

7 - Listen to Me

Dawn was fuming.

She couldn't move, couldn't speak and couldn't be heard. Every single time against her better, rock-solid judgment, she'd been proven wrong time and time again to trust in others.

James with a free hand was rubbing his ear, which didn't strike Dawn so much considering how neglected she felt. This way, there was undeniable proof she existed in the backseat, even if they were choosing to pretend like she didn't.

"Dawn..." James didn't take his eyes off the road, "can we please use our indoor voices?"

Katherine was out of sight, but her hand soon wasn't.

"It's only for a little bit, hon," Katherine cooed. "I know you don't like the car seat, but please just bear with it a little bit longer?"

"Th-that's..." She was going to scream again, but the rage subsided only for pure disbelief to hit the bloodstream first. Yes, Katherine was right that she didn't like the car seat, but had she the spacial awareness to realize what Dawn was actually saying, she'd know that wasn't the issue right now. Frustrated to no end she tiredly whined, "That's not what I'm talking about!" She banged her good hand off the seat, though it hardly made a noise when hitting the padding. "Just...just listen to me already!"

"Of course I'm listening," her hand tried to communicate that, but Dawn lifted her legs out of the way. "Remember what we talked about in the store though? We need to wait for our turn to talk."

"B-but, but..." why couldn't she see her own idiocy? Her own ignorance? Even James! "But you never gave me a turn! We're talking about what to do with me, so I deserve to be included! I'm a grown adult!" she cried. "It's my choice and you ignored me, then get mad at me because I have something to say about it? God, I'm so *fucking* done with this!"

"Language, please?" Katherine tried as a friendly reminder, though that hardly meant much on Dawn's radar. Did the drop of a single syllable matter more than being acknowledged as a legitimate person?

"It's gonna be okay, alright? We just need to have your wrist looked at--"

“I don’t want anyone to look at it! I want to go home! That’s all I ever wanted, but then you made me go to a store, wear a pull-up, ride in a car seat...” she tried choking back her emotions, “and n-now you’re taking me to some doctor I didn’t ask for...and then you’re probably gonna... Ahhh, Jesus, please, just let me go! I’m done!” How much of a broken record could she be?

“I understand, and I’m sorry so many things are happening that you don’t like, but please, this is all in your best interest...”

“That doesn’t make it okay to ignore me!” Dawn fired back. “Just because you’re bigger, that doesn’t mean you get to walk all over me!”

“We’re not walking all over you...” Katherine said, sounding sympathetic, yet in the antagonized eyes of the Little, still perched on her pedestal far above Dawn’s.

“And why do you do that?” Dawn thickly asked. “Every time I ever say something, all you do is tell me that it’s not what I said without any reason and just expect me to accept it! You don’t talk to me; you just act and push me along! You tell me to trust you guys, but all it ever feels like is that it gets worse and worse!”

“How about we all just take a breath?” James calmly suggested, but the tempo had become too fast for a meager pause.

“No! I don’t need to take anything!” Dawn roared, yelling from the confines of her seat. “I don’t want anything, and I don’t need anything! I need to get back to the hotel! They’re...they’re probably back by now, so leave me alone!” Yet another powerless moment. She shook and she trembled, but the clouds continued to float by and the car still kept in drive.

“Sweetie,” Katherine started, sounding pained, but from the first word alone Dawn knew she wouldn’t be hearing what she wanted, hence why all cylinders were still in motion.

Screaming at the top of her lungs, with such a volume even both Amazons struggled to focus, “SHUT UP!” Frantically, she shook her head in all directions. “Shut up! Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up shut up shutupshutupshutupshutup! I hate you! I hate you both! I don’t care anymore! I don’t wanna do anything! Take me back! Let me go home!” Tears were rolling down her fiery red cheeks as her composure once more shook asunder. The entire time she had been straining against her buckles, but finally her adrenaline was slipping just enough for her to fall back into the seat, yet no less sad nor agitated.

At some point the car slowed to a halt, and a mere glance out the window would be enough of a sign, but it was hardly something Dawn cared to do. She'd been torn apart and sewn back together so many times in one day, embers were starting to ignite along the fuzzy fringes that her mind and intellect were wearing down to be. A door opened and someone slipped out of the car, probably just to get away from Dawn's sobbing and screams. She hardly cared, embracing the bittersweet victory even, just to finally be alone.

Then the door right next to her opened, bathing her tired self in direct sunlight and the shadow of an Amazon looming over her.

"Please, please talk to me," Katherine begged. Now she sounded on the verge of tears, reaching her hands for Dawn in the car seat, but from the small girl's point, she flailed and kicked to keep the Amazon away.

"I don't want to talk! Take me back!" Dawn, equally, if not more sorrowful with a touch of spite, shouted as she tried to reject Katherine in every way imaginable. She had her chance to be amicable, but Dawn quite literally did not have the capacity to give any more.

