

Being Samantha Masters



an homage-sequel to Being Christina Chase

by Miriam Robern

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The Immune System of Patriarchy

Finley was waiting outside the building when Sammy arrived for Biology. They pushed themselves off the wall to amble over to him. Sammy couldn't help but smile, and lifted his chin just slightly, hoping for a kiss.

But Finley looked left and right awkwardly. "Hey. So. I mean. Good morning."

A tendril of dread curled around Sammy's heart. "Uh. Good morning," he managed.

"Listen, I'm... pretty sure that it's perfectly ethical for me to date you," they said, voice kept low enough not to carry and with the measured cadence of rehearsed wording. "But I'm not sure that the professor would see it that way."

Sammy looked from Finley to the door into the building, as if the professor in question would be standing there, glowering in disappointment at them both. But it was just a flow of students heading into the building for morning classes. He said something intelligent, like "Oh, okay."

"You all right?" they asked, tipping their chin down to scrutinize his face.

He nodded, smiled, lied. "Yeah, I'm fine."

Finley gestured at their own eyes. "It just looked like you got kind of teary all the sudden."

"Wind, I guess?" he shrugged. He did not ask, "Are you breaking up with me?" Because they weren't even together, right? They'd been on one date.

"The university code of ethics for TAs is really strident about dating students," Finley was saying, "but that was negotiated with the TA Union, and I'm not allowed to join the TA Union for the summer program, so I'm not sure if their code of ethics even applies to me."

"Yeah, totally," Sammy said, bobbing his head.

"Anyway," Finley sighed, and slipped their hands into the back pockets of their jeans. "We just have to keep things quiet, okay?"

"Yeah, I— I won't tell anybody about last Friday," Sammy promised, and forced himself to smirk. "It was just an apology dinner anyway, right?" That's it, he thought to himself: deny

everything, pretend it meant nothing, because then it won't hurt to lose it. It wasn't a strategy that had ever worked well for him, but one of these days, it might.

"I seem to remember you wanting it to be a date," they smirked back.

Sammy's smile grew wane as he answered automatically. "You asked me on a date," he corrected, keeping his voice quiet. But his heart was thudding and he knew he had to cut this whole thing loose from his life. He heard himself saying, "We can just call it a misunderstanding."

Finley stepped a little closer. "Well this Friday is definitely a date, right?" they asked, elbows cocked behind them, hands kept rigidly in their pockets.

Sammy's brain ground to a halt. He blinked. His heart lurched against the inside of his ribcage. "I thought... I thought you just said you couldn't—"

"I'm just not sure about what is and isn't allowed," Finley said with an elaborate roll of their shoulders, approximating a shrug. "So we'll need to keep things quiet. No flirting in class, or right outside of class. That sort of thing." They waggled their elbows behind their back. "And I'll keep my hands safely in my pockets, to resist temptation."

Sammy's lips refused to put words together for a full thirty seconds. Finally he managed, "...but keep dating."

Finley bobbed their head, grinning. "Secret dating. Kinda sexy, yeah?"

Relief flooded through Sammy and he could feel his cheeks burning red. "Oh, yeah. That's um. That's totally cool. Secret dating."

Finley threw him a wink and hooked a thumb behind themselves. "Okay. Well I've got to get in there, I promised the class I wouldn't be late again."

"Yeah, see you in there," Sammy heard himself say. "But I won't, you know, flirt across the classroom or whatever." But Finley was already bounding to the door and didn't hear a word.

He'd shuffled and reshuffled his schedule, compacting a few blocks of reading and streamlining his essay-writing, to free up some time. He'd managed to open up Tuesday evening, from seven to eight. But he was still reading, sitting in front of his laptop, while the video chat service told him to wait to be admitted to the meeting. He needed every scrap of time he could get.

He was still dressed up, not that he really stripped off his daily costume until it was time for bed most nights. But when he'd got back from the dining commons, he'd touched up his make

up and gave himself a once-over in the mirror. Just a cami-and-cardi set, striped white and mint green, with matching hair clips to bring it all together. It was basically casualwear. Especially since his black skirt with the lace edging was going to be out of frame, anyway. But he wanted to look at least presentable for Rowan's friend.

Rowan's friend, who needed work and refused to accept charity, who helped Rowan back when she needed it, and now Sammy could help her. He'd been hoovering up privileges and opportunities—on Uncle Gideon's advice to “take what you can get, babe,”—and if he could help somebody by spending an hour a week pretending to take voice lessons, well then, he was all for it. It was a dumb way to give back, he'd told himself at lunch, but it was what was available to him.

The video conference lurched into activity with a tin-can bwong and the video pane lighting up with a smiling woman's face. Somewhere in her mid-thirties, Black, and wearing makeup that had probably been striking when she'd put it on earlier that day. She smiled out of Sammy's laptop. “Samantha, right?”

