

17 - Too Tight

“Dawn? Honey? Please?”

“No.” Her arms were crossed and she sat firm.

“It’s not as bad as you think?”

“Yes it is! I told you that!” There wasn’t any remorse for a person who so one-sidedly decided to spring this on her. Dawn didn’t ask for it, so she had no qualms in refusing it.

“Don’t you wanna get out of that chair? There’s still a little time to play with Waver or watch cartoons?”

“Then take me out of the chair!”

With a hand on her hip, Katherine frowned. “Dawn, you need to eat your egg.”

“No.”

James had left a few minutes ago, and Katherine finished not too long after as well.

Dawn, by her standards, was done with breakfast as well.

But apparently not. She may have gone along with it, but by sheer circumstance and bizarre occurrence, the unrequested egg that’d miraculously appeared on her plate had still remained untouched. Where it went was of no concern to Dawn, as long as it wasn’t her stomach.

Katherine was already lifting her not-sippy cup with hands on it, “Do you want some more milk to wash it down?”

With a huff she pushed the plate back. “I don’t like eggs, Katherine!”

And yet it was dragged right back in front of her. “But you can’t be a picky eater,” Katherine scolded. “Don’t you want to get out of that wet diaper and into a dry one? The longer you take, the longer it takes to get changed?”

It was a low blow, especially with Katherine casually remarking about what Dawn thought was only known to herself. When did she notice that her diaper was wet? Wet wasn’t even the right word. She didn’t feel wet. The diaper had done its job and absorbed. It was just...fuller now.

“...It’s gross, though!”

“Come on, just a small bite, how about that?” Katherine left and came back with a fork and knife. She performed surgery from the next seat over, cutting off a small corner to an already bite-sized piece meant for Dawn.

Holding it on the top of her fork, she held it out for Dawn.

“Come on, open up! Say ‘ahhh!’”

The closer Katherine brought the fork, the more and more Dawn leaned her head back, but the give and take could only last for so long once she was hard-pressed against the back of a chair she couldn’t get out of on her own. Being a cornered animal, she finally lashed out.

Slap!

Somewhat. Dawn didn’t slap Katherine, but the shock was still there, which was likely why she was able to get away with what she just did. With a swift hit she knocked the fork from Katherine’s grip, sending it clattering on the floor and the small, meager piece of egg with it.

“Dawn!” Katherine gasped at the floor before flashing a stern frown back at her.

But for once in this horrid timeline, the stars had aligned.

The moment she heard paws scraping the floor Katherine spun her head. “Waver? No, No!”

Dawn did her best to turn her head and see as well, though limited by her Little-proofed seat, she could only catch fragments of the ambush from her now-furry friend, Waver. She didn’t even need to see it. She heard the dog collar jingle, and she heard the fork scrape across the floor from being kicked by an eager paw.

“No! That’s not for you! Drop it!” Katherine tried to command, but by the sound of her voice, the situation had already solved itself and slipped from her grasp.

Rubbing her forehead she knelt down on the floor. “It’s fine...it’s fine...it’s just an egg...” she sighed, sounding quite beside herself.

Katherine's eyes found Dawn's first before saying, "That was a very mean thing you did." And Dawn was currently trying to not look purely amused for once. Maybe it *was* a great way to start the day.

And now to send it home, with a smirk no less, "I said I didn't want any eggs?"

"I want an apology right now."

"For what?"

"For hitting."

"I didn't hit you! I slapped the fork!" Had this been a court of law, her argument might have actually worked. If only the judge and jury weren't as rigged as an arcade machine.

"We do not hit things out of other people's hands, Dawn."

"And we don't force other people to eat what they don't want."

"No more back-talking," Katherine kept her frown, sitting back down in the chair with the same fork. "If you don't want to apologize then that's fine. You're finishing your breakfast though."

The Amazon looked to double down with her resolve as the fork soon had a larger bit of egg atop it this time, only now Dawn could tell that the fork wouldn't be going anywhere unintended now. Now that Katherine knew to actually hold it, Dawn was competing against legitimate Amazonian strength.

Katherine didn't advance, and Dawn didn't make any moves either, other than her grossed out expression slowly starting to creep on her poker face.

"Dawn, baby, please?" Katherine was the first to crack. "I don't want to fight with you! Please? Just one bite? I promise; that's all you have to eat." With her other hand she grabbed the sippy cup. "You can have your milk right after, okay?"

As much as she hated to admit it, Dawn truly wasn't seeing any other way out of this. She had her fun, but she didn't anticipate getting any more tricks or escapes from this. It was Katherine's final mercy on the matter, and she'd be a fool to not swallow her pride and take it.

Like there was some final trick, Dawn kept glancing up at Katherine, waiting for the caveat or whole other egg hiding behind her back, ready to shove the entire thing in the moment Dawn opened her mouth.

But slowly she did so anyway, somehow making herself even more vulnerable than what a diaper and effective high chair could accomplish on their own. A tight crease was forming between her eyebrows the more she watched the fork ease toward her, all ushered by the coaxing smile from the Amazon behind it.

“Choo-choo! Here comes the airplane!”

“Choo-?” Dawn couldn’t help but hear the obvious mistake in her spiel, “That’s not what a—!”

And before she knew it she had already fallen for it.

“Annd chew...?” Katherine slipped the fork back out of Dawn’s mouth, leaving its unfortunate gift behind atop her tongue.

It was bland. Rubbery. Foreign. It didn’t even taste like food! She wanted to spit it out so badly more than anything; she hated eggs. *So* much! But was it all the gaslighting that made her seem to hate it so much more?

She curled her toes, practically ready to explode as she didn’t even try to chew, skipping straight to the swallow. Thankfully it was only a small bite, and small bites didn’t always need chewing.

Having forgotten to breathe through her nose, Dawn gasped for air the moment her mouth was clear, incidentally flashing an empty mouth to Katherine, who made a noise of glee.

“Good job!” Katherine smiled from ear to ear, setting the fork down. “I’m so proud of you!”

Dawn knew what had been done. Katherine knew her modes of transportation from one another, which is why causing the confusion was purely intentional. Just enough to confuse the Little to put food in her mouth. “It doesn’t change that you tricked me...!” Dawn found the words right before accepting an open sippy cup to drink down a heaping helping of milk just to forget the experience.

“But we’re all done now,” Katherine said with a soothing sense of finality, standing from her chair and taking Dawn’s plate with her. “I’m really happy that you did that, you know?”

“Good for you,” Dawn scoffed sickly. “I feel horrible.”

All she heard from behind was a short spurt of running faucet and Katherine's chuckle. "I think you're being a little overdramatic, silly."

