

JEREMY COLANGELO
ONCE AGAIN

AND SO DESPITE THE WEAKNESS that sat upon her chest and arms, Prisoner Six began cutting away at the mortar between the stone blocks in the far wall with the edge of the servant's spoon. And each day when she leaned back her head against the wall and breathed exhaustion from her lungs, the pictures in her mind grew weak and her remembrances passed into the void as silver flakes of dust. She could no longer taste the supper she recalled, nor see again the scars the light carved on her eyes. And so the eye inside her head would jump back weeks or months to a gesture that the servant made, which by its strangeness anchored that whole day inside a crevice at the base of Six's skull, and which now stood alone and upright as a nail. She sat crosslegged on the floor and felt her mind fall out from under her. And then she would again rise up and dig.

Six never slept, and as far as she recalled had never woken up.

"At least you know what you're doing," said the servant. Six had worn a canyon through the mortar.

"I do?" said Six.

"I must have mentioned that the wall across from the door was the thinnest." The servant gestured with a ladle. She was standing at the open door, which let in a blinding light. "Though, I should reiterate, because it's safe to assume that I've said this before, that there is no way that you'll escape this place. You might have assumed that the wall you're defacing is only as thick as that one stone. I am sorry if I led you to that conclusion. It was unfair of me."

"This is the thinnest wall?"

"Certainly, not including the doorway of course. And the back wall also has the advantage of leading outside. The rest will just send you into the other cells."

"There are—"

"Do you think that I would be able to sustain myself off just one prisoner in just one cell, master Narcissus?"

“I didn’t mean—”

“Just because you can’t hear them doesn’t mean they aren’t there, and anyway you wouldn’t *want* to hear them. Frankly, I much prefer *our* talks together—when they occur.”

“So,” and Six started doing calculations, “you bring me food every two hours, and I assume that the others have to eat as much as I do, and—have we had this conversation before?”

“Probably.”

“And they have to eat as much as I do?”

“Indeed.”

“And how many of you are there?”

“There is only room for one of me.”

“So then the prison must be very small. How many people could you possibly handle in two hours? Especially given how long we chat sometimes.”

“There are always enough of you for my purposes, and I am always on time. You must not assume so much.”

The servant put down the tray and ladled out the soup. She had a fresh spoon with her, which she left.

“Thank you,” said Six.

“The food is my duty.”

“I meant for the spoon.”

“You need a spoon to eat the food, and the old one is bent.”

“...”

“What?”

“I only chose that spot because the mortar had a crack in it. It’s been there, the crack, as long as I can remember, and I figured that it would be easier to start at a weak spot.” The servant smiled, showing no teeth. “What?”

“It is amusing,” said the servant, “if I may be so bold, that you would arrange a task of this magnitude around such a minimal convenience.”

“Should I have begun with the solid rock?”

“Perhaps not.”

The servant collected the old plate from its usual spot and left, as she usually did, before Six could begin eating. The closing door sprayed dark across the wall.

Two hours later, when the servant returned, she brought Six a chisel and hammer.

The servant had perhaps not expected Six to remain working without rest. Though each time she brought the food the servant found Six at work, she never said to stop. How many bricks could there be after the first one? Six had nothing else to do but work. The dark sustained her. Only hunger slowed her down. And yet the servant still continued to bring food. Six would make it through the wall eventually, given time enough.

Six wedged the chisel in the crack above the block and began to pull. The brick slid slowly until it came close to tipping over. It fell out. In the dark Six could not see what was beyond. Her fingers touched out to the back of the hole. The stone was without blemish. Then a bright light from the doorway revealed to Six a solid wall, grey and mercilessly smooth.

“Perhaps you could make yourself a bigger cell,” the servant said.

“I—what?”

“I’ll pull out that block for you, to keep the room uncluttered. If you remove the rest of the blocks then your room will be much larger. Would that be beneficial?”

“I think so.”

“And the floor, the ceiling, the other walls—”

“I’d miss the bumps.”

“What?”

“The bumps from the blocks on the floor, the seams, and on the walls when I lean on them—they’d be gone. The room would be completely smooth.”

“I suppose it would be. Soup?”

“Is it?”

“Have you gotten sick of soup?”

“What did you bring me last time?”

“You should be more specific.”

“What did you bring to this cell two hours ago? I remember eating chicken at some point—chicken breast and something with tomatoes in it.”

“Two hours ago in this cell: soup. Previous time: soup. The time before that: soup.”

“Are you sure?”

“It may have always been soup, or it may have been soup for a long time now. I suppose it is possible, statistically, if you go long enough—”

“What?”

“You are hungry.”

“Yes.”

“Had you forgotten?”

“I knew I was hungry before you told me.”

