

The bar was as dingey as they come when you go to a random bar at the edge of Washington D.C. Going out that night wasn't a part of his original plan, but an unsettling atmosphere had permeated their temporary housing at Quantico, thickening the air and making it almost suffocating. The feeling of being observed had haunted him throughout a long day of monotonous meetings and stale discussions. Yet, whenever he turned his gaze, no one returned it—except for the usual suspects.

ETA. and Hank had treated him normally, their banter and teasing flowing as usual, but even they couldn't ignore the shift in the atmosphere. ETA, usually at ease with the others, maintained an uncharacteristic stiffness, her back held straight as a rod, and all her communication with them short and factual. Hank seemed more protective than ever, as if guarding them both. They had all chosen to ignore the signs, refusing between the three of them to acknowledge these intricacies that both Lucky and Yasopp seemingly remained indifferent to, both of them as relaxed as ever.

He played his part, mirroring their indifference, but as the evening wore on and dinner passed, it became increasingly unbearable. That's when he made the decision to leave, abandoning the others engrossed in their poker game in the temporary quarters. He extended an invitation to everyone, yet no one seemed interested, not even the others. He shrugged it off, resolving to venture out alone.

The bar pulsated with life, its crowded space transforming into an impromptu dance floor near the worn-out jukebox, while others mingled throughout. He managed to secure a stool at the far end of the bar, distanced from the loud patrons.

"Hey there, handsome"

The just-vacated seat beside him had found a new occupant. And what a stunning occupant it was—a vision of brown hair that flowed down her back, and eyes that possessed the most enchanting shade of brown. He never expected to encounter such beauty in this place, and his heart fluttered at the sight of her, a funny feeling in his stomach.

"Hey there, beautiful" he responded and accompanied the words with his best smile.

"Do you mind if I buy you a drink?" he asked, and she nodded in consent, turning towards the bar and summoning the attention of the bartender with a shout. The bartender, visibly irritated and new from the recent shift change, glanced at the pair and did a double-take. They made quite an intriguing sight—the brunette in her colorful cardigan and short skirt standing alongside the larger, sun-kissed blond, wearing faded jeans and a black t-shirt. The bartender in contrast was tall, and dark and handsome and a total stranger to them both.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked, his gaze alternating between the girl and the boy, lingering for a fleeting moment on each of them.

"I'll have a bloody Mary, and my friend here..." the brunette paused, glancing over at the blond.

"Bernie," Bernie supplied.

"Bernie will have..." she trailed off, letting him finish his order. Bernie displayed his almost empty beer bottle, flashing a charming smile at the bartender. Their eyes met briefly before the bartender nodded and sauntered off to prepare their drinks.

As the bartender returned with their drinks, he found the pair engrossed in a lively debate about the ideal date: a movie outing or a romantic picnic on a hot summer evening. Despite the discussion, Bernie made it a point to take care of the bill, generously leaving a substantial tip for the bartender.

The argument unfolded as follows: Bernie advocated for the cinema, highlighting the break it provided from the heat with air-conditioning, and how a movie served as a perfect conversation starter. The brunette countered, arguing that a picnic at sunset was much more romantic. Bernie retorted that a movie had its own charm, emphasizing shared popcorn, the arm slung around the other's shoulders, and the way you could observe the date's reactions to the on-screen events.

As the bartender arrived with what he assumed was their change, Bernie regarded it as a tip instead.

"You keep it, my friend," Bernie insisted, offering him a radiant smile. "But I do need your opinion – whose side are you on?"

The brunette appeared equally curious about the bartender's response, prompting him to take a moment to actually consider their points.

"I must agree with Bernie here," he replied eventually. The brunette groaned, playfully throwing her hands in the air.

"Really? It seems neither of you are true romantics," she teased, though the way she looked at Bernie betrayed a different sentiment. The bartender left them to their evening but returned throughout the night to serve them more drinks. Bernie made sure to establish brief yet significant eye contact each time. The bartender was a bit endeared, just as the brunette beside the blond.

