

Academy for Ghosts

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Academy for Ghosts

by [DeiRyuu](#)

Summary

Life for Marco Bodt was about to get a lot more complicated.

Not to say that it wasn't already, since his parents research the paranormal for a living and he spends most of his nights chasing down their case studies with his closest friends. Being half ghost due to an accident doesn't exactly help either. So, naturally, when it came his time to start his college journey, he decided he was going to use it to take a break from the otherworldly. To uncomplicate things for once.

But Marco should've realized that the paranormal was bound to follow him wherever he went, even to a seemingly ordinary town like Stohess. That he was marked, 'haunted' if you would, by his condition. That being half ghost was a fulltime job.

And that it was only a matter of time before he stumbled across others like him.

[DISCONTINUED]

Notes

The anticipated? sequel to 'You Don't Know the Halfa it!' I won't be updating weekly like I did before, but I have a lot planned for this fic and I hope you'll stick around for the ride.

Just as before I'm tracking the tumblr tag, fic: halfa for anything related to this series ad you can go there to see my artwork/character designs from the first part.

Meetings and Surprises

A new chapter, a new beginning, the next step in the chaotic little world that Marco Bodt called his life. His hands gripped firm to the steering wheel of their family's minivan, the vehicle far more stable than the person guiding it was feeling.

Maybe he should have let his father drive a bit longer. He'd taken up first shift when they'd left home that morning, planning to split the four hour journey evenly between the two of them, but Marco had been too anxious to sit quietly and decided he needed to busy himself. It was his third hour behind the wheel, but they were at least swiftly approaching on their destination, as indicated by the road signs.

His father, Victor, sat to his side in the passenger's seat, craning his neck to watch the arrival time count down on the GPS. As he did, he drummed his fingers against the dashboard to the music that drifted from the radio. Marco himself had stopped listening ages ago- the thrum of his own heart in his ears was the perfect soundtrack to the present moment.

Marco could barely remember the conversation held with the guard at the front gate once their goal had been reached; he suspected his father had done most of the talking. All he knew was that IDs were exchanged at some point and he was driving away plus one dorm key, student ID, and mini map of the campus.

The various buildings the institution bore down heavily as he drove further and further in and Marco felt himself shrinking in, hoping the car seat would swallow him up. He faced things *far* more threatening than a college on a daily basis, but here he was, resolve wavering in the actualization that he was about to become a freshman all over again. If he could've calmed his nerves, he might've found some comedy in the thought.

Victor cleared his throat to draw Marco's attention. "Son, I know you're nervous, but a car driving itself is bound to raise some red flags if someone notices."

Marco would've questioned the meaning of that statement, but a quick look at his hands on the steering wheel, specifically the lack thereof, was the only clarification required. He reclaimed his visibility, muttering a brief apology.

See Marco was living –or half living, rather- proof of why one should not meddle with their parents' work behind their backs, especially when their occupation specializes in the paranormal. A dose of ectoplasmic energy combined with what were likely deadly levels of electricity were responsible for that little spectacle, as well as a slew of other ghost-related abilities that, after having them for two year's, he'd finally come to except as an aspect of his everyday life.

Victor reached out, placing a hand on Marco's shoulder. "Are you alright? I thought you had gotten over those nervous slips ages ago."

He sighed through his nose, near death grip on the wheel loosening slightly. No, he was not all right, but this wasn't one of the nervous slips that had so defined his first few months after

the accident. This was just his powers taking over and conveying his own desire to disappear in the current moment- an easy feat for a halfa to accomplish.

“It’s just...bigger than I expected,” Marco managed to settle on, unable to properly voice any of the thoughts swimming in his mind.

His father nodded, contemplating the response. “Well Rose is the best college for miles around. Most cities in the region send their graduates here- Trost, Shinganshina, Karanese. There’s probably a few people from Jinæ here as well, though it’s a bit out of the way.”

Marco cast him a sidelong glance. It’d been a while since his thoughts had dwelled on their former hometown- he had been rather young when they’d left; too young to form a proper bond to the small, suburban town. Unsure how to feel about that particular tidbit of information, he shrugged.

They found their way to Marco’s dorm with minor difficulty. A few misreadings of their printout map put them on the opposite side of campus and Marco regretting placing his father in charge of directions (the man tended to believe he knew the way better than a map or GPS, whether he’d been to a location prior or not), but they made it eventually.

The building was well-kept for what he knew to be an older establishment, though the brick foundation and near castle-like architecture certainly showed its age. Three neat rows of windows lined the exterior and the ‘211’ from the room assignment that’d been emailed suggested that he would be located somewhere along the centermost floor.

Marco pulled into the parking lot, the dorm casting a heavy shadow over them from the placement of the late afternoon sun. It promised relief from having to unpack in the hot sun, though did little to quell Marco’s still troubled nerves.

Victor gave a brief tussle of Marco’s two-colored hair -another side effect of his paranormal incident- before stepping out of the vehicle. The teen watched him maneuver around to the back of the van and give the trunk two sharp knocks. Taking the cue, he pressed the button on the console to unlock the trunk and joined his father outside.

“Hey Dad, I-“ Marco cut off abruptly, jumping forward to aid in the extraction of one of the larger suitcases. He grabbed the back end just as Victor yanked it out and would’ve been thrown back by the force.

“Ah, yes. Thank you, son,” he said, clearing his throat as Marco took the heavy bag away from him with relative ease.

The teen smiled, swinging the luggage gently as he continued his announcement. “Anyway, I was going to go ahead and check out the room. Maybe my roommate’s already here.”

“What-ow.” That was in response to bumping his head on the roof of the car. Victor leaned back from sorting through boxes, rubbing his dome. “That sounds like a good plan, just leave me the keys.”

“Oh, they’re still in the ignition.” Marco stepped back around the driver’s side and phased his arm through the door to fish out the keys, rather than opening it. He returned to his father, receiving a stern look as he dropped the keys into his awaiting palm.

Marco, realizing his blunder, flushed slightly. “Sorry. Habit.”

Victor sighed. “Just... don’t get caught, okay?”

The halfa responded with a brisk nod and slipped away, luggage still in tow. He stepped up to the front door of his new dorm, hesitating as his hand reached out towards the handle, as if it would burn if he touched it.

He took in a deep breath. Tackle your issues like you would one of your battles- that’s what Jean liked to tell him in times like these. He wished Jean was at his side right now, hand linked with his own as they spoke through the contact rather than words. The presence of his best friend turned boyfriend was Marco’s equivalent to a security blanket; their separation was another mountain he’d need to climb over so for now Marco was going to have to make do with just his words.

Yanking the door open with a bit more force than needed, the freckled teen made his way inside. There was a stairwell directly to his left and another set of doors ahead that led to what appeared to be some sort of common room. A few people, a combination of students and accompanying family members, were inside, too wrapped up in their own business to pay much mind to the newest addition to the dorm. Sparing only a fleeting glance, Marco made his way up the stairwell to the floor where his room was located- the second.

The middle level was busier as the lower, as this is where the rooms actually begun. As he exited the stairwell Marco nearly tripped over a spare box that had drifted away from the rest of its pile. He glanced over to the room closest to it, brass numbers above the peephole of the slightly ajar door proudly proclaiming ‘201’. He had a bit of searching to do to find his own room.

The basic floor plan consisted of eighteen rooms; eight along either of the longest walls of the building and one on each of the shorter ones, flanked by a stairwell to reach the other levels. The center space was occupied by the public facilities. Marco regarded the sign labeled ‘bathroom’ with displeasure as he passed- *that* was going to take some getting used to as well.

He found his own room just around the corner, right towards the end of the third wall, the 211 upon the door staring him down blissfully as it welcomed him to what would soon be his home away from home.

The door was already propped slightly open, the sound of rustled movement and piano music emanating from within, and that’s when Marco’s next issue finally hit him full force.

He had a roommate.

And his biggest concern right now wasn’t, ‘How do I adjust to living with a stranger’ or ‘What kind of person is he’ or even ‘I hope we get along’.

No, his biggest concern was making sure said roommate didn't find out he was part ghost.

When most of the people you conduct your day-to-day actions with are in on your big secret, your guard begins to lower. When he was in a relaxed environment, most notably when at home, Marco kept a thin veil on his powers, often walking through walls or aimlessly floating when he was idle. He would need to return to suppressing those habits, just as his father had warned him— unless he felt like giving his new roommate a heart attack. That'd be a lovely first impression.

Speaking of first impressions, it was time to get this one over with. With a knock, Marco slowly pushed the door open enough to let himself in. "Um, hello?" he asked quietly, eyes scanning the room.

The sole occupant was quick enough to spot, his bright blond hair and blue clothing contrasted against the barren white walls and plain wooden furniture. He was perched precariously on the end of a chair as he applied what appeared to be a map of the world on the wall above one of the desks, a roll of tape clenched between his teeth. He fumbled, caught off guard by the sudden interruption.

Marco was quick to act, bursting into the room as he deposited his suitcase by the door and placed both hands on his assumed roommate's back to stabilize him. The map, temporarily forgotten, peeled away from the wall to drape over the desk.

As yes, the perfect first encounter. Good to know those heart attack fears weren't entirely unfounded.

Once balance was reestablished, the blond hopped down from the chair and removed the tape from his mouth in order to set it down. Once he paused the MP3 player on the table, drawing the room into silence, he turned to give Marco his full attention.

"Thank you. That would've been a pretty lousy way to meet my roommate if I'd managed to hurt myself on the first day. I'm assuming you're my roommate, at least." Marco nodded slowly, received with a gentle smile and extended hand. "I'm Armin."

"Marco," he replied, taking the hand as his eyes took in Armin's features.

He was small. Not as small as say Krista or Connie, but enough for Marco to be aware of his own height in comparison. His blond hair was shaped in a bowl-cut like style and his eyes large and blue, not unlike a certain young woman who oversaw the labs at which his parents worked. They shared a mild resemblance, Marco noted in the back of his mind.

Yet that was not the oddest feature of the young man with whom he'd be sharing a room. There was something else to him, something Marco had not expected to witness in Stohess of all places, and it caused him to stare back in bewilderment.

"I hope you don't mind, but I already claimed the bottom bunk. I'm not a huge fan of heights- Oh! But I there might be a way to separate them and put yours on the floor as well if it's too inconvenient." Armin had continued to ramble on, seemingly unaware of the other's present state, and Marco snapped out of his light daze, shaking his head.

“No! No, it’s fine. Top bunk is fine with me,” he hurriedly replied, eyes drawing away from Armin and to the configuration of the beds. Besides abstaining from defying the laws of gravity in favor of using the ladder like a normal human being, he didn’t see any problem with the arrangement. In fact, it was probably ideal. If he lulled into a lax state and let his powers slip, Armin wouldn’t be able to see anything from the ground level. Theoretically anyway.

Marco looked back to Armin just as the short blond smiled, releasing a brief sigh of relief. “Good. I’m glad it wasn’t an issue.”

He nodded again, unsure of how to proceed with the interaction and trying his best not to stare too hard at the elephant in the room that Marco was pretty sure only he was aware of. Armin was looking him over as well, likely taking in how his dark hair turned stark white at the tips and possibly his bad eye, depending on how noticeable it was behind the glasses.

Thankfully Victor chose that moment to blunder in with the first set of Marco’s boxes, successfully breaking the tension. The two boys jumped in alarm, heads whipping around to the doorway and the adult struggling with a load that was a bit too much for him to be carrying.

Marco gave a roll of his eyes and stepped away from Armin to offer his assistance. He plucked the top box from the small totem his father carried in his arms, Victor’s balance noticeably improving from the lightening of his burden. He set the box down on the desk opposite the one Armin had already claimed, his father following him in order to do the same with the two that remained in his grasp.

He wiped a bead of sweat from his brow, looking down at their work. “Three down, fifty to go.”

“Hey, I didn’t pack *that* much,” Marco retorted, folding his arms.

This got a laugh out of the elder Bodt. “You sound like your mother right now,” he commented, brushing back the two-toned bangs with a casual sweep of his hand.

Turning, he noticed for the first time that the room contained once extra person. Armin stood awkwardly to the side, watching the family moment as he fiddled with the corner of the fallen poster strewn across his desk.

Victor beamed brightly. “Ah, you must be the roommate! I’m Victor Bodt, Marco’s father,” he announced, extending an outstretched palm in greeting.

“Armin Arlert, sir.” With the sudden shift of attention, Armin’s expression was akin to that of a deer caught up in a sudden beam of light, and he took the offered hand with visible reluctance.

He shook Armin’s hand in his usual enthusiastic manner, mildly jostling the small boy before he let go. He pulled back, hands on his hips and took a brief visual scan of the room.

“So I see you’ve been here long enough to get somewhat settled in.”

“Well, the friends who drove me here left about an hour ago, but we got in before noon.” Armin’s hand came up to brush a lock of hair back behind an ear, though it fell back into place almost instantly. “I might’ve left home a bit earlier than need be. I wanted to get a head start, but had forgotten just how close my hometown was to the campus- and how fast my friend likes to drive.”

“You’re from Shinganshina, aren’t you?” Victor said after a moment, running through his mental map the neighboring cities briefly. Surprised, Armin nodded. “Ah, yes! Lovely little town. My wife and I visited once for work in the past.”

Marco cringed visibly. That trip, though he personally had not attended, had resulted in a very... memorable point in his life. For both good and bad reasons.

“Really?” Armin cocked his head a few degrees to the left. “I can’t imagine what sort of work would bring you there of all places. There’s not much.”

A red flag shot up in Marco’s head, nearly causing him to drop the box he’d been sorting through during the discussion. Over his shoulder, Marco gave his father a stern look. The kind that said ‘For once in my life someone has no idea that I have any connection to the supernatural, so don’t you dare say a word about ghosts’.

Victor caught his son’s gaze, a pregnant pause following before he constructed his next statement. “Well, research, mainly. It’s pretty in-depth stuff, so I’ll spare you the details as it’d take far too long to explain.”

Marco exhaled the breath caught in the back of his throat.

“Oh, okay.” Armin blinked in surprise, expression otherwise unreadable. He glanced over to Marco briefly, but the freckled teen had busied himself with unpacking once more.

“Well, come on kiddo,” Victor said, giving Marco a heavy clap on the back as he set his sights on him once more. “Let’s go get the rest of the stuff out the car. We’ll be right back.” He directed the last part to Armin, who nodded briskly and glanced over to his fallen map, an internal debate waging as the Bodts let themselves out.

Marco let his gaze linger on his roommate a bit longer before exiting entirely, a small frown of concern alighting his features. There was no mistaking it, that luminescent green that lightly dusted the air in the blond’s immediate vicinity.

Armin had an ectosignature.

Why did he have an ectosignature?!

His father hadn’t lingered long after the van was void of Marco’s belongings. He stuck around for a little while, just to make sure everything was in order, but ultimately left to avoid the fall of night during his four hour drive back to Trost.

The process of unpacking was a slow one, and a brief break was taken for the two boys to venture out and locate the campus's dining hall for dinner. They managed to get turned around once and dinner itself was less than spectacular, but the time was spent swapping facts with Armin and getting to know each other.

Armin apparently lived with his grandfather- his mother's job forced her to constantly be traveling and his father accompanied her for these trips- but spent most of his time with his two childhood friends. He was planning on majoring in history, fueled by a desire to travel and learn about the world.

He was also a year younger than Marco, turning just seventeen by his next birthday in November. He had been allowed to skip a grade due to his higher than average IQ and decided to take the opportunity, even if it would draw him away from his friends.

Marco then told him about his own life- how he'd been born in Jinae, but his parents spent most of his childhood hopping from town to town until they'd finally settled in Trost. He spoke of the lunatics that made up his friend circle and how he'd begun dating his best friend two years ago. Armin inquired about the Trost hauntings, which Marco admitted to, being fairly common, but often disregarded, knowledge, though leaving out his own personal connections.

By the end of the day, Marco had accomplished more in learning about his roommate than actually sorting out his things. He'd put away some clothes, made the bed, and set out anything he knew he would be using in the immediate future- toiletries, laptop, chargers, etc. Everything else was going to have to wait until later that evening, or tomorrow considering his level of motivation was likely to drop after settling down for what was assuredly going to be a long conversation.

He lay on his bed, elbows digging into the mildly hard mattress as he propped his torso up and buried his feet under a pillow for warmth. As he'd retrieved his phone, he'd made an offer to step outside so as not to disturb his roommate, however Armin had insisted that wouldn't be necessary as he had several things to attend to at the main office and excused himself instead, leaving Marco alone in the room for the time being.

Muscle memory guided his fingers across the touchscreen, adeptly selecting the contact that easily topped his most frequented list and pressing the dial key. It'd barely been given a chance to ring before a hurried voice answered the call.

"Marco! You- no, wait." A long pause followed. *"Hi."*

Marco giggled at the sound of Jean's voice on the other end of the phone, tripping over his own words as he tried not to sound too excited. He *had* promised his boyfriend a call once he was settled in- the anticipation must've gotten to him, the sappy dork. "Hi yourself," he replied, amusement laced in his tone.

Jean cleared his throat with a guttural cough, brushing away his prior awkwardness. *"Sooo... how's campus life treating you?"*

A roll of the eyes granted a brief overlook of how he was still only half settled in, if even that. "It's only been a few hours, Jean. Ask me again in a month," Marco answered, humming softly to himself. "I'm still getting used to the idea."

"Okay, fine. What can you tell me, then?"

"Well..." Marco tapped on his chin. "My roommate- his name's Armin- seems really nice so far. He's out right now, but we've already started getting to know each other." He took a moment before adding, "He skipped a grade to get here so he's actually your age."

Jean let out an impressed whistle. *"Damn. Why didn't I think of that? I could've gone with you instead of suffering through one more year of high school."*

"I don't think your attention span would've allowed for that," Marco chuckled. "No skipping classes either."

He snorted lightly. *"Okay, point taken."* There was a creaking noise, likely Jean shifting whatever position he'd taken up on his own bed. *"At least you got a good roommate, and not some colossal asshole or weirdo. Not that you're any stranger to weird, eh Marco?"* he added as a footnote.

The elder drew quiet, an image of that green aura flashing in his mind. "...I never said there wasn't anything weird about him," he said in a hushed, serious tone.

"What, weirder than being some sort of child prodigy?" came the retort, though it had lost that sarcastic tone that Jean tended to lace all his commentary with.

Marco glanced to the door, as if expecting Armin to pick that exact moment to return. "He has a signature."

"Oh?" Jean's end of the line lulled into a silence, letting the phrasing sink in. *"Oh! Shit. Is he-?"*

The brunet shook his head. "No, definitely human. But he's been around a ghost, and a lot from the looks of it. He's got the same kind of rub-off you and Krista get."

Jean droned into the speaker, contemplating the quandary. Marco could just picture the look on his face, the same as the one he got when he was scrounging the depths of his mind for something to draw. Eyes screwed shut and brows drawn to a crease, bunching up at the bridge of his nose while a lightly chewed pencil hung from his teeth by the metal of the eraser. The writing implement was likely missing in the present scenario, any distortion of his voice was a result of the cellular connection, not an obstruction.

"Maybe he's dating a ghost?" Jean offered after moments of deliberation.

"Seriously?"

"Well I don't know! The two people you just listed are. He's not from Trost, is he?"

Another unseen shake of the head. “Shinganshina. And I don’t think they have the same sort of reputation.”

Jean repeated the name a few times to himself, his voice barely carrying over the receiver. “*Why does that sound familiar to me?*” he asked aloud.

“Remember that time when my parents were sent out of town for work?” It was a rhetorical question, of *course* he remembered. Considering how the following events had led to Marco nearly finding out what it’s like to be a frog in a biology lab, the usurpation of some modern day mad scientists, and the confession of feelings after a life or death situation. He would’ve been surprised had Jean replied with a no. “*That’s* where they went.”

“*What are the odds?*” He could hear the blond fidgeting again, as though a shift in position would suddenly provide him with the answers. “*So what’s the connection?*”

“That’s just the thing; what if there *isn’t* one? What if this is all just one big coincidence?!” He groaned, flipping over on his back. “That signature doesn’t tell me anything. There are plenty of cases of people who are haunted or live in haunted houses and have no idea; he could be one of them for all I know. And then what? It’s not as if I could even bring it up anyway, considering I’d have to explain *how* I know and we both know how well that’d turn over-”

“*Marco, you’re stressing yourself out again.*”

The prompt was enough for the brunet to pause long enough to take in a deep breath and release. He dropped a few inches to the mattress with a soft thud and a creak of protest from the bed frame, shaking gently from the sudden deposition of weight.

Right, powers. Need to keep an eye on those.

“Sorry. I just... I thought I’d be getting away from all these ghost shenanigans for once.” With a frustrated sigh he flipped to his side, pushing his glasses back into place where they’d slid towards his forehead. “Guess I’m just lucky.”

“*If that’s what you want to call it...*” Jean uttered this just barely under his breath, but Marco managed to catch enough to respond with an inquiring hum, urging him to continue. “*Nothing. Thinking aloud. It was a stupid thought anyway.*”

“Jean...”

The other groaned softly. “*Well, how often have we had any luck or coincidences when dealing with ghosts?*”

Marco didn’t answer.

