

“Nao...Naomi?” Daniel’s mouth hung agape, flinching just before he went back to squinting his eyes from the sudden shower of light.

“I heard a noise come from your room,” she blinked tiredly herself, but it already looked as if her energy was coming back. “What happened?”

While Daniel would have liked to think she sounded concerned, he still had yet to determine if any kind of emotion went on underneath her outward demeanor. The novelty of a new outfit on her had dried up completely the moment she started drilling into him.

“I—” Then he remembered.

He remembered what was on his ankles, suspended by the width between his legs, slightly weighed down and stained by something he absolutely could not afford to let her see...

His knees slammed shut like a bear trap, echoing the slap of his skin-to-skin in the small yet spacious room. The entire time he watched Naomi, worried she might somehow notice something. And unfortunately, she did.

Maybe it was a half-squint, or the beginnings of a scrutinizing look, but Naomi’s eyes narrowed down at the quickly panicking boy, trying to hide the accidental mess in his underwear.

For a hopeful redirect he shrouded his crotch hiding between his thighs with both his hands. “I-it’s nothing! I...I just needed to use the bathroom, okay?” Finally some logical distress kicked in, and using it as his weapon, “And why are you in here? Can’t I get some privacy? Please?”

It was a quiet, unnerving moment. The giantess in her nightgown stayed quiet, looking the bathroom over, more than likely displeased to see the trash bin tipped upside down and beneath Daniel’s feet. All he could do was blush and seem impatient, putting on the best act of his life. After all, his dignity depended on it.

And then he saw her nose flare up just the slightest.

Sniffing? She’s fucking sniffing?!

He was about ready to scream bloody murder, but just before he could summon the courage and strength to run wild, Naomi’s hand dropped from the doorframe, leaning back out.

“Please remember to flush once you’re done...”

She didn't close the door, unfortunately, but she was kind enough to leave. With her likely still in earshot, the best Daniel could do was sigh as quietly as he could. Success...!

Finally having his moment to be at ease once again, he contemplated just how badly he needed the bathroom... Most importantly, now without a monster trying to escape from his behind, his stomach didn't hurt anymore... The thought alone of being able to get back to sleep unhindered now sent a wave of relaxation through his muscles. Certainly it was going to be a fruitful sleep. If he could remember the comfort of the bed in a time of pure duress, that said enough on its own.

Once he was confidently "empty," Daniel maneuvered on the toilet seat, scoring the toilet paper that he would have hoped for before a maid confronted him on the toilet. Butt, before he went for his backside, he first tried to address the contraband sitting in his underwear...

He grimaced.

Daniel looked down at memory's past between his legs. What stared back up at him was a long chain of repressed memories. Embarrassing childhood moments, mortifying mishaps, and more. The remnants of the potty training era. All in the past. Buried. Long forgotten. So what was it doing in the present now? Sitting, and smelling in his adult underwear?

With each inch his hand with a wad of paper moved closer to the poo in his underpants, Daniel watched the doorway with a low, nervous breath. Was she even still in the room? What if she was listening? Wait, that'd be really weird, wouldn't it? A maid stalking her guest while they use the bathroom? What the hell, Naomi?!

And before he knew it he was swabbing the mess from his underwear. Somewhat. His heart sank as much as his mess that actually did make it to the toilet bowl. A thin layer of "evidence" was on the toilet paper. Looking back down, barely anything had left and it was assuredly there to stay. Not until they got washed at least.

Just as Daniel went to stomp his foot, clarity struck and reminded him that the metal can was hollow. He didn't need another reason for Naomi to storm in on him.

I'll just have to be discreet... Thank god I packed day clothes...

Clean up (as best he could), flush, try not to cringe as he slides his messy underwear back up his legs, hop off the toilet, and finally move back the trash can where he found it. All done quickly and diligently. Almost. Sluggishly, it was, in fact, all in part to the cold, disgusted feeling he had from the just as cold and unsettling mess well-absorbed into his briefs already.

Thankful for having a long enough T-shirt, Daniel did his best to stay composed once he peered into his room.

His heart nearly skipped a beat once he saw Naomi sitting by the bed. Waiting for him?

“Are you finished?” Naomi rose, already walking over.

Daniel stood by the doorway, keeping his distance right up until the wall behind him kept him in place. “Uh-m... Yeah...”

“You are?” she stopped right in front of him. “I didn’t hear the sink; did you wash your hands?”

Wash his...?

He turned his head like he had missed something, because he did. The sink, of course. The sink that was even higher off the ground than the toilet. Just reachable, had the trash can stool been positioned properly, but well high enough to be completely unnoticed and forgotten in a sheer state of panic by someone so vertically challenged.

“You didn’t?” she finished his thought for him.

Somehow successfully hiding his underpants, yet still caught red-handed, Daniel stammered, “It...it was high, so...”

“No,” Naomi raised a hand, twirling her finger, “back in.”

Naomi took the first step, and just to avoid being crushed Daniel did as he was effectively commanded. Stumbling back into the bathroom, he was about to grab the trash for a new foothold, but a lift-assist was provided before he could act.

“H-hey!” Daniel yelped as Naomi’s hands slipped underneath his pits. He started to swing his legs, but went stiff as soon as he felt the cold mess in his underwear. As his uncomfortable motivator, Daniel’s resistance died fast. Very fast.

Naomi stepped against the sink, sandwiching Daniel between the mold of the marble and a pair of breasts behind his head while she used a free hand to crank the faucet.

“Let it heat up,” Naomi calmly spoke as her eyes wandered on the mirror, and so did Daniel’s.

Her head came far above his and made for a sight Daniel never thought he'd see in his adult years. An experience like this was reserved for his childhood, yet again. Mom's job was helping him get toothpaste on his toothbrush and that was it. Back on the floor, clean his teeth, then one more "rocket ship ride" just to wash off his toothbrush.

Maybe for a moment he thought he was four again getting help from his mom to reach the sink, but then he saw the white hair, the emotionless demeanor, and ultimately a room he didn't recognize and had no relation with. Not by tomorrow, at least.

"Don't forget between your fingers," Naomi added from above, and Daniel listened just to make this go by faster.

"Thumbs, too," she chimed in again.

"I know..."

"Do you?"

"Yes, Naomi, I do..."

And apparently he did, because there weren't any more comments after that.

"Don't leave," Naomi finished before Daniel's feet touched the floor.

"Why? What?" He watched her lean over the sink and grab something, then she dropped to her knees with a bundle of cloth in her hand.

"Come here," she beckoned, and Daniel watched her skeptically, trying to discern the trap.

"Why?"

"Because the sheets only get wet when I wash them; not when you forget to dry your hands."

Her comments always struck with precision and cut like a knife. Thoroughly flustered, Daniel stepped forward, whipping out his hands. Call it childish, but he hoped that some water drops got on her nightgown...

He only looked at her again once his hands felt tingly. A soft, fibrous cloth gingerly wrapped and enveloped his hand, finger by finger as Naomi diligently worked up and down from the base to the tip.

