A Farm in the Forest

by MagicallyClueless

Summary

Pelican Town's local carpenter, Robin, received one of her biggest orders yet: clear the land and restore an abandoned house in the forgotten reaches of Cindersap Forest. With the completion of the home came its new owner, a young (and somewhat lost) adult named Jade. "A Farm in the Forest" tells the story of Jade's adjustment to farm life in Stardew Valley, the people she meets during her stay, and the unspoken secrets of the valley's past.

This fic focuses on character development and interaction between characters, both romantic and platonic. There is also an underlying plot that focuses on the world of Stardew Valley as well as Jade's history. This fic contains fantasy violence, drama, suspense, humor, and very occasional spooks.

Note 7/17/2019: This fic might not update until all the chapters are written; which hopefully will be soon! Thank you for understanding the wait!
Mystical creatures of the forest went quiet, for a stranger had moved into their domain. A trail led into the heart of the Secret Woods, revealing an overgrown field and a miraculously still-standing house. The previously rotted, somewhat dilapidated two-story house was transformed into a sturdy, beautiful home over the course of several months. The project, though hidden from most of Pelican Town, was the new pride of the local carpenter, Robin. As years went on and Pelican Town dwindled in townspeople, the forest expanded and practically devoured the now ancient neighborhoods. Getting to revive such a history-filled building was something that Robin was ecstatic about, though the means to revive it was... strange.

On a dull Summer day, Robin received a certain letter in the mail:

“To the carpenter shop owner,

Hello! I’m a former freelance worker who is looking for a place to settle, and I caught wind of your business.

I stumbled across a website about Pelican Town, and fell in love with one of the houses. I called in-town to buy it myself, but according to the mayor, apparently the home wasn’t in a good condition at all! It had gone through over 30 years of neglect and forest overgrowth! The website is... incredibly outdated.

While I could suck it up and just try to find somewhere else to live, I’m exceedingly stubborn. I went ahead and bought the land. From what the mayor said, you don’t seem to have many customers, either. Not even 40 people in town? Seriously?

Let’s make a deal, then! I need a place to live, and I eventually want to have a farm. Of course, that means farm buildings, which also means that I have the potential to be a long-term customer. I’ve seen pictures of your work, and you have incredible talent. It’d be a real shame to let that go to waste.

I’m willing to pay up to 50,000g for the refurbished house. I’ll even throw in utility expenses! I just really want to become part of the community and have land to call my own.

I look forward to hearing back from you, with hopefully positive news!

Thank you so much!

-Your (future) Neighbor”
Enclosed in the envelope was a picture of the house in its glory days, though it looked somewhat old in its own right. A tiny thank you note with contact information was attached to the picture as well. Robin shuffled everything out of the envelope, and realized there was one final gift: a check containing 3,000g was stashed in the very back.

Robin could hardly process her thoughts. Stars twinkled in her eyes at the mere mention of a new wood-involved project... and even more so that it was going to be a huge project! Colossal! She would be working on this for a while, with just her and the chirping of the forest! Bliss! Tons of wood, tons of possibilities, lots of... money! Money! At last, her family would have more to their name!

The eager carpenter took no hesitation to find the house and start working. A trail to the abandoned neighborhood was cleared, dozens of trees were chopped down, and a field was re-imagined and ready to be used as farmland. The house in question was practically rebuilt from the ground up but kept many of the same design choices, such as an extended porch and a balcony on the second floor. Throughout construction, Robin had kept in contact with the new home owner to keep them updated. Near the end of Winter, Robin’s dream project had been completed with utmost success. She almost wanted to live in the house, herself... but the 50,000g reward was too good to reject. After several pictures and a carefully written letter to the customer, the transaction was nearly finished.

In the middle of Spring, Robin received another letter in the mail. The 50,000g check was there with another letter attached:

“Dear Robin,

Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for me! The pictures you sent of the house are absolutely amazing. They look even better than the original! You really deserve this 50k and you deserve much more than that, too. Sadly, I’m broke as all hell now. But that’ll just make me have to work harder, huh? It’ll be great!

By the time you read this letter, I’m in the process of moving to Pelican Town. I look forward to meeting you and everyone else!

You’re the best!

- Jade”

Only a day later, a short and red moving truck made it’s way into the outskirts of Pelican Town, down the lonely hills and onto the dirt roads that led deeper into the forest. The road opened up into a vast, grassy field that was fenced off by rows of trees. At the far end of the field was a proudly standing two-story house made out of sturdy and smooth oak wood. There were a few steps leading up to the porch, which then had a rocking chair and a cushioned porch swing. To the side of the house was a large and well-built bin that was for collecting goods for payment, and a petite mailbox stood in front of the home with its address painted on the box itself. The truck purred along and slowly parked near the entrance to the new house. The engine to the truck shut off, and the driver’s door swung open. Out came an exhausted female figure dwarfed by the vehicle’s size. She let out an audible sigh and shut the door as she stumbled and trudged her way to the back.
The female in question seemed to be in her younger twenties, though she may have seen better days. Her skin was very pale, circles were under her hazel eyes, and her honey brown hair was long, curly, and messy from being pressed against the driver’s seat. Her choice of dress that day was questionable as well: A dirty white top was strewn over her torso and appeared to be far too big for her figure—it was more suited for a man twice her size. Below the shirt, she wore comfortable blue jeans that contoured her legs. Dingy red sneakers adorned her tired feet as she walked, then stopping at the very end of the moving truck. The young woman pushed up the tail gate to reveal organized rows of boxes and used furniture, all in ranging sizes.

“I should have hired some movers...” She sighed again, realizing how many belongings she really had. Everything in the truck was all she had to her name, but it would still take days to move in on her own and finish unpacking. The new townsperson glanced over to her recently acquired property. Birds chirped and chattered from the trees, leaves ruffled from the gentle breeze, and the house had such a homely, welcoming feeling to it. She smiled to herself. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad.

“Hey!!” yelled a faraway voice. “You must be Jade!”

The new townsperson lifted her head and stared towards the source of the voice in horror. “Y-yeah? That’s me!” she yelled back. Jade didn’t even consider the possibility that someone would see her on the day of her move... she was an absolute mess, and wasn’t in the physical or emotional condition to really talk to anyone. Despite the circumstances, the newcomer took a deep breath and stood up straight.

A red-haired woman eagerly ran up to Jade. “It’s Robin, the carpenter!” she beamed happily. Robin was slightly taller compared to Jade and also much brighter in appearance: Her bright red hair, glowing skin, and sparkling green eyes could improve anyone’s mood. Her hair was tied up into a short ponytail while her bangs and extra strands of hair trailed down the sides of her face and neck. Robin was wearing a brown vest with a tan trim, an orange short-sleeved shirt, emerald green pants, and fitting brown boots. Needless to say, she was a very cheerful in demeanor as well as dress.

Jade gasped. “Robin!” she repeated excitedly, the weariness drifting from her expression. They exchanged handshakes in greeting and smiled at each other.

“Welcome to Pelican Town,” Robin began, glancing at the truck and then at the house. “She’s a beauty, isn’t she? One of my best projects yet!”

Jade nodded and chuckled a bit. “Yeah, it’s gorgeous! I haven’t been inside yet, since I just arrived a moment ago. What a massive house!”

Robin crossed her arms proudly and marveled at her wooden creation. “Yup, 4 rooms, 2 baths, open kitchen and living room, and an attic and basement. Are you waiting for the others to arrive?” she curiously asked.

“... Others?” The newcomer blinked in confusion.

Robin nervously laughed. “Oh, I just assumed... it’s such a big house, and you offered so much money! You’re really alone?” The carpenter gestured to all of the boxes in the moving truck. “Wait... were you going to move in all by yourself?”

“Um... Well, yeah?” Jade aired out her shirt a bit, her exhaustion catching up with her again.

“Wow, you’re actually crazy. Look how tired you are, kid! C’mon, I’ll help you.” Before Jade could
really give a proper response, Robin had already retrieved a ramp from the truck bed to the ground and climbed inside to get the first few boxes.

“The first thing you need to learn about Stardew Valley, Jade...” Robin grunted as she had lifted two heavy boxes and confidently descended the ramp. “... Is that it’s okay to ask for help! In fact, most of us are bored. Ask us for help all you want. Yoba knows the townspeople put up a lot of quests,” she commented, stomping towards the house. Jade followed and opened the door to let her inside. Robin carefully dropped the boxes and then walked back outside without breaking a sweat.

“Thanks, Robin... You really don’t have to do this though, it’s okay! You’ve done a lot for me already, it’s unfair for me to-”

“Don’t sweat it! Where are you from? The city nearby? Somewhere out of the valley?” Robin had taken another few boxes and began walking back. Jade became riddled with guilt seeing Robin do all the work, so she lifted up a box as well and followed.

“I’m from, uh... the other side of the country, actually,” Jade murmured.

Robin set down the next set of boxes inside, and glared out to Jade. “The other side of the country?” Her eyes widened in shock. “You’re telling me you drove all the way here, and still expected to do everything by yourself?”

“Y... yes?”

Robin could make no other appropriate response but laugh. She walked over to Jade, who had set down the box she carried. “No more of this lonely life,” the carpenter began, clasping a hand on one of Jade’s shoulders. “And the whole town would love to see you. You should go to Lewis when you’re moved in... By the way, how old are you?”

“Uhm... 22?”

Her laugh turned into a cackle. “That figures, haha! What a young and stubborn age. Anyways, that’s perfect. There are so many people around that age, including both my kids!” Robin grinned. “You’ll be fine! And give this huge house more of a use, too. Sounds like you’re here to stay for good,” she nodded confidently and removed her hand from Jade’s shoulder to cross her arms again. “Thanks to my handiwork, the house will stay for good, too. I’m sure you’ll take care of it.”

Jade nodded. “I’ll do my best, Robin. It’ll be nice to have something to call my own... um, since we’ve been exchanging letters for a little while, I just really want you to know how important this whole thing is for me.” The newcomer stood in a rather boxed position, with tensed shoulders and closed legs. She hugged herself across her chest and stared down to the floor, taking quiet and deep breaths. “Really, I can’t thank you enough.”

Robin raised an eyebrow. “Is something wrong, sweetheart?” Her expression twisted into concern upon seeing Jade’s sudden change in demeanor.

“I... I’m fine, sorry,” Jade took a louder deep breath, trying to conceal the tears forming at her eyes. She coughed out somewhat of a laugh. “It’s been a really, really long year.” She wiped her eyes, and then smiled to Robin. “It’s the next chapter of my life now, and you helped with that. I’m going to annoy you with how much I thank you,” she half-heartedly joked.

“Aww, Jade,” Robin fawned over to the young adult with a motherly voice. She gave the newcomer
a light hug and gave her a few reassuring pats on the shoulders. “You’re always welcome to come over. And no more of this sappy business! That’s why I have broody children,” she chuckled. Her remark caused Jade to laugh a bit, too. That was improvement enough.

Over the course of the day, Jade and Robin emptied the moving truck and transported everything into the house. With Robin’s strength and enthusiasm, the feat was much easier than Jade expected. After the last box was transported, Robin even offered to return the moving truck. The newcomer accepted the offer, and the two finally parted ways. Jade felt better after the first day of her moving experience, for she made a new and encouraging friend. There would only be more, she thought to herself.

The sereneness of the forest at night brought the mystical creatures to rest. A new person has moved into their domain, but she just wanted a refreshed and quiet life like anyone else in Pelican Town.
First Day

Chapter Summary

After meeting the Mayor, Jade has to meet back up with Robin to get her farming gear.

Tuesday, Spring 23 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, if it isn’t the newcomer!”

Mayor Lewis gestured Jade into his makeshift office. They were both at his house, a dining table transformed into a temporary desk with papers and bills strewn about. They sat at opposite ends of the table, and politely smiled to each other.

Lewis was a middle aged fellow, as evident by his balding head and gray mustache. He wore a brown beret to cover his otherwise exposed head and had brown suspenders and pants of the same color. His shirt was obnoxiously green, contrasted even more so by his bright yellow tie. Despite the outfit, Lewis had a very calm and professional vibe about him. Jade felt like she was talking to someone who knew what they were doing.

On this day, Jade looked and dressed much better. Her face appeared brighter, her hair was no longer a mess, and she wore clothes that actually fit her body. A soft green and white ribbon pulled back the left side of her bangs, allowing her to see much better than before. She wore a black choker over a long, emerald pendant. Her shirt was still white, but it was clean and obviously hers; the top contoured her body well and had a feminine cut at the neck. A brown belt fastened her fitting jeans up to her hips, and she wore brown boots that would prove useful on the farm.

“It’s Jade! Nice to meet you, Mr. Lewis,” she grinned.

Lewis smirked. “You don’t need to call me a mister. Lewis is fine, or Mayor, even.”

“Oh, sure. I’ll just call you Mayor,” Jade nodded in thought. “So, Robin requested that I come see you.”

“Yes, it’s really big news to have someone move into such an off-the-radar place like Pelican Town!” Lewis began to shuffle through some documents on the table and began to write something on one of them. “How did you find this place again? Internet?”

Jade sighed as she tried to conjure her thoughts. “Yes, it was a really old website... um, maybe that should be removed now. I’m surprised it’s still up if it’s really that outdated,” she murmured.

“I’m surprised too,” Lewis replied with equal confusion. “I don’t even remember who made that. But, what matters is that you’re here. Robin told me you were planning to create a farm... is that right?”
“Mmhm. I don’t know exactly what I want to do yet... but I think farming is certainly a great start.”

“Wonderful!” Lewis finished writing and stood up from his seat, then walking over to a nearby kitchen drawer. He brought out a tiny bundle of packets with pictures of vegetables on them, then walked over to where Jade was sitting. “I got some parsnip and potato seeds after hearing about your move, to help you get started. Spring is ending soon, so these seeds grow rather quickly. It’ll be a lot of hard work, but it’ll pay off.” He offered the seed packets. “A town event is happening tomorrow, anyway. Maybe you could catch a break,” he explained, offering the packets.

“Oh wow, thank you very much!” Jade bowed her head in respect and humbly took the seed packets. “What is the town event?” she then asked.

Lewis sat back in his seat and continued to fill out paperwork. “The Flower Dance,” he began. “The young single folk come together in formal outfits and perform a dance. It’s been a tradition for ages. I think that would be a good chance for you to put yourself out there and meet everybody. Pierre might sell some special items too, of course.”

“That sounds pretty interesting, though I don’t think I can dance...”

“You don’t have to. Not everyone does, but I make at least ten young men and women do it. Since you just moved here though, we’ll be more lenient with you. If you can’t find someone to dance with, you don’t have to dance.” Lewis smiled and looked to her. She was looking off, but snapped to attention when he had focused his gaze in her direction.

“Now that I think about it, have you brought any tools for your farm?” Lewis asked, lightly tossing his pen back onto the table.

Jade’s eyes suddenly widened in shock. “Oh, no...” she frowned. “I... I didn’t think to bring any.”

Lewis chuckled. “There’s no problem, we thought something like that would happen. Head to Robin’s place, she has extra tools and a backpack to store all that stuff in. And with that, I’ll leave this for you as well.” Lewis took a folded piece of laminated paper and offered it to Jade. She kindly took it and unfolded it, revealing the paper to be a full-fledged map! The buildings and locations were clearly marked, making for very easy navigation.

“Ahh, you are way too kind!” Jade examined the map, searching for the carpenter’s shop. She found it at one of the northernmost points in the mountains, slightly to the east. She found that rather discouraging, since her own home was located in the southwest region of the map. “That’s a lot of walking,” she mumbled to herself.

“You’ll be surprised how time passes in the valley,” Lewis remarked. “And when you get a hang of the place, you’ll know all sorts of shortcuts. Anything else you need?”

Jade shook her head and stood up from her seat. She carefully stored the newly acquired seeds in her pocket and re-folded the map. “I’m good now. I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow at the Flower Dance?”

Lewis nodded. “Yep, and it’s very close to where you live. You can’t miss it.”

“Great! Bye Mayor,” Jade grinned and waved to him as she walked away. She exit Lewis’ abode to then travel to the mountains, where the carpenter shop was located.
The walk felt like it took a few hours, but Jade was turned around a few times on the way. At least she was starting to get a ground on where everything was; on the way, she discovered the location of Pierre’s grocery store and the blacksmith’s before finally realizing she was incorrectly reading the map. She found stairs up to the cliffs north of the blacksmith’s, then followed the trail that led into the mountains.

A wooden building very similar to the size of her own house was straight ahead. On Jade’s right was a closed garage, and a small yard with a giant telescope was to her left side. Above the entrance to the building hung a sign with a handsaw pictured on it. This was the carpenter’s shop, for sure. The young farmer sucked in a deep breath and corrected her posture before confidently walking towards the front door.

Her steps slowed down. She heard two unfamiliar voices yelling from within the shop. Would it be okay to enter? Is this just a bad time?

She heard Robin’s voice. It was stern, angry, and frustrated. Shortly after, a nearby door slammed shut.

Jade’s hands trembled. She turned her head back towards the town square, considering coming back later. But it took two hours to get here... She didn’t know what to do, as she stood at the porch for a solid moment.

The front door opened, causing Jade to step back in surprise.

“Oh? Hello, I didn’t see you there.” A tall, dark-skinned man stood before Jade. He had very short brown hair, deep brown eyes, and an exhausted look about him, despite trying to be polite and smile. He wore a blue polo shirt with dark gray pants supported by a dark belt. He looked to be wearing brown hiking boots, probably good for traversing the mountains. In one of his arms was a clipboard with random data scrawled on it. Jade probably couldn’t understand the data if she tried.

The newcomer froze. “I... hello,” she muttered back. “Is... Is this the....”

He seemed to calm down, as his smile seemed more genuine this time. “Yes, this is the carpenter’s shop. My wife has been waiting for you. Jade, is it?”

Jade shyly nodded.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jade. My name is Demetrius. I wish I could talk with you more, but I have to go check on my nearby studies of the local fauna.” He briefly shook her hand, and then stepped away from the house. “Robin is right inside, go on.” Demetrius waved to the young farmer lightly before officially walking off.

“Wha? Did I hear Jade? Come inside, hon!!” She heard Robin yell from in the house, causing her to snap back to attention. The newcomer conjured enough courage to step inside the home. At the entrance was a decent sized room with a large desk at the far end. Robin was perched behind the desk, and eagerly waved over to Jade as she entered. She walked further inside, noticing the chairs and bench at the left side of the room. There were old family photographs and a few small paintings adorning the nearby walls. At the other end was a small hallway that connected to another hallway, as well as an extremely bright room straight ahead. There was an opening in the middle of the hall that had stairs leading downwards to the basement. Jade hardly noticed the stairs at first.
“Welcome, welcome! I’ve been waiting for you—oh, what’s that look on your face?” Robin’s cheerful disposition quickly vanished. They both knew that it was an act at this moment.

Robin sighed. “When’d you come here?”

Jade shuffled her feet. “Some minutes ago.”

“Ugh... I’m really sorry you heard that.” The carpenter ran one of her hands through her hair and sighed again, thinking, “Demetrius and Sebastian aren’t on the best of terms.”

“Sebastian?” Jade asked. The name didn’t sound familiar.

“He’s my son... I had him before I married Demetrius.” Robin planted her face on her desk. “They fight way too much... at least I was here to end it. They’re all driving me crazy,” she grumbled. “Glad Maru wasn’t here for that. She’s our daughter.”

“Ah...” Jade went up to the desk and stood in front of Robin. “Well... I hope I can meet them in good moods.”

Robin laughed and sat up. “Oh, they’re great. I mean it. Maru’s a total sweetheart and doesn’t have a mean bone in her body. Sebby’s really sweet when he wants to be. He just gets the attitude from me,” she scoffed, but with a smile. “I think you’ll get along with both of them, it’s just that one of them is a little more difficult.”

Jade nodded. “I believe you,” she replied with a shyly but with optimism. Both of them seemed to relax.

“So, tools, right?” Robin turned around and shuffled some unseen objects around.

“Yup,” the young farmer replied. “And a backpack... I... I was less prepared than I realized. Hey, uh... do you have some water, too?”

The carpenter laughed and set a blue backpack on the table. “This has everything you need. Remember that there’s a river close to your house, so that’s how you’ll water your plants. I’ll get you some water for yourself, though. Long trip?” She walked out from behind her desk and head down the hallway, presumably towards the kitchen.

“Yeah...” Jade took the backpack and equipped it, then following Robin. “I got lost a few times on my way here.”

“Aww! Well, you’ll get a hang of everything quickly,” Robin said with a confident nod, stopping in front of their refrigerator. “You’ve only been here a day and a half now. But even so, it’s a super small town. And hey! You could get a stable with a horse from me someday, to make things even easier.”

Jade chuckled. “You’re far too kind, Robin.” She accepted the bottled water that Robin offered and almost desperately drank from it. As she finished drinking, half of the bottle was already gone.

Robin raised an eyebrow. She took another bottle of water out of the fridge and stored it in a side-pocket on Jade’s backpack. “There you go, hon. Keep yourself hydrated!”
“Thanks. I’m at least learning all this stuff early... I thought I had everything figured out, admittedly.” Jade sighed shamefully. “But, thank you for helping me out.”

The carpenter gave her a hearty pat on the back. “No problem at all, Jade! Be sure to come by i-

The basement door opened, causing Robin to halt her speech and stare down the hallway. “Hey!” she abruptly yelled, causing Jade to flinch. “Sebby! Come here!”

“What?” yelled back another voice. It was one of the ones Jade heard earlier, alongside Demetrius. A thin young man came walking down the hallway to meet with Robin and Jade. “I was just about to go out,” he mumbled.

“Sebby,” Robin began cheerfully, clasping both hands on the farmer’s shoulders, “this is Jade, the new farmer in town. Jade, this is my son, Sebastian.”

“Hi,” murmured Jade shyly with a faint wave of the hand.

“Hey,” he replied somewhat politely.

Sebastian appeared to be Robin’s opposite. He had straight, raven-black hair that was shoulder-length on one side and ear-length on the other. His eyes had a serious gaze, and his mouth was unsmiling. The young man wore a dark hoodie colored much like his hair. He wore even darker jeans on his legs, and his sneakers were black. The only real likeness to Robin that the young farmer could notice was his greenish eyes, containing a similar brightness to hers.

Robin grinned. “You said you’re going out? Perfect, take Jade home on your way.”

“What?” Sebastian looked at his mother in slight surprise.

“She’s tired from a long day, and you have a motorcycle. You know where she lives, too. Please take her home,” Robin nearly commanded, knowing that Sebastian wouldn’t reject such a request from his mother.

He sighed. “Fine, then.” Sebastian turned away and walked towards the entrance of the house.

“Bye, love you! Go on, Jade. Sebby will take care of you, he seems rough but he knows I’d kick his cute little butt if anything happened to you.”

“M... motorcycle?” Jade sadly murmured, not seeming to hear Robin’s later statements.

“Oh, it’s fine!” Robin gently pushed Jade along. “It’ll be fun!”

The newcomer unintentionally gave Robin sad puppy look, unsure of how to really respond. Robin gave her another confident nod, causing her to quietly obey and go outside. “Bye, good luck with your farm!” Robin beamed.

Sebastian had pulled up the garage door and rolled out his motorcycle. The vehicle appeared to be in fantastic shape, like it was well cared for. Its paint was a shiny yet deep blue. There wasn’t a scratch or wear, as if the vehicle was acquired only a day before. Jade walked out shortly after, slowly tensing after seeing the vehicle.
He glanced at her before looking back at his motorcycle, cleaning a bit of dust off of it. “You don’t have to ride if you don’t want to. She’s pushy.”

Jade sighed. “It’s okay... I’ve just never ridden a motorcycle before. It’s so... small, and... the roads are... big?” She quickly realized the irony in her statement. Pelican Town was in the middle of nowhere.

“Maybe it is out of town, but no one really drives around here, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Sebastian looked to her calmly. “So, you want to go or not?”

Jade stared at the motorcycle, and then at Sebastian. She slowly nodded. “Y-yeah, let’s go.”

He pushed the kick stand to the vehicle down and went back into the garage, then bringing out a dark blue riding helmet. He closed the shutters of the garage and offered the helmet to her.

“Oh, thanks,” she said as she equipped the headgear. Luckily, it was a perfect fit. Sebastian brought out dark shades from his hoodie’s pocket and put them on before straddling the motorcycle. He turned the engine on, and patiently looked back towards her. Jade took that as a sign to sit behind him and did so, though she felt incredibly awkward. What was she supposed to do?

“You might want to hold on,” he mentioned boredly.

“Wh... where?” she asked, defeated.

“You’ll see, I guess.” He lightly revved the engine, causing her to squeak and tightly hug his torso.

Sebastian couldn’t help but chuckle. “There you go.”

“That was mean!” she huffed. He shrugged, a faint smile perched on his face. He then removed the kickstand and slowly started the drive, mindful of the extra cargo.

The ride was very calm. Jade became lost in admiring the scenery of the valley; mountains transitioned to small wooden buildings, which turned into flat, grassy lands. The fields turn into forests, and they rode down a trail with walls of thriving trees. Jade’s home entered the horizon, and the motorcycle slowed down before stopping near the front porch.

She felt strange when they stopped before her home. The drive was shorter than she wanted it to be, and the breeze was so refreshing. Jade released her hold on Sebastian and hopped off of the vehicle. “Thank you for driving me home,” she kindly muttered. The young farmer took the biker’s helmet off and offered it back to him, which he took quietly.

“It wasn’t so bad, was it?” he asked, still noticing her tensed figure.

She shook her head and smiled. “It was really nice,” she confirmed. The newcomer glanced at her home, then to the rider beside her. “Um... this is a weird question, but...”

“Hm?” Sebastian turned the ignition off and replaced the kickstand. He dismounted as well and stood, digging a pack of cigarettes out of his pockets. After lifting his shades to the top of his head, he took out a cigarette, put the pack back, then shuffled out a lighter and began to smoke.

Jade averted her eyes. “How did you know where I live?” she asked.
“I help my mom with her projects sometimes. She worked pretty hard to refurbish this old place,” he replied.

“Oh, I see... Well, thank you for helping. I suppose I should have paid you too,” she smiled.

“Nah, I only help.” He tapped some ash off of his cigarette. “And I have my own job.”

“What do you do?” Jade asked curiously.

“I do freelance work as a programmer,” he answered somewhat dully, expecting a deadpan response from her.

“Oooh!” Jade’s eyes lit up. “That’s really cool. I used to do freelance work, too. I mean... not programming, I suck at anything code. But I used to do art commissions.”

Sebastian slightly turned his head towards her, but didn’t respond.

Jade crossed her arms in thought. “But... I’ve moved on from that, I guess. I wasn’t making much money, and I just ran out of ideas. I don’t really like making art anymore.”

“Hm,” was all he said.

“I’m fine, though! I am. I can focus all my energy on this, now... Oh, no. Is the sky getting dark?” Jade looked upwards to see the sky. She sighed in disappointment.

“Yup.” He was almost finished with his cigarette.

“Oh, no! I really need to get these seeds planted! And then that thing is tomorrow, aahh!” She scanned her field, trying to figure out where her plants would go.

“The Flower Dance?” Sebastian’s expression seemed even more soured than usual. “Are you going to that?” he asked.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s a town event! Why, do you not go?” She turned back to him.

Sebastian scoffed. “I have to, but it’s the worst event of the entire year.”

“Oh... really?” Jade drooped in posture. “It’s not fun?”

“Eh... maybe you’ll like it. You seem...” he made an unsure hand gesture. “... Excited?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she grumbled.

Sebastian finished his cigarette before he continued. “Nothing, just that it’s a cheerful event...” He pushed his shades down onto his eyes and remounted his motorcycle. “Well, I’m going now.”

“Oh... Bye, Sebastian. It was nice meeting you,” Jade waved to him as he took off, a slight smile painted on her face. As the rider faded from sight, she sighed and gazed back to the farmland. A bit of leftover smoke made her cough. “Eugh. Okay,” she huffed to herself. The young farmer grabbed a hoe from her backpack and held it like a sword. “Let’s do this,” she grunted.

It was the dead of the night by the time Jade finished tilling the ground and planting seeds. Out of
laziness, she watered the seeds with her half-finished bottle of water. For the last few minutes of the night, she stood and admired her little plot of ground. She did this, all by herself! Though... she wouldn’t have been able to farm at all, if it weren’t for the help of the townspeople. “I should get something for Robin,” Jade thought aloud as she admired her mound of dirt. “... Maybe when I get money first,” she sighed. Jade decided to finally leave the plot of dirt, shuffling her way back to her awaiting house.

Boxes were everywhere inside, but she was too tired to worry about unpacking for the time being. Her bed was clear and ready for being rested upon, which is all that really mattered. She barely took her shoes off before collapsing into the bed. No shower, no pajamas. Just sleep.

And she did.

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**Beep! Beep! Beep!**

An alarm clock chirped mercilessly to the young farmer. It was set to go off at 6 AM, which would be the time she arises every day from here on out. An unpleasant moan ruptured from Jade’s throat as she half-heartedly threw one of her hands to the alarm clock. She arose from her comfortable bed with circles under her eyes yet again. Not enough sleep.

Shower, dress, breakfast, backpack. This would become routine, but it was a healthy one. She looked outside her window, towards the plot of seeds she planted the previous night. Nothing seemed to be growing yet, but she was confident. There was a whole day ahead, so there was a lot of time to grow.

Jade exit her home and eagerly trot towards the river just off the edge of her property. She filled up her watering can while listening to the eager sounds of the forest. She sighed blissfully. The birds were happy, and so was she. She was away from her old life.

The newcomer stomped back towards her plot of dirt, and began to water. Her gentle, cheerful expression had faded. Jade’s old life. Her shoulders boxed up and her head drooped.

She suddenly snapped back up. “The Flower Dance!” she screamed. It was about to start! Jade hurriedly finished her watering and tossed the can to the porch before running across the field. “I’m going to be late to my first town event!” she shouted to herself in frustration.

In the distance, colorful flags were tied to fence posts. There was a path leading over a cliff. Jade could hear music playing from behind the mountain face. “I suppose that’s my destination.”

Before walking in that direction, Jade took a deep breath and straightened her posture. *It will be a good day,* she reminded herself.

Chapter End Notes

12/22/2018: You'll notice a few edits as you continue reading, if you've read this fic before. I'm mostly fine-tuning a bit of dialogue in earlier chapters so it feels more natural to the characters. I cut out a few of Sebastian's lines in this one since he's not that chatty.
with people he doesn't know.
Flower Dance

Chapter Summary

Haley can't participate in the Flower Dance, so Mayor Lewis asks Jade to take her place.

Wednesday, Spring 24 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Spring was ending soon, but the Flower Dance was the embodiment of the entire season. The entire town participated in the event, the older adults getting their fair share of chatter and gossip, while the younger adults grouped up among their own friends and waited for the main part of the event to take place. Some of the townspeople grew quiet and stared over at Jade when she entered the flowery field.

“Welcome one, welcome all!” The salesman from behind the nearby concession stand beamed. “You must be the new farmer, right? I’m Pierre, owner of the local grocery store.” He was a brown haired gentleman with glasses, a brown overshirt, and a blue undershirt. Jade couldn’t see anything else. “I have things for sale only available on this day! Feel free to take a look,” he proudly stated.

“H-hi, and thank you, but sorry... I have no money at the moment,” she murmured. Pierre didn’t seem very surprised, but still allowed her to look at the merchandise. She fumbled with her hands a little. “Um... I’ll try to support when I can.” She sighed and continued walking.

Jade couldn’t help but feel... awkward. She felt like everyone was staring at her... not that she could blame them. Her presence was merely a rumor, and the only townspeople to see her, save for Lewis, lived isolated in the mountains.

“Jade! Hey!” Robin waved her over. Jade’s had to smile after hearing that. Robin’s enthusiasm was infectious. She relaxed seeing someone she recognized and walked over. “Jade, I have some friends you should meet!” Robin gestured to two other ladies that stood alongside her. One of them had lovely melon green hair and a blue dress, while the other had strawberry blonde hair tied in a braid, with a purple top and blue jeans. They both politely smiled towards Jade, to which she lightly waved to them in greeting.

“This is Caroline,” she said, gesturing to the green haired lady, “and this is Jodi,” she concluded towards the strawberry haired woman. Both of them seemed young in appearance, but the dress had her convinced they were mothers. “Caroline and Pierre are Abigail’s parents, and Jodi has Sam and Vincent. Have you met any of them yet?” Robin glanced down to the young farmer, who she had clasped around the shoulder with pride.

Jade shook her head. “Sorry... I haven’t,” she replied.

“Ah, even if I did, I wouldn’t have heard of you until today,” Caroline sighed. She gestured to the far end of the flower field, where three young adults stood. The only one that Jade could recognize was
Sebastian, who had his back turned towards everyone except the other two figures; a very short purple-haired girl and a spiky blond-haired guy that was taller than him. It seemed like they were conversing. “There’s Abby and her friends,” she continued, “but she never really tells me anything.”

“The tall one is my Sam,” Jodi added.

“And then you know Sebby, of course. Oh, I forgot to ask you. Did the ride go well? He didn’t say anything out of line, did he?” Robin frowned in concern.

Jade chuckled. “The drive was fine, and no, he was nice. Quiet, but that’s okay. I think I talked too much.”

Robin had a proud look on her face. “That’s my young man. He never talks too much in general, though. Don’t worry about that.” She made a flail of her wrist in dismissal. “Why don’t you go talk to them and introduce yourself? You should make some friends your age,” the carpenter grinned.

“Oh, sure. I’ll talk to all of you later. It was great meeting the both of you,” Jade waved to the two before walking towards the aforementioned trio of friends.

Abigail and Sam seemed to notice that the farmer was walking in their direction. Both of their faces lit up in interest, the taller one even ushering a wave to her. Jade slightly waved back, growing eager in introducing herself. Sebastian turned around to see her as well, and lifted his hand in greeting.

Then a hand touched her shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re here at the Flower Dance, farmer Jade,” welcomed Lewis, stopping her in her tracks. For some reason, she didn’t feel it was very welcome. “I’m afraid I have a favor to ask.”

“Oh, no... what is it, Mayor?” Jade turned to him in worry.

“Well, turns out we’re one lady short.”

“... What?” Jade blinked.

“It’s such a shame, too. Haley is always so excited for the Flower Dance, she practices thoroughly beforehand and was the one to pick out everyone’s dresses and suits. She came down with the flu this morning though, and she’s not fit to dance.” Lewis sighed.

“That sounds terrible... I hope she feels better,” Jade murmured sadly.

“Doctor Harvey checked up on her, and she should heal up fine with plenty of rest. But for now, I hope it’s not too much to ask if you’d take her place for the dance this year. You look to be her dress size, anyway.” Lewis quickly examined her and placed a finger to his chin in thought. Jade took a step back and hugged herself.

“Um... well, I suppose I can’t say no,” she mumbled. “What do I have to do?”

“Just do a dance, it’s really simple and the music has a specific beat to it, you’ll be fine. And you’ll have a dance partner who will lead you.”

“Who is my dance partner?” Jade asked, suddenly terrified of the reality.
“Well...” Lewis sighed as he tried to think. “Haley tends to dance with Alex every year. Maybe you should ask him.” He gestured to the far northern end of the field. There was a bored, tan fellow with short brown hair. He wore a green football jacket and appeared to be fairly built compared to the other guys around. Jade gulped, a lump forming in her throat. She began to shiver, thinking back to her younger life. Alex didn’t activate pleasant high school memories.

The farmer took a deep breath. “Sure.” She wasn’t going to try to judge him prematurely.

Lewis seemed happy that Jade complied. “Great. The changing stations are right over there when it’s time to get ready, just take Haley’s labeled dress.” With that, Lewis took his business elsewhere, but gave Jade a reassuring nod.

The young farmer’s shoulders drooped as she glared down into the grass for a moment. She just accepted a role in the Flower Dance, without having a proper dance in her entire life. This was going to be a disaster.

Feeling discouraged, Jade decided not to approach the trio of friends completely. She passed by with a saddened expression as she made her way to Alex. At first, he didn’t even notice she was there.

“Um... h... hey,” murmured Jade shyly in a pitiful attempt of giving his attention. Being side by side, she realized how tall he actually was.

“Huh?” Alex snapped out of his train of thought to glance at the young farmer. “Oh, who’re you?” he asked.

“H-hi, I’m Jade, the new farmer that moved in.... I’m... apparently taking Haley’s place today? S-so, I’m... supposed to ask you to... dance with me,” she stuttered in nervousness.

Alex huffed. “Dammit, so Haley can’t come after all,” he mumbled to himself. He stood up straight and towered above Jade almost menacingly. With a smug grin, he stretched his arms and made a satisfied sigh. “Look, I know I’m great looking and all, but I’m not going to dance with some chick I don’t kno-”

His macho manner quickly diminished once he caught sight of his grandparents at the the other end of the field. The grandmother was staring at him condescendingly and shaking her head, while the grandfather rolled his eyes and fiddled with his wheelchair.

“Ugh. Look, farm girl. I don’t think either of us want this. Or at least, I don’t.”

“We don’t,” Jade coughed under her breath.

“But, I gotta take you, farm girl. It’s just the right thing to do. Lucky for you, I’m the best dancer out of all these bozos. They don’t take it seriously enough!”

The newcomer stared at him with curiosity. “So, you enjoy the Flower Dance?” she asked.

“Hell yeah I do. Well, with Haley, anyway.” He huffed, averting his gaze. “But you’ll do I guess. You’re like... semi-hot. Not too bad.” His eyes glanced back to her to internally confirm his statements.

“Excuse me?” Jade glared at him, but she wasn’t entirely sure if she heard him right.
Alex nearly laughed. “I’ll just lead the dance. It’s easy. It’s time to dress, so we should all go do that.” He stomped off towards the dressing stations, Jade half-heartedly following behind.

All of the bachelors and bachelorettes dressed for their roles in the Flower Dance; the men in sky blue suits and fancy black shoes, and the ladies in soft lilac-colored dresses and white pumps. Jade was to be in the third of the five women, so she would wear a special flower crown to commemorate the dance. She hasn’t worn something so feminine in a while, so the thought of several strangers seeing her like this made her nerves shake.

“Hey,” a calm female voice called out to the young farmer. She walked over in the same kind of dress, though it was more fit for her curvaceous figure. She had light brown skin and short, raspberry colored hair. She pushed her red glasses up on her nose and smiled in an intelligent manner. “I can tell you’re pretty nervous, but don’t worry. I’ll be right beside you, so you have me for support.”

“Oh... th-thanks,” Jade muttered.

“I’m Maru,” she happily responded. “You’ve met the rest of my family.”

“Oh! Yes, I recognize your name. I’m glad I could meet you, Maru.” Jade eased up considerably and took slower breaths.

Maru nodded, and softly took Jade’s arm to guide her outside of the dressing rooms. “You look so cute, you know. You’ll be fine out there,” she grinned.


Maru chuckled. “Thanks. A lot of us are worried about you, you know... Not many people are fond of Alex,” she sighed. “But... he’s not all too bad. At least when you get past that really... jock-y exterior,” she gestured with a shrug. “If you ever feel uncomfortable, though, I’m here. You do have friends here,” the young lady smiled.

“Robin has some insanely nice genes,” murmured Jade jokingly.

Maru laughed, able to hear her. “That’s anyone in this valley. Most of us are pretty nice... barring a couple, like my half-brother.” Before Jade could properly respond, she just shook her head. “Dance is about to start. Best of luck. You’ll do great, though.” Maru kindly pat Jade on the back before moving to her position with her dance partner. Jade glanced at the dance partner; he was probably taller than even Alex, but he seemed to be very gentle in demeanor... in fact, he was probably more nervous than Jade was. He had brown hair with a single curl, a groomed mustache, and beads of sweat forming at his forehead. Poor guy.

Alex took his position in front of Jade. “Ready, farm girl? I’m going to blow your mind with this dance,” he beamed.

“Why do you have to say it like that?” Jade tried her best to not scowl in response. She sighed. “Just tell me what to do, p-please.”

“No problem! You’ll do perfect. I’m the best, you keep forgetting that.” He winked. Sam laughed nearby, overhearing the boasting. “Hey, stop laughing, Gohan!”

Everyone went quiet as the music for the Flower Dance began. The eight surrounding bachelors and bachelorettes began to dance in synchronization, while Alex and Jade walked up to each other to
become the center of the show. He took her by the hands and carefully began to guide her around in
the dance, whispering instructions that others could not hear, so she would be able to dance correctly.

Her negative feelings towards the matter seemed to vanish. The music was beautiful, and the dancing
was... fun. Even with Alex, who was certainly not on her good side in the beginning. Alex seemed
to lose that “jock-y exterior”, as Maru described it. He became as absorbed in the dance as Jade
was... and he was right. He did dance very well.

Jade had gazed into Alex’s eyes near the ending of their dance. He was rather handsome... And the
way Alex looked back at her, he must’ve thought she was beautiful, too.

“Not bad, farm girl,” he muttered to her. She flushed, not knowing what she was feeling at that
moment.

“You’re not bad, yourself,” she murmured in return. They both had some form of a smirk while
looking to each other.

In the final part of the dance, all the men had to have their hands at the waists of the ladies, while
they had their arms near the men’s neck and shoulders. Jade flushed at the final portion of the
ceremony... this dance was a little too intimate for her, she thought.

“Hm, nah. I take it back. You’re pretty hot,” Alex muttered reassuringly. Jade’s eyes widened and
her face didn’t feel as warm as it did before. She heard him that time.

His hands slipped below her waist.

The Flower Dance concluded in a rather abrupt manner. Alex was suddenly on the ground, groaning
and clutching the right side of his face. Jade stood over him, face completely red and eyes blurry with
tears and engulfed in rage. Her left hand was balled up into a fist, knuckles red and throbbing from
the impact.

All of the inhabitants gasped, and weren’t even sure what happened. Jade wasn’t sure what
happened, either. Was it an accident? Did... did she consider that? A few of the townspeople had
pulled Jade away from Alex, while others crowded the downed bachelor to make sure he was okay.
Jade suddenly felt very overcome with guilt, but she couldn’t take back what she had done.

She roughly broke from the townspeople and started to run back to her home, barely able to see the
colorful flags adorned on the wooden fences.

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Jade locked herself in her house for the rest of the day. Not here for more than two days, and she was
already messing everything up. Punched someone who was just dancing with her. Why did she get
so angry? She didn’t even remember anymore.

Occasionally, someone would knock on the door and ask for her. She didn’t answer. No one should
see her at this state. Eventually, the knocking stopped, and she was by herself for the rest of the
evening. The young farmer took the time to remove her shoes and dress, and to actually get into
clothes that suited her. It was getting late... a long shower and pajamas seemed to be ideal for the
time.

Jade had tucked herself into bed early that night, but couldn’t find any power within herself to sleep.
She sighed as she tossed and turned in her bed sheets. Not only did she feel guilty and exhausted, but she was irritated... irritated at everything. Nothing went right today.

_Tnk!_

Something hit one of Jade’s front windows. She lifted her head, but thought it was just the wind.

_Tnk! Tonk!_

A pebble tapped against her window, and then a slightly bigger rock. Someone was throwing stuff at her window! She hurriedly stood up and walked over to the window.

“Psssst!”

She was almost ashamed at how quickly she discovered who the mysterious person was. Right under the window, was the very obvious spiky hair belonging to none other than Sam. He didn't properly conceal himself, most likely unaware of how big his hair was.

“Psst!” Sam lifted his head again, and then briefly screamed in surprise when he realized she was at the window.

“Sam, I told you we’re not doing that,” nagged Sebastian from a distance. He was here too? Jade sighed, and opened her window.

“What do you guys want?” she asked with a raspy, tired voice.

“And girl!” Abigail poked up her head beside Sam. “We wanted to see you,” she said.

“Yeah,” Sam loudly whispered, despite being very close to Jade. “Come outside for a sec,” he finished.

Jade closed her window, but wanted to humor them. She walked outside to see Sebastian standing on the porch, while Sam and Abigail were squatting by the closest window. They were all dressed in their regular clothes. _Officially no more Flower Dance_, thought Jade begrudgingly.

Sebastian sighed. “They never listen to me,” he grumbled as he glared at the grinning duo. They both stood up and joined the other two on the porch.

“What are you three doing out here this late?” Jade asked. “It’s like eleven at night... Look, I’m sorry... I’d love to meet both of you, but...”

“No, it’s okay,” Abigail began. “We actually wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me?” Jade was genuinely confused.

“Do you realize how _awesome_ you were today?” Abigail began, in shock. “You kicked Alex’s _ass_!”

“You pack a good punch,” Sam nodded proudly.

“... We’ve all kinda wanted to punch Alex in the face before. But you were the only one to actually do it.” Sebastian crossed his arms, a smirk on his face.
Jade wanted to accept the praise, but she shook her head. “No... it was wrong. I think I jumped to conclusions. He was an ass, sure, but... I shouldn’t have punched him,” she frowned, then sighed. “His hands slipped below my waist, and I reacted pretty badly. I should go talk to him.”

“I dunno, I think I probably would have punched him,” Abigail thought out loud. “You shouldn’t let anyone touch you like that, that’s good.”

Jade’s shoulders hunched and she stared to the wooden surface of the front porch. She lightly shuffled her feet. “It was probably a mistake,” she muttered in disappointment. “I just ruined my chance at gaining respect in the town...”

“Eh, people will forget about it,” Sam mentioned. “I once put a nasty fish in the Luau potluck, and everyone was pretty pissed with me.” His face brightened. “But, after all the community service hours, no one even brings it up anymore except when I screw up again!”

"Which is often," Sebastian added.

“Community service hours?” Jade looked extremely discouraged. “I can barely start a farm.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes towards Sam, but gazed calmly to Jade. “He is right that people will forget about it. It’s not like that kind of situation hasn’t happened with any of us.”

Sam sighed wistfully. “We’ve definitely gone through some stuff.”

Abigail nodded thoughtfully. “We’re honestly the worst,” she grinned.

“All of you seem like the bad kids of town,” Jade deadpanned in response. Sam and Abigail chuckled and shrugged to each other in admission. Sebastian didn’t respond and scowled at the two, not wanting to be included.

“They’re just idiots,” Sebastian corrected. Sam leaned an elbow on Sebastian’s head, obnoxiously proving his incredible height in comparison to his raven-haired counterpart.

“Don’t listen to Seb, he’s just short and angsty,” Sam laughed. He could practically feel Sebastian sizzle under him, as he roughly shoved him away with a red, angry face. Sam chuckled and eagerly stood in front of Jade, alongside Abigail and Sebastian.

Jade seemed to exhausted to be entertained, though their banter had her ease up. “I really appreciate it. All of you seem very sweet, but I’m just... tired and kinda wanna stay in bed forever after today,” she murmured.

The three were quiet, and took the time to usher a response. They all seemed concerned.

“You’re fine,” Abigail eventually spoke up. “Just know you’re cool with us. We were actually going to the saloon Friday evening and were wondering if you’d like to come.”

“Oh?” Jade looked to them with more attention.

“Yeah,” Sam continued, “there’s a nice little arcade section and a pool table. You can play with us, and we’ll order some pizza or something,” he said, grinning.

Jade wiped her eyes and yawned. “You know what...” she sleepily smiled. “That actually sounds
really nice. I would love to join.”

“Yay!” Both Sam and Abigail beamed at the same time. They hugged Jade in unison, causing her to giggle. She was actually grinning when they let go of her. She even glanced to Sebastian, who had a faint smile on his face.

“Okay, be there Friday at 6! Don’t be late!” Abigail stepped backwards off of the porch, pointing menacingly to the young farmer. Sam excitedly followed and pumped his fists while chanting for saloon night pizza. Jade and Sebastian watched them leave the farmland.

“I’ll be leaving with them, but I wanted to say...” Sebastian sighed. “Alex kept muttering how it was his fault, too. The guy’s rude, but...” He scratched his head. “Well, you’ll see.”

“What do you mean?” Jade frowned.

He was quiet for a moment. “He's just had... rumors, about family.” Sebastian hesitated, not really sure how else to word himself.

“Oh.” The young farmer thought for a while.

“It’s not your fault. I think you’ll be fine if both of you make up to each other.”

“Yeah.” The newcomer sighed and thread her fingers through her messy hair. “All of this is too complicated...”

“Yep.” He started to walk off, giving her a small wave. “See you later.”

“Goodnight, Sebastian.” The young farmer returned his wave. She stood and watched the three officially fade into the night, until she grew too tired to stand.

Another day ended, and fittingly so. Despite all the nightmares that happened that day, Jade was still able to sleep like a log.

Chapter End Notes

12/22/2018 note: Cut out some of Sebastian's dialogue to make him less chatty, such as him explaining about rumors and the like. At this point, he doesn't know Jade too well, so he probably wouldn't be talkative.

I also made Pierre less cold. I think he's meaner since he doesn't know Jade as well, but at the same time, he has a business to run. Toning down a bit of the sass.
The young farmer lightly slapped her own face, completely without hurt but as a gesture to say she needed to get her act together. She sighed, nodded to herself, then decided it was time to go tend to her crops. Right as she was going to leave her house, there was a knock at the door.

“Coming,” she shouted politely as she approached the door. Upon opening it, her expression morphed into shock and sadness.

Alex was there, normal as ever, except for the glorious shiner on his right eye. Despite the injury, he was softly smiling to the young farmer. In his hands, he held a wrapped plate of fresh cookies. “Uh, hey,” he began with hesitation. “Sorry, you probably don’t wanna really see me and all-

“No, I do,” Jade told him sternly. “I want to say I’m sorry.”

Alex blinked in surprise. “No, I’m sorry,” he rebutted. “It was an accident, but I should have watched where my hands were. I’m just stupid, for a moment I was thinking of Haley, and I’m closer to her, so it just-” he stopped himself, embarrassed. “Sorry, that’s all. It was rude of me. For all that mess.”

Jade sighed. “I forgive you, Alex. Thank you for coming up to me. But... I really am sorry, too.” She frowned as she stared at his bruise. “I shouldn’t have punched you. It was too harsh of me, and I reacted too quickly. If there’s anything I can do to make up for it, please let me know.”

Alex shrugged and thought for a moment. “You can uh, take these cookies. That’s a start.” He offered the plate, which she accepted happily. “My granny made ‘em. They’re the best tasting cookies in the whole town. I would even dare say the whole valley,” he confidently stated. “It’d hurt our feelings if you didn’t try them.”

Jade’s smile grew. “Aw, I’d love to. Thank you very much, Alex. Please pass it on to your grandma, too.”

“Will do,” Alex nodded. He stood there awkwardly for a moment, and then just sighed. “Hey, I just
wanted to say. The Flower Dance is something more serious for me, so it was weird dancing with someone I barely knew. But... even with all that stuff, I had fun. And you were good with dancing!"

The young farmer chuckled. “I’m good at following directions,” she corrected. “But yeah. I had fun, too. It was nice... I’ve never really danced like that before.” She flushed, her memory flashing back to the slowest part of the Flower Dance.

“Whaaat? That’s lame, farm girl.” He playfully nudged her arm. “Well, it happens every year, so you’ll get more chances. And who knows. Maybe you’ll find your real dance partner.”

“Aw, that would be great.” She sighed again, but this time with more relief. “Thanks for being so cool about this. I really do feel horrible for punching you in the face.”

“Well, you shouldn’t feel horrible with a swing like that. You should start boxing!” Alex suddenly gasped. “I should put boxing into my work out schedule! That’d be such a great exercise!”

Jade laughed. “We can spar and not feel bad about punching each other?” she offered.

Alex chuckled, too. “Aw, nah. No offense at all, because you’re really freaking tough. But I don’t want to hit girls, especially not pretty ones.”

“I was joking, anyway. But thank you for saying I’m pretty,” the young farmer smiled.

He nodded. “And don’t worry about the bruise. I’m a quick healer! Healthiest bod in the valley,” he grunted as he flexed. Jade chuckled again. He had a certain dumb charm about him, and he was exaggerating himself, but it was sweet.

“Yeah, I’m sure you are. Bye now, Alex. I’ll enjoy the cookies.”

“You better!” Alex hopped off of the porch and began his trek back to town.

The talk with Alex was a huge weight off of Jade’s chest. Even if other townspeople judged her for her actions, the person she had a quarrel with had no problem with her anymore. She was able to water her little plot of dirt, which now had eagerly sprouting plants. The weather was getting warmer as Summer was nearing, but she was confident that the crops could be harvested in time. Not to mention, she had been invited to hang out with Abigail, Sam, and Sebastian for the night. The tables were finally turning in her favor, and she was growing excited.

Jade decided that it was finally time to unpack all of her belongings. No more shuffling out clothes from a hastily packed suitcase, or grabbing a can of food from her leftover groceries. She lived here then, and planned to stay.

The majority of the day was spent unpacking, moving, and organizing. Her master bedroom finally looked livable enough, and her living room was starting to come together. Her room had the giant bed, and then a dresser, vanity, hanging shelves, and a large horizontal bookshelf full of comics and assorted books. Luckily for her as well that Robin included a walk-in closet and a master bathroom to accompany the bedroom. In the living room, she hooked up a small television, a three-seat couch straight across from it and a love seat to the side. A coffee table set between the television and the couch. “I’m finally becoming an adult,” Jade excitedly muttered to herself, gazing at her room design. She pushed up another bookshelf beside the television, then setting a few boxes containing DVDs and assorted books that weren’t included with the ones in her room. The young farmer grew
enthusiastic as her home slowly began feeling like hers.

The last bit of organization she wanted to attempt that day was to get all of her kitchen appliances in order; pots and pans were put up, food was stored in the cabinets and fridge, and utensils could finally have their own drawer to rest in. With all of her accomplishments, she awarded herself with a few cookies made from Alex’s grandmother. They were extremely delicious and made with such care. Jade’s mental list of gifting the townfolk increased in length, since there were so many nice gestures from them. When she was done with most of the essential unpacking, the sky began to redden. The day was ending.

The young farmer took the arrival of evening as a sign to leave for the saloon. She... didn’t even realize there was a saloon, not before Abigail had brought it up. Equipped with her backpack and some water this time, Jade took no hesitation in bringing out her map.

Stardrop Saloon. That’s what it was called. Jade sighed in relief. At least it was open late, if she got lost. She began her trip towards the saloon, but then her heart sank. Hopefully her new acquaintances wouldn’t leave if she was too late... The suggestion caused her to quicken her pace.

Luckily, the saloon wasn’t in such a location that was too confusing. In fact, the building was located right around the town square. Jade took a mental note of its location and did her signature deep breath before walking inside.

The saloon was filled with warmth, from the deep brown wooden walls and floors, to the pleasant music chiming away from the jukebox in the corner. Tables were spread out to Jade’s left and right, while the bar itself was straight ahead. A friendly, mustached figure cleaned a beer mug as he stood in front of the bar’s register. Behind him was a lady with sapphire blue hair and a red apron. The bartender noticed the newcomer and gave her a reassuring smirk. She waved to them and walked further inside, looking for the arcade part of the saloon.

There were other unfamiliar faces, barely recognizable from the previous town festival. A red-haired girl was sipping wine in the back, and a middle-aged blonde woman was chugging her beer. Neither of them seemed very interested in talking. She walked to her right, away from the women, and saw two gruff looking men talking to each other. One of them was scrawny and old, but had a wise and generous feel about him. He wore a beret and messy clothes... she could smell the ocean from him. The other one was a larger, stout man, with thick clothes and an overall depressing outlook. He didn’t seem like he was in the mood to talk, either. Jade continued walking, stumbling into the arcade.

Just as the trio had explained it, there was a large pool table in the center of the room. Sam had his back to Jade, carefully aiming his next shot against his match with Sebastian. Sebastian stood at the other end of the pool table, with such an air of confidence that Jade hadn’t noticed before. He stood proudly, and with such a smug smile as his friend desperately tried to conquer the next move. Some feet away from the pool table were two bulky arcade machines. One of them didn’t seem to be working, but the other one was on... Journey of the Prairie King. Sounded interesting.

At the end of the wall stood various couches, chairs, and side tables. Abigail was boredly reclining in one of the couches, watching the other two play their game. Something seemed to weigh on the young adult’s mind, but she was quiet. Upon seeing Jade, her eyes brightened and she smiled wide. “Jade!” she called happily. “You made it!”

The boys heard Abigail’s exclamation and focused their attention to the farmer. Sam took no
hesitation to drop the cue stick he was holding; the game had frustrated him to no end, anyway. “Hey, Jade!” He added to the enthusiasm. “Now that you’re here, we can have some pizza. Totally gonna do that now.” He took every opportunity to walk away from the damned pool table, causing Sebastian to chuckle.

“That means I win!” Sebastian called to Sam.

“Have your petty win!” scoffed Sam from the other side of the saloon.

Jade laughed a bit. “I take it he’s not a pro,” she mentioned.

“Far from it,” Sebastian confirmed with a smirk. “He’s trying, though.”

Abigail jumped up from her seat and ran over to the newcomer. “Hey, so how are you feeling?” she asked curiously, though she sounded excited as well.

Jade appreciated her concern. “I’m fine,” she replied calmly, “and I made up with Alex, so we’re fine now. I feel better.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Abigail smiled in response. “It would suck to make enemies that early in living here, y’know.”

“Yeah,” laughed Jade, mostly relieved. “Last year was really weird and my time here has been exciting to say the least. But... I’ll be settling soon, I imagine. I want to surround myself with cats or something. It’s a big house.”

“A cat lady!” Abigail giggled. “There’s no perfect role. I wish I could have cats, but...” her speech lowered to a grumble. “My dad’s allergic to pretty much everything, it’s annoying.” Her eyes narrowed. “Including everything I like.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” the farmer murmured. “Some parents can be pretty overbearing.”

“Ugh, isn’t that right,” Abigail huffed. “Anyways, how has the farming life been so far? Have you started?”

Jade picked up the cue stick that Sam dropped and examined it. Sebastian was zoning out, but paid attention when she seemed somewhat interested in playing. “Did you see that tiny plot of dirt outside of my house?” she asked with a snort. “That’s all my blood, sweat and tears!”

Sebastian silently reset the pool table, then gestured to Jade to make the first move. Abigail watched the two of them, though didn’t seem to be following the game itself. “That’s pretty neat,” Abigail hummed.

Sebastian silently reset the pool table, then gestured to Jade to make the first move. She leaned down and took careful aim at the cue ball. Abigail watched the two of them, though didn’t seem to be following the game itself. “That’s pretty neat,” Abigail hummed.

“What about you guys? What do you do?” Jade asked.

“Oh, I don’t have a job,” Abigail sighed. “I’m living the college life, or at least, I am online.”

Sam walked back in with a pizza platter, and set it down at a nearby table. “I work part-time at Joja Mart,” he replied, overhearing the conversation. “Which is to say, Abby’s dad isn’t fond of me.”

“Hey, you have to do what you have to in order to get by. I’ve survived off of less money before,” Jade assured them. Sebastian took his turn in the game while Abigail joined Sam with the pizza.
The young farmer chuckled a bit as she aimed for her next shot. “I’m surprised there’s even a Joja Mart here... well, maybe not too surprised. They were around every corner, where I used to live.”

Abigail grumbled with a mouth full of pizza. “Don’t get me started about that whole deal. You don’t hear the end of it from my dad,” she muffled. “I get it, since they’re competitors and stuff. But it’s nonstop. I’m tired of it.”

Jade shrugged. “At least it’s just one? But yeah, I can definitely understand the frustration on your part.” She took her turn this time, though she felt rusty. She unfortunately forgot many of the strategies of the game.

“Yo, can you two stop playing? So help me, I’ll eat both your rations,” interrupted Sam from the side. “Jade, take it from me. You don’t want to get caught in this pool business with Seb. He is an evil sorcerer.”

The young farmer laughed. “I’m hungry anyway,” she said, placing the pool cue back onto the table.

“You’re just tired of losing,” Sebastian commented towards Sam. Both of them joined the other two, who were already dining on their meals. The majority of the night was enjoyable. They all ate pizza, chatted leisurely, and of course, bombarded Jade with questions. The young farmer was happy to tell them how she discovered the valley and bought the land, as well as her ventures with moving and finally making her space livable. Even though she didn’t know too much about the three, she felt at peace with them. She could open up easier to them, as opposed to other acquaintances of the town. Or... friends? Jade wasn’t sure when it was really acceptable to consider them friends. But, she liked them.

After eating, Abigail took to the working arcade machine, and Sebastian and Jade returned to their game of pool. Though Jade played far better than Sam did, Sebastian still prevailed as the better pool player. “Told you,” nodded Sam sadly as Jade reeled from the loss. “Don’t even try to get competitive,” he pouted.

Jade’s grumpy expression transitioned into a cheerful one. She laughed as she stared at the pool table. “It was still fun! I haven’t played pool in forever,” she grinned. “How are you so good, Sebastian?”

“Secrets,” he replied with a smile.

“Dammit, I’ll get it out of you someday,” the farmer jokingly threatened.

“You were good, though. Want to try again?” Sebastian narrowed his eyes, his smile having more mischievousness than before.

“Don’t, it’s a trap!” Sam lightly shook Jade by the shoulders. Jade laughed and playfully shoved Sam away.

“Just one more game. I’ll avenge you and then myself, Sam.” Jade confidently nodded to the blond, who only shook his head in disappointment.

“One game is all it takes,” he stated woefully. “Here lies Jade, death by pool.”

She chuckled. “Don’t worry about it, Sam! I am a good player. The evil sorcerer said so himself.”
One game turned into three games, and Jade won absolutely none of them. She was caught in the same rut as Sam, with such a destroyed honor. And yet, they were both determined. Jade needed to wipe that dumb smirk off of the raven-haired man’s face.

One more game.

Sebastian laughed even harder at the frustrated noises Jade made after losing the last game.

“Damn your evil powers!” screamed Jade, slamming the cue stick back onto the table. Sebastian was in his own fit of chuckles, trying to cease his laughter by covering his mouth.

“Sam. We have to team up.”

“How?” he asked. “He... he’s too powerful.”

“We must figure a way! We can’t let him go this far!” Jade scrunched up her fist in determination.

“We need a pool training montage or something.”

Sam laughed. “Yeah, let’s see how that goes.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes, but he had a large smile on his face. “Hey, this was fun, but it’s time for me to go now. Night.”

“Night!” both of them beamed back to Sebastian. He waved and walked out of the saloon.

“Man... it’s that late already?” Jade pouted. “I guess I should go too.” She had turned to the arcade machine where Abigail was previously, but she was no longer there. “Oh... Abigail left already?” Jade felt a bit guilty for not noticing.

“Oh, yeah. She doesn’t really hang out with us the whole time,” Sam mentioned with a shrug. “I never really got why. If she felt left out, she could just say so.”

“Maybe she’s shy. I can understand that. But... you’ve all been friends for a while, yeah?” Jade tilted her head in wonder.

Sam lifted his own head to try to accurately recall. “Well, Seb and I have been friends forever. Abigail hasn’t been around us as much, but I mean, we’ve known her for a while. She just kinda roams and does her own thing sometimes. Everyone in town has known each other for a while, now that I think about it...” The blond itched the side of his face. “But... Still.”

“Well, four is better than three. Feel free to invite me anytime,” Jade smiled.

“Pfft, you’re always welcome. I’m actually impressed. Both Abby and Seb take a while to warm up to people, but they both really like you. And then I do too, of course,” he replied.

They smiled at each other. Jade gave him a friendly pat on the chest. “Well, I really like all of you, too. I’m glad you decided to cheer me on for punching an innocent guy in the face.” The sentiment made Sam chuckle, though he seemed embarrassed as well. It didn’t sound all that great when she put it that way. “Haha, I’m just throwing you off. I mean it, though. Glad you approached me last night.”
“No problem!” Sam nodded as if nothing had happened.

Like water off a duck’s back, huh. Jade liked Sam’s attitude. She wanted to speak more, but then she noticed a clock hanging on the wall of the saloon. It was a little past 9 PM. “Oh wow, it’s even later than I thought,” Jade huffed. “I should go for real now.”

“Man, same here. Have a good night!” Sam returned the pat to Jade’s head and waved as he walked off. The young farmer followed behind at a distance, breaking in path once she had left the town square.

Walking back home was different when it was dark, but at least Jade didn’t get lost on her way. Despite the earlier troubles she had traversing the town, the layout of Pelican Town was relatively simple and tiny compared to other towns and cities.

Jade felt satisfied as she finally made it back home. The full moon was shining clearly overhead, bats screeched in the distance, and leaves gently rustled in the night breeze. The young farmer sucked in a deep breath through her nose, and sighed out of her mouth. The end of the day... finally.

She stepped onto her front porch, but then halted. She heard something behind her. Jade slowly turned her head.

On her work and effort as a farmer, something green, glowing, and squishy had rolled onto one of Jade’s precious crops. It didn’t seem much bigger than the plant it had rolled onto, but it was still something Jade has never seen before.

“Hey! HEY!” Jade rushed up to the translucent, snotty creature. It heard her and opened its tiny green eyes. An antennae with a little sphere rose up from its top, and it made a squishing sound in retaliation. The creature was, quite literally, a living slime ball.

The young farmer ruthlessly kicked it off her crops. Taking it as a challenge, the slime jumped and charged towards her, latching onto one of her knees. At first, she didn’t feel anything, but then she felt an intense burning... Acid! It felt like acid! She yelled in pain and slung the creature off of her leg. Luckily, Jade had her tools with her. She desperately grabbed whichever tool she could feel for first, and brought it out. Pickaxe.

“Back off!” shouted Jade angrily, striking at the creature as if it were made of stone. The end of the pickaxe pierced through the entire creature; she could see the tool in its body. It squeaked in pain and broke free from the pickaxe, but it wasn't finished. It lunged at her again, to which she was able to dodge. Jade whapped the slime once more, smacking it into a nearby tree. The creature had exploded into several bits of goo on impact, and then ceased all movement.

“Little bastard,” Jade hissed, then examined her leg. It didn’t hurt very much anymore, but there was a hole on her knee, and a light red mark where it was exposed. “Gah...” she cursed under her breath, then hurrying over to her plant. It was a little slimy, but other than that, it was okay. The young farmer brushed the excess slime and glanced back over to the tree. The glops of goo were still there, but maybe it wouldn’t come back.

Now the sleep was really deserved. She was finally able to walk inside and slam the door shut. She took a quick shower from the day’s misfortunes, then collapsed into bed at once. That was enough nature for the time being.
Exchanges

Chapter Summary

Abigail hooks Jade up with some sweet new gear and Robin gets Jade to run an errand.

Saturday, Spring 27 Y1

“You’ve never seen a slime before?” Abigail smirked, entertained by the fact.

Jade and Abigail caught each other in town the day after their meeting in the saloon. The young farmer recalled seeing some leeks and wild horseradishes that could be foraged for selling and brought a basket with her, while Abigail was going to explore the mines that resided within the mountaintop. Since they were going the same way, they decided to travel together.

“That’s what those little bastards are called? How original,” Jade growled, subconsciously rubbing her knee where the slime attacked. “It stung me and tore a hole through my favorite pair of jeans, dammit.” She was sad to be wearing a different pair of jeans, though she was the only one who could tell the difference.

Abigail chuckled. “Which are you more upset about?”

“My skin heals, but my jeans are ripped forever,” Jade pouted.

“Unless you sew it back together, you dummy.”

“I’m a farmer, not a miracle worker,” she whined.

The young adventurer’s chuckle burst into a laugh. “Get someone to fix it, then! You know Haley’s sister?”

“I barely even know Haley, except for her dress size. The sister is completely off my radar.”

“Oh, uh. She’s the woman that helps Gus.”

“. . . Gus?” Jade hung her head. Remembering names were difficult for her.

Abigail raised an eyebrow. “Gus is the bartender,” she explained, “and Emily is the blue-haired lady at the bar. She’s Haley’s older sister. Anyways, she sews stuff, maybe you could ask her.”

“There aren’t even 40 people in this town and there’s already too many people,” Jade grumbled. Abigail couldn’t help but laugh.

“You sound like such a recluse,” she teased.

“Remembering people’s names is a hard task!” Jade shouted in retaliation. “I would forget all of your names if it weren’t for the incredibly fashionable hair most of you have.” Abigail could have responded, but nothing she’d say could really prove Jade wrong. She gave an approving nod,
“Speaking of fashion, I like your outfit today,” Jade mentioned. Abigail was wearing a mint bow on the side of her head, a black choker, a blue sleeveless coat, a gray v-neck, and dark jeans and shoes.

“Aww, what about my awesome outfit is really fashionable?” the adventurer gasped in a joking manner.

“It’s fashionable because it’s awesome,” Jade politely repeated, then hummed as he looked ahead of them. “You said you’re going to the mines, right?”

“Yup. Gonna search for some gems, and defeat a slime or two on the way.”

“Oooh, tough. Maybe I should start doing that... I still can’t believe a slime was around my house and nearly absorbed one of my parsnips.” Jade crossed her arms grumpily. She probably wasn’t going to stop talking about it for a while.

Abigail shrugged. “Well, you said you’re in a really old neighborhood, right? Slimes probably moved in around there. Honestly, I’d love to explore the ruins near your place. Don’t be surprised if you hear me shuffle around later.”

“You’re only allowed to if you drag me along,” Jade replied with a nod, “because I really need to explore, too.”

“Haha! It’s a deal,” Abigail beamed. “Oh, speaking of... do you even have a sword?” The two stopped in their paths. The sky was clear, save for a few stray clouds. A serene lake quietly babbled to one side, while a cliff face protruded from their other side. A small dirt road curved in the distance, a huge cave opening on one end and a lonely cabin on the other side of the lake.

Jade shook her head. “No... I used my pickaxe to defeat the slime last night.”

“You need a sword!” shouted Abigail. She seemed not only surprised, but worried. “If huge families of slimes live around you, you’re screwed!”

“Okay, okay! Where can I get a sword, then?” Jade began to sweat out of stress.

Abigail calmed down, and then looked around to make sure no one was nearby. “Okay, I can hook you up. Follow me to the mines,” she began, walking again and ushering Jade to come along.

“Um... is acquiring a sword like drug dealing?” Jade asked. She meant it as a joke, but she was half convinced that it wasn’t.

“It might as well be!” Abigail stressed. “I’m not going to tell you how many times my sword has been confiscated. It’s too much.” They quickly traversed into the mines, which was very dim and damp as most caves were. The rocky walls were a dingy gray, but there were lanterns dispersed about that shed some very gentle light. An old, rickety elevator stood at the far end of the cave. Old, shoddy minecarts adorned some abandoned railways. They looked like they haven’t been used in decades.

“Because my dad hates all joy in the world, I have two swords in case one gets taken. But since we’re friends, I’ll give you my backup sword.” Abigail walked over to a loose formation of rocks, and she moved some of them aside. She brought out a very simple western broadsword, but it still...
seemed to be cared for and could definitely deal with pesky slimes. “Here it is.”

“Oh, wow…” Jade gasped, covering her mouth with her free hand. “Are you sure I can have it?”

“You need it, dummy!” Abigail practically shoved the sword into Jade’s hands, causing her to drop the basket. The young farmer held the sword awkwardly before adjusting her hands.

“I’ve never fought with swords before,” Jade muttered shyly.

“Here, I’ll tell you how to fight slimes. Use that sharp end, slice them like you would a loaf of bread. Repeatedly. And much harder. There, dead slime. Happy ending.” The adventurer crossed her arms.

Jade laughed. “Well, now that you say it like that…. thanks!” She stashed the sword safely to the side of her backpack so that she could easily retrieve it, then picked her basket back up. “This will help a lot! Maybe I should put fences up at my place, too… That could minimize the terrorizing,” the young farmer stated, thinking out loud.

“You’ll figure it out, Jadey. Well, I’m gonna go… explore… the mines, I guess.” Abigail looked to the elevator of the mines worriedly, though Jade didn’t really seem to notice.

“Have fun and get lots of awesome gems!” Jade waved. “Time for me to go forage. It’s about time I start shipping stuff.”

“You got this,” Abigail grinned to her comically and waved back. Jade noticed a bit of fakeness from the smile, but decided to not comment. Instead, she left with hopes that Abigail was doing alright.

The young farmer took this fantastic opportunity to truly explore the mountains and learn the area. She was eager to see that the wild horseradishes and leeks were still popping out of the ground, and happily collected them. Her collecting was going well, and it got even better when she noticed that nearby bushes even had berries!

“Aw, heck yes!” Jade rushed up to a cluster of bushes behind the carpenter shop. The berries were pink and plush... she hoped they weren’t poisonous. “Huh... can I eat these?” The young farmer picked up bunches of the berries off of their stems, and happily stashed them in her basket alongside the other goods.

She suddenly halted when she heard some nearby rustling. Jade turned her head towards the sound, terrified of another creature... Luckily, just another townsperson... Actually, she’s never seen him before.

There was a man who had walked out of the bushes. The first thing Jade noticed was his lack of shoes, and then his furry tan clothes, and lastly, his incredibly messy gray hair and long beard. The man noticed her as well, but he actually seemed more scared of her than she was of him.

“U-um.... H... hello, I don’t think I’ve seen you before?” Jade shivered, not knowing how to respond. “S-sorry... am I... trespassing?”

His expression morphed into surprise. Why did she seem so nervous? “... I don’t think I’ve seen you, either,” he gently spoke. He glanced at her basket, seeming almost displeased.

“Oh, um... I-I’m the new farmer... My name’s Jade. It’s nice to meet you.” She swiftly bowed to
him.

He stood up a little straighter. “I am Linus,” he replied. “...I’m sorry to say, but you are trespassing.” He gestured nearby over to a small yellow tent. Jade couldn’t believe she didn’t notice that before.

“Oh! I’m really sorry!” She felt like a wreck. The last thing Jade wanted was to get into trouble with more townspeople. She noticed he stared to her basket, and took out a bunch of the berries she saw. “U-um... Would you like these as an apology? Though... I can’t say if they’re poisonous, maybe not...”

“Those are salmonberries,” Linus informed her. He didn’t really seem afraid anymore, though he didn’t trust her, either. “They’re not poisonous... quite nutritious, actually.”

“Oh, good! So... you can have these, if you want.” She stretched out her arm while holding the clump of berries. He actually smiled and humbly accepted them.

“Thank you,” he muttered.

“Y-yeah! Sorry for crossing without your permission, um... b-bye now, Linus.” She bowed again and quickly ran off, careful to keep her basket balanced. Linus watched her leave, glanced at the salmonberries gifted to him, and quietly walked back to his tent with a calm smile.

“Jade!”

The young farmer knew that voice. “Robin!” she beamed, turning to the source of the voice and enthusiastically. Jade was stopped at the bottom of the trail leading up further into the mountains. The carpenter’s shop was right beside her, and Robin was standing in its doorway, waving back.

“C’mere, kid!” Robin shouted to her. Jade complied and ran over to her.

“Hey! How are you doing, Robin?” she kindly asked as she approached.

“Oh, I’m doing just fine, hon. How are you? I haven’t seen you since that mess at the festival the other day. I was worried sick, you know.” Robin huffed, crossing her arms and giving a grumpy, motherly look to Jade.

She sadly smiled. “I was at the saloon with Sebastian and the others yesterday, and told them about making up with Alex and everything. He didn’t tell you?”

Robin gasped. “No, he didn’t! Ugh. That boy, I swear.” Despite the grumpy tone, she grinned back to Jade. The carpenter felt relieved to know Jade was able to hang out with others. “So, you’re making friends? You’re doing well?”

“Yeah,” Jade replied shyly. She averted her eyes, but she seemed happy. “I’m still adjusting to the town, but everyone’s been extremely nice. Sebastian kicked my ass in pool like five times.”

Robin laughed. “Oh what, you can’t win against him? Then I’m afraid I have some bad news if you play with me,” she winked.

“Somehow, I fail to be surprised,” Jade chuckled in response. “You seem to have a real competitive spirit.”
“Don’t even mention that to Demetrius, he will go on a huge spiel about it... Oh! I got lost in my thoughts. There was actually a reason I called you over.” She grinned.

“I’ll do anything for the builder of my lovely house,” Jade elegantly mentioned. “What can I do?”

“I love your spunk, kid. I wanted to ask if you could go run an errand for me. Do you know where Marnie’s ranch is? I would go myself, but I have some furniture orders to finish before the end of the day.”

“Uh... Can’t say I have,” Jade admitted, all confidence sapped from her voice.

Robin responded with a motherly sigh, though her expression was still cheerful enough. “I’m sure you’ve seen it. You know how you walk to town? Her ranch is on the way.”

“Wait.” Jade mildly interrupted to pull out her map, then searched for the location. “… Oh, that’s the ranch? I know where it is!” she beamed proudly, as if she didn’t need the map to help her. Jade casually folded and stored the map back in its appropriate place on her backpack.

Robin chuckled. “Great. Marnie ordered some more wood to fix her fences, and I was wondering if you could go take it to her. She already paid, so don’t worry about that.” Robin pointed out to a short but sturdy wheelbarrow loaded with a significant stack of wood. It seemed... heavy. Jade seemed unsure, but Robin snorted in response. “Don’t worry, it’s not as heavy as it seems. And you’ll be going downhill a lot, anyway.”

“Hmmmmm... I dunno...” Jade innocently looked away.

“Aww, please?” Robin clapped her hands together and stared to Jade with dilated pupils.

“How about we make this favor into an exchange?” Jade’s eyes met back with Robin’s, sparkling with a mischievousness that the carpenter was all too familiar with.

“Oh, boy. What do you want?” Robin smirked.

“My farm got attacked by a slime last night, and I think I need some wooden fences around my area.”

Robin went from curious to enlightened. Her eyes glittered with excitement. “Wait, this is an exchange? Sounds like you’re giving me an early birthday gift!” She cackled.

“Well, what do you say, then?” Jade smiled.

“I say absolutely yes. You don’t even have to pay, since you’ve been so sweet. And I admire a person with passion.” Robin nodded and examined her. “We need more people like you in town.”

“Wait, you say I’m sweet even after the whole thing at the festival?” Jade looked shocked.

“Jade, I will tell you a secret.” The red-haired woman sighed proudly. “I love scraps of all kinds. Be it extra wood, leftover food, or straight up punching someone.”

The young farmer laughed. “You’re terrible!”
Robin laughed too. “I’m just kidding, but really... if anyone has a huge problem with you because of a misunderstanding, they’ll have to go through me, first. You’re a good kid.”

Jade hung her head, but sported a shy smile on her face. “Aww...”

“Hey, I mean it too.” Robin pat the young farmer’s head. “You know how boring this town was before we got a new farmer? I think you’re the life this area needs, not only economically but for the townspeople... And maybe you’ll make my son go outside more, knowing you’re friends with him.”

“I wouldn’t say friends... Oh, why not make him work on the fence with you?” Jade joked.

“That’s a great idea! I will make him take a day off. Do you want to see Sebby more? I could have him visit you,” Robin excitedly mentioned, nodding with confidence.

Jade’s face blanked, then she shyly laughed. “I was just joking, I didn’t actually mean it... Are you forcing your son on me?”

Robin placed her hands on her hips, but didn’t answer the question. “Don’t toy with my fragile heart like this, Jade. Fence or no fence?”

“I would really like a fence,” she muttered.

“Then leave it to me!” Robin grinned. “But first, the favor.”

Jade looked back over to the wagon. “Oh, yeah. Of course! I’ll go do that now.” The farmer stepped over to the wheelbarrow and grabbed its extended handle. “Anything else you want me to do?” she asked.

“Nothing for now, but if I think of anything, I’ll let you know. You’re a lifesaver, hon!” Robin happily waved her off. Jade smiled and left, pulling a wheelbarrow with one of her hands while carrying her full basket with the other hand.

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Jade passed more unfamiliar faces on her way to Marnie’s ranch. Her skin shivered and her arms shook, terrified of what they thought of her, and what they were thinking while passing by... The young farmer inhaled deeply and straightened her posture, attempting her very best to walk with utmost pride. It shouldn’t matter what they think. Just a misunderstanding, like what Robin said. She had people like Robin by her side, to begin with. She would be fine.

Fortunately, Jade found the ranch without any sort of trouble. She lightly knocked on the door, but there was no answer. She opened the door to see no one behind the counter. Huh. The young farmer left the wheelbarrow full of lumber near the doorway before walking inside. “Um... hello?” she murmured weakly.

She stood at the front counter; it took up about half of the area, making the room feel much smaller than it actually was. The walls appeared old, but homely. Jade noticed two hallways, one going to a kitchen, while the other went to a living room. She saw one door left ajar, with...

Was that a girl? Jade squinted in an attempt to see better. A young, tan little girl stood at the slightly opened door. She had very dark, fluffy hair, large eyes, and an adorable purple dress. Her hand clutched to the doorway tightly as she stared at Jade in an almost alien-like way.
“... Hello there,” waved Jade.

“Aunt Marnie is busy, she said.” The girl’s voice was somewhat monotone, and very serious. Jade was worried that she was scaring her.

“Oh, where is she?” Jade asked.

“She brought her friend... I’m not supposed to talk to strangers.”

“Oh, I see... Um... Well, my name is Jade, and I’m the new farmer here. It’s nice to meet you,” she smiled. “I brought some lumber for Marnie... can you tell her that it’s waiting for her?”

The girl was quiet.

“... Um... What’s your name?” Jade awkwardly asked.

The girl took a step back into her room, and then slammed the door shut.

“That went well,” Jade remarked with sarcasm. She sighed. “Well, the wood’s there,” she confirmed to no one as she walked back outside.

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The bright blue sky had transitioned into warm purples and reds as the daylight faded. Jade sighed as she stared overhead on her trail back home. Lewis was right about how the time passed in the valley. She felt like she had so much to do in the day, but there was never enough time to do everything. The young farmer arrived back to her land and sighed in relief. All the carrying really tuckered her out.

She walked up to her plot of crops first to see how they were doing, and to make sure they weren’t eaten in her absence. Oh, good; they were fine... in fact, her parsnips actually looked ripe! “No way!” Jade exclaimed in excitement, quickly kneeling down to examine even further.

One by one, she plucked her group of parsnips. They were all perfect, even the one that had slime on it previous. What a successful first harvest! Jade stashed them alongside the foraged goods of her basket. Only the potatoes were left... hopefully they would grow before the very end of the season.

*Mew!*

Jade stopped paying attention to her harvest for a brief moment. She tensed from the squeaky call. Another slime?

No, it couldn’t be. Out from the forest trot a creature she could only faintly see in the dark. Jade gasped. “A kitten!”

The young cat was a tiny and thin ball of shadowy fluff. He didn’t have a collar, and he seemed to be limping on one leg... the poor thing couldn’t have been more than a teenager. The farmer sucked in another exasperated breath and rushed over to the tiny creature, though was careful to not startle him. “Hey, little guy,” she murmured with a high-pitched voice. “Where did you come from?”

The cat had stopped when Jade started walking, but then she kneeled down and stretched out her
hand. The feline inched forward and sniffed Jade’s hand curiously before rubbing his head into her palm.

“Aw,” she giggled. “I’m glad you like me.” The farmer’s eyes narrowed when she had noticed a slight burn on the cat’s leg. It must have been a slime, considering how similar the singe looked to the one on her knee. “Oh, no... this place really is infested, isn’t it?”

Jade sighed and gently pet the cat. “You know what, I might have some bandages.” She picked it up. Though he squeaked in protest, she took the feline inside and did what she could do to tend to the wound. Afterwards, she set the fluffy black cat back on her front porch, fresh with light medicine and a loose bandage applied to his leg. As a reward, she tossed a couple slices of sandwich meat to him. “In case you’re hungry,” Jade gestured.

The farmer walked back out to her basket, then storing it into a new and well-built bin beside her house for collecting. Robin really did think of everything when building Jade’s house, which she found very convenient. If she stored the goods right, there would be money in her mailbox the next day. Jade subconsciously stared over to the mailbox not a few feet away from the storage bin... she hadn’t checked it at all since moving there. Her shoulders tensed... She didn’t want to get mail, just in case.

Surveying the area one last time, Jade walked back to her house. The cat was still there and feasting on the slices of meat tossed his way. Jade chuckled, giving the cat one final pet before going inside.
Chapter Summary

Robin goats Sebastian into spending the day with Jade in an attempt to get him out of the house.

Sunday, Spring 28 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jade earned a nice little collection of money for her crops and foraging the previous day, but she found that she spent most of it... on pet supplies. The fluffy black feline was still on her porch the next morning, claiming the cushioned swing as his own. The bandage was groomed off of his leg already, but the wound appeared to be in much better shape. Jade decided that their meeting was fate, and she immediately claimed him as her new pet and friend. After retrieving her new money, she took off towards Pierre’s for cat food, bowls, and what she could only describe as “the most precious red collar in existence!” The cat’s name would be Onyx, a play on his charcoal fur color... but his name should have been Prince, because that was how his new owner would treat him.

Today, Jade wanted to spend the day by herself. Her potatoes had grown large enough for her to uproot and then ship, though she kept a couple for some home-made meals. She finally finished unpacking everything and decorated the house to her taste: paintings she made on the walls, bookshelves full of apocalypse novels and comics of varying genres, proud plushie collection, the works. After surveying her house, she laughed; her home showed her age, or at least her favorite memories. “This looks more like a college dorm than anything,” she snorted to herself. The room design wasn’t bad though, and she was excited to eventually bring people over. Well, if she could work up the courage, that is.

The young farmer transformed the smallest room on the second floor into her own gaming cave as well; it was complete with a desktop computer, a small television, retro consoles, colorful posters, and the ever-so popular beanbag chairs. While the room wasn’t that large, it was still open enough to have comfortable space between the television, game systems, and the chairs. One side of the room had two large windows with a view of the farmland, and the corner of the opposite wall was perfect for the computer and desk that accompanied it.

Jade only needed one more box to unpack to be officially moved in... the box was very small, but heavy. Jade sat in the middle of her gaming room, staring down to the very last package before her. Without much thought, she opened it and began rummaging inside. It was a collection of wires, an extra power strip, a few controllers designed for her computer, and...

A phone. Jade forgot she had a phone, or rather, she wanted to forget. It was an ancient flip phone that wasn’t larger than the farmer’s palm. Its case was dented, the screen was cracked, and one of the buttons on the keypad was missing. She picked up the phone and examined it, though she shivered. The battery was ripped out of the back, as it should have been. Her hands began to sweat. No. She chucked the phone into the nearest trash can. She didn’t have to worry, she knew she wouldn’t. Jade stored the extra wires and objects for wherever they needed to go, then tossed the very last empty
box into the attic.

The rest of the day was Jade’s now. Now that her home was complete and there was no farming she could do for the day, winding down was something she felt she needed. Her muscles were sore, it was getting hot outside, and she didn’t feel like showing her face more than once in town for the day. Jade walked back to her newly finished gaming cave and scanned the room. She hadn’t played any video games in what felt like ages... maybe she would finally get the chance.

_Bam! Bam! “Hellooo!”_

Robin? What was she doing here? Jade peered out from one of the nearest windows in the room, then opened it to get a better look. “Good afternoon, Robin!” she shouted cheerfully. “What are you doing here? I was gonna be a hermit today.”

“What do you mean ‘what are you doing here’? I’m makin’ you that fence!” Robin crossed her arms and tapped her foot.

Oh yeah! Jade already forgot about their favor exchanges. “Hold on!” She shut the window, traveled downstairs, and then opened the front door. Robin stood there and grinned in greeting. The farmer noticed an old truck filled with lumber near the entrance to the field... Oh, no. Sebastian was there, leaning on the side of the truck and smoking a cigarette.

“You brought Sebastian? I was joking about yesterday!” gasped Jade.

“He’s my helper today,” Robin chuckled, then flailed her wrist of dismissal. “It’s fine, it’s fine. Business is slow for him, and I need to get him out before he holds himself up in his room all summer.”

The farmer huffed. “As long as he doesn’t blame this on me, I’ll be fine. What are your plans?”

Robin examined the perimeter of the farm. “Well, I’ll just cover the whole area, and make sure the fences are nice and low so the slimes can’t squeeze under them. You don’t have to worry about any other curious predators, either. Sound good?”

“It sounds perfect.” Jade smiled. “Do you want me to help?”

The carpenter shook her head. “No, hon. Have your day off! Sebby helps carry the wood, but really he doesn’t even do the main job. The fun part goes to me,” she grinned, then looked to Sebastian. Her eager look shifted into irritation. “Ugh. I hate it when that boy smokes. _Sebby_?” Robin yelled.

“What?” Sebastian shouted from the distance, finishing his cigarette.

_“Get over here!”_ The raven-haired man sighed and flicked the bud of his cigarette away before walking over. As he approached the porch, Jade noticed how tired he looked... there were circles under his eyes and he was hunched. He even rubbed his eyes as he stepped forward... he must have not slept very well.

“Sebby, you didn’t even say hi! And now you smell,” the carpenter grumbled.

Sebastian ignored the latter half of Robin’s comment. “Hey,” he said to Jade.
The farmer calmly smiled. “Hi, Sebastian. Helping your mom today, huh?” She spoke in a soft voice.

“She hardly gave me a choice,” he replied. Robin playfully shoved him, which made him smirk a little. “What? You begged me to come with you today.”

“I do not beg!” Robin replied with a huff.

“Yes you do,” Sebastian quickly replied.

”Yep, gonna have to agree with him,” Jade added. They looked at each other with smirks; Jade snorted in response.

“Wha- Jade, not you, too!” Robin clapped both of her hands on the sides of her face.

“Robin, you begged me to run the errand for you yesterday.” The farmer giggled.

“You wouldn’t stop knocking on my door until I said yes,” Sebastian yawned.

“Those hardly count,” the carpenter scoffed. “Well, I’m starting my project now. Both of you run along.” She shooed them off with her hands, then walked herself off the porch towards her truck.

“Wait, why did you make me come?” The amusement vanished from the son’s face. He narrowed his eyes towards his mother, who was still walking away in a nonchalant manner.

“You helped me load the truck!” she shouted back, not even looking in their direction anymore.

“I didn’t have to be here for that!” he yelled in return, one of his eyebrows twitching.

Robin hummed and approached the door of her truck. “Ohhh well!” she concluded, then opened the door and climbed inside. She started the vehicle and slowly drove it over to the edge of the farmland to begin work.

Sebastian sighed with irritation, then glanced at Jade. He suddenly looked away, embarrassed. “... Sorry,” he muttered.

The farmer laughed. “No, I didn’t take it that way, don’t worry. If I don’t have to go somewhere, I normally don’t.”

He seemed to relax. “Yeah.”

Jade smiled. “Well, are you planning to head out? You can stay if you want. I finished unpacking everything, and to celebrate I was going to chill and play some games.”

Sebastian’s eyes slightly widened from the mention of games. “Games?” he asked, though not looking at her. It seemed as if he tried to stay calm.

“Mmmhm. I can’t afford anything new and fancy, but I take great care of my retro consoles!” The farmer gave herself a proud nod. “I grew up on video games, really.”

“... What kind of games do you play?” he asked, allowing himself to look at her this time. He seemed to wake up from the mention.
Jade giggled. “All kinds! I don’t really have a favorite...” She crossed her arms and stared upwards as she tried to think. “I get into different moods. For a long time, I liked platformers and adventure games... I’ve been itching for an RPG lately, though.”

Sebastian had fully turned to her, eyes fully focused on her. “Yeah?” He took a step back and rubbed one of his arms when he realized he was acting too interested. “Uh... what about a genre?” he asked.

“Horror!” Jade beamed. “But I like all kinds of games, like I said... And I don’t have many horror games to begin with,” her cheerful tone lowered into a disappointed mumble.

“Have you played Void of Space?” he asked again. “Sci-fi horror... and it does have some RPG elements,” the young adult murmured.

“That’s what I was thinking of playing!” The farmer grinned. “That’s one of my favorite games, actually.”

Sebastian could no longer conceal his excitement. He made a large, genuine smile. “Mine too,” he replied. “But Solarion Chronicles is more up my alley.”

“I’ve always wanted to play that game, but I’ve never really tried tabletops before... And I never had enough people to play it with,” Jade sighed, but with a smile. Her eyes diverted to see Robin; she was setting up the fence posts, but was also staring over at them.

“Well, Sam and I- ...” Sebastian noticed Jade’s staring and turned to see as well. The son’s face drooped, mouth formed into a scowl. Robin quickly turned her head back and continued to work as if nothing happened. “Mother...” he growled, tensing his shoulders.

Jade chuckled. “Want to come inside? We could play some games if you want,” she suggested.

“Do you mind?” Sebastian asked almost shyly. His attention quickly went back to Jade.

“I wouldn’t have offered if I did! Come on, let’s get out of Robin’s sight anyway. She’s very...” Jade made a hand gesture, unsure how to properly explain.

“I know,” he breathed tiredly. The farmer opened her front door and walked in, Sebastian following behind. “She did this when I first met Sam, too...” He sighed. “If it’s any consolation, it means she really likes you.”

“Aw, it means a lot. Robin’s a sweet lady.” Jade closed the front door, so Robin could no longer see or try to read their mouths. The carpenter wasn’t all too pleased to be unable to eavesdrop on them, but she returned to work with higher spirits.

Jade was both excited and terrified to have someone over at her house. She was done unpacking everything, but never thought that she would have a guest over so soon. Her nerves seemed to calm down when she noticed Sebastian’s interest; he nodded to her collections of books and movies, and his face brightened to see the stacks of video games upstairs. “You have consoles with the cartridges? I didn’t think you’d have that kind of retro... these look brand new!” He eagerly dropped to his knees to better examine the game collection in its cabinet, Jade kneeling beside him.

“Yeah! My dad was a big collector. He kept these in the attic for ages before he finally caved and let
me have them. They all still work, too. Check this out,” Jade began, taking out a clear cased cartridge from the shelf. It was bright red and in perfect condition, the art on the front containing the title ‘MOONBOUND’. “This was my dad’s favorite out of his whole collection. He had me promise to never sell it... As if I would.”

Sebastian gasped and stared in shock. “Holy... is that an original copy?!” Jade handed it to him to let him examine, which he did with eagerness. “And the red edition?! There are only thirty of these known to exist! How the hell did your dad get a hold of this??”

Jade laughed. “Random garage sale,” she told him. Sebastian scoffed and carefully handed the game back to her.

“Figures.” Sebastian watched her put the game back on the shelf, and then he continued to scan the game titles. “I’d kill for his luck.”

Together, they reminisced about their favorite childhood games as they attempted to pick out a favorite game to play. With all the choices they had though, it was difficult. Being unable to play a game due to too many choices is a first-world problem that Sebastian experienced often. Though, whenever he bought something and the family knew, it meant another snide remark from Demetrius, which meant another argument and another evening full of uncomfortable silence within the carpenter shop. Sebastian scowled as he thought of the potential trouble with his step-father, but looked to Jade confusedly when she had nudged his elbow. “Hm?”

“Void of Space has co-op you know,” the farmer suggested while holding up a case with the same title. “How about it?”

“Oh. Sure,” he replied without much thought. Jade happily complied and put the game in its appropriate console. She tossed one of the game controllers to him before plopping in a nearby beanbag chair. The farmer playfully pat the other beanbag chair for him to sit, which he calmly did. At first, Sebastian felt awkward to be in a house that wasn’t his or Sam’s, but he grew increasingly comfortable as they played the game. He forgot to even consider their level of friendship when Jade began to point out easter eggs within the gameplay, and he began to spout his own bits of knowledge as well.

One interesting thing that Jade learned about Sebastian was that, when she could get him to talk about something he was interested in, he could go on about it for a while. They ended up gaming for hours and talking as they did so. Discussions of the game they were playing turned into discussions of other games, which then morphed into proposals about fan theories. Sebastian was well-versed in everything involving his favorite titles, be it video game, book, or movie... Jade found it a very charming habit of his. However, when he noticed he was talking more than Jade, he would suddenly go quiet and stop himself. Whenever they were waiting for their game to load, he would withdraw from their current conversation and shyly text on his phone.

“Why do you do that?” Jade curiously asked him as he put his phone away. The game finished loading and they continued to play.

“Why do I do what?” Sebastian asked in return.

“You get all excited, and then you just stop talking and apologize. You shouldn’t be sorry, you know. I haven’t been able to discuss games like this in ages!” Her eyes sparkled with such fascination.
Sebastian was genuinely surprised to hear that. He glanced to Jade, but brought his attention quickly back to the game. Her stare was... intimidating for him. “I was talking too much. You weren’t really... saying anything, after a certain point. Sorry.” He scratched his neck and tried his best to watch the game.

“You did it again!” Jade chuckled. “I was quiet because I was listening, and I’ve never heard you talk so much before. People are so busy all the time, so... I like having a long talk with somebody, even if it’s just video game theories.”

The raven-haired man lifted an eyebrow. “Really?” he asked. “Hearing a theory about Dreadlord Oxodius of all things?”

The farmer giggled and nodded. “Yeah, that was really cool! I never heard a good explanation about him.”

Sebastian didn’t really know how to respond. His face intensified in color, and he seemed somewhat flustered. “Oh... I didn’t really expect you to be that interested.”

“Why not?” Jade tilted her head and looked to him, no longer paying attention to their game.

“... Because no one is,” he murmured.

Jade paused the game and turned to her side in the chair, so she could face Sebastian better. “Well, I think you have a lot of really interesting things to say. You’re really smart, Sebastian!”

He huffed and stared to the wall straight across from him. “You say that, but then you’ll hear about my ‘prodigy’ of a half-sister,” he grumbled.

“Honestly, I don’t really care what she’s up to if she’s not talking about stuff like this,” Jade responded with a shrug. “And I don’t think you’re any less intelligent.”

Sebastian didn’t reply, but he had obviously heard what she said. He shifted in his seat and looked away from her, face slowly heating up. His attention caught onto her computer and desk at the far end of the room. “You have a computer?” he inquired.

Jade brought her gaze to her computer as well. “Yup, mostly for games and stuff.”

“You don’t have internet connection yet,” he muttered.

The farmer blinked and looked back to him. “I don’t. How do you know that?”

“I’m the one that sets it up for people in town. Do you want to have connection? It’s not expensive.” Sebastian finally looked at her. He seemed calm again, but Jade’s expression twisted into worry.

“Um... Internet? Connection?” She hesitated.

“... You can just say no,” he mumbled.

“N-no! I mean yes! I...” Jade sighed. “I would really love to have internet, but... I wasn’t really... planning on having a connection this time around. I’m...” She hung her head, trying to figure out how to word herself. “You’re pretty savvy with this stuff, right? Since you’re a programmer, you understand computers and internet and stuff?”
“Uh... It varies, but I’d like to think so.” Sebastian didn’t seem to follow what she was saying, or why she was acting strange.

Jade glanced both left and right before nervously staring at him. “It’s not possible for people to track computers or anything, right?”

Sebastian lifted an eyebrow. “That’s pretty specific,” he pointed out.

Jade’s eyes widened in realization. “Ugh. That is super shady sounding, I’m sorry,” she laughed nervously. “I just have a bad history with being, um, on the grid, I guess... So I thought I’d avoid it altogether here.”

“How so?” he asked.

Jade sighed, then scanned around the room before dropping her sight to the floor. “Keep a secret?” she asked him.

Sebastian shrugged. “Sure.”

“Back where I used to live, I had a...” Jade struggled to speak. “A... stalker.” It didn’t sound as ridiculous as she thought it would at first. Sebastian watched her, but didn’t express anything other than the fact that he was listening. The farmer calmed down, took a deep breath, and then continued: “Knew where I was at every moment and would stalk me online, too... I used to have a phone, but even if I changed the number, eventually they would be on the other end. It’s made me pretty... paranoid, admittedly.” She laced her fingers together and twiddled her thumbs, staring at her feet. “I mean, that’s not why I moved here or anything. Nothing like that. But... well, it did get pretty bad. I can’t lie. Sorry.”

Sebastian sighed as he pondered about his response. “I don’t think you need to worry.” He stood up from his chair and walked over to the computer to better examine it. “As long as you don’t use any old usernames or anything you’ve had, you’ll be fine. As far as tracking you, I don’t think it’s something so simple... Especially since you live so far away, now.” He turned to Jade, hands in his pockets. “So you want internet, then?”

The farmer’s eyes brightened. “Would you do that? It’d be fine?” She stood up from her chair and hugged her chest as she stared at him.

The raven-haired man nodded. “I’d have to go back home and get the set up, so it’d be tomorrow, but.. Yeah.”

Jade grinned and eagerly went up to him with open arms. “Thank you!” she exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him in an embrace. The intention was friendly, but Sebastian instantly tensed and froze. His arms were up in the air, and he couldn’t move. The last person that Jade was this close to was Alex... the height difference was incredible, with Alex dwarfing Jade in height. In contrast, Sebastian only seemed to be a few inches taller than her. They were nearly face-to-face with each other, but that only made the situation even worse for Sebastian. She quickly realized what she had done and released her hold, taking a step back. He stared into the distance with shock, as if he were a deer caught in the headlights... whoops. Jade’s face flushed with both worry and embarrassment. “Oh, sorry! I, um. You don’t like people... getting close. That was my mistake.”

Sebastian didn’t reply, making her feel even worse. He put his arms down as she let go, at least. And
he was breathing, or at least, she thought he was... hopefully?

*BAM! BAM!*

Both Jade and Sebastian flinched from the sudden noise. There was the creak of the front door. “You here, hon?” called Robin.

“O-oh! Um! Yeah! I’m... here! C-coming!” Jade glanced to the room’s door, then back at Sebastian, who rubbed his ears from the noise. “H-hey, I really am sorry. Uh. I mean, I know it’s just a hug, but... Sorry.” She buried her face in her hands as she quickly walked away, completely flustered and ruined. It was better to get out of there and give Sebastian some space.

Robin waved to Jade as she almost tripped down the stairs before hastily catching herself. “Whoa, what’s gotten into you, clumsy?” She chuckled a bit at her own tease and crossed her arms. “You doing okay?”

“I’m fine!” Jade yelled. Though it was an interesting strategy, yelling louder did not necessarily increase the truth in what she was exclaiming. Robin saw right through the lie and noticed the nervous sweat and rosy cheeks on Jade’s face. The farmer knew that Robin didn’t believe her. Jade would make all these efforts to be friendly, but every action ends up backfiring in some way. Punching a large guy’s face, hugging a reclusive guy’s torso. Both painful and incredibly awkward for at least one of the people involved, if not both. Jade’s simple impulses led her down a path of carelessness; complete destruction, in her eyes.

Robin couldn’t help but find Jade’s expression of horror entertaining, but also worrying. “What’s up with you? You look like you’ve seen the end of the world,” she inquired in an attempt to be sensitive.

“I might as well have,” Jade whispered in woe. Sebastian walked downstairs, hands back in his pockets and hair flopped over his face. Robin just had to glance at him to put the entire situation together. *Now* she was really entertained.

“I’m surprised you’re still here, Sebby,” the carpenter grinned. “I was just about to let Jade here know that I finished half the fences. The other half will be completed tomorrow!” Robin gave a friendly pat to Jade’s shoulder as Sebastian stopped to be with them. He didn’t look as frozen as he did before, but Jade noticed that he refused to look her in the eye.

“You got that much done that fast?” Jade asked, trying her very best to focus on Robin.

The carpenter nodded. “Yep, work day’s over.” That’s when Jade noticed that it was dark outside. She peered behind Robin to look through the opened door; the sun slowly vanished behind faraway trees. Time passed that quickly?

“Wow,” Jade murmured. She had nothing else to say.

“So what have you two been up to?” Robin asked with cheer in her voice. Both Jade and Sebastian glared at her. She was too nosy for her own good.

“Video games,” Sebastian quickly stated.

Robin grinned. “Games, huh? So what did you do?”
“Nothing. I’ll get the truck running,” Sebastian mumbled to his mother.

Robin laughed and ruffled both of their heads. "No, don't worry about it! I'll do it," she beamed before walking out.

They were alone again, but it was Sebastian’s choice this time. Jade still felt incredibly guilty about invading his space, but at least he was more relaxed. He saw how nervous she was, and sighed. “...It’s really not that big of a deal,” he muttered, fixing his hair.

Oh, thank heavens. Jade made an incredible sigh of relief. “I’m glad, I was just so worried because of how you responded and all.”

He decided to ignore that, but looked away from her again. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

“Thanks for coming, I had a lot of fun.” Jade smiled. She felt much better since Sebastian was talking to her.

“Me too...” He smirked. “Why do you do that?”


“You freak out about everything. You shouldn’t freak out, you know,” Sebastian mocked, a mischievous grin forming on his face.

“Well-” Jade suddenly stopped herself, realizing he was copying her earlier dialogue. She laughed and then began to shove him to the front door. “Get out of my house before I give you a shiner.”

Sebastian was able to laugh too. He started walking without her aid, then giving her a wave. “Bye,” he said.

The farmer’s smile widened as he left. She was completely relaxed then. “Have a good night!” Jade waved back to him with utmost enthusiasm. Robin started her truck and drove slightly over to Sebastian so that he could climb in without needing to walk further. Together, they left the premises of the farm. Jade walked onto the porch to watch them leave, another sigh of relief escaping her throat. Her new fluffy companion meowed in greeting and rubbed Jade’s leg with his tail before trotting inside. Jade was quiet as the farm revealed its nighttime sounds and scents.

Jade didn’t really have the day to herself after all, but it was a good day regardless.

Chapter End Notes

12/22/2018 - Cleaned up a bit of dialogue
Beginning of Summer

Chapter Summary

Jade meets some townspeople and grows worried about her presence in town.

Monday, Summer 1 Y2

Chapter Notes

The first day of Summer was here and everyone could feel it. The trees of the forest seemed to glow in the beaming sunlight, as the clouds were scarce. Birds chattered about, forest rodents scampered to and fro, and mosquitoes buzzed about to all of the townspeople’s dismay. The heat was becoming unbearable even though the season had only just started. This summer would feel longer than most summers, that was certain.

As promised, Robin returned to complete the fencing on Jade’s farm. Sebastian was there too, but he actually had a job to do this time. Jade trusted him to set up the network connection in the house while Robin hammered away on the fence construction. The start of the new season meant new seeds in stock from Pierre’s, so Jade’s day would also be busy. Luckily, the pay from her last potato harvest granted her enough to invest in more crops. More profit was on the horizon!

Jade had eaten all the cookies from Alex’s grandmother by then, so she cleaned the plate and decided to return it when she took her trip in town. Looking at her map, she was able to locate Alex’s house and went there on her way up towards the grocery shop. The home was a decent sized compared to other houses in the neighborhood, but was still humble in appearance. The wood of the home was painted blue, but years of wear and tear have caused the paint to chip off. A wood carving of an owl was mounted above the attic’s window and surveyed the horizon. Near the sidewalk to the town square was the home’s mailbox, ‘MULLNER’ painted on its side. In front of the house was a closed wooden fence with a doghouse inside; a messy sign with ‘DOG’ painted in red letters was on the front. A flowing river pierced through the midst of the neighborhood, a trailer separating the home from the river itself... though the yard was messy and full of litter. The farmer approached the house’s front door and knocked on it while examining the area.

A tiny old lady opened the door, calmly smiling to Jade. “Hello there, dear,” she started with a gentle and cheerful expression. She was very short, had gray hair tied up in a bun, and a red button shawl over her blue dress.

“H-hello,” Jade began nervously. The old lady seemed nice, yes, but... “Um, I’m Jade.... f-from the new farm? I, uh...”

“Jade,” repeated the old woman, smacking her lips in thought. “Mmm... Oh, you are the girl from the Flower Dance,” she wheezed in laughter.

“Y-yeah!! I’m... I’m really sorry for that incident, still! I think about it pretty much every day...” Jade sighed.
The old lady chuckled again. “Alex is a strong young man, and we all forgive you. You seem like a sweet girl, from what he has told us... I’m Evelyn, but please call me Granny.”

“It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Granny!” Jade gave Evelyn a welcoming hug. “I-I can’t stay for long, because I need to get back to my farm, but I just wanted to thank you for the cookies. They were absolutely delicious. Here’s... here’s your plate.” Jade offered the plate back. “I’ll give back eventually, I-I just really need to get my farm started first... do you like fresh produce?”

“Oh, thank you very much.” Evelyn kindly accepted the plate and warmly gazed to the farmer. “You liking my baking is enough, dear. They’re my special cookies. Don’t you worry about us.”

Jade smiled, but this woman was just too sweet... she couldn’t help but still feel guilt in the back of her heart. “Thank you anyway, Granny... how is Alex doing? Has his eye healed up?”

A door opened from the far end of the house. “Who ya talking to, Gran?” asked Alex from a distance. Jade was able to see him as he walked up to the doorway to join them. Though she was concerned about his eye, she couldn’t really pay attention to it. Jade was distracted by his shirtlessness, made only worse by the sweat that adorned his body due to a workout session. The farmer tensed and sharply stared to Evelyn to avoid examining any further. Alex grinned upon seeing Jade and sent a friendly wave. “It’s the farm girl! How’re you doing, Jade?”

“I-I’m fine! H-hey!” she yelled. “H-h-how’s your eye? Good?” She forced herself to stare at his face, but was able to calm down once she did. His eye seemed to have healed up very well; it was still somewhat puffy, but not really noticeable for the most part.

“Yeah, it’s pretty much healed up. Fast healer, like I told you!” Alex grunted as he flexed his arms, causing Jade to instantly drop her sight back to Evelyn. Her hands were shaking and she began to sweat, herself.

“Th-that’s good... U-um, I must go now. Farm... stuff.”

Evelyn frowned when she noticed the young lady shiver before her. “Aw, please take care of yourself, okay, dear? If you’re shivering in this weather, you might be getting a cold. George’s health tends to change around this time, as well.”

“I-I’m fine... t-tell George I said hi as well?” Jade gestured to Evelyn. She chuckled and nodded.

“Seeya, farm girl.” Alex grinned to her. Jade swiftly left the premises and head straight for Pierre’s store. He laughed as she left, then stepping back to let Evelyn walk back inside.

“What a nice girl,” Evelyn sighed happily as she shuffled back inside. Alex closed the door for her. “It’s hard for me to believe she has such a fire about her.”

“Yeah,” the young athlete replied, helping his grandmother get to wherever she wished to go. “Jade’s pretty weird from what I’ve seen,” Alex stated with a laugh.

Jade had been to Pierre’s shop once before to buy pet supplies and she had met the owner at the Flower Dance, but she had a strange feeling whenever she entered the shop. Pierre was more than eager to welcome her inside and to browse his selection of items, but she felt like he was glaring her down whenever she wasn’t looking. He verbally welcomed her, but... she didn’t feel very welcome.
Abigail emerged from a door near the back of the shop, gave a friendly greeting to Jade, then walked out without giving her father any attention. Jade then walked up to Pierre and paid him for the seeds. There was a kind and professional look on his face, but she heard him mumble something under his breath as she was leaving. She wasn’t sure what she heard, but she tried to not wonder about it too much. Instead, Jade quietly exit the shop with a backpack full of seed packets.

The farmer began her walk through the town square. She was growing accustomed to her backpack’s weight with all the tools, but her head still drooped and she stared at the ground as she walked. Jade sighed to herself, watching the trail of the sidewalk to take the correct path home. She would always have to pass two houses on this street in order to get home, but she wasn’t sure who they belonged to.

“Hey!”

Jade lifted her head, assuming the call was to her. Straight ahead from the sidewalk stood Sam, a frail red-head lady, a young boy, and the young girl she saw only a few days ago. They were standing right beside another blue house, just before the entrance to Cindersap Forest. Sam was looking directly at Jade and waved her over. “C’merе!”

Jade quickened her pace to join them. “Good morning, Sam,” she greeted back with a tired smile. “How are you doing?”

“I’m doing great! Have you met my good friend Penny?” Sam gestured to the young lady beside him... the farmer found herself fairly short, but Penny seemed to be much shorter in comparison. Her red hair was curled up the sides and back of her neck, and her emerald green eyes nervously averted away from Jade’s direction. She wore a yellow blouse, an airy brown skirt, and pink tennis shoes with white socks. “Penny, this is the new farmer in town, she’s great!”

“U-um... H... Hello,” Penny nervously bowed her head to Jade. She was just as nervous if not even more nervous than the farmer before her. For some reason, Jade was able to react in a calmer manner.

“Hi,” Jade replied with a smile. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

The little boy hopped up in front of Sam and Penny. “Introduce me, introduce me!” He had strawberry blond hair that was short and spiky similar to his own brother’s, just without the hair gel. He wore a red shirt with thin yellow stripes, blue swimming shorts, and sandals that would be easy to take off once going to the beach. He had such an eager look on his face, too.

“Oh.” Sam laughed. “This is my little brother, Vincent. Penny teaches him and Jas all year, but they get a break in the summertime. We’re going to the beach to just relax and have some fun!”

Jade smiled and pat Vincent on the head. “Hi, Vincent!” She was much better with children than she was with adults.

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“Hello, miss!” Vincent grinned to her. Jade stood up fully to look around, since she swore she saw the other girl there.

“Aw, come on out, Jas.” Sam gently pushed her out from behind his leg. Jas, that was her name. She stared coldly in such a way that Jade wasn’t sure if she was scared or simply apathetic. “Jas, this is my friend, Jade. She’s very nice, I promise!”
Jas didn’t respond, and merely stared to Jade before shrinking back behind Sam’s leg. Sam laughed and scratched his head. “Sorry, she’s not very good with new people. She’ll warm up to you, though.”

The farmer smiled worryedly. “Yeah, I’ve met her before…” She glanced to the girl. “I didn’t know your name is Jas, though… that’s a very pretty name! It’s nice to meet you again.”

Jas shuffled all the way behind Sam and inched her way to stand behind both him and Penny. Jade saw a little hand raise up to hold Penny’s hand, which she accepted with a tender smile. Penny was calmer then as well and was able to look Jade in the eye. “I-it’s nothing personal… the kids are very excited to go to the beach, though.”

“Yeah!” Sam beamed.

“… All three of the kids,” Penny muttered.

Sam laughed and gently nudged Penny. “Well, we should be heading off now. I’d invite you, but you look pretty busy… oh, wait. Jade?”

“Hm?” Jade looked up at him curiously.

“Tried messaging Seb today, but no luck. Have you seen him today?”

Jade chuckled. “Oh, he’s at my house. He’s giving me internet connection. Do you want me to tell him anything? I’m going home right now.”

“Aw, what? He goes to your house already?” Sam grumbled something unintelligible, but he had a grin on his face when he looked back to Jade. “It’s nothing important, except now I’m upset no one invited me!”

The farmer appeared to be amused. “You can come over and hang out if you want, but I’ll be tired. I kinda doubt Sebastian is staying as long as he did yesterday-

“He was at your house YESTERDAY?” Sam looked as if he was the victim of a love affair. Jade couldn’t help but laugh at the pure shock on his face. Penny giggled as well, and the two ladies looked at each other with smiles on their faces. Sam had brought out his phone and began to peck away on the device’s flat screen. “I have like eighty questions for that fu-” He cleared his throat, remembering he was around children. “For that buttface.” The children went ‘ooh’, enraptured by the blond’s sudden name-calling.

Jade cackled. “He wasn’t there by choice, if that’s what you’re wondering. Robin dragged him to my house when she was working on my fence.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Robin does stuff like that.” Sam huffed after he finished texting on his phone, putting it back in his pocket. “He’s still a buttface.”

“That he is,” Jade laughed back a response. “Well, don’t you have a beach to be traveling to?”

“Ah! Yes!” Sam eagerly looked to Penny and then to each of the kids. “We’ll be going now. Feel free to join us sometime!” He waved and began to walk off towards the faraway bridge on the southern region of town. Vincent eagerly began running after and eventually outpaced his older brother, while Penny and Jas walked behind, still holding hands.
“Bye, everyone. I hope to talk to all of you again!” Jade grinned as she waved back, then continued her travel back home. The walk back was fairly uneventful, but Jade’s mind was plagued with thoughts of how exhausted she would be after planting all of her new seeds. Despite making the choice to be a farmer, Jade knew she wasn’t very athletic and never bothered to exercise... her legs definitely knew the fact. Her body has been aching ever since day one, and she was more than ready to get used to all the walking and farming.

When Jade returned to her farmland, Robin was setting up a gate near the river to allow easy access. The fencing was nearly complete; the only area not yet fenced was the front end of the farm. Robin sure did work quickly when she was inspired enough. Jade waved to the carpenter as she made her way to her front porch. She took no hesitation to set down her backpack and collapse onto the porch stairs to take a breather.

Jade sighed as she stared out to her farm. It was so empty... how would she fill it up? Rows upon rows of crops? Any farm buildings? The farmer dug out all of the seed packets from her backpack and examined them. Blueberries, melons, tomatoes, and corn. Pierre had told her while she was shopping that the only ones she would have to buy more seeds for were the melons, but she wanted to grow them anyway for the sake of diversity. She supposed the future of her farm depended on what she was capable of doing herself. The farmer took a deep breath and straightened her back when she stood up. Time to work.

Organization was a useful aspect to abide by when it came to farming. Jade tilled four separate and square plots of land for each type of seed she would plant. The tilling and planting didn’t take as long as she thought it would, but she only had a handful of seeds for each of the packets. She figured she would get more later, when she could successfully harvest. After planting the seeds, she ran off to the river with her watering can and returned to hydrate all of the dormant plants. Jade gazed at her four different mounds of dirt and nodded to herself afterwards, impressed by her own handiwork. Soon enough, there would be stalks and bushes that she would be able to harvest from periodically. And the cooking possibilities... Jade grinned, imagining the uses out of her crops.

“You might want a scarecrow,” piped up Robin as she walked over. She looked as tired as Jade did, but very satisfied with her project.

“A scarecrow?” Jade looked to Robin after tossing her empty watering can aside. She suddenly heard the cawing of feathered beasts up in nearby trees. Okay, maybe it was a good idea.

“Yup. I’m taking a little break now so I’m not completely done, but I know I’ll have some extra wood. Why not make a scarecrow with that? You could get some fibers from grasses to complete the look.” Robin unscrewed the cap off her water canister and took a swig.

“Aw, thank you... The wood will be really helpful. I’ll make good use of my scythe with those weeds, too!” Jade proudly crossed her arms, slowly feeling like an actual farmer. Robin chuckled, adoring her enthusiasm. She pat Jade on the back and finished up her water.

“That’s great, hon!” the carpenter replied with equal enthusiasm.

“Yeah! Oh, um... you’ve been working so hard. I’m surprised you were able to get all this fencing done so fast... do you think you’ll finish today?” Jade asked, eyeballing Robin’s water canister. She was getting a little parched, herself.

Robin nodded. “A few more hours and I’ll be outta your hair with this project.”
“... I honestly can’t believe you’re doing this for free,” Jade sighed. “Are you sure you don’t want me to pay you for this? The errand wasn’t that big of a deal.”

“Jade, hon.” Robin laughed and placed a hand on the young farmer’s shoulder. “You need to learn to accept kindness when it comes your way. I wanted to do this. Stop worrying, alright?”

The farmer wanted to accept the critique, but sighed. She couldn’t bring herself to. “I get what you’re saying, but... I don’t want to be, like, a freeloader or anything. I thought the exchange would be equal, but I forgot how big my farm is.”

“Freeloader? You aren’t a freeloader in any sense. There’s nothing wrong with accepting help, especially when you’re just starting out like this.” The carpenter frowned in worry. “Are the other townspeople saying anything to you?”

Jade shook her head. “No, not anything I didn’t expect, really. I guess I’m just not used to everyone being so nice... Well, most people.”

Robin glared. “Who’s starting stuff with you?”

“No one! I promise.”

“You seem bothered, though.” The carpenter crossed her arms and continued to stare to Jade. She began to crumble under the motherly glares.

“Well... People are still talking about me, I guess. I didn't feel very welcome in the shop.”

“I don't think it's specifically you. Pierre's a little obsessed with sales,” grumbled Robin.

“Oh, I see.” Jade blinked, sweating with nervousness. “Do you... get along with him?”

Robin’s expression lightened, and then she chuckled. “Sometimes, but I much prefer Caroline. I’m sure he has some great qualities, but... Yeah, not surprised. I can’t even tell you the stuff I hear from Caroline sometimes.” She rolled her eyes as she thought. Jade thought she looked like Sebastian for a moment. “Oh, yeah. Anyways, don’t worry, hon. Most of the townspeople are great! Since the town is so small, it’s just easy to flock to drama. Even I get like that, sometimes. But, I don’t think any less of you.”

The farmer smiled and nodded, accepting her explanation. “I’ll keep that in mind, Robin. Thank you.”

“Aw, it’s no problem. I’m gonna get back to work now, okay? Holler if you need anything.” Robin walked back to continue her work, leaving Jade to her own devices.

The sun was high in the sky, so there was a lot of the day left to go... but Jade wasn’t exactly sure what she could do to fill the rest of her time. The farmer picked up the tools she finished using and walked them back over to her backpack for storage. She left everything on the porch and walked inside to get some water and food for herself, a reward for a job well done. Jade decided to cook what store-brand food she had left, which consisted of pretty much a pot of spaghetti.

Around the time she finished cooking was when Sebastian walked downstairs; he had completed his own job without much hassle. The farmer brought freshly cooked food to both him and Robin, and
they were able to enjoy a nice lunch together. After lunch, Sebastian bid both of the ladies farewell and left the farm, while Robin took the rest of her time to complete the fence. The carpenter finished her job with much higher spirits due to the lunch and left some extra wood as a parting gift. Jade was contemplating on building a scarecrow then, but she had just planted the seeds... it wasn’t as if crows would steal the seeds right from the ground... hopefully.

Jade walked the perimeter of her fence to gauge just how much space she actually had for the farm, and to see what trails lie ahead in the forest surrounding her home. Birds chattered and flew around as usual, an occasional squirrel zoomed up into a tree, and a wild rabbit escaped into the bushes. Onyx sat by a specific fence post and rubbed his face onto it, marking his own territory already. When she walked up to the particular fence post, she noticed tiny claw marks along the wood. “Seriously, Onyx?” Oh well.

She had nearly completed her search around the area when she heard a squishing sound... Oh, no. It was all too familiar, and it was right outside the fence!

“A slime!” Jade shouted, running over to the source of the sound. To the west of the farm was the thickest part of the woods, and right on the other side of the fence rolled up a green slime. This one didn’t have an antennae like the last one did, but it was still bright green, and disturbingly adorable. “Little prick!” hissed Jade when she saw it. The slime hopped over and attacked the fence, but couldn’t seem to budge it or make any sort of impact at all. “Ha ha!”

The slime seemed to glare at her. A disturbed feeling washed over Jade because she wasn’t sure how exactly intelligent they were... but because they were small glops of goo, she didn’t really have high expectations. Even so, the slime creeped her out. It looked really... angry.

“Leave if you know what’s good for you!” Jade shouted. She didn’t really want to fight the creature, considering what happened to her last pair of pants, or Onyx’s leg. Small and adorable they were, but their acidic properties were nothing to joke about.

The slime didn’t seem to listen, and continued to attack the fence to no avail. Jade heard more squishing sounds from far away... There was another slime that rolled out from the bushes. And another, coming from behind a tree. Soon, a family of six slimes gathered, some with antennae, some without. “What the... where did all of you come from?” All of them piled up to the fence and began attacking it. The farmer could only guess that they disliked the barrier between the two sides of the forest. Jade quickly picked up her cat nearby and ran back to the house; she took Onyx inside, and grabbed her sword from her backpack. She was equipped to fight this time, and would protect her farm at all costs.

The farmer charged back towards the fence, staring down at the now angry group of slimes. She took one swipe of her sword, completely destroying one slime while making the others jump back from the blade... it was difficult to swing properly from the other side, especially with how close they were to the fence.

The slimes got riled up, though. They charged into the fence even more, and they squeaked with aggression. One of the fence posts actually began to lean from the constant force... No! These things weren’t in the mood to give up, but neither was Jade. Knowing they would not stop attacking the fence, Jade hopped over it and ran some yards into the forest to distract them. “Hey!” She yelled, waving her sword. It worked; they brought their attention off the fence and bounced their way to her. Jade began to step backwards, trying her very best to not be surrounded and to see what she was against. Five slimes. That wasn’t so bad.
Two of the slimes leaped up into the air, aiming straight for Jade’s face. She quickly backed away and shut her eyes as she swung her sword like a baseball bat. Luckily for her, she sliced both of the slimes directly through their centers, causing the both of them to explode into excess bits of green goo. Some of the excess splashed onto Jade’s face, which she hurriedly shook off and opened her eyes again... maybe it wasn’t a good idea to blindly strike her enemies. Three left.

Jade continued to back away as the last three slimes hopped and rolled towards her. The further away from the farm, the better. The third slime lunged towards Jade, trying to go for her leg, but she was able to block the attack and swing her sword at the gelatinous creature. Like the other two slimes, the third one met its fate and collapsed into inanimate glops of green. Jade smirked to herself... she was getting a hang of this.

That is, she was until she noticed more slimes cropping up in her surroundings. A stray slime attacked her from behind, latching onto her right arm. Her arm began to burn from the impact, causing her to scream and punch the slime off of her. She turned back around to make quick work of the slime that attacked her, but noticed even more were coming her way. Where were they all coming from, and were they really targeting her because of a random fence? Jade wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer. All she knew was that the forest was completely infested with these creatures... Three slimes became six, which became twelve, and more. They were everywhere. The farm was safe, at least. Onyx was safe, the crops were safe. However, Jade... Jade had no choice but to run before she got overwhelmed.

And so she did.
Jade escaped deeper into the forest.

Chapter End Notes

12/22/2018: I changed Robin's dialogue about Pierre. I feel the changes are more accurate here, since Robin doesn't really have time to be rude, but still might not be overly fond of some.
Chapter Summary

Jade finds an abandoned neighborhood not too far from her house. She meets one of the more mystical townspeople as a result.

For some of the townspeople, the far reaches of Cindersap Forest was also known as the Secret Woods. Only the foolish would dare explore it, for it was teeming with monsters and creatures of the unknown. With the dilapidated neighborhood being somewhat revived by Jade’s arrival, the rumors were confirmed to be true. Jade experienced a mere taste of what the woods had in store for trespassers due to weak but numerous slimes in the area. As the numbers of slimes increased, so too did the amount of danger Jade was in. She quickly escaped deeper into the bowels of the Secret Woods, for she would do anything to keep the slimes away from her humble farm.

Jade ran through tall patches of grass, passed by gigantic oak trees and traversed around long, spindly bushes. The forest increased in density, which increased the difficulty in traveling. The young farmer had to slow down, or else she would hurt herself just from not watching her steps. However, the family of slimes caught up to her. A dark green slime leaped towards her while it had the advantage, but Jade was able to smack it away with her blade. She was already getting tired from the running and wielding a sword, but this seemed to be a life or death situation then. She chopped and sliced the slimes close to her before she ran off again to get more space. Her foot got carelessly snagged within a knotted vine, causing her to trip and slam her backside against mossy ground. The moss did nothing in cushioning the collision, since the ground felt as rough and hard as stone.

“Gah...” The farmer dropped her sword from the painful impact. The noises and terrorizing squeaks from the living slimes had been silenced in the brushes of the forest; they either lost interest, or they avoided the area that Jade discovered. She made quick work of untangling her foot from the vines, then lying back in exhaustion. Farming was the least of her worries when it came to exerting energy.

After catching her breath, the farmer struggled to stand up. The ground that she collapsed onto consisted of patterned stone tiles, much like what was in the town square of Pelican Town. The tiles were cracked, out of place, and teeming with moss and growth, leading off into broken paths. Piles of rubble and houses with rotten wood surrounded the ends of the paths, all of them unliveable for humans. Trees jutted out from the center of some homes, glass was broken and vines crawled up the holes of the windows. The entire area felt like it was in a different world, apart from the town, apart from Stardew Valley. Jade picked up her sword and began to explore.

If the abandoned neighborhood was thriving and still a part of Pelican Town, the farmer could have sworn that the size of the town would double. Remnants of old shops, a marketplace, old homes... where did all of the people go? Howling wind shifted through the openings of weakened buildings, a rusty windchime still jingling its broken tune from a rotted porch. She continued onwards to the end of the street, which had one direction going left and the other going right; there was a mountain face in front of her, preventing further travel. The farmer resumed her journey by walking to the left, revealing another long street full of forgotten homes and a few two-story establishments.

“I wonder if anyone in town currently even lived here,” Jade murmured to herself as she gazed at the buildings in fascination. “This could have been such a huge town.” She wandered over to one of the
two-story buildings, which had a faded sign that was written in cursive. Glancing through the dusty windows, the building seemed to be an old restaurant. The inside seemed to be untouched, despite the gradual degradation of the building’s structure.

A stranger spoke. “Your presence angers the many creatures of the forest.”

Jade jerked from the voice, quickly pointing her sword towards whoever spoke to her. “Wh-who are you?!” she yelled, trembling.

A large, ominous figure stepped forward, previously concealed by the trees. He wore a dark rimmed hat with a strange yellow emblem and a dark cloak of the same colors. His hair and beard were long and purple, and his eyes were shadowy yet concentrated. The entirety of his body was concealed by the blackened cloak, so Jade couldn’t see anything else.

“Child, I have no intent to harm you. Put that stick down, as if it would damage me to begin with.” He walked over to her-no, floated? Jade honestly wasn’t sure, but she wasn’t one to start a fight she didn’t want to have. She lowered her sword. “I am M. Rasmodius, a wizard. I live in the heart of Cindersap Forest, where the magic seems to be concentrated. This valley is teeming with mystical beings, both good and evil.” An arm protruded from the opening of his cloak to fix his hat; he had on a black long-sleeved shirt, from what she could tell. “I have been watching you since your arrival, Jade. I know your past, and I’ve seen your future.”

“Wh-what?” Jade stared in shock. “H-how... you’re... You’re a wizard? Really?”

Rasmodius was unsurprised to be questioned in such a way. “You grew up in the city, full of skeptics. Full of foolish humans. I have no reason to lie to you, child. That would be a waste of time.” He began to move further down the mossy sidewalk, Jade following behind with slight hesitation. “You must be wondering about the state of this area.”

The farmer slowly nodded. She figured silence was the best option for now.

“Pelican Town used to be a thriving mining and farming town. Only the rarest of minerals could be found within the reaches of the mountains located here.” They approached further down the street, nearing the ascension into the mountains. A half-destroyed visitor’s center made of dingy gray stone haphazardly stood near the mountain face. It was placed near a gigantic cave entrance, though the entry was cloaked by vines and dangling moss. Jade noticed a rusted plaque above the stone building’s now-exposed doorway: ‘STARDEW VALLEY MINING ASSOCIATION’. The building’s innards were completely annihilated, particularly the side close to the cave entrance. The stone bricks had been crumbled onto a pile, as if something rammed into its side.

“I didn’t know there was another mine entrance here,” murmured the farmer.

“There are several, but the one you may know about is the one directly north of what the town is now. The entire area was covered by mineshafts. But they, in turn, ignited the rage of the creatures deep underground.” The wizard brushed back the vines from the cave’s opening, exposing a constricted area of rock and rubble. Nothing really seemed special at first, but Jade then noticed a white, strange looking shape within the rubble. She couldn’t tell what it was from the distance, since it had just barely been revealed through the sunlight from the cave opening. Jade’s vision slowly adjusted as she decided to walk inside... and then she saw it. Within the crumbling rock remained the gigantic skull of a carnivorous beast, its maw gaped open and full of stones and boulders. The skull was much larger than both of the humans present, and it had two rows of incredibly sharp and large teeth. Four huge holes were present on the sides of the head, indicating eyes and possibly ears.

“Oh, Yoba...” Jade gasped.
“Stardew Valley contains more mysteries than you or any other townsperson is capable of.” The wizard backed away from the cave opening, Jade walking out to join him. “The mining association crumbled because of the plethora of monsters, this portion of the town suffering the same fate. Decades of forest growth brought this area to the state it is now... Similarly, the creatures of the Secret Woods are becoming more active due to your presence. You are lucky that the stronger creatures are still dormant for now.”

The farmer glanced to Rasmodius with concern. “What can I do?” she asked. “I just... I want to live in peace, really.”

“It’s simple.” The wizard continued to float alongside the mountain face, the farmer forcing herself to come along. “Gain their trust.”

“Whose trust?”

“Those who own the forest. Gain their trust, and then the rest of the forest will no longer see you a threat.” There was a certain gleam in his eye... Jade felt somewhat threatened. “Your little pest problem will be resolved.”

Jade’s trembling only worsened to which she had to stop walking. She hugged herself and looked at the wizard, and then to the cave opening containing the skull. “Um... Who owns the forest?”

Rasmodius stopped and turned, looking to her without any change in expression; he was serious and unmoved. “The Junimos consider themselves the guardians of this section of the valley. They too wish to live in peace. Go to the Community Center, and then you will see them.” He shuffled around in his cloak. “Oh, but take this first.” He brought out a tiny bottle of green liquid. It looked very strange, and Jade wasn’t entirely sure she could trust him... yet, he said before that he had no reason to lie. Maybe she was a skeptic, after all. Before she could really respond, Rasmodius tossed the vial in her direction. “This potion will allow you to understand the language of the Junimos.”

Jade caught the potion due to reflexes, exhaling in relief when she saw it was unharmed. “Um... what exactly is this?” She stared back to the wizard with concern.

“The essence of the forest.”

The explanation didn’t exactly make Jade feel better. She stashed the vial in her backpack, then focused back to the wizard with elevated worry. “Thanks, I guess...”

He nodded in return. “You were foolish to venture into a dangerous place such as this.”

Jade sighed. “I’m sorry, I just... I didn’t exactly mean to come here. I was just trying to get slimes away from my fence, and I got overwhelmed, so I just...” Her words fumbled, unsure of how to complete her stream of sentences.

“Return to your home before the sun sets. They should be gone now.” Rasmodius started to move away, no longer giving Jade any visual attention. She didn’t follow him this time, instead glancing back to the direction she came from.

“How far away am I, even? I wasn’t even paying attention... But, um, thank you, M-” Jade looked ahead, but he had vanished. “... Mr. Rasmodius...”

Though Jade would have loved to explore more of the area, the wizard was certainly right about the state of the ruins. Not only were the buildings crumbling down and able to fall apart at any moment, but the young farmer was extremely inexperienced when it came to swords. “I wish I could punch slimes,” she mumbled to herself as she began backtracking out of the neighborhood. Her body was
beyond weary, but her mind was fully alert while she carefully traced her steps and tightly gripped her sword. She held her breath as she took her first step back onto the grassy ground, outside of the mossy tiled streets. The farmer took no chances in igniting the rage of any creature that resided nearby, for she walked slowly and carefully.

Her journey back to her farm took longer, but there wasn’t a single slime in sight. The farm was just as Jade had left it, and all of the claustrophobic feelings that the forest walls brought were washed away by the clear cerulean sky. Jade knew she had been absent for well over an hour, yet the day stretched on without the concept of time. She took a moment to reassess her surroundings, but stashed her sword back to the side of her backpack. Everything was fine, and she was safe again. Jade staggered back to her house, went inside, and set her baggage down before rushing to the bathroom. She showered, patched her scratches and minor wounds, then finally collapsed into bed with fresh pajamas. While the day was brimming with excitement, she couldn’t care that it was before 5PM. As soon as her head collided with her pillows, she was out.
Rain

Chapter Summary

On a rainy Summer day, Jade meets Willy for the first time and comes across Sebastian afterwards. She asks Sebastian to help her with the Community Center.

"Are you adjusting to the farm life, Jadey?"

"Oh yeah! I have so many stories to tell the both of you." Jade had never been more excited. She sat at her dining table alongside her mother and father, both as equally ecstatic and proud to see Jade doing well on her own. She was pleasantly surprised to have her parents visit so early, and she was more than eager to share her progress on the farm. It was raining lightly outside, but rays of sunlight managed to squeeze through openings in the clouds. The three were comfortable to be together inside, despite the somewhat gloomy day. "I'll start from the beginning."

Her father was tall and very thick in stature and build. He had no hair on his scalp, but sported a flourishing black beard with stray gray hairs. His calm eyes were a deep brown as they looked to his daughter with patience. He didn’t dress very fancy, wearing thick work jeans, brown boots, a dark blue shirt, and two black rings on his right ear. He wore a simple watch on one of his wrists and a gold band on his ring finger. "We’re all ears, ladybug."

The mother had been dwarfed by her husband’s size, and was more petite than even Jade. She had curling and flowing bronze hair, attentive hazel eyes, and a soft smile that revealed her caring, calm personality. She was able to make an attractive outfit with simple clothing, wearing a blue wrapped top, navy capris, and brown sandals. She was not a big fan of jewelry, only wearing an emerald pendant around her neck. Her wedding ring and an engagement ring made from smooth red coral shined proudly on her ring finger as well.

Jade took a deep breath as she thought of what the beginning actually was. "Well, the first person I met face-to-face was Robin. She’s the town carpenter, and she’s honestly the best. She helped me move in and has given me some good talks." The young farmer chuckled in thought, placing her elbows on the dining table and resting her head in her hands. "She’s in her second marriage I think, but she has a son and a daughter. They’re both really nice, but I’ve only seen Maru maybe once. I’ve seen Sebastian a lot, mostly because of Robin’s shenanigans.” She snorted a chuckle.

The mother was warmed by her daughter’s heightened mood. "I’m glad you have someone like that looking out for you here, while you’re alone. Are you making friends?" she asked, hopeful for a positive answer.

“Oh! Well... Maybe I’m not super close to anyone yet. I like Sebastian a lot, and his friends have been really good to me. Sam is a big sweetie, and Abigail is really cool. They’ve all been really welcoming in helping me grow accustomed to the town.” Jade hummed as she continued to recall. "I’ve met some other people... oh yeah. Uh. Well, I met Alex and his grandma... We had to dance together for a festival, but I punched him in the face."

Jade’s dad burst with laughter. "Ahaha, you really did that?? What did he do to make you react like that??"
“Don’t cheer her on like that!” snapped her mother, but the smile couldn’t be wiped off of her face. “Surely it must have been a reflex.”

The father scoffed. “Surely,” he repeated.

Jade laughed again. “Yes, absolutely! But no, it’s fine. It was just a weird misunderstanding. I think I’m finally getting over it, but some people in town have been a bit... negative.”

Her mother frowned for the first time upon hearing about the negativity. “Like what?”

“Aw, it’s not that big of a deal. Don’t worry about it, Mama. I think I just need to let everyone know I’m not a ruthless face-puncher.” Jade put her arms down and leaned over to pat her mother on the shoulder. Her shining expression was back as if nothing happened. “I can’t wait for you all to meet everybody, though!” Jade beamed with contentment. “Maybe I can make a big dinner? We could all have an outdoor picnic, I could invite everyone in town... that’d be so much food, though. Huh.”

The large man smacked his hand to the table with pride. “Great idea, food is the way to anyone’s heart. Maybe you could save up for it, use some of your crops?”

“Ooh, that’d be perfect! I want you two to come when I end up doing that. And we could get all the ingredients to make our family stew! Everyone will love that.” Jade lightly clapped to herself. “When I get animals, though, the meat isn’t coming from me. My animals are off limits! I mean it.”

"Aw, you don’t want to share?” Jade’s father asked while trying to suppress his laughter. The young farmer gave him such a sarcastic glare, though her attempt to out-sass him was interrupted by a knock on the front door.

“Huh, was I expecting anyone?” Jade wondered aloud as she stood up from her chair. She smiled to her parents before beginning her trek to the door. “Coming!” she shouted. As she approached the door, the lights in her house flickered off. The windows were shrouded in darkness, wind howling as the storm increased in ferocity. “Ugh, figures. Are you two okay? Maybe get some candles.” Jade glanced back in the direction of her kitchen.

There was no response.

“... Mom? Dad?” The young farmer stepped away from the front door to glance back at the dining table. They were not there. Thunder struck outside, rain pelting the rooftops and ticking against the window panes.

*Bam! Bam! Bam!*

The door was viciously beat against. Jade stared to the door in horror. Her breath halted.

*Bam! Bam! Bam!*

It got louder. The door would break down any second. Jade could no longer move. With one final crash, the door flung open and detached from its hinges. The door collided into the ground with an ear-wrenching crack-

Jade swung up from her bed instantly. A gigantic bolt of lightning struck nearby, the boom of the thunder rumbling her entire house. She heavily breathed and surveyed her room. It was very dark outside due to the densely clouded sky. Rain poured down heavily and pelted the house’s roof. A lower rumble came from the distance. The farmer slowly began to calm down when she realized it was only thunder. She collapsed back into her bed, emitting a large sigh of relief. “Yoba...” she murmured to herself. She glanced at the alarm clock beside her... 10 AM. She forgot to set the alarm
the night prior, but it wasn’t that big of a deal anyway; the rain took care of all of her farmwork.

Without much else to say, the young adult rolled herself out of bed and staggered over to her dresser. She dressed lazily because of the nasty weather, but was able to conceal her choice of wear with a very long blue raincoat. All she needed to do was to brush her hair, put on her rainboots, and throw over her coat’s hood before walking outside.

Summertime heat seemed nonexistent in the heavy rainfall, but Jade enjoyed the fact. A cool breeze brushed in through the front porch, which Jade could feel on her face and fingertips. She looked over to her crops and managed to sprout a smile, forgetting about her night for a moment. The plants seemed happy and were growing well. Upon scanning her farm, she caught sight of her mailbox. “Oh, yeah... I keep forgetting to check that.”

The first steps were taken off of the front porch and the farmer headed towards the mailbox. She opened it, revealing a small collection of letters. “How do I have so much already?” she grumbled, but swiftly grabbed the mail before running back to the dryness of her porch. With that, she plopped onto the porch swing and began flipping through.

Joa advertisement, Joa advertisement, a welcome letter from Mayor Lewis, Pierre’s shop advertisement... Nothing really important or special so far. Jade set aside the advertisements, while keeping the welcome letter for herself. She continued to flip through her mail. Another letter was a thank you from Marnie for running the errand from some days ago as well as an advertisement about her shop, while the last letter in the pile was about... fishing? The sentiment of fishing never even crossed her mind when it came to Pelican Town.

“Come to the docks at the beach before 5PM,” Jade read from the last letter in her hands. “I suppose I can go meet this Willy guy today... nothing else is on my to-do list.” She sighed to herself. “Except seeing what the Community Center is... or swordfighting lessons, maybe...”

The young farmer tossed her letters on the nearest surface she could reach inside, then tossing on her backpack and beginning her journey into town. Though the weather was so gloomy, her mood increased significantly; the rain was so beautiful on the empty farmland, and she loved the sound of squishing mud beneath her feet. As she exit her property, the open acres of Cindersap Forest were just as spectacular. Stardew Valley appeared to flourish in a much different manner when it rained.

No one really walked around much when Pelican Town was under gloomy weather. Even as Jade ventured to the town square, all the townspeople seemed to have vanished. She was reminded of her dream again, but the loneliness this time was calming rather than terrifying. The young farmer was able to easily gain her own bearings and really see the town for what it was... isolated, miniscule, and pleasant. There was an undeniable charm about Pelican Town, despite its run-down nature.

“Oh.” Jade snapped out of her exploratory trance and peered to a bridge down south. She could see a smidgen of the beach, but rows of trees were obscuring the rest of the horizon. The young farmer decided that was her destination and continued her miniature journey towards the docks.

According to the letter, Willy was the local fisherman who manned a bait and equipment store of his own. Though Jade wasn’t personally a fan of seafood, she pondered at how much money she could make from becoming a professional in her own sense. She did notice the diversity of the water sources in the valley; there were two lakes, several rivers throughout the woods, and a beach just at the bottom of town. With all the diversity, it was surprising that Willy was one of the few fisherman, if not the only fisherman available.

Moments of pondering brought Jade to the beach without much thought going into her route. The shore was huge, but the tide was higher and the faraway waves much more ferocious due to the
storm. To her left, she noticed a snug cabin. Warm yellow light emitted through the gap in the curtained windows, but she could not tell if anyone was inside. There was another shore near the cabin, though there was a river that separated her current standing and connected to the ocean. Lastly, there were the docks. There were several pathways to take on the docks, but Jade’s focus instantly went to the second cabin that rested on a large platform. That must have been the store the letter described, so it was where she went next.

