

My poor heart was not appreciating the workout I was putting it through. This wasn't a physical workout mind you, but it was beating like an enthusiastic little dwarf at her anvil just the same. The blood it pumped was rushing through my ears, I knew I was probably flushed and shaking, and I was definitely gasping for every breath. Just a little more, just the right movements and I'd be where I had never been before.

I twisted and wove, seeking that rush that always came from taking what I wanted. I needed them on their knees, I needed them to whine and complain about how I had them right where I wanted them. They were mine to do with as I would. They'd stepped in here with me willingly after all, so it was time to show them what little, unassuming Glade could really do.

I pressed inwards, twisting to avoid mistakes and push myself to that final victory. Then it arrived, the final writhing dance towards completion. Ten people, four of them with me, and we took what we needed from the other five. Pushed them down and made them moan, some trying to play it off like we hadn't just bent them back, while others conceded that it had been good.

And then it was over! I would be Master Rank as soon as the ladder updated, so long as the next player up didn't also keep playing today! I would officially be one of the 4000 best players in league! Well, I'd started out pretty high in the rankings this season, my placement matches combining with my previous rank to bring me very close, but still... it had been a struggle. I needed to play more and hone my skills before I really plunged back into the climb to Grandmaster. Still needed to maintain my ranked score though, but that was chores.

Saving the replay so I could go over it later and figure out where I could improve, I turned and found Aimee staring at me, her face flushed and eyes wide.

"What?" I asked worriedly. She was looking at me really funny!

"That was hot. I didn't know you could be like that!" Aimee exclaimed, her eyes bright and intense.

"Like what? Hot? What? I was just playing a game!" I gaped, very confused by what was going on.

"You were narrating it like it was erotica!" she breathlessly.

"Narrating it? I was... oh no, did I say all that stuff out loud?" I asked, mortified.

“Oh you most certainly did Gladikins, you most certainly did!” she laughed, that bright look still in her eyes.

I groaned, hiding my face in my hands so avoid her seeing the embarrassment that was spreading like fire across my cheeks. “Oh no.”

“Oh yes,” she laughed again, reaching out to ruffle my currently loose hair. Then she pulled back and smiled, “Okay, I’ll stop teasing. I came around to ask if you wanted to come with me to the Tompton Ave party. It’s on Friday night, which my phone tells me is tomorrow. It’s apparently a tradition every orientation week, and the whole street gets involved!”

“U-uhm,” I murmured, thinking on it. “You’re not going with Jack too though are you? Sorry, I just get nervous when I’m alone at these things.”

“If he ends up going, I’ll tell him to bring Finn,” she grinned, already going back on her promise not to tease.

“Finn?” I asked, really hoping she wasn’t going to go where I thought she was going to go with this.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice how you two ditched us yesterday to get some alone time,” she smirked. “I can see the appeal though. He seemed a bit nerdy for my tastes, but there was a hint of confidence in there too. You could do a lot worse.”

“No, no, no!” I squeaked in alarm. “No way, not him. Even if I was into guys, it wouldn’t be him!”

Even if Finn wasn’t gay, that was just too strange. We’d been friends for so long, and... I don’t know. I still didn’t know what real attraction felt like, but I could almost definitely say what it didn’t feel like, and I didn’t feel it for him. He and the other two were like brothers to me. Crap, annoying brothers sometimes, but still.

Aimee caught something else in what I’d said however, and she narrowed in on it like a bloodhound. “Oh, so you don’t think you’re into guys huh?”

“No that’s not what I meant... I... Gosh damn, I don’t know!” I groaned, letting myself flop forward so my forehead made a thump on my desk.

“You’re so confused, it’s adorable,” she said, her tone laced with amusement. “It’s fine though, maybe you’ll get hit on by someone at the party and find a little insight.”

“You said that you’d stop teasing me!” I whined into the desk, refusing to look up at her.

“Fine, fine,” she giggled. “But does that mean you’ll come? To the party I mean, I’m not holding out hope for other meanings of that word, at least tomorrow night.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, finally sitting up to frown at her in suspicious confusion.

“Never you mind, my young apprentice, never you mind,” she said with a cryptic smirk. “So, yes or no?”

“Fine, I’ll come,” I sighed in defeat.

“Maybe one day,” she laughed, turning and waltzing back to her side of the room. “I’m glad you’re going to the party with me though!”

