Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List

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Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List

by jotc

Summary

Pin-Lee isn't especially fond of camping, but knowing how much Arada loves it, they suggest a camping trip. It'll be fun, right? Probably?

Notes

This story is written with love for all three of these goofballs. That said, Ratthi's role is significantly smaller (he makes an appearance near the end.) Also, this is a minor AU in which these three somehow magically return safely to Preservation without anything changing.

See the end of the work for more notes

“I was thinking,” Pin-Lee said, and then paused to steel up their resolve. Once they said it, they wouldn’t be able to take it back. They took a deep breath and pushed out the words, “We should go camping.”

“Babe, you hate camping,” Arada said, but her face lit up with anticipation.

Pin-Lee couldn’t back down now. “Not always. I like spending time with just you, I like getting away from our regular lives, and on our last survey, we didn’t get to spend much time in nature like we usually would.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s keep it simple and chill though. Just us, maybe some light hiking and nice scenery…”

“Oooh, we could go up Droparock Trail and explore the unmapped area!”

“That’s…a lot more intense than I had in mind.”

“But babe, I’ve been wanting to do it for ages and I’m scared to go alone. If you came, you could protect me.” Arada looked at Pin-Lee with wide-open eyes.

They mounted a half-hearted defense. “I didn’t want to anywhere off the feed.”

“Oh, but that’s the best part of camping! And we can collect data. We got cheated out of so much data on that last survey. This way we can at least contribute to the planetary database. It’ll benefit everyone.”

“I was thinking more leisurely stroll while we look at pretty clouds?”

“We can do both! I’ll just take a few samples on the way.”

“If it’s just a few,” Pin-lee said, sighing just a little on the inside. They could hardly expect Arada to walk past an interesting specimen and not stop.

“I’ll send you a map,” Arada said.

“No wait, I can do that part—”

“No, it’s cool, I know just where we should go! Except I have some notes at home I need to check. I’ll show you a trail map and plan later tonight.”

Arada was nearly vibrating with enthusiasm. Pin-Lee reminded themself that they could hardly expect to bring up camping and *not* have Arada get overexcited. She was so beautiful when she lit up with passion, even if it was a passion Pin-Lee didn’t share. And the whole point of the trip was to connect with her.

“Okay,” Pin-Lee said. Later that night Arada put the trail map in their shared feed and Pin-Lee let out a string of curses.

“What?” Arada asked innocently.

“You didn’t tell me how much elevation gain there’d be.”

“It’s good exercise. You’re just as fit as me, babe. It won’t be a problem.”

“But—”

“Please, babe? I’ve been wanting to go for ages, but I’ve been scared to go alone.” Arada’s face turned serious. It sent a pang through Pin-Lee’s heart.

“You’re really scared to hike solo? I thought you did that all the time.”

“Not off the feed. You never know what might happen and I don’t want to be alone out there.”

“Okay, babe. I’ll come.”

“With you along, I know I’ll be safe!”

Pin-Lee opened their arms for a hug. This might not be the trip they’d envisioned, but it would be worth it to make Arada happy.

Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List:

- Arada Loves It — Pro (Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)

Pin-Lee felt better about the trail when they confirmed that many people did in fact hike Droparock Trail solo. It wasn’t some crazy deadly place that only extreme professionals went. It was just in an area where Preservation hadn’t yet placed reliable feed transmitters, but which held a wealth of planetary wildlife.

The day was fair, the air cold and sweet, and the trail began at a brisk but not unreasonable slope. For the next two hours they hiked upward, the view mostly restricted by trees.

It was actually kind of nice. Arada stopped occasionally to collect specimens. She recorded their location, date, time of day, size of the full plant, and she also photographed the collection site. Pin-Lee had expected to find it annoying but the breaks actually gave the hike a nice leisurely feel.

Arada had stopped to collect a moss specimen when an insect began buzzing around Pin-Lee’s face.

“That’s a muddled sipper. You want to shoo it away, their bites itch,” Arada warned.

Pin-Lee shooed one. It flew about in an aimless sort of way as if bewildered, and then headed back toward their face. They shooed it again.