Though Jade enjoyed walking through the town without seeing any people, she truly was relieved to see a middle-aged man sitting behind the counter of the bait shop. She slowly opened the door and entered, wiping her muddy feet on a mat right at the entrance. “Hello,” murmured the farmer while she carefully stepped towards the desk.

“Well, lass. Ye must be the new farmer I’ve heard about.” Willy smiled through his unkempt beard and moustache. He had a lot of dark hair and didn’t seem to care what it was doing, but the look on his face was gentle and he had an air of experience. He wore a messy brown beret and his red shirt was loosely stitched together. He was rather tan, most likely due to all of his days fishing under the blaring sun. Jade liked his attitude already, and noticed the dedication he had towards his craft.

“Y-yeah, that’s me. It’s nice to meet you... I’m Jade. Sorry, I don’t know when you sent that letter... but, I’m here now.” The farmer smiled and stood in front of the counter. She noticed several fishing poles up for display behind him, while several kinds of bait hooks were shown in a glass case. The air of the cabin also smelt of fish, seawater, and bait, though Jade wasn’t very surprised by the fact.

“Aye, that’s alright. You’ve probably guessed by now, but not many people take the art o’ fishing very seriously here. With a new face in town, I thought I’d introduce the basics and maybe broaden yer horizons.” Willy turned around from the counter and picked up a bamboo fishing pole that leaned against the wall. It wasn’t up for display like the others, and it didn’t necessarily look like much of a winner. Regardless, the farmer wasn’t the type to reject such a generous gift. He offered the fishing pole to her, which she kindly took. “It’s me old pole. Take it and give it a try. Maybe you’ll make a buck or two when there is some light left in the day.”

“Wow, thank you very much, uhm... Willy! Willy, I appreciate it.” Jade grinned and actually felt excited for the potential of fishing. She didn’t really have time to feel bad about wanting to make money, considering how little she had to her name at the time.

“Maybe when yer skill improves, come by and buy some better fishin’ poles. Bait, too. Look forward to seein’ ye.”

“Yeah, I will! It’s such a rainy day... do any particular fish come out in the rain?” the farmer curiously asked.

Willy let out a wheezy laugh. “Nothin’ you can catch as a novice. But, you seem to have the fire. I’m sure there’s a strong fisherman brewin’ within ye.”

Jade puffed up her chest with the confidence boost. “Thank you! I’ll take my leave now, and I hope to see you some other time. Have a good day, Willy.” She waved to him and left the shop, her face flinching when the barrage of rain splashed onto her coat.

She could take the time to examine the sea, now. The water was a deep blue, but clouded by the twisting waves and surplus of water. Some of the water splashed over the docks, but the planks felt very stable. The young farmer followed the path of the docks while she watched the looming grays of the clouds. The storm probably wouldn’t cease until the day was far over.
At the edge of one of the piers, Jade noticed a familiar figure. Sebastian was gazing at the horizon as well, hands in his pockets and his hood over his head. His hoodie absorbed the rainfall, causing him to be completely soaked despite the apparent precaution of shielding his head. A red and white striped umbrella was closed by his feet. It seemed as if he had no intention of using it.

Jade walked over to him, the creaking of the wood failing to capture his attention. “You brought an umbrella and you’re not gonna use it?” chuckled the farmer as she approached.

Sebastian quickly glanced towards her, but then relaxed just as fast when he realized it was only Jade. “Hey, Jade. What are you doing here?” he asked in response. Jade was convinced he didn’t really hear her, but she didn’t mind too much.

“I went to go meet Willy and he gave me a fishing pole!” Jade proudly held the fishing pole up. “I might take it apart though so I can carry the thing in my backpack... I can’t just keep holding it like this. Huh. Anyways, what about you? I think this is the first time I’ve seen you without your mom goating you into hanging out with me.”

He scoffed and turned to her completely. “I was at the saloon,” he grumpily corrected.

Jade chuckled as she messed with the fishing pole and tried to safely disconnect the pieces. “Okay, without your mom or Sam goating you into it.”

Sebastian smirked to her. “I think you want to get pushed off the docks.”

Jade finished disassembling her fishing pole and stored it safely in her backpack. She grinned from Sebastian’s low-key threat. “I was just being honest, but I am at your mercy!” She stepped forward and stood beside him to continue to watch the waves.

He smiled in return and continued to gaze as well. “I just like being out in the rain,” he stated.

“Yeah?” Jade sighed quietly to herself. “This is my first rainfall here. I think it’s really beautiful, and it was kinda nice walking out and not worry about any encounters.”

He nodded in agreement. “No one in the town really goes out when it rains unless they have to. I don’t really like driving when it’s storming this much, but... the ocean is nice, at least.”

“You got that right,” the farmer concluded. Neither of them talked for a while, but it didn’t feel awkward. While so many people in town were full of energy, such as Robin or Sam, Sebastian was the complete opposite. He was quiet, always thinking, and didn’t really demand any continuation in the conversation. Jade thought it was nice, considering she had to worry about task after task and worry about getting everything done before the end of the day. Sebastian was a pause within the chaos, allowing her to take a deep breath and reassess her day once more. She smiled as she thought about it, then glanced to see how he was doing. He was just as calm as her, shoulders relaxed, a hint of a smile on his face. “You are absolutely going to get a cold,” Jade quietly teased, breaking the silence.

Sebastian’s eyes widened in response, but then he glanced to her. Jade thought that he might have forgotten she was there. “Anything is better than the summer heat,” he responded with a shrug. “I’m not a big fan of the summer, except for the thunderstorms really. The dance of the moonlight jellies is actually kinda nice, too.”

The farmer groaned. “We don’t have to dance again, do we?”

He actually laughed a bit. “No, it’s not a dance. On the last day of Summer, everyone gathers here at night to watch these glowing jellyfish. Someone sends a boat with lights out into sea, and a bunch of
them start surfacing.” His gaze dropped to look in the depths of the ocean.

“Oh, wow! That sounds really pretty. I look forward to the end of the summer, then.”

“There’s also the luau, which is a week and a half from now,” Sebastian continued. “You throw some food in this huge pot and hope for the best. It’s usually pretty good, but Lewis is such a tightass about the whole thing.”

"Why?" The young farmer asked.

"The governor comes to visit our town during the luau, so he's desperate to impress. He nags everyone about bringing the perfect ingredients."

Jade huffed and shuffled her feet on the planks. “Governor, huh? Seems like he isn’t really doing that great of a job. One thing I’ve learned moving here is that Pelican Town is kinda run down... or maybe that’s the mayor’s doing? I dunno. Either way, it’s sad.”

“Hm.” Sebastian’s focus shifted back to Jade. “I guess so. Did you really expect that before you moved here?”

The farmer thought for a moment, but then shrugged. “I did expect it to be insanely rural, but I didn’t expect to come across completely abandoned portions of the town... oh! I haven’t told anyone about this yet, but did you know about that area?”

“What area?”

“Nearby my house!” Jade beamed. “I got attacked by slimes again and I made my escape deeper into the forest so they’d get away from my farm. I ended up coming across this huuuge area in which-” Jade stopped herself and gasped. “The Community Center. That’s right.”

Sebastian furrowed his eyebrows. “What are you going on about?”

“Sebastian, do you know where the Community Center is? I was told to go there,” the young farmer stated, determination painted on her visage. The rain pelted down harder, thunder rumbling in the distance once more. Jade leaned her head down so none of the water would get on her face.

The raven-haired man did the same with his head, but he was already soaked from head to toe. He sighed. “Yeah, it’s probably about time for me to head back anyway.” He leaned down and grabbed his umbrella to open it. “I’ll take you there, since it’s on the way to my house.”

“Oh, good! Thank you.” Jade started walking back towards the shore, Sebastian walking at her side. “You’re done with the rain now, huh?”

“Yeah, too much of a good thing sometimes.” They continued onwards, though they didn’t talk about very much, as was usual. Jade held an inner fear that she may have been making things awkward for Sebastian, but she never exactly got the vibe so the feeling was uncertain. In fact, he seemed happy to help her, and there was a cheerier air about him that didn’t seem to be there on sunnier days.

Time quickly passed in their travel to the next destination. As Jade expected, there weren’t any other townspeople nearby, though it was understandable. The storm conjured some dangerous gusts of wind and the rainfall felt like liquid daggers, even under the raincoat. Mist formed at ground level, giving the whole town such a gloomier vibe... Jade loved it. The two were walking across town
square when Sebastian decided to speak up, breaking the immersion into the storm: “You know, you
don’t have to say my full name.”

The statement caught the young farmer off guard. “Oh... does it bother you? Sorry, I assumed that
only certain people address you with nicknames.”

“It’s fine... I just feel like I’m getting in trouble if you keep calling me Sebastian. Only really
Demetrius calls me that,” he grumbled.

“So... Sebby, then?” Jade chuckled.

“No!” Sebastian interrupted rather quickly. “Not that one,” he groaned, embarrassment flushing his
cheeks, “That nickname’s reserved.”

Jade laughed. “Okay, okay. Seb it is, then.”

Sebastian nodded in approval. “Better.” They passed Pierre’s store and walked up the stairs at the
side of the building. Jade remembered the area, but it looked so much different in the rain. She saw
that old, rickety building again... wait. Was that the Community Center?

“You’ve got to be kidding me. Is this what I’m looking for?” asked the farmer, fairly disappointed.
“This thing is probably in even worse condition than the neighborhood I saw.”

“Yup,” Sebastian reaffirmed. “No one really goes here, and I think Lewis locked it up after a certain
point.”

The appearance of the building was only worsened by the rain, since it looked like a haunted house.
The outer walls were rotting and rickety, windows in disrepair, roofs full of holes. The Community
Center was an absolute disaster. “Geez, I can see why. How did it even get to this point?” Jade asked
as they approached the front doors of the building. The young farmer reached for the door handle
and checked to see if it was open. “Yep, locked.”

“I wish I could remember why everyone stopped using it, but it was so long ago. I don’t even think I
was old enough to recall.” Sebastian shrugged and simply made his way to the far left side of the
building. Jade followed absentmindedly, entranced by the depressing state of the area.

“Where are we going?” She asked, confusion plaguing her voice.

The raven-haired man stopped at a large yet broken window. The hole in the window was certainly
big enough to get inside. “You want to get into the Community Center, don’t you? This is how we
used to get in. I once sent Sam in on a dare, heheh.”

“Oh, I see... I should have something clever to say, but I’m honestly not surprised that you and Sam
have done crap here.” Jade snorted as she took her backpack off and carefully tossed it in through the
window, then climbing through the opening herself. Sebastian closed his umbrella and threw it
inside, joining her as well. The young farmer re-equipped her backpack as she examined the whole
place... the inside was far, far worse than the outside.

The first room they entered had whatever remained of a dining hall and a kitchen. The floorboards
were misaligned, some popping out of place, and the rugs were ragged and partially eaten by insects.
Wallpaper peeled off the walls, the sinks and fridges looked rusty and dirty, and the table chairs
probably couldn’t withstand any significant weight. One of the legs of a dining table had been
chewed off by termites, and there were similar holes piercing the ceiling. Old plates and silverware
lie dusty and overturned on the floor, tablecloths uneven and practically ripped off of the table itself.
“IT looked like a tornado came in through here,” Jade sighed.
“I think it gets worse every time we’re here,” Sebastian muttered, pulling his hoodie off of his person. He twisted the water out from the cloth; considering the condition of the room, he figured getting the floor wet didn’t really matter. “Well, not that we’ve been here much, anyway. I sent Sam in here to get something on a dare one night, and he ran out with the most terrified look on his face. He said he saw a ghost, and refused to ever come back here.” He chuckled as he slung the hoodie back over his shoulder. “That face was so worth it.”

“A ghost, huh?” The young farmer examined the room, though there wasn’t much of note. The whole place was empty, save for the furniture. “Did you believe him?” Jade asked, venturing into the next room.

Sebastian hummed in thought as he followed behind the farmer. “Well, I mean... there are monsters in the mines that kinda look like ghosts. But I don’t see why one would be here.”

As they walked down the hallway, they noticed one doorway to the left and another to the right. Glancing inside, one of them seemed to be the remains of a pantry, while the other one was an arts and crafts room in extreme disrepair. A playful mural on the wall had faded years prior and dust collected on the many shelves of both rooms. The end of the hallway revealed the main section of the Community Center, which was as disheveled as it was gigantic.

There was a double-door entrance into the building, though the entrance didn't really lead to much; most of the area was empty, save for carpet with ripped threads and stray dust and dirt. There was a hallway spanning into other sections of the building to the right of the room. The upper center section of the entrance had an old fireplace with a plaque that seemed much newer and brighter than the entire building. Six indentations in the shape of stars formed a circle within the plaque. To the fireplace's right, there was a broken and empty fishing tank, and to the left, there was a strange hut that seemed too small for even Vincent or Jas to crawl through. The floorboards were pulled up, so the small hut was built from the dirt foundation. Jade's focus went to the hut, expression lifting in curiosity.

"Do ghosts build huts?" asked the farmer as she approached the architectural wonder. She felt the outer walls, which seemed to be made of the floorboards that were pulled up from the ground.

"Huh. I don't think I've seen that before," Sebastian mentioned, kneeling down to examine the hut. "Hell if I know."

Jade sighed as she tried to put her thoughts together. "Well, I was told that the... Dammit, what are they called... Junimos! I was told those stayed here. Maybe this is where they live?"

"Junimos?" Sebastian lifted an eyebrow in concern. "What are those?"

Jade shrugged, walking over to the fireplace to get a better look at the unique plaque. "When I was in the abandoned section of my neighborhood, I was approached by this cloaked dude who called himself the Wizard."

Sebastian's expression suddenly twisted into worry. "Wizard? Oh, wait- you mean the guy in that tower? He approached you?"

"Yeah!" Jade beamed in return. "He was a little cold in demeanor, but he was helpful and gave me a lot of good information. He said that I would need to speak to the Junimos to restore peace in my neck of the woods." She suddenly paused. "... I now realize how ridiculous that sounds. But I'm not lying to you!"

"No, no, it's fine. I've experienced enough weird stuff to give you the benefit of a doubt." Sebastian
sighed and stepped further down the area, looking down the unexplored hallway. "If you've been around Abby for long enough, that kind of stuff rubs off on you. She talks about the stuff she's seen near the wizard's tower. She might know some of what you're talking about, if you ask her... but, we don't really talk about it out loud so much. Any interest in the supernatural makes you such an outcast in Pelican Town."

The farmer decided to follow alongside Sebastian when she saw nothing else significant about the fireplace. "You guys live smack in the middle of nowhere and only a few of you believe in stuff like this?"

He wasn't really sure how to respond properly, but she brought up a good point. "Ask them, not me. But I haven't really talked to the wizard guy, so I can't say very much, either."

"Wait." Jade suddenly paused, freezing in place. Sebastian turned to her and noticed a very cautious look on her face. She heard something behind her and was listening... "Did you hear that?"

"No," he replied.

"I heard a little springy noise." Jade conjured up the courage to look behind her.

"Well, this place is pretty old."

"But it was right behind me," she protested, standing up straight and turning towards the source of the noise.

Complete silence.

"Dammit. I must be hearing thi-

Sproing!

"Did you hear that?!" Jade whispered desperately.

The raven-haired man scratched his head with a very unconvinced expression. "I guess..."

She turned back to him and huffed. "Hey, you said you believed me!"

“I said I’d give you the benefit of a doubt.” Sebastian corrected. “But look at this place. It’s old and probably teeming with mice... Um, Jade?” He peered to her with worry, since she was staring at something behind him. Her face paled and she slowly wheezed in anticipation. At the end of the hallway appeared a miniscule creature. It was about the size of a slime except it had a more cylindrical shape in appearance. Similar to slimes, however, it had a long antennae with a ball at its end. It had beady eyes and hardly noticeable arms and legs, but it was watching Jade with childlike wonder. The creature was a soft yellow in color, squeaking quietly to the farmer.

“Th... there.... there it is!” she gasped, stumbling forward. Sebastian turned to look, but it had vanished in thin air.

“Where?” he asked, glancing back to the farmer with increasing worry. “I’m... are you okay, Jade?”

“Dammit!” cursed Jade under her breath. “I swear it was there, it just vanished... but it was so round and cute! It was like a fat yellow cylinder! That had to be a Junimo.” She huffed and took her backpack off to begin rummaging through it.

Sebastian sighed. “Here, I’ll just go look.” He walked further down the hallway, hoping to find
something to rationalize Jade’s behavior.

“Please do,” she stated out loud, though slightly frustrated. “Maybe it’ll be less skittish if I drink the thing the wizard gave me... A-ha!” Jade brought out the vial full of green liquid and stood up. She untwisted its cap and sniffed the end of it, face instantly showing disgust. “Yoba... I have to drink this?” Jade lowly coughed. She hesitated on whether or not to drink the potion, but then she thought back to what Rasmudius told her: he had no reason to lie. If this was the essence of the forest and would allow her to communicate with the Junimos, drinking it was a risk she could honorably take.

Sebastian passed by an ancient billboard full of forgotten tasks, then a room to his left that contained a destroyed safe half the size of the room. More of the ground was exposed to the elements from the rotting floorboards, though wild plants were growing from the dirt. Nothing of interest there. He continued down the straight pathway and came across a stairwell on the right that led to the basement of the establishment.

He paused when he walked onto the stairs, but he was able to see the whole room. Seemed to be a dysfunctional boiler room, with an old style furnace and oven. At first glance, it didn’t really seem like anything lived here. If there was something yellow hopping around, he would have been able to see it in the dark and dingy rooms. His attention was regained when he heard a thump coming from the main area. “I didn’t see anything,” Sebastian called back to Jade. He carefully walked back up the stairs to rejoin the young farmer.

Jade was lying on the floor, face down. Her whole body was limp, and from the raincoat, it was hard to tell if she was breathing. An empty and open vial was tightly held in one of her hands.

Three tiny creatures appeared before her. All fat squishy cylindrical beings, with short arms, short legs, antennae on top of their heads. One of them was the very same soft yellow, another a vivid green, and the last one a warm gray.

“Holy shit.”
Jade wakes up in the clinic and meets the doctor for the first time; Jade notices serious tension between Sebastian and his half-sister, Maru.

Sunlight shone through two small windows, stirring the young farmer awake. She slowly opened her eyes and emitted a quiet yawn, but couldn’t move all too much. The farmer’s body was still a little achy, but other than that, she had a great rest. She noticed she was entangled in a thin white and blue blanket and had her head against a soft white pillow; everything had a very clean, sterilized feeling to it. She definitely wasn’t at home.

Jade slowly sat up to get a bearing of her surroundings. The entire room was white, including the door at the very far end of the room, an examination table on the side, and a line of counters on the other side. A clean sink had been installed in the center of the counter tops with cleaning and medical supplies placed around it. A lone green office stool sat in the midst of the room with her raincoat and backpack set on it, but other than that, the room was fairly empty.

In the distance, she heard two irritable voices.

“I’m surprised you’re even here today... What do you need?” A feminine voice attempted to be kind, but it came across as tired. She sounded familiar, but Jade couldn’t exactly pinpoint who it was.

“I don’t need anything, Maru. I’m going to go see Jade,” the other voice replied. That was Sebastian; he must have been talking to his half-sister.

“No, Jade needs her rest.”

“Yeah, because you seem to be doing a great job in checking up on her,” Sebastian replied sarcastically. “Where’s the doctor, even?”

Maru made an irritated sigh. “Why do you always have to make a comment like that? I’m doing my job, and so you know, I did check up on Jade a few moments ago and she’s still out. Harvey will be here in a- Hey! Stop!”

Jade heard confident footsteps, followed by hurried clacks against the hard floors. “I told you that you can’t visit!” Maru yelled in frustration. The door to her room opened, Sebastian on the other side. He was significantly drier than when they last met, even though he still wore the same hoodie and similarly dark jeans. He seemed apathetic in nature towards Maru’s insistence, but his face brightened when he saw Jade awake.

“Hey, you’re up,” the raven-haired man said in his calm, cheerful demeanor.

Maru walked in afterwards, surprised by the farmer’s regained conscience. She was in a traditional nurse uniform, which was a white dress and a hat with a red medical cross printed on it. “Oh, Jade! It’s good to see you, but I’m sorry that we meet again on these terms.” She passed a glare to her older
brother, who was ignoring her. “I’ll be right back, I need to go get Harvey.” The young woman left as soon as she appeared.

“Here I am,” yawned Jade. She still felt rather tired, but happy in not being alone again. “What happened? How long was I out?”

“You were out all of yesterday and most of today. I saw an empty bottle in your hand... did you drink something?” Apparently, Sebastian didn’t exactly know what happened either.

A bottle? Jade thought for a while, her face then lightening in realization. “Ah! I had to drink that potion... I didn’t realize it’d knock me out for that long. Dammit, Rasmodius.” She huffed to herself. “Well... hopefully I can talk to the Junimos now.”

“Oh yeah, about that...” Sebastian scratched his head nervously and avoided eye contact. “Sorry for doubting you. You know those things are in video games and stuff, right? It was a little hard for me to believe at first, but...”

The farmer blinked in surprise. “Did you see them, then?”

“Yeah. There were three in front of you when you were passed out, but they moved and just watched me when I tried to check on you.” He huffed. “Honestly, I probably should have just taken you home... You seem fine. They’ll probably charge you at the clinic, though...”

She smiled. “I’m a little tired, but other than that, I feel great.” The young farmer chuckled. “And it’s okay, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Thanks for taking me to begin with. The fact that you’d worry about me that much is really sweet.”

Sebastian crossed his arms and could only glance at Jade before continuing to avert his eye contact. He was getting flustered. “It’s not sweet, it’s common sense,” he lowly mumbled.

The quiet withdrawal caused Jade to laugh. “Well, thank you anyway, Seb. I really appreciate it. Sorry that I interrupted your day with my unconsciousness.”

The raven-haired man slowly relaxed. “Um... you’re welcome,” he shyly replied. “Don’t worry about it... But don’t be stupid and drink random potions like that! I left you for only ten seconds!”

“The wizard gave it to me!” She insisted with a grin. “He said I needed to take it for the Junimos. I should have asked him how my body would react to it. But I’m fine, I promise! I barely even remember collapsing. I just remember... Green? And then I woke up here.” Jade began laughing. “I’ve gotten you really worked up, haven’t I?”

“Yes!” He loudly huffed. “But, it’s good that nothing is wrong. You should visit my mom later, because she was worried about you, too.”

“Aww, I will. Maybe not today, but can you pass the news on for me?” Jade asked, smiling.

Sebastian nodded. “Sure.”

Their attention went back to the door when it opened once more. A very tall and distinguished man walked inside with a clipboard in hand. His focus was on the clipboard until he saw that Jade was sitting up in the corner of his eye. The man’s eyes brightened upon seeing Jade’s recovery and smiled. He looked familiar, for some reason.
“Maru told me you’re awake! That’s wonderful, we were expecting you to be out for another day.”

“My cue to leave, I guess,” Sebastian mumbled. “Bye, Jade.” He waved to her and went out of the room, leaving her with who was presumably the clinic’s doctor.

“Bye,” Jade replied with a wave back. Her attention went back to the man who had just walked in. “Hi there,” she said to him calmly. “You’re the doctor, right?”

He chuckled. “Yes, I am. I’m Harvey, it’s nice to officially meet you.”

In Jade’s eyes, Harvey was extremely tall and broad. He had an organized mess of brown hair, a simple mustache, and black rimmed glasses that aided his dark brown eyes. He didn’t really wear any kind of uniform like Maru did; he wore a buttoned white shirt, a brownish-red tie, a deep green coat, dark brown slacks, and shoes that matched the color of his coat. Colorful, to say the least. He quickly wrote something on his clipboard and then set it down on the nearby counter.

“So, how are you feeling?” he kindly asked, picking up a stethoscope nearby. “No pains, headaches nonexistent, breathing normal?”

Jade nodded and stretched her arms in a yawn. “A little tired, but I’m good. Thank you for taking care of me, you and Maru.”

Harvey smiled and went over to her to check her pulse. “We are just doing our jobs, but it really is a relief to see you up and running. I couldn’t figure out what caused you to pass out so suddenly... there was nothing in your system.”

“I drank something and it knocked me out.”

“I’m aware, but... that must have been a very strange drink. Please be careful.” Harvey sighed in relief upon hearing Jade’s normal pulse. “You’re very healthy, otherwise. Don’t worry about paying, by the way. I didn’t have to do very much except for a simple checkup and give you a place to rest. You’re new here, and I doubt you have much, uh...” He backed away and fidgeted somewhat, but Jade laughed.

“No, you can say it. I’m poor as hell,” she continued to chuckle. “I promise I’ll come back and we can do a proper checkup, yeah? And I’ll pay then.”

“Great!” Harvey clapped his hands together once in excitement. “Don’t forget that you can always buy tonics at the front counter, too. Try your best to stay healthy! A farmer requires a lot of energy in the day,” he explained.

“Don’t I know it,” Jade chuckled. “Thank you. So, will I be okay to go?”

“Yep, your stuff is right here, I’m just getting the normal paperwork done. I look forward to your next checkup.”

“Awesome!” Jade was relieved to know nothing was wrong with her, other than the obvious. Harvey put his stethoscope down and began scribbling on the clipboard again before walking out of the room. The young farmer shifted out of her bed and put her shoes back on... Eugh. She was still in her clothes from yesterday, so she already felt grimy and unclean. She put her backpack on and held her raincoat, then venturing to the rest of the clinic. The whole front of the building was compact, so
the exit was very easy to see. She walked down the hallway of the clinic and saw Maru at the front counter. The young woman smiled upon seeing Jade, but it was obvious that something was bothering her.

“Hi, Maru. I wanted to say thanks for taking care of me! I’m going to head back home now. I’m so desperate for a shower.” Jade readjusted her backpack and stood in front of the counter to directly face Maru.

The nurse seemed to liven up a bit; she was happy for the gratitude. “I’m just glad you’re doing well,” she said in return. “You deserve a shower, girl. Go take it.”

“I will!” Jade beamed, but Maru’s previous expression was still on her mind. “Hey... Sorry to ask, but... are you doing alright?” Her worry began to show.

Maru felt slightly surprised at the question, but it caused her to smile in relief. “It’s nothing new, really...” She sighed. “Sebastian just never listens to me. It’s irritating, and he’s never made the effort to be a good brother. Even when I’m at work, just...” She grunted in irritation, but tried to keep herself calm for Jade. “I’ll be fine, sorry. Don’t worry about me.”

The young farmer frowned upon hearing the story. “I could talk to him if you want. I like to think I get along pretty well with him.”

“Haha, I noticed, especially since he even bothered to show up. I doubt he’d listen if you even mention my name, so I wouldn’t make the effort. You should be careful though, because rumors spread pretty easily in this town.” Maru put her elbows on the counter and stared to Jade with a motherly look on her face.

“Eh, I’ll be alright. More rumors wouldn’t hurt me, honestly. Thanks for your worry, though! I just wish I could help. You’re really nice, you know? I feel like it could be a misunderstanding, like most things are.”

“You’re really sweet, Jade. But... No, it’s probably not. Sebastian has always been like that towards me. Not listening to me or just outright ignoring me.” Maru appeared to be very discouraged... it brought an emptiness to Jade’s heart; she wished she could do something. “I think I’m hoping for a sibling relationship that won’t happen.”

Jade frowned. “Hey, I’ll tell you something too,” she started. “I had an older brother, and he was a pretty crappy older brother.” Jade paused in an attempt to organize her thoughts, but Maru was paying attention to her with a look of wonder and concern. “My brother wasn’t anything like Sebastian. We didn’t really have a relationship. Not one I wanted, anyway. I couldn’t say I loved him.”

Maru gasped. “Wow... it’s... that bad?”

Jade avoided the question; she wanted to focus on just Maru. “I think Seb is a good person, but he is just really bad at getting it across to people. Maybe he just needs a reality check and to try to see the good in you, too.” The young farmer made a saddened smile. “You love him, so that’s a good start. And you two talked to each other today, and you must see each other often. I think that’s good. You have a relationship. Just try to build on that.”

The nurse shrunk back and rubbed her neck. “That’s... good advice. Thank you, Jade. I’m sorry to bring up such a topic if it’s sore for you...”
“Oh, not at all. I think you’re really nice, and I really like your family. I hope things will get better
with all of you.” Jade’s smile was more genuine and cheerful this time. “I want to visit your mom
tomorrow, so be sure to say hi to me if you’re there!”

Maru nodded happily. “I might be working tomorrow, but maybe I’ll see you after shift? I actually
wasn’t supposed to work today, but it’s so rare we have patients... so, maybe I’ll get the day off
tomorrow. We’ll see.” She waved Jade off in a polite manner. “I’ll see you!”

“Yeah, bye!” Jade finally left the humble clinic and came outside into the beautiful town square. The
day was gorgeous and a lot of people were outside... Vincent and Jas chased each other to the east
bridge, a blue-haired lady was walking towards the saloon, Willy was toting his fishing equipment
somewhere... Wait, these were people. Oh, no. She quietly maneuvered her way around the square,
to try to not get anyone to notice her. She was a mess, and three people already saw her that way in
the clinic! Three was enough!

Luckily, the young farmer was able to get back to her home undetected. The cold front that came
with the storm had vanished, so it was smoldering hot outside as was expected. She hoped that her
crops were fine being dry all day long, and that the work wouldn’t be all too tedious. Despite the
heat, the plants were sprouting very happily and were growing well. From recent events, seeing such
a cute little sight was truly wonderful for her sore eyes.

Before going inside, Jade took her watering can and fed the eagerly sprouting crops. She eyed the
wood that was left near the house as a gift from Robin. Maybe it was about time to build a
scarecrow, as well as something else more exciting. Jade sprouted in eagerness much like her crops
as ideas began popping up in her head. She saw Onyx on the porch swing and tried to pet him
lovingly, but he seemed somewhat offended at her smell and turned his head away. The action
caused Jade to laugh and become somewhat depressed due to her cat’s rejection, but she would live.
Finally, shower time.

For the rest of the evening, Jade spent her remaining energy on building a scarecrow and a training
dummy. She wasn’t the best at crafting third dimensional things herself, but the scarecrow was at
least sturdy enough and believable to any crows passing overhead. She dug the end of her scarecrow
into the ground while she then perfected her training dummy. It was placed right beside her house for
easy access later; training was something Jade felt she needed to do, and it was also something she
was excited to do.

Her day concluded peacefully, letting the cat back inside and eating some leftover dinner. Her mood
was a roller-coaster for most of the day, since she was happy naturally, but random thoughts would
intrude her mind and break the peace. For this day, it was the conversation with Maru. The young
nurse’s relationship with her half-brother only made Jade think about the brother she didn’t have, or
rather, refused to have. Seeing families all throughout the town was rather touching and endearing,
but she only reminded herself of her loneliness even more so. In hopes of calming herself down, Jade
crawled upstairs to go play games. However, she paused when she noticed her computer monitor
was turned on.

The computer had been on for a while, since Sebastian was the last one to mess with it. She nearly
forgot that she asked for internet connection, but the idea was relieving to have again. “I haven’t
been on in over a year,” she pouted to herself out loud. It was nighttime and she knew she needed to
sleep, but she decided to walk over and sit in her computer chair. The young farmer took a deep
breath and made an internal promise of self-control. “Okay, just a little browse.”
Jade noticed a sticky note attached to the bottom of the computer monitor. Upon picking it up, it had the name of a messaging program and three usernames for Sebastian, Abigail, and Sam. “Aw, what a nice gesture.” Jade made a genuine smile again, briefly forgetting about her previous worries. The last fraction of her night was occupied by downloading the program and getting a username of her own.

The young farmer didn’t have any family in Pelican Town, but at least her interactions were transforming into relationships. Jade was not as alone as she initially thought.
Goals and Improvements

Chapter Summary

After getting completely owned by Those Slimy Bastards, Jade decides she needs to practice her sword fighting skills; the Junimos give Jade the responsibility of helping the Community Center and Pelican Town as a whole; bromance is established between Jade and Abigail

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Beep! Beep! Beep!

That familiar alarm clock again. Jade made quick work of smashing the snooze alarm and sliding out of bed. She was hoping her muscles would finally adjust to the work, but admittedly, she hadn’t been healthy in a long time. A shower, breakfast, and a half-confident pep talk to herself was all she needed to get the day started. With the sun out and no clouds in sight, a bright outlook was needed for a productive day.

Before leaving her house, she heard beeping sounds that weren’t from her alarm clock. “Upstairs?” Jade pondered aloud, walking up and back towards her gaming room. The soft beeping sounds were coming from Jade’s computer, which she was too tired to really turn off the previous night. She ventured over to the monitor, which had the instant messaging program pulled up.

“Oh, they all accepted my friend requests,” Jade happily chimed. Sebastian was offline and Sam was idle, but Abigail’s username was flickering an alert. A chat window was on the middle of the screen and contained the following:

ABIGAIL: Hey you finally have internet!!! Nice!

ABIGAIL: Oh right, you’re probably asleep now lol. I went on a forest adventure last night so it’s like 5 AM

ABIGAIL: Anyway we have hardly chilled together! Come say hi and hang out at the store okay?

Abigail wanted to hang out already? Jade didn’t feel like meeting too many people today, but Abigail had a good point about them hardly hanging out together. Their meetings were a coincidence for the majority of the time, so she really should give the effort of being a friend. Jade sighed as she tried to think of what she could do for the day, but then her face brightened. An idea!

JADE: Actually I kinda suck at swords and nearly got my ass beat (will speak of details later). I have some stuff to do today but since you’re the one who gave me the sword, maybe we could practice and talk and stuff?
The young farmer was just going to leave it there, but a reply appeared on the screen almost instantly. She was surprised that Abigail was up, after being awake so late... Or maybe she didn’t sleep at all?

ABIGAIL: Thats perfect!! But we cant meet at the store then, just come by the graveyard in the evening. Ass beating must be told in full detail

JADE: ahhh thank you! i have to go see robin today so i’ll be there after that. also go to sleep it’s 7 in the morning.

ABIGAIL: Sleep is for the weak

ABIGAIL: Okay but yeah really I should get some sleep now, see you soon!

JADE: haha, good morning then. see you as well!

Abigail quickly signed off, leading Jade to close the chat window. She decided to stay online, but cut the monitor off to prevent any further temptation in exploring the internet. With a deep breath, Jade left the room and descended back down the stairs. She was in higher spirits then since she had something to look forward to.

Jade’s crops were growing steadily outside, but none of them were mature enough to bear fruits and vegetables. Even so, the young farmer spoke to her plants with words of encouragement as she watered them for the day. Afterwards, she quickly scanned the whole farm for any straggling slimes, and then finally left to begin her day.

“First the Junimos, then Robin, and finally, training with Abigail. Yoba, do I need to train,” Jade mumbled to herself, followed by a whine. She wasn’t sure how long the Junimos would take, or if Robin would send her on another chore, but at least she had her day planned out. “I should probably forage again, and try out fishing. But I don’t want to tire myself if I’m going to train with Abigail... Agh.” There was too much to do and hardly any time to get everything carried out! At least no one was rushing her, she felt.

Pelican Town was more lively on this day, and Jade was actually dressed and prepared to witness its environment. She passed by a dark-haired fellow in a Joja Mart uniform, but he acknowledged her with nothing more than a glare. Apparently he wasn’t in the mood for greetings, so Jade decided to spare the introductions and continue on her way.

Vincent and Jas were walking towards the east part of town together, presumably to meet up with Penny, while Lewis was walking to the buildings of various businesses for town affairs. A red-haired woman with braids and a green and brown outfit was walking towards Pierre’s shop. Jade felt like she has seen her before, but couldn’t exactly recall from where. Jade continued on, not wanting to stop and chat with anyone. She needed to figure out what the Junimos wanted of her.

The Community Center appeared livelier in the sunshine, but it was still as decrepit and covered in plant growth as before. Jade approached the large double doors at the front of the building and turned the handle-- it was unlocked now, thankfully. She entered the Community Center’s foyer, and everything was just the same as before. Wait, there was one thing different. A golden slab glistened in front of the fireplace at the very end of the entrance hall. Jade walked closer to get a better look
and noticed scraps of paper with strange writing at its center. Though the text seemed to be an unknown gibberish, the young farmer could somehow read them.

“We are the Junimos.

We will help bring peace to the forest and fix this place if you help, too.

Prove to each of us that this is your home.”

“Okay...” Jade murmured to herself and moved the top scrap of paper to continue reading. There were rough crayon drawings alongside descriptions. The young farmer found the drawings to be adorable, as if a child made them.

The first drawing was an orange pumpkin with a green stem. “Grow the largest crop of all.”

The second drawing appeared to be some sort of purple bar. “Unite yourself with the stars.”

Below the purple bar was a scribbled yellow blob. Hay or wheat, perhaps? “Obtain a gift from an animal friend.”

That was the end of the page, but there were two more to go. Jade went to the third page and continued to read, as there was more information to absorb.

On the top of the paper, there was a drawing of a green fish. “Gain the respect of the lake god.”

Jade couldn’t tell what the fifth drawing was. It looked like an indistinguishable cyan blob. “Speak to the people of the past.”

“These are getting so vague,” Jade sighed. She glanced to her surroundings, but she seemed to be alone for the moment. She decided to read the last description on the page, beside a scribbling of a seashell.

“Become part of the community.”

“Well, okay. These are my instructions, I guess. Why do they have to be so ambiguous? I don’t know how to do most of these.” Jade folded the tiny collection of papers and stored them in her trusty backpack. “Are you in here, Junimos?”

The young farmer waited for a moment for a response, though there was nothing but the empty wind blowing in through cracked windows. She took that as a sign to accept her instructions and leave the dilapidated building. “Well, that didn’t take very long,” Jade remarked to herself, impressed. All she had to do was to go check up on Robin, and she would probably have time to kill until the meeting with Abigail. To fulfill the next portion of her errands, the young farmer ascended the trail that led to the carpentry shop in the mountains.

Summer colors certainly shown well in the mountainous area. Dozens of multicolored butterflies fluttered about, tree leaves glistened with bright and vivid greens, and eager vines trailed up the house’s outer walls. A flock of birds zoomed overhead, twittering in a language still unknown to Jade. Before getting entirely lost in the environment, the young farmer arrived at the shop’s front door and slowly twisted its doorknob.
“Come in, come in!” Robin beamed before Jade even had a chance to open the door. She must have been at her front desk. As she opened the door, Robin didn’t have to look twice to know who it was. “... Jade? Oh, Jade, hon!” The carpenter rushed out from behind her desk and swiftly embraced the young and frazzled farmer. “I was worried sick about you! I heard you had passed out!”

Jade chuckled, though her voice was muffled from being pressed against Robin’s shoulder. “I’m fine, Robin. I didn’t mean to scare anybody!”

Robin let go of the young farmer to stare her right in the eyes. Jade felt a little intimidated, as if she was a child getting in trouble with her mother. Robin’s gaze softened and she gently sighed. “I’m glad you’re okay. No one ever goes to the Community Center anymore... you’re lucky you had Sebby with you.”

“Yeah, I realized,” Jade said with agreement. “But, I’m fine!”

The carpenter huffed. “What were you doing out there anyway? Was it some kind of prank? Were you two alone?” Robin immediately gasped. She didn’t realize they were alone before. “Wait, you were by yourselves! Why were you out walking by yourselves?!”

“I had business to take care of in the place, that’s all! I met Seb at the piers and asked him to help me find it.”

Robin mumbled something under her breath. Jade couldn’t hear the gist of it, but she did hear the word ‘boring’. The unamused look on her face caused the farmer to laugh again. The cheerful response caused Robin to smile in return, and then she relaxed completely. “Sorry, I admit I get pretty excited... We just never get people here in Pelican Town, and you’re so young and energetic and I really want you to get along well with everybody. It’s like an early Feast of the Winter Star present to know you get along so well with my children.”

Jade pat both of Robin’s shoulders to assure her that she understood. “If it helps, I haven’t talked to anyone around my age in a long time. This is refreshing for me, too!”

The redhead seemed heartbroken to hear Jade’s response. “You haven’t?”

“No, I was on my own for a very long time before I moved here.”

“Wha... Jade!! You hurt me so! Please come by whenever you feel lonely. There’s hardly anyone up here in the mountains anyway.” Robin took the young farmer’s hands and held them. She became concerned with the cool temperature of Jade’s hands and pat them in a sad manner.

Jade was entertained and warmed by Robin’s efforts to be a supportive and loving figure. She could see the hopeful sparkle in Robin’s eyes and her eagerness to help. “I will, Robin. It means a lot to know there are people looking out for me here,” the young farmer added. She hugged the carpenter back and then they both smiled at each other. Jade thought it would have been strange to say, but Robin reminded her a lot of her own mother. Caring, excited, and exceedingly nosy... Admittedly, the same could have been said about her father. However pushy the behaviors were, Jade really did feel welcomed by Robin’s motherly presence.

“Hm, you look tense, hon. I’m not keeping you here, am I?” the carpenter inquired with worry.

The young farmer shook her head. “No, you’re not keeping me. I do have to meet up with someone today, though... I’ve been thinking of fishing. Is that lake pretty good?”
Robin grinned. “Oh yeah, sometimes we-

**Baff!** A brief explosion was heard down the hallway to Jade’s right. *“Dad!”* She heard Maru shout.

Robin’s expression snapped from amusement to unbridled rage. *“What’s going on in there?!”*

“All’s fine, honey!” yelled the carpenter’s husband, followed by nervous laughter.

“I’m going to kill them,” she whispered to Jade in frustration, and then began stomping off towards the laboratory they were supposedly working in. *“Like hell everything’s fine! You said this was a tame experiment!”*

“It *was!*” Demetrius stressed.

Jade stood there awkwardly for a moment. Maybe it was time to go. *“I’m heading off now, bye you guys!”* she shouted.

“All gone, hon!” Robin’s voice was very sweet, but then snapped back to her low, angry tone when discussing with Demetrius.

“Hi Jade and bye Jade, sorry!” Maru yelled back. The young farmer chuckled and decided to exit the carpenter’s shop. A fire alarm began beeping from within the home, and she heard more muffled yelling. They were... busy, it seemed.

The young farmer only caught sight of the lake once before, but it was truly beautiful when she got to see it again. She walked up to the lake’s bay and sat down in the grass. Birds were chirping, mosquitoes were buzzing, leaves were rustling. More importantly, the water was clear and extremely deep towards the center. Jade could see huge sunken logs and different kinds of fish swimming from within the lake; it was brimming with life, and was the perfect place to fish. Jade released the backpack straps from around her shoulders and brought out the pieces of her recently acquired fishing pole. The sounds of nature accompanied her as she pieced her fishing pole together and set up the fishing line. She didn’t know very much about fishing, but she was open to learning the hard way.

Three hours passed and Jade only had tons of seaweed and algae to her name. There were a couple of times she got an actual fish, but either she pulled too hard and set the fish free unintentionally, or she felt the fish was far too powerful for her. *“I suck at this!”* she yelled out in frustration. The young farmer saw something in the corner of her eye and peered to the left. A familiar man was partly concealed by a nearby tree, but he was staring to Jade curiously, and she was staring back to him.

“Oh... Hi, did I, um... Did I bother you?” Jade asked nervously. She remembered him; he was the person she gave salmonberries to, and trespassed on his property on accident. *“You’re... Linus, right? Sorry... I am trying to remember names.”*

He seemed a little surprised that she noticed him, but neither of them felt threatened with each other. Linus slowly walked out from behind the tree and cautiously approached. *“Yes,”* he confirmed. The wild man stopped some yards away from Jade, but they were in closer proximity. He glanced at the pitiful collection of greens beside the young farmer, then to the shabby fishing pole that she had
claimed as her own. “You have been fishing for a while,” he quietly stated.

“Yeah, and I suck at it hardcore. I’m horrible at this, I know. You’re probably a professional, since you live out here.” Jade sighed and flopped backwards, lightly tossing her fishing pole to the side. Linus silently stepped closer and picked up the fishing pole.

“You’re casting is off,” Linus began, sitting beside her.

Jade rose back up to look at him. “How?”

“I’ll show you. Watch.” He cast out the fishing line effortlessly. Jade took mental note of his methods and then stared out to the lake in awe. “Then you should pay careful attention to how the fish moves, when you get a bite.”


“Fishing is always rough at first, but when you learn how fish move and your own fishing equipment, it gets a lot easier.” Linus patiently waited as the line was in the water. Both of them could see the bright bobber floating on the surface, only moving in the slight waves.

“So, I’m guessing you fish often?” the young farmer asked with assumption.

Linus nodded. “It is a good source of food out here. I make my own bait, as well.”

“That’s admirable. I probably would be dead by now if I was left to my own devices, haha. But... I did live on the road for a while.” She laughed to herself. “Sleeping in a moving truck is... interesting, to say the least.”

The wild man merely glanced to her in response, but nothing else really came to mind. He slowly lowered his guard, though; she didn’t seem to be hostile and she seemed to understand him, at least somewhat. Out of nowhere, the bobber sunk underwater and Linus began to pull the fishing pole.

The young farmer watched in awe and attempted to pay attention to how he reeled the fish in.

“This is a carp,” he began without even seeing the fish yet.

“How do you know?” Jade inquired.

Linus successfully reeled the fish in, being a nice sized carp. It looked to be a light tan color, scales lowly glistening in the fading sunlight. “Carp are one of the weaker fish of the lake. Do you want this?” he asked, gesturing to the fish.

Jade smiled, but shook her head. “How about you keep it? You taught me so much already... and I realized that I didn’t bring any sort of ice chest.” She pouted. “But, I paid close attention and I think I’ll be able to fish! I’ll practice here. Thank you so much.”

Linus unhooked the fish and placed the fishing pole beside Jade once more. He calmly smiled, bowed his head, and then quietly walked away. Jade bowed her head back as he left, though she knew he couldn’t see her.

She sighed to herself. “Maybe it’s time to go see Abigail now. Sun’s setting.”
The young farmer was relieved that she left before the sunset, because she had some trouble finding the graveyard. It was located near the river that crossed the bridge to the beach, and it was close to the houses that she often had to pass to get to the town square. Despite how often she traversed those paths, she never found herself having to go through the graveyard.

When she arrived, she could certainly tell this was there Abigail wanted to go. There weren’t many gravestones about, and they were rather old, but they were definitely graves. Jade walked to the center of the graveyard and surveyed her surroundings. There was one grave to her left and three ahead of her. If there were more graves, they were either unmarked or faded away. It didn’t seem like many of the graves were being cared for. The area was also rather compact, as well. Bushes surrounded the area and there were haphazardly placed fence posts, but there were so few people in town that perhaps a large, cared for graveyard wasn’t necessarily needed.

Luckily, Jade did not have to wait very long for Abigail to show up. She confidently strode towards the unexpecting farmer and yelled a very polite “Hey!”

“Ahh!” Jade turned around to see Abigail with a shiny, proud sword in one hand, and a softly flickering lantern in the other hand. “O-oh! Hey!”

Abigail laughed. “Hi, Jadey. How are you doing?” she asked, walking up to the center grave and placing the lantern down.

“Oh, I’m doing fine. It’s been an interesting day, but it’s been very good. What about you?” Jade cheerfully responded, removing her backpack and taking out her sword. “Also, are we gonna train with swords or can we like... do sticks or whatever?”

“Nope, let’s just fight like this. It’s good to get a feel of your sword first. Don’t worry, I’ll be easy on you.” Abigail grinned proudly and went up to Jade, patting her on the shoulder. “I’m really happy you wanted to do this. Now, tell me how you got your ass beat!”

The young farmer chuckled as Abigail helped Jade with her stance. “Okay, well...”

And so, Jade recapped her entire experience of the abandoned neighborhood to Abigail; including the barrage of slimes, encountering Rasmodius the Wizard, and the gigantic monstrous skeleton buried by cave rubble. While she was explaining, Abigail helped the young farmer with her posing, how she swung her sword, and how to successfully block attacks. Soon, they were sparring comfortably and obtaining a fair rhythm. Jade was learning how to use her sword well, and it felt natural for her; however, she still had a lot of improvement to do, and she couldn’t help but treat sword fighting more like fist fighting. She was also paranoid about hurting Abigail, so she wasn’t nearly as rough with her blade as she could have been. The adventurer didn’t mind as much and figured she would gain more confidence with her sword fighting soon enough.

“Whoa. That is... wicked intense. You have to take me by your house sometime! We should explore the whole place!” Abigail excitedly beamed. “I want to see that monster of a skeleton for myself!”

“Yeah!” Jade panted, tired from sword fighting. She finally threw her sword aside and collapsed onto the grassy ground. Abigail laughed and sat beside her. The day had vanished at this point; the lantern was their other source of light, other than the rising moon in the sky. “That’ll be fun. This was fun too, but now I’m exhausted. And fighting is hard... You’re too good at this.” She sighed happily. “Thanks, Abigail.”
Abigail laughed from Jade’s blunt yet innocent statement. “You’ll get better... And call me Abby! Don’t be so formal about it.”

“Oh... Abby.” Jade chuckled. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine! Really though, I had fun too. I haven’t really been out exploring with anyone in a while.” She huffed in thought. “I used to bug Seb about it, but he’s always ‘busy’ with his work. And Sam actually does have a part-time job, he’s hardly ever up late.”

Jade sighed, trying to organize her thoughts. “Well, everyone has pretty busy lives one way or another. I’ll be really busy some days, too. I have a lot to do. But, I care about you guys. So... if you want to hang out, please let me know! I won’t know, otherwise.” The young farmer peered towards Abigail, who was plucking individual blades of grass.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” hummed Abigail quietly. “Oh, tomorrow is saloon night. Are you coming?” she asked with curiosity.

“Ooh, sure. It’s been a week already?”

“Haha, yeah... Um... I do have a favor to ask, though.”

“Yeah?” Jade sat back up and focused on Abigail.

Abigail sighed, trying to think, but then grinning to cover up her obvious worry. “Well, can we play some arcade games tomorrow? Journey of the Prairie King or something.” She seemed nervous.

“Yes!” Jade beamed. “... I was a little worried about you, when you left early last time. I hope I wasn’t ignoring you.”

“Oh, no, no!” Abigail chuckled nervously. “It’s not your fault. Or anyone’s fault, really. Seb is pretty competitive anyway, you seemed to be having fun with the pool matches. I had fun watching you.” The adventurer tried her best to lift the blame off of anyone and continued: “I was just a little bored, and pretty tired.”

The young farmer nodded in understanding. “Still, I’m sorry. I want to get to know all of you. So, we’ll play some games tomorrow! Seb can continue to wreck Sam in pool,” she giggled. “But... I’d like at least one match, after gaming. It’s personal now, Abby. I gotta ground the bastard. You understand me, right?” Jade clenched her fist tightly and shook it towards the air, causing Abigail to giggle once more.

“Yes, you should absolutely do that and I’ll be so happy when you do.” Abigail’s grin was genuine this time. “I look forward to gaming with you, then. I was really excited to learn that the new girl we have in town is into all the same stuff as me! Admittedly, I can get kinda left out in saloon night. Sam and Seb have their little...” Abigail twirled her fingers, unsure of how to express her phrase. “...Bromance.”

Jade cackled at the word ‘bromance’. “Holy Yoba, that’s great!” she continued to laugh, beginning tearing up. “I totally see it. They do have a bromance, don’t they? Seb talks about him so much. He’s always mentioned Sam to some degree when we’re together.”

Abigail couldn’t help but laugh in response. “Yeah! You should see them some saloon nights. They
argue like a married couple, but you know they secretly love it.”

“Ohhh man, that’s so great,” wheezed Jade, finally calming down her laughter. “Who is the husband?”

Both of them were quiet for a few seconds, and then simultaneously spoke: “Sam.” They both cackled again.

Abigail sighed whimsically, wiping a tear from one of her eyes as well. “This is so nice. I really look forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

“Yeah! Let’s make them jealous. What’s the girl version of bromance?”

“Still bromance, just better,” Abigail answered. They chuckled again. “We’ll be the best bros.”

“I’m sure we will!” the young farmer excitedly concluded. “But, now I’m super exhausted. I should go back home. See you tomorrow?” She staggered up and grabbed her backpack to re-equip it. Abigail stood up after her and grabbed her lantern and sword.

“Yep, see you tomorrow!” Abigail beamed.

“Oh, don’t be afraid to message me, by the way. I might not respond instantly, but I’ll always check!”

“That’s great to know. Now shoo! You need to prepare. We’re gonna get to the final boss of Prairie King.” Abigail smirked and gestured Jade to leave.

“Okay, okay~ Bye, Abby!” Jade waved and began to walk off.

“Bye!”

Jade was glad she decided to go out. A conversation with a new friend was the perfect way to end such a surprisingly hectic day.

Chapter End Notes

The instant messaging segments look MUCH prettier on other websites, since I can change the font and color code the names. It doesn't look like I can do that here, so I apologize... but I hope it's enjoyable for everyone regardless!
Jade's nightmares influence her to become closer to Alex; another saloon night with the squad

Ring! Ring!

That wasn’t Jade’s alarm clock, but she still managed to rustle awake. It was completely dark outside, and only the light from her clock illuminated her room. The numbers on the clock were blinking 12:00, as if the power went out earlier. “Oh, no.” Jade sighed tiredly. She’d have to reset every clock in the house, now, assuming it was a power outage.

Ring! Ring!

What was that, though? Jade begrudgingly slid out of her bed and stumbled towards wherever she heard the ringing sound. She paused and turned her attention to her staircase, realizing the sound came from somewhere on the second floor. “An instant message, maybe?” she yawned allowed, slowly walking upstairs. “I need to disable that damn sound. So annoying.”

The ringing stopped when she stepped through her game room’s doorway. Jade walked inside fully and looked around, unsure of that annoying sound’s origin-

Blip! That sounded like a text notification, but it wasn’t from the computer. Her eyes widened when she saw a light coming from the room’s trash can. Her breath halted as she stared at the trash can, but her legs began moving towards it without thinking. The young farmer leaned down around the opening and hesitantly stretched her arm into the can’s opening. Out came a tiny, half destroyed flip phone. It was the same one she threw away days ago, the battery ripped out and everything.

Yet, the phone’s front screen was illuminated. She turned the phone to read what was on the front screen:

Text message from:

NO

She slowly opened the phone, but only because she had to. Jade wanted nothing to do with this device.

She read the text message.

“Jonah is here.”
“... No,” Jade breathed. “No, no, no... No, he’s not.” Her breathing increased, and she snapped the phone shut. “No.”

Ring! Ring!

The phone began ringing in the palm of her hand.

Calling:

Jonah

“NO!” Jade screeched, throwing the phone harshly against the wall. The phone snapped in half, but it continued to ring. Jade began to stomp on the phone, trying to smash it to smithereens with her foot. She was hyperventilating and beginning to sob, huge tears forming at her eyes and falling in large drops down her cheeks. “No, no, no!!!”

The ringing continued, even though the light on the phone wasn’t even working anymore. The computer in the corner suddenly lit up, notifications of messages popping up. Jade didn’t dare look, but the notification kept sounding as if messages continued to be sent. Jade grabbed a game controller nearby and smashed it into the computer screen, screaming. The notification sounds continued, but the lights of the monitor malfunctioned.

Jade clasped her hands to her ears and rushed out of the room, knowing the noises wouldn’t stop. She could barely see, her tears heavily clouding her vision. A miniscule amount of relief fell upon the young farmer when she came back to the first floor, but she could still hear the obnoxious ringing and message sending from upstairs. She just wanted quiet.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

No, no. The door. She heard thunder rumbling outside. Rain heavily pelted the windows.

The power shut off. No sounds but the raining outside. Jade could only see the front door.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The knocking was rougher and more vicious. The door began to shake from each pound.

Bam! Ba-

With the last pound against the door, it broke off its hinges and fell to the ground. Wind howled outside and rain flooded in through the opening. She could see the shadow behind the doorway. It slowly stepped forward.

“You took something of mine.”

Jade could see him now.

“It’s time I repay the favor,” he continued. Alex glared to Jade with a maniacal grin stretched across his face. His left eye was missing. He continued to step forward, while Jade froze in place.
“No...” Jade breathed one final time.

Jade jolted out of her bed, heavily wheezing. She clutched her chest as she attempted to gain control of her breathing, but it only made her begin crying. She collapsed back into her pillow, sobbing. “It’s just a nightmare,” she squeaked to herself. “Just a...”

Beep! Bee-

Jade slammed the snooze button on her alarm clock. The day was bright and lovely, but she wanted to stay inside forever.

Wanted to, but couldn’t. She knew what she had to do, for her sake.

---

“Oh, you’re looking for Alex, dear?” Evelyn lightly smacked her lips, trying to recall her grandson’s whereabouts. Jade was standing in the doorway of Evelyn and George Mullner’s home in hopes of speaking to their grandson. Jade was fully dressed in her white shirt and still-ripped pants for a regular farming day, though she really rushed with her chores this time around. Evelyn could tell that the young farmer was very drained, but finding Alex seemed important to her. “He’s not home right now, I’m afraid. I think he is usually at the beach this time around, dear. Do you need anything while you’re here? I don’t mind.” The old woman was somewhat concerned, but she continued to smile to lift the young adult’s spirits.

Jade shook her head. “No ma’am, but thank you. You’re very helpful,” she tiredly smiled. “I wish I could stay longer, but I really need to just... talk to him. I’ll see you later, okay, Granny?”

“Of course, dear.” Evelyn softly waved her off as Jade ventured away towards the beachside.

This was the first time Jade had ever been to the beach while it was sunny, but it was just as gorgeous as it was when it was being pelted with rain. The summer heat was extremely apparent, though. Jade hardly believed she was out in jeans in such weather.

In the middle of the sandy shore, there he was: Alex stood there, jacket sleeves rolled up to his elbows, a wristwatch around his right wrist, and did the smarter choice of wearing shorts and sneakers. He had a gridball- a brown leathery ball the shape of a pointed ellipse- and threw it high in the air, then ran to catch it before it fell to the ground. The young farmer watched from a distance due to nervousness; she hoped he would turn around so she could confirm he had both of his eyes.

“And what are you doing?” A faraway feminine voice asked.

Jade lost focus and turned to whoever spoke. A blonde woman strut towards the farmer in an elegant and flawless fashion, but she had an air of snobbishness about her. Jade has never seen her before, and she could hardly believe someone that looked so pristine would be in a place like Pelican Town. The woman seemed to be of similar age to Jade, but she looked far different; her skin was glowing from the summer sun, her hair was bright, curling, and blonde, and she wore a shining blue pendant that matched her sapphire colored eyes. She had a bright blue tank top and a frilly pink skirt, white socks and short blue heels at her feet.

“U-mm... h-hello, sorry....” Jade didn’t really know what to say.
“You’re gonna ogle some guy and just say sorry? Who do you think you are?” the young woman snapped. “You’re the new farm girl, aren’t you?” She scowled. “The one who ruined my Flower Dance.”

“I… I d-didn’t…” the young farmer didn’t have the energy. With the mention of the Flower Dance, though, this must have been Haley.

“Yeah, don’t think I didn’t hear about that, farm girl. I was sick, but the Flower Dance is serious business. If Lewis stops making this a tradition, so help me, I’ll have your-

“Hey, it’s the farm girl!” Alex shouted ecstatically. Both of the ladies turned to glance at Alex as he was walking over. “Jade, how are you doing?”

Haley glared at her masculine friend. “You’re seriously talking to her like that? She punched you in the face!”

Alex huffed. “Oh, Haley, would you come off it? Jade’s weird but cool! Right, farm girl?” He playfully pat one of her shoulders. “And we made up long ago!”

Jade didn’t respond immediately, but she scanned Alex’s face almost desperately. Both of his eyes were there, there wasn’t any bruise, and his grin was as gentle as ever. This really was Alex. “… S-sorry, what did you say?”

The athlete chuckled heartily and lightly tossed his gridball in the air as they talked. “Just that we’re fine, farm girl. Have you met Haley before?”

“N-no…”

“Well, Haley takes a while to warm up to people,” he began and glanced to Haley with an almost condescending stare, “but I hope she’ll treat you nice.”

Haley rolled her eyes. “I don’t have to do anything, but I’m going now. Have fun with your farm girl,” she growled and strut away. Jade drooped her head and shoulders, unable to give a proper goodbye.

“Haley is still a bit sick and is pretty stubborn about the Flower Dance, but if you keep talking to her, I’m sure things will get better. She’s pretty nice after a certain point.” Alex laughed to himself a little bit. “So, why’re you here? Coming to enjoy the summer sun? You are looking pretty pale, farm girl.”

Jade stammered, trying to speak, but she was too shaken up by Haley to do much. Alex noticed her behavior and came to a frown.

“Hey, Jade… are you alright?”

“I-I… Um…. I just came to… see y-you.” She deeply breathed. “I’m… I need to get my mind off things.”

The athlete hummed in thought, confused albeit charmed by her statements. “That’s awful sweet of you, but what can I do to get your mind off things? Aren’t you closer to other people?”

Jade sucked in another breath, trying her best to keep calm. “W-well… what do you do here?” she
asked, somewhat evading the subject. Alex knew she was obviously troubled, but he also felt somewhat sorry for her. He softly sighed to himself before regaining his confident composure.

“When I’m not swimming or tanning or whatever, I’m practicing with my gridball,” Alex began, gesturing to the ball he has been tossing around. “I’d offer you to play catch with me, but since you’re a girl an’ all…” He deviously smirked, hoping to get a reaction.

“What does that mean?” huffed Jade, lifting her head and glaring at him.

“You might not be able to handle it, that’s all I’m sayin’.”

“Are you threatening my skills about a damn ball because of my sex?” Jade asked. Her stuttering was gone, Alex noticed. He was happy to know she was getting caught up in the heat, though he half-feared that his face would be in danger again.

Alex chuckled and spun the gridball on one of his fingers. “I don’t know. Am I?” he teased.

The young farmer’s shoulders tensed and she stood up tall to face Alex. Despite being the tallest she could be, she was still over half a foot shorter than him. “Then we’ll see who is the catch master here, Mr. Athlete.”

“Ah, I love that spunk!” He laughed. “Oh, I mean. You’re on, pipsqueak!”

For a little while, Jade and Alex played catch together. Whatever was troubling the young farmer seemed to fade in their game, and both of them got a lot of exercise by chasing the ball and each other across the sandy beach. Even though Jade was extremely exhausted, she was relieved that she had this opportunity with Alex. He was truly a nice guy, under a fake, vaguely threatening exterior. Her nerves about him have calmed down completely; she needed to spend time with him like this.

Similarly, Alex enjoyed playing with Jade. His only real friend in the entire valley was Haley, who never wanted to get dirty with sports or play any sorts of games. The young idol was royal in personality, and her personality wouldn’t allow her to humor Alex in the way Jade did. Even though Alex was trying to get on Jade’s nerves and tease her with sexist remarks, he did somewhat expect her to react similarly to Haley. Getting to play catch was eye opening for the both of them.

A shrill alarm beeped on Alex’s wristwatch after he had thrown the gridball to Jade again. She jumped up and directly caught the ball, but then looked to Alex in confusion. “What’s that?” she asked.

“Oh, damn!” Alex huffed, turning his alarm off. “I gotta go to work now. Have any money for ice cream?” he asked.

Jade ran up to him and delivered the ball back to him, signalling that she was done playing. “Yeah, I have some change. Why?”

“Because I run an ice cream stand!” Alex beamed. “Come on, I’ll show you where it is. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in that part of town.” The athlete began walking, Jade tiredly following behind. Even though she was exhausted, her spirits were much higher than before. “Haley usually meets me there, but she’s probably not in the mood. It’ll be nice for me to have someone to talk to.”

“Aw, sure,” Jade sweetly replied. “I could go for some ice cream, honestly.”
Alex guided Jade to the right part of town, an area the young farmer has only been to by accident. Right after they crossed the bridge to the right section of town, there was a tiny and glistening ice cream stand that was awaiting to be open for business. “Here we are!” Alex gestured with a ‘ta-da!’ under his breath. He moved behind the ice cream counter and began setting up the stations. “You got 240 gold, farm girl?”

“Uhhh…” Jade rustled change out of her pocket, and then slammed the required amount on the counter. “Yup!”

“Great, great! So, what’ll you have?” he inquired once more, gesturing to a laminated piece of paper that had the menu options. Jade stared at the menu for a little while, but then sighed and shrugged.

“Honestly, they all sound good to me. Surprise me!”

“A daring woman, I like it.” He chuckled and began to set up an ice cream cone for her. When he was finished, he carefully handed the ice cream cone to her with a napkin around its base. She happily accepted and marveled upon the creation: the ice cream had three scoops on it, the bottom being white, the middle green, and the top pink. She had to stop herself from drooling at the sight, since it looked so… “Cute!! This is so cute! I have to eat this?”

Alex laughed. “You didn’t really strike me as the type to find things cute.”

“I do! I’ll still eat this, but just. It’s cute. What flavor is this?”

“Try it and find out, farm girl!” Alex leaned his elbows against the counter and placed his head in his hands to watch her reaction.

Jade peered down to the ice cream and tried a part of it. Her eyes lit up and sparkled with admiration. The flavor was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t figure out what it actually was. It tasted… melon-y. But also with a creamy taste. Oh, well. “I love this!” she beamed. “Holy crap, this is amazing. Wow. Good choice. Such a good choice.” Jade eagerly began eating her ice cream.

“Haha, you’re cute, you know that?” Alex grinned.


“Hm.” Alex hummed in thought, watching her finish her ice cream. She must have been hungry, considering how quickly she devoured it. “So what do you do most days? I hardly see you around.”

Jade held up a finger to him as a gesture she would answer in a moment. She finished her ice cream, including the cone, then wiped her mouth with the napkin she held. “Lots of farming and errand running. I was thinking of foraging and fishing today, then going to the saloon tonight.”

“Oh, you drink?” Alex asked.

She shook her head. “No, I’m going to the arcade part. My new friends invited me.”

“Hmm.” The athlete thought for a moment, but then he came to a realization. “Oh, you mean the big hair, goth kid, and the purple hair girl?”

Jade laughed. “Well, that’s one thing to call them. Yeah, they’re my friends. You’re my friend, too, you know. At least, I hope so…”
“Yes, we’re friends.” Alex calmly smiled. “What do you have in common with those three?”

“Well, I like to think we like similar things, and we have similar humor. Though I can’t say I’m as mischievous as Seb or maybe Sam. You’ve probably known all of them longer, huh?” Jade stood to the side of the ice cream cart in case any other customer came.

Alex shrugged and turned to be able to face Jade. “If you want me to be honest, I don’t really know many of them. I’ve been around them for a while, sure, but... everyone has their own thing they do. They have their video games, I have my sports. Meh.”

“I’m not really a sporty person, but I did have fun today,” Jade replied with a smile. “So, you never know. Maybe more people are like that.”

“I’m not really interested in making friends all the time, but that’s okay.” Alex sighed, but his expression was gentle and content. “Haley’s fun enough, you’re entertaining. I always got Dusty.”

“Who is Dusty?”

“My dog! You should come by someday to see him. Everyone’s scared of him but he’s a big teddy bear.” He was eager to mention Dusty, but then scowled in thought. “Lewis made us put up the fence because some of the townspeople thought he’d attack.”

Jade frowned at hearing about the fence. “Aw, that’s terrible…” She did recall seeing the large caged area with a doghouse inside, but she didn’t remember seeing the dog himself. “I believe you, though. I have a cat, but he probably wouldn’t get along well with other animals, haha.”

The young athlete’s mouth stretched into a grin. “So, you like all kinds of animals, huh?”

Jade nodded. “Well, I am a farmer. I’m going to save up money to afford a place for animals, but I’m still getting used to a lot. It might be a while.”

“Oh!” Alex stopped leaning against the ice cream cart and joined Jade on the side. “Best of luck, farm girl.”

“Thank you, Alex!” she beamed in response. “And thanks for the ice cream. I feel a lot better.”

“What was wrong?” Alex couldn’t help but be curious, but he didn’t really want to push her. The opportunity now was prime.

The farmer hunched her shoulders shyly. “I… I had a nightmare, and I thought it would be good to say hi to one of the cheeriest people I know.” She averted her eyes, thinking of how to word herself correctly. “And then I need to go out and talk to people more, anyway… so, yeah.”

“Aww, I’m cheery?”

“Y-yeah. But I should go forage and fish and stuff now. Money’s not gonna make itself, you know?”

Alex chuckled. “Yeah, for sure. See ya!”

“Bye, Alex,” Jade smiled and waved. She left him in better spirits.
Jade spent the rest of the afternoon foraging Cindersap Forest and tried to practice more fishing. She was able to collect a plethora of sweet pea flowers, spice berries, and the occasional bunches of grapes. She also fished in the river below Marnie’s ranch and attempted to follow Linus’ advice from earlier. With a quick trip to her house, she had the ice chest available to tote the fish along. She successfully caught four different fish: two sunfish, a chub, and a rainbow trout! After the last fish, she knew she could do nothing else for the day. Too much running around, playing, talking, collecting. She was ready to wind down at the saloon.

After delivering all of her goods to the shipment bin successfully, she quickly showered and dressed for a fun evening. She wore a thin red graphic t-shirt, a pink and white skirt that went to her knees, black leggings, and her favorite pair of red sneakers. Jade always felt it was needed to treat herself and to take care of her appearance whenever she wasn’t feeling very well. Looking good would help her feel good, she thought. Jade then looked through her small collection of hair accessories and placed a black hairband on her head, behind her ears. “You’re gonna kick ass and see your friends,” she quietly encouraged herself.

Surprisingly, Jade was the first of her squad to arrive. She walked into the saloon, not many people there yet, but they were coming. For the bartender, Gus, Fridays were always the busiest.

“Welcome!” Gus greeted with enthusiasm. “I’m glad to see you back here, young farmer. Please enjoy your stay.”

Jade was surprised to be talked to so early. “U-uh, hi! Th..thanks!” She bowed her head and hastily scanned her surroundings.

“Gus, gimme a pint of yer strongest!” shouted a raspy middle-aged woman on the far left side of the bar. She burped loudly and slammed an empty mug of beer on the table, causing Jade to flinch back. The bartender smiled in a concerned manner, but did what was requested of him. Jade simply waved to them and began making her way towards the arcade.

At a nearby table, she saw Willy again. She forgot that she saw him the previous week, but now it all came together. She still couldn’t recognize the guy who came to sit beside him, but Willy passed her a knowing glance and she kindly nodded her head towards him as she passed on. Near the entrance to the arcade stood a very unfriendly fellow. She had also seen him before, but he didn’t seem interested in talking. He wore a casual outfit-- blue zipper hoodie, green shirt, dark shorts and shoes-- and he was drinking a mug of beer. Jade still couldn’t bring herself to wave at him, since his glare was so... strong. She didn’t want to bother him.

Finally, the arcade. The young farmer ventured into the area she became so comfortable with the previous week. The pool table was a mess of balls like before, which implied that the trio were the only ones to really play in the arcade room. She began setting up the pool table for a game when she heard the enthusiastic boom of a fellow arcade user.

“Holy crap, Jade, is that you?” Abigail laughed as she walked in. “You’re so cute!! I’ve never seen you outside of your dirty farm clothes!” Jade stopped messing with the pool table once she heard Abigail and turned to see her.

“Hey, Abby!” Jade waved somewhat shyly. “Aww, thank you... I thought I’d try to look nice since I’m done with dirty work for today.”

“Well trust me, you’re adorable. May the bromance commence,” Abigail said with a wink.
Jade giggled and playfully shoved her. “Yeah, yeah. Wanna play that game now, then?”

Abigail’s eyes brightened upon hearing about the game. “Yeah! I’ve been playing all day! Watch the pros.” The young adventurer confidently strut over to the arcade machine titled ‘Journey of the Prairie King’ and started the game up. “Co-op time! Come here, Jadey.”

The young farmer joined Abigail and took the side of the arcade machine that her friend did not occupy. “Okay, how do I play?”

“Pfft, easy. Shoot everything that moves, collect power-ups, survive.”

“Oh, shoot-em-ups! I love these. And this is co-op? That’s so cool.” Jade grinned with excitement. “Let’s go!”

As hard as Abigail tried to play, it was obvious that Jade was the better player... by a long mile. Jade wouldn’t have believed Abigail practiced if she didn’t mention it before, but she was having a lot of fun. Abigail was grinning and laughing, which is what mattered the most.

Jade grew somewhat distracted from the game when she heard Sebastian’s voice near the entrance. His voice grew louder as he was approaching the arcade room. Jade glanced out of the area to see that he was walking alongside Sam, who was listening with an amused grin.

“So then the entire top floor is soaked because Yoba forbid we not have a sprinkler anywhere--alarm is beeping, mom is screeching like a demon, and Maru and Demetrius are arguing. Then of course, Mom beats on my door furiously to help her clean up the mess that the other two made and my entire day was wasted mopping the floors and drying all the books that got wet.” Sebastian sighed with utmost irritation, an extremely grumpy expression on his visage.

“What was your room safe?” Sam asked, trying his best to not laugh.

“Everyone would be dead if they ruined my computer, Sam.” He narrowed his eyes. “Everyone.”

“Heyy guys!” Sam laughed when he saw Abigail and Jade. “Let’s have an extra fun night for Grumpy, here.”

“Hi, Sam! Hi, Seb,” Jade giggled. “I overheard a little. You were there when the fire alarm went off?” Her focus went back to the screen, especially since Abigail was grunting in frustration at getting crowded in-game. Abigail was on her last life, while Jade still had three lives. She was able to keep Abigail from losing her last life, and they were able to get to the next level.

Sebastian and Sam wandered over to see the game the other two were playing. “Yeah, did my mother tell you?” the grumpier one asked.

“I was actually just leaving the carpenter shop when it happened. If I knew you were there, I would have stolen you away, hehe!”

The raven-haired man sighed. “As nice of a thought that is, no one can escape my mother’s clutches. I’m always the errand boy.”

“He secretly loves it,” Sam chimed in.
“Shut up,” Sebastian deadpanned in response. The taller one couldn’t help but laugh.

“All of you shut up! We’re busy kickin’ ass!” shouted Abigail. She was trying to joke, but there was certainly a smidge of seriousness in her voice.

Jade chuckled and gestured to the screen, “there’s no ass to kick in that corner, Abby.” Abigail’s character was blindly running in the corner while Jade was defeating all the enemies that ran out into the field.

Abigail blinked in surprise. “Oh. Whoops. Lookin’ at wrong character.”

“Suuuure,” Sam said, chuckling. “You’re pretty good though, Jade. Also, you look so cute today!”

“Aww, thank you!” Jade briefly turned to look at Sam with bashfulness, then Sebastian, who was still trying to calm down from his previous rant.

“Seb thinks you’re cute too,” he said, throwing an arm over Sebastian’s shoulders.

“Shut. Up.” Sebastian grit his teeth while he spoke.

Jade giggled and turned back towards the game. “Aw, it’s alright. Hey, how much is pizza? I could buy today.”

Sam gasped aloud. “Pizza!” he beamed. “No, no. I’ll get it. Take care of Grumpy.” He unwrapped his arm from Sebastian and gave him a hearty pat on the back as he walked off, back towards the saloon’s bar.

Simultaneously, Abigail lost her last life. “Dammit!” the young adventurer shouted in discontent. “That’s the farthest I’ve ever been!”

“That was level 3,” Jade hummed, raising an eyebrow.

“Yeah! I can barely beat the first level!” Abigail sighed proudly. “That was fun, but this game pisses me off. I forgot how much it pisses me off.”

Jade chuckled. “You done, then?”

She huffed. “Yes. Go beat Seb’s ass now.”

“Excuse me?” Sebastian lifted his head from hearing his name. “And what did I do?” he inquired, a little bit of sass in his voice.

Jade turned away from the game and crossed her arms confidently towards Sebastian. “Oh, yeah. We have a score to settle!” She stomped up towards him and tried to stand up tall. Instinctively, Sebastian did the same, realizing she was about to challenge him. “Pool. You and me. Let’s go.”

Sebastian smirked. “Ah, didn’t you learn from last time? Are you really sure you want to go against me?” He leaned in towards her face threateningly. “No one has been able to defeat me.”

“Yet.” She poked his chest and grinned. “We’ll see who comes out victorious.”

Abigail gasped, mouth gaped open in shock from the bantering. “Sam should bring some popcorn
instead, damn... Knock him off his high horse, Jadey!” she shouted, cupping her hands around her mouth.

Jade and Sebastian stood at their separate ends of the pool table, both glaring to each other with competitive fire in their eyes. Their game started rather calmly, with sprinkles of banter thrown about through their game. Sam returned with a large plate of pizza and Abigail joined him while they ate. Instead of stopping to eat with them, Abigail brought both of them plates to sit on the side of the pool table so they could eat while they concentrated. This game was serious, this time.

And... Sebastian narrowly won. Again. Jade was slowly getting better, he could tell. One thing that he learned about Jade was that she was an adept learner, and soon enough they would probably be head-to-head with pool matches. Until then, though, he thoroughly enjoyed his victory. “Whoo!” he beamed, lifting the pool cue stick above his head. “Still got it!”

“Man, I was so close, too!” huffed Jade. “One more game.”

Sebastian laughed. “Okay, fi-

“Wait,” Jade suddenly interrupted. She knew what happened last week, and didn’t want to leave Abigail out again. “Sorry, Seb. Maybe Abby could play, actually.”

The young adventurer was surprised to be mentioned. “What?” she asked, then looking at the pool table nervously. “Oh, no, no. It’s fine. I’m not good at those games.”

“Aw, have you ever tried it before? I’ve never played pool before last week, you know.” Jade pouted. “Maybe you’ll have fun.”

“You can take my place if you want,” Sebastian offered, stepping away from the pool table to give Abigail the cue stick. At first, the young adventurer hesitated. By glancing at Jade, though, she smiled. She kindly took the cue stick and walked over to the pool table while Jade reset the game. Sebastian sat in Abigail’s previous seat and watched while eating one of the last slices of pizza.

Abigail was exceedingly terrible at playing, but she was ecstatic to be included. The rest of the night was spent with the group of four happily conversing, switching turns while playing games, and just having an enjoyable time together. Sam actually managed to win a game against Abigail, but lost sorely to Jade and, of course, Sebastian. The two better players went against each other once more, but Sebastian continued to prove himself as the better player. Winning against Jade entertained him the most, since it only made her try even harder the next time. He noticed how worked up and excited she became to prove herself.

Saloon night was a success. They enjoyed themselves much more than they have in a while. Abigail actually stayed much longer than she usually did, and all four of them were exhausted when their night concluded. Abigail shoved Sam playfully and hugged Jade goodnight before waving to all of them and leaving. Sam was the next to go, leaving Sebastian and Jade to walk out together.

“Sam seemed to get on your nerves today, huh?” Jade chuckled as they walked out together. The loud saloon was replaced with the quiet chirping of nighttime creatures. Both of them began walking down the street that was just to the side of the town square.

“Nah, I’m used to it,” Sebastian replied with the roll of his eyes and a smirk. “Sam’s just Sam, really.”
The young farmer nodded in agreement. “Certainly. I had a blast tonight, though. What about you?”

“Yeah, we haven’t all just hung out like that in a while. I got tired of only playing against Sam. Thanks,” he replied, faintly smiling. “You’re not a bad opponent.”

“Soon, I’ll beat you. Soon!” She chuckled.

“I won’t make it easy,” Sebastian playfully huffed.

The two stopped when their paths were going to diverge. Jade had to continue heading west, while Sebastian had to travel up north. Jade noticed he wasn’t walking away, so she wondered if he had anything to say.

“... Hey,” he began.

“Hm?” The young farmer kept her attention focused on him.

“You said you’ve never played Solarion Chronicles, right? The game?” Sebastian asked with curiosity.

“I’ve never played, but I would love to try,” she confirmed.

Sebastian scratched the side of his head and averted his eyes. “Oh. Cool. Well… most Saturday nights, Sam and I play Solarion Chronicles at my house.” He glanced back to her. “I was wondering if you’d like to join us.”

A gigantic smile stretched across Jade's face. “I’d love to!” she excitedly replied. “Should I bring anything? Like a character sheet or whatever. That’s the kind of game this is, right?”

Sebastian shook his head, smiling. “Just bring yourself. I’ll take care of the rest. You know where my house is, yeah?”

“Mmhm.”

“Cool. Um… See you later, Jade.” Sebastian crossed his arms and began walking away. “Oh, and take that same gaming spirit with you.”

“You bet I will!” Jade watched him leave, then continuing in the direction towards her own house. Saloon nights, then game nights. A rough start to the day brought a satisfying ending to the night.
For the first time in a while, Farmer Jade’s day was rather uneventful. At the very least, she was able to hone many skills she felt she would need in the long-run; more foraging in the forest, fishing more big hauls to store in the shipping bin, and even practicing her sword fighting on the training dummy she made just for the purpose. She didn’t see anyone at all, but it was needed on her end. Too much interaction with too many people caused her to feel exhausted, and she had been interacting with far too many people lately.

Despite her aversion towards engaging in social interaction too often, Jade still felt excited to join Sebastian and Sam for game night. Meeting them would be a great excuse to play games and relax, and she would still manage to fulfill some sort of unspoken social quota. She was proud of herself for being able to successfully include Abigail the previous night, but she realized that Abigail wasn’t necessarily mentioned for game night. Hopefully Abigail just wasn’t interested in Solarion Chronicles.

All of Jade’s crops were carefully watered; still growing. She hated how long they were taking to bear fruit, but they had to have some sort of value to them if they were going to take such a long time. After taking care of the crops, she collected her pay from the mail and read whatever letters she had before calling it a day and venturing back into her home.

After a shower and a half-heartedly crafted meal, the young farmer tried to treat herself and dress comfortably once more. The blistering heat outside didn’t take a shine to the warmer clothes she preferred, but she stubbornly continued to wear a dark blue pair of jeans. Instead of her usual white shirt, however, she took to a raspberry colored tank top instead. As always, though, she wore a black choker layered with her special emerald pendant.

“I’ve been thinking about the squad an awful lot,” Jade sighed to herself. She only really got to spend time with the three of them at once during saloon nights, so she already missed the feeling. The week would hopefully go by quickly, if it meant she could grow closer to her peers. Thinking about the trio reminded her that she could message all of them from her computer upstairs... but...

Upstairs. A chill went up Jade’s spine as she was reminded of her previous nightmare, again. Evening was approaching, too. She couldn’t keep doing this. After the young farmer dressed for a relaxing evening, she stared to the staircase that led to the higher floor of her house. Jade was frozen in the middle of her living room for an absurdly long amount of time.

“No. Stop doing this to yourself,” she grunted to herself in discontent, clenching her fists. With a deep breath, Jade gathered up the courage to ascend the staircase. The game room was just as she had left it... including the broken phone in the trash can. The young farmer sighed and took out the trash bag that contained only a small collection of junk, but she knew she needed to get it out of the house.
Blip! Jade suddenly flinched and covered her ears, dropping the trash bag she collected. Wait... it was from the computer. Blip! There it went again. Jade slowly untensed and went to examine her computer. She turned the monitor on, revealing a new message window addressed to her:

SEBASTIAN: Hey

SEBASTIAN: Ready for game night?

Oh, it was Sebastian. Jade calmly smiled, knowing it was him. She sat in her computer seat to reply; she didn’t have anything else but game night to look forward to, anyway. She could afford to goof off for a little while.

JADE: hey! heck yeah i am. just got done with my work day actually

SEBASTIAN: Nice, me too. What does your work day even consist of?

JADE: lots of desperate foraging for pocket change and aggressively staring at my plants

SEBASTIAN: I thought you were supposed to sing to plants

JADE: no, you have to show them who the alpha is. it’s farming 101 seb, trust me. i’ve been doing this for...

JADE: dang

JADE: like... a week and a half maybe?

JADE: anyways i’m a pro

SEBASTIAN: Ha, for some reason it feels like you’ve been here longer than that

JADE: yeah, i know. i feel really at home!

The young farmer relaxed back in her seat and smiled as she read the messages. She really did feel like the home was becoming hers. During more relaxing days, she could reflect on all of her work and progress and just appreciate living in such a beautiful area.

SEBASTIAN: Could be that pro-ness doing that for you

SEBASTIAN: Anyways, I wanted to message you to confirm if you’ve played any table tops at all before

SEBASTIAN: Due to past experiences, I just want to be able to give you a rundown before you come here

JADE: past experiences?
SEBASTIAN: Yeahhh, I’d rather not get into it

JADE: it was abby wasn’t it. can you even godmod in tabletops

SEBASTIAN: The fact that you know what the word godmod is makes me feel so much better. Come to your own conclusions with the rest.

JADE: lmao

JADE: so is that why you didn’t mention abby when you asked me yesterday?

SEBASTIAN: Games that take a lot more patience aren’t really her style, so it’ll just be us three

SEBASTIAN: That’s assuming Sam even comes. He hasn’t been answering my messages

JADE: sounds like another maniacal plan of robin’s

JADE: gotta trap two single attractive people in the same room

JADE: take away big hair to ignite the ultimate scheme

SEBASTIAN: Ugh, I hate how right you are with that

SEBASTIAN: By the way, I’m sorry for all her earlier behavior

SEBASTIAN: My mother can be unbearable. I know I’ve apologized for it before but considering recent events, she will honestly not shut up about you

SEBASTIAN: It’s like, I walk upstairs and I’m up there for not even three seconds before she goes “Have you seen Jade yet?! Is she okay?? Maybe she’s hungry, go take her some spaghetti, tell me how it goes!!!”

JADE: awwww she’s so caring. don’t worry about it, my mom was the same. she’d be asking me about every guy in town, ESPECIALLY if he was new and single. bonus points if ready to mingle

JADE: hey tho, i will never reject a steamy hot plate of spaghetti. that is the only way to a woman’s heart

SEBASTIAN: I’ve learned that the hard way

JADE: sounds like you’re full of regrettii

SEBASTIAN: holy shit

Jade was giggling to herself. The opportunity opened for a pun and she went for it. At first, she felt paranoid to try to crack jokes in an online format, where sarcasm could not be as easily detected. Luckily, Sebastian was easy to pick up on her words, which relieved her a great amount.

SEBASTIAN: Can you pls answer my earlier question before I regrettii you off a cliff
JADE: LMAO

JADE: no, i haven’t really played tabletops. but i’m very open to learning!!

SEBASTIAN: It might be hard to win your first scenario but once you get a hang of how the game goes, you’ll be fine

JADE: tell me everything your masterful mind knows

Sebastian began explaining the general rules about the game they were going to play and asked the occasional question to try to understand Jade’s grasp of the game. More questions arose as they tried to decide what play style and gaming class may best fit her. Jade certainly enjoyed discussing in-depth gaming with Sebastian, especially since it was obvious that not many of the townspeople were very interested. She also felt somewhat sorry for him, since Abigail didn’t really seem to be so invested and Sam is... Sam. Fortunately for him, Jade was just as interested and enjoyed surprising others with her bouts of knowledge, gaming or otherwise.

While they were in the middle of their discussion, the sun had already set behind the trees and mountains. Jade briefly stood out of her seat and glanced out one of the nearby windows. She supposed it was just about time to leave considering how dark it was getting, but as she almost turned around to go notify Sebastian, something caught her eye.

“Little... bastard!”

JADE: SLIME

JADE: THERE’S A SLIME ON MY FARM

JADE: sorry but i have to go now!! i’ll see you in a little bit.

SEBASTIAN: What color is it

JADE: only the most disgusting green imaginable!!

SEBASTIAN: Are you seriously freaking out about a green slime?

SEBASTIAN: You can hit them with a twig you find on the ground and they explode from the impact

JADE: those little bastards ruined my favorite pair of pants and nearly overwhelmed me!!

SEBASTIAN: Are you only infuriated because of a pair of pants

JADE: MAYBE

JADE: anyways bye!!

Jade didn’t even take the time to sign off of her computer, and instead took off with great speed
downstairs. She rushed outside, grabbed her sword she left outside for practice, and took off near the side of her field. She could tell the creature was curious about the crops she had been steadily growing.

“Hey! You!!” Jade shouted aggressively, running over to the slime. “I’m not afraid to destroy you!”

The green slime didn’t launch towards Jade, surprisingly enough. It actually rolled back and carefully watched the farmer.

“Shoo! Shoo before I kill you!”

... The slime... listened? It saw the sword and rolled away, revealing the spot that it was able to squeeze through. Jade followed the slime at a distance to see the opening. “Are you kidding me? A new fence and those pricks managed to make a hole just small enough?” she grumbled angrily to herself, but at least she didn’t have to get herself covered in slime goo. It was possible that the forest slimes were getting used to the boundaries of the farmland, or realized that its owner was furiously guarding the territory.

A victory is a victory, so Jade didn’t really mind. She ventured back to her porch, tossed her sword right inside the house, and went to go collect all of her trash in the house. Armed with only a small collection of trash bags, Jade set off towards town to be on time for game night.

Why was there no actual dumpster available in such a town? Was there a dumpsite nearby? If there was, Jade really could not figure out where it was. She walked out of Cindersap Forest and begrudgingly traveled into the town while toting all of her garbage. She noticed Sam walked out from the nearby blue house and stopped to greet him.

"Oh, there you are, Sam!" Jade yelled in greeting. She waved to him with her free hand while he walked over.

"Was I anywhere?" Sam asked with a chuckle, going up to her. "Hey, you going to Seb's?"

Jade nodded. "Uh huh, and I'm going to take this trash out... Uh, before we continue, is there a dump anywhere?"

"Does Lewis not have a trashcan in front of your house? A truck comes by." Sam guided her over to a large trash can in front of his house and helped her dispose the garbage.

"Well damn, I guess they don't know I live there yet. I can't blame them." She sighed and dusted her hands on her pants. "Anyways, let's go."

The two traveled through the town square together to reach the mountain range. Jade noticed how much calmer Sam was when he only had few people around, but she was glad to see that side of him. Sam seemed gentle and relaxed, which was a vibe that she didn't often get from him. It was nice.

"Seb was concerned you weren't coming," Jade began as they walked together. "He said you weren't replying to his messages."

Sam suddenly laughed. "Did he really say that? Why am I not surprised," he chuckled. "Seb's so ridiculous about stuff like that, and yet he never tells anyone anything."
"Aww, it's always good to be prepared, you know! Speaking of prepared, he gave me a lecture on the game."

"Ha! What class did he say you'd be good with?" Sam glanced down to the farmer.

"He said warriors are an easier class, but he could see me with a magic class. We were still deciding before I left, but I think I'd make a pretty darn good summoner." Jade proudly crossed her arms and nodded to herself with confidence. "It's a more complicated class, but he thinks I can handle it."

The young part-timer shrugged and smirked. "Hey, that means I get warrior. I've always been better with brute strength. Seb's the one that has to make it complicated with unnecessary strategy."

Jade glanced to him with amusement, then forward again as they continued onward. Sebastian and Sam's complete contrast entertained her since they were so close, but seemed to butt heads in both personality and preference within their common interests. Arguing like a husband and wife, Jade remembered Abigail saying. What a great comparison!

"Well, how fun would it be if you just one-hit KO'd every monster? It'd get boring!" the young farmer played devil's advocate.

"Oh, I know," Sam replied in agreement, "but I'm not about that constant support setup and using specific items or whatever. NEVER play Minimon with Seb, unless you want to pull all of your hair out and dangle him over a damn balcony."

Jade went into a fit of giggles. "It's that bad?" she asked. "Now you make me want to!"

"You enjoy suffering, don't you? You're just as horrible as him!" Sam lightly shoved the young farmer, causing her to playfully hit him back. They continued with their simple chatting until they reached the carpenter's house. The sight was so familiar and so welcoming to Jade; the mountains were just as lovely if not more lovely than the forest towards the southwest. Jade was about to enter the house, but Sam lightly tugged on her arm. "Seb's probably busy getting cancer," Sam huffed, looking out towards the lake. "Yo! Smokey!"

Sebastian stood out at the edge of the lake, smoking a cigarette. His head lifted up more when he heard Sam's voice, and looked over to see the both of them. Both Sam and Jade waved eagerly to their raven-haired friend and shouted for him to come over.

Sebastian chucked the bud of his cigarette into a nearby trash can and approached the two with a calm expression. "Hey," he said to the both of them, but then looked to Jade. "Has the slime issue been resolved?"

Jade huffed aloud and crossed her arms again. "Yeah, if you must know!"

The raven-haired man smirked in amusement, but decided not to prod Jade any further. He was the first to venture over to the carpenter shop’s front door and went inside, the other two following behind. Robin wasn’t at the front desk, so she was most likely out collecting wood.

“I’ve been in the shop quite a few times, but I just realized I’ve never been to your room, Seb.” Jade clapped her hands together and innocently smiled. “This must be nice, huh?"

“It’s not really that big of a deal, but sure, go nuts.” Sebastian walked to the right from the shop and descended the stairs that were hidden at the bottom of the home’s hallway. Near the end of the stairs
was a doorway, which then led to Sebastian’s basement of a room.

His room was fairly dim in lighting, but very huge as well as cozy; there was a large black sofa, a big table with a tabletop game and chairs, rows of bookshelves and a bed that faced the far corner of the room. Posters of various video games, books, and bands adorned the gray cinderblock walls. The farmer found herself staring at the posters... she was impressed. Over to the far corner of the room was a large square desk with two computers placed on top of them. The older computer of the two was off, but the newer computer had been turned on and illuminated the wall it was facing.

The three entered the room, feet creaking on the old wooden floorboards. “Oh wow, I love your room!” Jade beamed, trotting over to the northern wall to better examine the posters. She gasped when she caught sight of one of the bookshelves and eagerly ventured over to look at them; in her excitement, however, she bumped into an end table with an old radio. “Whoops.” She carefully moved the table back to the wall, before going to the far end of the room.

Sam laughed. “You like this nasty old basement?” he asked.

Sebastian glared at him and shoved him over to the game table. “Better than your kiddie room,” he scoffed.

A large gasp emerged from the farmer. She kneeled down at one of the bookshelves and marvelled at Sebastian’s collection. “Ca...Cave Saga! You have the latest issue!!” She almost greedily reached for the graphic novel she was staring at, but looked back to Sebastian with a sad, nearly puppylike expression. “Can... Can I look at it? Please?”

Sebastian emitted a sigh and sat at the game table, elbows leaning before the game board. “I dunno... Are you worthy?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“I am not! But, I beg.” Jade jokingly bowed over to the two at the other end of the room, forehead against the floor.

“Hmmmmm...” Sebastian scratched his chin. “Maybe you’ll be worthy if you can pass a scenario first try.” He smiled. “Come over here, it’s time to start the game.” He watched as the farmer hopped up and obediently joined the other two at the table. “Ready?” he asked.

“Yes!” Jade beamed.

“You know the drill for me,” Sam responded with a grin. “Let’s do this.”

For the majority of the night, the three engaged in a very intense of game of Solarion Chronicles. Sam was the Warrior, Sebastian the Wizard, and Jade the Summoner, all holding unique attributes of their own and the determination to complete their valiant quest as a team. Sam was possibly the most important in helping the game progress, since both Jade and Sebastian would begin theorizing and trying to figure out the best means for strategy, which then led into what-ifs and debates. Sam became more of a mediator in the best strategies and kept the both of them from getting too carried away with their ideas. The blond didn’t really mind, but he felt like he was dealing with two Sebastians instead of just the normal one... Which he absolutely loved. The other one was just slightly smaller, and held an endless supply of enthusiastic energy. And maybe less broody.

They completed the game with a rank B, mostly because Jade was very new at the game and the class she chose for herself wasn’t exactly the easiest for beginners. Regardless, both Sebastian and Sam were impressed, especially the former with how dedicated she was to the game and its lore.
Sebastian was still trying to get used to the idea that more than one person in Pelican Town actually had such similar interests, but he found it a pleasant surprise.

“That was awesome. How good is a rank B?” Jade curiously asked, helping the other two reset the table.

“It’s not bad at all. The highest you can get is an A, so yeah,” Sebastian replied with a lighter air in his voice. “I was a lot worse when I first started playing.”

Jade proudly polished her knuckles against her shirt and had a smug composure. “Maybe I’m just a natural,” she obnoxiously yawned, causing Sebastian to click his tongue in defiance.

“Oh, please. I was giving you the easy strategies,” the raven-haired man replied with a smirk.

“Ladies, ladies, you’re both beautiful,” Sam laughed, getting up from the table. “Time for me to head out though. No cat fights while I’m gone!”

“No promises,” Sebastian casually answered. “Bye, Sam.” He smiled.

“Bye, Sam!” Jade beamed in response. They watched their spiky-haired friend leave, then looked back to each other. “I guess that’s my cue to leave as well,” she kindly concluded.

“Fine with me,” Sebastian replied and stood up from the table, giving her the same faint smile. “Thanks for playing with us.”

Jade stood up after he did and bowed her head. “I had so much fun, so I should be thanking you instead! I’d love to do this again.”

“Oh, for sure. Well... aren’t you forgetting something?” Sebastian crossed his arms.

“What?” The young farmer glanced away confusedly, trying to recall.

The raven-haired man didn’t seem surprised. “Cave Sa-”

She loudly gasped. “Cave Saga!! I can borrow it?!”

Sebastian chuckled and nodded. “Yeah, but this means I can borrow your games and comics now.”

“I’m cool with that!” Jade eagerly ran over to the bookshelf she scanned previously and carefully removed the graphic novel of her choice. “But my collection of comics isn’t nearly as impressive as yours. You’re honestly the best, thank you.”

“Uh huh,” Sebastian acknowledged with a much more cheerful expression. Jade didn’t have her backpack with her this time, but she held the graphic novel tightly to herself. She bowed again and started to leave the room.

“Goodnight, Seb!” Jade waved with her free hand before disappearing back upstairs.

“Night, Jade.”
Jade meets Elliott and Leah; After exploring the woods, Jade's jimmies get rustled by a drunk resident with a huge potty mouth

I'm sure the summary had you guess this, but there is a strong language warning for this chapter.

Jade’s fridge was getting uncomfortably empty. All her large meals consumed, snacks devoured, drinks guzzled and desserts never stood a chance. Today marked a day in which she would have to rely on the grocery store for her stomach to live a fulfilled life. After her usual farming duties of watering the crops, playing with Onyx, and equipping her backpack, Jade set out towards Pierre’s grocery store.

The store was as it often was; not too large, rows of food and drinks, produce, and some hygiene products here and there. Really, the store wasn’t all too impressive— but Jade had no interest in the Joja Mart at the other end of town, even if Sam did work there. At the very least, she was forced to live much healthier with Pierre’s selections. All of the food was fairly fresh, save for the few snacks that adorned the corner of the store. Of course, Jade went to buy snacks first, and then decided to truly be an adult and shop for fresh groceries.

“Excuse me, madam.” An unfamiliar man gestured to some packs of food on the shelf in front of Jade as she was browsing. The young farmer peered to him, surprised by the different voice; she had certainly never seen him before.

His most noticeable feature was his glorious dirty blond mane of hair, obviously cared and brushed to perfection. His hair swept out to his right side, he had piercing emerald eyes, and his jaw was rather masculine, though his visage carried a very calm and day-dreaming expression. His suit seemed dated, but it fit him rather well; he wore a red button-up jacket with a cotton white shirt under it, a green ascot, slacks that matched the ascot and dark brown loafers. One of the first things that came to Jade’s mind— other than that he was gorgeous— is that every man was so exceedingly tall in Pelican Town, barring Sebastian. This one practically dwarfed her, as did most others, and she wasn’t even all that short for a female. For some reason, the young farmer could smell the ocean.

“Oh, sorry.” Jade kindly smiled and moved aside for him. The man softly smiled in return and proceeded to get his groceries. “Um... I don’t think I’ve seen you before,” she shyly murmured.

“Ah, yes. Are you the new farmer?” he asked, storing whatever he required into his nearby shopping basket.

Jade nodded. “I’m Jade, nice to meet you.”
“It’s a pleasure, Ms. Jade,” he answered. Man, his voice was deep. “My name is Elliott. I live in a cabin down by the sea, so that might be why we have not seen each other.”

That explains the ocean scent. “Oh, I think I’ve seen the cabin before! I’ve only been there a couple of times though, so that’s definitely why. I live way out in the forest, so some days I don’t even go to town... But it’s very nice to meet you, Elliott.”

“The forest? How lovely,” Elliott whimsically sighed, “I enjoy the serene sounds the forest gives. The river is quaint in the best of ways.”

“I agree!” Jade beamed. “Though, I can’t say I’ve taken the time to really breathe in the environment. I really should, now.”

“I highly recommend it,” Elliott kindly replied.

Jade was going to give a gentle farewell, but she noticed something rustling in the chest pocket of his jacket. “Um...” she muttered, poking at her own chest to try to gesture to him. “There’s... a little...”

Elliott softly smiled. “Hm?” He looked down at his own chest, and then let out a hearty chuckle. “Oh my, it seems a crab has made its way into my pocket.”

“What are you going to do?” The young farmer’s eyes widened with a pang of worry.

“Well, it seems rather comfortable. I would not want to disturb it.” The beach-dweller simply shrugged and continue to collect groceries. “It is the life of living on the shore, after all.”

Jade giggled and watched the tiny eyes of Elliott’s pocket crab. “You’re very nice, Elliott. Well, I’ll leave you be now.”

“Feel free to say hello anytime,” he pleasantly concluded, watching her leave with a calm smile of his own.

The young farmer then took the time to gather everything she needed, and head to the front counter to purchase all her goods. Pierre was standing there, first judgishly staring at her until he saw the full basket of food in her arms.

“Afternoon, Pierre,” Jade calmly stated to him with a smile.

Pierre did his normal, professional glance, pushing glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Morning, Farmer. Will this be all?”

“Yes please,” she cheerfully replied. As he rung everything up for purchase, the young farmer examined the store. “So, is Abby here?”

“Why d’you want to know?” Pierre asked.

“Well, she’s my friend.” Jade smiled. “How is she doing? Or really, how is your family doing?”

He huffed. “We’re fine, Farmer. I hope you’re faring well as well.”

“Of course!”
“Hm... Do you even shop at Joja?” he asked with curiousness plaguing his voice.

“Oh... No, I had to live off Joja when I lived in the city. I’d prefer to never do that again.” She put the required money on the table when he was done. “Tell Abby I said hi for me, please.”

“Sure.” He was a man of few words, apparently. “Glad to have your loyalty.”

“Of course!” Jade bowed her head and gathered her groceries. “Have a wonderful day,” she concluded before leaving. Hopefully Pierre didn’t hate her guts now, but she still felt like she was skating on thin ice. With every sweet soul like Elliott, there would be someone hard to impress like Pierre. She did somewhat understand his reasoning, however.

Luckily for Jade, she didn’t really have to come across so many people. A wave to Lewis as usual, a kind nod to Marnie, whom she has talked to via letters, and a fist bump to Sam, who was enjoying his day off from work and practicing on his skateboard. The young farmer peacefully returned to her home and stored all of her groceries for eventual meals, but she didn’t really feel like sitting around and acting lazy. Adventure was calling her name.

Jade shuffled out the instructions she gathered from the Community Center to hopefully make more sense of them. “Is there anything I can do?” she wondered aloud. One of the tasks was to ‘grow the largest crop of all’, which she had no control over... She stared outside and looked at her still developing farmland. That definitely wasn’t going to happen soon. ‘Unite yourself with the stars...’ Jade couldn’t even begin with that one. One particular task interested Jade; ‘Speak to the people of the past.’ Maybe the abandoned neighborhood held some significant history in this regard. The old mine shaft, perhaps?

“Time to go back to the old neighborhood, maybe. I only got to see part of it.” She pouted, staring over at her sword leaning near the front door. “I’ve been practicing a little bit, I think I can handle myself... hopefully.” Jade did have the advantage of taking equipment with her-- last time, she was quickly overwhelmed and had no choice but to flee. With a greater understanding, the young farmer would be able to hold her ground. “Yeah. You know what? I’m gonna do it,” she proudly told herself.

After grabbing her sword and taking her backpack armed with only tools and bottles of water, she exit her house for more exploration. She ventured over to the side of the fence she escaped once before and hopped over it, cautiously entering the depths of the woods. The trees only seemed to increase in height and width as she traveled closer to the heart of the Secret Woods, grassy ground soon being hardly invisible as she came across vines and brush. Needless to say, the forest by her house was incredibly dense. So far, there weren’t any slimes or other unwanted creatures nearby, but she kept walking and realized that she hadn’t reached the old abandoned neighborhood yet.

Minutes upon minutes passed. Still no ruins. Minutes turned into over an hour, which then turned into multiple hours. Jade should have been there by now, right? She didn’t go very far before, or at least, it didn’t seem that way... was it possible that the ruins were only accessible at certain times?

Wait.

Jade finally saw an opening between two large bushes. She parted them and peered into the location, eyes brightening when she noticed a stone path structured the same way the town square did it.

But... these weren’t the ruins she saw before. Actually, there were no ruins at all. The young farmer
walked out from the bushes and examined her surroundings. Within the forest walls lie an open area containing a thin stone path and a shallow pond. She ventured over to the pond, seeing unique fish she had noticed before. Ones settling at the bottom of the pond appeared to be catfish, and they were gigantic. Other smaller fish spritzed around the water, sometimes splashing out of their area of comfort for a brief period of time. Jade smiled and decided to leave them be for the time. She turned around, but froze; there was a large, strange statue of an old man in her line of vision.

At least there were ruins, the young farmer supposed. There were collapsed columns of marble nearby, the statue appearing to be the same material. She cautiously approached the statue and noticed a nameplate below his feet:

“Old Master Cannoli... Still searching for the sweetest taste...”

Jade blinked and examined the statue once more. He did appear to be an old man with a spindly beard, hunched over and waiting for something to come. “How interesting,” Jade thought aloud. “Nice to meet you, Old Master Cannoli.” She smiled and pat the statue, then crossing her arms. “I’m gonna see what else this place has,” she muttered, deciding to venture the direction opposite from whence she came. She froze again when the mouth of the forest was visible.

The poor farmer couldn’t catch a break... someone else was there. Jade remembered seeing her walking before, but she was always too far away or too busy to really be interacted with. The young woman before her had bright orange-red hair, unique purple eyes, and sported the odd choice of wearing a green belly shirt under brown suspenders and gray pants. Similarly to Jade, she wore brown boots. She seemed to be pulling out a type of fern and storing it in a nearby woven basket.

“U-uh... Hello there,” Jade piped up. She couldn’t have been very far from her house, if someone else was here.

The woman jumped from Jade’s voice. “Whoa, didn’t see you there,” she mentioned with a lighthearted smirk.

“Yeah, sorry. I was adventuring the forest and ended up here on accident... Um, I’m unsure if we’ve met before, so... hi? I’m Jade,” the young farmer nervously answered.

“Oh yeah, I’ve seen you a few times. I’m Leah, it’s great to finally meet you.” She smiled. “It seems you’ve made quite a home here. I’m glad. What brought you here?” the redhead inquired, bending back down to forage for more items.

Jade slowly walked up to her to see what she was doing. “I just moved out of the city, I wanted a home of my own.”

“Zuzu City?” Leah wondered.

“Nope, from the other side of the region.”

“Geez!” The forager stood up, satisfied with her full basket of goods. “Impressive. Hey, have you made use out of foraging yet? It can be a decent money maker,” she said, lifting up her basket of foraged items.

Jade nodded. “I have, actually! Though, I’ve never been here... Um, where are we?” she asked, embarrassed.
Leah chuckled and started walking, Jade following behind. “You don’t know where we are? It’s literally right beside the path to your farm.”

“... Really?” The young farmer wasn’t sure whether to believe her or not. They did exit through the mouth of the forest and came out into a much more open field sprinkled with trees. The two of them were back in the familiar Cindersap Forest, the large river side visible along with the large wizard’s tower in the distance. Just to their left was the cleared path that led up to Jade’s farm. “... Oh.”

“Haha, well, now you know.” Leah calmly smiled. “I’m going to head back to my cabin now, but it was very nice meeting you!”

“Yeah, have a good evening!” Jade waved her off. Wait, it was evening? The farmer stared up to the reddening sky with a mumble. She wasn’t upset that she found the entrance to the Secret Woods, but she was infuriated that her whole day was wasted scavenging through the trees, rather than locating the place she actually wanted to go. “I must have gotten turned around somehow,” she grumbled angrily to herself. “I need a compass.”

Because the young farmer refused to go back to her house empty handed, she started venturing off to do some foraging of her own; she passed the path to her house and head to the middle of the forest. As she wandered around to find some freshly grown sweet peas, she noticed there was someone sitting at the docks of the nearby lake... Oh, no. The dark-haired man from before, ruggedly dressed.

“Hey, you!” He suddenly shouted, noticing Jade just on the other side of the lake. The young farmer flinched, and looked over to him with terror stricken eyes. “Stop makin’ so much noise!” he growled.

“S... Sorry!” Jade replied back. “I’m j-just... Foraging.”

“Foraging.” He scoffed. “You think that’s all it takes to get by, huh? Gotta escape from the city, suddenly you’re in this magical wonderland full of pretty flowers and happy animals?”

“Hey, I said I was sorry!” Jade replied with an elevated voice. She didn’t want to yell, but she knew she was getting close to.

“You think you got it made,” coughed the man, taking another swig of beer. “You make me fuckin’ sick.”

“What the hell is your problem, dude?” Jade was irritated enough to go around the lake and stomp onto the docks, where he was. “What did I do to you to warrant such a response?”

“You’re too smiley,” he mumbled.

“Why does it matter to you? Maybe you’re too frowny,” she growled. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed those shifty glares you’ve given me before. What the honest hell is your deal with me?”

He lifted his head to glare at her one more time. This time, Jade was staring back, now that she had the courage. Of course, he wasn’t affected by her piercing gaze. “Ever since you moved here, everyone’s been talking. But I don’t get it. You’re fake as hell. You think you’re all cute and shit, with that high voice and clothes my fucking eight year old cousin would wear.”

“The last thing I am is fake,” Jade snapped in response. “I know who I am, and I embrace it, unlike whatever the hell you’re doing. Am I the one drowning my sorrows with alcohol? No, I’m doing
shit, doing more than you ever have.” He could practically feel the heat her anger was generating; her face was a solid red. “Truth hurts, doesn’t it?”

He huffed, taking another drink. “You’re arguing with a drunk person. Cute.” He stared back out to the lake. “You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

“And you don’t know what I’ve been through. So kindly dump yourself into the lake. Asshole.” Jade stomped off without another thought; screw the foraging. She didn’t engage in conversation with that man before for good reason.

The sun had already set by the time Jade returned to her home. She opened the front door to let her beloved cat inside, then stomped in afterwards, going to shower and dress in the most comfortable clothes she could dig out of her drawer. Almost mindlessly, the young farmer grabbed the few unhealthy snacks she bought from Pierre’s store and went upstairs to browse the internet and stuff her face with chips. The entire time, she was muttering under her breath, but finally quiet as she settled in front of her computer.

Oh, she had some instant messages. For a brief moment, she forgot that even existed.

SEBASTIAN: Hey loser

SEBASTIAN: Did you finish Cave Saga

Jade slowly began to calm down. Taking a deep breath and leaning back in her chair, she replied:

JADE: sup nerd

JADE: uh duh, i read the whole thing last night

JADE: do you really think i’d have a new edition of cave saga and not binge read it in one night

SEBASTIAN: Tru

SEBASTIAN: My sleep schedule is a lie when it comes to new releases

Sebastian helped her feel better, but the whole issue was still bothering her. She sighed as she thought of what to do.

JADE: lmao, same

JADE: hey though, is it okay if i rant for a little bit?

SEBASTIAN: What got yer jimmies rustled

JADE: honestly i don’t even know his name but he rustled my jimmies pretty good
JADE: like, the jimmies are on the ground right now, rustled right outta their seats

SEBASTIAN: Damn, that’s some serious rustling

SEBASTIAN: What’s up?

JADE: so you know that dark haired dude that guzzles beer during our saloon nights? like near the arcade

SEBASTIAN: That’s Shane

Shane. The name fit him pretty well, she thought. She’s known quite a few jerks named Shane. The young farmer scowled, stuffed a few potato chips into her mouth, and furiously typed on her keyboard.

JADE: oh, so that’s who it is. well, he was drinking at the lake near my house this evening and out of freaking nowhere he starts yelling at me

JADE: starts talking about how i’m fake and how i think i got it made, etc.

SEBASTIAN: Yep, sounds like Shane

JADE: wtf is his problem?

JADE: he assumed a lot about me and it pissed me off!!!

JADE: ... let me ask you something

JADE: do you think i’m fake? like i act too happy or whatever?

SEBASTIAN: No, I don’t

SEBASTIAN: He’s pretty much like that to everyone, so don’t let him get to you. And then you said he was drinking

SEBASTIAN: Sam works with him at the mart so he has to deal with him a lot. The guy is more pessimistic than me and that’s saying something

SEBASTIAN: I think he’s more stuck in the rut of everyday life and becomes angry with people who seem to enjoy living more than he does.

JADE: well it ain’t my dang fault is all i’m sayin

JADE: jimmies at maximum rustle

SEBASTIAN: Do you want me to send a bunch of videos about baby animals and their hilarious (and small-bodied) antics?

JADE: yes
JADE: how did you read my mind

She felt much better to get the rant off of her chest and had completely calmed by then. The rest of
the night was joyfully spent watching videos and lighthearted chatter. Jade was glad she had
someone she could rely on, even when she got home... Well, mostly. She didn’t even realize how
late it was when she finished browsing the web. “Dammit, Seb,” she tiredly muttered under her
breath, now smiling.

The young farmer was able to make it to her bed before she passed out from exhaustion. Her tiny
feline friend eagerly joined her and curled up her back, preventing any more movement for the rest of
the night. The young farmer felt the rest of the week would be hectic.
As the days droned on, Farmer Jade fell into a routine she knew she could handle. Farming was starting to become natural to her and money was slowly stacking up due to her constant fishing and foraging. After such a long time, Jade’s frail legs were finally used to walking, and her back grew accustomed to carrying several goods. She didn’t have to lift very much with her arms, but she did have to often use her tools—especially for gathering wood, which she used to repair her miraculously damaged fence. Her sword fighting skills were also improving due to constant practice, as was her companionship with her closer friends.

She was sure to say hello to everyone she knew and to try to visit her friends at least a couple times as the week progressed; she often caught Sam skateboarding or playing his portable console outside his home and noticed Abigail leaving the grocery store. Alex was often nearby, so she took to visiting him as well—they often played catch and then had some ice cream, which became fairly regular for the both of them. The young athlete did appreciate Jade stopping by and he loved to have someone to practice with, but after some days, he grew nervous. She wasn’t exactly sure what seemed to bother him, but they got along rather well and didn’t mind seeing each other every day. Jade was especially ecstatic to grow closer to him, and hoped their friendship would form a meaningful bond.

The only close friend of Jade’s that she didn’t see much of was Sebastian, but that was because he lived the furthest and hardly came out of his room. Despite his hermiting ways, Jade actually talked to him more than anyone else. Every evening they would chat with each other online, often leading into all-night rants or bouts of banter. There was rainfall on one day of the week and they decided to meet up then, since both of them enjoyed the sound of the rain paired with rumbling ocean waves. Neither of them talked much for the day, but they both enjoyed the choice of not having to speak.

For the most part, everything was going smoothly, and rightfully so. Jade grew accustomed to talking to the townspeople more and tried harder to make herself a positive figure in town. The last thing she wanted was for rumors to spread about her, like what happened at the end of Spring—she was a good person, and not everyone had to like her (a few of them surely didn’t,) but she didn’t want to be mistaken for a bad influence towards others.

Over half a week passed, and Jade received a letter about the next festival: the Luau. In the letter, Mayor Lewis put an awful lot of emphasis on bringing something delicious, healthy, and high quality, as if past circumstances prevented such. He also addressed Jade specifically in the letter, telling her that he expected ‘high quality crops despite [Jade] being a new farmer’. The letter went on about how he trusted Jade would do well for her first Luau, and that the governor would be impressed. “Uh... Governor?” She muttered to herself, confused. Another authority figure she has to worry about? She sighed, but then looked out to her crops while reading the letter.

“Bring something for the potluck, huh?” the young farmer wondered aloud. She did notice her crops
were extremely close to bearing ripe fruit, particularly the tomatoes. “Tomatoes go in everything, right?” She smirked to herself.

Jade was right. At the beginning of the festival day, all of the tomato seeds she planted finally paid off. Every single vine weighed down with bright, red tomatoes! For the first time in a while, Jade pulled in a gigantic harvest. The thought was extremely exciting to her as well, since the other crops were also close to bearing fruit. She pulled in a large haul of tomatoes and saved the largest, nicest one for the Luau. After her usual rounds, she eagerly set off towards the beach to take part of the festival, tomato in hand.

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Like the Flower Dance, the entire town gathered in one place. A large stereo system lie on a huge dancing mat and played cheerful music nearby. In the middle of the beach stood a gigantic pot full of ingredients being stewed to perfection. A short but large woman with dark brown hair was stirring. From what Jade could see, she wore a green dress and leather brown shoes. Before approaching, the young farmer decided to examine the rest of the area. Some large totem poles were set up as decoration, tiki lamps that brought more flare to the festival, and some long tables full of snacks and drinks. Below Elliott’s cabin, Linus was making a pork roast over an open fire, its scents lightly wafting throughout the entire shore. She could see Maru staring in drool-filled lust over to the pork roast, other townspeople congregating around and chatting amongst themselves. Under the music, she definitely could listen to the gossip and laughter of all her fellow neighbors. Most of the people seemed to be enjoying themselves. The Luau certainly looked like a festival Jade could get behind.

“Jade, you’ve made it! Welcome,” called Lewis from the side. Jade walked over to him and noticed a very large, round, and somewhat intimidating rich man beside him. The man had a purple bowler hat with a duck feather poking out of it, a fancy suit that matched the hat’s color, and shiny black shoes. He didn’t have any hair on his head, but he did have thick eyebrows and a fluffy, graying moustache. The man looked to Jade curiously as her calm walking became somewhat of a nervous shamble. He looked too important.

“H-hey, Mayor,” softly stammered Jade, glancing to the man near him. “This f-festival looks pretty, uh... great.”

Lewis kindly smiled and surveyed the festival area once more. “It certainly holds the best feast of the year!” He cleared his throat and stepped aside to show the man even more. “Jade, this is our region’s governor. He comes here once a year to try the stew and to check up on things.”

“Oh! H...hello! There! Sir!” Jade waved, but then felt that was rude and decided to bow instead. The governor chuckled in response to her bustling youth. “I’ve heard a lot of about the new farmer here, though I didn’t expect you to be such a young, lively girl. I expect great produce from you.”

Jade hopped up and stood up straight. “Thank you, sir! I-I’m trying my best!”

“What’s that in your hands?” the wealthy man asked, gesturing to the tomato. “For the pot?”

“Yes, I pulled in a big harvest this morning and... O-oh! I should... I should go do that. Now. Bye.” She quickly left for the giant pot, but she could feel Lewis’ glare as she left. Quickly, she went over to the woman at the stew pot and waved in greeting. “H-hi there,” she murmured.

“Oh, Jade! Finally we get to meet face-to-face. It’s Marnie,” she calmly but happily replied. Marnie
had her hair bunched up in thick braids, which tied together in a green band. Her eyes were soft and brown and her nose round. She had a very similar, motherly smile, but Jade also felt a sense of authority from her. She had no idea why, but at least knowing Marnie calmed her down.

The young farmer sighed and relaxed her shoulders. “Glad to see you, Marnie!”

“Did you bring something for the pot, dear?”

Jade showed her the tomato she picked. “Yes ma’am,” she kindly answered. “Do I just...”

“What a lovely pick, Ms. Jade! Just give it to me, I’ll take care of the rest.” Marnie continued to stir the pot until Jade offered her ingredient of choice. “I can’t wait for this to be done!” Marnie beamed, taking out a knife from her apron pocket and throwing tomato slices into the stew.

The young farmer nodded and took a deep whiff. It smelled meaty and delicious. “I bet this will be really good eatin’.”

“Oh, I’ll go ahead and say this.” Marnie grumbled something unintelligible under her breath. “The governor is hard to impress, and Lewis becomes such a...” She grunted again, stopping to stir for a moment to clench her fists. “Anyways, the stew will be lovely. To know that you so carefully grew something already makes it so much better.”

Jade pouted in embarrassment, eyes averting. “Was it that obvious that they’re making me nervous?” she asked.

Marnie laughed. “They make us all nervous. Go on and just try to enjoy the festival, dear.”

“Thank you, Marnie!” And with that, the young farmer ventured off to see what everyone else was doing.

There were quite a few people on the dance floor, but Jade found it adorable. Robin and Demetrius were attempting to dance together, but one of them tripped on the other’s foot and they started to laugh and tease each other. The young farmer thought they were precious, how a couple reaching their middle ages could still find such enjoyment together. Conversely, the two children, Jas and Vincent, were chasing each other. Jas was yelling at Vincent, while Vincent was absentmindedly running around and giggling, treating her yelling like a game. “Vincent, you need to learn how to dance!” she heard the girl yell. Jade passed by them and waved, causing the both of them to freeze. Jas stared right through Jade’s soul, but Vincent’s face lit up and he ran to hug Jade’s leg. The young farmer chuckled and ruffled his hair before he ran off again and continued to tease Jas.

Near the corner of the dance floor, Jade saw the blue haired lady that assisted Gus at the saloon. She wore a red and blue dress and was really getting into the music; her entire body was swinging, hair flinging, arms moving and legs kicking. A grin was on her face. Jade smiled as she watched her, but didn’t want to bother her. Jade noticed Evelyn and her husband, George, over near the shore. She happily waved to them but decided to not approach, leaving for the food table.

Gus was at the front of the nearest table, drinking some juice as he watched people come to and fro for snacks. Jade softly smiled to him before examining the food on the table. All of it was rather light and food that would go well with the stew; a lot of slices of meat, cheese, crackers, among fruits and other sweet treats. Jade was interested in the cheese and reached to take a plate for herself-- then froze. Her scowl.
Shane.

He had walked forward to get some more snacks for himself, passing an uninterested glare at Jade. Noticing how hard she was staring at him, he sighed and rolled his eyes.

“I still don’t like you, but it was mostly the drinks talking,” he said. He didn’t get why she was still sour, even after so many days passed.

“Oh, so you actually remember what happened?” Jade grunted.

Shane seemed unaffected; Jade was too tame to really intimidate him, even if she was trying to.

“Somewhat.”

“Look, I’m trying to have a good day so please don’t try to ruin this for me,” huffed Jade.

The scruffy man lifted his hands in surrender, eyes tiredly glancing her visage. “Fair enough with me. Just thought I’d say.”

“Okay, then.” Jade obtained the plate of food she wanted to get and simply walked off. She needed to leave before she got too carried away with her thoughts and say something she could have regretted. As she continued to wander, she saw Sebastian leaning against one of the totem poles, just out of sight from most people. The unpleasant encounter with Shane was practically nonexistent at this point, since she was ecstatic to see a closer friend she knew. “Seb!” Jade happily called, trotting over to him.

“Oh, hey.” His face left a hint of a smile and he stood up straight to greet the young farmer.

“No Sam or Abby?” Jade inquired, glancing around.

Sebastian shook his head and put his hands into his hoodie pockets. “Nah, they’re doing their own things. There are too many people here, anyway.”

“Ah, I see. I like the Luau so far.” Jade stood in front of him and popped some cheese from her plate into her mouth. Without saying a word, she offered some. He glanced at the food for a bit before deciding to accept and eating some himself. “Though, the governor guy creeps me out a bit.”

“He creeps everyone out, but all the business owners try to get on his good side. I don’t see the point, honestly. I mean, you’ve seen this town.” Sebastian glanced out towards the ocean horizon, not in the mood to see what everyone else was doing.

Jade nodded in thought. “Pfft, yeah. But, we’re self sustaining enough I think. Mayor keeps crappy tabs on the state of the town, but at least there’s food and internet. Both extremely crucial.”

They both hummed and nodded, continuing to eat from the plate that Jade held out. Then out of nowhere, she chuckled. “Why are you wearing long sleeves in this weather, you nerd?” the young farmer muffled. “Aren’t you hot? I thought you hated hot weather.”

Sebastian glanced down at his arms, and then shrugged. “I like to suffer,” he jokingly responded, mouth also full of cheese.

Jade’s chuckle broke out into a tiny laugh. “You’re so lazy.”
In response, he rolled up his sleeves: “Better, mom? I didn’t know I had two of you.”

She giggled. “Yes, though you could make it easy and just take your hoodie off. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without it... Sebby.” She made an attempt to mock Robin’s accent, but it came out as an exaggerated, hilarious regional twang. He gave her a certain look when she called him ‘Sebby’, which caused her to explode in giggles.

“And you most likely never will see me without it,” Sebastian deadpanned in response. “My hoodie is like, welded to my skin. Forever.”

“So you shower with a hoodie on?” she snorted.

“Maybe,” Sebastian answered with a smile.

They both stared at each other with amusement, then finished the plate of food together. “Okay weirdo, well I’m going to go say hi to everyone else. Want me to get you anything?”

“I’m good. Thanks for coming by.” Sebastian yawned and folded his arms behind his head, leaning back to the totem pole. “See you later, Jade.”

“Bye!” Jade waved to him and tossed the empty plate into a trashcan on the other side of the totem pole. She was in much higher spirits and ready to speak to others, though there were so many areas that she didn’t know where to go. She looked for Abigail for a while, but couldn’t see her on the beach. She did catch Alex and Haley talking to each other near the side of Elliott’s cabin, deciding to approach despite Haley’s vendetta against her. Alex seemed happy to welcome Jade and crossed his arms confidently as she approached.

“Farm girl! This your first Luau?” he curiously asked.

“Yup. I lived in the city, we didn’t have stuff like this. It’s nice!” Jade beamed in response. “And hi, Haley,” Jade waved in an attempt to be kind. Surprisingly, Haley made a slight wave in response. Perhaps festivals put her in a better mood, or she was finally getting used to the farmer’s presence. “I’m a little surprised you guys aren’t dancing, since you really like the Flower Dance.”

“Eh, time and place,” Alex replied. “Plus, I’ve been staring at that pot of stew for the past forever. I’m so hungry,” he groaned.

“You ate before we got here,” Haley nagged. “Are you really that hungry?”

“Healthy guys gotta eat!” he defended.

Jade chuckled. “I bet you have a stomach made of iron. Well, I’ll leave you guys to yourselves. Nice seeing you!” The young farmer waved to both of them as she continued heading to the far end of the shore. There was a tiny wood bridge spanning across a river gap that led into the ocean. The other side of the bridge was fairly empty, save for some rocky pools and some bunches of coral, but Sam and Penny stood just before the bridge, watching the river. He didn’t appear as tall as he usually did—his shoulders must have been hunched and knees bent. He seemed... irritated, which was rather unlike Sam. Penny appeared concerned, but she would try to say something to him to lighten the mood. Eventually, Penny drooped her shoulders as well, discouraged, then softly pat Sam’s back in reassurance. She eventually turned and began to walk back towards the main section of the festival, approaching Jade in the process.
“Penny! Hello,” Jade politely began, causing the young tutor to stop in front of her.

“H... Hello, Jade,” Penny shyly answered, giving a brief bow of her head. “How is the festival for you?” She meekly asked.

The farmer smiled, though it was more due to general worry. Penny seemed to be more nervous than she was, so she wanted to be a more positive figure for her. “The festival’s very nice so far... how are you? And Sam.”

“Oh...” Penny sighed, brushing back her cherry-red bangs. “I’m fine, actually... Though I am a little worried about Sam.” She frowned and glanced over to the blond man from a distance. “The Luau is among one of his... lesser favorite festivals, but his mother makes him go.”

“Why does it bother him so much?”

“I don’t think he is a big fan of the mayor, really... And everyone knows that the mayor is a little more, um, harsh? During the Luau. So, a lot of us are put on edge. And you know how Sam is, his, uh...”

Jade chuckled a bit. “You mean with how stubborn he is?” she mentioned.

“Yes! Yes, exactly.” Penny’s expression brightened from her gestures being understood. “One year he actually brought a disgusting fish for the pot and snuck it in before the mayor found out... He was punished for it, but it was probably his favorite Luau.”

“Oh boy,” the farmer sighed under her breath. “Maybe I shouldn’t say hi, then. Could you tell him for me?” she asked, though entertained by Sam’s shenanigans.

Penny nodded and softly smiled, lacing her hands together with her fingers. “Of course,” she softly replied. Jade loved how frail Penny’s voice was, especially since she hung around such a loud guy all the time. “He is not in the mood to talk to everyone, so that could be for the better. I’m sure he will love hearing from you, though.”

The young farmer felt relieved. “Thank you, Pen. You goin’ to get some food? Honestly, when is the stew gonna be done?”

“Attention!” shouted Lewis. “The stew is ready! Everyone gather around!”

Both the girls giggled at the amazing timing. “I suppose the stew is done now,” Penny cheerfully muttered. Together, they approached the gigantic pot and examined the presumably finished stew. She wandered back over to stand beside Sebastian at the back of the crowd, passing him a silent greeting. Abigail appeared from behind and hugged Jade out of nowhere, causing her to briefly squeal.

“H-hey!” She whined, but then noticed who it was. Abigail chuckled at Jade’s reaction and put an arm around her shoulders. “Abby, I was wondering where you went.”

“I was on the docks!” Abigail beamed. “Now we gotta listen to Lewis’ big lecture about the state of the town before we can eat. Ugh.”

As if on cue, Lewis ushered silence within the crowd and started speaking about the coming year, and what he has planned. Nearly everyone seemed to lose interest, but they were hushed for his sake.
The governor appeared to be pleased by the speech, though Jade thought it sounded more like a re-election campaign. A little ridiculously timed, if anything.

“You don’t understand how tempted I was to throw something disgusting in the potluck,” muttered Sebastian. Since they were in the back of the gathering, they were able to get away with whispering to each other. “Have you read the letters Lewis sends? His face looks more punchable every passing year because of it.”

“Jadey should take care of that,” snorted Abigail.

The young farmer rolled her eyes, but grinned. “Come on, now... But yeah, his letter was, uh. Intimidating.”

Both Sebastian and Abigail glanced at the farmer, suddenly curious. “What did he write to you?” the former inquired.

“He was just saying how he expected a lot of great things from me since I’m the new farmer in town. Junk like that. Impress the governor. Put 3 tons of crushing anxiety on my shoulders. No big deal.”

“Daaamn,” huffed Abigail. “It’s kind of expected, though. You see that romance novel looking guy over there? Elliott?”

Jade covered her mouth to suppress laughter. She didn’t think of describing him that way, but it made perfect sense. “Yeah,” she answered.

“Well, Elliott was the last one to move here before you did, and Yoba, did Lewis goat him hard into getting a supreme ingredient for the potluck. I think the most insane part is that he actually got the ingredient Lewis asked for.”

“What was it?” Jade wondered aloud.

Abigail looked off, trying to think for a moment. Sebastian nudged Jade to get her attention, then he answered: “I think it was a Super Cucumber.” Jade wasn’t sure if that was amazing, but Abigail’s face lit up.

“Yeah! That’s what it was. Those things are really difficult to catch, but that was arguably the best tasting stew we’ve ever had.” Abigail groaned silently to herself, putting her free hand on her stomach. Everyone was starving, for sure. Not even the cheese Jade ate was lasting very well.

The young farmer nodded in understanding. “That’s pretty cool of Elliott,” she hummed. “I just brought a huge tomato from my harvest. I’m really proud of my work though, so hopefully I won’t get flack for it.”

“Who doesn’t like tomatoes? You’ll be fine,” Sebastian concluded for them. Jade sighed in relief and nodded again, happy to get the support. Jade suddenly snapped to attention when she heard Lewis call her name:

“And we welcome our promising new farmer, Jade, who has undoubtedly brought a fresh ingredient that is sure to make the stew perfect for us all!” Lewis yelled, gesturing right to Jade in the crowd. She instantly froze in horror, both Abigail and Sebastian glancing at her in shock. The rest of the town turned to glance at her but quickly went back to focus on Lewis. In all honesty, they all just wanted to eat.
“Oh no. He’s putting the blame on you this year,” Abigail whispered.

“Whew... Let’s hope this stew is good, or Lewis will have your ass,” Sebastian muttered.

“What the hell did I do??” squeaked Jade, whose voice was only audible to the two people near her. Both of them pat her shoulders in a sad manner.

Lewis grinned nicely through that finely groomed moustache of his, but Jade could feel the condescending stabs of his glare. She really wanted this to be over with. “Without further ado: Governor, would you have the honors of the first taste test?” Lewis asked, elegantly offering a spoon to the large purple-suited man. The governor accepted the offer and stomped towards the pot, everyone watching in anticipation.

He plucked the end of the spoon into the stew, stirred a small area and then scooped out a hearty, red-orangey soup riddled with healthy ingredients. The entire town salivated as the governor took his taste and plopped the spoon carefully into his mouth. “Hmmm...”

He stood there for a moment. Lewis seemed terrified.

“It’s not bad,” the governor began, “But it’s not really amazing, either. Pretty average.”

Lewis hurriedly rushed up to the pot and took a spoon to taste test as well. He sighed in disappointment. “He’s right... a very, very average soup. Oh, well... Everyone! Come get your servings,” the mayor shouted to them all. One by one, the townspeople came forward and filled their bowls with stew from the pot.

“Jadey, don’t take it too hard. We’re here for you!” Abigail assured in an attempt to have Jade feel better. The farmer was horrified, because she caught a glance of Lewis’ merciless glare just before taste testing the stew himself.

“He’s gonna have my ass,” Jade heavily breathed. “Ohh, no. Everyone’s going to hate me.”

“Nah,” Sebastian started with disagreement. “Just Lewis, and no one really cares if Lewis hates you... He’ll be back to normal by the next festival, anyway. This wasn’t as bad as Sam’s.”

“Oh man, Sam’s was horrible,” Abigail laughed.

The farmer sighed. “I suppose so...” She grumbled as it was their turn to get their servings from the stew. After being offered bowls, the three of them scooped up stew to eat for themselves.

“Honestly, I don’t care if this tastes like a muddy slime. I’m hungry as hell,” mumbled Abigail, already taking a spoon to start eating. As she did, she hummed in approval. “This is pretty good, though. I like it.”

Sebastian tried his food next, and nodded in agreement. Jade sighed, staring at her bowl, then hesitantly trying herself. Hey, it wasn’t bad. She could probably eat a ton of this for leftovers. All of the town began eating the stew, and while no one necessarily loved it, it was still very filling. When most people were done with their first serving, Mayor Lewis surveyed the beach to find Jade. Once his eyes locked onto her, there was no more hope for the young farmer.

Jade froze like a deer in the headlights as Lewis began stomping towards her. “Oh no, oh no,” Jade
fearfully whispered to herself. “I’m done for.”

But just as everything seemed to spell doom and gloom for the young farmer, an angel appeared: Penny hurriedly ran in front of Lewis, causing him to bump into her on accident. “A-ah, sorry, Mayor Lewis! We really need your help though, like, really need your help! I think I saw someone in the water!”

“What?” Lewis worriedly asked. Penny took him by the arm and began guiding him off to the other side of the beach, hurriedly explaining what she saw in the ocean.

Sam suddenly appeared and lifted Jade up from behind. She was going to shout at him, but Abigail quickly covered her mouth. “Shhh,” the other three members of the squad said at once.

“Operation F.Y.L. is a go,” Sam muttered, carrying Jade behind the many decorations of the Luau while all of the townspeople were distracted. He saw Penny wave at him from a distance, causing him to wink and offer a thumbs up in return. Lewis looked back to Penny, which made her snap back to attention and continue to explain what she saw. Meanwhile, Sam, Sebastian, and Abigail all sneaked back towards Pelican Town while the blond held Jade in his arms. Together, they escaped the festival.

They approached the graveyard when Sam finally decided to set down Jade. The four of them all stared to each other mindlessly, but then broke out into heavy laughter. “I can’t believe we did that!” Sam cackled.

“Sweet Yoba, the look on your face,” Sebastian teased Jade, tearing up from laughter.

“You know what? I’m glad we’re outta there,” Abigail grinned. “It wouldn’t have been as fun if we watched Jade get ripped apart.”

Jade chuckled, but then looked at all of them endearingly. “You got me out of there, thank you. Especially you, Sam. What does Operation F.Y.L. mean, though?”

“Operation Fuck You, Lewis,” Sam narrowed his eyes. “He gets a 20 foot pole jammed up his ass when it comes to the Luau, because of some guy that only really cares to visit us once a year for food. It’s all pointless political garbage,” he growled.

Jade laughed from the abbreviation. “I like it!”

“Yeah!” Sam beamed. “Remind me to kiss the hell outta Penny for this. She’s the best, and was the one who suggested it in the first place.”

“But Sam, aren’t you married to someone already?” Abigail obnoxiously chuckled and winked at Jade. “To Seba-

“I will throw you into that pot of stew if you finish that sentence, so help me,” Sebastian threatened, glaring at Abigail. That only made her and Jade laugh even harder. They all took the time to calm down, but were very satisfied with their endeavors.

“What now?” Sam asked, looking around. “We got some daylight to burn, the whole town is ours.”

Jade giggled. “Why don’t we just go to my house? Movies and video games,” she offered. “And lots of snacks. You deserve it.”
“Don’t you have a cat?” Sebastian asked.

“Yes! And a cat! So now you have to come,” Jade grinned.

The three of them seemed pleased with the suggestion, and nodded to her. Sam raised his arms in victory. “To Jade’s house!” he hollered with utmost enthusiasm. The young farmer cheered with her trio of friends and started off towards the forest. Together, the four of them traveled back to Jade’s abode and stayed there until the day grew old and Lewis was no longer a threat.

While the Luau didn’t turn out the way Jade initially expected, she was extremely pleased with its outcome. Nothing could have been better than goofing off with her best, arguably troublemaking, friends.
Melons

Chapter Summary

Jade has gigantic melons; the Junimos repay Jade for her hard work; Robin finally gets a project

JADE: SEB
JADE: SEB PLEASE GET YOUR MOM
JADE: OR YOU DRIVE THE TRUCK I DON’T CARE JUST
JADE: GET HERE PLEASE
JADE: WITH THE TRUCK

Sebastian’s eyes cracked open, sight still blurry and mood incredibly irate, but there was no way he could stay there in bed. His computer at the other end of the room kept beeping alerts for instant messages, the sound too loud to really attempt ignoring. Begrudgingly, he pulled himself out of bed and shuffled tiredly over to his desktop. The messy raven-haired man collapsed in his chair, yawning and rubbing his eyes. He began to read the messages, ready to nag whomever woke him up so early, but his rage quickly became replaced by concern. Jade was easy to freak out about any occurrence, but she was always good about not messaging him absurdly early in the morning. They would often not talk until the evenings, when both of them were finished with their daily work.

SEBASTIAN: What's wrong?
JADE: you hoNESTLY WILL NOT BELIEVE ME if i tell you here just bring the truck and possibly a forklift. and a body builder.
JADE: as soon as you can
JADE: please, boo

He sighed, since he had no idea what she could be referring to. Jade was safe, though, which was good. She could lighten up on the caps lock. Too friendly with cruise control.

SEBASTIAN: Okay, okay, damn
SEBASTIAN: Friendly reminder to breathe
JADE: *DEEP BREATHS*
SEBASTIAN: Can you just tell me what it is? You made me get out of bed and now you're on my mental list.

JADE: okay... fine...

JADE: *deep breath again*

Sebastian rolled his eyes, but he smiled. It couldn’t have been so horrendous if she was willing to joke-

JADE: i have gigantic melons

Sweet Yoba.

SEBASTIAN: ... what??

JADE: I HAVE GIGANTIC MELONS SEBASTIAN

JADE: I AM LOOKING OUT INTO MY FARM AND THERE IS A BIG ASS MELON IN THE MIDST OF MY TINY CUTE LITTLE MELONS

SEBASTIAN: Oh, you mean your crops

JADE: YES MY CROPS

JADE: you don't understand!!! this is one of the challenges the junimos gave me for the community center!

JADE: i need to take this melon to the community center and i can’t do it by myself! </3

SEBASTIAN: Calm down, we’ll take care of it.

SEBASTIAN: How big is it?

JADE: it’s like as biG AS I AM

SEBASTIAN: I thought you said the melon was big

JADE: HARDY HAR HAR

JADE: i will punch you

JADE: your pretty face will have an imprint of my fist
The raven-haired man chuckled quietly to himself. He always loved to work Jade up; it became a significant hobby of his. Even when she was angry, she still managed to compliment. He wasn’t sure if she knew she was doing that, but he considered it a guilty pleasure.

SEBASTIAN: I’d be honored

SEBASTIAN: I can go get Mom about it, but I don’t think you’ve told me about the Junimo and Community Center stuff yet. Care to elaborate?

JADE: oh i haven’t?

JADE: okay so after i passed out that one time, i returned to the community center again and the junimos gave me these six tasks to complete to restore peace in the forest and to also fix the cc itself

SEBASTIAN: This sounds like a Saturday morning cartoon

JADE: HUSH

JADE: so basically i have all these cryptic pieces of paper

JADE: hold on let me get them

SEBASTIAN: k

JADE: okay yeah so one of the tasks is “Grow the largest crop of all.”

JADE: and that melon... thAT MELON... is pretty large

JADE: possibly.... the largest crop of all

JADE: i need to try and hopefully the junimos accept

SEBASTIAN: Oooh, I see

SEBASTIAN: What if they don’t accept?

JADE: then i got a big ass melon to sell

JADE: or maybe i’ll eat it. i dunno.

SEBASTIAN: You can barely finish two pieces of pizza

JADE: oommmffgggg can u not be a mom right now

JADE: let me be wasteful if i so please

SEBASTIAN: Consider it revenge, Ms. Roll Up Your Sleeves

SEBASTIAN: Okay well I’ll see you in a bit then

SEBASTIAN: Is there anything else you desire, O queen of drama?
JADE: your ass on a platter

JADE: i want the platter to have “I'M SORRY, YOU’RE THE BEST. love, sebastian” engraved on it

SEBASTIAN: Does it look like I have an ass to give

JADE: yes

Jade never failed to crack him up. Gentle chuckles became full laughter, though he tried his best to keep his voice down. As he was typing a response, there was a knock at his bedroom door.

“What?” yelled Sebastian in question.

“Sebby, you up? Come get breakfast!” Robin yelled through the basement door.

“Sure- Wait... Come in, Mom. Need to talk to you.”

Robin opened the door and peeked inside, seeing him at the other end of the room. “Yes, hon?”

He sighed, thinking of how to properly word himself. “Jade wants us to visit her with your truck and help her harvest some crops.”

The carpenter seemed intrigued by the suggestion. “Ooh, what is Jade doing? Does she have a larger than usual haul?”

“I... I think we’ll get to see when we get there,” Sebastian replied.

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Sebastian and his mother arrived at Jade’s farm by truck, the former quickly realizing that Jade did not exaggerate her words. In the middle of her rows of various crops sat a gigantic melon, pink and ripe for the taking. Beside the gigantic melon contained two smaller rows of “normal” melons, then still growing blueberry bushes, tomato vines, and corn stalks. The farmer herself was walking around the huge crop, examining it and trying to figure out how to safely move it. She caught sight of the other two once they drove up to the farm, then waved excitedly to them.

“I told you!” Jade shouted as both Robin and Sebastian stepped out of the truck.

“Man, look at that!” Robin beamed. “You’ve been busy, huh?” She grinned and proudly strode over to Jade, giving her a light hug. “So you want us to help you with this monster of a melon?”

Jade enthusiastically nodded. “Mhm,” she began, “I have to take this to the Community Center. Do you think we can carry it there with your truck?”

The carpenter studied the melon, sight then sliding back to her truck. “Hmm...” she considered. “Yeah, I think it might barely fit. Someone will have to keep it steady, though.”

