

## Ditch

“Is there anyone there?!” Mel cried from the bottom of the hole. Her voice sounded loud in the dark, damp ditch echoed off from the tall vertical drop they came in from earlier. Both of her feet were ankle deep in the mud below her, seeping in between her shoe, socks and toes after what seemed to be hours standing in the stuff.

Standing next to her in the long, cramped space, Daniel frowned. “If you keep yelling like that, you’ll strain your voice.”

“I don’t care!” Mel snapped. “No one will find us if we stay quiet! Hellooooo?!”

“Mel, calm down. Someone will come looking for us, I know it.”

“That was over...” she glanced up at the sky before snapping back at him. “I can’t even tell anymore! The sun’s already gone!” Mel pointed to the long narrow strip of light up top, where the blue sky was starting to dull and fade in color. By dusk, it’ll be yellow, and then eventually black.

“Soon it’ll set...” she started, but sighed before she could finish. She slumped back down into the murky ground filled with mud and grime. She had long since stopped caring about keeping her clothes clean; she had ruined them already by trying to climb the slippery surface.

“This is all your fault,” she murmured darkly.

Daniel sighed. Granted, she was right; neither of them asked for this kind of predicament, let alone to be trapped in a murky hole together. They were just two young teens at summer camp, exploring a bit far out of the camp grounds for some adventure. Funny how things turned out...



It happened just a week ago. One day during a summer camp hike, he took a side stroll from the usual route and came across a hole on the ground. It was dark, creepy, but big enough for him to crawl into. Using some of his hiking supplies like his rope and harness, he climbed down to investigate. Being a thirteen year old kid just going through puberty, he expected something gross like a hive of swarming insects, or something cool like a treasure chest containing the best comic books people haven't seen for years.

What he didn't expect was something beautiful and amazing.

The hole he climbed down into was really a secret cave with a big open space, like the Bat Cave or something. It was bigger than the hole outside seemed to indicate. Nearly the whole place was filled with water; blue, shimmering, soothingly refreshing water. He probably wouldn't have noticed the place if not for the glowing rocks from below the water, giving the place a sort of feeling fit only to gods. It was amazing, spectacular, and he was the only one who knew about it! Though with a discovery so amazing and unreal, it needed to be told to someone, anyone! But who to tell about this underground lake?

He thought about some friends, but they wouldn't be interested in swimming; they mostly keep inside of their cabins and stations at Arts and Crafts rather than engage in activities like swimming. No, a swimming spot this great needed to be swum in, not just gossiped about. Summer camp was ending soon too, so unless he found the right person, than this venture would turn out to be a pointless detour.

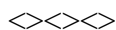
And then it hit him: Melody Rainbow, the fifteen year old gold-medal champ of the swimming rally and canoe racing events. The stunning mermaid with the black-hair, dark as the

shade of night cut short midway to her neck. The modest camper who wore an ebon-colored body swimsuit, and managed to flaunt it better than most other girls would otherwise. The British girl most likely to graduate as a candidate for the next Summer Olympics 10 km Marathon swimming event, and win for Gold.

But he couldn't tell her first. She was cute and older, and someone like him asking to show her some hole outside of camp sounded like 'shagging' her, as she put it to the other guys that asked her for something. He didn't want to give her that impression, whatever it was.

Just as he was considering who else to tell, he heard his stomach growl loudly. Shaking these thoughts away, he climbed back out, found the main road and hurried back to the campsite. He could decide who to tell later; it was time for lunch!

He quickly climbed back out, planning to leave the harness there for an easier climb down. However, in all his excitement, while he did know where he found the hole to the underground lake, he forgot to check and remember what exactly the hole looked like.



*“Gooooooooood afternoon, campers! For lunch today, we’re all having a hearty helping of Peanut Butter and Jelly sandwiches! There’s plenty to go around, complete with Minute Maid™ fruit juice and barbeque Lays™ potato chips! After lunch is canoe riding in the Little Bear Pond. Free swim is also available, but don’t go in too soon after eating, or you’ll get a cramp! Enjoy!”*

Daniel ignored the announcement for the most part as he followed the other summer campers to the mess hall. Sure enough, they had the food arranged out as they said, just left out

on tables with a chaperone to make sure each person got at least one. Daniel had heard plenty of stories of other camps having horrible grub and glob for food, so he was glad this camp wasn't one of them. After getting his bag, he found his two friends sitting in a corner table all to themselves. Colin was a blond chubby boy playing with his chips. Roger had a black cowlick with a 'scar' tattoo, and was stripping his plastic juice bottle of its wrapper delicately as if planning to save it.

