

The Padded Palace Act III: Chapter 13

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“You are gonna lose it when you see the new you!” shouted Stacy, bursting with enthusiasm as she finished her touch-ups on Connor’s mascara. With one final stroke on his eyelashes, she raised her hand in the air proudly before snapping the lid back on the mascara and making a move for Skye’s favorite pastel eye shadow pallet, “And you better start sitting still or else I’m gonna glue your back to the chair.

Giggling only through his nose out of fear he might mess something up if he got too expressive, Connor felt as though he was floating on a big, pink cloud that only got bigger with each new product that Stacy used. His giggling didn’t last long though, as an unexpectedly harsh tug on hair caused his body to jolt. “Youch! Take it easy, will ya?” he said, as he fought against Ellie’s tight grip on his follicles.

“Pfffffft! Suck it up, buttercup! Aren’t you supposed to be the guy here anyway?” said Ellie as she haphazardly tangled pieces of Connor’s short hair into the world’s smallest pigtail.

“Oh, I can’t imagine any guy letting us do this. I think it’s safe to say our dearest Connor is a sissy, through and through,” declared Stacy, allowing for the red in Connor’s cheeks to burn brightly despite the heavy foundation that had already been applied to his face, “That being said, I’m not sure this is exactly the style we’re looking for hair-wise.”

Puffing up her cheeks in frustration over Stacy’s comment, Ellie was quick to try and clear her name of any guilt. “Excuse you, it’s not as though I have a lot to work with over here,” she said, pinching a few strands of Connor’s hair and pulling them taut as if Stacy couldn’t see how short Connor’s hair was.

“I can fix it,” said Riri, stepping in next to Ellie and starting in on her adjustments, much to Ellie’s dismay. However, Ellie wasn’t about to say anything. Riri had been in a sour mood ever since Connor’s dress-up time started. Not mad, per se, but clearly on edge no matter how much she was trying to hide it.

Grabbing a comb from the vanity, Riri delicately and methodically ran the thin piece of black plastic through Connor’s hair, making sure not to tug too hard. “We don’t need to do anything too drastic. Just a slight adjustment to the part and a couple of bobby pins should take care of it,” she said, refusing to drop her serious expression in spite of the lively atmosphere, “How are you holding up, Connor? We can stop if it ever becomes too much.”

“I’m doing fine but thank you, Riri,” said Connor, feeling thankful that there was someone still inside the Palace walls with a more tempered attitude. Still, he didn’t want Riri to make herself sick worrying about whether everything was okay. In spite of the stony expression she was fronting, it was clear that she wanted to enjoy Connor’s makeover as much as the rest of the girls but there was something holding her back. Thinking on his feet, he was suddenly struck by inspiration, “Tell you what. I already have a safeword that Latasha and I came up with. If it’s ever too much, I’ll just say “caterpillar” and we’ll stop. Sound good?”

Nodding rapidly, a small smile appeared on Riri's face. "Glad to hear it. So long as you're having fun, I'm having fun," she said, letting the tension in her shoulders relax as she continued fiddling with Connor's locks.

"Hehe, am havin wots of fun. Fankooos," said Connor, emulating the infantile lisp that the girls often used when playing in Little Space. While he made a point to exaggerate his voice so that it was obvious he wasn't actually "Little," bubbling under the surface was the same excitable sissy baby that Latasha was able to bring out in him. He wiggled in his seat momentarily as a rush of giddy energy erupted out of him.

While it wasn't something he was consciously aware of, it was plain as day to the other three girls inhabiting the nursery with him. Connor was well on his way to slipping into Little Space.

"Mommy!"

Running into Latasha's arms at full speed, Skye squeezed her Mommy tightly. After having a blast in the arcade for the past hour, her social battery had made a complete 180-degree flip, allowing her to enjoy CrissCon to her heart's content. Still, for as much fun as she was having, returning to her Mommy's arms instantly filled her with deep feelings of warmth and security. "Me an Missy had so much fun! We did da swide a buncha times and did lots a cool VR games and den we pwayed wif some new fwens in da pwaypen fo a bit! It was so much fun!" she said, talking a mile a minute.

Giggling at her hyperactive baby girl, Latasha bend her knees and lifted Skye into her arms with Skye instantly wrapping her legs around Latasha's waist for security. "Shounds like you had tons of fun, baby," she said, slurring her words a bit due to the pair of drinks she slammed down with Elma. Thankfully, her tipsiness was nowhere near enough to make her as sloppy as she was at Carol's party but the night was still plenty young.

