RAILWAY SABOTEURS
by Norsebard

Contact: norsebarddk@gmail.com

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 elements 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.

The registered trademarks mentioned in this story are © of their respective owners. No infringement of their rights is intended, and no profit is gained.

NOTES FROM THE AUTHOR:

Written: February 28th - March 14th, 2015.

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

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
1943. Three years into the German occupation of Denmark in World War II, Anne-Katrine Jensen has settled down with her family on their farm. Life carries on as always, but the war intrudes on their peaceful existence when Anne-Katrine meets an old brother-in-arms who gives her an offer to join the resistance movement. If she accepts, she's to participate in a sabotage on the main railway lines just outside of town…

******

*

*

CHAPTER 1

Tuesday, June 1st, 1943.

Shapeless gray tendrils of the heavy morning fog swirled ceaselessly across a grassy meadow. Birdsong from a nearby cluster of beech trees created the background score to the eerie scene, proving that life went on, even three years into the German occupation of Denmark.

The curtain of fog briefly fluttered aside to reveal a tall figure clad in boots, coarse pants, a dark overcoat and a flat cap. The figure moved slowly and deliberately, like it was trying to penetrate the fog to see the condition of the soil. The familiar shape of a hunting rifle was visible on the figure's right shoulder. Sighing, the figure removed the flat cap to rub the brow in frustration.

Anne-Katrine Jensen plopped the cap back down on her black locks and stared at the impenetrable wall of fog that surrounded her. "Bloody typical," she mumbled under her breath. "I can't even see twenty paces ahead… how am I supposed to check the meadow for those damn things?"

She looked around, reminded of the brutal day three years previously where she and her brother's unit had fought the advancing German army. The weather had been similar on that day, at least to begin with, but the sun had come out to clear the stage for Death to sweep the land.

Grunting, she pulled her overcoat closer. It was June 1st, three weeks before summer solstice, but it might as well have been in the dead of winter judging by the single-figure temperatures. "No, this is pointless," she mumbled and turned around to head back.

The slog across the grassy meadow in her heavy clog-boots didn't do much good for the lasting legacy of her brief military career - the healed gunshot wound in her right foot still gave her grief, especially on foggy, rainy days - but she understood that it could have been far worse if Doctor Meincke hadn't performed wonders on it a scant handful of minutes after she had been shot.
Eager moo’ing reached her ears as she stumbled closer to the edge of the meadow to confirm that she was moving in the right direction. Soon, the twelve cows she owned with her brother Arthur Wilfred Jensen came into view. The livestock had been milked and were jumping to get back on greener pastures, and Arthur and their hired hand Poul Nedergaard could hardly control them.

"Anything, Sis?" Arthur said while he was still merely a silhouette that had trouble punching through the fog. He had recovered well from the acute appendicitis that had been the trigger for the entire sequence of events on that dreadful day, April 9th, 1940, but now and then, he confessed to still being annoyed with his sister that she had gone to war instead of him.

"I can't see a bloody thing out there, Arthur!" Anne-Katrine said and shook her head in frustration. "The fog's thicker than Mom's damn pea soup!"

Poul Nedergaard, now forty-seven and skinnier like they all were after three years of war, hobbled forward and pushed his flat cap back from his brow. "It certainly was loud in the town last night," he said in his strong, local dialect. "I don't think I'll ever get used to the sound of the anti-aircraft cannons the Germans have put up in the old garrison. What in the world were they firing at?"

"We had several Royal Air Force fighters blasting past overhead, Poul," Anne-Katrine said, reaching for the lead cow's rope so they could begin the trek onto the grassy meadow. Once the lead cow would move, the rest would follow by instinct. "I don't know where they were headed, but it sounded like they came in at tree-top altitude. And the Germans blasted away in this direction... we could see the searchlights and the tracer bullets clear as day. I only pray we won't find any duds out there like we did the other time."

A brief shiver ran down Anne-Katrine's spine when she thought of the unexploded forty-centimeter long anti-aircraft shell they had found buried in the soft soil smack in the middle of the meadow in November of 1942. The cannons had fired at a group of RAF fighter-bombers, but they had been several kilometers out of range so the Germans had wasted their ammunition.

The local police couldn't do anything about the dud and the German garrison Commandant, **Oberst** Vossler, wasn't willing to risk any of his soldiers to remove it, so they'd had to call in an ordnance disposal unit from the Germans' main hub at the old military airfield in Aalborg, nearly three hundred kilometers away.

Anne-Katrine sighed when she remembered the hubbub it had caused. At present, she didn't need that kind of excitement in her life, so she kept a firm eye on the grassy soil ahead of her as she held onto the lead cow's flank.

As expected, the other cows moo'ed merrily and followed the leader onto the meadow. At the back, Poul Nedergaard used a big stick to keep the cows moving forward; his club foot and his orthopedic boot slowed him down but made him a good man to have at the back to rein in the stragglers.
Up front, Arthur patted the hind quarters of a crimson cow to get it up to speed. The large animal moo'ed and shook its head like it was trying to tell him to sod off. "Sis… have you thought about my proposition?" he said as the cow finally got moving.

Anne-Katrine kept on walking but moved over on the other side of the lead cow to look at her brother - in particular at his hands. Although he wore gloves, the gold wedding band was visible through the leather. "To expand the farmhouse?"

"I believe that's the only one I've made, yes," Arthur said with a grin.

"I've thought about it."

"And?"

"We can't afford it, Arthur. You know that. We can't afford paying for the labor or the building materials."

Anne-Katrine fell silent and concentrated on walking through the dense fog.

A few minutes went by in silence before Arthur spoke in a quieter voice so Poul Nedergaard wouldn't hear it at the back. "People are talking, Sis."

Anne-Katrine looked straight ahead and kept walking. "The marriage was supposed to make people stop talking."

"It did at first. Now, people think it's strange that we can all live under one roof. I've heard that from more than one person."

"They've never said that to me."

"They wouldn't, Sis."

"Look," Anne-Katrine said and turned back to shoot her brother a pointed look, "what we have is no different from a dozen other farms around us. A husband and a wife… and the husband's old maid sister."

"Mmmm-yes, but those old spinsters aren't twenty-nine, Anne-Katrine. They don't look like you, nor do they behave like you. And that's why people are talking."

Grumbling, Anne-Katrine looked away and concentrated on the grassy meadow ahead.

For Anne-Katrine, the return trip went by in a silent brooding that only lifted when a petite figure broke through the fog and approached them with a wave. It didn't take long to recognize Lydia's coarse, dark-tan dress, her white apron, and the pale blue scarf she had wrapped around her honey-blond locks to keep the fog from making them damp.
After turning twenty-five, Lydia Jensen née Petersen had matured greatly and was more beautiful than ever - at least according to Anne-Katrine. The fact that she wore Arthur's wedding band on her finger was a minor irritation for Anne-Katrine, but one she had come to accept since it meant that Lydia and she could live together while still adhering to the strict word of the law and the judgmental eye of the Church.

Effectively, Lydia was Anne-Katrine's wife, not Arthur's, and she went to Anne-Katrine's bedroom at night, not Arthur's. Nobody knew the truth behind the charade, and nobody would ever get to know it. Even Poul Nedergaard had no knowledge of the true nature of their relationship. It meant they had to keep everything under wraps while they were in the company of others, but they had already lived that way for six years so it had become an unfortunate second nature to them.

Lydia's presence made Anne-Katrine's spirit lift and she reached up and returned the wave. "Hello again, Lydia. Did you think we had gotten lost?"

"Oh, nothing quite that bad," Lydia said in her trademark silky voice that sounded like it should come from a larger creature. "I just wanted to see how far you were. The oatmeal is hot and ready, and the coffee isn't far behind."

Arthur let out a groan and patted his stomach. "Sounds great, that. I could eat a bloody horse. How about you, Poul?"

"Oh, well," Poul Nedergaard said, tipping his flat cap at the lady of the house like he always did, "the Missus did make me a thick porridge this morning. But coffee sure sounds fine."

Lydia smiled and turned back towards the fence from where she had come. In the distance, they could barely make out the farmhouse and the cowshed. "Oh, there's plenty of coffee for everyone. Well, coffee… what passes for coffee these days, anyway. Some of it has a tendency to look like ground sawdust."

They all laughed at the undeniable fact of that statement. After nearly four years of the bloody conflict that had ravaged Europe, certain products were scarce and rationing had been introduced for just about everything. All imported goods like tobacco, coffee, tea and even most types of fruit except apples and pears were distant memories. In their place, crafty businessmen had introduced tea leaves made of dried rhubarb or stinging nettle, an indescribable, murky substance known as Coffee Substitute and the infamous Powhattan cigarettes that had gained such a reputation for being a terrible product that the brand name itself had turned into a word used to describe the worst of the worst.

Tea made of stinging nettle was one thing, but even the thought of the awful cigarettes made Anne-Katrine scrunch up her face and think back to the good, old days where she enjoyed her Bristol Favorites. She still smoked, but not only were the cigarettes rationed - unless the local tobacconist was willing to trade 'under the counter' - it was always hit and miss whether or not the miserable things would even remain in one piece while being smoked. She had tried to take
up the pipe, but Lydia had thought she looked too ridiculous with a *meerschaum* or a nose-warmed pipe in her mouth, so the matter had been dropped.

The farmhouse finally came into view ahead of them, and the four people walked across the uneven cobblestones to get to the front door. The old farm's courtyard looked like it always had, except for the flagpole that Anne-Katrine and Arthur had erected at the far end. The red-and-white Dannebrog, the Danish national flag, could only hang limply in the fog. Anne-Katrine had made it her business to hoist it each morning at the crack of dawn to show that although the land had been occupied, the spirit hadn't been crushed.

Lydia hurried over to stand in the doorway and put out her arms to block the others. "Ah! Your clogs are too dirty this morning. I have too many items on my to-do list today to have time to wash the kitchen floor. Put them here, please," she said and pointed at the wooden rack just outside the door. "All of you, please," she added, winking at Anne-Katrine who winked back.

"Breakfast is served!" Lydia said as she put down the steaming bowl of oatmeal on the wooden table in the kitchen. Anne-Katrine and Arthur had their spoons ready and scooped up large globs that were put on their own plates. Poul took a smaller portion just to be polite.

"Oh, it smells delicious," Anne-Katrine said before she went to work on the oatmeal which kept her quiet for the duration. She had shed the dark overcoat and sat in her customary outfit: a pair of coarse pants and a black vest over a tan, O-neck shirt.

"Thank you, Anne-Katrine," Lydia said with a small, humorous curtsey. "Husband dearest, do you want me to fetch yesterday's newspapers?"

"Yes, dear," Arthur said around a spoonful.

Even before Lydia had time to perform another humorous curtsey, Anne-Katrine pushed her chair back and rose. "I'll get 'em," she said, but Lydia put a hand on the taller woman's shoulder to hold her back.

"No, no, it's all right, Anne-Katrine. It won't take me but a few seconds." Smiling, Lydia walked down the connecting hallway past the old-fashioned telephone to get to the living room. She soon returned with the two newspapers Anne-Katrine had bought the day before when she had been to town.

After the morning papers had been put on the table, Lydia took the pale-blue metal coffee pot and filled the four mugs with the dark brown liquid. By the time she was ready to eat, there was barely a portion left in the large bowl. She found her spoon, scooped the remains of the oatmeal onto her plate and dug in.
Anne-Katrine smiled at her dearest before she pushed the chair back from the table to stretch her long legs. The chair made a harsh noise on the raw floorboards which earned her a raised eyebrow by Lydia.

"Pardon me," Anne-Katrine said and took the first of the two newspapers. Arthur and Poul just grunted at her, but Lydia puckered up her lips and winked.

The first newspaper Anne-Katrine leafed through was The Fatherland, a German-minded propaganda rag that nevertheless provided the sought-after, if strongly biased, information on what went on inside the kingdom and elsewhere. Often, one only had to read between the lines to retrieve information not found in the Danish newspapers that were all made under strict censorship. "Mmmm," Anne-Katrine grunted, leafing through the pages in search for something interesting. "According to the dispatches from the Reich, the German forces that used to be in North Africa have made a strategic regrouping and have moved across the Mediterranean and into Greece and Sicily to strengthen Fortress Europe."

"In other words," Arthur said, dabbing his lips with his napkin. "Monty kicked them out of Africa."

"Mmmm. That's it for today," Anne-Katrine said and put The Fatherland away. The next newspaper was the Danish Jutland Post which didn't provide much news from around the world but chose to have its focus on the local affairs. "Mmmm… sounds like the Germans have cracked open a Resistance group further north. Four men were trying to organize an act of sabotage but never got very far… one of them couldn't keep his mouth shut when he visited his ladyfriend, by the looks of it."

"Bloody amateurs," Arthur grumbled into his oatmeal.

Anne-Katrine lowered the newspaper and stared straight ahead. "It says here they've been sentenced to death for crimes against the German Reich. The sentence is to be carried out by a firing squad tomorrow at dawn… which is today. Good Lord… they're already dead…"

A concerned silence spread among the four people at the table, and a brief shiver ran down Anne-Katrine's back as she revisited her own, brief experience of being in the firing line. "In happier news," she said, looking back at the newspaper, "the market day in town is going ahead as planned. The German garrison Commandant has welcomed the festivities and promises to make it a colorful event. Hm!"

Lydia pushed away her empty plate and began to collect the dirty dishes. "Oh, I can't stand that dreadful man. He thinks he's the king of our little town," she said as she moved her chair back. After carrying the pile over to the kitchen table next to the wash basin, she put a bucket of water from the well onto the stove to get it to heat up so she could do the dishes.

"That's because he is," Arthur said darkly.
Anne-Katrine rose from the table, signaling the end of the breakfast ritual. Behind her, Arthur and Poul Nedergaard did the same. Arthur needed to go to the bathroom so he left in a hurry, but Poul stole a last glance at the cover of the Jutland Post before he put it away and took his flat cap. "Thank you very much for a lovely breakfast, Miss Lydia. Miss Jensen, I'll go ahead with my daily routines now. I'll sweep the courtyard at first, then the stables."

"All right, Poul. When are you leaving today?" Anne-Katrine said, leaning against the kitchen table.

"At seven."

"Mmmm. I'll come out in a little while to begin preparing the truck. Lydia and I will drive to town today. Perhaps we can make a few Kroner at the market day."

"Oh, right," Poul said before he hobbled out of the kitchen and down the hallway. Soon, the front door closed after him.

Anne-Katrine counted to ten to make sure they weren't about to be disturbed. With the house quiet, she leaned in and kissed Lydia on the neck while the shorter woman did the dishes. "Hello again, sweetheart. My, you look beautiful today."

"Thank you… only I know it's not true," Lydia said and swept away a few strands of hair with the back of her hand. The hair fell back down in her eyes at once, and she tried to blow it away with a burst of air that had very little effect.

Anne-Katrine smiled and reached up to move the stray lock behind Lydia's ear. "Oh, it's true. You're always beautiful."

"I'm wearing an ill-fitting dress and I'm up to my elbows in dishwater…"

"Well, that's also true, but it doesn't detract from your beauty."

"If you say so," Lydia said with a chuckle. "How about making yourself useful? Grab a tea towel and wipe off the plates."

Anne-Katrine chuckled back and reached for the tea towel that she and Lydia had made themselves like so many other women across the country. Held in red, white and blue, it represented the colors of the Allied nations and the roundels on the RAF airplanes that were occasionally seen racing across the skies. The Germans hated the fad and had tried to ban it, but red, white and blue were also the colors of the Norwegian flag which flew in many places because of the close bonds between Denmark and Norway, and the people behind the movement had claimed it was to support their brothers up north. "Oh, and here I thought you were going to say that I could make myself useful by kissing you."
"Well…" Lydia said and glanced to her left to look out of the single-glazing kitchen windows. Out in the courtyard, Poul Nedergaard moved the trusty, old broom in a steady pattern as he swept the cobblestones. "We better wait until we're alone for that."

Anne-Katrine nodded wistfully and began to wipe down the large bowl they had used for the oatmeal.

Later, Anne-Katrine rested a buttock on the sideboard underneath the telephone while she held the old-fashioned horn to her ear. "Hello? Hello? Are you still there? Hel- aw, dammit," she said into the mouthpiece as she tapped the hook a couple of times. "Hello, Birthe, are you still here?"

'I certainly am!' the nineteen-year-old telephone operator said at the other end of the line, followed by a quick snicker. Birthe was a kindhearted young woman whose voice was perfect for the challenging task - unfortunately, there were a few downsides to her as well: not only did she have a tendency to listen in on the conversations, she was the town's First Lady of Gossip, so the callers needed to moderate their messages unless they wanted to become the topic of the day at the square and the grocery store.

"Birthe, it's me again… Anne-Katrine Jensen."

'Go on.'

"I need you to try to connect me to Atlas zero zero three again, please. The connection was so awful I couldn't hear a damn thing before!" Anne-Katrine said and put away the single-page sheet with the telephone numbers for the entire region.

'The dairy plant?'

"Yes, please."

'I'll try. Please hold.'

"But not too long, eh?" Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle.

'I can't make any guarantees, Miss Jensen! All right, it's ringing… still ringing. And… yes, you have a connection.'

"Thank you," Anne-Katrine said and crossed her legs the other way. "Hello, is this the dairy plant?"

A series of howls, hisses and static was heard through the telephone wires that had become highly unstable after the Germans had seized the best and newest equipment for their own use. "Hello? Hello?" Anne-Katrine groaned, rolling her eyes in frustration.
'llo? Hello?' a male voice said somewhere in the ether, but that was the only thing Anne-Katrine could hear before the connection was lost for good. Sighing, she moved around and tapped the hook a couple of times. "Birthe, I give up. It'll be easier to simply drive over there. Thank you."

'You're most welcome, Anne-Katrine,' Birthe said and closed the connection.

Grunting, Anne-Katrine put the horn on the hook and let out a long, deep sigh. The ancient, creaking flatbed truck from the dairy plant hadn't shown up yet, and she had nine churns filled to the brim with fresh milk that she needed to get shifted before it would go bad. "I guess we'll just have to drive it over there ourselves," she mumbled as she shuffled away from the sideboard and out into the courtyard.

While she sat on the doorstep and put her clog-boots back on, she observed how Poul Nedergaard and her brother used a rotating grinding stone to sharpen a few axes that had gone dull. While Arthur continuously stepped on a small pedal that kept the large stone spinning, Poul held the various blades to the coarse surface which created a shower of golden sparks that burst onto the courtyard. It wasn't unheard of that sparks from a grinding stone had set an entire farm alight, so they had several buckets of water standing by in case a spark festered.

The ear-splitting whine that was produced by the grinding contact made Anne-Katrine's teeth water, but it didn't last too long. When she had her clog-boots on proper, she got up to head to the chicken coop, but Lydia had beaten her to it.

The younger woman came out of the coop and shut the mesh door behind her with her heel. She carried a large tray of eggs that she put down on a wooden rack intended for that purpose while she attached the three hooks to the mesh door to keep out the foxes. "Were you able to get in touch with the dairy plant?" she said as she took the tray with the eggs, accompanied by a cacophony of cackling chicken from inside the coop.

"No, I wasn't. Nothing but hisses and howls," Anne-Katrine said with a shrug.

Lydia walked across the uneven cobblestones until she reached her partner. "Oh… I guess we need to deliver the churns of milk ourselves…?"

"Looks like it."

"Do we have time for that? I mean, if we don't get to the market day before lunch, all the best spots will surely be taken…"

"I know. The fresh milk is more important, though," Anne-Katrine said and briefly ran a callused hand up Lydia's arm while they were out of sight of Poul. "Perhaps you could bring a few bars of butter? That always creates interest."

"I'll say!" Lydia said and broke out in a warm laugh. "Remember the time when we were practically assaulted by a brigade of housewives? Because we're self-providers, they don't have to use their rationing stamps on our products!"
Anne-Katrine grinned back and took the opportunity to stroke Lydia's arm again. "Yeah, I do. All right, I'll start up the truck. It should be ready to go in fifteen minutes or so."

"And then we'll be alone for hours and hours," Lydia added in a deeper register that made a pleasant little chill trickle down Anne-Katrine's spine.

---

A brief while later, Anne-Katrine locked herself into the woodshed at the far end of the garage barn and found a canvas bag filled with fist-sized pieces of beech firewood that she dragged back out into the courtyard. After locking up, she hoisted the heavy bag onto her shoulder. She needed a moment to get used to the weight, but she eventually staggered away from the shed and across the uneven cobblestones with a firm grip on the coarse material.

She went through the gate and made a sharp left turn at the road to get to their motorized vehicle. The twenty-year old Triangel flatbed truck she had bought third-hand for hardly anything at all greeted her with its regular sorry state. The front bumper was missing, the left headlight was gone altogether - which didn't matter since civilian vehicles were only allowed to drive with a single headlight on - and the radiator and engine cowling were held in place by a few rags that had been tied to the frame. The rear-end housing leaked oil, the roof of the cab leaked water, and the right-hand side door couldn't close properly. Other than that, it was in perfect shape.

Anne-Katrine dumped the heavy bag next to the wood gas generator and wiped a few beads of sweat off her brow. She stepped up onto the lower rung under the door and reached for the big stick that she always had on the bed. With a groan from the ache that rose from her back, she opened the side of the generator chamber and began to scoop out the ashes and sludge from the previous time she had run the truck.

---

It took plenty of cajoling, praying and cursing, but she finally had the generator chamber going well. All she needed to do was to start the truck itself, but that was always the worst part of the equation. After climbing into the cab to turn the ignition key to the 'on' setting, she moved around the front of the dilapidated truck and turned the handle a couple of times to get the crankshaft to line up. Then she gave it an almighty twist that made the old engine cough and splutter - but no more than that.

Growling, Anne-Katrine spat in her hands and gave the handle another, even harder, twist. This time, it came alive with a deep groan and a belch of black smoke. It didn't run cleanly for the first twenty cycles or so, but then it started behaving itself and settled down into a steady, if coughing, hum.

"That truck will be the end of me one day," she mumbled, wiping her sweaty brow with the back of a hand. She couldn't admire her handiwork for long - now they had to drag the nine churns of milk out of the courtyard and up onto the truck's bed so they could be delivered to the dairy plant.
"Arthur?" Anne-Katrine said as she walked back through the gate.

Raking sounds from the cowshed proved where her brother and Poul Nedergaard were, so she made a forty-five degree turn and headed over there. Standing in the doorway, she observed the two men mucking out from the overnight stay of their cattle.

Poul held the wheelbarrow while Arthur did the shoveling, and the pile of animal waste was already nearly a meter high. It didn't exactly smell of roses, nor did the bazillion flies create a pleasant environment.

"Arthur," Anne-Katrine said and stepped into the stables. "I have the truck running now. I could use a hand with the milk churns."

"All right… I'll be there in five minutes," Arthur said, taking a breather from the filthy work.

"Mmmm," Anne-Katrine said and left the stables. She briefly waved at Lydia - who had gone back into the kitchen to prepare the bars of butter they were going to bring - before she walked around the farmhouse and down into the cold storage cellar at the back where the milk churns were kept.

Since the old truck was too wide to fit through the narrow gate that had been built for horse-driven carriages, they had to shift the churns by hand. With each can weighing nearly one hundred kilograms, it wasn't a job for the weak. Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face as she went over to the first can and pulled up in her coarse pants. Crouching down, she moved the full can of milk onto her strong back so she could carry it out to the truck.

---

Nearly two hours later, Anne-Katrine drove the dilapidated Triangel truck past the sign marking the town's limits. The old truck had no problems following the stream of people who seemed to migrate towards the market day at the square. The square itself had been rebuilt following the fighting on April 9th and was almost as good as new. 'Almost' because the garrison Commandant had insisted on erecting a memorial for the German soldiers who had fallen on that day - the Danish soldiers who had given their lives to stop the advancing army apparently didn't rate a mention.

A row of parking spaces had been reserved for the farmers who brought their various produce to the market, and Anne-Katrine slipped the unwieldy truck into the only space that was wide enough. Once it had stopped, the old engine backfired which sent out a cloud of black smoke.

Lydia, who was sitting on the passenger seat with both hands on the door to stop it from flying open while at speed, chuckled out loud and looked behind them across the flatbed. "Oh, I think you scared a little boy, dearest. He's crying."

"Doesn't surprise me a bit," Anne-Katrine said and took the ignition key from the locking cylinder. The engine continued to cough and splutter for a while before it settled down. "Hang
on… I'll help you climb down so we won't lose any of the eggs," she continued and jumped down from the cab.

She quickly made it around the front of the truck and held the passenger side door open for her sweetheart. The box of fresh eggs was first, then the three bars of butter, and finally Lydia herself. Anne-Katrine reached up, took Lydia's hand and held it tenderly while the younger woman stepped down from the cab.

"Thank you, Miss Jensen," Lydia said to keep up appearances while they were in the company of strangers. Looking around, she could see that some were already giving them a sideways glance. "Oh, I am glad you didn't have to carry those awful milk churns into the dairy plant…"

"So are my shoulders," Anne-Katrine said and rolled the aforementioned body parts. "And the one hundred and eighty Kroner we got for the milk sure warm my wallet."

Lydia nodded and picked up the items they had brought for the market. "Indeed. Let's hope we'll make a few more Kroner on this. We have an electricity bill that's almost due."

"Mmmm," Anne-Katrine said, looking like she didn't need to be reminded of that.

---

The square was awash with people who mingled between the many booths commenting on the products for sale. It was a good turnout with every class represented from near-destitutes who had to stuff their boots with hay to fill the holes, to well-off couples who caught the attention of the commoners.

The poorer people and those working at the smaller, privately owned farms were restricted to the booths at the far end of the rows so they wouldn't get in the way of the bourgeois whose fancy pre-war clothes - black hats and shiny suits for the Gentlemen, tan dresses and elaborate headwear for the Ladies - were matched by the gold on their pocket watches, cufflinks and jacket buttons.

Lydia and Anne-Katrine were somewhere in the middle. Lydia had donned a tan dress that was a better fit than the one she used at the farm, and she had her blond hair up in the latest hairdo. Anne-Katrine wore her regular outfit of a flat cap, dark pants and a black vest over a white O-neck shirt, but she had her father's vintage watch hanging on its gold chain from one of the vest's pockets.

All booths were occupied by the time they got there, but it didn't take them long to find a trader who was willing to give up half of his table for their products. While Lydia laid out the eggs, the bars of butter and the herbs she had harvested from her vegetable patch, Anne-Katrine's face fell into a dark mask as she took in the sheer number of the uninvited guests in gray.

There were German soldiers and officers everywhere, and the cheerful din of the market day wasn't enough to prompt even the tiniest smile on Anne-Katrine's lips. The regular soldiers were
typically walking in small groups, but the officers nearly all had a Danish girl on the arm. The young girls seemed taken with the dashing officers in their dashing uniforms that were far more flashy than the drab, khaki Danish outfits. They laughed, they smiled, they offered each other tender squeezes and sent each other sly little winks that spelled out quite clearly where they hoped the fling would take them.

Anne-Katrine stared so hard at the flirting girls that she didn't even notice the elderly gentleman who had come up to their booth. A rumbling "Ahem!" brought her back to the real world. They had been joined by Lydia's former employer, Doctor Edvard Sigurd Meincke, whose whiskers and bushy eyebrows were as impressive as ever. Like most people, he had lost weight as a result of the food rationing, but the reduced girth had helped his complexion which was less ruddy than it had been before the war.

