

24 - Laissez Faire

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Your shoes?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...So you finally see my point?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...More cartoons?” she sighed.

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

“Take it or leave it?”

“Take it or leave it.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What was she supposed to do with it?

The burden of choices.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“...Thanks.”

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

Now what?

Go upstairs?

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

Ones she was willing to bend.

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

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

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

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

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

He's an electrician or whatever, right?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Waver, no!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

So much for secrecy.

“Dawn?” James was the first to speak, and either saying the name made him realize who was listening or someone in his meeting said something themselves, he quickly stammered with his head turning back to the screens. “Ah– no, uhm, sorry about this, everybody! I just need too– sorry? N-no, she’s my– our, our uhm... I-I’m sorry, if you could please just give me a minute...”

“It was Waver that came in, I was just seeing where he was going...!” Dawn threw out the first excuse that came to mind as she stood on her feet.

After a few quick clicks from his station, James was walking over.

“Sorry,” he took a knee just to make an attempt at leveling the playing field. “What’s wrong, what did you need?” Either he didn’t even bother listening to her excuse or he just didn’t believe it.

“I... I was just listening... I can do that, can’t I?”

And all James did was exhale softly.

“What?” Dawn frowned defensively. “Can I not?”

“Your timing is just really lucky, is all.” And yet given the circumstances, she couldn’t help but feel that “lucky” was just another poor shot at hiding the truth from her legitimate inconvenience. Dawn wasn’t dumb. She could hear the awkwardness in his voice just a second ago. She caused a scene, and the thought of how she must have looked was making her blush. She was just the runaway toddler that barged in on the parent’s business meeting. By making herself known to his colleagues, she just ruined whatever sense of professionalism he may have had. But then she slightly looked beside James and at the dog bed, hoping the blame was somehow shared.

It was weird and embarrassing and Dawn was quite ready to take her leave.

“Did you need a change?” And just like that she was thrown off her game.

“What?” Dawn gave him an unpleasant look.

“Dawn, you need to stop looking like you just ate a bug every time Katherine or I ask you a question you don’t like...” It was barely even scolding, given the grin on his face. “Do you need me to check?”

“No, I do *not* need you to check anything!” and she took a step back defensively. “I’m *fine!*”

“Okay, okay,” and he held up his hands then glanced back over at his desk.

And before he could try roping her into anything else, Dawn turned on her heel to walk away.

“Ah– hey!” James called in a friendly manner, then gestured her right back over. “Sorry, but you gotta stay in here for the rest of my meeting.”

Of all things, she wasn’t expecting that. “Why do I have to stay in here?” Was this supposed to be a punishment?

“Because,” and he briefly pointed at his monitors. “All my friends at work saw you, hon.”

“*And?*”

“Dawn? Attitude,” he warned with a small smile, and that only made the girl want to mouth off even more.

But she begrudgingly didn’t, bursting aloud in frustration, “Great, so then how does that affect me? So what if they saw me!”

“*So,*” James started, then let the suspense hang for half a second, “that means they all know I work home alone, Dawn. We’d be in a lot of trouble if they ever thought I wasn’t watching you properly, okay?”

“Ugh– so it’s *proper* to keep me caged up in your office like...like...! Like *him?*” and no offense to the pointed-at, but frankly it couldn’t have been a better example. Poor Waver sat at the end of Dawn’s smoking gun, and without an ounce of understanding in his head, he cutely tilted it instead.

“Dawn, if we were doing things properly, you wouldn’t be here right now.”

And that cut deep as well as confused her. “N-not...? W-well, obviously! Yeah, I wouldn’t be here! I’d be *home!*” He wanted to use his own shortcomings against her? *Now?* Of all times?

“No,” and he arched his brows, “You would either be with Katherine or at Daycare.”

His point was dismissed on the basis of complete stupidity, at least ruled by justice Dawn. She closed her arguments by shouting back. “I’m not going to some *stupid* daycare!”

“And we’re done using the word ‘stupid,’” James’ smile finally sunk below the horizon and became a frown. And he stood back up straight, walking right by the girl into the hall.

“Okay...let’s get these blocks packed up and in the office. Did you wanna help?”

“No, because I’m not playing with any st–... any blocks at all!” Christ, why was she actually censoring herself? For the person that’d beat her backside if she didn’t?!

“My meeting is gonna be for about an hour,” James explained over the clinking, clacking and scraping of blocks sliding across the hardwood floors into their tub. “Girl’s gotta have options, right?”

