

"How long have you been working here?" Victoria asked, standing outside the door to Oz Books as Max locked up. Normally, he'd just take the full ten steps to the left to the door leading to his apartment, so actually crossing the street to the little cafe was a change of pace. Still, there were worse ways to spend a Friday evening than having a cup of coffee with a flirty woman, as uncommon as all of those elements were.

"A little over a year and a half," Max said, turning to Victoria. "Why do you ask?" He wasn't trying to be paranoid, but a small yet incredibly loud part of him was *screaming* that there was no way a woman like that would take an interest in him without some ulterior motive. Other than a single notable exception, there was nobody in his life who was liable to play a cruel prank like that on him -- that he knew of -- but he couldn't help but be a bit suspicious.

"Oh, it's just that I've been living in town for a while and I never noticed this place. It's pretty well hidden," Victoria said, staring up at the sign. "I'm a little sad I never saw it before; I love places like this."

Max stole a glance at her, and then motioned to the other side of the street. It was warm enough for the terrace outside to still be a good place to sit for a few hours, although Max had his reservations about assuming that this interaction would last that long. In his experience, hoping for things to get better had consistently led to disappointment. But not even he could live in despondency forever. "Well, I don't think it's going away any time soon. Or me, for that matter," he said casually, scanning the street for cars before they did the little jog thing that was reserved for sort-of-but-not-too-busy traffic.

The cafe was a little thing, the kind of coffee shop that was at the core of a thousand pieces of fan fiction. It was a nightmare of mismatched wooden chairs riddled with aesthetically horrifying termite holes and gaudy colours scooted underneath metal tables that had one leg slightly bent so they wobbled ever so slightly. The baristas working the registers were all mildly attractive, hair up in buns regardless of gender. Everyone who would have disliked working in a place like this had left ages ago, leaving the only people who worked in the shop to exude an air of lackadaisical laissez-faire that made you feel like you were at home but also possibly might have to wait for your coffee for thirty minutes.

If Max had been the kind of person who enjoyed sitting in a cafe drinking coffee on his own, it would have been perfect for him. As soon as they entered the place, the atmosphere they were greeted with was very similar to the one inside of Oz Books, the main difference being the noise and the smell. Oz rustled and ruffled. The coffee shop clanked and gurgled softly. Same energy, different people.

They picked a table that appeared to be somewhat stable, and the chairs creaked strategically as they sat down. Max hoped against hope that this was the kind of place where someone would come to take their order. There was that awkward moment of two people trying to gauge who was supposed to talk first, and Max worried for a moment if his moment of brave forwardness would come to bite him in the ass now that he actually had to act on it. It seemed like a good idea at the time, flirting back with a woman who took his breath away the way Victoria did. But now that he was sitting here, he was trying not to panic.

"So you study astrophysics, right?" he tried. She nodded and he saw her eyes light up in the most spectacular way. This was clearly one of her great passions, and while he was intimidated by the subject -- his own fascination with the stars had never been anything he'd pursued to any extent beyond some magazines he'd bought when he was fourteen --

he was happy to know that Victoria's chosen field of study was something she'd enjoy talking about.

"Yes! I'm working on my master's thesis, actually. They're gonna send up a new satellite next year and I'm doing a study on the new integrated spectrometer... are you sure you want to hear this?" Victoria seemed a little bashful. Her field was, Max had to admit, highly specialized. Even if most people probably had an interest in space, he could imagine feeling somewhat insecure when it came to actually talking about a passion that was so specific, so he tried to put her on ease.

"I don't know much about spectral analysis," he admitted, "but I love hearing people talk about what they care about." That got a smile from Victoria again, who seemed to keep scanning his face as if she was looking for something. It was a little intimidating to be so thoroughly *looked at*, for sure, but to a certain extent it was also nice for someone to take an actual interest in him, even if he didn't really know *why*.

"I promise you, I can talk your ear off about it for the next few hours, and I do want to have an actual conversation in there somewhere." She paused for a moment and looked around. "We're not going to get coffee here if we stay here, are we?"

Max looked at the barista, a tall fellow who was leaning against the counter, scrolling through his phone. The man looked up and they made eye contact. Max nodded to acknowledge the interaction. The barista tipped an invisible hat and went back to scrolling through his phone.

"No," Max said, "we are not." He and Victoria laughed softly at that little interaction and got up to actually order their drinks. "When you're not studying astrophysics," Max asked while they waited for the barista to finish typing a response to something, "what do you usually do?"

"Oh, not much, to be honest," Victoria said, shrugging. "I like walking around the city, see what weirdness pops up. A large chocolate chip frappuccino, thanks. With a dash of espresso." Max raised an eyebrow at her order but didn't say anything. She caught it anyway. "Hush. I like sweet things," Victoria added.

"Very holistic of you. The wandering, not the coffee. Don't get me wrong," he added, "I like sweet things too, but coffee should be black. -- One coffee please. Black." The truth was that he didn't really know *why* he drank his coffee black anymore, just that he did. It was something he'd picked up during summer jobs with gruff men doing some construction work or other. He didn't even particularly like the taste.

"Ew," Victoria said matter-of-factly and took her drink, paying for it. "But yeah, I like seeing what comes my way. The world is weird in wonderful ways if you're open to it and I'm much too close to thirty not to see what I can find." She shot him another glance while she said that, and he wasn't sure if she was talking to him or about him. It wasn't like he was particularly interesting, so he figured she just had him pegged as someone who didn't get out much, someone to encourage.