“*Like I said, stupid,*” he said, after accepting the prolonged silence as conformation.

“No, no you’re right, Jean,” Marco murmured, tone resigned as he shifted back into an upright state.

"I am?" he asked incredulously before clearing his throat. "I mean, of course I am! Ask me anything, I have all the answers."

A smile danced upon Marco's lips before slipping into a full on laugh, light and breathy and he pictured whatever ridiculous face Jean had made whilst speaking those words. "I'm not so sure about that, but I guess you have to be the smart one once in a while."

Whatever ego he was building up was swiftly deflated with the huff Jean breathed into the receiver. *"Hey, I held that title before you showed up and took it from me! Someone had to keep those two idiots from getting themselves killed."*

"Mhmm..." The halfa didn't sound convinced.

"Speaking of Sasha and Connie, they said they're gonna start dragging me out with them more often because I'll turn into a hermit or something. I'm not gonna get any peace and quiet now!"

"What peace and quiet? You're with me practically twenty-seven and a good chunk of that is spent chasing ghosts around town," he snorted, feeling little sympathy for his boyfriend's quite frankly ridiculous plight. In fact, he was *glad* Sasha and Connie were taking some initiative to drag the grumpy blond out of the apartment for something other than their nightly patrol duties.

"Yeah, but you're not insane. And then I have to deal with their gross PDA and I won't have you around to return the favor," Jean scoffed, causing Marco to roll his eyes. He'd known the duo far too long- longer than Marco had even been in Trost- for his complaints to hold much credence.

"Gee, is that all I'm good for? Thanks," he deadpanned in response, idly picking at a chip in the footboard.

"I miss you, okay!" The confession came out in a sharp outburst, startling the freckled boy on the other end. Jean calmed himself with a sigh, letting his voice fall just above a whisper. *"I know it's barely been half a day, but I can't help it. It's hard not having you right here."*

Marco smiled gently, eyes sliding shut. "It's okay, Jean. I miss you too."

Marco was up bright and early Sunday morning, much to his own dismay. A long, tiresome day of driving, unpacking, and stressing himself out and still his accursed internal clock couldn't grant him the courtesy of sleeping in late for once. With a heavy groan, the halfa pushed himself upright, rubbing the excess sleep out of his eyes.

Armin was already up, likely for a while if the towel draped over his head was of any indication, tapping away at his keyboard until he was alerted by Marco's stirring. A brief moment was taken to assure the blond that no, he had not awoken him with his typing, and yes, he was in fact an early riser as well.

Roommate mollified, Marco hopped down from his bunk, stumbling as the rest of his limbs had yet to awaken fully. He ambled about his side of the room, grabbing his glasses off the desk as he mentally went over his to-do list for the day.

The first, and his top priority, was getting the rest of his belongings unpacked and sorted, which he set about immediately- after getting changed into something more suitable than whatever he'd gone to sleep in and roaming down to the dining hall to obtain some semblance of breakfast.

The process took longer than prior anticipated, Marco repeatedly having to rearrange things once he'd placed them to compensate for the lack of adequate storage space, something he had not factored for when packing initially. He also would've finished sooner had it not been for the sudden influx of texts around noon from Jean, complaining about a 'kidnapping' and how being third wheel to an overly affectionate couple should be considered cruel and unusual punishment. Marco's responses were less than sympathetic, until he got threatened with snapchats of the so-called 'torture,' which he most certainly did *not* need and decided to at least humor the blond.

Mid afternoon he added a significant stack of empty boxes to the ever-growing pile forming around the hall trash bin and took a step back admire his work. It was... perhaps a *tad* cluttered. There were more clothes in the closet than it was probably supposed to accommodate, the mini fridge he'd brought along took up more space than something with the word 'mini' in it's name should, and half the things on the desk only existed for their sentimental value, but overall he was pleased.

A few pictures of his friends and family had made it onto the walls to detract from the sterile, white paintjob, alongside a couple pieces of Jean's artwork made specifically for him (and a couple Sasha and Connie had made in retaliation that Marco had been too amused by to *not* hold onto). It all made the room feel a little more homey, and less like an institution.

Armin's side was similarly decorated with photographs, though in far less abundance. Instead, he'd chosen to focus his decorating towards a more global theme, consisting of landmarks, scenes of the natural world, and that giant map that'd nearly landed him a concussion yesterday. Marco had been the one to put that back up last night, using his height to his advantage and avoiding the chair altogether.

With the room sorted out, the rest of the afternoon was dedicated to creating a mental map of the campus, otherwise getting to class tomorrow might present a bit of a challenge. Armin accompanied him for this task and Marco was appreciative of the company. It was a welcome change from Trost, where people were friendly, but their superstitious natures led them to tiptoe around those involved in the paranormal research department. Bad omens and other such nonsense as Marco tended to think of it.

They had returned shortly after dinner, assured that they wouldn't get *too* lost come tomorrow, when the last thing scheduled for the day presented itself. The two trudged down to the first floor, accompanied by the rest of their floormates, to where the dorm's common room was located.

Their floor's RA, a rather strict looking senior who introduced himself as Ian, was already there to greet everyone once they'd all settled in. After a round of introductions, consisting of everyone's names, hometowns, and majors that went by too quickly for any of it to properly sink in, Ian went on to discuss the expectations of all residents. Basic things like 'don't make a mess of any public spaces', 'don't destroy school property', and 'if you're planning to do anything that you know you would shoot anyone else for subjecting you to, you probably shouldn't'. That one got a few chuckles.

Before they were all dismissed, Ian had one last piece of information to give them, something 'they don't tell you in the guidebooks' as he had phrased it.

"Some of you may have seen the old sports field located outside of campus," he had begun. "While it's technically owned by Rose, we are advised to warn students that it is off limits during the night since it's not furnished with any kind of lighting. Security can and will write you up if they catch you over there."

"Not gonna tell them the *real* reason?" One of the older students suddenly chimed in, a dark-haired individual sitting across from Marco who'd looked completely disinterested with the proceedings up until now. "About all the spooky things that happen at night? People who go there to see for themselves usually come back with the same story."

Ian sighed heavily, rubbing at his temples. "I didn't schedule this meeting to tell ghost stories, you know..." He looked up, glancing around the circle to the eager, curious faces of freshman and the upper classman who were just as eager to gauge their responses to what was likely old news to them. "All I'll say is that yes, people have reported strange things happening at night. Voices, usually giggling, and something touching them out of nowhere. Make of that what you will, but I was *not* kidding about security writing you up. I don't need any reports to file."

He shuffled the papers in his hands and did a quick scan of his residents. Most were talking amongst themselves now and the upperclassman who'd pressed for the topic had settled back into his corner with a smug smirk. "If nobody has any other comments, meeting adjourned."

Students began filing out of the room, but Marco was a bit slow on the draw, caught up in his own thoughts again. A ghost? *Here*? Armin having an ectosignature was bad enough, and now there was a specter practically right next door.

"You okay?" Armin cut through the introspection, offering a hand. "I'll admit it's surprising, but aren't you used to this sort of thing in Trost?"

"Oh trust me, I'm used to it," he replied with a dry chuckle, taking the offer as he pushed himself to his feet. "I think I'd be *less* surprised by the news is I wasn't."

The blond granted him a curious glance as he led the way back to their shared room.

"Thought you'd be getting away from it all?"

"You have *no* idea," Marco said with a sigh and with a sympathetic smile from the younger of the two, they left it at that.

But as he followed Armin up the stairway, the darkness cast in through the window by the night sky making that slight greenish glow ever more noticeable, Marco couldn't help but feel that his new roommate wasn't as oblivious to the paranormal as previously assumed.

Close Encounters of the Supernatural Kind

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Marco hadn't much time to dwell over his supernatural conundrums- his new course work swiftly made sure of that.

The very first class that Monday had demonstrated that there would be no grace period for easing the recent high school graduates into the college curriculum and by Wednesday it was clear that the trend would be consistent amongst all of the professors.

Thankfully, without his nightly duties, he did have more time to focus on academics without having to deal with the fatigue that came along with pursuing ghosts into the midnight hours. It was considerably more schoolwork, but he didn't have to balance it with a double life.

Still, it felt strange not having to use his powers for anything. He practiced small things when Armin wasn't around, like turning various objects invisible or grabbing odds and ends from the drawers without actually opening them, but had yet to transform or use any of his powers that were less compatible with an indoor environment. Tempting as it was, there was just no need for him to risk detection. The ghost story told to them during their dorm meeting had yet to resurface and the slight fade in Armin's signature proved that whatever he'd been exposed to had stayed in Shinganshina.

Over a month had passed before the complacent mask of normalcy he'd built up for the college would have to be shattered.

He was settling into the lecture hall for economics- undoubtedly his most detested of the general requirement courses he was focusing on this year while he sorted out his major- when he managed to overhear snippets of a conversation going on in the row before him.

The two girls were trying to talk amongst themselves, but their forced whispering wasn't a quiet as they had intended. Anyone sitting within three seats of them could likely hear every word of the conversation whether they were trying to or not.

"-said it was like all the warmth had been drained from his arm where it touched him."

"Ugh, creepy. What about the others?"

"Bolted before whatever *it* was got to them too."

"I told them they weren't just making things up to keep us out of there."

It was about here that Marco had tuned out, having heard all that he felt he really needed. Could that have been about what the RA had warned them about during the dorm meeting? After all, warmth drained away from mere physical contact was a pretty standard trait for ghosts. He himself had garnered a few complaints over the years for leeching away heat

when in his other, more spectral form. Complaints that typically went ignored given there was nothing he could do about that particular detail.

Clearing his throat, Marco leaned forward over the desk and spoke gently as he attempted to draw their attention. “Excuse me ladies, I couldn’t help overhearing, but- “

The two girls yelped in alarm, twisting around in their seats to get a good look at whoever would be so bold as to interrupt their conversation. The one on the right eyed him up and down a few times before a small smirk fell to her lips, deeming him passable.

“What’s up, cutie? You need something?” she playfully asked, twirling a strand of wavy red hair around one finger.

Marco blinked in surprise, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks at the... forwardness of her response. “I, uh, I was wondering if you were discussing that area just off campus that’s supposedly haunted.”

The brunette to the left scoffed loudly, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, our idiot friends thought it’d be a good idea to check it out last night. Then something scared them off.”

He took a brief glance forwards as their professor walked in and began her morning ritual. The girls twisted around to follow his gaze. They still had a few minutes before she’d be fully ready to lecture, so he decided to pry a bit.

“Something?” Marco asked in a hushed tone, resting his weight on his forearms as he leaned towards them to draw their attention back to him.

“Yeah,” the redhead interjected once facing back once more, raising up her hands to wiggle her fingers in the space between them. “They never saw anything, but one of them claims he definitely felt something touch him.”

He pursed his lips, cross-referencing the details with his personal experiences in the field, but the girl on the left managed to interrupt his thought process before the wheels could truly get spinning.

“Were you going to check it out?”

He looked over to her, eyes widened slightly. “N-no! Just, just curious is all.” He pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose and smiled innocently. “It’s a bit too risky for my liking.”

The brunette started to answer, but her friend beat her to the chase, leaning into Marco’s field of view and her companion’s personal bubble. “Although if you *did* want to check it out, it’d be good to bring someone along...” An elbow nudged its way into her side, the brunette forcing her back over to her own seat with a cross glare and a jab towards the professor, nearly done with setup at this point. “...or maybe a nice cup of coffee?” Hands found their way back into red curls and she looked up expectantly, gnawing on her lower lip.

Marco found himself blushing again and chuckled nervously, pulling a sympathetic look. "I'm flattered for the offer, but I've got someone back home who might not appreciate that."

The girl's eyes widened, face turning a shade that matched her hair well. She murmured out an apology and quickly spun back around with a distraught whine of 'Why are the cute ones always taken?!', stretching her torso over the desk in defeat. Her mousy haired companion gave Marco an apologetic smile as she turned to give her friend a soothing pat on the back.

He let his gaze linger on them for a second more, until their instructor's voice rang out across the lecture hall to signal the official start to class. Flipping open his notebook, Marco made a quick memo to the side about what he'd learned in those few minutes, and folded the corner of the page down over it.

Looks like it was finally time to give his ghost half some exercise.

Armin looked up from the book in his lap, confusion in his eyes when Marco had given the cover-up for his plans that evening, presented as a leisurely stroll around the campus grounds. A glance went to the window, darkness peering through the cracked blinds, and back to Marco. "This late at night?" he questioned.

In hindsight it *did* sound rather silly when spoken aloud, even if it was somewhat true; he usually left coming up with reasonable excuses to someone else, given how terrible a liar the halfa was. Otherwise he resorted to half-truths that made his life choices seem questionable at best.

Marco shrugged and scratched at the tip of his nose "I find it soothing."

His roommate regarded him for a moment, as though he could sense the eighteen-year-old had ulterior motives. He brushed it off a second later and flipped over to the next page in his reading, bidding Marco a safe walk.

He resisted his urge to sigh in relief at how generally accepting Armin was, though at any given time he looked like he was holding back the floodgates on a tidal wave of questions. He almost wished the blond would let one or two trickle through; keeping them all in *had* to be stressful.

Giving his farewell and promising he wouldn't be too late to return (an empty promise really, who could predict how long this encounter would take if anything actually happened?), Marco quickly made his way outside. Making sure no one was around to witness him, he stepped around back of the building and away from the beaten path, letting the cloak of night engulf him. He settled himself behind a tree, a few more glances assuring that he was entirely alone with little risk of suddenly being discovered.

Eyes slid shut. A deep breath was taken in and exhaled. Eyes opened again, flashing purple.

Marco let the energy pool at his center and released it all in a burst that light up the darkness. The rings formed, passing over his body as he felt the change taking place; his clothes being replaced by blue and black, eyes switching over to violet, and hair turning fully white.

He flexed his newly gloved hands, feeling the chill that his ghost half brought along with it course through his veins. It was invigorating, the sense of power this other form gave him, especially after having kept it dormant for so long; like the magma bubbling under the surface of a once sleeping volcano.

With a grin, Marco pushed off the ground and erupted into the sky.

He couldn't help the joyous cry that slipped past his lips as he rose higher and higher, the entirety of campus laid out beneath him like a scaled model. If he had to pick a favorite power, it'd be flight without a second thought. The wind embraced him like an old friend, guiding his path as he effortlessly rode the breeze.

Krista has once explained to him that many ghosts exhibited elemental cores, though few seemed able to tap into them- a potential limitation for spirits existing in the world of the living and likely why Marco, a beings of both worlds, demonstrated said ability. His was an air element; a rather tiresome power he did not like using unless the situation was in dire need of it, but did show itself in other ways. His affinity for flight and subconscious will over gentle breezes pointed to this fact.

Even now the wind followed his lazy downward glide outside the boundaries of the college, seeking out the stretch of land he'd been forewarned of. The conspicuous dark patch in the network of dimly lit buildings and streetlamps down below seemed like a nod in the right direction.

Marco pulled his feet beneath him like anchors, slowly lowering into the dark center of the field. The grass, already wet with dew, compressed under the weight of his light blue boots, each step making a faint squelch in the silence of the night.

He could see why visiting the field after hours was discouraged- even with the light pollution leaking in from the surrounding buildings the visibility was terrible. His own otherworldly glow was enough to light up his immediate surroundings, giving him a small pocket of vision on all sides, but normal humans would have to suffice with a flashlight. Easy targets if someone, or thing, were to sneak up in the rear.

Granted, none of that particularly mattered if the thing in question was a ghost that never appeared in a visible form, as Marco had come to understand. There were many reasons why a ghost would not appear before a human- fear, malevolent intent, and shame to name a few. The most likely for the present situation would be that Stohess was not as spiritually attuned as Trost; ghosts would have a harder time manifesting a discernible form here. Some may even find it impossible.

It was hard to determine which vein Stohess's specter fell into, as Marco had yet to detect any signs of it, not even the breadcrumb trail of a fading signature path. It wasn't a comforting realization.

Marco stepped towards the edges of the field, letting his glow to spread as he furthered the investigation, though with consistent results. He allowed his mind to entertain the idea that, maybe, there was no ghost. That it was chalked up to a series of convenient coincidences or

an elaborate ruse to dissuade potential troublemakers in continuing on their path of insubordination.

If only things were that simple.

Something from behind claimed a hold on the sleeve of his jacket, giving it a tug demanding of attention. Marco leapt away with a push into a hover as he pivoted his body in a full turn, puzzled as to how he could have been unaware of another presence.

Delighted cheers rang out at the action, a small voice crying ‘He flew!’ through the giggles. Marco furrowed his brows and brought his gaze downward.

The awed faces of two small children stared back up at him.

Well, rather two blurs of ghostly mist in the general semblance of children. They were very low-level spirits, only loosely tied to the human realm- he’d be surprised if humans could see anything more than a slight refraction of light, *maybe* an outline, where their bodies were. These were the typical forms ghosts took on before he’d lived in Trost, back when they had to use scanners and monitors if they wanted to know what one looked like. It was almost nostalgic. Almost.

The duo consisted of a boy and a girl of different ages, the girl clearly the elder with a signature of bright orange. The boy, who cowered behind her while peeking shyly up at Marco, a pale yellow.

Deciding the ghosts of two small children were unlikely to cause him harm, aside from the cruel nature of their existence hurting his heart, Marco dropped back to the ground and crouched before his tiny interlopers. The boy shrunk further behind what the halfa could only assume to be his sister from the way he clung so tightly.

“You see us,” she said with a certain awe to her tone. She took a bold step towards this stranger, brother whimpering in distress as he fought between staying glued to her back and staying far away from the strange boy with the white hair and glowing freckles. The former won out.

She studied Marco for a long time before she decided to speak again, the flicker in her aura evening out to match the frequency of a thoughtful hum the halfa was convinced she had no idea she was vocalizing. Her wandering eyes settled on his, nose crinkling. “Hey mister, what happened to your face?”

Ah yes, the obvious question. Children were not particularly known for their tact in such sensitive matters.

Marco felt his hand seize up, resisting the instinctual urge to reach for the lightly disfigured half of his face. While he may not have been as self-conscious about the scars as he once was, it was still a bit of a sore spot that he preferred not to have discussed. No such luck in this instance. “I was in an accident,” he explained in a finite tone, hoping her curiosity would not prompt her to pry further.

It didn't. "Oh," the orange child had remarked, twisting enough to look at the other ghost over her shoulder. "I think we were too, but we can't remember how we died. Are you dead, too? Is that why you're all glowy and can see us?"

"Eh..." Marco took a moment to scratch at the scruff on the nape of his neck. "Sorta."

"Sorta?" Surprisingly it was the boy who answered, peering out from behind his living (in a loose sense of the word) shield. He stepped out to the side, prior apprehension now replaced with intrigue. "How can you be sorta?"

"Long story." The halfa shrugged. Now was not the time to try to explain what he was to children who barely seemed to grasp their own situation. "Now I have a question for you; Why do you keep scaring everyone away from here?"

Her face fell to a pout, nose scrunching. "We don't mean to, honest! No one ever notices us and then they get all scared when I try to get their attention."

"What about that girl?" the boy asked, nudging her gently. "That one that walks by here sometimes and always stares."

The nose crinkled up further. "She doesn't count. Just because she looks over here doesn't mean she can see us. Plus she looks mean." She let out a tiny huff, arms crossed moodily over her chest. The boy gave her arm a few tugs in what was probably a comforting gesture in his mind, but was swiftly shrugged off. He looked to the halfa for help, expression exasperated.

Marco chuckled lightly. Strange, ethereal beings that they were, they were still children. Children who were just lost and confused about how and why they were like this now. It explained the testimonies about strange, icy touches- the poor kids just wanted someone to acknowledge them.

His laughter received a cross glare, too cute to hold much weight, especially with her nose still scrunched up. Then the tension in her face loosened, falling away to make room for an epiphany. "You can see us, mister! That means you could play with us!"

The two boys found themselves mirroring an expression of surprise accompanying the sudden proposition. The brother whispered something into her ear and she also whispered response, while met with a small groan, seemed to satisfy whatever his concerns were.

Both turned to Marco expectantly, wide eyes unblinking. Children were pretty demanding at times; *ghost* children were even worse. That youthful desire for recognition was never meant to be combined with a ghost's nature of obsession. He found himself wishing Connie was there. Not that Marco disliked kids; he actually quite enjoyed interacting with them when he found himself in the situation, but Connie was the one with younger siblings. He had the most experience in the field.

Marco sighed, knowing he had fallen into their trap. Their adorable, puppy-dog eyed trap of which there was no escape now that the request had been voiced.

Technically, it *was* his job as a halfa to help ghosts when he could.

“Alright, but it can’t be for too long,” he said, crossing his arms. “My friend might start worrying if I stay out too late.”

They cheered, quite loudly as well despite their small frames. The girl looked to her brother, grinning widely. She bent down to his level, whispering something into his ear that caused his eyes to widen. She pulled back and he acknowledged her with a brisk nod.

“Well?” Marco asked, both sets of eyes now back on him. “What do you want to play?”

“TAG! NOT IT!”

With the simultaneous chant, they both darted, splitting from one another for the first time since Marco had found them. He smiled, waiting a few moments as the trails of orange and yellow faded in the distance before giving chase.