“How bad does it itch?”

“I don’t know, they never bite me.”

“Why not?” Pin-Lee tried not to bristle at the injustice.

“I dunno? No one’s figured it out yet.”

“Ugh! It won’t leave me alone. One got on my arm while I was shooing the other one off my face!”

“Yeah, they do that. They’re slow fliers though, we’ll lose them once we start moving again.”

Something tickled behind their ear. Pin-Lee swatted at it. Their hand came away empty. Everything itched including parts of them concealed by multiple layers of fabric. They knew it was all in their head, but that didn’t help.

“Babe,” they said a bit desperately, “can we start moving again *soon?*”

“Sure.” Arada opened up another specimen bag.

“Babe!”

“Oh! Sorry.” Arada looked at the specimen bag wistfully and returned it to its case.

“Thanks,” Pin-Lee mumbled, a little embarrassed.

“No problem,” Arada said, her wistfulness still showing. “I’m sure it won’t be my last chance.”

They moved on. Arada found another whatever-it-was and got out her sampling materials. Pin-Lee swatted the first sipper to buzz their arm.

“No! Don’t crush—” Arada said.

“Babe, it was trying to eat me!”

“That wasn’t a sipper! Run!”

Pin-Lee ran, or at least moved as fast as they could. The trail’s uneven ground with protruding roots and stray fallen branches held them back. Something stung the back of their neck.

“Ow!”

“Keep going! You just need to get some distance, then they’ll go back to their nest!”

Pin-Lee scrambled to move faster. They collected five more stings before Arada said they were mostly clear. Arada made them hike another ten minutes, then called a stop.

Pin-Lee asked, “What was that? And why did it look exactly like one of those sipper things?”

“That was a pale bee. They’re bigger and more of a gray color than the sippers. They’re drawn to salty sweat, but they don’t sting unless you hit them.”

“I only hit one of them.”

“I meant normally. Once you killed one, the others smelled its crushed body on you and identified you as an enemy. We got lucky, really. We must have been just on the edge of its territory.”

“Why didn’t you warn me?” Pin-Lee scowled.

Arada did at least look apologetic. “I’m sorry, I forgot you wouldn’t know. They’re common in this region. Here, I’ll show you how to get the stingers out.”

“They *left things* in our body??”

“Yeah? A lot of stinging insects do. Just watch, it’s not hard.” Arada held out her own arm which showed a raised bump. She pulled a paper card out of one of her empty sample bags and scraped the card’s stiff edge over the sore. Something short and bloody wriggled free.

“You got stung too?” Now Pin-Lee felt a little guilty.

“Just a couple of times. I didn’t smell like an enemy but I was nearby and moving. It’s no big deal.”

The throbbing bumps felt like a big deal, especially the one on their cheek. But Pin-Lee couldn’t be wussier than Arada over bug stings that were at least partly their own fault. They put on a brave face while Arada scraped the stingers out. Then they shuddered all over. “Ewww! I can’t believe those stupid bugs left body parts inside us!”

“They’re not stupid! They were protecting their nest,” Arada said sternly.

“I know, I know! It’s still so gross that they *put something* in my body.”

“They’re very brave. They sacrificed their lives to protect their home.”

Pin-Lee wished the stupid bugs had been a little less brave. They weren’t going to win that argument with Arada though.

Arada was continuing, “The main thing is, you can’t really get rid of the smell without a full shower. So from now on we’ll have to be extra careful or more of them could come after you. I’d better take the lead position, I can spot them better.”

Some protector I am, Pin-Lee thought morosely.

Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List:

- Arada Loves It — Pro (Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)
- The Stupid Bugs All Look Alike - Con

Halfway through the day, Arada stopped and inhaled deeply.

“I think I smell a cesspit shroom.”

“That sounds ominous.”

“No, no, it’s just a mushroom that smells terrible. And isn’t cesspit just an old-fashioned name for an outdoor toilet anyway?”

“I think it’s something worse? We could look it up on the feed, if we had the feed.”

“Babe.”

“No, I didn’t mean that as a complaint. It’s just how I would normally find out.”