"Yeah? What if I made you eat stuff you didn't like all the time? How would you-!"

Twice she couldn't finish her sentence, but thankfully not because of eggs this time. A cold washcloth was smeared across her face from cheek to cheek, completely blinding her for a moment as a hand rubbed it across her.

"Clean as a whistle!" Katherine finally pulled back the cloth.

And what was not a moment of weakness, but being an opportunist, Dawn then held her hands out. "My hands too." Need she chastise the Amazon for being the reason her hands had syrup on them in the first place?

"Oopsies! Thank you for reminding me," Katherine smiled, working Dawn's hands over, finger by finger much more gently.

"How does that feel?" she finally pulled back, "nothing sticky?"

After making scissors with each pair of fingers, Dawn shook her head. "No. They're fine."

"Good. Now, let's get you upstairs and dressed," Katherine lifted her from the seat, then Dawn watched her eyes drift down at her with a grin. "I think we'll need to start using bibs from now on, too."

Dawn looked down at herself, displeased to find that indeed multiple splotches of syrup had made their way on her shirt. Her last shirt. The last shirt she had that was actually her own and had been brought to this dimension.

She embarrassingly covered one of the stains with a hand like it somehow made herself any cleaner. "I don't need a bib! You made me eat pancakes with my hands!"

"You're not in trouble, Dawn. It's to keep your clothes clean?"

"My clothes would be clean if you gave me a fork."

"You know we can't do that..."

Dawn couldn't have sounded more aggravated if she tried. "Right." And likely disillusioned into thinking her feelings could be solved so easily, Katherine gave her a short, soothing pat on the back.

Once they entered Dawn's room, the first place they went was the changing table.

"Please...! Just let me do it myself!"

"Sweetie, you might like it a lot more if you just relax?" Katherine sighed as she looked over Dawn. Effortlessly she tore off the tapes and got to work.

"And I don't need this stupid strap!" Dawn growled, trying to flex her muscles as she did her utmost to lift her upper half, yet to no avail.

"We won't use it once you can behave..." Katherine's words continued to carry a sense of guilt, yet be it a higher power or instilled prejudice, she did not relent.

Shortly thereafter, Dawn was in a new pair of underwear, albeit the horrendously absorbent kind.

The Amazon was then gushing fawning noises. "Look at you! All clean and smelling so nice!"

Dawn grimaced from the table, forced to smell the powder her own backside was covered in.

One of the worst things in this dimension were the uncanny similarities. So many basic norms apparently existed here as well, which to an intrigued observer might be beyond fascinating and grounds for revolutionary research on the theories of multiverses.

But for Dawn?

For Dawn, all it meant was that she knew that she smelled like a baby because back home this was the exact smell babies had.

This time Dawn wasn't even asked to participate in undressing herself. Without a word, Katherine snaked her hands up Dawn's sides, bunching her shirt along the way as she pulled it up, over, and off the girl.

"I can take off my own shirt!"

"I know you can, honey," Katherine said as she set the shirt aside. Then she stopped for a moment, staring for just a second, then set Dawn on the floor.

The pause didn't go unnoticed by the Portal Little. "What? What is it?"

"Hm?" Katherine tilted her head, apparently not on the same page. "Do you want to wear pants today?"

"There's nothing else I'd wear." Dawn folded her arms, waiting as Katherine went through the dresser. Looking up at it, she was reminded of how nothing in it could ever be passed off as either dignified or mature clothing. Whatever was in there came from yesterday's shopping trip, the same place that sold cribs and laxative-laced chocolates.

"Well *I* think you'd look adorable in anything you wear?" Katherine closed the drawer, kneeling down with a bundle of new clothes.

"I don't want to look adorable. I want my adult life back." Even putting it into words made her hurt, coming to terms with what the facts were right now.

"I know you're a big girl, though?" Katherine then held out a pair of baby blue pants by the elasticized waistband, "Step in?"

Begrudgingly Dawn did step in, and as she did so she said, "Say whatever you want, but it doesn't change that I'm being forced to wear diapers and call you my mother in public? James *spanked* me!"

"That was because you were being bad, Dawn. But...I don't like the idea of spankings either, sweetheart. I think we were all a little upset about everything that happened yesterday..." Rich. Because of course, if everyone was down on their luck, that apparently meant Dawn was taking one for the team. "Remember the timeout we had to give you?"

Like it was yesterday...*because* it was yesterday.

"Yes. I remember." Dawn grumbled, allowing herself to be turned by the shoulders.

"I bet that wasn't so fun either, huh? But, even stuff like that can be good, you know? Sometimes we all need a little quiet time to think about our actions." Just like how solitary confinement is supposed to make prisoners stay in line? Confinement didn't beget reform; all it taught was to better hide malicious intent.

Then a finger wedged itself between her bare back and bra strap.

“Katherine? What’re you—?”

The clasp was undone and her bra started to droop.

“I was a little surprised to see you wearing one of these...” Katherine murmured. “Sorry? What’s wrong sweetie?”

“Why are you taking off my bra?!” Dawn exclaimed, already fishing for the ends Katherine was holding behind her.

“Dawn, honey, you don’t need one?” Katherine calmly said as Dawn could only whimper from her final article being removed.

“Yes I *do!*” She stared up at Katherine’s enormous chest, big even for herself. Dawn’s relative chest size wasn’t nearly as big, but breasts were breasts and she was by no means flat.

A snug shirt was slipped over her head with short sleeves and a length that just barely reached over the waistband of her pants. Looking down at herself the first thing she eyed was her chest, expecting to find two small tell-tale nubs, but she didn’t.

No pointy-ness, and in fact, the same exact look as if she were wearing a bra, yet they felt and looked just as supported. Confused, she rubbed her fingers against the thicker material of the shirt.

“The shirts they make for girls are made to cover up your privates,” Katherine explained with a smile. “You surprised me when I saw you wearing a bra! I guess shirts like these aren’t common back where you’re from?”

“No...they’re not,” Dawn answered as she touched her chest, still inspecting the feel. Her shirt somehow worked just like wearing a bra, except without the strain of the straps on her shoulders? And to hammer it home, she bounced on her toes for a moment, surprised by the nonexistent bounce too.

For all women? Dawn skeptically looked up at Katherine who seemed to have a much...heavier burden on her torso. “Your clothes are the same?”

“Me?” Katherine blinked in surprise, then laughed. “No, no! Grown-ups still need to wear bras; that’s only for Littles.” she chuckled, and Dawn nearly tripped from the tremor that widened the gap. “Doesn’t it feel nice not needing to wear one?”