Every effort to connect was another limp-fish handshake in Dawn’s eyes. Where they met was questionable at best, and even those moments were offset so far by the Amazon continually exercising his complete indomitable authority that superseded her own emotions and feelings at the end of the day. Whether she caved or not didn’t matter. As she watched him carry her one toy she barely even asked for into the office, it was clear just how much control she didn’t really have.

“Come on, don’t be grumpy,” James encouraged good vibes again as he walked by one more time, “Where did you put your sippy cup?”

“Don’t know...” At least if she answered he couldn’t use that against her, right?

“Right...here!” James drove by the couch, swooping his arm down like it was a sport. He wiggled the relatively small lid-covered cup in front of his eyes like a scientist with a test tube. “Hmm... Yeah, let’s top you off.”

The stupidly cheery and dedicated attitude was getting to the girl practically nailed against the doorway into his office. She couldn’t say what she wanted nor express herself in any real way that wouldn’t get her in trouble, so she annoyedly swung her foot in the air, wishing there was *something* she could hit without punishment.

“Don’t you need to hurry up to your meeting?” Dawn shouted down the hall before sighing under her breath. Why did she even care? Was this trying to stall? Even if it was, she doubted something as foolish as that would get by him.

“They have other stuff to talk about, so don’t worry, I’m making good time.”

And naturally, of course Dawn's conscience was at ease. After all, the man partly responsible for trapping her in this god awful dimension was now free from any kind of pressure to get back on time. Wonderful. Truly. Now Dawn could sleep at night.

James was the first one back in the office, and Dawn was the last, forced by a patient, yet expectant look from her warden for the day.

"So you expect me to play with blocks for an hour?" Dawn caught him right before he could slip his headphones back on. Not that she would *ever* say it out loud, but at least there was something she could listen to or watch out in the living room. Her only other source of entertainment was muffled behind headphones, and frankly now the idea of James' one-sided conversation sounded a whole lot less interesting. Ignoring the blocks entirely, she walked by them and sat down by Waver, partially falling back into his dog bed. Her eyes couldn't have shown any less life if they wanted to.

She expected to be ignored as always and for James' meeting to resume, but from the corner of her supposedly disinterested eye he still watched her.

"Did you wanna play a game?"

With her arms still crossed, Dawn turned her head with a skeptical look.

"A game?"

"Yep," he nodded, "a game." And something unexpected happened. Very unexpected.

James picked something up from his desk. It was large and a deep, dark green. It was rectangular and fit in his hand, but it looked like a small tablet to Dawn. By the way he touched and swiped his fingers on it...it seemed like it was digital. *Digital?*

James came out of his chair one last time and Dawn was taken aback by what was being held in front of her.

A screen.

A handheld screen. Digital, pixelized. LEDs and lights. Stuff that wasn't rudimentary toys or just lifeless blocks. It felt weighty once he settled the device between her much smaller hands. She could feel now what was a dark green, rubber-like phone case hiding away the metal trim. It was a phone. A phone! A-a screen, and...

“Now Dawn, *please* be extra careful with this, okay?” James warned. “This is a *very* expensive phone okay, and you can’t go treating it like a toy—”

“I know how to treat a phone! I’ve had one my whole life!” Dawn desperately interrupted, and yet trying to prove her case only seemed to make it worse for herself.

“Do I need to take this back?” James warned, and true horror befell the girl’s face.

“N-no! Please! I’m sorry!” As strong-willed as she wanted to be, this was her first taste at something she actually wanted, especially when just yesterday Katherine had made it seem like something she would never have. Katherine disapproved of even the most pitiful ways the girl could be digitally enabled, and yet here James was, dropping a golden goose right in her lap. Even if it was just to pacify her, she’d give in whole-heartedly, just this once, just to enjoy a legitimate freedom...!

“Okay, so I’m gonna say it again,” James explained nice and slow, and Dawn was just itching to tap a screen. “Please be extra careful with this, okay? I want you sitting when you use this, and keep it in your lap at all times.”

Done, done, and done. She nodded clearly and quietly, showing total obedience for the first time in...well, ever.

“Okay?” he fished for an answer.

“Okay,” Dawn nodded readily back. Some might find it pathetic how quickly she caved, but the beauty of her withdrawal was that she didn’t know how bad it was until the substance itself was dangled right in front of her. Needless to say, now she was itching for her fix.

