April 9th, 1940
by Norsebard
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This World War II drama belongs in the Uber category. All characters are created by me, though some of them may remind you of someone.

This story depicts a romantic relationship between consenting adult women. If such a story frightens you, you better click on the X in the top right corner of your screen right away.

This story contains war-type violence, some of which is directed at women. Readers who are sensitive to such content may wish to read something other than this story.

Although this story is based on mission reports written by the Danish soldiers who fought in the skirmishes in South Jutland on the 9th of April, 1940, events have been amalgamated for dramatic purposes. Also, all characters depicted and names used in this story are fictitious. No identification with actual persons is intended nor should be inferred. Any resemblance of the characters portrayed to actual persons, living or dead is purely coincidental.

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NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

Written: January 20th - 29th, 2015.

- Thank you for your additional research, Phineas Redux, and for your help with the German dialogue, Boba71 : )
As usual, I'd like to say a great, big THANK YOU to my mates at AUSXIP Talking Xena, especially to the gals and guys in Subtext Central. I really appreciate your support - Thanks, everybody! :D

**Description:** In the early hours of the morning on April 9th, 1940, Anne-Katrine Jensen's life is changed irrevocably when the German Army commences Operation Weserübung, the invasion of Denmark and Norway. As a woman, she isn't allowed to join the hopelessly outnumbered Danish forces that struggle to put up a defense against the advancing army, but she refuses to let it stop her. Equipped with her ill brother's uniform and rifle, Anne-Katrine heads off to war - much to the despair of her sweetheart, Lydia Petersen…

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'Hello Miss Jensen,' a gruff male voice said at the other end of the line, making Anne-Katrine snap back to the telephone, 'this is Sergeant Ernst Viggo Mehlborg. I need to speak to your brother at once.'
"I'm afraid Arthur is indisposed, Sergeant Mehlborg," Anne-Katrine said, baring her teeth in a worried grimace. To underline her point, further moans and groans came from the bedroom.

'It's imperative I speak to your brother, Miss Jensen. We've just been given our marching orders at the garrison. We're going to the front. The Germans have breached our sovereignty by crossing the border in four places a mere thirty kilometers south of our position. All leave of absence has been withdrawn.'

"Oh… the Germans- oh no…"

'Arthur Wilfred Jensen is to join his unit at once… do you understand me, Miss Jensen? Your brother is to join the sixth regiment, fourth battalion, first company at once.'

"But Sergeant, my brother is very ill-"

'Bloody hell!'

"I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about it," Anne-Katrine said and once again tried to stretch the fabric cord. It was just too short for her to see inside the bedroom, but she had been in there often enough to know that her brother was in serious abdominal pain. "Sergeant Mehlborg, we have Doctor Meincke with us… do you wish to speak to him?"

'Well… all right. Put him on. Thank you.'

"You're welcome, Sergeant. Please hold," Anne-Katrine said and put the horn down on a shelf. She ran over to stand in the doorway and watched Doctor Meincke examine her brother's abdomen. It was clear from the moans and groans that emanated from Arthur - not to mention his ruddy complexion - that it was serious. "Doctor… Doctor Meincke, the caller wishes to speak with you…"

Doctor Edvard Sigurd Meincke had been working as a general practitioner in the next town over for nearly three decades. He was in his late sixties with an impressive pair of whiskers that had gone out of fashion a generation earlier, and his hair and eyebrows were as white and bushy as his sideburns. He had arrived in a dark suit and hat as any gentleman would, but he had shed the jacket and rolled up his shirtsleeves to reveal his arms that were far stronger than his gentlemanly frame alluded to. "Is it from the hospital regarding the ambulance?" he said over the rim of his metal-frame spectacles.

"No, it's from the garrison, Doctor."

"Mmmm. All right. I'll take the call, but it had better be important. Nurse Petersen, continue with the patient," he continued, showing the nurse what to do with Arthur's abdomen.

As the doctor went into the hallway, the twenty-two year old Lydia Petersen knelt down and moved over to tend to Arthur Jensen. She sent a long, warm smile at Anne-Katrine who was still standing in the doorway.
Whenever Anne-Katrine took her time to really look at the young, charming woman, she couldn't help but feel a wonderful pang of warmth in the pit of her stomach. Lydia had green eyes in the shade of the leaves at spring and strawberry-blond hair the shade of the leaves at fall. And better yet, she was hers.

The attraction between them had been instant when they had first met at the 1937 Harvest Fair. Anne-Katrine had sprained a finger in a beer keg-throwing contest and Lydia had been an apprentice nurse. They both had a supposedly dark secret of not harboring any attraction to men though they were expected to, but there was no need for secrets when they were together. For months, they could only meet under shady pretenses, but their hidden romance blossomed.

Anne-Katrine knew that village gossip would be the death of their relationship, so she did everything she could to keep it all under lock and key. The charade they had needed to perform the night they slept together for the first time had been worthy of an acting award. But when such a medical crisis arose, how could she not call Doctor Meincke and the charming nurse Petersen?

She smiled and pulled up her coarse workpants so she could kneel down next to Lydia. She put a hand on the nurse's back and enjoyed the quiet sigh the young woman let out at the touch. "How is my brother, Nurse Petersen?" she said formally. While she spoke, she rubbed her callused thumb across Lydia's back in a far more tender gesture.

"In a bad state, I'm afraid," Lydia said in her characteristic rich voice that sounded like it should come from a larger, older woman. "He's in terrible pain and the morphine Doctor Meincke injected earlier doesn't seem to help much."

"Damn," Anne-Katrine said and rubbed her mouth. It was clear by the strained look on her brother's face that he wouldn't be able to add his two cents' worth to the conversation. "Does the Doctor know what's wrong?"

"Appendicitis," Lydia said with a wistful smile.

"Damn. Such rotten timing... Arthur has always excelled at that."

In the hallway, the word 'appendicitis' was repeated into the telephone. "Yes, that's right, Sergeant Mehlborg," the doctor said, "I'm afraid Arthur Jensen is of no more value to you right now than a bent coin. Yes. No, that's out of the question, Sergeant, war or no war."

Anne-Katrine and Lydia gave each other worried looks. They were too young to remember the Great War, but they had both read newspaper reports and seen weekly newsreels on the horrors and atrocities that had been committed in the Spanish Civil War, not to mention the blitzkrieg against Poland in September of 1939.

"What do you think will happen when the Germans come?" Lydia asked quietly.

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply and once again put her hand on Lydia's back. "I don't know, dearest. Not too much, I hope. Arthur was in Flensburg just south of the border in January, and he said
everything was... well, he said it was just like always though there was a strong military presence."

Right on cue, Arthur began to moan, and Lydia tended to him by putting a cool, damp cloth across his forehead.

Once she was done, she leaned back and let out a short sigh. "Of course, some say the Germans will come as our protectors against the warmonger Churchill and the Bolsheviks from the east. I've heard several people in town say that."

"Lydia, please tell me you don't believe that nonsense!" Anne-Katrine said darkly. "If we are invaded, I'll guarantee you that... that the Huns will show their true face within a few months. Like we saw in the newsreel from Poland... remember that? An entire village razed to make a statement."

"I believe you... and I never listen to the town gossip, Anne-Katrine," Lydia said and put a calming hand on her partner's thigh.

In the hallway, Doctor Meincke finished the call and hung up. "Well," he said, moving into the doorway. As he did so, Lydia pulled her hand back in a flash. "The good Sergeant Mehlborg wasn't particularly pleased with the situation, but I told him that it had been our Lord's decision, and that He outranked him. The Sergeant didn't seem particularly pleased with that, either." The doctor let out a rumbling chuckle that made his whiskers move around.

"I'm afraid that Sergeant Mehlborg doesn't possess a sense of humor, Doctor," Anne-Katrine said, thinking back to the only time she had met the dour soldier. He had visited the farm for a box of eggs and some fine, white meat from a chicken, but had left behind a poor impression.

"Oh, and the Sergeant said his unit would use the side road just outside to travel south, so they will be by at some point in case your brother's health improves..."

"There's not much chance of that," Anne-Katrine said quietly, looking at Arthur's drawn face.

"No. May I slip past you, please?" the doctor said and moved into the narrow bedroom. After moving past Anne-Katrine and Lydia, he sat down on a chair that had been put next to the top end of the bed so he was close to the patient. "There isn't much we can do until the ambulance arrives. It should only be another fifteen minutes or so. Miss Jensen, could I persuade you to make a pot of good, strong coffee while we wait? I could certainly use some."

"I'm afraid we're all out, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said and rose from her spot. She dusted off her hands on her pants and offered the doctor an apologetic shrug. "I was supposed to go into town today to pick up some more, but..."

"Oh! Oh, drat," Doctor Meincke said and shuffled around on the chair with a disappointed look on his face. "Well, all right. Next time, eh?"
"Certainly, Doctor Meincke. Would you like a dram instead?"

"It's tempting, but I better not." Looking at his patient, Doctor Meincke grunted and rolled down his shirtsleeves. "Nurse Petersen, I don't need you at the moment. Why don't you go into the sitting room and share some gossip with Miss Jensen? I'm sure you ladies can find a topic worthy of your time. It will also spare my ears."

"Yes, Doctor Meincke," Lydia said with a brief curtsey. Turning around, she smiled broadly at Anne-Katrine and put a hand around the older woman's waist to guide her out of the cramped bedroom.

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Anne-Katrine took the kerosene lamp and walked down the short hallway to the sitting room. Opening the door, she reached inside and flicked the light switch to exploit all the electricity she could before the Germans had a chance to take down the power lines. A dim bulb came alive in the ceiling in an old, converted kerosene lamp similar to the one she carried.

She put the lamp on a sideboard and closed the door behind Lydia. The nurse had barely stepped into the room before she was swept up in Anne-Katrine's strong arms and held impossibly tight. "You are so pretty today, dearest," Anne-Katrine whispered, leaning down to place a soft kiss on her partner's forehead.

"Thank you… but I know it's not true," Lydia whispered back. "I didn't even have time to brush my hair when your call came. Doctor Meincke and I just burst out of bed, jumped into our clothes and ran out to his Ford A."

Anne-Katrine smiled and kissed the shorter woman's forehead again. "Hopefully you didn't burst out of the same bed…?"

Lydia returned the smile and wrapped her hands around Anne-Katrine's strong, shirt-clad waist. They stood like that for a short while until the question was burning in the air between them. "My entire life, I've only shared a bed with two people. My sister when we were small… and you. Does that answer your question?"

"It does," Anne-Katrine said and ran a callused thumb across Lydia's delicate eyebrows. The touch made both women smile and move closer to one another.

Lydia cast a glance at the door before she continued in a deeper register. "Sometimes at night… when I'm all alone, I pretend you're with me. I pretend that we make love like the first time. I pretend that we could be open about our love and stroll arm in arm along the stores on the square… I know the latter will never happen. The first two… the first two will happen again, or my name isn't Lydia Petersen."

"I'll do my part too," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle.
"Please kiss me before it's too late."

The plea was too heartfelt to ignore, so Anne-Katrine leaned down and claimed her partner's lips in a strong, loving kiss. Because they couldn't kiss often, she was always stunned at how wonderful it felt to share such sweetness with the woman who held the key to her heart. The silky softness of Lydia's lips was matched by a faint moan that escaped her throat. The bliss was only challenged by the tip of a cheeky tongue that tried to crash the party.

Lydia grinned at the surprised look on her lover's face, but the smile faded when they broke off the sweet contact at the thought that no one could predict when they would have another chance to kiss. Sighing, she leaned her forehead against Anne-Katrine's chest. "Thank you… that was beautiful. I love you."

"You're welcome… and I love you too," Anne-Katrine said and led Lydia over to one of the two dark-brown chairs that were standing around a circular smoking table near the cast iron stove.

Lydia folded her uniform and sat down with her legs closed and crooked to the side like any lady should.

The sitting room wasn't large, but it was cozy and just right for everyday use. The stately dining room - which was beyond a closed door at the other end of the smaller room - was only used for Sunday dinners and special events.

The half-timbered farmhouse hadn't changed much since it had been built in 1879, so the floor and the ceiling of the small room were made of shaved planks. The walls were raw bricks padded with a thick layer of bright white plaster to keep out the cold. Faded pictures of the family going back to the mid-1860s adorned the walls in wooden, utilitarian frames next to a newer portrait of King Christian the Tenth.

The single window in the sitting room was still covered by the lacy curtains Anne-Katrine's mother had put up when she had moved in after getting married. Anne-Katrine wasn't much for girly business like sewing, keeping flowers or collecting knick-knacks so all she had done to the living room was to tie the curtains together so they wouldn't be at risk when she and her brother sat at the smoking table with their cards or dice.

Time had passed the room by, except for the electrical lamp in the ceiling, a tick-tocking grandfather clock at the far wall, and a newfangled radio in a shiny mahogany cabinet that stood proudly on a lacy place mat on a sideboard.

Anne-Katrine put her hands on her hips and let out a long, deep sigh. "Dearest Lydia, I haven't shed blood, sweat and tears from dawn to dusk only to let the Germans come and take or destroy everything. I want to defend my home… my country. You."

"Oh, Anne-Katrine, I wish you wouldn't speak like that," Lydia said and sat up straight. "We talked about it when the war broke out last fall, remember? Wars should be fought by men. Apart from the sterling work done by the nurses of the Red Cross, there is simply no room for a
woman at the front. Firing weapons, killing people... ghastly. And the risk of paying the ultimate price is far too great."

"I understand that's how you feel. I hope you understand why I feel differently," Anne-Katrine said in a softer voice. "I know I can shoot just as well as my brother, if not better. I can ride a motorcycle, I can drive a team of horses or oxen... and cars and trucks... if only I could do a little thing to help the soldiers, I would be a happy woman. Perhaps somewhere in the supply lines... oh, it's no use, I know."

Anne-Katrine sighed and reached for a pack of Bristol Favorites cigarettes and an old-fashioned lighter. She lit up and blew out a cloud of pale gray smoke with a pensive look on her face.

Lydia opened her mouth to reply, but she was cut off by Doctor Meincke knocking on the door. "Are you ladies still gossiping?" he said, peeking around the door.

"It's safe to come in, Doctor. Nurse Petersen and I were discussing the state of the world. I have a light if you wish to smoke a pipe while we wait for the ambulance," Anne-Katrine said and held up the lighter.

"Oh! I could certainly use a pipe, but I'm afraid I don't have time for a proper round of tobacco. Perhaps you could offer me a cigarette instead?" the doctor said and stepped into the sitting room. Lydia had already relinquished her chair, but Doctor Meincke waved at her and sat down on the second chair.

"By all means, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said and held out the pack of Bristols for the older man. When the doctor took one, she offered him a light. Soon, two clouds of pale gray smoke rose to the low ceiling. Lydia was offered a cigarette as well, but she declined politely.

Anne-Katrine needed the soothing qualities of the cigarette to quell the storm that brewed inside her. The Sergeant's words had sent her stomach into an incessant churning, and she shuffled over to the window to glance outside. It was still too dark to see anything, but she sensed there was an unnatural calm in the air.

Clearing his throat, Doctor Meincke moved around to face his two companions. He held the cigarette in a humorous, old-fashioned way between his index and middle finger. "If the Germans really have broken the non-aggression treaty set up by Foreign Secretary Munk and the German emissary Ribbentrop only last year, they must have a really good reason. Perhaps they were secretly invited?"

"Invited?" Anne-Katrine said darkly. "Hardly, Doctor. They're here to invade us."

"Miss Jensen, I do not share your pessimistic view of the situation," the doctor said and knocked off some ash into a metal tray on the smoking table. "In any case, I have a feeling we shall all remember this date. April 9th, 1940."
"If we do, let's hope it'll be for something humorous and positive," Lydia said with a smile. Even as she said it, she realized from the dark looks on the faces of the people around her that her wish was perhaps a bit too naïve. She quickly looked down and folded her hands in her lap.

When a pained moan was suddenly heard from down the hallway, Doctor Meincke rose and stubbed out his cigarette in a hurry. "Please excuse me, ladies," he said and left the sitting room.

Anne-Katrine sighed once more and walked over to the smoking table. She sat down at the chair vacated by the doctor and reached out in the hope that Lydia would take her hand. The two women briefly looked at each other before Lydia did reach out and gave the offered hand a strong squeeze.

"Thank you for not scoffing at me before, sweetheart. It was a childish wish, I realize that now," Lydia said quietly.

"I'd never do that. Never." Nothing more needed to be said, and Anne-Katrine didn't.

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A short fifteen minutes later, the shrill ringing of the ambulance's brass bell could be heard from kilometers away. The ringing came closer and closer until it finally arrived at the Jensen farm - once there, the driver's assistant mercifully switched off the electrical clapper.

While Anne-Katrine opened the front door and stepped out onto the courtyard with a kerosene lamp to add some light to the proceedings, the driver turned the huge, unwieldy Packard ambulance around and reversed in through the narrow gate that had been built for horse-driven, not horse-less carriages.

The uneven cobblestones in the courtyard made the ambulance sway and creak, and the driver decided that enough was enough and pulled it to a halt - he and his assistant would have to carry the stretcher the rest of the way.

The two men who both wore the characteristic black uniforms of the Zone Ambulance Services - caps with shiny peaks, double-breasted shirts, riding breeches and long-shafted boots - stepped out and opened the Packard's rear hatch. "This better be the Jensen farm," the driver said in a broad accent that revealed he wasn't a local. He was a square-built man in his mid-thirties, but his assistant was several years younger; a lanky youngling with a long face and an Adam's apple that bobbed up and down even as he breathed.

"It is," Anne-Katrine said, making way for the men who carried the stretcher. "In here… to the right. Can it fit?"

A loud *whack-thump!* proved that it couldn't, but the woodwork at the doorjamb wasn't any worse for wear. The two men inched their way through the door and down the short hallway. The stretcher couldn't enter the narrow bedroom, but Lydia and the doctor had Arthur on his feet, and they were slowly moving out into the hallway.
"Here we go… here we go… just another step, Arthur," Lydia said with a firm grip on her dazed patient's left arm so she wouldn't add pressure to the abdomen. The morphine had kicked in at the worst possible moment, and Anne-Katrine's brother was so far gone he couldn't even moan. "Just another step and you're there… here we are… yes, sit down… you can sit down on the stretcher now, Arthur."

Doctor Meincke took the patient's other hand and guided the woozy man the last of the way onto the stretcher. "All right, gentlemen," he said and dusted off his hands once Arthur was lying down. "It's acute appendicitis. He needs to undergo urgent surgery so you must to drive him to the municipal hospital. Any questions?"

"Are you coming with us, Doctor Meincke?" the driver of the ambulance said.

"No. Nurse Petersen and I shall follow in my car."

"Very well, Doctor Meincke." The driver nodded at his assistant who leaned down and took the foot end of the stretcher. Together, they fumbled back out into the courtyard where Anne-Katrine held the door open so it wouldn't be thumped into again.

She walked beside the stretcher over to the ambulance while she held up the kerosene lamp to aid the two men in their task. The look of her deathly pale brother who was so foggy he didn't show any signs of recognizing her caused a dark mask of worry to form on her face. Narrowing her eyes, she tried to imprint every part of her brother's features into her memory in case fate swung its scythe before she could get a chance to see him again.

As the ambulance driver and his assistant wheeled in the stretcher and shut the rear hatch, a warm hand snaked its way around Anne-Katrine's shirt-clad waist. She held the kerosene lamp away so the gate fell into shadows. She didn't need the light to know who it was, and she didn't want to show the two men the true nature of the relationship she shared with Lydia.

Protected by the shadows in the dark gate, the nurse nudged her body up against that of the taller woman to show her support. She gave the firm waist another squeeze and leaned in to briefly rest her head on a soft shoulder. "It'll be all right," she whispered for Anne-Katrine's ears only. "Doctor Meincke is a good man and a clever doctor. Arthur will be all right."

"By God, I hope so," Anne-Katrine replied in a matching whisper.

The driver started the Packard and drove back out of the narrow gate and onto the road. There, the assistant made the brass bell ring two short stabs to let everyone know an ambulance was about to join the traffic - of course, they were the only traffic for kilometers in every direction. It didn't take long for the black van to disappear into the early morning mist.

Behind Anne-Katrine and Lydia, Doctor Meincke started his Ford A and drove around the courtyard to get to the gate. The old car with its old-fashioned suspension was able to navigate the cobblestones far better than the newer ambulance, but the engine ran rough because of the chilly temperatures. "Hop in, Nurse Petersen," the doctor said through the opened window.
Lydia gave Anne-Katrine's waist another squeeze before she curtseyed at the farmer like any nurse would. She hurried around the Ford and opened the door. Climbing up into the uncomfortable seat that she had to share with the doctor's bag, she closed the rattling door behind her and offered Anne-Katrine a little wave that was responded to in kind.

"Miss Jensen, I promise I'll call you as soon as your brother has come out of surgery," the doctor said as he fished for a gear. "I can't say exactly when it'll be, but my best guess is around lunch or so. Perhaps sooner. Perhaps later."

"I'll be grateful for any news, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said and ran a hand through her short, dark hair. She grunted and shuffled over to the Ford to shake the doctor's hand. "Thank you for coming all the way out here. And you, Nurse Petersen."

"Goodbye for now, Miss Jensen," Lydia said and waved again.

"Goodbye, Miss Jensen," the doctor said. After finding a gear, he drove off and left behind a cloud of steam and exhaust fumes. The rough engine echoed through the narrow gate, and Anne-Katrine could continue to hear it for several minutes as it went along the road back towards town.

A modicum of peace returned to the Jensen farm. Anne-Katrine let out a deep sigh and shuffled back to the farmhouse to clean up the mess her brother had made, and get started on the day's chores and other regular business.

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Back inside the hallway, she put down the kerosene lamp on the sideboard and took the old-fashioned horn off the telephone. She couldn't remember the number for their hired help, so she had to pull out a drawer to look at the single-page list of telephone numbers for the entire region.

"Atlas zero one four," she mumbled, closing the drawer. "Hello operator?" she said loudly into the horn.

'Operator is ready. Good morning,' a young female voice said at the other end of the line.

"Good morning, Birthe. Will you please connect me to Atlas zero one four?"

'Atlas zero one four... it's ringing. Please wait. Anne-Katrine, is that you? Oh, have you heard the latest? The Germans have broken through in four different places! The border stations at Padborg, Kruså, Rens and Sæd have been overrun!'

"I've heard. Is it still ringing?"

'Still ringing. Oh, Anne-Katrine, what do you think will happen? There was a really, really loud alarm earlier at the garrison. Soldiers have been swarming out all morning... the post office is right next to it so I've literally been hanging out the window to get a good look at it all. Bicycles,
motorcycles, trucks, everything. Some should come past you soon. Have you seen any Germans yet? Have you heard any airplanes yet where you are?"

"I haven't a clue what'll happen, and I haven't heard anything. Birthe-

'It's still ringing. I'm really worried, Anne-Katrine… what if they'll bomb us like they did in Warsaw?'

"There's nothing to bomb out here in the countryside and I doubt they'll want to waste their expensive bombs on our little town, garrison or not… please calm down. Do you have a radio there?"

'Yes, but it's turned off.'

"I would imagine King Christian or the Prime Minister will broadcast an update at some point."

'Oh… good thinking, Anne-Katrine! I better turn it on at once…'

"Wait, Birthe… is it still-

'Yes, it's still ringing. Oh… here Poul is now. Go ahead, Poul. Bye-bye, Anne-Katrine!'

"Goodbye, Birthe… Poul?"

The tired, inarticulate grunts that came out of the hired hand's mouth proved he had been sleeping like most citizens would at five to five in the morning. A wide yawn broke through the telephone line that he didn't even try to hide. 'Uh… pardon me. Good morning. Is… is something wrong, Miss Jensen?'

"I'm afraid so," Anne-Katrine said and turned around so she could lean her rear against the sideboard. "My brother has been taken to hospital with acute appendicitis. I need you to come out here sooner than agreed upon today. At once, actually. When can you be here?"

'Oh, forty minutes or so, Miss Jensen.'

"All right. I'll see you then. Goodbye, Poul."

'Goodbye, Miss Jensen.'

"And goodbye to you too, Birthe… I know you've been listening in," Anne-Katrine said and put the horn back on the hook. She just had time to hear a girlish snicker before the connection was cut off. The news of her brother's illness would reach even the farthest outskirts of their little town within half an hour, but there was nothing she could do about that. If nothing else, it simply underlined the dangers of being too open with regards to Lydia.
Sighing, she took the kerosene lamp and moved into the sitting room where she clicked off the light before she walked down to her brother's bedroom to change the sheets.

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Later, she donned her clog-boots and her flat cap and ventured back out into the early morning chill carrying a small crate padded with straw. Her mission was to retrieve the freshly laid eggs from the chicken coop, but she couldn't help but look up at the sky that was still dark but growing brighter by the minute. There weren't yet any signs of enemy airplanes, but the day continued to have an eerie calm about it that reminded her of the quiet before a storm.

She had barely reached the chicken coop before a sound akin to a heavy breeze reached her ears. It came from the road, and she hurriedly put down the crate for the eggs and ran across the cobblestones; not an easy task in clogs. She ran through the gate and onto the road where she just caught the tail end of a small unit of Danish soldiers on bicycles rushing south.

"Must be my brother's company," Anne-Katrine mumbled. "Sergeant Mehlborg's unit. He said they would be by. Dammit, I... I wish I could go with them." Putting her hands on her hips, she looked up and down the road to see if further bicycle platoons would come past, but it appeared Sergeant Mehlborg's would be the only one.

She sighed and turned around to go back into the courtyard. Above the gate, a row of brass letters spelled out that the farm had been built in 1879, at a time when the entire surrounding land had been under Prussian rule following the Danish defeat in the bloody war of 1864. It hadn't even been a generation since the Germans had been forced to give up the land in 1920 following their own defeat in the Great War. "And I'll be damned if Adolf thinks I'm just going to let him have it again without a fight!" she growled, clenching her fists.

The eggs beckoned, and she stomped back through the gate and into the courtyard to resume her duties.

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The numerous things that needed to be done on a daily basis on any farm had very little respect for the political aspects of the world - thus, Anne-Katrine donned a leather apron and walked into the cowshed to milk the twelve cows she owned with her brother. When their parents had been alive, they'd had a larger herd but the crisis years following the Great Depression had gradually put an end to large, privately owned farms. They had already been at twelve cows by the time of the fatal accident, and Anne-Katrine and Arthur had agreed to stay at that number.

They kept their cows well. In the summer, the animals roamed freely on the grassy meadows around the farmhouse, and in the winter, they stayed in a sturdy cowshed with plenty of hay on the floor. The results came in the shape of the many full buckets of steaming, off-white milk that were produced every morning and evening. The cow Anne-Katrine worked on moo'ed joyfully at being milked, and she chuckled as she worked the teats with her skilled hands.
Soon, she was able to move another full bucket over to the wall so it was out of harms' way. On her way back, she took an empty bucket and her footstool and moved down to the next cow in the line.

'Miss Jensen?' a male voice said from outside in the courtyard.

"In the cowshed, Poul!" Anne-Katrine said loudly, squeezing the contents of a teat into the bucket. The cow she was working on moo'ed in surprise at hearing the loud noise right next to it, but Anne-Katrine patted the large, dark red flank to keep it calm.

Her hired help, the forty-four year old Poul Nedergaard, hobbled past the sliding door and into the cowshed. As always, the man with the club foot and the scruffy appearance was wearing orthopedic boots, dark blue workpants and a sturdy jacket over a tan shirt. He took off his flat cap as he entered the stables to reveal his thinning hair. "Good morning, Miss Jensen. I'm really sorry to hear about your brother's illness," he said in his typically strong local dialect.

"Thank you, Poul," Anne-Katrine said between squeezing the teats. "Yes, that was an ugly surprise. We had gone to bed at nine as always, but his pitiful cries woke me up just after three. Nasty business. Fortunately Doctor Meincke was able to come at once. Which reminds me, thank you for coming so much earlier."