As the night wore on, the brunette began to feel the effects of the drinks, and of the flirting. The bar gradually emptied around them as they talked, leaving the dance floor devoid of swaying bodies and many seats at the bar vacant. The tables, however, remained occupied by happy drinkers, while people continued to come, and to go.

The bartender kept the drinks flowing, indulging the brunette, while Bernie happily nursed a few beers. Her speech slurred as she leaned in closer to him.

"So, are you going to kiss me?" she whispered, her gentle breath caressing his neck and tickling his short hair.

Bernie leaned back slightly, placing a hand on her cheek, and studying her intently for a moment. His thumb traced a delicate path across her cheek, grazing her lips softly.

"Not tonight, no" he responded softly. Before she could answer, or rebuke him, he smiled at her – a bittersweet smile that looked remorseful.

"You're too drunk, and I believe a cab ride home is what you need more than anything else." His words caught the bartender's attention, who nodded in agreement and began moving toward the phone by the cash register. Bernie turned his attention back to the crestfallen girl.

"Such a gentleman," she murmured, leaning forward to rest her head on his shoulder, inadvertently dislodging his hand in the process. Bernie allowed his hand to continue its trajectory, turning it into a soothing motion, gliding up and down her back instead.

"You've been absolutely lovely," he whispered, and she hummed in response. They remained seated like that until the cab arrived, exchanging tender murmurs and sweet nothings. The bartender discreetly observed their interactions, allowing them their moment.

Bernie accompanied her to the waiting cab, ensuring her safe entry before leaning in the window to wave her off.

"Call me?" she asked, to which he smiled and nodded, despite the fact that she never shared her number. Her realization of the oversight would come the next morning, but even if she had remembered to give it to him now, he wouldn't have reached out. It had all been a lighthearted encounter, all in good fun.

"Sweet dreams, beautiful," he told her, watching her disappear into the night and out of his life as the cab drove away. Returning to his stool at the bar, the bartender joined him, presenting him with another beer.

"You didn't follow?" the bartender inquired, but Bernie simply shrugged in response. The smile that had shone on his face all evening cracked slightly, revealing a wearier side of him.

"She wasn't my type," Bernie confessed, punctuating his statement with a large gulp of beer. The bartender raised an eyebrow.

"Really?" the bartender asked, meeting Bernie's gaze head-on, only to eventually divert his eyes. It didn't feel like a loss.

"What's your type then?" Bernie volleyed the question back at him. The bartender glanced around, finding no immediate need for his attention, and redirected his focus to the blond before him. Picking up a rag, he began wiping the bar as though engrossed in his task.

"Blond and flirty," the bartender replied, prompting Bernie to burst into laughter. In that moment, the bartender realized that perhaps neither of them had been as relaxed as he initially thought. His shoulders slumped, and Bernie's laughter continued, turning into a small snigger. They fell into a brief, comfortable silence, allowing the bartender to finish his cleaning duties.

"So, if taking a pretty girl home isn't on your agenda for the night, what brings you here?" the bartender finally inquired. Bernie leaned in closer, and the space between them suddenly felt simultaneously too small and too vast. The bartender couldn't help but glance down at Bernie's lips.

"Just, you know, cruising," came the response, hitting the bartender with an undeniable lack of subtlety. It suited him just fine. He glanced at the clock above the staff area door.

"I have a break in ten minutes. Would you like to join me for a smoke outside then?" he proposed, directing his gaze back to Bernie.

The bartender believed he had bore witness to Bernie's flirting throughout the evening, from the meaningful glances they had shared to how Bernie had interacted with the girl. Yet, all of that paled in comparison to the slow, sultry smile that now graced Bernie's face. It was

accompanied by a tantalizing glimpse of his tongue as he moistened his lips, and the intensity of the expression reached his eyes. The bartender noticed how Bernie's gaze shifted from his eyes to his mouth and back again. It left a burning feeling in his gut and a dryness in his mouth and well, he could probably take that break now anyways.