Maybe on some level it did. Practically, maybe, but not in every way.

Sure, it meant she didn't have to wear one more thing, but it also meant she didn't have to wear one more thing. An important thing. A mature thing. An adult thing.

"...I want to put it back on."

The lack of enthusiasm must have surprised the Amazon. "What? Don't you feel less stuffy, though?"

"That's not the point..." Dawn looked down at herself, at her specially designed clothes, feeling more corralled and collared by the second. "It...this feels weird." Desperation hugged her throat and her eyes did not drift. "I want my bra back."

And while the insecurity was setting in, it was a cloudy forecast from Katherine's shadow and her gentle shower of bad news. "Dawn, you've been wearing that for almost two days now. It needs to be washed."

"Th-Then..." Of course Katherine couldn't understand. *She* didn't have to wear kid shirts with bras built in them! "Can't we just wash it now?" Dawn stepped in place, trying to discharge her bubbling emotions.

Katherine folded her two-cupped friend and sandwiched it between her palm and thigh, calmly explaining, "Sweetie, we need to get going soon; it's not going to be ready by then."

A small noise of frustration escaped Dawn's mouth. It wasn't targeted anger, but genuine discomfort. Discomfort that preyed on her mind and sense of self.

"My...my other shirt? I want to wear that. The one I was just wearing!"

"The one you got syrup on?" Katherine tilted her mouth. "Honey, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing!" Dawn lashed, tugging at the bottom of the shirt with a sporadic thought that it'd suddenly become shorter. "This...this feels too tight!" This felt wrong. None of it felt right.

"Dawn? I promise that you look pretty?"

"It's not about being pretty!" Dawn panted with a whine, throwing her hands off the article in frustration. "This...this is wrong! These aren't my clothes...! These...this isn't what I wear!"

What was hers anymore? Maybe it was more lingering, remnant and pointless sentiment that was finally being peeled off of her, but it was nothing short of frightening. She didn't have panties. She had diapers. She didn't have jeans. She had elasticized toddler pants. She didn't even have a bra. She had a babified Little's shirt.

"C-can't we buy a bra or something on the way?"

"There aren't a lot of places that make those for Little's, sweetheart..."

Fuck! Why is there always some kind of reason...?!

She wanted to say something back, but the frantic back-and-forth seemed more and more pointless with each time it failed.

But more importantly, her shirt was feeling awfully tight then. It was shrinking. The room was hot. She could barely breathe...! In a panic she grabbed at her shirt, taking a few aimless steps back while she fought the fringe and started lifting it over herself.

"Dawn? Sweetie, please? We just got you dressed..."

It was a cocoon. A bio-morphing machine that was trying to change her. Everything was. Katherine. James. This dimension. These clothes. These diapers...!

And all she could see was a pale mint green, trapping herself inside a suffocation chamber with a mind of its own. She twisted, contorted and pulled, but it felt stuck and immovable.

And without a rational sense of self left, she whimpered as her feet couldn't keep in place and the world went sideways. Without her knees able to touch and a constant muffled crinkling filling her ears, the room was only filled with her noisy diaper and madness to go with it. "H-help! Help me! Please! I-I can't breathe! T-take it off...! TAKE IT OFF!"

"Dawn! Honey!"

And she flailed her feet and legs, crying as a nearby tornado suddenly swooped her in the air and she was too trapped in her prison to fight it. The air was running thin and she was feeling light-headed. Was this really it? Was this how she kicked the bucket? Suffocated by her own clothes and having her lifeless corpse flung about by an indoor natural disaster?

Before she knew it though the tornado had her upright and with yet another swift swipe of wind her vision had returned. That being said, had Dawn owned her wet eyes she may have come to realize that.

It was panting and sobs, overwhelmed by a mountain of change that was effectively trying to kill her. Kill Dawn. The actual Dawn, all so they could carve out her husk and stuff it with whatever this place wanted to.

“Baby? Can you hear me?” Katherine’s words hit with haste but had a cushioned impact. “Shh...shh... It’s okay, see? You’re alright. Everything’s completely fine... Shh...shh...”

Whether that was true or not, it wasn’t as simple as going from one-hundred to zero, and the decline was a long process indeed. Dawn heaved and hiccupped, left with no other choice than to lean into whatever soft mighty mass was being pressed against her.

The disembodied voice in her frazzled mind continued to coo and calmly instruct. “It’s okay...all right? You can breathe... You can...nice and slow...deep breaths...uh-huh, just like that...”

Dawn couldn’t even make words anymore, too busy trying to make her mouth and lungs cooperate with just the basics. Fear had seized her mind yet again and she was just finding the courage to reclaim it once more.

The large thing that slowly and easily massaged her bare back was like the anchor that kept her ashore and afloat in the stormy port. It was her taut iron-linked chain she tried to sync her breathing with. Down it went, in goes the air. Up it came; exhale.

Her arms felt cold, but it froze everything from within, harbored from the warm exterior that she was starting to realize. A warm hug, it was more like. Probably because it was. Finally, she opened her eyes, seeing that the side of her face was pressed against Katherine’s sweater-covered stomach. Her feet were suspended just where they came around her waist and had no lap left to rest on. Taken in by a subtle but calming fragrance, the accompanying warmth made her feel weak all over, had her panic attack not done that already.

The symbolic tool she used to find the rhythm and structure was just Katherine’s hand rubbing her back, slipping itself easily under her shirt. The snug one, but also the same one that apparently wasn’t as impossibly tight as she thought.

“Does your shirt still feel tight?”

In any other context it would've come off as mocking. Of course shirts didn't magically constrict or shrink as you wear them. That was obvious. Obvious to anyone of a sane and stable mind. The shame and embarrassment made her wince, but Dawn mumbled back exhaustedly, "No..."

"Good. Let's give it a few more seconds, alright? Breathe nice and slow. In, and out...In...and out..."

And for once, Dawn listened without rebuttal.

One step beyond her frightened self, it hurt to feel so vulnerable. To feel so unstable in a way that she'd never been hit by since coming here. Since embarking on this god awful, prolonged vacation. The day hadn't even started yet and she was already feeling like shit...

Since when could she not control her breathing? Since when was she a danger to herself? There wasn't a single time in her life that her own emotions could be so volatile and lethal...! It sucked. So much. Just like with diapers, adorned right beside it on her wall of shame now was mental weakness. Panic attacks...

Dawn for once didn't need to ask for the gestures to stop. Katherine of her own volition eventually removed her hand, smoothing out the same shirt Dawn was certain was trying to kill her. While the massaging ceased, her hand still rested on the girl's backside and lower back.