"Oh, don't mention it. The missus made me a quick breakfast so I'm all right. Have you had any yet, Miss Jensen?"

"No, and we're all out of coffee, too. I was planning on driving to town to get some, but with all this hubbub, I don't think I'll ever get around to it."

"Have you heard anything about the Germans? Have they really invaded us?"

"Well, I spoke to Sergeant Mehlborg earlier and he said so. Beyond that, I don't know anything apart from what Birthe told me," Anne-Katrine said as she squeezed a teat. "I suspect she told you the same."

"Yes… I hope it's merely an evil rumor. My grandfather was fifteen during the war of 1864, and the stories he told me when I was a young boy… no, they're too gruesome for a woman to hear."

Anne-Katrine raised an eyebrow at the words, but decided to let it slide. "Tell you what, Poul," she said and moved the next full bucket of milk over to the wall, "why don't you carry on here while I pour the first buckets into the milk churns. When we're done, I'll call the dairy plant and ask them to send over the truck a little early today. We wouldn't want to let the good milk go to waste… and we need the money. We can sweep the courtyard while we wait for the truck to arrive."

"Yes, Miss Jensen. I'll get on it right away," Poul Nedergaard said and hobbled over to the wall of the cowshed to get the second apron. Before he made it there, he stopped and cocked his head like he was listening for something.
Anne-Katrine was about to ask what he was doing when she heard it too - an odd drone that seemed to come from the air. Even the moo'ing of the cow she had just finished milking couldn't drown out the continuous noise from the outside.

Poul moved open the sliding door and hobbled out into the courtyard. Two seconds later, his panicky voice rang loud and clear through the cowshed: 'Anne-Katrine! Come quick! Airplanes… dozens of airplanes!'

"Bloody hell!" Anne-Katrine barked and hurried out of the cowshed. Outside, the metallic drone was far louder, and a look at the skies revealed why.

High above them, countless military aircraft flew north and north-east; the white-and-black crosses on the underside of the wings proved they were German. Some had two engines, others had three. Those that had three were slower and seemed less dangerous.

"Heinkel One-Elevens," Poul said and pointed up at the faster, twin-engined aircraft. "They're bombers. I remember that shape from the newsreels. They were used in Spain and Poland as well."

"Dammit… bombers? They're headed north-east… perhaps Odense or Copenhagen?" Anne-Katrine said, scouting the heavens while she spoke. As far as her eyes would allow her to see, more aircraft followed those that had already gone past. Now and then, nimbler fighters zoomed between the heavier planes to provide close air support in case the Royal Danish Air Force would scramble to intercept them.

"Could be… the others are Junkers Fifty-twos. Transport planes. Perhaps troop carriers? In any case, they're headed north… perhaps to Kolding or Vejle… or maybe Aarhus or Aalborg? There's a large military airfield up there."

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply and took off the apron. The sight and sound of the aircraft high above whipped her blood into a frenzy and she responded by throwing the leather apron onto the dusty courtyard. "Bloody hell!" she growled, clenching her fists.

An idea suddenly came to her with such clarity she was amazed she hadn't thought of it before. Her brother had been home on leave, but he had worn his full uniform when he had arrived. He had stored everything with military precision in his closet in the bedroom, right down to the battle helmet and the spare frames of live ammunition they had been issued in view of the political situation.

Anne-Katrine became lightheaded just thinking about it, but she knew it was the right decision for her. She simply could not stand idly by and go on with her daily business while her country was overrun by the Huns. Her brother couldn't defend the country from the advancing Germans, so she had to. She had to go to war.

"Poul," she said, but her voice broke and she had to start over after clearing her throat. "Poul, I'm about to tell you something you won't like to hear. I'm… I'm going to take my brother's place in
his unit. I cannot pretend that we should go on as normal. Nothing will be normal from now on, not with... with those rotten bastards up there." She made an angry gesture at the aircraft to underline her words. "I want you to finish taking care of the cows while I get dressed. Call the dairy plant and your wife if you can get through. Then I want you to stay here for the rest of the day until I return. Perhaps I won't return. In that case my brother will contact you. That's my final decision, Poul. Don't try to talk me out of it."

Poul Nedergaard wasn't in a state to make objections - all he could do was to stand all agape and stare at his employer. "But you're a woman!" he finally croaked, lifting his flat cap to rub his thinning hair.

"Frankly, that's irrelevant," Anne-Katrine said and spun around on her heel.

Without waiting for an answer, she stomped through the courtyard and into the farmhouse. She turned right and followed the hallway until she came to Arthur's bedroom. There, she strode over to the closet and swooshed the doors open. Like she had predicted, her brother's entire khaki uniform was lined up on the shelves in orderly fashion. His greatcoat was suspended from a coat hanger, and his dull brown, tall marching boots were at the foot of the closet. The standard issue M1889 rifle was leaning against the outside of the closet next to the leather backpack.

She pulled every clothing item down with little regard to the military code and carried the untidy pile into her own bedroom further down the hallway.

Once she had slammed the door shut with her heel, she shed her clogs, her pants and her shirt until she was standing in socks, bloomers and the special cloth she always had wrapped around her chest to support her breasts. Proper brassieres were too expensive and too uncomfortable to wear while working in the field or inside the stables, so she had come up with the perfect solution herself.

The first item she put on was the coarse, brass-button shirt. Though she and her brother were more or less the same size, his arms were revealed to be two centimeters longer than hers so she had to fluff the sleeves to make the cuffs fit. The high-waisted pants came next. She had a hard time screwing her wider hips into the slender cut, but she was able to close the five buttons - three in the fly, two on the waist - in good order. The suspenders were soon in place on her shapely shoulders before she reached for the tall marching boots that were mercifully her size.

Not long after, she stuck her arms down the sleeves of the double-breasted, eight-button greatcoat and closed every one of them. The leather belt with the bayonet and two pouches for ammunition and miscellany came next. The foot-long bayonet which went on the belt through a leather loop was heavy and cumbersome, and she considered leaving it behind. Weighing her options, she came to the conclusion that she would rather bring it and not need it than vice versa.

The backpack came next. She hadn't learned the special trick needed to get it in place by herself, but she managed to put her arms through the leather straps after uttering a series of mumbled and increasingly inventive cusswords.
Fully equipped, she stomped back to Arthur's bedroom and took the battle helmet and the gloves. The heavy steel helmet felt like a ton of lead on her dark locks and would take some getting used to, but she didn't have time for little things like that, so she tightened the chin strap and carried on. The rifle was next.

Reaching down next to the closet, she took the standard issue rifle with the one hundred and thirty-three centimeters long barrel. She checked the bolt action. It was ready, and so was she. She put the rifle over her shoulders with the weapon in front like she had seen her brother do many times. Once everything was in place, she took the bag with the spare frames and put it over her other shoulder.

She came to a halt and stared into the mirror that happened to hang on the wall opposite her. A fully armed and operational soldier looked back at her; a soldier who had her eyes and her features.

The insanity of the situation caught up with her and she had to take a few deep breaths before she could carry on. Her national pride gave her enough impetus to continue with her task though there was a grave risk she wouldn't come back from the front. Looking away from the mirror, Anne-Katrine stepped out into the hallway and closed the door softly behind her.

Instead of going out into the courtyard, she slipped into the sitting room and took a pack of Bristol Favorites and a matchbook that she put in her pouch for miscellany. She was about to leave when she reconsidered and found a piece of writing paper and a fountain pen. Furrowing her brow, she jotted down a few thoughts for her brother and Lydia - just in case.

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She found Arthur's standard issue bicycle next to the woodshed. He had spent a great deal of time polishing it and oiling the chain the day before so it would be ready in case he had to leave in a hurry, and thus, it moved without a squeak.

The cobblestones in the courtyard didn't offer a suitable terrain for bicycling, so she pulled the dull khaki bike through the gate and out onto the road before she swung her leg over the frame and got ready to leave her birthplace.

The activity meant that Paul Nedergaard came back out from the cowshed, but the deeply concerned look on his face didn't need many words of explanation.

"Goodbye for now, Poul," Anne-Katrine said as she adjusted the heavy steel helmet so it was on just right. "I hope we shall meet again… but if we don't, I want to tell you that you've been a good, solid man to have at the farm. You needn't worry about finding work if you wish to move on. I've written a letter of recommendation that's in the top drawer underneath the radio. Anyway, I'm sure my brother will continue to employ you once he returns from the hospital."

"Thank you, Miss Jensen… please be safe," Poul said and wrung his flat cap between his fingers.
Anne-Katrine chuckled darkly and started treading the pedals to get up to speed. "I'll try, Poul," she said over her shoulder. Soon, she was on her way, going in the same direction that she had seen Sergeant Mehlborg's unit take earlier.

*A*

**CHAPTER 2**

Twenty past five, Anne-Katrine worked the pedals hard to catch up with her brother's unit. The heavy, cumbersome uniform bothered her, and she sweated like a pig underneath the warm greatcoat. The rifle she carried across her chest interfered with her arms, and she couldn't help but wonder if the person ordering it to rest there had spent as much as a minute on a bicycle.

The trip was undertaken in an eerie silence apart from the monotonous singing from the bicycle's wheels as they drove along the road. The enemy aircraft had long since left her area behind, and it seemed like she was the only living being for kilometers. Looking over the misty fields surrounding her that were all painted in shades of gray with only the faintest traces of paler colors, she found it hard to believe the country was really under threat from an advancing army - the sights, the sounds and even the smells of wet soil and distant farms were like they had always been.

She drove in the middle of the road for most of the time except when she crested small hills. The terrain she was going through wasn't undulating as such, but even the smallest hill seemed like a mountain to her due to the heavy load she had to carry, and she needed to tread the pedals extra-hard to keep a steady pace.

Free-wheeling down the far side of one of those hills, she could hear a well-tuned engine of some kind moving up behind her. She grunted and waved her arm while she swerved to the side of the road to make way.

When nothing happened, she looked over her shoulder at the fair stretch of empty road that lay behind her with no traffic whatsoever. "What the blazes?" she mumbled, once again looking ahead to keep an eye on the gently winding road.

Two minutes later, the incident was repeated as she went up another small hill, but this time she knew exactly what was going on. A short kilometer to the east of her, a twin-engined German fighter with a long, sleek fuselage rushed towards her at tree-top altitude.

"Oh, sweet mother of Jesus!" she cried and aimed for the ditch on the right-hand side of the road. Her feet fumbled with the pedals and she nearly took a tumble on the hard asphalt. She finally came to a stop and threw the bike and herself into the ditch where she buried her face in the dirt and tried to become one with the ground.
Moments later, the fighter screamed past seemingly only meters above her head. She hugged her battle helmet and let out a surprised cry at how loud such a fighter plane actually was at that close distance. Looking up once it had flown past, she saw the enemy aircraft going a kilometer or so towards the west before it gained altitude and began to swing north.

She whipped off her rifle and worked the action. At that distance, it would obviously be impossible for her to hit anything, but she moved the rifle up to her shoulder and tried to aim at the fighter in case it returned.

Anne-Katrine stayed in her ditch for what she felt was half a lifetime - in fact, only four minutes went by. The fighter was gone, but she knew it could return all too quickly if the pilot had spotted her and had recognized the silhouette of a soldier.

Letting out a nervous burst of air, she moved up to sit on her knees and put the stock of the rifle down on the ground. She craned her neck in all directions for another minute before she came to the conclusion that she really was alone. "Anne-Katrine Jensen, was this such a good idea?" she mumbled as she put the rifle around her neck, dusted off the greatcoat and began to climb back up onto the road with the bicycle.

She pulled it up to the crest of the hill before she swung her leg over the frame and exploited the slope to get back up to speed. She was soon under way, but the incident had made her jittery and she couldn't stop checking the horizon for other enemy airplanes.

Ten minutes later, a new group of the heavy three-engined transport airplanes appeared above her, but she knew they were flying too high to be able to see her. She counted twenty-four aircraft before the group left her behind. This time, they hadn't been protected by fighters. "Is that a good or a bad sign?" she mumbled as she worked the pedals hard to maintain a good speed. "Maybe the fighters are tied up with the RDAF… or maybe they've already wiped them out and there's no need for air support… dammit, if I could only find Sergeant Mehlborg's unit…"

The adrenaline that had rushed through her following the incident with the low-flying fighter gradually faded away and left her legs sore from the unusual workout. She was used to being on her feet from dawn to dusk seven days a week, but she definitely wasn't used to using her thigh muscles like that - nor her neck muscles that were already complaining from wearing the heavy battle helmet.

"Oh, I'm bound to run across Mehlborg's men sooner or later," she mumbled and forced herself to tread the pedals even harder. "When the road signs say 'Berlin, two kilometers', I've gone too far…" The odd humor made her chuckle out loud and add a few more coals to the fire.

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On and on she went, past countless brown, bare fields that all looked exactly the same. The winter had been a rough one with plenty of snow and icy winds, but most farmers had sowed winter crops and there were green sprouts on most of the fields. A few of them were equipped
with wooden or concrete troughs, and Anne-Katrine's experienced eye told her they were used for livestock rather than crops.

The fields disappeared behind her but were soon replaced by new ones that looked just like them. The repetitive landscape continued as far as the eye could see, although her line of sight was broken by the frequent small hills.

As she crested one of those hills, she spotted a new group of enemy aircraft high in the sky above her to the south. Unlike the group she had witnessed most recently, these were the twin-engined airplanes that Poul Nedergaard had identified as bombers. They were flying at a higher altitude than most of the others, and she couldn't help but wonder if they were perhaps headed for Norway some four hundred and fifty kilometers to the north of where she was.

"Twenty… twenty-one… twenty-two…" she counted, keeping one eye on the road ahead and one eye on the planes high above. "Twenty-five… twenty-six… huh… twenty-eight. Twenty-eight bombers. Goodness me, twenty-eight bombers would be enough to wipe out even a major city." She shook her head and carried on in a darker mood than before.

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A few hundred yards off the road and to the left, two men in farmers' clothing were busy cleaning a trough. When they noticed her, they put down their rakes and spades and waved at the lone soldier on the road. One of them even took off his flat cap and waved it high in the air.

Anne-Katrine waved back and trod extra-hard in the pedals to show the two men she wasn't a baby. She thought she had recognized one of them, but she wasn't sure, and she wasn't about to reveal her identity until she met up with Sergeant Mehlborg's unit - whenever that would be.

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A kilometer or two further down the road, she realized she was indeed a big baby as the long ride and the heavy load had sapped her of her energy. She was able to free-wheel down a long slope, but she couldn't get her legs to co-operate for long enough to get back up the next hill.

Grunting in frustration, she slowed down and eventually came to a halt. Instead of taking a much-needed break, she continued up the hill in a slow walk. Somewhere in the middle distance, she could hear the well-tuned purr of a fighter plane's engine, but she couldn't see anything despite craning her neck in all directions.

The morning mist had lifted from the fields, but it had turned to fog and was hanging low in the air instead. Above the mass of clouds, the early morning sun was trying to poke through, but her experienced eye told her it would take a while - not the best conditions for someone who was on the lookout for enemy aircraft.
When the engine sounds came closer, she decided to take the break after all and headed for the nearest ditch. The first she found was filled with water and soggy leaves, so she shuffled further along the road until she came across a dry spot.

Anne-Katrine dragged the bicycle down the embankment and sat on a well-placed rock. She kept vigilant, but the fighter she was still able to hear didn't seem to get any closer to her.

The lack of her regular breakfast of hot coffee and sweet oatmeal was at the forefront of her mind as her stomach growled repeatedly. Her throat was as dry as sandpaper, but she hadn't thought of bringing a canteen. What she had brought was a pack of her beloved Bristol Favorites. Taking a cigarette, she struck a match and took a deep puff in the hope the nicotine would calm her churning stomach.

Sighing, she loosened the chinstrap and took off the heavy battle helmet to get some fresh air to her head and damp hair. The muscles in her neck thanked her for it, and she reached up to give herself a brief rub-down.

After a few minutes, she realized she had to make a decision: "Should I carry on and try to accomplish what I set out to do… or should I limp home with my tail between my legs like a pitiful coward…?" Mumbling, she made the cigarette bob up and down in her mouth. She picked up a stick and toyed with it, but it was only funny for a little while.

The sound of the fighter plane's engine could still be heard in her general area, but the fog made it difficult to pinpoint the exact location. At one point, it sounded like it was getting closer to her, but moments later, it went away again.

She took the cigarette out of her mouth and knocked off some ash into the ditch. 'The coward's way is the safe way,' she thought, looking at the gray landscape surrounding her, 'but if a real war happens, it will find me no matter what I do. No one will be safe under German rule… no. I set out to defend my country, and defend my country I will.'

Nodding to herself, she took a final puff on the Bristol cigarette before she stubbed it out on a rock. She got up, put the battle helmet back on and tightened the chinstrap. Since the surrounding area was quiet, she dragged the bicycle back up onto the road. Sighing, she swung her leg over the frame and began to work the pedals to carry on traveling south.

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Cresting yet another hill, Anne-Katrine let out a deep sigh of relief. Some three hundred meters ahead of her, she spotted the familiar khaki colors of Danish soldiers who had set up a defensive position at a fork in the road. The narrow side road she had been using joined a wider one with better asphalt and proper white lines, and thus offered a good spot for an ambush.

The small unit had taken cover behind a pile of excavated dirt from a recent road works at the base of the fork and had set up a machine gun nest that had a perfect view towards the south
across the larger road. Two men were manning that, and the rest were already in position on the
ground with their rifles up and ready.

She could see the easily identifiable figure of the dour Sergeant Ernst Viggo Mehlborg standing
on the right-hand side of the pile of dirt next to the riflemen. Gesticulating, he was no doubt
chewing out one of the poor Privates.

The realization that it was about to get real made her heart thump faster in her chest, and she
upped the bicycle's pace to get down there quicker. When she free-wheeled down the final slope,
the Sergeant noticed her and waved his arm.

She got ready to get off the bicycle even while it was still running. She had barely put her boots
on the ground before the Sergeant stormed over to her with a dark look on his face.

At the best of times, the thirty-three year old Sergeant was a man one shouldn't expect would
understand the finer points of any kind of humor. Perpetually po-faced, Ernst Viggo Mehlborg
had the disposition of a raging bull and was never afraid to show it through an impressive
barrage of swearing.

He wasn't overly tall, but his broad shoulders - presently accentuated by his greatcoat - made him
look like a square piece of wood with a head attached randomly on top of it. He had sharp, drawn
features, and a pair of steel gray eyes that nobody wanted to look into for any length of time.

"Jensen!" he barked before he got close enough to see the truth. "You took your bloody time in
gettin' here! I knew that nonsense about the doctor was a cock-and-bull story! Mark my words,
Jensen, this will go into my report!"

Two steps later, the Sergeant came to an abrupt halt and simply stared at the soldier in front of
him with a jaw that grew increasingly slack. "Anne-Katrine…?" he croaked hoarsely.

"Private Jensen reporting for duty, Sergeant Mehlborg," Anne-Katrine said and tried to perform a
proper salute that she didn't quite have the hang of.

"What… in… the… seventh… layer… of hell!?" Mehlborg roared directly in Anne-Katrine's
face. The outburst had been loud enough for the rest of the unit to turn around and stare.

Before Anne-Katrine had time to respond, the Sergeant grabbed her around the arm and dragged
her away from the other soldiers with no regard for her well-being. When they were well out of
earshot of the others, he pointed at a spot on the ground and roared "Stand to Attention!"

"Sergeant-"

"Silence when I speak! Anne-Katrine Jensen, you must be a drooling retard! Don't you
understand what we're doing here?! Any minute, the whole bloody German army could be
driving up that bloody road!" - Mehlborg pointed at the larger road they were covering - "And
we have a bloody girl here playing bloody pretend! In a stolen uniform! That alone is a violation of the bloody military code! It's a bloody disgrace is what it is!"

"Sergea-"

"Silence, Jensen! Get your ass back on that bicycle and drive home! This is about to be a real war, not some bloody ladies' tea-and-muffin party at the bloody vicarage!" Growling out loud, Mehlborg grabbed Anne-Katrine by the arm again and dragged her over to the bicycle.

By now, Anne-Katrine had lost what little patience she had and yanked her arm free of Mehlborg's grip before he could push her onto the bicycle. "Sergeant Mehlborg, I am here to defend my country! What does it matter if I'm a man or a woman if I'm willing to go up against the enemy?"

"Jensen, I am trying to save your ass here," Mehlborg said in a darker, quieter tone. "When the Germans arrive… and mark my words, they will come up that road with an armored column a kilometer long… do you think they'll spare your life if they catch you in the crosshairs and see a woman? If you're taken prisoner, what do you think will happen to you when they find out you're a woman? Use your bloody head and come to your senses, Jensen!"

"I'm willing to take that risk, Sergeant!"

"You're bloody insane… a woman who wears pants and thinks she's a man. Well, you're not a man, Jensen! And women have no place on the battlefield."

"Sergeant Mehlborg, listen to me… I can shoot just as well as my brother. Isn't that what we're here for? I've shot crows in flight, I've shot rabbits and tiny squirrels at two hundred paces…"

"Oh! Squirrels!?!" the Sergeant said and for once looked like he had found the humor in something. "Bloody well done, Jensen, you've killed a bloomin' squirrel. Let me tell you something… these squirrels we're about to face will shoot back! With burning hot lead that doesn't give a damn about who it kills. You have no training, no experience… nothing. You are a liability to the men here who won't have time to hold your hand and wipe your bloody tears away when the lead starts flying. Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Anne-Katrine? Go home. Get on your bloody bicycle and go home before it's too late. And that's an order!"

The Sergeant finished his speech by grabbing the bicycle and thumping it up against Anne-Katrine's stomach. Huffing, he stomped off back to the rest of the unit who quickly turned around and looked at the road they were there to cover.

Seething didn't begin to describe the emotions that tore around inside Anne-Katrine. She clenched her jaw and ground her teeth hard so she wouldn't let out the explosive burst of vitriol that was burning at the back of her tongue.

Everything inside her demanded that she told the Sergeant a few truths about what women could really do, especially a woman who had worked as hard as any man since she had been ten years
old. Common sense engaged in a fierce wrestling match with her pride, and although the tide of war swept back and forth for a while, her pride eventually won out.

Growling out loud, she stomped after the Sergeant and intercepted him at the makeshift ambush site. "Sergeant Mehlborg," she said, straining her voice so it wouldn't turn too aggressive.

The Sergeant turned around and faced her with a look that said it had better be good or else. Around them, the men snickered but kept their eyes pointed at the road.

"Sergeant, there isn't anything my brother has done at the farm that I haven't done just as well or better. I can shoot, I can drive cars and motorcycles, I have worked straight through from dawn to dusk a hundred times managing the fields and the livestock, I can grind knives and plowshares, I'm a better mechanic than everybody I know, I can dress wounds-"

"I'll bet you can sew, too!" one of the men said, earning himself a round of laughter from his comrades.

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and shot a fiery glare at the soldier who had scored a cheap point at her expense. It was one of her old adversaries from the region, Ole Thor Didriksen. At twenty-three, the round-faced Didriksen still lived with his mother when he wasn't in the service, and he wasn't known to be the bravest of the lot.

"Yes I can, dammit! We all know your mama still has to do it for you!"

Now the joke was on the other shoe, and Ole Thor blushed cherry red while his comrades laughed at him. He looked straight ahead and mumbled something about women in general and Anne-Katrine Jensen in particular.

Sergeant Mehlborg watched the exchange with great interest before he held up his hands to cut off Anne-Katrine. "An impressive sales pitch, Miss Jensen. One that would have worked wonders at the Harvest Fair… but not here. The front is no place for women. Go back to your farm like I ordered you to. Now."

Anne-Katrine's jaw worked hard as she digested the Sergeant's words, but she eventually let out a sigh and nodded at Mehlborg. She would just have to find another way to fight the enemy. Before she could turn around in defeat, the familiar sounds of two Nimbus motorcycles reached their ears.

"Look sharp, men," Sergeant Mehlborg barked, looking over Anne-Katrine's shoulder at the reinforcements that crested the hill on the small side road. "It's the Senior Lieutenant. Suck in your gut, Didriksen! And Jensen… impersonating a soldier is a punishable offense. Keep quiet and try to act like you know what you're doing!" Grunting, Mehlborg cast a hard glare at Anne-Katrine before he stomped away from her to intercept the two motorcycles.

Anne-Katrine furrowed her brow, unsure of what the arrival of an officer would mean for her. The three men on the motorcycles were in full combat uniform with additional goggles and
leather gloves with cuffs that reached halfway up their arms. Both motorcycles had sidecars, but only the second one was of a regular type. The first one had been converted to a gun carriage and carried a 20mm Madsen cannon.

The Senior Lieutenant drove the motorcycle with the cannon and came to a halt next to Sergeant Mehlborg. The two men saluted each other before Mehlborg pointed at his unit - and Anne-Katrine.

The woman in the firing line gulped and scrunched up her face. She didn't know what to do with her hands, so she held them passively down her sides to make it appear she had done it all a thousand times before.

The Senior Lieutenant nodded and drove the motorcycle further down the hill towards the ambush site. He parked and got off without paying attention to Anne-Katrine at all apart from a quick salute that she tried to respond to in kind.

Sergeant Mehlborg ran next to the second motorcycle that was eventually parked behind the wall of dirt so it would be out of sight from the road. Mehlborg stomped straight past Anne-Katrine as well and went up behind the line of riflemen. "Attention! Remain in your firing position!" he barked, turning to shoot Anne-Katrine a dark glare.

Anne-Katrine only knew vaguely what to do, but she stood up straight and kept her arms passive. She assumed a distant stare so she wouldn't appear too interested.

"Listen up, men," the officer said as he took off his goggles and gloves and put them on the motorcycle's seat. "I'm Senior Lieutenant Rudolf Preiss of the 2nd Infantry Battalion, 4th Company. I am usually not attached to your unit, but the high command is in a shambles at present so the regular detail structure has taken a hit. I am hereby assuming command over the unit until further notice."

Anne-Katrine could hear the men groaning under their breaths at the Senior Lieutenant's words and his upper-crust Copenhagen accent that clashed severely with the broader, rural dialect spoken in South Jutland. She wondered if she hadn't just gone from the frying pan and into the fire. The Senior Lieutenant was a dapper man in his early thirties with slick hair and a pencil-thin mustache that he promptly smoothed down once his hands were free. His narrow face didn't reveal too many emotions, but his eyes were alive and appeared interested in his surroundings.

"As you can see," the officer continued, "we have brought a 20mm Madsen that should be set up to cover the road. Andreasen, Larsen… see to it."

The two men who had come with the Lieutenant saluted him and began at once to roll the motorcycle with the gun carriage closer to the large pile of dirt. Two of Sergeant Mehlborg's riflemen needed to shift their position to the left to get everything to fit.

Unbuttoning his greatcoat, Senior Lieutenant Preiss produced a rolled-up wad of maps that he held up in the air. It was clear by the look on his face that it wasn't a satisfactory solution, so he
moved over to the other motorcycle and spread the maps out across the wide saddle. "Sergeant Mehlborg," he said, holding his finger at the map so it wouldn't blow away.

"Sir," Mehlborg said and strode over there. Anne-Katrine kept standing where she was although she knew full well it would look peculiar and perhaps even suspicious. She glanced to her left at the soldiers, but they didn't offer much help. Ole Thor Didriksen huffed and deliberately looked away from her, but there were other faces she knew from the towns in the region that were friendlier.

"Jensen! What are you standing there for, man? Get into position!" Mehlborg suddenly barked, pointing angrily at the rear side of the pile of dirt.

Anne-Katrine saluted him the best she could and spun around on her heel. She strode over to the large pile of dirt and crouched down next to two other soldiers from the unit. She took off her rifle and held it ready without working the bolt action. Processing what the Sergeant had actually said to her, she came to the conclusion that Mehlborg could have sold her out, but hadn't. He had said 'man' to protect her, and she narrowed her eyes and tried to pay back the favor by looking like a consummate professional.