“I can do that,” Jade confidently replied. “Just you helping me carry it is enough!”
“How does this even happen?” Sebastian wondered allowed. He knocked on the outer walls of the melon, which resonated with a deep echo. “Sounds hollow.”

“It’s a huge melon, and that’s what matters!” rebutted the farmer with a loud huff. “I planted a bunch of individual seeds, and out came this big thing on harvest day. Crazy, huh?”

Robin whistled, impressed. “I’ll say. Well, both of you stop dilly dallying! We need to load it up and get movin’,” she commanded the both of them while opening the back of her truck. She pulled down a ramp, went into the driver’s seat of the vehicle, and then watched the young adults carefully. Jade disconnected the vine that bore the melon and cautiously walked into her patch of plants, slowly pushing the gigantic fruit out of the crop zone. Sebastian helped her roll the melon up and into the truck, then returning the ramp and closing the truck bed. Jade sat at the front end of the truck bed, cautiously keeping a hand on the melon in hopes that it wouldn’t move much. Sebastian hopped into the passenger seat of the truck, and then they were off.

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Despite having to practically cradle a melon that matched Jade’s height, she found the ride smooth and relaxing. Cool wind whipped her hair as she stared out into the environment. She watched her farm’s trees turning into open plains, which then transitioned into a large and rocky flatland. Jade had never explored this area of the valley before, but it was just as depressingly old as the rest of the town. She saw the shattered ruins of a glass house and a miniscule, decrepit cabin that undergone decades of neglect. Even though there were trees and boulders scattered about, the land was so flat and the soil so rich that Jade wondered if the property used to have a significant purpose.

Not only did local businesses seem to drop in Pelican Town, but the farms did as well... farms that were supposed to brighten the economy. The young farmer felt a spiritual weight on her shoulder, but she knew she was finally getting out of that financial rut. With the large tomato harvest and an even larger melon harvest that she has yet to do, the time was nearing to really get her farm in gear. “I won’t end up like the other farms,” she muttered to herself. Her intention was either to encourage herself, or simply hoping that she wouldn’t end up like the others.

They went up a path from the old farmland, finally entering smooth, familiar territory. The pathway soon led to the mountaneous area that contained Linus’ humble tent and the far less humble carpenter shop. Jade held onto the melon for dear life when they drove down the slope of a hill, then once more when they exit the mountain region and entered the reaches of Pelican Town. Finally, the truck sputtered along slowly and came to a stop in front of the previously abandoned Community Center.

Jade took no hesitation in opening the back of the truck herself and setting down the previously used ramp. Both Robin and Sebastian exit from the vehicle doors to assist Jade in transporting the melon safely. Together, they all rolled the fruit to the Community Center entrance. Unfortunately, the melon seemed too large to really fit in through the double doors.

“Dang,” huffed Jade, crossing her arms at their final obstacle. “Do you think they’ll just take it here? It’s too big.”

“Maybe,” Sebastian shrugged.

“Why’re you doing this again? Who is ‘they’?” Robin inquired.

The young farmer turned her attention to Robin, but she wasn’t exactly sure how to word herself. “Uhh... Have you ever heard of the Junimos?”
“Junimos? Of course I have, I’ve seen them.”

Both Sebastian and Jade stared to her in mild shock, though the thought was very relieving to the latter. “S-so, I don’t have to explain myself, right? They’re these... forest spirits...?” The young farmer fumbled her words. She wasn’t exactly sure how much of a skeptic Robin was.

“Ahh, I see, so you’re working on some deals for them, huh?” The carpenter crossed her arms and nodded towards the decrepit building. “They’re holed up in here?”

Jade bashfully nodded. “Y-yeah... Have you worked for them before?” she asked.

“Oh, no. Well I mean, they don’t want anything from me. But the forest is their home, you know? My job involves cutting down trees in the forest, so to be courteous, I only take what I need. You remember this too, Jade. Always respect nature.”

“Trust me, I know that more than anyone at this point,” the young farmer huffed in embarrassment. Her mind flashed back towards the whole slime epidemic. She wondered if she did anything wrong to provoke so many of them, other than the fence. Maybe they were testing her? Seeing what she was made of? Jade became lost in her own mind as she tried to figure out the forest’s secrets.

Robin chuckled and pat her on the back, bringing her out of her state of wonder. “All of this will pan out. So, what next?” she asked.

Jade sighed. “Maybe I’ll go inside. You can leave now. Thank you so much for this, by the way. I’ll pay you.”

“Pay me?” Robin cackled. “No, no! I do this because I want to. But I fully expect you to give me a job when the money starts flowing in,” she winked.

“I will! I promise I will,” Jade beamed in response. “You’re honestly the best. I’ll go inside now, but I’m sure I’ll see you later.”

“Of course!” the carpenter happily replied. “We’ll just go. Maybe now that we’re in town, some grocery shopping may- where did Sebby go?” She suddenly looked irritated, turning all around to find him. They both then spotted Sebastian walking back up towards the mountains. “Hey! Sebby!” his mother called. “Just where do you think you’re going?!”

“Home!” Sebastian shouted.

“Like hell you are!”

“I have to work!” he yelled again.

“Bye, Seb!!” Jade screamed to him, cupping her hands around her mouth to amplify her voice. He didn’t vocally reply, but he did wave his hand at the farmer.

Robin puffed her cheeks. “That boy, I swear. He must’ve known I was going to drag him to the store. Oh, well. I’ll head off now, hon. Be safe!” She hugged the young farmer and fixed her bangs before closing the back of the truck and getting into the driver’s seat. The vehicle’s engine turned on, and the truck slowly drove towards the town square. Jade watched it for a while, smiling. She really wanted to do something nice for Robin.
The young farmer turned back to face the melon— but where it had previously stood so proudly, there was nothing.

“What the... it’s... gone?”

The melon they left in front of the Community Center doors had already disappeared. Jade frantically looked to her left and right, but it was nowhere to be seen. It didn’t roll anywhere, and even if it did, wouldn’t she hear it? Instinctively, the young farmer opened the double doors into the Community Center’s foyer. Everything was the same as before; a tiny makeshift home for the forest creatures, floorboards pulled up and overgrowth everywhere... A fireplace with a large plaque above it would normally be visible, but Jade’s missing melon placed right in front of it.

Dozens of Junimos gathered around the gigantic melon that somehow made its way inside. The majority of them began to roll the fruit off into different reaches of the building, while the last Junimo, a kind green one, squeaked to Jade. The young farmer curiously walked over, though she wasn’t sure she could speak. She had no idea what was happening and no words in explanation came to mind.

The little Junimo squeaked again and hopped into the miniscule makeshift home just to her left. It emerged with a shiny golden star, crawled up to the fireplace straight ahead, and tossed the star up into a plaque with six star-shaped indentations. “So that’s what it’s for,” Jade murmured to herself. The star glowed beautifully within the plaque, though that brought to attention that Jade needed to acquire five more stars.

There was a barrage of tiny squeaks and cries for the young farmer’s attention. She walked down the left hallway of the community center, hearing the source of the cries from the room on the right. Her jaw dropped open when she gazed in the now surprisingly clean room. A room that was previously in shambles, broken floorboards, torn wallpaper, collapsed cupboards... everything changed, and for the better. The floor was shining and clean, wallpaper revived and vibrant, floorboards fixed and containing all sorts of goods and utensils. There were some storage barrels lining the room, some counters, and lots and lots of space. This room was the master of storage rooms, and it appeared as if it didn’t even belong in the community center, considering how bright and fantastic it was compared to the rest of the building.

“Whoa!” Jade gasped, stumbling inside to look all around. “This is such a nice room! Just... Wow!” She heard some Junimos squeak from behind her, causing her to turn around. It was the same group that pushed the giant melon away before. They all carried up a wrapped present box to the farmer and waited until she picked it up. The box had been wrapped in a shimmery white and tied together with a silky red bow. “This is for me?” she asked all of them. “You really didn’t have to... thank you!” Her face flushed up from the token of appreciation and leaned down to pat them. They seemed to like the contact and climbed onto her arm, causing her to laugh. “You are real cuties. I’ll try my best to continue to fulfill your goals, even though I don’t have any idea where to start... the giant crop was pure chance.” She slowly sat down, letting the Junimos gather around her and sit on her legs. “Can I open this now?” she kindly asked.

The Junimos, extremely pleased with her kindness, ushered her to open the parcel. She carefully untied the bow and tore open the wrapping, finally removing the lid. Inside, there were several melon seed packets and a small collection of the region’s currency. Her eyes widened in shock, and she stared to all the Junimos. “You’re giving me all of this? Really?”

They squeaked and bounced to assure her. Jade giggled, loving to see how cheerful they were. “This
means so much. I don’t have to go to Pierre’s now... And how much money is this? Looks like a lot.” She gathered the money to further examine, jaw dropping a second time. “Holy sh...” She gulped, slowly put the money back in the box and closed its lid. “I... I gotta go.”

After giving the Junimos their proper goodbyes, Jade left the Community Center with her gift in arms and booked it towards the mountains as swiftly as she could. When the carpenter shop came into her sights, she ran even faster, having to skid her feet on the ground to stop herself when she got too close. The farmer keeled over, panting in exhaustion, before finally wobbling inside. “Robin!” Jade tiredly called, clutching onto her parcel with dear life. “You op-” She heard the truck outside. “Oh, there you are. Robin!!” She yelled again, stumbling back outside. Robin’s truck just pulled in and slowly drove into their open garage. She quickly turned the vehicle off and walked out to see what Jade needed. In her arms were a couple of grocery bags.

“Nice to see you again, hon!” the red-headed carpenter beamed. “Need some water again?” she pouted, noticing Jade’s exhaustion.

“I-I’m fine! I just ran here,” she panted. “Are you still open? Please tell me you are.”

“Of course!” Robin replied, causing Jade to emit the largest sigh of relief. “You wanting to shop?” She slid down the garage door and went back to the porch, dusting her hands. The carpenter arrived at the front door and opened it, allowing Jade to walk inside first before following.

“W-well... Can I see the prices? Of the buildings?” Jade meekly asked.

“... Buildings?” Robin suddenly appeared confused. “You mean... farm buildings?”

“Uh huh,” Jade answered, setting her gift onto the counter.

Robin blinked. “Farm buildings... that you want me to build? With my own two hands? I was... joking earlier.” She ventured over behind the shop counter and dropped the grocery bags in her trusty office chair.

“Yes, I’m completely serious!” Jade replied, chuckling.

“.... Yoba is real,” Robin whispered under her breath. “Here are the prices, hon,” she eagerly stated and slid a piece of laminated paper over with all the prices and requirements. Jade audibly gasped when she saw the prices, which made the carpenter express concern. “I know they’re expensive, but I have to... y’know... make a business. I know it’s pitiful, but-

“I want a coop!” Jade yelled, opening the gift again and slamming all the money on the table. “I have enough for it! I need farm animals!”

Robin didn’t respond, only staring down at the small wad of cash that Jade put on the very same counter. She looked back up to Jade, her eyes asking if this was actually serious, or if she was merely dreaming. Jade could tell that she hasn’t had a decent order in a very long time.

“That’s enough, right? I counted before...” Jade sighed. “But, if it’s not enough, I have some more cash at home I could bring. I’ve been getting quite a bit from my harvests, so I can finally-

“It’s more than enough,” Robin murmured in shock. “Holy...” She started to laugh to herself. “You really want a coop? Truly?”
“Yes!” Jade beamed.

“I always had such a good feeling about you! This is the absolute best!” Robin laughed even more, clapping her hands in giddiness. She ran around the counter and gave Jade a tight embrace. The young farmer was charmed and giggled, but the tight grip caused her to cough. “I’ll build you the best dang coop there ever was! I finally have business that doesn’t involve a festival!” She realized her death grip on the young farmer and let go, embarrassingly scratching her head. “Hehe, sorry. I just haven’t had a big project in ages. I’ve been itching to work for the past forever.”

The young farmer humbly gazed in understanding. “I’m guessing that’s why you offered to do stuff for me for free. I understand wanting to get away sometimes.”

Robin shrugged. “Guilty. But!! We have a lot of work to do!” The carpenter took the cash and stored it into a lockbox that was hidden behind a mountain of paperwork on the counter. She confidently turned around to Jade and crossed her arms. “First, you need to show me where on the farm you want your coop. How big do you want it? Dimensions, what you’re planning, colors you want, etcetera. And we need wood. Lots of wood.” Jade could practically see Robin’s form shudder from excitement. “Aahh, come with me to the truck! We’ll go there right now so I can get to planning. Come on!” Robin tugged Jade by one of her arms and tried to drag her away. The young farmer barely managed to take her parcel back before being stolen out of the front door.

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The ride to Jade’s farmhouse took as long as it normally did, but it felt much shorter since Robin was talking the entire time. The young farmer noticed that this was Robin’s time to shine; she started to talk about all the technicalities of building something even as simple as a coop and started to discuss features she could include. She began recounting her experiences of coops she built before, and what she already had in store for Jade’s. An endless spout of information came from the carpenter, which strangely made Jade think of Sebastian. The long rants and mountain of trivia that the young farmer learned through Sebastian only seemed to increase, but it was one thing she loved about him. He must have received the trait from Robin. Seeing the carpenter in her element and excitedly recounting her experiences caused Jade to smile.

For the next few hours, Jade and Robin planned the location and dimensions for the new coop. Jade decided that she wanted to house rabbits, so the coop would be elevated in length and have feeding systems attuned to them. Robin had to explain that it would cost a little more, but Jade didn’t really mind and happily scrounged up the extra cash. They both decided that the coop would best fit near the top left of the farm, but below her collection of crops; the building would be facing towards the right of the farm, aligned next to the path up towards the front porch. Both of them were already excited, but they could hardly contain themselves when the idea of a coop became reality.

Jade could tell that Robin didn’t want to leave, and wanted to begin building right there, but she needed to close up shop and Jade needed to finish her crop harvest and water her plants for the day. With another hug, the two parted. The young farmer watched as Robin left in her truck and stood there until the vehicle was out of sight. She took a deep breath, stared at the makeshift dimensions of the coop, then over to her crops that still needed to be tended to. “I’m finally starting to feel like a farmer.”

The evening quickly arrived after the rest of the melons were shipped in the storage bin and all the crops were finally watered; luckily none of them were too dry even with the unforgiving Summer sun, so she didn’t have to worry. While she had the opportunity, she prepared and planted all the extra seeds that the Junimos provided. She wasn’t sure she’d be blessed with a gigantic harvest again,
but crops were crops as always. Despite all the hard work, the farmer considered starting to chop some wood to help Robin. Unfortunately, it was already getting dark and she didn’t even acquire anything to carry the wood with. Jade would have to go to Pierre’s to make the transport possible, she realized with a low grumble.

The last portions of the day involved making dinner, playing with her cat, and lazing in front of her computer. Despite not doing all too much for the day, a lot was accomplished. And yet, she felt like she was forgetting something. As if on cue, someone sent her a message:

SAM: where are you fam
SAM: its saloon night and im going to eat your pizza
SAM: haha whoops too late
JADE: OH DAMN
JADE: I FORGOT
SAM: are you coming or not?
SAM: i cant kiss sebs ass by myself
SAM: its a two man job
JADE: yeah omg i got into my pajamas and everything i’m sorry!! i’ll be over!
JADE: how are you sending these messages to me btw
SAM: its called a phone. revolutionary
SAM: run at the speed of fast
SAM: im sure we can stay late for you
JADE: oh. duh
JADE: anyways i’d appreciate that so much!! thank you! OK SEE YOU IN A MIN

Just like that, Jade quickly dressed herself and leapt out the front door to go join her friends in their weekly saloon meetups. Their night was long and rather enjoyable, much like the previous weeks. The farmer couldn’t say she enjoyed having to deal with the townspeople every day, but the thought of being annoyed never even crossed her mind when it came to her trio of friends. A night of gaming, pool, and stories while snacking were essential to a great saloon night. Friday nights were always the perfect time for them to see each other face-to-face and catch up with all their goings-on. While Jade normally didn’t have too much to say, she had quite a few scenarios to mention then. For the first time, Jade got to tell a real story of her transformation into an actual farmer. Everyone was proud of her.

And for the first time, so was she.
Robin began construction on Jade’s new rabbit coop on the day after the order was given. The day was long, hot, sweaty, and grueling, but the carpenter felt a sense of pride to be back out on the field while doing *real* work. Jade was mostly preoccupied with her own farm duties early that morning, since another batch of her crops matured: blueberries! She eagerly harvested all the ripe blueberries from the patiently growing bushes and stored most of them, except for a tiny bowl of them for personal consumption. She tried one herself, and it was somewhat tart, but still delicious and fresh. These would sell well.

When Robin first arrived early that Saturday morning, she had a letter addressed to Jade. Upon reading it, she recognized it as a request from Maru:

“Hello Jade!

I hope you don’t mind me sending you a message like this. I’m sure you’re very busy and feel free to decline this offer, but if you could lend me a hand, I would really, really appreciate it.

I need some ore and gems for my next projects. I consider myself an expert at mining, but I’m not so good at the whole... monster part. I overheard that you’ve been practicing with a sword of your own, since there are some creatures scattered about the forest where you live. You know where I’m going with this, right? Haha.

I’ll happily pay you half of my findings if you’d like to go with me! I mostly need some copper and quartz, so it’s not too far down the mine. It’s crawling with insects and duggies, though, so I would keep that in mind. Oh yeah, and slimes. (I heard you dislike slimes, so I’m sorry if this bothers you! That’s not my intention at all.)

I’d like to go on Sunday if that’s alright. I look forward to hearing from you, either way. It’d be nice to chat and to catch up!

Thanks for reading,

Maru”

“Maru is literally a bowl of sugar,” Jade laughed out to Robin, who was already starting up the frame of the coop. “I haven’t been to the mines yet. Do you know what it’s like, Robin?” she asked.
Robin was hammering two pieces of wood together, holding iron nails between her teeth. She stopped for a brief moment and took the nails out, then continuing her business. “Nah, I don’t care for the mines all that much. Stone is the worst. And closed, rocky caves. Ugh. The only claustrophobic space I want to be in is if it’s surrounded by glorious wood.” The carpenter glanced at the farmer re-reading the letter, but went back to her woodwork. “Maru and Sebby used to sneak out a lot to the mines when they were younger. They’re both explorers at heart, even when I frickin’ tell them not to.”

“Seb is an explorer type?” Jade wondered aloud.

“When he was little, you could hardly keep him inside. He liked to run out in the rain, especially. That boy must be immune to colds now because that’s how often he got himself sick,” the carpenter chuckled. She made a motherly sigh, feeling rather nostalgic. She was quiet for a while, and focused on working. The young farmer carefully watched her. “... Now you can hardly get him outside. I worry about him, in that basement.” Jade noticed a change in how Robin was working. Her hammering was slower, and a very rare frown was placed on her visage. “I try to be a good mom, you know? He’s so big with his privacy, so I try to give him that. At the same time, I try to keep our family together...” She sighed. “But... I know he’s not very happy, living at home. He’s getting older, and I know in my gut that he’ll leave, sooner or later.”

Jade approached Robin and gingerly placed a hand on one of her shoulders. “Being a mother is one of the hardest jobs you can ever have,” she murmured. “And no mother is perfect. No one is perfect, period. But, you know... I think you’re doing your best, and it really shows how much you love your family.”

Robin stopped working and put her hammer down. She placed her hand on top of Jade’s and sadly smiled to her. “Thank you, Jade. That does mean a lot to me.” Her smile widened even more in thought. “You know, he’s been doing a lot better lately. I think it’s because of you.”

“Yeah?” Jade smirked.

“Mmhm.” The carpenter stood up fully and dusted her hands on her own pants. “He’s been talking a lot more. I like to ask about you, because he always has something to say. Usually I just get the same kind of response when I ask him what he’s been up to, but he likes to talk about you.”

The farmer chuckled to herself. “He complained about you asking about me once.”

“Oh, he complains about everything,” Robin snorted in response. “But... I mean it. You know the vibes you get from people? I can just tell he’s a lot more cheerful.” She wistfully sighed. “I want to say sorry for kinda forcing both of you together a few times, but I’m honestly not. I had a feeling when I first met you, and so far I’ve been right.” The carpenter winked and gave that familiar smirk of hers. “I think I can worry about Sebby a little less now. I feel bad for not giving Maru equal attention, but Sebby and Dem...” The entertained expression of hers quickly disappeared, and she crossed her arms. “I’m... I’m trying to keep our family together, like I said. You know?”

“I know,” Jade smiled. “Family can be very complicated.”

“For sure. Yoba knows I love them all so much either way. I just gotta let this stuff off my chest sometimes. It’s nice to take a breather and to work alone for a little bit. I get a little stir crazy at home.” Robin pat Jade in return, then went back to her building. This time, Jade could certainly tell that she was in higher spirits.
“You could say that you’re an explorer at heart,” Jade teased.

Robin bursted with laughter. “Oh, please. Don’t remind Dem that I gave them my worst traits.” She began hammering away again, pleased with her progress so far. “Thanks for the talk, hon. I think you should go with Maru. Just keep in mind that Sebby is easy to get jealous, especially with his sister.”

“I will,” Jade replied, glancing back at the letter. “Game night is tonight, so I’ll spend some time with him anyway. Maybe I could come back with you when your work day’s over? I’ll just tell Maru that I accept her request, too.”

“Sounds like a plan,” grinned Robin. Their conversation concluded, Jade letting Robin get back to work.

Even though the young farmer was busy with her progressing work load, she still wanted to help Robin complete her project at a faster rate. With a wagon Robin brought, Jade went out into the open parts of the forest to break apart and collect some stray lumber. Robin, being such a good sport, required nothing more and took care of the rest when it came to building. The young farmer could hardly do much now, but she was extremely satisfied to have such a productive morning.

Nothing else needed to be done except for fun time spent with her friends at the end of the day. Jade had spent the majority of her energy working in the morning, so she stumbled back indoors to shower away her exhaustion and then napped like a rock until the arrival of the evening.

When she awoke and re-dressed herself, she noticed that Robin was still outside and hard at work. The coop already seemed to be well into development, and it would definitely be done the next day. Impressive! She wanted to be surprised at the carpenter still working, but truthfully, she wasn’t. Robin was just that kind of hard worker. To quickly refuel them both, Jade made a couple sandwiches for dinner and walked outside to give her one. For a treat afterwards, they shared the fresh bowl of blueberries and took a moment to appreciate the fruits of Summer. Together, they took a well-deserved break and lightly discussed whatever was on their minds before Robin wrapped up construction at the end of her shift.

After Jade equipped herself with a backpack full of books and video games, the two got into Robin’s trusty old truck and drove off towards the mountains. The scenery they passed was the same as the previous day, though cloaked in a different palette due to the setting sun. Jade loved the soft and dim hues of the trees, the shadows the fading light cast in between the leaves, the soft reds of the sky and the dramatic white puffs of the clouds. The sky had an ominous look to it and the clouds seemed to crowd and clump together. Jade always welcomed rain, but she silently threatened the sky to not cast any rain until she was back home.

They passed that same old field again, causing the young farmer to lose focus. Something about the field and the decrepit old cabin intrigued her.

“Lookin’ at the cabin? That thing’s been here for decades. An old man used to live there and man the farmland, but he moved away when he got too old for the work and passed. There were some rumors about a grandchild coming, but...” Robin shrugged while she drove, eyes still kept on the road. “No one ever came. Lewis was disappointed, for sure. But then you came! You were a pleasant surprise for everybody.” She chuckled. “Hell, there were rumors that you were the grandchild. But you wanted a completely different house.”

Jade shook her head. “My grandparents are in senior homes on the other side of the region. I mean,
they might pass soon, but... None yet. And none of them owned a farm or anything.” She sighed, gazing at the beautiful yet gloomy scenery. A place full of history gave the ancient farm some pride and beauty, but it was eaten up by time so much that it became depressing. “I wonder if something happened to the grandchild.”

“Ah, who knows. I hope they’re doing well, whatever they’re up to.” Robin paused for a moment, carefully turning the truck onto the right path. In a few more minutes, they would be back at the carpenter shop. “Say... If farming’s not in the family for you, why did you decide to become one?”

Jade glanced over to the carpenter, silently thinking, then turning back to stare out the window. “Because it’s the last thing anyone would expect me to be,” she stated.

Robin chuckled, but the farmer couldn’t tell if it was because her statement was hilarious, or because she was caught off guard. “You’re something else, you know that? I like it. I know it’s not the exact same, but my parents fought tooth and nail to keep me from being a carpenter. They were very, uh, traditional. Didn’t think a woman should be doing hard labor.” She smirked, lightly nudging her elbow to Jade’s arm. “We’re proving them wrong, huh?”

The mood lightened for Jade, causing her to smile in return. “For sure,” she replied. The young farmer didn’t really consider what she was doing was hard labor, but... Robin was right. It was a lot of hard work, becoming less noticeable as she became used to the somewhat harsh routine. She didn’t even notice the scratches on her arms or the blisters on her hands. Not until she was finished working. Jade examined the palms of her hands as they came to mind. What was soft and dainty before had started blistered and hardened with wear. She began to wonder how different she would look if she allowed her pale skin to tan, or dyed her hair anything other than her honey brown.

Everything around the truck grew dark, causing Jade to snap out of her contemplation. “And we’re here,” Robin beamed, turning off the ignition of her vehicle. Jade glanced out of the back window—oh, they were in the house’s garage. Jade stepped out of her side of the truck, toting her backpack with her. Their garage was average among all garages; stone floors, brick walls, storage that couldn’t fit in the rest of the house. On the side opposite of Robin’s truck stood Sebastian’s shining blue motorcycle. Several tools hung on the wall closest to it and a lot of equipment sat on a dusty wooden table. Jade couldn’t really recognize any of the tools except for a gas can that was half full. Vehicles were truly out of her league, but she thought the motorcycle itself looked nice and well cared. Without any further dallying, Jade walked out and took a head start towards the front door while Robin closed the garage shutters.

Ah, the carpenter shop as it always was. This was the house she frequented the most, so the sights were familiar and welcoming to her. While she would normally search for Sebastian first, she had to respond to Maru’s request... Okay, maybe not the entire house was familiar. Jade ventured out of the shop area and glanced into the laboratory at the end of her path. Empty. She cautiously peered down the hallway and started to walk. She remembered the kitchen that branched off to her right, but the two doors ahead were completely lost on her. The room straight ahead was cracked open, so she peered inside. Demetrius was searching through a bookshelf at the far end of the wall. This must have been his and Robin’s room, then. Jade walked to her left to approach the second door and listened quietly before knocking.

“Coming!” came Maru’s voice from inside. The young nurse opened the door, face brightening up when she saw Jade. “Oh, hey! I didn’t expect you here.” Maru was in an outfit that Jade hadn’t seen before; she had a fuschia t-shirt under a navy pair of overalls and brown boots on her feet. She had a dirty washcloth stained with spots of black hanging out of her overalls’ front pocket, the same spots scattered across her clothes. Oil, maybe. She was tired behind her cheerful expression, since it
seemed she was working all day.

The young farmer kindly smiled in response. “It’s game night with Seb and Sam, so that’s why I’m here,” she answered.

Maru averted her eyes and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. “Oh, I see. Have fun with them.” She slightly smiled.

Jade noticed a bit of Maru’s tension. She hoped she didn’t offend her in some way. “But! Your mom gave me the letter this morning. And I happily accept your offer.” She grinned. “I can’t say I’ve been to the mines yet, but it’ll be a good experience. I promise I’ll do my best to protect us both.”

Maru felt a bit embarrassed to not know Jade’s reason for being at the house, but she was ecstatic to have her offer accepted. “Thank you, I really need to go to the mines. I’m working on my greatest experiment yet,” Maru mentioned. Jade seemed curious and tried to peer into the room, but Maru stood on her tip toes to block the view. “No! Not yet!”

Jade chuckled. “Alright, alright. Well, I’ll come meet up with you tomorrow. I’ll just walk here, yeah?”

“Yeah, absolutely. It’ll be fun! And dangerous. Be sure to bring lots of food. I have some medkits too, so we’ll be fine.” Maru confidently nodded.

“Of course. Have a good evening, Maru,” Jade said with a wave and started back from where she came. The young farmer heard the door close from behind her, so nothing was keeping her from raiding the basement then. Jade carefully walked downstairs and then loudly bammed on the door at the end of the basement hall.

“What?” Sebastian yelled, annoyed.

“Pizza delivery!” Jade shouted back.

She heard footsteps up to the door, and then it opened. Sebastian stood there with an unamused expression that morphed into disgust. “Ugh, you again.” They both stared at each other before Jade erupted into snickering. Sebastian couldn’t hold his grimace and smiled, leaning against his door. “It’s nice to see you, but why are you here? I left you a message.”

Jade’s face drooped in confusion. “I haven’t checked my computer today. I came here with your mom when she was done with her shift at the farm... did something come up?”

He patiently crossed his arms, not in the least bit surprised that Jade was late in getting the memo. “Sam was pulled into work today, so he couldn’t come for the game. We shouldn’t get ahead of the game without Sam, so yeah...”

“Aw,” Jade pouted, disappointed. “Sorry I missed it. I do have the comic to return to you, though! I’ll be out of your hair after that.” She swung off her backpack and kneeled down to open and rummage through her belongings. Sebastian leaned over to watch, then graciously taking the comic book she returned to him.

“Thanks-

“Nope, not done yet. You wanted these games, right?” Jade brought out a few more game cases and
offered them. He had talked about some games he’s been meaning to play before, so Jade thought he could borrow her copies. It was only fair, after all.

“Hah, you didn’t have to do this.” Sebastian took them anyway, since he was never one to reject free games. He sighed and looked back into his room. “I mean, I don’t really want to kick you out... I don’t have a nice setup like you do, and I don’t really have other board games, so...”

The young farmer zipped her backpack back up and re-equipped it, standing up. She flailed her hand in dismissal and calmly shook her head. “It’s fine, really! It was my fault for not checking before. Hey though, I won’t be on much tomorrow. I’m going to the mines with Maru.”

What was previously a calm, neutral expression suddenly transformed into irritation. “Maru?” Sebastian asked in slight disbelief, eyes narrowed. Jade quickly realized that Robin wasn’t joking about the jealousy bit. Sheesh. It was like she betrayed him for some unspoken reason. "What does she want with you?"

“Is it really that big of a deal?” Jade began, equally unimpressed by Sebastian’s attitude. “She sent me a letter and asked me to accompany her since she needs help dealing with monsters. It’s more of an errand than a get-together.”

The grumpy raven-hair crossed his arms, games and book still in hand. “Whatever, then. Bye,” he started, backing away and knocking his door shut with his foot. He was confused at how it didn’t shut all the way, until he saw Jade keeping the door cracked open with her boot.

“Ohh, no, we’re not ending this conversation yet,” Jade grunted, pushing the door back open. “Why are you like this whenever I mention Maru? I could probably tell you that I’m going to backflip into a pool of sharks and you wouldn’t act as dramatic as when you hear your sister’s name.” She firmly held the door open so that Sebastian could not easily exit the talk. Jade had no intention of going anywhere.

He backed away in a defensive manner and turned his head away so that he wouldn’t face Jade’s glare. “Half-sister. And I already said I don’t care. You can stop lecturing now,” he offhandedly replied. But of course, the young farmer wasn’t one to buy such a reply.

“You know, for such a smart guy, you’re really bad at hiding the truth. This is really ridiculous.” Jade huffed, stepping into the room. “You know how many times I’ve hung out with Maru? I could probably tell you that I’m going to backflip into a pool of sharks and you wouldn’t act as dramatic as when you hear your sister’s name.” She firmly held the door open so that Sebastian could not easily exit the talk. Jade had no intention of going anywhere.

Sebastian’s eyebrows furrowed and he continued to look away, face reddening in frustration. Despite the blank look on his face, his voice was still deep and angry: "What, so do you want my permission now or something? Back off, Jade." He turned his head back to her, now glaring. "I don't care what you do, but don't come here and drag me into this Maru crap."

Jade wasn’t going to let up. “Dragging you? I was telling you so you would know what I’m up to and expect me online a little later.” She huffed. "And I come to this house because of you, dummy. Hell, I even talk to you more than Sam and Abigail. Don’t act so controlling!"

“I’m not,” Sebastian snapped in response, though not as threatening as he wanted it to sound. He didn’t think Jade could appear so intimidating, but then again, he had forgotten about the circumstances in which they became friends. “You just don’t know Maru like I do, or all the shit I’ve been through because of her.” He replied somewhat weakly, but Jade could tell that he wasn’t any
Jade irritatedly sighed and took a step back. She went quiet for a moment to think. “Sebastian, I get it. I do. Siblings can be horrible. They steal attention, affection, your stuff, your space. Everything.” Jade took a deep breath, and continued: “But I think you need to lighten up. Maru hasn’t done anything to turn me against anyone, especially not you. Not since I moved here.” She stared at Sebastian until he finally softened his gaze. The young farmer slowly relaxed as a result. “So... chill out, okay?”

They were both quiet for a moment, allowing the tension to settle between them. Sebastian eventually gave up and exhaled, relaxing his shoulders. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. But... fine.” He averted his glance once more. “...Thanks for the games.”

“No problem, Seb. I fully expect commentary and reviews with your playthroughs, or you’re in big trouble.” Jade playfully nudged him. “I’ll talk to you later, alright?”

“Sure thing.” Sebastian was no longer angry, but he still wasn't in a good mood. Because of that, he didn't really have time for pet names or jokes.

Jade noticed. She smiled a bit in an attempt to ignore the slips in conversation. “Bye, nerd.” She pat him again and then she was off, full of hope that the conversation was resolved. There was so much more Jade wanted to say, but she really didn’t want to overstep her boundaries. A lot of assumptions could have been made, but Jade’s relationship with Sebastian was only just improving and she didn’t want to put it even more at risk. At the same time, she wanted to keep peace with Maru. They didn’t know each other very well, but she could already tell that the family situation was rather complicated.

The young farmer ascended the staircase, albeit slower and with less energy. Maru was right at the top of the stairs and jumped upon seeing Jade, instantly flushing in embarrassment. A closed blue umbrella was clutched in her right hand. “O-oh, sorry, I-I...”

“Sneaky sneaky,” Jade tiredly smiled. “It’s okay. Did you overhear all of that?”

Maru frowned. “Some of it. I was getting some food and I caught a little bit... Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize, it’s fine. Get lots of rest for tomorrow.”

The young scientist nodded. “Will do... Um, do you have an umbrella? I think it’s raining outside now,” she mentioned.

Jade peered down and noticed the umbrella in Maru’s hand. “I actually don’t,” she pouted. Without hesitation, Maru offered the umbrella to her. The young farmer accepted and carefully held it.

“You can return it tomorrow,” Maru calmly murmured. “Um... Thanks.”

Jade chuckled. “No need. Alright, see you for real.” She waved and was finally able to leave the carpenter shop. It was extremely dark outside and the rain was heavily pouring onto the ground... visibility was limited to just what was ahead of her feet. The young farmer sighed and took out a decent-sized emergency flashlight to safely guide her home. Expanding the umbrella and turning on the flashlight, she slowly made her way through muck and muddy grass. Hopefully her shoes wouldn’t suffer too much and reach the town square’s stone pathways before then.

Jade usually welcomed the rain, but it felt much more ominous in the late evening. Thunder from a
far distance caught her off guard, causing her to flinch and nearly drop her flashlight. Flashes of lightning lit up the sky, illuminating all of the farmer’s surroundings for a split second. Due to memory and what environmental figures she could see, Jade safely made it back home after a few hours.

The day didn’t really end as well as she wanted to, but there were always worse ones.
Jade acts as Maru's bodyguard on a trip down to the mines.

Jade may have overzealously packed for a mining trip that would only last from an early afternoon to a late evening. Along with Maru’s generously donated umbrella, the young farmer stored her trusty flashlight, her pickaxe, her still sharp and ready sword, a ton of snacks, some empty containers for loot, and rope (just in case). Jade also wore a lightweight red hoodie, her toughest pair of blue jeans, and the very same brown boots for farming. She didn’t exactly have much exploration gear, but for her first mission it would do.

She may or may not have played a plethora of dungeon crawler games the previous night. Though it was an attempt to ready herself, only Onyx was the witness of her questionable, if not hilarious, measures of preparation. The young farmer was so excited to venture the mines for the first time that she nearly forgot to do her regular farm work for the day... and there was a lot of it.

Her corn had finally finished growing, and she spent the majority of the morning pulling the vegetables from their stalks and tracking through muck created by the previous night’s brutal rainfall. The ground was still damp, so Jade decided to skip on watering the plants. The watered soil was a blessing for her, too; retrieving all the corn was exhausting and time consuming. She saved the two best corn pieces for herself and stored them in her refreshingly cool fridge.

Before leaving, she decided to leave a wrapped meal and drink out for Robin, who was still hard at work on the rabbit coop. Jade couldn’t help but survey the carpenter for a few minutes, since she was so powerful and eager to get the job done. Even with the mud and the dampened lumber, Robin was working quickly and with utmost precision. Sometimes she would get so caught up in her work that she would begin grinning. Jade was happy to give Robin such an opportunity to thrive. With a wave and a reminder about the food, Jade began her trek towards the mountains.

There was a sweet aroma about the valley whenever it recovered from a fresh rain. The sky, though partly cloudy, shown a vivid blue and contained the beaming sun. Grass sparkled with dew, mossy stone paths into town glittered bright, and curious animals of the valley ventured out from their homes for the warm summer air. The temperature was still high, as expected of the season, but there was a pleasant breeze that reduced the harshness of the heat. As Jade traveled out of the forest, she decided to stop at Marnie’s ranch and watch the farm animals roaming out in the field. There were mostly brown and white cows out and roaming, but she also caught groups of chickens fluttering about in tall grass. She continued to scan for any other animals, hoping that she could find—there they were! Jade’s expression lit up in glee upon catching some rabbits hopping out into shallow grass. Among them were several types: cream, white, tan, black, spotted. They were all so cute and so fluffy, even with the time of year! For a moment, Jade allowed her mind to escape with what was soon to be. From what Robin told her, they were expensive, but valuable cloth could be made from their wool. She wasn’t actually sure if rabbits bred like... well, rabbits. Sell them as pets, perhaps? There were several possibilities. Maybe she could get some cows too, eventually. Nothing beats fresh milk.
Oh. The mines. Jade pried herself away from the ranch’s fence and continued her travel through Pelican Town. At record time, she arrived at the front yard of the carpenter shop. Even if she didn’t have the entire town memorized yet, getting to Robin’s place became almost as natural was it was going back to her own house. Just on cue, Maru exit the front door with a leather brown messenger bag slung over her shoulder and across her torso. In her right hand, she held a clean steel pickaxe. Upon seeing Jade, she waved her over and approached. “Jade! Ready to go?”

“You know it. I’m excited to go! So, what is mining like exactly? Gimme details,” Jade cheerfully asked. The two started walking towards the mountain lake- a turn left would then bring them down a path that led to a huge cave opening. She gave a subconscious glance to the carpenter shop before giving her full attention to Maru.

“Hmm...” Maru gave the illusion that she was thinking, but then broke out into a nervous laugh. “Truth be told, I haven’t been to the mines in a few years. The huge blockage between the path and the mine entrance didn’t really help... it was removed just before you moved here.” The young scientist hummed in thought. “However, I’m sure it’s the same as before. The mines go down for dozens of floors, maybe even more. I’ve heard there’s over a hundred, but I’ve honestly never had the strength to go past floor 60. The deeper, the more dangerous. We’ll be going to the 20th floor to start us off, so don’t worry. I need some pretty low-tier stuff, but I can’t spend any money right now. I don’t have the funds to buy and smelt ore from Clint all the time, you know? I need a higher quantity, so I can’t afford it.”

Clint? From her context, that must have been the local blacksmith. Jade did recall seeing the shop before. “Oh don’t you worry, I understand. That sounds intense, though. Sixty floors is still pretty darn deep,” the young farmer praised, nodding. “So, how’s the area we’re going to? Pretty quiet?”

“Eh, somewhat. Lots of bugs, a few slimes. It’s covered in plants and moss, old cart tracks; you’ll see what it’s like. Kind of like a jungle within a cave, actually.” Maru glanced to the lake that they treaded beside. The water level was higher and the clarity was somewhat limited, but the lake still shined with beauty. “The monsters shouldn’t be powerful, as I said, but... They can still swarm, so let’s just watch our backs.”

A swarm. Ugh. “I’ve been swarmed before and I learned almost too much from that experience. I know I’ll need some new gear after this... so much stuff to keep up with.” Jade sighed, bringing out her sword from the side of her backpack. She examined it: still in good shape, though she hadn’t used it towards too many adversaries.

“Have you been to the Adventurer’s Guild yet?” Maru asked, now looking forward. When they turned onto the path with the cave entrance, they both caught sight of a cabin straight ahead. “It’s that old house, right there.”

Jade tilted her head as she stared at what was supposedly the guild. “Hm, I haven’t. What is it?” She put her sword back in its place and crossed her arms.

“Uh... Sebastian could probably tell you more about it than me... Again, I’m not into all the fighting and monster killing.”

“Was he into that stuff, then?”

Maru sighed. Her demeanor changed when Sebastian came into the conversation. They had something in common, apparently. “Yeah... I just know it sells equipment, armor, swords, the works.
"I never really go in there." Maru lifted her head up more and glanced to Jade, interested. "Oh, they do open in the afternoon and close pretty late. If you’re going, then you should keep that in mind. I know most stores open very early."

The young farmer took her words into consideration. "Will do, thanks." She chuckled. "You’re fairly chatty. I get like that, too."

"Oh... am I bothering you? Sorry," Maru quietly murmured.

Jade laughed. "Don’t be. I like it when people talk a lot to me. Makes me feel a bit important, you know?" Her smile widened. "I’ve been hanging out with the goons so much, it’s actually nice to be with someone else."

"Goons?" Maru had a decent idea of the group she meant, though she described them in such an interesting way. The two of them arrived to the mine entrance and walked in. The sight was familiar to them, though Jade had only been there once before. No one was there; only a ladder to their right that descended downwards and an old, rickety elevator at the far wall. The young farmer recalled the elevator, but didn’t realize she would ride it so soon.

"Oh," Jade snorted. "You know. Seb, Abby, Sam." She sighed with nostalgia. "Well, okay. To be fair, I hang out with Alex sometimes, too. Haven’t seen him around lately, but I can’t say I’ve been out exploring the town much."

The scientist sadly smiled in response. "That’s quite a variety of friends. I’m glad." She guided Jade over to the elevator and pressed the call button. Within a few seconds, the outer elevator door opened, revealing a tiny and surprisingly clean room. They both entered and examined the surroundings before Maru pressed the door button once more. Jade noticed Maru’s shoulders tensing.

"... Hey, what about you?" Jade asked, hoping to calm her.

Instinctively, the young scientist pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. She took a deep breath and then slowly exhaled. "Um, I tend to get along with most people... For people I talk to every day, though... Penny. She’s my best friend."

"Aw, it’s good to have a best friend. I don’t think I really have one yet."

Maru examined Jade in the corners of her eyes. "Well, you’re still close to others-" she lightly flinched when the elevator dinged.

"... Sorry for asking, but are you scared of elevators?" Jade asked, concerned. She noted how unspeakably fast Maru exit the elevator, but it did catch her somewhat off guard. The young farmer slowly followed her out into the depths of the mines, taking her sword back out.

"It’s just a thing, sorry. I’m fine." Maru sighed. "Elevators don’t really bother me, just that one freaks me out a little bit."

"It is a crappyish elevator. No worries." Jade smiled. "Well, this is a nice place. I could have a picnic here." The floor they were on was not very large and had an underground body of water to their left. The walls were rocky and gray, save for the soft orange light that mounted lanterns cast into the area. The water itself was extremely murky and still, though there were droplets of water that trickled from above. The floor appeared to be made out of stone, vegetation formed in several spots to give the appearance of grassy ground. Strange flora bloomed in the area’s corners and thorny vines crawled
up the mine walls, while vines wrapped around stalactites on the ceiling. Plantlife flourished so much in the room that it really did have a jungle-like appearance.

“Beautiful, right? Luckily, there are no monsters on this floor. We’ll be climbing upwards, which will have... a slightly different story,” Maru explained, gesturing to a ladder that ascended right beside the elevator. Jade turned to look at it- she didn’t even see it there. “We can travel up for five floors and we’ll come across the elevator again. I’m sure we’ll have all the goodies we need by then.” She strode over to the ladder and placed her hand on one of the steps, her head slightly turned towards Jade. “Let’s go.”

The duo ascended up the ladder to the 19th floor, kickstarting their mission to retrieve as much copper and quartz as possible. The area was long and winding, much like what Jade initially imagined the mines would be. There were tunnels going forward and branching off to the sides, though their next path was not very clear. Vegetation heavily dangled from the ceilings and there were large patches of weeds and grass-like material. Several rocks and stones scattered across the entire area, some glittering a soft copper color. There weren’t any monsters so far, but Jade elevated her guard and held her sword tightly. Maru noticed a rock full of copper right beside her and began to break it apart with her pickaxe.

“And so it begins,” Maru proudly said when she cracked the rock open. She picked up the pieces that contained copper ore and stashed them in her messenger bag. “It’s a little too quiet now, eh?”

Jade nodded, carefully surveying the area. “Ayup. I think we’re fine for now.”

“How about you hack those weeds apart with your sword? You can clear a path to the next ladder while I do this.” The young scientist continued to pick at the different rocks and minerals, searching for the copper she required.

“Oh, sure.” Jade felt a little anxious to leave Maru’s side, but she took a deep breath and walked down the tunnel. She sliced at huge patches of weeds that would have made travel difficult otherwise- it was also good to do since various critters could have been lurking under the leaves. No creatures could be found, but some of the weeds provided ample amounts of fiber. Jade thought she could have used some later, so she stored them in her backpack.

The young farmer ventured further ahead, cautiously scanning her surroundings and even occasionally looking backwards to see if Maru was doing well. Nothing significant happened yet, but the mines were too quiet and things were going too well. Jade crept onto a patch of dirt that led into a fork in the tunnel: one leading to a larger, sandier area, and the other to a winding path. She took a step forward with the intention of going to the larger area, but her foot started to sink down into the sand-

Pop! A grimy, brownish-red creature reared its head out of the dirt, tiny sharp teeth gnawing in Jade’s direction. “Gah!” Jade hurriedly backed up just in time and swung her sword at it, blade slicing at its surprisingly tough form. The creature went to Jade’s shins in length, but this was only the upper part of its body... it could have been huge, and it was definitely hungry. A glowing antennae dangled on the top of its head, too- it was like an angler fish on land.

As soon as the creature surfaced, so too did it sink back into the sand below. Jade’s breathing elevated and she stared down to the sand in horror. Where did it go? In only a few seconds, Jade’s other foot sunk into the sand.

This time she knew to dodge at a quicker pace and wildly swung her sword. The creature growled
and snarled, attempting to bite the sword, but only sunk back into the ground again. The young farmer purposefully began trekking on the sand in an attempt to bring it back up-- and it worked! The creature popped up one more time before Jade successfully sliced its head off with her blade. While the head stayed, now completely motionless, the rest of the creature’s body wriggled wildly before sinking right back into the ground. This time, it did not resurface.

“Jade, are you okay?” Maru shouted from a distance. “I heard you yell!”

Jade sighed in relief, that small battle being over with. “I’m fine! This thing came up out of the ground!” She shouted back. “Oooh, what’s this?” Jade noticed something shiny left by the monster she just slain. She leaned over and picked the item up- it was covered in goo, which may explain why it was so shiny, but there was something about this rock that seemed special. It was perfectly oval, had unique ridges and bumps on its surface, and it felt somewhat heavy.

“What did you find?” Maru shouted, voice getting calmer when she went to see Jade. Upon getting close enough, her eyes lightened with familiarity. “You found a geode? That’s good!” she cheered. “There are a lot of unique minerals and materials found in geodes. Take that to Clint later.”

“Ooh,” Jade remarked, marvelling at her find. “You sure you don’t want it?” she asked.

Maru shook her head and smiled. “Yeah, I’m just here for other materials. Here, though.” She took out a disposable cloth for Jade to clean the geode with. “This’ll do you some good.”

“Thanks!” Jade wiped the geode clean and stored it in her backpack. She felt a real sense of pride at getting her first item from the mining trip, and it felt great to get a successful monster kill without much harm done to herself.

The young scientist stared at the lifeless head of the creature Jade had just slain, and nodded her head with a disgusted expression. “Yep, that’s a duggy,” she sighed. “They tend to live in these sandy areas.”

Jade took a mental note of what duggies were, but she wasn’t exactly ecstatic to see more. For the time being, she wanted to take things slowly and not get too ahead of herself with all of her extra pride. Maru was finished with the first area it seemed, so the both of them ventured to the fork in the path and weighed their options.

“That larger area will most likely have a lot of duggies,” Maru brought up. “I think the ladder to the upper floor is in there, though... should we see?”

The young farmer tightly held her sword with both of her hands and took a defensive position. “Yeah, let’s do this.”

“Okay.” Maru took a deep breath. “I’ll run over to solid land and draw all of them out, and you can get slashing. Just try to not get overwhelmed.”

Jade glared to the giant and sandy room, a determined expression stamped on her face. “I got this.” She took away one of her hands from the sword to give Maru a high five of confidence. They nodded at each other with a ‘hmph’ and Maru ran forward.

Just as the young scientist said would happen, one duggie after another rose out of the ground to try to get their next meal. Maru was able to jump to the other side of the sandy pit, its ground made of stone. She took a second to catch her breath and look behind her. Half a dozen of them must have
come out of their hiding places; all the duggies growled and swiveled about, snapping their tiny jaws. Jade lunged forward, both hands back on the handle of her sword, and sliced all the duggies she could reach. She chopped the first one’s head clean off and brought the others significant damage before they disappeared back into the ground. In a hurry, Jade hopped backwards as the group of duggies rose to attack. One of them was quick enough to snap at one of Jade’s legs before she moved away.

In the moment, Jade didn’t seem to notice the puncture marks on her shin since she was too distracted by the monsters themselves. She hacked away with her sword, directly hitting one of them, slicing another’s head, and hurriedly dodging the last few who caught onto her tactics and tripped her under her feet. She stumbled in her last dodge, but spread her stance and powerfully swung her sword once more. She was able to decapitate two more duggies, leaving just two left to fight. They ended up disappearing into the ground, Jade hopping back once more to prepare, but they did not resurface.

“I think you scared them off,” Maru sighed out with relief. “They might be back sometime, though. Grab the goodies they dropped!”

Jade nodded with confidence and examined the dirtied battleground. She obtained one more geode, noticed a few regurgitated bits of stone, and grabbed an old rolled up piece of paper with a red thread tied around it in a bow. She didn’t want to linger around for much longer, so she jumped out of the sandy area to Maru’s location. “Just a geode and an ancient looking scroll thing. I’ll examine them more later,” Jade confirmed.

“Hmm.” Maru tapped her chin with her hand in thought. “Have you been to the library yet?” she asked. Jade shook her head, causing Maru to smile. “They have a museum there. If there are any artifacts you get from geodes that you don’t want, maybe you can donate them. Gunther would appreciate it.”

Two of them began to carefully traverse the new path. They saw a ladder clamped to the very far cave wall, though there were still clumps of copper ore to crack open before truly ascending. Maru brushed a batch of plants off of the nearest rock containing copper and began to pick it apart with her trusty tool.

“Is Gunther the guy that owns the library?” Jade asked while watching the mining process. She has lived in the valley for a while, though many names were still lost on her. Addmitedly, she didn’t really care to know all of them. Her small group of friends was enough.

Maru wiped some sweat from her forehead and collected some freed copper ore. “Ah huh, he’s the one you go to for all your artifact and book reading needs.” She chuckled a bit. “He loves me. I was the top artifact donator for a while.”

“Oooh, that’s a pretty great feat. Maybe we can make it a competition when I become a pro at this mining thing,” Jade huffed proudly. Since the area was clear, she placed her sword at the end of her backpack and took out her pickaxe. Just for the fun of it, she picked apart random batches of rocks she saw.

“Heh, that’d be cool. I’d be happy to accept the challenge. It will encourage me to get some more materials! There are so many gadgets I want to build, but then I realize that it’d only be possible with several mining trips.” The young scientist sighed as she collected the newly revealed copper ore. “It used to be so easy to spend the whole day at the mines. I’m jealous of Vincent and Jas... they’re so young, so naive. So clueless of their fleeting childhood days.”
Most of the rocks Jade cracked open were broken into smaller rocks, but a few of them did have geodes similar to the ones she took from the duggies. Picking apart the stones were much more labor intensive than fighting monsters, for some reason. Jade easily began to sweat from the work, deciding to stop once Maru salvaged enough copper ore. She took a brief break and focused on Maru’s statements. “All your time really does leave when you get older. It’s kinda funny... there’s so much I have to do in the valley, and most of it doesn’t even involve farming.” She laughed to herself. “Though, I do plan to get some bunnies when your mom finishes construction. I wonder how much time in my day they’ll take.”

Maru lifted her head to look at Jade. “Aww, bunnies? That sounds fun. They’re good for wool, I hear. Maybe you can make some cloth. I hear that’s a profitable business if you sell them to the right people.”

“Yeah! And I might sell some as pets. Make a store online and become an official breeder. I love animals, and I know some people may love bunnies almost as much as I do.” Jade put her pickaxe back and decided to free hand for a bit; there weren’t any monsters around and Maru was better suited for the harder mining work anyways. “Should we go up, now?” Jade asked, dusting her hands onto her pants.

“Looks like we’re done here, so let’s get to it.” The young scientist guided Jade to the ladder, both of them ascending one at a time. The floor above was very similar to the one they were just exploring, though there seemed to be more vegetation and rocks to make up for the lack of sand. Maru froze, eyes glued to the far cave walls in worry.

Jade tried to see what she was glancing at, but she couldn’t really tell what it was. There seemed to be hollow green blobs stuck to the walls. “What is it?” the young farmer asked in a whisper, just in case a louder voice would have disturbed anything.

“We have company now,” Maru muttered in return, pointing to the green blobs. “Those are opened insect pods... there are some giant flying bugs lurking around, so this is where we need you the most.”

Jade instinctively re-equipped her sword and scanned their surroundings. Nothing yet. They crept forward, Maru heading towards a batch of rocks to break apart. She was getting tired, but they still had quite a few floors to go. Jade softly pat the young scientist on the back before walking ahead, slicing away any patches of weeds in their path. Only the distant water drop from the tips of stalactites could be heard in the distance. It was too quiet again, and this time, they were very aware that creatures lurked nearby.

Jade suddenly straightened her posture and stared down the nearest tunnel. She could hear faint buzzing from the other end of the cave, but they were growing louder at an alarming rate. Jade took a deep breath and tightly clutched the handle of her sword. There they were. A white insect the size of a human head flew right for the young farmer. It was off-white in color, with thin and clear wings and beady red eyes. She couldn't see a mouth on it, but its speed was alarmingly fast- it shot its body right towards her, Jade barely having enough time to knock it back with her sword.

"A cave fly!” Maru gasped. She stopped mining for a moment to keep her guard up.

So that was a cave fly, huh? It remained airborne despite being knocked back and aggressively lunged towards the young farmer again. She swatted it down with her sword, causing it to writhe on the ground. Jade huffed and sliced it in half, finishing the job. It continued to move after death,
causing the young farmer to wince. "These things are gross..."

"There are more, watch out!"

Right. Jade lifted her head and quickly scanned her surroundings. She heard another buzzing sound, this time from behind Maru. Jade quickly ran forward and stood protectively in front of her mining partner—just in time, too. A second cave fly came barreling down the path and targeted Jade. Just like the first one, she was able to knock it to the ground and slice it apart with her sword while it was down. They stood there for a few minutes to listen around the mine floor, but no more buzzing could be heard. "Go ahead and mine while you can, I'll be scanning the rest of the area," the farmer stated, obtaining a newfound confidence from monster slaying.

Maru nodded and relaxed her form. She turned back around and started to mine away at the rocks. "Thanks. Shout if you need anything," she replied.

This floor seemed to be smaller than the last one they were on, but it still had a lot of minerals that could be of good use. Jade decided to collect some more fiber for herself and searched around the rocks for anything interesting.

Behind one vein of boulders, she saw a white, crystal-like formation. Her eyes brightened; she hadn't seen anything like that yet. "Hey, Maru!" Jade shouted, pushing some of the stones out of the way. She cupped the crystal formation and easily pulled it up. The shards were beautifully formed, sharp and geometrical.

"Yeah?" she heard Maru call from the other end of the floor.

"I found some crystals!" Jade yelled in return. She was hoping it was something rare, but considering how they weren't very deep underground, it probably wasn't. Either way, it was absolutely gorgeous.

Maru eventually caught up to Jade to see what she had, her eyes brightening in fascination when the crystals caught her sight. "Quartz!" She trot up to Jade at a faster pace, holding her pickaxe over her shoulder. "Oh wow, great job, Jade! Is it okay if I take this?" she asked, a sad sparkle in her eye.

"Nope, not at all." Jade handed the quartz to her, causing her to grin with glee.

"Thank you so much! I only need one more of these and then I'll definitely have all I need." Maru tucked the quartz in her bag with her free hand and pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. "This has been such a successful trip so far. I know it's too soon, but I still want to say thank you for coming with me."

Jade chuckled and continued to walk, Maru following right behind. "It's not a problem! This is certainly interesting. I'm glad you know some stuff about these monsters, because I sure as hell don't."

"I only really know about the more common monsters here, haha... But, I'm glad I could be of service! You're helping me so much, so it's the very least I could do." Maru sweetly smiled to her mining buddy, even though the buddy in question was too focused on going to the next ladder. Jade sliced apart some more weeds as they went through their path, the ladder to the next floor located at the very end of the tunnel.

Without too much effort, the two closed in on the ladder to the floor above, but Maru stopped in her tracks, causing Jade to stop as well and look back. "Uh... did you forget something?" she asked,
frown twisted in concern.

"Shh," Maru snapped back almost instantly. They stood still and listened. Jade heard it too.

There were squishing sounds, but it wasn't anything like the slimes- it sounded like something moving and writhing. Maru saw a patch of tall grass and slowly moved the leaves.

"Go! Go!" Maru suddenly shouted, pushing Jade to the ladder. The young farmer didn't really get a chance to look back, but Maru was panicked enough that she trusted her. Behind the patch of grass sat three large and green segmented cocoons, all growing and morphing into cave flies.

Jade hurriedly climbed up the ladder to the next floor, hand desperately reaching for solid ground. She looked up to the next floor, which was brighter than average and glowed a serene green. Once reaching the surface and grasping for ground to lift herself up with, her hand touched... slime. The entire ground was covered in translucent green goop and sticky slime. "What the..." Jade scowled, glancing at her slime-covered hand. She moved up and carefully got off of the ladder, her knees suffering the same fate as her exposed hand. "The hell is this?" she grumbled.

The young scientist followed behind and quickly joined Jade. "Oh man... This isn't good. We need to find the ladder immediately," Maru murmured in worry. The pathways were much wider than the previous floors and the room was incredibly bright and saturated with green. All salvageable rocks had been dissolved by the amount of slime, so there was nothing Maru could do on the entire floor. They could see the ladder at the other end of the area, but they could tell that the room was much larger than what they could currently see. Both of them cautiously began walking. Maru sighed and glanced to Jade, who was wiping her hands and knees with the same cloth used to clean off monster goop. "Sometimes, a floor of the mine becomes covered in slime when the slime creatures make their nest- Jade!!" Maru gasped in shock. "You're bleeding!"

"What?" Jade looked down at herself.

"Your leg! How long have you been hurt?! You can't be fighting toxic slimes with an open wound like that!"

Jade's eyes widened. She didn't even notice the wound on her leg, but there was a deep bite mark on her shin, blood soaking an area of her pants. The wound itself looked way worse than how it actually felt. "I don't know how I got this-"

"Look out!" Maru pushed herself in front of Jade and swung down her pickaxe at a green slime that began rolling towards them. Jade gasped, caught off guard, but stuffed her washcloth away and quickly readied her sword. Without hesitation, Jade aided in slicing the slime in half. It was a green one without an antennae, so it couldn't have been too difficult. The two hits injured the slime, but it still squished in determination and hopped forward, aiming for Jade's wounded leg.

"Bastard!" screamed Jade, whopping the slime away with a nicely timed swing. The slime ruptured into several smaller pieces of goo, some of it getting on her torso.

Both of the ladies sighed in relief. That was too exciting for their comfort. "Sorry about that," Maru muttered with a frown. "I'm drawing attention to us."

"It doesn't matter," Jade began, looking around with extreme caution. She noticed more clusters of slimes being drawn out from their cubbies and hiding places. "Run for it!"
Several slimes began rolling and hopping forward, each greedy for the death of whomever disturbed their nest. All of them were some variation of green, which certainly explained the color of the room. Maru paid no attention to them and instantly started for the near ladder, while Jade traveled backwards and smacked away the slimes that tried to attack. Seeing the slimes caused Jade intense frustration, anger, and most of all, helplessness. Why were there always so many of them? Give her a million cave flies over these little bastards!

Jade was suddenly more aware of the wound on her leg. She was starting to feel pain airing from it, and she noticed the slimes wanted to aim towards that spot on her body. Maru had climbed some of the ladder, but stared back in horror, hoping that Jade would get to the next floor safely. She was doing a great job of keeping all of them back, but it was apparent that she was getting tired. She sliced one of the slimes in half, causing Jade to smirk... unfortunately, some of the glop hit the wound on her leg and caused her to shout in pain. "Gah! Shit!"

"Jade?!” Maru was about to descend the ladder, but Jade hurriedly put her sword up and latched onto the wall.

"Go, go, go!” Jade shouted, the both of them hurriedly ascending to the next floor. Luckily, the surface was made of thick dirt and they dragged themselves right outside of the exit. Jade collapsed onto her back and panted in exhaustion. The sword fighting was really getting to her, and now her leg was burning. Maru scanned their surroundings and made sure they were safe before dropping all of her equipment and crawling over to Jade.

A hole had been burned onto Jade’s pants, exposing her now worsening wound. “I’m so sorry... I wish I noticed this earlier,” Maru started with shame plaguing her voice.

Jade responded with a pitiful laugh. “I didn’t really notice it either. It didn’t really hurt until I got slime on it...” She winced, staring at her second pair of ruined pants and nasty streaks of blood. “Can you help me out?”

Before Jade even finished her statement, Maru pulled up Jade’s pant leg and shuffled through her messenger bag. She brought out a medkit and began tending to the wound, carefully cleaning it and then spraying it with medicine. The medicine made Jade flinch, but the pain quickly subsided. Afterwards, Maru dressed the wound with a thick but short bandage that covered it well enough. She carefully pulled the pant leg back down, still frowning. “Do you think you can walk? How is it?” the young scientist asked- or rather, the part time nurse.

“I can walk, but we’ve done a lot of work. Let’s take that food break.” Jade adjusted herself, scooting even further from the opening to the floor below. She took her backpack off and retrieved tons of delicious snacks to eat and share with Maru. There was no argument from the partner, who then sat beside Jade and shyly picked out the food she wanted.

For a little while, the two of them took a well needed break. They ate sandwiches, chips, and had some leftover fruit. For Jade, she snuck in some candy for herself and ate it all since Maru seemed to be the slower eater. In the lull of their break, they chatted about how they were doing, occupations, some thoughts for the future. Maru somewhat urged Jade to speak more; Maru preferred to listen and wanted to learn more about the farmer herself. She was lucky that Jade loved talking- their entire break consisted of airy chats and fun details about previous experiences in exploration.

When their break ended, they went right back to exploring the winding tunnels of the mine. Jade regained enough energy to successfully fend off any flying cave flies, sliced apart some cave bugs, and collected whatever goodies they offered. Maru mention how the insect meat could make good
bait, so Jade ended up collecting some of the bug’s remains in the containers she brought. Gross, but could definitely be useful. Meanwhile, Maru mined out more than enough copper for her projects and found two more pieces of quartz. They spotted a few green slimes onto their final floor, which Jade went after without mercy. She really grew a vendetta against slimes and became much more talented in slicing them apart. Maru decided to let the young farmer vent her frustration, as long as she wasn’t being too careless with swinging the sword.

Finally, they were there. The next floor with an elevator, which at one point seemed so far away. Both of them were fairly tired despite the food break they had. The elevator ahead of them was certainly a heavenly sight. On this floor, there were abandoned minecarts full of coal and old, withered mine tracks. Ominous wind blew through the dark mine shafts, bringing a hollow, lifeless sound to the floor. The jungle-like appearance from the previous floors were barely present here. Something felt off.

Not even water droplets from the stalactites above could be heard. There weren’t any monsters nearby. Panic began to show on Jade’s visage, but Maru didn’t catch the same vibe. She cheerfully followed the iron tracks until she reached a branching path. Jade followed behind her, but glanced all around her in paranoia. She felt like something was watching her.

“Maru... Do you feel that?” Jade asked with a strained voice. Maru peered behind her to see how Jade was doing, but she wasn’t affected.

“No, what are you talking about?” the mining partner asked. She had stored her pickaxe away since she was too tired to mine any more, and she had more than enough to carry around anyway. The elevator, still old yet welcoming, was right at the end of the branching path.

“I...” Jade stammered, trying to put her thoughts into words. Nothing came out right. “... N... Nevermind.” She glanced back to one of the open mine shafts. The young farmer could have sworn she saw a human-shaped shadow.

Both of them stepped into the elevator and sighed aloud when their backs leaned against the metallic lining. “Home, here we go,” Maru sighed. She closed the elevator doors and pressed the button that would send them to the cave entrance.

“... Oh, Yoba,” Jade groaned, coming to a realization. “There is no way I can walk back to my house like this.”

Maru shrugged. “Mom won’t mind if you stay, you know. In fact, she’d probably beg you to.”

The young farmer chuckled, knowing such a statement was true. “Maybe I’ll take a nap and go back home in the night,” she suggested to herself. The elevator dinged when it reached its destination and opened up. The sky was a dim, darkening blue and visibility became limited. “Wow. We were in there all evening.”

“Yup,” the nurse sighed in return. “Mining can take a while. Maybe you should just stay the night, especially with your leg hurt like that. You should let it heal up.” Maru re-adjusted her messenger bag and started for the exit.

“I suppose you’re right,” Jade admitted in defeat.

Even with the temporary struggles the newcomer and the returning mining veteran had, their mining trip was certainly a success. Once they returned to the carpenter shop, they exchanged goods and
came to a proper agreement for pay. After some pleasant conversing and a house call to Robin’s cell phone, Maru wished Jade a good stay at their home. Jade bid her new friend a temporary farewell and decided to stay in the shop section of the house. She watched the evening fade into night from one of the front windows, scanning the silhouettes of the mountainous horizon. Robin would come back soon.
Strange

Chapter Summary

Sebastian feels unresolved tension with him and Jade; Jade has to spend the night at Robin's house

Sebastian didn’t think he would be so bothered by the previous day’s argument with Jade, but it was all he could think about. At first, he was calm. Jade just seemed more concerned, after all. She grinned at the end of their argument and said her normal, silly goodbye, indicating that she felt resolution. As the next day arrived, though, he just woke up and felt... angry. Breakfast didn’t improve his mood, his clients at work were much more frustrating to deal with for the time, and not even searching pictures of fluffy newborn kittens could alleviate his unbridled rage. There was just an incredibly sour mood that he couldn’t shake today; no one was helping, and no one would even care if they knew.

He was finishing up his usual rounds of work when Sam messaged him. Yoba, of all days, of course Sam would decide to pester him.

SAM: hey mama

SAM: pulled a sweet kickflip today

SAM: shoulda seen me, everyone woulda swooned

SEBASTIAN: Not in the mood.

SAM: whoa

SAM: are you ok bro?

SEBASTIAN: Not really.

SAM: want me to come over?

SEBASTIAN: No

SAM: ok then tell me what happened

SEBASTIAN: If you want me to be honest, I don’t really know why I’m not in the mood today.

SAM: now thats bs if i ever read it fam

SAM: is it demetrius again?

SEBASTIAN: No
SAM: uhhhh maru?

SEBASTIAN: Samson.

SAM: WHOA

SAM: you do NOT have to bring out the full names <;/3 ouch

SAM: who the hell pissed you off

SEBASTIAN: Just leave me alone, alright?

SAM: nop

SAM: did you get in a fight with somebody? at least tell me that

SEBASTIAN: I guess.

SAM: ok can you tell me who it is

SEBASTIAN: Mmrrhghhg

SEBASTIAN: I guess Jade’s been getting on my nerves

SAM: whoa really? i was starting to think she was gonna replace me bro : p

SAM: what happened

SEBASTIAN: She just got mad at me yesterday because of some Maru shit

SAM: oh boy

SAM: howd that go

SEBASTIAN: She said that I react too harsh when Maru comes into the conversation and that I act controlling pretty much

SEBASTIAN: I mean, I guess we made up, but I’m still a little bitter about it. She acts like she knows everything that’s going on and that she has it all figured out.

SAM: ah

SAM: well im gonna press the pause button there

SEBASTIAN: I:

SAM: ok by ‘knows everything thats going on’ you mean your whole situation with maru and demetrius right

SAM: the whole messy family situation
SEBASTIAN: Well, yeah.

SAM: ok well

SAM: now you know i get what youre saying

SAM: but what makes you think she thinks that

SEBASTIAN: She was going on about how she gets the whole sibling thing and that it sucks or whatever, the normal speech that pretty much everyone gives. Then of course she goes on to say that Maru hasn’t done anything to ruin us.

SEBASTIAN: Which, by the way, she is currently doing because that’s what this whole ordeal is about.

SAM: ok

SAM: that doesnt sound like a fun talk

SAM: have you talked to jade again

SEBASTIAN: No. She lended me some of her games and said bye our usual way but she’s too busy mining with the gadget queen right now.

SAM: maybe you should talk again if its still bothering you

SAM: i mean what is getting to you the most about this?

SEBASTIAN: I just think Jade is a little full of herself when it comes to these issues.

SEBASTIAN: She thinks she gets it, but she doesn’t.

SAM: maybe you can ask then

SEBASTIAN: What?

SAM: like

SAM: ask how she gets it

SAM: you know were all pretty good friends of jades but i dont think shes ever talked about her life before the valley

SAM: i think she may be sticking her nose where it doesnt belong but there may be a reason she is doing it too

SEBASTIAN: Huh.

SEBASTIAN: For once, you’re actually right.

SAM: my one true moment to shine mama
SEBASTIAN: ... I guess I could talk to her again.

SEBASTIAN: I have noticed how weird she gets with some subjects. She refuses to get a phone and avoids the subject altogether. And then she mentions Alex a little too often. It’s kinda weird.

SAM: *shrugging noises*

SEBASTIAN: Oh come on, you haven’t noticed?

SAM: tbh youre the one looking at her all the time and you talk to her the most

SAM: if i didnt know better id say youd be

SAM: #crushin

SEBASTIAN: Now you’re full of yourself.

SAM: maybe she likes alex

SAM: you jealous? ;^)

SEBASTIAN: I thought we were having a good, serious conversation, and then you bring up ridiculous garbage like this.

SEBASTIAN: Bravo, Samson. Bravo

SAM: HEY

SEBASTIAN: Nope.

SEBASTIAN: Going outside for a smoke now

SEBASTIAN: Done with you

SAM: darn

SAM: just as i was about to confess my undying love 4 u

SEBASTIAN: Oh no, how tragic

SAM: you abuse me

SEBASTIAN: Go kickflip yourself into the sewer k

SAM: only if you promise to do it with me

SAM: feel better!

Okay, Sam was ridiculous but he did always know how to lighten the tension. Sebastian was able to leave his room with a bearable state of mind, keeping Sam’s words (the useful ones, anyway) into consideration. He walked to his usual spot at the lake beside his home. Puffy pink clouds stirred
about in the orange-red sky, various trees gently rustled in the wind... Sebastian took a deep breath and exhaled, taking in the outside air. Perhaps he didn’t like being outside at every waking moment, but he needed the chance to unwind.

The raven-haired man took out a pack of cigarettes from his pants pocket and removed a cigarette. He took out his lighter from a different pocket and lit his cigarette while watching the lake. The process of smoking helped relax Sebastian, but as the moments passed, his mind got carried away with the less relaxing aspects. His mother would complain, he’s well aware of the health effects, yadda yadda... he breathed out a puff of smoke, eyebrow twitching in irritation. The winding down wasn’t going as well as he wanted.

He took another deep breath and trained himself to focus on the environment. If he could not think about everyone’s drama for a few moments, he’d be fine. Just as he finally relaxed, finishing up his cigarette, he saw Maru and Jade resurface from the cave entrance. Sebastian huffed and tossed the bud aside, walking back to the house. He felt talking to Jade would have been a good idea, but he wasn’t in the mood at the time. The basement welcomed the raven-haired man once again and he stayed there until nightfall.

Knock! Knock!

“What?” Sebastian called out.

Instead of answering, the door was knocked upon once more. The young programmer rolled his eyes and stood up from his computer chair to walk over to his door. He opened it, expression completely blanking when he saw Jade standing at the end of the staircase. For some reason, she held her backpack in one arm and some folded clothes in the other. She was wearing a soft blue t-shirt and fuzzy pink pajama pants... and socks? Why was she dressed like that?

“Hey,” Jade casually began, a cheerful smile on her face. “I’m staying the night. I got injured in the mines and I’m tired as all get out. Probably not a good idea to overexert myself.”

Sebastian blinked in confusion. “You got injured?” She seemed fine, from what he could see...

“Yeah!” Jade dropped her backpack and pulled up one of her pant legs to reveal the bandage. The wound was pretty large and the area around it looked fairly bad, but Jade didn’t really seem to react to it. It must have been more precaution than anything, or she was very talented in playing pretend.

“What happened?” he asked.

The young farmer picked up her belongings again and innocently stared up to him. “I can tell you if you’d invite me in,” she proposed.

For a moment, he wondered if she could feel the tension. If that was the case though, why was she acting so friendly? He supposed he could play along for the time being, so he stepped aside to let her in. Jade calmly entered and politely sat down on the couch not far from the entrance of the room. She set all her stuff down and rolled up the pant leg that concealed her injury.

“I have no clue how it happened, but with the marks, Maru said it was probably a duggy.” Jade snorted, entertained. “Cool, huh? Well, okay. Neither of us noticed I was bitten until we were a few floors up. It wasn’t a big deal and didn’t really feel anything... until I got attacked by those slimy bastards!” She bunched up her fists and grunted, ready to unleash a new rant. “We came into this huge area that was just covered with slime, disgusting! And out of nowhere, all of these-
She suddenly paused. Sebastian had his arms crossed, only glancing at her injured leg before looking off again. Jade clicked her tongue and sighed, leaning back onto the couch.

“Okay. What’s wrong? Are you mad at me?” Jade asked. She stared at him until he returned the eye contact.

Sebastian sat at the other end of the couch and watched her, unaffected by the question. “Does it seem like it?” He asked in return, genuinely curious.

“Uh, yes,” Jade deadpanned. “I thought we were cool.” Her exaggerated expressions were nonexistent. She never really looked like herself when her face was so... neutral.

He sighed. Maybe his attitude was unneeded. “We’re fine. Something just bothers me,” Sebastian admitted. “But... I don’t want to interrupt. Finish your story first.”

“No, if you’re bothered, I want to know why. I hope we’re still friends,” Jade pitifully murmured. Sebastian looked to her in shock- was he really acting that detached?

The raven-haired man adjusted himself on the couch and put his elbow on the furniture arm closest to him. He leaned his head in his hand, eyes drooped to look at Jade’s injured leg. “Don’t be stupid. We are friends.”

“Well, you’re acting like you don’t want anything to do with me,” she sadly replied. “If yesterday’s talk bothered you that much, I’m sorry. I probably overstepped some social boundaries.”

Another sigh. “... No, I’m sorry. I’m just not in the best mood right now. But... I do want to continue that talk.”

“Okay... I’m listening, then.” Jade shifted herself to better face Sebastian.

Here goes. “I just want to know what inspired you to give me a lecture.”

“What?”

“The sibling nonsense. About how you know how it is, blah blah.”

Jade huffed, not appreciating the attitude. She could tell he was trying, though. “Did you not know I had an older brother?” she asked in return, attempting to be patient. His face dropped. She probably never thought to tell him, after all. Jade straightened her posture and continued: “That’s how I know. And my brother was a manipulative ass.” The young farmer relaxed- she knew Sebastian just wanted more insight and showed concern in his own special moody way. “I don’t like talking about him. I think I just told Maru about him, since she was very upset about you one day,” she explained.

“Upset about me?” Sebastian repeated in question.

“Remember when you barged into my hospital room despite Maru telling you multiple times to wait?” Jade sighed, subconsciously rubbing both of her arms. “She was upset because you wouldn’t listen to her or give her respect with her job. It sounded like that wasn’t the first time it happened.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. He had forgotten about that. His actions sounded a lot more brash with the way Jade put it...
“You know I think you’re awesome and my go-to nerd for just about everything, but I understood her. Especially as a little sister. I wanted her to know that she wasn’t the only one who went through that stuff.” She lightly smiled. “I’ve been warned a bit about your relationship with Maru, but I just think she’s trying to get to know me more because of my experience. And maybe because she knows we’re good buds.” The smile quickly faded. “... I actually feel a bit sorry for her.”

Sebastian mumbled something under his breath. He wouldn’t dare say it any louder, considering the intimidating look Jade just gave him.

“Yes, I said I feel sorry for her. Get over it,” Jade grunted. “It doesn’t mean you’re treated better than she is.”

“I didn’t say anything,” he offhandedly replied.

She lightly hit his leg. “Like hell you didn’t.” Jade’s smile returned, also relaxing her position on the couch. She quickly glanced at Sebastian’s body language; he was certainly listening but was trying his very best to conceal whatever he was feeling. “I think the biggest thing you should take away from this is that Maru still thinks about you.”

He didn’t respond.

“I think you still think about her, too,” the young farmer quietly concluded.

Sebastian gave her a look. “Yeah, right,” he grumbled. Jade decided to let it go there, but was happy enough with the progress. Baby steps. He didn’t reply to any of her other statements, and instead switched the topic back: “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

The young farmer nodded. “Yeah, now I think only you and Maru know. In all honesty, I’d like to keep it that way.”

“I think you still think about her, too,” the young farmer quietly concluded.

Sebastian gave her a look. “Yeah, right,” he grumbled. Jade decided to let it go there, but was happy enough with the progress. Baby steps. He didn’t reply to any of her other statements, and instead switched the topic back: “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

The young farmer nodded. “Yeah, now I think only you and Maru know. In all honesty, I’d like to keep it that way.”

“Alright, then. That bad?”

“I lived with him before I moved here... I’d be happy knowing I’d never see his face again.” Jade sighed.

“Damn.” Sebastian was quiet for a little while. “What about your parents?” he asked out of curiosity.

Jade’s face showed nothing but melancholy. “That’s another story for another day,” she weakly murmured.

Sebastian went blank, which meant that he was panicking on the inside. “... Sorry.”

Rather than staying depressed, Jade ended up chuckling. Her way of expression was rather odd. “It’s okay, you were just asking. What about you?”

“Me? You mean like... my dad?” Sebastian shrugged. “I was too young to really remember him. I only know pictures and my mom’s stories. It doesn’t really affect me all that much.”

“Ooh! Pictures. I bet you have his hair. I should share pictures of my parents sometime.”

Sebastian snorted at the hair comment, which ended up piquing Jade’s interest.
“Wait. Do you??” Jade asked, almost demanding.

“I’m not answering that.” Sebastian smiled. He became entertained at the sudden frustration surrounding her visage. This was suddenly the best conversation ever. After some temporary bickering and bantering, he chuckled. “Okay, finish your story. Tell me what happened with your leg.”

The young farmer sat up straight with the brightest look on her face. She was officially back to normal, and took no hesitation in continuing the story of her very first mining trip. Sebastian was happy to lean back and listen.

After Jade concluded her epic adventure and proudly showed her ‘battle scar’, Sebastian hatched somewhat of an idea. “Maybe you’ll get your ass kicked less if you had some actual gear,” he started with a tease. He wasn’t wrong, though.

“And how do you propose I get actual gear?” grumbled Jade.

He smiled. “I know you haven’t been to the guild yet. That’s where some good stuff is, however they go only let members buy from them.”

“Okay, how do I become a member?” she asked, growing as impatient as she was excited.

Sebastian picked at his fingernails in a nonchalant manner, pretending guild matters were so trivial. “You need to get invited, either by Marlon or by another member.” He slyly looked to her. Jade wanted nothing more than to punch his ridiculous face right there. She couldn’t help but chuckle, though.

“Okay, so then are you a guild member?” Jade asked with an exaggerated tone, as if she didn’t know the answer.

“Maybe.”

“So... You gonna invite me?” she inquired. No more beating around the bush, especially since he seemed to be getting a kick out of it.

Sebastian shrugged, scanning Jade with suspicion in his gaze. “I dunno, are you really worthy?”

“I am the definition of worthy, Seb.” Jade puffed her chest with confidence and planted her hands at her hips.

He smirked. “Uh huh, sure. I’ll invite you, but they’ll only accept you as a true member if you fulfill a smaller monster eradication goal for them. Which means you’ll have to go to the mines again.”

“Okay? And?” Jade chuckled, unsure of what the catch was.

“And I’ll be going with you.” Sebastian crossed his arms. “Maru obviously didn’t do a good job in the mines.”

The young farmer laughed. “Okay, what makes you think you’ll be a better mining buddy?”

“Maybe because I still go to the mines. Have you even practiced your monster fighting?” Sebastian’s
voice was condescending and he stared down to her like a concerned parent.

“I have a training dummy and I’ve fought with Abby-” Jade was interrupted by Sebastian’s own laughter. “Hey! Rude!” she yelled.

“Okay, I’m going to tell you something that Abby would never say.” The raven-haired man leaned in, his visage clouded in deviousness. “You need to get some real practice with some people who actually have experience. The girl has never even been to the mines!”

“Wh- so?!”

“So, that’s why you keep getting your ass kicked! I need to teach both of you, honestly. Maybe I could open a class.” Sebastian hummed in thought for a moment, but then clicked his tongue in defiance. “Nah. Can’t be bothered.”

“Hey!!” Jade shouted, lips pouting. “If you can teach me, you should.”

“Well, duh,” Sebastian scoffed. “I’m not going to take you to the mines unprepared. We’ll go by the guild later and I’ll share some gear, alright?”

“Alright!” The young farmer was excited for another trip, even if her wound made it apparent she couldn’t take any more chances in the near future. “Okay, Mr.Pro. Do you have any enticing mining stories to get me properly spooked?”

“Oh, several.” Now it was Sebastian’s turn. More of their night was taken away by entertaining stories of ‘professional’ mining ventures. While Maru was ecstatic to collect ores and gems, Sebastian was all about the hidden treasures: swords, axes, tech, armor. Though, from his explanation about the deeper reaches of the mine, he did like a few shiny rocks there and there. With all of his talk, it sounded like he had an unseen artifacts collection. As was his usual way though, he was all tease and no show. Jade pestered him about revealing his spoils from the mines, but he refused to acknowledge even having any. Of course, a mischievous smile was perched on his face.

Since Jade was staying the night, they both decided to eat some late night dinner. Robin and Demetrius were asleep in their room and Maru’s door was shut. Jade slowly came to the realization that there was no actual living room for her to settle in. The biggest open area of the house had to be the carpenter shop, but there were only chairs... Her demeanor became shy and reserved after she and Sebastian finished their nightly meals. His room was the only one with a big couch in which to sleep.

Sebastian noticed and wasn’t really sure how to feel, but he knew he couldn’t argue with his slumbering mother and he definitely wouldn’t kick Jade out when there wasn’t really a good reason. Neither of them spoke of the matter, but Sebastian attempted to comfort her by letting her look at his proud collection of comic books. They sifted through the bookshelf together and gathered a selection of comics to read on the couch. Admittedly, reading the comics was a method used to comfort himself as well. No one has really stayed the night in his room, save for the spiky-haired skater boy known as Sebastian’s best friend. Even so, Sam was more of a free spirit and preferred to roam back home rather than hunkering down somewhere else.

Comic reading worked. For a moment, they forgot the sky was pitch black and the witching hour was upon them. They scanned the comic pages together, murmured some statements, and occasionally got into a discussion. For the most part however, they silently enjoyed the illustrated stories while sitting side by side. As the night progressed, Jade continued to adjust her place on the
couch until she found a comfortable enough position to doze. She was sitting upright, slightly leaning on Sebastian and having her legs stretched to the empty side of the furniture. Her eyelids were too heavy to keep open and she eventually gave in, but so too did her sense of balance. Previously, their arms were touching since Jade had to lean to read the book Sebastian held in his hands. Then her consciousness faded, her head dropping onto his shoulder and her whole body tumbling down to fully stretch across the couch.

Sebastian froze, instantly dropping the comic book from his hands. Jade’s head was on his lap and she was out cold. Just as they were doing well, something like this just... happened. He dropped his sight to look at her in full. Her hair had flayed over some of her face, eyes closed, mouth slightly open. He could swear she quietly snorted with each breath. Poor thing was knocked out... but it was pretty late. Jade probably wasn’t used to being up in the middle of the night.

The raven-haired man averted his eyes, unable to look at her for much longer. He felt a little strange, not only because he was trapped on the couch due to a tiny yet merciless farm girl, but because he... He wasn’t sure he disliked it. Everything about the situation would point to Sebastian being an anxious and uncomfortable mess. Someone in his room? Check. That someone not being Sam? Check. The very same someone invading his private space, staying on his couch, lying directly on his lap? Check, check, check. Jade was a friend of course, but... still, he didn’t let people very close to him. But this- this was oddly comforting, and he wasn’t sure how to feel about that. And she was... cute. Long eyelashes, button nose, round cheeks, pink lips. He hadn’t taken the time to examine at her face like this.

He suddenly scowled and glared across the room in an attempt to distract himself. Sam’s teases must have been getting to him, because that was the only possible conclusion he could come to. That, and he hadn’t had coffee in a while and was possibly hallucinating from drowsiness. Maybe.

Sebastian made a mental note to make fun of Sam less after possibly kicking his ass, at least until he got out of this funk. Pranking in moderation was key, and so was escaping the couch. “… Hey. Jade,” Sebastian muttered in a low whisper, half-hoping she would stir awake. Yeah, there was no way... she didn’t respond in the slightest. He sighed, throwing his head back in defeat- he didn’t really want to disturb her, so he wouldn’t try that again. He wished he was more of an asshole for these scenarios. Sebastian attempted to regain his composure and looked back down at Jade to figure out what to do. With extreme care, Sebastian held Jade up by her head and upper torso, moved himself off of the couch, and slowly laid her back down. She didn’t even move a muscle... Damn. Sebastian was either that careful, or Jade just slept like a log.

What a hassle. Sebastian glanced to the sleeping farmer once more before carefully collecting all the comics they read and placing them on top of the bookshelf. Organizing would come later. He grabbed a throw blanket and an extra pillow from his bed, first placing the pillow under Jade’s head and next spreading the blanket over her body. When that was finished, the raven-haired man just stood there. This whole occurrence frazzled him too much to really be all that tired and his face felt too hot. He sighed to himself again and glanced around his room as he pondered on what to do. His focus went to his personal computer in the corner of the room. Unwinding via the internet sounded like a decent idea.

Oh, Sam. Sebastian forgot that he sort of just left to smoke earlier that evening.

SEBASTIAN: Hey, you on?

SAM: ye
SAM: where you been

SEBASTIAN: Home. Had to deal with stuff after the smoke.

SAM: ooh

SAM: have you had the chance to talk to our farm fam yet

SEBASTIAN: That was the stuff I had to deal with.

SAM: everything good now?

SEBASTIAN: Um... yeah, for the most part. We’re good.

SAM: for the most part

SAM: what happened

SEBASTIAN: Nothing

SAM: i can read u like an open book friend

SAM: what happened

SEBASTIAN: For as far as you know, nothing. What matters is that nothing is in jeopardy.

SAM: omg what did you do

SEBASTIAN: You’ll never know.

SAM: really

SEBASTIAN: Yes. I know you won’t let it go if I tell you.

SAM: omggggghhgh

SAM: guessing game time!!!

SAM: ok well its obvious youre embarrassed so i bet you said something really amazing or she caught you at the perfect moment

SAM: did she walk in on u naked

SEBASTIAN: Yoba, I am not playing this game

SAM: iS THAT A YES

SEBASTIAN: Sure, why not.

SAM: dammit
SAM: ok... did you... confess your undying love for me

SAM: btw love you mama

SEBASTIAN: I hate you.

SAM: so help me i will find out what you did

SAM: detective on the case

Sebastian rolled his eyes. The guessing game would keep Sam occupied for a while, he supposed. Occasionally, he would roll his chair away from the desk to see how Jade was doing. She was lowly mumbling in her sleep, though he couldn’t tell what she was saying. She sounded exhausted and a little annoyed... Interesting, to say the least. He shrugged and returned to the computer.

SAM: everything is good then?

SEBASTIAN: Yup

SEBASTIAN: Just waiting to get tired now

SAM: same

SAM: wanna play a few rounds of team of titans

SEBASTIAN: Ooh sure

Ah, finally. A game that Sebastian wanted to play. He started up a game on his computer and turned its sound off to not disturb Jade from her slumber. A short amount of time passed when Sebastian heard more stirring on the couch. He didn’t notice it too much since his focus was still on the game, but then he heard Jade’s voice. She sounded more distraught than before. Scared, for sure. Sebastian completely lost focus on the game when he heard a terrified whine over from the couch.

“Jade?” He asked, standing up from his chair. She was a shivering lump on the couch, the blanket over her head while being curled up into a ball. “Hey, you okay?”

She was making sounds, but none of them responded to Sebastian. He walked over to get a better look, internally confirming that she was still asleep... but whatever she was experiencing, it was bad. He wasn’t sure if it was a nightmare, or if her wound somehow got worse? There was nothing Sebastian could see, so he was just guessing at this point. Cautiously, he reached his hand for what he assumed was her shoulder.

“Hey, um.” His hand slowly touched her shoulder. Jade suddenly shot up, awake and heavily breathing. The blanket furled down to her waist, her head revealing a mess of hair and eyes full of panic. She nearly shoved Sebastian away, but saw that it was him and pulled back her arms. Her eyes were watery and there were faint streaks of tears down her face. She was... crying?

“S-sorry.” Jade weakly sighed and wiped her eyes. The poor thing was a mess. She glanced all around the room, disoriented. It seemed like she forgot why she was in Sebastian’s room.
“I think you were having a nightmare,” Sebastian muttered. “Are you, uh... You alright?”

She slowly nodded. “Y-yeah. Let me just... Bathroom. Sorry.” The young farmer staggered out of her place on the couch, tossing the blanket back to the cushions before speed walking out of his room. Sebastian watched her leave, expression full of worry. In a few minutes, Jade returned with a washed face and a calmer demeanor. She collapsed back onto the couch and attempted to settle back in the blanket. “I hope I didn’t wake you...”

“Nah. I haven’t slept yet...” Sebastian went quiet. He didn’t really know what to say, but he did want to say something. Anything to make the situation less heavy.

Jade sighed, somewhat relieved. “Oh... Thanks for letting me stay. Sorry again.”

“You don’t have to keep saying sorry. It’s not really a big deal,” the programmer grumbled in response. “… Do you...”

“N-no, no. Just a nightmare. I’ll forget about it.” Jade threw the blanket back over her head. Sebastian saw her cry, so she wanted to make sure he’d never see her face afterwards. That was embarrassing.

Sebastian frowned and thought for a moment. “… I get nightmares too, sometimes.”

“I get nightmares all the time,” Jade pitifully murmured. “I’m tired of them.”

Sebastian ignored his computer and brought his chair to sit beside the couch. “Well, adjusting can take a toll on people.” He sighed, scratching his head. “This is going to sound cheesy as hell, but... I dunno. I’m bad at this. Just... if you need to let off some steam, or whatever... You know.”

Jade giggled a little bit. That was a relieving sign. “I know. Thanks.”

They were quiet for another minute. Sebastian stood up again, looking at his bed and then at his computer with worry. “I guess I’ll head to bed now too.” He went for his bed instead, deciding that he would explain his disappearance to Sam later. He didn’t want to deal with anyone for the time being. “Go to sleep, loser.”

“Okay, you win this time.”

Jade passed out after not even a moment. It was actually surreal how quickly she went to sleep, but at least that meant she was relaxed for the time being... and possibly exhausted. Sebastian took his time getting to sleep, but he faded off without much hassle. He was tired too, in his own way. This night was way too much.

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The next morning was, unfortunately for Sebastian, just as perplexing. He woke up as usual, sleepily peering around his dark room from the edge of his bed. Only his computer and the crack from under his bedroom door shed any sort of light. At first, nothing was different, but then he realized that Jade had spent the night and she was no longer in his room. He sat up and stared over to his couch, noticing a pillow kindly placed upright and a blanket folded into a neat square at the other end. Jade’s backpack was flayed out on the couch, the previous night's stuffed into it along with all the
After cautiously scanning his room again, he got out of bed and ventured over to open his door. Climbing up the basement stairs, he heard chatter from the other end of the house. One of them was his mother and the other was Jade, confirming she was still at the house. There was the light aroma of cooking... no one in the family really cooked breakfast, since they often didn't eat together. Everyone would wake up at different times anyway, so making breakfast for a family of four was pointless.

"Aw, you really didn't have to cook breakfast, hon! But this looks so delicious. How'd you get to be so great at cookin'?" Robin asked who Sebastian assumed was Jade. The carpenter's voice, though kind, was always booming. Anyone could hear her in the house.

"I did, though! All of you are so nice and it saved me a world of pain to just stay here for the night." Jade hummed happily- the sizzling on a frying pan could be heard. Sebastian stood there at the top of the staircase, listening. He didn't want to interrupt their conversation, but was still exceedingly curious. "I hope all of you enjoy this. I saw the food in the fridge and I really couldn't let it go to waste."

Robin laughed and pat the young farmer on the back. "Are you kidding? At this point, it probably would have. You've been keeping me busy! And I love you for it. Ooh, is this finished?" She started picking at some of the food.

Jade chuckled in response. "Yes, you can go ahead and make a plate for yourself. Oh, do you have any eggs? I could probably make some scrambled eggs." 

"Yes!! But don't make any for Sebby. He hates eggs. Uh, I might have something else..." Rustling was heard from the refrigerator. "Oh! Here, I'll help make you some hashbrowns."

"I don't think I've made that before. Help would be appreciated!" Jade beamed. The two went on to chatter and cook in the kitchen, bringing such a cheery, early morning vibe to the home. Sebastian saw Demetrius walk out of his room and to the kitchen. Ugh, that was a good reason to not venture further. Sebastian went back down the stairs, out of sight, but continued to listen. He heard Demetrius's surprise at Jade being there so early in the morning, but the breakfast caused him to respond in a more gracious way. With a kiss to Robin and a pat to Jade, he gathered his food and went to go eat in the lab. Sebastian was sure he had a rolled up newspaper on his way, since that was all he really did in the morning time.

Some more conversing happened between the two ladies, and then it seemed like they were done cooking. Jade left some food out for Maru, but gathered a plate for herself and another for Sebastian. She eagerly trot down the main hallway to go towards the basement, which gave Sebastian the signal to hurry back into the room and pretend he was doing anything but eavesdropping. The door was still open, so Jade walked in without prior invitation.

"Oh, Seb! You're awake. Want some breakfast?" Jade kindly asked. She was dressed in her regular farming clothes- white shirt, green bow, different pair of jeans, the works. He couldn't help but notice a hole on her jeans, which was hilariously located in a similar region to her current injury.

The plates of food she had were similar, but one of them had eggs and the other had hashbrowns. Among the different ingredients were strips of bacon and some buttery biscuits. She put the one with eggs down on the nearest surface, then offering the other plate to Sebastian.
"You made... breakfast?" Sebastian asked, even though he obviously knew the answer. He took the plate and sat down on the empty side of the couch. Jade moved her backpack and grabbed her food before sitting down beside him. He ate the food shamefully quick— as family dinners were gone, so too was really ever getting a decent, home-cooked meal. The only days they would really have decent food was when expiration dates were approaching and they needed to be cooked. On most days, however, Sebastian's meals came from cans or was ordered from the saloon, only rarely preparing anything even remotely similar to the breakfast Jade offered. This food was amazing.

He felt better at his glutton when he noticed Jade was practically devouring her meal. She must've been really hungry, considering the circumstances. "Man, I barely ate anything filling yesterday," she muffled, food still in her mouth. Sebastian paused for a second and shake his head at her. "Too busy getting swole from my pro fighting strats."

The statement caused him to nearly choke on his food since he almost laughed. He swallowed the food in his mouth and grinned to Jade. "Getting your ass kicked is such an interesting strategy. I've never tried it before... what are the results you're expecting?"

"The results are my fists in your pretty face, bastard!" Jade mercilessly shook one of her fists at him, but the other hand was too busy forking food off of her plate to eat.

Sebastian chuckled. "So testy." He continued eating, finishing around the same time Jade did.

"Your mom is the best for letting me cook." Jade lazily slid her back down her seat, the empty plate now residing on her belly. "I'm not much of a cook, but I've been trying to practice a little more since I live in an actual house. I've lived on garbage take-out for like, a year before that."

"Any reason why?" Sebastian asked, taking the breakfast plate to stack onto his.

"Oh, I traveled all around the region. I was homeless, kinda. I mean, I did have a moving truck to sleep in. I'm sure they regret having a one-time fee for use, hehe!" Jade folded her hands on her belly to warm the now void space. Sebastian just stared at her in slight shock.

"Wait... really?" He blinked. "Homeless for a year?" She mentioned living with her brother before. He guessed they had a bad falling out if she preferred to live on the road for a solid year... damn.

"Ayup. Have I not told you that? I swear I told somebody." Jade mumbled in thought for a moment, but then shrugged. "Either way, that's over now. I'm really happy in my home. It feels good to have something that's yours, you know?"

Sebastian smirked. "Now you're just bragging."

"Oh! Sorry!" Jade laughed, though her cheeks flushed in embarrassment. He noticed. "You own plenty of things, though! Like... a sweet-ass computer, which I'm sure you've rigged to impossible levels. And things."

Buttering him up with compliments, huh? Music to such a programmer's ears. "Nah, you're not going to get yourself out of this one," he replied with a smile. "How'd you sleep?"

"Oh, I slept great. Your couch is very comfy. I'm really excited to go home now and—

Jade stopped herself with a horrifically loud gasp.
"My coop!! It's done! Oh Yoba, I can have bunnies now! Bunnies!!" Jade suddenly hopped up. "Holy crap, I gotta go home. I need to do all my farm work and then..." She heavily breathed, shaking in excitement. "Bunnies!" She squealed again. The corner of Sebastian's mouth twitched as he tried to maintain a poker face. Her excitement was really adorable, so it was hard to not smile.

"Damn, take a breath for once." He chuckled and stood up after her. "Bunnies at last, huh?"

"Yes!!" Jade clapped to herself excitedly. "Okay! I gotta go. Thanks for the hangout and sleepover!" She stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around his torso in a huge embrace. This time it was completely on purpose and she would definitely not apologize for invading his space.

As was expected, Sebastian tensed up and froze in place. Jade didn't seem to care, since she was over the moon. She sure did have her high highs and low lows, huh?

The young farmer slowly let him go with a gigantic grin on her face. "I'm gonna get out of your very ruffled bed hair now," she giggled. Before he could really accurately respond, she took up her backpack and zoomed out of the door.

Sebastian stared after, speechless. His face was a solid red, and for a moment, he couldn't breathe. He subconsciously reached one of his hands up to feel his hair. For once, his busy mind was completely and utterly empty.

Strange, indeed.
Rabbits

Chapter Summary

Jade gets some new fluffy friends for the farm and attempts to catch up with some friends.

“I’m sorry, dear...” Marnie stood at the front desk in her store, checking over all the money placed on the counter. It was all Jade had to spend on things that weren’t food. “I can only give you one rabbit with this money. Cows and chickens are cheaper, y’know.”

Jade shook her head and frowned. “I’ve decided I want rabbits. They’ll pay off, and I know how to take care of them. I think I’d be getting in and over my head if I take care of cows and chickens now...”

Marnie sighed. The farmer did have a point. “Rabbits are lower maintenance for sure, but they will take longer to turn a profit. Are you sure you want to get one?”

“Yes,” Jade replied without skipping a beat. “I have a coop just for rabbits, anyway. They’ll be perfect in my farm... And I know it’ll take me a while to get a second rabbit, but it’ll be worth it.”

“Alright, alright...” Marnie collected all the required money and stored it away in her desk. “Come along, dear.” She guided Jade through the right end of the house and came out to Marnie’s ranch. She could only see so much through the fences, but this really was a huge farm. There were several barns with animals of all kinds roaming in and out of the open doors, silos to contain huge collections of animal fodder, and sectioned grassy areas that were groomed to fit for each of the animals’ needs; there was even a mud pit for pigs to relax and cool off. Without a doubt, Marnie’s ranch was heaven for all sorts of farm animals.

They were all so docile, too. Cows minded their own business and chewed in a field of grass, sheep roamed about and grazed, some chickens hopped forward to see what Marnie was doing before going back off and tending to their own business. Not only did she notice the normal cows, sheep, and chickens, but she saw some goats playing with each other, some pigs napping in a mud pond, and ducks floating around in a tiny body of water. All of the animals got along so well together, bringing joy to Jade’s beating heart. The sweetness was almost too much for her to handle.

Marnie walked into one of the barns, Jade following after. There they were. Sweet, fluffy rabbits of all shapes and sizes, hopping about and sniffling with their wiggly little noses. A few of them ventured out the door, but many of them were inside. Marnie guided the young farmer over to a group of excitedly roaming baby rabbits. “Pick your favorite, dear. Any of these four.”

Out of the four rabbits, two were white and tan and the other two were just solid tan. One of each of their variations were playing, one explored the perimeter, and the last one, a gentle white and tan rabbit, quietly sniffed around. Jade leaned down to get a better look at the rabbits, the quiet one curiously hopping over to her. She smiled and allowed the small bunny to sniff her, though she did notice the size. This one was slightly larger than the other ones and very calm.
Jade felt like the chosen one as the rabbit showed serious interest. “Hey, girl,” she softly murmured with an elevated voice. Slowly, the young farmer pet the bunny of interest. A bond had been established already.

“That one?” Marnie asked, smiling. “She’s a sweet one. Good choice.”

“Thank you. I love her already… Wait, do they have names?” Jade asked in return.

“Not yet, dear. Would you like to give this lovely kit a name?”

“Yes. A name…” Jade hummed in thought as she lightly played with her chosen farm animal. “How about… Butterscotch? You have such a pretty color, and I think it is a cute name that suits you,” she giggled.

“Butterscotch it is. I’ll send her home for you along with the fodder you bought-

“GAH!” Jade’s hand was harshly bitten, but not by Butterscotch. Another rabbit had run forward and bit her with its painful front teeth. The kit was smaller than the others, and also not advertised as being on sale- she was a fluffy white and wore jet black spots. Her eyes were full of innocence, but she carried such a deceivingly vicious demeanor.

“Oh, no! You again! Hey! Shoo!” Marnie huffed and tried to get the rabbit to go off, but instead it tried to bite at Marnie and then snuggled under Butterscotch. Butterscotch didn’t really seem to mind and yawned.

“That tiny turd bit me,” Jade pouted, wiping her hands. At least her skin wasn’t broken through, but it still hurt like the dickens. “What was that for, little one?” she sadly whined.

“Aye, I forgot… The spotted kit doesn’t get along with anybody except your Butterscotch. She’s a lot of trouble…” Marnie sighed.

“… Is she a lot of trouble? If you want to give her away, I could take her,” Jade slyly muttered. Marnie’s eyes widened from the proposition. It didn’t sound like too bad of an idea, and the rabbit certainly didn’t have that much of a place in the ranch…

Oh, fine. Marnie gave in. “You know what? If you’re willing to deal with her, I’ll give her to you for free. They’re both females, so you’ll have to buy an extra rabbit if you want to make your own litters. Just promise you’ll take extra good care of these babies.”

“I promise!” Jade beamed. “I’ll treat them to the very best of my abilities!”

The rancher liked the sound of that. “I wish you the best of luck! If you need any advice, I’m always here.” Her face dropped. “Usually.”

The young farmer giggled and returned her focus to the two kits that were soon to be hers. Butterscotch, and… Oh, there wasn’t a name yet. Jade brought her hand to where the spotted rabbit lay and hoped that she would take the opportunity to sniff. The rabbit did seem a little curious, especially with how gently Butterscotch responded. She eventually sniffed Jade’s hand and softly nibbled. When Jade pulled her hand away, she meanly bit again. “Hey!” Jade yelled. “We were getting somewhere. You’re such…” Hm. The black spots and nasty demeanor gave her an idea. “You know what? You’re Plague. That’s your name now. It suits you.”
Marnie chuckled. “Plague? Alright, dear. Well, I’ll send Butterscotch and Plague your way. Don’t forget to go see them when you return to your farm, okay?”

“Of course!” Jade stood up and eagerly bowed to the kind woman. “I won’t be gone all day, I just need to catch up with some people. Thank you so much for helping me, by the way. Is there anything you’d like me to do while I’m in town?” Jade adjusted the backpack that often strapped down both of her shoulders. She didn’t have all of her tools hanging off its end as usual, except for her sword and a disassembled fishing pole for easier carrying.

Marnie thought for a moment. “Hm... well you’ve done errands before. I do have a shopping list I need to take care of... can I get you to go buy some odds and ends for me at the store? Shane is at work today and I have some business to attend to, so...” She scanned the young farmer up and down. It seemed like she was up for the job, anyway.

Jade grinned. “Sure thing! If you have the list and the money, I’ll take it back.”

“You’re so sweet, you know? Robin is so right with what she says. It’s a shame that Lewis is so hard on you.” Marnie began walking out of the barn, Jade following after giving a parting wave to her two new rabbits.

“What? Is he still mad about the Luau, even though there were several ingredients in there and not just mine?” Jade mumbled as they went towards the main section of the house. The rancher went inside with the younger one still following behind. “He hasn’t talked to me at all since the Luau, but I haven’t checked my mail yet. Surely there is a condescending letter within.”

“Pfft,” Marnie snorted, going back to her desk. She pulled out the required amount of money, then took out a notepad and a pen from the desk. “I wouldn’t doubt it, but he really isn’t all that bad. Lewis just cares about his image...” She sighed. “Almost a little too much. That’s one of his downfalls.” She scribbled a list of items to buy from Pierre’s, then handed everything to Jade. “Here you are, sweetie.”

“Thanks,” murmured the young farmer as she stored the money and slip of paper into her pockets. “I’ll come by this evening. I hear you about the Mayor, though. He was really good to me when I first got here, so don’t worry. I’ve been told that he’ll cool off about the Luau anyway.”

“He will, and if he won’t, I’ll get some sense into him.” Marnie replied with a grin. While Robin was certainly the more motherly figure, Marnie gave the feeling of a friendly aunt, or maybe a big sister that could bully people into place. Either way, she was awesome.

Jade chuckled. “Thanks! I’ll see you later.” She waved and left Marnie in order to travel to Pelican Town.

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One thing was for sure: Jade was slacking in keeping up with people. While she felt like she’s been talking to Robin and Sebastian just about every day, she hadn’t really spent any bro-time with Abigail outside of the saloon, or really saw Sam at all since he’s been so occupied with work. Even less frequently were her visits to Alex- she felt like she barely even spoke with him at the Luau. Nightmares were becoming more frequent and he occasionally appeared in them. For her sake, she knew she needed to speak to him more. There was an undeniable comparison she could make to Alex that she wanted to destroy in order to bring peace to herself, and of course create a significant friendship with him as a townsperson. Jade’s first destination was absolutely to the ice cream stand.
across town.

As Jade approached the nifty ice cream business, she noticed Haley leaning her arms at the edge of the stand while talking to Alex. This was the usual place they congregated, Jade supposed. “Hey! Alex!” the young farmer happily shouted, giving an eager wave in his direction. Both Alex and Haley lifted their heads to peer over to Jade, startled and confused. “And Haley, of course. How are you two doing?” she asked as she stood on the other side of the stand. She had no intention to buy any ice cream, no matter how tempting... rabbits cost a fortune.

“Hey, farm girl!” Alex replied back with enthusiasm. Haley ignored her and gave Alex a specific glare before walking away.

“Oh, did I scare her off?” Jade pondered aloud.

“Nah, she was planning to leave. Ice cream?” he asked.

She shook her head and pouted. “No, I have to be good. I don’t have much money on me right now. What have you been up to? I feel like I haven’t seen you in days.” She confidently crossed her arms as she waited for an answer.

“Ah, uh... Well, it’s not a big deal. I haven’t been out and around too much, anyway. I’m fine, though.”

Jade huffed to herself. “Are you sure? You sound a little off,” she mumbled.

Alex suddenly laughed to lighten the tension. “Farm girl, I’m fine! How have you been?”

She decided to ignore it for now. “I’m doing great! I just bought some rabbits for my farm. I got to go on my first official mining trip yesterday, and it was really intense! I have this super cool looking wound on my leg, want to l-” She paused when she noticed Alex’s disgusted expression. “Anyways, it was fun and I learned a lot!”

“Uh huh,” Alex replied. He didn’t seem as cheerful anymore, mostly because he didn’t get it. He didn’t understand why Jade wanted to speak to him, or really wanted to be friends in the first place. It was easy for him to guess that maybe she took his kindness in a different manner.

“Yeah! I was with Maru, and it was so cool. She knew so much about all the critters out and about and we got SO much stuff! I might make some stuff with the ore I got, but I don’t know yet. Have you ever been to the mines?”

“I’m not really a fan of dirty places. Or monsters. I’m surprised you are,” Alex mumbled. He really, truly didn’t get it. They were so different.

Jade chuckled. “Of course I am! The valley is so full of places to explore, and it makes me so eager to explore more. Why didn’t you expect me to like the mines, though? Is it because I’m a female, huh?”

Alex rolled his eyes and scoffed. “Tch, well, maybe! As if a girl wo- Wait. No, I take it back. Because I hate those places, and I am as masculine as it gets.”

Jade laughed. “Ah, beautiful sexism. You can take it down a notch, though. Stereotypes don’t do much good.”
The athlete gave her such a look full of guilt and defense. “I wasn’t stereotyping! It’s just... statistics?” He huffed. “You’re an anomaly, I guess. And I am too, for the clean thing. Maybe.”

“You can stop trying to cover up your boo-boo now, Alex. But, I forgive you. I think it’s better to live by example.” Jade smiled.

She was way too nice... for some reason, it disconcerted Alex. This wasn’t the time or place for this, though. “Okay, different topic. Where are you off to, Jade?”

The young farmer stared up to the sky in an attempt to recall her errands. “Well... I was going to see you since I haven’t in awhile, and then I was going to- dammit!” Jade suddenly sighed, dropping her head. “I was going to crack open the geodes I got from the mine, but I don’t have the money... I guess I’ll have to fish some today so I can have some money for tomorrow. Yeah! Good plan, me... Ahem! Anyways,” Jade started. Despite how Alex was feeling for the time, Jade's monologues were always entertaining. “So, fishing, but- oh! Fishing will be after I go by Pierre’s. I’m running some errands for other townsfolk, and Marnie wants me to go to the store. I like to feel helpful, you know? Especially since my farming duties only really last all morning. I might see Abby, since she lives there. I miss her adorably dumb face.”

“Sounds like you have a full day,” Alex mentioned.

“Yeah! I should probably get going now, then. I hope you’re doing well, Alex... Talk to you later!” Jade cheerfully waved to him as she left for Pierre’s store. He emitted a sigh of relief when she was gone, her bubbly demeanor worrying him even more so.

Haley re-appeared and approached Alex.

“Did you hear all of that?” the athlete asked, concerned.

The blonde nodded. “She’s... something. Yeah, I would probably say she has some sort of... thing with you.”

“Great,” he sarcastically remarked.

“Just drop her. She seems to be bad at taking hints.”

“Well, I mean... she’s nice, but I...” Alex fumbled a bit, scratching his head nervously. “Yeah. Next time we talk, I’ll try.”

“This is why you only dance with me at the Flower Dance,” Haley grumbled. “You get into things like this. But, if you can’t take care of it, then I will.” She frowned and put a consoling hand onto one of his arms. “Alright?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Haley.”

She smiled. “What are friends for?”

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Jade arrived at Pierre’s shop without much hassle, though Marnie’s request list was all over the place. She wanted a few general foods such as bread and cheese, then a bottle of grape wine, human hair
products, horse shampoo, and... truffle oil? The young farmer shrugged. Marnie did say they were just some odds and ends. Regardless, she bought everything that was required of her, albeit with a somewhat condescending look from Pierre. She planned to just leave the store in her own awkward manner, but then she caught Abigail: “Abby! Hey, bro!”

“Jadey! I haven’t seen you in the past few days. Makes me bored! We need to do some more exploring together,” beamed Abigail. To get out of her father’s earshot, Abigail dragged Jade out of the store and into the deeper reaches of their home. For the time being, they just stood in the hallway. “You know, sword fighting and shiz.”

The young farmer chuckled. “Of course! We can’t fight bad guys without some proper practice. And you should come over to the farm sometime. You know you’re always welcome... to entice you even more, I have two bunnies now!”

Abigail loudly gasped. “Bunnies?! HELL yeah!”

Though they only planned to chat for a few minutes, their conversation quickly turned into an hour. Abigail introduced Jade to her room, which was a very cozy area! It had ocean-colored walls with drawings and posters scattered about, bookshelves and display shelves full of plushies and action figures, and a television with a retro video game console. Jade got to meet Abigail’s pet guinea pig, David Jr., and she stayed for just a little while to help Abigail get further with her video game. Apparently *Journey of the Prairie King* had a console version, and Abigail was as horrible as she was in the arcade version. One upside to the console version was that she could save between stages, at least. The novice explorer was improving too... in her own way.

After all of their fun, Jade decided to leave. They bid happy goodbyes and set off to go do their own thing- Abigail to go to the mountain lake for the afternoon, and Jade to return groceries to Marnie and fish in the river until the evening. Marnie felt so thankful for an errand well completed and wished Jade a wonderful rest of her day. Jade didn’t get any pay, but she didn’t want any; she got a second bunny for free, and it was about time for her to repay the townspeople’s’ kindness anyway.

The young farmer hadn’t fished in a while, so she was still at about the same skill level. She was able to catch quite a few fish from the river below Marnie’s ranch, though there were several that got away... one fish seemed especially powerful, and especially annoying. Her fishing pole nearly broke in half, but she had to let it go with lack of choice. She brought a decent haul back to store at the house, keeping a carp for herself to cook. She wasn’t really a fan of fish, but it wouldn’t hurt to try a new recipe. She slaved over the stove for what felt like forever in preparing such a nice meal- no, she still hated fish. Onyx had an extra large meal for that evening. Jade could stick to leftovers.

Finally, she could see her new babies. Butterscotch and Plague: the chosen ones, the lovely baby fluffs. Jade entered her completely finished coop and looked around, absolutely bewildered with just how nice and sturdy it all looked. Robin was amazing at her job, and Jade truly wished she could pay her more. Her two rabbits seemed very cautious of their new home, but they were still happily hopping around and chewing on the food that Marnie brought. Plague wasn’t as ravenous at the end of the day, but only because she was tired. Butterscotch napped and enjoyed the love and attention, as always.

Jade went back to her house for the last time that day. Today was full of productivity and friendly faces, so it was fantastic time spent in her books. After a shower and some cuddles with her then-bloated cat, she fell asleep.

No nightmares that night.
Interesting Developments

Chapter Summary

Sam asks Jade for some help with getting Sebastian to the beach the next day. After a
day full of geode cracking, music, and fishing, she gets the chance.

Chapter Notes

this marks the start of my official schedule, which is on Tuesdays and SOMETIMES
Thursdays. I think once a week for an update is too slow, but I know I won't always be
able to do them twice a week. I'll be updating the fic twice a week when I have a few
written chapters already.

Jade forgot to check her computer the previous day, and what a mistake that was. The poor thing
was beeping all night, though the sound was so quiet from downstairs (and Jade was so tired) that
she didn’t even really notice. Looks like she had some explaining to do:

SAM: hey
SAM: where u at
SAM: speak to me papa
SAM: jADE
SAM: whERE R U
SAM: im dyin g
SAM: *dead*
JADE: omg couldn’t you have just come to my house if you needed me that badly?
JADE: i forgot to check my messages last night, sorry~
SAM: !!!!!!
SAM: hey sexy papa
JADE: what do u want you turd???
SAM: :^)
SAM: jus got some questions for ya

JADE: oh boy

SAM: so uh

SAM: ive been really worried about mama seb you know? like. just totally heartbroken. ever since sunday

SAM: and i feel like you know something that he refuses to tell me because he is just so misunderstood and complex

SAM: *cough* so what was the thing that he didn't tell me

Sebastian didn’t tell Sam about her staying the night? It wasn’t really that big of a deal, Jade thought... it wasn’t like she stayed there with any specific intention, just that it was more convenient. A young woman staying at a young man’s house could seem suspicious, but they live in a modern world. People can get over it.

JADE: lmao

JADE: are you referring to sunday night?

SAM: WHAT HAPPENED

SAM: omg please tell me

SAM: he wONT TELL ME

JADE: well it sounds like i shouldn’t tell you if he won’t!

JADE: i don’t want to say anything behind his back.

SAM: plea se

JADE: ok fine

JADE: just pinky promise you won’t tell anybody.

SAM: *pinky promise*

JADE: *pinky promises* good. ok

JADE: well do you want before or after the extreme heavy makeout sesh

SAM: O:<

JADE: also do you want sfw version or like supreme extra nsfw

JADE: jk there’s just nsfw. lives were changed that night. and maybe a few people died
SAM: dAMMIT

SAM: CANT U JUST TELL ME WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

JADE: when ur older

Jade was giggling to herself. She saw the opportunity and she took it. Sam didn’t believe her for a second, but she wasn’t trying to convince him at all. She loved how easily he could read both her and Sebastian.

SAM: ...

SAM: well thats a good segway into what i also was going to message you for

SAM: sammy boy is becoming one whole year older tomorrow

JADE: aww happy early birthday!!!

SAM: thanks~

JADE: how old are you turning

SAM: 21

JADE: oooh such a fancy age~ hehehe i’m older than you!!

SAM: whaaaat?

JADE: i’m 22

SAM: man everyones older than me

SAM: i think i might be older than abby but i forget

SAM: seb is a frickin grandpa

JADE: wait how old is he??

SAM: like 25

SAM: so basically 80 years old

JADE: oooh! i will remember these ages~

JADE: anyways, continue. :>

SAM: wwwweeelll i am having a little party on the beach. nothing fancy just a good barbeque

SAM: seb abby penny and whoever wants free food are invited. im taking the day off so we will all
gather together around lunch time. eat and have a grand ole time.

SAM: would you like to come?

JADE: um, duh. obviously

SAM: good good

SAM: you dont have to bring anything if you dont want to but i do have an errand for you

JADE: i am ready

SAM: if you havent learned this about seb already then you will

SAM: but he is like allergic to the sunlight + beach

SAM: he hisses at the very orb that provides us the vitamin d and is sure to flip the ocean the bird before going 2 sleep every night

SAM: last year he made some hilariously bad excuses on being unable to come to my party

SAM: and it wasnt the same. half my soul was missin. i didnt have anyone to push off the docks

SAM: not this year

SAM: this time i have you

SAM: i think you can convince him to go to the party

A party, huh? Jade didn’t take the time to think about birthdays, let alone her own. Hers was in the middle of spring. So many birthdays must have passed in the town by then, but at least she could celebrate Sam’s birthday with him and their friends. His request was peculiar, though.

JADE: haha, why me?

SAM: considering how competitive you two are with each other you can probably make it into a contest

SAM: ive never been very competitive and he knows this. it wont work if i do it

SAM: then hes not really all that responsive to abby. probably because she is more chill

SAM: but you got the power

SAM: get his white ass to the beach and he will get in the water with us if its the last thing i do

JADE: omg!!! swimming! i haven’t done that yet!

JADE: i will help you.
JADE: but only for a fee

SAM: what u want

JADE: stop asking about the other night ;>

SAM: there are some things you just cant get me to do j

SAM: papa j

JADE: haha if you want me to be serious, it really isn’t that big of a deal. i don’t know why he doesn’t want to tell you.

SAM: hhrrmnGH

JADE: hm, i’ll tell you what. i’ll ask him myself and tell you what he says, ok?

SAM: fine

SAM: but youll convince him to come to the party right

JADE: yes! let’s push him off the docks together : D

SAM: i love you papa j

JADE: love u too sonny sam

SAM: thats so perfect for me

JADE: lmao, well i need to get my farm work started. i’ll talk to you later. just be sure to let seb know about the party so i’m not springing it on him last minute

SAM: im already on it

SAM: thx < 3

JADE: no prob < 3

Jade hadn’t been to an actual party in a long time, so she wondered what it would be like. This was Sam, so it would definitely be interesting, but none of them were rambunctious high school kids, so it wouldn’t be too interesting. Hm. Even though Sam said he didn’t care about getting gifts, the young farmer still wanted to do something nice. Ever since she moved in, he was always smiling, always elevating the mood. With him around, there was just a lighthearted, cheerful ambiance. He deserved a good gift.

Ah, well. It was something she could think about later. If anything, the birthday present could always come at a different date. She began to notice that was a trend with her... always later, never on the day required. Eventually, she’d have to catch up. With her funds and lack of resources for the time though, she really couldn’t afford to give too much. Jade ventured outside of her home to see what was in the mailbox: her pay for the day, random advertisements, condescending letter from Lewis as was expected, blah blah. Nothing interesting really struck her, but she did need some days to wind
down. If she wasn’t getting herself hurt somehow, she was running all around the valley.

Her bunnies certainly aided her needs to relax. Butterscotch flopped to her side to get some tender love and care, while Plague erratically zoomed all around the coop and kept close tabs on Jade to feed them. She managed to pick Plague up and give her some well needed love too, but she didn’t really seem as interested. After feeding them, she opened the gates in case they wanted to explore outside. The young farmer didn’t think she would have to worry about the bunnies’ tendency to roam, since Onyx developed a habit of being inside during the day and surprisingly had no interest in the rabbits to begin with. As long as he got to rub his fuzzy face against the outer walls of the coop to mark his territory, he was fine with whatever inhabited the inside.

Watering the crops came last, since Jade was just so excited to see her walking fluff balls. Some of the plants were coming close to bearing fruit, but nothing could be harvested for the day. The next day would certainly be a possibility; the blueberries seemed close to ripening, which meant Jade would soon be swimming in a reasonable amount of gold.

When all of that was finished, the young farmer glanced at the pay she received from all of her hard work with fishing. “This is definitely enough to crack open those geodes. I’m unsure if I’ve met the blacksmith dude, but... there’s a first for everything!” Jade grinned to herself and went back to her house to set up backpack up for the day’s travels. Like the previous day, she didn’t plan to do anything intensive, so her backpack wouldn’t have very much. Carrying her sword and fishing pole was a habit at this point, as was leaving a lot of extra room in her backpack in case she could collect something. Might as well put the fishing chest in there if she wanted to take some aquatic prizes back. Even though she had to wait for her crops to mature, at least there was a payoff in the valley’s many resources!

For the first time in a while, Jade had to bring out her map to see where to go. She remembered that Maru spoke of a blacksmith that would crack the geodes open and reveal interesting minerals and artifacts, but the young farmer has never been to the blacksmith’s place. After exiting her farmland, she followed the map to the town square, which then took her further east to the far end of town. She passed by Alex’s ice cream stand, but he wasn’t there yet. Must have been too early in the day. Above and to the right of the ice cream stand was a larger, vibrantly colored building. The wood was painted a deep green and its door to the inside was a solid purple, then two huge wooden pillars held up a mini-roof that provided shade. There was a groove big enough to stand in between the pillars.

Jade peered at her map to see what building that was again-- oh, the museum and library. “My destination should be right above this one,” mumbled the young farmer in concentration. She took a path to the left of the museum and headed towards the upright corner of the town. A very tiny, gloomy house stood in the midst of her path. It was made of dingy gray stone, had depressing brown roof tiles, and the entire home was connected to what appeared to be an ancient furnace. Steel pipes unintentionally decorated the house and equipment was strewn about the whole area- shovels and stones right beside the door and barrels and trash cans on the other end of the home. Consulting the map again, Jade knew this was the blacksmith’s workshop.

She entered the shop and realized that the inside was as industrial and depressing as the outside. The whole shop was just one room, a work desk and register on the left, with an anvil, furnace, and other tools and equipment on the far right. Its floor had smooth (albeit dirty and covered in soot) wooden planks, and the walls were made out of stone brick. Emerging from the back room came a rather large and somewhat familiar man. He was fairly tall and wide, had pale skin, and had ruffled brown hair accompanied by a thick but short beard. He wore a gray sweater under a huge dirt-brown apron that extended down to his knees. His jeans were deep blue and a bit saggy, especially apparent over his black boots. Tools hung out his apron’s pockets, giving him the appearance of being ready to
work, though he seemed surprisingly clean. He must not have done much labor lately, especially evident by the slight frown and somber blue eyes. Jade tried to figure out where she has seen him before, but she was feeling down just looking at him.

“A customer?” the man wondered, nearly shocked.

“H-hello! Yes! You’re the blacksmith, right? Uh...” Jade stammered, trying to remember his name. Nothing came to mind.

“Clint,” he stated. Clint approached his work desk and leaned against its edge. “You’re the farmer... Nice to meet you.”

“Yes! Nice to meet you as well, I’m, uh, Jade. Yeah. Okay, so... I was told that you crack geodes open?” she asked, throwing her backpack off of her shoulders to retrieve the objects in question. Clint waited for her to bring them out, his expression shifting to pleasant surprise when he saw five of them. “Here they are, uh... let me get the money,” she fumbled to get out her current funds.

Without hesitation, Clint accepted the payment and brought the five geodes over to the giant anvil on the other side of the room. Jade watched in fascination as he broke them open with a sledgehammer. The first two geodes didn’t hold anything too groundbreaking- one of them had glops of clay and the other one had copper ore. But the last three were very interesting to Jade: a glittery and lumpy mineral called jagoite, a gorgeous pink and sharded mineral called nekoite, and a green cylindrical fossil that Clint could only identify as a petrified slime.

“... I thought I was going to donate today,” pouted Jade, “But... These are so cool! I am keeping these. Wow. Thank you!” the young farmer beamed. Before the blacksmith could even respond, Jade zoomed out of the door with all of her freshly claimed materials. Her very first treasures of a successful mining trip were here at last! Well, not including the copper ore and a cluster of quartz of course. Details, details. She already started to imagine where to place them in her home; the shelves could certainly use some decorating. A petrified slime sounded so fascinating, too. She would lovingly name it ‘Petrified Bastard’ and revel in the fact that it just became a cute, non-threatening cylinder.

Jade actually didn’t have anything else to do in the day, but her empty pockets were crying for her to fill them with money. Using her map, she found a new path that led to the mountains in which Robin’s shop and home resided. Past the blacksmith’s, there was the indescribably dreadful and out-of-place Joja Mart, a rickety bridge led across the river beside it. Steps led up the cliff side near the community center, which finally revealed the normal path to the carpenter shop. The day was beautiful and she was feeling luckier than usual, so she would give fishing another try.

The unique and welcoming scent of fresh water wafted in the young farmer’s direction as she reached the same ground level as the lake nearby. She made her way over to the spot that she perched herself onto weeks before and glanced out into the water. Clear, beautiful, and just perfect...

Jade saw shadows of fish from the lake floor and noticed schools of low-tier predators swimming about the body of water. Jade planted herself onto the grassy bay and slung her backpack to her side. She dug out her fishing chest and then collected the pieces of her fishing pole to fasten back together.

Jade didn’t pay attention to the passing time, since she was so focused on fishing. Sometimes it felt like half an hour passed before she got a bite, but getting a bite was wonderful regardless. All by her lonesome, she caught a docile carp. It was a great size, though. Hopefully it would bring in some good cash. After storing the carp in the fishing chest, she cast out her line again and patiently waited for another bite.
"Jadey!" called a perky voice. Abigail?

The young farmer turned her head and grinned. What a coincidence that she would be here! "Abby, hey!" Jade exclaimed in return. Abigail was in her regular adventuring gear- teal coat, black pants, awesome boots- but she also carried a tiny black case. Jade thought she felt the bobber of her fishing line move, causing her to stare back out to the lake. While she was wondering what Abigail had in her hand, concentration was key.

"Ooh, I didn't know you fish. Gettin' some good hauls?" asked the ever-so curious Abigail. She wandered over to her fluffy haired friend and dropped to her knees.

"It brings in some money when I'm waiting for farming stuff. I just started fishing, but I got a carp so far," Jade cheerfully explained. Her attention was on Abigail, but her eyes were practically glued to the bobber above the water. "What are you up to?"

Abigail fell back onto her hind, crossed her legs, and then held the black case in her lap. "The fresh air is wonderful. I like to come out here and practice my flute," the young adventurer replied.

"Flute?"

"Mmhm," she went on to explain, then opening the black case. She brought out a nicely crafted flute, the color being a chestnut brown. Abigail lovingly examined her flute and touched the top holes of the instrument out of habit. When the deed was done, she watched the lake with Jade. "Do you mind if I play? I don't have much to talk about, but it is nice to not be alone."

Jade shook her head with such a calm expression on her face. "By all means, please. Hopefully the fish don't mind," she mentioned with a chuckle.

Abigail didn't need any more words. She lifted the mouthpiece of the flute up to her mouth and softly began playing. Though the atmosphere was full of a freshwater aroma, the wind then carried Abigail's bittersweet melody. The choice of music was very unique, but extremely soothing. For Jade, the song recapped a story. Sad notes reminisced the past, but the cheerful notes picked up the pace to a brighter, happier future. An adventure has ended, but another one- a better one- has begun.

She was glad that a fish didn't bite during the song. Her focus had shifted to Abigail's beautiful music, causing her to softly sigh when the song ended. "What piece was that?" asked Jade, completely moved.

"It was beautiful!" Jade beamed. "Wow! I didn't know you played the flute, but you're amazing. It's like the flute was made for you."

"Aw, shucks. Thanks, Jadey." She bashfully scratched her head with a free hand and took a moment to recuperate. "I didn't make the song because of you, but now that we know each other... I dunno, it makes me think of you."

"Yeah?" The young farmer turned her head to Abigail.

"Uh huh," she answered with a nod. "You're so fun and cheerful, but you're also a little sad. I notice
your down periods, sometimes. I used to flop back and forth with my feelings all the time too, but I think I'm finally finding my place. You know?" Abigail laughed again, this time with more dismissal. "I'm not trying to give a lecture or anything. And hey, I may be completely wrong. But... I hope that everything goes well for you. And that you find my place. We're helping each other, yeah?"

"Aw, Abby," Jade replied with a squeaking voice. Abigail was truly too sweet. "That means a lot... Yeah. Sorry, I'm fine. Really. I just have ups and downs, but I try to keep positive. I don't want any of you to worry."

Abigail playfully nudged Jade at the elbow. "Too bad! I'm your bro, your bestie. It's my job to worry about you. If it weren't for you, I'd have a lot more trouble applying myself, too. Actually, I-"

"Whoa!!" Jade was caught off guard when the fishing bobber went under the water. The fishing line was pulled to its fullest extent and the beginner fisherman had to apply all of her focus. Abigail lost her train of thought, though she was just as focused on the fishing as Jade was- it wasn't often she got to see this happen up front!

There were a few minutes of struggle, but Jade did it. She reeled in a rather impressive and colorful fish. Its scales glittered brightly in the sunlight and it appeared to contain an array of colors. "A trout!" Jade exclaimed with eagerness. "It's a rainbow trout. Yes!!" Jade heartily laughed, unhooking the fish to put in the chest.

"Whew... that was intense!" gasped Abigail. "Good money, huh?"

"I sure hope so." Jade sighed and set her fishing pole up for another cast. "What were you saying?"

"Honestly, I kinda forgot. I'll just play another song. Any requests?"

"Whatever your heart desires, gracious master of winds," the young farmer elegantly replied.

Abigail snorted. "You're such a dork." She giggled and held up her flute to begin playing again. For the next couple of hours, Jade fished in the lake while Abigail played her flute on and off. In their resting times, they would speak to each other and joke around. The evening approached quicker than both of them anticipated, so Abigail prepared her leave.

The adventurer gave Jade a friendly pat on the back. "Thanks for being my muse for the day, Jadey," she joked.

Jade nudged back and grinned. "No problem! I should probably be leaving soon, too... I'm getting a little tired," she replied with a yawn. Her yawn caused Abigail to do the same, then earning Jade a condescending glare.

"Dammit, now I'm tired," Abigail laughed. She put her flute back in its case and shut it before standing up. With her free hand, she pat some grass remnants off the back of her legs. Abigail was about to walk away, but then she caught sight of trouble. "What ungodly force dragged you outside?" Abigail teased to an approaching townsperson.

Sebastian stared to her, unamused. He approached them both, hands in his hoodie pocket, and internally questioned why he came outside in the first place. "Hey, you two," he responded, ignoring Abigail’s question.

"Hi, Seb!" Jade greeted along with a wave. "How are you doing today?" she kindly asked.

“I’m also great,” Abigail chimed in. The sentiment caused Jade to smile.

“I’m fine, as well. A little tired... oh! I need to talk to you, Seb. Don’t worry Abby, you can stay here,” Jade stood up and stretched her arms and legs before continuing. “It’s about-

“Sam’s birthday, I know. He’s been harassing me since the beginning of Summer,” the raven-hair grumbled. “And the answer is no. I’m not going.”

“Aw, come on!” Jade begged. “You haven’t even heard my argument yet!”

Abigail covered her mouth with her hand and chuckled as quietly as she could. She simply stood at the sidelines and watched their bickering. Meanwhile, Sebastian removed his hands from his hoodie just to cross his arms. “This’ll be good. What’s your argument?” he inquired. From his expression, he didn’t expect to be convinced.

Jade took a deep breath and stepped closer to the raven-haired man in question. “It’ll be fun!” she began in desperation. She really didn’t think this through.

“It’ll be partly cloudy!”

“Which means it’ll be mostly sunny. No.”

“Waves! Big waves!”

“I don’t swim with people.”

“Everyone will be there...?” Jade's desperation worsened.

“I hate crowds and you know that. Are you convincing me to stay?” Sebastian wasn't impressed by her effort.

“I-I mean... I’ll... I’ll be there! And it’s not the same if you’re not there.”

Sebastian tensed. She was merely stating her thoughts, but the way she said it made him feel odd.

“And... And I’ll kick your ass if you don’t go!” claimed Jade. Her fists were balled up and she stared at him, a passionate flame ignited in her eyes. “So... You’re going!”

He averted his glare. She always gave a certain babydoll look when she was excited- he couldn’t fall under its influence. “So what if I still don’t go?”

Jade grunted as she tried to think of an answer. “Then... then all of us will be really sad! Do it for Sam, he’s your bro. And...” The cogs in her brain were still trying to turn. “And you’ll miss out on how frickin’ cute Abby and I will be in swimsuits! You will be jealous, because that’s how cute we are. Jerk.”

“Hey!” laughed Abigail.
“Shh!” Jade snapped.

Sebastian continued to look away, but his eyebrows were furrowed in anxiousness and his cheeks were lightly flushed. “I don’t really... care about that sort of thing,” he weakly muttered, scratching his neck.

“Then just do it! For us. It'll be the first time I go to the beach with all of us, just having a good time. Sam would love you to come, and me too. The day isn’t complete without you.” Jade clapped her hands together and continued to stare at him. He made the mistake of glancing back. The sad, sparkling babydoll eyes- they were there. “Please.”

He was quiet.

“... Seb?”

He took a deep breath. “... No.”

Abigail continued to snicker as Jade yelled in frustration. The young farmer collapsed to her knees and angrily shook her fists to the sky, cursing Yoba for bestowing upon her such a friend as stubborn as she was. After her dramatic moment, she regained her composure and stood back on her feet. Like a cat, she acted as if the previous events did not happen. “Sebastian,” she bellowed. Her voice was deep and serious.

“What?”

“I’ll... I...” She turned away for a moment, sucking in another deep breath. Her arms trembled with nervousness. Quickly, Jade turned back to face him. “I’ll give you one of my deluxe retro gaming consoles.” Her voice was weak and shrill, but she was determined.

“Sweet Yoba, you’re awfully desperate,” Sebastian commented. He supposed he had enough fun for the time being. “I’ll consider it,” he mumbled.

Jade emitted a hilariously loud gasp. “Really?! You will?”

“... Maybe.”

“Yay!!” The young farmer jumped for joy. A 'maybe' was good enough for her. “Sweet! I did it, Abby!” She excitedly tackled and hugged Abigail, who laughed and dealt with Jade’s rush of movement. They then let go, and Jade gasped again as she recalled another bit of conversation from Sam. “Okay. There’s another thing we need to talk about.” She walked back up to Sebastian and leaned in close to talk lowly. The secretive behavior made Sebastian more nervous than it did with Abigail, who was still enjoying the entertainment of Jade’s reactions.

“What do you want?” Sebastian asked in a whisper.

“Sam was asking me about a few nights ago. Why didn’t you tell him I spent the night?” Jade whispered back.

Sebastian’s expression changed within a split second. He looked terrified. “... It’s... Look. Sam is... He does a thing.”
“He does what?”

“He doesn’t... let things go? I guess? And I know how he is... With... things.” Sebastian covered his mouth for a cough.

Jade tilted her head at her raven-haired friend, confused by the statement. “But it’s not a big deal... Is it?” Jade frowned. “Did something happen? Did I say anything in my sleep?”

“No! No... You’re fine. L-look. I just.” Sebastian breathed with frustration. He hated how he couldn’t properly relay his thoughts. “… Dammit. I’ll talk to him...”

The young farmer sighed and watched his body language. “If it makes you uncomfortable to tell people, you don’t have to... I guess I’m just confused about this whole thing.” Jade stared to him with concern. She felt like there was something she didn’t know about the situation. “Do you think Sam would take it the wrong way? I mean, he’s your best friend.”

Sebastian sighed. “I’ll just do it. Sorry. Sometimes he just takes jokes a bit far.” He wouldn’t hear the end of it from Sam... Sebastian already wasn’t sure what to think about the whole head-in-lap incident, let alone having to deal with Sam’s teases on a daily basis. At least, that was the grueling scenario that played out in his head.

“Just be sure to tell him you don’t want that. Sam’s an idiot, but he loves you and wants you to be happy, you know.”

“Ugh. You make it sound like we’re some couple.”

Jade cackled. “You kinda are. Bromance~”

“Mama Seb!” Abigail shouted. She didn’t hear most of the conversation, but she certainly caught the couple bit.

Sebastian glared to Abigail, unamused. Jade giggled and then pat the side of one of his arms. “If you want me to talk as well, let me know. We’re just friends, it’s not like it was some spontaneous affair. For all they know, I coulda slept in Maru’s room. Or like... on Robin’s desk. Or something.” The young farmer shrugged, though she brightly smiled. She still felt like she was missing something from the conversation, but she wanted to provide Sebastian the confidence he was obviously lacking in their talk.

“I guess,” the exhausted raven-hair mumbled. He still appeared to be extremely flustered. “… Gotta go. Bye,” he murmured, then waved to Abigail as he walked away. Jade watched him go off, still confused and concerned. He probably came out to smoke, but completely forgot after she hassled him.

Abigail waited for Sebastian to return to the carpenter shop before excitedly hopping over to the young farmer. “Okay. What was that about?” she asked with a laugh.

“Oh... After my first mining trip, I stayed at their house since I got hurt. Seb’s acting a little weird, though. I don’t know what’s bothering him,” Jade answered, frowning.

The purple-haired girl shrugged. “Maybe he’s more modest than I give him credit for,” she chuckled. “Man... sometimes I can’t believe I used to have a crush on him.”
“Ooh, what?” Jade’s interest was suddenly piqued.

“Yup. A few years ago, I was all over that. But then things got a little awkward and we kinda stopped being so close... saloon nights were a little weird. I think I might have scared him, but I wasn’t really ready for a relationship, anyway.” Abigail didn’t seem all that bothered to tell her story. Luckily, there didn’t seem to be any drama left to tell. “I’ve been wondering if I even like guys to begin with. It’s hard for me to figure out, especially in such a small town like this, you know?”

“Aw, yeah, there’s only so many people in Pelican Town. I’m sure you’ll figure it out, but there’s really no rush. Love takes time. I’ll be here to help you, though! I’ll be your trusty wingman,” Jade proudly told her friend with a confident puff of her chest.

Abigail chuckled and nodded. “I have no doubt about that at all.” She smiled and examined Jade’s visage. “So... what about you?”

“Huh?”

“Have you liked anybody?” she wondered aloud. “Well, in this town. I know you haven’t been here long, but hey.”

“Haha... What?” Jade nervously laughed. Her voice had elevated and she expressed such a demeanor that Abigail has never seen from her before. “That’s not something I think about, silly... I’m busy! Farm life! Yeah! Wow, it is getting late,” she randomly started, glancing above to peer at the orange sky.

“... Jade.” Abigail stared at her with the flattest expression possible.

“Abigail!” Jade yelled almost a little too loud. “That’s your name. Okay, gotta go, bye!” She effortlessly grabbed up her backpack and didn’t even bother to take her fishing pole apart before snatching it. With the pole and the fishing chest, Jade zoomed out of Abigail’s vicinity.

The young adventurer was pleasantly surprised with Jade’s reaction. “That was a little defensive,” she said to herself with a grin. Abigail cheerfully whistled as she began her short journey back home. What interesting developments.
Beach Episode

Chapter Summary

Sam and his friends meet up at the beach to celebrate his birthday.

Sam's gift from Jade would be a promise for a future gift. She knew it was tacky, but hey, it's all she had. If she wanted to be snobbish, she could have decided to only grace him with her presence! “Hah, present of presence,” Jade snorted aloud. Okay. She decided to stop thinking of ridiculous wordplay.

Today was Sam's birthday! As previously discussed, his friends and a few other townspeople would gather at the beach for a party. It wasn't going to be too busy, Jade felt, but she still mentally prepared herself for a thick crowd. The thought also caused Jade to worry about Sebastian. She wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't going, since he wasn't fond of crowds, but... Sam was his best friend. When the two were together, their bond was very apparent. They were brothers in spirit who have been through everything, and it would be such a shame if Sebastian missed out on something important to Sam.

In a way, it was important to Jade, too. Though she was just trying to convince Sebastian to join them in the previous day’s conversation, there was a smidgen of truth. She really wanted to go to the beach to just have a good time and spend some quality time with her friends. They were only ever together once a week at the saloon, so it was exciting for her to do other activities. Pool competition with Sebastian was entertaining, but she hasn't been to the beach to really swim. After all the times she's visited the beach, she was actually shocked that it took this long to really get in the water.

Enough pondering. Jade finished her farm duties in the early afternoon, sunny sky bringing lots of sweaty work. She had a big blueberry harvest and watered all of her crops, then going to her coop to check on and play with her rabbits. Everything was going well, though all the work tired her out enough for her to crave the feeling of cool ocean water even more. Jade's next destination had to be her house, where she rushed to get out of her farm clothes and put on some actual summer gear.

Her bathing suit was a vivid and cheerful light blue, hilariously being the same color as her raincoat. The top fit around her like any normal bikini would, while the bottom was frilly, translucent, and long, fitting much like a short skirt. Beneath the skirt was the actual 'bathing suit' part, which consisted of very dark shorts. After equipping her bathing suit, she slathered herself with more than enough sunscreen, just to be sure. Despite the hot summer weather and the obvious farmer's tan, she was as pale as a sheet of printing paper. She slipped on a bulky white t-shirt and put on some ankle socks with her favorite red sneakers after the sunscreen was dealt with. Lastly, she tied her gigantic mass of wavy brown hair into a relaxed ponytail. She was finally ready for fun on the beach. The young farmer snatched her backpack full of the usual gear (plus some more sunscreen and beach towels) before departing her beloved farm.

