

Red

'It's blood. It's blood. It's blood.'

I can smell the iron in the air, the presence in the room, hugging my knees with sweaty palms.

'It's blood, it's blood, it's blood.'

I can feel my brain cloud as I start to hyperventilate.

'It's blood, it's blood, it's blood,' is all my brain tells me, all my brain repeats.

My eyes stay closed, scared of seeing the dark ruby-red substance.

“Please!” I yell, “I don’t want to- I don’t want to be here anymore!”

I can’t stop crying as my breathing stops, my heart feeling as if it was beating at ten times the normal pace. I can still sense the specter of a nearby force, tears falling down my face, eyes still closed. My face started to feel sticky from the amount of salt water covering it.

A loud ringing noise, and then-

“Thank you, Rachel, for participating in your community’s volunteer work today!” I sigh in relief as the darkness my eyes saw against my eyelids turned to a bright orangish-red.

The iron scent leaves the air, and I can feel my breathing start to become regular. I open my eyes to the familiar fluorescent lights of the centrum, the white blinding at first. The initial shock of brightness was over due to my eyes adjusting, and I stood up, facing the typically-eggshell wall which had just turned transparent.

“You can come out now!” a cheery, young scientist, a friend, pepped from the otherside of the glass-like wall.

A part of the wall slid to the side, leaving a space the size of a doorway. I stood up and walked out, still slightly shaking. I knew I had just done good work for my community, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling like crap.

The smiling, petite scientist confirmed my thoughts when she told me, “The centrum is very proud of you! You were so scared in our simulation room that you have helped us power a city for a whole month!”

“Only a month?” I ask, frowning, “I usually do so much better!”

The scientist wore a sterile, business-casual pencil skirt, asymmetrical blazer, and button up shirt that just so happened to complement the blinding white of the teeth she was showing.

While some others may find the constant cheeriness creepy, I, having known the girl for a while, always felt better when I saw her grin.

“Oh, Ms. Lorrena, you always do the most for your community!” She replied, playfully raising one of her eyebrows.

I smiled, replying, “I should get going,” I tell her, “It seems many people want to phobium today.”

She follows my gaze toward the rectangular window that gave a one-sided view of the outside hall. The people outside looked disgruntled, most with hands in their pockets, some eating the lab-provided snacks, others reading books or fiddling with the screens of their Electoras.

“Ok! Well, don’t forget to suggest Dr. Leuen-”

“-The next time you come. I know, Fleur.” I finish for her.

Boring hours spent at the Timor-Centrum spent waiting will make any person restless, want someone to talk to. Fleur just so happened to be a scientist who was always on shift, and always seemed eager to talk to others. In a society filled to the brim with introverts, I was one of the only people also eager enough to reply to her. Thus, a friendship bloomed.

“Also, could we go to dinner after I get out of my shift? At seven?” Fleur asks me.

My smile turns to a twin of hers, “I’d love that!”

I walk through the bulletproof, tinted glass doors, which lead to a hallway with many halls attached that, after going through a maze of paths, lead to the outside. I walked into one of the vacant teleportation pods, which looked like clear glass tubes with a blue bottom and top, a happy grin on my face. I had a feeling of childish joy within me, feeling like a kid who just got asked to a playdate. I turn toward a pad and enter my home pin, then the password for my address, and finally, after many other extraneous password precautions, my fingerprint. After the murders of 2084, the government had stopped taking any chances when it came to home break ins.

I chuckled a little, trying to get over any remaining fear- back then almost anything could be hacked. Not so much anymore. I get a good look of the Timor-Centrum out of my pod, the name written across its top with black letters. The centrum looked like any regular office building, with its white-brick outer walls, domed ceiling, and abundance of windows. The only

thing out of the ordinary, setting the centrum apart from a regular workplace, were the two guards holding machine chem-guns on either side of its double-doors.

“Five. Four. Three. Two. One.”

The pod’s feminine-automated voice finished its countdown, and the previously clear glass turned into a myriad of colors, making the whole pod feel almost psychedelic. I slipped into that brand of consciousness I always do when ever I have to teleport. I hold onto the pin in my pocket that I got from the Timor-Centrum at some point. It read, “Most fear donated!”, and had become some sort of rabbit’s foot to me. Then the colors stopped.

