

Sim

Staring at the monster that had both eyes and snarl trained on her, Blondie fired off a shot off keeping her eyes on it. The monster howled in pain, stumbling back and clawing at the wound where the bullet hit. Looking at Blondie once more, the monster toppled motionless to the floor. Still holding her gun trained on the monster and watching it suspiciously, Blondie questioned the situation.

“Why did it fall this time?” Speaking aloud to myself, I wrestled with whether I should go investigate the monster. Bullets never took them down before...at least as far as I’ve seen. What about those copies inside them? This situation was starting to go farther into the category of insane bullshit than it already was.

Puzzling through so much information with no discernable answers and no one to bounce them off of made me uneasy, gives me a headache. Yeah, it’s my job normally but, it never included dissecting aliens or whatever these monsters and dark figures are.

“What the hell is this?” I complained to myself as I came up empty on any answers, and deciding not to inspect the monster after seeing it continued to breathe, labored breaths and stare at me.

“That’s a good question, actually.” The room flashed in a whirl around me as I turned and fired of a shot at the sudden sound of a man’s voice. Dark hair and placid eyes looked at the monster, they belonged to a tall man, unfazed and opening his fist.

“Who the hell are you?” I demanded, watching him and tensing for another shot.

“I wouldn’t. No need to waste bullets.” He answered, dropping the bullet from his hand and approaching the monster, without concern.

Looking around the room, the man sighed at the sight of the bodies of copies and monsters alike piled in the corner. He seemed annoyed.

“Did you do this?” He asked, pointing to the monster I shot and making eye contact with me.

“Yeah, the whole lot of them. What’s it to you?”

“So what did you find out about them?” He asked.

“You first. Who the hell are you?” I returned, sizing him up and waiting for his answer.

“Well?” I didn’t bother hiding my frustration, when at least two minutes passed.

He stayed silent, and looked me over and probably sizing me up as well, and finally spoke, “Where is Teresa? I need to speak with her and James.”

I can’t believe this shit. Is he trying to piss me off?

“What the fuck? Are you allergic to answering questions, freak?” I went from frustrated to angry, my blood hot and temper rising.

“No, I just don’t want to.” He answered quickly this time. It pissed me off more than him ignoring my first questions had. My hand twitched with the urge to shoot at him again, despite his earlier insistence.

“So, what? You expect me to just tell you what I found just because you showed up?” My glare could melt metal at this point, but if I wanted any clues on getting out or finding out what happened to Lisa, I may as well cooperate. Besides, it might be a good excuse to take her apart.

The man simply gave me an unpleasant smirk, like he knew something I didn’t.

I was going to find out what he knew.

“Well, intelligence isn’t free. You want mine, you give me something I want.”

Clearly amused, he asked, “So what do you want? Your friend here back in her body?” He pointed to the monster at his feet.

Well that’s one mystery solved.

“Eventually...I think I might like to play with her first, and see just what she’s made of.” I know I sounded like the kind of person you stay away from to avoid becoming a skin-suit, but science always comes first. It was nice to see he wasn’t completely unfazed by this fact, though I figured it had more to do with my lack of interest on recovering *Red* than anything.

“As you wish. What do you want then?” He asked, now giving me a much more interested look.

“I want to know who you are, what this place is, and how to get out.”

“Choose one.” He answered, making this little sparring session that much more interesting.

“I haven’t decided yet. Why don’t you ask me something first?” I answered, climbing to my feet, and keeping my distance, went to my computer and hit a few keys. I wanted to get as much information out of him as possible, and get us out of here.

“Interesting. You’ll give me an answer to anything I ask?”

“An answer, yes. Details depend on what information you pay me with? Or have you never negotiated trade of intelligence before?” Watching for changes in his demeanor, I could tell this wasn’t the case, and that most likely he told me about Lisa’s condition, in order to gauge my response. This was going to be an interesting game.

The man looked at me with more interest than before. “Alright. What do you think this place is?”

Not exactly the question I was expecting him to ask first but, since he appeared out of nowhere, could stop bullets with his hands, but was playing a game for information with me, I could assume that he wasn’t omniscient and so probably not something supernatural. The bullshit happening around us probably wasn’t either, but that was still debatable.

