

Masking

Chapter Fifteen

Let's Eat Cake!

"We return!" A voice cried from outside the door to Tammy's dorm. It popped open and three people- Tammy, Fara, and Kitty- walked in. Kitty scrambled onto the top bunk, a small container of chicken fingers in their hands. For a moment Emily was left stunned- how the hell did they climb with their hands occupied like that? But she was forced to recollect herself seconds later by the sight of Fara hopping into the bottom bunk next to Valerie. They immediately pulled her close in a gentle, affectionate embrace that seemed utterly at home on their body in spite of their size and musculature. Fara was much smaller- she always had been. The girl was a bit short and very mousey and bookish, so she'd look tiny being held by just about anyone.

Fara nuzzled into Valerie and muttered something quietly enough that nobody could make it out except Valerie. A spike of worry stabbed Emily's brain. Even if it wasn't about her- and it was very likely not- she still couldn't help but assume something was bothering her...her friend? Could she still call Fara that? Did she have the *right* to be Fara's friend again, after their years spent drifting apart? After whatever bullying and torment Fara had suffered through while Emily unknowingly turned her back on her? She did her best to dismiss those dark clouds from her mind. Even if they were well founded, and she wasn't sure that she could say they were, now was not the time to be untangling them- internally or otherwise.

"Is something wrong, Emily?" Asked Rika. Her head drifted into Emily's field of view, wearing an expression of mild concern. Emily was jolted out of her thoughts and smiled up at her. The blonde cheerleader could afford to wait and unpack all this sometime later. She was here to improve Tammy's birthday, after all, not to drag the mood down by adding the weight of her baggage. "You kinda zoned out there frowning. Is everything alright, dear?"

"Yeah, sorry! Just a bit tired is all, I got a lot of new information all at once the past hour or so," Emily laughed nervously. She waved dismissively with one hand as she spoke and hoped that her nervous laughter would suffice to smooth everything over. Rika's expression shifted to one of polite understanding and she stood upright to stretch. Emily turned her attention back to Tammy, who stood by the desk with the ice cream cake. She had her hands balled up and one of her feet kicked at the air. Was...something wrong?

"Is something wrong?" Rika asked Tammy before Emily could do it herself. Tammy turned towards the party wearing the most exhausted face Emily had ever seen on her. She leaned backwards against the desk, lips pursed together in aggravation. Emily grimaced in spite of herself. Had her family sent her a text message or something?

"Not enough *plaaaaaates*," Tammy growled to herself. It was hard to say what her tone was. She sounded angry, tired, and amused all at once. Emily stood to-

Once again, Rika was faster.

"That's fine!" Rika said merrily, most likely in a bid to sooth Tammy. "My dorm is one floor over, you can use some of mine. I'll be right back!" Rika darted out of the room, leaving the others to wait for her (and her plates). Fara laughed gently at the predicament. Valerie seemed amused by it as well.

"C'mon, girl. Relax. We all know you're not the best at planning. It's fine," said Valerie in a velvety tone. "Is something else stressing you out?" Instead of answering them, Tammy paced back and forth with her arms crossed and an unpleasant look of dread in her eyes. Valerie sat straighter and seemed to lock onto her with their eyes. The air got heavier, although Kitty's contented sounds from the top bunk limited how much pressure could actually build. "Tammy? Is everything okay?"

"It's just-" Tammy said shakily. She stopped pacing and turned towards Valerie looking stressed and apologetic. Her eyes aimed down and to the side. "I had a paper due this week that I couldn't finish because of...y'know...and I...gaaaah!" Tammy flopped down into her bed, sitting and pressing her hands against her thighs with her face scrunched up. "I hate him! I hate him! God...god damnit!"

"Hey, heyy," Fara whispered just loud enough that Emily could hear it. She hopped up, scurried over to Tammy, and took a seat on her left. She pressed herself up against Tammy's body like a dog concerned for their human. Fara's arms went around Tammy and she gave a few complimentary nuzzles. "There there, it's alright. Breaaaaaathe. Breathe," she purred. Something about what Fara was doing felt strangely familiar to Emily, but she couldn't put a finger on it- the sensation was rather uncanny. "It's okay. I'm sure if you explain, then-"

"If I explain, I'll break down sobbing!" Tammy protested. She sounded tired, ashamed, angry...Emily's heart broke to hear her like that. "I just...uuugh!"

