

21 - Age Appropriate

It was the sensual rub on her shoulder that had Dawn murmuring in her sleep. She was on her side, cozy on her mattress, head against a plush pillow.

“Time to get up already...?” Dawn groaned as she stretched, feeling the warm sunlight across her face.

“Thursday’s just afternoon class for you, right?” his calm and casual tone climbed up, over and around her neck, as if she could feel his breath against her.

“Yeah...” Dawn dreamily whispered, still with her eyes shut and oblivious to the rest of the world. “You?”

A resounding sigh from her lover. “Yeah...well, guess I’m the early bird this semester...” She could feel the mattress shift as a body rolled and moved. “Gonna make something fast though; should I get you too?”

“Mmm...nah,” Dawn yawned and stretched all over again, reaping the rewards of a well-rested body twice. “I’ll make something after...”

“If I leave, you’re not just gonna go back to sleep, are you?” His voice was distant and off the bed, and she just nearly turned her head to hear him better. Just nearly.

“Nope...promise.” Thankfully making a promise to her optional attendance wasn’t all that sacred.

There was some moving around the bed; dresser drawers opened and closed and curtains were drawn. A few minutes later he asked, “Still with me, by the way?”

“Hnnn...?” Her face rubbed into the pillow and sheets just a little more.

“I’ll try again when you’re a little more awake, but, uh...sorry about being tied up with research for next week’s break, and everything... It’s just it’d look good on a portfolio, so... I promise we’re gonna do something special over the summer, okay?”

“Kay...” with hardly a cognizant horse in the race, Dawn mumbled back, but she had the gist. Whatever her boyfriend was rambling on about, she had made her peace with it.

“Oh, by the way, don’t forget to take care of all the junk mail on the counter; I’m gonna throw it all out if you don’t look through it!”

She had a point in her mind to dismiss him, yet without any of the class or tact given how badly she wanted to go back to sleep. Putting it much more crudely in a sleepy voice, she muttered, “You’ve got...classes...”

“Yep, you’re right. Love ya, and don’t go back to sleep!”

“Love you...” She groaned back, trying to focus on the comfort for as long as she could. Maybe she could just skip class today and catch up on some personal reading... There was that one anthology she was enjoying, or maybe the introspective on that one convicted killer? So many choices, and she had the whole day to enjoy it. But first came finishing off the high of her sleep.

And she rested there, enjoying the sunlight for a few more seconds, all until he start rocking her on the shoulder again. Slowly, gently, but to a point that she couldn’t ignore.

“What...?” She tried to sound playful, but even boyfriends could only rock a sleepy girl so far. “You’re gonna be late...!” she tried to roll away, but there wasn’t much place to go. And the rocking continued, and continued, all until...

Finally in a clear voice, she sighed and rose with a frustrated voice.

“Luke, what?”

And she opened her eyes to the sunlight, laying in her mattress, head against a cushy pillow. She blinked, staring at the dark wooden panel of the desk that she was stashed under, spinning her head back over to the light leaking in from outside the furniture. Groggily, she looked down at her bed and pillow, finding now that while her head truly was cushioned, the bedding beneath was nothing more than an Amazon jacket and hard floor.

But her boyfriend rubbed her shoulder again, and she spun her head as worlds seemed to collide, but her rush and urgency stopped on a dime the moment it was killed. The baseless excitement died once she understood.

The hand affectionately rubbing her came from a soft-smiling Katherine.

“Did you have a nice nap, sweetheart? You slept without making a peep!” Katherine fawned and cooed, and Dawn was still trying to make sense of where she just was...or...what dream she was just having... Just a second ago she could see it; the other side of her apartment

bedroom...sunny, warm, and cozy... The doorway to the bathroom was right in front of her; close enough where she could leap out of bed towards it. And yet...

Her hand reached out and pressed against the wooden panel, sliding her hand up and down, like there was going to be a ripple, or intangible piece that was a portal; a gateway back to what she knew she saw and knew she was experiencing...!

“Dawn?” The same female voice was calling her back though, fastening the chain to the post that kept her rooted.

“Y-yeah...?” Slowly, the frazzled girl turned her head.

“Did you have a bad dream?” Katherine frowned, and soon their foreheads were touching. “You don’t feel warm...” she commented, but the concern wasn’t completely gone.

“I...I’m fine,” Dawn insisted, taking another breath and trying to fight the phantom surroundings from her dream. She’d been rocked emotionally and mentally so heavily though that it gave Katherine the opportune moment to tug down her pants.

“Hey...!” Dawn complained as well as a piece of paper stayed dry in water. And speaking of which, the front of her diaper was squeezed and a dry, crinkly puff spoke back.

“Getting her up?” Grace, if Dawn remembered correctly, asked Katherine from her adjacent seat behind the lobby desk.

Dawn could see the Amazon on her knees looking up and away to her friend that was well out of view, chatting, “Yep. We’re done for the day so I’m gonna get changed and get us out of here.” And without any debate whatsoever Dawn was being lifted up and onto her feet.

“Want me to watch her while you get dressed?” Grace asked.

Dawn stepped out and into the light, squinting just a small bit from actually adapting to the meager amount of darkness she had, though she did feel a tiny bit sore from sleeping effectively on the floor.

“Would you mind?” Katherine smiled appreciatively, and Dawn looked up at Grace, sitting in her chair like she had been before the girl fell asleep.

Her friend waved her off with a hand. “I did it the first time, didn’t I? Besides, if she slept well that means no crankiness, right?” she chuckled. “Lucky it’s been a slow day!”

“Really lucky,” Katherine nodded. “Dawn, honey? I’m gonna go get dressed and then we’re gonna get going, okay? Can you behave for Grace?”

Let it be said how lucky Katherine truly was. With Dawn still fully waking up it was the absolute sole reason why she wasn’t getting any pushback right then. She slept long enough to forget the good graces and also temporarily lose the energy to verbally fight back. So instead she lightly nodded, feeling distant more than anything else.

