

24.75 - Laissez Faire

The booming bark was what welcomed them back home. Waver scraped his battle-crying nails across the floor as both Little and Amazon returned. The *only* kind of unconditional love Dawn could imagine herself appreciating.

“Ope– hey! Don’t go too far,” James called after her, Dawn, who was trying to make a beeline for wherever the Amazon wasn’t going to be. “Let’s take care of this before I gotta get back to work.” Then his hand dropped on Waver’s head, offering endless pets.

This. If he was going to be as direct as that, why not just go out and say it completely? All the word games, all the disregard for her own agency and level of intelligence. It was definitely going to be more of a trigger for Dawn than insinuating it already was, but what she hated even more was beating around the obscene baby bush.

“Take care of *what?*” Dawn stopped on her feet with a warm bulk between her legs, hiding under her pants. If he was going to be frustratingly vague, she would too.

“Your sneakers?” He tilted his head with a grin, looking at her eyes briefly before nodding his chin lower to her shoes. “Shoes are for when we go outside.”

Shoes... Fucking shoes? He meant shoes...?!

For a moment her own expectations betrayed themselves, and her heightened emotions inflating over a false alarm suddenly had a warmth coming over her cheeks. She very well couldn’t take off her shoes on her own. Not unless she could decipher how in the hell these stupid knots worked.

So she marched right back with lighter footfalls than the ones going in. James dropped one knee to the floor and slipped the dreaded diaper bag off his shoulder while Dawn watched every moment of it with disdain.

“Show me how to untie them,” Dawn commanded, yet James looked up at her without seeming the least bit affected by her supposed orders.

“Your shoes?”

“Yes?” Dawn leaned in on it. What else could she possibly mean?

“Attitude?” and James taunted right back, making the girl’s mouth and lips quiver, contort and fight back a vehement temper.

“*Please,*” Dawn added, and yet the gesture hardly had any genuine meaning behind it. It was just another checkbox to get someone to do something for her, and James likely didn’t see it any differently. Yet just like Katherine, malicious or not, her technical compliance was exactly that and his hands slowed down.

“See where the knot is right here?” James pointed with a large finger, covering what to Dawn looked like two other nubs of lace. “All you have to do is pinch that with your fingers, give it a little tug, then pull on this lace here, and...just like that!”

“Wait– hang on!” Dawn nearly fell as a wet snout suddenly booped her on the cheek. Waver casually tried to displace her as he fought for her attention, and unfortunately he had made some gains. Only because the dog allowed it, Dawn grunted and pushed him back, now looking down at the demonstration she hardly got to see.

And just like he said, the beast had somehow been slayed and the tangled monster was now two distinct and separate shoelaces. His words were brief just like his demonstration, and while she was still trying to think of what to ask, he spared no time in undoing the second.

“W-wait– tie them again. Let me try...! Waver got in the way!” Dawn insisted, though the movements James made were already feeling like a blur. The words alone seemed to be easy to follow, but his actions hardly seemed like that. It was as if his instruction manual had omitted details. His fingers did things that weren’t nearly as apparent. Why was untying shoes so fucking complicated?!

“I can show you next time,” James chuckled, and Dawn’s frown deepened. “Now come on, one last thing.”

“What...?” Dawn moaned, continually glaring over her shoulder at the dog that wouldn’t leave her alone.

“We didn’t change you at the doctor’s office, so we’re gonna do it here...” he muttered with his attention divided and his hands rummaging through the diaper bag.

“I’m...what? N-no. No. You’re not changing me.”

“What? I’m not?” James put on a faux voice. “So who’s gonna, then?”

“*Me*,” Dawn held an open palm tightly against her chest. “I... God, even *she* isn’t allowed to, but with Katherine at least she’s a woman!”

“Dawn, don’t be silly. I know you’re upset about the doctor’s, but let’s try and have a good day, okay?”

“*James!*” Dawn burst aloud. “Maybe with Katherine, but *you* should know better! We’re the opposite sex!” He got away with it once in the car, way back when outside the hotel, but there would be no other chances.

“Dawn, I don’t really get what you’re saying,” and he patted his hand on the changing mat. “Can you come over and lay down, please?”

She was just about ready to slap her own face. With two animated hands she pointed at herself and said aloud, “*Woman!*” then to James, “*Man!* Please, if nothing else, don’t you think Katherine would have a problem with you seeing another woman naked?!”

“Whoa,” James put his hands on the breaks, “Ah-ah, let’s not talk about that, okay?” he warned, and somehow Dawn was the one at fault for suggesting something so obvious.

