Change of Heart

by SearchingForMercury

Summary

Gilbert just wants to go camping with his friends. Unfortunately for him, he seems to be perpetually stuck with the one guy he could care less for. Gilbert thinks he might just lose his mind.

And then he finds out that Roderich, who has had the map ever since embarking on their hike towards the campsite, hasn't been using a compass.

-----

Takes place in the same world as Passenger, set just a little bit before Alfred's grand adventure. It is not necessary to have read that story, however.
The lyrics to *American Pie* streamed out of the radio, mingling with the joined voices of Alfred and Matthew, Alfred's younger cousin. They were actually pretty good, Gilbert would say, though he couldn't be sure if they measured up to American standards or the snob sitting next to him in the car. And on any other occasion, Gilbert would join in with the singing, despite English being his second language. While he wouldn't admit he wasn't confident in all aspects of the language, he would definitely pretend he was, for better or worse. But he was sitting in Alfred's red Nissan Pathfinder next to the one guy he secretly, not-so-secretly, despised.

Maybe despised was too soft a word. He had a bigger vocabulary, he could color it a bit. The guy sitting next to him was the sort of thorn in people's sides that didn't cause massive bleeding. No, it made the wound fester, become infected. It turned the surrounding skin the yellow-green color of disease. It would bubble up, expand, until it just couldn't take it anymore and explode upon prodding in a great display of slimy yellow-white pus. Yes, *that's* what this guy was like. And the worst part of all? He spoke German.

Gilbert had always thought it would be fun to have secret conversations with someone in a foreign country. Sure, he had done so several times with Ludwig, but this time he had friends who *couldn't* speak German. He really wanted to see them get frustrated and listen closely for any mention of their names. Heavens knew he had been on the receiving end before. But Ludwig wasn't overly fond of the game and there was no way he could even start up a conversation with *this* guy. He just sat there, his obnoxiously pretty face tightened up to the point where one might guess he was either incredibly constipated or very much pissed off at one person in particular.

That person was probably Gilbert.

"Hey, hold up," Mattie said, holding up a hand. In his other, his cell phone was buzzing. Alfred lowered the music while Mattie tucked some of his blonde hair behind an ear and took the call. It could only mean it was one of the other passengers. How on Earth did Gilbert draw the short end when it came to seating arrangements? Sure, Alfred was cool, but he was driving. There was nobody to *talk* to.

The scenery outside was whirling by fast, other than the far off things like huge, rounded mountaintops that looked weirdly like hills the closer they got to them. Gilbert had heard somewhere that the Rocky Mountains were like the Alps, but no, no they weren't. They were much softer and surprisingly less rocky than he would have thought. They did pass by some pretty pink-red rock walls, though, and that was something. It reminded him of the rocks that made up the Garden of the Gods. The air was very dry, though, and, being the beginning of October, would sweep up a chilly wind every now and then. Apparently fall did not last as long a time and they were right at the start of it.

"They want to pull over and get something to eat," Mattie said, moving the phone away from his mouth. "They saw an IHOP half an hour ago and now they're craving breakfast foods, apparently."

Alfred nodded. "Tell them that if we don't see another one or something similar in the next ten minutes, we'll pull over for whatever comes along," he said.

When Mattie had hung up, the music was turned back up and Gilbert kept his eyes open for food places. Most of it was mountain walls, though, with tiny little gas station stops spaced far along the way. The great expanse of blue above them let the sun bear down without interruption, save for when they would dip down into a mountain's shadow. Then something streaked past.
"Whoa, did you see that?" Gilbert said and pressed his face up against the glass.

"Can you not shout?" the annoying sack of crap next to him muttered.

"Dude," Al said. "Roll down the window. Fingerprints on windows is about the same as dog slobber. I just cleaned it and I usually don't. I'd like it to last."

Gilbert ignored him. "But did you see that?" he pressed on.

"The carved bears?" Mattie asked, looking back at him with a smile. "Yeah, you see them a lot around here, along with other things. But the bears are more famous, I guess."

Gilbert immediately wanted one. What he'd do with it, he wasn't sure. Could he have it shipped to Germany? He was only an exchange student, so he was only there for a year, but he could put it in his dorm room until the time came. Those things were huge, though. It looked like a bear carved straight out of a log and about his height, maybe taller. He couldn't be sure. But he had seen them around Manitou Springs before, standing beside front doors and welcoming guests. That was definitely on his 'to buy' list. He tucked the thought away and hoped he would remember.

Soon enough they pulled over at a cluster of gas stations and fast food joints. There was hardly ever a place Gilbert had not seen a McDonalds, so he was surprised when they didn't park at that one. Instead, they parked in front of Wendy's and waited for the others to join them. Antonio and Francis clambered out a two-seater truck, which was the reason Gilbert had not been driving with them. He was Antonio's roommate, he should have gotten dibs on that seat, not forced to sit next to Mr. Gloomy McStick-Up-His-Ass. And then Ludwig pulled up next to them in a borrowed Jeep. Technically Ludwig had a driver's license from Germany and everyone had been kind of iffy about whether or not he could legally drive in the States, but they all agreed that so long as he drove under the speed limit, they wouldn't get caught. And of course, they told Ludwig none of this.

Out of that car, along with Gilbert's brother, were the girls: Elizabeta and Feliciana with her older sister, Lavina. Gilbert knew why Ludwig had been chosen to drive the girls, but he still didn't find it fair. Anything was better than the iceberg who was still standing next to him for some reason. Elizabeta had pulled her thick brown hair into a ponytail and Gilbert guessed the other girls would soon do the same. While it was technically fall, it was still really warm. It was one of the reasons they had decided to do this, to go camping.

Alfred had the perfect car for it, as did Antonio's cousin -- the person who lent Tony the truck. Almost everyone was an exchange student. Their school seemed to like cramming all the foreign kids in the same part of the dorms, because that was how most of them met.

"So we went from breakfast food to Wendy's?" Francis asked, his blue eyes scrunching up as he stared at the building. Cars buzzed past on the highway close by.

Alfred shrugged. "I didn't want to keep going and maybe not find any more food places," he said. "I thought everyone was hungry and you can never go wrong with a good old fashioned burger and fries."

"Very true," Lizzie said, grinning. "C'mon, let's eat!"

The shift from the hot parking lot to the air conditioned building was sudden and sent goosebumps up and down Gilbert's arms. Tony got stuck holding open the door, though he didn't seem to mind. Lavina did end up scowling and muttering something about being able to hold open her own door, to which her sister flicked her arm for. This only made the scowl deepen and the blush
Once they had their food, it settled down a bit.

"We're almost there," Alfred announced. As the only true blue American of the group, along with the only native person to Colorado, he was in charge, the leader of the pack, whatever anyone wanted to call it. He dunked a french fry in ketchup. "Probably another half hour on the road."

"But we still have to walk to the actual campsite," Lizzie said.

Al nodded as he chewed. His glasses caught the light.

"That should take us the rest of the afternoon," Mattie said.

Before they all climbed back into their respective cars, Gilbert pulled Frankie aside and asked if they could switch so that he could ride with Tony and let Frankie deal with the silent block of human whose company he had to suffer through.

"Why?" Frankie asked.

"Because he pisses me off," Gilbert muttered, glancing around to make sure nobody would hear them. Roderich, the guy in question, was one of Lizzie's friends and stuck by her like fly to tape. At that moment, he was talking to her near the entrance as they waited for a few of the others to use the bathrooms. That was another thing that pissed him off -- she had a boyfriend, this guy named Sadiq, and this Roderich guy was hanging on to her. Lizzie was a good friend of Gilbert's and he didn't like to see this guy sliming his way into her good book.

Francis looked almost amused. Gilbert recognized that face. It was one of the many reasons they were friends. "I don't know," he said. "I rather like hanging out with Tony."

Gilbert frowned. "Dude, no, please," he said.

"Sorry," Francis said with a shrug. "Can't change the seating arrangement now."

And that's how Gilbert ended up back in Alfred's car, sitting next to the ever silent Roderich Edelstein, directing dark thoughts towards one of his best friends. Fuck Francis and fuck his stupid French accent. He still didn't understand how it all worked out. If Roderich and Lizzie were such good friends, why couldn't they fucking carpool together? It wouldn't make him dislike him less, but wow, it would have done wonders for his mood.

Soon enough, they were parked and getting out of the cars anyways. The small parking lot was just dirt and rocks with a trail head near the rough wooden fence. The forest didn't look too thick, not like some of the forests Gilbert had seen in Germany, but they felt familiar and he liked that. They pulled out their camping equipment, strapped it to their backs, made sure everything was secure, and then locked up the cars.

"Sweet," Alfred said, once they had formed some sort of circle. "Is everybody good to go?"

"Let's do this!" Gilbert shouted.

"Yeah!" Lizzie also shouted and shot a fist in the air.

Some of the others nodded and they all walked towards the trail head. Gilbert almost giggled to himself -- Roderich seemed to be having a hard time with his pack with the way he was already slightly hunched over. A part of him, a very very small part of him, was mentally smacking himself in the face because he really shouldn't get a kick out of another person's misfortune.
"I can't wait to make smores," Feliciana said in an almost wistful tone. "I don't think I've had one before. Have I had one before, Lavina?"

"No," the other girl replied in a voice that sounded like it had sunk to the bottom of the ocean. Her eyebrows were drawn together in what Gilbert was beginning to guess was a permanent frown.

This didn't bother her sister, though, as Feliciana bounded up to where Ludwig and Lizzie were walking. Lavina's head shot up, eyes wide in what he guessed was panic, but when she noticed that Gilbert was watching, she went back to scowling.

"Hey, hey, have you had smores before?" she asked.

"Yup!" Lizzie replied with a smile.

Ludwig sort of nodded, but the tips of his ears were red. Gilbert knew what that meant. The grin that spread on Gilbert's face was less than friendly and he was about to call his brother out on it, but then Tony nudged Gilbert and jerked his head to the rear of their party. Roderich was trailing behind them.

"You should tell him to pick up the pace," Tony said.

"Why me?" Gilbert shot back. He didn't see why it was his job to inform the guy. "You noticed him first, why don't you do it?"

Tony shrugged and looked ahead. "He seems kind of shy and since you guys were in the same car, I thought he'd appreciate being approached by someone he kind of knows instead of a stranger like me."