"Feeling better?" Katherine asked from above, and Dawn wordlessly nodded. The hypocrisy would've been too damning to have taken the brunt of it now. Whether she wanted to openly admit it or not, Katherine was the only reason she wasn't still up on the ledge right now. Her greatest enemy had for a brief moment somehow become her hero.

How ironic.

"Oh!" A quiet, upbeat chipper came from Katherine, and Dawn could hear her head turn to the spot she was already looking. "Looks like somebody came to see you!"

Someone sure did. All in their four-footed swagger with a ring-ding from the collar around their neck and a wagging tail. Wagging as much as it was, the appendage stayed low like with his head, as if Waver were somehow in the presence of a king. Either that or he could actually get a read of the mood.

It wasn't the same energetic trot like he was always seen with, but instead a calmer stroll on over, resting right against Katherine's leg and giving Dawn's heel something to rest on.

“Such a good boy...” Katherine cooed with a chuckle, losing her upper hold on Dawn’s shoulders just to pet the fur atop Waver’s head. With a voice that could speak to the smile on her face, the lover of Littles and animals asked, “Want me to let go now?”

She did. She absolutely did, even if Katherine was the life support that Dawn needed in such a vulnerable moment. A moment that would have never happened had she not been in this situation. So if anything, this was just Katherine fixing the mess that *she* caused, was it not? This wasn’t Dawn’s fault. It was exploiting a part of herself that never had to be exposed. Of course. That was it.

“...Dawn?”

“Y...yes,” Dawn replied the second time around, too lost in her own thoughts to catch the first.

“Okay,” Katherine obliged and moved her hand, and Dawn slowly slid down her pants, getting back on her feet. There was a second of imbalance and a moment of weakness, but just as she was about to stumble, Katherine’s hand found her shoulder.

“Oops...is it hard to stand?”

“N-no...” Dawn looked away, “I’m fine.”

There was no gratitude expressed, but it didn’t stop Katherine’s appreciative look.

In fact, it seemed as if Dawn said all that the Amazon needed to hear. “Good,” she exhaled softly. “If...if you ever feel like that again, you can always come to me. You know that, right?”

“Uh-huh.” It was quick and dismissive. Actually *choosing* to use Katherine as a crutch? Laughable and sickening, just like the knot in her stomach right then.

“Wanna stay with Waver while I go get dressed? I’ll be right back. Promise.”

“Yeah...” Dawn said calmly and blandly. What else could she say, or in what way could she say anything? Hate was a hard emotion to process right then, and cheery felt just as wrong. So she kept it in the middle. Bland and lifeless.

“I’ll be right down the hall...” Katherine assured as she stood, and even spaced the door some more on the way out, opening it wider than it had been before. At night it meant isolation, but apparently after a crying fit it meant total supervision. It was any Little’s guess why she wasn’t offered to sit in the same room as Katherine while she changed, even.

But thankfully she wasn't asked because it was far from what Dawn wanted. Anything in this dimension was far from what she wanted. What mattered and she desired couldn't be attained here. It was all stuck with true safety across the dimensional border. Sitting back home. *Real* home. Home where her real mom and dad were. Her real family and her very real boyfriend.

Staring up at the ceiling with the side of her vision obscured by a tuft of golden fur, Dawn wanted nothing more than for the nightmare to end...

Then she shivered and quivered, feeling a tingle from her foot. Sitting her head up, she gave the culprit a mean mug.

"Waver...stop sniffing my foot...!"

"And you're sure you don't wanna listen to anything?" Katherine's eyes communicated the concern she had all on their own through the rearview mirror. Of course she couldn't turn around, and thankfully she never tried to, what with her hands on the steering wheel.

"No. I'm fine," Dawn tried to quickly dismiss the subject. Maybe Amazons did have good music, but that was only for Amazons. One trip in the car with Katherine already taught Dawn the kind of music she could expect while in attendance. Only the finest hit singles like The Wheels on the Bus or Ba-Ba Black Sheep. While she was a fan of contemporary, Katherine still somehow managed to miss her wide net.

The one pseudo-plus she'd had all day aside from the pancakes was a new pair of shoes. While they wouldn't have been her first choice, plain white sneakers beat whatever her pessimistic imagination could concoct, which surely would never match the cruel realities of a place like this. Though, sticking out her foot from her car seat once more, she frowned at it.

Double knotted? Triple? Single, even? It went without saying that Dawn didn't get a hand in tying her own shoe, as silly as that sounded, but expectations had been steadily plummeting as of late. Twice, Dawn had the chance to watch and listen while Katherine laced and tied her shoes right in front of her, but the moment then just like her memories of it now was a messy blur.

The fox chases the ferret, up and down the tree! Up and over...up and over...right, left, right! Something, something, something... *—All the way home!* And one convoluted and confusing rhyme later and her shoe was snug and tied. Maybe the rhyme or the reason had some credence, but only in the "fox" part. Sort of. The loops of shoelace around the complex knot were in fact

ears, but certainly not a fox. Probably. They were bunny ears, like they always were. Or...? How did fox ears look again?

A simple question, one that she'd actually be able to get an answer to. After all, they were driving to Katherine's work. The library. A place Dawn had only heard so little of, barely even now, the day of.

Per what little lore she had and the bountiful experience she'd been given herself from her own college one, the obvious expectation was a building full of books and a meager crowd of few willing to learn anything from them. College libraries had the benefit of students struggling to pass and in desperate need of silence. Unlike school though, the public city ones didn't necessarily have graduates and unders alike with such personal and urgent reasons for going.

Books though... Lots of books. Lots of reading material. Opportunities to learn...

And right before Dawn could reach her head up and over just to win that extra half an inch's worth of view from her car seat, she squashed the unexpected feeling entirely.

Excited...? Absolutely not. Not a million years. Before she was privy to the nonsense and humanitarian horrors this whole place had, sure, she had seen a few cool attractions. All in all the technology and infrastructure of this world wasn't anything to scoff at. But not once did she feel so appealed to...

It was her in-progress degree that spoke to the sound of crisp ink-printed paper turning from page to page. The smell of a new book. Soft covers, hard covers. Intricate spines, synopses sometimes on the back or on the inside. O-or! Or even on the inside of the sleeve itself!

H-however...this was no time for a feeling like that. After all, need she forget her situation? How she was dressed?

"Somebody's looking a little antsy back there, huh?" Katherine chuckled and Dawn jumped (but didn't go very far, courtesy of her car seat straps), making a noise herself. "Are you excited to see the library?"

"I...I guess I'm a little interested..." Dawn quickly tried to calm herself down. "We never saw anything like that during the...tour..." Great, now she was reminded of a subject that was still freshly sore.