“That's me,” Sammy nodded, suddenly more self-conscious of his voice than he'd ever been in his life. He put the biology textbook aside with shaky hands.

“And I'm Vanessa,” she smiled welcomingly. She glanced down and shuffling paper came over the audio. Checking her notes. “Oh, you're Rowan's cousin, right? How's she doing?”

“Kicking ass and taking names,” Sammy said with a weird laugh, and then wondered why he'd said that. Why was he so nervous? But he decided to cover whatever nervousness he had by adding, “At full volume, of course.”

Vanessa laughed along as if any of that had made sense. “Yeah, she's become quite outgoing. It's been so good to see her coming into herself on social media, but you should have seen her back when I was coaching her. Timid little thing, afraid of her own shadow.”

Wait, what? Sammy shook his head in disbelief. “I uh, only met her a few months ago,” he explained after a stunned moment. “I can't even imagine her as ‘timid.’”

The voice coach cackled. “She was, she was. Which only goes to show how dangerous voice training is: it'll unlock things that nobody thought was inside you.” And at this she winked at him, as if he was in on the joke.

But Sammy's heart thudded. This was supposed to be learning some parlour tricks so he could make his voice sound girly when he needed it to. But now this was going to *unlock things?*

Vanessa was settling into her office chair and smiling. She'd just asked a question. What

had she said?

“Sorry, you broke up,” he lied. “What was that?”

She smiled again, with the practiced confidence that knew exactly how bright and welcoming that smile was. “I asked you what you’d like to get out of voice training with me.”

“Oh, uh...” he stammered. “I just want to... sound like a girl?”

Vanessa gave him a look through the video chat. “Okay so first, honey, you already sound like a girl, because you are a girl, yeah?” She speared him with eye contact until he nodded mutely. “But leaving that aside. There’s lots of ways to sound like a girl. There’s lots of girls to sound like. Have you given any thought to your options?”

Sammy tried not to squirm in his desk chair. “Um. Can you... I’m not sure what the options are?”

“Well,” she said with an indulgent smile. “You can go perky,” she said like a helium-infused cheerleader, and then switched to “...or smokey and sultry. Or more... girl next door.” That she delivered in a voice Sammy was sure he’d heard in a thousand teen drama shows. “There is,” she went on, shifting her voice up and down and sideways to suit, “clipped, confident businesswoman or friendly midwestern housewife or hard-talking urbanite from the streets or bubbly ditz, tee hee.”

Sammy boggled as Vanessa’s voice leapt and danced and changed, over and over again. But beneath his amazement was a growing disquiet. This was the breast forms all over again. Getting handed the proper way to be a girl was one thing; picking out the kind of girl he wanted to be was... daunting. Probably impossible. Because he didn’t want any of this, any which way, right?

Except.

“Sometimes people give me... funny looks?” he heard himself say. “When I talk, I mean.”

Vanessa bobbed her head, her face a picture of sympathy. “Yeah. People can be shit, huh?”

“Yeah. And I uh. I’m not out, back home? And in a few weeks I go back home for about a month, and I don’t want to...” he trailed off, unable to articulate the nightmare scenario blossoming in his head. Him slouching off the bus in hoodie and sweatpants, no tits and no bra even, greeting his parents in a bright, lilting falsetto that he couldn’t stop.

The voice coach saved him from spiralling. “Nothing we do is permanent,” she promised. “And you can retain your masculine voice as long as you like. Switch back and forth as you

need.”

He nodded slowly, slightly mollified. A thought occurred to him, and he looked up at the screen. Rowan had said Vanessa was trans, didn’t she? Which meant— “Does that mean that you can...?”

The woman’s lips twisted slightly. “You can lose your masculine voice,” she admitted, “if you don’t ever use it. But that takes months. And that is what I did, years ago now, before I knew I wanted to do this. So I had to go searching for my old masc voice, or something close to it, and... I’m afraid I sound like a woman making fun of how a man talks, now.” She smirked and cleared her throat, and when she spoke it came out deep and rough, and just slightly laughable: “But it’s good enough to demonstrate the fundamentals.”

Sammy snorted in surprise, hands flying up to cover his lips. “I’m sorry, I just—”

“No apologies necessary, I know how I sound,” Vanessa replied, back in her normal voice. Face still full of sympathy, she added, “But we’ve gone the long way around to dodge the original question.”

Deflating a little, Sammy nodded. “Yeah, I uh. I don’t really know what I want to sound like.”