"Very well, Sergeant," Preiss continued, unaware that the unit he had assumed control over had a unique soldier in its midst. "Latest intelligence reports say the Germans have indeed crossed the border in four zones. Padborg, Kruså, Rens and Sæd, here, here, here and here." While he spoke, he pressed an index finger down onto the map to illustrate his words.

Sergeant Mehlborg scrunched up his face and gave his superior officer a long, dark look. Unlike the dapper Senior Lieutenant, Ernst Viggo Mehlborg was a local who had spent his entire life in the region - he didn't need someone from clear across the country to tell him where those four border stations were.

The Senior Lieutenant didn't see the look and continued: "You have chosen a good spot to set up the ambush, Sergeant Mehlborg. The field of view is excellent and the pile of dirt will give us some protection. Our orders are to stall the German progress for as long as possible. Reinforcements cannot be expected. When the situation gets too hot, we're to withdraw to the garrison where we'll make a last stand. If we're unable to make it back to the garrison, we're to find a suitable site somewhere along the way and once again engage the advancing forces."

"Yes, Sir," Mehlborg said, scrunching up his face as he looked at his meager unit that didn't have the best of reputations. The men had been called up for service in September 1939, but since then, they'd had no less than four different Company commanders who had all had different ideas as to the running of the units. The working conditions had been muddled at best, downright impossible at worst. Grunting, the Sergeant looked back at the officer. "What kind of German forces should we expect, Senior Lieutenant?"

"We can expect to face units from the Germans' 170th Division, possibly the 391st or 399th Infantry Regiments. They will most likely have armored support in the shape of light reconnaissance vehicles model Triple Two. That's where the 20mm Madsen comes in. Also, we
have heard unconfirmed reports that their 11th Motorized Regiment is still south of the border moving towards Tønder in the west. Why they're late, I have no idea. Perhaps they have been held back in reserve in case the resistance will be stronger than expected. In any case, they're moving away from us so they shouldn't be a threat here."

"Light reconnaissance vehicles are manageable, Sir. Do you have any intelligence on enemy tanks?" Mehlborg said, looking from the map and down the main road that led south.

Senior Lieutenant Preiss folded up the map and stuck it inside his greatcoat. "Not concrete intelligence, Sergeant. But from what we know, several Panzer groups have formed just across the border near Flensburg in the last couple of days. Panzer mark I."

"The 20mm Madsen can't do a thing about the armor on the mark I's, Lieutenant."

"I'm aware of that fact, Sergeant Mehlborg. Let's hope they won't deploy them here," Preiss said and buttoned his greatcoat. He saluted the Sergeant and walked over to supervise his own men who were setting up the cannon.

Anne-Katrine had heard all that. She had heard it, but she didn't like it a bit. A metallic taste grew in her mouth that she knew stemmed from worry or even fear. The battle helmet suddenly weighed a ton on her head, but taking it off would be even worse as it would only draw unwanted attention to herself.

"Jensen, over here," Sergeant Mehlborg said and pointed at a spot some distance away from where the Senior Lieutenant watched his men work.

Anne-Katrine furrowed her brow and moved away from her position. She just heard Ole Thor Didriksen give her a mumbled parting shot, but she had weightier things on her mind than playing his silly games. She went over to the Sergeant and attempted to salute him.

"Stand at Attention when you're being spoken to, Jensen," Mehlborg said with a dour expression on his face. When Anne-Katrine tried the best she knew, the dour expression only grew deeper and more resigned. "Never mind… bloody civilians."

The Sergeant briefly glanced at the officer before he leaned in towards Anne-Katrine and spoke in a quieter tone. "Much as I would still like to send you packing, I can't do it now with the Senior Lieutenant here. You got what you wanted. I hope you won't choke on it. Mark my words, Anne-Katrine, I will be watching your every move. If you get hysterical and do anything that will endanger the lives of the men I'm responsible for, God help you. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Noted, Sergeant. It won't happen."

"That's easy for you to say now, Jensen. You'll sing a different song once the lead is flying, I'll guarantee it. I don't think you understand the gravity of the situation here… look around! We are
eight men. Eight thousand men may come marching up that bloody road in a little while! So
don't you dare say you won't soil your pants, because I know you will!"

"Serg."

"Keep your trap shut unless I ask you a question, Jensen! When will you bloody learn to do as I
tell you?!! When the fighting starts, I'm ordering you to keep far, far away from the dangers. The
deepest ditch is the safest place for you. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Good. Now get back to the unit. Don't let the Senior Lieutenant find out you're a woman. He'll
take it out on me… and then I'll take it out on you."

Anne-Katrine sighed and nodded at the angry man. "Yes, Sergeant. I understand." She didn't
even bother saluting the irate Mehlborg who stomped back to his unit. After a few seconds, she
shuffled after him with a pit of fire burning in her stomach from the harsh treatment.

The soldiers that had arrived with the Senior Lieutenant - Karl-Bertel Andreasen and August
Larsen; the cannon operator and loader, respectively - toiled away at setting up the heavy,
cumber some cannon. When it was finally in place, they found rocks and large sticks and jammed
them behind the wheels of the Nimbus to prevent it from rolling backwards when it was exposed
to the cannon's recoil.

The operation was completed by August Larsen running over to the second Nimbus to pick up
several boxes of armor-piercing shells from the sidecar. Once he had loaded the first shell into
the chamber, he and Andreasen moved behind the cannon and awaited further orders.

On the opposite side of the large pile of dirt, the machine gun - complete with a curved thirty-
round magazine on top - was ready for action as well. The gun covered the same stretch of the
road as the 20mm cannon but was far more mobile and could easily move from side to side as
well as up and down if necessary.

Sergeant Mehlborg personally verified the machine gun and the man behind the trigger. The pile
of spare magazines was given a thorough check as well, as was the soldier responsible for
keeping the magazines coming during the fire fight. Satisfied, the Sergeant crawled into place
behind the pile of dirt and found a pair of binoculars in his backpack. He offered Anne-Katrine a
quick glare before his attention was put back on the road.

As the dour Sergeant put his arms on top of the pile of dirt and moved the binoculars slowly
across the road they were monitoring, Anne-Katrine gulped heavily and clutched her rifle. She
didn't have a watch with her - she had left the pocket watch she had inherited from her father at
home for safe-keeping - but her gut told her the hands of time were creeping towards six o'clock.

The air still held the odd, unnatural calm that had persisted throughout the entire morning, even
Anne-Katrine could feel that. The site for the planned ambush was so quiet she could hear the
calm breathing of the other soldiers and the occasional, faint metallic clang when their weapons were moved. Something would be going down before too long, she was certain of that.

The distant sound of a heavy, motorized vehicle approaching slowly made her clench her jaw and await the inevitable shooting. She counted the seconds while it got closer, but she had to admit it didn't exactly sound like a modern engine like those the Germans would be expected to use. It was closer to an old, rattling truck engine - like the one that was in the flatbed truck from the dairy plant.

Soon, it was revealed she had been right. The old, lumbering truck came rumbling over the crest of the hill and down the side road behind them with a full load of milk churns. The driver activated the turning arrow and intended to turn left, towards the south. Anne-Katrine recognized the truck driver and promptly looked away so he wouldn't call her name - and her bluff - if he saw her.

Sergeant Mehlborg got up and ran over to the truck. He jumped up onto the step below the door and poked his head in through the open window. Gesticulating towards the south, he spoke to the driver for a few seconds before he jumped off and moved away. Soon, the driver of the flatbed truck drove around the unit of soldiers and turned right onto the main road instead of going south like he had wanted.

Although some dust was kicked up by the truck's tires, Anne-Katrine let out a sigh of relief. Unfortunately, her relief was short-lived as Mehlborg came back to her position and shot her a dark glare that told her in no uncertain terms that he would rather wring her neck than allow her to fight.

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Several minutes later, the Sergeant grew impatient and lowered the binoculars. Grunting, he moved away from the pile of dirt and ran hunched-over to the Senior Lieutenant. He whispered something into the officer's ear that made the Lieutenant nod - which in turn made Mehlborg run back to the men.

"Everybody, stand down… but stay quiet and vigilant," he said in a calmer tone than usual.

The men - and Anne-Katrine - let out the breath they had been holding and relaxed just a little bit. Everybody continued to keep their rifles ready in case the calm was as deceptive as they expected it to be. Anne-Katrine briefly poked her head above the pile of dirt to take a look at the main road that ran past it.

From their vantage point, they had a clear view of the road for nearly a kilometer until it went out of sight over one of the numerous gentle hills that riddled the area. The vegetation along the road was scarce and consisted mostly of poorly maintained shrubbery and low bushes. There was a two-foot wide strip of grass on either side of the asphalt, but it was closer to brown than green with all the rain the area had received in the weeks leading up to the fateful day.
The road itself was wide and smooth, Anne-Katrine knew that from driving on it in a borrowed truck filled with livestock on their way to the cattle show the year before. If it was wide enough for a cattle truck, it would be wide enough for a truck carrying soldiers.

Sighing, she lowered her head and looked at the men around her. She recognized some, but not all of them. The first time her brother had been home on leave to work at the farm, he had told her that almost all of the companies at the garrison were made up of young men from all over the country - except his own unit, the 1st, which was exclusively local boys for historical reasons.

The members of the small unit were all young men in their early twenties with smooth, carefree faces that hadn't yet been marked by time or the horrors seen in combat. The chubby Didriksten she already knew, although being in the service had shaved a good number of kilograms off his gut. The next soldier, the one manning the machine gun, was a real charmer with sparkling eyes and pale brown eyebrows. The final one on the left was more boorish, with coarse features and a heavy brow. At the other side of the pile of dirt, the final man of the amputated unit had delicate features and fine, slender fingers that looked out of place holding a rifle.

Senior Lieutenant Preiss, the cannon operator Andreasen and the loader Larsen were several years older than the rest and seemed curiously misplaced in the company of the younger men.

The man behind the machine gun felt Anne-Katrine's eyes on him, and he smiled at her and reached out to offer a handshake. "Hello, Miss Jensen," he said quietly in a pleasant voice that held a moderate local dialect. "I'm Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen. You probably don't remember, but we met last year at the midsummer fair. I was one of the judges at the horseshoe contest that you won."

Anne-Katrine smiled and shook the soldier's hand. Winning the horseshoe-throwing competition was a fond memory for her because she had beaten a field of drunken, bragging men who had all claimed to be far better at the game than the sole 'girl.' "I'm sorry, I don't remember you… but I certainly remember the contest. Hello, Vilhelm."

Vilhelm grinned and nudged the man on his left who was responsible for loading the magazines on the machine gun. "This is Knud-Erik Kristensen… say hello to Miss Jensen, Knud-Erik."

"Hello, Miss Jensen," the boorish man said in a dialect that was appropriately heavy and slow.

Anne-Katrine smiled and reached over to shake Knud-Erik's hand as well.

"Didde-riksen you've already spoken to," Vilhelm continued, poking Ole Thor in the side which earned himself an angry grunt. "Yes Sir, our Didde-riksen certainly knows how to charm the ladies… don't you?"

The man in question rolled halfway over so he could look at Solbjerg-Hansen and Anne-Katrine. The way he furrowed his brow and broke out in an ungainly grimace when he looked the female volunteer in the eye left very little doubt as to his opinion about her and about women's place in
society in general. "Shut up, Vilhelm," he growled. "I can't believe there's a girl here. Girls aren't strong enough to go to war."

"Mmmm, I don't know," Vilhelm said, winking at Anne-Katrine whose lips had moved back in a grimace matching that displayed by Didriksen, "you should have seen her at the arm wrestling contest…"

"That's not what I meant!" Didriksen said hoarsely to keep his voice down. "I mean girls aren't mentally strong enough. It's been scientifically proven that the female brain is inferior to the male brain, especially when it comes to crises and conflicts."

Now Anne-Katrine's jaw really started working. She was about to offer the little pipsqueak a large piece of her mind when she happened to cast a sideways glance at Sergeant Mehlborg who was looking back at them. She thought better of addressing the issue directly, but an evil plan did form in her mind. "I need to write that down, Didriksen…" she said with a fair amount of sugar in her voice. "'Scientifically proven.' How do you spell that?"

"S-a-i-e-n…" Ole Thor Didriksen started, but soon discovered he didn't know how to spell it properly. "Oh, go to hell!" he growled and turned back to the road.

Vilhelm and Knud-Erik both offered Anne-Katrine a broad smile that made her feel better. Moments later, all thought of fun and games went by the wayside when they all heard an engine coming towards them from somewhere south on the main road.

"Heads down, rifles up!" Mehlborg ordered, prompting everybody to work the bolts on their rifles. "Hold your fire until my command. Let's see what's going on first."

Anne-Katrine pressed herself into the pile of dirt and slammed her eyes shut. She too held the rifle ready, but kept herself well out of sight. The engine noise came closer and closer but suddenly stopped some distance from the site of the ambush. The engine continued to idle, and Anne-Katrine thought she recognized the characteristic clattering of a two-cylinder motorcycle engine. It certainly wasn't a car, a truck or a heavier vehicle.

The tension that hung in the air between the soldiers could be cut with a knife, and Anne-Katrine began to chew on her lips. She realized the mounting tension had made her forget all about breathing, so she took in a lungful and let it out as quietly as she could.

Next to her, Sergeant Mehlborg crept up and peeked over the edge of the pile of dirt. "That's a German, all right," he whispered under his breath.

Anne-Katrine knew he was just talking to himself, but the news that the enemy had found them manifested itself like a punch in the gut. Licking her lips, she looked up at the Sergeant who was still peering over the edge only a few feet away from her.
Out on the main road, the German revved the engine once, then a second time which made Anne-Katrine suspect he was trying to find a gear. Her theory was proven correct when the engine note changed and eventually grew more distant.

"He's going back. He never got within firing range. It was a reconnaissance patrol," Mehlborg said and slid down behind the pile of dirt. He adjusted his helmet and looked at his soldiers who all shifted around to release some of the tension while they could. "Men, I don't think he spotted us. If he had, he would have left faster. All right. That means they're coming."

Hearing that, Anne-Katrine's heart performed a thumping double-beat and she had to put a hand on her chest to get it back under control. She had been eager to defend her country - now it looked she was about to get her chance.

The Sergeant continued: "Senior Lieutenant Preiss, may I have a word?"

While Sergeant Mehlborg hurried over to the officer to discuss the details of their operation, Anne-Katrine pushed back her battle helmet and wiped her damp forehead. A cold shiver ran down her back that spread to the rest of her body until it pooled in her gut as a block of ice that slowly turned hot.

Gulping, she stared at the borrowed uniform she was wearing, at their weapons, at the motorcycles and finally at the men she shared the situation with. It finally dawned on her she was about to gain firsthand knowledge of what it was like to be in a shooting war.

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**CHAPTER 3**

When the clock hit nine minutes to six exactly, the ground started to tremble and the eerie calm was finally broken by a mounting din of metallic noise that approached from the south. The noise had a direct influence on them all, not least Anne-Katrine who clutched her rifle until her knuckles turned white. Like she had been ordered to, she pressed herself even further into the pile of dirt to be out of the firing line.

Sergeant Mehlborg and Senior Lieutenant Preiss pulled out their binoculars and studied the main road near the small hill. The fog had lifted enough for the binoculars to be effective, but the enemy hadn't yet crested the hill and come out in the open.

The engine noises were so close it was possible to discern several different vehicles. The truck engines in the group seemed to run in a low gear up the hill, but there were others that ran freer. Anne-Katrine thought she could smell the exhaust fumes, but she shook her head to get rid of the foolish notion.
"Men," the Sergeant said in a quiet but insistent tone, "they're here. Remain vigilant. Watch for air support. Jensen…"

Anne-Katrine looked at him with wide open eyes.

"That's your job. Watch the skies for enemy aircraft. Call out if you see any fighters," the Sergeant continued before he put away his binoculars and got his rifle ready.

"Yes, Sergeant Mehlborg," Anne-Katrine mumbled, clutching her own rifle.

At the 20mm cannon, Senior Lieutenant Preiss patted the shoulder of the cannon operator Andreasen and inched away from the gun so he wouldn't be impacted by the recoil when the firing would commence. The officer moved his binoculars back up and scouted the terrain and their opponents.

It wasn't long before an oddly shaped, dark-gray armored vehicle crested the hill and came their way. The first vehicle was joined by an identical one, then a few motorcycles with machine guns mounted on the sidecars, then a long line of open trucks carrying troops in the familiar gray uniforms.

"We have spotted the enemy," Preiss said to the unit. "Nine hundred meters and closing. 170th Division… 391st Regiment as predicted," he continued, studying the regimental banners and pennants flying from the two vehicles up front. "Two armored cars at the point. Reconnaissance vehicles model Triple Two. Motorcycles… then trucks. No tracked vehicles that I can see."

Down behind the pile of dirt, Anne-Katrine's heart thumped so hard in her chest that she was sure the rest of the unit would be able to hear it. If nothing else, Sergeant Mehlborg would notice and chew her out like he had threatened to do if she ever got hysterical. She glanced over at the Sergeant, but the dour man was too busy following the events out on the road to notice. The other soldiers were tense but calm, except for Ole Thor Didriksen who couldn't lie still behind his rifle.

"Get ready, everybody. Hold your fire until the enemy is within range," Senior Lieutenant Preiss continued.

The response from Sergeant Mehlborg was a grumbled "But of course!" that made his men shift around nervously - Anne-Katrine included.

The Senior Lieutenant hadn't noticed the small jab at him and leaned down towards the cannon operator of the 20mm Madsen cannon. "Andreasen… single shots only to save ammunition. Armor-piercing shells. Make them count."

"Yes, Sir," Karl-Bertel Andreasen said, moving even closer behind the large, circular fore sight. Behind him, the loader August Larsen was already holding the next shell.
Just when Anne-Katrine thought it couldn't get any more dangerous, her shoulder was squeezed by the dapper Senior Lieutenant who leaned down towards her. "I can see you're afraid, son. Don't be ashamed, we're all nervous. It's God's way of telling us to be ready for the fight," he said in a fatherly tone.

"Uh… yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir," Anne-Katrine replied. She tried to speak in a deep, manly register, but her voice trembled too much. Preiss just smiled at her and gave her shoulder another squeeze before he moved back over to the right-hand side of the pile of dirt.

Anne-Katrine rolled her eyes and let out a sigh of relief. She continued to scan the skies like the Sergeant had ordered her to, but the fog had turned into a low cloud cover that obscured most of the view.

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"Three hundred meters and closing," Senior Lieutenant Preiss said but didn't add the expected order to fire.

Anne-Katrine's breath came in short, shallow bursts. She forced herself to close her mouth and breathe through her nose so she wouldn't look like a panting, terrified little lap dog. Her heart hadn't let up its forced cadence and was trying to beat its way out of her chest. Every muscle inside her was clenched, and she could almost feel how a projectile would drill its way through her flesh and bones. She looked around at the others to see how they were coping and saw to her great surprise that the men were still calm, if tense.

"Andreasen," the officer continued in a quiet, insistent voice, "commence firing."

"Sir," the cannon operator said and aimed the cannon at the first of the two armored reconnaissance vehicles.

The world seemed to come to a standstill for Anne-Katrine in the seconds before Andreasen executed the order. When the 20mm Madsen cannon fired, it did so with a vicious, growling bark that was far louder than she had anticipated - as a result, she jerked to the side and nearly lost her grip on her rifle. It didn't do anything for her heart, and neither did the dark look on Sergeant Mehlborg's face when she bumped into him by accident.

On the road, the shell screamed towards the first of the two armored vehicles. It impacted on the front just beneath the turret-like structure at the top and exploded in a shower of white sparks and orange flames. A split second later, the armor-piercing shell had penetrated the vehicle's sturdy skin and exploded inside with a hollow boom. Control was lost at once, and the vehicle swerved off the road and went head-first into the ditch on the far side.

At once, orders were barked from up and down the enemy column. Scores of infantrymen jumped off the trucks and spread out along the road. The second armored vehicle drove around the wreck and fired its protected machine gun at the bushes opposite the Danish soldiers in the belief the shot had come from that direction.
The surprise attack on the advancing force had been a success, but there was no time to celebrate. Within five seconds of the initial impact, Sergeant Mehlborg raised his arm in the air and let out a resounding cry of "Open fire!" that sent the small unit into their first taste of combat.

The men behind the rifles and the machine gun opened fire on the enemy with devastating effect. Several German soldiers fell before they could get into position in the ditch or behind the vehicles, but it didn't take them long to regroup and return fire.

Burning hot lead flew in both directions, thumping into the pile of dirt Anne-Katrine was hiding behind, or zinging through the air with a faintly melodic tone. She clenched her jaw hard and ducked her head as far down as she could. Clumps of dirt and little pebbles were kicked up on the ground behind them when the bullets impacted on the soil.

Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen kept firing short bursts of three or four rounds at a time from the machine gun, and the noises it created were nothing short of deafening. The others in the unit fired their rifles again and again, but the bolt action weapons were far slower and far less effective than the machine gun. Spent brass casings piled up next to each of them, and the stench of cordite tore through the nostrils of everyone there.

At one point, the machine gun stopped its infernal rattling, and Anne-Katrine whipped her head around to see if anything had happened to the young man behind the trigger. She needn't have worried, because Vilhelm resumed firing the customary short bursts as soon as Knud-Erik had clicked a new magazine in place on top of the instrument of death.

In the meantime, their opponents had regrouped and had turned the last remaining armored vehicle around. The machine gun that was mounted in the turret was located higher than those on their motorcycles and could shoot over the top of the pile of dirt, so it was a far larger threat than the other weapons.

The threat manifested itself at once as a row of bullet hits tore across the top of the pile, sending clumps of dirt raining down onto Anne-Katrine and the men in the vicinity. A second row of bullet hits came at once, causing even more chaos and prompting Sergeant Mehlborg to throw himself down onto his stomach and crawl over to the 20mm cannon. "Andreasen, take out that bloody Triple Two!" he barked, grabbing the cannon operator's shoulder.

The Senior Lieutenant nodded his acceptance, and Andreasen and Larsen put down their rifles and hustled back to move the Nimbus with the gun carriage into a new firing position. Before it could swing around to get the armored vehicle into its sights, a third row of bullet hits smashed into the pile of dirt underlining the severe threat.

"Fire at will, Andreasen!" Mehlborg barked, ducking to find cover. Larsen loaded a second armor-piercing shell and patted the cannon operator's shoulder. Moments later, a new, but just as vicious, bark came from the cannon which sent the shell screaming across the road on a perfect trajectory towards the armored vehicle.
The stationary reconnaissance vehicle was nearly thrown backwards by the impact that resulted in a shower of white sparks and orange flames like in the first strike. Barely a heartbeat later, the roof hatch blew out as a fireball erupted from the vehicle and created a mushroom cloud that billowed upwards. The fireball was followed by black smoke that rose from the destroyed machine.

Anne-Katrine shook her head to get her ears to work again after the second shot from the cannon. Out on the road, their opponents seemed to regroup again, as the intense pressure on the ambush site grew less.

One of the German motorcycles tried to bypass the defensive position to get a better angle for the machine gun mounted on its sidecar, but Vilhelm paid attention to the proceedings and cut down the two soldiers manning it with a longer than usual burst from his own machine gun. Riderless, the motorcycle went straight into the ditch where it turned over.

Anne-Katrine could hear the German officers barking commands to their men, and it resulted in a brief pause in the firing. She could hear the characteristic sound of nobnailed boots running across asphalt, proving they were regrouping once more. Her breath still came in shallow bursts, but with the destruction of the second armored vehicle, the direct threat to the pile of dirt she was hiding behind had grown less.

"Ease off the MG to save ammo!" Sergeant Mehlborg barked, and Vilhelm stopped firing at once though he kept vigilant. The riflemen around him kept up their fire, and Didriksen - of all people - was able to gun down a German officer who had tried to peek over the edge of a truck.

The chubby soldier could barely believe his luck, and he took his finger off the trigger and thumped his fist into the ground several times while he let out a series of joyful whoops.

"Didriksen!" Mehlborg hissed, emphasizing every syllable in the soldier's name. "Save the cheering for later, you imbecile! And keep the rifle ready!"

Didriksen didn't hear the Sergeant's command at first due to his celebration, and Mehlborg moved left to make the chubby soldier aware that he had been spoken to.

Mehlborg moving and the brief lull in the fighting meant that Anne-Katrine had room to see what went on at the other side of the road. Gulping down her fear, she held the rifle ready and crept up the rear side of the pile of dirt. She knew her battle helmet would be exposed, but she had to look to get an impression of what had gone down so far.

She only moved her eyes a centimeter or two above the upper edge of the pile of dirt, but it was enough to get a clear picture of the battleground. The wrecks of the two armored vehicles that had been taken out by the cannon were fifty meters apart and were effectively blocking the road. Both were well-ablaze. The wheels on the motorcycle that Vilhelm had knocked out were still spinning down in the ditch but were going slower by the second.
On the left towards the south, another motorcycle with a sidecar was kept waiting in front of a long line of trucks stretching all the way out to the small hill a short kilometer away.

Anne-Katrine moved her rifle up and tried to aim at the only enemy she could see clearly, the rider on the remaining motorcycle. He was too far away for the shot to be effective, so she lowered the rifle with a disappointed grunt.

In the following second, three things happened at once. First, she heard one of the men yelling "Enemy contact dead ahead!" at the top of his lungs; then she saw a host of odd, little blinking lights from the ditch across the road, and finally, the world around her came alive with hot lead zinging through the air and clumps of dirt being kicked up from all around her precarious position.

A pebble or something similar thumped into her battle helmet and knocked the heavy accessory askew. She flinched but didn't scream. Instead, her finger instinctively squeezed the trigger which sent a potshot across the road, but she had no idea if she hit anything.

Another second later, she felt a pair of strong hands around her waist pulling her down while the machine gun and all the rifles they had sent a barrage of lead onto the unit of Germans who had popped up out of nowhere. She slid down the rear side of the pile of dirt and stared directly into Sergeant Mehlborg's angry, gray eyes. For once, she felt it most prudent to apologize to the dour man for her stupidity, but he moved away before she could do so.

The odd, little blinking lights she had seen had been muzzle flashes, and she had been within a centimeter of becoming the unit's first casualty in battle. Gulping down the sour taste that had formed in her mouth, she reached up to adjust her battle helmet.

Lead screamed through the air from the Danish soldiers and the Germans involved in the surprise counter-assault. Further down the road, the officers in the armored column took advantage of the new flank and sent a few dozen infantrymen closer to the ambush site. Hunched over, they ran on the grassy verges of the road carrying rifles and the feared rapid-fire machine gun, the Spandau.

Mehlborg noticed and cursed out loud in a crude language that would have made most ladies faint on the spot. "Left flank! MG, pay attention to your left!" he barked, aiming and taking shots at the approaching infantrymen with his rifle.

Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen cursed as well and moved the machine gun around and to the left. He fired longer bursts than usual and was able to get at least five Germans before the others dove head-first into the ditches to avoid the lead.

Anne-Katrine sat with her back to the action, and she followed the developing combat to her right with clenched teeth. A terrified scream close to her made her jerk around and stare to her left. Johannes Ancher, the man with the delicate looks and slender fingers, cried out as blood spewed from a wound on his neck. He dropped his rifle and curled himself up into a ball.
"Oh hell!" Anne-Katrine croaked, quickly sweeping her own rifle around her shoulders to get it out of the way. Though she was forced to stick her head out into the storm of lead, she was at Ancher's side in an instant and wrapped her strong hands around the young man's slender waist.

Grunting out loud because of the bad angle she had to work in, she dragged him backwards and into safety behind the pile of dirt. The gap he left behind in the firing line was filled by August Larsen who left the cannon behind momentarily.

It was clear to Anne-Katrine that Johannes Ancher had suffered a severe shock from taking the hit. Crying like a little boy, he tried to swat away her hands when she wanted to check the wound on his neck that bled profusely and tainted the collar of his greatcoat crimson.