“Well, it’s super rare and I bet I can find it if I follow the scent.”

The smell intensified as they hiked. Arada took out a small jar of pungent paste and wiped some on her upper lip.

“Try this, babe.”

Pin-Lee sniffed the paste. “I’m not sure it’s an improvement.”

“Don’t you like menthol?”

“Is that what it is? I’m gonna say no. It kinda burns.”

“That’s part of the point. It numbs your senses.”

Pin-Lee applied the paste. The smell of rot mixed with the menthol to make an unholy stew that clung persistently to their nostrils.

“I don’t think it helped.”

“Pretty soon you won’t even notice,” Arada said confidently.

They hiked up. The smell rapidly grew thicker and more foul, until Pin-Lee could taste it. They fought the urge to gag.

“When do I stop noticing? I feel like I'm choking!”

“It is still pretty pungent,” Arada admitted.

“It’s not making you nauseous?”

“No? It’s just a smell.”

“It feels more like a living thing lurking over my shoulder. One with bad intentions. Are we at least close?”

“Yeah. Actually, it’s time to leave the trail. Follow me.”

Off the trail, the ground was a tangle of fallen trees and thick brush, with no way to tell if you were about to twist an ankle on a rock or step in a hole. And what if they met more hornets? And they didn’t want to get any closer to the stench anyway.

But they also didn’t want Arada to miss a chance at seeing a rare specimen. They sighed and followed her. Arada also marked the way back with a biodegradable dye detectable by their feed interfaces, so at least there was no risk of getting lost.

It was slow going. Arada moved carefully, not putting her weight down until she’d tested the land. Pin-Lee imitated her, wondering how long this mushroom quest would last.

And then suddenly the smell dissipated as if it never was.

“What the heck?” Pin-Lee asked.

“The odor changes once they explode,” Arada said. She sounded mildly disappointed.

Relief warred with frustration, and frustration won. Pin-Lee burst out, “So we did all that for nothing?”

“Not for nothing,” Arada assured her. “I’ll log the estimated location and the time that the odor dissipated.”

“And that’s good enough?”

Arada shrugged. “You can’t expect to find every cesspit shroom you smell. The time window between fruiting and exploding is so narrow.”

“You dragged me through that stink for a long shot,” Pin-Lee grumbled.

Arada shrugged again. “If you don’t chase the long shots, you never find the shroom.”

Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List:

1. Arada Loves It — Pro (Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)
2. The Stupid Bugs All Look Alike - Con
3. Stupid Cesspit Shrooms Stink and Explode Before You Find Them - Con

They arrived at a meadow full of knee-high pale purple grass. From here they could see the mountain’s snowy peaks.

“Oooh, look! It’s a mama squirrit and her babies!” Arada said.

Pin-Lee had seen pictures of squirrits but they’d never seen one this close. The mama squirrit was a quadruped, about knee-high, with blueish gray fur. Its long tail waved above its head. It moved in a half-hopping, half dashing motion as it chivvied the babies into staying close.

The pictures had captured the squirrit's scrunched-up face in more detail than Pin-Lee could make out from this distance. But it hadn't captured the grace and liveliness of its gait, or the way it fussed over the babies.

It made a chittering grumbly noise every time one of the babies got too far from the others. At one point it bit one of the babies' tails to stop it from bolting. The baby in question yipped but then nuzzled her.

"Ooh, a stub-tailed wolf! I think we're about to see predation!"

The short-tail wolf was another quadruped. If it stood up it would probably come to Pin-lee's thigh, but this one slunk low through the grass. From above, Pin-Lee and Arada had a clear view but the squirrits didn't.

"Can't they smell it?"

"It knows to keep downwind, and the grass impedes airflow too."

"Should we do something?"

"Why?" Arada seemed genuinely confused.

"I thought you liked the squirrits," Pin-Lee said weakly.

"I do, they're adorable! Don't worry babe, they're not endangered. Actually most of the native species are rebounding well after the disruptions due to terraforming."

"Umm…good?"

"I know, right? Nature is so resilient. At least, when people give it a chance. Some Rim worlds are just so sad."

"But seeing squirrits get eaten isn't?"