“That’s fine, honey,” she responded gently. “We don’t need to have a destination in mind. What we can do is work on expanding your range, in both pitch and resonance. And probably do a little breath work and shake up your cadences a little bit. Later we’ll worry about fine-tuning with creak and breathiness. And I know I’m throwing a ton of new terminology at you—”

“That’s kind of my life right now,” Sammy cut in with a smirk. “So don’t worry about it.”

Vanessa hit him with the smile again. “Okay. But the point is: we can go looking for a voice that suits you. Kind of explore the territory, see what we can find, see what you’re comfortable with. In my experience, most girls find something that just clicks for them, and then we’re off to the races. Sound good?”

Sammy nodded slowly. This was sounding more like what he’d hoped for: some tricks to learn that he could bring out when needed. He didn’t need to unlock anything. “Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Great,” she smiled, and he realized that it wouldn’t be long at all before he’d do his best just to make her smile at him like that. “Well, we’ve still got a chunk of time left in the hour, so let’s start on some exercises. How do you feel about making a bunch of funny sounds?”

“I take it back,” declared Leon a moment after his tray clattered onto the table next to

Sammy. “I dread the Literature class and the Composition class and also the History class.” His bag hit the floor and he slumped into his chair.

Sammy looked up from his reading. His own lunch, half-eaten, had been pushed to the side a while ago. He still had three chapters of *Persuasion* to polish off before class tomorrow, but he slid a finger into the book to hold his place. He lifted his eyebrows to show he was listening.

“In Ukraine, history is names and dates and nations and movements...” Leon griped, and put extra emphasis on “...and *events*. History is the story of what happened, yes?”

“Gid— er, Doctor Roth-Masters said we’d get to all the names and dates eventually,” Sammy pointed out. “We’re just not starting there.”

“But what are we starting with?” Leon responded rhetorically, and shoved half of his burger into his face. He went on with a full mouth, which Sammy tried not to look at directly. “Patriarchy? Homophobia? Feminism? Theories and theories and theories, nothing—” He waved his burger, which dripped ketchup onto his fries, and swallowed. “—nothing substantial. Nothing concrete. Not like Ukraine.”

Sammy shrugged. “But that’s the point of the Marginalized Scholars Program, right? To teach you how to do academic stuff the American way. Although,” he stumbled, and then confessed: “I didn’t really pay much attention in high school history, so I can’t really tell you if that’s what I missed in the US version of history class.”

“Pretty sure your high school,” Leon said, emphasizing ‘high school’ like it was a bizarre, alien concept, which Sammy supposed it was, to him. “They didn’t teach you that, what, homophobia is the immune system of patriarchy and used to quash dissent within the state. And the state is, of course, a patriarchal structure in and of itself. Everything is patriarchy. Everything bad, at least. And this is history?”

Sammy considered the young man from Ukraine for a long moment. “So just... to be clear, you’re straight, right?”

Leon’s eyes slitted slightly. “Yes. But that shouldn’t matter to the ideas. The ideas should be true no matter what my sexuality.”

Sammy waved his hands to quash Leon’s preemptive response, and sat up a little in his chair. “But it does matter to how you hear the ideas. Where you’re coming from, the experiences that you’ve had in your life so far, they have an effect on how new ideas sound to you.”

Leon frowned softly, nodded reluctantly, and consoled himself by making the rest of his burger disappear.

“Because like, I’m queer, right?” Sammy went on, patting his collarbone (his fingertips

touched skin and not fabric and he really should be used to that by now, right?). “And so from where I’m standing? Based on what I’ve experienced in the world? Homophobia being the thing that keeps everybody in line? That makes perfect fucking sense to me.”

Leon shook his head. “But homophobia is just the fear of gay people,” Leon protested, gesturing with a french fry.

“It’s not fear of, like individual gay people; it’s the fear of *gayness*,” Sammy corrected, and then clarified: “Of queerness. It’s the fear that, at any time, for any number of random-ass reasons, somebody might think you’re queer. That you’re not measuring up, that you’re not acting your part, that you’re less worthy of respect.”

Leon’s face placed him somewhere between skeptical and uncomfortable.

“Cause me? That’s my every day,” he pressed on. “Because I am queer, so when I get clocked as queer, I know what’s happening, cause I’m always hyper-aware of it. And when somebody decides that they think you’re queer, you can *see* them respect you less.”

Leon wasn’t convinced. “I’m sorry, that does sound terrible, but it only explains the oppression of queer people. It’s not the... foundation of empire that the professor made it out to be.”

Sammy waved his hands in frustration. This had been so clear to him in class; why couldn’t he explain it now? “You’re looking at it like it’s something that happens to just me, but it’s happening to everybody, all the time. Homophobia means that everybody’s constantly watching everybody else to make sure they don’t act queer. And that makes everybody a little bit scared, a little bit easier to control. Easier to take advantage of by the, uh—” He struggled to remember the right word, and then it popped into his brain and he snapped his fingers. “The elites, right? When everybody else is scared of getting called queer, or not manly enough, or not fulfilling their womanly duties or whatever, and they go along with all that bullshit to avoid it, then they’re more likely to go along with other bullshit, too. That’s what Gid— that’s what Doctor Roth-Masters was after in class today.”