Doctor Meincke had recently retired after turning seventy, but he kept a strong presence at the health center where he rented an office that he used while he wrote a medical science textbook. There was nothing old or stale about the sparkling eyes that shone back at Anne-Katrine above the rim of his metal-frame spectacles, however. "I say, Miss Jensen, you were far, far away just there. Mmmm?"

"Guilty as charged, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said with a grin. "Could we tempt you to buy an egg or two? Or perhaps some butter?"

"Oh, I'm afraid I have already bought my fair share from one of your competitors," Doctor Meincke said and adjusted his spectacles. "Had I known you had a booth down this end, I would have started here."

Lydia finished servicing a customer and put the four Kroner into her purse. "Good day, Doctor Meincke. You look healthy on this foggy day."

"So do you, Lydia. Mmmm… you're still not pregnant? I would have thought that after being married for a year and a half, you'd be well on your way to your second child by now."

"Oh, ha ha…" Lydia said, blushing brightly, "perhaps I'm not meant to have children, Doctor."

"I'm sure it's not for a lack of trying, mmm?" the doctor said, winking at his former nurse.

Now it was Anne-Katrine's time to blush. It certainly wasn't a 'lack of trying,' but rather the nature of the person with whom Lydia shared a bed that prevented a pregnancy. "Oh, Doctor!" she croaked to cover her own embarrassment, "Please, I do not need to be reminded of my brother's engagement in such activities!"

"Oh, I take it all back," the doctor said with a chuckle. "It was very nice talking to you, Ladies. I better get back to my wife. She promised she'd have a hot dinner waiting for me once I returned."

Lydia licked her lips to take her mind off her blushing cheeks. "Have a nice day, Doctor Meincke!"
"And you, Miss Jensen… Mrs. Jensen," the doctor said before he disappeared into the crowd.

When they were alone - or alone as they could be with several hundred people milling about on the square - Lydia and Anne-Katrine looked at each and broke out in identical, embarrassed grins.

---

"Don't look now…" Anne-Katrine said out of the corner of her mouth some time later. Their table was nearly empty with only three eggs remaining in the tray. As expected, the bars of butter had vanished like the morning dew, and the whisks of herbs had sold well, too. "… but the garrison Commandant is coming this way."

"Oh, no," Lydia groaned under her breath. As one of the few who could - and was willing to - speak a modicum of German, she'd had more business with the invaders over the years than she would have liked. "Can we make a run for it before he arrives?"

"Let's try," Anne-Katrine said and scooped up their meager possessions. The trader who had allowed them to use half of his table received the remaining three eggs to return his initial kindness.

To the left of the table, Oberst Herbert Vossler strolled along the booths in no hurry whatsoever. The soldiers in his armed escort gave him room but were close enough to intervene in case someone would try anything. In his mid-fifties, the Colonel was a career officer who had spent the inter-war years as a battalion commander at an Infantry training facility in Northern Germany - as a result, he wasn't as slim as the younger officers, but he was dapper with an impeccable uniform and his cap was on crooked in the style preferred by his generation.

Lydia and Anne-Katrine weren't close enough to see or hear what went on at the booth they had just left behind, and they had very little interest in finding out. Holding the empty egg tray, they walked purposefully down one of the narrow alleys to get to the street that ran parallel to the square.

Along the way, Anne-Katrine cast a wary glance at the white wall at the barber shop. Sometimes at night, images of the horrors that had taken place at that white wall crept into her dreams and reduced her to a sweating, trembling mess. The wall had been repainted and had lost all the scars inflicted on it by the bloody battles, but it was all there, inside Anne-Katrine's mind.

When the dark moments were at their strongest, she could hear the machine guns firing from the enemy tanks, she could smell the cordite and the stench of death, and she could see how her comrades were torn to pieces by the relentless lead that zinged through the air. Now and then, she dreamt that she too was killed at her position at the anti-tank cannon near the end of the battle. It always jerked her awake, and all she could do was to cling onto Lydia's soft body while the last remnants of the dreams were whisked away.
She shivered and picked up the pace to get away from it all. Someone moving into the alley behind them caught her attention. It wasn't a ghost from the past but rather a man wearing a tan trench coat and a hat that sat so low it obscured his face. The man looked down as Anne-Katrine glanced back at him, but kept on walking. "Sweetheart, I think we need to get back to the truck in a hurry," Anne-Katrine whispered out of the corner of her mouth. "I'll tell you about it once we're out of town… no… don't look back."

Lydia drew a worried breath but nodded and looked straight ahead. "Tell me now… what's wrong?" she whispered back.

"There's a man following us."

"Goodness me… do you think it's the Gestapo?"

"Not necessarily. It could be a hoodlum… we're carrying an awful lot of money, sweetie. Word may have gotten around that we received cash payment for the milk we dropped off. Come on, we're almost there," Anne-Katrine said and put a hand on the small of Lydia's back to get her to pick up the pace.

- *-*-*-*-

Getting to the truck wouldn't be the issue; getting the truck to start would. By the sixth time Anne-Katrine turned the handle for the crankshaft with no results other than a rolling fart from the exhaust pipe, she was ready to throw it all away and walk home. If it hadn't been for the nine empty - but expensive - milk churns on the flatbed, she and Lydia would have been a kilometer out of town already.

Lydia tried to be a good companion by doing her best to hold up the engine cowling so Anne-Katrine could look at the recalcitrant bits inside, but her lesser height meant she couldn't hold it up far enough to be effective.

Anne-Katrine smiled at her partner and ran a hand up Lydia's arm that was covered by the tan dress. "I appreciate your support, dearest… but you might as well rest your arms. This is going to take a while."

"Oh… all right," Lydia said and lowered the cowling. "Is the man in the trench coat still there?"

"I haven't spotted him lately, but… he may be, I don't know," Anne-Katrine said, glancing around the street that was still quite full of people there for the market day. "I'm just going to try one more time. If it won't run, we may have to call someone who can drive us home. Or try to call someone, at least."

Lydia smiled and returned the little touch. "I know you can do it."

"I wish I had your confidence," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle. After inserting the handle into the little hole on the front of the truck one more time, she spat in her palms to give it an old-
fashioned heave-ho. She put her back into turning the crank, and the effort finally paid off with a cough, a splutter and a cloud of smoke from the engine.

A few cycles into the sequence, the engine settled down and the roughness went away. Anne-Katrine opened her mouth to quip, but found that her annoyance with the old thing had removed the last traces of her sense of humor. "All right," she said and climbed up into the cab. "Let's go home."

---

Most people walked towards the square so the road out of town wasn't too bad. On the way out, Anne-Katrine steered the ancient *Triangel* truck across three years worth of potholes that hadn't been repaired because the Germans had redirected the local council's budget for roadworks into maintaining the garrison's many concrete surfaces. The leaf springs complained vociferously, the bed creaked and groaned, and the empty milk churns sang a peculiar song as they were flung against each other, but everything seemed to hold together.

When they finally reached the sign marking the town limits, she glanced in the rear view mirror to see if they were being followed by any cars driven by mysterious men wearing trench coats. The road behind them was clear, and she soon stepped on the gas which sent the old truck to the giddy top speed of forty kilometers an hour.

Lydia decided to ease her partner's visible annoyance, so she let the right-hand side door flap in the breeze while she scooted across the bench seat to lean her head against Anne-Katrine's strong shoulder. Humming to herself, she ran a hand up and down the long thigh that hid under the coarse pants. Now and then, she stopped to give it a little squeeze.

"If you keep that up, we may never get home, sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said, taking a break from the frantic shifting of the grinding gears to put a hand on top of her partner's.

"Perhaps so, but I have every reason to believe the world will keep on turning while we're otherwise engaged."

Anne-Katrine chuckled and reached up to select a lower gear as the undulating road went up one of the numerous small hills spread through the area. She glanced at the landscape they went through to keep an eye out for German fighter planes that had been known to strafe civilian targets though it was against their military code. The flat fields and scattered clusters of trees offered no protection from a fast-moving airplane if they were attacked. "We've had a pretty good day so far, haven't we? I mean, apart from the business with the truck," Anne-Katrine said and turned the steering wheel to follow the road.

"We have," Lydia said and kissed Anne-Katrine's cheek. "And I have a strong feeling it'll only get better."

"Oh boy," Anne-Katrine mumbled under her breath at the thinly veiled promise of a little nocturnal adventure.
CHAPTER 2

The night had indeed been rewarding, and Anne-Katrine still felt pleasantly sated the next morning. Whistling, she swept the courtyard to cover for Poul Nedergaard who’d had to stay at home to help his wife who had fallen ill. Now and then, she glanced through the kitchen windows at Lydia who had already begun the day's many regular chores. On occasion, the two women locked eyes and sent each other winks and knowing little smiles.

The morning had dawned far brighter than the day before, and the sun was already pounding down on the courtyard, heating up the old cobblestones and bringing out every last smell the farm had to offer. Anne-Katrine stopped sweeping and leaned against the broom to catch her breath. Wiping her sweaty brow, she was about to go on when she just caught a glimpse of something tan out of the corner of her eye.

When she turned around and looked out of the gate towards the road, there was nothing to see, but she was sure she had caught something hurrying past headed for the old Triangel truck. "Now what?" she grumbled and dropped the broom. She took a long stride towards the gate, but thought better of it and spun around on her clog-boots.

Flinging open the door to the farmhouse, she stomped along the hallway and put her hands on the doorway into the kitchen. "Dearest, please stay inside for the time being. I think we have a trespasser out front."

Lydia looked up from the bread dough she was kneading and stared at her partner with wide-open eyes. "What? A trespasser? Oh… do you suppose it could be the man in the trench coat… remember? The man we saw yesterday?"

"Huh… good thinking, sweetie. You have a point," Anne-Katrine said and strode down the hallway. Stopping at a cupboard halfway down to the sitting room, she opened the hatch and took her hunting rifle. She didn't bother putting it over her shoulder but worked the action at once to get the weapon ready to fire.

She scrunched up her face when she realized her clog-boots had made a mess on the hallway floor, but she would have to deal with that later. "I'll be outside!" she said and opened the front door.

"Please be careful!" Lydia cried from the kitchen, and Anne-Katrine nodded grimly.

On her way past the cowshed, she made a quick detour and stuck her head inside to warn her brother. It didn't take long before she ran along the uneven cobblestones and through the narrow gate. She stopped at the corner and peeked around it to make sure she wasn't about to run head-first into an ambush.
Because of the truck's large ground clearance, she could easily see a pair of legs clad in dark gray that were walking around on the far side of the old vehicle. Dark gray typically meant it was a German, but she couldn't see for sure. Clenching her jaw, she took a firm grip on the hunting rifle and ran hunched-over along the outer wall of the farm's east wing.

The trespasser's legs didn't seem to move too much and were still there when she reached the rear of the truck. Putting the hunting rifle to her shoulder, she jumped out ready to blast anything to smithereens.

Lydia had been right - it was the man in the trench coat, and like the day before, his hat sat so low his face was obscured. He was standing next to a regular, black men's bicycle, seemingly unaware of the imminent danger.

"Stay right there, Mister… don't make any sudden moves unless you want to taste lead," Anne-Katrine said darkly, trying to scan the surrounding lands to see if the man had an accomplice or two waiting to strike.

The man in the trench coat jerked away from leaning against the rear end of the truck's bed, but complied to Anne-Katrine's orders and remained calm. Grunting, he pushed his hat back from his face. "Hello, Anne-Katrine… remember me?"

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes and tried to drill two ice-blue holes into the man's face to show her unequivocal displeasure about the whole charade. She kept the rifle trained on him for a few seconds until she realized it was impolite. "Sergeant Mehlborg, I don't believe it… what the blazes were you thinking, man?! I could have shot you stone dead! Sneaking around like a crook…"

The lips of the dour, perpetually po-faced Ernst Viggo Mehlborg creased into a half-smile which was the most anyone would ever get out of him. He hadn't changed much in the three years since Anne-Katrine had seen him last. Now thirty-six, he was slimmer like they all were, but his bulldog frame and his broad shoulders remained, as did the sharp features and the steel-gray eyes. "I would have disarmed you before you had time to pull the trigger," he said casually. "You stood too close to me and your grip wasn't effective."

"I beg your pard-"

"And I'm not a Sergeant anymore, as you know. The Royal Danish Army has been forcibly disbanded by the German High Command."

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes to see if Mehlborg was pulling her leg, but came to the conclusion that the former Sergeant wouldn't even know what that meant. "Well… all right," she said and swung her rifle over her shoulder. Smiling politely, she put out her hand that her old acquaintance shook thoroughly.

"Jensen," Mehlborg said, and for a moment, his features softened. "I've come to ask you something."
"You want to buy the truck? You can have it for nothing if you can get the damn thing to start. Go ahead, it's all yours. It's only caused me grief since I bought it…"

"Not quite. It's important so we better take it inside. Perhaps I could be treated to a cup of coffee…?" Mehlborg said and began to walk down towards the gate.

"Well, the closest we have is Coffee Substitute. You're always welcome, Sergeant… I mean…"

"Call me Ernst."

Anne-Katrine chuckled and began to shuffle back to the farmhouse as well. "I'd rather not, if you don't mind. I don't know you that well. How about I just called you Mr. Mehlborg?"

"Well I'm not going to call you Miss-anything," Mehlborg said with the briefest hint of humor in his voice. "To me, you'll always just be Jensen."

"Mmmm-yes, but we have three Jensens in the household now," Anne-Katrine said with a grin.

---

A short while later, Mehlborg took off his tan trench coat and put it on a coat hanger in the hallway of the farmhouse. Once the hat had gone onto one of the coathooks, he reached up and smoothed down his slick hair that was parted in the middle.

Anne-Katrine grunted at the unexpectedly fancy hair - she realized she had never seen the former Sergeant without some kind of headwear.

Lydia stood in the door to the kitchen with an unreadable expression on her face, but she soon turned around to tend to her bread.

As the last of the residents to arrive, Arthur Wilfred Jensen didn't know if he should salute his former Sergeant or simply stand to Attention. In the end, he did neither. "It's a pleasure and certainly a surprise to see you here, Sergeant," he said and shook hands with the older man. Smiling, he opened the door to the sitting room and invited Mehlborg inside. Nobody had been in there since he and Anne-Katrine had played dice the previous evening after supper, so he arranged the chairs to give it a little more class.

"Thank you, Jensen. Likewise," Mehlborg said and sat down on one of the chairs. Without asking for permission, he reached into a pocket of his dark gray suit and found a pack of low-grade Shield cigarettes. Pulling an ashtray closer, he proceeded to light up and soon let out a cloud of pale blue smoke.

Anne-Katrine came out of the bathroom after splashing some water on her face, neck and arms. She cast a puzzled glance at the calm, silent former Sergeant but figured he would tell her the purpose of his visit once he was ready for it. Instead of going into the sitting room, she shuffled
into the kitchen where Lydia already had the water on the boil for the pale-blue metal coffee pot that every household in Denmark owned.

"Dearest," she said quietly as she slid up behind Lydia. "You were right. It was Ernst Mehlborg we saw yesterday. You needn't worry about that any longer."

"Thank God," Lydia said and turned around to stand close to her partner. "But why all this third-rate cloak and dagger nonsense? Why couldn't he just have introduced himself yesterday? I honestly thought the Germans had come for us. We've heard so many stories about… about…"

Anne-Katrine took Lydia's hands in her own to offer some comfort. "But it wasn't. It's all right, dearest. Do we have any oatmeal cookies left?"

"A few… up there," Lydia said and nodded in the direction of a tin which stood on top of one of the kitchen cabinets.

"I'll get them," Anne-Katrine said and stole a quick kiss from Lydia's lips on her way there.

---

After the oatmeal cookies had been well-dunked in the Coffee Substitute to give both parties some taste, Mehlborg cleared his throat to signal that he was about to speak.

Anne-Katrine, Lydia and Arthur who all sat at the same table put down their cups of coffee and looked at their guest. It was clear for Anne-Katrine that something important was about to take place, so she reached into her vest pocket to rummage around in a crumbled-up pack of Powhattans. She was lucky enough to find one that could actually be categorized as a cigarette.

Lighting it, she inhaled and let the smoke drift out slowly. "Mehlborg, I think there's no need for you to prolong the inevitable… will you please tell us why you're here?"

"Well," the former Sergeant said and shot Anne-Katrine an intense look. "I've come to ask if you want to be an active member of the resistance movement?"

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes and fell silent as the pale blue smoke rose from her Powhattan and drifted up towards the ceiling. A part of her had expected - or even hoped - that Mehlborg would say something like that, but it still came as a chilling surprise when the words were actually spoken.

Arthur and Lydia's reactions couldn't be further apart. While Arthur grinned and nodded at Mehlborg's offer, Lydia drew a sharp breath and let out a vehement "No!" while she clenched the hand that had held the cup.

Mehlborg shot the two people sympathetic looks, especially Arthur, but he shook his head and pointed at the silent woman across the table. "Not you, Arthur. You're married. I'm asking Anne-Katrine."
"Now wait just a damn minute, Sergeant," Arthur said angrily, looking from his sister to his supposed wife - Lydia promptly blushed and looked down.

Anne-Katrine chewed on her cheek and locked eyes with her brother. Her jaw worked hard as she digested the news and the offer. 'It will be excruciating for Lydia to live through, I understand that. I might die, I accept that… it's a fair trade-off for the chance to fight back against those who have invaded our country. It's just too important to decline.' She took a long puff from the cigarette before she stubbed the rest out in the ashtray. Her mind was made up, and her response would be simple. "I'm in."

"No! I won't have it!" Lydia cried, and this time she didn't just clench her fist, she slammed it onto the table top which sent the coffee cups dancing.

Ernst Mehlborg grunted and leaned closer to the younger of the two women. "Miss Lydia, I do believe your sister-in-law is old enough, not to mention clever enough, to make her own decisions," he said in a fatherly tone.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Arthur grumbled, crossing his arms over his chest in a huff that matched that of his wife.

Lydia's chin started trembling and she shot her partner a silent look of despair to send her a message that such an endeavor would be far, far too dangerous. "Anne-Katrine, please…" she said in an insistent tone, "please reconsider. Remember the resistance group we read about in the Jutland Post… I don't want to wake up one morning and read about you in the papers…"

Anne-Katrine grunted and reached out for the woman whom the world thought was her sister-in-law. "I know, Lydia. I promise I'll be careful. We couldn't stop them that day three years ago… this could be our second chance. This is something I must do to-"

Arthur matched his sister's grunt but gave it an angry undertone. "Oh! 'You' must do? This is something 'you' must do? As far as I recall, the only reason you went to the front that day was because I couldn't. If I hadn't been ill that day, would you have fought? Like hell you would have!"

"I'm aware of that, Arthur. But if no one even tries-"

"Hogwash, Anne-Katrine. Hogwash. Fighting is a man's job," Arthur said and pushed his chair away from the table. Without looking back, he stomped out of the sitting room and slammed the door behind him. Moments later, the front door was slammed as well.

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and fired blue lightning at the closed door. After a few seconds, she relaxed and reached for Lydia's clenched fist. "Lydia… I'm sorry, but this is something I must do. Mehlborg, when do we start?"

"Ten thirty tonight," the former Sergeant said, draining his cup.
"Tonight?" Lydia croaked, staring wide-eyed at the woman she loved.

Anne-Katrine pulled her lips back in a grimace. That was sooner than even she had expected.

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

At a quarter past ten that same evening, the mood in the Jensen household was decidedly edgy - it didn't help that it was already past everyone's bedtime. Arthur sat in the kitchen drinking a mug of beer and cursing at everything that had ever lived. Lydia sat quiet as a mouse in the sitting room with a half-done cross-stitch needlework in her lap, but she had hardly put the needle to the fabric all evening. Instead of turning on the electrical light in the ceiling, she had lit a candle that stood in an old-fashioned brass holder on the smoking table. The loud tick-tocking from the grandfather clock in the corner of the sitting room was the only sound produced in there, apart from the occasional deep sigh that escaped Lydia's lips.

Anne-Katrine opened the bathroom door and stepped into the hallway. Her stomach had been upset all evening and had finally rebelled against her potentially life-changing decision to be an active part of the resistance movement. To take her mind off what she was about to do, she had quickly washed herself from top to toe in icy water which had sharpened her senses.

When she heard her brother's ceaseless grumbling from the kitchen, she turned to her right and shuffled into the sitting room. Peeking inside, she briefly locked eyes with Lydia before she stepped in and closed the door behind her.

Instead of taking a chair, she crouched down in front of her sweetheart, took the needlework from her hands and put it on the table. "Lydia... my love," she whispered, taking the cold hands in her own. "I know this experience will be hard for you to swallow, but... please understand that I'll be extra-careful. I don't know yet what Mehlborg wants me to do, but... but I promise that I'll never take undue risks. I'm not a fool... I want to lie with you again, you know."

Lydia's lips creased into a brief smile, but it faded as soon as it had come. "Imagine... it's only been a day since we made love so beautifully. A day, and yet I feel that a whole year has gone by. I don't want you to do this, Anne-Katrine. It's going to end badly."

"Lydia-

"I know. You must," Lydia said and released a sigh that came from the bottom of her soul. She shook her head and took a firmer grip on Anne-Katrine's hands. "I'll be waiting for you here... because you will come back."

"I'll stop at nothing to return to you. That's a promise," Anne-Katrine said and leaned in to claim Lydia's lips in a warm, life-affirming kiss. Closing their eyes, they added just a little more pressure to the sweet affair to really confirm their connection. As they separated, Anne-Katrine placed a few tender kisses on her lover's smooth forehead. "I love you," she whispered, meaning every word.
"I love you too. And please… be safe."

No words were necessary so Anne-Katrine simply squeezed Lydia's hands again. The sound of a truck engine approaching out on the road gave the first clue that her new career as a resistance fighter was about to begin.

---

The truck Mehlborg had brought was smaller than Anne-Katrine's ancient Triangel so he was able to drive it in through the gate without any problems. Once it stopped on the courtyard in front of the farmhouse, he and two other men dressed in regular farmer's clothing jumped down onto the uneven cobblestones.

Anne-Katrine waited by the front door with the rifle in her hand. She had decided to have a little insurance ready until she got to know the two new men. "Good evening," she said and moved the weapon into the light from the kerosene lamp so the men could see she meant business.

"Hello again, Jensen," Mehlborg said with a wave. Like his two companions, he wore boots, coarse, dark pants and a sturdy jacket over a dark-tan shirt. "Kvantorp, Gudmundsen, move into the cone of light so Jensen can see you clearly. I told you she wasn't your typical girl."

The two men duly laughed and stepped into the light. One appeared to be in his mid-thirties like Mehlborg, but the other was younger, perhaps only early twenties.

Anne-Katrine studied them both. The older man had slick hair, brown eyes and bony features with a hawkish nose and noticeable teeth and cheekbones. His upright posture hinted at a military past. The younger man was stronger and more boorish, yet somehow more charming. He had softer features, wilder hair and grayish-blue eyes that were wide, seemingly taking it all in.

She decided that all in all, they were all right. "Welcome to the Jensen farm, gentlemen," she said and put the rifle against the cupboard. "Please step inside. I'm Anne-Katrine Jensen."

The older of the two men stepped over the threshold and moved into the hallway. "I'm Erik Hartvig Kvantorp, how do you do? Oh, and please, I go by Erik," he said and put out his hand. Once it had been shaken by Anne-Katrine, he pointed at the younger of the two. "And this strapping young lad is Svenning Gudmundsen."

"Good evening, Svenning," Anne-Katrine said and put out her hand again. It was clear the younger man was the shy, reserved type, but he shook her hand eventually.

Ernst Mehlborg stepped into the hallway as the last person and closed the front door behind him. "Jensen, as you may have guessed, Kvantorp and I came up through the ranks together. We met at the Royal Danish Army's Infantry Academy in Sønderborg."

"Mmmm. The thought had crossed my mind," Anne-Katrine said, nodding.
Erik smiled and reached up to smooth down his slick hair. "Oh, I'm glad to know I can still make the ladies think of me," he said, but completely missed the repeated eye-roll produced by Anne-Katrine.

Mehlborg continued: "Gudmundsen was too young to fight on that terrible day, of course, but he's the son of a childhood friend of mine."

"I see," Anne-Katrine said, turning back to the shy lad. "Oh… Gudmundsen… are you related to Anker Gudmundsen, owner of a farm to the southwest of the town?"

Svenning nodded. "He's my father," he said quietly in a voice that was softer than his strong frame alluded to.

"I've heard many good things about your father, Svenning. Gentlemen, can I get you anything before we leave?" Anne-Katrine said and tried to be a good hostess by smiling at their guests. "No?"

Throughout the conversation, Mehlborg hadn't removed his hand from the doorknob. "No. We don't have time, Jensen. We're going at once."

"Where to?"

"That's on a need to know basis. And you don't, yet. Suffice to say you'll be driving the truck."

Anne-Katrine grunted at the former Sergeant's gruff ways. "So you can keep an eye on me in case I get all girly and hysterical? All right. Please wait for me outside while I say goodbye to my brother and sister-in-law."

The three men all left the hallway and climbed back up into the truck. Gudmundsen and Kvantorp jumped up onto the flat bed and hunkered down behind the cab.

Anne-Katrine closed the front door and stepped into the sitting room where Lydia was still waiting at the table with her cross stitch needlework. "Sweetheart… I'm off now. Like I said before, I promise I'll be careful. No harm will come to me tonight, I'm sure of it. I'll be back before you know it."

Lydia's eyes were already puffy from the unresolved tension, but she hadn't cried yet. "I'm holding you to it," she croaked in a thick voice. "I won't let you go this easily. Not when I love you so much."

"And I love you too. I don't know how long I'll be, so you don't have to wait up for me," Anne-Katrine said and took Lydia's hands in her own.

Lydia could only snort at the stupidity of her partner's statement. She started shaking her head, but the motion was interrupted by Anne-Katrine claiming her lips in a warm goodbye kiss. She had more on her mind, but her throat wouldn't cooperate so she had to settle for a nervous smile.
Anne-Katrine's farewell to her brother was less pleasant. The moment she stepped into the kitchen, Arthur bolted from the chair and grabbed the lapels of her vest that covered her dark gray shirt, the darkest clothing she had been able to find in her closet. "Arthur! What the blazes are you doing?" she growled, trying to yank herself free of his strong hands.

Arthur's beery breath rolled off him in waves as he kept a firm grip on his sister's clothing. "You owe me. You owe me big time, sister. You better come home alive 'cos you owe me!"

"What are you talking about? I owe you nothing! Let go of me, you drunken son of a-"

"Oh, you don't? I think you do, sister. You owe me plenty. This is the second time you've overstepped your mark. I'm telling you right now, it won't happen a third time!"

"You're drunk off your ass, Arthur. I'd shut my dirty mouth if I were you... right now. Do you understand me?" Anne-Katrine said and finally forced the strong hands off her clothes.

Arthur huffed out loud and sat down on the chair. As his response, he took the mug and drained it of the beer he was drinking.

Anne-Katrine knew there was nothing more to say, so she clenched her jaw and spun around on her heel to get away from her brother.

---

A quarter to eleven PM, the last traces of the day's clear blue sky finally gave way to the approaching darkness. It would never go fully dark at that time of the year - the sun would already rise at a quarter past three in the morning to repeat the eternal cycle - but it was dark enough for a covert operation.

