

Dinner turned into an interrogation of my sexuality by the Aimee inquisition. Not really. She wanted to figure out who “my type” was, and was very determined to get to the bottom of what she saw as an intriguing mystery. She was nice about it though, and she stopped when I finally got a little fed up with it. I just had no idea who I was interested in, and I probably wasn’t going to understand myself any more clearly by randomly checking people out.

“What about you?” I asked tentatively as we walked back across the quad to our dorm. “Who is your type?”

“Guys, mostly. I’m fairly boring in my taste in guys too, just... hunky dudes. It’s a bit weird of me, but I actually like my guys a bit dumb. Big dumb earnest guys are just the cutest. As for girls... well I guess I’m one of those straight girls that all the lesbians complain about. I’ve had sex with a few girls, it was fun, but I’m more into guys I guess,” she explained matter of factly.

I blinked at her for a few moments, then turned back to our path. I kinda didn’t want to ask where I fell on her attraction scale. If she was too into me, that would put me too far in the masculine right? I did not want to be masculine...

“No offence by the way, if you were like, keen or anything, but you’re way too girly for my tastes,” she said, as though she’d read my mind.

I felt a blush creep up my cheeks at the unintended compliment though. Too girlish was definitely okay with me.

“I mean look at you! You’re like a pixie or something. Did you come out of the box that waifish?” she asked, giving me a once over.

“You have... I... don’t know?” I asked awkwardly. The girl had no filter! Who just... who just said something like that?

“Right, sorry,” she smiled pushing the door to Meyer house open with a shoulder. “I’m not judging or anything. You’re cute, pretty and all that.”

“Um, thanks,” I said, moving past her and hoping she couldn’t see my growing blush. This felt very strange, getting a lot of piercing questions and compliments from someone I’d just met. Did Aimee have an off switch? Oh no, please tell me she didn’t talk in her sleep...

We climbed the stairs while Aimee checked her phone, tapping away message after message. Now that I wasn't stressing out about finding my room, I noticed that the walls had a lot of pictures on them. Many were of previous students doing various noteworthy things, but it was the paintings that caught my eye.

There was one, right opposite us as we stepped onto the landing that our room was on, that really spoke to me. It was a painting of a huge mountain valley at twilight, and it was the artist's use of colour that really caught my eye. The way the cliffs were painted in a deep purple was incredible, and I always appreciated the use of navy blues in foreboding storm clouds. Use of colour and playing around with it was something I loved to do, and I had a feeling I was going to be taking a longer look at this piece later.

My favourite technique when you were messing with colour was to swap out different colours entirely for ones that made no sense realistically, but somehow still captured a subject. Like painting a face in vivid pinks and greens, reds and blues. It was just really darn interesting to my eyes. I couldn't—

Thump. I felt myself jostled, and something soft brushed against my cheek. Really soft.

I staggered and turned in surprise, trying to figure out what had just happened. I think I'd just walked into someone? I heard the clatter of something rolling down the stairs first, and I turned to watch as a laptop tumbled down, hitting each step with a crack. The steps had been edged with aluminum grips at some point to stop people from slipping, and each sharp edge of metal did increasingly more damage to the already battered looking computer.

"No!" a strangled, feminine voice cried out from next to me.

My eyes fell on the owner of the laptop. She was a few inches shorter than me, with a mass of curly black hair that she'd tried to tame with a hair tie, only for it to spill out in ringlets everywhere anyway. Her hair was so glossy it almost looked like it was made of metal or something, and her face was full of freckles. They made a really interesting pattern across her cheeks and nose.

Then she turned her dark eyes on me. They were a deep brown, almost black, but somehow they seemed to have the light of a fire in them. She was pissed, the curves and angles of her face twisting into a look of outrage and fury. I flinched away as my stomach dropped through the floor and my chest constricted painfully from the force of her burning scowl. I didn't even know her and I was already hating that I'd caused the anger in her expression.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she swore, and I cringed again. In my family, only my father swore, and that was only when he was very, *very* angry.

“I-I’m sorry!” I squeaked, backing up a little more.

“Sorry? That laptop was a... was a gift! I can’t... I can’t afford another one,” she said, looking like she was trying to decide between hitting me and crying.

“But you’re... here?” I mumbled, indicating the very wealthy hall we were staying in.

That was definitely the wrong thing to say. She bared her teeth and ground the next words out one at a time, “On. A. Scholarship. Asshole.”

“O-oh... I’m sorry! I’m sorry... I can buy you a new one, I can just tell my parents what happened and they’ll—” I stammered, but she interrupted me with a snort.