Leon scrunched up his face, considering. “Is conditioning, then, yeah? Hm,” he finally said, nodding slightly, which seemed to be, if not agreement, at least understanding. He ate a few more fries and Sammy was about to go back to his book, when Leon asked, “So you are queer?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“So you like girls?” he asked, speculatively. “I am unsure if transgender counts as queer or is something separate.”

“Oh, uh,” Sammy stammered. Right. He was a trans girl, at least for the purposes of this conversation. “I mean, it’s... complicated. Trans people are queers, but some are straight, but

they're still queers."

"That makes no sense," Leon told him flatly, and then pointed a french fry at Sammy. "But you. You are transgender, sure. But you like boys, so you are a straight queer? Or you like girls, and then you are a queer queer?"

Sammy tried not to laugh at Leon's earnestly-delivered question. "I like... both? And nonbinary people, too. I mean. All that doesn't really matter to me. At least," he added hastily, "for, uh, romantic partners."

"Are you seeing anybody now?" Leon asked, entirely too casually, not making eye contact.

Urk. Leon was nice and all, but Sammy was less than interested in his romantic attention. He and Finn were supposed to be keeping things quiet; could he even say yes, he was already spoken for? Maybe if he was very stingy with details. "Um. I am, actually," he said carefully. "Not a student here." Technically true, since Finley had graduated a month ago. "And with my class load, we just see each other on weekends."

The boy from Ukraine nodded for a moment, and when he looked up he smiled. "Good for you. I hope he makes you happy."

"They," Sammy corrected after a moment of consideration. There were lots of nonbinary people, right? He could be dating any of them. "They make me happy."

'Eeee eeee eeee eeee,' chirped Sammy at higher and higher pitches. He had his phone up in front of his face like some boomer on a video call, watching the numbers rating his pitch wobble higher and then lower again. The concrete blocks of his dorm room surrounded him, hopefully affording enough sound insulation that his neighbours wouldn't hear... whatever this was.

Voice training wasn't just one hour of video conference a week, it was that plus exercises every day, exercises that Vanessa had said he could plow through in fifteen minutes but if he did he'd be robbing himself of any progress. So here he was, taking his time to make funny sounds into his phone, filling up the hour he'd somehow managed to scrape out of his already-jam-packed schedule.

"Eeee eeee eeee, eeeeeee!" he squeaked, and then coughed. That last one had crossed over into falsetto, maybe, which he was supposed to avoid. The only problem was that he couldn't really tell the difference between the top of his normal range and the forbidden zone above that. But falsetto or not, that 'eeee' had set something in his nasal passages quivering in a very unpleasant way, so he was happy to call it falsetto and not do it again.

He lifted his phone to start again and a text message popped onto the screen. Finley, saying:

Hey.

Frowning softly, Sammy wiped the text message away. He'd respond after he was done eeee-eeee-eeeeing. But he'd only got two 'eeee's in when another text came in.

Finley again: Whatcha up to?

The cheap freebie app that measured pitch didn't know what to do with the phone vibration brought on by the text message and simply stalled out. Sammy's precarious flow on the awkward task of tweaking his voice had been thrown off, too. He decided to take a short break, and collapsed backwards into his desk chair.

Studying, of course, he texted back. Voice training was a kind of studying, right? He didn't want to explain that he was doing voice training on top of everything else, or why. He felt foolish devoting so much time to this thing he didn't really want, but he also couldn't not do the thing he'd told both Rowan and Vanessa that he'd do. All I do is study.

I could fix that for you. Finley texted back, with a winky face.

Sammy couldn't help smiling. Oh?

Finley responded with a photo, two pints of ice cream in one of their hands (the green nail polish gave their identity away), plus a pair of spoons sticking out from underneath.

Rolling his eyes, Sammy tapped out: You're sweet but I'm not getting on a subway to come eat ice cream.

Okay, first of all, came Finley's immediate response, you are on record as saying you would never say no to ice cream.

Sammy smirked, but didn't answer because the dots were already bouncing, heralding another text.

Secondly, they went on, I'm downstairs. Just buzz me in.

"What?" muttered Sammy. He enlarged the ice cream photo and, sure enough, he recognized the concrete stoop in the background. That was his dorm's porch.

He was supposed to do fifteen more minutes of voice exercises, and then he had an essay revision for Comp in the morning. He'd also scheduled a review of the week's Physics material for the quiz that may or may not happen on Friday.

