

## The Cleaver

Underneath the smell of fat, blood, and salt, Isa can smell the sun. It radiates from Bruno who, in defiance of his name, is as golden as the Aryan ideal. And, despite his kindnesses, she's jealous of his freedom to enjoy the weather.

It's July now. The storage garret is sweltering. Westfalian *landschinken* and links of *landjäger*s crowd the curing hooks. The hams and sausages mostly repel her, though there is some comfort in their camouflage.

Still, Isa's luckier than most.

There are entire families hidden in spaces smaller than this. Families with little food or water, with crying infants and terrible decisions to make.

She's survived so far due to her dry, delicate wit, what her father called *attic salt*. And, of course, *attic faith*. "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for," he told her, "the evidence of things not seen."

She doesn't speak to Bruno often, but she sees daily evidence of his affection. There are food packages, modest but fine, delivered before sunrise and after sunset. Books in German, Hebrew, English and Czech. Candles. A pitcher of water in the middle of the night.

Isa's pragmatic. She's certainly has time to think about things. Though her feelings for Bruno could be afforded to dependence, or loneliness, or gratitude, that's not all this is. Given another time and place she would feel the same admiration. She wonders at Bruno's strength, both his physicality and his character. His arms rope-muscled from his daily work, and a butcher's work itself, belie a gentleness. It's as if she's a wounded-wing bird he's cradled from the windowsill. But it's more than that, too. She feels it when

their eyes meet over lighting a match, the way their fingers brush when the candle passes hands.

She's come to know this stranger by his gestures: a kosher meal wrapped in butchers' paper, a rose-scented cake of soap, news he gleans from the gossiping patrons. Bruno takes great risk to bring her these pleasures—to her they are not so very small.

It's been weeks since Papa left to go looking for her sister Lisabet, and no word from him. No news overheard. It's just Isa and the charcuterie sharing the dark, salty space.

*This isn't kosher*, she thought the first day, and laughed out loud at the turn of phrase. Papa, Lisabet, and the stranger all shot her awful looks at the inappropriate mirth. It wasn't right to laugh when so much was at stake. It can't be right to feel the flush of love when there's been so much loss. But then, nothing's been right since that first yellow *Jude* star was stitched to her sweater.

Under other circumstances, Isa may not be tempted, as she is now, to take a piece from the tref ham and revel in the new taste. Desperate times are the true tests of our faith. Is it better to starve than partake of the forbidden? An endless series of days unfold in the near dark, with the seeming inevitability of iron-heeled jackboots kicking in the attic door. And darkness grows in Isa with each day she comes to know Bruno and what cannot be.

She's come to live by this stranger's routine. She anticipates the whirl of the knife wheel. She waits for the lock of the shop doors the way a patient waits for the tap of the fingernail on a vial of morphine.

Isa can hear him closing up shop below. She cups a candle and strikes a match before she can lose the ambient light. Bruno whispers her name.

He enters the attic, sits on the floor, and sets down a bundle of white cotton carefully.

“Isa.” Her name rests on his lips like a prayer. “Officers were in the shop today. Could you hear?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “I will do everything in my ability to protect you, Isa.... But if you hear boots which aren’t mine upon these steps...”

He cannot bear to say more. Instead, he leans over the flame and kisses Isa. For one brief sparking moment, she can feel everything. It’s a kiss full and wet with regret and longing and finality.

Bruno opens the folded apron to reveal a small bottle of bleach and a butcher’s knife.

“Whatever happens, don’t let them take you, Isa.”

She presses her face to Bruno’s cheek, his tears hot on her lashes. For the first time since hiding, Isa allows herself to cry, too. Her love is pure. It’s not susceptible to violence, not capable of being profaned.

When Bruno leaves the attic, she turns the well-honed knife over in her hand. A terrible decision to make. *To cleave means to cling faithfully*, Isa thinks. *To cleave means to split apart*.

She pulls her hair up tight with a ribbon and hacks with the knife until all of the long locks are strewn at her feet. She takes off her shirtdress. Using the apron to cover her eyes, she pours bleach over her hair. Wet-headed, Isa uses a bent pin to rip the stitches out of those sickly yellow stars. Isa waits. She scrubs with a soap cake. She rinses over and again from the pitcher to the bowl.

By morning, she’s as blond as Garbo and smells like a rose. Isa smooths out her dress and ties on the apron. She pushes the door open, reveling in the draft. Even the scent of fresh blood from the shop below is a blessing after months of salt and smoke. She ventures farther onto the steps and breathes deeply. Bruno turns, startled to see her out of context and out of color. He smiles.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting. The shop has been so busy lately,” Bruno tells his morning customers. “It may be fortunate that my widowed cousin will be coming to town soon. Perhaps she’ll be able to help.”