"No, there's plenty. Ooh, the wolf got one of the babies! It's not stopping, I'm not sure if it's quick enough to get another but it's gonna try. Ooh, it did!"

But Pin-Lee didn't see. They had closed their eyes.

Pin-Lee's Camping Pros and Cons List:

- Arada Loves It — Pro (Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)
- The Stupid Bugs All Look Alike - Con
- Stupid Cesspit Shrooms Stink and Explode Before You Find Them - Con
- Cute Things Get Eaten - Con

They crossed the meadow and headed up. The trail's rise wasn't steep, but there had been a lot of going up hills and for a time Pin-Lee's attention was completely on the trail in front of them.

The Arada said, “Stop.” She spoke quietly but something about her tone pulled Pin-Lee to an immediate halt. Over the feed, Arada said *Look a little to the left of the trail, up by the outcropping.*

Pin-Lee had only ever seen one in pictures. The awlerock’s twelve long tentacles draped over the rocks, with one looped over a tree branch. It might have looked a little like a land-bound octopus if not for the ring of eyes around its head, which it held slanted a bit to one side.

Awlerocks were herbivores but if startled or threatened, those tentacles (each up to two and a half meters long) were fully capable of crushing a person.

They ought to be scared, Pin-Lee thought. They could die right here and it wasn’t fair because they had checked and awlerocks weren’t supposed to come this far down the mountain. And yet all Pin-Lee could think was how amazing it was to stand here and see the creature’s actual eyes.

Don’t look away quickly but don’t stare, Arada said in their local feed. *We’re going to slowly back up a little, then turn around and go back.*

Should we really turn our back on it?

Yes. It’s not a predator, it’s not waiting for us to be vulnerable.

They backed down the trail. Pin-Lee tried not to stare.

OK, now turn around.

They turned and walked away. The back of Pin-Lee’s head felt itchy. It’s not as if they could do anything if the awlerock decided they were a threat, but it was still hard not to have eyes on it.

If only I’d brought a drone… Arada sent.

It’s… Pin-Lee couldn’t find the words. They wanted to say, it lives here, but Arada already knew that. They’d never been one to romanticize big fauna but somehow it was different meeting a creature they shared a planet with.

We’re the newcomers, Arada sent.

Yeah.

They hiked downhill as quietly as possible, not to conceal themselves from the awlerocks but because Arada said it disliked noise.

“We can talk again,” Arada said.

“That was so cool!”

“I know, right? We have to go back down though. I need to mark the trail so no one else comes this way and disturbs it. I wonder why it came down the mountain so far?”

“No one’s going to try to collect data and find out?”

“There’s already a program in place using hidden cameras, but we have to be careful not to disturb them. They’re very sensitive.”

“And that enormous thing survives just on lichen and moss? How on earth does it find enough to eat?”

“It’s amazing, right? Their territories are huge!”

Pin-Lee shook their head. “I’m just glad we survived!” The stress caught up with them and came out as laughter. They felt almost hysterical for a moment, then thought of Bharadwaj getting bitten by the worm and felt abruptly nauseous.

“Hey babe, maybe sit down a minute?” Arada glanced around. This section of trail had no conveniently placed rocks. “Or at least lean on a tree?”

Arada grabbed their arm and dragged them over to a tree. Pin-Lee leaned and swallowed.

Arada said, “They usually don’t attack hikers. It’s just that when they do attack, it hits the feed.”

Pin-Lee nodded and concentrated on taking deep breaths.

“Try to relax a little, and then since we’re turning back anyway, we’ll have time to reach the hot springs.”

“There are hot springs???”

“Yeah?”

“Yes, that! Let’s go to the hot springs! Hot springs are romantic and relaxing! We should totally go to the hot springs!”

“Babe, chill! How was I supposed to know you wanted to go to the hot springs?”

Pin-Lee took a deep, steadying breath and reminded themself that it was stupid to fight with someone who was already agreeing with them.

“I’m chilling,” they said. “I may have been a little stressed. You know, from the near death experience.”

“It’s a herbivore—”

“My point is that I would love to go to the hot springs. As you suggested.”