“Okay, I’ll be right back,” and Katherine stood and left, leaving Dawn with sunken shoulders and a gaze up at her new warden for the brief intermission. Another stickler for the rules, but just maybe slightly less oppressive than Dayna was...

“Did you wanna come sit on my lap?” Grace smiled, misinterpreting common courtesy through the eyes as just a silly child’s wanting.

“No, I’m fine,” Dawn replied, lucid enough for that, at least. “How long was I sleeping for?”

“How long? Hmm... I would say for a little bit, at least.”

Maybe it was coincidence, but it was another mention of passing time without any real metrics. No numbers, just phrases. Qualitative, but not quantitative.

“N-no, as in, like, how many hours?” Dawn clarified, hoping that being blunt was just shining light on a silly misunderstanding.

“Hours?” Grace repeated, but paused for a thoughtful hum. “Hmm... a little over three, maybe?”

Three? Since when did naps go for three hours? Weren’t they an hour or so at most? “That long?”

“Littles like you are always having big and exciting days,” Grace chuckled, “you’re gonna need a break in between all the fun, you know!”

That long though... Was she actually that tired? The days were longer here, weren’t they? So was her body just...catching up? Acclimating? The very word made her shudder just like her diaper crinkled. *Her* diaper...fuck.

“So did you have a fun day?” Grace did both the chit and the chat, leaving Dawn to wander in her very immediate space, curiously peering around the central pillar that the desk surrounded. Almost as if it was her own fortress...

“Uh...it was fine,” Dawn was passive in replying, wishing Katherine could somehow change faster.

“Did you like meeting Dayna?”

Did leprechauns bleed lucky charms? No, and not because the answer was blood, but because they didn't exist. Things that don't exist don't bleed. So no, she very much did not like meeting Dayna.

“She was...nice.”

All Grace did was chuckle, and Dawn gave her a look.

“What? What's so funny?” Dawn frowned.

“Hm?” she raised her eyebrows. “Oh! No; your mommy had some stuff to say about that, is all. Between you and me, sweetheart,” she leaned in with a playful whisper afoot, “you need to learn to behave!”

Were they talking about her when she was asleep? “Wh-what? What did she tell you?”

“How silly you can be,” Grace stayed vague with a cheery smile, and Dawn only exhaled, knowing just how impossible it was to get any kind of direct answer from anyone here.

“Oh hi, Grace!” a voice from beyond the great wall was heard and the Amazon sitting with Dawn looked up and over.

“Hey, Dayna! Excited to be off the clock? Vacation awaits!”

“You can say that again,” and the voice drew closer. Closer right until an unfortunately familiar face was visible to both Grace and Dawn now. “Just glad I got to finish it with a fun shift, no offense!”

“None taken,” Grace sighed herself, waving her hand. “Running the Little's corner is definitely the highlight of the week,” she said, and Dayna solemnly nodded.

“Definitely. Though,” Dayna chuckled for a moment, like it was required just to get the next part out, “I had to deal with one who was being a little bit bratty today...”

“Oh yeah?” Grace asked, and Dawn, still somehow unnoticed, shook and quivered. She shook from the anger of knowing exactly what she was about to imply, and quivered from the fear of having dodged a bullet. It sounded like she really did have a vendetta, if only by a little.

“She’s new and all, so I’m not going to hold it against her, but have you met Katherine’s new Little yet?”

“Yeah, I did, actually. Sweetheart in my opinion! Not yours, though?” Grace chuckled, and by forgoing any mention of the very person standing right beside her, just maybe the Amazon was covering for her.

“Mm, well... She’s something. It was like she was ready to throw a tantrum over every little thing! First she didn’t want her juice, then she got upset when I wanted to check her diaper, when she had to sit down for story time... Promise you won’t tell Katherine this part?”

Secrets from Katherine? Suddenly Dawn felt an oncoming bargaining chip, even if it was a tip from her newest enemy. Grace nodded and said, “Lock and key. Whatcha got?”

“When Katherine came to pick her up for lunch? She called Katherine by her first name!”

And the sound of shock in the woman’s voice rang an uncomfortable bell for the culprit. Dawn looked beside herself in a weird way. Did it really matter that much? Enough to tell another person about it? And of all things, too. It couldn’t have been that important to call her *Mommy*, right?

“Really?” Grace spoke with a similar spike of surprise, and Dayna readily confirmed.

“Yes! You should’ve seen how embarrassed she was! I completely get it, but still... I can’t imagine how embarrassed I’d be if my Little called me by my name in public; gosh, even in private! I wonder if—”

“Oh come on!” In a shocking turn of events, Dawn stepped back and shouted up to the heavens, catching Dayna off guard. “You can’t be serious! It’s not even that big of a deal!”

Clearly Dayna was taken aback, never expecting a second listener. But still, a second later and her persona was composed. The friendly, gossiping tone was dropped for one that played from

statuses, enforcing the separation between teacher and student. “Dawn? What are you doing back there?”

“Minding my own business,” she spoke crudely. “What about you?”

But instead of getting an answer, the grown up simply deferred to the other, continuing to talk right over the girl’s head. “Grace? Did you let her play here? Wait,” she turned her head both ways, “where’s her mommy? Where’s Katherine?”

“She’s just getting changed out of her uniform. I said I’d watch Dawn for her,” Grace explained, but Dayna looked far from satisfied.

“Has she been here this whole time? Katherine never brought her back after lunch– Oh, perfect timing! Katherine?” And Dayna disappeared from beyond the desk.

“Jesus... what’s her problem?” Dawn muttered, but she spun her head as the floor fell from beneath her. Or, more aptly, she was picked up. “Hey!”

