

The Shelter
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My footsteps echo through the labyrinth. The rock walls rise high enough to block out the sun for most of the day, keeping the earth warm instead of hot. It's a good place to go out for a walk when I become bored with the monotony of life inside the Shelter. It's also conveniently close, with only a minute or two of being exposed to the sun to get here. Though most people wouldn't even be brave enough to risk that. I traverse the path between the rocks faster.

Plus, no one comes out here anymore since the outside is "too dangerous" even with a suit on. But only an idiot would go outside without their suit. I can think over whatever's been bugging me, let it out and slip back into the Shelter like nothing happened. Of course, it's still a place you could get lost or stuck in if you don't know it well enough—I've stumbled upon more than a few decaying corpses during past visits. One I recognised from back in the Shelter. I didn't really know him well, but we'd talked a few times, he was thirteen, a year older than me, but obviously not smarter.

There was no reason to leave, there was food, water, jobs and, of course, shelter. But instead, he left, and he paid the price for it. I'm sure it would've happened sooner or later. After all, only an idiot would go out with a damaged suit on. But even if he was an idiot and was probably going to die out here sooner or later, the facts don't take away from the horror of seeing a sunburnt corpse.

Of course, the sights aren't the only things to dread when coming here. There's also the uncertainty, of places you could've been to hundreds of times over. One day, they could be there, standing tall, strong, and hard. The next, they could be gone, crumpled beneath the ever-growing heat of the sun. Most of this labyrinth is just dead ends, trails that lead to nowhere, so there's no great loss when the rocks do cover it up. But a few times, entire branches of the labyrinth crumbled under the harsh conditions. Most of the time it's just an annoyance, a small bit of rerouting to not go into a potentially hazardous area. There's always another way around in here.

I kick a loose stone in front of me, watching it skitter across the dusty ground. Blocking out the sun is one of the good things about this place. It takes from the immediate danger. But that leads to forgetting about the potential danger of it, which can lead to problems. I continue to

walk through the network of pathways, kicking the same small stone over, and over, and over. As I kick it again, it hits the wall and bounces into another passage, one I hadn't seen before. I look up, along the main path, and realise I'm in a whole new section of the labyrinth. An unexplored area, which means that I've gone further than I thought I had already. That can be dealt with later. As for now, my curiosity is priority.

The side access isn't very wide, jagged chunks of rock jutting out from the mouth of the entrance of this new path like teeth. I walk towards it, noticing the other spikes that trail the length of the path. It isn't too long, maybe ten meters, but there's an obvious turn towards the back. I walk into the new passage and down the path, passing between large protrusions and small spaces. It grows narrower as the path continues. Until it ends. It's another dead end. Why can't it just be like the stories for once? Why can't it just go my way? Where I can stay out here and explore and go on adventures and no one dies? Why is it so *frustrating*!

I hit my helmet, infuriated by the thoughts that swarm my head, making me more and more frustrated. I check the time as a side thought, realising I've been in here too long. It's almost 12 o'clock, which means it's almost time for the scorching. And if you're outside during the scorching, even with a suit, then it's pointless to try and save you. I try to turn around, but my suit is caught on one of the jagged rocks on the wall. I tug my arm free, swiftly followed by the sound of ripping fabric.

The heat reaches me immediately. When the suit is breached it shuts down completely, nullifying all safety protocols. This is because there's no use in wasting the materials on a person that's been exposed to the sun. Suits can be fixed easily, people can't. But I can't be discarded. I can't be thrown out yet, I need to get back.

That's why I run. Not because I'm scared. Why would I be scared? I run because they'll all need me soon. I'm not scared. I'll just go back and pretend I wasn't exposed to the sun. Because I wasn't. Only an idiot would break their suit outside. As I reach the entrance to the labyrinth, it's almost the scorching. The world looks blurrier and my body refuses to function properly. Not that it matters, everything's fine. But going out would be putting myself in direct sunlight, with no protection for my elbow. But they'll need me, not my elbow. If I'm not back before the scorching, I'll lose more than just my elbow. And they'll worry. They should worry because I won't be there, and of course they'll care. They wouldn't *not* care. Right?

I march across the open land, quickening as soon as I feel my skin burn. There it is, in the distance, the facility that keeps me safe. The Shelter. I walk faster now, stumbling towards my home. It looks simple from the outside, a metal dome-like structure the size of a bedroom. When I reach the Shelter, I press my hand to the pad to open it. But it doesn't open. I step back and look between the pad and my hand, confused.

It's supposed to open. It always opens—so what's wrong with it? Did I do something wrong? Do they know about the tear? They couldn't know about it...no one else ever goes there. No one! Just me, it's always me. No one. My elbow is now red, and the skin is peeling off. I start to pick it off as it sizzles, making it worse. I always make things worse. Why did I think anything would be different? I back away from the Shelter, but there's nowhere to go. This is the only place for miles in every direction.

I run back towards the labyrinth. My private escape that led to my permanent end. The one place I'm not hated. They all hate me. Why wouldn't they? I'm losing it. I don't even make it that far in before collapsing. I left everything behind. Food, water, a job, safety—all gone. And it's all my fault. So, I close my eyes, possibly for the last time.