Anne-Katrine shuffled around in the truck's comfortable seat and stared ahead onto the narrow, undulating road Mehlborg had her driving on. Like all other civilian vehicles, the truck was only equipped with one headlight, and even that was dimmed considerably by adding two pieces of adhesive tape to the glass. It was a nuisance, but it was for their own safety. If they could be spotted from the air, they could be strafed by enemy fighters from the British Royal Air Force - or so the Germans said.

She and the former Sergeant were the only ones in the cab; Kvantorp and Gudmundsen were still out on the bed clutching a heavy canvas bag between them. The bench seat inside the cab was occupied by a large road map that Mehlborg used to keep track of where they were. The country roads in the entire area were all so similar that even people with great local knowledge could get lost, especially in the dark.

"Jensen, we're coming up to a fork in the road at the top of this hill. Follow the road right."
"All right," Anne-Katrine said and selected a lower gear to get the truck to climb the hill. Since it didn't carry any cargo apart from the four people, the engine ran without strain and they were soon on the summit. Ahead of them, the road split in two, and Anne-Katrine steered towards the right-hand branch like she had been told.

A brief flash of something ahead of them made Mehlborg put his hand in the air almost like he was signaling Anne-Katrine to hold her fire. "Pull over, Jensen… let's not draw attention to ourselves by speeding up."

Anne-Katrine pulled her lips back in a worried grimace but came to a stop at the side of the road. She rolled down her window to listen for what might have produced the flash they had seen. Somewhere in the middle distance, the familiar sound of a motorcycle engine cut through the quiet evening. "A motorcycle… but not one of ours," she said quietly. "Must be the Germans."

Mehlborg nodded. "We all carry forged permits but I'd rather we didn't have to use them already."

"You didn't give me a permit… forged or otherwise."

"We'll deal with that if the need arises, Jensen. Resume driving. Slowly and quietly."

"Yes, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said, too preoccupied with the situation to remember her neighbor didn't hold that rank any longer. She got the truck going and trickled down the right-hand branch as slowly as it would go. The sounds produced by the motorcycle still came through the window, but they were more distant than before.

They kept going like that for nearly two hundred meters until Mehlborg let out a satisfied grunt. "All right, Jensen. Take it back up to regular speed."

Anne-Katrine let out a nervous breath and stepped on the gas pedal. "Mehlborg, isn't it about time you let me in on what we're actually doing here?" she said while she made frequent changes through the transmission to get the truck up to speed. "You said it was need-to-know… well, I believe the time has come where I do need to know."

"I suppose you're right. We're headed for a clearing at the far side of town. Once there, we'll park somewhere secluded and wait."

"Wait? Wait for what?"

"I noticed you had a radio in your sitting room," Mehlborg said while he kept track of their progress on the map. "Did you happen to listen to the BBC news broadcast last night?"

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and stared at the former Sergeant. "What the blazes does that have to do with-"

"Did you?"
"No. My brother and I played dice, and then we called it an early night," Anne-Katrine said, thinking back to the delightful hour and a half or so she and Lydia had spent making love. After that, they had fallen asleep in each other's arms, sated and well-loved.

"If you had, you would have heard a special code mentioned. You are aware that the BBC speakers inform the Danish Resistance groups directly by relaying coded messages in their broadcasts?"

"Well… honestly, no. I've often wondered about those strange comments that come at the end, but…"

"Yesterday evening, it was Niels Has A Friend."

The code left Anne-Katrine even more puzzled, and she could only furrow her brow and shake her head in confusion. "Well… I'm sure that's nice for Niels."

Mehlborg let out a grunt at Anne-Katrine's puzzlement, and it almost sounded like a chuckle. "We're Niels, and the message means we're about to receive a shipment of containers, courtesy of the Royal Air Force."

"Oh… a weapons drop?"

"Indeed, Jensen. All right. We'll reach a new fork in the road in five hundred meters or so. You need to take the left branch. Immediately following that, take a right branch down a semi-steep hill. Slow down the truck using the gears, not the--"

"I know, Mehlborg. I know how to drive a truck," Anne-Katrine said surly.

---

At the foot of the hill which hadn't been as steep as it was marked on the map, Anne-Katrine could see the outline of a clearing through the growing darkness. "Is that it? That clearing down there… a couple of hundred meters ahead?" she said and selected a higher gear to get the truck back up to speed after the descent.

"Yes. Strange… we're approaching it from the wrong side. It's the right clearing, though," Mehlborg said, turning the road map around to get a better angle.

"Don't look at me. I didn't have the map," Anne-Katrine said with a chuckle. Mehlborg shot her a dark look, but she was too busy driving to really notice.

Reaching the right spot, she turned the truck off the road and bounced across the uneven forest floor to get closer to the clearing itself. It didn't take her long to find a suitable spot to park the truck so it wouldn't be visible from the road in case a German patrol happened to come by. "All right, we're here," she said and switched off the engine. She glanced out of the windows at the dark shadows and the trees that stood stock-still in the calm evening. "Now what?"
"Now we wait," Mehlborg said and got comfortable in the seat.

_*_*_*_*_*

When nothing had happened twenty minutes later, Anne-Katrine grew increasingly antsy. She had rolled the window down to get some fresh air - and to be able to hear if engines came closer - but it didn't help much.

Carrying the large canvas bag, Erik Kvantorp and Svenning Gudmundsen had jumped off the flatbed as soon as the truck had come to a halt. The two men had disappeared into the trees and had remained out of sight ever since.

Anne-Katrine yawned widely out of nervousness as well as fatigue. It was well past her bedtime, but it didn't appear she would get any rest any time soon. Mehlborg wasn't much of a help. The experienced soldier had pulled his flat cap down over his eyes and sat with his arms crossed over his chest in perfect rest.

To take her mind off the situation, she reached into her pocket and rummaged around for a cigarette. She had barely found one before Mehlborg pushed his flat cap up and shot her a pointed look.

"I seem to recall telling you once that you better have enough for the entire unit, Jensen."

"Not again, Mehlborg… you really want a Powhattan?" Anne-Katrine said and held up the sorry excuse for a cigarette.

"Not particularly, no."

Anne-Katrine grunted and put the Powhattan in her mouth. "Well, that's all I have," she said as she searched her pockets for her lighter.

"You can chew on it, but not light it," Mehlborg said and pulled his flat cap back down.

"And why not, if I may ask?"

"Because the smoke can travel for kilometers. It may warn any Germans in the area. Also, the glow can easily be seen in this darkness."

Scrunching up her face, Anne-Katrine took the cigarette out of her mouth. "Oh… I'm sorry. I didn't think of that," she said and put it back into the pack.

"You learned a lesson today, Jensen."

Mehlborg's tone and patronizing ways made Anne-Katrine grunt and shoot him a dark look. "I thought you weren't a Sergeant any longer, Ernst? That kind of talk sure makes it sound like you're forgetting you're out of uniform."
"A proper soldier doesn't need a uniform to fight. A strong spirit is more than enough. You of all people should know that, Jensen."

"Mmmm?"

"Yes," Mehlborg said and sat up straight. "I've never seen anyone display more courage than you did on that terrible day three years ago. You weren't a soldier but you fought like one. I doubted you but you proved me wrong."

Anne-Katrine stared at the dour Ernst Viggo Mehlborg, understanding that he had just praised her higher than she could ever have hoped for. She also understood that he would never mention it again, at least not in the company of others. "Thank you, Ernst. We all did our part. It wasn't enough, but we did our part."

---

Silence fell over the cab for nearly ten minutes before Mehlborg let out a sigh that proved he too was getting fed up with the waiting. "Jensen, have you ever had any problems with the Nazi foreman we encountered at the Lynge-Hoffmann farm? What was his name…? I can't remember… anyway, the man whose teeth you smashed with your rifle."

"Arne Willumsen. No," Anne-Katrine said and shook her head in the growing darkness. "No, he's never caused me trouble. I've seen him around once or twice, though. I think he's been too busy to care about me. He's wearing the colors of the DNSAP now."

Mehlborg grunted strongly and raised his cap. "He's joined the Danish National-Socialist Party? That's interesting information, Jensen. Thank you."

"Yes, he's wearing a brown shirt, black riding breeches and a leather crossbelt, and he's carrying a red band with a swastika on his arm. Or he was when I saw him in town back in March for the general election. He and his cronies were holding a public meeting in front of the town hall decrying the Jews, the Bolsheviks, the so-called depraved homophiles… and all the rest of their ideological garbage. A thug. Nothing but a common thug… rotten bastard that he is. I guess he fits right in with the other bastards in brown and gray."

"Mmmm."

"Speaking of which… did you see the jumping jack cut-out of Frits Clausen, the self-proclaimed Führer of the Danish Nazis?" Anne-Katrine said and let out a brief chuckle.

"No, but I've heard of it."

"That was too funny. He's even fatter in real life. I saw him not long before the Nazis invaded Poland. He visited the Harvest Fair in 1939 and held a few speeches to support Hitler. Pure garbage… but there were plenty there who listened to him and cheered his inanities by raising their right arm. Disgusting."
Outside, the darkness grew denser. The last traces of blue soon disappeared from the sky prompting the stars to come out in force high above the crowns of the trees. The birds had settled for the night apart from an owl that was hooting somewhere close, but the forest was still alive with plenty of animal activity in the undergrowth and among the roots.

Anne-Katrine cocked her head and looked at the former Sergeant next to her. "I've been thinking… why did you call my description of Arne Willumsen interesting information?"

"We always like to know who we're up against. He could be targeted for elimination some day."

Anne-Katrine opened her mouth to reply but found Mehlborg's statement so conclusive that she didn't really need to know any details.

_*_*_*_*_*

The waiting grew tiresome and dangerous. The longer they stayed in that clearing, the larger the risk became of a German patrol spotting them. Anne-Katrine concentrated on breathing evenly so her imagination wouldn't run off with her, but she had already seen the first two battalions of Germans as shadows lurking among the trees.

She had left her father's pocket watch at home so she had no idea of the time other than it was dark o'clock. Mehlborg wasn't one for idle chit-chat so the waiting took place in a stony silence. She missed her warm, cozy bed and her bedmate - the latter worse than the former. At least her stomach had settled down.

Movement to the right of the truck made her sit up straight and stare through the windshield. In a split second, her heart shot up into her throat and started hammering.

The shadowy figure turned out to be Svenning Gudmundsen who came running towards the truck. "Sergeant Mehlborg, we can hear a distant heavy airplane. Everything's clear and we're ready to set up the bars," he said in his rural dialect after stepping up on the lower rung so he could address Mehlborg directly.

"The bars?" Anne-Katrine asked, but the two men didn't have time to answer her.

"Excellent, Gudmundsen," Mehlborg said and moved to open the door. "Come, Jensen. I need those strong arms of yours."

"Huh… well, okay," Anne-Katrine said, opened her own door and jumped down from the truck. It took her a few seconds to get her legs to move fast after sitting still for so long, but she knew she had to hurry because Ernst Mehlborg had already taken off into the dark clearing.

Inside the clearing, Kvantorp and Gudmundsen were busy pulling a large, bright white piece of fabric across the grass. Once it was in place, it dawned on Anne-Katrine what 'bars' meant. The white fabric had quite literally been laid out in a square-edged bar two meters wide and eight
meters long that would undoubtedly be visible from the air - even from a bomber that whipped past going at several hundred kilometers an hour.

"Jensen!" Mehlborg whispered strongly, pointing at the canvas bag. "Take the second piece of fabric and lay it out similarly down the other end of the clearing… you see what I mean?"

"Yes, Sergeant. I'm on it," Anne-Katrine said and reached into the bag. She took the large, bright-white wad of fabric and hurried down to the far end, nearly tripping several times because she couldn't see where she was going.

From somewhere high above, she could hear a distant airplane whose engines didn't sound like the German fighters that occasionally buzzed the farm just to scare the cows, nor the twin-engined RAF fighter-bombers that she had seen skim the tree tops several times. These engines ran using lower RPMs and had a deeper, more harmonic tone.

Anne-Katrine licked her lips nervously and began to spread out the 'bar' in an almighty hurry. She couldn't do it as neatly as Kvantorp and Gudmundsen, but the process was fairly intuitive so it wasn't too hard to get right. The fabric felt so soft in her callused hands she had to look at it twice. She wasn't sure, but she had an inkling it was the same kind of fabric used for parachutes.

When everything was done, she nudged the fabric with the tip of her boot to get it to line up. Her first ever 'bar' wasn't laid out particularly pretty but it would have to do. "Mehlborg! Is this acceptable?" she whispered with a hand next to her mouth to act as an amplifier.

"It'll do!" the former Sergeant whispered back. "Now get out of sight and wait for the airplane to arrive!"

Anne-Katrine grunted out loud but spun around and headed for the nearest trees. "Wonderful, more waiting," she mumbled as she slid in place at the foot of a thick, old oak tree. Above her, the owl took off in a huff, clearly upset that a human had interrupted its hooting.

---

Tension grew as Anne-Katrine waited by the tree. She studied the two bright white bars and realized they had to work as visual guidelines for the pilot when he approached the clearing. With everything pitch black down on the ground, a pair of bright white signs in the middle of nowhere would be the perfect marker for executing the weapons drop.

It would also be a perfect target for any German night fighters in the area - every pilot worth his salt would know something was afoot. Grunting, Anne-Katrine pushed that aside into a box labeled 'To worry about later.'

She chewed on her lips, wishing she had brought a sweet or anything to take her mind off the coming event. Working on autopilot, she reached into her pocket to find a cigarette and her lighter. Mehlborg's words about the smoke and the glow came to her before she could light up, and she put away the lighter with a long sigh.
She needed to do something so she began to roll the Powhattan around her lips instead of lighting it. It disintegrated almost at once and left her mouth filled with little pieces of an unidentifiable, leafy substance that didn't have anything to do with tobacco.

"Oh… for the love of… oh, this is disgusting!" she croaked and spat everything out at once. Grimacing, she wiped her lips and thrust her hands down her pockets instead.

Every creaking branch, every rustling leaf, every hoot of the owl sent Anne-Katrine's heart up in her throat. She tried to breathe evenly to keep calm until the real action would start, but the unusual situation was beginning to take a toll on her nerves.

She wasn't a cry-baby or a pansy girl by any stretch of the imagination, but she was unaccustomed to spending nights in the pitch black forest, and every little peep from anywhere around her made her believe that they had been spotted by a German patrol and that burning hot lead could be zinging through the air at any moment.

It didn't help that she was all alone in the middle of nowhere. The three men down the far end of the clearing hadn't said but a single word since she had laid out her 'bar'. The chill crept up on her and she wrapped her arms around herself, wishing she had brought a jacket.

The deep, harmonic engine note Anne-Katrine had heard from high above had been fainter for a couple of minutes, but it suddenly returned with a vengeance. It became clear - even to a civilian like her - that the airplane was descending to get ready for the drop.

She moved away from the oak tree to scan the skies everywhere above her. There wasn't anything to see apart from stars and the occasional puffy cloud, but an odd, dark spot in the sky to the north of her position caught her attention.

During wartime, the RAF bombers didn't use any running lights and their engines were shielded from sending out sparks or exhaust flames so they would be nearly invisible to the night fighters, but the great, big, black hole in the sky was surprisingly easy to spot.

The four-engined bomber's silhouette approached much slower than Anne-Katrine had expected it to. The vast shape seemed to almost stand still in the air as it came towards them, but she knew it was an optical illusion.

Down the other end of the clearing, Mehlborg ran out into the center of the two bars and turned on a powerful flashlight. "Get ready! Get ready for the containers! You too, Jensen!" he said strongly while he flashed reams of Morse code to the airplane above.

Anne-Katrine couldn't read Morse code so she had no idea what kind of message Mehlborg was relaying to the bomber crew, but whatever it was, it had the desired effect. The airplane seemed to slow down even more, and from Anne-Katrine's vantage point next to the trees, it looked as if
the entire underside of the fuselage opened up - in reality, the bomb bay doors were set in the 'open' position.

A bucketful of cold shivers ran up and down her spine at the thought of actually being bombed by one of those things, or even a squadron of them. Earlier in the war, she and Lydi had often visited the small Cinerama at the town square to watch free newsreels from around the world. They would show the grim reality of devastated cities from London in the west to Sevastopol in the east, at least until the German cities began to come under fire from British and American bombers. Once that had happened, the garrison Commandant had banned the newsreels and shut down the small, independent cinema.

The engine note had reached a thunderous crescendo, and yet the huge airplane was still several hundred meters away. Ready for anything, Anne-Katrine stared wide-eyed at the black hole in the sky to make sure she wouldn't foul up when it was her turn to go into action.

"Stand by!" Mehlborg cried, forgetting all about being quiet. With the airplane so close and so loud, the entire region would know about its existence so the need for whispering had gone. "Jensen! Are you ready?"

"I'm ready, Sergeant!" Anne-Katrine cried back. She clenched and unclenched her fists in a bout of acute nervousness that had to find some kind of outlet. "I'm ready… though for what, I have no idea…" she continued in a mumble, staring hard up into the sky.

When the bomber reached the far side of the line of trees Anne-Katrine was standing next to, a sequence of creepy noises rolled through the clearing. At first, it sounded like a pack of giant bats flapping their wings all at once; then an eerie whistle was heard that seemed to come from everywhere around her.

"Aw, this is not for the faint of heart," Anne-Katrine groaned through clenched teeth. Moments later, she had to rub her eyes at the sight of five pale gray parachutes that floated gently down from above on a direct collision course with the ground. Underneath each parachute, a container shaped like an overgrown cigar dangled from the wires that controlled it.

As the RAF bomber released its load of five containers, the heavy airplane jumped several meters into the air because of the sudden reduction in weight. When the pilot had completed his part of the weapons drop, he banked towards the west and took off in a hurry, skimming the tree tops for the next several hundred meters before the airplane climbed to a safer altitude.

The engine note changed to a more aggressive hum indicating that the pilot had increased the power to get away before any night fighters could see it. Within moments, it was out of sight though its characteristic sound stayed for a while longer.

Anne-Katrine was still rooted to the spot with her eyes trained on the cylindrical containers that were gliding towards her. The one that had been dropped first was much lower than its companions and was most likely going to land short and thus miss the clearing. The next three
were on a straight course for touching down somewhere between the two bars, but the fifth and final one seemed to overshoot.

When Anne-Katrine's assumption was proven right and the first container came in short, she grunted out loud and took off into the trees to keep it in sight while it made its final descent. "Mehlborg!" she cried over her shoulder, "Mehlborg, I got this one!"

"Good! And keep your bloody voice down!" the former Sergeant barked harshly, but Anne-Katrine was too preoccupied with following the trajectory of the container to pay any attention to him.

She fumbled and stumbled through the undergrowth like some grown-up girl scout, tracking the container until it landed in the middle of a cluster of trees. As the cylinder hit the forest floor with a muted thud, it kicked up a small storm of soil and old leaves. Above it, the silk parachute caught several branches which tore it to shreds, but it had already done its job well.

The cigar-shaped container stood on its end for a few seconds almost like it didn't want to give up the ghost just yet, but gravity took over and it toppled onto its side.

Anne-Katrine was there in a flash and dabbed her hands down the length of the two meters long and seventy centimeters wide metal container to find something she could use to carry it. Much to her relief, four bracket-shaped handles had been welded onto the casing. Dipping her hand inside the first bracket, she tried to lift the container to ascertain how much force she would need; it was heavy, but not overly so.

Another problem presented itself almost at once: what should she do with the remains of the parachute? "Mehlborg? Sergeant?" she whispered, but the men were too busy at the clearing to hear her. Grunting, she turned back to the container. "Oh, dammit… I can't drag it back with that thing still attached to it, so… so I guess I better take it off… somehow."

She moved her hands up to the other end of the cigar-shaped container to find a way to disconnect the parachute from its load. For once, she was lucky and found four snap hooks that she released one by one. The wires holding the container became slack at once and fell limply onto the forest floor.

"And heeeeeave-ho…" she groaned as she put both hands into two of the brackets and began to drag the heavy cylinder back through the undergrowth. Her heart thumped in her chest not only from the exertion but from the nervousness that coursed through her. The Germans would have heard the RAF bomber by now, but it wasn't a certainty they knew where it had been despite the many mobile listening posts scattered throughout the region. However, motorcycle patrols would soon scout the entire area, that was a given.

---

Returning to the clearing, Anne-Katrine breathed a sigh of relief when the container she dragged behind her went onto the smoother grass. She had nearly taken half a dozen tumbles over roots
and assorted other thingamajigs on the forest floor, but she would prefer not to taste any dirt if she could help it. Her palms were burning as were her lungs from moving her strong legs across the terrain.

The former Sergeant was kneeling down next to the truck while checking the contents of three of the containers. The fifth and final one wasn't there yet.

"Mehlborg!" Anne-Katrine said hoarsely as she dragged her heavy load the last bit of the way. "This is the one that went short… where's the fifth one?"

Mehlborg turned around and waved at Anne-Katrine before he pointed at a tree on the opposite side of the clearing. "There!"

Anne-Katrine followed his pointing and groaned out loud when she realized the final container was dangling five meters off the ground suspended from a thick oak tree. Its parachute hadn't just caught a few branches but an entire crown and was helplessly, and hopelessly, entangled in the foliage.

Erik Kvantorp and Svenning Gudmundsen were busy trying their hand at tree climbing on either side of the cylinder. Gudmundsen wielded a long knife that he used to saw through the parachute wires, but he had very little success.

"Have you checked yours yet?" Mehlborg said, standing up straight when the fourth of the five containers was dumped at his feet.

Anne-Katrine took a deep breath and rubbed her aching hands. "No. I didn't know I needed to. Should I have? Oh, and the parachute is still stuck among the trees over there."

"I'll deal with that in a few minutes," Mehlborg said and released the four latches on the side of the container to open the entire side. "Hmmm…" he said, rubbing his mouth.

"Something wrong?" Anne-Katrine said and knelt down on the other side of the opened cylinder that she had dragged back. She could see that it contained several rifles, pistols, hand grenades and boxes of ammunition for the firearms. Everything was wrapped in cloth so it wouldn't be destroyed in case the container suffered a rough landing.

"Well, no… this one has the weapons," Mehlborg said and took out a British Lee-Enfield carbine. "The other three have all the auxiliary equipment that we need, like detonators, crimping tape, timers, copper caps, turtles and tie busters…"

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and shook her head slowly. "This is all going way over my peasant head…"

"Which means," Mehlborg continued, turning around to point at the final one which was still dangling from the oak tree. "That all the pre-charges, black powder fuses and the plastic explosives are in the container about to come crashing down over there."
"Sergeant Mehlborg…" Anne-Katrine said hoarsely while she stared at the final container that Kvantorp and Gudmundsen were still trying to get untangled, "I'm not sure I needed to know that…"

"Mmmm. It contains one hundred kilograms of high-grade explosives. Composition C2, the very best quality any saboteur would ever want to work with."

While Mehlborg spoke, Gudmundsen finally managed to cut through the wires which sent the final container thumping into the forest floor with a hollow thud. Anne-Katrine jerked a foot in the air, but Mehlborg waved at her dismissively. "Oh, you needn't worry, Jensen. It's perfectly harmless without the detonators, and they're over here. It can't blow up unless we want it to."

"Good Lord… what the blazes do we even need plastic explosives for?!"

"Why, sabotaging the railway, of course. Come, let's get these four up on the truck while we wait for Kvantorp and Gudmundsen," Mehlborg said and slammed the lid shut of the container they were sitting at.

The news made Anne-Katrine a little slow in reacting, but she eventually got on her feet. Dazed, she helped the former Sergeant lift the containers up onto the truck's bed while she continuously shook her head and grumbled at the insanity of it all.

*

*

CHAPTER 3

The next morning, the fog had returned to the area surrounding the Jensen farm, and with it came cooler temperatures. At least there hadn't been any shooting with the anti-aircraft cannons at the garrison so Anne-Katrine and Lydia didn't need to search the grassy meadow for unexploded ordnance.

The two women walked in silence leading the cows onto the meadow. Anne-Katrine was tired after the long evening and the short night, but Lydia looked like she hadn't slept for a week. The blonde had dark circles under her green eyes that had grown dull and listless, and her complexion was a sickly gray rather than a healthy pink.

Anne-Katrine was in her regular outfit of dark pants and her beloved vest over an O-neck shirt, but she wore a jacket on top of that to keep out the chill. Lydia had on the usual unshapely, dark-tan dress that was just right for when she had to perform physical labor. Her hair and her shoulders were covered by a brown shawl, and she wore sturdy, long-legged boots that looked odd in connection with the dress.

"Sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said quietly so Poul Nedergaard who brought up the rear wouldn't hear her. The moo'ing of the cows behind them worked to her favor and enabled her to speak just
that little louder than she normally would have. "I told you that you didn't have to wait up for me… now I feel bad for causing such a dreadful look on your face…"

"I couldn't find rest anywhere," Lydia said with a sigh and a tired half-shrug. "I tried to go to bed, but every single creak and groan kept me awake. Arthur stayed up as well but I couldn't squeeze two consecutive words out of him. He was very, very angry with you, love."

"I know. He even refused to say good morning when I saw him today. I suppose he has a right to be angry. At least he didn't betray us to Mehlborg… oh, I'll have to square it with him later," Anne-Katrine said and gave the lead cow's flank a couple of pats when the large animal slowed down. The cow responded with an annoyed moo but eventually set off again before the other cows would come to a stop as well.

For a minute or two, moos and swooshing tails dominated the soundscape. Faint birdsong from a single blackbird could be heard from the cluster of beech trees somewhere to the east, but the fog was so low and dense everything was blanked out. Working in silence apart from the occasional "Yah!" to keep the cows moving, Anne-Katrine, Lydia and Poul at the rear herded the pack into the center of the meadow where they would remain for the rest of the day.

"Poul! I need a word before you go back," Anne-Katrine said strongly to make the hired hand aware that he should try to find his way closer to her.

The older man hobbled over to Anne-Katrine like a gray ghost until he broke through the fog. It didn't help that he was dressed in a dark-brown coverall and wore a dark-gray flat cap. Unusually, he had a two-day stubble and he appeared to be even more bleary-eyed than Lydia.

"First of all, thank you for coming out today. You look positively awful!"

Poul chuckled and scratched his unshaven cheek. "Much obliged, Miss Jensen… I feel even worse than that. I beg your pardon for the scruffy appearance… my wife's illness kept me up for most of the night."

"Oh, we certainly know how that feels… don't we, Lydia?" Anne-Katrine said and let out a dry chuckle. "Tell me, how is your wife?"

"Still poorly. But at least she was able to hold down her food by the time I left."

"I'm glad to hear it. Poul, once we've mucked out in the cowshed, you can go home for today. Or, if you wish, you can take a nap in the storage room first and then go home."

"Thank you, Miss Jensen. I prefer to head home to get a nap, if you don't mind."

"Oh, I don't mind either way. Miss Lydia and I shall stay out here for a moment or two longer to watch over the herd," Anne-Katrine said while she patted the lead cow's hind quarters. "The leader is a little contrary because of the fog. I have a sneaking suspicion she may want to walk back to the cozy shed."
"Could be."

Anne-Katrine patted the leader again. The red cow mooed and shook almost like she knew she was being talked about. "Yes. Once we're done here, I'll come and help you in the cowshed. I'm afraid my brother woke up with a bad case of the grumpies this morning."

"I've noticed," Poul said with a tired grin. "All right. Thank you. I'll begin mucking out right away."

"Thanks, Poul. I'll be there shortly," Anne-Katrine said and gave their hired hand a short wave.

As the older man hobbled away into the fog, Lydia pulled her shawl closer and let out a long sigh. "Love, I'm not comfortable with having those five containers stored in our cold storage cellar. What if the Germans come to perform a thorough search?"

