Liberation

by Norsebard

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DISCLAIMERS:

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 actual events that took place during the war, certain characters and events have been dramatized. 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: March 29th - April 13th, 2015.

- Thank you for your input, Phineas Redux, and thank you, Boba71, for your helping hand with the German dialogue :)

- These three stories are dedicated to the victims of the Third Reich, and to the women and men of modern Germany who have worked hard to wash away the stains left behind by the NS regime.
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:** 1945. In late April, the collapse of Nazi-Germany is almost complete. Before Denmark can be liberated by the British, Anne-Katrine and her sweetheart Lydia must fight a personal battle against a high-ranking officer of the SS who may just be fanatical enough to employ annihilation tactics learned on the Eastern Front. It all culminates on the eve of May 4th when the long-awaited message of the unconditional capitulation of the German armed forces is broadcast by the BBC…

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**CHAPTER 1**

*Friday, April 20th, 1945.*

Spring had finally arrived. The world at war had come alive with bright colors and strong, warm fragrances from the myriad of flowers that littered the fields and ditches lining the undulating roads in the south of Jutland.

After a dull, gray winter that had stretched back to November, nature had seemed to explode at the first caress of the sun's rays, and plenty of bees were buzzing around the many flowers, showing the same exuberance the rampant stallions did chasing the mares on the fields. Blackbirds were singing from the shrubbery, and swallows tore across the heavens in search for insect treats.

The paved side road south from the Jensen farm was stuck in the middle of a colorful palette; the dark-gray road snaked its way through the bright yellow or pale green fields underneath a stark blue sky that only sported a few fluffy white clouds. To complete the colorful world, two well-dressed figures pedaled their bicycles up the hills and down the dales on the way to their destination.

Anne-Katrine Jensen, now thirty-one and beginning to feel how the hard work at the farm had taken a toll on her maturing body, was dressed in her Sunday finest: black leather shoes, black, high-waisted pants that were sharply creased, a white shirt where the collar had been starched to the point of choking her, a four-pocket vest that had plenty of room for her father's gold watch on its chain, a black blazer jacket and finally a deep purple ascot.

Pedaling hard, Anne-Katrine cursed the fact that she wore black when the sun had finally broken through the thick layer of clouds it had been hiding behind for the past six months. She could already sense beads of sweat trickling down her spine underneath her warm clothes.
Next to Anne-Katrine, Lydia Jensen wore a far breezier half-sleeved, knee-length, pleated dress that accentuated her shapely legs and her slender yet strong body. The flowery dress - that she had bought in a second-hand store in town - came down in a plunging V-neck front that offered a tantalizing peek at her upper chest. She had her strawberry-blond hair up for the occasion, and she wore a sparkling pearl necklace that her mother had given her as a wedding gift. A small clutch was resting safely in the bicycle's basket.

The two women rode side by side on the paved road, and their squeaking bicycles were almost drowned out by the noises produced by the insects down in the ditches.

Lydia was on the left, but she pulled a little to the right so she could reach her partner. When Anne-Katrine took the offered hand, Lydia swung them back and forth for a little while with a loving smile firmly planted on her lips. "It was nice of Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann to send us a lunch invitation for his father's seventieth birthday, don't you think?" she said in her rich voice that - as always - sounded like it should come from a much larger creature.

"Mmmm," Anne-Katrine mumbled, shooting her sweetheart a matching smile. "I suppose it was. Simply astounding that my brother ended up having a belly ache on this very day…"

Lydia chuckled and pulled her hand back so she could steer better. "Especially since we don't have one… we all had the same for supper last evening."

"Indeed."

They rode on for another fifty meters or so before Lydia turned her head to wink cheekily at her partner. "Anne-Katrine, I'm surprised you don't have a belly ache today…"

Anne-Katrine chuckled and winked back. "Heh… no, that would be rude. I have known Flemming for many, many years, after all. Regardless of how I think of him and his German-minded ways, we should always honor old acquaintances. And besides, since he knows he can't get me to sign on the dotted line on the marriage certificate, he may test your resilience."

"No, silly!" Lydia said and let out a laugh that went into a deeper register.

"So you don't want me to be your knight in shining armor?"

"Now I didn't say that," Lydia said and turned the handlebars right so she could get close enough to rub her partner's arm.

They pedaled on in silence for a while until they reached the top of one of the numerous small hills in the area. From there, they could see the buildings belonging to the Lynge-Hoffmann farm a few kilometers further south. The red-and-white Dannebrog, the Danish national flag, flew proudly in the breeze to mark the birthday.

"You know," Lydia said, freewheeling down the hill, "I'm glad we acquired a spare tire for my bicycle. The old Triangel truck would have looked horrendously out of place at the mansion."
"The spare tire cost us an entire bottle of homemade bjøsk … and I had to give the bicycle dealer my favorite flavor, dill and herbs," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle. Moments later, the sound of a powerful engine came at them from behind and caused her to whip her head around out of sheer habit.

Earlier in the war, it could have been a Luftwaffe fighter on a strafing run, but following the pounding the German air force had taken from the Allied bombers, no pilot would risk flying in the daytime. Instead of a Messerschmitt, it was a black Mercedes staff car that came blasting along the road and down the small hill.

"Watch out, Lydia! Bloody Germans… always driving like they own the damn place," Anne-Katrine growled, jerking right to get out of the way of the fast-moving convertible.

She and Lydia put down their feet and came to a stop at the side of the road while the imposing black car raced past them. Two pennants flew from the car's fenders; the regimental colors and one carrying the SS-runes. A German officer clad in dark gray sat in the back looking high and mighty - and as expected, he didn't even acknowledge the two women as he drove past.

It took a while for the dust to settle, but when it had, Anne-Katrine and Lydia got back on their bicycles and resumed riding towards the Lynge-Hoffmann farm. "I can't wait," Anne-Katrine mumbled as she pedaled hard to get back up to speed, "I can't bloody wait for those bloody Germans to get their comeuppance… what's keeping Monty and his boys?"

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Freewheeling down the final hill, Anne-Katrine and Lydia let their bicycles coast through the right-hand, then the left-hand turn that would bring them onto the courtyard in front of the Lynge-Hoffmann farm.

It was still the largest farm in the area, and it looked as impressive from the rear as it did from the front. Since they approached it from the north, the stables and the garages were located to the right of the paved side road, and the mansion-like farmhouse and the barracks for the employees on the left.

The Dannebrog flew proudly from the flagpole just beyond the farmhouse that looked like it had been given a fresh coat of white paint to mark the occasion. Reaching the section of the road that cut through the farm, Anne-Katrine and Lydia put out their arms and swung left onto the courtyard that had been laid out with smooth cobblestones.

A split second later, Anne-Katrine fumbled with the pedals and nearly took a tumble onto the hard surface. She came to a screeching, sliding halt on the cobblestones and stared wide-eyed at the three vehicles parked in front of the mansion. One was Flemming's own Horch limousine, but the other two were identical, black Mercedes convertibles sporting German license plates and army pennants.
"What… the… blazes…?" Anne-Katrine croaked, staring at the staff cars and the drivers who were both wearing the characteristic gray uniforms of the Wehrmacht. Licking her dry lips, she turned around in the saddle and stared at the garages and the stables across the road to see if they would provide any clues.

The six-bay garage facility with the arched, dark-brown doors and pale-yellow bricks looked like it always had, as did the stables where she knew Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann kept his saddle horses.

Lydia hadn't expected Anne-Katrine to stop on a ten-øre, so she turned the handlebars and drove around in a little circle to get back to the other bicycle. "Love, what's going on here?" she said quietly, eyeing the German cars warily as she put down her foot on the cobblestones.

"I'll be damned if I know… did the Germans commandeer the mansion? We would have heard about it, surely…" Anne-Katrine said in a puzzled monotone.

"Maybe Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann invited them?"

Anne-Katrine let out a sigh that sounded more like a growl. "Oh… I think I just got a belly ache. How dreadfully unfortunate! Oh, and it's grotesquely contagious… now you have it too."

"But, Anne-Katrine…"

"No, we're not staying for another second," Anne-Katrine said and put her right foot on the pedal to get moving. Just as she pushed the pedal down, the front door of the mansion opened and Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann stepped out wearing a white summer suit.

"Anne-Katrine! Mrs. Jensen!" he said cheerily, waving a hand at the two women. He flew down the short flight of stairs onto the courtyard and strode over towards his guests.

Anne-Katrine sighed out loud and applied the brakes to make her bicycle come to a stop. She cast a dark gaze at Lydia who shrugged in return. "I suppose it would be impolite to leave like that," she mumbled, swinging her leg over the bicycle's frame. "Or would it…?" she continued, shooting Lydia another gaze.

"Yes it would, dearest," Lydia said and moved off her bicycle as well. She smoothed down her dress and fluffed her hair and the elbow-length sleeves so everything was spot on. Once she looked a million, she took the clutch from the basket on the handlebars. "Hello, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann!" she said loudly, waving back at their host.

Anne-Katrine was less enthusiastic on a whole, but she pulled her bicycle closer to the foppish man she had known for most of her life.

Now in his mid-thirties, Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann rarely left home without dressing like a movie star, and today was no different. He wore white patent leather shoes with black highlights, white cotton pants with a high waist that was held in place by a brown leather belt, and a white
cotton summer jacket over a matching shirt. He smiled broadly which made his cleft chin stand out. "Mrs. Jensen, so delightful to see you," he said in a buttery voice as he took Lydia's hand and kissed her knuckles.

"And you, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann," Lydia said and curtseyed like any lady would.

"Your husband has been detained, has he?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm afraid Arthur has succumbed to a stomach bug this morning, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann."

"Ah... what a pity," Flemming said and made an appropriate hand gesture. "Still, could a man ask for anything more than to have two such striking beauties at the table? Hello, Anne-Katrine. You look marvelous today."

Anne-Katrine hadn't gained any enthusiasm in the scant minute that had gone by, but she did manage to screw a smile on her face as she shook their host's hand. "Thanks, Flemming. Much obliged for the lunch invitation... but... what are these people doing here?" she said, leering at the German soldiers.

"Oh," Flemming said and made a sweeping gesture at the two cars and the soldiers guarding them, "they're here for the special occasion."

"What special occasion?" Anne-Katrine said perhaps a little too briskly. "I thought we were celebrating your father's seventieth birthday?"

"That's what I meant, Anne-Katrine," Flemming said and patted the tall woman's hand. "Tell me, is it your time of the month? I know for a fact you have perfect hearing. Ha, ha..."

Anne-Katrine furrowed her brow but let the comment slide to get back to the other thing which she deemed to be more important. "Flemming, the way you phrased that special occasion comment made it sound like the birthday wouldn't be at the center of the events... what else is going on today... April Twentieth?"

Flemming chuckled, but it didn't sound quite right and even Lydia noticed that something could be amiss. "No, no, no, you read me all wrong! Ah, let's not be too pedantic. Come inside and I'll introduce you to the gentlemen who are already here. Mrs. Jensen, may I have your arm, please? Anne-Katrine, you'll take the charming Mrs. Jensen's bicycle, won't you?"

Lydia smiled at their host and put out her arm. As they all strolled past the two staff cars, Anne-Katrine scowled at the German soldiers, in particular at the one who was standing near the Mercedes with the SS-banner. The scowl was ignored, so she led the two bicycles over to the wall of the mansion where she left them in the appropriate slots.
Like any proper host would, Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann climbed the short flight of stairs and opened the impressive wooden door for his visitors. He stepped aside at once to let Lydia inside the opulent hall, and was rewarded with a polite smile for his bother.

Anne-Katrine climbed the stairs right behind her sweetheart. From visiting the mansion several times over the years, she knew the birthday celebration would take place in the stately dining room which was off to the right. Flemming's father wasn't in the main hall, so she quickly knocked on the sliding door to the dining room on a quest to greet the senior Lynge-Hoffmann.

Opening it, she came to a dead stop when her eyes fell on the two uniformed men who were speaking to Flemming's father Marius. The elderly man was sitting in a comfortable wing armchair that had been placed in the corner of the dining room near the fireplace, but Anne-Katrine's eyes never made it past the two soldiers.

One of the two Germans was none other than Oberst Herbert Vossler, the garrison Commandant. In his late fifties, Vossler's rotund figure had grown slimmer since Anne-Katrine had seen him last, but he was still larger than most. His dress uniform was impeccable, however, with shiny, long-legged boots and riding breeches to cap off the ensemble.

The other German made Anne-Katrine narrow her eyes down into two blue slits. The man was in his mid-thirties, with steel gray eyes, sandy hair and an unbearable air of Aryan superiority about him. He wore a regular gray officer's uniform, but the SS-runes on his collar marked him as someone to be wary of. In addition to the runes and the four pips and a bar on the opposite side of his collar, he wore a Knight's Cross around his neck - the highest level of the Iron Cross - an Infantry Assault Badge on the right-hand side of his uniform jacket, and several colorful ribbons on the left-hand side which all indicated that he had participated in, and won, many battles.

"Anne-Katrine, Mrs. Jensen, come say hello to my father. Then I'll introduce you to the others," Flemming said and put a hand on the small of Anne-Katrine's back to guide her ahead.

Reluctantly, Anne-Katrine tore her eyes away from the Officer of the SS to walk across the floor of the stately dining room. On paper, the materials used weren't so different from those that made up her own farmhouse, but the planed floorboards, the cream walls, the expensive landscape paintings and the top-quality oakwood chairs that lined the long dining table were of a much higher standard than her own, rickety furniture.

"Father, look who's here," Flemming said and moved over to the other side so Anne-Katrine could have access to the elderly man's right hand. "Anne-Katrine Jensen and her sister-in-law have arrived to congratulate you on your birthday."

The elder Lynge-Hoffmann lit up in a smile as the tall, imposing woman leaned down and took the hand he held out for her. Marius Lynge-Hoffmann's face and body were marked by the endless years of hard work in his younger days to establish the farm that would eventually grow to become the largest in the region. His stark white hair made his ruddy complexion look even more flushed, but his almond-brown eyes had lost none of their old luster. "Good day, Miss
Jensen. How nice to see you today," he said in a voice that was similar to Flemming's if perhaps a touch more frail.

"How do you do, Mr. Lyng-Hoffmann," Anne-Katrine said and showed the appropriate respect for the elder by offering him a slight bow.

Behind them, Lydia waited in line to greet the old man. When it was her turn, she curtseyed deeply before putting out her hand. "How do you do, Mr. Lyng-Hoffmann. I'm Mrs. Arthur Jensen, Anne-Katrine's sister-in-law. Thank you for inviting us."

"Oh, you're very welcome, Mrs. Jensen. Neighbors should always be on friendly terms, especially when one part has your beauty and charm," Marius said, reaching for the black hardwood cane that he needed to assist his walking.

Lydia blushed and moved away without noticing that Anne-Katrine had come to another dead stop while she waited to be introduced to the two Germans. The two women nearly bumped into each other, but Lydia avoided an embarrassing incident at the last minute.

"Anne-Katrine," Flemming said, moving over to the two officers who both turned around to face their female guest, "please allow me to introduce you to Oberst Herbert Vossler, the town Commandant."

Hearing that, Lydia hurried around her partner to act as an interpreter. "I better translate, Mr. Lyng-Hoffmann… Anne-Katrine doesn't speak much German."

"Oh, Anne-Katrine… you still haven't learned the language?" Flemming said in a voice that dripped with disappointment. He winked at the tall woman to take the sting out of the words, but it didn't stop Anne-Katrine from shooting him a dark glare in return.

Lydia eyed them cautiously, but stepped ahead and spoke to the Commandant. "Herr Oberst, dies ist Anne-Katrine Jensen, eine Nachbarin und alte Freundin von Flemming Lyng-Hoffmann. Ich bin Lydia Jensen, Anne-Katrinines Schwägerin," she said in her best school German.

Herbert Vossler smiled broadly at the two women before him. A slight creasing of his brow hinted at being confused as to why the taller of the two was wearing pants and not a skirt, but it passed quickly as he looked at the strawberry-blonde with the Nordic features. "Freut mich, Sie beide kennenzulernen, Fräulein Jensen. Flemming hat mir schon so viel über Sie erzählt," he said and put out his hand.

"Mr. Lyng-Hoffmann has told Oberst Vossler a lot about you," Lydia translated, causing Anne-Katrine to cast a wary glance at Flemming before she stepped forward.

"How do you do, Herr Oberst," Anne-Katrine said and surprisingly managed to screw a smile on her face as she shook hands with the Commandant. "We have actually met before… a few years back, Mrs. Jensen acted as an interpreter for you."
Lydia smiled and turned towards Vossler to translate. "Anne-Katrine ist ebenfalls erfreut, Sie wieder zu sehen, Herr Oberst. Wir sind uns schon einmal begegnet. Vor einigen Jahren haben wir Ihnen geholfen, eine Übersetzung von--"

"Ach! Stimmt! Wo sind meine Manieren, Frau Jensen! Sie haben völlig Recht. Ich erinnere mich jetzt!" Vossler said, beaming at Lydia and Anne-Katrine.

"He remembers," Lydia translated laconically. Anne-Katrine just nodded before she moved over to the SS-officer.

Flemming took a step to the right and put his hand on Anne-Katrine's arm. "And this, Anne-Katrine, is SS- *Obersturmbannführer* Heinrich Wittenfeldt. He's a veteran of the old Schalburg Corps before it was disbanded last fall. He fought on the Eastern Front--"

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes. The Schalburg Corps was notorious for committing acts of counter-sabotage in Copenhagen and elsewhere. They had no qualms about destroying popular restaurants or landmarks, or even to shoot down innocent bystanders to prove a point. Subsequently, the propaganda press would put the blame on the Danish resistance movement.

"-which earned him the Knight's Cross that he received from the Führer in person. Later, he returned to Denmark to command the SS Guard Battalion Zealand. Herr *Obersturmbannführer*, this is Anne-Katrine Jensen."

It was evident by the dark frown on Anne-Katrine's face that she wasn't delighted in the least to be greeting such a high-ranking SS officer, but she put out her hand nonetheless. Before she had time to speak, Wittenfeldt waved his hand dismissively at Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann.

"Why such a long-winded tale when we have a beautiful woman in our midst, Lynge-Hoffmann? Enchanted to meet you, Miss Jensen. I hope the table arrangement has us sitting near each other," Wittenfeldt said and clicked his heels. Bowing to Anne-Katrine, he brought her hand up and kissed her knuckles.

Anne-Katrine and Lydia stared wide-eyed at the *Obersturmbannführer* when they realized he had spoken in an upper-class Danish that was far too perfect for him to be a German.

"That's right, Ladies. I'm a Dane," the Officer said with the slightest hint of annoyance in his voice from reading their expressions.

The corners of Anne-Katrine's mouth twitched, and her wide eyes once again narrowed down into blue slits. The potentially dangerous moment was defused by one of the Lynge-Hoffmann servants who entered the stately dining room carrying a tray with aperitifs.

"Ah! Finally!" Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann said, clapping his hands excitedly. "Let the festivities begin!"
Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt clicked his heels again and strolled away from Anne-Katrine and Lydia. The two women exchanged dark looks before Anne-Katrine put her hands on her stomach. "Now I really do have a belly ache..." she mumbled under her breath.

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By the time the dessert was put on the long table, Anne-Katrine wished she had stayed at home. Although the oxtail soup and the venison roast in burgundy sauce were exquisite dishes and the wines an excellent vintage, fate would have it that she had been placed next to the Obersturmbannführer.

As the servants removed the used plates and the silver cutlery and put the fine port and the Ice Cream Surprise dessert on the table in its stead, Anne-Katrine sloshed the last of the red wine around in her bowl while she cast longing glances at Lydia who was being chatted up by not only Flemming but Commandant Vossler as well.

She had tried to hold a polite conversation with Heinrich Wittenfeldt, but they had a limited amount of topics they could both address. Wittenfeldt knew nothing of owning a farm, and Anne-Katrine knew nothing of conducting a summer Panzer offensive in the Ukraine. The officer didn't speak all that much, but what he said about his exploits on the Eastern Front made the small hairs on the back of Anne-Katrine's neck stand on edge.

In a lull in the conversation, Anne-Katrine dabbed her lips and put her napkin on the white tablecloth. "Herr Obersturmbannführer," she said in her most civil voice, "do I detect a dialect from around Copenhagen in your voice?"

"You do, Miss Jensen. Charlottenlund, in fact," Heinrich Wittenfeldt said and displayed what could be perceived as a smile. "Have you ever visited our capital?"

"Oh no. No, I rarely leave my farm here in South Jutland," Anne-Katrine said and toyed with the spoon that had already been laid out for the Ice Cream Surprise.

Nodding slowly, Wittenfeldt eyed Anne-Katrine from top to toe. "I was born in Leipzig in Saxony, but my parents moved to Denmark when I was less than one year old. When I was a boy, I spent many a summer day playing at the old Charlottenlund Fortress by the coast. My friends and I pretended we were soldiers out to stop a Bolshevik invasion of Denmark. We always defeated the enemy. Oh, but I shouldn't bore you with tales of war. After all, the front is too gruesome a place for a woman."

'Different uniform, same old nonsense. I'll bet I have as many battle scars as he does,' Anne-Katrine thought, biting her cheek at the Obersturmbannführer's statement. She offered the officer a polite smile before she tended to her napkin to kill time. 'I wonder what he's doing here? Is his unit intended to reinforce the garrison? Ernst Mehlborg told me last month they were planning a sabotage against the garrison's truck depot, but with battle-hardened SS-troops defending it... hmmm. I better call him as soon as I get the chance.'
She suddenly noticed that she had been spoken to by a servant behind her right shoulder. "Pardon?" she said and turned around.

"Would you like a slice of the Ice Cream Surprise, Miss Jensen?" the young maid said, holding a tray with a block of vanilla ice cream that was covered in pickled fruit and chocolate shavings.

Anne-Katrine didn't know if she should, so she cast a glance across the table where Lydia was already enjoying a slice of the dessert. By the look of rapture on her partner's face, the ice cream was delicious. With the shortage of food and subsequent introduction of rationing in 1940, they had only had ice cream twice in the past five years, so she had almost forgotten what it tasted like. "Oh… well… yes, please," she said and moved aside to give the young maid room to work.

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The feast began to wind down as the servant girls removed the plates used for the dessert. The fine port remained on the table and was in fact joined by a bottle or two of Brøndum snaps. As the shot glasses were distributed and filled with the clear spirits, Anne-Katrine looked across the table and locked eyes with Lydia to ask silently if the time hadn't come for them to leave.

Lydia nodded imperceptibly and put down her napkin. She pushed back her oakwood dining chair, but before she could get up, Flemming rose from his own chair and tapped his glass, signaling he wanted to hold a speech. Scrunching up her face, Lydia sat down with a bump so she wouldn't appear to be disrespectful to their host.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Flemming said in a ceremonious voice, looking around at his guests. He stopped at his father and offered him a polite smile. "Seventy years ago today, my father, Marius Lynge-Hoffmann, was born on this very land. Through years, even decades of hard work, he built the splendor you see here now. There is no sign of the old wooden shed, the filthy pig sty, or even the flea-bitten livestock they owned… today, the Lynge-Hoffmann estate is the largest, richest, most efficient farm in all of South Jutland. And it's all this man's doing. Let's have three cheers for my father, Marius Lynge-Hoffmann."

Smiling, Flemming picked up his full glass of Brøndum snaps and held it high. Commandant Vossler and Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt followed him, as did Anne-Katrine and Lydia though the latter had no intention of drinking all of the fiery spirits.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!" Flemming cheered loudly, finishing by downing the drink in one gulp. Vossler and Wittenfeldt did as well, but Anne-Katrine and Lydia just nipped at the potent liquid - after all, they didn't have a chauffeur at their disposal like the Commandant and the SS-officer did.

Marius smiled broadly at his son and reached up to dab away a few beads of sweat from his ruddy forehead with an off-white handkerchief. He thumped the butt of his hardwood cane into the floor a couple of times to symbolize clapping. "I thank you, my son," he said in a frail voice. "You neglected to mention your own part in the development of the farm. Oh, if you could only
find a suitable wife and give me a handful of grandchildren, I could die happy," Marius continued, looking squarely at Anne-Katrine.

Feeling her stomach churn, Anne-Katrine smirked at the elderly man before her eyes slid over to Flemming's unbearably smug face. She had an inkling she was supposed to add her ten-øre to the discussion, but she would rather keep her personal life away from the Commandant and the Obersturmbannführer. The awkward half-smile on Lydia's face seemed to suggest she found it all rather embarrassing.

The moment broken, everybody sat down except Heinrich Wittenfeldt. The Obersturmbannführer looked at Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann and the Commandant who nodded back. "Meine Damen und Herren," he said in a near-perfect German. "Bitte erlauben Sie mir, eine kurze Ansprache für einen weiteren großen Mann zu halten, der heute geboren wurde."

Anne-Katrine leaned back on her chair and scrunched up her face. She hadn't understood every word, but she had caught the gist of Wittenfeldt's message: he wanted to hold a short speech to honor another great man born on the day. She looked across the table and asked Lydia silently if she would come over to translate. Lydia smiled and pushed her chair back, but a stern look from the Obersturmbannführer made her reconsider.

"Please remain seated while I speak, Mrs. Jensen," Heinrich Wittenfeldt said in Danish before he cleared his throat and raised his glass. "Heute wird der wichtigste Mann der Welt sechsundfünfzig. Unser mutiger Oberbefehlshaber, unser strahlendes Licht im ewigen Kampf gegen die degenerierten Massen, die jüdische Pest und die scheiß Bolschewiken. Unser glorreicher Führer, Adolf Hitler!"

Anne-Katrine didn't need to have that translated. She froze solid on the inside and clutched the shot glass so hard her knuckles turned white. Her face turned into a dark mask of anger as she sought out Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann's eyes. The foppish man couldn't hold her stare but looked down at once.

Wittenfeldt hadn't noticed, and continued: "Auf den Mann, der uns ein großes deutsches Reich gegeben hat, das die Welt durch den Klang unserer Stiefel erzittern lässt," he said in German before he continued in Danish: "And now, for the Danes among us, I'll present our old oath. I vow to you, Adolf Hitler, as Führer and Chancellor of the German Reich, eternal loyalty and bravery. I vow to you and to the leaders that you set for me, absolute allegiance until death shall claim me. So help me God! Long live Adolf Hitler! Sieg Heil!"

"Heil Hitler!" Commandant Vossler barked, shooting to his feet.

The Obersturmbannführer knocked back his second shot and smashed the glass down onto the white tablecloth. When he realized the remaining four people at the table hadn't followed his call, he scrunched up his face and looked them all in the eye.

Lydia and Flemming couldn't hold the evil glare, but Anne-Katrine could, and she gave as good as she got. She shot blue fire back at the officer who had turned out to be as fanatical as his
uniform had hinted at. Such a strong showing of defiance against the Germans in general and the SS in particular was dangerous to her health, she knew that, but her Danish blood simply couldn't react in any other way.

Wittenfeldt eventually sat down with a huff. The rapidly mounting tension was broken by Commandant Vossler who let out a chuckle. "Ach, Herr Obersturmbannführer, jetzt haben Sie unsere Gäste in Verlegenheit gebracht. Herr Lynge-Hoffmann, wäre es möglich, noch eine Portion Eiscreme zu bekommen?"

"Aber natürlich, Herr Oberst," Flemming said and hurriedly left the table to alert his staff about the Commandant's request for more ice cream.

Leaning back in her oakwood dining chair, Anne-Katrine's jaw worked overtime to digest the unfortunate development of the birthday luncheon. She narrowed her eyes and looked at Lydia who had gained a pair of worried, red blotches on her cheeks. Marius didn't look any better, but it was hard to tell if he was affected by the Obersturmbannführer's outburst or simply tired from the day's events.

A stony silence returned to the table. The air between the people built up into something akin to a summer thunderstorm. Something had to give, and it turned out to be Heinrich Wittenfeldt. Dabbing his lips on his napkin, he rose from the dining table and clicked his heels at his companions. After nodding at the two women and Marius, he saluted Commandant Vossler and strode out of the stately dining room.

Anne-Katrine let out a deep, long sigh. 'We haven't seen the last of him,' she thought, eyeing the uniformed man as he closed the sliding door behind him.

_*_*_*_*_*_*

The next hour or so went by under more peaceful conditions. Marius had gone to bed to get a nap, and the others had relocated to Flemming's private den in a more secluded part of the mansion.

The den was a cozy affair with exquisite mahogany smoking tables and a matching desk, four British Chesterfield armchairs and a genuine Persian rug on the floor. Classic landscape paintings adorned two of the four walls; the third was covered by dusty tomes from the floor to the ceiling, and the final saw a window overlooking an ornamental garden at the back of the mansion.

Pale-gray reams of tobacco smoke hung heavily in the air. Flemming and Anne-Katrine were both smoking genuine cigarettes; Anne-Katrine's first in nearly five years. She savored the rich taste of real tobacco, but remembered to politely blow her smoke away from Lydia who was already looking a little green around the gills. Now and then, they all reached down to take a sip of the fine port.
Commandant Vossler was sitting opposite from Anne-Katrine and Lydia. The aging Oberst had been telling humorous tales from his days as a Battalion Commander at the Infantry Training Facility near Husum in Northern Germany, but now that his cigar was almost through and his glass of port close to empty, he appeared to get ready to leave. "Herr Lynge-Hoffmann," he said and drained the last of the tawny liquid, "Es war ein angenehmer Tag. Ich muss leider zur Basis zurückfahren. Fräulein Jensen, Frau Jensen… ich hoffe, wir treffen uns bald wieder."

'I hope we shall meet again soon…' Anne-Katrine translated in her mind. 'Soon better be a fair while off,' she thought, putting her cigarette in the porcelain ashtray. She rose and put out her hand to say a proper farewell to the Commandant. "Goodbye, Herr Oberst," she said and performed an appropriate bow while they shook hands.

Lydia came next and curtseyed at the senior officer. "Auf Wiedersehen, Herr Oberst! Es war mir ein Vergnügen, mit Ihnen zu sprechen," she said, offering the older man a polite smile.

Anne-Katrine connected the dots in her mind and arrived at: 'It was a pleasure talking to you… oh, well… I don't know about that, but at least he acted like a human being unlike the blinkered fanatic from before,' she thought, shooting Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann a sideways glance.

"Oh, das Vergnügen war ganz auf meiner Seite, Frau Jensen," the Commandant said and kissed Lydia's knuckles. "Herr Lynge-Hoffmann, we shall speak over telephone, ja? Good day to you all," he said in broken Danish.

Oberst Vossler put on his gray gloves and saluted his companions before he spun around on his heel and left the den to get his coat and his uniform cap.

The door had barely closed behind the rotund officer before Anne-Katrine stomped over to Flemming's armchair and leaned down towards the dapper man, making him flinch and shy back from her strong presence. "Flemming… how dare you invite us to a party celebrating Adolf bloody Hitler's bloody birthday! Tell me, what the blazes were you thinking, man? And that raving fanatic… spewing out some asinine oath of allegiance or whatever the blazes that tripe was! For the love of God, man, what were you thinking?!

Huffing, Anne-Katrine stomped back to her own armchair to salvage the rest of her cigarette. When she had sat down, she reached out for Lydia who took her hand at once and gave it a little squeeze.

Flemming was still squirming in his seat, and he wore an expression on his face that resembled that of a schoolboy who had just been caught peeking up under the headmistress' skirt. "Anne-Katrine," he tried, but his voice broke and he had to start over. "Anne-Katrine… please… I had no idea Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt was quite that… uh… faithful to the party line. He had just been transferred in from Copenhagen and I thought it would improve my… uh… my standing here if… if I invited him. That's the honest-to-goodness truth!"

Anne-Katrine rubbed her brow and took a final puff of her proper cigarette before she squashed it out in the porcelain ashtray. She sighed which made the pale-blue smoke escape her mouth and
nostrils. "Flemming… I dare say you have bet on the wrong horse this time. A fanatical SS officer will only cause trouble for us all. The Commandant is just, well, a career officer who happens to wear the colors of the opposing side. But a bloody SS- Obersturmbannführer … dammit, man… they're bloody war criminals! I could tell you stories from the Eastern Front that would make your bloody stomach churn!"

"Maybe he's not that bad when the chips are d-"

"Yes he is, dammit!" Anne-Katrine barked and slammed her fist into the armrest. To get a grip on her temper, she downed the rest of the fine port in one gulp before she poured herself another one. "Tell me, Flemming, when he called Sieg Heil, were you tempted to respond with a rousing Heil Hitler?"

A flash of annoyance raced across Flemming's face. He sat up straight and pinned Anne-Katrine to the spot with a hard glare from his almond-brown eyes. "Of course not, Anne-Katrine. I'm not a Nazi just because I've traded with them. This is business, not politics."

Anne-Katrine shook her head slowly. "No, Flemming… Wittenfeldt won't care. We didn't follow the call so we're his enemies. All of us. You, me and our families. He may not come for us tomorrow or even next week… but he'll remember our snub and he'll be breathing down our necks for the foreseeable future. Mark my words, Flemming… you've made a terrible mistake."

Lydia gasped and put her hands across her lips. "Is that true, Anne-Katrine?" she croaked. "Will he come for us?"

A deep sigh escaped Anne-Katrine's lips. "The risk is far too great to ignore, Lydia. He's a fanatic. You saw that."

"But… but what can we do?"

"Defend ourselves."

"Now really, Anne-Katrine-" Flemming tried, but he wisely kept quiet when he caught a glimpse of the fire that shot out of Anne-Katrine's blue orbs.

"Not a word out of you, Flemming," Anne-Katrine said and pointed a strong index finger at their host. "You no longer have a say in the matter. However… if you tell me all you know about the charming Obersturmbannführer, I may forgive you."

"All I know? I hardly know anything about him…"

Anne-Katrine threw her hands in the air in the age-old sign of annoyance. "All right. I gave you a chance to redeem yourself. It's been noted that you're not interested."

"No… no, wait-"
"Come, Lydia… we're going home," Anne-Katrine said, ignoring Flemming's whimpers. After downing the rest of the fine port, she got up and put out her hand to help her sweetheart up from the other armchair. "We have better things to do than to listen to-"

"Anne-Katrine, will you wait a bloomin' minute?!" Flemming barked and jumped up from his chair. His suave, cool movie star exterior cracked and left him a sweating, flushed man. Groaning, he shed his summer jacket and opened the top button of his shirt to get some air to his neck. "What… what can I do?"

Anne-Katrine chuckled and sat down again. She reached for the silver cigarette case on the smoking table and helped herself to another proper cigarette. "Lydia and I saw a map of the battle lines in the Jutland Post this morning. Field Marshal Montgomery and his men are just south of the border, Flemming… I presume you already know that. It's not possible to say when they'll make the final push, but when they arrive, I'm sure they won't look too kindly on the people who have made a fat profit from trading with the Germans."

Squirming, Flemming looked from Lydia to Anne-Katrine. "I suppose…"

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply and reached out for Lydia's hand. She gazed fondly at her partner almost like she was gauging her reaction. When their eyes met, the two women smiled at each other to settle the deal. She looked back at Flemming and pinned him to the armchair. "But we are in contact with someone who could get in contact with the British. Do you follow me?"

"Oh… the resis- uh… I always knew you were a remarkable woman, Anne-Katrine. I should have known you'd… uh… know someone. Yes, I follow you."

"If you tell me what we need to know to eliminate… or at least lessen the threat from the SS unit, we'll put in a good word for you."

Flemming licked his lips nervously and once again glanced at the two women. With shaking hands, he reached into the silver case and snatched a cigarette. His fingers trembled too much to light it, but Anne-Katrine came to his rescue with a steady hand on the lighter. Leaning back in his chair, he let out a pale-blue cloud of smoke that slowly drifted towards the ceiling. "All right. I'll tell you what I know… or… or what I remember of the things Wittenfeldt told me. But it isn't much, you might as well realize that sooner rather than later."

"We're all ears, Flemming," Anne-Katrine said and knocked off some ash from her own cigarette.

"Well… like I already told you, they're called the SS Guard Battalion Zealand. When the Danish Schalburg Corps was disbanded in November of last year, the various SS units acted autonomously for a while before it was decreed from the German high command they should form a new battalion that could be mobilized in case the British or the Russians invaded us."

"Liberated us," Anne-Katrine added darkly.
"Ah… we still don't see eye to eye on that when it comes to the Russians, Anne-Katrine… but never mind that now," Flemming said and took a nervous puff from his cigarette. "After the RAF attack on the Shell House in Copenhagen in March… have you heard about that? I gather it was a violent affair… anyway, following the attack that destroyed thousands of important Gestapo files, it was decided to move the SS Guard Battalion Zealand over here to the south of Jutland. Don't ask me why."

Lydia needed a pick-me-up to offset the worrying news, so she took the bottle of port and poured herself a healthy drink of the high-quality tawny liquid. "Do you know how many there are of them, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann?" she said, raising the glass to sip from it.

"Not exactly, no, but I believe Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt mentioned they haven't fully assembled yet. The present units consist of one hundred, maybe one hundred and fifty men… or so… with more to come. Oh!" Flemming said and squirmed the other way which almost made the ash fall off his cigarette. He hurriedly knocked it off so it wouldn't stain the Persian rug, "I do remember the name of his second in command. Would that interest you?"

"At this point in time," Anne-Katrine said darkly, "everything interests us, Flemming. Go on."

"Well, all right. Hauptsturmführer Jens-Jørgen Andersen. Mmmm… yes, that's right. I've never met him, so I can't-"

"Jens-Jørgen Andersen?" Anne-Katrine said in a monotone. "Wittenfeldt is a different animal as he was born in Germany… but… how the blazes can someone with a name like Jens-Jørgen Andersen that cannot possibly be more Danish voluntarily don the SS runes and join a band of bloody war criminals?!" - For each word she spoke, her voice grew in intensity until it was a near-bark.

Lydia reached over and patted Anne-Katrine's arm, a tactic that seemed to work. Anne-Katrine smiled, but shook her head at the pitiful direction the wonderful Spring day had taken. Everything had gone downhill since Wittenfeldt had raced past them out on the paved side road. "Flemming, I wouldn't expect the Obersturmbannführer to mention anything about the strategy or strategies they'll be following, has he?"

"No, but…"

"But?"

"Well," Flemming said and once again squirmed in his seat. "He did mention 'scorched earth' in a casual conversation with Oberst Vossler before you came. Now, Anne-Katrine, please don't throw a fit… I don't know the context. I just heard the words!"

Anne-Katrine slammed her jaw shut and stared darkly at Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann. Scorched Earth was a policy the Nazis had perfected on the Eastern Front. It was as simple as it was deadly: large units of the SS would round up everyone who lived in a given area, villagers and peasants alike. The residents would either be executed or driven towards the opposing armies as
a buffer of refugees. Once the areas were devoid of human life, everything would be razed and burned down to the ground so it would be of no use to the approaching forces. Homes, crops, livestock, everything would be destroyed. "We can't allow that to happen," she said in a steely voice.

"Anne-Katrine," Lydia tried, speaking quietly, "what's-"

"I'll tell you later, Lydia. We need to get home," Anne-Katrine said and jumped up from the armchair. After taking a last puff, she stubbed out the cigarette that had suddenly taken on a unpleasant aftertaste. "We need to call our special friend before it's too late. Flemming?"

"Y- yes?" Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann said, shying back from the hard glare in Anne-Katrine's eyes.

"Have you told us all you know?"

"Y- yes…"

"You better not be lying," Anne-Katrine said and suddenly leaned down towards the sitting man. "And you better not be telling the charming Obersturmbannführer that we've had this conversation. That would be the quick way to an early grave. Do you understand me?"

Flemming's wide eyes tore around his face and it looked like he was about to wet his pants. A vigorous nodding was his only response to Anne-Katrine's statement.

Anne-Katrine grunted and moved away from her old acquaintance with a purposeful stride. Lydia thought it most prudent to smoothen the ruffled feathers, so she performed a quick curtsey in front of the frazzled man. "Thank you very much for the delightful lunch, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann. It was so good to taste ice cream again. Please give our compliments to your housekeeper," she said before she followed her partner out of the den.