“Okay then.”

“Okay.”

They looked at each other cautiously.

“You’re not dizzy any more?”

“No, I’m good.”

“Okay, follow me.”

Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List:

- Arada Loves It — Pro (Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)
- The Stupid Bugs All Look Alike - Con
- Stupid Cesspit Shrooms Stink and Explode Before You Find Them - Con
- Cute Things Get Eaten - Con
- Awlerock - Pro

They arrived at the hot springs near sunset. The springs were natural but people had moved rocks to create low walls and direct the water into multiple small pools. Some held small groups of hikers while others were empty.

Someone had rigged a manual trickle shower and Pin-Lee scrubbed themself with relief, happy to get rid of whatever odor made her a target for the pale bees as well as the dust and sweat of the day’s hike. They sank into the blissfully hot water next to Arada with a happy sigh.

The water felt wonderful and Pin-Lee’s tense muscles began to unkink. And yet they couldn’t shake their mood. They were tired, embarrassed, and their bug bites throbbed. But more than that was some feeling they couldn’t quite identify that spread through them like an ache.

They knew they weren’t fully hiding it. Arada could tell something was wrong. At first she made an effort to act extra cheerful herself, but her mood slowly sank too.

There was an obvious question brewing: *Why did you come if you’re just going to sulk?* But Pin-Lee wasn’t sulking, even if it looked the same on the surface.

They drew a deep breath. “I’m not upset at the bug bites or anything. I’m just embarrassed that I’m so bad at this. You would have had more fun by yourself.”

By the time they finished, they had Arada’s full attention.

“Babe! You’re a great protector! I don’t need you to protect me from…” Arada searched for words and finally said, “*insects, or awlerocks.* Those are things I’m good at.”

“Then what *do* you need protection from?”

“Being alone. Things going wrong. Getting hurt off the feed with no one to go for help. But mostly…” Arada hesitated and took a deep breath as if summoning up her nerve. “Complicated decisions. Trying to handle the kinds of crisis where I don’t even know what the crisis is.”

“Like the survey,” Pin-Lee said, understanding a little better.

“Like the survey,” Arada agreed. “Babe, it’s not fair to suggest camping if you don’t want to come. You know I don’t have it in me to turn down a camping trip. It’s my favorite thing.”

“I *did* want to come. Actually, I had fun.”

Arada’s face lit up. “You did?”

“The scenery really was beautiful. And I liked seeing the squirrit family even if they got eaten. Even the bad parts were interesting and I liked being alone with you.”

Arada was never more beautiful than when she glowed with happiness like this. Pin-Lee leaned in for a kiss. It was nice at first, but then—”

“Ow!” Arada’s nose brushed the sting on her cheek and Pin-Lee pulled back reflexively.

“Oh! Sorry. I can switch angles…”

Suddenly it all seemed funny. Once Pin-Lee gave in to laughter, Arada joined her.

Laughing together seemed to relax some twisted up tension. Once they were calm again, Pin-Lee summoned up their nerve. “Sometimes I worry that I’m boring. I like looking after you but I also like impressing you. And then it turns into worrying about if I can’t impress you.”

“Babe, you are never boring! You’re the least boring person I know!”

“Really?” Pin-Lee felt warmth spread through them.

“You’re so complicated! I feel like I’ll never fully understand you.”

“I don’t feel that complicated though? I feel kind of bland.”

Arada considered that. “Maybe you’re not more complicated. Maybe everyone is equally complicated and it’s just that I notice your complexities more because I love you.”

“Aww.” Pin-Lee leaned in for another kiss, this time at a different angle. It went better.

When they pulled back, it was Arada’s term to work up her nerve.

“Sometimes I feel like you don’t want me to be good at stuff.”

“Babe, no! That’s not it at all.” Pin-Lee’s stomach dropped. “I love seeing you shine. That’s why I wanted to go camping with you. It’s amazing watching you in your element.” They hesitated, and then added, a little hurt. “Is that how you see me? As someone who’s threatened by your ability?”

Arada looked down. “No, not that exactly. It’s more just a fear a wrestle with, the same way you worry about being boring, right? I know I can be kind of a lot. And people either don’t like that or they like it a little too much.”

