

Darkness...

Blurred thoughts...

Blurred memories...

Nothing but darkness...

Was it always only darkness? I don't recall it always being dark though?

A fuzzy image begins to appear as I open my eyes.

My head hurts so much. I can't remember anything... Where am I anyway?

I try to drag myself off the cold floor and glance around the room, leaning against the wall as I try to relearn how to stand correctly. It looks like some sort of bunker... a shelter perhaps? In the centre of the room is a wooden table and a chair, illuminated by an eerie red light which floods the room. A family of chairs are stacked at the far back of the room and on the wall is a shelf, containing unlabeled boxes and cans. On another wall is a corkboard containing documents and... more documents. My head suddenly starts to spin and I nearly fall back down to the ground... Where is everyone?

I lean against the wall, taking my time to slowly gather my thoughts.

Breathing slowly, yet steadily, I get the confidence to stumble my way to the table to take a closer look to see if there is anything on it. Nothing. I drag myself over to the shelf and notice a flashlight. I take the flashlight and ignore the other supplies. I then move to the locked metal door which was keeping me safe from whatever is on the other side.

I open the door... a sudden sense of dread rushes through me as I do. A horrible yet familiar feeling... but I push through it.

On the other side is darkness... nothing but just the complete and haunting absence of light. The smell of burnt metal rushes through me. Before me was a very messy hallway. Most of the walls are scorched as if a raging fire painfully ate away at them. Parts of the ceiling have collapsed and expose the wiring and piping above. Usually hallways are straight and structured but this one was warped, almost dream-like.

I step out of the room and nervously force myself to creep deeper within, carefully watching every step I take. I start wondering to myself: *What happened? Where is everyone? And... what about Amelia? Amelia... Amelia!*

As I turn the corner I see her, stuck underneath some rubble and struggling to pull herself out. I rush to quickly assist her. Gathering all my strength, I try my best to move the rubble out of the way. Rocks, metal plates, concrete, tiles, and a few wires, one by one I remove them until eventually Amelia picks herself up from the ground. I take a moment to take in who is standing in front of me. Her beloved purple suit, now covered in dirty marks but somehow not ripped. Her hair, all messy and unkempt. And her eyes... *her... eyes...*

“How frustrating.” Irritated, Amelia let out a sigh.

“Huh? Oh... yeah... must be frustrating... to have everything you built fall like this...” I respond, putting myself in her shoes and imagining how frustrating and annoying it must be to work so hard towards something and watch it all burn before your very eyes. A small sense of guilt seems to arise from deep within but... why would I be feeling guilty? For what? Did I do something? Did I start the fire? But how would I even do that? I would never do such a thing... right? But what if I-

“Ashley!” I suddenly jump, not realising Amelia was trying to catch my attention. She lets out another sigh. “There you go again, working yourself up over nothing. Relax.”

“Relax? How come you’re so relaxed? Everything you have is gone!” Amelia smiles and stares directly at me. “No point in getting upset over what’s happened. What is important right now is what we do now.” I sigh back. “Of course... you’re always right after all... heh. Wait. What do you mean by that? ‘What we do now’?”

Amelia’s smile turns more into a smug smirk as she responds. “We’ll need to start over. Rebuild this place. Start from scratch. Just me... and you.” An odd feeling of loneliness and dread fills me as I realise that there is a good chance that everyone else is dead. “We’ll start by reactivating the heart of this place. Follow me.” Without thinking, I instinctively begin to follow her.

On the way, I keep trying to work up the courage to ask Amelia about what happened and where everyone is, but the scenery already answers all my questions. Warped corridor after warped corridor we continue onwards, each step echoing all around us. Only now do I realise that the smell of burning flesh filled my lungs and the source of the smell came from the occasional dead body we would walk past. I try to look away. Even though I'm used to people dying, I'm never good with dealing with corpses. Yet again, guilt starts to build within me but I can't find the source of it. Eventually though, we get to Amelia's office.

A flush of horror floods my head. A wave of anxiety makes my head dizzy. *Why here?* A sudden but comforting pressure is applied to my shoulder. I look and see Amelia smiling at me. Without even speaking, I already know what she is saying: "*Stay strong*".

