

A few days later, and I was getting ready for my first day of class. I'd spent those days mainly hiding in my room and only coming out for meals. Aimee had noticed pretty quickly, of course, but I'd refused to budge when she tried to get me to go outside. Outside was where the angry girl and my old friends were. Much better to stay in my room and dive back into League. I'd made progress there thankfully. Researching and playing a few games as all the new champions so I knew what the hell they did.

None of which was relevant to my coming day, where I assumed we'd be listening to a bunch of health and safety speeches and being given pieces of paper with our class outlines on them. Typical first day orientation stuff. Nothing I couldn't handle. I could definitely do this, just don't think about how your old friends and the girl who's laptop you broke are out and about too. Don't think about it...

I'd decided to wear my hair down today after I saw that there was almost no wind. It was impossible to keep my hair contained as soon as there was even the slightest breeze, so I was always excited to be able to leave it down. It curled into nice ringlets as it passed the small of my back, so as much as it was a pain, I also enjoyed how it looked sometimes. I fantasized about dyeing it one day. Something outlandish to give my mother a conniption once I was safely self sufficient.

Unfortunately, along with the lack of wind, it was also going to be a reasonably hot day, so I had to prepare to wander around in the sun all day. With that in mind, I picked a pair of swishy baggy pants and a crop top that was cropped just a *little* too high for my liking, but I had a flat stomach so I guess it would be okay. I just knew that guys would be eyeing me up, and I always hated that. I knew what they said about us girls when we weren't around, and it wasn't pretty.

Still, I left my room on time, my satchel across my shoulder and my sketchbook in hand. I loved my sketchbook. I loved finding things that looked quirky or interesting, then trying to capture their likeness in graphite, and later possibly in watercolor. Watercolours were lovely, perfect for bringing a bit of life and colour to the better sketches I might do throughout the day.

Aimee had left earlier, her classes starting earlier than mine, so I was on my own as I exited the dorms, making my way across the campus following the directions of a map I had squirrelled away in my sketchbook. I needed that map to give me a mind image of the whole place, and once I had a little familiarity with the campus, I'd never need it again.

The campus was nice, the same blend of old and new architecture begging me to get a sketch or at least an impression of the lines used by the architects. Students walked around me, solo like I was, or in chattering groups. I felt a smile tugging at my lips, just relishing the feeling of

being a college student. I'm sure the panic and deadlines that everyone warned about would come soon, but gosh it was a nice day currently.

I was almost to my class when something caught my eye. A flower of some species I didn't know the name of had decided to grow out of a crack, then wind its way around an old, dented looking steel pipe. The pipe was rusting, the paint flaking off as the metal shucked it off, no longer allowing it purchase along its length. The stem flower had wrapped itself around the pipe twice before drooping off to the side and blooming. I needed to get a sketch of this! It would look so great once I got some watercolour paint down on it too.

I quickly sat down on the grass nearby, then stood up again and shifted until I was satisfied with the angle. I began to capture the image at the concrete, drawing the jagged cracks in the pavement with broad, intentionally shaky strokes to try and get an impression of the rough edges. Once the cracked pavement was in, I moved upwards, sketching in the leaves and exposed roots at the base of the plant using short, precise strokes.

I felt my worries easing as I lost myself further into the drawing, relishing the satisfaction of getting the dented lines of the pipe blocked out with long smooth movements. Then came the centerpiece, the flower itself, drawing attention to it not just with the way I'd framed it, but also with the amount of detail I put into it. My lines were shorter and cleaner here, rather than the more vague, broad strokes I'd used in the concrete.

When I completed the flower and shook myself out of the haze that always came over me when I was concentrating, I smiled down at the work. I liked it, although I knew I'd find faults with it by the time the sun was setting. I always did, and many other artists I'd spoken to reported the same problems. Perfectionists, the lot of us.

Wobbling to my feet, I stretched languidly and looked around, catching a guy staring at me. Oops, this was a short top. Good thing I'd worn a nice bra I guess!

Wait...

Oh no! I had class! Darn it! Checking my phone, I saw I was already fifteen minutes late. I grabbed my stuff as fast as I could and hurried the rest of the way through the winding pathways of the campus until I got to the door, discovering it wasn't locked and almost falling through it in my haste to get inside.