“Well, I’m the only one here that hasn’t died and yet I’m stuck with three who are setting world records for it, so it’s not likely the underworld or whatever afterlife there may be. If it’s a

simulation of some sort however, it's a poorly designed one. Your NPCs all vanished as soon as any of us came into contact with one another. Sure, it was good for scaring the shit out of us, but still not very well made." I could tell by the look on his face that at some point, I struck something near correct.

"Are those your only theories, then?"

I couldn't keep the scoff from fully escaping and ignored his question, asking one of my own. It was my turn after all. "What are you doing in this place, and how are you able to leave?" The man raised an eyebrow, I imagine he thought I would hold onto the question of who he was. I'd find out soon enough, considering I doubted this exchange was the only time I'd see him.

Exposed

Sim stood and watched Blondie as she asked her question, her body language betraying nothing. She was definitely impressive in her ability to keep any information from leaking out through more subtle means. He decided that taking a little detour to chat with her, and glean what the intelligence of their outfit knew, it may serve useful in their own directive. After all, they did literally exist to serve his needs. Even if they didn't know it.

This petite blonde woman was definitely more than she appeared. What's that technology she has in her body? It's nothing like what my creators made, did she do that to herself? Does that have to do with why she remains unafflicted with the reset? Maybe I should be pursuing information from her, not just Porter or James. Let's set out a breadcrumb and see what puzzle she solves with it. "Porter can answer your first question. As for your second one, my particular part in all this allows me certain permissions on where I go and what I can do."

I wish I could see the wheels turning in her mind, it was obvious that she made some connection. *What perspective have you just gotten a hold of? What's it going to cost to have you give it to me? Small woman, you're very interesting.*

"What is that technology you're wearing? Where did you get it? What does it do?" I asked, as she leveled a hard stare at me. "I had it before crashing through your wonderland mirror, what does it matter?" She answered, betraying nothing.

"Then it should be no problem to answer where it came from."

Her eyes went cold, a slight and subtle change in her body language followed that as she shifted slightly in front of the computer she messed with earlier. "It's technology I use for work." She finally answered, looking annoyed that she had to answer at all.

"What am I doing here, and who are you?" The blonde asked, truly a question I wasn't expecting in our little game thus far.

"What do you mean?" I couldn't help but want her to clear up her question.

“Exactly what I said. It’s become increasingly obvious through my time here with Porter, Red, and James that I’m the odd one out. Then there’s the matter of our conversation, you are either trying to get me to recall something I don’t remember, or are prying an answer that you’re looking for yourself. So, what is it that you think I’m doing here, since-wait that’s not right.” She stopped mid-sentence, and crossed the room to one of the copies on the ground.

“Do whatever it was you were going to do to put her back in her body.”

“Something you discovered?”

“Yeah...something like that.”

Intrigued by her reasoning, I couldn’t help my curiosity of where those breadcrumbs led her to.

Grabbing one of the copies of James that she hadn’t shot in the head, the blonde dragged him back to the table and threw him on top of it haphazardly. “He’s the real anomaly here.” The blonde said, patting the lifeless copy on the chest.

With a jolt, it sprang to a sit erupting into a miserable cry.

Confusion circled me with her deduction, and the fact that she’d made a copy of James come back to life. At least it looked that way as it breathed slowly.

“You lost me.”

“The rest of us have been in positions where danger was imminent, but we all signed up for it. In addition, none of us saw those dark creatures before coming here, aside from him. They attacked his family when he was young, and then his school just before he ended up here. I thought it may have to do with trauma that attracted them to him, but that’s not the case. Whatever it is, the answer isn’t in here, just like I’m sure the reasoning for my being a party to this isn’t here.”

Stopping, she looked from me to the still red-haired soldier, and then continued.

“Unless *the programmers that be*, decided to add a little extra observation insurance to this simulation you’re running here. It’s just a theory but, if it happens to be the case, then I suppose we’ll find out what happens when they lose that extra observation.”

Watching as she picked up her laptop, I was surprised when she snapped it over her knee, surprised someone as small as her could.

Dropping the laptop, the blonde woman’s tattoos glowed momentarily and faded to her natural skin color.

Wanting to ask what she was trying to accomplish, I didn’t have to wait long to find out. Catching both our attention, we both heard the copy suck in a deep breath, and then another before looking up at myself then at the blonde, and finally the body of the red-haired woman.

“It took you much longer than last time, though you did seem to discover other things much sooner this time around.” He said, looking at the other bodies in the room.