Getting somewhere always seemed longer when she really wanted to go. Though Jade rushed to get to the shore, it took quite a while. When she finally arrived, however, her expression brightened. The travel was worth it.
"Jadey!" called Abigail from a far distance. Jade automatically reacted by turning her head to the source. Abigail was relaxing on a plastic bench that connected to a large and equally plastic picnic table, which was located on the far side of the beach, past Elliott’s cabin. Music played from a portable stereo, colorful balloons suspended from the edges of the table, and there was quite the group of people filling the area. Middle-aged adults stood in tight circles as they ate barbecue, including Jodi, Caroline, Robin, and Marnie- Sam’s birthday seemed to be a good excuse to relax on the beach during lunch break. Gus was grilling various foods on a shiny red grill while Pam greedily watched from a close proximity, and Vincent and Jas played in the shallows of the shore, splashing and chasing each other under parent supervision. The main group of folks Jade concerned were the young adults her age; for the time, she saw Sam and Abigail chatting alongside Penny and Maru. The young farmer felt a childlike giddiness from seeing everyone together, but was slightly disappointed with the lack of Sebastian.

Jade waved back to the group while making her way over. She crossed the bridge past Elliott’s cabin and crossed some rocky, coral-scattered patches of ground before reaching the smooth, sandy shoreline. As she approached, she noticed that the four young adults wore their swimsuits; Penny wore a vibrant green one-piece, Maru a fuschia two-piece, and Abigail a purple bikini with colorful cartoon skulls printed on the material. Sam had on boxers that went to his knees, though they were sagging- he appeared to have gone into the water previously, as did Abigail. She was sitting on a multicolored beach towel and the end of her trailing purple hair was damp. Both Maru and Penny were dry, but they were also stuffing their faces with food. Penny had eaten a rack of ribs and Maru was still eating a juicy cheeseburger. Jade realized how much she was starving.

"Hey guys!" shouted Jade in return. “And a happy birthday to you, Sam!”

“Hey! Thanks,” grinned Sam. “Almost thought you wouldn’t come. All of the old peeps are eating and will leave soon, so it’ll just be us. Mom just likes to make parties, especially since it makes a good excuse for the whole family to be together, you know?” He glanced over to his mother, and then at Vincent playing where the water hit the shore. “Well, almost everyone. Maybe dad will be here next year... But hey.”

The young farmer nodded. “Sounds good with me. This food looks delicious, but I’m unsure if I wanna eat first and wait to get in the water, or just belly flop into the ocean without a care in the world.”

“Live on the edge!” Abigail chuckled. “Do both.”

Maru nodded in agreement while chewing her food. “This food is so worth risking cramps for,” she muffled with contentment.

Penny giggled as she watched her friend. “Isn’t that just a myth?” she asked. Everyone shrugged in response.

“It’s a myth I ain’t following,” Sam confidently replied as he turned to look at the food on the table. Jade also took some time to examine the goods: half of a birthday cake, ice cream and various drinks shielded in a cooler, burgers, hot dogs, salty potato chips, and pork ribs that were completely picked clean. Sam reached for a handful of potato chips and began eating them while relaxing with his friends. Gus finished the last batch of food on the grill and delivered another fresh rack of ribs. Nearly everyone hounded the picnic table and grabbed another plate. Jade quickly took her chance and started to take a little bit of everything.

Jodi noticed the young farmer after she approached the table. “Hello, Jade!” she kindly greeted. The
poor woman looked exhausted, but the food and getting some time with her own friends seemed to improve her mood for the day. She had the same ponytail hairdo as usual, though today she wore a white spaghetti-strapped top and denim capris. She had a long-sleeve pink plaid shirt tied around her waist. “It’s nice to see you. Sam was excited for you to come,” she remarked with a smile.

“Oh, thank you! I’m happy I could come,” Jade replied with cheer. “I haven’t been to a birthday party in ages. I feel like a little kid, but in the absolute best way.”

Jodi chuckled as she watched Jade collect her food. “That’s good. I do these for Sam, but I think it helps to have Vincent around, too. It’s a good break for me, as well.” She sighed. “If it weren’t for the calendar in front of Pierre’s, people wouldn’t even know most birthdays. No one ever celebrates anything, which can be depressing. That boy Alex had a birthday last week but no one heard anything about it. Shame.”

“Wh-...Really?” Jade stared in shock, not knowing Alex’s birthday had already passed. She felt like she needed to do something, then... especially if no one really wished him a happy birthday. She noticed how he only really hung around Haley, and no one else. The thought saddened her.

“Yep, poor thing. Not my kid, though, so eh... Enjoy the party and feel free to stay for Sam, okay?” Jodi concluded in a sweet, mom-like voice. Apparently all the mothers had that certain lull in their tone, but Jade liked hearing it. She waved as Jodi left and finished getting all her food, trying not to let Alex bother her. Robin was too busy stuffing her face to talk to Jade, but she still managed to get in a high five for a hello before Jade left to join the group again.

Jade started eating and listened to the chatter of the blond and his gal pals. Despite whatever hilarious topic they were discussing, Jade’s mind drifted back to Sebastian. Maru and Robin were there, but not him. It was just... stupid. “Hey Maru,” Jade piped up when they were at a slow point in their talk.

Maru brought her attention to Jade with a gentle expression on her face. “Yes?”

“I see you and your mom here... did Seb just say he’s not coming?” Jade gloomily asked.

The four of them changed in demeanor when she brought Sebastian into the talk. Sam quickly tried to shift his body language to emanate positive feelings. “Hey, don’t sweat it, Jade. You failed your mission, but it was kinda impossible to begin with,” he laughed.

The young scientist shrugged as she finished up her cheeseburger. “Mom was knocking on his door and saying we were leaving for the beach, but he didn’t even answer. We just assumed he was still sleeping or something, but knowing I was going probably didn’t help.”

“Nah, it’s not your fault, Maru,” Jade answered. “It does make me sad, though. I would have liked all of us to be here, especially since moments like this feel so rare.” The young farmer pouted as she began eating a slice of birthday cake.

“It definitely is rare,” Penny repeated in agreement. “I am glad we still get to do this. I was a little scared it was going to rain...”

Jade hummed as a sign she was listening while chewing her food. “I thought I had him. Abby was there! Abby, how close was I?”

“You had me pretty damn convinced,” laughed Abigail.
“Chillax, chillax. I talked to him last night and I had a big feeling he wasn’t coming. He said he might, but meh, I doubt it. It’s okay, though!” Sam chimed in, a kind expression on his face. He had a mature older brother vibe, which wasn’t something that appeared very often with him. Sam’s expression immediately changed when his vivid green eyes pointed in Jade’s direction. His mouth formed into a smirk. He looked sly, and... threatening. Jade gulped, unsure of how to feel about his stare.

“W-well... it still sucks,” the young farmer weakly muttered. She pouted less when the food brightened her mood and filled her stomach. Gus was truly the best of the best with meals.

Abigail stared at both Sam and Jade, puffing her torso in pride. “I’ll say that he steals you two all the damn time. Now’s my chance to make my way into the number one spot,” she joked. Jade smiled and lightly shoved her.

“All of you are my number one spot,” replied Jade. “Sorry for sulking, heheh. Let’s just try to enjoy ourselves.”

Just as Sam predicted, nearly everyone left after everyone’s stomachs were filled. All the cooking equipment was packed up, leftovers shared, and table folded and toted away. In the late day, only the five young adults remained to enjoy the beach among themselves. All of them chatted and had fun conversations full of silly jokes and banter, which then led to the moment Jade has been waiting for: swimming!

There were wooden docks that extended outward from the furthest side of the beach, except this path was straightforward and much smaller compared to the docks on the other side. After Jade removed her socks, shoes, and shirt, she ran out onto the pier docks with the other four and stopped at a large platform that marked its edge. They all stared out into the beautiful ocean horizon, waves gently rolling. There were clouds scattered about the sky, but the day was still so bright and shining that it didn’t even matter.

Sam stepped up to Jade and clamped a hand on her shoulder. “Look at that, Papa. The ocean looks and sounds amazing, doesn’t it? You don’t get this in the city,” he wistfully sighed.

“Yeah... it’s so nice. I’m falling in love with the valley. Nature really is wonderful.” Jade didn’t mind to sound so cheesy, though she didn’t really care. The scenery brought a calmness she needed. Hearing the tumbling waves, seagulls calling out to each other. Maru and Penny sat on the edge of the pier and let the water swallow their feet, while Abigail stretched her arms on the other side of the pier to fully feel the wind in her hair. All of them were listening to Sam and Jade while winding down from all the previous commotion. “Have you had a good birthday?” Jade asked, lifting her head to look at Sam.

He nodded. “Can’t complain at all. I love you guys. Though... I am a little bummed about something.”

“What is it?” asked Jade, frowning. “Seb?” she guessed. That’s why she was bummed, anyway.

The blond chuckled. “Strangely enough, no. I’m kinda used to that. What really bums me though, is that I didn’t get what I wanted this year.”

Abigail was quietly snickering to herself, trying her best to prevent Jade from hearing. Penny glanced over at her, then to Sam. She seemed a little grumpy, but said nothing. The young farmer stared back out to the horizon, much gloomier this time. “You didn’t get what you wanted? What’s that?”
Sam slid his hand down to Jade’s back, right in between her shoulder blades. “Oh, just…” He roughly shoved her off of the docks. “Your suffering!! Ahaha!!”

“SAM!” screamed Jade as she tipped off of the docks and into the water. There was a huge sploosh! of water that splattered around him and Maru and Penny.

“Sam, you know better!” scolded Penny, huffing as she flicked some stray water off of her. Sam broke out into a cackle and started tearing up from laughter.

“Her face! Ahahaha! That was... Oh, man! Golden!” Sam squawked in delight. Abigail walked over curiously, concern shrouding her visage.

“Dude. She hasn’t come out from under the water yet,” Abigail muttered.

Sam suddenly stopped laughing. “... I didn’t push her too hard, did I?”

Hands latched around Sam’s legs, quickly followed by Jade’s upper half springing out of the water. “Suck it, Sam!” she yelled, mercilessly tripping him and dragging him into the ocean. With a laugh-filled squeal, Sam had been thrown underwater as well. It all happened so fast, so the three remaining ladies watched in shock. As the two emerged from the water and started to wrestle, however, they relaxed and started to laugh.

“Come on in!” Jade beamed. “Water’s great!”

Abigail didn’t need to be told twice. She plugged her nose and cannonballed off the pier, even more water cascading onto Maru and Penny. The remaining two looked at each other with shrugs - they had been splashed enough already - and jumped in after.

Swimming, playfighting, and even more vicious banter occupied the rest of their day. None of them realized how long they stayed out in the water or really how much time passed, but the sky slightly dimmed as the sun was getting close to its daily departure.

“Man, not too long now and we’ll have to get out of the water. Sharks really love leg dragging jerkfaces,” Sam remarked, giving a sly glance to Jade.

She cackled and splashed some water at him. “I think they’re more attracted to back pushing jerkwads.”

“Uuugh, can you two talk about things that aren’t sharks? I’d swim out of here but you two can be my meat shields,” Abigail grumbled, carefully watching the water all around her. There was no real reason for her to worry since the ocean was so clear and sharks of the Gem Sea were so docile to begin with, but hey, she could do what she wanted.

Penny started with a chuckle, then broke out into a yawn. “I am getting pretty tired,” she added. “I think I might head out soon. What about you, Maru?’’

“Heh, yeah. Today was a lot of fun though. I think we all needed a break,” Maru replied. She stretched and let the lowly swelling waves carry her around. In her relaxing, she glanced out onto the shore. Her eyes widened at what she saw. “Wait, is that...?’’

“Holy Yoba! Seb!!” Jade yelled happily, flailing and waving. He walked onto the sandy region of
the shore while carrying a portable beach chair. He unfolded it, stabbed an umbrella beside the chair
to shade, and finally sat down with a book in hand, not even paying attention to the others. The
beach chair was far away from the water, and from how he was dressed, he had no intention of
getting wet. “What the- are you wearing your hoodie still, you nerd?!”

Sebastian was indeed wearing his hoodie. At least he had the decency to wear shorts, though they
weren’t of the swimming variety and were just as dark as his hoodie. He had his black shoes on as
usual and crossed his legs as he got comfortable in the chair. Despite his non-answering, he did hear
Jade’s yelling (as anybody could). He stared her dead in the eyes and rolled up his hoodie sleeves
while sporting a sarcastic, exceedingly punchable expression.

The young farmer took no hesitation in swimming onto the shore. “Hey!” she beamed, first going
over to her backpack to take out her beach towel. She dried herself off some and wrapped the towel
around her shoulders, then waddling over to the already reading Sebastian. “I’m really happy you
came! Granted, you’re here really late, but...”

“Eh, I got done with work,” he boredly replied.

“That’s good! You should go say happy birthday to Sam. I’m sure he’s so relieved to know you’re
here... ugh, why are you dressed like that, though? You can’t swim in that!” Jade huffed.

“Exactly.” Sebastian placed a finger where he stopped reading and lifted his head to look at Jade. “I
already told you. I don’t swim with people... And I’ll talk to Sam when he comes to shore.”

The young farmer didn’t really want to have that kind of banter, so she decided to not pester him
further. “Aw, alright... Well, I had a lot of fun. The food was good, too. I’m sure Robin got some of
the leftovers, so you can have some.” She plopped down beside the chair and watched the remainingour swim around in the ocean. It looked like Sam and Abigail were busy dunking each other and
yelling. Their playfighting caused Jade to giggle.

Sebastian glanced at Jade, who was content sitting there, then glanced back out to the ocean. He
watched them for a while and enjoyed the quiet from such a distance. For many moments, he forgot
he had a book to read. Jade was right about everyone being together... it was nice.

Maru and Penny reached the shore, both getting their towels and chatting to each other. After a few
minutes, Maru called out to everyone: “Hey! We’re going home, see you later!”

“Happy birthday again, Sam!” Penny kindly called out after.

Sam, Abigail, and Jade all waved and yelled their farewells to the two ladies. They grabbed their
stuff and walked away. Maru made the effort to wave to Sebastian as well, which he acknowledged
with slightly raising his hand. Bland, but it was more than what he would usually do. Jade’s eyes
sparkled at their interaction; she was very proud of both of them.

The remaining two eventually got out of the water and dried themselves to join Jade and Sebastian.
Orange began to mix with the cerulean blue in the sky as the sun started to set. Seems like a day well
spent.

“Finally decided to join, eh? You miss me that much?” laughed Sam. He spread out his towel and sat
on the other side of Sebastian’s chair, while Abigail laid hers out near Jade and flopped across it.

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Sebastian smirked. “Happy birthday, man.”
“Thanks! This was a pretty damn good birthday, if I do say so myself. Even if none of you got me presents,” he jokingly huffed.

Jade whined, hugging her knees. “Hey! I’ll get something when I have the money,” she pouted. “I harvested a ton of blueberries today so I’ll just have to find a good store. Or order online, maybe.”

Sam chuckled and shook his head. “I’m just joking. I really don’t care.” He sighed wistfully and clapped his hands together. He dumbly smiled and fluttered his eyelashes. “In any case... friendship is the greatest gift of all!” he swooned in a high-pitched voice. Both Abigail and Jade laughed, while Sebastian pushed the blond with his foot.

Since their friend arrived so late, the four of them stayed for a couple more hours on the beach. They mostly talked, watched the sunset, then pointed out stars as they slowly revealed themselves in the sky. The tide started to come in and allowed Sam to joke about shark fins he saw in the water. Everyone had fun, and even Sebastian warmed up to their location and sprouted more conversation. The night concluded wonderfully with everyone together. Jade felt like she wouldn’t forget it.

The young farmer put her large white t-shirt back on and walked off the beach with her closest friends. Sam and Jade were separated from Sebastian and Abigail as their paths diverged, but they all said their proper goodbyes. Sam was next, and then Jade was left alone to go to Cindersap Forest and get to her farm. She didn’t mind the quiet, and the night was truly beautiful. Fireflies were extremely active at this time of night and glittered her path back home.

Before she went back to her house, she checked on her sweet little rabbits in their coop. Butterscotch was stretched out, sleeping, while Plague snoozed under her and twitched her leg every once in a while. Jade felt so relieved to know they were doing well. Without disturbing them, she shut the gate that allowed them outside and then left them be. Jade stepped onto her porch and nearly opened her door, but froze. Something didn’t feel right.

She glanced behind her shoulders to survey her farm. Nothing was there, not even slimes, but... She still felt like someone was watching her. It was the same feeling she had when she was in the mines before... just that feeling of something lurking in the shadows.

She didn’t see anything.

“Jade, you really need some sleep,” she mumbled to herself. She opened the door, jumping back with a gasp when her cat zoomed out through the opening. “Gah! Onyx! You nearly gave me a heart attack,” she desperately breathed. She really needed some sleep then. Onyx hopped back onto the porch and mewed, rubbing his side and tail against the young farmer’s leg. She leaned down to give him some loving pets before he then took off to go do his regular cat business.

Jade didn’t like the idea of letting Onyx stay outside while she felt this way, but... maybe it was just her imagination. She walked inside, showered, and started to watch a movie before she passed out in mere minutes. The day finally ended.
A late birthday gift from Jade causes Alex to finally confront her all-too-friendly behavior.

A new day arose and Jade woke up with her merciless alarm clock. She couldn’t complain since she slept fairly well and had a dreamless night, or at least had a dream she couldn’t remember. Sunlight happily shined through the windows of her lonely room, signifying another clear day. Lack of rain was rather nice, but an unfortunate side effect was that the temperature was so high. Jade soon felt an aching that she couldn’t explain- not until she stepped into her bathroom and gazed into her mirror.

Sunburn. Great. Despite her attempts to be so prepared at the beach, her pale self managed to burn to a crisp. Jade sighed and lightly touched her red cheeks, then pulled her shirt back to examine her red shoulders. Well, she knew it could have always been worse. After her shower for the day, she tried to treat her burns with aloe and dressed in extremely comfortable, non-irritating clothing. Despite the hot weather, she protected her arms with a white long-sleeved shirt and decided to be the farmer among farmers with a nifty pair of overalls. She wore her normal brown boots as usual and never left the house without her choker and emerald necklace. They looked tackier with the long sleeves and overalls, but hey, it still worked. To protect her head and face, Jade fished a straw hat out from her closet. For extra cuteness, she pinned her normal green bunny bow onto the base of the hat. Now she looked like a real farmer!

The official farmer had more to do than to look classy. Thanks to the commotion Sam made on her computer a few days ago, she made it more of a habit to check her computer upstairs... Oh, good. No new messages, though she did forget to close her conversations from the previous night. She sat down to re-read her bantering with Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN: Yo where’s that console you promised, loser

JADE: you didn’t say anything about it at the beach!!

JADE: i assumed the pure power of ~FRIENDSHIP~ brought you there

SEBASTIAN: Well, I mean. It did

SEBASTIAN: However, I am not one to reject such generous offers

JADE: offer’s over, chump!

SEBASTIAN: So harsh

SEBASTIAN: Who made you so mean??

JADE: you~
SEBASTIAN: Oh

SEBASTIAN: Yeah, that sounds about right.

JADE: you can come play though

JADE: you need to meet my bunnies!

SEBASTIAN: Oh yeah. What are their names?

JADE: butterscotch and plague

JADE: you'll love plague

SEBASTIAN: I bet she’s an asshole

JADE: that’s why you’ll love her!

JADE: so come visit for bunnies and games

SEBASTIAN: Sure thing

JADE: honestly you don’t even have to announce when to come over.you can come by whenever.
i’m usually home after the sun sets

JADE: just be sure to knock and let me know you’re not a burglar

SEBASTIAN: Ah, Jade.

SEBASTIAN: Jade, Jade, Jade. So naive. So innocent.

SEBASTIAN: There is so much you do not know about me.

SEBASTIAN: I have burgled the entire countryside. No one is safe.

SEBASTIAN: Not even... bunny ranchers

JADE: excuse me did you just type the word ‘burgled’

And so on and so forth. She giggled throughout the conversation, reliving the various jokes, banter, and occasional discussion. With their talk, she hoped Sebastian would take her up on her offer and visit whenever he wanted. Jade realized that she went all around town, but there were very few times anyone ever went to her farm willingly. Looking around her house, it really was lonely. It was just asking to be occupied by friends and good memories. She wanted her house to be a place for everyone to spend time together, much like the previous day’s little beach party. Maybe Maru and Penny could come, too. Penny was always wonderful company, and Jade wanted nothing more than to mend the ongoing feud between Sebastian and his half-sister. The young farmer daydreamed at her computer desk, imagining all the potential scenarios.

Finally, she got up to go eat a quick breakfast and start up her farm duties. A good portion of her
morning was spent watering plants, harvesting a lot of corn and tomatoes, and feeding her rabbits. Reminiscing about the fun she had yesterday reminded her of what Jodi stated... Alex’s birthday passed already. While she sat and rubbed baby Butterscotch’s stomach, she frowned.

To hear that Alex never celebrated his birthday, or at least never had the chance to, was so heartbreaking for farmer Jade. She missed the occurrence nearly a week ago, but no one told her—not even Alex, and she was pretty sure she had seen him a few times before the actual day. Though she had no idea what to give as a gift, she still wanted to bring him some acknowledgement. She had to spend her birthday without anyone as well, since she was on the road. While she did enjoy spending time by herself, feeling lonely has always been an entirely different matter. Maybe his birthday passed, but hopefully she could make things right.

Jade opened the barn gates for the rabbits to roam freely in the field, then stared around as she thought of what to do. Evelyn brought her cookies before and she seemed to be a fan of home-cooked meals... Jade didn’t really have the time to cook anything, but she did harvest all those crops earlier... Hm. The young farmer ventured over to her shipping bin to examine all her pulls for the day. She normally had everything separated and in bunches so the collecting could be done in an easy manner. Maybe Alex wouldn’t mind having some corn? It was more of a family present than one just for him, but... hey, a gift is a gift. Jade took an ear of corn and closed the shipping bin. She supposed it was better than nothing, and hey... maybe he would appreciate it.

After all of her farming duties concluded, Jade packed her usual tools along with her gift of corn and left for the beach first. Alex was always out practicing gridball at the time, and she hadn’t played with him in a little while anyway. It was a good idea to visit.

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Jade surveyed the whole area after she made it to the beach. Ugh, the sunlight was still as harsh as ever. She mumbled a prayer to Yoba under her breath to send some rain her way. At least Haley wasn’t there... she wanted only good vibes, and she had a feeling that Haley wasn’t the biggest fan of hers. Alex was there as he often was, however- playing catch by himself with a gridball, as was his daily routine.

“Alex!” Jade shouted, distracting him for just a moment.

“Hey, farm girl,” Alex called back. He suddenly looked nervous. “What’re you up to, huh? And what’s with the getup?”

Jade waved in excited greeting and quickly trot up to him for an official hello. “Hey, Alex!” She dropped her sight to examine her clothes. “Haha, figured I’d look like a real farmer today. I got sunburnt pretty badly yesterday. But!!” She slung her backpack off of her shoulders and took out the ear of corn. “For you!” she offered. “Well, you and your family. I thought you could make a good meal out of it, especially since you like eating healthy.”

“Aww, what’s the occasion?” Alex asked almost shyly. He caught his gridball and lightly tossed it aside to focus on Jade.

“The occasion?” Jade snorted through her nostrils. “I missed your birthday last week! Take this as a placeholder, until I get a real present. Though, I did grow this all by myself, so it has that going for it. Nice, huh?”

Alex’s cheeks flushed and kindly accepted the gift. “I, uh, didn’t know anyone else knew about my
birthday.” He sighed, but with a smile. “Thanks, I’m impressed.” His smile soon faded, and Jade felt like he was more depressed than impressed. “Um... I should talk to you about something. Follow me,” Alex muttered. The athlete’s face was sweaty, but it didn’t seem to be from working out. He was... anxious.

Jade tried to ignore the behavior for the time being and followed Alex; he walked up to the docks past Willy’s shop and sat down at the edge. Jade plopped beside him and glanced at him before staring out at the ocean horizon. It was just as beautiful as it was the previous day and Jade enjoyed the sounds and smells of the ocean, but the silence between her and Alex was awkward and uncomfortable. She couldn’t tell what was wrong.

“... Hey, farm girl.”

“Hmm?” Jade looked to him.

“You know I don’t really celebrate my birthday much, right?” he asked.

She nodded. “I still wanted to say something. It made me really sad to know you don’t do much and I felt bad for not letting you know on the actual day, so I thought you would like it.”

Alex sighed. “I do, but...” He put the ear of corn down beside him and stared to her with extreme concern. “Why me?”

“Why you?” Jade tilted her head in thought. “Well, I thought we were good friends. We are, aren’t we?”

He was silent for a moment, eyes locked onto the watery horizon. He eventually took a deep breath and fully turned to her. The silence was unbearable to her at this time, but she tried her best to be patient. Jade slowly turned her head towards him, frowning when she saw his expression. “... Are we not?” she asked again.

The athlete thread his fingers through his hair and sighed. “In one way, we are,” he began. “Jade... This is pretty hard for me to say, but uh... you don’t... like me, do you?”

“Like you?” the young farmer repeated, confused.

“You know what I mean. Having feelings for me. Wanting to be my girlfriend.” He averted his eyes in shame, not wanting to face her as he came out with it.

Jade stared to him in surprise for a little while, the concern on her visage increasing. “Um... Does it seem like I do?” she asked.

“Sometimes, yeah.” He propped up one of his legs on the docks and leaned an elbow on his knee. “You’re sometimes too nice to me, and I get really concerned, because when I call you cute and flirt or whatever, it’s all... you know.... just air, I’m just giving compliments. I mean... you really are cute, but I don’t...”

Jade was quiet for a moment, but then she let out a soft chuckle. “Alex, stop. It’s okay.” She sighed in relief and then chuckled some more. “I’m sorry that I came across like that. I don’t have feelings for you, I promise.”

He sighed in relief as well. “That’s good... Because, I do like you, but just as a friend. I don’t have
many of those, which is crazy, right? Me, no friends? Pfft.” Alex was trying to lighten up the situation, but Jade felt like he was being a little serious in his statements. It caused her to giggle again. “I mean to say is, it’s nice that you talk to me. You’re weird, but in an entertaining way. I just... don’t want it to be more than that,” he sighed.

“Don’t worry, I feel the same about you. Well, maybe not as a friend,” Jade began. She propped up both of her legs and hugged them, staring back out to sea. “Admittedly, I was a little too excited to befriend you. But that’s because you... you’re like a brother to me, in a really weird way. And I really liked the idea of having that kind of friendship.” The farmer leaned her head onto her knees, eyes focused on a twisting wave in the distance. “It doesn’t help that you look a lot like my real brother. He’s not a very good person, though... So I wanted to convince myself that you were nothing like him by getting to learn more about you.” She chuckled to herself. “I see how that could come across, now... I’m sorry I made you so uncomfortable.”

“... So, am I?”

“Huh?”

“Am I like your brother?”

Jade’s expression lightened from the question. She glanced to Alex and shrugged. “Well... you’re like a brother I never had, that’s for sure. There are a lot of things about you that make me wish you were my sibling.”

Both of them went silent. Alex stared at the young farmer for a while, but then he decided to join in watching the ocean waves. He appeared to be in better moods, though he was still worried about Jade. For the moment, he didn’t really know how to respond, so he took to listening to the faraway seagulls and rolling water.

Jade forced herself to examine the athlete beside her again, but defaulted back to the sea. She sighed. “I was too harsh on you at first. I put you in the same category as my real brother, since both of you are big, athletic, charismatic, all of that. But, one big difference is that you’re a good person. You’re really sweet... And I just felt so bad for how we first met. Swinging at my brother was... sort of a reflex. I don’t think you deserved the same.”

“I got it,” Alex swiftly replied so she would not have to continue. “I’m sorry you had a crappy brother... I had a pretty crappy dad.” He frowned. “And my mom... she...” He shook his head, taking a deep breath to prevent himself from going any further. “I... I get it, is what I mean. Truth be told, I like you for a lot of the same reasons. I’ve never had a sister, but... I dunno, you’d make a pretty good one.” He hesitantly reached his arm out and pat her back. “No one has really took the time to just... talk to me, I guess. You’re a good talker and listener, y’know?”

Jade chuckled. “Yeah, I’ve heard that before.”

“And then there’s no other fun girls in town. You’re pretty fun.”

“Aww, Abby can be fun. She likes games and stuff like I do!” Jade beamed.

Alex smirked, but shook his head. “I mean my kind of fun. You were definitely a surprise in this town, Jade. But, y’know what?” He grinned and lightly nudged her shoulder. “I love it. I’m glad you’re here.”
The young farmer’s face brightened. “Really?” She grinned and playfully nudged back. “I’m glad I’m here, too. And I’m glad you’re here with me.” She fidgeted a little bit, glancing out to the sea and then back to the athlete. “Platonic sibling hugs?” she asked, opening her arms.

“Aw, c’mere,” he went, grabbing her around the torso with one arm and tugging her up to him. She squealed from being dragged and then giggled, hugging his arms when he toted her up close to his side. Jade was very content being in Alex’s hold. For a moment, she really did feel like a little sister.

They enjoyed watching the ocean horizon together. “So... how’s your late birthday so far?” Jade casually asked. “Good?”

Alex stared down to the farmer, breaking out into a chuckle. “Yoba, you are totally a sister. Gotta know everything.” He took one of his hands to ruffle her hair, causing her to laugh back and wrestle with his arms. “Yeah, it’s been great. Apparently I got a little sis now?”

“Yes, I’m the best gift. I know.” Jade relaxed again and leaned her head against his chest. “You should treasure me, since I’m one of a kind.”

“Oh boy. Looks like I got the annoying kind,” Alex deadpanned. Jade glared up at him, but then they both laughed among themselves. The two settled again, then Alex scoffed in thought. “Well, you do an awful lot of talking about everything under the sun, but you don’t talk about yourself much. So... out with it. Hobbies, ambitions? Is there anyone in town you like?”

“Yoba, not you, too! Everyone’s been pelting that question on me lately!” Jade instantly flushed and nervously chuckled. “What kind of question is that, anyway?! Do I like somebody... I haven’t been here very long!” she replied.

“Doesn’t matter. The whole town has seen who you hang out with. So, tell me!”

“Aw, come on,” Jade retorted, face solid red. “That’s not something I really think about.”

Alex let go of her and scoot away to get a better look at her. “You’re in so much denial,” he accused, grinning. “You’ve taken a shine to someone already, haven’t you?” He waited a second, though he knew what would happen. Jade crossed her arms and refused to answer... Alex knew he hit a soft spot. “Hmm.... Easy one first, is it the purple hair girl?”

“No, I don’t like girls! And her name is Abby.”

“But you’re so buddy-buddy with her. What’s wrong with a cute girl, huh?” Alex winked.

Jade huffed and playfully shoved him. “Nothing’s wrong with a cute girl, but I like cute boys!”

“Cute boys,” Alex repeated, thinking. “Well, we’ve already established it’s not me. Plus, I’m not cute. I’m sexy.”

“Give me a break,” groaned Jade.

His eyes widened. “You couldn’t like someone in that couple you hang out with, right?”


The athlete cleared his throat and stared to Jade with utmost seriousness. “You know... Sam and....
“Wait. Are you talking like... romantic couple?” Jade watched his face for a moment to see his shock. She then broke out into a cackle when she came to the realization. He was! “Holy YOBA that has got to be the best thing I’ve heard!! They really do look like that, though!” She started to laugh so hard that she was tearing up.

“They do!” Alex flushed up in embarrassment and crossed his arms in irritation. “So they’re not?!”

“No, no, they’re not.” Jade calmed down and chuckled. “I think it’s an honest mistake, though. They would be cute, wouldn’t they?” she snorted. “But they’re more like brothers. Sam just likes to tease and joke and Seb pretends to ignore it,” the young farmer explained. She wiped her eyes and let out a cheerful sigh. “Also, the ‘other guy’ is Sebastian. You’ve been living here longer than I have... learn their names!”

Alex shrugged in dismissal. “They’re part of a crowd I don’t think I’d get along with. Mostly, anyway. Good for you, though.” He smiled in an attempt to be supportive. Jade really did appreciate how hard he tried to not offend, even if he did make a few slips here and there. “So... either of them, then? They cute to you?”

“Wait, who do you like? Do you like anyone?” Jade glared at him with her face still red. She figured fighting fire with fire would bring about the best.


“Thought so,” Jade giggled, relaxing once more.

“Man, you’re gonna be a pain in my ass, aren’t you?” The athlete pat her on the head.

“Yep!”

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Jade came back to her farm with a backpack full of foraged fruits, flowers, and ferns, since she forgot to take her basket along. It was a good time killer, and she didn’t want to bother all of her friends after seeing them the entire last day. Regardless, she felt great after her talk and mini hang out session with Alex, but also a little embarrassed. She could hardly believe she gave him the wrong impression, but it made sense with how excited she was to befriend him anyway... or really anyone, for that matter. “You really gotta take it down a notch,” she mumbled to herself as she dumped all the foraged items in her trusty shipping bin.

Walking away, the young farmer came to a horrific realization. “... What did other people in town see?” she sadly asked herself. Jade traveled over to her rabbits’ coop and shut the gates for the night. She peeked in the door and wished them a soft goodnight before closing it and officially heading for her home.

That was a good question, though... what did other people in town see? Did they see her desperation with Alex, her excitement in being with others? Did people assume she was in a relationship with someone? Was there a reason more than one person asked her about her relationship life? Jade fell in love with the beauty and wonders of Stardew Valley, but she wished people would keep their mouths shut and not be so... so nosy! At least in the city, no one cared about her. In small towns,
people cared about her a little too much. Jade couldn’t say anything however, since she was nosier than she could ever possibly admit.

After showering and dressing into the coziest, fluffiest pajamas, Jade trudged over to her kitchen to make a half-hearted meal. Her mind was heavy with thoughts about herself, the town, her future. She didn’t feel like cooking anything serious, so she began heating up raviolis from a can on her stove. Onyx, always curious of anything food related, kept the young farmer company and rubbed her legs as she loomed over the stove.

“One, I need a real talk. Will you real talk me?” Jade asked, shuffling the raviolis around in a pan. She sighed and plopped onto the kitchen floor while waiting for her food to heat up fully. Her black beast of a cat wandered over and went into her lap for more love and attention.

“Come on, Onyx. I know you got the knowledge.” She smiled and pet him as he pushed his head into her hand. “Today was a busy day, you know. What about you? Did you destroy any possible burglars wanting to burgle?”

Onyx meowed, followed by a yawn. He shook his fur and began to knead his paws on one of Jade’s legs.

“That’s a good boy,” Jade chuckled. “Man... you know, maybe their questions weren’t so bad after all. DO I like anybody?”

Her feline friend settled in her lap and gave her sleepy eyes of contentment.

“Aww, don’t look at me like that...” Jade pet Onyx again, which caused his eyes to completely close. He laid his head down and settled for a temporary rest. “I’m going to get up in a minute, you know... but you do have a point.” Damn that cat, having all the supreme knowledge he does. “Maybe I do.”
Competition

Chapter Summary

Jade gives exploring another shot; Sebastian and Alex have an unpleasant encounter with each other

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Summer felt like it was droning on for forever, so it was a relief to know that the last week arrived to Pelican Town. As the days led up to the last week, Jade got really serious with improving her skill set. If she wasn’t out running errands or doing her farm work, she was leveling her skill in every field she knew was lacking. Mornings were spent with sword fighting practice against her makeshift training dummy, afternoons were used for exploration and foraging, and evenings were all about fishing and getting those perfect, expensive catches. Linus, the kind wild man, noticed her consistent effort and gave her more pointers on how to fish well. Because of his help, Jade shared some of her catches with him. He was humbled by her offers, and gave her a nifty recipe that would put her extra catches to good use: sashimi. She hated fish, but she kept it in mind due to his kindness.

Lightbulbs went off in Jade’s head when she learned that sashimi was one of Sebastian’s absolute favorite dishes. She spent some more time with Robin and helped run a couple of errands for her, so the sashimi love was one of the wonderful secrets spilled. She needed to thank Linus later for the recipe, for sure.

Speaking of Sebastian, he actually did come over to visit her farm. The fact was surprising since he ended up seeing her three days in a row: saloon night with the squad on Friday, game night with her and Sam on Saturday, and willingly visiting her house on Sunday evening. Since her home was on the other side of the map, he arrived by motorcycle to get to her farmland. Jade was shocked to see him out there without anyone else, but she was ecstatic to have his company.

Sebastian was able to meet Jade’s two rabbits and reacquaint himself with Onyx. As expected, Plague was his favorite and as horrible as he thought she would be. She immediately bit him on the ankles as he entered and tried to climb up his leg, but luckily Jade was there to pick her up and calm her down. He found the ordeal entertaining, even if Plague did have a nasty pair of teeth.

Alex also took to visiting Jade. He had a route for his morning jog and changed his route to the forest, where she lived. Jade would usually be watering or harvesting her crops when he would come by early in the morning, so he would always be the first face she saw in the day. They both enjoyed interaction with each other and didn’t mind for such an occurrence to be routine. If Jade successfully completed her farming duties early, they would both take a break on her front porch and chat about anything on their minds. It was nice to have someone else in the house, and Alex really wasn’t as bad as she thought he would be. He was always cheerful and liked to listen, even if their interests often clashed.

And so came Monday, the true beginning of the end (of Summer). The young farmer had finished getting ready for a new day when she heard the boom of faraway thunder. She walked out onto her front porch to see such a beautiful, beautiful sight: rain! Calling it rain was actually an
understatement, since the raindrops were huge and pelted down with extreme force. If she didn’t live at an impressive elevation, the whole farm could have been flooded! Jade nearly teared up at the sight of her foggy, rain-soaked farm. She knew what she wanted to do today.

Jade was so happy to be equipped in her bright blue rain boots and raincoat again. She wandered out into her farmland, backpack over her shoulders and an multicolor patterned umbrella suspended over her head. Alex probably wouldn’t show since she doubted he would want to jog in the rain, but it was all right if they didn’t see each other every day. Her farm work was cut in half thanks to the rain, so she only took to taking care of her little bunnies. She kept them in their home while Onyx took refuge in her house, but Jade wouldn't be going inside anywhere on this day. There was one thing and one thing only that she needed as it was pouring outside, and that was exploration.

She eyed the side of the fence that has tortured her with slimes and unneeded shenanigans so much before. "I'll find those ruins again if it's the last thing I do!" Jade yelled to herself, bursting with confidence. The excited farmer had spent so much time honing all her skills that she felt like she was more prepared. Proper sword fighting or not, she had used her sword enough that she could actually defend herself and others well enough. She packed for everything she would possibly need for her short journey, including a compass to get a better grasp of where the ruins actually were. When everything was said and done, Jade eagerly hopped over her farm's fence and set out to explore the forest.

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Mud squished under the young farmer's feet with each step and spears of precipitation collided against her umbrella, causing her to travel slow and carefully. Despite how she stuck out like a sore thumb on the forest floor, no animal or unidentified creature appeared at all. There weren't any slimes that came to attack her, but Jade felt like that was more the rain's doing. They must have not been very fond of rainfall, though their composition didn't seem to help. Either way, it was good for the exploring farmer, if not slightly disappointing. She was beaming with energy for fighting, and this was the one time nothing challenged her. Ah, circumstances.

For this exploration trip, Jade toted along her axe, pickaxe, and sword. In her right hand, she held her compass, and in her left, she had her axe firmly grasped. She would chuck the axe's blade into the bark of every other tree she passed in order to mark her path, which so far was going successfully. Nothing looked familiar, but she didn't really have the time to examine her surroundings the very first time she ran.

What an eye-opening experience this was. Jade would examine nature from afar, but she hadn't taken the time to actually take in the environment as she traveled. Grass, weeds, and flora glowed a beautiful green in the heavy rain, unaltered by muddy patches of dirt that Jade stepped through. Trees of the valley were very tall, but could have been much taller; most of the ones she passed were decades old, while they would have been practically endless in height if they were over a century. As strange as it was, the forest was rather young and only recently flourished with so much vegetation. The barks of trees were vivid browns and their various types of leaves were vibrant greens. Even though Jade herself wasn't approached by fauna, she could hear birds calling to each other up in the treetops and noticed the occasional rustle of a bush.

Squishing sounds of mud became the thunk of solid rock. Jade suddenly stopped when she noticed that she had walked onto a stone path, much like what was in Pelican Town. Her eyes brightened significantly upon seeing the path and what the path led to. Finally, she discovered the abandoned neighborhood yet again! And this time there was no magical man to scold her otherwise. She marked the tree right before the stone walkway and then continued onward.
The young farmer's memory was flooding back to her as she entered the neighborhood. Every building was just as it was before, just accompanied by the mist from rainfall and the deeper coloring that water made onto the buildings. Lightning struck far away again, followed by an unseen tree collapsing onto the forest floor. "Whew... I should be careful. If a tree can fall down, these buildings certainly can," she reminded herself.

Razmodius, the valley's resident Wizard, had told Jade of what happened to scare many potential villagers away. A chill shot down her spine as she recalled the mysterious monster skull in a collapsed mine entrance. Something similar to a war must have happened to make an entire section of town to be so... empty. An attack of a catastrophic scale. The young farmer ventured down the lonely road, glancing at half-destroyed buildings that ranged from mom-and-pop stores to official buildings. One of them was a post office, and another one seemed to be a local sheriff's office and jail. With how tiny the town was- not even 40 people- maybe everything was fine without any cops or a post office, but...

Still, the abandoned homes were heartbreaking. Jade wondered how many families used to be in Pelican Town and how many of them proudly took root before... this... happened. For some reason, she started to think of Lewis and his role in Pelican Town. Did he become mayor before Pelican Town shrunk, or was he a result of someone advocating for change? He was certainly old enough to at least retell his experiences, but she would have to get him back on her good side. At least the town still existed, and for good reason. There was a certain beauty about the forest in the region, especially in the rain.

The young farmer ventured out of the main street and went onto a road with dilapidated homes. Some houses were in better shape than others, however all of them showed some sort of wear. She peered through every other window she passed, just to see if there was anything interesting. Empty house after empty house, only abandoned furniture and crawling vines occupying the spaces and rooms. Seems like most people left before anything bad happened.

Jade noticed one empty house that seemed to be in good enough standing; it was rather tiny, but its woodwork was done so well that it was in a much better condition than most of the others. The framing was made of oak and it had a nicely shuttered roof, though age and vegetation misplaced some of the roof plates. She could see a bedroom window on one side of the house, fencing to a backyard at its end. On the side that faced the street, two dusty glass windows sandwiched a red door with chipping paint. Overall, it was a cute house that somehow stood the test of time. Its appearance compared to the rest of the neighborhood really intrigued Jade, so she walked over and tried the doorknob to see if it was locked.

"Sweet!" Jade beamed. She successfully opened the door without any means of force. Closing her umbrella, she ventured inside to take a closer look. Pleasantly enough, the inside felt much larger than the outside did. She was greeted with an unsurprisingly empty living room that contained a dusty sofa and an inactive fireplace. The wooden floors, although dusty, held up fairly well. The framing of the house and the type of furniture felt familiar, if not nostalgic, to Jade. She hadn’t been here before, but the home reminded her of someone.

The young farmer walked past the living room, caught a glimpse of a kitchen and a cramped bathroom, and entered a smaller room at the other end of the house. It appeared to be suited for a child, considering the faded blue of the walls and a bed more suited for a toddler. A family home, then. Jade was slightly disappointed that every room was mostly void of anything interesting, but the house itself was still fun to venture through. She peeked out of the window that the child’s room had for a view of the neighborhood.
Trees and plants growing in and around other homes drooped from the heavy precipitation. Mist clouded the stone pathways, water dribbled off of rooftops and the low growl of thunder maintained an ominous presence in the area. Lightning struck in the distance, creating a threatening boom of thunder close by. Jade was trying to figure out why she enjoyed the rain so much… maybe the sound, and how everything changed when it rained. Rainfall always sounded relaxing, and the rush of cool air felt wonderful. Rain made the whole valley feel less lonesome.

Jade noticed some abnormal movement in the corner of her eye as she was staring out the window. Dark shadows slowly rose out of the misty ground and shuffled down the stone path. One shadow led two shadows, which led three shadows behind that. All of them were around the same size, translucent, beady eyes and mouths with pointed teeth completely see-through. They didn’t really have proper heads, torsos, or even arms; each shadow was a dark, pointed blob with legs shrouded by precipitation. Jade watched with both horror and wonder. She’s never seen them before, but they gave off a certain… feeling. She felt like she was being watched again. They didn’t seem to notice her in the house, so she was safe… as much as she would have loved to show off her fighting skills, there were too many of them, and she didn’t know if they were even enemies to begin with.

One of the shadows made an otherworldly grunt before it stopped following the others. It started to turn towards the house Jade was in, causing her to suddenly drop out of the window’s view. She clapped her hand onto her mouth to keep quiet and listened closely outside for anything. She heard the shadow make another grunt and stayed down until she heard the noises from further away. The young farmer lifted her head to see outside when she could no longer hear them.

“Whew… they’re gone,” muttered Jade, overcome with relief. She scanned the surroundings of the house just to make sure they were really gone. A thankful sigh escaped her mouth. Those shadow-like creatures didn’t notice her, and if they did, at least they didn’t care. Jade didn’t really want to stick around to see if they were passive or not- she was ready to fight a group of slimes, not a group of dark monsters. As soon as Jade’s guard was let down, she felt a hand firmly grasp her shoulder. With a gasp, she turned around and instinctively swung her fist.

No one was there.

“It’s… it’s time for me to go home,” Jade stressed to herself.

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Sebastian stood before Jade’s house, bright red and white umbrella open in one hand and a dark messenger bag tightly held in the other. It was the middle of the afternoon, but she didn’t appear in town, nor did she stop by the carpenter shop to say hello. He assumed she decided to take a day off, which he completely understood… but despite seeing her consistently over the past week, he still found himself outside and ready to see her again. Most of the time he would grow tired of seeing people, though he has felt much more energetic as of late. Must be the rain.

He stepped up to her front porch and closed his umbrella before heading to the front door. He politely knocked. “Game delivery! Open up,” Sebastian shouted loud enough to beat the rain in volume. There was no response. Hm. Sebastian made another series of knocks, then looked in through the nearest window to see if she was around. The lights were on, but no one was replying.

“Meeooowww!” yowled a cat from the inside. Sebastian had a view of part of the living room, the dining room, and an open kitchen, with Onyx hopping up unto the kitchen counters. Sebastian spread a large smile, then checked his surroundings again. He could probably just do the game
Sebastian opened the door and entered Jade’s home, Onyx meowing upon catching the human in his sights. “Hey, little buddy,” calmly murmured the raven-hair. Onyx jumped off of the counters and trot over to Sebastian in greeting, fluffy tail high in the air. The young adult kneeled down to properly pet the already spoiled feline. “Have you seen your mama around, kitty?” His smile widened when he started to hear the cat’s obnoxiously loud purring. “Yeah, it’s nice to see you, too.”

The home was awfully quiet, so maybe she really wasn’t here. Sebastian simply shrugged to himself and stood back up, then venturing upstairs. He made his way to Jade’s beloved gaming and computer room and glanced around. Surprisingly enough, the whole room was pretty clean. She liked to complain about how messy her home gets, so either she just cleaned or she was exaggerating. He stared over to her computer (which was still on) for an uncomfortably long amount of time. He ultimately decided not to go over to the other side of the room. Jade was one of the few people to completely respect his privacy, so he would just do what he arrived to do. The raven-hair approached her shelf full of video games and kneeled once more to examine the collection.

Eventually, he took out some games from his messenger bag and began to put them back in their alphabetical place. After some more staring, he took a couple different games, then stored them in his messenger bag before standing up. To finish the exchange, he placed some games that he owned on top of the shelf. Done. Sebastian quickly exit the room, since he felt a pang of guilt from being in the room alone.

Sebastian began his journey downstairs when he heard the front door swing open. His heart skipped a beat, unclear if it was due to fear or due to excitement.

There was a shout. “Yo!”

That… wasn’t Jade.

Alex entered the house with a tied grocery bag in hand. A clear plastic poncho draped over his head and shoulders to ensure he wouldn’t be a victim of the rain. “Farm girl! Couldn’t jog because of the rain, but I brought some goods,” the athlete called again. He walked in some more and shut the door, giving a friendly pet to Onyx, who just as happily greeted him. “Hey, where ya at-”

Both of them froze when their eyes met. Sebastian was stopped right in the middle of the staircase, surprisingly glaring at Alex. The athlete stared back with equal shock, completely wordless for once.

Suddenly, both of them developed the gall to speak:

“What are you doing here?” they both asked in unison, judgment clouding their voices. After their question, they both jerked back, appalled.

Alex gasped, offended. “What do you mean what am I doing here? I see Jade every day now! The hell are you doing in her house?!”

“I see Jade every day, and I don’t have to explain myself to the likes of you,” Sebastian growled. He fully walked downstairs and stood his ground against Alex. The athlete, always ready for a challenge, stepped up to Sebastian. He dwarfed the raven-haired man in both height and width, but there was an enraged flame within Sebastian’s eyes that put the two on even ground.

The glare was too much. Alex eventually averted his eyes and relaxed his stance, though he still seemed perturbed by Sebastian’s presence. Jade did talk about Sebastian an awful lot, so it wasn’t
like he was a stranger… then again, he was presumably in her house without her say. Something just
didn’t sit right. “You a friend of Jade’s, then?” the large one asked, hopeful for an answer.

The smaller of the two crossed his arms and softened his glare, though he still seemed on edge.
“Possibly.”

“You’re uh…. Sib something, right?”

“Sebastian,” he coldly replied.

“Got it…” Alex began to nervously sweat. Sebastian was a little too intense, and didn’t want to get
friendly. “I’m, uh… Alex.”

“I know,” Sebastian answered.

Truly a man of many words. Alex sighed, not really wanting to produce any smalltalk. “Hey, I’m
just going to wait for Jade to come back, so…” The athlete awkwardly left their stand-off to put his
poncho and the grocery bag on the dining table. Sebastian continued to stand there and watch Alex,
who then sat on the living room couch and turned on the nearby television. “You can… you know.
Leave.” He waved him off. “Seeya.”

Sebastian didn’t reply, and instead sat down at the opposite end of the couch. He leaned against the
arm of the furniture to have a better sight of Alex and crossed one of his legs, signaling his refusal to
move. The raven-haired man narrowed his eyes to the hulking athlete before him.

“What?” Alex asked with a scoff. “Need glasses, squinty?”

“You think you’re hot shit, don’t you?” Sebastian replied with a smooth, calculated voice. His eyes
contained that same intimidating flame, but his demeanor was calm and collected. It was as if he was
playing a strategy game.

Alex suddenly glared back, anger clearly stricken across his visage. He took a second to revert back
to a neutral expression before slyly replying back: “I’m surprised you can speak at all. I was starting
to think you were echolocating with all your cave-dwelling friends.”

“Echolocation uses sound, dumbass.”

“You didn’t deny having cave-dwelling friends,” Alex proudly snorted.

“You didn’t deny being a dumbass,” Sebastian snapped back with effortless timing.

Both of their calm expressions disappeared into scowls as they glared at each other. They were quiet
for a moment, before Alex then decided to speak again: “How the hell are you friends with Jade? I’m
starting to think you’re some crazy intruder, with that bag of yours.”

“My relation to Jade is none of your damn business,” Sebastian answered with irritation in his voice,
“and I’ve been with her far longer than you have.”

Alex rolled his eyes. “Oh yeah? I doubt you know anything about her.”

“Try me,” the raven-hair growled.
“Fine.” The athlete took a second to think, then narrowed his eyes to Sebastian. “When’s her birthday?”

Sebastian stared at him like he was stupid. “Spring 19,” he deadpanned.

“Fair, fair…” Alex huffed as he tried to recall another question. “Okay, what’s her favorite food?”

“Anything with ungodly amounts of sugar- wait, no.” He straightened his posture to face Alex with more intimidation. “You’re trying to learn more about her. Fuck off,” hissed Sebastian.

“Learn more about her? I know these answers!” yelled Alex. “You’re just scared you’ll get something wrong. Back off or else,” he angrily threatened.

Sebastian impatiently bounced his knee. “What even is Jade to you?” he demanded in question. He didn’t really know Alex very much, but something about him just made Sebastian feel so… so angry. Not only did he feel angry, but there was the aftertaste of fear and what seemed to be betrayal. Who the hell was this guy, and why is he the one questioning Sebastian? Sebastian had been with Jade from the very beginning, even if he didn’t want to be at first. Alex had no right to even pretend he was on the same level, let alone anything more than that! Jade mentioned Alex a few times, but it was nothing so… close. He assumed it was just Jade being herself and being friendly and sweet to everyone. She did make up with Alex at the end of Spring, after all… No. Jade would have told Sebastian if she had any legitimate interest in Alex. Him being at her house was merely a coincidence, a circumstance that could be easily misunderstood. Sebastian was easily the better friend. The better person. He had to be... right?

“Why do you care, huh?” Alex asked in return. “I doubt you’re anything special.”

“From your lack of a real answer, sounds like you’re really not, either.” Sebastian regained the appearance of his calm and collected self, but in reality, he was terrified. He didn’t know for sure what Alex was to Jade and that uncertainty was so disconcerting.

Alex hummed for a second. “Okay, you know what? Fine. I’ll be the bigger person.” He glared to Sebastian, his courage returning. “She’s like a little sister to me.”

Sister? That… was an unexpected yet welcoming answer, if he was actually serious. Sebastian audibly sighed in relief, which then piqued Alex’s interest.

“What? You scared I was dating her?”

Sebastian instantly brought his guard up and continued the cold stares. “I know she would never date a brute,” he scoffed.

“You think an emo toothpick is any better?” laughed Alex.

Sebastian instantly stood up from the couch and clenched his fists. This time, the rage was not limited to only his eyes. His entire body emitted rage and hatred towards the athlete sitting before him. While Alex was fairly intimidated, he instinctively stood up and faced him to stand his ground.

The door swung open. Both of them jerked their heads to the side, all composure instantly lost.

“Haha! I didn’t expect company today, uh… hey guys,” Jade cheerfully remarked. “Why’re you
both hangin’ out at my place?”

Sebastian and Alex passed each other more threatening glares before they both approached the young farmer. “Heyy, farm girl!” Alex boomed with joy, hopping over the back of the couch to have more of a headstart towards her. Without hesitation, he picked her up and bear-hugged her, the young farmer making a short squeal in response.

“Hey Alex, nice to see you too. Now let me down!” she laughed in embarrassment. Alex gently set her down, causing her to give him a friendly shove. Jade rushed over to Sebastian, nearly opening her arms to embrace him as well, before remembering his boundaries and slowing to a wave. “H-hey, Seb! I didn’t expect to see you today, but the rain does all sorts of wonderful things, huh?”

“Oh huh.” Sebastian noticed the hesitation with her arms. He felt a burst of enough bravery to take her arms and bring her into a hug. He closely embraced her, eyes piercing into Alex’s very being as he did so. Jade was the one to tense in his hold, but she quickly relaxed when she took it as a rare occurrence. She had been accustomed to the cold rain all day, but he was soft and warm. He didn’t really smell like smoke that day, which relaxed her even more. Gently, he let Jade go. There was a loving smile on Sebastian’s face, the intimidating glare gone in an instant. “Hey,” he softly greeted her.

Jade’s cheeks flushed a solid red, shocked by Sebastian’s move. She covered her cheeks with her hands to try to hide her blushing and nervously laughed in response. “I… heh, wow, you… you two must have gotten pretty friendly, huh? I’m glad. I don’t think I’ve ever… um… seen you two talk?”

“We haven’t,” Alex corrected. “We were just waitin’ for you.”

Jade blinked. “… Sorry, what did you say? I wasn’t listening, sorry.” She coughed, still completely flustered.

Alex narrowed his eyes to the now extremely smug Sebastian, then softly smiled at the lovely farm girl. “It’s all good. We were just waiting for you. Brought you some goods from Granny. She made some extra cookies and wanted you to have some.”

“Aw, tell her thanks for me!” Jade beamed. She removed her hands from her face, deciding to just pretend her cheeks weren’t actually so hot. “What about you, Seb? Here for anything?” she kindly asked.

He shrugged. “Just wanted to come by. Traded the games we discussed. I put them upstairs and took the ones you talked about, if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, not at all! Thanks for coming by.” She glanced over to Alex too, sweetly smiling. “Thanks to you both. I’m glad you two could get along.”

“Sure,” they both answered, then promptly glared at each other. Jade giggled in response. She didn’t notice their secret battle of wills, but she did feel some tension going on. Them being in the same room made her feel uneasy, even if she did cherish the both of them. Sebastian was too stubborn and Alex was too hotheaded. The combination probably wouldn’t cooperate all that well.

Sebastian felt confident enough after getting the better response from hugging Jade. He smiled at her and gave a kind wave. “I’m going to head off now before it gets too dark. Talk to you tonight?”
For sure,” Jade happily nodded. “Have a safe trip home!”

The raven-haired man nodded and gave another passing pet to Onyx before leaving through the front door. After he was out of sight, his legs became noodles which caused him to collapse against the front porch’s frame. “I can’t believe I just did that,” he quietly breathed to himself, shocked by even his own ability to do something so bold and stupid (to him, at least). Alex really riled him up, especially with picking her up like that, and that scathing emo comment. He huffed and regained his composure, walking out into the rain after grabbing his umbrella. He forgot to open the umbrella on the way back to his home.

Alex pat Jade on the head and yawned, going over to the dining table for his poncho. “I should head out, too. See you later, okay shorty?”

“Aww, okay,” pouted Jade. “You be safe too now, y’hear?”

“Please. I’m the definition of safe!” Alex confidently waved and left right after. He didn’t exactly have everything figured out yet, but Sebastian’s protective responses and the way Jade reacted to his hug was… something, alright. He decided to go home and think some more.

Jade stood out on her porch and watched Alex leave- Sebastian was long gone at this point. “Man… the one time I get surprise visitors is the one time I decide to go adventuring,” grumbled the young farmer. Onyx trot out onto the porch after and meowed for attention, though Jade took it as an intellectual response. “I know, man. The nerve!”

She walked back inside. What a tiring day, and the whole situation between Sebastian and Alex was a little tiring too despite getting to see two of her favorite guys. Jade shuffled off towards her bathroom, deciding to shower after all that intense adventuring. Of course, her mind drifted back to what she came home to. Hopefully everything went well. Both of them were definitely going to be interrogated.

Chapter End Notes

(i’m going to start putting up my post-writing notes from the forum, so you get to see more rambles from me!)

nerd vs jock who will win

well, i was a little scared that this would be a bit ooc, but that's mostly because i've handled interactions that already existed within the game (the squad, haley/alex, the group of moms, etc.) but not necessarily instances like this. one of alex's comments in-game is about how he has seen sebastian and knows literally nothing about him other than being "some goth guy". in this fic, however, jade being close to both seb and alex will cause them to interact occasionally. due to them knowing literally nothing about each other, they'll get into a lot of misunderstanding and protectiveness for jade. alex is more like a guard dog while sebastian wants to defend his place as The Favorite Boy. that leads to some bold moves and wacky shenanigans.

i also think that sebastian can get fairly rude when he feels he has been wronged in some way, which is why he snaps at alex so easily. tho to be fair, alex didn't exactly help since he assumes that his friendship with jade is righteous and solid and didn't think to
consider sebastian as the Cute Boy In Town, which caused him to be offhandedly rude as well. i wouldn't be surprised if they have had multiple unpleasant encounters with each other pre-jade, but hey, that's neither here nor there.

other than that, more exploration is a-go! That's not really the big "focus" of the chapter but it still opens up some significant points i want to address later on. hopefully i can handle this route well, since i'm doing a lot better with character development than i am with world building. after the relationship hurdle is taken care of (which, from the writing, you guys can probably guess is soon) we'll definitely be focusing on more of that end. i probably should have narrowed my fic down some but hey it's too late for that now and i'm just going to have fun with it.

anyways, hope you guys enjoyed as per usual! i had fun writing the snark as always
Initiation

Chapter Summary

Sebastian takes Jade to the Adventurer's Guild so that she can become an official guild member.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Days ticked by as the last day of Summer approached ever closer. The end of Monday zoomed by, and before the valley even realized it, Thursday had already arrived. The days weren’t necessarily boring, but they weren’t all too noteworthy.

Right after Monday, Jade hunted both Alex and Sebastian down to spend time with them and question them separately. Surprisingly, both of them were cooperative and told their experience with each other. Their quarrel was just as Jade expected: her raven-haired companion was all too stubborn, and her brother-in-spirit let his mouth get the best of him. Even if she wanted to be angry with them, she couldn’t. Some people could just never get along due to their nature, Sebastian and Alex being no exception. She just hoped they would behave for her sake. Their incident did lose their house-entering privileges when she was not around, however. In the end, she considered the situation resolved. They just did what their instincts told them to, after all.

A grand melon harvest blessed the young farmer yet again on Wednesday. All of the melons were normal sized this time around, though they were plentiful and (from the few melons she kept) were extremely delicious. She was able to get some more blueberries and tomatoes as well, leading to a very successful harvest. As the season was wrapping up, Jade had to wonder how much longer the crops would have to be cared for. Either way, bank was bank.

Since Jade no longer had to care for the melon crops, her working time significantly reduced. She was able to spend time with her rabbits much earlier, which they didn’t seem to mind. Despite all the time and care that they received, Butterscotch and Plague were still too young to produce any wool. However, the time for them to be true farm animals was approaching. Jade figured she would be able to start collecting wool around Fall.

Wednesday then transitioned to Thursday, which blossomed into Friday. Too many interactions with too many people, so the young farmer absolutely needed a break. Hilariously enough for her, Friday was not that day:

SEBASTIAN: Jade.

SEBASTIAN: It is time.

These two messages sent a chill down Jade’s spine as she examined the screen of her computer’s monitor. Beads of sweat formed at her head as she saw the messages. Time? Time for what?
JADE: for what?

SEBASTIAN: You know what.

Her face instinctively flushed as she tried to think. What was he referring to that she apparently knew? Was she being all too oblivious?

JADE: uhhhh….

SEBASTIAN: Aw, come on

SEBASTIAN: You haven’t bothered me about joining the guild even once!

JADE: OH

She suddenly burst with laughter. Sebastian’s pestering had a much more, ehm, tame subject than she initially expected.

SEBASTIAN: I know that beat up training dummy you have

SEBASTIAN: It’s time to do some real fighting, yeah?

JADE: man to be honest with you the guild thing completely slipped my mind

JADE: and we’re both so busy in the day. today is ~the chosen day~ then?

SEBASTIAN: Yeah, no work for me today

SEBASTIAN: Even if I did, I just think I need a day off

SEBASTIAN: You up for it?

JADE: um duh of course. i’m all done with my worky

JADE: isn’t it saloon night tho?

SEBASTIAN: We can skip at least one saloon night, y’know

JADE: awww i’ll tell abby then

SEBASTIAN: Which leaves me to tell Sam

JADE: sweet

JADE: so can you tell me what we’re gonna need?

SEBASTIAN: In person, yes
SEBASTIAN: I’ll help you get ready since we’ll be going to a unique area. You can start packing first since you’ll still need normal cave stuff.

SEBASTIAN: Unique area will be after your initiation tho.

JADE: ooohhh surprises?? <3

SEBASTIAN: Nothing surprising enough for you to get all excited.

JADE: but seb

JADE: you got me all pumped for adventure

JADE: tell me what we doin

SEBASTIAN: You’ll see

JADE: grrnghng

SEBASTIAN: lol

SEBASTIAN: Okay, I’ll come by in a few.

SEBASTIAN: I’ll just take you to the guild via motorcycle.

JADE: ok see you!!

JADE: be safe on your way!!

After dealing with the necessary messages to her bright purple-haired bromance, Jade was all packed and ready to go for another mining adventure. Her heart pumped with excitement as she packed containers, snacks, tools, and useful materials for the trip. Maru was fun and all, but this was Sebastian. From what he told her, he had adventure and fighting in his blood. Powerful wizard in-game, valiant knight in real life. Jade spent longer than she intended imagining him in armor.

She snapped out of it when she heard the rev of a motorcycle outside. Sebastian stopped in front of the house and turned off the engine, standing up to properly greet Jade. He had shades on to protect his eyes, though everything else he wore was the same. The young farmer emerged from the house and happily waved to him as she approached.

“Hey, you ready?” Sebastian asked with a smile. Jade noticed that he had a thick coat with his traveling bag. The summer weather was diminishing, but not that fast.

“Uh huh. Why do you have that big coat?” asked Jade, deciding to point it out immediately.

He smirked and gave a lighthearted shrug. “You’ll see. Let’s get you some unique stuff, too.” Sebastian took the shades off of his eyes and placed them on top of his head instead. Together, they walked back inside the house.

Jade realized Sebastian was requesting that she take some very winter-heavy items. A thick coat,
long sleeve apparel, tundra boots, the works. She played along, even though she had no idea what they were for. Other than the winter clothing, Jade had completely packed for their trip. Sebastian was proud of how well she prepared, making the young farmer even more excited. They exit the house and made their way to the motorcycle, confident for their next journey.

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“Here we are.”

The two adults gauged at an olive green cabin, placed on a cliffside before the lake. Jade recognized the guild even though she wasn’t completely sure what it was before; the building was conveniently located right beside the mines, so she saw it in passing. Surrounding the structure of the house were two wooden pillars, its frame and roof having the same rich brown coloring. Beside the front door was a tiny wooden sign with a sword engraved on it. Jade marveled at the cabin in fascination. It was tiny, but new places always had her attention.

Sebastian joined Jade after equipping his own mining gear. For the first time, Jade actually saw Sebastian take off his hoodie. She found it hilarious that he had a shirt of the same color underneath, though it fit him very well and looked nice; he was also much thinner than his hoodie alluded to. Afterwards, he slung a dark messenger bag akin to Maru’s over his shoulders and across his chest. Jade could notice the large winter coat hanging out of the bag.

“This is the Adventurer’s Guild,” he presented. “I heard that it used to be really huge back in the day... but, it’s just been the two guys for as long as I’ve been here.” Sebastian shrugged.

“Let’s go, then!” Jade beamed. She wanted to be the first one to walk inside, but her companion stepped in front of her to open the door. Together, they proceeded. The guild was much smaller than she imagined it would be, but then again, everything in Pelican Town was. Some barrels and supplies stacked in the corners of the main room, a large table and chairs to their right. A gigantic bear rug took refuge in the middle of the room, leading up to the main desk. An old (yet somehow younger than Lewis) man stared to the two visitors in surprise... No one ever came by. He had a ruffled mess of silver hair, a scruffy beard, and an eye-patch over his left eye. All they could see him wear from their perspective was a green tunic and a brown cape over one of his shoulders.

To the right of the main desk was another old man idly swinging on a rocking chair in front of the fireplace. He had on a gray sweater, dark brown/red overalls and a deep red hat that leaned over his closed eyes. He also had silver hair and a beard, though his was more tame. A gentle fire was burning in the fireplace, bringing a warm glow to the whole area. Jade’s attention went to the weaponry and maps of the region all over the walls, before then settling onto the man behind the desk.

"Welcome... I’m surprised to have visitors this time of year," the one behind the desk mentioned. His voice was strong but raspy. Dude’s been through a lot.

Sebastian lifted his hand in greeting. "Hey, Marlon. Long time no see."

"Indeed," sighed Marlon. "And who is this?" His glance focused onto Jade. She partly hid herself and gave a tiny wave in response, intimidated by the guild leader.

"This," Sebastian began, walking up to the desk while taking Jade by the arm, "is your new recruit. Jade wants to be part of the Adventurer's Guild."
The young farmer shyly dropped her head. "Hi," she muttered.

"You?" Marlon stared at her for a while. "... Wait a minute. You're the one who decked that huge fellow in the face!" He suddenly burst with laughter. "What a hook!"

Jade's face flushed in embarrassment. "Is that all everyone remembers me for?" she lowly muttered, then glared at Sebastian when she heard a snicker. Her sight dropped again with a pout. "Y-yeah, that's me," she admitted. "I'm a local farmer."

"So I hear." Marlon's cheerful disposition vanished. "You may be good with your fists, but how are you with a blade?"

"I'm teaching her," Sebastian replied for her. "I think having the guild as a resource will help her a lot, as well."

Marlon stared at the two for a bit, then sighed. "We'll see about that. You're a good enough swordsman, but don't let that get to your head. This ain't the first girl you brought here," the old man mumbled, fishing for something in the desk's drawers.

"Not the first girl?" Jade lifted an eyebrow to Sebastian. The young man in question suddenly appeared nervous. "I just tried to bring Abby here once, is all," he corrected. "It's not like I do this often."

"Uh huh, heart breaker." Jade chuckled and nudged his side. Sebastian nudged her back with a huff, then they got into a small war of messing with each other before Marlon stood back up.

"Alright, here's the contract." Marlon slapped a tattered piece of paper onto the desk. The paper itself had a description of the guild, what they stood for, and what each guild member should abide by. At the very bottom, there was a place to sign Jade's name. "You'll get the ability to sign it after you complete your first task."

"Okay, what's my first task?" asked the young farmer.

Marlon placed his elbows onto the desk and stroked his beard as he stared at Jade. "Hm..." He examined her demeanor, which only seemed to make her more nervous. Beads of sweat formed on Jade's forehead, unsure of what he was going to say. Would she fight slimes? Bats? Bugs? Could she really handle them, even with Sebastian as a support? She didn't want to screw up, whatever it was.

"Do you have a weapon?" asked Marlon, after an excruciatingly long minute of silence.

Jade nodded, taking out her sword from the side of her backpack.

"You've been managing with this sad old thing?" gasped the guild leader in surprise. "The blade's chipped and this definitely isn't the sharpest."

"My friend gave it to me!" she claimed in desperation. "I've used it a lot, so it's pretty worn."

"What's your experience?"

Jade hummed in thought to try to recall her experiences. "Mostly slimes... A lot of them live around my farm. I fought a lot of bugs when I went to the mines for the first time, though." She went quiet again, trying to recall anything else. "Oh! B-but! But I do practice. I want to try my best to defend
my farm and my friends."

"Mmhm..." Marlon examined her some more. "Noble. Maybe you have what it takes, after all."

The young farmer's face brightened. "Really?" she asked, excited.

"I'll tell you what. I'll loan you a brand new sword for your initiation. If you want to keep it, you can pay me after." He stepped over to the wall behind him and picked out a sharp steel broadsword, though it appeared relatively thinner and lighter than many of the other swords on display. "From what I've seen from you, speed is your ally. A sword like this would be better suited for you." He placed the sword and its sheath on the desk.

"Wow..." Jade marveled at the sword, looking for silent permission before holding the sword to examine. "Thank you very much, Marlon. I'll do my best."

Marlon smiled behind his beard. "I know you will. As for your exact task... I'll start you off easy. Ten slimes from the mines." He aggressively gestured to Sebastian. "His kills don't count. Bring back the evidence and you're in. Sound good?"

"Yes, that's perfect. Thank you, Marlon!" Jade happily bowed. She sheathed the sword and put it around her waist for easy access.

"I'll buy this sword for 10 gold if you want," mumbled Marlon.

She chuckled. "No, it was a gift. I'll keep it as a souvenir if anything. Thank you again." She returned Abigail's old sword back in the loop of her backpack, then looked to Sebastian. "Anything else?"

He shook his head. "Nope, looks like we're good. You'll be able to get some pretty good armor after you become a guild member. Well, when you get more skilled, anyway." The raven-haired man waved to Marlon and started walking off, Jade eagerly trailing behind. Everyone was in higher spirits; Jade got to borrow a new weapon and Marlon had fresh blood interested in the guild.

"Hey, wait a sec. Let me put this sword back here since I don't want the extra weight," started Jade, venturing back over to Sebastian's motorcycle. She placed her old sword with all of Sebastian's extra stuff. He ventured over as well.

"I forgot my own sword. Thanks for reminding me," he cheerfully remarked, taking his own sword. Its sheath and length was very similar to Jade's; he must have been a swift fighter, too. "I need some new equipment, to be honest. I'm more of a collector, so I tend to hunt for rare stuff rather than go out of my way to fight monsters."

Jade watched him in fascination. "Well, you better not be losing faith in yourself since you're the one who has to cover my ass," she snorted. They began their walk towards the mines. "So, you tried to bring Abby to the guild? How'd that go?"

Sebastian sighed. "She talked about adventuring and whatnot all the time, but she started making excuses whenever I would try to get her to join. I eventually was able to bring her to the guild and she received her first task... she pretty much ignored it and never talked about it after that."

"That's a shame... I think Abby would be good with fighting."
"Maybe." Sebastian gave an unknowing shrug. "I think Marlon was convinced I was just trying to impress her, since she never appeared after that. I was more confused than anything," he mumbled. They entered the mines, though Sebastian didn't head towards the elevator. He approached an opening in the ground that had a ladder leading downwards, then started descending it first- Jade carefully followed after him. They entered the very first floor below ground level, which was a fairly tiny and underwhelming area. It appeared to be a regular cavern, much like the floor above. No real vegetation to make the place pretty.

Jade scanned the whole room to make sure there weren’t any lurking monsters. A feeling inside of her told her she should be relieved, even though it was her current job to hunt down slimes. “Well... Didn’t you say before that she’s never been to the mines? She could have just been really nervous.”

“Yeah, that’s precisely how I found out.” Sebastian casually removed Jade’s pickaxe from her backpack and walked into a specific area of rocks. He tightly held the pickaxe with both hands, then swinging downwards to the rocks. They all shattered rather quickly, but that was something to be expected just below ground level. “Abby was weird to me then, and she was weird for a long time after that. It’s a little different now... I think the four of us make a better group. Before, I just preferred Sam and me.”

The young farmer wanted to speak, but she knew she couldn’t. She watched his mining nervously, though she was thinking more about his words than what he was actually doing. She recalled Abigail mentioning her fleeting crush on Sebastian, which is probably why she acted ‘weird’ to him. “Maybe we should help her overcome her mining fear sometime,” muttered Jade.

“Yeah, maybe. I have to be honest, I’ve never exactly been all too patient with Abby. I did help her with some sword fighting, though. That’s what prompted me to get her to join,” he explained. Due to his mining, the entry down to the next level was revealed. He lightly tossed the pickaxe back to her and then began his descent. Jade put the tool back on her backpack and carefully climbed down. With how Sebastian was acting, it seemed like he’s traveled this path several times.

The second floor was larger; maybe not as big as the areas Jade explored with Maru all that time ago, but still impressive. In the waves of rocks, Jade could see a couple of lazying green slimes. Both had no antennae and seemed to be exploring for any sort of nourishment. "Sorry to interrupt, but..." she gestured over to the slimes.

"I know. You got this covered," Sebastian said, taking the pickaxe once more. "Keep your eyes focused on the enemy, block when they charge, and go in for the kill."

Jade took a deep breath and nodded. "I got this," she repeated to reassure herself. A couple of huge rocks blocked the path to the other side of the cave, where the slimes roamed cluelessly. They didn't seem to hear the two speaking. Sebastian quickly broke the rocks up and signaled for Jade to go through. With a nod, she unsheathed her new sword and sneaked to approach one of the slimes.

Both of the green, translucent creatures frantically glanced around when they heard the break of rock. Before one of them could properly react, Jade swiftly swung her sword. It got knocked away from the impact and squeaked in agitation. Both of the slimes had their sights on the novice fighter then. She took another deep breath and prepared herself as the further slime began to flicker. It jumped high in the air with its aim right at Jade's face-

"Block!" Sebastian shouted.

Jade instantly held the sword in front of her face, which deflected the slime's attack. As the slime fell
to the ground, Jade sliced it in half. Its gooey form exploded and slopped onto the ground.

"Good!" the raven-hair cheered. "Always take advantage."

"Aww, you gonna backseat drive my fighting?" giggled the farmer. For a moment, her ego got the best of her, but she realigned her sight onto the remaining slime. It jumped for her, which she dodged just in time. She went down to attack it, which caused it to explode in only a second. "Yeah!" she beamed. "That wasn't so hard."

Sebastian approached Jade and gave her a rewarding pat on the shoulder. "Form needs a little work, but we can fix that," he teased with a smirk.

"Oh, please," she laughed. "That face you just made looks just like Sam!"

"Don't ruin my good mood," playfully nudged the intermediary explorer. "Eight more. The goo is evidence; collect that and we're fine."

Jade pouted. "Eugh... I have to touch this?" she grumbled. She flicked the extra slime off of her sword and sheathed it, then fished out containers for the slime.

"Yup."

"How come sometimes slime burns and sometimes it doesn't?" Jade asked, kneeling down to store the more solid pieces of slime.

Sebastian smiled, always eager to answer questions. "That's an attack of theirs, so it's something they have to do. Sort of like a bite, since they don't really have mouths. The slime itself is harmless... mostly. Don't eat it."

Jade suddenly cackled. "Do you have a story about how you know that?"

"Sometimes truth or dare gets serious, Jade."

The young farmer went into a fit of giggles, cleaning her hands after properly storing the slime. "You and Sam are honestly the best."

"We know." He chuckled a bit.

There didn't seem to be any other slimes in the area, so Sebastian took to mining through the area. He forgot where exactly the ladder was, this time around. Jade was grateful that he was taking the time to find the next level, even though it was only splitting their work evenly. "You know... you really are in a good mood. I don't think I've seen you smile so much."

Her mention caused him to instantly scowl. The reaction made Jade laugh again. "Aww, I love the smiling, though! Let me see it again."

Sebastian turned his head away, not wanting to give her the satisfaction that her demand made him smile again. "I do whatever I want," he grumbled in an attempt to be grumpy. She giggled and didn't say anything, though she knew he was just trying to cover it up. "I just like being in the mines."

"Me too. It's really nice to go with somebody. I mean, I've only been here twice, but still."
"Hah, I got you." Sebastian was quiet for a moment, focused on mining. "... I hope I wasn't forcing you into this guild thing," he eventually muttered.

Jade blinked in surprise. "Huh? No, not at all! This is something I really want to do," she cheerfully began, her voice proud and determined. "Especially with you. I'm having fun."

"Ah, alright... I didn't know if you just didn't want to do it, like how Abby was. I mean, I wouldn't have a problem if that was the case, but..."

The young farmer chuckled. "Oh hush, would you? There are too many benefits in the guild to pass up, in addition to the fun I'm having."

The raven-haired man revealed his smile to her once more. He seemed relieved. "That's good... wait, what did you say before?"

"What?"

"Especially with me?" Sebastian asked.

"Oh." She grinned. "I was just extra excited since I know you're into stuff like this. I couldn't imagine mining with Sam or even Abby, really. It feels natural with you."

He paused, revealing the next ladder downwards. "... Yeah?" he said in an almost touched voice, looking back to her.

"Yeah," she smiled, taking the pickaxe. She was the first to descend the ladder this time, Sebastian following suit.

"What about Maru?" Sebastian asked, which caused Jade to groan and laugh.

"I knew that was coming," she snorted. "You can relax, Seb. I like Maru, but I've hardly spent time with her," Jade laughed to herself as she climbed down. "So... you're the king, you get to keep your crown of friendship."

"Ah, my rightful place," joked Sebastian. They went down to the third floor and scanned their surroundings once more. These rooms just seemed to be growing in size. This one was more narrow, but the path to the other side of the room seemed to have a large opening. They didn't see anything in their line of vision, so Sebastian took to listening for anything nearby. "There are probably slimes on the other end," he quietly stated.

Jade nodded and handed the pickaxe back to him. The mining resumed and Jade kept a careful guard around them.

"... I know it's not something you really care about... to be honest, neither should I, but..." Sebastian wiped his forehead, the mining proving to be quite the workout. "You got the crown, too. Of... friendship. I guess."

She giggled. "I do? No Sam? I don't mind sharing."

"I couldn't do this stuff with Sam. He's absolutely my best friend, though he wouldn't be caught dead in the mines unless it was skate-friendly or was good for guitar practice." He sighed, trying to word his thoughts correctly. "Sam's my bro, but I feel like I can do everything with you."
"Aw, Seb..." Jade held her hands to her heart, completely charmed by his words. "You're gonna make me cry. That's so sweet."

Sebastian accidentally mined open the next ladder down, however, the two ignored it for the time being. There were definitely slimes at the other end of the area, since they could hear squishing of a venturing slime and various squeaks. At the time, though, Sebastian was ignoring everything. He stood up fully and brought his complete attention to the young farmer. He coughed and tried to form another scowl, peering away from her to try to make his trick work. "Don't let it get to your head."

"Too late," she chuckled.

He looked back to her and smiled again. "You're the worst, you know that?"

She smiled back. "Yup."

They took the moment in. It was wonderful to be in mutual agreement on how they felt about each other, even though both of them were holding back their real thoughts significantly. Jade happily sighed in their quiet. She wanted to ruin the moment with a terrible joke.

"You look like you’re about to say something horrible. You have a face you do before the fact.” Sebastian narrowed his eyes at her.

"Aw man, I do?” She laughed. "I was trying to think of something- DUCK!"

Sebastian quickly kneeled down- he saw terror in Jade’s face and had no time to question her actions. She swung her sword at a slime that lunged towards Sebastian, successfully slicing it into several pieces before it even hit the ground. When all was said and done, he stood back up and marveled at the collapsed slime. “Damn...”

“Sorry! I didn’t see it before, I’m sorry,” gasped Jade. “Are you okay?” She frantically checked him to make sure nothing was wrong.

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little frazzled, is all,” he muttered, then brushed his hair back with a sigh. “Don’t be sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. The teacher just got taught,” he pitifully laughed.

“Let’s make it both our faults so we’re even,” the novice concluded. She leaned down to collect the third slime. “Hey, seven to go, at least.”

“For sure. This’ll be a breeze, especially with reflexes like that,” he proudly spoke.

After that mini-panic attack, they both decided to descend down to the next floor. They got into the swing of exploring, defeating slimes (as well as stray bugs that proved to be nuisances) and mining down new entrances. Soon enough, three slimes became four, which became six, and so on.

The noble mission to get all ten slimes was tiring for the both of them. There were only a couple slimes, if any, on each floor, and they were determined to get all of them in one day. The last slime was defeated only a few floors below an area containing the elevator. Jade squealed with joy after slicing the last slime away. She was becoming skilled in blocking slimes’ attacks and tearing them apart before they could really do any damage. Sebastian told her to not get too cocky, however-green slimes were the weak ones.
“At least I can better protect my farm. From slimes, anyway,” Jade pouted. She had stored all the necessary slime blobs and sheathed her sword for hopefully the last time that day. They were making their way back up to the floor with the elevator for a quicker escape. “I don’t really know what lives close to me... I think you should explore the forest with me sometime, Seb. There are really interesting ruins!”

“Exploring is always fun. I have to build up to it, though,” Sebastian sighed, stretching. They heard his back crack from the action, which made Jade chuckle.

“What was that, grandpa?” she snorted.

“Nothing. Also, respect your elders. I’m too old for this shit.”

The young farmer giggled again, entertained. “I’m taking a guess that you haven’t been able to go to the mines all too much lately.”

“Yeah. I get so caught up in a routine. Work just about every day, run errands, seeing people I tolerate once or twice a week,” explained Sebastian. He smirked, glancing at Jade. She was too distracted by finding the ladder to really notice, though she was still listening. “Then whenever I have the time, I don’t always feel like mining or monster slaying. It’s been some weeks since I last went, so this is refreshing.”

“Hehe, only would being underground be refreshing for you,” Jade teased. Sebastian shrugged, smiling in defeat. She wasn’t wrong.

They finally reached the elevator without any more trouble. The light beside the elevator turned on with a ding and the door slid open. Both of them walked inside, but neither of them pressed any buttons yet.

“Hey,” the raven-hair began. “Let’s go to the area I was talking about before.”

“The reason we need the coats?” Jade asked. He nodded. “It’s in the mines?” she inquired once more, which incited another nod.

Sebastian closed the elevator door and set a floor for them to travel on. “The floor shouldn't have any monsters, so we’ll be fine. We need somewhere to take a break, anyway. Might as well be somewhere nice.”

The young farmer dropped her backpack and shuffled out her wintry coat to wear, Sebastian doing the same with his bag. Her gray and white coat draped over her whole torso like a dress, while Sebastian’s- which was surprisingly a soft blue- hugged his torso. Both of their coats were lined with fake fur, which was both comfortable and fashionable. Haley would be proud.

Their destination seemed to be dozens of floors below. Jade really had no idea where they were going, but she was fairly eager. Eventually, the intermediary guild member broke the silence: “How did miners operate in this elevator? I feel like we’re suffocating,” he huffed.

“Haha, yeah. Maybe this was installed later? By the guild members for exploring purposes. I dunno.” Jade shrugged.

Sebastian did the same gesture. “Maybe.” They were silent for a moment, but both of them enjoyed the presence of one another. “For some reason, this reminds me of one time when Maru and I were
much younger." He smirked. “I wasn’t older than 13, but we weren’t allowed to go to the mines. I sneaked out and Maru followed me, and we went down this elevator together, armed with nothing but a shabby sword and a bookbag.”

“Oh, boy. What did you do?” Jade laughed with accusation in her voice.

He lightly nudged her, smiling with mischievousness. “We were going down the elevator, when all of the sudden...” Bam! Sebastian slammed his hand to the nearby wall of the elevator. Jade flinched, but laughed. “The elevator stopped abruptly, and the light overhead went out!!”

“You’re horrible!” she giggled.

“Hey, I didn’t do it.”

“But....” Jade continued playfully, giving him a certain look.

He laughed. “Okay, I did jump in the elevator in an attempt to get it working... and maybe to scare Maru, just a little bit. Here, I can show you-”

“Haha! No, please!” Jade continued to laugh, and then squealed and tackled Sebastian when he threatened to jump in the elevator. “You’re gonna kill us!”

The raven-hair playfully pushed her away, which incited Jade to push him back. Their exchange turned into friendly if not somewhat rough banter, not stopping their sick burns until the elevator stopped and opened with a ding! Shivering mist wafted into the elevator, the doorway revealing a bright, frozen cavern. The older of the two hoisted his messenger bag and walked out. “Welcome to the ice caverns,” beamed Sebastian. Jade copied his actions while following behind with stars shining in her eyes. Despite the small dimensions of the room and its emptiness, it was beautiful. There was freezing pool of water just to their left, which is where Sebastian was headed.

“I needed this cool air more than anything,” Jade happily sighed. “And this area is so beautiful! Wow, that water is so pretty!” The young farmer was busy with ‘ooh’s and ‘aah’s as she examined their level. Bunches of icicles hung down from the ceiling and all the rocks were blue, freezing, and far more durable than boulders of previous floors. Sebastian sat down in front of the pool of water and let Jade continue her excited roaming. A large smile was placed onto his face as he listened to her. “I want to take a nap here. Forever,” Jade stated with a matter-of-fact tone.

“And have me drag your ass home? No thanks.”

“Aw, I’d drag your ass home,” Jade laughed, trotting over to join him. She began to calm down upon gazing into the pond.

He chuckled. “You already know my response to that.”

“Blah blah, I live closer, something something?”

Her reply brought out such a rare chuckle. “You’re getting too sassy. I need to stop rubbing my sass onto you, so I can keep my title as ungrateful smartass.”

Jade wistfully sighed and pet one of his arms. “Oh, Seb. Sweet, poor, Seb. I was always sassy as all get out.” It was her turn to stretch and yawn. “In other news though, I’m exhausted. Mind if I lean on you?”
“Not at all,” Sebastian answered.

“Thank you. I’m already starting to get cold.” She took no hesitation in using his cushy shoulder as a pillow, scooting closer to him so that they were directly side by side. Sebastian stared at her for a moment as he figured out what to do; whatever it was, he didn’t want her sitting like this.

“Hey... You can... move closer, if you want. Here,” the raven-hair softly began. He wrapped his closer arm around her and moved her head closer to his chest. She adjusted to the changes and got comfortable, one hand placed below his chest and the other on his leg. Sebastian summoned a moment of bravery to hold her stray hand. In not even a moment, they started to feel each other’s warmth. Only faint crackles of ice could be heard in the background, since neither of them muttered another word. Gentle expressions conveyed their true state of contentment.

The guild initiation was a success.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to Risukage and Kid Absurdity for helping me fine-tune this chapter! I was really paranoid about a lot of things and I'm more confident about it now. As always, thanks to CjBeats for proofing and helping make sure my fic stays on track. It really helps to know what everyone thinks and I tend to keep all suggestions and comments in mind. I'm doing this fic for fun, but I still want to tell a good story and to improve.

That being said, a lot of stuff is starting up and we're finally getting into more places that I want to explore. Lots of chatting and insight this chapter, along with sassy old men. Good times.

Next chapter will be the finale of Summer!
Dance of the Moonlight Jellies

Chapter Summary

After a relaxing day of being (mostly) by herself, Jade reunites with the squad during the last festival of the summer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stardew Valley was already getting cool with the approaching chills of Fall and some of the trees had already yellowed. This was the last day of Summer. Even wild animals knew the time of year, for they were hurriedly packing up food and making preparations for Winter. Farmer Jade should have been doing the same amount of work for her land, though her mind was somewhere else that day.

As she cleared her farmland, uprooting dying crops and fixing the soil, there was peace. She hadn’t had a nightmare in quite a few weeks, nor did she wake up in cold sweat or really wake up with any sort of discomfort— in fact, a good dream had graced her being for the first time in forever. Jade couldn’t remember too much of it; she recalled a cool breeze, pastel blues and greens, and complete sereneness. No house, no rain, and most importantly, no monster. It was a welcomed change.

Aside from her bouts of paranoia with shadow people and spectres, life was extremely peaceful. Friends, people to rely on, a sense of community... the eager Jade gained all of that during the summertime. The joy she felt, the excitement to see people’s faces— this was something unheard of for a long time. Life on the farm was almost too good to be true, but Jade was happy to be a part of it. Her alternatives involved being miserable while freelancing for grossly underpaid jobs. She had more control here, even if it didn’t involve her personal skills.

“So, what did you do before Pelican Town, then?” curiously asked Alex. He was reclining back in one of Jade’s dining chairs, feet lazily propped up onto the matching dining table. He watched the young farmer as she chopped away at something on a cutting board. Whatever she was making, he was pumped for it— Jade started inviting him for lunch when he didn’t work his summer job, and her food was fairly tasty. Nothing Granny worthy, but there was an unfairness in comparing someone so great to mere novices.

Jade sighed with frustration as she was trying to cut pieces of fish just right. She had finally learned how to gut and clean the fish she caught correctly, but making a perfect meal was still far fetched for her. “I worked at home for a little while. I did have a part time job at a tailor shop, but only really the register and stuff. I used to live on art commissions,” she explained.

Alex crossed his arms behind his head, giving a slight nod in thought. “Art stuff? Hehe, how do you go from an artist to a farmer?”

“Well, pay’s better, for one. I’m still creating something... just plants, instead of, you know. Drawings. I was running into a dead end anyway. It was getting harder and harder to really look for jobs- dammit!” Jade yelled to herself from an irregular fish slice. “Agh! Sorry, this probably won’t be
amazing,” she pouted, then arranging the fish slices onto a dinner plate. She applied seasonings and sauces to make it the nicest she could.

“Oh please, food is food. Thank you for making lunch for me!” he beamed. The athlete properly sat up in the chair and excitedly scoot up closer to the table when Jade walked over to him with the plate. She set it down in front of him with a really anxious expression clouding her visage.

“Ta-da,” she whimpered. “Sashimi. This is my first time making it, but I followed the recipe... please try it and be honest with me.”

“You’re not gonna try it?” inquired Alex. “More for me,” he grunted, then started to eat. His face lit up, smiling with a mouth full of sashimi. He finished that portion and grinned, “Yeah! This is pretty good. Could probably use a little less sauce, but meh, I ain’t complaining.”

Jade huffed and nodded with determination. “Okay! I’ll make it better next time, then. So you enjoy it?”

“Yup, tastes pretty good to me.”

A sigh of relief. “Good... I’m glad. I need to learn how to cook all sorts of things.” She ventured back over to the kitchen to get her own meal. Leftover lasagna seemed like a solid choice for her.

Alex made quick work of his own meal; by the time Jade joined him, he was finishing up the last of it and downing a glass of water. “So,” he returned after a hearty sigh of a full stomach, “you ever going to share your art?”

“Mine?” Jade snorted, mouth full of food. “No, I don’t even have much with me. And I haven’t done any of that in so long. I think the most I’ve done here is doodle some fan art if I can’t sleep or something.”

Alex pushed away his plate since he was finished. “Fan art?”

“You know... like...” Jade noticed the clueless look on Alex’s face and became unsure of how to proceed. “... Do you watch TV at all?”

He nodded. “I do watch gridball games on TV. Though I’d rather go to the actual games themselves.”

Jade hummed in thought. “So... no TV shows, really? Like, any dramas, comedies, cartoons?”

“Nope.”

“Uhh.... How about video games?” Jade asked with a shrug. Alex gave her such a look that answered the question for her. “Okay, this is a little harder to explain then... it’s just a drawing of characters that I like, I guess?” She gave up and just settled to eating. Alex nodded like he understood, though he didn’t really know what it was like to want to draw a fictional figure. Real ones, maybe.

Oh well. “Hey, whatever you’re down for,” the athlete cheerfully concluded. “If you make something nice though, I wanna see.” He stacked her plate onto his when he noticed she had finished eating. With that, he stood up and went to go clean the dishes.

“Sure,” Jade replied with a smile. “If I make something, you’ll be one of the first know about it.”

“Good!” he grinned.
After some much needed banter and chit-chat, it was time for Alex to leave. They said their goodbyes, Alex then mentioning how he would be at the last festival of the summer.

Wait.

“A festival?” Jade asked, shocked.

“Yeah, the moonlight jellies one. Will you be there?” inquired the young athlete.

The Dance of the Moonlight Jellies! Of all the festivals, of course Jade forgot about the one she was looking forward to. Marnie mentioned how Mayor Lewis enjoyed the festival, and more importantly, how he would forget the blemishes that consisted of the entire Luau. This was her official break! And she knew Sebastian spoke of the festival as well... if he found the get-together relaxing, then she definitely would enjoy it. Win-win!

“Yes!”

Jade’s entire day was wasted in the best way she knew how: being a complete couch potato. The Dance of the Moonlight Jellies would begin at 10PM that night, so she had so much time to kill and no requirements other than to simply get through the day. She yearned for her favorite bean bag chair upstairs and plopped into it, wearing a tank top, fuzzy pants, and most importantly, fluffy bunny-eared slippers. She excitedly stamped her feet on the plush carpet when the title screen of a borrowed game flashed onto the TV. For hours, she allowed herself to get swallowed into another world. Jade experienced true bliss for getting to have a personal day to herself. Several snacks and lots of gameplay later, Jade eventually fell asleep while snuggled in her bean bag chair. Her snoring was so loud due to her position in the chair that she actually woke herself up an hour later. Surprised as she may be, she was really happy. Maybe her life was too good to be true for the moment, but she would be damned if she didn’t enjoy it while it lasted.

Time finally closed in and caused her to get ready. The night was pitch black, only the beautiful full moon softly illuminating the sky and ground with cool hues. There was an overwhelmingly cold wind dominating the air that night, causing Jade to bust out one of her old jackets. She kept warm in a favorite outfit that she favored for saloon nights, except with a zipped up red jacket covering her torso. With hands in her cozy coat pockets, she was off.

Hoo-hooing of owls and chirping of faraway crickets accompanied Jade’s short but intimidating journey into town. Rarely did she ever leave when it was so late, and so... dark. Strangely enough, however, she wasn’t put-off by her loneliness in Cindersap Forest. The moon was bright enough to guide the young farmer’s path and she didn’t sense that anything- creature or person- wanted to confront her.

Crunching of crisp grass and rustling of trees transitioned to tiny steps on the stone pavement and rushing wind between dark buildings. Several lamp posts spread throughout the town and shined upon all possible paths, though no one was around. Maybe she was one of the last ones. Jade hurried to the path towards the beach so that she wouldn’t miss anything.

While the beach was certainly a sight to behold in the day, something was just absolutely breathtaking about it at night. Somehow, the moonlight felt even more powerful on the shore. Sand appeared to be blue, except around the shoreline where little boats carried warm-colored lamps. The ocean somehow appeared to be even more blue than in the daytime. Waves crashed in the distance and seagulls flew around, wondering why so many of the townspeople were gathered.
Seeing everyone together again brought a warm feeling to Jade’s heart... well, most people were together, anyway. Some townsfolk stayed on the shore and some were even on the other side of the beach itself. Everyone else stood at the docks, as was evident by the concentration of chatter and the gathering of lights. Jade needed to see her friends and she didn’t see them on the shore, so she figured the docks had her people.

The young farmer passed friendly greetings to those she walked by, wishing Harvey a good night, asking Marnie how her animal babies were doing, and so on. As soon as she stepped onto the docks, she noticed Lewis standing beside a larger wooden boat carrying a lantern. He was positioned near Willy’s house, and there was pretty much no way to avoid him. Jade took a deep breath and approached him with all the confidence she could muster.

“M-mayor! Are you having a good night? Sir?” Jade asked in a cheerful, yet terrified, greeting.

He turned to her without even the slightest hesitation. The expression on his face communicated more of a pleasant surprise rather than any sort of discontentment towards her. “Oh, if it isn’t Jade,” he calmly remarked, smiling through that mustache of his. “I’m having a great night. Now that you’re here, I think we might have everyone for the festival. How are you doing?”

Jade had never felt more relief before that moment. He really did seem fine. “Thank you for asking, I’m doing very well also. I’ve never seen moonlight jellies before, so I’m excited.”

“Oh, it’s a treat. Go on and say hi to others, enjoy yourself. I’ll let everyone have a little more time before I release the boat and call the jellies.” Lewis kindly shooed her off, though his voice was so gentle if not slightly cheerful for the events to come. Jade not only felt relieved, but inspired.

“Of course. Thank you, Mayor,” Jade happily exclaimed, then continued along Willy’s house.

Since she had a whole day to herself, she supposed she could chat with everyone else for the night. She met up with Alex again, Haley trailing along as was usual in public places. Jade noticed Haley’s much more cheerful demeanor. Even the sassier folk waited in anticipation for the jellyfish to arrive. Jodi, Willy, Clint, and who she presumed to be Haley’s sister were also lingering near the house. Jodi seemed calm and relieved to be alone, while the others were simply doing their own business. She even noticed Elliott at the far edge, watching the ocean waves with an increasingly complex feeling stirred into his expression. Jade ventured away from the house and continued further down the docks. She came across Jas, who seemed to be too excited about the potential baby jellyfish to remember that she didn’t like the farmer. If Jas was so pumped, then Vincent was extremely pumped for the jellyfish. As soon as Jade gave him the attention, he rattled on about the rare green jellyfish he’s heard about, and how he was motivated to find it himself.

Finally, her squad. The three of them chat to each other at the very end of the docks, far away from everyone else. Sam and Abigail seemed to be more engaged in conversation, while Sebastian sat on the side, quietly listening and staring out into the ocean. Occasionally, he would mutter a snarky word to keep himself part of the chatter, though he seemed a bit distracted.

“Hey guys!” beamed Jade as she approached them. All three of them turned to face Jade at about the same time, varying degrees of excitement on their faces.

“Jadey!” Abigail cheered first, running over to give Jade a friendly hug. Sam grinned and waved to her, while Sebastian fully stood up to properly greet her.

The young farmer chuckled. “Hi, Abby,” Jade smiled, then walked forward with her to see the other two. She acknowledged Sam’s presence with a half-hearted shove, then shared her own toothy grin to Sebastian. “Are you taking care of these goons well enough?”
“I wish they’d take care of me at this point,” scoffed the raven-hair. He softly smiled to her and moved closer to the three of them. They all stood in a square, facing each other. “This is your first moonlight jelly dance then, huh?”

Jade nodded with glee. “Yes, I’m looking forward to it! And Lewis didn’t bite my face off. It’s already the best day.”

“You’ll enjoy it with or without your face,” Sebastian remarked, his smile wider.

Sam responded with an almost obnoxious yawn. “If you ask me, this is one of the more boring festivals. Watching the jellyfish only make me sleepy,” the blond began. “I also get a little... jumpy. Like I need to... make... something, you know...” He glared at Sebastian with such a devious expression. “... Happen.”

“If you touch me, your ass belongs to the jellyfish,” the shorter male hissed.

Abigail broke out into a cackle. “When did you push Seb in? Wasn’t it a few years ago?”

“Why are you worried about him?!” shouted Jade. “That spiky haired bastard threw me into the ocean a few weeks ago!” She jumped up in an attempt to headlock Sam, though he was far too tall. Sam laughed and spun around in a circle while Jade hung off of his back, giggling.

Sebastian seemed surprised by the fact. “Wait- really?” he inquired.

“Oh yeah, that happened at Sam’s birthday. You came there late,” Abigail snorted. “It was pretty fu-hey! Watch where you’re swinging my girl!” the adventurer snapped, then tugging Jade by her waist. Jade kept a tight grip around Sam’s neck, causing him to bend backwards from Abigail’s pull.

“Ack! Seb! Save me, bro!” Sam desperately squeaked, choking by Jade’s merciless hold.

The young farmer made a cartoonishly evil laugh. “It’s my turn now! The depths of the sea call your name!!”

Sebastian just watched, extremely entertained. He chose not to save his bro, for he wanted to know what would happen next.


Jade blinked. “Oh yeah! Okay. Revenge taken, Papa forgives.” Jade let go and dropped off of Sam with a laugh. She high-fived Abigail for perfect teamwork.

Meanwhile, the blond was completely heartbroken. He pouted his lips to Sebastian in the most puppylike manner possible. “Bro... You shoulda saved me, bro. I coulda been a ghost.”

“Why! I never!” he loudly gasped. Sam threw an arm around Sebastian’s shoulder anyway, suddenly acting completely casual. “It’s okay, I still love you. Even though you wound me deeply.”

“It kinda looked like you deserved it,” chuckled Sebastian.

“Why! I never!” he loudly gasped. Sam threw an arm around Sebastian’s shoulder anyway, suddenly acting completely casual. “It’s okay, I still love you. Even though you wound me deeply.”

“I know you do,” Sebastian said with the roll of his eyes. A smile still remained on his face.

Jade giggled at the two, then staring to Abigail with an entertained expression. They smirked at each other, though Jade’s sight eventually roamed over to the other side of the docks. “Oh- hey! The Mayor must be sending out the boat now. How long does it take for them to come?” the young
farmer wondered aloud, peering over to Lewis. He slowly pushed the boat with the lantern out into the open sea.

Abigail gasped, stars shining in her eyes. “In just a few minutes! Let’s hurry to the edge,” she eagerly answered, taking Jade back to the very end of the docks. The boat slowly rolled out, swaying back and forth from the gently rustling waves. Its light proudly shined to the world before it was too far to truly see.

The four of them kept their attention to the water. Jade sat down at the edge to get a better view, Abigail and Sam both content with standing. Sebastian had exit his favorite blond’s hold to join Jade at the edge.

“Have you ever seen jellyfish before?” Sebastian asked his farmer friend, voice gentle and quiet.

She shook her head. “Not that I can remember... other than television, of course,” Jade responded with equal softness.

“This will be a treat, then. They’re really beautiful, especially the moonlight jellies.”

“Aah, I can hardly contain my excitement,” Jade giggled to herself. Her eyes brightened when she spotted a blue glow approaching the surface of the water. The glow increased, then revealed itself to be a large, round jellyfish with a silvery blue glow. It curiously fluttered about the water like an angel of the sea, others just like it rising to meet the ocean surface.

Most people went quiet, save for a few whispers among townspeople and gasps of awe at these gorgeous creatures. Jade’s focus went from jellyfish to jellyfish, staring at all of them with complete fascination and wonder. She eventually stood on her hands and knees to lean closer to the water.

Sebastian watched her and quietly huffed. “Hey, be careful. They can still sting,” he warned, moving closer to her. For her safety and for his own peace of mind, he held an arm around her waist.

She chuckled. “I’m fine, I’m still on the edge- oh! Look at those! Little babies!” she went in a hushed(yet beaming) tone of voice. Jade pointed to a group of tinier jellyfish, fluttering and dancing in the gentle ocean waves. She wrapped her free arm around him as well, especially since it allowed her to properly lean.

He nodded in acknowledgement. “They’re very cute,” the raven-hair agreed, glancing to her. Despite how cheerful she often was, he never saw her in such a state of childlike awe. Her eyes were wide and reflected the gentle glow of the jellyfish. She would grin when she saw a new one and excitedly whispered to him about what it was doing. Sebastian didn’t even realize that he had started to pay attention to her more than the jellyfish themselves.

Jade completely sat back down, but she didn’t let go of him, and he didn’t let go of her. She marveled at the swarm of jellyfish, each one swaying to the will of the sea. When she didn’t focus on all of them, the ocean just seemed to sparkle with utmost beauty.

“The ocean is glowing so brightly,” Jade murmured, fascinated. “Wow, I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Yeah...” Sebastian muttered in turn. He looked back to her to see her focus, but he quickly became overwhelmed with terror. “... Jade? Are you alright?” he inquired with a frown.

“Huh?” The farmer returned his glance, confused at his expression. She blinked, and then felt tears stream down her face. “Oh...” All she could do was smile in response, then look back at the sea. She wiped her eyes with her free hand and wistfully sighed. “I’m just really happy... this is so beautiful. I
never thought this even existed before I moved here,” she replied in an attempt to sound unaffected. Her tone was wobbly and voice was weak, even though she was nothing but filled with joy.

Sebastian continued to watch her for a while with worry still painted across his face, but he slowly calmed down as she seemed to do the same. “... It’s okay,” he replied with an understanding smile. “I get captured in the moment, too.”

Jade fully relaxed with his words, then deciding to lean her head to his. Sebastian adjusted his sitting so that they could comfortably hold each other.

“The way the moonlight jellies look in the water remind me a lot of my favorite place,” Sebastian mentioned. “All the tiny lights illuminating the night, how far and yet how close they are...” he sighed as well. “The feeling can be so... indescribable.”

“Absolutely,” she whispered in agreement. Together, they watched the dance of the moonlight jellyfish. Eventually, one of the curious creatures after another faded back to the depths of the ocean. The sea soon calmed down, accompanied by only the faint blue glow of the moon.

Begrudgingly, the two of them unraveled from their hold and stood up. The moonlight jellyfish had completed their visit, and so too did the humans. Both Sam and Abigail were gone, causing both of them to feel guilt at not noticing they left. In fact, no one was on the docks. It was nearing midnight, and most of the townspeople had left already.

Most.

“Sebby!!” powerfully yelled Robin, drunk from the lack of sleep. Her bedtime had come and gone, and had to face the consequences. She stomped over to Sebastian and Jade as they left the docks, then followed behind by Demetrius and an extremely exhausted Maru. “There you are!” she shouted, probably louder than she meant to. Sebastian instinctively flushed and let go of Jade once he noticed he was holding her hand.

“Yes, mother, I wouldn’t leave,” he muttered.

“Good!! Did you like the moonlight jellies, Jade?? It was your first time watching them, wasn’t it?” Jade smiled and nodded. “It was, and it was amazing. Did you three enjoy the festival?” she asked in return.

Robin vigorously nodded. “Yeah! And now we’re going home, and I’m sleeping for twelve hours. Lewis can kiss my ass. Right, Dem?” She sleepily laughed.

“Dear, you’re exhausted. Let’s just go,” her husband suggested, not even paying attention to her vulgar expressions.

Sebastian sighed. “Um, actually... you guys go on ahead.”

“Aaawwww,” Robin swooned, noticing the closeness between the two young adults. “It’s so late at night. I think you should walk Jade home, right, hon?” She looked to Jade with a motherly grin, then brought her sight back to Sebastian: “I wouldn’t want you walking home alone, though... So, maybe you could spend the night if she’s okay wi-”

“Spending the night?! Absolutely not!” Demetrius suddenly piped up.

Sebastian suddenly scowled. “Why should it matter?” he asked in return, irritated.
Jade realized the tension. “H-hey, look, it’s not a big deal, you two...” Both of them seemed to take that in their favor.

“But it is a big deal, sweetheart. A grown man shouldn’t be staying in a young woman’s house!” Demetrius suddenly piped up, irritated.

“A grown man! I’m not under your petty rules. If Jade wants me to spend the night, then I very damn well can and will, Demetrius,” Sebastian snapped back in an instant.

Maru suddenly glanced at Jade with worry. Robin also seemed concerned, but she appeared to be more irritated at the sudden argument.

“Guys... Hey, look, it’s fine,” Jade pitifully murmured. “I can just go home by myself if it’s that much trouble...”

“You live in my house, you’re under my rules-

“It’s NOT your house! Mom built it and Mom owns it, not you!” hissed Sebastian. “Why is it that you only ever seem to have rules when it’s about something I’d like to do? Don’t even pretend like you care about anyone but you and your perfect little daughter!”

“HEY!” screamed Robin, causing the both of them to shut up. She had completely woken and heaved with rage, glaring at both Demetrius and Sebastian with ferocity and disappointment. Both of them took a step back, intimidated.

The fiery-haired mother glared to Sebastian first. “I am absolutely appalled with your behavior. Since when do you speak first and ask questions later?”

“Mom-”

“I’m not done!” Robin growled. “You do NOT talk to your step-father like that, and you do not bring your sister into this! I built the house, but we are a family, dammit! He owns our home just as much as I do!”

Sebastian sighed and went quiet.

“Understand?” she glared.

“... Yes, mother.”

“And you!” Robin turned to Demetrius, who was already nervously sweating. “Numbnuts, I’m the one who suggested that he walk her home and stay the night! He is a grown-ass adult, so treat him like one!” she furiously huffed and poked his chest threateningly. “You knew exactly what was going to happen when you decided to yell like that, so don’t even act like you had no part in this!” She finally crossed her arms and continued to glare.

“... I’m aware, love. I apologize,” Demetrius murmured with a frown.

“Good,” she hissed to the both of them. “Now, to settle this officially... Jade.”

Jade suddenly came to attention, staring at the terrifying mother with fear in her eyes. “Y-yes, Robin?”

“Hon, what do you want? Do you want Sebastian to take you home?” Her voice was soft and gentle towards the young farmer, causing her to relax.
“I...” Jade flushed with a frown, dropping her head. “Well, I... Yeah, I would appreciate that. It’s a pretty long walk and I’ve never been out this late, so...”

Robin gave a confident nod. “Then it’s settled. Maru, Demetrius, we’re going home. Sebastian, when you’re home tomorrow, I fully expect both you and your step-father to talk this out. Officially. I am so sick of this shit,” she sighed. Her voice still showed strain, but she seemed more exhausted than angry at this point. Jade had seen that exhaustion before... the family tension was really taking its toll. “Jade... I’m sorry you had to see this. I wish I could say it doesn’t happen much, but... Either way, I hope you have a good night, hon.” She approached Jade and gave her a light hug, then glared to Sebastian. “You take good care of her.”

Sebastian respectfully looked at Robin in the eyes; he knew he would have been scolded more if he didn’t. “Yes, mother. I will.”

Robin fully seemed to calm down with that statement, and then pat Jade on the shoulders before stomping off. Demetrius followed behind without another word, then Maru glanced sadly to Jade before trailing her parents.

Jade and Sebastian were finally left alone, though neither of them could move for a moment. The raven-haired man glared towards Pelican Town enraged, fists clenched, shoulders tensed. The young farmer was trembling, shocked from the argument, Robin’s outbursts, and just... this.

“... Sorry,” he eventually muttered, breaking the silence. He passively offered his hand to her. “Let’s not have your day end like this.”

“Yeah... it’s... it’s fine.” Jade took his hand, and they started walking. “Um...”

“Hm?”

“... I know you’re not okay. And... I think one way to help would be to... talk about it? It sounds like this has happened far more than just this time...” She scanned Sebastian’s body language to make sure she wasn’t overstepping any boundaries. His shoulders were slowly relaxing, at least. “Would you like to talk about it?”

Sebastian let out another frustrated sigh at the suggestion, but he didn’t want to keep Jade in the dark. “Okay,” he started.

That was a long walk home.

Chapter End Notes

This was a chapter that started out with a plan and turned into "HOW DID THAT HAPPEN??" but i'm pretty happy with how it went and we got some more issues addressed so I'm game. Other than the argument at the end, the day went pretty well for Jade. Good thing Seb is taking her back since he probably needs a break from the family anyway.

Fall is coming, and it shall come beautifully! A lot of stuff is going to happen that I'm excited to address. Thanks for sticking with me this long.
Dealing With It

Chapter Summary

Sebastian spends the night with Jade while carrying a ton of unresolved baggage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"He’s been doing this shit since I was a kid."

Such enraged words marked the beginning of the rant that Jade always felt was coming, but was never sure of when. Even calling it a rant wouldn’t give his feelings proper merit; this was something that had built up for years of merely ‘dealing with it’, grumpy conversations only truly taking form over instant messaging or sprinkling into daily dialogue that everyone already grew accustomed to. Sebastian was furious, exhausted, and excessively frustrated with the aftermath of the last summer festival. Moments before that unavoidable argument, he had never felt more engrossed in the world. From the curious floating jellyfish, to being around his beloved friends, to watching Jade’s first experience with the festival, he felt so... happy. How could a couple of ill placed comments destroy his entire evening?

It could happen with such ease, apparently. He had explained some previous arguments about Demetrius, how he felt mistreated in the household, and how the ‘house rules’ only seemed to apply to him when convenient for Demetrius to exercise his ‘fatherly privilege’. Sebastian seemed to have a lot of backed up hatred for Demetrius, bringing Jade a terrible sadness in her heart. She wanted to fix his troubles, but she only knew how to do one thing.

Listening. She listened to him the whole way back to her house, giving only understanding nods and short comments to show she was invested in the talk. When they got to the farmland, Sebastian couldn’t take it anymore. This was the first time in weeks she saw him pull out a cigarette. “Sorry, I really need this,” he mumbled to her before holding the cigarette in his mouth and igniting the end with his lighter. He knew Jade didn’t react very well to smoking and he was very well aware of the effect it had on his health, but if anything, it helped relax him. He stood in front of the young farmer’s house and tapped his foot impatiently as he breathed in his cigarette. Jade quickly ran to the house to turn on the porch and house lights.

Afterwards, she grabbed a flimsy wooden sword and started walking back to him. The sword faced a lot of wear, but was still sturdy. “Hey, um... I can tell you’re just taking a break, so maybe we can do something constructive when you continue the talk.”

“Really? You’re actually willing to hear me talk more? I feel like I haven’t even covered the tip of the iceberg yet.” He scoffed, angrily gazing out into the black of the night. He decided to focus on the shadows cast by the warm glow of the house lights. He heard Jade’s footsteps towards him and glanced at her with the corner of his eye. “…A wooden sword?”

“Mnhm. My training dummy is good for stress.”

“Huh... maybe that’s not a bad idea,” he pondered aloud.
“Yes, but you can finish that first. I’ll be over here.” Jade trot over to the place of her training dummy, which currently took refuge at an empty space to the left of her home. In a few minutes, Sebastian finished smoking, kindly disposed of the cigarette butt in an outside garbage can and joined her.

He sighed. “Where do you want me to begin?”

“You were talking about your career choices.” The young farmer handed him the wooden sword and stood back to see his practice. Sebastian’s hits to the training dummy were tactical at first—striking with precision, skill, swiftness. He was doing what he did best.

“Things like that make me wonder why Mom even wanted to marry him,” he started with a growl, though he seemed a lot calmer than before. The outbursts and the last smoke seemed to help a little. “I’ve never even seen my grandparents, because that’s how much they didn’t get along. They wanted her to live a traditional life, live as a housewife and wear Sunday dresses. That didn’t fly with her, of course. She was always about being herself,” he continued, striking the training dummy in the chest, “doing what she’s passionate about, proving her worth. Doing a man’s job ten times better than anyone with balls. Carpentry wasn’t in her family, but it was in her blood.”

Jade sat at the edge of her porch, watching him closely. She gently swung her legs and silently admired his fighting form.

“Mom was—... is, an inspiration to me. And at least she tried to raise me right, with ideals that I didn’t have to follow anything in a traditional light. Maybe I wouldn’t always succeed, even if I tried hard, but damned if I never tried.” His strikes against the training dummy were becoming a little more fierce, though he still maintained his composure.

He halted his breath as he swung the sword once more. “Mom always talked about trying your best. So I did. I did all of that. I wanted to impress her... I wanted to impress them.” The training dummy wobbled from the last attack.

“I aced all of my classes every single year of my school life. I took all kinds of classes, even shit I hated. I fucking enrolled in advanced placement for subjects I didn’t even want to breach. Give me all the history and science in the world, but I took math to get ahead! To get ahead just once, and maybe hear a... hear just one, one fucking word of praise.” He grit his teeth and held the sword tightly. With an angry scream, he jabbed at the dummy’s head. “MATH didn’t fucking WORK!”

He continued, strikes getting heavier and less thoughtful. “Every little thing had to be commented on!! Why didn’t Sebastian get a perfect score? He got a 97 but Maru would have got 100! He couldn’t be that smart, since his fucking sister was the one who skipped ahead TWO grades!” Another hit. “Who cares if he wrote a ten page essay, Maru’s was twelve pages!” Another. “What did you do to your clothes? Your hair? Making some kind of statement?” One more. “Only little kids play with fucking toys, Sebastian!” Jade stood up with worry, noticing his rage building even further. “She’s so sociable, meanwhile this sad sack of shit gets panic attacks in a full fucking classroom! What a disgrace!” He swung at the dummy so hard that its head popped right off and rolled onto a patch of dirt. “... Shit... sorry.”

Jade worriedly smiled. “I actually sliced the head off with my real sword and kinda just... put the head back. I was having a stupid day,” she laughed with softness in her voice. “... How are you feeling?”

“I’m...” He sighed. “I’m better. Just... angry.”

“It’s natural to feel angry... it sounds like most people never took the time to acknowledge and
understand you.” The young farmer stepped over to the fallen dummy head and stuffed it with some of the hay that fell out. She slowly walked back to the training dummy itself and placed the head back on top, mumbling an ‘I’ll put it back together later’ under her breath.

“Not that it really matters anymore. I gave up with Demetrius, after constantly disappointing him.” Sebastian twirled the wooden sword in his hands absent-mindedly. “It didn’t end there, but I did give up talking to him. I didn’t bother to tell him why I didn’t go to college, or why I wanted to become a programmer. I’ll only hear words about how I’m throwing away my future, I’m not making enough money, I’ll just waste my funds on games, blah blah...” Sebastian offered the sword back to Jade, which she took before he sat on the grass and collapsed back to stare at the night sky. “He’ll never know how much money I actually have. I’ve been saving it up for so long.”

Jade lightly tossed the sword aside to sit beside him.“For anything in particular?” she asked, watching him stargaze.

“For getting away.” He frowned. “Ever since I started freelancing, I started saving up. Just... to move out of Pelican Town. I hate it... Hated it.” A sigh escaped his throat. “Maybe I just... hate living in that basement,” he quietly muttered. “But... I never felt like I belonged here. Zuzu City always had a nicer appeal. A place where no one cares what the hell you’re doing.” He sighed again. “Unfortunately, the apartments are so expensive... and if I go now, I’ll have to land an embarrassing part-time job. Maybe I should start job hunting...”

The young farmer softly pat him on the head. She wanted to speak, but she didn’t know exactly what to say. This was Sebastian’s time to talk about himself, which was an opportunity he never really seemed to have with anyone else.

“I... I mean. I have Sam, and Abby sometimes... and you.” He sighed in frustration this time, turning his head to look at Jade. His head flopped to its side, so he tiredly glanced at her leg instead. “... I don’t know what to do with myself.” The raven-haired man mustered enough energy to look her in the eyes. “Jade... Maybe it’s unfair to ask you for advice, but... What should I do?”

“Hm...” Jade continued to watch him while trying to not upset herself too much with Sebastian’s troubles. She had welled up with emotions; seeing him so upset caused her to feel bias against anyone and everyone who wronged him. On the other hand, however, she tried to keep a calm conscience. She knew that a lot of it was him filtering his frustrations- Demetrius didn’t actually call him a disgrace or scold him for a non-perfect grade, she hoped. He had obviously thought about escaping Pelican Town for a while, though no matter how logically he planned it, it just seemed... off. “Well,” she began with hesitation, trying to word her best. “I think... I think you should be there for your mom.”

Sebastian peered away from the young farmer, listening. He was in serious thought.

“It sucks to be stuck there... Especially with a step-dad that doesn’t understand you, and fails at trying to understand, but... your mom never let you down, did she?” Jade asked. Her question was a mix between a rhetorical and a genuine one; she felt like Robin was the only family member Sebastian felt close to, but she didn’t want to completely jump to conclusions.

“Well... No...” Sebastian murmured.

“I’ll be honest... Zuzu City is... it’s... If it’s anything like the city I used to live in, it’s full of people. Full of corporate mess, tiny overpriced apartments, high levels of crime, drugs, the works, it’s...” She frowned. “It doesn’t sound like you.”

Sebastian went quiet again.
“I had to escape the city. I had to,” Jade started. “I preferred living on the road, homeless, for a year, rather than return to my old apartment. And... And I had a ton of shitty jobs, I wasn’t happy with any of them, and I did freelancing on the side, too...” The young farmer continued to speak, but she wasn’t sure she was doing the right thing. She didn’t really want to talk about herself, though she hoped it would provide some proper insight. “I think that you could live in Zuzu City. I think you’re very capable of landing a good job, getting a nice apartment, but...”

A moment of silence. She conjured up enough words to continue: “But... You’d be leaving all the people you know. Time by yourself can be nice, but... being completely alone is something else. Walking in a city, surrounded by thousands of people you’ve never seen... it’s the loneliest feeling of all. I was alone for a really long time... And, I struggled with it for a while. Sometimes I still do.” Jade’s arms started shaking and her teeth chattering unintentionally. She hugged herself and tried to regulate her breathing. “Y-you don’t have to be alone, though,” she weakly muttered.

“Maybe Zuzu City ends up right for you after all, or maybe you find a different town to call home... Life can be so weird like that. I wish I could tell you for sure what to do, but until then...” Her heart was beating like crazy since she was so nervous. In her mind, she prayed she was saying everything right. “Whenever someone upsets you and you can’t stay in the house, you can... you can come over and stay, okay? You don’t even have to say anything. I know it can help to be around someone familiar, and to take a break from certain people. You don’t even have to be in the same room, if you don’t want... I just don’t want you to be alone.” She took a deep breath and shakily exhaled.

“Just... be there for your mom, and... be here for yourself. At least until you figure everything out,” Jade concluded.

Sebastian slowly sat up, not bothering to fix the hair that flicked over his face. He next propped himself up on his knees and peered down to the still sitting farmer, then quickly leaned forward and tightly wrapped his arms around her. Jade was slightly pushed back from the force of the embrace, but was more focused on him than herself at the moment. Her face instantly flushed from such an abrasive move, especially from someone who sought only minor contact, if any at all. The young farmer did recall the sly hug around a week ago, but she felt like it was more about Alex than about her...

This was different. Jade snapped out of shock and gently returned his embrace. She could feel his chest shifting from a terrified pound to a consistent rhythm the longer they stayed there. She felt a quiet sigh escape his throat once more and saw that he had finally relaxed. He continued to hold her for a minute before eventually letting go. Without saying a word, Sebastian left for the front porch and then entered the house. Jade had to take a minute to stargaze before mustering the courage to enter the house after him. Though it took her a moment, she understood why he hugged her like that. In a situation of constant stress, only wordless actions could properly express gratitude.

You’re welcome, Sebastian.

--

Jade supplied her raven-haired companion with extra pillows and blankets for his stay on the couch. She had bid him a goodnight as he settled and then she left to her room to go shower, but later returning to find him still awake. He still hadn’t talked at all, but he didn’t really seem ready to sleep, either. The young farmer decided to break the ice:

“Still awake? It’s 2 AM. I’m screwed tomorrow,” she pitifully laughed. “But, I’m good. Thank you for taking me home. Take all the rest you need.”

“... Sorry for prodding some more, but are you feeling better?” she inquired.

Sebastian actually sprouted a faint smile from the question. “Yeah... I’m fine. I just get into thinking moods sometimes. I know I should sleep, but I don’t really feel tired.”

The young farmer crossed her arms and hummed in thought. “Well... I got a ton of movies and games at your disposal. I trust you to not make hell of the place while I’m sleeping,” she chuckled. “Oh, I do have some books... whoops, crap, I never returned this to you,” she pouted, noticing one of his borrowed books on her nearby shelf.

“I’ll come for it later... Do you have a pen and some paper anywhere?” he asked.

“Uhhh-” Jade darted her eyes back and forth as she tried to recall where any could be, “Oh!” She squeaked, then taking off into her bedroom. She emerged with a sketchbook and a simple black pen. “I doodle before sleep sometimes,” the young farmer explained with a somewhat embarrassed laugh, opening the sketchbook to a blank page before offering both materials to him.

He gave her a nod as a thank you and tapped the end of the pen to his chin as he tried to think. In a few seconds, his eyes lit up and he scribbled some writing down on the paper. A few more seconds passed before he glanced at the still standing Jade. “Hey, which is better: a dragon that is the size of a housecat but can still breathe fire and wreck one’s shit, or a fruit bat that’s the size of a house but it’s harmless?”

Jade giggled from his question and sat down at the other end of the couch. “Depends... is the bat domestic? Like, can I ride it on a saddle? Does it have a dog’s loyalty?”

“Huh.” Sebastian wrote some more. “Yeah, bat wins.”

“What are you doing?” she grinned.

His smile was more genuine this time. “Writing random concepts helps me sleep. It’s a form of organization for my mind, in a way.” He went quiet again, drumming up another comparison. “I just like figuring stuff out. Kinda like math problems, except fuck math.”

“As was previously established,” she chuckled again.

“Yes.” He smiled at her, but then glared at the paper, tongue sticking out the corner of his mouth as he tried to draw something. “Dammit.”

“Haha, what is it?”

“I just drew a bat that only a mother could love,” he replied with a dramatic, strained voice. He turned the sketchpad around to show her. Jade stifled her laughter as she stared at the page; the top left corner had a couple of notes in perfect, clear handwriting, while the bottom right corner of the page had a blob that vaguely resembled a bat with fangs. She could still tell it was a bat, and it was so cute in the most elementary way.

She snorted and clapped her hand over her mouth. “Oh my goodness,” she spoke, slowly removing. “Here, let me help you.” Jade laughed a bit as she slyly took the pen from his hand and doodled onto the paper herself. Once she was finished, she returned the sketchpad and pen to him. Above Sebastian’s drawing was a much more realistic, fluffy bat, complete with a saddle strapped on its back and huge, pointy ears. The bat’s wings had circled over the tiny, blobby bat, a dialogue bubble with the text ‘my son! < 3’ written inside of it. Sebastian sent out a hefty laugh upon witnessing the drawing.
“I love this,” he chuckled. “Is Bat Mom helping her malformed son somewhere?”

Jade giggled and settled on the couch some more, hugging her legs while watching him. “She’s taking him to bat school, obviously.”

“Ah, yes. The most dignified bat school of the region. I should draw him with a... batpack.” Sebastian snickered to himself as he doodled more on the paper.

Jade’s low laughter turned into a high cackle. “That was bad and you should feel bad!” she snorted.

“You love it,” he said.

“I do,” she laughed in return.

Both of them forgot they were supposed to sleep, and instead passed the sketchpad back and forth to continue the hypothetical giant bat story. They ended up developing a world for the bat family, making ridiculous creatures to befriend the bat family, and so on. They had an endless amount of fun coming up with multiple ideas and concepts, Sebastian offhandedly mentioning that he would love to make games one day. Without skipping a single beat, Jade told him that he should bring their silly ideas to fruit. He seriously considered it, if only for fun.

Writing and reflecting back and forth of ideas slowed down in time. Sebastian was actually in the middle of a statement when his voice faded. His head went limp on the couch arm and his eyes could no longer stay open. Still in his right hand was the pen, and on his stomach lie the sketchpad. Jade was in a better state of consciousness, but after Sebastian’s long period of silence, she realized it was finally time to settle down. The sketchpad and the pen were placed on a nearby coffee table, then Jade covered up the exhausted programmer with a cozy blanket. After hearing obnoxious meowing from the front door, Jade let Onyx back inside, then finally ventured to her room.

She collapsed in her bed and stretched her arms and legs with a yawn. The young farmer knew she would hate what the alarm clock would tell her, though she decided to look to the nightstand beside her anyway: 3:25 AM. Wow. Tiredly, Jade disabled her 6 AM alarm and curled up in her covers. Farming could wait until she was well rested.

Chapter End Notes

This was a really exciting chapter for me to write because of the intense dialogue in the beginning and just the more sprinkles of cute fluff. More exposition and more buildups will also lead to some more resolutions and conclusions. I'm at that point in the story where a lot of building up is beginning to pay off and some of the bigger points in the story will be properly approached. WHOO

Sebastian's family situation and how the four of them deal with it has always been one of my favorite topics in the game, so I'm really excited to get into the base of it and explore it further. We've only really seen a little bit of Robin's and Maru's thoughts about it, but since the bulk of the conflict is between Sebastian and Demetrius, we'll see how that turns out.
After Sebastian leaves for the day, Jade focuses more on her farm duties and realizes something about her rabbits.

While the first day of Fall greeted Jade in the friendliest of manners through a shining autumn sun, Jade could not return that same amount of enthusiasm. Her bed seemed ten times more comfortable than before, even though all she did was stay up some hours later than her regular bedtime- or, well, several hours. She glanced over to her alarm clock that shown it was nearly noon, causing her to roll off her mattress with a grumble.

The young farmer, after dressing for a long day of work, waddled out of her room to check if Sebastian was still there. He was, and seemed extremely comfortable in the blanket and pillows. One pillow was under his head, while the other was over his face. Onyx had also made a comfortable napping place on Sebastian’s stomach, curled up into a ball and snoozing with content. Jade giggled at the sight; if she didn’t know better, she wouldn’t have guessed that anyone was on the couch at all.

“What’re you laughing at?” came a tired, muffled voice from said couch. A hand emerged from the blanket to pet the purring Onix.

“You,” Jade laughed at a more comfortable volume. He was awake after all, it seemed. “Did I wake you?”

“Nah, I’ve just been lying here a little bit. Not like I can get up,” the raven-hair mumbled, fully aware of Onyx claiming him as a seat.

“Yeah, you’re pretty trapped there.” She chuckled. “Good morning. Well, afternoon, in a few minutes. Are you hungry?” the young farmer kindly inquired, already walking for the kitchen. Sebastian grabbed the pillow off his head and tossed it to the other end of the couch, causing Onyx to jerk awake. Only seeing a pillow, the fluffy black beast quickly relaxed and dozed off once more.

Sebastian adjusted himself enough to barely peer into the kitchen. “Whatever you give me is fine... Do you have coffee?”

“Nope... I got orange juice,” Jade responded.

“Wha- who doesn’t have coffee?” he groaned almost pitifully, knowing there were circles under his eyes.

The young farmer searched through her fridge, looking for anything that would be good to make. Eh... nothing really stood out. She needed to go and buy fall seeds from Pierre’s place anyway, so she could probably buy some lunch if the saloon was open. “I have to run to the shop since I’m pretty empty here... I could get some coffee for you, if you’d like. I’m more of a tea person, so I
don’t have any coffee in my house.”

He sarcastically clicked his tongue. “Typical loser choice of drinks,” he tried to say in a snobby tone, but a yawn had interrupted his flow. “You don’t have to bring me coffee, hun. Thanks, though.”

She suddenly paused and stared over to him with disbelief. “Hun?”

“What?”

“You just called me hun,” Jade stated as a matter of fact, expression showing her amusement in overabundance.

“... What?” Sebastian slowly descended back down into the pillow below his head, half-hoping she was kidding. Jade broke out into a cackle, cheeks flushing from such a slip of the tongue. His face reddened as well, partly due to embarrassment and the fact that he was too tired to even moderate his statements. “Shut up!” he weakly yelled, pulling the blanket up over his face.

“Would you like me to bring back some spaghetti, Robin? Tell me. How are the kids doing?” Jade teased in between her laughs, walking up to him. She poked his face through the blanket, causing him to unfurl the covers and flail at her.

“I hate you,” he snapped in a low grunt after she backed away. His childish response only caused her to laugh again. All the commotion caused Onyx to jolt back awake and escape to some other part of the house. Sebastian grumbled something that Jade couldn’t hear and turned onto his belly. He buried his face in the pillow, then after a few seconds, inquired: “Why are you still here?”

“Haha! Oh, sorry. I know you’re a very busy carpenter,” she snorted, extremely entertained. Jade’s laughter finally died down enough to grab her backpack right at the house’s entrance, then grasped for the front door. “I’ll be off getting some food and farm stuff. If Alex comes over and your son misbehaves, his ass is grass!”

He wanted to create an irritated and snarky response, but he heard the front door open and close before he could. An hour passed of tidying up the living room, fixing his hair for the day and dreading going back home. He knew he would have to leave Jade’s house at some point and get the interaction with his step-father over with, though he didn’t want to deal with it at all. There wasn’t as much pent up frustration thanks to his massive tirade the previous night, so at least he wouldn’t be unnecessarily caustic... Still, trying to talk it out with Demetrius always ended up the same way.

Usually Robin was there to mediate them both, Demetrius spouting honorary step-fatherlike things to say, how he just ‘cared’ about Sebastian and wanted the best for him. Sebastian, knowing he would only cause more trouble, stayed quiet and begrudgingly stated he understood Demetrius’ reasons for whatever situation. Robin didn’t believe her son at all and knew he was frustrated, but the interaction exhausted her more than anyone else. She let them get back to whatever they usually did while she had to go vent about her own troubles- usually by chopping down trees. No one was at each other’s throats, so it was resolved until next time for the most part.

Jade returned with quite a few grocery bags; one of them was full of packaged food from the saloon, while the others were full of seed packets, various consumables, and a sack of dry cat food. In one of her hands, she held a hot and lidded cup of coffee. Sebastian was sitting on the couch and watching television when she entered. “Hey, I’m back!” she cheerfully called, which made him to stand and walk over to her in greeting. “Oh, there you are. Here,” she started, giving him the coffee, then heading over to the dining table to put everything else down. “Whew! I should have worn a jacket,
it’s already getting so chilly.”

Sebastian smiled to her before glancing down at the coffee. “Aw, you didn’t have to.”

“Yes I did, Grumpy. I got the coffee black, but I have sugar and whatever else you fancy coffee drinkers need if applicable.” Jade groaned as she took off her backpack, then flopped onto the nearest dining chair. She started rummaging through one of the grocery bags for the meals she bought.

“Hah, I’m almost flattered. Almost.” He watched her and sipped the coffee given to him.

The next portion of the day was spent eating their first meal of the day, chatting, making light of the first day of Fall. Jade mused on about how the Stardrop Saloon was open for lunchtime, the prices of seeds, and anything else that was on her mind. Sebastian mostly listened, partly because he was eating and partly because he just didn’t know what to say. Going back home weighed heavily on his mind and hearing Jade’s relaxing voice delayed the inevitable.

Jade started on her farming duties no later than 2 PM. Around her stalks of corn, she carefully tilled the soil and planted some more corn, a row of cranberries, and a patch of pumpkins. She saved a lot of her money from past harvests, so she was able to splurge and get some of the far more expensive crops. Sebastian watched her fulfill her farming duties as he finished drinking his coffee. The breeze felt very pleasant and he had never seen an actual farmer at work before. The process, although monotonous, was really interesting and calming to him. She would occasionally yell to the porch to talk to him, which he answered with equal snark.

Eventually, Sebastian knew he could no longer stay even if he wanted to. A statement from the previous night had lingered in his mind: Be there for your mom, be here for yourself. It was time for him to talk to Demetrius, and not for self-closure... the very least he could do was fulfill Robin’s request. “Guess it’s time for me to head off,” he stated as he approached the still working Jade. “Thanks for letting me hang out.”

Jade dropped her gardening hoe with an exhausted sigh to better focus on him. “Aw, no problem. You’re always welcome here, you know... and don’t be afraid to message me, okay?” She worriedly smiled to him and took his hand to hold. The raven-hair didn’t verbally respond, though he gave a nod of acknowledgement and a stare that showed his thankfulness as well as reluctance.

"Uh..." He started after their some brief silence. He stared at her, appearing as if he actually did have something to say. However, a moment passed and he couldn't bring himself to speak. "... Bye," he muttered, then slowly let her hand go and finally left the premises. Jade watched him with concern, focusing back on her work after he passed the farm gates. She hoped the confrontation would go well, but a sinking feeling told her that it was more complicated than she knew.

The rest of the day was her own, as was her farm. All of her crops were successfully planted in their plots, watered to perfection, and she went to her large rabbit coop to give even more attention. Jade spent some time with her rabbits, idly reading a farming manual after she had properly greeted them and brought them more hay. She had made a comfortable seat on a generous pile of straw when she noticed something slightly different about her rabbits.

Butterscotch and Plague were not only larger, but... fluffier. Jade cast her reading aside and picked docile Butterscotch up to properly examine her. Butterscotch was officially an adult, and from the length and looseness of her fur, she was properly able to give wool. After some wrestling with the smaller, faster Plague, the same proved to be true. Their fur coats had grown at a rapid pace, so it
was time to do something about it.

Jade excitedly grabbed the proper brush to groom them and receive their wool. The fluff came off effortlessly and the rabbits themselves enjoyed the attention. By the time the young farmer had finished, there were two impressive masses of multicolored wool. She collected the newly created goods and opened the bunny-sized gate for the two to run out and feel the fall breeze. Jade didn’t know what to do with the wool exactly, but none of it would be shipped until she had a good idea. To better brainstorm, she returned to her house and properly stored the wool in an empty container.

“...I can’t believe I didn’t really think this far ahead,” the farmer admitted to herself with a sigh. “...Wait.”

Immediately, she rushed upstairs to her computer desk. Yes! They were there! She swiftly approached the desk and took a small collection of papers with descriptions and illustrations written by the Junimos. She put down the only goal she completed, which said to “Grow the largest crop of all.” A majority of the instructions Jade had trouble understanding, but there was one task that suddenly made sense:

“Obtain a gift from an animal friend.” Next to the vague statement was a scribbled yellow blob. Perhaps she was wrong, but after brushing her rabbits, she recognized the blob as a mass of wool. Or at the very least, something related to her animals to begin with.

“I’ve found my next goal,” Jade ecstatically told herself.

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The Community Center was as barren as it always was, save for the magically refurbished storage room. Jade confidently walked to the main area with her backpack, secretly hiding the terror and doubt she felt towards her offer not being accepted.

“Junimos! I’m here!” she boomed, glancing around the dilapidated foyer. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around in a while! Work is slow, but I want to try my best with this.”

The young farmer plopped in front of the destroyed fireplace to shuffle out the wool she collected from Butterscotch. The wool was white and tan as she was, but it was yellow enough to count. “I don’t really know where to put this, so...” Jade took the bundle of wool and set it out in front of the fireplace. She instinctively glanced above at the plaque that contained one of six golden stars, the lone star representing her only successful task so far.

Slowly, some curious magical Junimos crawled out from several empty spaces; from the tiny hut beside the fireplace to the very floorboards Jade sat on. They all floated, bounced, and tip-toed over to the foreign material placed on their land to examine.

“Oh... hey, all of you... is this acceptable? For one of the missions?”

None of them paid attention to Jade for the moment, all of them scanning and squeaking to each other about the woolly substance. A soft yellow Junimo, one that appeared to be an expert in the matter, stood the closest to the wool and touched it with a tiny, stringy arm. The young farmer saw its dark eyes sparkle in delight as it squeaked its loud and eager approval. The group of junimos all hopped excitedly, cheering. With that, the yellow Junimo picked up the wool and returned to the hut.

“I-is that a yes?” Jade asked aloud, flushing. She somehow felt flattered since she could vaguely read
their gestures, but what they were actually saying was completely lost on her.

Instead of receiving an answer, all of the Junimos surrounding her disappeared in a cloud of sparkling light. Jade stood up, checking her surroundings with confusion. “Um... Hello?” she weakly asked.

Just then, the yellow Junimo from before had stepped back out of the hut, this time containing a golden star. It carefully made its way to the fireplace and then hopped up high enough to successfully place the star into another indentation on the plaque. There were two out of six stars, causing Jade to practically burst with excitement.

“So you did accept! Thank you!” Jade beamed, kneeling down to the little yellow Junimo. It hopped with equal enthusiasm and squeaked, then bouncing its way to the hallway at the left of the building. The young farmer was led to another room on her left in the middle of the hallway. To her right was the clean storage room, and to her left was... “Wow.”

A colorful plush purple carpet covered the floor of the room, shelves up full of children’s books and toys. Art easels stood at the far end of the room, positioned so the sunlight would hit them through the windows just right. Colorful cabinets contained bountiful arts and crafts supplies, cubbies full of reference books, empty journals, and even more toys. Comfortable furniture had been positioned beside shelves and crafting stations for several art purposes. This was not only a child’s dreamland, but an artist’s. The supplies Jade saw were extremely high quality, and such a nice set-up created an itch that she needed to scratch.

“You’ve outdone yourselves,” Jade gasped. “Butterscotch’s little bundle of wool pushed you to do all this?” She was completely mesmerized, only snapping out of it from hearing the excited squeaks from her magical softball-sized friends. “Thank you all. I hope to complete the next tasks in hopes that this complete Community Center will do... something.” She proudly puffed her chest, examining the room once more. “You know, I’m already getting some great ideas!”

The Junimos around her feet were ecstatic to hear such dialogue. Jade took some more minutes examining the contents of the room before peacefully making her leave. The eager and colorful creatures followed her around and bounced happily until she left the building. “Bye, little friends!”

--

The young farmer was too exhausted from all the farming work she did, plus the amount of walking it took to travel to the Community Center and back, after already going to town once before in the same day. Needless to say, Jade didn’t have the energy to fish, mine, or forage. Home called her name, and so too did her fridge of newly bought snacks.

Though there was still enough time in the day, Jade decided to put her bunnies back in the barn early. They got enough food to eat outdoors and she didn’t plan on exiting the house once she entered. Jade actually planned for an evening of vegging out, but something was on her front porch.

It was a rather large and wooden contraption. It looked familiar, but Jade couldn’t put her finger on why. A piece of paper with crayon scribblings was attached to the machine:

“We are the Junimos.

Thank you for helping us.
“Aww,” the young farmer mused with delight. “A wool spinner? I could do so much with this! Man, I owe the little guys so much.” Jade examined the machine and pondered where to put it, but nothing really came to mind. Instead, she picked it up and moved it to the far side of the porch, keeping it in a convenient spot but also out of the way. With a giggle, she returned inside, spirits high from such a productive and successful day. “I should tell Seb about this.”

The novice bunny rancher showered the day’s wear away, dressed in pajamas and took a tiny army of snacks upstairs to occupy her as she played games and relaxed. Her very first action involved sitting in her computer chair and bringing up her instant messenger to tell of the good news.

“Oh...”

Jade sighed. Sebastian wasn’t online, and even so, she didn’t think it was a good time to mess with him.

“I hope he’s okay.”

Chapter End Notes

It took a while for me to get this chapter (and the next one) to a point that I liked, but I think I did pretty ok now. This is a more relaxed chapter to get away from some of the more intense stuff, more progression with Jade’s farm and slowly trucking along to get things done.

We’ll be returning to some previously established issues in a few days before finally getting to a chapter that I’ve been waiting to do for a long time.