"They haven't in the three years they have occupied us, love," Anne-Katrine said quietly as she patted the lead cow to make her stay in place.

"There's a first for everything. Did you ever expect you would go out on a dangerous mission for the Resistance like you did last night? No, you didn't."

"I didn't, but honestly… it wasn't that dangerous."

"It would have been if you had been caught by the Germans, dammit!" Lydia said in a hoarse, strong voice. Out of sheer habit, she looked around to see if anyone had overheard her outburst. Since the only living beings there were of the four-legged kind, it didn't matter what she said. "Last night, I couldn't get that newspaper article from the Jutland Post out of my head, Anne-Katrine… I don't think you understand how I feel about this… this worrying detour our lives have taken."

Anne-Katrine took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. She reached over and pulled Lydia in for a brief hug. "I do understand, sweetheart. Please believe me. I understand that you feel it's foolish to seek out danger, or even to invite danger to our doorstep, but our situation is different from that other group we read about. Ernst Mehlborg and Erik Kvantorp are experienced soldiers… they won't easily be tricked by collaborators or informers. Svenning Gudmundsen is a sensible, shy young lad. He won't get mixed up with questionable people either."

"Dearest…" Lydia said but stopped to let out a sigh. "Anne-Katrine, you know as well as I do that the Germans have no qualms about torturing information out of the people they capture. Nobody can withstand that. I'll accept it this once, but… but… oh… please don't be angry with me…"

"Never," Anne-Katrine said and pulled Lydia in for another hug.

"I must insist that this will be the only time your farm… our farm… is used as a temporary depot. I don't often throw a hissy fit, but I do this time. I won't have it."
Anne-Katrine nodded and leaned down to place a tiny kiss on Lydia's lips. "I promise," she whispered for her partner's ears only. "This won't happen again."

'On several levels,' Anne-Katrine thought as she pulled back and watched how Lydia's frown turned into a smile of relief. A knot of worry began to form in her stomach over what she had done - but perhaps more to the point, what she hadn't done. She had told Lydia about the weapons drop and the five containers, but no details about the contents of the shipment other than the basics. In other words, Lydia had no idea they were sitting on detonators, black powder fuses and no less than one hundred kilograms of plastic explosives.

'My first lie to her. It'll also be my last, or else I'm not worthy of her love,' Anne-Katrine continued in her mind. She sighed and returned to watch the lead cow like she had said she would.

---

Once the cowshed had been mucked out, Anne-Katrine put the shovel back in the corner and sprinkled fresh hay on the floor of the bays. With everything ready for the cows to return at the end of the day, she grabbed hold of the handlebars on the wheelbarrow to take it to the dunghill. Because of Poul Nedergaard's club foot, he wasn't able to control the heavy, stinking load so Arthur or Anne-Katrine always did it - and with Arthur still upset, it was Anne-Katrine's job.

She rolled the heavy wheelbarrow along the pathway in the cowshed and turned right once she made it to the barn door. The barrow rumbled along the uneven cobblestones which aired the load and sent a bazillion flies buzzing everywhere. Just as she turned behind the shed headed for the dunghill at the far side of the farm's west wing, she thought she could hear the telephone ringing inside the farmhouse.

The thought was confirmed a moment later when Lydia opened the front door and stuck her head out to shout: "Anne-Katrine? Anne-Katrine? Telephone!"

"I'll be right there!" Anne-Katrine shouted back, puzzled over the fact that someone had actually made the phonelines work.

---

After getting rid of her stinking load, Anne-Katrine pulled off her clog-boots and stepped into the hallway. She rested a buttock on the sideboard below the telephone and took the old-fashioned horn. "Hello, this is Anne-Katrine Jensen. Please go ahead," she said into the mouthpiece that was fixed onto the telephone.

'Hello, Anne-Katrine, how nice to hear your charming voice,' a man said at the other end of the crystal clear connection that was mysteriously free of crackles, howls, hisses and static.

Anne-Katrine slammed her jaw shut and narrowed her eyes. She knew that voice, and it belonged to someone she had very little interest in speaking to.
'Oh, such a stony silence… can't you recognize me, Anne-Katrine? It's Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann.'

'I recognized it, all right,' Anne-Katrine thought and slipped her buttock off the sideboard. Instead, she leaned against it fully and crossed her legs at the ankles. "I certainly can. Hello, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann."

'Oh, Anne-Katrine! Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann is my father… I thought we were past that?'

"Hello, Flemming. To what do I owe the pleasure of talking to you?" Anne-Katrine said in the most sugary voice she could muster. It was so bad that Lydia came out into the hallway and cocked her head. Anne-Katrine shot her partner an exasperated look that earned her a shrug.

'There I was, thinking… Flemming… why don't you call Anne-Katrine just to hear her voice? So I did. No, in all honesty, Anne-Katrine, would it be an inconvenience for you if I came by for lunch today? I have something important I need to share with you."

Anne-Katrine mouthed 'Go To Hell' and almost said it out loud, but didn't. "Lunch today? Well…" She glanced at Lydia who had come back out into the hallway wiping off a mug. The blonde shrugged again and offered Anne-Katrine a hesitant nod. "Uh, well…"

'If you're running low on food, I could have my housekeeper, Mrs. Nielsen, prepare something I could bring over? We had an excellent venison roast yesterday evening and I'm sure we could slice off some cold cuts. Oh! And I believe there's still some of the glorious cream gravy with cowberries left. It was quite delicious."

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes dangerously. To offer someone as proud as she a handout that amounted to the scraps from tables of the rich was a low blow, and one that triggered her stubbornness at once. "No, no, you don't need to bring anything. We would be honored to see you at lunch, Flemming. I promise we'll have a grand feast prepared for you."

Now Lydia narrowed her eyes. She mumbled a few choice words before she spun around on her heel and stomped into the kitchen to prepare said 'grand feast.'

'Oh, that sounds excellent. Thank you! I'll swing by at a quarter to twelve or so. See you then. Goodbye.'

"Goodbye, Flemming," Anne-Katrine said and hung up. Sighing, she stared straight ahead without seeing anything. "And there I was, thinking that shifting a load of cow patty would be the low point of my day…"

_*_*_*_*_*

"Stand still, woman!" Lydia growled, helping Anne-Katrine into a starched shirt that had belonged to the farmer's father. The chemical treatment had made the collar stiff as a board, and the task of closing the top two buttons proved to be a far greater challenge than imagined.
The two women stood in front of a small mirror in their bedroom. Anne-Katrice's regular clothes were strewn about on the double bed in an unruly heap. Next to the scattered garments, Lydia's dark-tan work dress had been folded neatly. The blonde had put on her morning coat while she struggled with her partner's fancy clothing, but they were running behind schedule and she was growing increasingly impatient because of it.

"I am standing still… it's you who's moving around the whole damn time," Anne-Katrice croaked, trying to relax the muscles in her neck so that Lydia's slender fingers could close the top button.

"It's past eleven thirty! And you need to put on your jacket… and the ascot… and we need to brush the jacket… and I need to finish up as well… and my hair… and I need to keep an eye on the pot roast… and the potatoes… and I need to prepare the butter sauce… and we need to-"

"Lydia, please calm d-"

"All this for a grand feast following a night where neither of us slept well," Lydia said while she finally managed to secure the top button. "And I haven't seen you in the kitchen helping me!" she continued, nudging a finger into her partner's stomach.

"Ooof! I know, I know. I'm sorry," Anne-Katrice said and reached down to still Lydia's hands before she could poke her again. "I hadn't planned on it, you know. This all came as a surprise… I was ready to turn him down, but…"

"But your pride got in the way. Anne-Katrice, dearest, some day your pride is going to get you in real trouble." Lydia realized what she was saying and slowed down her frantic movements. "Love, I'm sorry… it just flew out before I could close my mouth. You've made up your mind about the other thing… and I support you regardless of the decision you end up taking, you know I do. It's just…"

"I know, sweetie," Anne-Katrice said and squeezed Lydia's hands tenderly. "Let's not talk about that today. Or at least not now."

Lydia nodded and stood up on tip-toes to place a quick kiss on Anne-Katrice's lips. "No, let's not. Oh, I can't stay. I need to check the pot roast… and the potatoes… and the butter sauce… and try to find the fine port… and-"

"Go on," Anne-Katrice said and moved in front of the small mirror to get on with her own program. As Lydia left the bedroom, Anne-Katrice slipped a deep purple ascot around her neck and made it sit perfectly under and around the starched collar. The ascot was a compromise. She didn't want to wear clothing that was too feminine so a dress or even a simple skirt was out of the question. However, she understood that wearing a proper men's necktie would create more friction than necessary so she had discovered the ascot as a safe way to touch upon the feminine while still remaining true to herself.
She looked at herself to assess her outfit. Although it was only Thursday, she had donned the entire Sunday set consisting of shiny shoes, the good pants - sharply creased, of course - a starched shirt, a two-tone vest with the chain for her father's gold pocket watch hanging as it should, an elegant jacket and finally the ascot. All held in dark gray with the occasional black highlight save for the deep purple ascot.

All in all, she was ready for a wedding, a day in court or a grand feast with a man whom she had personally revealed to be working for and with the German occupational force.

As the last things she did before she left the bedroom, she brushed the myriad of long, loose hairs off the jacket and pinned a special, commemorative medal to her chest made up of four copper coins and a bow tie in the same red-and-white colors as the Danish national flag.

---

By the time the black Horch limousine belonging to the Lynge-Hoffmann family slid through the gate and drove into the courtyard, Anne-Katrine, Lydia and Arthur stood in the doorway to greet their guest.

Anne-Katrine and Lydia presented a dashing couple with the younger woman wearing a flowery pre-war dress she had found at the back of her closet. She wore higher heels than usual, but it still wasn't enough to be at eye level with her partner. Her hair was up in a fanciful 'do that accentuated her comely face, and a sparkling pearl necklace - her mother's; it had been a wedding gift - graced the smooth skin on her neck. Like Anne-Katrine, she wore the commemorative medal on her lapel.

Arthur was next to his wife with a surly expression on his face, and his hands stuck deeply into the pockets of his pants. He too wore his finest Sunday set, but his clothes weren't as shiny or well-kept as Anne-Katrine's because he had used them far more. The sleeves of his jacket showed clear scuff-marks at the cuffs and the elbows, and he had been unable to close the top button of the starched shirt. The necktie hid it - mostly.

The driver of the Horch, who wore a black cap and a white uniform, stepped out and went back to the passenger door on the left side of the imposing vehicle. As it opened, Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann stepped out wearing a silver-gray, tailor-made suit over a white shirt and a black tie.

The wealthy land owner was in his early thirties, and he had movie star looks with a strong, cleft chin, symmetrical features and a smile that could charm the bloomers off every woman he would ever want. He had flowing, dark-blond hair that was parted just to the right to create a dark-golden wave, and his eyes were almond-brown and always sparkling - especially now as they fell on the tall woman in the doorway. "Anne-Katrine Jensen, you look more and more beautiful for each passing day. How is that possible? Enchante, Mademoiselle," he said and reached for Anne-Katrine's hand so he could kiss it.

Anne-Katrine allowed him the pleasure for once, but cringed when she felt his warm, moist lips on the back of her hand. "Hello, Flemming. Welcome to the Jensen farm. You already know my
brother, but I don't believe you've met my sister-in-law yet. Flemming Lyne-Hoffmann, this is Lydia Jensen."

Lydia stepped forward and performed a quick curtsey at their guest. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Lyne-Hoffmann. Welcome to our humble abode."

"Why, thank you, Mrs. Jensen. Oh, the pleasure is all mine, I can assure you," Flemming said and kissed the back of Lydia's hand as well. "Say, Arthur, how in the world did someone like you find such a beautiful wife? Oh, and you're still working hard in the cowshed, I see?"

"None of your damn business," Arthur mumbled, shaking hands with their guest.

Flemming's only response to the slight was to pull his hand back and wipe it discreetly on his pants. "Oh my, it certainly smells delicious here. What are we having?"

"Pot roast with prunes and chopped parsley. Also potatoes in butter sauce," Lydia said with a beaming smile on her face. "Please! Please come inside, Mr. Lyne-Hoffmann. Anne-Katrine, why don't you show Mr. Lyne-Hoffmann into the stately room while I tend to the roast?"

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face but kept most of her annoyance on the inside. "But of course. This way, please, Flemming."

---

The stately dining room beyond the common sitting room was only used for Sunday dinners and special occasions. An elegant mahogany dining table with six matching chairs that had belonged to Anne-Katrine's grandfather dominated the room that was decorated according to the trends of the early part of the twentieth century: heavy curtains, heavy furniture and plenty of knick-knacks everywhere.

Because it wasn't used often, the room carried a warm smell of dust, wood and old tobacco smoke that clung to the curtains. A wind-up gong clock mounted on the wall struck noon with a deep, harmonic note just as Flemming and Anne-Katrine stepped into the doorway.

Three of the four walls carried an abundance of paintings and family photographs, including some of Anne-Katrine's father from his younger years when he had been a soldier in the Royal Danish Army's Guard Corps during The Great War. There was also a photo of Arthur and a few other members of his platoon taken at the garrison in the autumn of 1939, but Anne-Katrine couldn't look at it. Next to her brother, Vilhelm Solbjerg-Hansen, Knud-Erik Kristensen, Johannes Ancher and Ole Thor Didriksen all presented broad smiles at the camera. Three of the four men were killed by enemy fire on April 9th, 1940.

A mahogany sideboard took up most of the space along the final wall, and above it, next to the window with the heavy curtains, Anne-Katrine had pinned the Dannebrog, the Danish national flag, next to a black-and-white photo of King Christian the Tenth and a colorful rendition of the
Royal Coat of Arms that had been hand-painted onto a piece of glass. The flag was large, a meter wide and two meters tall, and it drew the eye as it was designed to do.

Flemming stopped in the doorway and looked at the arrangement; the flag in particular seemed to interest him. Anne-Katrine stood behind him, ready to give him a push if he didn't want to go on. "Flemming?" she said in a sugary voice.

Flemming stepped inside and went up to the mahogany table that had already been laid out. As the man of the house, Arthur should sit at the head of the table, with his wife on his right and his sister on his left - which meant that Flemming went straight over to claim the chair next to the one Anne-Katrine would be sitting on.

Anne-Katrine groaned inwardly, but allowed her guest to feel at home by gesturing at the chair.

Since the food wasn't yet on the table, Flemming pulled out the chair and sat down. "Tell me, Anne-Katrine," he said, crossing his legs in a gentlemanly style, "what are those coin-like things you and your sister-in-law wear?" he said, pointing at his own lapel.

Anne-Katrine looked down at her chest and touched the commemorative medal. "This? Oh, it symbolizes April 9th, 1940. Lest we forget."

Flemming shifted uncomfortably on his chair, so Anne-Katrine continued: "It's made up of four copper coins. A five-Øre, a two-Øre and two one-Ører. That's nine Ører in four coins... the ninth of April. Oh, and they have to be struck in 1940."

"I see," Flemming said, once again shifting on his chair. "But why isn't your brother wearing it?"

"He refuses because he couldn't fight on that terrible day."

"Oh..."

The awkward moment was interrupted by Lydia calling Anne-Katrine's name from the kitchen. "Excuse me, please," Anne-Katrine said and left the stately dining room.

---

When the food was ready, Anne-Katrine helped Lydia carry dishes and bowls from the kitchen into the stately dining room and place them on the mahogany table. Everything had to follow a strict plan that Lydia had laid out in advance, and Anne-Katrine knew better than to go against a well-laid plan, especially one that had been designed by her partner.

She noted with some dismay that Arthur had already sat down at the head of the table with a sour look on his face. "Arthur, did you fetch the beverages before you got comfortable?"

"No."
Anne-Katrine cocked her head and shot her brother a dark look over the curt answer. "Well, in that case, I suppose I better get them. Flemming, we can only serve beer, but it's cold. We'll have port for the dessert."

"Oh, I enjoy the occasional beer," Flemming said and put his cloth napkin back on the table after having already spread it over his lap. "Should I fetch the bottles?"

"Oh, no… no, you're our guest," Anne-Katrine said hurriedly, smiling for all she was worth. Flemming smiled back and retrieved his napkin to start over.

"Dinner is served!" Lydia said and fluffed her hair as she came into the dining room. "Oh… hang on… the beverages…"

"I'll get them, Lydia," Anne-Katrine said and spun around on her heel.

---

In the cold storage cellar at the back of the farm, the dark-green crate of Fuglsang beer shared the space with a few bottles of milk that had been taken from the churns produced by their cows, a row of hanging smoked salamis, bottles of cream and bars of home-made butter - and five cigar-shaped metal containers that Anne-Katrine would rather not have their German-minded guest seeing.

While she was there, she checked the one with the explosives to see if it had moved since she had put it there. It was secure, so she went back to the crate of beer and took four bottles. Reconsidering at the last moment, she took another bottle before she closed the cellar door behind her and went back inside.

---

She stepped into the stately dining room just as Flemming held his napkin to his lips while chuckling over an apparent joke. Arthur didn't look amused, and Anne-Katrine rolled her eyes. "Here you go, Flemming," she said and put four of the five dark-green bottles down in front of four plates. The last bottle was put on the floor next to the sideboard in case someone needed one extra. "A cellar-cooled Fuglsang. A local brewery from Haderslev in case you don't know the brand."

"Why, thank you, Anne-Katrine. Oh, I was just asking your brother if we should say Grace… but then I thought, no, Social-Democrats don't say Grace!" The joke was apparently so amusing that Flemming chuckled into his napkin all over again.

Anne-Katrine took a deep breath and let it out slowly while she looked at the bleary-eyed Lydia whose complexion had gone back to dead-tired gray after all the commotion while making the grand feast. The younger woman creased her lips into a smile when she noticed she was being watched. "Well, Flemming…" Anne-Katrine said as she found the bottle opener and proceeded
to open the four beers, "we just happen to be Conservatives. I believe we all voted for that party at the general election back in March."

"No, really? What a relief. So did I," Flemming said with a smile as he took his cutlery and held it ready.

Lydia looked around the table before she rose and took Flemming's plate. She stabbed a fork into the first slice of the pot roast and arranged it neatly on their guest's plate. A prune had fallen out onto the tray, but she scooped it up and gave it to Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann as well. A handful of potatoes and a good helping of steaming hot butter sauce soon followed. "Well, I must admit I voted for a different party," she said as she handed the plate back to Flemming.

"Oh, that's all right, Lydia," Anne-Katrine said and took care of her own food. "It was supposed to be a free election after all. Here in South Jutland, we take pride in not following the word of a single man. Isn't that so, Arthur?"

Flemming raised an eyebrow at the thinly veiled needling, but concentrated on his slice of pot roast.

The comment didn't provoke much of a response from Arthur, either. His only reply was a grunt while he waited for his wife to fill his plate. When she had, he dug in like he hadn't eaten for a week.

Anne-Katrine couldn't help but study the markedly different eating habits of the four people at the table. Where she and her brother were used to wolf down the food using any means necessary in order to get back to work, Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann ate like a member of the landed gentry with unhurried gestures and frequent breaks. Lydia held the cutlery with grace and class, and only cut off tiny bites so she wouldn't have to chew like a cow to get rid of it in case someone asked her a question. Now and then, her slender but strong fingers reached out to take the tumbler with the golden liquid. She only took small sips so it wouldn't look like she was accustomed to chugging it down.

An old, Danish proverb says that to know someone's true nature, you shouldn't speak with them, but eat with them. Anne-Katrine grunted when she realized it had been proven right.

'Good Lord, how I love that woman,' Anne-Katrine thought between chewing on the pot roast. She forced herself to take smaller bites to honor the hard work Lydia had done in the kitchen, but it was tough going. 'How in the world could someone as graceful and charming and beautiful and warm as Lydia fall in love with a coarse, uncouth farmer like me? I have no idea... no idea at all. I need to get my priorities straight. Helping Ernst Mehlborg is all well and fine, but if I push Lydia away from me in the process, I'll have achieved nothing. Hell... I'll have lost everything. I won't allow it to come between us!'

After dabbing his lips on the napkin, Flemming put it on his lap but let the cutlery rest on the plate. "I must say, Mrs. Jensen, this pot roast is simply marvelous. Juicy and delicious. And the prunes form the icing on the cake, ha ha!"
"Thank you very much, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann," Lydia said and mirrored the gesture by dabbing her lips with her napkin. She cast a sideways glance at Anne-Katrine to see if she approved of the dish as well - the smile that came back proved that she did.

"Oh," Flemming continued, "did you all hear the aircraft last night? I certainly did. In fact, it woke me up shortly after eleven. It must have been a large one with the droning noise it made."

"We heard it," Anne-Katrine said, sending Lydia and Arthur a silent message to keep quiet about her whereabouts the evening before. "I had just locked up for the evening when the sound came nearer. I stepped out into the courtyard to look for it, but it didn't come close. Then it left the area."

"Indeed. I believe it was an RAF bomber. The Luftwaffe doesn't use four-engined aircraft here in Denmark."

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes but kept eating. 'What is he doing? Is he trying to test us to see how much we know? Or is he trying to get us to reveal information that he can take to the Germans? That little bastard... is that the reason why he came here today? Well, he won't succeed!" - "How would you know it had four engines, Flemming?" she said while she held a bite of potato on her fork. A droplet of butter sauce dripped off it and landed on the plate.

"Oh, I can't say for sure, obviously. It just sounded that way," Flemming said with a disarming smile.

Anne-Katrine didn't return it but chose to concentrate on her potatoes and her slice of pot roast. She looked up at Lydia who had an unreadable expression on her face. They locked eyes and sent each other a silent message to steer clear of potentially touchy subjects. Arthur was less interested in even looking at her, but she eventually got the message across.

Flemming didn't seem to pick up the change in the mood around the table and went back to his slice of the roast. "I'm reminded of a humorous story I heard last week. I enjoyed dinner at Commandant Vossler's house at his request-"

Anne-Katrine clenched her fist around the fork and shot Flemming a dark glare.

"-when we were joined by Major Max Kubech of the Luftwaffe, the new commander of the military air field up in Aalborg. He's a veteran pilot who has flown numerous missions on the Eastern Front, you see. He had been given a two-week leave and had driven down from the base but needed somewhere to spend the night before he crossed the border into Germany. Now, he told me that when he was first transferred to his new post, he flew into Danish airspace from Poland, and he thought he had gone ten years back in time! Why? The fields were green, the buildings were still standing in the cities and he could see bathing beauties frolicking at the beaches. A little slice of Paradise, he called it. I'm sure we all agree with him."

Lydia nodded and smiled politely before she took another small sip of her beer. Anne-Katrine looked less impressed, but kept it all under wraps. Arthur, on the other hand, didn't find the
comments at all amusing and looked like he had no intention of keeping anything under wraps. "Thank you for the dinner, my darling wife," he said and pushed his chair back. "A farm needs a hand on the wheel at all times. If you will excuse me."

"Oh... was it something I said?" Flemming said and took his glass of beer.

"It wasn't," Anne-Katrine said, glaring after her brother as he closed the door behind him. "I'm afraid my brother is suffering from a severe case of sour eructations today."

"Mmmm. Well, it isn't because of the delightful food, that much is abundantly clear," Flemming said and held up his plate. "My dearest Mrs. Jensen, may I ask for another helping, please?"

"Why, certainly, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann," Lydia said and shot up from her chair to be the perfect hostess.

---

Later, after the empty dishes had been brought into the kitchen and their place on the table had been taken by the pale-blue metal coffee pot, a dish with marzipan rings and a bottle of fine port, Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann moved his chair around to sit parallel to the table so he had room to cross his legs in a gentlemanly fashion.

While Anne-Katrine and Lydia put the fine china cups and three small glasses for the port on the table, Flemming reached into his jacket pocket and found a silver cigarette case. "I think it's a crying shame there's such a strong anti-German sentiment here in Denmark. My family has had business with the Germans for generations and we have never felt mistreated. I can assure you they're intelligent, well-behaved, well-educated people with a great business sense and a thorough understanding of the world." While he spoke, he opened the silver case and took out a perfectly shaped cigarette.

Anne-Katrine stared at the cigarette with ever-narrowing eyes. It wasn't a Powhattan or any of the other low-grade brands like Shield, Holger Danske or Sønderjyden, that was a fact. Her eyes never left it as Flemming dabbed it against the table to get the tobacco lined up, then put it into his mouth. He lit it with a fancy lighter, and the smoke that was exhaled nearly caused Anne-Katrine to moan out loud - it was a real cigarette.

"It's obviously because of the occupation, Flemming," she said, transfixed by the pale blue smoke that wafted up towards the ceiling. She considered asking for one, but didn't want to appear desperate for a proper smoke - even though she was. "After all, they have invaded our country. That alone will cause a strong emotional response. In some cases, even hatred."

"True... but is the alternative any better?"

"The alternative? I would imagine the alternative of being occupied is freedom, Flemming."
"Well, obviously," Flemming said and shuffled uncomfortably on his chair, "but… imagine if the Bolsheviks came to our shores. Look at the brutality of the Soviet regime during and following their revolution. As a land owner, I wouldn't get to keep my head on my shoulders, that's a fact. And you know what, Anne-Katrine? I doubt you'd be allowed to own this farm, either! They don't seem too keen on the concept of private property."

"Touché."

Lydia took the bottle of port and removed the cork that came out with a *plopp*. "A glass of fine port, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann?" she said as she held the bottle ready.

"Thank you, Mrs. Jensen," Flemming said and held up his glass. "You're an extraordinary hostess," he continued, flashing Lydia the grin that had sent many a female knee knocking. The effect on Lydia was less than desired, but she still offered their guest a polite smile in return.

While Anne-Katrine poured Coffee Substitute into the fine china cups, Flemming sipped the port and put it down next to his dessert plate that held a piece of the traditional marzipan rings - though it wasn't actually made with marzipan but with a substitute product because of the shortage of almonds. "It is a shame, though. For centuries, Germany has fostered countless great minds in literature, music, architecture… indeed the arts as a whole. Goethe, Schiller, Wagner. Need I go on?"

Anne-Katrine grunted into her cup as she took a swig of the coffee. "Goebbels, Himmler, Adolf himself… need I go on?"

"Ah, but Hitler is an Austrian," Flemming said and knocked off some ash into a porcelain ashtray. "No, let's not speak of such dreary matters after such a wonderful meal. On a far brighter note… Mrs. Jensen, when did you and Arthur get married?"

Lydia put down her cup and offered their guest a smile. "In December of 1941. My husband proposed in mid-October, but I had to fulfil my contract with Doctor Meincke where I worked as a nurse before we could get married. That ended December 1st. After that, I was free to pursue other interests… such as starting a family."

The two women briefly locked eyes but looked away at once so it wouldn't be too obvious who loved who in the Jensen household. Although it had been Arthur who had made the proposal itself in front of Lydia's parents, he used words Anne-Katrine had written; simple yet heartfelt poetry that explained to the world why she loved Lydia Petersen. The honest declaration of love had stirred up a storm with the younger woman's parents who hadn't been too excited about giving their daughter away to a common farmer. When it became clear how much 'he' loved her, all the stops were removed.

After the traditional ceremony in the town church, Arthur and Lydia - who wore her mother's wedding dress - were taken to the farm in the back of a two-horse sleigh that Anne-Katrine drove across the snow-covered landscape. Arthur received an entire crate of beer for his troubles.
That night, their wedding night, Lydia had slipped into Anne-Katrine's pleasantly warm bedroom in a sheer nightgown that had sent their pulses racing. The night had simply flown by while they made love in every way known to Woman.

