

In the Shadows

In Amaranthia, we don't count our age in numbers, but by how many purges we have survived. There aren't many that are old, but many that are young and orphans. My name is Jamilah Hassan, and so far, I've survived five purges since my thirteenth birthday. Every citizen of Amaranthia is forced to attend the purge every year, starting from their 13th birthday. Today is a special event for many thirteen year olds, including my sister Lina. Today is the start of the week, January 19, 2124 and the start of the annual purge. It happens in the confined zone of the abandoned town. Buildings are beaten, trees are nonexistent, roads are chipped and the light poles flicker at night. It's a cold and dreadful place inside these walls, but outside, everything is just perfect. Amaranthia has hosted these purges ever since the town was moved to its current location. Some people say that the President made a deal with the devil to create the heaven that we live in, for the price of people's lives.

The announcement comes loudly, through the big megaphones as I stand with hundreds of others, crowded around the podium on the town square. The crowd's murmurs start to fade as the President comes up to stand on the podium, making him visible to the hundreds in the back. It smells like sweat, anticipation and fear. The president is an old man with greasy white hair and wears his usual blood red bowtie. "Attention! Ladies and gentlemen, the annual purge has begun. As always, you will get a one hour head start. Good luck." Fifty trained assassins are lined up on either side of him. All of them with predatory expressions on their faces, studying their targets.

One hour. I would get one hour to run as far away as I can with Lina. I have to carry her sometimes because of her asthma and her shorter strides. Sometimes, I worry for her health because she isn't big enough for a thirteen year old, but then, I remember her superior

intelligence. The 5 year difference in our age doesn't seem so big thanks to Lina's maturity after our parents died. It had taken a big toll on seven year old Lina but she's getting better by the day.

One particular soldier in the front, right next to the President, catches my attention. He is tall and built like a bear. His dark skin and cropped hair immensely contrasts his ice blue eyes. He is young, too young to be drafted, yet I feel no sympathy as I stare at him. He meets my eyes and freezes. I freeze. Time freezes. His eyes are as blue as sapphires and they don't back down from my stare but look... conflicted. We stay there for what feels like hours, until he breaks his stare first to look at the President and whispers something in his ear. There is something he knows that I don't.

I take one more look at the crowd around me, at the soldier, the abandoned town and lastly at the fat man. I pray to God that I won't get chosen this year. Or get caught. I turn around to face the huge iron gates that look tiny with miles between us. Our salvation. If Lina and I can escape these gates before the week is up, I will survive, even if I am a target.

Day 1: January 19, 2124

I keep running as fast as the wind and my feet will allow. My onyx curls flow behind me like a tail and I frantically brush it off my face. Lina is asleep on my back, her long hair bouncing up and down with eachstep. *What will happen to her when I'm gone?* I can't get chosen. Luckily, I don't see a tail behind me in the dark. Safe. *For now.*

It's too early to say anything because it's only been a couple hours since the announcement. There have been 108 deaths already. The names were read through the speakers without any emotion behind them. Understandable, as I didn't know them either. The city is big and no one bothers to make relations and friends because most of us won't make it to 40.

It's hard to see in the dark but I manage to find an opening in between two old apartment buildings and set Lina and my backpack down. *Shelter*. Opening a meal replacement shake, I dump its contents into a bottle of water and shake it. Lina stirs awake heaving heavily as if they were chasing us even in her dreams. Handing her the shake, I search in my bag for a blanket and a small hoodie I can use to make a pillow. Suddenly I get the feeling that I'm being watched by someone in the shadows. Turning my head around, I find nothing. No sign of anyone. *Calm down*. I take a deep breath and close my eyes to picture my house, outside of these prison walls. Lina places a hand on my knees as I open my eyes again. She is done with her half of the bottle and hands it to me. I finish it in one gulp. The terror slowly fades and my blanched face returns to its regular deep honey color again. A headache follows right after and I drift away into total darkness. My only escape from this nightmare.

