

The Number that Was Her Name

When June was around four or five, before she invented those sophisticated, *posh* games of pretend, she immersed herself in the simpler joys—she would try to find human features in nature, as younglings do to learn through imitation and repetition. The mountains were always good contestants with their voluminous curvatures and suave colors resembling the human skin's glowing luster. But butterflies, oh, the butterflies! The degree of butterflies' likeliness to human eyes was uncanny. With the flapping motions of their wings, they created the illusion of thousands of blinking eyes. It was because of this miraculous resemblance June believed that you never really go away when you die. You simply split up and keep living as different beings. Your eyes become a part of the sky within two amorous butterflies, your body dormant under the green mountains and the earth, and your heart lingers on as the core of a crackling fire, warming the hands of freezing travelers from all around.

Therefore she was not afraid of death. She did not care for the pain, but surely it would not be all that bad if she could turn into a bird or a sycamore tree or a stick of butter or a butterfly. What wondrous sensations would await her!

Instead of being kissed by the venomous lips of death, June slowly regained consciousness. Much to her surprise, she was lying on a bed of some sort. Her hands groped around for a mattress or a blanket, but all she found was a bare wooden frame pressed against her back. Although shabby, it wasn't the hard floor of the train anymore, nor was there the queasy stench of human odor sifting through the air. Was the journey all just an eerie dream, and she had not, in actuality, left her bed in the cottage? Would Frau Roth be there by the table to smile at her when she rushes downstairs, jumping extra hard on the broken step (third one from the top)? June was suddenly very hopeful.

She opened her eyes.

"You are awake!" The Guardian's young face heaved into June's sight.

Oh. A wave of disappointment and heartache numbed her excitement.

"Here, you have to eat something," The Guardian stuffed a loaf of bread into her hand.

Staring up, June was not yet completely disconnected from the world of the old bookkeeper, "Where is Fynn?"

"We got separated. The men went in another direction just beyond that fence. You passed out for an entire day! This madam was kind enough to carry you in from the train. "A woman nodded and turned away to check on her children. June muttered a blurred *thanks* and felt a bubble burst in the back of her throat.

"*Oh!* You've got a number." The Guardian pointed at the sleeve of the grey clothes June came to notice that she was wearing, "From now on, you are not June anymore. You are *A14351*." The Guardian never really fully understood the humans' obsession with naming each other: What was

the purpose of having a name if they were only going to occupy the earth for such a (relatively) brief period?

A14351. It was the first time that June had ever heard of having numbers for a name. It was longer than 'June', so it will take longer to copy her name onto the initial page of documents like Frau Roth does. But she liked it. Paradoxically, in those cold, rigid numbers, she saw a freedom that made her feel like a grown-up, walking alongside a crowd greater than herself. *Miss A14351.*

The hunger finally caught up to June, and she was all of the sudden ready to bite off her own tongue to quench the burning sensation in her stomach. She devoured the bread like a madman and licked her finger clean of crumbs, unsatisfied with the small portion.

"I'm not supposed to help, but-" The Guardian took something from his pocket and passed it to June, "*This-this* will render you invisible in the eyes of other people. Use it for investigation, sneaking out, whatnot. Just one thing: use it sparingly. It is fueled by affection—genuine, uncontaminated affection. I have a feeling that it is hard to find in here. "

June crouched down by the door and borrowed the light seeping in from under the gap to examine the item. It was a blue pendant. The light precipitated on the gem's smooth surface, forging into liquified waves of blue, gently flowing within the confines of the oval jewel.

"That looks expensive," the madam from earlier approached June slowly from behind, "That *sapphire* pendant in your hand. Where did you get that?"

Those flashy words attracted some room fellows' sticky gaze like moths to the piercing moon.

"It's a family heirloom. An imitation to the real thing. We keep it for sentimental value, really," The Guardian was vigilant. Remembering his disguise as a five-year-old boy, he added quickly, "At least that was what Grandpa said. "

The crowd lost interest and returned to their previous occupations: huddling with each other, braiding hair, biting nails, screaming in the corner. Judging from the weight of the light oozing in from under the locked door, June deduced it to be either near sunrise or a little after sunset. She asked around for the time but received the same answer: all the watches were taken away at registration. Her query was rejoined by the unbolting of the door, revealing an officer dressed just like those who accompanied Hunger to the orphanage.

The officer shouted in German, asking for a translator. No one volunteered, so he carried on regardless. *They are now officially in the jurisdiction of the, blah blah, subjugated to the rightful containment of the, blah blah.* June found it hard to pay attention to the officer's words when his imperial styled mustache resembled two caterpillars boxing each other. They smashed into each other and pulled back to regain momentum with each opening and closing of his lips. June once observed the birth of butterflies, or as some may call it, the death of the caterpillars—wrapped up in semi-translucent cocoons, they bent their bodies with incredible silk-like flexibility. June

pictured the officer's mustache metamorphosing into a black butterfly and his frantic expression upon witnessing the miraculous escape. June's lips curled upwards uncontrollably.