Anne-Katrine's cheeks flushed red at the thought of the special night. She would remember that night for as long as she lived, of that she was certain. Clearing her throat, she returned to the present and took a swig from her Coffee Substitute to cover her blushing.

"Oh, you were a nurse, Mrs. Jensen?" Flemming said and took another puff of his proper cigarette. "I'm sure that's come in handy here at the farm."

"Yes, I've treated a few scraped knuckles," Lydia said and took a bite out of a piece of the marzipan ring that she had whipped together in an almighty hurry following the announcement of their noon guest.

Flemming sipped his Coffee Substitute and chased the bitter taste down with some port. "Anne-Katrine, there's really no excuse for you now… which leads me to why I wanted to come over. Perhaps I should propose right this minute? Perhaps I should go down on my knee and ask for your hand in marriage…?"

Anne-Katrine froze in place with her coffee cup suspended halfway between the table and her mouth. Lydia went one better and choked on the piece of marzipan ring she had been chewing on. She coughed and spluttered until she nearly turned blue, but Anne-Katrine jumped up from her chair, raced around the table and dunked her partner's back until the coughing fit receded.

She hadn't replied yet, and the air turned increasingly pregnant following the question. She licked her lips while she racked her brain to come up with an answer the man across the table would understand - one that didn't include coarse language.

"Come now, Anne-Katrine," Flemming said and drained his port. "With your brother finding such a pretty, skilled wife, surely the time has finally come for you too. If it's the farm you're worried about, I'm willing to buy out your share. When we're married, you'll obviously stay in the mansion with me."

"Flemming," Anne-Katrine started to say, but stopped. Her audience of two looked at her literally from the edges of their seats. To stall, she walked back around the table and sat down on her own chair. To stall even further, she slapped her hands on her thighs. "Flemming, I don't think we should marry while there's a war on."

Lydia stared from Anne-Katrine to Flemming and back again.

"Dear Anne-Katrine," Flemming said and held up his glass of port like he was asking for a refill. Lydia reacted at once and poured another drink into it. "You have been holding out on me for nearly ten years now. If I didn't have such a strong self-esteem, I would start to think there was something wrong with me."
'There is something wrong with you! You're a guy!' Anne-Katrine thought, narrowing her eyes. "Flemming, frankly, I'm amazed you haven't married someone else in the meantime."

"Well, it's not for a lack of offers, you should know that. I just feel that you and I would be a match made in heaven. Think of how pretty our children would be. Mmmm? Alas, I can see another proposal has gone down the proverbial. Cheers," Flemming said and downed the fine port in one, disappointed gulp.

Anne-Katrine took a deep breath that she let out slowly - she had managed to dodge yet another bullet. She glanced at Lydia who sent her a knowing smile in return. Their remarkable little charade still held up though it was under pressure from all sides at once.

_**_**_**_

With the air once again snatched from Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann's sails, there wasn't much reason for him to stay at the Jensen farm. After another cup of Coffee Substitute, he dabbed his lips on his napkin and pushed his chair back. "Since I was unable to pierce your sister-in-law's armor and break through to her heart, I'm afraid I must bid you a farewell, Mrs. Jensen. It was a marvelous pot roast. Far better than anything my housekeeper has ever made. In fact, the entire feast was magnificent."

"Oh… thank you very much, Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann," Lydia said and rose from her chair. She blushed at the praise and looked down at her hands.

Anne-Katrine thought it looked indescribably cute, but she wouldn't comment on it while their guest was still there. She was hopeful he wouldn't be for too much longer. Getting up, she put out her hand and waited for Flemming to shake it. "So… always a pleasure to see you, Flemming."

"Likewise, Anne-Katrine… likewise," Flemming said and kissed the back of Anne-Katrine's hand. He held onto it for just a little too long, but he finished by giving it a kind squeeze. Smiling, he leaned in towards the woman who had turned him down yet again. "I wish you would reconsider. As my wife, you would be treated to the best the world has to offer. I've always said that a woman only truly blossoms when she's married… when she becomes a mother. Imagine, Anne-Katrine… imagine you and I as a loving couple. Wouldn't it be Paradise compared to this?"

Anne-Katrine didn't know what she should say to that particular statement, so she settled for offering their guest a half-smile. "Get home in one piece, Flemming. Watch out for German fighters. They like to buzz our fields from time to time."

"Oh, but surely not. Goodbye, Mrs. Jensen. Goodbye, Anne-Katrine. See you soon!" With that, Flemming left the hallway behind and stepped out into the courtyard.

The driver woke up at once and jumped out of the limousine. Adjusting his cap, he opened the passenger door for his employer, and soon, the fancy, black Horch limousine rumbled out of the courtyard and out of sight.
Still standing in the doorway to the courtyard, Anne-Katrine let out a long, slow sigh that sounded like it came from the bottom of her soul. "That went well," she mumbled, loosening the ascot.

"I thought so," Lydia said and snuck her hand inside Anne-Katrine's to play with her calloused fingers. "However, the next time I have to improvise a grand feast for someone, I'd like to know about it a bit further in advance, thank you. Oh… I think you should help me with the two dozen dishes now. Seems like a fair trade-off, doesn't it?"

"It does. And I will."

"Thank you," Lydia said and gave Anne-Katrine's hand a squeeze. "You know… Flemming was right about one thing."

"Oh? What's that?"

Lydia grinned broadly and stuck out her tongue at her partner. "Your children would be beautiful!"

Groaning out loud at the unfairness of it all, Anne-Katrine swooped down and pulled her partner in for a sideways hug. "Don't you start… don't you start, Miss Lydia!" she said, tenderly clawing the back of the flowery dress.

-*-*-*-

Later that same evening, dusk brought forth a new spell of fog that rolled over the meadows surrounding the Jensen farm, though it wasn't as dense as it had been earlier in the day. The swallows flew low in search of the final insect snacks of the day, and the blackbirds performed the last encore in the beech trees to the east of the grassy meadow.

It had been a warm day once the sun had penetrated the morning fog, and the meadow exuded a smell of pure, old-fashioned Danish summer - growing crops on distant fields, warm soil, and the fresh scent from the many surrounding trees. It would have been a perfect evening for a romantic stroll, but the cows needed to come home to their cozy shed, so Anne-Katrine, Lydia and Arthur herded the pack across the meadow like they did every night during the summer months.

Anne-Katrine's jaw worked overtime while she guided the lead cow back home. She glared darkly at Arthur who had refused to speak a whole sentence to her since their lunch with Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann. Lydia tried to keep the mood easy-going by retelling a colorful old folk legend, but it fell on deaf ears.

"My dearest brother," Anne-Katrine growled, prompting Lydia to forget all about her story and tend to the cows instead. "Isn't it time you quit moping like some damn, petulant five-year old and came back to the adult world with the rest of us? What the blazes is the matter with you, anyway?"
Arthur grunted out loud and gave the cow he controlled a whack over the hind quarters to get it back on track. "The matter? You dare ask me that? Oh, let me see… how about you once again butting in and grabbing something that should have been mine?" he growled, shooting his sister an angry glare.

They walked on for a little while before Anne-Katrine let out a sigh. "Just so we're on the same page… what are you talking about?"

"That thing last night with Mehlborg, of course! Dammit, Anne-Katrine! Do you have anything else you're keeping from me?" While Arthur spoke, his eyes slid over to Lydia, but he looked back at his sister at once.

"Mehlborg asked me a straight question and I needed to give him a straight answer, Arthur. How could I make him understand the damn charade Lydia and I have to play without exposing myself… and her?!"

Anne-Katrine's jaw worked ceaselessly, but she took a few deep breaths to calm down before she continued: "Arthur, I wish we didn't have to hide our love, but we do. You know damn well that if people find out, we'll be treated like the worst kind of garbage. You told me yourself the other day that some people had begun to talk. The vicar would demonize us in his sermon, some people might physically hurt us… or worse, the Germans might come and drag us away in the middle of the night for being depraved homophiles. Tell me that's not what you want!"

"Of course not! Dammit, whenever we argue, you always twist my words to give them a second meaning… you've always been an expert at that. How about just saying no to Mehlborg? A simple 'no' would have sufficed, Anne-Katrine. He would have listened to that."

"Perhaps so, but it wouldn't have made him ask you. You know that just as well as I do."

"Ah yes… because of my so-called marriage. Ah, yes."

Now Anne-Katrine's face really scrunched up into a dark mask. Lydia tried to help by wrapping an arm around the taller woman's waist, but it didn't stop the anger from rolling off her in waves. "Dancing round and around this topic will lead us nowhere. I suggest we shut up now before we say or do things we'll regret!" she said in a hoarse voice.

"Fine!"

"Fine," Anne-Katrine mumbled, pulling Lydia in for some comfort.

---

Later, as the darkness of the evening had claimed the land, Anne-Katrine sat on the doorstep of the farmhouse practicing her thousand kilometer stare. She had lit one of the two torches next to her that created a flickering, orange light.
After taking a final puff of the Powhattan she had been smoking, she grimaced over the poor taste before she stubbed it out on the doorstep and threw the butt away. When the door opened behind her, she let out a sigh and got ready for the next round of the battle against her brother.

"It's me, love… don't get up," Lydia said and closed the door softly. Pulling up in her dark-tan work dress, she folded her legs and sat down on the doorstep next to her partner. She wrapped an arm around Anne-Katrine's waist and moved in close so she could rest her head on the strong shoulder. "It's been quite a day. I'm dead on my feet…"

"I know. I'm sorry for all the hubbub today," Anne-Katrine said and mussed Lydia's knee.

"Don't apologize. It would have been impolite to say no to Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann. I wish we'd had a little more time to prepare, though."

"I promise I'll do better next time," Anne-Katrine let out a sigh and looked at the old items around the courtyard that fell into the flickering cone of light from the torch; the water barrel that was only half full after the recent dry spell, a pair of old plowshares and finally at the even older, and dreadfully rusty, wheel for a carriage they didn't even own anymore.

Sighing, she locked eyes with Lydia whose face had indeed turned even more sickly gray and listless than it had been earlier. "I love you so much," she whispered and leaned down to claim the younger woman's lips.

Once they separated, Lydia reached in under Anne-Katrine's vest and stroked her stomach and left side. "And I love you. Good Lord, I'm so tired… how about we called it a night and hit the sheets? I know I'll sleep so much better with you there."

"Now that's the kind of proposal I could live with…" Anne-Katrine said with a tired grin. Getting on her feet, she helped Lydia up next to her and held her tight. The moment was too good to miss, so they closed the distance between them and gave each other a nice smoosh that took away just a little of the fatigue that had fallen on them both. "Bedtime," Anne-Katrine said as she opened the front door.

* 

* 

CHAPTER 4

Four days later - Monday, June 7th, 1943.

Anne-Katrine, Arthur and Poul Nedergaard poured into Lydia's kitchen and scuffled around playfully to get the best seats. In the end, they just took their customary seat around the kitchen table.
The cows had been milked and taken to the meadow, the cowshed had been mucked out and the waste had been transported to the dunghill. Nine churns of milk had been placed in the cold storage cellar, and six arms had been scrubbed thoroughly in the icy water from the well in the courtyard - in short, it was time for breakfast.

The reason for the high level of excitement among the residents of the Jensen farm presented itself immediately as the penetrating, husky aroma of øllebrød - cooked sweet ale with mushy chunks of rye bread and a dash of brown, powdered sugar - filled the kitchen. Lydia chuckled over the behavior of her companions as she stirred the three-liter pot on the stove.

Four soup plates had already been placed on the table with four spoons and four glasses of lukewarm milk - and three of the four people in the kitchen had already grabbed their spoon to be ready for the treat.

"I hope you're ready for it, because here it comes," Lydia said and sealed off the old stove's burner before she took the pot with the steaming hot øllebrød and moved it over to the table. Dunking a large, wooden spoon into it, she grabbed Anne-Katrine's soup plate and poured a healthy amount of the dark-brown, chunky substance into it. "There you go… Arthur?"

The procedure was repeated until all four soup plates were full. Moving the pot back to the stove, Lydia had to chuckle out loud at the sight of three grown-ups digging into the øllebrød with gusto. She sat down and took her own spoon, but didn't begin to eat until she had seen the faces of her companions. They were more than pleased, so she dug in and followed the others while the beer was hot and the chunks of rye bread had the right amount of mushiness.

---

Afterwards, all four leaned back in their chairs and rested their full bellies. Anne-Katrine reached for the newspapers she had bought when she had been in town the day before, but they were just out of reach and she simply couldn't be bothered to move a muscle to get them. "Oh, that was just wonderful, Lydia… it's not an everyday dish, but when you make it… just wonderful," she said, patting her stomach.

"I concur," Arthur said and smiled at his wife.

Poul Nedergaard nodded and wiped a pale-brown foam mustache off his upper lip. "I haven't had øllebrød since my mother lived… my wife refuses to make it because of the strong smell. Yours was just right, Miss Lydia."

"Thank you. I'm glad you enjoyed it," Lydia said and smiled at Anne-Katrine in particular. "That's definitely an old recipe I intend to keep."

Outside in the courtyard, the flatbed truck from the dairy plant rumbled across the uneven cobblestones and turned around so it had the rear end facing the short staircase down to the cold storage cellar. The driver honked twice and jumped down from the cab together with another man who was dressed as an apprentice.
"Oh... I can't be bothered," Anne-Katrine said and waved her hand dismissively.

"I got it, Sis," Arthur said and got up.

Not thirty seconds later, he came back into the kitchen with an unreadable expression on his face. He locked eyes with Anne-Katrine and seemed to temporarily fall back into the state of resentment he had been in a few days earlier. Stepping aside, he revealed the identity of the supposed apprentice - Ernst Mehlborg.

"What in the world?" Anne-Katrine said and sat up straight despite her full belly. "Sergeant Mehlborg... when did you get a job at the dairy plant? And as an apprentice, no less!"

"Oh, an hour ago. Good morning, everybody. Good morning, Mrs. Jensen," he said and put out his hand so Lydia could shake it. "The Germans didn't even look twice at the truck when we left the plant. It appears we've found a solid means of transport."

Anne-Katrine got up and pushed the chair under the table. With Mehlborg there, it was clear something was about to happen. She cast a brief glance at Arthur to gauge his reaction, and noted with some dismay that his face had already grown darker. "I suspect you're here for the containers?"

"Indeed we are, Jensen. We're moving them to a different location. I need a hand to get them onto the milk truck."

"I'll be there... in a moment. Arthur, please help the driver load the milk churns first," Anne-Katrine said and offered her brother a look of sympathy. "Once you have, come back inside. We need to have a word... all of us."

Arthur nodded and left.

At the same time, Poul Nedergaard let out a grunt as he pushed back his chair. "I better leave. I probably know too much already, but I can't be involved in anything with an ill wife back home. I'll be outside sweeping the courtyard, Miss Jensen."

"Very well, Poul. We can discuss the day's chores a little later."

Poul smiled at his employer before he left the kitchen. Anne-Katrine waited for the front door to close before she took two of the soup plates and moved them over to the counter to help Lydia do the dishes.

After Lydia had put a bucket of water from the well onto the stove to get it heated, she turned around and wiped her hands on her apron. "We still have a portion of øllebrød left if you wish to join us, Mr. Mehlborg."

"Oh no. Much obliged, but I just can't eat that stuff," Chuckling - and causing Anne-Katrine to raise an eyebrow at the odd event - Mehlborg pulled out one of the chairs and sat down at the
"You see, I grew up on a farm much like this one. And we had øllebrød every morning for the first fifteen years of my life. The very definition of 'too much of a good thing,' you know."

Anne-Katrine wondered if the far more open and jovial man who was sitting at her kitchen table was really the dour, perpetually po-faced Ernst Viggo Mehlborg or if someone had injected a truth serum into his veins, but she decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

Before Anne-Katrine had a chance to speak, the former Sergeant looked up and pinned her to the spot with a strong gaze. "Jensen, what would you say if I invited you to a strategy meeting tonight?"

"A meeting? With Kvantorp and Gudmundsen?"

"Yes. And a further man as well."

"Honestly, Mehlborg…" Anne-Katrine said and absentmindedly took a tea towel that she used to wipe off one of the plates that Lydia had dunked in hot water. "This is what I meant before when I spoke to my brother. We need to have a family council before I can commit to anything."

While she spoke, she glanced over at Lydia who offered her a weak smile in return.

Mehlborg cocked his head and shot her a gaze that overpowered even the one from earlier. "No, Arthur can't take your place. Yes, I know what you were about to say. He's married. You see, Jensen, when a man enters holy matrimony, he suddenly finds himself with someone who depends on him. That makes him less likely to take the risks that need to be taken. It may make him react slower because he has to stop and think about what the outcome may be. We can't bring someone like that to where we'll be going."

Lydia scrunched up her face and shot Anne-Katrine a dark look that seemed to say: 'I depend on you, not Arthur, dammit!'

"Mrs. Jensen," Mehlborg continued, oblivious to the silent exchange between the two women, "surely you can convince your husband it's a foolish notion? This kind of business is best suited for unattached people like myself and your sister-in-law here."

Anne-Katrine rubbed her face with her free hand. Her frown only grew worse when Arthur stepped back into the kitchen and gave the others a puzzled look. She glanced from Arthur to Lydia and finally over to Mehlborg. Something had to give, and it would most likely end up being her peace of mind.

---

Arthur's fierce slamming of the front door as he stomped away across the courtyard hung in Anne-Katrine's ears even as she and Mehlborg carried the last of the five containers over to the idling milk truck. The wood gas generator sent out a foul smelling smoke that sent them scurrying away from the white clouds.
The containers were protected by a sturdy tarp that Mehlborg pulled over them to cover everything fully. Once the tarp was in place, he jumped off the rear of the truck and met with Anne-Katrine at a safe distance from the clouds of wood gas.

"Jensen, when you arrive at the meeting tonight, you must knock twice, then three times in rapid succession, then twice slowly. You understand? Repeat so I'm sure you do."

"Knock twice, then three times in rapid succession, then twice slowly," Anne-Katrine said, counting off on her fingers.

"Good. The password is Niels Ebbesen Leads Us All."

"I'm… I'm sorry? Niels Ebbesen… the Danish freedom fighter from the year dot?"

"Indeed. Appropriate, wouldn't you say?"

"Well," Anne-Katrine said with an embarrassed shrug, "I only heard about him once before I left school after the fifth grade, so… I wouldn't know. In any case, Niels Ebbesen Leads Us All… I'll remember that."

Anne-Katrine noticed that Lydia was looking at them through the single-pane kitchen windows. The younger woman wore a look on her face of deep worry that bordered on grave concern. Anne-Katrine tried to reassure her lover by giving her a comforting smile, but Lydia left the window without smiling back.

"Jensen!" Mehlborg suddenly barked. "Keep your mind on the matters at hand! Bloody civilians… what did I just say to you?"

"I… I didn't hear, Sergeant."

Mehlborg rolled his eyes and took a step closer to appear more intimidating. It didn't quite work since Anne-Katrine was several centimeters taller than he was, but his bulldog frame offset that to a certain extent. "I said, you'll need a cover name for the meeting. Which will it be?"

"What? A cover name? Why would I even need a cover name? I already know Kvantorp and Gudmundsen…"

Mehlborg took a deep breath but let it out without yelling, much to Anne-Katrine's surprise. "Yes, but the last man isn't from around here. He doesn't know any of our names. That way, he won't be able to give anyone up if he's arrested."

"Oh… Gertrude. Like Gertrude Stein," Anne-Katrine said with a grin.

"Never heard of her. Who's she? An actress?"

"Not quite. An author."
"I see. Very well," Mehlborg said and opened the truck's passenger side door. "I'll meet you at seven, then," he continued before he swung himself up into the milk truck's cab.

"Wait, Sergeant… hang on," Anne-Katrine said and grabbed hold of the door so it couldn't close. "There's something I need to tell you… this was a one-time deal only. I'm sorry, but I can't allow further containers to be stored here. It's just too dangerous for the people close to me."

"All right. Is that a final decision?"

Anne-Katrine licked her lips and thought of the concerned look on Lydia's face. "Yes. Yes, it is."

"Very well. Noted. I'll talk to you tonight."

"See you at seven, Mehlborg," Anne-Katrine said and stepped back so the former Sergeant could close the door. She briefly waved at the truck as it left the courtyard. Once it was out of sight, she turned around and looked darkly at the kitchen windows where Lydia still hadn't reappeared. With Arthur off in a huff somewhere and Lydia in a depressed mood, there were plenty of broken fences for Anne-Katrine to mend over the course of the day.

---

The day went by in a stony, unpleasant silence for most involved. Poul Nedergaard tried to remain cheerful as the only one, but his efforts were ignored by the three gloomy people he worked with. Lydia spent most of the day in the kitchen either washing the floor and two sets of curtains, or preparing supper at the stove. Anne-Katrine had taken up residence in the sitting room with the old newspapers and a full ashtray of smoked Powhattans, and Arthur had spent the entire day cleaning out in the garage barn and a dozen other similar, time-consuming chores so he wouldn't have to speak to his sister.

Anne-Katrine stubbed out yet another Powhattan and looked up at Poul who stood in the doorway to the sitting room with his flat cap in his hand. "Hello, Poul. Is the day over already?"

"It is, Miss Jensen. It's nearly six o'clock. I'm on my way home now. Is there anything I-"

"No no, Poul, it's all right," Anne-Katrine said and got up. As she rose, she dusted off her vest and her shirt which produced a small heap of ash that fell onto the carpet. She made a mental note of finding and using the dust roller before she left for the meeting. "You've done plenty today. Thanks. See you tomorrow. Get home safely."

"Thank you, Miss Jensen. See you tomorrow."

Anne-Katrine moved into the hallway beyond the sitting room to wave goodbye to their hired hand. Once the older man had hobbled over to his bicycle, she closed the front door and let out a deep sigh. She could hear Lydia working in the kitchen, but her feet seemed reluctant to go out there and face yet another cold shoulder - or worse, another disappointed look.
It had to be done, so Anne-Katrine shuffled into the kitchen. She waited in the doorway and put her hands on the doorjambs for support. It just happened to look like she had them up in defeat or surrender, which wasn't too far from reality. Lydia didn't exactly ignore her, but she wasn't her usual warm self, either. "Sweetheart," Anne-Katrine said and stepped into the kitchen. "I know you're upset. You have every right to be upset. It's just-

"Anne-Katrine, have you ever stopped to consider that Mehlborg is using you?" Lydia said and pointed a wooden spoon at Anne-Katrine in a somewhat accusing fashion. "That he's taking advantage of your national pride and your willingness to work hard? What if you're just another asset to him… an expendable asset? Have you thought about that? Well, I have. A lot."

"I know, dearest. It's difficult to explain… it's something I must do," Anne-Katrine said and moved in close. The Cumberland sausage in the large pot took care of itself, so she took Lydia by the arms and pulled her in for a warm hug. At first, the younger woman was reluctant to follow the hug, but she mellowed after a few seconds.

"Looking back," Lydia said quietly once they separated, "I regret my decision to marry your brother. It has only brought us dissension. We should have carried on with what we already had, you and I. Met once in a while to... to make love, and keep everything else under wraps."

"Oh, sweetheart... I didn't know you were dissatisfied with living here..."

"I'm not... please don't get me wrong, love. Some parts are better than I dreamt of," Lydia said and gave her partner's sides a little squeeze. "It's just that Mehlborg is a man of strict traditions. If Arthur hadn't been married, he would have asked him, not you."

"It may not have been the case. I think he would have asked me regardless of my brother's marital status," Anne-Katrine said with a despondent shrug. "Simply because I fought on that day three years ago and Arthur didn't."

Sighing, Lydia returned to the Cumberland sausage. "We'll never know."

"No. It's almost time for me to head to town, Lydia. I know we haven't seen eye to eye today, but... but may I have a kiss for good luck?"

A brief smile flashed across Lydia's lips as she put the lid back on the pot and wiped her hands on her apron. "But of course," she said and stood up on tip-toes to get the best angle. Once they separated, she ran a thumb across Anne-Katrine's cheekbone to feel the smooth skin. "Take care... please. Do you hear me?"

"I hear you loud and clear, sweetie. It's just a meeting."

"These days, it's never just a meeting. The Germans are everywhere around town. They have informers everywhere..."
"I'll be careful. I love you," Anne-Katrine said and stole another kiss just to be on the safe side when it came to good luck.

---

Not long after - without saying goodbye to Arthur who had refused to even acknowledge her presence - Anne-Katrine rode her bicycle down the side road to get to town. She knew the ten-kilometer stretch like the back of her hand, so she focused on getting used to the cover name she had selected and the password she had to deliver at the door in order to get in once she got there.

She had chosen to wear the same dark-gray shirt she had used for the weapons drop in case they had to slip away unnoticed, but her flat cap, her coarse work pants and her vest were the same as always. It was impossible to work the pedals in her clog-boots so she wore a pair of nice, pre-war shoes. Finally, she had put a jacket into the basket that was hanging on the handlebars in case the evening would turn chilly when it was time for her to go home.

Now and then, she scanned the skies to check for fighter airplanes of any kind, not just the Germans who loved to buzz unsuspecting motorists. The evening hours often saw large groups of American and British bombers returning from a daytime raid on one of the cities in northern Germany. Nearly all of those bomber groups had fighter escorts that occasionally swept down low to lure the anti-aircraft cannons at the garrison into firing at them so they couldn't fire at the bombers.

It hadn't been more than a month since a British Lancaster bomber had been shot down only fifteen kilometers to the north-east. None of the crew had made it.

Anne-Katrine shook off the dark thoughts as she pedaled hard to get up one of the numerous small hills in the undulating landscape. The bicycle underneath her creaked and squeaked in perfect disharmony, reminding her of the happiest days of her childhood. Every single Sunday in the summer months, she had driven around aimlessly to see nature's many colors and magical moments. She didn't have time for that anymore, but it remained a dream of hers. "One day," she mumbled under her breath, "one fine day, Lydia and I will go out here and… and be ourselves. Do nothing for a whole day but live… and love. One fine day…"

---

That fine day would seemingly have to wait a little longer. Anne-Katrine's face scrunched up when she realized the main road into town was awash with German soldiers from the garrison. It seemed everyone had been issued orders to do the same thing at the same time, and as a result, the road resembled a gray beehive.

There were Germans everywhere, and they all wore full combat uniforms. Truck after truck had been parked at the curb on the main road; most of them were waiting for their share of soldiers to climb aboard, but a few were already occupied. Officers barked orders and engines were started. Motorcycles carrying machine guns raced up and down the line of trucks like sheep dogs trying to whip the herd into shape.
Jumping off the bicycle so she wouldn't draw too much attention to herself, Anne-Katrine walked along the sidewalk with unhurried steps. Although she was at the risk of running late, there was no need to stand out so much the Germans would catch an interest in her.

She didn't need to go all the way to the square. Instead, she crossed the street between two trucks and headed for Smallegade where the meeting was to take place. She was able to pick up a few phrases here and there from the soldiers she went past, but cursed the fact that she couldn't speak the language well enough to understand more than the most basic like Guten Tag.

The Danish citizens who were out on the streets leading to the square had all learned the importance of minding their own business when the Germans were near. They all kept their heads down so they wouldn't even look at someone they didn't know, much less address someone on the street.