The night was cold outside, but that just made them want to keep closer to each other, huddling into each other's warmth. The bartender leaned against the wall, finding support, while Bernie leaned into him, seeking closeness. Light was sparse in the dark alley, filtering through a narrow opening in the propped up backdoor beside them.

Despite their limited time together, they savored each moment, unhurriedly exploring one another. Bernie pressed himself against the bartender, effectively trapping him against the wall. In response, the bartender ran his hand through Bernie's blond hair, playfully tugging at it. Their free hands roamed, gliding over each other and under clothes to reach the other's skin.

Bernie leaned closer, his warm breath ghosting across the bartender's lips. Their gazes flickered between each other's eyes and lips, anticipation building between them. They kiss, their connection slow and deliberate, brimming with sweetness until desire overtook it and became fervent. The bartender lets out a low groan, breaking away from the kiss as his head thudded back against the wall. Bernie redirected his attention to the bartender's neck, his lips tracing a path of kisses while they both catch their breath.

"*God*" the bartender softly moaned as Bernie did something delicious with his tongue. Bernie grinned against the nape of his neck and gave a gentle bite.

"Bernie's fine" he told the bartender who only responded with a breathless chuckle.

"Let me worship you" Bernie added later, and although it wasn't the perfect line in the circumstance, at least it fit the iconography he was going for. The bartender groaned, but it was hard to discern whether it was from excitement or exasperation. Bernie made sure to position himself in a way that shielded the bartender from the entrance of the alley, providing both protection and support. Neither of them was too keen on losing their footing and toppling into the garbage cans beside them. Falling into a bunch of trash was the greatest mood killer.

"I found him!" Someone shouted at the entrance of the alley. That about took the cake from the potential of falling into garbage when it came to killing the mood. Bernie turned towards the man shouting, assuming it was a customer looking for the bartender. However, as more men joined the first, Bernie's bad feeling grew. These large figures did not match any of the patrons from inside the bar, and a shiver ran down Bernie's spine: he recognized them.

Bernie shielded the bartender from the other men, hoping they didn't make out too much detail in the dim light. Meanwhile, the bartender was frantically readjusting his attire, trying to return it to its normal state. Bernie didn't get that luxury, standing there in disheveled hair, his T-shirt untucked and jacket askew.

"Get inside and make sure to lock the door behind you" Bernie instructed the bartender in a quiet tone. They had the good fortune because the door was just behind their backs, making it easy for the bartender to take a small step and a slight turn before he stood on the other side of the door, securing the door firmly between them. The bartender stood by the door for a moment,

leaning his forehead onto the cold surface, heart pounding in his chest. On the other side, Bernie stood alone.

He remained motionless by the door, observing the five men who had gathered before him following the initial call. They were not there because they had found him as in the bartender, but because they had found him, as in Bernie. He wasn't the sharpest tool in the shed, neither especially perceptive nor smart, but this much was clear as he took the others in.

"Hi, guys" he greeted them, "what are you doing here?"

The five men from his squad was angled towards him, but in the near darkness, he couldn't see their expressions. The one closest took a step forward, and his grin became visible as he got closer.

"Oh Bernie. We were looking for you, of course" he said as he stepped even closer, bridging the large gap between them slowly. Bernie recognized the voice as Gab's.

"The others were worried" he continued, but it was a blatant lie. If the others had truly been concerned, it wouldn't have been Gab, Rockstar, Limejuice, Monster, and Punch standing before him. It would have been Hanks, ETA, Lucky, or Yasopp – the ones who genuinely cared. Bernie knew this was all a façade, covering something else, something scarier.

Bernie had been to war, been in active combat, but never had he been so afraid as he was now at the lie. Then, he had people he trusted covering his back. Now, he stood alone facing them instead, trust broken. Something had happened between then and now, and he wasn't sure what, but he had a hunch, at it made his insides turn to ice.