"I can't wait to show you!" The Amazon in the driver's seat was far less reserved. "You know how our house has two floors?"

Yes, one plus one did in fact add to two.

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, the library here has *three!* And they’re a *lot* bigger than ours.”

Lots and threes didn’t put much into perspective, but apparently Dawn was supposed to work with what she had. Big and three floors. Okay. Still, three floors was interesting. She was only used to the one big floor design...

And when they pulled into the parking lot, even from Dawn’s vertically disadvantaged view she could see the upper ends of the massive building.

From the second floor up she could see the ornate windows, tall and wide, carved concrete trims and linings. Multi-colored brick and black-iron roofed lighting fixtures lined the irregular shape of the walls. Extrusions were inconsistent and gave the monument character, all on top of its choice-selected portions of the roof that sloped with heavy, thick looking dark green shingles.

It was all the wonder and craze the design of her hotel had, but by so, so much more.

“Is...” One question started, but another was already interrupting herself, “--wait, is that a tree up there?” Maybe it was some kind of decor or design she didn’t understand, but a pocket of the building came out up to the second floor like a giant outdoor balcony or patio, and sure enough, a big head of green foliage was sitting on the corner of it...

“There’s a lot of cozy places to read books here,” Katherine spoke with pride. “If they’d let me, I think I’d just wanna live here...!”

It was of course obligatory that Dawn considered next that this was undoubtedly the largest building she had ever laid eyes on. Part of that was certainly Amazons taking advantage of their size, but even within this dimension, she hadn’t seen anything as large. It was like a...stadium, or something! But for books! Forget her college; they didn’t have anything on this!

Crap. Now Dawn couldn’t keep her feet still. Maybe she *was* a tiny bit excited. But only just a little. Maybe just a lot. She didn’t exactly have concrete expectations, but just from the outside alone? Was it fair to expect now something even beyond her wildest imagination?

Regardless, she tried to not let it show, and she tried to stay calm. While she wasn't going to try and be anything as disrespectful as she was yesterday, she'd certainly be trying to stay on the reserved end of things...

The engine's murmur finally stopped and Dawn's many straps kept her from feeling the car come to a full stop.

"Okay, we're here!" Katherine announced with a cheery intone. With both hands grabbing her seat she spun her head, finally forcing Dawn to make eye contact. "Well? Are you ready?"

"I guess...?" Dawn tried to play it off, using the thought of wearing a diaper as a wondrous tool to help ground herself. Though, it may have made her plummet a bit too fast, now dreading the feeling of being a public spectacle. At least there were pants this time...

"I think you're gonna have a lot of fun!" Katherine giggled right before slipping out of the driver's seat. Once her door was shut, it was Dawn in the company of silence while she waited for the warden to set her free.

Though, what slightly irked her more than it should have was the apparent detour Katherine made to the trunk. She was treated to the sound of birds and cicadas all behind her while the Amazon fished through the back. Another gentle slam and finally her sentence had ended.

And while Katherine spent a moment on her car seat, she said, "So Dawn...do you remember what we talked about this morning?"

A not so quiet sigh left the girl's mouth. "Yeah." Sure, maybe she was required to call for Katherine using a specific kind of title, but all she needed to do was not call for her at all?

"Do...do you think we could try real quick?" she gave a hopeful look.

Try? What, give the 'M' word a test run? It bothered the tiny girl to no end just how expectant the Amazon looked. Her eyes couldn't hide the anticipation and celebration just waiting to jump out from them. Whether it was forced or not, it was certainly an experience Katherine wanted, and Dawn could tell clear as day.

So with a bitter taste in her mouth, Dawn dismissively copped, "Mom."

And before she could finish the one and only syllable, Katherine's teeth already came out to play and a gust of gratitude was just about to leave her mouth. But she stopped short. Her bouncing eyebrows sloped off at the ends as her inner points prayed for a far better result.

“What?” Dawn frowned on the outside, but grinned from within. “I said it?”

“W...well...” Katherine slowly tried to navigate the unexpected loophole while she finished unbuckling her. “I think it’d sound a bit better if...uhm, you called me *Mommy*, instead?”

Now this. *This* was fun. This was the excitement she needed. Nothing like a word game to get the real morning started.

“Why?” Dawn asked and dared not repeat. Not even on a technicality was she going to make it easy. *Why call you [BLANK]? Nope! How come you prefer [BLANK]? Zilch!*

“L...Boys and girls don’t really call their mommies that, Dawn? That’s more of a...grownup word?”

“So I’m not a grownup, then?” Sort of playing along, but also sort of annoyed now.

“You’re a big girl,” Katherine corrected and assured, yet missed the mark entirely. “But sometimes with Littles and their parents—”

“Guardians?” Captors? Kidnappers?

“Uh-huh,” Katherine nodded, but admitted to no fault, “with Littles it’s much more common to say Mommy and Daddy. Mom and Dad sound a lot more plain, huh?” Katherine made an off-face, like she was trying to appeal to Dawn’s kid-like emotions that didn’t exist. Dawn did not readily agree, so Katherine seemed to at least partially drop the indirect explanation. “It’s a little embarrassing if a Little you’re taking care of doesn’t call you that...” and to the woman’s credit, she didn’t hold Dawn hostage by keeping her in the seat. Suspended by sitting on her arm, Dawn had no choice in grabbing onto her shoulders.

But before a smart-ass answer could be thought of, or another dumb kind of question just to twist the semantics could be made, a far more bitter, cheap and annoying move was used.

“It sounds silly, but someone might call LPS if they think anything’s wrong?”

And that would mean LPS gets involved, and that’s somehow bad for Dawn. Get removed from Katherine and James...taken somewhere...blah-blah-blah. Quite frankly, it’d probably be the perfect time to let *somebody* know that she isn’t from this world. And yet, that somehow was the worst case scenario. Trust was an awfully hard thing to stomach nowadays.

“Fine,” Dawn put it briefly, far too annoyed for the game to have ended this quickly and so abruptly. What a sore loser, Katherine was.

“Thank you,” Katherine smiled appreciatively, and the walk to the library began.

“Since we’re here so early, not a lot of people come around right now,” Katherine explained the lack of cars and abundance of empty space. “We get *really* busy in the afternoon, though!”

“Is this place really that popular?” Dawn asked, still marveling over the look, but fairly skeptical nonetheless. After all, books were just books. *She* knew the value in them, but that didn’t mean every other living person did.

“Uh-huh! Lots of people like coming here to read books, but we also have movies, computers, and other tools that people may wanna use. We even just got a cafe last year!”