Without perceiving June's subdued ridicule, the officer took post by the door as the residents piled outside. Looking back at the structure she just exited, June saw rows of barracks extending beyond the horizon, with lines of exhausted people ambling out of each barrack.

June marveled at the sea of people. There were so many of them, all dressed up in the same faded striped clothes and numbers switched to their sleeves. Hundreds, no, thousands even. Were they all prisoners trapped by Hunger and Disease? Will the morbid lovebirds first experiment on them with the deadliest virus and then send them straight to Hunger's stomach?

They were thoroughly counted and herded forth by officers with guns.

"Where are we going?" June whispered to the Guardian as they walked side by side.

"To work. In here, we have to work to survive," The Guardian replied.

Work! *How marvelous.* Romy was bragging about going out into the society for work incessantly, and now June could finally experience the same joy of earning her keep through honest, exciting work!

An officer murmured something into the ear of another officer standing near him, who let out a string of ill-disposed chuckles.

He turned to the marching crowd and adjusted the red armband on his left sleeve, "Sing," he ordered the prisoners arrogantly.

June was struck by the sickening feeling of familiarity—the scene too closely resembled the one from the spider kingdom. "*Sing,*" said Svan to the cricket. It couldn't be.

Dead silence permeated the group. No one opened their mouths. Instead of the shyness of performance in front of a crowd, it was more of a united, unspoken protest. The anger brewing inside the prisoners from the imprisonment and dehumanization gave them the courage of defiance. Mistakenly attributing their silence to their ignorance of the song, the officers lead on solemnly, educating the empty-headed souls of the greatness of their cause:

*We are the fighters of the NSDAP
Loyal German in the heart, firm and tenacious in the fight
We are devoted to the swastika.
Heil our Führer, Heil Hitler to you!*

Still, no one sang. The officer's excited expressions chilled into dangerously gloomy ones. All of them pointed their gunpoints directly at the prisoners. A wave of flustered panic spread through the group, causing some to raise their hands high up into the air, others huddling closer to the center of the herd.

"For the last time. *Sing.*" A bullet that was meant for intimidation shot into the open sky. It unzipped people's proud mouths and out came pouring a song. It was a tormented song of many different keys and many different tunes. It was a song so faint that one would worry about it fading out like an unprotected flame on a particularly windy night.

"Louder!" One of the officers demanded, poking the woman nearest to him with the stock of his gun.

The volume surged significantly, but the intonation did not improve in its accuracy. Even though the group could be described as lackluster singers at best, the officers inebriated in the music as if they were listening to the most extravagant German opera, their hands swung in front of them in their make-believe conduction of the Berlin orchestra group.

June glanced around. She was appalled by the painfully mechanical parting of the lips the officers called singing. The woman next to her sank her nails so deep into the palm of her fist that blood came trickling out of the five crescent-shaped wounds. June had always thought of singing as a beautiful thing—even when the cricket put farewell into its song, it was still *beautifully* sad. The prisoners' song was different: it was dry, ugly, and painful. It was a blade cutting through layers of tender tissues in the lung, the heart, and the throat to finally escape the lips of its victim.

This was wrong. June subconsciously grabbed onto the pendant hanging around her neck, her heart beating faster in rage. *This was wrong.* With that thought, she felt the person behind her stepping onto the heels of her shoes. She turned to survey the culprit but found the woman staring directly past her like.....like she couldn't see her. She had turned *invisible*, June realized with an animated exhilaration. She was free to do whatever she pleased!

After making sure that she couldn't be seen, June started to sing along with the group tentatively. The voice that came out was weak and somewhat doubtful. Indeed, June wasn't much of a performer in her entire life leading up to this point. Some children were natural born singers, commented Frau Nuemann, and June was *quite the opposite*. *Furthermore*, Frau Nuemann smacked her lips and exclaimed how she had *never seen such a talentless child like June*, while Frau Roth made a funny face behind her back (June did have a way with words, demonstrated by her expertise in snappy comebacks). Lacking confidence and experience in singing, June's hesitant voice was soon swallowed by the crowd.

Suddenly, the image of a golden cricket popped into her head, bringing forth a rush of determination to her voice. If her little friend could sing with such a blinding certainty, surely she could do the same. She packed her lung with air until it hurt from the compactness, and she bellowed out this majestic song:

*We are the fighters of the Water Closet
Loyal dung beetles in the heart, firm and tenacious in the fight.
We are devoted to coprophagia.
Heil our appetite, Heil Hilter to you!*

As she sang out the edited lyrics of the same song, by no means did she hit any note or landed anywhere remotely close, but she did manage to turn a grand march song into a nursery rhyme. It felt good to sing, thought June, to *really, really* sing.