But he rolled across the room to jam his finger on the button to let Finley into the dorm.

“And then what happened?” Rowan wanted to know.

Sammy smiled at the video chat, trying not to blush. “We ate ice cream and cuddled a little as we watched a movie.”

His cousin lifted one eyebrow. “Cuddled a little?”

“Do I have to define cuddling for you?”

“In this instance, yes,” Rowan nodded emphatically. “Were clothes involved?”

“Of course clothes were— Jesus, Rowan!”

“Cuddling is better without clothes,” opined Zoey. “That’s just science.”

Sammy groaned at the ceiling. “We kissed, we made out a bit, there was some... light petting.”

Rowan looked confused. “I’ve heard of heavy petting, but is light petting even a thing?”

Zoey shrugged theatrically.

“Okay fuck you,” he told the screen lovingly. “All I’m saying is my gentlethem caller brought me ice cream last night and I thought it was sweet of them.”

Zoey tilted her head quizzically, “A bit early in the relationship to attempt a booty call, isn’t it?”

“It wasn’t a booty call,” he all but howled, “because there wasn’t any sex.”

Rowan smirked, and Sammy could tell the look was meant for Rowan, not him. “I mean, most attempted booty calls don’t result in sex.”

“You guys are terrible and I have a study group to get to,” he told the screen. “Chat again tomorrow?”

Sammy felt self-conscious the whole way there, clutching his silly little picnic basket and fretting that making the date he’d planned “a surprise” was sort of silly, since he was literally lugging a picnic basket onto the subway. All he’d divulged was that they’d be active, so wear some sensible shoes. Which Finley had taken to mean dress casual: a band tee shirt, jeans shorts, and tennis shoes. That meant Sammy, in tight light jeans and a flowy pale pink blouse plus still-pristine frat shoes, looked just a bit overdressed in comparison.

Worse, he realized: standing next to each other, they looked like a straight couple.

They made small talk on the subway, with Sammy's attention split between Finley talking about their roommates' hijinx and the automated subway announcements. He didn't want to miss their stop.

And then he led them into Central Park. The day was warm and clear, perfect weather for picnicking. Given it was a Friday afternoon in the summer, the green landscape was dotted with people taking advantage of the massive park.

Frustratingly, he had to drop Finley's hand to check the map on his phone, but then he set it down on the flat top of the picnic basket so he could glance down at it. His free hand found its way back to Finley's. He was surprised how soon they came up on their destination: a scenic pond with a fake castle rising up on the opposite side.

There were a few other people scattered about, some of them on their own picnic blankets. Sammy led his date to an open spot and turned to face them, both hands clutching the basket handles. "It's a picnic," he explained. "I packed us a picnic. And it's... pretty here. And afterwards, I made us reservations at the Metropolitan Museum of Art."

Finley grinned. "I love the Met! And a picnic sounds great. Where'd you get the basket?"

"My uncles," he said with a shrug. "So you've been before? To the Met?" He'd told himself that his date idea probably wasn't terribly original, and the museum wasn't going to be anything Finley hadn't already done before, but he'd still held out some stupid hope that it would all be new and exciting.

"I mean, yeah, I've lived here for four years, I've been," they said with a gentle smile. "But not for ages. I'm excited to go!"

Sammy set the basket down to open it. Finley had clearly noticed his anxiety over the date and was trying to mollify his fears. He wasn't sure if he liked that they'd noticed and that they cared or if it only made him more self-conscious. He'd never planned a date before, and he wanted so much for this to go well that he knew he'd start flailing if he thought about it too much. "I, uh, I looked online for date ideas. Picnicking at the Turtle Pond seemed nice, and with the Metrop— I mean, the Met, right there..."

Finley reached out to take the other side of the thin picnic blanket and help stretch it out across the grass. "Absolutely. Samantha, this is great."

Sammy unpacked the picnic lunch, which was mostly just sandwiches and fruit and a sort of half-assed charcuterie board, minus the board. Finley laid across the opposite side of the blanket, watching with a bemused little smile on their face. When he looked up to explain what he'd packed for their picnic—which was all obvious, really, but still—his date just smiled and said,

“You’re adorable.”

Whatever Sammy was about to say was lost under his sudden full-body flush. “It’s just a picnic.”

“And you care a whole lot about making it just right,” his date pointed out. “Which is nice. It makes me feel good that you care about the details.”

Sammy sniggered, and when Finley raised an eyebrow at the odd reaction, he explained: “Me caring makes you feel good, but you telling me about me caring is just you caring about me feeling anxious, and it’s just like... a big echo chamber or something.”

“Exactly,” his date smiled, and picked up one of the soda bottles that had rolled out onto the blanket. They held it out in toast. “Here’s to echo chambers of caring.”

