

Lianna and I met up three more times that week, and our friendship seemed to grow by leaps and bounds through each one, as well as our classes. Once we'd moved past the whole disliking each other thing, it was like we were made to get along, in our awkward and sort of shy way.

When I wasn't hanging out with Lianna or Aimee, I was practicing my skills in League, much to the despair of my bed. It probably missed me with how little I was using it. Who needed sleep when you were running on the raw excitement of life? It felt wild, just being able to express myself properly without the weight of my parents holding me down.

The tryouts for the midlane position on the club team were tomorrow, a Saturday, and I was... well, shattered. I still had to go for more assignment work with Lianna though before I could get some rest. The wait to go and see her each time was excruciating. I just wanted to rush over there now! Just half an hour to go and it was killing me.

I was just sitting in my computer chair and lamenting the slow passage of time when my phone began to vibrate, marching its way across my desk towards the edge like some sort of suicidal little creature. I cringed as I reached for it, the call was sure to be coming from mother.

Phone in hand, I clicked the button to wake the screen and my anxiety turned to excitement as I saw the caller ID.

"Aunt Vicki!" I exclaimed as I accepted the call.

"Hey!" she laughed, hearing my enthusiasm. "How are you doing kiddo? I thought I'd call to check in."

"I'm okay. Class is really fun, I'm learning so much already," I said, only barely catching myself before I went full ramble mode about all the technical details.

"That's good to hear. I was worried after I heard your father complaining about paying for art supplies the other day," she replied, her voice gaining that edge that she had when she wanted to talk crap about my parents, but held back.

I gave a sigh and tried not to think back on that conversation. Father caused all sorts of anxious emotions to boil up within me when he got mad.

“Well, how about friends? Met anyone fun? Your uh, transition is going well too?” she asked, changing the subject before one or both of us could start bitching about my father.

“Yeah my transition is going well. Um, and yeah my roommate is nice, she’s cool. I met some of my old friends too, which was interesting. Only one of them was able to recognise me,” I laughed, and then my mind turned to the girl who occupied it most of the time. “There’s also a um, a girl in my class. Her name is Lianna and she’s really nice. We’re doing an assignment together! She’s a really good artist and I’ve been learning so much from her and stuff. We even swapped styles at one point! It was cool.”

I continued to gush about Lianna for a good few minutes before I realised what I'd been doing and stopped abruptly, feeling my cheeks heating. Was I really *that* interested in her? I mean, she was really pretty and very fun to hang out with, but still... rambling about her to my aunt was a new level for me.

“I... see,” Aunt Vicki replied after I'd ground to a halt, her tone thoughtful. “This girl, Lianna? You like spending time with her?”

“Um... yes,” I said as casually as possible. My cheeks gained a few more degrees. Had she caught something in my tone? Did she realise that I was crushing on my friend so hard I was probably like, some kind of pulp or juice by now?

“I see,” she murmured again, almost too low for the terrible phone mic to pick up. “Just make sure your mother doesn’t catch wind of that, at least not... yet.”

My heart iced over with fear and slowly I asked, “...Why?”

“Your mother isn’t... she doesn’t see things the way people like you and I do. It’s not that she’s against a woman being interested in a woman, but I have a feeling that if it were her own daughter, that might change,” Aunt Vicki said diplomatically.

Well there it was, confirmation that my mother would hate it if she found out I was interested in other girls, rather than the guys she had tried to push me into liking.

“You don’t uh, care about it though? That I might be interested in a... a girl?” I asked, anxiety thundering to life in my chest.

“Of course not, you’re more than allowed to love whoever you want,” she said gently. “I honestly assumed you were already interested in women.”

That threw me for a loop. “What? Why?”

That was a huge relief, but how did she know? Did she guess or what? Were there signs, other than the fact I had been thought to be a guy for half my life?

“Oh, ah. Because you were born... a certain way,” she replied awkwardly, and I cringed as she tried to dodge around the issue. That had been exactly it.

Still, awkwardness aside, —which was somewhat understandable, she was a straight, white, cis woman after all— she was still supportive. The knowledge that I at least had her on my side gave me a feeling of relief and safety. I could count on her to advocate for me if things really hit the fan, just like when the whole trans thing had blown up.