It felt weirdly intimate with how deliberate she was being, but Daniel didn't comment, staying as quiet as she was.

"Dry?" she asked, probably knowing the answer.

Daniel flicked his fingers out like he was a webslinger, all tapped out of water juice.

"Dry," he confirmed.

"Good," Naomi pushed on the floor to stand herself back up. With the flick of the switch the moonlight was welcome once again. "Let's go then. Back to bed."

"What time even is it...?" Daniel looked for a clock, spotting only a mechanical one too far away and shrouded in darkness.

"Late," Naomi abridged the time. "Too late to be up. Too late to be making noise in the bathroom."

"Yeah, well, I had to go," Daniel said back defensively. Feeling the courage to throw some of his own shade in the dark room, "It's not my fault I was forced to eat so much tonight..."

He expected pushback. Another deadpan comment about how it was his fault for "letting it happen," or in some roundabout way just being too much of a pushover. But he didn't get that.

"Did you like the cake?" It was the same topic, but a different section. Trying to remember what any food had tasted like was a sore feeling on the stomach, like bringing back phantom pains. But in spite of that he did remember the final dessert. His birthday dessert.

"...Yes, I did..." Had he not been a build-a-bear with simply far too much stuffing, he actually would've liked to enjoy the sweet. Maybe she saved some as leftovers?

And right before she turned him around to lift, Daniel caught one of her world-famous split-second smiles. "Good."

It almost made Daniel smile. It actually tickled his heart, weirdly enough. Naomi *could* show emotion, yet apparently it happened so infrequently. She was frugal with her moods. Happiness, anger, excitement; she spent up her reserves like she was stuck in some kind of financial depression. Getting week-to-week with just a single smile a day. As just a person struggling to conserve, maybe Daniel was wrong about what he first initially thought...

He soared above the bed and awaited touchdown, willing to endure the nonconsensual lift just one more time for the sake of making it to the bed. But he stopped.

Hanging there in her arms, he was suddenly raised just a smidgen higher. Higher than Naomi, even. So high, it left his butt right in front of...

Sniff.

The moment she sniffed, before Daniel could finish his thought to be mortified he was already deposited onto the bed.

“N-Naomi—I—!”

His world rolled all over when her hand slipped between the bed and his back, spinning him to be on all fours.

No! She can't find out! She can't!

And just as he started his mad dash to crawl to the other end, expectations for this woman dropped faster than his underwear. Wait, his *underwear?!!*

Daniel did successfully start his crawl, yet he failed to notice the maid's finger hooked around the back of his underwear. As soon as he felt his briefs leaving his bottom and slipping down his legs, in a whimper he immediately backed himself up to reunite with the mess he was so desperately trying to conceal.

But Naomi pushed back on his bare bum, severing the connection completely once he sat on the bed with his crotch covered, staring up in horror at the woman with his underpants in her hand.

Like it was some kind of show, revealing to the audience inside and out that there were no tricks, Naomi stretched his briefs and pressed her fingers on the fabric of the crotch, flipping it inside out entirely.

He was forced to see it again before Naomi did, who only half-turned it just to see. She sniffed once more, looking displeased by what her nose was forced to endure. It was a big room, but so was the stench of failure and embarrassment.

“Daniel...?” Naomi didn't stop the way she displayed his accident like it was an art display.

“What is this?”

What was it? Was she going to make him say it?

“U...Underwear...”

“Messy underwear,” she promptly corrected. “You were just in the bathroom, weren’t you?”

And just like when his bowels betrayed him, so did his mouth once he blurted it all out.

“You don’t understand! I-I suddenly woke up and that medicine you gave me must have done it! I really had to go! So I fell out of bed, then I hurried and was gonna make it but I—!”

Yet in three simple words, his tale of tribulations and trials was dismissed. “No, Daniel. Stop.”

They both faced off like they had the first time they met that night, only the situation had become far more damning.

With nothing left to say, Daniel whimpered.

“It...it was an accident...!”

Naomi for once didn’t take in any smells, but rather expelled them. She exhaled, looking down at Daniel’s stain, making the telltale shake of her head. The shaking notion that radiated a world of disbelief and disappointment.

“Goodness...” she murmured pacing around the bed and to the other side with the shameful act dangling from her finger, “and at *twenty years old*...”

Whether it was passive or unintentional, shots had been fired and Daniel winced with each hit, nearing the verge of tears.

Naomi bent down and up with Daniel’s duffel bag in hand, setting it on the bed. “Okay, let’s see...” However, the apex predator was prone to react to noise, just as she was to smell. Naomi lifted her head the moment she heard a snuffle, and not the stench-discerning kind.

“Daniel?”

“Wh...what...?”

“Is everything alright?”

No, it was just smelly. Surely. That's why he couldn't stop sniffing. Sniffing. How humid was it in this room anyway? His eyes were suddenly feeling wet now too. What gives?

"I'm *fine!*" he raised his voice yet it cracked under the pressure of humiliation. He masked his face with his forearms, trying to wipe away the embarrassment between his naked legs.

How could anything be fine?

It was the first time seeing his sister in over a year, on his birthday, and he had been stuffed so full that he could barely even make it to the bathroom...! And if the self-disgust wasn't harsh enough, he'd been caught red-handed by an emotionally distant and strict maid that seemed to only look out for her boss and furniture above all else. Daniel was an object of disgust and ire for the woman, no doubt. He was a walking body that left messes in its trail, one of which was in her hand.

So by coming out tonight and achieving nothing but being a bother and a mess, how couldn't he feel upset? He didn't keep contact for a reason and had been assaulted all night by the same things that made him so distant so long ago.

Daniel moved like his knees were glued together and scooped his way to the other end. "Please...! Just get out already...! I won't make any more of a mess; I'll be gone tomorrow!"

And just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, a new sinking feeling hit him.

Rose.

Rose would undoubtedly find out about this. She had to. It was Naomi's fucking *job* to tell her! Inform her about messes in her mansion, and that included everything inside of it, including the state of Daniel's ruined underpants.

It would be the end of him. Quite literally. There would be no recourse and it would give Rose the final piece she needed to truly cement her little brother as only and forever just that. A little, helpless brother. A brother that needed just as much looking after as she disillusioned herself into thinking since their childhood.

The moment he felt the mattress shift with an added bum, he nearly cried bloody murder.

So he settled for just murder. "Go *away!*" he cried, peeking just long enough between his hands to know what was approaching. "Just get *out!* Leave me alone!"

“Daniel, come here.”

“*No!*” and in a heightened fit of embarrassment and rage, he shouted a crude, “*FUCK OFF!*” that took the breath out of his sails. He huffed tiredly and sadly, not wanting the embarrassing, belittling mantra that Naomi was sure to give. It was always indifference with her, with just a smidgen of judgment and disgust. Maybe tonight was the night she spent it all on the poor boy.

“Danny.” Naomi spoke once more, much more firmly. And before Daniel could cuss her out once more, a large hand had him by the ankle, dragging him away to his doom.