“What does that mean?” She asked, but the copy already turned his attention to me. “I see you’ve been tampered with again, and let out where you’re more vulnerable to further corruption, Sim.”

Walk-in

“You know it’s dangerous to what we’re all trying to accomplish here when you’re wandering outside your boundaries. Especially with how fragile your state is right now. No matter, we’ll just have to make a few adjustments so this doesn’t happen again.” The copy spoke, their full attention on the man called Sim.

Watching Sim’s demeanor, he seemed much more nervous with this copy’s attention on him now. Admittedly, I found myself a little tense within this copy’s presence, almost on instinct and that was even more curious than the cocky asshole’s sudden behavior modification. “What do you mean by this time? How many times have we run through your particular simulation now? When are you going to let us out?” I demanded, trying to put together the puzzle that now had more pieces that didn’t fit in.

The copy clucked its tongue, and remaining expressionless turns its focus towards me. I felt myself take a step back, with no more to my instinct than feeling threatened.

“Whenever you like, if you could remember how. As for how many times you’ve run this experiment, you’re still within the confines of the first time. You’ve been providing interesting results on the test subjects up until now. Especially with all the variables they’ve introduced to the equation. It’s been a much more interesting experiment than even we could have expected.

However, we can’t have our main system corrupted through interference, so-”

Before I could think to move, I was choking with the copy’s hand pressed tight around my throat. Before I felt the grasp clench, a sudden blur followed by a spray of smashed teeth and blood as the copy was knocked from the table and sailing into the wall beside it.

‘Red’ stood between me and Sim, one fist covered in blood, and the other clenched and ready to deliver another serving of pain.

What the hell? She actually saved me?

I couldn’t help but glance at Sim who had the ghost of a smirk on his face.

Sneaky bastard.

As the copy stretched its jaw, and recovered to a sit, Red let loose that second serving and made me glad I was only on the receiving end once. Her fist must have been made of steel, because the punches alone were enough to send blood spraying up the wall in grotesque patterns as she beat the copy beyond recognition.

Halting Red’s next punch from pulverizing the first real lead in information we’d had, I hoped it would give me more information than before. A long shot in hell, I know.

“How do we get out of here?”

The copy opened their mouth in what I assume they attempted to be a grin, and with the remaining shards of bloody teeth left, came across much scarier. “Walk out the same way you walked in.” Looking up at Red, the copy spoke sinister words, “I’d try harder to survive, if you actually want to leave here at all.” With that, the pulverized body dropped dead, the entity possessing it gone.

“What the fuck does that mean?” I looked at Sim and then to Red who looked over the copy’s body, silently.

Exile

Waiting for it to return to life, I couldn’t let go of the tense familiarity of pulverizing the copy, or of what it said to me.

The hell does that mean, try harder to survive. It’s been all we could do to barely keep ourselves alive in this nightmare. Isn’t it?

I didn’t have much time to think about it, the boy and dark-haired woman returned and both looked like they’d seen a battlefield.

“You look like hell.” The blonde spoke up, stating the obvious as she looked them over. “There and back, in a flaming handbasket.” The boy answered, leaning against the wall near the door and sliding to a sit. When he made eye contact with me, I couldn’t help but loosen up, and ask what happened and what they found.

As he finished detailing the hellscape they traversed to get back, it donned on me that he never said anything about having to go through one when they left.

That was weird. We hadn’t seen any of the monsters in quite some time despite it being night. However, at the same time, James and Porter were running through hell covered in kerosene.

“Did either of you have to reset?” I asked, sure I knew what the answer would be. Instead he merely turned to Porter and began asking her about what she was missing, calling her Teresa for some strange reason.

Looking at me silently, Sim seemed to know what I was thinking but, if he knew the answer, I imagine he would have shared it by now. Unless they already made whatever changes, they were talking about. Whatever that meant.

Looking at each other, Porter and James nodded admitting that it had been at least three times since they left.

The blonde looked at me as if I’d cracked some sort of code, she seemed to have figured it out as well. Now we knew what it was referring to, but why?

So, where does that leave us? I have yet to reset again, and haven’t seen any monsters but, they’ve reset several times in quick succession

“You two need to leave, now. You brought it with you.” Sim pressed, his expression one of urgency.

“Leave where? We just got here.” Porter demanded, glaring at Sim before it went to blinking in confusion. He’d vanished, right in front of her eyes.

“Fucking cryptic ass bastard.”