They exchanged its for several rounds of the game, Marco claiming the title for a majority of the time as he let the kids give him the runaround. He could’ve easily outsped them, either on land or airborne, but where would the fun be in that?

Deciding that more time had crept by than he would’ve preferred (He really needed to outfit his ghost half with a watch one of these days), Marco called an end to the game during one of his ‘not it’ turns by collapsing onto his back with a cry of surrender. The two ghosts clambered up on his stomach, giggling madly as they tagged and subdued their prey. Their ethereal bodies barely exuded any weight upon him, but he let them believe he was at their mercy regardless.

“Alright kids, I need to get back to my room before it gets too late.”

“Aww...” they chorused, sliding off his torso to sit dejectedly in the grass.

Marco switched over to lie on his side, getting a good look at them. Already he was noting a subtle change in their physiology; their signatures seemed weaker, and not in the sense of physical exhaustion. It was though their bond to the living realm was starting to lose power. He’d seen this before, when ghosts were returning to whatever plane of existence they rightfully belonged to, when their business was concluded and they lost claim to the human world.

He should’ve realized a game of tag would be the calling card for a pair of kids looking for attention.

As he pushed up, supporting his weight on his forearms, he found himself enveloped by two small pairs of arms, combined efforts enveloping his broad shoulders on either side.

“You’ll come back, right?” the boy’s voice said close to his ear.

Shoulders pinned in place, Marco maneuvered his arms to the best of his ability to return the hug. “If I find the time I’ll try to. I promise.”

Releasing the halfa, the children stepped back, giving him the chance to stand up properly. They had faded even further, auras mere dull mists of colored glow. Small hands grasped for each other as brother and sister said their farewells to their new halfa friend. Side by side they retreated further into the shroud of night, slipping further into the spectral realm with each passing step until no trace of the existence remained outside of Marco's recent memory.

They were gone, for now. Spirits who straddled the boundary in that fashion- children especially- were rather unpredictable. You could quell their regrets or lingering desires, sending their souls over, and they still might find their way back to the realm of the living at a much later date. Helping at least sent them away for longer stretches of time if they were the lingering sort. He'd have to make a few more scattered rounds to be absolutely sure, but adrenaline junkies hoping for a good scare were definitely going to be disappointed for some time.

He sighed as he ran a hand through snowy hair, knowing it was high time to reappear back at the dorm before Armin grew concerned for his wellbeing. A passing glance to the field as it passed below and a sinking suspicion told him this was only the beginning to his haunted adventures in Stohess.

And, lucky him, it was just in time for October.

The next day brought with it the continued obnoxiousness of lectures, reading assignments he'd prefer not to do, and the reminder of approaching mid-semester exams.

It also brought along the added bonus of a Skype conversation back home. He had these one to two times a week, almost always instigated by his boyfriend who still refused to admit to how much of a sentimental sap he was being over their separation. Connie and Sasha had made the rare appearance and one particular call had been streamed live from Sina labs with Krista (and Ymir, if you counted her looming in the background and making sarcastic remarks off screen as participating) giving the more in depth recap of Trost activity. The other members of their ragtag task force were not reliable when it came to the details. His parents mostly dealt in phone calls during their breaks, as their work hours usually conflicted with Marco's own class or sleep schedule. Dedicated workaholics to the core, those two.

He'd waited for Armin to go off on one of his near daily trips to the library (the blond was going to end up either working or *living* there if this stayed consistent) before logging into Skype. This round was going to feature a solo Jean as Marco was eager to relay last night's events unto him. It didn't matter how many people were in on the halfa situation, he'd always feel more comfortable sharing these things with Jean. That was just the type of relationship they held as each other's confidants.

Although, Marco recalled as he waited for Skype to load, Jean had almost seemed reluctant to accept the proposition earlier when Marco had texted him about it. Odd considering how eager he normally was to video chat.

He watched the little green status icon pop up next to the desired contact once the application fully loaded and sent in the request. The image jumped to his screen as Jean accepted the call, revealing a familiar face and-

“Oh my god, Jean! What happened?!”

On the other end, the blond pulled out his best charming grin. The one that he liked to believe made Marco swoon inside, but really just caused him to roll his eyes most of the time.

“What? No ‘hello’?”

Marco tilted his head down enough to peer at Jean over the top of his glasses. Even with the distortion coming in from the right hand side, he could quite clearly make out the nasty looking bruise running diagonal from his nose to his cheek, purpled with age. His eyes flicked up to meet Jean’s, a single brow raised in questioning.

Well, that explained the reluctance.

The blond crossed his arms, looking away from the webcam. *“There was a shade... and it used tail whip...”* He glanced up again, tilting the injured side of his face towards the screen. It looked even worse when further illuminated by the light from the monitor. *“You can probably guess how effective it was.”*

Marco made a sharp intake of breath through his teeth, wincing at the mere thought. He knew the pain well; ghost tails were notorious for being *far* more solid than one would think for all their wavering. He also knew that Jean didn’t have the luxury of accelerated healing that had saved him from many a day-old welt that would’ve looked remarkably similar to the one Jean now sported. “Are you alright?”

He gave a noncommittal shrug. *“I’m not dying or anything, but it still stings like hell. And everyone feels the need to point it out to me, like I don’t fucking know there’s a giant bruise in the middle of my face. Do you have any idea how annoying that gets?”*

“Gee, I can only imagine,” Marco murmured, bringing his elbows up on the desk so his chin could rest in his hands.

Marco watched the gears turn in the blond’s head turn as he decoded the heavy sarcasm. His eyes widened slightly at the true moment of realization.

Jean Kirschstein: King of not thinking before he spoke.

“Wait, I didn’t mean... shit.” Hands flailed in front of the webcam as the words tumbled from his mouth, never quite finishing a statement before it fell to curses and restarted. Marco moved the lower of his face into his palm hide the amusement while he continued to allow his boyfriend to struggle with his poor choice in words.

Somewhere between the barely concealed snickering or the mirth in his eyes, Jean finally caught on. His mouth snapped shut with a near audible click, eyes narrowing into thin slits. *“Oh you little shit...”*

Cat out the bag, Marco allowed himself to laugh freely, pulling his hands back into his lap. “Alright, I’ve had my fun.”

“You’re a terrible boyfriend.”

“Love you too.”

Jean eventually managed to get Marco to discuss the recent events that had prompted the call in the first place. This launched the brunet into a long recount that was told more by an excitable pair of hands than the words coming from his mouth (He tended to do this when he got into long anecdotes). Jean found himself tearing his eyes away from his boyfriend’s face on multiple occasions just so he could follow the wild gesturing that was supposed to represent the narration.

He didn’t mention to Marco how he may or may not have screenshotted a few of his more interesting expressions. He’d just have to wait until they inevitably wound up on Facebook to find out.

“...so I sent them on their way for now, but I’ll have to check back at some point to see if they’ve found their way back,” he finished up, overly active hands falling calmly to the desk as if they’d spent the entirety of the recap session there. “Probably towards the end of the month when the boundary’s weaker- that’ll be the most likely time.”

“Watch out, they might want you to take them trick-or-treating if you do.”

Marco chuckled lightly. “Wouldn’t be the strangest thing someone’s wanted me to do... recently at least. Did I mention one of the girls tried to ask me out for coffee after our discussion?”

Jean started to shake his head, that ‘I-told-you-so’ look glinting in his golden eyes. *“And you didn’t think anyone there was gonna think you’re hot.”* He gave a little satisfied nod of his head, arms crossed over his chest. Then he thought on it more, brows furrowing as he did so. *“Wait, wait. She tried to ask you?”*

Brown eyes rolled. “No, Jean. Despite the fact that I am very much in love with another man, specifically you, I decided to invite a random girl in my class on a date with me. Especially after I completely interrupted her conversation with her friend.”

“Oh cut the sass, you know what I meant. How often does the girl do the asking?”

The halfa blinked, tilting his head a fraction to the side. “It’s not that uncommon, is it? As I recall, Sasha was the one who asked Connie out.”

Jean let out a snort. *“That’s because Connie’s as dense as a rock. We’d all be ghosts if she’d waited on him to figure it out. Besides, those two are weird, you can’t use them as an example for anything.”*

“If you say so,” he mused, eyes wandering to a conspicuous skid mark in the middle of the ceiling from the previous residents, the origins of which were an utter mystery. He really needed to float up there one day and try to clean it off.

“Anyway, what’d you tell her? That you were already dating a total hunk?”

Marco snorted, gaze floating back over to the screen where Jean was showing off his best profile. Truly his modesty knew no bounds.

“I told her I was taken.”

Jean side-eyed him, mildly disappointed, before turning back to face the screen. *“Close enough.”*

“So...”

The door decided to open in that instant, bringing Marco’s train of thought to a screeching halt. Armin, back earlier than usual from his library run, entered the room in reverse, using his back to push the door open while his arms were currently preoccupied.

“The printer’s broken again so I hope you don’t need-“ he began, until he turned around fully and observed Marco’s surroundings, particularly the face staring out from his laptop screen. “Am I interrupting something?”

“Not really,” he said, leaning back in the chair to address his roommate. “Just talking to Jean.”

Curiosity piqued, he ventured a few steps closer for a quick gander at he who occupied so many of his roommate’s long distance interactions, having only seen him in pictures prior.

“So we finally meet face-to-face. Sort of,” Jean announced once Armin had come into frame, giving him a sweeping wave that Armin returned with a nod, hands still full. *“Ignore the bruise... that’s not usually there...”*

“Good to know?” he said slowly, giving Jean an odd look as he went to deposit the papers and books cradled in his arms on the desk.

Marco merely shook his head and mouthed ‘He’s kind of an idiot’ to Armin. The younger blond gave him his condolences as he set down his load.

“By the way, what were you about to say earlier? You got cut off.”

Marco turned back to him, blinking a few times behind those frames. What *had* he been about to say? Armin’s sudden reappearance had done an excellent job at distracting him; that mental train did not want to pull back into the station to refuel. Probably something about what was happening at home.

“Ah... You know what, completely slipped my mind. I’ll tell you next time if I remember.”

Jean gave him a doubtful look, shrugging it off. *“Suit yourself. It’s probably for the best anyway, I need to start heading out soon. Krista might sick the she-demon on me if she thinks I’m slacking off again.”*

“Well we wouldn’t want that, now would we?” he mumbled, knowing full well that Krista would never do that. Ymir probably wouldn’t be opposed, though. The two rarely got along.

“No kidding,” Jean replied, not quite catching the cynicism in his tone. “I like my face to be unmaimed, thank you very much. Or, not any more than it already is... oh never mind, you get my point. Text ya later?”

“Of course. Tell everyone ‘hi’ for me.”

“Pretty sure they just assume it at this point, but fine,” he added swiftly before Marco could give him a look or voice his protest. “Bye and... Iloveyou.”

The last part was said quickly and quietly after a glance around Marco’s head at the back of Armin’s. He still got flustered over outward displays of affection in the presence of anyone outside of their usual social circle, even if it was being done across a computer screen. Some nonsense about clashing with whatever image he’d built up for himself that Marco didn’t believe for a second, but the real reasoning probably clashed with that image just as much.

It was a rare day when Jean was more self-conscious over something than Marco.

“I love you, too,” Marco replied unabashedly, a tender smile reserved specially for Jean on his face. His boyfriend went a little pink in the face as they concluded their farewells and finally ended the call.

Quitting out of Skype for the day, Marco shut his laptop and stretched his stiff back out from sitting still so long. That chair was not the most comfortable thing in the world. In fact, the ones in the lecture halls were probably more pleasant.

“Are you sure I wasn’t interrupting?” Armin asked suddenly, breaking Marco out of his mental comparison of campus seating.

He leaned back enough to look over at his roommate, who was directly behind him, but not enough to send himself toppling to the floor. “Nah, I was distracting him from something he needed to be doing anyway. I think he likes to use me as an excuse to procrastinate.”

“I think you do too,” Armin quipped, nodding toward an open notebook that was hanging half off the desk after being shoved aside to make room for the laptop.

“I was getting around to it...” he murmured, rescuing his notes from their inevitable fall to the ground to set them down before him. “He’s more interesting than reading up on outdated social systems.”

He glanced over at the loud chime of a Facebook notification on his phone, which was, of course, from Jean. He made a mental note to check that later as he turned the volume down, smiling to himself at the contact name.

Armin let out a chuckle, lazy smirk that went unnoticed by Marco on his face. “You two are really sweet with each other,” he remarked, returning to organizing the cluttered stack of papers on his own desk space.

The brunet hummed thoughtfully, grabbing his notebook off the desk so he could at least commit himself to his studies in a more comfortable position. The top bunk was a suitable

enough locale as he tossed the book up there, unconcerned over losing his placing. He would have to start over anyway.

It wasn't until he hauled himself up the ladder and settled into position that he even realized the notebook he'd grabbed wasn't even for the class he'd planned to study for that night. That one was still sitting contently on the desk.

It was times like these that he wished he'd been gifted with the telekinetic powers of a poltergeist instead of his wind element. Air manipulation, aside from being draining, was not the best mode of transport for small objects. He knew from personal experience during a momentary lull in judgment.

He never realized until that moment how many loose leafs of papers he had in his bedroom.

Groaning, Marco flopped backwards into his pillows, pulling the notes over his face to muffle his sounds of frustration.

"You okay up there?" Armin asked, looking up briefly. Marco's arm appeared from over the edge of the bed frame, giving him a quick thumbs up.

He removed the notebook from his face, fixing his askew glasses as he stared at the words written on its pages.

Economics. *Of course* it was economics.

Setting it down to the side, Marco brought his hands to rest on his stomach with a deep exhale. Maybe he would just procrastinate for a little while longer.

Late. He was actually running late.

Maybe he shouldn't have put off his studying after all. Granted, he didn't think he'd stayed up particularly late, it was fairly tame compared to most of his nights in Trost.

Yet he was still rushing to class that morning, minutes ticking ever closer to him being officially tardy.

He took the time to pull out his phone to check the clock, scrolling past a winking smiley face from Jean that was probably in response to his earlier comment of 'Delete those pictures' (He'd finally looked into that Facebook notification late last night). Provided it was accurate to the clock in the classroom, he had about three minutes to slide into class before the lecture actually started.

Sensing something just out of his current field of vision, Marco jerked his head up and dodged out of the way before he went barreling into another body. The person in question adopted a very startled expression as he was narrowly evaded, clutching a messenger bag close to his chest.

Marco waited a few seconds for his heart rate to return to normal before he trusted himself to speak.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry! Are you alright?” Marco asked, finding himself having to look upwards to make eye contact. He was used to those that were taller than him only exceeding by a very small margin; he barely came up to this guy’s nose!

“I-I’m fine,” he stuttered, nervously brushing at his dark bangs while he hugged his bag closer. “Sorry, but I need to get going.”

He left as abruptly as he had appeared, offering only a curt nod, and Marco watched him for a brief moment. He seemed harmless enough, though perhaps in a bit of a rush, but Marco couldn’t help the weird vibe he got off him.

Of course, then he remembered his own rush as decided he could mull over recent events once he was seated in the lecture hall.

It was a good thing this college didn’t stress punctuality as heavily as high school did, because he was most assuredly going to be tardy.

Chapter End Notes

I would like to take the time to acknowledge noodlethoughts over on tumblr for drawing [fanart](#) of halfa!Marco.

Not Alone

Chapter Notes

Just in time for Marco's birthday (aka: I've been sitting on this chapter for months, everything but the very end written and finally forced myself to finish it due to the occasion). SO sorry for the delay, in my down time I actually picked up a part-time job and was having difficulties balancing hobbies and work for a while. Writer's block doesn't help either.

Alright, enough with the excuses, on to a very long overdue chapter!

A loud yawn cut through the silence of the night, or about as silent as a college campus could get right after midterms when everyone was out rejoicing. Marco probably should've been down there with them, reveling in the completion of the first trial of freshman year and pretending he had a social life outside of Armin and the classmates and neighbors he casually spoke with. Instead he was seated a short drop above one of central academic buildings, legs crossed beneath him as he did what he could best describe as 'supervising'.

What he was supposedly supervising was another matter entirely. Midterm exams had ended about halfway through October, which, incidentally, was around the same time that Rose started to show its true colors- spiritual colors to be exact.

He supposed he should be grateful it at least didn't happen during the examination period.

It began with colored wisps floating in and out of his line of site as they flitted between the known planes of existence, his peers blissfully unaware of any change. Harmless, but a clear sign of the thinning boundary that allowed ghosts to become more present this time of the year.

As the days approached the final week of the month, it advanced to more complex encounters. A few full manifestations much like the two children (who had been present on one of his revisits, but had wanted nothing more than to play hide-and-seek with him before returning to the ether) that roamed the campus at random intervals and sparsely interacted with the students. Marco tended to leave them to their own devices, as the only concerns their presence had brought up so far were perhaps the more inopportune locales they often turned up in. A memorable incident involved a rather depraved ghost that'd chosen the showers as prime haunting grounds and he'd had little qualms chasing that one off.

He was under the impression the other students were vaguely aware of their presence, often suddenly turning in their direction or reacting to sudden chills, but only he seemed to be able to maintain any sort of visual on them, even if he was mostly just seeing the signature.

One of his continued encounters was with an odd ghost of indeterminate... anything really that aimlessly roamed the premises, but had yet to attempt any interactions with the living. They were sentient enough to have assumedly once been human, even if appearances suggested otherwise; wide-eyed and willowy with a mellow blue aura that almost suggested some sort of water spirit despite the lack of lakes or rivers in the vicinity. They never spoke, content to watch Marco every time their paths crossed in an odd, somewhat eerie, manner.

Acqua, as he had nicknamed the odd specter since they could not offer any sort of moniker (He'd thought it clever and the ghost didn't seem to mind), was lurking nearby, just out of eyesight as Marco had deemed them unimportant to his current task. His focuses were instead on a little silver orb-like specter, very reminiscent of the classic sheet ghost or a villain of Pacman fame, which was rather intently tailing one of the students. A burly blond in a muscle shirt that probably wasn't suitable for the October chill, though he didn't appear too bothered.

He walked below Marco's current position, seemingly unaware of his invisible admirer as it bobbed to and fro, drawing ever closer with each dip in the air. The halfa slid down from his vantage point, slipping out of sight as he floated down to ground level. He wasn't sure of the ghost's intentions, but he wasn't going to take any chances either.

Moving closer, the silvery spirit had already begun to slow, picking up on Marco's presence. It lagged behind, torn between continuing its pursuit and investigating this sudden ectoplasmic energy source and Marco took this stall to his advantage. While maintaining his invisibility, he brought his hands close and conjured up a spherical shield of energy, encasing the ghost within a small force field. It screeched in protest, ramming at the walls of its cage.

"Shh, I won't hurt you," he whispered, bringing the bubble close to his body. He could feel it wriggling within the confines of the shield and looked up to make sure the student had gotten far enough away before attempting to deal with his momentary prisoner.

He nearly froze in his tracks.

The blond had stopped, staring backwards in Marco's general direction. Had he not been presently invisible, he would swear the other student was looking directly *at* him. Had he heard the noise? Or felt the fluctuation in temperature ghosts were infamous for causing?

But then he turned and continued about his business as though the previous event had not occurred, humming an unrecognized tune as he did. Marco let out a deep breath he'd subconsciously begun to hold and hopped back up to his rooftop where he could attend to the small spirit in his clutches.

Dropping the invisibility, he observed the other ghost, which had stopped squirming in favor of glaring at Marco with its beady little eyes- like a tiny puffball bird with its feathers ruffled in all the wrong directions.

Marco chuckled, shifting the orb in his hands. "Calm down little fella, I'm just making sure you don't cause any trouble. Now..." he craned his neck to make sure the student from before had wandered out of view, "how long have you be following that guy around and why?"

A hollow noise whistled past his ear, light and airy as the wind. Marco started, nearly dropping the small ghost as he realized the proximity between he and Acqua had drastically decreased, the cerulean entity hovering just behind him. He pulled back a short distance, eyeing the wispy specter while he used his hands to dispel the energy bubble and release the captor. The orb rumbled moodily, yet contented to remain hovering just above the halfa's palms. Beady eyes darted between the two larger spectral beings.

Satisfied that it was unlikely to move in the near future, he took his eyes off the ghost to look at Acqua. Despite their closeness, they did not have their attentions focused on Marco, but the late-night walker blissfully going about his life away from the three ghosts.

"You too?"

They turned, giving Marco one long, slow blink with their blank, expressionless eyes. Their mouth quivered up into what could almost be called a smirk and away they glided. Marco frowned, though given their typical interactions he wasn't sure why he was expecting different, watching them fade back into the night. The tiny ghost rumbled in Marco's hands, an audible mirror to his disconcert with the transaction.

"Truly an enigma, that one." He raised his hands in such a manner that placed him eye-level with the lingering ghost. It made its reverberant noise again, seemingly in agreement. Marco laughed gently. "You're harmless, aren't you? I don't know what was so interesting about that guy you were tailing, but I don't think I have to worry about you hurting anyone."

