Better than a lullaby

—

Vanessa wasn't supposed to be alive.

She wasn't supposed to make the drive back to her motel. She wasn't supposed to have made it her last night working at that godforsaken restaurant. Hell, she wasn't even supposed to survive the first night.

"I'm not supposed to be alive."

And yet she was. Alive to wash her face again.
Alive to greet those bags her reflection carried beneath its eyes.
Alive to see she was in great need of a haircut...or at the very least a comb or two.
But she could handle that later, she wasn't going anywhere now after all.

At the moment all she wanted to do now was throw herself face first into her crappy—hopefully clean—mattress and sleep off the last few days. Sleep for a month maybe, then stuff her face with something that wasn't gas station noodles. Maybe a sandwich place? There had to be one close by, and if there wasn't she wouldn't mind a long drive with something to look forward to. Something on rye bread, she thought. That sounded wonderful. She could practically taste her thoughts on the short walk from the bathroom to her bed.

But right about then was when she was reminded that she hadn't made it back alone. And her houseguest was finally showing itself.

It had been hiding since their moment in the car, Vanessa wasn't even sure it had followed her inside till now. But there it was, hunched on the side of the bed—furthest from the warm light of the side table lamp—the spindly figure of the marionette. It was holding something close, something she couldn't quite make out, but she wanted to slap herself once she did.

It was holding the music box she kept on her nightstand, the very same one that had been used to hold her old friend's spirit captive for decades.

"I can explain that..."- Vanessa began without thinking. What was she even going to say? She didn't even really know why she'd brought the damn thing on this grand death tour of hers. Maybe as a reminder of the pain she'd caused? Some weird coping mechanism?

Or maybe just...fear...of ever having to face it...*her*...again. She wanted to believe she would never use it again, but...

Before she could say whatever stupid half baked excuse she was sure nearly left her lips, the marionette moved. That was enough to silence her. It wouldn't turn around to face her, intentionally no doubt. It only raised one of its long striped arms to point at the lamp. Vanessa took the hint, flicking the light off and taking a seat at the opposite end of the bed, her back to the puppet. She had questions of course, several, evidently so did her guest.

"*Are you hurt*?" it asked, its voice a ghostly whisper, though...not as eerie or malicious as Vanessa had heard the last time they'd met.

"No." Vanessa replied once she'd managed to fight the tension around her vocal chords. "Are you...doing okay?" It felt silly to ask given her condition, but her concern was genuine.

"I've felt worse." It said back. Vanessa almost wanted to laugh at what sounded like an attempt at humor, but she wasn't sure it was the time.

There was a long silence afterward, long enough for Vanessa to notice the occasional accompanying ***"drip"*** sound from the bathroom that told her she'd left the faucet dripping. There was so much she wanted to say now that she'd had the chance, now that it wasn't trying to kill her. If that embrace they'd shared before said anything the opposite could've been true.

"Charlotte I'm sorry I-" she tried to rip the bandaid off, almost wanting to say all the words at once

"*QUIET*." But the marionette cut her off. "I'm going to speak now."

Vanessa held her tongue as requested.

"I didn't plan on coming to save you. I wasn't sure what I was going to do when I saw you again. But I've been doing some thinking. A lot of thinking. And I need to know. Did you know?"

Vanessa wasn't sure at first what it was asking her, but it clicked just as it continued.

"What he, *your dad*, was doing. Did you know?"

She felt herself choking on the answer. She'd tried her best to repress all of that, to forget it. Part of her was terrified what answering truthfully may lead to, but... it would be better now to let it go. She deserved answers.

"At that point...I knew...for some time."

"And you still stayed with him..." she could hear the pain in its voice as it went on. "You still said nothing to anyone...to me. Why?" Vanessa could only squeeze her eyes shut in shame. She couldn't see but could somehow feel it had its eyes on her now.

"I was in so much PAIN..." Its voice dropped as low as the temperature in the room. Vanessa could see her own breath now. "I wanted all adults to pay. For ignoring me, again. For forgetting me, again. For letting me die. Just like my dad. Always too busy...even for his own daughter. But now I know what hurt me the most was you...you didn't say anything...And I can't forgive you for that."

Vanessa's knuckles turn white from how hard she was gripping her own knees. A pit of despair was growing in her stomach. She had imagined many times how this would go, so many things she expected it to say.

"I can't forgive you...for not trusting me."

That...wasn't quite one of them.

"W...What do you mea-"

"Why didn't you tell me...you were suffering? Or about what a monster your dad was?!" Its voice began to crack with rage.

"Weren't we friends?! I told you everything! I trusted you with everything! Why didn't you trust me?"

"Because I was scared!" Vanessa shouts for what feels like the first time forever. "I watched, one by one, kids disappear around me. I watched him take them away, break them. I wanted to say something, but he was always watching, always. It was like he was everywhere I went. Even now I can still feel his eyes on me everywhere I go! And I was scared that if I told you...you would be next." A pitiful scoff escaped her "But I lost you anyways...I let him take you. And then I kept you with that stupid box, cause I was too much of a coward to let you rest." Her voice broke as she fought back the tears burning at her eyes. "I'm sorry Charlotte....I'm so so sorry..."

She sobbed. She didn't know what else to say. There really wasn't anything left. Even now she worried somehow her father would come back to punish her for saying it aloud.

The marionette said nothing, and Vanessa felt what little weight it carried lift from the bed. Perhaps returning to hide from whatever shadows she'd crawled out of, leaving Vanessa all alone.

At least until she felt the weight of a full person sit next to her. She finally dared to look, and there she was.

Charlotte, perhaps by some trick of the light, looked just as Vanessa remembered in her memories, only with the addition of black tears that permanently stained her monochrome flesh. She put her arms awkwardly around Vanessa. She was cold, and still not quite willing to look her in the eyes.

“I'm sorry.” Charlotte's voice — not the puppet's — came in a pained whimper. “I know you are too...” There was a conflict in the little girl, her grip on Vanessa teetered between a hug and a strangling squeeze. “I don't wanna be angry anymore, but it's so hard to stop.” She didn't know if this was right, to want to show such compassion to the one who's caused her such pain...but it was what she wanted. To let go.

Vanessa didn't think twice before returning the embrace the second Charlotte's hold softened. Not bothering to suppress her open sobs. All of a sudden Vanessa too felt like she was a little girl again, crying all the tears she'd never allowed herself to in the arms of her best friend. She was...happy.

Charlotte had no more tears to shed, the years had taken them. But this felt...cathartic, more than any fantasy she'd ever had of taking her revenge on her. She would be here with her, reclaiming the time and friendship that had been stolen from them, and Vanessa would cry for both of them.

“I don't remember you being such a crybaby.” A smile finally crossed Charlotte's face, small but glimmering.

Vanessa let out a chuckle, wiping her eyes on her sleeve. “Geez...Cut me some slack. I've been through a whole lot.”

“Well I still can't forgive you...not yet. But we were both hurt...we don't deserve to go through it all alone. I don't want to anymore.” Charlotte rests her head on her friend's shoulder, feeling a sense of ease she never thought she would again.

Vanessa just looks at the specter that once tried to kill her, now looking ready to take a nap in her arms — and without any music box for a change. She wondered if she was dreaming, and hoped that she never woke up if she was.

"Yeah...I..can live with that."

"Hmph…At least one of us can."

Charlotte had always had a taste for dry humor, and like her friend she never had a sense for good timing.

But the stark silence after Charlotte's brazen comment quickly fell to Vanessa's fit of stifled snickering that eventually erupted into a shared relieved laugh between the two old friends. Tonight they would both sleep a lot easier.