“A cafe?” Dawn finally turned her head for that, and whatever look she gave, Katherine’s glittering eyes must have found it priceless.

“Yep! They have lots of yummy desserts! If you want, maybe later we can stop by?” she tempted with her tone of voice. ‘Be obedient and I’ll pay you off with sweets,’ or something like that.

“Maybe...” Dawn muttered while she admired the grand entrance. A short staircase prolonged over many feet with long, flat slabs. It plateaued out into a space with benches and islands of grass with trees. Everything about this place was breathtaking, and Dawn was afraid to admit to liking any of it. Did liking this mean that she condoned and accepted all the practices a place like this had? Was *this* what kept Earth from achieving such wonderful things? Just a discriminatory social hierarchy and a whole lot of diapers?

Come to think of it...

So just a whole *lot* more diapers, then?

As they approached the front doors, Dawn watched for Katherine’s hand to reach, but it didn’t, given she was using both to hold her. So instead two unexpected things were noticed. One, was that the doors were automatic and sliding. Impressive. And two, was the strap over her other shoulder that had somehow gone unnoticed.

“Katherine, what’s that?”

“What’s what? The doors?” Then she followed Dawn’s finger. “Oh! That’s just a bag I packed for you? Though, I put some of my stuff in there, too,” she chuckled sheepishly, and Dawn wasn’t smiling.

Calling it just a bag felt plain deceptive. Normal bags weren’t that wide and were far more nondescript. A purse wouldn’t be as big and with so many pockets and zippers. And any normal bag wouldn’t be covered in prancing cartoon puppies all over pastels.

“I don’t need a diaper bag.” It felt gross just to say even aloud.

“Sweetie, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about...” And for once she guessed right about how Dawn was feeling. Then again, embarrassment was only half the picture. She was partially correct, at least; so the same as always.

“Why couldn’t you have just brought something *normal*? Like a backpack, or something?!” Or the best case scenario of all: nothing!

“These *are* normal, Dawn?” Katherine jostled her shoulder either to adjust or bring even more attention to her entire arsenal of diapers, powder and more. “Besides, a backpack wouldn’t be big enough. Well, maybe it would have...but that’s only because we’re still getting you everything you might need?”

What? What could she possibly need more than what a backpack could hold? Toys in case she gets bored? A second change of clothes should she— wait, no gross. Super fucking gross. Dawn dashed that thought right away.

So finally, opting for the high road, Dawn frowned, “I’m upset you didn’t even tell me.”

“...And I’m sorry for not telling you,” Katherine apologized, though it felt more like a performance than anything. Probably in her mind bringing a diaper bag was a no brainer. Poor Dawn was too busy with her cartoons to even realize that much. “But sweetie, you *know* we can’t go drive home every time we need to change you, right?”

Yet another blow to her image. Did she really think Dawn was *that* simple-minded? “I *won’t* need changing,” Dawn seethed quietly, and finally their trip across the marbled floor opened up to an atrium.

While daylight was bleeding in from all sorts of points, the most unobstructed example was a massive skylight from the roof all the way up to the third floor shining down on the first. Thick fancy rock columns started where they stood and repeatedly stacked from floor to floor,

supporting each and every platform above it. Forget what was on the same level as them, Dawn spun her head just from the astonishment of the massively tall and mighty bookshelves she could see. Shelves that looked just a few feet from the ceilings right above them!

They'd taken a step through time and reached the Roman civilization in its grandest, golden era. Poor Alexandria's library was thought to have been lost, but it'd simply gone and disappeared to another dimension. Right here...!

Practically a messy blur with how far away it all was, but Dawn could see the variation in colors, shapes and sizes that lined the endless and larger than life shelves. And...things were moving? Things hanging from the ceiling? Sure, there were many assortments of cool glass bubbles with lights in them, but machines moved quietly and seamlessly across the ceiling, following tracks like trains on rails.

“What're those?”

“Those,” Katherine held Dawn close just to freely point up, “are special helpers we use to manage the library!”

Special helpers? “So you use robots?”

“Uh-huh!” And despite Dawn making it clear she knew the distinction between what functioned off blood and electricity, Katherine continued to explain, “They help us put books back where they're supposed to go and get the ones we need! The library is a *really* big building, even for me.” So probably a mini city for Dawn. “Now we have lots of helpers that can keep the library clean and organized.”

Dawn watched for a little longer, but the trolley started moving again and they were off. “So what do you do then?” The use of robots was impressive, but the greatest advancements always spelled the downfall for those they replaced.

“Well, sometimes books can be in hard to reach spots or in places that you need someone like me to go to. And also, there can be days when one of the robot helpers can be feeling kind of sick, so it's my job to make them feel better!”

The layers she spoke with were always a mental challenge to dissect... But on a much more serious note, the actual skill involved in her job was bleeding to the surface.

“Wait, so you do maintenance on the robots?” Apparently calling herself a librarian was selling it awfully short. In all honesty, actually, it was kind of...

“Cool, right?” Katherine chuckled through a Cheshire grin. “Our book buddies get regular check-ups though, so they always stay nice and healthy!”

“Huh...” Dawn commented as her head focused on the trail they left behind them. Adverts and signs sat on so many shorter shelves and aisles. Fun-looking graphics or simple, informative plaques and cards that indicated topics or genres. Though, what she wasn’t seeing were any sort of numbers to indicate sorting. Sort of, at least. Much more subtly it was a lengthy series of numbers, letters *and* symbols? Poor Dewey would be rolling in his grave.

“How...how do you guys sort stuff here?”

“We use a special system that’s kind of like a home address. Kinda like how our house has a specific street and number?” Katherine explained while they ascended a grand staircase. “Every book has a house and we remember where each and every one of them live!”

Maybe they hadn’t gone for madness completely.

“Yeah...we do that too, but...” Dawn frowned, finding that their sorting labels looked more and more like gibberish the deeper they went. “Your system looks weird.”

“It can be a little tough to read,” Katherine agreed, but Dawn couldn’t tell if the Amazon was legitimately conceding or trying not to make the girl feel incapable.

It was for some reason a hard thing to ask, but Dawn said aloud, “Well can you show me later?”

“Of course!” Katherine couldn’t have sounded happier. Her hold on the Little squeezed for just a second, affirming the affection that words could not. “When I’m on my break later we can absolutely do that!”

“...Kay...” Dawn kept it simple, still fighting that urge to stay reserved. It sucked because she was curious. It looked like heaven for books and they were walking right by all of them. A treasure trove of knowledge and literature, yet she couldn’t even understand the basic building blocks of how to navigate any of it...! But it didn’t change her urge to sift through it all and explore. Yes, an actual place she wouldn’t mind adventuring in.