Marco pulled back his hands, lacing his fingers behind his back. The ghost looked down at the sudden addition of distance between it and a solid surface, hovering into the open space to test the waters. After a few more bobs to be absolutely sure this was not some form of halfa trickery, it looked to Marco with a slow blink then flitted off. Whether to continue its pursuit or do whatever it was that sentient balls of ectoplasm did when left to their own devices, Marco did not know, nor did he feel too hard-pressed to seek the answer.

The teen let himself fall back to face the sky, hands on the back of his neck. A thick cloud cover had rolled in earlier that evening and seemed content to hang around, blocking any view of the night sky. He felt the gloom creeping into him as he stared up into the grey, releasing it as a heavy yawn that seemed to encompass his entire being for its duration. If being found napping atop of the academics building- which was two stories high and offered no form of access to the roof- wasn't an open invitation to an uncomfortable series of questions, he might just entertain the idea. Alas, life was cruel in that manner.

He surrendered to the need for appropriate sleeping accommodations and not arising suspicions, slipping off to return to his dorm under the mask of invisibility. Blurs of students and the occasional spirit raced past down below as he made his final once over, one party blissfully unaware of the other. Hopefully it would remain as such for the coming days.

Swiftly arriving at the dorm, Marco swooped down through the roof, scouting out his floor's bathroom to make sure it was unoccupied. Finding it thankfully was, he dropped his ghostly form with a bright flash of light and leaned against the sink with a tired sigh. Patrol was far less tedious when he had three other people working alongside him keeping the task

lighthearted with amiable chatter, regardless of the greatly shrunken radius of surveillance he'd charged himself with.

A brief moment was taken to examine his reflection in the mirror, rubbing at slight bags beginning to form behind his glasses, before walking out the door. On the way out, he managed to startle one of his dormmates, who looked legitimately alarmed that someone had chosen to exit the bathroom at that exact moment. Marco slunk past with an apologetic grin to the fellow student.

Armin was stretched out on the floor when he came back to the room, three books and his laptop open before him. He peeked up over the top of the screen, alerted by the sound of the door closing as Marco pushed it shut with his foot.

"You're back late again," he remarked, removing a green highlighter from between his teeth, its cap littered with delicate tooth mark indentations.

"Yeah, I... bumped into someone..." came the response, eyes scanning the intricate setup while he rid himself of his shoes and carefully stepped around the tomes.

"Oh." Armin brandished his highlighter, selecting another series of words in the leftmost book. "Classmate, I presume."

Marco hummed a vague response, tossing his unused keys and ID towards the desk where they clattered noisily on the tabletop. Acqua *had* snuck into one of his classes just yesterday, only to awkwardly linger a few seats away from the halfa for the duration, so he supposed it wasn't a total lie taking technicalities into account.

He hauled himself up the ladder to the top bunk, collapsing into his mattress while the bed creaked in moody retaliation. He rolled over onto his back and pulled his phone out of his pocket to check in on whatever messages or updates he may have missed while on patrol.

"So," he heard Armin say from ground level, "I was speaking to Eren and Mikasa while you were out and they both want to visit this Sunday. That's not an issue for you, is it?"

Sunday... Sunday... That was the thirty-first, wasn't it? Marco propped himself up on one arm so as to obtain a visual on the blond, who was looking up hopefully in his direction.

"Visiting for the holiday, huh?" He rolled back over, scrolling through his phone once more. "Nah, go for it. I'm kind of curious to meet them, actually."

There was a light cheer on Armin's end, followed shortly by his expression of gratitude. "Yes! Thank you, Marco! I'll let them know right away." He could already hear rapid tapping away at a keyboard- perhaps Armin wasn't being quite as studious as previously assumed. "They are a bit odd, I have to admit. Eren can be rather intense at times and Mikasa's kind of serious, but I'm sure you'll get along with them just fine," he rambled as he typed.

"Can't be any weirder than my friend group," Marco mused as he read through a series of snapchats from Sasha that seemed to be an update on discoveries made while running their own patrols in Trost. It was difficult to discern when most of them were ridiculous selfies

featuring either an equally ridiculous Connie or irate Jean trying to escape their grasp, vague shimmers in the background that were probably supposed to be the ghosts and captions consisting of terrible puns.

Armin was humming gleefully to himself, done with whatever correspondence that had occurred. Marco smiled slightly. Armin always spoke so fondly of the two whenever they were brought up in conversation, he was interested to witness how his roommate would act with them present.

Still, there were certainly better days to choose than *that* one given his own situation. He only hoped his personal duties as a halfa would not cause conflict.

A particularly rude awakening from the pounding of rain against their window was the first sign that Sunday would prove to be a gloomy event. The persisting cloud cover from early on in the week had finally perpetuated itself as the heavy precipitation the weather reports had been threatening. Marco groaned, making a few attempts to burrow deeper into his cocoon of blankets before accepting that his body had already betrayed him and surrendered itself to the waking world. Groggily he sat up, blankets still draped around his shoulders in one final act of rebellion and looked around with bleary, half-open eyes.

Armin was, of course, already up and ready for the day- Marco fancied himself an early riser, more by habit than choice, but he had not *once* awoken before his roommate. Unaware of the stir on the top bunk, he sat at his desk engrossed by something displayed on his computer screen, it's dim glow the only source of light the room currently held. The occasional pulse of the light indicated he was likely watching a video of some sort, though Marco was not at the right angle or state of consciousness to determine what.

He yawned and reluctantly drew away from the warm embrace of his comforter to haul his sleep heavy form down the ladder. His foot missed the bottom rung and a tight grip was the only thing that saved him from a nasty tumble.

Marco let out a deep breath and turned to glare at his foot as it regained its opacity.

"I see you're awake." Marco's *graceful* descent down the ladder had been enough to garner the blond's attention, earbuds off and video presumably paused while he looked on in mild bemusement.

Marco let out an awkward chuckle and scratched at the tip of his nose. "Somewhat," he responded, shuffling over to the desk to retrieve his glasses and phone. He adjusted the positioning of the frames on his face while he scrolled through the device. A few spam emails, updates on upcoming campus events, but nothing requiring his immediate attention. He returned to the home screen, frowning slightly at the cheery little pumpkin icon sitting at the top before glancing over to Armin. "Oh, your friends are coming in today, aren't they?"

Armin nearly swiveled around in his seat, and probably would have were it not for the fact that wooden chairs did not function in that manner. “I’m so excited! It feels like *forever* since I last got to see them.” He grinned brightly, the anticipation rolling off of him near palpable. “I just hope it doesn’t rain the whole time they’re here.”

Marco brushed it off with a casual wave of his hand, holding back another yawn. “It’s still early, I’m sure it’ll clear up before they get here.”

It, in fact, did not clear up. If anything the weather had gotten worse as morning crept into afternoon. The rain’s assault on their building gained in intensity and thunderstorms were guaranteed for the evening if the reports were to be believed. Armin’s friends were expected in around mid noon and the blond spent the time worrying over driving conditions and unsuccessfully distracting himself from said worrying via textbooks.

Marco’s attempts at studiousness were met with a similar failure, though not due to the stress of anticipated company. His unease was the reward of being what he was on that particular day. It may not have been anywhere near Trost levels, but it was still Halloween and Marco could feel the disturbance in the air from the blending of two very different worlds. The rain didn’t aid in the matter, making it difficult to discern if the bright colors that occasionally skirted along below through the open blinds were ectosignatures or passing students sporting vibrant rain gear.

He postponed his fruitless watch to the evening, when ghosts would be a more prominent issue, and assignments to a time yet to be determined in favor of the internet and half listening to Armin fret over whatever texts he’d been receiving over the course of his friends’ travels. Judging from his reactions, they weren’t far off.

Sunday was an odd day to be expecting visitors from out of town, but since Shinganshina was less than an hour’s drive it wasn’t too much of a hassle for them to drop by for a day and return home before the clock turned over to the first hours of November. Everyone involved was still expected to be up the next day for classes of some form after all, though Marco had little faith that much sleep was going to be obtained by anyone who lived on campus. College law denoted that holidays required some form of party to be carried out, day of the week and weather be damned.

The sudden chime of a text notification and Armin’s wordless vocalization of excitement (Squeak? Did that even qualify as a squeak? For lack of a better term it would) were all Marco needed for confirmation of their arrival, though his roommate’s word vomit as he excused himself to go retrieve them was a nice touch. He chuckled, leaning back in the desk chair as he listened to the echo of footsteps quickly disappearing down the hallway.

His moment of solitude was a brief one, lasting only a few minutes before the cracked door opened the rest of the way to reveal Armin flanked by two people his age, all slightly damp from the downpour despite the umbrella that Armin was currently relieving from the grasp of a black haired girl to set against the doorframe. Their other guest, a boy with a messy mop of brown hair partially plastered to his forehead, stood to her side, his bright hazel-grey eyes darting about to take in all their was to see in the small dorm room.

Marco easily recognized them both from the photos that decorated Armin's half of the room, but he still stepped forth to give a proper introduction. "These are my childhood friends, Eren and Mikasa. Guys, this is Marco." He gestured to the two parties in turn, smiling expectantly.

Marco rocked the chair back onto all four legs, moving his hands to rest in his lap as he politely addressed them. "Nice to finally meet you two. Armin talks about you a lot." They both turned to him briefly with knowing smirks, at least he assumed that slight upturn on Mikasa's lips was a smirk, and the blond went a little pink under the scrutiny.

"Pleasure," Mikasa said, inclining her head in a polite nod. Eren instead did a mock salute, taking two fingers to his temple while he grinned at the other.

"Sup."

While his first impressions were good ones, there was something else Marco had noticed off the bat. Something that should have occurred to him, but had been overlooked in favor of other, more pressing, concerns of a similar nature.

It seemed Armin had not been alone in exposure to whatever supernatural being dwelled in their hometown. As soon as they'd come through the door, he'd caught the bright glow of that green ectosignature that'd been steadily fading from Armin's person, just as strong as it'd been on day one, but closer inspection, namely the three of them coming fully into the room and putting some space between one another revealed something he'd not been expecting. The aura was only on two of the three; Eren did not show any signs at all of spiritual contact.

But, they were usually together, correct? That's what he'd gathered from Armin's occasional anecdotes. How could he display no traces if his two best friends did, especially when one of them hadn't even been around for nearly two months and *especially* when he *lived* with the other party involved? Marco did recall Armin mentioning that, due to circumstances that he didn't feel was his place to tell (and Marco would've felt bad prying into the personal business of two people he'd never met anyway), Mikasa was Eren's foster sister of sorts. It only added further puzzlement to the state of the situation.

He scrunched his nose, grasping at straws for a potential solution. *One* came to mind immediately, but anything related to that topic was the very definition of grasping at straws so he pushed it aside. They may both have friends who showed supernatural exposure, but between that and surely some typical domestic matters that would likely go undiscussed, the similarities between himself and Eren probably ended there. Still Marco held on to the theory, keeping it tucked away in some corner of his mind. Never hurts to be hopeful.

Armin cleared his throat sharply and Marco snapped back to attention, focusing in on the blond. His brief retreat into his thoughts had been long enough to allow him to miss whatever exchange had just occurred.

"I'm sorry, I... remembered something... last minute... what did you say again?"

"I asked if you wanted to join us," Armin repeated as he held up a deck of cards procured from who knows where, giving him roommate a look of concern. Or maybe it was suspicion;

the line was too fine to differentiate. "I wanted to show them around campus, but the weather had other ideas so this is Plan B."

Marco's eyes drifted briefly to the window and the persisting curtain of rain before falling back to his roommate. He smiled at the younger. "Sure. Why not?"

He learned three key things that afternoon; Armin treated everything like a game of chess, Mikasa had the world's greatest pokerface (though poker was not amongst the roster of games played), and Eren's competitive side was truly a dangerous sight. The intensity with which he stared down those cards brought out the flecks of green in his eyes so much that Marco swore they would've glowed had the lights been out.

A break was taken for food as well as Eren's sanity after his latest crushing loss at Go Fish, somehow managing a net total of zero matches while Armin sat comfortably upon seven full sets. He offered a humble explanation of having a good memory for details then quickly shifted the topic over to dinner. They decided the easiest option was to order something in and they pooled their funds together to pay for a large pizza and extra tip for the poor delivery boy who was forced to brave the tempest on their behalf. He sourly took the monetary apology upon arrival and bid them a curt farewell, puddles of water trailing behind.

Marco watched his retreating form for a brief, sympathetic moment, pizza in one hand as he shut the door with the other. "Maybe we should've picked it up after all," he commented, returning to the circle they'd formed on the floor and placing their dinner in the central area, previously occupied by the deck of cards.

"He'll live," Eren replied, noticeably less sympathetic (and perhaps still a tad bitter over his defeats) as he reached forward to claim the first slice for himself. He paused to take a bite, mumbling around a mouthful of melted cheese and pepperoni. "I doubt we're the only delivery he's making."

Mikasa gave him a reproachful glare for the lack of manners, brandishing a napkin as she leaned to her left to wipe away a stray tendril of cheese escaping from the corner of Eren's mouth. He squirmed away from the motherly gesture, protests of embarrassment muffled by pizza.

Marco looked over to his right just in time to catch the tail end of Armin rolling his eyes, nibbling on the end of his own slice. Feeling his roommate's gaze on him, he turned to Marco and shrugged. "She tends to fuss over us," he offered after swallowing the food in his mouth. "Mostly Eren. He needs it more."

"*Armin*," he whined at the mention of his name, finally managing to wrench himself free from the clutches of Mikasa and her napkin. He nursed his wounded pride over another slice, giving Mikasa a look that dared her to try that stunt again. She sighed, deciding instead to focus on her own pizza.

"See?" Armin reiterated and Marco tried to hold back a laugh that didn't go as unnoticed as he would've liked, Eren turning to him in mock betrayal. The elder mouthed a 'sorry' back to him.

“*Well* since we’re sharing stuff about ourselves now, Marco should to,” Eren announced, gaze fixed forward. “Namely about why his hair is dyed like that.”

Well, it was only a matter of time before someone had to question his oddly colored hair, but the suddenness of it still managed to catch Marco off guard.

“I didn’t dye it?” he replied lamely, the response coming out more as an inquiry. A few strands of his spectrally bleached bangs found their way between a forefinger and a thumb, twirling as though he could rub the pallor out. “It started going grey about a year ago.”

“What?” Though only Eren had voiced his alarm, both he and Mikasa took to looking at Marco in disbelief. Armin didn’t seem surprised- he’d probably noticed the lack of coloring hair product amongst his roommate’s belongings long ago. “You’re like our age, how can your hair already be changing?”

“I don’t know. Stress?” The shrug Marco gave after saying this was of the noncommittal sort. Even he didn’t understand why his hair insisted on displaying some form of white pigmentation whether he was ghost or human.

Already Eren was moving to further comment, but Mikasa gave him a subtle jab to ribs to silence him and Marco mentally thanked the Asian girl. The younger boy glared over to his adoptive sister, rubbing at the offended spot. She offered no apologies, instead choosing to address Marco. “It looks good on you.”

“I never said it looked bad! It’s just... different,” Eren blurted defensively, arms folding across his chest. “Cool, but different. It seriously does that naturally?” By now he was leaning forward slightly into the circle, trying to look more closely.

Marco smiled as he took in the compliments, appreciative, if not somewhat embarrassed by the attention. An airy chuckle masked his awkwardness under the scrutiny.

“You know, one of my classmates actually brought you up in a conversation a few days ago. Complimented your style.”

Marco looked over to Armin when he interjected, the blond’s gaze focused elsewhere as he blindly scanned his mind for any traces of the memory. “...really?” It was the first he’d heard of it, but why had he waited until now to mention the exchange?

He hummed his affirmation. “Only briefly, though. We went on to complain about back-to-back courses set on opposite sides of campus. They really don’t give us enough time to reasonably get to them.”

“Oh come on, this campus can’t be *that* big- Ow!” That had been Eren, rolling his eyes in a dramatic fashion as he expressed his opinion and Mikasa quietly reprimanding him with another blow to the side. “Stop!”

Armin took the moment to steal a glance over to his roommate, winking as he did so. Realization dawned that there was no classmate, only Armin’s ploy to hijack a conversation

that was heading in a direction that Marco had wanted to steer away from. He silently thanked his roommate and his expert ability to read a situation.

“It’s bigger than you’d think...” he went on to say, only to be replied with the skeptic quirking of Eren’s lips. “I’ll show you around eventually, if this rain ever clears up.”

“Good, I’ll hold you to it,” Eren stated, skeptic expression replaced by a more satisfied one. Mikasa merely looked between the boys and kept her opinions on the exchange to herself, though her slight exhale of exasperation was not missed by Marco.

The pizza was but a lingering memory and cards replaced by Netflix when the weather finally changed. It was already well into the evening, though with the heavy cloud cover that had defined the day, one could hardly notice much difference. True to his word, Armin announced an excursion out into the night to revel in all that was Rose Academy, or as much of it as they could make out in the darkness. An invitation was extended to Marco that he graciously declined, explaining how he may adventure out on his own later to sample the ‘nightlife’. He made true on the statement once a reasonable amount of time had passed since their departure, lest they wander back and suddenly find him mysteriously absent.

He glanced about the now empty room, tensing slightly as he triggered his transformation. The waves of energy pooled from his center, cascading outward and immersing him in their waters. He embraced it, feeling the chill seep into his extremities as his ghostly self took hold.

Marco took a slow step towards the wall, then another, then a final one *through* it, turning off his visibility as he did. Despite how sparsely populated the outdoors were at the present moment, a glowing figure standing two stories up in mid air would not go unnoticed for long. He quickly left the premises, flying high to do an aerial scan of the campus.

While nowhere near the levels he faced back at home, Stohess certainly seemed far more haunted than previously assumed as the halfa found himself overlooking a scattered frenzy of spectral beings flitting about the school grounds in every which-way. The ghosts were all on the lower range; wisps, manifests, the sort of thing they used to track whispers of when his parents’ investigations still toured the country. Still, save for there being seemingly more ghosts about and in a more agitated state as their days on the physical plane drew to an end, tonight’s paranormal happenings were not all too different to those of the previous days.

Marco navigated the campus under his cloak of invisibility, watching the slow spill of students out of the safety of the dorms to initiate whatever social events had been planned now that the rain cleared. The ghosts lingered near them, drawn by the energy, though seemed no more interested in the living as they were aware of their presence. A few turned heads in confusion, maybe a shiver as ghost and human briefly occupied the same space, but nothing Marco felt the need to intervene in- a far cry from how events were likely shaping out back home. He was sure Trost was keeping his friends quite preoccupied in the present moment.

He moved on, shooing away a handful of curious specters from the larger crowds for precaution’s sake as he passed by. In his rounds he managed to locate a few spirits of the deceased he’d encountered in the days prior, still lingering in the stations they’d assigned

themselves to with no intentions of leaving until they were forced back to the other side. Marco had no real need to attempt a relocation- they were, thankfully, not of the aggressive sort, though the thin boundary had made a few of them strong enough to manifest a full physical form. A few unfortunate souls would likely receive a fright this evening, provided they were sober enough not to misinterpret the ghostly attributes (Marco would never forget his accidental encounter a year back with a heavily inebriated individual who'd demanded to be taught how to make walls 'pass-throughable').

After a brief chat with one ghost whose goals for the duration of their time on Earth involved finding anything of interest in the library, Marco took a detour to the field off campus that hosted his first supernatural encounter of Stohess. The culprits of said encounter were of course nowhere in sight, replaced instead by a few roaming wisps of arguable sentience, further debunking any of Marco's predictions on the night's proceedings.

Marco landed, reclaiming his visibility once both feet hit the grass and surveyed his surroundings. They usually made their presence known immediately, so it was safe to assume they would not be making an appearance in the living world today, which he eventually deemed for the best. Spirits who lingered year-round became unpredictable when exposed to the environmental shift Halloween brought and he was probably not mentally prepared to tackle that if two rambunctious children were involved.

He hummed to himself, taking a brief respite in the relative peace of being surrounded by generally harmless ghosts while he thought on his next course of action. A pink tendril took to circling the stationary halfa's head like a halo, which he ignored in favor of his thoughts of whether or not to continue his patrolling when there appeared to be nothing to patrol for. His brain was having a hard time accepting the concept of docile spirits on Halloween.

The weather made the decision for him, the first droplet of rain alighting on his nose from the still lingering clouds before a few more pattered around him. His eyes were immediately trained to the skies, slight frown tugging at his lips while he scanned the horizon. The rain itself wasn't an issue- he could easily turn intangible and avoid getting wet altogether. It was the distant flashing of bright heavenly lights that accompanied it that bothered him. Lightning storms were bad enough on their own, but combine that with a halfa whose cause of half-death was electrocution and it was easy to understand Marco's aversion to the weather phenomenon.

When the thunder finally hit, rolling in a lot sooner than he would have predicted given the apparent distance of the lightning, Marco knew it was time to call it a night on reconnaissance. Rose could certainly handle the rest of the night without any more halfa intervention.

He was kicking off the slowly dampening grass, completely intent on returning to his room, when something caught his attention. A shout in the night, too distant to make out what had been said, echoed through the air like the rumbling thunder. Marco's ascent was halted and he dropped into a hover as he scanned the visible horizon.