“That makes sense,” I sighed, resisting the urge to lower my forehead to the desk. “Thank you for always being so supportive of me Auntie. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“It’s no problem kiddo, and know that I will always love you,” she told me.

What did I do to deserve an aunt like her? Honestly. She was so good to me.

“What about you though? How are you doing?” I asked, prompting the conversation to switch to her.

Aunt Vicki lived with my uncle, who was so jovial it was almost intimidating. He was always there at every family gathering, making people laugh with crazy stories or just generally making my uptight family enjoy themselves a little. I sat back and listened to her regale me with tales of the extended family and their shenanigans with a smile.

My knock on Lianna's door was almost immediately answered by her swinging it inwards. Standard procedure now, the thought of which sent my stomach into a sort of funny little dance. We had a routine now!

"You look tired. Either you have bags under your eyes, or you're trying a weird experiment with makeup," she said without any sort of greeting, her eyes filled with a mix of concern and admonishment. "I didn't ask in class, but have you been sleeping?"

"Uh, oh... yeah. Just, long day I guess," I said, trying to awkwardly laugh it off.

"Glade... we had the *same* day," she groaned. "Why aren't you sleeping?"

"I've been, uh... it's a long story," I cringed. Sure, she knew I played games, but being very good at them was a different matter. You could be a girl who casually played games, but getting competitive and intense with them was something else entirely.

"Okay well, come in anyway," she said, finally giving me one of those smiles I was quickly becoming addicted to.

"Thanks," I said, moving in behind her.

She was wearing a comfortable looking sweatpants and hoodie combo today that somehow had me wanting to cuddle up to her even more than normal. I was in some pretty comfortable clothes myself, tight shorts and a big cardigan with a wide neckline that showed off my neck and collarbone. She hadn't noticed that I guess, seeing the bags under my eyes probably.

Cradling my art bag under my arm, I followed her to the usual spot, but saw a lack of cushions and raised my eyebrows at her. Giving me an apologetic look, she explained, "I'm feeling lazy today sorry, can we just spread out on the bed instead? My back is killing me too, I think I slept funny."

"Yeah that's fine," I nodded, but I didn't move to get up onto the bed. It was the same as mine, a king single. Almost a double really, if you squinted.

She hopped backwards onto it, her stuff already sitting next to her and ready to go. She gave me a little nod of invitation, and with that extra mote of permission I sat down onto the bed with her. The bed bounced a little with the weight of us both, and I couldn't help when my thoughts went to all sorts of other potential things that could make a bed jump around.

I wanted to kiss her again so damn badly. A real kiss, without alcohol involved. The desire hadn't changed in the slightest ever since our first assignment session. If anything, it had gotten stronger and stronger with each passing day.

"With us sitting next to each other like this, I figure we could try doing like, portraits in profile?" she asked hopefully, dark eyes searching mine.

Gosh, it was a struggle not to stare into them for the entire session the way they went so big and wide when she was looking at me.

She raised her eyebrows when I didn't reply, and I quickly jumped to agree. "Yes! Yeah, that sounds good. Sorry."

"Sweet," she smiled, turning to pick out a pencil. Something about her expression had me questioning if she was calling me, or my agreement sweet.

Following her lead and picking out a pencil, I stared down at my page in thought, wondering what style I'd choose this time. Maybe I'd just try and be as accurate as possible for the first few, then go a little abstract after that? Her neck looked... really good from this angle, and I was so glad I was allowed to just stare and stare at her.

With an effort of will that was almost painful, I pulled my eyes away and began to put pencil to paper, recording what I saw as faithfully as possible. Her neck was so slender, her skin so soft, it was almost difficult because of how pretty it was. With an ugly or weathered face it was easy, you had so many lines and wrinkles and divots to give the piece character, but none of that was true about a smooth, pretty girl like my friend here.

"Uh, Glade," Lianna said slowly, her pencil pausing where it was halfway through a line. "Sorry if I'm prying or whatever. I just want to um, to make sure that you're okay. That nothing is bothering you and keeping you up late."