Gilbert's face twisted up in disgust at Antonio's thoughtfulness. He gave a short groan and rolled his eyes. "Fine, but next time you do it," he replied and stopped walking. Tony smiled at him -- he had a really good smile, a smile one couldn't ignore and not feel good about their day. Fuck Antonio, too, and fuck his good meaning nature.

Roderich looked up and, when his eyes met Gilbert's, dropped his gaze back to the ground. He did seem to walk a little faster, though.

"Hey, you're going to have to pick it up a little if we're going to make it to the campsite in this century," Gilbert said.

"I'm doing as best I can," Roderich said. Gilbert could tell he was already slightly short of breath.

"Yeah, well, your so called best isn't good enough," Gilbert replied. "We barely even started. If you knew you couldn't keep up, why did you even bother coming along?"

"I don't have to explain to you," Roderich said and tried brushing past him. But he was too slow and just wound up walking next to him. So he could keep up, technically -- for a short while, anyways.

Gilbert frowned. "Whatever, just don't slow us down," he said.

They walked in silence up until they caught up with their group. And it wasn't because Roderich had miraculously grown robot legs that were fast as the average human. They were crowded around a large plaque in the middle of a small clearing.

"What's going on?" Gilbert asked. Not for the first time was he glad he had a naturally loud voice.
Alfred and Matthew looked up.

"There are a bunch of routes," Alfred said. "They all lead to the campsite, but we were trying to figure out which one to take when we realized something that you would definitely agree constitutes as awesome."

Gilbert raised his eyebrows.

"We're gonna split up into groups!" Alfred said as if revealing a prize on a game show. "This way we get to explore each one, take pictures and stuff, and meet in the same spot! We've all got maps, so it'll work out!"

"The only problem was that not everyone here is used to camping or hiking," Mattie said. "But we thought we could pair those who weren't with those who are. Which we just did."

This time Gilbert frowned. "You already did? Then who am I paired with?" he asked. He didn't like decisions being made for him. And he had a bad feeling about this.

"Well, since you two weren't here, we figured you could be a team," Mattie replied, looking to his cousin for reassurance. Gilbert felt like his energy went flooding down through his body to settle at his feet. This could not be happening.

"Yeah!" Al said, grinning wide. "So I'm going with Tony, Mattie's going with Frankie, Liz'll be going with Feliciana over here, and Ludwig goes with Lavina!"

Gilbert had a lot of things going on through his head. One of them was the overwhelming pity he had for his brother for being paired with Lavina. Another was the overwhelming pity he had for himself. He wasn't sure what he deserved to be paired with this block of ice disguised at a person. Really, he got good grades, he maintained a clean room -- where had he gone wrong?

"I suggest a small change, though," Gilbert said and he could really kick his own ass for what he was about to suggest. "I think Feliciana should go with Ludwig and Lavina go with Lizzie." He was willing to sacrifice his own sanity for the sake of his brother's. Roderich couldn't be that bad. Not as bad as Lavina, anyways, with her weirdly moody behavior and dark attitude. Plus, Ludwig's ears had gone red when talking with Feliciana. He knew what was up.

"Sure!" Feliciana said and skipped over to Ludwig, whose entire face was steadily changing color.

Alfred nodded, though he looked slightly suspicious, and then clapped his hands. "Okay teams!" he shouted and began pointing out the paths and who would take which route. Matthew went around making sure everyone had a map and pointed out where the campsite they were heading for was located.

After everyone else had gone, with their voices slowly fading into the regular sounds of nature and silence, Gilbert plopped down on a rock.

"What are you doing?" Roderich asked. His glasses slid down his face and he pushed them back up.

"Taking a break, you need it," he replied. "Do you have a water bottle with you?"

"Of course I do," Roderich said, scowling.

Gilbert lifted his hands, like in defense. "Hey, you never know with some people."
"And I'm just one of those people," Roderich stated, giving him a look.

"Yeah, you are," Gilbert said. The heat was not helping his mood. He just wanted to get back in those trees, amongst the shade and smell of pine needles. "Now either sit your ass down and drink some water or I'll make you. And trust me, there is nothing fun about a face full of sweat and water in a place full of bugs." Actually, he wasn't sure what kind of bugs there would be. Colorado was so dry, even the worms looked weird.

Roderich finally took a seat under a tree and pulled out a silver water bottle. Gilbert hoped he had brought more than just that. There was a stream near the campsite, but first they had to get there.

When they finally set off, they were following a thin, one person path. Gilbert breathed in, already in love with the ponderosa trees that grew there. They let off a scent that reminded him vaguely of vanilla, which had been what led Alfred to recognizing and telling him about the trees.

"You're lucky to have me on your team," Gilbert announced. "I'm pretty good at this."

Roderich made a weird noise through his nose and -- was he laughing at him?

"I'm serious!" Gilbert said, frowning at the back of Roderich's head. He broke a twig off from one of the branches and threw it at him. It almost went down the back of his shirt, which inspired Gilbert to break off some pine needles and to wait until the time was right.

"I'm sure you were," Roderich replied, though his tone was still heavy with his amusement.

Gilbert huffed a bit but let it fall into silence. He had, after all, suffered an entire car ride that way. Another half hour or so wouldn't kill him. Probably. There was a little radio in his pack, but it was covered by so much junk, he wasn't sure if it was worth the trouble of finding.

Not even ten minutes later and Roderich was asking for another break.

"You really aren't cut out for this, are you?" Gilbert asked.

Roderich glared at him. "Why should it matter if I'm 'cut out' for this?" he asked. "I am here to have fun."

Gilbert snorted, though he did sort of have a point, he guessed. "How much fun can it be if you're so out of shape?" he responded.

"Because my friends are here," Roderich snapped. "What's it to you? Let's just go."

"Sure thing," Gilbert said, rolling his eyes. He stood up and dusted off his pants. "It's not like I was the one who needed to breathe. Hey, aren't you from Austria or something? Shouldn't you be used to the thin air?"

"Not all of Austria is made of mountains," Roderich muttered. He was gripping the map tight in his hands, the paper crinkling something awful. "Now, I think this is the path here," he said and motioned toward what seemed to be patches of dirt strung together between the pine needles and grass.

"You think or you know?" Gilbert asked.

Roderich shot him a look to which Gilbert just grinned at.

Being October, Gilbert wouldn't be surprised if the pine needles had covered part of the path, especially if it wasn't such a well known one. If that were the case, however, there would have
been trail markers or something. Maybe they were the ones who were supposed to do that. Regardless, he hadn't seen any and it was starting to get worrisome. After another ten minutes or so of not seeing a trail marker, during a Roderich break, Gilbert snatched up the map and studied it.

"So where are we on here?" he asked. When he didn't receive an answer, he looked up to see Roderich staring into the trees, his eyebrows sunk down. Then his bottom lip disappeared between his teeth. "Roderich," Gilbert said, slow and even. "Where are we on the map?" He got up and went to sit beside him. "Point. Now."

Roderich sighed and peered down at the crinkled paper. "I believe we are here," he said and pointed to a spot on the outlined path. "Or here." He moved his finger a little further along the route.

"You think?" Gilbert said. "Or you know?"

Roderich shrugged and looked down at the dirt. "I've never done it before!" he burst out.

"Then why did you take the map?" Gilbert asked, voice sharp. Oh god. He really hoped this wasn't happening.

"Because it was given to me!" Roderich replied in the same panicked tone. "I thought how hard is it to use a map? I've used them before back home, on road trips, so how hard could it be?"

Gilbert stared at him. He wanted the other man to feel all the anger being sent his way. Like his eyes could send out heat waves or something. Hate waves, rather. "Did you use a compass?"

Roderich promptly buried his face in his hands.

"Are you fucking for real?!" Gilbert shouted and stood up. "What the fuck were you thinking? That we could just hope we were going in the right direction? Even when you're on a road trip, you look at road signs, right? To make sure you're going the right way? Why the fuck would you think you didn't have to use a compass?"

"I'm sorry, okay?" Roderich shot back at him, standing up as well.

Gilbert let out a dry laugh. "Sorry? Sorry's not gonna cut it! We are probably lost in a goddamn forest because of your shit-for-a-brain."

Roderich made a move like he wanted to run at Gilbert, smack him maybe, an involuntary jerk of his body.

"Do it," Gilbert provoked. "Fucking do it."

Roderich matched his gaze for a few moments before melting down into something that cooled Gilbert's temper. He crumpled back down and put his face in his hands for a second time.

"Oh god," Roderich mumbled into his palms. "Oh god. Can you fix this?"

As the adrenaline left his body, Gilbert also let out a sigh. The lightheadedness that came with it prompted him to get out his water bottle. "Yeah, maybe," he said. "Maybe if we can figure out the direction and what sort of path we were following, we can back track or head in the direction we think the path is. And if that doesn't work..." He didn't really want to think about it.

Roderich nodded.
After careful consideration, a compass in one hand and the map in the other, Gilbert set off with Roderich following behind him. He should have been leader from the get-go, what had he even been thinking? Trusting that this weird, seemingly complicated guy to guide them through the forest? This was definitely one of his more stupid decisions.

"This is the last time you get the map," Gilbert muttered. They were heading in a north-westerly direction and, if Gilbert's fervent prayers were answered, towards the original campsite. There were other ones marked out on the map, but even if they stumbled across the wrong one, they'd be able to find their way back to a street or the parking lot.

Roderich just sighed.

"No, I'm serious, your map privileges have been revoked," Gilbert said. "Permanently. In fact, we better leave the decision making to me."

"I've apologized, I don't know what more you want me to say," Roderich replied.

"How about admitting I am superior to you in every way?" Gilbert said, feeling the smirk snake onto his face. He really was only saying it to be a butt.

"Right," Roderich mumbled.

"Name one thing you're better at than I am," Gilbert said, looking at the other man over his shoulder.

"Playing a musical instrument," Roderich said right off the bat. "Baking a multi-level cake, baking in general, sewing, hemming --"

"I said one!" Gilbert interrupted. "And jeez, what are you, a housewife? Do you clean, too?"

"Even if I were, there is nothing wrong with that or my hobbies," Roderich replied, his tone stiff enough to make Gilbert glance back at him. The other man's mouth was drawn tight, his eyebrows stuck in a semi-permanent frown. It made Gilbert feel the stress of it all. "And I try to stay neat."

