

Tammy hopped to her feet, her stomach full of a mix of pride and annoyed resignation. She had beaten the paper! She did it! She had caught up to the present without falling into a death spiral!

"Yes yes!" She cheered as quietly as she could, exuberantly pumping both fists up into the air. Then she remembered she was in the library. She fell quietly back into her seat and blushed. As she quickly clicked and typed about to save and submit the file, her mind wandered. What would she do about paying Rika back? The girl expected nothing in return usually, but Tammy never liked letting others solve her problems for her- not without making it up to them in some way, at least. She could offer a session or something, but that

almost felt like commodifying their relationship. Tammy preferred for her influence to come with no strings attached, except the expectation that she and the recipient treat each other kindly. She liked to think she lived by that rule decently well.

Perhaps she could help Rika with an assignment sometime? That seemed the most appropriate, but...on second thought, that would also almost be like payment. She sighed and resolved to simply be extra nice and accomodating if possible. Hardly a bouquet of flowers, but it did the trick most of the time. She located the link to upload her paper, followed it, and submitted her work. She had been worried that after everything she did, she'd see that the site would just lock her out of submitting anything.

Not having that happen? A pleasant surprise, in her opinion. She liked when fewer wrenches got jammed into her day.

"Mission complete!" She texted to Rika with a big grin on her face. She turned to leave and...then stopped. She probably had other homework she had to do, right? She sighed. None came to mind, but she knew better than to trust her own memory like that. Resigned, she turned and trudged slowly over back to the chair before she slumped over into it. That made it time to log back in and double check all of her other classes for that, she supposed...

Emily arrived at cheer practice feeling pretty good about herself. She got changed into her uniform quickly and quietly as she always did, ignoring the small talk and gossip around her. Michael, Arella, and Marshall chattered about a class they all had together with some kind of relationship drama interspersed in the conversation. She picked as much up more or less against her will, not that it bugged her too much.

"Alright, hurry up!" Cried the voice of Ms. Brosh, the cheer squad's teacher. "We have a game this Friday, and some of you have been slacking! Cut the chitchat, dangit!" Normally the toothless attempts at a mean coach act would make Emily smile. This time though...she couldn't help but think herself their intended target. She finished

changing into the conservative university's tight and mildly provocative cheer uniform while keeping as empty a head as she could. She wondered whether hypnosis could help her focus on this like it could with her studies...

No, probably not. Even if it did she knew better than to trust her hands with a classmate's health while under any kind of dulling influence. Best not to roll dice on that sort of thing. But thinking of bringing those two parts of her life together...

Did Tammy like sports? She obviously liked cheerleaders, if her reaction to Emily's little routine the other day meant anything, but plenty of nerds liked cheerleaders. It was like, Bargain Bin Slutty Halloween Costume number one, *maybe* two or three after like...what, cute witch?

But sitting through a football game just for the chance to see Emily bounce around in her uniform...

But she wanted to share this with Tammy. She wanted Tammy in her life.

But she didn't want to steal from Fara...

Or from Amanda either, for that matter.

Uuugh. She missed not having relationship drama! The boys she hooked up with started rumors sometimes but she'd always shrugged those off! Well, except in...

Oh...

Emily froze, a cold pit in her gut. She owed Fara an apology. Well...ANOTHER one.

"Is something wrong?" Asked Marshall from behind her. Emily silently cursed that girl's beautiful gold-adjacent eyes and their ability to pick up when things were upsetting people. She loved Marshall to death for it (platonically of course), but it still made things really difficult for her sometimes.

"Just cringing at old memories, nothing serious," Emily half lied with her best fake smile as she stuffed her things back into her locker. "I'll be fine. Gotta stop being a mess every practice or I might get cut," she added, shutting the locker and closing its padlock. "Thanks for your concern. I mean it."

"I know you do, everyone does," Marshall snarked with a lopsided grin on her face.

"But something's up. I don't want gossip I want to help." She stepped a bit closer- not enough to get in Emily's space but enough to make her intentions clear. Her face became more dour, even the half of her mouth that was smiling. "It's Tammy, right?"

"What? Nooooo," Emily wanted to reply. She wanted to deflect the conversation, sidestep it, execute it before it escaped the womb. She...thought better of doing that, after a pause. She took a deep breath and collected her thoughts.