Friday morning was exciting, because we were finally going to have our first life drawing session! I’d always wanted to go to one, but having someone get naked for a bunch of high schoolers was frowned upon for obvious reasons. That, combined with my parents’ refusal to pay for any private classes, meant that this was my first opportunity.

Drawing people was one of those things that was a skill all of its own. Life drawing, along with studying anatomy and other such things, were the cornerstones of learning to draw humans.

People were also just fascinating and fun to draw, the way you could see the bones and muscles underneath giving them form and shape. I loved the smooth flowing lines, the creases and wrinkles. Before now, I’d had to content myself with drawing clothed people, or from porn online, which had earned me an awkward conversation from my parents on more than one occasion.

When I pushed open the door to my life drawing class, I saw that the easels had all been set up in a semicircle around a small stage. The stage was draped in a sheet to give us a background to draw, if I had to guess, as well as a chair and a few other objects that the model would use to pose.

The model himself was wearing a robe and sitting on a stool off to one side, casually reading a book. He looked old, and I swear his face was almost entirely wrinkle... it looked fascinating, and I was already itching to get to drawing.

I was the last person into class again by the looks of things, but I had a legitimate reason this time. I couldn't exactly rush dilating, and I liked to do it during my morning shower so it was easier to clean up afterwards. At least the time it took was lower now, my parents had been less than understanding about why I needed to take up to fifty minutes in the shower for the first few months. Plus, showers were great anyway! Why rush, if you lived in a water rich state?

My mind was dragged jarringly back to the present when I saw that the only seat left was the one right next to Lianna. Damn! Damn, gosh darn... I hated my inability to swear. It would be so great right now to just toss out a few curse words under my breath. My very first life drawing session, and I had to sit next to the annoying mean girl! My sketches were going to be crap with her there ruining my concentration.

I sat down carefully, as though by being as quiet as possible she wouldn't notice me. It was absurd of course, and she looked up to see who was taking the spot. Her expression while she still hadn't recognised me was... nice. It was nice to see her face without the angry scowl that was always present in some form while I was next to her. I wanted to draw that neutrally happy expression.

That wasn't the subject today though, and I turned my eyes forward before her expression resumed its regular programming and I was forced to see the scowl again.

"Looks like everyone is here, so I'll go and lock the door while our model gets himself set up. Everyone please thank Gerard here for agreeing to be our model today," our professor said calmly, walking over to the door.

We heard the click of the door that signaled no one else could wander in and see a naked guy, and damn I realised if I needed to use the toilet I would be out of luck.

Once she was back from the door, she continued, "Alright. Here's how these classes work. I will give you all a time limit, a medium and possibly other instructions. This is for practice only, and

to give you direction. Don't feel bad if you aren't finished when time runs out, it's all about practice. Now, Gerard, if you'd be so kind as to take the stage and give us a sitting pose?"

The model nodded silently and removed his robe, then walked over and stepped up onto the stage. Oh... oh gosh, that was old man junk. I had known what was coming, but there it was, just swinging around all droopy like. That was an image I was going to carry around for the rest of my days, and not in a good way.

"Thank you, now everyone. You have ten minutes to do a full figure sketch of our model here using charcoal," professor lady said happily.

We all silently got to work, but I hesitantly raised my hand to the teacher.

"Yes Glade?" she asked kindly, moving over to me.

"Can we listen to music? I work best when I have music," I asked softly, then heard the barest snort from Lianna.

"So long as you can hear me speak, I have no problems with that," the teacher smiled.

"Thanks!" I grinned, then grabbed my headphones and put some music on at low volume.

The class was reasonably calm after that, the music keeping my thoughts in the zone and away from Lianna. Her influence wasn't gone though, my sketches stayed closer to the realm of the realistic than normal as I tried my hardest to get everything down on paper and within the time limit.

When our ten minutes was up, I sat back and stretched upwards, then casually glanced over at the girl next to me. Her eyes flicked away from where they had been staring as I stretched, and onto my paper. In turn, I checked out her drawing, I'd never seen any of her work and was curious what it would look like.

It was good. It was really good, better than mine I was pretty sure, and I felt a surge of annoyance and admiration in equal measure. Damn, she was definitely better at realism than I was. Her lines were so incredibly crisp, sharp and sure, despite us using charcoal and only having ten minutes. She'd managed to capture the model almost completely, seeming to have run out of time when she was halfway through shading the legs.