That was the major difference since the early months following the invasion. Then, many people had welcomed the German soldiers as protectors - but now, with the tide of the war going against the Nazis from Stalingrad in the east to El Alamein in the south, their inherent brutality rose to the surface, and many families had experienced unwarranted arrests or brutal beatings simply for looking at German officers the wrong way. Even worse, you never knew if the person you had just complained to about the sorry state of affairs was a member of the secret German police, the Gestapo.

Anne-Katrine followed suit and kept her eyes firmly on the sidewalk as she left the main road into town and moved down a quiet side street by the name of Smallegade. The address she was to visit was located two hundred meters down the street.

---

Although the sounds of the trucks and the many soldiers carried into Smallegade from the main road, the neighborhood was quiet and peaceful. It consisted of a row of separate, one-storey villas on the left-hand side of the street, and a long line of two-storey terraced houses on the right-hand side.

The contrast between the bourgeois villas and the working class terraced houses couldn't have been greater. Where the well-maintained villas all had nice gardens with picket fences, apple trees and flagpoles, the terraced houses were in a poor state with sub-standard windows and crumbling red brick walls.

The terraced estates had been built from 1903 to 1905 to serve as cheap housing for the blue collar laborers that worked at the town's two major employers at the time, a brewery and a sawmill. The sawmill had vanished when they ran out of trees to cut down, and the brewery was declared bankrupt during the Great Depression - the owners had embezzled the company for millions to cover their own losses. Once the employers were gone, so were the blue collar laborers, and the town fell into financial despair until the garrison was established in 1932 bringing new life and new tax payers.
Anne-Katrine crossed Smallegade and moved over to the terraced houses. She tried to spot the numbers on the doors she went past to find the right place, but it wasn't easy since most had been left to their own devices for so long they had fallen into decay.

When she finally found it, she had already gone past it. Mehlborg had told her the meeting wasn't going to take place in the terraced house itself, but rather in a concrete cellar underneath it. Parking and locking the bicycle, she took her jacket from the basket and put it on.

A crumbled staircase led down towards a green metal door, and Anne-Katrine descended the fifteen steps, mindful of not tripping over loose pieces of concrete. Standing at the foot of the staircase, she realized it was so deep that even her taller-than-average frame couldn't be spotted from Smallegade. She gulped down a lump of nervousness and raised her hand to knock on the metal door.

"Knock twice, then three times in rapid succession, then twice slowly," she chanted under her breath, making sure her knuckles followed the command to the letter.

When nothing happened at first, she narrowed her eyes and pushed her flat cap back from her forehead. Her heart slowly began to speed up and she developed a sneaking suspicion that the meeting had been called off because of the high level of German activity.

The old, green metal door, the crumbled steps and the rusty drain at the foot of the staircase didn't offer her any clues as to what she was supposed to do in case she wasn't let in. She licked her lips nervously and shuffled up the first step, then the second, to see if she had been followed.

A sound akin to a slider being moved aside reached her ears from somewhere behind her. She hurried back down to the foot of the staircase and clenched her jaw. "Niels Ebbesen Leads Us All," she croaked, hoping that she had spoken clearly enough for the person on the other side to understand her.

Another few seconds went by before the door was cracked ajar. The gap was only thirty centimeters or so, but Anne-Katrine took that as her cue and slipped inside the cellar. She had barely made it beyond the threshold before she heard a revolver being cocked right behind her. Then, a cold piece of metal was pressed to the back of her head at her ear.

The terrifying sensation sent a bucket of ice water down Anne-Katrine's spine, and she had to clench her jaw in order to stop from her teeth from chattering. Her mind turned to a muddle and her eyes grew wider and wider as the cold steel was pressed harder against her skin. "Niels Ebbesen Leads Us All?" she croaked again, hoping it would be enough to make the unknown person remove the weapon.

"Who are you?" a man said in Danish that held a strong accent from the Southern Schleswig province south of the border.
"G- Gertrude," Anne-Katrine croaked. When the cold steel was removed from behind her ear, she let out a long, gasping sigh and blinked several times to get the little, black spots that had invaded her vision to go away.

Turning around, she stood face to face with a man in his late twenties who was dressed in a dark-gray overcoat and matching pants. He appeared to be the only one there. He had a hard, angular face, and the relentless look in his eyes told a tale of seeing - and perhaps committing - countless horrors on the battlefield.

"If you make a sudden move, I will kill you. Sit down over there," the man said, pointing at an overturned wooden crate with his free hand.

Anne-Katrine thought it most prudent to follow the man's orders, so she shuffled over to the crate and sat down. The cellar was nothing to write home about. It was dusty and smelled of mold and decay, and the four support beams in the center of the room were draped in cobwebs. A naked light bulb was hanging down from the ceiling, but the glass in the bulb was dimmed of old age so it was impossible to see if it actually worked or not. A rusty, old bicycle leaned against the far wall next to three crates similar to the one Anne-Katrine sat on.

"How did you get past the Germans?" the man said in a voice that could be perceived as threatening.

"Well… I just… walked past them. That's all," Anne-Katrine said with a shrug.

The man narrowed his eyes, clearly not satisfied with the answer. Before he could ask again, someone knocked the secret code on the door. "Don't. Move," the man said hoarsely, once again pointing his gun at Anne-Katrine.

When the door was cracked ajar, Anne-Katrine could hear Ernst Viggo Mehlborg speaking the password. Soon, the former Sergeant stepped inside which made Anne-Katrine let out a huge sigh of relief and rub her clammy brow.

"Hello, Gertrude," Mehlborg said and removed his hat that he had pushed all the way down over his eyes. "I'm Leo. Finn and Lars will be here shortly. The German presence has made it difficult to get here today."

"Not for her," the man with the gun growled, shutting the door behind Mehlborg. "She claims she just walked past the soldiers."

"She probably did, Anton," Mehlborg said and took off his tan trench coat to reveal a dark-gray suit similar to the one worn by the man with the gun.

"Without getting asked for her papers even once? I don't believe it."
Anne-Katrine grunted under her breath and decided to take the bull by the horns now that Mehlborg was there to back her up. "You know, you ought to, because that's what happened. What the blazes is going on with all those Germans, anyhow? Why are they being mobilized?"

"It's some kind of exercise, Gertrude," Mehlborg said. "It's got something to do with the Atlantic Wall."

"Oh… the fortifications at the west coast?"

The man known as Anton moved over to the other side of the cellar to keep a clear firing line at Anne-Katrine in case she made a poorly judged move. "She obviously doesn't have a clue about anything. What do we need a woman for, anyway? Make us tea? There's no place for a woman on the battlefield."

Anne-Katrine took a deep breath to tell Anton a few truths, but the sight of the revolver pointed at her made her calm down before she could let rip. "I beg to differ, Anton. I have fought the Germans."

"Everyone here fought on April 9th, Gertrude," Mehlborg said and made a sweeping gesture at the three of them. "Though not all on the same side."

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes and stared at the man she knew as Anton. "What the hell is that supposed to mean? Are you a German?"

"I'm from Southern Schleswig!" Anton barked. "You know damn well the province was absorbed by Germany as spoils of war without asking the local population where their loyalties were! Come 1939, I had the choice of wearing a Nazi uniform or being interned in a camp. So I chose the uniform. On April 9th, I was part of the 240th Panzer Support Company on the tails of the 399th Infantry Regiment, but I never fired a shot against a Danish soldier!"

Anne-Katrine scrunched up her face and looked at Mehlborg for an explanation.

Mehlborg confirmed Anton's story by nodding. "That's right. He's a deserter. His company as well as the entire 170th Division was sent to the Eastern Front in 1942. After a massacre against the civilian population of a small town not unlike this one, he'd had enough."

"Yes… my unit was forced to collect the bodies of the civilians. I hid in the wagon that took them away to a mass grave just outside of town," Anton said in a weak voice that proved he was revisiting the gruesome scenes. "I tricked my way home to Southern Schleswig… and then I made my way back up here."

Anne-Katrine felt the hairs on her arms standing on edge as she listened to Anton's story. It struck her how little the Danish population - herself included - really understood of the gruesome realities of war, much less of the war crimes committed at the front in the various theaters of the war. Denmark really was a Paradise, exactly like the Luftwaffe Major that Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann had spoken to had said.
The dark moment was broken by the secret code being knocked on the door. While Anton let in 'Finn' and 'Lars' - Erik Hartvig Kvantor and Svenning Gudmundsen - Anne-Katrine let out the breath she had been holding and ran a hand through her damp hair. She was in way over her head, and she knew it. But she couldn't back out now.

"All right, let's start, shall we?" Mehlborg said a short while later. Kvantor and Gudmundsen didn't stop talking among themselves, so the former Sergeant held up his hands to get everyone's attention. "Listen up, men. And woman. Thank you. I have sourced important information on the sequence of trains on the main north-south line, but we'll get to that later. First, I need to hear if we have anything to report on new informers or repeat offenders. Finn?"

Erik Kvantor rose from his crate and smoothed down his slick hair. Like the others, he wore gray to blend into a crowd in case they needed to make a quick escape. "I don't have much to report, Leo. Greta Hansen from Viktor Karlsens Gade number six has been at it again. She has reported one of the tobacconists for selling cigarettes under the counter. As some of us already know," Erik said and turned to Anne-Katrine to bring her up to speed, "Greta Hansen is a seventy-seven year old busybody who acted this way even before the occupation began. Then, she reported all and sundry to the local constabulary. The difference is that they didn't bother sending out patrols when she called them. The Germans do. That's what I have."

Anne-Katrine rubbed her chin. She had used the tobacconist on Viktor Karlsens Gade several times to get her Powhattans, or even her good, old Bristol Favorites when they were still available in the first few months following the invasion. Perhaps she had bumped into the informer without even knowing it?

"All right. Lars?" Mehlborg said and nodded in Svenning Gudmundsen's direction.

The young, shy man rose and clutched his flat cap in front of him like a schoolboy who had been sent to the headmaster's office for a spanking. He licked his lips and cast a weary glance at Anton whose arms were crossed menacingly over his chest. "Well… I don't know if it's true or not, but I heard from someone who knew someone who had been there, that… uh… that someone had tried to rile up the patrons in the Kastellet pub on the square. The man was apparently dressed like a out-of-work bum, and he spewed out statements damning the German presence and things like that. He tried to lure the patrons into agreeing with him, but… uh… as far as I know, no one did. And then he, uh… well, left. We don't know the instigator's identity, but I… uh… we have his description."

Anne-Katrine furrowed her brow and looked at Mehlborg in the hope that he would shed some light on the puzzling report.

Catching her puzzled look, Mehlborg turned towards her. "If someone agreed with him, he'd report it to the German Commander of the Guard Detail who'd send in a patrol to arrest the individual. It's a ploy to flush out dissidents."
"Oh… I see," Anne-Katrine said and shook her head over the endless line of dirty tricks the Germans resorted to - since she, Lydia and Arthur spent most of their time out on the farm, they were somewhat shielded from all the nasty goings-on in town. 'One thing's for certain, though… it'll take years if not decades before the common Dane will tolerate the Germans again, even as friendly neighbors…' she thought, glancing over at the man she knew as Anton.

"Gertrude, I believe you also have a report about a collaborator, don't you?" Mehlborg continued, shooting her a pointed look.

"Uh… Willumsen?"

"Yes."

"Well, all right," Anne-Katrine said and sat up straight. Standing up felt more natural, so she rose from the crate. When all four men of the resistance group turned to look at her, she began to fiddle with her hands, not knowing what to do with them. 'Oh, this is ridiculous!' she thought, throwing all that insecurity away and standing ramrod straight. "The former foreman of the Lynge-Hoffmann farm, Arne Willumsen, is a known uniformed collaborator. Indeed, I would even call him a proper Nazi. On April 9th, 1940, he had prepared a welcoming party for the German regiments. He was going to hoist the Nazi flag from their flagpole, and he had dozens of armbands all carrying the swastika. He had SS posters, German rifles, the works."

"And you know that, how?" Anton said.

"I was there that day and saw it with my own eyes."

"Mmmm…"

"And," Mehlborg said with something that could be called a grin on his face, "she smashed out his teeth with her rifle. It didn't hurt his looks that much… he was ugly as sin to begin with."

'Finn' and 'Lars' chuckled, but Anton didn't seem too impressed.

"Later," Anne-Katrine continued, "Arne Willumsen was an agitator and a speaker at a Nazi meeting held in connection with the general election back in March of this year. By then, he wore a full uniform… brown, not gray. I knew him from before the war, and looking back, I suppose he always harbored nationalist opinions while not being quite Nazi-minded yet. He is now."

When a chorus of grunts came back to Anne-Katrine as a response to her report, she licked her lips and got ready for the last part. "Also, to come clean, if you will… I spoke extensively with Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann the other day. I presume you have him listed as a known collaborator?"

Mehlborg nodded. "We do. What was the purpose of the meeting? Simply a social call?"
"Well… I've known him for nigh-on half my life. He asked for my hand in marriage."

For once, Mehlborg was stunned into silence. Erik Kvantorp and Svenning Gudmundsen both turned around to gawk wide-eyed at Anne-Katrine. After a short, but highly embarrassing delay, Erik let out a strong chuckle. Once again, unfortunately, Anton didn't seem too impressed. "I sense you turned him down? You shouldn't have," the man from Southern Schleswig said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"We could have had a direct connection to Oberst Herbert Vossler, the German garrison Commandant. You should have accepted Lynge-Hoffmann's proposal."

"Oh, really? You don't think that should be my decision to make?" Anne-Katrine said and shot the new man a dark look.

"No."

"For your information, it is my decision. And my decision was to turn him down," Anne-Katrine said and crossed her arms over her chest to mirror the posture Anton had been in since the meeting started.

Erik Kvantorp swung his head back and forth between Anne-Katrine and Anton, seemingly hoping that he'd see a cat fight - or a cock fight - develop between the two hard-minded individuals.

Before it could evolve into something that could threaten the group's integrity, Mehlborg stepped in to put the lid on it by raising his hands in the air. "We're here to fight the bloody Germans, not ourselves. Now will you calm down so we can get on with the program?"

"You shouldn't have invited a woman, Leo. Especially not one who's so peculiar and seditious," Anton grumbled.

That barb made Anne-Katrine's jaw go to work, but she was able to keep most of it on the inside save for the dark, thunderous mask that fell over her face. She looked up at Mehlborg whose expression mirrored her own. Instead of speaking her mind, she sat down but continued to glare at the men around her who wisely kept to their own business.

"So… with that out of the way," Mehlborg said and let out an audible sigh, "I have one more incident to report before we can move onto the important items. Two young boys, aged eight and nine, were arrested by a German patrol after they had pinned a note that said 'Dummkopf', which is German for idiot, to the back of a uniform jacket belonging to a sleeping Corporal of the 11th Motorized Regiment. The Corporal was also arrested by the patrol because he had been imbibing while on duty. The children's parents were called to the office of the Commander of the Guard Detail, but the boys were let off with a stern warning. No news has reached us about the Corporal."
"Two weeks of latrine duty!" Erik Kvantorp said with a grin on his bony face. "At least! That's what I would have given him. Corporal Dummkopf! Ha!"

They all chuckled at that, save for Anton who chose to shoot Anne-Katrine a dark, surly glare that didn't need to be translated from the dialect spoken in Southern Schleswig to be effective.

Turning around, Mehlborg pushed two crates together so he could get a flat surface for a large, map-like piece of paper he produced from his coat pocket. To the uninitiated, it was just a huge collection of squiggly lines, but that was to keep the Germans from deciphering it too easily in case he was arrested.

"I need you to come over here so I don't have to say it more than once," he said and spread out the piece of paper.

Everybody rose and moved over to the two crates. The makeshift table wasn't particularly stable, but it was all they had. "This," Mehlborg said and planted an index finger on the map which made the makeshift table wobble, "represents the main north-south railway line two kilometers to the west of where we are. The town was never connected to the lines for passenger use, but in the old days… and Gertrude, I'm sure you can confirm this… there used to be a freight yard for the town's brewery."

Anne-Katrine nodded. "That's right, Leo. It was one of the busiest freight stations in all of South Jutland."

"Yes. When the brewery collapsed, the station was abandoned, but the stationhouse itself is still here," - Mehlborg pressed his thumb down onto the map at a certain group of squiggly lines - "along with all the regular facilities like a coal depot and a water tower for the locomotives. The Germans have claimed it and put it back into operation. They use it as a temporary stop to replenish the engines after the five-hour haul from Aalborg, and also to relieve the soldiers patrolling the trains before they start the last part of the journey, which takes them across the border and into the Reich. There aren't any troops stationed there as such, they always come by truck when a train is scheduled to arrive."

Erik Kvantorp let out a grunt and followed Mehlborg's fingers on the map. "Have they changed their schedules after the recent railway sabotages further north?"

"No," Mehlborg continued, "they're still coming regularly. Five trains a day. We all know the Germans thrive on regularity."

"Ordnung muss sein," Anton grumbled and the men duly laughed. Anne-Katrine didn't know what the German phrase meant, and she knew she couldn't ask without being viewed as a country rube - or worse, as an ignorant woman. She decided to store it for later. Lydia would be able to translate it for her.

"So," Mehlborg continued, "military logic would suggest we could do the most damage by attacking the station itself and destroying the facilities. And we would probably do that if we had
a platoon or two at our disposal. But we don't, so we have to take the second best option which is to-

"Blow up the tracks ahead of the station… to the north of it?" Anne-Katrine said, narrowing her eyes. "It won't work to destroy the tracks following the stop, because the trains would still be able to be replenished at the yard while the tracks are being repaired ahead of them. And I suppose we do it to cut off the flow of trains…?"

Erik Kvantorp and Svenning Gudmundsen both grinned at the newest member of their little resistance group, but Anton was predictably less impressed.

"Partially," Mehlborg said, moving back to the map, "however, this is where the plastic explosives from the containers come into play. It's excellent thinking, Gertrude, but I can hear you aren't aware of the insane forces unleashed when the C2 detonates. Four kilograms will be enough to comprehensively destroy fifty meters of track, not to mention smash two dozen ties. Our objective is to get the train to derail and crash down the embankment. It needs to be at a certain speed to do that, otherwise it'll just roll off into the gravel."

"Oh… I see," Anne-Katrine said and glanced at Anton who still had a surly look on his face. Looking back at the map, she continued: "In that case, I take it all back and suggest we do it roughly five hundred meters to the south of the station. Which would be here… or so." - She pointed at the squiggly lines on the map - "It's a right-hand curve so we'll be out of sight… not to mention out of the firing line… of the soldiers at the station. The embankment is particularly steep there on the outside of the curve. Gravity will take over and make the train fall off the edge… so to speak."

Mehlborg nodded with a look on his face that could be perceived as a smile, even touching upon pride. It didn't last long, but the message had come across. "Very good, Gertrude. I was about to suggest the same thing."

Erik Kvantorp let out a loud laugh and slapped Svenning's shoulder. "Good Lord, she isn't anything like your typical girl, is she? I like her spunk! Gertrude, I'm glad you turned down that other fellow, because I'll surely be asking for your hand come peacetime!"

"Oh, I can hardly wait," Anne-Katrine said in a monotone.

"Right. Back to business," Mehlborg said. "The latest intelligence from Aalborg freight yard shows that we may have a hospital train coming through at first light tomorrow. The Germans have been known to paint red crosses on regular trains carrying documents or troops, but we can't know for sure so we need to let that one go. Sabotaging a proper hospital train would give our opponents a moral victory… and that would be bloody idiotic of us."

Everybody grunted, even Anton.

Mehlborg looked at them all and kept his eyes lingering on Anne-Katrine to see if she could keep up with the flow of information. When it appeared she could, he continued: "The next train
arriving will be our target. According to the schedule, it will be a regular freight train headed for the Reich carrying the fruit of our lands. Mainly agricultural products and pork for Fat Herman's dinner table, but also regular crated goods. We can't allow stealing to go unpunished so that'll be a good opportunity for us to create an exclamation point."

"Leo?" Anne-Katrine said and raised her hand.

"Go on."

"You said the trains are carrying guards that will be relieved at the station. How many are there typically?"

"It obviously depends on the importance of the freight it carries. For a regular goods train such as this one… I'd say anywhere from six to twelve. Some will be in the locomotive, some will be further down the train."

Anne-Katrine was about to speak again when Erik raised his hand. "Leo, the Germans occasionally add wagons carrying rapid-fire anti-aircraft cannons to freight trains to protect them from strafing fighters. Has the intelligence mentioned anything about such a car on this train?"

"No it hasn't, Finn," Mehlborg said, "I doubt the cargo would warrant an anti-aircraft cannon. Besides, ack-ack cannons mounted on train cars can't swing down that low. Since we're down on the ground, it shouldn't be a danger to us."

The word 'shouldn't' echoed in Anne-Katrine's mind and created an unfortunate memory of the burning hot lead that had zinged past her ears on that terrible day three years previously. Some of the lead had penetrated her flesh, and she could feel a distant throbbing in her foot and itching from the long scar on her right forearm just thinking about it.

Working on autopilot, she reached into her vest pocket to find her cigarettes, but remembered Mehlborg's repeated order to only smoke if she had enough to share with the rest of the unit. 'I suppose that's also valid for a Resistance group… I better not.'

Ernst Mehlborg sent each of the members of the small guerilla team an intense gaze to make sure they were all on the same page. When nobody appeared to have further questions, he folded up the piece of paper and put it into his coat pocket. "Very well. Finn and Lars, we'll meet tomorrow morning at four thirty at the pre-arranged point. Don't be late. Anton and I will be there well in advance. If we aren't, it's because we're dead… and the mission will subsequently be scrubbed. Gertrude, I need a word with you in private before you leave."

Erik Kvantorp croaked out loud and gained an expression like someone had just strangled his favorite pet. "At four thirty? Four bloody thirty in the bloody morning?"

"That's when some of us go to work every morning, Finn," Svenning Gudmundsen said, looking back at Anne-Katrine who grinned back at him.
When the meeting was adjourned, the members of the resistance group agreed to leave in a reverse order to how they had arrived. They would leave at three minute intervals so nosy neighbors or Germans who happened to be by at the same time wouldn't get suspicious of a large group of people leaving at once.

Erik 'Finn' Kvantorp and Svenning 'Lars' Gudmundsen were ready to leave as the first. Both men were quieter than when they had arrived; learning about the plans had seemingly given them plenty to think about. While Anton cracked open the metal door to scout out the area, the otherwise shy Svenning slid over to Anne-Katrice and took her by the shoulder. "Don't be afraid… uh, Gertrude. I promise I'll look out for you if we're forced into a firefight with the guards on the train."

"Well, that's… I mean… much obliged, Lars," Anne-Katrice said, shaking the young man's hand. She had been about to quip that she had already seen a great deal more combat than he had, but the young man's face was so sincere there was no doubt he meant what he said. Anne-Katrice smiled at him and patted his shoulder. "Let's hope it'll be manageable if it comes to that."

After Kvantorp and Gudmundsen left, Mehlborg waited for three minutes before he slipped past the metal door and walked up the concrete staircase. That left Anne-Katrice alone with the surly Anton. He didn't have his revolver trained on her like before, but the mood in the cellar turned frosty at once.

Anne-Katrice couldn't be bothered to try to break the ice with the surly deserter. It was obvious the man from Southern Schleswig was dead set against having her there, or even involved on a whole, but she had very little patience with men like that.

The three minutes were finally up and she brushed past him without even looking in his direction. The concrete staircase was clear, and she ascended the crumbling steps carefully so she wouldn't end up looking a fool by tripping over anything.

Upstairs, she went to the right of the terraced house to fetch her bicycle. The evening was warm and pleasant, so she took off her jacket, folded it neatly and put it in the basket. While she did that, she glanced around at Smallegade and out onto the main road to see if anyone was watching her.

'Mehlborg said he needed to have a word,' she thought as she reached into her vest pocket to find her lighter and a much-needed cigarette. 'But I don't see him anywhere… should I wait? Or should I go? No, I better wait. He wouldn't have said it if it wasn't important.'

She lit the Powhattan and inhaled deeply to let the nicotine - or what was left of it compared to the pre-war cigarettes - soothe her nerves that had become jumbled after hearing about the plans.
Smallegade was as deserted as it had been when she had arrived. Down the far end of the small side street, at the main road into town, she could still hear German officers shouting commands, but the trucks that had been visible had left.

With the cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth, she unlocked the bicycle, moved it away from the house and began to drag it slowly down Smallegade. Thirty meters beyond the cellar she had come from, Mehlborg casually fell in next to her to make it appear he was chatting up a woman just in case anyone was watching the scene unfold from one of the villas across the street.

"Jensen, I need your truck for the operation," he said quietly. "And I need you to park it at the Guldbrandsen farm close to the railway line tomorrow morning. If it goes wrong, we may still have a chance to escape if we have two vehicles. Do you know where that farm is?"

"Yes, I've worked with the Guldbrandsens before," Anne-Katrine replied just as quietly, "but I can't guarantee I can get the old thing to work, Sergeant. I swear it's got a mind of its own sometimes."

"If that's the case, we'll come up with a secondary plan. All right. Meet us at the tracks five hundred meters south of the freight station tomorrow morning at four thirty. We'll approach our target dressed in the uniforms used by the railway workers."

"Uh… I see," Anne-Katrine said and knocked off some ash. "Do you have a uniform for me, then?"

"No, because the Railway Workers' Union doesn't allow women in its ranks, so it won't matter."

Grunting, Anne-Katrine took another puff. "Hmmm. Figures…" she said as the smoke trickled past her lips.

"Jensen," Mehlborg said and put a hand on Anne-Katrine's shoulder to get her to stop. The old brothers-in-arms looked darkly at each other for a while before the gruff former Sergeant licked his lips. "I sense you're not comfortable doing this."

Anne-Katrine took a deep puff of her cigarette and exhaled slowly. The pale blue smoke that escaped her mouth could symbolize her courage leaving her. It could also symbolize her life leaving her if their mission failed and they were captured, but she preferred not to dwell on that part. "You're right, Mehlborg. This is going to be the only time for me. I… I have… I nearly feel I'm married, too. I'm quite close to… to my brother, you see. And my sister-in-law." - 'You bloody coward… just tell him like it is!' she thought, kicking herself inwardly.

"I understand and accept that, Jensen. I know what you're capable of, but I also know this is different. If you ever feel under pressure from the Germans, or Willumsen, or perhaps from Lynge-Hoffmann, you need to call Apollo three-one-nine. The number doesn't exist, but the telephone operator-"
"Birthe?"

"Yes. She'll get in touch with me and I'll take care of the rest."

Nodding, Anne-Katrine felt the hairs at the back of her neck stand up. 'Taking care of the rest' could mean killing someone - maybe even Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann if he got too close. "Apollo three-one-nine. I'll remember that. Let's hope I'll never get to use it."

"Yes. We better split up now. See you tomorrow morning at four thirty, five hundred meters south of the freight station," Mehlborg said and briefly touched Anne-Katrine's arm before he tipped his hat and strolled away like he hadn't been successful in getting to know the woman.

Taking a deep puff from her cigarette, Anne-Katrine let out a nervous laugh at the prospect of soon being up to her neck in a sabotage involving armed guards, high explosives and a train that she was supposed to derail. 'What have you gotten yourself into, you damned idealistic fool...?' she thought as she swung her leg over the side of the bicycle and took off down Smallegade towards the main road. 'I should have listened to Lydia... she was right all along, this is bloody insane...'