To think of all the wondrous things she might be able to learn. A wonderful reprieve from everything that sucked about this world. Hell, she could even try to learn more about the madness that dictated it!

Another few moments of quiet observation and fascination ensued, though that was interrupted by a third person's voice.

“Katherine?!” A loud and surprised voice echoed across the marbled floor.

“Sorry,” Katherine whispered in Dawn's ear, “You're gonna be a little popular today!” Much more clearly, aimed at the stranger and not Dawn, she chuckled, “Good morning, Grace!”

The footsteps sounded louder and closer, to the point that the other Amazon was within conversing distance of the pair.

“You're joking, right? You had *no* plans to tell me?!”

“Grace...” Katherine moaned sheepishly, “It all happened so fast, okay?”

What, kidnapping a little? Walking her around like an accessory? Dawn still had yet to look at the other woman, She was busy pinning her chin on Katherine's shoulder.

“But...ah! I can't believe it!” Grace cried a small cheer, “You actually did it! You and James got a Little! Oh my gosh, congratulations! What's her name? When did you adopt her?!”

Somehow Dawn's head went heavier, trying her best to focus on the “Book Buddies.” Surely they looked and sounded more interesting than this one-dimensional giant sounded.

Then an unwelcome hand started to comb the back of Dawn's hair. The only reason she allowed for it was simply so she could use it as an excuse to keep looking the other way. “Her name is Dawn, and it was a couple days ago... It's been a bit hectic, so we've all been adjusting a bit.” Yeah, but some a whole fucking lot more than others...

“I can imagine!” Grace laughed, no less excited. And finally some kind of social awareness must have caught up with her, because then she gasped. “Oh!” Lowering her voice, she asked not so quietly still, “Is she a bit shy?”

“It's her first time here, Grace,” Katherine spoke like she was scolding, but it was far more fabricated than the tone she'd use with Dawn. Fake scolding, and that made it all the more frustrating to know that she personally had to put up with the real deal. But just when Dawn thought that Katherine was sort of on her side, a hushed voice coaxed right beside her ear, “Dawn? Do you wanna say hi to my friend?”

A question, sure, but was there really a choice? Maybe there was, but also maybe there wasn't. In any case, only one answer could be appropriate for both. Dusting off the rust on her swivel, Dawn turned her head, mouthing an awfully bland, "Hi."

Her end of the bargain as far as she was concerned was "behaving" and using the stupid M-word. Nothing else. Nothing at all.

Grace, Katherine's friend, was in some kind of uniform. She was almost like a stewardess in some combination of white and dark green. Skirt blouse, nametag, and so on. Did people really need uniforms to work at the library? Whatever, Dawn didn't feel like asking.

And either her response was intentionally misread or deliberately skewed, Grace laughed as she said, "Oops, yep! She does sound a little shy. Sorries!"

Sorries indeed. If Dawn had it her way, she'd like to go unnoticed the entire day just to get to the more interesting parts faster. The parts that didn't include other people.

"Today's sort of like a trial run; just as we try to figure things out."

"James works from home though, doesn't he?" A whole day with James? After the spanking, it felt just as undesirable as a day with Katherine seemed, but at least it meant the plus of getting to stay home.

"Not every day. Not today," Katherine clarified. "We're still...figuring it all out, I guess?"

"Uh-huh, I get ya! My sister went through the same thing with hers." Her what? Actual baby? Or forever baby? "Trouble finding a daycare, I'm guessing?"

And now the spotlight was on Katherine.

"Well..." Katherine's voice lulled, and Dawn quietly and expectantly waited for what better have been a damn good answer. "We're not thinking about that quite yet... We just got her and all, so..." Fine, Katherine. Somewhat passing.

"Actually, that reminds me; why didn't you just take maternity leave?"

Was that how bad it was? Kidnapping Littles really was tantamount to birthing a new baby?

"It's...a little complicated?" Katherine deflected, and Dawn wasn't looking to throw any life raft to help, partly because she had no clue whatsoever on what to add. "We talked about it and are

still trying to decide what might be best..." Now was that a lie or a genuine truth? If the latter, why the hell were Katherine and James having more conversations without her?

"Is that why you called out yesterday?" Grace tutted and her frown was heard. "I hope you're not reading books all the time when you're supposed to be looking after this munchkin, you know?"

"Grace, come on!" Katherine groaned defensively. "I'm not gonna do that!"

"I know," she sighed, "All I mean is that the first few weeks with a Little are some of the most important? I can't believe the boss even let you come in today, with her, no less!"

"It...took a little convincing," Katherine laughed, though her tone carried the memories of a stern talking-to. "Oh! But, Dawn really likes books! Right, honey?" she roped Dawn back in, bouncing her arm just to double down on getting her attention.

"...Yeah."

"Oh...! So today's kind of like a little treat then, huh?"

"Yes it is," Katherine agreed unanimously, and Dawn the abstained said nothing else. Said nothing else until a new bombshell was dropped.

"Oh, and actually, would you mind watching her for a little bit?" Katherine asked and Dawn's eyes went wide. "I still need to go change into my uniform..."

"Of course!" Grace obliged, and things were moving faster than Dawn could even get a say.

"W-wait!" Dawn cried, finally speaking up before the handoff could happen. "I-I'll just stay with you!" she said to Katherine, clearly looking not to separate.

"Oh, sweetie," Grace cut in on their one-on-one, "You don't wanna go back there. It's *super* boring. Mommy's just going to get dressed!"

Dawn didn't care what this woman had to say, and still looked hopefully at her captor. But instead, Katherine offered a small smile and said, "I'll be back soon, alright? Be good for Grace?"

And it was a hard fought battle not to cuss right then. Betrayed and broken, Dawn went cold when a new stranger's pair of hands took hold of her.

“Grace is one of my best friends,” Katherine calmly and slowly explained, just to ward off whatever separation anxiety she thought Dawn was maybe about to have, and honestly was about to feel... “You can trust her, okay?” Then finally, she told her friend, “Please be gentle? This is still a lot of new stuff for her...”

“Roger!” Grace assured. “And actually, Dawn! Your Mommy says you like books, huh? I know *just* where to take you!”

“Wait, no!” Katherine, of all people, cried out. “You’re taking her *there*? I wanted to show her!” What? Show her what?

“You snooze, you lose, Mommy!” Grace laughed, and Dawn didn’t know how to feel.

It felt oddly uncomfortable to be looking at Katherine empty-handed because it meant Dawn was being held by someone else. Someone she didn’t know. Someone she didn’t trust, and the only way it seemed she could protect herself was by gambling on the right people.