“Don’t ‘hey’ me, troublemaker,” Grace playfully sighed, “You’re mommy’s gonna get in trouble if you let anybody find out she let you nap back here, you know?”

“Why, because Dayna is sticking her nose where it doesn’t belong?”

“Dayna cares about Littles a lot, honey...” Grace explained, but it seemed to be sparing an awful lot of enthusiasm, to the point where the woman seemed to doubt it herself. “Let’s go hand you off. Sooner you two skedaddle the better.”

“I can walk, you know?” Dawn complained, but was barely even acknowledged as Grace carried her out the back and back to the front of the desk where they closed in on Katherine and Dayna.

“Katherine, you never brought her back after lunch. The whole day were you just–?”

“Bwah!” Grace forcefully interrupted, and even Dawn could feel the tense atmosphere. Katherine looked pensive and reserved, meanwhile her peer came off as aggressive and annoyed. “Sorry, Kat! Dawn wanted her mommy!” And like a box of chocolates Dawn was held out as such, to which Katherine warmly accepted now in her street clothes.

Dayna’s mouth still hung agape with a stern sentence she seemed like she wanted to finish, but apparently Littles really did function the same like children as far as set pieces went. No adult in their right mind would chew out another in front of a kid.

“Oh, thanks!” Katherine smiled, briefly bouncing Dawn against her hip. “Did you miss me?” Dawn wasn’t sure whether she was just being exploited as a diversion at that point or Katherine was being genuine. Either way, the warm smile still made her feel uncomfortable and brought on a blush, so maybe it didn’t really matter.

“And actually, Dayna, do you have a sec?” Grace asked with a sense of apology in her voice. She clasped her hands with a guilty look. “Since Katherine’s gotta go, I was wondering if you could help me organize just a few late return filings real quick? Call it your last job before vacation time?”

Dayna looked caught between two different hares she was trying to catch at the same time. She briefly stuttered, then ultimately sighed. “S-sure...”

“Perfect! Thank you so much!” Grace grabbed Dayna by the shoulder, then tapped Katherine’s. “Have a good night, Kat; be good for Mommy, Dawn!”

Apparently if it was coming from an Amazon and not a Little, Katherine was adept at reading cues, hence why they were already drifting away. “Thank you!” She waved. “Have a great vacation, Dayna!” Katherine called, then whispered in Dawn’s ear, “Can you say bye to Grace?”

“What?” Dawn, not whispering so much, rebutted, “why?”

“Because she did something very nice for us. Please?”

And like that they were back to speaking in broad strokes and flowery words. Reluctantly, and without a gesture, Dawn called out blankly,

“Bye Grace.”

“Bye-bye!” Grace, still within earshot, waved back, still escorting Dayna away.

“Jesus, what was her problem?” Dawn vented as they reached the outside. “Was she mad at you, or something?”

“No, Dayna wasn’t mad,” Katherine was quick to correct, “she just...wanted to make sure everything was okay,” she briefly explained, but didn’t leave room for comment. “More importantly, did you have a fun day?”

Calling it 'fun' couldn't have been farther from the truth. But what wore on the girl was Katherine's constant smiling. Her stupid, kind words and overbearing attitude, especially with how upset she could be over the stupidest things that Dawn would say or do...

"It was...interesting."

She froze up from the elated gasp from the Amazon.

"Really?" Katherine asked, sounding no less happy. "Oh, that's great! I'm so glad you had a fun day!" She squeezed her tighter, and Dawn tried to push back just to give herself breathing room. "I know we had some problems, but I know it was a lot of fun spending my lunch break with you!"

And maybe it felt begrudging to admit, but that was probably the highest point of the day for Dawn as well, if not the part where she slept through the remainder of it. After all, she was at least humored in browsing some of the books, even if she was censored the whole way through. It was the highest point, if only because everything else was simply so much worse.

"Next time..." Dawn started, but wished she never even began. *Next time*. When was next time? Tomorrow? Two days from now? Days. Days she referenced going by with the full expectation that she would be here for that much longer. Waiting and wondering just when her sentence would end.

"'Next time' what?" Katherine, as inquisitive as always, bounced Dawn on her hip like she needed a reminder to finish her questions.

"...Nothing. So now can we go home?" Dawn asked as she looked around the parking lot, finding it to be far more packed than it was that morning.

"We can..." Katherine lulled, and Dawn wasn't much of a foodie, but she knew how to smell a carrot dangling from a stick. "I was thinking we could make one quick stop somewhere first. Is that okay?"

No, it probably wasn't. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise! Do you wanna guess?"

"I just want to go home... Can we, please?"

"We will right after. I promise you'll like where we go, though!"

Soon Dawn was slipped into her car seat, slipped and snaked into the cushioned seat, safely secured and strictly strapped into place without a chance of getting out on her own. What she didn't appreciate was her accompanying accessory set being placed right next to her. She watched Katherine drop the diaper bag right next to her before shutting the door and getting into the driver's seat.

"Wanna listen to some music?" Katherine asked as she pulled out of their space.

"Nope. All set."

Did she really care if her doll was entertained or not?

"Ta-dah!" The excitement was sure and true, but it wasn't shared.

Dawn gave her a skeptical look as she watched outside the window from her seat.

In another attempt to spark some joy, Katherine asked, "Dawn, you know where we are, right?"

A sliver formed between her lips just to let out a quiet sigh.

"A toy store?"

"Yes, the toy store! Don't you wanna pick something out?" Again, the Amazon kept trying to sweeten the pot, but her tricks and tactics were simply suited for a different kind of opponent.

"Can't we go to a bookstore, or something? I'll gladly pick out a book," Dawn tried to compromise.

"They sell books here, too! *But*, you need to pick something out to play with too, understood?"

"Why is it so important I get a toy? I don't play with toys, Katherine," Dawn tried to explain as clearly as she could, yet hearing the clicks and snaps of her own car seat straps seemed to make for a sore juxtaposition, somewhat.

