

"But paints *are* college related!" I complained quietly into my phone.

"Excuse me? Eleanora, if we say our money is not to be used for your hobbies, it is not to be used for your hobbies," Father growled into the phone, his mouth too close to the receiver.

"It's not a hobby. It's my degree," I murmured, the fight already leaving me.

"I am well aware that it is what you *chose* to study. My point stands, do not spend our money on hobbies," he said gruffly, using that tone of voice that he always used when he'd decided the conversation was over.

"Sorry," I said, unable and unwilling to say more.

As Father continued to rant about how I was never going to get a job with an arts degree, Aimee was giving me side glances. I could see her listening, and it was making the torture that much worse. It was embarrassing.

When I was finally allowed off the phone, Aimee gave me a sympathetic look. "Parents?"

"Yeah," I nodded, unwilling to say more.

"Okay... well, do you want to go to the club's day thing?" she asked awkwardly. "Maybe that will cheer you up."

"Yeah okay. Let me put some clothes on," I sighed morosely.

Stupid Father and his stupid dislike of the arts. How could one man be so utterly awful and boring at the same time? It was probably because of the looming spectre of my parents that I decided to wear a dress today. A thoroughly normal sundress, spats underneath in case a breeze caught it. Cutoff denim jacket over the top.

My outfit was further added to when I took one step outside into the glaring sun and paused. "One second Aimee, I need to go and get a hat or my pasty skin is going to burn like crazy."

"Sure thing," she called as I rushed back inside.

I felt a little gross with how I looked, probably due to my mother's obsession with floppy, wide brimmed hats like the one on my head. There was one up-side to the hat though, I could hide behind it! Just tilt it down slightly and then bam, you couldn't see my eyes!

Arriving at the large carpark that was where they had set up all the clubs day stuff, I turned this way and that, trying to get a look at everything. There was all sorts of crazy, interesting booths and stands. I spotted the anime club very quickly, not because I had an interest, but because there was a lot of... stuff going on there. It was a bit much for me, but I appreciated the enthusiasm I guess.

Then there were all the sports clubs and other things. More stuff I wasn't interest in. There were actually so many clubs, and more things besides. There were food stalls and a few of those market square style knickknack shops where they sold random necklaces and floaty skirts and stuff. It seemed like it was half about the whole clubs day thing and half about just having a little festival. I was happy with it, it was great fun.

"Glade! Look!" Aimee exclaimed as we neared one of the booths that was selling jewelry.

She was pointing to a necklace that had a little turtle on it, the shell done in some cheap green gemstone. It was pretty cute, I had to admit, but I didn't see what all the fuss was about.

"I need it," she said with the same kind of determination a napoleonic soldier might have used as they rushed a breach in a wall.

"Then get it," I chuckled, indulging her. "Why do you like it so much?"

"I love turtles," she said, grinning happily at me. "They're so funny and cute. The baby ones are just... oh my heart!"

"Now who's being the cute one! Grab it then!" I said, making shooing motions at her and giggling.

"Okay... since you're standing there being all enabling, I'll do it!" she said excitedly, and pointed the necklace out to the lady running the stall.

A quick transaction later and she was staring at the thing like it was never going to be taken off once she put it on. She was funny, and I loved the happiness that was written all over her face. Damn, this girl really loved turtles I guess.

My smile was viciously stripped from my face when I heard a far too familiar voice call out, "Aimee!"

"Jack!" Aimee exclaimed, turning to greet him.

I turned much more slowly, hoping he would mysteriously disappear while I did so. My luck was so much worse than that however. It wasn't just Jack, but Finn and Ryan as well.

As Aimee and Jack did their overly flirty and slightly nausea inducing greetings, I watched my other two friends from beneath the brim of my hat. Ryan was pretty much the same, which is to say he was wearing clothing that people thought was *super hip* back in like, the early 2000s, and he still looked to be struggling to get that overly buff physique he was always going on about.