Katherine simply stared at the girl from a slight distance, cupping her mouth as her glossy eyes threatened to overflow. Even now, she was trying to be there for Dawn in some capacity, but the Little wasn't having it.

"Go away," Dawn's words attacked her heart, cutting it down with a merciless blade. "I HATE YOU!"

Katherine's shadow over the girl had become static. Not a single part of the Amazon even dared to make as much as a vibration in the particles of the air itself. Only until the gravity of Dawn's ridicule crushed the mighty giant with the weight of the world. Her arms trembled and she made the slightest whimper, faced with a reality too harsh to bear, leading her face to contort into a scrunched and heartbroken mess. Full-on sobbing, she was quick to close the door, giving the battle-scarred Little the time to herself she'd sought so desperately for.

"K-Kath, honey!" James called for her from the driver's seat, and as Dawn rolled her head to the side, they met eyes for a brief moment. Something reflected off his eyes, but she couldn't be sure what she saw. Utter disbelief? Shock? Disgust? Maybe something along those lines, considering she'd just pushed his wife to tears... Of course it was her fault. After all, it was only Dawn the incompetent Little that could only make bad decisions and say the wrong things, right? Only she deserved the blame of making mistakes, so why would anyone be on her side? Nobody was...

Left with this result, James wasn't more than a moment longer in getting out of the car, likely going after Katherine, understandably. Then, sitting in the company of herself, locked in a car seat, responsible for an Amazon in tears, left with a plethora of new reasons to silently weep over. Biting her lip, she tried not to make it loud. And even then, every so often, she could feel the slight throb from her wrist...

"It's not my fault..." bitterly, she told herself. Not even her emotions were listening, so carefree to move to the beat of their own drum. The absurdity of the situation was a toss-up, whether it be awarded to still being trapped in a car seat, or even feeling a smidgen of remorse for an Amazon.

She wasn't in the wrong though. She couldn't be. Even if she was, she wasn't. As long as she didn't give in, she wouldn't have to deal with the perpetual struggle of trying to please others at the cost of self-sacrifice.

Apart from the tears, things were finally quieting down. Not only was the car itself silent, but she could hear herself think; something she'd been longing for what felt like forever.

She didn't try to fight the seat straps as an act of submission and disinterest. If she wasn't trying to pass everything through a pessimistic filter, she even dared to say that she might even be comfortable right now. The soft seat, the mute ambience, and her reclined positioning. Just to take it one step farther, by lifting her legs she could lay there almost fetal, had the buckle not gotten in the way. But whatever comfort she didn't have, her lack of energy allowed her to overlook it. Once more, she fell asleep.

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It was another sudden awakening when Dawn lurched forward, though the seat-belt straps quickly caught her before she could go flying forward.

“You awake?”

Dawn reacted to the sound before she could even put a name to it, seeing that it was James. He was back behind the wheel again, and looking out the window showed that they were on the road again.

“Y-yeah...” she rubbed her eyes. “Where are we?” Were they going to the doctors? She hoped not. Even if after all this they weren’t going to listen...

“The hotel,” James said, in a leveled voice, casual, as if what to Dawn happened five minutes ago didn’t happen at all. Granted, the byproduct of sleep was the passage of time, a wonderdrug for any sort of short-burst tension. Like always, his eyes were focused on the road. He didn’t give any explanation after stating the fact.

“What? Why are we...” she’d been subjected to it so many times, only on the rebound did she realize that it wasn’t disappointment. She was being taken back. She was being listened to. “Wait...the hotel? Really?” The disbelief in her voice couldn’t be misplaced. After everything she’d been through, how couldn’t she feel a bit giddy?

“Try to stay relaxed, though,” to serve by example, James spoke even lower. “Katherine’s asleep.”

“Asleep?” Even slower to remember that there was a third person in the car. Then again, it was a bit hard when she couldn’t see the person sitting directly in front of her. And if she listened closely, tuning out the noise of rubber rolling over asphalt, she could hear the rhythmic inhale and exhale of another person.

“After everything you’ve been through today, I figured you might be asleep when we got back to the car...” he quietly sighed, giving his wife a glance. “Even Amazons have their limits, too.”

So even the mighty could fall...? Thinking about things, that was only part of the truth. While Dawn was trying to hang on to any piece of dignity she could, Katherine by the same token was doing whatever she could to keep her safe. Whatever she thought “safe” might be.

“But...” Call her the fool for thinking she should ask, and definitely call her the idiot for pestering the Amazon she just finished screaming at. “...How come?”

“How come?”

She nodded out of habit despite it being an unnoticed gesture. “I’ve been trying to get you to take me back this whole time...” It was honestly a little hard to believe. “I guess I wasn’t expecting you to listen.”

“Well, I decided because I was afraid my eardrums wouldn’t survive another errand...” he lightly chuckled, drilling a pinky into his ear.