I blinked in surprise for a moment. Lianna going all concerned friend on me was not something I'd expected to happen.

"It's not anything bad... it's just a little embarrassing," I told her, feeling anxiety rise within me. "You won't uh, judge me will you? It's weird."

"No, of course not," she said quickly, her hand reaching over to rest on my thigh. "You didn't judge me for earning money arguing with neckbeards until they can paint their space marines."

That was only mildly distracting... if she slid it up, reached between them a little... wait, no! Oh my goodness! Control yourself Glade, you damn weirdo!

"Okay well uh, so you know how I play games right?" I asked slowly.

"Yeah, what's to be embarrassed about that? Plenty of girls play games these days," she frowned, and her hand squeezed my thigh sympathetically. Well that wasn't extra dang distracting or anything!

"Yeah well... I'm very good at one in particular, extremely high ranked... and that's not me boasting either," I winced, watching her reaction closely as I continued. "I've been practicing for the college team's tryouts. They're tomorrow."

"Wait, like... competitive gaming?" she asked in surprise. "You're *that* good at games?"

"No, no... just the one! I suck at most others," I said quickly, hoping she wasn't seeing images of me as a slob sitting on a couch with rubbish, food scraps and empty takeout boxes all around me.

"Oh, I see," she said with a kind smile. "I mean, that's a little impressive though. I assume it's a big thing if the university has a team?"

"Ah, just the club, but it is a big thing. There's professional teams and stuff that get paid up into the millions," I told her, beginning to relax. It didn't look like she was judging me. Curious was more like it, but she was clearly surprised by it all.

Just as I was thinking that, her eyes lit up with recognition, "No! I have seen that type of thing! It's on sports channels sometimes!"

"Yeah!" I said with excitement. "That's probably it, or one of its competitors! The game I play is called League."

"That's kinda cool actually, and I am totally not judging you," she said, taking her hand back and leaving a yearning spot of cold in its place.

Maybe it was how tired I was or possibly it was something else, I don't know, but my feelings and attraction for Lianna were working themselves up into a state of overdrive. Watching her now as she reassured me that she didn't think that my being a massive nerd was bad, I couldn't help it as a raw wave of need crashed into me. The sheer intensity of the emotions flooding me almost brought me to tears, and with a hiccup, I realised that was exactly what had just happened.

"Oh, what the heck?" I squeaked as I felt tears rolling down my cheeks. I quickly put my current sketch to the side and wiped uselessly at my face with my hands and gave a sort of hollow laugh. "I don't know where this is coming from!"

Obviously I knew exactly why it was happening, but like... I'd felt those emotions for her before and hadn't cried or anything.

"Whoa, okay," she said, placing her own pad to the side and shuffling across the bed towards me. "Come here, you're tired and emotional, it's fine."

Seeing her arms wide with the offer, I all but threw myself into them. Contact with her warm, soft body brought fresh tears and I lost all reticence. I snaked my arms around her and pulled myself as tight as I physically could with shaking breaths and a fluttering heart. She held me close in turn, and it sent my thoughts spinning off into a wild, emotional happiness.

Oh my gosh, we were finally hugging each other. She felt so wonderful, so deeply good and right against me that I was further overwhelmed and fresh tears slipped free. It wasn't that I was upset that had me crying, it was just that the raw emotion bubbling within me had nowhere to go but out through my tear ducts.

"You're a mess," she murmured kindly, her head resting on mine as I in turn used her shoulder for a pillow.

"I know," I hiccuped again, my breathing refusing to cooperate and function normally. "I always get like this when I'm tired, especially since I started HRT. Gosh..."

"It's fine, just close your eyes and rest for a second," she told me, and that's what I did, easing into our embrace as a very happy Glade.

I didn't realise I'd drifted off to sleep until I was roused by Lianna with night having descended. I was barely awake as she eased me down onto my back, threw a blanket over the both of us and then gently pulled me back into her arms. I felt myself smile and murmur something, but I

don't know what it was. I was too happy to be cuddling with her, and with that thought I drifted into one of the deepest sleeps I'd ever had.