Her voice sounded high and stressed as she gave a bitter laugh, “You’ll... Oh that’s great. You’ll tell your rich parents. Fuck you.”

She stomped down the steps, or... she tried to, she wasn’t very big, so it was more of a light tapping, and picked her laptop up off the lower landing. She turned it over, her eyes looking desperate inspected it, then she sagged in defeat when she saw it was unsalvageable. Walking back up the stairs, she brushed past me with a tear filled, angry glare, and walked down the hallway with wilted shoulders.

I took a shuddering breath as I watched her stride angrily away, her curly ponytail swinging from side to side. I had really messed up. I felt tears of my own welling, partly from the stress of the encounter, but also because I just... she’d looked really upset and I didn’t like upsetting people.

“Wow, that was... you’re a real disaster aren’t you?” Aimee said with a pained laugh. “You didn’t even realise she was there did you?”

“No... I didn’t. Gosh, I’m such a... a screw up,” I groaned, burying my face in my hands to hide.

“Well... yeah I can’t argue with that so far. You’re nice though, so it’s not all bad,” she said, patting me on the back in a way that was probably meant to be encouraging. “I mean, she walked into you too, even if you did just sort of, walk out in front of her.”

“It was definitely my fault,” I said, shaking my head sadly and turning to make for our room. At least when we got in there, I could hide.

“If you say so... and her name is Lianna Chambers, by the way,” Aimee said quietly as she jogged to catch up.

I shrugged and gave her a weak smile. “Probably won’t need her name. She definitely won’t want anything to do with me after that.”

Unlocking the door to our room, she said, “Yeah... she’s already been pretty intense around the dorm. She’s one of those scarily gifted people who’s good at literally anything she touches.”

“Except dodging idiots,” I commented sadly.

“Yeah, except that,” Aimee chuckled, holding the door for me again. “You don’t seem like an idiot to me, though.”

I walked through and into our room, making a beeline for the computer chair I’d been provided.

Sitting down heavily, I sighed. “Oh I am an idiot, trust me.”

My roommate raised an eyebrow, and I cringed and turned away. “Sorry. I’m just a huge screw up, you’ll learn that pretty quick. I’m sorry. I’ll shut up now.”

Aimee’s expression turned soft and she moved over to sit on my bed, spinning my chair with a foot until I was forced to look at her. Her warm hazel gaze roamed mine like she was scanning me or something.

“Look, Glade... We’re going to be roommates for the rest of the year, so you should know something. It’s important that you understand this okay? Are you paying attention?” she asked, her tone solemn and serious. Then she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper and said, “I’m a screw-up too, although I prefer the term fuck up, because it’s more fun to say.”

“What?” I asked, as my brain caught up.

Leaning back and flopping onto the bed, she giggled, "I'm a fuck up too! Seriously, you walked in on me going to *town* on myself with Blake. That's got to count for some serious fuckup points there."

I gave a surprised snort of amusement, my mouth jumping ahead of me to say, "F-screw up points? What do you mean? Are we going to have a competition?"

"Fuck yeah," she laughed, her face lighting up with a grin. "Yeah... yeah let's have a fuck up competition this year. Whoever can fuck up the most, and the bigger the fuckup, the more points it's worth."

"How do you even define what a screw up is? Like, can't we just go and intentionally do something dumb to get points?" I asked, my brain already whirring to life as I thought about definitions and rules.

"Nah that's not a fuck up. A fuck up is when you don't mean to do something stupid, but you do. Like before when you walked right into the path of that girl. That was a fuckup. If you'd done that intentionally, that wouldn't be a fuck up, because you achieved what you set out to do!" she explained, nodding along with her own words. She looked very pleased with herself, it was kinda funny.

"Okay, that makes sense," I nodded, laughing along with her. She was a fun person, happy and free.

"So are we doing this?" she asked, giving me an excited puppy look.

"Sure," I nodded with a big grin. "Sounds silly and fun."

"Yes!" she exclaimed, pumping a fist. "We have a dumb roomie thing now! First day! Awesome!"

"What's a dumb roomie thing?" I giggled, my mood brightening as her good one infected my bad one.

"You know, like how in movies and stuff, the roomies always have that wacky in-joke thing? I always wanted to be a part of that," she grinned. "Fuck I'm *so glad* you're cool. I was so scared my roomie would be like a total workaholic or a bitch or something. I so got lucky oh my god. I got the cute goofy shy girl!"

“I’m cute?” I asked, zeroing in on that one part of what she’d said. I mean, I knew I was kinda pretty but hearing it from someone who wouldn’t just be saying it because it was the *done thing* was really nice.