It wasn’t her phone and she wouldn’t even be using it like one. It was a loan from James on whatever game he was putting in front of her, but it was so much more than nothing at all. She was being trusted to hold something expensive; something that wasn’t intended for kid– *intended* for enslaved Littles. Christ, was she really this excited over a temporary privilege? Whatever, it didn’t matter. Just having a phone on her person again was empowering, even if that was a total, helpless delusion.

“This is a game I like to play a lot,” James pointed down at the screen, and it was a basic square grid with but a few numbers filled in. “The goal is you put in a number from one to fifteen for every square so that all the columns,” he traced his finger up and down, “all the rows,” finger from left to right, “and even the big diagonals,” top left corner to bottom right, top right to bottom left, “add up to the same number. Cool, right?”

At this point he could punch her in the face and she'd still be ecstatic. She nodded her head.

“Cool. And if you solve this one, they'll let you move on to the next one. Try playing with a couple of those. And remember, please be careful with my phone, okay?”

“I promise,” and the way she said it came out as if she was pledging her life to protect his firstborn child, or something. The resolve went far heavier than anything like a phone would need, but that's how desperate she was for...*something*. Anything that made her feel like more than a kid, and this was it. Her one little bit of sweet salvation for the day.

Maybe it was a good thing she was being forced to sit down, because her hands were trembling as her excitement boiled over. The things she could do with a phone. Play games, read articles, download web novels...comics...

But James' voice returning to her meeting was the reality check. Without consideration or planning for anything else, Dawn made the rare decision to finally focus on something in the moment.

The front of the phone was empty of any actual tangible, physical buttons. It really was just a screen, much like she remembered her actual parents and grandparents dubbing them... It was big, again, like a miniature tablet. She was curious, but she quashed that side of herself just so she couldn't walk herself into losing an invaluable privilege.

The game seemed simple enough and the grid really was small. Four squares for every up, down, and across, and a few numbers already dotted the grid. She tapped on an empty square and an array of choices came to life; one to fifteen, just as she was told. Though, she did pause to consider that it was a weird range of options. Why all the way up to fifteen and not something like nine?

Either way, she wasn't going to college for numbers for a reason, but at least the concept of this game didn't escape her. It was about logic. Isolate the minimum or worst-case, then scale from there... Figure out what works, what doesn't, and what needs to be tweaked. Until finally...

LEVEL COMPLETE!

And it was stunning. Gears had finally turned and more than just angering and frustrating thoughts had gone through her head. It was a game she could play and keep her brain sane at the same time. She couldn't help but smile from ear to ear, just looking at the button to continue. The next level that could give her the same clean, unadulterated dopamine hit that she felt okay

enjoying. It was everything she wanted. Soon the grids got bigger and she was taking longer, but it was enough to occupy her brain. She tapped and tapped, glad to finally be engaging with something. She didn't even play with things on her own phone, once upon a time. Right now was just a testament to how starved she felt. What was embarrassing to admit, which she'd never say out loud, was that this wasn't a game for herself, and that's exactly why she was so willing to partake.

This was a game that James played, and if an Amazon could play it, somehow that made it acceptable to Dawn. As much as she had been forced down the baby drain, she would never dig herself deeper willingly. And since James played it...

Thankfully games were universal. It was minimalistic but not without navigation icons. She surfed through the menu, coming upon all the levels she had progressively worked her way through, Come to find out though they'd all been beaten before. Figures. She only made it a quarter way through a page belonging to countless tens of more. And they likely got harder and harder... And yet, each and every one of them she saw was completed with full marks. How much did James play this? Curious, and over ten pages deep, Dawn looked at one of the levels and was suddenly taken aback.

More than five, more than ten—fifteen? Fifteen by fifteen squares lined the grid, partially filled all the way through. The sheer size made the girl's head hurt, especially when just to see the entire scope of the titanous board she had to minimize so much of what she could see. James could do this? Dawn quietly tapped on a square at random, hardly even fathoming where to begin.

Maybe if she had a piece of paper, or a spreadsheet she could brainstorm options that would likely be just as fruitless, but what she saw seemed far from a lackadaisical experience.

"J...James..." Dawn muttered with her eyes still on the screen, then she spoke more clearly, "how you even—? O-oh," and she stuttered right back once she remembered why she was being distracted by his phone in the first place.

Her small mention was enough for him to lean back and swipe his ear cup to the side.

"Sorry, what's up?" James asked, and Dawn for the briefest of moments actually felt guilty.

