

Chapter 1

Like the longest sleep after the longest day, only longer; much longer. The darkness bit and then ceased.

1466 struggled along the wet mud of her allocated plot. 50m² of land that had to be hand ploughed by the end of the day, or her rations would be halved, again. 1466. Four numbers that she could remember, which had been allocated to her as a new name when she had lost her former one. Her legs were numb, as were their wont these days. *It had to be my damn lot in life*, she thought, *to have the most useless bloody legs in the country*. Her back wasn't much better, either. Moving was a struggle, let alone ploughing. *My body should be able to do this*. The guards told her that it was easier for interrogees with her kind of brain damage simply to refer to themselves by their case number. She couldn't really remember names, and anyway, it made it easier for her to identify herself to the guards. "Identification?" "1466." Quick and efficient... and one couldn't *be* too efficient. One really *couldn't* be too efficient in this place.

Half rations weren't much of a punishment at this point. 1466 found it hard to feel particularly strong negative emotions now, or at least, hard to distinguish them from the ones she was already feeling. What's half of nothing? What's half of nearly nothing? You know that the human body is capable of survival on 500 calories per day, or they would give you more. They need you to plough this plot. *Perhaps ore mining had been better. They told me this would be better. Easier. Less challenging. There's obviously something wrong with me. I'm letting people down, here. Who cares?* Surely the guards would at least be inconvenienced by her death? This was no way to live, but in what way could she die? Torture – a worse form of torture – flashed through her mind, and she continued to inch her way through the mud.

A week ago, a worker in her neighbouring plot had been able to carry on no longer, his final breath coming shortly after his collapsing face-down into the mud. It was one of the rarer occasions in the centre – the only time when interrogees were allowed to stop their work briefly was upon the death of another interrogee. Three of the keener-eyed amongst the neighbouring plot workers had asked for and been given permission to visit the deceased in order to acquire whatever possessions they could. This was how one survived in the centre; less dirty clothes and extra rations could be obtained by getting to corpses first. 1466 had been one of the keener-eyed, but had not been able to acquire anything from the incident. As she had approached the body, she had been stopped by fierce growling from the two others who had reached the scene first, as dogs protecting their catch. She had started slightly, and begun trudging back to her plot when she looked back and noticed a commotion between the two. She knew better than to return to the corpse, but she couldn't help but notice the fight escalate. With every fibre of strength left in them, they punched each other ceaselessly as if their lives depended on it. They did. After a short while, the one on the left fell to the ground, where he was dispatched by several final blows. The victor now seized the opportunity to acquire the clothes and rations of both corpses before him, before quickly scurrying back off to his plot to continue working. 1466 turned her head back nonchalantly and resumed her ploughing.

One day soon, she would surely be the victim of some such fight, or an unprovoked attack, or something worse. She had survived the recent winter which had been bitterly cold, but for nought, it would seem.

The fact that it was cold was somewhat irrelevant. The downward trend in temperature had long since ceased to be a concerning factor in 1466's mind. *This just makes it easier to get to sleep. It makes me feel naturally drowsy. I haven't really the energy to shiver, so that isn't keeping me awake either*. Nevertheless, she was kept awake from time to time by worry about her predicament. *Haha!* She made herself laugh inside, sometimes. What did she have to worry about? She knew what problems she would encounter tomorrow; the same ones she did each day for every day in her recent memory. Which was just about all of her memory. *What emotion was laughter supposed to trigger, again? Scorn is all I can feel right now.*

The wind was howling outside, bringing with it more familiar winter snow. What was it now? 10 degrees below freezing? The human body couldn't last too long under such conditions, her makeshift cloth sack bed and wooden hut as "shelter" notwithstanding. She had thought that it would be reasonable for interrogees to huddle together for warmth in winter, but had discovered to her disappointment that it just wasn't the done thing. Other interrogees were not to be trusted even in daylight. None were willing to make an exception to this distrust during the night. In any case, it was strictly forbidden by the guards. All interrogees knew what it was like for it to be made worse than death for them. She had thought about a hunger strike... long ago... but it was easy enough for them to force-feed you. You needed to be kept alive for interrogation. That was the standard line trotted out any time you asked for a reason, if you received any answer at all.

1466 took a deep breath and clutched the cloth sack tight, trying to clear her mind of all thought. Refuge *from* the mind. That was what was needed. Allowing the mind to take over – to let its baser instincts prevail – would only lead to pointless tears. This was illogical. *You're in a bad situation, to say the least. You know full well what happens when you feel emotion. It's negative. It's about the shitty situation you're in now, and... didn't it used to be about how much worse you have it now than you had it before? Crying in this situation is illogical, as it will simply make your face wet and depress you even more. Refuge from the mind is key.* She dozed off.