Safely home on the Jensen farm after a hurried ride, Anne-Katrine didn't even have time to park her bicycle in the garage barn before she stormed inside the farmhouse and sat down on the sideboard in the hallway. She drummed her fingers on the wooden surface a couple of times before she took the horn off the old-fashioned telephone and tapped the hook twice in rapid succession.

'The operator will be ready in a moment. Please hold,' a young female voice said at the other end of the line. Anne-Katrine recognized it as belonging to Birthe, the town's leading gossiper. The young woman was a friendly, joyful soul, but she listened in on the conversations, and worse, she couldn't keep quiet about them - thus, if the nature of the conversation was private or even intimate, one should really write a letter instead.
Lydia came in almost at once after having parked their bicycles in the barn. Wringing her hands, she had a dark, worried look on her face that wasn't eased until Anne-Katrine pulled her in for a tender hug and a little kiss on the cheek. "I'll put the coffee pot on while we wait," she said, looking around to see if they had company yet. They didn't, so she moved even closer to her partner. "And I love you," she whispered.

Anne-Katrine mouthed I Love You Too and offered her sweetheart a supportive smile.

At the same time, their hired hand Poul Nedergaard climbed the two steps and leaned against the doorjamb. The forty-nine year old man with the club foot and the orthopedic boot took off his flat cap and scratched his thinning hair. He was dressed in a dark-brown coverall that was littered with wood shavings and ash, revealing that he and Arthur had been busy working on their old Triangel truck.

"Birthe?" Anne-Katrine said into the mouthpiece on the telephone.

'I'm still busy, I'm afraid… please hold,' Birthe replied, making Anne-Katrine roll her eyes at the inconvenience. The heat was getting to her, so she loosened the deep purple ascot and put it on the sideboard. With no activity from the other end of the line, she briefly put down the horn to take off her black blazer. They had been pedaling like the whirlwind to get home as quickly as they could, and the result was visible as a damp stripe down the spine of her shirt.

"Did you have a good day at the Lynge-Hoffmann farm, Miss Jensen?" Poul said in his characteristic broad rural accent, clearly wondering about the usually so unflappable Anne-Katrine's curious haste to get to the telephone. When his only answer was a shrug, he continued: "Your brother and me 've been cleaning out the wood gas generator on the truck so it's ready for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Anne-Katrine said with a furrowed brow.

"Yes, the market day…"

"Oh… right," Anne-Katrine said and shook her head. "I'm sorry for being so absentminded, Poul. It's been an odd day to say the least."

"I see… if you don't need me for anything, I got things to do…"

"Go right ahead, Poul," Anne-Katrine said with a smile before she turned back to the telephone. "Birthe, I'm sorry, but this is urgent," she said into the mouthpiece.

'Anne-Katrine, is that you?'

Anne-Katrine looked towards the heavens and shifted her position so she rested both buttocks on the sideboard. "Yes," she said with a sigh.

'Well, why didn't you tell me sooner? To whom do you wish to speak, please?'
Anne-Katrine licked her lips and narrowed her eyes. A long time ago, after she had been involved in the railway sabotage outside of town, Ernst Mehlborg had given her a telephone number she could use if she ever got into trouble with the Germans. The number didn't exist and was in fact a secret code that Birthe would know how to process. In those situations, the friendly operator knew better than to listen in on anything that was said. "Apollo three-one-nine, please, Birthe."

A moment of silence followed before Birthe came back online. 'Apollo three-one-nine… it's ringing. And there you are, Anne-Katrine."

"Thank you, Birthe. Hello?"

'Hello, this is Uncle Leo,' a familiar male voice said at the other end of the line. Anne-Katrine could hear a click indicating that Birthe had closed her part of the connection.

"Hello, Uncle Leo," Anne-Katrine said in a cheery voice in case the conversation she was about to hold with the former Sergeant Ernst Viggo Mehlborg was being tapped into by the Germans. "This is your niece Gertrude. Oh, I have some wonderful news for you… wonderful and important news, in fact."

'Oh?"

"Yes. I'm pregnant, and I'm nearly bursting at the seams to tell you all about it. Oh, Uncle Leo, I have so many things to tell you. Gosh, you simply must come over for coffee and cookies. I remember you telling me you'd be busy with your friends, but I dare say my news are more important than your card games. Shall we say tonight at eight?"

'Oh, I'm so happy for you, sweet Gertrude,' Ernst Mehlborg said in a voice that was tinged with put-upon glee. 'Yes, I'll show up at eight or so.'

"Oh, how wonderful. All right. See you then, Uncle Leo. Bye-bye."

'Bye-bye, sweet Gertrude, and thank you for calling,' Mehlborg said and hung up.

Anne-Katrine kept the horn to her ear for a few seconds to listen for suspicious clicks and hisses. A few came, meaning they may have been monitored by the Germans. Nodding grimly, she tapped the hook and put the horn back on it.

Lydia came into the hallway with her hands firmly covering her lips. Smiling broadly, she put out her arms and pulled Anne-Katrine into a hug. "Dearest, although it was made on a gloomy background, you should be a vaudeville artist. That was just amazing."

"Thank you…" Anne-Katrine said and mussed Lydia's elegant hairdo that she hadn't had time to unravel. "I wish it wasn't necessary, but… it seems the world is conspiring against us. Mehlborg will be coming over for coffee tonight. Is that all right with you?"
"But of course, dearest. Pregnant, eh?" Lydia said and poked an index finger into Anne-Katrine's gut. Chuckling, she decided it was a good time to kiss the taller woman, so she got up on tip-toes and placed a loving kiss on the enticing lips.

"I know… it was the first thing on my mind," Anne-Katrine said with a cheesy grin.

"Congratulations are in order! I guess I'll be knitting diapers and baby socks now?"

"Mmm-maybe not," Anne-Katrine said and leaned down to give Lydia a fair-sized smooch in return.

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CHAPTER 2

Wednesday, April 25th, 1945.

It was just after two in the morning when a series of rattling, spluttering noises broke the silence in the dark airspace above the Jensen farm. Moments later, a large, black shadow raced through the air not thirty meters above the top of the flagpole that stood outside the quiet farmhouse.

The metallic noises were joined by sounds of creaking wood and flapping canvas, creating an image of a sailing boat in distress on a vast, angry sea. As the black shadow raced past the farmhouse and further across the meadows and fields, it left behind puffs of black smoke that were accompanied by occasional showers of orange sparks.

In the dark bedroom inside the farmhouse, Anne-Katrine cracked open an eyelid and looked around to find the cause of the strange noises that had stirred her from her sleep. Everything seemed quiet, so her sleepiness won the battle with her curiosity and sent her back into a blissful state between sleeping and being awake. She snuggled up closer to Lydia and closed her eyes.

Not three seconds later, a boom from somewhere in the middle distance rattled the farmhouse and made the brass lamp in the ceiling swing back and forth.

"What the blazes?" Anne-Katrine mumbled in a drowsy voice, reaching up from below the blanket to rub her face. Once again cracking open an eyelid, she stared at the swaying electrical appliance in the ceiling that had been converted from an old kerosene-burning lamp.

She cocked her head to listen for other sounds but couldn't pick up anything out of the ordinary. An owl hooted somewhere in the trees behind the farmhouse, but that was about it. With the world falling back into a peaceful state, she shrugged and snuggled down all over again.

Then a quiet knock was heard on the door to the bedroom. 'Sis? Sis, are you awake? Did you hear that boom?' Arthur Jensen whispered through the keyhole.
"Oh, hell… this is going to be one of those nights," Anne-Katrine grumbled and stirred Lydia awake so she could get out of their bed. She didn't want to do it too rudely, so she leaned in and placed a tender kiss on her sweetheart's forehead.

The gentle touch worked as Lydia came to almost at once. The drowsy strawberry-blonde yawned widely and smacked her lips several times in preparation for the new working day. "Oh… it can't be four thirty already… just can't be," she mumbled, leaning her head back down onto Anne-Katrine's chest.

"No," Anne-Katrine whispered back, running her fingers down Lydia's back that was protected by her sleeping gown, "but something's happened outside."

"Oh… can't it wait? I wanna sleep…" Lydia said with her eyes closed.

Anne-Katrine chuckled and gave her partner a little nudge to make her understand they had to get up, at least temporarily. "It probably could, but Arthur can't."

"Mmmm… all right," Lydia said and rolled over onto her back to clear the path for the taller woman to get out of bed.

Anne-Katrine grinned at the cute, bleary look on the younger woman's face. It was just too good to ignore, so she leaned in and claimed Lydia's lips before she pulled the blanket aside and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "Psst! Arthur! Are you still out there?" she whispered in a strong voice.

'Yes! Did you hear it too?'

"Yeah," Anne-Katrine said as she got up from the bed and wrapped her morning coat around her sleeping gown. After putting the blanket back across Lydia's body, she tip-toed over to the door and stepped outside into the hallway.

Her brother, the twenty-eight year old Arthur Wilfred Jensen, leaned against the sideboard by the old-fashioned telephone with a kerosene lamp in his hand. He was dressed in coarse working pants and a matching jacket, but the pale, soft fabric under the jacket proved he was wearing his favored sleeping shirt instead of a proper shirt. Like his sister, he had bare feet and wild, sleep-tousled hair. "Good morning," he said quietly as he moved away from the sideboard. "I think we may have a cow loose or something."

"I don't know what it was, Arthur," Anne-Katrine said, but soon lost the ability to speak as her face cracked wide open in a yawn. Once she had her wits about her, she smacked her lips and rubbed her face. "All I know is we're standing out here in the middle of the bloomin' night talking when we should be sleeping…"

Arthur grunted and put the kerosene lamp down on the sideboard. "I think I'll put on my clogs and head out to take a look… we don't want to spend all morning catching cows, either."
"Good point," Anne-Katrine said with a sigh. "All right. I'll wait here while you do that."

Nodding, Arthur padded into his own bedroom to put on his clogs. Moments later, he came back through the hallway with the characteristic ca-lump, ca-lump, ca-lump from the wooden shoes. He unlocked the front door and peeked out into the pitch black courtyard, but the results were inevitable. "I can't see a bloody thing out there," he mumbled and took the kerosene lamp. "I'll be back soon, Sis," he continued before he stepped outside.

"Mmmm," Anne-Katrine said, leaning against the doorjamb to her bedroom. Her eyelids grew heavy, but the cold breeze that came in through the door when Arthur opened it kicked her awake again. "Oh!" she croaked, rubbing her bare feet up and down her calves so she wouldn't get frostbite from the arctic blast.

It didn't take two minutes before Arthur hurried back into the hallway and closed the door behind him. After he had put the kerosene lamp on the sideboard, he held up a warm piece of twisted metal that was coated in slick, shiny oil. "Look! There are parts like this all over the courtyard… even next to the cowshed. I think we have an airplane down out there, Sis…"

"Dammit…" Anne-Katrine said, stifling another yawn. She reached for the oily part but thought better of it at the last moment. The ice cold well-water she'd need to clean her fingers afterwards came to the forefront of her mind and was enough to make her reconsider her approach. "What time is it?" she croaked, trying to dab the pocket where she always kept her father's pocket watch - of course, she didn't wear her watch with her sleeping gown so the search was fruitless.

Arthur quickly stepped into the sitting room at the end of the hallway to find out the time by reading the tick-tocking grandfather clock on the wall. "Ten past two," he said as he closed the door behind him.

"Bloody hell… we could've had another two and a half hours of sleep!"

"I guess the airplane felt a need to come down here…"

"Perhaps so. The next question is… is it a Luftwaffe fighter or an RAF bomber?"

"Does it make a difference?" Arthur said and threw the oily part back out onto the courtyard so it wouldn't stain the floorboards.

Anne-Katrine's face hardened as she watched her brother close the front door again. "Yes. If they're Brits, we should look for them. If they're Germans… they can damn well help themselves. I lost the last remaining sympathy I had for those bastards when we saw the pictures of the executed resistance fighters in Copenhagen the other day."

"True," Arthur said and nodded somberly. "Well, we won't find out standing here in our underwear. I'll change and go out there to look around the meadow. Are you coming or what?"

Anne-Katrine sighed but eventually performed a shrug. "I better."
Stepped back inside the bedroom, the tall woman moved over to sit on the edge of the bed. "Dearest," she said quietly, nudging Lydia's bare leg that stuck out from underneath the blanket. "Dearest, are you awake?"

The blonde responded by yawning and snuggling down in the sheets. "Not really. Are you coming back to bed?"

"I wish! But I can't. We suspect an airplane has crashed somewhere near us," Anne-Katrine said, caressing Lydia's smooth thigh. "We're going out there to-

Lydia bolted upright in bed which made the blanket pool in her lap. "What?! When? I didn't hear a thing!"

"Just now… and you wouldn't," Anne-Katrine said with a warm smile. "I don't think you'd hear a kilometer-long column of elephants when you're sleeping…"

Lydia guffawed and swatted at her partner's hand. "Oh, you! All right… may I come along? I better take my old medical bag… if it is an airplane, the airmen could be wounded."

"Yes, but we don't know yet if it's a British or a German plane, Lydia."

The underlying message of not wanting to help wounded Germans hung heavily in the air until Lydia shrugged and swung her legs over the side of the bed. "We shall see once we get there. Is it safe to turn on the light?"

"The black-out curtains are in place, so… yes," Anne-Katrine said and flicked the newly installed light switch on the wall. The dim, fifteen-watt bulb came alive and cast a brownish-orange glow over everything in the sparsely equipped bedroom. Beyond the one-and-a-half-width bed itself, it had a fifty-year old closet and an even older night stand with a built-in zinc wash basin on top standing at the wall opposite the bed. A wooden chair carrying various clothes completed the collection.

While Lydia shed her sleeping gown and changed into her coarse, dark-tan working dress to be ready for the unexpected task, Anne-Katrine stood up and removed her morning coat and her sleeping outfit. Her bloomers were already on, but at night she never wore the piece of cloth that supported her breasts, so she reached for it and began the process of preparing the accessory.

"Love," Lydia said, sitting on the bed and tying her bootlaces while she watched Anne-Katrine wrap the cloth around her chest, "I've never understood why you want to do that cumbersome business each day when you could just buy a good, supportive brassiere…"

"Because I've never tried one on that didn't gnaw on my flesh when I'm working in the field. This is soft and comfortable… and I came up with it myself," Anne-Katrine replied with a shrug as
she finished up by attaching safety clamps to the cloth. Chuckling, she leaned down and placed a little kiss on Lydia's forehead.

A scant minute later, she was fully dressed in high-waisted, brown work pants, a tan, o-neck shirt and her beloved vest. The clog-boots, the flat cap and her sturdy jacket came next. Anne-Katrine and Lydia offered each other another little kiss before they left the bedroom and clicked off the light.

"Hmmm… we better get a light each," Anne-Katrine said, picking up the lamp Arthur had left on the sideboard in the hallway. "It's mighty dark out there and I'd like to see what I'm stepping in…"

"Mmmm!"

Turning around, Anne-Katrine tapped a fingernail on the brass lamp. "Here, you can have this one. I'll go over in the garage and find a couple of the old ones. Arthur!"

'Yes?' a disembodied voice said from beyond the closed bathroom door.

"We'll be outside! I'll fetch you another lamp from the garage!"

'All right!'

"Let's go, sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said and put a hand across Lydia's back. Outside, they quickly discovered the courtyard was indeed littered with oily engine parts similar to the one Arthur had picked up earlier.

Lydia held the kerosene lamp low and let the cone of light sweep across the uneven cobblestones to get a clear picture of the mess. "Oh, goodness me… look at that! There can't be anything left of the airplane itself!" she said and looked back up at her partner. "I hope we won't find too many dead bodies," she continued under her breath.

Anne-Katrine strode across the courtyard and moved the creaky, rusty barn door aside to get into the garage. With their Triangel truck too wide to fit through the gate, the garage was used for a wide selection of items they had amassed over the years, like two old horse-driven carriages that were too brittle to drive anywhere, a collection of spare wheels and axle assemblies for the carriages, and a wooden sleigh that hadn't been used since Lydia and Arthur's wedding day more than three years earlier. The runners were so rusty it would take an entire day's worth of hard work to get them clean again, and they just didn't have time for that.

Smaller items included the grinding stone, their scythes, all their spare milk churns and an orderly pyramid of filled sandbags that the former Sergeant Ernst Viggo Mehlborg had provided for free in case the war ever came too close to the Jensen farm.

The spare kerosene lamps and lanterns stood on a system of shelves at the back wall, and Anne-Katrine stumbled over there in the darkness to find two that were ready to be used. She needed to
go through four different lamps to find a few that worked, but she could eventually leave the garage with two additional brass lamps over her arm.

Outside, she turned them both on which helped to penetrate the darkness. The mess in the courtyard looked even worse in the added light, and Anne-Katrine let out a low whistle. "Poul Nedergaard is going to have a fit when he gets here today… we better help him sweep the courtyard," she mumbled to herself.

Right on cue, Arthur stepped out of the farmhouse moving his suspenders over his shoulders. He hastily donned his working jacket and reached for the final lamp. "Sis, are you sure we're allowed to carry lamps out in the fields? I mean, there's supposed to be a black-out in place, you know," he said, adjusting a little knob on the lamp to make the flame grow stronger.

Anne-Katrine grunted and began to move across the courtyard headed for the path next to the cowshed that would take them out onto the meadows. "It's an emergency… and I doubt the Germans can really be bothered now. Of course, if it's a German fighter, we should adhere to the black-out… shouldn't we?"

Lydia grimaced at the harsh statement but chose not to comment. Nothing further needed to be said, so they moved ahead silently with their kerosene lamps held low so they'd be able to spot larger pieces of debris.

The first section of the path past the cowshed and onto the meadow was dominated by the same oily parts they had found in the courtyard. Anne-Katrine grunted and bent over to pick one up. "Dammit… there's oil on the grass… we need to collect all of these bits so they won't have time to contaminate the meadow too badly. The absolute last thing we need now is to have our cows get sick," she said, turning the twisted metal over in her hand. "I'll get the wheelbarrow… Arthur, carry on. Wave your light if you find anything of importance."

"I will, Sis," Arthur said, taking the lead of the little group.

"Oh! Look!" Lydia suddenly cried, pointing towards the town. From inside the German-held garrison, two powerful searchlights had been turned on and were sweeping the skies like they were looking for enemy aircraft.

The two eerie cones of light moved at random, reminding Anne-Katrine of a pair of white arms that moved across black velvet. They all came to a complete standstill to listen for further airplanes, but everything was quiet save for the owl that hooted in the nearby trees. After a short minute, the searchlights were turned off leaving the landscape draped in black.

Moving first, Lydia held up her brass light so she could look back at Anne-Katrine who hadn't left yet. "Since the Germans were using their searchlights, I'd wager it means it's an RAF bomber out here… somewhere."
"Could be," Anne-Katrine said and moved her lamp in an arc like it would help illuminate the large meadow. "We'll find out. I'll get the wheelbarrow so we can carry on. We need to pick up those damn oily bits."

Some time later, Anne-Katrine pushed the wheelbarrow ahead of her which left a deep rut in the soft meadow. At last count, she had found thirty pieces of oily metal fragments, and she wondered if the airplane even had an engine attached to it after all that debris. The pieces she had encountered had grown larger and larger for the past few minutes as she traversed the meadow where their cows were usually kept, indicating they could be getting nearer the crash site itself.

She, Lydia and Arthur had split up to be able to cover more ground in less time, so she was all alone, only accompanied by the lamp that hung from one of the wheelbarrow's handlebars. A point of light somewhere ahead of her was Lydia who walked on the other side of the meadow, shining her light down on the ground.

At the far side, near the fence to their neighbor's closest field, she suddenly found half a wing that was lying casually on the ground like a child had simply thrown it away after having grown tired of playing with it. The wing was painted in a camouflage pattern, and the Royal Air Force roundel adorned the tattered remains of the canvas that was draped across the wooden frame.

"Bloody hell… I found it," she croaked, looking up to see where Lydia and Arthur were at. They were still some distance away from her and didn't appear to have spotted anything. She let the wheelbarrow be and ran over to the wing. "Hello! Lydia! Arthur! I've found it!" she shouted, waving her light to make the others aware of her discovery.

Once they had waved back at her, she held the light closer to the ground to look at the wing, but it meant she didn't see where she was going. A second later, her foot disappeared down a deep rut that could only have been created by something very heavy. "Bloody hell!" she cried, staggering forward to keep her balance. Once she had, she shone the light from the lamp down onto the wide, deep rut. "Will you get a move on, I've found it!" she cried, waving her lamp back and forth.

'Coming, Anne-Katrine!' Lydia's disembodied voice shouted back. Her light bobbed left and right as she hurried across the meadow to come to her partner's assistance.

When Lydia and Arthur arrived, Anne-Katrine pointed at the wing. "It's an RAF fighter! Look at the roundels… and look at this rut. It must have hit the ground here and slid on… down towards the far end of our meadow."

Lydia let out a sigh of relief at the realization that it was a friendly aircraft. She cast a brief glance in Anne-Katrine's direction, knowing in her heart that her partner had been serious when she had said she wouldn't help injured German airmen.
Anne-Katrine knelt down and touched the tattered canvas. "On second thoughts, it must be a fighter-bomber. The wing's almost too large to be one of the regular British fighters… wouldn't you agree, Arthur?"

"Yes," Arthur said, holding his light at the front of the wing to illuminate that it didn't have any machine gun ports. "I'm guessing it's a Mosquito."

"Hush," Lydia suddenly said, but her two companions were too involved in the exciting discovery to notice her. She put a hand behind her ear to listen better, but the ambient sounds were drowned out by the chattering Jensens. "Hush! I can hear voices!" she cried loudly enough for Anne-Katrine and Arthur to pay attention and clam up.

With silence once more spreading over the meadow, they could all hear male voices from somewhere close by. There seemed to be two; one moaned in pain and one cried for help in English. Arthur jumped up at once and took off in a fast stride, following the deep rut further down towards the far side of the meadow.

Lydia and Anne-Katrine kept standing at the wing, but it didn't take long for Arthur to cry back: 'I've found them! They're wounded!'

The call sent the two women into action. Anne-Katrine took off after her brother while Lydia checked her medical bag thoroughly by the light of the kerosene lamp before she followed the others.

By the time Anne-Katrine arrived at the crash site, she spotted two airmen in dark-brown coveralls on the ground next to a comprehensively crashed aircraft. It was a de Havilland Mosquito, but the impact with the ground had torn it apart to such an extent it was only the cockpit, the very top of the fuselage and the raised tail that resembled an airplane - everything else was crushed into a ball of wood or simply gone altogether.

One of the two airmen was sitting up, but the other was lying prone on his back nursing his arms. Arthur knelt down next to the one who was sitting and tried to communicate with him, but judging by the puzzled look on the airman's face, the first attempts hadn't gone too well.

"Is the other one all right, Arthur?" Anne-Katrine said and knelt down next to the injured man. She looked up just in time to see Lydia come racing with her medical bag ready.

With the cones of light from the three lamps joining together, it was easy to see the cause of the man's pains. The sleeves and gloves of his flight suit were torn and bloodied. Anne-Katrine and Lydia tried to pull off the airman's bloody gloves, but he complained vociferously so they had to treat him with great care.

"I don't know, dammit!" Arthur said, rubbing his brow. "I can't speak English… beyond that, I don't think they're even from England…"
Anne-Katrine grunted out loud while she and Lydia finally succeeded in taking off the gloves to reveal the airman's bloody fingers. Four fingers on his left hand and at least three on his right were visibly broken. She grimaced at the horrible sight, but Lydia had seen it all before when she worked for Doctor Meincke so she wasn't affected at all.

Then Anne-Katrine realized what her brother had said. "What nonsense is that, Arthur? Of course they're British... it's an RAF fighter!"

"I didn't say British, I said English... I can't understand a word this guy is saying to me!" Arthur said, shooting the first airman a puzzled look that rivaled the one that had gone the other way moments earlier.

"Let's do it the basic way," she said and pointed at herself, "Anne-Katrine. Arthur. Lydia, nurse," she continued, pointing at her brother and her sister-in-law respectively. "Denmark."

"Oh! Thank ye very much for that vital piece o' information, lassie!" the sitting airman said in a thick, Scottish brogue, "I worried we had come down south of the border. I'm Flight Officer Hamish MacKendrick, Dundee, and this is Sergeant Craig Parkes, originally of Brisbane... in Australia."

"G'day," Craig mumbled, looking up at the women surrounding him. He tried to smile, but it was clear the shock from the crash and the pain shooting up from his fingers were too strong for him to do anything but lie there and moan.

Anne-Katrine nodded and smiled, but Arthur still wore a puzzled frown on his face. "I can't understand a bloody word of what this guy is saying..." he said with a shrug.

"He's from Scotland, Arthur... the other is an Australian."

"Oh... you better speak to him, then. You wanna swap?"

Anne-Katrine looked up, then down at her sweetheart's valiant efforts at soothing the injured airman's pains. "All right," she said and moved up. She and Arthur changed positions so she got the man they needed to speak to. Kneeling down, she put out her hand and waited for the airman to shake it. "Hello, Sir. Our English not good but we try."

"That's good enough for me, lassie," Hamish MacKendrick said and shook Anne-Katrine's hand thoroughly. Grunting, he took off his flight cap and ran a dirtied hand through his locks.

Anne-Katrine was almost disappointed when the Flight Officer didn't have wild, red hair like all Scotsmen had in the funny pages in the newspapers. In fact, he was a slender man in his late twenties with soft features and brownish hair. He had brown, playful eyes under a pair of well-groomed eyebrows; the left of which had an old scar right through it.

"Good, good. You can walk? We have farm over there... not too far," she continued, pointing back at the farmhouse.
"I can walk, all right, but I doubt Sergeant Parkes can, lassie," the Flight Officer said and moved to get up. "He was banged about decently when we were introduced to the ground. His belts failed, and I believe he smacked his hands and probably his legs against the fuselage. Is this your field?"

"Cow meadow, yes."

"I better watch my step, then," Hamish said with a broad grin.

"Anne-Katrine?" Lydia said and moved back from tending to Craig Parkes' fingers.

When Anne-Katrine shuffled back to her partner, she put a warm hand on the small of Lydia's back to offer her support. "I'm here… is he all right?"

"Well, on a whole, yes," Lydia said in Danish as she wiped a few beads of sweat off her brow. The Australian airman smiled weakly at her and she returned the gesture in kind, "but his fingers are very bad indeed. I have to give him a shot of morphine before I attempt to set them, but I need much better light than what we have out here. Do you think it's safe to take the Flight Officer and the Sergeant back to our barn?"

Anne-Katrine leaned back on her thighs and rubbed her mouth. A long time ago, after her participation in the successful railway sabotage in June 1943, she had promised Lydia that she would never go to war again, but the war seemed to sneak up on her no matter what she did - first the encounter with the fanatical Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt and now two downed airmen.

Following the uprising against the occupation forces in August 1943 that had culminated in a nationwide general strike, the German officers and soldiers had shed all pretenses of being civil; the Jewish population of Denmark had been hunted down though most had managed to escape to neutral Sweden, random civilians had often been falsely arrested or simply beaten half to death, and in the town, house-to-house searches were conducted on a weekly basis.

They were rarer in the rural districts, and the farm had only been searched twice, but if the German Army - or worse, one of Wittenfeldt's SS units - came when the two airmen were hiding there, Anne-Katrine, Lydia and Arthur would be executed without a trial for hiding enemy combatants.

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply and rubbed Lydia's back. "We can keep them there for a day or two, but no more than that. I'll call Ernst Mehlborg at first light. He'll know what to do."

"But their injuries…"

"I won't risk anything, Lydia. Not now. The Germans are desperate… you know how they've reacted lately. No. I've made up my mind… and that's final."
Lydia nodded and returned to tending to the wounded Sergeant. "All right, but you need to tell him… my English is very poor."

"I'll try," Anne-Katrine said and leaned down towards the injured man. "Sergeant Parkes? Sir, we take you to my barn now. Warm and light for the… for the… uh… broken fingers. And morphine. We carry you, my brother and me."

Nodding, Craig Parkes let out a pained groan that proved he agreed with the plan. Like his Flight Officer, Parkes was a slender man in his mid to late-twenties, but that's where the similarities ended. The Australian was wiry and his dark hair was so short it was hardly there at all. His face was contorted in pain, but it was easily seen that he had coarser features and far more leathery skin than the fair Scot.

With the details of the plan sketched out, Anne-Katrine smiled at her sweetheart before she shuffled back to the Flight Officer.

"A mighty fine plan if I may say so, lassie… and I shall bring up the rear," Hamish MacKendrick said and clambered to his feet.

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Walking back towards the courtyard, Lydia kept a few paces ahead of the others holding a kerosene lamp in each hand. Combined, the lamps cast a stronger light onto the ground so Anne-Katrine and Arthur wouldn't take a tumble and drop their precious cargo. The injured Sergeant let out a few moans as he was held up by a pair of strong arms, but he took most of it on the chin and Flight Officer MacKendrick brought up the rear like he had said he would.

Anne-Katrine had her jaw firmly clenched as she carried the Sergeant across the uneven meadow. The terrain seemed smooth when they took their cows out to pasture each morning, but on this particular trip, she found every single pothole the meadow had to offer. The heavy load and the odd way of walking put a strain on her body that didn't do her old wartime injuries any favors. Her right foot had already started to throb in a way it hadn't done for a very long time, and her right arm wasn't far behind.

They finally reached the hard-packed dirt at the edge of the meadow and were able to move ahead more freely. A gentle breeze sent a strong whiff of the dung hill over the small group; at the back, Flight Officer MacKendrick let out a disgusted grunt, but Sergeant Parkes chuckled out loud. "Oi, that dung heap smells just like back home, mate! Almost makes me homesick…" he croaked in a voice that carried a lyrical Australian accent although it was tinged by a strained undertone.

"Good Lord," Arthur said out of the corner of his mouth, "I can't understand him, either. What's he saying, Sis?"

"He misses his own dung hill back home…"
"Huh?"

Anne-Katrine chuckled out loud and shook her head. "Never mind. Watch the uneven cobblestones, Arthur…"

"But of course! It's not the first time we carry something heavy across here, you know…"

Anne-Katrine could almost hear her brother rolling his eyes at her. It didn't bother her as much as it had done in the past, but it still grated on her good mood that had already taken a hit from being active at such an ungodly hour of the day.

When their personalities had developed as young teenagers, they had been involved in fierce rows that had driven a wedge between them for weeks at a time. Anne-Katrine had always stood firm on the belief that she could do everything Arthur could, and Arthur had always stood firm on the belief that girls were inferior to boys in fields such as physical labor and intellectual musings. Friction between them was inevitable and would sour their relationship until they were suddenly forced to co-operate following the death of their parents in an automobile accident.

"Just a little friendly advice 's all," Anne-Katrine mumbled, looking ahead at Lydia who kept on shining a path for the small group.

They managed to clear the uneven cobblestones without dramas. Reaching the barn that was used for storage and the garages, Anne-Katrine put down her heavy load and helped Craig Parkes lean against the wall of the barn. "Rest here… open door now. Understand?"

"Yeah," the Sergeant said, nodding with a face that was still contorted in pain.

"Arthur?" Anne-Katrine continued, leaving the Australian with her brother while she took a firm grip on the barn door. It had a tendency to jump its rail, and she felt at once that it had done so again despite her getting the kerosene lamps from that very barn not an hour earlier. Grunting, she put her back into it and shoved the squeaking, rusty door aside one inch at a time.

The display of strength caused a few raised eyebrows from the foreign visitors, but they kept quiet about their observations.

Once the door was open, Lydia slipped inside and hurried over to the system of shelves at the back wall to create more light for her coming, important tasks.

Anne-Katrine went back to Craig Parkes and pulled his arm across her shoulders, mindful of not touching his broken hands. "Sir," she said and turned to the Flight Officer, "can you take other arm? My brother can't help. Needs to prepare bed."

"Oh, certainly," Hamish said and moved in under the other shoulder of his colleague. Together, they shuffled into the furthest corner of the barn where they had to wait for Arthur to clean up an old ottoman.
Arthur fluffed the pillows and beat the bedlinen clean on the bottle-green ottoman that he had slept on several times in the past couple of years following his marriage to Lydia; not because of tiffs or quarrels, but because it gave his wife and his sister the sought-after privacy on the evenings they wanted to make love. At first, he had stayed in his bedroom to try to sleep through it, but the walls were far too thin to muffle the sounds of carnal pleasure - thus he had taken up sleeping in the garage barn on the special occasions.

With the ottoman ready to be used, Anne-Katrine and the Flight Officer lowered Craig Parkes carefully onto the bottle-green fabric. Arthur knelt down and loosened the bindings on the clumsy, fur-lined flight boots before he helped the Australian sweep his legs up onto the ottoman.

Lydia came back with an armful of kerosene lamps that she turned on and placed around the makeshift hospital bed to give herself plenty of light for the medical attention she was about to administer.

The lights from the lamps illuminated the garage and the many items in there; the sleigh in particular became an impressive sight in the orange light. "Oh! An old-fashioned sleigh!" Hamish MacKendrick said and shuffled over to it. As he took in the sights of the traditional vehicle, he stripped off his flight suit to reveal his khaki officer's uniform underneath. "Lassie, is that used regularly?"

"No," Anne-Katrine said and dusted off her hands. She shuffled over to the officer and looked at the rusty runners. "No, too rusty. And don't have horses to pull it. Horses too expensive for… for… uh… silly."

"For frivolous activities?" Flight Officer MacKendrick said with a grin. He turned around to look at Lydia and Arthur. "Your brother… is he married to Miss Lydia?"

"Yes. I'm old maid," Anne-Katrine said with a matching grin.

MacKendrick took a step back and looked at Anne-Katrine's impressive frame. The grunt he let out and the raised eyebrow that accompanied it told a tale of not knowing the details. "I dare say… the men in Denmark must be deaf, dumb and blind…" he mumbled.

"Anne-Katrine?" Lydia said, kneeling next to the ottoman. She looked up to lock eyes with her partner to show that it was urgent.

"Excuse me, Sir," Anne-Katrine said and shuffled over to Lydia. She knelt down next to the nurse and grimaced at the sight of the Australian's broken fingers. Black and blue didn't begin to describe their condition. The man's thumbs had miraculously escaped in one piece, but seven of the remaining eight fingers were visibly broken - none of them were even remotely straight.

Lydia wiped her brow and leaned in towards her partner. "Anne-Katrine, we have to give him a double shot of morphine before we can even think about setting those fingers. Even with the morphine, we may not be able to do it. If we succeed, we'll need splints for each and every one
of them. I don't even know what we can use for that... it's not going to be easy and it's going to take me all morning."

"All right..." Anne-Katrine said and rubbed her mouth. "We don't have a choice. Shall I fetch it for you?"

"No, I got it... but it's the last we have. Are you still going to call Ernst Mehlborg?"

Anne-Katrine licked her lips and looked at the injured airman. The Australian's face was still contorted in pain, and his pasty hue proved that he was keeping a lid on it to keep up appearances. "We have to. They can't stay. It's too dangerous for all of us."

"All right," Lydia said and got up. "Arthur, would you mind making some Coffee Substitute while I fetch the medicine? Anne-Katrine needs to stay here to speak with them."

"Good idea... I'm on it, Lydia," Arthur said and left the barn.

Anne-Katrine turned to offer Lydia and the Flight Officer a smile, but the dark furrow between her brows that accompanied the creasing of her lips proved that she wouldn't breathe easily until the two airmen were gone from the Jensen farm.

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"Anne-Katrine, please tell him the injection won't hurt," Lydia said and scooted closer to the injured Australian. She gave her second-to-last bottle of morphine a good shake before she removed the safety cap from the syringe and plunged the needle into the bottle through the protective skin.

"Sir, you get the needle now with morphine, but it won't hurt," Anne-Katrine said faithfully, holding the injured man's arm steady. With the poor state of the Sergeant's hands, they'd had to cut open the flight suit and the sleeve of his khaki uniform to get to the veins on the inside of his right elbow.

"I'll be as brave as a bloody sailor at a bloody convent, mate," Sergeant Parkes croaked through clenched teeth.

Anne-Katrine opened her mouth to translate but found that she hadn't really understood what the Sergeant meant. She shrugged and looked back at her sweetheart.

Lydia smiled at the airman and carefully penetrated his skin with the tip of the syringe. When the needle was all the way in, she squeezed down on the plunger and emptied out the container into the man's vein. "All right," she said as she pulled it back out. "It's in... now all we can do is wait."

Anne-Katrine turned back to the Australian. "That's it... now we must wait for the morphine to work. Won't be long," she said in English.
"I used to be a bloody sheepshearer, mate… I can wait for bloody days if I have to..." the Australian mumbled. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back on the pillow so he wouldn't put too great a strain on his system.

Once again Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face as she tried to parse the answer - and once again, she had to give up. "I think he's all right," she said to Lydia. While her sweetheart was busy putting away the spent syringe, she offered her a little rub on the back to make up for dragging her out of bed at such an ungodly hour.

The dramatic scene settled down somewhat following the successful injection, and Flight Officer MacKendrick used the lull in the proceedings to find his set of maps and mission orders from an inner pocket in his suit. "Lassie, is there anywhere I can burn my orders so they won't fall into the wrong hands?"

"Of course, Sir..." Anne-Katrine said and got up. "Uh... we have a... a... a chimney over here," she continued, pointing at a pot-bellied stove that stood in the far corner of the garage barn. In wintertime, the stove was used to make coffee and hot soup so they wouldn't have to enter the kitchen with their filthy footwear after a strenuous day in the field - Anne-Katrine had even used it to warm her clog-boots.

"Ah... no, that's called a stove. The chimney is on top," Hamish said and shuffled over there.

"Pardon me. Stove," Anne-Katrine echoed and took the poker. She opened the hatch and stirred the old ashes before she found a piece of scrap newspaper that she stuffed inside it. She patted her vest for her matches but couldn't find any. "Arthur? Arthur, have you seen my matchbook?" she said in Danish. "Arthur? Where the blazes is he?"

"He went outside because of the syringe..." Lydia said from next to the ottoman.

"Big sissy," Anne-Katrine mumbled. "Uh... I need to find matches. Please wait," she said in English.

"I'll hold," Flight Officer MacKendrick said with a grin.

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Once the fire was burning merrily inside the pot-bellied stove, Anne-Katrine used the poker to open the hatch to allow access to the chamber.

Hamish MacKendrick had crumpled up the sheets of secret information and threw them all into the fire. The papers were soon blackened and eaten by the flames that grew from the added fuel. It didn't take long for the chamber to return to normal, and Anne-Katrine closed the hatch with the poker.
"So… that was that," the Flight Officer said, dusting off his hands. "I dare say Sergeant Parkes and I should praise our lucky stars for landing in your meadow. It would have been much worse had we crashed closer to the Germans."

Anne-Katrine mirrored the gesture after hanging the poker on a small hook. "Yes. The German garrison is ten kilometers that way," she said and waved towards the town.

"The direction in which we flew? Ha! That explains the searchlights we saw… we had no choice but to come down here, but I told Sergeant Parkes we better set our Mossie down somewhere flat. We were shot down by a nightfighter… we never saw him coming until it was too late. Our port-side engine was shot to pieces."

"I have many of those pieces in my wheelbarrow if you want them back," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle.

"Why, thank you, lassie! Perhaps you could ship them to RAF Colerne c/o 29th Squadron and Wing Commander J.W. Allan? I'm sure they'll be pleased." The Flight Officer grinned but it soon faded and he became more serious. "We were part of a triple raid. Two squadrons went to strafe airfields inside Germany, but they were merely decoys while the unit I was in headed for the docks at Kiel. Our intelligence suggested the Germans had placed a detachment of warships there… well, I dare say they had. Three cruisers! I've never seen flak so dense."

"Uh… flak?"

"Anti-aircraft fire, darling."

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face at the inappropriate term of endearment, but let it slide. "Oh. I see."

"Yes. We were all peppered with shrapnel, but the Mossie is made of wood so it can withstand most things the Germans can throw at it. We didn't lose any airplanes over the target area, but… that damn nightfighter came when I wasn't looking. Shame on me."