“Hell yeah you’re cute!” she exclaimed, gesturing to me like it was obvious. “If I gave you a green dress you’d look like fucking... Tinkerbell or something. Real cute.”

“O-oh. Okay. Thank you,” I smiled, feeling really odd and awkward.

“No problem. Well, I’m going to go and watch some TV or something. Wait, can you even call it TV anymore if you’re streaming it onto a laptop? Anyway, have fun!” she chuckled, standing up and walking around to her partition, then ducking back. “Oh uh... yeah. Sheets and stuff are in that cupboard and... sorry if my mess overflows a bit.”

“Oh, um, it’s okay. Thank you,” I smiled, blinking at her abrupt exit.

“Cool. I’ll be here. On the other side of this dinky little wall, watching a show,” she said, then grimaced. “Damn, we need a new phrase for that.”

I heard her talking to herself as she rustled around on the other side of the wall, and I couldn’t help feeling pretty lucky about my roommate. We’d both gotten lucky. The initial impressions had been... interesting, but she seemed really fun. A little too intense for my comfort, but that’s what college was about right? Throwing yourself out of the comfort zone and trying new things?

Or trying old things that you’d tried to run from?

I looked at my laptop, chewing on the inside of my cheek as I turned the idea around in my head. My parents weren’t around anymore, they would randomly walk into my room and yell at me for playing games. Well, not games, plural. Just the one.

League was a fairly simple game on the outside. Two teams of five, one arena, kill the other team’s base to win. The bases being in the bottom left and top right corners of the square shaped arena. Each player on those two teams picked a character and a role to play for that match, and then when it was over in roughly thirty minutes, you started it all again.

I took a deep breath and decided to throw my fear and caution to the wind. I set my laptop up on its stand, then plugged my keyboard and mouse in. It wasn’t that I was scared of the game — I

loved the game itself — I was scared of the fact that my old high school friends would see me log in.

Booting my laptop up and logging into the game, I saw that yes, all three of my closest high school friends were online. Jack was in a ranked ladder match on his own, while Finn and Ryan were playing an unranked match together. All three of them had been good guys when I knew them, as far as teenaged high school boys could be. Which is to say they might say some awkward things, but they meant well.

Before I got into any matches against other people, I needed to have a look at the changes that had been made to the game as a whole and to my favourite characters in particular. The company that made the game liked to do that, change things to keep it interesting and fresh. The unfortunate side effect of this practice was that a character that might have been good one year was terrible the next year, and those of us who played those characters were forced to adapt or swap.

It was when I was loading into a private match that the first message came in.

Riservis: Ben!!! Is that you, or did someone hack your account? Haha. How are you man?

I cringed at the use of my dead name, feeling that familiar old spike of pain whenever someone used it. Gosh I had hated that name, even before I realised it wasn't supposed to be mine. I couldn't blame Ryan for it though. He didn't know. None of them knew.

Painterlie: Hey Ryan :). I'm good, how about you?

Riservis: Holy shit!! It is you! Wow! I'm good dude, just playing some normal matches with Finn. Where have you been? You like, dropped off the map!

Painterlie: Just took a year off to figure some stuff out. I'm at college now, what about you?

Please don't be at Charrasee College. Please don't be at Charrasee College. As much as I had liked my old friends, the thought of rolling the dice to see if they were accepting was too much for me to handle right now.

Riservis: We're all at Charrasee College. Sophomores now! We're all in the same dorm together, it's pretty awesome.

Gosh darn it! Damn! They were here. Probably in the Selworth Hall complex too, since Selworth Hall and our high school had this thing where they encouraged students to go here. Damn this was going to be awkward. Would they recognise me? Probably not, since I looked very different now... but the chance was there. I think? No one had clocked me yet, so that was a good sign.

Painterlie: Oh nice. That sounds fun.

Riservis: Yeah it's great. Hey, wanna play a match with us after this?

Painterlie: Oh... maybe, I'm pretty rusty, I was just going to play a bot match.

Riservis: Come on! Like old times! Here jump in a voice call, it will be fun!

Painterlie: Um, I can't do voice haha. Roommate

Riservis: Oh damn. Still, you can listen to us right? And then type. Please? We miss ya bud!

Painterlie: Okay okay, fine. Give me a second.

I quit out of the private match I was in and took a few steadying breaths. I had no intention of unmuting my mic, but I could at least communicate with them better in voice. It would be fine, it was going to be fine. When the call came through, my heart was pounding with nervous energy, but it was quickly drowned out by the chorus of my friends greeting me. All three of them were in a call, and as much as I'd hated who I was while I knew them, it was nice to hear their voices again.

