

The Song of the People

By Ella Hannesson

I think there is a difference between existing and living, a difference between seeing and looking, between hearing and listening. With each day that passes, our work as slaves only gets harder and the battle against falling apart only looks more grim. Right now I don't think I'm living, right now I think I'm merely existing.

Routine must be high on Queen Taera's list of regard, for with each passing day, everything is the same. We are up at six a.m. on the dot and then we go to the kitchens where we will cook and clean for the next fifteen hours. I wasn't always a slave, none of us were. But when Queen Taera issued the decree that all girls in Florinthe who were between the ages of twelve and twenty-five were to come to the palace to serve as maids, I had no choice. It has only been six weeks since Queen Taera has been in power. There were twenty of us in the kitchen, all limping and bone tired from our work. Our work day is done and I am leading us back to our sleeping quarters. I am the oldest at age fourteen.

The guard opens the door to our quarters and I hear the "click" as he locks it behind us, there is no way to escape. I shuffle over to my bunk and fall onto the lumpy, old bed. Everyone is always so exhausted from our work that no one makes a sound as we unbraided our hair. I pull out a photo of my family from under my pillow. Everyone is so happy in the picture, my parents are laughing and my two younger brothers are grinning, their eyes dancing with mischief. My mother's brown hair is tied back and she is wearing her usual grey apron, my father is wearing plain grey trousers and a large brown tunic. My brothers, Kellen and Christian, are wearing their usual blue jumpsuits. The photo was taken last year, so the boys are only two in the picture. It's absurd to think that it was only last year. I miss them so much.

I look around the cramped room, at the sad grey walls, dirty stone floor and the ten bunks. Each girl has her own bed and we all wear the same faded blue dress and the same grieved, knowing expression as we remember our families. I will never forget the day guard threw open our door and demanded to see Asrea and Daniall Tyrin. My father and I had stepped forward and listened as they read the new law that females from ages twelve to twenty-five in Florinthe were solely meant to work as maids and all men were to be sent to waging war against the Caltiqs. At the time Taera had only been in power for one week and we didn't know how bad our situation would get. We packed our stuff and said our goodbyes. Tears were blurring my vision as I hugged my mother and whispered "I love you," and did the same to my twin brothers. I turned around, head held high as we marched to the palace. That was the last time I saw my family.

On the top bunk I hear Mel snuffle. She is the youngest at age twelve. "It's okay, Mel," I try to comfort her, "we all miss our families." Mel has never talked about her family and we all suspect that it is just too painful for her. "I kn-know." Mel chokes out and I reply "Here, you should get some sleep, we all should." A rumble of agreement

comes from the other girls. I grab a sharp, narrow stone from off the ground and make a mark on the wall beside my bunk. Fifty-six marks. I roll over and tug on the thin blanket, no one really sleeps well, no one even cares anymore; our families are gone and there is nothing to wake up to except another fifteen hours of work. I close my eyes and slowly sink into oblivion.

I'm shivering as our alarm goes off and we all jump out of the bunks. Five fifty-three. That gives us seven minutes to braid our hair and get to the kitchens. I braid my long golden hair, yanking on the knots from last night and then move to do Mel's thick head of brown curls. Once everyone's hair is back and we are ready, I lead them to the kitchens. On the counter there are twenty pieces of bread and a glass of water to go with each plate. Everyone hungrily gulps down their bread and water. We have two minutes to eat before it is time to work. I finish my bread and grab my knife and begin chopping potatoes. Chop, chop, chop. Each slice that is cut is a reminder, you are a slave, it is what you do now, keep cutting, slice after slice and then off to cut the next food.

My hands ache from all the chopping and my feet are so sore from standing. Mel lets out an exasperated sigh as she accidentally drops a tomato she was holding. I walk over and help her clean up the splattered tomato. "It's okay, Mel," I assure her, "we're all tired." The other girls nod in accord. I stand up and resume my work. I wish it wasn't like this, twelve-year olds slaving in the kitchen, but it is and there is nothing we could've done to save us from this fate. Taera had murdered the entire royal monarch. King Clarence, dead. Queen Lanthine, dead. Prince Syllas, dead. All dead and the throne replaced by an imposter. Taera had an announcement at her coronation that she was simply tired of seeing the empire slowly fall, Florinthe losing wars, slaves escaping, and people being too free. "Freedom is a privilege, not a right," Taera had said. She was, of course, wrong, but since she was the Queen we were all obliged to follow her orders, no matter how unfair.