Dawn didn’t have much of a response, now that she was of a much more stable mind. “S-sorry...” she mumbled. “I was just a little stressed out then... Is your ear okay?”

“I’ll survive,” he said in good spirits, stifling a laugh. “In all seriousness, there is an explanation, but if it’s okay with you, how about we table that until we get to the hotel? I don’t want to wake Katherine up.”

“Sure...” and to settle herself down, she turned her head over to the window beside her, watching the passing scenery of the city. From where she could see it, there was an orange hue hanging up above, mellowing out her mood along with the aftermath of so many festivities packed into a single day.

“Sleep well, at least?”

“As well as someone like me can...” It wasn’t a dig at James, in particular. Just a truthfully honest fact.

“Hopefully you’ll feel better once you’re home,” he reasoned, stroking his thumb across the steering wheel. Even the Amazon dimension and its plethora of technology weren’t immune to red lights.

“...Thanks,” she answered back. It felt strange, finally getting a regular conversation. After every suffocating and awkward exchange with Katherine...this felt oddly refreshing.

They didn’t speak any more than that, but this truly had grown to be Dawn’s favorite type of dialogue. The absence of noise dancing in tune with their surroundings, there couldn’t be a better complement for the white noise around them. While their presence entertained each other, they could enjoy their own thoughts and play their own tunes, not needing to waste a breath on trying to decipher the other’s.

Once the voices had ceased and moment after moment wasn’t being forced down Dawn’s throat, her mind could drift to so many other things than just the object of her misfortune and pain. She

could hear her own breathing, watch the rise and fall of her chest, let her legs dangle without a care in the world. It may have been her withdrawal that made the return so sweet, but she was starting to remember what peace felt like.

Bathing in the warm light that leaked through the tinted window, she might even wager that she could fall asleep again, only that it'd be true sleep. Deep sleep. A wonderful rest that had dreams and wasn't just an empty void for her to stare into. There wouldn't be the panicked jumpstart as soon as she woke up, feeling like she just escaped some terrifying monster from the otherworld.

After a few more sharp turns, she could feel the car begin to slow down until it reached a complete stop. Was this it?

"We're here," James said in a quiet voice, announcing so with the click and retraction of his seat belt. "I'll get you out in a second."

In a few seconds James was at her passenger side, reaching his hands for Dawn's buckle.

"How do you even undo this anyways? I tried, but it wouldn't budge..." she watched intently as James handled it, trying to figure out the obvious trick she was missing.

"Really?" he asked, pushing his finger into the button, just like Dawn did, only for him the simple press was enough to undo the network entirely. Almost immediately the straps unbuckled and fell limp. Dawn was stupefied.

"How...?" What did she do that was any different? Her technique was exactly the same, if not more?

"Well, I guess they do make these things pretty well..." James commented, feeling the button with his hand again. "It's as simple as you think," showing her, he pressed his finger, and the button in its plastic shell sunk easily. "Only it takes Amazon strength. It'd be a little problematic if the Little sitting in it got out while the car was in motion..."

"So we can't be trusted then?" Dawn asked, already on the offensive.

"It's just not safe, that's all. Car crashes can already be lethal to Amazons," he paused, seeming hesitant. "For a Little..." The subject had grown grim, thus Dawn knew better than to prolong it.

“Whatever...” not her problem. One and done. “Hopefully Heather won’t mind... Uh, if she says yes...” It sort of came out of her mouth without a filter. She hadn’t meant to bring up such a strange topic. James didn’t speak on it though.

“Is it alright if I pick you up? What with the whole no shoes thing...”

Dawn made a small approving noise, holding her arms out. Everything felt much more relaxed with James; like she was a normal person. He asked questions, listened, had such a more...inviting atmosphere about him.

Though, objectively, what he didn’t have were the same features as Katherine. His arms were made of pure muscle, hence why Dawn felt like she was being supported by hardwood floors and brick walls. When Katherine was holding her, there was that same feeling of strength, but not to the degree of James. You could tell he was being gentle, but his carry didn’t have that same innate softness his wife’s did.

With his free hand he closed the car door, and Dawn looking around could see the parking lot they were submerged in. Also from her vantage point there was a clear view of the hotel. He definitely wasn’t lying to her. They really did come back.

They walked by the front passenger side and Dawn could see Katherine laying near the window. She was asleep, seemingly at peace, but the window couldn’t hide the red and puffy look around her eyes. Clearly she’d been crying for some time...

James continued to walk, Dawn in arms. “Are we not gonna wake her up?”

“Think it’s just you and me on this one. I’m gonna let her rest.”

“Oh...well, okay.” It was another day for Dawn, but what about Katherine? She wasn’t the best to be around, but she didn’t deserve to be left high and dry, even if Dawn had to be resolute. She never meant to hurt her feelings, but sometimes it had to be like that... In other words, this was their goodbye, unfortunately left on not such a great note.

