

The Padded Palace Act III: Chapter 22

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THUNK!

Shutting her van's truck door heavily, Latasha let out a satisfied sigh as she wiped the droplets of sweat off her forehead. "That should do it," she said, trying her hardest not to sound too sleep-deprived. The last thing she needed right now was for Aanya or Jesi to try to get her to stay and rest, both of whom were happy to help with cleaning up and packing.

"C'mere," said Jesi, holding her arms out wide for Latasha. As the two old friends embraced, she made sure to hug Latasha as an equal and not in any way that could be perceived as treating her Little, just in case there were still any raw feelings lingering, "We didn't see you nearly enough to be satisfied. We have to meet up again soon."

Returning Jesi's affections in kind, Latasha responded, "Absolutely. You've got my numbers so don't be a stranger. And give GareBear extra headpats for me." Her hug tightened as she spoke, unable to fully suppress the small part of her that didn't want to leave so prematurely. However, as she glanced at Skye from over Jesi's shoulder, it became a lot easier to ignore that selfish part of herself.

"You gonna be good for Mommy Tasha?" asked Aanya with her hands placed on both of Skye's shoulders.

Nodding rapidly, if Skye knew one thing, she was going to try to make her Mommy's life easier from this point forward. "I'll be good," she said, smiling proudly.

"You'll be good, what?" Aanya teased, flashing Skye a sly smirk.

Skye giggled through her retort, "I'll be good, ma'am."

"That's a good girl," said Aanya, planting a few final headpats on Skye's head before sending her off in Latasha's direction.

As the four friends said their final goodbyes, a lone figure stood behind a glass partition watching. Elma leaned her head against the clear surface. There was no flavor worse than that of crow and she was about to serve herself up a big helping of it. Sighing, she straightened her stance and assumed her Mother persona, burying her anxieties as best as she could. "Latasha!" she called out as exited the hotel and approached the car, "Happy I didn't miss you. I hope you don't mind the intrusion. Hi, Skye." She waved to her partner in crime from the night before, earning a small but cheerful wave back.

"You're okay," said Latasha, her smile remaining despite her voice taking a downturn in tone, "Um, would you guys give us a minute?"

Clapping her hands together, Aanya was more than happy to get the others organized. "C'mon, Skye, let's go get you a candy bar for the road," she said, luring Latasha's Little with the promise of a sweet treat.

Left alone by the hood of Latasha's van, neither Elma nor Latasha were certain who should get to speak first. "I'm sorry," they both said simultaneously, cutting each other off. Snickering, Elma cut back in, "Y-You go ahead."

"I, uh...I owe you an apology," said Latasha, her eyes failing to meet Elma's, "I left and I never fully explained why. And I didn't call much because...I was a coward. I knew in the back of my mind you had to resent me and I didn't want to face that. I should never have pushed you away. I'm sorry."

Folding her arms defensively to keep from crying, Elma very much regretted letting Latasha speak before her. It was already going to be hard enough to get through her apology without her mask cracking. Now, all she wanted to do was hug Latasha as hard as she could. But first, she had something she needed to say, "While I appreciate the sentiment, it's me who should be apologizing. I wasn't upfront with you about my disappointment. I resented you. I let that get the better of me." She swallowed hard, feeling the makings of a frog in her throat, "I...I'm so..."

Not waiting for Elma to finish apologizing, Latasha lunged forward and pulled Elma into the tightest hug imaginable. For the next minute, neither woman said anything to the other, their quiet sobs saying more than words ever could. It was a cathartic moment they'd each needed for a very long time.

"You'd better call more," muttered Elma, resting her chin on Latasha's shoulder.

Leaning her head against Elma's, Latasha curled her lips in, producing a soft smile, "I will, I promise."

"...you just heard Call Me Definitely by Karey May Underway. Coming up next on America's 40, we--"

Pressing her thumb against the radio's off button, Latasha could practically taste home as she turned the corner onto her street. It had been a grueling few hours of driving considering the night she had as well as the seldom few hours of sleep she achieved afterward. It would all be worth it though when she could crash down on her bed for the rest of the day. Mercifully, Skye had been gracious enough to let her jam out to music on the radio that was much more lively than the kiddie CDs her stereo system was filled with. "So, what are you thinking? Are you going down for a nap as soon as we get home or do you want some time to unwind first?" she said, kind of hoping that Skye would take the latter considering her own exhaustion.

