



Season 1 Episode 4: The Dark Ages

Like all people with disabilities, Alice's blindness doesn't worry her too much - she just uses the newest model of bionic eyes. But when her implants experience a hardware issue, things start to go dark for Alice

Content warning: Disabilities

Link to the episode: <https://lab.sapienship.co/the-dark-ages/>

Transcript

Alice pressed against the wall, attempting gingerly to feel her way forward. It was happening more and more often now. Nearby, she could hear strangers laughing as they walked past her toward the subway station. She wanted to shout for help, but she knew that it would pass, so long as she remained calm and didn't move suddenly.

She had known it was coming. She had felt the slight pressure building in her temples since waking up, then just before it happened, a kind of buzzing noise, like an electronic tinnitus. There was no way of knowing how long it might last. It seemed as if the bouts of blindness were becoming longer each time. They were definitely becoming more frequent. After the headache and the buzzing was the gray haze, something between smoky clouds and television static, slowly superimposing on her vision. At that point, it was a mere matter of moments before her eyesight entirely faded and she was stranded in darkness.

She edged slowly to her left, the cool glass of a display window at her back, hoping to reach its edge and a doorway where she could either enter and ask for someone to help her call her sister, or else simply sit, out of the way of the teeming hordes of commuters and shoppers, until her vision returned. If it returned.

She did it the way she'd taught herself – first, a pointed toe like a ballet dancer's to test the ground, then the heel, and finally a slow shift of her weight onto that foot before sliding the few inches across. And breathe, then repeat. No doubt she looked crazy to any passers-by who might stop to watch. She was a blank-eyed woman facing forward to the busy road in rush hour, inching along the pavement as if she was on the edge of a narrow precipice. Or perhaps they'd seen it all before. You see all kinds of things in the city. And she wasn't the only one, far from it.

Only that morning, before the darkness closed in on her but after she'd woken into a panic with the headache and buzzing growing in intensity, she'd seen a man hopping on one leg as she ran down the street toward the emergency clinic. She had almost laughed at the strangeness of it, the hipster with the chiseled beard and selvedge jeans lurching along, then posing like a flamingo... but then she had caught a flashing glimpse of his ankle. Or there was that embarrassed woman striding briskly through the park the week before, her right arm extended rigidly before her in a Roman salute. Alice used to think these people were all high on drugs, or just simply mad. Now she knew better. Biomedic prosthetic organs were not that rare anymore, apparently.

Perhaps that's how people were looking at her right now, Alice wondered. Perhaps they saw her edging along a shop

window as if perched high on a mountain ledge, and presumed she was crazy or doped. Maybe even now they were walking around her, giving her a wide berth, worried she might suddenly yell, or attack.

If so, she was somewhat glad about it. The thought of a crush of people pressing against her, pulling her in their flow down the sidewalk panicked her a lot. It was the subject of her most regular nightmare, a dark dream of pushing and shoving, touching and grabbing, where she couldn't see where she was going, or even who was there.

The memory of the nightmare brought a shudder of fear and shallow breathing. She stopped her delicate demi-pointe stepping and paused against the glass once more.

"I can't live like this," she thought.

Out of the darkness, a pinpoint of light appeared at last. It was just like the first time. A swirling gray fog slowly displaced the blackness, and within it colors and shapes began to form. The world was slowly being returned to her, along with a warning. She was running out of time. She had to see Dr Xiang as soon as possible. She blinked twice as her vision swam back into view, and wiped away her tears. Then, when she was sure she could see, she began to run again.

"The Dark Ages are over!" announced the video billboard. "In times past, if you suffered from diseases like macular degeneration or retinitis pigmentosa, you were condemned to a life spent in darkness. No longer!"

Color burst onto the screen. The camera swooped down from a great height over stunning snow-capped mountains and lush valleys toward a small group of people. It kept closing in, at a slower speed now, toward what looked like a happy, laughing family, enjoying nature together. A grinning mother held a baby boy in her arms, while her husband swung a laughing girl in circles. The camera kept closing in, slower and slower, focusing first on the woman and baby, then just the woman's face, until finally the screen filled with just her left eye, a dark well surrounded by a circle of rich amber and framed with implausibly long lashes.

"At Xiang-Roberts-Singh, we stock all leading brands of retinal prostheses," the billboard continued. Just below the amber pupil, in the sclera, corporate logos began to appear.