"Fair enough. I'm getting there myself, honestly. I just don't feel the need to go out there all that much. It's scary if you don't fit in," he said, a little softer as they made their way back to their table.

Victoria sat down and cradled her cup, drops of condensation forming on the plastic. "I'm very aware," Victoria said. "I've found a place to fit, I think. I had to carve some of it out, and figure myself out along the way." Seemingly stuck in a reverie for a second, she

shook her head and looked up at him. "So what about you? Obviously you don't go a-wanderin', but you have to have some hobbies?"

He nodded, blowing softly on his coffee. "I have a group of friends, but I'm not sure I fit in there either, if I'm honest." She shot him a slightly awkwardly pitying look and he held up his hand. "I don't mean that in a metaphorical 'do they even like me' sense. I mean literally. They're all LGBTQ in one form or another. I feel at home with them, but I'm not a part of the community, you know?" If Victoria's eyebrows went any further up, they would merge with her hairline, and a smile played on her lips. He decided to pretend not to see it but he couldn't help smiling back. "I spend a lot of time reading, too. And honestly, the bookshop keeps me plenty busy. Hey, it gets me coffee dates with cool people," he said with a now more daring grin.

"See," Victoria said and smiled. "I was going to ask what you like reading, but now I want to hear more about these cool people you have dates with." There was a twinkle in her eye, the same one he'd seen when she'd first walked in, and he couldn't help but be a little mesmerized by it.

"Well," Max began. "This tall woman walked into the shop recently. She was about my age, well put together. Not bad looking," he said, getting a scoff from Victoria, followed by a dazzling smile as if to prove a point. "Fine. A *beautiful* woman walks into the shop. Cool as all hell, looking a little lost. Impeccable fashion sense."

"You know it," Victoria added with feigned conceit.

"And before you know it, we get to talking and *she* asks *me* out for a drink, so I think working in a small bookstore out of the way definitely has its benefits," he finished.

"That does sound alluring," Victoria said, nodding sagely. "So what do you usually look to get out of these dates?" She glanced at him over the rim of her cup and Max suddenly felt the mood shift ever so slightly. He realized that a joking answer here might not be in its place. Victoria seemed to be testing the waters, in a sense.

"Well," he said, and looked her dead in the eye, "all hypotheticals aside, if someone beautiful, smart and funny asks me out, I think it's best to see what comes our way and, in the meantime, I'm going to enjoy every second of listening to someone be passionate about what they care about."

"Good answer," she said, and smiled again. There was a moment of comfortable silence while they both enjoyed the gentle summer heat and their drinks, occasionally shooting each other a glance. Neither seemed really able to resist smiling when they did. After a while, something seemed to occur to Victoria. "You mentioned that most of your friends were queer, but that you didn't fit in?" Max nodded. "This might be a weird question but... do you want to?"

He frowned. "What do you mean? You can't just... join up. Demanding access to queer spaces is something they, that is to say, uh, we, cisgender straight people, have been doing for ages. I don't want to contribute to that."

Victoria smiled again. "That's very kind of you, Max, but there's usually a reason why someone might want to join the LGBT community, and it's not always out of a sense of entitlement. Still, I'm very grateful you're considerate like that. I wish more people were. It would've made my life a lot easier."

"Oh, you mean you're..." Max asked, not wanting to make any assumptions. He'd just made a whole thing about wanting to be one of the good allies, assuming someone was

gay or bi was not the way to do that. Victoria calmed his nerves by laughing, a soft sound that rang through the air like little bells.

"I'm trans, Max," she said, smiling. Max started to stammer an apology, but she cut him off gently. "I don't hide it. It's a part of my identity and I like people knowing about it. So no worries. Though I am a little flattered you couldn't tell."

Max couldn't help but stare for a moment, and then quickly shook his head. He didn't want to give her the feeling that he was gawking at her, looking for 'proof'. He was just blown away by the revelation. "That's amazing," he said.

"Oh?" Victoria raised her eyebrows again. "Plenty of trans people pass as cis, Max. You just don't notice most of the time."

"No," he added. "Not that. Just... You're so confident in *yourself*. You've got a..." He tried to find the word, swirling his coffee until it got dangerously close to spilling, but he had his mind on other things. "You've got this air of confidence. Like you *know* yourself." Victoria shrugged with a little half-smile.

"Well, I don't mean to brag..." she teased.

"I wish I had that," Max added with a wistful sigh.

"What now?"

"You know, I wish I had myself figured out the way you did."

"You wish you were trans so you could figure yourself out..."

"Well, I mean, if you put it like that..." Max's sentence petered out. "I just wish I'd had the confidence to have found myself the way you have. It's... honestly inspirational. Not in a 'You're so brave you decided to do this thing' way, but more like... I wish I was where you are. I hope I can be some day."

"Again," Victoria said, and Max found her expression almost impossible to read. "You're saying that, in order to figure yourself out, you'd rather be trans?"

Max shrugged. "I mean... if you've got good people it's not the worst thing in the world. And, I mean, look at you." He smirked and shot her a glance that, for the first time, seemed to make her a little bashful. "You look amazing. Who wouldn't want that?"

"Who indeed," Victoria said, and finished her drink.