"Oh, hey, Garebear! Look who it is!" said Jesi as she and Aanya were in the midst of parking Gary's stroller at the ARcade's entrance. Based on the number of merch bags they had wrapped around the stroller handles, they had been on one heck of a shopping spree, "Did we just miss you guys? That's such a bummer! Gary would've loved having some friends to play with."

Snapping her fingers dejectedly while maintaining a hold on Skye's bottom with her other hand, Latasha cursed their rotten luck. "Darn, that would've been sho much fun. Skye and Misshy would've loved a third buddy," she said, doing nothing to mask her sloshy speech.

"Wuh-oh! Sounds like someone's been getting sauced. Doing some pregaming before the party tonight?" quipped Aanya as she approached the group hand-in-hand with Gary.

In an instant, Latasha sobered up quickly as her anxiety skyrocketed. She quickly set Skye down before checking the time on her phone. "Shoot! It's already 30 minutes past eight and I still have so much setting up to do," she said, her mind reeling before turning her attention back

to Jesi and Aanya, “Hey guys, I know you were about to head into the ARcade but would you mind changing plans to help me get everything ready for the party. I promise to make it up to you tomorrow.”

“Oh, my Goddess! Of course, we can help! Don’t let Gary’s pouty face fool you. She was in here for half the day,” said Jesi, reaching down and giving Gary’s scrunched-up cheek a small pinch, “Just tell us what you need us to do.”

As Latasha began pouring over party details to Jesi and Aanya, Skye began backing away from the group of imposingly tall women, wanting to return to her Mommy’s arms but not wanting to interrupt while she was chatting with her Big friends. She gripped the hem of her dress as her chest began to feel tight.

Bump!

“Everything okay, sugar?”

Suddenly, Skye felt her back press into another person. She quickly jumped forward and turned around, looking up at Mother Elma. “Oh...I, uh...um...” she stuttered, failing to locate her talk box in the presence of such an intimidating figure.

Kneeling down to Skye’s level for the second time today, Elma placed a gentle hand on Skye’s shoulder as she cracked a gentle smile. “Now, sweetheart, you know I can’t help you if you don’t use your words. I want you to take a big breath and tell Mother Elma what’s got you so worried,” she said, lightly rubbing her hand on Skye’s shoulder to further put her at ease.

Doing as she was told, Skye took in a lungful of air and let it all out before attempting to speak again, “I-I knows Mommy is weawwy busy wite now...buh dis was sponse ta be ouw twip togedder an s-shes nod...” Her words trailed off as her heart rate ticked up again over the course of her explanation.

“Shh-shh-shh, it’s okay. I understand,” said Elma, shifting her hand to Skye’s back as she inched closer, “Your Mommy may have put a bit too much on her plate today but that’s okay because we know how hard she’s trying, right?”

Nodding her head solemnly, the pain in Skye’s heart doubled as she began feeling guilty for complaining to Elma at all. “I knows. I don mean ta be wike dis. Ish jus my toopid heavt gets aww achy and it makes me scawed,” she said, spilling her guts to Elma now that she was a bit more comfortable around her.

“Hey, you know what? I’ve got a trick that can help with that. You want me to teach it to you?” said Elma, earning an enthusiastic nod from Skye in response. She grabbed onto both of Skye’s shoulders and centered the Little’s attention solely on her, “First, I need you to take five deep breaths with me through your nose and let them out through your mouth.” Together, she and Skye inhaled and exhaled simultaneously with each of Skye’s breaths becoming progressively less shaky. “Good. Next, look around and list five things you can see. It can be anything, big or small.”

Doing as she was told, Skye's eyes scanned the surrounding area. "Um...slide...bottle...pillow fort...wristband...corn dog," she said, at first trying to be selective before listing the first whatever came to mind first.

"Now, tell me, does your heart still hurt?" asked Elma, smiling as she watched Skye think for a second before gasping and shaking her head no, "See? You got it. There's nothing to it." She patted Skye's eliciting a bright smile from the awestruck Little. Accepting Skye's hand into her own, she stood up and returned the once frightened girl to the semi-circle that her Mommy had formed around the strollers.

Pulling Skye's stroller out from its parking spot, Latasha was jogging in place, clearly itching to get back to her room as soon as humanly possible. She looked around momentarily before spotting Elma with Skye. "Oh, there you two are! Let's get diapered butts moving!" she asked, too focused on the task at hand to ask where Elma and her baby girl had wandered off to in the first place, "We've only got 90 minutes until the party starts and we gotta make the most of every minute!"

TO BE CONTINUED...