Huehueheuheuehehue
Sebastian hadn’t shown his face to anyone for the past few days: not his half-sister or step-father, hardly his mother, he didn’t feel like dealing with Sam or Abigail and Jade was definitely not a possibility. Due to shrinking confidence, he would only surface out of his room for eating and hygiene, then disappear back down to his cold and dark basement. For once, there was no abrupt knocking at his door, no eager mother telling him to come get dinner or the same peppy voice telling him that a friend had arrived. For these few days, Sebastian only had two modes: work and sleep. Since he was so stressed, he did the latter far more than the former.

He didn’t want to be home, really. Speaking about his dissatisfaction out loud really had him realize how badly he wanted to get away, and the feeling only increased after having the “final” talk with Demetrius. Eugh, that talk. It went as well as he thought it would, which is to say, it was an absolute disaster. Maybe it would have gone better if he had kept his mouth shut like all the other feud settlements, but Sebastian told them everything that time. He reached his breaking point and his family had to face the consequences. Sebastian spared no details about how fed up he was with Demetrius’s parenting, his anger with the rules, what he refused to follow, et cetera.

The last situation that incited such an argument really put Sebastian over the edge as well. The Dance of the Moonlight Jellies was supposed to be even more special than it already was. For weeks, he had been building up courage to make his “move”. A real move on a real person he cared about, something he’s thought of for ages but could never find the right time, or even the right state of mind, to verbally confess. The calming ambiance of the dancing jellyfish and getting to spend that time with Jade had him realize that the time was ever approaching. His hopes were immediately dashed by that argument, which ruined the ambiance, ruined the plans, ruined everything despite having the perfect night just moments before. His gigantic fest of rambling didn’t necessarily help, either... at least it was good to get it all off his chest.

The time to confess came and left, and Sebastian didn’t know what to do. He didn’t want to speak to Jade when he was still in a funk, but he knew it was unfair on her as well... unlike most people, however, Jade did seem to understand that sometimes he just needed space. She hadn’t messaged him or pestered him at all for the past few days, which was a good sign. Admittedly, he hoped she would say something to give him a proper excuse to leave the house, but he was already growing exhausted of the brick-padded basement walls. While sprawled on the bed in his room, dressed to leave the house, he glanced at texts from Sam.

A sigh escaped his already irritated throat. Sam was well aware that Sebastian needed space, but Sam also didn’t care and still attempted to talk. His blond companion wasn’t being too annoying and just messaged about any casual subject, purposely skating around the family argument. Sebastian knew that Sam was goating him into discussing his problems, so he might as well have taken the bait.

He finally left his gloomy basement to see any human face that didn’t belong to his family. He did
catch a glimpse of Demetrius and Maru in the lab, then Robin at the front desk, but he didn’t really say anything. Robin watched him leave with concern, spouting a “be safe, Sebby!” as he left the front door. Sebastian decided to take his motorcycle from the garage to drive into town instead, which usually resulted in a longer route.

One of two ways to get to town without facing cliffs or approaching stairs was to take the path behind the carpenter shop and to pass a giant, abandoned farmland. Robin took the route several times, Jade even taking the same road when she had spent the night some weeks ago. Sebastian liked the fact that it was abandoned, since it allowed so many trees to grow in what used to be fertile soil for farming produce. As the fall season progressed, leaves of maple trees darkened into various red and fuchsia hues. Oak trees transitioned into bright and fiery yellows and oranges, while the evergreen trees barely softened in color. The farmland was gorgeous, especially as the sky started to turn orange- the evening was one of Sebastian’s favorite times of day, if it had to be sunny. Scents of pine and overgrown flora led into the actual Cindersap Forest, vegetation crowning its land and surrounding its sparkling rivers and lake. Passing Marnie’s ranch and Leah’s cabin then led into town, which coincidentally went right to Sam’s house.

Sebastian parked his motorcycle in front of the bright blue house in question and then approached the front door. It didn’t really matter that his ride was in the road, since there were very few people in town with vehicles and calling the path a ‘road’ was generous to begin with. He gave the door a couple of knocks, but after no response, just entered instead. If Jodi didn’t answer, it meant that she was off running errands. Vincent was either playing with Jas and Penny or was accompanying his mother, and Sam...

Sam was there for sure. Right after entering the home, Sebastian heard the excited strumming of an amplified guitar. The blond just got off of work and celebrated in the loudest way possible. Sebastian passed through a nearly barren living room, which had only a few sofas, a coffee table, a desk and a rug, then ventured close to the source of the blaring instrument.

He went over to the right side of the house and approached the upper-most door in the hallway, carelessly knocking with the knowledge that Sam wouldn’t hear him anyway. He jiggled the door handle, soon followed by the abrupt halt of guitar strumming and the eager stomps of his tall friend. Sam opened the door and there he was. “Hey Mama! I thought you were off to do other stuff today,” he cheerfully started and stepped aside to let Sebastian in his domain.

“Don’t pretend like you didn’t invite me.” Sebastian sighed and accepted the offer. Sam’s room was surely the largest room in the house, complete with plush green carpet, the essential furniture, and a drum set and musical keyboard of all things. To the northern side of the wall, there was a dresser, bookshelf, and trash can full of junk food wrappers. The far right side held Sam’s bed, which had a blue guitar hooked to an amp resting on it. Lower to the right was his desk and computer, while the bottom left corner of the room had exposed wood flooring with the drum set and keyboard. Posters of his favorite bands and hobbies adorned the textured brown walls and windows proudly brought in the slowly fading light from the front of the home itself. While the best friends (mostly) had the same kinds of furniture, Sam’s room was much more cheerful and inviting.

Sebastian took a quick glance around before taking Sam’s computer chair and positioning it at the more open end of the room. He instantly collapsed onto the seat and let out another sigh, as relieved as he was burdened with seeing his intriguing friend. Sam stretched with a yawn and reclined on his bed, adjacent from Sebastian’s location. “I know you’re not here for band practice,” Sam snorted.

“Just ask and get it over with,” the raven-haired man groaned. “I know you’ve been dying to question me.”
The blond laughed, expecting such a blunt answer. “Well, from how you’re talking... seems like it didn’t go very well.”

“It didn’t. I called Demetrius out, and it just made the whole family a bunch of nervous wrecks.”

“Is that why you’re on edge?” he inquired once more.

Sebastian took a moment to answer since he wasn’t actually sure of how to respond. Eventually, he frowned. “It’ll be fine... Demetrius and I being at each other’s throats is nothing new. Just my snapping back is.”

“Okay, so family troubles will die down in time?”

“Yeah, it always does. I don’t think Demetrius will mess with me for a while.”

“That’s good. Baby steps.” Sam grabbed his guitar, unhooked it from its amp, and started playing in an absent-minded manner. “Why’d you snap back this time?”

Sebastian sighed. “I’ve been dealing with this shit for years.”

“What’s different?” Sam sounded almost disinterested, asking questions as if he already knew the answer to them.

“I’m tired of it, that’s what’s different.”

“You’ve always been tired of it.”

The raven-hair crossed his arms. “I guess, but...” He grumbled. “I can only take so much. I’m not some powerful wizard in real life.”

Sam smirked. “Then, what broke you?”

Sebastian didn’t answer. He went quiet and stared at the carpet in contemplation.

“Hm.” The best friend ceased his guitar playing for a moment. “Well, I’ll say what I’ve gathered from these past few days, and you say something if I’m wrong.” He glanced to Sebastian, accepting his silence as approval. “So... Dance of the Moonlight Jellies, it’s beautiful, yadda yadda, spending some time together...” He paused again, reading his friend’s body language. “I’m guessing three things that may have happened, and I have a feeling of which one it is.” The blond emitted a sigh this time, though more airy and dramatic. “One: You told Jade how you felt and she rejected you, ruining your night. Yoba know that’s a total lie. Two: You told Jade how you felt, and your step-dad saw y’all being romantic, OR...”

Sam stared at Sebastian with a serious expression. The raven-hair could feel his glare, which was rather intimidating since it was so rare. They already knew what the next statement would be.

“Three: You didn’t tell her how you felt even though you said you would, and Demetrius still found some way to fuck up your night. The little gust of wind to ruin your house of cards... or however it goes.”

Sebastian grumbled something under his breath, but gained enough composure to return Sam’s watchful eye.

“Is that it?” Sam asked once more, waiting for a response.

“I was going to,” Sebastian answered, discouraged. “I was planning to walk her home, family came
by to talk, then Demetrius pulled a fit about me going to her house. I was just so mad and I needed to get a lot off of my chest... I didn’t even think about it until after it was over.” The raven-hair hung his head and sighed once more. “By the time that happened, it would have been so awkward... it was late at night at her house and everything... I actually fell asleep while talking to her.”

Sam actually laughed, the serious demeanor completely diminishing. “You fell asleep while talking to her? Holy shit, you must have been exhausted, knowing you.”

Sebastian flushed and averted his glance. “Shut up, Sam,” he commanded in a slowly weakening voice. “Confessing is a lot harder than it sounds. You don’t have to worry about stuff like that.”

The blond thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement. “Well, yeah. You know I’m not good at this sort of thing. I don’t get fever dreams or imagine people naked unless they look hilarious. Even then, it’s like...” His statement was interrupted by his own laughter.

Sebastian’s face reddened at a much faster rate. “I haven’t done any of those, you ass!”

“Yet.” Sam broke out into a cackle. “I kid, I kid. Hell if I know, really. My point is, I’ve been dealing with your gooey lovebird shit for like over half of the summer and I don’t want to go through more gooey lovebird shit for the fall. I wish I could help more, but the only thing I can really say is to just go for it, man.” His eager voice finally calmed to a more gentle and friendly tone. “Don’t let your step-dad get in the way of your happiness, you know? Maybe he ruined one night, but you got like... a million more. Totes.” He playfully plucked at the strings of his guitar again. “You think too much and talk yourself down too much. Jade is probably waiting for you to ask her out.”

“How do you know?” was all Sebastian asked.

“... How do I know what?”

The flustered one of the room continued to look away, rubbing his arms. “That she, you know... is waiting?”

Sam loudly hit his guitar and stared at the raven-hair with the most offended expression. “Did you seriously just ask me that?”

“It’s a valid question!” the friend desperately stressed.

“You fuckin’ donut! A blind tourist would see it. You two are painfully obvious about everything, forever. When you told me how you felt, I was like, oh thank Yoba, finally.”

Sebastian defensively stood up, arms still crossed. “What? How?”

“Oh, Yoba. Where do I even begin.” Sam chuckled and set his guitar aside, then laced his hands together. “Okay. Well, pre-Jade, you never smiled like an idiot. Now it’s like, every time we’re at the saloon, you’re smiling at her, watching her at the arcade machines and you often forget what you’re talking about. I remember a few weeks ago you lost your first pool game because you were distracted. And you were playing against me!”

“That’s nothing!”

“AND game night is getting so intimate, it’s actually ridiculous. You’re an offensive wizard giving Jade all the potions and buffs? Really? One time she rolled the game dice and you congratulated her for no reason.” Sam briefly paused. “And then she said thank you and got all giddy, not even noticing that she did absolutely nothing. Because you congratulated her.”
“She’s still learning how to pla-

“Not to mention, both of you do this thing. You do this staring thing, where when the conversation ends, you just stare at each other. And you do it in public a lot? Even Abby was like, holy shit dude.”

“...”

“Oh yeah, and to top it all off, that Alex guy even approached me to ask questions. He talked about how Jade was acting all strange and cooking food she doesn’t eat, then getting all flustered if he asked about you. He also said that you flirted with her in front of him. This is the same guy who was convinced that you and I were extremely gay for each other for like two years-

“Okay, you made your point! Damn!” Sebastian grunted, face as red as a tomato. He meekly sat back down in the chair and planted his face in his hands, overwhelmed with flustered thoughts and embarrassment.

Sam chuckled. “Good, so none of that BS you were spouting earlier. She really likes you, dude. And you feel the same about her. Just get it over with. No time better than the present.”

“It has to be a better time than the present, though. The last festival was so perfect, until...” He sighed, which caused Sam to roll his eyes.

“There you go, doubting yourself again. You know, for the last season I’ve been hearing about how Jade is perfect this and perfect that. You need to realize that she sees that about you, too,” Sam retorted. “So stop makin’ excuses!”

The raven-hair was quiet for a little while longer, though he did seem to be in serious thought. Eventually, he gave up. “Alright...”

“So, what are you going to do?”

“I’ll... I’ll confess, the next chance L...” Sebastian stopped in the middle of his statement, exhaling an exhausted breath. He started walking towards one of the room’s windows. “Yoba, it’s hot in here... I’ll do it the next time I see her, alright?” He pulled one of the windows open and took in a deep breath of fresh air, eyes closed. Once he opened his eyes, he immediately became overwhelmed again and dropped to the floor, hiding under the window. “Shit,” he breathed in terror.

Sam wanted to point out how the house’s temperature was actually comfortably chilly, but Sebastian’s reaction to the window interested him more. He ventured over and looked out the window, a devious smirk forming into a carnivorous grin. “Hey! Papa J!”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Sebastian hissed in a whisper.

Jade was examining Sebastian’s motorcycle with curiosity and concern painted across her visage. With the direction she faced, it seemed like she was heading back home when the ride caught her attention. Her backpack had been bulked out due to a ton of content, though it appeared to be light with how it sat on her back. In her arms, she held a container with cloth, thread, and an assortment of sewing supplies. Her attention instantly focused on Sam when he called for her, causing her to hurriedly trot to the other side of the window. “Sam! Hi!” she beamed. “How are you? Uh... Is Seb here?” she then asked, gesturing to the motorcycle. Instinctively, she peeked inside the room to confirm her suspicions, but didn’t see anyone.

“I’m doing pretty good,” Sam chuckled, extremely entertained. “Sorry, though. Angst Machine isn’t here. He’s just a dum dum and left his motorcycle during his last visit.”
“Oh, I see...” Jade frowned in disappointment. “But... I’m glad he’s been going out. I’ve been so worried, you know? I haven’t heard from him at all for the past few days. I’m beginning to think he’s avoiding me...” She sadly looked down at her container of crafting supplies. “But... I know that’s silly, right?”

“Very silly. He just gets like this sometimes, even though he needs to stop being a pus- AAGH!” Sam had been punched in the knee, causing him to wince. “...Cramps! Damn cramps!”

“Oh, no! Are you okay?” the young farmer inquired.

Sam regained his composure and nodded. “Yeah, sorry, muscle pains, y’know. So. What’s all that stuff for?” He pointed at the supplies she held.

Jade decided to ignore her worries for a moment. “My rabbits can produce wool now and I got a wool spinner, so I can start making money off of them! I’m thinking that I’ll sell some of the cloth by itself, while I try to make some trinkets with the rest. It’ll be the first time I actually do something like this, but I could sell stuff on the internet, you know?” Her smile widened. “I got a lot of these supplies from the Community Center! A couple of the rooms are completely refurbished now and they are amazing. You and Seb should absolutely come check it out with me sometime. I think I’m the only one that goes there.”

“That old haunted place? Pfft, it’s getting refurbished? When did Robin find the time? I thought she’d be too busy dealing with her trash son- DAMMIT!” The blond recoiled again, claiming another case of cramps.

Jade giggled since he was acting strange. “I found the time, actually! I’ve been helping the Junimos- You know what, long story. Anyways, I should go back home... I’m sure you’ll see Seb again since his ride is here... can you tell him hi for me, if it doesn’t bother him?”

Sam slyly smirked. “Sure thing, sexy papa. Why would it bother him, though?”

“Well... I just don’t want to annoy him, that’s all. Has he told you about what happened? I’m just...” The young farmer lost her cheerful ambiance to reveal her true worrisome nature. She had been stressing about Sebastian ever since he left.

“Yeah, he did.”

“Oh... I won’t ask about how the talk went. I’d feel too bad.” She sighed, cheeks lightly flushed.

“It’s okay; I’m sure he’ll tell you later.”

“Maybe... Hm, you know, I should give him something to cheer him up. I know family issues are harsh... Can you help me? What is something simple I could make?” Jade asked, this time with a much more upbeat tune.

Sam grinned. “Make a seashell necklace!”

“Really? I’d have to take a trip to the beach, but... if you think he’d like it!”

Sam audibly gasped and Sebastian covered his own mouth with his hand, face a solid red once more. He glared up at Sam and shoved him at the shin. Sam cackled again and reached out to Jade desperately, “I’m kidding! I’m kidding! Holy Yoba, that was a joke! Ahahaha!”

“What’s funny about it?” Jade asked, glaring at him with confusion.
“Haha, shit, I keep forgetting you’re from the other side of the region. The mermaid pendant, seashell necklace or whatever, is for proposing.”

Jade belatedly gasped and flushed up as well. “Sam!! Don’t joke like that! Proposing was with coral jewelry where I lived!” She huffed and hugged the box of supplies to herself. “...Asshole!”

Sam laughed and reached to pat her on the shoulder. “Sorry, ehehe! But seriously, whatever you make would be good. I have a VERY,” Sam paused to lightly kick his hidden friend, “strong feeling that he’ll be seeing you soon. He’s a lot better.”

“Whew, that’s good to know. Thanks for the info, Sam... But I really should go now, or else I’ll be asking you a million questions. Nice room, by the way!” The young farmer held the crafting supplies with one arm to wave at Sam as she walked off.

“Bye~!” Sam frantically waved her off, then shutting the window. He broke out into another wicked cackle when he saw the extremely devastated look on Sebastian’s consistently flushed face.

“You’re such a prick!” softly yelled Sebastian, refusing to get off the floor.

“Hey, I lied to your oblivious future girlfriend for you. Now, grow a pair and go get her.”

The raven-hair hugged his knees. “That wasn’t fair! I meant I would try tomorrow... It’s too late to do that now!”

“Excuses, excuses,” laughed the blond some more. “You heard her, though. She’s worried sick about you. How dare you break her heart like that?” he dramatically asked, grasping his own chest.

“Shut up!” Sebastian groaned.

Sam walked away and relaxed by his bed once more. “I’ve never seen your face so red for so long. It’s amazing and hilarious!” He whimsically sighed and grabbed his guitar again, happily strumming. “I think I’ve messed with you enough. You know what to do.”

After a few moments, Sebastian stood and glared over to Sam as he tried to calm himself down. A few moments passed before the raven-haired man could effectively speak: “Okay. I’m heading off.” Sebastian went to the room’s exit, then glanced back at his best friend once more. “…I’ll do it tomorrow...”

“I have faith in you, bud!”

He weakly sighed. “Too much faith, but thanks,” he muttered before finally leaving.

Sebastian cautiously wandered out of Sam’s house, then quickly mounted his motorcycle before anyone came out of the blue. He drove off, though he went through town. He exit to the left of town, coming across a bus station and a real road that stretched across both directions, the one leading to the left going into a tunnel. He took the route to the right and drove as the night arrived and the moon took its place high in the sky.

A long time passed, but he eventually reached his destination. He dismounted his ride and stood on rocky ground, the edge of a cliff suspended just before him. The darkening purple night sky was bustling with gorgeous, shining stars, and there was a sparkling city just in the horizon. He took a seat at the edge of the cliff and watched the horizon, allowing a sigh to escape his throat for one final time that night. Without even thinking, he took out his pack of cigarettes to have a smoke. As he prepared to take a cigarette, he stared at the pack for a while, and then stashed them back in his pocket. He brought his focus back to the view, trying not to think about his habits.
Sam was being rough on Sebastian with the whole confession deal, though it helped him in this one case. He really was thinking too hard about this and chose to be blind about a lot of signs Jade may have given. Family issues, relationship struggles, it was all clashing together in a convoluted mess.

He remembered another thing Sam said: baby steps. Family issues could be completely solved later. The rant he had those days ago really did help. The relationship struggles, however...

Sebastian could solve that in the near future, but not at this very moment. Instead, he chose to clear his mind and watch the horizon.

*Jade would like this view*, he thought to himself.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sure you guys can tell that one point of conflict will be tied up in a neat(?) little knot very, very soon. I've had several different ideas of how to approach this topic but it was really hard to truly get it off the ground, so hopefully this chapter makes sense and flows well enough. Next two chapters will most likely deal with this plot string since it's definitely something I've been building up for a while. Like a mini-finale without actually being a finale. Some stuff is off-screen maybe, but I think the bigger, more influential moments have been covered to help drive the "main" couple of the story.

When all is said and done, there will be a greater focus on some other plot strings. That's not to say that this particular part is "finished", though. Ah, you'll see what I mean at least. It'll be good.
Chapter Summary

Abigail informs Jade about passing rumors in town about her; attempts to get Jade to confess.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some days passed with no Sebastian. Really, some days passed with no one at all. Sam and Maru took Penny out for her birthday on the 2nd of Fall, Abigail had been bogged with extra work for her father’s store due to the changing seasons, and Alex had appeared far less due to gridball season and personal schedule adjustments. To make herself useful, the young farmer honed her fishing and mining skills some more; it helped to get her mind off of the unintentional loneliness. Jade might have been worrying too much, but she would have at least expected to hear back from Sebastian by then.

Ever since they established their friendship, they talked practically every day. If they weren’t talking online, chances were that they were meeting up in person- and if that wasn’t the case, one of them would have let the other known when they were busy. Jade didn’t even realize that they had established a routine with each other, though she didn’t have to really consider it before this day. Due to the situation with his step-father combined with Jade’s lack of contact, her nerves were high and her concern was even higher.

Luckily, she came across Sam the previous day and was relieved to learn that Sebastian was doing relatively well- of course she was still completely bummed about hearing no word from him, but his well being mattered more than her regular conversation fix. Her personal duties kept her busy, anyways. After various web searches and examining the contraption herself, she learned how to use the Junimos’ wool spinner to make usable material from her hard working rabbits. The first bundle of cloth she sent in didn’t really pay all that well, so she decided to keep the crops as steady income while the cloth would have other uses.

The completely refurbished room from the Community Center brought Jade a fantastic idea that would combine both her artistic skills and absolute need for money: handmade products! Maybe woolly socks, gloves, really cute sweaters... the fall season really brought out warm, cozy ideas. Her mind also ventured to keychains, charms, small plushes... all of them were wonderful to think about, though Jade would have to revive painful college memories and suffer a lot of trial-and-error to make something that people would actually buy.

Jade’s had elevated hopes, however. She wasn’t in the same position as she was in the city. Back then, art was her only choice aside from being a Joja worker, which eventually led to her severe money troubles. Her current situation at least allowed her to make art at a more leisurely pace while still making comfortable amounts of money from the farm. Nothing prevented her from buying more crops or keeping more farm animals, after all. Stardew Valley had a much slower pace to begin with; Jade felt like she could breathe and take time to learn about her environment. No being thrown into any unknown situation, and if she was, she had a better chance of adjusting accordingly.
In the middle of the afternoon, after Jade had settled for a well accomplished day, there was a knock at her door. “Coming in just a sec!” the young farmer cheerfully called as she made her way to the door. Opening it, she saw it was none other than Abigail. “Abby! Hey,” she greeted with a smile.

“Yo,” replied Abigail, donned in her usual adventuring attire. “Are you busy? I feel like we haven’t chilled alone in forever. I’d love some quality time.”

“Nope! Come on in,” Jade eagerly replied, stepping aside to allow entry for her guest. “It’s true that we haven’t spent time outside of regular squad days, other than festivals. I was just winding down, myself. It’s been a weird week.”

The young adventurer scoffed in agreement. “Tell me about it.” She followed Jade to the living room couch so that they could both sit. “So, how are you doing?” she asked, care beaming in her voice.

The tone of the question surprised Jade, though she was more than happy to answer. “I’m surviving. My bunnies are doing great and my cat is obnoxious and adorable as always, so that helps a lot.”

“That’s good,” the purple-haired girl hummed. “I just know you have your ups and downs. I heard rumors about what happened at the festival. Dang, girl. You do not have good luck with festivals,” she chuckled.

Jade returned the laugh in a lighthearted manner. “I really don’t. But, I am fine. Thank you for checking up on me, Ab. It means a lot.”

“No problem! As for me, I’m doing well. Work is a pain, but a family business is a family business, y’know. College classes are... Bleh, well, anyway. I haven’t been chatting with too many people so I kinda just need a little break. You feel?”

“Uh huh, I definitely feel.” Jade watched Abigail’s movement for a little while. She noticed that her friend didn’t really look around the house or stray from her seat, almost as if she was too tense to do anything. “... Is that the only reason you’re here?”

Abigail let out a sigh, knowing full well she was caught red handed. “I heard, uh, more rumors than that,” she quietly stated.

“Like what?” the young farmer asked, narrowing her eyes.

“A lot of stuff passes through the shop, you know? My mom has her gossipy friends, my dad chats with the customers... I overhear some of it, but a lot of it can be bogus! That’s just how this town is. Don’t get mad at me...”

“Abby... what is it?”

The young adventurer looked her fluffy-haired friend in the eye with concern. “Well, I don’t think it’s any question that you and Seb are close, but some people have been spreading some really nasty rumors. I think that might have had a hand in that whole... outburst thing after everyone left the festival.”

Jade’s face suddenly paled. “Why can’t people mind their own damn business? Ugh... What are they saying this time?” Her voice was suddenly deeper, more stern.
“I don’t know who started it or spread it around, but some people noticed how you go to Seb’s house every weekend and you and Sam walk back very late at night. Then they also see you hanging out with Alex all the time and his almost daily trips to your house before most people are even awake.” Abigail sighed. She was disappointed that the town took such note of Jade’s routines and have them be used this way.

“What the... why does that matter, though? Is someone stalking me?” She asked, nearly plagued with terror.

“No, I don’t think people are stalking. Just people passing by and then information gets collected. It happens, especially the longer you live here. But they start wondering, especially since you hang out with all these boys and you don’t really, how do I say it... talk to anybody about it? You kinda keep to yourself outside of your friends.” Abigail rolled her eyes, though it was more towards the situation rather than at Jade. “People are asshats and they love to make stuff up no matter what, though. Basically, people are joking that you’re having affairs with the boys you do know.”

“That’s such bullshit!” yelled Jade. “Alex is my friend, he’s like a brother to me! The only other person his age that he’s close to is Haley, but even then she gets caught up in other stuff... Sam is our friend, you know that! And Seb...” She grit her teeth angrily, face heating up in rage. “I would never do that to him!”

Abigail frowned, putting a hand on Jade’s shoulder. “I know you wouldn’t, and everyone who knows you is aware that you wouldn’t.” She softly smirked. “You’re just a bundle of joy, y’know? People are drawn to you. Plus, Yoba knows you’re hella more innocent than me,” she snorted in an attempt to lighten the mood. It didn’t work. “Only an idiot would believe the rumors, but I think the possibility might have messed Seb’s step-dad up some.”

“Then I’ll go talk to him myself!” Jade growled, fists balled up in ferocity.

“It’s okay. Robin’s really awesome, she’s been doing a bang-up job of dispersing the rumors. She knows you, and of course she knows Seb. I really don’t know what asshat would make up crappy rumors about you, but I do know that something unpleasant floated around about Seb last year and it caused a gigantic fight between him and his step-dad. I’m not surprised if the same happened at the festival, with him taking you home late and all.”

Jade had been engulfed with anger. “I’ll go beat the shit out of whoever started it!” she hissed.

“Whoa, whoa,” Abigail started, standing up to block Jade’s path. She held Jade’s hands and gradually lowered them in an attempt to calm her down. The young farmer was still furious, but she allowed Abigail to comfort her, at least. “Look, I hate talking about stuff like this. Most people like drama and gossip, but I just kinda want to have my place, you know? Plus, I’m not done with my explanation. Let’s take a sec to breathe, okay?”

It took a few moments, but Jade eventually calmed down. “Okay... Continue.”

The young adventurer slowly sat back down and got her fluffy-haired friend to do the same. Their hands were still locked with each other since the gesture helped calm Jade somewhat. Abigail took a deep breath and resumed her talk: “There was some airy gossip about all three of the boys, but I think the ones with you and Seb stuck and accumulated the most. Some people were speculating a ton of late night affairs, going into off-limits areas of the town, stuff like that.”
“That totally stretches every bit of the truth! And even if we did, why the hell would it matter?”

“Well, see, that’s the thing. Even if the truth is blaring at everyone, they want something more interesting. Seb’s step-dad kinda looks for excuses to accuse him of anything, and I think the rumors may have got to him before Robin could... So he has that outburst at Seb when he saw anything vaguely resembling a rumor.” Abigail eventually let go of Jade to cross her arms in thought. “My parents can be strict like that too. Getting mad about shit even if you’re old enough for all of that, and it’s none of their business…” She sighed. “Can I be honest with you about something?”

“What?”

“I’m telling you this for personal reasons, too…” Abigail muttered and averted her eyes from her friend. “I already told you before about how I had kind of a crush on Sebastian. Awkward, it came and went, it’s not really a big deal, but…” she impatiently sighed. “Okay, let’s be real. You like Seb, too. He’s the one you’ve been so distracted with for ages,” she blatantly stated. “I just... don’t really want the same to happen with you, I guess? People made rumors about me and him, too, since we had similar interests and appearance, I guess.”

Jade smiled a little. “No, you’re way cuter.”

“Aw, you’re so adorable when you lie like that, Jadey,” chuckled the purple-haired girl. “I think I was a little too... forceful with my crush, maybe? I made it painfully obvious without saying it, and then that plus the rumors made it really awkward with us. I still feel pretty awkward around him sometimes,” she admitted with a puzzled look on her face. “I tried to not bother you about your crush much, but I can tell... Except, I think you might actually be okay. It seems like Seb likes you too, and I don’t think he’s been exposed to the rumors outside of his step-dad.”

The young farmer had relaxed her shoulders for the first time in their conversation. Her cheeks lightly flushed and peered away. “Maybe... Where are you going with this?”

Abigail grinned. “Well, first, I wanted to talk to clear some air. I hate hearing lies about you, and it helps to get to talk to the real you.” She pat Jade’s cheek, causing her to playfully flail back. “Second, it was to get complete validation that you, in fact, are head over heels for the emo.”

“Don’t call him that!” instantly snapped Jade.

“Case and point,” snorted the adventurer. “Third, I want to help you. You two are so damn cute and it’s a crime that you’re not together. Him and I just ended up in this weird limbo of friendship and friendzone because of how I never confessed, then my feelings faded like that. But you fell harder than I ever did!”

“Oh hush,” quietly muttered the farmer.

Abigail proudly laughed, then grabbed Jade’s hands once more. “So, we’re going to do it, Jade. I want to help you confess!”

Abigail seemed much more cheerful after her intentions were uncovered. Jade liked the change and it made her feel excited as well, though the thought of confessing terrified her. A million things could go wrong, and they were doing so well before. An odd stage between friendship and a dating relationship, maybe, but they were happy. What if her feelings ruined it all?

“Oh no, missy. I see that look on your face,” Abigail grumbled, pointing out the horror mixed with
doubt on Jade’s visage. “Girl, you can’t doubt yourself! Where’s the confident Jadey I got to learn all about?”

“Confident Jadey has never confessed!!” she suddenly blurted, face officially solid red. “I... Oh Yoba, this is real, isn’t it? Yoba... I never had time for boys before! School, jobs, family troubles!! I had to live with my brother, for Yoba’s sake! I’ve never been even close to this situation!! Now I live on a slow-ass farm with a living breathing non-related male in close proximity!”

Though she thought it was a little mean, Abigail really did enjoy Jade’s reactions to the thought of confessing. “Haha, wait. You didn’t even date in high school?”

“I had too many things on my plate to date anyone, especially during high school!” the farmer whined. “Oh, wait... I think I did have a boyfriend in high school? For like, two weeks maybe? What was his name? I... that doesn’t count. I didn’t care as much as I do, now! Teen angst has been replaced with adult anxiety,” breathed Jade in terror. Her speaking was rapid and hurried as if she had never thought about confessing before this moment. Abigail pat her shoulders and lightly brought her into a warm, friendly hug.

“Let’s take a step back, haha! You’re fine, really. That’s why newly found expert Abby is here,” she proudly reassured. “Confessing may be difficult, but it’s totally essential. There’s no ‘maybe’s, just a yes or a no. If it’s a no, then you’ll have a definite answer and you’ll be able to move on much easier. If it’s a yes, well... you’ll get to go to the next level!” The young adventurer released her trembling friend again. “This is adorable, honestly. I feel like I’m back in high school.”

“So do I,” Jade whimpered. “Maybe it’s good that he hasn’t been talking to me, since I’ve been feeling so weird with all these emotions... Whew, I have to figure all of this out.”

“Love is complete torture, my friend! But that’s why we... hey, what’s that beeping?” Abigail grew distracted from a faint beeping noise in another part of the house.

“Huh?” Jade went quiet to listen. “Oh, that sounds like my computer,” she then stated, standing back up. “Saved by the bell,” she murmured to herself, quickly heading towards the stairs. Abigail happily followed behind, then realizing they were going to the game room.

Jade walked over to the computer on the other side of the room while Abigail decided to examine the shelf full of games. She chuckled to herself, completely unsurprised that some of Sebastian’s games were on the shelf. After a brief moment, Abigail peered back over to Jade. “So, who is it?” she asked, noticing how quiet Jade was. The young farmer was sitting in her desk chair and typing away at the computer.

“Huh? Oh, it’s...” Jade huffed. “I... I don’t want to confess yet! It’s so cheap to do it over a messenger!”

Abigail dramatically gasped. “It’s Seb?” She asked with a chuckle, walking over to her.

“Sh-shut up, Abby!” Jade squeaked, though she did nothing to stop Abigail from reading over her shoulder.

SEBASTIAN: Hey.

SEBASTIAN: Sorry for being away for a while, I’ve been busy with a lot
SEBASTIAN: I know these messages are a little earlier than our usual, but considering the absence I assumed this would be fine

SEBASTIAN: Let me know when you’re on, I’d like to talk to you about something

“Oooh, he’d like to talk to you about something, Jadey~” Abigail teased. “This is perfect!”

“Shh!”

JADE: hey!!

JADE: i’m here now, sorry! it’s ok, i know a lot of stuff happened recently

JADE: don’t worry though, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to

SEBASTIAN: There you are

SEBASTIAN: Eh, I’ll go over the talk details later. It went about as well as you’d expect though

JADE: is everything okay at least? ):

SEBASTIAN: For the most part, yeah.

SEBASTIAN: What about you?

Abigail audibly groaned at the boring conversation. “Jade, ask him about the thing he wants to talk about. This could be your chance to confess too, if he’s inviting you anywhere.”

Jade blushed and glared at her impatient companion. “I’ll get there when I get there!”

JADE: yeah, i’m doing fine

JADE: especially knowing that things are going well for you!

JADE: i’ve been doing a lot of farm stuff. i’ll chat your head off about it later tho

SEBASTIAN: Sounds good with me

SEBASTIAN: I’ve been catching up with work mostly

JADE: the world needs your skills!

JADE: but oh hey, what did you want to talk about?

SEBASTIAN: Oh yeah.

SEBASTIAN: Uh
SEBASTIAN: I think we should hang out.

JADE: O: and do what

SEBASTIAN: The usual. Causing panic throughout the valley, terrorizing small villages, setting lewis’s toupees on fire, etc

JADE: sounds perf

SEBASTIAN: I actually have a place in mind that I’d like you to see.

JADE: is it a surprise?

SEBASTIAN: Maybe a little one. It’s outside, so don’t get too excited

JADE: 2 late!

JADE: my excitement knows no bounds

Abigail huffed. “You should tell him that you want to talk to him, too.”

Jade didn’t sass back that time, realizing the purple-haired friend had a point. With an extremely deep breath, Jade made more replies:

JADE: i need to tell you something when we next see each other too

SEBASTIAN: What is it?

JADE: things

SEBASTIAN: We’ll have a lot of stuff to talk about, then. I’d like to say something later too

SEBASTIAN: Is tonight okay? Too soon?

JADE: no that’s perfect

SEBASTIAN: It’s motorcycle distance so I’ll pick you up

JADE: my body is redy

“Why do I type like this?” Jade whined, dropping her head onto her desk with a thunk. “I thought it would be funny, but now it’s going to have weird sexual connotations!”

Abigail cackled. “It’s weird if you make it weird, Jadey. Plus, your feelings don’t suddenly invalidate your friendship. He knows you pretty well, and that way of typing definitely isn’t new for you.”

SEBASTIAN: it better be
“Holy shit!” Jade cried out, flushing and covering her face with her hands. “Abby, slap me. No, punch me. I need to regain some sense. Something’s still messed up in my head,” she stated with a muffled voice.

“You’re still making it weird!” laughed Abigail. “Give me the keyboard, ya pansy.” She scoot Jade aside to share the desk chair with her and moved the computer’s keyboard closer to herself. From then on, she began to answer Sebastian.

JADE: lmao
JADE: okay, what time?
SEBASTIAN: Uh... 9, maybe? Is that too late?
JADE: for nerds like u maybe
SEBASTIAN: Is that a challenge
JADE: whatever u say pretty boy

“I do not type like that!” Jade huffed aloud.

“Ha! Yes you do,” snorted Abigail. She continued to type.

The farmer stared at the computer screen in horror, completely defenseless. “I only called him a pretty boy online once!”

“I’m just saying what you’re thinking, Jadey~”

JADE: hehe i’ll see you tonight then!
JADE: i gotta go finish up my daily stuff now, tho.
JADE: bye < 3

“No!! Don’t type a heart!”

“It’s not the end of the world, Jade. You gotta give heavy hints. You’re confessing to him, anyway,” Abigail boredly replied. “I’m helping you!”

Jade stared at Abigail with a childlike sense of wonder as well as betrayal. “Wh... Can I really do this, though? Truly?”

“Yes, I believe you can. You just gotta stop worrying so much. I know you have it in you,” Abigail beamed. “I wouldn’t be pushing you if I didn’t have total faith in you.”
After a minute of quiet from Jade, she nodded. “You’re not wrong, I guess... it’s just...” She sighed. “Yeah, I do need to step it up.”

“Thatta girl!” Abigail heartily pat her on the back. “And look, dream boy answered back.”

SEBASTIAN: Yeah < 3
SEBASTIAN: Bye

“Heart icons bring more heart icons, Jadey. It’s beginning, and it’s beautiful. My children are growing up,” Abigail started with another chuckle. She expected some sort of banter in return, but instead, Jade was just staring at the computer screen. “... Oh boy. Jadey?”

“Holy Yoba, Abby, he typed one back... Am I looking too far into this? Should I be concerned?”

Abigail shook her head. “Honestly, I think you need to look into it more. Both of you are so...” She made some hand gestures to Jade that suggested flimsiness. “... You need that push. But hopefully both of you will get more comfortable after all is said and done.”

“Holy shit...” The young farmer fell speechless for once. She didn’t say anything else.

Abigail chuckled. “I’m... gonna let that sink in for you. I’ll hang out with you today until you have to leave, okay? Maybe we can get you in some cute clothes!” She watched her friend for a moment, then smiled somewhat worriedly. “... For now, I’m going to give you a little time. I’ll be downstairs!” The adventurer gave a farewell wave as she got up and let Jade take the whole seat.

Jade took another moment to re-read the text on her computer’s monitor. She calmed down and noticed that his typing was a little different, save for the occasional banter that the two were so used to exchanging. Reading it made her happy, however. She slowly started to come to terms with her own romantic feelings, rather than keeping them under the shroud of denial and lack of bravery. Maybe she could make more daring strides in their romantic relationship, rather than taking innocent advantage of their sweet moments alone. Even though she never outright told Abigail about her feelings for Sebastian previously, she felt relieved at her friend’s knowing.

Instead of worrying herself about Sebastian some more, the young farmer spent a nice evening with Abigail. Together, they went out exploring, though they came back empty-handed. Still, they enjoyed themselves and then returned to have dinner. Afterwards, Abigail completely raided Jade’s closet to put together a nice and warm outfit for a presumably romantic autumn night. Some black leggings, a full and somewhat short pink skirt, and a dark long-sleeved shirt had been picked. The skirt was the same one she wore at her first saloon night with the squad, which was probably why Abigail picked it out to begin with. Jade got dressed, then equipping her favorite red shoes and her comfortable red jacket.

“Do you want me to do your hair? I’d love to do your hair,” Abigail excitedly stated, playfully batting around some of Jade’s waves.

“This isn’t a date, you know,” muttered Jade in return. “My hair is fine the way it is... I don’t want to get all dolled up, that just makes me seem so suspicious.”

Abigail rolled her eyes and crossed her arms, smiling. “Fine, you don’t have to get completely ready,
then. I just want everything to be nice! Admittedly, I like having a gal pal like this.”

Jade giggled and nodded, noticing such a pattern. “Maybe later you’ll get the opportunity to help me out some more.”

“Yeah!”

--

The designated time eventually approached, Abigail leaving just before the time struck 9 PM. Jade walked out to her porch when she heard a vehicle outside, then she caught sight of the motorcycle’s headlights piercing through the already dark night. The ride stopped near the front of the house, the driver then waving over to Jade.

She eagerly waved in return and trot over to him without even a second thought. “Seb!!” the young farmer yelled happily, finally able to see him after quite a few days.

Sebastian was more visible now that they were close to each other. “Hey,” he replied with an equally cheery look on his face. Jade lightly hugged him on the side, but then backed up when she noticed she was too excited.

“Hi! ... Sorry,” she laughed, blushing with embarrassment.

“Sorry about what?” he asked, confused. “You ready to go?”

“About... nevermind.” Jade took a second to collect herself in order to continue her brave streak. Between the two, brash moves came much easier to her. Despite her eager disposition, however, she was still nervous. “Yeah, let’s go. How far is it?” She carefully sat behind him on the motorcycle, sure to sit on her skirt in a way that wouldn’t be too obnoxious in the wind.

Sebastian hummed in thought for a moment. “It’s a bit of a long drive, but we’ll be back before your absurdly early bedtime,” he snorted.

“It’s not that early!”

“Uh huh,” he returned with a smile. “... Well... you gonna hold on?”

“Hold on? To what?” Jade wondered, getting flustered.

All Sebastian had to do was to rev up his motorcycle, causing Jade to tightly wrap her arms around his torso. He cackled at the sudden reaction, then glanced back at her with a grin. “That never gets old.”

“You’re horrible!” she huffed, staring away from him with false anger.

“I know,” he cheerfully replied. He had briefly examined her as she was looking away... her outfit was cute, and she was close enough that he caught a hint of berry-scented shampoo. The reality of where he was taking her and why was slowly setting in for him, as well. Now he couldn’t back out, and he had the responsibility of safely driving her to their destination. “... Alright, you good?” asked the raven-haired man with partial worry.

“I’m going to dropkick you in the face,” she softly mumbled, burying her head into the back of his
hoodie.

He merely chuckled again in response. “So, you’re good,” he concluded.

And then they were off.

Chapter End Notes

I haven't had a chapter that split up the days in a while, but I think this is a good case.

We move back to Jade's perspective to see what she thinks and more directly learn about how she's been handling her feelings- mostly through pretending it's not there due to her fear of getting rejected. Close relationships are terrifying for her for a lot of reasons, and we'll learn some more of those reasons and also see if Jade overcomes her insecurities to properly respond to Sebastian.

All in due time!!

For now, enjoy Abigail trying to be The Best Mom Friend

I didn't write or imply this, but I kinda like to think that Sam was the one to type "it better be" and monitoring Seb's conversation for the lols
Jade didn’t necessarily care where she and Sebastian were going since she was sure it would be wonderful. Getting to spend quality time with her raven-haired companion was exactly what she needed after several days of lying in a pool of stress and talking to no one. Even though she didn’t have the full details of the talk he had with his step-father, he seemed to be functioning well enough. More than well, actually. As she held onto Sebastian’s torso in the motorcycle ride, he just felt different. The young farmer, though she tried to do so in her head, couldn’t truly describe the feeling in words. He didn’t necessarily seem confident or all too relaxed, but he wasn’t uncomfortable or nervous, either. Sebastian was focused, but he didn’t appear cold in manner. Whatever it was, Jade felt safe and calm with him.

She hadn’t seen an actual concrete road in a while, only making the journey all the more mysterious and exciting for her. Sebastian drove them down a winding road surrounded by thick forests, then transitioning into a mixture of mountains and huge plains of farmland overrun by tall grass and thin, spindly hardwoods. Though they couldn’t see the moon in its entirety, the light brought everything a muted blue hue and shined between the openings of faraway trees. A clear sky full of twinkling stars loomed above them, all shining in an array of vibrant colors. Ahead of them was a dark horizon, only highlighted bits at a time by the motorcycle’s headlights.

One particular field came into view that provided the perfect shot of the full moon. Jade’s eyes sparkled as she beheld the celestial body... she didn’t know how it was possible, but the moon appeared much larger than she would have initially guessed. Its moonlight appeared much brighter and brought great contrast to the environment- soft white and blue light clashed against the pitch black shadows of the night.

The wind also felt great. The breeze brought a very welcome chill; not only did both Jade and Sebastian enjoy the colder weather, but it gave them more of an excuse to huddle closer. Jade shielded her eyes from the rush of wind ahead by leaning down and resting her head against Sebastian’s back. He felt so warm and had a scent that she never had too many chances to really take in. Usually, he would smell like smoke, but such a stench was completely absent during the ride; instead, he had a familiar and welcoming scent that completely relaxed her. The natural smell mixed with the sweet aroma of grass and flora they passed on the way to their destination, especially when the trees increased in scarcity and only open plains and hills were before them.

Half an hour must have passed from Pelican Town to wherever they were going, though it all went by so fast for the young farmer. She was too taken in by her surroundings to truly care about the time spent. The duo turned off the main road, venturing back onto smaller country-like paths. Open plains transformed back into a forest and rough dirt paths soon became solid rock. Eventually, they slowed to a stop. Sebastian parked the motorcycle and turned off its engine near the edge of a cliff, then gave a deep breath to collect himself once more. “Here we are;” he said, staring out into the horizon.
“Oh, wow!” Jade gasped aloud, taking no hesitation to remove herself from the motorcycle. She trotted up to the very edge of the cliff and fixed her wind-blown hair as she gazed upon the view.

The full moon was still suspended high up in the sky, accompanied by billions of eagerly glowing stars. The cliff Jade and Sebastian stood on was towering above an entire forest, several roads and scattered bodies of water, all of them leading to the silhouetted horizon. A huge city could be seen far away, buildings beside buildings and towers stretching far above ground level. Hundreds upon hundreds of lights glistened from the city itself, bringing such an otherworldly life to the otherwise still and serene skyline.

“That’s Zuzu City,” Sebastian mentioned, walking up to join her. “It’s definitely the closest urban place to Pelican Town, but considering how far it is, that’s not saying much,” he explained with a smirk.

“Zuzu City, huh? It’s gorgeous from this distance,” the young farmer started again, eyes sparkling. “Is this the place you mentioned at the last festival?”

The question came as a surprise to Sebastian. “Huh?”

Jade smiled. “When we were looking at the jellyfish, you said the lights reminded you of your favorite place.”

“Hah... you remember that? Well... yeah... I like to go here to think, and I, uh... wanted to show you.” He suddenly tensed and paid attention to how the young farmer carried herself. “D... Don’t cry, okay?”

She chuckled. “No worries, I got that out of my system at the last festival.”

“Good.” Sebastian crossed his arms and brought his sight to the horizon once more. He went quiet, but for some reason, it felt a little unnatural for Jade. She glanced over to him to notice that he was getting increasingly nervous, though the same could have been said about her. Reality soon set in that they were both alone, on a cliff, full moon above, gorgeous view... Conditions were perfect. He finally spoke after that unsure moment of silence: “I used to be so drawn to the city, especially with how beautiful it looks here. But... the more I think about it, the less I want to go. I don’t know what my future will be, but... Stardew Valley isn’t all that bad for what it is.”

“Yeah... it’s nice to see things from a distance like this, even if the actual place may not be amazing. I can see why this is your favorite spot... it’s so quiet, the noises from the city are so far away. It’s easy to get mesmerized.”

The raven-hair nodded. “Those are a few of the reasons I love it, too.” He fidgeted a bit. “I... don’t really take anyone out here. No Sam, or Abby, or any other mystery person. This was always my place.”

Jade’s face flushed with his explanation. “Um... So why invite me?” she asked. Her heart started to pound, but she wasn’t sure why. All he did was just state something about the location...

“Well,” he breathed, planning his next statement carefully, “After all the stuff that’s happened, I just... I thought you’d like it.” His face was the next to heat up, though he tried to draw away attention from it by adjusting his stance.
“I love it,” she corrected. “You can’t ever get tired of nature... or, cities? With nature? Ah, who knows.”

Sebastian glanced back over to her with a smile. “Hehe, yeah...” He eventually sighed and turned his attention completely to her. “... Um... So, as I mentioned before, I’d like to just... talk, if that’s okay with you.”

“Of course it is.”

“Alright... Uh...” He unfurled his arms to be able to scratch his head. “Well... I have to be honest. I mean, I did think you’d like being here, but... I wanted to take you here because...” He took a deep breath. “Well, you’re... different. To me.”

Jade didn’t verbally reply, but she did turn her head and shift her focus to him.

“I’ve always had issues hanging around people... I’ve never had a lot of friends, and I was always more content being completely alone than to really go out. Large groups make me anxious, anyway.” Sebastian sighed, peering away from the young farmer. “I get anxious even in smaller groups, to tell you the truth. Talking to people can just... take a lot of energy out of me, you know?”

Even though he wasn’t looking, Jade still nodded. She stared at him with concern, wondering what he would say next.

“But... I don’t feel that way around you. It’s so strange to me,” he explained, a flustered smile on his face. Sebastian gained enough courage to return her gaze. “I get excited to talk to you... I like being with you, listening to whatever’s on your mind, your crazy jokes and banter, it’s...” He tiredly laughed to himself. “Wow, I’m still doing a pretty shitty job at this. There’s a lot I want to say to you, but it’s... it’s hard to tell you exactly. I lose focus way too easily and get distracted, and I have...” He sighed, no longer smiling. “I have... It’s troubling.”

Jade tried to emulate a calm smile, though she could hardly compose herself, much like him. “It’s okay... You can take your time. I’m still listening,” she gently replied.

“That’s... that’s exactly what I’m talking about,” the raven-hair pointed out. He thread his fingers back through his hair and let out another heated sigh. “This is torture, you know? You... You’re all I think about. It drives me up the wall.” Sebastian broke his stare again, though he didn’t turn his head. “Fuck, this is difficult... Jade, I...” He huffed. “You... You know what I’m saying, don’t you?”

“Seb...” Jade stepped closer to him and took both of his hands to hold.

Surprisingly, he couldn’t have been more flustered than he already was. He was still trying to conjure up the proper words to say. “H-hey, remember the talk just a few days ago? When I was at your house... You said that I didn’t have to be alone.”

“Y-yeah...”

“Well, I... I don’t want to be alone. Not anymore.” One final gaze to Jade. “S-so...”

His statement, though slow to start, was interrupted by a soft kiss from the listener. She knew his difficulty with expressing how he felt, since she felt the exact same way. With no words to properly convey her emotions, Jade had leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. Sebastian completely froze and stared at her in shock when she leaned away once more.
Jade sheepishly smiled, heavily blushing from the gesture. “I was... I was really lonely before you, too,” she began, voice shaking from her nervousness. “It’s hard for me to really properly say, as well, but...” She nodded and let go of his hands to hug her chest. “I feel the same way about you. Everything you said... I love being with you, the time we spend together, I...” She nervously laughed. “Wow, you’re right. This is really difficult... For a long time, I was in some sort of denial because I wasn’t sure what we actually were, or what would really happen...” The young farmer took a deep breath to try to compose herself, but she already felt like she was on the verge of passing out. “I can’t ignore it anymore. I don’t want to.”

Sebastian stood there seconds after she finished her reply, but each passing second felt like an eternity. Jade was scared she might have confessed wrong, or said too many brash things... maybe the kiss was too much. Paranoia was already getting the better of her, but then she was tightly embraced by her partner in question. Immediately following his embrace was a serious, passionate kiss. Jade tensed at first from surprise, but slowly relaxed and allowed herself to be taken by the swell of emotion. She returned the hold as they kissed, and didn’t let go even after their lips parted.

Both of them stared into each other’s eyes, fear and paranoia completely vanishing. Their anxiousness was still at an all time high, but they still grinned to each other in excitement. Their chests were pressed against each other in that they could feel their rapidly beating hearts, their faces still close enough to feel the heat radiating from their flushed skin. Jade leaned herself up high enough to bump their foreheads together, causing Sebastian to happily lean back to her.

Neither of them really spoke much after that, but they didn’t necessarily have to. Warm kisses were confessions of love, their tight holds promises of loyalty, and their gazes indications of trust. They collapsed at the edge of the cliff together and watched the proudly twinkling stars. Sebastian didn’t want to leave, and Jade didn’t want to let go.

So they didn’t.

Beep! Beep! Beep!

Jade woke up with a groan and lazily stretched out her arm to slap the snooze alarm. She grumbled something about the alarm under her breath and then exhaled a loud yawn, stretching her arms and legs before going limp on her bed. She slowly opened her eyes and smacked her lips. She felt fantastic for some reason, like she could take the whole world by storm, but she couldn’t think of why. A good dream, perhaps?

... Wait. No. A dream?

Jade suddenly jolted out of her bed. She then realized she was still in the clothes she wore the previous night, sans her hairbow, necklace, and shoes. The young farmer quickly glared all around her room, then paced into the living room to see if there were any other changes. She stood there for a solid moment, completely dumbfounded. She didn’t remember going home...

The young farmer huffed and walked over to one of the windows at the front of her house. She stared out the porch, confused, until she saw someone approaching the door. She quickly opened the door, but then froze when she realized it was Sebastian. A rush of feeling suddenly overwhelmed her as the previous night became much clearer. It definitely wasn’t a dream.
“Hey, you’re awake,” he beamed as he walked up to the porch. He wore one of his usual outfits, hoodie and all, but Jade’s attention instantly went to what was in his arms. He held a large bouquet of red and lavender roses, all lovingly bound together in an ivory colored wrapper. “... Wait, did you just wake up?”

Jade flushed in embarrassment, knowing her hair was a mess and she was still in old clothes. “Aw, dammit... how did you know?” she yawned.

Sebastian chuckled and kissed her on the cheek when he stopped right in front of her. “Lucky guess. I won’t bother you for long, but these are for you.” He offered the bouquet to her, seeming somewhat tense though he eminated an air of confidence. “I would ask you to go out with me, but... we... we kinda went through all that already, ahaha.”

The young farmer stared at the bouquet, still trying to come to terms with the fact that Sebastian was here to begin with. It must’ve been so early, so she wasn’t used to him being around, but even so, she was beaming with joy. The meaning of a bouquet, especially one with roses like this, had a universal meaning across the region... This was a true confession of love and a request to bring their relationship to the next level. “Wow...” she breathed, grinning from ear to ear. “You... you’re offering this to me? Really?”

Before he had a chance to really respond, she took the bouquet and held it to herself in order to gaze lovingly at them. They were vibrant, full, and gave off an incredibly lovely scent. “Th... Thank you, Seb! I-I accept!” She stammered, holding the bouquet tighter as she started to tear up.

“Aw, come on... You said you wouldn’t cry.” He flushed and frowned at her crying, leaning in to hug her. His response caused her to cough out a laugh, then hugged him back tightly while moving the bouquet out of harm’s way.

“It’s a happy cry,” she whimpered, burying her face into his chest.

Sebastian softly laughed at her pitiful reply and pet her head. “I know,” he gently replied, faithfully standing there until she released her hold. “Be careful... there was an embarrassing amount of people at the shop that saw me buy the bouquet... We’ll have to avoid some of the pushier people.” He rolled his eyes. “Especially my mother.”

Jade slowly nodded and wiped her eyes, still smiling. “It’ll be worth it... Wait, um... How did I wake up here? Some of last night was a little fuzzy.”

“You don’t remember? You fell asleep while we were stargazing, so I just took you home,” he snorted. “I thought you were awake on the ride back, so you must’ve been very tired. It’s two in the afternoon, by the way.”

“Holy shit!” Jade suddenly yelled, her demeanor completely changing from small and humble to large and increasingly exaggerated. “I woke up at freakin’ TWO? I haven’t done anything yet!” She whined, glancing over to her rabbit coop and then all of her unwatered fall crops. “Aw, man!!”

“We were up pretty late... You don’t have to go to the saloon tonight if you’re too busy,” Sebastian replied with a yawn.

“AND tonight is saloon night?!”

Sebastian chuckled. “It’s alright. To be honest with you, all of this really tired me out, so I might not
go, anyway.” He stopped himself and frowned in embarrassment. “I mean... I just got a lot off my chest, really. It’s not that I want to take a break from people, or anything.”

“I understand, trust me. Holding stuff in can be really tiring,” Jade answered, smiling. “... Yeah, you know what? Screw it. Sam and Abby can play pool amongst each other. I’m gonna take me a damn nap.” She nodded with fierce certainty, holding the bouquet to herself once more.

“You deserve it for putting up with all my shit lately... thank you, really. I’m not only saying that because you’re my... you know.”

“Say it, I wanna hear it!” She grinned, playfully nudging him.

“Aww, fine...” Sebastian huffed, trying to keep his cool. “You’re my girlfriend,” he bashfully responded.

The raven-haired man could see Jade’s brighten up and sparkle with the mention. “Don’t mention it, and I’m not only saying that because you’re my boyfriend,” she grinned, showing her rosy cheeks. Sebastian playfully nudged her away from him for her statement, still as flustered as ever. His reaction made her giggle and hug him again. “It’ll take us a little while to get used to that,” she laughed.

“We’re not going to be one of those really gross couples with all the PDA, are we?” Sebastian asked lightheartedly.

Jade couldn’t help but laugh again at the inquiry. “Only in front of Sam.”

He gave a thoughtful nod and scratched his chin. “Hm, yes, I could agree to those conditions.” He chuckled and took a step back to see all of Jade. “Well... You seem to have a full day ahead of you, so... I’ll see you later?”

“Y-yeah! Thank you so much for coming by, this was an amazing start of my day.”

“Mine too,” he grinned.

“Awww... Well, get lost, nerd!” Jade said with a smooch and then a playful shove. He laughed and started walking off, waving to her.

“Message me later, loser!”

Jade watched her new partner leave her farmland, giving him a little wave when he glanced back to see if she was still there. She finally retired into her home, then squealed to herself excitedly when she was officially alone. Her focus drifted back to the bouquet of roses. “I better get a vase for this.”

Chapter End Notes

*PDA means public displays of affection, in case you did not know

HA HA IT ONLY TOOK 31 CHAPTERS HAHAHAHAHHhhh
Well, this fic is very slow buildup for a reason. I was really excited to write this and did a lot to try to make it perfect and still pay an homage to the in-game 10 heart event. Of course, a lot of the dialogue is different, but I like to think it's due to the farmer not being a silent protagonist. He knows Jade and can bring up past conversations with her, as opposed to him just liking the farmer due to 2x sashimi a week. Sebastian has always been a favorite of mine (this fic makes it extremely obvious, but still) so giving him a non-stereotypical and varied character is important in my fic. Hopefully he still stayed well-enough in character for this.

There is another difference with the game other than what I just pointed out, and that is... bouquets! If there's any criticism I have with the game, it's that you start dating the character, and then they confess their feelings for you? That just seems backwards. The 10 heart event, at least Sebastian's, seemed very fitting for a confession/dating proposition, which is why I did it this way. I also liked the idea of the NPC in question giving a bouquet, rather than having the farmer do it every time.

The main thing I meant in my post-writing for the last chapter is, of course, Jade and Sebastian dating does not mark the end of the story and it definitely doesn't mean that they will be perfect forever after that. They aren't perfect people, so they'll continue to experience development and growth as the story goes on. There are several other plot points that I can address much better now that a relationship has been established, and this marks more development to come for other characters as well. That doesn't mean that Sebastian and Jade will have less on-screen time spent, but it does mean that no one has to wonder about their status anymore. There's still a story to tell and I'm excited to dig into the rest of it!

Thanks for reading as always and I hope this was worth the wait!
Visiting

Chapter Summary

Jade goes to the carpenter shop to buy a silo and brings food for the family while she’s at it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The speed in which townspeople caught word of a new couple in town was terrifyingly swift. Jade went into town once that Friday afternoon to buy some more food for herself, only to be stopped several times by excited and curious townsfolk. Marnie stopped her right outside the ranch to discuss relationships, Sam yelled for her in passing and gave her a bear hug, Maru and Penny waved and happily congratulated Jade, Alex ran up to her and gave her a real bear hug (then low-key threatening to hurt Sebastian if he ever made her upset), and everyone stared at her in Pierre’s shop, especially when Abigail emerged from her room to greet and ask how it went.

Jade didn’t necessarily mind the attention, though she was used to just passing everyone in town. She had her friends and she would say hello to others, but she wasn’t really a presence that many went out of their way to notice. Occasionally, Lewis would approach her and ask about the farm and did ask what she was doing at the Community Center once, but he accepted her responses and allowed her to do whatever she wished. For a while, however, Jade seemed more like rumor fodder than anything else.

Regardless, Jade happily told Abigail how the night went while many of the nearby villagers listened in with no shame and all lack of subtlety. After shopping, the two walked outside together and continued to chat. Abigail relayed her excitement for Jade’s newfound relationship and understood (or at least, tolerated) the proposition of no saloon night. When they parted, Jade went back home and honed her fishing skills right outside her farm border until she grew tired. Many fish were shipped, a couple were preserved, and the young farmer had succeeded in exhausting herself. Her last waking moments were spent playing video games and chatting to her equally tired boyfriend through a messenger. While not too many townspeople approached him, his mother was the equivalent of twenty people when it came to his situation. The mere aura of her excitement could smother him if they weren’t careful!

Saturday arrived, and with Saturday night came game night. Both Jade and Sebastian were overflowing with positive energy and looked forward to the return of Solarion Chronicles, while Sam was entertained enough just by watching them. Robin kept herself from intervening the game as much as she could, though she had no mercy whatsoever when either member of the couple walked up from Sebastian’s basement. Unlike Sebastian, however, Jade eagerly answered any questions Robin had and expressed her feelings and gratitude towards her new partner. Robin’s grumpy son only intervened when she got carried away with her baby boy growing up- baby pictures. Those were absolutely off limits and any embarrassing story of him as a child was forbidden. The young farmer was, of course, disappointed in not getting juicy details, but she let him have that victory.

Needless to say, Jade and Sebastian were happy together and the town knew of it rather quickly. They both found themselves more productive as the week droned on; when Jade wasn’t working
hard on her farmland or sewing crafts for selling, she was fishing, sword fighting, and mining. Sebastian started adjusting his own sleep schedule to get more productivity out of his day; sleepless nights and vaguely bearable work days became restful nights and enthusiastically full work days, to the point that he could even start on his own projects.

There were some days that Sebastian felt overwhelmed at the carpenter shop- especially with Demetrius, who had kept a significant distance ever since Sebastian’s outburst- though he took no hesitation to relax at Jade’s house. He loved that he could visit and not be pressured to do anything, not even speaking. Jade’s home was very quiet and her presence was extremely welcome, so he loved to wind down and listen to whatever she was up to while relaxing in the living room or the game room upstairs. Jade always loved him visiting as well and felt calmer and safer when he was around. Even if they weren’t always in the same room or in the mood to chat, there was something soothing about knowing how close they were.

Because of his frequent visits, Jade took the opportunity to show off her practice with cooking. He often arrived when Jade was finished with farm work and eating, so he finally got to try the sashimi that Jade worked hard to make. She was extremely worried about how it all turned out, though she didn’t need to- he loved the food and joked that he should start coming over every evening for dinner. Despite the comment being a joke, he really came around often enough that it might as well have been a serious statement. Jade welcomed the change and embraced Sebastian’s attempts to include himself more, even if it was just the both of them. Sebastian usually left when he felt recharged again, but never parted without lovingly holding his girlfriend and giving her a kiss. Their routine certainly changed, but it was wonderful. More of their interactions were face-to-face and they could rely on each other wholeheartedly.

Of course, Sebastian’s increase in visits meant that he bumped into Alex a few times more than the favorable amount. Jealousy wasn’t really the right word to use, but neither of them really liked each other and they didn’t understand how Jade found redeemable and lovable qualities in both of them. Alex was too strong, too loud, and didn’t really have any common interests with Jade other than punching things. Meanwhile, Sebastian was too smart, too quiet, and seemed too grim of a person to really be with someone as sweet as Jade. Alex and Sebastian were very much the opposite, but Jade tried her best to mediate between them and to give them both the attention they needed. She attempted to explain her sisterly feelings for Alex and romantic feelings for Sebastian, though it didn’t seem to get through to either of them. As long as they weren’t fighting or making Jade pick sides, she didn’t necessarily mind.

Back to Jade’s farm progression, she accumulated more money than she really knew what to do with, thanks to all the fish she caught and valuable materials she found from her mining trips. Crops were also selling rather well and her rabbits were producing great wool that Jade was putting to use. Still, more could be done. She ended up buying another rabbit- a male this time- and invested in two baby chicks to settle in the same coop. She wasn’t much of a fan of having her rabbits and chickens in the same space, but at least they seemed to get along well enough. The new rabbit’s name was Bullet, for how fast he charged around the barn as well as his beautiful gray fur. The two chickens, one white and one brown, were named Mayo and Gloria. Mayo cheeped as loud as she could with all her tiny heart, while Gloria seemed like she took charge of the place. Since they were adjusting, Jade’s recent goals involved saving up for another coop and bringing the most wonderful crops to fruit.

The pumpkins Jade planted were still growing at a snail’s pace, as was the corn. She could still harvest some of the corn she planted the previous season, and the rows of cranberries she planted had reached adulthood without any issue. With all the fruit she gained from the harvest, she had way more baskets of cranberries than she knew what to do with. Some of them were kept for herself since
she was a huge fan of fruit, a majority of them were sold, and a few extras were given off to some families that would appreciate it. Alongside the families of her squad, Jade gifted Marnie for how welcoming she’d been and left her enough to share with Shane, her nephew.

Several sunny and rainy days passed, bringing a brand new Wednesday to Stardew Valley. Jade appeared to be in high spirits, even though her allergies seemed to be acting up. Her enthusiasm was most likely because of the next day, however: she and Sebastian were going to work on some monster eradication goals and spend some alone time in the mines. She tried not to think about it too much, since she would get excited and it would make time pass by far slower. Instead, she put more focus on her plans for the day: going to the carpenter shop and getting a new building for her farmland. Increasing animals meant a lot of extra hay lying around, making the whole barn feel messy and unorganized. Having a proper place to store them would be the ticket to cleanliness, and it would give Jade the ability to store more feed.

Jade arrived to the carpenter shop, wearing her usual farming outfit, plus a light red jacket to fight the outside breeze. She toted along her backpack that contained an assortment of materials for Jade’s normal foraging trips, as well as some books and games that she borrowed from her boyfriend. In addition, she brought some food to get on everyone’s good side for lunch time. With a grin, she waved over to the bored Robin at the front desk. “Good afternoon, Robin!”

The redhead jolted up from hearing Jade’s voice, eyes sparkling in delight. “Jadey! Hey!” She quickly ushered the young farmer over to examine her and give her a motherly pat on the cheeks. “How’s my girl? Also, call me Mom.”

Jade chuckled. “We talked about this already, but I’ll think about it. I’m doing pretty well, and I hope you’re doing the same!”

“I am! Are you here for Sebby?” Robin cheerfully asked.

The young farmer shook her head, though she still smiled. “Actually, I’m here for some farm stuff. I’ll still go see him after, but before I get to that... are you hungry?”

“Yeah, it’s my break soon. Why?”

“Because,” Jade began, slinging her backpack off to rummage through it. “I brought... food! Ta-da!” She brought out a lidded bowl full of freshly cooked spaghetti. “Should still be hot!”

Robin made a noise that was between a gasp and a hungry grunt. “Aww, you shouldn’t have!” she beamed, holding her hands on her heart when Jade also brought out some plastic eating utensils for her. “It’s too late, you’re my daughter now. I’m making you my middle child,” giggled Robin. She took absolutely no hesitation to pull off the lid and start eating.

“I baked some muffins for everyone, also. I don’t know who likes what so I used some cranberries for some and just regular mix for the others. I didn’t know what kind of lunch food Demetrius or Maru would like, so they can have all the muffins they want,” Jade continued to explain while pulling more containers of food out of her backpack. The last thing she pulled out was some specially made sashimi, which was, of course, for Sebastian. “I got some food for Seb too, but I wanna go ahead and order a new farm building if that’s okay.”

Robin vigorously nodded. “Yeah! Of course!” Her voice was muffled due to the mouthful of spaghetti. Jade had never seen her with so much joy. “Whatchu want?” she asked, continuing to stuff her face.
“I have five farm animals now, and it’s getting hard to keep up with organizing the hay I buy. Marnie told me that you could build a silo for me.”

An irritated groan erupted from the carpenter’s throat despite a mouth containing pure spaghetti bliss. “Uuugh, a silo? Forreal? I hate stone,” she grumbled, still eating. “You’re lucky you put me in a good mood from this food.”

Jade chuckled from her mannerisms. “I would still have done it anyway. I promise I’ll have some big, wonderful building ideas for you later! Ones that involve wood,” she beamed.

“You are just the sweetest,” Robin replied with a smirk. She finished up her food surprisingly quickly and emitted a short, happy burp. “Ahh. That hit the spot. Alrighty, well you need a ton of stone, some copper bars, some clay and a hundred g’s for Mama. You got all that, hun?”

“Mmhm... I’ve been keeping some stuff from foraging trips and got a nice bit of clay, and I’ve been converting my copper ores thanks to Maru’s advice. It hasn’t given me much use other than that, so I’m glad it can go to something like this.” The young farmer put the required money onto the desk and smiled with pride. “This should cover the costs.”

“Perfect!” Robin yelled. “I hate stone, but I’m excited to return to your adorable farm. Oh! Maybe I can make Sebby help,” she cackled. “Though I probably don’t have to do that anymore. It’s so weird to get used to! He used to stay in constantly, and now he goes out almost every day. I’m so happy for him!”

Robin’s enthusiasm was absolutely contagious. Jade loved watching her get excited about projects and her family. “Hehe, I’m sure he’ll come by if he wants to. I know he is tomorrow, since we’re going to the mines together.”

“Aww, is it a date?” The redhead curiously leaned across the desk to better hear.

Jade nervously giggled from the question, face starting to flush. “Yes, I suppose it is...We’re doing some guild missions together, and then we’re gonna have a picnic when we reach our milestones,” she answered. Robin filled the room with happy ‘aww’s that made the farmer all the more flustered and excited. The farmer couldn’t think of any proper response except for a tiny sneeze to the side.

“You two are so cute, I can’t get over it!” She folded her hands under her chin and grinned at watching Jade’s mannerisms. “I hope you have fun, but please be careful. That boy used to head out to the mines by himself and get himself hurt all the time! I’m sure you two will take real good care of each other, though.”

The young farmer shyly nodded and smiled. “Yeah.”

“Speaking of Sebby, how are you two? Is everything going well?” Robin managed to pry her eyes off of the young farmer for just a moment to collect the offered money and write the building order down. Afterwards, she started going through all of her blueprints to find one for a silo.

“Very,” Jade replied, watching the carpenter with a still blushing face. She was going to explain more, but then she heard the abrupt opening of the basement door and the stomps upstairs.

“Mother, stop meddling,” snapped Sebastian as he approached. “I heard you squealing from downstairs.”
Robin suddenly cackled, pausing for a moment to see her son. “I’m not meddling, just asking! I want to know that my baby is getting along well with his girly. Especially since you haven’t dated since like-

“Mom!” shouted Sebastian, embarrassed.

“Oh, please, it’s not that big of a deal,” snorted his mother. Both of the young adults could tell that Robin was having fun, considering her smug grin and the looks she exchanged. “But fine, I’ll lay off~” She laughed to herself and peered away to continue searching for the blueprint.

Jade lightly nudged Sebastian when they stood beside each other, an innocent smile perched on her face. “Well hey there,” she said playfully.

His grumpy demeanor quickly diminished, causing him to give an equally gentle nudge in return. “Hey,” he replied in a soft voice. “From mom’s groaning before, I imagine you asked for a stone building.”

She laughed with a nod. “Yep!”

“How are the animals?”

“They’re adjusting pretty well, but the chickens are still little babies. They’re so cute! My bunnies are getting along with them, luckily. I was worried about having to build another expensive coop,” explained Jade.

“You can still build one!” piped Robin, still looking away. She finally found the blueprint, but found herself writing some additional notes onto it.

The young farmer gave a teasing glance over to the redhead then coughed into the bend of her arm. “Hehe, I know. Eventually! Promise,” she answered, clearing her throat. When she faced in Robin’s direction, her attention went back to the containers of food she brought out. “Oh! Lunch for you.” Jade grabbed the sashimi and kindly offered it to Sebastian.

“Aw,” he instinctively replied, eagerly taking the meal. “Thank you!”

“You want some muffins too? I’ve just been big on cooking lately,” she continued, pulling open the tab that covered its baked goods. The scent of warm muffins and berries wafted into the room.

“Oh, yes.” He balanced the sashimi in one hand and dug out a couple of the cranberry muffins in the other. Cautiously, he glanced over to his mother to make sure she wasn’t looking, and then delivered a peck to Jade’s cheek. “I’ll see you later,” he happily remarked, then started walking away with the food given to him.

Robin finally looked up just as he was leaving. “Hey! You gonna leave your girlfriend just like that?” she shouted.

Jade giggled and patted the concerned carpenter on the arm. “I think he just knows you’ll be working at my property and saying a ton of embarrassing things.”

“Yup,” came his voice as he descended back down the stairs.
Robin huffed and crossed her arms. “I’m not *that* bad, am I? Nothing is embarrassing about my sweet boy! I’m just so happy! I’ve been waiting for this. You know, I had such a feeling about you, hun. From the very first day I helped you unpack your boxes!”

“Hehe, if you say so, Robin.”

“It’s true! A mother has these instincts, you know. They know who is good and who is trash. Lemme tell *you* all the trash I came across-”

Jade laughed. “I believe you! I should get going, though, especially to set up all the stuff for the silo for you.”

“Boo! You two won’t let me gush.” The carpenter made an exaggerated pout, then reaching for one of the muffins; the scent was too good to pass up. “I have nothing to do today, so I’ll be there in an hour or so, fair?”

“Fair.”

“Oh, do you want to go see Demetrius and Maru? They’re both in the lab right now if you want to go take these to them. They’ll love it!” Robin beamed, having already devoured the muffin she took. Jade glanced at the container of muffins and then nodded, taking it. She left Robin one more just in case, which was then taken immediately. Robin waved as Jade walked off. “Seeya later, hun!”

“Hehe, see you, Robin!” the young farmer gleefully replied. She ventured out of the shop and down the hall of the family’s home, passing the basement stairs to go to the lab straight across. The lab itself was rather bright, with white tiled floors, white cabinets and counters, and white walls. Jade was surprised how her eyes weren’t hurting from how light it was, but the completely ‘clean’ appearance of the room helped with studies and experiments. Maru sat on a stool to the side of the room, writing a report about a recently completed study. Demetrius stood at the far end, peering carefully into a microscope and occasionally etching down notes.

Jade watched the two of them for a moment, wondering if they were too busy or not. Robin said they would love the snacks, but...

Maru turned her head towards the young farmer after completing her report. “Oh, hello Jade!” She hopped out of the chair to properly greet Jade, causing Demetrius to lose focus and see the commotion.

“Hi Maru, and hello Demetrius,” Jade shyly began. She was used to Maru’s presence and liked her as a person, but her interactions with Demetrius were very limited and unpleasant. The first time, she recalled, was freshly after an argument with Sebastian; Demetrius himself seemed to be in a rush, and only after that has Jade heard of him in a negative light. The second time was, of course, a confrontation after the Dance of the Moonlight Jellies. Since Maru seemed to look up to Demetrius, Jade hoped that she just had rotten luck in her interactions, though being in the same room as him didn’t make her any more comfortable. “I, uh... I made muffins for everyone. Would either of you like any?”

The young scientist blossomed a pleasantly surprised expression. “Wow, you made these? Thank you!” She took no hesitation to wash her hands in the lab’s sink and grabbed one of the muffins close to her. Demetrius wandered over and made a calm smile, seemingly unbothered by the intrusion.
“Jade? Thank you for coming by. I may have one of these, right?”

“Of course! Have as many as you want. Both Robin and Seb took a couple.” She nervously laughed. “I made them for all of you, so I hope you like.”

Maru gave a confident nod. “I’ve been hungry this whole time, hehe.” She took a bite of her snack, then grinned. “This’ll help me tide until work here is done. I didn’t know you liked baking!” she exclaimed. Jade smiled as the two helped themselves to the muffins—she caught everyone at the right time, it seemed.

“Ah, I don’t really consider myself much of a baking person, but I’ve just been trying to expand my horizons.”

Demetrius took a mental note of the farmer’s statement. “Honing your various skills can certainly expand your potential future. Smart decision.”

“Haha, thanks, I suppose... I hope I didn’t interrupt anything,” Jade murmured. She shifted her feet somewhat uncomfortably.

Maru shook her head. “Not at all!” Her expression suddenly vanished as she came to a realization. “Oh, no-- I left one of my experiments running in my room. I’ll be right back,” she hurriedly stated, quickly running out of the room. Jade watched Maru leave with a pained look on her face. She didn’t want to be left alone.

“Ah, heh, there she goes. Maru can be focused on so many things at once that there are the few occasions she forgets,” Demetrius said with a nostalgic laugh. “She has a great head on her shoulders. I’m proud of her.”

Jade nodded in agreement, though she wasn’t really sure what to say.

“Speaking of... she has talked about you in a couple of instances. Maru is fond of you, so I hope you two can be great friends.”

She didn’t necessarily doubt they would keep their friendship. The farmer felt rather awkward in this conversation. “I hope so too, Maru is very nice.”

Demetrius finished the muffin he was eating, though he didn’t seem to be interested in more. Jade didn’t mind the fact, and instead just waited for him to continue their talk: “I’m sure Maru would love if you visited more often.”

Yoba, this was awkward. Jade felt like he almost didn’t know. “Uh... I actually visit all the time, since, y’know... Sebastian lives here...”

His whole demeanor changed. It was as if his body twitched in irritation from hearing the name. Demetrius slowly peered down at her, more serious and stern, before forcing himself to soften his glare and look away. “I see,” was all he said.

“Y-yeah... um... for the past while now, I’ve been playing board games with him and Sam just about every Saturday night. I also just like to come by and visit, especially since he takes the time to come see how I’m doing after work. It’s a long walk, but it’s worth it. My bunnies love him, too.”

Demetrius didn’t really reply, but Jade still felt like she needed to keep talking:
“Did you know he’s trying to quit smoking now? Not only is it a bad habit, but he knows the smell bothers me, and he’s using gum to help suppress the urges.” She smiled, though it was obvious she was stressed about Demetrius. He didn’t seem to notice. “He was trying to keep it a surprise for me until he felt more confident, but I felt the gum in his hoodie pocket.”

“Hm.” The older scientist frowned. He seemed bothered by something.

“He... he’s really smart too, you know! I was having computer troubles just a few days ago, and it didn’t even take him a minute to figure out what the problem was. And he fixed it!” Her voice started to shake. “He wants to build me a nice computer someday, because mine is just store bought and it’s nothing fancy. He’s really sweet. Even if we weren’t dating, I-I think he would go out of his way to do something so nice.” She took a deep, hesitant breath. “B-because...”

Maru had returned with a face full of soot, but she felt pretty accomplished with herself. She frowned when she saw Jade shivering, Demetrius peering at her with melancholy. “I’m back...?” the younger scientist muttered.

Jade put down the baked goods onto the nearest counter. “E-excuse me,” she stammered with a weak, breaking voice. Quickly, she left the lab. Both Maru and Demetrius watched her leave and immediately turn to walk down towards the basement.

Sebastian was working at his computer, typing away with occasional mouse clicking. An unwrapped plate with only trace amounts of sauce left had been set at the edge of his desk. He heard his door open and quietly close, followed by a thump against the wall. Curiously, he leaned up from his computer chair to see who it was, then stood when he saw Jade hanging her head and hugging herself. “What happened?” he asked, heading over to her.

She shook her head and limply held out her arms. Sebastian took her pitiful gesture as a request to be held, which he did without question. Her arms tightly latched to his sides and back and she buried her face into his chest, bringing comfort to them both. Eventually, the programmer let out a sigh.


Jade lifted her head and released one of her arms to tiredly wipe one of her eyes. “Is Sam teaching you pick up lines?” she quietly asked with a shy smile.

He chuckled and continued to hold her close. “Maybe.”

“You’re such a dork.”

“Hey, it made you smile.”

“It was a smile out of pity,” the young farmer giggled.

“Uh huh.” He kissed her head and leaned against her for better holding. Jade emitted a gentle breath that showed her improving mood.

After their moment of closeness, Jade decided to speak up: “I just wanted Demetrius to know how wonderful you are.”
“Huh?”

She buried her face again. “He kept avoiding us as a topic and it made me upset.”

Sebastian scoffed. “You shouldn’t worry about that... mentioning me is a lost cause to him.”

“But I wanted to,” squeaked the farmer. Her gentle yet desperate sounding voice made him chuckle.

Sebastian backed away so that he could see his partner’s face. He let go of her to pat her shoulders. “Hey, it’s fine. Why should I care about a loser for a step-father when I have an even bigger loser right beside me?” He asked with a smirk.

“Aw, now you’re just trying to flatter me,” Jade laughed. She playfully hit his chest, then grabbed the collar of his hoodie to pull him over to her. They exchanged a loving kiss and then gazed into each other’s eyes. She chuckled and just as easily pushed him away. “Ew, you taste like fish,” she mentioned in a lighthearted manner.

Sebastian seemed surprised at first, but then settled with a bashful smile. “That’s your fault. Wait, how do you taste? Come here.” He casually pulled her back over to him for another smooch, causing her to laugh and let out a dramatic ‘nooo!’ They spent a moment exchanging playful banter, then held each other when they were content.

“Want me to take you home?” he eventually asked, bumping their foreheads together.

Jade slowly nodded and took his hands to hold. “Please.”

He smiled. “Alright.”

The two of them walked back upstairs, his right hand intertwined with her left. Demetrius and Maru heard Jade sneeze loudly from the other side of the house, followed by Sebastian laughing and teasing the person in question. Some muffled conversation and a booming yell from Robin later, the young lovers seemed to have exit the house. Demetrius still seemed to be in somewhat of a funk after Jade’s little act. He peered over to Maru, who was tweaking a gadget on the lab counter.

“Maru,” he started, his expression revealing his personal conflict. “Tell me more about this... Jade. What is she like?”

Maru saw the look in her father’s eyes and knew he was lost about something. When he couldn’t figure out a problem, he would most likely obsess over it... it happened to be such a quality she inherited from him, too. With that, the young scientist emitted a knowing sigh. “Dad... I can tell you what I know, but you know who you should really be asking.”

“I’m very well aware.” Demetrius decided to focus back on an experiment he was doing with his microscope. “I would like you to humor me.”

The young scientist, with such concern painted on her visage, finally nodded. “Sure, then.”

Without any more quarreling, Maru agreed to tell her father what she knew and liked about Jade. Shortly after, Robin left via truck to begin planning out the silo. The rest of the day was spent building with provided materials at the farm while Sebastian and Jade decided to practice their sword fighting. Robin was all too obnoxiously commentating on how adorable they were with each other, which prompted Sebastian to take their practice to the woods.
Jade thought his reactions were hilarious and she didn’t necessarily mind Robin’s innocent prodding. It was almost like she was getting a family again, which had a very welcoming feeling.

She missed them.

Chapter End Notes

Had quite a few different ideas for this chapter, but this was the end result. Pretty happy with it since I wanted to bring Demetrius back (Jade has only seem him twice before!) and to start building up his character. At this point, the cast is pretty dang big so this is probably all the people we'll see... until we get into some surprises later down the line :^)

This chapter is more of an info dump than anything since a lot of time passed between the last chapter and this one. We're starting to get into the more lasting plot lines, helping Sebastian's family and we'll eventually start learning the facts about Jade's as well. It'll be a good time.

As always, hope you enjoyed the read!
Thursday had arrived once more, just a few days before Abigail’s birthday and a little less than a week from the Stardew Valley Fair. On this particular day, Jade felt... groggy. When she woke up, her head was pounding and her face felt like it was on fire. No sunburn or flustered thoughts, but her cheeks were flushed a deep rose. It didn’t take long for her to realize she couldn’t breathe through her nose, and her whole body just felt so weak and flimsy. Several coughs, sneezes, a discouraged nap and a half-hearted shower later, Jade readied herself for a day of exhausting farming, with a date to the mines afterwards.

Work was slower than she expected. She went out of breath constantly, barely had any energy to water her crops, spent too much time tending to the land and she felt like she couldn’t keep up with her hyperactive farm animals. She opened the gates to feed them, kept a safe distance from them, and let them all out to safely explore the farmland. Jade had a feeling that something was amiss, but she still refused to believe it- she acted as normal as she could, despite wobbly standing and coughs that nearly knocked her off her feet.

Robin was working on the silo right beside the building it would supply. Jade did notice her, though the two assumed they were too busy to really chat. Working with stone was less natural for the carpenter, so she had to apply a lot more concentration to successfully get the job done. Unfortunately, she never noticed the farmer’s odd behavior to do anything. Time passed and Robin head home, Jade doing the same when all of her excruciating farming chores were completed.

There was an engine running in the distance in the later parts of the afternoon, followed by a knock at Jade’s front door. The sound caused her to sport a groan at her realization. She didn’t get enough rest and the date with Sebastian was just around the corner. The young farmer spouted a guttery yet enthusiastic, “I’ll be right there!” before trudging out of bed and waddling to the door. She lazily fixed her hair while simultaneously reaching for the door, then opened it to reveal Sebastian.

Sebastian warmly smiled at seeing his girlfriend. “Hey, you ready? Uh...” he asked, his voice then fading. His expression twisted into concern. “You don’t look so hot.”

“Excuse you, I’m sexy,” coughed Jade to the side. “I’m all packed for the ice caverns, let me just go get my stuff-

“No, come here.” Sebastian gently took her by the arm when she tried to go back into the house and brought her close to him. “You sound and look sick,” he said with a frown, caressing the sides of her face and then feeling her forehead. “... Yoba, you’re burning up. Wait... did you actually do your farm work today?”

Jade huffed and tiredly blinked her eyes. “Of course I did... S’my job, Seb.”
“You look like you’re about to pass out. You shouldn’t be doing anything when you’re feeling like this. Change of plans.”

“But... We’ve been planning this all week! I just got a stuffy nose and a cough, that’s all!” She interrupted herself with a sneeze, then groaned as she regained herself. “... I still want to go!” she desperately whined.

“Oh, we’re going somewhere.”

“Really?” Her eyes, as foggy as they were, brightened upon being thrown a metaphorical bone.

“To the clinic,” Sebastian said with a glare. “You’re sick.”

“Ugh...” Jade coughed into the bend of her arm. “Do I have to?”

Sebastian walked her back inside to get her out of the cold weather, then continued to check her. “Yes... Damn, Jade, how did you get so sick? And you’re not wearing warm enough clothes.”

“It’s fine,” Jade insisted. There was a chill in the air, but she wore her regular farm clothes as she always did. Sebastian knew she was experiencing serious denial, since her arms were covered in goosebumps and she kept hugging herself. He pulled his hoodie off and tossed it to her.

“My hoodie is very warm. We’ll be on my motorcycle so you need it,” he explained. Jade grumbled something under her breath, but she obeyed and slipped on the hoodie that he wore just about every single day. Her mannerisms quickly improved, since she was overcome with his jacket’s warmth from body heat and relaxed from being surrounded by his scent. He fastened the hood over her head and smiled. “Better?”

The young farmer couldn’t complain. She gave a shy nod and sniffled, passively reaching to hold his hand. Her eyes drifted to his torso, since she rarely if ever saw him without his hoodie. He had a dark blue sweater on, which kept his dark fashion sense and would keep himself warm even without his hoodie. Jade was always surprised with how thin he was, but she found him very cute.

He held her hand in return, seeming relieved. “Good,” he said after a heavy breath.

“If I’m sick, I don’t want to get you sick too,” she weakly murmured.

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “No if, you are sick. And don’t worry about me.”

Jade still insisted she would, but a sneeze caused her to forget what she was sleepily arguing about. When all was said and done, Sebastian led the sickly patient out of her house and drove her off with his motorcycle. The drive itself caused Jade to accept the fact that she was sick, since her head was spinning and she practically had a death grip on Sebastian’s waist as they went to their destination.

While the drive lasted a few minutes at the most, Jade was too frazzled to really notice. She groaned when the motorcycle came to a stop and waited for Sebastian to guide her after dismounting the vehicle. He led her over to the clinic, ushering an exhausted snort from the farmer. “I’ve only been here once before, and you were the one to take me. Maybe you’re the one making me sick,” she joked, then fully leaned on him as they walked. “Love sick,” she loudly whispered in a raspy voice.

“I’m going to abandon you at a church’s doorstep,” he deadpanned in response. Jade emitted a tired
laugh from his reply and followed with a little more cheer when they entered the clinic.

The place was the same as before: bright walls, tiled floors, light colored furniture everywhere. Maru, donned in her nurse’s uniform, lingered behind the front desk. Before, she boredly organized her desk supplies, but then lifted her head when she heard them enter. She stared in confusion upon seeing the two guests, since Sebastian was never one to see his half-sister and Jade looked different with a hood over her head. “Um... Welcome?” Maru began with a question, unsure of what to do.

“Hey. Jade’s sick, is Harvey here?” The raven-hair seemed more understanding for the time being, as he didn’t really give Maru any attitude or a passing comment unrelated to the situation.

“Oh, my...” Maru frowned, looking at the sniffling Jade. “He’s here, but what’s wrong?”

Jade mumbled something that she couldn’t really hear, then yawned afterwards. Sebastian merely sighed and let go of her hand to hold her around the shoulder. “She might have just caught a bad cold, but I just think it’s a good idea to check,” he stated.

The nurse nodded in cooperation and scanned the counter in front of her. Quickly, she took a clipboard that had a pen chained to it, then slid it over to the guests. “Fill this form out and he’ll be right with you.” Maru took no hesitation to walk off into the other reaches of the clinic.

The young farmer sleepily wiped her eyes and slowly blinked at the sheet of paper, then walked over to get a better look. She grabbed the pen and sluggishly scrawled her name and information on the clipboard. “... Dang, do I have to pay? I left my wallet at home,” she sniffled.

“Don’t worry about that. If worst comes to worst, you owe me.”

“I can’t exactly take a day off if I’m too sick to work... who would do my chores for me?” Jade finished filling out the information and slid the clipboard back to the other side of the desk. She retired back over to Sebastian and leaned against him in exhaustion.

He put his arm back around her and pat her on the head. “We’ll take care of it. Maybe Marnie or someone will do the animals for you.”

Jade stood up straight to scramble for a nearby box of tissues on the front desk. She grabbed a tissue just in time and sneezed into it. “Ungh... Good, they’re my babies... I don’t want to make them sick. I tried to not mess with them much today anyway. Can bunnies and chickens get colds?”

Both Maru and Harvey entered the main lobby to see their new patient. Jade hadn’t seen Harvey too many times before, but she was just as surprised at how tall he was. And that luxurious moustache! She was probably too sick to really understand her thought process.

Harvey had a strange amount of excitement behind his expression of concern towards the farmer. One could estimate that his behavior was due to not getting too many patients, though getting sick was never fun to witness. Nicely, he urged the farmer in through the door to the other areas of the clinic. She started to follow, but then glanced sadly over to Sebastian when she noticed he wasn’t going with her.

“I can’t come with you, but I’m waiting for you right here,” the raven-haired man said with a smile.

Jade didn’t like the answer, but she accepted. Without much more fight, she went with Harvey to the patient room. Sebastian found a nearby seat in the waiting room and sighed, taking out a phone from
his pocket to kill some time. Maru had gone after the other two, but after a few minutes, returned to
the front desk until she was needed once more. She had a decent view of her half-brother to her left
and discreetly watched him for a little while. “Thank you,” she eventually said.

Sebastian didn’t look up from his phone, but he heard her: “For what?”

“You’re waiting here instead of going into the patient’s room,” his sister recalled, regarding his last
clinic visit with Jade. “I’m just saying I appreciate it.”

“Oh... No problem.” Sebastian was surprisingly tame. He could have returned some attitude, but
decided not to. Maru wasn’t necessarily sure if he was more focused on Jade to be rude, or if he had
actually begun to tolerate his family again. Either way, progress was progress, and she thought it was
nice to see him care for others.

Meanwhile, Jade had been taken to one of a few patient’s rooms and was instructed to sit down on
the examination table. Harvey had taken her temperature and gasped aloud when he saw it. “102.1
fahrenheit... Goodness, you’re burning up. I’m surprised you could even get here,” he stated,
surprised.

The young farmer shrugged. “I wanted to go out today,” she whined. “We were gonna go on a nice
date... kick some monster ass, have a nice picnic, and-” she coughed away from the doctor. “And I
was hoping for smooches.”

“To be honest, you sound a bit delirious,” Harvey pointed out, sweating nervously. “Th-that’s not to
say what you’re saying is bad, you just sound very tired.” He cleared his throat and decided to stop
talking, since he probably would have made it worse. Jade felt a little too lightheaded to really
recognize she was supposed to be offended, if at all. Instead, she just let him do all that was required
of him as a doctor. As was expected, Jade had come down with a significant case of the flu. “You
just need a lot of rest, fluids, and Maru will send you home with some medicine,” he stated,
scribbling a doctor’s note down for the medication. “With a lot of care, you should be back to normal
in just a few days. Week at the most, but hopefully you’ll recover quickly.”

“Goodie,” Jade tiredly cheered. “Though the idea of lying around for that long is... bleh... I at least
want to play games or something,” she yawned.

Harvey gave her a gentle pat on the back and handed her the note to give to Maru. “It’ll be fine, Ms
Jade. Just be sure to do what I said and you’ll be taking the world by storm again.”

Jade nodded and then left the patient’s room, Harvey finishing business up in the room before going
off to his office to complete some paperwork. Sebastian stood up and walked over to her when she
entered the main lobby again, then stood beside her when she handed the note to Maru.

“Everything going well?” the nurse cheerfully asked, getting the medicine for her. She offered all the
required materials in a small bag and then smiled. “I hope you’ll feel better soon, Jade. Don’t worry
about money right now, bill gets sent in the mail.”

“Double goodie,” wheezed Jade. “I hope so too. Thanks for being adorable as always,” she said with
a wave.

Sebastian took the bag and started guiding her back outside. “What did he say? Few days of rest?”

“Uh huh.”
“You’ll be better in no time. If I see you sneaking out to work, I’ll have your ass.”

“I’m so scared,” the young farmer laughed. “In any case, be gentle.”

He rolled his eyes and put the medicine in one of the motorcycle’s compartments, then got on the vehicle, waiting for her to join him. “Why are you so sassy with me? Sick people are supposed to be sad and cute, like senior citizens.”

“Hey, I’m not cute!” Jade sat behind him as usual and hugged him. “I’m sexy, I told you already.”

“Haha, alright. Let’s go, then.”

When they rode back to Jade’s home, Sebastian made sure that she dressed in her pajamas and went right back to bed. She kept on the hoodie because she seemed all too comfortable in it, and he didn’t really want to increase the odds of catching her flu. Plus, she seemed really precious, bundled up in a dark hoodie and surrounded by all of her blankets. With a groan of dismay after taking her flu medicine, she settled her head into her favorite fluffy pillow and watched Sebastian with a puppyish look.

She coughed to the side before she spoke: “Are you gonna stay here with me?”

“Yes, you shouldn’t be alone when you’re sick like this.”

“Awww... you’re so sweet,” Jade softly complimented. “I can rest easy.”

“Damn right you can. I need to go back home to get some stuff if I’m going to end up spending the night,” Sebastian explained, walking to the doorway of the bedroom. “I’ll be back soon, though. Do you need anything before I leave?”

“Nah... I’m gonna settle down,” she yawned. She murmured a goodbye as she got more comfortable, watching him until he left. Her eyes closed once she had been left alone, slipping off into unconsciousness in an instant.

--

“Hey.”

Jade felt a gentle nudge at her shoulder. Slowly, she opened her eyes and grunted at whoever dared to wake her.

Wait, she recognized that voice. “I didn’t want to wake you, but you need to eat.” Sebastian helped prop her up in bed and continued to examine her. Poor thing was barely awake.

She merely mumbled, “okay...” and yawned. “What time is it?” She seemed relatively calmer thanks to the medicine, though her nose had still been blocked up.

“It’s just after 7:30. You’ve been sleeping all afternoon, which is good. Uh... I’ll bring you some food, but you should know...” Sebastian suddenly appeared to be nervous.

Despite her sickness, she knew that expression brought trouble anytime. “What?” She coughed.
“... Sorry,” he muttered.

“... About?”

“Uh...” Sebastian scratched his head, then stared at the door to her room. “I... may have been followed-”

“Sebby!” boomed a voice from the other end of the house. Jade appeared shocked at first, but then laughed to the best of her ability. Robin couldn’t stay home knowing one of her new babies were sick.

The raven-haired man sighed in irritation. “She wouldn’t take no for an answer. But... she did make you some soup, albeit by using your kitchen. I’ll, uh, go get it.”

Jade spread a knowing smile as he left the room, returning momentarily with a bowl of soup and a mug of hot tea. She could see steam rising from the bowl, then noticed its warm reddish color when Sebastian carefully placed it on her lap. He set the tea down to the nightstand beside her bed.

“Careful, it’s hot,” he said.

She wished she could have smelled then, since the soup made her very curious. She stirred the contents around with the spoon that waited at the rim of the bowl and glanced to Sebastian with curiosity. “Is this tomato soup?” she wondered aloud.

“Pumpkin soup, actually. You probably can’t taste it very well, but... it’s one of my mother’s home cooked dishes.” Sebastian softly urged her to take a spoonful. “Try it.”

“I’ve never had pumpkin soup before,” murmured the farmer. How disappointing; she wanted to be able to taste something new. Even so, she still took a spoonful and carefully sipped the soup’s broth. Its consistency was rather nice and she was able to consume the soup without much difficulty. Its warmth was soothing on her sore throat, which prompted her to sigh in contentment.

Sebastian watched her as she drank the soup, relieved that she seemed to like the dish. “Mom used to make me pumpkin soup all the time,” he quietly mentioned. “It was my favorite meal as a kid. She made it when I was sick, too. I liked getting to laze in bed all day and having a ton of pumpkin soup at my disposal,” he chuckled.

“Aww, little baby Seb,” Jade reminisced while taking a break from her meal. “I bet you were a nightmare.”

“Hehe, I was. It’s a lot harder for me to get sick now, since I fell down with all kinds of illnesses as a kid. I went outside a little too much and was a little too daring with some stuff...”

Jade snorted. “That’s an interesting thought... it’s kind of the opposite now, isn’t it?”

“Maybe. I do like staying inside, and nothing outdoors really captures my attention anymore. I always thought that was just a part of growing up... for me, at least.” Sebastian paused to grab a napkin and wipe a bit of soup that spilled onto Jade’s blanket.

She quietly thanked him and continued to consume her meal. In another break, she smiled to him. “Funny... it’s the opposite for me.”
“Really?”

“Uh huh... when I was a kid, I stayed inside all the time... truth be told, I stayed inside even as an adult... I hated going outside to do even the simplest tasks.” She frowned. “Not that home was much better. I fought with my brother constantly, and-” She coughed to the side, away from her partner. “I wasn’t allowed to see my parents.”

The raven-hair didn’t reply, though he was closely listening. A frown had cursed his visage.

“That’s... that’s a complicated story. Maybe I’ll tell you when I don’t feel like crap. But... Anyways, after I escaped and moved here, I just... I want to be outside all the time.” She shared a cheerier expression to show that she was fine. “I do love being inside and goofing off, but everything is so new and exciting here. The forest, the beach, the mines... I love it all.” Jade radiated with childlike wonder. “I’ve learned so much since I started living here, and I’ve done more here in half a year than three at my old place. I never even knew Junimos, or slimes, or anything existed. Or, well... they just seemed like something from a storybook.”

Sebastian’s expression softened. He didn’t seem very pleased, but he felt calm from Jade’s smiling. She continued to down the soup, so he assumed it was his turn to talk: “That explains why you’re so stubborn about accepting when you can’t do something.” He smirked and avoided the light slap she was going to give his arm. “It also explains why I like exploring with you so much.” He folded his arms on the bed and lay his head down, still watching her. “I may not get too sick, but your excitement is contagious.”

“Aw...”

He suddenly blushed and laughed. “Sorry, that was lame, wasn’t it?”

“No, we’re dating. You’re supposed to say lame things.” She finished her food and reached to drink some tea.

“Are you an expert about this?” He suppressed more laughter and instead lifted an eyebrow.

“Totally. I have watched so many romcoms,” she joked. Sebastian laughed and sat up, then taking the bowl from her.

“Alright, you’re officially sleep deprived.” He leaned over to kiss her on the head. “Nice talk. Get some rest, now.”

“Yes, Sebby.”

“... Jade-”

“Sorry, I know that’s your mom’s nickname. Let’s make some new ones.”

“Please. No.”

“Sebaestian. Because you’re my bae.” Jade let out an obnoxious chortle.

“Holy Yoba...”

“You my boo, then. Seboo.”
Sebastian died a little on the inside. “Why am I nice to you?”

“Because I’m what makes you Seb-last-ian.” Jade laughed even harder. She looked and sounded drugged, but with the medicine, it couldn’t have been much of a stretch.

“Holy shit. Sleep.” He mistakenly led her on with a snicker. She deeply inhaled to breathe out another horrible pun involving his name, but he held out a hand to stop her. “Nope. Leaving. Leaving forever. Bye.”

“Sebyestian!” She waved.

“Dammit,” he breathed. He left the room before anything else would go wrong, though he was smiling after turning away from her.

The smile instantly vanished.

Robin was having some of the extra soup at the dining table, sitting with some uninvited guests. Maru came by since she saw Jade earlier at the clinic, which was understandable, but there was no explanation for Sam, Abigail, Penny, and Alex, of all people, to be in Jade’s house. All of them were eating with contentment and quietly chatting to each other when Sebastian exit the room.

“What the... What the hell! Mom!” Sebastian suddenly screamed.

“They came here themselves! They just wanna see how Jade is doing! And this is a lot of soup anyway, so everyone dig in. Come get some, Sebby.”

“N... No! All you assholes get out!” He furiously pointed to the door. “Jade’s sleeping!”

“We heard her laugh a minute ago,” Alex non-chalantly pointed out. “Also, grandma made her cookies.” He proudly held up a wrapped plate of Evelyn’s freshly baked cookies. On top of the plate was a get-well-soon card from the Mullner family. “Unless you got a problem with that, Toothpick.”

“You know what, I don’t even have the energy to deal with you today.” He quickly let that go, since Jade probably would have wanted the cookies. He suddenly glared to his best friend, Sam. “You have no reason to be here!”

Sam rolled his eyes, grinning. “How could I stay at home when Papa J is ill? We all decided to come say hi after hearing the news from Robin. I was chilling with Pen and Abby so they came along too. Right, gals?”

Penny shyly nodded. “It would be rude to not visit...”

Abigail agreed with fierce confidence. “She’s our friend too, you know! Oh... Huh, where’s your hoodie?”

“Doesn’t matter! Leave whatever shit you got for her and get out!” the raven-hair snapped.

“Sebby! Language.” Robin gasped and threateningly pointed the spoon she held towards him.

“Mother!” he yelled again, face red with rage.
Maru didn’t say anything and casually sipped a cup of tea that Robin made, watching the whole event unfold. She felt that nothing could be said to add to the moment’s perfection.

Everyone from the dining table focused their attention to Jade’s door as it creaked open. Sebastian turned around, anger quickly transforming into worry. Jade had waddled out of the room, tiredly rubbing her eyes with her sleeve. She was wearing the hoodie with pajamas underneath, though the shorts she wore didn’t poke out much. Fuzzy socks were on her feet to maximize comfort on her end. “What’s all this ruckus?” she asked in a lighthearted voice, still glowing from her earlier punfest.

“Found the hoodie!” Sam blurted out. Abigail and Sam exchanged a loud high-five.

“Shut up!” hissed Sebastian, then looked back to Jade and cautiously reached for her. “It’s nothing, you should go back to bed.”

Jade wanted to listen to her loving partner, but the commotion was too interesting to pass up. She saw everyone gathered around the table and stepped forward in surprise: “Aww, did all of you come here for me?”

The visitors expressed their varying degrees of affirmation and greeted her. Jade held her hands to her heart and wanted to tear up.

“All of you are so nice... Thank you! I need a picture of this moment,” she started, sleepily digging through a cabinet at the nearby entertainment center.

Sebastian watched her with a worried huff. “What are you looking for?”

“My camera... I can’t find it,” she pouted.

“Oh! I have one!” Robin beamed, quickly running outside. She returned immediately after, holding a digital camera that she grabbed from her truck outside. Everyone seemed excited about the gesture except for Sebastian- he was confused, irritated, and didn’t understand what Jade really saw in the moment. “All of you squeeze together!” the eldest of them all beamed, motioning them to close in at the dining table.

“Actually.. is it okay if I take the picture instead?” asked Jade. “I’m not fit for a photo and I want you to be included.”

“Aww, sure. I barely know how to work the thing anyway,” Robin snorted in reply and kindly offered the camera to Jade. She happily accepted and messed around with the device’s setting for a moment before requesting everyone to stand up together. The six who were originally at the table did what they were told and positioned themselves in front, all cooperating to stand together. Since Alex towered above pretty much all of them, he stood in the middle to provide balance, while everyone crowded around him. Sebastian decided to sit this one out, instead standing behind Jade with grumpily crossed arms.

She smiled. “Almost perfect,” she softly muttered. “I’m still missing a person.”

“Come here, Mama!” Sam beamed over to the raven-haired man.

Sebastian seemed confused. “You wanted a picture of them,” he said, sounding a little offended.

Jade nodded. “I do, but you are part of this moment. You’re the biggest part of the moment, if you
ask me,” she explained with a smile. “You should go stand in front of Alex. I think that’ll make it
perfect.”

Her boyfriend sighed, but he wasn’t one to argue, especially with her voice sounding so scratchy and
pitiful. He still didn’t get it, though he did end up wandering over and standing in the requested
place. Sebastian was incredibly short compared to Alex, so the whole picture remained balance and
complete from their positions.

“Come on, Seb... smile for me.” Jade focused her gaze to him. “Don’t make me start saying lame
gooey puns in front of everyone.”

“Hey, I didn’t agree to do any of this!” Sebastian replied back almost desperately.

Jade thought for a few seconds. “Remember the last time it rained, and we raced to find shelter but I
just ended up falling flat on my ass? You walked me home with muddy butt prints.”

His recalling made him unintentionally smile. Everyone else’s face had lit up and glanced to
Sebastian to see his reaction. Jade took the picture immediately, then grinned at the result. “There we
go.”

The whole group, save for Sebastian, went over to see how the photo looked. All of them stood
together and all of them seemed cheerful, even Sebastian with such a genuine smile on his face.
Robin excitedly told Jade that she would get the picture printed for her, while everyone else seemed
satisfied with the outcome. After that was done, they all sent their regards to Jade, though they all
kept a significant distance. The young farmer didn’t mind, and instead ventured over to Sebastian to
show him the results of the picture.

“You cheated,” Sebastian huffed.

She giggled. “It had to be done... Anyway,” she coughed. “Here, look. You’re right in the middle.”

He examined the picture and was actually surprised at how... happy... everyone looked. Even
himself.

“We look kind of like a family, don’t we? Everyone I know and love in the same photo... I don’t
want to ever forget it.” She tiredly smiled. “That’s enough excitement for now... I’ll go fulfill my b-
friend’s wishes,” Jade said afterwards, gently taking Sebastian’s hand to place the camera on his
palm. “I’m glad I have you to take care of me.” The young farmer kissed his shoulder, even though
she would have loved to give him a legitimate kiss. The one true downfall to becoming ill. She
parted without any sort of ridiculous pun this time, passing waves to everyone before going back to
her room.

Sebastian fell absolutely speechless. After she went back to her room, he decided to look at the photo
one more time. He facepalmed at the realization and sighed to himself. “Sebastian, you idiot,” he
grunted under his breath.

Ignoring everyone else, the raven-hair put the camera on the nearest surface and then followed Jade
to her room. She had already settled and curled up in a ball of blankets, and the room was dark and
quiet. He wandered over to one of her windows, which had a cushioned reading chair placed nearby.
He sat down and watched her for a moment, then peered out the window.

Noise from the main area of the house faded when the guests departed, leaving the remaining two to
their own devices. It was a peaceful night.

Chapter End Notes

another fluff chapter!

I liked the idea of the farmer getting sick, especially with all the stuff they deal with, from dusty buildings to mines, fighting dangerous monsters and really just overworking themselves a ton. Jade probably got a little bit of everything!

still slowly chipping away at plot points, which will probably become clearer in a few chapters. for now, let's enjoy the fluff!
Unfortunately, Jade still felt sick by the time Abigail’s birthday rolled around on Saturday. They briefly met in order for the farmer to give a sweet gift, though the object in mind was nothing all that expensive. Jade heard from one of the squad that she adored amethysts, which she luckily encountered in her last trip to the mines. Abigail was overjoyed to receive such a nice gem and couldn’t properly express her gratitude since the poor farmer was still contagious. Still, Jade wished she could have spent a full day with Abigail, but she could hear Robin and Sebastian’s voice in the back of her head, telling her to continue to rest.

She was well enough to visit the town and do the less laborious tasks on her farmland, so everything was at least shifting back to normalcy. Robin completed the silo and Sebastian was off somewhere, which meant Jade returned to a house occupied by only her yodeling feline. Nothing else was asked of her, so her afternoon was spent lazying in her game room and playing games that would make her sleepy.

Then came a message on her computer:

SEBASTIAN: Are you awake?

SEBASTIAN: You should be sleeping, but I’ll message just in case. Abby did see you in town today

SEBASTIAN: Which, by the way, is pushing it. I hope you’re feeling better if you did that

Jade snorted from seeing the messages. It was just like him to worry like that.

JADE: i feel a little better!! my fever has gone down and i can smell.

JADE: just a little bit. but still.

JADE: i promise you i have not overworked myself so you can rest easy

SEBASTIAN: That’s good. I’ll come by this evening and help you with anything you need

SEBASTIAN: I also wanted to ask if you’re up for game night.

JADE: OH MAN
JADE: tonight IS game night, isn’t it?!

JADE: man ofc it’s on abby’s bday and everything. i’d feel so bad playing it without her though.

SEBASTIAN: She hates Solarion Chronicles so I wouldn’t get worked up about it.

SEBASTIAN: Or well, she likes the world, but hates playing.

SEBASTIAN: We all saw her today and hung out so don’t worry.

JADE: fineeee....

SEBASTIAN: Wait, hold on.

SEBASTIAN: Sam wants to talk about it too. Let me add him.

JADE: okie

-- SEBASTIAN added SAM to the chat. --

SAM: papa j

SAM: lets have it at your house

JADE: the game?

SEBASTIAN: You probably should have the windows for fresh air.

JADE: i’m not THAT weak lol. i’m getting better!

JADE: robin gave me this little face mask so i don’t cough all over people. it has a cute bunny pattern, she thought of me.

SAM: lmfao

SAM: ok well it can get crowded in the basement anyway and i have a proposal.

SEBASTIAN: What?

JADE: what is it fam?

SAM: dont get me wrong, i love watchin yall being nerdy genderswapped clones in love.

SAM: and since i told seb that he absolute is 100% biased, last game night was much more legit.

SEBASTIAN: Which I’m not.

SAM: ofc mama

SAM: whatever u say.
SAM: the fact of the matter is
SAM: i’m as third of a wheel as a third wheel can wheel. in third
JADE: no you’re not!!
JADE: we love you hanging out with us!!
SAM: i know papa
SAM: but i still would like to bring in a fourth person
SEBASTIAN: Who in this town would even want to play Solarion Chronicles?
SAM: :^)
SEBASTIAN: ... NO
SEBASTIAN: NOT her.
JADE: who???
SAM: someone who knows her shit better than seb
SEBASTIAN: She is a fucking cheat.
SAM: if u say so
SAM: i want her to come along and itll be better in jades house anyway
SEBASTIAN: Damn right, she is not going into my room
JADE: who is this?? who do you hate so much?
SAM: oh dw
SAM: seb doesnt hate her just hates that shes better
SEBASTIAN: She is NOT better.
SAM: why dont you let me bring her along then and well see ;^)
JADE: i’m????????????
SEBASTIAN: I legitimately hate you
SAM: r00d
SAM: isnt he cute when hes angry papa
JADE: yes but i am also terribly confused.

JADE: but sure, just bring the game and we can set up a nice area in the living room : D

JADE: seb you should come early. i would love the help < 3

JADE: also i washed your hoodie

SAM: omg

SAM: thats so......................... domestic. swoon

SEBASTIAN: Stuff it, Sam

SEBASTIAN: I’ll be over earlier then

JADE: i’ve been careful to not mess with it much after washing because i don’t want to accidentally make you sick

JADE: while we’re on the topic, if we have a fourth player, maybe i can just be the scenario narration?

SAM: ooooh

SEBASTIAN: You’re not going to play your character?

JADE: well i don’t want to be messing with the dice and cards all too much, especially since i don’t have my own dice set yet ):)

JADE: it was my turn to write a scenario and i wrote it with just three players in mind anyway. what kind of player is mystery girl?

SAM: shes the best damn white mage youll ever see

JADE: ok. since i tended to cast the heal potions and etc. it won’t be too much of a difference.

SEBASTIAN: ):)

JADE: it’ll be ok! you’ll love the scenario. i swear!

SAM: youll need to kiss him better

JADE: i would if i could atm!

JADE: the alternative would be to have late night cuddles on sam’s corpse

SEBASTIAN: That’ll do.

SAM: double r00d

SAM: ill just make u more sick with my revenge corpse stank
JADE: lmao

SEBASTIAN: Worth it.

SEBASTIAN: I’m getting rid of you now

SAM: take me away boys

-- SEBASTIAN removed SAM from the chat. --

JADE: are you okay? ):

SEBASTIAN: I’ll be fine

SEBASTIAN: I was just kinda looking forward to the three of us like usual.

SEBASTIAN: But I know it’s not fair for Sam to be the odd one out like that

JADE: i think he’ll appreciate it and it’s always fun to have someone else join!

JADE: if any trouble starts i’ll try to take care of it, but promise me something.

SEBASTIAN: What is it?

JADE: promise me you won’t try to start a fight or take the game too seriously

JADE: i know how you get

JADE: if you feel irritated, focus on me instead! i’m here for you always

SEBASTIAN: ...

JADE: and even if she is objectively better it doesn’t matter

JADE: because you’re always the best to me!!

JADE: ok? < 3

SEBASTIAN: Okay

JADE: thank you~~

JADE: so i’ll see you soon?

SEBASTIAN: Yeah, I’ll be over in a few hours with the game and etc.

JADE: i can’t wait!

JADE: i’ll leave you to it. get to me safe!

SEBASTIAN: Of course
Sebastian: Bye <3

Jade: byeeme <3

Sebastian was probably a bit grumpy, but Jade had confidence that he would cheer up. The boys seemed too caught up in their banter to really answer her only question: who was the mystery player if it wasn’t Abigail? Sam seemed to be friends with the person, so Jade still looked forward to seeing her, whoever she was.

The thought of three people over at her house caused Jade to stop playing video games and make some of the rooms more presentable. She did have more people over previously, but she felt much worse and had the excuse to just lie in bed all day. Wearing the neat bunny-patterned mask gifted to her, she spent the next few hours cleaning the kitchen, sweeping the floors, organizing the books and movies she had left out, and dusting her prized artifacts on the tops of her shelves for good measure. Even if they were people she had been with for so long, even Petrified Bastard, her petrified slime artifact, needed to look its best.

When the young farmer completed all the house work, she showered and dressed in comfortable clothes that would be perfect for playing Solarion Chronicles. As if he was on cue, Sebastian knocked and then opened the front door, calling with an “I’m here,” then just walking inside. Jade ventured back into the main area of her house and brushed her hair when he entered. She saw that he carried a long and rather sturdy box with fantastical art and the game’s name on the front.

“Seb! Hey,” Jade beamed. He put the box down on the living room couch, which gave her the opportunity to walk over and eagerly hug him.

“Hey, Jade. You look much better today,” he stated in a cheerier voice. Sebastian felt relieved to see Jade’s health improve. “Been getting enough rest?”

“Yes, Mom,” she giggled, letting go of him. “Tonight will be interesting, won’t it?”

It certainly would be. While chatting about the possibilities the night would bring, both Jade and Sebastian moved back the living room couch to make more room for the coffee table that had been placed in the middle of the area. Since the table was wide enough for a proper board game but short enough to sit comfortably, Jade threw cushions on the floor for the four of them and Sebastian set up the game itself. After all the precautions have been made, the young farmer ran to the laundry room located to the side of the living room in order to return her boyfriend’s beloved hoodie. He wore it immediately and already seemed to increase in spirit.

And so, game night was about to begin. When guests had arrived at the door, Jade had been carefully organizing her notes for the game to come. Sebastian let them in, Sam walking in first, the mystery lady then walking through and revealing herself as... Penny?

Out of everyone she could have guessed, Penny was one of the last people she considered. Abigail was out, Haley seemed to ridicule such activities, and she didn’t know anything about Leah... for the people in their age range, that left just Maru and Penny. Sebastian has only really shown such ferociousness towards Maru, so that was Jade’s best estimate. Apparently not. She watched Penny step into the home while carrying a long strapped purse. Only glancing, she give a shy wave to both Sebastian and Jade, sure to be half obscured by Sam’s figure.

“Hi, Penny,” Jade said with an air of cheer. “Sam was telling me he’d invite someone, but I didn’t
realize who it would be. Glad to know it’s you!”

Sam blinked in surprise. “I didn’t? Whoops.”

“Ah, it’s all fine and dandy,” Jade beamed. Her voice was slightly muffled from the mask, but everyone could agree that she sounded as normal as ever. “Welcome, you two. I’m excited to actually start this, and it’s always fun to have a fourth person!” Jade focused on Penny again, who shyly nodded. Jade’s three guests all joined her at the temporary game table. Sebastian was quick to settle, while the other two looked around curiously.

“I never had much of a chance to look at your home before... it is very nice... thank you for allowing me here,” Penny quietly started, her expression faint but gentle. Before Jade could answer, she grew somewhat worried. “Oh, um... how are you feeling?”

Penny acted very sweet. Jade felt like she could relate to her stammering and shyness, considering that’s how she acted towards others when first meeting them. She didn’t realize how far she had come. “I’m feeling alright. Took my meds, cough is mostly gone, I can taste stuff now... Still a little sick, so I’m just trying to keep my hands off everything.” Jade smiled under her mask. “I’m just going to be handling the scenario today. I worked on it myself, so I hope you like it!”

The timid teacher nodded. “I’m sure I will... I haven’t played Solarion Chronicles in ages, since my tutoring job takes up most of my time. I might be a bit rusty,” she sadly admitted. Sebastian had been awfully quiet, so Jade reached to hold his hand as they all conversed. The two lovers sat closer to each other, while Sam and Penny relaxed on the opposite end of the table. Sam had placed his dice set and nifty character figurine on the table and happily listened in to the conversation.

“You never struck me as someone who enjoyed Solarion Chronicles. How long have you been playing?” Jade curiously inquired.

“Oh, my... Years. Nowadays, I just read the books... I’ve read them all,” she replied, voice elevating slightly in excitement. “I look forward to the adventure we will be going on!”

“Yeah!” Sam beamed. “Pen’s being modest. She’s a natural. All three of us would play before... Well.” The blond glanced to his dear cinnamon roll haired friend, unsure if he should continue. She simply smiled in response and gave him a reassuring pat.

“It’s okay... Um, my mom used to be a bus driver, but the bus is old and my mom doesn’t drive it much... especially since we don’t get too many tourists and hardly any townspeople use it,” Penny muttered, then adjusting her red bangs. “So... the bus hardly runs and my mom doesn’t get paid when it’s unused. I get paid enough to keep the trailer running... it’s just a lot of hard work. The children are a joy to be with, at least.”

“That makes sense. Thank you for sharing,” Jade gently replied. “Sounds really busy! Maybe I should use the bus sometime to help you guys, heheh.”

Penny made a sad smile in response. “That would be nice. I’m happy I could participate this time, in any case.”

“Yes! We’re all happy to have you. Hey, though. School reminds me... where did all of you go to school? There doesn’t seem to be any education system here... sucks for the next generation,” the curious Jade pondered.
Sam stretched his arms and then folded his hands behind his head, thinking. “Well, I used to live in the city too, so I went to school at the last place I lived,” he answered.

“Oh... There is a high school right outside of Zuzu City... I know a lot of us in Pelican Town went there,” added Penny. “I remember the lot of us riding the bus there.”

“Oh, well I’m glad you had somewhere to go. I guess it’s cheaper for Vincent and Jas to be here, huh?” Jade thought for a moment, and then nodded to herself. “What about you, Seb?” She looked over to her boyfriend, who wasn’t paying much attention to the conversation and was reaching for something under the table. She tugged the hand she held, bringing him back into focus.

“Huh? Sorry.” Sebastian let go of her hand and reached both of them under the table, pulling out the resident black and fluffy beast. “Onyx was distracting me.”

“You win this one.” Jade chuckled and pet her mischievous cat, though he seemed to be more occupied by batting at the strings of Sebastian’s hoodie. Sebastian adjusted his seating, causing the feline to dart out of the raven-haired’s hold and into some other part of the house. “Ah, he’s actin’ crazy tonight. Anyways, sorry about that,” Jade said with a grin.

“It’s okay,” Penny warmly remarked. “I didn’t know you had a kitty... he’s very cute.”

Sebastian placed his elbows on the table and watched them all. “What was the question?”

“Where you went to school,” Jade repeated.

“Oh. Yeah, outside Zuzu City. I think all of us had to go there, though I was on my way out when a lot of others came in. I think Abby was going in as a freshman when I graduated.”

“Oolldd,” groaned Sam. Such a remark caused an extra pillow from the couch to be thrown at him.

“And that asshole would have been a sophomore, probably,” Sebastian said with a deadpan tone.

Jade laughed. “It’s nice we have so many people in the same age bracket. You think there’d be less similarity in a town like this.”

Penny nodded. “Even so... not that I really want this place to be a city, but... it would be nice to have more children to teach. Maybe build an actual school here... one of those really cute small ones you only read about in books.”

One of Sam’s eyebrows twitched as he attempted to suppress a joke he wanted to make. “I know some people who will provide some new babies,” he snorted. He failed miserably, and another pillow was sent flying at his head. Jade was the culprit this time.

“It’ll be you since I’ll be knocking you back two decades,” the fiery farmer huffed. Such a remark ushered a cackle from Sam; it was the exact reaction he wanted. Their conversations and banter eventually slowed down as they grew more accustomed to the home. Once the four of them settled, Jade hid behind a standing folder and stared down to her scenario notes. “Okay, are we all ready to play?” She glanced around to read the room. The three others gave some form of confirmation, allowing Jade to continue. Their game of Solarion Chronicles would then rightfully begin.

Many components about that particular game night had stacked against Jade, though she handled it with confidence and charm. She wasn’t in her best health, there were more people in her house than
she grew accustomed to, and she was the one to write the scenario even though she hadn’t done too much writing herself. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, even Sebastian, who had worried her earlier in the day. Her story wasn’t too bad, either. The three with characters were able to respond rather well and included many spontaneous moves and surprises.

Penny really was being modest, though. For some reason, she knew the exact words to mutter, the right numbers to roll with the dice. Every single time, the numbers were in her favor. It was as if she had excellent luck, to the point that Sebastian had her use his dice for the next move, since he was convinced hers were faulty or weighted.

But, no. The numbers were still in her favor, every move was perfect, and Penny herself changed in demeanor as she played. The shy, soft spoken cinnamon roll became an extremely focused, calculated, brutal adversary. Though she had a more healing role in the game, Jade wondered how fast the game would have gone if she dealt more powerful attacks. The young farmer’s story could have been very short!

Still, the game lasted hours into the night. Realizing the time, Penny asked to end the game early with a shy promise to continue the next week. Jade, feeling much drowsier from the night and medication, agreed and thanked her for arriving to play. Just like that, Penny changed back to her soft and gentle ways. She bid farewell and more wishes for improved health as she left, Sam following after. Sebastian stayed late as he normally did, not wanting to walk an incredible distance just to undergo another night. With permission from Jade, he made himself comfortable on the couch and decided to stay another night. His frequent visits made her ponder cleaning out the box-filled bedroom across from her game room, or to at least get him a proper bed, but he seemed content just being in her home. She felt relaxed, too.

Before they parted for the night, Jade couldn’t help but ask him, “That was really fun, but it was truly surreal watching Penny... What did you think?”

“Not surprised at all,” Sebastian answered, stretching his arms with a yawn. “But... Yeah. It was fun. She was impressive.”

“For sure,” Jade mused in agreement. “And you were being a great team player! I’m really proud of you.”

The gesture made him flush and avert his eyes. He was often too modest, as well. “... Thanks,” he muttered. Sebastian went quiet, though not for the usual reason... a realization came to him out of nowhere. Many circumstances would trigger him into feeling consistent irritation, mild to severe anger, jealousy, intolerance; the same should have happened with Penny’s performance during the game, but...

He felt calm. Sebastian was moodier earlier in the day, but even seeing Penny, he was fine. Not even the consideration of being angry or resentful came to mind during the game. His head was full of his own strategies, processing the playthrough itself, occasional random thoughts of how Jade was feeling, or where Onyx was. The home, or at least Jade, had such an effect on him... or has he just lost the motivation to stay angry? Maybe he was getting old.

Eventually, Sebastian peered back to his girlfriend and examined her expression before wondering aloud: “How long are you going to wear that mask?”

“Maybe I’ll take it off tomorrow,” the young farmer answered with a shrug.
“Why not now?”

“Because I don’t want to make you sick!” she stressed.

Sebastian smiled. “What if I said I didn’t care?”

“Then I’d call you a dummy.”

“I don’t care,” he started.

“You’re a dummy!” Jade snapped back.

He softly laughed and reached out for her. “Come here,” he suggested with a murmur. Jade leaned over to him and he gently pulled her closer. Pulling down her face mask, he gave a warm and inviting kiss. Jade didn’t have enough sense to reject the gesture or to pull away, considering she hadn’t felt such contact in days. The kiss concluded and they both faced each other with flustered yet excited gazes.

“You just want the pumpkin soup,” Jade muttered a joke, though she was so quiet that she couldn’t really make it sound silly or accusing enough.

“You caught me.” He grinned and adjusted himself on the couch some more, still keeping his eyes on her. “Goodnight,” he calmly and happily concluded.

Jade fixed the mask back over her face, though she was still grinning like a giddy child. In the most distinguished voice she could possibly muster, Jade uttered back a gentle “goodnight, Seb.”

She didn’t know what got into him, but she was excited. Hopefully her sickness would be completely gone the next day.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter came a teeeensy bit late for quite a few reasons! Aside from just being unable to write for a little bit (I've been doing this since May, I'm allowed to get burnt out every once in a while hehe) I couldn't figure out how to handle the Solarion Chronicles bit. While I would have liked to talk about them playing the game, overall it's not too important to the point of the chapter and it's more about everyone getting along with each other and etc. Still, deciding what to do there did have me reach a sort of standstill until I figured out what to do.

Still chipping away at development. Next chapter should be bigger and lean towards more plot stuffs, but it will still be fun and cute. I think we're reaching a trend with these chapters, hehe! But I hope you enjoy as always!
Stardew Valley Fair

Chapter Summary

Jade and everyone involved take part in the Stardew Valley Fair for a day full of games, food, shenanigans, and giving Pierre the stink eye probably.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Stardew Valley Fair approached ever closer, and for once, Jade was ready. This festival would not go wrong as far as she was concerned. A week prior, she received a letter in the mail about bringing 9 main items for a contest at the festival. There were several categories, and the more she included, the better chance she had to win the grand prize! Apparently such a prize was a currency only used at the festival, but it would still be fun and she could actually win something after such rotten luck the past two festivals.

And the odds were in her favor yet again! Her sickness had passed, her crops were flourishing, and her rabbits had plentiful amounts of wool. When she wasn’t at complete health, she devoted much more time into making crafts. Using the provided wool, supplies from the Community Center, and her own creativity, she had crafted a lucky charm that looked just like a rabbit’s foot.

The best of the best would be included for the fair, too. Jade used a large but pullable wagon that Robin left on the farm to carefully pack all of her goods for a safe travel. For the fair, she picked the largest stalks of corn, the greatest pumpkins of the patch, and some foraged blackberries and hazelnuts. She was fortunate enough to include a large salmon she caught the previous day, and then her rabbits provided not only raw wool, but she was able to include a roll of cloth and the rabbit’s foot she made as well. To complete the bundle for the contest, Jade included her actual lucky charm, Petrified Bastard. Petrified slime apparently qualified for the minerals category!

After all the preparations were made and Jade accomplished all of her daily farm duties, the young farmer set out towards Pelican Town with a covered wagon full of the rewards of her labor. On this day, the Stardew Valley Fair would begin. On this day, Jade would win.

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Jade arrived to the fair earlier than most of the townspeople, since she had to set up for the contest. Several people, including those not even citizens of the town, were setting up tents, booths and the like. Colorful balloons, streamers, and festive decorations adorned the buildings in town square and wrapped around temporary fencing to provide various pathways to each of the stations. There seemed to be a shop surprisingly run by someone other than Pierre, several food and concession stands provided by Gus, a ton of minigames, a small petting zoo, and of all things, there was entertainment... by a clown. Creepy, but Lewis went all out for this festival, for sure. Jade entered through the southern part of the town and explored up to the northern area to see where the contest took place. On the way, she spotted other exhibits from fellow townspeople, such as Clint and his blacksmithing practice and Robin with all of her wooden crafts and materials. Jade’s face brightened upon seeing Robin, and Sebastian was there too, helping her set up the exhibit. Immediately after seeing them, she burst out an excited, “Seb! Robin! Hey!!”
Both of them turned around when they heard the eager farmer’s voice, Robin excitedly waving over while Sebastian smiled, his arms still full of supplies. Jade wandered over to them while tugging her prized possessions behind, which Robin noticed with a gaze of curiosity. “Hey, you making an exhibit of your own?” the carpenter inquired in a lighthearted tone.

“Oh! No, but I am taking place in the fair contest for the highest quality goods. I have a hunch I can win this one!” Jade beamed aloud.

“We’ll be rooting for you,” Sebastian chimed in. “Abby’s dad usually wins every year. It’d be nice for a change.”

“May the best producer win- wait, does he even make any products?” The farmer furrowed her eyebrows in confusion.

Robin rolled her eyes. “If you want my opinion, I say he’s never touched a dang watering can in his life. But, who knows for sure. I know Caroline has a garden, but the stuff he displays, is, I dunno.” She shrugged, trying to express what she meant. “A little... mass produced? Maybe? I don’t think Caroline had a part in it.”

“No heart, you mean?” Jade added in question.

The carpenter nodded. “Yeah, that sounds about right. Enough about him, though. After you get all set up, you should come check out my exhibit! And take Sebby around the place, there are tons of games to play when everything opens for business.”

Jade and Sebastian exchanged pleasant but sad looks. “Actually, we probably won’t see each other too much today,” the raven-hair responded.

“What?? Why not?” Robin seemed betrayed by such a fact. The fair was just asking to be a romantic wonderland! “Did you get in a fight?!”

The young farmer chuckled and shook her head. “Not at all! I think it’s fair to say we’ve been neglecting our friend duties a little bit. I know I haven’t had some quality time with Alex in a while.”

“Sam’s been bugging me constantly for a decent hang out. I haven’t been alone with him in ages.” Sebastian sighed, putting down the supplies he held to Robin’s exhibit table. “Jade and I just figured that the fair would be a good opportunity to play catch-up.”

Jade nodded in agreement. “Yeah, and with me getting sick recently, we’ve been together a lot. He’s too adorable and caring, ugh. I need a break.” She grinned and poked at him, to which he playfully nudged her back.

“Don’t say that stuff in front of Mom,” Sebastian muttered, blushing.

“Say everything in front of Mom,” Robin stated in an instant, expression completely serious and fascinated. Such a response caused Jade to laugh, even though she knew it wasn’t a joke. “I like to know you two are getting along well!” added Robin once more.

“I know, I know,” giggled Jade. “You should know we’re doing fantastically, though. Hey, let’s have lunch together, maybe,” she continued her statement to Robin and then brought her attention back to Sebastian. “It’ll be fun eating in a big group! Whatever Gus is cooking is killing me already.”
Sebastian groaned, indicating how hungry he already was. “Ugh, me too, and you can smell his cooking everywhere. Group lunch sounds like a plan,” he concluded, smiling. Robin went back to setting up the exhibit, but she continued to glance at the newfound lovers to see their precious interactions with each other. A toothy grin stretched across her face from watching them.

“Great, then. Well, I need to go set up, so I’ll see you later in the afternoon, then?” the young farmer went for confirmation.

“Mmhm. Good luck.”

“Good luck kiss?” Jade shyly asked.

Sebastian blushed more and grumpily stared at her. “Again. Mom is right there.”

“She’ll see it sometime anyway!”

Robin cackled. “What? See what? I don’t see anything,” she said, staring at them and waiting for them to kiss. Sebastian huffed at his mother and sighed to Jade in defeat.

“Fine,” he softly mumbled back. Jade took it as a cue to give him a gentle hug, the two then exchanging a simple and cheerful kiss.

She let go of him with an expression as bright and clear as the sunny sky. “Now I know I’m gonna win,” she calmly remarked. Robin clapped her hand onto her own mouth to prevent ruining an endearing moment.

“Yeah, yeah.” Sebastian gave a warm smile, then gently nudged her away. “See you later.”

The gesture made Jade giggle. “Bye, nerd. Hope people buy tons of stuff from you, Robin!” She waved at them and began walking off.

“Heh, me too!” Robin waved her off, then instantly stared back over to Sebastian. Before she even uttered a single word towards him, he held up a hand in defiance.

“I want to hear nothing about this. Kissing is not that big of a deal.”

“I can say whatever I damn well please,” Robin sassily cocked her head and crossed her arms, grinning. “And it is a big deal, because that was so cute!! You two were made for each other! I can give you advice. You know what? I’ll give you some advice. I was a youngin’ just like yourself when I first met your father...” And there she went. Robin was always full of stories, reveling in youth, nostalgia and using her rebellious past to give helpful (if not slightly invasive) relationship advice she acquired over the years. Sebastian had already suffered a couple of similar lectures since starting his relationship with Jade, so he was somewhat used to it. He didn’t stop her from talking, though, since she was so excited and he was able to learn more about his mother... maybe a little too much, but hey. Robin had been keeping the advice behind locked doors for a while. Sebastian had very few dates and Maru never had an interest in anyone, which meant Robin never really had the chance to present her wisdom. Sebastian continued to help Robin with her exhibit as she yammered on, a smile still faintly showing on his face.

Meanwhile, Jade eventually found where she was supposed to go for the produce contest. There were several large displays standing in a row, all located in front of and past Pierre’s store. Pierre’s
display was the one furthest to the left, various fruits and vegetables placed in an aesthetically pleasing manner. There was an empty display to his right, but the two after that were occupied by Marnie and then Willy. Marnie’s display mostly had produce and artisan goods from her farm animals, while Willy had a fantastic array of fish. The specifics of their displays suddenly brought Jade great nervousness... They had a variety of their own, but kept within a theme. Jade’s was all over the place with the theme and had an intense variety. Hopefully they would still count. With a deep breath, she continued to walk forward and stopped in front of the first empty display.

Lewis approached her while she was carefully organizing her goods, and he seemed ecstatic for her to take part. “Well if it isn’t farmer Jade!” he started with a pleasant surprise. “It’s good to see you. This is one of the biggest festivals of a year by a long mile.”

The young farmer glanced at him with a smile, then continued to add to the display. “Hello, Mayor. The fair looks amazing already! I can’t wait for everything to start.”

“Mm, yes. I’m pleased to see your participation in the contest, as well. The competition is fierce, but I have faith in you.” Lewis watched as she set her display, though she paused for a moment to take in his words. Such a phrase from Lewis was really sweet and did help her confidence.

“Thank you, Mayor! That means a lot. Even if I don’t win, I think I tried my best.”

Her response incited a proud laugh from him. “That’s the spirit! Judging may take a little while, so you’re free to explore and do whatever you want after you finish setting up. I’ll call everyone over before announcing the winner, so good luck!”

“Of course! It was nice talking to you, Mayor,” Jade eagerly replied. He gave her a pat on the shoulder before walking off to speak to Caroline and Pierre near their own display. Setting up didn’t take all too long, and when she finished, she was blossoming with pride! Everything was organized by category, making a colorful and neat collection of food and an array of other farming products. The only thing left to do was to convince herself that she would still do well even if losing was a possibility.

Several tents opened up for business and tourists came in droves. Pelican Town surely knew how to throw a real fair, and the amount of people seemed to show it. When Jade finished her display, she wandered over to Marnie and Willy’s showcases and chat with them for a while, before then finally going to Lewis and announcing that she had finished. Lewis bid her a temporary farewell so that she could go off and experience the many parts of the fair for the first time.

With some hunting around, she finally found her fair partner right outside his house. They changed loud greetings with endearing “farm girls” and “gridball boys” and set out to explore the fair together. Alex had some extra fair tokens from last year, so he split them with Jade in order for them to play games together.

Alex has been to the fair several times, so he found himself an expert at many of the games. Jade, however, either loved the games or hated them. There was a tent that contained a pool of fish, and whoever obtained the most fish would win a significant prize. With all her fishing practice, the game was a breeze! The amount of tokens she won from all her catches seemed to show for it, too. Alex was decent enough, though he much preferred the shooting gallery. Jade, for the life of herself, could not hit a single target with the damned slingshot for that game. Targets went by too quickly, some popped up and vanished instantly, and she was just baffled by the whole game. The athlete by her side was able to hit just about every target and then some, winning a hefty amount of tokens for doing so.
“I don’t know how you managed to win that cursed game, but wow, that was awesome,” Jade remarked with a grin. “What are these tokens for anyway?”

Alex scratched his head and looked around for a specific stand. When he caught sight of it, he discreetly pointed over to a tiny shop overloaded with souvenirs and an assortment of cheap prizes. Many of the items consisted of oversized plushies, toys, nic-nacs, and so on, but there were a few peculiar items that caught Jade’s interest even from the distance. The shop stood alone in the top-left corner of the fair, though its popularity was noted. Families and eager adolescents approached the stand to reap their rewards. “There’s nothing too much, but the games themselves are fun, yeah?” He slyly looked at her and emitted an evil chuckle. “Plus, I get to kick your ass.”

“You wish!” she laughed in response. “We’re even right now. Uhh... Let’s go over there.” Jade took her dear friend by the arm and walked him over to what seemed to be a strength tester. A gigantic, burly man stood at its side, yelling about the machine and egging people into playing. When the two approached, he grinned and spouted about the name of the game. Without even skipping a beat, he offered Jade a giant hammer. “Thanks! Okay, Alex. It’s time to see who is really the strongest one.”

“You’re on, farm girl. Fish all you want, but this is my kind of game,” he boasted, pointing his thumb at his chest.

“Okay, you know what? You go first!” Jade tossed the hammer over to him, causing him to stumble back. She laughed when he insisted he was just caught off guard, then watched in fascination when he tried to get the highest mark on the strength tester.

Unfortunately for Alex but great news for Jade, the game was more of a ‘get to the top or the bottom’ game, which involved more timing than it did strength. When Alex tried, he almost got the top mark, and Jade’s turn allowed her to get the very top mark and win the grand prize!! Of one token. Alex burst with laughter with seeing her winnings of one token, but hey, she was still a winner.

The fair carried on in a cheerful manner. The two played some more games, explored over to the petting zoo and conversed about animals and farming, and so on. They would come across some fellow townsfolk and briefly talk to them, though everyone seemed preoccupied with whatever they aimed to do at the fair. Jade found talking to others useful, since they knew where extra games were and some of them even parted with some tokens to give her a better first experience. Penny wasn’t in the highest of spirits due to her actually being banned from one of the more gambling oriented games. She told the farmer and athlete about how she won too many times and had too many tokens, so she gave quite a mound to the both of them. When they left her side, she still had a gigantic stash of tokens, though all the poor thing wanted to do was to play.

A nearby fortune telling tent caught the young farmer’s interest as well. In the mouth of the tent, an old woman wearing a blue cloak stood in front of a presumably magical crystal ball. Abigail stood near the tent and watched people’s various fortunes, making her extremely giddy and fascinated. When Jade approached, she excitedly explained that this fortune teller in particular was real and that the old woman could see into people’s futures. Jade wasn’t one to easily buy such statements, but she noticed the Wizard looming nearby and there were enough magical creatures in the world to give this particular fortune teller the benefit of a doubt.

Alex went to have his future explained first, both Jade and Abigail watching his expressions. At first, he seemed proud, beaming, and then he seemed somewhat bummed and discouraged. When he walked back over to the girls, he huffed. “What does some old lady with a sparkly ball know anyway?”
The young farmer chuckled. “Did you get a bad fortune?” she asked.

“We’ll talk after you get yours! Go, go!” He lightly pushed her over to the tent, making Abigail laugh as well.

“Yeah! Good luck, Jadey!”

Fine, fine. Jade dismissed the both of them and approached the woman. “H-hello, miss. I would like my fortune told,” she began, placing the required money on the counter. The old woman nodded and examined Jade for a while, not even paying attention to the money at first.

“Mm, your fortune,” the woman began, giving her another detailed look. “Excited, are we? Young people are often skeptical, but I am able to see your willingness to trust others. Naivety in some cases, maybe, but such proves to be useful in this instance. I may give you glimpses of your future.”

The young farmer blushed in embarrassment. Maybe she did seem too excited. “Th-thank you, miss.”

“Now, let’s see...” The old woman began to consult the crystal ball, while Jade waited in anticipation. She gave a raspy chuckle, and muttered a “my, you’re an interesting one.” Jade didn’t reply, but she was already devoured by her words. She eagerly awaited for what would next be said. Finally, the old woman smacked her lips as she readied to speak: “I see a young man with you, just a little older- oh, his name. Sebastian.”

“Y-yeah??” Jade was impressed already. She never mentioned any names to her!

“Both of you are somewhere... dark. You both appear serious, but not unhappy... yes, something important must be happening.” The old woman had her focus completely on the crystal ball, not paying attention to Jade or her reactions. The statement she gave had confused the farmer, though it made her excited as well. If anything, she looked forward to more moments with Sebastian, especially if they were happy moments.

The old woman paused briefly, then continued: “I see another man. Large, brown hair... green- no, unique... Unique eyes.”

Jade lifted an eyebrow. “Alex?”

“No. He is unfamiliar to the town, but familiar to you.” The fortune teller continued to stare at the crystal ball. “I see a...” Her voice faded and went quiet for another moment. “... I will give you advice, child.”

“Huh?”

“To reach your positive future, you must first pass the negative. Your immediate future is cloudy, unsure. I see storms, blood, anguish. You are still running away, even from a home you now hold dear.” The old woman eventually lifted her head and stared right into Jade’s eyes. “My advice for you: do not run away. You know what running has done to you.”

Jade looked like a deer staring into a car’s headlights. Her expression was full now shock, terror stricken in her eyes. She did not respond.
“What I see is not always the definite future. You have the ability to change your story, for better or for worse. Damaged as you may be, you have a powerful conscience and an aura that even magical creatures can trust. There are people in town who hold you dear. Do something good.”