*

*

CHAPTER 5

Lydia's release sent a shudder through her well-loved body. Panting, she stilled her lover's rhythmic motions and pulled herself close for a warm snuggle. She wrapped her arms around the soft body underneath her and let herself float away on a glorious golden cloud. It was too good to last. Her quiet moans turned to sobs as she seemed to want to attach herself permanently to the woman she loved.

"Shhhh, please don't cry..." Anne-Katrine whispered, stroking Lydia's bare back while the shorter woman's strong arms tried to squeeze the air out of her. "Please don't cry, sweetheart. Everything's gonna be fine today."

"You don't know that... nobody knows that," Lydia croaked in a broken, raw voice.

Anne-Katrine smiled and pulled Lydia closer for a kiss. "Everything's gonna be fine today because I say so."

Shaking her head - which made the loose, blond locks tickle Anne-Katrine's bare chest - Lydia let out a long sigh. "I wish I had your confidence. This is going to be the worst day of my life."

"Roll over," Anne-Katrine said and tried to release the strong hold around her upper body. When Lydia seemed reluctant to even consider letting go, Anne-Katrine kissed her on the forehead. "Please... so I can breathe?"
Lydia sighed again but let go. She rolled over onto her right side to make room for Anne-Katrine next to her. They pulled the coarse blanket over them so the late night chill wouldn't negate the wonderful warmth they both felt.

Now they had finished making love, the bedroom fell back into a foreboding silence. They hadn't lit a candle so the room was draped in darkness. It was three in the morning. Outside, the sun was just below the horizon, getting ready to cast its invigorating light on a world at war.

Lydia reached up and traced Anne-Katrine's features with an index finger like she was trying to etch it into her brain in case she wouldn't get another chance. They were so close it would be a crime not to kiss, so they did. A series of slow, loving nibbles and kisses were exchanged accompanied by gentle strokes beneath the blanket. "I love you, Anne-Katrine Jensen. I don't want you to die out there today… please come back to me. And in one piece… not like the last time you went to war."

"I love you too. Nothing will stop me from returning to you, dearest. I promise," Anne-Katrine whispered, running her fingers up and down Lydia's side and hip.

Lydia sighed and finished their little bout of kissing by offering Anne-Katrine a longer smooch. Then she pulled back slightly to look her partner in the eye. "I'm scared, Anne-Katrine. I'm scared of what's going to happen today… I'm scared that I may never see you again. Or perhaps worse… I'm scared that you may return only to have suffered wounds so grave you'll die here… in my arms. And that I won't be able to save you."

"Oh, sweetie," Anne-Katrine said and hurriedly pulled Lydia back for a strong hug. "Listen to me… I know this is going to sound morbid, but I am planning on dying in your arms… in sixty years! Yes… in, oh, the year 2000, we'll still be together. We may not live here at the farm, but we'll still be together. And we'll still love each other just as dearly as we do now. And that's a promise you can take to the bank… if banks even exist then."

The close contact and the declaration of love were too much for Lydia who began to sob again. "I can't believe that for a minute… not until I see you back… alive and healthy from whatever you're going to do today… I won't believe it," she whispered, stroking Anne-Katrine's face.

Anne-Katrine knew her sparse time was running away from her, so she swept the blanket aside and sat up. At once, she stood up and tucked the blanket back down around Lydia's naked body so she wouldn't get cold. The chill crept up her own flushed skin, but it was nothing she hadn't tried a thousand times on the cold winter mornings. "Sweetheart, I promise I'll return," she said and leaned down to sweep a damp lock of hair away from her partner's forehead. "There's no need for you to get up. I'll just freshen up and get dressed… and then I need to try to kick some life into the truck."

"No need for me to get up…" Lydia growled and swept the blanket aside. "You don't know me very well, do you?"
Anne-Katrine chuckled and put out a hand to help Lydia up from the bed. She had an ulterior motive, because as soon as they faced each other in the middle of the dark bedroom, she grabbed her lover and laid such a strong kiss on her lips that she nearly fell back down onto the bed. "I had the time of my life. Thank you for everything you did for me this morning," she said while clawing Lydia's bare back. "Not to mention all you did to me this morning!" she added in a husky purr.

Lydia's lips cracked open in a smile that matched the huskiness of her partner's voice. "You're welcome. And thank you… it was wonderful. Are you sure I couldn't tempt you to stay at home today and forget all about that dreadful business?"

Chuckling, Anne-Katrine ran her hands up and down Lydia's arms. "Tempt me? You bet you could… but I have to go. Remember… I love you. And I'll be back before you even know I'm gone."

---

Later, Anne-Katrine stood outside at her ancient Triangel truck. She pushed her flat cap back to wipe a few beads of sweat off her brow that had come from the strenuous procedure she had just been through. The wood gas generator was up and running, as was the truck - even if the latter was coughing and spluttering. The white clouds of foul-smelling smoke that rose from the chimney indicated that everything was working as it should. It was just touching half past three in the morning and she was ready to go to war.

Dressed in the darkest clothes she could find in her closet, she had even eschewed her beloved vest in exchange for a black jacket. She walked around the truck to see if any new leaks had developed since the last time it had run. The engine didn't sound too good, but everything that was supposed to be dry was - although the oily rag she had wrapped around the rear axle assembly seemed to be more soaked than usual.

"It'll have to do," she mumbled as she reached for the door handle. Her sixth sense made her look over at the gate to the farm. A petite figure in a dark-tan dress and with a brown shawl wrapped around her head and shoulders was hiding in the shadows.

Reacting on instinct alone, Anne-Katrine hurried over to Lydia and pulled her into a crushing, moaning, sobbing hug. "Oh, sweetie… I love you so much… please don't despair. I will be back… you hear me? I will be back… simply because I love you."

"The Germans won't care…" Lydia croaked, burying her face in the crook of Anne-Katrine's neck.

"The Germans won't have any say in the matter. I love you, and I will be back. And my word is law!" Anne-Katrine said, hoping the joke would lift the spirits just a little.
Lydia shook her head, but eventually moved back from the crushing hug and let out a deep, long sigh. "I love you too. Anne-Katrine… please… I can't go through this again. Please promise me you won't agree to further operations…"

"I promise, sweetheart. I've already told Mehlborg that this is my one and only sabotage. I'll never leave your side again. I have to go… give me a kiss for good luck."

---

The last kiss was as strong as the first, and Anne-Katrine could still feel it on her lips as she drove the old, dilapidated truck into the pre-dawn murkiness on her way to the Guldbrandsen farm on the west side of town. She had a rock-solid knot of worry and guilt in her gut, and she couldn't get Lydia's green, glistening eyes out of her mind.

Now, when it was almost too late, she understood Ernst Mehlborg's words about how married people were prone to thinking about the outcome instead of simply taking the risks necessary to carry out the task they were there to do. She would have to push all that aside and focus on the task at hand - namely blowing up the tracks. Once she had accomplished that, she could think of Lydia again.

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

The cogs in the old truck's transmission whined as it went up a small hill, causing Anne-Katrine to select a lower gear in a hurry to keep it alive. The weak-chested engine sounded like it was strained to its limits even though it didn't run with any cargo apart from the driver.

"I shouldn't have bought this bloody thing," Anne-Katrine mumbled as she changed gears yet again to reach the summit of the hill. Looking out of the side window at the scenery that went by seemingly in slow motion, she let out a mocking snort and shook her head in disgust. "I could have driven faster up this bloody hill on my bloody bicycle…"

It didn't help she was driving west, towards the section of the horizon that still held the last traces of the night sky. With the dimmed headlight, she couldn't see anything out of the windshield other than the most basic. Since 1940, a coated metal shield had been bolted onto most of the trees lining the roads to reflect the headlights so the motorists could see where the road went, but then the decree to dim the headlights was issued, leaving everybody back at square one.

Anne-Katrine was familiar with the roads south of the town to get to the Guldbrandsen farm, but mostly from the vantage point atop her bicycle. The side road she was on turned out to be narrower than she remembered, and she had to correct mid-turn several times in order to stay off the grassy, or muddy, shoulder.

The old engine coughed and spluttered, and now and then, a gust of wind sent the white clouds of foul-smelling smoke into the cab. The third time it happened, Anne-Katrine rolled down the window in the door and drove with her elbow on the windowsill to get some fresh air in her face. The wind was unpredictable so it didn't always work.
Apart from keeping her eyes glued to the undulating, winding road, she was on the lookout for German motorcycle patrols. She would never be able to outrun the nimble motorbikes in her old, lumbering *Triangel* so she knew she would have to adhere to their commands and stop at once if she were to be pulled over.

She had already tried it several times in the three years the Germans had been in Denmark. A woman her height stood out in a crowd, and she had paid the price for that. They would ask for her identification papers, her name, her address, where she was going and why she was there. On this occasion, they would most likely also ask what in the blazes she was doing at such an ungodly hour. They would probably wonder why she drove around with an empty truck, so she would need to come up with a clever answer that wasn't so clever it would arouse suspicion.

She didn't have a forged permit like Mehlborg and the others so it would be her real name and address that she would be forced into giving. That, of course, would lead the Germans directly home to Lydia. The worrying thought made her furrow her brow as she glanced in the rear-view mirror. So far, her luck had held up.

---

Seventeen minutes past four, she drove the coughing truck off the side road she had been using and onto the courtyard in front of the Guldbrandsen farm. Unlike her own courtyard that was equipped with uneven cobblestones that were nearly fifty years old, the square in front of the Guldbrandsen farmhouse was covered in gravel which was far smoother to drive on, even if it did crunch so loudly in the quiet of the dawn that it sounded like someone was busy snapping twigs.

No one was there to greet her so she didn't know what she should do. Mehlborg had said she had to bring the truck in case they needed an alternative means of escape, so she maneuvered around to make the front point back out onto the road so they'd be able to leave in a hurry if they had to. After finding a reverse gear, she turned around in the seat and backed up to the wall of a barn where the truck could be parked safely and quietly.

Shutting off the engine, she looked around in the growing light. The railway line ran two hundred meters from her position. The right-hand curve where they wanted to derail the train was some eighty meters to the north - and north was to the left.

Out of nowhere, the driver's side door was opened. Anne-Katrine clenched her jaw hard and hurriedly reached for a spanner she always had underneath the seat. She pulled it back and held it high, ready to bash in the head of her would-be attacker.

"Easy does it, Jensen," Ernst Mehlborg said, taking a step back from the door. He was dressed in the typical uniform of the railway workers: black boots, a maroon coverall and a hard hat that had seen better days.

"Mehlborg… for the love of God, man!" Anne-Katrine croaked through clenched teeth. Shaking her head, she put the spanner back below the seat and climbed down from the cab. "The next
time, would you mind alerting me a little sooner? Good Lord, you nearly gave me a bloody heart attack!"

"I'll make a note of it. We can't stand here all day. Get a move on, Jensen," the former Sergeant said, hunching over and running into the deep shadows closer to the railway line.

Anne-Katrine looked to the heavens for guidance but nothing came to her. Instead, she shut the door, hunched over and ran behind Mehlborg into the shadows.

They came to a stop at the final line of shrubbery before the railway tracks. Erik Kvantorp, Svenning Gudmundsen and the dour man she only knew as Anton were already there.

Erik's bony face lit up in a grin when he spotted the latest arrival. "See, Anton… I told you Gertrude would be here. Good morning, Miss. So nice of you to join us at this brutal hour."

"Yeah, nice. The pleasure is all mine," Anne-Katrine mumbled, slotting in between Erik and Svenning so she wouldn't have to be too close to Anton. She glanced to her right at Svenning and offered the shy, young man a smile and a little nudge - he smiled back, though only briefly.

Mehlborg scooted over behind them and tapped Anne-Katrine on her back. When she turned around, he thrust a rifle into her hands. "Here, Gertrude. This isn't a Danish M1889 that you used three years ago, but a British Lee-Enfield. Same concept, same way of shooting it. Pull the bolt back, insert magazine, push the bolt forward, squeeze the trigger in the direction of the enemy. Ten round magazine. Don't lose count."

"I understand… uh… Leo," Anne-Katrine said and held the rifle close to her. The Lee-Enfield's barrel wasn't as long as the Danish M1889 and it was a little lighter, but on a whole, it was a weapon she was comfortable with. It came with a leather strap that she wrapped around her left hand to keep it steady in case she needed to fire at anyone.

Kvantorp, Gudmundsen and Mehlborg himself all took British-built, original Stenguns from a canvas bag that Anne-Katrine hadn't seen until Mehlborg opened it. The dark fabric had been perfectly camouflaged against the shadowy background, but when she peeked into it out of complete curiosity, she wished she hadn't. Four packs of putty-gray plastic explosives were lined up and ready to be used.

While she was watching the contents of the bag with wide eyes, Anton reached into it and took all four packs of Composition C2 and put them into a smaller bag that he carried over his shoulder. When they were in place, he took the four detonators and held them separate from the explosives.

"All right," Mehlborg whispered, crouching down behind the four people. "Get ready… we're going in. Finn and Lars, move ahead. Ten meters spread. Report the condition of the target once you're out there. Gertrude, other side of the tracks. Stay down and cover the stationhouse with the rifle. Anton… do your worst."
Anne-Katrine gulped as Erik Kvantorp and Svenning Gudmundsen got up and moved onto the crushed stones next to the tracks. They hunched over and ran on either side of the two rails until they were twenty-five meters out. The old Staff Sergeant Kvantorp knelt down and signaled Mehlborg that everything was ready.

"Go, Gertrude," Mehlborg said, nudging Anne-Katrine's leg.

The vague outline of Lydia's face that filled Anne-Katrine's mind's eye had to take a back seat to the present. Clutching her rifle to her chest, she got up and ran out onto the dirty-gray stones that crunched under her boots. After following the tracks for thirty meters or so, she hopped across both rails and slid down the embankment on the outside of the curve. The crushed stones were coarse to lean against and everything reeked of coal and oil, but she would have to live with it.

She moved back up into a firing position at once and kept the Lee-Enfield level with the nearest rail. Her field of fire was sound, so she hunkered down with her eyes peeled on the freight station some five hundred meters to the north of her position. Only then did she discover her heart was thumping so hard it tried to push through her ribs.

"Calm down, Anne-Katrine..." she mumbled under her breath. "Bad things happen to those who are jittery. Calm down... breathe evenly... just relax and think of all the good things in your life. Think of Lydia. Think of øllebrød. Think of your brother. Think of your farm. Bloody hell, Lydia is more important than all of those things put together..."

The positive thoughts seemed to help as her heart slowed down to a mere frantic cadence. She rolled her shoulders so she wouldn't cramp up at an inopportune moment. The distant sound of an airplane made her tighten up all over again, but a frantic search of the skies surrounding her proved they weren't about to be strafed by a Luftwaffe fighter.

The freight station was sparsely lit to make it blend into the background to prevent attacks from enemy fighters or fighter-bombers. It had a single platform on the right-hand side of the tracks as viewed from the north, but several metal frames resembling step ladders on the left-hand side. Looking at the metal structures, Anne-Katrine reckoned they were used by the engineers of the trains to get down on the side opposite the platform in case they had to check something on that side of the train.

The old, low building connected to the platform had been equipped with camouflage netting on the roof and down the sides that did an adequate job of concealing the red bricks so common for the era in which the station had been built. Beyond the building, the railway yard itself consisted of a few side tracks the locomotives could roll onto when they needed coal or water. One of those side tracks was occupied by a shunter locomotive that appeared to be readied for the day's chores - white smoke billowed up from the stack, and at least one man was moving around the front of the boiler.

Squinting, Anne-Katrine could just make out the shadowy outline of the coal crane behind the old stationhouse. It was a rickety, old thing: just a simple wooden cab on a metal structure with a bucket at the end of a long chain. The whole thing looked as if it might collapse at any moment
from decades of hard use. She briefly wondered why the Germans - always so obsessed with technical progress - hadn't replaced the crane with a far newer one.

Apart from the steep embankment Anne-Katrine was leaning against, the landscape surrounding the station was flatter than a pancake. It wasn't the result of a natural dale but the combined efforts of thousands of workers with shovels and other manual equipment for excavating the countless tons of dirt they had needed to shift. When the station had been built in 1903, the terrain had been as undulating as the roads in the region, but the locomotives of that time weren't strong enough to maintain a steady speed up and down all those hills, so the order had been given to flatten everything in sight.

In the subsequent years, trees and shrubbery had been planted between the tracks and the Guldbrandsen farm so their livestock wouldn't stray onto the railway lines. The fields on the east side of the tracks all belonged to a different farm, one Anne-Katrine knew was owned by a known collaborator who had no qualms about selling his products to the German forces. The fields were cultivated but presently devoid of life apart from a few birds that circled near the soil.

Wisps of an early morning mist hung in the air, created by the flat terrain. Anne-Katrine could see it had the potential to grow into the same kind of dense patches of fog that she knew from home - if that was a good or a bad thing, she wasn't quite sure.

'Ooh, what am I doing here?' she thought, adjusting her position so she had a better view of the station. 'Once again holding a weapon… once again waiting for the enemy to discover us. Once again exposing myself to danger that could be fatal if my luck runs out. Fatal for anyone of us… or all of us.'

Sighing, she looked over at Mehlborg who remained stock still. She shook her head at the man's almost unnatural calmness. 'I know I wanted to fight for my country, but this is a classic case of getting more than I bargained for. I could be at home snuggling up to my wife! All right, the cows would still need to be taken to the meadow and we would still have to muck out the shed afterwards, but…and all right, Arthur would probably still be angry with me, but we would have fun at the breakfast table over the oatmeal and the strong Coffee Substitute. I would help Lydia with the dishes and we'd kiss… instead, I'm hiding here ready to be shot at or blasted to smithereens in case Anton doesn't know what he's doing. The order to fall back can't come bloody fast enough for me!' 

Sighing again, Anne-Katrine shuffled around to find a more comfortable spot, but, alas, none was to be found.

While she let her eyes glide slowly across the landscape, a dark-gray Opel Blitz truck with the German military cross on the door came to a halt at the level crossing close to the station. She could hardly believe her eyes when a group of six men all accompanied by barking Alsatians on leashes jumped off the bed and assembled behind the truck. She groaned under her breath and leaned her head down to thump it against the stock of the Lee-Enfield. "Oh, for the love of… why, why, why did that just have to happen? Bloody attack dogs!" she croaked, glancing through the building dawn haze to alert Mehlborg in case he hadn't noticed yet.
Grunting out loud, she pointed straight ahead with a series of frantic gestures. Mehlborg remained as cool and passive as ever: his only response was a nod. Further up front, Kvantorp and Gudmundsen crawled into position on either side of the tracks so they would present as small a target as possible in case the lead would start flying.

Soon, the men from the truck - who wore brown uniforms, not gray - split up into three groups of two that began patrolling the area around the station. One group stayed at the station, one moved further north, and one moved directly at the members of the resistance group.

Groaning, Anne-Katrine shuffled back slightly to see how long it would take Anton behind her to place the explosives.

The brooding deserter knelt down and placed the first of the four packs of plastic explosives against the iron rail. He molded the Composition C2 into following the shape of the track so it could blend in perfectly underneath the top bar. Once the first charge was in place, he took a detonator and inserted it slowly and carefully into the putty-like material.

Once it was set, he glanced around to make sure he hadn't been spotted. He and Anne-Katrine happened to lock eyes, but it didn't last long. The next pack of C2 was ready at once, and he got up and ran just shy of twelve meters further south along the track. There, he knelt down again and started over with the next charge.

Anne-Katrine sighed and turned back around. The uniformed men with the dogs seemed to be satisfied with their initial check because they had moved back to the stationhouse where they were chatting to one another.

A metallic clang behind her made her jerk about and look over her shoulder. Half-expecting to see a fireball erupting at Anton's feet, she was surprised to find him in one piece. It appeared he had attached several of his hellish devices to four of the ties between the two blocks of C2. She couldn't quite figure out what it was - other than it resembled a turtle with its head drawn into its shell - but she had no doubt it would be loud and violent once it detonated.

Like earlier, Anton got up and ran another twelve meters south before he knelt down again and started working on the third charge.

The dour man from Southern Schleswig moved up into a kneeling position and waved at Anne-Katrine. At first, she didn't know what he was doing, but she soon realized he was trying to get her to come back to his position. A cold shiver trickled down her spine at the thought of being anywhere near the volatile instruments of death, but she moved away from her hiding place and crawled along the embankment until she reached the man with the explosives.

"Gertrude, I need a hand," he said gruffly, holding up a detonator. "The ground is too uneven here. It rolls away from me before I have time to prepare the space it needs to be in."

Anne-Katrine bared her teeth in a worried grimace at the sight of the shiny metal detonator that wasn't much larger than a cigarette. Knowing the time had come to put up or shut up, she
unfolded the rifle's strap and swung it over her shoulder so it would be out of the way. "All right… what do you want me to do?"

"Hold the detonator while I prepare the charge… like I said!"

Anne-Katrine narrowed her eyes but held back the barb that she had already prepared. She crawled up the embankment and knelt down next to Anton using two ties as support for her knees. With her hands held together, she was given the deadly metal cylinder and carried it as tenderly as she would a newborn kitten.

Anton molded the plastic explosives charge with both hands and shaped it to fit inside the top rail like he had done with the first two. When it was ready, he took the detonator from Anne-Katrine's hands and squeezed it in until it was buried halfway into the doughy material.

"How will you get them to detonate?" Anne-Katrine asked, furrowing her brow at the entire process.

"When I've placed the last charge and all the tie busters, I'll connect them through wires. When the first one goes off, the rest will follow and we'll destroy nearly fifty meters of track."

"Right…"

Anton nodded and pointed up at the first of the three blocks of high explosives that he had placed so far. "The first charge has a contact sensor… see how I put another detonator across the rail about ten meters ahead of the charge?"

"Yeah," Anne-Katrine said, looking at the metal cylinder resting on the rail. The tiny thing would be invisible to the men operating the train, but even if they did see it, they would never be able to get the train stopped in time. "So when the first wheel of the locomotive runs over it, it'll detonate? And the next one, and so on…"

"Exactly."

"But what are the tie busters for, then?" Anne-Katrine asked, looking at the metal contraption she thought resembled a turtle.

Anton narrowed his eyes to gauge why Anne-Katrine asked him all those questions. He studied her face for a few seconds before he shrugged and took the bag with the fourth and last C2 charge. "They'll break the ties in two which will add to the dynamic forces at work. Otherwise, there's a risk the plastic charges would just blow off the bolts that hold the rails in place. The train might still derail but it would go straight on into the crushed stones and not down the embankment."

"Oh… I see."
Dogs barking in the middle distance made her sit up a little straighter and strain her eyes to see through the growing murkiness. The morning mist had already obscured the water tower and the coal crane just beyond the stationhouse, and it seemed to grow denser. "Do you need my help with the last detonator, Anton?"

"I can't say yet… can you wait?"

"Sure," Anne-Katrine said and swung the rifle off her shoulder to be ready in case the guards spotted the dark figures kneeling across the rails. She waited for nearly thirty seconds before Anton gave her a thumbs-up that proved he could manage the last charge on his own. She nodded back and scooted down the embankment to safety.

Hunched over, she hurried along the loose stones that crunched loudly under her feet. In the early morning silence that was only broken by scattered birdsong from the nearby trees, the noises she created were so loud she was amazed the men at the stationhouse hadn't already sounded the alarm.

The thought had barely entered her mind when she could hear more Alsatians barking - this time, there was no doubt they were coming her way. "Oh, bloody hell," she growled, slipping into place along the embankment. She held the rifle level with the rail to get back to the good field of fire she'd had before, and soon noticed two men with dogs walking on either side of the tracks headed south.

They had already moved roughly two hundred meters south of the station which meant they were no more than three hundred meters out from Anne-Katrine's spot - and less than that away from where Erik Kvantorp and Svenning Gudmundsen had taken up their defensive position. Anne-Katrine glanced over at Mehlborg who had moved down to lie on his stomach next to the rail. Like the men up front, he held his Stengun ready to fire.

Clenching her jaw, Anne-Katrine felt her heart pick up the pace and start to beat harder all over again. A quick look behind her proved that Anton wasn't yet done with the last charge. She gulped down a nervous lump and worked the bolt action of her rifle, bringing a cartridge into the chamber.

The guards strolled south at a leisurely pace. They kept their dogs on leashes while they scanned the tracks for foreign objects. Now and then, the two men spoke to each other, but they were too far away for Anne-Katrine to hear which language was spoken.

She cocked her head and looked closer at the man walking on the opposite side of the tracks to where she was hiding. There was something familiar about him; about his lean stature, about the way he walked, about the way he moved his head when he talked to the other guard.

Then it struck her - it was Arne Willumsen. "I'll be a son of a bitch," Anne-Katrine grunted, staring at her old adversary. The lanky former foreman of the Lyng-Hoffmann farm had grown a Hitler mustache that made him even uglier than he had been before. He was dressed in shiny black, long-legged boots, dark-brown uniform pants and a shirt in a slightly paler brown. He
wore a black leather crossbelt over his chest and an old-fashioned, brown military cap that sat straight, not crooked like most of his German colleagues preferred to wear them. A red armband with a black swastika was placed prominently around his left upper arm.

The guard next to Willumsen was dressed identically, but Anne-Katrine only had eyes for the traitor she knew. Dawn had already broken in the east, and the first rays of the sun painted the air in an odd, purple-bluish hue. Even though a proper visual identification was difficult, there was no doubt in her mind it was Arne Willumsen. 'I've spoken to him many times over the years… and I agreed with his notions more often than not. Where did he go so wrong? Good Lord, I've played cards with him on more than one occasion. He bought me a beer at one of the Harvest Fairs! And look at him now. I guess his appearance at the National-Socialist speech back in March wasn't a coincidence…'

The guards came closer and closer. The Alsatians began to pick up a scent of something they couldn't quite see yet, but Willumsen and his colleague were too busy talking to each other to pay attention to their dogs. They both carried German 98K standard issue rifles over their shoulders, and both held the leash for their dog in the right hand.

'All set!' Anton whispered somewhere behind Anne-Katrine. Looking behind her, she could see the dour former German soldier legging it across the tracks heading for the safety of the shrubbery. After he had connected the four charges with wires like he had said he would, he had tried to conceal the putty-gray packs of high explosives by shoveling a few handfuls of crushed stones over them.

She licked her lips nervously when she realized she was caught on the wrong side of the tracks. If she moved, the dogs would see her and bark their heads off which would alert Willumsen and the other man, not to mention the rest of the guards back at the station.

Anne-Katrine felt a bucket of ice cold water being poured down her spine. She took several deep breaths to combat the chills, but she hardly worked. She was in big trouble and she knew it. She glanced across the tracks just in time to see Kvantorp, Gudmundsen and Mehlborg duck into the shrubbery. "Bloody hell," she croaked when she locked eyes with Mehlborg who signaled that she should stay where she was. "I can't do that! Those bloody Alsatians will tear me to shreds… how would I ever explain that to Lydia? I have to move south… how far do those bloody Nazis need to patrol those bloody tracks, anyway?!!"

She glanced over her shoulder at the four packs of high explosives, at the detonators that were all ready to go, and at the numerous tie busters that she would have to walk or crawl right past. Gulping down a foul taste in her mouth, she swung her rifle over her shoulder and fumbled backwards until she was sufficiently out of sight. When she appeared to be in the clear, she turned around and commenced crawling further south.

The pointy, sharp-edged stones cut into her palms and poked her mercilessly in her chest and her knees, but she didn't dare stand up or even move further down the embankment - besides, the latter option was pretty much useless to her since the ditch at the foot of the embankment was
full of water that had been painted black by all the coal dust that polluted the air when the trains moved past.