"N-nothing... Sorry...about that."

“We’re wrapping up in a few minutes, so don’t worry, we’re almost done,” James assured her in a way that she wasn’t particularly looking for, but somehow she imagined making that clear wouldn’t have stopped him from the way he did, nor Katherine.

So she looked down at the screen, still in confused awe while she drank some juice, wondering just what kind of way James approached this kind of game. Did he keep a notebook nearby for it?

There were many things to wonder and consider, and the only thing that kept her from brainstorming more was the sudden buzzing device in her lap. The phone vibrated as Dawn jumped at the unexpected surprise.

INCOMING CALL: KATHERINE

Katherine...? Katherine. Obviously. It was her first time seeing the name written down as far as she could remember. Just like how she imagined the spelling, but reading it was new... Reading anything, for that matter.

Her first instinct was to look up at Joyce, still with his back turned. He was talking about something. More about nanites and upkeep of conduit material...? Again, it all meant nothing to the girl, which is why she summed it all up to James being busy.

But God forbid she hang up on Katherine or let the call go. All she could think of was herself in regards to how the woman would react, hence why she cautiously answered the call. The plan was simple: answer, explain James was busy, put in a good word for herself, and let that be that. Not to mention, even if it wasn’t meant for her, she *did* get to talk on a phone again...

“Hey, hon!” Even when she wasn’t in the flesh Dawn could still hear her rosy smile. Half a second of nothing went through the phone waves. “James?”

“S-sorry,” Dawn checked back in. “Uh, hi, Katherine.”

“Dawn?” The confusion was potent in her voice, but no less cheery. “Hi there, honey! Did James put you on so you could say hi? Are you behaving?” The last question came with a slight bit more seriousness, and Dawn was already looking to give up her one phone call.

“No, James is in a meeting right now,” Dawn, the trust secretary, explained in a lowered voice. “I figured I’d let you know.”

“Well thank you so much for telling me that!” Katherine praised, and Dawn felt no more proud. “But sweetheart, what are you doing with James’ phone?”

“...To answer your call?”

“Does he know that you’re using it?” Her voice was soft and patient, yet it sounded like a parent erring on a gentle scolding for something cute that their kid shouldn’t be doing.

“Yes, he knows. Did you want me to take a message for him?”

“No thank you, but thank you for asking that,” she chuckled, and what Dawn hoped to spin as a productive and helpful moment was turning into nothing more than a gaslighting session. “Are you being quiet right now for James?”

Thankfully there were no faces to be seen on either end, which is why Dawn could get away with a silent sigh. “Yes, I am. He’s in a meeting.”

“Okie-dokie. I’m gonna hang up now, okay? And Dawn, once I do, can you please give James back his phone? I know it’s cool, but these aren’t toys like your blocks, so please—”

“--Yeah, sure.” It was as blunt and to the point she could have been. Yet again her words were not getting through and it hardly felt like she was believed. It was the best she could do without shouting all over again and compromising James. Just maybe one Amazon would be in her corner on this one. What’s more, she didn’t have to listen to a damn thing Katherine told her because she wasn’t here to enforce jack, including misunderstandings that Dawn apparently wasn’t credible enough to explain herself.

“Thank you very much. Be good for James and I’ll be home soon, okay?”

“Yep.”

“Bye-bye...!” and finally the call ended. Rather than moving from her spot, Dawn doubled down, wiggling against her wall of slumbering fur and sitting in the dog bed, doing exactly what she wasn’t told and going back to her game. The easier levels, of course.

A little bit later and James was finally stretching from his chair with a triumphant roar.

“Aghh! All done!” he sighed with relief, and Dawn feigned interest behind her sippy cup. “Sorry we had to coop you up like this, but thank you for behaving.”

“Why do you have to say ‘behaving’?” And since James was actually here, unlike Katherine, she tried to tone down the facial expressions. “I was quiet because it was the *polite* thing to do. I don’t do it just to make you guys happy.”

“Then in that case, thank you for being so polite,” James smiled with a chuckle, and the verbiage was sounding annoyingly familiar all over again.

“Is it lunch time?” Dawn rose from her throne, but spun back around, lifting with both hands and holding out the large device. “And...thank you for letting me use this.”

“If you’d like you can use it again later.”

Again?

Again...?

Did he really just say that?

Just like that, for once, miraculously, a bridge hadn’t been burnt. An opportunity was given and renewed.

“R...really?” Dawn sounded hesitant.

