

“I’m tired,” isabel cuts across me and the words fizzle in my throat. I always take it a step too far, chastity-ruth says.

We shift apart in the bed, space yawning between us again.

*I am pretty. I am a good girl. I always do as I am told.*

The Messages continue, as if nothing has changed.

Dawn slowly pours out of the light-lamps, chasing my dreams away. Unfolding my body, I stretch out, claiming the entire mattress. isabel has gone.

I get out of bed, tossing my hair back to scan my face in the mirrored wall. I do this every morning, a part of me hoping that I’ll have been magically transplanted into a different body during the night—isabel’s, or megan’s maybe. That I’ll wake up and be paler, thinner, different. *Better*.

On the wall opposite my bed, an outline of a hand-print is etched into the glass in pink plastic. I press my hand to it, feeling heat prickling my palm until the glass coating thins to transparency and I push through, grimacing as what feels like thousands of sticky fibers dissolve against my skin. Inside, mirrors cover every surface again, even the floor. At the front of the room there is a narrow steel changing room with gray rubber tubes curving from the top into the ceiling. I slump in the fuchsia armchair beside the changing room, drumming my fingers on the onyx marble vanity table. A semicircle of coral light bulbs around the mirror casts my face in a rosy glow. I tap the glass and it turns milky, then opaque, dissolving to reveal

a computer screen, a cartoon graphic of a woman laden down with shopping bags popping up.

"Good morning, freida," the Personal Stylist Program says in a staccato voice. "How are you today?"

"Nervous."

"I believe that is to be expected on the first day of term," it says. "How do you want to improve yourself today?"

"A complete redesign would be nice," I mutter, chewing on my lip until I catch a glimpse in the mirrored wall of how unattractive it looks.

"How do you want to improve yourself today?" None of the PSPs understands sarcasm.

"Maybe something in white? Stream Fashion TV. I need some inspiration after the holidays."

A catwalk appears on the screen, a long strip of wood suspended midair in a black vacuum, pounded by a torrent of fashion models. They have been designed primarily for this purpose, hundreds of them falling off the factory line with their gaunt bodies and featureless faces.

White looks good with my skin tone. I picture megan in something similar, her complexion turning like spoiled milk, and I feel a brutal thrill.

"Wait. That one's perfect." On my VoiceCommand the screen freezes on a model wearing a sheer white round-neck tee embroidered with appliqué lace flowers, a white lace skirt falling in ruffles to knee length.

"Is that okay?"

“Yes,” the PSP concedes. “I will request the appropriate items from the fashion closet now. Step into the changing room.”

The screen snaps back into a mirror. S41 Delicate Iced Chocco hair. #66 Chindia Yellow eyes. *That’s me. That’s what people see when they look at me.* I peel off my nightgown and throw it into a trapdoor set in the wall underneath the vanity table. The changing room opens, beeping loudly until I step in, the steel trap closing like a greedy mouth around me.

“You have gained weight.” The voice fills the room. “You are now 118.8 pounds. I will recommend in your weekly report that you are to take extra kcal blockers until your weight stabilizes between 115 pounds and 118 pounds.”

“Do I have to take more?” I hate the kcal blockers, which always leave me doubled over with stomach cramps. I guess I should be grateful they’ve improved since the early days when exploding colons were reported. “It’s embarrassing.”

“You are the only person who is informed of your medication requirements.”

I snort rudely at this. In theory, yes, our prescriptions are private, but nothing stays that way for long in the School. By breakfast my sisters will know that I’m weak, that I’m greedy, that I can’t control myself. And I thought I had been a good girl last week.

The lasers crackle to life, scraping against the steel walls of the room as the infrared hoop descends from the ceiling, tickling as it inches down my body. The box then

inhales, a whooshing gulp of air, sucking up any dirt and pumping it Underground to be disposed of. The lasers rise again, spraying makeup onto my naked skin, and gently pulling my hair into a bun at the nape of my neck. We are only allowed to use this machine twice a day, in the morning and at bedtime. It's too expensive, chastity-ruth says, so the maintenance of hygiene and makeup is our own responsibility during the day. Within two minutes I'm spat out, today's outfit and matching accessories left in the open trapdoor at the base of the wall. I grab them, the portal disappearing as soon as I do so.

"This doesn't look like it did on the model." I pull at the faded T-shirt, the floral embellishment crumpling beneath my fingers.

"It was as close a match as I could find within the School's fashion closet."

Back in my cubicle, I examine my body from every angle in the mirrored wall, swallowing disgust.

"Let's go."

It's freja at the doorway, her collarbones spiky in a beige crocheted top and canary-yellow skirt.

"I'm ready," I say, pushing my feet into the faux snake-skin slingbacks and falling into line, hurrying to catch up with daria in front of me.

The dorm is bursting with the sound of thirty pairs of high heels scraping against the black-and-white diamond tiles. We march together in silence, the same as we do every morning.