

Swift Deer

"Ayala is a precious girl," Devorah, the old grandmother, murmured. "Her name means deer, and she certainly is like a deer- swift, fast, and oh, ever so gentle."

"Is there anything else you can tell us about her?" the officer, Maximus, asked quietly, a hint of sorrow in his voice. He was part of the Children's Aid Society, based in France.

"She's out there, I know," Devorah replied raspily, "Somewhere in the cold, shivering, freezing. She would be about eleven years old now."

"Could you describe her appearance?" Maximus inquired, a bit more professionally this time.

"Blonde, straight hair, gray eyes, a button nose, skinny, about 4 feet and 8 inches, and a beautiful smile, complete with dimples."

"Thank you," Maximus replied. "We'll do what we can."

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"We'll do what we can," Abba, Ayala's father, said in response to her constant flow of questions regarding her going to the toy store.

"Abba, Abba, let's go! I want a doll!" Ayala whined.

"We'll ask Mama," Abba finally gave in.

"What's all this noise?" Ruth, Ayala's mother, walked in.

"Father won't get me a doll!" Ayala said dejectedly.

"Abba, why won't you get her a doll?" Ruth asked teasingly.

Suddenly a series of harsh knocks sounded against the door. Abba peeked through the curtained window of their small square house. When he saw who was standing outside he tensed up, whirled around, and grabbed Ayala and carried her upstairs to the attic. He placed her in it gently.

"Don't be scared, Ayala," he told her calmly, "Everything will be okay." But his expression said otherwise. He ran back downstairs and brought Devorah, Ayala's grandmother, to the attic as well. It was becoming stuffy in there.

"Both of you, hide. Don't make even the slightest little peep." Then he turned to Devorah and told her that a German officer was outside. Ayala tried to ask Abba what was happening, but he told her to be quiet. Then he left the attic and closed the

trapdoor. Ayala watched as Devorah closed the curtains of the attic window and settled down. They both heard someone open the door, and the stomping of footsteps.

"We have come to arrest you- you are Jewish, correct?" someone stated, rather than questioned, in a haughty tone.

"Yes, but why should you arrest us?" Abba asked.

"Because you are a threat," he said simply, and commanded someone behind him to arrest them. "Now I shall search the house- I'm sure you won't mind that," he said, cackling with joy at just the thought of invading the poor couple's privacy.

Ayala finally started to understand: They were Jewish, these people didn't like Jews, her parents were getting arrested, and she was hiding with her grandmother. As soon as she realized this, she started panicking. Devorah sensed this panic and simply looked at Ayala; her eyes seemed to say, "Calm down. I'm here with you." As if being hypnotized, Ayala immediately obeyed and regained her composure. She started feeling sleepy, drowsy, tired, her eyes started closing... Before she knew it, she was asleep.

4 hours later.

Ayala woke with a start. Was her grandmother still here? Where were her parents? Where was *she*? She quickly turned around, her heart beating out of her chest- but it slowed down once she saw the large snoring heap that was her grandmother. However, that calm didn't last for long. Though two of her original questions were answered- her grandmother was still here, and she was in the attic- her last question was yet to be answered. She quietly stood up and looked out the window, and breathed a sigh of relief. The German officers were gone. She still didn't have the heart to talk above a whisper, so she tapped Devorah and murmured softly, "Savta? Are you awake? Where's Papa and Mama?" Devorah opened her eyes slowly, and noiselessly hugged Ayala.

"Do you remember that German officer?" She asked gently. Ayala nodded. "Well, he took Papa to a very bad camp."

"But why didn't we come with them?" Ayala inquired, looking up at Devorah, her eyes shining with tears.

