

## Only the Strong, Only the Loyal

She started to sing. Ignoring the gavel, I slammed my hand against the table. The convict jumped in laughter. Her boisterous sound echoed throughout the courtroom. My stomach turned.

“Why did you do that?” I hissed through my teeth at the grown woman.

Her face beamed, “What did I do so bad, Your Honor?”

“You know what you did, Ms. Vell.” I glared, “Or should I even include you in the human race for being so ignorant?”

Gloria Vell smiled slyly, “It’s only *music*.”

“You *sang*,” I pointed out, “you know this country prohibits such things!”

Ms. Vell stood beside her lawyer, as she scratched her tangled hair. I watched as her lawyer proceeded to squint at her, and shook her head with a frown. My heart broke as I realized she had to be associated with this imbecile, and this case would probably wreck her career. Fixing the black rimmed glasses on my face, I looked back at the maggot.

“I sang? That’s what this fit is about?” she chuckled. My eyes widened at her response, and as I leaned in, I could feel the vein in my head pulsing.

“We don’t *sang* here *missy*- you should know this as a citizen. Although, I should question your intelligence,” I murmured, and then suddenly smiled,

“You know Ms. Vell, this *is* a repetitive offense. If you were under 18, I would have sent you to the Juvenile Mental Configuration Facility, but since you are an adult, I can quiet your idiocy... eternally.”

Ms. Vell suddenly went silent, and for the first time, I was able to see her eyes lose light. With a smirk, I announced, “I hereby order you, Ms. Vell the defendant, guilty. In response, I sentence you to a live execution. Your execution date will be November 28, 2052 at 9:30am. Sing to that.”

With the slam of my gavel, I dismissed the court case. Clenching my teeth together, I tried not to chuckle as the cop escorted the singing disgrace. Ms. Vell’s brown eyes were wide with fear and disbelief. Her eyes never left my smirking face. Not to mention, her cheeks were pearl-white, like those my sister used to flaunt around her neck.

That night, I lied down in my white sheets. As usual, I was looking up to the ceiling. It was how my dad was taught, how my mother was taught, and everyone else in the country was taught. It required a lot of self discipline.

‘*Probably something that Vell the Rat knows nothing about,*’ I rolled my eyes and tried to get some sleep, but I couldn’t. In the back of my mind, I could still hear Ms. Vell singing. I felt a chill, as if my sister’s pearl beads bumped up on the bones of my spine, and deep in my mind, I could see my sister... singing. Fearlessly. I felt my stomach coil.

It was almost like yesterday. I remembered her ocean eyes and her brown hair. My sister was the best at carrying her “stern face.” This is something we were always taught as kids- to never show any expression. That’s a sign of weakness. But, my older sister had a much greater weakness, or “gift” as she called it: her voice. I began to remember all of the times when she would sing soft lullabies to me. Her lips would smile just like Ms. Vell. She had this soft light in her eyes, like as if she was a butterfly first taking flight. My sister would use the term “magical” to describe the moment. One night I asked her why she bothered to sing, knowing it was illegal.

“Singing adds color to this dull world,” she beamed, “in a world where everyone is expected to be so sullen, singing is free joy.”

Joy. What is that? At first I was hesitant, but then over time, I fell into that same prison. My sister taught me to smile, and she taught me to sing in abandoned buildings.

“Back straight! Deep breaths!” she would softly command. The way my voice echoed through the empty space, it gave me chills. I had no idea voices were able to do such a magical thing. It’s almost witchcraft! It has to be witchcraft. But in that moment, I felt a strange feeling I’ve never felt before. It was a sparkly feeling- a feeling that made you warm all over. I remember over the years beaming and laughing around with my sister, but having to pretend to be cold bricks around our dad. Frowning in front of any authority, but softly singing on the empty streets from the store. I guess science would say that it was another case of adrenaline that comes with breaking the rules.

That was until, one day my sister never came back from school.

“Dad,” I walked up to him, my cheeks that same pearl hue.

“What, son?” he huffed, “and calm down. Put the blood back into your cheeks, people will think you’re sick.”

“What happened to my sister?” I ignored his command, and with a grunt, he pinched my ear.

“Stop with this emotional response right this minute!” My dad growled, “but if you want to know so much, your sister was taken away just like your mother. She was singing, son! *Singing!* And that is *forbidden!*”

I looked up at him, still in a daze. I felt the pain gripped my guts, and caused my throat to tense, my eyes to water. I shivered, as I let out a shriek. I think this is called crying?

I could see my dad barely through the water looking shocked, his eyebrows furrowed, and as he stomped around me, I could hear him making a call.

It was then I found myself in the back of a police car, with handcuffs and ankle cuffs. Also, I had red, thick tape to quiet my cries. I was sent away to the Juvenile Mental Configuration Facility for five years. The first two years were spent being screamed at and barked at with commands. Over time, I just became emptier, until there was nothing at all. I conformed back to my loyalty to my country. It was then that I felt that same overwhelming flame erupt in me, devoid of any love. I made a vow to myself: I will never be tricked into a foolish belief again.

“You singing maggot,” I hissed softly between my teeth. Maybe from a holding cell, Ms. Vell would hear my spirit telling her that. Hopefully, she was trembling and going over her most favorite moments in life. I hope her singing was worth it.

The morning of the execution, I decided to watch outside the café. The crowd multiplied, gathering in cliques to watch on their cellular devices. I was watching it on my laptop, a small fire in my heart. It was like that free-feeling I got when I first learned to dance and heard my sister softly applaud. Sitting down with my dark coffee, I began to hear The Executioner relay the verdict.

“Gloria Vell is being charged with singing. This violates The Fervent Act of 2038, which prohibits any fervency, and dramatic/musical arts. This is to protect our citizens and help our country establish unity,” her voice was flat, and soundless. Sipping my coffee I felt my muscles relax, and I leaned back in my chair with my eyes locked on the screen.

“Over the decades, music has had the ability to control and cause violence. Emotions also created weak people, and emotions can also create aggressive people which can cause chaos,” she continued, “to survive as a country, we *must* eliminate the weak. Only the strong will survive. Only the loyal.” And with that, Ms. Vell was shoved in the room. She had handcuffs and ankle cuffs. I could see her mouth covered with thick, red tape. I felt my eye twitch.

Her eyes looked bloodshot. I could see, as she looked in the camera, the bags underneath her eyes. The town remained silent. No one smiled. No one cheered. And I made sure to do the same.

“We would like to give credit to Mr. Hope, our city’s judge.” My picture was shown on the screen, but the city gave me the cold shoulder. No one smiled. No one cheered. It stayed that way. Silence, just the way I like it. It was this same way throughout the execution of Ms. Vell, and as the live shut off. The town stood still. No one shifted at the violence.

I could hear my heart beating in my ears. No one laughed. No one clapped. I guess they were just all glad the pest was gone. Or did this city, this country have any ability to comprehend what gladness was? For myself, I was glad the nuisance was gone! I wanted to dance, I wanted to shout, and I wanted to celebrate! But at that moment, I felt myself shrink in my chair as I began to think about my sister. The one who taught me those things. The one who taught me gladness, to smile, and to dance. But in that same instance, I saw my Dad looking down on me in my mind with the same blank face. He wouldn’t be proud, he would have just furrowed his eyebrows. He would then tell me I fixed my tie wrong, and that was against the rules.

*Stop with this emotional response right this minute!* I could hear him growl on the back of my neck.

As I went to hug myself, I stopped, and balled my fists under the table, all of this with the same blank stare on my face.

“To survive as a country, we *must* eliminate the weak,” I mumbled to myself, “Only the strong will survive. Only the loyal.”