“Of course.”

“But,” Six looked at the doorway, set in walls only two blocks thick, “could I remove the blocks from that wall too?” She pointed.

“From the wall with the door in it?”

“Yes.”

“In principle.”

“Would you stop me? Or call the guards?”

“The guards?”

“Have we talked about this before?”

“Probably. There are no guards. I am here alone with you.”

“And all the prisoners.”

“Exactly.”

“So why then could I not just overpower you? You are shorter than I am, though I get smaller every time I check.”

“How long have you been shrinking?”

“Since.”

“Since?”

“Since I have been checking, that I remember, I have become thinner and shorter every time. I hold myself against the wall and count the widths of my fingers from the seam above my head. Perhaps I should attack you now before I lose too much of me.”

The servant put the tray and soup pot on the stone and took Six’s hand. The servant’s skin was cold, and her hand felt fat and empty.

“I would rather you just left,” the servant said. “It would make my life much easier.”

Six didn’t move until the servant pulled her hand. At the tug she took two slow steps forward, towards the light in the door. Her pupils closed to needlepoints against the light. The servant released Six’s hand and pushed her on the shoulder. Six stepped outside the cell.

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“Is that what you have today? Not soup like usual?”

“It is a bad idea to eat the same thing too many times in a row. Makes people unruly, violent.”

“Violent?”

“But you are not violent today—are you?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Good. I have chicken breast for you, with some tomatoes.”

The servant put the tray on the floor in the middle of the cell. She then placed both hands on the stone and dragged it noiselessly out the door. Six began to eat. The tomatoes burst their guts across her tongue.

It was not hard for Six to make a crack along the flat face of the wall. Once she had made a divot in the stone, she began chipping systematically across the face of the rock until the wall was rough and eager for her touch. While she did this, Six decided that the tunnel should angle upwards, since she could get more leverage with the hammer that way.

She still dug in little forward bursts and she imagined that each stonechip she removed was that final scrape of flesh that kept the sky from her. But then she would remember that her chisel could get stuck, and she would stop the forward reaching so that she could carve the tunnel wide. Expand her little universe. Somehow, even when she aimed away from the outside, she still expected that each strike would make the light shine through.

At least if she could see the outside then she would be able to judge how long it would take for her to reach it. If she knew, she would be able to

forget about the time; she could stop counting the blows against the stone in rhythm with the pulse inside her head, and could forget to listen for the servant's call to eat.

Two hours in between each meal. She had forgotten what two hours felt like until the day her tunnel moved up far enough that the light from the open door no longer reached her. The servant never shouted, so even if she called Six would not have heard her above the noises of the chisel on the rock. But Six could keep the time by her hunger, sometimes getting to the bottom of the tunnel just as the servant closed the door. Six could find the food by smell, once she snorted out the dust. Eventually Six began to miss their talks, and so she learned the rhythms of starvation so to anticipate the visit by the tightening of her gut.

When next the servant came, Six skidded down the shaft and shot straight out the hole. She approached the servant with a scraped-up elbow trickling blood across her arm, her hunger blocking out the pain.

"How goes the excavation?" said the servant.

"Upward."

"Outward?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe."

"Chicken again?"

"Is it again?"

"You remember more than I do."

"But I have more to forget as well."

The servant left the food outside the door and went into the cell to collect the bits of stone that had fallen from the tunnel. A breeze came in from the doorway. When Six blinked she saw red blotches floating passed her, burned there by the light. But Six did not look away.

"You know better than to run," the servant said.

"I would not be able to outrun you," said Six.

"You know that isn't true. I am far too large."

The servant's black shirt and overalls strained against her flesh. Was this the first time that Six had noticed? She could not remember.

"What do you eat?" said Six. "No matter how much you feed me, I stay a skeleton. Am I being hungry for two?"

“Have I not told you about this before?”

“Probably.”

“Probably.” The servant reached outside the cell and grabbed a small stool. Six sat cross-legged on the floor. “I should have known from your voice that you were among those still permitted ignorance.”

“And what—”

“—do I not know?” Yes, that is exactly what happens next. And then I usually tell my parable.”

“You—”

“Yes.”

“But—”

“Because there is always a small chance that the parable will help you learn your place in this little cosmos before you try to escape. At least that’s what I always tell you.”

“But the—”

“Tunnel, yes. I suppose you’re right. And usually at this point I talk about who wrote the parable, or how I came to learn it, or why I keep telling it despite it never working before.”

“And how many—”

“I don’t remember. Have you ever tried to play the lottery? I already know you haven’t, but this game works better as a dialogue.”

“I—”

“Just say ‘no.’”

Six did.

