

"I don't know how to act around her now!" I complained, staring up at Aimee from the floor.

I'd been here for an hour or so now, having tumbled into my room and flopped down onto the floor in front of my roommate.

"Pretty simple really, she's into you, you're into her..." she said, raising an amused eyebrow.

"And?" I asked almost desperately.

What the hell did I do next? Seriously! I had no idea how to deal with attraction!

Chuckling like it was obvious or something she gave me a look. "You flirt, of course."

"But we don't like each other!" I complained, not even sounding convincing in my head, let alone out loud.

"Yeah... uh huh," she rolled her eyes.

I fell silent after that particular piece of sarcasm, because I couldn't really dispute it. We didn't dislike each other anymore, even if we hadn't explicitly said as much. Or maybe we had... we'd exchanged numbers, for assignment reasons of course, and that thing was sitting in my phone like a lead brick. I was constantly scared she was going to message me, but just as constantly scared that she *wouldn't*. A part of me remained unconvinced that she really didn't hate me, and it was very vocal.

"Why hasn't she messaged me yet?" I whined, staring at my phone that had landed face down next to Aimee's bed.

"Why haven't *you* messaged her yet?" my friend shot back, sounding a little exasperated now.

I glanced away, anywhere but meeting her eyes. The truth was that I was scared, scared of any number of things. I was terrified that things between us might progress, because for one thing, I had no idea what I was doing. My life had been one big ball of dysphoria and confusion as I tried to get through high school alive in a very literal sense. I hadn't even had time to address my sexuality, to explore who I was interested in and try a few clumsy relationships like all the normal people.

So all of this meant... what the hell was I meant to do with a girl if I liked her? She's seemed interested today, but maybe I was looking into it too much? Maybe she actually was really embarrassed about what had happened. No she'd seemed... she'd smiled at me and stuff! That was good right?

Then there was my parents. I wasn't even sure how they would feel about my being interested in girls. The way mother had been pushing me to be into guys, I knew what she'd prefer, but would she hate me if I was into girls? I really hoped not... because she'd find out eventually, and until I was self sufficient, the meds I needed to live could be held hostage by her.

"I'll do it later," I sighed miserably, getting up off the floor and retrieving my phone. "I'm too stressed out by the whole thing right now, I'll probably make an idiot out of myself."

"However long you need, but you do have an assignment to do as well remember," she told me, her tone compassionate, but her reminder nevertheless brought another spike of anxiety up within me.

"I know," I said quietly, giving her a small smile before I moved over to my partition.

I needed a distraction badly, something that would take my mind off this stuff so I could think about it with a clearer head in an hour or two. Obviously this meant turning to my number one distraction, gaming.

I logged into League, and was about to just throw myself into a casual match when I realised I still hadn't joined the chat server for the League club I'd joined. I scrounged up the card I'd been given and created a new account. Just another thing I did regularly, creating new accounts to compartmentalise my old life from the new.

The chat program they used was Discord, the same one that my friends and I used, which was why I needed to make a new account. When I got a look at the club's server it was immediately apparent that it was a clusterduck.

They even had a damn porn channel, which seemed to be full of nothing but weird drawings of incredibly badly proportioned women without any clothing on. I couldn't help but heavily judge the liberties the artists had taken in the name of porn, and then noticed that I didn't feel anything by looking at this crap.

The porn did nothing for me, not even the few real photos that were posted. Not a thing... did this mean I wasn't actually attracted to women? Guys loved this type of thing, I could tell by the

various comments, and they were attracted to women, and yet here I was with dry underwear and a practically still heart.

I sighed, leaning forward to cradle my head in my hands while resisting the urge to scream in frustration and confusion. Why was this stuff so hard? Why did it feel like I was taking one step forward and then eleven steps off in another direction, neither forward nor backward.

Clicking away from the porn channel, I ducked in to take a peek into the general channel, where most of the chat was happening. Everything looked fine, just normal game talk... until I noticed some of the names.