"Because you need fun things to play with!" Katherine emphasized, finally sighing herself, albeit in a much more playful way. "I like books too, but I can't be a bookworm my whole life!" In other words, diversify with your hobbies. What "hobbies" was Dawn allowed to have here?

Books, if at all, and what; playing with toys? Toys and books? Or were her hobbies just the different games that she was supposed to play? The self-defeatist attitude was as justified as it was demoralizing.

But having been through the song and dance enough, Dawn decided to be as much of a buzzkill as Katherine could be when she wasn't the one getting her way. "Is it because of LPS?" The apparent Big Brother of this world.

"Don't worry about that," Katherine hushed much more somberly, but she still came off as positive. "Besides, you tried really hard today and you deserve a treat for that. Anything you want, okay?"

"So what if I want nothing?" A real glass half-empty kind of gal.

"Then I pick something," Katherine grinned, catching Dawn in a way she didn't expect, annoyedly so.

"Fine. Whatever..." Dawn muttered on the brief walk across the lot and into the store, advertising with big bubbly, colorful letters and all.

The moment they stepped inside, Katherine was already fawning. "Oh wow! Isn't it so big?" She pointed and Dawn followed her finger up to the massive animal balloons floating around the warehouse ceiling. Pigs, cows, and horses, all equally as round and bloated save for their unique colors and tails. They looked larger than life; far bigger than the normal Amazon, and only served as a reference for just how big this place really was.

"Yeah, cool," Dawn commented, then glanced at all the metal cages of balls, boxes, colorful adverts and distant beeping and buzzing noises.

Katherine walked them through the entrance, swiping a catalog like it was some kind of dead drop. Had Dawn not been watching the endless number of pages flip past her fingers, she likely would have seen the stars in Katherine's eyes as she made small noises of glee at the colorful image explosion of endless products, gadgets and gizmos.

"Sure we're not here to get you a toy?" Dawn called her out, and all she did was chuckle.

"Hmm, maybe! I only get to come here when it's for one of my nieces or nephews, so I guess I'm a little excited to have another reason to go..." Katherine giggled. Or in other words, Dawn was but another means to an end. "So? Did you have any ideas?"

“Ideas? I wanted a book. Not a toy. If we get Waver a toy can I just take the book?”

“That’s very thoughtful of you,” Katherine said as she rubbed her head, “but I think he has *plenty* of things to play with. You on the other hand?”

So much for trying...

She sprung for the first pointless thing that came to mind. “Fine. Blocks. I don’t know.”

“Yeah? Let’s go see if we can find some...” And off they went.

The toys certainly were endless, much like the shrieking children and crying Littles inside the store.

“NO! I WANT BOTH!” One would wince, and another would beg.

“Just *fucking* let me go you sadistic *bitch!*” Identifiably, the Littles were the ones with more...refined language. And while Katherine may have tried, either her hasty pace to avoid the meltdown or hand to cover just one of Dawn’s ears was always a reactive strategy rather than a proactive one.

“Pllleeeeeaaaasssse!”

“Mommy! Mommy! This one! This one!”

“I DON’T WANT A FUCKING TOY! I’M AN ADUL—” Cue the slaps and smacks.

“You don’t have to try and cover my ears, you know...” Dawn spoke simply, getting more annoyed with each attempt.

Katherine, missing the point entirely, opted for an unnecessary teaching moment by saying, “I don’t want you thinking that just because others do, that doesn’t mean you can use naughty words, understood?”

“Yeah, kinda figured that...” Maybe it was all in her head, but her bum may have twitched just then.

Hearing more and more from kids and captures had her both unnerved and observant. Of course it made her uncomfortable; she was forced to listen to people who had it just as bad as her. They were all mirrors for her circumstances, as far as she could tell. Maybe that’s why the store was so

big as well. Enough space and soothing music from overhead speakers just to tune out the cries of the eternally damned.

“I think we found what we’re looking for!”

They finally turned into an aisle that was thankfully empty. The tall shelves were organized like warring factions, each section championing some kind of branding or product. Something that looked like a knock-off for legos, others as some superior imitation of knex, and more. Big block sets, small block sets; soft ones, hard ones, plush, mesh, and more. It had to have been some kind of haven for any aspiring materials engineer. One that still needed pull-ups for bed at night.

“There’s so many...!” Katherine looked up, down, left, and right. “You’ve got a lot to choose from, huh?”

“Those,” Dawn pointed out a small box. “Let’s get those ones.”

“These ones?” Katherine crouched and pulled the box off the shelf.

It was a bright orange box seemingly filled to the brim with cubes, spheres, and prisms of endless shapes, sizes, colors, and patterns. A circular cutout lined with plastic was a snapshot into the eternal land of creativity the toy assuredly had, but Dawn hardly cared. It could have been as boring as a stick in the mud and she still would’ve asked for it. As long as it was in the same place. After all, she pointed at the first thing she saw.

“Hmm...” Katherine hummed, and Dawn by chance followed her finger tracing across the packaging. Her digit moved and moved over the selling points and finally stopped on some label.

‘L4+’

Interesting, but certainly more random jargon. Dawn didn’t care to think too hard, given how peeved she still was by that Library’s stupid sorting system. She’d figure it out soon enough, but she didn’t want anything else to kick her while she was still down.

“And you’re sure about these?” Katherine asked, like she was warning her with a ‘last chance’ sort of look.

“Yep. They’re perfect.”

“Alright then!” And in Katherine’s hand they stayed. Boom. Easy. Done.

“Can we go now?” After thinking twice about it, she decided it’d probably be better not to try and see any of the books here. Given the setting, she was more than likely going to leave book-less and disappointed.

“Yes, we can,” Katherine started, but then stopped, raising her eyebrow with a grin. “*After* you pick something you *really* want?”

Was it really that obvious? Dawn just barely clicked her tongue.