Another shout, closer this round, caught his attention and when he turned his head, Marco realized that something was coming at him. Something large and fast and suddenly he was staring straight into a pair of bright red eyes, concern and alarm flashing across them in the

seconds before they darted out of the way and vanished. After taking a second to remember how to breathe, Marco spun around, flecks of water splaying from his wet bangs as he frantically searched for traces of the red-eyed apparition.

“So you got reinforcements I see!”

He found something else instead.

In his brief moment of panic, Marco had failed to notice the thing that had charged him had not been alone. When he twisted back around, a figure floated a distance from him in the air, clothed by a long black coat that billowed in the winds of the incoming storm. He had pale hair like Marco’s currently, but of a more silvery-blue sheen and reaching just above his shoulders. His ears tapered up to an elf-like point and his eyes blazed a vivid green.

His own purple eyes widened in surprise. He *knew* that aura. How could he not when he saw it, in a weakened form, every time he took a close look at his roommate? This was the ghost that Armin and Mikasa had been exposed to.

No, he corrected himself. This wasn’t just a ghost. More accurately, this was the reason only two of the trio showed signs of spiritual contact- just as ghosts had difficulty discerning Marco’s own duality while in human form. Floating before him, practically seething with spectral energy, was the culmination of all his wildest, far-fetched hopes that he was not the only half ghost in the world.

And his name was Eren.

Marco gaped, a swelling mix of confusion and astonishment bottling itself up at the base of his throat, making speech temporarily impossible. Eren, however, was more than willing to continue his tirade despite the lack of response.

He cracked his knuckles and held up his fists in a fighting stance. “I don’t know what you ghosts are up to here, but I’m stopping it!”

Marco found his voice long enough to yelp out a cry of protest while dodging out of the path of Eren’s charging fist, looping back around behind his aggressor. “Wait! I’m-“

Eren did not wait for him to finish his sentence, pulling back for another attack that Marco only had a brief second to react to. He braced himself against the air and lined up their fists, catching Eren’s punch in the palm of his hand.

“Would you just listen for a second?!” he yelled, free hand flying up to counter the second fist, which had been aimed for his side. Eren was strong, almost ridiculously so, and Marco’s advantage over him in the height and weight department was just enough to keep them locked in a stationary hover. He didn’t want to think about how badly any of those blows would have stung had they actually made contact.

“Why? So you can distract me long enough for your friend to come help?” Eren challenged, trying to break free. When Marco’s grip held true, his eyes narrowed, swallowed up in their green glow.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!” Marco snapped, about to explain when he found himself silenced as that green began to change, melting into a vivid golden orange. The shock alone would have been enough to make him lose his grip on Eren’s fists, but he held true until flames of the same color leapt from his hands, using Eren’s forward thrust to force him away with a wince of pain.

The downpour soothed his singed hands as Marco, with heavy breaths, watched Eren draw himself to a halt and slowly turn around. He clenched his fingers tight, spectral flames trailing up to his elbow and dancing upon his skin and clothing without affect to either, despite the steady flow of rain. If Marco himself weren’t so flammable, he’d probably draw more fascination out of the display. For now it was a cause of distress.

Uttering the roar of battle, Eren burst forth, leading with his inferno. Marco brought his arms up, a disc-like shield affixing itself to his forearms to absorb the blow. Lightning flashed at the moment of impact, but Marco could not afford the chance to react to anything other than Eren. His shield had cracked from the sheer force of the blow, flames rolling off the sides and licking around the edges. Small bursts of heat teased at the sides of his arms and he gritted his teeth hard in concentration to keep that shield together.

“No more of your lies, ghost. Now where did your friend go?”

Marco groaned in frustration. “Do you see anyone else here? Whatever you were chasing flew past me before I even got a good look at it. I’m here on my own.”

Eren’s eyes narrowed in suspicion, glancing briefly to the air space behind Marco and the assumed lack of traces of the red-eyed ghost. A conflicted look fell to his face, an inner war over his next course of actions likely waging in his head.

So Marco threw him another option.

“Eren.”

The opposing halfa faltered immediately. “How did- what- who-“ His flames fizzled out from the blow to his psyche, eyes returning back to their initial green, though he did not fully relent the attack. “How do you know who I am?” he demanded, pushing harder against the shield, pushing it to its limits. A few more cracks radiated outward from the initial impact point, pronged like the lightning that still flashed along the horizon.

“Eren, it’s *me*.” With a final, exasperated push, Marco relinquished his shield, letting it shatter into shards of crystallized ectoplasm with enough exertion to force some distance between the brawlers. His breath was coming out in hard pants and he looked over with pleading eyes. “It’s Marco.”

“Marco...?” he repeated, whispering the name. He floated in a stunned silence, wheels whirring in his brain as the information processed. Confused eyes roved over the other’s form, taking in every amount of detail they could absorb. He lingered on the scar tissue and damaged eye before trailing over to the violet galaxy on the unmarred half of his face. “Holy shit, it is you!”

Marco took a deep sigh of relief as Eren's body fully relaxed, except for the stunned expression his face had frozen into. A hand raked through his drenched hair, forcing his bangs to stick up at awkward angles rather than fall back to frame his eyes.

He could hardly believe this was the same person trying to burn his face off just moments before.

"You're a halfa," Eren managed to state after a few seconds of silence, tone betraying his lingering disbelief over the whole situation.

"That's what I've been told," he remarked, rubbing at one of the soaked sleeves of his jacket as Eren continued to stare him down.

"...I need to sit."

Marco quipped a small smile a bit at the other halfa's idea of sitting down, kicking his legs out in front of him to rest his elbows on his thighs while remaining completely airborne. Hands cupped either side of his face as he massaged his temples, as though the information was too much for his brain to handle. Occasionally he'd glance over to the elder, jaw slack with words that just wouldn't form.

"Is this why your bangs are white?" was what he finally decided on. "I knew that couldn't be natural!"

Marco *definitely* couldn't believe this was the same guy who nearly burned his face off.

He laughed now that the tension had been broken, dipping down to 'sit' across from Eren. "I think we have a lot to talk about."

Eren nodded a bit and flicked his eyes downward to the ground. "We may need to do some explaining first, though," he added, head tipping towards where he'd glanced.

At ground level a dark umbrella had appeared, person beneath obscured by both distance and rain. Eren flew down to their position, Marco following in a cautious descent until he was close enough to determine that the 'person' was actually a *persons*, namely Mikasa and Armin. They watched as the two touched ground, clearly perplexed as to why their friend was currently in the middle of a thunderstorm with a strange ghost.

Marco held back, letting Eren approach first. Something about Mikasa's suspicious glare told him that was currently the best course of action.

Eren bounded over, taking a quick glance over his shoulder before he spoke to his two best friends. "Guys, you will *not* believe what--"

"Marco has ghost powers," Armin chimed in. Three pairs of eyes were on the blond in an instant.

"You knew?" Marco half whispered, finally daring to come forth now that the proverbial beans had been spilled.

“Yeah, seriously? A heads up would’ve been nice,” Eren added, folding his arms across his chest moodily.

“Well, not exactly,” Armin admitted. “But I knew something was up whenever you kept running off for various ‘errands’ late at night. Not to mention you’re from the most haunted city in the country and yet claim to know next to nothing about ghosts. You’re not the best liar in the world, Marco.”

“There are some people there who don’t...” he murmured, dejected.

“*This*, though. This was an explanation that never even occurred to me!” He looked between the two halfas, smiling faintly. “Looks like your dad’s theories were right.”

Eren made a sort of grumbling noise in the back of his throat and turned away.

“Your dad?”

“It’s a long story,” was Armin’s answer to Marco’s question.

“Which we can discuss elsewhere,” Mikasa said, intervening in the conversation for the first time. “This may be all well and good for you half ghosts, but Armin and I are going to catch cold if we stay out in this storm much longer.”

They looked up, acknowledging how they were still standing in the middle of a downpour, surrounded by thunder and lightning. Marco flinched at the flash of the latter and cast a vote in favor of Mikasa’s proposition.

They rushed back to campus before they bared witness to the full wrath of the storm and reconvened in the dorm. Marco at Eren entered via use of the wall, resuming human form once inside, while the remaining two took the more mundane route of the door, discarding their dampened jackets at the entryway. The circle was reformed, now for the purposes of spinning yarns rather than playing cards, to which Marco was encouraged to go first.

He started from the beginning, from Jinan, where they lived until he was old enough for his parents to continue their cross-country paranormal investigations, hopping from city to city for a few years before finding permanent employment and settling in Trost. He spoke of the labs in which they worked, established for the goal of understanding the city’s strange relation with the spiritual realm, and the type of work they did.

Then Marco got into what they truly wanted to hear.

The memories of that day were as scored into his mind as the scars in the flesh of his ghostly form and he recounted the events of his supernatural origins to a curious set of ears. They listened quietly, perhaps with the occasional whisper amongst themselves so as not to derail Marco’s narration.

The room lulled into a silence once Marco was done with his story and the trio took the time to let everything sink in. They glanced between each other, saving their comments for later, after their own tale had been told.

Shinganshina as it turned out, while not nearly as extreme as Trost, also had decent levels of ambient spiritual energy- enough for the occasional unexplained event or ghost sighting. They generally went unnoticed, but some people were highly attuned to the strange activity. Eren's father was one such person. The hospital he'd worked at had been a particular hub for the supernatural, understandably, and he'd been researching it long before any of the trio were even born.

"He would disappear for hours in the basement, cooped up with all his books and notes," Eren had specifically noted with a bitter tone.

None of them had put much thought into the research, disregarding it as an odd quirk of the doctor's they'd grown up alongside, and thus, acclimated to over the years. Then tragedy struck and sucked them all right into the world of the paranormal.

It had been a Halloween night, when creatures of the other realm slipped through the cracks and found themselves alongside the living. Eren's mother had attracted the attention of a rather malevolent spirit, a glorified leech that fed on the life force of its victims. They were eventually able to free her from its hold, but her body had suffered too grievously from the attack and she passed away a few weeks later.

Eren's father threw himself entirely into his research, putting Eren and Mikasa under the charge of their godfather while he worked. They went months without contact until he finally revealed himself to Eren, disheveled and manic as he brandished a syringe containing a strange liquid. He administered it to his son with instruction that it should protect him- and everyone he cared for- from falling to a fate similar to his mother's. Then he merely vanished, leaving behind nothing but questions. After that Eren's powers started cropping out over the course of a few days and they knew that serum had something to do with it.

The weight of the tale lied heavily on Marco. Eren's powers had come at such an unimaginable course of events that he could not help the "I'm so sorry," that slipped past his lips, finding no other words appropriate. No wonder they had been so insistent on visiting Armin tonight, the most haunted of eves. Had a similar event occurred in his own past, Marco knew he would've been back in Trost by yesterday to protect his loved ones.

Eren shook his head. "Not your fault. Hell, I should be apologizing to *you* for our... misunderstanding. I have some anger issues when it comes to ghosts. Especially intelligent ones."

That seemed like an understatement in Marco's opinion, but given that his rage was completely justified, he simply nodded in response.

"I'm still in awe that you have powers, Marco," Armin interjected, grabbing his attention. "When we looked through Eren's dad's belongings after he left, he did have some speculations on halfas existing somewhere in the world, which probably led him to make the serum. We just never thought we'd find anyone- all his research pointed to folklore."

"Actually, I wanted to ask you guys about that research, if you don't mind." A shake of the head gave Marco the consent to keep going. "He wasn't looking into how ghosts affect people's health, was he?"

Eren stared at him for a long moment, unblinking. “How did you know that?”

“Armin, remember when you met my dad and he mentioned going to Shinganshina for work? That was why. They were there to talk to someone who was working on the supernatural and medicine. It might’ve been him.”

“He was the only one researching ghosts,” Mikasa stated, a slight look of surprise that was mirrored by her friends reaching her face. “Grisha Jaeger. Does that sound familiar?”

Marco shook his head a bit and readjusted his glasses where they had slipped down his nose. “Sorry. This was nearly two years ago, what I’ve already mentioned is pretty much all I remember.”

An extended pause followed. “Two years? But... it’s been five years since anyone’s even *heard* from my dad. How’s this even possible?” The last sentence was mostly spoken to Mikasa and Armin and met with uncertain gestures.

Eren leaned forward abruptly, pushing himself fully into Marco’s personal bubble, much to the older halfa’s alarm. “You have to tell me where he is!”

“I don’t know! I’m sorry, but I *really* don’t have many details to give you.” Not given his own status during the time of his parents’ absence— captured and moments away from becoming the victim of a science experiment before his friends made their daring rescue. The traumatic ordeal left little room in his mind’s catalogue of events for research he was not even present in acquiring.

Eren, dissatisfied with the response, fell back in place with a despondent huff.

“Besides... I don’t think he’d still be there. If he’s been avoiding people he cares about, I really doubt he’d want anything to do the ones who planned the whole meeting.” Marco’s lips downturned to a subtle frown and he furrowed his brows in concentration. “Especially if they’d dragged him out of a three-year hiding to talk to two complete strangers.”

Eren’s gaze had fixed to a point in the floor between them, green seeping into the edges of his irises. The glow looked odd in his human form, almost like he was possessed and Marco briefly wondered if his friends thought the same of him whenever the situation arose.

“I’m just pissed that this entire time, he’s apparently been right underneath our noses! Shinganshina isn’t even that big of a town, where could he possibly be hiding that we haven’t looked?!” He punctuated the outburst by slamming a fist into the ground hard enough that their downstairs neighbors, provided they were in the room, likely heard the noise.

“We still don’t know that for sure,” Armin pointed out. “All we know is Marco’s parents *met* him in Shinganshina. Whose to say he didn’t return for that sole purpose and leave right afterward?”

When he huffed again, Mikasa put a calming hand atop Eren’s head, fruitlessly petting down a few flyaways. “It’ll be too late when we get home tonight, but we can look around tomorrow,” she assured him. He didn’t look particularly convinced, but he’d calmed enough

for the neon green to recede from his eyes and to react to the dull throb of pain resulting from punching one's fist into solid tile.

"And when I get the chance," Marco offered, "I'll ask my parents what they remember from that trip. I know they have to have something filed away in their office." He'd call now, while everyone was still in the room, but he knew they were far too preoccupied with work at the present time.

"Oh would you? I'm really curious to know if he told them anything that wasn't written down in his old lab," Armin admitted, taking his eyes off Mikasa as she was placing Eren's injured hand underneath her own to dissuade him from aggravating it any further.

"Kinda sucks you're getting wrapped up in this mess my dad left behind though," Eren had remarked after a few failed attempts to free himself of his sister's vice grip.

Marco shrugged. He'd essentially offered to have a conversation with his own parents, with whom he had a healthy relationship. It was hardly a momentous undertaking. He honestly would have done it for curiosity's sake alone.

"It's really not that big a deal. Besides..." His gaze fell to his companions in turn- to these people who, within a few hours, had upturned what he'd come to understand of his very existence.

Marco's eyes landed on Eren last and he broke out into a wide, sincere grin.

"We halfas have to stick together, right?"

Homecoming

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

November was a slow month; that awkward lull between major projects and exams which left little to accomplish academically while ghost appearances, for lack of better terminology, died back down after the sudden influx.

In other words, there wasn't much to do.

Armin spent the time being a good student and reading ahead in all his classes and personal studies. Marco wished he could've shared that level of dedication, and maybe he would have if the classes he was enrolled in pertained to his interests rather than mandatory core subjects. For the sake of maintaining manageable stress levels, the bare minimum to keep up good grades was about all he was doing school-wise.

Instead, he busied himself with his tinkering hobby; something he really hadn't a chance to exercise since coming to Stohess. He'd recently come into possession of a broken mp3 player, courtesy of their neighbor around the corner who'd accidentally dropped it over the second floor balcony. Marco, somewhat proficient in repairs (he had cobbled together a functioning ectogun out of spare parts after all), had offered to try his hand at fixing it. The request was declined, dormmate claiming that he'd wanted to upgrade to a touchscreen anyway, but said Marco could have it to fiddle around with if he so desired. Deconstructing the small device became part of the regular routine whenever Marco had nothing better to occupy his time.

The repetitive pattern of events was broken only by the long awaited arrival of Fall Break that ran during the last full week of the month. Seven blessed days (Nine counting the weekend before and ten for those who were given Friday off) free of classes where students could do as they pleased. While some chose to stay behind, whether due to travel inconveniences or issues on the home front, most would be returning to spend the time with their families.

Marco and Armin were in the latter category, and were spending their free day getting ready to leave- or at least Armin was. He'd be leaving as soon as Eren and Mikasa arrived, which wasn't planned until late afternoon as they did not share the same class-free luxury the college students did.

Marco, however, would have to wait even longer. The Bodts- workaholics to the bitter end- would not be available to pick up their son until Sunday morning, and Trost was *just* far enough away that flying didn't seem a reasonable option. He spent the time supervising Armin's prep and telling himself he could do his packing Saturday to help ward off the boredom of an empty dorm.

"Do you really need to bring every single book you own?" he asked from across the room while watching Armin perform a complex game of Tetris involving a decent sized box and a

sizeable portion of the library that usually occupied his living space. There were other things in there, a few school supplies and his textbooks, but the majority came from his personal collection.

Armin looked up long enough to catch Marco's eye, then to the few remaining books still occupying various sections of the room. "I'm leaving some of them here. Why? Was there something you wanted to borrow? I was actually planning to swap a few of these out for the ones I kept at home, so it might not make the return trip."

Marco felt his sigh melt into a light chuckle and he shook his head. "You sure you don't live in a library?"

"Hilarious," Armin retorted as he pulled about half of the box's contents out and set them to the side. "But that reminds me that I need to return some library books before I leave." He pivoted his body, eyeing a small stack resting at the corner of the table.

"You should probably get on that." Marco leaned a little further in the desk chair, letting his forearms come to rest on his thighs. "They could be here any minute."

Armin glanced at his charging phone. "I doubt it. They've still got about thirty minutes."

As though on cue, a loud knock rapped against the door in a notable rhythm.

Eren, most likely, Marco decided. Mikasa didn't seem like a 'shave-and-a-haircut' type of person.

"I'll get it," Marco offered after taking one look at the small barricade Armin had created for himself trying to reorganize his belongings. He strode across the room, hopping (floating, really), over one of Armin's bags that lay slightly in his path. He'd gotten a tad liberal with his powers in the room ever since Armin learned of them- much to the blond's initial surprise. Eren, as it were, was not overly fond of his halfa state of being and rarely let the ghost side intermingle with the human, so it'd been odd at first to enter the room to occasionally find Marco hovering just off the ground. Now he barely batted an eye at it.

Marco pulled open the door, speaking before he could even see the person standing on the other side, "Hey guys, how... how..." He faltered, brain grinding to a halt. The figure currently leaning against the doorframe, with their ashen blond hair shaved to the scalp in the back, certainly didn't look like Eren *or* Mikasa. In fact, they looked an awful lot like...

"Jean?!"

He grinned. "Hey there, good looking."

Normally the comment would've gotten a scoff out of Marco, maybe a playful punch to the shoulder depending on the older boy's mood, but at the present he could do little more than stare, mouth agape with unvoiced questions.

"Sooo... you gonna invite me in, or what?"

Instead of answering, Marco enveloped him in a huge hug, simultaneously drawing him out of the hallway and into their room. He pressed his face into the softer hairs on the top of Jean's head, breathing in his familiar scent. "Oh my god, I can't believe you're here," he sighed into his hair, feeling Jean's arms slowly come around to rest at his hips.

They stayed like that for a moment, until Jean made a few nudges at his side. "Uh... Marco?" He pulled back and followed his boyfriend's pointing finger to spy Armin smiling fondly at the two of them before realizing he'd been caught and quickly averting his attention elsewhere.

"Oh, Armin! I'm so sorry!" he apologized, releasing Jean. "This is Jean- well, you've sorta met already, but he's here!" he gestured dramatically to the somewhat flustered boy at his side.

Armin laughed and shared a handshake with Jean for their first, in-person meeting.

"Now that I think about it, why *are* you here right now?" Marco asked once pleasantries had been exchanged. "You didn't skip school just to come see me, did you?"

"Hey, I told you I'd be better about that, didn't I? You care more than the teachers do anyway..." he added under his breath.

"Jean."

"Relax. We got out early today. A-" Jean paused with a glance over to Armin, who'd returned to fussing over his library returns and was paying the couple no mind. He leaned closer to Marco anyway, lowering his voice. "A ghost attacked- a minor one, not a huge deal- but they still closed the area so Sina folks could deal with it. So I decided, what the hell, I've got nothing to do, and came to get you so you wouldn't have to wait on your parents. Sasha even lent me the van."

"Now, see, you had me up until that last part," Marco mused, using their close proximity to claim Jean's hands in his own.

"I have to buy her lunch tomorrow."

"*That* explains it." Leaning forward, Marco pressed a soft kiss directly between his eyebrows. "Well, I'm really happy you're here."

Whatever response Jean had mustered was obscured by a choking noise made in the back of his throat and he looked away to hide his swiftly reddening face. Marco laughed and released Jean from his grasps- and Armin from their PDA- to recover. He took up residence on Marco's desk, pushing his laptop safely aside.

"Well, we can leave whenever you're ready I guess," Jean said, making an amused smirk as he spied his art pieces decorating a portion of the wall behind him.