"Close. Fara," she specified. "I was bad to her when we were younger and I'm really only just now learning how. It's...not complicated, I guess, just, you know...A Lot?" She said with a sheepish look on her face. Marshall's face scrunched up in

thought.

"Because she's a lesbian?" Marshall mouthed. Usually Emily couldn't read lips but this one time they seared their meaning into her retinas as surely as a laser or a tattooing needle. The words hit her hard.

"...h-how did-" Emily forced out, trying to piece together in her head whether Marshall had ever mentioned Fara in the past. An ex of hers, maybe? Perhaps she and Fara had gone to the same high school or something?

"Not...difficult to pick up on," Marshall muttered. "But we have mutual friends. I'll talk after practice if you want to. We can go to the creek."

"We have a creek?" Emily asked as she watched Marshall walk away.

Emily finished changing back into her normal clothes. She walked out of the gym, a big bag slung over one shoulder. She had taken Marshall up on the girl's offer after all. She didn't know what to expect but she knew not to blow the girl off after asking for help. As she waited by the door she sent text messages to a few friends asking about their days. Perhaps not the best policy to reach out as rarely as she did, but nobody have ever gotten mad about it.

"Hey," said Marshall as she approached. Her uncanny ability to always be exactly on time apparently made some of her friends

joke that she was some kind of ghost. Emily jumped a bit, suddenly understanding why.

"H-hey! Where'd you come from?"

"Same changing room as you?" Marshall answered. "You wanna go drop off that bag so you don't ruin your cheer uniform?"

"O-oh...yeah. We should do that." Emily turned and started on the walk towards her dorm. "Meet you back here, I guess?"

"No," answered Marshall, "I'll just come with you. It'll be faster that way anyway, and I like a walk. Campus is beautiful anyways."

"That it is," replied Emily with a big smile. She took a deep breath full of crisp

autumn air. It was starting to get a bit chilly outside, she realized. Wearing a coat wouldn't be optional for her very much longer. "Lots of trees and stuff."

"You're not as good with words as Tammy is, are you?" Cracked Marshall, grinning.

"Again with Tammy!" Emily pouted and flailed her arms. "Where are you getting that?"

"Emily you bought her chocolate cake when she looked upset. That's like, Fifth Grader Learning Subtext level affection. And well...it's Tammy. She's kind of...well she calls herself a slut and it means it 100% as a compliment. Not in the reclaiming sort of way either, she just straight up uses the term exclusively as praise so...call it a hunch."

"Uugh," Emily grunted and rolled her eyes as they crossed the road back onto the athletic side of campus. "Yeah, I...I'm involved with her, I guess. I'm one of her...subs."

"And so is Fara, I take it."

"Shh!" Emily just about hissed. "Not so loud!"

"So you'll keep her secrets better than yours?" Teased Marshall with a knowing look. "Sounds like you're a good friend to me, at least."

"Nice to hear," Emily chuckled, "especially from you. But...no, I can't really...accept that. I...really let her down, before. When we were younger."

"That happens, sadly," Marshall said softly.
"You apologized?"

"Not...enough," Emily almost whimpered.
She grabbed an ID card from her bag and
unlocked the door to her dormitory
building. "You know her?"

"Not especially well," Marshall answered.
The two waved at the receptionist on the
way through the lobby and past her. "But
I'm acquaintances with some of Tammy's
friends. Have you met Rika?"

"Oh..." Emily basically chirped. "I...have,
actually. As of yesterday, in any case."

"Oh, good. We're friends. Up or down?"

"Up."

Marshall dashed out in front and pushed the appropriate button on an elevator. It opened without hesitation. Both girls stepped in.

"Floor three."

"You got it." Marshall pressed the button and the elevator closed. "You want me to give Rika your phone number?"

"Huh?"

"Rika. I have her phone number. You want me to give her yours? I feel like you might benefit from being able to contact her easier." The elevator came to a stop and opened. Emily shook her head no as they stepped out of it and fished her key out of her bag. The two came to her door, which

she unlocked quickly.

"No need. I'll make do," she said and then sighed. "I could ask Tammy for it, anyways."

"About that, how's...that?" Asked Marshall.
"You being into girls is new, let alone...*liking* people romantically at all, even. She special or...what?"