Without hesitation, she tore open Johannes' backpack and found the medical kit they all carried. The few bandages and the swabs of cotton wouldn't do much good, but she knelt down next to him and pressed the cotton against his neck to soak up as much of the blood as she could.

The Germans at the other side of the road seemed to mind that she was trying to save a life as they soon laid down an intense blanket of fire right at the spot on the pile of dirt she was crouching down behind.

Baring her teeth in a worried grimace at the constant clatter of bullet hits on the soil - not to mention the occasional ricochet that screamed through the air - she ducked down as far as she could and waited for Vilhelm to convince the Germans to look elsewhere.

When the air was less polluted with lead, she resumed working on the injured man. She obviously wasn't a qualified doctor, but she had dressed enough wounds at the farm where incidents and accidents were inevitable to know what she was doing. Though Johannes resisted her to the last, the cotton swabs were effective in soaking up the blood. Once the flow slowed, she used the last remaining swab to clean the wound so she could see how badly injured the young man was.

It turned out the gunshot injury was a flesh wound, and not even a deep one at that. The projectile nicking Johannes Ancher had most likely been deflected off the inside of his battle helmet as an angry red stripe presented itself down across the temple and cheek on his left side. When it had met resistance at the base of the neck, it had grazed the fleshy part but hadn't dug in at all before it had left him behind. "You lucky, lucky boy," Anne-Katrine said, squeezing the wounded man's shoulder.

Johannes didn't appear to think he had been quite that lucky, because he was still crying his eyes out. The news that he was basically all right made him calm down, but he kept on sniffling. "Th-thank you," he croaked, reaching up to wipe his eyes with slender, trembling fingers.

"You're welcome," Anne-Katrine said, wrapping the clean bandage around his neck and securing it with two safety clamps. After checking that it was on properly, she handed Johannes his rifle so he could defend himself. The young man initially seemed reluctant to carry the weapon, but it only lasted for a few seconds.
Sergeant Mehlborg came over to check up on the injury. He gave Anne-Katrine's handiwork a quick once-over before he nodded at her as a silent sign of approval. Before Anne-Katrine had time to respond, he slapped a new five-round frame into his rifle and crawled on to fill the gap in the firing line so August Larsen could concentrate on operating the 20mm cannon.

"And you're welcome too, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine mumbled under her breath as she squeezed Johannes' shoulder again. The young man seemed calmer, so she crawled the other way to be nearer Vilhelm and Knud-Erik, and further away from the cannon in case it sent out another one of those vicious, ear-splitting barks.

Not a minute later, the first blood that had been spilled paled into insignificance compared to the rest of the problems that suddenly befell the unit. The group of German soldiers who were entrenched at the other side of the road whipped up such a storm of lead that Mehlborg's men - and woman - had to keep their heads well down to be out of harms' way.

Two German soldiers took advantage of the counterstrike by commandeering a motorcycle where they mounted the Spandau rapid-fire machine gun onto the appropriate brackets on the sidecar. As the firing from the team in the ditch increased to provide cover, the two men accelerated towards the group and let the machine gun spew an endless stream of burning hot death.

Sergeant Mehlborg saw the danger, but before he could warn Solbjerg-Hansen at their own machine gun, he got a bullet in the arm that made him spin around like a top. For a heartbeat, he just stood there with a poor grip on his rifle, but then he fell down. First on his knees, then on the side that had been shot.

Anne-Katrine opened her mouth to cry out the Sergeant's name, but the frenetic sound of the German machine gun - commonly referred to as the Spandau because of the district in Berlin where it was produced - drowned her out. Bullets zinged past right above her head, and she was pinned down so effectively she couldn't even breathe without tasting the danger.

Right in front of her, Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen let out a brief cry and jerked backwards. A squirt of blood that tainted everything in its path briefly shot out from the bottom of the battle helmet like a morbid crimson fountain. The machine gun fell out of his limp hand and became silent. A wisp of smoke rose from the barrel that suddenly pointed skyward when the stock didn't have a shoulder to lean on.

"Keep that MG firing!" Senior Lieutenant Preiss cried from the other side of the pile of dirt. "Andreasen! Aim at that motorcycle! Shoot, man! Shoot!"

Larsen quickly loaded a high-explosive shell into the 20mm Madsen cannon, but when Andreasen pulled the trigger, the weapon just clicked. A panicked cry of "Misfire!" was heard from the cannon operator, and Larsen immediately went to work trying to un-jam the cannon by rocking the loading mechanism back and forth.
It was a gift to the two Germans on the motorcycle who came closer and closer with their Spandau machine gun still spewing fire and death. Small flames escaped the perforated barrel as it released its deadly load to give it a demonic quality.

Anne-Katrine aimed her rifle at the man controlling the Spandau and tried to take a potshot, but it went wide. She frantically worked the bolt and shot again. The second shot was at least closer, but it ricocheted off the motorcycle without causing any harm to anyone - all it did was to leave a dent in a fender. A moment later, the Spandau was aimed at her and she had to bury her face in the dirt so she wouldn't suffer the same fate as Vilhelm.

"Didn't you hear me?!" the Senior Lieutenant cried in a voice that grew increasingly frenetic. "Keep that damn MG firing! That's an order!"

The least likely man in the squad, Ole Thor Didriksen, tried to shove Vilhelm's body aside and grab the machine gun, but he was in a poor angle to take the instrument of death. Knud-Erik put aside the next magazine and tried to shove the dead body away as well, but it wasn't until Anne-Katrine helped them by grabbing Vilhelm's boots and legs and pulling him backwards on his stomach that they were able to get him moved. The two men took the machine gun, but Didriksen had barely put it to his shoulder before the German Spandau was turned his way and grazed him in the upper back.

The chubby soldier cried out in pain and let go of the machine gun like it had been the reason for his wound. He rolled to the side and tried to stay out of the firing line. Almost at once, a red rose of blood blossomed through a blackened hole in his greatcoat.

Anne-Katrine stared in wide-eyed panic at the death and destruction all around her. Vilhelm, the friendly young man who had been her judge at the horseshoe contest, had taken a bullet in the face that had caused such a horrific wound she had to push him back over onto his stomach so she couldn't see the injury.

Gulping down a foul taste of vomit, she aimed her rifle at the motorcycle and tried to take a few potshots, but her hands trembled too much for it to do any good. Movement to her left made her look that way, but she could hardly believe her eyes when she spotted Sergeant Mehlborg trying to crawl across unprotected ground to get to the machine gun. His khaki greatcoat made him stand out against the grayish-brown ground like a sore thumb, but he was determined to get there or die trying.

They locked eyes for the briefest of moments, but it was enough to convince Anne-Katrine that she should at least try to provide him with cover. She tried to aim more carefully at the soldiers who threatened them, but when she squeezed the trigger, her rifle just clicked - she had forgotten to insert a new frame. Pressing her lips together in a growing panic, she ducked down behind the pile of dirt and reached into her backpack to grab the next batch of cartridges.

Once the rifle was ready to fire, she took another shot at the motorcycle that came close enough to make the rider perform a sharp turn to get away. She shot again, then again, but her rate of success was dropping rapidly. This time, she counted the shots, so when she had fired twice
more at the soldiers across the road who remained passive while the Spandau on the motorcycle
distributed death, she reached into her backpack and found a fresh frame at once.

It wasn't enough and she knew it. It would never be enough unless someone manned the machine
gun. Mehlborg couldn't do it, Didriksen wouldn't do it, Kristensen couldn't operate it on his own -
it all came down to her. Swallowing a hard lump that had formed in her throat, she realized it
was time for her to prove her words that women did have a place on the battlefield.

While Andreasen and Larsen continued to work at the cannon to clear the misfire so they could
stop the men on the motorcycle, Anne-Katrine braved the lead storm and inched her way up to
the vacant machine gun. She wrapped her fingers around the wooden handle and lifted it back off
the ground. She found the weapon to be heavier than she had expected, but it fit perfectly onto
her shoulder which eased the burden.

Burning hot lead zinged right past her battle helmet. Some shots thumped into the pile of dirt
next to her, others hit the ground directly in front of her, but she hardly sensed it. With a growing
numbness that swept through her body, she turned the machine gun around and aimed at the men
on the motorcycle. Sergeant Mehlborg shouted something she couldn't understand, and when she
squeezed the trigger, the infernal noise created by the weapon drowned out everything else.

As she fired off the first salvo against the motorcycle, the machine gun created such a violent
racket directly into her ear that she nearly dropped it again simply out of shock and surprise.
Clenching her teeth, she defied the violent noise and the storm of lead that zinged past her to
swing the barrel around.

The foul stench of cordite tore through her nostrils as she squeezed the trigger, but she was
determined to end the threat. It was difficult for her to limit her index finger to only fire the
short, three or four-round bursts needed, but she got the hang of it before too long.

Aiming for the man controlling the Spandau machine gun, she squeezed the trigger and watched
how the line of tracers escaped the barrel of her gun and ran directly towards her opponent.

This time, her aim was spot on. Aided by the unstoppable firepower of the machine gun, a whole
slate of bullets hit the German soldier across the chest and nearly cut him in half. The Spandau
machine gun fell from the dead man's hand as the body flopped around grotesquely under the
influence of the lead that struck him.

Anne-Katrine stopped breathing. She stared with wide open eyes at the horrific sight of the dead
man in the sidecar. Blood spewed from the row of gaping wounds in the man's chest, and it was
clear he was long since dead. She had killed a man - her actions had taken a life. Out of nowhere,
she could feel tears stinging the back of her eyes, but she blinked them away angrily so she
wouldn't confirm the negative stereotypes some of the men had about women.

The next second, she received a hefty thump on the helmet by Knud-Erik Kristensen who
screamed at her to resume firing. She did. She put the machine gun back to her shoulder and
delivered one short burst after the other at the rider of the motorcycle who tried to escape. When
he moved out of her field of fire, she concentrated on the soldiers in the ditch at the other side of the road.

Another short second later, the 20mm cannon to her right sent out one of its vicious, growling barks to prove Andreasen and Larsen had been able to cure the misfire. The high-explosive shell screamed down the road until it hit the fleeing motorcycle. The impact was as violent as those against the armored vehicles, and the rider and the man Anne-Katrine had already shot dead disappeared in an orange fireball.

Anne-Katrine almost lost her grip on sanity when she saw the two men on the motorcycle being flung through the air like a pair of burning puppets. One landed in the middle of the road, the other disappeared into the ditch. Her entire body shook and trembled as she turned her attention back to the dangers at hand.

When the magazine clicked, she waited for Knud-Erik to attach a new one, but she discovered she had to press a button on the gun's frame to release the spent magazine. Knud-Erik roared into her left ear that it was right next to her thumb. She ran her finger around on the metal and found the button easily enough - with the next magazine in place, she worked the action and resumed the short bursts that held the soldiers on the opposite side of the road pinned down. All she could see were the occasional muzzle flash and a line of dark-gray battle helmets, but she aimed for them nonetheless.

Movement from a different section across the road made her try to zoom in on the soldiers there, but it was difficult with the gunsmoke that drifted down the road and the opposing fire that seemed to grow stronger once again. She suddenly realized they were moving a unit back to the trucks but keeping another in place as firing cover.

From one moment to the next, the line of dark-gray battle helmets she had been aiming for disappeared. She was certain she hadn't hit them all which had to mean they were regrouping. She rattled off another two short bursts over their heads before she released the trigger and let the weapon cool off.

An eerie silence once again fell over the battleground. For some reason, both sides had decided simultaneously to hold their fire. The three conflagrations on the road crackled and popped, and there was a grotesque stench in the air of burning rubber, metal, leather and flesh. Licking orange-white flames and fat columns of black smoke rose from the two destroyed armored vehicles and the thoroughly devastated motorcycle that had been taken out by the high-explosive shell.

Anne-Katrine wetted her lips and kept a firm grip on the handle of her machine gun. Her wide eyes darted back and forth across the road to find a target. The trucks that were stationary some three hundred meters further south didn't appear to want to move ahead. The gray battle helmets in the ditch opposite her hadn't reappeared. Two groups of enemy soldiers had formed up on the grassy verges of the road by the trucks, but they were out of effective range and didn't pose an immediate threat.
Gasping, she released the breath she had been holding. Her heart was still going at full speed in her chest, and her muscles ached from the stress and tension she was under. Even that was nothing compared to the thoughts of death and destruction that slowly began to return to her mind in the absence of an external danger. It didn't take her long to realize the eerie silence and the anticipation of the next attack were worse than the actual firing. She panted and rubbed her mouth while she glanced at the road. She could feel the blood draining from her face, but she was determined not to get into a bout of hysteria - or worse, faint.

"Keep that MG going!" Senior Lieutenant Preiss cried from his position at the Madsen cannon, but just as Anne-Katrine put the hot, stinking machine gun back on her shoulder to carry out the orders, she heard a familiar, gruff voice in her ear.

"Disregard that order, Jensen. Hold your fire to save ammo," Sergeant Mehlborg said quietly, putting a hand on her shoulder. The dour man had a pained expression on his face, and his chin and left cheek were splattered with his own blood, but at least he was alive. He pulled back slightly and let out a "Hold your fire!" loud enough for all to hear.

He squeezed Anne-Katrine's shoulder again before he crawled away from her and over towards the Senior Lieutenant to explain his counter-order.

Anne-Katrine let out a sigh of relief over Sergeant Mehlborg's reappearance. Though he was a dour, hard man at the best of times, she had come to respect him for his leadership and his skills in combat. He was battered and bloodied after his gunshot wound, but he hadn't even flinched - in fact, she thought that he may have smiled at her when he touched her shoulder for a second time.

A curious feeling in her hands make her look down. Every one of her fingers trembled uncontrollably, and it soon spread to the rest of her body. The block of ice that she'd had in her gut for the entire fight melted and turned into a stream of lava that rolled through her body. It produced a hot flash that made her break out in an uncomfortable sweat that soaked her shirt in a matter of seconds.

An image of the man she had killed entered her mind's eye in a wave of blood-drenched hideousness, but she shook her head to make it go away. Another image of the two dead soldiers flung through the air on fire was even worse, but she tried to deal with it in the same way. A heavy blanket of fatigue fell over her that threatened to sink her into a deep swamp. She let out a gasp and shook her head again to get the unpleasant feeling to go away. It did so eventually - and reluctantly - but she needed to concentrate hard on the main road and the dangers at hand or else she knew she'd fall into a state of complete apathy.

After nearly thirty seconds of no enemy activity whatsoever, Knud-Erik Kristensen nudged Anne-Katrine's side and leaned in towards her ear. "What the hell are they doing? Why have they stopped their attack?" he whispered in his heavy, rural accent.

"I don't know, Knud-Erik…" Anne-Katrine whispered back, rubbing her mouth.
"I think they're moving back towards the trucks… look, over there at the other ditch," he continued, pointing the barrel of his rifle at the opposite side of the road where one of the low bushes was being shaken in a way that could only be produced by someone crawling past it.

"Yes… I see it," Anne-Katrice said and raised the machine gun to find a target. There wasn't any to be found, so she lowered it again. A persistent whimper to her right made her lick her bone-dry lips and look at Ole Thor Didriksen whose bloody greatcoat proved that his injury was seemingly worse than a mere flesh wound.

"Kristensen, can you crawl around and help Didriksen? He's in a bad state," she whispered, but Knud-Erik shook his head.

"No, Anne-Katrice… I need to be here at the magazines in case you need to resume firing. Maybe Ancher or-" 

"No, Ancher is wounded as well."

"Damn. And the Sergeant is as well," Knud-Erik said and craned his neck to look at the poorly Didriksen beyond Anne-Katrice's back. "All right. I'll try."

"Can you see what's going on with the Sergeant?" Anne-Katrice asked, shuffling to the side so the loader could crawl around her boots.

Knud-Erik crawled the long way around and came up to Anne-Katrice's right side so he was between her and Didriksen. "It looks like Sergeant Mehlborg and the Senior Lieutenant are discussing the strategy… maybe they wants us to pull back before it gets any worse?"

"Maybe," Anne-Katrice said with a sigh. Hunkering down, she put the machine gun to her shoulder and swept the barrel across the road a couple of times to search for a target. There was still plenty of activity at the trucks, but the soldiers there didn't seem to be getting any closer. The bushes in the ditch opposite her position had stopped shaking, indicating the unit that had tried to outflank them had gone away.

To her right, Ole Thor Didriksen whimpered and moaned as Knud-Erik worked hard to pull him back to safety so the wound could be addressed. Sitting up straight when he was safe behind the pile of dirt, the chubby soldier stripped off the greatcoat to allow Knud-Erik to examine the source of the bleeding.

A surprised grunt followed by a muted curse escaped Knud-Erik's lips when he yanked a large piece of twisted shrapnel out of the greatcoat. It had left a fair-sized hole in the shirt and Ole Thor's skin, but it hadn't dug in deeper than a thorn from a rose would have.

He stared at it like he couldn't believe that Ole Thor Didriksen of all people would have had the good fortune to only be grazed by the shrapnel - especially when a better soldier like Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen was lying dead next to them with a three-centimeter-wide crater in his forehead.
"Ole Thor, you damned, miserable, whimpering son of a bitch," he growled in a voice that
developed such a thick dialect it was almost incomprehensible. "Look at this, you little shit! It's
no worse than pricking yourself with a needle! It's time for you to act like a man and shut the
hell up!"

"What are you talking about? I was shot in the back!" Ole Thor hissed through clenched teeth.
His face had gained a ruddy complexion and was covered in sweat. He cut himself off mid-
stream when he happened to glance in Anne-Katrine's direction with eyes that were round and
glassy. "And you! I saw you shaking before… you are scared… scared like a little baby
girl! Didn't I say that would happen? Do you want me to hold your hand, little girl?"

"Didriksen!" Sergeant Mehlborg barked from the other side of the pile of dirt. "Pipe down or
you'll regret it!"

Ole Thor did pipe down, but his jaw kept on working and he continued to cast dark, evil glances
at Anne-Katrine.

Knud-Erik Kristensen let out a constant stream of grumbles and growls as he wiped the blood off
Didriksen's ruined shirt. Once the wound was clean, he placed a bandage under the fabric and
pinned it to the shirt using safety clamps. "There. You're fixed. Now shut up!" he growled before
he crawled back to Anne-Katrine's left side and assumed his position at the spare magazines.

A scant thirty seconds later, it finally dawned on Anne-Katrine and the others what the Germans
had been waiting for. The whining engines of several fighter planes sounded overhead and
seemed to come straight for them.

"Oh hell," Anne-Katrine croaked under her breath as she saw three airplanes appear as
silhouettes against the gray sky to the south of her position. The sight of a new, and far more
dangerous, enemy, kick started her heart and sent a jolt of trembling nervousness through her
body.

Next to her, Ole Thor let out a squeal that reached the highest registers.
"Airplanes! Fighters! Sergeant Mehlborg! Fighters!" he cried, frantically pointing his rifle at
their attackers.

The aircraft were three Henschel 126 ground-support fighters that were equipped with two
machine guns each. They dropped down to tree-top altitude when they spotted the hostile
position at the fork in the road; soon, the planes split up and came at the Danish soldiers from
two sides at once with their engines roaring wildly.

Before long, muzzle flashes could be seen from the fixed machine gun mounted behind the radial
engine on the lead plane. It wasn't long before a row of bullet hits tore open the ground on the
rear side of the entrenchment near the 20mm cannon. As the airplane climbed and turned to the
north with an echoing roar, the rear gunner who was sitting in a basket-like open cockpit with his
back to the pilot turned the second, mobile machine gun around and opened fire on the people
down on the ground.
"Take cover! Take cover!" Mehlborg roared, gesticulating wildly with his good arm to let everybody know they should dig down and watch out for the strafing airplanes.

The second fighter came in for a pass that displayed better aim. Burning hot lead zinged through the air and sent pebbles and clumps of dirt flying everywhere. The second salvo carved up the ground immediately beyond the boots of Anne-Katrine and her comrades causing everybody to pull in their legs at once.

"They're gettin' better!" someone shouted, but Anne-Katrine had more than enough to do with protecting her head and the rest of her to notice who it had been. She had forgotten all about her own machine gun in the melee, but the sound of hobnailed boots running towards the ambush site made her roll back over onto her stomach and pick up the heavy weapon.

A squad of German soldiers with bayonets fixed on their rifles had taken advantage of the confusion to stage an assault, but Anne-Katrine opened fire when they were still at sixty paces. The violent noise once again assaulted her eardrum, but she didn't flinch even once. She held down the trigger and cut down the entire group of seven men in a long burst that emptied the magazine. She stared wide-eyed at the blood-soaked devastation she had caused, but she pushed the moral aspects aside and kicked Knud-Erik's shin. "Magazine! I need a new magazine, Knud-Erik!" she cried in a voice that had turned frantic and screechy.

Before he could come to her rescue, the third plane came in for a roaring strafing run and he had to duck and roll away from the row of bullet hits that came straight at him. He made it to the machine gun in one piece and clicked on a new magazine. Reaching over, he thumped Anne-Katrine's shoulder. "It's ready!" he cried in a voice that was just as screechy as Anne-Katrine's had been before.

As the third plane went into a climb, the rear gunner released a long salvo that came so close to Anne-Katrine that her face was dirtied by clumps of soil that were thrown up by the projectiles.

The rear gunner continued his salvo as the plane banked left, and eventually found a target: Senior Lieutenant Preiss moved the wrong way and was cut down. His limp body flopped across the 20mm cannon before it fell to the ground.

Spurred on by the success, the third plane came around in a steep, banking turn that allowed the rear gunner to continue to pepper the ground. The cannon operator Karl-Bertel Andreasen was in the wrong place at the wrong time and received two hits to his body that threw him down on the ground next to the cannon.

Anne-Katrine held onto the machine gun like it was the only thing that kept her alive. She stared with wide open eyes at the road in case the Germans would try another sneak attack. Nothing happened; they seemed to rely on the strafing runs. She considered turning the machine gun at the aircraft, but she knew she would only waste their precious ammunition - it wasn't quite the same as shooting crows in flight with a hunting rifle after all.
A few seconds later, the decision was made for her. The three planes combined into a group and headed south, seemingly satisfied with their attack. Not two heartbeats later, Mehlborg took full advantage of the lull in the one-sided affair by jumping up and waving his good arm in the air. "Fall back! Fall back!" he roared. When he had everyone's undivided attention, he pointed at the side road behind them that they had used to get there.

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CHAPTER 4

It was twelve minutes past six. The eight men and one woman from the amputated unit belonging to the 1st Company had managed to hold off the entire German 391st Infantry Regiment for twenty-one minutes, but now that the retreat had been called, everybody seemed more than eager to leave the pile of dirt at the fork in the road.

While Knud-Erik took the remaining magazines, Anne-Katrine grabbed the machine gun which felt like it had grown to twice or three times its proper weight of eighteen pounds - in reality, her arms had grown weak from the stress. She crawled backwards until she was protected by the pile of dirt. It didn't take a professor of theoretical mathematics to figure out the Germans would be coming, so she held the heavy weapon close to her and ready to fire.

She cast a sad glance at Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen's body that Sergeant Mehlborg was kneeling next to. The Sergeant went through the young man's pockets to take letters and personal items, but with their hasty activation in the early hours of the morning, he wasn't carrying much. The rest had to be in the locker by his bunk at the garrison.

The loader August Larsen did the same to the dapper Senior Lieutenant who appeared to have had more personal items on him. The rolled-up wad of maps the officer had kept inside his greatcoat had been shot clean through and was soaked in blood. Larsen checked the maps for strategic information that shouldn't fall into enemy hands, but when he discovered they didn't hold any, he threw them onto the ground. The two bodies were left for the Germans to deal with.

"Move your bloody asses! On the double!" Sergeant Mehlborg barked, getting up from Solbjerg-Hansen's body. He signaled Anne-Katrine that she should get up as well.

She staggered to her feet and spun around, but she nearly dropped the heavy machine gun along the way. Only by putting a gloved hand around the scorching hot barrel did she prevent it from dropping on her feet. The heat penetrated her leather glove and made her hiss in pain, but she kept the firm grip until she could reach her bicycle.

"Jensen! The motorcycles!" the Sergeant shouted, pointing his good arm at the two Nimbus motorcycles that the Senior Lieutenant had brought to the fork in the road. "Didn't you say you could ride a motorcycle?" While he spoke, he hurried over to the one that carried the 20mm Madsen cannon on the gun carriage.
Anne-Katrine nodded and changed direction though the heat from the barrel was about to burn through her glove. "Yes, I c- can!" she said hoarsely through clenched teeth. She went over to the second Nimbus that had the regular sidecar. Groaning, she put the machine gun on the flat front of the sidecar and hurried around the motorcycle.

Getting on it, she turned the ignition key to 'on', set the fuel mixture to rich and jumped up to give the kick starter a good spin. The engine coughed but didn't turn. A second attempt yielded the same result. She quickly hopped off and knelt down to see if the small lever for the fuel mixture was even working.

"She can't even start it!" Didriksen cried, still speaking in the embarrassing high register. "That's it, I'm not letting a woman drive me around… I'm taking the other Nimbus!"

Sergeant Mehlborg only had time to bark "Didriksen! You bloody imbecile!" before his voice was drowned out by Anne-Katrine finally getting the recalcitrant Nimbus to fire.

She revved the four-cylinder engine - affectionately known as the 'bumblebee' because of the characteristic buzzing exhaust - a couple of times before she adjusted the fuel mixture to make it run leaner. "Come on! You can argue later!" she cried, waving the men over to her. Moving with frantic gestures, she put on the pair of goggles that were hanging from the handlebar from when it had arrived. They didn't fit too well with her battle helmet, but she didn't have time to adjust them. She didn't need the special gloves, so she threw them into the sidecar.

Johannes Ancher jumped up onto the second seat behind Anne-Katrine and wrapped his arms around her waist. His greatcoat got in the way, so he had to adjust his position on the seat mounted on the fender for the rear wheel. His arms rubbed against Anne-Katrine's waist as he did so, but he was gentleman enough to add a quiet "I do beg your pardon!" Once he was in place, he pulled his left arm back and used it to hold the rifle in place.

Knud-Erik Kristensen jumped into the sidecar and sat with his legs together so the injured Karl-Bertel Andreasen could find a soft seat. Bleeding from two wounds, Andreasen breathed heavily but managed to pull the heavy machine gun down into his own lap. He sat in a highly crooked angle and was fully exposed to the wind, so he needed Knud-Erik's hands around his waist to pin him down.

"Go, Jensen!" Mehlborg shouted, slapping Anne-Katrine's back. "Up the road… and don't look back!"

She didn't need to be told twice. After moving her rifle around so it wouldn't interfere with her arms, she twisted the throttle and turned the Nimbus around in a circle to get the nose pointed at the side road. Once she had it going straight, she gave it a bit more throttle to compensate for the weight of four people and the equipment which would far exceed the recommended maximum load. The bumblebee engine groaned and spluttered, but it eventually gained speed.

Behind her, Didriksen had trouble starting the other Nimbus. Nemesis struck as the same problem that he had used to mock Anne-Katrine with appeared on his machine. Groaning wildly,
he stepped off and twisted the little knob on the engine that controlled the mixture. When it finally started, it did so in a cloud of pale blue exhaust fumes that made the men around it fan their noses.

On the road, the sound of nobnailed boots running towards them reached their ears, and Sergeant Mehlborg put the rifle to his shoulder and fired four times at their would-be attackers to show them they weren't defeated yet. "Get on the bloody thing, Larsen!" he shouted to the loader who had driven the other Nimbus when they had arrived.

August Larsen hopped up onto the gun carriage and put his legs on either side of the 20mm cannon's barrel. Grabbing the metal framework, he knelt down and held onto the cannon for dear life.

Didriksen revved the engine that ran anything but well. Blue fumes escaped from the exhaust pipe each time the revs rose, and his ruddy complexion turned worse each time he saw a blue cloud. "Sergeant! What should I do?!" he cried, looking around in a panic.