The room was small and old, definitely one of the ones from when the college had been built originally. The back wall was dominated by wide windows that gave a view of a courtyard, while the other walls were ringed with old wooden desks and easels that had been shifted out of the

way to make room for the dozen or so people who were sitting in a circle in the middle of the room. I'd just walked in on the whole, sit in a circle and talk about yourselves thing...

"Hello dear, you wouldn't happen to be Eleanora Stokes would you?" the teacher asked warmly... wait it was a professor when you were in college right?

"U-um yes! Sorry I'm late! I got distracted!" I squeaked, pulling my hair over my shoulder nervously.

"Not a problem Eleanora, please take a chair and we'll make room for you in the circle," she smiled amicably.

I did as she asked, grabbing a chair from where they were stacked up next to the wall and shuffling over to where some of my classmates had opened to let me in. Oh this was so embarrassing. I could feel a blush all across my face and chest as I sat down, my eyes practically rooted to the floor in front of me.

"So, since we're already all looking at you, why don't you start us off? Tell us about yourself, and what had you so distracted," the professor smiled encouragingly.

"Oh um, sure.. Uh... my name is Eleanora Glade Stokes... I go by Glade. Um, I like drawing and painting... um..." I winced, my mind tumbling over itself trying to think of anything interesting to say that wasn't... well, the biggest thing about me.

"What had you so distracted?" the professor prompted, and I looked up at her.

Oh... my eyes never made it to the professor.

Sitting across from me was Lianna, the girl who's laptop I'd broken. She was wearing a really nice black dress that was form fitting from the top down until her waist, where it flared out slightly in a short pleated skirt. Her legs looked so long with the skirt starting so high! Wow, her makeup was good today too, she had beautifully drawn eyeliner, the ends flicking out in impressive wings. Her eyes were crazy dark today too, which was probably an effect of the makeup she'd used.

My admiration for her style and presentation was not shared by her apparently, because she was glaring at me with just as much fire as she had a few days ago. I felt strange as I met her eyes. Warm, fluttery, nervous and scared. Wait, why the first two? Normally when I was scared of someone, I just felt the last two. Maybe it was the guilt?

“Glade?” the professor asked, and I gave a gasp, finally getting my eyes to travel the rest of the way.

“Wh-hat? I asked, trying to shoo the strange emotions I was feeling away with willpower alone.

“My, you do get distracted easily don’t you?” the professor lady laughed. “I was asking what had you so enthralled as to turn up late to my class.”

“Oh! I was sketching a flower that was growing around a pipe!” I said a little too excitedly. No, naughty mouth, less excitement, it’s just a flower!

“You were sketching?” she mused, looking down at my sketchbook. “May we see? This is a life drawing class, after all.”

“Ah...” I grimaced, before deflating and nodding. Showing new people my stuff was always scary.

I got my sketch book out and flipped to the correct page. Wow I had a lot of sketches. I needed a new book soon!

Placing the book carefully on the ground where everyone could see it like we used to do in my high school critique sessions, I stammered out an explanation, “I just... I really liked the way it had twisted around the pipe, and the way the pipe was dented. I was um... interested to see how I’d do the subtle shading I needed for all the little divots and stuff so... yeah I had to sit down and draw it...”

“Intriguing...” the professor lady said, leaning forward to get a better look. “I see you still had an eye for the overall composition of the piece though, giving the flower more detail.”

“Um... yeah,” I mumbled, feeling another flush bloom across my cheeks. Could you like, double blush? Was that a thing? I was definitely double blushing now.

“I’d have a lot more to say about it if this were a real critique, but for now I will say that you have impressed me right out of the gates young lady. Thank you for being brave enough to share this with us,” she smiled, before turning to the next girl in the class. “Onwards to you then my dear, please tell us your name... and no, don’t worry, I don’t expect a drawing out of everyone.”

I sighed in relief as the classes' focus was turned away from me and onto the next poor soul. As the introductions rounded the circle, I struggled to keep my eyes on whoever was talking, and off Lianna. The worst part, was that every time I failed, and my eyes flicked to hers, she would either already be looking at me, or her eyes would find mine an instant later. They still had that fire in them too, and it was making me nervous.

When it came time for Lianna to speak, I found myself listening intently, eager to find out something other than her name.