Sammy scooped up the other soda bottle and tapped its neck against Finley’s. “I’m not sure we’re supposed to be this sappy on Date Number Two.”

“Is it Date Number Two, though?”

Sammy handed Finley a sandwich and then levelled a warning finger at them. “You asked me out first. Last week was a date.”

They lifted their hands as if they were being held up at gunpoint instead of fingerpoint, trying to look innocent. “I wasn’t saying this was Date Number One. I was just thinking after Wednesday, maybe this counts as Date Number Three.” They unwrapped the sandwich and made appreciatory noises at the contents: his mother’s chicken salad. “Maybe even Date Number Four if we count our first kiss.”

“Okay, now you’re reaching,” Sammy laughed, settling more comfortably on his side of the blanket. “May I remind you that I kissed three other people that night, too—at your direction. Kind of weird.”

“Kind of sexy,” Finley shot back, grinning.

Sammy busied himself with his food, ignoring Finley’s eyes on him until it became unbearable. Finally, he allowed, quietly, talking almost directly into his sandwich, “Yeah, it was.”

They ate in companionable silence for a little while, enjoying the simply made food and artfully constructed view. Sammy regretted sitting opposite Finley; he wanted to cuddle, but he also wasn’t quite sure how cuddling would work with picnicking at the same time. There had been a lot of juggling with the ice cream on Wednesday.

He snorted in sudden amusement, and told Finley, “I told Rowan and Zoey about you showing up with ice cream, and they thought it was a booty call.”

Finley quickly took a pull of their soda, covering for something. “...ha ha, yeah, that’s funny.”

Sammy looked across the picnic blanket, eyebrows raised. “Okay, that was a lot of hesitation and not the quick denial I was expecting.”

Finley collapsed onto their back instead of making eye contact. “Um.”

Sammy leaned a little closer. Was Finley... actually blushing under their beard?

They looked up into Sammy’s face, smiling faintly and apologetically. “It wasn’t a... booty call booty call, but it was... the same impulse, I guess?” When Sammy only lifted his eyebrows, Finley tried to explain: “When you’re in a relationship—”

“We’re in a relationship, now?” he asked in mock surprise.

Finley covered their face with their hands. “I swear to god, Samantha, half of your transition is just you getting sassier. Shut up, let me finish.”

Sammy gave them an expansively sassy gesture to continue.

They repeated, “When you’re in a relationship,” and then cleared their throat. “Sometimes you just... want to see your person.” They tried to shrug into the ground, which only bunched up the blanket underneath them. “And sure, if it’s a sexual relationship, that maybe-probably involves sex, but if it’s not a sexual relationship yet, maybe it just means... making out while you watch a movie.”

While Finley was focused on explaining himself, Sammy had taken the opportunity to creep a little closer. He wasn’t quite looming, but he was smiling down into Finley’s face. The genderqueer’s features were all twisted up, uncertain how their explanation would be received. “That’s sweet,” Sammy told them. “And I totally get what you’re saying, I accept your explanation, and I’d like to go back to the part where we’re in a relationship.”

Finley heaved a relieved exhale while also rolling their eyes. “Not going to let that go, are you?”

Sammy leaned down slowly, descending until Finley’s lips puckered for a kiss, and then he stopped, smirking, withholding. “Nope.” He could feel Finley’s breath on his face.

“I feel like I need to reiterate that I’m leaving in five weeks,” Finley said soberly, and then smiled ever so softly. “But until then, I think I would like to call this a relationship.”

Giggling in unabashed delight, Sammy closed the remaining distance between their lips and kissed them, hard. He broke off long enough to breathe, “Yes, please.” And then for a little while they were both a tangle of limbs on top of smooshed sandwiches and tumbled tupperware.

When they separated, Sammy back lay on the grass (the blanket sat in a tangled heap three feet away) to catch his breath. His body still seemed to be fizzing and popping, heart hammering, head spinning. Finley lay beside him, their only contact two of the genderqueer’s fingers lightly stroking the side of Sammy’s thigh.

After a long moment of fingertip caresses and watching the clouds gather in the sunset lighting, Finley spoke up: “Okay, because it’s always a thing at this point? I prefer enbyfriend.”

“What?” Sammy couldn’t help asking the sky.

Finley propped themselves up on an elbow to make eye contact. “‘Datemate’ always sounds weird to me. The rhyming, I think. And ‘theyfriend’ and ‘themfriend’ are just... this whole thing with confusing pronouns for genders? Pet peeve of mine. So. You can call me your enbyfriend.”

Sammy smiled up at them. “This is Finley Aceves,” he said, gesturing with one hand as if he were introducing people, even though he was laying on the ground and didn’t quite have the right range of motion. “My enbyfriend.”