An unfamiliar alarm wrenched me from warm, nonsensical dreams, and I groaned and tried to roll over in an attempt to find the source of the racket. Instead, my nose became buried in soft, silky hair that was definitely not my own. Rather than the apple and honey of the shampoo I had used recently, her hair smelled faintly of citrus.

Her... suddenly I was very, very awake. I was tangled up with Lianna in her bed, and it felt so damn good! How had this suddenly happened? I'd thought we were settling into a nice and comfortable friendship where I had to just quietly ignore my feelings for her until they abated, but instead we were here.

What did we do now? Was this just a friendly sleeping together thing? Is that what happened when you were friends with other girls? I didn't really think so, if I was being honest with myself, at least not like this. Not with her face nestled into my neck like that, her slow breathing sending warm air tickling across my collarbone. Certainly not the way our legs were all tangled up or how our arms were thrown haphazardly across one another.

As the alarm finally halted its insistent bleeping, Lianna shifted and yawned. There was a moment where she too was figuring out what had happened in the night, and then she pushed back slightly to look at me. We stared at each other in silent acknowledgement of the fact that we'd slept cuddled up in her bed all night.

"Well, uh," I croaked, then cleared my throat and tried again. "Thank you. I slept really well."

"Like twelve hours," she smiled in a jokingly accusing way.

Her smile was infectious and just like that I was grinning like an idiot right back at her. My cheeks began to heat with the crazy embarrassment of the situation. I knew that there wasn't a whole lot to be embarrassed about, but for some reason my dumb brain was reacting that way. My stomach had started up a silly fluttering thing that was all kinds of uncomfortable and pleasant at the same time.

“So um, this is nice,” she murmured, her eyes flicking to my lips in a way that had my breathing stutter with hope.

“It is,” I managed to gasp, and it was my turn to glance at her lips just as her tongue slipped out to wet them.

Of course, when I thought we might finally kiss again, that was when my own phone decided to go off. I groaned and reached down under the covers for it, my heart briefly ceasing to beat as I brushed down Lianna’s leg. Soldiering on past that particular hiccup, I found it and pulled it out, staring blearily at the screen.

“Oh fuck!” I blurted, then slapped a hand over my mouth as I realised that I had sworn and what it was trying to tell me. I had to get back to my room, the tryouts for the team were about to happen!

Evidently Lianna had seen it too, because she threw the covers off us and rolled out of bed. “We’ll talk about this after, you have your thing to get to!” she said quickly, searching the room for something.

I followed her out of bed and immediately felt myself sway as the blood failed to catch up. Oh damn, this wasn’t good. Oh well, nothing I could fix now, and it’s not like I wasn’t used to the feeling of being light-headed after taking spironolactone for a year before my surgery.

“Alright, here!” Lianna exclaimed, passing me a waterbottle and a hunk of chocolate. “It’s my bottle, but... well you know, we’ve been there and done that. Chocolate is to get some quick energy into you. We can leave all your stuff here until afterwards, I’m only down the hall after all.”

“Thank you,” I said, surprised by her ability to think quickly in an urgent situation.

“Cool, let’s go!” she smiled, pulling on her big hoodie again. “Is it okay that I come along?”

Wait, she wanted to come and watch? Why would she want to do that? No one other than my three league friends had ever been interested in my gaming on more than a cursory level.

“You want to?” I asked, trying to find that twitch in her expression that would show she was only indulging me. It wasn’t there.

“Fuck yeah!” she grinned, miming out a silly little cheerleader routine. “I’ll be your first fan, cheering you on!”

“Oh my goodness,” I laughed, then spontaneously I leaned forward to press a kiss to her cheek. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, well...” she mumbled, suddenly bashful. “You just seemed to be really excited about it and... yeah. So fuck it, I’m excited too, let’s go!”

“Alright, alright, just let me down this water and chocolate first!” I giggled as she made her way towards the door, shaking imaginary pompoms again. She just kept surprising me with her wild personality. First she was angry at me, then she was cold but amicable, then kissing me, then... well, whatever this was.