

The Twelve

Thump. The last shovel of dirt covered the hole. The silence rested uncomfortably above their heads as they sat there huddled together. The room was dark, damp, and dreary. There were twelve of them in all. Each had committed a crime against the government, but none of them deserved this. Yet, the government did not care. Those who desired to leave the country were dangerous. They were rebels who could destroy all control set in place meticulously by the government. They wanted to make these twelve children serve as examples to the remainder of society. They wanted to stop all rebellious ideas, all thoughts of freedom, and acts of treason against the government before complete terror broke out. They wanted to kill these traitors here and now. So, twelve children ages five to fifteen sat huddled together, buried twelve feet beneath the ground, simply waiting to die.

It all started months ago when these twelve children met. Each of them lacked a home and a place of comfort, but they found peace in each other. They began to fend for one another; the older kids serving as bodyguards and the younger ones helping to find food. Each night as the sun fell, the cold raced through their bodies and they huddled together for warmth as they waited for the sun to bring light to their world of darkness. Even now as they sat under the surface of the Earth, they remained huddled as they had before. Though they couldn't see one another due to the darkness and despite the terror reigning through their veins, their close proximity welcomed a calming sensation into their small cave.

“Guys, I don't think we are getting ourselves out of this one...” whispered a quiet voice. It was James' voice. James was the leader of the twelve. At fifteen, James was already

5' 11" and served as the dominant leader for the rebel army. He was strong – both physically and mentally – and always put others before himself. His short, dirty-blond hair and deep green eyes gave him a sense of innocence and made him easily approachable. He was the perfect leader, and after long days, he could be found sitting somewhere quiet with his arms wrapped around his sister telling innocent, happy, childish stories to take away any fears she had. For the most part, James was reserved and quiet but he was never shy or afraid to say what needed to be said. Without a doubt, he took care of each child that joined their group and he would settle for nothing less than that the safety of his friends.

“James, I’m scared,” Tori said softly and leaned against James’ warm body. He wrapped his arms around her little body and held her close. He couldn’t bear to think about how she would never see daylight again. She was only five, but she would never get to live life. She was one strong, sweet little girl. Had she not been born in this time of war, she would have made one amazing mother. Everyday, Tori rose and checked on the other children. She was the youngest of all but her heart was one of the biggest. She made it her job to make sure everyone else woke up and had food before they started working. However, the government couldn’t see that. They simply saw opposition and deemed her life unimportant; so now Tori remained twelve feet beneath the ground she once walked on, waiting for death to take her little life away.

“Tori, we are all scared.” Said another voice. James, Tori, and the other children remained quiet for a moment as they let the idea of death sink into their minds. The silence became overwhelming, and with each breath, the little rebels began to get more and more afraid. Slowly a voice rose from the darkness:

“How would you like to hear a story, to pass the time?” It was Marie’s voice. Marie was James’ sister and was slender, shy, and usually silent. Most of the other rebels didn’t really know her or feel close to her. Tori was the only one who would talk to her, but Marie

didn't mind. She liked being quiet; it gave her time to think things through and to notice her surroundings. Though she wished she had friends, Marie preferred her own company because in her mind, no one other than James could hurt her. But now as she sat in perpetual darkness, Marie felt alone and terrified. She brushed her thick, brown, curly hair out of her heart-shaped face and, had there been light in their cave, the other children would have seen the fear in her vibrant green eyes. She wanted to let others know who she was, so that maybe, by the end of her story – before her inevitable death – she would be able to be free of her secrets.

Marie took the other children's silence as a "yes" for story time and began to speak. Her small voice was soft at first, but as time passed, it grew stronger and more confident. She knew she would have to start at the beginning; so, she began:

*"Once upon a time, there was a little girl whose eyes shone like emeralds whenever the light hit her face. Her smile was often hidden behind the sadness she felt overwhelming her little heart, but when she did smile, it was as though the heavens had opened up. Her smile radiated like the sun and made everyone around her feel an overpowering sense of safety and peace. However, this poor little girl didn't smile very often. She was living a life of pain and unhappiness with no signs of escape. She was only eight; yet, she knew nothing about her parents other than what her brother told her. During the day he would scream out and call them countless names. He would rant for hours on end about how useless they were and how he was glad he and his sister had been sold to the government because at least he would they would never be abandoned again. But no matter how much the abandonment had hurt him, the little girl knew he missed them dearly. His eyes poured out tears in the darkness of the night when he thought no one was around. He would whisper their names out as he slept as though his pleas could some how make them come back and save him. He wanted to forget them, but his sister knew that he would never let himself.*