With her lips from the straw of the small drink that came with her McNaldo's meal, Skye gulped down the mouthful of sugar water as she ruminated on how awake she was feeling. No doubt, the other girls would all probably be heading back to their respective homes soon if not having already departed considering it was past noon. Still, she had a strong sense that if she tried to nap now, she'd just end up staring at the ceiling and bored out of her mind. "Hmmm, I probably won't wanna nap for a little bit," she said, feeling wired from the rush that sitting in the front seat gave her. She rocked back and forth eagerly in the front seat bursting with energy, contrasting Latasha's poorly masked dejection. Something that Skye was quick to pick up on, "I'll be alright on my own for a bit, though, if you wanna sleep. Plus, Connor will be there."

“Psssh! I appreciate the thought but I’m doubtful you’ll be seeing much of Connor today. Remember my first time running the Palace on my own? I was so down for the count that night that you couldn’t wake me up,” said Latasha, laughing with Skye as they gleefully remembered how chaotic those first few months were. Sadly, they wouldn’t get to muse on their nostalgia for long as the Padded Palace finally came into view, “We’re home, baby girl!”

Raising both fists in the air in an adorable fashion, Skye had no idea how much one day away from her home would make her miss it so much. She couldn’t wait to see all her stuffies and get back into her regular routine. Moreover, she was on pins and needles to see Connor again. As the van pulled into the driveway, she bit her lip, thinking about how surprised he was going to be when he heard her talking without her usual lisp, something she had officially decided to stop using outside of Little Space.

As Latsaha jumped out of the van, she had to remind herself not to instinctively go to the other side of the car to let Skye out, instead moving to the trunk to unload their suitcases and what remained of the party supplies. “You can head on in Skye. I’ll worry about the bags,” she said, tossing the house key to Skye before popping the trunk.

“You didn’t tell Connor, right?” asked Skye, bobbing back and forth on her light-up shoes and swinging her hands behind her back. Having asked to surprise Connor as they were packing up the hotel room, she wanted to make sure Operation: Attack Huggies was still on the table.

Giggling at her mischievous Little, Latasha was quick to reassure Skye whilst simultaneously nudging her toward the front door. “Yes, yes, I promised you, didn’t I? Now run along,” she said, patting Skye’s padding and sending her racing into the house. However, she wouldn’t get further than unloading the first bag before Skye was once again standing at the front door.

“M-Mommy...I fink chus nees ta see dis,” said Skye, unable to prevent herself from slipping back into old habits as a mixture of shock and confusion along with a plethora of other confusing emotions filled her brain.

Latasha immediately snapped to attention upon hearing Skye’s lisp return in full force. Abandoning her luggage by the open trunk, she raced over to Skye. “What’s wrong, baby?” she asked, only for Skye to point inside the house without saying another word. Her eyes followed Skye’s index finger, which led directly into the nursery. Just what had Connor and those three troublemakers done to her house?! She walked quickly past her home’s entrance as she beelined through the living room and into the nursery, the scent of shit and sex instantly filling her nostrils.

“Connor? Girls?” said Latsaha, flicking the nursery’s light switch and peering around for signs of life. As far as she could tell, nothing seemed too out of the ordinary. That was until she spotted one of the cribs in the far corner of the nursery, which appeared to be housing more than one Little by the looks of things. She gingerly approached the crib, peeking over the top of the bars to see inside only for her jaw to smash through the floor as she gazed upon who was inside. Sleeping soundly with moist diapers taped around their waists were three recognizable bodies: two of which belonged to two of her students, Ellie and Riri, and one that didn’t belong at all.

That being Connor, who was resting in the middle of the small cuddle puddle with a swollen, soggy diaper poking out from under a pretty, powder blue nightie. “What the f-”

“Latasha?!”

Suddenly, Latasha whipped her head back to stare at Stacy, who was standing in the doorway wearing one of her favorite caregiver dresses and a shocked expression. “I-I didn’t think you’d be home so soon! Uhh...” she said, her mind reaching for any sort of explanation that didn't get her in trouble. Sadly, she had nothing as she raised a pair of empty hands, grimacing through her guilt, “Surprise?”

END OF ACT III.