“What, did you not like the game?” James glanced down at the screen. “Oh wow! You didn’t make it this far, did you?”

“Hardly... how did *you* make it that far?” Dawn frowned as she stood on her toes just to see where he lowered the screen. “Do you really use a piece of paper to solve this stuff?”

“Paper?” he chuckled, “what would you need that for?”

“To...plan? Don’t you see how big this grid is? How else are you supposed to solve it?”

And the disconnect showed when he tilted his head. “Yeah? Well, let’s take a look...” and he squatted with the screen easily visible to both parties now. His finger started tracing items on the map, “So we have this...that...those...mhm...okay, yep. So imagine this *one* big square into a lot of smaller ones. Somewhere around the size of—”

“W-wait, you’re not actually solving it right now, are you?” Dawn stammered in disbelief, and James was clueless.

“Why not?” he grinned.

“Y-you can just solve this in your head?” He sounded so confident, like the answer was living in his head and all he had to do was dumb it down for the disadvantaged audience.

“It’s not too bad?” and James was back to tracing out spots. “If you think about these rows and this column here...” and he sectioned off four independent series of would-be sums, “let’s think about what combinations we could do here to make them equal, which would start with...” And somehow, in some way, James proceeded to explain, but ultimately show, that he was somehow capable of tracking five different series of numbers, how to arrange them and affect their sums, all without a second guess. It was as if he was asked two plus two.

“Mm...” Dawn quietly nodded without a modicum of honesty. She didn’t understand the first thing about his explanation, more intrigued and frightened by how seamless it just was for him. “Don’t...don’t you play games to *de*-stress from work?” and Dawn forced a laugh, trying to point out what she hoped was some very obvious absurdity.

“Oh yeah!” James nodded confidently. “Crunching numbers like this can help me relax a little,” he laughed. “These are some easier ones. I think my favorites are the product ones. Like when you multiply them?”

“Yeah...” Dawn again nodded with a distant and depressed understanding. It only made sense though, right? He was bigger so that meant a bigger brain... That’s all it was. Whatever they lacked in emotional and moral understanding apparently they made up for it in sheer brainpower...

“As long as you’re careful you can play with that again, but let’s not tell Katherine, okay?”

Well shit. “Don’t tell her...?”

“I made sure you were out of view, but no, we probably shouldn’t be letting you play with that sort of stuff right now... At least not while LPS is around.” And like that, all roads lead to Rome.

“Uhm... Katherine called while you were in your meeting.”

“Oh, did she?” James nodded, then paused. “Oh– I see!” and he laughed. “Well, never mind, I guess! Did she leave me a message?”

Dawn shook her head. “Nothing Katherine wanted to say with me hearing, I guess. Wait, when you do talk to her, can you put it on speaker so I can hear?”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’re gonna be talking about *me*?” Dawn let the impatience overflow for just a second.

“Dawn...” and he popped his lips. “If I told you the world was gonna blow up and we’d all be swimming in space, what would you do?”

“What?” How the hell did they go from ruining lives to blowing up planets?

“If I tell you something that you can’t control, I can’t control, and something that’s only gonna stress you out, would you really wanna know anything at all?”

“So what– ignorance is bliss?” Dawn came back with a scoff. “And no, Katherine *and* you decide what happens to me, so you *can* control it! Besides, if the world is gonna blow up, at least I wouldn’t have died an idiot never knowing and appreciating the rest of my life!”

“You know, that’s actually something really interesting to talk about?” James smiled, but he stood back up. “Ready to go get some lunch?”

“Were we not just talking about something very important?” Dawn tried to stay still, but the crinkles from her diaper suggested otherwise.

“We were, but nothing that needs to be talked about right now. But actually something that does; do you need a change, you think?”

“Do I...?” If only she could connect the dots as fast as James could do impossibly annoying mental math. “N-*no*! I don’t need a change! A-and when I... When *I* decide I want one, *I*’m doing it and no one else!”

“And once you can take off your diapers by yourself, we’ll talk about that. But I’m gonna assume you’re all set,” he hung by the doorway. “Now come on, we gotta get your sneakers on before we go out.”

She’d been slighted and she certainly did not like it, but she moved on. “We’re getting takeout...?”

“I don’t think anyone likes going to the doctor’s, or the dentist. Not me, at least,” and he audibly shuddered. “I know we started off a little bumpy this morning, but I know going someplace new can be tough.”