"Oh. Oh! Crap..." Marco realized, "I need to pack now."

“You should probably get on that,” Armin parroted with a playful smile and Marco stuck his tongue out for the remark.

“Take your time,” Jean added, oblivious the exchange going on between roommates as he continued to admire the room’s décor. “I need a break from that clunky old van anyway.”

It took Marco far less time to get ready than Armin had (mostly because he wasn’t trying to bring home *every single book he owned* he had reiterated), but Jean’s comment on needing a break from the open road was enough to keep him lingering in the dorm a bit longer. Plus he did want to see Eren and Mikasa again, if only briefly.

The three idled for a little while as they waited, discussing mundane topics as Armin and Jean got better acquainted.

The wait wasn’t too long of one, though they were running a bit behind schedule. Armin’s phone was buzzed with a notification from Mikasa that the two had just arrived outside his dorm and only moments later could they hear loud footsteps echoing down the hall from their ajar door (Marco, in his excitement, had neglected to close it and Armin just elected to leave it as he was expecting company anyway).

“You would not *believe* the bullshit we went through trying to get here!” Eren practically burst through the open door, followed by a far quieter Mikasa who shut it behind them.

“There was this stupid fucking ghost,” Eren continued, ignorant to his surroundings, “just hanging around the car for some reason and *someone* wouldn’t let me deal with it.”

“Eren,” Mikasa prompted, tapping his shoulder.

“I don’t care if it was a small one, you could’ve just let me handle it. Instead we had to go chase it off while...”

“Eren,” she tried again, a bit firmer.

“...still being ‘discreet’ and it took so long and-“

“*Eren.*”

“What?” He turned with an exasperated huff, giving her his full attention. Mikasa pointed across the room and he finally noticed Jean sitting on the desk by Marco. “Oh. How much of that did you hear?”

“Well considering that you were yelling, all of it,” Jean said after he was done being taken aback by the suddenness of the entire situation. He frowned deeply at Marco, in that ‘care to explain’ manner.

“He was playing a videogame,” Mikasa deadpanned, though from Jean’s expression he clearly wasn’t buying it.

“It’s alright,” Marco interjected. “This is my boyfriend, Jean. He’s in on all the ghost stuff.”

“Yeah, I am,” he said cautiously, currently exchanging heated glares of suspicion with Eren. “That doesn't explain why *they* are.”

Marco bit his lip and glanced between the other three. “Should I tell him? He’s good at keeping secrets, I would know.”

“Might as well,” Eren answered in a bitter tone, crossing his arms. “Remind me to look before I start talking next time.”

“You wouldn’t listen anyway,” Mikasa answered.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“Guys.” Jean cut them off. “Explanation.”

Marco took it upon himself to shed some light on the situation, pivoting in his chair to face Jean again and placing his hands on the other boy’s knees. “Alright, Jean. Remember way back when I told you I could see traces of a signature on Armin?”

He frowned, wracking his memory for the details. “...vaguely...”

“Well, Eren here’s the reason for that.” He gestured grandly across the room and, for a split second, the hints of hazel in Eren’s eyes seemed to gain a few shades of green. “He’s a halfa, just like me!”

Jean donned a stupefied expression, glancing between the two *halfas*, as it were. “You’re kidding.” He said this mostly to himself, as Marco would obviously not be admitting such a thing in this company were it not true. It had taken a near-death scenario to get him to open up to his ghost sympathizing parents on his new double life- Roommate of a mere few months and Co. would likely not be privy to this information under normal circumstances.

He looked at Eren a moment longer. *This* guy was a halfa? Besides the initial outburst, the boy didn’t leave much of an impression as far as Jean was concerned. If anything Mikasa (He only knew her name because Armin had spoke of her before their arrival), who retained this air of mystery as she absorbed the scene around her in quiet contemplation, seemed the more likely candidate for ghost powers.

Still, two was not a big enough sample size to be making any judgments so Jean kept his opinions to himself for once. (Especially with the way Marco was side-eying him, as though he knew that someone in the room was going to be offended if Jean voiced whatever was on his mind at that present moment).

“So... Any other halfas you wanna tell me about?”

Marco shook his head with a little smile and gave Jean’s thighs a light clap. “I’ll try to keep you in the loop next time.” He leaned around in his chair to address the rest of the room. “Everyone good?”

Eren grunted, narrowing his eyes at Jean over the top of Marco’s head (Not wanting to be undone, Jean glared right back), so Mikasa answered for him.

“We’re good.” She gave Eren a rough nudge that did not go unnoticed by anyone and he muttered his agreement.

An awkward silence fell upon the room and Marco got the distinct impression that this first introduction had not granted Jean and Eren very high opinions of the other. Jean was most likely responding to Eren’s hostility, but Marco didn’t know the other boy well enough yet to discern exactly what was triggering it. Perhaps he just wasn’t keen on a ‘stranger’ knowing his big secret, Marco couldn’t say for sure.

“Well... we should probably be heading out soon,” Armin interjected in an attempt to dilute the tension. “It’s a long drive back after all.”

“What? No it’s-“ Another jab from Mikasa had him quickly abstain from completing that thought. “Okay, okay. Damn. Where’s your stuff, Armin?”

Armin gestured to the space behind him where his belongings had been consolidated into three vessels- a box full of books, a hamper for laundry (Marco couldn’t judge, he was planning to do the exact same thing for the conservation of precious quarters), and a book bag for electronics and their various accessories.

“You need any help?” Marco offered, noting the box in particular, since, aside from the other things Armin had packed, it contained at least three textbooks and those things were as heavy as they were expensive.

“Thanks, but we should be fine,” he replied just as Mikasa moved to retrieve the box in question, hoisting the heavy load with ease. A slightly disgruntled Eren grabbed up the two remaining things as if to prove his own worth.

Jean leaned close to whisper “Are we sure she’s not the one with the powers” in Marco’s ear. Marco rasped another admonishment, almost missing the words being spoken to them from across the room.

“-you next week!” He managed to tune in for the last fragment of Armin’s sentence, turning to see the three of them now standing by the doorway. As the only one with his hands free, Armin was opening the door for his friends.

The boyfriends chorused a ‘bye’, unsynchronized waves sending them off. Armin was the last to make his exit, closing the door behind them. It clicked shut with an echo across the suddenly quiet room.

“Well... that happened,” Jean remarked, not allowing the silence a moment to sink in.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“Hey that was a lot to take in at once, it’s still sinking in. And are they always like that?”

“Erm. I think so.” Marco crinkled his nose. “Eren might’ve been in a bad mood though.”

“No. You think?” He smirked and then changed the topic. “Top bunk’s yours, right?”

Marco frowned out of confusion (and little for the unnecessary sarcasm), but nodded anyway and Jean slipped away from the desk to haul himself up the nearby ladder.

He shook his head. "At this rate, it'll probably be dark by the time we finally get home."

"...and that's a problem, why?" Jean had stopped his ascent halfway in order to toss a look over his shoulder. "Your parents are at work, my mom's not expecting me home at a reasonable time anyway, and everyone else is borderline nocturnal."

"Why's your mom not expecting you at a reasonable time?" Marco asked, pointedly ignoring the point the rest of that statement had made.

He muttered a vague "Distractions", though the come-hither look Jean had cast him gave Marco a pretty good idea of what sort of 'distractions' were in question. And it was the sort he did not mind at all.

With the ladder still occupied Marco took a different route to the bed, *leaping* up to the top bunk from the side. Granted, there may have been some assistance from certain gravity-defying powers, but the feat was no less impressive. He pivoted around, reaching over to help his boyfriend up the rest of the way.

"Show off," Jean remarked, grasping Marco's forearm as the halfa hauled him up to his level. He stumbled upon landing, foot catching in the bedspread, and they toppled into a heap of tangled limbs and giggles, Jean on top.

Marco flicked his bangs away from his eyes, flushed grin spreading to his cheeks. "Oops."

"Oops?" Jean shifted so he could prop himself up on all fours, looming over Marco's body. "I think I like this position just fine."

"Oh do you now?" Marco adjusted his own position so he was lying flat on his back. His hands wandered upwards, headed for a set of back pockets until reminding himself that Jean tended to store things there, to hang off the unused belt loops of his jeans instead. "Well, maybe that was intentional."

"Was it?"

He laughed. "No."

"Well, I'm not complaining either way." Jean pushed his body down closer, weight resting on his forearms while Marco leaned up to meet him halfway.

The kiss started off slow, the two reacquainting with the feel of one another after months apart. Short, successive pecks interspersed with breathy giggles and hums of approval. It continued until Jean decided there was some territory he needed to remap, and abandoned Marco's lips in favor of his jaw line. The descent continued and Marco's hands slipped from Jean's beltloops to dig into the blankets below.

"Dorm room walls aren't exactly the thickest things..." he said between a gasp as Jean drew a prolonged stripe up Marco's neck with his tongue, practically tracing the freckles there.

Jean paused. He sounded more as though he was reaffirming a fact for himself. After all, when they fooled around at home they didn't have to worry about being quiet due to a usually empty apartment and good soundproofing between neighboring suites. Still, the tone used certainly wasn't a dissuasive one, and after a moment with no further remarks from Marco, he continued.

"*Jeeaan...*" Marco practically whined, brain faltering under the peppering of slow, deliberate kisses to his neck, teeth occasionally nipping at the sensitive flesh to further drive the point home. He bit at his lip, barely holding back a breathy moan.

Ah, so he *was* trying to be quiet.

"Yes?" Jean whispered teasingly against his flesh, nibbling at his collarbone to entice those delightful noises Marco was so determined, and failing, to keep from slipping past his lips. Jean settled himself down on the brunet's body, giving his hands the freedom to roam, and when they found their way under his shirt, brushing against his skin in ways that sent shivers up Marco's spine, the halfa muttered something that sounded suspiciously like 'Oh fuck it' and pulled Jean's face up to his, interrupting the assault on his neck. He pressed their foreheads together, eyes slowly fading into deep purple.

"You're glowing~," Jean purred with a smirk in his tone. Marco groaned again, only partially from Jean's actions. Without fail, whenever his boyfriend managed to get him all worked up his eyes would light up. It was a good thing neither of them were overly fond of PDA- Marco because he was polite enough to acknowledge how it tended to make people uncomfortable and Jean because he was one of those people who got uncomfortable- otherwise some foreseeable problems could arise if they got carried away.

"S-shut up," Marco retorted in a murmur, threading his fingers through the longer hairs at the back of Jean's head to pull him closer and occupy that mouth with something other than smart remarks. His own for instance.

"But I love it when your eyes do that," he said as he pulled away, unfazed by Marco's distraction tactics. He pulled off Marco's glasses and set them to the side, giving himself a better view of the light show.

Marco squinted, thrown off by the removal of his lenses. "I don't. Everything goes all wonky if I'm not in ghost-mode."

"Well, good thing I'm the only thing you're looking at like this."

"True," Marco replied, a smirk in his tone as his arms looped tight at the back of Jean's head. "You always look odd and mildly purple to me."

Jean let out a snort of mock offense. "Don't kill the mood," he chided.

"Mood's still alive and well," Marco chuckled lightly. With the positioning of his hands, he guided Jean back down so their faces were almost touching and leaned up to cover that gap.

The door, which was definitely closed this time (And locked. It was always locked to the outside), swung open, causing a startled halfa to turn himself invisible. Armin strolled in, mumbling to himself about libraries as he made a beeline to his desk.

“Aaand now it’s dead,” Jean huffed in defeat, watching the blond bob of hair scurry around the table gathering books.

The comment seemed to have alerted him, as Armin’s head spun quickly upwards to the top bunk. He paused a moment to glance around before addressing the question resting on his tongue. “Where did Marco go?”

“Where indeed...” He glared down at the depression Marco’s still tangible head was making in the pillow. Invisible fingers nipped at an exposed patch of skin near Jean’s hips once their owner realized that making a face wouldn’t work.

Armin glanced up again when Jean bit back a curse and took in the scene more carefully. Jean’s, admittedly already unruly, hair looked even wilder than it had less than ten minutes before, his shirt was riding up at the waist, and that position he was sitting in, butt hovering just off the mattress, seemed too impractical (not to mention uncomfortable) to be held so casually.

He quickly pieced together the puzzle, awkwardly shuffling his cargo. “Anyway, I forgot to grab these last time, but we’ll be leaving for good now,” he said as he risked one last glance up to the top bunk. “Uh, tell Marco ‘bye’ again for me.”

Armin hurried out the door just as Eren and Mikasa’s curious faces appeared in the entryway. He ushered them back, pulling the door shut with a slam.

With a deep breath, the halfa popped back into visibility, hand coming up to lay over his rapidly beating heart.

“Welcome back to the world of the visible.”

He snapped his eyes open, back to their usual brown, to glare up at Jean. “Hush, I panicked!”

“Uh-huh... How’d that go for you?”

“... he totally knew, didn’t he?”

“All I’m saying is that if anything else got left behind, he won’t be back for it anytime soon.”

Marco made a strangled groan in the back of his throat, throwing an arm up to shield his face.

“Hey Marco~”

“What?” he grumbled in a voice he was sure didn’t sound as annoyed as he was going for.

“Your roommate says ‘bye’.”

With the arm that wasn't being used to block himself from reality, Marco pulled a pillow out from behind his head and pelted Jean with it.

With the mood officially dead (*Fully* dead Marco stated after another half quip from Jean), Marco made the executive decision that it was well past time to get a move on. By this point it would be closer to 9 pm when they returned and, predicted distractions and the fact he was technically a day early aside, Marco still felt a little guilty for the tardiness. Jean did not share his sympathies, but complied without argument.

The two hauled Marco's belongings, consisting of a duffle bag, laundry basket, and whatever small things Marco could shove into his pockets, down the two flights of stairs and out to the parking lot.

Sasha's van, affectionately referred to as 'The Hulk' due to its size and color, was easy enough spot tucked away towards the corner of the parking lot. Amongst the silvers and blacks of the other cars, it stood out as the only green thing in the vicinity, even with the dull paint job that made the vehicle look older than it really was. Sasha could never remember the exact model year without looking at the manual, but she knew it had one previous owner and enough miles to make it temperamental at times, which was why she seldom let others drive it. Jean must've promised more than just a free lunch to have her loan the van for such a long trip.

Jean produced a set of keys from his back pocket and they loaded Marco's stuff into the trunk. After some brief directions to make sure Jean knew the way off campus and check out with the front gate (Jean had to sign a guest list upon arrival, but otherwise hadn't received much difficulty getting past security since friends and family were in and out all day picking up students), the two were on their way home.

The drive back felt far shorter than the initial one out to the campus, aided greatly by the absence of nerves that stretched every minute into an hour. Falling asleep halfway through probably helped too. Marco awoke with a groan to the newest EDM hit that he'd already heard one too many times no thanks to thin dorm walls and swiftly switched the station. Jean jumped at the sudden change from synthesizers to a droning male voice, van straying a tad as he steadied his hands.

"I see Sleeping Beauty is finally awake," Jean remarked, stealing his gaze away from the road for a split second to glance over at his passenger.

"Oh? It's been a hundred years and we're *still* not there?" Marco moved to find a more suitable station, settling on some alternative song that sounded vaguely familiar to him. "I thought you drove faster than that."

Jean, lacking a comeback, grunted and stared fixedly on the license plate of the car ahead of them.

He chuckled, leaning back from his dial tuning to look out the window. Last he recalled there'd still been sunlight creeping up past the horizon. Now night had fully set in. "Okay, but seriously, how long was I asleep?"

"Eh... two hours maybe? We're pretty close to the exit now." He made a passing gesture towards his phone, propped up on a stand near the dashboard. The GPS app displayed on its screen was approximating another twelve minutes before they left the freeway and about forty overall for the remainder of the trip. Marco kept himself awake for the duration of it.

They had lulled into a comfortable silence long before the van pulled up to the curb in front of Sasha's house, and was broken immediately as the vehicle's rightful owner burst out of the front door, flanked by her boyfriend and neighbor, Connie.

"Happy Homecoming, Marco!" The greeting, which half the neighborhood had probably heard, was almost eerily in sync. They must've spent all evening practicing.

He was barely out of the van when the two of them pounced and a strategically placed hand pushing the door shut was the only thing that kept them all from tumbling straight to the pavement. It did not, however, save him from a face full of Sasha's fluffy brown ponytail. He tried to hug them back, but with his arms pinned to his sides, he could only manage a few awkward pats to their waists.

"I missed you guys too, but I kind of can't breathe right now," Marco managed to get out once he rid his face of hair. Sure he could always phase out of their grasps, but that would be cheating.

"You can breathe later," Connie remarked, squeezing even tighter.

"You technically don't need to anyway," Sasha added and Marco could feel them both nod in agreement against his chest. He rolled his eyes. Let it never be said that he was lacking in the affection department when it came to friends.

"I'm here too, in case anyone cared." Jean came around to lean on the Hulk's hood, jangling the keys noisily in one hand.

That caught Sasha's attention at least and she peeled away to go confront a now regretful Jean with an interrogation on the state of her vehicle while trying to retrieve the keys. He dangled them just out of reach while answering questions- at least until Sasha remembered she'd loaned him a spare set and fished out the real keys from the purse slung over her back. Battle lost, he relinquished the spare.

With a smug smirk, Sasha pocketed the keys and then hugged him anyway, whilst wishing him congratulations for returning unscathed. Whether in reference to her doubts on the finicky nature of her van (which had given them little trouble, though Marco had been awake for at least one of its random lurches towards other lanes) or Jean's driving skills, it was unclear.

Connie, who'd abandoned trying to squeeze the remaining life out Marco in favor of clinging to his arm like a lost child, decided he was content where he was and gave a few cheers of

agreement for Sasha's verdict.

Greetings settled, they all piled into the van. Sasha reclaimed the wheel and, while he had been offered the passenger's side as man of the hour, Marco decided to take up the middle row alongside Jean- their usual arrangements whenever Marco didn't just outright fly to their destination.

They pestered Marco for details on college life as though he didn't keep in regular contact with them through various social media venues. Apparently his anecdotes weren't good enough until they were done in person and he found himself retelling the tale of the first- and last- after hours party he'd attended.

"I'm sure it's barrels of fun when you aren't one of the three sober people around, but I'm not ready to try mixing alcohol and ghost powers just yet," Marco finished explaining just as the van was pulling into the parking lot of Sina Laboratories.

Marco stepped out of the vehicle, sighing deeply. Seems as though a few months in another city didn't help shake the anxiety that this place tended to bring upon him- old wounds and whatnot. He moved over to the back, motioning for Sasha to pop the trunk as he pushed his thoughts aside. Everything was fine now, he reminded himself as he pulled out his luggage.

Doing a quick scan of a parking lot, Marco located his parents' car, parked close to the building. Bags in hand, he walked over and quickly phased his belongings into the trunk, where he wouldn't have to worry about carrying them around. Satisfied with his work, he rejoined his friends.

As they passed the security guard at the front door everyone pulled out their ID badges- Marco had owned one ever since moving to Trost due to his parents, but the others were issued their own set by Krista when their secret patrols had been established. They were listed officially in the records as her interns.

The guard, who was almost always the one on duty when they visited, looked up briefly from a magazine to wave the four teenagers off dismissively. Marco was mildly disappointed. Not even a 'long time, no see'? They filed past with no further exchange.

It was fairly typical for a Friday night- empty hallways, but plenty of noise from everyone bustling about in their offices or the labs. Muffled jazz leaked out from behind a closed door while off-key singing rang out from someone else who probably didn't realize their door *wasn't* closed. Felt a lot like the dorm, Marco observed.

The group reached a crossroads and Marco broke away. "I'm going to go see my parents, I'll catch up with you all in a bit."

"You sure you don't want us to tag along?" Connie offered.

Sasha interjected. "Oh let them have their family time. He hasn't seen his parents in months."

"Ah. Well, shouldn't this one be going to then?" He made a vague gesture to Jean who frowned in befuddlement. "Aren't you like... an unofficial family member?"

“Oh yeaah~ Maybe you should go with, Jean.” Sasha donned a cat-like grin, nudging Jean a bit.

“Okay, time to go.” Ears red, Jean shoved the two of them, snickering to themselves, off towards the elevators.

Marco shrugged and turned the corner. Maybe he’d ask about that exchange later.

He worked his way down the corridors, exchanging brief greetings and conversations about college with a few of the scientists he passed along the way. Nearing the office, the door was ajar enough to hear his parents’ voices through the gap. He gave a little knock to announce his arrival before letting himself in.

Neither one had looked up from their work at first, both situated on opposite sides of the somewhat small room behind their respective computers. After a few seconds, Victor ventured a peek at their oddly silent guest and seemed genuinely surprised at who he found.

“Marco?!”

The sound of her son’s name was enough to get Isabella’s attention. Before he had the chance to raise his hand up in a wave, she’d abandoned her desk and engulfed Marco in his second bear hug of the hour. Victor- always a little awkward in the physical affection department- watched from a safe distance.

“Oh, my baby’s home.” Before letting go, she pulled Marco down to her level to plant a kiss between his eyebrows. “How did you get here? You didn’t fly all that way, did you?”

“What?” Marco straightened back to full height. “No, I- Didn’t Jean tell you he was picking me up early?”