"Uh huh."

As things fell back into silence, Gilbert tried to imagine what kind of instrument the guy played. He really doubted it was something loud and brass, like trumpets. Something that probably did not require much lung-work, either, considering Roderich was still huffing and puffing despite their constant breaks. No, he looked more like he would use something delicate, something pretty sounding. Like a harp or a violin. Something with strings, probably.

And as for sewing, it wasn't difficult to see that either. Roderich's small hands working over a piece of fabric, guiding it under the needle of a sewing machine. Gilbert could picture what his dorm room might look like, after a project -- full of sketches and patterns, recipe books and aprons. He'd have to ask when they got back, maybe, to see what it really looked like and compare.

Suddenly Roderich grabbed Gilbert's shoulder, making them both stop.

"Has it gotten darker since we started?" Roderich asked, looking around with obvious panic in his eyes.

It was subtle, very subtle, and he wasn't sure how he had even noticed, but Gilbert checked his watch to be sure. "Yeah, probably," Gilbert said. "It's getting close to when the sun sets around here, with the mountains and all."
"Are we going to, to keep going?" Roderich asked. His blue eyes looked so big behind his glasses, Gilbert couldn't help but feel a pang of pity. Not to mention he was still clutching at Gilbert's sleeve.

"Okay, I'm making the executive decision to set up camp here," he said and stamped one of his legs, for good measure. Then something else dawned on him and it must have shown on his face because Roderich's expression dropped.

"What?" he asked.

"I just remembered that I was going to share a tent with Ludwig," Gilbert said. Fuck. This could not be happening. "And he's got it.

Roderich looked simultaneously relieved and surprised. Apparently he had been expecting something worse, though what that was, Gilbert couldn't even begin to fathom. "We'll just use mine, then," he said with a little shrug. "I'm assuming you have your sleeping bag and such?"

Gilbert nodded but his mind was still stuck on sharing a tent. Fuuuuck. "Yours is probably a one person tent, though. We can't both fit."

"It might be tight, but not impossible," he replied and pulled off his pack. "Neither of us are very tall."

Gilbert sighed and pulled off his as well. Together, they set up Roderich's spiffy new silver tent between two large trees where the ground was relatively flat. It really wasn't the biggest, but it would do, he supposed. After this, Gilbert went around, gathering up sticks and anything else that looked burnable while Roderich followed his instructions on digging out and preparing a campfire.

"I've got matches," Roderich said when the sticks clattered into the hole he had dug.

"I've got something better," Gilbert replied and pulled out his lighter with a grin. It was a shiny little Zippo lighter with a dark eagle carved into the side. He held it up to one of the sticks until it caught fire and dropped it in.

"You smoke?" Roderich asked, as if the idea surprised him.

"Yeah, a bit," Gilbert replied, but did not explain further.

Roderich stared at the growing flame, the light catching his glasses and moving across the reflection. The darkness around them was soon to come, like it swept up, over everything, though it couldn't extinguish the flames. The wood popped and curled black and a glowing red.

Gilbert dragged his pack closer to him and dug around a bit, breaking Roderich's concentration. They had been planning on fishing and eating that during the trip, but they hadn't gone in unprepared -- fishing wasn't always a guaranteed thing. So he pulled out two peanut butter sandwiches and handed one to Roderich, who mumbled a thanks and began peeling off the saran wrap with his thin fingers.

"What happens if we can't find our way back?" Roderich asked, his voice smaller than usual.

Gilbert swallowed his bite before speaking. "Well," he said, trying to think of a way to phrase it so it didn't sound as bad. "Then we stay put. If we stay in one place, it's easier for the others to find us. We can't be that far from them, though."

Roderich nodded, staring into the fire once again. They discussed the next day's plan for a bit,
how they would continue walking for a couple hours and if they hadn't found anything, they
would set up camp again and make a more serious plan. Crickets and the flutter of wings made up
their background noise, which didn't bother Gilbert any. The same couldn't be said about
Roderich, though, and it wasn't until they had crawled in the tent and curled up in their respective
sleeping bags did he voice his concerns.

"There aren't any bears around here, right?" he asked.

"Just go to sleep," Gilbert groaned.

Roderich went quiet for all but a few seconds. "Because I'm not sure what to do if we encounter
one."

"Sleep."

Gilbert could hear Roderich shuffle about from the rustle of his sleeping bag. "I'm serious,
Gilbert," he said and his voice came from a little higher. He had pushed himself up.

"I heard Colorado has bears and mountain lions and coyotes, so really, we're fucked all the way
around," Gilbert grumbled. He couldn't help but want to tease the guy. "Now go to sleep or I'm
kicking you out to deal with them yourself."

Roderich settled back down and Gilbert thought that he could finally catch some shut eye when he
said, "Do you know what to do when--"

Gilbert swung his food out and Roderich let out a shout.

"Don't worry about it," Gilbert mumbled into his small camping pillow. He reached out and felt
around until he found Roderich's head. He gave his hair a rough ruffle. "Most animals don't
approach humans. Especially not this close to regular camping grounds. So relax, go to sleep, and
don't think about it. The most you have to worry about is a squirrel making off with your food."

"Okay," Roderich said. There was a pause and Gilbert thought they were both going to get some
rest. "Goodnight."

"Yeah, g'night, now for fuck's sake, sleep."

And finally there was silence.
Turning Point

Gilbert thwacked at the bushes with more force than was necessary to get through them. The day was just beginning, the morning air still chilly and almost sort of damp. Roderich had his jacket zipped all the way up, but Gilbert didn't want to look at him, which was pretty easy considering they had continued walking in a line; Roderich still couldn't seem to keep up with Gilbert's pace. Before they had set off, Gilbert had found a large stick that he declared as his, which was what he was using to demolish the bushes.

The air smelled fresh and made his nose tingle. It was heady with the pines and ponderosa, even more so than when they had first started out the day before. Sunlight was weaving in through branches and around the trees, but it was more like a glow than anything else.

"So how long do you suppose we should walk for?" Roderich asked.

"I said a couple hours," Gilbert said. "Or did you not hear me when we were talking. Together. Last night."

"Yes, but how many hours, do you think?"

"I don't know!" Gilbert said in an exasperated manner. He aimed his new walking stick at some brambles.

"What's your problem? Didn't sleep well?" Roderich asked and it was obvious he was annoyed. Fuck, Gilbert did not want to think about that. Not with the way he had opened his eyes that morning to stare into such a pretty face that he had felt disoriented and curious as to who he might have had a one-night stand with. And then remembering all the events that had occurred the day before, tumbling down on his mind like a load of sharp-edged bricks. Roderich was a guy, not a girl. They were lost in a forest, sleeping in a tent, not snuggled close in his bed. And besides, he didn't do one-night stands, and certainly not with some guy he had just met.

"Are you okay?" Roderich asked. It was then that Gilbert realized he had gone silent. "Your ears are red."

Shit, he could even feel them heating up. "I'm fine," he mumbled. "Let's just not talk, okay? Just...find our way through this shit storm of trees and whatever."

Roderich let out a sigh so audible, Gilbert wanted to smack him. For a while they had only the sounds of birds and the crunch of their own footsteps to listen to. Then Gilbert began thinking about everything that had led up to their trip.

"So why'd you decide to come camping with us?" Gilbert asked, blurring out his thoughts. "I mean, there must have been a bunch of opportunities to do something else, so why this?"

"Oh, are we talking now?" Roderich replied, voice dry.

Gilbert's teeth ground together. "Don't have to be an ass about it," he said.

"I'm the ass, now?" Roderich said. "I thought only you held that position."

"Whatever."
He could hear Roderich sigh again. "I don't see why this is so important," he said. "I wanted to be with friends, with Elizabeta. I've never been camping before so I thought why not. That's it. End of story."

"Uh huh," Gilbert replied, rolling his eyes. "Sure it wasn't because you had the hots for someone?"

The pause that followed was long enough to where Gilbert was partly surprised when he shouldn't have been. He had thought Roderich was in love with Lizzie, the way he hung around her and only her. "What gave you that impression?" Roderich asked and his voice was like Russian ice.

"Seriously?" Gilbert said. "She has a boyfriend, you know. You clung to her like nobody's business, I'd be surprised if I was the only one who noticed."

"Elizabeta?" Roderich asked and something about his tone made Gilbert suddenly unsure about his earlier deduction.

"Who else? You didn't talk to anyone but her," he responded.

The other man laughed -- a real laugh. Gilbert didn't get it, he had been so sure that Roderich liked her. If not Lizzie, then--

"Feliciana? Lavina?" Gilbert asked, frowning. They were the only other girls on their trip and if he was being honest, he couldn't really see Roderich liking either of them. Each to their own, he supposed, but he couldn't imagine their personalities meshing in a way that worked well.

But Roderich was still sort of chuckling to himself and Gilbert couldn't seem to press him further - - he didn't want to be wrong again and he really didn't like being laughed at.

Not long after, Gilbert came across a stretch of dirt that looked something like a path. The only problematic thing he could see about it actually being a path was the lack of footprints, but he didn't tell Roderich this, who was still huffing and puffing somewhere behind him -- he could hear him. He swore, if there was some hungry, man-eating beast within fifty miles of them, Roderich would have given their location up hours ago. But a path was better than no path, he reasoned, and put more confidence into his steps.

"Are you absolutely sure we are going the right way?" Roderich asked.

"Says the guy who got us lost to begin with," Gilbert scoffed, staring down at the map before glancing over at the compass in Roderich's sweaty hand. "Have you been drinking enough?"

"Of course."

Gilbert looked up at him. Roderich's shiny face was red in the cheeks and his glasses kept sliding down. It wasn't warm enough for him to be working up such a sweat. So Gilbert dropped his pack and dug around until he brought out a plastic water bottle. "Here," he said. "For when you run out."

Roderich frowned, eyes darting up once to meet Gilbert's, but he took it. "Thank you," he said.

That answered Gilbert's earlier question about Roderich's water supply. That meant that they would need help -- the sooner the better. And as for Roderich's earlier question, he wasn't sure at all. He could only do his best to try and get them through the forest, but he really wasn't sure if his best was cut out for this.

Not even fifteen minutes of walking later, Roderich called out to him.
"Can we stop for a moment?" he asked.