“Good. Well, you know how they work right? Where you have to pick one set of numbers out of an immense quantity of possible combinations, and you only win if the set you picked comes up randomly?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent. The way the parable goes is that there is a woman, who I’ll call Josephine, who decides that she wants to win the lottery. She picks a set of numbers, which serve her faithfully through several weeks of loss. Eventually she notices that the winning numbers have been equally consistent—identical each week. Josephine starts watching the numbers as they are chosen. She sits close to her television to make sure that the gentleman who runs the machine that picks the numbered balls has not manipulated the result. She talks to others who play the same lottery to see if they have

noticed too, but none of them remember anything about each winning set except that it was not the one that they had picked.”

“At first Josephine is afraid to change her numbers, which have been constant for so long now that the time before the lottery has faded in her mind. ‘They are random, right?’ she says. ‘They are chosen from the machine. I see it roll around filled with balls with numbers on them, and I see the little tube that each ball is sucked into. Which numbers come up still depends on how they bounce around inside the machine. I can at least treat it like it’s random. And that means that there is no guarantee that next week the numbers will be the same.’

“This is what Josephine tells herself every week, until one time she decides to change. As she goes up to purchase her ticket, she expects that the cashier will give her a surprised look, as if he had just caught her cheating. But, of course, he has no idea which numbers she has bought, and may not even remember her. After all, who knows what the cashier does when Josephine is gone?

“Josephine takes the tickets and she waits until the numbers come up, and they are the same ones that have come up every week before. Josephine has finally won the lottery. Rich beyond reasoning and duly satisfied, she stops playing for a while, but then, probably by chance, she checks the numbers again, and finds that they are still the same. She knows that her friends still play their old numbers, that they will continue to lose the game and so increase the jackpot every week. She buys another ticket, and wins the lottery again. Then another week goes by and she wins a third time, and then a fourth. Soon Josephine forgets the taste of hunger.

“Now the whole country knows that Josephine is rich—that she is perhaps Fortuna, god of luck. And so she continues to buy the same numbers every week, and continues to win and grow fat, and continues to watch the other players choose the losing numbers. But sometimes Josephine remembers that she has no idea what goes on inside of the machine, that as far as she’s concerned the numbers are random. So every so often Josephine goes to cast her old standby, not hoping that she’ll win, but that she will lose in a way that she has not before. But, as far as I remember, this has not occurred.”

“So now, old friend,” the servant said, “it is time you told me a story. When did you begin to dig that tunnel in the wall?”

“A while ago,” said Six.

“How long is a while?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you remember the moment that you first tore away the stone?”

“Not really.”

“And do you know where the chisel came from?”

“I’ve had it forever. Haven’t I?”

“As far as I’m aware,” the servant said, “but I’d like to take it from you.”

“No.”

“As payment for the food I bring you.”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because it is mine.”

“How?”

“Because I have had it for my whole life—as long as either of us remembers. How can that be true without the chisel being mine?”

“But if you gave it to me, then it would be mine instead.”

“Yes.”

“And I demand it in exchange for your food.”

“You have never asked for it before.”

“In all likelihood, I have asked for it many times, and many times you have given it to me. The food you eat is mine to give, or to not give, and I know you need to eat it. The condition has always been, as you recall, that you would give me what I want in exchange for the food I bring, and anything you have is fair for me to ask for. Since you need the food to live, everything you have could potentially be asked of you, and so everything you own is thus already mine.”

“I could stop eating,” said Six.

“Your death would be merely inconvenient.”

“I would give up everything then, so there would be nothing that you could take from me. But—”

“But?”

“All that I own are this chisel, the hammer, and the clothes I wear. What do you take when you have all of those?”

“I might not want to take them all. I can take whatever I like—everything or nothing as I choose.”

“But what else is there?”

“That there is the answer to your question.”

“What question?”

“Earlier you asked what I eat. The answer is that I eat exactly what I want to eat, and given long enough I will someday want to swallow you.”

The servant stood up and slowly pushed the stool out the door with her foot. Six, scraping her knees on the floor, crawled with insect speed towards her hole. The rubble from before was gone, though she hadn't seen the servant carry it away. The smell of charcoal briefly floated through her nose before being pushed back by the chalky dust.

As she lost sight of the cell, Six noticed briefly that her hunger was gone. But then it returned, with barbs.

“How long is the tunnel?” the servant said. She had not moved from the door.

“What?”

“You have been digging that tunnel for a long time—yes?”

“Yes.”

“As long as you remember?”

“Right.”

“So it must be very far. I'm surprised that you can still come on time for food. How long is it, exactly?”

“It goes,” Six calculated, “up to where the light from the open door disappears behind the curve. A little farther, actually, since there's still room enough after that for the length of my body.”