I didn't give her any of the praise I was thinking, I didn't like her, so why should I? Plus, she had nothing to say about my work, instead turning back and replacing the paper on her easel with a new page. I followed suit, and went back to ignoring her. Or... trying to ignore her anyway.

As the class progressed, and the more I saw her work, I began to see the perfection that Aimee had mentioned. She was annoyingly, incredibly... *painfully* skilled. Damn, I'd been hoping she was secretly mediocre so that I could write her off as competition when they began to whittle the number of students down into the second year. I know that thought was a little mean, but I was pretty sure she was better than me, and that might be a problem later.

We worked through several different exercises over the next hour, some sketches having to be done in as little as one minute, others longer and with different tools. Each time, the professor would come around and point out one or two things we'd done well, and one or two things we could do better. Then, when the hour was up and the model went behind a screen to get changed, the professor turned to us.

"So, you've all done several sketches. Now, I want you to pair up with someone in the class and go over each piece. Just as I did, I want you to give at least one thing that went well with the drawing, and one thing that could be improved. Remember to be nice too, this is as much an exercise in giving critique as it is in sketching," she told us, emphasising the point about being nice.

I'd known as soon as she told people to pair up, that Lianna and I would be together. It wasn't that we chose it, it's that everyone around us chose other people, and in about ten seconds flat we were forced to group up. My stomach dropped out as I realised how painful this was going to be. She was not going to be nice, I knew that much for sure.

I watched her reaction to it with bated breath. Was she going to make a scene about it? But no, her eyes flicked up to meet mine for a moment, then away. Visibly schooling herself into impassivity, she looked back up at me and took a deep breath.

"Okay. I guess we have to do this then," she stated wearily.

"Ah, yeah," I murmured, feeling lost as to what I should say.

"Well, you go first I guess. Show me the first one," she said, her tone still even and without all but the mildest emotion.

I did as she asked, taking out the ten minute sketch and placing it before her. I'd gone for messy strokes in this one, the absence of charcoal lines denoting the shape of the object just as much as their presence did so. I had the shape, shading and perspective of the model down pretty well, and realistic, or so I thought.

"Your eye for shape is good," she said after a moment, her eyes roaming the paper. "I don't see anything wrong there, but you're still doing that messy abstract thing that I'm not a fan of."

"I like to use abstract techniques to try and get a little emotion into the piece," I said quietly in my defence.

"What emotion is that?" she said, gesturing with a scoff at the drawing.

I could only shrug and say, "Guess. If you get it right, I did it right."

She looked up at me then, her eyes finding mine and staying there, making a home for a moment. Gosh her eyes... I couldn't get over them, so dark, their contours only revealed when light was hitting their surface in just the right way. Then they came alive with the deepest, richest browns I'd ever seen. The colour reminded me of dark roasted coffee beans that had been freshly ground.

"Okay," she finally said, taking a deep, slightly shaky breath.

She turned back to my sketch and frowned at it in thought for a minute or so. The way her brows crinkled together was kinda funny, and all of a sudden I felt a little smile tugging insistently at my lips.

"The lines are messy, but it looks like you did that on purpose for some of them, while the others look just, careless. I don't think there's much emotion from the model, but you... weren't totally jazzed about something here," she wondered aloud, turning to me to gauge my reaction to her words.

"Uh... yeah," I said sheepishly, then whispered, "Old man junk."

Her face lit up with an amused smile for a moment and it was... incredible. Wait, was she... pretty? Did I think she was pretty, or was it just the fact that the angry girl with the dark eyes was smiling at me finally? Either way, this was totally great, I liked her smile.

Her expression wavered when I answered her with a smile of my own, and she frowned again. No! Bring the smile back! Should I make more jokes about flaccid penis?

“I can see the emotion, I guess,” she said, back in the impassive voice again. “I think you could have done a little better with the shading. Darker tones in the shadows for more depth.”

Wow, I felt like I had whiplash from that interaction. There was also nothing wrong with my shading, it— damn she might be right. Just a little.

“Could also do with defining the lines a little better, even working within your abstract style, it gets a little hard to read around the shoulders here,” she continued, pointing to the area in question. “The lines are too heavy and it gives it a blurry look.”