"We literally just took a break," Gilbert said. "You know, when I said that we'd walk for a few hours, that didn't include rests. So even if you're trying to stretch it out so that we stop sooner, it's not gonna happen."

"No, not that," Roderich said with a scowl. "I wasn't even thinking about that. I need to, uh, go to the bathroom."

Gilbert stared at him until it got awkward and that he realized it had been a question. "And?" he said. "Get to it then."

The color of Roderich's face went far darker than Gilbert had been anticipating. "You don't expect me to just go, like, like right here?" he asked.

"Uh, well, I figured you'd wanna step to the side or something," Gilbert replied, scratching at his head. He would be wishing for a shower the next day, but the odds of that happening seemed to grow increasingly unlikely.

Roderich stared off to the side and if it weren't for the expression on his face, Gilbert would have thought the man was debating which tree to do it under. "I don't," Roderich started. He licked his lips and swallowed. "I don't want to do it in front of you."

Gilbert felt all the muscles in his face ease up as he grinned. "Oh man, that's what's got you all worked up?" he asked.

Roderich shot him a glare before stomping off into the trees.

"Don't go too far now!" Gilbert shouted after him, his grin still very apparent in his tone. "And if you don't come back in ten minutes, I'm leaving you."

"Shut up!" Roderich shouted back.

"You should feel lucky!" Gilbert continued. "I could have said five."

The other man only made some deep throated sounds of frustration.

Gilbert crouched down and began fiddling with some of the pine needles on the ground. He found a pinecone and then another. Pretty soon he had himself a small army, all wielding pine needle swords and debating whether they should attack the tree. No, one of them argued. That was where they all came from, they couldn't possibly attack their own mother! Gilbert sighed and stood up, brushing the dirt from his knees.

"Are you done yet?" Gilbert called out.

"Just a moment," was the response.

He groaned and began to pace, but he didn't get very far before he heard, "Gilbert!" Without a second thought, he ran in the direction he had seen Roderich go.

"Dude, you better be all done," Gilbert shouted as he ran. "If you were bitten by a snake or some shit, you're a goner. Ain't no way I'm sucking venom out of your--"

Roderich hand came out of nowhere and smacked him upside the head.

"Gross, dude," Gilbert said, making a face. "You didn't even wash your hands."
That's when Roderich smiled for what felt like the first time. "But I did," he replied, sounding proud of himself. "Right over there."

Gilbert looked to where Roderich had just lifted his arm to point at, between some trees where the light got brighter. Together, they walked out into a small clearing, surrounded by trees all around except for one side. And that was where the stream was. Roderich stopped walking at the edge of the forest, but Gilbert kept going until he was staring into the water. Too small to be considered a proper river, but deep and clear enough that he could see fish. He whirled around to gape at Roderich -- and he knew that his mouth was open, but he didn't care.

"Not bad, right?" Roderich asked, still smiling.

Gilbert closed off their distance with a few short strides and grabbed Roderich's shoulders. "Not bad at all," he said. "You done good." Gilbert ruffled his dark hair, not at all surprised with its soft quality.

Roderich's cheeks turned pink and he looked away. "I'm not a dog," he mumbled.

Gilbert snorted and turned back to the little river -- that's what he decided to call it. "We're staying here," he said as he pulled off his pack. "I name it...Fort Kickass."

Roderich frowned, but pulled off his own pack. The relief from finally being able to stop carrying it was so obvious on his face, Gilbert almost snorted. But he had bigger things to focus on.

"You've never seen Archer?" Gilbert asked. Roderich shook his head. "Man, you are missing out. Anyways, you set up the tent, I'll go get stuff for a fire since you seem to like getting lost." Gilbert didn't even wait to see what new sort of frustrated expression Roderich could make before stomping out into the surrounding trees.

-----

Gilbert's thumbs were beginning to ache from the excessive force he put into smashing the buttons on his DS. He didn't even really have to -- Pokemon battles were taken in turns. But he liked the thrill it gave him, thinking if he attacked fast, so would his Charizard. His Machamp had already gone down not moments before, as did the rest of his team. Everything was hanging on Charizard. And, of course, that meant that he won. His Charizard was the best.

He turned off the DS, closed it, and looked up, blinking. There was still some sunlight, as Roderich still had his head buried in his book, so Gilbert pulled out a notebook from his bag and started scribbling out words, then sentences, until he was documenting their entire adventure so far. His cursive was shit to look at, which was why he wrote it in only when he really needed it. This was one of those times. Half German, half English, and some of the words turning into lead smears on the page -- oh yeah, nobody could decipher that.

Every so often he would glance up at Roderich, but whether to make sure the boy was still reading his book or that he was still actually there, Gilbert didn't know. One thing he was certain, though: this whole shit adventure was going on his Tumblr. It wasn't like he had a huge following or anything, just a hundred or so, but he thought he owed it to the world to showcase Roderich's amazing ability to get on his nerves.

"Do you need something from me?" Roderich asked all of a sudden, his voice breaking through the silence and making Gilbert aware of just how much thinking to himself felt like a dream.

"Why would I ever need something from you?" Gilbert responded with a sneer.
Roderich rolled his eyes and looked back at his book and the silence settled back around them all too comfortably until Gilbert couldn't stand it.

"What are you reading?"

"Why do you ask?" Roderich mumbled back, eyes still moving back and forth as he continued to read.

"Because you're so into it," Gilbert replied and went to look at it, but Roderich moved it away. "C'mon, let me see!" He tried again and Roderich did the same. "You're probably reading something dirty, that's it, that's why you don't want to show me. Explains why you're so into it, too."

"A book doesn't need to be dirty to be interesting," Roderich replied and snapped the book closed. He had one of those fancy book covers on, a red plaid design and made of paper.

"Then why did you hide it when I tried looking at it?" Gilbert asked.

"Because it's you," the other man replied.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Roderich sighed and looked up to the sky, which was beginning to darken. "We should start a fire," he said. "And have dinner."

Something about Roderich's tone had Gilbert pause. He didn't push it. As he built up the sticks and twigs, he thought about it instead. Roderich was probably afraid Gilbert would tease him for it, and not in the to be funny way, but the serious, demeaning sort. And Gilbert definitely liked teasing people, but he wasn't a bully. Did Roderich think he was? Probably, considering how much anger he had taken out on the guy during their hike alone.

"We should probably check our food supply," Gilbert said. He felt drained of energy, for some reason.

"Good idea," Roderich replied.

After they joined both their supplies of food and, discovering that they were large enough to last more than a few days, Gilbert made an inventory in his notebook. If they started fishing, they could stretch it out even further, but there was no rush for that. So they filled up their water bottles and settled down with their sandwiches.

"So," Gilbert said, his mouth full of bread. He swallowed before continuing to speak. "What are you studying?"

Roderich paused and Gilbert would bet he was wondering why there was this sudden interest. Gilbert just wanted to make conversation, though. And possibly to repent for his past bullying. "Microbiology," he replied.

"What," Gilbert deadpanned.

"What?" Roderich said, frowning.

"Nothing," Gilbert said, leaning back a little. "Didn't take you as the science sort is all."

"I have music as a minor," Roderich said, almost like an explanation. "It just doesn't do so well as a career."
Gilbert laughed. "Yeah, wow, like why would you even need to go to school for that?" he asked.

Roderich glared.

With a little cough, Gilbert steered the conversation elsewhere. "So where are you from, exactly? Like, I mean, I know we're speaking German, but your accent is a little funny and I can't really place it. Bavaria?" he asked.

"Austria," Roderich corrected. "Northern Austria, though, so I'm not surprised you thought Bavaria."

"Huh," Gilbert said and poked at the fire. "I'm from Berlin."

"I know."

Gilbert looked over at Roderich, but couldn't see his face. "Yeah," he said with a laugh. "My accent is pretty obvious, I guess."

The conversation faded back to silence after that, though Gilbert wouldn't say it was awkward. It felt pretty comfortable, actually, with the fire, the insect noise coming from the forest, and the dark sky above them. When the fire died down, they didn't try bringing it to life again. Instead, they called it a night, got ready for bed, and crawled into the tent. Roderich being within reach made Gilbert remember that morning, but before he could ruminate on the subject, everything sort of fell apart.

Literally.

"What the hell?!" Gilbert said, thrashing about, trying to get the tent off of him.

"I'm so sorry!" Roderich blabbered. "And it didn't look that difficult, just like a puzzle, sort of, and when it stood upright it looked okay and I didn't think-"

Gilbert burst out laughing. "Oh my god," he wheezed when he managed to get some air. "Oh my god, this is great."

Roderich grew quiet and Gilbert didn't notice until he had managed to stifle his laughter.

"I just, I thought I was following what we did yesterday," Roderich blabbered. "And it didn't look that difficult, just like a puzzle, sort of, and when it stood upright it looked okay and I didn't think-"

Gilbert burst out laughing. "Oh my god," he wheezed when he managed to get some air. "Oh my god, this is great."

Roderich grew quiet and Gilbert didn't notice until he had managed to stifle his laughter.

"Oh man," he said and a short giggle rose up. He reached out and ruffled Roderich's hair. He made his voice go a little gruff. "Why so serious?"

"I messed up," Roderich said, his voice small sounding.

"So?" Gilbert replied. "It's just a tent. We can put it up properly, it's not like you broke it. And even then, you can still use a broken tent as a tent. C'mon, let's get this together so we can sleep."

Roderich was still very quiet, even when they had redone the tent (Gilbert showing him how to do it, too) and were back inside.

"You know, I didn't always know how to put up a tent either," Gilbert said. He wasn't sure if Roderich was still awake, but he said it anyways. "The first time I tried it out on my own, I forgot to anchor it down, so the wind took off with it, like a balloon."
The other man didn't respond, so Gilbert turned over, brought his blanket up under his chin, and closed his eyes.

-----

The next day flew by in much the same way. The majority of the time was spent in silence as Roderich read his book and Gilbert played his games. He had brought a gameboy for the occasion, along with several pairs of batteries in the event that his DS would die. Which it did. That only meant he couldn't play certain games, though. It was during one of these games that he came up with the ideal Pokemon team Roderich would probably have. Needless to say, it definitely featured a Magikarp. But he took his teams seriously, so Roderich also had psychic and ice Pokemon. Not that he would ever actually tell him, but it was something he thought about a lot.