His father let out a quiet snort. “With what car?” he remarked, knowing full well Jean’s preferred, and only, mode of transportation was that death machine of a motor scooter parked out back of their apartment complex.

“Sasha’s. He really didn’t tell you?”

“We haven’t heard from him all day,” Isabella confirmed.

“We have been rather busy today, what with that ruckus this afternoon at the school- he did at least tell you about that?” Marco nodded. “I don’t know if an opportunity would have arisen.”

“And, in any case, this was a lovely surprise after that fiasco. Are you going to stick around with your folks for a bit?”

“I’ve got to go catch up with everyone downstairs, but I’ll be back once we’re done. Jean and I were actually hoping to ride home with you- if this isn’t an all-nighter type of night, that is.”

“Well, it was...” Victor started, until he caught the look his wife was giving him. “But I think we could afford to pack up early.”

Marco shook his head. It was long past any time that could reasonably be considered 'early'.

"Go see your friends. We'll get to a stopping point before you get back," Isabella told him softly.

Marco gave a sympathetic smile and was about to make his exit when a sudden thought crossed his mind. "Oh! I almost forgot. Do you still have those research notes from your Shinganshina trip to see Dr. Jaeger?"

"Jaeger?" Victor took a moment to scratch the stubble forming along his jawline. "Been a while since I've heard that name. Why the sudden interest?"

"Funny story," Marco started, trying to figure out the best way to word the situation. He was fairly certain Eren wouldn't appreciate him spilling his family secrets to people who he'd never even met, even if they were acquainted with his father. "It came up in a conversation. Apparently Armin's a close friend of the family."

"That's an odd coincidence," he muttered. "Well I'll see what I can find. A few things are logged into the computers, but..." Victor took a nervous glance at their mess of an office. "The original notes are going to take a bit longer. We're not exactly organized here."

"We?" Isabella chimed in. "Who's in charge of the filing?"

"I don't know why you put him in charge of it..." Marco whispered to his mother.

"Because I hate filing," she whispered back.

"We," Victor emphasized after clearing his throat, "still have some sorting out to do. Go see your friends, maybe it'll turn up before you get back."

"If you say so. Be back in a bit." With a cheery wave to his parents, Marco slipped down through the lower floors of the building- who needed elevators when you had ghost powers? He stopped his descent when he reached Ymir's room on the no longer secret basement level. Ever since they had uprooted the lab's underground research division and Krista took over management, she swiftly revealed the operations to the rest of the workers to ensure it wouldn't be used for any more immoral experiments.

Marco's group was settled on the old worn couch that took up most of the room, joined by Krista and Ymir. The small blonde woman took up the only other available seating- a desk chair- while her ghostly companion floated at her side, hair fluttering in spite of the distinct lack of air currents.

Everyone but Ymir jumped when Marco suddenly appeared unannounced at the doorway. She folded her arms with a smug grin. "Still can sense you coming from a mile away."

"I wasn't trying to be sneaky," Marco replied, rolling his eyes. He walked across the room and plopped himself down on the couch, wedging between Jean and Connie. His addition made it a bit cramped for space, but everyone on the couch was too used to invading each other's personal bubbles to care.

The conversation that ensued was of little note, mainly catching up Ymir and Krista on everyday things he'd already discussed with the others. While he did consider them his friends, his relationship with the two felt more professional, so their casual conversations were few and far between.

Today's incident at the dorm was the most newsworthy thing to happen, but he'd already expressed his concerns to Jean about mentioning Eren unless the situation called for it. If he ever met their friends- and Marco had a suspicion the opportunity would arise- he could reveal his own secret.

They wrapped up with a quick exchange of Halloween stories- Marco relayed his repeated encounters with the odd ghost he'd dubbed Acqua, while apparently things in Trost were no different from the usual, though damage control was a tad harder without halfa assistance- before Sasha and Connie had to get home.

Promising to come visit sometime tomorrow, the two saw themselves out, leaving a much roomier sofa and significantly quieter room. It was safe to say, at that point, the rendezvous was ready to be concluded.

Stopping just short of the door as it slid open again, Marco nudged Jean forward with his shoulder as he lingered. He paused, turning to face his boyfriend with a confused frown.

"I'll meet you upstairs. I need to discuss some 'ghost things' with Ymir first."

She crossed her arms, eyebrow raised.

"Again?" Jean shoved his hands into his pockets. "I feel so ditched."

"Oh hush, we've been together nearly all day, you can survive five minutes."

"Fine," Jean huffed, stealing a quick kiss (Ymir made a loud gagging noise) before he marched himself out into the hallway and disappeared behind the vertically sliding door.

Marco sighed. That was the boy he was in love with, all right.

"Okay, Violet. What's so special that you couldn't say it in front of anyone else?" She moved from her 'seat' to stand in front of Marco, hovering a bit so she was eye level with him. "Did you want a training spar? We haven't had a good brawl in a while."

Her arm looped across his shoulders in a mock headlock and he gently removed it. "Uh... no. Maybe later. I had something I wanted you to look in to. Both of you, really."

Neither of them answered, only looked at him expectantly, clearly waiting for some clarification. Right.

"Could you, maybe, look into that data you have on me for anything... strange?" Marco wrung his hands. He really wasn't sure how to go about wording this, but meeting Eren had instilled a few doubts in him and he really needed an expert (or the closest he could get) on human-to-ghost experiments to confirm.

Ymir clicked her tongue. “Everything about you is strange, you’re gonna have to be more specific.”

“Why my hair does this?” he offered. That *was* part of his concerns.

“I thought we’d decided that was just a side effect of your powers.” Krista frowned, a worried crease appearing between her brows. “Marco, what’s this about?”

He began to go into a rather uninvolved excuse about a ‘hunch’, but the look on the women’s faces told him that they weren’t buying it for a second. Well, so much for classified information. Marco made a mental apology before he spoke again.

“There’s... another halfa.”

“What?!” Surprisingly, it was Krista who made the loud exclamation, though Ymir was certainly no less shocked. “Why didn’t you tell the others? This is huge!”

“Because I don’t want to go spreading the news around. I found out... sort of by accident and I don’t know how comfortable h...they are with me telling others about them. Even this feels weird, and I haven’t even said much yet.”

“Alright, fair enough. I suppose I wouldn’t like you all going out there and blabbing about Ymir to your classmates.”

“I’d be cool with it,” she added unhelpfully.

Krista decided to ignore her. “So how much *can* you reveal, because something about this other halfa clearly has you riled up.”

“It’s just that they still look normal,” he said in exasperation. “As a human, I mean. None of the features of their ghost side have shifted over and they’ve had their powers much longer than I have.”

“And now you’re worried something odd is going on with your own because of it,” Krista finished.

Marco nodded sheepishly. “It’s been nagging at me.”

“I don’t know if we can really make that judgment, given that there’s only two of you.” Krista put a hand up to her mouth and took a brief glance at Ymir, looking for any sort of reaction from the female ghost. Finding none, she continued. “I think it’s more likely to involve the way they got their powers.” Marco made a face. “Right. Either classified or you don’t know.”

“Sorry,” he added.

“No, no, I understand, but it’d help if they were here to make comparisons and fill in missing data. Still, I can at least see if I find anything we might’ve overlooked for you. A DNA sample would help too, a strand of hair that has both colors on it should do fine. I don’t think we’ve tested that before.”

“Okay. Do you have any sci- Hey!” Marco started, before Ymir cut him off by reaching forward and snapping off a few strands from his bangs with her claw-like nails.

“Got it,” she stated as Marco glared.

He reached up to pat his hair. It still felt intact, so he figured she hadn’t mangled his bangs too much.

“I’ll get back to you before your break’s over if anything comes up.”

“Thanks, Krista,” he replied, watching Ymir deposit the strands in a plastic bag she’d procured from a desk drawer. “And, do you mind keeping this between us, for now? I don’t want to worry the others if it turns out to be nothing.”

“Mum’s the word,” she said, though something in her expression hinted that she may not have been all too approving of the secrecy. Ymir gave a noncommittal thumbs-up, but she’d go along with anything Krista agreed to.

Thanking them again, Marco made his exit up through the ceiling and deposited himself back in his parents’ office, where he rejoined with them and Jean. Much to his surprise, they had actually managed to wrap up work for the day and were in the process of closing up shop for the night when he arrived. While unsuccessful in tracking down the research notes, they promised to give it another once over tomorrow.

Since it was a little over an hour to midnight, they swung by a 24-hour drive thru on the way back (Marco, realizing he hadn’t eaten since he and Armin got lunch on campus, wolfed down most of his food before they made it to the apartment).

Once back at the complex, they gathered Marco’s things out of the trunk and headed up to the second floor, but not before taking a quick detour halfway to stop by Jean’s apartment. Since he had already expressed his intent to spend the night with Marco, the trip was really to check in with his mother, Adele. She was tired from a long day of work, but gladly spared a few minutes to chat- and a few more to chew out her son for not calling at all during his escapades. Not wanting to keep her from sleep, the conversation was brief and soon everyone was headed up to the Bodts’ domicile, where they heated up their takeout and spent the rest of the night lounging around the den, late night re-runs of old sitcoms playing in the background.

Victor and Isabella were the first to retire for the night, but the boys were not far after. Since nothing had garnered their attention on the drive back and neither were in the mood to do much of anything, they decided to go straight to bed. Marco changed into the first set of t-shirt and shorts he could find and went to go take care of all his bathroom business while Jean fumbled around in the collection of clothes he kept in Marco’s room for such occasions (Marco, likewise, had his own stash in Jean’s). Their paths crossed as he was headed back to the bedroom, Jean now clothed in a pair of sweats.

Glasses set on the side table, Marco slipped under the covers, leaving the light on Jean when he joined him. He was already beginning to doze when the lights cut out and the door shut, signaling the arrival of his boyfriend. Jean wriggled in next to him, grumbling under his

breath about it being chilly while snuggling up close to Marco as if it'd improve the condition. While not emanating a radius of cold like he would in his ghost form, Marco still wasn't particularly warm to the touch. Jean often compared it to cuddling the unused side of a pillow, and, though amazing on those hot summer nights, not so great in November.

Still, he seemed comfortable enough with the situation, head near Marco's shoulder and their legs thoroughly tangled. He gave him an affection nudge as was about to surrender to sleep when Jean's voice cut through the waxing silence.

"You know what I just remembered?" Marco hummed his acknowledgement of the question. "That crazy poltergeist has been in a mood lately. I think one of the Halloween ghosts riled him up."

Marco opened one eye, peering through the darkness at Jean's outline beside him, "And you wait until now to mention this because...?"

He shifted, pushing his face partially into the pillow. "I said I just remembered."

"Fair enough."

He turned his gaze skyward, staring blankly at the ceiling. The resident poltergeist hadn't kicked up a fuss all night and probably wouldn't at this rate- he was one of those odd ghosts that was more likely to be active during the day- so he'd probably calmed down from whatever crisis he was having.

"Daz'll be fine for now. We can go check in on him sometime tomorrow," he said through a yawn.

"We?" Jean shifted next to him, the mattress dipped and the blankets slid down as he sat upright.

Marco sighed and shut his eyes. "Oh, go to sleep. I'm not awake enough for this conversation."

"But we are going to have a conversation, right?" Jean leaned forward, hovering over his boyfriend. "Cause I've had to deal with him this whole time you've been gone and--"

Taking advantage of their positions, Marco reached up and grabbed him, pulling the stubborn boy down to his chest, where he held him in place. "*Goodnight*, Jean."

Jean grumbled and struggled a little before deciding that being trapped in Marco's arms wasn't *too* terrible a fate. He forfeited his attempts at escape and settled into the position.

"I guess it can wait," he whispered into Marco's neck, his breath tickling. Marco smiled and released him, though Jean only moved to pull the covers back up around them. "Night."

"Night," Marco hummed contentedly. It was the end of a long, rather interesting day and, surrounded by a strong sense of 'home', he finally drifted off.

Chapter End Notes

Look who's back in business! I'm sorry this took way too long, work, life, and writer's block just kept getting in my way. I'm by no means giving up on this project, I've still got a lot planned for it. Hopefully the next chapter won't take nearly as long.

Fall Break

Chapter Notes

Quick explanation if anyone still cares about this series. I've finally come to terms with a fact I've been wrestling with for a while- I'm never going to finish this. I got stuck a while ago and never managed to pull myself out of that slump. By now I've fallen out of Attack on Titan and never fully fleshed out most of the plot points I was planning on introducing.

It's short, but I at least want to post my work on the next chapter since I got a decent amount done before the block hit.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When he awoke to loud crashing, Marco regretted his decision to leave Daz to his own devices. The poltergeist's ability to stir up a ruckus that easily penetrated through the entire third floor that separated them was truly amazing.

Shifting gently so as not to disturb his partner, he reached out blindly to the other side of the bed, only to be greeted by an empty mattress where Jean should've been. After a brief moment of panic from a sleepy mind, he relaxed. While Marco was normally the one to wake first, there were those mornings where Jean was the early riser- and, unlike Marco who'd lie around with the hope of dozing off again, once he was awake he was usually up and occupied.

Well, with no one beside him to disrupt, Marco was free to toss about trying to find a comfortable position in his protest to being awoken. He flopped over onto his side and stretched his body to its full length, his foot bumping against an odd weight at the end of the bed. He nudged it a few more times until Jean's voice rang out in complaint.

Ah. Whoops.

He opened his eyes and turned his gaze, blurry from both sleep and astigmatism, on the vague outline of his boyfriend down by the footboard, partially illuminated by the small desk lamp up against the wall. He must've needed a light source in the windowless room, but didn't want to possibly wake him with the overhead light. He was sitting up and staring at Marco, probably glowering.

"Sorry," Marco offered meekly. Jean only sighed and turned his head downwards.

Seeing that sleep was definitely out of reach at this point, Marco sat himself up in bed, reaching over to the nightstand to retrieve his glasses. Visionary aid in place, he could take in that Jean wasn't just sitting at the foot of the bed, he was scribbling something down in a notebook that he'd probably stolen out of Marco's desk. Why he wasn't sitting at said desk,

where the lamp could provide better lighting, was anybody's guess. Surely it was a strain on his eyes.

Another crash caused Marco to flinch, forcing him to drop the subject of his boyfriend's odd life choices.

"That's been going on for about half an hour now." Without looking up, Jean pointed the eraser of his pencil towards the ceiling.

"Seriously?" Marco sighed, surprised in spite of himself that he'd somehow managed to sleep through thirty minutes of that. With some effort he heaved himself out of bed, feet not quite touching the floor before he transformed. He technically didn't need to, since floating up to the top floor wouldn't exert much of his powers, but it made it easier. Plus it was kind of habitual at this point- he wasn't sure Daz had ever seen him in his human form.

And this was not the morning to test theories. Marco yawned and rubbed the remaining sleep from heavy lids. The glow in his eyes and freckles seemed to flicker like a flashlight on low batteries.

Jean, now watching with mild intrigue, bit back a smirk. "Ready?"

The halfa yawned again. The only thing he felt (and knew he probably looked) ready for was hopping right back into that bed and conking out for another hour or so.

"You coming with?" he asked.

Jean made a dramatic stroke on the paper. "Nope."

Marco shrugged at him, as if to say 'your loss' (Though secretly thanked his boyfriend's reluctance to interact with Daz. He didn't have the energy to deal with both of them right now), and scooted himself up to the fourth floor, alone.

Daz's loft was currently in the middle of a tornado of furniture and décor, sustained by the poltergeist in question, who was sitting in the center of the room with eyes trained to the floor as if he were in some kind of trance. Occasionally something in the cyclone would veer off course, crashing into the wall or bouncing between other pieces of furniture and resounding loudly.

"Daz," he called. Marco didn't turn tangible straightaway and rightfully so as something was already sailing towards him at high speed. It passed harmlessly through his head and then boomeranged back into the whirlwind. Daz didn't look up.

"*Daz*," he tried a little more forcefully, becoming tangible. He reached a hand up, catching a large book that strayed in his direction. "Come on, it's too early for this."

He hurled the book back into the flurry, where it slammed down directly in front of Daz. It was enough to jolt the poltergeist out of his trance. The spiral of objects drew to a sudden halt, all poised to strike whatever had spooked their owner. Upon realization that it was only a book, Daz searched the room frantically until he cast his vision upon the visitor.

“Morning.”

Everything slowly fell back into its proper position as Daz’s telekinetic hold on the room faded.

“You’re... you’re back,” he said in a harsh whisper, as though Marco had left on an arduous journey with little to no hope of return five years ago, rather than college for a few turns of the calendar.

“For a little while,” he remarked, rubbing at his eyes again. When he removed his hands, Daz was suddenly much closer than he’d been previously, and Marco slipped briefly out of tangibility from surprise.

“You felt it too, right? That’s why you came back,” he rambled on, staring at Marco intently. He edged a bit closer. “We’re all doomed, aren’t we?”

Marco frowned, utterly baffled, as he leaned back slightly to regain a reasonable amount of personal space. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Daz’s expression immediately fell. “Don’t you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

“The shift! The shift, Marco!” He floated over, gripping the halfa harshly at the forearms. “Don’t tell me you can’t.”

“All I can feel right now are your nails digging through my sleeves. Have they always been that sharp?”

A look of horror crossed Daz’s face and he backed away. “You really don’t... But, why else would you come back now?”

“Fall vacation,” he answered. “Daz, what’s going on?”

But the poltergeist was lost in the depths of his mind, murmuring frantically, and Marco only managed to catch snippets of what was being said. “But what does this mean?” “Is it only me?” “Is this the end?” Marco eventually gave up trying to listen in as the room around them began rattling once more.

“Daz. Daz! DAZ!” he yelled, snapping the poltergeist out of it before things got chaotic. “Look, I promise I’ll look into your... shift, but I need you to find a quieter way to vent your anxieties. You’re gonna disturb the entire complex at this rate and you *know* how our building manager gets.”

The mere mention of the apartment’s supervisor and her wrath was enough to send a chill down Daz’s ghostly spine. His blank eyes stared deeply back at Marco. “Promise?”

“Halfa’s honor,” he assured. With Daz seemingly quelled, he bid the resident ghost a short farewell and exited the loft.

Marco sunk back down and deposited himself back on the bed from enough of a height that the mattress squeaked out a loud protest. Jean had relocated to the spinning desk chair and was spared a potential launching. The notebook he was previously using had disappeared, likely back into the drawer, and he was now scrolling through something on his phone.

“So, what’s the crisis this time?”

“I don’t even know.” The ring materialized around his waist, transforming him back into his sleepwear. He glared at the ceiling in frustration. “I’m not sure *he* knows what the crisis is.”

“Then it’s probably nothing.”

“Maybe...” Marco wasn’t quite ready to dismiss it so quickly. Sure Daz was, in all honesty, oddly paranoid for someone who’s been dead as long as he has. Ninety percent of the time the cause of said paranoia was either minor or non-existent (and probably resultant of suspended memories and emotions surrounding the circumstances of his death), but personal experience has proven that that ten percent can sometimes lead to very serious problems. He should at least follow through with some form of investigation.

He glanced over, catching Jean staring at him rather intensely, a perplexed expression shadowing his face. When their gazes crossed, he played it off by turning his head and stretching.

“*Anyway.*” Jean stood and moved over, a hand gently clapping Marco’s thigh. “Get ready, we’ve got breakfast plans.”

Marco craned his head upwards, eying his boyfriend and how he still sported the clothes he’d slept in. “We do?”

Jean wiggled the phone in his hand in Marco’s general direction. “Sorta. I guess Mom figured by the sudden lack of noise that we were awake so she’s making us food now.”

Marco sat up, stretching out his shoulders. Seems as though his plans for the morning had already been made without his input, not that he was complaining. A nice home-cooked meal with the Kirschsteins was probably the best thing to take his mind off of Daz’s potential ‘doom’ - at least until he was in a better state of mind to process it. First thing in the morning really wasn’t an ideal time for sudden revelations of that nature.

He smiled softly. “You know what, breakfast sounds amazing.”

“On your left, Marco!”

The halfa twisted in the air, firing off a shot of violet energy that just narrowly landed the target. The shadowy sliver he’d been aiming at slithered away, angrily flicking its singed tail in Marco’s direction.

After breakfast, he and Jean had met up with their other two friends and the rest of the day fell easily back into the old routine- roam the town by day, fight ghosts by night. It wasn't quite night yet, the last few rays of sunlight were still clinging to the horizon, but it was dark enough as far as some ghosts were concerned.

Marco gritted his teeth as the shade, the generally accepted name for shadow specters, dove towards the ground, missing another ectoblast in the process. Either the ghosts were getting more cunning, or he was getting rusty.

"Shake a tail!" he heard Jean calling from below, Connie at his side as they chased after the spirit. Connie swiftly took lead, despite the heavy bag on his back, passing by and drawing the shade's attention to derail its attempts at escape. Connie was not one for battling ghosts, instead he prided himself on being equal parts fast and obnoxious- in other words, the perfect distraction.

While his little song and dance with the shade was going on, Jean took the chance to line up a few shots with the modified pistol Marco had made for him. It wasn't the same model first given to him two years ago- with full access to Sina's resources thanks to Krista a few upgrades had been in order.