“What? Why not? Then you know it! You *know* you’re doing something wrong!”

“Dawn, the only wrong thing is me letting you spend the day in a wet diaper. And no, we’re not gonna talk about that stuff because it’s inappropriate. This is the final call, missy, scooch over here.”

“*Yes!* It is inappropriate! That’s what I’m trying to say!” Dawn poured herself out. “Do you *really* want to see me naked? Think about how Katherine would feel about that!”

“*Dawn?*” James raised his eyebrows, and the warning was in his voice, just like the hand-holding scenario all over again. “We’re dropping this. Are you gonna come over here or do I need to come over to you?”

Shutting it down? Again? Like always? “N-no! James!” she took a quick breath, “I’m not trying to start a fight! I’m genuinely asking you a question here! I’m an adult and you are too! You’re married, and I have my privacy!” The disdain and disgust he seemed to show and have was something else entirely. It wasn’t the shock and hatred for infidelity he was having, but likely something far more taboo that even a dimension as damned as this one mutually understood. The implication of cheating Dawn was making implied a betrayal of sexual and intimate love. And

for Dawn to suggest that, a Little, to an Amazon with a biased mind that saw her nothing more as a...

“Absolutely not!” James raised his voice into a knee-jerk shout, and the girl trying to insinuate such things flinched at the bark in his tone. “Why...why would you even ask that? N-no... No, don’t answer that,” he shook his head in sheer disbelief, and Dawn couldn’t have looked any more beside herself.

“...So you finally see my point?”

And her assumption couldn’t have backfired any more spectacularly. “What? No! Do not *EVER* talk about something like that again, do you understand me? Did we not just get finished with washing your mouth out?”

“W-wait, no! James! I-I’m not trying to be rude or whatever! Can’t you understand where I’m coming from? I just mean that—”

“Ah-ahp! Zip it! Nope, not another word about that. This conversation is done.” He beckoned with his hand. “Now come over and lay down, please? We’ll be quick.” The Amazon looked out of place, but not in the way Dawn wanted. She could feel the awkwardness she hadn’t intended, and there was now a light on the walls all around her; the box she was in.

James was a married Amazon man, and Dawn, as far as an Amazon was concerned, a cute Little, just tried putting herself on the same pedestal as someone more than twice her size. In that same breadth she tried to suggest sexual connotations with herself and an Amazon. An adult and a—

Waver’s bark brought her troubling thoughts to a halt, and James waited expectantly for what she wonderfully failed at trying to get herself out of. So great that she was back in hot water again.

“You...you really just see me as a kid...” Dawn muttered under her breath, taking one slow step after another to the operating table. She fell back on her backside, hardly phased by the feelings beyond her own headspace.

A big hand gently fell on the top of her head.

“Dawn, it’s... I don’t want you to *ever* think that way about me, okay? It’s... It’s a really tough thing we shouldn’t be talking about. When Katherine says something like she ‘loves’ you, that’s not the same as ‘love’ between two adults, okay?” Despite how defeated and misunderstood Dawn felt, it didn’t numb her senses to see how out of his element the Amazon seemed. She clearly broached something he wasn’t expecting. Of course. What was changing a kid’s diaper to

him? He wasn't seeing a grown woman nude. Christ, it *was* difficult to talk about, only because Dawn was starting to empathize with just how absurd the line of thinking was around this place.

"Whatever..." Dawn huffed, tugging down her own pants and enduring the embarrassment that apparently only one of them felt. Maybe James had done this one before, but it wasn't trading one diaper for another. He had the "privilege" of having her go from a wet diaper to a dry one.

"Okay," James clapped his hands like a landmark that tethered him back to his own warped reality, "Let's get this off first... Hey-!"

It was the first time an uninvited guest preyed upon one of Dawn's most vulnerable moments, but at least dogs, big or small, probably didn't have any malicious intent.

"Out! Out!" James laughed as Dawn shielded her face from wet tongue licks that hung right over her. "What, do you need to go, huh? Pee?" *How ironic.* "Okay, fine." James came back to his feet, but not before dropping an uncomfortable pat on the front of Dawn's diaper. "Stay right there. I'm just gonna let this guy out real quick." Uncomfortable in the way of setting statuses in their little hierarchy...

Like wife, like husband. James opened the front door and suddenly Dawn wasn't the scapegoat for frustrations any longer. The dog went out the front door to do what he needed to do, and the girl laying pantless on a plastic padded mat couldn't help but feel slighted.

"Shouldn't you watch him?" Dawn asked as the giant went back to tugging at her diaper.

"Nah, Waver's a good boy. We walk him with a leash, but that's only because we have to."