“*Stop! STOP!*” he shouted and kicked, but only his one free foot could flail. The sleek and smooth bedding was too expensive to have any barren stitching or folds for him to grab on with his desperate hands. Soon enough he was right before the beast adorning a nightgown.

He was being lifted, about to be eaten. Thrown? Punched? All the same he winced, too far in his own shell of insecurity to make heads or tails of anything anymore. No better than the mess he made in his own pants.

She swallowed him. Whole. Her insides were dry and airy, like the moon could still shine through her giantess exterior and soft insides. But make no mistake that he was compressed all over. Stuck at the bottom of her gut where he'd be digested and thankfully forgotten by the rest of the world, but especially by the one who saw him at his most shameful moment.

“Danny?”

God, now she was talking to her food? And what, was there a mouth inside of her stomach? Just so she could tease her meals?

“Can you please open your eyes?”

And stare back at the lining of her stomach? He moved his head just slightly, brushing its top above the crevice where the ceiling of his prison was. Soft, just like everything else.

Yet finally succumbing to the mindness and resolving it as his true and final end, Daniel opened his teary eyes to at least meet the insides of his maker.

And inside was the wall of the bedroom.

A window? A looking glass in her stomach? Obviously not.

It was a stretch to have assumed it, maybe, but Daniel was most certainly not eaten, nor inside of Naomi. Though he was in quite close proximity to her. Nuzzled against her stomach beneath her extruded and hanging buxom, Daniel sat in the crevice between her thighs where so much of her silky nightgown pooled together.

He could feel her warmth all over, radiating almost like the heat packs he would use as work, yet so much less artificial.

But he was no less naked from the waist down, sinking into Naomi's lap. It was bewildering and shocking. The most intimacy he ever expected from a person like Naomi was being lifted and just maybe being slapped. But an affectionate move like this?

Was it really Rose that snuck in?

“Are you feeling calmer?”

Like manual breathing, her words forced the realization that his tears had subsided for a substituted shock and uncertainty. He was breathing heavily still and his face felt warm, but the wetness on his face was drying away.

But a lack of crying made room for many things, including more emotional discomfort.
“S-stop...! Let go of me...!”

“No.” Her hands situated themselves comfortably against Daniel's stomach, locking him in her massive body-sized hug. “Not until you calm down.”

“I...I *am* calm! Just let me go!” Let him go and don't force him to confront himself!

“Shh...” an unexpected coo left the maid's lips. “Calm down.”

“Naomi...!” Please!

“Are you embarrassed?”

“Y...yes!”

“Why?”

Why? She knew exactly why. She was just forcing a confession!

“Is it because of what I said?”

Daniel had the ignorance caused by his own crying to have let the wound be forgotten, but Naomi’s reminder brought it back in full force.

Twenty years old. Embarrassing himself like this.

“*Yes!* So let me go! Just let me go back to sleep!” Sleep and somehow forget.

“...I’m sorry.”

“What? I don’t care! I don’t care if you’re sorry!” Sorry didn’t fix anything. ‘Sorry’ didn’t excuse her words. Sorry didn’t make them any less true...!

“I shouldn’t have said that,” she insisted and doubled down, and Daniel’s stamina divided by the same magnitude. He tried to squirm and leave her grasp, but for Naomi it was hardly even an exercise. “I was...surprised, is all.”

Surprised. Like the damage hadn’t already been done. She said what she said because she had meant it! There was no excuse now and there was no backpedaling. How could Daniel even hate her if she spoke the truth? Was she really the problem at that point?

“Just *LEAVE ALREADY!*” Daniel tried to scream, but one of his fasteners covered his mouth and cupped his chin, muffling him completely. The knee-jerk anger from being silenced was immediate, but so was Naomi’s own defense.

“I’ll leave, Daniel, but you need to use your inside voice?” Naomi with all the power and none of the emotion spoke in a way that left Daniel completely to his own devices to figure whether she was angry, annoyed, or simply telling him how it was. “This is a big home, but Rose’s room is not far from yours...”

Waking Rose up? The fear of being found out by her was hitting back again in troves. Naomi dropped her hand and Daniel had gone mute. Everything he was doing was just more ink that stained the record he had no hopes in hiding now. Not when the person who waited on his sister hand and foot personally pulled down his stained briefs...!

She was going to tell her. Everything. All of this. What an unpleasant reminder, and what an unfortunate circumstance. Seeing his own demise before it had yet to happen, and none of the power to prevent it.

Finally the warmth had left once Daniel was lifted out of the maid's lap. Deposited right next to her, the only thing that stopped him from slipping into the sinkhole right next to her leg was Naomi standing back up.

He didn't speak a word as she searched through his bag, pulling out one extra and clean pair of underwear. Meant for the next morning, though, and absolutely not for something like this... Did Naomi see it that way though? He shuddered either from the shame or the sudden chill in the room.

"Okay," Naomi held out the briefs, stretching them open with her fingers hooked inside. All Daniel could do was stare, maybe about to look incredulous. But thankfully it was a false alarm, probably, when after a long moment Naomi took her hands out and settled for setting them on the bed. "...Please put those on before you go back to sleep."

Maybe there was a thanks in order for fetching those for him, but that didn't undo how awkward and ashamed he felt, especially that knife-twisting, off-handed comment she made...! Even if it wasn't with malice or meant to be malicious, that didn't change his reaction. His embarrassment.

While Naomi quietly strode around the bed and to the door, Daniel wasted no time in swiping the cherished article and hiking them up his legs. Feeling at least somewhat whole again, it meant he could look forward to all those wonderful nightmares now of waking up in the morning to deal with his sister's reaction...

"Daniel?"

She hadn't left yet? The hairs on his arms went erect and he could barely turn his head. No, he didn't want to.

"...*What?*" he answered back bitterly.

"I'm sorry again for what I said. I didn't mean it like that... But, I would like for you to also know that...this will stay between us."

Apparently Naomi was a mindreader now too, and Daniel blinked. Ultimately, he really didn't know anything about her, yet that didn't change his assumption for Naomi to be all-telling. It was her job, wasn't it? This was lying, wasn't it? A coverup? It didn't change that she knew what Daniel had done, and that warmed his cheeks, but it supposedly meant Rose didn't know. She wouldn't know. *Ever.*

And so he bit his lip, murmuring, finally turning his head. "...Th...thank..." and in his reveal it was cut short by the soft click of the metal latch from the closing door. Having left it at that, it was just Daniel now. In a bed far bigger than he could ever fill or really want for, embarrassed and confused. All those things, but thankfully, most of all, tired.

Feeling perplexed with a stranger, now acquaintance in his mind, Daniel tried to forget and move on, exploiting the discretion as fuel and fantasy for this whole late night adventure being some terrible nightmare. If he could forget, that's all that mattered.

With a much emptier stomach this time and for the most part all clean, Daniel fell asleep with the weight having gone from his stomach to his conscience. How bloated.

