

The Mysterious Dark

By Anna Schumacher



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WOB

The moment I wake up, I wish I hadn't. The sounds of screams and gunshots flood my ears—no filter, nothing stopping them. The room around me reeks of death, blood, urine, fear. There are two others crowded onto the thin mattress with me, an old woman's hot, labored breath on my cheek.

Then the hunger hits me, like a knife wedged between my ribs. It's a burning, stabbing, throbbing pain, inescapable and inevitable. I lick my chapped lips, but it only makes them more dry. I try to sit up, but find I don't have the strength and suddenly, the fight no longer seems worth it. *Why try?* I ask myself. *Why fight a fight you cannot win?*

I close my eyes, willing death to come; willing God to take me. I squeeze them tighter, and suddenly I see Max's face behind my eyelids.

"You can do it, Ida," he's saying to me. *"Just one more day."*

And he gives me that smile, the smile that promises everything will be okay. That as long as I have *him*...

The vision disappears when the Kapo starts screaming to get up, you filthy Jews, and I force myself out of the bed and out of the door for roll call. As I shuffle, struggling to put one foot in front of the other, I trip over something that feels very much like a body. I try not to look, but out of the corner of my eye I see that perfect jawline, those full lips and high cheekbones, blood seeping out of a gunshot wound in the center of his forehead. *Max*...

I reach for him but just as my fingers almost touch his lips, the scene around me fades into blackness and I'm falling, falling, falling. In the nothingness of this in-between, I feel no pain, and I relish the comfort of it. It doesn't last, a new scene filling in. I'm an entirely new person, around 20 years younger, lying on the ground in a rural grassy field. It's summertime, with a sun so bright I have to squeeze my eyes shut and block the light with my hand. It feels surreal, like I'm outside of my body, but the moment I come crashing into it the pain is back.

It's everywhere, bruises upon cuts and scratches and blood all over the place. I glance around disorientated, trying to figure out how this could have happened. There's nobody around, only this stretch of grass for miles and miles. But somewhere in the distance... a group of blurry figures, coming clearer as they run towards me. *Friend or foe?* I can't help but wonder.

It becomes frighteningly clear that they are anything but friends as they near, cackling and reeking of cigarette smoke. I try to stand up; to run away, but find it impossible. I settle for smoothing my dress down, pushing myself up into a seated position. Blood trickles into my eyes, clouding my vision.

“What do we have here?” inquires the leader with a smirk, elbowing his buddies. He’s cocky, filled with a confidence that makes me uneasy. I won’t deny that he’s handsome, but the type that warns of danger. He runs his fingers through his thick black hair, grinning down at me.

“Get away,” I try to yell, but I sound unsure of myself, my voice shaky. “Stay away from me.”

I crawl farther back from him, dragging myself painfully with my arms. The others laugh, and the leader drinks something from a flask.

“Aw, don’t be afraid of me, beautiful,” he croons, terrifying me all the more.

And suddenly he’s on top of me, and I’m kicking and screaming and yelling bloody murder. I manage to kick him off of me, but to no avail. He comes stumbling drunkenly back, an unfamiliar glint in his eyes.

“I will make you regret that,” he snarls, and my eyes widen in trepidation. I scream louder, and just as he nears me the scene cuts to black. I’m breathing heavily, floating through the dark again.

“What is happening?” I yell angrily into the void. “Somebody let me out of this!”

The emptiness around me sucks the sound so quickly I wonder if I’ve said anything at all. There’s nothing to fight; no way to stop this. No walls to pound, no lock to pick... not even a light switch to stumble around for. I succumb to the fate of whatever is happening, sighing as the world rematerializes around me again.

It’s the heat that hits me first, starting like the comfort of a campfire on a cold night but gradually building into a painful sting I can’t escape. I’m surrounded by a fiery inferno, akin to the fires of hell. Across from a wall of fire sits a little boy on a high chair, naught but three years old. Somehow, I know he is my son. And somehow, I know I cannot save him. Despite this, nothing will stop me from trying.

“Mommy!” I hear him scream, crying as the fire gets closer and closer to him. He’s stuck where he is, strapped in to the stupid high chair. He doesn’t take his eyes off of me as I sprint through the fire toward him.

If I thought it hurt before, that’s nothing compared to now. My entire body feels as if it’s on fire and well... it is. My long blond hair, my pride and joy, catches the flame first. The heat travels up and into my scalp, and I involuntarily scream. Years of high school track and cross country are paying off, the endurance and adrenaline giving me the strength to continue. But even that is not enough, and the fire reaches my little boy before I do.

“No,” I choke out. “Liam!”

“Mommy?”

And then the fire overtakes me, right before I get to Liam. I crumple to the ground, my body burning up. I’m screeching, and sobbing, and rocking on the floor, and I realize this must be the worst way to die.