“Any plans for when you get back?” James made small-talk as they walked. As he walked them both, rather.

She was ready to respond immediately. But, then she wasn’t.

“Uhm...weird,” she laughed a little. “I guess I didn’t think that far ahead.” She’d been so blinded by the notion of going home, she never once tried to look beyond the flash. “Enjoy life, I guess. Get out of it what I haven’t gotten much of here...”

“Yeah? I take it your experience here wasn’t all that great?” he didn’t say it with a shred of offense. An unfortunate truth, honestly.

“It was interesting to say the least...” she concluded, summarizing the vacation thus far. All the way up until today. “Today, though...” she grew quiet. It was all fun and games now that she was in the home stretch, but a scar she’d have to live with is one from today. There were so many tense and terrifying moments, it was shameful to admit she felt changed. This entire time, maybe she’d been so desperate to go home because she was finally beginning to dissociate. She was becoming something she didn’t recognize and the harsh world around her was so rigorously trying to shape and sculpt her.

“Since Kath isn’t with us right now, you’ll just have to count it for the both of us when I say that we’re sorry for today.”

“Sorry?” Dawn looked up at him, suddenly feeling a twinge of guilt. “I mean...”

“I know,” he smiled, “it’s a lot of things to consider. We stopped someone from taking you, yeah, but in a way maybe we were just doing the same thing.”

“Definitely not,” Dawn cut him off. “I know I said some things earlier and I’ve been freaking out all day, but...it was all in the heat of the moment. At heart, I think you two are good Amazons. No, I mean, good people.”

“Yeah?” James asked, looking a little reserved, but undeniably happy. “Ya think so?”

Dawn nodded her head. “There were definitely a few times...but I know you guys had good intentions. Just, sometimes...it was hard to accept them for what they were.”

“Like we’ve said, we never weren’t trying to act in your best interest. Toward the end, we really did want to make sure you were okay. That, and at least try and give you a fun day that wouldn’t leave such a bad impression.”

“Well, as much as I appreciate it, I think I might be having nightmares about being kidnapped...” she sounded like it was a joke, but she wasn’t smiling. “Even though our ideals don’t mesh so

well together, you've proven to me that there are some well-meaning Amazons though..." but just as many, likely more, bad-intentioned ones...

"Our plan when we first rescued you was to make sure you were alright, then try and do some exciting things. Just so you'd maybe think a place like this isn't as bad as you think."

"I'm sure it can be good for the right people," Dawn spoke somberly, taking a moment to think. "I mean, you two seem to be living a good life."

"It's not only nice for Amazons; that was a point we wanted to make. Though, we didn't communicate that so well with the time we had."

"Maybe it can be for...smaller people. They're called 'Littles', right? Regardless, maybe it can be good for them if they're surrounded by the right people..."

"Goes without saying for any person; Little or Amazon." He adjusted his arms some. "And also, when you get back to your dimension, go see a doctor, please? We'd feel a lot better knowing that you did."

"It doesn't hurt though..." Dawn lied through her teeth, holding back an urge to hold her wrist already.

"I'm not gonna rat you out, so you can be honest now," James said in a no-nonsense kind of voice.

Dawn was silent, though reluctantly she sighed. "Okay...I promise."

"Thank you." And then the girl was rewarded with a firm pat on the head. Dawn didn't say anything, likely in part to her leniency for the man that spoke to her almost like an equal, and that she was willing to look past the minor bumps since the finish line was in sight.

The pair stepped inside the hotel, looking no different than it did earlier that day. The same attendant was on staff and her smile looked no less corporate than it did before.

"Good afternoon! Welcome back, is there anything I can do for you?" Either she didn't remember completely or was making a deliberate effort to focus on the Amazon.

"Hi, we came earlier trying to check into her room?" he nodded down at the Little in his arms. Thankfully Dawn was a bit more clothed so she could have a bit more confidence.

“Yes, that’s right...” the woman nodded, already typing away on her machine. “And also, those are very cute pants, honey!” She finally gave Dawn some recognition, but not in the way she wanted.

Just hold your tongue... You’ve made it this far already... Frustrated, she settled for keeping the attendant in her side-view.

“Someone’s a bit grumpy,” her voice grew bubbly, then she made an obvious whisper to James. “Any misbehaving, today?”

“Huh?” James looked a bit off-guard. “Well, I mean, no... A few minor bumps, but all in all I’d say things went well today.”

“Good,” she smiled. “Now, let’s see...you tried checking in earlier, but you needed some form of identification...which you did not have.” She looked back up. “Do you have any now?”

“No,” Dawn replied, much calmer this time. Calm because she knew there was another way out of this stupid policy.

“Well...” she started to look apologetic, “I’m sorry, sweetie, but the rules haven’t changed...”

