

4 - Uninvited Consequences

“Did we miss a turn...?” Rose was the first to start asking questions as the car rolled down the street. While Danny couldn’t see it, he was sure that they were noticing all the cracks in the road, the dirtied brick walls, questionable stores and shifty passersby. Most of them were probably friendly, but visuals were always the first impression.

“We’re on Fletcherson, right?” Danny asked from his sister’s lap, trying to ignore the boa constrictor that was starting to keep him in place. His sister’s unease wasn’t the most unfounded thing. Crime *was* a thing here, just probably not as much as she was thinking. Regardless, it was obviously a far cry from her pretty and magnificent mansion.

The only places the birds would perch were the concrete linings and high, high power lines embedded into conduit bolted against the building walls. While Rose must have been used to the quiet and serene mornings back at her home, now she got to understand just what kind of white noise Daniel had accustomed himself to. But in fairness, it wasn’t *that* bad? Well, it was easy enough to get used to, at least.

“How do you go to work everyday, Danny?” his sister asked again from her seat, and Daniel was trying to sit as straight as he could to catch some familiar surroundings.

“How? The bus?” Otherwise he would have been walking, but distance, commute and the like just didn’t support that.

“A public one?”

“...Uh, yeah?” How else? Did they have private ones where she worked?

“I think we’re almost there,” Naomi reported after another glance at the vehicle’s console.

And after just a few more turns and a little bit more driving, and they parked in the small lot Daniel had absolutely zero use for, given his lack of personal wheels.

“This should be it,” Naomi announced.

“Is this it, Danny?” Rose asked, with a hand on his shoulder and arm over his stomach.

“Uhh...yep! This is it.” *Finally home!* Yeah, it looked bad, but home really was home, and part of that meant saying bye to Rose.

Both women undid their seatbelts and Naomi stepped out first, followed by Rose going for the door. Just as Daniel was sliding off her lap to go first he was quickly suspended in the air.

“Ah! Danny, let me go first, okay? I’ll put you down,” Rose with her hands under his arms explained, and Daniel couldn’t do much more than let her go as she pleased. Either way, there was an odd sense of familiarity hearing the distant cars, exhaust from nearby HVAC units, distant feet scuffing across the sidewalks, and in general a lack of calming noises.

It’s what home felt like.

“Actually...the building looks kinda far, huh?” and Rose hoisted her brother up to her hip. “Why don’t I carry you?”

“Rose, I’m fine,” Daniel insisted, though without trying much to appeal. Either she was letting him go or she wasn’t.

“It should be fine?” Naomi offered from the other side of the car, and Rose shared a pensive look with her friend. Reluctantly, slowly, like a steel wire slowly beginning to unravel, Daniel came closer and closer to the ground.

And just when he did touch the pavement, right as Daniel started to move...

“Wait, Danny?” Rose called clearly and directly, enough to make her brother stop on a dime. He turned his head.

Out held in front of him was his sister’s five-fingered hand, all stretched out expectantly.

“Hold my hand?”

“What? Why?”

“Just in case,” she was brief, but serious.

“Rose...it’s safe? You’re being a little overdramatic—”

“--Danny, it’s either hold my hand or I’m carrying you,” Rose dropped the hammer with an unyielding look. She obviously meant business and finally her attitude sounded just as immovable as she looked.

And all Daniel could do was awkwardly scoff, maybe hoping he could think of something, yet his sister had a face that made no room for negotiation. Without saying something direct, Daniel near-slapped his hand into Rose's who clamped down on his snug and securely.

“Stay close, okay?”

“It's not dangerous...” Daniel sighed. “Wait,” he remembered, stopped and turned then went for the car. If only the leash on his hand led that far though.

“What?” Rose called from her spot, letting Daniel move away any further.

“My bag?” he pointed impatiently. Unfortunately he was recently new to having his ability to move around severely limited. If anyone none the wiser saw them, they'd think nothing more of it as a doting mommy trying to keep track of her son. After rearranging some familial titles though that would be exactly the truth...

“Naomi has it. Please stay next to me?”

“You're talking like I've never been here before?” Daniel huffed and drifted back closer, and he tried to lead the trio as best as he could. It was a lucky day for the building to seem so empty, though, and the embarrassment of having to hold his sister's hand while they walked around needn't be shared with anyone else.

“Rose...you can let go of me now?” Daniel reminded his sister the moment they touched the carpeted floor, standing at a pair of glass doors requiring a code to get any deeper within.

“After we get to your room, Danny,” Rose said in an almost dismissive voice, like she was trying to shush a fussy boy, and fussy Daniel was certainly feeling.

“What? You don't have to bring me up? We can say bye here, you know?”

“Do you have a code?” Naomi asked, with a finger already hovering over an analogue keypad.

“Yeah, 8-3-2-7-9-0-0-1-7-2-9,” he recited on a fast whim, hardly stopping to try and make it sound coherent. After all, he was trying to make a point. “So I should just—”

Then there was a loud beep from the door, and suddenly Naomi was standing off to the side with the open entrance held by her hand.