"And here you are."

"And here we are. Lassie," MacKendrick said and licked his lips, "you don't suppose it would be possible for me to get a cup of tea?"

"My brother is making coffee, Sir."

A flash of disappointment raced across the Scot's face at once, but he was a gentleman and was able to hide most of it. "Oh… coffee? Well… coffee will do, thank you."

Exactly on cue, Arthur came back into the garage barn with five mugs and a thermos of the indescribable, murky substance known as Coffee Substitute. The already poor quality had deteriorated even further over the past few months and was now barely more than grounds and a...
few additives to give it a dark-brown color. He gave his wife a mug and poured the steaming hot liquid into it. Once Lydia's mug was full, he poured himself another full mug and shuffled over to Anne-Katrine and the Flight Officer. "Coffee?" he said, holding up the thermos.

"Yes please," Anne-Katrine said and took the two mugs while Arthur filled them up. "Sir, you need milk? We have plenty of milk but no sugar left."

Flight Officer MacKendrick grimaced but shook his head. "Oh, no thank you. I shall be fine. Thank you. Cheers," he said and took a sip of the dark-brown liquid. The look on his face proved it wasn't particularly to his liking. Another sip confirmed it, and he bared his teeth in a horrified grimace. "Oh... is it... is it supposed to taste like this?"

"Yes," Anne-Katrine said with a shrug. She tried a sip of her own mug just to make sure, and found it to taste just like always.

"Ah." MacKendrick tried another sip but came to the conclusion that he better admit defeat before his stomach would beat him to it. "I'm terribly sorry, lassie... but I can't drink it. It's God-awful!"

"Yes," Anne-Katrine said again, followed by an even larger shrug. She chuckled and turned back to Arthur. "Don't we have a few dried tea leaves left?" she said in Danish.

The way Arthur's face scrunched up proved that he had just been insulted beyond belief. "I think we do, but... Sis, there's nothing wrong with my coffee!"

"I know, Arthur," Anne-Katrine said and put her arm around her brother's shoulders, "but our guest doesn't like it. Please?"

"Well, what would he like? Bloody Englishman..."

"He's a Scot, Arthur."

"Same bloody thing..."

"Ah, no."

"Does it matter? What kind of tea does his Lordship want? We have rhubarb, stinging nettle and apple leaves."

"I'll ask," Anne-Katrine said and turned back to the Flight Officer. "Sir, we can offer you tea made of rhubarb, stinging nettle or dried apple leaves," she said in English.

Hamish MacKendrick seemed to ponder the selection for a few seconds before he lit up in a smile. "Perhaps you could just give me a mug of water that I could heat on the stove over there? Yes, that would suffice, thank you."
"Water? Plain water?"

"Just a mug of cold water, thank you, lassie," MacKendrick said with a broad grin. "Oh! And one more thing… I know I'm being a nuisance now… but you wouldn't happen to have a cigarette, would you?"

Anne-Katrine blinked a few times before she offered Arthur a smile to prepare him for the message that would no doubt go down like a lead balloon. "The Flight Officer would like a mug of cold water, please," she said in Danish.

"He can get his own damn-"

"Arthur…"

"All right, all right," Arthur said and shuffled back out of the garage barn to get the water from the old-fashioned pump well in the courtyard.

Once that had been dealt with, Anne-Katrine rummaged through her vest pockets to find her ubiquitous crumpled-up pack of Powhattans. Finding it, she looked at the poor excuse for a cigarette and wondered if she should really expose a member of the Allied Forces to the unpredictable nature of smoking a Powhattan. She came to the conclusion that he had asked for it, so it would be impolite not to give him one.

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Fifteen minutes later, the morphine had kicked in. Sergeant Craig Parkes had drifted off into a fitful slumber and Lydia was kneeling on a cushion next to the ottoman to be as close as possible to the Australian's injuries. Anne-Katrine, Arthur and Flight Officer MacKendrick all had worried looks on their faces, but Lydia's was set in stone as she prepared the seven pairs of splints she needed to use. She had feared they wouldn't have enough tools for the task, and she had been right - she'd had to sacrifice two footstools to have enough pieces of wood.

To test if the morphine was effective, she touched Sergeant Parkes' hands and gave them the briefest of squeezes. The man didn't even flinch. "All right," she said and wiped a bead of sweat off her brow. "I'm going to set his fingers now. Please don't interrupt me while I'm working."

"We won't," Anne-Katrine said and offered her sweetheart a smile.

Arthur smiled too, but it was of a far more nervous kind. When Lydia took the first pair of splints and began to straighten out the Sergeant's ring finger on his right hand, he had seen enough. "I'll be outside… sweeping the courtyard," he croaked and left in a hurry.

Even Anne-Katrine flinched at the gruesome task, but if Lydia could handle it, so could she. 'I can help deliver cows… I can put down animals if I have to… I can clean the outhouse during a summer heatwave… but there's no way… no way I'd be able to do what my dearest is doing
now… *Good Lord, look at her rock-solid hands! If that had been me, I’d be trembling so fiercely I might put his pinkies where his thumbs are…'*

A particularly nasty crunch shot up from the injured man’s middle finger on his right hand when the bone was straightened, causing Anne-Katrine and the Flight Officer to scrunch up their faces in dread.

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After what seemed an eternity, Lydia had reset all seven broken fingers. The Australian airman suddenly sported sawn-off pieces of wood from the footstools to support his limbs, but it was better than no fingers at all.

Hamish MacKendrick let out a surprised grunt at the sight. "I must say, lassie… I hadn't expected the little lady to be such an efficient nurse. I hope your brother knows how fortunate he is to have her in his life." His throat was still raw from the coughing fit he'd had after smoking the Powhattan, so his voice sounded deeper than it had before. After speaking the sentence, he reached up and picked a few pieces of would-be tobacco off his lips and tongue.

"Oh, he does," Anne-Katrine croaked. *'And so do I,'* she continued in her mind as she gazed at Lydia who leaned back on her thighs and rubbed her weary face. The two women locked eyes for the briefest of moments to send each other a little message of love. It was enough to give Lydia a smile on her face before she turned back to her patient.

Outside in the courtyard, the dark night had finally given way to the crisp hues of daylight. Dawn had broken while they had been busy in the garage; it marked the time where they were supposed to get out of bed and begin the long list of daily chores like milking the cows, moving the full milk churns to the cold storage cellar and then onto the truck from the dairy plant, take the cattle out to the meadow and muck out the cowshed - and after all that, she'd need to call Ernst Mehlborg again about the airmen.

The challenges seemed like insurmountable obstacles for Anne-Katrine as a tidal wave of fatigue nearly bowled her over, but she knew she couldn't keep the cows waiting for too long. If they weren't milked at their regular time, they'd get agitated and that would only make them far more difficult to lead onto the meadow later on.

Before she could do all that, a significant thought of Obersturmbannführer Heinrich Wittenfeldt came to her mind. It wasn't outside the realms of possibility that the fanatical SS-officer would conduct thorough searches after they had snubbed him at the luncheon. He hadn't done anything yet, but Anne-Katrine knew it was too good to last.

"Sir," she said in English, "I need to tell you that we have a unit of the SS in the garrison."

"Mmmm!" MacKendrick said, scrunching up his face.
Anne-Katrine took her Scottish guest by the arm and moved him through the barn to a corner that hadn't been cleaned up in years. "We have not had problems with them yet, but… just to be safe, there is a hayloft up there that I think you should use," she said and pointed at a section of the wooden ceiling that looked just like the rest.

"Where?" The Flight Officer said, cocking his head.

"There," Anne-Katrine said and pointed at a faint, dark outline. When it became obvious her guest didn't see a thing, she pushed a few old items aside to be able to shuffle over to the far wall. Once there, she pulled a rope that blended in perfectly. As she yanked it downwards to release a locking mechanism upstairs, a wooden staircase that reached all the way down to the ground was lowered from the ceiling.

"Oh, how marvelous… yes, that'll be a perfect hideout. Oh, I'll bet you and your, ahem, male acquaintances have spent many glorious hours up there, eh, lassie?" MacKendrick said and let out a loud laugh.

Anne-Katrine grunted and began to clear the way so they could get the Australian airman up the ladder while he was still under the influence of the morphine. She had indeed spent many hours up there when she was a teen, but it had been by herself, and she certainly hadn't been dreaming about any male acquaintances. "Oh, a Lady never kisses and tells, Sir," she mumbled and moved past the Flight Officer. "Please wait while I get my brother so we can carry the Sergeant to safety."

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CHAPTER 3

Several hours later, the seemingly endless list of chores had taken a severe toll on Anne-Katrine's lower back. While she had helped loading the milk churns onto the truck from the dairy plant, she had felt a twinge in her back that had only gotten worse since. Now, she was flat on her stomach on her bed while Lydia rubbed a soothing balm into the lower reaches of her bare back.

"I'm getting old," Anne-Katrine mumbled, resting her head on her crossed arms while her partner tended to her long torso. "Old and weak."

Lydia chuckled at the despondency in Anne-Katrine's voice. Straddling her partner's long legs, she dug her fingers into a jar filled with a viscous liquid better known as palm oil. Once she had a good glob, she distributed it onto the bare skin and began to rub it in. "Don't be silly, Anne-Katrine, this was just a pulled muscle. Not the first… won't be the last."

"Still… I'm getting old. Back in the day, I could have carried two churns at a time-"
"Back in the day," Lydia chanted in a solemn voice, "in the year dot when the King of Diamonds was still but a knave, I walked for three hours straight each morning just to get to school…"

"Are you teasing me?" Anne-Katrine said and looked over her shoulder. Sure enough, Lydia had a broad grin on her lips. The pink tip of the tongue that followed hammered the point home. "You are teasing me! I'll remember that…"

Lydia chuckled again and finished up rubbing the soothing oil into her sweetheart's long back. Once she was done, she hopped off Anne-Katrine's legs and put the lid on the jar of oil so it wouldn't get everywhere. She took a moment to run a finger up Anne-Katrine's back, up past the cloth that kept her breasts in place and up to her neck. "You feel that?" she husked.

"Oh yeah…"

"Then you're not old and weak yet."

"If you say so," Anne-Katrine said and waited for Lydia to move away from their bed so she could shuffle around into a sitting position. When they were face to face, she pulled her dearest in for a hug. "Thank you… I feel better already."

"You're welcome, love. Please don't strain your back too much… let it rest for the remainder of the day, and everything will be back to normal at supper time."

"Thank you, Nurse Jensen. I shall keep that in mind. How long do you think I need to wait before I can put my shirt on?"

"Oh, not long. About five minutes or so," Lydia said and put the jar into a small drawer inside the closet. Closing it, she wiped her hands on a towel and shuffled back to Anne-Katrine where she reached up to caress the bare, sculpted shoulders. "While you wait in here, I'll make oatmeal for all of us… including our two guests up in the hayloft."

"Sounds like a very good plan, sweetie. I'm pretty hungry after getting up at such a stupid hour, and I'm sure our overnight guests are too," Anne-Katrine said and reached for her shirt and her vest.

Lydia smiled and leaned down to claim Anne-Katrine's lips in a nice, little kiss. "I said five minutes, Anne-Katrine. Which isn't yet," she whispered around her partner's lips. Moving decisively, she took the clothing items from Anne-Katrine's hands and put them firmly on the bed next to her.

"Ah… yes, Nurse Jensen."

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The characteristic smell of hot oatmeal bubbled up from the large pot that Lydia put on their kitchen table. Taking a wooden spoon, she poured a healthy glob out onto the plates in front of
Arthur, Poul Nedergaard and Anne-Katrine before she transferred what was left onto her own plate.

Anne-Katrine smiled at her partner before she grabbed her spoon and dug in. "So the debris and the other remains of the aircraft aren't visible from the road, Poul?" she said and stuffed the full spoon into her mouth.

"No, and I was even looking in that direction, Miss Jensen," Poul said, taking the pale-blue metal coffee pot and filling his mug to the brim with the Coffee Substitute.

Arthur nodded, too preoccupied with his oatmeal to answer.

Lydia took the coffee pot from Poul and poured herself a mugful before she passed it onto Anne-Katrine. "That's something at least. The Germans hardly fly in the daytime anymore… and if it can't be seen from the road…? Well…"

"Mmmm," Anne-Katrine said around a mouthful of oatmeal. She put down her spoon to take a sip of the coffee and to gaze lovingly into Lydia's eyes for a moment. The back rub had already worked wonders and she was ready for the next chores on her list.

Poul Nedergaard pulled his lips back in a worried grimace as he looked at the others. "Miss Jensen, Mrs. Jensen… please don't consider me a coward, but… but I'd rather not be involved in helping the airmen and all those things. The Missus depends on me, and the Germans have been particularly nasty to everyone in town since the Russians entered Berlin… and the new SS troops are even worse."

"We understand, Poul," Anne-Katrine said and reached across the table to shake the hand of the man she had known since a week after her parents' passing some nine years earlier. Nothing more needed to be said, so she didn't.

The rest of the breakfast was conducted in relative silence; only the grunts that emanated from Anne-Katrine and Arthur that came from reading the articles in the previous day's Jutland Post on the progress of the war broke the monotony. "There's an updated map of the front lines here," Anne-Katrine said and wiped her mouth on a napkin, "that shows that apart from pockets of resistance in the Netherlands and northern Germany around Hamburg and Kiel, Denmark is the only bloody place still solely controlled by the bloody Germans! Can you believe that? I mean… what the blazes is keeping Monty and his boys?!"

Lydia pushed her chair back and put the empty pot in the wash basin. After igniting the stove with a match, she lifted the heavy bucket of cold well-water up onto one of the burners - without heating the water, they couldn't do the dishes. She grunted loudly from the exertion when she needed more muscle power than usual to lift it high enough to clear the edge.

Anne-Katrine noticed and jumped up in a flash to assist her sweetheart in getting the bucket up onto the stove. "There we have it," she said with a smile.
"Thank you… I got it a little too full today. I hope you didn't aggravate your back," Lydia said and swept a few hairs out of her eyes. She returned the smile, but with Poul there, that was all she could do.

"I didn't."

"Good. Do you want to go over there with the other pot of oatmeal, or should I…?"

"Mmmm… how about we go together?" Anne-Katrine said and took the second pot, a ceramic bowl that Lydia had put on the kitchen counter protected by one of their red, white and blue tea towels.

Oblivious to the conversation between his wife and his sister, Arthur pushed his own chair back and put his bowl down into the filthy pot. "It's a bloody disgrace is what it is. Look at the progress of the Russian armies… if we're not careful, we'll be overrun by a new enemy."

"Well, that's what Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann has been saying for years now," Anne-Katrine said, holding the ceramic bowl. "Oh, I don't know... the more I learn of world politics, the more disenchanted I get. Never mind that now. Poul, we've already swept the courtyard so you don't have to do that today."

"I see," Poul said, looking over the edge of the second section of the Jutland Post.

"Instead, I'd like you to grease the latches and hinges on the doors to the barn, the cowshed and the cold storage cellar. They've been a little sticky lately. Once that's done, we'll find something else for you."

Poul Nedergaard smiled, folded the Jutland Post in half and stuck it under his arm. "I'll do that, Miss Jensen."

"All right," Anne-Katrine said and left the kitchen holding the pot of oatmeal.

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Up in the old, dusty hayloft, Flight Officer Hamish MacKendrick and Sergeant Craig Parkes had made themselves comfortable on the last remaining straw bales from the previous year. The loft had a low, steeply sloped ceiling that meant neither of the men nor Anne-Katrine could stand erect, but Lydia had plenty of space above her head.

The floorboards creaked and groaned as the people up there moved around, but everything seemed to hold up to the unusual weight. Now and then, pieces of straw slipped through cracks in the boards and fluttered down onto the floor of the barn.

MacKendrick had emptied his bowl of oatmeal in record time, and even Parkes had munched down quite a bit of his portion. Lydia had held the spoon, but it was crystal clear the proud
Australian hadn't enjoyed literally being spoon-fed by the nurse, no matter how charming she was.

Neither of the two men could be persuaded to test the Coffee Substitute or the replacement tea leaves, so they had been given mugs of hot water like during the night. MacKendrick took several sips from his mug as he watched Lydia help the Sergeant. Now and then, he grinned at the expression on his colleague's face.

After dabbing Craig Parkes' mouth on a napkin, Lydia put down the spoon in the empty ceramic bowl and dusted off her hands. "Anne-Katrine, please translate…"

"Go ahead," Anne-Katrine said and knelt down on the other side of the injured airman.

"His fingers look all right save for two that have lost color… well, he can see that himself. I may need to reset those two."

Grimacing, Anne-Katrine turned to the Australian. "Sir, your fingers look good except for those two," she said in English while she pointed at the index finger on his right hand and the ring finger on his left. "Nurse Jensen must perhaps do them again."

"Bloody hell…" Parkes croaked, casting a worried glance at Lydia. "But if it can't be helped…"

Anne-Katrine nodded and looked back at Lydia. "He understands. Do we have any morphine left?"

"Yes, but only one bottle, I'm afraid…" Lydia said with a shrug.

"Oh… all right." Anne-Katrine fell quiet and looked at the Sergeant's fingers. She glanced over at Flight Officer MacKendrick and offered him a shrug that was responded to in kind.

"I… oh, I have an idea," Lydia said and briefly put a hand on Anne-Katrine's arm. "I don't want to leave the Sergeant for too long in case his condition worsens, but could you perhaps ride into town and fetch a new batch of morphine from my old employer, Doctor Meincke?"

"I certainly could, Lydia… good thinking. Yes, I'll do that right away."

While Lydia and Anne-Katrine spoke in Danish, Sergeant Parkes looked at his three companions with an ever-deepening frown on his face. "Oi, this is bloody awkward, but…" he suddenly said, looking quite embarrassed, "… but I have to do a number two, mate."

"Oh, Sergeant!" Hamish MacKendrick croaked, throwing his arms in the air.

Parkes squirmed in his seat, looking so embarrassed he was about to croak. "We were only supposed to be away for three or four hours…"
"You have to do a what?" Anne-Katrine said in English. When all she got out of the Australian was a grunt and a pair of reddening cheeks, she furrowed her brow and looked at Flight Officer MacKendrick.

"The Sergeant needs to borrow the outhouse," Hamish said flatly.

Anne-Katrine bared her teeth in a grimace and looked at the Sergeant's disabled hands. "Oh," was all she could get herself to say.

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When that particular drama had been dealt with, Anne-Katrine hopped onto her bicycle and followed the side road into town. As always when she rode on the snaking, undulating road in the presence of birds, bees and colorful flowers, she allowed her mind to drift from her depressing everyday life.

Images of the life she hoped she would lead with Lydia once the war was over came to her unprompted. They would never be able to declare their love openly, or to get married, or even to kiss in public, but they would continue to live together and love each other dearly until their dying breath, of that she was certain.

The arrangement they had with Arthur was unusual to say the least, but all parties seemed to have come to terms with their bohemian family structure. When Arthur felt his most basic need build, he rode to town and spent the night in the company of a young widow who lived on a quiet side street to the square - thus, everybody got what they wanted.

Earlier in the war, people had been gossiping about Anne-Katrine living under the same roof as the newlyweds, but the war and the increasing brutality of the Germans had largely put an end to the gossip. Since the Danish police had been captured and sent to concentration camps in mid-September of 1944, the need for drawing attention to oneself had vanished. Unfortunately, Anne-Katrine and Lydia both had vast experience in keeping everything under tight wraps, so they'd had a head start compared to everybody else.

Anne-Katrine trod a little harder on the pedals to get up one of the numerous small hills that were scattered around the area. The bicycle squeaked and creaked from a lack of oil, reminding her of yet another thing she had to add to her to-do list. Cresting the hill, she freewheeled down the other side until she had to resume pedaling.

With the end of the war in sight, the Germans - and in particular the SS-units - would be even more brutal and unpredictable than they had been in the preceding months and years. It would only take one unfortunate incident for her and her family to end up nose-down in a ditch with a bullet in the neck. It wasn't unheard of, and it wasn't an appealing thought.

Reaching the main road into town, she put out her arm and turned right. The larger road was in an even worse state now with all the trucks driving to and from the garrison. The potholes were
so deep they could damage a rim beyond repair if she drove down into one, so she kept her eyes glued to the road to steer around the many obstacles.

When she went past the old, abandoned gas station, a uniformed, battle helmet-wearing German from the Field Police stepped out onto the road and put up his hand in the 'stop'-sign.

Anne-Katrine did as told and freewheeled towards him. When she was close enough, she jumped off the bicycle and dragged it the rest of the way so she wouldn't appear to be a threat. She knew what was coming, so she already had her hand halfway down her pocket.

"Halt, Fräulein. Ihre Papiere, bitte," the Gefreiter - a Corporal - said, asking for her papers. Like other members of the Field Police, he had red highlights on his uniform, and he wore a large metal shield on a chain around his neck.

'Well, at least he said 'please'," Anne-Katrine thought as she handed over her identification card. The young soldier studied the papers closely; he even scratched at the edge of the photo to see if it was poorly made. Forged papers and permits were a ten-øre a dozen now, but most of them were of such poor quality they wouldn't do a thing to aid the people who had bought them. Anne-Katrine's was an original issued by the chief constable of Haderslev, so she was safe.

"Sprechen Sie Deutsch?" the soldier asked, still holding the papers.

Anne-Katrine shook her head to the question - she didn't speak German.

"You live Egon Mathiesens Vej?" the soldier said in a pitiful, broken Danish.

"That's right, Herr Gefreiter."

"And you farmer?"

"Yes. I own a farm with my brother."

"Mmmm. What you do in town?"

"I need to see a Doctor."

"You are sick?"

"He's an old friend, Herr Gefreiter."

The Corporal looked at the papers one last time before he gave them back to Anne-Katrine with a shrug and a disinterested look in his eyes. "Mmmm. Sie können weiterfahren. Go now."

"Thank you, Herr Gefreiter," Anne-Katrine said and stuffed her papers down into her pocket. After swinging her leg over the bicycle's frame, she looked over her shoulder to see if the road was clear. She was the only one there, so it was safe to pedal on.
Anne-Katrine continued down the main road into town until she reached the curbstones at the edge of the square. There, she jumped off her bicycle and dragged it across the pavement so she wouldn't draw attention to herself.

Even five years on from that fateful day in 1940, she couldn't visit the square without hearing echoes of the machine guns mounted in the turrets of the Panzers she had battled near the barber shop; nor could she forget the faces of the two men from her unit who had been killed there.

It didn't help that the square resembled an army base with a machine gun nest, combat-ready motorcycles, several trestles, hundreds of meters of barbed wire and what appeared to be thousands of sandbags everywhere.

The sea of gray uniforms present sent Anne-Katrine's heart plunging into her boots. With that many German soldiers at the square - and looking fully prepared for heading into battle - the risk of having their peaceful little town turn into an all-out war zone when the British forces came was simply huge.

An officer from the regular Wehrmacht was standing on a box speaking to a guard detachment of soldiers carrying rifles. Anne-Katrine was too far away to hear what the man said, but even if she had been closer, she wouldn't have cared.

Further along the square, a group of men from Wittenfeldt's SS unit had gathered at one of the benches and spoke casually to one another. They had plenty of room since even the regular German troops wouldn't get anywhere near the men with the dreaded runes on their collars. Anne-Katrine kept an eye on them as she went past. She noticed they all wore the same badge on their uniform shirts that she had seen Wittenfeldt wear: the Infantry Assault Badge, which meant they were all battle-hardened veterans from the Eastern Front.

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Instead of stopping at the health center, she carried on past the larger buildings lining the square until she reached a row of two-storey villas that all had neat front lawns with picket fences, bird baths and flagpoles. A recent decree had banned Danes from flying any flag other than the Nazi standard, so every single flagpole was empty as a protest.

When she reached the house she was looking for, she opened the low garden gate and dragged her bicycle up a row of flagstones past well-groomed flower beds until she arrived at a dark-brown wooden door equipped with a brass knocker. Before she used it, she glanced over her shoulders a couple of times to see if she was being watched.

It seemed an eternity went by before the retired doctor Edvard Sigurd Meincke opened the front door, but in reality, it only took three minutes. The cause for the delay was quickly revealed: the retired doctor's impressive, bright white hair and old-fashioned whiskers were tousled like he had been disturbed in a nap, and he wasn't wearing his metal-frame spectacles. Most unusually for a
man of his stature in society, he was wearing a burgundy robe with a belt hastily tied around his waist instead of a proper suit.

Anne-Katrine suddenly thought the doctor looked old, but she realized that he was; he had recently turned seventy-three. 'My God, how time flies... I'll be old and gray before I know it...' she thought, looking at the elderly man's ruddy, wrinkly face.

"Oh..." doctor Meincke mumbled when he realized the person at the doorstep was merely a fuzzy blob in the air. "I seem to have mislaid my spectacles... who is it, please?"

"It's Anne-Katrine Jensen, Doctor Meincke. May I come in, please?"

E.S. Meincke's face lit up in a smile when he recognized the voice. "Oh! Why, certainly, Miss Jensen! Come in, come in... how nice to get a visitor!" he said and moved aside to make way for Anne-Katrine. When she had moved past him and into a narrow hallway, he closed the front door and clapped his hands together in glee. "My wife is doing her regular rounds of shopping with the maid, but I'm almost certain I can make you a nice cup of tea... if I could only remember where I put my spectacles..."

The narrow hallway followed the length of the house and seemed to end in a kitchen. A sideboard underneath a large mirror just inside the door proved that Doctor Meincke's wife enjoyed making cross-stitch embroidery. A staircase draped in a forest-green carpet went upstairs and out of sight. Several doors led off from the hallway, but only one was open: into the sitting room.

Anne-Katrine peeked into the room where she noticed a reclining chair that looked like it had just been used. Half a newspaper had been thrown haphazardly onto the plush carpet - it was the Conservative Voice. A small, round table stood next to the chair carrying a half-full glass of brandy, a pipe in a rack, and the very spectacles the good doctor was searching for. "Hang on, Doctor Meincke... I know where they are," Anne-Katrine said and strode into the room.

She took the spectacles and strode back out into the narrow hallway where the doctor was still waiting. "Here you go, Sir," she said and carefully slid the metal frame up his nose.

"Ah! I am indebted to you, Miss Jensen!" Meincke said as he adjusted the spectacles to make them sit just right. "Oh... I must say... are you getting enough sleep? You look somewhat bleary-eyed..."

Anne-Katrine chuckled and shuffled back into the living room. She had a wide range of sitting furniture to choose from: the reclining chair, a sofa, two wing armchairs and several leather poufs and footstools were lined up ready to be used. The reclining chair was obviously Meincke's favorite spot, so she made a beeline for the sofa near the dormant fireplace and made herself comfortable next to a pair of embroidered pillows.

The room sported a hefty collection of highly feminine knick-knacks of all types. The shelves and windowsills were crammed full, and even the mantelpiece was heavily laden with porcelain..."
figurines of shepherds, ballerinas and doves in flight. The icing on the cake were the two red-
and-black bow ties that acted as curtain closers on the lacy fabric that covered the window to the
street.

Anne-Katrine chuckled again and thought back to her own sitting room that was devoid of knick-
knacks, save for Lydia's embroidery. Smiling at the thought, she crossed her legs at the knee. "To
be truthful, Doctor Meincke, we were rudely pulled from our sleep last night. We had a visitor…
or rather, a pair of visitors out at the farm."

"Oh? Not our invaders from the south, I hope?" Meincke said and sat down on the reclining
chair, the promised tea all but forgotten. He let out a short grunt when his rear made contact with
the soft cushion.

"No. Two men wearing RAF uniforms decided to drop by. They crash-landed in our meadow."

"I say!" Meincke cried and adjusted his spectacles to get the most out of the unexpected news.
"How dreadfully exciting… are the men in good health?"

"Mostly," Anne-Katrine said and leaned forward on the sofa. "That's actually why I've come,
Doctor. One of the airmen suffered a host of broken fingers. Lydia set them, but we had to use
the last of our morphine. We were wondering if

"You shall have them…” Meincke suddenly clammed up and fell back against the reclining
chair's backrest. Cocking his head, he eyed her over the rim of the metal frame. It was clear
something important went on inside his mind, and he licked his lips several times before he had
all his thoughts lined up enough to make them public. "Miss Jensen… would it be possible for an
old, old man such as myself to come with you out to your farm so I could take a look at the
broken fingers? I must admit I am bored out of my skull most days. Nothing to do here but to
read the newspaper and fiddle about in my garden…"

Chuckling, Anne-Katrine offered the elderly man a broad smile. "You are most welcome, Doctor
Meincke… I know my sister-in-law will be most pleased to see you again. We do have a little
problem, though. I came here on my bicycle…"

"Ah, that's not a problem," Meincke said and waved his hand dismissively. "Although I'm long
since retired, the Germans have continued to renew my petrol permit. My good, old Ford is ready
to go as we speak, and there's plenty of room in the back for your bicycle!"

Meincke shot up from the reclining chair but let out a hiss even before he had straightened out.
Smirking over his frailty, he had to clamp down a hand on the backrest while he waited for his
back to co-operate. When everything was settled, he downed the glass of brandy that stood on
the round table in a single gulp. "I'll get dressed in a hurry, Miss Jensen. Don't go anywhere!"
With that, he left the den in a purposeful shuffle.

"Don't forget the morphine, Doctor Meincke!" Anne-Katrine said strongly to the retreating form.

One second later, the retired doctor came back to stand in the doorway to the sitting room with a puzzled look on his face. "The morphine? Oh! Oh, the morphine… drat, my mind has turned to a sieve from all this wretched inactivity. Miss Jensen, feel free to take a glass of brandy while I get dressed!"

"Thank you, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle, looking at a clean glass but no bottle anywhere in sight.

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Doctor Meincke's old-fashioned Ford A drew a lot of attention as it drove down the main road out of town, especially since it had a distinct, flatulating sound coming from the exhaust. Anne-Katrine, whose bicycle took up the entire back seat, made sure to look down into the footwell until they reached the city limits, but the retired Doctor waved at several of his former patients.

The elderly man had put on his best pre-war suit to mark the special occasion of his first house call in years: black shoes, dark-gray, high-waisted pants, a white shirt with starched collar and cuffs, a tight-fitting, two-tone vest, a dark-gray blazer jacket in a straight cut, and finally one of his favorite hats.

Coming up to the side road that would eventually take them to the Jensen farm, he activated the turning arrow and moved the huge steering wheel to the left. He cast a glance at Anne-Katrine and chuckled out loud. "Oh, pardon me for laughing, Miss Jensen. I can assure you I am not laughing at anything you've done. Seeing such a beautiful woman sitting to the right of me, a thought of taking my future wife on a romantic drive in my one-horse gig came to mind. Oh, it must have been in 1898 or so. The world was a far more peaceful place then, but that's another story for another day."

The doctor fell silent almost like he didn't want to tax his younger passenger's patience, but Anne-Katrine reached over and patted his arm. "Oh, please go on, Doctor Meincke. Have you been married for that long?"

"No. I needed to graduate and start my first practice before I could commit to the sacred marriage. We moved here in 1903 when it was still a boom town. At first, she worked for me as a nurse, but we got married in 1905. I had so much to do the first few years I had very little time for my darling wife. I do believe she only stayed with me because divorces were unheard of at the time. Alas, children formed the piece of the puzzle we never had time for."

"Not uncommon for young, professional couples."
"No," Meincke said and looked at Anne-Katrine's profile. "Speaking of which, Miss Jensen… I honestly believe you should talk to your sister-in-law about having a gynecological examination. Not having any children must be tearing at her soul, not to mention her husband's. After all, a woman only really blossoms when she becomes a mother, and Lydia isn't getting any younger. I know you are all very busy at the farm, but speaking from personal experience, you should take the time to raise a family. And besides, you'll need a little Jensen who can take over one day."

'If you only knew the truth,' Anne-Katrine thought, licking her lips. 'If we could only tell you the truth… but how would you react? Would you curse us and walk away, or would you accept and embrace us for who we really are? We'll never know.' - "I promise I'll speak to Lydia, Doctor Meincke," she said and looked down at her hands.

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Cresting the last of the small hills before they returned to the farm, Anne-Katrine was kicked in the gut by a mule. A dark-gray German truck carrying a full platoon of troops was parked outside the Jensen farm. She stared in wide-eyed terror at the truck and the soldiers who all wore battle helmets and carried rifles.

Her mouth became bone dry and she couldn't produce one drop of saliva to moisten it. "Doctor… please drive faster," she croaked, grabbing hold of the dashboard with both hands.

E.S. Meincke's ruddy face scrunched up into a dark mask of worry which made the impressive whiskers stand out even more. Nodding, he stepped on the throttle, and the increase in power made the old Ford A pick up speed.

The car had barely come to a standstill behind the German vehicle when Anne-Katrine flung open the door and jumped down onto the hard-packed dirt. She stared at the troops atop the truck with a heart that thumped so hard in her chest it was nearly thunderous. The soldiers all wore SS-runes on their collars.

Gulping down a bitter surge, she stormed through the gate and into the courtyard, not thinking about anything but the fates of Lydia and the others. She came to an abrupt halt when she spotted a VW Kübelwagen staff car parked near the entrance to the farmhouse.

An officer clad in dark-gray and wearing shiny, long-legged boots leaned against the car's door in a casual stance. The uniform gave him away at once: It was Obersturmbannführer Heinrich Wittenfeldt. The man from the SS was smoking a cigarette but threw it away when he locked eyes with Anne-Katrine. Smiling coldly, he reached up and put a couple of fingers to the shade of his cap that was on crooked like most of the SS veterans preferred it. "We meet again, Miss Jensen," he said and pushed himself off the Kübelwagen. "I must say, what a lovely, quaint farm you have here. Such old-fashioned rural romanticism. Straight out of a nineteenth-century landscape painting. You even have an old pump-well. Red, of course… I'm impressed."

"What's your business here, Herr Obersturmbannführer?" Anne-Katrine croaked although her throat was drier than sandpaper. There was no sight of Lydia, Arthur or Poul anywhere, and it
made her knees knock. The garage barn where the airmen was kept appeared undisturbed, but she deliberately didn't look at it. She forced her disobedient legs to move ahead to close the distance between herself and the man from the SS.

"We're searching for deserters. A cowardly group of *Wehrmacht* soldiers who chose to become traitors. Such a foolish notion, don't you agree, Miss Jensen? Soldiers shouldn't flee but fight. Fight to the death if necessary."

"I wouldn't know, Herr *Obersturmbannführer*. I'm not a soldier."

"Ha, of course not. You're a woman, after all," Wittenfeldt said and came to a stop too close for Anne-Katrine's comfort.

His aftershave tore at her nostrils, but she refused to back down or even look away. Up close, it was plainly evident the man's eyes were as cold as the grave. They held no warmth or even humanity; they simply stared at her expecting her to yield like everyone else had done since he had first put on the uniform. Anne-Katrine would do no such thing.

Wittenfeldt cast a cool glance around the courtyard but didn't seem to find anything worth exploring. He took a step away from Anne-Katrine and folded his hands behind his back. Nodding, he strolled around the woman who was as tall as he was. "But you're a proud woman, Miss Jensen. That was difficult to miss at the luncheon last week. I must admit you fascinate me. Merely a woman, yet willing to stand up to a high-ranking, highly respected member of the Schutzstaffel, unlike the spineless coward Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann. I sense a kinship in you, as a matter of fact. Perhaps not on a political level, but certainly on a personal level. You see, standing up to a figure of authority is what set me onto this path. Our pride is what drives us. Personal pride. National pride. Am I right?"

"Perhaps so, Herr *Obersturmbannführer*."

"Oh, I know I am. So... the deserters. You wouldn't happen to have seen any, would you, Miss Jensen?"

"I wouldn't know what to look for, Herr *Obersturmbannführer*. There are German soldiers everywhere."

"True. But these soldiers are cowards. Unshaven, uniforms in disarray, most likely unarmed. Most likely hungry since they know they can't get too close to society or they'll be spotted," Wittenfeldt said and moved away from Anne-Katrine. Grunting, he came to a stop and spun around on his heel. "That's why I thought of you and your farm. You have food here, and if you wanted to, you could hide an entire platoon of cowards in your barn there."

"I won't have anything to do with German soldiers, Herr *Obersturmbannführer*."

Wittenfeldt chuckled coldly. "Ha! I believe you, Miss Jensen. Very well. If I order my men to search the farm, they won't find any deserters...?"
"None."

"Mmmm."

"Herr Obersturmbannführer," Anne-Katrine turned around to once again look the officer in the eye. The delay before the cold man answered caused her stomach to clench so violently she had never experienced anything like it. Her heart was already performing a frantic tap-dance, but her heart rate grew further when she didn't get an answer. Wittenfeldt smiled at her; a smile that reminded her of the way a badger would look a second before it would bury its fangs in your flesh.

"They're inside. Your sister-in-law kindly informed me you weren't here, so I ordered them to wait in the kitchen until you returned. Why they haven't come out yet, I can't say. Perhaps they dislike the company," Wittenfeldt said with a casual shrug. He grunted and moved back to the Kübelwagen.

"May I see them?"

"But of course. Neither of you are under arrest." He opened the low door and moved to get in, but kept standing with one boot up in the car. "Miss Jensen, you know what will happen to you and your family if I find anything untoward here, don't you?"

A brief moment of worry raced across Anne-Katrine's face. It hadn't been enough for Wittenfeldt to notice it, but she clenched her jaw to stop it from happening again. She couldn't do anything about the brick of fear she had in her gut. "I do. You'll kill us all," she said in a voice that was appropriately strangled for the subject.

"And I won't even flinch when I pull the trigger," Wittenfeldt said and got into the front seat of the Volkswagen. He pushed the driver's shoulder and pointed through the windscreen. Moments later, the car started, and the two men drove out of the courtyard. On his way past Anne-Katrine, the Obersturmbannführer saluted her by putting a couple of fingers to the shade of his uniform cap.

Anne-Katrine tracked the Kübelwagen with her eyes until it had gone through the gate and left their farm with the troop-carrying truck in tow. "Neither will I… you rotten bastard," she mumbled.

As the tension slowly left her, raw fear bubbled to the surface in its stead. It formed the vanguard of a tidal wave that she needed to get rid of at once. Clenching her jaw, she ran around the corner of the cowshed and deposited the contents of her stomach onto the dunghill.

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Anne-Katrine leaned forward with her hands on her knees to get her equilibrium back after the rough incident. Panting, she swept a few damp strands of hair out of her eyes to be a little more
presentable for the person belonging to the footsteps she could hear moving closer behind her. "Go away, Arthur," she croaked in a raw voice.

"No, it's me, love," Lydia whispered. "I've brought you some water... in a dipper. Here, give me your right hand."

Anne-Katrine reached behind her and took the dipper. After rinsing her mouth and splashing some cold water in her face, she drank several gulps to compensate for what she had dumped on the dunghill. "Thank you... my God, I've never been so frightened in my life. I thought he had already found the airmen... I thought he had already killed you."

"Come," Lydia said and tugged at Anne-Katrine's arm. "Come, love, the others can't see us... I need to feel you so badly..."

"So do I," Anne-Katrine croaked and turned around. Not unexpectedly, Lydia's eyes were red from crying. Both women sighed deeply and pulled each other close. Reconnecting, they rocked back and forth while they held on tight. "Did he hurt you?" she croaked once they separated.

"No. He never laid a finger on any of us. Nor did his men."

"Good..."

Lydia sighed and shook her head despondently. "I was so afraid, love... you thought we had been killed... well... I thought he was here to tell us that you had been arrested... or worse. Thank God none of it happened."

"Yes... Lydia, we can't have the airmen here. We can't even wait for sunset," Anne-Katrine said and caressed Lydia's cheeks to be certain she was really there and not just some ghost summoned by the fear that had raced through her. "Wittenfeldt is no fool. As soon as the wreckage is found, he'll put two and two together and come here to search for them... and if he finds them in the barn, he'll take us as well. He's a raving fanatic... I saw it in his eyes. There's no soul left at all in there."

"I... I agree... we need to try to call Ernst Mehlborg again. Oh, it was so unfortunate you couldn't reach him this morning... if we still can't get in touch with him, maybe... maybe we should move them out ourselves? Perhaps we could drive them deep into the woods... or something?"