“That isn't far.”

“The stone is very hard.”

“The stone crumbles in your hand. It's almost talc. You could cut it with a spoon if you wanted to. Clearly that chisel isn't helping.”

“But I've been digging for so long.”

“And you are so far from the outside edge that the birds have yet to hear the echoes of your hammer through the stone. Come down now—I have food for you.”

“You're going to stab me with the chisel!”

“No.”

“You'll eat me alive?”

“I am not going to eat you today, and the chance of me eating you tomorrow, or on any given day, is so small as to be almost zero. But everyone has to die eventually.”

“And then one day you will stab me with the chisel.”

“I want the chisel because the chisel is mine. You will know when the time has come for me to eat you when the food I bring is poisonous.”

“You’re going to poison my food?”

“Not today.”

“How do I know that you’re not lying?”

“You can trust me. Come down from the tunnel.”

“I won’t until you—” but then Six’s hand shifted. The walls of the tunnel suddenly felt slippery, though they remained rough enough to tear her skin. The first scrape on her elbow had already begun to heal, though now it was torn open again, and at the bottom of the tunnel Six found that the stone of the floor was soft.

“Stand up,” the servant said. “I know exactly how it goes—you were going to refuse to eat. You would have said that my argument was futile. You were going to come down from the tunnel on your own and let me bring the food, and then you were going to throw it to the darkness of your cell and let the two hours of eternity devour you as the hunger filled the crannies of your mind.” The servant pushed Six down and leered over her. Six, her arm up to guard her face, looked at the servant’s eyes and saw no fury in them.

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” Six said.

“Do you now know how *bored* I am with you? I barely even think about what I say to you anymore. I don’t even know what I would do if you were to try something I didn’t expect.”

Just as the servant spoke, Six stood up and tried to strike her across the face, but the servant barely had to move to avoid the blow.

“But the violence is part of the machine. Do you know what I do once I poison someone?”

“I don’t.”

“Maybe I unhinge my jaw and swallow them whole. Or maybe the poison leaves them alive, but paralysed, and I just stand over them as they starve, and I watch the room digest them, and then I cup their liquid bodies in my hands and sip. I feel full for a while, and then suddenly I don’t. It’s like you barely existed at all.”

“That’s a lie. Now you’re just trying to scare me.”

“It doesn’t matter. As far as you’re concerned, it’s as true as the sky above your head—blue and cloudless, last time I checked, and sometimes

there are birds.”

With great unbalance, Six pulled back her hand again, against the spasm in her gut where the numbness had betrayed her, and held the blow above her shoulder while she looked into the servant’s depthless eyes, her face made dark by the glare of the hall. Outside the cell her food was waiting.

Two hours later, the servant came again with food, and left as soon as it was placed. Six ate the meal. She felt she had no choice; she knew this was the end.

A woman known as Prisoner Six waited inside a cell for her meal. She was thin, dressed in a black smock and covered in a misty haze of grey dust from the walls around her. There were no windows in her cell, and the door shut without a seam, and she could only by the nervetips of her fingers know the edges of the room. Every two hours the servant came bearing food, and so opened the door and let in the light. Six spent the time between the feedings walking in a circle around the cell’s perimeter, trying not to think about the time, trailing her fingers across the walls, unblemished except for a thin crack in the mortar across from the door.

One day the servant brought Six soup, and also a metal spoon, and so despite the weakness that had sat upon her chest and arms, Prisoner Six flattened out the spoon against the floor and wedged it in the crack. She slowly began to dig out the mortar, and eventually removed the stone, revealing behind the wall a flat face of solid rock. Six held her ear to the wall, trying to hear birds outside, but she could not.

The servant continued to come on time, and never mentioned the tunnel that Six had begun to dig, though one day she left a chisel and a hammer with the food. Eventually, Six dug a thin passage, sloping upwards, just far enough in that she could no longer see the light of the door when it was time to eat. It was a good thing, then, that this time the servant had brought a lantern with her.

“I have your food.” The servant placed the tray on the edge of the tunnel, on the small flat area left by the stone that Six removed, which was just deep enough to fit the tray. Six looked down and saw the servant looking up the tunnel, lantern held in a gloved hand.

“Aren’t you going to leave?” said Six.

“I will, eventually.”

“Have I asked about this before?”

“Probably. There are many questions in this room, and most of them are yours.”

“I am very hungry.”

“Then come down and eat.”

“With you watching me?”

“Yes.”

“Why.”

“Because you have to eat, whether I am here or not. You remember that, at least?”

Six thought back as far as she could go. “I do,” she said, perhaps with uncertainty.

“Then come down to eat,” the servant said, “before that tunnel closes in and traps us all.”