“Uh, actually,” James butted in, “didn’t you mention earlier about their tour group coming back at some point? Are they back yet?”

You’d think she was surprised to hear James speak, once she heard what she did. There was a brief, wordless moment before the worker started to laugh it off.

“R-right! Sorry about that, I forgot,” chuckling, she typed a few more things.

Sure you did... Dawn’s pupils were running circles.

“Uhm, Stacy, right? They’ve been here for a bit now, so the little ones might be napping, but I’m sure she’s awake...”

There was more silence other than the queue from the front desk phone which was held against the woman’s ear.

“Yes? Hello? Is this Stacy Jackson? This is the front desk calling, we believe that there’s a little who belongs to you and your group? Name?” she placed a hand over the speaker, looking expectantly at Dawn.

“Dawn Kepler.”

“Dawn Kepler?” She was speaking back into the phone. “Okay, alright. I’ll let them know. Have a good afternoon, bye.”

After hanging up the phone, they had her attention again.

“Stacy will be down in a little bit. You’re more than welcome to wait on the couches if you’d like?”

“Thanks. Think we’ll take you up on that,” he turned to the lobby’s corner where a well-defined waiting area was set up. Cream-colored leather couches surrounded a large wood and glass coffee table; all sized for those of superior size, to Dawn’s disadvantage. Thankfully James was there to lift her over the quite literal hurdles however, as he set her down on the solfa.

Taking a seat right next to Dawn, it felt like a landslide once the much heavier James pressed into the cushion, proving her denim and leather to be a bad combination when it came to sitting still. Down the tiny slope she went and crashed right into James’ legs.

She tried standing herself up to move away. “S-sorry...” she did her best to apologize and maneuver at the same time.

“Yeah, you better be,” James looked at her scrutinizingly, one squinty eye and a big frown. “Next time y’ain’t gonna get off so easy, ya hear?”

Reflected in the girl’s eyes was the silhouette of a completely deranged stranger. “Wh...what was that impression...?” It was a voice saturated in disappointment.

“I was trying to be funny!” James chuckled, “No need to look like I just ate food off the floor!”

“Yeah, but...” Dawn continued, still shrouding herself in the art of persona, “that was, like, bad. Really bad. So bad I need to take back my ‘sorry’,” walking herself into a trap, she stifled a giggle. “And what did you say? ‘Y’ain’t? I’ve never heard something so ridiculous before!” She couldn’t help but crack herself up.

“Yeesh, tough crowd over here...” Quite politely, James with his open palm added some force to Dawn, sliding her to the other end of the couch, lighting the fuse to an explosion of even more laughs.

“Oh, that’s right,” a switch flicked inside Dawn’s head. “Shouldn’t we go ask to bring that other person down? Heather?” Again, she wasn’t out to betray her own kind, but she felt like some gratitude to the couple was owed... Besides, it was only an offer, even if she was pretty much guaranteed to refuse. You wouldn’t be right in the mind to sell yourself off to a place like this.

James didn’t reply, assuming vocals was the only way to. Instead, he stared off in the distance, as if his answer were somewhere that wasn’t here.

“James?” Dawn leaned forward a little, as best as she could without sending herself off the couch.

“You know...” James leaned back against the couch, arms splayed across the top of it, “Katherine and I, we talked a bit.” While his sentence had ended, it didn’t feel like he was looking for a reply. “Katherine’s wanted to adopt for a long time now; she’s been talking about it for months, actually. Only until today did we actually get serious about it.”

She was sympathetic, and James was nice, but she didn’t like the rose-tinted terminology. “Like, take some random Little off the street? That kind of adoption?” Need she remind them it was called kidnapping?

“I know you have different opinions about what it should be called, but that’s the norm for what it’s called here,” he gave his neck some relief. “At least with Katherine, I feel a lot better about how she addresses it.”

She was thinking of making another comment, but even if she didn’t like what James was saying, he wasn’t pressing her buttons intentionally. He was expressing how he saw the world. How society saw it for him.

“Katherine doesn’t like forced adoption, and I’m not so crazy about it either,” not so crazy? That’s as far as it went? “It’s a lot better when it’s consensual. It can’t always be that way, but I think it’s the best... Maybe what you call it isn’t totally wrong for the people that do take Littles as they please. We’re not like that, though.”

Dawn didn’t have much of an opinion in the way that’d be considered constructive, quite the opposite, actually, reasoning why she didn’t say anything at all. She just listened.

“Katherine wants a Portal Little, especially, because she thinks they stand to benefit the most compared to a Little here. In Libertalia or any other city-state.”

“Benefit? How?” it may have come off as offended, but she tried to limit herself to neutral questions. “There’s only one kind of person there; no Littles and Amazons. We live our lives, get an education, work, fall in love, be happy, and everything else. There is no strict hierarchy between races and one person babifying another, you know?”