"Because Papa and Mama love us very much and wanted to save us," Devorah whispered. Ayala felt like she was a volcano about to explode with sobs. Any second now she would burst. Devorah hugged her, but for some reason that made her want to cry even more. No more comforting embraces from Mama, no more laughing at jokes with Papa. All she had was Devorah- and if they took her away, too? Then Ayala would be left alone, in this strange, cold world... No! She refused to think like that. She'd find them food and water, and in the process save Papa and Mama. She stood up and made her way towards the attic door, but then her insecurities took over again- she was only ten, if an officer saw her they'd kill her, and maybe even find Devorah and kill her, too, she had no idea how to navigate the twisting alleys of the city by herself, and many more worries and doubts. Devorah then whispered to her, "Go, my dear Ayala- if you wish to survive, you must find food and water. I am much too old- but you are quick and gentle as a deer. I believe in you. Be brave." Ayala nodded, took a deep breath, and went out of the attic door. Her house was eerily quiet and empty.

"I don't see any food, and all of the pitchers of water are empty.... The officers must have taken it all," Ayala thought sadly. Their family didn't have any running water- instead they went to the local well and took water from there. Ayala decided that she'd try to go to the well and fill up one of the pitchers that the officers didn't take. She gently stroked the copper design on it- it was one of the most prized things her family owned. Ayala was surprised that the officers hadn't taken it. Its deep green color was breathtaking, and the design was in the shape of a deer's head; her mother had always said it was made for Ayala. She held back a tear and steeled herself. Then she took her father's old coat that was basically rags held together by very loose stitching; it was the only coat the officers hadn't stolen. She went over to the fireplace and smeared some coal onto her face so that she wouldn't be recognizable. "Ayala," she thought as she was coating her cheeks with ashes, "you've got this! You can save yourself, Devorah, Mama, and Papa!" She stood up, got her pitcher, and slowly opened the door. It was the dead of night. No one was stirring. She crept out quietly and silently. Only now did it dawn upon Ayala the question of how she was actually going to get food. She went out, thinking, "If only Mama and Papa had asked some friends to get us food- then I wouldn't have to go out." A lightbulb went off in her head just then. "That's it," she thought triumphantly, "I'll go to Annie's and Sam's! They'll help us!" Ayala then proceeded to run all the way to her parents' close friends' house. She managed to get there quickly and quietly. She knocked on the door softly, knowing that she was now safe. "Annie and Sam aren't Jews, so no one would have taken them away," she reflected. The door opened, and a sleepy Sam peered down at Ayala.

After a second, he finally processed who was at the door and immediately said, "Ayala! What are you doing here?" He could recognize her even through the coal mask on her face and the strange coat that was completely covering her body.

A shadowy figure appeared behind him- Annie was in light cotton pajamas and had a night cap on her head. "Yes, Ayala, why are you here at the dead of night?" she inquired. Ayala quickly explained what happened, and as she was talking she saw them both tense up in shock. As soon as she finished her story they embraced her, and as she hugged them she burst into tears, remembering how they would hug her just like this whenever she and her parents would come to visit them. Annie and Sam agreed to bring her and Devorah food and water, and then sent her away with her old, dark green pitcher, just as dawn was approaching.

As she sprinted away, they caught a glimpse of the emblem on the pitcher, and Sam said, "Run, deer, run."

"That was how we lived for three months," Devorah explained to Maximus. "However, after the second month people started to get suspicious. By the third the German officers found out. Poor Annie and Sam got caught and were given the death penalty. The officers found our hiding spot, too, but I had suspected this would happen and arranged a new hiding spot for Ayala ahead of time- an area in a bush in our backyard. I offered Annie and Sam to join her if they caught wind of the officers coming,

but they didn't want to risk getting Ayala caught. And so, one sunny Sunday afternoon, we saw the German officers go to Annie's and Sam's house. I then sent Ayala out to her hiding spot, and I stayed in the attic. They caught me, but they didn't get a chance to kill me- the concentration camp that they put me in was freed just a day after I was captured. They never found Ayala."

Maximus smiled gently and said, "That's it for now. You may leave- we'll do the best we can in finding your Ayala."

"Thank you," Devorah said, and got up to go. She walked out the door of the station calmly and assuredly. She knew they'd find her. A smart deer never gets caught.