

“Government must depend for its efficiency either on force or opinion.”

Estel

Estel glanced around her. Decorations lined the streets in the small village where she had spent her entire twenty years; mocking her with their bright, vibrant colours while she continued to feel empty and unhappy. Loud music filled her ears, slowly encompassing her and attempting to convince her that this was a happy occasion. Maybe it was for the men here, but it was far from joyous for her. She began to feel dizzy and steadied her balance by holding onto the railing in front of her. The parade would be starting soon, and Estel watched the soldiers, shop workers and members of the public finish setting up, a huge mess of nervousness building inside her stomach.

“I can do this”, Estel said to herself. “I have been through worse than this before”.

They arrived three years ago. “To ensure no more wars broke out”, they said. “To keep the women in line”. They’d been ordered to “protect us” by the government.

Other girls began to filter into the area where Estel was standing, which was a cordoned off section of the town square, realistically only big enough to fit around 20 malnourished and beaten girls, but all 54 members of the female population of Ironside were going to be stood here, all of them equally malnourished and beaten. Except for Estel. She had it worse. When they first accused her of having a child in secret, they were relentless. The soldiers would abuse and torture her, demanding information on where her secret child was hidden. None of it was true. Even upon realizing they were wrong, nothing changed. The beatings continued.

Turning to her left, Estel saw the soldiers who hadn’t been recalled to fight, as they pushed more women into the sectioned area. The ones who had stayed behind and perpetuated this nightmare, so that even though *he* had gone, the beatings remained, albeit to a lesser extent. She watched as one girl, no older than fourteen, was kicked to the ground because she dared to ask if she could have something. Her sentence was cut off by a blow to the head, so Estel wasn’t even sure what it was she wanted. With blood pooling around the young girl, who was cradled on the floor, she stifled her cries

out of fear of further punishment. This was not something out of the ordinary for the small village of Ironside anymore, and Estel, along with every other woman who was present, didn't dare turn their gazes towards the incident.

"YOU are the problem. I don't feel sorry for you. I don't feel sorry for any of the women here. You brought this on yourself."

Groups of men began to gather either side of the main road, which was closed off with a fence to give the parade a path to follow. It was slightly strange, calling this whole occasion a parade. The parades that Estel remembered from before were much nicer than this one. Her favourite, which her mum had only taken her to once, was the May Day Parade. The floats had consisted of beautiful arrangements of flowers, each one wildly different from the next but equally as extraordinary. Completely enthralled in this memory of her mother, Estel began to smile, ever so faintly. She had mastered the art of a faint smile, one that won't alert the soldiers into thinking she was hiding something. One that she always did when she remembered her mother.

A loud horn sounded from the speakers directly behind her, not only ripping Estel from her method of escapism, but also startling every other woman in the area.

"The parade will begin in fifteen minutes. The parade will begin in fifteen minutes", a loud, deep voice boomed through the speaker.

Upon hearing this, the men who were busy perusing the stalls that had been set up meandered over to join the others who were waiting. One man carried fresh bread from the market, one man tipped back a brew he had purchased from the bar, and another seemingly stole a packet of sausages from the butchers and shoved them in his pocket, but each of them congregated with the others, waiting for the parade to start.

He hit me. I think it was the sixth beating I had that day.

"Where is the child?" he spat.

“I promise you; I do not have a child. I would never go against the rules”. I replied.

“And what are the rules again, Estel?” he said, speaking with such disgust in his voice that Estel wondered if maybe she really was scum.

“Women cannot procreate. Women caused the rise in violence due to the overpopulation epidemic. Any woman thought to have had a child, or carried one, will be punished.” I said, repeating the rhetoric drilled into all women over the past three years, trying to make my insincerity seem sincere. I’d never forget that rule.

The horn sounded again.

“The parade will begin shortly. Gentleman, please take your places”.

Only seconds passed before a crackle of microphone feedback jolted Estel into standing upright, and she focused on what she was about to witness. With deafening trumpet music slowly rising from the speaker behind her, she knew that it was time. She was going to see him, and all the other soldiers who were returning from war. This parade was for them, to celebrate their heroism, to commemorate them for being valiant members of the military who sacrificed their comfortable position guarding Ironside to fight on the front lines.

The crowd of men fell silent, and Estel’s hands began to shake. She felt the anger rise from her feet and slowly make its way through her body. She wanted to hurt him, kill him. He was responsible for her scars, her bruises and her black eyes. He should be made to pay, for torturing helpless women just because they have the biological ability to carry out childbirth. They should all suffer, but *him* in particular; he loved the pain he could inflict.

In the distance, Estel could see them, marching towards the parade path in front of her. Even though they were just small silhouettes, her breathing quickened. “He’s there”, she thought. Her stomach swirled with anxiety, but she remained stuck to the floor. The figures grew larger as they approached, and before long, the men in the crowds were cheering.

“Well done boys!” “You’re heroes!” “Thank you so much! God bless you!”

The women were silent. They had nothing to be thankful for. The beatings had been far less regular since the soldiers left to fight, but they were returning. If the girls standing with Estel had any hope, it was now shattered. All of them knew it.

The soldiers had made their way to the main town square and were shaking hands with the men who cheered them on. Some of them stopped to recall stories of their battles, and how many people they had killed. The men, hooked onto their every word, commemorated them even further.

Estel scanned the row of soldiers but couldn’t see who she was looking for. She thought that maybe he had been killed, and she was silently infuriated by this, hoping he had at least suffered. A few minutes passed while Estel was lost in this thought, until she noticed the familiar black, curly hair and immediately knew why she hadn’t seen him at first. His face was almost unrecognizable, covered in wounds. His left eye was missing, and he walked with a limp.

Estel broke into a hysterical laughter. The women around her immediately pushed to get away, knowing her fate. Estel herself knew her fate, but she couldn’t stop. The brave, heroic soldier, the one who had beaten her to near death many times, had suffered. He had been in pain. She laughed harder, attracting the attention of everyone else, until the entire parade fell silent except for a few murmurs of repulsion among the men.

Feeling a tight grip on both of her arms, Estel was dragged away, still giggling.

When she was taken behind a wall, out of sight of everyone else, she was still giggling.

When she was pushed to her knees, staring at the poster pasted on the wall which depicted the country’s Prime Minister with the words “*we are here to protect you*” underneath, she was still giggling.

When she heard the *click* of the gun behind her head, she was still giggling.