Day 2: January 20, 2124

The sirens aggressively wake us up and we don't even have the chance to have our breakfast before the announcement is made. "Welcome to day two, everyone. The borders have moved inward five blocks in each direction. Keep running toward the exit and maybe you'll make it. Good luck." I curse at the voice and pack our bags. For the first hour, Lina runs right beside me, keeping up surprisingly easy. It is after we stop to recharge when she starts to breathe heavily and we take it slower from then on. Another dry voice makes an announcement through the speakers on the posts for the 84 losses. My mind races, *how are they so fast? It's only been half a day*. I guess it becomes easier after the borders become smaller and more people congest certain areas. Amidst the bad news, by sundown, the first couple names of people who have survived are also announced. I counted about 60. Our name will be there before the week ends. I pledge that to myself. Lina keeps up with my running and doesn't complain once. I hadn't either

when I was 13 and survived my first purge. The terror and confusion took me so forcefully that I had no time to.

After the announcement is made and all the names are called out, Lina and I focus back on our task to find shelter for the night. Lurking in the shadows of deserted buildings, we try to avoid any oncoming soldiers. I remember these alleys and buildings like the back of my hand now. We pass by a soldier booth and turn left, where there is a small structure with a patio on its roof. As we climb up to rest, I look back at the station and I get that sudden chill again. *This is getting out of hand.* Someone is watching me. I know it. Lina stares at me in confusion as I survey the roof and surrounding buildings for any walking uniforms. Just as I am about to give up and go to sleep, I see a pair of bright blue eyes lurking in the apartment building right next to the level of the patio. I blink... then they are gone. I shake my head.

“I could have sworn they smiled before they disappeared.”

“What are you talking about?” Lina asks, confused.

Am I imagining things? Certainly not. *Right?* After another meal replacement shake, it takes me hours to fall asleep, and when I wake up the sun still hasn't risen yet.

Day 3: January 21, 2124

Somebody's watching me. I pretend like I can't tell and keep running toward the gates, miles away. Lina is close behind when we stop for a break and I hand her the red inhaler. We have come a long way since the first day but having Lina with me is inevitably slowing me down. By today, I would have been only a few miles away from the gate and been out by day four. I tell her that we need to hurry and get farther away from the shrinking border and take less breaks. She nods her head and we go off again. The feeling of someone following me starts to fade the faster and farther we run. I don't know what is coming for me but I have to survive it.

By the time the sun had creeps underneath the horizon, we seemed to have caught up with the rest of the surviving citizens. There is a group of thirty or so people standing in a tight circle waiting for the announcement. Some, with tears in their eyes. As soon as they see us, a small space opens up, just big enough for the both of us.

“The announcement will come any minute now,” I say to nobody in particular.

They all look up from their shivering hands and give a silent nod. “ Citizens of Amarinthia, today is your lucky day. We have had more escapers than dead today. 104 people, including some targets escaped the gates and are free to live their normal lives again. Only 102 targets were killed.” The voice starts listing all the names. No emotion, no remorse. *How could a human be so inhumane?* By the time we all had dinner, or what was left of our stashes, the lights went out. *Someone is watching me.* The thought didn't so much as finish when I spied a pair of those same eyes. Such a deep blue that I thought I was going to drown. My heart pounded faster. *Am I his target? Did he recognize me? Will he kill me? Why won't he kill me?* These spiraling thoughts didn't help at all when I suddenly stood up. Surprised by my own bravery, I slowly walk toward those eyes. I want to confront him for giving me such a scare. I would live with that image ingrained in my memory for the rest of my life. The silence of the night is cut off by my footsteps and he manages to vanish into thin air. *Gone, just like that.* And all I get is a simulated heart attack. I don't sleep the rest of the night. I twist and turn but all I can think about is death. And it is so... so near.

Day 4: January 22, 2124

Today will be the last day for me and my sister in here before we get out. I made a promise to myself last night. I would carry Lina on my back if I had to but we were getting out of

here. And I wouldn't ever have to see those blue orbs again. Everyone bolts awake to the sound of the sirens warning us of the shrinkage in the area.