Anne-Katrine pulled her lips back in a worried grimace. "Not until we've run out of options, love. I could perhaps try to call Erik Kvantorp... in any case, I won't risk your life as well."

Lydia opened her mouth to complain, but an inappropriately cheerful honk-honk from the horn on Doctor Meincke's old Ford A echoed around the courtyard as the softly-sprung car danced about on the uneven cobblestones. Instead of complaining, she moved up on tip-toes and placed a quick kiss on Anne-Katrine's lips. "Can we please take the conversation away from the dunghill? I'd like to be able to breathe soon..."
"All right," Anne-Katrine said with a raw, throaty chuckle. She put a hand on her partner's shoulder and guided her back out onto the courtyard.

Arthur and Poul Nedergaard had already come out of the farmhouse and were talking to the Doctor in hushed tones with dark, somber looks on their faces.

"Love," Lydia said for Anne-Katrine's ears only. "I'll make some Coffee Substitute and find a bottle of the good biesk. I think we can all do with a dram."

"I agree. Do you need help?"

"No, thank you." Lydia smiled at her partner before she walked back to the entrance and disappeared inside.

While the men continued to speak, Anne-Katrine stepped up onto the running board of the Ford A and grabbed her bicycle. It took her a while longer to get it down than it had to put it up onto the back seat - it didn't help that her arms were like rubber. She wheeled it over the uneven cobblestones until she reached the sliding door to the garage. Moving it aside, she was pleased that Poul's work with the oil can had helped. It moved far more freely after being serviced, and she took full advantage of that by keeping a firm grip on the bicycle while she opened the door. If she didn't, her knocking knees would cause her to fall.

With the bicycle safely parked, she shuffled down to the other end of the garage barn to the spot where the hidden staircase was located. She furrowed her brow when she realized that the floor was covered in straws from the many pieces of hay that had fluttered down through the cracks in the ceiling. "We'll need to sweep the floor… God, that would have given them away at once," she mumbled as she went over to the wall and pulled the rope.

The staircase came down to the bottom stop, but not a sound was heard from above. "Hello? It's Anne-Katrine," she said in English. Her voice was but a hoarse whisper although the Germans were long gone.

'We're still here,' the disembodied voice of Flight Officer Hamish MacKendrick said.

"I'm coming up."

'All right…'

Anne-Katrine climbed the staircase until she was upstairs. The Flight Officer had his service revolver trained on her, but he put it away when he saw she was alone. She had expected it, but it was still a worrying experience to look into a black muzzle pointed straight at her. She smirked and shuffled over to sit down on a straw bale next to Sergeant Parkes. "The Germans left," she said in English.

Hamish MacKendrick grunted and buttoned the flap on the holster. "Were they looking for us?"
"No. Deserters. Don't think your wreck is found yet."

"It was the bloody SS, mate," Sergeant Parkes said, nodding towards the far wall of the hayloft. "We watched 'em through the cracks in the boards."

"You spoke quite extensively to the officer, Miss Jensen. What could you possibly have to talk about for so long?" MacKendrick said in a voice that didn't hold the Scot's usual warmth. He narrowed his eyes and studied Anne-Katrine's face closely almost like he was gauging her loyalties.

Anne-Katrine sighed and reached up to rub her face which was still clammy from the vomiting. Being reminded of the threats issued by Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt made her stomach churn all over again. "He was threatening me and my family. He likes to hear himself talk, I think. But he's a dangerous man. He will be back. You can't stay," she said in English, looking at both her foreign guests.

"Bloody hell," Parkes grumbled, but MacKendrick waved his hand at his colleague.

"Miss Jensen is right, Sergeant. The safe house has been compromised. Do you know how to get in touch with the resistance so they can get us back to England?"

Anne-Katrine nodded. "I have a contact… but he didn't answer when I called him earlier. I try again in a little while."

"Bloody hell!" Parkes croaked, grimacing so broadly Anne-Katrine could see he was missing one of his molars. "If the bloody Jerries have put the tongs on the bloody resistance contact, we're well and truly stuffed like a pair o' bloody prize turkeys, mate!"

Anne-Katrine had no clue what the Australian was saying, so she looked at Hamish MacKendrick with a face that resembled a question mark.

MacKendrick chuckled and reached over to pat Anne-Katrine's knee. "He's worried, lassie. And so am I, for that matter."

"Oh… of course. Well, I try again soon," Anne-Katrine said and shot the men reassuring glances. "By the way, the old man in the old car is the doctor here to take a look at Sergeant Parkes' fingers."

"That old cracker?" Parkes said with a snort. "Oi! Can he even climb the bloody staircase, mate?"

Anne-Katrine chuckled and got up. "We will see in a while. Do you still only want hot water?" - a pair of identical nods proved that MacKendrick and Parkes still didn't feel like experimenting with the Coffee Substitute or the odd tea leaves.

_**_*_*_*
Getting Doctor Meincke up into the hayloft hadn't been as difficult as feared. Getting the elderly man back down into the garage barn proved to be a larger operation than crossing the Rhine, or even D-Day, had been.

Everyone was involved in helping E.S. Meincke down, one slow, fumbling step at a time. Sergeant Parkes' broken fingers meant he couldn't help, but he provided plenty of utterances of "Bloody hell!" and "Bugger me crooked!" when the situation called for it.

Finally down on the ground, Doctor Meincke dabbed his flushed forehead with a lavender-laced handkerchief. He had shed his jacket and his vest in the process, but he had kept his favorite hat atop his white locks. "Oh dear," he croaked, taking off his metal-frame spectacles to wipe the lenses that had misted up from the exertion. "Oh dear… this was almost too much for an old man. Nurse Petersen, I must-"

Lydia smiled and leaned in towards her old employer. "My last name is Jensen now, Doctor Meincke," she said as she kept a firm grip on the elderly man's arm.

"Oh… but of course. Nurse Jensen, I must commend you for the excellent work on Sergeant Parkes' fingers. I couldn't have done it better myself. Well done!"

"Thank you very much, Doctor Meincke," Lydia said and performed a curtsey. "And now… would you care to join us in the kitchen for some tobacco, a cup of Coffee Substitute and a little dram?"

Meincke's face lit up like a sun, and he put out his arm at once. "I say, that's the best offer I've had from a woman this side of my fortieth birthday. Don't mind if I do, thank you!"

Arthur and Poul Nedergaard briefly exchanged weary glances before they each took one of the elderly Doctor's arms to assist him out of the barn and across the uneven cobblestones - that too took some time.

Meanwhile, Lydia stayed behind in the barn and slid over to help Anne-Katrine seal the staircase to the hayloft. It had never been a cumbersome task - all they had to do to close it from the ground was to pull on the rope and lock the spring mechanism - but it had turned into one. With the unusual amount of use the lock had been exposed to, it had failed. Now, Anne-Katrine needed to crawl up onto two boards that connected the support pillars. Balancing sixty centimeters up in the air with one foot on each board, she could just barely push the staircase upwards enough for MacKendrick to grab it and secure the locking mechanism from the other end.

Before Anne-Katrine closed it completely, she moved her head into a spot where the Flight Officer could see her. "I call my contact now. I'll come out and explain to you," she said in English.

"Very good, lassie. We shall wait for it."
"Won't be long… I hope," Anne-Katrine said through clenched teeth; the added strain on her lower back from the horrendous working position sapped her of her last ounces of energy. With a groan, she pushed the staircase up until MacKendrick took it the rest of the way.

Jumping down from the boards, Anne-Katrine dusted off her hands and pressed them to her lower back. Moaning under her breath, she got ready to go back to the farmhouse, but she barely had time to put a foot to the floor before she was bodily assaulted by a blonde whirlwind. She and Lydia hugged for a little while before the shorter woman leaned her head against her sweetheart's chest.

"This has been a day I'll remember for a long, long time…" Lydia said in a voice that was muffled by Anne-Katrine's shirt.

"So will I. Actually… I'd like to forget it." Anne-Katrine chuckled and pulled Lydia even closer to her chest. "What was that you said about inviting us over for coffee and a smoke?"

Lydia nodded into the shirt before she pulled back. She kept a firm grip on Anne-Katrine's hands just to be safe. "Mmmm. And a dram too if you wish."

"One of my bottles of bjesk?"

"Mmmm!"

"I think I better hold off the potent spirits for now," Anne-Katrine said and pressed a hand to her stomach. "But never mind. Come on, I can smell the Coffee Substitute already."

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The mood was joyful around the kitchen table after the second round of bjesk. Doctor Meincke had declined the second drink on grounds of driving home, but Poul, Arthur and even Lydia had needed a new shot of home-made cranberry snaps to calm their frazzled nerves after the many frights of the day.

Anne-Katrine didn't have time for any of that. She was out in the hallway, leaning against the sideboard with a mug of Coffee Substitute in one hand, the horn for the old-fashioned telephone in the other and a lit Powhattan between her lips. "Birthe, it's me again… still nothing?" she said, shuffling around to find a better spot.

'I'm afraid not, Anne-Katrine. Apollo three-one-nine still doesn't answer. But it's ringing.'

"All right. Thank you, Birthe. I'll… oh, I'll try again in a little while."

'You're welcome, Anne-Katrine. Goodbye.'

"Bye," Anne-Katrine said and hung up. The ash needed to be knocked off, so she put down the mug and tapped a finger on the pitiful excuse for a cigarette until the gray tip released into an
ashtray that she had put there for that very purpose. Sighing slowly and deeply, she shuffled back into the kitchen.

She kept standing at the doorjamb to observe the four people at the table. The doctor was talking about inviting everybody home to his villa for stinging nettle-tea and barley pastries whenever they were in town, but that was less important for the time being.

The kick of the *bjesk* had given Arthur and Poul red blotches on their cheeks, but they were nothing compared to those gracing Lydia's face, ears, neck and everywhere else - the woman was simply flushed from head to toe.

A sly smile creased Anne-Katrine's lips. When Lydia was in such a state, she became even more touchy-feely than she was regularly. *'It's too bad we can't exploit it,'* Anne-Katrine thought, letting her eyes glide slowly down Lydia's shapely body. *'We both need to wind down and let go after the night and day we've had.'*

Her thoughts were interrupted by the telephone ringing. Putting down the mug of Coffee Substitute on the kitchen table, she strode back to the wall-mounted telephone and picked up the horn. "The Jensen farm, Anne-Katrine Jensen speaking," she said into the mouthpiece.

*'Anne-Katrine, it's Birthe again. I have a caller for you. It's Elektra one-one-two.'*

"Oh? I have no idea who that is. Go right ahead," Anne-Katrine said and stubbed out the Powhattan in the ashtray so she didn't have to think about that as well.

*'Here's the caller now. Bye, Anne-Katrine.'*

"Bye again, Birthe," Anne-Katrine said and listened to the regular series of clicks and hisses. She couldn't quite make out if Birthe was still on the line, so she decided on the spot to moderate her messages no matter who the caller would turn out to be. "Hello?"

*'Hello, sweet Gertrude,'* Ernst Mehlborg's characteristic voice said at the other end of the line.

Hearing the familiar voice, Anne-Katrine rubbed her brow and let out a long sigh of relief.

*'It's your Uncle Leo. How are you, my child? It's been far too long since we've spoken. Oh, I've had such a problem with rats. Would you believe it, I suddenly had several fat, dark-gray rats running around in my apartment. I had to relocate in a hurry!'*

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face. Mehlborg's coded message meant that he had been visited by the Germans, and it only added more fuel to the fire of worry that burned brightly in her gut. "Oh no, Uncle Leo… how terrible! I've had pests too… though not quite that persistent. I showed them the door and they left on their own, can you believe that?"

*'I believe anything you say, sweet Gertrude.'*
The conversation attracted the attention of Lydia who came out to stand in the doorway in the exact same place Anne-Katrine had been in only moments earlier. Anne-Katrine offered her sweetheart an Okay-sign and the flushed Lydia replied with a smile and a wink.

Anne-Katrine chuckled and returned to the telephone. "Oh, but you really must come over and see my two new house pets, Uncle Leo. They're so fine. One is a Scotch Terrier and the other is a wire-haired sheep dog. But I can't provide for them any longer… not with all the rats that are running around these days."

'Oh, that is too bad… do you want me to come over and take them off your hands?'

"Yes, please… if you can…?"

'I certainly can, sweet Gertrude. I've written it down so I know what to bring. I'll be there a little later on. All right?'

"Absolutely. We'll be waiting with bated breaths. Goodbye, Uncle Leo," Anne-Katrine said and turned around so she could put the horn back on the hook.

'Goodbye, sweet Gertrude.'

She tapped the hook a couple of times and placed the horn back on the telephone. "Sweet Gertrude," she mumbled under her breath. "I think the Sergeant is enjoying these charades a little too much…"

With that out of the way, she shuffled into the kitchen and made a beeline for the pale-blue metal coffee pot. It still held a good portion of Coffee Substitute that she poured into her mug on top of the old, dark-brown liquid. It didn't improve the taste, but at least it was warm.

Sipping from the mug, she made eye contact with her partner who asked her a silent question about the caller. Anne-Katrine simply mouthed Mehlborg Is Coming.

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**INTERLUDE**

Tension grew once more among the members of the Jensen household as the hours went by with no sign of Ernst Mehlborg. Doctor Meincke left at half past two so he could be home for his regular tea time of three o'clock. His wife had promised to bake him a rum cake, and he wouldn't miss that for the world.

Three o'clock became four o'clock, then five, then five thirty. Feeling as nervous as a cat in a rocking chair factory, Anne-Katrine had shuffled behind the farmhouse where she observed
Lydia tended to her vegetable patch. Even the sight of her dearest humming to herself as she rested on her knees and plucked the weed from the carrots couldn't calm her down.

Anne-Katrine stood with her hands behind her back and bobbed up and down on the balls of her feet. The Powhattan that hung from the corner of her mouth was the fourth one in the last hour alone.

Lydia chuckled and leaned back on her thighs. She cast a sideways glance at the other woman who seemed three meters tall from her vantage point down on the ground. Sweeping a few strands of hair up under her headscarf, she leaned forward again and continued to groom the carrot patch. "Love, did you tidy up the cold storage cellar like you said you would?"

"Yes."

"Did you sweep the courtyard again?"

"Yes."

"Huh. I see," Lydia said and leaned back on her thighs again. "Oh, that's right, the screw holding the-"

"I tightened it."

"Oh." Lydia shrugged and put her tools and her gardening gloves into a reed basket. Getting up, she picked up the basket and strolled over to her lover. "I know one thing you haven't done enough of today… and that's kissing me. We've had the day from hell… one that I don't want repeated any time soon, thank you very much. I think we've both earned a kiss. Don't you?"

Talking about it instead of doing it was a nonsense, so Anne-Katrine removed the cigarette and leaned down to claim her sweetheart's lips in a nice, loving kiss. When they separated, they smiled at each other and let the tip of their nose brush against that of their partner's.

"I wish we could go to bed right now and make love 'til dawn," Anne-Katrine said and let out a sigh that proved how much she was fed up with the world intruding upon them.

Lydia smiled and reached up to caress Anne-Katrine's jaw. "I know. Let's hope we'll get that opportunity soon."

The sound of a distant truck engine reached Anne-Katrine's ears and made her pull back from her dearest. It wasn't one of the German trucks, they were all too new to sound like the one that approached them. Nodding, she put her Powhattan back in her mouth and gave Lydia's shoulders a little squeeze. "I think that's Mehlborg now. We'll soon be home safe, sweetheart."

A flash of worry spread rapidly over Lydia's fair features. "Please don't say things like that, love… there's no need to tempt fate."
"True. I'm sorry. Love you," Anne-Katrine said with a wink.

"Love you too. Go on, tend to your old Sergeant. I need to wash and peel the potatoes, the carrots and the onions. We're going to have vegetable stew today."

Anne-Katrine had already set off down the length of the farmhouse, but she came to a stop and looked back over her shoulder. "Oh… no meat?"

"It's meatless Wednesday, silly. Did you forget which day it was?"

"Yeah…" Anne-Katrine said with a shrug. "It feels like this bloody day has lasted a whole month already… and it's not even dusk yet."

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The truck that came down the final hill did indeed belong to the former Sergeant of the Royal Danish Army, Ernst Viggo Mehlborg. He honked his horn twice when Anne-Katrine stepped out of the gate and waved at her old brother-in-arms.

Another man sat next to Mehlborg in the cab, but Anne-Katrine couldn't recognize who it was until the truck got closer. It turned out to be none other than Erik Hartvig Kvantorp, the Staff Sergeant from the Infantry Academy in Sønderborg.

The truck had barely come to a halt outside the gate - it was too wide to fit through the narrow passage - before Erik jumped down from the cab and strolled around the front of the truck. The two years that had gone by since Anne-Katrine had seen him last hadn't affected him too much. He still had a hawkish nose and a pronounced facial bone structure, and his hair was still slicked back in the same style. He wore the bog-standard outfit of the day laborers to blend in with his rural surroundings: clog-boots, coarse, dark-brown pants, a pale-tan shirt and a black vest.

"Anne-Katrine!" he cried and put out his hand at once.

"Hello, Erik," Anne-Katrine said and gave the hand a strong shake. "You're keeping healthy, I see?"

"I am indeed. And so are you, goodness me," Erik Hartvig said and broke out in a broad, toothy grin as he let his eyes roam up and down Anne-Katrine's shape. "Oh, but what's that… still no wedding band on your finger? Tsk, tsk, Anne-Katrine… my offer stands, you know," he continued, buffing his fingernails on his vest.

"Ah, yes. I wasn't interested then, and I'm not interested now. Hello again, Sergeant," she said and once more put out her hand when Mehlborg had jumped down from the cab holding a suitcase.

"Jensen," the dour, perpetually po-faced Ernst Viggo Mehlborg said as he shook Anne-Katrine's hand. Like his companion, he was dressed as a typical day laborer.
Unlike his companion, however, the years had begun to put their mark on the former Sergeant's face. Now thirty-eight, a fine pattern of crow's feet had begun to form on the outside of his eyes, and a few gray hairs had appeared at his temples - the rest of his square, bulldog-like frame was still the same, though. As always, he wasted no time on niceties but went straight down to business. "You said over the telephone you had been visited by the Germans. Who, when and why?"

Anne-Katrine chuckled over Mehlborg's directness, but did her best to answer his questions. "It was a platoon of the SS at lunch time. They were looking for deserters... or rather, Obersturmbannführer Heinrich Wittenfeldt said they were, but it could be smoke and mirrors. They didn't do anything except try to intimidate us. Well, they did in fact intimidate us... that's why I called you again."

"All right. We have clothes and forged identification papers for the two airmen. Where are they?"

"Up in the hayloft," Anne-Katrine said and pointed over her shoulder. "Flight Officer Hamish MacKendrick, who's a Scotsman, and Sergeant Craig Parkes who's from Australia."

"I see," Mehlborg said and strode through the gate in his characteristic military gait. Anne-Katrine and Kvantorpe spun around and had to resort to jogging behind the Sergeant to keep up with his fast pace. "Jensen, did they crash land or bail out? And did they sustain any injuries?"

"Crashed. The remains of their Mosquito is still out on my meadow. The Germans haven't found the wreckage yet. The Australian broke nearly all his fingers but my sister-in-law set them. She's a qualified nurse, you know."

"I see. Where to?"

"To your right, Sergeant. Through the sliding door," Anne-Katrine said and upped her tempo to beat Mehlborg to the barn door.

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The floorboards of the hayloft creaked and groaned dangerously under the weight of four large men and an equally large woman. Lydia and Arthur, who stood underneath the retractable staircase to assist Craig Parkes on his descent, beat a hasty retreat to safer grounds in case the entire hayloft would come crashing down.

Hunched over but standing akimbo, Mehlborg eyed his creations: MacKendrick and Parkes were now dressed in regular Danish clothes fit for a day laborer. Clogs, coarse pants, vests, shirts, short jackets, flat caps, the works.

Mehlborg had been prepared for any eventuality, so the forged identification papers he had given the airmen carried grainy, smudgy photos of people who bore enough of a passing resemblance to the two foreigners to fool all but the most pedantic of the Germans.
The names proved they were now Jens Hansen and Hans Jensen. MacKendrick and Parkes looked at each other and let out a few chuckles at the similarity of the names. "Mate, how do you people tell each other apart here?" Parkes said, guffawing at the names. "Everybody's got the same bloody names… there must be a million blokes called bloody Jens Hansen or Hans Jensen here. Apart from my folks, I don't know anybody called Parkes."

"We also got a million Jens Jensens and Hans Hansens. What can I say… we're all one big tribe," Anne-Katrine said in English with a grin on her face.

Chuckling out loud, Flight Officer MacKendrick closed the last button in his pants and turned to face his Australian colleague. "You probably shouldn't visit Scotland, Sergeant. We have hundreds if not thousands of people with the same name up there… the clans, you see."

"I better stick to bloody Australia, then," Craig said as he looked down the steep staircase. "How the bloody hell did I ever get up that bloody thing last night?"

"We carried you," Anne-Katrine said with a shrug.

"You better carry me down too, mate… it's either that or a bloody swan dive, but then you might as well get a broom and sweep me up."

Anne-Katrine smirked at the Sergeant's odd humor, but she nodded and put out her strong hands. "We carry you down…" she said in English before she switched to Danish. "Lydia, Arthur? Are you ready down there? The Flight Officer and Sergeant Mehlborg are coming first, then Sergeant Parkes… I'll be down last, holding his arms."

'We're ready for all of you, Sis!' Arthur said from somewhere out of sight.

"They're ready," Anne-Katrine said in English. The look on Parkes' face showed that he wasn't too pleased with the situation.

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It took several minutes for the five strong women and men to get Sergeant Parkes down the steep staircase, but they managed to get him onto the floor of the garage barn in one piece and without bumping into anything even once.

"Oi, bloody well done, mates," Craig croaked with sweat pouring from his brow. As he looked back up the staircase, a shiver broke out on his body that he tried his best to shake off. "It's been a barnstormer, but there's a limit to even an Aussie's patience. I'm off, but thanks a bundle for powdering my nappy, mate."

Lydia cocked her head and leaned in towards Anne-Katrine. "What's he actually saying? It doesn't sound like real English to me…"
"I'm afraid I can't tell you... I only understand every other word or so," Anne-Katrine said and gave Lydia's shoulders a little squeeze.

"Oh... I thought it was just me..."

"Miss Jensen... lassie," Flight Officer MacKendrick said and put out his hand. When Anne-Katrine reached out to shake it, he pulled her in for a brief hug. "Thank you for all you've done for us. We're eternally grateful for your support. It was a stroke of luck to land here... had we come down closer to the town, we might have been on a train headed for Stalag Luft by now. Once again, thank you. And thank you, Mrs. Jensen... and you, Mr. Jensen."

Lydia got the gist of the message and curtseyed to their guest. Arthur didn't bow but settled for shaking hands with MacKendrick and nodding at Parkes.

While Erik Kvantorp led Flight Officer MacKendrick and Sergeant Parkes out to the truck, Mehlborg pulled Anne-Katrine aside. The two strong-minded people strolled over to the chicken coop and took position by the mesh fence. "Jensen, the situation in town is getting out of hand, even beyond the mess with the arriving SS units. Have you been near one of the schools or the garrison itself lately?"

"No. I was in town earlier today, but only at the square. There were so many gray uniforms I didn't know where to look. Why?"

"German refugees," Mehlborg said with a deep sigh. "Lice-infested, disease-ridden German refugees wearing nothing but tattered rags. Hundreds of them. They've come from the provinces in the east that have now been overrun by the Soviet armies. They're everywhere... both schools have been commandeered to act as refugee camps, as have the police station, the old movie theater, parts of the municipal hospital and the bloody public swimming bath! They've even brought diseases like the measles, dysentery and tuberculosis with them!"

Anne-Katrine was taken aback by the agitation carried by the usually so unflappable Mehlborg. It was clear to see the situation bothered him, but if it was connected to the plight of the refugees, or simply the refugees themselves was hard to decipher.

With the two airmen safely out in the truck, Lydia came over to her partner and the Sergeant. She hooked her arm inside Anne-Katrine's which she felt would look perfectly acceptable for sisters-in-law given the unusual circumstances. It also gave her a rare opportunity to hold onto her sweetheart in the company of others. "Who have?" she said, just catching the tail end of the discussion.

"German refugees, Lydia. They've invaded the town," Anne-Katrine said somberly.

"Oh, those poor people... Sergeant Mehlborg, is there any way we can help them?"

Mehlborg shook his head. "No, Mrs. Jensen. The refugees are kept strictly separated from the local population. There's a blanket ban in place against any form of fraternization."
"Oh, that must be horrible…" Lydia said, giving Anne-Katrine's arm a little squeeze.

Anne-Katrine furrowed her brow. She would never speak out against anything Lydia had said if they weren't alone, but the seemingly innocent comments grated severely on her good mood. "Well…" she said after thinking long and hard about her answer. "If the Germans hadn't willingly let themselves be seduced by that oh-so-nice Mister Hitler, none of it would have happened, Lydia."

"Well… perhaps so… but still. They're human beings. Plenty of women and children, I presume?" The question was aimed at Mehlborg who nodded affirmatively. "Anne-Katrine, if the situation was reversed, wouldn't you be desperate for help? Of course you would."

Anne-Katrine sighed and pulled Lydia closer to signal that it was a good time to stop the talk before it could evolve into something else - and 'something else' was the absolute last thing she needed after the horrific day they had been through.

"Well, we better be off," Mehlborg said and reached out to shake Lydia and Anne-Katrine's hands. "Jensen, I'm not going to tell you where we're going. Suffice to say Kvantorp or I will be in touch in case there's a development… either on a national or a personal level. Similarly, if you have news, just call Elektra one-one-two. That's my new phone number. Like the old one, it's a fake that Birthe will know how to process."

"Elektra one-one-two… noted, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said as she shook the hand offered to her. "I hope you'll get safely to wherever you're going. Once our cows are back in their shed, we'll milk them… and then we'll make it an early night."

"Not too early, Jensen," Mehlborg said in a rumbling voice. "You should always listen to the news broadcasts from the BBC. The evening one is on at seven or seven thirty, the late one at ten o'clock sharp."

"Ten o'clock is far too late for us farmers, I'm afraid," Anne-Katrine said with a grin. As a response, Mehlborg let out a sound that could be perceived as a chuckle. They nodded at each other before the former Sergeant spun around on his heel and strode back out of the courtyard.

When they were alone, Lydia turned around and slipped her arms around Anne-Katrine's waist. She moved in for a little hug before she took a half-step back and locked eyes with her partner. "Why didn't you want to talk about the refugees, love? Surely it's not because they're Germans…?"

"Sweetie, please… I'm far too tired to talk about that now," Anne-Katrine said and leaned down to place a small kiss on Lydia's lips. "Can't it wait until tomorrow?"

Lydia briefly scrunched up her face, but let it go. Instead, she leaned in to rest her head on Anne-Katrine's soft chest. "I suppose it can," she said in a muffled voice.

*
CHAPTER 4

Saturday, April 28th, 1945.

Their old adversary, the heavy morning mist, had made an unwelcome return. The sounds of harmonic cowbells and random calls of "Yah!" were the first pointers that Anne-Katrine and Arthur were leading their livestock onto the meadow at five in the morning after having milked them. Little after little, gray shadows broke through the patch of fog and formed into creatures of the two or four-legged kind.

It was too soon for Poul Nedergaard to have come to work, and Lydia was at home preparing the oatmeal, so the twelve cows were only minded by two people. Everybody strolled across the meadow until they arrived at a juicy section that hadn't been too damaged by the crashed Mosquito. Hundreds of pieces of debris were still scattered over the back half of the field, and most of them were too big to do anything about.

Shivering, Anne-Katrine wrapped her overcoat closer around her body. The barrel of her hunting rifle stood up in the air at her right shoulder like a dormant chimney. "It's almost the first of May… and it's still bloody freezing in the morning when the fog rolls in…" As she spoke, a plume of steam escaped her mouth to underline her words.

Arthur mirrored his sister and snuggled further down in his doublet. "All we can do is to wait for the sun to burn through the layer of fog… it shouldn't be too long," he said, trying to peek up at the pale disc suspended in the sky. The sun hadn't traveled very far into the heavens yet, but the previous days had all been warm and bright, so chances were the pattern would be repeated.

"Let's hope so," Anne-Katrine mumbled. The lead cow was reluctant to head into the damp, misty conditions, so she had to persuade it by clapping its hind quarters.

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Once the cows had been left to their own devices, Anne-Katrine and Arthur walked back across the meadow. They came to a stop at the huge wing of the downed fighter-bomber from the Royal Air Force.

"You know," Arthur said and gave the wooden frame a kick with the tip of his clog-boot, "I can't fathom that it hasn't been spotted yet. I mean… look at it," he continued, making a sweeping gesture with his hand at the deep rut in the field that led down to the crushed remains of the fuselage. The hulk still stood there like a beached whale. "It's all over the bleedin' meadow!"

Anne-Katrine grunted and shuffled back and forth to remain warm. "Mmmm. I have no clue, no clue whatsoever what we should do to it. It would take us a month to pick up all the pieces… and where should we put them? I suppose we could set it alight-"
"Won't work, Sis. Everything is wood and canvas save for a few bits and bobs like the engines. It would create a column of smoke a kilometer high. They'd be able to see it from across the bloody country!"

"True," Anne-Katrine said and fell silent. Shrugging, she turned around with the intention of leaving the wreckage to simmer for another few days. The fog had begun to swirl around at the edges, meaning the heavy patch was about to lift or at least grow less dense.

She set off strolling back to the fence, but movement to her far left made her stop and look towards the edge of the forest some five hundred meters away. The blackbirds and gray sparrows weren't singing, but they rarely did when the fog was low. She let her blue orbs sweep slowly along the edge of the trees, but whatever the cause had been of the movement she had seen in her peripheral vision, it didn't return. "Arthur, did you see something odd just now? Over by the-

That's how far Anne-Katrine got before a small unit of German soldiers broke through the trees and came towards them.

"Oh, bloody hell!" she growled, swinging her rifle off her shoulder and hunching over. "Arthur! Arthur! Get over here at once!"

Her brother had still been standing at the wing, but he hurried over to Anne-Katrine's position when he heard her frantic voice. "I'm here… what the blazes is going on, Sis?"

"Germans. A small platoon… by the trees," Anne-Katrine said, pointing with her left hand while she held the rifle ready with her right.

"Dammit… at five o'clock in the bleedin' morning?!"

"I wish I had brought my binoculars," Anne-Katrine growled, wrapping the rifle's leather strap around her arm. Quickly looking down, she searched for a spot on the meadow that wasn't occupied by a piece of the wreckage - or worse, a cow patty. When she had found a safe spot, she got down on her stomach and aimed the rifle at the soldiers who were still waiting at the trees.

"It's bad enough you have your rifle! It's against the German law!"

Grunting, Anne-Katrine moved the weapon from left to right in a sweeping arc to survey the situation. "Never mind that now, Arthur," she said without looking up.

"Oh, Sis… what are you doing? We can't fight a bloody platoon of Germans!" Arthur said hoarsely, staring at his sister's face that was set in stone. She didn't answer at once, so he got down next to her.

"When they spot the wreckage, they'll come for us no matter what. You know that. Perhaps we can even out the odds."
"Even out the odds… did you eat a can of spinach over night, Popeye? This is insane!" He put a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it off at once.

Anne-Katrine cast a brief glance at her brother before she looked down the barrel of her rifle. "Don't disturb my aim. I know it's insane, but do you have any better ideas? We'll be up to our armpits in trouble as soon as they come any closer. Maybe I can scare them off with a shot across their bows…"

Arthur understood that continuing to argue with his sister when she was in that kind of mood was a waste of everyone's time, so he pressed himself down into the grass which was still damp from the fog.

The activity at the line of trees looked somewhat disorderly, but Anne-Katrine kept aiming at the soldier at the head of the small group. She didn't have a scope on the hunting rifle so everything was too far away to see any details, though still within range. Years earlier, she had shot a deer that was further away than the men, so she knew she'd be able to strike a killing blow if she had to.

She counted four, five, six soldiers coming out of the trees wearing their regular dark-gray uniforms, long-legged boots and leather harnesses. The latter meant they were carrying infantry kits or backpacks. One of the men wore a camouflaged waterproof cape and a rifle. Something did strike her as odd, though - none of the men wore battle helmets or even the regulatory garrison caps.

Trying to breathe evenly - which wasn't easy since her heart insisted on beating a polka - she followed the lead soldier down the barrel of the gun. She zoned everything else out of her mind; just the rifle and the man in the fore sight existed in her world.

The soldiers closed to three hundred meters. They didn't seem to be following a plan but wandered around aimlessly looking for something; not all looked down at the ground. Anne-Katrine knew the 'something' had to be the wreckage of the Mosquito, and she could see the first man in line was getting close enough to spot the first pieces of debris. She loosened her trigger finger to make it less likely to jerk.

"What if they're the deserters the Nazi bastard was looking for?" Arthur whispered hoarsely into Anne-Katrine's ear.

She kept quiet, but the thought made her furrow her brow. 'Well…some of the things would be consistent with deserters…no battle helmets…they're not following a search pattern…I can't see an officer among them…only one of them has a rifle…and they all seem pretty young for a dawn patrol.'

Licking her lips, she relaxed her firing stance for long enough to look at her brother. "You may be right, Arthur… but how will we find out? By standing up and saying Hello There…?"

"I have a white hankie in my pocket…"
Anne-Katrine chuckled and shook her head. "This isn't the Katzenjammer Kids, you know. If they're hostile, they'll blow you to hell."

Arthur reached into his pocket and dug out the handkerchief. He clenched it in his fist, but soon relaxed it to let it flap in the wind. "I'm willing to take that risk. Wish me luck."

"You have it. Good luck, Arthur."

"Thanks," her brother said and slowly got to his feet. Soon, he waved the white handkerchief like crazy so the German soldiers could see it.

Anne-Katrine kept aiming the hunting rifle at the soldiers, but she let out a long, highly puzzled grunt when they didn't react like she had expected. Every single one of them threw his hands in the air and stepped forward, even the one carrying the rifle. "What the blazes?" she mumbled, staring hard at the men to see if they were merely playing a trick on Arthur.

The soldiers had moved close enough for her to see that they were nothing but teenagers with ill-fitting uniforms that were filthy and sprinkled with leaves and little twigs like they had been sleeping in the rough for a while. Although they all wore the standard issue leather harnesses, none wore infantry kits or even regular backpacks.

The man with the waterproof cape and the rifle held the weapon high above his head to make sure nobody on the potential battlefield got the wrong idea. He seemed older than the others - though still only perhaps twenty - and he was most likely the one who acted as the spokesman.

Anne-Katrine grunted. She knew she had to make a decision soon. Arthur was still moving towards the soldiers with the handkerchief flying proudly, and the Germans still had their arms in the air. "They're wearing gray, but are those young boys really my enemies?" she mumbled under her breath. Sighing, she decided they weren't.

With a thumping heart, she sat up and moved back onto her thighs so the others could see her. The young men came to jerking stops at the sight of the hunting rifle. She chewed nervously on her cheek as she clambered to her feet and lowered the rifle, although she didn't swing it over her shoulder yet.

Her overcoat, vest and shirt were soaked to the skin from lying flat on the damp grass, but the heat produced by the adrenaline that pumped through her system offset that - and besides, she didn't have time for niggling little things like a wet tummy in the present situation.

Moving slowly, she edged towards the soldiers. She tried to rack her brain for any German phrases she could use, but could only remember a few scattered words that she wasn't sure would help or hinder her attempt.

Ultimately, she had to go with the truth. "Hallo. Wir sprecken nix Deutsch. Don't speak German… anyone of you speak Danish? Uh… sprecken eine von Ihnen Dänisch?"
Everybody shook their heads. "Oh wonderful," Anne-Katrice mumbled and rubbed her brow with her free hand. "Arthur, what should we do?"

"You're asking me?"

"Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking," Anne-Katrice mumbled in a monotone. Furrowing her brow, she studied the young men who weren't yet old enough to shave.

They all had the typical Aryan exterior of fair skin, pale-blond hair and bluish-gray eyes, but it didn't take but half a glance for Anne-Katrice to see that none of them belonged to the ranks of the fanatical like Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt. Most had soft faces with friendly eyes, and one or two even looked like they had been crying at some point.

Their ill-fitting uniforms were pitiful to look at, and a good example of the complete state of disarray that ruled inside the once so all-conquering Nazi war machine.

The armed man in the camouflage cape stepped forward but kept his rifle high above his head. Up close, it was confirmed that he was a couple of years older than the others, and his cape had fluttered aside to reveal a Volkssturm badge on his chest - 'Volkssturm' meaning 'People's Storm,' and it was the name given to the desperate, last-ditch attempts at creating new battalions by using young boys and ill old men.

His angular, slightly more hard-edged face gave Anne-Katrice a different sort of vibe compared to those of the teenagers, but his voice was friendly enough when he spoke: "Gnädige Frau, haben Sie etwas Brot und Wasser übrig?"

"Brot and wasser? That's got to mean bread and water, right?" Anne-Katrice said to Arthur who could only shrug. "Ja. Ja, we have Brot und Wasser."

The affirmative answer sent a ripple of positive murmurs through the small platoon, and Anne-Katrice couldn't help but grimace at their enthusiastic response. "Come with us," she said, pointing at the farmhouse in the distance. "Kommen Sie mit uns… zu… uh… nach Hause. Wir haben-

"Das können wir nicht, gnädige Frau. Können Sie es stattdessen rausbringen? In unserer Lage können wir nicht lange an einem Ort bleiben. Wenn uns die SS findet, sind wir so gut wie tot."

Anne-Katrice stopped and scrunched up her face. "What did he say, Arthur? Something about… uh… no, I don't want to guess. I only understood 'SS'…"

"I don't speak German, Sis! How often do I have to tell you?" Arthur said and let out a groan that matched his statement.

"Bloody hell… all right. We need help… would you mind fetching Lydia? Please? Pretty quickly too if you don't mind."
Arthur groaned again but lowered his handkerchief. "Yeah, yeah, all right. I won't be long."

"Thank you."

The sight of Arthur legging it across the meadow headed for the farmhouse made the group of young soldiers visibly nervous. They began to shoot each other sideways glances like they weren't sure if the running man was going for help, or going to call the authorities.

When the man with the camouflaged waterproof cape lowered his rifle down to his waist, Anne-Katrine raised hers at once, but the soldier shook his head and swung the rifle over the shoulder with the barrel pointed straight up. Since none of the others were armed, Anne-Katrine followed the example set by the young man.

Grunting, she pointed in the direction Arthur had run. "My brother… mein bruder ist nach hause… oh, what the blazes is 'running' called in German… gegangen um seine Frau zu holen. Sie kann sprechen- sie spricht Deutsch. She speaks German. You understand? Verstehen Sie?"

"Mehr oder weniger, ja. Nicht wahr, Jungs?" the man with the rifle said. The others nodded and grunted. Smiling nervously, he put out his hand. "Gefreiter Karl Zirner, vierzigstes Battalion, erste Schützenkompanie, gnädige Frau."

"How do you do, Karl. Ich bin Anne-Katrine Jensen," she said and shook the man's hand. The curious irony of the fact that she was shaking hands with a uniformed member of the enemy wasn't lost on her. Had they met five years previously, she could have had Karl Zirner in the crosshairs of her machine gun at the fork in the road or at the square. Had they met two years previously, she could have met his glance across the crushed stones or at one of the overturned box cars at the railway sabotage - but it was 1945. Nazi-Germany had all but collapsed and all the evil regime could do was to send young, beardless boys to fight their battles. "Pleased to meet you… uh… froh Sie… Ihnen zu treffen. Or something."

The young men chuckled at the horribly broken German, but it was clear they caught the gist of the message.

Anne-Katrine pulled back and assumed a neutral stance while she waited for Arthur and Lydia to return. Though Arthur could hardly have reached the farmhouse yet, she was already eyeing the path onto the meadow with mounting anxiousness.

