

VANITY

"Citizens of Cherry. This is a reminder to never walk alone. Never enter a blind room. Always keep a mirror on hand. Call 888 for a travel group. And remember: stay lovely, stay seen."

It is winter. Snow blankets the pink pathways and emerald roads. White pearl skyscrapers sparkle, and the snow glows in brilliant hues. Speakers sing cheerful songs to empty streets. The people wait inside.

Fluorescent tinsel charms Monochrome Magazine's ceiling. Windowed walls tint yellow on the marble floor. Aisles of plastic desks, glossy computers, and dewed plants fill the studio. Vanity types on a clear keyboard. Words scroll across the mirage of her skin.

"Hey, hey, hey." Sunday wheels across the row, bumping into Vanity's table. "Still up for coffee later?"

"Mhm. Is Willow joining?"

"Not today." Sunday pokes at a brown leaf. "Her boyfriend's dad wants them to stay for the night. Their power went out."

A bell rings from ceiling-mounted speakers. Sunday pushes and glides away.

"I'll be down in 10."

Employees funnel down the winding mirror stairwell. Window slivers beam sun rays into the ground-level hallway. A wide glass door props open at the end. Vanity unfolds her sunglasses and passes through.

Metallic cars of copper and rose whirl across snow-pillowed roads. Crowds flood out from buildings and merge on the sidewalks. Vanity steps aside to the nearest tree. Frosted crystals drip from its barren branches. Snowflakes bend to her breath.

Sunday emerges from the wave of employees and hooks her arm around Vanity's. They walk down the street, discussing new projects and cafe cravings. Transparent watchtowers stand along the path. Three people sit and chat inside the small room. They nod at Vanity and Sunday.

Cherry is a peaceful city, and every resident is perfect. They age when they wish. Nothing ever changes.

"Excuse me." A man in a royal blue suit calls from behind. He smiles warmly as Sunday and Vanity turn to him. "Which way are you two going?"

"Straight for a few blocks." Sunday releases Vanity's arm. "Do you need a buddy?"

"Yes, if you don't mind."

The man is nearly perfect. He has no blemishes or wrinkles, and his skin is silk. But the claw mark carved across his forearm is longer than his sleeve.

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Vanity reaches her apartment before sunset. Thick glass divides the rooms, and pale orange photographs decorate the outer mirrors. Her parents watch television in the living room. Her younger siblings, Belle and Charm, sit in the right-side bedroom.

"Where's Celeste?" Vanity empties her bag in the kitchen.

"Sleeping." Her mother turns on the couch. "The twins had their Aging today. Charm's is coming up soon."

"The big thirteen. I don't miss those days."

She chuckles. "Nobody ever does."

Vanity walks down the hallway. Two bedrooms with four beds sit on both sides. Celeste and the twins, who both turned 8, sleep on the right. Belle and Charm work on the empty bed, writing on clear pages with white markers.

The apartment's only blind room is behind the last door: the Closet. Vanity clicks the button, and the glass distorts into a mosaic. A subtle timer ticks inside. The Closet is narrow with a toilet, bath, and shower. The apartment's lone window fills the back wall, illuminating the space. The parallel mirror reflects the outside.

Vanity unzips her clothes and turns on the shower. Steam blooms and dewes the walls. Five round puncture scars colour her left thigh. Souvenirs from trying to leave Cherry at 16.

Every resident tries only once.

The timer beeps louder, and Vanity enters the hazy shower. With a final tick, the walls turn clear, and the falling sun dyes the room red.

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Smoke plumes from a blue-edged building. Floors of aquamarine tiles and plastic desks glitter in the sunlight. A large crater and cracks riddle its sides. Caution tape and officers detour civilians away.

Vanity pulls Sunday's hand through the dense crowd.

"W-what happened?" Sunday is pale.

A small woman beside them leans over. "Happened at sunrise. Someone hid a bomb."

Paramedics wheel out dozens of stretchers covered in lilac tarps. Greyed, mutilated limbs dangle from the metal trays.

"As you all know, there was an accident this morning at Trinity Bank." The department manager faces a window, watching the street empty. Employees gather around her and sit on desks and chairs. Everyone wears their sunglasses.

"At 7:23, a bomb on the eastern wall went off. Because of the mirror interior, the sun and snow blinded everyone. 86 people died." She turns to the group, her lip bloodied and scabbed.

"We think it's the Shutters."

Sunday squishes her tear-soaked cheek on Vanity's shoulder.

The Shutters are a violent group known for cutting off power and blinding districts. They have attacked cities outside Cherry for decades, and nobody knows what they look like.

"For the time being, we've been instructed to continue on as normal. We'll be having drills-"

A loud zap fills the room. The lights pop. Rows of emergency lights hiss but stay off. Chairs clatter and fall as everyone stands in a panic.

"Get to the windows!"

Sunday tugs on Vanity's hand. "C'mon."

They move to the glass. Everyone stands in pairs, holding hands and staring at one another. Vanity looks towards the dark stairwell. Something moves around the corner.

"The kids." Vanity's voice shakes. "They're at home."

"What? No, they should be at school."

"No, no, they stayed home today. Belle's sick." Vanity grabs her phone and flips it open. She dials Celeste's number but there is no signal. "I have to go."

