

DAY 31 IN THE BLOCK

When the harvest begins, all that exists is fear. It feels like an eternity before it ends, before the nanotech releases its grip on the parts of my brain that access terror and panic, before my heart begins to slow, and my muscles relax.

Back in the Loop, the prison I was in before the end of the world, the harvest lasted only six hours, and when it was done we were left alone in our small soundproof cells. It seemed horrible at the time but compared to the Block it was like heaven.

The harvest tube stays in place while the water comes. It rushes in from the ceiling, smelling of acrid chemicals and bleach. As usual, I consider letting it drown me; pushing all the air out of my lungs at the moment the tube fills, and waiting to die so that I don't have to face another day of this hell.

But I don't.

The tube fills with water until I'm completely submerged. Time passes – ten seconds, twelve – and then

the water drains away, throwing me to the floor once again.

The air comes next, so hot that my skin feels like it's about to blister and burn. Once I'm dry the tube lifts and retreats into the ceiling.

The harvest is over, and what comes next is just as terrible.

I wait, naked on the floor, my arms magnetized together behind my back by the implanted cobalt in my wrists.

It's been sixteen days since Happy, the all-powerful artificial intelligence that first ran the world and then destroyed it, tried to trick me into giving up the location of my friends. Happy somehow accessed my brain and convinced me that I had been broken out of this prison by Pander, Malachai and Kina, but I figured it out, I realized that none of it was real despite how convincing the simulation was. I took them to the river near the centre of the city and savoured the memories of spending time there with my family when I was young. Me, my sister, my dad and my mum would go to the riverside on summer days and spend hours playing, swimming, talking and just being together as a family.

It took the AI about four minutes to realize it had been deceived. Since then Happy has tried every day to trick me into giving up information. It uses different tactics: fear; coercion; bargaining; confusion. Then it tried a twenty-day simulation of a life after the war, a life with Kina.

But I will keep my secrets guarded, I will not let Happy win.

The technology that Happy uses to try and draw information out of me is the same technology they have been using to keep my mind from slipping away in the monotony of the Block. They call it the Sane Zone.

I'm still breathing heavily from the harvest and the water when the hatch in my cell door opens.

Immediately I moderate my breathing, slow it right down.

The guard on duty today is Jacob. Good. In the last few days I have managed to get through to Jacob, he has listened to me, hesitated before beginning the harvest, looked at me with real regret and shame in his eyes.

'Inmate 9-70-981, be informed that I have a loaded weapon and I am prepared to use it if you do not follow my instructions. Am I understood?'

My head is turned in the direction of the cell door and I see Jacob; young, skinny, fashionably long hair. His eyes glare at me down the barrel of a Ultrasonic Wave rifle. I don't move, don't blink, don't react to the gun pointed at me.

'Inmate 9-70-981. Please lie down on the bed so I can activate the paralysis . . . Inmate 9-70-981 . . . Luka, are you OK?'

Still I don't move. I lie still on the floor of my cell, try to keep my breathing as shallow as possible so that Jacob might think I'm not breathing at all.

‘Luka?’ He sounds unsure now, scared. ‘Oh shit!’

I hear the spin lock on my door opening, and see the door swing inwards. The young guard runs over to me, sliding to his knees and rolling me on to my back.

‘Luka! Luka!’ he calls, slapping my face to try and rouse me.

I want to grab for his USW rifle, I want to spring into action and break out of this place, but the energy harvest has left me drained, so I have to wait for the healing technology inside of me to work. The important thing is, I’ve tricked a guard into entering my cell.

I take a sudden deep breath, as if I’ve just come to, and look at Jacob with confusion on my face.

‘What happened?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know,’ he replies, his voice shaking. ‘I think you stopped breathing.’

‘Gods,’ I say in hoarse voice, ‘I wish I’d died.’

‘Don’t say that, don’t be saying things like that.’

‘Why not?’ I ask, stalling for time, waiting for my strength to return. ‘Death is a thousand times better than this place.’

‘Come on, please, don’t say things like that!’ he repeats. ‘I should call a medic drone, make sure you’re alright.’

His eyes begin to scan left and right, activating menus on his Lens.

‘No, no,’ I say, sitting up. ‘I’m fine, Jacob, really. I think I just fainted.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yeah, I’m sure,’ I say.

‘I’m s’posed to call a medic drone if something like this happens.’

‘Jacob, I’m OK, I promise.’

He sighs. ‘If you’re sure, inmate 9-70-981.’

‘Oh, it’s 9-70-981 again, is it?’ I say, laughing. ‘What happened to Luka?’

‘I was panicking,’ he tells me. ‘I’m not s’posed to call you by your real name.’

I can feel my strength coming back now, feel the exhaustion ebbing away.

‘Well, if you’re alright, I need you to lie down on the bed, I have a schedule that I need to stick to. If I’m late again I’ll be in trouble.’

‘Yeah,’ I say. ‘I understand.’

I get to my feet – it takes enormous effort after the harvest robbed me of all my energy, but I can already feel my power coming back, I can feel my body healing itself, every micro-tear in the fibres of my muscles, every strained tendon and every scratch. This is a new feature, a piece of Alt tech in my body causing me to heal at in-human speed. We all have this ability now, all of the inmates from the Loop and the Block – this way they can reuse our energy over and over again. We are the rechargeable batteries that power the machines that will end humanity. They heal our bodies with tech and keep us from going crazy with the Sane Zone.

I stand beside the bed and turn back to Jacob. I’m still completely naked, and yet unperturbed by that fact, conditioned by now not to care. I don’t move, just stare at him.