"Damn, it's good to see you Ben!" Jack said quietly, which was his usual volume.

Jack was the tallest and largest of the four of us, but he was also the most calm and unassuming. It was usually his job to settle down any arguments in the group. He was only sometimes good at it. Usually his job was to keep Finn and Ryan from killing each other when we played League.

Finn on the other hand, was your typical awkward nerd type with a scraggly beard and just one too many *opinions*. He was generally willing to help you out if something went wrong though, in his grumpy sour sort of way. There had been more than a few times where he'd been there late at night helping save me from an assignment I'd forgotten was due.

The last of my friends, Ryan, was a great guy when it was just our little group, and a total dick when he was around people he wanted to impress, which usually meant a pretty girl. He'd been known to disappear when a girl even looked at him, off on a mission to woo her. He was also the most likely to turn around and back you up when someone decided they wanted to pick a fight. He'd been there to help me with bullies on many an occasion.

Painterlie: Hey Jack! Best to use my ingame name though or you'll confuse Ryan ;)

There it was. I needed them to call me at least Painterlie if I was going to be able to stand playing with them. It would be too painful otherwise.

"True. Ryan does forget things like that," Finn laughed. "Alright, Painterlie it is!"

"Hey! That's rude, I can remember!" Ryan exclaimed in mock outrage.

"Sure you can," Finn said sarcastically. Oh dear, things had not changed at all then.

Ryan and Finn squabbling again. I could already see myself going quiet until Jack stepped in and told them both to shut up.

Painterlie: I haven't played since they released the KDA skins, and didn't play months before then either.

"Wow, does that mean you might seem like one of us mortals for a little?" Ryan remarked dryly.

Painterlie: Haha, probably!

"I find it funny that you only logged on for the KDA skins. Let me guess, it was the prestige Akali skin that you went for?" Jack said, a cheeky grin audible in his soft voice.

Painterlie: Maaaaybe.

"Knew it," Jack chuckled. "Oh, my game finished, I'll invite everyone and we can play."

He did so, and we queued for a game, everyone bantering while we waited. The misgendering quickly grew to chafe however, and the discomfort had me falling silent and just listening by the time we got into the pregame setup. Well, I was already silent, but I stopped typing.

In the game, there were a few areas to the square map. The most visually prominent being the three lanes that connected the two bases like roads. A top lane, a middle lane and a bottom lane. Each of these lanes held two towers for each team, that would shoot at anything not on the appropriate side, effectively denying access to the enemy until they were destroyed. Little computer controlled creatures of each team would rush down these lanes to battle in the center, and rewarded gold if killed by a player.

Four of the five roles a player could pick revolved around these lanes. A player for the top lane, a player for the mid lane, and two in the bottom lane. The bottom two players were split further into the support and the carry. The support's job was to assist the carry player in gaining the levels and gold they would need to, well, carry the team to victory. Or so it was meant to go. Reality often disappointed.

The last player was one who played in the jungle, a maze of twisting paths that lay between the lanes, holding all sorts of monsters to kill and avenues for flanking the enemy as they sat complacent in their lanes. They were known as the jungler, and they were a bit of a wildcard, moving between lanes to jump on the enemy players, trying to bring them down.

I was a midlane player, or I had been when I was playing regularly. I was given the role again by my friends, and I tried to remember how and what my job was. The middle lane was the shortest lane, and frequently the site of some hectic fights as the junglers passed through from one side of the jungle to the other.

When it was my turn to pick my character, I picked my old favourite, Akali, a melee assassin character with a lot of flashy movement abilities. I slotted that skin that Jack had made fun of me for wanting so much, and grinned as I looked at the artwork of the character. There was something about her aesthetics that had drawn me to the character, long before I'd ever been interested in how she played.

"I'm ready to see if Paint still has it!" Jack said happily, and I heard him clapping through his mic.

Oh dear, time to embarrass myself.

The game began, and I walked my character down the middle lane to where I was supposed to be, trying to familiarise myself with everything as I went. Right, that was the shop to buy items that would improve my character through the game. Those were my four abilities down the bottom. The map displayed down in the corner. I could do this. I could totally do this... wait, who the hell was that on the other side? I'd never seen that character before! Some buff dude with chains wrapped around his arms?

As the minions arrived at the middle and started their frankly adorable little battle, I ducked in and out trying to get the kills on the little things while watching for what the hell the other guy would do. He was like, throwing his chains around and stuff. Oh, he hit me with something! I backed off after taking damage, trying to figure out what had just happened.

