

Eyes open.

I don't see anything. Nothing but the same blank room as always. It's a cube, five meters by five meters by five meters. Everything is white. White walls, white floor, white ceiling. White mattress on a white cot. White toilet. White camera.

It would appear a stark but otherwise innocuous room. But then the details start to impress themselves upon you. The padding on the walls and the floor. The fact that there's no bedding. No toilet paper. No clothing. The bathing facility, next to the toilet, doesn't have a faucet. Water pours down from a slot in the ceiling. Never very quickly, and the large grill of a drain is impossible to block with anything in this room. The water is always tepid. The air is always warm. There's a window in the door, and it doesn't open from the inside.

I stand and stretch, slowly. I make happy little sounds as I do, contrasting with the popping of my back. I'm putting on a bit of a show, but it isn't something that really occurs to me. It hadn't taken that long to learn not to worry about what the person on the other end of the camera might see.

If there is one. I don't know how often I'm being watched. Maybe all the time, maybe only now and then. They change the schedule on a frequent and irregular basis, and they don't tell me anything about it. It's rather important that I not know.

I take a few minutes stretching. I start at my neck and work down, working each muscle nice and slow. Shoulders, then arms. Wrists, then fingers. Sides and chest and stomach. Hips, then legs. Knees, then ankles.

This is important too. I enjoy this part, but it's important. They made sure I knew it. Always stretch after I wake up. Always always always stretch after I wake up. It's important.

I know how important it is that I do everything right.

Once I'm done stretching, I feel warm and tired. I'm a little sweaty, a little sore. I think I might be getting sick. I've been coughing, sneezing, my nose has been running a little. I make a note to tell the doctor.

It's probably nothing. Just a cold. But probably isn't good enough. I can't get sick. It's important.

Eyes closed.

Eyes open.

My hands hurt. My neck hurts. I must have had another attack.

I stand and stretch. It hurts a little. It hurts to breathe.

I walk and crouch in front of the door. When I get to just the right angle I can see my own reflection in the window. There are ugly bruises on my throat, black and violet. They're in the shape of fingers.

Looking down, I see that my hands are a little swollen. Inflamed, especially around one of the knuckles. I think that finger might be broken.

So. That's what happened.

It's been a while since that happened. I need to start my breathing exercises again if it's going to be happening again. And I should make sure they cut my fingernails again. One of them looks like it's getting out past the quick. That's not good.

I can't do it myself, of course. That would be stupid. It probably wouldn't be a problem—nail clippers couldn't cut very deep, after all, and even if they hit a vein it would only bleed so much. But probably isn't good enough.

I stretch, paying extra attention to my neck. I always pay lots of attention to my neck, of course. That's particularly important. But after the last attack, I know that it's even more important now. There's no room for mistakes.

Once I'm done with that, I feel tired. I'm hurt enough that my normal stretching routine is a struggle. By the time it's done I'm flushed and sweaty, my heart going pitter-patter, and I want to go back to sleep. It's not good to ignore that kind of feeling, so I curl up on the floor. It sounds better than the mattress right now.

I'm giving the camera another kind of show, now. I know that I look creepy when I'm upcurled. I love that upcurl is a word. I didn't believe Doctor Mike when he told me that it was, but he showed me in the dictionary, and ever since I've made sure to use it. It makes him smile.

But anyway, I know it makes me look creepy. It makes me look inhuman. Between the constant stretching and the other things that had been done to my body, I can upcurl tighter than just about anyone. Add in the hairless skin, the scars and bruises, and I look like some sort of freakish monster.

Which, in its own special way, isn't an entirely inaccurate description of my situation.

Eyes closed.

Eyes open.

I know right away why I'm awake. The door is open. That means something special, so I don't start stretching yet. That can wait until later. As long as I do it, it doesn't matter too much exactly when.

After a couple of seconds, Doctor Mike comes in. He's wearing his special suit. Some people would say that it looks like an astronaut's space suit. But I'd say that it looks like a positive pressure personnel suit appropriate for use with biosafety level 4 hazardous material, since that's what it is.

"Good morning, Taylor," he says, handing me a white keyboard. His voice comes through an externally-mounted speaker. There's no direct connection between that and the microphone on the inside. There was really no connection between the inside of the suit and the outside at all. And with the materials it was made of, it would take quite a bit of work to make one.