Through the windows and perched atop in the tall, tall trees, somewhere, birds of all species and types chirped and tweeted their morning chatter, starting far earlier than Daniel ever could. Especially after last night. Laying there in a bed fit for a king that he was nowhere near the size of, Daniel laid there motionless, quietly soaking in the white noise muffled by the expansive glass windows. The direct sunlight just stopped short of the side of his bed, and other than the white noise of nature, an absolute silence filled the home.

In any other place or in any other setting it would've been cause for concern. It would've been birthing bumps all over Daniel's skin; every hair would be erect with anxiousness.

But there were no cars here to beep or bonk into one another. No bumper to bumper traffic, or loud yelling from one street-goer to another. No loud, droning buzz from neon signs hanging just outside his apartment. Just Daniel, two others, and a property that made the entire city block he lived on look small.

The silence wasn't eerie because it was simply the standard here. It was the calm without the storm. Pure serenity. The covers he slept under were cool, yet sun-kissed.

Only now was he realizing just how unrealistic this all was. How impossible it seemed. A vacation at most meant a nearby motel in the same dreary city with its only claim to fame being constant hot water.

But a place like this? It was equally bizarre and maddening to consider he had merely gone from a foyer to a dining room then lastly his room, and yet somehow it'd trumped just about anything in his recent life that he could recall. There wasn't any point really in trying to remember

anything for comparison, actually. The moment his room had its own bathroom and his reviews were already this high, there wasn't even a contest anymore.

He had gone from off-brand pot-boiled noodles and straight to caviar. Given what he had last night, the comparison was much more literal.

Certainly Daniel could only have been a man's man to find the strength in slipping out of bed, relinquishing himself of the endless comfort such a mattress could give. His large and mighty chest swelled with strength as he let out a battle cry, or in other words meekly yawned to welcome the next day...

While it wasn't much, the drop from his bedside to the floor startled him for just a second, quickly forgetting the mismatch of himself against just who this home was furnished for. Who it was built for. The phantom impression of himself from last night was still laying face-down on the carpet, making a far less graceful descent to the ground...

That only made his eyes drift along to the half-open bathroom. A place without pleasant memories, and a reminder that last night's nightmare had been a waking one. Praise Naomi for doing either the bare minimum or just unintentionally, but Daniel had easy access to his bag on the floor where a new pair of pants were retrieved and worn. But lastly, his hand found his stomach, grateful for his prized organ somehow surviving the gauntlet that hopefully came only once a year, and this year only.

This home and its meals were assuredly fit for giants, of which Daniel was most certainly not. And as he looked up at the door, his one of hopefully few vertical challenges declared its duel.

It was all custom on top of Daniel being innately vertically challenged, or maybe just his sister being vertically gifted. The knobs were just above his head, the bedframes rose the mattress to his chin, and all but the already oversized duffel bag he had brought was in the least ways accommodating to his size.

He turned the knob and peered both ways down the hall finding nothing but closed doors and sunlight invading windows through the pockets left between the rooms.

It was a big home. Big in the relative and factual sense. Like a mouse, he silently stepped, walking one way down the hall, solely guided by his own curiosity.

The texture in flooring changed once the smooth carpet left his feet, replaced by cool wood that not even the sun itself had a chance at heating in its entirety. He descended the wide set of stairs,

snapping back the other way as he turned for the second half headed further down on the midway landing.

At this point it was no longer just the birds he could hear, but in fact the sizzles and sparks of something cooking. Call him a glutton for punishment, or his stomach a traitorous masochist for even being open to the idea of more food. And yet, with a tinge of newfound hunger as his witness, Daniel followed the scent and sounds.

A door on hinges, yet without a handle is what he came to. Gently pushing it open, the business of a skillet and firey stove top at work filled the kitchen.

Was it the maid cooking? More than likely, as Daniel slowly walked in further, spotting a black uniform just beyond the island between them. Poor Daniel couldn't even see over the counter.

Looking just around the island, he watched the white knot of apron cloth swish and sway, to and fro as she moved back and forth from station to station. Her face looked dulled and disinterested, yet her hands moved like they belonged to someone else.

The way she carefully sprinkled the spice, skillfully flipped the food, perfectly measured pourings from just a glance; it couldn't be done by someone that was truly bored.

Only when a small speck of food fell on the floor between the two did the uniform finally spot her spectator.

"Oh, you're awake?" Naomi commented, bending forward for the food.

"I..." Daniel started, but couldn't help in not watching Naomi finish, nearly brushing the floor clean with how close her chest had come to reaching the floor. Only when Naomi raised her brow, expecting him to finish his sentence, did he.

"Y-yes!" he scratched his head awkwardly. "I'm... I'm awake..." Awake and quickly sheepish at the thought of last night...

After a graceful motion for the trash, Naomi was already working with breakfast again.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah...I did." As well as he could, ignoring an interruption from his bowels...and a certain maid. And yet what really grilled his head was how in spite of that, the comfort that followed couldn't be matched...

The sizzling bacon filled the silence.

"Was the bed not too big for you?"

"S-sorry?" Were big beds not a good thing?

"No, it's nothing. Sometimes smaller spaces can be nice, is all. Relatively speaking."

As plain as she'd said it, Daniel felt the tiniest slight nonetheless. Unsure of it being an actual insult, he went quiet for a moment.

"Uhm...where's Rose?" Better to ask than search in a place like this. They'd be sending a search party after him otherwise.

"Rose likes to spend some time in her office before breakfast," Naomi explained, incidentally offering a side profile of herself while she flipped something in the pan...bouncing her upper half with each flip... "She does a lot of work."

Trying not to notice her assets, "Uhm...you seem like you do too?" Daniel added as he strolled over to the fridge. Jeez. Thank goodness this was for just the weekend. Even then it would've been nice to have brought a personal foot-stool.

But right as Daniel was reaching the fridge, Naomi slipped right between him and it, gingerly forcing him back by the mass of her backside.

"Would you like something?" She asked as she looked through the fridge.

"No...that's fine," Daniel declined, trying not to stare. "I can look after you."

"I'd rather I get you something, then. Your sister may be successful, Daniel, but it's no excuse to waste electricity. Now what is it? Do you want some juice or milk?"

"Uhm..." Maybe juice would've worked a second ago, but it suddenly felt demeaning to accept the offer. "Actually, what about coffee? I'll have that."

Naomi left the fridge with a carton of milk.

He watched her reach for one of the higher cabinets, pulling down a cup. Then...straight into it she poured a glass of milk, handing it to Daniel.

"W...wait, I said coffee?"

"And I haven't made any yet," Naomi put it again in a basic tone. She was already shuffling new things on and off a second pan now in tandem. "I make it once Rose comes for breakfast. Have some milk for now."

Daniel stared down at the white substance. This didn't exactly feel consensual, if that made any sense.

"Uhm...that's fine," he looked for a place to set it down, quickly realizing there was no reasonable spot short enough for him. "I can just wait until breakfast."

While he may have been imagining things, the smallest breath of air exhaled from Naomi, who pivoted back on her foot, clicking her low flat heels with each step, coming straight for Daniel.

In a yelp of surprise he'd been taken by the armpits, pressed against her soft front and plopped onto the edge of the island. The milk was removed from his hand and it, glass and all, was placed in the fridge.