"There there, sweetie," Valerie grunted. They placed a hand on Tammy's back and rubbed gently. The girl sighed and relaxed a little bit. After a few seconds, even her expression loosened and lost its painful edge. "I'm sure they'll work with you. Let's just take the day off for now alright?"

"Yeah," reassured Fara. She kissed Tammy on the cheek and squeezed Tammy gently. "It's your birthday. He can't reach you here. Let's just have a nice happy day together, and tomorrow we can help you with your paper. Does that sound okay?"

"Okay," said Tammy reluctantly. She kissed Fara and Valerie once each. It was just a quick peck on the lips, but the casual show of affection to multiple people in sequence made Emily

feel...things. She couldn't quite put her finger on what. "Th...thank you both...." Tammy managed to say out loud. She sounded like she was about to cry. Emily stood up to go help reassure her, but within an instant Tammy's face had cleared up. She smiled at Emily with sunshine in her eyes and fluttered her long pretty eyelashes. Emily's heart skipped a beat and she felt her face going flush. "Sorry about that, dear. I'm okay now. Or at least, I'm okay *enough*, now." Emily chose not to press the issue. She smiled back.

"That's good to hear," she trilled sweetly.

Tammy smiled and downed a forkful of ice cream cake using a plastic fork. It had thawed more than enough by the time all the relevant cutlery and plates were available, so it was pleasantly easy to cut and eat. She smiled at Emily from her position standing off to the side. Rika and Kitty sat on the top bunk, each with a plate, and on the bottom Valerie and Fara talked in between bites of theirs. Emily was still seated in the chair. Off to the side. Tammy wanted to help her feel welcome, but she was afraid of coming across too forward about it. Sure, Emily was hardly the first "straight" girl to succumb to her charms, but it was different in person. She didn't want to come across as a creep, after all. Internet etiquette, in trans spaces especially and trans-heavy kink spaces in particular, could be...exceedingly forward. She took care not to encroach on any boundaries there too, of course, but in physical space, where bodies could actually physically touch, that duty went double.

"You sure you wanna stay in the chair?" Tammy asked. She was aware of the way allistic people danced around ideas like hospitality and wants without actually addressing them directly, but she wasn't very good at actually performing the act. "There's plenty of room in the bed, I promise they won't mind giving you some space." She wanted her subjects to be friends. Was Emily giving them space out of obligation? Fuck, what if- she might have just not felt comfortable mingling with them like that, especially so soon after all the business with Fara! "Not that you have to move! I just-"

"It's fine, I promise," Emily reassured her. She gave Tammy a smile. It puzzled the autistic hypnotist to no end. Was that a happy smile? Was it genuine? It was so hard to tell...Emily was free to tell her anything that made her upset or uncomfortable, all of Tammy's beloved were, she strove to make that as clear as possible, but-

No, no. She was second guessing herself. She just had to assume she was overthinking things unless something gave her more substantial evidence that she wasn't.

"A bit silly of *you* to be asking that," chirped Kitty from the top bunk. Their oversized hoodie, removed to keep from getting it dirty, hung from the corner of the bedpost. "When you're standing! At least she gets to sit, hehehe~" Tammy giggled and felt her mood lighten. Yeah, that was a bit of a silly question, come to think of it.

"Why is that, anyway?" Emily asked and then scarfed down a fork stabbing's worth of her ice cream cake. She regarded Tammy, her eyes gentle and curious. After she swallowed she added, "shouldn't you get the best seat in the house? You're in charge, aren't you~?" Her eyes took on a playful squint, as if to challenge Tammy's authority. Both Valerie and Kitty reacted with wild giggling and great enthusiasm.

"This *is* the best seat in the house, thank you very much," Tammy teased back, her head turned up in faux arrogance. "I happen to like standing! The audacity!" She took another bite of her cake and made a sort of "hmp!" sound as she did. Everyone giggled at that. Emily's eyes traced around the room and seemed to soften and relax. She looked like she was considering something about the other people in the room. Tammy hoped that whatever the blonde was thinking, it was helping her get more comfortable. Then, after a bit of quiet time spent eating, Emily smiled.