“I... Thank you.” Jade truthfully did not sound very thankful, but the fortune was something she needed to hear for herself. The old woman simply smiled and took the currency left on the table.

“Of course. I wish you a good day, farmer Jade.”

Jade bowed her head and quietly returned to Alex and Abigail, both extremely curious with her sudden change in demeanor.

“What’d she say, Jadey?” Abigail asked first. Alex watched with more concern.

“O-oh, nothing too big... um...” The farmer frowned as she tried to recall. “Oh! She did say something about me and Sebastian.” Jade ended up telling them the more positive side of her fortune, while keeping the other part to herself. All of them shared their fortunes with each other, though Jade had a feeling they all had something negative they were hiding. At least they just as easily dismissed the conversation with each other and carried on to other activities.

Everyone was getting hungry, so the three of them met up with Sam and Sebastian, Maru and Penny also joining with everyone else. They all sat at the same picnic table and dined upon juicy burgers, fries, salads, the works. While Jade and Sebastian had fun at the fair, both of them were excited to reunite. They sat beside each other and talked just about the entire time, mentioning their fair-filled adventures and teasing each other about who was the better token collector. Lunch was lovely with all of them, their table full of delicious food, laughter, and a plethora of captivating conversations.

A few of them left at a time until it was Jade with Alex, and Sebastian with Sam. The two not involved in a relationship chatted amongst each other until the lovebirds finally parted ways. Jade didn’t necessarily feel guilty for spending some extra moments with Sebastian, considering how well Alex and Sam seemed to get along. Truthfully, she hadn’t seen Alex be so genuinely social except towards herself and maybe Haley. She felt happy that everyone was bonding some way or another, in any case. After lunch concluded and everyone said their goodbyes, the fair continued.

After another fishing game and some entertainment shows, Jade heard a call from the other end of the fair: “The results of this year’s contest is in! Everyone involved, report to the displays!”

The young farmer gasped and instantly ran to the source when she heard. Alex smirked and followed at a slower pace. The other three contestants were already there and patiently waiting, Jade then going beside her display and waiting for the results. Some people had curiously crowded around to see what the fuss was about, including Alex to see how Jade was faring.

Lewis held a clipboard in one hand and a megaphone in the other. Thoughtfully, he stared down to whatever was written on the clipboard in front of him, then one by one, listed the contestants. Each word passed by in an eternity, trying Jade’s patience and making her even more anxious for the results. Eventually, Lewis finally brought the announcement the four contestants were eagerly waiting for: “And the winner of this year’s Stardew Valley Fair Showcase is...” He glanced down at the clipboard once more, making sure he had his facts straight. “Jade!”

She could hardly believe it! She tried so hard with her display, and actually won! There was a round of kind applause, then some people dispersed while others watched Lewis approach her. “As a farmer new to our community, you’ve showed massive improvement with your skills, and everything
you brought today shows just that. Here, you deserve this,” Lewis happily stated. He offered her a thousand tokens to buy whatever she wished, along with a frilly red button that showed she won first place. The young farmer eagerly thanked the mayor, Marnie and Willy both passing by their congratulations before putting up their displays. Pierre watched her with a scowl, but looked away when Jade turned in his direction. When all was said and done, Alex approached her and gave her a very proud pat.

“Farm girl! You did awesome. Fair’s working out well for you, huh?” he asked with a grin.

“Yes! It’s been great. Help me load, will ya?” Jade asked in response, gesturing over to her display. She started lifting some of the goods to put back in the wagon she brought. Alex happily assisted her by lifting the large pumpkins she brought and carefully placed them in the wagon. They were heavy for even him, so he could only imagine the struggle she went through to load them and carry them all the way to the fair. Together, they finished cleaning the display and had everything carefully packed up to take home later. “Perfect,” Jade beamed. “Let’s go to that shop! I have a crapload of tokens to spend now.”

Alex snorted. “Of course. Too bad there’s not too much stuff that’s good, but hey, you might like somethin’.”

“Hope so!” Jade started tugging along her wagon as she walked with Alex following by her side. He seemed surprisingly quiet compared to his usual demeanor, though such a manner would never be unnoticed by Jade. She glanced at him as they walked. “What’s up?” she asked.

“Oh, uh... Nothin’, really...” He eventually huffed, then seriously stared towards her. “Um. Do you believe in that fortune telling business?”

“Well... it would depend, but I think in that lady’s case, I’d believe it,” Jade muttered in response.

“Great.” He sighed, discouraged. “I guess some things she said rattled around in my head for a bit. I’m not feeling right.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Uh... You know what, sure. I guess I can trust you,” he replied with an unsure grumble.

Jade looked back to him, amused. “You guess? Hehe, of course you can. Go on, tell me.”

“Well... it’s just... we all have secrets, you know?”

“Whew, Yoba knows that for sure.”

Alex nodded. “My, uh... My fortune kinda involved that. And I don’t really know how to go about it.”

“Well, can I be of any service?” asked his dear friend, keeping a watchful eye on him.

The athlete straightened out his jacket and fumbled with his hands for a moment, trying to think of how to properly word his next statements. “Uh... Maybe... I guess, before I really talk about myself, I have some questions about you.”

“Go ahead!”
“How long did you have feelings for... That... S-...” Alex always forgot the damned toothpick’s name. Jade was about to scold him and correct him, but he finally remembered: “Seb! Sebasomething. Him.”

“One of these days I’m gonna beat you up,” laughed Jade. “Sebastian. And, uh... A long time? Maybe not as long as many crushes go, but... We were really great friends, and it branched off into other feelings.” She shyly smiled in thought. They approached the shop, so Jade excitedly looked at all the selections. With the winnings from all the games, the contest, and the tokens that Penny left her, she could buy practically anything. As she browsed the shop’s selection, she still kept an ear out for Alex.

“I see... What made you confess your feelings?”

“Hm?” Jade unintentionally blushed from the comment. “Oh, whoa, uh... Well... I had a push from a friend, and it turned out that Sebastian wanted to confess anyway, heh... So we kinda confessed to each other at the same time.”

Alex went silent for a moment. “A friend, huh?” He frowned. “Maybe I need that push. But I know it won’t end so happily for me.”

“What?” Jade paused her browsing and stared at him in shock. “Wait, do you actually like someone? I thought you were just being difficult with me! Holy Yoba! Who is it? Do I know who it is?” Jade grinned and eagerly turned to him, excited to learn more.

“Hey! Shh!” Alex flushed up and pat his hand in front of her mouth. “Don’t be so loud! No one knows who it is. It’s a secret that I’d rather keep to myself. Forever.”

Jade said something with her mouth muffled, but no one could make out what she was saying. With the roll of his eyes, Alex removed his hand. “So you do like someone then,” Jade replied in a more quiet voice.

He huffed and nodded. “Let’s... ugh. Let’s not talk about it in such a big place like this. But... I would appreciate some advice. It’s been messing with me.”

“Come by in the morning, like what you used to do! I know you’ve been busy, but I’m always free to chat then. I don’t want you to be feeling so unsure about stuff.” Jade grinned and gave him a light hug. “Okay?”

He thought for a moment and then agreed. “Yeah, that sounds good. Sorry I haven’t been around too much,” Alex nervously mentioned.

“No, it’s okay! I’ve been so preoccupied anyway, with the animals and harvesting and then getting sick and all. I’m happy I got to see you and everyone else before, and it’s nice that we all get to hang out here. So, for now, lets- ooh!” Jade’s eyes fixated on a glittery looking fruit in the shop. “What’s that?”

Alex looked to what she was referring to, then blinked in surprise. “Wow, they have one of those here?” They asked to get a closer look of the object, which the shopkeeper allowed. The fruit was shaped like a star and shimmered a bright, sparkling purple. There was a hole in the middle of the fruit and a few green leaves sprouting from it’s highest tip. “That’s a stardrop. It’s said to be the best tasting fruit in the whole world!”
“Whoa! How much is it?” Jade checked its price, stepping back in shock. “Two thousand tokens. Wait, let me see.” She counted up all her tokens, then stomped her feet in glee. She had exactly the amount required. “Sweet! Should I buy it, Alex?”

“Ooh, you know what? Go for it. Maybe you can share with your toothpick.”

“That’s a great idea!” Jade eagerly talked to the shopkeeper and exchanged the tokens for the stardrop. The fruit itself was fairly bulky, though it felt rather lightweight as well.

“Those are super rare, you know. You deserve it! Honestly, I hear those things can go for tens of thousands of G’s.” Alex crossed his arms and nodded with confidence. “They’re said to have super powers too, ooooh.”

“Wow, I can’t wait to try this. Do you think Seb will like it?”

“Yeesh, talk about obsessed.” He laughed and nudged her along. “You should go hang out with him, festival will end soon anyway. I’m thinkin’ of going home early.”

Jade giggled from being pushed, but settled to examine him once more. His way of acting caused her great worry. “Aww... Okay. Will you be alright? If you can’t wait until the morning, I want to be there,” she stated.

He shook his head in dismissal and smiled. “I’ll be fine! I need to make sure the grands are doing alright anyway. See you tomorrow!” With that, he ventured away with a wave, heading towards his house. Jade pouted as she watched him leave, though he was right about the festival. The sky started to darken with reds and purples and the many lanterns that surrounded the town square turned on to accommodate the loss of light. Some other people seemed to be leaving and some exhibits have closed, including a very excited Robin who gained some well-earned cash from her projects. Jade explored the still busy remainder of the fair grounds to find anyone she recognized. With so many crowds of people, she started to feel a little overwhelmed, like she was in a city.

Finally, she spotted her favorite person sitting in the only unpopulated area at the fair. Sebastian rested at the edge of the river just before the east side of the town. A petting zoo was nearby, though their noises didn’t seem to bother him. He lifted his head and turned when he heard the squeaking wheels of Jade’s wagon.

“Hey there,” Jade pleasantly remarked as she approached. “Hehe. I wanted to make sure it was you.”

“Oh, hey.” Sebastian warmly smiled, then turned back to watch the river. Jade stopped her wagon on the last bit of pavement, confident no one would mess with it, and sat beside her loving boyfriend. She held the coveted stardrop in her hands, waiting for the right moment to bring it up to him. “I heard you won the contest. Congrats, you deserve it,” he happily commented.

“Yeah! I think Pierre might be mad at me, but I’m just excited to win something for once. It’s been a very good festival,”’ the farmer beamed in reply.

“I would have loved to watch, but Sam decided to be a daredevil and lunge into the muddy pit over there,” he said, pointing over to the pigs at the petting zoo. “He ended up pissing all the animals off and some authorities chased him around until he hid on the roof of Penny’s trailer and finally went home.”
Jade chuckled from the story. “It sounds like your fair has been rather eventful as well! Did you have a good time?”

“Oh yeah, I haven’t laughed so hard in ages. Sam’s a dumbass, but he’s my dumbass.” Sebastian sighed in contentment and leaned back as he watched the water flow. Jade took a moment to relax with him, but then she recalled the stardrop.

“Oh yeah... um, I got this for us to share,” Jade quietly mentioned, holding the mysterious fruit up for him to see.

“Whoa. Is that a stardrop? You won one of those?”

“Mmhm.”

“... You want us to share it?” Sebastian watched her in bewilderment. It was such a rare fruit that he was baffled it would be shared to begin with.

Jade smiled and nudged him, then breaking the fruit in half. The fruit came apart with ease and halved perfectly. The inside seemed soft and mushy, like the inside of a jelly filled doughnut. Its aroma was rather questionable, but Jade tried not to judge it too harshly. It was supposed to be the best tasting fruit in the world, after all!

He glanced down to the halved fruit she offered and shyly took it. “Thanks... Are you sure, though? This stuff is supposed to be super rare. I wouldn’t want to take that from you.”

“Aw, we’ve been apart all day. Let’s have something memorable we can share.” She smiled and held up her half of the fruit. “Want to try it at the same time?”

“Yeah, let’s see if this thing holds up to its name,” Sebastian answered. Both of them turned to each other and counted down from three at the same time. At the final number, both of them took a bite out of their stardrop halves.

The taste... was indescribable. Both of their eyes widened, mouth gaped, and stared to each other in shock. This really was the best tasting fruit in the world.

“Holy shit,” Sebastian muffled with a full mouth.

“I know, right?” Jade responded, voice equally covered by the food. Neither of them spoke for a while and took to finishing their halves of the stardrop. Jade was the first to finish, wiping her mouth with a satisfied, “that was absolutely worth the tokens.”

“No wonder this is rare. Damn.” Sebastian finished his piece afterwards and flopped back to stare at the sky. Jade giggled and lay beside him.

“How would you describe the taste?” she asked him.

“To be honest? I dunno. It was very... season-y. Kinda spicy. Extremely delicious.”

Sebastian’s answer sounded very odd to Jade. “Really? I would describe it was super sweet. It tasted like the best candy in the universe!”

He chuckled. “Maybe it tastes like what we like the most.”
“Could be. I really love candy.”

“How you don’t have cavities baffles me.” The raven-haired man turned his head to watch her, a soft smile on his face.

She continued to watch the sky. “I’m just really good at covering my tracks!” Jade laughed and settled down. “I feel so awake now,” she added.

“Me too. That fruit was surprisingly filling as well.” Sebastian reached to hold her hand as they relaxed. “Thank you for sharing.”

“Thank you for being here,” the young farmer responded just as quickly, leaning to kiss him on the cheek. They both lay and listened to the babbling river, followed by the faraway commotion at the main part of the festival. The quiet moment had been disrupted by a light clink against Jade’s wagon behind them. The farmer sat up to see what it was, surprised to see Demetrius standing there.

He seemed a bit nervous and somewhat out of breath, as if he just arrived. Sebastian sat up once Jade did, his visage lacking any expression.

Jade decided to take the bait. “Hi, Demetrius... need anything?”

“Ah, yes...” He took a deep breath. “Sebastian. Your mother would like help loading the truck. The exhibit is over now.”

The raven-hair sighed. “I’ll be right there,” he calmly replied, then stood up. He helped Jade up afterwards, Demetrius quickly leaving. “… I could be interpreting things wrong, but that was... incredibly swift. I think he is wary around you.”

Jade scratched her head. “Considering my outburst last week, I wouldn’t be too surprised... as long as everything is going well at home, I’m fine,” she replied.

“Yes, it’s been okay. Quiet, if anything. We leaving each other for the night?”

“Mmhmm.” Jade smiled, then let go of him to take the end of her wagon. “I should be toting this home, myself. Tell your mom I said hi!”

“Will do. Be safe.” He waved to her, to which she waved in response. They ended up going their separate ways, as both of them had filled their social quota for a while. Regardless, the Stardew Valley Fair was fantastic. For once, things went well. No angry Lewis, no yelling Demetrius, and there were several great memories that Jade knew she would hold dear.

The fortune teller’s words of warning took a back seat in Jade’s mind. Nothing could ruin her experience, not this time.

Chapter End Notes

Big chapter, lots of stuff going on! Lots of lovely banter, contests, shenanigans, PLOT FORESHADOWING, and blah blah you got it.
I actually didn't want to include Sebastian in this chapter at all, but that ended up not happening since it'd be OOC, hilariously enough. I did accomplish bringing the spotlight to someone else for a bit, which was Alex in this case. It seems like Jade and Sebastian are still figuring out how much time to spend together, though they try their best to not neglect their friends! I think after last game night, Sebastian is much more conscious of the fact, too. It's weird suddenly having to juggle between people you love when before the instance was nonexistent.

Next chapter is going to deal with Alex some more. There have been some things I've been foreshadowing for a while that I'll get to directly address, though I still think it might catch people off guard, especially since it's been sprinkled over older chapters. It'll be good though and I try to keep everything in character as always!

Some delicious stuff is comin' up, y'all. Some delicious stuff.
Small Town Confession

Chapter Summary

Jade encourages Alex to confess to a long-time crush.

If there was anything concerning at the Stardew Valley Fair for Jade, it was the trouble Alex seemed to be going through. He didn’t want to continue his conversation with his sister-in-spirit at the fair, so their talk proceeded the next morning. Jade completed all of her farm work and was in the process of winding down right when Alex stepped into the scene. He wandered over to her, gave falsely confident greetings, then finally settled on the porch swing. Jade moved beside him to listen to whatever he needed to discuss.

The day was bright and beautiful. Red and orange trees surrounded the farmland, dry leaves gently flew onto the barn’s roof or settled down onto the grassy terrain. A soft breeze maintained its presence, making the perfect weather for a light jacket. Jade propped her feet onto the swing she shared with Alex and leaned her head on her knees. “Okay, start talkin’.”

“Ugh, I’m really so bad at these things.” Alex groaned and threw his head back as he tried to think. “Where did I leave off?”

“You said you liked somebody!” Jade beamed, tapping her feet excitedly.

“Oh...” The anxious athlete took a deep breath and flopped his head forward in defeat. “Yeah.”

“Well? Why the mood?”

Alex managed to return her worried gaze. “Well... It’s not going to work out. I know it’s not. For... a lot of reasons.” He sighed again. “At first I thought so because the person was already taken, but now...”

Jade watched her dear friend with a frown and placed one of her hands onto his closest arm. “Well... I know yesterday you talked about confessions. Are you thinking of confessing?”

“Ah... My gut’s telling me I should, even though I know what the answer will be. It’s... It’s wrong, anyway. And you know how fast rumors spread, you know? I don’t want to be hearing about this everywhere, or the person being unable to show their face. You know.”

The young farmer felt confused and baffled at his statements. She could understand the bit about rumors, but... being unable to show faces? Complete embarrassment? Something was fishy here. “Alex, it’s fine to try to hide from the paparazzi and all, but... What are you going on about? Truthfully, you’ll never know what happens unless you confess. And...” Jade started, fumbling her words to try to reply correctly, “Abigail told me, that confessing is good to do either way... The better result is you going to the next level, and the worst result is you moving on and eventually finding someone else! Which isn’t that bad at all, if you ask me.”

“You don’t get it.”
Jade sighed. “Okay, then make me understand.”

“I’ve, uh... I’ve known this person for a long time, but... they don’t really know me that well,” he muttered. “We’ve talked before, sure, and would often buy ice cream in the summer, pleasant conversations every encounter. Even meeting on the beach, and just passing in town... Yoba, this has been happening for a while. It’s actually sad that I haven’t shaken this yet. I shouldn’t feel like this.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t feel that way? It sounds pretty legitimate to me, and even if it didn’t seem like that, I don’t have a say.”

“Look...” Alex took another deep breath and ran his hand down his face in frustration. “Just... Promise me you won’t tell this to anybody. Telling you is the only way you’ll get it.”

“I promise, Alex.” Jade responded with an encouraging smile.

“... Okay.” He watched her for a while, scanned the area of the farm, then focused back on her with a more determined expression. “I, um... It’s...”

Jade gently pat him on the shoulder in hope that it would urge him to speak.

“It’s a guy, okay? It’s a guy.”

Oh. That did explain some things, especially since they lived in such a small town. And with how Alex was, Jade knew that he struggled with some stereotypes. It took him a little while to stop the girly insults with Jade, and he sometimes treated interests as either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ even if he didn’t mean to. Not to mention, rumors of any romantic calibur did spread pretty fast. Even just hanging out with her friends sparked some rumors, so she knew the validation of Alex’s paranoia.

Though the young farmer was quiet for a moment to absorb the information, she ended up chuckling. “I really like guys too, you know. Is he cute?” she asked with sparkling eyes.

Alex stared at her, surprised. “... That’s your first response?”

“Well, is he?” Jade warmly smiled.

“... Yeah.” He frowned and blushed. “My grandparents would disown me if they ever found out.”

“Whoa, now. I highly disagree with that,” Jade retorted in a lighthearted voice. She leaned her head onto his shoulder and wrapped her arms around one of his to keep him grounded. “That nice and frail old lady who made cookies for the person who decked you in the face? I hardly think she would get upset about a guy that makes you happy.”

“More worried about gramps...”

“There’s nothing much he can do about it if he has a big issue with it. Just be true to yourself, you know? Are you telling me you’ve gone ages with these feelings and haven’t told a soul?” Jade asked, legitimately curious. She was terrified of the answer.

“... Yeah.”

She didn’t realize how a single word could slice her heart in half like it did. Jade didn’t keep her
feelings for Sebastian to herself for all too long and it was still torture for her. She couldn’t fathom how Alex felt, keeping those emotions pent up for an unbearable amount of time. “Wow... Not even like... Haley? I thought you were close to her.”

“Haley’s great, but we kinda stick together for more practical purposes. There aren’t many people in town, so yeah. She’s a good friend, and protective, but I couldn’t tell her something like this,” explained Alex.

“Ah, I see...”

“The, um, the fortune teller, from yesterday, was telling me what I already knew I guess. That the current path I’m going romantically won’t meet a happy end... Which, I guess means that I should try to let go and move on.” He frowned. “But... I’m not sure I can.” Alex leaned back in the porch swing, but threw an arm around Jade to keep her close. Her presence was comforting.

The young farmer was still trying to figure out what to say. It was a lot to take in, and Jade didn’t have too much experience in mediating people’s feelings. Alex was hurting, though. She wanted him to be happy, and needed to say just the perfect words...

Alex let out a somewhat nervous laugh. “You know, I was going to confess around the time you moved in. I was confident that he, uh... probably liked guys too. But...” He sighed again. “That... turned out to not be true.”

“How are you sure about that?” Jade asked.

“Well, um... I thought they were dating at one point? And it turns out they never did.”

“Huh, that happens to the best of us, honestly. If I didn’t know any better, I would have probably thought the same of Seb~” Jade interrupted herself with an earth-shattering gasp. “Wait a second!!”

Uh oh. Alex turned away from her, face red, while she confidently stood up. “Don’t tell me!! I know you don’t like Seb, and plus, he is taken for the next forever probably... So that leaves...!!!” She giggled and excitedly stamped her feet again. “You like Sam! You thought he was dating Seb for a time!!”

“Shh!! Your damn voice carries for miles!” Alex blurted in frustration. Jade knew she was absolutely correct in that moment, especially with how dark and flushed his face became. Alex keeled over with a groan and buried his face in his hands while Jade did a tiny dance in celebration for getting it right.

She quickly calmed down when the reality of the situation hit her. “Well... you have good taste! Sam is really sweet and fun. And you know, he ain’t bad looking. He’s very athletic too, you know. Agile, to say the least.”

“Trust me, I know,” he grumbled.

Jade sighed and sat back down, giving her brother-in-spirit a gentle nudge. “Hey. You know... I consider myself decent friends with Sam. And... I think you should tell him. I can’t say for certain that you’ll get the outcome you want, but... Sam is a very good person. He would handle the truth with grace, and you’ll feel better for doing so.”

The athlete lifted his head to glance at the young farmer once more. “... Will you help me?” he meekly asked.
“Of course! I’ll do everything in my power to help you. And I just so happen to have an endless source of Sam information just a few instant messages away! Or... a forty-five minute walk.” Her face went blank, feeling like the analogy didn’t go through well. “It’s Sebastian,” she blatantly stated. Alex snorted and returned the nudge.

“I got it,” he assured her. “But, uh... It’s okay. I don’t want you to tell Subassman anything.”

“Fine,” she giggled, then punched his arm for the name. “What can I do, then?”

Alex went quiet and peered away in thought. Eventually, he returned to her. “... Can you tell me I’ll be alright?” He asked with such a weak voice.

Jade stood up again, then hugged her friend around the neck and collar bone. She bumped their heads together and confidently smiled, backing up so that they could see each other’s faces. “Alex, you’ll be amazing.” Her smile slowly transformed into a grin. “And... if it doesn’t work out, it’s not the end of the world. I’m always here, too.”

The athlete’s expression was a mix of massive relief and the urge to cry. He didn’t outwardly express either of them, but did give Jade a hug in return. “You’re not so bad after all, farm girl,” he chuckled, slowly sounding like himself again.

“I know, I’m pretty great. So! Tell me. Is this why you were weird with me in our early days? What moments did you know? You need to spill.” Jade eagerly settled beside Alex once more and waited for more juicy bits of information.

Alex laughed. “Okay, fine. I owe you that much.”

Much of their day wasted away with tsunamis of conversation and bountiful quality time. Jade ended up taking him inside for some lunch so they could comfortably continue talking while in the cushy spaces of her home, and he didn’t leave until around 3 PM. The athlete promised Jade that he would keep her up to date on what was happening, providing his phone number on a piece of paper to let her know the results that night. She wished him the best of luck upon leaving, though the only phone she had was a house phone that wasn’t even hooked up yet. Jade was left alone again with the rest of the evening left to her disposal- she would deal with the details later.

She couldn’t help but wonder how Alex’s endeavors would turn out, of course. Whatever it was, she didn’t really have a good feeling, even if she wanted his feelings to work out. There was something about Sam that she couldn’t pinpoint, but unfortunately, she didn’t really know him enough to confirm her suspicions. While he did care for others and had a massive “interest” in people’s romance, he never seemed focused on himself. Was he lonely? Did he have a lover already? And what about Penny? They seemed pretty close...

But, thinking about it some more, Jade felt it was unfair to lump Penny and Sam together as a couple. Doing so would be just like lumping and Alex and herself together, which was something the townspeople considered and something Jade found extremely annoying. Whichever way Sam swung, though, he had talent in keeping others guessing.

Wow. Sam was a complete mystery to her, and it took this long to realize it. Jade found it funny how she knew the “mysterious” member of the squad inside and out and could list all his favorites, peeves, and what all of his body language symbolized, but Sam... Her mind went blank. The blond was sociable, fun, and an amazing foil for Sebastian, but when it came to actually knowing Sam,
Jade really could not recall. Perhaps a one-on-one hang out session would be in order, as long as she could do it without anyone noticing.

Such sneaky moves could wait for another time, however. Jade wisely spent her time fishing at the body of water right beside her farm, until, unfortunately, her old fishing pole gave in and snapped. Jade sadly walked back onto her farmland with her broken fishing pole and a large ice chest full of fish, but perked up when she heard the familiar hum of a motorcycle engine.

Pouting transformed into excitement, the young farmer dropping her supplies to run over and hug Sebastian as he stepped off his vehicle, then returned to pouting when he asked what she was up to. He couldn’t help but laugh at her expression when she remarked the broken fishing pole, which incited an irritated huff and a fake shove from her. A playfight broke out from their physical banter and teasing remarks, only concluding when both of them were laughing more than spouting actual banter. Like the “helpful” boyfriend he was, Sebastian assisted in storing her fish for shipment and rounding the chickens and rabbits inside their homes.

He assured her that she could buy another fishing pole when all was said and done, and offered to go to Willy’s shop with her the next day. He’s seemed much less busy than before and the weather forecast stated that it would rain, anyway. Jade always welcomed more time to spend with Sebastian, so the plan sounded golden with her. The young farmer had a fantastic evening, all things considered... unfortunately, all of her bouts of paranoia returned. She was cuddling in bed and watching a movie with Sebastian when all of her worried thoughts rushed back at once.

Jade snapped her head in the direction of her alarm clock to look at the time. Her face suddenly paled; it was nearly 9 PM. “Oh, no... I’m gonna miss it. Seb, do you have your phone? Can I use it?” She brought her focus to Sebastian, who was nodding off from holding her and being wrapped in blankets.

“Hm?” Sebastian yawned and dug around in his pockets, bringing out his phone. “Sure, I guess, but... Why do you want to use it?”

“I have to text someone! It’s really urgent.”

“Sure.” He offered the phone to her and then buried his face in her mass of waves and curls. “We really need to get you a phone...”

Jade graciously took the phone and reached for the slip of paper Alex gave her, then began tapping away on the device’s screen. “I didn’t need a phone until now,” she huffed. “Plus, my computer has everything I want.”

“Maybe I want to hear your voice but I don’t feel like walking an hour,” the raven-hair spoke again with a yawn. His voice was muffled from her hair, though he seemed too comfortable to adjust. A few moments passed from his last statement, bringing alarm to him even while drowsy. “Hey,” he said, in hopes to get her attention.

“O-oh, sorry. Um. I’m dealing with this.”

“With what?”

“I’m not allowed to tell anyone!” the young farmer stressed. “My friend will get mad at me.”

“You’re using my phone,” he grumbled, finally deciding to lift his head. He peeked over her
shoulder to see who she was texting. On the screen was just a number followed by messages:

JADE: Hey I’m on seb’s phone

JADE: I thought I told you a long time ago that I don’t have a phone but I’m worried about you! Is everything okay?

???: Can’t talk right now

JADE: Let me know when you can :

Sebastian didn’t recognize the number, nor did anyone state any names. Trusting Jade wasn’t a question, though he didn’t get what was going on. “Fine, don’t tell me any names. Why do you need to talk to your friend?”

“They’re gonna confess to someone in town, and they’re supposed to tell me how it goes. It’s super late right now so I thought it’d be done by now...” Jade sighed. “I’m really worried.”

“Someone in town?” Sebastian raised an eyebrow. There were only so many people in town, so there were few possibilities of who this ‘friend’ was and to whomever they were confessing. As someone who loved his privacy, however, he didn’t prod any further. “Try not to worry. Good luck to whoever your friend is, though.”

“Yeah...” Jade relaxed back and slouched in Sebastian’s arms. With a pathetic whine, she snuggled into the blankets more. “Did you go to that fortune telling place at the fair yesterday?” asked the farmer.

“Heh... I did.”

“What kind of fortune did you get?” she continued in question.

The drowsy programmer, though unsurprised, didn’t know how to reply without being so gushy. “Uh... To be honest, it was a pretty good fortune. I always get crappy ones. Boosted my ego a bit.”

Jade snorted. “Your ego, huh?” she repeated in a giggle. “Did the fortune teller say any names?”

“I’m keeping that one to myself.”

“Uh huh,” she concluded with a smile. The two continued to watch the movie together, though Sebastian faded off to sleep quickly. Alex never texted back, causing Jade to slip off into dreamland as well. Hopefully the poor love-struck athlete was doing well enough...

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Jade had another dream- no, nightmare? But it was different.

She drowned in pitch black, as if she wandered into the depths of a cave or had been thrown down a well. The floor was solid beneath her, but nothing was around. There was just... darkness.

She began walking, though she couldn’t feel her legs. Only the sounds of her shoes clapping against
the ground gave her any sort of indication. She tried to speak, her mouth opening, her thoughts transferring, but nothing came out of her mouth. This was strange. This couldn’t be real.

A voice crept in through the cold chill of the space. It was an otherworldly voice, distorted, creepy, its pitch all over the map... it was... unsettling. Jade grew aware that she was experiencing a dream, but it was too different. The dream was empty, void... She had never gone through anything like this. Maybe she was stressed, but... the young farmer stopped walking to try to gain her bearings.

The voice’s garbled structure also began to stabilize. Jade looked forward- whatever forward was in this case- and noticed a blotch of white that appeared in front of her. It stretched out far, and mimicked her silhouette like it was a shadow. But... it was a blinding white, the only thing she could see in the void, the only indication she could see at all. She still couldn’t tell what the voice was saying, though it sounded more and more human-like. The inverse shadow at her feet moved, even though she didn’t move, herself. It opened its pitch black eyes-

Jade woke up.

She adjusted herself with a snort, much less jumpy she thought she’d be. Her heart was pounding, but she was safe at home. Just a dream, after all, even if it was strange. If anything, she felt disappointed that she couldn’t ever decipher what the voice was saying...

There came a familiar and gentle snore at her side. Sebastian was tangled in the same blankets she took refuge under, except pillows stacked on top of his head to shield from the television’s still blaring light. Jade spent a few minutes admiring his sleeping form, which, at a glance, looked somewhat uncomfortable. His hair shrouded his face, hoodie pushed up and sleeves uneven. One arm clutched around the rim of a blanket, while the other was presumably hanging off his side of the bed. Jade didn’t want to mess with the covers too much to satisfy her curiosity, though she was fairly certain she could see one of his knees near the arm closest to her. He was snoring, so he was comfortable, at least. The bed was big enough for him to continue such an expressive sleeping position, anyway.

Just then, Sebastian’s phone lit up in the middle of the bed. Oh, no... she forgot about Alex, if only for a moment. She picked up the phone and glanced at the time that displayed on the screen. It was past midnight... Okay, maybe she forgot about Alex for quite some hours. She unlocked the screen and squinted as she scrolled to find some text messages, the light still hurting her eyes.

There they were. Alex messaged back after all, interestingly proud statements glowing on screen:

???: Well... I did it

JADE: I’m here! Sorry, fell asleep. How did it go?

???: We walked to the beach and had a really long talk about a lot of stuff.

JADE: Whoa, really?

???: Let me call

Not even a moment later, Sebastian’s phone began vibrating and started receiving a call. Jade had been caught by surprise, clutching the phone and worming herself out of bed as quickly and quietly
as she could. After exiting her room and carefully closing the door, she finally answered the phone.
“Hello?” she muttered in a low voice.

“Yo,” came Alex from the other end. “Sorry, I know it’s really late, but I just... I’m better at talking than texting, anyway. I felt like you should know how it went.”

The tired farmer beelined for the living room couch and collapsed to listen. “I was waiting for this, so please tell me everything,” she calmly replied with a smile. “I’m trying to be quiet... Seb’s asleep.”

“Whoa,” the athlete replied in an elevated tone. He sounded fascinated and excessively annoying. “Sounds like maybe you need to tell me some things.”

“Wh- no!” Jade nearly shouted with a huff. She knew what he was alluding to, but she didn’t want to think too hard about it; regardless, her face flushed up. “He spends the night all the time, it’s not-”

“Oh?” Alex laughed. “Does he now?”

“Y-you’re twisting my words!” Jade ignored the fact that she, in fact, was stating everything. Face now completely red, she curled into a ball on the couch while listening intently at the phone. “This isn’t about m-me. Just talk.”

The athlete lightheartedly exhaled, figuring his time to tease had concluded. “Sure thing.”

“Well?”

“It... It could have gone worse,” Alex muttered. He waited a moment for Jade to say anything, though she seemed to be waiting for him to continue. His sigh was heavier this time. “To go ahead and get it out of the way, he doesn’t reciprocate my feelings, and I knew he wouldn’t. I guess it’s nice that I know for sure now.”

Jade frowned from the news. “I’m sorry, Alex.”

“The weird part is... after saying he was flattered but didn’t reciprocate, he wanted to go out. He said, hey, let’s still go on a late night walk! And before I could even answer, he took me by the arm and just... dragged me along to the beach.” Alex laughed, though it was more of a sad one. He was still figuring through his heartbreak, Jade figured. She didn’t speak and allowed him to proceed.

“Talking was a little awkward... he was really, uh, nervous, I guess. But he was trying his best to be enthusiastic. He tried to explain to me how he felt about people. He told me not to feel bad, because he doesn’t like guys or girls... or anybody. Not in that way.” Alex paused for a moment, thinking carefully before his next lines. “I... can’t say I understand, to be honest. But, he was trying really hard to stay positive and be nice to me, and hear what I have to say.”

“Mmhm,” muttered Jade. She had completely forgotten about his joking before and closely listened in.

“He said that he felt very happy with the relationships he had, and that he’d be even happier and more than eager to get to know me as a friend. He also said he understood if I wanted some space, but... Yoba, how does someone smile so much? He was smiling at me the whole time. His voice was loud, and still managed to sound so sincere and honest. Then...”

Jade was on the edge of her seat.
“He didn’t look angry or sad, but not all that happy either... He said that he wasn’t the person for me.” Alex emitted another sigh. Jade wished she could have been at his side to comfort him. “I insisted that he shouldn’t feel bad for that either, even though I felt like shit myself. But, it meant a lot that he went through the effort to explain. He kept saying how he wanted to be friends, and he’d love to get to know me more that way, and that he was sorry he couldn’t reciprocate. As funny as it sounds, him apologizing actually made me feel better about it. You’re supposed to stay upset, you know? ... If anything, I feel... relieved.”

“Relieved?” Jade asked, egging for more explanation.

“Well... Even though Sam is so... Sam, I didn’t expect how anyone would react, especially another guy, to getting confessed... And by me, no less. But, he took it all in, he nodded sincerely, and then laughed and dragged me to the beach. Who does that?” He actually let out a chuckle as he talked. “You were right. He is a good person. And... Because of that, I can’t be mad, or all that disappointed. He’d want me to go forward with my life, and he wants me to be friends, so... I will.” Alex sounded a lot better now. “I guess I’m mainly relieved because he likes me enough to be friends, even after that.”

Jade smiled a little. “Aww,” she swooned. The story woke her up some more. “Yeah, he is a very caring person... What are you going to do next?”

“Well, uh... Honestly, I’m probably going to take a break from everything for a little bit. I’m so damn tired. I didn’t know just talking to people could make you feel so tired. But... After that, I think I’ll take him up on his offer. When the most awkward part of the conversation was over, we just hung out and talked. It was fun, and he offered to walk me home when he planned to leave but I said no thanks and that I’d talk to him later. Now I’m sitting out here, watching the waves.”

“It must be cold out there at night. You should go home, ya dope.” It was Jade’s turn to sigh, though it was in a more motherly manner. “I’m sure you’ll be fine in no time! Come by my house when you’re up for it and we can play some catch or whatever you want. You should see how big the animals are getting, too. You’ll be shocked.”

“Hehe, that sounds fun... Yeah, I deserve a break. I did good, didn’t i?”

“You did,” Jade affirmed with a confident nod, even though he couldn’t see it.

“Hm... Have you been to the springs? That bathhouse near the train station?”

“... We have a train station and a bathhouse?”

“Ha! Okay, let’s go there sometime... maybe not for a while, but it’d be something fun. You can drag along the toothpick and whoever else if you want, though he’d probably be crushed at seeing a real man’s body, such as yours truly.”

Jade laughed. She was happy that he was willing to banter, even if he was so crushed. “Wow, extending an invitation? I like this reborn Alex already. We can finish talking about that later, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan, farm girl. I guess I should get home now... Um, thanks. For pushing me to do this. I don’t feel the best, but... I feel like it’ll just get better from here. You know?”

“Absolutely. Be safe on your way, gridboy.”
Alex sarcastically clicked his tongue. “Tell that Seb to keep his hands to himself.”

Jade huffed. “Goodnight!” she hissed before hanging up the phone. The young farmer stared at the now dimmed screen of the device, then sighed. Alex sounded much cheerier, but she still hoped he would be alright. Maybe a gift would be nice, when he comes back around to it.

Meh. Jade decided to think more about it later when she was fully rested. The whole ordeal concluded for the time being, allowing her to peacefully return to her room.
Jade groggily awoke to the pitter-patter of rainfall colliding against the roof. She slowly turned her head towards the nearest window; the outdoors managed to remain so bright despite no speck of blue in the sky whatsoever, and it was gorgeous. She sat up and checked her alarm- oh. She overslept, but she didn’t set her alarm in the first place. It was 10 AM, which wasn’t too bad since it was still the morning. Sebastian wasn’t in bed anymore, so he probably went home after waking.

The young farmer untangled herself from her already messy blankets and sheets and wandered over to the window just across from her location. She tiredly forced her window open with a grunt, relaxing once the cool air wafted in with fresh rainwater scents. She spent a moment taking in the dampened environment, how the birds still chirped happily and the trees still glowed with their bright, warm colors. Leaves fell and littered the borders of her farmland, though she didn’t seem to mind all too much. The fall has been fairly dry so far, so it was really nice to breathe in the rain.

The impatient grumbling of her stomach told her that it was time to make breakfast. Jade wandered out of her room, noticing Sebastian’s laptop turned on and set on the coffee table in front of the couch. Speaking of coffee... Jade could smell the bitter aroma of freshly brewed coffee over from the kitchen. She nearly forgot that he brought over a coffee maker back when she was sick, since he needed something to stay awake. Funny he never took it back.

Ignoring her stomach for just a moment, Jade opened the front door to find the suspicions in the back of her mind confirmed: Sebastian sat on the porch steps and watched the light rainfall while drinking a mug of coffee. He glanced back to her when he heard the door, then calmly smiled and returned to the view. She silently joined him and watched at his side, enjoying the opportunity to gauge at her farmland once more.

Sebastian took a sip of his coffee and watched Jade in the corner of his eye after a few moments of silence. “What’s the plan today?” he gently asked.

Jade couldn’t help but smile; his voice was soothing to hear and the rain only made it even more relaxing. “Um... Well, fishing was a fairly profitable source of income, and my pole broke... so... Maybe I should do that first after farm work.”

“Oh yeah. I said I would come along for that.”

“You still going to?” Jade inquired, leaning her head on his shoulder.

He made a playful huff in return and bumped his shoulder up to pick at her. “Depends. Am I going to get treated in return for escorting?”

Jade snorted. “I won’t throw you into the ocean, maybe.”
His arm was thrown around her in response. “As if I haven’t heard that one before,” he chuckled. Another comfortable minute of silence passed between them. “How did you sleep?”

“I’m okay. The rain is nice to wake up to... my crops are happy.” Jade sighed as she scooted closer into his hold. “I’m happy you’re here.”

“But?” Sebastian moved his head to look at her. He knew she didn’t sound as chipper as she usually did.

She wasn’t in the mood to hide it or really keep up her cheerful persona. She was still worried about Alex and wanted to do something nice for him. “... I’m... still a little nervous, I guess.”

“About what?”

“Well... You know... The whole thing last night.” The young farmer frowned in defeat. “I suppose it’s all solved. He confessed to the person in town, and got rejected but they remained friends and worked things out. He still seemed upset afterwards, because who wouldn’t, and I’m not going to hear from him for a little while... I’m relieved that he got everything settled, but... I don’t know. I wish I could do more. I wish people could be happy, like us. I just feel like I didn’t do something that I should have done.”

Sebastian stared out towards the barn in the distance, watching the water drip off of the shutters and into the short grass below. He took a slow breath and finished his coffee, setting the mug down beside him. “Hm... Jade?”

“Mmhm?”

“You’re a caring person... you worry and genuinely want the best for everyone. You put everyone before yourself, and it just shows how big of a heart you have. Maybe it drove me a little crazy at first since you’re so nice, but it’s just how you are.” He let go of her so that he could fully face her. Jade blushed from the sentiment, though she still had a pouty look on her face. Sebastian gently lifted up her chin with his hand so that the focus would be brought back to him. “But...” he continued, a frown on his own visage. Jade carefully watched him, waiting for his answer. “I think you can be a little... careless. You tend to dive head first and ask questions later in any given situation.”

She shyly averted her eyes and spent a minute absorbing his information. “I don’t try to...”

“Of course you don’t. You have a very selfless nature,” he responded, the corners of his mouth rising ever so slightly. “I want you to take better care of yourself. Your effort to help others doesn’t go unnoticed... so, you can take a step back and just think of what you can do for yourself. What keeps Jade happy and safe?” He genuinely smiled this time. “I just worry about you too, that’s all,” he concluded.

Jade leaned back over to him and tightly but lazily hugged him. He wrapped his arms round in turn and rested his head on hers. “What can I do?” she muffled.

“You can be patient. If he said he wanted a break, then that means he will return to you later.” Sebastian idly threaded his fingers through her fluffy and bunched up hair while she buried herself in his hold. “So... There are plenty of things you can do until then.”

“Like what?”

“Well... let’s have some fun. It’s a rainy day, perfect for all sorts of mischief.” His gentle smile malformed into a smirk. “I’m sure we’ll think of something. Um... Let’s get your fishing pole, then stop by my house right after. I forgot to bring some extra clothes.”
She ended up giggling. “You stay so much, you might as well just have some clothes here.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he replied with a tease. “How are you feeling now?”

“Better,” calmly replied Jade. She lifted herself from his chest and gave a somewhat tired smile. “I mean, I’m still worried, but... I know I should just try to be patient. He does want to hang out with all of us later, when he feels up for it. Did you know that we have a train station?!”

Sebastian actually let out a laugh from her surprised string of words. “Yes, I actually go there quite a bit. You’ve never been?”

“No!! I was honestly surprised to see we have a freaking bus, let alone a train station.”

He warmly smiled. “Let’s go to the train station, then. It’s not that impressive, but it’s a good place to hang out. Not to mention, the station is right behind my house.”

Ooh. Jade didn’t realize it was that close, but that was interesting! She was already getting excited from more time to spend with Sebastian. He knew how to distract her well. “I’d love that,” she beamed in response. “But... Food and shower for me, first.” She stood up with a grumble and headed towards the front door. “You better not give yourself a cold while I’m gone!” She shouted as she left the porch.

“No promises,” he chuckled back.

Once eating breakfast, showering, and dressing for a fun (and rainy) day, Jade brought her attention over to her farm animals. All of the bunnies were chased, petted, brushed, and guided over to their food stalls, since they wouldn’t have liked the rain. Her two chickens were also doing fabulously, both of them enjoying the petting, gentle words of encouragement, and casual grooming before being provided with corn meal to chow down on. Since Sebastian was still there, he watched the process she went through to take care of the animals, and was fascinated to say the least. He could tell a lot of love and care went towards her fur and feather born children. After wool and egg collecting with several bouts of banter, they had lunch and then finally set off towards town.

Jade used to enjoy the rain because it brought cooler weather and was always a joy to run around in, though she found a different reason to feel happy: Sebastian. He definitely brought out his more cheerful, childlike side in gloomier weather. Instead of his usual neutral expression, the corners of his mouth were slightly raised. His eyes were wider and his green irises sparkled even in the dim and cloudy environment. Sebastian thrived within his element.

While avoiding the complaints Jade gave about Sebastian’s hoodie not being suited for rain, he carefully drove them to the bridge before the beach. They both dismounted and rushed across sandy shores to reach the docks at the other end, then entered the fisherman’s shop without much trouble, both relieved by getting out of the freezing rain.

Well... almost relieved. Jade attempted to mask her disgust for the store’s fishy stench, while Sebastian was too focused on getting dry and warm to really care. Willy was restocking bait into one of the several bins in his store, but paced back behind the shop’s counter when potential customers arrived. “Welcome, welcome. Make yerselves at home. Lots of new fish and bait for ye,” started the withered fisherman. He was surprised to see two young people in his store, but pleasantly so.

“Hello, Willy,” kindly replied Jade. She was the first to step forward despite the overwhelming stench of chum and fresh fish. “Actually, I think it’s time for me to get a new fishing pole... the one you gave me a long time ago is broken. Do you have any more?”
It was as if Jade spoke the magic words. Willy’s demeanor changed for the better after her request, eagerly showing her the clear-glass display of all the available fishing poles. She had enough money for the most expensive fishing pole available, which was an iridium-based rod, but she didn’t want to spend all of her cash at once. Jade settled for a nice and sturdy iron-based rod and still with some leftover cash to boot! The transaction completed and the young lovers left the shop. Jade felt happy to see Pelican Town’s kind of fisherman again, while Sebastian was more worried on how to properly drive on the motorcycle with the equipment.

The weather made it so Jade could hold the fishing pole as-is without it really impacting their drive. Light gray clouds darkened in the sky and menacingly hung overhead as a storm picked up around the valley. Thunder could be heard in the distance, breaks in the clouds flashing from faraway lightning. Sebastian felt paranoid enough to drive slowly and prevent going into any worse areas in town.

Getting to the carpenter shop took much longer than intended, but they were safe and in one piece. Sebastian parked in the house’s garage and immediately stood up to take his hoodie off and twist the water out of it. While drying himself, he watched his dear motorcycle in dismay. As much as he loved rain, he hated driving through it. Jade didn’t seem all too bothered when she got off the motorcycle, though; the raincoat and boots she wore kept her dry.

“I’m gonna go shower and all that good stuff. You, uh...” The raven-haired man watched his girlfriend with both reluctance and fascination; she seemed so excited to have a brand new fishing pole. “I have a feeling you want to go back out there,” he chuckled.

“I do! Wow, and I hear you catch more fish in the rain!” Jade beamed.

“Is that real, or is it just a video game thing?”

“I dunno. Guess I’ll find out! I’ll be out by the lake!” she stated with utmost enthusiasm. She waved and ran back out of the garage’s opening, turning left to go to the lake in the mountains. Sebastian watched her with concern since the storm picked up, but she was so excited. He decided to move the opposite direction and finally enter the home.

The storm picked up, but at least it wasn’t so bad that the young farmer couldn’t go fishing. She decided to cast her line out on one of the several islands within the lake, all of them connected by old wooden bridges. Jade stood on one of the larger islands in the middle of the lake, which had enough room for her and quite a few pine trees. She set her bait on the fishing hook and cast out the line, hoping to obtain some great catches.

Some minutes passed and nothing. Only rumbling thunder and heavy rain accompanied her during the chilly afternoon, though not getting a catch so soon was normal. The young farmer’s hopes were still high for any potential big catch, focusing on the bobber in the water for a while. Slowly, her attention faded, allowing her to examine her surroundings.

Rain never stopped being so beautiful. The ground was foggy and the lake was rising in water level and losing clarity. Despite the loud rush of rain and the growling sky, Jade felt so quiet and peaceful. She only hoped that fishing in dreary weather wouldn’t give her another bad cold.

More minutes passed by, testing Jade’s already dwindling patience. She’s waited longer, though. She could do this. The precipitation seemed to come down even harder and the sky grew darker; Jade glanced above to see heavy clouds twisting and twirling as if they had a life of their own. She recalled a television station that remarked the moods of spirits on each particular day... they must have been very displeased for the time.
Right then, the entire sky flashed before her very eyes. She heard an earth-shattering crackle, followed by ringing in her ears. The ground shook. She saw the tree beside her start to collapse forward in two, burning halves. Something-- a fish? the tree?-- yanked her off the dirt.

Water. Lots of water sinking past her raincoat, up her nose, in her eyes. She could only open her eyes long enough to see a mass of bubbles. Where was she? How deep? Where was the surface? Several precious seconds were wasted. She attempted to regain her sense.

The fishing pole was out of her hands, but... She couldn’t feel that arm. Or her legs. It was cold. It took several attempts to discover her surroundings. There was the surface, but it was so far away. Time was running out. It was getting dark. She could barely hold her breath.

A gigantic shadow loomed over her. It had to be much larger than her. Her vision started to blur, as did her focus. She could only see... teeth. A lot of teeth and the hulking body of a fish. Her heart dropped to her stomach. The spirits were very displeased.

It swam away.

... No, it didn’t. She felt it brush against her back. The force brought her closer to the surface of the water, but it was still so far away. She couldn’t feel anything now, but she no longer cared. Rage overwhelmed her senses. Determination. She told herself to swim up, so she tried. She wasn’t sure it was working, but she couldn’t give in. Spirits or not, they wouldn’t win.

Her eyes couldn’t stay open anymore. She just tried her best to reach upwards, swim with all her might despite every muscle in her body working against her. Her burst of energy faded, even with a mind furiously urging to continue. She could feel a crash into the water nearby. Her consciousness faded.

There were two very familiar voices. They sounded muffled and hazy.

“... Just some nasty bruises. Yoba, I’m surprised she only got off with some scrapes...” The source of the voice was very close to Jade. She had difficulty in making it out, but she felt like the voice belonged to Maru.

“Are you sure? She’s okay?” the second voice asked with utmost worry. She knew that voice from anywhere... Sebastian.

Maru sighed. Jade felt a warm hand brush across her own forehead. “Yes, I think she’ll be fine... I’m glad I got to her in time since she almost drow-” Her voice abruptly halted, a tense second of silence in the room. “... Sorry. I... I’m just glad she’s alive and well.”

“I...” Sebastian exhaled, slightly shaken. “Forget about it,” he quietly replied with dismissal. He didn’t seem to be in the mood to nitpick with Maru. If anything, he was thankful she was there at the right place and time. A different hand gently clasped onto Jade’s arm; it was colder but still felt very comforting. She knew it was Sebastian’s. “Shit... this is all my fault,” he whimpered with a scratchy voice. “I had a feeling and I went back on it...”

“No... no, it’s not your fault. No one could have seen this happen. It was only raining before. These things don’t just... you know.” Maru’s tone, though hushed, brimmed with understanding. Another pause, and then a sigh of relief. “She wasn’t crushed by the tree. I think it just ended up dragging her somehow.”

“Urrngh...” Jade groaned as she came back to the waking world. She slowly opened her eyes, seeing the two half-siblings hovering over her in concern.
“Jade!” They both exclaimed, leaning in closer.

She slowly lifted one of her arms to wipe her eyes. “Where am I?” tiredly asked the young farmer, still disoriented. Sebastian had backed away after seeing she came to, hugging himself and observing her with a terror-stricken expression. She sat up with a woozy grunt and wiped her eyes as she looked around. They were definitely in the carpenter shop, but she wasn’t sure she had ever been in this room... it was bordered with starry wallpaper and some astrology posters covered the walls. She rested against a cushy teal colored bed and noticed an old, dusty computer in the corner. There were several shelves full of science magazines and books.

Maru held the farmer’s hand and gave it a sincere pat. “You’re in my room. Can you recall anything?”

“Um... not much...”

“That’s normal. I’m sure it happened pretty fast... We were so worried,” the young nurse continued. She glanced over to her half-brother, who wore clothes surprisingly different from his usual get-up. He wore a light gray t-shirt with characters on it and dark blue jeans. Still the same black shoes, though. His arms relaxed only enough to cross, still staring at his girlfriend with both pain and concern.

Jade’s focus was on Sebastian, but slowly went back to Maru as she attempted to regain her thoughts. Maru wore her usual overalls, but they seemed surprisingly clean compared to her damp and disheveled hair. “What happened?” She asked in hopes to remember.

“Ah...” Maru deeply breathed to accurately recall. “All of us heard a terrifying crack of thunder, then a huge disturbance in the lake. I had come back home from work when I saw one of the trees on the island missing... One of your rain boots floated to the surface.”

“Oh...” Jade didn’t even realize she was no longer wearing her raincoat or boots. Her hair was still wet and matted from all the commotion, but she had been dressed in warm pajamas that belonged to Maru. She had a blanket wrapped around her shoulders and another at her legs, pulled down only while Maru was checking her vitals.

“I dived in and got you out in time. Took some resuscitating and your arm was pulled, but you’re fine and we fixed it,” explained Maru. “You’re safe, now. You’ve only been out cold for an hour at best.”

Jade took a moment to examine her own arms and legs. She could feel them again; in fact, her right arm hurt something awful. The room felt so warm, even if she still felt the need to bundle up. “I couldn’t feel my limbs before.”

The young nurse watched her. “Yeah... Could have been shock. The water was freezing and you were practically thrown into it. The impact may have given you some bruises, but I’m so glad there’s nothing worse. That lake is pretty deep...”

“Wait... I remember something.” Jade’s breathing increased as her memories flooded back. “I thought I was in trouble for a second.”


“Yeah.” Jade shivered and curled the blanket around herself more. “There was... a really huge fish, above me. I just remember seeing its teeth. Then it swam behind me, and I think it ended up giving
me a boost towards the surface of the water... Like it helped me? It was really hard to swim, though..."

The half-siblings couldn’t conjure any coherent answers to her statements. She wasn’t lying at all, but the thought of something that big being in the lake... it was extremely disconcerting. “... I’m just glad you’re okay,” muttered Maru with a sigh. “If you weren’t going to wake up when I thought you would, I would have taken you right back to the clinic.”

“Man... I get myself into more trouble than I ever mean to,” grumbled Jade to herself. “I’m so sick of seeing the clinic. I just want things to go right. Stupid spirits...”

Maru emitted a bit of a chuckle, hopefully not with ill timing. “No clinic this time. Just... Be careful, okay? You’ll be feeling sore, but I don’t think anything is broken from how you sound.”

“Nah... just my arm, really, but you said you fixed that,” replied Jade. She rolled the shoulder bringing her pain, first wincing, then sighing in relief when she adjusted. “Thank you...”

“Think nothing of it, Jade.”

Sebastian walked back over. “So... you’re well?” he asked. The poor guy looked as exhausted as she did.


Sebastian was in the process of calming down, but her remark made him tense again. “You’re worried about a fishing pole?” he asked, irritation in his voice.

“Well... Yeah. I just got it,” said Jade. “I wonder if it’s still in one piece...?”

“Wh... Because of that fishing pole, you almost--!” He grit his teeth in frustration and glared at her. “You... Y-... Agh!!”

Before she could really answer, he stomped out of the room and slammed the door shut. Maru watched, frowning but unsurprised. Jade sat there in shock, unsure what she said to set him off like that.

“Oh, no. The young farmer’s face had been struck with realization. “No, I get it. I wasn’t thinking very much... It was still insensitive of me to talk about something so trivial.” Jade frowned. “I’m sorry.”

Maru shook her head to dismiss the apology. “Again, just give him some time. After that ordeal, you both need some time to unwind. He thinks it’s his fault for what happened,” she murmured.

“It’s not! If anything, it’s my fault. I wanted to go fishing out there...” Jade’s breaths interrupted in a terrified hiccup. “Dammit...” She started to tear up and slowly wiped her eyes. The exhaustion was returning to her, along with the droves of feelings that come with a near-death experience. “I’m sorry,” she pitifully cried.

The young nurse’s first instinct was to pull Jade into a nurturing hold. “No, no, it’s okay,” answered
Maru in her gentle tone. “Look... A lot happened. Just take a rest, okay? You can stay for the night, if you don’t want Mom to drive you back in the rain. Both she and Dad are running errands in the city today, so they won’t be back until late.” She didn’t expect Jade to reply, surprised to even get a whimper of approval as a response. Maru held her with a deep sigh. “It’s okay,” she softly repeated.

It took Jade several moments to calm down, but she eventually did. Maru gently let go of the traumatized farmer, then looked over to the door of her room. “Um... you hungry? It’ll be dinner time before you know it.”

Jade slowly nodded.

“... Okay. I’ll go make something. Feel free to explore the house if you want, but don’t overdo it, alright?”

Another nod.

Maru smiled. “Good. I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me,” she remarked, then left the room. Jade stared at the then open doorway, pondering her next move. She was exhausted, but... all she could think of was Sebastian, and how he was doing. Giving him space was the right thing to do, even though it didn’t feel right. She spent ages sitting there, staring off into space while in a battle between her brain and her heart.

... Her heart won. Jade carefully stood from the bed and kept herself wrapped with the blanket. She felt a little sore, but she could hardly notice it over her blaring thoughts about previous events. Nothing mattered until she made up with Sebastian.

She made her way down the house’s hallway, then descended the basement stairs. Sebastian’s door was left ajar, Jade peeking inside to see if he was in there. She slowly pushed the door open and glanced around. Her eyes locked onto him lying face down on his bed, head resting on one of his pillows.

There was no way he couldn’t hear her walk in, and yet he continued to lie there, unmoving. Jade stared at him with worry, not even sure of how to begin. “... Seb?” she eventually squeaked.

No response.

“... I know you’re not sleeping,” she murmured. “I... Look... I’m really sorry.” Jade stood there awhile to see if he would respond, but all he did was close his arms in on the pillow he buried his face in. “You have every right to be upset with me... What I said was really stupid. I wasn’t thinking.”

Still nothing...

“Seb... On normal circumstances, I would leave you alone, but... With everything that’s happened, I can’t let this sit.” She frowned. “Please, talk to me...”

He wasn’t asleep, right? He couldn’t have been.

“What do you want me to say? I was being insensitive... I didn’t realize it. I had to process my thoughts for a little while, and I just... I feel a little sore, but it’s fine... So I didn’t think it was all that much to worry about.”

“Not much to worry about?” Sebastian finally repeated. He lifted his head but refused to turn in her direction.
“Seb...”

“That’s it? Because you’re fine, it’s not much to worry about?” His voice grew stronger, but it was also broken, offended. His entire demeanor changed, from dead weight to boxed frustration. Finally, he turned his head to her. His face was lit in rage, eyes portraying as much flare as it did pain. “Because you’re not fucking dead, it’s okay? Not a big deal?”

Jade frowned and took a step back. “Seb, I-I didn’t mean-”

“What did you mean, then? What could you possibly say that would make this better?” He stood up from his bed, glaring her down.

Jade felt intimidated, but she tried to stand her ground. Regardless, she didn’t answer. She didn’t know how to.

“You know, good idea! I should have applied that logic when I saw my half-sister drag your limp and lifeless body out of the fucking water.” He clenched his teeth as he spoke. His eyes, though angry, started to dampen. He was trying very hard to control his already heaving breaths. “I should have laughed it off and go, wow, it’s not a big deal, as my half-sister had to perform CPR on you multiple times before you finally hacked up all the water in your lungs!” Sebastian practically yelled at her, but the voice lost its menacing tone. A tear slid down his cheek, still glaring at her and balling up his fists. “Since you’re okay, right?!”

She was speechless.

“What if nothing helped you towards the surface? What if Maru wasn’t there? You’d be fucking dead, Jade! You’d be dead and you just...” His tone officially cracked, causing him to turn away. He wiped his eyes and coughed out another desperate breath. “What would happen then? Is it really not a big deal when you were so close to leaving me?” There was no attempt to hide his tears now, but he couldn’t look at her at all. “Fuck, Jade... This is exactly what I was talking about earlier!”

She was crying now, too, but still couldn’t move. She didn’t know what to say.

“You’re so damn careless! Yeah, maybe it was just bad luck this time around, but what about next time? What about the times before that? This isn’t the first time I was scared you were hurt! Remember when you collapsed at the community center? Dammit... remember when you went to the mines? ANY time you went to the mines? Just over a week ago you could barely stand you were so sick!!” The words just kept coming, and he couldn’t stop them. “Have you ever stopped to really think of what could happen? How precious your life is, and how easily it can be sapped away?! All from just one stupid decision if I never stopped you!”

“I’m sorry!!” screamed Jade through a stream of tears. “You’re right!! I’m sorry! I’m a moron, okay?!” She hiccuped and wiped her eyes next. The blanket had slipped off of her person and she didn’t even realize it. “I never think things through! I never think about my safety, or consider how you feel about it. I’ve never been more sorry,” she sobbed. “Please forgive me... I’ll be more careful. I’m sorry...”

“I’m sorry!!” screamed Jade through a stream of tears. “You’re right!! I’m sorry! I’m a moron, okay?!” She hiccuped and wiped her eyes next. The blanket had slipped off of her person and she didn’t even realize it. “I never think things through! I never think about my safety, or consider how you feel about it. I’ve never been more sorry,” she sobbed. “Please forgive me... I’ll be more careful. I’m sorry...”

“Jade...” He tried once more to control his breathing, making several attempts to calm himself down. “You’re not... you’re no moron. Just...” He sighed and thread his fingers through his hair. “I love you. I can’t bear the thought of you getting hurt. I get enough nightmares as is...”

Jade tightly embraced him and cried into his chest, Sebastian wrapping his arms around her just as tightly. One arm firmly wrapped across her torso, while the other arm kept her head close to him. He heard a weak and muffled, “I love you too...” from her.
“Look... I... I’m sorry for yelling. I just...” He sighed as he continued to hold her close. “I get so anxious when I don’t know you’re okay. You’re strong and independent, and want you to stay that way, but... Just... Be safe... please. I can’t handle anything less...” Sebastian buried his face into her hair. “I was really, really scared...”

Jade lifted her head up enough to clear her voice. “I’m sorry I put you through that... I know I keep saying that, but... I understand. I’ll... I’ll be more careful. Thank you for being there all those times, and...” She weakly kissed his shoulder. “I promise I’ll try to stay safe. I didn’t realize how... how close I was to...” She hugged him tighter. “I don’t know what I’d do if the same happened to you, either...”

Sebastian released his hold to get a better look at her, making her do the same. “Thank you,” he simply replied, voice tired but extremely sincere. He placed his hands to her cheeks, wiped the stray tears with his thumbs, and leaned over to kiss her on the lips.

At first, the kiss was to signal the end of their confrontation, but... It wasn’t exactly perfect. The kiss ended too soon. Jade, enraptured by his gesture, brought his head back over for another kiss.

Then another.

And another. Each kiss lasting longer, each kiss portraying their heightened emotions all in one gesture. Jade relaxed her arms around his collarbone while his hands stayed firm at her sides and kept her close to him.

Neither of them could speak, but neither of them needed to. Somehow, they ended up on Sebastian’s bed, participating in an excited and relieved make-out session with each other.

“All right, I didn’t know if you liked grilled chee--oh...” Maru wandered to the basement to bring Jade and Sebastian dinner, but they seemed, uh... busy. She clapped her hand onto her mouth to prevent making any more noise and slowly backed out of the room. Silently, she shut the basement door and sneaked back upstairs, her face as red as a tomato.

Jade probably wasn’t in the mood for dinner, but at least she and Sebastian were feeling better.
Chapter Summary

Jade learns that she needs to phrase herself better.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The three who were part of the near-drowning incident decided to keep it to themselves for the most part. Maru didn’t see Jade or Sebastian anymore that night, so she had the responsibility of informing Robin and Demetrius what they deserved to know: Jade simply needed some time to spend with her boyfriend. She wasn’t particularly lying, though poor Maru never enjoyed concealing the whole truth about the lake. As for their close friends, it wasn’t very necessary... the trio were merely relieved it was over.

Demetrius didn’t exactly absorb the information until he saw Jade the next morning. Most of the family’s mornings were spent grabbing food and getting out, but Robin wanted to make a good impression for the very special guest. The father arrived to the kitchen, newspaper in hand, when he noticed everyone eating freshly cooked breakfast at the dining table. Robin, Maru, and Jade were all devouring their sausage, egg, and cheese filled meals, while Sebastian seemed content with some coffee and toast. There were four chairs and four people at the table, and yet... a seat remained open for Demetrius.

Eugh. Jade and Sebastian were sharing a chair, that’s why. The father of the household unintentionally focused on them as he sat down. Robin, through a full mouth, eagerly told her husband what there was for him to eat. He gathered his food and settled, mind focused on reading the mood of the room more so than eating.

It was strange. Everyone seemed happy, which was fine, but... he never really saw Sebastian smile, let alone actually pay him no mind. The raven-hair didn’t even realize Demetrius joined them until Jade greeted him with a gentle, “good morning!”

“... Good morning,” replied Demetrius in equal surprise and sincerity. “How did you sleep?” he kindly asked. Demetrius couldn’t lie to himself; he hated the idea of a guest staying the night with one of his kids, even if it was the troublemaking one. Sebastian’s two outbursts and Jade’s desperate attempt to get him to understand his step-son kept his mouth shut, though. Sebastian was an adult, and he did respect the house rules for the most part... plus, Jade was lovely; she seemed to adore everyone in the family. He’d swallow his pride for this one.

“I slept like a rock--” Jade interrupted herself with a laugh. “A log. I slept like a log.” She grinned over to Robin, who wiped an imaginary tear from her own cheek.

The carpenter couldn’t have been more proud. “You’re learning so fast, hon,” she wistfully remarked. Sebastian rolled his eyes and nudged Jade with a smirk, causing her to bump him back.

Demetrius merely smiled and slowly pecked away at his food while unfolding his newspaper. “That’s good. Maru said you were having an unfortunate day.”
“Yeah! I’m a lot better. It’s especially thanks to her and Seb for that,” Jade went, giving a kind smile to Maru, then endearingly resting her head against Sebastian. He cast one of his arms over her shoulders, securing their contact with each other. “I know both of you were away, but I’d still like to thank you for treating me so well. I don’t get to have breakfast with a family often at all, so this is really nice.”

“Aww, hon! You’re always welcome to stay here. I like the whole family being together,” Robin mused, stabbing the last morsels on her plate with a fork. “I’m sure Sebby enjoys you staying, too.” She exchanged a devious grin to Sebastian, who blushed and averted his eyes. Maru made an awkward cough while she was eating.

“Mother, don’t ruin this,” he calmly pleaded.


“Of course not,” Sebastian answered as a matter of fact. He finished drinking his coffee and pushed his empty plate away. Jade was surprised to hear his comeback, mainly because it... wasn’t a comeback? He normally would have denied speaking about anything romantic with Robin, so maybe he wasn’t in the mood. Either way, Jade was absolutely moved.

“Aww, Seb,” she quietly swooned, leaning into him more.

Robin chuckled more from their interactions. “Both of you are adorable. I hope Sebby was a good host!”

“He was,” the young farmer happily replied. Maru choked on a piece of food and then coughed, taking a huge gulp of orange juice after. “Ah, Maru, you okay?”

“H-huh? What?” Maru pushed up her glasses to get a better look at Jade. “I-I... Yeah, just. Got distracted while trying to figure out a scientific formula in my head.”

Demetrius perked up from Maru’s mention. “Oh? What kind, dear?”

“Uh... Biology.” Her face was red. Everyone except Demetrius noticed her strange behavior, but none of them were really sure why she was acting as such.

Meanwhile, Demetrius excitedly straightened his posture at the mention of biology. “Biology!” He boomed in repetition. His true calling! “Tell me, Maru! What is the formula? I am sure I can help.”

“U-um...”

Robin looked as concerned as she was entertained. “You okay, sweetie? You look a little hot.”

Jade nodded in agreement. “Hopefully you’re not getting sick... The storm was pretty bad yesterday,” she solemnly added.

“I-I’m fine! Really!” Maru emitted laughter, though no one-- except again, Demetrius-- believed it. “Oh, Jade! Your clothes are washed. L-let me go get them!” she exclaimed. Instantly, Maru got up from the table and marched off at a quick pace.

“What’s up with her?” Sebastian wondered aloud. Jade exchanged glances with him and shrugged.

“Hopefully she is not overworking herself,” Demetrius muttered with a sigh. “She has been a little stressed lately with the clinic. It is the busy season, you know.”
Jade hummed in thought. “Yeah, I hope she’s doing well too... Oh! Darn, I can’t believe I forgot about my own work for a moment... I should really get to the farm. I have lots of cute faces to feed.” She stood up from her side of the chair and stretched with another yawn.

“Want me to take you home?” offered Sebastian. He didn’t appear as concerned with whatever her answer was, though Jade didn’t want to assume. Even though the tension was resolved, maybe it was too soon to spend time apart.

“I’d love that,” she cheerfully replied. The rest of their conversation involved day plans, sassy banter, and the usual schemes for torturing Sam. The steady couple cleaned up the kitchen together and then parted ways just long enough for them to get ready for the day. Sebastian disappeared to the reaches of his room, while Jade located the frazzled Maru and obtained her dry clothes.

Maru seemed to have calmed down, but Jade decided not to directly confront her about her earlier behavior. If she was faring well, that was what mattered. The young farmer started for the nearest bathroom to change her clothes, but Maru sheepishly called out for her just as she was leaving. “H-hey. Jade?”

“Hm?” She turned to face the nervous Maru.

“Uh...” Maru stepped forward and reached out to touch Jade’s shoulder. With that, she took a deep breath: “Please take care of my half-brother.” She said it with a wobbling voice, as if she were giving away her own child.

Jade’s face blanked. “Hah...” She turned her head back to see if anyone was there, then back to Maru. “...Okay?”

Maru vigorously nodded. “Thank you.”

The young farmer chuckled, hugging the clothes to herself. “Maru, is there something you want to talk about?” she asked in a teasing tone.

“Wh-what? No. No, just.” Maru nervously exhaled. “Whew. I just haven’t seen someone so... um... c-close... to Sebastian. You’re special.”

Jade’s chuckle broke into full-blown laughter. “Thank you, but I feel like I’m missing something here!” She grinned, noticing Maru’s flushed face again.

“It’s okay. You... you don’t have to explain.” The gadgeteer balled up one of her fists and held it close to her heart, eyes sparkling. “If there’s anything I learned as a kid, it’s that... Sebastian is very fragile. I hope you were gentle with him.”

“Aww, thanks for your concern. It was pretty intense at first, but I think we settled everything pretty well,” Jade beamed with confidence. Maru probably overheard their argument the previous night... poor thing! The young farmer was more than happy for Sebastian’s half-sister to be so caring, even though they weren’t on the best of terms.

Maru stared, speechless, then gathered herself with another heavy breath. “Th...That’s... Wow, um, that’s... good.”

“Yeah! I have the feeling we’ll get even better as time goes on, too. Hehe, he said he loved me after all that,” Jade continued, blushing lightly. “I mean, I know I loved him before, but now... I can hardly describe how I feel!” She giggled to herself.

Maru choked on her own spit and pounded her chest in a cough. “Alright! I’m just! Gonna stop you
there, before I ask questions I regret.” She started gesturing Jade out of the room; Maru’s face was even redder than before.

Jade raised one of her eyebrows at Maru’s behavior, but simply shrugged and started walking again. “You don’t have to be embarrassed! I’m really happy you care. I hope you have a wonderful- whoa, hey!” Jade huffed from being pushed out of the room.

“Bye!!” the younger one desperately yelled. With that, she was pushed out of the room, Maru walking out and hastily heading towards her own room.

Maru was acting so weird... Jade decided to walk the other way, searching for the bathroom to change her clothes. What was up with her, anyway?

... oh. OH.

Oh no.

Jade briefly froze in realization. “Oh... Oh, no! No, no, uh!! Maru! Wait! Wait!!” Jade suddenly took off in the opposite direction, going towards Maru.

The young gadgeteer sped up. “It’s okay!!! You don’t have to tell me anything else!!” she shouted, covering her ears with her hands. The poor girl was in a fever.

“No, you don’t get it! It was a misunderstan-

“I get it!!! I promise!!!” responded Maru from the other end of the house. “I trust your feelings!!!”

Jade tried to chase after her, but the door to her room shut and locked. “Maruuuu!” the farmer desperately called, jiggling the door handle and knocking. “Maru, I meant something else!! Maruuu!”

Instead of a reply, a power drill started up. It gradually grew louder until it was apparent that no one could be heard from the other side of the door. Jade clasped her face with both of her hands, face now as red as Maru’s.

Sebastian approached Jade in his usual attire, noticing she had collapsed at Maru’s door in shock. The young farmer continuously whined the gadgeteer’s name, a traumatized expression clouding her focus. He glanced at her, then at the door, then back at her. “... Okay, what was all that yelling about?”

Jade didn’t reply, instead gesturing with her hand for him to approach. Sebastian obediently leaned down to Jade’s eye level, then turned his head to the side to listen. She whispered something in his ear... His eyes widened.

“... Whoa. Really?” Sebastian asked, forming a grin.

Jade solemnly nodded.

“Holy shit.” Sebastian erupted into devious giggles, covering his mouth with a hand as he did so. “That’s... interesting.”

“... I don’t like that look on your face,” Jade mumbled, squinting. “There’s... something evil about it.”

“Me? Evil?” He laughed rather confidently. Jade was actually intimidated, even though his laughter was irresistibly cute. “Don’t be ridiculous!”
“What are you planning?” Jade glared at him, crossing her arms.

“Ah, don’t worry about it~” He gave his girlfriend a kiss on the cheek, mischievous grin ever so present. “After all, WE’RE STILL NEW AT THIS!” He yelled into the door, cupping his hands around his mouth. “I KNOW IT’S HARD!”

The drilling became even louder from within the bedroom, making Sebastian to cackle himself to tears. Jade lightly hit his arm, but he was unphased, laughing to the point that he collapsed beside her.

“Holy Yoba... I’m gonna have so much fun with this. Wh... What did you... even, heh, tell her?” He calmed down enough to wipe his eyes, still heaving a few chuckles.

Jade blushed furiously and turned away from him. “I’m not falling for this scheme of yours!” she claimed, lips trembling as she tried her best to not smile back.

Sebastian was going to answer, but he just started laughing until he could hardly breathe. Robin glanced down the hall to see what all the commotion was, then endearingly smiled. She let them be; it’s been so long since she’s seen her Sebby in such a good mood.

After a minute, the raven-haired man finally settled down. “Hehe, aww, don’t give me that grumpy face,” he lightheartedly teased Jade. She shoved him to the side and stood up with still a red face.

“Y-you’re horrible!” she weakly stammered. She knew she loved his trollish side, but she would never admit it to his already towering ego. Sebastian stood up after her, extremely aware and entertained by the fact. “I need to get dressed before we leave. Behave!” she stressed. Her face dropped when she saw he was trying really, really hard to not reply with another joke.

“You make this so easy, Jade,” he snorted, grinning. “For you, though, I will be good.” Such effort was rewarded with a false kick to his leg before she stomped off.

When all was said and done, Jade and Sebastian bid farewell to Robin and Demetrius, then set out for the farm. Jade rode the bike so often that getting to her farm was a breeze, no matter the distance. Unlike the previous day, the sky shone a brilliant blue and not a cloud was in sight. It was as if the storm was a dream-- or, well, a nightmare. Due to her pondering, Jade felt surprised when she and Sebastian arrived to her farm already. Everything was how she left it, so she supposed it was time to continue her farming life.

Jade got off the motorcycle while Sebastian remained, tiredly looking at the farm house. “Guess I should get to work too,” he sighed. “I haven’t been working as much as I should.”

“Yes, go work!” Jade replied, shooing him with her hands. “... Heh, I still feel the need to apologize,” she ended up murmuring.

“You don’t,” simply answered the raven-hair.

“Well... Still. I think I’m going to stay out of trouble for a little while. Saloon tonight?”

Sebastian thought for a moment, and then nodded. “Yeah, that sounds fine. I’ll see you tonight, then.”

“Good. You take care of yourself, too,” Jade told him with a smile. She did feel somewhat guilty since they’ve spent so much time together. Sebastian really needed an evening to himself...

“I’ll get to it eventually,” he said back with an equally cheery expression. Sebastian waved a
goodbye to her, Jade doing the same as she started to walk back to her house. “... Wait. Jade,” he called, narrowing his eyes at her for some reason.

“Huh?” Jade turned to look at him.

“Come here,” he started. “There’s something in your hair.”

“What? Really?” Jade reached back and felt for whatever was in her hair while walking towards him. Her efforts were in vain, since she had so much hair and a very little idea of where they were.

Sebastian snorted and reached for her when she was close enough, calmly urging her to turn around so he could get whatever it was. “Your hair is the most constructed mess,” he joked. “Oh. Here it is.” He took out a thin glittering object from the abyss of her hair, its shape similar to a plastic guitar pick. Its color was a bright green and it felt smooth to the touch, but whatever it was had been lost to Sebastian. “Why was this in your hair?” he asked, confused.

Jade turned around to see the object in question, leaning in to examine it in detail. “What is that?” she pondered aloud, then taking the object to get a better feel. Then her eyes shot open in surprise. “Oh. This is... this is a scale. From the giant fish I told you about.”

“... Really?”

“Yeah. Look at the size of this thing,” she said, showcasing the scale. “How does something that big live in that lake? I mean, it’s an okay sized lake, but...”

Sebastian shrugged. “Maybe you should do some research on it. There’s bound to be some information about local fish in the library,” he suggested. “Well... If anyone knows that fish exists. I sure as hell have never heard about it.”

“Huh... I guess I’ll see.” She pecked him on the cheek and grinned. “Alright, get lost!”

“Eugh, with pleasure.” He smiled back and waved to her again. This time he really did drive away, while Jade returned to her house, scale in hand.

Research wasn’t such a bad idea, but where to start...?

--

Friday nights always brought an extremely full saloon, making Gus, the bartender, extremely happy, while everyone else enjoyed their time to drink, eat, and socialize. Jade was often the last of the squad to arrive, not only because of the distance, but because she hadn’t participated in a proper saloon night in a while. Getting together with Sebastian and taking a sick day seemed more important at the time.

At last, Abigail and Sam got to join Sebastian and Jade for their highly coveted saloon night. When the young farmer entered, Abigail was already relaxing on the couch while the boys played an unevenly matched game of pool. She watched them all, smiling, then gave a single wave of greeting. “The gang’s here! At last!” she beamed.

“Hey!” Abigail piped up excitedly. “It’s good to see you, Jade! I feel like I haven’t seen you in ages.” The novice adventurer hopped out of her seat and trotted over to her dear friend eagerly, the two then exchanging a friendly hug. “How are you~?”

Sebastian brought his focus to Jade while he shot the cue ball for his turn, but his aim failed in accuracy. Sam watched the horrible move with a gasp, then shouted in glee. “HA! What was that,
“What?” Sebastian looked back at the pool table, his expression going flat. “... I want a redo.”

“No! This is my time to shine!” Sam excitedly giggled to himself and readied for his turn.

Jade chuckled as she watched them, passing a wave to them both. “I’m doing alright, Abby. I’m happy we get a night again.”

“I’m not!” Sebastian huffed. “You’re too distracting. Leave forever.”

Jade approached to see how their game was, then laughed. “Look, Seb. It’s not my fault I’m so beautiful. Just ask Sam. Sam, is it my fault?” she asked the blond who giggled furiously while making his move in the game. After he completed it, he confidently crossed his arms and turned back to Jade.

“Normally? Yes. But, whew, see Sebastian in his LARPing gear and not even I can contain myself. He’s definitely the more distracting one.”

“For the last time, it’s not-- YOU have costumes too, asshole.” Sebastian glared at the two, then pretended they didn’t exist while he planned his next move. While doing so, he was grumbling something unintelligible under his breath. Jade went into a fit of chuckles after seeing him so worked up.

Abigail ushered Jade over for an arcade game while the guys argued and joked with each other. So far, the night was peaceful and everyone was having fun. The atmosphere was full of warm air and the sounds of clinking glass and dishes. People excitedly conversed, the smell of beer and hot food wafting in the saloon.

For a while, Jade really enjoyed herself. After her life being derailed for just a moment, she felt like she was finally on track... but, something kept nagging her in the back of her mind. How was Alex doing? She hadn’t heard of him in a few days... was it alright that she didn’t? Sebastian and Alex were different, so she couldn’t treat them the same... was giving him space the best decision? Her mind weighed heavily with serious thoughts about her brother in spirit.

Jade had enough playing with Abigail and she didn’t feel like watching the guys anymore. With minimal thoughts, she ventured over to the nearest window and peered outside. There was the blackness of night, a view with a shoddy picket fence and the darkened figure of Alex. The athlete in question would always be outside during the night to spend some time with his dog, Dusty. Even though he was right there, she felt so far away. She wanted to be there to comfort him.

Sam strode up to her and effortlessly threw an arm around her. “Whatcha thinking about, Papa?”

“Oh...” Jade watched Alex, then turned her head away in embarrassment when she realized she was staring. “I... Maybe it’s not a good idea to talk about,” she murmured. Sam was sort of part of the problem.

“Hm...” Sam glanced over to Alex, then sighed with a smile. “I see what this is. Don’t worry!” The ecstatic blond’s smile transformed into a grin. “There will be a happy ending. I have some tricks up my sleeve, you know.”

“Well, can one of those tricks have me be best siblings with Alex? I miss him,” she mumbled with a frown.

Sebastian walked over to them right after her last three words were ushered, as if he was summoned
by magic. “Hey, what are we talking about?” he asked in a louder-than-usual voice, already noticing Alex through the window.

Sam burst into laughter and playfully shoved Jade over to her boyfriend. “Just talking about how you two hardly talk about your relationship! Talk about boring~”

“Hey!” The couple retorted at the same time.

“It’s none of people’s damn business,” Sebastian grumbled.

“Yeah! Plus, there’s no need. I always hated seeing couples randomly making out on the street,” grunted Jade. “Oh, wait. Seb, remember our rule about public affection?”

Sebastian’s face blanked as he tried to think, then mischievously grinned. “It’s fine if it’s in front of Sam?” he asked for confirmation.

“No!” shouted Sam.

“Come here, boyfriend,” Jade swooned, dramatically leaning back while having her arms around his neck.

“Noo!” the blond protested again.

Sebastian confidently held her with one arm and caressed the side of her face with his free hand. “Anything for you, girlfriend,” he replied with equal drama.

“Nooooo!”

The couple brought their faces close together with exaggerated kissing faces. Sam made a high pitched screech and threw his arms up in defeat, hastily leaving the game room. Jade and Sebastian couldn’t hold their ridiculous expressions any longer, so they broke out into quiet laughter. The raven-hair gently helped Jade stand straight and looked towards the direction Sam went. “Making life hell for two people in one day. This is the best day of my life,” he excitedly muttered.

“You know, at first I didn’t approve of your evil agenda,” Jade started, scratching her chin in thought. “But now I think I might have to reconsider.”

“Oh? Do I sense a partner in crime?”

“You’ve used me both times today so I’d have to say yes,” Jade chuckled. After some seconds of pondering, she crossed her arms. “Well. Not until you tell Maru the truth.”

“The truth about...?”

“You know what!” Jade quickly answered, blushing. “She’s horrified!”

Sebastian cackled again. “Oh, she’s fine. Maru’s smart; she’ll figure out that I was just pulling her leg.”

“Are you sure?” Jade huffed.

“Well, yeah. Like we’d actually do it in my room...” Sebastian glanced to his right as he continued his train of thought. “The whole room is so dim and depressing that I can only stay in the room for so long... You know how long I’ve been saving up to get out of there? There’s also just a basement smell you cannot get rid of, it’s atrocious. And the bed is tiny and cramped, so if we were being logical about this, yours would be way better~” He suddenly stopped himself, his amused face
instantly fading into shock and embarrassment. “... Uh...”

“Sebastian!” Jade yelled with a solid red face.

“I didn’t mean it that way!” he claimed, flushing just as hard. While he tried his best, he just couldn’t bring himself to look at her. The unfortunate Sebastian covered his face with his hands and collapsed onto a nearby couch, pondering about how this was the worst day of his life. This was why he wasn’t talkative.

It took Jade a brief moment to calm down, but she still found amusement in his explanation. Of course she knew he didn’t mean to come across in a brash manner, but that didn’t mean she wouldn’t give him hell for it. “Then what way did you mean it?” she asked with fake accusation.

“... You know... Logistics...” He weakly muttered.

“Logistics? Well, logically, you’ve had to have thought about this a lot to logically explain the logistics of the state of your room. With logic.”

“Fine, I’ll go tell Maru it was a joke,” Sebastian groaned, lifting his head to only bump it against the back wall. “Please, Yoba, drop this topic for eternity...”

Jade laughed for good reason. “That’s the taste of sweet, sweet karma,” she mused.

Abigail walked up to them, appearing slightly irritated. “Yo, are we getting food? And where did Sam go?”

The couple ceased their banter to bring attention back to Abigail and Sam. Sam, in his dramatic episode, actually went to the bar to go order some food for the four of them. He shortly returned with a bountiful pan of pizza; the whole squad then ate and rejoiced for a wonderful night spent.

After several conversations about their lives, various interests, and a plethora of inside jokes, the four parted their own ways. Sebastian and Abigail headed up north, while Jade and Sam walked together up until they reached his house. Jade returned to her house, cautious of her surroundings but ecstatic. She was happy she got to spend time with some of her closest friends, especially after the previous day.

Jade felt satisfied to conclude the night on such a positive note.

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter was full of some heavy stuff, so here's something to even the load! I had a ton of fun with this and with shenanigans, and hopefully showed some character development as a result. There may be tidbits of Plot Progression that'll be more obvious later on.

I think the biggest thing this chapter showed me is that I love Maru and I think she's precious
Legendary

Chapter Summary

Jade is alone for the day and decides to do a little bit of research on the fish of the valley.

SEBASTIAN: Hey

SEBASTIAN: Mom’s birthday is tomorrow, so Demetrius is dragging the family to the city today for some ingenious 2-day plan he has

SEBASTIAN: I don’t know what it is to be honest. I wasn’t paying attention to the multi-paged graph, or whatever he was lecturing about. He had a laser pointer and everything

SEBASTIAN: Something about stimulating family bonding by .02% and fluctuating mood levels or literally anything a normal person wouldn’t say.

SEBASTIAN: And this happens.

SEBASTIAN: Every.

SEBASTIAN: Year.

SEBASTIAN: Anyways, I’ll be gone all day.

SEBASTIAN: We can’t really keep in contact, so I didn’t want to worry you.

Aww... Jade didn’t like walking up to her computer to see such messages. She was done with all the tiring farm work and planned to spend a low energy day, but without Sebastian, she was left wondering where to turn after all was said and done. Her social obligations were filled from saloon night, so she didn’t exactly feel like hanging out with anyone else, except for the still absent Alex. The young farmer supposed she needed a day alone, too.

JADE: aww!! am i too late

SEBASTIAN: Nah we’re waiting for Mom to finish up work

SEBASTIAN: It’ll be a day (and night, Yoba help) of family “fun”. Yay

JADE: i can read the excitement in your text

JADE: i’m sure your mom will be super happy you are taking part though

SEBASTIAN: She’d probably kill me if I didn’t.
JADE: we both know you’re a mama’s boy. embrace it

SEBASTIAN: When I’m cold and dead

JADE: you mean you’re not???

SEBASTIAN: Funny

JADE: lmao

JADE: well i hope you have a good day regardless of step-dad’s intricate graphs. i’ll miss you!

SEBASTIAN: Thanks. I’ll survive somehow

SEBASTIAN: I hate that I forgot about this, because I actually had plans for today.

JADE: plans?? your plans to do nothing?

SEBASTIAN: You know

SEBASTIAN: There are very few chances I get to do whatever I want

SEBASTIAN: Let me choose to do nothing if I so please

JADE: so i was right

SEBASTIAN: That’s not the point

SEBASTIAN: The point is

SEBASTIAN: My plans are ruined

Jade giggled from their excessive banter. While Sebastian certainly had his quarrels with Maru and constant fights with Demetrius, the three of them put their differences aside to please Robin. She noticed that Sebastian has started to mellow out as well; their current conversation was the biggest rant he had in weeks, and it was being more dramatic than anything. Much smaller instances used to set him off and stress him out, causing him to go on tirades that Jade always urged him into giving. She was glad that she could be a proper soundboard for his frustration, especially since it seemed to help him a lot. Her mind kept wandering to the previous day, when he laughed so many times. He deserved to be happy.

JADE: what ever shall we do?????

SEBASTIAN: lol

SEBASTIAN: I’m afraid it’s too late for me to make a plan B. Guess doing nothing has been rescheduled.
SEBASTIAN: So what’s going on for you today?

JADE: just got done with all my farming etc

JADE: i need to go to the library and look up that big ass fish

JADE: i was thinking of asking willy since he’s The Fishing Guy but... well you know. losing the fishing pole. i kinda feel like i can’t

SEBASTIAN: That’s understandable. Have you even been in the mood to fish?

JADE: no, but it was one big way i made money... i think for now i’m going to double up my foraging and maybe sell some stuff online.

JADE: speaking of, i also ran out of art supplies at my house so i’m probably going back to the community center today

JADE: i’ve been making a lot of nice things in my off time!! but they’re surprises.

SEBASTIAN: Curses

JADE: oh, crap. wait. what should i get your mom for her birthday???

SEBASTIAN: Honestly?

SEBASTIAN: Can you make spaghetti

JADE: yeah but i’ve given that to her before ):

SEBASTIAN: It doesn’t matter. You don’t understand how much she loves spaghetti

SEBASTIAN: You should give her some tomorrow if you have the chance, she would really appreciate it

JADE: aww.. sure, then! thank u!

SEBASTIAN: WTF

JADE: what happen

SEBASTIAN: EVERYONE JUST WALTZED INTO MY ROOM LIKE IT’S A PUBLIC DANCE FLOOR

SEBASTIAN: BRB

Jade could only imagine the hilarity that was happening. Lots of declarations about private space and lots of screaming, probably. Sebastian didn’t answer again until a solid five minutes later.
SEBASTIAN: Okay so APPARENTLY it’s time to leave now.

JADE: omfg

JADE: lmao, have a good day! be safe!

SEBASTIAN: Thanks. You too!

And then he signed off. Jade sighed wistfully, happy to have received her interaction with Sebastian for the day, but also saddened that the carpenter shop would be empty if she went to visit. She was sure everything would go well; the family seemed closer as of late.

Time for her own chores, then. After toting her backpack full of supplies, Jade decided to travel towards the library first, which hopefully had books about local fauna in the valley. She hadn’t given the place a chance to begin with, since she was never that much of a reader. Some comics here and there and a few fiction books, but she only really started reading more when Sebastian had suggestions.

The young farmer passed hellos as she walked by several people in town, though she wasn’t in the state of mind to warrant chatting with anybody. Feelings were mutual on the other end, it seemed; all the villagers were busy with their own endeavors. For some reason, she was just feeling too... sluggish. Something weighed on her mind, but she didn’t know what. At least it didn’t take too long to locate and arrive at the museum/library hybrid.

While the outdoors were breezy and chilly, the indoor museum was pleasantly warm. She glanced her surroundings, noticing the building owner, Gunther, at the front desk. Looking to the right, there contained a surprising amount of people in the library section. Abigail searched in a book section about adventuring, Penny sat at one of the tables with her students, Vincent and Jas, while a tall, handsome fellow-- Elliott, if she remembered right-- reclined near the inner-edge of the bookshelves. Quite a concentration of villagers for something as low-maintenance as a library, but there wasn’t anything productive to do in town. It made sense.

Luckily, no one seemed to notice Jade was there, so she began her mission to search for informational books. There were some about crops, the mines, various monsters... Ah, there it was. In the far back end of the library, she uncovered a dusty blue tome that contained all the information needed for fish species. The library seemed a little full, so she ended up checking the book out and leaving. Community center next; she was sure the Junimos didn’t mind her taking some space for a little while.

What a quiet day... Jade felt like she hadn’t said a word to anyone, not including her farm animals. Truth be told, she did feel a little lonely... she still had work to do, however. Silently, she traveled to the community center by passing a bridge behind Penny’s trailer, then ascended stairs near Pierre’s shop. The community center, though appearing disheveled and unloved, welcomed her with open arms. She entered the building and briefly examined the area, passing a wave to the Junimo hut despite not being able to see any of them. Without skipping a beat, she walked to the arts and crafts room and settled in one of the comfortable chairs.

Being in the abandoned building, she at least felt more at home with the Junimos hiding around. She stretched her arms and legs, heartily yawned, then plopped the fishing encyclopedia in her lap to start
Several minutes passed... there were an awful lot of fish in or near the valley. She skipped through waves of pages to find a section about lake fish. She started feeling woozy for some reason. Each passing picture of a fish, each depiction of the water... she started feeling a little cold. Several more minutes passed. There was nothing here.

No fish was as large as what she saw, nor any of them the same color. There was a largemouth bass, which often had a green color, but there was no way it could grow to terrifying proportions. Sighing, Jade shuffled around her backpack to bring out the scale she found. Large, glittering, deep green. For some reason, the scale was painful to look at, but this was all the physical evidence she had. Its information needed to be here somewhere.

She set the scale down to a small table beside her, ushering a determined grumble as she continued to flip through pages in the book. After some more minutes of ignoring her sickness while searching, she heard some squeaking. Junimos?

They started appearing around her, ushering sweet little greetings in their native tongues and bouncing around. Several of them crowded around the table with the scale, and one even tried to reach for it.

“What do you want with this?” Jade asked, picking the scale up again. “Do you know the fish this belongs to?”

Nearly all of them bounced and squeaked rapidly, showing their affirmation. It seemed like they really wanted it.

“Um... Okay,” she simply replied, giving it to them. The scale probably had more use to them anyway, and she had her caustic memories to go by. Nearly all the Junimos bounced and pattered out of the room to presumably store their new item, while Jade begrudgingly returned to this behemoth of a book.

Wait.

The Junimos wouldn’t just want a scale... and this fish was abnormal, it was huge, terrifying, and... mythical. Instantly, the young farmer flipped to a section about rumors, myths, and legends involving aquatic life. There were tales of sinking ships from overgrown sharks, mysterious jellyfish that looked shockingly similar to the Moonlight jellies, merpeople, winter-bound aquatic life with teeth as long and sharp as icicles, and more. Then, she saw it. On one page, there told a story about a lake fish so gigantic to be seen from afar, yet so elusive to never be spotted up close. When fishermen were lucky enough to get it to bite, they were even luckier if their fishing pole survived its pure power. Few people have seen the fish, and even fewer have had close encounters with it. There was even a line in the book about how no one survived a close encounter at all. Heh, there was a first time for everything.

Rather than actual photographs like many of the fish entries had, this fish was just a drawing. It appeared long, bulky, and as much horror as there could be in a cartoonishly green fish. It had a white underbelly and yellow, beady eyes. Its most striking feature to her was its gigantic, sharp teeth. Sightings were the most common on rainy Spring days, but there was no mistake. This was the fish she saw.

Its name was none other than The Legend - the king of all fish, one of the oldest and most mysterious
species ever documented in Stardew Valley... And to think, Jade actually saw the creature with her own two eyes. Realization struck her face as she recalled one of the Junimos’ requirements for her. She dug around in her backpack once more and brought out those same papers with scribblings on her goals.

She was right after all. One of the pages, with a drawing of a green fish, requested her to ‘gain the respect of the lake god’. Well, she was alive, so maybe that was respect enough. Why she was, however, she had absolutely no clue. With the book’s descriptions about such an important fish, she really could have been gone, just like that... Jade stopped breathing for a brief moment, then gasped for air. She really wasn’t feeling well.

Quickly, she closed the book. That was enough for the day. Jade spent a moment to return to reality before forcing herself to stand up. She forgot to take any supplies she needed, but her health was more of a concern. The last thing she wanted to do was to collapse, especially while Sebastian was gone. He was supposed to have a forced fun family day; he couldn’t go back to her as a mess.

Jade allowed herself a lot of patience as she left the arts and crafts room and went back to the main lobby area. When she arrived, the right half of the room appeared refurbished and fixed, complete with an anchor decoration, some posters, and a huge, clean fish tank. There were three stars in the mantle above the fireplace, too. If she remembered right, she only had three more of their tasks to fix. Junimos hopped around excitedly as she entered and examined the newly refurbished area. Because of how she was feeling, she gave them only a few moments of her time before heading out the door. On normal circumstances, she would have been very excited, but... she was just... tired. Many of the little ones followed her until she left the establishment.

While avoiding villager eye contact and any unwanted discussions, she finally went back home. Her trip was very slow, since she felt like she couldn’t walk very fast, but the less she thought about anything, the better she began to feel. Just get to the house, she continued to tell herself, keeping her mind off of being alone, off of the fish. Her chest felt less pressure and she could properly breathe out of her nose. Maybe it was a little chilly, but she didn’t think about it. She just needed to get home.

The exhausted farmer arrived just as the sky was reddening. A gift from the Junimos appeared on the doorstep, though it wasn’t wrapped in a gift this time: it was a very sturdy and fancy fishing pole, surprisingly better looking than the brand new one she bought. As much as she appreciated the kind creatures’ gestures, she couldn’t bear to look at a fishing pole for a while. She leaned it against a wall just through the door.

Her next actions involved checking her farm’s perimeter to ensure its safety, feeding the cat and herself, and then taking a well deserved shower to celebrate a somewhat productive day. Afterwards, Jade dressed into her coziest (and most hideous) pajamas, ready to collapse in bed at the fragile time of 9 PM. Of course there was a knock at the door right as she plopped into bed.

“Whaaaaaat?” lazily grumbled Jade. The whiny response incited an even louder and more rapid knock. “Ugh! Fine!” She grumbled, rolling out of bed and shuffling over to the front door.

Sebastian had his arms crossed, providing her a motherly glare. “So cranky,” he mumbled.

“Seb!” Jade gasped, releasing her tired demeanor to give him a hug. “Welcome back!” she eagerly replied, taking no hesitation to give him a simple kiss. He smiled and hugged her back with one arm.

“Hey,” he replied with cheer, albeit somewhat tiredly.
“How was the trip?” she asked.

“It was fine... We did a lot of exploring and shopping. Mom got a ton of new stuff, her favorite being a deluxe chainsaw that Demetrius won’t let her use until tomorrow. She was seriously about to go in the black of the night, revving that thing around,” Sebastian answered with a smirk. “How about your day?”

Jade wasn’t really sure how to answer. She wasn’t horrible, but she couldn’t exactly lie to him and say it was a good day, either. It was a forgettable day, aside from seeing the Junimos and realizing just how fragile her life was. “It was alright. Truth be told, I’m not in the mood to talk about it... Later, maybe?”

He replied with an understanding nod.

She sighed in relief. Good answer. “After I did all my errands, I made dinner and was going to sleep early.”

“Oh, sorry. Was I disturbing you?”

“Never!” the young farmer retorted in an instant. “Oooh, what do you have there?” she then asked; Sebastian held a solid shopping bag that was slightly obscured by his back.

“Ah. Well...” He brought the bag forward, then opened it enough to dig around inside. “I actually got you something while I was in the city.”

Aww, a present? Sebastian was already the best boyfriend! Did he have to prove himself even more? Jade excitedly watched him bring out the gift in question-- oh! It was a present box slightly bigger than his hand, though it was very slim and fancy looking. The box itself was blue with a purple bow wrapped around it.

“It’s not in its packaging or anything since... well, you’ll see.” He offered the present to her and turned his head away. “Here, open it,” he quietly muttered.

Jade gently received the present and sprouted a grin. “Aww... you really didn’t have to give me anything!”

He instinctively flushed. “Just... open it.”

“Okay, okay.” Jade delicately pulled the present’s bow off, then lifted its cover. Her expression blanked upon seeing the gift.

A phone. Not just a phone, but a fancy phone- a touch screen phone as big if not bigger than her own hand, slim design, and... This looked... expensive.

“... I know what you’re going to say,” he sighed; he had repeated the potential conversation in his head several times. “Be quiet for a moment, and I’ll tell you why I want you to have this.”

So be it. Jade was still processing how to feel... not only was this expensive, but he knew she didn’t like phones.

“I know you’ve expressed distaste towards mobile stuff. All of that is completely your business, and
I’m sorry if this counts as stepping on your toes… admittedly, this might be more of a gift for me than for you.” Sebastian frowned with uncertainty, gazing off the corner of his eye as he tried to continue. “So I guess… sorry for being a selfish ass?”

Jade would have told him he wasn’t being a selfish ass, but he was still trying to form his sentences at the moment. She waited for him to continue his explanation.

“There have been quite a few situations where you needed a phone and didn’t have one, and… you go exploring a lot, into the mines, et cetera… Cell service usually works in those places, surprisingly. At least, where I’ve gone.” He lowered his head, completely embarrassed. He felt like an overbearing parent, and Yoba knew he was aware of what that was like. “I like to think I’m very independent… I like to be alone and I’ve had my fair share of close calls. I know you value your independence as well, so I really don’t want to seem like I’m telling you how to live your life…”

“Seb, where are you going with this?” Jade chuckled. It seemed like he was about to go off with a tangent.

The laugh, though alleviating, didn’t remove Sebastian’s anxiousness. “Uh… I’ve just been thinking, is all. I worry about you a lot, but you know… emotions were really high a few days ago, and I may have seemed like I didn’t want you to be adventurous. It can be hard to get my point across in those situations…” He exhaled, able to finally get to the point: “Basically, you should feel free to do whatever with your time. Explore, kick monster ass, and anything else you feel you can do… But, be safe, and don’t ever be afraid to ask for help. Just call, even. We’re loners, but that doesn’t mean we have to be lonely. You’ve said that yourself.”

“Aww... Seb...” Jade held back tears for his sake. Damn him for being so sweet... her eyes dropped back to look at the phone. Maybe she didn’t hate phones, if it was for a good reason, like safety. It’s been so long since she owned one, too... only paranoia kept her from getting another mobile device.

“I, uh... I put my number and some other ones you may like. Sam and Abby, resources around town. Maru put hers and Penny’s numbers in there too... oh, and that number you texted a while ago. I’m assuming it’s Alex, since I pretty much just listed everyone else.”

“Wow... I honestly don’t know what to say. This is... wow. Seb, that’s possibly the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me. I promise, I’ll keep this with me at all times,” the young farmer replied with a squeaky, emotional voice. She was overwhelmed with joy from such a sweet gesture... A sweet... expensive... gestu-- she just couldn’t get over how expensive this looked. “Sebastian.” Her voice became sharp, serious.

“What?” he asked, staring at her in surprise. He didn’t like the full name use.

“How much did this cost?”

“... Don’t worry about it,” he huffed defensively.

“Seb!! This phone looks so damn pricey! I don’t know how I can ever repay this!” she shouted in desperation. Her face was flushed, partly from being flustered and partly from being baffled. The reality set in that the gesture was too sweet! It would take ages to get a gift to match the price! What could she even sell to rack up enough gold?!

“Hey. You’re not paying anything,” he snapped back. “I... I did this because I wanted to, and I had a feeling you would get a good use out of it. I had some money lying around, anyway...”
“How do you just have money lying around? I thought you were saving up! I—” She suddenly stopped. He didn’t use that money, did he?

Sebastian kept his focus on her. “Yeah, I was saving up... you know, to move out of the valley. But...” He crossed his arms, blushing. “That was awhile ago. I don’t like the way long distance sounds, and it seems like I’m here for the long haul. So...” He nervously unfurled his arms to scratch his chin. “You know...”

Oh, here came the tears... Jade tried her best to keep from crying. She was already a trembling mess, overwhelmed with relief, happiness, love, and anxiousness all at once. With barely controlled breathing, Jade was able to very weakly mutter “you’re not a... selfish ass,” tears collecting and then streaming down her rosy cheeks. She closed the present box and held it tightly to her chest, then clutched at the collar of his hoodie with her other hand. “Inside,” she commanded in a half-cry and half-threat.

“Inside?” Sebastian repeated.

It was actually depressing how weakly she pulled him. “Come inside,” she nearly begged. Sebastian, not one to argue with his blubbering girlfriend, allowed himself to be tugged into the house. He shut the door behind him, though his gaze remained on her, unwavering to see her next action.

Jade let him go when he was in the house, then slowly walked towards the nearest table-- which was in the kitchen-- and gently set her new gift at its edge. Within a flash, Jade hurled herself back to his side and embraced him with such impeccable force. Sebastian stumbled back from the impact, then hesitantly wrapped his arms around her as well.

“I love you,” she cried through a grin. While wiping her tears, she exhibited a large frown, but then smiled again when her eyes met with his. Poor thing was going through a roller coaster of emotions.

His face became solid red from the declaration, but tried to brush it off like it wasn’t a big deal, as if people were watching. “Love you too,” he softly mumbled.

“My day wasn’t really the best... I wish I could tell you why, but... I don’t have the words.” She chuckled and wiped her eyes again, still grinning. “But I’ve never been happier at the same time. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Sebastian didn’t reply, though he definitely heard. He just stared at her, flustered and not knowing what to do.

“I’m sorry. I’m a mess.” She hugged him again. “I’m fine, really. I want to kick your ass for spending so much money, but the fact that you did that just because you care about me... Words can’t describe.” Jade let go once more, then walked back over to grab her phone. “You should help me figure out how this works. I’m a grandma with this tech,” she joked through her serious scratchy voice.

"Of... of course I will.”

“Great,” Jade beamed, taking a hold of his hand. Together, they walked towards her room; she already assumed he was spending the night, which she was correct about; the shopping bag he carried actually contained an extra set of clothes for himself. “... Seb?”
“Yeah?” Sebastian glanced to her while they walked, then stopped in the middle of her room. She sniffed from her last cry, but didn’t seem to be upset anymore. Curiosity was more apparent than anything.

“If you’re not moving to the city... where are you going to go?” Jade exhaled in slight worry. “You don’t like the basement, but there aren’t exactly many... places, you know.”

Sebastian gave a nonchalant shrug. “I’ll figure something out,” he replied with more pep in his voice. “I can rot in the basement for a little while longer if it means I get to stay in town.”

“Good,” Jade cheerfully added. “I’ll make sure you won’t regret your decision.”

He smiled. “I know.”
The end of Fall nears and Jade gets to spend time with her dear Alex.

After Jade was given a brand new phone full of mini games, trinkets, and an obligatory photo of her boyfriend as the lock screen wallpaper, she and Sebastian saw each other less frequently. Jade didn’t necessarily mind since he really and truly deserved a social break--in fact, she probably did, too. She visited the carpenter shop with a pot full of spaghetti for Robin’s birthday, celebrated with their proud family, and then gave some quality time to herself for the rest of the evening and several evenings afterwards. While the young farmer didn’t make too many efforts in leaving the forest, her phone buzzed with texts constantly; many were from friends but a vast majority were from Sebastian. He spent time alone in his room and at his favorite driving spots, but he never failed to let her know what he was thinking about or the fact that he simply wanted to know she was faring well. Their distance, as interesting as it was, brought them closer and allowed them to breathe at the same time.

That wasn’t to say they never saw each other, however. Even if they didn’t meet the entire day, Sebastian would still come by during nighttime to either visit or to stay the night entirely. He was usually too lazy to refuse the latter option, so they often spent long nights talking, bantering, playing games, and resting with one another. Such behavior became so routine for them that they didn’t like sleeping apart. Jade was scared to be left alone with her thoughts, while Sebastian could barely sleep at all. There soon approached an unspoken rule between them that encouraged Sebastian to stay as much as he wanted. Sometimes he left in the middle of the night while other times he would still be asleep when she woke, but he was welcome all the same.

Before she realized it, Winter was fast approaching. Weather dropped to freezing some nights, some of her crops died early, and she felt guilty taking some wool from her poor rabbits. Three days until the next season officially started, and two days marked the last festival of the season: Spirit’s Eve. Every time Jade and Abigail were together, Spirit’s Eve would be mentioned with overwhelming positivity. Abigail was certainly excited, and after asking Sebastian about it, he seemed excited, too. Jade considered herself a fan of the horror genre, so she looked forward to how it would pan out.

Until then, Jade did a good job of keeping herself busy. Stardew Valley endured another cold yet sunny Fall morning, Jade settling with her dear Sebastian as he typed away some work on his laptop. They both sat on the living room couch as the television yammered on about something; neither of them were listening and preferred it for background noise. The young farmer accomplished all her required farming duties and was finishing up a knitted dark purple scarf.

“You know, townspeople are so nice. I never thought Haley’s sister would be as wonderful as she actually was. Remember when I put that notice up for knitting help?” Jade cheerfully asked with her light and airy voice. While talking to him, she was focused on her scarf, while he seemed focused on his own work. He didn’t respond for a little while, but it was expected.

“Yeah. Emily helped you?”
“Uh huh. She showed me how to hand dye the yarn I made. This scarf is made from my bunnies, can you believe it? Though, I’m a little too scared to try more intricate patterns...” The young farmer shrugged, taking another moment to finish up her creation. “A-ha! Done!” She grinned and held up the scarf as a whole. Sebastian stopped whatever he was doing long enough to examine her and her creation.

“Ooh, nice. Good for the season coming up,” commented Sebastian with a content smile. She took no hesitation to wrap the scarf around his neck.

“It’s for you!” She beamed. “It’s your color. And the bunnies worked hard!”

Sebastian actually felt surprised at how he didn’t see her actions coming, though he loved the gesture. “Aw, Jade... Thank you, it’s very soft.” He lifted his arm to feel the scarf splayed down his torso. “Is this the surprise you were working on?” he quietly asked.

“No, that’s still a secret,” answered Jade with certainty. “You’ll love it, though. It’s taking a little while to get just right!”

He leaned over to her side and bumped their heads together. Jade took the chance to move in closer with him and relax. “I look forward to it,” he softly answered. They both became lost in each other’s contact and the gentle warmth that radiated from their being. Sebastian started to doze before knocking at the front door interrupted their moment. He sat up and glared at the door, while Jade sighed and stood up.

“Coming!” Jade shouted as she walked towards the front of her house. She opened the door and rubbed her eyes tiredly. “Can I help you?”

“Farm girl!” beamed Alex. Jade’s jaw dropped from the realization; it was no one other than Alex himself! She hadn’t seen him in what felt like forever, and their reuniting was long overdue.

“Alex!!” squealed Jade and glee. She tackled him and hugged, but with his girth, he hardly stumbled. He laughed and hugged her back. Something seemed a little different about him, but it was better. Stronger. Alex seemed renewed, somehow.

“Hey, long time no see! I’ve missed you and your silly shenanigans,” eagerly boomed the athlete. “Thanks for the texts, by the way! Instead of answering, I just thought I’d come by.” He grinned.

Jade giggled and let go of Alex, only to grab him by the arm and practically drag him inside. “I’m glad you did! I have to show you what the phone looks like! There’s so many neat stuff on it. I’m hopelessly addicted to some games.” She laughed to herself, then stopped tugging him. “So! How are you? Do you wanna stay for some late lunch? Any time we can catch up??”

“So many questions, farm girl! So little time.” Alex loved to see her enthusiasm, and truth be told, he did feel bad for avoiding most people while he tried to spend some time by himself. Especially with Jade, who seemed more excited to have him around than his other mutual friends. “I’m doing good, and I’m ready to get back in the game. Also, I can’t stay—” He caught Sebastian glaring from the couch, then spout a devious grin. “You know what? I got time. I think it’s time for us to hang out, anyway!”

“Oh, goodie! Heehee, it’s been so long since I’ve had my two favorite boys in the same place. I gotta make something special...” Jade started, roaming over to her kitchen and examining the contents of her refrigerator. “... I’m putting pizza in the oven,” she deadpanned afterwards. There was nothing really available for her to cook without it getting too complicated, and they’d have to deal with it.
Alex happily stayed at the house to properly catch up with Jade, and even made the decision to be polite to Sebastian in just a specific enough way to irritate him. The raven-hair had been massively disturbed by the jock’s presence, but as time went on, he calmed down and decided to be good in return. Jade adored Alex like a brother, and it just so happened that he was also annoyingly protective like one. After they all ate, Sebastian disappeared somewhere upstairs while the remaining two took the opportunity to play catch-up.

Nothing was awkward between Sam and Alex anymore, thank Yoba. Over Alex’s break, he actually went out of his way to speak with Sam and form a decent friendship... maybe it wasn’t what he initially wanted, but he knew he couldn’t dwell on his feelings. Sam had no romantic interest with anybody, and Alex learned to respect it. To his own surprise, he really did move on. He accepted Sam as a friend, and in turn, Sam promised to make up for it. Alex didn’t really understand what he meant, but the blond always had that mysterious vibe under his outgoing silliness. This was a better time than any to just go with the flow.

In addition to clearing the waters with his new spiky-haired friend, he had also taken more chances to be productive and dwell into more studies than just sports. Athleticism had always been exceedingly important to Alex-- and it still was-- but there had been a lingering emptiness with the change of seasons and his slowly aging body. Intelligence was the only way people could get anywhere, and he needed to be prepared for the harsh reality. After work out routines and caring for his grandparents, Alex actually took some time aside to read from the library and take some recommendations; he learned of Penny’s nature this way. He didn’t even realize she had much of a presence in town until he saw her teach the children.

So, Alex returned to Jade with a better attitude, more determination, and more powerful mental and physical fitness. He was ready to take on the world, and he was happy that Jade could witness his success!

To celebrate a renewed Alex and the reunion with his dear sister-in-spirit, he proposed an idea: “Hey, remember a long time ago, I suggested takin’ you to the baths? It’s really nice there. I tend to go there in the winter especially, and since it’s coming up, maybe you’d like to see how it is.”

“Oh, I do remember!” Jade happily recalled. “Are you finally going to take me there?” she then asked. Even though they were done eating, they still sat at the dining table and chatted their hearts away.

“Mmhm, and bring your lame boy over if you want. We can all hang out and relax in the sauna. Take a break from routine.”

“That sounds so lovely. I guess I can break the bathing suit back out of my dresser...” The young farmer hummed in thought as she tried to organize her plans. “Hey, Seb!” She called aloud, knowing he had taken refuge in the game room.

“What?” yelled Sebastian in return.

“Come here!!! We gotta ask you something!”

The response ushered an irritated grumble from upstairs, but shortly after marched her faithful boyfriend. “What is it?” he asked, refusing to even acknowledge Alex. The athlete didn’t really mind, but still grinned and threw his arm around Jade’s shoulders.

“Alice thinks it would be fun for all of us to go to the bathhouse! I’ve never been there before and I think it would be very relaxing. Maybe needed too, since it’s so cold outside. Would you like to join us?” innocently requested the girlfriend.
Sebastian seemed to be in a real conflict. For one, Alex would be there, and regardless of Jade’s fondness for him, Sebastian had to call him a ‘friend’ through gritted teeth. Cold weather was nice so getting in a hot bath sounded nice, but that required for him to be half naked in front of people not Jade. Not a fun idea. On the other hand, however, *Alex would be there and Jade would be with him*. Maybe Alex was tolerable, but this was a *bathhouse*! Jade would be in a swimsuit, exposed to the elements, exposed to *Alex*! And he was her boyfriend, right? He needed to be there to support her. And this was her first time going!

Alex blinked while watching the raven-haired man figure out his thoughts. “Is he okay? He’s been standing there for five minutes.”

“I dunno. His face is so red, like he’s not breathing.” Jade watched with concern, especially since he didn’t reply to either of them. “... Seb? Sebby?”

Sebastian snapped out of his train of thought and stared to Jade, almost shocked that he broke his trance. “What?”

“... Did you hear me? About going to the bathhouse?”

He was quiet for a few more seconds, but then he nodded and crossed his arms. “... Yeah.” He sighed. “Okay, fine. I’ll go along.”

“Really?” Jade’s expression brightened to show her excitement. “I’m glad!” she beamed and stepped forward to hug him. So it was settled, and they would all be going to soak in a nice sauna for the evening. Jade considered bringing other people along, but she couldn’t really think of anyone other than... Well, Sam. She would have liked giving Alex company when her attention wafted to just Sebastian, but she didn’t want to include Sam after he’s just getting better. Not yet. Maybe she would be too focused on relaxing to give Sebastian too much attention, anyway. She really needed the ability to settle.

Alex eventually left the house, then Sebastian did shortly after. Like other days, Jade cracked down on foraging to make herself useful and to pass the time until they all met up again. Grapes and berries galore, tons of flowers, ferns, herbs, and even some mushrooms that grew deep in the forest. Jade encountered some slimes loitering in the secret woods, though she was able to take care of them fairly quickly. With training and sharpening her skills, she didn’t even get a scratch, and even acquired some interesting slime balls as well as various trinkets from them. Jade returned home with a ton of valuable goods to ship, then spent the rest of her time lulling about in her room.

The time eventually came, signaled by Alex’s reappearance to the house. Together, they left for the sauna, Sebastian joining them when they passed his house. To get to their destination, there was a line of old stone stairs that led up another steep hill. After climbing them, there came a gigantic flat area, a huge glass building to their left and a rickety train stop at the northern end. The whole area had been walled off by natural rocky mountains, save for two tunnel openings on the opposite ends of the tracks. Sebastian looked at the train stop with fondness, then told Jade that they should hang there alone sometime. The young farmer, of course, eagerly agreed, while Alex guided them both to the glass building.

Inside were depressingly bland and waterproof walls of a cramped room, though it felt rather nice and warm. One door led to the men’s side of the sauna, while the other indicated the women’s side. The three begrudgingly parted ways, only to remeet at the actual baths.

The locker rooms themselves were bland and had an unsettling smell due to one of the lockers. Most of them were shut tight except for a group at the far end of a narrow hallway. Jade passed by sinks, bathrooms, and noticed a huge pink room with chairs and a wall-sized mirror branching off from the
The young farmer stuffed all her belongings in an empty locker, changed into the same blue swimsuit she wore at Sam's birthday gathering, then continued to the left of the hall. There were a couple of showers on one end and a large blue booth on the other. Steam wafted from the booth, and the unpleasant smells had faded. Whatever was on the other side smelled surprisingly nice.

Jade walked through the booth, which caused a puff of steam to whap her unsuspecting face. She entered the largest and official room, which had boring blue tiled floors, but a vibrant and beautiful pool that stretched across the room's perimeter. The pool itself seemed varying in depth, stairs going down the shallow end and a ladder on the deeper end. She noticed through the steam that there were glass walls with a view of the outside—oh! The ceiling was glass, too! She could see the beautiful grapefruit sky up above, the day waning away almost as soon as it began. A splashing sound caught her attention.

It was Sebastian, grumbling to himself as he descended the pool's stairs and entered shallow water. He wore only some swimming shorts that were as hilariously dark as his hair. He didn't seem to notice Jade, not until she greeted him with an eager, "Seb! These are the baths, huh?"

His expression dropped like a rock, as did his entire body when he realized she was in the same room. He used the water to distort his half-naked figure and stared over at her in surprise. "H-hey," he hesitantly murmured. Only his head was above the water.

She giggled and decided not to prod further, even though she didn't understand the cause of his behavior. Jade followed him into the baths and joined him at an equal level, letting out a content sigh when the warmth from the pool settled in. "Hey. Is Alex still getting ready?"

"Hell if I know... I just rushed to get ready and came out here. I wasn't paying attention to him and probably never will," Sebastian answered, his regular grumbling sass making a fantastic return. Jade let out another happy chuckle. "That's fair, honestly. Hey, though! What a beautiful place. I was surprised at how pretty it is, considering how underwhelming the locker rooms were."

"The locker rooms manage to look like trash even when not a lot of people are using it, but no one really like... works here, or cleans up." He had a bored expression on his face, but so did Jade. Neither of them were surprised at the lack of people in town. "So, that's one of the reasons. The bath is very nice, though." Sebastian let out a sigh, indicating he was on the path to relaxing as well.

Alex stomped into the main area of the bathhouse and strode into the water with expertise. "Third wheel, comin' through!" he beamed with a grin. Jade lifted her head to see how Alex was doing, and--wow. She never really noticed how big the athlete actually was... his body type wasn't exactly too attractive to her, but it was intimidating for sure. He had hefty muscles that proved just how powerful his bear hugs were, yet he was still lean enough to not appear totally menacing. Jade wondered if she had actually bulked up from all the farm work... she never really took the time to examine herself all too much. Instinctively, she stared down at herself and hummed in thought.

Sebastian’s eyes had closed from relaxing in the bath, only grunting at Alex’s statement. Jade snapped out of her temporary train of thought and smiled to her dear brother-in-spirit. “You’re not a third wheel at all! This bath already so relaxing, though. I need to go here more.”

“Right?” Alex eagerly replied. He went on to explain how often he came by the place, even mentioning the few occasions he’d run into other townspeople and the surprising amount of times he actually encountered passing strangers. Jade happily engaged in the conversation with him and chattered away, the hot water not doing a well in calming her excited attitude. The three were content, however; even Sebastian enjoyed listening to the two and contributed a few thoughtful words to their conversation.
It didn't take long for all three of them to be taken in by the sereneness of the baths. Eventually, they
dozed, conversations subsided for a little while, then started again when Jade decided to sit on the
pool's edge instead. Her feet continued to dangle in the water while the rest of her body took a break
from the heat. Alex reclined back, arms rested out of the water, while Sebastian stirred from the
movement and brought his attention over to Jade.

"Can I just say something?" Jade calmly started, smiling at them both. Both of them gave some
varying degree of affirmation, urging her to continue: "I'm happy both of you can tolerate being in
the same room."

Alex opened his eyes and shot an interesting smirk to the young farmer. "S'that so?"

"Mmhm. I appreciate both of you being here with me," Jade continued, smiling. "I was considering
bringing in Sam, since both of you like him."

Sebastian gave her such a bored look. "That lazy ass wouldn't come all the way up here," he
nonchalantly replied.

"Hey!" snapped Alex, seemingly out of nowhere. "Pretty damn bold coming from you," he sneered.
The couple seemed surprised from the remark, but while one shrunk back, the other narrowed his
eyes and glared forward. "Excuse me?" Sebastian began in a threatening tone.

"You heard me. Have you ever looked at anything that wasn't a computer?" grunted Alex.
Jade sighed. "Guys..." This was all just a misunderstanding of tone.

"Unfortunately, I have, with this sore sight front of me," Sebastian snapped in return with an
aggressive gesture towards Alex's figure.

"What a prick! How is Jade your girlfriend? How are you even friends with Sam?!!"

"You're the odd-one-out here, dumbass! Don't be starting shit you don't know how to handle!"

They started yelling. The peace had been broken just like that, and Jade couldn't gauge how or why.
Both the guys stood and started to size each other up, spouting nonsense about their authority,
relationships, who is better. Et cetera. Their voices got muffled to her, ringing dominating her
hearing, but she could hear the tones. She felt so upset. It was her fault... right?

The water rose past her feet. It felt so cold... Why was she cold? Jade hugged her arms and stared to
the boys, but she couldn't focus on them. There was something behind them.

Water levels continued to rise. It smelled like a swamp. Jade's chest tightened up, and she started to
feel so sick. She couldn't believe her eyes... there was something in the water with them, at the
furthest end of the pool. It was large, ominous, and... green. Rows and rows of teeth, beady yellow
eyes, staring straight at her. Judging eyes.

"GET OUT!" screeched Jade in desperation. She wasn't sure if she was yelling at herself, the guys,
or the monster. "OUT! GET OUT!... GET OUT!" she yelled with empty breaths, desperately
escaping the water to cling to the bathhouse wall. Sebastian and Alex instantly ceased their bickering
from Jade’s outcry, exchanging worried looks to each other before silently agreeing to exit the bath
and go over to her.

"Jade?! What happened?" Sebastian hurriedly asked. She sounded too scared for their bickering to
be the source of her trauma.
"Look, we're sorry! It was bad of us to fight," added Alex, hesitantly putting a hand on one of her trembling shoulders. She didn't seem to respond to it, only staring at the water with horror.

She tried to swallow a lump of air down her throat. After the two got up and moved, the gigantic fish, the Legend, or whatever it was... it was gone. "There... there was a..." She hastily breathed and stroked her hair with one of her hands. How could it just vanish? The young farmer wandered back over to the pool and touched the water with the tips of her fingers. The water was steamy and excessively warm, as it should have been. Jade stared to the other end of the pool. No scales, no teeth, no eyes. Nothing.

"What? There was what?" Sebastian repeated with worry.

Jade collapsed back and continued to stare at the pool. "... It's..." The words wouldn't come out right. "I... T-take me home. Please." She forced herself up and walked back to the women's locker rooms. She didn't turn to look at them or give any indication that she wanted to. She was there, and then she vanished, just like that.

Both of them were speechless. Neither of them argued with each other after that incident. After cleaning, dressing, and gathering all of their things, they met back at the entrance of the glass building. Jade didn't mutter a word on the way back, her silence unnatural and unsettling.

At the farm, Alex parted with a close hug to his sister-in-spirit, then gave Sebastian a trusting look before leaving. It wasn't the athlete's place to figure out what was wrong, and both of them accepted the fact. Sebastian already decided that he would stay the night, so he wasn't leaving her side for a second.

"Jade..." He muttered, watching her nervously. "Something doesn't add up here... what... what happened? What did you see?" Her boyfriend watched her with a soft seriousness. He needed an answer, but her well being was the most important.

Jade didn't answer for a while. They returned to the couch in her living room, watching the television that continued to serve as background noise.

"Jade... please."

"You won't believe me," she finally answered.

Sebastian's eyes widened. "I will believe you."

"No..." Jade sighed. "Sebastian, I love you, but... Look. I think I'm just tired... I'm going to bed early."

After some serious thought, the raven-hair eventually sighed in defeat. He didn't want to prod her anymore. "... Alright, Jade. Goodnight."

"Yeah."

With her eerie silence, she got off the couch and walked to her bedroom. Her steps were quiet, shoulders drooped. She was like a different person.

Something didn't feel right.

Chapter End Notes
First, I want to apologize for going off my schedule! It's been a crazy last few weeks and some new things came into my life, which requires a lot of adjusting.

So, basically:
I AM NOT UPDATING ON A SCHEDULE ANYMORE.

It was a nightmare trying to get this up, so hopefully you understand! I've been too busy with all sorts of things. I've been behind on a lot of things, a lot of important school related things, and I need to give that more of a focus.

I am participating in NaNoWriMo this year and it WILL be my fic, so I'm definitely going to keep writing. When the chapters come out though, that's uncertain. But it's clear I can no longer keep up the same schedule, and I think it'll be less stress on me if I updated when I finished rather than rushing to finish.

THIS IS NOT A HIATUS! The end of my fic has been planned already and it just requires writing. Updates may be slower sometimes or faster other times. Thank you so much for your patience!

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Sorry again that it came out super delayed!
Chapter Summary

Sebastian and Jade go on their first out-of-town date in Zuzu City.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was as if nothing happened the day after the bathhouse trip. Jade was back to her cheerful self, smiling, laughing, enjoying all the positive qualities of life. Sebastian hated that he didn’t know what bothered her at the baths, but he couldn’t summon the courage to bring it back to attention. She was happy, or seemed like it, anyway... he couldn’t ruin that, even if his curiosity was at its peak.

Spirit’s Eve arrived in a flash. The entirety of the town square had been blocked off for the day since they were setting up, and not even the people in town knew what it would be like! Rasmodius, the local wizard, took the liberty of setting up the event himself, possibly with his arcane abilities. Jade was aware of what the festival was, since, unlike previous events, Spirit’s Eve was celebrated across the entire region. Costumes, scary stories, lots and lots of horror themed food. Stardew Valley apparently celebrated such a holiday with all their might, which made the young farmer excited to participate as well. Spirit’s Eve was the last festival of the season and the first one Jade has ever been to in regards of the valley.

For once, nothing went wrong, or at least nothing seemed like it. Spirit’s Eve was full of spooks, horrors, and elaborate pranks on Sam, and it was glorious. Jade spent the entire festival night with Sebastian in which they had a feast and explored the ‘haunted maze’ together. In the end, they didn’t really find out the mystery behind the maze, but they did spend a good fifteen minutes practicing bad parkour on the gigantic fake spiders that dwelled there. Jade didn’t have any time to sit on her thoughts since she was so occupied. When she went home late that night, all she could think of was the fun she had with Sebastian and her friends. It was probably the best festival to date.

Snow arrived a few days into Winter already, the entire valley blanketed with powdery white. Wild animals went into hibernation when the forest’s once proud trees towered naked without leaves. Livestock huddled in their barns and coops, all circled around the heaters that kept their space warm and comfortable. Jade wished to huddle around a fireplace too, though her farm work certainly took priority. In the cold weather, her dear rabbits kept their wool and enjoyed the luxury of being indoors, especially since their normal food was covered in snow. Her chickens made eggs as they always did, perfect for shipment. Despite being unable to plant any crops, Jade found the season productive as well as relaxing.

That particular day was especially productive, at least in the social sense. Sebastian arrived at her farm via motorcycle to take her on a date- and not just any date!! They were going out of town and actually planned to spend money, like what one would consider as a normal outdoor activity. Right after lunchtime, Sebastian and Jade departed for a wonderful time spent with one another.

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“Jade, is this your first time in Zuzu City?”
Sebastian dismounted his recently parked motorcycle while keeping an eye on his hyperactive girlfriend. She was jittering from excitement, a huge grin stamped on her face as she followed his actions. Winter wasn’t any more kind to the city as it was to the valley, so the weather was just as freezing. Jade had a thick red zipper jacket and a matching stitched bear hat along with warm black leggings under a favorite white skirt of hers, and Sebastian wore a deep purple beanie that matched the long scarf Jade knitted him, his hoodie, and to a certain degree, his jeans as well. Hilariously enough, both of them wore regular sneakers that normally wouldn’t pass in cold weather, but it didn’t seem to bother them.

“Yeah, I’ve never been before!” Jade beamed to her boyfriend, hopping in place with her hands in her jacket pockets. They stood on the third floor of a parking complex, finally ready to depart on foot. Sebastian took the lead while she followed closely behind; he seemed to know where he was going, though in reality he was as unfamiliar with the city as she was.

“You’re in for a treat, though the city is incredibly busy... Yoba, I certainly don’t care for all the traffic here. That’s one good thing about Pelican Town, huh?” He smiled and glanced over to her, who then nodded in agreement. Their sneakers tapped the black concrete of the parking lot, echoing in the large and empty space. Car engines, tires, and horns could be heard right outside. Sunlight sparkled through the open gaps in the parking complex, signaling a bright but still chilly afternoon.

“I already know I’m in for a treat,” the excited girlfriend freed one of her arms to wrap around his own. “After all, I’m spending the day with you, and I couldn’t ask for anything better!”

Sebastian formed a sheepish smile, his pale cheeks flushing from the simple statement. “Heh... well, we haven’t exactly been on a proper, um, date.”

Jade stared off into space, surprised. He was right. “Wow... I actually didn’t even notice that. We spend so much time together, so it’s a wonder we haven’t really been out on a proper date. Unless you count those times we went to the mines.”

“No- ... Okay. I kinda do count that. They were fun, despite how dangerous it was,” he huffed. “It’s also kind of a job though, since there are those monster eradication goals for the guild.” Sebastian shrugged.

“We should work on that together later. I want some magical rings.”

He snorted, expression lighting up once more. “You would. Yeah, it’s a future date,” he continued.

“Great!” Jade beamed once more. She didn’t know what else to say, but luckily with Sebastian, she didn’t have to be talking to have his attention. His warmth was addicting, his smile calming, and the silence between them spelled out comfort and love. Jade was always eager to spend time with Sebastian, but for some reason she felt even more so in Zuzu City. In a place full of people she didn’t know, getting to show off her boyfriend was all the more exciting. Sebastian was hers and everyone around them would know it, though hopefully not through obnoxious means.

They traveled down heavily populated sidewalks close to even busier streets, making their way towards their destination. The Zuzu City mall was their intended goal, but there were so many interesting shops full of different nic-nacs on the way. Boutiques, antique shops, diners, cafes, and specialty shops lined the streets to entice citizens and tourists alike. Despite never being to Zuzu city in particular, Jade knew exactly what shops to ignore and didn’t seem as bothered with the speedy walking as Sebastian did. It came as a surprise to him since she would often be easily distracted by the shiny and new, though it made more sense as he thought about it. “Jade, you’re from the city, right?” he asked to confirm his suspicions.
She snapped out of her walking trance, paying attention to her boyfriend once she heard his voice.
“Hm? Yeah, haha. It’s surprising how much I remember about the city. I prefer home, though... everyone’s nicer.”

“The city certainly is a little... crowded,” Sebastian quietly commented. He loved the variety of the bustling city, but walking down the streets made him question why he even wanted to move to a place with so many people. Maybe Zuzu City was fun to visit, but dealing with crowds on a daily basis, thousands of unknown faces, and good Yoba, the traffic, it was... not his ideal life. On the outside, Sebastian kept his cool demeanor, especially since he didn’t want Jade to worry. Inside, however, Sebastian felt incredibly anxious. He hoped the mall would suddenly appear before them so that they could deal with crowds in smaller doses. Everything was too loud. People were shoving each other aside and zooming past. It was a little much.

Luckily, Jade was there. She probably couldn’t tell he was nervous at the time, but she was well versed in how he dealt with strangers. She kept her arm locked with his to ensure they wouldn’t be separated and confidently marched forward to their destination.

"Hey... do you mind talking about life? Before?” Sebastian asked, watching her movements closely. Ultimately, she didn't seem bothered by his question. Her smile was gentle and her eyes hooded contently as she watched her steps ahead. When he spoke, she glanced at him before bringing focus back to the sidewalk.

"Sure, I don't mind! Is there anything you want to know?"

The raven-hair shrugged. He supposed he didn't have anything specific. "Just... in general, I guess. I'm curious. You... you know, you never really struck me as someone who used to live in a place like this."

Jade laughed. "That's probably for the better! But, sure. Uhh... well, I mean, no one really talks to each other. There are so many people you don't know around, yeah? So I always went from place to place, no detours, no walking in less populated places. As nice as it is to be alone, it’s more dangerous here.” She stared up to the sky for a moment to plan her next words, then nervously laughed; it came across as a bit fake, as if she didn't really find her train of thought humorous at all. "Well, I mean, we have monsters back at home... But they're not really as scary as other humans are."

Sebastian couldn't help but usher a chuckle in response. He didn't find her statement funny, but... "I've never heard you say something so somber," he admitted.

"Really? Ah, sorry. I normally try to be positive." Jade was surprised at herself; she didn't realize her worry was getting the best of her.

He shook his head. "No, don't be sorry," he softly stated. A gentle smile formed on his face as he walked alongside the young farmer. "It just sounds like something I would have said."

"Well, I mean, humans are scary, right? I'd rather be in a room with a giant slime monster if I got to pick between that or a human, because I at least know how to deal with it.” While Jade was being completely serious in her statements, she snorted at herself. He couldn't help but laugh too.

"Oh, I completely agree." Sebastian gave her a playful nudge. "I'm glad we have that in common."

Jade smiled. "Me too. It can be hard to say in words," she muttered. She felt free and comfortable, knowing Sebastian understood what she meant. Maybe he didn't have the same reasons as her, but they could still relate to each other. It meant the world to her. "O-oh... um... Sorry, got off track there.
Um... well, there's a lot to do in the city, so that's really nice. Though I never really went out much. You kinda... need friends for that."

Sebastian didn't find her last sentence very entertaining. "Ah... well..." Sebastian needed to say something. "We're together. Is there anywhere you wanted to go that you couldn't before?" he then asked. "Maybe after the mall."

"Hmm..." Jade hummed for a moment, trying to think of any specific place. "... Can we go to an ice cream parlor? Just sitting at a nice little dining place sounds fun!"

Her question made him grin. "In this weather? We're freezing."

"Yes," she answered confidently, puffing up her chest.

He laughed. "I love it. Let's do it."

Their somewhat serious conversation morphed into lighthearted chatter about anything on their minds, from what they wanted to eat later in the afternoon, to the weather, to even what they hoped to buy. Jade teased Sebastian about how he would have to do a lot of waiting while she tried on new clothes, which he rebuffed with sarcasm and a bit of nagging. As if on cue, Jade suddenly stopped on the sidewalk. The mall of their choice was just around the corner, but a small clothes store caught her eye; she stared through the window of a colorful, cutesy shop, its front display having mannequins in detailed dresses, wearing bright coats, fluffy backpacks, and an unbearable amount of hair accessories. Looked like a shop that suited Jade perfectly.

The young farmer stared at one of the mannequins in admiration, paying special attention to its dress. While the dress wasn't poofy or short enough for Jade's taste, the colors and theme certainly was; it was a soft light blue with a white drawing of a cat's face just under the chest. The cat's 'ears' covered the chest area of the dress, while there was a white undershirt that kept the cut from appearing too low. It seemed like it could be a decent summer dress, but with enough layers, it could be done just fine for winter.

Eventually, Sebastian gave her a nudge to knock her out of her trance. "You want to go in there?" he asked, extremely aware of her fascination.

"... Can we?" she squeaked.

"Well, duh. That's why we're here."

"Great!" Without another word, Jade sped into the store.

Sweet Yoba, the store was even more colorful inside than it initially appeared... and much, much smaller. Sebastian stuck out like a sore thumb in the store, since he was the only source of dark tones compared to the swarms of shining feminine outfits. He narrowed his eyes as he followed in after-not out of disgust, but due to the brightness being a bit too much for him. Jade had already disappeared into some corner of the store after giving a polite greeting to the cashier. Sebastian gave them a hello as well and decided to wander around.

"Seb!" he instantly heard. Jade spoke loud enough for anyone to hear, but she was still being considerate enough to not yell or disturb. "Come look at this one."

He obediently followed, navigating through racks of clothes. Many of them seemed inspired by TV show and movie characters, though there were some original (and equally cutesy) outfits in the mix. Sebastian found Jade holding up a dress similar to the one she admired at the front display, except it was yellow and looked to be designed after a bear instead. He wasn't surprised she picked that one
out of pure giddiness. He couldn't help but smile.

"What do you think of this one?" she asked, almost unsure. Sebastian suddenly halted, not certain of how to answer. She noticed his tension, then laughed. "Listen, you know me. Just tell me what you think, because it's really cute, but I dunno if it's for me. This is the only one like the display I can find, though..."

"Uh..." He sucked in a deep breath as he stared at her, then the dress, then back at her. "Well..." He shrugged. "It's certainly... bright."

Jade coughed out another laugh. From her perception, he sounded like he was desperately forcing some kindness. "Anything else?" she asked, giving a knowing smile.

He scratched his head. "Um..." Eventually, a sigh escaped his throat. "When I think of you, I don't really... think of yellow."

"So yellow's not my color?" Jade stared at the dress and hummed, rocking her heels as she contemplated. "Hmmm... you may have a point there. Maybe a bit too gaudy."

Sebastian sighed in relief, which made her giggle.

"I wasn't holding you against your will with that question, was I?"

"Uhh... I'm just not too good at this. I mean... you've seen my wardrobe."

She laughed again. "That's okay! I'm having fun, and you're helping a lot even if you think you're not. You won't hurt my feelings, you know."

Sebastian wanted to say something, but then backed down in defeat. He knew it was obvious he was scared of hurting her feelings. The raven-hair, like any decent boyfriend, wanted her to enjoy whatever she wore. She was cute either way.

"So, what color do you think of, then?" asked Jade in curiosity. She could tell the question still made him nervous, but she sent loving looks his way to assure him she didn't mind what his answer was.

"Maybe, like..." He shrugged. "Greens."

"Green is one of my favorite colors! Wait, it's not because of farming, is it?"

"No, you just... It's a youthful color, but maybe not like... as young as yellow. I guess. You know, like. Cheerful." He tapped his chin in thought, then flushed in embarrassment. "Wait... did that make sense?"

Jade grinned and gave him a reassuring nod. "Yeah, it did! That's really sweet, Seb. Thank you. Hmmmmm..." She put the dress back and continued to browse, though nothing caught her eye like she thought it would. There were a lot of accessories she loved, though she had a lot of similar ones back home. Others just seemed too expensive for what they appeared... Sebastian decided to browse as well. Even if he doubted he'd find anything for himself, the clothes were still cute to look at. He was almost surprised Jade didn't pick up everything she saw.

Hilariously enough, Jade didn't find anything for herself. The clothes were either too bright, the patterns were not favorable, or the articles of clothing seemed too long or too short. The few she did liked, they were incorrect sizes. What an unlucky store... but she still had fun. Her spirits were lifted from getting to just participate in any activity with Sebastian.
She noticed him in one other part of the store, looking thoughtfully at a dress. The dress had thick straps that went over the shoulders, a high cut, and had several layers fluffing out the "skirt" part of the dress. It had a light rabbit pattern, and the dress itself was a soft, desaturated green. From the distance, Jade thought the dress looked cute, though something she wouldn't have expected Sebastian to look at.

After a minute or so, he brought his attention away from the dress and wandered back over to Jade. "I'll wait at the front for you. Don't worry about me; take your time."

The girlfriend grinned. "Of course! I actually think we might leave the store empty handed... it looked so promising, too."

"Well, hey. We'll be going to a lot more. Maybe ones that aren't in such a cramped... space."
Sebastian tried to comfort her, but ended up reminding himself about unpleasant details of the store in the process. "Actually... I think I'll wait outside. Don't worry, though. I'll be right by the door."

She giggled. "That sounds fine. I'll follow you in a minute."

With that, they kindly parted. Jade watched her boyfriend walk out of the slightly claustrophobic environment, though still completely visible through the display window. She felt relief knowing where he was, and even more relief that he wasn't looking inside to see what she was up to. Jade's eyes shot to the rack of clothes that Sebastian spent a considerable time around, then immediately sneaked over to it, as if that increased her chances of going unnoticed.

The dress was much cuter up close... actually, it was extremely cute. Jade knew that Sebastian didn't care all too much about fashion, especially for himself, but he still had a great eye for detail. Probably because of his nerdy Solarion Chronicles characters, Jade thought. Her mouth widened from cheer, feeling flattered as she examined the clothing in front of her. It was so perfect for the winter season, too.

She left the store with something after all. After a moment of waiting, she exit the shop with a closed plastic bag. Sebastian raised his hand in greeting and approached her so they could be reunited. "Got something after all? What is it?"

"Oh, it's just something. I thought it was cute." Jade locked their arms to not be separated and resumed their walking.

He found the answer rather cryptic, but quickly accepted it. "Oh. Nice," Sebastian lightheartedly replied.

As if the colorful shop with crowded space was its opposite, the mall was the largest complex either of the young adults have ever been to. Well over a hundred clothing stores, specialty shops, and restaurants had to be in the mall, and that didn't include the open market space where more independent creators sold their merchandise. Smooth tiled stone led to elegant tiled marble indoors, the mall's proud name arching the entrance. A huge fountain sputtered clear water with colorful lights in the mall lobby, still visible and beautiful even with the hundreds of people sharing the same space. Sebastian felt pleasantly surprised that there was so much room to walk with the amount of people. Jade noticed his nerves eased, while her own nerves increased from the sheer amount of options they had in term of stores.