“Well fuck those people! I never meant to make you feel that way.”

They kissed a bit more. When they broke apart, Pin-Lee said, “I guess we should have talked about things like this before signing a contract with Ratthi.”

“Oh never mind Ratthi,” Arada said impatiently.

“You don’t mean that! You’re the one who wanted to date him!”

“I did.” Arada made a sulky face. “But then he broke up with me.”

“You’re still jealous?” Pin-Lee felt a pang of jealousy too. A mean little part of them wanted to ask why Arada thought she deserved Ratthi’s affection but Pin-Lee didn’t.

“Of course I was jealous.”

Arada said it matter-of-factly, like it wasn’t even anything to be embarrassed about. Pin-Lee, who tried so hard to hide that kind of feelings, just stared at her.

Arada went on. “He broke up with me because of you, even though all three of us were already under contract. Ugh! it was so annoying! I wouldn’t have minded if he didn’t like me, or if he liked someone else and he had to break the contract to date that other person.”

“So you specifically didn’t want him to like me?”

“What? Babe no, everybody should like you, you’re amazing!”

“Then why…”

“I already told you. He stopped having sex with me over it, even though he was already dating you. Ugh! He’s so… so Ratthi! I don’t know what goes on in his head sometimes.”

“But you wanted him to fall in love with you, not me?”

“A little,” Arada admitted. “I like attention. But I knew he wasn’t really in love with me. Mostly I wanted him to like me enough to have sex.” She sighed. “The sex was great.”

“Umm…It kinda wasn’t. For me.”

Arada looked crestfallen. “You didn’t have fun?”

“I guess I was kind of in my head?” Pin-Lee took a deep, steadying breath. This was the bit they’d been least eager to confess. “I never really wanted to date Ratthi. I suggested it because I thought, what if we all die and my last memory is that I was too jealous and insecure to make my wife happy?”

“Presumably your last memory would be something else like, how did that enemy SecUnit find us?”

“Arada!” Pin-Lee mock punched her.

“Sorry, sorry! But on the scale of things to regret before you die, you were really worried about me not getting to have sex with Ratthi?”

“Yeah,” Pin-Lee admitted. “Or I guess more generally, I worry I’m trying to keep you too close?”

“Babe. You can trust me to complain.”

That was true, and it cheered Pin-Lee up a bit.

“But why were you jealous and insecure that I liked Ratthi? Do you feel that way every time I like someone?”

Arada looked at them, her face calm and open.

“Yeah? It’s hard to admit. I feel so unenlightened.”

“Babe! There’s nothing wrong with monogamy.”

“I don’t think I’m monogamous though? I think I’m just jealous.”

“Why?”

“Ugh, I don’t know! If I even knew, maybe I wouldn’t feel that way?”

“Do you really think I’m going to lose interest in you so easily?”

“No? Yes? I think it’s like what you said about being afraid to be good at stuff. It’s not really coming from you, just from my own insecurities. That’s why it’s so embarrassing.”

“But if it’s insecurity, why did you hate it so much when Bharadwaj misunderstood and wanted to date you? And when Ratthi got feelings? Those are compliments, right?”

“Aaagh!” Pin-Lee grabbed their head. “Yes, they’re compliments, but not the ones I wanted? I hate telling people no.”

“Babe. You need to trust us not to be so fragile.”

Pin-Lee was about to reflexively deny it, but then they thought. Why *had* they been so upset that Bharadwaj thought they wanted to date her? Bharadwaj was the one who’d been rejected, shouldn’t she be the one to feel upset? And she’d been embarrassed, but only for a minute. Now any lingering awkwardness was all from Pin-Lee’s side.

“Okay,” they said, feeling a weird combination of liberated and stressed. “Okay. I’ll try.”

Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List:

- Arada Loves It — Pro (Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)
- The Stupid Bugs All Look Alike - Con
- Stupid Cesspit Shrooms Stink and Explode Before You Find Them - Con

- Cute Things Get Eaten - Con
- Awlerock - Pro
- Conversations at Hot Springs - Pro

Arada cocked her head. “Do you hear that?”