Punch and Monster joined Gab's side, effectively trapping Bernie in the alley. Though they were still a few paces away, the threat they posed hung in the air. The others remained at the alley's entrance, keeping watch. Rockstar glanced back at the four of them, his expression reflecting sheer terror. He was the youngest, the squad's babyface, and by the look on his face, this was not what he had expected this evening.

"Who was that then?" Punch asked, gesturing towards the now closed door. Even if the bartender had rushed inside and called the police, there was little hope of anyone arriving in time to deescalate this, especially at this hour and in this part of town. Bernie felt his possibilities to come out of this unscathed diminished by the second.

Bernie cleared his throat, feigning nonchalance, praying to whomever listened that they hadn't caught any details at all about the bartender.

"She was just some fun for the night" he replied, forcing the broadest smile he could muster, lying through his teeth.

Bernie may not have been the fastest or strongest fighter in his squad, but he was *the natural* as they lovingly had called him, having effortlessly learnt new techniques during training. It was this ability that allowed him to dodge Punch's lightning-fast punch aimed at his face, he was the fastest after all. However, Bernie's evasion led him straight into the waiting arms of Monster, who swiftly pinned him against the wall. Monster's massive arm pressed against Bernie's windpipe, causing his head to collide with the wall forcefully. Punch, seizing the opportunity, forced Bernie's other arm against the wall. Bernie groaned, struggling to breathe.

Gab garbed his face, forcing him to meet his cold gaze. Bernie used his free hand to grab onto Gab's arm, but no matter how hard he gripped the arm, his opponent remained unyielding.

"You, Bernie, are a fucking liar" Gab spat, delivering a punch directly to Bernie's solar plexus. Bernie's body instinctively tried to double over, but he was held firmly in place, the impact robbing him of all breath. He lacked the air even to groan or respond, allowing Gab to continue his verbal assault.

"Not only was that not a girl, but a fag just like yourself" Gab sneered, pointing aggressively towards the door. Bernie focused on getting air back inside his lungs, desperately trying to prevent the panic that was bubbling under the surface. The only thing he could do was regain control of his breathing.

"Do you seriously think we are a bunch of idiots?" Gab's face was so close to Bernie's that flecks of spit landed on his face as Gab spoke. Bernie closed his eyes, attempting to push away the hatred emanating from the other man.

"Do you seriously think we don't notice how you look at Hank?" Gab continued, and in that moment, Bernie realized he had been the idiot to believe that his attraction had gone unnoticed. He had been meticulous in hiding his feelings, never allowing himself to indulge in longing glances or displaying his affection. Had his attempts at concealment been in vain all this time? Had he always been so inept at disguising his emotions? He felt himself starting to spiral.

"Or how you look at us in the shower" Gab continued his rant, but this was the statement that bought Bernie out of his spiral of panic. It was a blatant lie. He had never, ever looked at them that way. The absurdity of the statement forced an involuntary laugh to escape Bernie's lips before he could suppress it. Gab responded by breaking Bernie's nose.

Blood got everywhere, and Bernie momentarily lost consciousness because when he came to, Monster and Punch were holding him up. Bernie had endured his fair share of beatings, even as a child on the playground from older kids, but this was different. These were his equals in combat, and they knew precisely how to inflict effective damage. At least the punch had resulted in Gab not holding Bernie's face anymore.

Gab struck again, not targeting Bernie's face this time, but his torso, likely fracturing some ribs. Bernie made sure not to give them the satisfaction of making even a single sound. Gab persisted, delivering blow after blow, alternating between grunts and slurs directed into Bernie's face as he did so.

Eventually, Gab stopped. It might have lasted no more than fifteen seconds, but it had been enough for Limejuice to intervene and urge Gab to stop.

"Just get it over with" Limejuice told Gab from his post as lookout. Of all the hurtful things Gab had spewed, Limejuice's detached words hurt the most, because they implied a plan to do this to him. This wasn't a mere realization followed by spontaneous reaction; they had uncovered the evidence they needed and were now proceeding with their scheme. Bernie slumped heavily against the others, forcing them to tighten their grip on him, and locked eyes with Gab, refusing to let him do this the easiest way: with Bernie in shame before him.

