

The Brave Count – Kirri, Year 6, VIC

“31,1998,182,294, 19765, 21.”

The Governor stood upon a podium reading out numbers. It was the year 1879 and in Kalveria, due to overpopulation, the government had imposed a new law. This was entitled The Brave Count. Anyone who was brave enough to put their life on the line would have a number etched onto the back of their hand. Each day, the numbers assigned to six citizens were to be called out and whoever possessed those numbers would then and there take their final breath.

Each day, everyone in Kalveria gathered to hear the Brave Count. Everyone was nervous yet excited because the lucky people whose numbers weren't called out by the end of the year would win ten thousand dollars. So choosing to be assigned a number was not only about bravery, it was also about money.

On the 20th of April, in a public library in Kalveria, four women Joan, Sophia, Amelia and Lily had all rushed to the TV to watch today's Brave Count. Once again the Governor stood up and in his quavering voice read the numbers of today's victims.

“65, 2987, 34856, 81, 15543, and finally the last number for today is...” Everyone held their breath. “Three.”

Suddenly the room went silent. You could have heard a fly blink; it was so quiet that suddenly everyone jumped at the sound of a blood-curdling scream. Lily screeched in sorrow as she looked down at her hand and saw the still-red mark of a three etched there.

Lily had put her name down in the first place because her family was struggling for money. She felt for sure if she was courageous and positive, it would turn out well for her. But the risk she had taken had suddenly sunk in. She thought about running and hiding, but before she could utter a word to her friends or even bid farewell to her family, the librarian hurried her off to the execution room and before you knew it, she was the one standing on the podium.

For the first time Lily understood what gut-wrenching fear was; it felt like hundreds of swords poking into her all at once. But as she was walking up to the podium, she felt a slight tingling sensation on her left hand. Completely shocked, she looked down and saw that the once bloody three that had been etched on her hand was gone.

Confused but hopeful at the same time, and before she had time to question and ponder what had just happened, she quickly jumped from the podium and showed her hand so the Governor could see it was blank.

The Governed looked confused and angry and grabbed Lily to pull her back as she tried to run away. But at that moment, the Governor nearly cost Lily her life because just then Lily felt something touch her arm: she had knocked against the bottom of the suspended axe.

Trembling, she tried to break free from the Governor's grasp to get out of the way but millisecond by millisecond, the axe was getting closer. The crowd held their breath and then gasped as the axe started to swing. *Whoosh!* Lily suddenly found herself on the floor and when she looked up she saw that she had been pushed aside by Joan.

But it was too late! The axe had swung, and by the time Lily had the strength to stand up again, she stared in disbelief at the blood-stained body of Joan lying only metres away from the podium. Joan had saved her, but died in the process.

For hours on end, all you could hear was Lily's wails and cries - she blamed herself for Joan's death. What she didn't know then was that was the last time the Brave Count axe would swing. The law was about to be changed, but that day would haunt her for the rest of her life.

Lily's feelings of loss and pain quickly turned into feelings of anger and rage, and day by day she was slowly driven insane. For years on end Lily visited Joan's grave every day, week after week, year after year, until one day, without any explanation or even a murmur around the town, she was never seen again. To this day, the townsfolk say that if you listen hard enough on the 20th of April, you can still hear her crying and screaming.

This went on for years and years; every year on April 20, the townsfolk would gather and listen to the screams on the wind. This tradition became known as Brave Day and it went on for 63 years. As they stood together in the old execution yard, the screams actually filled the townspeople with happiness because it reminded them of the last Brave Count to ever occur.

Then, on the 20th of April in 1942, something happened. This year was different because as the people gathered, they saw something in the distance they couldn't quite recognise. It was hard to tell if it was a person or a demon because it was early in the morning and fog obscured the sun. As the shape got closer, they saw that she was a little girl who looked like she was floating. She had a ghost-like presence about her: her face was as white as the whitest cow's milk and she had a beautiful smile across her pale face. And from a distance, they could all hear her laughing.

When she was almost close enough to touch, one of the town's people called out, "Look at her hand - there's a scar in the shape of a three."

The townspeople stood there in shock: the little girl looked identical in every way to the photos they had seen of Joan. But at the very moment she reached them and became immersed in the crowd, the laughing little girl disappeared, and that was the last they saw or heard of her.

But from that day on, every time there was a fog in Kalveria, it brought with it the sweet sound of the little girl's laughter. And the townspeople decided that Joan had returned to remind them how important it is to take care of your friends and be brave enough to sometimes even make sacrifices for them.