Clutching a now injured arm, the shade wailed at him, completely forgetting about Connie as it swooped in to attack a surprisingly calm Jean, who'd let his weapon fall to his side. As the ghost descended to narrow the gap, its progress was halted mere feet away as Marco dove up from the ground and grabbed hold of its tail. It chanced one brief surprised look at the halfa before a quick spin had it launching off in the opposite direction.

"Cutting it a little close there," Jean remarked as the boys watched it arc into a crash landing. Hearing the smirk in his tone, Marco ignored him and flew off towards the impact point, hoping he'd aimed well. Connie and Jean followed after.

Upon arrival, the scene that greeted the three proved that Marco's aim was true. The shade was hunched low to the ground, hissing menacingly as it glared down the shaft of an arrow, Sasha on the other end, ready to launch at a moment's notice. It shuffled from side to side a bit, testing the waters, but Sasha was locked on.

Her gaze wavered briefly as the boys crept into her field of vision, flitting over to follow the sudden movement in her peripheral. The distraction did not go unnoticed by the ghost as it tried to take advantage of the lapse in focus.

"Oh no you don't," she warned, snapping back to attention as she let her arrow fly, revealing that Jean wasn't the only one to receive an upgrade. As it neared the shade's field of energy, the arrow triggered- head splitting apart to release a glowing net of energy that encapsulated the ghost on impact. It dropped like dead weight to the ground, shrieking and thrashing.

"Ugh, why's it always shades," Sasha griped as the group converged on the captive ghost, shivering from a chill that ran down her spine. "They suck the fun out of everything."

Shades had always been Trost's biggest problem- there was no shortage of them lurking about town, they were a pain to fight, and they were one of the few variants of ghosts that

almost always targeted the living. While the exact origin of shades was still a subject of debate, it was agreed that their nature of harvesting negative emotions suggested that those types of feelings were key to their creation. Take into account high spiritual levels and a town heavily rooted in superstition and fear and it was little wonder why they ran amuck.

Marco shook his head. “That’s kind of the point of shades. Connie, do you have the container?”

“Of course.” Reaching into his pack, Connie pulled out one of the pill-like containment units they used to capture ghosts. He spun it around in his hands, nearly dropped it, and sucked the squirming shade inside. Without a ghost to restrain, the net of energy fizzled away, allowing Sasha to retrieve her arrow as the head reset back into a point. She gave it a dramatic twirl before shoving it back into the quiver.

Marco floated over, resting his hands on Connie’s shoulders to peer over his shaven head. He looked upwards at the touch, flashing Marco a cheeky grin as he displayed the blinking yellow light that had now appeared along the side of the container- the indicator that it was now occupied.

Marco gave it a contemplative stare. “Is it just me, or was that more trouble than usual?”

The others exchanged glances and shrugged.

“Maybe you’ve just been out of the game too long,” Connie offered, toying with the thing in his hands. When he started to spin the no longer empty container, Sasha snatched it away and passed it off to the hovering halfa.

“I’m not spending another half-hour chasing that down,” she warned.

Leaving them to their moment, Marco looked down at the newly acquired container. Rusty or not due to his absence, it shouldn’t have mattered that much with the three of them doing just as much work as him on what could be considered a routine mission. If anything, it meant they’d been slacking off while he was away, but Marco had a feeling that wasn’t the case. His chat history certainly implied otherwise.

Giving the cylindrical device a decisive turn, Marco furrowed his brows and briefly considered if Daz’s paranoia was just rubbing off on him. The poltergeist’s unknown plight had been lurking in the back of his mind all day, just as cryptic as it was first thing in the morning.

“Marco?”

Hearing his name, the halfa looked up to realize the moment had passed at some point, leaving him as the new center of attention.

He coughed awkwardly into his free hand. “Well, I guess I can go drop this off at the lab...”

Jean patted the holster at his thigh. “We’ll finish up here.”

Informing his friends that he'd rejoin them once he finished at the lab, Marco shot off into the sky. He took the long route around to the lab, enjoying the calming hues of twilight as it sunk in. A few ghosts caught his eye along the way, wisps and some small animal ghosts that were easily herded away from civilization where they were less likely to randomly pop up in someone's living room. They were kind of like bugs in that regard- small and harmless, though creepy, and heaven help you if one decides to fly at your face.

He scooped up one last eel-like wisp hovering around someone's screen-in porch, drawing a raucous from the lapdog on the other side, before continuing on to his destination. Upon arrival (he'd dropped the ghost off halfway to spare it from becoming a potential test subject), Krista and Ymir were already in the lab. The younger of the two women was working off the room's smart board monitor, the tablet it was synced to in her hands as she flicked through something that involved a lot of names and numbers- managerial work no doubt. Being the supervisor of an entire research facility seemed like a handful.

She looked so focused in her work that he almost didn't want to impose, but then Ymir, without even turning, elbowed Krista gently and pointed behind them.

"Ah, just the halfa I wanted to see," Krista said as she turned and laid eyes on him, floating awkwardly in the middle of the room. She gestured towards a nearby table. "You can just leave that there."

He had just barely set the container down before she'd grabbed him by the arm and lugged a startled Marco off towards a large machine in the back of the room. It was mainly used to monitor ectoplasmic exposure in the workers- an early warning system for potential possessions and sickness from high concentrations- which meant it worked well enough in regards to halfas, albeit with a few quirks.

Marco let out a sigh of annoyance as he was set in position of the scanner. For the first few months of their partnership, he had to go through this process on a near weekly basis as they analyzed the ghost half of him and how his body adapted, often having him showcase certain powers so the computer could read those as well. They stopped when the readings kept coming back with little to no changes and Marco kept voicing his objections to the constant scrutiny.

He looked over to see if Ymir was gleaning any amusement from this, but she'd disappeared at some point, alongside the container. His mind tracing back to the shade that had been in that container, a thought clicked. "Hey, Krista? You guys haven't been picking up any strange readings around town lately, have you?"

She looked up, confusion falling over her face. "What?"

"Something Daz said this morning. He's in one of his panics and-"

"No, not... you didn't know?" The confusion started to blend into concern. "Hasn't anyone told you?"

"Told me what?"

She didn't answer right away, instead reaching for the tablet that she'd discarded earlier. A few taps later and the rosters minimized to make room for a graph cataloging the ambient levels of spectral energy spread throughout the town as recorded by their instruments on a regular basis. The chart started off steady with a sudden peak marked at the end of October, as expected, before returning back to normal levels. At least, that's what he saw at first glance. A closer inspection, however, revealed that the decline did not quite reach the usual average, resulting in a concentration that was no more than five percent higher. Slight, but noticeable enough.

"What does it mean?"

"Right now, not much. It's slightly affecting the weaker ghosts, but just because that energy is the main thing that holds them together." Marco hummed to himself. That would explain the shade- it certainly gave them a run for their money trying to catch it, but he never felt any increase in it's threat level. "Nothing's changed with Ymir, but she can still tell it's going on."

"Daz more or less said the same thing, but everything seems the same to me."

"Maybe because you've been away from it so long," Krista mused as she disappeared back behind the monitor. That's what everyone seemed to be telling him, like he was being guilt tripped for going to college. He knew that certainly wasn't the intention, and the hypothesis in this case was a valid one, but he refrained from comment regardless.

Krista prompted him to change back for the next set of readings that she needed, so Marco summoned forth the transformation rings and switched over to human form. What followed was an awkward silence, broken only by the tapping of keystrokes. Marco opted to fuss with his glasses in the meantime.

"Okay, we're done."

He paused midway through cleaning off a smudge with his shirt. "Wait, that's it?"

"The data *does* need to process first. This thing wasn't exactly built with half ghosts in mind."

"Right. Duh." With a sheepish look and a smudge that was probably worse, he set his glasses back upon his face and transformed again. "Did anything come up from the hair sample?"

"Maybe... But I want to get these results before I make any calls." She stole a peek out from behind the monitor at Marco, whose face betrayed his disappointment in her response. "I'm sorry Marco, but you know how long these things take sometimes."

"No, you're right. Besides, you're the one that's going out of your way to do this, I should be apologizing to you!"

She gave a weak smile. "It beats doing rosters."

Ymir chose this moment to phase herself through the back wall, chucking the ghost container dangerously close to Marco's head. He dodged swiftly and scooped it up before it hit the

floor, doing a quick check to confirm that she had gone to empty it. The containers were only for field use after all, as the facility hosted any number of enclosures for their research subjects- at least until they moved on to another plane or festered into harmless spectral energy due to isolation.

With the indicator light on the side no longer flashing, Marco clipped the vessel to one of the blue straps around his thigh and frowned at an unconcerned Ymir. She'd returned to hovering at the back of Krista's chair, staring idly at the scrolling text as her partner sorted through data, arms draping over her shoulders in a loose embrace.

Marco decided it was probably best to leave them to their work and meet back up with the other half of their friend group.

"If nobody needs me..." he trailed off, already making a start for the ceiling.

"Wait." Krista's voice drew him to a halt and he descended slightly to give her his attention. "You'll be fine. We're going to find out what's going on."

"If it helps, no matter what you'll still be better off than me. Probably," Ymir offered.

It didn't really, but the attempt was appreciated.

"I've got to go check in with the others. I'll see you later." With an upward thrust he disappeared through the ceiling to regroup with the trio and find out just why they'd been withholding information.

Knowing the cause of at least one of his current worries was enough for Marco to put his mind to rest, though the subject itself had a bit more mileage to go before he set it aside.

Oddly, the fluctuation of energy about town was news to his three ghost fighting friends, though Connie admitted Krista may have tried to explain it once and it just sailed over their heads. *Apparently* interpreting the scientific aspect of their work was Marco's job. He wondered how many other important briefings had gone ignored in his absence.

His parents, who he confronted about it the next day, were another story. Not only had they known, but they were currently running most of the research on it. The only reason they'd neglected to inform their son was simply because they'd spent so much time discussing it with each other, a part of them was convinced he'd been involved at least once. Although the spiel they had flown into on the observed and potential ramifications of such an event quickly replaced any feelings of frustration Marco may have had on being out of the loop with regret for ever bringing it up.

Daz was the last one to be told and, while he wasn't particularly calmed by the information like Marco had been, the conspiracies this allegedly opened up at least kept him quiet and

distracted. The complex could rest easy once more and Marco could proceed about his life as he normally did, falling easily back into routine.

And then Monday rolled along.

Fall break was exclusive to the colleges, at least in their region, so all lower level schools did not enjoy the luxury of being off for the week. Between school and work, it was one of the few times where pretty much everyone Marco knew had somewhere they needed to be except for him.

He hung around the labs for a little while, helping out his parents until he grew bored of their endless scientific debates. He'd suffered through enough of them in his youth, back when they were living out of an RV, constantly on the road with no hope of escape when the exchanges began. Marco excused himself and went to find Krista.

He found her up on the top floor, faithful shadow ever looming, going over requests that her employees had put in over the past month. Unfortunately, she had no results to report yet, nor any sightings to dispatch him to. Ymir offered up sparring practice again, rather insistently, and he ended up accepting this time.

The training room was on the lowest level, appropriated from a large viewing room that connected to the above floor via several one-way mirrors. It was intended for use of observing test subjects' behavior before Ymir claimed it for her own- blocking off the mirrors and door from inside so only she could access it by phasing through (and deactivating the field that prevented ghosts from phasing through the walls beforehand). It'd served as a place to get acquainted with her new powers without input from the scientists, a bit of an escape for her to take out her aggressions. Now she trained there with Marco and the others.

"So, what are we working on?" Marco asked once the two had settled themselves in the room. Ymir's response was to immediately throw a punch, which Marco just barely blocked with a small shield. "Hey! I wasn't ready!"

"The ghosts don't care if you're ready or not," she responded, twirling her body around to aim at a portion of him that was not protected.

Marco repositioned a bit too late and caught a blow to his forearm. He dropped the shield to rub the sore spot. "I thought this was supposed to be for fun, not serious training."

She grinned smugly, holding out a hand as she slowly concentrated her energy around it. "I changed my mind."

Eyes wide, Marco flipped backwards out of the way of her charged punch, which would've easily shattered the flimsy shield he'd been using, then immediately dropped to avoid another that was aimed at his head. He looped down and around, coming up behind her, to which Ymir countered with a high, roundhouse kick. The breeze grazed his cheek as Marco leaned out of the way.

"Ymir..." he complained, preemptively summoning a new, stronger shield. There was a flash of golden yellow, which promptly dissolved against the barrier Marco had set up.

“Not bad,” she remarked, blowing the residual energy off her fingers like smoke from a gun. Marco frowned at her through his violet screen. “Now can you handle *this*?”

She charged up both fists and launched herself towards him. Marco, who’d already grown frustrated with the hyper-aggressive sparring, expanded the shield into an encompassing bubble and waited until the exact moment of impact to pop it. The explosion of outward force was strong enough to throw her across the room and into the back wall.

Wincing, Marco darted over to her, hands fidgeting between reaching out and worriedly covering his mouth. “Ymir! Oh, no. I’m sorry, I didn’t-“

She laughed loudly, peeling herself off the wall. “Oh please. Like that’d do anything to me.”

Marco frowned. Granted she was right, energy based attacks and weaponry were the only things that could seriously harm a ghost. A physical blow like that would only hurt in the moment, though that knowledge wasn’t going to make him feel any less bad about tossing his friend in such a manner.

Ymir hopped down to the floor, readjusting the strap of her tank top where it had slipped askew from her flight into the wall. “I think I felt a gust behind that one. Good job.”

Marco looked down at his hands. Maybe he got a bit carried away with that last move, but at least it seemed to be enough to knock the fight out of Ymir. She’d ceased lunging at him full-force in favor of leaning against a heavily scorched portion of the wall from previous sessions.

Experimentally, he took a spot next to her. She glanced over, nudged him (rather roughly, he noted) with her elbow, and did nothing more.

“So...” he prompted, confident that it was settled now, “what was that all about?”

“What was what?”

“That *training*.” He stared pointedly at Ymir. “You usually aren’t that aggressive.”

She shrugged in a noncommittal manner. “Been holding back lately. Our ‘interns’ aren’t as fun to spar with as you. Just shield and dodge- can’t even use ectobeams against them.”

“Well aren’t I lucky,” Marco muttered, rolling his eyes.

“Yes you are,” she replied in a tone that made it unclear whether or not she’d picked up on the sarcasm, and moved away from the wall. “Now, time to distract Krista from work.”

She disappeared up through the ceiling without another word to him. Marco paused for a moment then decided it’d probably be better to return to his parents rather than follow Ymir, depending on what her current definition of ‘distract’ pertained.

Tuesday, Marco elected to skip out on the labs entirely to roam about the city. He stayed mostly human for this, casually strolling along the busy streets of downtown as he soaked in the atmosphere. Trost was a pleasant enough place when there wasn't some sort of supernatural disaster going on, and it was always worth the time to appreciate it.

He window shopped along the local businesses before making his way back towards the labs in order to meet his parents for lunch. There was a sandwich shop about a ten-minute's drive from work that the couple usually picked up from, but they made the effort today to actually eat inside the restaurant at Marco's request, though both looked quite out of place in their full Sina uniforms.

They parted ways after finishing their meals and Marco- having mostly exhausted his window shopping options- flew off for more scenic venues.

This was how he stumbled across Buchwald, or, rather the other way around. A blur out of the corner of the eye as he skimmed along the edge of the forest and suddenly the ghost of a misty stag is running in the air alongside him. Buchwald generally haunted the woods where he'd likely lived and died, but every so often he sought out Marco and company, if only to prove that his spirit still persisted in their world.

Pleasantly surprised, Marco dipped down to give his spectral companion a quick pat between the ears- he was looking a bit more solid than usual, though Marco could still see the landscape through him if he squinted- and continued his flight with newfound accompaniment. Buchwald would surely slip off on his own accord, just as suddenly as he appeared, but until then Marco steered towards the wilder outskirts of Trost.

Buchwald did eventually take his leave, after they'd traveled together for roughly fifteen minutes, as silently as he'd appeared. Marco took it as a sign to loop back around and return to civilization. Besides school was almost out for the day and everyone was supposed to be meeting at his apartment to get work done. Nothing was likely to get done, but it was a nice, quiet setting regardless.

Two hours later they'd find themselves curled up in front of the television, homework and study materials completely forgotten and retrieved only when Sasha and Connie had to head home shortly afterwards. They said their goodbyes, deciding that tonight was not the night to go on their patrol (It wasn't an everyday deal anyway, the Sina staff were *somewhat* capable of that when they needed to be), leaving Marco and Jean to return to the couch for another lazy evening.

By Wednesday, there was news on Marco's condition.

He sped on over to the lab as soon as he got Krista's message, appearing on the other side of the desk she was currently working at like he'd scheduled an appointment. She looked up, not batting an eye (after over a decade of Ymir, she didn't startle easily) and gently set her phone down.

"Hello, Marco. You know, the door *was* open," she remarked with a sly smile. "You're picking up Ymir's bad habits."

"Fuck doors," Ymir lazily called from across the room, eyes never leaving her magazine.

He felt himself flush and sunk down into a nearby chair, switching back to human form. "Sorry. I'm anxious."

"Understandably." Krista picked up a stack of papers, tapping the edges on the table to align them. "Anyway, I finally got done with those analyses and..."

Marco braced himself for the worst.

"Every result came back absolutely normal. Nothing's changed."

She set the papers down in front of him. They contained all the results of the testing- diagrams of ectoplasmic energy levels, core temperature scans, vitals, etc. Alongside it was a similar set dated from over a year ago- likely the last check up he'd done. Aside from a few minor and accountable fluctuations, the data was near identical.

He poured over the data several more times before placing them back on the desk, leaning back in his chair in resignation.

"So... everything's fine."

Krista gave him a curious look. "Did you *want* something to be wrong?"

"No. No! Of course not. I just... I don't know." He stared down at his hands where they rested in his lap. If he looked hard enough, Marco could see a faint outline in his right palm of the electric burn from when he got his powers- normally only visible when he was a ghost and hidden under gloves even then. "I guess I expected some kind of explanation."

"Maybe you're just weird," offered Ymir.

"*Maybe*," Krista sighed at her partner's bluntness, "it's affected by how you got your powers. Or halfas just take to their powers differently, or it's because you live in Trost. All I can give you are theories."

"...we really don't know much about my powers, do we?"

"All I know is that, by your standards, everything seems to be perfectly fine." She scooped up the papers and handed them to him once more, suggesting that he should hold on to them. "Please stop worrying for once."

After thanking Krista for her help, Marco let her get back to work and retired himself to his living room for the rest of the day. Jean showed up after school to drag him off the couch, but ultimately failed- Marco was adamant on staying firmly rooted to his spot on the sofa. Jean ended up entangled in his boyfriend's limbs while an autoplay of compilation videos droned on from the laptop on the table, grumbling about how their lives were 'spiraling into a sea of monotony'.

He dozed off shortly after voicing this complaint.

Marco, in the meantime, was content to let him nap as he lost himself in his own head for a while, ignoring Krista's advice about worrying. A nudging at his ribs was the only thing that drew him from his thoughts, signaling that Jean had roused himself. Marco made a humming noise of acknowledgment.

"You're doing the thing," Jean said, ceasing his prodding.

He decided to take the bait. "What thing?"

"The thing where something's obviously eating at you and you won't share it."

Marco would have folded his arms across his chest in a defensive maneuver, but Jean was currently occupying that space, so he settled for tuning his head away.

"Go back to sleep."

"Iwuzzn't 'sleep," he argued through a heavy yawn.

"Uh-huh."

Jean didn't go back to sleep, though. Instead he twisted around with his chin resting on Marco's chest so he could stare up at him through lidded eyes. They stayed, silent, in that position for a few moments until Marco finally caved.

"It's nothing."

"Mar-"

"No, I mean it's literally nothing. Nothing's wrong and I shouldn't be bothered by it, but I am."

He could tell by the expression Jean adopted that his admission had made little sense so he went into all his concerns about powers and potential side effects and the results he got back from Krista. By the end of it Jean was wide awake and sitting upright, Marco's legs pinned beneath him.

"Why didn't you say something earlier?!"

"I don't know," Marco answered, sighing at himself. "I wanted to spare you the worry incase it ended up being nothing- which it did."

With a deep groan, Jean rubbed at his temples. “And people say *I’m* the frustrating one...”

“That’s because I only frustrate you,” Marco retorted, earning himself a flat glare. “I swear I would’ve told everyone if it had turned out to be serious. Cross my heart and hope to die.”

The irony was not missed on Jean, but he merely rolled his eyes and leaned back into a more reclined position, allowing Marco to move his numbing legs out from underneath him. “It’s a start, I guess.”

Chapter End Notes

And there you go. This chapter concluded pretty naturally, but at the time I wanted this chapter to cover the whole week-long break and I couldn't get around to writing the next scene. The plan was going to be Marco being convinced to hang out during the school day, but having to do it invisibly since he'd been recognized as a recent graduate, but it didn't feel like it had much point and I couldn't think on an alternative.

While I didn't do much with it, I really enjoy this AU and I'm glad created it. Sorry to anyone who was hoping for more, but feel free to message me if you want details about the things I had planned.

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