"Vanity." Vanity yanks her bag off her desk and rushes to the stairwell door, tugging off her heels and turning on her flashlight.

"Wait!" Sunday screams and the floor quiets. She is frozen, shaking in fear. "D-don't go."

Vanity smiles. "I'll call you later."

She pulls the door open. The stairwell is black. It is completely silent. The curving wall bounces the stream of light down into the dark. Her image looks back, frightened.

With a breath, she runs.

Vanity's feet tap as she descends the spiral. Her light dances across the space, and figures in her passing reflections move out of place. The echoes of her footsteps grow louder. They are not hers.

Whistles, thuds, and scratches barrel after her. They get louder and louder. Bangs shutter the walls. Vanity keeps her eyes on the ground.

She leaps down the last few steps and sprints through the hallway. Sun rays peeking through the windows catch hundreds of black, taloned fingers flicking at her hair.

The door slams open and cracks the outside wall. She falls onto the ground, the stone scraping her skin as she turns and shines the light into the corridor.

Nobody is there.

The sun burns into the snow and buildings. Traffic lights dangle from their beams, lifeless. The speakers are dead. Lines of people spread across the towering windows, and red splatters ooze from doors left ajar.

Vanity pushes herself to her feet, whipping her bloodied palms on her pants. She flicks off the flashlight and takes out her compact mirror. She lifts its lid. The mirror is fractured but its light still works.

A car horn blares from behind as a silver car swings out from a parking lot. It flies up beside Vanity and the door pops open.

"Get in." It's Sunday. Two deep scratches drag across her cheek.

"Are you insane?"

"Like I'd leave you alone."

Vanity sighs, shoves the mirror into her pocket, and hops in. The car races forward. "Isn't this the manager's?"

"Yup."

Vanity coughs a laugh. "How'd you manage that?"

"Ah, well," Sunday grins nervously, "I might need to go job hunting later."

Officer trucks zip by in the other direction, and groups of people run between the buildings. Their car passes beside the watchtower they greet every day. Eight people cram inside. Tape grips their bloodshot eyes open.

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Cuts wound the glass walls of the apartment, and the Closet's window shines brightly. Celeste sits against it; Belle and Charm sit beside her. She stares at herself across the room, ignoring the silhouettes of figures twitching in the dark.

The front door opens, and Vanity and Sunday run in, slamming it behind. Their lights ricochet across the empty room and land on the blood trail in the hallway.

"Vanity!" Belle cheers, wiping her tears.

They hurry to the Closet and Belle unlocks the door. She wraps her arms around Vanity, and Sunday stands aside, scanning her light through the apartment.

"You guys okay?"

Belle shakes her head. Celeste slumps to the side, blood smearing an arc on the glass.

"Celeste?" Vanity moves Belle away and hurries over. She crouches and checks her pulse.

"Hey, wake up. We gotta go."

Charm looks away. He and Sunday freeze when her light lands on something in the dark.

"Vanity."

"Yeah?" Her voice scratches.

"Whose reflection is that?"

A tall dark figure of a man stands in her light. His features are grey and twisted. His tattered, long clothes drag on the floor and his head bends to the ceiling. Two pure white eyes weep tears glued to his skin. His hands hide behind his back. He sways back and forth.

Vanity rises to her feet and steps in front of Sunday, placing her flashlight on him.

"Take Celeste and the kids outside. I'm going to watch from the right. You guys watch from the door."

Sunday rips her light away and the kids pull Celeste onto her back. Vanity hugs the wall as she moves to the right. The figure keeps staring straight.

Sunday and the kids ready in the hallway, watching his slow teetering. Vanity slides behind the kitchen counter and steadies her flashlight on his figure. His left arm is not behind his back anymore.

He's pointing a long knife at the group.

Smiling.

He's not a reflection.

"VANITY RUN!"

BANG. Vanity smashes a pan into the back of his legs and tackles him to the ground. He crumbles down with a guttural cry.

"GO." She bashes the pan against his head. The group runs behind her and outside. She shoves herself off him and sprints to the door.

In the reflection of the light, he scrambles to his feet and throws his knife at Sunday. It whistles. Vanity bangs the door shut as it slices her shoulder open and pierces the mirror. He lunges, she barely avoids him as she runs behind the counter and grabs the flashlight.

He laughs hysterically as he leaps over and crashes into the cabinets. Vanity runs down the hallway. She barely latches the Closet door shut before he slams into it. He wildly cracks his head and stabs his knife against the glass.

"Let me in. Let me in. Let me in."

Vanity backs up to the window and slides down in the corner. She takes out her mirror and grabs the window's cable.

She meets his eyes.

"Go to hell."

She turns off her flashlight, yanks the cable, and blinds cascade from the ceiling. The apartment goes black.

Eerie scratches and thuds creep in the dark. The man shouts as he bangs on the Closet and front door. Vanity stares at her small reflection in the fractured mirror. Its tiny light buzzes.

Something tugs on Vanity's hair. She grits her teeth. Countless footsteps and scraping nails fill the air. The man shrieks, hitting the walls.

He goes silent. Vanity screams.

Light floods the apartment as Sunday barges in. The sea of dark figures vanishes. Blood pools from Vanity's legs and claw marks shred her pants and skin.

The man's mutilated corpse stares at her from the door, his painted skin scraped away.

The city's lights flicker on.

A pleasant voice fades in.

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