The Third Prisoner

By E. M. Lewis

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Characters

Prisoner #4588930
Prisoner #8836729
Prisoner #1439872

Time

There are no calendars or windows here, so no one knows what time it is, or how much time has passed.

Setting

A prison.

In the cell where Prisoner #4588930 and Prisoner #8836729 are held, there are no windows. Just gray walls and not enough room for two beings. Each of them has a thin blanket, and they share a bucket, and occasionally a tin of not-enough-food is pushed through a small slot under the door. There is nothing else, and there has been nothing else for a long time.
Prisoner #4588930 sleeps under their blanket and Prisoner #8836729 sits with their back against the wall, knees up, hands moving listlessly.

Prisoner #8836729

Wake up.

Prisoner #4588930 doesn’t move.

Prisoner #8836729 gives Prisoner #4588930 a strong shove with their foot.

Prisoner #4588930

What? What’s happening?

Prisoner #4588930 sits up, groggy and afraid.

PRISONER #8836729

Wake up.

PRISONER #4588930

I don’t want to wake up.

PRISONER #8836729

I don’t want to be alone anymore.

PRISONER #4588930

You can talk to me while I sleep. Quietly. Very quietly.

PRISONER #8836729

I want you to talk back.

PRISONER #4588930

I hate you.

PRISONER #8836729

I know.

PRISONER #4588930

I was trying to have a dream.

PRISONER #8836729

Was it working?

PRISONER #4588930

No! Someone woke me up!

(MORE)
It wouldn’t have worked anyway. I don’t dream anymore. Who knew that that was something a person could forget?

Let’s play the game.

No.

Please?

I don’t feel well.

You should try to sleep, too.

I can’t sleep.

Maybe if you exercised for a while.

How long do you think it has been since we got here?

Forever.

No, really.

Long enough that I don’t want to be alive anymore.

I hate it when you talk this way.

Honestly?
We could play the math game. Or we could exercise together and see who can do more. Or...

Or?

Something. Anything.

Maybe later. I’m going to try to sleep again now.

You do nothing but sleep!

Prisoner #4599830 lies down again, and pulls the blanket over their head.

A moment. Then Prisoner #8836729 cocks their head. Then presses their ear to the wall.

I hear something.

Food?

Not so soon.

There is a sound of keys in the door.

Get back against the wall and cover your head. Hurry! Hurry!

The two prisoners moved to the back wall and curl in on themselves, heads down, hands curved around their necks in submission.

The door creaks open, and a great lump, wrapped in a blanket, is thrown into the cell. The door closes.

A moment. Then the two prisoners warily raise their heads and look to see what’s happened. They stare at the lump.
Is it another prisoner? PRISONER #4588930

I think so. PRISONER #8836729

Is it alive? PRISONER #4588930

Why else would they throw them in here? PRISONER #8836729

To torture us? PRISONER #4588930

Prisoner #8836729 nudges the lump with their foot, then leaps back when it moves.

Prisoner #1439872 sits up, and then looks at the other two prisoners curiously.

Hello. PRISONER #8836729

Hello. Prisoner #1439872

Are you a spy? PRISONER #4588930

No. PRISONER #1439872

Why are you a prisoner? PRISONER #4588930

No good reason. You? PRISONER #1439872

Same. (beat) PRISONER #4588930

(beat) There’s not enough room for you here. Or enough food to share with you. PRISONER #8836729

Don’t be inhospitable. Would you like a crust of bread?
PRISONER #4588930
Where did you get that?!

PRISONER #8836729
I was saving it for later, to give you as a gift or to eat myself, I hadn’t decided yet. It could have gone either way. But now, I think we should give it to the newcomer. #1439872.

Call me Zara.

PRISONER #1439872
Prisoner # 8836729 and #4588930 both pull away, pressing their backs against the wall, listening to see if anyone has overheard.

PRISONER #8836729
We’re not allowed to have names!

PRISONER #4588930
No names!

PRISONER #8836729
You’ll be beaten!

PRISONER #4588930
So will we!

PRISONER #1439872
We won’t tell them.

PRISONER #8836729
A long moment.

PRISONER #8836729
PlaiTor.  
(beat; shakily)
My name is PlaiTor.

PRISONER #4588930
You shouldn’t!

PRISONER #8836729
What more can they do to us?

PRISONER #4588930
I don’t want to be hurt more.

PRISONER #8836729
I know.
Prisoner #8836729 -- Plai-Tor -- touches Prisoner #4588930’s shoulder gently.

PRISONER #4588930
They could be a secret agent.

PRISONER #8836729
Or maybe they’re just like us.
(beat; to Zara)
Are you just like us?

PRISONER #1439872
I am a prisoner here, and I have been for a long time.

PRISONER #8836729
There! You see? Have a crust of bread.