“That’s not...!” New places meant stressful situations? Suddenly she wasn’t expressing herself; it was the stress apparently from new circumstances. A kid without their routine that didn’t know how to keep their emotions in check because it was all sorts and flavors of unfamiliar. It sure-fucking was, but Dawn knew how to keep herself together. When she was pissed or upset it was because she damn well knew that the time called for it. But trying to explain any of that was either likely to fall on deaf ears or undo whatever supposed sympathy James had for her right then. “What...whatever.” Dawn strolled right past the man, heading for their shoes.

“Hey!” James beckoned, then finally whistled. “You’re coming too!” James clapped his hands and a dog collar jingled.

A company of two was now a three.

“Can I get a supreme meal please and one Little’s meal?” James spoke into the mic from the driver’s seat.

“I don’t need a Little’s—! Hey! Stop!” Dawn tried to voice her protest, but unfortunately the one person not getting food was licking the side of her face. “Q-quit it!” she shouted like the words existed in the dog’s library of commands, and now he nuzzled his head against her face. While she would have liked to push him away, her car seat made that frustratingly impossible.

“I’ll get what you’re getting!” Dawn tried to interject, and James sighed.

“You’ll think it’s too spicy,” James explained rather than warning, making it clear that there was no room for debate.

“And for drinks?” the worker asked over the speaker.

“Uhh, Pola for me, and fruit punch for the Little’s meal, please?”

Pola? Annoying dogs aside, now Dawn could consider an uncanny similarity with her own world...

The meal was paid for, Waver kept pacing between Dawn and the empty side where he could gaze out the window, and James listened to the quiet music on the radio that thankfully wasn't nursery rhymes. It was as if his existence wasn't just to serve Dawn's. Go figure.

“What even is this place? Like a McDonalds, or something?”

“Huh?” James laughed. “Who's Donald?”

“The person who came up with the thing. Where are we again?”

“This is a McLittles.”

“Interesting.”

One weird coincidence after another.

“Don't expect this to be a regular thing, by the way,” James said as he adjusted his mirror.

“Treats don't come all the time.”

“It won't be regular because I'm going home soon,” Dawn huffed as she crossed her arms. Sooner couldn't come soon enough.

“We're working on it...” James soothed as the car rolled forward. “Thanks!” and bags crinkled their way in the car. “Ah—! Waver, stay!” he ordered his companion to halt, and somehow his words worked far better than Dawn's. Come to think of it, for a man so smart, why did he decide to bring a dog into a car with hot and fresh food and expect him to be obedient? By the way Waver whined into a slump on the seat, Dawn couldn't help but feel a sense of comradery with their predicaments. Then again, given the dog got to pee when and where he wanted, the sense of being equals was feeling wishful at best.

“How much longer do you work after lunch...?” Dawn aimlessly asked as the scenery passed by them on the road home.

“Just a little while longer, not a lot. I'm thinking I'll be done and Katherine'll be back by the time you get up from your nap after lunch.”

And again, springing all these “surprises” on her. The end of the fucking world. But she answered it in a way that at least made her seem unbothered. “I'm not taking a nap. Don't need one.”

“You’d be surprised how sleepiness can sneak up on ya?” James laughed, “I know I can be the same exact way once my head hits the pillow.”

“Mm. Yeah, sure, but I’m all set.”

“Then you’re gonna be awfully bored in your crib for the next couple hours. Dawn, let’s not argue about this, okay?”

“I’m not arguing– I’m just saying that I don’t need a nap!” So much for sounding calm.

“And that’s okay, but I’m saying that you do. You took a nap for Katherine the other day, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but that was just so I didn’t have to go anywhere else! Ugh...did she even tell you about that shitty–”

“*Dawn?*”

“It was an accident! Fine! My bad! That...” Christ, what was left in her arsenal if she couldn’t even call something stupid?! “That *very* ‘not fun’ place at the library, including the person working there. It was horrible. At least I didn’t have to talk to anybody when I was sleeping...”

“Mm...well, Katherine *did* say that you sounded a bit better after your nap, though? I know at least for me I can be a bit grumpy when I haven’t slept enough.”

“Yeah– if I don’t sleep a full eight hours, or whatever– or however long people sleep here... Is it possible, just maybe that it’s not me getting cranky, and instead just everything being as horrible as I try to say it is?”

“Hmm...well, I think if you want some time to yourself, spending that in your crib is just the way to get it.”