And then of course came nighttime once more with a little more discussion around the fire while they ate -- Gilbert discovered that it was marine microbiology that Roderich's studies focused on and that he would be going back to Austria after the school year was over, much like Gilbert, except he was obviously headed back to Germany.

The day after that, Gilbert decided on several things. First off, he was going to wash his hair in the little river. He didn't care about it being clean for the sake of his naturally good looks, but rather because his head itched like crazy. Second, they were going to try fishing. Neither of them knew how and it might take them a little while to actually catch anything. And third, they needed to come up with a plan in case the others couldn't find them. There were still a few days of their planned trip, so it wasn't until those had passed would Gilbert get antsy. Lost or not, he was going to enjoy his time with nature.

The water was cold, especially before the sun came up, but Gilbert clenched his teeth and bore with it. When they had checked their supplies the first time, he had found a small bottle of shampoo among Roderich's things, which explained why the other man's hair never seemed to go flat. Not like Gilbert was paying any special attention to it or anything, it was just a little weird. And besides, he always prided himself on being observant. He had also found several tons of hand sanitizer, which he had also helped himself to, despite having brought his own.

Roderich climbed out of the tent with sleepy eyes and an oversized t-shirt when Gilbert was stoking a new fire, munching on some granola and dried fruit. He handed Roderich a bag when he came to sit beside him. Gilbert was also working on making coffee.

"You should get a blanket or put some pants on or something," Gilbert said, nodding to Roderich's bare legs. They both slept in boxers, the only difference was Gilbert either wore an undershirt or no shirt at all. He couldn't sleep well when it was too warm. "It's still cold."

Roderich accepted the food, but made no move to get a blanket. When the sleep had cleared out of his eyes, he looked up at Gilbert and opened his mouth, presumably to speak, but stopped for a moment. "Did you use my shampoo?" he asked, eyes narrowed. Gilbert couldn't tell if it was because he wasn't wearing glasses or if he was legitimately annoyed that he did so without asking.

"I'll buy you some more when we get back," Gilbert replied, taking another stab at the fire. A campfire needed three things to work -- fuel, ignition, and air. He had told Roderich this at one point, in the event that something were to happen to him, which he assured him wouldn't because he was just so great at camping. He handed him a tin mug full of, what he hoped to be, regular coffee.

"Uh huh," Roderich said and took a sip. He made a face and dug around for some packets of sugar and creamer.
After he had explained his plan, they both took their time eating and getting dressed, whiling away the morning so that the sun had the chance to rise and warm things up. It was some time after lunch when they were finally standing beside the little river, fishing rods in hand. The nifty thing about their fishing rods was they folded in half, so as not to get in the way during the hike.

"So how do you do this?" Roderich asked, eying the thing up and down, like it was some unsightly weapon he didn't want anything to do with.

"Not sure," Gilbert replied. Alfred had promised to teach them, which was why any of them had brought fishing rods in the first place, but he obviously wasn't around. The closest thing he had to fishing experience was in Animal Crossing, and he could bet that didn't amount to much.

After a bit of fiddling, they figured out how to attach the bait and, deciding it couldn't hurt his chances, Gilbert threw back his fishing rod and then forward again, like he had seen in his games. It didn't do much. Roderich just sort of stood there, staring, so Gilbert made a face at him.

"At least I'm trying," he said. "But I guess we could just, uh, set the bait in the water and hope for the best."

Roderich gave one of those annoying sighs, but did as Gilbert suggested.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, only that it felt like forever. His arm was getting tired, his legs itched, the wind through the trees was their only background noise, and he couldn't think of a damn thing to talk to Roderich about. It was one of those times where he was thinking way too hard for a conversation starter, something to grab hold of and toss Roderich's way.

"This is going nowhere, isn't it?" Gilbert deadpanned.

"Looks like it," Roderich replied.

"Damn it!" Gilbert said, kicking the water.

Roderich leapt out of the way. "Hey now," he said. "You know that's only going to scare the fish away, right?"

Gilbert kicked at it again and Roderich ducked to the side. Gilbert grinned -- what an interesting reaction. This time he scooped up some water and sent it towards Roderich, who didn't have enough time to escape it.

"Gilbert!" he said, annoyed, and pulled off his glasses to clean them, but Gilbert didn't give him a chance.

"Water fight!" Gilbert shouted, threw his fishing rod to the side, and jumped into the little river, effectively getting Roderich even more wet. "C'mon!"

He watched Roderich's expression twist up, like he was annoyed, but considering what he could possibly get out of such a battle. Gilbert didn't want him to think -- heck, he didn't want himself to think -- and so he grabbed Roderich's arm and dragged him into the water.

"It's so cold!" Roderich shrieked.

Gilbert burst out laughing -- oh god, what had that been, such a high pitch -- and Roderich shoved him, making Gilbert lose balance and fall flat on his butt. Water had pretty much crept in everywhere at that point, so he just had to get even with Roderich. Which he did by thrashing all his limbs, splattering water everywhere.
This time, Roderich retaliated, smirking in such a way that threw Gilbert off his game. His glasses were gone, sitting off by a rock somewhere probably along with his fishing rod, and he dove into the water. Gilbert wasn't even aware that he could swim -- not that he really needed to in something this small. They slapped at the water, sprayed it at each other -- Gilbert even spat some at Roderich at one point -- until they were both too tired to keep at it.

"Okay," Gilbert said in between breaths. "I'm good. You good? You better be good, cause I can't do this anymore."

"Yeah," Roderich replied and walked towards the tent. With one hand, he pushed back his dripping wet hair. He had such a painfully pretty face, and everything about him looked almost delicate, like the way glass was curved and smooth. Gilbert felt like he took a smack to the chest when Roderich turned those pretty blue eyes to him. "What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Gilbert lied. "I was just thinking how we probably look like drowned cats."

The other man's eyebrows rose really high before he gave a very bemused sort of smile. He looked better that way, instead of straight-faced or frowning. Gilbert swallowed and moved his attention to his pack.

They towelled off and changed their clothes, though Gilbert was suddenly wishing for a separate room to do so in. He wasn't sure why, he didn't find it weird before. They weren't facing each other and he had changed a bunch of times in locker rooms. His fingers fumbled with the edge of his shirt, the button on his shorts, but eventually he got it all figured out. He built another fire as Roderich brushed his hair; they were both shivering.

As soon as Gilbert could feel his fingers again, he pulled out his notebook. Flipping to a page that was not covered in his smeared handwriting, he doodled a quick bird and then passed it to Roderich. The other man stared at the page and nodded, passing it back, but Gilbert wasn't having any of that.

"Your turn," he said, pushing the notebook back.

"I can't draw," Roderich replied.

"Doesn't matter," Gilbert said.

Roderich frowned, taking the pencil in his hand. His fingers were long, Gilbert noticed, and even with it all curled up, pressing hard into the pencil, they looked like the sort that would do well with little things, like untangling jewelry or yarn, maybe typing on a computer. Gilbert was so focused on his hands that he didn't even see what Roderich had drawn until the notebook was being pushed back into his own hands.

It was a stick figure.

The laugh burst out of his mouth before he even had time to think.

"I told you I can't draw," Roderich muttered.

It was just -- no. Gilbert stopped that train of thought before it even had time to finish. Roderich was not cute.

"No, no, it's good," Gilbert said, and sketched out another bird, this time with a little tuxedo.

They passed the notebook back and forth, adding more and more to the picture until it was covered with all sorts of stick figures wearing different outfits, music notes, birds of all shapes and
sizes, and a castle. The original stick figure guy was labeled Franz, for some reason, and he was the only one surrounded by flowers. The image made no sense, the story forgotten as soon as they made it up, adding more to it with every stroke of the pencil.

"Why music notes?" Gilbert asked. "Do they even mean anything?"

Roderich looked off to the side. "They're bits from compositions I remember," he said. "Pieces on the piano. Some are just note combinations I like."

Gilbert stared down at the page, suddenly more intrigued. "Sing it, then," he said. "Or hum, I guess, cause these don't really have words."

Roderich chuckled and took the paper. Gilbert had been expecting him to protest, put up more of a fight, but when Roderich began humming, Gilbert knew why he hadn't. Roderich was definitely the most pitch-perfect person Gilbert had ever met. He had heard some of those melodies before and Roderich's voice was so fluid, even just for a little humming. Nobody could be self conscious about that voice.

"Dude, that is nuts," Gilbert said.

Roderich stopped and smiled. "Thanks," he said. "My grandfather had me take singing lessons when I was little."

"Whoa, my dad just had me learn how to shoot!"

Roderich snorted, throwing Gilbert in a cloud of confusion.

"What?" Gilbert asked.

"Nothing," Roderich said, but giggles kept bubbling up. "I don't know," he said. "It's just, the image fits you so well. But it's also very random? I'm not sure."

Gilbert smirked and leaned back a little, looking up at the blue sky. There were a few dark clouds pressed against the edges, where the trees cut off the rest of it, but it didn't look like much. Clear skies for that night, anyways, which was important. Because when the sun finally set and their conversation had lapsed into silence, Gilbert threw water on the fire.

"What did you do that for?" Roderich asked, sounding more than a little alarmed, which had Gilbert grinning.

"You'll see," he said. Though, the more he thought about it, the more he wished he had dragged out their sleeping bags or something. But sure enough, with the light from the campfire gone and the sun having set a while ago, the sky lit up with all the speckles and glitter that was the stars.

"Oh," Roderich murmured.

Gilbert grabbed hold of his flashlight, found his pack, and leaned back on it as Roderich watched him, then he did the same.

"Oh man, there's the big dipper," Gilbert said, pointing up even though Roderich obviously couldn't tell where he was pointing at.

"Where?" Roderich asked. "There are a lot of stars."

"Um, to the right, a little," Gilbert said.
He could hear Roderich huff a little. Yeah, he definitely wasn't seeing it.

Gilbert crawled over. "Don't freak out," he warned. There was nothing more painful than getting hit hard in the nose. Okay, so there probably were more painful things out there, but still. Gilbert put his head right next to Roderich's, so that he could see what he was seeing a little better. Then he took hold of his hand and used it to point out the shape. "Right there," he said, ignoring the thumping going on in his chest and the warmth of Roderich's hand.

"Oh!" the other man exclaimed. The delight in his voice had Gilbert smiling, though when he noticed it, he tried pushing it into a frown. "Wow, this is the first time I've seen it!"