"You're late," Roger said when he arrived at their table, eyes not leaving his bottle.

Daniel shrugged as he un-wrapped his PB&J sandwich. "You know me; just doing another usual hike around the area!"

"That's dangerous, you know," Colin chided; he was fiddling with his potato chips in each hand before eating them, pretending they were fighter jets going into his black hole of a mouth. "You could end up with a broken bone or something and miss all sorts of stuff!"

"Like?"

"Arts and Crafts, for one," Roger smirked. "If we pool all our collected resources and materials together, we can make a legit go-kart and scare the pants off of the counselors."

"We still need to think of projectiles," Colin added. "You think we can make papier-mâché balls as hard as rocks?"

"I think we can get something better. Danny, you've been collecting rocks, right?"

He swallowed a bite of his sandwich in bewilderment. "What? Why?"

“Well, you always go out and risk your own safety doing who-knows-what in the woods, without any protective equipment like guns or shields. Surely you can find something cool on your hiking quests sometime?”

Daniel smiled, recalling his memory of the cave. “Well, I found something cool just today. See, it’s-“

“Cool, let’s see ‘em.”

Daniel blinked. “See what?”

“The cool rocks you found?” Roger reminded, extending his hand. “Hand them over.”

“I didn’t find any rocks,” Daniel answered. “Just-“

“No rocks?!” Roger cried. He lowered his voice quickly when a counselor looked their way briefly. “Then how are we supposed to get back at them? Have you forgotten that they *stole* our Nintendo DS™’s?!”

“I believe the term is confiscated,” he reminded. “And they said they would return them after summer camp is over. They just want us to enjoy the outdoors and not sit around fiddling with electronics all day every day.”

Colin rolled his eyes. “That’s what they *all* say, but I know that one of them is playing my file of Mario Kart DS™. I miss that game.”

“So we can’t get back at them unless we have rocks or something hard to hit them with,” the de facto leader added. “I don’t see how anything you found would be ‘cool’.”

“But it is!”

“Then what is it?” Both Roger and Colin were staring at him now, ready to gauge what kind of answer he was going to give.

Daniel sighed and decided against it; their silly revenge plot was something he could never understand, even if the idea of making a go-kart sounded cool. They also were delusional on the fact that they could even *make* a go-kart out of arts and crafts materials, let alone effectively. Last he saw their kart they had just finished making a papier-mâché wheel the size of a basketball.

“Never mind; you guys wouldn’t understand anyway.” With that, he took his food and left the table to sit somewhere else. Maybe he could tell his discovery to someone else... but whom?

“What’s wrong with him?” he heard Colin asked.

“It’s the cooties,” Roger spat. “He’s never been the same ever since Melody Rainbow marked him with hers.”

“Cooties?” the plump boy asked.

“You know; that love sickness!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not what it’s called-“

“Of course it’s not what it’s called! It’s a *code-word*, stupid!” The rest of the bickering was drowned out as Daniel moved further away. He felt annoyed that they still disliked Mel for some reason. Maybe he should tell her after all?

He could see her at her table now, sitting and chatting with her friend Paula. He remembered the first time he saw her, as she made the last stretch of her first race at Camp Weekeela. She came in third but had fun and was all smiles congratulating and shaking hands with her winning rivals. She drew his attention from the winner the moment she pulled her swimming cap off. The way her short locks uncurled and swung about as she shook her head back and forth. The stream of water droplets that flew away from her yet dazzled her appearance like neon lights.

Yeah, he had cooties for her bad... so bad that he quickly sat down in an empty table before he was caught staring. It wasn't the usual physical contact, but more like cupid's arrow. The code he and Roger came up with was a warning for the *actual* cooties, in case someone they knew was suspect to the icky girl contamination. He wouldn't mind if it came from Melody, though.