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Five minutes later, Lydia and Arthur came hurrying back up the hard-packed path that led to the meadow. Lydia was wearing ankle boots and her regular dark-tan working dress with a white apron tied around her waist, and she had wrapped a red-and-white headscarf around her fair locks so they wouldn't be affected by the damp conditions.

As soon as Lydia came into sight, she waved at Anne-Katrine and the others. It brought a cheer from the soldiers, but it was most likely caused by the sight of the picnic basket carried by the
fair lady rather than the sight of the fair lady herself. When Lydia reached the damp grass, she
pulled up in her long dress to be able to run more freely.

"Morgen, Jungs!" she cried when she was close enough for the young soldiers to hear - 'good
morning, boys.'

The soldiers mumbled a response, too preoccupied with the potential contents of the picnic
basket to think of anything else.

Lydia hurriedly put the reed basket down on the damp grass and opened the lid. "Ich bin Lydia
Jensen und ich habe 'ne Schwarzbrot für Sie," she said and produced the item she had mentioned,
a loaf of rye bread, "Und eine Plockwurst und ein Glas Griebenschmalz… Sie können nicht
einfach die Plockwurst ohne Schmalz nehmen. Oh, und zwei Flaschen Johannisbeersaft," she
continued, holding up a whole, smoked baloney, a jar of salted lard with cracklings, and two
bottles of home-made blackcurrant juice.

The cheer that rose from the young men sounded like one made when the home team scored a
goal in a soccer match. Lydia smiled at them all, including her partner. "Haben Sie ein Messer,
um das Brot und die Wurst zu schneiden?" - 'Do you have a knife to slice the bread and the
sausage?'

Everybody shook their head. "Wir haben keine Messer oder Werkzeug," Gefreiter Zirner said,
"wir haben alle unsere Waffen und die Ausrüstung weggeworfen, damit die Briten nicht denken,
wir sind feindlich gesinnt. Wenn wir sie finden, möchten wir uns ergeben, damit wir endlich
nach Hause gehen können."

Anne-Katrine leaned in and put a hand on Lydia's shoulder. "I didn't get all of that… what did he
say?"

"They threw away their weapons and equipment so the British forces wouldn't think they were
trying to attack them. They want to surrender to them so they can go home."

"Oh… good thinking. Gutes denken!" Anne-Katrine said, but the message didn't quite get across
as Gefreiter Zirner's forehead gained a whole set of puzzled furrows. "Never mind," Anne-
Katrine continued, looking down into the picnic basket instead.

"Ich habe ein Messer… Sie können es behalten," Lydia said and reached into the reed basket.
She produced one of their old kitchen knives that they had intended to throw away - it wasn't
particularly sharp, but it still worked, and now the Germans could have it.

"Vielen Dank, Fräulein Jensen," Gefreiter Zirner said and took the knife. He knelt down at once
and used the lid of the basket as a support to slice the bread and the baloney. Once he had a pile
of slices, he took the salted lard and spread it out on the bread.
While the German soldier was busy with the food, Lydia slid over to Anne-Katrine's side and put an arm around the taller woman's waist. She didn't say anything, but she didn't have to. The look of love in her eyes said more than an entire essay could.

"Sis, I think I'll head back to the farmhouse," Arthur said and pointed over his shoulder. "I need some dry clothes… and looking at all this food makes me so damn hungry. I need my oatmeal and my mug of Coffee Substitute pretty badly. Is that all right with you?"

"Of course, Arthur. Go right ahead. Lydia and I will be back once our… well, our new guests have moved on," Anne-Katrine said with a smile.

They watched in silence as the men ate; they all wolfed down the slices of rye with lard, cracklings and smoked baloney like they hadn't had a solid meal for days, which they probably hadn't. The two bottles of blackcurrant juice went around the group until they were both less than a third full. Everybody seemed to be enjoying the picnic, so Lydia stepped forward while she wiped her hands on her apron.

"Wo kommt Ihr alle her? Wie heißt Ihr?" - 'Where are you all from? And what are your names?'

The Gefreiter looked up while he chewed on a slice of sausage. "Gefreiter Karl Zirner, vierzigstes Battalion, erste Schützen-"

Lydia chuckled out loud; a warm, friendly sound that made all of the young men shoot longing glances at her. "Nein, ich meine Eure Heimatstädte. Wo kommt Ihr her?" - 'No, I meant your home towns. Where do you come from?'

"Ach so… wir sind alle aus Schleswig-Holstein. Eckernförde, Rendsburg, Bad Segeberg, Kiel, Cuxhaven und so. Ich komme aus Kiel. Das sind Gottfried Wahlberg, Klaus Erhardt, Jochen Gartzke, Maximilian Rosch und Jens Lüttmann," Karl said while pointing the knife at each of his fellow soldiers in rapid succession. "Wir nennen ihn 'den lütten Jens' weil er gerade erst fünfzehn geworden ist."

"Dann nehme ich mal an, Sie sind 'der alte Karl', nicht wahr?" Lydia said with a wink - 'I suppose you're called Old Karl, then?' The joke made the young soldiers laugh with her and call their Corporal by the new nickname - Karl didn't look like he appreciated it all that much, but he rolled with the joke.

"Jens?" Anne-Katrine echoed, looking at the young boy who was called Little Jens because he had only just turned fifteen. "How ironic. Three out of six of our supposed enemies have Danish names. Jens… Klaus… Karl."

"I know," Lydia said in Danish, looking up at her partner. "That's the insanity of war right there, isn't it?"

"Yes. I recognize some of the city names from recent articles in the Jutland Post," Anne-Katrine said somberly. "Quite a few of them have been bombed all to hell while these boys have
marched around in circles up here. They'll have nothing to return to. Maybe their families have been killed… and they won't know it until they get home. If that's even possible."

Lydia sought out Anne-Katrine's hands and gave them a little squeeze. "Dearest, would I be wrong in thinking that you've begun to look beyond the uniform…?"

Anne-Katrine chuckled and returned the squeeze. "Oh, well. I guess my time of the month is just around the corner. I always get so damn maudlin when the curse strikes."

"No, somehow I don't think it's that, love." The two women looked at each other. They couldn't often use terms of endearment when they were in the company of others, but since the present company couldn't speak a word of Danish, they were safe from prying ears.


"What did he say?" Anne-Katrine whispered out of the corner of her mouth.

"He thanked us for the delicious food… and they need to move on as they have a long way to go yet."

"Ah… thank you," Anne-Katrine said in Danish before she tried to communicate in German. "Ich wünsche Ihnen alle eine sichere… no, not sichere… dammit, how would a German say I wish you a safe voyage home?"

"Meine Freundin und ich wünschen Euch eine gute Heimreise," Lydia said and reached out to give Karl Zirner's hands a strong squeeze.

"Danke… das bedeutet uns viel." - 'Thank you… it means a lot to us.'

"Oh… 'gute Heimreise…' I wasn't even close. Hmmm, I need to remember that. Uh… auf wiederschauen," Anne-Katrine said and put out her hand.

The small platoon of youthful deserters all got on their feet and began to move south amid a flurry of waves and calls of "Auf wiedersehen." South was generally the direction of the border to the Reich - and the amassing British army - but they had nearly fifty kilometers ahead of them over undulating terrain with hostile forces in several different uniforms out to get them.

Anne-Katrine and Lydia watched the sorry group of young boys shuffle on before they turned around and strolled home to get breakfast, taking the opportunity to walk arm in arm for once.

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Tuesday, May 1st, 1945.
There was something in the air; an indescribable feeling of teetering on the brink of a major event that had the potential to change all their lives. It seemed the entire world held its breath, but what the reason for it could be was anyone's guess.

Spring had finally arrived, and the birds and the bees were out in full force. Blackbirds, gray sparrows, great tits and even swallows were jumping around in the bushes or racing across the skies in search for food for the little ones back home that had recently cracked their shells.

In the middle of all that splendor, Anne-Katrine sat on the staircase in front of the farmhouse pondering life and smoking a North Star cigarette. She had finally given up on the low-grade Powhattans, but the new brand with the Anglo-inspired name wasn't that much of an improvement - of course, neither were its competitors that all bore colorful names like Break, Shield, Victor, Rider and Princess.

She had already had to pick fluff off her tongue twice, and the taste left much to be desired. It said on the pack that the product contained tobacco, nicotine and tar, but she hadn't found either of the first two yet. An abundance of the third element could explain the peculiar taste, however.

The sky was blue, the sun was beating down strongly on the uneven cobblestones, the chicks in the coop were picking grain and clucking merrily, and although she had a list of chores longer than her arm that she needed to go through, she had no reason to be downcast - yet she was.

The pale-blue smoke trickled up from the tip of the North Star cigarette as Anne-Katrine sat with her elbow resting on her knee and her head propped up on her arm. She glanced around the courtyard that looked like it always had. The sliding door to the garage barn was open, and metallic sounds filtered out into the air; sounds produced by Arthur who was rummaging through all the old junk. Now and then, a larger clunk was heard, meaning he had dropped - or thrown - something on the floor.

Behind Anne-Katrine, the front door opened and Poul Nedergaard stepped out. She shuffled to the side to give the man with the club foot and the orthopedic boot better room to get down.

Once he was down on the uneven cobblestones, he pushed his flat cap back from his forehead to scratch his brow. "It's a mighty odd day today, Miss Jensen," he said in his rural dialect.

"Mmmm."

"Almost like God is trying to tell us something."

"Well, perhaps so," Anne-Katrine said and took a deep puff from her cigarette. "I didn't know you were a man of faith, Poul?" As she spoke, the pale-blue smoke trickled out of her mouth.

"I'm not, but there's so much evil in the world today that we need some grounding. Some ballast for the soul," he said and pulled his flat cap back down. "Well, that's what I think, anyway."
"I agree with you," Anne-Katrine said, nodding solemnly. 'Though not from the Holy Scriptures. The ballast for my soul comes from Lydia. If I didn't have her, I'd be lost,' she continued inwardly.

"Do you want me to sweep the courtyard?"

"Yes please, Poul. Oh, I better get a move on as well," Anne-Katrine said and got to her feet. "I need to fix the wheelbarrow… and clean the troughs… and muck out the gutter on the farmhouse. The last time it rained, it was overflowing in two places."

Poul chuckled and shuffled over to the barn to salvage the broom before Arthur could get to it and throw it out with the trash.

Anne-Katrine took a deep, final puff of the North Star and threw the butt down on the courtyard so Poul would have something to sweep up. She was on her way over to the cowshed to begin working on the faulty wheelbarrow when the front door opened again.

This time it was Lydia who whistled for Anne-Katrine and waved her back to her. All the while, she glanced at Poul's retreating form, but their hired hand hadn't noticed their little interaction. "Anne-Katrine… I need a hand with something," she said with an alluring smile on her face.

The smile alone was cause enough for Anne-Katrine to spin around and stomp back across the uneven cobblestones in her clog-boots. At the door, she shed the boots and let them rest on the rack before she stepped inside.

Anne-Katrine had barely made it into the sitting room to the left of the hallway before Lydia shut the door with her rear and fell into the taller woman's arms. "Oh! Hello, sweetie," Anne-Katrine said with a cheeky grin creasing her lips. That was all she had time to say before her lips were claimed by a strawberry-blonde who seemed reluctant to let go.

They kissed and nibbled at each other's lips for a while before they separated and gave each other a little breathing space. "So beautiful… so vibrant," Anne-Katrine whispered, caressing Lydia's brow and cheeks. "What a nice surprise. Thank you… I needed that. Is there any particular reason for-"

"No. A kiss doesn't need a reason," Lydia whispered, already getting up on tip-toes for the next round.

"True."

Once more their lips mingled, and they were pleased to find out the second time was as sweet as the first. Lydia chuckled huskily and snuck her hand inside Anne-Katrine's vest to give the long torso a little tender attention. "Love, have you noticed there's something odd in the air today? It's almost like-"
"Mother Nature is holding her breath. I know," Anne-Katrine said and leaned down to place a tiny kiss on Lydia's hair. "I have no clue what it could be, but it's... odd. Yeah."

"Do you... do you ever think about the fate of the deserters we met? Those poor, young boys?" Lydia said and pulled back from her partner. She shuffled over to one of the chairs at the smoking table and removed a cross-stitch embroidery before she sat down.

Anne-Katrine nodded and followed Lydia over to the table. She sat down on the other chair and reached out at once. When their hands connected, she let out a grunt. "I do. Unless they've been caught by the SS, I think they must have reached the British lines by now. But... honestly... I think I would have stayed here."

"Not to fight, surely!"

"No, no, no, of course not," Anne-Katrine said and shook her head. "To hide in the woods. Six men could live there for weeks if they played their cards right. Come out every now and then to get food... or steal it if they had to... and if they could find a steady source of water, they'd be all right."

"That's probably true, love. Speaking of being all right, I sometimes wonder what happened to MacKendrick and Parkes as well. Sergeant Mehlborg has never told us though he said he would..."

"Actually, he said he would inform us if anything happened, so... anyway, it's hard to say what's been going on. They may still be in town for all we know... or they could be back in England," Anne-Katrine said and gave Lydia's hand another squeeze.

They were content with smiling at each other for a little while before Anne-Katrine gave Lydia's hand a final squeeze. She was reluctant to leave but she had to, so she eventually rose from the chair. "Much as I would like to, I can't sit here all day. What's on your agenda today, sweetie?"

"Oh, I think I'll bake a sponge cake. Later on, I'll put a Cumberland sausage in the large pot and let it simmer for a few hours."

Anne-Katrine grinned and pulled Lydia up and into a new hug. "Sounds wonderful. Love you," she husked, kissing the enticing lips while she still had time.

"Do you love me because of my Cumberland sausages?" Lydia said with a wink once they separated.

"I love you because of your everything, dearest. I thought you knew that by now...?"

Lydia grinned saucily and pulled her partner down for a proper see-you-later kiss. "I do."

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The day went by as expected for everyone at the farm. Poul Nedergaard was working on their old Triangel truck and Arthur was playing solitaire in the sitting room with the last of his beer from lunch. Lydia was out back at her vegetable patch tending to her various little projects, and Anne-Katrine had climbed five meters in the air and was balancing on an old, rusty ladder trying to get the farmhouse's gutter clean of moss.

Earlier in the day, she had fixed the wheelbarrow which hadn't been a major issue once she had discovered the cause of the wobbly wheel; then she had cleaned the troughs which had turned out to be a bit more problematic and had required a healthy amount of elbow grease - but those minor annoyances paled into insignificance compared to the gutter.

Flushed, cursing and swearing, Anne-Katrine used a petite shovel on a long shaft to scoop out the foul-smelling gunk that was more than a little reluctant to leave its comfy home. Again and again, she scooped up a shovel-ful and put the vile, dark-green substance into a wooden bucket that was hanging off a hook near the top rung of the ladder.

Even with her long arms and the extra-long shaft, she could only reach so far, so she often had to climb all the way down, move the ladder another three meters to the right and then climb all the way up again. By the eighth time she had done that, she was ready to throw it all away and move to Himmerland.

Just when she thought she had been through the worst, the long shaft broke in two which sent the petite shovel clanging down onto the cobblestones five meters below in the courtyard.

As a result, the vile, foul-smelling moss was deposited all over a small yet colorful flower patch at the foot of the well. The flowers had been yellow and orange, but were now mostly sickly green and dripping with stale water from the gutter. "Oh, terrific… Lydia is going to kill me," she mumbled, taking off her gloves so she could rub her weary face.

Before she had time to climb down to get started on the clean-up operation, a sound reached her ears that made her blood freeze over. She hadn't heard that sound up close for years in real life, but it was one that often intruded on her dreams and made them turn dark and frightening: jingling tank tracks.

She pulled her lips back in a nervous grimace and tried to shuffle around on the ladder. Looking behind her, out over the roof of the garage barn and onto the side road that led south, she could see a faint cloud of exhaust smoke that could only come from heavy vehicles such as tanks or large trucks.

The jingling sounds were soon joined by the humming of many truck engines, and it gave her an unwanted flashback to the time when she had been on the receiving end of a Panzer assault. She needed to see what was going on, so she began climbing down the ladder. She took it easy so she wouldn't trip and break her neck in the fall, but as soon as she was on the ground, she hurried across the courtyard and through the gate where she joined Poul Nedergaard at the side of the road.
Lydia soon came storming up behind Anne-Katrine and grabbed hold of her shirt. "Is it Monty? Is it the British? Have they finally come?" she said through a bout of frantic panting.

Anne-Katrine didn't answer at once. She stared at the huge, dark-gray tank that was at least twice the size of those she had crippled in the battle at the barber shop. Angular and ugly, the Panzer Mk. IV tank took up the entire width of the side road, and its tracks tore chunks out of the soft, grassy verges. The dreaded white crosses on the front and on the turret proved it was German. The black-clad commander stood out of the hatch in the turret to guide it along the narrow roads.

Worse still, none other than Obersturmbannführer Heinrich Wittenfeldt was driving at the head of the column in a VW Kübelwagen flying the SS-banner along with a regimental pennant. When the officer caught a glimpse of Anne-Katrine and Lydia, he put his fingers to his cap in a mock salute.

Lydia dug her strong fingers into Anne-Katrine's arm as her only response. When the Kübelwagen didn't stop, she let out a shocked gasp of relief.

The huge Panzer Mk. IV went through the easy left-hand turn and rumbled past the Jensen farm. Another Mk. IV followed it closely. Behind the two tanks, a row of covered Opel Blitz and Mercedes L3000 trucks were pulling four-wheeled carriages with vast 88mm cannons that could be used for anti-aircraft or anti-tank purposes. Another row of flatbed trucks came at the far end of the column carrying the gun crews and regular infantry. The tail was brought up by a motorcycle equipped with a Spandau machine gun on the sidecar.

"For the love of… that's an SS panzer group…" Anne-Katrine croaked, staring at the dark-gray hardware that drove past them at a steady forty kilometers an hour. "Bloody hell… they're really serious… Wittenfeldt, that insane fanatic is really serious about turning our little town into a battle zone! It'll be a slaughterhouse if they engage the British here!"

"But what can we do?" Lydia said through clenched teeth. Her face had lost all color and she looked to be on the brink of passing out. Clutching Anne-Katrine's shirt with such strength the fabric was nearly torn, her face told a horrid tale of keeling over if she let go.

"There isn't a bloody thing we can do! Nothing… nobody can go up against such a force with the weapons we have access to. Our pea shooters wouldn't even chip the bloody paint of those things," Anne-Katrine said and threw her hands in the air. "No… this needs a full-on armored assault… and we may just get it. All the way up and down the main road into town…"

Poul Nedergaard was still standing next to them with his flat cap in his hands. Sighing, he reached up to scratch his stubble. "Miss Jensen… I'm reminded of the day when you and I saw the German airplanes. The day you went to war," he said, shooting Anne-Katrine a despondent look.

"So am I, Poul. So am I. I need a dram… Lydia, do we have any bjesk left?"
"I think we do," Lydia croaked. She briefly looked up at her partner before she shuffled back through the gate with dragging steps.

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Supper was a somber affair. Seeing the SS Panzer group had hammered the point home that their little corner of Paradise could soon turn to a hell on earth if the mad men in uniform had their way.

Nobody spoke. The only sounds heard in the kitchen came from the stove that ticked and groaned from cooling off, and the occasional clang when a fork hit a plate. Everybody pushed their food around, even Lydia, who had spent all afternoon preparing the Cumberland sausage.

Anne-Katrine tried to smile at her partner to show that she enjoyed the hot meal, but the large amount of sausage, potatoes and gravy that she had left on her plate negated the effort. Sighing, she stopped pretending to eat and pushed the plate away.

To Anne-Katrine's left, Arthur mirrored his sister. "It was a delicious sausage, Lydia. Thank you for supper. I just wasn't particularly hungry…"

Lydia smiled at her husband before she returned to slicing off another piece of the sausage for herself. "You're welcome, Arthur. Did it perhaps need a touch of salt? I thought it did," she said, slicing it again and putting the smaller piece in her mouth. She chewed on it vigorously but it never seemed to go anywhere. Ultimately, she had to flush it down with a swig from her glass of water. She had reached her limit with that experience and pushed away the plate with a deep sigh.

Only Poul seemed to be unaffected by the day's events. He dug into his sausage with great aplomb and even sawed off another large piece since nobody else seemed to want it. Between chewing and wiping his lips on a napkin, he looked around at his tablemates but came to the conclusion that if they didn't want any, there was more for him. "Mrs. Jensen, it's a delicious sausage… could you perhaps save a piece for me for lunch tomorrow?"

"I certainly can, Poul," Lydia said with a tired chuckle. She glanced into the pot at the Cumberland sausage that had barely been touched. "It was supposed to be meatless Wednesday tomorrow, but it would be a criminal waste to throw it away, so… we're going to have it for supper tomorrow as well. And potato soup by the looks of it…"

Anne-Katrine nodded and folded up her napkin. Supper was as good as done, and all that remained was doing the dishes. She was about to get up when Lydia spoke in a small voice.

"Anne-Katrine… wait… before we leave the table, there's something I need to know. Should I pack? Do you think we'll be… God… forced out of our home? Or do you think we'll perhaps need to flee if the fighting starts?"
Anne-Katrine glanced at her brother and across the table at Poul Nedergaard. At that exact moment in time, she couldn't care less what the older hired hand thought about her, so she reached across the table and took Lydia's hands in her own. "There's no need to pack because we won't be going anywhere, Lydia."

"But... we might be caught in the middle of a real war..."

"If we do, you and Arthur can go north or east... perhaps to Als... Broager Land or somewhere equally remote. But I'll stay. This is my birthplace and I have no intention of leaving it behind."

It took a second or two for the words to filter through, but then Lydia clenched her jaw hard and shot her partner a dark glare. "Tell me," she said harshly in a voice that reached into the deepest register, "what good would it do to escape if you're not going with us? Tell me that, Anne-Katrine...? Will you forget your damn pride for once and open your eyes, woman!"

Arthur and Poul eyed each other cautiously, exchanging a silent message to stay far, far away from the heated conversation that was seemingly about to kick into high gear.

"Lydia-" Anne-Katrine tried, but she was cut off at once.

"No, let me speak! You saw the tanks this afternoon... you know how fanatical Wittenfeldt is... if he wishes, he can annihilate every living thing around here through that... that... scorched land or whatever-"

"Scorched Earth..."

"Yes, and you know he will! Either that or he's luring the British into a full-scale tank battle right here in our peaceful little world... you've seen the newsreels, how much do you think would be left of the town? Nothing but charred ruins, Anne-Katrine! And nothing but ruins out here, too! It would be insane to stay, Anne-Katrine, birthplace or not."

Anne-Katrine leaned back in her chair and let out a long, slow sigh. Closing her eyes, she ran her hands through her hair while she tried to collect her thoughts.

"Well, that's my cue," Poul said and got up from his chair in a hurry. He was followed immediately by Arthur who took the plates from the table and put them on the kitchen counter for the women to clean later. The two men quickly exited the kitchen and went out into the garage barn to be at a safe distance in case the sparks or the porcelain would start to fly.

Anne-Katrine was glad they were left alone because what she needed to say wasn't for everyone's ears. Sighing again, she leaned forward and took Lydia's hands in her own. "Dearest, this is going to shock you, but I need to say it. I love you from the bottom of my heart, you know that, but I won't leave, I can't leave. Everything you see here has been built by my grandfather. My father continued the tradition, and now it's my farm. I feel that I would betray my ancestors... my family if I ran away, regardless of the threat."
"But all of that is just… just…"

Anne-Katrine licked her lips and began to caress the back of Lydia's hands with her thumbs. "Three generations of my family have sat here in this kitchen, or in the sitting room, or in the Sunday dining room… the courtyard, the cellar, the cowshed, the barn… we walk where they walked and we still do the same things my grandfather did when he was our age and just starting out. The amount of blood, sweat and tears that was shed building this farm makes it impossible for me to leave."

"Love, I don't understand why bricks and mortar are more important than what we share…"

"It's… oh, you're my heart, Lydia, never think you're not… but the farm is my blood… my soul. That's just the way I am. There's nothing I can do to change that. But it doesn't make me love you any less, you must understand that. You must!"

"I love you too," Lydia croaked, locking eyes with the woman who was her wife in all but name. "But I don't love the farm the way you do. To me, this is just the place where we live. My heart… the love I feel in my heart is only connected to you… we could live in a palace or a mud hole for all I care… if we were together, I'd be the happiest woman on earth. I'm here because of you, Anne-Katrine, not the roof we live under."

Lydia pulled back from Anne-Katrine's touch and let out a long, slow sigh. "I'm glad this wretched day is coming to a close. I hate it when we argue. Hate it with a passion… you know why?"

"Well-"

"Because my heart always gives me such a kick in the chest when I raise my voice at you… I feel I'm being torn apart. I love you too much to argue with you, but-"

"But sometimes I'm just too bloody stubborn and proud for my own good?" Anne-Katrine said, shooting up from her chair. She was at her partner's side in an instant and pulled her in for a sweet, crushing hug.

Lydia chuckled into Anne-Katrine's strong arms. "Something like that, yes."

"I had an inkling it would be. I love you, Lydia Jensen. Please don't forget that."

"I won't forget that for a second. And I love you too."

"Good," Anne-Katrine said and rubbed her hands up and down Lydia's frame, "but please understand how I feel about this topic. It's very important to me."

"I respect your point of view, love… but I fear I still don't truly understand it. Oh… let's hope it'll never come to that. Let's hope calmer heads will prevail."
"Yes. C'mon, let's get the dishes done so we can listen to some dance music on the radio," Anne-Katrine said and leaned down to kiss Lydia on her temple. "According to the radio times, the State Broadcasting Service will be transmitting live from the Ritz in Copenhagen… after that, the early news from the BBC is on."

Lydia nodded and gave Anne-Katrine's strong arms a few loving strokes before she pushed her chair back to get on with the program.

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After doing the dishes in record time, they said goodbye to Poul who went home to his wife. While Anne-Katrine carried the cups and various trays into the sitting room for the evening soiree, Arthur turned on the radio that hid inside a shiny mahogany cabinet. Once it was on, he adjusted the wooden box so it lined up with the lacy place mat it stood on.

"Barley cookies or the new sponge cake?" Lydia said from the kitchen.

Anne-Katrine popped her head out of the sitting room and grinned at her partner. "Sponge cake, if you please!"

"I knew you'd say that…" Lydia said and took the cake out of the baking tin.

Moving back into the sitting room, Anne-Katrine distributed the cups, the dishes and the cutlery at the smoking table before she found the deck of cards they were going to use later on.

On the sideboard, the radio came alive, but the melodic tones that escaped the loudspeaker weren't upbeat big band music but a somber requiem of some kind. Anne-Katrine spun around and stared at Arthur who in turn went back to the radio to see if the dial had been set right.

"Hmmm… don't know what's wrong with it," he said with his nose almost stuck to the dial to see better. "It's set on the correct frequency, but… that can't be it. Perhaps a German jamming station?"

"No, I've heard one of those. They don't play music at all," Anne-Katrine said and shuffled over to the radio. She leaned down and stared at it next to her brother. No flashes of wisdom came to either of the two Jensens, so they both shrugged and shuffled back to the smoking table.

Two minutes later, Lydia came in with five slices of her freshly baked sponge cake on a tray. She came to a halt in the doorway and stared at the radio like her sweetheart had done only moments earlier. "What's that? Wasn't it supposed to be live from the Ritz?" Shrugging, she continued over to the smoking table and put down the tray.

"Well… yes," Anne-Katrine said, holding the newspaper. She ran her index finger down the column until it arrived at the proper program. "That's what it says here. I guess they must have changed their mind. Oh, well. We don't need the radio to have fun."
She shuffled over to the radio to turn it off, but Lydia stopped her by putting a hand on her arm. "No, wait… isn't that a requiem? Maybe someone important has died? Maybe King Christian?"

"Well… he's an old bloke… I guess that's possible," Anne-Katrine said and scratched her hair. "But I think they'd interrupt the somber music to give us an update… or something. Eh, what do I know."

"When does the BBC start transmitting?"

Arthur sat down at the smoking table and transferred the first slice of the sponge cake over to his own dish even before the Coffee Substitute was ready. He took the thickest slice, and it earned him a sharp glare from Anne-Katrine - he just shrugged; he had seen too many of those to give a damn. "In five minutes or so, Lydia. Give or take."

"Let's wait for it," Lydia said and led Anne-Katrine back to the table. "Sit down while I get the coffee pot."

"Yes, Mrs. Jensen," Anne-Katrine said, happy to have seen the end of their little tiff before it could evolve into something darker. She knew they still had to talk about their differences of opinion, but the time for that would be later, not now. Sighing, she reached for the second-thickest slice of the sponge cake before Arthur could snatch that as well.

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A handful of minutes later, Arthur had turned the dial to tune into the snippet of music from the Prince of Denmark's March that was used by the BBC as a way to identify the station. The airwaves were filled with cracks, hisses and electronic humming that came from the jamming stations that threatened to blank out the music, but the sound quality was soon rectified by Arthur fine-tuning the dial.

'This is London. BBC transmitting to Denmark,' the typically distinguished speaker said in Danish.

"Oh! We got it," Arthur said and pulled a footstool over next to the radio so he could react quickly in case the frequency would begin to wander. Anne-Katrine and Lydia turned around in their chairs but remained at the smoking table.

'We are transmitting on the nineteen meter band, on two frequencies on the thirty-one meter band, on the forty-one meter band and on the fifteen hundred meter band-'

Anne-Katrine chuckled out loud. "I've never understood why they say that every single bloomin' time they transmit… I mean, if we can hear the message, we already know where on the band they're transmitting, right?"
Lydia smiled and took a small sip from her cup of Coffee Substitute. While Anne-Katrine's attention was directed elsewhere, she cut off a small part of the second-to-last slice of sponge cake and moved it over to her own plate.

"First, we interrupt the regular service to bring you an important news flash from German radio. In a communiqué from the Führer's Headquarters in Berlin, official sources state that Adolf Hitler is dead. We repeat, Adolf Hitler is dead. Unconfirmed rumors from German sources claim that the Führer fell in combat against Russian troops that have reached the center of Berlin. We cannot verify these unconfirmed rumors, but in a communiqué from the Führer's Headquarters in Berlin, official sources state that Adolf Hitler is dead.'

"Well, I'll be a son of a bitch," Anne-Katrine said flatly, staring at the radio where the BBC speaker repeated the entire announcement before he continued with news from the British side of the battlefields. "This calls for a cigar and the fine port. Let me get it at once," she continued and jumped up from her chair.

Arthur didn't speak at all, and Lydia just sat there holding her long-forgotten cup of coffee. "That explains the requiem," she said after a while though Arthur was too preoccupied with his thoughts to listen.

Anne-Katrine soon came back with a chilled bottle of fine port that she had taken from the cold storage cellar. After she had put it on the smoking table, she strolled over to the sideboard underneath the radio and found a polished wooden humidor containing a clipper and a handful of high-quality pre-war cigars. She gave Arthur one and carried her own back to the table where she found a pair of ashtrays, her lighter and three glasses for the port.

The cork from the bottle of fine port came out with a *plopp*, and the chilled, tawny liquid soon filled the three glasses to the rim. "To Hitler's health! Long may he burn in hell!" she decreed and drank half the port in one, long sip.

Lydia took her own glass but kept her intake to a minimum.

Arthur and Anne-Katrine clipped the butts off their cigars and let the lighter caress the tips. Soon, the cigars were well-alight, and patches of pale-gray smoke wafted up towards the ceiling. "What a terrific end to such a peculiar day," Anne-Katrine said and inhaled the high-quality smoke. Breathing slowly, she made an O with her lips to let the smoke drift out of her mouth and into perfectly shaped smoke rings. "Lydia, do you want to try?" she said and held out the cigar.

"Oh God, no!" Lydia said and shook her head in horror. "I'll stick with the port and the sponge cake, if you don't mind. The smoke alone is enough to make my toes curl."

Anne-Katrine chuckled and reached over to muss her lover's arm. "Arthur and I won't mind if you step outside to get some fresh air on this lovely evening!"

"Why, thank you, dearest!" Lydia said with sarcasm dripping from every syllable. Winking, she took her glass of fine port and left the sitting room.
Anne-Katrine had barely had time to reach for the bottle of port to refill her empty glass before Lydia came blasting back into the room with an emphatic: "I can hear massive gunfire from the town!"

"Bloody hell! The garrison!" Anne-Katrine cried and bolted upright. She and Arthur quickly opened the window so they could see and hear for themselves. Though there were no visible flashes on the evening sky towards the west, the calm air reverberated with the sound of numerous weapons being discharged somewhere in the far distance. So far, only regular rifles and submachine guns had opened fire, not the 88mm cannons or the massive tanks Anne-Katrine and Lydia had seen drive past the farm.

Anne-Katrine shook her head in disgust. "Wittenfeldt's SS troops. They've run amuck," she said in a voice that trailed off into nothing.

A split second later, the telephone started ringing out in the hallway. "Oh, bloody hell! What now?" Anne-Katrine cried and stomped out to pick it up. She remembered too late that she had left her cigar behind at the table, but she didn't have time to go back for it. Instead, she waved at Lydia and pointed at the cigar so she could give it to her.

Whipping the horn off the hook, she put it to her ear at once. "This is Anne-Katrine Jensen. Birthe?" she said into the mouthpiece.

'Have you heard the latest?'

"Not now, Birthe, please… who's calling me?"

'Elektra one-one-two, Anne-Katrine… I'll connect you at once.'

"Thank you," Anne-Katrine said and leaned her buttocks against the sideboard underneath the telephone. At the same moment, Lydia came out with the cigar, holding it between her thumb and index finger an entire arm's length away from her. Anne-Katrine smiled and blew her sweetheart a kiss.

'Gertrude, this is Uncle Leo,' Mehlborg's characteristic voice said amid a cacophony of gunfire.

"Uncle Leo… I hope you're not too close to those fireworks," Anne-Katrine said with a worried look on her face.

'Yes and no. The bloody rats with the bloody runes are shooting at everything that moves over here. I'm calling you from the floor of my apartment. They've gone completely off their bloody rockers! There must be at least ten civilian casualties already…'

Anne-Katrine shook her head. "Oh, God… those rotten bastards," she mumbled away from the mouthpiece.

'I suspect you've heard the latest?'
'No! Stay the hell away, Gertrude! It's a witches' cauldron in here… and they're using burning hot lead. Did you listen to the entire broadcast?'

"We have, yes. Do you want me to come into town-"

'You should have. In the special bulletin at the end, they said that the carrier pigeons Niels sent them have arrived in good health and are safely back in their dovecote.'

"Uh… I suppose that's good news," Anne-Katrine said with a look of pure puzzlement on her face. "The carrier pigeons Niels sent… I don't have a clue-"

'I'll call you later once the cordite has cleared… don't go anywhere, Gertrude, you hear me?'

"I hear you loud and clear, Uncle Leo. All right, thank you for calling."

When the connection was broken, Anne-Katrine didn't want to spend time talking to Birthe, the telephone operator, so she tapped the hook a couple of times before she put the horn back on it. "The carrier pigeons Niels sent…?" she said and furrowed her brow.

She took a deep puff from the cigar, and the high-quality smoke seemed to do the trick. "Oh! Oh, the airmen! Bloody hell, I had forgotten all about them!" she said and jumped away from the sideboard. "Wonderful news for a change… Lydia! Arthur! I have some great news about Flight Officer MacKendrick and Sergeant Parkes!"

* *

CHAPTER 5

Thursday, May 3rd, 1945.

Thursday was market day and more civilians had taken to the streets of the town than it had seen for years. Because of the fair weather - pleasantly warm and sunny, and just the faintest breeze that ruffled the leaves on the trees and the feathers in the hats of the well-off ladies - people were strolling towards the square in droves.

The main road into town had been altered into a perverse obstacle course. Only two lanes out of the four were open, and for every fifty meters, makeshift road blocks with closed pillar boxes made up of hundreds of sandbags that were encapsulated in barbed wire forced the drivers to change lanes, thus sending everyone into a ceaseless, nauseating zig-zagging if they wanted to get closer to town.
Each pillar box was equipped with several rifles and an MG42 machine gun of the type that had earned the nickname 'the buzzsaw' because of its rapid rate of fire.

German soldiers from the Wehrmacht, the Field Police and a few men from the SS stood guard at the pillar boxes, seemingly ready to man the defensive positions in a matter of seconds if the orders to do so came. Everybody wore battle helmets and they had bayonets and hand grenades tucked under their belt. They wore full infantry kits on their backs containing shovels, water canteens, medical supplies and extra ammunition - in short, they were all in a state of high alert.

In the middle of all that, an old, dilapidated Triangel flatbed truck came puttering up the road, zig-zagging between the pillar boxes like all the other civilian vehicles - nearly all were horse-driven carriages because of the fuel shortage, but the Jensens had a permit to own and operate a heavy, motorized vehicle. The wood gas generator chose that exact moment to send out a cloud of white, foul-smelling smoke just to remind everyone of its existence.

Behind the wheel of the Triangel truck, Anne-Katrine cast weary glances at the machine guns and the soldiers manning them. She had tried being in the firing line of the rapid-fire weapons, and she never wanted to experience it again.

Lydia sat to Anne-Katrine's right. She had plenty to do with holding a tray of eggs in one hand and keeping the loose, flapping door shut with the other. "At least it's not raining this time," she mumbled, looking up at the roof of the cab through which she could see the blue sky. Down on the floor, she had three bars of butter wrapped in grease paper that she kept in place by having her feet on either side of the small bundle.

Arthur sat on the truck's bed, leaning against the rear of the cab while smoking one of the Powhattans that his sister had given up on. Now and then, he looked down at the German soldiers they went past.

They zigged, zagged, zigged again and zagged some more before they reached the final checkpoint set up at the last section of the main road into town, at the entrance to the square. The road turned left at that point and continued past the garrison, but that entire part of town was strictly off-limits for anybody but German personnel.

Both the huge Panzer IV tanks Anne-Katrine and Lydia had seen driving past the Jensen farm were parked on the square with their gun turrets pointed at the final checkpoint and thus the people who had to pass through there. The square's pavement hadn't been able to cope with the tracks of the multi-ton vehicles and had broken up into jagged pieces. One of the black-clad tank crews loitered about next to the large Panzer IV, but the other tank was idling as witnessed by the black haze that rose from the twin exhaust pipes at its rear.

Anne-Katrine handed her identification papers out of the window to a guard from the Field Police while Lydia did the same to another German policeman who had climbed the lower rung on the other side of the cab. Up on the flatbed, Arthur leaned over the railing to give his papers to the superior officer of the two lesser-ranked men at the doors.
No problems arose and they were allowed to carry on before long. Anne-Katrine activated the turning arrow and swung the old truck to the right, down the side street that would lead them to the parking spaces reserved for those selling goods at the market day. They had only made it two hundred meters down the street when they were forced to pull over by an Oberleutnant who stepped out into the truck's path with his arm held firmly in the air. "Oh, this is getting tedious," Anne-Katrine groaned, already reaching for her identification papers.

"Fräulein, Sie können hier nicht parken," the First Lieutenant said after he had opened the truck's door. "Die Straße ist reserviert für Militärfahrzeuge."

"What's he saying?" Anne-Katrine said, turning to Lydia to get the message translated.

"That we can't park here. It's reserved for army trucks."

"Bloody hell," Anne-Katrine mumbled, tapping the Triangel's broad steering wheel. "All right, ask him where we can park instead."

"I'll try," Lydia said in Danish before she put down the tray of eggs and leaned across her partner to address the officer. "Herr Offizier, wissen Sie, wo wir unseren Laster parken können?"

"Hier nicht. Weiterfahren… sofort!" the Oberleutnant barked and waved them on.

Lydia bumped back down into her own seat. "He wouldn't say… we need to move on at once. I think he means business, Anne-Katrine."

"All right, all right… bloody Germans," Anne-Katrine mumbled, fishing for a gear. She found first gear eventually and took off at an astonishing fifteen kilometers an hour - after all, there was no need to help a German by hurrying away.

They drove around the narrow side streets for a while until they came to the depressing conclusion that the whole trip been a waste of their time. There wasn't a single parking space that could accommodate the old, clumsy truck apart from the spots commandeered by the Germans for their own transports.