Their shopping journey at the mall began. They ventured to a few clothing stores, Jade pointing out shirts with stupidly hilarious designs and making Sebastian snort with laughter in the process. Both of them eventually grew very comfortable with their explorations, finding things they liked, sharing their finds, and mocking the ones they thought looked ridiculous. The first out-of-town date jitters
quickly faded.

With their comfort came their ever so loving (and exceedingly sarcastic) banter. Such exchanges of words increased when Jade learned that Sebastian was quite the penny pincher:

"Sebby... Just. Just buy it. You keep going back to it," she laughed.

"I don't need it." Sebastian shamefully looked away from a hoodie as they stood in the middle of a general clothes store. The hoodie was the same dark blackish-purple that he currently wore, except it was far newer, had softer and thicker material, and had a zipper.

"Aw, come on." Jade assumed a sassy stance and crossed her arms while glaring at the raven-hair. 
"You only bought a new shirt so far, and I'm pretty sure you have the same one at your house! This hoodie is actually new. And you need it."

Sebastian glared just as sarcastically in return. "Okay, one: the shirt at home is all faded, and it's one of my favorites so I wanted another. And two: my current hoodie isn't that old, and it's still pretty good..."

She gave him a certain look. He knew which kind she was doing. "How old is your hoodie, then?" she asked with a dead tone.

"Probably... uh..." Sebastian started to count on his fingers as he glanced up to the ceiling in contemplation. "Maybe... seven years."

Jade's mouth gaped open in shock while he counted. "You were in high school!" she almost yelled.

"I took care of it! Hey! Haven't you seen Sam's jacket? Or that Shane guy? My hoodie doesn't have holes or anything like that. And if there was a hole, I'd sew it back."

"You know how to sew?" Jade lifted an eyebrow and smiled in amusement.

"That's not the point. The point is, this hoodie is still good. I shouldn't waste my money," he huffed, completely ignoring her expression. Subconsciously, he messed with one of his hood's strings.

The young farmer watched him for a moment, giving an unamused 'mmhm' under her breath, then grabbed the hoodie off the rack it hung from. "I'm going to buy it, then."

"What?!"

"You heard me-"

"No, don't buy it!" He almost instantly snatched the article of clothing from her hands. "It's expensive, I don't want you spending that much on me."

"You bought me a phone!" she instantly retorted.

"That was a gift, and you don't owe me anything."

"Then you won't care if I buy the hoodie as a gift-"

"I'll just buy it, okay? Yeesh!"

Jade cackled from his heated response. "Okay, okay. You win."

Sebastian snobbily lifted his head and nodded. "Damn right I do."
After he bought his new hoodie of choice and left the store, he seemed much more ecstatic about his purchase - they even stopped in the middle of the mall for him to take the purchase tags off and switch his hoodies. He seemed so comfortable and relaxed, even more than he wanted to admit.

Jade gave him a hearty pat on the back. "I'm taking your old hoodie," she nonchalantly stated.

"What?" Sebastian looked to her, not hearing her the first time.

"Nothing," she cheerfully hummed.

And so, they continued their fun mall trip. Both of them grew more excited when they found video game shops and were able to get some nifty bundles for affordable prices. Toy stores were also fantastic, especially since they got to throw plushies at each other and have spontaneous foam sword fights. Jade forced Sebastian to let her buy some figurines he collected for himself, while he refused to leave the store without giving her a plushie she wanted for her own collection. With heated comments that eventually led to laughs and play fights, they left to terrorize other shops, satisfied with the gifts they bought for each other. They passed a laser tag arena with broken hearts, internally regretting the things they had to carry. Sounded like laser tag would be a good future date, though!

Walking apparently got too tiring for the both of them, or at least for Sebastian it did. Jade got her exercise from maintaining her farmland, while Sebastian only ever walked around town. Both of them decided to end their shopping endeavors anyway and have a well deserved food break.

They sat in a booth of the least crowded food court they could find and bought some fast food to feast upon. The young farmer had an affordable mountain of chicken nuggets with a side of fries, while Sebastian preferred the burger meal for himself. Both exchanged brief banter in between bites out of their food, simultaneously answering several missed texts on their phones.

"Hey, Jade." Sebastian spoke in his regular tone and volume, taking a sip from the drink that came with his meal.

"Yeah?"

"Remind me to knee Sam in the groin when we get back," he simply stated.

She snorted and almost spit out what was in her mouth. "Holy Yoba," she muffled, trying to keep herself from laughing. Finally, she swallowed her bite of food. "Why?"

"He’s being a pest. All these texts. They’re ridic- Wh... Why?" He groaned in irritation.

Jade’s visual focus shifted to Sebastian in curiosity. "What happened?" she asked.

"Okay, so Sam sent me so many texts while we’ve been out, and he knows where we are. Lots of texts that are like, don’t make out too hard, watch out for dwarves who will steal your money while unconscious, if he sees a strip of photos from a photo booth he’ll disown us, et cetera."

She chuckled. "Sounds like Sam."

"Yeah. Well, the asscrack just sent me another text asking me how many adult stores we went to."

Her amused expression dropped in surprise, then picked up again to accompany her cackle. "What does he think we even do?"

"Don’t ask. He’ll give you a long list, and then probably make a badly written fan fiction just to torture me and ‘prove’ his point." Sebastian rolled his eyes and set his phone down to continue
eating.

Jade did a familiar puff of her chest and paused her dining to cross her arms. “Well I mean, Sam’s suggestions aren’t so bad! Let’s find some. Also, lingerie.”

Sebastian gasped from the suggestion, then choked on whatever he was eating. He managed to cough out his food on his plate. “Jade!!” he yelled in accusation.

She cackled, flushing in response. “I was just joking! Calm down.”

“It’s not funny. Don’t be a Sam.” He huffed, his face also a light red.

“Hehe, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to shock you like that.” She resumed eating, checking her phone absentmindedly. “I’m not really sexy enough for lingerie or anything like that anyway.”

“What?” Sebastian stared at her as if he was offended from her remark. “I didn’t say that.”

“I know, but I said it.” She shrugged, like she already accepted it as a fact of life. Her meal had been fully consumed. “Why, do you think I’m sexy?”

Poor Sebastian’s face was as red as a tomato. He averted his gaze and stared to the nearest wall, completely flustered. “Come on...” he muttered, silently pleading her to not ask him such questions.

The young farmer appeared neutral and uncaring when she asked the question, but seemed rather invested and entertained when she saw his reaction. “… Really?” she asked to confirm what his body language conveyed.

“You already know how I feel about you,” he mumbled under his breath while taking another sip of his drink.

Jade took a moment to study his behavior, then calmly smiled. “I do, but it’s nice to hear it sometimes.” She giggled and leaned her elbows on the table. “You build up my ego something awful, you know. I’m used to being just... cute, to people. You know? I mean, not that I can blame them, since people mistake my preferred style of dress for... childishness... I guess.”

Sebastian calmed down enough to focus on the young farmer again. “… I... I think you’re both.”

“Hmm?” Jade grinned, gesturing for more elaboration.

“I mean... you are cute, but that doesn’t stop you from being... you know.” Sebastian felt too warm in his current outfit, so he unzipped his hoodie. With a grumble of dismissal, he practically hid his face while sipping from his drink again. There wasn’t even any liquid left in the cup, so he tried to eat some of the ice out of desperation. “Sh-shut up, you’re beautiful.”

She giggled from his reply. As quiet and grumpy as he sounded, the feelings behind them were genuine and loving. “Aww, I love you too,” Jade answered to his indirect declaration. A moment passed between them as they finished up their food. “Hey... I’ll say it. I think you’re sexy.”

“Jade!!” Sebastian yelled again, even more flustered than before.

“What? It’s true! You are!”

“We’re in public,” he deadpanned.

“Does it matter?”
“Yes,” he answered with extreme emphasis.

“Do you want me to say it tonight, then?” Jade teased.

“Yes-” Sebastian coughed. “I mean no. No! No. Stop looking at me like that. Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything,” she remarked with a grin.

“I hate you so much.” Tomato Sebastian was back. After they threw the remains of their meals away, he tightly held Jade’s hand. He seemed much more bold than before. “Let’s go get that ice cream,” he started, trying to change the subject entirely.

She simply laughed. “That’ll be really fun.”

Their trip at the mall ended, and their date in Zuzu City was officially over when they watched the darkening sky after finishing their eagerly anticipated cones of ice cream. With linked arms, they returned to Sebastian’s motorcycle. They mushed what goods they could into the motorcycle’s compartments, while Jade could loop the rest with her arms. She held onto Sebastian’s torso on the ride to Pelican Town, her face safely buried in his back. Time flew by quickly; before either of them knew it, they were already at Jade’s farm.

The night ended on fantastic terms. It was a good date.

Chapter End Notes

IT'S DONE!!!!
IT'S!!!!!!!!!!!!!
DONE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
AFTER 2 MONTHS!!!! I FINALLY GOT OUT OF THAT HOLE!!! not only was real life stuff happening (things are fine now!) but i was just. having SO MUCH trouble with chapter 41.

most of the writer's block had to do with how i wanted to do something with spirit's eve and just... couldn't. nothing good or productive was coming out of it, and i felt horrible because i thought i would cover every major festival. ultimately, though, it was a waste, and it was better for me to keep any drama from happening and make a summary instead. my time will be put into some other plot twists!

guys i'm SO EXCITED for the next chapters to come. we're probably 70-80% done with the story at this point. there is some really big stuff coming up and i am excited to take this journey with all of you.

thank you for being so patient. i really hope the next chapter will come out quicker, but i can't promise anything. i do promise that this story WILL end, though. it's my baby. and i'm just. i'm so proud. i've learned so much in all these chapters i wrote, not only about the characters or how to write but, myself too. i know that sounds corny but that's what kinda happens when you're obsessed with character development LOL

anyways, i hope you enjoyed!! thank you SO MUCH for reading!!!
A Feeling

Chapter Summary

Something is changing in Stardew Valley, but no one knows what. Increased monster populations bring a concern to the Adventurer's Guild, while something more personal begins to pick at Jade.

Wednesday, Winter 3 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You got a phone and you haven’t been answering my calls? Jade, I’m hurt!” pouted Alex, who sat with Jade in a barn full of snuggled rabbits and two eagerly clucking chickens. They rested on piles of fresh hay while warming themselves by the heater that had been placed in the middle of the space. Butterscotch, the most docile of the rabbits, snoozed lazily in Jade’s lap, while Bullet and Plague, the two more hyperactive rabbits, treated Alex’s crossed legs like an obstacle course. The athlete didn’t mind the little ones playing—in fact, he loved it, but he couldn’t help but be concerned for his dear sister-in-spirit. It was very unlike Jade to answer a text with a simple ‘I’m fine’ after being asked how she was, since she gave such an impression of honesty. Actually, Alex didn’t think she was really acting like herself in general.

He assumed Sebastian would have noticed her behavior and act accordingly, but after days without seeing her, something still seemed a little off. Her smiles weren’t wide enough, her eyes not as bright, her hair not as... poofy. Subtle things, and Sebastian should have noticed! But Alex did and he showed it. He didn’t know what the problem could be, or even how to explain his suspicions, but he just felt she was still bothered. She needed to talk about it to somebody.

“Ah, is that why you came here?” Jade made a sad, concerned smile. “I went on a date yesterday, but I thought I texted you back. Oh, wait, do you mean over the past week?”

“Yeah!”

“Oh...” The young farmer went quiet and thought for a while. “To be honest... I haven’t really been in the mood to hold phone conversations.”

At least she answered. Alex grumpily huffed regardless of the response. “Is everything okay? Something seems off. Why hasn’t Sebastian done anything?! Is it because of him?”

“Whoa, whoa. Little too many questions there,” sighed Jade. “No, Seb and I are doing great. Nothing’s off, not with him or in general. Sometimes I just don’t feel like talking.”

“Wh-... You can’t tell me nothing’s off! This never happens. I’m worried about you, farm girl. I barely even saw you during Spirit’s Eve,” he retorted with a firm voice. Alex crossed his arms to display his seriousness.

The young farmer wasn’t really looking at him, nor did she seem all that fazed by her words. She just gently pet Butterscotch while continuing her responses to confrontation. “Alex... you’re worrying too
much,” she began, voice blank. “I was just busy preparing for the new season, and after I’m done with all my work I just want to rest. I spent Spirit’s Eve with Seb, too.”

Hmmmmmmmm. She didn’t seem all that elated, but she didn’t seem to be lying, either. Was Jade even one to lie? He really couldn’t bring out a situation in which she was anything more than sarcastic. He had no reason to doubt her, but there was still that feeling in the back of his head… “Okay. Fine. But…”

“What?”

“Don’t think I forgot about that whole thing that happened at the bathhouse last week. It’s weird to not talk about it, you know.”

The thing at the bathhouse? Jade wasn’t sure what he- oh.

“It’s fine, Alex. I just wasn’t in the right mind,” she muttered. He knew she spared too many details, and he wasn’t giving up. How could he help his dear sister-in-spirit’s troubles if he didn’t know what they were?

Alex picked up Bullet, who finally got tired of running. Bullet squirmed at first, but then settled and gnawed on Alex’s jacket. “Can you please tell me what happened?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t even told Sebastian.”

“So? Just tell me. It’ll help.”

Jade took a deep breath. “I don’t think you’d believe me,” she muttered.

Alex shrugged. “Who cares. Just say it.”

Fine. “I saw something in the water, okay? Something… um.” Jade gasped and suddenly stopped. Carefully, she looked at him, then continued. “Okay, so I have… I have a big fear of, um… sea monsters.”

“You do?” Alex raised an eyebrow.

The young farmer nodded in reply. “I’ve had some… nightmares, lately, and… I guess they messed me up pretty bad. I was drowning, and a gigantic fish almost ate me,” she explained with melancholy. “I, uh… I saw the same fish in the baths. It took me a quick moment to see it wasn’t real, but it still got to me,” Jade concluded with a frown.

“Oh…” He went quiet for a moment.

Alex gently sat Bullet down and threw an arm around the farmer. “Thank you for telling me… Sorry for bringing it up. I’m glad it wasn’t real, though!”

Jade snorted. “Yeah, me too.”

“How are you feeling now?” he asked.

Well, Jade couldn’t lie. Telling him did help, because at least someone knew. Sebastian worried about her so much… maybe it was fine that only Alex had knowledge of her hallucination. “I’m good now. I promise. But… don’t tell anyone what I said, okay? I just… I want to let it go. I don’t want people to start talking.”
“You have my word, farm girl. Plus, you’re strong!”

Jade puffed up her chest from his remark. “Yeah. I am strong! So... don’t forget it.” She smiled, which made him happy. He could tell she improved already.

“I used to have nightmares a lot too, so I understand,” Alex remarked. “Uh, after Mom died, it was hard for me to sleep, and whenever I did, I’d just have horrible nightmares so it felt like I didn’t get any rest at all. I definitely know how that feels...” He didn’t like the sudden silence, or how she was looking at him, so he cleared his throat. “I-I mean, it doesn’t happen much anymore. I’m fine! Really. Umm...”

“I’m glad you don’t have them much anymore. It must have been difficult,” replied Jade in a gentle manner. She leaned back against him and pat the shoulder the furthest from her. “It must have taken a lot for you to tell me.”

“Whew! It did. Okay, subject change.”

Jade agreed. She didn’t want to stew in their negative feelings for long. “My bunnies get to keep all their fur... Butterscotch has been much sleepier lately and I think she might not be feeling well... I might take her to Marnie later.” Whoops, that wasn’t all that positive, either.

Alex chuckled. “Well I’d be damned if I didn’t want to take more naps in the winter. It’s tiring.”

From there, they talked about whatever was on their minds and enjoyed their time spent. They finished caring for the animals, then Alex and Jade parted ways. To gain extra income since crops were no longer a factor, the young farmer wanted to tackle the mines once more. She prepared proper clothing, food, and checked several times to make sure her phone was with her before marching out of her snow covered farm.

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Jade stopped at the Adventurer’s Guild to see if there were any missions she could take on for the day. She happily greeted Gil, who tipped his hat to her and continued rocking in his chair, and Marlon, who was actually surprised to see anyone that day.

“Hey, Marlon. I thought I’d try to bring in some money today since I can’t exactly water crops. Do you have any missions posted up?” asked Jade as she adjusted the tools on her backpack.

“Alone today? Hmm, be careful,” Marlon stated thoughtfully and stroked his beard. “Now’s a better time than any to do some missions... something fishy is going on. We don’t know what yet, but there have been a lot more monsters appearing. Clear the first few floors of the mine and I’ll make it worth your while.”

The young farmer nodded and accepted the offer, but she seemed cautious. “More monsters? Has this happened before?” she asked curiously. “It’s not like... a mating season or anything?”

“No mating season,” Marlon sighed, frustrated at his inability to properly answer. “This has happened before, but we’ll handle it. Your help is appreciated.”

A gentle, familiar smile formed on Jade’s lips. “Of course, I’ll do anything I can. Thank you, Marlon,” she said with a wave, then quickly exit.

The thought of more monsters made Jade nervous, but she did have a sense of pride that told her to protect her home, and she wanted to get back on her feet with feeling in control of her life. She didn’t want to imagine the annoyance and potential trouble that slimes in town would cause. Instead of
dawdling around, Jade entered the mines and prepared herself for the trek ahead. Right before descending the ladder to the first floor, she took her phone out of her pocket and dialed a number.

“... Uh, Hello?” asked an extremely tired, deadpan voice that belonged to no one other than Sebastian.

“Sebby!” Jade beamed, then paused. “Did I wake you up?”

“No, just waiting for coffee,” he grumbled, then yawned. “I did wake up a few minutes ago, though.” There was a faint meow in the background, followed by a quick retort by Sebastian.

She laughed. “It sounds like you haven’t left my house.”

“Eh, I’ll be out of here after coffee and shower. I need to focus on work. What are you up to?”

“I actually wanted to call because I’m about to go in the mines. There’s a nice buck if I clear out some floors. I’ll try to be safe,” she told him in a serious tone. Her bubblier side normally surfaced to say everything would be fine, but she knew she needed to be real about the subject of safety, especially after all that’s happened. Jade meant it this time.

Sebastian woke up a lot faster after hearing her words. “Mines? Are you dressed properly? Do you have the boots and gloves? It’s cold, are you wearing a coat? And if you get hurt, you need first aid or life elixirs. Please tell me you have that.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at that. “Yes, mom, I have everything prepared! I double checked all my supplies. It makes me really happy to know you care about me so much.”

Jade heard a huff from the phone speaker. “Of course I care about you,” he mumbled. “I’m glad you’re ready. I trust you’ll kick ass.”

“Of course! You get home safe, too. I’ll see you later.”

“I love you, Jade,” Sebastian answered clearly and seriously.

She chuckled. “I love you too, but relax. We’ll speak again.”

A few seconds of silence. “I know...” he muttered, then sighed in defeat. “Sorry... I’m still nervous.”

“I promise you I’ll call you as soon as I can,” Jade assured him.

Sebastian sighed again, this time in relief. “Please do. I love you.”

“Love you too!” Jade hung up first, though it was difficult. She loved hearing his voice, and he sounded so nervous after he found out about her mission to the mines. She didn’t even bother pointing out that he said the same thing twice... it was too sweet.

The amateur adventurer decided that she had done enough dawdling, so she descended down the ladder to begin her mission. Already, the air Changed around her. There was a heavier feeling, one that gave a sense of an unwelcoming presence. She hopped off the ladder and turned to see the first floor; the area was as tiny as it has always been, but slime covered one of its corners and had been spreading over previously brown rocks, as if it had a mind of its own. The sound of Jade stepping off the ladder had disturbed whatever waited in the mines; quite a few green slimes emerged from behind and under boulders and through cracks in the walls. Though the number was manageable, there were more of them than usual. Marlon certainly didn’t exaggerate.
With ease, Jade dealt with the slimes on the first floor. Due to practice and more than one mining mission, she got much handier with her own sword and was much quicker when it came to defending herself. She collected what slime and algae she could and even mined some copper ores and quartz for herself before continuing. Usually she would take the time to appreciate the environment and be quiet and careful, but her purpose was clear for the time being. Eliminate the monsters and move on.

The second floor was the same in behavior, but with a bigger area, more residue, and more slimes. At least they were just slimes, she thought, and not invasive bugs or worse. Despite her tremendous issues with slimes early on in her farm life, the young farmer certainly became skilled enough in dealing with them.

Jade continued to descend, the monsters not giving her any trouble, but there was still that eerie feeling in the back of her head as she cleared them out. The air increased with an odd, heavy impression, and the slimes didn’t seem to be the origin. Something was there, something more threatening. Something she couldn’t see.

Five floors passed, and the ding of a nearby elevator had nearly given her a heart attack. “I think... I think it’s time for me to go back up,” she mumbled to herself. The feeling was too heavy, and whatever it was, she was... scared. Unsafe. Most importantly, she was alone. No more risks... not from her.

The eerie feeling Jade had remained even after she exit the mine, but nothing around her indicated that she was in immediate danger. For the time being, she decided to ignore her own instincts and simply went back to the guild to receive her pay. Providing proof that she had hunted all the monsters on the first floors, she was granted a generous amount of cash that seemed to melt all her cautiousness away.

Marlon felt impressed with all of her work, giving her a nod of approval afterwards. “Feel free to take on more missions whenever you’re free... I’ll be working full time because of the increased spawns.”

Jade kindly bowed her head and stashed all of her goods away. “No problem, thank you for giving me the work. I will say something is... odd, about the mines right now. That weird kind of slime is building up on the walls.”

“That happens when there is are too many slimes in an area. You saw that right as you descended?” he asked with as much concern as there was curiosity, though no tone of voice changed his blank expression.

“Yes, not much, but... it was there.”

Marlon gave another thoughtful stroke of his beard. “Interesting.”

Rather than explain further, he decided to let the young farmer go. They parted on kind terms and went their separate ways. Jade walked around the lake near the mines and went in the direction of Robin’s carpenter shop, then remembered to pull out her phone and get in touch with her worried boyfriend. As she found his number and waited for him to answer, a welcoming figure emerged from the entrance of Robin’s shop.

“Hello? Jade?” inquired Sebastian to his phone as he surveyed the land around him.

“Hey!” Jade shouted as she hung up the phone. Sebastian’s attention immediately went to her, and he approached in such a way that showed an attempt to not appear overly excited.
“Hey,” the raven-hair responded with a full smile. He wore his brand new hoodie over clothes suited well for winter and placed his phone back into his pants pocket. Without hesitation, he greeted Jade with a hug, which she returned amicably. “Well, you seem to be in one piece. That’s good,” he sighed in relief. He was visibly impressed that she was dressed for the weather and the condition of the mines. No less than a scratch on her, though she did smell of dirt and slime.

The young farmer couldn’t help but giggle in his presence. “I told you I’d be fine, and I called you, didn’t I?” She generously grinned and kissed him on the cheek. “Fighting monsters might actually be easier than farming,” she mentioned with gusto.

Together they spent a couple moments discussing the mines, its situation, and their plans for a future. Of course, some of the usual banter was thrown in, indicating that Sebastian finally relaxed enough to bring about his quick wit. Finally, they said their goodbyes and Jade went off to buy some groceries before heading back home.

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When Jade became alone once more, those feelings returned... a strange, horrible presence unsettled her and filled her with dread. She did all she could to relax: showering, fuzzy pajamas, curling up in a blanket with her cat, and sewing together trinkets to sell... But...

Something about the atmosphere made her shoulders droop. Her mind went in darker places than she wanted, no matter how she tried to distract herself. She couldn’t explain it, or even fathom why she suddenly felt this way, but it was... wrong.

That night, as Jade lie in bed in her struggle to sleep, she brought out her phone once more. Finding the same contact she always searched for, she put the phone to her ear and waited. “Hey... Seb? Is it okay if we talk for the night?”

It was as if every negative feeling vanished. Whatever was there was gone.

Chapter End Notes

another chapter done!! whooohoo! this one took way longer to write than i would have liked, but to be honest, i’ve been rather burnt out on SDV. it’s a passion of mine, but i’ve been writing and drawing so much that i think i really just shut down and struggled for a while. after a break though, i’ve had some time to breathe and just kinda do my own thing for a bit, and now i’m starting to get back into the SDV hype. hopefully the next chapters will be easy to write, but take solace in knowing that each chapter is still written with as much love as the last. i can’t wait to continue!

thank you for reading and i hope you enjoyed <3
Jade wakes up to strange and accusatory messages from Abigail.

Friday, Winter 5 Y1

Friday again. Jade hadn’t been feeling great as of late, but her friends and her quality time with Sebastian did help keep her head up. For a few days, she had been venturing into the mines and slaying the various monsters that live there so she could be paid. While she did go a few times herself, Sebastian accompanied Thursday’s trip and ended up spending the night. He initially wanted to stay there for just a few hours and finish up his work on the computer, but ended up falling asleep on his laptop and needed to be carried to bed.

However, there were no complaints from Jade. She loved being able to wake up at his side, and she truly felt comfortable and welcome to be with him. Though he probably wouldn’t admit it, Sebastian had been slowly migrating over to her house. Some of his clothes stayed there, he kept his laptop in the living room, and an assortment of books, games, and even his coffee maker found their place in Jade’s abode. She wondered how his room currently looked, especially since she hadn’t visited in awhile. Not like it mattered much, anyway. Sebastian was with her, and that’s what counted.

Jade woke up not to her alarm, but to text messages. Tiredly, she grabbed her phone from her nightstand to see who would even bother to message her so early.

ABIGAIL: Jadey!!! Hey, I haven’t seen you in a while!

She audibly groaned at seeing the message. Why at this time, and it was Friday... they would see each other that day. What was up with Abigail? The irate farmer checked to make sure Sebastian was still asleep, which he was, and then decided to answer.

JADE: hi abby but you woke me up and i’d like to go back to sleep

ABIGAIL: Sorry, I had another sleepless night and I didn’t think the message would wake you up.

ABIGAIL: I missed you though!

JADE: it’s friday so we’ll be seeing each other at the saloon anyway

ABIGAIL: Hmm, true, but cant we ever hang out alone? Dont you get bored of hanging out with Sebastian all the time?
JADE: if i was bored of him he wouldn’t be my boyfriend abby

JADE: you do realize how early it is right

JADE: i’m sorry but i have to get up to tend to my farm every morning and i’d like to get as much sleep as i can

ABIGAIL: Well...

ABIGAIL: At least answer if you want to hang out today or not.

JADE: again, we’ll be at the saloon, so i’ll see you then and we can game ok?

ABIGAIL: It’s just not really the same though.

JADE: i’m busy otherwise, i’ve been in the mines and caring for my rabbits

ABIGAIL: Mines?

JADE: yeah i’ve been working for the guild

ABIGAIL: Guild?!

JADE: is this new news or something?

ABIGAIL: Have you been going alone? It’s dangerous.

JADE: sometimes i do go alone but seb was with me yesterday

JADE: maru has been asking about more materials so seb and i plan to go tomorrow too

ABIGAIL: Of course.

JADE: what

ABIGAIL: You haven’t thought to bring me along at least once? I love fighting and stuff

JADE: ok one i’m still tired as all hell so i am slow to process anything m

JADE: but two i was told that you hated the mines so i didn’t want to ask

ABIGAIL: I could get over it...

JADE: abby what is your deal m

ABIGAIL: It’s like I never see you without hanging off of Sebastian’s arm anymore.

JADE: excuse me?

ABIGAIL: You know what, never mind.

ABIGAIL: See you tonight.

JADE: ok????????

JADE: is there something you need to talk about??????
Abigail stopped responding. Jade wiped her tired, blurry eyes and then sighed, putting her phone back down across the top of her nightstand. “I don’t have the energy for this,” she mumbled to herself, then closed her eyes in an attempt to sleep.

Not half an hour later, Jade’s alarm clock mercilessly rang to signal the new day. She smashed the alarm button with utmost irritation and sat up with a groan. It felt like she didn’t get any sleep at all, and she could have really used those extra minutes... Sebastian stirred in the bed beside her with a sleepy stretch and yawn, though he showed no intention of getting up anytime soon. Jade decided to reach for her phone to check if there were any messages, and...

Nothing. Even though Abigail seemed obviously upset about something, Jade was rather irritated that it all had to happen the way it did. She bombarded her with messages so early in the morning, then straight up left her hanging? Ugh. Jade got out of bed and went to go shower, hoping it would wake her up.

The shower did what it could, so it did help a little, the farmer supposed. After getting ready for the day, she went on to feed her cat and then start breakfast for her and Sebastian. As if on cue, the raven-hair drowsily wandered to Jade’s location, sleep still on his face and a mess of bed hair on his head.

“Hey,” he yawned, instantly going towards his coffee maker. “Would you believe me if I said I was planning to go back to my house last night?”

Curses. Even when she was in such a grouchy mood, his voice really relaxed her. Her shoulders slowly lowered, though her focus remained on a frying pan; she was cooking pancakes for the both of them. “Normally I wouldn’t, but you were pretty focused on finishing up that work. How far did you get?”

Sebastian shrugged and waited for his coffee to be made. “To be honest, I don’t remember. I guess I was really tired.” He sighed. “I don’t really want to freelance as much as I used to. It’s alright, but maybe I should start looking for another job.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah... I know it’s not really possible, but I’d love a job where I don’t have to deal with any people. I suppose freelancing is alright since it’s all through the computer, but they still stress me out... I do enjoy the jobs themselves, but... eh. I guess that’s just work for you.” He poured himself a some coffee when it was done, then added whatever ingredients he wanted to have the perfect cup. “Though, I guess I shouldn’t complain too much. I’m still getting paid, I guess. There are people who hate what they do, and I’m not one of them, luckily,” he continued, then took a sip out of his cup. “Maybe I should put my ideas to the test. Do some independent development.”

“I’m in the same boat today,” Jade sighed, slipping the finished pancakes onto a plate. She continued to make more as she thought of what to say. “I don’t really want to work.”

Sebastian thought for a moment while he watched her carefully. “It’s a bit unlike you to say that. Rough night?”

The young farmer sadly nodded. “Is it that easy to tell?”

“Yes,” he replied without skipping a beat. “Are you alright?”
Jade put the next batch of pancakes on another plate, then seasoned them both. She walked over to her kitchen sink to clean the frying pan she just used, while Sebastian took the courtesy of bringing both plates to a nearby dining table. The farmer’s boyfriend continued to watch her with focus on his face, as if he was trying to properly read her. She eventually joined him at the dining table and began picking at her own food for a few seconds. “Just a little irritated,” she admitted.

“About what?” he asked, starting to eat his pancakes.

“Uh...” Jade sighed again. She might as well have told him. “Abigail messaged me before my alarm went off, and she was acting really weird. Now I feel like she’s mad at me, and I’m not completely sure what I did.”

Sebastian stopped eating after she talked, trying to think of how to respond. “She messaged you there, huh? Hm... she used to do that with me. It was kind of annoying.”

“I don’t like to admit it, but it was. And now I don’t even know what to say to her.”

“Well, it’s saloon night. I’m sure you can talk then,” Sebastian thoughtfully muttered, then returned to his eating.

Jade sat there for a moment to try to absorb the conversation, then eventually nodded. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. I like Abby when she’s her cheerful self... it’s rare I see anything else.”

“Abby’s alright,” Sebastian nonchalantly added. His tone indicated he had a clear disagreement with Jade, but still respected their relationship. The young farmer didn’t mind, of course, but she was curious about his own opinion.

“You know... I heard about the sort of... falling out you two had? If I can call it that... what happened?” she asked, her nosiness getting the best of her. Her lightened mood finally reminded her how hungry she was, and she ended up eating the pancakes with much more enthusiasm than before.

“Eh...” Sebastian finished his pancakes and leaned back in his chair, taking another sip from his coffee. “To start off, we used to be closer friends. I, uh...” He scratched his head and averted his eyes, almost too embarrassed to be in the same room. “I kinda... had feelings for Abby, for a little while.” Quickly, he turned back to her, suddenly surprised. “This was a few years ago, though! It’s been a long time. The only reason I even think about her is because she is your friend.”

Jade smiled. “I believe you, Sebby. Go on.” If anything, she was relieved. He trusted her enough to talk about it.

“W-well... honestly, I didn’t really know her very well. I thought she was cute and her interests were cool enough, so I admired from a distance I guess. She was still in high school and I was looking for colleges, but at the time I didn’t really care.” Sebastian finished his cup of coffee, then got up to make himself another cup. “She came up and talked to me one day, and we sorta hit it off. We all had fun hanging out, but then it just got sort of...” He sighed. “Just... awkward.”

“How so?”

“Well, she wouldn’t leave me alone.” Sebastian sat back down and drank his refilled cup. “It’s like, I couldn’t go into town without her calling my name when she saw me, and whenever she would go places she’d drag me along, she’d even go to my house when I was working.” He sighed in irritation. “I mean, I liked her, so I did deal with it for a while... but I just got more tired. I was exhausted because she always wanted to talk, hang out, play games, and she didn’t really seem to notice that I wasn’t always up for it.”
“Oh, geez.” Jade frowned, since she knew Sebastian’s space was important to him. The only reason Jade had so much quality time with him to begin with was that it was completely his choice, save for the times his mother dragged him along. She knew she could never force Sebastian anywhere, at least not without him being a grump about it. Even so, he was far more honest in saying when he did not want to do something. That much has changed.

“I wasn’t mad at her for that or anything. I’m not even sure I noticed at the time. I felt pretty shitty for turning down some of her invitations,” he explained. “It wasn’t like she was doing it on purpose... she just wanted time together.” Sebastian shrugged. “But, I don’t know. I think eventually something snapped with me. I wasn’t happy, and I liked her less the more I learned about her. Not that she’s a bad person or anything, but... I knew I wouldn’t last in a relationship with her, and even as a friend she was kind of pushing it.”

“I understand,” Jade replied, urging him to continue.

“Oh yeah, back when we were together a lot, the whole town kind of expected us to be together. That made it worse for me. The culty scene chick and the emo hair goth. Predictable. Like I was being forced into some guidelines.” Sebastian rolled his eyes. “I mean, the whole look she goes for is cool and all, but I learned that I needed more than that...” he sighed once more, looking exhausted. “Man, I feel like a prick even saying this stuff. I’m not being bad, am I?”

“No, you’re just talking about your experiences and feelings.”

“Alright. Because, I mean it, I don’t hate her or anything. There was just a point where I didn’t really want to be involved with her. I try to not make age a thing, but I think she still had some growing up to do... I wasn’t the right person, and some of her actions seemed kinda... forced, like she wasn’t being honest with herself. So, I lost those feelings, and I never really came forward and confessed, even though everyone wanted me to.” Sebastian slowly relaxed. “I think she eventually got the message, but we never really talked about anything. She’d still try to hang out sometimes, but it wasn’t as bad, I guess. We’d all still hang around the saloon. I would say that it didn’t really stop being awkward until you came along and balanced us all out.”

The young farmer curiously smiled. “Yeah?” she wondered.

“Yeah, so we could all do our thing and just... have fun,” he concluded, though he appeared nervous about something. He absentmindedly fixed his hair. “To be honest... I was afraid of falling into the same deal with you.”

Jade snorted in a laugh. “Really? Like what?”

“I dunno, you’re just... all... peppy, and you have a lot of energy. I thought you were cute, but I know where that got me last time. Admittedly, I kept my distance,” he muttered, flushing in embarrassment.

“Pfft, I know I only ever got to see you because your mom pretty much made you.”

Sebastian laughed a little. “I can say no to Abby, but I can’t really say no to my mom... that much is true.” He finished his second cup and decided to just watch her. Both of them were done with their breakfast, leaning against the dining table to focus on each other. “I’m glad she made me.”

“Aww,” Jade remarked, lovestruck. “I’m glad she made you, too. It’s not like I was very outgoing either, so it was hard to try to include myself in the town... people tend to get ‘being loud’ and ‘extroverted’ mixed up sometimes,” she explained. Sebastian started chuckling, covering his laughter with his mouth while Jade sat there, confused. “Hey! What’s so funny?”
“You are loud,” he snorted.

“Well...!” Jade crossed her arms and did a falsely angry pout. “That’s just how I am! Though... I really did try to make more of an effort... I was alone for a very long time. You start to crave attention... or at least, being noticed.” She sighed as she thought. “I don’t even think I wanted to be a farmer.”

That came as a surprise to Sebastian. “Really?”

“Yoba, no. I hated the outdoors. I don’t exercise. If I could have survived on junk food and city pizza, I would have.” She picked at the edge of her dining table as she continued. “I just... No one... would have expected me to become a farmer. I don’t want to be found by people I used to know.”

“... Found by whom?”

“But, I do enjoy it! I like the outdoors a lot now, and I think I’ve put on some muscles... that’s pretty cool, huh? I try to talk to more people, so yeah... And... my animals are my life. And of course, I got to meet you.” The young farmer grinned, but something about it seemed odd to Sebastian. She was hiding something, and it bothered him a lot that she wouldn’t tell.

“Jade... Now, you know I’m bad at confrontation and stuff, but...” He sighed. “Don’t be afraid to talk to me. I’m here.”

Her cheerful disposition failed as soon as it started. “I... Yeah, I know. Thank you.” She flushed a little out of nervousness. “It’s not a big deal. Sorry I made it seem that way. Let’s get back to Abigail.”

“Alright...” The raven-hair sighed and stretched back into his seat. “What kind of stuff was she saying to you?”

Jade grumbled in thought. “About how I always hang off your arm or something.”

“Me?” he asked. “... She could be jealous of you.”

“Jealous?” The young farmer seemed confused. “Well... she doesn’t have feelings for you. At least, she told me she didn’t. Why would she lie?”

Sebastian gave a knowing look. “Did she know you had feelings for me at the time?”

“I... I’m not sure,” she admitted.

“It’s possible she did. Maybe it’ll be good to try to talk to her when you can, discuss things that were never discussed... If I have to, I’ll help.” Sebastian threaded his fingers through his hair as he tried to compose himself. “Stuff like this is always frustrating.”

Jade nodded in agreement. “Yeah... thanks for supporting me on this. I do want us to be friends. There were times I did feel close to her and trusted her, though I suppose we haven’t had many chances to hang out...” She sighed. “Hopefully all of this will blow over.”

Sebastian smiled and nudged her from the other side of the table with his foot. “It’ll be fine. I don’t think anyone is even capable of hating you.” He snorted, “Yoba knows I tried.”

His reply was met with a light kick to his shin. “Like hell you did!”

The two laughed and began discussing lighter subjects while they started to get ready for the day.
Jade did feel in lighter spirits since Sebastian was able to ease her mind. She hoped that whatever tension stood between her and Abigail would be solved, though...

It was time to go to the saloon. Farm work was all done and there was some successful foraging for goods, above and underground. Due to anxiousness of missing Abigail, Jade left the farm a little earlier than she usually did. The evening’s cold proved to be much more harsh than the morning, and as the night arrived, it only got worse. Jade decided to wear Sebastian’s old hoodie under her usual winter coat to stay extra warm, though the thought did cross her mind that Abigail would notice and criticize her for it. The young farmer was lost in her thoughts for a while, namely... why should she feel bad for being close to Sebastian? She didn’t want to feel that way.

Jade walked much further than she realized when she heard a door open and close nearby. Surprised, she looked over. Sam’s house! But where was...

“Hey, Papa!” beamed the ever-so-sunshiney Sam. He popped up beside the farmer and grinned his cheerful grin, but caused her to squeal in the process. After a mini heart attack, Jade calmed down and exhaled in relief.

“You scared me!” she stressed, giving him a light hit on the arm. Sam laughed and scratched his head in slight embarrassment.

“Heheh, sorry! Are you heading to the saloon now? Let’s go together.”

Jade nodded. “Of course!”

And so the two navigated through Pelican Town’s pathways, all of which had snow shoveled away for proper walking. On their way, Sam noticed that Jade was still remarkably tense. Unlike Sebastian, however, his curiosity could only be satisfied one way:

“So, what has you troubled?” the blond asked in a cheery tone, much like before.

Jade blinked in surprise and glanced up to her friend, unsure of what to say. “Um...”

Sam playfully sighed and pat her head as they walked. “Seb didn’t tell me what it was, but he was worried about you.”

“It’s...” The young farmer sighed. “I promise I’ll tell you after saloon night, okay?”

“I’ll remember that!” he beamed. “But... seriously, I hope you feel better. It’s such a drag when you’re unhappy! You and I balance Seb out, you know. I don’t want to lose my teammate!”

Jade responded with a genuine smile and nudged him with her shoulder. “Thank you, Sam. I’ll make sure we keep that balance.” She snorted in laughter and grinned. “I mean, thank you, son.”

“Heyy, there it is!” Sam laughed in return. Time flew by, and before they knew it, they had arrived to the Stardrop Saloon. Finally, they were out of the cold.

Sebastian joined them at the saloon, and for a while they had fun with one another, but Abigail had not arrived yet. Ten minutes became thirty, which became an hour. She was late.

An hour became four. Everyone in the saloon was leaving. She never showed up.

“Sh...should I text her?” asked Jade. She noticed some other townspeople were gone, and aside from Gus, only she, Sam, and Sebastian remained.
Sebastian sighed and put a hand on Jade’s shoulder. “She’ll come around when she does... maybe check up on her tomorrow, but it’s too late to do anything right now.”

Sam watched them both. “So this has something to do with Abby, huh? I’m... not surprised, actually.” He laughed a bit. “Seb’s right, Jade. There’s no use in worrying about it tonight. Maybe she needed some time to herself. We all do, sometimes.”

The young farmer knew both of them were right. “I’m... yeah. I suppose so.”

“We still had a fun night. You should try to get some sleep,” Sebastian suggested. He sighed, “I’d love to join you tonight, but I actually have a lot of work to do. If you need me, though, phone’s always on.”

“Thank you.” Jade gave him a kiss on the cheek, which then ushered a groan from Sam. “What? Do you want one?” she asked, sharp eyes to the blond.

“Maybe,” Sam huffed.

Sebastian laughed. “You should do it, Jade.”

Jade smiled at them both, then reached her arms out and puckered her lips, stomping towards Sam. “I’ll give you a kiss!” she yelled to him, causing him to panic and back away.

“Joke! It was a joke!” he stressed, face flushing. Jade nearly pounced him, but he dodged just in time and used the pool table as a shield.

“So you want one from Seb, too?” Jade pondered aloud. The suggestion made Sebastian laugh.

“You know what, I think he does,” the raven hair agreed, giving Sam a sinister smile, slowly walking towards him as well.

The poor blond was trapped! He screamed and ran out of the saloon as fast as his legs could take him, loudly cursing the two for being evil seductresses. Jade and Sebastian shared some laughter with each other, then left the establishment to see that Sam was waiting right outside for them (albeit with some playful remarks about revenge). The three parted ways to go home, and did so without any trouble. When Jade was alone, however, she couldn’t help but tense up again.

Was that their last saloon night?

Jade didn’t like thinking about it. She didn’t want her negative thoughts to take over, but...

Something inside of her gave a particular vibe. She could feel the answer welling up.

It said that saloon nights were over.

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I end on too many cliffhangers, but hey, yolo. I was going to make one huge chapter but I decided it would be better to cut it in half, as this chapter is nearly 4,000 words!

The issues that this chapter (and the next one) focus on is what I've wanted to focus on
for a little while, so hopefully you enjoy. As Abigail was always kind of an "awkward" character to me, it took me a little time to realize her role in the story. I feel like I haven't been giving her the attention she needs for the complete story, so that's what these two will accomplish.

We'll see how it turns out. ;^)
What a lonely night. Sebastian regretted not spending another night with Jade, though every night without Jade felt like that as of late. He tried to focus on his freelance work, but it proved difficult since he was so worried about Jade and the situation with Abigail. He checked his phone more than usual, but no messages came his way. He wished he had a proper excuse to text Jade himself... she needed a night alone, though. They all did, even if it wasn’t enjoyable. Sebastian did manage to finish a couple jobs, so at least his decision wasn’t a complete waste.

But why did he feel so useless? His brain told him that he should stay out of their business, but his gut told him that there had to be a way he could help. Extremely tired, Sebastian decided to listen to neither and sleep away what he could.

Saturday morning came, and one of his wishes had been fulfilled! As he checked his phone, the screen notified him of a text from Jade:

JADE: I don’t think going to the mines today is a good idea. i’m sorry since we planned it and i was really looking forward to it, but... tell maru i’m sorry too, okay? let’s try again when things with abigail get sorted out.

Sebastian sighed, but he was anything but surprised. “I was looking forward to it, too,” he softly mumbled to himself, typing out a response.

SEBASTIAN: It’s alright, Jade. Did you sleep well?

The text was immediately seen, and right after came a reply.

JADE: not really to be honest...

SEBASTIAN: That’s no good. You should take it easy today, or at least try to.

JADE: i’d love to but i know i have to confront abigail today. i won’t forgive myself if i don’t. i don’t like things being awkward and i just want the situation to be cleared up

SEBASTIAN: I understand

JADE: thank you for asking by the way. i’m sorry again that we can’t really meet up. i was really excited, and i like seeing you get along with maru

SEBASTIAN: There’s always another time, don’t worry about it. The mines will wait for us I’m sure.
JADE: you’re the best
JADE: um but

SEBASTIAN: ?

JADE: i haven’t been clingy or anything have i?? am i really around you that much?

SEBASTIAN: I’d tell you if I was annoyed or felt smothered, I promise you that. We do hang out a lot, but it’s not like we’re massively affectionate in public. I think the worst we did was kiss in front of my mom at the fair, and she was telling us to

JADE: you have a point there. ok i was just making sure

JADE: i’m about to go shovel snow and toss some feed to the animals so i’ll talk to you later

SEBASTIAN: Be safe

JADE: you too with whatever you’re up to today <3

That was the end of that, the raven-hair supposed. A lot of questions must have been running through Jade’s head, but that just gave Sebastian all the more reason to be there and support her. Sighing, he got up and got ready for the day to come. He had a feeling it’d be a long and grueling one.

Sebastian skipped breakfast as he normally did, appearing in the kitchen for just a cup of coffee... or not. There was no coffee maker. He sighed to himself, forgetting it was at Jade’s house.

Tea it was. While he didn’t prefer it as much, the tea was smooth and soothing for the throat, containing just enough sugar and caffeine to get him properly started for the day. Robin and Demetrius were in other parts of the house working, giving Sebastian the opportunity to approach Maru’s door and give it a gentle knock.

“Hey,” he began just loud enough for his voice to pierce through the door.

Maru didn’t respond for a few seconds, caught off guard by her sibling’s decision to even approach the door. “Coming in just a sec,” she answered. Sebastian heard some steps just on the other side, and then the door slowly opened, Maru peeking through the opening with soft and curious eyes.

“I, uh... just wanted to let you know that Jade and I can’t go to the mines today. Your project will have to wait a bit.” He lowered his head. “Sorry.”

It wasn’t good news, but Maru was relieved it wasn’t something worse. “Oh... it’s okay. Thank you for telling me. Did something come up?”

A nod from the half-brother. “Yeah. Jade was looking forward to helping you. If the project can wait, we’ll definitely do it later.”

“I would go to the mines myself, but... you know, monsters and all.” The novice inventor gave a saddened smile. “It’s a personal project, so I can wait. Are both of you okay?”

“We’re fine, just some other stuff to take care of that can’t wait. In fact, I’m about to leave for that purpose. If Mom needs me, I’m in town.”

Maru gently waved him off. “Alright, I’ll see you.”
Sebastian returned the wave and walked away, going back to his room to grab his scarf, hat, and gloves before heading outside. The snow began falling yet again, so it continued to pile on the fields and pathways, also accumulating ice on the sidewalks and street lamps. Sebastian personally enjoyed the snowfall, but with the consistent cold, he hoped that the weather wouldn’t eventually prevent him from going outdoors. With a festival coming up, he felt the whole town hoped for the same outcome. Driving seemed too dangerous for the time being, so the raven-haired man traveled to his destination on foot.

The situation with Abigail was between her and Jade, but Sebastian still wanted a dose of his own answers. For his girlfriend’s sake, he wanted to know why Abigail reacted in such a way and what the real issue was, for he had a feeling it wasn’t about Jade being ‘clingy’. His best opportunity to confront his gothic acquaintance came while Jade was busy, bringing him to Pierre’s general store right after opening time.

Upon entering, Pierre was checking his store’s stock and putting fresh vegetables and fruits up for sale. He heard someone walk through the entrance, boasting a hearty “Welcome!” without knowing who arrived. Lifting his head for a brief moment, he saw it was Sebastian, and his excited demeanor diminished in an instant. “Ah, here to shop?” Pierre attempted to ask.

“Actually, no. I’m looking for Abby. Is she here?” asked Sebastian, glancing at the many aisles of food and goods to appear less intrusive.

“She just left,” sighed the store owner. “I don’t know where she went, since she ignored me when I asked her. I can’t be arsed to care about it right now.”

Sebastian, though not on the best terms with Pierre, could agree with him there. “Thank you anyway. I’ll go try to find her. Have a good day,” mentioned the raven-hair, and then he was gone.

The search for Abigail began with checking her usual hangout spots: the bridge near the shop, the library, the graveyard, the spot in front of the wizard’s tower. She was nowhere to be found, and Sebastian left himself feeling disappointed and somewhat lost. Along the way back to Pierre’s shop, he came across Sam walking to work. They both waved to each other, the taller one grinning while the shorter one awaited whatever banter was next.

"Whoa, buddy, I haven't seen you up so early. I'm heading to work-- what are you up to?" eagerly asked the blond, clad in his employee uniform.

"I'm actually, uh, looking for Abby today. Have you seen her?" he asked.

"Hmm..." Sam put his hand to his chin as he tried to think. "Actually, my mom said she saw Abby head up towards your house. Maybe you two passed each other at the wrong time?"

Sebastian tiredly exhaled in realization. "She wasn't going to my house. I think I have an idea of where she went, now. Thank you, Sam." He gave his best friend a pat on the arm before leaving.

"Don't do anything stupid!" ecstatically yelled Sam. The raven-hair simply responded with a raised hand to signal he heard.

He made his way to the last place he could possibly think of: the mines. Though she was afraid of whatever lurked down the mine elevator, it was the last place people would have thought to look. As he arrived, his suspicions were confirmed; Abigail had an old sword in hand and kicked around a stray rock near one of the stone walls. Her face was expressionless and she was unnaturally focused on the rock she was moving. Even when Sebastian entered, there was no indication she noticed or cared.
Sebastian took a small breath to ready himself. "Abby," he started to get her attention.

She stopped kicking the rock around and lifted her head, but didn't respond.

"You didn't come by on saloon night. What's up?" he asked.

"Don't even pretend like you don't know," she answered, turning to face him. "Did Jade send you here?"

Sebastian shook his head. "No, I came here by myself. I am worried for Jade, but I'm here to fulfill my own curiosity."

Abigail dropped her sword and crossed her arms. "Is that so."

The raven-hair walked up to Abigail, hands in his pockets. "Yep. So, tell me why you're acting this way."

She sighed. "Why should I even talk to you? You never really cared about me to begin with."

"That isn't true, Abby."

"Then what is?" she retorted.

He could already feel that it was going to be a hell of a talk. "Abby," he sighed once more, "I cared about you for a while, and even if we aren't close anymore, I still want to know you're doing alright."

Abigail tried to keep her composure, but didn't answer.

"Tell me. Is this about you and me? Is it really about Jade?"

The amethyst-hair seemed very reluctant to respond. She bit her lip and appeared more upset than before. "I don't know," she eventually said.

"What do you mean by that?" instantly asked Sebastian in reply. "I understand we never really got to talk things out before, and it just got awkward."

"It did," Abigail muttered in agreement. "I... I'm over that, honestly. I don't really care anymore. It was my fault, and I accept that."

"It was both of our faults for failing to come forward," he corrected.

She grumbled something under her breath. "Listen, I'm sure you want to hear that some other girl likes you, but that's not the case. I don't have feelings for you."

"Then what's the issue?" asked Sebastian, ignoring her extra remarks.

"The issue... are you serious?" Abigail looked him in the eye, still somewhat calm but increasing in tension. "Maybe I don't care that we're not so close anymore, Sebby, but that doesn't take away from the fact that Jade's been avoiding me! Even when I tried so hard to not repeat my mistakes!"

"Don't call me Sebby," Sebastian muttered nonchalantly.

"Really? You care about that now?"

He shrugged. "I don't think Jade has been avoiding you. You know she gets really busy with her farming job."
Abigail seemed to be much restless than before and uncrossed her arms to clench her fists. "Ever since you two started dating, you don't go to saloon nights as much anymore."

"We've only missed a couple, and I think they were for good reasons. We had just started the dating the previous day for one of them, and then Jade got really sick."

"She barely gave a hello and a present on my birthday!" the irritated adventurer continued.

"She was sick, I was surprised she even went out to give you anything to begin with," Sebastian responded.

"I can't ever see her on the weekend, she is always busy or doing something-"

"Game nights. We used to invite you to those, but you always found it boring and you didn't enjoy it." The raven-hair saw a bit of a pattern in Abigail's words, and felt like she was trying to find reasons to be angry. There still could have been more, but... he couldn't see much more than that. "As for your texting, you should know that Jade goes to bed early and wakes up early. You tend to be somewhat of a night owl. The timing is unfortunate, but it's not her fault... or yours."

"The few times I really got to hang out with her alone were before she started dating you. How has so much changed in such a small amount of time? It can't be a coincidence." She growled to herself. "Now I can only ever see her when she's with you or you and Sam," she angrily elaborated, "I even helped her try to confess to you!"

Sebastian blinked in surprise. He wasn't aware of Abigail helping.

"I feel like that was a mistake," she grumbled with a scowl. "She's changed, and not for the better, while you pretend to be all high and mighty through her influence," she scoffed. "Don't think no one's noticed."

Sebastian's stiff face softened in an attempt to understand. "Abby... I think you're just trying to find reasons to be mad at her. You want to see her more, that's fine... why not just say that to her?"

"Because I'll just get shrugged off again! That's what always happened."

"What?"

"Well, it sure as hell happened with you," she snapped.

Sebastian took his hands out of his pockets and rubbed his temples. "Alright. So the stuff that happened with us didn't help at all." He slowly exhaled. "Abby, I'm sorry I didn't handle your affection the way I should have."

"I told you already!! It isn't about you!" Abigail snapped. "It's Jade! I have feelings for her, not you!"

They both went completely still and stared at each other in shock. Abigail realized what she said, regret planted on her expression. Sebastian still needed time to process the thought.

Eventually, Abigail collapsed and leaned against the cave wall. Sebastian slowly followed her lead and plopped beside her.

"... I know she's happy with you," Abigail softly muttered. "For a while, it made me happy. I didn't really mind. But it's just. The same damn thing all over again," she breathed in frustration.

Sebastian watched her carefully. "... How long?" he asked.
"Ugh." Abigail stared at the ceiling in thought. "I guess it was more of a fleeting crush at first, but we became friends pretty fast so it just went on from there. I thought we got along great..." She hugged her knees and rested her head on her legs. "But I know she is just nice. I doubt she even likes girls. And when she gained feelings for you, it was pretty obvious..."

The raven-hair emitted another sigh. "I'm sorry."

"I was never going to confess anyway. I thought it'd just go away." She frowned. "But she's the only one who made me feel included. Now, though..." Another sigh. "I wish she looked at me the way she looks at you..."

"Abby, listen..." Sebastian laced his fingers together and thought about what to say next with care. "Maybe she doesn't... feel that way... but, she does care about you. She's been worried about you ever since those texts happened. Do you think it's better if you two aren't friends?"

"I don't know," she answered again.

"If it keeps going on like this, it'll..." Sebastian internally cursed himself for what he wanted to say. "Look, it got awkward with us because we never came forward and talked. I, kinda had feelings for you too, you know. For a long time after that I didn't really know how to feel about you."

"If you're telling me to confess to her, I'm not going to do it. I don't want to impact her happiness like that. It'd just... it'd make it worse, for her."

"At the very least, you should tell her why you've been frustrated. I'm sure she would apologize and try to make it right with you."

Abigail looked at him for a moment, then shook her head. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"Why?"

"You really don't get it." She impatiently tapped her feet.

Sebastian was quiet for a while, trying to think of how to reply. "Maybe I don't," he admitted.

"You don't understand how lucky you are."

"I try to."

Abigail gritted her teeth. "You were the one to tell her I didn't like the mines, weren't you? That's not something I exactly want going around."

"I only told her because she wanted to fight monsters with you," explained Sebastian.

"Maybe I wanted to go..." Abigail glared at him. "Just because you are her boyfriend doesn't mean that you dictate who she hangs out with."

Sebastian sighed. "I get you're upset, but I told her that before we were dating. Also, Jade hangs out with whoever she wants to, and I do the same. It was her choice to not ask you." He took a deep breath. "Plus, I remember when we first came here together. I thought I was doing you a favor."

"It's not your responsibility to decide, even if you saw how I acted!" Abigail yelled. "I'm scared, so what?! I can get better!"

Sebastian tried his best to not get riled up. He found it difficult to truly understand Abigail, but he knew she was upset and never had the chance to really vent her frustrations. Instead, Sebastian kept
his fighting thoughts to himself in an attempt to level with the adventurer. "Fine, I'm sorry, then," he mentioned.

"Too late for that."

Sebastian remained motionless. "I don't care if you hate me. I just want things settled with you and Jade."

"I don't know why I ever liked you... and I don't understand what Jade sees in you." Abigail leaned against the wall again and stretched out her legs, kicking whatever dirt remained away.

"Sometimes... neither do I," he muttered. "But, I love her. I try my best to be a person she deserves."

Abigail's eyes widened. There was silence.

"Prove it," she eventually said.

"What?"

"You've never said that about anyone before. Prove you love her." Abigail stood up and grabbed her sword. Sebastian instantly tensed when she picked up the blade, unsure of her intentions.

"How?" he asked, getting up after her.

"We fight!" she yelled. "Prove to me you'd truly do anything for her like I would, and maybe I can rest easy. My conscience will be cleared."

"Wh- Abby, seriously?" He stared at the sword in shock. "You actually want to do this? This is ridiculous."

Abigail nodded triumphantly. "I love Jade! I'd fight for her without a second thought. Prove you love her more than I do!"

Sebastian was silent for a small moment, trying to sink in the whole situation. "Abby, you've been scared to go in the mines. You haven't practiced."

"Bullshit! Don't say what you don't know. Answer me, unless you think I'm right!" the purple-hair shouted, pointing her sword at Sebastian.

"... You know what?" Sebastian glared at her and confidently nodded. "I'll get my sword," he scowled.

Abigail smirked. "Save it for tonight. 10PM, right here."

“So be it. You do realize if I lose, I'm not breaking up with her or anything like that? Something as petty as a sword fight does not define how I feel about Jade."

“Just be ready, Sebby.”

He almost thought to correct her, but this time, decided against it. “Seeya,” he said, and then was off.
Jade didn't really have the chance to talk to Abigail that freezing Saturday. Even though the young farmer's day was fulfilling due to the work she accomplished, it all felt like it was for naught when she arrived at Pierre's shop, only to be turned away by Abigail herself. She had knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Asking Pierre and Caroline of her whereabouts, they both answered that she should have been in her room. If she was there, she was ignoring her. Despite Jade's enthusiastic nature, she knew when to take a hint. In the end, she slipped a letter under Abigail's door for her to read later and left, defeated.

She texted Sebastian later to detail her disappointment:

JADE: I tried to get in contact with abigail but i think she doesn't want to see me still. ):
JADE: I left a letter for her and hope things will be ok. needless to say tho i'm completely exhausted

Jade checked her phone half an hour later, but Sebastian did not reply. Some more hours passed, and still nothing.

JADE: Are you ok?? or busy?? sorry i've just been worried and idk
JADE: Seb???:)

She checked the time. Middle of the afternoon... she supposed he took the day to continue the work he's been backed up on. "Please answer soon," the young farmer sighed. There was no reason for him to not ignore her on purpose... right? "I'm fine, we're fine," she told herself. "Just nerves." That negative feeling stirred and danced within her conscience. She didn't like the feeling, especially since it seemed so otherworldly.

Jade decided to spend the rest of the day foraging and digging for new objects. Glancing at the many rivers and lakes throughout the valley, Jade had as much temptation to fish as she had fear for its risks. That same feeling formed in the pit of her stomach again, but she decided not to act on it. She found plenty of plants and vegetables to sell along with a few interesting artifacts. Extending her time out of the farm, she donated what artifacts she could to the museum and kept up with other townspeople, even offering to do simple errands for them. She needed to keep her mind busy, since whenever she didn't, she'd check her phone and just be disappointed at the lack of answers.

As night fell, she returned to her farm. Everything was peaceful. No monsters wandered through the fences, the snowfall was beautiful and gentle, and it wasn't snowing so heavily that she had to shovel upon her return. The animals were also doing well, except for Butterscotch, who had been behaving strangely. Marnie wasn't at her store to diagnose, but at least Butterscotch was still eating. Jade did as well as she could have in that point of time, which was good enough until the shop opened, she supposed.

Jade expected any sort of reply from Sebastian by then. One part of her wanted to go to his house and make sure he was okay, while the other part assured her that Sebastian was too busy to answer until after he was finished. After all, Sebastian always returned the texts, even if it took a little while. Jade told herself that multiple times so she would stop worrying, and eventually settled for bed after checking her phone one final time. In moments, she fell asleep, her muscles aching for rest.

Ping!

The sound of a text message caused Jade to wake. She groaned and reached for her phone, turning on the screen. She had only slept a few hours, according to the time, but the text... The text!

Her eyes widened. It was Sebastian! Finally! She woke up a little more as she opened to see what the
SEBASTIAN: I'm sorry for not replying all day, but I had to take care of some very important things.

She was never so happy to receive a text before that moment. Eagerly, she began texting back when she heard a knock on the door.

SEBASTIAN: It's me

Oh, wow. He arrived so late. Curiously, Jade got out of bed and stepped to the front door, cracking it open to make sure it was him. Seeing his silhouette, she opened the door fully as he shuffled inside, strangely without his jacket. Instead, he had a turtleneck on, but no gloves, no hat, no scarf... his extra clothes were all in his hand for some reason.

"Seb?" asked Jade in concern. "What's up?"

He did not answer, and instead stumbled forth to tightly hug her. Jade was tense at first, but relaxed when it was apparent he wasn't going to let go for a while. They took in the silence and breathed in an intimate moment with one another.

In time, he let go of her and looked into her eyes. Something was different about him. He looked more... alive. Gently, he kissed her. "I'd like to sleep here with you," he muttered.

She flushed up heavily and just stared at him, but he seemed too tired to reply and dropped his extra clothes onto the nearby couch. He disappeared into her room, where she stood, dumbfounded. Eventually, she followed him back to the bedroom and settled in her side to sleep. Sebastian had already flopped onto his stomach and hadn't moved an inch, even as Jade adjusted to get comfortable. She didn't get any answer yet, but she was happy Sebastian was safe, and ultimately, by her side.

The next day finally fell upon the valley with clear blue skies and bright yellow sunshine, which managed to melt some of the remaining snow. Sebastian woke up without Jade at his side, though it didn’t come as a surprise to him when he saw the clock: 12 PM. Of course he overslept.

Sebastian shuffled out of bed and fixed the sheets while half asleep. Without hesitation, he made his way to the kitchen where he started up his coffee maker. Finally, precious coffee. He heard the mewing of Jade’s cat nearby, which then walked to Sebastian’s side and rubbed his leg in greeting. Sebastian mumbled a ‘morning’ to Onyx and poured himself a well deserved mug of coffee when it was ready. His next destination was one of the windows that showed the majority of the farm. His face brightened seeing Jade exit her animal barn and watched her approach the house. She walked in and quickly closed the door behind her, shaking off the cold.

“Whew. Still freezing.” She smiled to Sebastian. “Good morning... or, afternoon?”

Sebastian casually sipped his coffee. “Whatever one is better to hear.”

“So, are you going to explain what happened yesterday?” asked the farmer as she took off her winter coat. “I’m glad you’re alright, but I haven’t s-" She suddenly paused, noticing a lump under one of his sweater's sleeves, the spot of which was sliced. The raven-hair noticed her line of sight and sighed, face cringing as Jade lifted his sleeve to investigate further.

There was a bandage wrapped around his arm, the padding dyed a soft pink from what was presumably his blood. She stared at him in shock.
“Sebastian, what is this?” Her nostrils flared. “If you tell me to be safe and stay in contact, I expect you to do the same!”

He sighed. “I can explain.”

“Then please explain!”

Sebastian frowned. “It wasn’t from a monster in the mines or anything like that. I’m just... let’s sit down.” He paused his thought to go to the couch in Jade’s living room, setting his coffee down on a nearby end table. Jade followed him with crossed arms, plopping down and waiting for whatever story he was about to conjure. She didn’t seem to be in a happy mood. “... You have every right to be mad. I’m sorry, but I felt like I needed to do this. You deserve the story.”

“Go ahead, then.” Jade calmed down a bit, waiting for him to continue.

“I found Abby, and she and I, uh, got in a fight.”

“A fight?!”

Sebastian watched his girlfriend with a frown, trying to think of how to best explain. What happened with Abigail, it... it was tough.

He remembered the previous night, arriving at the mine entrance as he was instructed. He heard steps some ways behind him, but looking back, he noticed Abigail, her posture stiff and movement slow as if she knew a less-than-favorable fate. Patiently, he waited for her to approach, then gave a small wave in greeting. “Are you still sure you want to have a sword fight?”

“With all the times you’re asking, it seems like you’re the one that’s not sure.” She smirked at him, portraying the fake confidence that Sebastian was accustomed to seeing.

He sighed, unsurprised. “I’ve never fought another person with actual swords. We can’t just do sticks or whatever? I don’t want to hurt you on accident.”

“You won’t hurt me, because I’m going to knock you down and show you what I’m made of!”

Sebastian frowned. “What is this? Are you trying to prove something to yourself?” Foreseeing her refusal, the raven-haired man removed his precious hoodie, scarf, hat, and gloves.

“Shut it.” Abigail raised her sword. “We’re fighting.”

Jade settled more on the couch as she watched Sebastian. He stared at the floor in deep thought, then raised his head to look at the farmer. “I do admit I did some prodding... I wanted to know why Abby was acting that way towards you, and I know she wouldn’t tell you. I do talk about awkwardness with her a lot, but, truth is... I know her pretty well.” He sighed. “It’s probably one reason she stuck around with me and Sam so long. I didn’t like being around her anymore, but I did know how she was.”

“I see...” The young farmer muttered to indicate her listening.

“I eventually found her and we just talked about some stuff. I don’t think it’s right for me to repeat it,” he explained, taking his coffee again. He downed the rest of it and placed the empty mug back on
the end table, giving himself another deep breath before continuing. “Things got kinda heated and, she waged that we would have a sword fight to settle it. I didn’t really want to at first, but... I think I needed to.”

Jade frowned, brows furrowed in concern. “You could have been hurt a lot more! What about Abigail? Was she hurt?”

Sebastian looked forward once more, recalling the moments of the fight.

It lasted longer than he thought-- Abigail had been practicing her sword fighting, and she was enraged. Without hesitation, she brought down her blade, but Sebastian was much quicker and much more passive. Every strike was blocked, and every step she took forward was every step he took backward. She got angrier and angrier at each strike, but Sebastian could tell it wasn’t the fight that frustrated her.

“I’ll prove you wrong!” she shouted, sweat appearing on her forehead. “I can get by on my own!”

Sebastian did not respond and continued to defend himself with care.

“I’m not going to make the same mistakes!” she yelled again.

He glanced at her once before his attention went back to the swords.

“I belong somewhere!” She screamed, catching Sebastian off guard with a devastating swipe. He had backed away in time, but had dropped his sword. Abigail suddenly froze. She stared at his arm and he looked down. Blood accumulated through a cut on his arm.

“Shit,” he mumbled to himself, quickly bringing up his sleeve and clasping the cut with his hand. Abigail’s eyes filled up with tears, but Sebastian interrupted her before she could say anything: “It was an accident. I know, despite this fight, you didn’t intend to hurt me.”

She immediately dropped her sword and fell to the ground, lying on her back to stare at the blackened ceiling. Only the soft orange light of nearby lanterns kept the top floor of the mines visible. Her tears could no longer be held in, and she silently cried.

“Did the fight make you feel better?” asked Sebastian. His head tilted downwards to see her.

For the longest time, Abigail didn’t really reply. She didn’t move, only staring at the cave’s rock formations, a million thoughts rushing through her head. She built up the strength to reply after many concentrated moments... “If Jade doesn’t accept me, then what am I doing here? What am I doing just following all of you around?”

Sebastian softly exhaled and watched her for a moment. “Abby, Jade still values you as a friend.”

“Just a friend won’t get me anywhere in this town. I’ve always been an outcast. I always will be.” Warm tears streamed down her face, but she showed no expression.

“Then... find somewhere you do belong.” Sebastian frowned. “... I did have Sam, but it’s not like I was really... happy here, in Pelican Town.”

“You weren’t?”

“No. I was saving up money to move to Zuzu City,” he said. The cut started to sting, causing
Sebastian clasped tighter and unknowingly winced. “But... Well... I don’t want to leave anymore.”

Abigail closed her eyes. “So you really do love her that much, huh?” she asked.

Sebastian sat beside her. “I do,” he answered.

More silence.

“You’re a good fighter, Abby.” He smiled a little. “I’m impressed with how much you practiced. Maybe you will be able to go down the mines someday.”

“... I’m sorry,” she breathed.

“What?” Sebastian asked, confused.

Abigail finally looked in his direction. “I... I realize how I’ve acted to you. It wasn’t fair. It’s not fair how I acted to Jade, either. I haven’t found my place here yet, and, it’s frustrating... I thought I could get somewhere with Jade, but...” she shook her head. “I ended up taking it out on everyone.”

It suddenly clicked for Sebastian. This fight. “... It’s okay,” he softly replied.

“Maybe I just liked the idea of being with Jade more than Jade herself,” she sadly laughed. “I don’t think I’m ready for anything like that yet. Seeing you, I... I think what I feel is different. I don’t feel so strongly.”

“It happens,” muttered Sebastian. “We’ve all felt that way about someone before.”

“... Thanks.” She sadly laughed. “For letting me throw a tantrum.”

“You have nothing to thank me for.” Sebastian stood up once more. “You should get some rest, Abby. I need to patch myself up.”

The raven-haired walked to the mouth of the cave entrance and turned to watch her. Eventually, she nodded and got up, grabbing her sword. She walked out before Sebastian did, but paused at the other side of the opening. Quickly and gently, she gave him a hug, then continued walking. Sebastian watched her leave for a while, slowly breathed, and then turned to watch the lake for a few moments. After giving himself a moment, he finally began his trek towards the carpenter shop.

“She wasn’t hurt,” Sebastian explained, pausing to give a moment of thought. “I originally thought I needed to fight her to prove myself, but the reality was... she was the one who needed to prove herself,” Sebastian explained in an attempt to word himself carefully. “But, it was good. I think she felt better in the end, and... I did some thinking, too.”

“Yeah?” Jade tilted her head.

He smiled. “Yeah. I do feel a bit bad for Abby, but... I think she made me realize how lucky I am.”

“Lucky with what?”

“Ugh, don’t make me say it. It’s so embarrassing.” He lightly shoved her on the side, causing her to laugh.

“So, everything’s okay?” she asked.
Sebastian nodded. “They should be. I hope Abby will approach you soon, but, for now, I’d give her time.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. The two lifted their heads from the sound, looking towards the front door. “Man, what timing,” Jade chuckled as she got up to approach the door. No one other than Abigail waited on the other side as she opened it.

“Hi, Jadey,” Abigail began. Her expression wasn’t ecstatic, but she seemed at peace. “I just wanted to say sorry. I overreacted to you, and I hope we’re still friends.”

The young farmer seemed taken aback by the notion that they wouldn’t be friends to begin with. “Of course we’re still friends. I was worried I upset you. I mean, I was a little cranky from the time you texted me, but I know we haven’t been hanging out very much. I’d like us to have those chances!” she beamed.

Abigail welcomed such enthusiasm from Jade. She seemed to be more cheerful than some of her more sad instances; it made Abigail happy, too. “I’m sure we’ll hang out in time. Actually, um, I think I’m going to be more occupied so we may see each other less.”

“What is that?”

“Adventuring is my passion, you know? I think it’s time I took that seriously. I...” Abigail laughed at herself. “I need to grow up, honestly. I’m unhappy here. I’m an outcast. I can’t just... expect that to change, even with you, the newest villager, here.”

Jade’s face saddened from her words. “I don’t think you’re an outcast,” she mumbled.

The purple-haired adventurer gazed at Jade, still smiling. “It’s okay. I think for a while I denied it, but I’ll be happier finding where I belong.” She pat Jade on her shoulders. “You belong here.”

She chuckled a bit. “You think so?”

“I know so,” Abigail confidently replied. “Anyways, I’m gonna be off now. I should probably finish up my college classes.”

“Ah, good luck!” Jade enthusiastically replied. “So... we’re good?”

The adventurer giggled, then hugged the farmer. “Yes, we’re good.”

A sigh of relief from Jade. “I’m glad! Good luck with everything you’re set to do.”

“Thank you.” Abigail grinned and waved as she started walking off. “Good luck with all your stuff, too!”

“Thank you!” Jade shouted as the distance increased between them. When she was far enough away, Jade retreated back inside and joined Sebastian back on the couch.

“Was that who I thought it was?” Sebastian asked, stretching out in his seat.

She nodded and smiled. “Abigail seems a lot better. I’m happy for her, and glad it’s over now.”

“Me too,” Sebastian sighed in agreement. “Now we just have to worry about the Festival of Ice tomorrow.”

Jade’s expression suddenly dropped. She stared at Sebastian, eyes daring him to deny what he said. “... The what?”
A long winter was ahead of them.

Chapter End Notes

Abigail was never a major character by any means in my story, but she still deserved some time in the spotlight and I wanted to address some issues that probably aren't focused on too much, such as Abigail's relationship with the others in town, the bros, and her own immaturity.
Of course, my own interpretations may be different from others, but this is definitely how I wanted to show and develop her in my story. There are a lot of interesting, kinda sad, aspects of Abigail that tend to get ignored. I think she has the most insecurities of anybody, but pretends they aren't there. Relatable in an interesting way.

Hopefully all of you enjoyed the chapter, and also hopefully the whole thing with Abigail didn't come out of nowhere. I did have some plans to address it before the last chapter but for a while it was always hard for me to find where she could go, which is hilarious, since that's kinda part of her character too.

Anyways, thank you very much for reading! <3
Phobia

Chapter Summary

In preparation for the Festival of Ice, Jade tries to get back to fishing.

Sunday, Winter 7 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Why does this town have so many festivals?! Do I have to do anything?? Will Mayor Lewis kill me??” Jade worriedly paced back and forth in her living room, while Sebastian curled up in a throw blanket and watched her from the couch.

“Oh, calm down. It’s nothing you have to do. There’s like, snow men and ice sculptures and stuff. Mom is always excited to go because she gets to help with the sculptures. There’s also the...” Sebastian slowed his words, then glanced to Jade worriedly. “There is, uh, an ice fishing competition. Have you really fished... since... you know...?"

The farmer stopped her pacing to look at her boyfriend. “No... I’ve been too nervous. I know I should get back to fishing since it’s good money, but...” Jade whined, then hugged herself. "It's hard to get back into the swing of things... I still have nightmares sometimes."

Sebastian sighed. "That makes two of us," he muttered, getting up from the couch. He waddled over to her and opened the blanket to hold her and trap her in its warmth. "We can't stay afraid forever, or else it'll take control. Do you want to fish?"

She buried her face in Sebastian's neck and wrapped her arms around his heated torso. "Yes, there's a lot I can do with fish. If I'll be ready for the fishing competition or not, I don't know, but... I want to try. Will you help me get back into it?"

"Yes," he happily answered. "Maybe you could teach me someday, too."

Jade smiled. "I'd like to do that!"

When Sebastian got ready for the day, he and Jade ventured out into the freezing wonderland that was the Cindersap Forest. When the woods opened up to a clearing of the forest, Jade and Sebastian went to the bodies of water just below Marnie's ranch and Leah's cottage. Sebastian carried Jade's backpack for her, while she focused on carrying just her fishing pole, gear, and ice chest. The water was clear, shallow, and swarming with beautiful fish practically waiting to be caught. Occasionally, one or two would hop out of the water, then splash back under to continue swimming. For a moment, Jade was bewildered by the fish themselves, but then her attention went to the body of water and she froze completely.

Slowly, the farmer felt an arm around her side. "It's okay," Sebastian muttered. "It's a beautiful day, no snow falling, and the water's shallow. It's like knee height." He took a deep breath. "This is a good spot to settle. How about we sit there?" Sebastian offered, pointing to a wooden bridge bare of snow.
Jade eventually nodded and breathed at a slow pace. "Whew... Yes. You're right. Um, that's a good spot," she agreed, walking with him to the bridge.

"So, you bought another fishing pole after all?" Sebastian asked for curiosity's sake.

"Actually, no," she replied, loosening her death grip on the pole itself. "It's a gift from the Junimos..."

"They must really like you," he lowly hummed. "Maybe they are saying you can do this, too."

"I-I'll try," Jade answered, staring at the fishing pole in slight fear. She set up the hook and bait while her boyfriend carefully watched, the two of them exchanging gentle banter to distract from the nervousness of fishing.

Getting started was difficult. Jade's hands shook after she cast the line into the water. She started to feel unnaturally cold, dropped the fishing pole, and began crying. Immediately, Sebastian rushed to hold her and assured her that they didn't have to fish. Sebastian retrieved the fishing line, but Jade was in so much trauma that he forgot to take the fishing gear with them. Almost as soon as they arrived, they left.

Jade felt differently an hour later. She felt refreshed again and wanted to give it another go. Sebastian seemed reluctant, but eventually she was able to convince him. They returned to the same spot to try to fish once more.

She lasted a little longer this time. Jade stayed relatively calm until the bait was taken by a fish. She instinctively let go of the fishing pole in horror, causing Sebastian to scramble after it. He reeled in the line, but the fish already escaped. Jade was in shock and spilling tears once more. They left again, Sebastian making the excuse of getting them some food. They took a break with a late lunch, but Jade wasn't finished trying. She wanted to go back-- she needed to go back. Her boyfriend, as worried as he was, saw that this was how she wanted to overcome her fear. She did better, so maybe it would work...

They returned to the fishing spot again. The line was cast, Jade waited with determination planted in her expression, so focused that she didn't mutter a word.

"Jade... Ferngill wasn't built in a day, we can do this slowly." Sebastian watched her worriedly, paying close attention to even the most subtle of clues. Her hands were still shaking, but her eyes were practically glued to the water. There weren't any trees around them, there was no storm, and most importantly, the water wasn't so deep.

"It's irrational for me to be scared, so I need to get over whatever I have."

"No it's not," Sebastian retorted. "It's okay to be scared after what happened."

"I know it's okay," she replied. "But I don't want to be."

There was no working his way out of this one. "Fine, then... but my point still stands. It's okay if we have to keep doing this after the festival."

Jade shook her head. "I want to participate."

"Yoba, you are stubborn as hell." He laughed a bit. "I see what my mother meant about me, now. I can't say I'm that much different when it comes to stuff like this... I respect that you're devoted," he explained, but then frowned. "Just don't get carried away. There's only so much you can do for yourself."
Her focus broke when her eyes shifted to Sebastian. She lightened up a little. "Thank you for worrying about me, Sebby," she murmured. He quickly averted his eyes as his cheeks flushed and spared any verbal response. Jade's smile turned into a chuckle. "I promise I won't get carried away... I wouldn't even do this if you weren't here beside me. I won't until I feel safe doing this on my own again, which probably won't be for a while. Let alone ever fishing at the lake by your house."

"Honestly, I don't even go by the lake anymore except on the path to the mines," Sebastian mentioned, nervous. He brought out a stick of gum from his pocket, unwrapped it, and tossed it in his mouth. He offered a piece of gum to her in which she accepted and did the same. "I think anyone who went through that will stop going around that place," he mumbled while chewing.

Jade thought for a moment and nodded in agreement. "Yeah... But, I do mean it. I'll be safe."

"I'm glad." Sebastian warmly smiled back to her.

"... Um..." She sighed. "I didn't tell you why I freaked out at the bathhouse a while ago. I didn't want you to... worry about me so much."

"What is it?" Sebastian asked with furrowed eyebrows. He tried to not sound aggressive, and instead took a more supportive tone.

"After that whole incident, I've hallucinated a few times. Along with nightmares and these... surreal dreams... they all felt really weird, and important." Jade frowned. "I've... I'm... A lot has been getting to me. I haven't been feeling my best. It's like, every time I try to be happy, there's something, nagging at me, telling me something is horribly wrong. That this is a waste of time. I swear I can hear a voice. It feels heavy on my heart."

Sebastian continued to listen, putting his hand over hers. He made sure to show his undivided attention, though he remained quiet.

She seemed calmed by his interaction, which caused her shoulders to untense. "I... Yoba, I sound crazy," she laughed. "But, I will say one thing... It's hard for me to ever have those nagging feelings when I'm with you. I don't want those feelings to take control, and I want to prove that they won't by getting over this silly fear of water. Water as shallow as this."

"Aww," Jade lowly swooned, returning his kiss. "You're the squishiest."

Sebastian gently kissed her cheek. "Thank you for telling me," he muttered in response. "I understand it's not easy to say those things, and I'm... you know." He nervously chuckled. "I haven't exactly made it easy. I do worry a lot. But I do have a lot of faith and trust in you. I'll always be by your side. We'll get through this together."

The young farmer broke out into a cackle. "No, you are!" she yelled, lightly shoving him. He shoved back, the two engaging in a small play fight. In their scuffle, Sebastian had accidentally pinned Jade on the bridge, her back against the flooring. They made powerful eye contact with each other, excited feelings of love and admiration apparent between their gentle giggles and laughter. For a brief moment, Sebastian surveyed the area to make sure they were alone, then leaned back down to grant Jade a deep, loving kiss.

For a long moment, they held each other, obsessed with one another's warmth and touch. The first kiss gently ended but quickly followed by another from Jade, the two closing their eyes to take in a
Something rattled against the bridge, causing Sebastian to jump up nervously. Jade sat up in a hurry, looking around. "Oh! Fish! Fish!" she shouted, lunging for the fishing pole that struggled to jump off the bridge and into the water.

"I forgot we were fishing," mumbled Sebastian under his breath as she took successful hold of the fishing pole and began reeling. The two brought their concentration on the splashing water, a small fish flapping this way and that to try to break free from the hook.

"You're mine!" shouted Jade in an aggressive manner, furiously reeling, turning the pole, and letting go of the reel in strategic ways to bring the fish up to the bank. When the line was short enough, she lifted the fish out of the water. "Haha! Yes!!" she beamed, marveling in the glory of her small fish. It had a sleek, orangy-tan color and friendly (albeit beady) eyes. "I think it's a perch! I've never caught one before!" she yelled happily.

"Congrats," Sebastian replied with a wide smile. "You did it! I'm proud of you."

"Me too!" the farmer beamed once more. Immediately, she unhooked the fish and brought it back down to the water. It quickly swam away, allowing Jade the time to wiped her hand on her dry winter coat.

Sebastian watched, confused. "You weren't going to keep it?" he asked.

"Nah, I think I'm done fishing today."

"Really?"

"Yeah... I'm happy I was able to catch something. That was my main goal," she explained. She giggled and started to blush. "I think I'm a little too distracted right now, anyway."

Sebastian instinctively flushed as well. "What?" he asked.

Jade picked up all her fishing gear and straddled it in one arm, then grabbed Sebastian by the coat with the other arm to drag him. "Yup, we're going home." She gave him a sly look that only made him more flustered.

"Th...That's not fair," he huffed, face more red. "You're terrible. Don't look at me like that."

"Sebby?" she asked as if she was changing the subject.

"Wh-what?"

She tried her best to not laugh, and instead, blew a bubble with her chewing gum. "I've been, uh, waiting for you to notice that I-"

His eyes lit up in realization and horror when he saw the bubble. "... Dammit!"

She couldn't hold in her laughter then. "I have the piece of gum you were chewing," she finished.

"Don't say it!" He desperately yelled. The poor thing was as red as a tomato at this point, never feeling more embarrassed in his life. He quietly breathed out steam as Jade giggled mercilessly, letting go of his collar to hold his hand. They went back to the farm, somehow closer than before.
Some time was spent back at the farm, but when the two decided to continue their day together, they both left to make some money at the mines. Sebastian insisted the cut he received from Abigail was no big deal, so Jade allowed their mission as long as he was extra careful.

However, when they arrived to the mines, something was amiss. A wooden fence blocked the entrance with a big white sign blaring ‘KEEP OUT’ in red painted letters. Sebastian and Jade exchanged confused glances, then back to the fence. A piece of paper had been taped to its ledge, which Sebastian took off to read.

“Mines have been shut down due to oversaturation of monster spawns. The Adventurer’s Guild deemed the mines unsafe for other guild members and villagers- a professional team of hunters are on their way to fix the problem. Stay out until further instructed.” Sebastian lifted an eyebrow. “That’s so strange... I was here just yesterday.”

Jade shrugged. “Maybe it was good we didn’t go do Maru’s errand... this sucks, though. How often does this happen?”

The raven-hair shook his head, then returned the paper to the fence’s ledge. “I’ve never seen this before, not while I’ve lived here. I been here since I was a kid, too... I hope no one was hurt.”

“We too...” Jade stood on her tip toes to see if anyone was actually in the mines. It looked empty as usual, except a giant cover had been placed on the ladder going down. Sebastian’s phone began ringing, causing him to lift a finger to Jade as he turned away and answered.

“Hello?” Sebastian asked. “... Just outside the mines- I’m outside of it, mother! I saw the sign.” He sighed in irritation. “... I was at Jade’s.” His foot began to tap. “... None of your business, Mother.”

Jade silently giggled, which made him shoot a glare at her. His face was flushing, embarrassed again.

“... Mothe- mom, please slow down. Mom!” He sighed even louder. “Yes, we can come visit-” Sebastian put his hand on the speaker part of the phone and looked back to Jade. “Mom wants help delivering some furniture out of town, do you want to come along?”

The young farmer grinned and crossed her arms. “Yes, I’d love to help.”

Sebastian nodded and put his ear back to the phone. “We’ll help-” he started, but then pulled the phone away from his head again. Jade could hear Robin’s excited chattering from the other end, even though she couldn’t make out what she was saying. Eventually, he returned to speak on the phone. “Mother, you’re going to make me go deaf.” He paused. “Yes, I was sassing you.” Some more silence on his end, but he took his phone off his ear and gave Jade a deadpan stare. Robin seemed to be on some sort of rant. The young farmer tried to suppress her laughter. After about a minute or so, he tried to speak again. “I understand, mother,” he muttered. He flushed a little again, and turned back away from Jade. In a very quiet voice, he mumbled. “I love you too,” he said, then hung up.

“Awww!!”

“Don’t you even dare say anything about this. I swear you and my mom will be the death of me,” he grunted, tossing his hood over his head.

Jade giggled some more. “You have a beanie on, why do you need the hood?”

“I’m extra cold. Shut up.” He pulled the strings of his hood to cover more of his face.

Her giggles transformed into a cackle. “I love it when you’re so flustered. It’s cute,” she mentioned
cheerfully. “Come on, Grumpy. Let’s go help your mom.” Jade decided to give him some space and walk ahead, which had him waddle behind as another flustered mess.

The mountains grew quiet again, even as the sun began to set. A robed figure wandered to the mines entrance and then stood there, waiting. Marlon exit the guild building some ways away and gave a respectful nod in greeting as he approached in a limp.

A breath of exhaustion came from the older, silver-bearded man. “We ain’t what we used to be,” muttered Marlon. “Can’t calm the monsters if we don’t know what’s going on with them.”

“I’ve only seen one type that’s aggravated the monsters like this,” replied the Wizard. “I will look more into it.”

“Can we still hold the festival?” asked Marlon.

“We’ll just keep an eye out. Maybe we will find out some more clues to this phenomenon.”

Marlon nodded thoughtfully. “We’ll be prepared. I’ll warn Linus.”

“I am sure he has felt it already. See if he has any new information.” the Wizard tilted his hat. “Goodnight.”

The mysterious figure faded away like magic. Marlon watched him leave, then put his focus back to the mines. Slowly, he nodded to himself. The guild leader limped away to converse with an old friend.

Chapter End Notes

HOO BOY i have been able to write a lot and I'M EXCITED WHOOHOO

this chapter and the next few ones are average length and typically don't have too much going on, but they're still pretty essential for the story and hopefully they are enjoyable!

what's nice about these chapters is that they aren't necessarily filler but they are the "in-betweens" on developing characters for the next big thing. it's a little weird to write but in the end they end up being just as important as the big event chapters. plus, some fluff in there. fluff everywhere. fluff in your FACE

anyhoo, hope you liked. stay tuned for the next ones to come.
Festival of Ice

Chapter Summary

Jade decides to participate in the valley's first winter festival.

Monday, Winter 8 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Festival of Ice in concept proved to be both exciting and terrifying for Jade. She looked out her window that morning to see a bright, beautiful day with lightly drizzling snowfall, and couldn’t help but imagine all the fun with piles of snow, snowmen, snow sculptures, snowballs at Sebastian’s face... Yes! She absolutely had to go!

Jade eagerly dressed for the outdoors and zoomed to her animals to check on how they were doing. She fed all of them, but paid special attention to Butterscotch, whose behavior still seemed odd. She cursed Marnie under her breath for not being available on a festival day, but Butterscotch was still eating and being very sweet. Her other rabbits, Bullet and Plague, still acted their usual, and the chickens, Mayo and Gloria, laid impressively large eggs for consumption. All seemed well as Jade harvested what goods she needed to, then left them snuggled in the security of the walk-in coop.

Time seemed to pass so slow when she didn’t have Sebastian around. After their errands with Robin the previous night, Sebastian decided to stay in the truck when Jade had been dropped off at her farm. Jade partly felt that Sebastian wanted to join her another night, but he would have been faced with dozens of teasing comments from his mother- too many to handle. The young farmer didn’t blame him of course, since Robin was excessively snoopy and wanted to know how their relationship fared too much to be necessary. The carpenter had nothing to worry about in regards to Jade and Sebastian, though she could have learned to ease up on her curiosity.

When it was time to leave, Jade gathered her fishing gear and nervously began her walk down to the clearing below her farm, where the ice festival was to be held. She could already see ice sculptures on the horizon as she walked, one the figure of the mermaid, another of a mascot, and the last of some kind of castle. One of the villagers, Leah, chipped away at the mermaid, putting her final touches on its scales, while Robin excitedly hammered in more details of the ice castle. Walking forward, she saw more of the villagers spread throughout the field, conversing in front of randomly placed igloos and standing around a small frozen lake. Before exploring to other reaches, she ventured to Robin for a hearty hello.

"Robin, good morning!" beamed the young farmer, then allowed herself to marvel at Robin's creation. "This sculpture is lovely. You have a remarkable craft."

"Please, please, hon," Robin snorted, "call me Mom."

Jade laughed. "You know Sebastian would freak out if I ever did that."

"I know, but he freaks out about everything anyway." Robin cackled. "Oh! Thank you for the sculpture compliments. Leah is helping out too! Talented girl. I hope you enjoy your first ice festival."
It's one of my favorites, if only because I get to build and break stuff."

"Haha, I can see that," agreed Jade. "I'll try to have a good time, thank you!" She was about to walk away, but Robin reached out to her.

"Wait a sec, hon."

"Hm?" Jade turned back to her.

"Do you know when Sebby's birthday is?" she asked.

Jade's face suddenly blanked. She can't believe she never even thought to ask him before... he knew her birthday, but she had no idea what his was! He never even brought it up, oh no... the gift she was working on wasn't even perfect yet! She had so much to do still! A big letter to write! A cute outfit! Jade clasped her head in terror as she tried to assess the damage of the situation, but Robin laughed it off instead. "Wh-what? What's funny?" she asked with accusation.

"You, silly!" she chuckled. "Don't worry, hon. Sebby probably avoided telling you anything... he's so weird about his birthday!" Robin huffed. "But, let's keep it a secret. His birthday is just two days from now: Wednesday, the 10th. I talked with Maru and Sam already and we'd like to throw him a little surprise party."

Jade nervously scratched her head. "I-I got it, but um... if he's not the type to tell people his birthday, do you think he'd be happy about a surprise party?"

The carpenter simply grinned. "Usually, no. But, you're here now. I think we could celebrate his birthday at your house. What do you think?"

The young farmer shuffled her feet in the snow. "I can't think of anything specific to do..."

"We'll handle it for the most part, but you'll have a big role in it! I'll tell you the details tomorrow and we'll get everything set up."

"Alright, but... Seb comes to my house all the time, and often without announcing himself. How can we keep him from coming over when we're setting up a surprise?"

Robin made the most confident cackle Jade has ever heard. "I got it under control! As do you, specifically. We never get to do anything fun for his birthday, but we have the perfect plan now, especially with your involvement. Look forward to some news tomorrow," she winked. "Now, go on!" Robin beamed, giving Jade a light shove. "Go have fun!"

Jade's eyes sparkled in inspiration. She bowed fully to the carpenter. "Yes ma'am! Thank you Robmom!"

"Close!" Robin laughed as she returned to the sculpture. Jade continued her exploration of the festival, heading to the icy lake next. She saw an area full of fishing gear, so she decided to put her equipment down and survey the area of competition itself. Lewis and Marnie seemed to be discussing something, not noticing her presence. Jade tried to not think much about fishing itself, and wanted to handle it when it was time.

The necessities aside, Jade ventured to the snowmen next. She got to see adorable creations by Penny and Jas, the pitiful amalgamation that was the blacksmith's snowman, made only recognizable through Emily's gracious help, and of course, Abigail's snow-goon, only lightly criticized by Pierre. Regardless, everyone seemed to be having a great time. Jade would have liked to build a snowman, but she didn't see anyone she could build with...
At least everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The young farmer often forgot how full the town was, so seeing all the people, though slightly intimidating, warmed her heart. She smiled seeing Alex conversing happily. He shouted something to Penny, which she giggled and responded, and he returned to talking to a few other people. Jade couldn’t recognize them... one of them was Shane, she thought. The other two she hardly saw in town... possibly co-workers? She wanted to say hello, but didn’t want to interrupt. Alex’s cheerfulness was important to her regardless. Jade continued onwards...

Ah-ha. On the other side of the frozen lake, she saw her target. Sebastian was leisurely talking to his dear best friend with his back towards Jade's direction. Sam didn't seem to notice her from the distance, which made it perfect. Jade slowly sneaked forward and shoveled some snow with her hand. As she stealthily made her way to the boys, she crushed the snow into a ball and aimed carefully. "Don't fail me now," she muttered under her breath. She extended her arm backward, keeping a specific eye to Sebastian, then lunged the snowball forward.

A perfectly round snowball pelted his back, causing him to stumble forward with a shortage of breath. Sam stood there in shock, but instantly burst into laughter when he saw the culprit just some feet behind. Sebastian stood up straight and slowly turned, absolutely enraged.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry, that was an accident," Jade started with an exaggerated, breathy tone. "Sebbyyyy! How are you?!"

He said nothing at first. Instead, he dipped one of his hands into the snow and slowly constructed a snowball of his own. "Not well," he nonchalantly replied. "I'm about to mourn the death of my girlfriend."

Jade laughed and ran away as he stepped forward with a snowball in hand. Sebastian's enraged face quickly turned into one of amusement, cursing when his snowball missed the elusive target.

"Dammit. Sam, help me chase her down."

Sam watched while being filled with laughter. "Are you sure this isn't your battle, dude?" he asked between his chuckles. "The look on your face! Ahahahaha! I can't ever get tired of it." Sam's fanfare had been cut rather short by a snowball hitting his face and exploding into tiny flakes. Jade cackled aloud in the distance, while Sebastian tried to hold in his laughter. "Okay, I'll help you. It's go time," he gasped. "You MESSED with the hair, Jade! You are on my LIST!" Sam pointed furiously to the ground and stomped one of his feet.

"Catch me, loser!" shouted Jade excitedly. Suddenly, she had not one, but two people chasing after her. They tried with all their might to hit her with a snowball, but she was just too full of energy. They chased each other around the edge of the festival bounds to not bother the others, but unfortunately for Jade, a pile of snow happened to be in her way. She tripped over the soft and snowy structure, accidentally crushing it and collapsing.

"Ha! Caught you red handed!" Sam beamed, tossing one of his snowballs in the air and catching it. "What're we gonna do with the culprit?"

"Hmmm..." Sebastian slowly contemplated as he saw his girlfriend sit up, still trapped in her own destruction. "Snowballs are not enough. She must suffer the consequences."

"Ahh! Noooo!" Jade cackled, bracing herself when the two shoveled up snow with both of their arms. They threw it all on Jade, half-burying her in a cubby of snow she tripped over. Sam was sure to also toss some of the snow in her hair, for good measure.

"Okay, she's suffered enough." Sebastian laughed and extended his arm to help her up. Jade grabbed
his hand and he pulled her upwards and out of the snow. She stepped out of the pile of snow and dusted off what ice still stuck to her person. As soon as she could, she hugged Sebastian in greeting.

"I got you good, didn't I?" she asked, chuckling.

"Hardy har. Yes. Okay. You're like five years old, I get it." Sebastian replied with a smile, and didn't seem to mind the physical contact in the slightest.

"It's okay, because Seb is six," laughed Sam. "Good official start to the festival!" he confidently concluded.

The three continued their banter with each other, enjoying their time spent. Truthfully, there wasn't too much to do at the Festival of Ice other than goofing around. Luckily for Sam and Jade, they were experts in goofing off, just as Sebastian was an expert in pretending he didn't like doing the same. Time passed by quickly due to their interactions with each other and they were able to see the festival in full before the fishing competition. Jade saw some rather rare sights: Demetrius smiling to the trio, Linus being in closer proximity to the rest of the group, and the Wizard of all people surveying the festival. Everyone seemingly enjoyed themselves all the way to the climax of the festival: the fishing competition.

When Mayor Lewis called the contestants to the lake, Jade grew jittery and nervous. "Do you think I can do this?" she muttered weakly to Sebastian.

"Well, you caught only one fish yesterday, but... you caught a fish. Don't push yourself. Just try to have fun." He smiled. "I'll be watching."

Jade sighed in relief, and looked both ways before giving him a small kiss. "Thank you, I need it." With that, she approached the ice lake again and gathered her fishing gear.

"Rules are simple!" shouted Lewis as the contestants approached their corresponding fishing holes. Jade noticed Pam, Willy, and Elliott taking a part in the contest as well... she expected Willy, but not really the other two. Either way, it'd be a tough match. "The one who catches the most fish wins! Now get ready... Set... Fish!" Lewis blew a whistle for the four to begin. Jade fumbled at first with casting her line, but eventually she did, later than everyone else.

The villagers all watched in fascination. Willy already pulled in a fish. Elliott. Pam next. Jade's hands were shaking.

A tug on the line! Jade instantly began reeling and pulled in her first fish. It was a small gray chub. She glanced over to where Sebastian was, then smiled when she saw he gave her a thumbs up. Quickly, she tossed the fish into a bin beside the fishing hole and resumed.

Hands were still trembling. She began to feel unnaturally cold. "Seb's here," she whispered to herself. He was there. She had nothing to worry about. She could hear the swimming of giant fish, the scrape from its scales. Subconsciously, Jade grabbed her hair with one hand. It was only lightly damp from the snow. She wasn't in the water. She had nothing to worry about.

Another tug from the line, and she jumped in shock, then yanking the pole. She could have done better in reeling the fish in, but she was still able to do so. Another chub. "Good job," she muttered to herself. Good job. She put the fish in the bin and cast her line once more. She noticed she had held her breath, so she slowly exhaled and glanced at all the people. They made her nervous. She didn’t want them to realize something was wrong. She saw Sebastian again. Nothing to worry about.

Throughout the competition, Jade began to relax. Fishing was calm and monotonous, though a little
boring for some, provided some safety for her. She was just fishing small chub out of a hole she could hardly fit in, and she already caught four along with a few pieces of junk here and there. "I'm okay," she whispered to herself. She wanted to be okay. She cast her line for the fifth fish, but then the whistle blew again. Time was up. The four hauled their bins up to the mayor for him to judge properly.

Lewis seemed impressed. "Look at all these fish!" he beamed. "Good job, everyone. Now, the results." For a few moments, he examined each bin. "And the winner is... Willy, with five whopping fish!" Lewis cheered. The whole town applauded accordingly, whistling congratulations to the fisherman. None were surprised, even though the competition was close. Jade had just been one fish off from being tied with Willy, and that was a victory enough for her.

As Willy accepted his rewards for winning the competition, Jade made her way to Sebastian with a trembling body. She smiled to the raven-hair, though he could sense something wasn’t right. Sebastian held her hands and bumped their heads together. “You did a good job.”

“Thanks...” Jade whispered. “If I keep talking, I’ll start crying,” she muttered with a shaking voice. Sebastian nodded in understanding, when Sam approached them both.

“Hey... what’s wrong?” Sam asked with a frown.

“She’s just a little bummed not winning, that’s all. Give us a minute,” Sebastian answered. Sam didn’t need to prod any further and pat Sebastian on the shoulder before walking away.

“Thanks for covering,” she whispered. “Am... am I doing better?”

“Yes,” he said with a smile. “Just rest. You deserve it.”

Jade vigorously nodded and wiped her face. She survived the fishing competition, and even got second place for it. Her heart felt like it was pumping out of her chest, but she was excited. She, for a moment, went through it all despite being terrified.

The festival went into its later stages when everyone started to go home. Jade still felt too frazzled to go back home alone, though she ended up proving herself useful when Robin requested more help with clearing up the festival. Together, Robin, her family, and Jade put away the ice sculptures, with exception to the one Leah wanted to keep for herself. Not everyone could fit in the truck to complete the delivery mission, but the daughters and son seemed more than happy to hold the structures in the truck bed. The sun was already descending down the mountains when they drove off, bringing a swift end to a freezing winter day.

Maru, as of late, has felt much more comfortable being around Sebastian, and by extension, Jade. While riding in the truck bed, she smiled worriedly to Jade. “How are you doing? I was surprised you entered the contest.”

“I’m... I’m good, still a little shaken, admittedly, but it was my choice and I could handle it.” Jade nodded to no one in particular. “Thank you for worrying.”

Maru passed a glance to Sebastian, who seemed well versed in Jade’s stubborn mentality. He kept some form of contact with Jade, be it touching shoulders or having a hand on her leg. While accepting of Jade’s behavior, he didn’t seem to worry any less. Maru felt heartened by their gestures.

“It’s no problem, Jade. So, what are your plans after this?”

“I’m going to take a shower, get in my pajamas, and sleep,” Jade replied with a shiver.

Sebastian lifted an eyebrow. “It’s 6PM.”
“Okay, maybe I’ll eat first, then.” Jade sighed. “Though, I’m not very hungry... Whew, we’ve been talking about me an awful lot. What about you guys?”

Maru gave a warm smile akin to her mother’s. “I’m probably going to finish some paperwork from the clinic I’ve been putting off... Business is much more ruthless in the winter.”

Sebastian shrugged. “Probably work.”

“I hope you both get all your stuff done,” Jade answered in a tired yet cheery tone. She glanced through the back window of the truck; Robin and Demetrius seemed to have a pleasant conversation with each other. Looking back at the siblings, Jade crossed her arms. “I noticed Demetrius was a little different at the festival. Are you fighting less, Seb?”

The raven-hair didn’t expect such a topic to come up to suddenly. “He’s... okay,” mumbled Sebastian, which was pretty much his ‘yes’ to Jade. “He’s not getting on my case as much, that’s for sure. Don’t really know why.”

“Well, you haven’t exactly been one to pick fights yourself, Sebastian,” Maru added. “I suppose everyone has mellowed out.”

Jade smiled. “That makes me happy to hear.”

“I still hate living there,” Sebastian grumbled.

Maru smirked and wanted to give a response, but decided against it. There was no question that Sebastian hardly stayed at the carpenter shop anymore, though she didn’t want to frustrate him by bringing the fact to light. Jade had a very similar thought.

The truck eventually stopped for their errand to be completed. Afterwards, Robin offered to have Jade over at their house for dinner, which she happily accepted. Though Sebastian often skipped the family dinners, Jade’s inclusion insured that he would also participate. Together, they all had a festival dinner and managed to enjoy one another’s company. Robin was more than eager to have a full dinner table and, for once, no significant bickering. She put part of the peace to Jade, though most of it she felt went to Demetrius and Sebastian’s slowly increasing understanding with one another. Her favorite boys haven’t fought for a little while and she was eternally thankful for it.

Jade ended up staying the night after all, though her initial plans still came true. She took a hot shower, borrowed some pajamas from the very kind Maru, then dived into Sebastian’s bed for an early night’s rest. Sebastian himself settled at his computer and silently worked, glancing over to his slumbering girlfriend every once in a while. Unknowingly, he smiled to himself.

It was a peaceful night.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing too much to note this time around; there's some focus on improvement from previous chapters. Things have been going smoothly for a while, huh?

;^)
Chapter Summary

Jade takes care of some loose ends and starts preparing for Sebastian's birthday.

Tuesday, Winter 9 Y1

Jade woke up, feeling achy as ever from fishing, lifting, walking, and everything else, but at the same time, she felt extremely comfortable. She loved her bed, however there was a certain joy in being in another bed. Sebastian’s blankets were thick and warm, and his pillows fluffy and covered in his scent. The only drawback was that he was not beside her when she woke... where was he?

Jade’s question was answered as soon as she sat up from her spot. Sebastian was still in his computer chair, slumped over on his keyboard and completely passed out. The young farmer couldn’t help but giggle at the sight; he was so hard at work that he forgot when to stop. She hopped out of bed and went over to him, suppressing even more giggles when she saw the computer screen. A document of code was open with the bottom of the screen filled with gibberish from when Sebastian’s face pressed against the keyboard. On normal circumstances, Jade would leave him to rest, but he didn’t even sleep in a proper bed! She gently nudged his shoulder. “Psst, hey,” she began.

An unfavorable groan came from the raven-hair. “No,” she heard him mumble.

“You fell asleep in your chair, dummy.”

He was quiet for a moment, but then lifted his head just enough to see the time on the clock. Way too early. He made a noise between a groan and a sigh, then wiped his face, sitting back into his chair. “No,” he just repeated in a quieter voice, rising out of his seat like the undead. Jade covered her mouth and refrained from commenting on the pattern of keys that indented his cheek. He waddled over to his bed and collapsed to where Jade lay previously, grabbing any pillow he could reach to put on top of his head. She let out another giggle and followed him, pulling the blankets over him.

“Night night,” she said in a hushed tone. A shorter grunt came from the raven-hair, possibly a goodnight in return. The young farmer grinned and pat the pillow on his head before turning to the rest of the room.

The room was how she remembered it... for the most part. It wasn’t as clean as it normally was, and didn’t have as much in it. She could blame the lack of cleanliness from having spontaneous company, but Sebastian often cleaned up after himself. The most mess she saw before this merely involved open books on top of shelves and on the floor, near his desk. While there wasn’t garbage anywhere, clean clothes were piled on the couch near his door and a couple of his drawers were open with clothes hanging out of them. Bookshelves seemed emptier and his gaming cabinet had half as many games as it previously did. A few of Jade’s games were on top of the cabinet, probably with intentions to return. Most of the games that were still there were ones Jade owned at her house already. Lastly, the whole room was a bit stuffy. She could see dust accumulate on most of the surfaces. It was apparent he hadn’t spent much time at his home, at least not for a while.

Jade decided to stop her snooping and leave the basement to go see what everyone else was up to. Immediately after reaching the top of the stairs, she saw the friendly figure of Robin walking down
the hallway. “Good morning,” the young farmer cheerily greeted.

“Morning, hon!” beamed Robin. “Some breakfast is in the kitchen if you want any. I’m going to be very busy today, so I gotta get started!”

“Oh, I hope all of that goes very well! Thank you for letting me stay the night,” kindly replied Jade. “I’ll be outta your hair with my clothes and food.”

“Oh please, stay all you like, hon. I’m sure Sebby appreciates it. Oh! Speaking of Sebby...” Robin leaned in. “Birthday plans.” She winked.

“Y-yeah! Yeah, I remember. Okay, what are we going to do?” she asked.

Robin stood back up fully and crossed her arms. “Well, for starters...” She ventured over to her front desk in the ‘shop’ part of the house and dug out two tough strips of paper. Tickets? “There’s a really nice aquarium in Zuzu City. That was one of my first dates with Demetrius, actually.” She warmly smiled. “I think Sebby would really like it, there’s all sorts of interesting animals, huge and spooky. And a frog exhibit. They’re... probably one of his favorite animals,” she cackled. “It suits him, somehow. Anyways, I’m rambling.” Robin offered the tickets to Jade. “He’d enjoy it that much more with you.”

Jade’s face paled. Huge and spooky, Robin said. But... they’d be behind glass cases. There would be nothing like the Legend in the aquarium... right?

“... Hon? You okay?” Robin asked with a frown.

“... Um...”

The mother examined Jade with uncertainty. “Is it not a good idea?” she asked.

“N-no, it is! It is. Sorry. I’m... Fish kinda... Deep water...” Jade scratched her head. She didn’t want to say it. “I’ve just, uh, been a little nervous with water. I’m surprised I could fish yesterday.”

“Ah...” Robin thought for a moment. “Sorry, maybe I should have asked. But... there’s a lot of beauty in wildlife. Often they are misunderstood...” Robin chuckled to herself. “There I go again. Of course you don’t have to go, sweetheart. We can get Sam to go instead.”

Jade stood there in thought for a moment, then silently took the tickets. “I’d like to go,” she answered, softly smiling. “It’s for Sebastian, not me. And I can hold my own. I’ve been trying to get over that whole fear.”

“Are you sure, hon?” Robin placed a hand on her hip as she watched the young farmer carefully.

“Yes.” She hugged the carpenter. “Thank you, I’ll make sure Seb enjoys his time outside.”

Robin awwed and returned the hug ecstatically. “Of course, hon. While y’all are out, we’ll set up a surprise party back at your house. I’ll take care of everything, pay and all. You just worry about keeping him busy.”

“I can do that!” the young farmer replied. She wasn’t sure how Sebastian would respond to a surprise party, but as his mother, Robin knew well enough. Jade decided to put her trust into the carpenter.

“Good!” beamed Robin. “I ain’t asking you to lie or anything. Just have a good time.”

“I will,” grinned Jade. Taking Sebastian out for a birthday date sounded extremely fun, so she hoped
her trauma wouldn’t ruin any of it. “Oh, Robin? Do you know if Marnie’s in her shop today?” she asked.

Robin laughed, somewhat unsurprised by the question. “She should be, but be quick! It’s Tuesday, all the old girls including myself work out at Pierre’s. I know she always seems to disappear when you need her, but maybe you’ll get there in time.”

“Thanks,” Jade answered with a wave. With the tickets in hand, her first destination was to the laundry room where her old clothes were located. She got dressed, stuffed the tickets safely in her pants pocket, then grabbed some breakfast in the kitchen. She caught a glance of Maru and Demetrius in the lab as she head back to the basement, giving them a wave. Sebastian was asleep once more, so Jade left him a note to read when he woke later. Before shooting out the door, she grabbed the fishing supplies she used at the festival previous. There was a lot to do this day.

The young farmer walked outside, eyes squinting from the brightness of the day. The sky was a bright blue, though the sunshine did nothing in making it warmer outside. Piles upon piles of snow scattered throughout the whole land with no intention of melting anytime soon. Jade hugged her winter coat to herself more and continued surveying.

She could see that the mines were still blocked off some ways away. Linus decended from the hill nearby and walked towards the mine entrance, while Marlon approached the entrance from the other way. They met up with each other and began talking about something. Linus turned and saw Jade staring from the distance, causing Marlon to look as well.

“O-oh. Whoops,” she whispered to herself. Jade always got too caught up in the scenery to realize she was staring. Giving an awkward wave to them, she started walking off towards the town. “Hopefully those two aren’t ones for rumors. Who even knows in this town,” she snorted.

The town itself had its usual amount of activity. Villagers went from shop to shop, home to store, crossed bridges and stopped to chat with their acquaintances. On the way back to the forest, Jade paused in front of a bulletin board at Pierre’s shop. There was a calendar that highlighted different aspects, such as birthdays and events. Sebastian’s birthday was the next day of course, then a big festival near the end of the season. Feast of the Winter Star, it said. Jade’s eyes lit up; one of her favorite holidays if not her absolute favorite. Her original city celebrated it, too. Thoughts flooding with ideas and plans, Jade resumed her trek to the forest. Farm first, then celebration.

Oh, thank Yoba. When the young farmer approached Marnie’s ranch, the shopkeeper in question was actually there for once. Jade sighed in relief, since she was running somewhat low on feed and Butterscotch really needed some professional attention. “Hi, Marnie!” beamed the farmer, eager to get to business.

That’s when she noticed Marnie seemed a little... stressed. The woman in question ushered a forced smile to appear amicable, then began organizing her uncharacteristically messy desk. “How’re you doing, Jade?” she kindly asked, though the tiredness in her voice was apparent.

“I’m doing well, thank you. How are you..?”

“I’m fine, dear, I’m fine,” Marnie answered. She knew that wasn’t true, but didn’t know Marnie well enough to really receive more answers. “Can I help you?”

Jade smiled a little, trying not to seem so worried. “Yes, um... I need to buy some feed for my rabbits and chickens, and... one of my rabbits, uh...” She tried to conjure the right words. “Butterscotch has seemed a bit odd lately. She’s much slower than usual, and she’s still eating but I’m worried she is hurt or something.”
Marnie began writing the order down on a slip of paper. “I’ll get your feed delivered—” She waited for Jade to place the appropriate amount of money on the table. “Perfect. Ah, um... Butterscotch is still eating, yes? Nothing else seems wrong? Is it alright for me to check on her tomorrow instead?”

Jade scratched her head in thought. “I’ll be a bit busy tomorrow... But, if I don’t have to be there, you’re welcome to go to my barn and tell me the news afterwards.”

“I can do that. I promise your sweet animals will be under the best care,” the rancher concluded. “I’m really sorry about this, I’ve been uh, somewhat preoccupied, it’s been difficult to keep everything in check.”

“I understand, Marnie. I hope everything will work out for you!” Jade answered in her much cheerier voice.

“If it doesn’t I’m gonna rip that slimy mustache off his face,” she grumbled under her breath.

“What?” Jade didn’t hear.

Marnie laughed. “Nothing, nothing! Okay, dearie, I got your order and I’ll send someone to deliver it to your silo.”

“Thank you and have a good day,” bowed Jade. She quickly left, figuring Marnie still needed some time to herself. Right as she went onto the path towards her farm, she heard Marnie leave and grumble something to herself. Everyone had their own dose of drama to deal with, the young farmer supposed.

Home at last! Jade rushed to care for all of her animals in the barn, making sure they were all warm, cozy, and most of all, happy. After half an hour of feeding, brushing, and talking to the animals, Jade finally went back to her house and immediately shed herself of everything she was carrying; first the fishing supplies were stored, then the winter coat, hat, and scarf came clean off. Jade briefly flopped onto her couch with an exasperated sigh, calculating her next steps.

Aquarium date, huh? Jade dug out the tickets from her pants pocket and stared at the details. It did sound romantic, and Sebastian did have a fascination for certain wildlife. She remembered how he admired the jellyfish, his bountiful trivia about frogs, how he often quietly watched the water. Aquariums suited him after all... fish were beautiful, mysterious, quiet. She knew Sebastian would be worried about her going, but she was crazy if she refused the opportunity to see his childlike wonder. Something told her that she wasn’t the one magnifying the terror she faced back at the lake. The feeling was very foreign. She didn’t want it.

“I gotta look cute...” she muttered to herself, staring at the tickets. Suddenly she shot up from her seat. She knew exactly what to wear!

Ping!

Oh, boy. Who was it? Jade reached over to check her phone.

SEBASTIAN: No

JADE: Lmao, what?
SEBASTIAN: I saw your note. My mother put you up to this. We don’t have to go out anywhere.

JADE: I am taking you out and we will have fun O:<

JADE: Happy early birthday <3

SEBASTIAN: URhglfjlfj

SEBASTIAN: We don’t have to do anything for my birthday. It isn’t a big deal

JADE: But I want to!! you’re a great boyfriend, i want to take you out.

SEBASTIAN: What are we even doing

JADE: I’ll show you tomorrow, but you have to drive

SEBASTIAN: It’s not anywhere fancy is it

JADE: LOL no but it’ll be fun, I promise that

JADE: We’ve only been on one ‘big’ date so it’ll be a lot of fun going out again

JADE: This is coming from someone who doesn’t care about going out

SEBASTIAN: Fine

JADE: I know i implied it already, but it’s a DATE which means it’ll only be you and me. be up in the morning too!

JADE: *kissy face*

SEBASTIAN: You’re such a dork

JADE: Duh <3 now be excited!

SEBASTIAN: Okaaay

JADE: I’ll be busy today, so I’ll see you tomorrow. be a good boy

JADE: No, you’re a MAN now

JADE: How old are you turning

SEBASTIAN: None of your business

JADE: I’m asking sam again because I forgot

SEBASTIAN: No

JADE: Omg you’re turning 26 YOU’RE SO OLD

JADE: Senpai....

SEBASTIAN: UGH

SEBASTIAN: Let me rot in peace.
JADE: Maybe I should get you a walking cane for your birthday

JADE: It'll look like a wand from solarion chronicles

SEBASTIAN: I hate you

SEBASTIAN: And Sam

SEBASTIAN: And everyone.

JADE: LMAO I’m just teasin. tomorrow will be fun, I promise

JADE: Have a good day <3

SEBASTIAN: Ok <3

SEBASTIAN: You too

Jade lost the track of time from having so much fun talking to Sebastian. With their conversation out of the way, however, Jade was ready to continue her plan. She first scrambled back to her room to pick out a nice outfit for herself. Even if it wasn’t something super fancy, she still wanted to look nice... Jade laughed at herself, thinking about it. She never really wanted to look nice for another person before.

After her clothes were sorted out, she walked back into the living room and brought out her sewing supplies from a cabinet near the television. Her surprise for Sebastian was nearly complete, and it would prove to be a wonderful birthday gift for him. She really hoped he would like it despite it being a bit cutesy... Quietly, she continued sewing and putting the finishing touches on her gift.

Lately, Jade couldn’t feel very comfortable being by herself. She was cheerful, but the longer she spent in silence, the longer she worked on the gift, she began to feel depressed. She could have blamed it on anything; the freezing weather, the health of one of her animals, not being impressive with her date, and of course, the fear of being lost in the lake once again... but she knew that wasn’t the reason she started to feel that way.

She paused her work for a moment and stood up, staring to the staircase that ascended to the second floor. Slowly, she walked to it and checked the front door before following the stairs upwards. To the right, there was the computer and gaming room, as usual. She spent much of her time relaxing in there. The room itself was the same as before, tidy but crammed with games and consoles.

There was a room to her left. The door was always shut, and no one ever questioned it, thankfully for her. When she moved in, she used it as storage for all the boxes and extra stuff that wouldn’t fit in other reaches of the house. For some reason, she never finished unpacking all of the boxes, and never cleaned out the room- no. She knew the reason.

Jade stood there for what felt like an eternity. She knew what she needed to do, but did she have the will? The strength? Maybe she could get over the fish in time, but not this. Not this. This was the whole reason she came to the valley. The reason she ran away. Her feelings worsened. It always happened like this. Whenever she would feel comfortable, that voice would begin nagging again. It would say that he’s still after her, that her efforts were in vain. She could remember the phone ringing. The texts. He was after her, he said. She could remember it again.

It couldn’t ruin her day again. Not again. Not tomorrow. She was tired of being under the control.
She couldn’t run away again. Not again. Even if she wanted to.

Jade opened the door and walked inside. She shut the door behind herself.
His Birthday

Chapter Summary

Jade takes Sebastian out to celebrate his birthday.

Wednesday, Winter 10 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Sebby! Someone’s at the front doooor!” shouted Robin from her front desk, engrossed in her work.

“You couldn’t get it?” sighed Sebastian as he walked out of the basement. He zipped his hoodie up as he approached the door.

“Wait!” Robin yelled once more. Obediently, Sebastian walked over to her. She gave her motherly smile and fixed a stray strand of hair on his head.

“Seriously, mom?” he grumbled.

“Yes.” She chuckled. “Go have fun.”

“It’s just a date. We’ve been on them before,” he replied.

“But it’s your birthday! It’s extra special. Okay, bye now!” waved Robin.

The raven-haired man sighed, but smiled to his mother for her good intentions. He parted her with a wave, then opened the front door.

“Happy birthday!!” beamed Jade as soon as Sebastian opened the door. She greeted him with a loving hug. “Are you ready for today?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he said as they let go of each other. “You haven’t told me where we’re going yet.” He noticed her hair was poofier than usual and topped with a soft green and black bow. She had a winter coat on, but he could only see black leggings and boots underneath. Was she wearing a dress?

“Oh!” Jade dug into one of her winter coat pockets, then showed him the tickets. He took them to examine.

His eyes widened. “Aquarium?”

“Yeah! It’ll be fun. Don’t say it,” she snorted.

“... But are you sure?”

“Yes. This was my choice.” Jade nodded and smiled. “You’re such a worry wart. This is for you, though! So, how about it?”

Sebastian watched her with simple curiosity; he couldn’t keep his stoic expression and smiled back at
Jade enjoyed riding with Sebastian on his motorcycle, since it allowed so much closeness and a
degree of safety that she couldn’t properly describe. She held tightly onto his torso while they left for
Zuzu City, head leaning to his back as she watched the scenery pass them by. The drive itself took a
while, but the day was so beautiful and roads clear that it didn’t really matter.

The young farmer at least found herself to be useful when they got to the city and Sebastian needed
help with directions. Together (and with their phones) they navigated their way to a parking space
closest to the aquarium. Jade was trembling, but this time it was due to excitement. Her heart pumped
as hard as it did on their first date; there was just something about spending a day exclusively with
someone she loved.

They could already smell river water as they entered the aquarium building, a scent familiar to both
of them. The floors had dark blue carpeting while the walls shown a light blue, bringing a lot of
space and aquatic feelings. They went through the entrance and used their tickets, so the entire
aquarium could then be explored at their leisure. The first exhibits were saltwater focused, clad with
different buzzwords and species to entice some attention.

"Have you ever been to an aquarium?" asked Jade, eyes focused to the first exhibit’s entrance as they
walked.

"When I was little, yes. Mom said I really loved it, but then I'd act jealous if Maru got to go."
Sebastian scratched his cheek as he thought. "I was apparently a very lively kid."

Jade laughed. "I can believe it. Well, no Maru this time. I've never been."

"This'll be a different experience for both of us, then," the raven-hair gently commented. The two
went into the first exhibit, which already captured Jade’s complete attention. There was a gigantic
hallway with divots of rooms, small tanks on both ends, leading to larger tanks at its end. The fish
flourished with life in their tanks, all sorts of sizes and colors, different ways of swimming, the
amount of attention they paid to passersby. Sebastian couldn't tell that she had a bad experience
before, but he supposed aquariums were different.

He found himself watching Jade more than the fish themselves. Every time she saw a fish she
thought was interesting, she'd softly call his name and talk about what she found interesting. They
would read the names and types of fish together, comment on the sillier names, and then make banter
and jokes as they continued walking. Jade was always grinning with her eyes sparkling as she
watched the water... it reminded Sebastian of when they first saw the Moonlight Jellyfish together,
how she'd stare and watch with fascination. Though he wanted to focus, she was more interesting
than the fish. When she noticed him, they'd briefly make eye contact, then smile at each other. His
heart was pounding too.

Exhibit went into exhibit and the two forgot they were even on a date to begin with. Both of them
were happy, chatting, taking pictures, and enjoying every moment in its passing. Any nervousness
they felt was gone, and any ounce of professionalism that came with a date was no longer there. It
was just Jade and Sebastian, and that was all that really mattered. They watched in awe at seahorses
and giggled at how they wrapped around plants and each other, became lost in the slow drifting of
the glowing jellyfish, then teased and cursed each other when they couldn’t get a proper picture of
the only giant sea turtle in the aquarium.

Some tanks were low to the ground and allowed visitors to touch the fish; Sebastian seemed reluctant
to do so at first, but Jade nagged him into it. They felt the strange and slimy stingrays, and as they continued on through the exhibits, got to feel the bumpy spines of sturgeons. The couple had completely let loose at that point, excited to see what fish were next. There could have been beautiful fish, weird fish, unbelievable fish, and...

Frogs. Sebastian belonged to Jade until there were frogs. Sebastian saw the frog exhibit, and his face lit up as if he were a child. Eagerly, he took Jade to one of the tanks and began pointing out the specie names, providing his own trivia and even gave insight to ones he caught before in the valley. He never talked too much unless he had something to explain, so Jade really loved when he went on one of his trivia rants. She remembered when she first got to hang out with him, they would play video games and he'd excitedly talk in-depth about technical details, the story, the characters he enjoyed. He had so much knowledge about things he loved, though not many chances to really show it. In talking about frogs, Sebastian noticed that Jade was watching him more than the frogs themselves. He flushed in embarrassment and sighed. "Sorry. I got a little carried away," he muttered.

"No, I was listening." Jade giggled. "I just really like it when you talk so much," she admitted. The girlfriend leaned down to watch a bright yellow and black tree frog. "So, they're that color for a reason, you said?"

Sebastian took a second for her compliments to sink in. At first, he seemed dumbfounded, but then he averted his eyes, blushing. "I'm not used to getting praised for that," he weakly replied.

"I've always loved it, Seb. Now, don't stop there!" she grinned.

His face lit up just like it did before and turned back to the frogs. Happily, he continued his explanation. He remembered he never had to hold back with her; maybe Abigail or Sam didn't care, but she did. He couldn't explain how that felt to himself, nor the amount of appreciation he truly had for the gesture.

They approached the final exhibit: river giants, the largest freshwater fish in the world. While Jade didn't seem to mind, Sebastian suddenly appeared nervous. Before they entered, he stopped her.

"Are you sure you want to go through this?" he asked. "I mean. Let’s be real. The fish you saw was pretty giant."

Jade shook her head, still with that warm and loving expression of hers. "There is only one of the Legend. That was the fish I saw. It has never been caught before, and those who have tried, have suffered at its jaws."

"For some reason, that doesn’t make me feel any better," Sebastian grumbled with crossed arms.

She laughed and started walking, nudging him on the back to get him to continue. “I’ve been thinking... and I don’t really know how to explain it, but I feel like those fears aren’t... mine. Drowning, I think, is pretty terrifying to me. It’ll take a while to really be comfortable with water again, but... the fish... Every time I see one, fearing them becomes more and more foreign,” she explained. Her voice lowered to ensure that Sebastian could only hear her: “I relived that day so many times... And I can’t forget what the Legend did, it was so strange and it just... it pushed me closer to the surface when I couldn’t move anymore. It probably could have charged me, or eaten me, or anything like that, but instead it... pushed me.”

Sebastian watched her, silent.

“I’ve told you a little about the Junimos and their missions before. One of their missions was... ‘Gain
the respect of the lake god”. They took the scale that you found in my hair and considered the mission completed. That was the lake god, and it... respected me?” Jade sighed. “I’ve been so confused about it all, but I do believe it helped me that day. If it didn’t push me, maybe Maru wouldn’t have reached me in time.” The two held hands again, though they stopped walking. “... Sorry. I know we shouldn’t talk about something so serious on this day of all days. But, I’m fine, I promise. I think I’m learning better about my place in the world.”

“I’m... just glad you’re safe,” muttered Sebastian in return. “... We should really look through those missions again. What kind of tiny rainbow fairy assholes consider almost dying a mission?” he asked with a huff. He began walking again, guiding Jade along.

She couldn’t help but chuckle at his comment. “Maybe they can see the future or something.”

“With all the magic stuff in this world, I wouldn’t doubt it. I think I prefer keeping it a fantasy, though,” Sebastian answered.

“Aw, you don’t wanna cast heal on me?” she laughed again.

“No,” he snorted. “I’m a wizard, not a healer. I thought you knew me better than this.”

“Can wizards heal? Let’s ask Rasmodius.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “We’d probably get a lecture... Oh, here are the fish.”

The last exhibit consisted of a gigantic room with the walls as the fish tanks. Species of all kinds fluttered through the water, from giant stingrays and catfish to enormous types of carp found in only certain parts of the region. A specific type of fish caught Jade’s eye; it had a narrow head and small eyes, but its body length stretched farther than a person’s, each scale the size of a human’s palm. It had large, flowing fins on its latter half, and the spaces between the scales turned red at its backside. The fish strolled through the water elegantly, ignoring the stingrays and catfish that roamed at the bottom.

“Wow.” Jade just stood there and watched.

“The board says it’s an arapaima,” Sebastian mentioned. “Maybe not a lake god, but it is beautiful.”

“... Thank you for accepting the date,” Jade said.

“Huh?”

She leaned her head on his shoulder and continued watching. “I just want you to know that I really appreciate these moments. This was a lot of fun.”

Sebastian brought his focus to the fish as well. He slowly exhaled and took in the moment. “Yeah,” he muttered. “I do too.” He didn’t necessarily want to say it, but he didn’t mind celebrating his birthday if it meant days like this.

All the exhibits were explored, so they exit the building. Before getting back on the motorcycle, the couple ventured to a nearby diner and had a celebratory meal together. They laughed, ate, exchanged banter and became breathless from the funniest inside jokes they had. Sebastian walked into the date with a neutral expression, but came out grinning. Eventually, they made their way back to the raven-hair’s motorcycle and prepared their leave.

“Hey, we’re going to make a pitstop on our way back. Is that alright?” asked Sebastian, offering her a motorcycle helmet.
“You mean, somehow extend our date even further? My, I’ll really have to think about it,” Jade answered in an exaggerated, breath filled voice.

“I forgot I still have to abandon you at a random door step. I think I’ll drive you to that right now.”

“Hey!” laughed the farmer. They mounted the motorcycle and she hugged onto his torso as normal. “Threatening me? Yoba. You’re the worst.”

“I know,” he grinned. The two drove off and left Zuzu City once more. Jade wondered where they were going when she saw they had no more place in Zuzu City... she never really thought to ask how far Sebastian drove at times; she just knew he loved riding, and she loved having the opportunity to enjoy it with him. The sky already started to dim as the sun began its descent, signaling such a fulfilled day for the couple. Scenery appeared more familiar as they drove on, and then Sebastian turned off the road.

For the second time in knowing each other, Sebastian stopped his motorcycle on a cliffside. There were a couple of clouds floating behind the horizon that showed Zuzu City’s silhouette. Jade’s heart began pumping again. “Your favorite spot?” she asked.

Sebastian dismounted his motorcycle and walked to the cliff’s edge, deciding to sit down. Looking over to her, he pat a space beside him. She put her helmet on the vehicle and quickly joined him. “I actually haven’t been here in a while,” he said.

“Oh?”

“Mmhm... I often went here to just de-stress and think about life, since it’s just so calm and beautiful. I’ve been pretty busy lately... I’d like to come here more often,” he mentioned. “I never get tired of the view, though. I thought we could watch the horizon together.”

“Aww,” Jade swooned. “That sounds really nice.” She inched closer to him so their shoulders would touch. Slowly, she leaned to him. They were quiet for many moments, simply taking in the environment around them. Jade closed her eyes from being so relaxed, while Sebastian’s focus was towards the sky’s changing colors.

“Um...” Sebastian started. Jade opened her eyes, but didn’t move.

“Hm?”

“... I know I don’t show it all too often, and the phrase itself may be overdone, but...” Sebastian flushed and gently nudged her. “I love you, you know.”

Jade’s smile widened. “I love you too, Sebby.” She lay his head on his shoulder. “I can always feel it.”

“Good, because I mean it...” He made a large sigh of relief. “I feel like I’ve opened up a bit more. I’m not so stressed. Little things used to bother me all the time, but lately I’ve just been more at peace,” he explained. Sebastian turned his head to look at her, then began to stroke her hair. He thought of adding onto his statements, but nothing really came to mind. Silence was just as important.

Jade lifted her head to gaze back in his eyes. Slowly, they leaned in and kissed. She smiled as his hand went from her hair to her cheek, which she gently held. “I hope you’re having a wonderful birthday,” she muttered.

“It’s been perfect,” he replied. “I, um... I don’t look forward to my birthdays, usually. Mostly because it’d just remind me that I was still in the same job, still in the basement, getting older and not
going anywhere. It felt very embarrassing.”

“Ah, I understand.”

“Yeah... Haha, I hope this doesn’t sound weird, but I’m excited for our future.” Sebastian gently kissed her again. “I feel like I’m getting a lot out of life now.”

For most, Sebastian’s trust proved to be difficult to obtain, but for Jade... they were connected. There was nothing to hide. Instead of replying, the young farmer kissed him back. They spent more time with one another, watching the red sky on their own terms.

Sebastian and Jade returned to the farm just before the sun set. When both of them went inside, they shed from their winter layer of clothing and settled inside. Sebastian noticed her dress, then; he thought it seemed familiar. “Shame it’s been freezing outside... your dress is cute,” he mumbled, trying to seem inconspicuous.

She giggled, ecstatic that he noticed to begin with. “Thank you, I wanted to look nice for your birthday.”

“Aww...” He coughed. “Ugh. Emotions,” he joked. “You know, I half expected there to be a surprise party or something, knowing my mom and Sam.”

Jade’s eyes widened. Her house was void of anyone, even though Robin said they would throw a surprise party. “… I actually thought so too,” Jade admitted. Huh. “Oh well. It’s still nice with you and me. I have my present to give you!” she beamed.

“Aw, you got me something? You didn’t have to.”

“Yeah! I’ll be right back-”

Bam! Robin busted through the front door, holding a fancy birthday cake. “It’s your birthday!” she yelled, several other villagers following behind her: Sam, Abigail, Maru, Penny, and even Demetrius, all in party hats. Sam and Abigail dramatically entered while throwing confetti, while the others carried their respective gifts. Sebastian jumped from shock of the sudden entrance and clutched his heart. Jade stood there, lost and confused.

“I know you don’t like surprises, but it’s your birthday! Live a little!” shouted Robin. “My man’s 26 today! Let’s celebrate!”

For a brief moment, Sebastian’s expression was a mix of shock, rage, and confusion. Jade watched him worriedly and reached to comfort him, but then he actually... laughed. “You were just waiting to do something like this, weren’t you?” he asked, though he already knew the answer.

“Yes,” Robin grinned. “I promise we’ll get out of your hair, just have a piece of cake and let us have you for a little bit. Jade’s had you all day.”

“Yeah!” shouted Sam. “He was my boyfriend before yours,” he said in a snobby manner to Jade.

“You wish,” snorted Sebastian.

“Okay, okay, sorry. Brofriend.”

“That’s better,” the raven-haired man laughed.
Only the beginning of their celebration was really loud. The rest of the time was spent eating cake, chatting, talking about anything that came to their minds. Sebastian opened the few gifts from his friends and family and calmly thanked them, happy to receive anything for his birthday. All was well, until there was a knock on the door.

“I’ll get it,” Jade said as she walked over and opened the door. Marnie was there, seeming exhausted and somewhat troubled.

“Miss Jade, could you come with me to your barn for a moment?” she asked. “There’s something you need to see.”

Everyone quieted down, curious to what was going on. “I’ll be right back,” Jade told them, then followed Marnie to the barn. “Is something wrong? I’m sorry... I was out all day today, I didn’t know it’d be so late,” the young farmer informed Marnie, frowning.

“Just come look, dearie,” the rancher replied. Both of them went through the barn doorway to see Jade’s livestock.

Her two chickens were nesting off on the side of the barn, dozing and ready to sleep, while the three rabbits were sleeping already... with six other baby rabbits. Jade gasped and slowly went over to them, leaning down. The kits were just born and curled up to their mother, Butterscotch. Butterscotch herself woke up from the commotion and groomed what little ones she could reach before settling back.

“Holy Yoba,” Jade muttered in awe. “Butterscotch was pregnant. Now I know the signs,” she nervously laughed.

“Congratulations, Miss Jade,” Marnie said with a smile. “They were born just a few hours ago. They’ll need to be with their mama for a while, but I’ll happily buy some of them off of you when they’re old enough. Just keep watch over them and make sure mama gets fed,” she explained.

Sebastian knocked on the side of the barn entrance. “Hey, everyone else left. They wanted to tell you goodnight,” he said to Jade.

“Aw, thanks... Seb, come here,” she whispered, ushering him over. Sebastian wandered to their side and noticed the litter. “It’s their birthday too,” she lightly giggled.

Marnie watched them both with half admiration and half jealousy, then stood up fully. “I gotta go home too. Have a good night and stay warm you two,” she remarked, then left. Jade and Sebastian both kindly waved her off and brought their focus back to the litter.

“Wow,” Sebastian said. That was all that could really come to mind. They spent some time watching the mother with her babies. Jade didn’t want to ruin the moment by saying anything, but she couldn’t help herself when she saw that Sebastian had taken his phone out and aimed it in the direction of the rabbits.

“Are you taking a picture?” she asked, amused.

“Shut up,” he replied. That was a yes.

“Pfft... You can visit them all you like. I think when they grow up a little and their personalities show more, we should name them. What do you think?” she asked again.

Sebastian appeared as if he was actually considering something. “Name one of them Dreadlord Xarth,” he deadpanned.
“I’m not naming a bunny Dreadlord Xarth,” Jade sassed, rolling her eyes. “It has to be something original. Like Darklord. Or Maximum Deathguise.”

Her comment caused the raven-hair to laugh. “Please, for the love of Yoba, name one of them Darklord.”

“We will see,” Jade snorted. “Oh, yeah. I need to give you your present, still. Let’s leave these little guys to sleep,” she stated and stood up. Jade and Sebastian left the animals’ home and shut the door behind them, then finally went back to the farmer’s own house. Robin did her motherly duty and nagged Sam into sweeping up the confetti mess he made in mere minutes, so the place was relatively clean. There were a few opened gifts and the remaining cuts of cake on the kitchen table while everything else went untouched. Sebastian flopped over on the couch and let out an exasperated sigh, and Jade walked off to some other part of the house to retrieve his gift.

“Uuugh. Finally done with walking,” the raven-hair groaned. “Too many interactions today. I think I might be done talking until next year.”

Jade walked back to him, amused. “Calm down, drama queen. You still have this.” She offered him a very small gift box that could fit in both of his hands. “Last surprise of the day.”

Sebastian quickly sat up to receive the gift, then narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously (and jokingly) before opening his gift. His expression immediately softened as he pulled out a carefully crafted plush; its design struck Sebastian as very familiar, and he couldn’t put his finger on the answer until he noticed there was a backpack strapped behind its wings. “Holy shit, did you make the little bat kid with his batpack?”

Jade laughed. “You remembered!”

“Of course I remembered. That was the first night we spent together, wasn’t it?” Sebastian eagerly examined the plush. “Thank you, I love it- wait, is this a- Yoba, how did you know?” He noticed a certain clear-blue jewel embedded on the bat’s chest. It was unmistakable; that was one of his favorite finds from the mines, called a frozen tear.

“I’m just observant,” snorted Jade. “I’m really happy you like it. I was scared it was too cute.”

“I love cute stuff,” he said in such a serious tone. “Why else do you think I’m dating you?”

Immediately, he ruined it. Jade tackled him and Sebastian laughed, trying to defend himself. They play fought for a moment before they both decided they were too tired and lay on top of each other on the couch.

“Sorry, sorry. Cute and deadly I should say.” He smiled and kissed her head.

“Damn right,” Jade jokingly huffed. “I wrote a really cheesy and personal letter to go along with your gift... but it’s... whew, it’s what you could call ‘embarrassing’,” Jade said and mocked his voice.

“Is it, now?” Sebastian asked with an eyebrow raised.

“Mmhm.” She tossed a closed envelope onto his face. “Read this when you’re alone.”

“Will do,” he replied and grabbed the letter. He cradled it and the plushie to one side of his chest, while Jade rested on the other side.

She closed her eyes, comfortable from his warmth. “You’re my favorite loser,” she murmured.
“I can feel it,” he chuckled. They spent the rest of the night together, finally able to take a break from all the commotion that came with birthdays. Sebastian’s birthday came to a fitting conclusion.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is now a little over a year old! Man, time flies. But we are getting closer to the end, though when that happens is unclear.

I'm very lucky to be in such a loving and warm community and I'm so glad that I got involved in Stardew Valley to begin with. Thank you all for all the support, and thank you to all of those who have been patient and have enjoyed the fic so far. I hope you'll continue to enjoy as the fic starts to go to the end! Writing this fic has absolutely been a blast and I'll continue to say it until I'm blue in the face.
Dear Sebastian,

I’m writing this letter to you because there is no actual way I can tell all this stuff to your face without crying or spontaneously combusting, or both. We’ve been through so much together in this time, and we’ll be going into the new year together too. We’re approaching my first full year living here, and I wouldn’t be the person I am today without you at my side. I’m sure girlfriends and boyfriends say these mushy things to each other all the time, how they love each other and they couldn’t imagine their lives without one another, blah blah, but I’m serious. You changed my life, and helped me improve as a person. I can’t ever thank you enough for that.

This year has definitely been the best in my life to date, and never have I got to know so many spectacular people and call them my friends. I never even dated very much, so I was extremely nervous when I gained feelings for you. For a little while I pretended they weren’t there, because I didn’t know how to handle it. Eventually, Abigail pushed me to try to confess, and well, here we are. I’m learning that I shouldn’t just... put things on the backburner. If I continued to do that, maybe we wouldn’t be together today. Maybe I would have been even more careless. I don’t want to live a life like that anymore.

There are a lot of things about me you deserve to know, especially since we’re in this relationship for the long run. I’m sure you’ve noticed some other things about me, things that I try to ignore and pass off as minor. It’s always been difficult for me to truly talk about it. Even though I may be loud, and talk a lot, and generally pretty cheerful, it’s really hard for me to open up to people. I hate that feeling of vulnerability, or the thought of people using information against me. I completely trust you, though, and I feel like I can completely be myself around you.

SEBASTIAN: What the hell Jade

SEBASTIAN: I read your letter this morning

JADE: oh

Sebastian quietly read over the letter, locked in his basement room. He lounged back in his computer chair with a lamp and his computer screen providing ample light for the letter. After wiping his eyes, he read it over again to make sure he got everything right. It was a lot to take in.
I wasn’t very happy when I first moved to Pelican Town. To make a long story short, I’m sort of a runaway. I used to live with my brother, but I was able to leave and take all my stuff while he wasn’t there at the apartment. I pretty much lived on the road until the house your mother built was finished, because the last thing I wanted was to go back to that apartment. It was a pretty rough year, but I survived, and I was very relieved when I found a new place I could call home.

There are still a lot of things that stay with me from when I lived in the apartment and when I was on the road, so I don’t really feel... with it all the time, if that makes sense. I didn’t have a very good relationship with my brother. We fought constantly, both verbally and physically, and we parted on pretty rough terms. He was one of the few people in my life, so it was pretty hard to transition to just being alone for a year, then to the valley as it is now. there is more i should tell you, but i’ve tried to write this three times already and i really don’t want to worry you more than i probably am now.

I guess the main reason I’m telling you all of this is because I don’t want to hide anything from you and pretend that my past doesn’t exist. I need to accept that the circumstances in which I came here happened, and that this is all real. Most of all, I need to remind myself that I shouldn’t run away anymore. I want to stay in Pelican Town as long as I can, I want to be with you and to be happy. Real happiness.

Thank you for all the times you’ve called me out and confronted me. Thank you for worrying about me, and thinking about me. Thank you for loving me. I hope I can become the good person you really deserve in your life.

Love,
Jade

P.S. If it helps lighten this letter up a little bit, it took me a lot of willpower to not address the letter to ‘Seboober’ or ‘Mama S’

Sebastian coughed a laugh when he finished the letter, though his vision was too blurry to properly make it out the second time he read it. He wiped his tear-filled eyes again and responded to Jade on the computer.