Or in other words, even Waver could be trusted outside on his own. A dog. And yet Dawn, a human being, would under likely no circumstances be afforded the same kind of freedom. Maybe in part to her own doing, but if everything before her run-away served as a precedent, all she gave them was further justification.

He didn't have quite the finesse or knowhow that Katherine did. He got the job done, but it was an awful "quiet quitter" kind of behavior. Get the job done and go home, hence the standard feeling Dawn could somehow distinguish around her hips. There were plenty of similarities though, such as being just as weightless, if not more, with her ankles in the hand of a man of muscle.

His grin may have sensed that there was a critic afoot, leading him to ask, "So? Think I did a good job?"

Rating diaper changes now? She was supposed to do that?

“You did fine. Am I done now?” Dawn was already sitting up.

“Yup. And looks like you’re done too,” he rubbed the dog’s head beside him.

Dawn didn’t ask to pull up her pants, and frankly the absence of it being done for her was the slimmest of silver linings, but one nonetheless. The last unfortunate sight she did have to see was James walking away with a balled up wet diaper of her own making.

“Kay, you’re all set for now!” James announced.

“For now?” Dawn gave him a sideways look.

“Yep, for now,” James nodded right back, like there was humor to respond to. “I’m gonna work for a couple more hours, then we’re gonna do something about lunch. Let me get something on the TV for you...”

Dawn followed him around the couch and watched him fiddle with the remote.

“...More cartoons?” she sighed.

“No? Don’t wanna?” James’ finger rested on the remote’s button. “How about this: I turn it on, and if you want you can watch it, or just do your own thing?”

“Take it or leave it?”

“Take it or leave it.”

“Which reminds me,” James pivoted yet again after bringing the screen to life. He came back with a dreaded sippy cup, crouching down just for Dawn to take it with both hands. “Have that, and when you want more just let me know. I’m gonna be in my office,” he threw a thumb over his shoulder, down the hall directly behind him. “Ah– And~!” he lunged just to his side, sliding out a plastic bucket filled with all sorts of shapes and colors. “How could we forget?”

With both hands he lifted the plastic tub, tipped and flipped it and sent all its contents pouring out onto the floor. Her blocks that they got from yesterday.

“So you’re...just letting me do what I want?”

“Just about, yep— Ah, but *don't* say that I said that to Katherine, okay? She likes to overreact...” He came back up to his feet, legs long and fully straight. “I’m just gonna close the door a tiny bit just in case it gets a little noisy.”

“W-wait, what about Waver?” Dawn looked over at the goofy dog bathing in his dog bed.

“He’ll be doing what he always does,” James chuckled, but his smile retracted a little. “Do you want me to keep him in my office with me?”

“That’s...fine...but...” She was limited. She was trapped. There were clear limits to what she could do and get away with, but... The very thought of asking seemed to endanger whatever she was getting right now. Whatever it could be called. Let there be no mistake, though, as it was still painfully far from freedom. “Do...do I really not have to be in your office?”

“Well...I don’t think you’ve given me a reason to keep you cooped up like that,” James openly pondered. “But you can’t go outside on your own,” he firmly warned, and it didn’t need elaboration as to why. “If you want to for lunch though you can go play in the backyard. Just don’t mess with Katherine’s garden, okay?”

“I don’t want to play... Wait, if I can do whatever, can I read? That book Katherine brought home! She said I could read it!” Finally, a great idea!

“Ohhh no. I know what a crafty fib sounds like,” James chuckled, and the annoyance from the accusation showed on the girl’s face. “Kat wanted to read that with you anyways, so wait for it tonight, okay? Besides, as good of a boy as he can be,” James’ eyes looked over at the seemingly innocent dog, “We’ve lost plenty of stuff because this guy likes to run around a bit more than he should!”

And like that, the one true thing that would have made this situation go from livable to actually decent was dashed completely. At least she still could go pseudo-unsupervised. Unfortunately that way of thinking had come from Katherine and all the places and people she was put in front of up until yesterday. Today’s warden was...progressive.

“Be good and come get me if you need anything!” James walked away, and the gravity of a new situation was setting in for the girl. A new diaper, cup of juice, blocks, cartoons, and mostly free reign of the house. Lower half only, most likely. And true to his word, Dawn watched James disappear in the office with the door left half ajar.

A man who she could get so angry with, be scolded by just as fast, then go back to “friends” all in the same few minutes, was now giving her the most length on her leash she’d ever been actually allowed. For once she had “options,” and just like a dog she sort of caught the car she was finally chasing.