A shitty, halfway-right point, indeed. Again, twisting the logic and reason just to put her in the same place. As far as James was concerned, he’d put on whatever dressing Dawn liked just to get her where he wanted or was told to put her. Even when she wasn’t here Katherine could still be so oppressive...

“I still don’t want to.”

“Dawn? Do you think you could throw me a bone?” James tried to reason. “I know the doctor’s wasn’t fun, and I know you don’t like naps, but I feel like I’ve given you a lot of free time this morning, you got to play that game, and now I got us lunch? Do you think we could do a little more give and take?”

And while James professed himself as just a cog in the machine, Dawn knew, deep down, that he had far more wiggle room than he was letting on to. He claimed he was making compromises and going out on a limb for her, when she somehow knew that he was hardly making an effort. Sure, he did nice things, but anything at this point could feel nice if it was even a degree away from whatever sick mantra that doctor had been injecting their brains with.

“I’m not eating in the high chair,” Dawn pivoted as she was petting the dog head hanging over the armrest of her car seat.

“That’s a no can do,” he sighed. “You have to eat there.”

“Come on! Can I seriously not be trusted? Just...just let me eat on a towel, or something!”

“We have one dog in the house, not two,” James laughed. “I’m saying no because that food is for you, not Waver. He’s obedient, but even he likes to be mischievous...” and they made one last turn back into the neighborhood, pulling into the driveway. “Now come on, we’re gonna eat a yummy lunch, sleep for a little bit, then Katherine will be back to hear about all the mean things I did to you all day.”

And yet the only crimes Dawn could accuse James of were the ones where she benefited from them. As immovable as he was, even Dawn knew better than to think he was somehow worse than Katherine... And yet, the best to offer still sucked so much.

Inside, in her chair, spread out on a paper bag was quite the marvelous spread. A small pile of animal-shaped nuggets, breaded and admittedly nice-smelling, two containers of brown and caramel-shaded sauces, and unmistakably fries peeking out of a small paper packet. That was all she had for food, and apparently it came with a show as well.

“What is this?” Dawn frowned at the plastic duck on two legs. She swiped at it and cranked the dial on the back. Over and over.

“I wish my meals came with a toy, you know,” James pointed with a fry, and Dawn set it down, pointing the duck at the edge of the table, right where the autonomous machine marched and quacked to its own death. Right off the table.

“Boom!” James sounded with the crash on the floor, picking it back up. “Ohh...hey, how about this?” And Dawn ate a few fries, tasting similar to what she might expect, albeit slightly sweeter. She watched him spin the dial and he pointed it at her. But it didn’t walk. It hopped?

It lurched and jumped, and the girl was confused, glancing up at the Amazon like he may have just performed some kind of black arts, or something.

“How did you...?” and Dawn reached up and out to catch the toy mid-leap, missing it entirely until it fell into her lap.

“A trade secret,” James chuckled before a bite into his burger.

The toy certainly felt sturdier than she remembered having back on Earth, like it wasn’t meant to just last the afternoon, or the same amount of time it took to digest the meal that the trinket came from.

But the magic was undone once she saw that the dial not only wound up, but pivoted in four different directions like a lever. She pushed and watched it move back, this time spinning in place before springing forward.

“Cool, right?” James smiled, but Dawn didn’t, just watching it move. She even sipped some of the fruit punch (that James put in her sippy cup first) before answering.

“They build them better here, I guess.” The food was putting her in a bad mood. It was good. Unbearably good. It was sweet, but it did something; it irked her in an annoying way the way she wanted more, like salty chips out of a bag. A good feeling that didn’t stop coming. She liked the sauces. Both of them, and the chicken crunched just right...

The fruit punch was cool and refreshing. Sweet all the same, yet somehow a different kind of cleanse altogether that complemented everything in that same stupid way... It made her feel content. Good, despite how she wanted to feel.

Fuck it, sure, she was grumpy. Maybe that was the secret, though. She was always grumpy.|

Before she knew it, the juice was gone, and so was her food. The fast food tasted better here, or at least better than she remembered. But still, she stared at James’ side of the table with envy.

“I wanna try one,” Dawn reached out her hand like she awaited an offering.

“What, a fry?” James pulled one out. “What do you say—”

“Please.” Though, it didn’t quite sound like she was pleading for it.

“*One*, and that’s all you get,” James gave her the fry, but not before swiping away her own sauce and swabbing the whole thing through that.

“Hey!”