"Really?" Gilbert asked, turning his head before turning it right back. He had forgotten how close their heads were. "That's a pretty obvious one, wouldn't you think?"

"That's what everyone says," Roderich said. "But I could never find it. I could always find the three stars, though. The one with the belt."

"Orion?"

"Yeah."

Gilbert snickered at that. "Yeah, he's pretty easy to find too," he said.

Roderich hummed a little in agreement.

He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but he would mumble out constellations and Roderich would sometimes find them, other times not. Sometimes he would be happy he found them, other times he would just go, "Huh." At one point Gilbert had explained to him that he took an astronomy class once and it had come with a lab where the class shivered up on a rooftop and stared into the night sky. Roderich listened to him talk, interjecting with his own thoughts or comments. It wasn't until he stopped responding when Gilbert noticed that he had fallen asleep. And it also wasn't until Gilbert was lifting him up and setting him inside the tent that he realized something.

He liked Roderich.

Not in the sense that he just thought he was pretty, either, or as just friends. No, he LIKE liked Roderich -- the way he felt comfortable around him or how their conversation flowed at times. He found himself far too interested in why Roderich did some of the things he did or what Roderich's reaction would be to the weird shit he said.

It was dumb.

He knew it was dumb, him having a crush on a guy he had only gotten to know for a few days. And besides, Roderich obviously had a crush on someone, he had pretty much said it himself. Not to mention the whole Roderich was a guy thing. But maybe he was bisexual? Gilbert could have smacked himself upside the head for that. There really was no point in getting his hopes up.

Questions and thoughts kept whirling about in his head, leading to more questions and more thoughts, until it felt like his head was so full, it all should have been leaking out of his ears. So he pulled up his blankets, forced his eyes closed, and tried to think about school instead, going through equations in his head from his last test. And with that, he managed to finally fall asleep.

-----

The next morning, Gilbert woke up to the sounds of things being moved about outside the tent.
He turned his head, but the spot next to him was empty, so that ruled out the possibility of wildlife creeping on them. They were probably too close to the road anyways, but he supposed some animals might not care -- just a little smell of food and they could come wandering through.

Gilbert didn't know how long he stayed there, listening to the sounds of whatever Roderich was doing, but he let his mind wander over the things he had tried to push out of it the previous night. Now that his brain wasn't fuddled by the need for sleep, he could review it in a more systematic way. Perhaps he was too hasty in deciding it was a crush, that maybe he just really liked him as a person. Roderich had a great face, a wonderful voice. He could keep up a conversation with Gilbert, but so could Antonio and Francis. It didn't feel the same, though, some part of his brain kept reminding him.

Not to mention whenever he thought of the other guy, he got this weird sort of exhilaration in his gut, like he looked forward to what they might say to each other next. Gilbert had never been overly fond of touching people, but now he was a little too aware of wherever Roderich was and knew that it wouldn't change even after they got back to school. And school. Gilbert wasn't sure how he was going to deal with that. Regardless, this couldn't be a crush if he didn't expect for anything to happen, to get anything out of it.

But then his stomach whined at him in the weirdest way he had ever heard it, so he got up to finally eat.

Roderich looked up at him when he exited the tent, crouched in front of the fire pit with a stick in his hand. A thin blanket was wrapped around his shoulders.

"What are you doing?" Gilbert asked, even though it was fairly obvious. His voice was still scratchy from sleep.

Roderich huffed, the usual frown coming back to his face. "I'm trying to figure out how you built the fire. I remember you showing it to me, but I can't seem to get it to make that shape. The sticks won't stay up," he said.

Gilbert snorted. "You're useless without me," he said and reached down to grab a stick. With it, he prodded Roderich. "Move," he commanded.

Roderich's mouth twisted to the side, but he did as he was told. "There's plenty of space," he mumbled.

"Do you want me to show you or not?"

Roderich didn't reply.

The fire did little to improve Gilbert's mood, however. His brain was starting to protest to all the same thoughts floating around in it and Gilbert felt kind of achy from sleeping on the ground so many days in a row. Maybe it was the cloud coverage that day, making the whole sky glow grey, or that he had woken up so late, but he felt sluggish, like everything he did was in slow motion.

As he was writing in his notebook, he occasionally glanced up to see what Roderich was doing, which was just reading his mysterious book. It must have been a really good one, though, for sometimes he would flip back and reread pages. And Gilbert decided that he was definitely going to burn his notebook someday, because really, he didn't want anyone reading it. He had even gone so far as to use some of the Russian words he knew.

And then a drop of water fell on the page.

"Aw man," he mumbled, rubbing at it. Only a few moments more and another landed further
down the page, so he closed it up and put it in his backpack, noticing that Roderich had done so as well and was looking up at the sky. Gilbert did the same and thunder gurgled overhead.

And then the sky fell down on them.

"Oh fuck!" Gilbert shouted and hopped up, energy flooding through him.

Roderich scrambled to gather their things and Gilbert struggled to move their tent. He wasn't sure how long the weather was going to last and it was a little too close to the small river for his liking. He dragged it towards the trees until it was right up under the first few ones and pegged it down in the slowly softening dirt. Then he turned his attention back to Roderich.

"Hurry up!" he shouted.

"You hurry up!" Roderich retorted and Gilbert would have snickered at the lame comeback if he wasn't so rushed for time.

Together, they stuffed things in their backpacks, leaving behind the things that didn't matter so much, like mugs and fishing rods; those could be retrieved after the storm. They ran for the tent, clutching their backpacks. Gilbert held open the flap and ducked in after Roderich.

They sat there, huddled together and breathing hard for what felt like an eternity. They were both still holding their backpacks like they contained gold or some shit, like in the movies. Then they both looked at each other, breathing still taking time to slow down, and burst out laughing.

"Oh my god," Gilbert said, leaning back.

Roderich did the same, smiling. Their shoulders bumped together.

"What were we even rushing for?" Gilbert asked.

"I don't know," Roderich replied, and they both broke out in a new fit of laughter.

"I mean, it was just rain," Gilbert said. His nose tingled, but he didn't sneeze. They both definitely looked like drowned cats then.

Roderich took off his glasses and set them to the side -- there was no use trying to dry them off if there was nothing dry to wipe them in the first place. He then looked at Gilbert while pushing away some of his hair and his face lit up. "Can I do something?" he asked.


Roderich had this small smile, like he was trying to push it down, but it wasn't working. He carefully pushed Gilbert's hair around a bit, the movements making Gilbert more nervous than he wanted to admit. He didn't like feeling nervous. "There," Roderich said and settled back so that their shoulders touched again. He chuckled, making Gilbert frown again. "You look like Ludwig."

"What?!" Gilbert said, voice loud, and he tried messing his hair up again. There was nothing wrong with looking like his brother -- they were siblings -- but he liked looking like himself.

"Now you just look ridiculous," Roderich criticized and went to work fixing his hair again.

Gilbert's eyes narrowed, but couldn't find anything to say. So they lapsed into comfortable silence. Roderich sort of shivered and Gilbert looked over at him. They were both pretty much shivering, but stuck in a tent, Gilbert wasn't really sure what to do. The beating in his chest was making him
lightheaded and he blamed that entirely on Roderich. He had such a small face with lovely cheekbones and large eyes and dark lashes and Gilbert really liked talking to him -- so he just sort of leaned in. Roderich looked up and his expression softened. Then they were kissing.

It was light, at first, just sort of pressing their lips together, and then the logical side of Gilbert's brain caught up with him. He would have just gone, "What the fuck did I just do," if it hadn't been for the other pair of lips that were moving against his. Roderich was kissing him back. So he pressed against him with more need, more pressure, and Roderich brought his hands up to Gilbert's jaw, the back of his head, and Gilbert's hands went to his waist.

Roderich shivered again and Gilbert pulled away.

"We should, uh, dry off or something," he said. "We're gonna catch a cold."

Roderich's face looked flushed, his wet hair plastered to his forehead, but he nodded. "Yeah," he said and leaned away. "Of course."

And so they faced away from each other as they changed clothes as best they could in their tight quarters. Sometimes Gilbert would accidentally elbow Roderich or Roderich would accidentally smack him with a sleeve of his shirt or the leg of his pants, but eventually they got it all right. Gilbert could feel that his face was on fire, especially his ears. It was still on fire, even when they were all done.

And Roderich definitely took notice. He just couldn't seem to not smile, making Gilbert all the more embarrassed. That was also not an emotion he liked having. But he could deal with it if it meant Roderich reaching out to press his cold fingers against Gilbert's flaming cheeks. That was okay. It was also okay that he leaned over and gave him another kiss. And that was how, with a suggestion from Gilbert, they were curled up under their sleeping bags, talking quietly and listening to the pitter patter of rain against their tent.
Found

Gilbert opened his eyes without knowing when he had closed them. One of the pillows was gathered in his arms, like a stuffed animal, and, as he shifted, he realized it was really warm inside the tent. He stretched out his legs and then turned a little more. Roderich was curled up against him, towards the small of his back, and Gilbert would have felt all happy about it if he wasn't so groggy and wondering how the heck he wound up as the little spoon.

The rain had stopped, although water would still drop down on their tent from the trees every so often. And Gilbert stayed there, thinking about absolutely nothing, his eyes taking longer and longer to open after blinks, until he felt Roderich move against his back. Then he remembered the kiss and the urge to sleep scuttled away faster than it took for his heart to pound out an extra beat and send heat creeping up around his face and ears.

Roderich let out a light little sigh and stretched; Gilbert was reminded of a cat. And he knew the moment the other boy fully woke up when his head shot up and he looked around, squinting.

Gilbert stared at him with eyes wider than he'd have liked. "Morning there, sunshine," he said.

Roderich's brow was furrowed. "What time is it?" he asked.

Gilbert shrugged. "Does it matter?" he asked. His whole body felt tense.

Roderich's shoulders slumped a little, his expression relaxing a bit. "I suppose not," he replied.

That's when Gilbert couldn't stand it anymore and hopped up, unzipped the tent, and stood up outside, breathing in the rainy air. It always smelled so good, the rain -- so fresh. The ground had turned to sludge, but he didn't mind it. He just needed to get his body moving. So many things had happened and he felt like his brain couldn't keep it all in. Like that kiss. He went to the little river and splashed some water in his burning face. He couldn't believe he had just gone ahead and went for it, just swooped in and kissed him.