*Each morning, the little girl and her brother rose before dawn and got ready for work. They traveled to The Palace where they spent hours working for the government. While the little girl spent her day cleaning and cooking, her brother was forced to work for the government's army. Each night, the little boy would return home with his sister and she would spend time addressing his various wounds. A new bruise or cut or blister was always present but it wasn't until much later that the little girl actually realized why her brother always came home wounded."*

Marie paused and the darkness loomed over the twelve kids. She longed to see their faces as she heard to her story. She imagined them awaiting more and more of her story to be told. But mostly, she longed to see her brother's face as he listened to her recount her own past. She knew the darkness would never leave and noticed that everyone's breath had slowed since she had begun to speak. She could feel their stares as they thought about what she had just said. Suddenly she heard a shriek that made her heart jump come from one of the kids' voices. It was Mark. She could imagine his ocean blue eyes in tears as he cried out, "Michael, Michael wake up! James, do something he's not breathing. Why won't he sit up anymore? Michael!" Marie didn't know whom, but one of the other children near Mark, pulled him into a hug and attempted to calm him. They knew they were all going to die but in this moment it finally sunk in: death is closer than it seems.

Marie sat there in silence afraid to continue her story. "Keep going Marie," whispered Elle – one of the other kids. "Please," she begged. Marie nodded forgetting that no one could see her. Her voice trembled as she continued her tale:

*"One afternoon, the little girl became more worried about her brother than ever before. She decided to follow him in hopes of discovering the cause of his endless injuries. Though her brother claimed they were from cleaning weapons and working with the military's machines, she knew he was lying. As she saw him leave the house, she began to*

*walk quietly after him. She was small and able to hide out of sight. As he reached the military section of The Palace he entered through a heavy wooden door. The little girl raced behind him and snuck through the crack in the door just before it was too tiny for her to fit through.*

*She waited behind a large crate for a while and then moved forward until eventually she sat just outside an arena made of large wooden walls. She could hear screaming and cheering from inside the building and her curiosity grew. She had already lost all track of her brother so she decided to venture into the arena and try to see what the commotion was about.”*

Another scream arose from the twelve children. “Benjamin...” his voice was whispered by one of the other kids, and everyone paused for a moment as they remembered the sweet little six year old boy. The boy who was known for rescuing animals and loving outdoors. Each of them thought back to when they met hi; he had been barefoot and shirtless. James had offered him a home, shoes, and the only jacket that he owned, but Benjamin refused everything except the home. He loved being as free as he could, and shoes took away his sense of freedom. And so as they realized he was actually gone, each child wished they had been able to feel the sense of freedom that Benjamin somehow managed to experience despite the ongoing war. “Keep going, Marie, please,” this time it was Tori requesting more of the story.

*“Once inside the arena, the little girl froze. Her emerald eyes grew larger than ever before. Tears began to stream down her face as she looked out into the arena.*

*There in the center of the circle stood her brother. He was surrounded by five or six other boys. They were all at least sixteen or older, well fed, and muscular. She could see the fear in his twelve year old eyes as their swords and knives gleamed beneath the bright stadium lights. Without thinking, her little legs began to run forward. Screaming, she sprinted toward her brother. He turned in shock, and she watched him scream out her name*

*just seconds before a whip snapped across his back. His knees buckled beneath him. He dropped to the ground. The little girl ran beside him and pulled him to his feet. They turned and saw the armed boys smiling devilishly at them and fear grew inside their chests. Both siblings turned and began to run. The little girl's weak legs couldn't move fast enough to keep up with her brothers and she struggled to keep up. She could see the hope in his eyes as he reached the exit of the arena and turned around to check on her. She yelled for him to keep going but he waited for her anyway. Behind them, their attackers sprinted effortlessly as though they believed there was no way these little children could ever escape. But the little girl and her big brother did escape. Somehow they managed to run from the arena, the military section of the building, and eventually the entire building. Their tiny little legs carried them far away and they ran deep into the city that surrounded The Palace. Deep down the little girl was glad to finally be free of the palace but she knew why the boys with knives hadn't chased them vigorously. They didn't think these children could survive on their own. And deep down, she agreed."*

Marie paused for a moment and let her story fill the room. She wasn't done, but she stopped to take deeper, slower breaths. She could tell something was different, but she had been so focused on her story that she didn't know what it was. At long last James whispered, "I think we just lost Susan. That means seven of us a-a-a-are... dead." His voice hung in the air as though suspended by some greater force. Marie couldn't believe that she hadn't realized how many kids had passed away. "James, who else beside Michael and Benjamin?" He paused before answering his sister. His voice shook as he listed the names, "Michael, Benjamin, Elle, Ricky, Caroline, Mark and Susan." One by one each name projected a memory. Marie remembered each child's smile and began to regret how reclusive she had been all this time. After a few moments and the death of but another child named Patrick, Marie resumed her tale.