The once beautiful hues that had covered the walls of the pod all changed to a mix of scarlett and ruby red. A disgusting blare of sound goes off over and over again, so loud, so loud, *so loud*. Then... Gone.

I was crumpled on the floor, and I had to slowly remove my palms from over the top of my ears to make sure the noise was actually over. The red was gone, the capsule dark. I could tell the glass had turned transparent once again, even if all I could see outside was pitch black. The pod- was this a malfunction? Malfunctions do happen sometimes, I’ve heard stories-

Then, the voice of the pod. “Thank you, Ms. Lorrena, for volunteering in our experiment.”

“What!? Wait! I didn’t volunteer in anything!” I yell, right before the lights turned on and pierced through the darkness.

I was in the personnel-only pod the scientists used in the lab. I had seen it so many times due to it being placed in the room where the centrum employees watched and controlled the fear room. I looked around, checking to make sure it was safe to exit the pod, to leave. My eyes gazed over the one sided window that looked into the fear room, the counter tops all around the small lab room, and the holo-pads sitting upon them used to control the conditions of the fear room. I saw nothing concerning.

I open the curved, transparent door of the pod, and step out. My shoes click on the tile of the lab. I walk farther in, my pace hurried, and I head for the door. I can hear my heart beating, can feel myself praying this is all just a pod malfunction.

‘*Where is everybody?*’ I think to myself- there was a whole line of people when I left. None of the scientists or controllers seemed to be at the end of their shift. None-

I grasp the cold, steel door knob. I take one final glance behind me before I open the door-

'Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh- oh my gosh,' My heartbeat catches as I see Fleur's disheveled body on the other side of a counter. She was in a sitting position, her head slumped over, matted hair covering her face, and... a wet, red puddle around her. I begin to notice other bodies in the room, but I couldn't focus on anybody but the raven haired beauty.

"Oh my gosh, Fleur!" I run over to her, kneel down, grab her shoulders in my hands.

She was- cold. She was so horrifyingly, obviously dead. I stifle a sob after noticing my hands were now covered in the blood seeping out from a still bleeding chem-wound on her side. The sticky red also stained the knees of my pants, the white of her outfit. I gagged.

'Not right now,' I berate myself, *'This isn't the time to be scared. This isn't the time-'* I gag again, and decide to look upwards, away from the blood, toward her face.

She was the same age as me, twenty-three. I'd go to cafés with her sometimes. She would say that they make her feel as if she's stepping into the past. She'd-

She's gone. She's gone, she's gone, *she's gone.* One of the brightest minds of my generation.

"Is this your experiment?!" I yell to the ceiling, "I don't like it. I don't want to be here! Is this one of your little simulations?! Take me out!"

I didn't necessarily know who I was talking to. Terrorists? It couldn't be the government because this- this wasn't allowed. They had to get my actual permission to put me into a simulation, and Argonite, my country, has one of the most constitutional governments known to Earth's history. People trusted the system because the system placed trust into the people. They wouldn't do this- *Right?*

I stand up, ripping my hands away from Fleur's shoulders, bringing them towards my body in loose fists. Tears were rolling down my face as I ran- stumbling towards the door. I open it, and walk out-

I hear the gunshots. I run away from them, dodging.

Holes still simmering appeared in the wall that had previously been right behind me, and I take to running down the halls, away from the source of the bullets. I twist and turn, doing a marathon through the labyrinth that is the Centrum. I reach a fork. I see a dead body of a fear-

donor down one way, and I run the other. Fleur's dull eyes are imprinted in my mind as I sprint, open a door, fling myself into the random room, and lock it behind me.

I hear footsteps run right past the door as I slump down onto it, my eyes closed. I open them again, black dots appearing in my vision. This was not good. People were dead, and I most likely would also be soon. People shouldn't do so much physical exercise after phobiuming- it could cause black-out level exhaustion. I had to get something to drink and eat. Soon.

The lights are dim, and there are no windows leading to the hall or the outside. Desks and chairs sit in rows throughout the room, and an Electora-board sat on the wall in front of them, telling me that I had run into a classroom for the centrum's summer camps. A small fridge lays next to the teacher's desk at the front of the room, and my dry throat practically yells, prays, asking me to open it. I stand up, my weak muscles sore as I walk toward the fridge, away from the door.