I proceed to follow Amelia into her office. Turned over bookcases, half of the ceiling has collapsed, her favourite painting now completely destroyed. I quickly make my eyes focus on Amelia to avoid having to look. Amelia goes to the back, and seems to mess around with a bookcase which hadn't fallen over. Very quickly I realised why as with a few clicks, the whole thing rotates open, revealing a secret, dark passage. A cold and gentle breeze comes through the now open door. I quickly rush through, desperate to get out of the haunting place which was Amelia's office.

I walk down the passage with Amelia behind me. The passage is claustrophobic, piping and wires lined the walls, and each step I took reverberated down the metallic cold corridor. Seems like the fire didn't make it in here... thankfully. Somehow though, the darkness seems stronger here.

I suddenly pause.

"Wait... am I even allowed to be here?"

"You're asking that now? Of course you're allowed here," Amelia responds, stopping as well.

"But-"

"No buts. You're promoted. Now shut up." Amelia snapped back as she suddenly brushed my shoulder as she marched past me. Taking a moment to recollect myself, I press onwards.

Eventually, after a few turns down this confusing maze, we reach our destination. The metal corridor opens up to a giant open cave. A lot of the ceiling seems to have collapsed onto the floor and random unidentifiable electronics are scattered underneath the rubble. The light I have struggles to pierce through the darkness. After taking a deep breath, I start to walk forwards again, keeping a close eye on where Amelia steps.

Eventually, we reach a metal staircase and we climb up it, each step echoing in the massive chamber we find ourselves in. Halfway up though, I pause to take a look over the railing, shining my light into the darkness to see just how far the light will reach.

“Ashley?” Amelia calls out to me.

“Ah, sorry!” I quickly shine the light back to the staircase, illuminating the steps once more.

Eventually, we reach the top. The staircase led to a metallic catwalk suspended by metal beams coming from the void above. Amelia continued onward into the darkness, clearly used to walking this path over and over, again and again. As always, I follow behind.

Eventually, we get to a door. A very sturdy, reinforced door with a clear label saying “DO NOT ENTER” and “AUTHORISED PERSONNEL ONLY”. To the right of the door is a retinal scanner. For some reason, Amelia looks at me, expecting me to do something. I tilt my head at her, confused. She then nods towards the scanner.

“You do realise I won’t have permission... right?”

“Try it.” Amelia smirked at me.

I groan as I move my eye to the scanner. Surprisingly, the device lights up as it recognises my presence.

BEEP

The reinforced door slides away, revealing another red-lit room.

“Wha... huh?!” Confused, I look back at Amelia but she’s already walked into the room. I follow behind and the door closes behind us. I shake my head to forget about what just happened.

Inside is a giant console, containing buttons and levers. Monitors hang from the ceiling, all unpowered and unresponsive except for one which is blinking text reading: “EMERGENCY POWER MODE”. This room clearly is some sort of control centre. Directly in front of where I entered is another reinforced door and to my right, deeper in where the red light begins to fade out, is another door. This door however was larger, looking almost like the containment chamber doors from deeper down this place.

I move to stand beside Amelia as she picks up a chair which was on the floor. She looks at me and nods towards the chair, the same way she would always do when she invited me to sit down. I oblige.

“So... how does this thing work anyway?” I ask curiously.

“Well, you remember that substance we use all the time?”

“Errr.... Nooo?” I try my hardest to recall what she is talking about, only to keep drawing up blanks in my head.

“Oh... yeah... You wouldn’t know. Well, I’ll explain it another time in more detail. For now, just follow my instructions carefully okay?”

“O...Okay.” I look at the ocean of controls which laid before me. Already I start to feel overwhelmed. How am I meant to make any sense of this? What if I mess it up? What if I actually destroy-

“Relax... There is nothing to be nervous about Ashley.” Amelia once again places her hand on my shoulder and smiles.

I take a deep breath. “Alright...”

“I don’t think this is working”. No matter how many times I tried to follow her instructions, the console just seemed to be not responding to any action. The monitors remained off and the room still had that eerie red light. Amelia seems to be deep in thought.

“Seems like it’s in a worse state than I initially thought... There might be a good chance we’ll have to do some repairs. How frustrating.”

“Repair it? H-how? How can I do that? I’m not exactly the sort of person to-“

“Of course you can do it. I’m here to help you after all.”.

I sigh. “You’re always right...”

“Good girl.” Amelia places her hand on my head. “Now, we have quite the long road ahead of us. But I’m sure you’ll manage it...”

“I’ll make sure of it.”