“Welcome to day 4, remaining civilians. Today is going to either be very easy or very difficult to escape death. The borders are now only 10 miles in each direction so you better get to work. Good luck.” The sun barely has time to rise from the horizon before we all take off running in the direction of the Iron Gates. From my observations, we only have about 5 more miles until we reach the salvation of this nightmare. If we run about five miles an hour, we'll get there before sundown. Theoretically, it seems very easy but only time will tell.

Next thing I know, my feet are aching with each step as we approach the gates. My heart is pounding in my chest knowing that I'll wake up from the nightmare soon. I look back to Lina following close behind. Her breathing seems normal and she doesn't slow down. I find relief in that and as I turn my head forward, something bright blue catches my eye. *Why? Not now! Please.* The thoughts start to spiral into the depths of my mind and anchor themselves. Even though my mind is running, my body suddenly stops and I feel like I'm looking at myself from someone else's view. Lina stares at me with a confused expression and opens her mouth to say something.

“Why did we stop? We are so close!” Her words are coming out breathless as she tries to catch her breath.

“I think I saw something. Someone. I've been suspecting that I was a target but now I know for su-,” I manage to say, but get cut off by a figure coming out from the crack of the building. *It's him. He's here to kill me.* Lina seems to have read my mind as she steps closer to me to hold my arm tight. Turning my head to look at her, I see that instead of scrunching her eyes and making herself small, she looks more determined than ever. She stands, eyes dark,

stance firm and fists formed. I've never felt more proud of her. It seems as if I'm the one that needs protection and not her.

Tearing my eyes away from Lina, I turn toward the icy blue eyes that have already been on me. My chest constricts at the thought of dying when freedom is at my fingertips.

I've always been fascinated with the idea of an afterlife but what if that's not the case? I don't have time to commiserate over my situation because the soldier that was 10 feet away, is getting closer with each stride. When the tip of his shoes kiss mine, I look up through my lashes to his face. Chizeled, cold and calculated. Not a shred of emotion, not a single explanation for why he was following me. I find it extremely irritating that he acts like he did not cause me to have a heart spasm, multiple times. *Why can't men just take responsibility for their actions and be mindful of others feelings!?*

"Just shoot me already!" I shouted irritably. "Why are you following me around everywhere like a *creep*?!"

He doesn't move an inch as he tears his eyes from mine to do a quick once over. I can't decide if it's a look of amusement or pity. I feel overly exposed even though I'm covered from top to bottom. I want to slap him in the face for causing me so much distress. I don't even know him, his name or anything else but I wish I did because it would make insulting him more profound.

The tangible silence is suddenly cut off by the words that come out of his mouth.

"Your sister is allowed to leave but you're coming with me."

"What if you can't catch me?" I push, testing his patience.

"You're cute to think that you can. Like I said, tell your sister to leave before I decide to take her too". He sighs, frustrated.

I clench Lina's hand for what is the last time as I say "Run, and make sure you never get caught." She understands what I mean by 'run' because her eyes flare and she hugs me. I bask in the last moments of warmth until the inevitable comes. The soldier- menace makes a noise and I felt my knees buckle as Lina releases me. I stay put though, not showing my weakness to him.

As Lina's small figure starts running, she becomes even smaller as the distance separates us. I finally allow myself to look away and wipe the tears that I didn't realize were running down my face. *This is the end.* It pains me to think that I'll leave this hell without accomplishing anything in my life.

"Oh, no. This is *just* the beginning." the soldier whispers. I feel a hint of sorrow at his words. *How did he know what I was thinking? What does he mean by that?* The thought finally clicks and I drop to my knees to take a deep breath. *This isn't just another soldier. I knew something was different about him since I saw his face through the crowd.* The realization hits me like an asteroid.

When I open my eyes, my guardian is kneeling down and looking into my eyes. I look into his too. So blue, so deep and so mesmerizing. I already feel like I'm dying. I debate whether I should ask for his name but remember that I'm going to die anyway. We'll meet later, in another life. He slowly stands up, adjusts his gun to his grip, takes a longing look at me and finally, finally pulls the trigger. *What a way to leave this world.*