And a small bit of emotion escaped the Little, muttering Katherine’s way, “...Don’t take long...” A hand reached out and smothered her hair and forehead.

“Promise!” Katherine smiled, lingering for a little longer, but Dawn and Grace heading the other way finally convinced the other Amazon to depart.

Well great. They’d barely just got here and Dawn was being transferred like she was property. Immediately it felt weird. Grace didn’t hold her like Katherine did. Totally different arm feel.

“So Dawn,” Grace immediately sprung into chatting the girl up, “your Mommy must be real excited to have you, huh?”

“Yeah...” The honest to God truth. Likely for worse, though.

“Is it fun having a Mommy and Daddy around?”

“It’s something...” Something she probably couldn’t say bad things about without making a scene.

“Something, huh?” Grace chuckled. “Well, your Mommy has wanted to adopt for the *longest* time! She’s been talking about it a lot lately, so I know you’re gonna get lots of love!” Enough to drown in, assuredly.

“Where are we going?” Dawn opted for a shift in topic, expecting to get herself into “trouble” should they linger on anything undesirable for too long.

“We are going to the *best* part of the library. Your Mommy *loves* getting to work in this part!”

And in line with her explanation, the bookshelves in the area had dropped to about a quarter in height, offering a predominantly more colorful selection of reading materials. The basic adverts and plaques now didn’t go without caricatures and eye-catching designs. Friendly cartoon faces, rainbows, bees and butterflies. Letter blocks and stylized book graphics.

The marble was sectioned by a sweeping rubber trim that defined the difference between professional flooring and colorful carpeting. Circles, squares, triangles and pentagons of varying size and shade were on the floor. The walls on the way back had painted clouds and flowers with smiling faces and more. If the demographic for the library was somewhere in the middle, this corner of the world they had reached was far beneath that.

In fact, along that rubber trim was a simple but effective faux white picket fence sectioning off the large area. Hanging above the ceiling in a large sign, right above the opening to the pen was labeled “LITTLE LEARNERS CORNER.”

The kids section. This was the corner dedicated for kids.

“Ta-da!” Grace excitedly cheered, stepping inside. The centerpiece of the area was a small clearing, covered with a few big and lush bean bag chairs and plush cushions. At the end and designated as the throne though was a large Amazon-sized rocking chair. Dawn didn’t need any actors to figure out what she was looking at. The story time area.

“This is where all the kids can come and read some really cool stuff! Wanna explore a little?”

And before Dawn could refuse, she was being set on her feet.

The bookshelves were shorter, yes, but that still put them well above the girl’s head. It was vexing to think that even the most childish parts of her favorite hobby still exceeded her physical abilities.

“Wanna grab a book? It’s okay, you can!” Grace assured, and suddenly permission was given to investigate.

Curiosity kept her slightly invested though. After all, books were books. She came up to a bookshelf tracing her finger along the wooden edge of the shelf, trying to spot anything at least

worth looking at. Finally, she landed on a thick spine and pulled the book out, pleasantly surprised that it could mostly fit in her hands.

Though, that was where the pleasantries ended.

Yes, the book was thick, but not with content. Thick with a cardboard like material. The pages were far from thin, and the count couldn't have been more than ten pages total, front to back. Before even reading the title she tried to skim with her fingers, but the pages obviously didn't bend like paper did, leading to a methodical finger for each thick cardboard page.

It was more illustration than words. Sentences stopped within eight words. A "paragraph" at best was three sentences at most. Then she read the title on the front.

“KEEPING COZY”

All capital letters. Not very hard to read. By design.

Dawn sighed, slipping it back in. Okay, fine. Unlucky. She moved over to a different shelf, a bit more hopeful.

Thankfully this one wasn't cardboard, but it was thin...

A low page count. With illustrations, lots of them. Thirty pages, at most, but the words could only account for forty percent of the page... The pages were wide, just so the cartoon drawings could fit. Only then did the imagery of discarded toilets, empty bathrooms and smiling children in nurseries make her concerned enough to read the title.

“Potty Playtime!”

“Ooou!” Grace commented from above, making the girl realize that she was in fact being watched. “That’s a fun one! Was some of it hard to read? If you want, we can set it aside to read for later?”

Clearly her disdain had been mistaken for reading incomprehension. “N...no thanks...” Dawn tried to stay calm, slipping it back where she found it. She quickly made for a different shelf. *Please, don't let door number 3 disappoint.*

She moved and walked, trying to ignore her crinkle, and suddenly felt drawn to the higher shelves behind the rocking chair. Just by the distribution of size and width Dawn was feeling far more hopeful there. Content she had no idea, but maybe for being much closer to actual stories?

Her hands latched onto a book far bigger than what she had just been touching. Amazon-sized, maybe? But just as she was starting to slide it out...

“Ah-ah!” Grace tutted and Dawn watched her hand invade her vision and firmly press it back in. “Sorry, Dawn! Those are the ones the grownups read to everyone. Why don’t we go check out some other books?”

Grownups only? Dawn scrunched her eyebrows and frowned.

Turning in place, she looked up at Grace. “So why can’t I touch them?”

Without skipping a beat, the Amazon explained, “Because those are for grownups, sweetheart.”

“So I can’t read them?”

“It’s a rule, honey. Books need to be taken care of, so that’s why you can’t touch the ones on that shelf, okay? Those ones are a little too big for you, but I promise you can see them once we start story time?”

And like that her curiosity was dying fast. Not allowed? Against the rules? She turned and made a beeline for the exit.

“Whoa, where are you off to?” Grace chuckled, having no trouble at all to keep ahead, and the audacity to lift Dawn and turn, positioning the Amazon between her and the exit.

“I want to read books. *Actual* books,” Dawn frowned.

“And there’s plenty to read here?” Grace smiled, but the look wasn’t reciprocated.

“Why can’t I go out there?” Suddenly the white picket fence surrounding the space felt less like decor and more of a functioning container.

“Because it’s easy to get lost, honey. We have plenty of fun stories to read here?”

Sure, she had to behave, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t list her grievances, right? “I don’t care about the books here. I wanna go see what else is around here.” Go explore the big shelves. The genres and topics. Anatomy of foxes. Nothing about cozy playtime and feel-good fantasies that lasted for ten pages! The only reading material in here was assuredly for first graders and below, and that felt like a stretch. Kindergarteners, maybe?

But firmly, she was denied. “No, Dawn. That’s a rule we have here.”

“Wh-what? What rule?”

“No Littles are allowed to play with the books.”

E...

Ex-fucking-cuse me?