They definitely blushed, this time. “Yeah.” Sammy’s enbyfriend laid a hand on his belly, warm through the thin fabric of his blouse. “And I take it you’d like to be my girlfriend?”

His heart skipped a beat. Fuck. Why had this not occurred to him? “Yeah,” he heard himself say in a smiling exhale. That was not the right answer, nor was it the right word, but it was the best he was going to get, wasn’t it? It’s not like he could confess everything to Finley here and now, tell them that he wasn’t really a girl, he just pretended for... reasons even he was having trouble articulating, anymore. It was just too much to explain right now, in this moment, and the last thing he wanted was to ruin this moment. So he smiled again and said, “I’m your girlfriend.”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art was a blur. He rented a locker for the picnic basket and they walked, hand in hand, through exhibit after exhibit. Egyptian art, Roman art, European art, American art, Japanese art. But Sammy barely saw any of it.

He was Finley’s girlfriend.

There was a room full of instruments, for some reason. You could push buttons to make them make noises.

He was Finley's girlfriend.

There were suits of armor, for people and for horses, and Finley made a joke about codpieces that Sammy just barely realized wasn't serious commentary before he nodded along with it.

He was the girlfriend.

There was a whole stone temple, transplanted from wherever the colonizers had uprooted it from.

Girlfriend.

He couldn't even translate it in his head. For a little while—through the whole Impressionists section, in fact—he wondered if, when Finley or somebody else said “girlfriend,” his brain could just find-replace into something more appropriate, so inside his head he could be Finley's—well, boyfriend. But that fantasy dissolved as soon as Finn asked one of the docents for directions, saying “my girlfriend and I,” and his brain didn't find-replace, it didn't come up with anything more appropriate, it just sort of sat there in his skull and drooled.

He was back at that CQA meeting, on Finley's arm again, everybody looking at them. Everyone seeing Finley and their girlfriend, the trans girl, which meant that they must—

Finley asked if Sammy would mind if they bought a cinnamon roll from the cafe for them to share. He said no, of course not, why would he mind, and it wasn't until they were sitting down at the table that he remembered that this was his date and maybe he should have done that, or planned for it, or something.

Which was when Finley gave him a piercing look across the table. “Samantha, are you okay? You've been kind of... not all here.”

Oh, fuck, now he really was ruining the date. Sammy blinked rapidly, shook his head. Pushed through the cobwebs when they didn't clear on their own. “No, I'm good. I'm good. I just.” A thought struck him, made him laugh, and then he had to say it out loud. “I never thought I'd be somebody's girlfriend.” It was, after all, the truth.

Finley made a satisfied little sound and held out a forkful of steaming cinnamon roll. “Well you're mine,” they purred. “Until you get tired of me.”

“Or until five weeks is up.”

They rolled their eyes. “Put this in your mouth and stop talking.”

Sammy did as he was told.

“Sometimes I forget this really is your first rodeo,” Finley said while he chewed. “There's a

whole lot of feelings. This isn't even my first time and I've got lots of feelings. But the first time, it's huge and intimidating—"

Sammy opened his mouth to say something and had it stuffed with cinnamon roll, instead. Finley gave him a warning look, so he chewed.

"You're my girlfriend," they said insistently, and then couldn't help smiling at the statement. "And none of your feelings are too big or too much for me, okay? I look forward to hearing all about all your feelings... that means all your fears and all your misgivings, too." They reached forward to wipe a dribble of syrup off his chin. "You never have to hold back with me."

He waved a hand around and around over his head, and Finley's fork stilled, tacitly allowing him to speak. "It's all kind of spiralling around in here," he admitted.

"Not too surprising." His enbyfriend mirrored the twirling gesture with the bit of cinnamon roll on their fork, and then popped it in their own mouth.

Sammy looked left and right; the museum was emptying out, the end of the day approaching, with fewer and fewer people around. One woman walked purposefully from some half-hidden exhibit and across the interior plaza, and for a moment their eyes met. She looked from Sammy to Finley and back, smiled, and went on her way.

They looked like a couple. He looked like Finley's girlfriend. He also looked trans, which meant, when the lights were out and the making out escalated to something more...

Suddenly he was reminded of Uncle Gideon lecturing, and Leon complaining about Uncle Gideon lecturing, and Sammy himself explaining to Leon about what Gideon had been lecturing about, and that was it. That was exactly it. Sammy could feel the eyes on him. He was being watched, he was being evaluated, he was being judged.

And for some reason he was going along with it.

He opened his mouth to speak and had to wave off another bite of cinnamon roll. "No, um. If you really do want to hear some of the... stuff in my head—"

"I do," they nodded, and fed themselves the lingering bite.