But then, Roderich had kissed him back, so he guessed it was okay? He wasn't really sure what to think about that. Did that make them a thing or something? Like a couple? Or was Roderich the sort to be swept away with a moment and he was going to take it back later?

"I'm gonna try finding something dry to burn," Gilbert said and marched off into the trees. Pine needles would get stuck to his feet, but at least he had more space to think, more distance. He wasn't sure if he could handle talking to Roderich while his brain was a mess, but he knew he needed to -- he knew he wanted to. Roderich just seemed way too okay with kissing him.

After he found enough dry material to start a fire with and, in turn, dry out the wet stuff they had gathered before, he began to build one. Roderich was going around and gathering the things they had left out when rushing to get in the tent. He poured out mugs in the river and set them up in a little line near the fire.

"So uh," Gilbert said, startling Roderich into knocking a mug over. He cleared his throat. "I guess I'm a little confused." That was an understatement.

"About what?" Roderich asked, fixing the mug. He wasn't looking him in the eye which, for some reason, helped calm Gilbert down enough to continue.

"About all the things," Gilbert replied. "I mean, we, uh, we kissed." He could feel his face flush again. "Right?"
Roderich snickered. "*No,*" he said and rolled his eyes. "We just hallucinated the entire thing."

Gilbert frowned. "Anyways," he said. "You didn't, uh, seem to hate it or, or anything. So I guess I'm not sure why."

Roderich paused. "You're not a bad kisser, if that's what you're wondering," he replied.

"*No!*" Gilbert scowled. "I mean, you're a dude and I'm a dude and yet you weren't freaked out or anything by it!"

Roderich sat down. "What do you want to know?" he asked.

Gilbert hesitated, trying to figure out what it was he actually wanted to ask. "Do you, uh, like me? Like that?"

He had thought Roderich was more calm than he was, but the other boy's face turned red. "Yes," he mumbled, looking off to the side. "For a long time, now."

A long time? They had only just started talking a few days ago, when the whole expedition started. "What do you mean?" Gilbert asked.

"You know," Roderich said, gesturing vaguely with his hands. "Since we first met."

That had Gilbert sinking down into thought. *When had* they met? And how could Roderich like him if they didn't even really talk beforehand? And then he remembered being introduced to him by Lizzie, some day last semester at Chipotle. Roderich had been so out of place there, having a hard time ordering by himself until Lizzie helped him choose something. Gilbert had been mildly annoyed with him even then -- because of his indecision, the way he seemed to cling to Lizzie. But if he had been nervous about *Gilbert,* then dang.

"*Oh,*" was the only thing he could think of to say.

Roderich sort of nodded and their conversation turned to silence.

After some time poking at the fire, Gilbert got tired of the quiet, of the stillness that surrounded them, and remembered something he had brought with him. Roderich looked up from the book he was reading as Gilbert stood up and walked over to his backpack, dig around a little, before holding up his little radio with triumph. He felt like Link from Legend of Zelda and wished he had the appropriate music.

It crackled when he turned it on and he jumped a little before adjusting the volume. All the while he was tuning it, trying to catch some sort of station, he could tell Roderich would look up from his book on occasion -- just little glances, but it made Gilbert hyperaware of his own movements. And then the radio caught hold of a tune, something upbeat but without words, and then flickered out again, so Gilbert was careful to move the dial just a little at a time. The melody came back.

He moved his head to it, his shoulders, giving Roderich a goofy grin. The other boy raised an eyebrow, so Gilbert stood up and took the book away before grabbing his hands.

"What are you doing?" Roderich whined, watching as Gilbert set the book to the side.

"Dancing!" Gilbert replied. "With you!"

Roderich gave him one of his better, "You have got to be shitting me," faces. "I can't dance," he said.
"Neither can I!" Gilbert said. He couldn't make his grin go away. He took hold of Roderich's waist and hand before swinging them wildly around their campsite.

Roderich let out a startled yell, head moving back and forth to see where they were going.

Gilbert felt like whatever he was doing, it was somewhere in between a waltz and swing dancing. The music felt jazzy to him, but he wasn't an expert on music other than the good old fashioned rock and roll. He pulled Roderich closer, enjoying the way he laughed when Gilbert tried getting him to move like him. Their pace slowed down and, even though the static filled jazz kept insisting they do something with more pizzazz, Roderich rested his head against Gilbert's shoulder.

Gilbert's heart was thudding in his chest and it was a miracle his legs were still supporting him. He was sure Roderich could feel it, the way his chest was flush against Roderich's. And then the other boy looked up and Gilbert realized they had stopped moving about and instead were sort of swaying. And Roderich looked so pretty and they were so close that Gilbert cupped his face and leaned in--

A shrill whistle shot through the air and the two of them jumped.

Gilbert had heard that whistle before. It was with a mixture of joy and dread that he remembered what they were for and went to find his own. Roderich was watching him with a furrowed brow and, as Gilbert put the whistle up to his lips and blew, his expression got darker.

"What is that?" Roderich asked, but from his tone, Gilbert could tell he had already kind of guessed.

Gilbert let out a nervous chuckle, not wanting to actually explain it. "Well, you see, if you ever, uh, get separated from your group, you can do a bunch of things. You can decide on a checkpoint and meet everyone there or, if you can't move or, uh, get lost," he looked down at his whistle and wet his lips, "you can use this whistle. You can shout and whatever all you want, but eventually your voice is going to fail, right? So that's why they made this whistle."

Roderich looked at the whistle, then up to Gilbert, back to the whistle -- but with squinty eyes, and then moved that expression back up at Gilbert. If Gilbert had to name that look, it would be, "I don't believe this shit."

The whistles kept happening and for each time, Roderich would cover his ears. Eventually they got closer until Alfred stumbled through some bushes while Tony, Lizzie, and Lavina walked around it a few moments later.

"Dude!" Alfred said, his face lighting up. But before Gilbert could say anything, Al put a finger and let out three whistles.

"What took you guys so long?" Gilbert asked, accepting the hug Tony had for him.

"Why do you smell good?" Tony asked and Gilbert shoved him away.

"We thought you guys would get there eventually," Alfred said.

"We definitely forgot about you," Lavina replied, giving him a half bored, half pissed expression.

"How have you been?" Lizzie asked Roderich, who was blushing scarlet for some reason. It gave Gilbert a frown he couldn't explain.

"So are you gonna tell us?" Alfred asked, clapping a hand to Gilbert's shoulder.
He nodded in Roderich's direction. "You should really be asking him," he replied. "He's the one who got us lost."

"Lost?" Lizzie said.

"You're seriously not that far off the path," Lavina said, shifting her weight to one foot.

Tony smiled at her and when she noticed, she glared and looked away.

"Well, it's a good thing you stopped then," Alfred said. "Who knows how far you would have traveled." Two whistles shot through the air, making Roderich and Lavina jump. So Alfred sent out another set of three and it continued like that until Mattie, Frankie, Ludwig, and Feliciana came marching out from the trees.

Frankie did the same thing Tony did upon reaching him, except he added a rough head ruffle. "Why is your hair so soft?" Frankie asked. He was taller than Gilbert and had gone about inspecting the top of his head.

Gilbert shoved him away. "Dumbass," he said, fixing his hair so that it wasn't stabbing him in the eye.

Lavina made a beeline for her sister and the two of them started chatting.

Ludwig frowned a little, but Gilbert gave him a smile and it disappeared into obvious relief. So Gilbert stuck out his tongue and wiggled his ears, making Ludwig roll his eyes. So long as he wasn't actually worried.

With the sun sinking, Alfred and Mattie thought it best to make their way to the car. Roderich and Gilbert's things were packed away in a flurry of helping hands and they were off, everyone talking about their adventures and how the weather played into them. It wasn't long until they reached where the dirt met pavement and though there was still some light from the setting sun, the streetlights were already flickering on.

Backpacks, jackets, and fishing rods were thrown into the backs of cars, everyone buckled up, and soon they were back on the road. Gilbert leaned back against the headrest of his seat, watching dark shapes and dim lights whirl past his window. He shifted his gaze out the front, instead, but it wasn't any better -- just the dashes from the street whizzing by, forming an almost solid line.

He tried not to glance at Roderich, not with Alfred and Matthew so close, but as it grew darker, he couldn't help it. Roderich had his arm propped up on the armrest, his head in his hand, staring out his own window. And Gilbert didn't like that -- being ignored. So Roderich probably wasn't really ignoring him, but if he really did like Gilbert, wouldn't he be at least sort of nervous sitting next to him?

So Gilbert casually put his hand down on the seat and casually inched it over the fabric until he could get his pinky to prod at Roderich's leg. Needless to say, Roderich flinched like someone being woken up with cold water to the face.

"You okay there?" Alfred asked, peering into the rearview mirror.

"Yeah," Roderich said. "Yeah, just fine."

"Oh yeah," Mattie piped up. "We decided we were going to stop for food on the way. Um, back at camp, we decided."
"I could definitely use a bathroom," Roderich said. "A real bathroom. With running water."

Alfred and Gilbert laughed while Roderich glanced at Gilbert with a frown.

"Dude, me neither," Al replied. "I like camping and all, but there's nothing like going back home to all the instant stuff -- hot water, microwaves, a comfy bed -- yeah."

Soon after, they pulled over at a McDonalds on account of Alfred's "burning desire for hot, salty fries." They spilled in like a team of zombies-turned-human. Maybe that was a little dramatic, though Gilbert would definitely say they had all seen better days. They stood around the entrance for a while, deciding on what to do.

"I, for one, need to use the restroom," Frankie said.

"How about ordering first, so that while it's being made, those who need to use it can go?" Mattie suggested.

Frankie smiled at him and nodded. Gilbert got the feeling something might just form between them, though whether it was a relationship or friendship, he couldn't tell. He also didn't really care, as he was far more focused on everything Roderich was doing -- what he was ordering, what his face looked like in response to Lizzie's comments. He could care later, when his own romantic interest wasn't being weirdly dodgy.

And so when everyone had settled down with their food and Tony got back from the bathroom, Roderich hopped up to go. A few moments after he did, Gilbert pushed his tray away from him and announced, "I'm gonna go after Roddy."