Lydia chewed nervously on her fingernails. The three bars of butter that were wrapped in grease paper were well-protected for the time being, but they wouldn't last indefinitely in the pleasant spring warmth. "How about… oh… how about the gravelly lot behind the Farmer's Trust Savings Bank?"

"Won't work, Lydia," Anne-Katrine said and shook her head slowly. "The Germans have laid claim to it as well. There's a motorcycle depot there."

"Oh…"
Up on the bed, Arthur tapped his knuckles on the roof of the cab which sent flakes of rust down onto the seats between the two women. "How about the fifteen or so parking spots behind the post office, Sis?" he said down through the cracks in the roof.

"They're off limits now, Arthur… they're behind barbed wire fences."

"Oh… you're right. Damn," Arthur said and bumped back down on the bed.

Anne-Katrine tapped the steering wheel impatiently while she tried to go over the town's geography in her head. She knew it like the back of her hand from living in the area for so long, but the Germans had made so many changes and had laid claim to so many free spots - and cordoned off others with kilometers of barbed wire - that she came up short. Every suitable spot she could think of had already been occupied by the people in dark-gray.

Lydia grunted and began to shuffle around on the seat like she wanted to climb down from the cab. "I do know one thing… I won't allow the good butter to go to waste. I'll take the three bars and the tray with our eggs and walk up to the square. I'm sure it won't take me long to find someone who wants to share a table. Don't say it's not all right because that's how it's going to be."

Chuckling, Anne-Katrine jumped down from the driver's seat and ran around the front of the truck. Once she was on the other side, she held the flapping door open while Lydia climbed down with the precious cargo. "Sounds like a good plan, dearest. Tell you what, you told me you had called the doctor to ask if we could come over after the market day, so while you conduct your business, Arthur and I will drive around again and cross over to Kong Frederiks Allé… that's the small street at the back of Doctor Meincke's villa. We'll meet you there."

"Oh… sure. Sure!"

"All right?"

"Certainly, love," Lydia said and reached out to put a finger on Anne-Katrine's arm - a finger was all she had available while holding the eggs and the butter. "Yes, I'll be there later on… hopefully with some change in my pocket. Please tell Doctor Meincke that I'd like a spoonful of sugar in my stinging nettle-tea if he has any."

"I shall. Good luck." Anne-Katrine glanced around the quiet street. They were alone which meant she could lean in and give Lydia a kiss on the temple without causing any narrow-minded citizens to suffer from acute moral queasiness.

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The journey to Doctor Meincke's villa proved to be a trek akin to the forty days in the wilderness. At one point, Anne-Katrine had to reverse four hundred meters back from a dead end street that hadn't been one the last time she had been there - on this visit, the street was blocked by sandbags, barbed wire and a small, yellow sign that warned passers-by of anti-tank mines.
It took them an eternity to cross over to Kong Frederiks Allé, and it didn't do any good for Anne-Katrine's mood or indeed her blood pressure. Arthur had transferred to the cab instead of sitting up on the flatbed, but he knew better than to speak to his sister when she had the characteristic white-and-red blotches on her cheeks and forehead.

The narrow alley behind the row of villas wasn't quite wide enough for the unwieldy truck, but Anne-Katrine had gone past the point of caring. She bumped the left-hand set of wheels up on the sidewalk and stayed there. Switching off the ignition, she let out a long, deep sigh. "Well… I could have lived without experiencing that…"

"Me too," Arthur said with a chuckle as he pushed open the flapping door and jumped down onto the street.

Anne-Katrine moved a little slower since her blood pressure had already gone through the roof - there simply wasn't room for further excitement in her life at that point in time. Sighing again, she climbed down from the cab and shut the door behind her.

Kong Frederiks Allé was part of a quiet, upscale neighborhood that had been built in the days when the town prospered in the early part of the twentieth century. To adhere to the wishes of the well-off people who had bought the villas before they had even been built, the architect and the master builders had created a row of unique, individually designed one and two-storey villas that not only fit with the times, but would remain elegant for decades to come.

Some of the villas had their facades turned towards Kong Frederiks Allé; others faced the square on the other side of the row of houses, but they all had gardens of varying sizes with plenty of picket fences, apple trees, flower beds and bird baths. Here and there, flagpoles had been erected in the back gardens, but they were all bare to follow the decree issued by the Germans.

Arthur strolled over to the garden gate and put his hands on the wooden frame. "Bourgeois heaven!" he said with a chuckle, making a sweeping gesture at the splendor.

"Don't knock it, Arthur… I'll bet you'd love to live here with that widow of yours," Anne-Katrine said and gave her brother a hip-check as she walked past him up the garden path.

"Yeah, yeah… haw, haw."

The rear entrance to Doctor Meincke's house was simply a dark-brown, wooden kitchen door between two windows that were protected by the compulsory black-out curtains, but the elderly man's wife had made sure the entrance was properly decorated by adding a white flower basket filled with red, yellow and deep-purple pansies underneath each of the two windows. The area around the door itself was remarkably free of knick-knacks, but the shiny brass door handle appeared to be an aftermarket product.

Before they knocked on the door, Anne-Katrine straightened her white shirt and plucked a few pieces of fluff off her beloved vest to be as presentable as possible for the doctor, but mostly for his wife. House guests shouldn't look nor act as uncouth peasants, even if they actually were -
thus, she had even decided on wearing a nice, pre-war pair of shoes instead of her regular boots. "For the love of... will you stand up straight and tuck in your shirt!" she admonished, fixing her brother's collar like he was five years old. "These are respectable people... we're not here to play dice and chug down beers!"

Arthur gave his sister an Evil Eye, but did what he had been told. When everything was in good order, he raised his hand intending to tap on the kitchen door, but Anne-Katrine beat him to it.

"I'll knock," she said and did so. "And take a step back from the door so Mrs. Meincke can see we're not peddlers or knife-grinders."

"Sis..." Arthur said in a voice that proved he had just about had it with keeping up appearances, "what the blazes has gone into you today? What's up with all this playing silly buggers when we're just out for a tea party?"

Nobody had come to the door yet, so Anne-Katrine had time to scrunch up her face and shoot her brother a dark glare. "Because Lydia is very fond of the old guy and the feeling is mutual, Arthur. I don't want to act like a damn bull in a china shop in front of the Doc's wife! It would cast a bad light on Lydia... so pipe the hell down."

Footsteps from the other side of the door meant they were about to be let in, so Anne-Katrine looked straight ahead and assumed her most winning smile. Arthur just grumbled.

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Before the stinging nettle-tea and the barley pastries could be brought into the sitting room for consumption, Doctor E.S. Meincke's wife Else-Marie brought in a tray heavily laden with a wide variety of tobacco: cigarettes, cheroots, cigars, exquisite blends for pipes, and even snuff.

Lydia - who had returned from the market day almost before Anne-Katrine and Arthur had moved into the sitting room - was already engaged in a lively trip down memory lane sitting next to the doctor's comfortable chair. She declined sampling the tobacco tray, but the other house guests all took what they wanted to smoke.

While Arthur took a Powhhattan and a Holger Danske cigarette - he stuck the latter behind his ear, much to his sister's visible annoyance - Anne-Katrine went straight for the North Stars. As Else-Marie moved the tray back to her husband so he could take some of his favorite tobacco blend for his pipe, Anne-Katrine couldn't help but study the woman who hadn't been anything like she had expected.

Anne-Katrine had imagined the wife of the doctor - who was in her late sixties - would be a severe battle axe in a habit-like dress and with a tight bun in the hair. In fact, Else-Marie Meincke was jovial and kind, and she was the owner of a pair of sparkling husky-gray eyes. Nearly as tall and as ruddy as her husband, she had her gray hair in a braided ponytail that almost reached down to her waist. She wore a bone-button, tan shirt with puff cuffs and a long, pleated skirt that alternated between deep and paler burgundy - in short, she looked gorgeous.
The two women looked at each other and exchanged smiles. "I must say, Mrs. Meincke… you certainly have a vast collection of knick-knacks here. Look at that mantelpiece!" Anne-Katrine said and put the North Star in her mouth. There were a lighter and matches on the tobacco tray, but she dug into her vest pocket to find her own. Leaning back on the sofa at the dormant fireplace, she lit up and watched the pale-blue smoke wafting towards the ceiling.

"I'm an avid collector, Miss Jensen. I have collected porcelain figurines since I was thirteen years old. I am simply enchanted by their colors and the filigree craftsmanship," Else-Marie said, once again smiling at their guests. Tucking in her skirt, she sat down in a chair underneath the window and folded her legs to the side like all ladies did.

Anne-Katrine glanced down at her own timber logs that weren't exactly folded to the side. She cleared her throat and tried to shuffle into a slightly less uncouth sitting position. Arthur chuckled at her, but she fixed that with an elbow in his side.

Lydia and Doctor Meincke were engaged in a lively conversation about a time when they had worked together to deliver a baby. Although Lydia sounded like she always did, Anne-Katrine zoomed in on an uncharacteristic frown that had found its way onto her sweetheart's forehead. The frown only came when Lydia was upset about something, but Anne-Katrine couldn't figure out what could have caused it in the present situation.

'It was already there when she joined us,' she thought, taking a puff from the North Star. 'Did anything happen at the market? She didn't mention any incidents, but… there's definitely a frown right there between her brows. Hate to see that.'

She held the North Star straight up so the ash wouldn't fall onto the plush carpet, but it was high time she did something about it. She was already getting up from the couch when Else-Marie flew up from her chair and handed her a porcelain ashtray. "Why, thank you very much, Mrs. Meincke," she said and knocked off the impressive, gray tip.

With the cigarette drama over, she could go back to studying Lydia's face. Their connection didn't fail to work, and Lydia's eyes slid over to lock onto Anne-Katrine's. A single look was enough for Anne-Katrine to realize that something had indeed happened at the vendor tables. 'Bloody hell… I should have stayed with her… she was probably pushed around by one of those bloody Germans… dammit!'

Since Else-Marie was already on her feet from delivering the ashtray, she performed a quick count of her guests before she moved into the kitchen to get the tea pot and the trays with the barley pastries.

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After the tea and the pastries had been consumed with great relish - the barley pastries had come straight out of the oven, and Anne-Katrine simply could not say no to hot pastries - Else-Marie wheeled in a playing table where the top was made of smooth, dark-green felt.
She put it near the middle of the sitting room and began moving chairs over to it so a good time could be had playing cards. "I thought we could play a hand of a new card game I read about in the Family Journal," she said as she placed the last of the four chairs at the table. "It's an English game called Crazy Eights. Supposedly, it's all the rage over there right now. It's very similar to Olsen… except not quite."

Anne-Katrine chuckled and got up from the couch. "Well, that does sound intriguing. Can't say I've ever heard of Crazy Eights, but there's a first for everything. Arthur?"

"I'm in," he said and followed his sister to the table. After a game of chairs, he sat down diagonally opposite Anne-Katrine, to the left of the chair Else-Marie had chosen.

It didn't take a scientist to figure out they were one playing spot short for the five people at the soiree, but the matter was solved when Lydia shook her head and helped E.S. Meincke get up from his reclining chair. "No thank you, Anne-Katrine… I'd rather sit this one out if you don't mind. I'm such a slow learner when it comes to new games. I'd rather watch."

"Fine by me," Anne-Katrine said and sat down at the table. She took the deck of fine playing cards that Else-Marie had put on the green felt and began to shuffle it.

Else-Marie bent down and released two wings that made the table twice as wide. "So, now we have room for refreshments. What can I get you, Ladies and Gentlemen?"

"I'd like a beer if I may," Arthur said, purposely ignoring the dark frown on his sister's face.

"But of course. Miss Jensen?"

"I'm good for now after those delightful pastries. They were delicious, Mrs. Meincke," Anne-Katrine said with a polite smile that didn't last long when she looked over at her brother. She mouthed Only One Beer at him, but he ignored that too.

"Oh, thank you very much, Miss Jensen," Else-Marie said and smiled back before she turned to her husband. "Darling, I know what you want… a small brandy. What would you like, Miss Lydia?"

"Oh… well, it's still a little too early in the day for me, so… could I have a glass of cold water, please?" Lydia said politely.

"Certainly. Hang on while I fetch the beverages. Don't start without me!"

Anne-Katrine chuckled as she tracked the Doctor's spirited wife on her way out of the sitting room. She couldn't help but ponder how much of a firebrand Else-Marie Meincke had been when she had been in her twenties around the turn of the century. A relationship would never turn stale with her around, that was a fact.
Lydia declining to play meant that Doctor Meincke sat down next to Anne-Katrine. The elderly man squinted a couple of times almost like he couldn't see the cards - or even the playing table - but he found his seat in good order and rolled up his sleeves.

Playing Crazy Eights had been great fun for all even though Doctor Meincke had had to withdraw after the first few hands because he simply couldn't remember the rules. Lydia had stepped in and had comprehensively cleaned the clocks of her opponents - over and over again - despite her initial hesitation, but the hands of time were slowly approaching the hour when the curfew would come into force.

The beginning of the end of the afternoon's entertainment came when Else-Marie rose from her chair and wheeled in a radio on a small mahogany table. After she had turned the radio on to allow it to heat up, she went over to her husband who had returned to his reclining chair after the excitement of the card game. "Edvard," she said quietly, leaning down towards him and putting a hand on his shoulder.

The bleary look in the elderly Doctor's eyes behind his metal-frame spectacles proved the day had been a strenuous affair for him, but it hadn't stopped him from extensively exploring every last part of Memory Lane with Lydia. The elderly man blinked a couple of times and looked up at his wife. "Darling? What gives? Is it bedtime already?"

Else-Marie chuckled and leaned down to kiss her husband's ruddy forehead. "Not quite… it's time for the BBC. It's four o'clock and the first of the day's broadcasts is about to begin, Edvard."

"Oh! Oh, we wouldn't want to miss that, would we?" Doctor Meincke said and sat up straight in his reclining chair. He'd had a plaid over his knees, but he folded it up and put it across the armrest. "Miss Lydia, do you listen to the BBC at home?"

"We do, Doctor," Lydia said and nodded politely from her spot at the playing table. "We listened to it when the big announcement of Hitler's death came the other evening."

E.S. Meincke nodded and raised his spectacles to rub his weary eyes. "Good Lord, the shooting that took place on that night… Else-Marie and I hadn't been that frightened for years. Those wretched SS soldiers fired their weapons indiscriminately. Nobody was safe. We actually crawled down into our coal cellar… it had been a while since I had been down that steep, steep staircase, but we had no choice."

"We truly didn't," Else-Marie said. "God, what a horrible evening that was. Let's hope they won't have a reason to shoot quite as insanely tonight. Oh, here it is now," she continued and hurried over to the radio as the first notes of the Prince of Denmark's March started.

Soon, the typically distinguished speaker began the regular spiel: 'This is London. BBC transmitting to Denmark. We are transmitting on the nineteen meter band, on two frequencies on the thirty-one meter band, on the forty-one meter band and on the fifteen hundred meter band.
News from the 21st Army Group led by Field Marshal Montgomery suggests that talks are still ongoing with representatives of the German armed forces including Admiral Hans-Georg von Friedeburg of the German Navy, and General Eberhard Kinzel of the Wehrmacht.

Anne-Katrine zoned out and studied her sweetheart instead. Lydia had left the playing table to sit at the doctor's left, and the frown between her eyebrows had made an unwelcome return. She listened in silence with her hands folded in her lap, looking intently at the radio seemingly in the hope the BBC would finally transmit the message they were all waiting for - the official proclamation of the end of the hostilities.

Nazi-Germany had collapsed after Hitler's death - a death that was still reported by German sources to have been in combat against the Russians, but everybody who wasn't controlled by the swastika knew that he had killed himself in his bunker. Great Admiral Karl Dönitz, now President and Supreme Commander of all German armed forces, had taken over command and had sent a delegation of the highest-ranking officers to Lüneburg Heath to have negotiations with Montgomery.

"But what the blazes they're negotiating about is beyond me..." Anne-Katrine mumbled, sighing deeply as the news continued from the radio. She got up from the playing table and lowered the two wings so Else-Marie could wheel it back to wherever it had come from. "Surrender now or be annihilated, that's the message I would send to those bloody Germans. What's Monty waiting for, dammit?"

Shaking her head in disgust, she took a deep, final puff of yet another North Star and stubbed the remains out in the porcelain ashtray.

"My sentiments exactly, Miss Jensen," Else-Marie said, nodding decisively. "We've heard so many rumors these past few days, haven't we, darling? The British have liberated Åbenrå, the British have liberated Tønder, the British have liberated Haderslev... but none of those rumors are ever true!"

"Mmmm..."

"Why someone is spreading those rumors, I'll never understand. They're based on wishful thinking, not facts. I wish they'd keep the rumors to themselves," Else-Marie said with a firm nod. She fell quiet and seemed to ponder the progress of the war.

The BBC broadcast closed with the regular special bulletin in which the speaker read aloud a seemingly random collection of names. Anne-Katrine listened intently to hear if 'Niels', the code name for Sergeant Mehlborg's resistance group, was mentioned, but it wasn't. When a scratchy, slightly warbled version of Kong Christian, the Danish National Anthem, was played, Else-Marie rose and turned off the radio. Once the playing table had been taken care of, she came back in for the radio on wheels.

Arthur shook his head and leaned back on the sofa. "It won't happen today, then," he said and crossed his legs at the knee.
Once more returning to the sitting room, Else-Marie made a beeline for the chair by the window. She tucked in her skirt and sat down, but she briefly moved the heavy black-out curtains aside before she turned back to Anne-Katrine and the others. "Looking out, I can see several bullet holes from the other evening on the houses near us… and not only that, the Germans have changed the memorial on the square to reflect the… ugh… the supposed heroic death of that awful Mr. Hitler. They even have a guard of honor out there in black uniforms! A group of soldiers standing to strict Attention to honor a man who was responsible for so much death and destruction. It's… it's despicable! Oh… I apologize for my outburst."

"Oh, that's nothing," Anne-Katrine said with a lopsided grin. "You should have heard what we've said over the years. Isn't that right, Lydia? Arthur?"

"Very much so," Lydia said with a polite smile. Arthur just nodded.

Else-Marie nodded as well and smoothed down her skirt so she had something to do with her hands. "What worries me is that, well… given how strongly the Germans reacted the other night, how won't they react if they're given the order to surrender?"

"They won't like it, that's a fact," Anne-Katrine said in a rumbling voice. "Commandant Vossler may accept it, though grudgingly so, but Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt and his fanatics won't, I guarantee it."

Grunting in surprise, Else-Marie looked up at her guest with a look of worry on her face that only grew deeper by the second. "Why, Miss Jensen… you sound like you know them personally… but surely not?"

"I'm afraid so, Mrs. Meincke. We've had the distinct misfortune of meeting Heinrich Wittenfeldt in person a few times," Anne-Katrine said somberly. "Among other things, he threatened to kill Lydia and I if we were hiding people he was searching for."

"Oh, but that's diabolical!" Else-Marie said and clapped her hands together in front of her bosom. The jovial expression disappeared for a moment and was replaced by one of shock and uncertainty. She glanced over at her husband to find reassurance, but it quickly became clear a look wasn't enough, so she got up and hurried over to Edvard's side.

Lydia went the other way and squeezed herself in between Anne-Katrine and Arthur on the couch so it would appear to the elderly couple that she too was seeking refuge with her husband. In reality, she touched Anne-Katrine's thigh far more than Arthur's. To complete the serene image of conformity, she took the hands of both Jensens surrounding her.

"Well," Anne-Katrine said and gave Lydia's hand a squeeze. "I'm sorry that we had to stain your wonderful hospitality by ending on such a bum note, Mrs. Meincke, but I'm afraid that Lydia, Arthur and I need to drive home now before the curfew comes into force." With another squeeze of Lydia's hand, Anne-Katrine rose from the couch and pulled her supposed sister-in-law with her.
Else-Marie smiled and moved away from her husband. She fluffed her shirt and moved forward with her hand extended. "Oh, but that's not your fault, Miss Jensen. I lay that blame squarely on the Germans… Lord knows they deserve every last curse we can throw at them."

"Ha! Indeed," Anne-Katrine said and shook Else-Marie's hand before she moved over to the doctor. "Goodbye, Doctor Meincke. It was a pleasure to visit you," she said and performed a small bow to the elderly man.

"Oh, likewise, Miss Jensen," Edvard Meincke said over the rim of his metal-frame spectacles. "Yes, indeed. You and your charming wife may come anytime."

'What did he just say?' Anne-Katrine thought, narrowing her eyes.

"Edvard!" Else-Marie said sharply. "Mind what you're saying!"

Doctor Meincke looked at his wife with incomprehension written all over his face. "Mind what I'm saying…? Oh… oh, I do beg your pardon, Miss Jensen. I obviously meant your charming sister-in-law."

"Oh, that's quite all right, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said with a grin. "I understood you perfectly."

Arthur shook hands with their hosts and left early to get the wood gas generator going on the truck, but Lydia performed a deep curtsey to Else-Marie. "Thank you very much for a wonderful day, Mrs. Meincke. Speaking at such length with your husband is something I'll cherish for a long time. We'll be in touch."

"Oh, you're most welcome, Mrs. Jensen," Else-Marie said with a smile. "I've had a wonderful day. And I dare say old Edvard has too. I haven't seen him that animated for months!"

Everybody laughed at that, and Lydia went over to her old employer, Edvard Sigurd Meincke, and offered him an even deeper curtsey. "Goodbye, Doctor Meincke. It was delightful to revisit all the old events. Let's do this again another time, shall we?"

"I'd love that, Mrs. Jensen," the retired doctor said, smiling at his old acquaintance. "I've said it before and I'll say it again… apart from my wife, of course, ha ha… you were the best nurse I ever worked with."

Lydia's cheeks gained a red hue, and she curtseyed again out of sheer respect for the elderly man. "Why, thank you, Doctor Meincke. It warms my heart to hear that."

'And mine,' Anne-Katrine thought, smiling broadly at the warm look on her sweetheart's face. Nodding to their hosts, she put a hand on the small of Lydia's back and guided her out into the hallway.

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Driving home in a hurry before the strict curfew became active, Arthur had returned to the flatbed after taking a single glance at the somber look on his wife's face. Without speaking a word, Lydia had taken her customary place in the corner of the cab. The good mood she had been in from saying goodbye to the Meinckes had faded, and she had turned as quiet as a mouse. All she did was to hold onto the flapping door and look out onto the street ahead.

Anne-Katrine could only cope with the silence for a good two hundred meters, and by then, she had already tapped her fingers against the rim of the steering wheel at least fifty times. "Love, when are you going to tell me what went on at the market?" she said and drove onto the section of the road that forced her to zig-zag all the way down to the side road that would take them home.

When Lydia looked at her with a look of worry and surprise on her face, Anne-Katrine sighed. "I'm not that blind to your worries, sweetheart. Were you bothered by the Germans? You were, weren't you?"

"No," Lydia said in a small voice.

Nothing more came so Anne-Katrine opened her mouth to inquire further. Before she had time to do so, they were stopped by a Feldwebel from the Field Police who demanded to see their identification papers. Groaning, Anne-Katrine reached for her card and handed it to the gruff-looking Sergeant.

Once they moved away from the main road and onto the far quieter side road that would lead them home, she reached across the cab and put a comforting hand on Lydia's knee. "Sweetie, please tell me what's bothering you. I can't help if you won't tell me what's wrong."

Lydia briefly looked over at Anne-Katrine. Sighing, she scooted closer on the bench seat in search for a little warmth and compassion. "I was accosted at the market…"

"I knew it… those bastards…" Anne-Katrine growled, but Lydia shook her head.

"Not by the Germans. By two young Danish men who had seen me help one of the other vendors. A German soldier wanted to buy something, but the vendor couldn't speak German so I helped her translate. I shouldn't have."

Anne-Katrine stared straight ahead without seeing much. Her jaw was clenched to the point of her teeth grinding, and the knuckles on the hand that held the steering wheel turned white. "What did the young men do?" she said hoarsely.

"They pushed me around. They smashed three of our eggs and threw a bar of the good butter onto the filthy ground. They called me a bitch and a whore for the Germans. The soldier tried to help me, but that only made it worse. No Dane could be bothered to help, not even the vendor I had translated for."
The beginnings of an ice cold smile creased the corners of Anne-Katrine's lips. Her eyes turned to stone as she was already busy laying plans for the messy end the two men would come to. "Would you be able to recognize them? Because I suddenly have an urge to go back and bust some noses."

"I probably could, but... but it wouldn't help us, love. Please forget all about it," Lydia said and snuggled up to her partner's warm body.

"Forget about it? You want me to forget about it? I can't do that! That's the only thing I can't do!"

Lydia shook her head and squeezed herself even tighter against Anne-Katrine's frame. "You must. Promise me."

Anne-Katrine tapped the rim of the steering wheel again and again. Though her jaw worked overtime, she pushed the thoughts of vengeance to the back of her mind - but she wouldn't forget the incident. She left it to simmer. One day, the war would be over and the time would come to settle old scores. "I promise that I won't do anything stupid, love. But don't ask me to forget it because I can't. I won't."

"Can we talk about it later, then? I just want to go home now..."

"Try to get some rest if you can... I'll carry you inside if I have to," Anne-Katrine said quietly, reaching around her partner to give her waist a little squeeze.

Lydia nodded and relaxed her agitated stance so she could lean more comfortably against Anne-Katrine's body. Sighing, she closed her eyes and tried to leave the worrying incident behind.

The blue death glare that shone from Anne-Katrine's eyes proved that she may have pushed it aside, but that she would never, ever forget what had happened to her partner.

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CHAPTER 6

Friday, May 4th, 1945.

History was about to be made, but only a select few knew about it in advance.

The weather had made a turn for the worse: a steady drizzle that had started at noon had soaked everything in sight, and hardly any breeze was present to sweep away the heavy clouds. In the early part of the evening, a small line of pale blue in the far distance towards the west held a promise of drier, nicer conditions, but it would take a while for the brighter weather to spread over the entire land.
Life went on as it invariably did at the Jensen farm. After a long, hard day of doing all the little things that needed to be done at a working farm, like milking the cows, bringing them to the meadow, mucking out in the cowshed, carrying the full milk churns to the cold storage cellar, sweeping the courtyard, bringing the cows back from the meadow, milking them again and carrying the second batch of churns to the cellar, the three members of the unusual family were in the process of finishing up so they could call it an early night.

Arthur was in the sitting room smoking a cigarette while he fiddled with the radio so they could listen to the BBC broadcast that was scheduled to come on at eight thirty. Lydia was in the kitchen giving the stove a thorough cleaning with steaming hot water from a bucket that nearly bubbled over with suds, and Anne-Katrine was in the Sunday dining room doing various little odd jobs like sweeping the floor and adjusting the family portraits so they were hanging straight.

"It's almost eight thirty!" Arthur said, using a hand to amplify his words so the two women who were both at opposite ends of the house could hear him. The first notes of the Prince of Denmark's March began to play, and he adjusted the dial to fine-tune it onto the station. Because of the rain clouds that still hung low over the land, it wasn't a good reception, but it would have to do.

Anne-Katrine stepped into the sitting room and closed the door to the Sunday dining room behind her. Dusting off her hands, she shuffled over to one of the two chairs at the smoking table. She had to remove one of Lydia's cross-stitch embroideries first, and she put it on the table with great care.

'Oh! The coffee isn't ready yet!' Lydia cried from the kitchen.

"You still have two minutes!" Anne-Katrine shouted back, mirroring her brother by using a hand as an amplifier.

'I need three!' came the inevitable answer.

Anne-Katrine eyed the empty table that Arthur was supposed to have taken care of but hadn't. "Well, that gives us plenty of time to put the mugs and plates on the table. Right, brother dearest?" she said and got up.

"Huh? Oh... yeah. Sorry, I forgot," Arthur said, looking at the empty table.

Anne-Katrine quickly took care of business and sat down again. She dug into her vest pocket and found a North Star and a lighter that she used to ignite the recalcitrant cigarettes that had proved just as unpredictable and low-quality as the Powhattans.

Lydia hurried through the hallway with the pale-blue metal coffee pot and entered the sitting room just in time to hear the familiar introduction to the BBC news program. Grinning over her excellent timing, she poured Coffee Substitute into the three mugs before she put down the pot on a crochet place mat. After offering the cookie tray to Anne-Katrine and Arthur, she took a barley cookie and chewed on it noisily.
'This is London. BBC transmitting to Denmark. We are transmitting on the nineteen meter band, on two frequencies on the thirty-one meter band, on the forty-one meter band and on the fifteen hundred meter band-

"Why, why, why," Anne-Katrine said through a cloud of cigarette smoke that escaped her mouth, "do they say that each and every program… I mean… it's just a waste of their time… and ours!"

'The collapse in Northern Germany is complete. The English forces have advanced to the Danish border-

That piece of news made Anne-Katrine pipe down in a hurry and lean forward on her chair. Squinting, she stared intently at the shiny mahogany radio, hoping, wishing, praying that the speaker would deliver the message they all desperately wanted to hear.

'Kiel and Flensborg have been declared open cities. The amount of captured soldiers is so vast it's impossible to count just yet. The Danish Liberation Council has called for discipline in the final hours before the liberation. Admiral Dönitz has had meetings with the German authorities from Norway and Denmark to plan the future course in both countries.'

"Just surrender already," Anne-Katrine mumbled, holding a cup in one hand, a cookie in the other and a cigarette between her lips.

'Allied forces from east and west have now been joined over a distance of one hundred and sixty kilometers, and almost all of Germany has been overrun. The Swedish press has reported rumors that Russian paratroopers have landed in the Dyrehaven amusement park north of Copenhagen, and today, rumors flourished that Russian troops have gained a foothold on the island of Falster. These rumors are utterly unfounded.'

A loud grunt and a "Let's bloody well hope so!" came blurting out of Arthur, earning himself a pair of identical shushes.

'Last night saw vicious fighting in the streets of Copenhagen near the German barrack… uh, the German barracks, and there have even been reports of cannon fire. In the Dyrehaven and the square in front of Gentofte Town Hall, German troops have engaged in internecine fighting where…'

The transmission fell silent. Chewing on a barley cookie, Arthur grunted out loud and jumped over to the radio to adjust the dial in case it had wandered. "Mmmpf fnhph mnhhpfff," he said with his mouth full of cookie crumbs. When he realized that nobody would be able to understand him, he shrugged to show that the dial hadn't wandered at all.

Anne-Katrine took a deep puff of her cigarette and let the smoke trickle out of her nostrils. Because of the unusual break in the transmission, the tension was mounting rapidly, and she couldn't keep her right foot steady - it insisted on tapping a beat on the floorboards.
A few cracks, hisses and howls came over the airwaves before the distinguished speaker returned: 'At this very moment, it's reported that Montgomery has issued a statement that says the German troops in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark have surrendered. This is London, we'll repeat. Montgomery has at this very moment issued a statement that says the German armies in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark have surrendered!'

It took a few seconds for the ten-øre to drop, but then five years' worth of pent-up frustration exploded in a single moment. All three members of the Jensen family burst up from their chairs and let out a wild, unbridled cry of relief. They fell into each other's arms and danced about on the floor; jumping so hard that the cups and plates rattled on the smoking table, and the grandfather clock in the corner of the sitting room nearly toppled over.

"Ohhhhh," Lydia cried at the top of her lungs, "it's over… it's over… it's finally over…"

Anne-Katrine momentarily let go of her sweetheart to pull her brother into a crushing hug. The Jensen siblings thumped each other's backs and generally behaved like a pair of five-year-olds who had been told they would receive an early Christmas gift. "Congratulations, Arthur, you old bastard… we thought the day would never come, but it did…" she cried, playfully punching her brother in the gut which earned her a breathless "Ooofff!"

Lydia had waited long enough to feel her sweetheart's strong arms around her body, so she squeezed in between the dancing Anne-Katrine and the grimacing Arthur to do what had to be done—and that was to kiss Anne-Katrine senseless. The two women let their mouths do the talking as they met in a bruising kiss that quite literally took their breaths away.

When they separated, Anne-Katrine put her hands under Lydia's arms and swept the petite woman into the air, much to her wild delight. The sitting room was too small for aerobatics so Anne-Katrine couldn't swing her partner around and around like she wanted to, but she did give her the hug of a lifetime after letting her back down on the floor.

Through all that, the distinguished speaker from the BBC continued like nothing unusual had happened: 'This is a special bulletin: Dagmar, Arnold, Brooke, Fatima, Sally, Tristan, Pan, Arthur, Samuel, Elly, Flora, Signe, Edmund and Axel. This has been a special bulletin.'

"Oh!" Anne-Katrine said, hurrying over to the radio to listen for the coded messages, but it was too late as the speaker had already moved on. "Did he say Niels? Did anyone hear if he said Niels?"

"He didn't, Sis… but he did say Arthur!" Arthur said with a beaming smile on his face.

"Haw, haw," Anne-Katrine said, but the laughter got stuck in her craw when she caught a glimpse of the North Star she had been smoking. She had forgotten all about it in the hubbub, and the cigarette had flown onto the floor where it was about to burn a hole in the floorboards. "Oh, bloody hell," she croaked, hurriedly bending over to pick it up.
The posture was simply too good to miss, so Lydia moved swiftly and gave her sweetheart's shapely behind a good, though playful, smack.

"Oi!" Anne-Katrine cried and flew upright. "You're asking for a tickling, Miss Lydia!" she said, moving her long fingers in patterns that couldn't be misunderstood and earning herself a delighted squeal in the process.

'We repeat. The German troops in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark have surrendered to Field Marshal Montgomery. The surrender is effective tomorrow morning at eight, British Summertime. At eight, English Summertime… that's the same as in Denmark. The surrender also covers Helgoland and the Friesian Islands, but as previously reported, not Norway. The only Danis- uh, the only German troops that are still fighting are the forces in Czechoslovakia and Norway.'

"Hang on," Anne-Katrine said, suddenly coming to a stop. "It's not effective yet? What did he say? That it only starts at eight tomorrow morning? Why the blazes would they do that? Now they've given the bloody Germans all bloody night to… to… attack us!"

"But we will strike back, Sis," Arthur said strongly. "The resistance groups won't take it on the chin this time… they'll strike back, mark my words."

"That'll be a slaughterhouse! Oh, dammit," Anne-Katrine said and thumped a clenched fist into an open palm, "just when we thought this was good news… the bloody Germans will attack, capitulation or not. They have nothing to lose… they'll attack!"

The radio speaker continued: 'Please allow me to finish this evening's broadcast… this greatest evening for you at home that has also been the greatest evening for us out here. Uh, to finish by saying that you are always in our thoughts and that we look forward to meeting you again. This greeting is extended to all Danes, at home or not. To round off, here's the national anthem.' The broadcast ended with a scratchy, slightly warbled version of the Danish national anthem.

"All right," Anne-Katrine said and ran a hand through her damp hair. "We need to remain calm. First of all, I'll hoist the Dannebrog. It's time to show the Germans we Danes won't take it lying down anymore."

At that exact moment, Lydia came back into the sitting room with a bottle of bjesk and three glasses. She had only caught the last half of Anne-Katrine statement, but she furrowed her brow comically. "The flag… we can't hoist the flag, Anne-Katrine…"

"Oh yes we can. That bloody decree isn't valid anymore!"

"No, but… not the decree… the sun is setting. If you fly the colors after the sun has set, you invite the Devil in for a dram and a dance… you know the old legends…"
Anne-Katrine brushed past her and stormed into the hallway. "He's welcome!" she said as she pushed off her slippers and jumped into her outdoor shoes. "I'm hoisting the flag, devil or no devil."

"Well… uh… all right. But I'm coming too," Lydia said and hurried after Anne-Katrine still holding the bjesk and the shot glasses.

Outside in the courtyard, Anne-Katrine had already stomped over to the flagpole and was busy fiddling with the lines. It only took a handful of curses before the Dannebrog was attached and hoisted up the long pole. At once, the red-and-white flag unfolded and fluttered proudly in the gentle wind that came at it from the west. It was highly unusual to see a flag in the semi-darkness of the evening, but the pride of seeing the national colors more than offset that.

Anne-Katrine took a step back and stood akimbo. Nodding to herself, she stomped over to Lydia and Arthur who had poured the bjesk into the glasses. She took the one offered to her and promptly wrapped an arm around her partner's shoulders. "Free at last," she said and knocked back the bjesk. The potent, home-made snaps burned its way down her pipe and into her gut, but it was a good warmth. It ignited the righteous fire that had been simmering there ever since April 9th, 1940, and she felt inclined to grab her faithful rifle and hunt down every last German she could find.

Unlike the night where it had been announced that Hitler was dead, the air was eerily quiet - no gunfire could be heard from the town or the garrison. "Love, I must admit I have a growing sense of dread in my stomach," Lydia whispered, holding onto her sweetheart. "I fear it's not over yet after all…"

Anne-Katrine nodded as she looked up at the flag. "Mmmm… something's about to happen. That's inevitable. Let's hope it'll be… that it won't be too bloody. But there's a risk it could be."

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All thoughts of making it an early night had been swept aside by the excitement brought on by the announcement of the German capitulation, so Anne-Katrine, Arthur and Lydia hadn't gone to bed despite the fact it was nearly ten o'clock.

To mark the momentous occasion, Lydia had stripped down all their black-out curtains and was busy putting candles on every windowsill to symbolize the return of the light. She had used an entire matchbook for her little act of defiance against the black-clad forces of darkness and evil, but the flickering flames more than made up for it.

When Anne-Katrine entered the kitchen, Lydia still stood at the windows overlooking the courtyard. She slipped up behind her partner and wrapped her long arms around the smaller body. The giddiness from the liberation and the closeness of the beautiful soul in her arms worked together to create a heady thrill that bubbled to the surface the second she inhaled her partner's scent. They swayed back and forth for a little while before Anne-Katrine leaned in and
placed a kiss on Lydia's hair. "I love you," she whispered, giving the warm body in her arms another little squeeze.

"Love you too," Lydia whispered back, running her fingers across Anne-Katrine's bare forearms. "Can you believe the Germans have capitulated? I almost can't. It's like a dream… let's hope it won't be a bad dream."

"Mmmm."

They fell silent and settled for standing there in each other's arms. Anne-Katrine caressed her partner's stomach from the waist and up to the underside of her tender peaks; clawing here, stroking there, she administered plenty of sweet loving through the dark-tan dress.

Lydia leaned back into Anne-Katrine's touch and let out a sensual sigh. "Careful, love…" she husked, "you're about to start something we may not have time to finish…"

"This is already a very special evening," Anne-Katrine whispered, mussing Lydia's hair with her nose and mouth. "How about we made it a very special night, you and me. Mmmm?"

Before Lydia had time to answer, two shady silhouettes ran into the courtyard just outside the kitchen windows Anne-Katrine and Lydia were looking through. "What the blazes?" Anne-Katrine barked and moved back from her sweetheart in a hurry.

The first thought through her mind was that it had been the two young men who had accosted Lydia at the market day - they could be back for more. Growling, she ran out into the hallway, tore open the door to the cupboard and grabbed her hunting rifle.

She quickly worked the bolt action to make sure the weapon was ready to fire. Her clog-boots were outside, but she still wore the outdoor shoes she had used when she hoisted the flag. "Arthur! Someone's out in the courtyard!" she barked before she hurried back to the kitchen and locked eyes with Lydia. "Stay here… and stay down. Please!"

"I will," Lydia croaked, hurrying further into the kitchen to be as far away from the windows as possible. The room didn't offer many natural places of safety, but she crouched down behind the supper table and pulled the nearest chair in front of her.

Anne-Katrine's face turned into a dark mask of anger as she tore open the front door and blasted out into the courtyard with her rifle ahead of her. "Hands up, you rotten bastards! Come out into the light so I can see what kind of rats you are! Don't think I won't shoot to kill!"

'Hold your fire, Jensen!' a familiar male voice said from the shadows.

"Mehlborg?! What the blazes, man?! Where are you? Come out, dammit!"