PRISONER #1439872
We’ll split it into three pieces.

PRISONER #4588930
Maybe I like you after all.

They eat the crust hungrily.

PRISONER #8836729
So you know nothing of the outside?

PRISONER #1439872
I don’t even know if it’s still there. I’m sorry.

PRISONER #4588930
I’m going to sleep again.

Prisoner #4588930 lies down, covering their eyes with their blanket.

PRISONER #8836729
They aren’t well.

PRISONER #1439872
They have been hurt?

PRISONER #8836729
Hurt much, and then left here with me. Us now. (softly)
Zara.

PRISONER #1439872
Plai-Tor.
Plai-Tor smiles.

PRISONER #8836729
Hearing my name on someone else’s lips makes me feel real again.

PRISONER #1439872
Were you doubting your realness?

PRISONER #8836729
We were beginning to wonder. When there is no time, when
there is no light, when there is no work...

Plai-Tor turns away, trying to hide tears.

PRISONER #1439872
Don’t cry! I’m sorry.

PRISONER #8836729
It’s okay.

PRISONER #1439872
I’m sorry that my being here means less room and food for
you.

PRISONER #8836729
Better that then being alone. For some time, I was alone,
and that was unbearable.

PRISONER #1439872
Me, too.

A moment.

PRISONER #1439872 (cont’d)
But it was when I was alone that I discovered my magic.

PRISONER #8836729
Your magic?

PRISONER #1439872
Yes.

PRISONER #8836729
I don’t believe in magic.

PRISONER #1439872
Neither did I, until I woke up with it.
Now I am beginning to be as wary of you as #4588932.

A long moment.

Show me. I don’t even care if it’s a trick.

Tell me something you miss, from the world.

I try not think about my life before.

A small thing.

There was a place I would go, a forest that was filled with birds. All kinds of birds. My job was with birds, and that place was filled with them, and I could sit amongst the trees and watch them take flight -- swooping and turning in the big, wide sky.

Zara takes one finger, and uses it to draw a window on the wall of the cell. They draw trees. They draw birds in the sky, flying, and then a bird perching on the windowsill. The birds in the sky are moving, the trees sway in the wind, and the bird on the sill turns its head to one side, to look at Plai-Tor.

Oh....

Plai-Tor reaches out a trembling hand, and touches the bird, gently petting its feathers.

Oh, Zara!

Plai-Tor looks out the new window, and feels the air on their cheek.

It’s been so long!
Prisoner #4588930 uncovers their head, and looks up at Plai-Tor and Zara.

PRISONER #4588930
I don’t believe in magic.

PRISONER #8836729
But look! Birds! There are birds!

PRISONER #4588930
Their finger is bleeding.

Zara looks at their bloody hand.

PRISONER #1439872
It will stop after a while.
(beat)
Would you like something? I have another drawing finger, on this other hand.

PRISONER #4588930
Will it hurt you?

PRISONER #1439872
It would please me. I am happy to not be alone anymore, and grateful to be with you.

PRISONER #4588930
I don’t remember my name.
(beat)
Isn’t that terrible? Do I even exist if I don’t have a name?

PRISONER #8836729
You exist.

PRISONER #1439872
What do you remember? Let me give you a gift of it.

Prisoner #4588930 shakes their head, and shakes their head. Nothing. Nothing. But then...

PRISONER #4588930
My... mother.

PRISONER #1439872
You had a mother...

PRISONER #4588930
Warmth and sweetness and safety and the smell of... cinnamon. She sang to me.

(MORE)
I remember being held close, in that cinnamon sweet warmth, feeling safe, because she was singing to me.

Zara draws musical notes on the other wall of the cell, with the drawing finger of their other hand, drawing and drawing, and suddenly we can hear a woman's voice singing, with great love and sweetness, a lullaby.

Oh!!! Oh!!!

Prisoner #4588930 lurches up from the floor and throws their arms around Zara, who is surprised, but receives the hug and lets themselves be held.

Aylen!

Aylen?

She would call me Aylen. I am called Aylen. I have a name. (shouting at the wall of the cell)
I have a name!!!!

Shh!!!

I have a name.

Aylen.

Plai-Tor.

I'm going to sleep a while now.

Okay.

Okay.
Okay.

Zara tucks their bloody hands in their sleeves, and lies down under their blanket to sleep.

Plai-Tor...

Yes.

Is this really happening? Or have I remembered how to dream?

Take my hand. Do I feel real to you?

Aylen takes Plai-Tor’s hand.

Yes.

I like your mother’s voice very much.

I like your birds.

We can keep going.

Yes. We can keep going.

They keep holding each other’s hands, and watching the birds soar in the open sky, and listening to the music. Aylen sings along. Plai-Tor whistles like a bird.

They keep going.

<end of play>