Finn was... a harder read. When I'd known him, he'd been like two inches wide and most of his body weight had been his glasses. He still had the huge glasses, his eyes were terrible, but the rims had changed to match his face. He'd also put on a little weight, filling out that old pencil frame of his into something... almost normal looking. He looked good. It was making my head spin. How was he going to be an annoying hypernerd if he looked like that?

"Oh!" Aimee said, turning and gesturing to me. "This is my roommate and friend Glade! She's great."

"Hi," I said quietly. Oh Aimee, I already knew them, that's for sure. Although... I guess the introduction still stood, because they most definitely didn't know me, at least not anymore.

"She's also pretty shy, but don't worry, once we find an art booth or something you'll meet her for reals," Aimee laughed.

"Nice to meet you Glade, I'm Ryan," Ryan said... and oh god he used the stupid deeper voice. The one he started using when he was talking to girls.

Help! Help! What did I do here? He hadn't recognised me! He hadn't recognised me so bad he was already starting to make a move! No, this was way, way too weird. This was super weird. Bad Ryan, stop!

"Hi," I said again just as quietly, desperately trying to avoid his eyes as he ducked to look at me under my hat.

“Oi dickhead, you’re making her uncomfortable,” Finn groaned.

“I am not,” Ryan shot back in irritation.

“Look at her, you utter fuckwit, she’s trying to avoid your eyes and everything,” Finn said, rolling his eyes derisively.

I was very red right now. I knew I was very red. This was... so damn embarrassing. I was embarrassed for both myself, and for Ryan. He’d be mortified when he finally figured it out. He’d probably call me some slur or something for daring to be attractive as a trans girl.

Finn and Ryan squabbled for a moment as Jack and Aimee slowly led us down the path to more stalls. They were doing a very good job of ignoring the two squabbling guys behind them, and I was stuck walking next to those same idiots. I’d chosen to put Finn between myself and Ryan, because Finn seemed to understand that I wanted to be left alone. Damn this was way too awkward.

“Fine, if you’re so good with girls, as you seem to think you are, why don’t you have a girlfriend?!” Ryan asked, throwing his hands up in the air.

That one finally made Finn falter. He opened his mouth to reply, then turned away, his cheeks slightly red. Oh dear, it was true though. Finn had never really had a girlfriend, although I’d seen him befriend the odd nerdy girl or two.

“That was mean, Ryan,” I said quietly, shocking him out of his next words. Words that would have probably driven the knife home.

“Ah, no... it’s okay. We argue all the time,” Finn laughed awkwardly, trying to cover up his discomfort.

I tilted my head up far enough to make pointed eye contact with him for a moment. Stupid boy. Let me help you, you... dingus. His eyes did something funny when he saw mine though. They sort of stuttered wide for a moment, then he frowned and shook his head.

The two guys next to me moved on to other topics of argument, and I was at least forgotten. Something had happened there though. Had Finn recognised me? If he had... why didn’t he say anything? He’d shaken his head, so maybe he thought he was wrong? Damn... I wish I just had the confidence to come out to them all. It would make things so much more simple.

We all stopped at a food cart of some description, getting these greek pita bread wrap things. We moved over to a nearby ring of benches to eat them, and I was immediately made grumpy by the way my one kept dripping. I managed to get like halfway through the silly wrap thing before I gave up and threw it out. I was wearing a dress that I really did not want to get stains on.

The others ate theirs happily, Jack being his usual suave self and eating his expertly, while Aimee went the opposite route and didn't give a crap when it dripped onto her hands. Finn tried to be meticulous in his eating, picking at it with a fork, which was funny to watch. I have no idea what Ryan was doing with his, but I'm not entirely sure you could call it actual eating.

"Hey Glade, you haven't shown any interest in the clubs and stuff yet, are you going to join the art club or something?" Aimee asked, suddenly remembering that I existed.