Oh no.

Jack, Finn and Ryan were all members of the club. I had really, *really* fucked up in joining it. They at least didn't know who I was while I was behind the new Discord username, but the moment I participated in anything club related with them, I'd be screwed. Shit... well, maybe I'd be lucky and this was one of those clubs that didn't actually do much? Or I'd have to make a new League account too.

I went to check their events postings and didn't find much. LAN parties where everyone met up in person to play league, which I was definitely not interested in going to after the guys at the booth. A few random hang outs, a cosplay competition. Nothing major, until I hit the big posting. Tryouts for the College league team. Apparently we had a tournament going with a bunch of other Colleges around here that had a real cash prize for the top three teams.

I wanted to do that so badly. I was good, possibly one of the best players in the College, if not the outright best player. I could do it. Really easily I could do it. All I had to do to sign up was react with a thumbs up.

Then there was the money involved... if I had money, I could hide it from my parents, start a new account and start saving. The day when they finally kicked me out onto the curb as coming. If not for my being interested in women, then for my desire to make a career out of my art.

Even the thought of being without my parent's financial aid sent a chill of anxiety through me. I had no idea how to go about life without them. I hadn't been taught how to file taxes, how to deal with any legal crap that might arise from my being trans. I had no idea about any of it, and it hit me just how unprepared I really was. Shit, would I need to pay taxes on any winnings I got?

Before my anxiety could take control, I reacted to the post with a thumbs up, then quickly killed the app. It was only a matter of time until the others found out, the way things were going. I was

in too many places they were, doing too many of the same things. What the hell was I going to do? Maybe Finn could help?

I pulled out the app again and logged in to my old account, then asked Finn if he was around to hang out. He was, actually thanking me for giving him the opportunity to leave his apartment, where two very competitive friends of ours were getting a little too intense.

I threw on some tight jeans and a too big T-shirt, because although the rain had stopped, it was now stupidly hot and humid. My jeans couldn't stick to me if they were already skin tight after all! Plus it made my ass look great and there was a slim chance that Lianna might see me. I needed to look good in case that happened. To give myself a little internal feminine boost, I chose one of my few necklaces to put on, a little silver red panda on a chain that I had loved on first sight.

I met him out near the front gate to the whole complex with a smile, and he pulled me into a quick hug that earned a squeak of surprise from me.

"What?" he asked, a cheeky grin plastered across his face.

"I wasn't expecting the hug!" I said with a quiet laugh.

"Hey, I don't see you as a guy now, so it's not awkward to hug you," he said sheepishly, his grin still very much there. "I'm always second guessing myself with my male friends, because you know... attraction and all that. But with you now it's like, whatever, she's a girl. Doesn't matter!"

"Did you ask to see if I was comfortable with it?" I teased with mock seriousness.

Finn looked genuinely alarmed at that, his smile slipping. "Shit, I'm sorry! I wasn't thinking... I..."

"Finn, it's fine, hugs are nice," I chuckled. "And no attraction here either as it turns out."

He blinked at me for a moment before he got it, then his smile widened again and lowering his voice he asked, "Oh really? There's a story there, and it sounds fun."

"More like confusing," I groaned, then pointed down the sidewalk. "Can we walk somewhere? I don't really mind where. Plus, first you need to tell me the story of why you needed to evacuate the dorm room so badly."

With a nod from him, we started aimlessly walking down the sidewalk away from the campus. I hadn't really explored the city too much, only really going into the center of town every so often

since we'd lived out in a satellite town a few dozen miles away. I was curious about the surrounding area.

"Well, you know Ryan. He's so easy to wind up, and Jack practically makes it his hobby since I stopped doing it," Finn sighed.

"He does? He always seemed more sensible than that," I frowned.