"Shut up and ride it!" Mehlborg barked, firing the last round at the German soldiers. Before he got on the second seat, he reached into his backpack and found a full frame that he slapped into the rifle. He quickly put the rifle around his neck and grabbed hold of Didriksen's waist. "Go! Go, Didriksen!"

The Nimbus lurched forward in a cloud of pale blue smoke. The bumblebee engine coughed and spluttered and was reluctant to gain speed, but Ole Thor throttled back which reduced the fuel flow. Once it ran cleanly and stopped smoking, he twisted the throttle again to let it climb to the preferred speed more naturally.

Just as the second Nimbus reached the straight part that led up to the side road's first hill, they could hear German voices cry "Halt!" When they didn't stop, hot lead began to zing past them, but the motorcycle had gained enough speed and momentum to carry the three soldiers out of range in a hurry.

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The two motorcycles blasted through the countryside with the characteristic exhausts singing in a deep, harmonic roar. The small hills that peppered the side road presented no problems for the twenty-two horsepower engines, and with the invasion in full swing, there was no risk of meeting oncoming traffic.

Anne-Katrine kept her eyes firmly on the road ahead, but in her peripheral vision, she recognized the small hill where she had rested her legs and where she had met the twin-engined fighter that had buzzed her. A little later on, the field with the troughs where the two farmers had waved at her when she was going the other way came into view, but it disappeared as quickly as snapping her fingers. She just had time to see that the farmers were gone.
She had the Nimbus going at nearly seventy-five kilometers an hour. She had never ridden a motorcycle at that speed before, and it was going just a little too fast for her tastes on the narrow, undulating side road. Several times, she came too fast into the turns and had to correct to pull through, but she had managed to keep it on the road so far.

Because of the added weight of the four passengers and the heavy equipment, the engine was strained to its limits, and it wasn't long before it began to sound strangled and lose power. As the speed decreased, it started vibrating and backfiring. Anne-Katrine checked the fuel mixture to see if she had run it too lean, but it had the right setting. A particular backfire sounded like a flatulating bull, and the engine promptly started belching smoke. Not fifty meters further on, the cause of the problems became evident as one of the cylinders stopped working. The vibrations caused by the failure meant the entire frame shook so hard between her legs that she and Johannes Ancher had a hard time even staying on.

The problems with the motorcycle made Didriksen break out in scornful laughter. "I knew the girl couldn't ride a motorcycle!" the chubby soldier said, looking anything but sorry at Anne-Katrine's plight.

"Don't you ever shut up, Didriksen?" Anne-Katrine growled, but her comment didn't have the intended effect.

Didriksen broke out in a screechy laugh, and he didn't pipe down until his waist was squeezed by Sergeant Mehlborg who was sitting right behind him. The two men had a brief conversation, but the details were snatched by the wind and brought away from the others. The red flush that swept over Didriksen's face as he clammed up and concentrated on the road didn't need a translation, however.

Anne-Katrine kept up the one-sided struggle with her motorcycle. Since the cylinder had parted company with the rest of the engine's inner workings, the others had to work that much harder to keep everything going. The speed had dropped to a mere forty-five kilometers an hour, and the frame was shaking so hard that Anne-Katrine could almost feel the nuts and bolts growing slack and loose.

She looked around at the landscape they went past to gauge how far they had come and how far they still had to go. At her best calculations, they had made it roughly four, possibly five kilometers away from the ambush site, but they still had fifteen to eighteen kilometers left until they were back at the village and the garrison.

It was impossible to tell if the Germans were following them or sticking to the main road. The Nimbus she was driving was making so much racket it drowned out everything else, and she didn't have time to look over her shoulder. The trucks carrying troops wouldn't be fast enough to catch up with them on the winding road, even with a cylinder missing in the bumblebee engine, but she couldn't remember if the regiment they had fought had more than two motorcycles.

There had been the initial reconnaissance patrol; then Vilhelm had taken one out, and she had dealt with the other. A brief flash of the soldier she had nearly cut in half with the salvo from the
machine gun sent an ice cold shiver down her back, but she clenched her jaw and looked ahead to forget all about it.

A loud cry of "Enemy aircraft!" from Sergeant Mehlborg made her snap out of the dark thoughts and look in the direction he was pointing: towards the west. One of the three Henschels that had strafed them at the ambush site was circling over the fields a kilometer and a half or so away from them, clearly on the lookout for the fleeing soldiers. So far, it didn't appear the pilot and the rear gunner had spotted the motorcycles that would no doubt show up as tiny dots at that distance.

Anne-Katrine bared her teeth in a grimace and briefly looked over her shoulder. Her Nimbus produced a constant stream of pale-blue puffs of smoke that followed the road perfectly. Just to mock her, the motorcycle belched out a particularly impressive puff of smoke that drifted off the road and onto the field they were driving past.

She whipped her head around and looked at the ground support airplane that was still circling. Even as she was watching, it straightened out and came around in their direction. "Oh, bloody hell," she growled and tried to twist the throttle even harder. All it did was to make the Nimbus rattle and shake even worse.

It was clear the enemy aircraft had picked up a scent of something, because it turned south and increased the speed. Anne-Katrine knew at once the pilot or the rear gunner had seen her blue smoke, and sure enough, the airplane turned north to follow the road a kilometer or so behind the two motorcycles. It wouldn't take it ten seconds to find them.

"Incoming!" Sergeant Mehlborg roared, thumping Didriksen's shoulder to get him to speed up. "Jensen! Get off the road and take cover! You're too slow to evade it. That's an order!"

"Yes, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said and looked around to find a spot she could use for cover. As luck - or even bad luck - would have it, they were in the middle of nowhere. The endless fields around them were all flat as a pancake and would provide no cover or protection whatsoever. The ditch at the side of the road would be their best option, but it would mean they would most likely have to sacrifice the motorcycle, as such a juicy, fat target would be too good to miss for any gunner worth his salt.

Just when Anne-Katrine thought her luck had run out, she spotted a low cattle bridge spanning the ditch on her side of the road. The cattle bridges were used when the farmers took their livestock onto the fields in the spring, and she had used the one near her farm often enough to know it was built with the strength to hold them, and wide enough for them to hide under.

"The cattle bridge!" she cried to Johannes who responded by wrapping his arms even firmer around her waist. Anne-Katrine turned to tell the Sergeant what she intended to do, but they ran out of time.

From above, the Henschel came in low and dangerous. Its engine roared loudly as the fixed machine gun behind the propeller started spewing death. The resulting row of bullet hits tore up
the asphalt between the two motorcycles and sent sparks and chips of the tarmac in all directions. Anne-Katrine cried out in frustration and turned sharp left. The cattle bridge was only fifty meters ahead of her, and she twisted the throttle to get the last out of the ruined bumblebee engine.

On the other motorcycle, Didriksen tried to mirror Anne-Katrine's turn, but he hadn't seen that she was trying to reach a specific point in the landscape. Instead, he aimed directly for the open, unprotected ditch on his side of the road - with inevitable results.

The Nimbus carrying the 20mm cannon went straight off the road and flew through the air for nearly a second before the nose dropped down and it performed an ungraceful crash landing at the very top of the ditch. All three men were thrown off and rolled along the field in various states of disarray. The motorcycle itself dug in, and the engine let out a rolling fart as a way of crying enough. It tried to balance on its front wheel for a brief while, but gravity took over and it tumbled down into the ditch the wrong side up.

Anne-Katrine noticed it in her peripheral vision, but she was too focused on the cattle bridge ahead to really see what went on. When she reached it, she turned the smoking Nimbus onto the bridge and did another sharp turn left at once to get closer to the edge of the ditch itself. "Everybody under the bridge!" she cried, jumping off and helping the wounded Johannes Ancher off the second saddle.

Once the young man staggered down the ditch to get to safety under the cattle bridge, Anne-Katrine hurried around the Nimbus and helped Karl-Bertel Andreasen up from the sidecar. The cannon operator was hurt worse than it had initially appeared, and it was clear by his paleness and sluggish behavior that he was in great pain.

"Knud-Erik, push the Nimbus down into the ditch while I help Andreasen!" Anne-Katrine cried, wrapping the injured man's arm around her shoulder and helping him down the slope.

The large, boorish Kristensen had a little problem getting his heavy rear out of the narrow sidecar, but he did so eventually and pushed the machine further along the edge of the ditch until it could roll the rest of the way. As the last thing he did before he dove for cover, he took the machine gun and two spare magazines.

Above them, the Henschel came in for another strafing run. The three men on the field looked to be out of action, so the pilot aimed directly at the bridge.

Below the cattle bridge that was made of wood and concrete, Anne-Katrine swapped Andreasen for the machine gun, but her arms still hadn't regained enough strength to have a truly effective aim. "Take cover!" she cried when she spotted the plane coming towards them with its weapon flashing. Although the ground near them and the bridge above were hit by rows of bullets that zinged through the air and ricocheted off the concrete, the sturdy structure held up admirably and they were never in any real danger.
When the enemy ground-support fighter moved away, Anne-Katrine popped her head out of the ditch to check up on Didriksen, Mehlborg and Larsen across the road. She looked just in time to see the Sergeant give Didriksen a bash across the battle helmet, no doubt as retribution for crashing the motorcycle. "I think the others are all right," she said and hurriedly moved back down into position.

Panting, she looked at the condition of her own little group of men. Kristensen appeared nervous but calm, Ancher was pale and visibly frightened, but Andreasen was in a bad state. Blood seeped through his greatcoat in two places from the bullets he had in him. Leaning against the side of the ditch, he breathed heavily and looked like he was only barely hanging on.

Her own heart was racing along in her chest at breakneck speed, but the adrenaline kept her going. She had a metallic taste of fear in her mouth, but it went away after she had swallowed a couple of times. One thing that didn't affect her was the bad shaking she had experienced at the ambush site - and for that, she was grateful.

Grunting, she adjusted her grip on the heavy machine gun that wasn't designed to be held while fired - it had no grip at all on the barrel. Her glove still bore the scars from being burnt after carrying the weapon to the sidecar in the escape, so she knew it would be nearly impossible to hold onto it in case she needed to fire at the enemy aircraft.

The engine noise of the Henschel that strafed them once again grew in volume. Roaring, it came in for a third pass which was again aimed at the cattle bridge. The bullets struck up a fierce concerto on the roof of the concrete structure, but it was built for hoofs so it was able to withstand the pressure without too many problems. As the airplane moved away, the rear gunner released a long salvo that came within five feet of reaching the inside of the ditch where they were hiding.

Kristensen let out an series of incomprehensible, local curses as he pushed himself even further in under the bridge, but the salvo proved to be the last calling card from the enemy fighter in that pass.

As soon as the engine note moved away and died down, Anne-Katrine ran out of the ditch and dumped the heavy machine gun into the motorcycle's sidecar. "Knud-Erik! Come help me get it back up!" she shouted, already grabbing the handlebar and the saddle to push the Nimbus out of the low part of the ditch it had rolled down into.

It didn't take long for the two strong farmers to push the motorcycle back up onto the flat part of the field so they could drive back across the cattle bridge. While Kristensen and Ancher helped Andreasen up into the sidecar, Anne-Katrine ran across the bridge to get to the men on the other side.

A sweating Larsen and a blushing Didriksen were trying to get the Nimbus with the heavy cannon righted so they could pull it back up from the ditch. Anne-Katrine added her muscles and tried to help as much as she could, but it soon became clear that Ole Thor Didriksen had a hard time accepting that a 'girl' could do much more than wear a skirt and look pretty.
"Didriksen," Anne-Katrine said in a growl, "if you keep pushing it that way, we'll never get it out of there. Listen to me, it needs to go this way… not that way. It'll only dig in further if you keep pushing it that way!"

Didriksen opened his mouth to complain, but a growl from Sergeant Mehlborg - who appeared to have aggravated his wound in the ungraceful tumble - made him pipe down before he could say anything that would get him smacked again.

With a heave-ho, Anne-Katrine, Larsen and Didriksen worked together to get the Nimbus righted. Once it had the right-side up, it was fairly easy to pull out of the ditch - but when they finally had it back up on the road, it became clear they had lost their most powerful weapon.

"Dammit!" Sergeant Mehlborg barked. He hobbled over to the cannon and knelt down next to it. "The bloody barrel is chock-full of dirt… it must have dug in nose-first," he said, sticking a finger into the muzzle. When it came out, it had been dirtied by soil.

"It did, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine added.

"Bloody hell! The pipe can't be changed or cleaned without the proper tools! And they're back at the garrison…" Mehlborg said and stood up straight. "All right. We'll have to get rid of the bloody thing. Jensen, Larsen, loosen the bolts and dump the cannon."

Anne-Katrine and the loader August Larsen looked at each other and displayed an identical, raised eyebrow. The order had been clear, so they went to work getting the bolts loosened enough to remove the cannon from the gun carriage.

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Fortune smiled on the small unit for once, as did the sun that finally broke through the low clouds. The enemy airplane didn't return, and the bumblebee engine in Anne-Katrine's motorcycle held together although it rattled badly and smoked like a clogged chimney. Sergeant Mehlborg had had enough of Didriksen's erratic driving, so he swapped seats with Johannes Ancher and had a strong arm wrapped around Anne-Katrine's waist as they drove towards the village and the garrison.

Didriksen's motorcycle wasn't running straight after the accident which prevented him from gaining the speed he had been traveling at before. All in all, the two motorcycles were able to continue on, but they were crippled.

They were still thirteen kilometers out of town when they came up to a section of the road that cut through the lands belonging to the largest farm in the entire region. The stables and the garages were located on one side of the road, the farmhouse and barracks for the employees on the other.

Anne-Katrine knew the farm well, and especially the people living there. Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann, the eldest son of the wealthy farmer, had for years tried to ask for her hand in
marriage, but she had politely turned him down for so long that he had eventually lost interest in her - or so she hoped.

Looking ahead, Anne-Katrine could see the wealthy farmer's elegant Horch limousine parked near the farmhouse, and she reached back and patted Sergeant Mehlborg's leg. When the man behind her leaned forward, she pointed ahead. "Sergeant, see the farm we're approaching?" she said loudly to be heard over the rattling engine.

"Yes, Jensen?"

"We need petrol. The last time I was here, they had several drums' worth."

"Can a Nimbus run on regular petrol?"

"Yes," Anne-Katrine said and nodded in case Mehlborg couldn't hear her.

"All right," Sergeant Mehlborg said, squeezing Anne-Katrine's shoulder. "Good thinking, Jensen. Drive into the courtyard when we reach it."

Anne-Katrine put her arm in the air to signal to Didriksen that she was about to stop. When they reached the section of the road that cut through the farm, she slowed down and turned left into the open courtyard in front of the garages. It was equipped with cobblestones, but they weren't as uneven as those in her own courtyard back home so the motorcycles weren't at risk.

The suspension soaked up most of the bumps, but Anne-Katrine had to stifle a grin when she noticed that Didriksen's Nimbus didn't like the cobblestones at all - the damaged front fork wobbled quite badly on the uneven surface causing the chubby, big-mouthed soldier to get a rough treatment from the saddle under his bottom.

Appearance had always been important for the wealthy farmer, so even the six-bay garage facility was well-maintained with arched, dark-brown doors and pale-yellow bricks. The doors for all six bays were closed, but a large sliding door had been opened to allow access to the stables.

The flagpole at the farmhouse on the other side of the road was bare, which surprised Anne-Katrine as she looked around. Apart from the black limousine that was parked by the front door, everything was quiet.

She pulled the Nimbus over by the garages and stepped off. It was almost too quiet, and she had a flashback to earlier in the day when the eerie calm had hung over everything like a thick winter blanket. Mehlborg stepped off as well and hobbled over to the nearest garage door but found it padlocked. He pounded on it, but nothing happened.

"Maybe they've gone to town," Anne-Katrine said with a shrug. She took off the gloves and strode across the courtyard to peek into the stables.
A pang of envy hit her straight in the gut at the sight of the neat stables. Everything was far cleaner and classier than her own cowshed, but it was an inevitable result of her meager financial clout compared to that of the wealthy farmer. The stables were mostly empty save for two saddle horses at the far end that were both chewing on fresh hay.

Shrugging, she stepped back out into the courtyard and looked around. She needed a Bristol so she reached into the pocket of her greatcoat and found her matchbook and the crumbled pack of cigarettes.

"Jensen," the Sergeant said sternly, causing Anne-Katrine to look at him before she'd had time to light up. "If you're planning on smoking that, you better have enough cigarettes to go around."

A look into the crumbled pack proved she only had four cigarettes left including the one in her mouth. "Fair point, Sergeant Mehlborg," she said and put the unlit cigarette back in the pack.

Anne-Katrine suddenly noticed a figure who peeked out of the front door of the farmhouse across the road. When the figure noticed the Danish soldiers, it flew back inside. Two seconds later, a lanky man wearing a flat cap and a dark-blue coverall stepped out and came towards them. "Sergeant! Someone's coming to see us… I know these people. I'll speak to him," she said before she waved and walked across the cobblestones to intercept their host.

"Very well, Jensen. Make it snappy, we haven't got all bloody day," Mehlborg said, adjusting his rifle so it was closer to his hand in case he needed it.

"Yes, Sergeant. Hello, Arne," Anne-Katrine said when she was close enough to see who the other man was. She had spoken to the farm foreman many times over the years, but this time, she couldn't help but feel that he wasn't too happy to see her.

Arne Willumsen waved back, but a dark shadow raced across his unattractive face when he saw the many soldiers and the two motorcycles. His eyes carefully examined the uniforms and the weapons before he put out his hand to shake Anne-Katrine's.

"Hello, Miss Jensen. Say… when did the Army allow women to join the ranks?"

"Today. We're in a little fix, Arne. We need petrol. Can you lend us some? We don't need much, just twenty liters or so."

"Well…" Arne said, rubbing his angular chin. His eyes never left the rifle around Anne-Katrine's neck. "I s'pose we could do that. How will you pay?"

Anne-Katrine shrugged. She felt the hairs at the back of her neck stand on edge while she spoke to the foreman, but she didn't understand why as she had spoken to him many times over the years since her parents' accident without noticing anything odd. "That's a good question, Arne. I think you'll probably need to write a bill and send it to the garrison. They'll pay you later."

"Mmmm…?"
"Is there a problem?" Anne-Katrine said with her hand creeping closer to her rifle. The sense of unease never let up when she looked into the foreman's eyes - in fact, it grew stronger. "Don't tell me you've already used all the petrol you had. The last time I was here, you had four two-hundred liter barrels stored in the garage!"

"Oh, we still have those."

"So?"

"Well… I s'pose we could sell you twenty liters. All right, come with me. The drums are down in the final bay with the truck."

When Arne began to walk towards the garages at the other side of the road, his eyes locked onto Anne-Katrine's for the briefest of moments. The cold glare only lasted a heartbeat, but it was enough to send a chill down her spine. The look told her that she hadn't imagined the distance between them - something was up. She waited for him to move a few paces ahead before she followed him, but she kept vigilant and glanced at all the windows in the farmhouse and the barracks.

"Have you met any Germans?" Arne asked casually. "Do you know when they might get here?"

"It's hard to say. We encountered them down at the main road. I wouldn't treat it so casually if I were you, Arne. I doubt they'll be in a good mood once they arrive."

They had almost reached the road where Sergeant Mehlborg was waiting. A squeak of old wood somewhere to Anne-Katrine's right made her look at the farmhouse. She could hardly believe her eyes when she spotted a rifle pointing out of the window in the room nearest to the end wall - and even worse, it was pointed at her. She opened her mouth to cry out a warning, but she had no idea what the proper military term would be. Ultimately, she just cried: "Rifle! There's a rifle in the window!"

At once, Arne set off in a run, but Anne-Katrine caught him by the scruff of the coverall and forced him to stop. Mehlborg took off his own rifle and worked the bolt action. He covered the house and the foreman while he backtracked to the motorcycles. Behind him, Knud-Erik Kristensen jumped out of the sidecar with surprising speed - if not grace - and set up the machine gun on the flat part at the front. When he worked the action, the metallic sound seemed to echo all over the two courtyards.

"Arne!" Anne-Katrine said hoarsely, shoving the foreman further across the road towards the motorcycles. She had a firm grip on his coverall that made the lanky man walk in a funny way. "What the blazes are you doing? Who is in there? Have the Germans beat us here?"

"It's Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann's driver…"

"But why?!"
"We want the Germans to come here, stupid woman!" Arne barked, trying to twist free of Anne-Katrine's grip. "They're here to liberate us from the Jews and the Bolsheviks in the government!"

"What?! That's… that's bloody insane!" Anne-Katrine hissed, giving Arne a good thump in the back. "They're here to invade us! Don't you understand that?"

When Arne seemed to think he understood far more than the woman carrying the uniform, Anne-Katrine growled out loud and yanked him around some more. "Sergeant Mehlborg! The petrol is inside the garage… the last bay… we need to take it ourselves."

The Sergeant nodded and hobbled over to the nearest garage door. The padlock was soon broken off with a well-aimed whack from the butt of the rifle. Grunting, the wounded man shoved the sliding door aside - and came to an abrupt halt in the opening. "Those bastards…" he growled at the items he had found in the garage. "Jensen! Get that tall piece of shit over here," he said through clenched teeth.

Anne-Katrine wondered what Mehlborg had found that would rile him up so badly, but she too stopped with a jerk in the door. Inside the first bay of the garage, the familiar red, white and black Nazi flag was spread over a table ready to be hoisted on the flagpole. Several home-made armbands adorned with swastikas were ready to be put on, and two crates carrying official Wehrmacht stamps and insignia and containing German 98K standard issue infantry rifles were placed at the wall underneath a propaganda poster for the SS.

"You rotten bastard! Traitor!" Anne-Katrine roared, ramming the stock of her rifle into Arne Willumsen's gut. The foreman groaned loudly and doubled over. Whimpering from the hard impact, he fell down onto his knees and swayed back and forth. Anne-Katrine's jaw worked overtime as she took in the sights. "Do Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann and his son know about this? Answer me, dammit!"

"Of… of course… they do," Arne Willumsen croaked.

"Where are they?"

"On a business trip… to Berlin!" Arne's lips drew back in a grimace that was supposed to be a grin. Two seconds later, the grin disappeared along with a handful of his teeth as Anne-Katrine smashed the stock of her rifle into his mouth. The foreman was knocked out and fell to the floor with blood seeping from his gums and his split lips.

Sergeant Mehlborg looked up from his spot at the table where he held a handful of the Nazi armbands. "Was that wise, Jensen? He knows who you are… what if he comes to your farm seeking revenge?"

"If he does, I'll kill him."
Mehlborg let out a grunt and threw the armbands down on the floor. With an emphatic gesture, he slammed down the heel of his boot and rubbed the swastikas into the ground like he would a cockroach.

Anne-Katrine fell silent and remembered the many times she had spoken to Flemming Lyng-Hoffmann. He had always appeared to be a charming young man. Conservative like most farmers, but charming - even if he'd had a hard time understanding they could never be an item. Ever since the first time she had met him, she had been impressed by the way his head had always been full of fresh, modern ideas of how to develop the farm. "But he was a traitor all along... he and his father," Anne-Katrine mumbled, wiping off the blood on Arne's coverall.

Mehlborg grunted again and moved away from the table with the flag. Putting his rifle around his neck, he hobbled over to the barrels of petrol that were placed further into the garage.
"Jensen, let's take what we need and get back to the garrison. Much as I would like to, we can't do anything about these people now."

"Yes, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said and let out a heavy sigh.

Anne-Katrine had hoped her mood would improve when they finally returned to the village on the two crippled motorcycles, but it didn't. The traffic on the main road into town was no different than on any other day of the week, almost like the civilian population hadn't noticed or understood there was a bloody shooting war going on right at their doorstep.

'The civilian population' - she had to chuckle darkly when she realized she hadn't thought of herself as being a part of that group any longer. She was, of course, but it would be difficult for her to go back to the humdrum of her everyday farming life after what she had seen and experienced. She had no idea what had happened to her brother, and even less what would happen with regards to Arne Willumsen, so her future was anything but clear. The Sergeant had been right in warning her about the traitorous foreman, but she hadn't lied when she said she would kill him if he came too close. She could feel that in her gut.

They drove past row after row of regular one and two-storey town houses with romantic picket fences, pretty gardens, neat curtains and tall flagpoles. At least the Danish flag, the Dannebrog, was flying proudly from the flagpoles rather than the Nazi flag.

The battered and bloodied soldiers attracted plenty of attention on their trip along the main road; in particular at the gas station and at a small grocery store. The latter saw a handful of women standing in a line on the sidewalk waiting for the store to open so they could spend their daily allowance on groceries like they did six days a week, but the khaki-clad soldiers on the rattling and smoking Nimbus motorcycles managed to steal their attention away from the store.

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply as she drove along the main road headed for the four-way intersection at the town's square. That's where she would have to part company with her brothers in arms. She felt she had done her fair share - even if her quest of stopping the enemy from
invading her country had ultimately failed - but it would be a nonsense to try to enter the garrison in what was essentially a stolen uniform.

Little did Anne-Katrine know that fate had another card up its sleeve for her. By the time they reached the intersection at the square and prepared to turn left towards the garrison, two soldiers in squeaky clean greatcoats and with polished boots ran out towards the motorcycles holding up their hands in the universal sign of 'Stop.'

Sergeant Mehlborg squeezed Anne-Katrine's shoulder and pointed at the curb. She did as asked and pulled over, immediately looking away from the new soldiers so she wouldn't get caught. Behind her, Didriksen brought the second Nimbus in to park, and he took the opportunity to stretch his back.

"Sergeant!" the first of the fresh soldiers said as they both snapped into a salute. "We're from the 2nd Battalion, 4th Company Infantry Engineers. I'm Private Jørgensen, this is Private Knudsen. Have you seen Captain Dalsby?"

Mehlborg grunted in a way that almost sounded like he was chuckling. "No. Should I have?"

"Captain Dalsby gave us an order to set up a 37mm anti-tank cannon at the square before he left. The cannon has been set up, but Captain Dalsby hasn't returned to approve the work. It was nearly twenty minutes ago."

Mehlborg sighed and pushed his battle helmet back from his forehead. He looked at the pristine, squeaky clean uniforms of the two Privates and let out another grunt, though this one wasn't a chuckle. "We haven't seen him. We've been at the front. Where did he go?"

"He took the main road out of town headed south, Sergeant."

Now Anne-Katrine let out a grunt. If the Captain had headed south and hadn't returned, chances were that he had either been captured or killed. Sergeant Mehlborg seemed to follow Anne-Katrine's train of thought as he sighed deeply and stepped off the Nimbus.

"Where is the cannon?" he said, adjusting his rifle. "I can approve its location for you, but we have engaged the enemy and have wounded men here who need attention."

"It's at the barber shop, Sergeant."

Mehlborg stopped with a jerk and raised his good arm. "Wait… not the barber shop with the white walls?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"You put an anti-tank cannon up against a white house? Bloody hell, Private, the Germans will be able to see that bloody thing clear down to the bloody border!" - As Mehlborg spoke, his voice grew in volume until the last words were roared, not spoken.
The young private gulped audibly and seemed to shrink under the Sergeant's intense glare. "We were told by Captain Dalsby to put the cannon at the barber shop… so we put the cannon at the barber shop, Sergeant…" he tried, but it was clear the young man was losing his courage fast. His comrade kept quiet and settled for nodding.

"There must be other officers here?"

"No, Sergeant… it's been such a mess this morning. Our command structure has dissolved completely. Nobody knows where anything or anyone is… I'm afraid you're the highest ranking soldier here at the square."

Sergeant Mehlborg looked towards the heavens for guidance. "Jensen… and the rest of you. Leave the motorcycles and come with me. Looks like we won't be able to return to the garrison at once. There's a flock of sheep here who needs a strong shepherd."