“Nap time is in a few minutes, so I don’t think you’d want an upset stomach,” James reasoned aloud, and whatever taste Dawn was trying to experience was now significantly dampened by the remnants of her own meal.

She bit and swallowed, and the taste went as much as she might expect, or just as James warned.

Spicy, or rather, over-seasoned. Like it had too much pepper and a slight burn on the mouth. It wasn’t the same as the fire-hot pizza, but it gave the same feeling as her face imploding every time she had a chip covered in vinegar in salt. And somehow her own sauce made this bearable?

“And no,” James suddenly wiped her face clean, “no seconds. All set now?”

“Yep,” she sighed.

“Yep,” James mimicked in a sing-song joking voice. “Definitely sounds a little sluggish to me!”

And on their short trip up the stairs, followed by a curious dog, the fullness in her stomach traveled and moved uncomfortably fast.

“W-wait, I need to...” but she didn’t. It came and went far too easily and far too well, like her bladder was a revolving door. The flood started on its own, barely by Dawn’s command and the warmth filled and dried up fast.

“Need to what?” and coincidentally he adjusted her in his arms, squishing the signs of shame closer against her skin.

“...Nothing... Just...*change*...” she ended in a whisper.

“Just what?” and they were inside the nursery.

“A-a...” her eyes moved over to the dreaded place she wanted to go even less than the crib. “A change...”

James wasn't up to speed, and the girl cringed when he had to press his hand underneath her just to reach the same understanding. She blushed and his thin shirt was now bundling between her embarrassed fingers. Had she really been drinking that much juice all day...? But why was the feeling so unannounced...?

"One change coming up!" James announced, and off to the table she went with a full belly of food, and now slightly less juice. The tapes came off easy for James; the farthest thing from impossible like they were for Dawn. The diaper change was just as demeaning and embarrassing as the first. She wasn't seen as a woman which is why James didn't care, and why it made *him* uncomfortable for her to suggest that she had some sort of modesty to hide.

Like she could compare herself to Katherine.

But she didn't. As different as James was in his way of treatment, they may have gone through different battles, but it was all the same war that used the same powdered battle tactics that puffed white clouds on the girl's crotch.

"Maybe Katherine can give me some pointers?" James shrugged, poking at a kind of humor Dawn would never laugh at, nor would she *ever* want to get used to. She wouldn't stand for it, which was rich, considering she was on her back right then. Even better, with James there wasn't even the chest strap. Either he didn't know or forgot Katherine's warning. And why wasn't she trying to intervene? Because it was pointless? If only the point in pointless though actually meant something. This entire shit and piss show was far too big of an umbrella to effectively target anything.

She was confused, content, and conflicted by the food, the way she was treated, the things she saw and things she was allowed to do. It was horrible, no doubt, but the fact that they tried in their own morbid way made it so much harder to hate consistently and continually. But hate took energy, and so did resistance. Energy was something she felt more and more sapped of when she needed it most. And what sucked was she knew exactly how to get that energy back. In nothing but a shirt and diaper, the answer hit her right upside the head the moment she pressed into it. All its confrontational softness and cool, fluffy feelings.

She knew the answer and how to recharge, but like so much else she didn't want to admit to it out loud or internally. So she didn't. Not a peep.

"Waver, shoo!" James chased the dog out before closing the blackout curtains shut. "Is it okay if I leave a crack in the door?" James asked. Dawn may have looked his way, but she didn't say a word.

“So am I gonna assume you’re okay with that...?” James hummed teasingly.

Dawn rolled over, facing the wall beneath the windowsill.

“Alrighty!” James took it in stride, as always, inching the door closer and closer to being closed, but never quite completely, allowing a slice of sunlight from the hallway to peer through. “Have a good nap; I’ll check on you in a little bit!”

She was digesting her food and laying down finally sapped her of whatever adrenaline she must have been hanging onto. Between the doctor’s and marching around the house all day, was she really this tired? Maybe it was using her brain for the first time in what felt like forever. Something did it, or likely somethings.

Either way, she couldn’t ignore the oncoming tiredness. Her diaper crinkled beneath the single blanket to her name, but it wasn’t enough to keep her awake. Laying on her stomach took care of the awkward bulk between her legs, and going to sleep dry was unfortunately something worth celebrating.

While there was more to go, it seemed like the bulk of the day had been overcome. Katherine was always a can of surprises, but there was this, at least. Time to herself. Reflection. Soothing. Recharging... Resting... Calm...

After a few more waves of fading in and out, finally, she fell asleep.