I shrugged, I knew I wanted to join the LGBT group, but I couldn't really do that with any of these people around. It would be a pretty big giveaway if I just wandered over there after all.

As for the art club...

"I'll probably leave the art club out, they're usually pretty... intense about things from what I heard. I think I'll stick to just doing my own thing. Plus, like, I'm already here to do an Art degree, no need to double up and burn myself out," I told her after a moment.

"Oh right. I didn't think about it like that," Aimee said thoughtfully.

"That's the most words you've said this whole time," Finn chuckled from next to me. "Not that I'm surprised. Speaking means that Ryan might try and talk to you. Trust me, that is *no fun*."

I dipped my head under the brim of my hat again, trying to hide the laugh that was threatening to bubble out of me. He was so right. Talking to Ryan as a girl would probably be hell on earth.

"I think I'll um, go exploring on my own actually, after we're done here. If that's okay," I said softly, looking up at Aimee and hoping she would be okay with it.

"Yeah that's cool. You do your thing," Aimee smiled. "Jack and I can have our pre-date, date. With extras!"

I gave a snort and nodded. Aimee was funny.

Once the others were finished eating, I carefully said goodbye and rushed off before Ryan could offer to escort me or anything stupid like that. Gosh, he'd been trying to get me to talk for a while after Finn had made that comment about talking to him. I was less and less nervous about Ryan, and more and more frustrated. I was definitely not interested in him. Ryan was about as far from boyfriend material as you could get while still being genetically human.

I was gone for barely a minute when I heard footsteps rushing up behind me, and I cringed inwards, knowing it would be Ryan rocking up. Oh god he was going to follow me all over the place and I wouldn't get to sign up with the LGBT club. Maybe I could pretend to be a lesbian.

"Relax, it's only me," Finn laughed as he pulled up alongside me.

I looked up in surprise and then narrowed my eyes. Was he trying to make a move on me too?

"Don't worry, don't worry. I'm not pulling a Ryan... or a Finn from a while back," he said in a calming voice.

My veins were instantly filled with ice as he said that last part, and my face must have drained of colour because he gulped and started stammering. "No, no I mean... like... fuck. That was... shit."

Shit. He knew who I was, he had to know who I was. This was bad... if he told the others, everyone would hate me. Was Finn disgusted by me? I was even in a very feminine outfit right now, he must be thinking all sorts of awful things.

"You recognised me?" I asked in a small voice.

"I wasn't sure until your reaction just now," he said sheepishly. "But hey! Don't worry, it's cool with me... Fuck, fucking... society. It shouldn't even fucking matter if it's cool with me. God I hate this shit. I had an argument with Ryan yesterday because he kept calling things *gay*. Moron couldn't understand the *simple concept* that just because you don't mean something to be offensive, doesn't mean it won't be taken that way..."

Oh dear. That was Finn. I was surprised that his forceful opinions had landed on my side of the fence, but... ranting about Ryan being an idiot? Quintessential Finn right there. I felt myself relax as it became clear that I had nothing to worry about, then felt that warm feeling of relief that came with coming out. Even if I hadn't really come out. It was just awesome knowing I could be my whole self around Finn, history and all.

“Thank you so much,” I sighed happily. “You look good by the way, you’ve filled out.”

“Thanks... so do you, you’re really damn pretty,” he smiled awkwardly. “Uh wait, just so you know, I’m not hitting on you! Well, not anymore.”

“Not anymore?” I frowned, motioning back to where we’d been eating. “Were you hitting on me earlier?”

I hadn’t noticed anything, but sometimes I had trouble with that sort of thing.

“No! I meant... *earlier*, earlier,” he said, tripping over his words again. Wow, he must be nervous if he was getting all tongue tied like that. Normally words were his thing.

“You’re going to have to be a little more specific then,” I grinned, enjoying his bumbling. It wasn’t every day you got to see Finn like this.

