

# A World No More

By Sophie Ng

I wake to the sound of wheat being ground and the smell of flour, too. But I don't hear or smell flour for long, because Mother is staring at me.

"Well, get up. What are you doing just sitting there? Do you think you're a sack of flour?" she scolds. There is a streak of flour on her face, but I decide that it's best not to tell her.

"Yes, Mother." I try not to smile as I get out of bed and open my closet.

I sit at the table for breakfast, and I suddenly realise that Father is gone.

"Mother, where is Father?" I ask, and her face is soon clouded with anger and sadness. Etienne sighs but does not speak.

"He's gone, Emilie. He went to the meeting with those dirty, God-disrespecting revolutionaries," says Mother, her voice shaking. Revolution? I had heard talk among some of the men in the village about a protest, but a revolution? It seemed

unlikely. I had seen the king's men with their big guns and brutal voices. The poor villagers had no chance against them.

When Mother leaves to start working, Etienne looks at me, his dark eyes distant.

"I don't understand why Mother doesn't like the revolution. Isn't she tired of barely having food on the table?" He seems angry and confused.

"I bet you ten loaves of bread that we will win," I smile at him, and he nods.

"Well, I must get back to work. Would you like to join me?" He leads me outside, where the sun is just rising above the mountains.

My brother is many things. Hardworking, strong, useful to our family and the village. As he heaves bags of flour onto the horse-drawn cart, I realise why Mother prefers him over me. I am simply a girl who cannot work or help the family. But I can try. I pull my dress up so that it doesn't get dirty. I take a piece of old rope from the cart and tie it around my waist so the part of my dress I pulled up stays in place. Etienne immediately understands and hands me a bag of flour.

By sundown, we have already finished piling the flour onto the cart. Usually, it takes Etienne days to fill the cart alone. I think it is also because we have had less wheat and flour lately. Father says it is because of the bad weather. He wipes his hands on his trousers and smiles at me.

“Thank you for helping me, Emilie,” he says and shouts for one of the men to take the flour to the market, since our village is at the edge of the city. Before long, Mother has returned with bread, fish and even a small piece of beef. She places the food in a sack and runs over. She must be so happy to see that I am useful and helpful. Instead of taking my hand and thanking me, she drags me into the house.

“What were you thinking, you stupid child? You are a girl. You are to stay home and cook and clean. I may as well hit you now before you become the devil-” She pauses, her eyes wide and staring at me. But she isn’t. She is looking at something behind me. I turn around and see Father, his sharp eyes threatening and defiant.

“What is going on here?” he asks. He beckons me over with his hand and I run to his side. He takes me in his arms, and I know I am safe from Mother’s wrath.

“Your daughter did men’s work! She helped Etienne with the flour! She was supposed to stay home and clean and cook!” Father looks down at me and shakes his head.

“Emilie can do what she wants. Are you not glad she is helpful, unlike that girl Marie Louise next door?”

“Well, at least Marie is God-fearing and good! She listens to her mother and father, stays home to cook and clean and has real manners.” Etienne holds out his hand and I take it. He takes me back to our room because he doesn’t want me to hear our parents arguing. We sit in silence, listening to the occasional shouts that fly

through the house. Finally, we hear loud footsteps and Mother slamming the door. Sometimes I wonder what would happen to us if we didn't have Father. He is my hero. Etienne's hero.

Now is one of those times.

I wake up and listen for Mother's loud yell, but it never comes. I look to my side and see that Etienne is already awake. I get dressed and walk to the table, where Father is reading the newspaper with bread in his mouth. Etienne is sitting across from him, slowly chewing.

"Good morning, Father, Etienne," I say and Father smiles.

"Ah, finally. I thought you'd never wake up, Emilie. I have great news for both of you. Your mother has left for the city to be closer to the church, and I am now in charge of our house and you. Etienne, if you could, try to save some more flour for the village today. Emilie, you may walk in and out of the house as you please, but you must help your brother. Have I made my words clear?"

"Yes, Father," we both say in unison.

"Alright, then. Can I trust you while I go to my meeting?" Etienne and I glance at each other before he speaks.

“Who better to trust than two children with the courage of a knight and the wisdom of a chancellor, Father?” I smile the moment he finishes. Father has always said that my wisdom is that of a chancellor, and that Etienne’s courage is of a knight. Father nods and takes a piece of bread and some beef, then looks at us before he heads off towards the city.

I am feeding the cow when Marie Louise, my neighbour, appears behind me.

“What are you doing?” she asks, and she pulls her dress up to avoid the mud.

“I’m feeding our cow, Marie.” Etienne’s clothes are far too big for me, but I don’t want to get my dress dirty in case there is an important ceremony like a funeral of a priest. I quite like our priest, Father Bernard. He is good friends with Father.

“Well, you shouldn’t be. My mummy told me your mummy left because you were acting like a boy. And you are! You’re wearing boy clothes and doing boy work. You’re even sitting like a boy! My mummy also said your wicked father and brother taught you this.” I’d thought I could tolerate her for a minute, but the moment she started talking about my father and brother, my blood boiled.