“But are there low crime rates? Clean energy? Advanced technology?” James was quick, but gentle on the rebound. “Everyone has access to sufficient, if not amazing healthcare here. Education consists of a lot more here than in Terra, as well as low poverty and pollution.” He wasn’t challenging her, but it sure felt like it.

“S-so? That’s just for Libertalia, anyways. Can you say the same for every other city-state? My home may not have everything, but we do have our good parts, you know. And how do you even know about that stuff? About my dimension?”

“It’s true that’s how it’s like here, but those sorts of things don’t change much across the states. They’re just about constants everywhere, apart from federal policy. And I know Katherine might focus on the more...emotional points of a place like Terra, but we do have knowledge about your more quantifiable logistics.”

“Well, maybe this is a better place for infrastructure, but at least we don’t turn smaller adults into babies...” Dawn sulked, thinking of recent events.

“I think that has some truth to it,” James agreed, to Dawn’s surprise. “Though, while you might think differently, I don’t believe Amazons adopting Littles is always so black and white... It’s impossible to imagine every different situation, but there can often be a lot of emotional or mental reasons for why a Little might be adopted. It’s a big topic; something I’m not qualified to speak about, but my point being that not everything can be rejected at face value.”

He had chosen a poor place to cut himself short, because Dawn felt no more moved to his alignment than she’d been prior to their meeting. She stayed silent, otherwise she would feel compelled to keep the debate going, and then it’d only be destined to devolve into an argument, one she would probably get the blame for...

“Hey, come on...” Dawn tilted thirty degrees to the left once James’s hand nudged her, along with his coaxing. “I didn’t mean to start an argument. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Dawn exhaled, “It’s just...” she took another breath. “It’s a lot. A... a lot more for me to take in. I don’t have all the facts that you do...”

“Not about who knows more, right?” James said, Dawn almost anticipating another pat on the head, but it didn’t happen. “Let’s keep things in good spirits though, yeah? Like...have you thought any more about what you’re gonna do back home?”

“No...” she answered pensively, although her thoughts weren’t weighing on his question so much.

“Really? Nothing at all?” he smirked. “Come on, I’m sure there’s something. Study? See some friends? Work? Go be a lump on a--”

“Why?” Dawn’s voice interrupted him.

“Huh?”

“Why?” She repeated again. “Why did you two do all this for me?”

“Well, we already said, silly...”

“Yeah, but... I’m thankful. Very thankful...” Dawn lamented, forced to remember what her worst fears could have been. “Even after you two saved me, assuming you people really do think of us as only kids, you could have just left me with the police.” She turned her head, catching James’ eyes up above. “But you didn’t.” His look was still friendly, but it didn’t have the same smile as it did before. His expression was silent, soaking in everything before him.

“I don’t know everything, and I’m not some mind-reader, so I don’t have all the answers, but I’m not stupid either...” she couldn’t help but clutch the materials of her pants. Even if it was James, the traces of an Amazonian confrontation were starting to linger. “If adopting was so important to you two, why would you bother putting up with me for an entire day if you don’t even want to get Heather anymore?” If Amazons today had taught her anything, amidst the good and the bad, they were far from being fickle-minded, at least towards a Little. They were headstrong at worst and immovably stubborn at best.

James was still in a positive mood, although his smile seemed to be suspended by wires more than his own free will. “First...” he started, and Dawn could feel herself tense, awaiting some bombshell she had no conceivable means of imagining.

A shadow loomed over her and she was too frozen to budge, nearly feeling her life flash before her eyes as certain doom descended from above. The shadow grew larger. Larger until she suddenly felt a giant's hand atop her head, patting it gently.

"Please take a deep breath?" he asked sympathetically. "You can trust me, I'm not going to hurt you."

There was a time lag before his words hit, yet once the signals finally reached her brain, she'd stopped her hyperfocus to give herself a self-check. A cold sweat was running down her back, she was shaking all over. They were all the same sensations that were a prelude to some kind of panic attack, like the couple she'd already experienced.

"S...sorry..." Dawn murmured, pulling herself together. "I-I know I can trust you guys, but... And, are you sure you don't want to adopt Heather? B-because I can... I'm sure we can ask--"

"It was you."

"--Sta..." she had been on the cusp of finishing her last-minute idea when James had managed to totally derail both her mouth and mind. They'd both been talking at the same time, so of course she couldn't be positive of what she heard, but the longer she stayed silent, and so did he, there in her stomach did she feel this terrible feeling. A feeling so terrible, that the bottom of her stomach seemed to stretch for miles down below, and there plummeting in free-fall was her heart and lungs, pleading for air.

Again, she could not say with absolute certainty her ears had heard what they did, but a human's sixth sense always seemed to spur those terribly, seemingly irrational feelings.

"I..." She couldn't even finish the first syllable. "...was...?"