“I mean back when you were... you know. Fuck what do you even call it. I don’t want to throw your dead name around or whatever. You know what I mean!” he said, getting frustrated.

Wait.

What?

Hold on, Finn was gay? Since when...? No wait, oh my god that made so much sense. All the times he used to help me out late into the night, the way he used to stick up for me and stuff. Had he been crushing on me?

“No way! Were you crushing on me back in high school?” I asked excitedly, trying to keep my voice down, and then another thought occurred to me. “Wait, you’re not... you don’t have a crush on *Ryan* do you?”

“What? Fuck no! No way! I have standards, Jesus!” he said in alarm. “I’m only attracted to guys with three or more brain cells. Which is you! Or, I thought it was you, or something! I wasn’t fully crushing on you! I just thought you were cute, that’s all. No like, full on crush!”

I gaped at him for a moment and then grinned, “Oh wow, poor Ryan! That’s harsh! It’s okay if you had a crush on me back then though, I won’t hate you for it or anything.”

“No, it’s the truth, no crush... damn though... Glade right? Fuck, I really did miss you. The others are great, even Ryan, but you can’t like... talk to them about stuff you know? It’s all fun and dumb stunts and... no actual talking,” he said with a sigh. “Oh damn and it just occurred to me why you don’t want to use voice in league.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “It’s tough even with just the pronouns being thrown around. Thanks for taking up my screen name instead of my dead name too by the way, I don’t think I would have been able to handle any of that without it.”

“Yeah fuck, no problem. Don’t worry by the way, about this stuff, I won’t tell them. You’re actually like the third person who I’ve told about the whole... dick fascination thing,” he said.

Dick fascination? Really? That was one way to put a name to it I guess. It was certainly how I’d describe Aimee’s... sexuality.

Giggling at his choice of words, I said, “Yeah... about that. Want to go and sign up for the LGBT club? That’s where I was going...”

“Yeah, let’s do that... I wasn’t going to do it, because of the others, but... if you’re going to. I don’t know, I feel like if I have a friend with me I can totally do it,” he said, running his hand over his forearm with nervous energy.

“You’re really different, you know that?” I asked, then smiled shyly and said, “I missed you all too. Jack and Ryan haven’t changed, but you’ve really matured.”

“Thanks... Yeah, I realised at the start of last year that I was... you know. Damn, it’s still hard to put that label on myself. Anyway, I realised that, and then went on a kind of culture binge. I came out the other end feeling like a fucking idiot for all the stuff I used to believe and it kinda humbled me,” he explained, gesturing wildly as his continued nervousness got the better of him again.

“Gosh, calm down Finn,” I said, putting a calming hand on his arm. “It’s all good, we’re on the same team and all that. I used to think some dumb things before I realised it all too.”

“When did you realise?” he asked, looking over with interest.

“Um... when I was fourteen,” I told him.



“Oh wow! So you knew, the whole time we were friends? About yourself I mean?” he asked with mild horror. “That must have fucking sucked!”

“It was what it was,” I shrugged, trying to avoid a trip down memory lane. “I started HRT at the beginning of our senior year and just hid it.”

“Damn...” he murmured, then shook his head and smiled. “I feel like we have so much to catch up on. I keep bouncing from wanting to talk about one thing to the next.”

“We could like, hang out and stuff. Today even. Jack and Aimee are going to be off on their... date. Maybe I should save you from an evening in Ryan’s company,” I laughed, already imagining the both of them arguing without Jack’s supervision.

“Oh shit, I didn’t even think about that. Yes, please can we hang out later. Like, literally anywhere other than where Ryan is,” he said, a look of genuine horror dawning across his face.

“Sure,” I nodded, feeling my heart get caught up in my happiness.

Damn, I was so happy to have at least one of my friends truly back. And he’d called me Glade! He was accepting! This was so, so awesome! Now I just needed to tell Aimee... somehow. She’d be okay with it right? She had to be okay with it.