SEBASTIAN: You gave me feelings too early in the morning
JADE: omg...

SEBASTIAN: I’ll keep the letter safe. I understand it may not have been very easy to write, but it means a lot to me.

JADE: i’m glad and i’m especially glad i didn’t scare you off with that letter

SEBASTIAN: Of course not. We’re in it for the long haul, like you said. That’s kind of scary to really type out, but I like to think we’re both comfortable enough with each other to admit that we can’t imagine dating anyone else.

JADE: yeah, for sure. it’s also nice, though. i’m glad we can rely on each other!
SEBASTIAN: Follow up question, totally not related, at all, but can I come over

JADE: of course you can come over

JADE: can you come hold me

SEBASTIAN: Hell no

SEBASTIAN: You're holding me

SEBASTIAN: I'm the one that just read all this

JADE: LOL did it really affect you that much??

SEBASTIAN: How can you even ask me that

SEBASTIAN: I can’t even type it out

JADE: omg seb...

JADE: seboober...

JADE: come to me my love

SEBASTIAN: No

SEBASTIAN: (leaving now)

Winter has proven to be a very successful season for both Jade and Sebastian. After reading Jade’s personal letter, Sebastian went to visit her home to spend some quality time. For some days on, their lives were fairly uneventful but pleasant. Jade started to fish more with Sebastian cheering from the sidelines, and eventually she fished as naturally as she did before. They went to visit the Community Center a few times, Jade eagerly showing him the completed rooms, and decided to spend some afternoons relaxing in the building.

The mines were still closed, and coincidentally, the young farmer saw Marlon outside at a more frequent rate. Occasionally, he would greet Jade and ask if she has seen anything strange outdoors; she’d always respond with a negative, but hoped he could take care of whatever he needed to take care of. Jade and the carpenter’s family had a hunch that something was going on, but none of them could really figure out what it was. Either way, many villagers found the blocked off mines as disappointing.

At least there was more to do than to find ores and gems. Alex began visiting the farm more often, seeming in much higher spirits. Tutoring with Penny was going well and he excitedly told Jade of a fellow Sam introduced to him. Nothing romantic set in stone yet, but sparks were indeed flying. Jade felt relieved and happy at how situations were improving for Alex, and especially loved him coming over more often. The athlete in question wasn't thrilled that Sebastian was usually at the house, but in time they learned to deal with each other more.

Sam also started to make some unannounced visits, mostly because Sebastian was there so often. The three enjoyed banter with each other and gaming upstairs, and on game night he actually spent the night since their Solarion Chronicles game lasted into the morning hours. While Jade enjoyed her rarely rewarded solace, she was happy that her home was being used so often. It was like she had a
family there already.

Jade and Abigail met a few times that week, but it seemed to be more of a farewell. While the winter began calming down, Abigail told her family and friends that she was leaving town for a little while. With nothing but a sword, backpack, and a rented horse, the young adventurer left for her journey of self discovery. She promised to write letters and that she would still visit the town, though Pierre and Caroline didn't seem to take the news very well; they eventually did come to the realization that there was little they could do to really stop her. Sebastian felt surprised by the news, but pleasantly so— he had a sense of pride for her and hoped she would do well. Needless to say, Jade already began missing her.

In Abigail's honor, Jade decided to do some more exploring herself. She ventured with Sebastian to the ruins near her house on a particularly sunny day to share the beauty of the forest, though their visit was cut short when they noticed the Wizard patrolling the area. He seemed to be searching for something, but the two couldn't really figure out what. To spare a lecture from Rasmodius, they quickly left before they were noticed.

Jade enjoyed having Sebastian around regardless. When he wasn't doing his personal work or assisting Robin with her orders, he was actually willing to learn and help with animal care. He accidentally slipped a fact that he had been reading books about farming, which Jade found touching and adorable. Outside of working, they both liked to be alone, but they were still near each other. If Jade was in the kitchen, Sebastian could be in the living room. If Sebastian was upstairs, Jade was just outside. When Jade did her farm work, Sebastian relaxed on the porch and watched her from the distance, often working on his laptop as well. They fell into a routine they both enjoyed.

The last week of Winter arrived and life couldn't have been better: Jade had less of her depressed moments, Sebastian's relationship with his family slowly improved, and the other villagers became more hyped by the coming holiday.

"So, does every townsperson get a letter about who they are to secretly gift?" asked Jade towards her boyfriend. The two spent another freezing afternoon in the Community Center's crafts room. There was a large window at the far end that provided a beautiful view of Pelican Town, and there were a few tables to allow more productivity. While Jade was sorting the yarn made from her rabbits' wool, Sebastian was sitting on a table across from her, working on his laptop.

"Yup, even the kids," Sebastian answered without looking up from his computer screen.

"Ohh." Jade finished sorting, then took one bundle of yarn to start knitting. "Are we allowed to tell who our secret people are?"

"Lewis probably would say no, but I don't think people care that much."

The young farmer nodded thoughtfully. "Mine is Penny. I think i'm going to make her a hairband... her hair is so pretty, and I think this green would fit her nicely. What do you think?"

"Uhh... I don't really look at Penny. I guess so?" Sebastian shrugged.

Jade laughed. "Do you look at anyone?"

"Not usually," he mumbled. "Sam got mad at me once because I didn't notice a haircut he got."

"Sam? Mad?" The farmer laughed some more. "There are two things he takes seriously in the world: his skateboard, and his hair."

"And his guitar. You know, he had an old one, and it took him so much willpower to get rid of it."
He sighed. "Though, I guess I'm no better. I still have my old PC in the basement. I don't have the heart to get rid of it when nothing is really wrong with it."

"Hah, that's understandable!" Jade beamed. "Oh, I forgot to ask. Who are you the secret Santa for?"

Sebastian thought for a moment, trying to recall. "Uhhh..." He eventually rested his head on the table. "... Oh. Maru, I think."

"Oh, that's a neat coincidence. What are you thinking of doing?"

"No idea. She'd normally be easy to get gifts for, but the mines have been closed off..." He seemed troubled. "I've never been good at this whole... gift thing."

Jade smiled and stopped what she was doing to watch him for a moment. "I'm sure she'd be happy with whatever you give her."

"Hah, you say that, but I'm stuck on getting a genuine gift or giving her something to freak her out." He sat back up and reclined back in his seat. "Too bad it's not frog season..."

"Holy Yoba, you're such an annoying brother," she chuckled.

"It is a title I take pride in," Sebastian joked. He crossed his arms and stared to the ceiling, humming in thought. "She still hasn't been able to finish her personal project yet... oh, you know what?"

"Hmm?"

Sebastian looked to Jade. "Have you ever been to the Calico Desert?"

She seemed surprised and perplexed. "The what?"

"It's the opposite way of Zuzu City. It's hot there, even in this time of year." He reclined back. "But, there are mines there too. I wonder if we could get something there... I've never been to the mines, though. And I hate the heat. And the desert. You know what, nevermind, I'm buying her something online." He began pecking at his laptop's keyboard, presumably searching for products.

The young farmer smiled and returned to her knitting. "It'd be nice to visit sometime and see what's there. It's always fun exploring new places, though... if something is wrong here, would it be the same there?"

"I have no clue," Sebastian answered. "Maybe we could take it up with the guild later."

Jade nodded. "That sounds good."

They were quiet for a little while, and in time, Jade started grinning to herself. Sebastian happened to glance at her and notice her change in expression. "What's got you all excited?" he asked, still continuing his work. Jade stopped knitting and rest back in her seat for a moment.

"I was just thinking of our conversation. You called your room 'the basement'."

"Well, that's what it is," Sebastian simply answered.

"Yeah, but you didn't call it your room. How often are you even there anymore?" she asked.

Huh. Sebastian never thought of his time in the basement that much. "Uhh... Barely, to be honest." He scratched his head. "It's not really home."
"Yeah, you're at my house so often that you might as well call that your home," joked Jade.

They both froze and stared at each other. They suddenly realized it wasn't that much of a joke.

Sebastian averted his eyes and fixed his hoodie's collar. "Uh... well... it wouldn't that much of a stretch... Like half my stuff is there."

"Y-yeah... It's kinda weird when you're not there, to be honest..." Jade cleared her throat and covered her mouth in an attempt to distract her blushing. "I wouldn't mind if you, um, stayed, you know."

"... Really?" he weakly asked.

"Well, um, would you like that?" the young farmer stuttered.

Evening fell to the valley. All the villagers finished up their jobs and began to wind down for the nighttime. Jade and Sebastian entered the carpenter's shop just as Robin was about to leave to get some fresh air. "Oh, hey you two! I'm afraid shop's closed now if you're wanting some stuff, hon," she first addressed them both and then just Jade.

"I'm not here for that, Robin, but thank you. We, uh, have something we'd like to talk about," the young farmer replied. Robin noticed both of them seemed rather nervous, which was unusual especially in front of her. Curiously, she stood and watched their mannerisms.

"Okay, what is it?" Robin said, widely smiling.

Sebastian coughed and straightened his posture. "Mom, I'm moving out."

Robin's jaw dropped. "What?? Really?"

"Yes, you deserve to know. I appreciate that you've let me stick around for so long, but I've decided where I want to live," he muttered. He tried to maintain a proud stance, but he didn't really know how Robin would react. Slowly, he crossed his arms and avoided eye contact with Robin.

Jade saw that he needed a bit of help. "He'll be moving in with me," she mentioned. "It's a big enough home and Sebastian and I are comfortable enough to live together."

Robin continued to stand there, absolutely stunned. Her lack of response was terrifying for the couple, especially since she was so loud at all times. It was rare they truly saw her speechless.

"I've stayed with her many times before, and I already help with housework. You don't have to worry about us," Sebastian continued on, still nervous. "... I'll still visit from time to time."

Suddenly, there came a sniffle from the carpenter. The couple glanced to each other, then to her in horror.

Robin grinned, but her eyes were tearing up. She wiped her eyes and tightly hugged Sebastian. "I knew this day would come, but I didn't expect it to happen like this," she replied in an elevated tone. Sebastian hugged her back and pat her back when he heard her crying. "I'm very proud of you, and I know you'll be responsible." She let go of their hug, then laughed. "I thought you were going to say you were engaged for a minute, but this is good news, too."

Jade blushed. "No! Just moving in."

"I know, I know. It'll be a good learning experience for you both. Dem moved in when we were
dating, too. Sebby was probably too little to remember," the carpenter laughed.

Sebastian groaned. "Okay, before you get all started on the baby stories, I'm going to leave."

"Aw, no! Let me reminisce." She proudly cackled and hugged them both instead. "It makes me happy seeing the both of you together. Let me help you move in, at least."

"All my stuff can probably fit in the truck anyway," Sebastian muttered. "Can you help tomorrow?"

“Yes! Absolutely!” Robin beamed. “Are you going to tell the other two?”

Sebastian wanted to say something akin to ‘they don’t really care’ but knew Robin would unleash her sass and rage if he did so. Instead, he simply shook his head. “You can tell them. I'll go ahead and pack some stuff,” he answered. Immediately, Robin went off to other reaches of the house, while Sebastian and Jade went back to the basement together.

“Whew. That was surprisingly nervewracking,” Jade mumbled. She sat on one end of Sebastian’s couch while watching him dig out a carrying case from his closet. “I’m glad she took it well. Though, I guess you’ve been around a long time.”

“Yeah... I think all of them knew that there wasn’t a place for me here, anyway. That’s part of why I hardly got along with Demetrius. He always thought I was being lazy and just taking advantage of Mom’s kindness. I’m pretty sure he wanted to kick me out as soon as I turned 18.”

“Well, some people just simply can’t afford to leave. It’s not like Maru is going to stay here forever, either. How old is she? 21?”

"Yup. And I guarantee you if you ask him why Maru hasn't moved out, he'll say stuff like, 'oh, she helps with the lab, and she doesn't make much money from the clinic' while simultaneously ignoring all the times I've helped Mom with her work and my freelance job." Sebastian rolled his eyes. "It's not worth getting worked up over now, though. I won't have to deal with any of that anymore."

"You're right," agreed Jade. "We may have to adjust some, but it's also really exciting. I'm sure you'll be a lot happier working at the house and having places to relax without being forced into a basement corner."

"I like darkness as much as the next guy, but I'm honestly pumped to get to be by a window. Spring's coming, too. That'll be some nice breezes," Sebastian added. He packed some clothes and various personal objects in the suitcase, then began cleaning out his closet and dresser. Jade got up to help him in hopes to speed up progress.

"Yeah!" Jade grinned. "That's the spirit. And plus, it's a pretty big house. It's kind of a waste to have only me in there. I always loved company." 

Sebastian suddenly stopped, then groaned to himself. "Sam is going to be so annoying about this."

"And Alex," laughed the young farmer. "They can't help but tease. It'll get old for them, I promise."

Sebastian warmly smiled to her. "Yeah, you're right." They continued packing up and got some stuff organized for easier moving the next day. On their way out, Sebastian decided to carry the suitcase so he wouldn't have to worry about it later. The young couple happily discussed anything that was on their minds when they went back to (what was soon to be) their house.

The thought was nearly surreal, that Sebastian was going to live in such a beautiful house with someone he loved. He imagined he would end up in a small city apartment, maybe find a roommate
if he was lucky to split costs. Having a girlfriend and actually living with her never really crossed his mind until his relationship with Jade really sunk in for him. This was real, wasn't it?

In any case, he didn't want Jade to have any concern with him as a housemate. He generally kept to himself and didn't cause much of a mess. He hated housework, but then again, he didn't know anyone who generally liked it. Sebastian still felt extremely nervous, and had fears of what Jade would think of him as a true housemate, but he still walked on and knew he had to go through it. Most of his fears were in his head, and he was sure Jade ran the exact same scenario in her head as well. They were walking into a kind of commitment, and that in and of itself was both terrifying and exciting.

"Hey, if I annoy you or something you'll tell me, right?" Sebastian asked when they returned to the farm. Jade could tell there were several thoughts weighing heavily on his mind.

"Of course. We've always been honest with each other," Jade cheerfully answered. "You should do the same with me. Of course we'll get into little arguments here and there, but that's normal, yeah? We've had big ones already," she mentioned.

"Yeah."

The young farmer gently touched his hand to try to reassure him. He reciprocated and held her hand back, building up the courage to look at her. She smiled from the contact. "I'm glad you no longer have to leave to go back to your mom's place," she muttered. "It'll be good for both of us."

He leaned in closer and hugged her. "Yeah," he said again. "It will."

Chapter End Notes

I was mulling over whether this chapter approached too soon or not, but this is chapter 49 and I've been beating around the bush that Sebastian considers Jade's home as his own for a while now. It seems a little sudden for both of them, but truthfully they've been feeling it for a long time.

Things are moving on up and hopefully life is improving for the folks of Pelican Town. Guess we'll have to see what happens next!

small edit 12/20/2018: changed a few lines of dialogue in this one to be more in character
Reflection

Chapter Summary

Sebastian takes a last look at his old room before moving to his new home.

Tuesday, Winter 23 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sebastian stood in what used to be his bedroom. The walls were still rocky, the ceiling was still damp and covered in pipes, and the floor was still smelly and creaky... but it was his past home. The only pieces of furniture-- a bare bed and unused television-- were left. He tried to describe how he felt in his head, but it was... complex. On one hand, he was more than happy to leave the carpenter shop. He didn’t belong there, he didn’t fit in with his family except maybe his mother. On the other hand... he grew up in this house for almost his entire life. Granted, he didn’t always live in the basement, but it was still his own space that he could retreat to. Having his own home was terrifying in a way. There was a lot more responsibility... of course, though, Sebastian knew he couldn’t turn back. The decision was already made, and eventually, he would be able to drop the nostalgia.

Robin entered the room and noticed him stare at the then-empty walls. She crossed her arms and waited to give him a moment before fully approaching him. “Hey, everything’s packed up now. You ready?”

“Hm?” Sebastian glanced to her, then sighed and nodded. “Yeah.”

The carpenter smiled and nudged him with one of her elbows. “I know it’s a big thing, but you’re a smart young man, and I think you’ve thought about this more than you realize.”

“I guess so,” he muttered. “I’m excited, but... I don’t know. This is the right time, right?”

Robin laughed. “I don’t think I told you the full story about how I moved here. Maybe it’s appropriate to do so now.” She made her way to the empty bed and sat down, patting beside her. The raven-hair complied and joined her, quietly watching her.

“So, your grandparents were a little... strict, with lifestyles. They didn’t really think that a woman should be doing jobs that required a lot of labor, and expected me to be more of a housewife than anything. They hated your father, you know, because he was one of those types that didn’t follow any kind of norm. They hated how he had no real structure, and didn’t want me to be that structure either.” Robin snorted. “I was so mad at my parents, with how they didn’t agree with my dreams, and how they wouldn’t accept that I loved your father. We got the idea to immediately leave and just start a life of our own. I didn’t think twice about it.”

Sebastian simply watched her, engrossed in the story. Robin laughed in thought as she continued speaking:

“We lived in a cramp cabin as I started building this house in the valley. I got pregnant with you, but I didn’t stop building,” she explained with a grin. “I actually think you made me work harder!
Though of course people were worried about me, but I was always a tough gal. You were a healthy, beautiful, and super tiny baby."

"Moomm," huffed her son.

"You were! It was love at first sight. Your father loved you too, you know."

"You’ve never really talked about him much other than when you were dating," Sebastian murmured. "Well... not even your parents."

Robin warmly smiled. "There’s a reason. I try to not dwell on the past, and I just don’t want anyone to feel bad for me. I’ll always love my parents, and I even love your father, still. But I couldn’t live up to my parents expectations, and your father, well... our excitement was very compatible, but we brought out the worst in each other, too. It turned out neither of us really had structure. It happens, sometimes. You get really caught up in the moment. You desperately want everything to work out, but... we wanted different things in our lives, and our passions weren’t enough to hold the relationship together."

"What did he want?" he asked.

"He wanted to get out of the valley, like you did once. He never imagined himself as someone with a family, and... while he did love you, he was unhappy being there. He didn’t really expect me to want to settle. In his words, he said that I lost the passion I once had to make a change."

"That’s obviously not true."

Robin grinned. "Aw, you feel that way? I think so too. I never stopped loving carpentry. I always wanted to build bigger and better homes, furniture, buildings, whatever. Maybe I don’t have the time or ability to do huge things by myself, but... I made this house. I made the house you’re moving into. These homes, it... it makes me more proud than I can really say." Her expression calmed and she fixed Sebastian’s hair. "I loved your father, but he couldn’t grow up. He needed a lot to learn himself, and I couldn’t be in that journey with him. But I’ll always be thankful, because he helped me build you, and you are so much more mature than he ever was when I knew him.” She brushed his cheek with endearment. “You and Maru will always be my proudest creations.”

Sebastian smiled back, though it faded after a moment of thought. "... Where is he now?"

Robin shrugged. "To be honest, I don’t know. He left before I finished building this house, and he was convinced I’d never finish it because of you. I met Demetrius one day when you were just a few years old. You don’t remember it, but you two did get along very well. You’d laugh at him all the time, and you’d fall right asleep when he held you. You were such a handful, you know, so that was a talent Dem had!" Robin beamed, then gave a nostalgic sigh. “I know you two don’t get along as much now, but... I hope you do know he really did try his best to give you a happy childhood. That was something your blood father never did. It was hard for Dem to juggle both you and Maru at the same time when she was born, and in the end he sort of folded. I wish I noticed it at the time, but I hope you two will be able to rekindle your relationship. As far as I’m concerned, he’s your real father.”

Sebastian took a moment to take in all the information. At this point, he really was willing to accept Demetrius’s role in his life, and living in another home would possibly ease the tension between the family. No one was perfect. “I guess that explains the lack of visits. Though I can’t say he really loves us that much if he’s never returned.”

The carpenter made a rare frown. “I’m... I’m unsure,” she muttered. “I can’t ever know how you
truly feel about him, but... I think if you met him, you would be... disappointed. You have a lot more in common with your step-daddy than you do him.”

“You think so?”

“Mmhm. Both of you are stubborn, for one,” Robin laughed. “You’re both very smart, maybe a little oblivious, your heart’s always in the right place even if you mess up. You’re too logical for your own good.”

Sebastian snorted. “Some of those seem contradictory.”

“You just proved my point! And humans are filled to the brim with contradictions, that’s what makes them so interesting!” Robin eagerly answered. “Most of all, though... I don’t want you to regret that you don’t really know your blood father, or your grandparents.” She sighed. “Maybe one thing I have in common with him is that maybe I’m a little too cowardly to return, too.”

“That doesn’t sound like you, Mom.”

Robin was the one thinking, then. “Yeah, I guess not. Maybe I should do something about it!” She grinned. “But you’re my priority first,” she finished with somewhat of a nervous laugh. “I kinda lost the point in telling you about all of this... I suppose, if anything, I’m really happy you made this decision without... running away, or severing your connection with any of us. You’re level headed when you want to be. Jade’s a good girl. I think you two will be great, if you balance each other out well enough. I feel like I don’t have to worry about either of you.”

The raven-hair blushed and shyly nudged his mother away. “Please.”

“I mean it!” Robin cackled and hugged him tightly. He groaned, but made no attempt to push her away. “Let’s go get everything into your new home.”

Two days before the Feast of the Winter Star, Sebastian moved into Jade’s generously sized farm. He and Robin arrived by truck, with all of his belongings secure in the back. Jade happily welcomed them both, and they started moving in.

However, Robin noticed interesting, if not a little odd. “Hon, I’ve noticed you’ve slept in the room across from the den, but... Are you not moved in upstairs? That’s where the actual master bedroom is.”

Jade helped Sebastian bring in some boxes when Robin asked her the question. She was taken by surprise, nervously glancing upstairs and then over to her current bedroom. “Um... truth be told, when I moved in, there was too much effort in putting everything upstairs. I just ended up keeping all my boxes there while I settled in my current room. I originally intended to move back up there, but...”

“Oh, we can help you get everything situated! We’ll have to do some rearranging for Sebby’s stuff, anyway. How about it?” Robin asked, grinning.

Jade put down a box she carried and anxiously started for the stairs. “I-I’ll just get my empty boxes out while you bring everything in,” she squeaked before leaving. Robin raised an eyebrow watching her. She seemed quite nervous.

“Hm... Alright, how ya feelin’, Sebby?” the red-haired mother eagerly asked her son.
He shot a disgruntled look. “My legs are killing me,” he groaned, finally dropping the large box he carried. “But there are only a couple boxes left. At least a lot of this stuff won’t be too bad to unpack.”

“Great! We’ll get Jade’s stuff and get you two moved upstairs. I always found it a little weird that it was never used, but all the rooms in this house are great. You know why that is?” she asked again, egging Sebastian on with her elbow.

He rolled his eyes, but was smiling. “Because you built it?” he asked.

“Exactly!” she beamed. Robin, satisfied from the answer, helped bring the last of the boxes into the house. Both of them saw Jade walk out with several empty boxes stacked on top of one another and dropped them outside. Together, the three rearranged many rooms of the house; the gaming room upstairs shifted so Sebastian’s computer and beloved couch could fit, Jade’s old room became a spare study and guest room, and the master bedroom upstairs became the room the young couple would share from then on.

Before dinner, everything was unpacked. They put some boxes up in the attic and other boxes (namely Jade’s) out to the dumpster. Sebastian noticed some boxes were weighted with items, but Jade didn’t seem to hear him when he asked about it. He eventually let it go, and they completed their move. Moving them took all day (and not even everything got unpacked), but Robin helped them with most of the heavy lifting and happily left them alone when the sun started to set. After she went back home, Jade and Sebastian collapsed onto their bed in exhaustion.

The young farmer nudged him as they both stared at the ceiling. “I’m glad you only had a room’s worth of stuff and not a house’s worth. That would have taken so much longer.”

Sebastian sighed and went limp, closing his eyes. “Yeah, that was too much exercise. I think I’m done, for the next year maybe.”

“You’re too dramatic,” she chuckled. “Hm... I guess it was a good idea to move up to this room. It’s a fresh start for both of us.”

“Honestly, I kept forgetting this house had a balcony. That’d be nice for reading.” Sebastian yawned.

“You’re too dramatic,” she chuckled. “Hm... I guess it was a good idea to move up to this room. It’s a fresh start for both of us.”

“Yeah...” the farmer sighed and sat up from the bed. “I think the biggest thing for me was that I was too embarrassed to ask anybody for help, so I never moved to this room. Robin already did so much for me when I moved in for the first time. Did she ever tell you how I was when I first got here?”

The raven-haired opened his eyes and turned his head to see her. “She was just ecstatic about the new villager and said you were a sweet girl.”

Jade snorted. “She was the first person I officially met, and I was a total wreck. Like, my hair was messy, I was wearing some old clothes, the only nice thing on me were my red sneakers. She was really happy to see me, and then I just started crying because I was overwhelmed.”

“You started crying?” Sebastian repeated in question.

She nodded. “Haha, yeah... Well, she was just so nice and I couldn’t believe I had a home of my own, I was super emotional. Your mom is so cool, you know. She’s always supported me.”

“Aw...” Sebastian narrowed his eyes. “You’re not gonna cry now, are you?”

Jade snorted and shoved him again, flopping back onto the bed. “Maybe a little,” she mumbled. “This does feel a lot like the time I first moved in, except I’m much happier now than I was before. I
have you to thank for that.”

Sebastian smiled and gently kissed her cheek. She turned to look at him and they directly kissed again. “Please, I can only do so much,” he bashfully replied. Such compliments always made him blush. “... Hey. Just about one more season and it'll be a year we’ve known each other. Kinda crazy so much could happen in a year.”

“Yeah, I never knew I’d be here and with you. I look forward to you living here. I end up making too much breakfast anyway,” Jade joked.

“Ah, the true motive of you allowing me to live here. Leftovers.” His smile widened. “I look forward to it, too.”

They held hands and stared back at the ceiling, before their eyes eventually closed. A loving moment of bonding formed between them and they enjoyed the silence...

Rrrrumble...

Jade laughed. “Was that you?”

“I’m hungry,” Sebastian murmured in embarrassment. “I haven’t eaten all day.”

“... Man, neither have I. Let’s order some pizza or something,” she smiled.

Overall, their move-in was successful. After dinner, Jade felt eager to show Sebastian the land he half-acquired and gave him another tour of the farm. The rabbits and chickens were settling for the evening while Jade checked to make sure they had enough feed for the next day. She sighed, wondering when the grass would thaw to signal a spring morning. She loved the winter season, but she realized how costly it was to not have crops growing, and how the animals didn’t seem as content with store-bought feed. The farm itself had a proud glow in the snow however, Sebastian happy to soak in the view. They spent the rest of the night inside, covered up in blankets and watched the sun set from the balcony’s window.

...

Chapter End Notes

this is one of the last more relaxed chapters, which is probably why it took me so long to write. pace will probably pick up more soon. there will still be some chill chapters here and there but everything is progressing and, as most of the focus has been on social aspects, some more of it will be put to the world itself.

enjoy!
Something Was Wrong

Chapter Summary

Something’s off about the valley.

Wednesday, Winter 24 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Something didn’t feel right.

Jade saw a cave riddled with bones of ancient monsters, dead secrets of the valley. The air smelt of sulfur and it was hard to see anything except for what was at her feet and the faint green light in the distance. Gravity bore down on her as she struggled to walk. She was so tired, for some reason. She couldn’t help but think of her bad memories. Of her bad actions. Running away, the most cowardly thing she could have done. Running away when she could have done something.

You could have done something, couldn’t you?

Something about the scenario didn’t seem real, but she could feel the cold, damp rocks that surrounded the tunnel, she could feel the crunch of the dirt and bones beneath her. She began to smell the rot of small creatures who dared enter and couldn’t escape. There was gooping slime from stalactites above, but no living slime creature. No creatures were there. No life.

But she wasn’t alone. She could feel something following her. Every once in a while, as she made her way towards the green light, she could feel something touch her shoulder. She stopped looking whenever she felt it since nothing was ever there.

She finally reached the room, which was large and circular. It was full of old-style cages hung from the ceiling, ones that would be seen in a dungeon. The source of the light consisted of thousands of strange green markings on all the cages. Old, rusted chains dangled along with them. Discarded weaponry, shields, helmets... human skeletons. The stench grew. There were tiny bones in the cages, cushioned by beds of dead grass. They didn’t look like any bones she saw before... For some reason, seeing them made her want to cry. It felt like tragedy. It felt like she could have prevented something.

You can’t run again.

I don’t want to run, she bitterly and internally told herself. The voice wasn’t hers, but she felt stern. She wasn’t going to run. Why did it keep bringing that up? How was this relevant? Didn’t it know all the improvements she’s made? Her friends? Her significant other? Pets? Fa-

You know why.

This had to be a nightmare. It had to be. But it was so real. She looked around, but couldn’t see the source of the green light. Everything in the room had shadows, but when she looked down at herself, she didn’t see hers. Her shadow didn’t exist.

No. It did.
She saw it. It was standing at the end of the room. The whole figure black, and the eyes-- there were no physical eyes-- were seethrough, the very green of the room.

It was real. She knew she would forget, but for the time being, she just kept telling herself. It was real. “What do you want?!?” she yelled as loudly as she could, but her voice only came out in a breathing whisper.

The shadow lifted its head, staring at her. She couldn’t tell what kind of expression it was making, if it was making any expression at all.

The shadow disappeared. Jade looked down at herself, and the shadow still was not there.

Thunder striking. Heavy rain. Jade saw a door at the other end of the room, wooden and perfect, just like her house’s.

Bam!

No. Not you.

Bam!

The door was going to collapse.

Bam!

The door cracked under the pressure and burst open. She was paralyzed. But there it was.

It was Alex- no. It wasn’t. She wanted it to be Alex. It looked like Alex. It had his clothes, his hair. But she knew it wasn’t. Alex did not have the menacing eye, or the hulking stance, or the haunting breathing. The very moment her perception changed, its true form showed. It definitely wasn’t Alex.

“What choice did you want me to make?” Jade shouted, though she wasn’t sure the air carried her words. “I can’t be held back by this anymore. I can’t be shackled. I’m finally living a normal life!”

She felt something grab her neck. It was black, and it stung and began to spread throughout her body. The shadow that looked just like her now had her in a devastating grip.

All of Jade’s drive vanished as it took hold of her. Her depression returned. Her struggling worsened. She really, really wanted to run away. Not from the dream. From the world.

Run away.

The shadow was speaking to her. She couldn’t feel her own heartbeat. Running away must be so easy. Then she wouldn’t have to think anymore. She wouldn’t have to see him, break down her door, she wouldn’t have to confront him, ever again. She wouldn’t have to disappoint anyone else. Running away sounded really nice to her. Yeah... running away. This time for real.

Something happened, just as she began to slip away. The green lights vanished. The cages broke, and the bones in them transformed into balls of light. They spoke a familiar voice, but in a language she wasn’t supposed to understand. The shadow let go of her and vanished. The cave vanished, the farm door and he vanished. There were only the balls of light. She felt a breeze. She could smell pleasant growth. She heard leaves rustling, a far away wind chime. She felt a warmth that surrounded her head, back, and arms.

She heard a soft voice amidst the ancient whispers of the forest.
“Jade,” it said.

“Jade,” he said.

“Jade?”

She opened her eyes.

Sebastian sighed in relief as he held her close to him. “Jade, you worried me sick... do you often go out here at four in the morning?”

“What...?” Jade still tried to get a handle on reality. She saw her boyfriend’s worried face with the night sky behind him. The moon was slowly descending for the impending morning. Wait. They were outside. Jade suddenly sat up and looked around, puzzled.

The raven-hair carefully watched her. “I woke up and you were walking outside in your pajamas. There’s still snow on the ground and you were about to jump the fence!” He huffed, and gestured to the slippers on her feet. “I at least brought those... were you sleepwalking?”

The young farmer suddenly realized just how cold she was out in the dead of the night. Her feet were like blocks of ice, and immediately she began her trek back inside. Sebastian quickly followed her, concerned.

“I... I never thought I sleepwalked before, I...” her words fumbled out before her. “It... I’m...” She went back inside with him right behind, immediately relieved by the warmth of the house. “I’m sorry,” she finally murmured.

“Jade... it’s alright. It’s not like you could help it.” He gently smiled, but then frowned as he stared at her. She looked beyond exhausted, like the life was drained out of her. “How... how are you feeling?”

“I’m...” Jade sighed. “I don’t know, right now.”

He watched her for a moment, but then slowly nodded. It wasn’t the time to press on. “... Well... you should go back to sleep. I’m normally up at this time... I’ll keep an eye on you.”

The girlfriend would have given a cheery response if it weren’t for the circumstances. She simply kissed his cheek half-heartedly and slowly walked back upstairs. Sebastian ran his hand through his hair, sighing anxiously. What a first night.

Jade didn’t stir anymore in her sleep. She didn’t have any dreams or nightmares or any sort of thoughts before she woke. Sebastian kept his word; he stayed in the same room and would occasionally glance at her while he used his laptop. The morning came too soon, but seemingly there was peace. One more day until the Feast of the Winter Star.

The young farmer enjoyed getting to have her boyfriend over for breakfast, and to know it would be every morning instead of the occasional sleepover. Sebastian wasn’t one for breakfast foods, but she saw him cooking as she went downstairs. Eggs, grits, sausages. It didn’t seem like him to cook and to make such a nice breakfast. Jade thought he did it as a treat for her, showing his concern under a domestic layer of care.

She still appreciated it. “What’s all this?” she asked, smiling.

“Oh, I just... kinda went through the fridge. You have this stuff so I assume you like it,” he started.
“Honestly, I didn’t know you could cook much,” Jade snorted. Her tone indicated that she was fine. Or rather, she didn’t want anything to get to her that day.

Sebastian understood. “Eh, I’ve cooked for mom before. Not the best, but I can make the basic stuff.”

Jade smiled in thought. “You know, impressing you is why I started cooking more too. That, and farming up my own ingredients.”

“Really?” He glanced at her.

She chuckled. “Yeah. There was one time when I was making sashimi and Alex got onto me because he knew I didn’t like fish.”

“Well I don’t like eggs so we’re even.” The raven-haired man gave a single strong nod and put the finished food on a plate. “Go on and eat, I know you work all day.”

“Aw...” She smiled and sleepily kissed him on the cheek. “You better not do this too often, you’ll spoil me.”

“Don’t plan to,” he snorted back with a pat on her head. “Alright, I’m taking a bath.” He gave a dismissive wave to her as he started walking off. She grinned as he did, the two exchanging familiar playful glances. Before he disappeared upstairs, she gave a roll of her eyes. A sign of annoyance to some, but to her, it meant she was able to make light of a scenario.

Jade enjoyed her breakfast, spent some quality time with Onyx, and then set out to get ready for the day. She tried to act as if she didn’t remember her experience, even though she recalled every detail. Sebastian never prodded her about her being out in the snow, but they both knew she didn’t sleepwalk. She never has, not before the previous night. So why was she walking? The young farmer knew the answer somewhere, but the swelling suspicion wouldn’t reach her conscience. She hoped she could find some kind of answer.

The rabbits helped calm her down. They behaved a little differently, like they knew she was upset about something. The farmer just did her regular duties: brushing her bunnies’ soft fur and collecting wool, feeding the chickens and making sure they were healthy, grabbing the eggs they left. She loved Winter, but she just wanted the season to be over already. The season must have been messing with her, among other things.

After Jade completed all her required work, she walked back to the place Sebastian found her, right at the gates. Nothing looked out of the ordinary, just a snow-covered fence that led deeper into the forest... wait. She knew the ruins were straight ahead. It could have been a coincidence, but it made her want to explore the ruins more. There had to be more there.

She jumped over the fence and took a few steps forward. An incredibly ominous feeling came over her. The path felt different, much more... somber. A foreign force wanted to bring her in, but another one pleaded for her to go back. Plus, she couldn’t go exploring in this state. Not there, anyway. She hopped back over the fence and returned to the safety of her farm. “I’ll go tell Seb I’m leaving to forage,” she mumbled quietly to herself.

So she did. By the time she returned to the house, Sebastian was upstairs and working in his new office. He didn’t even see her until she stood beside him and kissed him on the head.

“Oh, hey,” he greeted, surprised by his own inability to notice. “You taking a break?”

“I’m done with the farm right now, so I’m just going to go forage and explore the town some. I’ll be
back this evening, most likely,” Jade said in response. She smiled at the thought of telling him such things. Usually they’d just message each other, but as they lived together, they only had to be a room apart.

Sebastian looked away from the computer screen and returned her gaze. “Alright, be safe,” he muttered in a lighter tone. They kissed each other and hugged to signal their parting.

“I will. You have fun getting used to the house,” she replied, smiling.

The raven-hair returned her cheerful expression. “It’s still pretty weird, but I like it. It’s very quiet, and I like the window. Lots of trees.”

She decided to stare out the nearby window with him. She agreed, it was nice. “Yeah, the farm is far away from everything. It sucks walking a lot though. Maybe I should get a horse.”

“A horse? I bet my mom could hook you up.”

“Really?” Jade pondered for a moment. “I’ll ask her about it later... it must be really expensive.”

“Yeah, I mean, a regular horse is bigger than both of us combined,” he retorted.

Jade rolled her eyes, still smiling. “It’s not hard to be bigger than the both of us, we’re both short.”

“Hey! I’m not that short. I’m taller than you,” he sassed.

Jade giggled and let it go for that moment. “Anyways... hey... before I leave, I want to know... how’s the festival tomorrow going to work?” she asked. She really didn’t intend to stay and chat with Sebastian, but she really enjoyed their conversations. She forgot why she was so nervous before.

The raven-hair narrowed his eyes as he thought for a moment. “Eh, it’s nothing too bad. There’s a huge feast and all the families have to sit together. We all exchange gifts before the feast itself begins. Sometimes Willy tells us stories.” He yawned. “The food is pretty good.”

“Ohh, I see... Where will I sit?” she mumbled in question.

Sebastian almost looked offended. Jade could see his mother in those eyes. “With me, duh.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. “I am part of the family, huh?”

“My mom would kill you if you didn’t join us probably. Especially since you don’t have family in town.”

“Well, I’m honored,” the young farmer concluded with a grin. “Thanks for the heads up. I’ll really be going now,” she said. The two kissed again and waved each other off. Jade left the house with her trusty backpack over her fluffy coat. She wore Sebastian’s old hoodie under her winter coat for warmth, but it also helped soothe her nerves. She found difficulty being anxious when she caught hints of his scent.

Her foraging trip was more exciting than most other trips she had. Something seemed to be changing within the valley... slimes were everywhere in the more public areas of the Cindersap Forest. She equipped herself to slay them and collect the materials they dropped, but the ominous feeling she had before returned. Many of the slimes were blue in contrast to their normal green, but they did drop some fairly interesting items. She was able to salvage some foraged goods and some artifacts, even a nice weapon from one of them. She didn’t want to think about how the slime obtained it, though.
As she walked towards the town, there were slimes. Jade slain all of them as she traveled since they all tried to attack, but she wondered how the other villagers dealt with it. Was it a certain breeding season? Or did it have something to do with the mines? Jade decided to go to the Adventurer’s Guild and see if they knew anything.

“Good afternoon, Marlon,” Jade muttered as she entered. Marlon was inside and the cabin looked as it always did, but he seemed busy behind the counters; his visage showed seriousness and intensity. Slowly, Jade walked over. “I have um, some stuff to sell,” she mumbled and put the slime’s weapon on the table.

“Afternoon,” he eventually replied, then examined the weapon. “I can give you 300 for it.”

Jade’s eyes widened. “Yo! That’s good for me. Thank you,” she happily answered, and Marlon gave the gold while he kept the weapon. “I, uh, I found it in a slime. Does that normally happen?”

He nodded. “Sometimes, yeah... You fighting deep in the forest?”

The young farmer shook her head. “No, sir... I actually came here to ask you about that, and about the mines, if it’s okay.”

The rugged man tensed up, but he didn’t stop her. He stared at her, as if a que to continue speaking.

“There were slimes everywhere in the forest, you know, just below Marnie’s ranch. I’ve never seen them there before, so it worried me. Is there a kind of mating season or something?” she asked.

Marlon sighed. “No, that’s unusual.” He seemed angry for some reason, but Jade knew the anger wasn’t directed towards her. “I’ll look into it,” he simply stated.

“Thanks... Um... is there an ETA on when the mines will open up again?” she nervously muttered.

Marlon shook his head. “Look, I can tell you’re a curious young lady. You’ve been adventuring for a little while and considering the stuff you’ve been selling to me, you aren’t bad at it either. Take my advice, though. Stay out of this one. Somethin’s brewing in this valley and we don’t know what it is yet. A friend of mine has been saying there’s an imbalance that needs to be fixed.”

“Impalance?”

“Look, I don’t know. But you can tell. More monsters showing up in areas that villagers go to. There has to be a reason they’ve been doing that. We just don’t know what exactly it is yet. We can’t find answers.”

Jade frowned. “And there’s nothing we can do?” she asked.

Marlon glared at her. He understood she was well meaning, but he has dealt with horrors of the valley she hadn’t seen. “Look. If there comes a time we need you and other guild members’ help, we’ll ask for it. For now, though, just stay out of it. Slay the monsters you see, but don’t venture too deep in any place.”

“I...” She wanted to say something, but the words wouldn’t come out of her mouth. Eventually, she gave up. “Alright.”

“And if you do run into anything significant, let me know immediately,” he sternly finished.

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Jade answered. “What would count as significant?”
Marlon thought for a moment. “Any strange experiences, or a monster you haven’t seen before,” he answered.

Strange experiences... “... I... Um, okay, I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.” She waved to him and took her leave. A part of her wanted to tell him about the dream, but it seemed so unrelated. It’d only worry Marlon about stuff that didn’t concern him, anyway.

As she left, she noticed Sam coming back from his work at Joja Mart. He grinned and she groaned since they both already knew what the conversation would be about. Sam eagerly asked her about Sebastian moving in and all the juicy details, though he found it disappointing that there were hardly any to give. After sending a warning to Sebastian through texting, the two walked back to the farm together and had a cheerful evening. Sam got a brief tour of the house and teased them until Sebastian ushered him out.

Finally, they were left alone and they got to spend the rest of their day together. There was nothing much to note; they enjoyed being with one another and it felt like a normal and harmonious ending to an otherwise average day. When the two grew too tired, they got ready for bed and lay together, murmuring their goodnights and settling for sleep.

Sebastian couldn’t sleep, though. “Jade?” he asked.

“Hm?” She turned her head to look at him.

“... Do you want to talk about what happened last night? With the sleepwalking?”

Jade knew the subject would come up again sooner or later, but she couldn’t blame him. She slowly exhaled. “... I just had a really vivid dream. That’s all I remember about it.”

“Do you normally have those dreams?” he asked again.

She thought for a moment. “I... I’ve had a couple. This one felt more real than the last ones though.”

Sebastian nodded while listening. “I’m glad you could sleep again. It’s always hard for me to when I have a nightmare...” He stayed quiet for a moment. No words went between them, but they were both awake. “... Do... Do you want to talk about it? About your nightmare?”

Jade held his hand under the covers and sighed. “I don’t know. Not because I don’t want to tell you, but because I can’t muster the words that would properly explain it. It was just... it felt... bad. I felt really unhappy.” She frowned. “It was like I wasn’t in the valley anymore.”

He watched her, then looked at the ceiling. “Ah...” A moment passed. “Well... I’m sorry. I hope you won’t have the nightmare again.”

“Thanks,” she softly replied, and snuggled up to him. “You woke me up before, so I have you to thank for that.”

“Mmhm.” Sebastian smiled and leaned in to her.

They talked a little more, then fell asleep together. Their comfort was enough to destroy the bad vibes of the early morning.

Chapter End Notes
I finally get to crank it up and address the issues that have no doubt been lingering for a while. We're getting close, fam!
We'll see how this turns out.
Feast of the Winter Star

Chapter Summary

Jade's condition steadily gets worse, but she and Sebastian hope the Feast of the Winter Star will calm her nerves.

Thursday, Winter 25 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Ring! Ring!

Jade groaned and opened her eyes, disturbed by the sound of her phone. It impatiently rang at her bedside, allowing her only a brief moment to grab it and check. There was no name on the caller ID, and the number was unknown. Against her better judgment, she pressed the call button and put it to her ear.

The other end was full of static. “Hello?” she asked in a hushed tone, quiet to not disturb Sebastian at her side.

A voice pierced through the static. “You escaped me once, but you will not get away again.” It was raspy, angry, but... it sounded like him, in a weird way.

Her eyes shot open. “Excuse me?” she asked, horrified.

“I know where to find you.”

Jade began trembling. “You’re not supposed to know this number!” she screamed. “You... you’re not! You’re lying!” Her eyes immediately began to tear up. She imagined the end of her farm life. It passed by too quickly... it couldn’t have ended this way.

The call ended. She glanced again at her phone. The number was still unknown, but the caller ID changed. The name ‘Jonah’ appeared in large, bold letters. She dropped her phone in shock.

Jade opened her eyes again and sprung up. Was... was that really a dream? No. It felt too real. She glanced at her phone, and it was still on her nightstand, screen off. She looked to the other side of the bed and Sebastian snoozed like he heard nothing. Jade reached for her phone and checked the screen, checked her recent calls. Nothing.

There was still a negative feeling in her gut. What was happening felt foreign, unknown. She didn’t imagine it... right? Could she really be going crazy?

“S-Sebastian,” murmured Jade as she nudged him awake. “Seb...”

“Hm?” He lifted his head, an exhausted and grumpy look appropriate on his face. “What?” he bluntly asked.

“I-I, um...” She began tearing up. “Sorry...”
His eyes widened towards her reaction and he shifted himself to sit. “What’s wrong?” he asked, more awake.

“I had another... dream. It... it felt real, like the last one. I thought I was awake but I wasn’t.” She frowned and wiped her eyes before tears could run down her cheeks. “This is really frustrating me... I feel like I’m going nuts.”

Sebastian stared at her, concerned. “Whoa, now... what happened? What did you dream about?”

“He called me... h-he... oh, Yoba, I’m a wreck,” she murmured again. “It’s... you know... a long time ago I mentioned a stalker?”

“Yeah... I remember that,” he replied.

Jade exhaled and tried to keep her composure. “He called me... he had my number, and said he knew where to find me.”

“Well... it was a dream, right? It’s not true,” Sebastian retorted, worry increasing on his face.

“That’s why I haven’t seen my parents, you know? When I left the apartment, he knew I would go see my parents. But I couldn’t go there. I didn’t want to drag them into this. They know nothing about it,” she explained; a tear finally escaped one of her eyes. “I don’t know what would’ve happened if I was there. He really... he... he had a temper, you know? I was okay if he called me hundreds of times if he left them alone.”

Sebastian was silent, only listening to her.

“Maybe it was stupid... everyone probably thinks I’m dead by now. I dropped off the radar. I... my old life wasn’t all that great, but... but I still think about them, you know? I still think about my parents, and how much I love them,” she sobbed. “But I can’t go back, I can’t. He’ll find me... it took me months to get him off my trail. He called me so many times, I saw him follow me, I had to do so much to leave and to go way out here, into the valley.”

“Jade...” Sebastian didn’t really know what to say. “... I know I can’t say much about it, but... did you... did you ever go to the authorities about this?”

“He was the authority,” Jade quickly responded. “And he was the star of the community. Everyone loved him, everyone respected him. He couldn’t do any wrong. But he was evil.” She wiped her eyes again. “I saw his temper, his obsession, his manipulation. I knew who he really was. But no one ever believed me, because I was so quiet, I kept to myself all the time. I never went out. And he knew that I knew.” She deeply breathed. “I feel like, if I didn’t escape, he would have found a way to silence me for good. So I just decided to disappear instead.”

Her significant other continued to watch her, keeping a distance that she needed for the moment. “Is it alright for me to ask who this person was?” he muttered.

“His, um... his name was Jonah,” Jade returned. “I... I regret a lot of things I did, a lot of things I said and didn’t say. It’s been really hard to adjust to the valley, with people who want to know me, and everyone so welcoming and nice. Sometimes, it made me feel even worse... Like I don’t deserve to be happy here.”

“You know that’s not true...”

“Yeah, I know,” she continued. “I know it’s all in my head. I really like that everyone is so honest here, and how real the connections are. I do feel like I belong here... that’s what makes me so scared,
if my past catches up to me, if he really does find me. I don’t... I don’t want to think of what would happen.”

“Maybe it won’t happen... if you really did drop off the map,” Sebastian mentioned.

She sighed. “Well, he knew I was alive. A month into my drive, I found out he was tracking my phone. I had to destroy it and keep going, but I lost him for like half a year. I nonstop traveled, so I lived on the road pretty much. I was able to go to the valley when the house was finished. Maybe he did think I was dead after that, or just gave up searching, but a part of me doubts it. I think he’d still be looking for me.”

Sebastian ran his fingers through his hair in frustrated thought. “Look... if there’s any chance that your stalker’s gonna find this dinky old town in Stardew Valley, you’re not alone. I have your back, my family has your back, all of your friends have your back.”

“Thank you... it really does mean a lot to me.” Jade managed to smile. “Pitiful, huh... I became a farmer in a dying town because it’s the last thing he’d expect me to be. But... I actually love it. I love this job.”

Sebastian snorted. “Well, I wouldn’t say dying. I think you breathed some life back into it.”

“You think so?” She smiled more.

“Yeah. I’m very happy you’re here, anyways.” He closed the distance between them with a hug and she returned the embrace.

“I love you,” she murmured in his shoulder.

Sebastian blushed. “I love you too,” he replied. “It was just a nightmare. Maybe you just need some fresh air and relaxation to get things off your mind.”

“Yeah...” She sighed in his arms. “Maybe the festival today will do me some good.”

“That’s the spirit,” he smiled. “Afterwards, how about we go for a drive? We can get some food.”

“I’d love that.” She relaxed and felt secure from Sebastian’s hold. Everything he said seemed just right. Maybe she wasn’t so crazy.

“Oh, and you know what we haven’t done in a while?” he asked again.

“Hm?”

“We haven’t fought some monsters. Or, well, I haven’t. I bet there’s a ton in the forest.”

Jade’s eyes brightened. “There’s been a lot more monsters, lately. Marlon wants us to get rid of any he sees. We should definitely go do that.”

Sebastian smiled more. “It’s a date, then.”

She blushed and playfully pushed him. “Sure, I guess,” she laughed. Sebastian pushed her back with equal force, and their conversation devolved into silly teases and jokes.

Something was wrong, but for a little while, Sebastian could make it right. That’s what Jade told herself. A little doubt swelled in the very back of her mind, though. What if, one day, Sebastian isn’t there to make it right?
After their morning rounds around the farm were finished, the couple walked hand-in-hand towards
the town square, which is where the Feast of the Winter Star would take place. Both of them carried
a wrapped gift in their free arms, while their other arms were intertwined with each other. Being with
Sebastian always made Jade much more cheerful, but as silence passed between them on the cold
walk, the more her joy faded, back to how she was in waking up. Sebastian glanced at her every
once in a while, and noticed she was still shaken from the previous events... He watched her
nervously, though tried to keep his composure. Only the sounds of faraway birds and slimes creeping
about near trees could be heard. “Have you ever had a big festival dinner before?” He asked, trying
to break the silence.

Jade thought for a brief moment. “A family one or a town one? I mean, my family would have feasts
when we all lived together... I lived in too big of a city to have get-togethers like this. Maybe if I
went to a church or something...”

“Ah, well, you’ll really enjoy this one. All the families have tables and there’s tons of food to eat. I’m
actually getting hungry thinking about it,” the raven-hair groaned.

Jade could tell what he was doing. He was acting much cheerier than his usual self in an attempt to
cheer her up too. It was sweet... but something still felt off about the day. She really wished she
could be more like herself, enthusiastic and loud, but it wasn’t coming to her. Maybe this was the real
her.

“I wonder what it’s like to uh, kiss? In the snow?” Sebastian pondered aloud.

The farmer’s previously downcast eyes widened and she stared at him, surprised. “Did I hear that
right?” she asked, nearly hysterical, cheeks even more pink than what the cold gave her.

Sebastian couldn’t help but laugh; he hoped that would get her attention. “Yes, I just wanted to see if
you’d answer. I was losing you a bit there.” He warmly smiled and kissed her head. “Um... Maybe
you’ll feel better having some good food,” he muttered.

Jade sighed. “... Sebastian, did I make it awkward for us?” she asked.

“What? No, not at all. Please don’t think that,” he answered with more concern on his visage. “I
mean, all the information I got was a bit overwhelming, but... it would be for anybody. I’m not going
anywhere.”

She considered his words and thought again, drooping her head in defeat. “I suppose so... thank
you,” she murmured. Her hand tightened to his. “I know it doesn’t need to be said, but please don’t
tell anybody.”

There were a lot of things Sebastian wanted to say, but he knew it wasn’t right to chime in at the
moment. Maybe when things settled. “I won’t,” he simply replied. They smiled at each other. Even
though Jade’s expression faded some, it was still sincere.

All of Pelican Town crowded around their main meeting place, which seemed small and cramped
when everyone was there at the same time. Several buffet tables were set around a gigantic, gorgeous
festival tree, which was adorned with lush white garland and multicolored ornaments. Of course, as
the festival was called Feast of the Winter Star, a giant, gleaming yellow star sat atop the huge tree
for everyone to gaze. Each table had different families- Pierre and Caroline sans Abigail, Penny and
Pam, Alex and his grandparents, Jodi and her sons, and last but never the least, Sebastian’s family at
the far end table. There were extra tables for everyone else, like Elliott, Leah, Willy, and everyone
else who thrived on their own in the valley. The tables themselves had hot and steamy festival meals: turkey, ham, dressings, rolls, many things covered in cheese and such delicious unhealthiness that one (except maybe Leah) couldn’t resist!

Robin’s face lit up when she noticed Jade and Sebastian walking towards their family table together. She frantically waved them over, causing Maru to laugh and wave at the two as well. Demetrius, though not participating in his family’s antics, managed to smile to the two.

“Hey! Are you guys ready to dig in?” grinned Robin. “What gifts did you get? Are any of them for me?”

Sebastian and Jade exchanged glances. They knew she was more excited for the gifts than the food.

“Settle down, dear, they just got here,” Demetrius murmured, a drop of sweat trickling down his forehead. “You look like you’re going to flip the table over.”

“Sorry!” Robin beamed, then sat back down. “I’m just excited.”

Jade’s mood improved some. “Do you mind if I sit with you guys this year?” she shyly asked. She knew what the answer would be, but she still didn’t want to barge in.

“Wh-I... Wow! Excuse me! Sit down!” huffed the carpenter, nearly appalled that Jade felt like she had to ask.

Obediently, she sat down, grinning. “I didn’t mean to offend you, Robin!”

“I can’t wait for you to stop calling me Robin,” she grumbled. “You better stay with us while you can before you get your own family table,” Robin then cackled. The couple in question groaned in unison, though Sebastian decided to cover his face in doing so.

Sebastian took a deep breath. “Mother, you do,” He sat back up, then clapped his hands together and aimed them at her. “You do realize that... that we’re not married, right? You know this?”

Robin crossed her arms.

“I want you to say it,” he sternly told her.

She looked off with her signature stubborn glare. “Well, you’re living together, you might as w-”

“I want you to say it, Mom,” he repeated. “It’s embarrassing for you to keep bringing stuff up like that!”

Robin huffed. “Fine, fine. Not married. Whatever. Buuut!” She slammed her hands on the table. “How’s the house life doing? I can tell you have so much color on your face already!”

“Mom, that’s because you caught him off guard,” Maru whispered.

“Oh please, he’s glowing,” Robin answered back with a flail of the wrist.

Sebastian stood up with a bored look on his face. “I’m getting food,” he grumbled, then stalked off to the other side of the table.

Jade sighed, a little embarrassed for him as well, but decided to stay in her seat to take in the environment. She could hear chattering all around her, smell the food’s many irresistible scents, and see the family that’s warmed up to her so much over the past year. It really has been a crazy year, now that she thought about it. Having a family again felt nice. She exhaled, trying to relax herself
The family ate together and enjoyed themselves, for a grand festival like this only happened annually. Surprisingly, there was no arguing at the table: Sebastian learned to keep his mouth shut (with food) and Demetrius didn’t really want to disturb his girls’ joy. After all their feasting concluded, it was finally time to give gifts. Jade, slumped in her dining seat, nervously eyed Penny, then glanced around to make sure no one noticed. She nervously clutched the gift box to herself and prayed to Yoba, or whoever was listening, that she would enjoy a homemade gift. She looked at Sebastian, too, who seemed nervous about giving his own gift; the recipient was his sister, after all.

Sebastian and Jade exchanged looks, then calmed down once meeting each other’s gaze. With a form nod, both of them got up and left to deliver their gifts. Penny chattered with Sam, who held a new comic book in his hand. Jade didn’t want to interrupt their conversation, but right as she approached, Sam winked at the red-head and walked off to some other part of the town square. Finally, she spoke up: “Penny?” Jade squeaked in an attempt to get her attention. The young woman in question turned her head towards Jade, then pleasantly smiled.

“How having a good festival, Jade?” she asked.

The young farmer nodded. “Yeah! Um, I was your secret santa, so...” She handed the gift off as quickly as she could. Penny stared at the box with surprise, but smiled more as she tore the wrapping and opened it.

Inside the box shimmered a brand new scarf with a green as deep and bright as Penny’s eyes. Her smile formed into a grin, and she snatched the scarf to examine it. “Wow!” beamed Penny. “It’s so pretty! Did you make this?” she asked.

A sigh of relief. Penny seemed to like it, so Jade was satisfied with that. “Yeah, I made it from my rabbits’ wool. It’s extra soft and should keep you warm!”

“I love it, and the color is so pretty. Thank you,” she warmly replied and wrapped it around her neck. “I don’t own any scarves, so this was really nice. It’s been a brutal season.”

“Yes, I noticed you don’t have too much warm clothes, so I thought I could add to it. I hope it lasts a while!” Jade replied with zeal. She was in a much better mood since the present was a success. The two continued their conversation, which was enjoyable and light-hearted. It was nice talking to more people again.

When Jade and Penny’s talk concluded, there were still other things to be done. Jade searched for her beloved Sebastian in the crowd of people and noticed him and Maru having a pleasant talk. It seemed like Maru approved of whatever he got her, too... that was a relief. Now, all that was left was...

“Hello?” called someone from the other direction. Jade turned to see who it was- oh! It was Dr. Harvey. Her heart skipped a beat from nerves. He never talked to Jade, or really all that many people from what she saw. It should have been obvious why he called her out, but in the moment, she felt like she did something wrong.

She gulped. “U-um, hi, Dr. Harvey,” she muttered.

Then Harvey was the nervous one. “O-oh, Harvey’s fine, um, I’m not working,” he mumbled in response. “I just... I have a gift for you, uh, this year, so, here.” He hastily offered a small gift box to her, which she took without much thought.
“Oh yeah, my secret gift! Thank you, Harvey!” Jade said with excitement.

“Uh, I didn’t really know what to give you, so... But! I hope you like it, and stay safe over the holidays,” he stammered. Jade ripped her gift open with such excitement that she didn’t notice Harvey left just seconds after.

Her excitement quickly faded, and she realized then when Harvey left. It was... medicine. Just... medicine. Jade sighed a little, though she knew she couldn’t be too ungrateful. After all, a gift was a gift. She did get sick last Fall, and Winter wasn’t too kind of a season, either. Plus, she’s had the strange dreams. Maybe it was medicine that could help her rest easier? She checked the bottle- oh! That’s... exactly what it was. He gave her sleep aid. A pleasant coincidence.

The gift wasn’t too bad, then. She would get a use out of it, and her gift to Penny was a success, so the whole holiday went well overall. Jade wafted her gaze over to Sebastian yet again, and saw him sitting alone at the family table. She wandered over and plopped beside him, curiously eyeing his gift. “Did you get anything nice, Seb?” she asked.

Sebastian lifted his head and looked over, only just realizing her presence. “Oh, hey,” he muttered, then smiled. “Yeah, I got something from Alex, can you believe it?”

Jade snorted. Of course she could believe it. Who does he think Alex went to for gift help? “What did you get?” she asked again, though her sly glare knew everything.

His expression lightened more and he rolled his eyes at her attitude. “I got a new scenario pack for Solarion Chronicles... that was actually really cool of him. Even if you probably helped him.”

“I’m glad!” beamed Jade. “We should try them out later.”

“Definitely. Hey, though... I’m... kinda done with people, how about we leave now?” Sebastian asked, his voice quiet. He did seem a little tired, and Jade completely understood. Talking to so many people did take a lot of energy out of him... admittedly, her too. Maybe more energy than she came to terms with.

So, she nodded. “Yeah, let’s go.” The two stood up and walked off together, passing their goodbyes to nearby friends and family as they exit the crowds and towards Cindersap Forest. Sebastian noticed the small box she carried, though knowing her, she would have yelled her gift to the clouds... he wasn’t sure whether to pursue or not. It’s been a little weird lately, and she just wanted to walk. Jade didn’t realize how quiet she was, but Sebastian did.

Sebastian loved Jade, but he felt frustrated... he thought he knew her well enough to know what exactly to do. He thought he would be able to help, and make her forget all her bad ties with the past, the bad memories and the gloomy aftermath. None of it was really her fault, nor could he say it was his for not knowing what to do. But lack of understanding didn’t make the situation better. He could feel Jade slipping from his fingers, and the last thing he wanted was for her spark, the first thing he fell in love with, to fade. Sebastian frowned, noticing her increasingly exhausted look. He hoped it was because of the festival, but he was too smart for that. He knew the early morning still bothered her.

“Hey, Jade-

“YOU!” interrupted the Wizard. He appeared out of nowhere, just as they exit the town square. Both Jade and Sebastian jumped from the sudden shout and stared at the purple-bearded mage, dumbfounded.
“Rasmodius?” gasped Jade, unsure what else to say. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? Did you not heed my warnings?!”

Sebastian was lost. He looked to Jade, and he could tell Jade was lost, too. What did she do? The wizard seemed too angry to care about their reactions. Jade went into a panic. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she stammered, tensing from the accusation.

“The- oh, we don’t have much time!” he yelled as he quickly examined Jade; he opened her eyelids wide, checked her hands, and felt the temperature on her head, all in just a few seconds. It happened so quickly that Jade couldn’t really react- “Gah! You are coming with me!”

“Wait, wait!” Jade pleaded, “I really don’t know why you’re-”

“No time!” yelled the wizard, then strongly gripped her shoulders. In a flash of purple, they vanished, leaving Sebastian by himself. He could barely process what just happened, and every exchanged word made him as confused as he was suspicious. As soon as the thoughts came together, though, they were gone.

The freezing chill rattled leaves of nearby trees and the voices from the town square were nothing but echoes. The raven-haired man stared off towards the forest, unmoving, as if he broke, too. A gust of wind pushed against him, almost begging him to stay put. But his legs started moving without his direct thought. There were a lot of things to question, but there was no point. There was no time. Sebastian continued walking, blank expression turning into one of fierce determination. His steps were more certain. If there was no time, then there was no time for him to dawdle. He knew one place the wizard could be.

Chapter End Notes

So there's a few reasons it took me forever to get this chapter out. No motivation, life got complicated, and since this fic is reaching 2 years, it's not as easy for everything to make sense. Ideas and plot points change as I write more and my direction was originally much different (and tbh not as good) as where I'm going now. There are some things I wish I could trim from the fic and I REALLY wish I could rewrite a few things (the stupid phone is one of them, i think i could've done the spooky phonecalls without her having to have it in chapter 6), but that's just how it goes when you write chapter-by-chapter. Maybe when I'm finished, I'll go through it some, but I'm more of a keep-looking-forward kind of person. My writing style continues to develop and change more, so I can confidently say my writing now is way better than the start of this fic. I would hope so, since it was a year and a half ago whew

That being said, lack of motivation was a big reason. Your comments are really appreciated and they drive me more than you might think. It's nice to know people are reading, and it inspires me to try to write more and get my chapters out more frequently. HOWEVER, please do not ask me here when the next update is- it's really discouraging when I think I'll get someone's thoughts and instead it's just a question on when I'll update. If you really want to know, you can always ask on my Tumblr or in the SDV Discord.
You'll be happy to know that I have the rest of the fic planned out now. I don't know how many chapters it'll take, we still have quite a bit to go, but I do have the main plot points figured out and I've made everything fit together. I estimate we'll have about 20 chapters to go, being generous with numbers- the climax is definitely in around 13-15 chapters, and then the aftermath and loose ends might be a couple chapters after that. Either way, the end is in sight, even though 20 seems like a lot.

Thank you to everyone who stuck with me on this journey so far! It really does mean a lot, seriously. I get this is a super long fanfic and it's not traditionally lighthearted, but it is my first fanfic and I hope my way of storytelling has interested you. I really hope you continue to enjoy the fic and I hope to see you at the end, too.
Magical Hotspot

Chapter Summary

The Wizard discovers what's wrong with Jade.

Thursday, Winter 25 Y1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I told you ages ago to never go to the ruins, but you did! I should have kept a closer eye on you, living so close to that horrible place- Gah!” The wizard jumped back as a puff of smoke from the cauldron smacked his face. He desperately fanned the fog away, then stirred the pot while Jade stood in a baffled state.

“Wait... what just happened?” Jade asked. She examined her surroundings; they were in a dim room made out of cobblestone. The torches and ominous glows surrounding the room barely illuminated the many trinkets and jarred collectibles on the walls and shelves. There was also a tiny window that had little impact of the room’s visibility. Jade wandered over and looked outside; they were in the Cindersap Forest, there was no doubt. Still, that didn’t explain one vital mystery: “How did we get here?”

Rasmodius appeared extremely... irate. “What, so you got nothing to say about the ruins, huh? You just want to know how I poofed us here? I’m a wizard, girl, think with your brain!”

Jade flinched. “I’m sorry,” she muttered. “I... look, I went to the ruins a couple times. I was careful, though. I haven’t been there in a long time-”

“What was the earliest you’ve been there??”

She didn’t know what to say. “Um... maybe... Summer?”

His jaw dropped. “Summer?! This thing has potentially been with you for two to three whole seasons?! No wonder there have been monsters everywhere, they’ve been wandering closer and closer! Sending all the damn creatures into a panic!”

What? Jade stared at him in fear; she didn’t know what to do.

The wizard took a deep breath, realizing he was getting too carried away. Of course the girl didn’t know what was going on; it was information only select people knew, if even that. “Before I even answer, you need to tell me what you’ve been experiencing.” He slowed his stirring, then turned to her, serious expression still evident. “If you have what I think you have, then your life has been taking a turn.”

“A turn?” Jade scratched her head. “I... I mean, there have been positive things happening. It’s wrong for me to just... be unhappy, right?”

“Then why are you?” Rasmodius asked, again. “You’re unhappy, right?”
She didn’t really expect to get a lecture out of a purple-bearded man of all people. She slowly breathed, and nodded in admission. “I... I guess I am unhappy. There’s this... weight, that’s been on me for a while now. Even when everything is going right, I just can’t help but feel everything is about to go wrong. I’ve made too many mistakes, and I feel like I’m being punished for it. Rightfully so.”

“Well, I have some good news for you. Maybe you got your own problems, we all do, girl, we all do. But there’s something that’s been making it much worse on you,” he said.

Jade watched him. She didn’t really know what he meant and she felt too stupid to ask. Her silence indicated him to continue on: “You’re being possessed, farmer. A shadow spirit took a hold of you.”

As if on cue, he held his hand up to keep her from speaking again. He continued, “It’s not on you right now, but its influence is unmistakable and the aura it left on you reeks of dark magic. It will return if we do nothing about it.” Rasmodius grabbed a glass cup and watched the cauldron as it slowed to a simmer. He looked back at Jade, and sighed. “Did you ever see anything like that? A shadow spirit looks exactly how it sounds: a shadow. They are amorphous blobs of void essence and most of them are very dangerous... not to be mistaken with the Shadow People, though they look very similar. Shadow Spirits are corrupted and are not even questionably alive.”

The young farmer’s heart sank. Possession was too heavy of a word to properly grasp, let alone it being something that actually happened in their world. At least the wizard understood enough to let her decompress for a moment. When she was ready, she finally answered: “I... I did see something like that, long ago. It was a rainy day, and I saw a lot of them walk in the middle of that abandoned town. It was the second time I ever went to that area.”

Rasmodius seemed much more in control of his emotions, so he simply stroked his beard. “I see,” he said, voice low and intimidating. “If it’s been with you this long, then no doubt you’ve experienced the long-term effects. These shadows live in those ruins, and seek to expand their territory. As ravenous as the things are, they’re very intelligent... They might have targeted you for that purpose, especially since you live so close.” He sighed. “They can’t reproduce like most living things can; they’re monsters, born from the shadows of their former selves. They feed by draining the energy of living things until they can no longer sustain themselves... if I didn’t catch you now, no doubt you would have suffered the same fate,” he explained.

Maybe she wasn’t crazy after all. All the things she went through... they were actually legitimate? “So... the nightmares... the sleepwalking... it...?”

“That was probably the shadow spirit, exposing whatever weakness it can find.”

It was clearer now. Jade understood, at least a little bit. But, she knew being possessed didn’t create her problems... she already had those problems. The shadow spirit simply dug them out from the very back of her memory, where she buried them away... that was the part she didn’t understand as much. But at least the visions, the nightmares, all those experiences that were too real, there was actually a purpose. “Well... How can I stop it, then?” Jade asked.

“That’s the tricky part,” Rasmodius answered. “There is a ritual I can perform to rid you of the spirit’s hold, but...” he sighed. “I don’t think I have the power to do that. Even I, with all the abilities I possess, am unable to do this task. However, I can do one thing.”

“What is it?”

“I can protect parts of your mind. The shadow spirit won’t know that you’re aware of it, and it won’t be able to feed off of your weaknesses, at least for a little while. I highly recommend you take the
opportunity.”

Jade nodded. “Okay, but... um, what about the ritual? If you can’t perform it... will I just have to keep doing the second option? It sounded temporary,” she replied, unsure.

The wizard appeared unamused, though he was willing to reason with her. “The shadow spirits have a grave enemy, one that has kept them from slithering into the main reaches of Pelican Town. The forest spirits, Junimos, have had their territory in and near Pelican Town for a long time. Perhaps you can ask them for help.”

Her eyes widened. “The Junimos!” she repeated, nearly ecstatic. “The letter they gave me... they wanted me to prove that the valley is my home, and gave me several tasks to complete. I... I still need to do three more,” she said. Her excited voice slowed down to a mutter.

“It sounds like you still need to gain their trust, then. Knowing the world’s balance as it is, their trust for humanity has decreased and their numbers have suffered because of it. The spell I can cast on you will protect you for a little while, but it would be smart to assist the Junimos and restore their faith. Maybe then, they’ll help you. You have a common enemy,” the wizard concluded. He peered over to the cauldron again, then scooped up some of the glowing liquid with the glass cup.

“That makes sense... okay, but, the tasks are super cryptic. What do I even do?” The young farmer frowned. “I’ve read them over in my free time, and I can’t really figure them out... one of them is to become a part of the community, another is to unite myself with the stars, and the third one is to speak to the people of the past. The first one makes some kind of sense, I guess, but I don’t know how to prove it... and the other two are very... strange?”

The mysterious bearded elder nodded to himself. “Those are the exact words?” he asked, then upon her nodding, thought some more. “People of the past makes me think of those who are no longer with us. We have a graveyard near the river, surely you’ve seen it by now. I sense many auras there often. Maybe you should investigate.”

Okay. I’ll take whatever hints I can get,” Jade replied. She felt much more thankful than she actually sounded, but the wizard wasn’t exactly a cheerful fellow himself. The graveyard sounded like a good place to start, in any case... she never took the time to read the gravestones or see who the previous members of the town were. Reading them would help her become part of the community a little more, too. “Thank you... um, so what is the spell you’re going to cast, then?”

The wizard glared at her with those serious eyes of his. “Simple,” he started, offering her the cup of strange liquid. “Drink this first. It will give you the vulnerability required to take the spell.”

She returned the glare. The color was a gross and glowing neon green. The last thing she drank from the wizard made her pass out. “Is this going to knock me out?” she asked, cautious.

He rolled his eyes and sighed. “If you absolutely must know, your subconscience is much stronger than your conscience, for it goes beyond your petty human senses. So, yes, it will knock you out, because it is too much for you to grasp. But when you wake, the spell will be on you, and you can finally leave. You’re welcome.”

“Yoba, fine,” grunted the farmer as she took the glass. “I trust you. Thank you for helping me... and... I’m... I’m sorry. I should have listened to you more than I actually did.”

Rasmodius shook his head. “This issue goes beyond you and me, girl. We must do what we must do. The faster you drink, the earlier you can leave.”
His answer didn’t satisfy Jade, but he was right. This was beyond the both of them. Closing her eyes and plugging her nose with two fingers, she downed the ominously colored potion. A chill went down her spine and her face scrunched up, even though she masked the taste the best she could. Then, everything got fuzzy. Her muscles weakened and her posture faltered. The wizard walked towards her before everything went black.

A familiar scent stirred the young farmer back into the waking world. It was cold, but she relaxed, cradled by something—no, someone. It was his scent, his arms, his hold. Jade opened her eyes to the setting sun, confused, but relaxed. She heard the crunching of snow, and focused her vision. Sebastian carried her, looking serious and calm, quiet with a busy mind. She caught a glimpse of the barn... they were back home already? Wait... what happened?

“Seb...?” murmured the young farmer. She didn’t know what happened, or why she had to be carried. Her head felt like it weighed a thousand pounds and her eyelids struggled to open further. Her mind was clouded, fuzzy... it was hard to think. She wondered if she had been drugged, since she hardly had any control of her limbs.

At least Sebastian’s face softened when Jade spoke to him. He smiled, relieved to see her awake. “Hey,” he gently replied. “Don’t try to move much, we’re almost home.”

“What... happened?”

“The wizard said you might have some amnesia... Try to get some rest first, and then we’ll take care of everything else, alright?” The worry in his voice increased, though it was so caring at the same time. Normally she would try to combat him in a war of wits, but she felt too weak from whatever occurred.

Sebastian found a way to unlock the front door while carefully holding his significant other. He walked inside and finally ascended the stairs to put her in bed. He gently placed her on her side of the bed, then flopped back to his side with a groan. “I can’t believe I carried you all that way. At least the tower wasn’t too far, but still. My arms are killing me now.”

Jade sleepily smiled. “You calling me fat?”

“No, I’m calling me weak,” he huffed. “Anyways, I guess the date we planned for tonight is cancelled. That’s alright, though. Take the rest of the night to sleep.”

“Can you at least tell me what happened?” she asked.

He sat up. “Depends, are you awake enough to read a letter? The wizard wrote it for you. You were at his tower and I got there right after you passed out... he explained most of the ordeal to me, but admittedly I let my temper get the best of me,” Sebastian muttered with embarrassment. “I was just scared you were hurt, that’s all.”

“I’m fine,” she answered, a calm smile on her face. She wasn’t sure if she could focus on reading the letter, but Sebastian’s voice was good enough for the time. “I didn’t mean to worry you again,” she said as she sunk further into the bed.

“It’s alright. That wasn’t really your doing. The wizard, you know, appeared out of nowhere and took you. I’m still trying to wrap my head around the stuff he said... I guess it’s surreal for me, knowing magic is even more intense than what any game could do.” He blushed, feeling even more self conscious than before. “Sorry, I know you’re supposed to get some rest. When you feel better,
we’ll get up to speed.”

His voice was already fading again, and Jade closed her eyes. The raven-hair touched her forehead with his hand to make sure she wasn’t getting sick... luckily, she seemed alright. He frowned, thinking about all the information the wizard told him. Of all places, Jade decided to move to Pelican Town: a magical hot-spot of dreadful creatures.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter. I originally had this completely done but then I had a better idea, so I changed it. Simultaneously, school work has been kicking my ass. Like read-200-pages-for-one-assignment ass kicking. That, and I've been distracted by video games, I'll be honest. Buuuut I really want to continue writing on my personal projects, including this one. It's just harder to make the time. I really hope things will calm down and I'll be able to focus on personal works, so college stops taking over my life.

Anyways, we finally know the culprit! We've come full circle! The creepy writing now has more merit! Whooohoo! I've been planning this for a while and it's one of the plot points I've really liked throughout the changes my story has been through. It also gives a better connection to the Junimos, which I originally was 100% stumped on. Hopefully the story doesn't seem choppy or anything because of it, but we'll have some more actiony stuff approaching. Like I said before, if I could polish on some previous chapters, I would, but I'm a keep-looking-forward kind of person and I'd rather have a complete fic than for me to take like another whole year to revise everything and change the chapters I'm unhappy with.

Hope you enjoyed and have a good day/night!
Jade received the best rest she had in a long time. Her memory was still fuzzy, but she read the letter from Rasmudius as soon as she woke up. The old-timey, almost fancy letter detailed their conversation and what Jade should do next, causing her to get out the remaining scraps of paper the Junimos wrote for her. For some reason, Sebastian couldn’t read the scraps of paper; it all came out as gibberish to him, so he couldn’t help her decipher the source material. However, the wizard already gave her a starting point, so that’s what she would do first. A weight had been lifted off of her already. As foggy as everything felt, Jade already beamed with positivity. She had a clear goal, one more important than her farming duty: Jade needed to speak to the people of the past.

As soon as she felt better, she returned to her farm work and then set off towards the lower end of town. The seasons started changing, slowly but surely, as grass started to grow back around the valley’s many paths. Snow melted under the merciless sun with increasing temperatures. It was still cold enough to wear a heavy coat, so that’s what Jade left with. She didn’t even know if Sebastian noticed, but she grew accustomed to wearing his old hoodie under her coat. She could feel its warmth and sentimentality... He didn’t miss it, anyway.

Jade never exactly hunted for ghosts, nor did she think she’d ever try, so ‘speaking to the people of the past’ proved challenging. When she traveled to the graveyard, armed with her fishing pole, sword, and backpack, she stood wondering what to do. The graveyard was appropriately small since the town didn’t even have a hundred people in it. Most of the gravestones were so old that the names were hard to make out... Jade supposed there hadn’t been any deaths in a while, which was good. Moss overgrew on the gray slabs and trees stood proudly to get their nutrients from the dead. The view looked more beautiful than somber, more peaceful than creepy. It was nice.

For a while, the young farmer waited. Most of the day passed by with her sitting in or near the graveyard. She fished safely at the river bank as she waited for anything, any sign of other life... or, well, death, nearby. But there wasn’t anything, except lots of fish she successfully caught and stored in her trusty cooler. Jade still felt shaken after her experience with the Legend, but recalling her practice before the Ice Festival helped calm her nerves. The graveyard’s calming atmosphere helped, strangely enough. An encounter with the Legend could have scared anyone, but she thought the shallow water held no threats and there were large enough fish for her to make profit with. She fished until after the sun set, then decided to wait for an entity. It was getting dark, and there was still nothing... she didn’t even feel any presence, and it was getting too late for her to be out. She didn’t want to get in trouble with slimes out and about at night, plus, she didn’t want to worry Sebastian. Before the gloomy night turned into the witching hour, she hurried back home.

This process repeated for the next few days. Jade would wake up, do her farmer duties, then stay around the graves. She bid her time by reading all the gravestones and paying her respects, bringing
them wild flowers and pretty stones in hope of enticing any response. She even stayed home in the
daytime and checked the graveyard at night once. Nothing came.

The more time passed, the more skeptical she got. She believed magic had a strong influence, and
even believed in spirits, but what was she even waiting for? Was a dead person going to glow a
spooky blue, then give her a magical sword and send her on a quest? She crossed her arms and
furrowed her eyebrows in thought. Okay, she thought that with sarcasm, but at this point that’s
probably what could happen. Defeated, Jade sighed and continued her endeavors.

Winter transitioned into Spring at last. Different types of foliage grew around the town, and the
temperatures steadily grew warmer as the environment became greener. Jade thought about the first
time she moved to Pelican Town, how it looked the exact same as it did the previous year. The town
felt much different, though. It was familiar... it was home. But there was still no spirit, no ghost or
anything of the sort.

Jade lost most of her hope, but she went one more night before trying another ghost-catching
method. The graveyard was quiet as always: the wind occasionally blew, the bugs loudly chirped,

She stopped right as she started walking. An ominous feeling came over her and loomed behind. Her
eyes dropped down without moving her head. The moon was bright and she searched for her
shadow. It was there, intact. Nothing about her moved, not even the hairs on her head.

There was some rustling. Jade turned back towards the graveyard. It was a shadow hovering over
one of the grave’s flowers.

“You! Stop!” yelled Jade as she hurried to pull out her sword. “You terrorize me for the last time!”

The shadow flinched at the noise, glanced over at her, then absorbed the flowers and ran. It didn’t
have any arms and seemed awfully short... and scared.

“Hey!” Jade ran after it. The shadow shuffled off at a speed that made it invisible if it wasn’t for the
moving grass. It went to a fenced area, near a manhole, and pried the opening to quickly slip under.
Jade dropped her sword and dove for the manhole cover. She pried it open just in time, pushed it
aside, and descended the ladder into the depths below.

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Green. That was the first word that came to mind when Jade saw where she was. Green, foggy,
putrid, humid. But there was something... interesting, about it. Jade forgot she was chasing for a
moment as she saw the huge expanse of the sewers... could such a small town really make rivers of
sludge?

Wait. “Hey! Where’d you go?!” Jade hissed as she marched around the corner of the hall. She
cought something shiny in the corner of her eye and walked towards it- wait, not just one shiny thing,
but several! A haven of shiny objects, objects she’s never seen before, all stacked and organized
neatly.

“D-don’t take what’s not yours, human!” cried a voice behind her. Jade widened her eyes and turned
around.
It really was a shadow, but it was different from the ones she saw at the ruins. For one, it was much shorter, had large, innocent... Eyes? Holes? She couldn’t tell. A big mouth too, but the ‘teeth’ were only silhouettes. Everything about the shadow was see-through. It reminded her of the nightmare she had in a way. Though, nothing was nightmarish about this shadow; it was a cute blob, and it didn’t even have arms. Just tiny legs and tinier feet. There was a little curl on the top of its head, too.

“I’m not going to steal anything,” Jade replied. Something welled within her to not be aggressive to the shadow anymore. “What are you? Are you related to the thing that possessed me?”

The shadow tilted its upper half in perplexion. “Possessed?” It stood upright again. “Wait... no, I see it... I see it! No! Why are you here? To kill me and spread that awful curse you have?!”

Jade frowned. “No, no. I’m not here to kill you-” Jade put her sword away. “See? And I don’t want to spread whatever this is... I just want to get rid of it.” She sighed. “We got off on the wrong foot... I mistook you for something else. Let’s start over,” she told it and leaned down to be closer to its height. “My name is Jade. I moved to the valley almost a year ago. I’m a human. What about you?”

The shadow was silent for a moment, then looked at the items in the corner. It glanced at Jade, then slowly waddled over to the items. Some wildflowers emerged from its body and landed in a blue glass vase. It sat down, facing Jade. “... Krobus,” he muttered. “I’ve been here a long time... I’m just a Shadow person.”

The farmer felt relieved that he replied to her. “It’s nice to meet you, Krobus,” Jade said with a smile. “I’m sorry for pointing my sword at you and chasing you. I... I was scared too, but I promise I won’t do that anymore.” She watched the shadow, who slowly seemed to relax. “Um... so do you know what this ‘curse’ is?” she asked.

“Yes. I know it too well. I want nothing to do with it,” Krobus quickly responded.

“I don’t blame you,” Jade sighed. “But... I need some help. You look very similar to the things that... got to me. Why is that?”

Krobus was quiet for a while, but right when Jade was about to speak, he replied: “They were Shadow people too. A long time ago, they were. They’re not people anymore.”

Jade frowned. “What about them changed?”

“War, hunger for power, corruption of land. Those shadows you speak of... they are not even alive. They are supposed to be dead, but they came back.”

She blinked. “Like zombies?”

“I don’t know what a zombie is...”

“Oh, um... it’s basically what you described. Zombies are people who died, but they come back and they’re monsters and try to eat people.”

Krobus stared at the green-tiled floor. “Yeah. That sounds like what they are. They make more monsters, too. I thought there weren’t any in this area...”

“I went somewhere I shouldn’t have gone. There is a very old part of town, buried by the forest. There’s caves and buildings taken over by vines. I saw a lot of the shadows there, marching... Huh. They had arms and were very tall.”

“Some call them the Shadow spirits. My people, they... they do not take kindly to humans, but they
fight for their own territory. The ones you saw are smart but only want destruction. They are lost, angry. Even then... I want nothing to do with it. I’m tired of the fighting.”

Jade could tell Krobus was starting to lose interest in the conversation. She tried to collect her thoughts. Well... he wasn’t a ghost, but maybe he knew more about the past. “Thank you for letting me know. I won’t, and I’ll try not to come across your people, either. Um... So, that area the Shadow spirits were in. What is so special about that area?”

“The town above you. The one you humans call, ‘Pelican Town’. It used to be bigger, it used to have more people. There are many huge mines under and the people worked in there a lot. Some Shadow people underground didn’t care, but others did. Other monsters woke up, and one year, a beast emerged.

It killed not only humans, but my people too, and the dwarves, and everybody. A group of humans killed it, right as it got to the surface. Only people underground suffered. I don’t know what the humans did after that, but I know they stopped mining so much. The beast still lays there, as do the souls of the restless. Like the Shadows you saw...” For a moment, Krobus closed his mouth. “Get rid of your curse and never go back. They are the problem of the Junimos now.”

“Wait, Junimos?” Jade asked. She listened closely before, but she could no longer stay silent. “The Junimos are helping me. We have a little deal, I suppose... I give them items they want, and they give me items in return. One thing they asked... they asked me to talk to someone about the past... I... I think the task was about you.”

Krobus scrambled up to his feet. “Oh my,” he said, shocked, hurried. “You are a friend of the Junimos... Maybe it is your problem after all. I... I hate what I am about to do, but... this is the work of Yoba, and I take these encounters seriously.” He waddled over to his assortment of items and absorbed an item, then waddled back to Jade. “Here.’” The item phased out of Krobus’s body and into Jade’s hands.

“A... scroll?” Jade didn’t want to open it just yet, but the paper looked old, and it was tied with a faded blue ribbon.

“It’s a dwarf scroll. I usually throw them away, but... I think you should have it. There is rumor that possession of all four scrolls lead to one of the greatest dwarven treasures. It... it might help you and your Junimo friends.”

Jade watched Krobus and smiled. “Thank you... you’re very kind, Krobus. You’ve helped me a lot, more than you realize. I’ll definitely pay you back for this. Um... is it alright if I ask you for another favor?”

“Yes?”

“I need to tell the Junimos we had this encounter. Is there some kind of proof I can give them?” the young farmer asked.

“Oh...” Krobus looked at his assortment of items again. “Hm...” He waddled over to a pile of black egg-shaped objects with red spots on them. He took one and put it in Jade’s other hand. “You can give this as proof, but also you can use it to do the paying you said.”

“Really? What is it?” Jade observed the item... it was rough and coarse, but something was strangely cute about it.

“Hatch it, it is an important creature of my people”
Jade stared in shock. “... Hatch? Wait, this is seriously an egg? What a strange color!”

Krobus nodded. “Void items. Shadow people have many of them. It would be a great honor to see you raise such an animal.”

She chuckled. What a night it has turned out to be. “Thank you, Krobus. I’ll take good care of the egg and I’ll even bring you some product from it.”

Krobus smiled a little. She didn’t think he was able to do that with his... hole-mouth. But it was cute.

“I should go now, thank you.” Jade gave a slight wave.

“Please don’t tell the town about me.”

Jade smiled too. “I won’t. But I have a few humans helping me with this journey... is it okay if I tell them?”

Krobus thought for a moment. “If Yoba permits it.”

“I’ll give you a prayer, Krobus.” Jade safely stored her two new items and waved to him. “Have a safe night.”

The shadow person watched Jade travel back to the pure air of Pelican Town. “Th-thank you... you too...” he muttered.

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Sebastian stood at the edge of the porch, watching the night sky and the silhouettes of rustling trees. It was way past his bedtime, but he wanted to make sure Jade got home safe. The spring air was pleasantly cool, anyway- not too cold, not too hot. He noticed grass grew pretty high around the property... it was like there was never any crops to begin with. The reds of the barn and silo contrasted the blue-green hues of the grass. He wondered if the animals were sleeping well.

His attention snapped back to reality when he saw a waving figure at the end of the field. It was Jade, there was no doubt. He smiled and waved back. She seemed in good spirits, though a part of him wanted to scold her for being out much later than usual. Maybe that meant good news?

“Seb!” cheered Jade as she approached. She finally reached the porch, put her bookbag down with a sigh, and rewarded herself with a hug from her boyfriend. “I’m happy to see my favorite boyfriend,” she sighed.

“I’m your only boyfriend,” he smirked. A few seconds passed, and his face scrunched up. “What is that smell? You need a shower.”

Jade laughed. “Oh... I was in the sewers. That’s probably why.”

“I need a shower too, I just hugged you. Ugh!”

She laughed harder. “Oh, please! I’ll tell you the whole story. Let’s go inside.”

“The whole story better involve why you assaulted my senses,” Sebastian said with a grunt as he lifted her backpack. They chuckled among each other and walked into the house together.
After properly cleaning herself, she told Sebastian all about what happened and her meeting with Krobus. They discussed the Shadow people, the Shadow spirits, and what lie beyond. Sebastian didn’t know about how the ruins came to be, but it didn’t seem like anyone their age did. He considered asking his mother about it, though Jade warned him to not drag her into the situation. After some brief banter, the conversation concluded and they eagerly put their new egg in the barn’s incubator before heading off to bed at last.

Like the previous night, Jade felt at peace. There was no spirit attacking her head. Hopefully soon, it would stay that way.

Chapter End Notes

Edited 7/17/2019: Adjusted some of Krobus's dialogue
Seeds and Scrolls

Chapter Summary

Jade and Sebastian pretend to be responsible adults by eating at their mom’s house.

Tuesday, Spring 2 Y2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You should get, like, five hundred seed packets.” Sebastian gave his beloved farmer a firm nod. He and Jade browsed Pierre’s shop together to get food, and more importantly, crops. Sebastian remarked how springtime arrived, but Jade hasn’t done anything with the field. He originally advised against it, but Jade insisted that the work would keep her positive and they needed the money, anyway.

“Five hundred? Can we even afford that?” Jade peered at the prices displayed on the store shelves. “Are... are there even five hundred?”

“Got some extra in the back!” Pierre yelled from the counter. Of course he would want her to buy extra.

Jade bit her lip as she weighed out her options. “I know we can make the money back if we invest in so much, but...”

Sebastian snorted. “I was joking... were you actually considering getting that many seeds?”

Jade blushed. “Well... I want to work hard! This is the season I moved here, getting some good crops is important to me.”

Pierre peeked over into the aisle the two stood in. “Sellin’ some red cabbages this year, too. Maybe you’ll be interested in that.”

Jade sighed. “Well... potatoes are always a safe choice...”

The raven-haired man dismissed them both. “Let’s just get some of everything... except the green beans. The trellises look like a pain to put in the ground.”

She nodded in agreement. “Okay. Um... let’s get extra cauliflower, and extra potatoes. Then a little bit of everything else. Parsnips grow fast so we can just keep replanting those. I could probably plant some seeds from the forest, but I don’t know what those will grow...”

“A fun roulette, then. I think that’s our plan,” Sebastián confirmed.

The two grabbed a hefty amount of seed packets and some lunch, then set everything on the store counter. Pierre already scurried behind the register and eagerly priced then placed the items in two paper bags.

Jade blinked. “Yoba, thirty thousand?” she gaped her mouth at the number that displayed on the
register.

Sebastian brought his hand to his chin in thought. “... How much is it without the food we bought?”

Pierre took a few seconds to calculate. “Twenty-eight thousand,” he said. The couple sneered.

“There’s pizza in the freezer,” Jade grumbled, then grabbed the extra food to put back in the shelves.

Pierre nodded and offered the remaining bag while Sebastian handed the required money over. “It burns,” Sebastian groaned as he took the bag.

“We’ll live,” Jade chuckled. They exit the shop together and walked on the pathway home. “I’m surprised you wanted to run errands with me. Are you really that worried?” She dug her wallet out of her pocket and gave him half the money they spent.

The raven-haired man accepted the money without reservation. “Nothing of the sort. I like being cooped up in the house, but I end up feeling a bit useless after a while. I’d like to help and break up my routine some.”

Jade smiled and bumped him with her elbow. “I’m glad we can do stuff like this together. I understand about wanting to break routine. How’s computer work going, though?”

He shrugged and bumped her arm back. “It’s going alright. I got a job due in a few weeks, but I wanted to take a break today. Well... I say ‘break’ loosely... I’m gonna help you plant this stuff, aren’t I?”

“Damn right you are. You suggested I buy five hundred!”

“It was a joke!”

“Still, we might as well have gotten that many. This is a lot, but it’ll pay off huge later.” Jade chuckled. “No, you don’t actually have to help. But I’d appreciate it.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes. “Please, of course I’ll help. I’ll even roll up my sleeves.”

“Oh no, not your tiny white arms!” she laughed.

“Hey!” Sebastian scoffed. “They’re not that white.”

“But still tiny?”

“Maybe.” Sebastian laughed too.

Their arrival at the farm meant planting time. Jade started their labor by digging rows with her hoe, then she stuck her trusty scarecrow in the middle of their freshly tilled land. Sebastian brought her water as a refresher and began planting the seeds. He had a master plan for crop organization, which Jade found hilarious. He wanted the reproducing crops at the very back, close to the barn, then the cauliflower next, and all the cheaper produce closest to the house. Jade helped him plant out his ‘master plan’, then they watered everything together. Their chickens and rabbits ventured over a couple of times, but retreated back into their shelter when the evening approached.

The couple collapsed on their couch as soon as they went back inside. Not a word passed between them for several minutes; only heavy breaths. Finally, Jade spoke: “That was your official welcome to the farming life.”

The farmer giggled. “Well, yeah. But thank you for helping me. I could tell you were having fun, even though you won’t admit it.”

“Mmhm.”

The two relaxed for a while. Jade squirmed up to Sebastian’s side to lay beside him. He had to make himself comfortable by moving his arm under her neck and holding her. They settled and Jade closed her eyes for a moment.

Then, a buzz from Sebastian’s pocket. He dug his phone from his pocket and squinted at the screen. “Oh, Mom’s calling.” He answered the phone and held it to his ear, suppressing a yawn. “Hello?” he asked. “... Sure. Yeah, she’s right here.” He held the phone away and looked at Jade. “Want dinner at my mom’s?”

“No cooking tonight? Yes, absolutely,” Jade answered and grinned.

Sebastian put the phone back to his ear. “Yeah, we’ll be there.” He heard Robin yell something, but it was so muffled that Jade didn’t catch what she said. His face flushed. “I’m hanging up now.” More yelling from Robin, and in a small voice, he mumbled a “love you too” before hanging up and tossing the phone to the end of the couch.

“Are we leaving now, tomato face?”

“Yea- okay, one: shut up. Two, yes.”

Jade laughed. “I love your tomato face,” she muttered and kissed his cheek.

Sebastian groaned, but he couldn’t help but smile. Jade was cute even when insufferable. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s get ready, then. I’ll get the bike’s keys.”

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Sebastian thought going back to the house would be awkward, but his experience wasn’t so bad. Robin welcomed him and Jade with open arms, hugged them, then brought them inside. While Demetrius’s relationship was still a gray area, there was still an unspoken sadness between him and Maru. Neither of them could muster any courage to talk about it, which Jade noticed. She wondered if Sebastian wanted to hang out with her and be a better big brother... maybe Maru was thinking the same, but her as a little sister. The young farmer didn’t have any ideas on how to help them, or else she would have tried to bring them together. Knowing Sebastian, though, he’d tell Jade there was no issue.

Demetrius had reserved thoughts on Sebastian being gone, marked by his perplexed expression at the dinner table. He was relieved that there weren’t as many fights, but... an unmarried couple, in the same house! Everyone at the dinner table knew he wouldn’t have allowed it if Sebastian and Maru switched places. Maybe he was more protective over Maru? Maybe he trusted Sebastian’s safety more. Either way, the two were never even. Robin did her best to avoid talk like that, but Demetrius left dinner early to work, so it wasn’t that much of a problem. Sebastian had to face the 3 women in his life for the remainder of dinner and begrudgingly so.

“Soooo, we haven’t had a big talk like this since the winter feast! How’s home life?” cooed Robin. “Are you two doing well? Couples have to adjust a lot when they live together, you know!”
Jade laughed. “I think Seb is still adjusting and being more courteous than he usually would be.”

“What?!” Sebastian scoffed and crossed his arms. “I haven’t been acting any different.”

The farmer poked his arm and grinned in a tease. “I’m joking! Okay, half-joking.”

“It’s nicer since I usually have the whole house to myself in the daytime,” he answered his mother. “Honestly, I don’t think I see Jade more than I did before. Other than nighttime, I guess?”

Robin wanted to complain about the lack of a spicy answer, but Sebastian seemed happy! Jade too. They were an adorable couple, and it was like they were born to be with one another. The mother smiled at them both, then glanced at her other baby, Maru. She finished her meal and eagerly listened to the couple. A part of Maru missed talking to Sebastian, too.

“Well, just be prepared. Petty things will drive you crazy! I know that was an issue with me and your daddy at first. He takes everything literally, so I had difficulty adjusting to that,” Robin explained, then chuckled. “Well, it still happens, but I’m used to it now. I asked him to get some fruit from the store the other day, and he came back with a basket of tomatoes! I scolded him, but a part of me finds it endearing, too.”

“Like Jade’s snoring.” Sebastian gave a firm nod.

Jade gasped and nudged him. “I don’t snore, you snore.”

They playfully bickered, then stopped when they remembered they were with company. Sebastian blushed and quietly coughed. “Anyways, we’re fine. If we fight, it’s not going to be anything worse than what we’ve already fought about.”

Robin watched them both in fascination. “I trust y’all! Well, I still have some cleaning to do at the shop, so I’ll leave you be for a while. Stay as long as you like!” she beamed and stood up. “I’m so happy you two are doing good,” she said before leaving.

Jade looked at Maru. “You haven’t been talking a lot. How are you doing, Maru?”

The young scientist slightly jumped from the sudden rush of attention, then smiled and waved her hand in dismissal. “Oh, I’m just enjoying listening to you guys! I’m fine, just the same old, really.”

“I wish I was doing the same old stuff, but... it’s been getting better. Oh! Maru, I have a question,” Jade replied. Maru watched her and gave a nod to proceed. “I know you like artifacts and stuff... so... I got this scroll and was told it was from... dwarves?”

Maru’s eyes widened. “Really?? What color was the ribbon?”

Jade blinked. “Um... blue?”

Sebastian’s younger sister sprang out of her seat at the table. “Blue!” she repeated excitedly. “Let me show you something!” She took off and motioned for the other two to follow. They entered her room when Maru halted them with her hand.

“I need to get it first. Hold on just a sec.” She pulled a small carpet that revealed a wooden hatch. With a smile, she pulled it open and crawled inside.

Sebastian and Jade waited patiently and glanced around her room; after all, neither of them were ever in there. Jade vaguely remembered waking up in the room after the fish incident, but those memories were hazy compared to the fight with Sebastian on that same day. She frowned as she thought about
it. Wasn’t time to get into that somber mood. She wanted to think about something else.

“Did you know she had a hatch like that?” Jade asked.

Sebastian shook his head. “News to me. I think I’ve been in here as much as you have,” he replied.

“Ohh. Maybe you should hang out with Maru more.”

“Maru? I barely hang out with anybody. Sam’s lucky to get me once a week.” Sebastian crossed his arms.

“Maybe when everything settles and I take care of this shadow business, we can both take more time into going out and hanging with others,” Jade continued.

Sebastian sighed. “I suppose... how are you holding up? Feeling weird?”

“I’ve been better since we visited the wizard, but I’m unsure how long it’ll last. I’m just enjoying it for now,” she told him. “Maybe we-”

Thud!

“Found it!” shouted Maru from below. She pushed a large closed storage container up to the ground floor and then ascended with a grunt. “Whew!” She sighed and grabbed it, then she kicked the hatch door closed. “Here’s my collection of books and scrolls I found. You’d be surprised how much stuff gets preserved perfectly in the ground! It’s almost like someone buried them on purpose.”

Jade and Sebastian glanced at Maru, then focused on the object in her hands. The tub, much wider than her and certainly heavy, was lidded and made out of black plastic. Both watched in fascination when Maru placed the container on her bed and pried its top off. Inside were old, neatly stacked books and small multicolored cases. Maru took out one of the smaller cases to reveal three rolls of paper tied by different colored ribbons.

“Here are the dwarvish scrolls I own,” she said. “I’m interested to see if you have a different one... see... I was studying these scrolls, and the first two here made sense... but the third scroll I got was much different from the other two! It was like I was missing information. Can I see which one you have so I can continue? There’s some amazing technology by dwarves, forgotten by men! I wonder if this is the first step!”

Jade chuckled. “I love your enthusiasm. The scroll I have looks very similar to what you got, so I can go grab it if you want.”

“Please do!” beamed Maru.

“Okay, I’ll be right back. You two behave!” Jade said and waved to them.

Sebastian waved back but playfully sneered at her. “Keep to the paths, it’s getting dark!” he yelled.

Maru and Sebastian were left alone, and the air was heavy for some reason. The raven-haired brother glanced at his ruby-haired sister, but he didn’t really know what to say. They talked a few times since he moved away, like at the Feast of the Winter Star. Admittedly, the incident with the Legend made them more susceptible to talking, too. But... it was still a meager step of progress in the mountain of frustration, jealousy, and aggression that was their perceived relationship. Sebastian felt guilty when he recalled the ways he acted to her, especially when he started to know Jade. His behavior shouldn’t have been excused, he thought. But there they were, standing together in her room.
“So... how have you been?” Maru asked. She felt the tension, there was no doubt. The sooner they could get comfortable, the better.

“Oh... I’ve been fine. How about yourself?” Sebastian asked.

“Honestly? It’s been boring,” she laughed. “Harvey’s working me hard, as usual. So much paperwork from flu season, and now we’re moving into allergy season. With the mines closed, I have nothing to do but work on existing projects, so this scroll thing is a nice change of pace.”

Sebastian nodded as he listened. “Maybe it’ll turn out.”

“Mmhm.”

They were quiet for a little while again. Eventually, Sebastian sighed. “Hey...”

“Huh?” Maru looked at him.

“Just...” He breathed. “... Sorry.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “For what? You have nothing to be sorry about.”

“No.” He threaded his fingers through his hair. “... Nevermind. Whatever.”

Maru smiled. “I think I know what you’re apologizing for.”

“Well, then I don’t have to say it.” His face scrunched up and he turned his head away from her.

She started laughing. “Fine, we’ll make it even. I’m sorry too.”

“No.”

“You can be sorry but I can’t?”

“That’s right,” Sebastian answered with a nod.

“But I am sorry.” Maru tugged his sleeve to get him to look at her. “I... I should’ve interfered more, but... I just felt like I’d make it worse if I got involved with the family fights. I was too inactive. That’s a problem too.”

Sebastian was quiet.

“I’m serious,” she continued, then frowned. “I remember we were really close as kids. Well... we fought a lot, but that’s just what siblings do, right? I didn’t realize our family was separating as we got older.”

He sighed again. “That’s... just what happens. I was a handful to deal with anyway... I don’t think I was a good brother. So... I’m sor-”

His apology was cut short by a hug. Maru wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his hoodie, to which he tensed in surprise. Slowly, he relaxed and gave her an hesitant pat on the back. Maru chuckled. “Let’s just think about the good things,” she said.

“Fine,” he huffed.

“... Dad’s just weird about showing some emotions, you know... he’s so based on logic, and doesn’t have a lot of social grace. But he loves you, he always has. I think he’s hard on you because he’s
“Oh, bullshit,” Sebastian scoffed. “If he’s strict with you, then he used to have me with a ball and chain.”

Maru frowned and let go of him. “I’m not saying I had it harder than you. He’s been like that with both of us... maybe I’m not one to pull practical jokes like you, and I don’t consider some activities fun, but it was rough going out when I was a teenager.” She walked over to her bed and sat down; her eyes shifted to the floor and her shoulders slumped. “Maybe he’s a little more lenient now since I’m an adult, but I still feel guilty for leaving the house to hang out with Penny. And the curfews! If I even entertained the thought of going out on a date, he’d be appalled.” She sighed. “He still treats me like I’m thirteen sometimes. I admired that you would confront him and do what you wanted anyway. Sometimes I wished I could’ve done that.”

Sebastian’s face softened and his eyebrows furrowed. “I... well... being in the basement can make you a bit stir crazy. At least you had an actual room.”

“Please, I would’ve loved the basement! It has so much room, I could’ve had all my projects laid out perfectly. I thought it was cool you had such a big space.”

The raven-haired man blushed out of embarrassment. “It wasn’t that cool...”

“Still! I always thought you were cool, even when we didn’t talk anymore. Of course, I thought it wouldn’t kill you to go out more.” She laughed when Sebastian pushed her by the shoulder.

“I got some choice words about you too,” he replied, smiling a little.

They were quiet again, but the silence was more comforting.

“When the mines open again, do you want to go mining?” Maru asked.

“Sure,” Sebastian answered. They both looked on at the bedroom door, calm. That was that.

---

Jade returned to Robin’s house just as the moon rose. She came back in one of her old red jackets and had the scroll safely stuffed into one of the pockets. She approached the dimly lit home and entered the faint porch light above the door. She jiggled the handle— to her surprise, the front door was locked. She mumbled something unintelligible and knocked until someone finally heard her.

Sebastian opened the door. “We’re not interested in whatever you’re selling.” He quickly closed it.

“Hey!” Jade didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. “Open the door, I sell great products!”

The door cracked open. “I don’t know. I think you’ll have to prove it.” He almost closed the door again, but Jade wedged her foot in the opening.

“Ha!” She beamed.

“Dammit. Okay, come on in,” he said with a smile and opened. “Glad you’re safe. Nothing spooky?”
Jade would’ve passed his question off as a joke if she didn’t actually look out for strange shadows. “Nothin’ spooky, you don’t have to worry. I got the scroll!”

“Shh, my mom goes to bed early. Come on, I’m sure Maru’s waiting for what you have.” Sebastian shut and locked the door, then guided his shouty girlfriend back to Maru’s room. Jade took the scroll from her jacket pocket and eagerly offered it to the young scientist.

“It is the scroll!” Maru mused in a hushed voice. She unraveled the scroll and glanced through it, then grabbed another one and scanned them both together. “Same writing style, looks like it fills in the blanks... amazing! No! More than amazing, this is phenomenal!”

Jade scratched her head. “Can you actually read it, Maru?” she asked, unsure.

“I could notice certain patterns, but I wanted the full documents to be sure. It seems very similar to our own language, just... different letters, possibly a reversed grammar structure.”

“Okay, I have another question, then,” Jade continued. “I was told this would... help some critters. Um... It’s a long story. But, if it’ll help them, what does knowing the scrolls do?”

Maru lifted her head from the artifacts. “Well... the possibilities are endless. These could be directions, it could be history, it could be lore... if I had to hazard a guess though, probably history. Everything is sectioned out.” She held the ends of one of the scrolls and aimed it at her ceiling light.

Sebastian leaned over and squinted at the scroll with Maru. His eyes widened. “Hey... looks like one of the graves.”

“What?” Both Jade and Maru reacted.

“Yeah. The graveyard in town. The lettering on one of the gravestones looks like this.” He walked away from Maru and stuck his hands in his pockets. “Might be worth checking out if you can understand it.”

Maru’s jaw dropped. “Gravestone!” she repeated, astonished. “We’ve lived here for so long, I can’t believe I never noticed it! Maybe they’re connected, and this can help your... thing. Yeah!” She flopped back onto her bed, entertained and relieved. Quickly, she sat back up, staring at Jade with a strange ferocity. “Jade, give me a while and I’ll try to decipher all of this for you. I don’t know how long it’ll take, but are you in any kind of hurry?”

The farmer started to sweat. “Well... I mean... I’m not going to rush you, but the sooner, the better.”

Maru narrowed her eyes. “Is... something the matter?”

“It’s fine!” Jade quickly replied. “But, it would be a big help to me. Thank you, Maru.”

“No problem. I’ll call you as soon as it’s done, fair?” Maru asked. She didn’t want to prod however tempting it was.

“Very fair! It’s getting late, so I think we should go. Right, Seb?” Jade looked over to her boyfriend, who desperately tried to make himself appear relaxed. He nodded, which she figured was enough. “See you later, Maru,” Jade said with a wave, then grabbed Sebastian’s hand. She tugged him out of the bedroom door and started for the house exit.

When they both sat on Sebastian’s motorcycle, the man let out a large sigh. Jade could see his breath from the porch lights and the night’s breeze. “What is it?” she asked.
“... She’s helping you out, so... maybe it would be a good idea to tell her all this magic stuff,” he muttered.

Jade’s lips tightened. She wiped her forehead and fastened her arms around his torso. “I think one day I will, but not right now. She should enjoy the research.”

He stared at the dirt road. “Alright, it’s up to you.”

They drove off and went home together.

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey whaaat two chapters in the same month? Crazy. Insane, even. Everyone's been writing in the SDV Discord and it's motivated me a lot. That, plus summer break, means more writing! Whooohoo! It's really exciting to cross out parts of my story outline as I make progress, too. That being said, this chapter and the next few will probably be more relaxing chapters. After all the stuff that's happened, it's time for a bit of a break, yeah?

Anyways, at this point, this fic is a few weeks over 2 years old. Thank you all so much for continuing to read and seeing the advancements over time. I plan to put my fic on another site eventually, but I'll proofread them and fix some of the writing mistakes before I do that; if you notice some changes in the writing later, it's that!

I hope you continue to enjoy reading and I'm excited for what's next. Thanks!
Exhaustion

Chapter Summary

Jade ties up some loose ends as Maru continues studying the scrolls. She also learns that
planting a bunch without upgrading tools is a Bad Idea.

Thursday, Spring 4 Y2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

For the next few days, it was quiet. Maru was still busy researching the scrolls, but Jade needed to
put her attention to her farm work. With all the stress from the monsters, she felt she could watch
over her animals more...at least, most of them. Butterscotch’s babies were growing fast! Their
personalities started showing, as did their hyperactivity. When Jade entered the barn, she was
practically overrun by them, and they nibbled all the feed they could find only to poop it out in
minutes. Jade contacted Marnie on the 4th of Spring, and Marnie happily bought off all but two
rabbits. Now Jade had five rabbits, two chickens, and a decent amount of dough.

After Marnie left, Sebastian ventured to the barn to see who was still around. Even though he didn’t
interact with the animals too much, he felt a significant bond. They were born on his birthday, after
all.

“Seb, I think you’ll like these two. They’re little gremlins, is what they are,” mumbled Jade as she sat
in the hay, letting the five rabbits play and hop around her. She looked exhausted, but that was her
condition for the past week.

Sebastian twitched out a smile. “Is it a good idea to be sitting down in here like that?”

“Please, I’m a farmer, these clothes are getting dirty either way. Plus, it’s way easier getting their
wool like this.”

“I’ll stay standing,” Sebastian chuckled. “They’re very cute. Butterscotch and Bullet are good
parents.”

Jade nodded in agreement. “They are! Maybe it’s time to name them...”

“They both seem pretty destructive. Can one of them be Dreadlord? You never directly confirmed or
denied it last time.”

She laughed. “No! Well... maybe! I... I like it. Would the other one be Xarth?”

Sebastian shrugged. “I would be proud to have that name as a rabbit.”

“Think about being the dad of those rabbits!” Jade said with wobbling laughter. “We’ll conclude this
later. I’m thinking of getting more chickens t-” she paused.

“What is it?” Sebastian asked.
“I can’t believe it slipped my mind... I need to go to the Community Center,” she sighed. “Krobus gave me an item to show them.” She stood up and dusted her backside. “Are you staying home? Can you watch them and let them eat outside?”

He frowned a little. “Are you sure you should be going out? You seem tired from all the watering... at least eat before you leave. Or have some coffee.”

“I’m not a coffee person,” she answered with a yawn. “I’ll eat if it makes you feel better. I’m just not used to having a huge field. Marnie paid me nicely for the babies, so there’s that at least.”

“Alright,” Sebastian said. He was quiet for a moment, then slowly breathed out through his nose. “I’ll watch the animals from the porch.”

Jade pet the rabbits and opened the gate for them to scamper outside with glee. The chickens casually wandered out after them with Jade and Sebastian following last. She shut the barn door and graced her hand on Sebastian’s shoulder. They exchanged subtle smiles, one tired and the other worried, then Jade went back to the house.

After a short break at home, she walked towards the Community Center, armed with nothing but her light red jacket full of goodies. The day welcomed her with photogenic clouds and singing birds, but she felt too tired to appreciate it. Her muscles felt achy, her eyes were burning, and her lack of sleep was catching up to her. The winter cold had vanished and she still needed to adjust to the rising temperature, especially after a whole season of no crops. The ground may have flourished with returning plant life, but the colder season kept her much cozier in bed.

She might have been the only one to feel this way too, since the townspeople were excited and thriving in the new season. Jade waved to those she passed by, but for the time being, their enthusiasm perplexed her. Maybe she got too many seeds after all, and she didn’t want to force Sebastian to help her water the crops. Maybe it was stress.

Before she knew it, she was back at the Community Center. She entered the main hall and called out a ‘hello’ to the gentle forest beings. She pulled out the same black egg with red spots from her jacket’s pocket and displayed it in her palm. “I think I’ve solved another task... here is proof. This is from Krobus... he told me about the history, and the curse that’s on me. Will this be enough?”

One after another, colorful Junimos appeared from their leafy hut, through the walls’ cracks, and up the overgrown floorboards. They bounced and hopped over to Jade as one of them examined the egg. Instead of taking it, however, the tiny creatures looked at her. All of them went silent.

She started to sweat. “I... do you want me to explain more?”

The entire group bounced and squeaked in unison. Jade took it as a yes. She ventured to the arts and crafts room in the building and sat in a chair, placing the egg on the table. She retold the story of everything she knew, especially since the Junimos deserved to know. They all listened attentively, then bounced and squeaked when she finished her story. Afterwards, they took her egg and placed a note in her hand. Dumbfounded, she read it:

We are the Junimos.

Thank you for your story.

We can get rid of the curse. But we can’t do it right now.

Show us a gift of the stars and we will help.
Jade put the note down, then noticed a tiny gift box back on the desk. Smiling, she opened it. Inside was the same egg, just nestled in a bed of dried grass. At first, Jade didn’t know what to think... then she giggled. “The presentation is cute at least,” she mused. “Well... that’s another task, isn’t it? Unite with the stars... or something... So, if I complete that task, then I’ll be done with this curse?” Jade stood from her seat and surveyed the area. She was speaking aloud, but there weren’t any Junimos in earshot. She wouldn’t have understood their squeaks anyway.

Jade walked back into the main hallway and saw a fourth star on the mantle, then snooped around to see what room had been fixed. There was an uncharacteristically bright doorway beside a dilapidated bulletin board. Curious, Jade entered. The room was fixed with a large desk in the center of the room, clean wallpaper all around the perimeter, and a larger than life safe in the top right corner. Jade didn’t see much of a use for her to be in here, but she was excited to get another room of the center restored. Other villagers might find it of use if they knew the building was being fixed.

She bid farewell to the Junimos and then walked back into town. The rest of the day was ahead of her, but she didn’t know what to fill the time with... she had extra money, and Sebastian helped pay for the seeds... maybe she’d give that back to him, or buy a gift in return. Jade passed through the town square and took the street towards Cindersap. Well, she couldn’t think of anything specific for Sebastian, so she can give the money. If he refuses, they can just put it towards savings... Her train of thought vanished when she heard excited chatter from Sam’s house. Jade lifted her head and pointed her sight towards the door.

Just like that, Sam exit the home. “Oh! Papa J, hey!” he beamed. He waved excitedly and gestured her to walk over, which she did.

“Good afternoon, Sam, what’s all the commotion?” Jade asked, smiling.

“Oh, you didn’t hear?” Sam laughed, though unsurprised. “My actual papa is back! He was in the force for a while... why don’t you go meet him? Today’s his birthday, too.”

Jade blinked. “Birthday? I don’t have a gift for him...”

“Oh please, that’s fine. You don’t even know him.” Sam slapped her back to usher her into the house. “Hey, dad! I want you to meet Jade!”

Jade felt embarrassed, but cooperated. She glanced in the house: Jodi was in the kitchen, Vincent was playing with toys and bouncing around with a party hat, and a man stood in the middle of the living room, checking his watch. Jade lifted her view to the towering middle-aged man, burly, blond buzz-cut and a scowl to fit. She could definitely see where Sam got his looks from, but they gave off entirely different vibes.

The man’s scowl unfurled into a look of wonder as he saw Jade. “Is this the new villager you told me about? Can’t say I’ve seen you around before,” he mused. His voice was deep but gentle.

Jade immediately dropped her sight, unsure how to continue. “I, I’m Jade... n-nice to meet you, sir,” she muttered.

Sam laughed. “Yeah! She’s the new farmer, and a good friend of mine! And an even better friend of Sebastian’s,” he teased.

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Sam laughed. “Yeah! She’s the new farmer, and a good friend of mine! And an even better friend of Sebastian’s,” he teased.

“H-happy birthday, sir,” Jade told him, voice shaky.

Kent’s face softened. “Heh, thanks. You can call me Kent. You’re a little tense, huh?”
“I’m nervous meeting people,” she quickly admitted, then forced her eyes back up towards him. “B-but, it’s nice, hearing about you, uh, Kent.”

“Ain’t nothing to be tense about. Got that enough across the lines. This place needed a farmer, so glad to have you here.” Kent crossed his arms, shoulders low and gaze unmoving. “How long you been in town?”

Jade tried to lower her guard, instead sticking her hands in her pockets. “I moved here late last Spring. I’m approaching my first year on the farm,” she answered. “I’m loving it.”

“Good to know,” Kent said with a nod. “Well, I know Sam dragged you in here. You can leave if you want.”

“Yeah. I have some more work to be doing, b-but uh, welcome back,” stammered Jade. She gave a wave, shot a helpless look at Sam, then exit the house. Sam curiously watched out the window as she went back towards the forest.

---

Jade slammed her body against her bed and lay there, face down. She heard some steps approach to her side, but instead of looking up, she just groaned.

Sebastian glanced at her, then boredly looked down his phone. “Jade, Sam just told me you met Kent and acted like, and I quote, ‘a zombie that just learned how to speak’. Everything alright?” he asked, tucking his phone back in his pocket.

“Was I that bad?” she whined, then rolled to her side. She looked at her beloved boyfriend.

“Oh, I doubt it. You’re just nervous meeting new people. But... ever since we got those crops, you’ve been exhausted. Maybe we should do something about it.”

“Like what?” Jade rolled back on her stomach.

Sebastian nudged her back onto her side. “Well, why exactly are you feeling tired?”

She sighed. “I have to check every plant, water them all with my small watering can, run all the way to a water source, run back, water some more, probably cry a little, water the plants with my tears—”

“It’s clear we got too many plants. How about getting a better watering can? Or some sprinklers, or something.”

Jade flopped onto her back, eyes wide. “... I’ve kept those tools your mom gave me for so long. They’re... old, admittedly. Maybe I could get new ones.”

“I know Mom’s talked about Clint upgrading tools. Maybe you can do that? I know Mom has some blueprints too, maybe I can find something useful.” He shrugged.

“That would help... but... I don’t want to move,” Jade whined again. She grabbed her head with her hands and sighed. “I think the stress of past events is finally getting to me. I’m glad Maru is helping us out, and nothing’s on me right now, but...” She dragged her hands down her face. “I chose the worst job. How can I water all these crops, tend to all these animals, all while keeping ravenous
monsters at bay? Is that something that farmers here normally deal with? Is that why I’m the only one here?”

Sebastian sighed and sat beside her. He was quiet for a moment, peering away and biting his lip as he thought. “Hey.” He returned his gaze placed his hand on her shoulder. “Let’s just... think of one thing at a time. Alright?”

“You know that farm up north? I wonder why he left? Your mom mentioned him once.” Jade folded her arms behind her head and looked back at Sebastian. “I mean... is there a reason this town isn’t doing so great? Are we just interrupting an ongoing war with nature?”

He watched her and noticed the worry on her visage. He shook his head. “The guy who owned the farm up north was an old man. He passed with old age.” With a huff, he crossed his arms too. “And the same will happen with you.”

Jade was quiet. “I hope so,” she muttered. “But... you’re right. About thinking of one thing at a time.

“I’m always right.”

She smiled. “Don’t push it, nerd.”

Sebastian unfurled his arms and playfully nudged her. “Too late. So, what’s your first move?” he asked.

“I guess going to get my tools upgraded... when does Clint’s close?”

“Umm... around 4PM, probably?”

Jade quickly sat up, then scrambled for her phone. “It’s... it’s 3PM.” She sighed. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. “No, let’s go now. I’ll drive you.”

“Ugh, fine,” she grumbled.

“I know you’re tired, but you’ll be even more tired tomorrow. Let’s go.” Sebastian stood from the bed and left the bedroom. Jade listened for a few minutes as she slowly built up her motivation. She soon followed suit by worming herself off of the mattress.

“I hate that you have a good point!” she yelled from the top of the staircase.

---

Sebastian slammed his body against his bed and lay there, face down. He heard yelling from downstairs.

“Sebastian! We drove all that way for nothing, you gotta help me!” Jade called from the front door. After no response, she stomped her way up to the bedroom. “Hey!” she yelled, poking his side.

He groaned. “At least he gave us a blueprint to work with.”

“Not good enough! If I need copper, iron, whatever bars to upgrade my tools, we have to do it. I
know I have a lot of copper and a little bit of iron, maybe that’ll be enough. Anyways, help me build a furnace! We have the materials!”

Sebastian sat up without much effort, but still grumbled to himself. “It was my fault, I thought you just had to pay the guy.”

“No, you gave me a second wind. If we get a furnace built, at least we don’t have to worry about it anymore. There’s still light outside and the sun’s not setting for a few hours. Here, I’ll even pay you, I got money from selling the buns,” Jade said, digging into her jeans pocket.

He shook his head and placed his hand against her pocket. “You dummy, I don’t want your money. Fine, I’ll help you. Let’s figure out a place to put it.”

Jade eagerly hugged him. “Thank you. Let’s get this over with,” she beamed.

Their house didn’t have a basement, and putting heated metal like a furnace on a wooden floor didn’t inspire them, so they settled for outside. Behind the house, the roof stretched over to provide ample shade. Jade cleared the area of grass and laid down a stone path to place the furnace on.

Surprisingly, the furnace didn’t take that long to make, but... it was much smaller than they anticipated. The whole thing was as wide as the average person, went to chest-height, and the opening was the size of a basketball. The furnace could probably only handle a few chunks of ore at a time, but since Clint asked for bars, maybe that was a good thing.

After their first furnace, Sebastian was done for the night. Jade told him goodnight; he wanted her to join him, though she continued working instead. He honored her wishes and went back inside to finish up his own jobs. Since she learned how to make a furnace slowly but surely, she felt more confident tackling the next ones on her own. In the dead of the night, she had built three furnaces, all relatively sturdy. She had picked up enough coal from her previous trips to load them and toss in some copper ore for good measure. The ore melted quickly and formed into desirable bars, which Jade carefully took out to allow cooling. She loaded the next ones in, and did this over and over, until she had several copper bars to her name.

Jade checked her phone: 1AM. “Yoba,” she grunted. After starting the furnaces, she went over to her barn and check up on the animals. Butterscotch and Bullet were sleeping beside one another, while Plague and the two younger rabbits nestled under them both. The five looked like a giant ball of fur together, which made Jade laugh a little. She went to the chickens; Mayo pressed herself against the far right wall as she slept, while Gloria shifted in her own nest to get comfortable. Jade brought out the gift box that stayed in her jacket pocket and took the egg from it. “Well... Krobus said I could hatch this,” she murmured to herself. Robin installed an incubator while building the barn, so she hoped it would work. Carefully, Jade placed the egg in the incubator.

She allowed her mind to wander as she stared at the hot box. She couldn’t help but think of what the chick would look like. Would it be black and red too? Jade yawned. It seemed like something Sebastian would like. Another yawn. “I should... go to bed,” she mumbled, and then shuffled her way out of the barn. After closing and locking the gates, she went back to the house.

A blast of cool air hit her as she walked through the doorway. The kitchen was clean and empty, and the living room was dark. A blue glowing light came from the computer room upstairs. The stairs themselves... they were way too high, for her level of energy. She stretched her arms, then wiped her eyes.

Jade merely glanced at the couch. Sleepy. She collided into the cushions and immediately passed out.
I'll start including the dates in my fic, and I'll update the old chapters EVENTUALLY. But hey! Writing again! No promises when the next chapter's coming out but it's reaching good progress.

To get this chapter out, I reread my entire fanfic. If there's anything incorrect/out of place in the context of my fic, PLEASE let me know. I've been getting massive deja vu in some areas even though I don't think I wrote about them. If you point out something I've already written about, I'll fix it. Hopefully it's good though!

This is more of a chapter to get her caught up on the game mechanics again. For a while we were in the curse stuff, but more game-y stuff is coming up. That being said, we're still going to move forward. I look forward to the next chapters, and thank you very much for reading and sticking by my side even with slow updates!

Next chapter, I'll link my own analysis/reflection of my fanfic. I don't have the last 2 parts out yet but if y'all want to know what I think about the progression of events, it might be interesting for you.
Chapter Summary

While the mines continue to be quarantined, Jade is at a loss until Alex tells her about the quarry.

Friday, Spring 5 Y2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Jade’s exhaustion would no longer be so extreme, since she dropped off the copper bars and her watering can at Clint’s place. She was so focused to correct the previous day’s blunder, in fact, that she forgot to water the crops. And on such a sunny day! Warm enough to rock the day in short sleeves.

Sebastian went into town the same time as Jade did, returning later with some sprinkler blueprints. In bad news, though, the sprinklers were pretty expensive in materials, and the only precious material they had was copper. Jade didn’t take to the news well, but she still appreciated the effort and kept the recipes. Sebastian went off again, and Jade was left to her own devices.

She rocked on the front porch’s swing and watched Onyx roll around in a beam of sunlight. At least she wasn’t as tired, but her farm would suffer. “Onyx, what should I do?” she sighed, though mostly talking to herself. “The mines are closed. I can’t get more materials even if I tried.” Her eyes drifted over to the fence that divided her property from the rest of the forest. “I know there are abandoned mine shafts all around, but... I really should be careful.” A shiver went up her spine. She felt better since the Wizard helped her, but she knew the forest had many inhabitants. The lurking creatures, whatever they were, weren’t dumb.

“Farm girl!”

Jade jumped. She glanced over to the central path in the farm... Alex? “Yoba! Give a better warning next time!” she gasped.

Alex laughed and tilted his head towards her. He tucked his hands in his jacket pockets. “You didn’t notice me comin’ up?” he asked. “You have a big farm, you know. But we haven’t been together in a little while, so I just wanted to check up on you.”

“Well then, come here,” Jade went, patting an empty spot beside her. “Farm life’s just been busy... among just, stress.”

He sat in the designated spot, warm smile on his face. “Well, that’s just how it is, huh? I guess it’s hard to adjust since you didn’t have to do as much last season.” He pet Onyx, who rubbed against his leg.

“Yeah... We got a little carried away with planting, since we had so much. But hopefully it’ll be fine. I’m getting some better tools that should help a bit more. I wish I could just go to the mines and get more stuff done, but...”
“Why not just go?” Alex asked.

“I... trust me, I’d like to, but they’ve been closed off. You know that, right?” Jade absentmindedly watched his exchange with the cat.

Alex shrugged and leaned back in the seat, crossing his arms behind his head. “I guess. Do you care enough? I mean, you could climb over it.”

Jade shook her head. “I trust the guild. I shouldn’t make any reckless decisions. Admittedly, the thought came up in my head already.”

“Ah, alright... uhh... well I know there’s a quarry. No monsters there... probably.”

“A... quarry?” Jade blinked.

“Well, I don’t know where it is exactly. Somewhere in the mountains maybe. I just go to the bath house, though.”

“Still... that’s... a good idea! Maybe there’s hope for me after all.” Jade hopped up from her seat and clenched her fists, a grin on her face. “I’ll look for it, starting near Robin’s place... and I’ll take a lot of storage!” She quickly went inside her house, but kept the door open. Alex could hear some rustling on her end.

Alex laughed a little. “You’re the only one who would get excited about rocks. Um... hey though, I have some good news.”

“Hm?” Jade exit the front door with her backpack and army of tools. She curiously turned her head towards him. His face reddened a little and he scratched his neck, looking away from her.

He stopped rocking the porch swing, deciding to focus on the nearest window. “I, uhh, well, do you know who Shane is?”

She dropped her arms. “Shane... I’ve barely had any interaction with him, but he’s...!” She groaned with irritation. “He kind of apologized so I shouldn’t get salty about it, but I am.”

“Oh... you don’t like him, then?”

“He was a complete ass to me. Why?” Jade narrowed her eyes.

“Well... we’re kinda... friends... Sam introduced me to him. He’s rough around the edges but he’s been getting nicer, at least a little bit.” Alex frowned a little, trying to get his bearings. “I don’t really think I should get back in the dating pool any time soon, but... it’s kinda fun to think about.”

Jade watched in surprise, then sat back down beside him. “Wait, do you like Shane?”

He laughed, though his face showed admission. “I wouldn’t say that completely. I don’t think I like the real him as much as I do the image in my head... he’s got a lot of problems. I’m not a fan of... some habits. But, there aren’t a lot of gay guys in town, so he kinda has to notice me.”

She placed a hand on his shoulder, nodding as he explained himself. “There’s good incentive to include yourself in the picture more... of course you can’t jump into that kind of relationship so blindly though, since there’s a chance you could get hurt. This... has definitely happened to me, in a way,” she giggled with a shaky voice. “It’s good to be curious, but just because you two have something in common doesn’t mean you should let your guard down, or lower your standards.”
“Oh, don’t worry. I know. I feel like, if there’s anything in the future, it’ll be a long time from now. But... Shane is interesting. I feel like we can relate with a lot. If anything, maybe I could help him out, and he could help me.”

Jade nudged him. “Well, I don’t think there’s anything wrong with wanting to help him, and see similarities... But, just don’t jump into it because you could help. You should continue being friends and let me know how it goes!” she beamed.

Alex laughed. “Maybe if we become good enough friends, I can make you like him.”

“Maybe, but I think the most important thing is that you’re happy. Even if I hate his guts, it doesn’t matter to me. But if he does anything stupid, I’m kicking his ass.” Jade pat his back.

He laughed again. “There she is,” he said, rubbing his knuckles on her head. She snickered and tried to slap away his hand. He let go and relaxed back again, letting the both of them stew in the sounds of nature. “So, where’s your boy?”

“He’s in town. We’re not together every second, you know.”

“Mostly just surprised he’s in town at all. He seems like a homebody.” Alex shrugged.

“Well... he kind of is,” Jade chuckled. “But he’s been more comfortable about moving around since he started living here. I kinda worry that he’s not working much because of me. I’ll ask him about it later.”

Alex yawned. “It’s because you’re so distracting!”

“No!” she huffed. “It’s... well... yeah, maybe. It feels like life’s been going a million miles a minute. I know that as soon as I get used to this way of living, it’s going to change again.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “What do you mean by that?”

“I just mean...” she sighed. “The routine. It feels like I was on a rhythm last summer, but this year is messy.”

“You started off last year decking me in the face,” he laughed.

“What! No! Ahh! You still remember that!” Jade panicked, covering her face. “I still feel so bad about it! I’m sorry for that!”

Alex took one of her hands and grinned. “Calm down, I was just teasing! I deserved it anyway.” His look softened when Jade looked back at him. “I was trying to mask my own feelings, and... force myself into a position with a girl, even if I didn’t want it. I thought everyone else did. Looking back, it was really stupid of me... And it was definitely stupid of me to assume it was normal behavior. I’m sorry I made you so uncomfortable... really.”

“Alex, you know you don’t have to say sorry. You already apologized before, and I accepted it wholeheartedly.” She huffed, then held up a finger when he was about to speak again. “And I know I’m being a hypocrite since I also said sorry! Let’s just accept we were both acting stupid. I was overwhelmed, is all. I’ve never been held by a guy like that before, and it made me confused. Then all my alarm bells went off when you held my hips, and I reacted without thinking.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t think about it. I shouldn’t have done that, and I’m glad you weren’t afraid to punch me for it,” Alex said with a firm nod. “I’ve done a lot of thinking, and I’m reading more... I feel like if you didn’t do that, I wouldn’t be on this path.” He smirked. “I gotta say though... having a
hell of a hook is a real interesting reaction.”

“I had a lot of fist fights with my real brother. We didn’t... get along,” she snorted. “Last year, I was a lot more vulnerable about it. I had little.... episodes. You look a lot like him.”

“So he’s handsome?”

Jade lightly slapped his arm. “I’m being serious! But, I feel like I’ve told you this before.”

“I know, I know,” he said, smiling. “But you’re better about the whole thing now?”

“A little.” Jade sighed as she thought about the ordeal more. “It’s not so constant. Living here has helped a lot... it’s a beautiful town, with so many nice people. There’s some drawbacks, but... I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“Mind if I ask some questions, then?” Alex’s voice was soft.

Jade didn’t answer him for a full minute. “Well...” she sighed. “I... I don’t know. I... yeah, some things I need to keep to myself still.”

“Can I at least ask if you’re taking good care of yourself?”

“Yeah,” she gently smiled. “I’ve never told you, but I did something really stupid a while ago and Sebastian got so upset with me. Like, really upset. It was the only real fight we’ve had, but it was enough for me to shift gears.”

“Damn, what did he even say?”

“Nothing I need to repeat. But, it was the first time he said, ‘I love you.’” Her cheeks lightly flushed as she relived the moment in her head.

Alex’s eyes widened, then he gasped. “Jade, you dog. Did you say it back?”

“Of course I did! We live together, we ain’t friends, Alex!” She exclaimed, her face getting redder.

“What a mess!” he laughed and poked her, causing her to whap at his hands and poke him back, equally cheerful. Happy with the exchange, he settled with a grin. “How is living with him going anyway? Any nasty habits?”

Jade’s flush faded a little, to her relief. “He’s pretty clean. I think he’s pretty self conscious about his presence in the house, but he’s starting to relax a little. Sometimes he forgets we have a laundry basket, though,” she huffed. “But it’s just habit, he at least always does something if I ask him. Well, if he remembers.”

Alex laughed. “Have you seen him naked?”

The red face was back. “No! Don’t ask me those questions!”

“You live with him! It’s a normal question to ask. You haven’t even walked in on him? What kind of couple are you?”

“It’s not hard to tell when someone’s in the bathroom!” she shouted.

Alex was in a giggling fit. “Jade, you’re shouting so loud, you’re scaring the birds!”

“I don’t care!” She covered her face with her hands again.
“I notice a touchy subject,” he teased. “The tension I’m feelin’ from you right now is so unreal.”

Jade whined. “Shut up! I’m going to the quarry!”

Alex wheezed from his laughter and doubled over to hold his stomach. “Hey, don’t get away from me now when this convo got so much better! You at least have to tell me if you’ve seen... or felt... anything.”

“He has very wavy hair after showers and that’s all you’re getting,” she huffed, standing up from the seat and hunching her back. She was completely turned away from Alex.

“With or without towel on the lower end?”

“With! I’m leaving.” She stood up straight and crossed her arms, then she started to walk.

“No, come back, haha! I’m sorry!” Alex pathetically reached for her. “You make joking so fun. I’m just glad to know your home life is going well and that you haven’t changed all that much,” he chuckled.


Alex stood up and approached her. She slowly turned to him, then looked up at him. Her face was still red, and she refused to look at him in the eye. He grinned. “A hug before we leave?” he asked, opening his arms.

A very slight nod from her. She complied by letting herself fall into his arms, her head hitting his chest. He tightened his hold, then slowly released. She finally smiled. “I should really go now. I had fun talking to you, though. I’ll try to remember to message you more.”

“Please do,” Alex beamed. “I’ll leave too. Hey though, are you excited for this year’s Flower Dance? I have a feeling you won’t be stuck with me this time.”

Jade’s eyes widened. There was an undeniable glow about her this time. “Well...” She lowered her head. “I-I, uh, well... I guess that’s an interesting thought,” she stammered.

“Yoba, you’re such a mess. Stop actin’ like you’ve been dating him for a few weeks, make a big move or something,” he chuckled.

“You’re not in control of my life! I’ll go as slow as I want!” she shouted again, clearly embarrassed.

“I was just teasing you again, Jade,” Alex laughed. “I got a feeling he’s doing just about as well as you. I’ll see you later, alright? Let’s go out to eat sometime and talk more!” he said as he stepped off the porch. He granted her a wave as he walked off.

Jade watched him and waved to him in turn. “See you later, Alex!” She giggled some. “I’ll be thinking of a lot of embarrassing questions to ask you,” she then mumbled under her breath.

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“Have you seen Shane naked?” grumbled Jade to herself as she walked through the abandoned farmland up north. Robin and Sebastian both went through the farmland with their vehicles, so there were already some ground-in paths. “With his dumb. Jacket and. Joja-ing. Whatever he does.” She
kicked a rock to the side. After a few moments, she laughed at herself. “Alex isn’t embarrassed of anything that would be fun... of the actual things, that’d be too mean.”

She glanced over to the rickety farmhouse as it became more visible through the various oak and maple trees. “... What does Shane do? I actually never thought of that,” Jade wondered aloud. “I’ll have to ask Alex.” Suddenly, her focus snapped back into place. “Embarrassing! Think embarrassing, Jade!” she stressed, chopping the air in front of her.

As she walked, a big gust of wind nearly swept her off her feet; she stumbled forward, shocked, and looked behind her. Tree leaves audibly rustled, grass rubbed against her jeans, and the farmhouse loudly creaked. She stared at the house for a while... it almost sounded like it was alive. The buzz from her exchange with Alex faded, and she was thrust back into the valley’s mystical reality. She wasn’t alone with the forest watching her every move.

The gust left in a fleeting moment, and it took all the eerie feelings with it. Jade stood there, dumbfounded, as if she were trying to process her thoughts. Slowly, she resumed her journey to the mountains. “I... something about Shane... what was it...?”

Jade reached the mountain side, where she saw Robin’s house and a part of the bath house up in the distance. She walked in front of the carpenter shop, though she didn’t want to bother anyone while they were working. She briefly thought about Maru, and wondered how her progress was. Still no messages from her, but in her case, that meant she was just busy.

There were ominous traps set all around the grassier patches of the forest. A berry-painted sign had been tied with a vine, stating: BAIT IS FOR MONSTERS. PLEASE AVOID. Some of the traps had already been triggered, if the slimy bars were any indication. “I suppose the monsters got out here after all,” sighed Jade as she carefully stepped around the traps. They were all at least displayed in such a way that they weren’t too hard for humans to see.

So, she went towards the mines. They were still blocked off, but in the distance she could see a long bridge connect to a surprisingly full field. She wandered past the Adventurer’s Guild and to the field... and lo and behold, it was the quarry! She saw jewels she’s never seen in real life, precious minerals, materials she could use to upgrade her tools... the works! She would definitely be able to make sprinklers.

For the bulk of the day, Jade tirelessly mined bunches of stone, copper, iron, and even a bit of gold. There were rocks that had amethyst, rubies, emeralds, and aquamarines. All of them shined brilliantly, her excitement increasing every time she stored a new gem in her backpack. She found plenty of geodes within the bits of stone. There were even some strange rocks, but her pickaxe was too flimsy to penetrate them. Maybe next time.

Jade worked hard, but as a result, her energy was all gone. She fell back to her knees when she couldn’t mine anymore. Her breaths were heavy, and she wiped her sweaty forehead. After some desperate digging in her backpack, she brought out a bottle and poured some water on her face. She loudly sighed and took a minute to rest, deciding instead to gaze at the sky. There were a lot of clouds; if she was lucky, there would be rain that night. She fell back completely and watched the cloud formations for several minutes, allowing the clouds to form specific shapes the longer she stared at them. A part of her wanted to fall asleep, but as soon as her eyes closed, she shook her head and sat up fully. With another swig of water, she put her tools back in her backpack and resumed the trek home.
When Sebastian came home, the sun had already set. The animals were safely locked in their home, and only the kitchen light in the house was on. He grew a bit concerned when he couldn’t find Jade anywhere until he wandered to the backyard. She was loading the furnaces with more ore and coal, not even noticing his presence. There was no indication that she seemed well rested in any regard; her hair was in shambles, jeans dirty, boots muddy, and hands shaky, callused, from all her work. Her green eyes weren’t as bright as they usually were... exhaustion was really catching up with her as farm work went full force.

“Hey, Jade,” muttered Sebastian in greeting.

Immediately, her eyes lit up. She turned to look at Sebastian, and froze, face completely red. She quickly averted her eyes, then loaded the furnaces with more haste. “H-hey,” she stammered. The behavior was strange, but not too unnerving. “... Long day?” he asked.

“Uhhh...”

“... Yeah?”

“... Yes, a very long day. But... rewarding.”

“Did you get to water the crops?” Sebastian asked.

“No, but I hope they’ll be okay. It’s just one day, after all.” She bit her lip as she blushed for a moment. “Um, what about you? Your day?”

Sebastian yawned, tired himself. “It was fine, was with Sam at the Saloon for a while... I think I’m staying in tomorrow. I’ve been doing a lot of errands, and I’m a bit tapped out.”

“That’s good, haha... I-I mean, about the... fine part.”

He tilted his head. “You’re acting a little weirder than usual. Are you that tired?”

“Yoba, yes,” she sighed, hanging her head in shame. “After this I’m going to shower.”

“Um... hey, how about you go do that now? You seem pretty out of it, and uh...” He scratched the back of his head. “The couch isn’t as comfy. You don’t wanna be in that for two nights in a row.”

Jade shook her head. “I’m almost done, done worry. And I’ll go to bed normally... what about you?”

“Probably gonna work a bit. But I’ll join you later,” he said, hiding his smile by looking down and fixing the wrinkles on his hoodie. He opened his mouth, as if to say something else, but went quiet. “... Don’t stay up too late, alright?” he asked, then glanced once more before walking off.

Jade watched him leave, then made a heavier sigh, holding her head with her hands. “Alex is right and I hate him for it,” she mumbled, blushing. “I was fine until he pointed it out!”

Sebastian turned his head when he heard Jade’s shouting from the back of the house. He stood still for a moment, then decided to walk back inside.

Chapter End Notes
Whoo I didn't wait forever this time!

Here's the reflection of my writing, as brought up in the previous chapter notes: http://magicallyclueless.tumblr.com/post/180527002995/rereading-a-farm-in-the-forest-a-ramble-pt-1
This post includes links to the other posts, and of course this is the intention to share without really cluttering up my fic with extra chapters that aren't necessary.

In the end, I've grown a lot since the beginning. I desperately want to rewrite my old chapters, to show, hey! I've gotten better! But I need to finish my work first, at the very least. The more I think about it, the more nervous I get, because I can't help but imagine all the people who stopped reading because of mistakes that I'm extremely aware of several years later. But, I don't hate my writing as much as I thought I would, and I'm extremely thankful for those who stayed for the ride!! At the very least, I'll change a few phrases I don't think sat right and add the dates while I'm at it.

This chapter was kinda slow, but I still try to make them interesting and fun. I hope you guys enjoyed this and I hope you enjoy the next chapter too.

Works inspired by this one: A Sebastian is the Forest by KidAbsurdity, The Birdwatcher: A Love Story by Gabaw

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