The audacious lyrics surprised the prisoners. After the initial silence, a few bold ones chuckled at the canny childishness. The sun seemed to have come out for a brief second to cast the monotonous grayness away.

"Who did that? Which one of you was it?" The angry officers searched the formation, who had all stopped singing with their lips shut, clenched tighter than a lover's embrace. Naturally, the officers failed to detect the source of the ongoing performance. June spotted a terror-stricken fear of the supernatural in their eyes.

She giggled and kept singing the stanza over and over—she jogged in a circle to throw her seekers off of their course. Whenever the officers got frustrated and were about to give up, she would offer a few extra loud chords as a clue; conversely, she would suddenly stop singing when they get too close. It was quite like a game of tag. Who knew that she would find such diligent playmates in here?

Finally, the officers panted like golden retriever puppies after extended playtime. Propping their arms against their knees to keep themselves from falling over, the tallest one ordered the prisoners, "No food for the rest of the day. For *all of you*."

The cold proclamation pacified June's elevated heart. The sudden shift of mood on people's faces frightened her. There was disappointment, resentment, and a small trace of the lingering warmth of laughter. June felt a sharp pinch of guilt: she just wanted to make people feel better. That was why she sang.

Shouldn't she have?

To make things worse, the blue pendant was now only two-third blue, with the top 1/3 taking on a pale, colorless white facade. *Use it sparingly*, instructed the Guardian.

In the days to come, June did listen to the Guardian and used the pendant sparingly. Accompanying her increased self-control was consistent diarrhea and a vision blurrier by the day. Everyone in the barracks suffered the *Disease of Hunger*, two wicked fairies happily married to each other.

In every single one of those days, June noticed the madam who carried her into the barracks on the first day weeping herself to sleep. The hoarse sobs of someone who ran out of tears but still stored an immense amount of sadness in her heart permeated the room. But everyone was too preoccupied with their own misery, their own physical pain to act on the sympathy they had fostered in their spare time.

"Is there anything I can do?" June walked over and placed a hand lightly on the madam's

shoulder. When the madam looked up and bumped into June's soft brown eyes, she thought they were just magical—the kindness and fearlessness found only in a child made her nose sore again.

"No, dear. I'm afraid not," she wiped the tear remnants from her face.

June noticed that she clutched onto the picture of a man between her right thumb and index finger, "Is this your brother?" She inquired curiously. She only assumed it because of the similarity between the two: they have the same black curly hair, brown eyes, round faces, and a well-calibrated smile.

"My husband," The madam passed the picture to June.

June had heard before that if you truly love your spouse after you marry, your face will grow more and more similar until they bear an unmistakable resemblance. It was the first time she had seen such a case in real life. How wonderfully curious!

"My husband is not in his best health. He has a heart condition that requires a daily medication called aspirin. I just want to make sure that he was okay," The madam was tearing up again.

"Would you like to hear from him?" June's hand reached for the pendant, overwhelmed by sympathy and willfully ignoring the Guardian's warning.

The madam did not get her hopes up because of the one innocent question. She would answer, yes, but just to entertain a little girl, and to quiet the part of her that brimmed with a wrathful apprehension, "Yes. Yes, I would like that very much." She then cried herself to sleep and tossed the conversation to the back of her mind.

Therefore, deducing from the logical progression of things, the madam was entitled to a tiny gasp of disbelief, a moment of stunned stillness, when June came back the next day with a pen, a piece of paper, and a bottle of aspirin in her hands.

With the power of the pendant, June had sneaked out the previous night just before curfew. She slipped out of the closing door like an agile eel. Wandering around the camp freely, June spotted a building different from the rest of the barracks. Following an officer through the door, June found her way into a storage room. Fine silk jackets and rouge colored, squared shouldered dresses, diamond earrings and gold necklaces, and rows of medicines assembled all the prisoners' stolen colors into the one room. The clear organization helped June to spot the labeled aspirin bottle without much difficulty. Before she hurried back to her barrack, she glanced at the picture placed on an office table by the entrance. It was Hunger, standing next to a man that must be Disease. June thought that they looked nothing alike—they must not love each other very much.

Rest assured, I will defeat you, she promised her photographed enemies.

The next day, the madam spent the brief lunch break compiling her longing and worry into a letter, which June hid beneath her shirt and secured with the elastic cord of her pants. Before she

set off for her newly-gained mailman duty, the madam wrapped June into a tight hug. Slumbering under her shirt, the lush blue on the pendant grew like the rising tides in early mornings.