"Ray-Ban, Carl Zeiss, Armani, Gucci, Varilux and more! Don't live in darkness any longer. Talk to us TODAY about low-cost hire purchase and leasing options."

Alice sighed and held up her left hand to the door sensor. After a moment's pause, the door slid open.

"Welcome to Xiang-Roberts-Singh!" announced the greeter from behind a plexiglass screen. "How may we help you today, Ms Rodriguez?"

Twenty minutes later, Alice was sitting in front of her optician at last. His smooth, avuncular face was distorted in a frown.

"I'm afraid I don't have good news for you, Alice. Unfortunately, your implants are beginning to malfunction. I did warn you that there was a risk of this happening. And according to our records, you didn't take out insurance, is that right?" Alice protested: "I couldn't afford it. I mean, I could barely afford the eyes themselves! Surely this can't be legal? Aren't they obliged to fix them?"

"Well, unfortunately Econovision went out of business last year," Dr Xiang explained. "I'd expect that their tech patents will be sold eventually to one of the bigger firms, but that's a matter for the receivers. So basically, there is no company to provide the tech support you need. And, being frank with you, no one else is going to agree to take on those liabilities even if they do purchase some of Econovision's assets."

"So, what's going to happen to me?" Alice asked quietly. She tried to stay calm, but she felt on the brink of tears.

"You're going to need new implants," said Dr Xiang. "Your employment health plan doesn't cover that, as you know, and you're not insured for replacements in the event of failure of your current implants."

"But I can't afford that!" she protested again. "I'm still paying off these ones!"

"From the diagnostics," Dr Xiang told her impassively, "it looks like you may have some intermittent sight for maybe another three weeks. After that, they'll go dark for good. It's not a power issue, otherwise I could maybe attempt a rewire and reboot. There's a problem like that with one of the models, but the company did a recall, so I'm able to recalibrate those for patients for free. But as I've explained, Econovision are insolvent and no longer trading. And anyhow, your implants are experiencing a hardware issue. I did explain that this brand was not the optimal solution for you, if you recall."

He swiped at his tablet for a moment, and then sent an image to the screen on the wall.

"These are our current cheapest models, Ms Rodriguez," he began. "The Budgetsight models are pretty robust and we haven't had too many complaints. Again, I'd suggest paying for insurance, just in case."

Below the spinning schematic of an eyeball were two numbers, both much higher than her current mortgage payments.

"I have to remind you as well that your current models are on a hire purchase program, and you have -" He paused to look at his tablet once more. "Seventeen more monthly payments to make."

"But they don't work!" exclaimed Alice. "Why do I have to pay when they don't work? And I can't afford this kind of money!"

Doctor Xiang sighed. He heard this kind of thing a lot these days.

"You could try crowdfunding?" he suggested. "Only you can put a price on your sight, Ms Rodriguez."

"I dunno," she said bitterly. "Seems like you're doing a pretty good job of that."

She managed to make it out the front door of the clinic before the tears began. She put her face in her hands to stifle the sobbing.

"The Dark Ages are over!" announced the video billboard once more.

Questions for reflection and discussion

The following questions can be used for a group activity (in a classroom or otherwise) or for personal reflection after listening to the episode.

1. Some people with disabilities or amputations can have their abilities restored using prosthetic technology, but it is very expensive. How can we make this technology more affordable?
2. Different countries have different types of health systems. In the UK, for example, the state pays for healthcare for everyone out of taxes, whereas in the USA, the patient pays. Who do you think should pay for healthcare?
3. Some medical and psychological conditions can make people seem as if they are moving or behaving strangely. Do you think society sometimes judges them unfairly because of this?
4. Do you know anyone who has impaired sight? What would you do if you discovered you were going blind?
5. Many people prefer to buy branded products because they perceive them to be better quality. Would you pay more for healthcare if it was branded?
6. As technology becomes more complex, users become more reliant on tech support to help when things go wrong. Do you think companies should be obligated to provide ongoing tech support for their products?
7. If you could buy bionic eyes which enhanced your sight – maybe allowing you to see in the dark, zoom in on distant objects, or even access the internet – would you get them?
8. We often purchase insurance in case things go wrong. We need it to travel, to drive cars or to buy houses, and some people have insurance in case they lose their jobs and need money to live on. When might you buy insurance, and what would you insure against?