"You can have milk at breakfast, then. Now, would you like a snack? We have fruit." She stood right in front of him, waiting for an answer. It was just crossing the line of personal space, as his toes were forced to brush against her waist-high apron.

Suddenly it had become a staring contest, and quite sorely Daniel was about to lose. Naomi's expression was unchanging. It wasn't spiteful nor was it with disdain, just nothingness. Or maybe a hint of something, but far too deep down for the boy to notice.

"Bananas..."

"I'm sorry?" And in another unexpected move, Naomi leaned in close. Very close. Making Daniel himself have to lean back kind of close. Her ear was just next to his mouth and her expression was innocent, like she truly did just want to hear him better.

Had Naomi's pristine, snow-white hair been just any bit unkempt, or a little unrefined, a poor flustered Daniel would've been feeling it against his skin. And for him, a true master of the opposite sex, couldn't help but notice her subtle, peachy scent.

"Bananas...?" He was much more meek this time. His minimal bravado was quickly shutting down. "Do...do you have any...?"

And Naomi finally pulled back, giving him room to breathe. She gingerly lifted him once more back onto the floor.

"Yes," and finally, a small smile appeared, "we do."

He watched her stroll elsewhere in the kitchen, seeing her hands and feet seeming to move exclusively with purpose. Every movement had a reason and every word was part of a plan. When things were placed, that's where they stayed. When cabinets and containers were opened, she needed not more than a few moments to dwell on what she could already envision. And yet, for someone who always seemed so calculating and efficient, it was striking Daniel uncomfortably with what he had hoped to forget about last night.

A phantom scent somehow overpowered the remnants of peach, eggs and bacon, taking his mind elsewhere much more gross and embarrassing. The same imagery of her judgmental disappointment, her hanging gaze that caught him on the toilet...the hug she gave him...

"Daniel, is something wrong?"

He blinked, realizing that they were staring at one another. Naomi was by the counter, raising the tilt of her knife that was already halfway through something on a plate.

"Wh...what? N-no...everything's fine..." Not really, but if they could keep last night a secret, then that meant his feelings about it would stay as one too, right?

His awkwardness wasn't attacked, so the cutting resumed. Shortly after Naomi's index digit was rhythmically tapping a slender jar, raining a sparkly brown powder down below on the plate. Her work ethic was like magic. The mess and management of the detour in breakfast's preparation was handled faster than it had begun.

"You'll need to sit on the counter while you eat," Naomi said, rather than requested.

"I'm fine eating down here?"

"Puppies eat on the floor, Danny." Was that a joke? "There's no table here to eat at. I can clean up faster if you're nearby."

Sound...points, and since he didn't say anything immediately back, it was all chalked up to more non-verbal consent to lift him once more. Soon he was back on the countertop, though slid back right into the corner where two runs of counter met. He was back to being closer to Naomi's face

level, watching her first before noticing the plate of fruit she slid right next to him. Plump, soft and sweet-looking slices of yellow, glazed atop with some kind of brown dust. A part he didn't request, but that didn't stop the fruit from looking fresh and delicious... Maybe he really was insane for already warming up to the idea of food again, but thankfully memory and sleep could untrain the stomach into being ignorant and fearless all over again.

"Uhm...thank you," Danny said to Naomi, already assorting a different platter of foods to be enjoyed for later.

"You're welcome," she replied much more plainly.

And dining on the snack like the finger food it was, Daniel popped a slice into his mouth. The first sensation was the slick, momentarily firm banana that softly squished into such a delightful taste...! But his taste buds were hit with such a wonderfully unexpected one-two punch the moment a sweetly sharp cinnamon brought it all home. A pairing he never asked for, but one he now knew that he couldn't live without...!

"Where..." Daniel paused his mouthful question just to swallow, "--where do you get your fruit from?"

"A market that's special for produce," Naomi explained quite minimally. "Is it good?" her eyes finally shifted to their corners just to look.

"Y-yeah, it's really good, actually..." *Stop thinking about last night. If she's not bringing attention to it, why should you?* "Thanks for the cinnamon, too."

"...I'm glad you like it." Naomi said and continued cooking while Daniel kept snacking. Though, most of their time spent together was white noise. The maid kept on being a maid, playing into her distant and quiet demeanor while Daniel spaced himself with the anxiety of trying to think of something that didn't involve his underwear. And come to think of it, where did it ever go? With a mouthful of banana, he quietly stared at the woman's back.

Washed it, probably, but Daniel really didn't want to ask... Opening the door on any of that didn't sound very fun at all.

"Naomi?" someone called as they entered the kitchen. "Have you seen Danny anywhere? I went and checked his room, but...— Oh! Danny! Good morning!" Rose couldn't have been more delighted, rushing right over to where he sat on the counter.

“Morn–!” Daniel started but didn’t get to finish. The air was squeezed out of his lungs by the affectionate beast. His bottom left his seat just slightly as he was swayed to the joyful hums of his towering big sister.

“Mmm! Morning-morning!” She chipperly cheered before finally letting go, but she hadn’t gone far. Like nothing else in the world mattered, particularly her maid she wasn’t paying any mind to, Rose’s hands were planted on either counter beside Daniel, boxing him in and forcing him into a close conversation.

“Did you sleep well?” Rose asked, letting her eyes drop down to the plate beside her brother, smiling with a finger tracing the rim of the plate.

No real reason to lie... “Yeah, I did.” But no reason for total honesty either? It was the best sleep he had in a long time, but he doubted Rose’s ego needed anything else to go with it. After all, Daniel was self-aware enough to imagine a comment from himself might make it so she could finally die happy.

“Good! Really good,” Rose nodded briefly, and then some more. “Did that medicine for your tummy work out? No stomach aches anymore, right?” and yet the question seemed more like procedure than legitimate, because his sister was already pressing her hand against his flattened stomach.

“No, Rose, I’m fine...” He tried warding her off without sounding too annoyed.

“And that makes me very happy to hear,” Rose giggled with an affectionate hand running atop his head as she finally turned away. “How’s breakfast going, Naomi?”

“Almost done. I’ll start on coffee right after.”

“Sounds good~” Rose muttered, constantly shifting from one task to the next, now glancing at her phone. And like the brother she seemed to adore so dearly had become an afterthought, he was quickly remembered once his sister darted her head at him. “Sorry...” she smiled sheepishly. “My mornings can be a bit busy; even on weekends...” she followed with a sigh. “Naomi might’ve told you, but I usually start my mornings in my office.”

“Yeah, she did...” Daniel answered before swallowing another piece of fruit. It was times like these that showed just how opposite the two women were to one another. In the way Daniel adapted to conversation, he was still trying to crawl out of the social shell he prepared just for Naomi’s sake, now flinging forward into a constant back and forth he could expect from his chatty sister. “What kind of stuff do you work on from home?”

“Setting up meetings, emails. Boring stuff,” Rose’s mouth dramatically sunk. “Though I kinda cheat a little...!” she grinned with a hand cupping the side of her mouth. “I like to slack off and read scientific journals, sometimes... Don’t tell anyone, though!”