"Here's the thing, Bernie" Gab began, condescendingly patting Bernie's cheek as if his now reddened and swollen hands hadn't just inflicted blow after blow upon the blond moments ago.

“None of us wants you around, especially not in the squad anymore. The problem with this is that the times are changing, and even though you are a liar and a sick individual, we all know that Hanks will let you stay if we bring this to his attention. He always took to protecting you something fiercely” he continued, “and even if he did bring it further up, they’d just call you sick and give you a disability discharge, and well that is far more than you deserve.”

A sickening feeling twisted in Bernie’s gut as he realized where this was headed. Lately, the stigma of being gay in the military had somewhat diminished, with politician weighing in on the current ban of homosexuality in the military. Bernie had hoped to bide his time, seeing that proper change was on the horizon. It dawned on him now that the change in public perception not only did him good but had influence over the solutions possible for the ones doing the witch-hunt in the military.

“So, we figured, let’s just make you desert instead, and punish you while we’re at it” Gab said with a sadistic grin. His smile was cruel and righteous in the most fucked up way. As Bernie looked at the people around him, he no longer recognized them. A few hours earlier he would have called them family, close friends, brothers in arms, but these people were strangers to him now. The betrayal left him hollowed out, no enthusiasm for the future – a future he no longer had.

Because Bernie had made up his mind. He would desert the Marine Corp, regardless of the pain it would cause and the absence of a future outside of it. He felt he had no other choice. How could he ever trust these people with his life again? Coming forward would require exposing his true self, explaining everything, and that would only lead to more heartbreak. He couldn't bear the thought of Hank's disappointment.

Bernie averted his gaze, breaking eye contact with Gab, who took it as a victory, his grin growing impossibly wider, impossibly more malicious.

“Is that a yes, Bernie boy?” Gab taunted, grabbing Bernie’s face again, forcing their eyes to meet. “Use your words. You’ve always loved the sound of your own voice, so use it now.”

Bernie burned.

“Just let me fucking go” he croaked, attempting to release himself from Gab’s grip, “I’ll be gone. just let me go.”

Gab studied him for a moment before patting his chin and releasing Bernie’s face.

“What a good little obedient fag you are, following orders like a champ” he sneered, each word laced with mockery and hatred. He gestured to Monster and Punch, signaling them to do the same and release Bernie. They slammed him against the wall one final time before complying.

“Probably got off of it too” Monster murmured to Punch as they walked away.

Bernie could barely stand on his own, but sheer spite and the rough texture of the wall supported him. He wiped his face on the sleeve of his jacket, smearing the blood around rather than truly cleaning it. His abdomen throbbed with a dull ache, not overpowering but enough to hinder his movements.

Monster and Punch had joined Limejuice by the opening of the alley, while Rockstar remained at a distance. Gab strolled leisurely towards the others, enjoying his victory a bit too much, needing to revel in it just a little longer.

“I wonder if Hank will get an even bigger stick up his ass now that he has only one person to suck his cock” he loudly declared in the small alley. “Perhaps we should get rid of him next, then ETA will have no choice but to suck mine instead.”

Something clicked within Bernie then: the unease he had sensed in both Hank and ETA earlier that day. Perhaps they weren't just targeting him, but his best friends as well. Bernie could accept the consequences for himself—he might even deserve them—but his friends did not. They never would. If this fight was about them, Bernie refused to be the one to succumb in shame.

Before his brain fully registered his actions, he lunged at Gab, grabbed his shoulder, and forcefully threw him to the dirty ground. He straddled him in one fluid motion and returned the broken nose.

“Don’t you even dare bring them into this” Bernie hissed in Gabs broken face, blood mingled with spit flying, “I’ll never forgive you if you even as much as touch a hair on their heads.”