Painterlie: What's this champion in the mid lane? He's all crazy and it's scaring me.

"Oh that's Syllas. He can steal your abilities and use them against you. Watch out for him when he gets level six," Jack said vaguely and very unhelpfully.

"You'll figure him out. His main thing is like Jack said, his ultimate ability mimics yours," Finn replied, slightly more helpfully.

Right, I used to not care if there was someone I didn't know too much about on the other side, at least in a non-ranked game... just... keep going and stay back until you're feeling comfortable. No problem... Oh no!

Out of the jungle exit next to me, the enemy jungler came barreling out of the darkness to stun my character, and suddenly that Syllas guy was wailing on me too. Then I was dead, just like that.

"Ohhh dead already! Maybe he is human like the rest of us!" Ryan laughed good naturedly.

Damn, I wish I didn't have such a reputation to live up to. See, back when I first met these three, they had been friends for a long time, and they had loved this game back then too. Mostly because I wanted friends really badly, I'd joined in, not caring what I had to do to earn their approval.

Turned out though, that I had been incredibly good at the game. Freakishly good, and as my new friends realised what they had in their midst, I very quickly became a popular person to play with. They liked winning, and they liked the way I could carry them through ranked ladder matches. Our friendship had solidified because of my skill, and even after it had become less relevant, I'd still loved the way they had praised me for a particularly flashy kill on an enemy character.

All of which led to a fire being lit inside me. I was going to beat this weird chain man, and I was going to win and take back my old crown! I hoped... no! I would! I definitely, one hundred

percent would do this. The guy on the other side was probably only like, silver ranked or something. I was diamond rank when I played, I was better than this.

I went back into the lane with a frown and renewed vigor, and got to work killing as many small minion things as I possibly could. I stayed out of the way whenever that meanie on the other side started looking all shifty, which meant his jungler friend was probably around. Then I'd dive back in for some more tiny person slaughter. In no time I was beating my opposing laner in gold and ready to buy my first item!

The game progressed after that, with me being killed twice more when the enemy jungler rocked up to ruin my fun in annoyingly unexpected ways. I got some kills on the other guy though, and roamed around to my friends and helped them out as much as I could. Finn and Ryan were the Support and Carry respectively, as they had been in the past. They still argued like a married couple too, but they seemed to get things done down there. Jack was our jungler, but unlike the enemy team's guy, he was pretty selfish about it.

I didn't do nearly as well as I used to, but I held my own, and by the time the game ended I was pulling off some moves that might have looked like my old self if you squinted and looked at it from the corner of your eye.

Rubbing my face, I typed a goodbye to my friends and sat back with a groan. That had been a little stressful, and I decided I was going to find out all about this man and his chains, so I didn't get blindsided down the line. I needed to get back into form or I was going to be very upset with myself. League was one of like, two things in my life that I wasn't a fuckup at. League and Painting.

Placing my headset on the desk, I turned to get up, only to find Aimee leaning against the wall watching me with a smile. Seeing her right there had my heart in my throat instantly, and I squealed in surprise, my arms flailing around in a panic as I fell off my chair. I was not expecting to find her there!

"Aimee!" I squeaked, my heartbeat making like an aging car's starter motor for a moment.

Doubled over and laughing, my roommate wheezed, "Oh my god. I'm sorry! I'm sorry! That was so funny, but I'm sorry!"

I couldn't help but smile, feeling a laugh bubble up to match hers. Her laughter was so great, the snorts and gasps were downright infectious. We laughed like that for several moments before I pulled myself off the floor and flopped onto my bed.

Looking up, I asked between gulped breaths, "What were you doing there?"

"I was going to say goodnight, because I was going to hop into bed and read until it was time to sleep, but you were so focused that I didn't want to disturb you. You were really into that game," she said, still giggling.

"I was yeah... it's been a long time since I last played it, but I wanted to see if I still had it in me," I smiled sheepishly. I hoped she wasn't one of those people who would judge me for playing video games. Nobody batted an eyelid when a guy played games, but there were some who frowned in disapproval when it was a girl playing.

"Nice! Did you win?" she said, completely oblivious to my fears even as she showed them to be unfounded.

"Yup!" I nodded happily.

"Yes! I mean, I never doubted it of course, but you need that confirmation before you celebrate right?" she grinned, giving me a huge over the top wink.

I just nodded, my smile too big to allow words past it. She was so goofy. I was already happier here than I had been at home, and I was starting to think that college might actually be really fun. Maybe. Unless my parents found out how to ruin that too.