And all he did was weakly smile back and nod. Rose got to read up on research and journals during work hours. Daniel was given a performance review if his quota dipped in the slightest... The world was simply not fair.

“Oh, Naomi,” Rose tapped her friend on the shoulder, but she wasn’t sticking around to follow up. With her apparent thought left half-finished, Rose briefly disappeared. Daniel tried giving Naomi a ‘what gives?’ sort of look, but apparently a year of service made this sort of thing the norm and unsurprising.

“We were so busy last night with Danny’s birthday that I forgot to give us our doses...” Rose muttered as she popped a fat plastic cap off a translucent magenta bottle. Only after she held out her hand did Naomi turn, and with something in both their hands, down the hatches they went. *No water or anything to drink it down?*

Fair enough though, Daniel was a little curious.

“What did you just take?” he asked, and Rose raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, these?” she flashed the tiny bottle, looking down at them. “Just...some special vitamins my company is working on. I helped make them, actually!”

If owning a mansion and a maid wasn’t enough for Daniel to believe in his sister’s skills, certainly popping her own pills counted for something.

“What kind of vitamins? What do they do?”

“They make us *big* and *strong!*” Rose laughed as she flexed her moderate muscles. But after her macho-ism quickly deflated, she explained, “They just give us our daily vitamins. Give us the energy we need to get through the day, is all!”

A wonder energy drug? Didn’t that sound appealing. For a person that only knew menial labor, the idea of an honest and effective performance enhancer never sounded like a bad idea...

“Could...I try one?”

Maybe he was getting ahead of himself, but it felt like a done deal given it was Rose. Though instead of hearing a resounding 'yes' from his sister, a puff of pensive air left her lips as for the first time Rose seemed hesitant.

"W...well..." Rose went quiet, staring down at the bottle in her hand, like the ingredients or prescription label on it carried a convenient explanation. "Danny, these were made with females in mind... They leverage certain hormones that boys either don't have or really shouldn't have a lot of..."

It was the first time he put his sister in an awkward position, and it showed quite clearly when his sister of all people seemed to hit an emotional roadblock.

His sister acting uncharacteristically was as awkward as it was when she *did* act like she typically did. How paradoxical. The hugs and coddling was as weird as the lack thereof. "Oh, uh, yeah, that's fine," Daniel excused her. "I was just curious, is all..."

"No! I'm sorry I had to say no," Rose smiled apologetically, slipping the bottle away. "But...! *You* can get lots of energy from a lot of different things. A good night's sleep, a nice big breakfast, and drinking lots of milk!"

And suddenly it felt like an agenda was being pushed. His sister was trying to cushion whatever disappointment she thought he may have been feeling, which wasn't much, but it was definitely embarrassing to have a scene made over him at all.

"Rose, it's fine, really," Daniel tried to dismiss it without a blush.

"I know...I just...don't like letting you down, is all..." Rose quietly admitted without the usual flare and fire her tone typically had. But she kicked right back into it with a shift in tone, "But more importantly, it looks like Naomi fixed you a little snack, huh? Couldn't wait for breakfast?"

"W-well she offered, so I just..." Daniel murmured as his sister lightly pinched the last slice on his plate, swallowing it herself.

"Mmm!" she beamed. "I haven't had these in so long! I remember Mom would *always* get bananas for you! Did you make sure to thank Naomi?"

"Yes, I thanked her," Daniel was quick to the punch. Did his sister really think he wasn't capable of manners?

“Very good,” she complimented, though it only made it feel like he was only acting for praise, like any kid being taught with a carrot and stick. “Now,” she started and Daniel was lifted, “how about we give Naomi some space while she finishes up in here?”

“Rose, I can walk,” Daniel stressed, but he didn’t get any closer to the ground.

“I know you can, Danny!” Rose laughed. “Why don’t you like being carried? Besides, you’re barefoot right now. The floors *are* clean, but better to be safe than sorry!”

He was barefoot. His shoes came off once he...was taken back to his room? He stayed quiet, trying to recall last night. Where *did* Naomi go with his shoes? But before he could ask they were already in the dining room.

“So you slept well?” she asked again, and again Daniel was sitting in her lap. If not for history, the same debate would have been had, and likely the same result would have been found.

“Yeah, I did... Though...I guess it’s sort of weird when the bed is *that* big...”

“Is it?” Rose asked and her two words seemed loaded with curiosity. No judgment, just fascination. “I guess that could be a little weird, huh?”

“Mm,” Daniel nodded, unsure of how to really carry on his own conversation topic. A few vital seconds passed while he debated whether trying to revive it, but between his own hesitation and Rose’s content hum, a new thought emerged.

“Oh, actually,” Daniel started to slide forward, but an arm was already catching him by the stomach.

“Whoops! Scooch back a bit, Danny. You’re gonna slide off like that!”

“Er,” that was the point... “I need to head back up to my room, actually. I have to make a call.”

“A call that can’t wait til after we eat?”

Fighting his sister’s words and logic was always annoying. She never really ‘bit’ back, but she always knew how to manipulate and twist. “I’d rather it didn’t... I need to give my friend a call. Jess? Did you see her last night? She said she’d pick me up today.”

“Danny, we can give you a ride back?” Naomi laughed lightly, “What kind of big sister would I be if I didn’t even take you home?”

He barely slipped his fingers into his hair, “Well, I appreciate it, but Jess already said she’d come, so I should still call her and everything...” Maybe his time spent with Rose since forever wasn’t all that bad, but just like last night he was starting to reach his fill. The question was whether this was doomed to repeat itself as well.

“Breakfast’s about to be ready, though?” Naomi insisted, bearing down and crushing his resistance like the pressure her chest naturally put on his back. “It’s not gonna take long to eat, I promise!” she chuckled.

“Rose, I’ll be quick; it’s not that big of a deal...”

“And then your breakfast is going to be all cold?”

“No it won’t.”

“Mm...” Her most passive aggressive move ensued. The not so silent, disagreeing hum. The noise Rose always made when she thought she knew better, but didn’t want to rub it completely in your face...

And so with a great big huff, Daniel groaned, “Fine.” Sitting where he sat and doing no more. Maybe he could wait, but his patience was secondary to his predisposition to be annoyed whenever Rose was against him. It was his anger with the world and never seeming to be in the right. There was always a reason for why he was wrong and why it was just somehow better to fall in line with his big sister. Half the reason he left home was to be an independent thinker.

Yet here he was, sitting in his big sister’s lap and listening to her orders.

While he started counting the seconds just to fuel the frustration and figure how long he would’ve had, the mental stopwatch didn’t even reach a full minute before platters on two rigid hands came out from the kitchen.

The bounty was great, but thankfully not near the scale last night’s dinner was. It was a lot before him, yes, but at least he had two giantess’ stomachs to take on the bulk of it.

Pancakes, blueberry and strawberry, creamy, buttery and crisp. Thick cuts of long, greasy bacon with hash browns, a pitcher of orange juice, another filled with apple, all with eggs and toast. So traditional yet completely rejuvenated and revisioned by a maid bolstered by a bottomless bank account.