“Danny?” Rose patiently called, gently tugging him forward.

She...she caught all of that? Immediately?

There wasn't even a pause, as if she'd been listening and typing in tandem at the same time, because she absolutely had been. Cook, clean, organize, manage, and memorize now, too?

Danny gave her a look compounding multiple kinds of emotions, yet Naomi in her own headspace didn't even glance back as she gently closed the door behind them, easing her pace to be back in line with the vanguard as she adjusted Daniel's duffel bag over her shoulder like it was a large purse.

"Is there any elevator we can take?" Rose asked aloud, but it was never addressed to Daniel. Somehow he was a secondary source of information to everything or was just discounted for being written off as less than...?

"No, they're out of service," Daniel said anyway, and at least he was heard. "We have to take the stairs." And fighting Rose's grip just to drag her forward, Daniel took them over to a thick push-bar door that opened up into a tall, winding stairwell.

"We go up five floors," Daniel explained, watching Naomi go first and then he and Rose second. Although, having Naomi take the lead may have been a bad idea. With her setting the pace, she moved at a speed comfortable for herself and Rose, but not the poor little brother.

The climb was nothing new to Daniel, but the small jog at which they were ascending certainly was. As pathetic as he may have felt, trying to hold his breath and not to pant, he asked almost like a joke, "Th...think we can slow down a little...?"

"Ah...!" Rose spun her head in shock, and without even a debate she leaned over and swooped Daniel up. "I'm sorry, I wasn't even thinking...! Going up these stairs must be a whole lot for you, huh?" and like that he was glued to her hip; a fate he had been trying to avoid.

"It's not...hard for me," he took the chance to catch his breath, "You two just walk too fast...!"

"Doesn't that mean we'll get there faster?" Rose suggested with a smile, then her eyes started to wander. As they moved up the cement stairs she was more than likely noticing the unbalanced lighting. Corners could be clear as day, or others just shady enough to mask the gradient of grime emerging from the cracks. Some fixtures on the walls were either whiter or more yellow than others. Scuffs, unremovable stains; chipped tile on the walls, and more. Everyone was quiet, save for light scrapes of shoes and Daniel trying to get his breathing in order.

“It’s the third one,” Daniel pointed the door out, already looking around from his vantage point for something he didn’t have. “Wait, Naomi, can I see my bag?”

“Why? What do you need?”

Did he need a reason to look through his own stuff?

“My keys are in there,” he kept it brief. “Let me get them so we can get inside.”

And instead of bringing it any closer, the maid took it upon herself to unzip the bag hanging from her shoulder and piece through it.

“Hey, that’s my stuff, I can find it,” Daniel tried to bark commands, reaching out his upper half and arm, but Rose holding him against her side wasn’t doing the boy any favors.

“She’ll find it, Danny,” Rose calmly hushed, turning her head to either end of the hall.

“Yeah, but I didn’t give her permission; I know where they are if you just let me—!”

And one jingle-jangle later and Naomi had a keyring hanging from her finger. Neither was he handed his own key, nor was he asked for permission. Instead, the consentless key slipped into the rickety lock the creaky door opened up.

Without much control over anything at this point, Daniel sighed, saving but a modicum of face as he gestured to the party already ahead of him, muttering, “Make yourself at home...”

Rose took a few quiet steps inside, turning her torso to observe the entrance and kitchen, giving Daniel the same views by proxy. Impatience had a way of boiling over.

“Rose, please? Put me down now?”

Even then it wasn’t immediate, like the floor was somehow toxic; a foreign substance his sister dared wouldn’t let his vulnerable baby brother touch. But eventually she did put him back to the ground. As promised, if only with a little bit of viscous hesitation.

“So uh...yep, this is my place,” he made the late announcement as he pushed the door shut.

“Take a seat if you want, I guess.”

Or just leave now.

It wasn't impressive, and he only had two chairs instead of three. But guests were over, so of course Daniel could keep on his feet.

"Oh..." Rose spoke as she slowly strolled across the kitchen, tapping her finger off the counter periodically like she was testing for asbestos. Other sights or attractions like his cheap cabinets or loose handle knobs were otherwise things she barely grazed like unfortunate, broken toys. "This is... nice!"

The lie was so bad that it made the little brother think twice about it.

Naomi was being just as much of an inspector as his sister. She'd gone from a maid to a forensics scientist, peering over the fridge and helping herself to see what was behind the cabinets. Though, Daniel *could* see just how much of an attack this kind of setting must have felt like to a maid. If keeping a domicile clean was her passion, the state of Daniel's home was tantamount to heresy.

Yet with a face that seemed to weather any storm, Naomi wordlessly roamed, going as far as to crouch down low to look in the lower cabinets.

"S-sorry, but uhm, are you guys looking for something?" Call him a social recluse, but he didn't remember this part when having a new guest or friend over...

Simultaneously both women stopped their motions, quietly exchanging an empty look, then ending on Daniel.