Pin-Lee listened. “Someone else is coming this way? I guess this is a pretty popular place, and I can see why. It’s amazing.”

“Yeah but I think that’s Ratthi.”

Pin-Lee wasn’t sure at first, but the closer the voices came, the more clearly it sounded like Ratthi. Then Ratthi and another man emerged from the trees into the clearing. Ratthi visibly startled when he saw them.

“Ah! Hello!” Ratthi said. “I didn’t realize you two would be here. Um, have you met Dutta?”

Dutta was a colleague from the wormhole department and (he cheerfully explained) one of Ratthi’s occasional lovers.

“This guy always lifts my mood,” Dutta said with a warm laugh. “How do you all know each other?”

And so they made excruciating small talk until Ratthi dragged Dutta off to another pool. (Dutta suggested that they all move to a larger pool but Ratthi said no, at which point Dutta finally appeared to notice the awkward air. Pin-Lee felt both guilty and relieved over that.)

Arada sighed. “I think we made Dutta uncomfortable.”

“Yeah.”

“At least Ratthi is having fun.”

Something squirmed in Pin-Lee’s stomach. “I think we made Ratthi uncomfortable too.”

“Should we go so we’re not bothering them?”

“No! Sorry babe, it’s just these pools are way too amazing. I don’t want to leave just because Dutta and Ratthi might or might not be feeling an emotion.”

Arada looked oddly uncomfortable at that. After a brief pause, she blurted out, “I’m sorry I got mad when you called the pale bees stupid.”

“Babe! You never apologize for defending animals!”

“I know you didn’t really mean it though.”

“I really didn’t,” Pin-Lee assured her. “I was just upset about getting stung. I’m sorry too. But why is it on your mind now?”

“I think sometimes I show off a little. I don’t want to leave either, I just felt obligated to suggest it. But if you said yes I would have been really disappointed.”

“Babe! It’s so sweet that you admitted that. And you can always show off to me.”

“Except when you get stung by pale bees.”

“Except then,” Pin-Lee agreed. They thought things over, then added, “Actually, should we ask Ratthi to come back? Just to talk things out a little more?”

“You don’t think it’s rude to Dutta?”

Pin-Lee waved at Ratthi’s pool. He and Dutta had joined three other hikers, and the five of them were in animated conversation. “I bet Dutta won’t mind if we’re quick.”

“And is there even anything to talk about?”

“Yeah. I think I’m over being jealous. I don’t really want to hurt his feelings, but he was the one to say we could have a series of conversations, right? Maybe something good will happen.” Pin-Lee thought a minute, then added, “If you even still like him.”

“I do,” Arada admitted. “Even when he’s annoying.” She went to get him.

Pin-Lee’s stomach twisted as Ratthi and Arada returned. *I survived pale bee bites, stub-tailed wolves, seeing an awlerock, and saying my feelings out loud,* Pin-Lee reminded themself. *I can survive talking to Ratthi.*

Arada and Ratthi returned to the pool. They shuffled around to make space. Pin-Lee positioned things so the three of them sat in a crescent with Arada in the middle. Ratthi looked eager yet nervous.

“Arada said you’d been talking,” he said.

Arada nodded.

Arada and Ratthi both began to speak. They both cut themselves off. Ratthi made one of the dramatic hand flourishes he was so fond of and said, “You first.”

Arada said, “I really like having sex with you and I would like to have more sex. It’s fine if you’re not falling in love with me. I’m not really falling in love with you either.”

Ratthi nodded. “Sex with you is an absolute delight and if not for the circumstances I would be entirely eager to continue. But there are some complexities.” He looked at Pin-Lee.

They said, “Ratthi, I like hanging out with you but I don’t like you *that* way.”

“I like hanging out with you too,” he said earnestly. “I would love to hang out with you regularly.”

“But won’t that frustrate you? You said you were falling in love with me.”

“That’s why I want to hang out with you on a regular basis. We could play KillJoyBloodLustTechRiot!”

Arada pulled a face and said, “Ugh, it’s so violent.”