Ernst Mehlborg and Erik Kvantorp came out into the center of the courtyard. Both men wore clothing items that Anne-Katrine thought she'd never see again - battle helmets, leather
crossbelts and the standard issue khaki greatcoats. They were both armed with Stenguns that were carried over the shoulder. Danish flags had been hand-painted onto their helmets so people would be able to identify them in a hurry.

"What in the world, Sergeant? Have we been mobilized without me knowing about it?" Anne-Katrine said and lowered the rifle.

Erik Kvantorp chuckled and stepped forward. His bony face lit up in a toothy grin which looked odd underneath the battle helmet. "Hello, Miss Jensen. Why, I must say you have that command-voice-thing down pat. You've missed your true calling… you should have taken up a career in the military!"

"This is my true calling," Anne-Katrine said and swung her rifle over her shoulder. She scrunched up her face and looked at the two men who were once again dressed like the soldiers they were. "Well… all right. I can guess why you're here. Come in. We'll make some Coffee Substitute… oh, and don't bother taking off your boots."

Mehlborg grunted and stepped forward. "We weren't going to. We need a word with you and your brother, Jensen… and we don't have time for coffee."

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The sitting room was crammed full to such an extent that Anne-Katrine had to stand up. Mehlborg and Kvantorp's greatcoats and equipment took up so much space they could barely fit next to Lydia and Arthur who were both sitting down at the smoking table.

"Arthur Jensen, Anne-Katrine Jensen," Ernst Mehlborg said in a solemn voice. "As you may expect, tempers are flaring in town. We need you to keep the peace so no one will be tempted to do anything foolish, like attacking the garrison. The assignment will last for the remainder of the night. You'll be relieved from your posts come midnight, but we need to remain vigilant until the official hour of the capitulation at eight tomorrow morning. Can we count on your help?"

"Yes! Finally!" - "Yes," both siblings said as one.

Lydia scrunched up her face and began to wring her hands. It was clear she wasn't fully satisfied with the development, but when she looked at Anne-Katrine seeking reassurance that everything would be all right - and not too dangerous - she got it with a warm, kind smile.

Kvantorp nodded and patted Anne-Katrine on the back. "Excellent news, Miss Jensen. All right, we have a pair of Resistance armbands for you out in the truck. I'm afraid we don't have further greatcoats, but we do have Danish battle helmets ready if you want them."

Anne-Katrine and Arthur eyed each other. Both nodded. "The helmet sounds fine, Erik," Anne-Katrine said. "It's heavy, but I'd rather have it and not use it than vice versa. How about weapons? I have my hunting rifle, but Arthur doesn't possess a firearm."
"We have Stenguns for you out in the truck," Mehlborg said.

Arthur lit up in a smile and reached over to thump his sister's shoulder. "I've never had a chance to fire one of those! I've read about them in the illegal press… most people say they're difficult to shoot with, is that right?"

Anne-Katrine licked her lips but kept quiet. In 1943, when she had returned from the railway sabotage just outside of town, she had promised Sergeant Mehlborg that she wouldn't utter a word about any of it to anyone. She had kept her promise when it came to her brother; Arthur only knew that she had been involved, but no details.

Lydia was a different matter. The nightmares had come like Anne-Katrine had expected they would, and Lydia had helped beat them off by holding her tight in the darkest times. Things had been talked about that they had sworn they would take to the grave. Locking eyes with her partner, their connection was established at once, and Lydia responded by returning the kind smile from before.

"Only if you don't know what you're doing," Mehlborg replied to Arthur's question about the Stenguns. "So. Are we done here?"

Lydia shot up from the chair and went straight over to her husband and her sister-in-law. "Sergeant Mehlborg, may I have two minutes with my family before you leave… please?"

"Of course, Mrs. Jensen," Mehlborg said and allowed something that could be perceived as a half-smile to grace his lips. Nodding at Anne-Katrine and Arthur, the two soldiers moved out of the sitting room and left it deathly quiet.

When the door closed behind Mehlborg and Kvantorp, Lydia took Anne-Katrine and Arthur's hands in her own and squeezed the fingers that had grown strong and calloused after decades of hard work at the farm. "Please listen to me. Both of you. I understand that this is something you must do, but… I'm begging you to be careful and not take undue risks. You hear me? I want you both back in one piece come tomorrow morning. All right?"

"I understand, sweetie," Anne-Katrine said with a warm smile. Arthur just nodded at the woman who was nominally his wife.

Lydia nodded back and pulled first her husband and then her sister-in-law in for a hug. Predictably, it didn't stop there with Anne-Katrine. The kisses that were exchanged were deliberate, unhurried affairs that - apart from making Arthur blush - sent a strong message of love between the two women. "Come back to me," Lydia whispered, caressing Anne-Katrine's cheek.

"I will. We both will," Anne-Katrine whispered back.

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Out by Mehlborg's truck that had been decorated with several Danish flags hanging over the sides of the flatbed's railing to identify it as a Danish vehicle, Anne-Katrine and Arthur received their battle helmets that they put on at once. Anne-Katrine wore her regular clothes, but she had changed into a pair of high-legged boots that she could walk in for many kilometers if she had to.

They were both given the Resistance armband which was a red, white and royal blue piece of circular cloth that was supposed to sit on the upper, left arm. Anne-Katrine pulled hers on first, and she had to chuckle when hers was a better fit than Arthur's because her muscles were more prominent.

Kvantorp offered her a toothy grin as he folded down the truck's tailgate. "I wouldn't want to meet you in an arm wrestling contest at the Harvest Fair this year… or maybe I would, I don't know."

"They don't have mixed competition," Anne-Katrine said as she climbed up onto the truck's bed. "I always compete against the gals working at the dairy plant. If you want muscular women, you needn't look further. I'm a sylph compared to most of them."

"Oh, my! Perhaps I should pay them a visit one day… all right. Back to business. This is your standard British built Stengun. Perforated barrel. Thirty-round magazine. Slide-lock Action. Trigger body," Kvantorp said, grabbing one of the two submachine guns and pointing at the various items. "Insert the magazine on the left of the weapon, like this. Make sure it clicks into place. Work the slide-lock action like this. Make sure it's at the back stop. Don't fiddle with it and don't block the ejection port. Aim at the enemy and squeeze, not yank the trigger towards you. The weapon has quite a kick and has a tendency to pull upwards and to the left. You understand?"

Arthur nodded enthusiastically, but Anne-Katrine had heard it all before. "It also has a fairly short range. Only a hundred meters or so," she added as she took the Stengun given to her. She casually released the safety and pressed the little button to release the magazine - it was easier to transport that way. When she looked at her brother, she had to chuckle at the wide-eyed stare she got in return.

"Jensen… well, Jensens," Mehlborg said upon returning after having stirred the wood gas generator. "I need a word before we drive into town. Come over here," he continued, waving the siblings closer to him.

Anne-Katrine and Arthur shuffled up to the front of the truck. The first thing Anne-Katrine saw when she got there was a windshield that had been shattered into a hundred pieces. "What the blazes… that's a bullet hole!" she said, pointing at the mess.

"Yes."

"You got too close to a German patrol?"

"No. A Dane who either didn't see the flags we have draped on the truck… or didn't care."

"Oh. Bastards," Anne-Katrine said, donning her battle helmet. The metal pot was just as heavy and cumbersome as the one she had used on April 9th, but at the same time, it gave her a sense of security even if she knew from painful experience that it couldn't stop a bullet fired directly at it. She reached up and secured the chinstrap faster than Arthur could which made her chuckle once more. "All right. What was it you wanted to say, Sergeant?" she continued, adjusting the Stengun, the battle helmet and the Resistance armband.

Ernst Mehlborg assumed a gloomy expression - which wasn't unusual, but this one seemed darker than normal - and let out a short sigh. "I wasn't being entirely truthful with Mrs. Jensen in there. The situation in town is already bad, and it's getting worse by the minute. I said I wanted you to keep the peace, and I do... but it will be at the square and the garrison. Wittenfeldt and his SS units refuse to surrender. They have relieved Oberst Vossler of his command... well, he's been deposed and is confined to his quarters... and they have claimed the garrison as an autonomous province of the Third Reich which hasn't surrendered yet."

"Bloody hell..." Anne-Katrine croaked, staring wide-eyed at the former Sergeant. "I wish you had said that sooner, Mehlborg... I'm... you should have been honest with us..."

"Can't the English do anything about it?" Arthur asked.

Mehlborg shook his head. "We have been in touch with the 21st Army Group that's massing just south of the border. They won't enter Denmark until the capitulation is official tomorrow morning."

"So, basically," Anne-Katrine said, pushing her battle helmet back from her forehead - the metal item suddenly weighed a ton on her head, "what you're saying is that Arthur and me and a bunch of other guys using hand-me-down equipment are about to go to war against a fanatical SS-Obersturmbannführer who has hundreds of men at his disposal... not to mention two Panzers, God knows how many motorcycles and a whole bloody array of 88mm anti-tank cannons!"

"Basically, yes. It must be done, Jensen. I know you and your steady hands. I know you'll deliver when push comes to shove."

"Oh, that's just beautiful, Sergeant... just beautiful," Anne-Katrine croaked, rubbing her face. She took several deep breaths before she looked at her brother. "Arthur... I think you should stay here. For your wife's sake."

"I beg your pardon, Sis? I'll do nothing of the kind!" Arthur said and shot his sister a surprised glare. "I didn't fight on that terrible day five years ago. I've regretted it ever since. You know how I feel about that!" he continued, putting a hand on his sister's elbow to underline his words.

Anne-Katrine thought back to the many little arguments they'd had over the past few years. For a while, it had soured their relationship to the point where they didn't talk to each other at all. It had lasted until Lydia had forced them to sit down and square their differences. "Yeah, I do. All right. Someone needs to watch your butt... so I'll come along," she said and patted Arthur's
shoulder. "But Mehlborg… this was a dirty trick to play on us. It doesn't become you," Anne-Katrine continued, pointing an accusing index finger at the former Sergeant.

"Noted," Mehlborg said with a nod. "Let's mount up… the sooner we get there, the sooner we can go home to our families."

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CHAPTER 7

"What a difference a day makes," Anne-Katrine said out loud as she held onto the railing for dear life. Mehlborg had the truck going at full speed down the main road into town, but unlike the day before where Anne-Katrine'd had to zig-zag between the pillar boxes, the former Sergeant drove straight on.

"What's that? I couldn't hear you," Arthur shouted, standing right next to his sister.

Anne-Katrine shuffled closer to him and made a sweeping gesture with her hand. "Never mind… but look at this!"

"I know… it's worse than I thought."

"Yeah…"

The Germans had been told of the impending capitulation ahead of time and had withdrawn to the garrison with their weapons, but they had left everything else behind in a disorderly mess. It hadn't taken more than fifteen minutes following the historic announcement for the citizens to flock onto the streets for an impromptu celebration. Flags flew, bonfires were started in the middle of the streets which sent reams of foul-smelling smoke skywards, and the abandoned control posts and pillar boxes were vandalized or torn down completely.

The sandbags and the endless rows of barbed wire had been thrown onto the sidewalks where kids played on them and adults posed near them for pictures - one man even urinated on a German sign that said Halt!

Everywhere they went, people shouted and cheered at the truck with the fluttering Danish national flags on the side. Anne-Katrine waved back occasionally, but it was too dangerous to let go with both hands at once when Mehlborg went at the insane speed of nearly sixty kilometers an hour.

The closer they got to the square, the more chaotic the scenes became. Confusion and general pandemonium reigned supreme, and it dawned on Anne-Katrine just what kind of witches' cauldron the once-so quiet town had become. The cheerful mood of the citizens had turned to
anger in places, exemplified gruesomely by the dead body of a man who was lying in the middle of the street with his head bashed in.

Another place they went past, a house - perhaps belonging to a known collaborator, or simply someone who had been too friendly to the Germans - was being vandalized by a mob of angry men who threw the furniture out through the smashed windows.

Seeing that, Anne-Katrine got a rock of worry in her gut. Lydia had been left alone, and if tempers and calls for retribution ran that high in town, someone might remember the strawberry-blondie who had translated for the Germans from time to time. She clutched her Stengun harder and bared her teeth in a worried grimace.

At the entrance to the square, Mehlborg reduced the speed and turned left to follow the road which would continue on past the post office until it came to the garrison. Similar to the pillar boxes on the main road, the control posts, the sandbags and the kilometers of barbed wire had been removed from the road block that had been in place in front of the post office since the brief uprising in August of 1943.

Almost at once, Mehlborg slowed down and came to a halt at the curb. "Everybody off!" he shouted through the little peephole at the back of the cab. Anne-Katrine and Arthur did as told and jumped down onto the street. They could hear scattered gunfire from around the town, but it wasn't too bad - yet.

The many bonfires had created a peculiar smell that hung heavily over the streets. At first, Anne-Katrine thought it could be burning rubber or celluloid, but then she discovered that citizens had thrown their abhorred black-out curtains onto huge fires that reached far into the sky.

The post office itself was a modest two-storey building made of red bricks, with a flat roof, large windows and a windbreak featuring a pair of glass double doors that had recently been opened for the first time since they had been permanently sealed nearly two years previously. In the intervening years, people had to use the rear entrance if they had business at the post office.

On the upper floor, the friendly telephone operator Birthe worked in a small cubicle with hundreds of plugs and a single window, but she had wisely abstained from watching the proceedings.

Kvantorp and Mehlborg soon joined Anne-Katrine and Arthur, and the sight of four resistance fighters with proper battle helmets, armbands and automatic weapons attracted a huge amount of attention from the celebrating people. Kids of all ages flocked to the site in droves to gawk at the brave men - and woman - who were about to take the battle to the Germans.

At present, the post office worked as the makeshift headquarters for the local Resistance, so the four people crossed the road and walked through the double doors. The interior of the lobby where the counters were located had seen better days with plenty of faded, torn wallpaper and well-worn linoleum on the floor. It hadn't been vandalized, only neglected since the start of the
war as the garrison had siphoned off the local council's budget for the maintenance of public buildings.

They walked through the lobby and into a hallway where all but one of the twelve doors - five on either side and one at each end - were locked so nobody would be tempted to steal the mail. The post master's office was the only one that was open, and it had been converted into a battle room where a handful of young men in helmets and wearing Resistance armbands had assembled at a shiny desk. An old-fashioned radio that had already been in the office stood on the edge of the desk playing oddly inappropriate dance music from the regular program.

The first person Anne-Katrine laid eyes on inside the post master's office was her old comrade Svenning Gudmundsen with whom she had fought at the railway sabotage. "Oh! Svenning! Svenning Gudmundsen, how the blazes are you, old chum?" she cried, transferring her Stengun to the other hand so she could give her old acquaintance a good shake. During the brief firefight at the railway line, Svenning had been severely injured, but Anne-Katrine and Mehlborg had managed to save his life by bringing him to Doctor Meincke in an almighty hurry.

Gudmundsen had turned twenty-three, but he had kept his soft, charming features and his wild hair. He had his attention focused on a map on the shiny desk, but he spun around and stared with his grayish-blue eyes at the people who walked into the office. "Why, if it isn't Anne-Katrine Jensen!" he said and put out his hand.

Anne-Katrine remembered him as the shy, reserved type, but the passing of time and his wartime experiences had matured the young man, she could see that with half a glance. He had an air about him of someone who had evolved into a natural leader, and the way the even younger, fresh-faced men around him looked to him for words of wisdom seemed to prove that.

When they shook hands, Anne-Katrine noticed that Svenning was protecting his left side where he had been shot. "How have you been, Svenning? Are you still bothered by the wound?"

"Oh, I've had a steady couple of years, actually. And yes, now and then the wound makes itself noticeable," the young man said, looking down at his upper, left chest that had been penetrated by a German bullet.

"Especially when it's damp and chilly, eh?" Anne-Katrine said with a knowing grin.

Svenning chuckled and gave Anne-Katrine's hand an extra squeeze. "Well, you would know. How's life at the Jensen farm?"

"Oh, just fine, thank you. Up and down, you know. Odds and sods."

On the desk, the old radio howled and hissed before a Danish speaker broke through the jamming stations and delivered a statement in a distinguished voice: 'What follows is a pre-recorded proclamation from the Danish Liberation Council.'
"Everybody, pipe down!" someone said at the back of the office. "There's a news bulletin on the radio!"

The din quickly died down so nothing would disturb the broadcast, and Svenning and Anne-Katrine moved over to the radio to hear better.

'Resistance fighters!

The liberation of Denmark is nigh. In a matter of hours or days, it will be determined if the German forces in Denmark accept the final defeat of the Nazi regime and capitulate, or if they choose to enter a desperate, futile battle. The war Denmark has lead against Germany was forced upon us by the assault of the Nazis on our country, and the repeated violations against our population.

We Danes braved the conflict and our people have fought well, but we have never wished for unnecessary spilling of blood, and we do not wish for it now. If the Germans seek war, we know we are ready. Every man will assume his post and do his duty, but if the enemy comes to his senses and chooses capitulation, it will be fortunate that our people will be spared further blood sacrifices.

We shall assume the surveillance tasks we have been chosen for and prevent all retaliatory measures against the defeated. Only if hostile forces disregard the terms of the capitulation and seek an armed conflict can we strike back, and then only in self-defense.

We urge all resistance groups to follow their instructions closely. Whether it comes to a fight or capitulation, the final hours of the resistance will require even greater discipline and self-control than before. No group must strike before the order is given.

Resistance fighters! Comrades! We have faith in you.'

Anne-Katrine let out a slow sigh that seemed to be mirrored among the other members of the resistance who were in the office. They all knew they were stuck in the middle of a scenario where the Germans would disregard the capitulation.

When Mehlborg came back into the office, everybody stood up straight, but he waved dismissively and strode over to the table with the maps.
"All right, Gudmundsen," he said as he walked around the table to look at the map that displayed the town. "I need a status report. What's been going on since I left?"

Anne-Katrine and Arthur shuffled over to the table to see better, prompting the young men around Svenning to move aside to let the older people through. Anne-Katrine heard a few mumbled murmurs about 'women shouldn't fight,' but she had no time for such tomfoolery.

"The units from the SS are still entrenched in the garrison," Svenning said and planted a thumb on the map on top of the military complex, "but they've issued a threat to break out and reclaim the town if we don't fall back and cease the hostilities. The Panzer Mk. IV's have both been moved beyond the control posts. Rifles were fired at them, but… well. Three of our volunteers were able to capture a motorcycle with a rapid-fire machine gun mounted on the sidecar, so we have that at least. And two boxes of ammunition for it."

"Mmmm," Mehlborg said, cocking his head to look at the map.

Anne-Katrine had followed the flow of updates and turned to look at Arthur to see if he had any questions - he didn't. "Any news on Oberst Vossler, Svenning? The garrison Commandant?"

"None, I'm afraid."

"All right," Anne-Katrine said and furrowed her brow which wasn't easy wearing a battle helmet. Chewing on her cheek, she looked at the map and then up at Mehlborg. "Sergeant, do you think it would be a good idea to try to communicate with the Obersturmbannführer?"

"What do you have in mind, Jensen?"

"Well, I just thought Wittenfeldt would perhaps be more likely to surrender to someone he… well, knew."

"That he knew?" Svenning echoed, shooting Anne-Katrine a highly puzzled look. "Pardon me, but may I inquire how-"

Anne-Katrine smirked. "I understand your concerns, Svenning, but I can assure you we have a hate-hate relationship. We've bumped into the Obersturmbannführer a couple of times in the three weeks he's been stationed here. The first time we met, he insisted on spewing out the SS oath of allegiance… he was most annoyed with my sister-in-law and I when we didn't follow him. Later on, he threatened to kill us. He knows who I am but not that I'm involved in the resistance movement."

Mehlborg crossed his arms over his chest and let out a series of grunts that displayed quite clearly that he was thinking hard about the suggestion. His already po-faced exterior grew another shade of dark that made him appear quite gloomy. "No," he finally said, moving his arms down to stand akimbo. "No, there won't be any communication. Instead, we need to up our presence at the garrison. If they follow through with their threat and try to break out, we need to be there to stop them. Gudmundsen, stay here and coordinate the effort. Keep the radio open."
"Yes, Sergeant Mehlborg," Svenning said with a decisive nod although he didn't salute.

Mehlborg nodded back and strode away from the post master's office headed for the door. "Jensen! Come with me!" he said just before he disappeared down the hallway.

Anne-Katrine and Arthur both chuckled and shot each other matching glances. "Which Jensen? Both of us?" Anne-Katrine said. Arthur couldn't provide an answer, so they both shrugged and followed the former Sergeant out of the door.

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They jogged a further three hundred meters along the road that had come past the post office. It was a strenuous task for Anne-Katrine with the heavy helmet, the hunting rifle and the Stengun all doing their worst to bog her down, but she clenched her jaw and carried on.

The garrison was located on the outskirts of town to reduce the risk of complaints from the local population. Anne-Katrine had only been in there once, and that had been when her brother had been called up for service in 1939.

To say the garrison had changed appearance since then would be an understatement. The Germans had rebuilt and modified it extensively since the beginning of the occupation, adding watch towers at the four corners of the six-meters tall perimeter wall that rimmed the entire complex. Machine gun posts had been placed on either side of the main entrance, and the entrance itself had been made far safer with a pair of control posts that were divided by tank traps.

The hands of time were storming towards eleven PM so the natural light had long since left the area, but powerful, German-built lamps running on diesel generators so they wouldn't be susceptible to power cuts illuminated the entrance with the same strength as small suns.

A small group of the Danish Resistance had assembled a huge pile of discarded sandbags and had assumed a defensive position across the road from the entrance. Mehlborg whistled at them when he, Kvantorp, Anne-Katrine and Arthur approached so nobody would have an itchy trigger-finger.

"Any news?" Mehlborg said as he crouched down behind the sandbags. Arthur, Kvantorp and Anne-Katrine followed him in and made themselves as comfortable as the conditions and the situation allowed.

"None, Sergeant," a double-chinned man in his late forties said. Like everyone else, he was wearing a battle helmet, but his wobbly chins and his girth that strained his belt made him appear like a blimp compared to the more slender people around him.

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes as she took in the sight of the overweight man. After five years of food rationing, hardly anyone had too much on the ribs, and those who did had often been involved in black-market trading. Swallowing her annoyance, she came to the conclusion that if
Sergeant Mehlborg could work with the man, so could she - and besides, he had to be a volunteer as well.

Suddenly, one of the other men at the defensive position caught a glimpse of Anne-Katrine and let out a scathing: 'Oh… who brought a girl?'

Now Anne-Katrine's jaw really started to grind, and she clenched her Stengun hard. She decided not to bother with the narrow-minded individual, but Arthur took care of business for her with an emphatic: "Sounds like the girl was already here, you nincompoop!"

'I beg your p-'

"Silence!" Mehlborg barked. "And settle down! We're here to keep the bloody peace, not start a bloody war by arguing!"

Once the tempers had cooled, Anne-Katrine and the others crouched down behind the sandbags and stared across the road. Anne-Katrine held her Stengun ready to fire, noticing that everyone around her did the same. The insanity of the situation caught up with her, and she could only let out a deep sigh while Mehlborg and Kvantorp spoke to the man in charge of the defensive position.

Sighing again, Anne-Katrine leaned her battle helmet against the inside of the sandbags and stared up at the stars that had just begun to twinkle. One in particular was impressive, and she reckoned it had to be Venus rather than a proper star. 'Coming here was a mistake... a bad mistake. I should have stayed at home with Lydia,' she thought as she studied the men she shared the post with. 'Lives have already been lost in this bloody mess... and Wittenfeldt is fanatical enough to follow through on their threat. He doesn't care one bit about dying... in fact, I wouldn't be surprised if he sought out death so he could be reunited with his beloved Adolf! Dammit, what am I doing here...?'

The sound of a truck engine starting wafted out from the garrison at the other side of the street. Anne-Katrine pushed her thoughts away for later and crawled up the wall of sandbags to see what was going on. Men were shouting harsh words in German, and another engine was soon started; this time it was a motorcycle.

"Mehlborg... I think we've got trouble in store," Anne-Katrine whispered, reaching out to give the former Sergeant's shoulder a nudge.

She had barely uttered the words before the Germans turned off the powerful lamps at the entrance, leaving the road in and out of the garrison in inky darkness. Moments later, the motorcycle they had heard starting came towards the entrance and the road beyond it at speed. Right behind it, the heavier Mercedes L3000 truck came lumbering across the garrison's open courtyard.

"Oh, bloody hell... it's starting," Anne-Katrine croaked, popping her eyes wide open at the sight of the MG42 'buzzsaw' machine gun that had been mounted on the motorcycle. The soldier...
manning the rapid-fire weapon was none other than *Obersturmbannführer* Wittenfeldt in person. He had traded his officer’s cap for a standard issue German battle helmet, but his uniform was easy to recognize.

A group of SS soldiers stood on the bed of the truck that slowly gained speed. They were all armed to the teeth with submachine guns, rifles and hand grenades.

"Here we go again…" Anne-Katrine croaked, frantically working the action on her Stengun.

Mehlborg scooted up to the edge of the sandbags to see better, but soon ducked back to safety. "Heads down, rifles up!" he barked, glaring at yet another sorry excuse for a platoon that he had at his disposal. Looking to his right, he happened to lock eyes with Anne-Katrine who was the only one who followed his orders. "Fire upon my mark!"

"Sis!" Arthur cried, and the tremble in his voice proved that his first taste of real war wasn't to his liking.

"Not now, Arthur…” Anne-Katrine said through a clenched jaw. She kept her eyes firmly glued to the enemy soldiers across the road. That a great deal of them were fellow Danes mattered less; she never looked past the dark-gray uniforms and the runes they wore on their collars.

She could almost feel the red, white and royal blue colors she wore on her arm. The pride she felt from wearing those colors sent a wave of warmth through her that gave her the kick she needed to do a good job. She had been trusted with the colors, and she was determined to honor them by doing her job well.

"Wittenfeldt!" Mehlborg roared, "Lay down your weapons and adhere to the terms of the capitulation! This will be your only warning!"

Almost as expected, Heinrich Wittenfeldt would do no such thing. A barked command of *Open fire!* was heard from the other side of the street, followed by the staccato chattering of many weapons.

Once more, burning hot lead zinged through the air and peppered the sides of the sandbags Anne-Katrine and the others were hiding behind. Lead, sand and pieces of fabric that had been ripped off the bags flew everywhere and created untold confusion in a matter of seconds among the inexperienced volunteers.

"Return fire!" Mehlborg barked, but only a select few responded to his order.

Several of the men howled and shriveled up into frightened little balls of humanity, but Mehlborg, Anne-Katrine and Arthur popped up from behind the sandbags and fired one short burst after another at the motorcycle and the truck with their Stenguns. The weapons sounded like frantic typewriters as the hot lead and a host of sparks escaped the muzzles and ejection ports on their way towards their targets.
Wittenfeldt made the motorcycle's rider drive around so he had a better field of fire. Soon, he let the buzzsaw machine gun spew hot death at the sandbags and the resistance fighters across the road. The SS soldiers atop the Mercedes truck joined in at once. They returned fire with their rifles and MP40s that sent cascades of cordite smoke down the street.

Caught in the middle of a barrage of lead, Anne-Katrine threw herself down behind the sandbags and pressed the little button to eject her spent magazine. The empty frame was soon thrown away and a second one attached. Before she moved back up to resume firing at the fleeing truck and Wittenfeldt's motorcycle, she glanced to her right at her fellow volunteers, her brother and Sergeant Mehlborg.

The former Sergeant was firing at the truck as expected, and Arthur tried to help to the best of his limited abilities, but many of the volunteers were pressing themselves against the sandbags with their heads ducked down between their shoulders. Their Stenguns were on the ground next to them, untouched.

A concentrated barrage from two men with MP40 submachine guns atop the truck tore open a sandbag right next to Anne-Katrine and sent her diving for cover. When she had a new firing position, she popped up with the Stengun tucked under her arm. Squeezing the trigger gently, she sent a shower of burning hot death at the two soldiers.

Red roses blossomed on their uniforms; one fell off the truck and landed heavily on the ground behind it, and the other fell backwards and out of sight. His place was soon taken by another soldier with a rifle, but Anne-Katrine ducked back down into hiding before she would appear in someone else's firing line.

Once the truck had moved on another thirty meters, she popped her head back up and looked at the body on the road. The man was clearly dead. Shaking her head in disgust, she put her weapon to her shoulder and fired several short bursts at the escaping truck, but it was already moving out of range.

She barely had time to breathe before the characteristic sound of the buzzsaw machine gun tore through the evening air a moment later. Burning hot lead, sand and pieces of fabric from the canvas bags went past only centimeters from her and her brother, and for a split second, she thought she had finally reached the end of the line. She cried out and ducked her head as far down as possible.

A loud _CLANG_ right next to her was followed by a stunned grunt, then a wailing cry that sounded like it was fueled by panic rather than pain. With all the lead flying around just above her head, she only had time to glance at her comrades, but her eyes popped wide open when she saw blood on Arthur's hands. "No… God, no," she croaked, shuffling to the side to take care of her kid brother like she had promised Lydia she would.

She was at his side in an instant and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Arthur! Arthur! Where were you hit? Arthur?"
A look of wild, unbridled panic was painted on Arthur's face after the frightening experience. It was clear it had left him on the verge of a full-on breakdown, but the strong hands on his shoulders kept him back. He could only croak, but stared at his left hand that had been bloodied by a stray ricochet that had come down after carving a silver furrow across his battle helmet.

Anne-Katrine noticed the silver furrow and instantly remembered the identical one that had been on her own battle helmet on April 9th, 1940. The adrenaline that blasted through her made her break out in a screeching laugh, but it was clear that Arthur didn't find the situation particularly funny. "Arthur..." she said, still holding onto his shoulders, "you're all right... that's only a scratch... come on... the job isn't done yet."

"N- no... no... I've- I've been sh- shot... I don't wanna die," Arthur croaked in a voice that grew increasingly panicky. It wasn't long before even his sister's steady hands weren't enough to hold him back, and he broke out in a full-body shiver and wrestled himself free of her grip. He shied back from her and crawled along the wall of sandbags with a look on his face that explained quite clearly that Death had just tapped on his shoulder.

"But... Arthur... what the blazes, man...?" Anne-Katrine croaked, shaking her head in confusion. "I don't want to die either, but... but we're trying to protect others... Arthur, will you come back here!"

In the meantime, the Obersturmbannführer had turned around and had raced up to the square to protect his troops, but more gunfire from a buzzsaw machine gun soon echoed across the street.

The new salvo turned out to come from the one captured by some of Mehlborg's volunteers rather than the one Heinrich Wittenfeldt had on his motorcycle. The firing had been effective as the radiator of the Mercedes truck carrying the SS unit burst wide open in a shower of steam and hot water.

As soon as the plumes of steam rose into the sky, the firing was redirected at the wheels on the left-hand side of the truck; the tires were quickly shot to pieces. That meant the SS soldiers atop the flatbed were now unprotected, and they responded by returning fire at once against the captured motorcycle. With the truck being crippled to such an extent, the driver let it roll over to the curb where it stopped with a jerk.

Mehlborg jumped up from his cover and ran out into the middle of the street. Crouching down to present the smallest possible target, he stared into the garrison. No further activity seemed to come from there, so he turned his attention to the wrecked truck. "Jensen, follow me! Both of you! Kvantorp, take charge here... the rest of you... stay!" With that, he was off up the street, zig-zagging along the sidewalk in case he was fired upon.

Down behind the sandbags, Anne-Katrine groaned out loud and stared wide-eyed at her brother whose condition had only grown worse in the intervening moments. Mehlborg had already made it some distance up the road, and she was loathe to disobey his orders. "Arthur," she pleaded, reaching out for her brother, "I'm frightened too... but we can't... you can't do this now..."
please… snap out of it and… and pull yourself together. Please… for my sake… for Mehlborg's sake."

When the only reaction to her plea came in the shape of Arthur shaking his head in unbridled terror, Anne-Katrine let out a deep sigh and took her Stengun. After peeking over the edge of the sandbags to see if the coast was clear, she jumped to her feet but was held back by a strong hand that grabbed her ankle. It nearly caused her to take a tumble, and she spun around to offer the culprit a dark-blue glare. "What the blazes do you think you're doi- Arthur?! What the hell is wrong with you, man?! Mehlborg needs me!"

"Stay here, you crazy broad!" Arthur howled in a voice that had already crossed into the realms of hysteria. "You'll only get yourself killed! Think about Lydia!"

Anne-Katrine stared wide-eyed at the blubbering mess that looked like her brother but behaved nothing like him. Arthur's chin trembled like he was on the brink of crying, and there was a certain smell of fear and feces in the air. Scowling, she grabbed her brother's clothes and yanked him closer to her. "I am thinking about Lydia! Who the hell do you think I'm doing all this for? I'm doing it so we can live in a free country, you bloody worthless coward! You've been on my back for five stinking years about that day in April… and now that you get the chance to prove yourself, you shit your breeches!"

"I was shot! I nearly died!"

"You got nicked on your finger, Arthur!"

"But-"

"I don't have time for this nonsense," Anne-Katrine growled and grabbed the Stengun Arthur had dropped. She quickly released the magazine and stuffed it down her pants pocket before she took off after Mehlborg. She never looked back, not even when Arthur cried her name. She simply couldn't care less.

The former Sergeant had already made it to the abandoned truck and used it for cover. Numerous bullet holes and blood splatters on the railing proved the fire fight hadn't been as one-sided as it had initially appeared it would be. He held his Stengun ready, but most of the SS soldiers had already made it onto the square where an even greater panic had broken out.

With no need to zig-zag, Anne-Katrine was at Mehlborg's side in less than thirty seconds. She fell in behind him and loosened the magazine on her Stengun to see how many rounds she had left.

"I thought you weren't coming, Jensen," Mehlborg said while creasing his lips into something that could be interpreted as a half-smile on a good day.

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it for the world… I just needed to slap some sense into my brother. It didn't work. Do we have any spare magazines, Sergeant? I have less than one and a half left."
'No. We haven't had a supply drop since the middle of April. We've had to spread out what little we have among the volunteers.'

Scrunching up her face, Anne-Katrine attached the magazine to the Stengun and worked the action. "All right. Good thing I brought my hunting rifle, then."

Gunfire from the square was followed by screaming and the sound of breaking glass. Someone threw a hand grenade, and the detonation created shrapnel that tore through the air. The little pieces of twisted metal were faintly melodic and sounded like an eerie symphony played in the wrong key. More screaming followed, and it didn't take long before a group of civilians with white flags came out from the mouth of an alley and ran towards the post office to find shelter.

"Wittenfeldt won't care about a white flag," Anne-Katrine said glumly. "He'll just kill them all regardless. And us too if we're not careful."

"I agree, Jensen. We need to stop him before the number of casualties becomes unacceptable."

Anne-Katrine chuckled darkly while she scouted out the area around the alley. It seemed quiet enough, as most of the gunfire had come from further down the road.

With the SS unit occupying the square and using it to terrorize the citizens, it would be too dangerous to move further down the road as she and Mehlborg would be in plain view the entire way down there - but the alley connected with the square on the other side of where the soldiers were. "Sergeant… do you suppose Wittenfeldt chose the square for a purpose? I mean, the memorial has been changed into being a shrine for his big hero Adolf. I wouldn't put it past him to have thought of that."

"You're probably right, Jensen. The alley leads to the square… on the other side of the damn memorial."

"Yes it does."

Mehlborg scrunched up his face a couple of times before he nodded. "Very well. That's what we'll do. Come," he said and took off across the road headed for the mouth of the alley.

Anne-Katrine was right behind him, running hunched over which wasn't easy in her long-legged boots. They were quickly at the mouth of the alley which had fallen into an inky darkness. Because of the way the two buildings had been built, an echo rolled around in the alley that made it sound like the two people formed the vanguard of an entire infantry battalion. Reaching the other end, the sounds of many boots died down, but it had been good while it lasted.

The former Sergeant peeked around the corner to perform a thorough reconnaissance. After a while, he offered Anne-Katrine a thumbs-up. He pointed at himself and then a book shop at the other side of the narrow section of the square they had entered. When Anne-Katrine nodded, he took off and hurried across the square and up onto the shop's doorstep where he held his Stengun ready.
Gulping down a lump of worry that had formed in her throat, Anne-Katrine slid up to the corner of the alley so she could look at the square. It was a good thing she didn't need to listen for enemies, because her heart was thumping so hard the blood coursing around her veins drowned out everything else. She rolled her shoulders to lose some of the tension, but it didn't really work.

The house she was using for cover had a facade of red bricks that reached all the way to the wider stretch of the square. There, the motorcycle with the MG42 machine gun mounted on the sidecar was parked somewhere between thirty and forty meters from her position.

Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt had moved into a defensive position behind the memorial like she had expected he would. Like most of his men, he was armed with an MP40 submachine gun. For the moment, Wittenfeldt hadn't realized he could come under threat from behind - a sign of his lack of local knowledge - but it might change before long.

The celebrating citizens had finally escaped from the square, but scattered gunfire could be heard from quite a few of the side streets and alleys. Now and then, Wittenfeldt or one of his men sent a burst of lead across the square to remind people that he was still in charge. Two people - a mature woman and a younger man - were lying still on the pavement at the other end of the square, but it was impossible to see if they were merely wounded or already dead.

Anne-Katrine cast a weary glance across the street at Mehlborg who signaled that she should move ahead. It didn't sit well with her, but she bit down on her lips and followed orders.

Sliding along the red brick wall, she couldn't get the pitiful look on her brother's face out of her mind no matter how hard she tried to focus on the task at hand.

Her strong, beloved brother had turned into a whimpering little boy upon realizing that he was mortal. She hadn't expected that and it disappointed her greatly. She had often been spooked, scared or even frightened in the face of enemy fire, but she had never become hysterical to the point of soiling her pants like Arthur. She had gulped down the terrors and carried on - either because other people depended on her, or because her own life was on the line if she didn't fight back. 'Maybe that's why I have those damn nightmares… I push everything aside to deal with the present… at least I have Lydia to hold me tight. Oh, get a grip, Anne-Katrine! This is about to get dangerous all over again!'

She shook her head to get back to reality. She was only twenty meters out from her enemies. It seemed Wittenfeldt hadn't been successful in persuading his entire unit to follow him down the proverbial dead end: he only had nine men there, but all nine were armed to the teeth with various firearms that were ready to be used at a second's notice.

Movement to Anne-Katrine's left proved to be Mehlborg who hustled from the book shop and up onto the doorstep at a butchery four shops further along the narrow stretch. They briefly looked and nodded at each other before Mehlborg stepped away from the doorstep and held up his weapon.
Anne-Katrine took the opportunity to get down on her stomach and hold the Stengun ready ahead of her. The concrete foundation at the foot of the wall of the brick building she used for cover was cold and damp to push against, but it was her only chance of getting away from the firing line. The square's pavement was ice cold to lie on, but she pushed all that aside.

"Dammit… another firefight at the bloody square… I wish I had a proper machine gun… not this pea shooter," she mumbled, clenching and unclenching her fists to make sure her muscles were relaxed. Remembering the spare magazine she took from Arthur's Stengun, she reached into her pocket and found it at once.

Mehlborg took a deep breath and shouted: "Wittenfeldt! Lay down your weapons and surrender! We have you covered!"

The results were inevitable. About half the SS force including Heinrich Wittenfeldt spun around and dropped down onto the square's pavement where they opened fire at once. The MP40 was a formidable weapon, and the men were well-trained in urban combat. Burning hot death screamed down the narrow section of the square; many windows were smashed which added to the inhospitable conditions by sending large amounts of glass onto the square below, and chunks of bricks and mortar were ripped out of the walls as the lead made an impact.

Anne-Katrine kept her head well down as she returned fire. The staccato chattering from her Stengun mixed with the smoother sounds from the MP40s and created a wall of noise that gave her a banging headache almost at once. She fired ultra-short bursts of two or three rounds to preserve her sparse ammunition, but her good aim was more than enough to offset that. One man went down after she had sent a bullet into his chest, then another was clipped in the left arm. The Germans turned their fire on her, and she had to bury herself as far down into the pavement as she could. Bullets struck everywhere around her and sent ricochets whistling in all directions. Chips of the brick wall she was lying next to were sent careening all over the place, including a few that hit her battle helmet and painted it a dusty red.