He managed another punch in Gabs face, knocking him out, before the others pulled Bernie of their friend. He landed awkwardly, rolling away from them, and quickly assumed a defensive crouch as they closed in. His ribs throbbed from Gab's earlier assault, and his ankle ached from the rough landing, but he managed to stay on his feet as Limejuice advanced. He had no way out of this fight, Bernie knew that, because if he tried to grapple him, the others would just move in, and he was in no condition to actually knock Limejuice down. He tried anyway, punching his former friend with his non-dominant hand to surprise the other. It didn’t connect as intended, hitting Limejuice's thigh instead, but it still momentarily disrupted his former friend. Limejuice’s plan had been to force Bernie down, but with the pain, he now decided for a choke hold instead. Bernie had no way to avoid it in his position, but he fought it nonetheless, managing to both punch and scratch Limejuice’s arm until he let go, moving away.

Monster moved in, going straight for Bernie's head, and he had no choice but to block the punch head-on. Bernie did so clumsily, the impact landing on his wrist instead of his forearm, causing excruciating pain and a stifled sob. Punch had moved to Bernie's side, and with Monster's advantage, they grappled him, taking hold of Bernie’s arm and twisting it behind his back, applying intense pressure that nearly snapped it. Bernie's only defense was to go with the motion, allowing himself to be brought down to his knees before them. While on the ground, Monster delivered a powerful kick to Bernie’s back as Punch released his hold, sending Bernie sprawling face-first. He managed to curl into a protective position, shielding his head from the worst of the kicks, but the rest of his body remained vulnerable. They took full advantage of that.

Limejuice was the first to step away, dragging Punch along. With one final blow to Bernie's back, Monster intensified the pain. Bernie wished for unconsciousness to claim him, but it eluded him.

Instead, someone kicked him forcefully in the ribs, rolling him onto his back. The change in position was immediate and agonizing—he couldn't breathe properly, not in this position, yet he couldn't move either.

Gab loomed above him, his heavy boot pressing down on Bernie's ribcage. He leaned in, increasing the pressure, and Bernie felt his ribs *move*.

He screamed then; the air forced out of his lungs as his ribs were forced into them. Gab removed his foot from what once had been Bernie's chest, but now only felt like a battered cave-in of splinters and piercing pain. Moments later, Gab's face swam into focus, hovering just inches from Bernie's.

He whispered in Bernie's ear, his words filled with malice, "I hope you burn in hell."

Bernie barely registered the words, too busy suffocating: drowning in his own lungs. Gab spat in his face before walking away too the others. They left him there, alive but not breathing.

Bernie closed his eyes for a final time to a view of a dark, overcast, and grey, light polluted sky. It wasn't even beautiful.

And then, he opened them again.

Efterord av mig

På hösten 1991 utvärderades Marine Corps LINE combat system i DC någonstans så jag lät dem bo i Quantico och så jag tänker att Bernies squad var med i den processen, då de egentligen är stationerade med 1st Marine Division i California. Tidigare det här året var de med i Gulfkriget, i striden vid Kuwaits Internationella Flygplats. Marine Corps vann den utan större förluster, så var nog inte supertraumatiskt.

Jag har last på alldeles för mycket känner jag rent spontant.

De är totalt 13 i squaden, (S)Hank(s) (squad leader), Bernie Beckman (inofficiell second in charge), Lucky Roux, Yasopp, Limejuice, (Bonk) Punch, Monster, (Building) Snake, Hongo, Gab, Rockstar, ETA and Teeth. ETA är den enda kvinnan, döpt efter att alltid fråga "är vi framme snart" fast "What's the ETA?". Limejuice kallas det för att han en gång råkade squirta det i sitt eget öga. Rockstar vill bara vara en i gänget, han är yngst, låt honom vara.

Bernie är Sanji, det blev så lite.

Också, slängde in möjlighet för hämnd, för självklart kommer han inte riktigt hämnas sig själv (i alla fall inte än), men ens möjligheten till att de han tycker om kan bli påverkade är för mycket.

Jag kunde gjort det här mörkare, det kunde jag, men jag ville inte skriva det...

Jag vill tacka Christoffer och ChatGPT. Utan er hade inte denna lilla horribla scen varit möjlig.