THE COLOUR RED

"She dreamt about running through the streets, the sky stretched infinitely ahead of her."

KATE GRAHAM

She crouched in a dark alleyway, hidden in the shadows. Many passers-by thought she was simply another orphaned urchin, and so they continued walking without another glance. They were very wrong. This was the freest Elisa had felt in a long time. She sat, smiling to herself and furiously devoured her stolen goods. The gaunt baker, already dangerously close to losing his business with the strict rationing of food stamps, had been furious when he had seen the thin, dirty arm reaching towards his bread rolls. He had screamed, purple-faced, and chased her down the street. Elisa had evaded him, ducking down low and losing herself in the crowds of people. She giggled to herself as she thought about it, sitting in the dank, dingy alleyway with a full stomach. To her, this was the greatest adventure. She didn't dream about being an explorer sailing to foreign lands, or a princess living in majestic castles. She dreamt about running through the streets, the sky stretched infinitely ahead of her.

She stood up, venturing out of the alleyway. People ignored her, looking firmly above her head, their eyes skirting around her. They didn't know who she was, just that she was dirty and unimportant. Elisa didn't understand why. She thought that they looked almost as hungry and sad as she usually was. Perhaps they were too busy to pay attention to her and had places to be. Maybe they just didn't care. She shrugged to herself. It didn't matter. She wasn't here to see people.

Elisa looked up. A small smile tugged slowly at her lips before it won over, displaying crooked teeth that were too big for her child's face. The miserable sky was almost entirely grey, blanketed in clouds and smoke from horizon to horizon. But to Elisa, it was the most beautiful thing in the world.

From every building, every person, every street, Elisa could see flags of red. She hated the hideous emblem of stark and rigid lines branded on them but red was such a bright, pretty colour. Elisa could have stood there for hours, drinking it in. She felt spoiled. She could barely remember the last time she had seen this much colour. Glorious, splendid colour. It gave life and passion to the dark and dull street. The ugly shop windows and lamp posts breathed and danced before her eyes. The city was alive. Elisa laughed, and she could feel the wind laugh with her. She heard the laughter drift down the street, fading merrily. She stumbled over her clumsy, naked feet, trying to chase it. The further Elisa ran, the faster the laughter ran away from her. It beckoned her, asking her to follow. Elisa quickened her pace, not wanting to be left behind. It was the colours themselves that were calling to her. Red was the loudest of them all.

Elisa had decided that it was her favourite. Singing flitted and floated between the red flags that lined the street, making them fly out in the wind and reach out towards her.

They started to twist and turn, rippling like an ocean of rose petals above her head. Elisa craned her neck up to look at them. They surrounded her, rising and falling to an unseen song, pulsing to the beat of an invisible heart. The red danced. Elisa danced too as she followed it, trying to join in.

Elisa skipped and danced with the red for what felt like hours. She almost lost herself through the long streets that twisted behind her like beautiful, colourful ribbons. She didn't care. She didn't want to find her way back. Elisa never wanted to spend another miserable day of her life trapped in the dark. The streets had emptied, and the first streaks of orange started to paint themselves across the glowing horizon. Elisa wished she could see the sun setting every day. It was even more beautiful than she had remembered.

The red moved more urgently, and Elisa turned onto a new street, admiring it. A sudden shock of stillness and silence echoed around Elisa. The dancing was extinguished like a hundred candles being snuffed out at once. Where the waves of roses had swirled above her, now flags hung limply, as if they were holding their breath. They were waiting for something. Elisa felt the hairs rise on the back of her neck. A few seconds passed. She couldn't move. Something was very wrong. Why had the flags brought her here?

A strange sound echoed up ahead. It was the sound of boots. Two pairs of them. Heavy, black, striding with purpose. Elisa started quaking even before they had walked into view. She didn't know the two men. She had never met them. But she had met others like them. She knew who they were. She knew what they did.

The tallest one of the pair stopped when he saw Elisa standing in the middle of the street, tears rolling down her face. She stared up at him. He frowned.

"Are you okay, child?"

Elisa said nothing.

"What are you doing out so late?"

She said nothing.

"Are you lost?"

Nothing.

He looked at the shorter man and shrugged. "What do we do with her?"

"Let's just take her in."

Elisa felt the cold and painful embrace of stone on her back as she scrambled to get away from them. Angry words spilled out of her like hot tears before she could stop them. "NO! Get away. You can't take me again! Not like the others."

Elisa choked on her sobs when she realised what she had just said. She should have stayed silent. The men exchanged a knowing glance. They didn't know who she was, but they knew enough. When they looked back at her, they both had a strange look in their eyes and Elisa didn't like it. She could feel them staring at the bones that jutted from her skin at awkward angles, and the deep brown eyes that revealed too much.

"The ... others?" The first man asked cautiously, already knowing the truth. Elisa could barely hear him.

An angry, high-pitched wailing pierced the air. It wasn't coming from Elisa, or the men. It was coming from the armbands the men wore on their ugly, over-starched military uniforms. The armbands were red. Elisa felt betrayed. She should have noticed. She should have known. Red was the symbol of the soldiers. It had been a trap.

The screaming suddenly multiplied tenfold, coming from every direction. The flags hanging from above joined in. Elisa covered her aching ears. They howled and screeched, thirsting for Elisa's blood, yearning for it to spill out onto the street. They wanted to create more red. The angry red flags became columns of flame twisting viciously into the sky, polluting it with ash. She should never have trusted them.

The men walked closer towards her and the flags jeered louder. Elisa quickly scrambled back up to her feet and sprinted back the way she had come. She couldn't think properly and could barely remember which of the almost identical streets she had previously travelled down, but somehow her legs remembered. The men gave up chasing her, but the flags kept up, always just above her head.

At first, her feet had been numb, but now they stung viciously with each slap against the ground. The rough cobblestones had ripped them apart. A trickling flow of blood began to trail after her. It was a fresher, brighter shade of red

than the flags, which howled in delight. The blood howled back. It snapped and grabbed at Elisa's wounded feet.

Elisa was almost home. The sun had fallen beyond the horizon, sending a comforting darkness to surround her. It smothered the flags like a thick fog so that she could no longer see them, and they could no longer see her. Their deafening noise quietened to a dull roar of white noise, and by the time she turned onto her street and slipped between two buildings, she couldn't hear them at all.

Elisa ducked down behind a carefully constructed pile of household junk like any other and quietly unlocked the trapdoor hidden behind it. She dropped down into the pitch-black basement room and three pairs of arms instantly surrounded her. They squeezed so tightly that she felt like she couldn't breathe, but it was a good feeling. Her mama. Her little cousin. The old man who refused to tell her his name but whispered stories to her in the dead of night when she was too scared to sleep. They were her home.

"Where were you?" Her mama sobbed softly into Elisa's hair. "We thought ..."

She hadn't escaped like she had planned, but Elisa felt safer and happier in that dark, colourless room than ever before.

– THE END –