She needed to know about the cave... if he could tell her anyway. Because really; an underground lake that only he knew about? It was the perfect plan to woo her, ask her out, and maybe, just maybe, see her in that slim, black one piece bathing suit again.

It was a long shot, and Mel wasn't normally a girl easily impressed; she wouldn't take any ordinary racing challenge unless there was a wager to the winner, for one. Didn't matter whether she won or lost; she's human after all, not perfect. She would be interested in anything swimming related, but only if there was something to gain out of it. She just loved water that much.

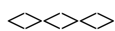
Daniel knew she had to be the one to tell about the underground lake. He knew how bored Melody was already of their summer camp. The daily schedule was basically an hour of

planned activities, followed by an hour of free time, jumping back and forth until night time. The major swimming events were already over. Only a handful of people could challenge Melody Rainbow at swimming, and they all left early for different reasons. Randy had to study for a scholarship, Claire left for a national swimming contest she signed up for a month in advance, and Rafael was homesick. Rafael was one of several others that came to the camp from South America, but he probably didn't expect to stay so long a summer session.

Anyway, Melody, or Mel as her friends called her, hadn't swam for weeks after all that. Daniel wanted nothing more than to try and rekindle that for the last week or so they were here. Maybe even get to know her well enough to call her by nickname. So, using their hour of free time, he went off to ask her to see the underground lake with just him.

What's more, he wasn't sure if he could fix his looks. He considered combing his brown hair, but they were going to go swimming anyway, if all went according to plan. Same went for attire too; all he needed were his trunks in the end. But what if she didn't like how he looked in his trunks? Her competition usually included people with regular work-out routines and muscles. Daniel was by no means fat, but his tummy was kind of flabby. He wasn't competitive with sports or swimming, and compared to her, he'd look geeky. Hopefully the few small pimples on his forehead weren't that noticeable, either.

Well, telling her about the cave still sounded like a better alternative than Roger or Colin. She would appreciate it more than they ever could. At least that's what Daniel kept telling himself.





*“It’s free period, campers! For the next hour, you are free to engage in any activity you so choose, including swimming! All swimming events for Camp Wekeela are over, but the Little Bear Pond is open every day to those who want to enjoy a lovely swim! Enjoy your day!”*

Camp Wekeela was an overnight sleep away summer camp in Maine. It was once an all-girls camp in the 20’s called Camp We-You-Wega. Then it was bought off after World War II as Camp Wekeela and became an all-boys camp. Now it was a co-ed camp after being bought again; has been for the last thirty or so years. It’s a really popular camp as well, because of the pond to swim in that offered free swim period as just announced.

By the second free period, Daniel mentally convinced himself to go over and ask her straight up, alone if possible. Walking down to one of the camp areas, she found her talking with Paula again at the pier. Paula was changing to her bathing suit by lifting her orange striped shirt over her head and revealing her pink swimsuit. Daniel distracted himself by looking at a window to the mess hall and try straightening up his appearance again. He couldn’t help but eavesdrop on their conversation as his hand pulled back his hair.

“Up for a swim, Mel?” asked Paula. “I think the weather is perfect for it today!”

“Not today,” she sighed slightly. “I’m just here to buddy up with you... maybe tomorrow?”

“Come on, Mel! You said that yesterday!”

“Well, swimming around the lake almost every day is dull. I want something... brill, or ace. You know, what the others call ‘cool’.”

Daniel almost left them, but his mouth ran before his brain could override it. “Mel, could I talk to you about something? Alone?”

The forwardness of his request caught both of them by surprise. After a few awkward seconds, Mel turned to her friend and said, “I’ll catch up later, Paula.”

Her friend took that cue to leave and jumped into the pond. They watched her swim out to the center, where other kids were also swimming and/or rowing their canoes across Little Bear Pond, having fun in the wide space around them. After watching for a moment, Mel turned and gauged the boy beside her. “So what is it, uh...?”

“Daniel,” he offered.

“That’s right, the adventure nerd,” she said with recognition. Daniel noticed she wasn’t mean when calling that, but wouldn’t have minded in any case. He liked knowing he was different from Roger and Colin. “You went on a lot more hikes over the summer than your friends did,” she added.