I’m in the black in-between only momentarily this time, still crying as I try to regain my senses. Does this get worse? Please tell me it doesn’t get worse.

...it does. Now I’m somewhere far in the future, fancy new technologies everywhere but they do nothing to save us. There are no trees. The sun burns illogically hot, the heat traveling through the protective clothing that covers every inch of my body. And evidently there’s no oxygen either—every person here is hooked up to a massive oxygen tank, except for those who clearly couldn’t afford them.

Those people are crumpled on the ground, coughing and fighting for their next breath. The rest of us trample over them, putting them out of their misery. We're crowding a spaceship, pushing and fighting to get closer. I work my way to the front of the crowd, grabbing the handle in an effort to pull myself into the capsule.

Out of nowhere a terrible feeling hits me, like my lungs are on fire. My grip loosens and my body hits the ground, pain racking it as I gasp for oxygen that doesn't come. My vision goes blurry, but through the haze I can see that somebody has cut my oxygen tube and is now using it to breathe. I move to get it back, fighting to pull my knife out of my pocket and throw it at them. The lack of oxygen is taxing my strength, and somehow my face covering has slipped off. It feels like instant sunburn, just as bad as the fire was if not worse.

Somebody steps on my stomach and I can't breathe, can't breathe, can't—

I breathe in relief when I fall through the ground and back into the black void. Will this ever end? I focus on my breaths, thankful for something as simple as oxygen for the first time I can remember. *In. Out. In. Out. In...*

Out into the world again. Or am I? It's as dark as the void, but I'm no longer falling and something feels different. There's... solid ground. Feeling. Noise. *What is that?*

I cover my ears when I recognize the noise. It's the sound of bombs, destruction, war. I'm surprisingly feeling no pain this time, but the fear makes up for it. The moment I realize I'm holding a flashlight, I flick it on.

When my eyes adjust, I see I'm in a basement—a bomb shelter, of sorts. The walls have crumbled around me, dead bodies crushed under the rubble. I swallow back the bile that creeps up my throat. I close my eyes, willing the darkness to come back; willing the scene to end.

A wall crumbles behind me and my safe space becomes even smaller.

"Help me!" I yell, covering my mouth immediately after. I don't want the wrong person to hear.

The ceiling comes crashing down, the rubble missing me by inches. I have to curl myself up into a ball to fit in the small cavity. I force myself to take shallow breaths, knowing my oxygen will run out. The minutes drag into an hour, my oxygen supply dwindling. I wish to die, to end this, but by some sick miracle, it doesn't happen. The bombing stops, and soon somewhere far above I hear rescue workers sorting through the remains of the building.

"Help!" I cry out, but I can't make my voice loud enough to be heard. I will be trapped here until I die. It's the best ending for a claustrophobic person like myself.

"I've had enough," I whisper to whoever is controlling this. "I get it. End scene. END SCENE."

The mysterious dark heeds for once, slipping me gently out of the rubble and back into the emptiness.

I brace myself for the next nightmare, but it doesn't come. Now they're toying with me.

"Stop it," I tell the dark, and once again it listens.

I'm full on sobbing at this point, but I can feel that the new scene materializing is real this time. I gasp, sitting straight up on my bed—my bed!

I smile in relief, basking in the 21st century life. *It was just a nightmare*, I tell myself. *Just a nightmare*. Despite how much I hated my life last night, now I'm euphoric to be back.

I reach for my phone, scrolling through the notifications.

Melissa: "Ugh, wish I was sleeping. Life sucks."

Jamie: "Can't believe we have ANOTHER test today... so unfair."

Aubrey: "Blech, so tired of wearing masks. Could things be any worse?"

Maurice: "Sos, Jake just kissed Olivia in front of me. Kill me now."

A news site: "Could America be the worst country to live in? Yet another political scandal!"

They're wrong.

They're all wrong.

How didn't I see it before? I complain about my life every day. In every class I slip into my seat and grumble to the person next to me, "I don't wanna be here."

But... are we dying? Are we in the middle of a war? We're not. I grab my phone.

To Melissa: "I'll bring you some coffee. ;)"

To Jamie: "Lol, know I sound insane but could we try being thankful to HAVE school? ;P Besides, you know you'll get an A."

To Aubrey: "I mean... I suppose things COULD be worse. Just thankful to be alive. :D"

To Maurice: "Sorry hon. I promise it'll be okay. Try some optimism... you deserve better than him anyway."

I swipe away the news notification, a smile on my lips. I silently thank whoever was behind the dream for a valuable life lesson, and crawl out of bed the happiest I have been in a long time. The day ahead is bright, and full of possibilities. I'm ready to seize it, and to cherish the best and brightest moments, rather than complaining about the worst ones.

I realize it's all in perspective - and it takes seeing the dark to truly appreciate the light.