A loud buzzer awoke her at 4:30 in the morning. She briefly relieved herself, got up and out of her hut, her food sack slung over her shoulder, and walked to the communal dining area where interrogees were allowed to consume their rations. She would be subject to regular checks, so she couldn't risk eating or drinking anything outside of this area. *10 minutes to get there, 5 minutes for checks, 15 minutes to eat.* After the guards had checked her (and her sack's) weight, she was given her daily rations. A few uncooked vegetables and some bread, usually, as well as one small cold meat item per day. Vegetarians were rarely heard of again. Either you became a meat-eater, or you died of starvation. Still, 1466 didn't think that the meat was human. Rations were to be apportioned as the interrogees saw fit throughout the morning and afternoon eating periods. Eat too much in the morning and you'd have nothing left for later on. Vice versa.

1466 thought briefly about talking to the interrogee sitting across from her this morning, but didn't see the point. *Haha!* There was that laugh again, its associated emotion entirely ambiguous. Instead, she (as all the other interrogees) simply conserved what little energy she had by staring gloomily into the room while she ate, making occasional lifeless eye contact. *I feel sick.* After a short while, she got up, slung her sack over her shoulder, and exited the dining area to be escorted to her allocated plot.

She emerged briefly from the ore mine to shove the mining cart's latest haul out and into the mobile skip. As daylight pierced her eyes, they struggled to adjust from the recent gloom. With every effort of her being, slightly shaking with exertion, she gave an almighty push to the cart and watched it transfer its cargo. Still, ore mining was in fact one of the less crappy jobs carried out by interrogees. One worked in close quarters with the other miners and, whilst one was not allowed to actually talk to them, it still gave one *some* feeling of company. The guards were so uniform and monotonous they could easily have been intricate statues, coming to life only when necessary to ensure that you were sure how little freedom you had.

Back into the mine. Very little time for fresh air, but some is better than none. Pushing the cart with her, the walk to the area currently being excavated took about 5 minutes. This was one of the more recently opened seams. As she started to attack the face of the seam once again, her body drenched with sweat, an ominous rumbling sound came from behind. The mine, usually silent but for the punctuations of pickaxes and rolling wheels, was filled with a very unique sound – human voices. Loud human voices, screaming of the imminent danger that was about to befall the hapless workers. A cave-in had been triggered. The noise was becoming immense and rocks were falling all around. The dust was so thick that breathing was impossible and coughing was mandatory. *Passing out is the best-case scenario here.* Before another thought had time to emerge, she looked up to notice a large rock falling from somewhere above, crashing onto the ledge beside her, and

smashing into her head.

She came round in what was called the “medical ward”, though it was barely large enough to fit two people. She had been one of the lucky ones who actually got something that could be described as treatment.

“Rebecca! Wake up! Can you hear me?” yelled the medical attendant.

Rebecca opened her eyes and for a moment, didn't recognize anything about her existence.

“Y... yes, I—”

Rebecca was not allowed to finish.

“Get that bitch up and about NOW!” exclaimed a guard to the attendant. “I don't want her cluttering up this place any longer than necessary!”

The medical attendant didn't have time to introduce himself.

“Let's get you up, Rebecca. You've taken a nasty hit to the head so we've disinfected and bandaged it.”

Rebecca? she wondered.

“Sorry; who is Rebecca? Am I Rebecca?”

The medical attendant furrowed his brow.

“You will explain to her that she is to be identified from now on as '1466',” the guard said with a low voice that hinted at aggression. “That's her case number.”

“Yes, but she may be able to recognize her name, maybe as soon as this eve—”

“YOU will do as I said! It's easier for us to address them by number anyway.”

The guard eyed the attendant so as to leave no doubt. The attendant tried again, as Rebecca had in the meantime fallen back into a state of semi-consciousness:

“Rebecca. Re—” The attendant stopped himself with a brief sigh. He had joined the medical team with such enthusiasm. A real chance to give back to the community that had taught him everything he knew. Not just a chance to help people, but to help those most in need of rehabilitation. It would surely, he thought, have been such a satisfying experience; the finest and proudest moments of his medical career would be practised here. Yet now he was reduced to this. Lying to patients. “Please wake up. Yes, that's right. Now, your name is '1466'.”

“'1466'?”

“That's right. It's a number, and it's your name. You lost a lot of your memory when that rock hit your head.”

Rebecca rose as fast as she could, only to find herself nearly collapsing again through a combination of dizziness and surprise.

“Didn't you say... 'Rebecca', though?”

“No. You are '1466',” the attendant replied, holding her steady.

The guard lost what little patience he had. “Useless. She won't be fit to work in ore mining anymore. I'll leave you to get it done. Hurry up. 5 minutes, no more.”

He left the room. There was no chance of the medical attendant telling 1466 her old name again. The behavioural recognition cameras would notice it, the system would record it against his file, and would schedule a date for his appointment with the warden to be informed of the news of his probable execution. The system would schedule executions, surprise inspections, routine torture sessions – those sorts of things – in advance, so as to save the warden the bother. Cushy job, warden. If you could get it.