"No," Rose offered innocently, "we're just curious, is all. I was just...really excited when I heard you were living nearby...! I wanted to see what my little brother's..." her head wandered for a moment, like the compliment she was fishing for even existed, "...house...looked like."

House was incorrect, and calling it an apartment was a stretch as well. Whatever tests they were administering though, Daniel figured he had failed them with flying colors. Maybe that wouldn't be announced until the whole apartment had been inspected though, because Daniel stood between Naomi and Rose while his sister moved into the living room and the maid still lingered in the kitchen.

"Oh, did you sleep on your couch the other night?" Rose asked while she looked over. It was a polite question that understated the lack of cleanliness in the room. A bundle of bedding was still discarded in the corner where Daniel tried to hide the sounds from his phone. From Rose, specifically. The pull-out couch was still pulled out; still a mess of sheets and blankets, and two pillows that weren't even in a straight line.

And in the spirit of touchy-feeliness, Daniel watched Rose's hand sink lower and lower, right until the whiny, croaky screech from one of the bedsprings said something back.

"Yeah," he answered. He did sleep on the couch the other night. And the night before that. And the other night before that. And...

And then his sister's hair started to sway as she looked around the room, finally asking, "Do you take off your mattress cover every time you get out of bed?"

"What? What are you talking about?" A mattress cover?

"Well, you know..." and to make a point, Rose made the springy mattress spring all over again, looking nearly south of a neutral expression. "The extra padding to make the couch softer?"

"I don't have one?"

"You don't?" Once more, her head slowly fell down on the sore sight her hand couldn't seem to leave. "So it's just...?" Clearly she was perturbed, but her reactions weren't quite what Daniel was expecting. Or at least, he wasn't expecting to fry his sister's circuits this sort of way.

But on a dime the memory must have been erased, because the moment she looked at her brother again it was back to square one with her curious smile. "Could I see your bedroom?"

And before he could speak, it hit him.

The feeling.

The feeling. That moment that any kid with a somewhat typical childhood could remember. The times when mom or dad would ask a seemingly simple question that would unearth national-level grade secrets of trouble and turmoil. A question that couldn't be avoided or dodged, as even with a second to think, poor Daniel hadn't the skills to knock down the walls of his apartment to construct a whole new room and furnish it with a real bed; all within the few moments that his nervous synapses were firing. It was an answer his mother wouldn't have liked, and a place between his heart and stomach twinged uncomfortably.

"U-uhm... You're...already in it?"

And Rose innocently blinked, like she didn't catch it. She tilted her head and made the smallest, thoughtful hum while all the pieces came together.

“Rose? H-hey, Rose?” Daniel called for his sister as she turned on her foot and moved down to the other end of the room, checking one of two final doors. “Rose, what’s your deal?” Daniel asked, but he very well knew the answer, and Rose was already acting it out.

He stood against his sister’s leg while she took a brief pause from staring a thousand yards in his minute bathroom. Mostly clean, but not every tile was perfect and neither was the grout meshing it all together. Specks of something and other were in places too far to reach for cleaning, but that excuse fell flat when the bottom corners weren’t far from that either. Faded, but forming chronic stains beneath leaky faucets and showerheads, and more.

“Rose, you’re overreacting, it’s not even that bad...!” Daniel tried to convince his big sister while he had no choice but to give her the right of way once she paced by him and to his final room, a meager closet. He was trying to convince her, just like he had convinced himself. But the allure of independence had a tricky way of making him blind to all the disadvantages or shortcomings. After all, his life was filled with shortcomings. *He* was a shortcoming. Him finding fault with a home like this was just the pot calling the kettle black.

And while he watched his sister watch the flimsy shelves with small amounts of cleaning product narrow space where his shirts hung, she said simply, “Danny, could you go sit on the couch?”

It was another turn out of left field. He had braced himself for the ridicule or disgust, but her calm, yet quiet remark was throwing him off as well. “Rose? Can’t you just—”

“Daniel?” she repeated with her back still turned, yet far more firmly. His own sister said it so sternly. Like she was an authority figure to him. But she wasn’t. She was in *his* home and giving him commands? Where did she get off? Daniel had half a mind to bark and tell his sister off and show her just really who was boss. He...had a mind...only half of one.

It was not running away, but a strategic retreat, in fact.

Not even the given fact he was surrounded by four walls that he owned and paid for was enough to make him feel secure. Suddenly the screechy springs from where he sat lost their sub-par comfort entirely. They’d merely become the loud and noisy bodies that was making his sister go crazy.

And while he bided his time and definitely did not do what his big sister told him to, Daniel from his spot leaned back and looked into the kitchen, spotting Naomi occasionally move to and fro, looking here and there. *Snooping...!*

“Danny?” Rose had returned, only now with her arms tightly crossed with one another. “I want you to get whatever clothes you wanna bring back with you, okay?”

She spoke some words, yet they missed the boy entirely.

“C-come again?”

“We’re gonna pack you a bag so you have some things to wear back at the house,” Rose explained, but mostly stated.

Was this a joke, or a misunderstanding? The brother tried to find one on either side, but came up empty-handed, and almost empty-mouthed. “Rose...uh, I’m not going anywhere? I only said I was staying the night?”