"He has the same weird complex as Ryan about proving he's the coolest kid on the block, always has. He's just better at hiding it. You know how Ryan is, but for some reason his shit has started working you know? Maybe there's just a greater concentration of people who'll buy his bullshit, but Jack feels threatened in his alpha status and he's biting back and... ugh, it's a whole *thing*," he said, waving his hands around erratically.

"I'm really questioning why I was friends with them in the first place," I grimaced, then shook my head. "No, I'm not, but still. Damn they need to chill."

Shrugging, Finn shook his head. "I mean, they're fun to hang out with, but just not all the time. Ryan is still super generous about his time. Still backs you up whenever someone outside the group fucks with you. He's loyal, and... well until I found out exactly what you'd been up to, it felt like he was the only one."

I opened my mouth to apologise, or protest, I wasn't sure which, but Finn beat me to it. "No don't worry, I totally understand. I've seen the shit that you trans people have to deal with. It's fine, seriously. It's just, at the time, we all thought you'd decided you were better than us or whatever you know?"

"You're all way cooler than me," I sighed softly, avoiding his eyes.

My friend just gave a snort and I could hear his eyes rolling when he said, "Have you seen yourself? Look at you, you're a hot girl with a don't-give-a-fuck style and you're still a badass in league. I'd say you're pretty damn great."

I frowned even as a smile tugged at my lips, trying and failing to feel good about the compliments. It's not like I was trying to be any of that. Well, I was trying to be good looking, but I'd mostly fallen into it by accident, along with a healthy dose of good luck.

"So tell me about this sexuality thing," Finn said, mercifully changing the subject.

"I uh, at that big party they had the other day. I made out with another girl and... it was really nice," I said quietly, feeling embarrassed about it despite the bubbles that were fizzing up inside me. I wanted to kiss Lianna again, so very badly.

"Uh huh," he said with a wry, knowing smile. "I get that."

"You do?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Not the girls part, but the rest yeah. Who's the girl? Did you know her, or is Glade a little wild these days?" he teased.

My cheeks grew warm and a smile blossomed across my face. "I know her. She's doing the same major as me. She... I thought she was awful at first, but I think she's just kinda defensive. She opened up a little today and it was so fun. We have to do an assignment together too, so we exchanged numbers, but I still haven't messaged her."

He smiled knowingly. "Nerves?"

"Yeah. She's really pretty," I said, my blush and smile both growing deeper.

"Well at least you know she's into you right? That's step one out of the way," he said, his tone placating.

My anxieties over Lianna skyrocketed all over again and suddenly I ran out of words on the subject. "True. Maybe... I'm not sure. I'll message her tonight I guess."

"I'm cheering for you," he said soothingly. "It's hard, I know. You got this."

I gave him a wan smile and we continued on down the street, talking about easier, less emotional subjects as we went. It kept striking me how much Finn had matured, especially when he wasn't in the company of the other guys. He was almost like a different person.

That is, until we passed a tabletop gaming store. I saw it first, and knew he was going to stop before he'd even laid eyes on it. When he did, his walking slowed and he turned to me with a hopeful expression.

"You want to go in huh?" I grinned.

“Yeah it’s been forever. You know how the others weren’t into this stuff. You were the only one who humoured me on it,” he said like an excited puppy.

“The last time I decided to have a curious look inside one of these types of places, all the guys looked at me like a unicorn had just casually walked into the shop,” I said with a wary look towards the dark interior of the store.

Giving me a once over, Finn made a sound of agreement. “Yeah... they don’t get too many girls in there. Well actually, I think it’s been changing recently. Some women are getting into it now.”

“And I’m sure they had such a great time breaking into that,” I said ruefully. “Although... I mean, the little models look cool and it was fun to paint yours and stuff but...”

“Please?” he asked, still looking hopeful. “I’ll tell them to fuck off if they mess with you. I’ll bust out old, opinionated Finn all over their asses.”

I took a deep breath in preparation, then shrugged. “Sure, why not. Can’t be worse than losing to you every time you made me play.”