What was she supposed to do with it?

The burden of choices.

The juice had run dry many cartoon shorts ago, coupled by the passing of multiple toy commercials. Apparently this dimension had programmable robots as toys for kids. Things that let you make it do more than just wave its arms or play a hardwired digital noise by the press of a button. Too bad computer science wasn’t her angle. Juice had come and gone, including refills which weren’t longed for this world.

She could hear James speak down the hall a few times; laugh, even. Apparently his work wasn’t all no-nonsense, whatever it fully and completely was... Meanwhile, Dawn was taking her third random, idle stroll around the kitchen, looking up at the counters she couldn’t see over, staring inside the black and empty oven. By Waver’s empty bowls, by the kitchen table, including her “special” chair...

Suddenly she was dragging her palms across the glass, screeching as skin dragged across the barrier between her and the backyard. Spotting all the lush leaves from plants sprouting colors of all kinds. The sun was bright with a modest amount of clouds. Spots of shade littered the back along the fence and through the groves of plants varying in shape and size.

And just because she could, Dawn stood on her toes, hopping for her hand to latch around the handle. She brushed her feet along the floor, using her entire weight to tug the sliding door, but it didn’t budge. Whether she weighed enough to do it or not was a question that couldn’t be answered, as she looked up at a lever-like latch sprouting from the handle, farther from her reach.

Not worth it... Dawn sighed and departed from the effective looking glass. But still, save for the occasional headpop James gave her, for once Dawn was her own body. No diaper checks, encouragement to do something she didn’t want to do, or some dumb kind of activity or person she was being forced to socialize with. She was still emotionally and mentally sore from this morning, but for once when it rained, it had yet to quite fully pour.

In her passtime of walking around the house she had finally started to dabble in some architecture with her bundle of building materials. Nothing major. No big-business contracts; just small-time experimentation. She left off on three stories of premium couch-front property, paired with a nice view of the TV, as well as the local beast of the living—

“*Really?*” Dawn scoffed as she saw it. Or rather, what was left of it. As accurate as her listing had been, what it did not include was the repeat offenses of the domesticated wildlife. What was once three floors was now the third grand incident on the same construction sight. Waver was up from his bed again, playfully nudging the rubble Dawn’s monument had been reduced to by the bump of his curious snout.

“Would you just—!” Dawn grunted, doing her utmost to push the beat back with no avail, slipping under her own weight as her socks went across the floor, “--butt! Out!”

But one bark later and Waver circled the girl, giving her hands nothing to lean all her weight on. She fell for the floor, skidding a few more blocks in every direction as Waver nudged her all over.

“...Thanks.”

And with her meager imagination all dried up, her willingness to kill time in such a fruitless way was no longer an option. Not after a dog single-handedly bankrupted her entire firm. While she could have watched more of those mindless shows, something about consuming media here was finally starting to wear on her. Making her own madness was the only way, especially if she had nothing to read.

Now what?

Go upstairs?

She could, but the most she could expect to find was likely James and Katherine’s room, assuming they hadn’t closed it off. Without a meaningful reason, and no matter what they thought of her, Dawn still had her own morals.

Ones she was willing to bend.

Saying she was walking quietly was difficult, given she couldn’t stop a dry diaper from doing what it did best: crinkle. But pants muffled those things, and a slight waddle just maybe minimized all the creases that rumped and crumpled while she moved.

She didn't call, but she slowly dropped to her knees, curiously listening in on whatever she maybe could hear. In a way, it was the first time she had some kind of unfiltered radio talk...

There was loud and fast typing; stuff Dawn didn't hear from being so far away. But finally she did get to hear something more than white noise.

"Hey...Hank, got a few seconds?" James asked from the other side of the door, but it wasn't to Dawn, and there was no Hank in the house. The beauty of remote work. "And just checking to see if my cam is... Oh, yep, it's on."

And however boring or mundane as the conversation could or might sound, it beat interacting with something *intentionally* designed to keep her brain occupied. "Mhm, yeah, it was about this Zen-Tech project we were working on? I've been taking a look at the load calcs and they seem a bit over budget for this kind of size..."

He's an electrician or whatever, right?

"So...I just brought up my screen. I haven't got into any sort of arc-flash study yet; I'd rather wait until we have specifics on the kind of equipment the owner wants for this place. Oh- the fire alarm systems? Jeez, don't get me started..." James let out a sigh, in a James-like fashion. "Am I in charge of that? I forget. The sun solution technologies all these buildings want for energy efficiency's great, but I wish we'd finally get a license for the software that handles all the heavy lifting for rudimentary stuff for us. Yeah...the amount of parasitic capacitance we get through all these nanite hubs is ridiculous. Maybe I'll just send this one to Tom in an email and beg a little!"