“Danny, it’s okay; you’ll be nice and comfy at my house.”

“Did you hear me?” he repeated again, “I’m not going back. I appreciate it, but I wanna stay at my own house now.”

“Danny, this isn’t a house. Don’t be silly,” Rose was clear and concise, speaking with a heavy sense of finality.

“Yes...it is?” Daniel countered with a heavy sense of incredulous behavior. “Rose, you’re being ridiculous. Just because my bed is a—”

“And that’s not a bed!” Rose finally raised her voice, and just when Daniel expected the full on shouting, her lips quivered as the words struggled to come out. “Th-that’s not a mattress, either! D-danny, you can’t call this a bedroom...!” She looked around, just daring the illusions to cease and for a real, reputable place to live to appear, but there was no magic to undo the horror.

“Don’t you know how long I’ve lived here?” Daniel questioned her again. It was all just privileged behavior making her talk like this. She was just too rich to comprehend a living situation less than her own. “Yeah, Rose, I sleep on a couch; so what? I have my own bathroom, and it’s not like people visit? This *is* my room!”

“Danny...!” Rose repeated, more distraught than the first time. “You’ve been *living* like this? In...” she huffed, “in some...run-down box in a dangerous neighborhood?”

“It’s not even dangerous...!” What was her angle? To be disgusted with every last thing that her little brother had to his name?

“You don’t even have a *bed!*” Rose insisted, and Daniel gave her a straight look of pissy denial. “And yes, it is dangerous, whether you want to believe that or not. Why do you think I made you hold my hand when we were outside?!”

He nearly choked on the absurdity. “B-because you’re just a worrywart that won’t leave me alone?!” cockily, Daniel answered. He wasn’t the one who fucking asked to hold her hand!

Rose frowned, but his bark only bolstered her bite. “Yes, Daniel, because your big sister worries about you. And I’m worrying about you right now because this is your ‘apartment’!” She sighed worriedly, walking to the corner where all his noise-canceling bedding had gone. And all the while she grabbed his mess and tried to tidy it, she muttered to herself, “How could mom even agree to co-sign something like this...!”

And her words stung. They stung as badly as they did when they were kids. The same kind of kindness and concern that poisoned him. How could mom let this happen? How could Daniel be living like this? How could he have tried making something of himself, all on his own, even if it meant accepting some setbacks. Where did Daniel, the disadvantaged, discriminated and belittled, have the audacity to do something as inconsiderate and selfish as trying to be his own person?

“Is everything okay?” Naomi finally showed up, but Daniel’s hands were planted on his knees, staring ahead at the wall opposite from his tyrant of a sister.

“Everything is fine,” Rose confirmed with her words, but body language from both brother and sister seemed to disagree. Then she looked over at Daniel, “Danny? Do you want to start getting your things?” And instead of a reply, all she got was his slow-turning head.

“You...you’re joking, right? Rose, I’m not leaving.”

“Danny, that isn’t up for discussion. I’m not letting you stay here on your own.”

The fabric from his thin and flimsy sheets were tight between his clawing fingers. Everything he could see and hear was pushing him over the edge. “And that’s not your decision, Rose!” The tension continued to unfold, all the while Naomi stood wordlessly off to the side. “You’re right; it’s *not* up for discussion because I’m not going anywhere. You’re leaving. Now!”

“We’ll be leaving once we have everything you need,” she repeated, and as obsessively careful and kind as his sister habitually was, finally her patience could be seen as something that wasn’t truly limitless. “Danny, why are you being like this?”

“WHY ARE YOU BEING LIKE THIS?!” Daniel screamed, leaping onto his feet. The puff of anger heaved his chest up and down, leaning harder into the rage. “Why...?! Why are you *always* like this?! Y-you...! Urgh!” He wanted to move. Hit something. Let off steam, but he couldn’t do any of that. Not without either hurting himself or somehow sinking deeper into whatever chronic confirmation bias his sister had; a product of the kind of world they lived in.

“I’ve *been* living like this, Rose!” he shouted again, uninterrupted and with the floor, all while his sister still had the half-folded bedding in her arms. “*BEEEN*, as in a long time now. I have my own apartment and I have my own job! I’m independent! You don’t have any right to just...show up and take any of that away from me! Yeah I get it, you think my apartment is shitty,” and the blunt honesty afflicted his sister with a small twitch. “Sorry it’s not your fancy, multi-million dollar mansion kind of nice, but I guess we can’t all be that successful.”

“Danny, that’s not—”

“--I’m not done!” he angrily courted back the ball. “You...! You’re always just...belittling me! I didn’t ask for you to take me home. I didn’t ask for you to come up here! I never asked to be judged, ridiculed or forcefully taken from my own home! *MY* life! You have *NO* right!”

That’s all this was. Just another huge mistake. More reasons for regret for agreeing to any of this. He should’ve done what he always had; ignore his sister. Keep her blocked, ignore her texts and missed calls. Keep to himself; maintain the bubble. The moment she came back into his life it’d be like a sweeping plague all over again, one that he had worked so hard to scrub himself clean of and yet he was still caked in the residual effects.