“Listen, Marie Louise. You have no business in why my coward of a mother left, what my brother and father taught me, and what I do. Now leave me alone, please.” Her eyes widen and she runs away. I continue feeding the cow peacefully, when suddenly, a loud bang rings through the air. I figure it may just be that something

in the horse cart has broken down, but another bang, even louder this time, deafens me to my core. Then, I hear men shouting and loud footsteps. I walk closer to the door of the barn, afraid to look, and when I do, I immediately shut my eyes. Men are rushing towards and into the city. Some of them have guns. I spot Etienne running with the crowd, shouting and yelling at the top of their lungs and his wild hair shaking. Oh, how alive he looks! I stay inside the barn, but something inside me is making me regret it. How does one grow up with a father with a lion's heart and a brother with a knight's courage, but sit all alone in a dark barn with the smell of rotting hay all around her? I know not. So, before it is too late, I run outside and join the crowd.

I have never seen the city, not entirely. I have only caught glimpses of its large buildings and heard words of its beauty. But here I stand, amongst a crowd of men and women, in front of it in all its glory. And I am surprised. Instead of the tall buildings and the glimmering statues, I see a grey, dark world. The men look around the bridge that we are on and I suddenly realise that it is raining. The fresh, cold water is falling onto my face. Etienne holds my hand tightly, and I look up at him, but he keeps looking forward.

I remember those cold winter nights when I would have nightmares about the terrible stories in a book that'd frighten me, and I'd wake up screaming. But Etienne would calm me down and make everything all right again. Etienne always made everything all right again.

No one speaks. No one moves. No one breathes. This is a tense moment in an even tenser world. Suddenly, I see someone running across the bridge. He is tall, and his coat is waving around him as my hair does when I run across the great wheat fields. It is Father! I jump up and wave my red handkerchief up in the air, but he does not look at me. Instead, he walks over to one of the men in front and points forward. I follow his finger to a tall, dark building. It looks like a prison, or perhaps an enemy fortress. The men start walking towards the building. Among them are whispers of a single word. 'Bastille'.

We are marching steadily towards the Bastille. Slowly, and not in unison, but steadily. We are not in a straight line like the king's soldiers or the rows of wheat that stand on our fields, quietly waiting to be harvested. We are in a large group, tightly together as if we were bound to each other by a rope. It seems a long way away, but at least I have Etienne with me. I know he will keep me safe. We stop at the blacksmith, where multiple friends of Father and the other men come out to join us. I recognise one of them as the baker who often buys our flour, Desnot. I wave to him to show my respect, but he does not smile or return the gesture, just as Father did not. Perhaps they both found it impolite because the king's army often wave to one another, and right now, they are our enemy.

The rain is getting heavier. I hold Etienne's large coat closer to my body, but it is no use. I am already drenched. A tiny mouse pokes his head out of a bush as we walk by, and his beautiful eyes are begging me to take him into my coat. I quickly

pick him up and stroke his fur. He is warm and soft, and he tries to stay in my hands as I put him into my pocket.

“Hello, mouse.” I whisper, “Would you be willing to join me as friends in this great revolution?” He does not reply, only squeaking quietly. If I were anyone else, anyone like Mother or Marie Louise, I would not understand him. But I am Emilie Lesauvage, the daughter of a brave and kind-hearted man. I do understand the little mouse. He is telling me that he wants to go back to his family. I have no choice but to let him go. I take him out of my pocket and set him free.

“Goodbye, my friend.” I watch him scamper off into the dark, wet, muddy grass. I hope he runs back to me. I miss him already. But I return to the world, where our marching is getting bolder, louder, and our singing too.

The singing stops. The marching stops. We have arrived at the Bastille. The men start to raise their swords and muskets.

“They were here earlier,” says Etienne quietly, “and we won’t be back again. We will strike them into the ground.” I notice fleeting panic in his eyes and I nod.

“We will, brother. I assure you, we will.” He puts his arm around my shoulder, and I look up at him with admiration. This is the face of my brother. This is the face of my blood. This is the face of a knight.



Oh, how quiet it is now, after the rain has passed! A man inside the Bastille is shouting. The men next to me also begin to shout, and I hear a roaring gunshot. We advance into the courtyard, where several guards are standing with their guns. They fire. Everybody screams. Suddenly, my world changes. My quiet village life disappears before me. The days I used to run across the fields with Etienne chasing me are gone. The smell of fresh flour is gone. It is all gone. Father has vanished before me, and I am too afraid to think of why. My mind is a dishevelled mix of worry and fear. But still, I take my red handkerchief out of my pocket and begin waving it, just as the other men are doing. The guards do not stop shooting. The men do not stop shouting. Etienne has disappeared into a blurred world of blood and bullets. I climb the fence and onto two old, empty barrels. I look for Etienne among the men, and I spot him, holding a blood-soaked coat in his hands. He does not even move as a guard points his gun at him. I jump off the barrels and shout,

“ETIENNE!”

It is too late. Etienne is lying on the ground with the rest of the men. I bend down to see if he is still alive. His eyes are closed, but when I take his hand, he opens them.

“Etienne, I’m sorry.” My eyes are filled with tears as I speak. He slowly raises his arm to point at the Bastille. I look up and see that the men have broken inside. He puts his hand on my shoulder.

“Do not be sorry, Emilie. Go. I have work to do. Ten loaves of bread to bake. Promise me you will take care of yourself. Vive la France, Emilie. Vive la France.” Etienne’s voice is clearly choked with tears; the first time I have ever seen him cry. He smiles weakly and I do too. His hand falls from my shoulder, his eyes open but staring into nothingness.

“Vive la France,” I whisper, my tears dripping onto the ground.

I do not follow the men inside. I must survive, even though the ones I love most dearly are gone.

Even though my world is now no more.