“Yeah,” I conceded, trying to hide my defeat. She was right. I’d struggled with the shoulders and ended up putting too many lines one atop the other until it was a mess, making it hard to see their shape.

“On to mine then,” she said, still in a coldly neutral voice.

She got out her ten minute sketch and laid it down in front of me. I’d glanced at it before, but I hadn’t gotten to really take it in like I could now. Unlike mine, her lines were scarily tight and precise, and it honestly looked like she’d used a pen or something. How was she getting charcoal to act like that? You could almost never get the type of charcoal we’d been given to hold an edge for more than like two seconds. You either turned one corner of the page into a nightmarish black abyss where you used it to sharpen the stick, or you got messy like I had.

“How did you get your lines so consistently clean? Charcoal never stays sharp like that for me, and I don’t see any evidence you were keeping it sharp. Not that I’ve practiced much with it, but yeah,” I asked, genuinely wanting to know the answer.

“There’s always a sharp edge on the stick, you just have to look for it,” she told me matter of factly. “Plus, I alternated between shading and linework, using the shading to keep it sharp. It’s kinda simple stuff.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” I sighed. “I think I need to practice with charcoal.”

She didn’t say anything for a few moments, and I realised I’d turned the critique of her sketch into a conversation about me. Damn, that was actually kinda rude. Best get back on track.

“Well anyway um, your lines are great,” I said lamely, and started to search for something she could improve.

How could I find something she could improve when she was damn flawless? This was difficult, far more difficult than the drawing had been. That is, until I noticed something glaringly obvious.

“You’ve smoothed out his wrinkles,” I said, more in confusion than anything else.

“What? No,” she frowned leaning over to look at her picture.

The movement brought our shoulders into contact, and suddenly all thought of her sketch was gone. I felt hot electricity running all throughout my arm, and every hair on my body stood to attention as a wave of goosebumps flashed over my skin. She was so close, way too close, oh my gosh.

“Where?” she asked, looking up at me with a genuinely confused expression.

Her face was so damn close, and I think she realised it too, because she leaned back a little and swallowed.

It took me a second to recover from her leaning into me like that, but with a shaking breath I pointed out what I’d seen. “Um, here, the face, look.”

With the pictures side by side, it was fairly easy to see what I was talking about, and she gave a hum of thought when she saw the blurriness. “Well shit, yeah I see it.”

“Do you um... perhaps have problems with your eyesight?” I asked with a frown.

“What?” she blurted, staring at me like I’d just mentioned that the sky was actually green. Then her face darkened into an angry thunderstorm, and she snapped, “No, I can see just fine, thanks.”

Oh, wait... crap! Did she think I was saying she’d walked into me a week ago because she was blind? Oh no, if she did, that was the absolute wrong thing to say. She looked so angry now, and it hurt to see what little friendliness we’d been cultivating just drain away like that.

“No, no! I didn’t mean it like that! I just...” I blurted, my chest constricting with anxiety.

“Just stop. Let’s get the rest of this done so we can leave,” she said, her expression wary and frustrated.

Damn, damn, *damn!* I really messed this up!

The rest of our buddy critique session went... poorly. She was sparing with praise and quick to pull apart any mistake I’d made in painful detail. In turn, my own critique of her work turned down a similar path, and by the end of the class we were glaring at each other in anger.

Which was when our professor noticed our angry staring contest.

“I assume that you two didn’t see eye to eye on some things, hmm?” she asked dryly.

“You could say that,” Lianna muttered, while I stayed silent.

“Well in that case, enjoy critiquing each other’s work for the semester. I expect you both to learn how to give feedback without being confrontational about it,” she said, and I swear there was an evil twinkle in her eye. Oh no... please no.

“What? No, you can’t be serious!” Lianna exclaimed loudly, looking horrified.

“Yeah that seems... a bit mean...” I murmured, trailing off.

“Well if you have issues with giving crit, I’m not going to force you onto any of the others am I? I’ll email you both some resources on the subject, I do hope you read and take it in,” she smiled amicably, that evil twinkle still in her eye. Damn meddling teachers!

“This is shit,” Lianna groaned, when the professor had left to deal with another pair.

I didn’t respond, simply gathering my things to leave. I was suddenly very much looking forward to the party. Maybe that would turn my angry, frustrated mood around.