“Ouch... yeah, sorry about that,” he laughed, already heading towards the door.

I laughed along with him, it had been fun regardless. I’d mostly done it because I felt sorry for him and wanted to make the guy happy. I hadn’t even known the rules.

The shop window was almost completely covered by a huge diorama display of some battle or other laid out in miniatures. I had no idea what it meant. It looked impressive though, and I caught myself trailing as I admired the artistry of it all. The models themselves had been lovingly painted by someone talented, and the whole arrangement had been constructed with an eye for composition too.

Following Finn inside, I found myself looking around curiously at the interior. It was an open space with the products lining the walls, while the center of the reasonably large room was dominated by several tables in various states of use. It wasn’t as badly lit as I’d initially thought either, it was just white halogen lamps, rather than the sun, that was giving light.

I sidled up as close as I dared to one of the tables, where four guys around my own age were having a heated debate about rules while their little miniatures stood idle on the table. It was like the poor little guys, and creepy aliens, were frozen mid battle while their commanders argued.

The table itself was set out with a bunch of cute little trees and buildings that had all been constructed and painted with the same loving care that the front diorama had been.

It shouldn't have surprised me then, that when I looked over at the furthest table she was sitting there. Lianna, sitting at a table and glaring daggers at some poor bastard who was holding his paint brush like it had just bitten him.

It had taken me a few moments to even recognise her, because she was wearing such vastly different clothing to what she wore to class. Faded, ragged jeans poked out from underneath a huge hoodie with the logo of the store on it. Her black hair was pulled severely back into a bun that looked like it must really hurt. The whole getup was so strange, like she was trying really hard not to look as gorgeous as she was.

Then it hit me, that was probably *exactly* what she was trying to do. Rule one of interacting with guys in an environment like this was looking as unappealing as possible. The less they saw you as attractive, the more they would respect and listen to you. I had learned that the hard way as I transitioned. I wish it also helped with the constant terrible, awkward flirting... but it didn't.

Shit, should I go and talk to her? Should I run out of the store so she wouldn't see me? Oh no, what if she didn't want anyone to know she worked here? Actually, did she work here at all, or was she just a fan?

"Hey Glade! Look at this!" Finn called from across the room, taking the decision away from me.

I cringed inwardly as Lianna's eyes snapped up and found mine, her expression going from stabby to alarmed in the space of a second. Oh no. We stared at each other for several moments, unsure what to do, like a staring contest where neither of us knew the outcome of losing.

"Glade?" Finn called again, and I lost the staring contest as I glanced over at him.

"What?" I asked anxiously, too quiet for him to actually hear.

"Look at this! They have the new models in!" he exclaimed excitedly.

I sidled over to him, glancing frequently at Lianna and finding her doing the same. Despite the obviously frumpy look she was going for, I still couldn't keep my eyes off her. My gosh she was so amazing. My heart was beating rapidly now, and the ghost of her lips on mine was once again teasing me in ways I was most definitely not equipped to handle right now.



“Look!” my friend said excitedly when I arrived next to him. “I knew they were overhauling the models for this army, but I didn’t think they would have them in so soon!”

“Finn,” I murmured desperately, willing him to shut up for a second.

“I know, they cost even more than the last ones did, but they know that us addicts will keep buying them anyway,” he chuckled to himself as he stared at the little packet he’d taken off the shelf.

“*Finn*,” I hissed, and he snapped out of his excitement to stare at me in confusion.

Putting him between myself and Lianna, I whispered, “The girl I was telling you about is sitting over at that table *right now*.”

“What?” he asked, stupidly turning around to stare at her.

“Oh my god,” I groaned, yanking him back towards me. “Don’t just stare like that!”

I peeked around my friend to get a look at the girl who was the reason for my rapidly rising heart rate, and found her staring right back at us again.