"It never was Heather," James spoke clearly, with an almost piercing gaze. He himself had changed nothing about his demeanor, yet the very fabric of reality began to morph in the troubled eyes of Dawn as she struggled to come to terms with the truth. "We wanted to adopt you, Dawn."

She was a cesspool of emotions. No one word could perfectly describe the intangible mess her mental guts were. Anger would only tickle the fringes of her collapsing mind, much less the melted beams otherwise known as her former confidence leaking through the cracks into the abyss. Misery encapsulated her very state of ruin, yet not the shattered windows she knew to be her glance at hope.

A small bubble rose in her chest, close to her sternum, separated by something within a mere inch from the outside world, until it burst with such force that she lurched forward, feeling a small gasp escape from her mouth. It caused a chain reaction, sending streams down her eyes, as she still watched the Amazon up above in pure silence.

It was a day of many surprises and upsets, because for once, James, the mighty Amazon, of a race who could do no harm unto Littles, looked remorseful. “D-Dawn...” He reached his hand forward, but Dawn with her feet propelled herself away along the couch. It wasn’t even by intention, instead a mysterious force that moved her body for her. It was so involuntary, yet at no point did Dawn object. After all, pure instinct seemed to know best.

Yet a puff of air burst from her lips. Then another, until finally her mouth did stay open, only it was kept agape by the manic laughter she’d been plagued with. The tears didn’t stop, nor did the terribly contrasting giggles as the pieces truly began to fall apart.

“...Dawn...” James didn’t come any closer. No closer than the moment he first sat down. There was a crease in his forehead and a head pointed towards Dawn, yet firmly planted on the sofa.

“H-how...h-ha-how could I h-he-have b-b-been so...stupid?” She wiped her face with the back of her hand, drenching it in wetness, only to have put a band-aid on such a nasty, mortifying gash.

“Please, you’re not stupid.”

“I-I...I ack...a-actually th-thought you wanted her...” she gave him his eyes, and what a horrid sight they were. “But it was *me!*” What a sick joke she’d been treated to. She continued to laugh and cry all the same, wrapping her arms around her legs as more and more truths became self-evident, further cascading the world around her in utter black.

“Dawn, we never planned to take you by force...”

“I believed them...” she whimpered to her imaginary friend, in a low voice. “I *trusted* them!” She laughed a bit louder, enough for James to give their surroundings a slight glance. He was a simple outsider to the chaos that erupted from Dawn’s very being, barely able to fathom the chilling realization of how many times she’d been sitting on a false floor.

“H-hey...” she reared her head from her wet hands, giving James such an ugly, teary face of amusement. “D-didn’t I say ‘adopt’ earlier?” James’ mouth moved, completely caught off guard,

but before he could even associate two words for a thought of how to respond, Dawn skipped the reply with more laughter.

“I r-really must be losing my mind!” She continued to laugh, letting her sight bleed through the cracks between her fingers. Then, she pulled the front waistband on her pants. “A-and look! I’m even in a pull-up!” At the most random intervals, despite the muddy mess she was, somehow she could seem to sharpen her mind, to appear composed for seconds, only to fall apart right after.

In one of those moments, she with a deadpan look asked James, “Did you two drug me too? Just so I’d use this thing?” before the stunned man had a chance, she kept laughing.

“No, we’d never do something like that,” he did his best to answer straight-laced, but even he sounded a little hurt. “We did everything we could to help you. We were only going to ask after--”

“*Help* me?” Dawn erupted. “Everything has been to help me? The shopping? The diapers? The car seat? A-and... Wh--” a second form of herself cut her own speech short just to laugh some more. “What even *is THIS?*” She gestured to the spacious lobby, running her hands through her hair. “Is this some sick *fucking* joke?” Finally, the maddening smirk she had felt flat, devolving into a quivering lip with flowing tears. “B-be honest...you never planned to let me go home, d-did you? This is what...just to get my stuff before you take me back?”

“No!” James raised his voice, finally enough to reach Dawn’s core. As frantic as she was, the sheer volume seemed to shell-shock her. “No...” he repeated, though calmer. “You’re back, Dawn. Back for real. It *was* you. Not anymore. Katherine and I...we made a mistake. We saw what today was like for you; we’ve seen how you’ve been affected. It’s...it’s not right. Even still, we were *always* going to ask you. It was *always* going to be your choice.” And it likely still was, but everyone knew how much of a wasted gesture it’d be.

Off by the other end of the lobby, a sliding door opened, and out stepped a familiar face. Dressed in more casual clothing, not donned by their waist-strapped mic & speaker set, blonde-haired Stacy stepped out panning her gaze across the lobby. She seemed to look the way of James and Dawn for a moment, but stepped over to the front desk first.

“I think that’s her...” James meekly said, watching the Amazon carry on with their own conversation. He even caught the employee point in their direction. “I know we can’t undo the things we did, and even though we thought we were doing something good, Dawn, I’m sorry. I’m sorry for hurting you, for making you think that you couldn’t trust us, that we betrayed you.”