The Amazon shared a laugh with his coworker that Dawn couldn't hear, showing a side of himself Dawn had yet to personally experience. After all, as far as James knew, Dawn was off doing one of the few things he had left her with. She hadn't an inkling of understanding of what went into electronics and technology back home, and it could have been one-to-one in complexity here, but the girl would have no idea whatsoever.

Transformers. Conduction coils. Busses, but not the vehicular kind, something about nanites, whatever those were, and more. At best the words could have been mapped to dusty entries in the girl's own internal dictionary, but the words meant for them would have been sparse.

Still, as much as she didn't understand, it wasn't entirely boring to hear, although it kind of was. Maybe it was novelty, or just the simple fact that it was different and she likely wasn't intended to hear. It was the act of truly getting to be a fly on a wall or some kind of bystander.

Every moment with or without James was like a constant antithesis to Katherine's approach. Where she was doting, admittedly controlling, and soft, James gave distance, a twisted sense of freedom, and was firm. They had the same unfortunate qualities as deeming themselves as superiors and authority figures, including their resistance to letting Dawn do anything they themselves refused her from. Something-something about opposites attract, and yet all their subjectively worst qualities somehow had to be identical.

"Ope— Actually, can we pick this up after?" James shifted gears, and Dawn scrambled to her feet. Was he coming out to check on her? And how wonderful, she needed to pee all over again. The unfortunate downside to needing hydration.

"Yeah, yep. Got a meeting right now, actually! Gonna cut this short; thanks, Hank!"

Dawn didn't hear any kind of beep or phone hanging up. Just clicks and a new opening introduction.

"Hey everyone, sorry about that!" James apologized. "I just got tied up with a different project for a second, but I'm here now." Some silence and conversation, as well as the sound of paws padding and nails scraping across the floor...

"Mhm? Sure, I can bring those documents up. So the design within New Holola's ordinances wants us to go fully electric. This gives us a good excuse to handle a lot of the building's maintenance and autonomy with nanite technology, which as an update to our efficiency packages will satisfy our stretch system goal."

Stretch systems...? Nanites...? Whatever it was, it sounded complicated, or at least involved to an extensive degree. It sounded like some kind of presentation, and James got to do it all from the comfort of his own home.

While she listened, she bit the bullet once again, quietly grunting as she pushed uncomfortably, bringing herself to a point where she could wet herself. She was far from happy to leave her dry paradise, but at least she knew better than to struggle with what was a pointless argument at least right now. And as weird and strange as it was, making that unfortunate choice had her thinking of Kyle from the doctor's office all over again.

She quietly sighed and let the warmth creep all over, making her cringe, but not as much as it once did, unfortunately. But with the inconvenience out of the way, at least now she could go back to her local radio station.

But then the dog paw scraping got louder. Louder until—

“Waver, no!”

Loud and proud, with spunk and swagger and wagging tail like he owned the place, Waver nonchalantly bumped his head into the door, nudging it wide open from halfway open to fully. The modicum of darkness in the hallway dried up the moment bright sunlight from the office windows flooded everything it could see, Dawn included.

She saw the tall back of James’ black office chair, built like an exo-skeleton with a plastic shell supporting the mesh backside and plush black cushioned seat. His many monitors were alive with information, text, documents, drawings, and digital sketches and models. A black pair of headphones covered his head, but they weren’t enough to mask the sound of Waver barging on in, nor Dawn’s cry for restraint.

Sitting on her knees she stared up at James’ workstation, who now was looking down at her. Just beyond his head and on his screen was a small handful of other displays. Other faces of other people at their computers in their homes or offices, just like him. Just like them. She couldn’t hear a thing, but she could see the men and women all moving like live participants because that’s exactly what they were. Colleagues in a work meeting.

She could see eyebrows raise and smiles widen. Complacency and mundanity went to interest and humor, especially when the door just barely knocked against the wall, all ending in Waver circling his second dog bed and parking himself down in his vacation home.

All because of *someone*, she had gone from spy to spectacle, and whether to be afraid or scared was the newest and most important question.

“Dawn?” James asked, but before he remembered to cover the foam bulb in front of his mouth with his hand.

Her voice was quiet and admittedly embarrassed. She didn’t expect to be caught like this. “I…” Was it worth lying? Was there a need to? “I was curious…”

Now she could see one of the female Amazons on screen with a hand over her mouth, obviously trying to stuff a giggle.

So much for secrecy.