He dithered again, and then chided himself. Even if this was a real relationship now, it still had its expiration date; it was still, essentially, Sammy's practice relationship. He could throw caution to the wind, right? He could say anything.

"I'm anxious about butt sex," he said, and Finley nearly choked. "Sorry, too much?"

"No, no," his enbyfriend assured him as they spared a glance around to make sure nobody

was sitting nearby. The museum really was emptying out. “Just surprising.”

“That was what freaked me out, back at the CQA mixer,” Sammy confessed. “That people would think that you were...” He rolled his eyes at himself. “That you were fucking me like that. Which is stupid, even if I didn’t know it then, and I know it now and I feel foolish for worrying about it then but I also still worry about it now, a little. Not that people will think that —well, not entirely that people will think that—but also just because... I don’t really know how it even works? And if I... if I am your girlfriend—”

“Okay, let me stop you there,” they cut in, and supplemented the interruption by feeding him a bite of cinnamon roll. They’d reached the center, and everything was especially gooey, now. “You being my girlfriend does not require or even imply anything about anal sex.”

Sammy was slightly relieved that even Finley dropped their volume at ‘anal sex.’ He nodded slowly, swallowed. Finley quickly replaced the bite to keep him quiet.

“I am in no rush, okay?” his enbyfriend assured him. “Maybe we get there, maybe we don’t. I’d much rather enjoy the journey than worry about any particular destination along the way. Which means I would, if it’s all right with you, really like to make out before this date is over. And nothing more than making out. Okay?”

Sammy nodded, smiled. “Okay.”

The problem with that plan, however, was that just a few minutes into making out in his dorm room, Sammy had his hands down Finley’s shorts and they had theirs up his blouse, and ‘just making out’ didn’t just seem needlessly limiting but rather increasingly impossible.

Sammy’s hips had started grinding on Finley’s leg in a way that he didn’t think he could willfully stop. He had a handful of their ass and wanted nothing more than to pull them into himself... somehow. The actual details of geometry involved weren’t especially clear.

It was Finley who finally broke off, panting, planting hands on top of Sammy’s shoulders and pushing to separate them. “I should probably go.”

“You should stop being so considerate,” Sammy told them in between gasps, smiling wide and biting his lip and yes, Finley’s eyes went right to the intersection of his teeth and bottom lip. He was going to have to remember that trick. “And stay.”

Finley backpedalled in the half-dark room, smiling like a kid presented with a pile of candy. “I want to save some of this—” and here he gestured vaguely up and down Sammy’s body, and also the space between them “—for later, to savour. I don’t want to rush.”

“I kinda do.”

That got a laugh out of Finley, and the heat of the moment seemed to dissipate. “Yeah, I can tell. You are a very tempting... temptress. Oof. It’s late, and I’m tired, and that alone is a pretty good reason not to jump into our first time.”

Sammy rolled his eyes but settled down to sit on his bed, arms folded. “That probably makes sense.”

“Now.” They looked Sammy up and down again, this time like he was a trap that might spring on them. “Can I kiss you goodnight without you dragging me back into your bed, temptress?”

“No promises,” he answered, but planted his hands at his sides and leaned forward, lips puckered.

They shared a long but mostly chaste kiss, and then Finley hurried out the door. Walking a little funny, Sammy noted with satisfaction.

He threw himself backwards onto the bed with a sigh. He could feel that too-many-emotions exhaustion creeping up on him, and grudgingly acknowledged that perhaps Finley had been right, after all. If he had kept pushing and overloaded himself, who knows where he’d have ended up. Probably crying into Finley’s lap. Or their naked crotch.

Well that was an interesting image to consider.

He pulled his little purse out of the picnic basket on the floor, and then pulled his phone out of that. 10:20. He nodded to himself and opened up the texting app.

Home safe after picnic date, he told Rowan.

Early bird! she responded almost immediately. I'm just about to head out. How'd it go?

There were so many ways to answer that question, but he finally settled on, I'm Finley's girlfriend.

Rowan responded with a gleeful torrent of emojis and gifs.

Sammy set the phone on his desk and shifted his butt over to sit in the chair. The images kept coming on his phone while he woke up his laptop, checked his calendar, and opened the rough draft for his LIT50 essay. He looked tiredly at the long series of paragraphs, fixed a misplaced comma, then leaned back in his chair and picked up his finally quiescent phone.

Is it sad that I scheduled study time for after my date? he texted.

No that's good, his cousin replied. You should get as far ahead as you can. It's not like you're getting anything done next week.

He frowned softly at his phone and texted a single question mark.

It's PRIDE, Sammy! came the response. Next week is Pride!

Isn't that just like... a parade?

Rowan reply was only: Oh, Country Mouse.

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