"I don't know," Emily sighed as she tossed her bag down next to her bed. "She's so...soft. And like...simple? I can *get* her easier than most people. And she has such a beautiful little smile and she's...honest."

"Okay damn I thought you were just gonna say you like nerdy girls, strike one for stereotypes," Marshall said with a little

giggle. "That's really cute. I'm happy for you."

"Well it's..." Emily realized on a delay she had nothing to need to defend herself from. "Thank you."

"Of course. This whole love thing is new to you?"

"Yeah," Emily fessed up as the two went back out the door to her dorm. "No practice from high school. I can suck dick pretty sure but feelings? Those are new."

"So she's even simpler than a one night stand with a jock?" Teased Marshall. "Don't let her hear you say that, probably. I'd really advise against it."

"I know THAT!" Whined an indignant Emily.

"I am *very good* with Tammy, actually!
Hmph!"

"I would hope so if she's as simple as you say she is," Marshall laughed as Emily forwent the elevator this time in favor of taking the stairs. "Hey wait up!"

"FOOL!" Cried Emily, yanking a door open. "You fell for the oldest trick in the book!" She then politely waited for Marshall before letting go of the door. It driftly shut on its own.

Emily stepped out into a clearing. The ambient light from some nearby streetlights illuminated the spot and gave a decent view of a small running creek. The water made the only ambient noise

Emily could pick up: a slight tricky one. She smiled subconsciously, pleased by the sound. As she moved her head about looking for somewhere to stand, she saw Marshall walking past and hurriedly stumbled after her. She realized why soon after: a bench waited for them.

"Why didn't I know this was here? This spot is so calm..." Emily muttered to herself as she walked over to it and took a seat. Then she noticed Rika next to her. "Wh-what are you doing here!?"

Rika, leaning back and seated sitting straight up, suddenly stirred and blinked as her mind groggily returned to the world of the living. She yawned and stretched. She did not seem to notice Emily or her shock. Emily turned back towards Marshall and pointed a wavering finger sideways at the

girl sitting next to her.

"Did you...do that on purpose?"

"No," Marshall laughed. "But she comes here at night a lot. She's usually awake though."

"Screw you, I pulled an all nighter studying," Rika yawned. She dug around under the bench for something- a book or a pen, probably. "How long have I been out cold like that?"

"It's nine twenty five ish," Emily answered with a glance at her phone.

"Oh! It's you! The new girl! Hi!" Rika shot back into position sitting up. "Welcome to my little hidey hole! I come here to listen to the creek and draw. Sometimes I take naps

too, but rarely on purpose."

"That's cool," Emily said. "Cozy little spot you've got going here."

"It is!" Rika replied. "But if it's almost nine thirty...jeez, I didn't eat dinner."

"You've been here for four hours!?"

Marshall shouted in concerned shock.

"You can't go around sleeping on a bench that long sitting up, not if you can help it ...your poor back!"

"I know, I know," Rika groaned and dismissively waved a hand. She shakily stood up and stretched again, cracking her spine two or three times real good. "I know you two just got here but mind walking to the cafeteria with me?"

"It would be an honor!" Emily cried out before she knew what she was doing. Wait. When had she stood up?

"Trying to impress your crush's posse, are you?" Marshall teased from behind her.

"Don't blame her. She spent a whole night in bed with Tammy unguarded," Rika snarked. Something inside Emily recognised that tone. She slowly forced herself to fix her gaze nervously on Rika, who wore a mischevious little smile. The girl had her arms crossed. "For all we know, the screws Tammy put in her head made her do that." She seemed to notice that Emily felt afraid and softened in both expression and posture. "Don't worry though, she wouldn't give you anything untoward. Though most of our triggers *are* kept pretty standardized...I could try using

all of mine on you, and check that way, hmmm?" She stood up and positioned the fingers of one hand to prepare a snap.

"That sounds fun actually. Not in public though, of course." Her hand unfurled and she walked past a

stunned...blushing...mildly aroused Emily.

"Oh my god you are a DORK," Marshall remarked with a laugh barely kept from escaping her mouth. Both she and Emily followed Rika's lead.

"Which of us?" Emily and Rika asked in unison.

"Yes."