“You did save me...” Dawn murmured, looking afar at the tour guide, who just turned their way. “That, I understand. Thank you for that. You brought me here, which I’m thankful for too.” They looked at each other one last time. “But don’t misunderstand. I don’t forgive you. You may have saved me, but you groomed me. You tried to push me along all day to your whims. So again,” she continued, stone-cold. “Thank you, but I do not forgive you.”

She stopped speaking, yet between their gazes, a conversation seemed to keep on going, only until a third party had severed it.

“Hello~!” Stacy said in such a terribly stark contrast to the grim mood the pair had seemed to cultivate. Her greeting seemed somewhat neutral, but then she biased her attention. “You must be James!” with an outstretched hand, she waited for James’.

He watched it for a moment, then stuck his out, finally processing Dawns’ words. “Y-Yes...” Once more, he gave Dawn a small glance, but she was already looking away, sitting still, hanging her bare feet off the couch.

“So this is the someone my munchkin has been with all day?” she chuckled, giving Dawn a second’s worth of spotlight. “I have to say, I’m a little surprised to see her back...” she said in a not-so-secretive voice, laughing by the end of it.

“Well...my wife and I were only trying to bring her back.”

“Oh?” Stacy replied with a slightly surprised set of brows. “Back? You’re not here for her stuff? That’s what the front desk told me...” she turned her head, further announcing her culprit. Dawn, meanwhile, hadn’t budged. For better and worse. Either she wasn’t phased or had been so traumatized that she lacked the composure to even express herself.

“No...she’s here to go home. With the tour group back to Terra?”

“Right...right...” Stacy nodded, looking down at the girl again, a finger pondering her chin. “Absolutely positive?” she asked James. She leaned in a little closer, actually whispering now. “Our laws support it, you know...”

“Please make sure she gets home.” James said no more than that.

“...Well, alright then...” she turned and crouched, keeping her knees together. “Dawn, sweetie?” She even went to tap on the girl’s shoulder, but she did turn to her. “We’re just gonna go get your keycard then take you to your room, okie-dokie?”

Dawn nodded, allowing the gears she had no hand in to do it for her.

“Alrighty then,” she smiled, standing, and as she did, having the audacity to pat a turning Dawn on the padded behind. Stacy snickered a small bit, “thought so!” James had watched, though he didn’t look to be in great spirits. “Okay James, I can take over from here. She’s in safe hands!”

“R-right...” he looked past Stacy’s shoulder, watching the Little’s back, with a passive hand rubbing her behind, yet trying to be minimal about it. “Th...thank you.” He then spoke a bit louder, indicating it was meant for Dawn. “Goodbye Dawn. I’m sorry; I wish we could have ended it on a better note...”

Not a word. Not a gesture.

Stacy watched, though didn’t say anything, simply commentating with small noises and a curious look.

“Well, off we go!” Stacy stayed cheerful, as much as she was since this morning, escorting Dawn away. James stood there, watching for a few moments longer. The more distance created weaker attachments though, as he finally took a breath, then started to walk his own way. Out the glass doors and on the sidewalk, he looked back in one last time.

Stacy and the attendant were speaking, both smiles, whilst he saw Dawn by the woman’s side, significantly shorter, the size a Little was, stricken with puffy eyes and an exhausted look. If nothing else, he could only be certain she’d be ready to sleep...

There was resistance, but he fought the tide, stepping onto the asphalt and headed back to the car. Amazon biology, it always crowned the female half of their species as the hormone-driven ones when it came to Littles. He never fully understood their irrational attachment to a complete stranger, despite being overwhelmed by such natural instincts that a small creature seemed to incite.

He hadn’t understood. Not completely. Not even now. But...less than before. If he could summarize it into words, now, in this moment, it felt as if he were forgetting something. Something insignificant, like a paperclip he’d been tinkering with, or pencil he twirled with his fingers. He could live without it, but of course he’d be left wondering about it...

Katherine was awake when he got to the car, as she leaned against the window, quiet. James got into the driver's side, closing the door, buckling himself. She didn't look at him, nor did she say a word. Neither did James. Not at first.

“Thank you...”

Katherine turned her head.

“She wanted to say ‘thank you’.”

Katherine nodded, looking down at her interlocked fingers, squeezing them some. Witnessing as her vision became more and more of a blur.

“W-we...” she sniffled, wiping her eyes. “We did the right thing...right?”

James took a long, drawn-out breath. He reached his arm around Katherine's far shoulder, leaning his head into hers. “You know...it sort of hurts a little...letting go... But... I'm proud of us. We did what I, really, can't imagine any other couple in our position doing...”

A hiccup interrupted their moment, Katherine reaching her turn for waterworks.

“I...I want her back...!”