I was very familiar with the specifications of those suits. I'd had a decent amount of input on their design, after all. The base was a standard hazmat suit, pressurized to be suitable for biosafety 4. But there were some other considerations as well, things that the generic design didn't have to consider. We did.

I take the keyboard and type a quick *good morning*. It shows up on the screen which lowers from a slot in the ceiling. White text on a black background, like old DOS machines. I never used one, but I'd seen pictures. They'd had that keyboard specially made, as I understood it. Flexible plastic, minimal electricity provided by a very securely contained battery. It can go through the same biosafety precautions as the suits—the vacuum, the radiation, all of it. It can because it does, and it does because it has to.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

sick, I type back. *i think i have a cold*.

He doesn't bother pointing out how unlikely that is. I know very well that there's no microbial contamination in here. We're all very careful about making sure that it stays that way. But there's always the potential for something to have slipped up.

Probably it's nothing. But probably is never, ever good enough.

"I'll make sure you get some antivirals," he says.

thank you. and i need a nail trimmed. it's getting too long. I hold the offending digit up in front of him. The nail is barely visible. Cut it any further back and it will sting and bleed and be generally no fun at all.

"I'll have one of the guards take care of it later today," he says. There's no trace of humor in his voice.

I nod and type some more. *make sure you don't forget. oh. i had another attack the other day. choking. i'm going to start the breathing exercises again. vital capacity and residual volume*.

"Thank you," he says. "I was going to remind you. But of course you remembered."

it's important, I type. **important**

"Of course," Doctor Mike says. He sounds very tired. "And...if it isn't too much trouble, we'd like to do some testing tomorrow. Another experiment to see how your...condition responds to a heterodyned signal."

I nod. *it's no problem. should be fine since i had an attack...was it yesterday or today?*

"Yesterday," he says. Not that it matters too much. After an attack I'm usually fine for at least two or three days.

okay then. you know where to find me if you need me. :p

He musters up a smile, but it looks forced behind his faceplate. I reach out, very slowly, and pat him on the shoulder. Gently. Making sure that they know I'm not having an attack, and this is just an expression of comfort.

And how hilarious is that, that *I'm* offering *them* comfort? But they often need it more than me.

"You're an inspiration to all of us, Taylor," he says, as though echoing what I was thinking. "The way you've held up is...well, it's humbling."

I smile, sort of. It's not much of a smile, I know. I look worse when I smile than when I upcurl. No teeth. No tongue. *how long has it been now?* I type.

"Going on fourteen years now," Doctor Mike says. "You've made it almost three times as long as anyone else.

of course i have, I type matter-of-factly. *someone needs to keep an eye on you guys. you'd be lost without me.*

"You laugh," he says dryly, "but I think you might be more right than you know."

i still remember the day i came here, I type suddenly. *do you remember the first time we talked?*

"Of course," he said. "You were such a brave little girl. Right from the beginning." He's quiet for a moment. "No one so young should have to suffer so much," he says at last. "Not that anyone should. But it especially shouldn't happen to children."

i know. it's why i'll never leave you. nobody else should have to do this. ever.

"Thank you," he says, quietly and seriously. "Now. Is there anything I can get you? Anything that you're missing?"

I snort a little. Anything that I'm missing? How about *everything*?

But that line of thought isn't productive, and I put it aside. *a priest?* I type hopefully. *it's been a long time since Anthony left.*

"I'll try," he says. "It's...not easy to find one who can look past your unique circumstances, but we'll see what we can do."

preferably not one that tries to strangle me with his rosary this time.

"Like I said," Doctor Mike says. "It's not easy. Is there anything else?"

I hesitate, then hesitantly type *a game?*

He sighs. "Taylor," he says. "You know what happened last time."

I know. It was...such a simple accident. They were a little too slow to shut down the voice chat. They hadn't realized that I was having an attack until after a few words already got through. That was back when I still had a tongue. Only a few words, but it had been enough.

please? I type. *i saw an ad for a pretty awesome shooter the last time i got to use the computer. we can shut down all chat in and out. you can analyze everything i do in case there's an encoded message. i just want to play a game.*

He smiles a little. "You know," he teases, "a lot of people would say violent games are the last thing we should let you have. Given your...condition."

I sniff. *those people don't know what they're talking about. i've seen their arguments. they were nonsense when i came here, and they haven't gotten much better since then.*

He laughs, and I smile. I'm happy to have made him laugh. Doctor Mike doesn't laugh enough. Never has. "I'll see what I can do," he promises. "Is there anything else?"