There were two single person bathrooms, which wasn't surprising, Alfred had said, for being so far out in the mountains. And so Gilbert stood there feeling awkward about himself for a full minute before deciding his time would be better spent leaning against the wall. And then the door swung open and Gilbert wasted no time in pushing Roderich back inside.

"What are you doing?" Roderich asked, eyebrows up.

"I just wanted to make sure of something," Gilbert said and swooped in for a kiss. Roderich made a noise, but then he was pressing forward -- kissing back. And it was like everything settled back down into place, that his worries were baseless, silly.

Roderich tilted his head and brought his hands up to Gilbert's chest, to the back of his neck, until his arms were practically draped over Gilbert's shoulders. And Gilbert's hands started up with Roderich's face before they were suddenly around Roderich's waist. He wasn't entirely sure when that happened.

Gilbert was the first to pull away, looking into Roderich's blue eyes, which looked almost sleepy. He smiled and Roderich smiled back. It was okay. Everything was okay.

"I think," Gilbert said and licked his lips. "I think you should go back first."

Roderich nodded and straightened his glasses. "Yeah," he replied.

Gilbert pretended to fix Roderich's hair, but really he just liked the feel of it. He cupped Roderich's face, kissed him again, and said, "Alright. Alright, yeah, go."

The other man nodded and the moment he walked out the door, Gilbert leaned against the tiled wall and let out a sigh. He wasn't sure how he was going to keep this up. He didn't like being teased by Frankie and Tony, but he also didn't like not being with Roderich. He shrugged,
teased by Frankie and Tony, but he also didn't like not being with Roderich. He shrugged, glanced at himself in the mirror, and decided that was a problem for another day.

When he waltzed back over to the group, he practically chirped, "Next," at them.

"What are you so happy about?" Frankie asked, lifting one of his ridiculously trimmed eyebrows. Gilbert stared at him, missing a few beats in what should be a normal conversation, and said, "Do I look happy?"

"Yeah, you're grinning stupidly," Tony replied, his mouth full of burger.

"Well, I just took a massive shit, so whoever goes in there is not gonna be happy," Gilbert replied, taking his seat.

There was a chorus of "Oh gross!" and "Nasty!" around the tables. Roderich met his eye for a moment, but they both looked away and Gilbert couldn't help the way his smile grew.

Halfway through eating his burger, Frankie threw a french fry at Gilbert.

"So what happened in those woods?" he asked.

Gilbert swallowed. "What do you mean?" he asked, taking a drink of his soda.

"You were lost for an awful long time," Frankie continued, eying him like he knew exactly what had happened and just needed confirmation.

"We already told you--"

"We, hm. Well, I know that you told me things," Frankie said, one side of his mouth curling up.

Gilbert rolled his eyes, but he could feel his ears beginning to warm. Goddamn his ears. "Well, we just did random shit to pass the time. Games, reading, fishing, music--" his ears got warmer, "--uh, drawing. Stupid shit."

"Mhmm," Francis said, drawing out a long silence as he drank from his soda, but didn't break eye contact.

"So, so anyways," Gilbert said, picking apart a french fry. He looked up and saw Antonio watching Lavina. "So Tony."

He turned around like he had been static-shocked.

"What?" he asked, as if he had already missed part of what had been said to him.

Gilbert nodded toward Lavina, who was talking with her sister and turned her entire back towards Antonio. Not suspicious at all. "What's up with that?" he asked.

Tony looked at her and it was like his entire face relaxed into a sloppy looking smile. "Isn't she pretty?" he sighed.

"Um," Gilbert replied. "Okay, that answers that."

After they ate, they all wandered back out to the parking lot as if reluctant to make the trip, but eager for beds with mattresses and soft blankets. They didn't talk much but instead climbed into their respective vehicles like they weren't even thinking.

Alfred turned on the car and with it came the radio, suddenly too loud for their ears. When
conversation dwindled and the road seemed to stretch on forever, Al cranked a few dials and
suddenly cold air was blasting through the car.

"Nobody gets to sleep," he said. "Cause driving in silence and in the dark is really boring."

"That's the time you get to think to yourself, though," Mattie replied. "It's nice." He yawned,
covering his mouth.

"I don't want to think," Al replied.

Despite his best efforts to keep them awake, Mattie snuggled down in his seat, pulled up the hood
of his jacket, and closed his eyes anyways.

"Fuckin' Canadians," Al mumbled.

"It's got nothing to do with being Canadian," Mattie mumbled back.

"Bullshit," Al said, but this time his cousin didn't respond.

-----

Gilbert wasn't overly fond of waking up without remember having fallen asleep. The only times
he approved of them was when sleep was the intended goal. His window revealed even more
darkness, but with significantly more streetlights. He recognized some of the buildings whizzing
by -- they were on the highway. Roderich's hand was in his -- something Gilbert had managed to
pester Roderich to agree to -- though the owner was breathing deep and even.

He looked over to Alfred's eyes in the rearview mirror, but they were focused on the road. Despite
having said earlier that he didn't want anyone falling asleep, Al had turned the music down; it was
only a murmur of soft words against the sound of the engine.

It almost sounded like Roderich gasped when he woke -- just a short, quick breath and he was
stretching. His hand disappeared from Gilbert's the moment he realized it was there, which
shouldn't have bothered Gilbert as much as it did. Roderich was very obviously not the 'public
display of affections' sort.

"Have a nice nap, did you?" Alfred asked and something about his tone made Gilbert look up at
the mirror again. Alfred's eyes flit between the road and Gilbert. He had definitely noticed.

"Best I've had in days," Gilbert responded, gritting his teeth against the flush spreading across his
neck and ears. It was dark, nobody could see.

Alfred let out a weird sort of 'ugh' noise, one that stretched a little, with his eyes rolled upwards.
"It was so boring. I'm glad we're almost there. I love driving and all, but you really have to be in
the mood to think if you're going at it alone," he said.

When they finally did arrive, students were still milling about the campus despite the time. It made
Gilbert suddenly aware that on any normal day, he wouldn't have been so tired. It left him feeling
weird, displaced, so he shook his head and hopped out of the car. He grabbed Roderich's
backpack before the other boy could even speak.

"That's mine," Roderich said, after getting over the apparent shock it had given him.

"Astute observation," Gilbert replied. He started walking towards the dorm along with everyone
else.
"I can carry it just fine," Roderich said.

"And yet another," Gilbert said and grinned. "You're on a roll today, Roddy."

He scowled, eyebrows bunching up. "You know what I mean," he said. "And don't call me that."

Gilbert smirked. "But it suits you so well."

The fluorescent lighting only made Gilbert's tired eyes feel heavier. He stomped up stairs and, upon passing Antonio, nodded told him he'd need the room for a little while. Tony glanced at Roderich and nodded. His usual smile was gone and if Gilbert had to say why, he'd guess it had something to do with the way Lavina's glare was set on him.

When they finally reached Gilbert's room, Roderich was nearly able to snatch his bag back when Gilbert dug around in his pockets for the keys. The air was stale when they walked in, difficult to breathe. So Gilbert threw open a window, letting in all the sounds of the roadwork around them.

"So what do you want?" Roderich asked, crossing his arms.

"About?"

"Us."

Roderich's eyebrows furrowed as he looked away, off to the corner where there was a growing pile of clothes. The expression made Gilbert's stomach flip, and not in the good way.

"So," Gilbert said, leaning back against Antonio's bed. Gilbert got the top bunk; it hadn't taken them too long to decide that. "Are we dating now, or. Or what?"

Roderich let out a sigh that made Gilbert's stomach drop a little. His eyes wandered up to the ceiling. "I just. I don't know. I don't think we should, to be perfectly honest."

"How come?" Gilbert spat out faster than he could think.

"I just don't see it working out," he replied. "I mean, you were originally straight to begin with and then we'll be going back to our own countries after the year is over. It just doesn't make sense."

Gilbert watched Roderich's face, like maybe he was looking for a sign that he was joking. But Roderich didn't look up. It didn't make sense, with the way Roderich had acted in the forest. And then now?

"When did you decide this?" Gilbert asked.

"In the car," Roderich said. "On our way to get food."

And then suddenly the weird feeling of doubt made sense. Roderich had been acting off.

Gilbert let out air through his nose. "And you just, what? Let me kiss you? And then in the fucking car? Jesus Christ."

"I'm sorry," Roderich mumbled. "I thought it could just, just end. With the day."

Gilbert wasn't even sure where to begin. For one, he didn't like being led on when the other party had no intention of keeping it going. He'd have rather had a nice, cold denial. A straight up
refusal. And Roderich was just giving up so *easily*. For such stupid reasons.

"First off, I wasn't straight, per say," Gilbert said. "I mean, I'm not. To be honest, I'm not really sure what I am, but I think I'm asexual. But I also don't mind genders, so I guess I'm kind of bi too? Just not with all that gross sex stuff." He could feel his cheeks heating up from the topic. "Anyways, and then dude. Germany and Austria are *right next to each other*. It'd take us like, what? A day of travel? Maybe not even that, depending on where we both live."

"It's still long distance," Roderich said.

"*Not that* long distance," Gilbert insisted. "There are buses and trains and shit. I could probably *walk* and still get there in the same day."

Roderich let out a laugh, which in turn made Gilbert smile. He crawled over to sit next to him.

"See? I think it could work out. And then after we finish school, maybe we could find jobs closer to each other or something, assuming we're still together," Gilbert said.

"Yeah?" Roderich asked, his voice quiet.

"Yeah," Gilbert replied and took hold of his hand.

Roderich finally looked up at him with a soft smile and Gilbert was glad he had tried reassuring him instead of just giving up.

And then the door swung open and the words, "Have you seen my compass?" died on Lizzie's lips as she took in what was happening. Roderich snatched his hand back, but it was too late, she was already grinning. Sadiq stood behind her, leaning against the doorframe.

"Uh huh," she said, crossing her arms. "I fuckin' knew it. Sorry to have interrupted."

"Wait," Gilbert said, scrambling to get up.

But Lizzie just cackled and walked back out. Sadiq threw him a smirk before the door closed again. And she was still cackling when Gilbert wrenched it back open.

"We all knew it," she was saying to her boyfriend. "We set them up. The whole thing. Didn't expect them to get *lost*, but hey, added bonus." She laughed again, a little less evil that time.

Gilbert closed the door and sighed. Whatever. He wasn't complaining.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!