With a heart that nearly thumped out of her chest, she resumed firing and emptied the first magazine after another two short bursts. Mehlborg provided cover fire while she ejected the spent magazine and slapped the new and final one in place. Looking for a target, she found Wittenfeldt's ice cold face - though it was presently twisted in anger - but she couldn't get a proper aim on him. Instead, she continued with the short bursts hoping they would be enough to persuade the SS soldiers they were headed for doom.

It was too good to last, and it didn't. Anne-Katrine didn't hear the one that got her, but she had an inkling it could have come from Wittenfeldt's weapon as he was firing in her direction at the time. Out of nowhere, a white-hot poker drilled its way into her left arm just below her shoulder. The bullet entered right next to the bone and carved a tunnel in the muscle and soft flesh down to her elbow. There, it glanced off the joint and exited through her skin just below the armband in a shower of blood and torn fabric.
Her eyes nearly rolled back in her head from the immense pain. Groaning, she grabbed the Stengun and squeezed the trigger out of pure reflex, but the burst went wide and didn't do much good apart from forcing the men from the SS to duck. It had been the last rounds in her last magazine so the weapon fell silent. It suddenly weighed a ton, so she let it go and watched it clang onto the pavement.

"Oh, dammit," she croaked, feeling the Devil himself poking his hoof into the wounds on her shoulder and her elbow. The exit wound hurt more, if that was even possible. The fierce, throbbing pain crawled up her neck and tainted her vision red. Breathing heavily, she mouthed a silent prayer while she was still among the living.

She looked down at the gray pavement and saw her own crimson blood pooling around her elbow. "Bloody hell… if I make it back from this one… Lydia is going to kill me," she croaked, trying to crawl back from the precarious spot she was in. The distance back to the alley was too far, so she gave up and settled for burying herself into the pavement.

To her left, she could hear Mehlborg's Stengun firing in the typical staccato fashion, but it wasn't enough, and it would never be enough unless she could even out the odds. With an almighty, nearly superhuman, effort, she managed to get her hunting rifle off her good shoulder and pull it up towards her. She couldn't get a proper, two-handed aim, so she put the rifle's barrel over her bad arm that grew number by the second.

Another burst from the MP40s was fired in her direction, and she watched in morbid fascination how the screaming ricochets seemed to create sparks and small, blue flashes as they bounced off the pavement. Not long after that, she was on the receiving end of another shower of brick dust that rained down from all sides. The little red chips got everywhere, even into her mouth, but she spat it out at once with an emphatic "Blergh!"

Pinning the rifle down with her near-dead hand, she was able to work the bolt action which sent a cartridge into the chamber. She panted hard through clenched teeth from the hellish pains that shot up from her arm, but she moved the rifle back on top of the dead hand and pulled it closer to her shoulder so the recoil wouldn't send it flying.

With everything ready, she searched for a suitable target. She moved past first one, then another soldier before the third man from the left lined up at the end of her foresight. She looked at his ice cold, soulless eyes for a moment before she took a deep breath and concentrated on sending him to hell where he could join his beloved Führer. She squeezed the trigger of her hunting rifle and heard the characteristic muted bark. Despite the pain that screamed through her arm from the recoil when the weapon was discharged, she didn't flinch.

Obersturmbannführer Heinrich Wittenfeldt continued to fire his MP40 with fanatical insanity burning brightly in his eyes, but from one moment to the next, he was pulled to his feet seemingly untouched by human hand. Gurgling, he dropped the weapon and clutched his throat that had become a gaping, bloody wound directly above his Knight's Cross. With eyes wide in terror, he staggered backward a step or two before he fell down onto his knees. He twitched once but keeled over and became still.
Anne-Katrice kept vigilant, but it was soon clear the fighting spirit had been snatched from the other men following their commander's messy end. One after the other, they threw down their weapons and put their hands in the air amidst cries of "Don't shoot!" and "We surrender!" in various Danish dialects.

Out of nowhere, a group of volunteers wearing Resistance armbands - who hadn't been anywhere near the square when it had mattered - came forth and apprehended the men from the SS. They collected the weapons and put them into the motorcycle's sidecar for later processing.

Anne-Katrice caught most, but not all, of that. Groaning pitifully from the white-hot poker that continued to rummage around in her wounds, she let go of her rifle and rested her weary head, making the battle helmet clunk down onto the pavement. Panting, she shook her head repeatedly. "Made it through another one… thank you, God."

The pain from the wounds was getting worse, so she tried to sit up. The blood that had tainted her formerly white shirt and her black vest was a stark reminder of the evil entity known as War. She took but a single glance at it and groaned out loud once more - now Lydia would really kill her.

Mehlborg was at her side in an instant and helped her swing her legs around. "Where did you get it?" he said, moving aside the weapons so she had more space to breathe.

"Arm. Left arm. Shoulder… elbow… hurts!"

"I'll bet," the former Sergeant said and knelt down next to the farmer. He briefly examined the exit wound by letting his fingers touch the skin just above and below the blackish-red welt. "You feel that?"

"Yessssss!"

"Good. That means your nerves haven't suffered too much damage. You did well, Jensen. I couldn't have done it better myself. A perfect shot with only one hand on the rifle."

"Yeah… thanks. I got him. And it's over. That's all that matters."

People started flocking back onto the square now that the worst of the danger had been eliminated. Some appeared to be shocked to see a woman involved in the fighting, but most offered Anne-Katrice looks of sympathy. There's always one dissident in every crowd, however, and this time it was an elderly woman who gained a look of perfect outrage at the sight of the blood soaking Anne-Katrice's shirt. The culprit wasn't the blood in itself, but the fact that it made the outline of Anne-Katrice's left breast stand out quite clearly through the fabric.

"Mehlborg, wouldya mind fetching me a Doctor? I'd like to go home now… with two arms on my body. I'm in for a fierce bollocking as it is…" Anne-Katrice croaked, reaching up with her good hand to wipe her clammy brow.
"I'll see what I can do. Sit tight, Jensen."

"Yeah… right now," Anne-Katrine said and tried to pull herself into a better position. She could, but the pains that shot up from her arm were so strong she had to slam her eyes shut, "ugh… right now, that's about all I can do…"

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The end of the hostilities brought an uneasy peace that took until two in the morning to settle. By then, only the hardest remained on the streets though many bonfires were still burning and many scores were still being settled. The SS units had been disarmed and had been confined to their quarters on the garrison until the British forces arrived - whenever that would be.

After the death of Obersturmbannführer Wittenfeldt, Commandant Vossler had been released from his own confinement and had given an officer's oath to cease all aggression, not least to protect the hundreds of German refugees that were holed up under dreadful conditions in one of the garrison's oldest barracks.

Several Wehrmacht soldiers and officers who had found shelter with young women across the town were rounded up and brought to the garrison. The young women who repented their perceived misstep of falling in love with a German were merely treated poorly; those who refused to repent anything were stripped naked and beaten. Their hair was cut off and red swastikas were painted on their bodies to act as a stark reminder of their treason.

For Anne-Katrine, the road home seemed twice as long as it usually was. Having lost her heavy battle helmet somewhere along the way, she sat in the passenger seat of Ernst Mehlborg's truck with the wind blowing in her face from the shattered windshield. Her wounded arm was in a sling, and the morphine injection she had been given by Anders Halvorsen - the town's new doctor - after he had patched her up meant she floated around in a daze.

Someone, somewhere spoke to her, but the voice came from a million miles away. She turned her head and realized Mehlborg's lips were moving. The sound had a hard time filtering through her fuzzy brain, but it came to her eventually.

"-must admit I was terribly disappointed in your brother, Jensen. I hadn't expected him to fall to pieces like that. I regret asking him. He clearly wasn't cut out for the task… he should have stayed at home with his good, little wife."

"Mmmm… and you didn't see the worst of it," Anne-Katrine croaked, thinking about the unfortunate smell of feces that came from her brother. The embarrassing incident would damage their relationship, there was very little doubt about that - but how deep the chasm between them would become was still too early to tell.

"Anne-Katrine," Mehlborg said and leaned towards his passenger, "that's why we never asked married people to join us!"
Anne-Katrine nodded solemnly. She was married, but she couldn't tell him that. "I was disappointed too," she said in a voice slurred by the morphine. "You never, ever want to see your brother like that. First timer or not. Oh, that's going to be so awkward when he gets home. So Godawfully awkward…"

"Are you going to tell his wife about the details?"

The question hung in the air for a while before Anne-Katrine gave the only answer she had to give - a shrug. She and Lydia kept no secrets from each other, but this concerned someone else too; someone she held dear to her heart. In short, she had no idea.

A somber silence spread among the two people in the truck. They went along the paved side road at a good pace, aided by the fact that Mehlborg had removed the masking tape from the truck's single headlight. Now it worked like it was supposed to, illuminating the road a good fifty meters ahead of them.

"I wish you were a man, Jensen," Mehlborg suddenly said.

"Huh? What on Earth for?"

"If you were, I could send in a recommendation to the Danish Liberation Council on your behalf. They'd give you a financial compensation for the fighting you've participated in. But women can't apply for it."

"Typical," Anne-Katrine growled, rolling her eyes. "I can't be the only woman who has fought the bloody Germans!"

"No. Hundreds of women have been in the resistance movement. Some have been captured. A few have been executed."

"And yet the bereaved can't be compensated because their loved one wasn't a man! Oh, for the love of… it's a man's world right now, Sergeant, but mark my words… it won't be for much longer. We will have our say, and it's going to be sooner rather than later."

Huffing, Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and stared straight out onto the dark side road.

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Later, Mehlborg pulled the truck over in front of the Jensen farm. The torches had been lit at the front door, but everything else was dark and quiet. Anne-Katrine could just make out that the candles were still burning in the windows. She gulped hard when she thought of the kind of reception she'd get when Lydia caught wind of the sling and the blood on the ruined shirt - not to mention the wound itself.
For once a gentleman, Mehlborg jumped down from the cab and walked around the front of the truck until he got to Anne-Katrine's door. Opening it, he gave his wounded passenger a hand to get down.

When she was safely on the ground, Mehlborg reached into the cab to get the hunting rifle that had been in the footwell behind her feet. He helped putting it over her shoulder and took a step back.

"Anne-Katrine Jensen, you have been one of the best damn soldiers I have ever worked with," he said and offered her a proper salute. "And certainly the best girl," he added with a rare wink that caught 'the girl' by surprise.

Anne-Katrine chuckled and returned the salute. "Likewise, Sergeant Mehlborg… and thank you for not treating me like a bloody girl. Will you give Svenning Gudmundsen and Erik Kvantorps my regards the next time you meet them?"

"I will, Jensen."

Anne-Katrine preferred to shake hands with the man she had known since 1939, so she put out her hand and waited for the former Sergeant to take it. The battle-hardened brothers-in-arms gave each other a firm handshake before Mehlborg stepped over to the truck's railing and released one of the two Dannebrog flags that had been nailed to the woodwork.

"Uh… what are you doing, Sergeant?" Anne-Katrine said, furrowing her brow as she watched Mehlborg attach the flag to the highest point of the gate that he could reach without stepping up on something.

"You saw the vigilante mobs in town, Jensen… if you have a Dannebrog here, they'll think you're one of the good people and drive on. There. That should do it."

Disgusted with the undeniable truth of Mehlborg's statement, Anne-Katrine shook her head and let out a long, slow sigh.

"I'll call you with updates when I have any. All right, I need to get back to town. Bye for now, Jensen."

"Bye, Sergeant Mehlborg. Stay safe," Anne-Katrine said and waved at the former Sergeant.

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Anne-Katrine watched the red taillight disappear over the nearest hill before she had worked up enough courage to shuffle through the gate. The morphine injection was still working, but it meant she couldn't feel her left arm at all - and it bothered her.

Halfway across the courtyard, she came to a dead stop when the front door to the farmhouse opened and Lydia stepped into the flickering cone of orange light from the two burning torches.
She had her arms wrapped around herself and looked miserable. Her green orbs slid down to the sling and the shirt that was soaked in a crimson substance that could only be blood. She didn't utter a word.

Anne-Katrine licked her lips. The stony silence grated on her nerves harder than getting a five-star bollocking would. "Sweetheart," she tried, but it didn't garner a response. "Sweetie… I caught a bullet. I'm fine, just a little beat up. Arthur's fine too. He… he chose to stay in town for now."

Silence.

"Sweetie? Sweetie, please say something. Anything," Anne-Katrine croaked as she came closer to her partner. "Please yell at me and call me a stubborn old bat or an-"

"How could you?" Lydia said in a tiny voice, effectively cutting off anything Anne-Katrine had to say. "I begged you to be careful… and you promised me you would. And yet you've been shot. How could you?"

Anne-Katrine shrugged with her good shoulder. "If I'd had any say in the matter, I wouldn't have been. But I didn't. It was Wittenfeldt… he's dead."

"Oh…"

"Sweetie… may I come in, or do you want me to sleep in the barn tonight?"

Lydia let out a deep sigh. She turned around without speaking a word and stepped back into the hallway. There, she turned right and shuffled into the kitchen.

"I guess it's the barn for me…" Anne-Katrine said and crinkled her nose. The front door hadn't been slammed yet, so she decided to test her luck by continuing ahead and climbing the two steps. Lydia was rummaging around in the kitchen, so she shuffled out there to look at her partner. "Dearest… what are you doing? It's two in the morning…"

"I'm going to heat some water so I can clean your wounds," Lydia said in a detached voice that proved she had gone into Nurse mode. "Have you had a morphine injection yet?"

"Yes. Doctor Halvorsen gave it to me at the square."

"It happened at the square? Again?" Lydia said as she found the bucket she needed to pump water into. She carried it across the kitchen and came to a stop at Anne-Katrine's tall, injured figure.

Anne-Katrine chuckled darkly. "Yes… again. Though down the other end. At the memorial."
Lydia sighed and moved past her partner. Less than two minutes went by before she returned with a couple of liters in the bucket. She pulled it up onto the stove and ignited the appropriate burner. "Was Arthur hurt at all?" she said, deliberately focusing on the bucket.

"Not physically… well, a little nick on his finger. But…"

"But?"

"Lydia, there's something I need to tell you… about Arthur… he… oh, hell," Anne-Katrine said and wiped her clammy brow with her good hand. "He lost his nerve after we had been shot at. It… oh, hell. It wasn't pretty. I think it… well… under fire, he rolled up into a little ball and was on the brink of getting hysterical. Actually… he did get hysterical."

The two women briefly locked eyes before Lydia went back to the bucket. "Oh," was all she said. A short minute went by before she licked her lips and turned to look Anne-Katrine in the eye. "Have you considered that his reaction was normal and that yours was, if not abnormal, then rare or unusual?"

"Lydia," Anne-Katrine said and moved closer to her partner, "when I first raised a weapon in anger five years ago, I was frightened out of my skull… but I did what I had to do to survive. I fought to stay alive… I killed to stay alive. I killed to protect you. And that part is as valid tonight as it was back then."

"Wittenfeldt…?"

"Yes. I shot him dead."

Lydia sighed deeply and stuck her pinkie into the water to test the temperature. It was just right, so she turned off the burner but let the bucket remain on it to catch the last of the heat. After a brief while, she nodded imperceptibly like she had come to terms with her partner's decision.

The stony silence seemed to return, so Anne-Katrine took another step closer to Lydia. "Love?" she said, cocking her head and putting out her hand.

"Do you need another injection?"

"No. I need you to come over here and give me a hug."

Lydia sighed again but shuffled across the kitchen and fell into her partner's grasp. She had to be careful not to aggravate the wound or to get blood on her clothes, but she still managed to give Anne-Katrine a fair-sized squeeze. "Can you walk on your own?" she whispered.

"Sure. It's just my arm this time."
"Then head into the bedroom. I'll help you undress so we can clean the wound. I need to see how bad it is so I can give you the best possible treatment. You'll be out of commission for the next couple of days or more, that's for certain."

"Yeah, I guess."

Lydia put a hand on the small of Anne-Katrice's back and helped her out of the kitchen. They shuffled along the hallway, keeping a firm grip on one another until they reached the bedroom door. "When is Arthur coming back?" she said as she opened the door.

"I honestly don't know, Lydia… not now. Maybe not tomorrow, either."

"We probably need to call the job center to get a couple of day laborers to help Poul."

Anne-Katrice shook her head. "Won't work, love… the town's standing on its head right now… that won't change for the next couple of days."

"Damn." Grunting, Lydia reached inside the dark bedroom and found the light switch. When she flicked it, nothing happened. "Oh… terrific… the power's out."

"The lines must be down. Hang on, I'll get the good, old kerosene lamp," Anne-Katrice said and began to move away from the door to get to the cupboard in the corner of the hallway. Before she had time to move a centimeter, she was stopped rather decisively by Lydia who put a strong hand on her stomach.

"You're not doing anything or going anywhere until I say it's all right, Miss Jensen! Now begin to undress while I fix us some light."

"Yes, Nurse Jensen," Anne-Katrice joked, but it fell flat given the circumstances. While Lydia went over to the cupboard, Anne-Katrice shuffled into the bedroom where she kicked off her shoes and began to unbutton her pants. Once they pooled at her feet, she swept her blanket aside, hobbled around and sat down with a bump on the soft bed.

Lydia soon had the kerosene lamp going strongly, and she came back into the bedroom and put it on the bedside table. In the orange cone of light, she observed Anne-Katrice's pooling pants, bare thighs and salmon-colored bloomers before she moved in and took the high-waisted pants that had also been stained by the blood.

She put them on the floor and began to unbutton the vest and the shirt, mindful of not disturbing the sling too much. "I won't be able to salvage your shirt, love. It's been too badly soaked by the blood. We'll never get it out."

"I know… dammit. But the vest? I love that vest…"

"I can't say yet. I'll give it a good scrubbing," Lydia said and leaned down to offer her partner a kiss for comfort, the first since her return.
When they kissed, they realized they should have done it sooner. Working almost instantaneously, the sweet contact was all they needed for the world to feel right again. The kiss deepened and became more insistent; they closed their eyes and let the love that flowed freely between them calm the raging tempests inside their hearts and souls. Once they separated, they remained close to share the moment for as long as possible. "I love you so much, Anne-Katrine… but-

"I love you too…"

"But you have to promise me… and I really do mean it this time," Lydia whispered as she gazed deeply into her partner's blue orbs, "you simply must promise me that you'll never, ever head off to war again. Ever. The next time you do, I may not be here once you return. If you return."

A nervous grimace raced across Anne-Katrine's face. The threat of losing Lydia far outweighed any success she could ever hope to reap on the battlefield, regardless of the conflict or the opponent. The Germans had been beaten, and it would take years if not decades for them to return to a position where they could pose a threat to world peace. The Soviet regime in the east was another story, but they were among the Allied nations and not an immediate threat. "I promise. Ama'r! Cross my heart, hope to die. My war is over, love… I'm here to stay."

"You've said that before…"

"I know," Anne-Katrine said and caressed Lydia's cheek. "I'm sorry for betraying your trust in me. This time, it's for good."

The smile that spread over Lydia's features began faint but soon grew strong. Leaning in, she gave her partner another deep, insistent kiss that proved that she had forgiven her - mostly - for coming home with yet another gunshot wound.

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An hour or so later, Anne-Katrine was flat on her back in bed, staring into the pitch black bedroom. Far too many thoughts swirled around in her mind for her to find rest, but she tried to wade through those most important and let the rest fade away.

Arthur. She had no idea what to do about her brother, but something needed to happen quickly before it could fester and ruin their relationship for good. She shouldn't have called him a coward, she understood that now. She had a chilling flashback to the conversation she'd had with Heinrich Wittenfeldt when he had come to the farm searching for deserters. He had said that Anne-Katrine and he were similar in many ways. His words had perhaps been proven right by her reaction to her tormented brother's plight. They needed to have a serious, adult conversation about what had happened and how they could move on from that. Lydia would need to be involved in that as an intermediary; otherwise things would be said in the heat of the moment that would only drive an even bigger wedge between the Jensen siblings.
She had killed again. She had taken the lives of at least three, and most likely four men. They had all tried to kill her so it had been pure self-defense, but the memories of how they looked in death would stay with her for a long time. She had killed twenty men now over the course of the past five years, and she remembered them all. They weren't pleasant memories, but at least she felt something. That was the difference between her and someone like Heinrich Wittenfeldt whose heart had been cold for years - at least, that's what she told herself.

Sighing, Anne-Katrine pushed all those negative thoughts aside. All that mattered now was Lydia. It was impossible to see a thing in the dark bedroom, but she could feel - feel the weight of her sweetheart across her good arm, feel a steady breath that caressed her skin at her right shoulder, and feel the strong arm that was draped across her nightgown-clad torso just below her breasts.

She held her sweetheart in her arms, and she had been successful in defending her home and her country; all she needed for her world to be right again was her brother back in her life, but he would come around eventually. Of that, she was certain.

Her train of thought was disturbed by Lydia shuffling around and letting out a mumbled, inarticulate groan. Smiling, she pulled the sleeping woman a little closer and snuggled down to finally get some rest after the long, hard day. "I love you, sweetheart… and I'll never leave you again," she whispered into the darkness - and every word came from the bottom of her heart.

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**EPILOGUE**

*Thursday, May 10th, 1945.*

An unimportant stretch of the main north-south road roughly ten kilometers out of town was once again the preferred route for massive columns of troops and military vehicles. On April 9th, 1940, it had been the German 391st and 399th Infantry Regiments driving north with the intent to occupy Denmark; on May 10th, 1945, it was half the British 21st Army Group who drove north to liberate the land from the Germans.

But the British didn't have the road all to themselves. While the armored columns headed for Haderslev, Kolding, Vejle and other towns and cities further north, the defeated German troops marched the other way. Tens of thousands of Wehrmacht soldiers and officers who had all been disarmed at staging areas throughout Jutland were on their way home to a Germany that hardly existed anymore.

In the days following the capitulation of the German forces in Holland, north-west Germany and Denmark, the press had cast off the shackles of censorship and had been able to report freely from the front lines further south without worrying about answering to the German high command. The articles and the pictures showed the harsh reality of the utter devastation the
Germans had brought upon themselves by electing a leader that had only brought misery and death.

The newspapers also brought pictures from camps whose names would be etched into history, and whose mere existence would cast a black shadow over Germany and Germans for a very long time: Dachau, Sachsenhausen, Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme and, of course, Auschwitz.

On the side of the busy road, dwarfed by the tanks and armored vehicles that drove north, a small Nissen hut made of corrugated steel had been hastily erected by a unit of the Royal British Engineers. The hut was used as a base for a group of Danish resistance fighters who were trying to keep track of the Germans going south in case war criminals such as people from the SS or the Gestapo, the secret police, were trying to sneak out of the country by hiding in the ranks of the regular Wehrmacht soldiers.

Inside the hut, a man wearing a flour bag over his head so he couldn't be recognized sat at the window overlooking the road and the soldiers marching past. The man, who was born in Southern Schleswig and thus Danish-minded, had been a secretary for the Gestapo and knew just about everyone important. He had rolled over on his former comrades in exchange for a more lenient punishment. Now and then, he alerted his liaison after recognizing a face in the groups of men marching past.

"Are you sure?" Anne-Katrine said, holding a list of names belonging to known war criminals in her good hand. She wore her regular outfit of boots, high-waisted, coarse working pants, an off-white o-neck shirt and her beloved vest that had been salvaged through a bout of fierce scrubbing. She had left the flat cap in the truck since the warm sun was beating down from above.

Her left arm - which carried the Resistance armband - was still in a sling, but it hadn't stopped her from participating in the last official operation the Danish resistance movement would carry out. However, she hadn't broken her word to Lydia as her partner was there working as a nurse.

The Red Cross had set up a medical post next to the Nissen hut manned by their own nurses and local volunteers in case any of the German soldiers marching south were dehydrated or suffered from blisters, torn ligaments or other injuries. The post often resembled a beehive with a bevy of young, female nurses zipping back and forth between the patients and the back of the tent.

'I'm sure,' the former Gestapo secretary said from inside the hut. 'The next group… third row, the second man from the left… Willi Dietzsche, an Oberleutnant in the SD, the Sicherheitsdienst… the German security service.'

"All right," Anne-Katrine said and stepped over to the group of Danish resistance fighters and British soldiers who were waiting for just such an occasion - her brother was one of them.

The two Jensens offered each other a smile when they met. When Arthur had finally returned to the farm on May 7th after a two-day bender to drown his sorrows over his failure to perform, he had been hung over, filthy and unshaven. Once he had slept it off and had cleaned up his act, it
had taken an entire day of endless, emotionally draining talks for the siblings to come to terms with what had happened, but they had cleared the hurdle and were on their way to mending their relationship.

She flipped through the papers to find 'D', then 'Di' then 'Dietzsche, Willi, Oberleutnant-SD.' - "Third row, second man from the left. Supposedly a Mr. Dietzsche, a member of the SD," she said to the man in charge.

Once the other men had moved away to observe the German soldiers marching towards them, Arthur shuffled closer to his sister. "How's your arm, Sis?"

"Oh, throbbing. But it's better today, thank you."

They smiled at each other without speaking. Anne-Katrine noticed the dark, harried look in her brother's eyes and realized it would take a while before the shock of what had happened behind the sandbags would recede enough for him to return to normal. For her, it had taken two weeks to digest most of the events of April 9th save for the really bad experiences, but she'd had help in the shape of Lydia. Now Arthur needed help too, and she was determined to give all she had to get her brother through what would undoubtedly be a tough couple of weeks, or perhaps even months.

One of the other Danish resistance fighters called Arthur's name, and he offered Anne-Katrine another brief smile before he ran over to the others.

While the British soldiers stopped the German group to pick out the man in question - who was wearing the uniform of a simple Wehrmacht private instead of the attire fit for a First Lieutenant - Anne-Katrine shuffled over to the Red Cross post to see how Lydia was coping with the heavy workload.

As the oldest non-Red Cross nurse present, Lydia had found herself acting as a mother hen to a group of volunteers from the local nursing school who were all teenagers. The young women spent as much time gossiping about the cute British lads as they did taping sore German feet, but Lydia had made them follow the plan after speaking a few choice words with the rough edge of her tongue.

The Red Cross had put up nearly fifty lawn chairs and thirty bunks on wheels under a white canvas awning to assist those soldiers who were too exhausted to carry on. Some of the Germans had marched for nearly two hundred and fifty kilometers to get to the post, so the nurses weren't short of patients.

Anne-Katrine waited for Lydia to finish up powdering and taping a blistered foot before she shuffled over there and put a hand on her partner's elbow. "Hello again… still keeping busy?"

"Oh, I'll say!" Lydia said and let out a muted chuckle - the red blotches on her cheeks were proof of her words. Like the other nurses, she wore black shoes, white long-stockings, a white dress with an H-front over a pale-blue shirt, and finally an elaborate, starched hat with the Red Cross
logo on the front. Since the temperature had climbed to eighteen degrees Celsius, the Red Cross Matron had allowed the volunteers to forego the cape. "What about you? Have you found any bad men since we last spoke?"

"Perhaps we have. I can't say."

"Oh… is it that hush-hush?"

"Well, no. I just don't have a clue!"

While they laughed at that, Lydia took the opportunity to run her fingers up and down her partner's injured forearm to provide a little comfort and support. Still smiling, she looked past Anne-Katrine at a group of young men standing at the Nissen hut all wearing the Resistance armband and carrying a rifle. "Anne-Katrine, who are all those men? Did they belong to Sergeant Mehlborg's group?"

"Those young pups?" Anne-Katrine said and took a peek over her shoulder at the men in question. "Nah. I call them the Latter Day Saints. They all joined up after May 5th when no harm could come to any of them. But they're wearing our colors so I have to treat them with kid gloves. Otherwise they'll get annoyed with a girl like me and report me to the regional branch of the Liberation Council."

"Oh, what a load of… can you believe that?"

"Frankly, no," Anne-Katrine said and dug into her vest pocket to find her cigarettes. She had given up on all the Danish substitute brands, but she had been in the right place at the right time for once and had lucked into some high-quality British cigarettes: she had traded a bottle of her homemade bjøs for a German medal that someone had found at the square following the battle. She had read in an article in a special edition of the local newspaper that the British soldiers were keen on bringing home war mementos, so she had offered a Tommy the medal in exchange for a carton of British cigarettes. It was a win-win situation for all involved, and she took full advantage of that by lighting up and inhaling a lungful of the smoke produced by the high-quality tobacco.

Lydia had a new patient she needed to take care of: a German soldier in his late forties who was pulling a cart with various objects that he had collected in his years in Denmark. He hobbled badly as he entered the medical post from the Red Cross and made a beeline for one of the lawn chairs.

Out on the road, the next company of German soldiers came marching down towards the Nissen hut. Another member of the Resistance had temporarily taken over Anne-Katrine's job of liaising between the former Gestapo man and the British, so she had plenty of time to study the group of men who marched with a steady, unhurried cadence.

Smoke wafted up from the tip of the cigarette as she watched them file past her. The men were young, only in their mid-twenties, and it seemed most of them had sandy-blond hair and blue
eyes. Most of the soldiers were Privates but they had two Gefreiters, Corporals, walking with them to keep them in line. They didn't look like the members of a defeated army, and were in fact singing a marching song at the top of their lungs.

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes. Her lips became a thin line in her face as she watched the young men, their orderly uniforms and their scoffed boots. They were members of the Wehrmacht, the regular German army, and not one of the special branches like the SS, but it was clear they formed a disciplined, veteran unit. Growling under her breath, Anne-Katrine stomped over to her sweetheart and pointed at the marching soldiers. "Lydia… that had better not be a Nazi battle song they're singing…"

"I don't think so," Lydia said, wiping her hands on a towel.

They listened for a few seconds but the lyrics didn't seem offensive. The answer came from the mature soldier who had taken off his boots to air his tired feet. "Pardon me," he said in broken Danish, "but that's not a Nazi song. It's the Westerwaldlied… a very popular folk song. Maybe they're from that region, I don't know…"

"Oh… thank you very much, Herr Soldat," Lydia said with a smile before she tended to the man's blisters.

Anne-Katrine wasn't really appeased, but she took another deep puff of her British cigarette and pushed the whole thing aside.

The incident was soon forgotten about when a car driving towards them from the north applied its horn again and again to fit between the marching Germans and the British armored columns. "Now what?" Anne-Katrine mumbled, stepping away from the medical post to see better.

A black Horch limousine came racing down towards the control post at the Nissen hut. Running with two working headlights, the elegant piece of machinery kicked up a dust storm as it drove on the crown of the road that offered the most room for such a vehicle. A passenger was sitting in the back, and once the car got close enough, it became evident that it was Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann. Soon, the fop leaned forward and tapped the driver on the shoulder.

Anne-Katrine stepped out to the grassy verge with her hand in the air as the car swerved in between two groups of marching Germans to get to the side of the road. It came to a halt where she stood, and the rear window was soon rolled down.

Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann was as always dressed impeccably; this time, he wore a dark-gray pre-war business suit that really did make him look like a movie star. His hair was slicked back and his cleft chin stood out in the strong sunshine. The only thing out of the ordinary was the missing pencil-thin mustache on his upper lip. "Ah! Anne-Katrine!" he cried, sticking his hand out of the window so she could shake it.

"Flemming," Anne-Katrine said dryly, taking a final puff from her cigarette before she threw it down and crushed it under her boot. She shook Flemming's hand just to be polite.
"How have you been? I haven't seen you since my father's birthday party. Oh… did you get yourself wounded?" he said, gesturing at the sling.

"I was stung by a bee."

"Oh… uh… all right…"

Anne-Katrine chuckled at the puzzled look on the fop's face as she leaned down to peek onto the back seat of the expensive limousine. "So… this is how the high and mighty drive, is it? Too bad it's a German car. Or perhaps you'll buy a Bentley now?"

"Well, I'll think about it," Flemming said and smoothed down the fabric on the back seat.

"What happened to your mustache? You look like you're fifteen years old again."

Flemming laughed as he ran a finger across his smooth upper lip. "Yes, I thought it was time for a change. The people I'm about to see haven't had the best of luck with mustaches recently, so I thought I'd better go bare… so to speak."

"Have you heard the Russians have invaded Bornholm because the German commandant refused to surrender?"

"I have. Such a tragedy… so many civilian casualties. Arial bombardments, too. Dreadful."

"Though I hate to admit it," Anne-Katrine said with a lopsided grin, "you have warned us of the Soviet threat for a couple of years now."

Flemming returned the grin, though his was broader. "I believe I have, yes."

"Flemming, how in the blazes were you able to escape punishment by the British? I wouldn't have thought they would allow you to run around freely. Or did you bribe them all into releasing you from custody? You were put in military custody, weren't you? I heard you were… but…"

"I was indeed, but they treated me with the utmost fairness. Matters were squared with a Colonel C.E. Brislington who has connections here in Denmark. Connections, my dear. All a matter of connections," Flemming said with an uncharacteristically sincere look on his face.

Anne-Katrine shook her head and let out a sigh. "You're certainly a smooth operator, I'll give you that. What are you actually doing here?"

"Oh, I thought you'd never ask," the fop said with a beaming grin on his face. "I applied for a special permit to enter the British-controlled zones in Germany. It came by special delivery this morning courtesy of the British embassy in Stockholm. You know me… there's no time like the present to strike a deal."
"A deal? What kind of deal are you expecting to strike down there, Flemming? Didn't you see the pictures from Berlin and the other cities? There's nothing left!"

"Ah, but that's just it, Anne-Katrine! The cities will have to be rebuilt… enter a crafty entrepreneur from the north who could, say, buy local construction companies for next to nothing and go into business with the Allied forces to rebuild everything."

"Clever so-and-so," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle.

"Yes, indeed. Indeed I am. Oh, we better move on," Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann said and shuffled around on the back seat. "Anne-Katrine, is there anything you need that I could help you with? Maybe at the farm, or-"

Scrunching up her face, Anne-Katrine shook her head in such a way even a blind man would know she wasn't interested. A handout was the absolute last thing she needed, and especially one that came from the rich fop. "No thanks, Flemming. We already have all we need," she said decisively.

"That's not true! You don't have a bridal bouquet!" he said and winked at the woman he had been trying to get to marry him for better part of fifteen years.

The look on Anne-Katrine's face proved it would last another fifteen years easily, if not twice that, before she would even consider it for more than a second at a time. "Ah yes. True. My life is sorely lacking without one," she said in an overly feminine, sing-song voice. "I cry myself asleep each night just thinking about how much I've missed not having a bridal bouquet."

Flemming let out a loud laugh and stuck his hand out of the window to shake Anne-Katrine's again. "Sarcasm isn't lost on me, you know. Goodbye for now, Anne-Katrine. Stay safe, all right?"

"I will, thank you. You too, Flemming. You'll need it where you're going," Anne-Katrine said and shook the hand of her old acquaintance. She took a step back and watched the black Horch limousine drive out into the middle of the road and continue southward. She tracked it with her eyes until it disappeared into the mess of marching soldiers and armored cars.

She strolled back to the medical post, but Lydia was busy treating and bandaging a German's bleeding foot so she didn't have time to chat. Instead, she shuffled back to the Nissen hut to see what went on there. The Oberleutnant from the Sicherheitsdienst that the former Gestapo man had picked out from the group had confessed to his real identity and had been sent to an internment camp before he would be transferred to a prison for questioning and further processing.

It gave Anne-Katrine the creeps to work with a former member of the Gestapo, Danish-minded from Southern Schleswig or not, so she couldn't be bothered to stay at the Nissen hut and listen to him betray his former comrades. She remained close in case anything happened that would need her input or help, but the covert operation was going peacefully so she had very little to do.
She still wore the Resistance armband, but it wasn't as much fun as it had been earlier - not that 'fun' was the right word to use considering what she had been involved in.

There were simply too many fresh faces around, too many young, beardless men who had joined up after the hostilities had ended because of pressure from their parents or their peers. Of course, some of the fancier fellows had joined the Resistance to impress their girlfriends. The members of the latter group were easy to spot; they always spoke loudly of their own importance in the resistance movement while downplaying the efforts of those who had been there throughout the war.

Anne-Katrine sighed and looked at the fresh faces and the many hangers-on who shuffled around the small camp looking important. She looked at the Germans who were still marching south, and at the British columns that were still moving north. "I've paid my dues," she mumbled and carefully moved her arm out of her sling so she could take off the Resistance armband.

Once the red, white and royal-blue piece of cloth was off her arm, she folded it up and stuffed it into her vest pocket. It would go onto the wall of the stately dining room with the old flag, the picture of King Christian the Tenth, the painting of the Royal Coat of Arms and the special commemorative medal made of four copper coins that symbolized April 9th, 1940.

Her bad arm throbbed almost at once, so she moved it into the sling to take the weight off it. She began to shuffle back to the Red Cross medical post to inform Lydia that she was retiring from the stage, but she had only made it halfway there before her attention fell on a flatbed truck that reversed up to the area where the Danish and British soldiers were waiting.

The truck carried another load of fresh-faced rookies with big grins, shiny weapons and brand new Resistance armbands. When Anne-Katrine caught a glimpse of the leader of the relief squad, she came to a dead stop and stared wide-eyed at the man. She recognized his chubby shape at once - it was none other than one of her old adversaries, the near-misogynistic Ole Thor Didriksen.

The insufferable Didriksen had spent the entire war save for April 9th working as the third assistant in a grocery shop, but now he wore a Resistance armband, a battle helmet, an M1889 rifle and a perversely smug grin on his ruddy face. He had the attentive audience eating out of his hand as he told stories of his exploits in the war, and it didn't sound like he was holding anything back.

"Oh, hell no… Did-de-riksen," Anne-Katrine croaked, staring at the chubby soldier. "That does it… I'm not spending another minute here… not with bloody Did-de-riksen in charge…"

If there was one thing she didn't need at that moment in time, it was to talk to Ole Thor Didriksen, so she stomped away before he could recognize her. She strode across the dusty area and into the Red Cross medical post where she went straight over to Lydia. "Dearest, can you talk?"
Lydia wiped her hands on a towel and looked at the general confusion around her. The young nurses had finally been whipped into shape and were working on the tired Germans as a team, not gossiping individuals. There were fewer Germans who needed help on a whole, so there were many empty lawn chairs and bunks. "Well… yes. What's wrong? You look annoyed."

"Oh, that's a long story."

"You're not wearing the armband…?"

"No. I'm retired. From now on, I'm just a farmer with a colorful past," Anne-Katrine said with a tired grin. "Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that I'll be sitting in the truck resting my poor arm… and head… and feet. You don't have to leave early, I'll just catch some shuteye."

"Actually," Lydia said and looked at the workload that had grown less over the last thirty minutes, "I'm sure I can get off early. I just need to speak to the Red Cross Matron. We're volunteers after all. Tell you what," - Lydia hooked her arm inside Anne-Katrine's good one and began to shuffle along the medical post - "if the Matron says it's all right, and I'm sure she will, I'll be at the truck in five minutes and then we can drive home. Will that work for you?"

"You better believe it will, sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said with a grin.

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It took seven minutes rather than five, but it made the reunion all the sweeter. Anne-Katrine had already started the recalcitrant, old engine so they didn't need to turn the crank or stir the wood gas generator. It meant they had all the more time for the important elements of life.

Lydia had barely climbed up into the Triangel truck's cab before Anne-Katrine pulled her close and claimed her lips in a 'how nice to see you again after all this time'-kind of kiss.

They grinned at each other before Lydia scooted closer to Anne-Katrine and leaned against the warm body. With the engine still idling, Anne-Katrine fished for a gear and found reverse so she could move away from the parking spot. The old truck came to life in a cloud of black smoke and a barrage of farts from the exhaust, but it moved, and they were soon on their way home to the Jensen farm.

… Where they lived a simple life milking cows, leading them to the meadow, carrying the churns to the cold storage cellar, mucking out in the cowshed, sweeping the courtyard, cleaning the gutters, tending to the vegetable patch, serving and eating oatmeal, øllebrød and Cumberland sausages, and spending many a glorious evening making love under the blanket in their bedroom - in short, Lydia and Anne-Katrine lived happily ever after…
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THE END.

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