“Just thought I’d enjoy the scenery while I can, I guess,” Daniel shrugged. Inwardly, he couldn’t believe his luck; she unknowingly gave him the perfect entry into swimming hole! “I was actually hiking the other day when I managed to find something really, uh- *brill*.”

“Oh? Like what?”

“An underground lake,” he said.

“A lake?” she blinked skeptically. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not,” Daniel shook his head. “It’s close by, and we could walk there in just a few minutes.” He paused and thought about what he just said. “Well... maybe not a lake, but I found a big body of water to swim in at least.”

“Wouldn’t the camp counselors have found this long before a camper did?” she reasoned, quirking her eyebrow. “Because an underground lake would have been found in a cave, aquifer, or spring, and last I checked, there was none of that around Camp Wekeela, and it has been around for years.”

“It was in a small hole in the ground,” he admitted. He looked down partly in shame and partly to not be distracted how smart she sounded with her British accent. “I was barely able to crawl in it, but it looks much bigger inside than it does outside.”

“Do you even know it’s clean?” she touched the pond water lightly with her foot, playing with ripples. “Or for that matter safe? It could be a natural reserve, or filled with piranhas or something. Underground lakes aren’t known for their salinity, either.”

Daniel had to admit she had a point, but he was too excited to share a great discovery with this cute, clever, black haired, older girl and see her slender form in her bathing suit again to consider it too deeply. So what if the pathway was a bit rocky and steep? That’s what those hiking activities were for, right?

“Don’t you at least want to see it?” he asked.

“Who else knows about this ‘lake’?” Mel humored him with air-quotes.

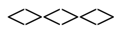
He decided to take a risk. “You’re the first person I told about this.”

She looked surprised, maybe flattered even. “Why’s that?”

*This is it, say you like her, say you like her.* His mind ordered. But his mouth fumbled at end. “Because I like... swimming... and I thought you did too? And... wanted a change of scenery?”

*Smooth.*

Mel just stared at him oddly. She then glanced back at the pond where Paula and the others were. Daniel couldn't tell what she was thinking, and was just about ready to leave dejected when she finally said, “Where did you say this lake was again?”



The following day, they met during the first free period and left to find the cave, dressed in casual clothes over their bathing suits. For Daniel, he had a long-sleeved striped shirt and his pair of trunks, and Mel wore her yellow tee and brown capris. Both carried water and towels in their slung bags. Daniel wanted to get rope as well, but he left his only one back at the hole.

“Are we lost?” Mel asked after several minutes of walking between trees and over rocks. “I don't think this is the usual path.”

“I tend to wander out to different areas sometimes,” Daniel admitted. “It's more fun that way, you know?”

As they passed an overturned log on the dirt road, Mel squinted up at the sun. If there was one other thing she had a knack for besides swimming, it was being a living, human clock.

“Well, where's this hole then? We've been at this for twenty already.”

Daniel looked around the forest they were in; there a whole lot of trees with spreading moss growing on their bases. The path they were in now was just between what looked like a hill

of rocks and an overturned log leaning against a big rock. He had taken this pathway before; was it for the spot he found?

“I think...” he started, before pointing to his right. “It’s over there.”

Mel followed his pointed finger, seeing the space between two trees that led deeper into the woods. She glanced back up to the sky again and then the way they came from. “This better not take long. I can’t even see the intercom tower to the camp anymore.”

“You don’t have a swimming race set up back there, do you?” Daniel asked.

“No,” she replied. “It’s just they’re doing friendship bracelets for Arts and Crafts, and I want to make sure I get to make one for Paula.”

The idea of making his own friendship bracelet for Mel was a nice brief thought, but he didn’t think he was ready to that yet. It was daring enough just asking her to come here. Perhaps he could make a papier-mâché boat with the guys instead.

Showing no reaction but a nod, they kept moving forward on his direction. They crossed streams, walked up slopes, and climbed a cliff or two before they reached the ideal spot. Down in front of them was a deep and dark chasm.

“I think this is it,” Daniel admitted.

“Are you sure? You said it was a ‘hole’.”

“So?”

She dropped her bag pointed down to the chasm. “That looks more like a ditch; there’s a long narrow furrow to the ground. See?”