"Hello, Uh, my name is Lianna Chambers. I'm from Philadelphia. I enjoy all things art, as well as cooking, hiking and mixing drinks. I don't get to do a lot of hiking anymore since... um, something happened, but if I can put together the money to travel somewhere with a good trail, I love to do that," she said, her voice faltering and hitching as she mentioned the *something* that had happened. "There's a lot of great landscapes to draw out on those trails."

The professor thanked her when she finished, just as she had done with the others, and moved on to the next person, a muscled guy I had barely paid attention to.

My thoughts did not move on however, and I found myself turning over every word that Lianna had spoken like it was a clue in a mystery novel. What had happened to her? She didn't seem like she was struggling with an injury or anything that would keep her from hiking, but those could always be lurking out of sight. She'd mentioned not having a lot of money again too... which had me feeling terrible about her laptop all over again. Damn... I wished she'd let me buy her another one.

As class wrapped up, she threw another angry, scolding glance at me and I cringed away. Something in my heart ached to be receiving those looks of animosity. I wanted to be her friend, not hurt her or break her things. Well, maybe not friends, because making friends was hard and nerve wracking, but I didn't want to hurt her.

Even though I'd made a good impression on the teacher, I left my first class feeling less than optimistic about the year. It hadn't felt like a victory, with Lianna's dirty looks and my own dislike of the limelight. What if the teacher kept calling on me like that? What if she kept putting me on some pedestal for all the other people in my class to sneer at? I felt anxious just thinking about it.

The rest of the day turned into a slog. Lianna was in every single one of my classes that day, and although she cooled down a little and stopped sending death stares at me, by the end of the day I still felt crap.

I'd thought it was because of Lianna that my day sucked, but that was only part of it. There was only so many hours of torturous nothing I could endure before my brain melted out of my ears. Why did we have to go through the same health and safety speech for every single class? Every. Single. Class. It was literally the same speech too, they read it off the same handout they must have been given in their staff meeting or something. Even the teachers looked like they hated it.

All of this culminated in a day that should have been exciting, but had instead drained me of all my mental and emotional energy. I hadn't even had the energy to do many sketches... So what did life decide to do? Well life decided I hadn't suffered enough. My phone rang, and when I looked down at it, I saw my least favourite person calling, my mother.

Answering the phone, I put it to my ear and said, "Hello?"

"Eleanora dear, you know to answer with your name by now," my mother said, sighing with disappointment from the other end.

"O-oh... Sorry. Um, Hello, Glade here?" I said, raising the end of my sentence into a question.

"Eleanora. Your name is Eleanora. No one will take you seriously if you use *that* name. Think of the impression that will make if you answer with that? You need to sell your *brand* Eleanora. Remember, think of yourself as a company, you need to get people interested in you and what you do just as much as any company after all," she said, shifting into that droning voice she used when she decided she was going to try and *teach me the ways of the world*.

"Sorry mother," I mumbled, failing to scrape together the willpower to give her a proper response.

"Yes, well, that being said, how was your first day at College dear? I hope you made an impression," she said lightly, as though she had realised she was coming on a bit strong out of the gate and knew I wouldn't listen to her unless she tried to be nicer. It was true, but I hated the way that me hearing her words was the motivator.

"Uh, yeah I did actually. I was late to my first class because I stopped to sketch something. The Professor liked my drawing. She outright said she was impressed so that was cool," I said, finally feeling a little excitement over the fact that yeah... I actually had made a good impression today.

“That’s good dear, well done. Although, I would think it would be a better idea to prepare one of your little drawings in advance, rather than being late,” she told me. “Being late won’t land you a job or... whatever it is you artists do after college.”

And just like that, she torpedoed my happiness over my first class. Figures she’d find a fault with whatever I did.

“Thanks mother. I’ll do that next time,” I said neutrally. If I let on that she’d said something to hurt me, it would be a whole other *conversation*. God forbid I tried to explain that it was *because* I was late that the professor asked to see my work in the first place.

“Yes, well... I’m sure you’ll impress all your professors and get good grades. You’re a smart girl and I expect you’ll do very well. Your father and I love you dear. We’ll see you when the semester ends,” she said, hanging up before I could say goodbye. Not that I’d bothered even opening my mouth to do so.

“Thanks *mom*,” I sighed as I put my phone back in my satchel.

I needed to get back to my dorm and my bed. Beds always made me feel safer. Maybe I could work my terrible mood out on the people of league. Silently destroying my opponent might be cathartic. I automatically muted everyone at the start of the game. I didn’t need the extra sodium.