“I’m *not* having seconds,” Daniel was quick to the punch, even before saying thanks. He felt the need to be fast because his sister was already decorating two plates.

“Yes, I know,” Rose chuckled, “I don’t think we want a repeat of last night...” Daniel certainly did not, for multiple reasons. One of which Naomi was privy to, and probably didn’t want either, for the sake of her freshly washed sheets... “Though, I do want you to try and finish what’s on your plate?”

A plate of food he didn’t even get to make himself. Per that reason, he gave no verbal confirmation. Not more than a second later and a plate was slid in front of him. To Rose’s credit, it was a little slice from every corner of the early morning culinary world. If Naomi made it, some of it was assuredly on his plate.

“Thanks...” then leaning his head out, “A...Ahm, thank you, Naomi...”

“Of course,” Naomi replied, but did not look. Good, sort of. Things were “normal” with her around Rose right now. Just so Daniel could have his plate right before him, Rose took the inconvenience in stride with having her plate off to the side, bending slightly to the side each time she was ready for more. But between now and last night, not once was a comment or concern ever expressed about that end of things. Only a plethora of reasons why it was necessary, of course.

“So, Danny?” Rose called his name and stroked his shoulder in the same breath. “I was thinking...?”

“...Uh-huh?” Some food in his mouth covered his tactless behavior from letting out a sigh. It was never good when Rose was thinking. Too bad Rose was always turning her gears.

“We didn’t really get to do anything for your– What?” Rose started to say, but what she saw had her frozen with cheeks full of disappointed air.

“Because I already told you, Rose,” Daniel, the culprit for making his sister look and feel this way by the power of his angry glare alone. “*No* gifts! We already did the dinner!”

“That’s hardly a gift, Danny?” Rose tried to reason, turning up the dial some more with another shoulder rub. “Come on...! We could go out on a little shopping trip? The mall? Any store you want? *Anything!* Please? Please let me get you something? It doesn’t matter what it is; we’ll get it!”

His sister was offering a blank check and he would need to be an absolute fool not to take it. Well, surely that meant skipping the college route indicated something. Daniel shook his head, going back to his food.

“I’hm faihn, Rose,” Danny with not a manner left in his body, mumbled back, food and all. Rose’s upset noises were humming like a purring cat, only she was being pet in all the wrong ways. And after a big swallow, washed down with some juice, he added, “besides, I wanna go home after we eat. Can you take me or should I call my friend?”

“Of course we’ll take you...” Rose’s impulse to answer hadn’t changed, but the vibrance was gone and her moodiness was setting in fast. “...Can I come see your apartment, at least?”

It was far from what he’d consider presentable, even if it was in its cleanest state. What he’d show her was far from anything to marvel at, and instead just another repeated injustice of the housing market. Staring up at a ceiling that made up the height of two floors of his building, the disparity was feeling quite literal.

Even Rose emotionally wounded wasn’t afraid to continue coaxing Daniel into finishing his food. If only it was for a good cause. Whether it was vegetables, meat, oil and vinegar, ice cream or cake, his sister sought to see the surface of his plate no matter what. Just when his pace with his fork started to dip, that’s when her reminders would start to rise.

“That looks yummy, huh?”

“You should have another bite of that!”

“Maybe you just need to wash a little down with your juice?”

“Danny, just a little more, come on...!”

He would tell her to stop, but the words would come right back again not more than a few minutes later. By the time the food was finished he felt quite stuffed, but thankfully not by the same intensity that he was last night. At least this time he could comfortably move, even if feeling slightly bloated.

And past just the few crumbs and syrup puddles on his plate was his sister’s beaming smile. “Good job!” she openly praised, tussling his hair. “Doesn’t hurt, right? No tummy aches?”

“No, my stomach’s fine...” Daniel answered as he tried to curb the verbiage. “Okay, I’m all done. Can we go now?”

One silver lining or minute perk to being small could only be a positive as long as you were selfish enough to not care about certain things. Being the smallest boy with portions just as big as his peers meant a smaller force pushing a just as big option. Do the physics, crunch the numbers, no matter which way it was split, Daniel was the slowest eater of the three.

Naomi and Rose were already chatting for some time, save for Rose pausing their talks just to keep her little brother's fork moving and shoveling. Annoying, but the light was at the end of the tunnel.

“Slow down, speedy, Naomi still needs to clean up?” Rose stood with her brother in arms, nodding appreciatively to her one friend on payroll. Naomi was up and moving about, clearing the tables as both brother and sister transitioned into the hall. “Besides, just cuz I carry you, that doesn't mean you can go walking barefoot outside?”

And if he needed the reminder, Rose gave it in the most exploitative way possible. A sudden fire of pins and needles, prickling and tickling all over came from his foot. Immediately his muscles were shot as his knee darted up to his chest.

“*ROSE!*” Daniel shouted and frowned with far less filtering this time.

“S-sorry!” Rose apologized, but the satisfaction wasn't gone despite her remorseful giggle. “I just wanted to see if you were still ticklish...”

Saying all stone faced, ‘I am,’ may have worked for most, but Daniel couldn't make his voice boom or the ground shake with his physique. Not everything he said or did could be seen as “no nonsense,” so it was always a game of strategy for how to convey himself.

So instead of admitting to any of it, he grumbled, “Don't do it again...”

“Sorry...” Rose meeped, but the depth of her sincerity was anyone's guess.

An unfortunate kryptonite that he had yet to rid himself of, if that was even possible.

Tickles.

“But...are you *sure* you wanna go home today? We still have the whole weekend? I'd really like to spend some more time with my special little brother?” She gave him a squeeze, just in case he needed reminding that he was that special person.

“Yes, I’m sure...” Good house, good food, good room, and...questionable hospitality. Despite the downsides, of course it was better than everything he had. Everything he would likely ever get. This is what being an elite got you, but the pleasure was only pain if it meant knowing that it was something you could never attain. Apart from a prolonged stay leaving him at the mercy of Rose, it also meant an extension on a temporary window to grow more attached to luxuries that wouldn’t last.

Going back to his dingy, dark and damp apartment was just what he needed, in fact. A nice long rest on his rickety, springy pull-out bed with a fresh bowl of boiled noodles in front of the faulty TV just to remind himself of what things were really like for him. He needed some good old fashioned humbling.

“...Okay,” Rose supposedly gave up with a small sigh, but kept on a smile. “Let’s go grab your stuff upstairs.” She made it sound like a team effort, but only one of them was doing all the walking.

One brief trip up-and-around-back-down-and-over later, and they were approaching the front door. What struck as a surprise though was Naomi’s doppelganger standing by the door. Maybe he missed the news, but apparently she’d been fired; a story that needn’t be told with her street clothes on. Not even a full day had gone by and his mind had so strongly associated her with her uniform. Though, probably to fill the void from what little emotion Daniel had to work with...

“I need to spy on you one of these days,” Rose rolled her eyes at her friend who looked none the wiser. “How do you always get everything done so fast?”