"The *best* seat in the house is on your feet?" Emily teased again, a bit of icing on her mouth ruining what would otherwise be a powerful confident grin, "allll these laps to sit in and you still choose to stand?" The question slapped Tammy in the face, but like...in a good way. She blinked slowly and resisted the intense urge to shiver with her entire body. Emily's smile slowly faded. She put her plate aside and looked concerned. "Oh, god I- did that hurt your feelings I'm sorry-"

"No no, you're fine," Tammy, red in the face, reassured her. "I was just taken aback, that's all, uh- aaaaah!" She lost the battle against her nervous system and wiggled, but through careful concentration kept herself from dropping her cake. Tammy nervously laughed and looked at Emily with a sheepish little smile. "I-if you're offering, then..."

"Well of *course* I'm offering, dear," Emily purred, "why else would I say it?" Rika laughed merrily and, setting her plate aside for a moment, she smiled down at the two. One of her hands placed itself on Kitty's head and began to scratch their scalp in a slow, relaxed manner. Tammy mewled and took a quick bite of her ice cream cake to try and stall for time. It regrettably gave her brain freeze. The pink haired girl winced and vocalized by making an odd sort of panicked gay warble.

"Brain freeze gaaaah," Tammy bemoaned in pain and twitched, face merry but embarrassed. Everyone else in the room had a fun little laugh together, and that included Emily. Tammy playfully (and lightly) stamped one foot on the hardwood floor of her dorm. She felt her heart pitter patter inside of her ribcage with delight, and smiled wide in spite of herself. "How is that even possible with how long it was sitting theeeeeere?" She asked nobody in particular. This made her guests laugh together too.

Tammy basked in the warmth of all the happy faces and gentle smiles in the room. Then she remembered that Emily had offered up her lap as a seat and started blushing again. "O-oh, I- yeah, sitting in your lap sounds great, Emily!" Tammy stammered out with an attempt at a

dominant smile. She was still blushing and the brain freeze hadn't quite ended, though, which both cut into her authority somewhat. "But maybe not until after we finish eating?" She remembered the current situation with Fara and tried unsuccessfully to steal a glance and see if their face read as uncomfortable or jealous. She was standing too far forward; her head couldn't rotate enough to get a good look.

"That sounds good," Emily said. Her eyes flicked to the bed, but Tammy didn't see it. "Though this chair isn't a good place for that, probably, it...really doesn't seem stable enough for a second person." She spoke the truth: the chairs were of a peculiar design, resting on a pair of curved wooden bows instead of traditional straight legs. Why anybody would design a chair like this- that both easily rocked when you didn't intend it to AND threatened to hospitalize you when you did- nobody at the school had any idea. Emily opened her mouth again but trailed off. She quietly ate more of her slice of cake, seemingly lost in thought. "Maybe Fara deserves your attention?" She was smiling awkwardly, and clearly (at least, clearly as far as Tammy could tell) trying to deflect and be kind.

"No, no, it's fine," Fara piped up. Tammy took this opportunity to turn her body in Fara's direction. She rapidly scarfed down the remains of her slice of cake, tanking some more brain freeze in the process, and then offered Fara a smile with faint smears of blue icing all over it. Fara smiled back. It was hard for Tammy to tell if it was genuine or not. "I got to be tranced against the wall before everyone else even got here, remember?" That was true enough, of course, but even so...that didn't mean it wouldn't potentially be rude to give so much attention to Emily with her right there, given the two's history and all. Valerie patted Fara's head with one hand while they finished their own slice of cake.

"Well! I want to snuggle you!" Tammy declared with a haughty sort of confidence. She strode over to the cake and cut out a second piece for herself. "Rika, Kitty, do either of you want seconds while I'm over here?"

Fara didn't want to feel jealous. She wanted to get over this. Emily clearly made Tammy happy, so as long as the blonde bitch didn't break her heart or do anything bigoted...then there was no reason for Fara to feel bothered. She didn't want to be like this! She wanted to just throw her baggage into a creek and be done with it. Whether Tammy was right about Emily wanting to do right by her or not...Fara asked herself, did that part even matter?