He stood there with his hands balled into fists, breathing and watching, done from speaking, and long enough to let Rose respond. Truth be told, however, Daniel had wished it would’ve been a wordless departure.

“Danny, I care about you, can’t you see that?” Rose spoke honestly, like she always did. Daniel wanted to call it clouded and confused behavior, but his sister was always rocksteady in her delusions. “And I’m *not* belittling you! Am I not allowed to worry about you? My little brother? It’s been years since I feel like we’ve ever really connected,” she went on with hurt in her voice, “a-and, I can’t tell you how excited I was and still am because we could finally talk again. Don’t you know how proud I am of you? You’re working and living independently! With...everything involved,” in other words, given he was a boy, short, and weak, “I’m so proud of you... I really am.”

“So if you’re so *proud*,” Daniel twisted her words right back, “why? Why can’t you just leave me alone?! I gave you what you wanted, didn’t I? You got to see me! We talked!” And somehow broke a record in making it feel like the biggest mistake of the year. His fists felt tighter. “So why? Why can’t you actually do something for once that *I* want? Just *leave!* I don’t care that you don’t approve! I don’t care if you think I’m living somewhere dangerous; it’s none of your business!”

“Danny, it *is* my business!”

“No it isn’t!”

“Yes it is!”

And finally, foolishly, jumping right back into the rabbit hole he shouted, “Says who?!”

“Says *me!*” Rose raised her voice, dropping her answer like a guillotine, “your big sister!”

“Just... just stop it! Leave!”

“Danny, if I have to carry you out, I will,” Rose threatened, and Daniel hardly doubted the promise, which is why he grit his teeth behind his lips. She would and absolutely could. She had the money, the might, the power and reason, all in a world that perfectly justified her behavior. Daniel, as disadvantaged as he was, had overcome the odds, even if it was only in the slightest. Despite his setbacks and meager living arrangement, it was undeniably his. It was the “dream.” A man living on his own, and that very dream looked to be inevitably plummeting towards the sun.

The gears in his head were turning, likely at speeds far too slow compared to his sister. Everything he had ever said or would say, she always had an answer. Always a reason or rhyme just to keep smooth sailing as long as she was at the wheel. He had already been checkmated but was just too poor of a loser to shake, practically because his opponent never even treated their games like a challenge.

That’s all it ever was. Daniel was just playing games until it was time for his mom or sister to tell him to put the toys away. And this, right this very moment, was no different. His small and meager corner that he had carved and found a difficult and tiring way with was being dismantled and put away.

“Didn’t you like sleeping in that bed last night?” his sister tried to reason. “That’s *your* room, Danny. You don’t have to worry about what you need to do for breakfast, lunch, and dinner?”

And almost randomly his eyes drifted over to Naomi, quiet and patient, holding her hands at her waist. She'd gone through his entire kitchen, privy to just how sparse it was. She was absolutely informed on what she could say and make it that much more damning for the boy. But she didn't, only maybe because she felt out of place dogpiling on a "family" meeting.

"So what, you're just trying to sweeten the deal so I'm less pissy?" Daniel fumed, and his sister did look guilty, but her position was rock solid.

"I'm trying to convince you because I want the best for you, Danny... I know what I'm doing right now makes you angry and it feels unfair, but if that's what I have to do to keep you safe and cared for, I will be the villain... I know it's hard to understand, but I really just—!"

"Stop," Daniel interrupted with a deadpan voice. "Just...stop. You made up your mind, didn't you? Like you always do. So just do it. Do whatever you want." Again, it's not like he ever had a choice. He did at one point, and that was the mistake of inviting Rose back into his life, and these were just the consequences of that.

"Do...do you understand what I mean, though?"

"No. I don't, and I don't think that I ever will," he choked down a scoff. "But that's out of my control, because I can't do anything, apparently. I can't do anything for myself; not without you just...*fucking* it up for me, somehow! So fine! Do what you always do best and just *FUCK EVERYTHING UP FOR ME!*" he screamed, and finally he put a dent in his sister's armor. She winced, flinched, and looked ready to fall back.

"Danny...I..." Rose's mouth hung open like it was fishing for air rather than getting out words. She barely stuttered though in the few syllables thick with sadness that she could muster. Slowly she approached the bed, setting down the load of linens and sniffled.

And while Daniel was shaking from the anger, feeling so cheated and defeated, even he was unnerved by how Rose looked. For the first time in forever, he was truly seeing that gods did in fact bleed.

Finally, Naomi reached out a hand and walked over, "Rose...?"

"I'm...fine," Rose spoke only after a deep breath. "Can I...uhm, can you just help Danny pack for me? Please?" and she sniffled again. The shiny look in her eyes was obvious and the tears were just moments away. And yet in spite of how hurt she looked, it apparently affected nothing for the outcome. This was it. His last day on his own.