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and looked at the wounded. Karl-Bertel Andreasen wouldn't be fit to do anything but lie in a hospital bed for the foreseeable future, that was an undeniable fact. "Sergeant Mehlborg… the wounded…"

"I know, Jensen," Mehlborg said and turned back to the young soldier. "Private Jørgensen, do you know Doctor Meincke?"

Anne-Katrine whipped her head around and narrowed her eyes.

"Yes, Sergeant," the young man said.

"All right. Fetch him. Tell him we have several wounded men who needs urgent medical attention. On the double."

"Yes, Sergeant," the young soldier said and took off in a fast run after saluting the Sergeant.

Anne-Katrine licked her lips as she stepped off the smoking motorcycle. She took off the goggles and hung them from the handlebar. Outwardly, she was calm, but a million thoughts churned violently in her mind. If Doctor Meincke came, so would Lydia since she was his only nurse. If Lydia came, not only would she get a terrible shock from seeing Anne-Katrine in uniform - and possibly blow her cover - there was a real risk she would be unable to control her emotions and reveal they were romantically involved. At that point in time, Anne-Katrine didn't know which would be worse.

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Within a few minutes, the newly arrived soldiers attracted plenty of attention from the townspeople. Because of the garrison, they were used to seeing soldiers on a daily basis, but never any who were bloodied and filthy. Little boys of all ages flocked around the two motorcycles and the uniformed men - and woman - and made loud comments about the weapons and the sorry state of the uniforms and the two Nimbuses.
The next wave comprised of upstanding citizens who were out for an early morning stroll or on their way to work. Before long, everybody stopped to stare at the soldiers. The contrast between the dark suits, flowery dresses and elaborate headwear worn by most of the townspeople, and the battle helmets and khaki uniforms with all their smudges of crimson and dirt-brown was noticeable, and seemed to be the talk of the town.

Anne-Katrine had her own reasons for wishing the spectators would leave, but most of the men of the small unit weren't interested in having an audience, either - most, but not Ole Thor Didriksen. The chubby soldier had appointed himself to be the spokesman and was retelling the various battles they had been in, and especially the part he had played, with great aplomb. The wound he had on his back was his crowning achievement, and it earned him a round of oooooh's.

When Doctor Meincke and Nurse Petersen arrived from the health center further into the square, the crowd parted to let the pair through. They were both carrying large medical bags seemingly filled to the brim with bandages and all the rest of the items they had expected to need in such a situation. "Pardon me, good folks… let us through, please," Doctor Meincke said as he strode through the spectators. His white hair and impressive whiskers seemed to be even brighter in daylight, but it was because his face was flushed from practically jogging across the square.

Lydia followed him at a couple of paces' distance carrying a bag so large it was nearly bigger than she was. She didn't notice how one of the tall soldiers stared at her with a pair of bright blue eyes.

Doctor Meincke and Nurse Petersen aimed directly for Karl-Bertel Andreasen and began to strip the greatcoat off his shoulders. It didn't take long for the experienced doctor to see the cannon operator was hanging on by the skin of his teeth. "This man is in a very poor state," he said to the other soldiers. "We need a stretcher for him at once. He needs to undergo immediate surgery to remove those projectiles."

A stretcher was about the only thing that wasn't present at the enclave of people at the square, but several men at the back took off in a hurry to find something that could be pressed into action. It wasn't long before they returned with a door they had taken off its hinges.

The makeshift solution was crude, but it would work, and Andreasen was gently transferred to the door before he was carried away to the hospital by a group of volunteers. Doctor Meincke nodded and wiped his hands that had become bloody from the two gunshot wounds on Andreasen's body. "Who's next? You? Young man, come over here and let me see your wound," he said and waved Johannes Ancher over to him.

While the doctor unwrapped the bandage that Anne-Katrine had set during the bloody action at the ambush and studied the puncture wound in the fleshy part of Johannes' neck, Anne-Katrine kept to herself at the back of the group. She tried to look down at the ground so Lydia or the doctor wouldn't recognize her, but the quest was hopeless as she couldn't keep her eyes off her dearest.
The nimble nurse was her regular, charming self; smiling and helping the soldiers who needed a friendly touch after the hell they had been through. A raw need to be the one who could get her hands squeezed - not to mention her lips kissed - by the warm-hearted nurse tore through Anne-Katrine's heart and soul and left her a quivering mess inside.

Fate wasn't to be denied, and Lydia happened to look up at the exact moment Anne-Katrine was looking at her. Her face changed instantly from a happy smile to perplexion and shock. Blinking several times, Lydia shook her head slowly like she couldn't fathom what she had just seen.

Silently, she moved through the throng and arrived at Anne-Katrine's side. The two women just stood there, staring at each other. Lydia's chin started trembling as it dawned on her that Anne-Katrine Jensen was wearing her brother's uniform, and that she had been involved in the bloody fighting against the Germans. She opened her mouth to speak, but she could only croak.

"Hush, dearest. Please don't cry," Anne-Katrine said quietly as she took her sweetheart's hands. The gentle touch felt too good to be true, so she ran her callused thumbs across the back of Lydia's hands just to make sure it was really happening. "It's all right. I'm unhurt. Do you hear me?"

Lydia looked up and down the woman she loved, at her filthy uniform and her dirtied, dead-tired face. "My God, Anne-Katrine, you look dreadful! What happened to you… we spoke only a few hours ago," she croaked in a trembling voice. She reached up to try to calm her quivering chin with her hand, but it was no use. Her green eyes seemed to turn to crystal, and unstoppable tears soon rolled down her cheeks. "Have you fought the Germans?" she added in a near-silent whisper.

"Yes. Down by the main road. Please, dearest, I'm just fine. I'm tired, but fine."

"Please kiss me… I need to feel you… I need to know you're not some kind of ghost…"

Anne-Katrine closed her eyes and let out a deep, tormented sigh. Kissing Lydia was all she wanted to do, but the only thing they couldn't do - not at the town square with at least fifty people watching them including a host of her brothers in arms who knew she was a woman. "We can't… we can't, dearest."

"Please… kiss me!"

"We can't," Anne-Katrine said and took Lydia's hands in her own. She gave them a strong squeeze to at least attempt to provide some of the confirmation Lydia sought.

"I- I'm breaking up inside… please kiss me…" Lydia said, and now the tears really started coming.

The sight of her sweetheart crying almost sent Anne-Katrine over the edge as well, and she could feel tears stinging the back of her eyes. She took several deep breaths and squeezed Lydia's hands again. "We can't, dearest. It would destroy what future we have here. Please understand…"
"But..." Lydia croaked, staring wide-eyed at the taller, uniformed woman. Sighing, she seemed to come to terms with the terrible injustice, but her lips kept on moving in a near-silent mumbling. She shuffled back and pulled her hands from Anne-Katrine's touch. "All- all right. I can't stay. You're unhurt, but others need my help," she said and disappeared into the crowd without looking back even once.

Anne-Katrine followed the retreating form with her eyes. The emotional punch in the gut made her shake all over, and her heart thumped so hard in her chest it became painful. She looked at her brothers in arms and the spectators, and cursed the fact that the world - and in particular the region they lived in - was so narrow-minded that two members of the same sex couldn't even be seen holding hands in public. Sergeant Mehlborg hobbling back to the group waiting at the motorcycles gave her something to do, but her mind had shut off completely and she moved like in a daze.

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**CHAPTER 5**

The Sergeant returned wearing a dark look on his face that had never been particularly bright to begin with. He put his hands on his hips and observed the throng of civilians who were gathered around the makeshift first-aid station. Some watched the events in silence, but most were yapping and gossiping like they were spectators at a football game. The boys were still admiring the weapons, and Didriksen was still basking in the rare attention from the young, unattached women among the spectators.

Grunting, the Sergeant strode over to Doctor Meincke who just finished treating Johannes Ancher's wound. "Doctor, do you have any news from the garrison? I tried to call them from the barber shop, but I fear the lines have been cut."

"I don't, Sergeant," Doctor Meincke said and dusted off his hands. "But I know the Germans are most everywhere now. They have dropped leaflets in all the major cities warning us of Winston Churchill's intentions of a swift invasion of Jutland... it will not fool anyone but the Party faithful. The Citadel in Copenhagen has been captured, as has the King's palace. The Royal Guards put up a brave fight, but they were simply outnumbered."

"Mmmm..." Mehlborg said and gained another dark frown.

The Doctor nodded and reached into the bag of medicine that Lydia had carried to the square for a few more supplies. "The state broadcasting service has been silenced, but before they went off the air, they told us that German soldiers has dropped down in parachutes on the military air base up in Aalborg, as well as the Masnedø Fortress. Now, to me, soldiers jumping out of an airplane to capture a base or a fortress sounds like lunacy, and I wonder if the reporter had his facts straight."
"No, the Germans have units they call *Fallschirmjäger*. Paratroopers, Doctor."

Doctor Meincke smiled and offered the Sergeant a shrug. "In that case, I stand corrected, Sergeant. Whatever their designation, they have captured it… and the entire Royal Danish Air Force was caught on the ground and subsequently destroyed."

"Dammit…" Looking even more upset, Mehlborg growled and rubbed his weary face as he looked around at the remains of his unit that hadn't been too large to begin with. "Very well. Thank you very much, Doctor Meincke. I'm afraid we need to go to war now."

"Oh… again?"

"Yes. Listen up, men," he said in a strong voice. The soldiers all turned to pay attention to the Sergeant, including Anne-Katrine who didn't look like she could do much of anything. "We're to man the 37mm cannon here on the square. Before we can do that, we need to set up a roadblock for when… and mark my words, when the Germans arrive. 1st Company, leave the motorcycles and come with me."

The Sergeant spun around and marched off further into the square.

A groan was heard from one of the soldiers, and - predictably - it turned out to be Ole Thor Didriksen. He wasn't stupid enough to ignore an order, so he said farewell to his female admirers and hooked up with Johannes Ancher, August Larsen and Knud-Erik Kristensen. Moving as one, they marched away from the square in Mehlborg's footsteps.

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply and looked at the Sergeant's hobbled stride and the three soldiers who followed him. She tried to find Lydia in the crowd, but the nurse had vanished. Shrugging, she adjusted her battle helmet and took the heavy machine gun before she set off in something approaching a proper march. It didn't take long for an entire line of little boys to follow her, and she felt like a mother goose. Narrowing her eyes, she looked over her shoulder at the entourage but had no clue what to do to get them to leave. The uniform masked her gender, but if she spoke, she would reveal that she was a woman which would cause a far greater ruckus.

Fortunately for all involved, the town's sole uniformed policeman caught wind of the situation and came racing on his bicycle to stop the civilians from getting in the way of the soldiers.

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Anne-Katrine didn't have to go far to find the cannon they were there to man. Although she didn't have any military training at all, even she let out a long groan at the way the anti-tank cannon had been placed up against a bright white wall. She cast a glance at Sergeant Mehlborg who seemed to be lecturing Didriksen once more.

Not far from the impressive 37mm cannon on wheels, a group of bricklayers who had been working on building a new house in a side street to the square pushed over two old-fashioned wooden carriages filled to the rim with building materials of all kind. The men toiled away at
moving the carriages in place, and when everything was lined up, it left a clear firing line for the cannon and plenty of space to set up defensive positions underneath for the rifles and the machine gun. The bricklayers even laid a makeshift wall five bricks high for protection.

"Here we go again, Knud-Erik," Anne-Katrice said in a downcast voice as she crawled in under the heavy carriages. She looked up with a concerned look on her face, but the old wagons seemed to hold. Sighing, she folded down the machine gun's bipod and placed the struts on the bricks. She quickly discovered that five bricks was far too high, so she removed three of them and got down on her stomach. With two bricks, the machine gun would have a slight upwards angle which could come in handy.

"Looks like it. Are you all right, Anne-Katrice?" Knud-Erik said, crawling in next to her. "You sound really tired," he continued, piling up the spare magazines they had left.

"I'm just fine. Don't you worry about me," Anne-Katrice said and let out another sigh. She shook her head at the insanity of the situation - in fact, it wasn't just insane, it was surreal. There she was, pretending to be her own brother, flat on her stomach on the town square's pavement that she had walked on countless times. If that wasn't surreal enough, she and her comrades were about to defend a cannon post outside a barber shop of all places.

Behind them, Sergeant Mehlborg and the loader Larsen manned the cannon. To her right, Didriksen and Ancher crawled in under the other carriage and readied their rifles. She was glad she didn't have to spend more time than absolutely necessary with the insufferable Didriksen. Grunting, she raised the machine gun onto her shoulder and tried to sweep it from right to left to see if her firing line would be clear.

Suddenly, another layer of chaos was added to the already confusing mess. A Nimbus motorcycle carrying a dispatch rider came roaring up the main road from the south. The rider slowed down by the two motorcycles the unit had left behind and bumped over the curb to the square itself. When he was clear, he sped up again until he had reached the cannon post.

The dispatch rider jumped off and hurriedly removed his goggles. "Who's in charge here?" the young man said and looked at the soldiers underneath the carriages.

Sergeant Mehlborg came out from behind the cannon's armored shield and intercepted the rider. "I am. Any news?"

The dispatch rider offered the Sergeant a quick salute. "Sergeant, I'm afraid there's a German Panzer column headed this way. They're a short kilometer outside of town… well, they were. They must be closer now."

"A proper Panzer column?" Mehlborg echoed, and his voice went into a deeper register. "Not an armored column? Were you able to recognize their regimental pennants?"

"Yes, it's the 399th Infantry Regiment, Sergeant. And yes, they have Panzers up front. Proper tanks. At least two, probably more. Panzer Mark I."
"Bloody hell!" Mehlborg roared, and his cry could be heard over half the square. "Very well. Thank you. Proceed to the garrison for further orders."

The two men saluted each other before the dispatch rider ran back to his motorcycle and disappeared off the square.

Underneath the carriage, Anne-Katrine buried her face in her trembling hands to give herself just the tiniest amount of privacy. If the Germans had tanks up front, they wouldn't hesitate to use them… and there were civilians everywhere. One of them held a special place in Anne-Katrine's heart. She couldn't leave her post now, not when the rest of the unit depended on her at the machine gun. She had to clench her jaw hard to stop her teeth from chattering, and when she tried to rub her brow, she did so with trembling fingers.

"Anne-Katrine, are you sure you're all right? You're looking a little pale," Knud-Erik said for Anne-Katrine's ears only.

Anne-Katrine pulled back her teeth in a worried grimace. She considered telling the boorish man about Lydia, but she doubted he would understand. "I'm… I'm just not thrilled at the news we're to face German tanks," she croaked, hoping, wishing, praying that Lydia would be sensible enough to flee when the battle started.

"I know," Knud-Erik said darkly. He cast a long glance at Anne-Katrine before he readied the seven spare magazines they had left.

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Until then, the town square had been tense but quiet, but the news that the Germans were coming - and with tanks - spread quickly and caused widespread pandemonium. Civilians all over the square ran to and fro to find cover in the houses. Those who were merely visiting tried to run into stores or hide in doorways in the hope of staying safe in the inevitable fire fight.

Several fresh soldiers arrived from the garrison running as fast as they could with the backpack bouncing up and down on the backs of their squeaky clean uniforms. They all carried the standard issue M1889 rifles, some of which looked so clean and new that it was doubtful it had even been used at the firing range.

Anne-Katrine had her eyes out on stalks scouting for Lydia, but she couldn't catch a glimpse of the familiar nurse's uniform anywhere. When her search was fruitless, she looked over her shoulder at the imposing anti-tank cannon that looked grotesquely out of place in front of the barber shop's white wall. She couldn't see through the armored shield, but she knew Sergeant Mehlborg and the loader August Larsen would be waiting there literally with the finger on the button.

The town's sole policeman ran around like a headless chicken to get all civilians off the street, but the poor man was in way over his head, and his frantic shouting only made the chaos worse.
Sergeant Mehlborg ducked out from behind the cannon's shield and stared angrily at the ineffective policeman. "That bloody idiot! He'll only make it worse! If he doesn't get those-

That's how far Mehlborg got before an unwanted noise entered the soundscape and made him pipe down - the familiar, and frightening, metallic jingling of a tank running on tracks. Growling, he ducked back behind the armored shield.

Anne-Katrine had to swallow a huge lump that formed in her throat. The jingling of the tracks sent a shiver down her back which wasn't just cold, it was icy. She wrapped her fingers even harder around the machine gun's handle and stared ahead at the open space towards the entry to the square.

'I should have kissed Lydia when I had the chance…' she thought, trying to take deep breaths to control the quivering mess that was all she had left inside. 'I should have kissed her regardless of how the people around us would have reacted… but I didn't. I was a coward and now I'm going to pay the price. We don't stand a chance against tanks… I should have grabbed her and kissed her senseless. But I didn't. And now it's too late.'

Ahead of her, civilians and a few soldiers came running into the square, waving their arms and shouting at the top of their lungs. They all shouted the same thing: 'the Germans are coming!'

The sound of the jingling tank tracks was joined by the steady, monotonous hum of truck engines that brought hundreds of German soldiers to the their little town. Now and then, the droning was overpowered by higher-revving engines that could only be motorcycles.

Underneath the heavy carriages, Anne-Katrine breathed faster and faster until she had to smack her cheeks to snap out of the trance and get back to the real world. The old, familiar block of ice had returned to her gut, and it had a tagalong in the shape of an eerie numbness that swept up from her legs. Rolling her shoulders, she moved the machine gun left and right a couple of times to make sure she still had an open field of fire.

A dark-gray shadow appeared at the intersection just beyond the square. The first Panzer I tank loomed large with a black-and-white cross painted on the side of the angular, clumsy-looking vehicle. Ominously, the tank's number was thirteen which had been painted on the turret in bright green. The first tank rudely shoved the two Nimbus motorcycles to the side, finally wrecking the one Didriksen had been riding. The other one was shoved up onto the square and pushed off and out of sight.

Before Anne-Katrine could as much as think about squeezing the trigger of her weapon, the twin machine guns in the Panzer I's turret opened fire the second its commander spotted the roadblock. The storm of lead from the rapid-fire weapons screamed through the air and punched holes in anything that stood in its way.

Down below the carriage, Anne-Katrine let out a brief scream and ducked her head as far down as she could. Bullets tore past her on all sides, and she could hear the lethal lead zinging through the air right next to her. Even thinking about returning fire would be out of the question. Large
and small chips of wood and the building materials stored in the carriage rained down upon her and painted her khaki greatcoat pale-gray.

The firepower of the twin machine guns was formidable, but the tank did have one natural enemy that its commander hadn't counted on - the 37mm cannon.

"Open fire!" Mehlborg barked, immediately followed by a loud, cracking boom from the Bofors anti-tank weapon. The shell screamed towards its target some one hundred and twenty meters further towards the entrance to the square until it impacted on the Panzer I's right tread. A violent explosion that started white but turned bright orange within milliseconds made the heavy vehicle rock back and forth - and more importantly, stop firing its twin machine guns.

As the loud boom from the explosion rolled around the square, it was joined by the sound of dozens of window panes falling onto the street below - victims of the violent forces of the air.

The crippled tank had lost a large section of its right tread, and the entire right front of the vehicle was burning, but the engine was still running. The driver tried backing up, but all he achieved was to lose more and more of the tread. The tank crew finally decided they were sitting ducks for the 37mm cannon and opened the hatch atop the turret to escape.

"Commence firing!" Mehlborg barked, and Anne-Katrine and the rest of the unit didn't waste the opportunity.

While the rifles around her cracked repeatedly, she put the machine gun to her shoulder and squeezed the trigger, aiming for the figure at the hatch. The familiar deafening racket nearly burst her eardrum and the cordite once again tore through her nostrils as she fired off several three or four-round bursts at the man in the black uniform. She killed the one she was aiming for, and he disappeared down the hatch in a shower of blood.

The other crewmember seemed reluctant to try his luck at the hatch, so he stayed out of sight. Anne-Katrine stopped firing and let her weapon cool off. The numbness she had felt before had seemingly spread to her heart, because she didn't experience the kind of emotional jolt she had felt after her first kill. Whether that was a good or a bad sign, she wasn't sure.

The German progress had not been halted, merely stalled by the loss of the first Panzer I. Working under the cover of the smoke and haze from the flames that still flickered from the burning tank, several German infantry units spread out and began to move towards the roadblock. While one group advanced, another covered them with small arms fire.

"Sergeant!" Anne-Katrine cried over her shoulder. "Sergeant Mehlborg, we've got infantry coming towards us!"

"They're your targets!" Mehlborg shouted back. "Return fire! Keep them back!"
"Yes, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said and put the machine gun to her shoulder. Aiming for the front of the line of soldiers, she squeezed the trigger and fired several, short bursts at the approaching enemy. Around her, Kristensen, Didriksen and Ancher added their rifles to the mix.

Several German soldiers fell from the line Anne-Katrine had aimed at. Others were wounded but were able to fall back to a safer location behind the burning tank. There, they settled in and returned fire with their rifles and the occasional pistol.

Anne-Katrine already knew in her heart it was a hopeless stand-off, but it turned tragic when Johannes Ancher let out a cry and dropped his rifle. The young man with the delicate features had taken a bullet, but the panic that claimed him made it worse. Instead of crawling back to safety behind the carriage, he tried to get up on his hands and knees.

"No! Johannes, get down… get down for God's sake!" Anne-Katrine cried, but she could only watch in horror as a slew of bullets thumped into the young man and made him fall hard onto the ground.

Didriksen let out a squeal at seeing a dead body right next to him, but Anne-Katrine roared out her anger and frustrations and looked ahead to find the enemy who had killed the youngest member of the squad. An infantryman who was balancing on top of the tank's left side holding a rifle would do. Without hesitating for a second, she aimed at him and squeezed the machine gun's trigger. The projectiles that shot out of the muzzle flew towards the man and turned his head into a red haze. He fell off the tank and went out of sight. Anne-Katrine lowered her smoking weapon and stared at the bloody battleground with eyes that only showed a hard sheen of darkness.

With the resistance so fierce, the German officers decided to withdraw the infantry and send the next Panzer I forward. The units fell back to make way for the tank that soon sent out a cloud of smoke from its exhausts as it rolled forward with its tracks jingling loudly on the paved square. The tank maneuvered around its shot-up counterpart and moved further into the section of the square that was defended by the Danish soldiers.

"Sergeant!" Anne-Katrine cried, intending to tell Mehlborg they faced a new threat. She didn't have time to wait for an answer as the twin machine guns in the second Panzer's turret started talking and spewing hot death all over the two carriages.

Once again, Anne-Katrine and the others had to dive down behind the low brick walls the bricklayers had made for them while the bullets zinged past. The melodic tones created by the projectiles as they screamed past their ears provided a chilling background score to the hellish mission, one only topped by the sound of the impacts onto the armored shield of the 37mm cannon. There, the bullets played a grand symphony of death in major and minor keys as they were reflected off the strong armor and sent in every - unpredictable - direction.

The Panzer I's turret swung left and continued to distribute death. The two wooden carriages were littered with holes that made the old woodwork creak and groan, and like before, chips of wood, brick and mortar rained down upon those lying underneath.
While she kept her head well down, Anne-Katrine raised her machine gun and tried to fire a short salvo at the tank, but the bullets just tap-danced against the armor plates and disappeared into the ether.

She clenched her teeth and waited. Waited for Mehlborg and Larsen to fire the cannon and take out the tank - or waited for Death to come and point the scythe at her. It would be one of the two, of that she was certain.

Death did come, but it wasn't for her. As the tank's turret swung the other way and the twin machine guns continued to blast out the burning hot lead, Knud-Erik's luck ran out. He caught a whole slew of bullets in his chest that made him jerk around like a manic puppet.

"Oh! Oh God, no… Knud-Erik!" Anne-Katrine cried, but it was already too late to save the boorish farmer with the friendly manners. Blood ran freely from the young man's mouth, and he grabbed Anne-Katrine's greatcoat with a terrified look of raw fear in his eyes like he hoped she could do something. Within a few heartbeats, his hands relaxed their grip and he slipped onto the ground with a peaceful look on his face.

Anne-Katrine panted wildly and her teeth chattered in her mouth. She and Ole Thor Didriksen were the only ones left at the forward position. Staring at the dead body next to her, her entire being screamed at her to get up and run away before it was too late - but she knew it would lead to certain death.

With Knud-Erik Kristensen dead, she would have to change her own magazines, but that was the least of her problems now. Full of anger and hatred towards the Panzer and the Germans in it, she grabbed the machine gun and fired at the tank without aiming at anything. She kept the trigger down until the entire magazine had been emptied - and miraculously, several of the shots went in through the driver's open peephole mounted directly below the twin machine guns.

The tank's guns stopped abruptly like someone had thrown a switch. The vehicle jerked to a halt and swayed back and forth on the tracks for a brief moment before the driver found the reverse gear. A cloud of black exhaust fumes blew out of the tank's rear pipes as the man at the controls stepped on the gas to get away from the dangers at the roadblock.

Anne-Katrine snapped out of her stupor and found the little button on the right-hand side of the machine gun that would release the spent magazine. Pressing it, she was able to take the old one off without problems. Getting the next one would be a problem, however, as Knud-Erik had fallen on top of them.

She had a tormented look on her face as she pushed aside her fallen comrade, and the look only grew worse when she found the next magazine was soaked in his blood. She wiped it off on his greatcoat as best she could and placed it on the machine gun's frame. It took three tries to get it to click into place, but once it was secure, she worked the action and put the weapon to her shoulder.
The all-too familiar eerie calm fell over the battleground, and Anne-Katrine took the opportunity to look at Didriksen. If his flushed face and shaking hands were anything to go by, the chubby soldier appeared to have reached his breaking point. Anne-Katrine sighed and moved the machine gun left and right to get a feel for her line of fire. There weren't any targets so she relaxed her stance.

The lull in the fighting allowed her to think for a moment, but she didn't like the thoughts that came to her. There had been nine of them before the first battle at the fork in the road - now they were four. The chances of survival were poor to say the least.

A handful of seconds later, the tank had entered the unwieldy cannon's limited field of fire. At once, Sergeant Mehlborg's gruff voice cried out an echoing "Fire!" followed by the cracking boom from the 37mm cannon. The shell screamed towards the Panzer I, but unlike the first shot that had been a success, the second attempt only saw the shell ricocheting off an oblique angle on the turret's armor plating.

Anne-Katrine stared wide-eyed at the shower of white sparks that seemed to burst out of nothing as the shell hit the tank. A mere second later, the spectacle was dwarfed by the shell finding a target - one of the houses lining the square. It hit the upper floor of a three-story house and blew out the entire corner of the building in a violent explosion of pure white and bright orange.

Bricks, glass and woodwork rained down onto the square and created a racket that overpowered even the Panzer I's engine as it tried to get away from the roadblock. The tank was still rocking back and forth from being hit, and there was a large, pitch black smudge on the turret where the shell had struck it.

A fire brok out in the building that had been hit, and Anne-Katrine couldn't help but be puzzled over the fact that the worst damage to private property - so far - had been caused by friendly fire.

Not only had they broken every window around the square with the first shot from the cannon, now they had started a fire that could potentially burn down half the town as the fire department wouldn't be able to do anything about it while the shooting war was raging. She shook her head and hunkered down behind the machine gun. She could hear Sergeant Mehlborg curse and swear behind her from the fiasco, and she was glad it hadn't been her finger on the trigger, ricochet or not.

Still going backwards, the driver of the Panzer I had reached the spot where the first tank was stranded after losing its tread. Unfortunately, he reversed directly into it in his haste to get away which caused several of the German soldiers in the vicinity to wave their arms and yell at him, or simply to scurry out of the way.

Anne-Katrine decided to help them find their feet. Pulling her index finger towards her, she fired several short bursts in the general direction of the gray-clad soldiers. Cordite and exhaust fumes hung heavily in the air so she couldn't see if she had hit anyone. Sporadic small arms fire came back at her, but compared to the twin machine guns in the turrets of the tanks, the single shots almost felt like they weren't returning fire at all.
"What did you do that for?!" Didriksen cried from somewhere on Anne-Katrine's right. "They had stopped firing at us! Now they're shooting again! You stupid woman!"