The head of the kitchen, Miss Dell, comes in at the exact time she does every day, seven twenty. We hustle over and get in a line, backs straightening, feet moving together. If you are not presentable you are punished. Miss Dell is wearing a black suit, her dark hair tied in a low bun and her sharp features are accentuated with dark paint around her eyes. She scans the kitchen, making sure everything is acceptable, but something unfit catches her eye. She walks over to the faint red stain on the floor where Mel dropped the tomato. "Who did this?" she demands. I step forward. "I did, Miss," I confess. I see Mel's eyes widen as she realizes I will get punished for her mistake. Miss Dell approaches me, a predator stalking its prey. She pulls out a knife and I hold out my hand. I know the drill. She draws a line on my flesh with the knife, a crimson trail of blood in its wake. She drops my wrist, disgust clouding her face. "Mistakes are not tolerated, you should know." I try to ignore the searing pain in my wrist as I give a shaky nod. "Now girls, the queen orders that all citizens of Florinthe must attend her announcement in Central at eight pm. We have forty minutes. Let's go." And with that she turns and leaves, motioning us to follow, which we oblige and follow her out of the kitchen.

Mel starts to thank me profusely. I hold up my hand, I don't want to hear it. My hand is still bloody but the pain is gone. I do not regret taking the blame, no twelve-year old should be cut because they dropped a tomato. We head through the stone palace corridors and pass through the lush walkway beside the palace before we arrive in Central exactly five minutes early.

More people file in Central and we watch as Queen Taera appears on the dais. The jewel-encrusted crown that should have been on Syllas's head was sitting on Her Majesty's auburn hair, the sceptre in her pale bony hand. Resentment floods in me, as I watch Taera sit on the throne, a smile on her thin lips saying that she knew she had won. "I have ordered you all here so you can witness what will occur. I'm sure you are all aware that I have only been Queen for merely nine weeks, so there are many things I should set straight." Her voice is dripping with mock sweetness, her smile not reaching her eyes as she turns around and beckons eight shackled boys around the age of thirteen. "These young boys were caught stealing gold from the palace. There is absolutely no stealing. Punishment is to be death by hanging." Queen Taera looked all too happy with that punishment.

Eight guards come forward and tie rope around each of the boys' necks. I cover Mel's eyes with my hands and close my own as the boys succumb to their cruel fate. "This is the fate of anyone who commits a crime! There are no second chances when it comes to the law." She is cruel, wicked even, and it makes me wonder, with all the good in the world, how could one be so evil? I'm sure the boys had not jumped at the idea to steal. Perhaps if Taera didn't take most of the people's money, they wouldn't be forced to steal; I am lost in my depressing thoughts. That's when I hear it, the faint hum of voices as the people sing. The sound gets louder until I can hear the lyrics and I recognize the song. It is an old song that the troops of Florinthe used to sing while they were in battle for their freedom against the Caltiqs.

"You can take away our homes, you can take away our lives." By now most of the voices around me have joined in and I begin to sing, too. "You can kill off all the children and the husbands and the wives. But if there's one thing that you can't, it is the dream that we hold dear, the one that promises that something good is drawing near. Because we will be free again, and tomorrow's another day, waiting for our fight for freedom to begin."

Taera's confident smile is now fading at our act of rebellion. She tries to silence us but our song is stronger than her commands. The music is all around us, saying we are united, we are strong and we won't give up.

"That dream is true and it won't break, and never shall we say, it is over, we surrender, we give up. You can take away our homes, you can take away our lives, you can kill off all the children and the husbands and the wives. But if there's one thing that you can't, it is the dream that we hold dear, the one that promises that something good

is drawing near. Because we will be free again, and tomorrow's another day, waiting for our fight for freedom to begin.”

Each note that is sung is a strike of defiance against Taera, who is trying and failing to silence the crowd. In that moment, when we are all united, when not even Taera can break us, when everyone knows that perhaps we can overcome this reign of terror, I think I finally feel alive again.