I shake my head and hand him the keyboard. Then I snatch it back from him and type something else. *thank you. i know how hard you try to make me happy, and i'm sorry it's hard sometimes.*

"No," he says. "Thank you. Like I said, you're an inspiration. If what I do makes it a little easier for you, that's more than worth all the work I do."

I smile. *okay, that's all. goodbye. <3 <3*

"I love you too, Taylor," he says, taking the keyboard. He gives me a hug before he leaves, my skin against the surface of the suit. To anyone else it would probably feel very uncomfortable. To me it seems quite natural. It's been more than ten years since I felt someone else's skin touch mine. There were some incidents not too long after I came here that convinced all of us that it shouldn't happen again.

He leaves, and the door closes behind him. The screen retracts back up into the ceiling. It would probably be fine if it stayed out, but there was that word again. *Probably.*

I watch Doctor Mike leave, and then start stretching. A while later it's time to lie down again. I want to be rested for the testing tomorrow. Not that I expect this test to amount to more than any of

the others, but I have to try. I have to keep trying. It's important. It's maybe the most important thing of all.

Eyes closed.

Eyes open.

It takes me a moment to catch my breath. It was a dream. I know it was a dream. I knew it was a dream while it was happening. But sometimes if a dream is bad enough it doesn't matter.

You'd think that the worst dreams would be of tests, or attacks, or the aftermath thereof. Scary things, painful things. Nightmares.

No. The worst dreams are the nice ones. Pleasant dreams. Fond memories. Things I took for granted, back then. Back when I could say I was Taylor and stop talking after that and it wasn't lying.

I don't remember much from before. I was only...seven? Seven when everything changed. Over the years I've come to the conclusion that this is a mercy. Bad enough to be the way I am. Having something to compare it to would just make it cut deeper.

But I have a little. Things like...warm voices singing Christmas carols. Long blond hair that smells of lavender. Chicken soup when I got sick. Bloodying up my nose while playing with my big brother and everyone hurrying to comfort me. A hand to hold my hair out of my face when I was sick.

I know what I did, of course. I wasn't aware of it at the time. The first thing I remember from that time is waking up alone in a jail cell and asking what was happening. That's exactly the way I phrased it, too.

"What's happening?"

"Where am I?"

"Why is there blood on my shirt?"

And endless such questions. No one was particularly inclined to answer them, of course. No one was particularly inclined to have anything to do with me. There's something about a little girl soaked in blood and mewling piteous questions about what's going on that unsettles even quite hardened people.

Eventually, I was brought out of the cell and escorted to another room. A few people talked to me there, while everyone else was forced to wait outside. I didn't realize it at the time, but the people who stayed weren't cops. They were doctors.

One of them—Doctor Jacobs, I think his name was—started talking about demons, and how this wasn't *this* kind of demon but the *other* kind of demon, and something about influence and possession.

Doctor Mike was the one to interrupt and point out that I didn't understand a thing the older man was talking about. Except it was Intern Mike then.

We've both come a long way since that first meeting. In very different ways.

Doctor Mike was the one to explain, in simple words and gentle tones, that I had a demon in me. It would take me over and make me do things.

Had taken me over. Had made me do things. That was my mother's blood. My brother's. And no, they weren't going to be okay.

I cried then. He held me, rather awkwardly, and then the actual doctor explained something else.

They didn't know how to kill the demon, or make it go away. They'd tried, and all they'd managed to do was chase it from one body to another. But there was a trick to it. It could only move on after the body it was in died.

So they'd changed their approach. Instead of destruction, they'd started focusing on containment. Which, thanks to the nature of the infection, meant keeping the host alive. No matter what.

And now I was the host.

Fourteen years later, they still couldn't get it out of me. They're still trying, though. We all know that it's only a matter of time before the demon manages to make me kill myself, or else I just die. People don't last forever. When I'm gone, it could do a lot of harm before they next manage to isolate and contain its host.

The guards in their protective suits help me to lie down on the table. Doctor Mike slides the needle into my vein, then holds my hand as the drugs start to work.

I believe in God, I think, as the anesthetic agents start to do their work. *But God does not believe in me*. With the ketamine and propofol carrying me away, something about the thought seems strangely hilarious, and I giggle a little.

Eyes closed.