Daniel leaned over, noticing how long the gap was. “I could have sworn the swimming spot was here. I mean, I left my harness and rope there and everything.”

“Now it’s swimming spot? Not a lake?”

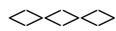
“It feels like a lake. Just wait until you see it!”

Mel leaned over as well. “Well, maybe you were just imaging thi-AHH!”

“Mel! WHOA!”

The dirt under Mel gave way and crumbled, allowing gravity to take over and pull her in. Daniel instinctively reached to catch her, but overstepped himself and fell in along with her.

Ironically it looked bigger on the outside than it did when they fell in.



“Hellllllllp! Somebodyyyyyyyy!” she called, but stopped short as she started coughing.

“Told you,” Daniel said.

“Belt up,” the British girl hissed. “I can’t believe we wasted all that time doing nothing but gendering and getting stuck in a ditch! Bloody hell, I never should’ve listened to you!”

Daniel checked his watch, noting their time here was about to reach the fourth hour mark. “Look on the bright side; at least you’re not stuck here with someone you’d rather not spend your time with, right? And I’m sure we’ll be fine here if any bears do show-”

“Don’t even go there,” Mel glared.

“Just a thought,” he said, ashamed. Last thing they needed reminded that they were in potential danger in the woods, with starvation and predators around.

The two of them sat uncomfortably in the ditch, sitting as far away from each other as possible. Sitting down in the narrow space forced their lower backs to seep down to the muddy water. Before long, Mel was shivering from the dirt and cold... and very close to crying.

Her head huddled over her knees and under her arms, in a makeshift fetal position. Her entire body trembled as her breath hitched and trying to hold her voice back from crying out loud.

Daniel never felt so miserable in his life. He only wanted to spend time with Mel, but instead he ruined her day and trapped her in this stupid ditch. She wasn't a beautiful mermaid; she was a dirty girl out of her element. And he caused it. Without thinking, he quickly scooted over to her and draped his arm over her shoulders. He figured she didn't want a hug from him, but he didn't want her to feel alone or cold in this.

“I'm sorry,” Daniel began. “I didn't mean for any of this to happen, but don't worry. The world isn't going to end if you're not in time for a swimming race. Sometimes a change of pace is good once in a while, you know?”

“You would know?” she asked. “Are you even okay with missing Arts and Crafts? You always like doing that.”

Daniel thought for a moment before sighing. He was looking forward to learning in making his own papier-mâché boat in a rainbow color design, admittedly. It was a nice

conversation topic though, to get them away from thinking of... other problems “A little, but I like to think it was worth it. I got to spend some time with you after all.”

“I’m not having a good time here, being stuck,” she sniffled.

“Neither am I, especially because I made you cry. But at least we’re upset together.”

The next few minutes passed in silence and contemplation, the two of them sitting close together. It started getting dark, and even Daniel was starting to get worried. Quite suddenly, the ground below them shifted.

Mel blinked. “Did you feel that?”

“Feel what, exactly?” asked Daniel.

Before either of them knew it, the mud and dirt wall behind them gave way to a deeper hole below them. They fell into it, screaming and clinging to one another in fear.

Then, they splashed into water. Daniel quickly recognized it as the swimming spot he found yesterday. Somehow it looked brighter at night than it did in the day, because of the glowing rocks at the bottom. He couldn’t see the ceiling, but it was more welcoming than the taunting ditch hole. The water felt perfect to swim in too; not too hot, not too cold. The temperature was just right.

He turned to the wet and surprised mermaid, grinning ear to ear as she stood in the shallow end. “See? I told you it would all work out!”

“I guess you did,” Mel said. “It’s... beautiful.”

“Like you,” he blurted out.



She turned to him the moment he said it. “What was that?”

“Uh, nothing,” Daniel said quickly. “But listen, Mel, I’m really sorry about what happened. If there’s anything-“

She hushed him with a single finger touching his lips. “Let’s just forget about it and swim a bit, all right?”

“Does that mean you’re taking up my swim offer?”

She nodded slowly. “Only for today... only because I’m dirty. And just to be clear, I don’t want to do something like this ever again.”

For some reason, Daniel could tell Mel was lying. She was smiling when she said that.