“I said I wanted those blocks, didn’t I?”

“And I’m sure you do, but let’s pick out something else, okay? I want you to really think about it, okay?”

“How should I know what I want if I didn’t even want anything from the start?!” Was she really being forced to choose if she was upfront about her complete lack of interest?

“That’s okay,” Katherine soothed and bounced, but it only made Dawn boil hotter. “How about I walk down some aisles, and if you like it, we’ll get it?”

“Then... just get me another thing of blocks, or whatever.” At least playing architect meant needing the imagination for what a finished building might look like.

“You have enough blocks,” Katherine decided for her, now apparently the arbiter of all Dawn’s needs and wants. “We’re still gonna get you a book too, you know?”

“Don’t want one anymore.”

“What? Why not?”

“Just don’t. Changed my mind.”

“...Well, can I pick a book out for you?”

“I’d really rather you didn’t.”

And instead of pushback, Dawn got literal pushback when the Amazon smothered her cheek against her face.

“Jeez... what’s got you so grumpy?” Katherine frowned for just a second, but was back to smiles as they moved down the aisles, traversing the endless maze.

Some time later, Dawn felt the need to broach a recurring and uncomfortable topic.

“Kath– *Mommy?*” *Shit.* No one was nearby, as far as she could tell. She could have gotten away with it...!

“Ya-huh? See something you like?” and she already started to turn on her heel.

“No. I...I need to go use the bathroom.”

“Hm? You don’t feel wet...”

But before Katherine could administer a check, Dawn quickly spoke up, “N-no! I didn’t...urgh, I didn’t do *that!* I’m just saying that I *need* to go!”

“Oh,” Katherine said, though her face implied the disconnect. “Dawn? Sweetie, it’s okay to use your diaper?”

“Yeah, I know!” *Fuck! No! I don’t know because it’s not okay!* “Just... Please? No one’s watching! No one’s gonna know! Just take me!”

“Dawn...please don’t get upset with me.”

“I’m not gonna be upset if you just let me go!” The very thought of needing to go had her fidgeting, but Katherine’s arm around her back kept her from going anywhere.

“Are you nervous?”

“Nervous?” How did that even apply to the situation? It was just...disgusting! And yes, embarrassing! Nervous didn’t even apply! Nervous made it sound like peeing herself was a willing possibility, like she just needed a light push on...! “I’m not nervous! I’m just...just let me go use the bathroom! If...if I pick out a toy will you let me? Please?”

“No, but I’d still like it if you picked something out,” and like it was an open and shut case, Katherine kept walking. That was it, then. No more talk about using the bathroom.

“Ka– *Mommy! Please!*” Dawn begged and her legs squirmed. All because of that stupid juice...!

“Shh...Dawn, it’s okay, honey.”

Softly, yet firmly, she was being refused, and every second with trying to hold it meant less brain cells she could use to strike up an argument. “You’re not even being fair...!”

“It’s okay...” she tried shushing the girl, moving on to hums, “you don’t need to be embarrassed.”

Dawn at many points had been a fool in underestimating the absurdity of this dimension, but at least now she was starting to see when and where she was at a total loss, hence her frustration right then. At the library she had no option; no Katherine to beg. However now she did and couldn’t afford herself the excuse of “had Katherine been there, maybe things would have gone differently.” The only difference though would be being held while she peed herself versus standing on her own two feet.

“Just...can you just put me down?” Dawn was desperate with her shaky ask. “I won’t run...!” Even if she tried, her bladder would be the first thing to give out before her legs.

And like the question hadn’t already been asked, Katherine whispered, “Honey, are you nervous?”

“Yes, I’m nervous!” Dawn blurted out. Fuck it, if she was being forced to do it, then yes, she was nervous! Nervous and embarrassed. Disgusted like she was since doing it the first time. Every disgusting and awful feeling that came with the act...!

But in a shocking turn of events, Dawn was slowly set on the floor. Yet another dreadful compromise. A small, technical victory, which was nothing but a loss framed through a different lens.

“Ah-ah!” Katherine snagged Dawn by the hand the moment she tried to take a step. “Stand right here.”

“What? Why?” Dawn asked as she was parked in front of the shelf, feeling a shadow overhanging her as it reached closer to the floor. Soon Dawn was being held by the waist while Katherine was crouched behind her, covering the Little on both sides with her legs and hanging her head over her. “Katherine?”

“No one’s watching, it’s okay,” Katherine whispered, and Dawn felt an assuring pat on her stomach. “Just look at the toys, okay?”

“W-wait, no!” Dawn tried to wriggle free, but the Amazon wasn’t letting go. “S-stop!”

“Didn’t you want some privacy?”

“Y-yes...!” Privacy from *everyone*! “But...but you’re...!”

“Dawn,” and she broke up the words with a kiss atop her head. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen, silly. Just let me know when it feels like you’re done, okay?”

Let it be known that it could have been argued this was something Katherine had *not* seen. However, it couldn’t be debated that she had certainly seen Dawn do worse... Pertaining to the number poo variety... Or did she pee herself then, too? It didn’t matter! Her breaths were nervous all the same and she was waiting for the chance to disappear, but the adrenaline was just making her feel the need to pee even more.

What was she supposed to do? Lie and say she went? What if Katherine checked her just to see if she did? Or what if she didn’t? Then Dawn would really have to pee herself in an even more public situation than this farce for privacy already was. If anyone did see, they’d just see a mother sheltering her child from the rest of the world while they did whatever kids do. Cry? Throw a tantrum? Wet their diapers? Either way there would be the instant recognition, and the only thing protecting Dawn from that was her own willful ignorance and Katherine’s motherly demeanor shielding her from it.

She breathed and breathed. Inhaled and exhaled. Sighed, fidgeted, and squirmed. Finally she was looking at what was in front of her. Speed Racerz toy trucks, zipping across the cardboard cover in a blazing trail and all. Big, bulky plastic trucks...with big wheels...premade, customizable tracks, and...