The blast of cool air that hits my face when I open the fridge felt rejuvenating and fresh, and I felt hope as I saw the... it was obviously food but I wasn't sure what type. A plethora of water bottles sat in there too, though. I sat behind the desk and began to drink. I tried not to let the dark thoughts overwhelm me, tried not to think of the death toll, tried not to think of the culprit. Tried not to think of Fleur's cold, dead skin. Tried not to think of the dinner that would never happen. I failed.

The water was my life force, its temperature fighting back a large army of negative thoughts. My hands weren't shaking as much when I moved onto the foreign food, and I tried not to think of the fact that the person whose meal I'm eating may possibly be dead.

I looked down at the strange food, about to dig my fork into it, when-

A giant, hairy spider came crawling out of its depths, its pincers the size of my fingers. A shrill, loud sound escaped from my mouth. I immediately dropped the food, ran to the other side of the room, and covered my mouth. I could hear footsteps outside the door, fast paced, urgent. I heard the cocking of a gun as I ran farther and farther away from the spider, who was slowly crawling up the walls on the other side of the room.

I prayed that it wouldn't come my way, my breathing heavy but quick as a knock sounded on the door. I stayed as quiet as I could. Waiting, just waiting for the person to go away, to leave me be. I could imagine that my heartbeat looked like the Mod-Himalayan Mountain ranges. Tears rolled down my face, and the spider began to walk closer and closer to me.

I picked up a book from a desk nearby, a heavy encyclopedia with electronic moving pictures. I threw it at the spider, and it hit it square in the face. I heard the bang the book emitted when it hit the spider, killing it. The body of the spider was... Gone. I had no time to think of why before I heard the bang of a gun, and the chemicals on the bullet burned a small hole right through the door. I slid under a desk, praying the person out there wouldn't see me, hyperventilating as I slowly began to have a panic attack. I could hear a laser cutting through the door, I could hear the door break off its hinges. Terrorist. They must be a terrorist.

'I'm done for,' My brain repeats to me, 'I'm dead.'

I heard taps on the floor as the person walked to the front of the room, dressed in the black tactical gear of- The military?

Then she turned around. I saw her clear brown eyes, her jet black hair, and I knew she saw me as soon as we made eye contact. She didn't say a word as she walked toward me, her steps not making a sound. I started to stumble and crawl on my back away, only succeeding to pinning myself into a corner. Tears poured down my already sticky face as I let out a body-shaking sob.

"Please!" I yelled, "Please! I've never- I've never done- I've never done-"

The military woman knelt down in front of me, her bulky black gear clanging onto the ground, her machine chem-gun held in two hands as she pinned my knees with her own.

I looked away from her eyes as she completed my sentence. "Anything wrong? That's the point, sweetheart."

She dropped one hand away from the gun, and used her now-free hand to grab my chin, yanking it to force me to look at her. Her face seemed understanding. Sympathetic.

She stared me straight in the eyes as she raised her gun so its cold, hard muzzle touched the left side of my head, my brown hair matted with sweat.

I could feel the warm, sticky sweat dripping down my face when she told me goodbye.

"Is it done?" The man's hair was the same color as his blindingly-white suit when he looked across the desk at his underling.

“The citizens have been exterminated, sir,” Replied a women in light, black clothing, “And, if I may ask, sir, why bring the girl back? Why tamper with the pod? Why give her the hallucination of the spider? Why... add the extra trouble, sir?”

The man looked at her, suspicion in his eyes, “The girl? She was a top donor. Easily scared. Why wouldn’t we?”

The women nodded in understanding, if not a bit apprehensively.

“Good. Now remember,” The man took the chin of the women on the chair across from him, the move of power almost twin to that of a young adult’s final moments.

The women did not let her stare wander around the oval office when he told her, “The fear from their deaths combined with their hallucinations will power this entire country for years to come. The fear of the people when the citizens hear of these ‘terrorist’ attacks can power twenty more. People giving fear? Even the most powerful donors can truly only power a small city for a day, no matter what we tell them.

The fear people feel when they die? Enough clean energy to power a country for months to come. This is all for a good cause, general.”

The man may have released the women’s chin, but she stayed in the exact same position, leaning toward him, when she replied, “Understood, sir.”