“Shit, I have to go over and talk to her now,” I swore, then winced and pressed my lips together when I heard the curse word slip out. Damn, Aimee was really getting to my vocabulary.

“It’s okay, just be calm. You can do it,” Finn encouraged me.

“Okay,” I nodded, rolling my shoulders, even as my breathing indicated that I was anything but calm.

As I always did when I found myself getting stuck in a quagmire of thought that threatened to immobilise me with indecision, I just launched myself into my course of action before I could get all worked up about it. I walked haltingly over to Lianna’s table, where she’d turned and was saying something to the guy who’d been the subject of her ire a few moments earlier.

“I was hired to teach you for a reason, I know what I’m doing and my boss will back me up if you give me any more shit,” she growled. “Now gimme a second, I have to talk to someone.”

Quickly, she stood up, gently taking my elbow and leading me further back into the store, away from the people at the table. She wore a slightly anxious but otherwise unreadable expression as she turned and flicked her dark eyes up to meet mine.

“I didn’t know you were into this stuff,” she whispered quickly, motioning awkwardly around us.

“Um, I’m not. Really. My friend over there is though, and he convinced me to come in and look,” I said quietly, pointing to indicate a staring Finn.

She glanced over at him, then back at me without her anxious expression changing.

“I’m not overly enthusiastic about it either, but they needed someone arty to teach those dickheads to paint, and they get me to make all the other displays and stuff too,” she said, like she was trying to convince me that she wasn’t a big capital Nerd.

“Hey no,” I said, reaching out instinctively to place my hand on her arm. “It’s fine, I won’t judge. I was actually thinking just now that all the displays and stuff were really well done. Plus, confession time, I play video games so like... yeah. Don’t worry.”

A smile flittered across her face for a moment and she glanced bashfully down at my hand on her arm. “Was I that obvious? So many other girls think it’s fucking weird that I work here, and it kinda is. I mean, I don’t do the game side of this stuff, I don’t really care about it, but it’s fun to do the artistic side.”

“Are you kidding me? Seems like a pretty cool job for an art student to me, besides the assholes you have to deal with,” I grinned. She was smiling back at me properly now, and it had my chest feeling all sorts of lovely, dancing, fluttering sensations.

“Thank you,” she blurted, looking relieved. “I thought for sure that you’d judge me and stuff when I saw you standing there staring at me. Guh, my heart is still trying to calm down.”

She was being so cute, with her honest smile and the way she was all nervous about my judging her. It meant she cared what I thought of her, which meant that she definitely didn’t hate me! I wanted to do a little victory dance right there, but I would have looked incredibly silly, so I didn’t.

“Yeah, don’t worry. It’s fine,” I reassured her again, then heard one of the guys back at her table raise his voice.

“Ugh, those shitheads. One of those guys has an ego the size of our campus I swear. The rest are fine, but god I want to fucking curb stomp that dick into a paste,” she grumbled, getting all scary angry again.

Except, this time, her anger wasn't directed at me, and I found myself admiring her in an entirely new light. What would it feel like to have her look like that while she was defending me? She was really hot when she was angry at people I didn't like, rather than me. Suddenly the idea of her glaring daggers at my parents barged into my thoughts. Oh my, yes please.

“I guess I should let you get back to stabbing him with your paintbrush then?” I asked, unable to hide my smile as I watched her glaring at her unsuspecting victim.

“Don't tempt me. I have a sharpened paint brush. Like really, don't tempt me,” she told me seriously, before her eyes quirked up into a hidden smile.

“Right... oh and uh, I'll text you later about our um... assignment,” I said, remembering we had to spend a rather large amount of time staring at and admiring each other's faces. I mean drawing. Drawing each other's faces.

“I'd like that,” she told me, her deep black eyes watching mine intently. “See you tomorrow?”

“Definitely.”

Then she was off, back to the table and already talking in a low menacing tone that had the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end even as a pleasant warmth bloomed between my legs.