A meager meep left the girl’s mouth as her legs went stiff and she tensed up. A warm drop left her body, but it didn’t go far. Katherine’s touch was almost as snug and secure as the diaper was around Dawn’s hips, quickly soaking up the sudden and ongoing stream. For a quiet, uninterrupted moment, she wet herself; freely as much as she’d been forced to.

“Good job...!” Katherine whispered her praise as an Amazon hand wiped away the tears. She’d done it multiple times before, but never in such close proximity like this. There was simply no way of hiding from her. Even if she knew what went on, and even if she changed her diapers, what didn’t change was the self-disgust and embarrassment.

“Why...why do I have to...?” Dawn tearily muttered.

“Because we love you so much, sweetie,” and after another kiss Dawn had finally emptied her system, drained in more ways than one.

“Ready to go back up?”

Meekly, Dawn nodded.

“And...upsie-daisie!” Katherine cooed and Dawn soared. Apparently she’d put on a show convincing enough to not warrant a diaper check, and her face grimaced once her thickened, diapered front pressed her fake-mommy’s side.

“Just tug my shirt if you see something you like,” she said as she rubbed her back, and on they went.

They went and went. Aisle to aisle. Dolls, stuffed animals, play sets, kitchen imitations, and more. There were toys that felt awfully advanced for what Dawn would consider friendly for kids. Train sets with gearboxes to manipulate the speeds, robots with programmable command sets, and make believe cauldrons with “substance synthesizers – PARENT MUST SUPERVISE,” and so on. Everything at first glance reminded her of what might be pure gold to kids 8 and under, but the idea felt deceptive once she had a closer look.

“Wait,” Dawn finally spoke up, “what are those?”

“Those?” Katherine took a step back. It was a large display behind a thick layer of transparent plastic glass, or something. Large, wide tablets were propped up on tiny posts, lined in protective and color casings that had handles reminding Dawn of her sippy cups. The edges were patterned and textured for easy grip and the top even personified the technology with a friendly cartoonish face. Maybe there really were some parallels between this dimension and her own. They were tablets marketed for kids.

Dawn was no kid, naturally, but it probably felt like it was the most dignified thing she could get. It was the first screen she had seen since losing her phone. Ignoring the childish case, it could just maybe be something bearable. And after all, Katherine *did* say she could get anything...

“I’ll get one of these,” Dawn decided.

And she waited for Katherine to grab one above the display.

And she waited.

And waited.

“...Why don't we look at something else?”

“What? But you said I could get anything? It's a toy, isn't it?”

“Yes, it is, but I don't think we need any more screens in the house. Besides...” she murmured as she looked at one of the boxes, “I don't know if one would be appropriate. Let's go find a different toy, okay?”

“Wh-what? But it's actually something that I *want!*”

“And I'm sorry, Dawn, but I don't want you playing with one of those,” Katherine explained, but her decision was firm. “Maybe another time, okay? But let's try and get you some things you can touch and play with in your hands.”

“Yeah, and you can use a tablet in your hands. Katherine, please? I lost my phone; this is the closest thing to that!”

“Dawn, no,” she firmly said it again. “And...ah, see here?”

Dawn looked at where she was pointing.

‘A6+’

“Yeah? And?”

“The ‘A’ means ‘Amazon’,” Katherine slowly explained, then traced the six and plus. “It's for Amazon kids that are six and up.”

Her first instinct was to blink, and then to wonder to what kind of discrimination she was being subjected to. Because she was a Little? Wait—no, that was obviously the reason. The only reason. But did the age factor even matter?

“A-are you serious?”

“Uh-huh, see the ‘A’?” Katherine started to re-explain, “That's the first letter for ‘Amazon’--”

“I know how to spell! But are you seriously saying I can't have one because I'm a Little?”

“Dawn, some toys are made for different boys and girls, okay? There’s even toys just for Littles, too!” Like the mutual exclusivity was somehow supposed to make her happy again.

“Katherine, that shouldn’t matter. I’m smarter than a six-year old, Amazon or not. I know how to use a tablet!”

“I don’t think you should be using things like that, is all.”

“What? Why?!” Would it somehow be too stimulating for her? Was that it?

“Because—”

And just because Dawn’s foot was against Katherine’s thigh she could feel the vibration from her pants. After maneuvering the Little in her arm she pulled out her own personal tablet, answering a call with the phone against her ear.

“Hi honey, what’s up?”

James? Was she talking to him?

“Put it on speaker...!” Dawn hissed quietly, and Katherine didn’t even look at her, as if it was deliberate, like she was implying not to ask.

“Uh-huh, yeah,” Katherine paced in place, bouncing her charge as if to distract her. Dawn could hear mumbling noises from the phone, but hardly anything to piece out something on the other end of the phone. “We’re at the toy store right now, actually! Just getting Dawn a few things she can play with.”

“Mhm. Mhm? Wait, she’s...right now? Waiting? Al...alright. Okay, we’re on our way now. We’ll just be a few minutes, okay? Okay...thank you...” Katherine took a breath that Dawn knew to be nervous, and she concluded the call by saying, “Love you. Bye.”

“What? What was that about? Did James call?” Dawn was immediately asking, and Katherine was hardly telling.

Dawn checked both ends of the aisle before making her move, finally whispering in the Amazon’s ear, “*Katherine!*”

“Huh? Sorry, sweetie? What?”

“Who called?”

“Just James, sweetie... Hey, we’re gonna just get you the blocks for now, okay? We’ll come get you some more toys another day,” she explained as they started walking back to the front of the store.

“You’re acting weird,” Dawn gave her a scrutinizing look. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong; everything’s okay,” Katherine smiled, but Dawn wasn’t buying it, and the lack of communication was poisoning the already toxic waters.