“Of course...” and Naomi followed her friend and boss into the kitchen where they spoke in hushed voices. A little after he could hear the front door open and close, and soon Naomi was back in the living-bedroom with him.

“You hurt her feelings,” Naomi, a master of so many things, now including obvious reads of the room, said.

“Yeah, and she’s been hurting mine since the day I was born,” he scoffed, finding it much easier to stay bitter now without the wreckage of his own making to be on full display.

“You also swore at her.”

“Yeah? Your point?”

“She’s your big sister, Danny.”

“Yeah, and that’s the same reason why I’m getting evicted by my own family! Did you not hear anything we were just arguing about?!” Christ, what was the point in arguing? Naomi was just a proxy for his sister’s manipulative and oppressive bidding. He’d gone from debating with a brick wall to a cement one.

How was he going to explain this? Would he even get the chance to? Canceling his lease early, and for what reason? Because his sister didn’t approve? And his job...! His source of income. Gone. If Rose was going to force him out of his home partly on account of a neighborhood like this, it was a snowball’s chance in hell of getting to work in it. Especially now with the commute? Every thought about the crumbling logistics of everything was making him more and more frustrated.

What also didn’t help was when Naomi pressed into the same, shitty mattress that his sister also did. She didn’t say anything, but he certainly knew what she was thinking.

“Where are your clothes?”

And he looked at her without an answer. Sure, it was all inevitable, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t drag his heels, right?

And Naomi patiently waited, only long enough for her to stand back on her feet and take the hint to go searching on her own. So what if it made him look like a brat. He’d already been demoted to being just a kid again, anyway.

He hardly watched, but he could hear her follow the same search that he watched Rose do, from bathroom to closet, lingering with each look just to take in the horrid sights of his decrepit home. After the sound of a thousand plastic hangers sliding over, up and off a bar, Naomi was back with a bundle of shirts she gently set on the bed.

“Your bathroom has mold.”

“Yeah, thanks for reminding me.”

“The dangerous kind, Danny.”

The dangers were objective and blunt, but it didn't stop Daniel from sighing with his head in his hands, unsure of anything other than just being pissy. He could live with a little danger if it meant having his own life.

Hanger after hanger was removed and discarded. Naomi folded his shirts like a machine, one after the other. Many were faded and worn with merely a few in halfway good condition. The money he made didn't allow for much, but again, he wasn't looking to thrive. Now with all of it crashing before his very eyes, the bare minimum couldn't have looked any sweeter.

“So what, is she just waiting in the car now?” Maybe, just maybe he could somehow get Naomi out, and he really would be free? Was there some way to trick her? Ask for her sister, or something? Childish, sure, but since when did acting like an adult accomplish anything?

“She's calling your mom, right now.”

“What? Why?” and he was off on his feet and ready to give chase.

“Danny, no,” Naomi called, and without needing a single hand gesture, seemed to beckon him back over all the same. “Stay here.”

“Or what, you'll hold me down?” Just who did she think she was?

“Do I need to?” Naomi in one of her rarest moments turned up the heat just the slightest bit, and truthfully, Daniel wavered. He hesitated enough to consider how pointless it would be to try and stop his sister, trying to justify that as a reason to stay. All to avoid acknowledging just how little he could really do against Naomi; a giantess entrusted with supervising him.

He clicked his tongue, turning on his heel and finally pacing the room, opting for a different way to vent.

“Just...why?! Why does she always have to do this?!”

“Do what?” Naomi invited herself into his headspace, all the while she bundled pants and boxers together.

And for once Daniel didn't bite back. For once, he reciprocated.

“Act like...just act like a guardian! I was *fine* before she showed up! She has no right to just screw everything up for me!” And instead of kicking something that'd kick right back, he opted for one frustrated swing in the air.

“How is she screwing things up?”

“H-how? Were you not listening?” he gave the maid a look of disbelief, but Naomi in spite of her neutral look, at best indicated a curious vibe. “I have a *job!* An apartment! I live on my own!” he gestured each and every time to himself. “And all because Rose doesn't like where I live, *she* gets to be the one who takes all of that from me? And I don't even get to argue?!”

“Danny, Rose is concerned about you.”

“Yeah, and it's been that way my entire *fucking* life!” he cried. “And finally, just when it *finally* felt like I actually had my own life; a place where I could go without feeling like I was just being *judged* or looked down on, I...I'm being punished for trying to be nice? Did Rose ever tell you? I've had her blocked for a year just so I didn't have to talk to her. Just so we wouldn't have to meet like this. So something like what's happening now couldn't! Fuck! Half the reason for moving so far away was just so I didn't have to deal with any of that...!”

“She didn't share that, no,” Naomi briefly shook her head, “but she has always talked about you. Rose does care about you, Danny.”

“Yeah, and I know that...” he sadly muttered. “Too well...” and his eyes stared off into space, trying to bottle the frustration that just didn't seem to stop pouring. He was mad and angry and all without recourse. “And you don't see any problem with it, do you?” He finally put her on the spot. “With what my sister's doing?”

“...If I had a little brother living on his own, I'd be worried, too.”