Briefly putting down the machine gun, Anne-Katrine crawled around on the spot to glare darkly at the chubby soldier. It was clear by the look of raw panic on his face that he was about to do something rash, like deserting his post. His flushed, ruddy face was covered by a sheen of sweat that made him appear like a little piggy roasting over an open fire.

Didriksen moved his battle helmet back and kept staring at Anne-Katrine instead of looking at the enemy. "We're all going to die here because of what you just did! You're an insane fanatic! You should have your head examined… crazy woman!"

Anne-Katrine blinked a couple of times as she digested Didriksen's words. Grunting loudly, she rolled her eyes and crawled back to the machine gun. "That idiot… what an imbecile!" she mumbled under her breath. "The Army won't allow strong, capable women to join up, but they'll gladly accept nincompoops and braggarts. What the blazes is wrong with this world?!"

The easily recognizable sound of hobnailed boots running on the pavement made Anne-Katrine forget all about her indignation. She hunkered down behind the machine gun and moved the barrel left and right several times to see if the soldiers she had heard were moving closer to her, or simply regrouping.

It was difficult to see much of anything through the haze produced by the fighting which made her gulp down a worried lump that had formed in her throat. She had discovered that the clouds of cordite had a tendency to hover in the air for quite some time if there wasn't any wind to blow it away. It wouldn't necessarily pose a problem in itself as it was of a pale-bluish-gray color, but the smoke from the tanks' exhaust was equally reluctant to leave the narrow gap between the town houses, and that was pitch black - in short, just the thing the Germans would exploit for mounting a sneak attack.

Hearing another group of hobnailed boots made her pull her lips back in a worried grimace and move around so she could look behind her. "Sergeant! Sergeant Mehlborg! I think they're up to something!"

The words had barely left her mouth before Didriksen let out a squeal produced by pure panic. Some seventy meters ahead of them, three German soldiers came out of the fog and fell down on their stomachs where they set up a pointy, dark-gray instrument of death on a tripod. A few seconds later, a muzzle started flashing from low down which produced a storm of lead headed Anne-Katrine's way.

Crying out, she dove for cover behind the low wall of bricks and tried to protect her head. It wasn't a new tank, it was one of the rapid-fire Spandau machine guns used on the motorcycles.

Anne-Katrine's own machine gun couldn't go that low in its present position, and sitting up to return fire would be suicidal. She needed to pull it back down onto the ground so the barrel would be level with her attackers, but she could only reach it in a bad angle, and lying flat on her
stomach didn't give her enough leverage to pull the heavy weapon down from the bricks she had put it on.

A direct bullet hit or a screaming ricochet - she wasn't sure which - grazed her battle helmet and knocked it askew. She cried out in terror, but it only lasted for a heartbeat until she found out she hadn't been shot dead after all. She hurriedly pulled the battle helmet back down to cover her face.

Terrified screams and cries of pain were suddenly heard from somewhere behind her. At first, she wasn't sure if it was coming from Ole Thor Didriksen or further back, but as the screaming continued, she recognized August Larsen's voice.

The situation was already bad, but it was about to get worse. The second Panzer I, the one with the black smudge on the turret from the earlier strike, had received a new commander as a replacement for the one Anne-Katrine had wounded through the peephole. It started in a cloud of black smoke and rolled up the square on its jingling tracks.

Staring death in the eye, Anne-Katrine decided that it was now or never for yanking down the machine gun from the brick wall. With an almighty effort, she managed to get it down, but not only did she whack herself over the head with the stock, she nearly pulled her arm out of its socket because of the weight and the bad angle.

When she had the trusty machine gun at her shoulder, she opened fire at the enemy Spandau nest some seventy meters ahead of her. She continued to fire in short bursts to save her scarce ammo, but the amount of smoke and fog that drifted across the square made it difficult for her to see what she needed to aim at - ultimately, she aimed at the muzzle flash from the enemy weapon.

She had no idea if she was successful in killing all three men at the machine gun post, but she considered it at least a partial success when the enemy weapon ceased firing and cries for help could be heard. Lowering the machine gun, she panted through clenched teeth as she observed the battleground ahead of her.

"Jensen! Jensen!" Mehlborg roared from behind the cannon's armored shield.

Anne-Katrine groaned out loud and looked behind her. "Sergeant?" she shouted back.

"Get back here! I need your help!"

"My help? You need my help? With the cannon?" Anne-Katrine croaked, shaking her head in disbelief. Looking ahead, her ears could just pick up the jingling of the Panzer's tracks.

"Jensen, will you get your ass back to the bloody cannon! On the double!" Mehlborg roared, leaving very little doubt as to the seriousness of the situation. "Didriksen! Take over the MG!"

Didriksen whimpered, but seemed to understand he needed to follow the order or else he'd be in real trouble if he managed to survive the battle. The chubby soldier put his rifle around his
shoulders and began to crawl away from the second of the two carriages. He looked anywhere but at Johannes Ancher's dead body as he crawled past it.

Anne-Katrine rubbed her face and stared wide-eyed at the dark-gray cannon that loomed behind her. "What the blazes does the Sergeant think I can do with that damn thing? I can't shoot a cannon!" she mumbled under her breath. Shaking her head, she made way for Didriksen but deliberately gave him a wide berth.

Once Ole Thor was in place behind the machine gun that Anne-Katrine had operated for most of the morning with such gruesome success, she crawled away from the protection of the two carriages and entered the open area in front of the cannon. The ground was covered in dust and littered with spent brass casings, pieces of brick and plaster, shards of glass and various other debris that had been produced by the fighting. Crawling across all that seemed excessive, so she jumped up and ran hunched-over until she was behind the cannon's shield.

The loader August Larsen was sitting against the wall of the barber shop behind the cannon. He had been wounded twice, and although his wounds had been hastily dressed, the crimson blood that seeped from his torso created a grisly contrast to the hitherto white wall that had turned dark-gray from the many bullet holes that had ruined the pristine plaster.

Sergeant Mehlborg gave Anne-Katrine's battle helmet a dark look but didn't comment on it. "All right, Jensen… I'm afraid Larsen has been badly wounded. I tried to help him, but… well, never mind that now. You're our new loader. Do as I tell you and there's a chance we may get out of it alive."

"Loader?" Anne-Katrine croaked, looking at the two crates packed with shells. The thirty-seven millimeter shells had different-colored tips depending on their type. The armor-piercing rounds were red, the high-explosive shells yellow. An empty casing was lying on the ground next to the cannon, the only visible result of the shots that had been fired. "Sergeant, I don't know the first thing about shooting a cannon… we don't have them at the farm, you know!"

Despite the situation, Sergeant Mehlborg let out a chuckle, the first all day. "Consider this a crash course, Jensen. I need to have someone I can rely on under fire. Didriksen isn't that someone."

"Well… thank you, Surgeant." Anne-Katrine's eyebrows crept up her forehead. She had never expected to hear such a strong compliment from the dour soldier, but now that it had been given to her, she felt her original decision had been right all along. She did have something to offer, regardless of her gender.

"You're welcome. I think we have an enemy approaching us as we speak, is that correct?"

"I think so, Sergeant. I heard the tracks. But…"
"We've got no time for buts, Jensen. We need to go to war," the Sergeant said and adjusted several knobs and handles on the cannon. "Take an armor-piercing shell… the red one… and load it into the chamber once it's ready."

Anne-Katrine rubbed her face with a trembling hand. Nodding, she reached for the crate with the shells, but stopped and took off her rifle. Once that was out of the way, she got rid of the backpack, the belt with the ammunition pouches and the bayonet, and finally the heavy, warm greatcoat so she could move her arms more freely like she was used to back home in the field. The two peaks in the sweat-soaked khaki uniform shirt proved without a doubt she was a woman. When she felt the Sergeant's eyes on her chest, a rare blush crept up her cheeks.

"Jensen, you're not wearing the regulatory undershirt. It's compulsory with your combat uniform, and I'm afraid I have to make a note of it in my mission evaluation," Mehlborg said while his lips creased into something that could be interpreted as a smile.

"I'm terrible sorry, Sergeant Mehlborg," Anne-Katrine said and rolled up her shirtsleeves to display her strong forearms that were tangible proof of the many years she had worked from dawn to dusk at the farm. "My brother was still wearing his when he was taken to hospital."

"So that part was true?"

"Yes. He really does have appendicitis. Rotten timing."

"I'll say."

The friendly conversation was interrupted by a frightened squeal that came back from Didriksen's position underneath the carriages. "Tanks! Tanks! The tank is coming back!" he howled in a high-pitched voice. "What should I do?!"

"Open fire at will, Didriksen!" Mehlborg shouted back. When the machine gun opened fire in the regular short bursts, the Sergeant grunted and released the chamber on the cannon so the spent casing from the second shot flew out in a cloud of cordite smoke. "Insert the shell there, Jensen… and don't drop it."

"I won't, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said and reached for the first armor-piercing shell. The brass casing was surprisingly light and cold to the touch, and she held it as tenderly like she would a newborn calf. She carried it the five paces and inserted it in the chamber with the tip first like the Sergeant showed her - that particular part of the equation didn't come as a surprise to her.

While she worked, Mehlborg adjusted all the various things that needed to be spot on for the shot to be effective. "Ready?" he said strongly to be heard over the jingling tracks.

"Ready," Anne-Katrine echoed, slamming the chamber closed by raising a handle to the 'Closed' position. A vertical breech block slid up and sealed off the barrel.

"Searching for a target… aiming… stand clear, Jensen! Fire!"
Up close, the firing of the cannon was a violent experience. Not only was the cracking boom so loud that Anne-Katrine cried out and covered her ears, the barrel was thrown back from the recoil with such force the entire cannon jumped thirty centimeters in the air and trembled like it was falling apart.

The shell screamed through the air and scored a perfect hit on the Panzer I's left tread. Once again, the heavy vehicle was thrown to the side as the bright orange explosion engulfed it in flames.

Anne-Katrine held her breath while she waited to see if the Panzer had been disabled by the strike.

Up front underneath the carriage, Didriksen was still firing at the tank, but the driver of the vehicle had wisely shut his peephole so he couldn't be hit by a potshot like in the earlier attempt at storming the roadblock. The vehicle continued to rock back and forth while the orange flames burned at one end and black smoke rose from the exhausts at the other.

"Infantry! They're coming! They're really coming! They're all over me! Sergeant!" Didriksen suddenly cried in a voice that nearly turned into a scream. He started firing the machine gun, but the combined firepower of the advancing soldiers made it a hopeless task for the chubby soldier.

Anne-Katrine hurriedly reached into the crate to get a new armor-piercing shell. "That wasn't enough, Sergeant!" she shouted, waiting for Mehlborg to release the breech block that sealed off the chamber.

Moving fast, the Sergeant pulled down the handle which sent the spent casing rattling onto the ground in a cloud of smoke. Anne-Katrine was ready, and she put the new shell into the chamber and slammed the handle back into the 'Closed' position.

The Panzer I was dead center in Mehlborg's sights, but before he had time to pull the trigger and send the tank to hell, it opened fire with its twin machine guns. Reams of burning hot death peppered everything at the two carriages and the cannon, making any form of retaliation impossible.

Lead zinged through the air with unstoppable force. Some of it tapped against the cannon's armored shield like a violent hailstorm and sent ricochets shooting off in all directions. Some penetrated the brick walls and the last remaining windows of the nearby buildings, or hit the pavement and created multi-colored sparks. Some hit the barber shop's white wall and ground it into mortar dust - and some of it hit the three soldiers standing at the cannon.

August Larsen was the first of the three to experience the violent nature of the projectiles that blasted through the air. A stray bullet tore the eyes out of his head, and he screamed insanely as he collapsed to the ground with his hands covering the horrible wound.

Anne-Katrine wanted to help him, but before the thought had even cleared her mind, her right boot caught a bullet directly on her foot. The leather was ripped open and a crimson fountain
splashed up from the wound. A wave of fiery, awful pain blasted up her right leg and made her clutch the armored edge of the cannon. Clenching her teeth, she stared in wide-eyed shock at the bleeding wound, but despite the ferocious pain, she praised herself lucky - especially as she moved her eyes up to look at Larsen whose face resembled the floor of a slaughterhouse. The poor man was still screaming in pain and shock.

As the turret of the Panzer I swung back to the other side, Sergeant Mehlborg was shot in the same arm he had already injured. He was thrown off the cannon's right seat and fell into the open. Bullet hits cracked all around him on the pavement and blood poured from the second wound, but he crawled back up to the cannon to try to find protection under its armor.

Anne-Katrine's chin trembled at the thought that it could all be over. Though she was frightened stiff, a million thoughts raced through her mind of things she would have loved to have done if she'd had a little more time - not least of which to kiss Lydia senseless to make up for the injustice she had caused when they had met at the square. The harsh reality of the endless, deafening noises that came from the Panzer's machine guns turned it all into a foolish pipe dream.

She didn't dare move from the spot she had found behind the cannon, and the intense pain that shot up from her foot prevented her from doing so even if she had wanted to. Alas, the spot wasn't as safe as she had thought it would be.

As the fire intensified and the German infantry came closer, a surprise salvo from a different angle tore chunks of fabric out of her khaki pants at her lower legs. Through a stroke of good fortune, only a few of the bullets actually grazed her skin, but it was enough to draw squirts of blood.

Crying out from the white-hot pain that shot up from her legs, Anne-Katrine had to release the grip on the armored shield. She couldn't stand up or even sit, so she fell down. Her battle helmet thumped onto the pavement and caused her to see stars, but it was nothing compared to the pain that rose from her legs.

A split second later, a mule with hooves of fire kicked her in the arm, and she was thrown onto her other side. Warm blood that had spewed from her arm dripped off her right cheek and stained her shirt. An angry red furrow had been plowed along the skin on the inside of her right arm from the wrist to the elbow. The bullet had followed the curvature of her elbow until it had dug into her upper arm. As it had left her, it had torn parts of her flesh and most of the rolled-up shirtsleeve to shreds.

The white-hot, burning pain that rose from her entire body made her unable to do anything but lie on her left side and wait for Death to take her. She barely registered that the shooting stopped, or that a sound of a powerful engine was heard from further down the square.

As she lay there in a fiery daze, she watched dozens if not scores of German soldiers advance towards her position. The infantrymen clad in dark-gray moved aside for a fully operational Panzer I that drove past the two that had been disabled in the fight.
The tank rammed the two wooden carriages at full speed and left crushed wood and unruly piles of building materials in its wake. It didn't stop there. Revving its engine again, it lurched forward and carried on towards the cannon.

Anne-Katrine tried to blink away the red haze of pain as the tank came closer to her. She was in a precarious position, but there was nothing she could do to move. Sighing, she closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. Before the scythe could swing at her neck, she was surrounded by soldiers wearing black, hobnailed boots.

The soldiers grabbed her arms and pulled her upright, caring very little about the cries she let out. They spoke German to her, but her brain was so muddled by the pain and the fatigue that she couldn't understand what they were trying to tell or ask her. All she knew was that they dragged her to safety.

The pain was so fierce that parts of her body grew numb, but she was just able to see the third Panzer I aim for the cannon and drive over it at full speed, comprehensively destroying it under the tracks and the heavy body. The driver revved the engine and backed up before he went at it again to show what they thought of the resistance.

Cheers rose from the German soldiers holding Anne-Katrine, but she was in no condition to complain. Still in a haze, she felt herself being dragged away, but the torture suddenly stopped. Voices around her spoke in German, including a female one that seemed familiar, but she had no idea what the conversation was about.

Other men crowded her and began to speak Danish, but her numb brain couldn't understand that either. Because of the heavy battle helmet, her head lolled around on her shoulders like it wasn't attached to anything inside her neck. All she felt was fiery pain from her wounded arm, legs and foot. Warm blood seeped down from her upper arm and stained her shirt, ruining it beyond repair, and her right boot felt like it was filled with water - but it was blood.

The last thing she saw before she fell into a pitch black chasm of unconsciousness was that one of the people around her wore black shoes and a white nurse's uniform.

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**CHAPTER 6**

The next twenty minutes to half an hour went by in a blur for Anne-Katrine, but she had the feeling she was carried a short distance across the square she had shed blood, sweat and tears defending from the enemy who had ultimately defeated her. Later, she thought she was being carried up a flight of stairs, but with all the impenetrable fog and darkness she had in her mind, she really had no clue what was going on.
Her first conscious thought in a while came when she realized she was lying on a soft bed rather than a hard slab in a morgue somewhere. It soon became clear it wasn't just a military bunk but a real bed as it was complete with sheets and a pillow. The bed smelled clean and inviting; in fact, it smelled just like the perfume Lydia used to wear.

Anne-Katrine wanted to crack open an eyelid, but the fiery pain that shot up from her wounded arm, legs and foot tried to pull her back down into the reddish-black hell of pain she had come from. Little by little, she was able to discern the sounds that were produced around her, but it was such a muddled din she wasn't really all that interested in waking up. At least the voices spoke Danish, not German.

The voices died down and ceased altogether. Anne-Katrine breathed a sigh of relief and snuggled down in the soft bed. She was slowly drifting towards consciousness with the terrible pains from her wounds doing their worst to drag her back to the surface.

All she could think of was pain, and she couldn't even shift in the bed without tendrils of fire crawling up her right leg. The wound in the foot seemed to be the worst. Her lower legs were warm and aching as well, but they felt different. Her right arm had grown numb and she didn't like that one bit.

She finally opened her eyes, but the tiny crack between her eyelids wasn't enough to see where she was. Forcing herself to open her eyes further, she took in the sights of the small room she was in.

It wasn't large at all, only three by three meters, and the furniture was sparse and simple. It was equipped with the bed she was presently occupying, a tall, dark-brown closet beyond the foot end of the bed, an identical closet on the other side of the room, and a spartan two-drawer desk with an anglepoise lamp and a battle helmet sitting on the desk top that had probably been the one she had been wearing. A swivel-chair had been pushed in under the desk, and a bloody mess of something was hanging over the backrest. All the walls including the closed dark-brown door were bare and the lamp in the ceiling was nondescript, so there were no hints as to the identity of the owner of the room. It held a faint whiff of disinfectant like she was near or in a hospital, but that didn't help much.

Natural light fell onto the floor from somewhere behind Anne-Katrine, but when she tried to crane her neck to look above her, it hurt far too much and she had to give up. She had seen enough to know the two-pane window had been shattered which meant she had to be somewhere at or near the square.

Hurried but determined footsteps beyond the closed door made her draw a deep breath that her nervousness commanded that she held. The footsteps didn't sound like hobnailed boots, but the Germans didn't all wear boots. If her luck really had run out, it could also be a Danish collaborator there to finish her off.

The handle was depressed and the dark-brown door creaked open. Anne-Katrine stared hard at the doorway to see who it would be although she knew her present state of weakness would
leave her unable to fight even an ugly duckling. The creature who entered the room and locked eyes with Anne-Katrine wasn't an ugly duckling, but the world's most beautiful nurse.

Anne-Katrine let out a long sigh of relief as Lydia slammed the door shut and rushed over to the bed.

The nurse fell down on her knees and wrapped her arms around the injured woman on the bed. "Oh, sweet Anne-Katrine… sweet Anne-Katrine, I'm so happy to see you… Oh God, I'm so happy to see you awake and… and… and…"

"Unwell," Anne-Katrine added in a croak. A relieved smile wanted to form on her lips, but it couldn't push hard enough through the pain to create more than a faint crease.

Lydia let out a strangled squeak and buried her face in the crook of Anne-Katrine's neck. She gave her the hug of a lifetime before she pulled back and simply stared at the injured woman with wide-open, glistening eyes. The stare lasted for a heartbeat or two before she leaned back down and claimed the lips of the woman she loved.

The kiss was so good that Anne-Katrine needed a little more; then a little more after that. When they separated, she could hardly feel the pain that shot up from her wounded members. Of course, her wonderful state of bliss only lasted for a few seconds, but it had been a strong reminder that she should never refuse Lydia another kiss for as long as she lived. "And I'm really glad to see you, dearest," she croaked and reached up to caress Lydia's cheek. "I'm so, so sorry for treating you the way I did back at the square. I was being a selfish bitch… it will never happen again."

"Oh, Anne-Katrine!" croaked and promptly dove down for another hug and an even better kiss.

The next separation was worse than the first since the emotions ran deeper, but Anne-Katrine had a few questions she would like answered, so breaking off the sweet contact was an unfortunate necessity. "Dearest, where are we?" she said, trying to shift around in the bed.

"In my room above the health center. I stay here during my shifts when there's nothing for me to do. You were brought up here by a couple of strong men. I… I think I stole you right out from under the Germans' noses," Lydia said and broke out in a blush. "I pretended I could speak real German and tried to act nonchalant. I don't know how I did it, but… here you are."

A broad, proud smile spread over Anne-Katrine's face, and she reached out to take her sweetheart's hand. "You always were the clever one of us! Oh, dearest… how can I ever thank you?"

"By staying alive!" Lydia said nervously. She returned the squeeze before she gestured at the battle helmet. "I nearly lost you today, love. Several times, by the looks of it."

Anne-Katrine tried to zoom in on the battle helmet, but it wasn't until Lydia brought it over that it dawned on her what her sweetheart had meant. A silvery scratch four centimeters long ran
along the front of the helmet not a finger's width above the lower rim. She remembered the helmet being knocked askew by a ricochet. At the time, it hadn't seemed that big a deal, but the silvery scratch told a different story. She fell back in the bed and let out a deep, long sigh.

"So you see," Lydia said and put the battle helmet back on the desk, "you've used two of your lives today. Careful… you can't have too many left, love."

"I know," Anne-Katrine said and sighed again. She tried to relax, but the pain was a constant presence in her foot and her lower legs. The strange numbness still trickled through her right arm, and that was the greater of her worries. The throbbing foot she could live with for the time being, but the thought of a paralyzed arm sent a cold shiver down her spine. "Lydia, I… I can't feel my arm. My right arm. I don't like that.. I don't like that at all. Please… can you take a look at it?"

"Oh, love, don't worry… I gave you an injection of morphine directly into the arm when you were brought in," Lydia said and squeezed Anne-Katrine's good hand.

"Oh… thank God," Anne-Katrine croaked and looked down at herself. The angry red furrow that ran from her wrist to her elbow looked even worse now as the surrounding flesh had lost some of the adrenaline-induced flush.

"If you need another injection, just let me know."

"It won't happen. I had a family member who succumbed to a morphine addiction. It was pitiful to watch. No, it won't happen."

"But the pains…"

"No injection."

Lydia leaned down and kissed Anne-Katrine's forehead. "I was about to suggest that we cut off the bloody uniform. It's going to hurt you. I didn't want to do it without your consent or without offering you another injection. I love you too much to ever cause you pain… but this time, I'm afraid there's no way to avoid it."

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face at the thought of her brother's uniform being cut to shreds - but it was already ruined, and wearing it would simply be too dangerous in the long run. She was surprised they hadn't already been visited by grim-looking men carrying rifles and dark-gray uniforms. "I love you too… and go ahead. I'll just scream into the pillow if the pain gets too fierce."

The look on Lydia's face told a tale of not feeling too comforted by the answer, but she moved over to one of the closets, opened it and found a large, curved scissors designed for just that purpose. Gulping, she returned to the bed and held the tool ready. "Where should I start?" she whispered hoarsely.
"The boot… I need to see if I still have a foot in there," Anne-Katrine croaked, trying to put her good hand under her head so she could see better.

Lydia gulped again and took the scissors to the ruined, blood-soaked leather. She cut away pieces of the boot for nearly a minute before she could even attempt to remove what was left. Fresh blood stained her fingers and the sheets, but she didn't pay any attention to that.

Cold sweat poured down Anne-Katrine's pale face, and she stared wide-eyed at the slow, deliberate process of cutting away the boot. Tendrils of raw, fiery pain moved up her leg and made her gasp repeatedly. She moved her good arm down and grabbed hold of the bed's wooden frame while her foot was being worked on.

After cutting open the shaft, Lydia moved the scissors down on both sides of the boot and cut away the leather all the way to the sole. When it finally became loose, she put the bloody scissors on the bed and wrapped both hands around the remains of the boot. "It's… it's going to hurt," she said apologetically before she began to move the top of the boot up and away from the wound.

Hurt didn't begin to describe it. Anne-Katrine let out a strong hiss as the tendrils of pain turned into a monstrous being that champed on her foot. She tightened the grip on the bed's frame to the point where it began to creak.

"It's off… now I need to take the sock off as well. This is going to be easier," Lydia said and took the scissors to the khaki sock. It was easier to cut off as she had promised, but a few loose threads had worked their way into the wound and had to be extricated by hand.

When Lydia let out a croaking "Oh, God..." Anne-Katrine didn't dare to look down. She kept her eyes fixed on the lamp in the ceiling out of fear of what she would see down there.

"I... I need to fetch the doctor, love. It's worse than I thought it would be. I'll be back before you know I'm gone," Lydia said and left the room in a hurry.

Anne-Katrine panted from the pain that rolled up her leg. Little by little, she moved her eyes down from the ceiling and onto her foot, fully expecting to see nothing but blood and twisted chunks of flesh. She was surprised to learn she still had all her five toes, even if they were soaked in her own blood. The throbbing, oozing, evil-looking, reddish-black wound was located halfway up the foot - but that was all she had time to see before Lydia came back with Doctor Meincke.

"My, my!" the ruddy doctor said, staring over the rim of his metal-frame spectacles. "I'll be damned. Hello, Miss Jensen. You certainly keep us occupied today. I can see I owe Nurse Petersen an apology. I thought she had lost her mind when she told me you had been brought in wearing a uniform." He chuckled which made his white whiskers bob up and down.

"Hello, Doctor Meincke..." Anne-Katrine croaked, moving her head back down on the pillow.
Doctor Meincke chuckled again and took off his jacket. As he studied the wound, he rolled up his shirtsleeves like he was about to deliver a baby. "Now that's what I call a gunshot wound. Directly on the navicular bone. Very well. Nurse Petersen, we'll need-

Anne-Katrine's ears weren't able to pick up the rest of the conversation that became a blur of Latin terms and expressions. The room began to spin and twirl like a wheel, and she fell back down the pitch black chasm of unconsciousness.

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When Anne-Katrine came to for a second time in the room, she noticed at once the throbbing pain had receded. Also, the climate in the room was cooler and more pleasant. Someone had put a blanket over her body, but the good Samaritan had had a reason - her uniform was gone, and she was lying in her bloomers and the special cloth she used to support her breasts. "What the blazes…?" she slurred, reaching under the blanket and finding plenty of bare skin.

Her eyes weren't yet fully back to regular service, so she had to settle for running the fingers on her good hand around her upper body to see what else was missing. The wound on her upper right arm had been thoroughly bandaged and she had regained some sense in her fingers - and for that, she was grateful.

Her legs smarted, but the pain was manageable and she thought she could feel that a soothing balm had been applied to her lower legs. Her wounded foot was a different story. It still throbbed, but it was fainter than before.

She decided she needed to see rather than feel. Cracking open her eyelids, she cast a quick glance around the room. It was still daylight outside, and the rays of the late morning sun shone through the broken window and cast an orange glow on the huge bandage that covered her foot. "At least I still have it," she mumbled. She tried to move her ankle and promptly wished she hadn't.

At the same time, the door handle was depressed and Lydia poked her head in. "Thank goodness, you're awake," she whispered and stepped into the room.

"Not really… but getting there," Anne-Katrine said and put her good arm under her head so she could look at her sweetheart. "What happened to my uniform? Who undressed me? I'm not wearing much of anything…"

"I put the remains of your uniform in the attic. It's safely stored in an old sea-chest Doctor Meincke has kept from when he traveled the seven seas in his younger years… and I undressed you, love. Isn't it strange? I've so often dreamt of undressing you… but not like this."

