

### “Just a Girl”

I love that the guards think I'm weak. When they see me, they smirk, laugh, tell me I'm pretty. I'm sure that once I'm out of their sight, they don't give me a second thought. They're big, strong men, doing *important* things, serving their Fuehrer, wearing uniforms and carrying guns and thinking they're special. And I'm just a girl, nineteen and looking much younger, no uniform, no gun, no nothing. They're the occupiers and I'm the occupied. They've been in Warsaw, my city, my *home* for over a year now. They think I'm nothing. They're wrong.

It's so easy convincing them, though. They see me every day and every day I'm just an ordinary girl to them. I walk past the Warsaw ghetto to get to work. They stand at the gates; most of the time they're not doing anything. Unfortunately, today isn't one of those days. The taller guard has an old man by the elbows; the shorter one is shouting. “Who do you think you are?” he yells, punctuating his words with a kick aimed at the man's head. The man is obviously Jewish. The yellow star on his coat shines brighter than anything else. His eyes are closed; his face is contorted with pain, and his beard is gray and stained crimson. I feel sick. I try to be like everyone else on the street and act like nothing is happening, like I feel nothing, like there's nothing *to* feel, but I can't. Because I know that if those guards knew the truth about me, I would be bleeding too.

Before the war, Rachel was my best friend. We did everything together. We were practically family. Then, September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1939 happened. The Germans came and everything started changing. At the beginning of 1940, all of the Jews in Warsaw had to leave their homes.

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Rachel's parents were terrified. My parents agreed to take Rachel in. Now she lives in our attic. She can't leave our house. If anyone finds out, we will all suffer. But it has to be this way. In the ghetto, people have no food, no heat, and live in crowded, filthy rooms. And every few weeks, trains come to Warsaw and take people out of the ghetto and I don't even want to think about what it would be like if Rachel ended up on one of those trains.

They say that the trains go to camps. They say that the camps have ovens where they burn people alive; they say that you can smell the smoke from a thousand miles away, they say that the prisoners in the camps are sometimes shot on sight like rabid dogs; they say, they say, they say...all anyone knows for sure is that no one ever comes back from the camps. I can't let that happen to Rachel. She cries at night, about her parents. She doesn't know where they are, or even if they're alive. I don't know what to tell her.

This is hard for us, too--for Mother and Father and me. We scrimp and save for months on end so that we can get black market ration books for Rachel. Sometimes I feel like I could explode from wanting to tell someone the truth. It makes me *so angry* when people I know listen to the Germans and say that the Jews deserve this; that things are better off this way, and this is how things *should* be. The worst ones are the people who hated the Jews *before* the war. They were the first to snatch up abandoned Jewish property and they practically smile when they talk about the ghettos. I had teachers who even claimed that Hitler is right about the Jews being inferior. I try to tell myself that these people don't understand. They don't know anyone like Rachel: Rachel, who is smart and funny and was the best artist in our class; Rachel, who doesn't deserve any of this. No one does.

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When I get home from work, all I can think about is the man getting beaten by the guards and how glad I am that Rachel is here, far away from all of that. And then I see him, standing in the living room, the swastika on his armband like a beacon and redder than the blood I've been thinking about all day. He's talking to my mother and drinking tea like his being here is the most normal thing in the world. He smiles when he sees me. I smile back and mumble, "Good afternoon." Then I leave the room. Mother follows me.

"What is he *doing* here?" I whisper.

"Just calm down. He's here because one of the neighbors noticed the attic light." I feel the color start to drain out of my face.

"Does that mean he's going to go into the attic?"

Mother sighs.

"Yes. Rachel is in the cellar right now. He probably won't bother to check there."

"Only probably, though, right?" Mother nods. Her voice is calm, but she's shaking all over.

"I need you to stay in the cellar and make sure that nothing happens."

"But what if he comes down?"

"Then you'll have to do whatever you can. I promised Rachel's parents that she would survive this. I don't intend to break that promise."

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I go into the cellar. Rachel is there, looking more worried than I've ever seen her. I tell her everything will be fine. I'm not sure if I believe myself.

"I'm so sorry," Rachel says. "I never meant for anything like this to happen, I..." I shush her. The guard is making his way to the cellar door. Suddenly I know what to do. I grab a loose brick from the wall. I go to the bottom of the steps. I'm ready.

I love when the guards think I'm weak. But I love it even more when they turn out to be wrong.

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