“Yeah, sure, worried, but *this* worried?!” He marched over to Naomi, sitting on her legs and knees while she folded. “Worried enough to jeopardize his job and apartment, all to make yourself feel better?”

“Would it not make you feel better, too?”

Naomi always had little to say, but what she made up for in quantity hit him like bullets in quality. He gave her a confused, incredulous look.

“Are you happy?” Naomi asked, but the question must have been rhetorical, because she continued. “Do you like being away from home? Is it nice not talking to your sister?” Her head glanced over at the kitchen, then the bathroom. “Your fridge is just barely empty and your cabinets have nothing either. Is that something you’re happy about?”

“I don’t have to be happy about it, and stop twisting my words! You know what I mean!” Did she really? Clearly Rose didn’t understand. She never did.

“If you’re not happy, then why are you upset that your sister is trying to fix that?”

“Because it’s not her job to! It never was, but she’s always just...getting involved, and I hate it! Besides, you just said it yourself: my kitchen’s empty. Why didn’t you just say that and make it even worse for me? Because that’s what you do, right? Just do whatever my sister says?”

And Naomi softly exhaled before saying, “I’m your sister’s friend, and it’s my job to manage the house. Rose is putting you through a lot, but I don’t disagree with it. Not because she pays me to,” and seizing the moment of opportunity, Daniel’s heart skipped a beat the moment a hand on his back made him fall forward, straight into the maid’s chest and arms.

“St-stop it!” and he pushed against her chest, but her arms were firm.

“Rose doesn’t pay me to do things like this,” she gently explained, just as her soft embrace of him grew more snug. “Is this really someplace you want to live?”

“It is if it means...!” he tried to squirm, but he wasn’t going anywhere, “If it means keeping Rose out of my life!”

“So you would make yourself unhappy just so she can be, too?”

“Yes!” If Rose could feel it, that alone justified all the suffering, all the grief...!

“Really?”

“Yes! I mean it! Now let me go!” he tried to break free, but Naomi’s hugs were simply too strong.

“Would you make yourself unhappy for the rest of your life, as long as it meant your sister, someone who loves you more than anything, would be upset too?”

And as grave a question as it was, Daniel answered just as feebly with an immediate and resounding, “Yes...!” Anything...just to get back at her!

“Even if that means sleeping on a couch, having no real food, and living someplace dangerous?”

“It’s not dangerous!” It wasn’t...!

“Your bathroom is,” she reminded, “and being lucky today doesn’t mean the same for tomorrow. You don’t care?”

“No...! I don’t!”

An invasive thumb swabbed across his cheek, underneath his eye. “So why are you so sad, then?”

The wetness spread over his face and the sniffles wouldn’t stop. Daniel went to speak, but then he hiccupped. What...what was she wiping on his face? That’s what was happening, right?

“I’m not...! I’m not sad...!”

“So you don’t like it when Rose cares about you? You like it when you make her cry?” And as accusatory as the words could be, Naomi never seemed to hold his feet over the fire, like she was just an inquisitive therapist, wiping his tears the whole time.

“J-just stop it...! Stop hugging me...!”

“But you’re crying?”

“I’m not crying!” And the sky wasn’t blue. “Just let me go!”

“...And if I decided not to, would that make you angry with me, too?”

More figures in his life flexing their authority on him willfully? How could it not?

“Yes! So leave me alone! Just leave already!”

“I will leave, Naomi assured, but Daniel shuddered once her hand traveled up and down his back. “But you’re coming too.” And with just a little more force she pushed Daniel in deeper, to the point where he straddled her thigh and his head was against her shoulder.

The tears didn’t stop coming and he didn’t know why, but Naomi stroking his back probably didn’t help either.

“It’s been tough, right? Living like this?” Naomi spoke openly and freely, leaving his half-packed bag unattended just so she could use both her hands to comfort him.

“Just stop...!” he cried, but the abyss wouldn’t answer back. Not directly.

“Rose isn’t here. I’ve kept one of your secrets already,” and the reminder made him quiver, “I don’t mind keeping another. If I do that, will you cry for me?”

And the flashback reminded him of the guilt and self-disgust. The offhand comment she made. A twenty year old boy so bold and unbecoming enough to reach a point like this and do the things more in line with the behaviors of a toddler.

He tried to stay mighty, but his cheeks weren’t any less wet. He wanted to stand tall, but he couldn’t get off her thigh. And most of all, he wanted to face the world and see the sun, but his head just wouldn’t leave Naomi’s shoulder. Something inside of him was on the cusp of breaking. The cracks were there and the water was already leaking through, but he could manage. Just barely, he could survive long enough to put himself back together...

But then a soft whisper reached his ear, “Big boys cry too.”

Then his lip quivered and a small moan came from his mouth. His hands were moving instinctually and his arm reaching over her soft chest grabbed at her shirt like it was a security blanket. It was embarrassing. Shameful. He didn’t want to be seen or treated like this. It was the antithesis to everything he had worked for and for all the reasons he desperately wanted to oppose. He still believed in it, but...just now. Just this once, in the privacy of himself and a supposed confidant, maybe there was time for a break.