“Babe! You watched baby squirrits get eaten with a smile on your face!”

“That’s just animals doing animal things!”

“And the game is just pixels! Pixels aren’t alive!”

Arada considered that for a moment. “But doesn’t it give you nightmares?”

“Babe! Focus!”

Both of them looked back at Ratthi, who watched with a delighted smile.

“You’re both so lovely,” he said. “In different ways.”

“I don’t want to have a baby with you,” Pin-Lee said abruptly.

Ratthi nodded. “I think I was affected by fear of dying. That was an inappropriate topic to raise.”

Pin-Lee felt somewhat reassured until Ratthi continued, “Since all of us do hazardous survey work which takes us off planet on a regular basis, we’d need more marital partners to form a stable household where some members provide child care, and—”

“Ratthi! This isn’t helping!”

He blinked. “But I was agreeing with you.”

“The issue isn’t that we don’t have enough marital partners! The issue is I don’t want to have a baby with you!”

“Then I don’t see the problem? Because I agree, it was an impractical suggestion.”

“The problem is you’re going to want a lot more from me than I’m willing to provide.”

“I don’t think so? Or let me put it another way, what is it you think I want?”

“For me to be in love with you!”

“But you just said you enjoy hanging out with me.”

“That’s not love!”

“Why not?”

“It’s…” Pin-Lee waved their hands and searched for words. “Surface level! You can play video games with anyone you don’t hate!”

“Yes, and you can play them with someone you feel deep and abiding affection for.”

“I also don’t want to have sex with you!” Pin-Lee said it quite forcefully. Ratthi appeared unphased.

“Ah… I was really quite sure I mentioned this but maybe I forgot? I don’t do monogamy, really.”

“I know? None of us were doing monogamy,” Pin-Lee said, waving a hand at Arada.

“Oh, sorry, I guess what I really meant was that I don’t restrict lovers to my romantic partners, and the flip side of that is I don’t really feel the drive to have sex with everyone I’m in love with.”

“You say everyone you’re in love with. How many people is that?”

Ratthi looked into the distance for a minute. “I suppose I’ve lost track?”

“Ratthi!” Pin-Lee was on the verge of adding “You’re such an enormous weirdo,” but they bit back the words. Instead they said, “That way of approaching things is new to me.”

Ratthi sighed. “I keep hearing that. But it can’t be that rare, can it? Maybe I just don’t explain things very well. But just to check, is that a no to KillJoyBloodLustTechRiot?”

Pin-Lee thought over the day, everything they’d talked about with Arada, everything they’d been through in the survey, and the reason they’d suggested forming a throuple with Ratthi in the first place. Suck everything you can out of life, they thought. You don’t know what the future will hold.

“It’s a yes to KillJoyBloodLustTechRiot, and a yes to sex between you and Arada,” Pin-Lee said. “And if I’m not happy I’m going to raise a stink as bad as the cesspit shroom.”

“That’s great!” Ratthi said, beaming. “I ought to get back to Dutta though, it’s bad manners of me to keep him waiting.”

Ratthi left. Arada asked, “Babe, are you sure about this?”

“Never,” Pin-Lee admitted. “I’m only really ever sure of myself in court. But I mean it.” The last light of the sun is still visible, the voices drifting in from the other pools are indistinct but reassuring, and Preservation Station was coming into view overhead. They were glad they came.

Pin-Lee’s Camping Pros and Cons List:

- Arada Loves It — Pro ~~(Maybe a Little Too Much - Con?)~~
- The ~~Stupid~~ Bugs All Look Alike - Con
- ~~Stupid~~ Cesspit Shrooms Stink and Explode Before You Find Them - Con
- Cute Things Get Eaten - Con
- Awlerock - Pro
- Conversations at Hot Springs - Pro

- Unexpected Meetings at Hot Springs - Pro
- Even the Bad Parts Were Worth It - Pro

End Notes

In my head, it would be the funniest thing ever if by "falling in love" Ratthi actually meant "want to play video games with." I don't know if I sold it on the page, but one thing I love about the throuple is they make me laugh. So I hope someone besides me gets a smile from this :)

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