"Sweetheart," said Tammy's voice. It ambushed Fara from inches away and pulled her back into the present. Tammy reached around Fara's shoulders and hugged her gently. Fara struggled not to point out that this was Tammy's day, not her own. Next the pink haired girl gave Fara's hair a brief dainty kiss. She squeaked, beside herself. "We all love you. It's okay to feel jealous, okay?" Fara wanted to say that she wasn't...okay, no, she was definitely jealous, but the jealousy wasn't *it*. She was feeling more than that. She'd been jealous when Kitty got added to the

equation, but that had been different. Kitty was cuter than her, sweeter than her, more interesting than her, and for a time had gotten more attention than her. But Rika and Valerie had helped her adjust, much like Valerie was no doubt purposefully doing today by staying so close to her.

It was...a lot of things. She felt bitter that Emily had betrayed her like that, frustrated that Emily still got to be one of Tammy's subs in spite of that. She felt anger with herself for not vetoing Emily's addition to the polycule even though she knew she was allowed to. She was angry with Emily for thinking she could just turn a new leaf now and everything would be okay. She felt useless because it had been Emily that pitched in to help them weave around Tammy's dad the day before. She felt defeated knowing that the person who had done so much for her was at the mercy of such merciless people, and further that there was nothing she could do about it.

But all those feelings melted away, just for a while, under the warmth of the veritable *sun* that was Tammy's beautiful, uncomplicated affection. Tammy kissed Fara's head a couple times, purring gently all the while into her ear. Fara rapidly felt better. Her body grinned on its own as the bad feelings ebbed away into her memories. They would be back before long, no doubt, but just for the night she was free from them. Tammy still loved her, and that was more than enough. Fara giggled and weight faded from her back and shoulders.

"You okay, Fara?" Emily asked. Fara regarded her with the least amount of suspicion that she currently could- which, admittedly, was not zero. She wanted to trust Emily right now, and she would be ruining the vibe of feeling better if she didn't...so...she decided to open up, just a little. Fara shrugged her shoulders in Emily's direction.

"I'll be fine I think," Fara said. "Did we ever actually decide what we were gonna be watching, actually?" There was a mild buzz of chatter as the others checked and discovered that no, they had not. Tammy giggled and gave Fara's shoulders one last squeeze before she stood up from the bed and turned her TV on. Fara watched Tammy fumble with consoles and controllers for a little while. Things were quiet, but...less tense than they'd been previously. That was nice, Fara thought to herself. Valerie got up and grabbed a second slice of cake. When they sat back down, Fara rotated ninety degrees to plant her head in their lap. Valerie gave no verbal acknowledgement, but they did cross their legs accommodatingly to give Fara's head a more comfortable resting place.

Fara relaxed even more. She took in the familiar shape of Valerie's legs beneath her head, and (somewhat less pleasantly) the texture of the jeans between her and them. She nuzzled up against them, less for her own sake and more because she knew Valerie liked when she did that. She closed her eyes and thought about her first session with Tammy. Tammy's soft, caring voice droning in her ear. The gentle hands rubbing her back, which she could practically feel

even in the present just from thinking about it. The feeling of her mind melting against a sloped wall and driiiipping down it as the heat of Tammy's care turned it into a runnier and runnier form of liquid.

The room was smearing away from her focus, just like it had then. Peace blossomed inside of her as she returned to their meeting in her head. Fara didn't feel insecure. She felt precious, and she felt deserving. She felt Tammy's fingers, like phantoms conjured by the strength of her memories alone, pressing artfully into her shoulders and sapping away from them only the tension, the weariness. The fears and stresses and doubts were driven away by the soft intimate heat of Tammy's care then, and they were equally powerless now.

Fara smiled.

After a minute or so of that, she was gently shaken awake by Valerie's leg. She sat up and shook from her head the remains of her impromptu self-imposed trance. The bad feelings would be back, of course. They always came back.

But so did Tammy.

"You dozed off there, hehe," Tammy giggled. "Wanna take a nap, sweetheart?"

"No, I'm fine," said Fara. She smiled, no less awkwardly than last time. This was far more genuine though.

"Okidoke! You haven't voted yet, what're we watching?"