In the face of losing everything, just this once he could give in and try to collect himself. No one would see. No one would tell. The tears finally came with noise as he finally sobbed, finally letting it all pour out at once. All in the comforting shoulder of Rose's maid.

Naomi, the emotional abyss.

And after a long cry, drying his face and somehow being put back together, if only to get through today and its trials and tribulations, Daniel stood awkwardly by the door of his apartment, wrought with no less grief about the inevitable circumstances. If anything, though, at least now he felt slightly better equipped to swallow the painful pills.

"Do you want to bring anything else?" Naomi came up from behind, adjusting his plump and filled bag hanging over her shoulder.

For a second, he glanced up at the freezer, remembering a gift that he wouldn't get to enjoy. "No. That's everything."

"Okay," and without a word Naomi went to lift Daniel, but he stepped out of reach.

"W-wait, can...can I just walk? Please?"

Naomi looked at him with her arms still frozen from trying to snatch the phantom image where he once stood. He would be slower. She would walk faster, he would be tired, and then being carried wouldn't be up for discussion. He knew that, and yet he still wanted to enjoy the illusion of freedom, assuming this was his last day of it.

To his surprise, a hand was waiting in front of him.

"Will you hold my hand?"

It didn't take more than a second for Daniel to slap his palm into hers.

At this point, it was all about little victories.

"Does it feel comfy?" Rose stood by the open passenger side nervously, reaching her hands in, over, and under constantly like an invasive probe.

“It’s fine...” Daniel bitterly answered. The thing had been bought and installed, meaning that they were well beyond the point of discussion. Nothing more dangerous than a big sister with personal values was one not only validated by societal views, but by legal ones as well.

“Do you still have the receipt?” Naomi asked from the driver’s seat, chatting with Rose while Daniel sat in between.

“I do, why?” and like she was sensing an oncoming danger, went right back to reaching over Daniel, nearly pressing her bosom right against him. “Is it tight enough with the seat?”

“It is, but just in case we run into any issues. He looks secure.”

“Yeah...he does...” Rose quietly agreed, pulling back to take in the full sight.

And Daniel tried to stay calm as best as he could. There he was, finally in the car without having to ride in anyone’s lap or be under constant supervision. Not in the front passenger seat, mind you, but with an arrangement that finally meant he could see out the window beside him. If only his new...seat wasn’t what it took.

There were many comments he wanted to make, but none of them were positive, and none of them would accomplish anything. So he kept it to himself, having let off enough steam (hopefully) already in the apartment that would no longer be his.

“You get your own cup holder, isn’t that nice?” Rose spoke encouragingly, tracing her finger on the plastic hole in his seat.

“Yeah,” he not so enthusiastically responded, then tried leaning forward, grunting the moment his snug straps over his shoulders and between his legs afforded just a meager inch of slack. He tried to point over at the plastic shell hiding between the middle seats; a feature that natively came with the car, unlike his retrofitted seat. “There’s cup holders too.”

“These are closer, though!” Rose smiled, resting a hand on his knee, right above where his leg and foot dangled. “Beats sitting in my lap, right?”

And for once Rose asked a question that really did make Daniel debate, but not enough to answer back. If he did, all it would’ve ended in was something rude or mean. He may have said some things to Naomi in a frustrated fit of rage, but he wasn’t deliberately in the “making Rose cry” business...

So being the bigger man, Daniel squirmed while he got comfortable, leaning back into the slight angle his seat put him in, gazing up at the ceiling.

“If you wanna take a nap, you can, you know?” Rose suggested.

“Uh-huh.”

Finally she closed the door and was out of sight once she sat in the seat in front of him.

“Are we ready?” Naomi asked.

“Think so. Do you have what you need for dinner tonight? We should do something about lunch when we get home, too...”

“We should be all set,” Naomi said as Daniel watched her play with the rear-view mirror, right until their eyes were meeting in the reflection and the boy snapped his head the other way. He sighed, dropping his hands on the buckle that he wished could have been at his side, but was instead now resting on his stomach. He looked down at the two big red buttons hiding in the black plastic casing like they were the eyes of a beast that kept him confined. Given a little more life to his chair and that would have precisely been the case.

He was surrounded on all sides by mesh padding, supporting him from head to bum, finally putting him within all the legal walls that allowed him to ride in a car. It was a turning point in so many unfortunate ways, and he had no choice.

And the conversation in the two seats ahead of him continued. He listened especially hard when he heard his sister whisper not so quietly to her friend.

“But still...I love how cute his car seat is...!”

Quietly, defeated, Daniel did in fact sit in his car seat. Installed by Rose and buckled in by her as well. While he and Naomi packed his things, apparently Rose had gone and ran an errand, hence why he was in a baby seat now.

Yet another gesture he never once asked for, but also one he could not refuse, no matter how dearly he wished to.

And his head turned and wandered, landing on the rear view mirror just one last time, coincidentally catching Naomi’s face. And without even really noticing it himself...

She smiled.