“It’s what you hired me for,” Naomi said, re-aligning the purse hanging from her shoulder.

Yet a single sentence hardly did the woman’s work and wonder any justice, but maybe being humble was a byproduct of her reservedness. And just as Daniel was getting acclimated to the altitude, he was descending once more.

“Kay, let’s get our shoes on!” Big sister announced. Though, Rose was already wearing shoes. In other words, more putting the “team” in “I,” only the shoe was on the other foot. Completely figuratively.

Just as Daniel was about to confess to losing his shoes, there they were, perfectly aligned and parallel to one another, folded socks included. The knots he usually kept had been undone and they’d been prepared like two thrones for his king and queen soles to sit within.

“Wait, did you grab these?” Daniel asked Rose, yet never seeing her actually set them up like this herself. Unless Rose knew how to stop time, too? Was there a pill for that?

“Hm? No? I figured Naomi did, right?” Sure enough, the shoe thief admitted to the crime quite easily. The woman nodded simply.

“I was trying to find these earlier,” Daniel said, implying a bit of passive aggressiveness. “Where did you take them? I thought I lost them, or something.”

“I moved them to where we keep the shoes,” Naomi explained, then stopped. Or, no, rather she finished her explanation. *The shoes go where the shoes usually go.* That was it? That was her explanation? What did A to B matter if it was nothing more than abstract ideas?

So in fighting back a dirty look, Daniel said up to her, “Just don’t go taking my stuff without asking.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized blankly, “I would have told you, but I remember being asked to leave because you wanted to sleep?”

“Y-yes, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have told—”

“That’s enough, you two!” Rose playfully interjected, pouting through her words and literally stepping right in between. Giving Naomi the shoulder, Rose turned and crouched in front of her brother. “Danny? Can you please let Naomi off the hook this time? She’s used to tidying things up like that because that’s how I have her do it here... If she does something without telling you or asking, she doesn’t mean it in any bad way?”

More acting behind the scenes, which was what seemed to be her motto. Daniel stayed quiet for a second, now feeling like the jerk for being the root of a misunderstanding. But wasn’t it still fair to be annoyed? Whatever he had a right to, it was best to go with what didn’t make waves. And not only that, but...

He could see Naomi’s face just beyond his sister’s shoulder.

I kind of owe her...

“I...I’m sorry,” Daniel said without trying to diminish his words with an exhale. “I just get annoyed when my stuff goes missing...”

“I understand. Thank you for telling me that,” Naomi replied, dropping her signature inkling-sized smile.

Daniel went back to reuniting with his footwear, slipping on his socks that’d been retrieved likely the same time as his shoes. The longest part of the ritual was tying his shoes, something he didn’t frequent. His knots were prone to being lossy and loose which is why he always took the time to be slow and steady with his looping bunny ears. That way he’d never need to tie again and could just slip them on and off as he pleased. But Naomi undid all of that for him. So trying not to be the anchor for much longer, one messy pair of knots later and they were out the door.

A grayish kind of day, but far different from the orange pink sky of yesterday afternoon.

“Danny, let’s go to the car while Naomi locks up,” Rose ushered him ahead with a gentle pat on the shoulder, swinging his duffel bag along like it was her handbag. He may have started the pace, but his sister soon took the lead, especially because she was the one who actually knew where they were going. Down the few steps, around the bush and down a sloping incline and an expensive black car was waiting for them.

While it was Daniel’s surprise, Rose was the one who froze in place, putting a hand over her open mouth. “Oh! *Shoot!*” she muttered, looking over her shoulder for the answer.

“What? What’s wrong?” Daniel asked.

“I didn’t think to get you a seat for the car...!” she said with worry.

A seat. A special seat because he was too small... “Rose...I’ll be fine.”

“It’s the law, Danny...” Rose muttered, walking up ahead to the car. He watched her from a distance open the passenger door, leaning in to do whatever it was she set out for. But all she did was groan once her head came back out, looking quite beside herself.

“I don’t like it...” Rose returned with a glum voice, “but would you mind riding in my lap?”

His sister *not* excited to have him so close for once? Astonishing. Not really, but maybe if it wasn’t because society mandated for him to be more constricted than he was already feeling.

“Naomi!” Rose’s foot turned, scrunching pebbles and asphalt beneath her shoe, “we don’t have a booster seat for Danny?” It wasn’t an accusation or shifted blame, but astonishment over their collective lack of foresight to prepare for absolutely anything.

Daniel would have told Rose that even with Jess the result would have been the same, but based on her distraught look...maybe that wasn't the best idea.

"I'll make it a priority for tomorrow," Naomi decided on the spot, and while it didn't ease so much the troubled look on her friend's face, it was enough to get them all moving into the car.

Clean leather seats and a minimalistic interior. While the car was just a few hairs from looking new, it certainly came off as well-kept and regularly cleaned. It didn't have the scuffs and specks of accumulated use like Jess' car had. This vehicle was probably worth five to ten of hers.

Naomi was the one in the driver seat, and Daniel, burrowed in Rose's lap, wearing the seatbelt against his chest and cheek, reinforced by Rose's arm against his stomach, and finally with a personal headrest, both brother and sister sat securely in place.

"Try to stay off the highways when you can?" Rose asked Naomi and Daniel felt her protective arm bite into him a tiny bit more.

"Of course."

"Good... Danny, feel comfy?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." As fine as he could be.

"Sorry about this...I promise, next time you're in here you'll have your own seat."

And suddenly he hoped to never be riding in this car again. While he was sitting in his sister's lap, at least it didn't mean riding in a booster or straight out car seat for kids. This had its drawbacks, but even if by a little, it definitely ranked above car seats...

"Are we ready?" Naomi asked, turning on the nearly silent ignition. A few seconds later and her finger was tracing the console, typing in everything a navigation system would need to know.

"Mm," Rose nodded. "Danny?"

"Yep." Home would soon be upon him.

And they were off.

After a few long stretches of city road and sharp turns down the high hills that returned them to the modern, far less affluent part of the world. Rose had finally calmed down enough for more

chit-chat, though her arm protecting her brother stayed rock hard like she really was just another part of the safety system.

“Danny, I’m really excited to see your apartment, you know...!” she intoned, rubbing his knee.

And poor Rose. Her excitement would die to the mold in the stairwell before it could even reach his decrepit home. It was livable, but far from extravagant. Far from probably anything someone as gifted, lucky, and privileged as Rose had ever seen in her life.

“Well, don’t get too excited...” But the vision itself would do more justice than his words ever could. Describing wasn’t his strength, and apparently deterring others either.

But Rose’s hum and chuckle didn’t change, finding their footing after fifteen minutes of uninterrupted car ride, implying more than likely that it was a safe journey ahead of them. Safe for the most part. While they wouldn’t be harmed physically, what still stood to be attacked were their impressions.

And as they drove to the next town over, Daniel was starting to wonder about the most vulnerable of the two. The one housing him like he was her egg in a nest. If her situation now said anything about her standards for living...

Rose was in for a treat.