Anne-Katrine smiled and reached out for Lydia. "You'll get that chance again soon. I promise. From now on, things will be different between us."
Smiling wistfully, Lydia took the offered hand and sat down carefully on the edge of the bed. "Oh, if only it were as easy as that. I'm afraid that we still have to speak softly, love. I wish we could change it by snapping our fingers, but... it won't happen. And now with the Germans here..."

"I know. But I promise I'll think of something that will make it easier for us. I love you, and I simply refuse to spend time away from you. Mmmm?" Anne-Katrine said and squeezed Lydia's hand.

Lydia answered by smiling broadly and leaning down to claim her partner's lips in a long, loving kiss. When they separated, she ran a thumb across Anne-Katrine's cheeks. "Let's see. Oh, you look so tired, love. I can't imagine how strenuous it must have been for you. I love you, you know I do... but... what were you thinking?"

"I wanted to defend my country," Anne-Katrine said with a sigh and a shrug. "I never expected that it would be... well... what it grew into. The mission failed, we didn't stop the Germans, but... oh, this is going to sound pathetic. But I take pride in what I've done. How I acted. I didn't embarrass myself in front of the other soldiers. Some were skeptical about having a woman join the unit, let me tell you... but I proved my worth."

She fell quiet and remembered the faces of the men she had fought shoulder by shoulder with. The friendly, charming Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen. The boorish Knud-Erik Kristensen who looked like a slow-witted fellow but wasn't. The reserved, delicate Johannes Ancher with the slender fingers that seemed better suited to holding an artist's charcoal pencil than a rifle. The aloof Senior Lieutenant Rudolf Preiss who had given her some fatherly advice without realizing she was a woman. The brooding Karl-Bertel Andreasen whom she never really got to know. The loader August Larsen with the swarthy looks and the funny nose. All among the dead or the dying. And the gruff, dour, perpetually po-faced Ernst Viggo Mehlborg who had shown new sides of himself during the last fight. Of course, the chubby, misogynistic Ole Thor Didriksen wasn't one she could forget either, no matter how hard she tried.

A cold shiver raced across her body when she remembered those who had died, and even worse, how they had died. The gruesome crater in Vilhelm's forehead. The horrified expression on Knud-Erik's face as he held onto her in death. The awful sight of August Larsen without his eyes. All those images would come to her in her sleep for years, or even decades, to come, she knew that without a doubt.

Blinking, Anne-Katrine looked up at Lydia whose cheeks glistened with tears. She cleared her throat and squeezed her sweetheart's hand. "So... does that answer your question?"

"It does," Lydia whispered and leaned down to kiss Anne-Katrine again.

"Do you know if Sergeant Mehlborg, Larsen and... and Didriksen survived?"

"I'm sorry, I don't. Do you want me to find out?"
"I want you to stay here with me… that's what I want you to do," Anne-Katrine said and reached over to wrap her arm around Lydia's waist. She clawed it just a little to prove that she wasn't dead yet, even if her right foot did look like she had already dipped it into the grave.

"In my evening prayers, I'm going to thank God for saving you. I couldn't live without you, love… not now." While Lydia spoke, she ran her fingers up and down Anne-Katrine's good arm to caress the smooth skin and the fine hairs. "You mean so much to me. Even the mere thought of losing you makes my heart clench and despair."

"You won't lose me, sweetheart. I'm not planning on pursuing a military career any time soon," Anne-Katrine said with a wink. A brief, dark thought on the situation that could potentially develop after smashing out the teeth of Arne Willumsen, Flemming Lyne-Hoffmann's foreman who sympathized with the Nazis, flashed through her mind. She decided not to tell Lydia about it until later. They would have plenty of time to go over all the horrific things she had experienced in her four hours at the front.

Commotion from the square spread to the ground floor below the room. Gruff, German voices barked commands, and the familiar sound of hobnailed boots could be heard on the pavement and even inside the health center.

"What's… what's going on down there?" Anne-Katrine croaked.

Lydia poked her head through the shattered window to see what could cause the racket, but pulled it back at once like she had been bitten. "There are Germans everywhere down there! Soldiers and officers… some have just gone into the health center! They… they must be conducting a house-to-house search for… for… for something…"

"Or someone. We've got trouble coming," Anne-Katrine groaned and tried to sit up, but Lydia held her down.

"No, love… listen to me, there's nothing here that ties you to the mysterious soldier who fought the Germans out there… I've removed your uniform and your battle helmet. Please, you're too weak to get up!"

"Some of the soldiers grabbed me, sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said and clenched all her tired muscles to at least try to sit up. "They were as close as we are now. They must have seen my face… my chest. They know I'm a woman… and if they find a wounded woman… no, I need to get up. Please move."

"But… oh!" Lydia cried and hurriedly moved up from the edge of the bed. She clapped her hands over her mouth as she watched Anne-Katrine's face turn red as a tomato from the strain of sitting up.

For Anne-Katrine, the room started spinning again, but she knew she was as good as captured if she didn't take control over the situation. "Please… Lydia… please, I need your help… I can't fight them alone. But we have to… come up with something fast…"
"Oh!" Lydia cried and clutched her head. She stared at the sparsely furnished room in a panic until her eyes fell on the closet. Spinning around, she tore over to it and swooshed open the door. It contained several old capes, shirts and dresses in the familiar blue-and-white colors used on the uniforms worn by nurses - some of them were hers and some belonged to her predecessor. She had often meant to ask the Doctor if she could throw the old ones away, but now she was glad she hadn't. She quickly grabbed an old blue shirt and white dress from the upper shelf. Almost as an afterthought, she snatched a garrison cap off the top shelf.

"All right… look at this. Please… put out your arm… no, the other one," Lydia said and put the blue shirt over Anne-Katrine's strong shoulders. It wasn't a perfect fit, but it would have to do. At once, Anne-Katrine began to close the buttons with fingers that really didn't want to work so fast.

The white dress was a lot tougher to put on as it involved Anne-Katrine standing up so the fabric could be lowered over her head and her rear, but everything literally fell in place before long. Lydia helped Anne-Katrine pull the straps up on her shoulders and close the four buttons that held the front in place. As the last thing she did, she fluffed the garrison cap open and mashed it down onto Anne-Katrine's short, dark locks.

"There…" Lydia said, rubbing her brow frantically. "That should do it. You look just like a nurse. Now please… please lie down and rest. You're so pale, love… if you faint and fall down, I can't get you up in bed by myself."

"I won't faint," Anne-Katrine said through clenched teeth. Her foot throbbed, her legs smarted worse than before, and her arm had joined the Greek chorus to add its two skillinger's worth.

The German voices downstairs seemed to come closer, and it didn't take long for Lydia and Anne-Katrine to hear a pair of hobnailed boots that ascended the wooden staircase to the nurse's room.

The two women shared warm glances and offered each other a smile for good luck before Lydia turned to the window and picked up a jagged shard of glass. Moving fast, she ran the edge of the glass along the inside of her index finger in a spot near the root that wouldn't jeopardize her nerves or tendons but that would nick a vein so a steady stream of blood could be produced.

Anne-Katrine gasped out loud and stared at the red droplets that blossomed from her sweetheart's hand. Before she could ask what in the world had come over the nurse, Lydia leaned down and smeared her hand on Anne-Katrine's pristine white dress at her upper arm. She took great care in not touching the existing wound, but the crimson blood on the white uniform gave the impression the arm was only hanging on by a thread. "You cut yourself on flying glass, love."

"Ohhh… I get it."

Lydia smiled and leaned down to kiss Anne-Katrine on the forehead. "You're the bravest, strongest woman I know… but now, I think you need to cry like a real pansy girl if you can. Men will never suspect a weeping woman… it's the world's oldest ploy."
"I'm not going to ask how you know," Anne-Katrine said and tried to look inside herself to produce tears that would seem real. It wasn't too hard after the hell she had been through, and real tears did start to flow before long.

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A scant minute later, the door was pushed open and a grim-faced German infantryman stepped inside the small room with his rifle ready. The dusty uniform and the filthy boots proved that he had been one of those who had participated in the fire fight. He cast a quick glance around the room until his eyes fell on the two nurses at the bed. One was kneeling and dabbing a bleeding wound, and the other was crying her eyes out. There was plenty of glass on the floor.

"Schwester, wir suchen entkommene dänische Soldaten. Haben Sie welche gesehen? Und was zum Teufel ist hier passiert?" he said in a hard voice.

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes but kept crying. She translated inwardly and came to the conclusion that the soldier was looking for 'fleeing Danish soldiers.'


Anne-Katrine translated in her mind: 'My girlfriend was hit by flying glass and I helped her stop the bleeding.'

The soldier pulled his lips back in a half-smile at the broken German, but it seemed to do the trick. "Ich verstehe. Wir brauchen Ihre Hilfe unten auf dem Platz. Einige unserer Kameraden wurden während der Kämpfe verwundet."

"Wird geschehen… wir werden bald unterkommen, Herr Soldat," Lydia said with a smile.

The soldier narrowed his eyes, but eventually nodded and left the room. Anne-Katrine counted to thirty inwardly before she stopped crying and pulled Lydia closer. "Was that wise?" she whispered in case thirty seconds hadn't been enough for the soldier to leave. "Telling him we'll go downstairs to help the German soldiers who were wounded in the fight?"

"Don't worry, love. I'll go… that's my job. If I meet that soldier again, I'll just tell him that you fainted or became hysterical from the bad experience. I think he'll believe me… that was a very impressive bout of crying."

"Thank you. You've thought of everything, haven't you?"

"Well… I'm not big and strong like you so I have to rely on fast thinking."
Anne-Katrine chuckled and took full advantage of being so close to Lydia by pulling her down and claiming her lips in a sweet, little kiss. "That's the one I owed you from before. Here's one for good measure," she whispered before they kissed again.

When they separated, Lydia traced Anne-Katrine's eyebrows with a thumb. "That was nice… but not quite the one you owed me from the square. I'll come around to collect that one once we're alone. Mmmm?"

"Mmmm!"

Anne-Katrine grinned despite all the mess she had been through since she had been rudely awakened by her brother's pained cries at a quarter past three in the morning. The thought of her brother's unknown fate made the smile fade from her face. He would never believe a word of what had transpired - in fact, he would be steaming mad for missing the most important event in South Jutland since the region was given back to Denmark in 1920.

"What's on your mind, love?" Lydia whispered.

"My brother. Have you heard anything from the hospital?"

"No, I'm sorry. Doctor Meincke went inside with the two men from the ambulance service when Arthur was admitted this morning, but I stayed in the car because we needed to come back here. The phone lines have been down for a while now. I asked Birthe if she could do anything about it… the phone operator, you know… but she told me the lines were down everywhere. If we want any news on your brother's surgery, we need to go over there in person."

"Well, that won't be today," Anne-Katrine said and let out a sigh. "All right. I pray that he's all right…. and I hope our hired help Poul Nedergaard is up to the challenge of running the Jensen farm in our absence. With that damn foot, it's going to be a while before I can pull my weight again."

"Weeks, love. Many weeks."

"Dammit… the cows need to be brought out to pasture every single day starting… hmmm… late next week. We can't keep them in the cowshed all summer. They'd go insane. And so will I, for that matter, if I continue to be as helpless as a newborn…" - the latter part of the statement was delivered in a mumbling monotone.

"I'll help whenever I can, and with whatever I can," Lydia said and kissed Anne-Katrine again just because she was there. "But please… don't expect me to be up to my knees in cow patty."

Anne-Katrine opened her mouth to reply, but further commotion down on the square dragged her from her all-too brief moment of bliss and back to the harshness of reality. The familiar drone of truck engines echoed between the houses lining the square although they never got closer than the intersection that led to the garrison. Other vehicles did drive onto the square, and a car door was soon slammed close by.
"Dearest, I need your help to get up… I need to see what's going on down there," Anne-Katrine said and pressed her good hand into the mattress. It was too soft to give her enough lift, so she bumped back down with a pained hiss. "Please…?" she said through clenched teeth.

"All right, but only briefly," Lydia admonished in a motherly tone. She reached for Anne-Katrine's good hand and helped provide enough leverage for the taller woman so she could get off the soft bed.

Working together, they hobbled over to the window where Anne-Katrine looked outside. Down on the square, an open staff car painted in the typical German steel-gray color and carrying white-and-black crosses on the hood and the doors had parked in front of the health center. An important-looking officer wearing a soft cap instead of the ubiquitous battle helmet sat in the back clearly awaiting a visit from someone.

"Is that a General?" Lydia whispered.

"A General? Here?"

"A Major, then? Or a Colonel?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know the German uniforms," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle.

"Don't they have similar ranks to the Danish army?"

"Well… I presume they do. I can't say… I hardly know the Danish uniforms!"

"He's waiting for someone… oh… look… isn't that the mayor?" Lydia said, pointing at a gray-haired, pot-bellied figure who hurried along the square wearing a dark suit and a gray hat that he held in his hands.

"Looks like it… yes, it is. Mmmm… now what?"

Below the shattered window, all the German soldiers involved in the house-to-house searches came out onto the square and fell into an orderly line. A junior officer stepped up to the staff car and saluted the higher-ranking passenger. While the pot-bellied mayor continued towards the soldiers in a slow jog - he couldn't go any faster - an open-sided troop carrier truck drove up alongside the staff car.

Anne-Katrine's good hand nearly tore a chunk out of the window's woodwork when she saw Sergeant Mehlborg, August Larsen and Ole Thor Didriksen up on the bed being guarded by armed soldiers. It was clear that Larsen was in a very bad shape. A bandage had been wrapped around the remains of his face, but blood was already seeping through. He needed two men under his arms to even stand.
"Those German bastards," Anne-Katrine growled, staring wide-eyed at her three comrades. As she watched, the three men were pulled down from the back of the troop carrier truck and brought over to the staff car. Her trigger finger itched as the high-ranking officer spoke to Sergeant Mehlborg, but she let out a grunt of surprise when the two men saluted each other at the end of the conversation. Another German soldier climbed in behind the wheel of the staff car which soon drove off. "What the blazes was that all about…?" she mumbled, moving back from the window.

The throbbing pain in her foot had grown exponentially in the minute or so she had been standing up, so she could barely even hobble back to the bed without hissing with pain. She tried to sit down, but even the simple task of bending her knees caused her problems, and she couldn't hold back a groan.

"Didn't I tell you to be careful?" Lydia admonished as she helped Anne-Katrine sit down and swing the leg with the bad foot up into the bed.

"Yes, dearest… you better go down there so the soldier won't come looking for you. And…"

"Yes?"

"If you can," Anne-Katrine said and let out a groan as she put her head down on the pillow for a much-needed rest. "I would be eternally grateful if you could tell Sergeant Mehlborg that I'm fine… or at least still among the breathing."

Lydia smiled and leaned down to fluff Anne-Katrine's pillow. "I'll see what I can do. It might take a while before I can get back. I love you," she said and stole a kiss.

"Love you too, dearest. I'll just take a nap in the meantime…"

"And don't even think about standing at the window by yourself!" Lydia said and pointed an unwavering index finger at her partner.

"I won't, dearest," Anne-Katrine said with a broad, tired smile.

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Despite her pledge, Anne-Katrine cut her nap short when she could hear new trucks arriving, and she forced herself to get up when some of them drove onto the square and came to a halt. She stood by the window and looked down upon the sea of gray that had formed in the past couple of minutes.

Several open trucks carrying fresh troops turned the square into a giant staging area when they began to offload their deadly cargo. The reinforcements lined up in groups of ten or twelve while they were given their orders by barking *Feldwebels* or *Leutnants*. Once the orders had been issued, the groups marched off in perfect synchronicity to whichever parts of town they had been assigned to cover.
Near the entrance to the square at the two wrecked Panzer I's, a large group of German infantry engineers and mechanics were repairing the tracks that had been shot off the two vehicles by the 37mm cannon. The tank carrying the unfortunate number thirteen on the turret was towed away by an open tank-like vehicle with a large hook at the back, seemingly out of commission because of the fire. The next tank - carrying number five on the turret - was in better shape, and it wouldn't take the engineers long to repair its missing track.

The town's fire department had finally been allowed to tend to the corner of the building that had been shot to pieces by the ricocheting shell. The twenty-year old fire truck had been parked underneath the house, and two firemen were given a brutal workout when they first had to raise the ladder using manually operated cranks, and then pump like insane to feed the fire hose that a further fireman pointed at the building while he climbed up the ladder.

Anne-Katrine let out a grunt at the ineffectiveness of the Danes compared to the strict militarism of the German invaders.

She looked further into the square to find the Panzer I that had nearly taken her life. Unlike the first two tanks, the tracks of the surviving Panzer hadn't been damaged, and the commander celebrated that by comprehensively tearing up the square's pavement by locking one track and spinning around with the other down at the site where the 37mm cannon had stood. The tank drove back along the narrow side street with the black-clad commander standing up in the hatch on top of the turret like he was daring anyone to take a potshot at him.

Not that anyone would. The group of little boys of all ages who had marveled at the weapons and uniforms of the Danish soldiers were now marveling at the weapons and uniforms of the German soldiers. The children formed a ring around some of the regular German infantrymen who seemed pleased with the attention. The soldiers offered their admirers pieces of chocolate or at the very least pats on their fair heads.

Anne-Katrine noticed that some of the adults behaved in much the same way. Although some hurried away pretending not to notice the invading army, and others tried to display defiance by staring down the Germans, a much larger group than expected raised their right arm to give the soldiers and officers the Hitler salute. The gall rose in Anne-Katrine's throat and she had to swallow several times to keep it all down.

Those who welcomed the Germans were brought to the front of the spectator lines so the regiment's propaganda photographer could snap the local population's happy faces and raised right arms for the National-Socialist newspapers back home.

Anne-Katrine slammed her good fist into the broken window's woodwork several times as the depressing events caught up with her. She had fought, she had shed blood, she had nearly died trying to defend those people, and now they stabbed her in the back before the blood that had been spilled on the pavement had even dried.

Breathing heavily as the pain threatened to claim her once again, she needed to lighten her mood and started looking around for Lydia. She found the nurse with her large medical bag next to one
of the troop carrier trucks treating some of the German soldiers who had been wounded in the fight. It appeared to be mostly minor injuries, so they were quickly seen to and shipped onto their units. A line of Germans were still waiting to be helped by Lydia, so she seemed popular with the invaders.

Anne-Katrine growled and looked elsewhere. A makeshift prison enclosure had been created in one of the central sections of the square by putting up four brightly striped trestles. A handful of disarmed Danish soldiers were already there, and more joined by the minute. Doctor Meincke was kneeling down next to August Larsen. The loader was flat on his back on the ground using his backpack as a pillow, and even Anne-Katrine could see it wouldn't end well for him.

The thought had barely left her mind before the doctor covered Larsen's head with the bloodied, torn greatcoat indicating that he had succumbed to his horrific wound. Sergeant Mehlborg helped the elderly doctor get up from the ground and leaned in like he wanted to exchange a few words with him. One of the German prison guards cut it short by barking a command and tapping his rifle.

A minute or two later, Anne-Katrine watched Lydia come up to stand next to the gruff guard having finished treating the Germans. It appeared that only one member of the medical team could be allowed to enter the makeshift prison at any one time, because she had to wait by the guard for Doctor Meincke to leave. When he did, they nodded at each other before Lydia stepped beyond the trestles.

Upstairs in the room above the health center, Anne-Katrine clenched her jaw and tightened the grip on the woodwork. She almost forgot to blink and breathe as she stared at her sweetheart down on the square.

Lydia moved over to Ole Thor Didriksen, but the chubby soldier didn't seem to have a scratch as he shook his head and pointed at the Sergeant. Doctor Meincke had already bandaged Mehlborg's wounded arm, but Lydia offered him a drink of water and a morphine injection to take the worst of the pain. He accepted and rolled up his other shirtsleeve to make it easier for her.

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes as Lydia leaned in and seemed to whisper something to Mehlborg. The Sergeant briefly turned his head to look up at the shattered window where Anne-Katrine was standing, but she couldn't see if he had been able to spot her - and she wasn't about to wave. Mehlborg nodded and leaned in to reply before Lydia packed up and closed the medical bag. She curtseyed at him and at Didriksen like any nurse would before she turned around and left the makeshift prison enclosure.

Upstairs, Anne-Katrine let out a long, trembling breath and wiped a few drops of cold sweat off her brow. At least Mehlborg knew she was safe - but what would happen to him, Didriksen and the other captured soldiers? She would have to wait for Lydia's return to find out. In the meanwhile, the throbbing pains in her foot had come back with a vengeance and had in fact crawled up her leg.
"A shot of morphine doesn't sound so bad now," she mumbled, keeping a hand on the wall while she waited for the latest wave of pain to recede. "But I should probably refuse to have one… it's so addictive… at least until the point where my foot is about to fall off. Then I may reconsider…"

Groaning with pain, she turned around and staggered back to the bed for a much-needed rest.

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Ten minutes' worth of awful, fiery pain went by before soft taps on the door proved that Lydia was back from helping the soldiers. The nurse peeked in, but it only took her a heartbeat to realize that something was wrong with her partner. "Oh, Anne-Katrine…" she said darkly as she stepped inside the room and closed the door behind her. Putting the medical bag down on the floor, she slammed her hands onto her hips and shot Anne-Katrine a dark glare.

"I know," Anne-Katrine croaked. "I'm afraid I overestimated my strength, dearest." To underline her words, her face had turned an unhealthy shade of red and her lips were pulled back in a pained grimace.

"I'm giving you another injection of morphine whether you like it or not!" Lydia said strongly, sounding like a schoolmarm who had to punish one of her favorite pupils.

"But Lydia…"

"Hush!"

"Yes, dearest," Anne-Katrine croaked and tried to roll back the sleeve of the dress so her sweetheart would have plenty of room to plunge the needle into her skin.

While Lydia reached into the medical bag to find the syringe, a clean needle and a bottle of liquid morphine, she glanced up at her patient and let out a constant stream of low, rumbling words that sounded like "Of all the stubborn, pig-headed… simply won't listen to reason… damn pride… can't lie still for two minutes…"

"Before I get the needle, may I have a hug and a kiss, please?" Anne-Katrine said and put out her good arm in a gesture she hoped would appease the visibly annoyed nurse. "That's just as good as any shot of morphine."

Lydia couldn't hold the scowl for too long, and she leaned in for a brief hug before she claimed the older woman's lips. "Please, love… lie still. You've bled enough today already," she said and held the syringe ready.

"I'll try," Anne-Katrine said and watched how the needle was inserted into her skin at a vein. Lydia squeezed the plunger and the oddly-colored liquid entered the blood stream without any pain or spillage. "Didn't even tickle," Anne-Katrine added, smiling at her sweetheart who was packing her medical bag once more.
"Good. It'll take a few minutes for it to work. Please refrain from any foolhardy activity or behavior in the meantime… Miss Jensen, do I need to write it down on a postcard in order for you to understand?"

Anne-Katrine chuckled and leaned back on the bed to experience the full effect of the morphine. "I deserved that. Oh… I could kill for a cup of coffee…"

"I doubt we have any, love."

"We're out too… and I never got around to buying any. Mmmm… if I can't have coffee, I need a cig… my Bristols were in the pocket of my greatcoat down at the cannon. Do you know if it was recovered?"

"I don't," Lydia said and shot her partner a raised eyebrow. "And there'll be no smoking in bed when I'm around, Miss Jensen."

"Oh, but-" A stern look from Lydia made Anne-Katrine forget all about the cigarette and focus on a safer topic instead. "Never mind. Before I doze off… thank you for contacting Sergeant Mehlborg. What did he say to you?"

Lydia finished packing the medical bag and sat down on the edge of the bed. She reached up to run a finger across Anne-Katrine's forehead while she spoke. "Several things. He told me that once he, Ole Thor Didriksen and the rest of the captured Danish soldiers have been registered, they will be sent back to the garrison. The German officer in the staff car told him… oh, and it was a Colonel… that everybody would be placed under confinement to the barracks until further notice."

"Confinement? Well… all right. I suppose it's better than facing a firing squad. Still… I wonder what Sergeant Mehlborg thinks of all that?"

"Oh, I could tell you if I swore, but I don't, so I can't. Is that answer enough?"

"It is," Anne-Katrine said and offered her sweetheart a smile.

"He also told me that a dispatch rider had arrived not long ago with an order from the King to lay down the arms and cease fighting to spare the country from the kind of bombardment we saw in Poland."

"Wh- what? That can't be right… the parliament didn't declare war against Nazi Germany?"

"Apparently, it wasn't a war at all, love. Because of the utter chaos in the communication lines, the orders didn't reach us before it was nearly too late. The Sergeant told me they had been issued very early in the morning… only an hour or so after the Germans began the invasion."

"That early?" Anne-Katrine croaked, thinking back to the blood-soaked ambush at the fork in the road where they had left two comrades behind, and the brutal, gruesome fight at the square that
had cost three further lives. Everything she and her unit had done all morning had been a tragic, catastrophic waste of time and life.

She stared at the ceiling without seeing a thing. The morphine pumped around her body trying to dull her senses, but her fiery indignation fought back everywhere it could. "So it was all for naught... it's bad enough that the people down there betray us and salute the Germans... but our own bloody government?!

"Please calm down, love," Lydia said and put a gentle hand on Anne-Katrine's shoulder to hold her down. "It was to save the country from being bombed-

"The Germans may still do that! You can't make deals with the Nazi bastards! Look at all those bombers and transport planes up there... and the tanks, and the thousands of soldiers... they're not here to hand out roses and tell us what a wonderful chap Adolf is, and that he's only trying to protect us from the British! They're here to take us by force! It may be calm for a while, but they'll show us their true face sooner or later. The Germans always do."

"Please... Anne-Katrine."

"I will continue this fight, Lydia... I don't care how long it takes, or how much pain it will cause me. I will continue the fight to rid the country of the Nazi swines, so help me God. There, I've said it." Panting from the indignation and pain that shot up from her foot, Anne-Katrine fell back down onto the soft pillow and stared at the ceiling with angry, fiery eyes.

Her trembling breath, her ruddy complexion and the beads of sweat that had formed on her forehead just from speaking so harshly betrayed her fighting talk and she knew it. "Right now," she said in a far quieter tone, "I'm as weak as a pup... but my strength will return. And when it does... I'll find a way to fight back. I swear I will."

"Oh, Anne-Katrine," Lydia said with tears streaming down her cheeks. Holding back a sob, she knelt down next to the bed and wrapped her arms around the prone woman. "I wish you wouldn't speak like that. Words like that might get you killed... I want you to stay alive. I want to build a future with you, dammit!"

"I want that too, sweetheart," Anne-Katrine croaked.

"And how do we even get you home? You can't walk down the stairs... we'll have to find someone to carry you. What about the car? I can't drive, and neither can you with that foot. And the Doctor is too busy. Oh, Anne-Katrine, this is such a mess..."

Anne-Katrine smiled weakly and reached up to pull Lydia further down towards her. "We'll think of something, sweetheart. We have a few hours to come up with a plan. We can't do anything before the German units have left the square... don't you worry. Where there's a will, there's a way."

"Oh, I fear it's not going to be that easy..."
"Please don't be too angry with me," Anne-Katrine said and mused Lydia's neck. "I chose to go to war today to defend my country and to show what women are capable of. The wounded foot can't stop the feeling in my gut that it was the right decision… even with the terrible casualties we suffered. Or even the betrayal by the government. It was a righteous fight."

"Mmmm…"

"Sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said and rose up to briefly kiss Lydia's lips, "if every other way of getting home fails, I can put a pillow up under my dress and pretend I'm pregnant… and weep. Men will never suspect a weeping woman, remember?"

Lydia pulled back and stared at her partner to see if she had finally fallen into the clutches of insanity. When all she saw was a wink and a dead-tired smile, she let out a prolonged sigh and fell back into Anne-Katrine Jensen's strong arms.

Closing her eyes, Anne-Katrine enjoyed the company of the woman she loved. With tender strokes, she ran her hand up and down Lydia's back while she listened to the trucks that were idling down in the square, and the invading soldiers who were barking orders in a foreign language. She had lost the first battle, but there would be more. Her war wasn't over - it had barely begun.

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THE END.