But not needing to pick a toy out was in its own way a victory, so maybe the urgency to leave wasn’t all that bad. After all, if Katherine wasn’t running, surely no one died. No big deal, then.

“Who’s here?” Dawn couldn’t help but notice the black car parked out by the sidewalk, but her personal chauffeur was headed straight for the house, skipping the driveway and stone walkway by shooting through the lawn. It seemed urgent, but apparently not enough for Dawn’s bundle of blocks to be left behind in the car, now hanging from Katherine’s wrist in the bag they were packaged in.

The door was unlocked and Katherine stepped inside.

“James?” she called.

“Right over here!” he called back and around the corner. It was like a dramatic reveal with the way they stepped into view. James was positioned opposite to them, and in between was an eerily familiar head of hair. That same head turned up for a moment, then stood to realize its full Amazon form.

“Hi Katherine, I’m sure you remember us meeting the other day?” she held a hand out over the couch. “Francine?”

“R-right,” Katherine forced out a chuckle, shaking her hand. “From LPS?”

“Gosh,” the woman feigned a frown, looking distraught, “I hate seeming like the boogeyman with all these visits...! Ah! And *this* cutie right here is *Dawn!* Not Donna!” she corrected and laughed, but Dawn didn’t. As friendly as she tried to be, Dawn wasn’t fond of Amazons,

especially the ones that talked to her like she really did go to daycare. Other than that, a smiling face that intruded on your home in a suit and badge never had any real smiles to give.

“Oh, please, sit!” Francine gestured over to James, which Katherine quickly went for, sitting leg to leg with her husband. “I just had the chance to meet with James.”

“S-sorry for making you wait,” Katherine jostled the bag, “We were just getting Dawn some toys from the store.”

“Oh, that’s not a problem,” the woman smiled. “What toys did you get her?”

It was a fairly innocent question, but even Dawn couldn’t help but feel slightly weirded out by it. There were different ways to ask something like that. One was as a lead-in to cheer for the child who got them, acting all impressed and excited, but this wasn’t like that. As if it was a question exclusive to the Amazons in the room. Like she was ready to judge.

“Just some blocks to play with... She loves being creative...!” Katherine explained on the spot as she quickly pulled them out, brandishing them.

“Oh those look fun,” James leaned out just to see for himself.

“Right?” Katherine agreed. “Dawn picked them out all by herself!”

“Good pick, Dawn!”

“Yeah, thanks...” the Little murmured.

“Would you mind if I took a look?” Francine asked, already holding her hands out.

“O-of course,” Katherine obliged. The woman stared at the packaging for a brief moment, slowly turning it over, studying the contents like it was a bomb, or something.

But whatever inspection she was conducting, possibly they passed, because she was soon handing it back over for James to accept. “Thank you,” and just a second later she was typing something in on her phone. “Did you get her anything else?”

“Anything else...? No...well, we were going to, but...once my husband called that you were here, we hurried...so...” and with each pause she made a half-glance at her husband, like somehow he might have an answer.

“Oh, well I’m sorry for interrupting like this!” Francine chuckled, and James did most of the heavy lifting on meeting her gesture halfway. Dawn was back to being coddled like a security blanket for Katherine. “Just to reintroduce myself for you both: my name is Francine Bush and I’m a case handler for LPS. I’m here on a report that was made about an alleged mishandling, or kidnapping that’s still under investigation.”

Despite the obvious tension, Dawn with her lack of knowledge had a far easier time being rude. So out she blurted, “Yeah, the one that person was lying about?”

“Dawn...!” Katherine warned sternly, then quickly apologized, “I’m sorry, she...I think she’s just a little upset we couldn’t finish our trip to the toy store...”

“No, that’s okay!” the woman smiled, then pointed at the box in James’ lap. “Actually, I’d hate to be the reason she can’t play with her new stuff. Why don’t we let her keep busy with that while we talk?”

“I’m fine, I don’t want to—” But the sound of tearing cardboard was already making Dawn purse her lips. Suddenly a rainstorm of blocks was pattering on the floor. The only kind of forethought that saved her was using her feet to stand before Katherine could set her on her bottom – her warm diaper, before she could feel the squish. It felt like she was under a magnifying glass now that every big in the room was sitting on the couch, and she was the cute decoration playing in the middle. On the floor. Lower than everyone else.

She had half a mind just to make a point of her disinterest, but just to keep up the bare minimum of appearances she slowly dangled one block over another, watching the unsurprising clank and crumble of her two-block structure. And as she performed similarly unimpressive feats, she quietly listened on.

“Where’s Waver...?” Katherine quietly whispered to James.

“Upstairs. Figured it’d be better to keep him in our room...”

“So,” Francine continued, “I said I’d be making some unscheduled visits in the future. I apologize for this one being so soon; it’s important for these kinds of things that we get to meet both parents, if and when applicable,” and she nodded to both Amazons.

“If—” Katherine spoke up, suddenly stopping. “If...if James can answer any questions a-about whatever this witness reported...”

“No, that’s alright,” Francine said. “I was able to ask him some things before you got here. Unfortunately I can’t offer any more information right now other than that the claims are still being investigated. I hope you can understand, but we take the wellbeing of Littles into very serious consideration, which is why we ask that until we’ve resolved everything, you don’t try to finalize any sort of adoption paperwork.”

“Right, of course,” James was the one to answer, and even with her back to them, Dawn could feel the strength leaving Katherine. “So is there anything we can do for you?”

“Well...like I said, I know that it’s soon, but as of yesterday I understand you both were still getting some of the essentials for Dawn?”

“Y-yes. We finished the start of her nursery the other day,” Katherine explained, and James backed her up. “A crib, changing table...”

“And a toy chest?” Francine raised her eyebrows, and only after a solid second did she smile with a glance down at the blocks, finally implying that what she made was a joke.