*“The little girl and her brother spent years living day by day in the city. Each night they huddled together hoping to find some warmth and thanking God for that day. However, both of them grew more and more unhappy. They were cold and hungry and didn’t know how to provide for themselves. They began to acquire odd jobs in the hopes of gaining money to one day escape the country. But as time passed, the government grew more corrupt and began to restrict its people. Few jobs became available and the children became more scared and depressed. She longed for peace and freedom for both her and her brother. Her brother was sad, but he never gave up hope. Each morning he awoke and repeated the saying “while there’s life there’s hope.” Slowly her brother welcomed more kids into their group. He never worried about the lack of food but rather pushed himself to work harder. He wanted to help them, and he knew deep down that he had to. He was their only hope.”*

Marie paused. The cold surrounded the children and they huddled more closely to share what little warmth they had. As they moved closer to one another, the loss of their friends sunk in. Only three of them were left. Jake and Evan had died. Marie took hold of her brother’s hand on her left, and Tori’s hand on her right. It wasn’t much, but this small act gave Marie enough courage to continue her story.

*“But as the group grew in size, the girl realized that they couldn’t survive with such meager food. They needed more, but there were no jobs left. By now the little girl was thirteen; however, the years on the street made her seem slightly older. She was quiet and no one seemed to want to be her friend, but that just made her life easier. She didn’t want anyone to know what she did. What she was doing. Because each night the little girl left the group and secretly wandered a couple streets away. Here she knew she could find men who were filthy scum. But as inhumane as they were, they were willing to pay money to desperate girls. It was here that the girl began to sell her self; she would do anything they asked in return for money.*

*As the sun rose in the mornings, she would return to the remaining children with whatever money she had been able to acquire that night. But her own desperate acts were not something she was proud of. She was ashamed and embarrassed and wanted nothing more than to push all the horrible thoughts from the night before away. So, the girl would place the money in the middle of the children and pretend to be asleep.*

*Despite how much she hated what she did to herself each night, the joy on the children's faces as they awoke and discovered the money made it worthwhile. "Look! We got money again!" cried one of the children each morning.*

*"Someone must really want to help us escape this country," would reply the brother of the girl. "And this only goes to show us: while there's life there's hope." The children would all agree as they smiled and nodded their heads in unison. Then their day would begin."*

Marie stopped her story. She could feel the small hand beside her losing strength. "Tori are you okay?" she asked quietly.

"She must be really brave," whispered Tori.

"Who?"

"The little girl, the one in your story. She must have been really brave." Tori's voice faded as she spoke. Her breathing slowed, and with one last gasp, stopped entirely. Marie's eyes began to water. No one had ever called her brave. She had never thought of herself as brave. James' hand squeezed her hand and he pulled her into a hug.

*"Each child would go about doing their chores somehow finding the ability to laugh and smile every once in a while. The only one left apart from this was the not-so-little girl. She remained sullen and quiet and alone. The other kids left her alone and often got mad at her. "Why can't you just be happy every once in a while?" they would ask her out of frustration. But the girl never replied. She simply hid her face behind her thick, curly hair*



*and continued doing whatever she had been doing. As the girl seemed to be more and more depressed, her brother grew worried and tried to put her at ease. At night he would tell her stories about princesses and fairytales but nothing seemed to cheer her up. So, eventually he would give up and go to sleep. Little did he know that the end of his story meant the start of her night. For as her brother's eyes closed and drifted to sleep, she would rise and wander away only to start the entire event all over again."*

"I never knew," he whispered. He spoke softly out of shame. *How could I have not known? How could I have let her do that?* He thought to himself. His breathing was quick and raspy and Marie could tell he was growing weak. "Tori was right. You are brave Marie. Braver than anyone ever knew..." his voice drifted away, his breathing halted, and Marie began to cry even more.

"Don't leave me James," She pleaded. But it was too late. It was her fault they were all dead and now she was all alone. As the tears poured out from her vibrant green eyes, she began regret her actions. She was glad James would never hear the end of her story because if he had, he would know that it was her fault they had been arrested for trying to escape the country. If only she had never wandered away that last night. Then they would be alive. She didn't know the government was following her as she returned home that final evening. She had just wanted to help her family.

With one last breath she whispered, "I'm sorry James..." Her eyes closed and her throat grew tight. She struggled to draw oxygen into her lungs but there was none left. Their cave had run out of her air. She began to claw at the ground, trying to dig her way out. But she couldn't. There was no escape. She pulled at the earth around her, begging God to save her. She choked and coughed and gasped. Her arms grew weak and she collapsed on the ground. Her fingers gripped the dirt beneath her as she gasped one last time and then froze. She remained there beside her brother and the other children. All twelve of them frozen in the

ground. All twelve of them forever lost beneath the surface of the Earth without hope.

Because where there's life there's hope, but without life, all hope was lost.