

Josie paced down the hallway, looking around for other personnel. She had a book bag slung over her shoulder, covered with a cloth, and a neutral expression hardened on her face. She stopped at a round door flush with the wall, and it cracked itself open as she slid her fingers over the plate. The room was incredibly dark, except for some small floating lights and the light coming from the open door. There were piles of books and paper and in the corner, one lone figure stood, obscured in shadow.

“Hey, Vanessa,” she stepped towards the figure as she addressed them, to no response. She took a few more steps before the figure seemed to bump against the wall of the room, whip around to see her, and release an inhuman noise.

“Don’t be scared, Vanessa, it's just me, it's Josie,” she whispered. Josie put a firm hand on what seemed to be the creature's shoulder and they stilled. She hoped they couldn't feel her climbing heartbeat as her eyes adjusted to the darkness and she witnessed the horror of their form, the collapsing of any remaining human appearance; until they seemed to pull it all back together, shifting into place until they were a normal girl again.

To Josie, she was still just six, all toothy smiles and giggles, the same as she was a few weeks ago. To keep her in this glorified cellar was so cruel that Josie even broke protocols to be here. She kneeled on the padded white floor and draped the cloth from her bag around Vanessa’s shoulders, dumping a few small cartons of milk onto the ground.

Vanessa moved her mouth silently, as if remembering how to use her muscles, Josie noted with a shiver—she must’ve been out of it for a while.

“Here, milk. You need something to drink.” She tore one of the cafeteria standard-issue milks open at the spout and lifted Vanessa’s chin to help her drink. The girl's eyes focused inward on Josie, past the carton, and she felt her hair raise. Suddenly, Vanessa tilted back from the milk carton and brought herself to her feet. Josie’s small moment of hesitation was enough for Vanessa to run toward the door, and she sprinted as hard as she could on her weak legs.

“Agh- Vanessa!-” Josie held the girl around her torso as her arms swung forward, grabbing at the air. She kept pushing against Josie’s arms, trying to reach for the door, and Josie pulled her in, holding Vanessa’s back close to her chest. She braced herself as Vanessa thrashed, making small sounds of frustration.

“You can’t leave, Vanessa, I-I’m sorry, they’ll hurt you out there,” Josie knotted her eyes to keep tears back. “I can’t let you go.”

“I want to leave,” Vanessa croaked out with rusty vocal chords, pushing her palms behind her against Josie’s shoulders. Josie became rigid at the sound of the girl's voice, and once more Vanessa took her hesitation as an opportunity, stumbling out of Josie’s grasp and out

the door. The sound of Vanessa running down the hallway echoed in Josie's head as she touched the now discarded cloth, her glasses slipping down her nose and onto the floor beside her hand. The door slowly shut itself, clicking shut just as she heard several heavy footsteps and a yell that, however garbled, sounded remarkably like a young girl.