James and Katherine made another on command laugh.

“That’s great, then,” Francine murmured as she did something else with her phone. “And how did today go? You both work, yes? Do you already have her in daycare?”

Nope. No daycare... Dawn quietly shook her head helplessly as she tried to balance a cylinder on a cube.

“W-well...I brought her into work with me today,” Katherine slowly started. “My work has a place that watches parent’s Littles when they need to do research or use any of the library’s services.”

“Mhm...” More notes on her phone. “And that’s for employees, as well? They watch the Littles of employees?”

“There’s...there’s no rule against it...” Katherine explained, but she sounded a bit stunned, like she was caught off guard.

“And is that your long term solution for her?” Francine glanced from guardian to guardian. “Every day at the library?”

Maybe minus Dayna, sure, it could work... Dawn pessimistically supposed.

“A couple days out of the week I regularly work from home,” James volunteered. “She’ll be staying at home with me then.”

“While you’re working?” Every question she had seemed to be judging. Maybe it was her job, but did she have to sound so bitchy about it...?

“I’m able to be away from my computer; she’ll be under safe supervision,” James answered with more confidence than Katherine could seem to.

“Okay...” Francine nodded, making more notes.

“Is...is that okay?” Katherine asked, finally asking an obvious yet unanswered question.

It felt like something fairly essential, and yet Francine sounded like she was only answering because they asked. Otherwise it was on a need to know basis. “For now, yes, but I’m sure you both understand we want what’s best for Dawn’s wellbeing?”

“Right,” husband and wife agreed.

“That’s why I’d be concerned about her socializing opportunities. Sometimes parents can underestimate it, but having routines and consistent faces can be important for a Little to feel comfortable with their environment. At the library; is it usually the same Littles that are being dropped off?”

The air went quiet for a moment.

Finally, Katherine, like a student caught without her homework, admitted, “Not...all the time, no... It-it’s just that getting her into a daycare this time of year when it’s already in the middle of the year...”

Another wordless nod from Francine. “That’s alright. It should be fine for now, but I suggest trying to put her around with some other kids her developmental age. As far as daycare goes, we can arrange something for you if need be.”

Dawn stayed quiet, but boy was she clambering those blocks real hard. There was no way in hell she was going to a daycare. And what gives? Being forced to play with mindfucked Littles? What did she mean by “developmental age?” She had the developed mind of an adult, so that obviously meant socializing with adults. Right? Right?

“How about doctor’s visits? Do you have anything scheduled for her yet?”

Every question was like a bombshell that threw the Amazons off their game. Dawn had never seen the mighty and immovable checkmated before.

“No...not yet... We wanted to find someone that we were comfortable with...” Whether it was true or not, this was the first Dawn was hearing Katherine speak of it.

“Mhm, I can understand new parents being nervous about that,” Francine sagely nodded, and for once it felt like they’d reached a point of common ground. “But it is important you make sure your Little is up to date on everything and in good health. It’s a number one priority we recommend,” and she let the pause hang just to intensify her point. “Littles pre-adoption can be known to not be so proactive with taking care of themselves; thank goodness they have the grown ups looking out for them though, right?”

Another collective laugh from the trio, all at Dawn’s bitter and annoyed expense.

“Which is why...” Francine, already with something prepared in her inner pocket, pulled out a slip and scribed a few things on it with a pen. “I’d like you two to take her to that appointment for tomorrow,” she handed them the paper. “I understand if the timing may not be ideal, but it really can’t be understated making sure your Little is in good health...”

“Nope, we understand,” James nodded, glancing down at the slip. “I’ll make the time. No worries.”

“Perfect,” Francine nodded appreciatively. “That’s an appointment for a local Little-trician we like to refer parents to in the area. There won’t be any need to explain the situation or your current circumstances; just treat it as a normal check-up. You’re more than welcome to use her as Dawn’s primary care moving forward, but we’d like to know of any switches you might be making if that’s the case.”

“Right...thank you,” James said again, and Katherine said something similar.

“Okay,” Francine exhaled, then looked around the living room. “Since things have changed, would it be alright if I saw her nursery now?” She lifted her note-taker from the coffee table. “Just to keep all our information fresh.”

Just how anal is she...? Dawn wondered as she contemplated the best way to chuck a ball at her spindly structure. Maybe in a way where the ball would hit the woman?

More importantly, she still had the card to play about being stranded here by a tour guide, but would she even listen? As “helpful” as she sounded, Dawn didn’t quite get the most positive vibes from her... If anything though, at least she gave thoughtful explanations, as twisted as they are. Nothing like “bad words are bad, or this toy isn’t appropriate for you.” She worked like math whereas Katherine functioned like creative literature. Vague and operating on a sense of reason that merely just “felt” right.

Real glime-dazzling stuff.

“Kat?” James stopped his wife from standing. “Why don’t you stay with Dawn while I go show her around? Sure your day was busier than mine.”

“That’d be fine,” Francine coolly included. “I’m done with my questions for today.”

“Uhm...sure...” Katherine agreed, sinking back on her seat.

And Dawn flinched once a rough hand over her head tousled her hair, leaving the gesture in James’ wake as he walked ahead with the LPS worker.

“We have a high chair for her if you want to see that?” James chatted as he guided her to the stairs.

“That’d be great. I’ll see it on the way out...”

Dawn watched them disappear up the second flight from her leaned out position. But before she could look away she was suddenly pulled into a tight embrace.

“K-Katherine?” Dawn grunted over the sniffles from the woman. “C-can you let go?”

“I’m sorry...” she sniffled again, sounding on the verge of tears. “I love you more than anything, sweetheart.” And without asking to, Katherine kissed her on the forehead.

With Dawn’s foot hanging from the hold, still close enough to the floor, all she did was kick one of the spheres with the back of her foot.

Going...

Crash!

Crumble!

The great tower of babble had fallen.