She stopped crawling to get her bearings. Ahead, the embankment followed the outside of the right-hand curve for another four hundred meters until the track leveled out and continued straight on towards the south. The line had one more stop in Denmark a dozen kilometers further on before it crossed the old border and entered the Reich.

Going to her right by crossing the tracks was out of the question while the two guards were behind her - and they still were, she could hear the dogs whining and barking clear as day.

Moving to her left remained the only viable option, but it would include jumping over the meter-wide ditch and running across open terrain for a further twenty-five meters or so until she would reach a cluster of low bushes that she could hide behind - of course, that particular option would leave her stranded on the side of the tracks where the train had been designed to end up after being derailed. Regardless of the other dangers, getting intimately acquainted with an out-of-control freight train weighing several hundred tons wasn't something she fancied.

Anne-Katrine let out a sigh and turned around so she could peek over the edge of the crushed stones. Arne Willumsen and the other guard were still walking towards her, but they had slowed down somewhat. "Wonderful… I'm stuck and they won't leave," she mumbled into the stones. 'If they get any closer, they'll see the first detonator… the one Anton put across the rail,' she thought, biting her lips.

The two Alsatians seemed to pick up a strange scent, so she ducked her head down and slid off the edge of the embankment. She looked towards the east where the sky had already reached its regular daytime hue. It wouldn't be too long before daylight would conquer the wispy morning mist that lingered in the air.

"So be it. If I can't run, I can fight," she mumbled to herself. She swung the rifle off her shoulder and crawled back up to rest just below the top of the dirty-gray stones. She held the rifle level and aimed at Arne Willumsen's torso.

At that distance, it would be a pot shot at best. After a few seconds, she lowered the rifle to try to aim at one of the dogs instead, but found it to be even more difficult. 'If I miss my first shot and they release those attack dogs, I'll only have five seconds to kill them both before they're here… before they bury their eye-teeth into my throat. That's impossible with a rifle. Dammit!'

Grunting, she tried to spot Mehlborg, Kvantorp, Gudmundsen and the man she knew as Anton somewhere to her left, but the four men had hid too deeply into the shrubbery to be seen. "Typical," she mumbled, "They've got submachine guns at close range… I have a rifle at long range… but I have the wrong bloody targets!"

An odd rumble began to roll through the ground and the rail she was using as a support for the rifle. Somewhere in the far distance, the shrill noise of a steam-powered whistle cut through the air.
The shrill noise was repeated almost at once, only closer. It caused Anne-Katrine to peek over the edge of the crushed stones to see what was going on. The second instance of the noise had come from the station where a man dressed similarly to Willumsen stood on the platform and waved an arm in the air at the two guards.

When Arne Willumsen, his colleague and both Alsatians turned around and hurried back to the station, Anne-Katrine let out a sigh of relief and rubbed her brow repeatedly. She was so tense she could hardly get her shoulders back down below her ears, but she knew it would be suicidal if she jumped up and raced across the tracks at once. The dogs would notice her within a second or two, and then it would all have been for naught.

She counted to thirty inwardly, then back down to zero before she moved up and crawled over the edge of the crushed stones. It wasn't even necessary to put a hand on the rails to register they were trembling because of the approaching train. She didn't want to be anywhere near the plastic explosives in case the vibrations caused them to go off prematurely, so she continued moving to her left in a hurry.

Holding the rifle ready to fire at all times, she raced unnoticed across the rails and into the shrubbery on the far side. When she was safe, she flopped against a tree and let out a long groan.

"Well done, Gertrude," Mehlborg said, still holding his Stengun. Kvantorp and Gudmundsen offered her looks of sympathy, but Anton was a bit more distant. "That's our train that's just arrived. Did you hear it?"

"I felt it," Anne-Katrine croaked, putting the safety back on the rifle before she swung it over her shoulder. "Now what? Shouldn't we make a run for it while we have the opportunity?"

Mehlborg shook his head as he walked over to Anne-Katrine to pat her shoulder. "No. We need to stay in case the charges fail. If they do, we give the locomotive and the wagons a solid shower of lead as they roll past."

"Bloody hell… I thought we were done," Anne-Katrine croaked, staring wide-eyed at Mehlborg.

"Almost… but not quite."

Anne-Katrine sighed and swung the rifle off her shoulder. "I guess I'll still be needing this one, then. Uh… Leo, you'll never guess who I saw out there. Arne Willumsen was one of the two guards clad in Nazi-brown."

"What? Are you sure?"

"Fully," Anne-Katrine said and nodded to prove just how sure she was. "It was Willumsen, though with a toothbrush mustache. I could recognize his ugly mug anywhere. The other guard was a stranger to me, but it was definitely Arne Willumsen."
Erik Kvantorp chuckled and leaned in to join the conversation. "He pops up in the oddest of places, doesn't he? I swear, Gertrude," - he smoothed down his slick hair to underline his words - "it's because of your magnetic personality. A girl who drives a truck, handles high explosives and brandishes a rifle with the skills of any man… I wasn't kidding when I said you should hold off any marriage proposals until you've heard mine."

Anne-Katrine blinked a few times and scrunched up her face in annoyance. "Tell you what, Finn… the first time you made that joke, it was amusing in a juvenile sort of way. This time, it's juvenile in an unamusing sort of way. Get the picture?"

Erik could see when he had reached a dead end so he put his hands in the air and backed away. "All right, all right… you can't fault a bloke for trying."

The face of Anne-Katrine Jensen showed that she could indeed fault a bloke for trying. Moments later, their differences were pushed aside when they heard the locomotive release steam as it slowed down upon approaching the freight station.

All five resistance fighters fell into position among the shrubbery. Metallic noises proved that their weapons had been readied, including Anne-Katrine's Lee-Enfield that she balanced atop a few rocks to get a steady aim.

Deciding he needed to see better, Mehlborg crawled ahead to peek around the bushes. "It's stopped," he whispered back to the others. "They're not taking on water or coal so it probably isn't too heavy. I'd suggest the intelligence I got from the Aalborg freight yard was solid. Three… four… five guards step off the train. Four, five… make that six guards board the train on this side. All regular German soldiers. One of them climbed up into the locomotive, the others went into the box cars."

Nodding to himself after his successful reconnaissance, Mehlborg spun around and crawled back into the shrubbery. He took his Stengun and got ready to spray burning hot death at the enemy.

"Now what?" Anne-Katrine whispered, leaning so close to the former Sergeant her nose touched his ear as she spoke.

"Now we wait for it to leave. Then we'll see if the charges work."

"Oh… wonderful. More waiting…" Anne-Katrine mumbled. She let out a sigh as she hunkered down behind the rifle and waited for the inevitable firefight.

_*._*_*._*_

Five minutes later - that had felt like fifty-five to Anne-Katrine - the freight train finally let out a drawn-out whistle to signal that it was ready to leave the station. The characteristic rhythmic chugging started with a single burst that grew into several, then many.
As the steam locomotive left the station pulling its heavy load, a massive cloud of dark-gray coal smoke billowed up from the smokestack despite the fact that all locomotives had to run with a mechanical smoke-suppressor so they would be less likely to be detected from the air.

The chugging locomotive gradually picked up speed and rolled noisily down the line towards the first detonator. The ground began to shake and tremble as the many steel wheels rolled faster and faster. When it left the station, it became clear it was pulling six wagons - all regular box cars, which meant the train wasn't protected by an anti-aircraft cannon on a flat car.

At the spot where Anne-Katrice and the other resistance fighters were hiding, the tracks began to send out a harmonic hum that proved the train was traveling closer and closer to its doom; that critical spot in the gentle right-hand curve that could end up as its final resting place if the charges worked.

'Or our final resting place,' Anne-Katrice thought, swallowing a nervous lump that had formed in her throat. Digging herself in even deeper, she held the Lee-Enfield rifle tight as she stared out at the approaching train.

Three-hundred and fifty meters and closing.

Mehlborg leaned in towards Anne-Katrice and spoke in a regular voice; he didn't have to whisper because of all the metallic, creaking, clunking noises produced by the train as it approached their position. "Jensen, stay sharp. Aim high… that's where the guards will be. If the charges do go off, keep your head low and open your mouth to protect your eardrums."

"I understand, Sergeant," Anne-Katrice said, clutching her rifle.

Two hundred meters and closing.

With her heart beating faster and faster to infuse enough adrenaline into her blood to cope with the coming situation, Anne-Katrice clenched her jaw and looked out at the tiny, silvery detonator that was still resting across the rail despite the vibrations. Anton had prepared it for just that eventuality by tying it to the top part of the rail with a piece of the wire that connected all the detonators.

It was hard for her to imagine what kind of explosion such a tiny device could produce, but she had read enough articles in the newspapers to know that the new explosives developed for the war effort were hundreds of times more effective than the erratic, volatile dynamite that she and Arthur had seen used at the farm a couple of times to remove stubborn tree stumps. They had hired demolition companies for the job, but even they had to treat it with great care - not so the new compositions that could be molded around any shape.

Fifty meters and closing.

"Get ready!" Mehlborg barked, and they all listened. Anton seemed distant like he was revisiting another scene somewhere else entirely. Erik Kvantorp had lost the cheeky grin he had worn
earlier, and Svenning Gudmundsen sent Anne-Katrine a look of support that she responded to with a nervous smile. She hunkered down and watched the locomotive get ever closer to the tiny, silvery device.

When the first wheel hit the detonator, all that happened was a little bang and a puff of white smoke. Anne-Katrine stared at it with a slack jaw, almost ready to complain out loud when the row of tie busters went off. All the charges she had thought resembled turtles detonated in an ultra-quick series of loud reports that sent stones and large fragments of jagged wood flying in all directions. The tie busters had done their job well by cracking every one of the large ties in two all the way down the line.

The train began to wobble on the rails that were suddenly not running on solid foundations. A split second later, the first C2 charge went off directly underneath the locomotive in a flash of blinding white light.

The world came to a standstill in the fraction of a second it took for the sound to reach the shrubbery where Anne-Katrine and the others were hiding. Then all hell broke loose; the ground shook violently, the leaves were blown clean off the shrubbery and the air was filled with the loudest explosion Anne-Katrine had ever heard.

She cried out at the ferocity of it all and dug her head into the dirt as far as it would go. Shrapnel from the rails, the crushed stones and even from the locomotive itself zinged over their heads creating a creepy concert of disharmonic tones.

All of that had only been the first charge. When the second, the third and finally the fourth pack of C2 detonated in the sequence perfected by Anton, Anne-Katrine had already given up all pretenses of being a brave soldier. She dropped her rifle and could do nothing but clutch her head that she had buried into the dirt.

The brutal reports from the explosions were joined by a cacophony of metallic noises that came from the locomotive, the coal tender and the wagons behind it. Metal creaked, whined, wailed and groaned as it was twisted beyond recognition or simply torn apart. The four explosions had removed more than fifty meters of the rail on the left-hand side of the track and a good portion of the ballast underneath, leaving behind deep, gaping holes in the surface.

The train performed a ghoulish, rattling jitterbug as its momentum forced it forward on the crushed stones instead of the metal rail it was designed to drive on. As it began to tilt ever so slightly, three men jumped down from the cab and came to ungraceful landings in the middle of the track: both engineers and the German guard who had been stationed in the cab.

With an ear-splitting wail that resembled an air-raid siren, the locomotive leaned further and further to the left until gravity took over and it crashed down the embankment in a cloud of white, burning hot steam. Behind it, the coal tender and three of the six wagons went the same way.
Although it hadn't been up to full speed, a runaway train weighing hundreds of tons couldn't be stopped easily. The boiler and the cowcatcher pressed a huge wall of dirt ahead of the locomotive until it slowed down and came to a stop in a cloud of steam and a shower of sparks.

Anne-Katrine's ears were ringing incessantly and she counted at least half a dozen honey bees buzzing around in her head from the brutal treatment. Trying to get her bearings, she stared wide-eyed at her companions to see how they had coped with the results of the sabotage. Everybody seemed to be in the same condition as she which pleased her.

Glancing back across the track, she couldn't believe her eyes. She was looking at the underside of a box car that had flipped over but had stayed up on the top part of the embankment. Everything was obscured by a cloud of dust from the crushed stones, but she could just pick out the steel wheels that were still turning freely.

Wails of pain from the guards and the train crew reached her ears and sent a cold shiver down her spine. The two engineers and the German who had jumped out of the cab were sitting on the track with their heads in their hands. Even while Anne-Katrine watched the scene unfold, the German soldier got up and recovered his rifle.

Shouting out loud in hard, angry German, he spun around and took a pot shot at the shrubbery. The shot didn't go anywhere near where Anne-Katrine and the others were hiding, but his intentions were clear.

A moment later, Anne-Katrine had her Lee-Enfield to her shoulder and squeezed the trigger. The bullet hit the German soldier in the chest. He staggered back a couple of steps but fell backwards and became still.

Anne-Katrine lowered the rifle and stared at the dead body with a dark expression on her face. Around her, three of the four men gawked at her like they couldn't believe what they had just witnessed - only Mehlborg wasn't surprised at Anne-Katrine's mental strength.

"Well done, Gertrude," the former Sergeant said, leaning over to thump Anne-Katrine's shoulder. He turned back to the two train engineers who had dropped down onto their stomachs when the shot had come at them. "You out there! Are you Danes?"

Both nodded and yelled back that they were.

"Run to the south... get behind the trees! There's going to be a firefight here any moment!"

The men clambered to their feet and staggered along the tracks to get further south. One of them dragged his right leg, but it didn't take them long to reach safety among a cluster of trees some seventy meters further down the railway line.

Anne-Katrine sighed deeply and worked the bolt of her rifle to eject the spent casing and load the next round into the chamber. She could already hear yelling, barking and shrill whistling from
the guards with the attack dogs. Although she could happily live without it, she was about to have another encounter with Arne Willumsen and his Nazi cronies.

The wrecked locomotive's boiler decided to have the last laugh. Down in the ditch on the far side of the embankment, it ruptured and blew out a massive cloud of burning hot steam that rose into the air and obscured the sun that had just made it over the tree tops in the east.

*

*

CHAPTER 6

Anne-Katrine and her companions watched all six uniformed collaborators hurry up the tracks to get to the train wreck. Now and then, they took pot shots at the shrubbery on the right-hand side of the railway line with their rifles, but they weren't even close to hitting anything. They had released their Alsatians that stormed ahead of their masters with their teeth bared in fits of raging bloodlust.

"Get ready," Mehlborg said calmly over a soundtrack of wildly barking dogs and hissing steam from the ruptured boiler. "Fire at will. Concentrate on the dogs first. Go!" He thumped Kvantorp in the back, and the former Staff Sergeant jumped out of the shrubbery with his Stengun poised to fire at the approaching dogs.

Gudmundsen and Anton hurried out after him, but when Anne-Katrine rose to follow them, Ernst Mehlborg held her back. "No, Jensen… this isn't your fight," he said with a firm grip on her arm.

"What the blazes are you on about? This is my fight!"

"You'll be shooting at fellow Danes, not Germans."

"Danes who are wearing the uniform of the enemy, Sergeant. That makes them traitors in my book. Like I said, this is my fight!"

Out on the tracks, Kvantorp, Gudmundsen and Anton took the fight to the Alsatians and the collaborators. They opened fire with their Stenguns, producing the staccato chatter so characteristic of the simple, yet effective submachine gun.

Anne-Katrine and Mehlborg stared hard at each other for several seconds before they both understood they were better off fighting the enemy instead of an ally. "All right," Mehlborg said, reaching into the canvas bag he was kneeling next to. "But not with the rifle. Here," he said and thrust a Stengun and four spare magazines into Anne-Katrine's hands. "Beware, it's not as forgiving as the machine gun you used three years ago."

Anne-Katrine nodded grimly and swung the Lee-Enfield over her shoulder. She shoved the spare magazines into her pockets before she took the Stengun and held it ready by placing her hands in
the most logical places: on the trigger and on the magazine that stood out in a forty-five degree angle on the left-hand side of the weapon. "Thank you," she said and jumped out of the shrubbery.

With Mehlborg hot on her heels, Anne-Katrine ran up next to the tracks and quickly surveyed the situation. Kvantorp and the others had already killed three dogs, but the other three were still coming, and the collaborators - who were barely one hundred meters to the north - were firing their rifles repeatedly at the resistance fighters.

Anton and Kvantorp were kneeling next to each other to cover the remaining dogs, and Gudmundsen had moved over to the wrecked train to search for possible survivors among the German guards who had been on it.

Anne-Katrine hunched over and sprinted towards the train to find some cover. A few projectiles zinged past her, but it was nothing she couldn't handle. Only a few meters before she found safety, one of the three attack dogs spotted her and took off in a barking frenzy. Being mauled by a good-sized Alsatian wasn't anywhere near the top of her wish list, so she stopped running and took aim at the dog that tore at her.

Clenching her jaw hard, she squeezed the trigger and sent out a burst of hot death at the dog. The weapon went off in a staccato chatter that reminded her of a typewriter gone amok, but her first time firing a Sten hadn't been too successful as the temperamental weapon had fired its bullets anywhere but at the dog.

"Bloody hell," she croaked and aimed better for her next burst. Clenching her muscles so she could hold the weapon stock still, she aimed dead center at the dog that was already too close for comfort. She squeezed the trigger and watched how the next salvo took care of her urgent problem with gruesome efficiency.

For a moment or two, she stared dumbstruck at the remains of the dog. It wasn't by far the first animal she had put down, but it still gave her a stronger punch in the gut than when she had killed the German guard earlier.

Hot lead zinging past her ears made her snap out of the dark zone and run over towards Svenning Gudmundsen who was using the undercarriage of an overturned box car as his firing position. "Svenning, did you find any survivors?" she croaked, moving the Stengun in a sweeping pattern to find the best angle of attack against the uniformed collaborators further up the tracks.

"No… only dead people. I couldn't find more than three guards, though… Mehlborg said there were six… you got the one who was in the cab, but I don't know where the remaining two are," the young man said, glancing past Anne-Katrine's shoulder and out onto the tracks.

Several staccato bursts were fired from Anton and Kvantorp's Stenguns, and at least one, perhaps two of the brown-clad collaborators were thrown to the ground up at their defensive position. Anne-Katrine couldn't see if Willumsen had been one of them, but she hoped he had been.
She stepped away from her cover and fired off a short burst from the Sten. Once again, the weapon jumped erratically in her hand making it nigh-on impossible to get a proper aim on a target smaller than a barn door. "Sergeant Mehlborg was right," she said, staring down at the smoking submachine gun, "this thing is bloody awkward to use… I wish we had the kind of machine gun here that I used back then… that was effective."

She fired another short burst of hot lead before the magazine was empty. Cursing under her breath, she stepped back into her cover and looked for the release.

"It's there, Anne-Katrine," Svenning said, pointing at a minuscule metal knob next to the trigger body.

"Thank you," Anne-Katrine said and pressed it to release the spent magazine. She dug into her pocket to find a new one and clicked it in place. Before she could fire at the collaborators, hot lead zinged past her ear and made her and Svenning move back in a hurry. "Bloody Nazis," she grumbled, trying to peek past a steel wheel to find a target.

A slew of bullets suddenly struck the undercarriage right next to Gudmundsen and Anne-Katrine creating a disharmonic concert in major and minor keys as they ricocheted off the metal and into the ether.

Grunting out loud from the surprise, they both ducked down and spun around to see where the shots had come from. Two German soldiers had appeared just over a hundred meters further down the railway line and had snuck up on the Danish position without anyone noticing.

"The remaining guards from the train… bloody hell, we're pinned down!" Anne-Katrine croaked and readied her Stengun, but Svenning hurriedly put his hand on top of hers and shook his head.

"Wait, Anne-Katrine… the Sten can't shoot that far! They're still out of range. You'll only be wasting ammo…"

"What? What kind of pea shooter is this?!" Anne-Katrine growled and put down the submachine gun. Instead, she swung her Lee-Enfield off her shoulder and wrapped the leather strap around her hand. As another bullet hit the box car and ricocheted wildly with an eerie whine, she put the rifle to her shoulder and aimed dead center at the nearest of the two soldiers. She squeezed the trigger and watched him fall down. He tried to crawl away but soon became still.

The other soldier dropped down onto his stomach and returned fire at once, furiously discharging his rifle to get even. Several hits impacted on the box car's frame that sent sparks and flakes of rust flying everywhere.

"I can't believe this is happening again!" Anne-Katrine croaked, brushing rust out of her hair. "Get down, Svenning… he means business!" She had barely spoken the words before the German fired again. A few missed their target, but most were well-aimed. One of them hit flesh and sent a shower of warm blood onto Anne-Katrine's left cheek.
Her insides turned to ice as she reached up to touch her cheek. When her fingers were coated in crimson blood, she let out an explosive burst of air and tried to get a sense of where she had been hit. The shock and adrenaline that pumped through her heightened her senses but dulled her pain receptors so she didn't feel a thing.

The answer to the gruesome question came a few seconds later when Svenning Gudmundsen let out a pained groan and slipped down onto his knees with blood seeping through his dark jacket.

"No! Bloody hell! Mehlborg! We have a man down!" she cried, throwing the rifle to her shoulder to aim at the German soldier who had fired the shot. The first few attempts went wide and ricocheted harmlessly off the crushed stones, but the third hit him in the head, ending his life. Anne-Katrine lowered the rifle and stared at the two dead Germans with a grim expression on her face.

First things first, so she swung the Lee-Enfield over her shoulder and knelt down to see how badly the friendly young man next to her had been wounded. His face had turned ashen in the brief moments since he was hit, and his jacket glistened with dark red blood. "Dammit, Svenning… it doesn't look too good," she croaked as she ripped open the man's jacket to find the wound.

Mehlborg was at her side in an instant and knelt down next to her. "Bloody hell, Gudmundsen," he echoed, gripping Svenning's hand to offer his support. "How is he, Jensen?"

"Bad and getting worse," Anne-Katrine said, watching the blood seep through a nasty bullet hole on the upper-left part of the young man's chest. "He needs urgent medical attention. Did we bring a medical kit?"

"No."

"Then we're going to lose him," Anne-Katrine said grimly, looking down at the friendly young man's ashen face.

Mehlborg grunted out loud and thumped his fist down onto his knee. "Dammit! We can't leave him here… the Germans or the collaborators will kill him on sight. And we need to get a move on, Jensen. The dogs have all been killed, but at least one of the collaborators legged it back to the stationhouse like the Devil was on his tail."

"I'll bet that was Willumsen, that bloody coward. He's going to radio for assistance from the garrison."

"Well, that's a given. We can't stay."

Anne-Katrine's face grew into a dark mask of determination as she looked down at Svenning's pained features. The young man had a look of raw fear in his eyes that she knew all too well from her own past.
For a brief moment, she went back in time to April 9th where she revisited the comrades she had seen dying at the ambush site and the square in front of the white wall at the barber shop, the spot where she had nearly died herself after being wounded three times. She could almost feel the murderous pain from her foot, her legs and her arm, and it made her more determined than ever to save the friendly Svenning Gudmundsen who had promised to protect her if it came to a firefight. "All right," she croaked in a raw voice. "We have to get Svenning to Doctor Meincke. We have to drive into town."

In the meanwhile, Erik Kvantorp and the man Anne-Katrine knew only as Anton had come over to check up on Svenning. They both looked at each other after Anne-Katrine had made her decisive statement. "That's nonsense, Gertrude," Anton said gruffly. "He's dying. We can save our own asses by scattering like we agreed upon."

Anne-Katrine's upper lip curled into a fierce sneer that made the man from Southern Schleswig pull back in a hurry. "That may be how you do it where you come from, but here in Denmark, we help a comrade when he's down!" she growled, reaching under Svenning's prone body.

Before Anton had time to shoot back a barb, Anne-Katrine lifted Svenning off the ground with an almighty effort and put him over her shoulder in a carry that she had performed a thousand times with eighty-kilogram sacks of feed for her chickens. Svenning Gudmundsen weighed less than that, but it was still hard on her lower back. "Let's go!" she croaked through clenched teeth.

"You heard the soldier!" Mehlborg barked, "Regroup to the trucks on the double!"

Anne-Katrine grunted out loud when she stood up straight with her precious cargo over her shoulder, but Mehlborg assisted her across the tracks and back into the shrubbery.

---

It caused no problems for Anne-Katrine to carry Svenning across the hard dirt, but when she reached the soft gravel at the spot where she had parked her Triangel truck, her boots dug in and she nearly lost her balance. "Oh, dammit all to hell!" she barked, trying to hold onto her cargo. On her shoulder, Svenning groaned out loud but held on - and of course, if he could groan, he was still alive.

Mehlborg hurried back to them and aided Anne-Katrine across the gravel. "My own vehicle is parked behind the sheds over there… it's too far for Gudmundsen. We'll put him in your truck. Kvantorp, make yourself useful and get the wood gas going!"

"Yes, Sergeant," Erik Kvantorp said and ran around the front of the ancient truck to begin the laborious process of kicking life into the advanced machinery.

While Anton stood guard and covered the railway line behind them with his Stengun, Anne-Katrine yanked open the right-hand side door and climbed up on the lower rung of the ladder. "Hope this damn thing will hold both our weights," she groaned as she deposited the wounded Svenning Gudmundsen onto the seat. She climbed up the rest of the way and helped push him
into the center. The young man let out a pained groan in the process, but helped Anne-Katrine by pulling himself across the seats.

"Why not to the right?" Mehlborg said, climbing up behind the wheel to pull Svenning the rest of the way.

"'Cos the bloody door can't close, that's why! I'll drive, you'll man the door and shoot if it comes to that… we'll keep Svenning safe between us," Anne-Katrine growled and jumped down into the loose gravel.

A split second later, Anton opened fire on a figure that had run past out on the tracks. "Leo! One of the collaborators is out there! I think he's got an MP40!"

"Bloody perfect!" Mehlborg roared, "Just what we needed. Everybody, report in all enemy activity as soon as you see it. Finn, get that bloody wood gas generator working, man! We don't have all day!"

"I'm trying, dammit!" Erik croaked, stirring the cylinder for all he was worth.

Anne-Katrine ran around the front of the old Triangel and picked up the Stengun she had dropped earlier when she had nearly lost her balance. She clenched her jaw and tried to spot the man Anton had reported seeing. Scanning the shrubbery further to the south, she thought she could see a shadow clad in brown moving into a firing position. "Sergeant! I think I have him… to the south of us… near the-"

That's all Anne-Katrine had time to say before their last remaining opponent opened fire with his German MP40 submachine gun. Bullets zinged past the people at the truck but missed all of them through a sheer miracle.

Hurriedly yanking the driver's side door open, Anne-Katrine climbed up into the cab and wrapped her arms around Svenning's upper body. Tugging at him gently, she pulled him down to lie across the seat. "I know it hurts, Gudmundsen, and I'm sorry… but I gotta get you out of the firing line…"

Svenning wasn't in any condition to answer, but he let out a croak that could be translated into a thank you.

Stepping down, Anne-Katrine checked if her magazine was full. It was. Her heart thumped in her throat as she leaned against the truck's wing and scanned the entire section of the shrubbery ahead of her over the barrel of her weapon.

Erik jumped in next to her and pressed himself up against the door. "I didn't have time to finish up! We can't leave yet!"
More shots were fired at them, and it appeared the shooter's aim was improving as a few projectiles struck the other side of Anne-Katrine's truck and sent dust and chips of wood flying everywhere.

Zig-zagging to confuse the shooter, Mehlborg hurried over to the shrubbery they had come from to find an offensive position that would work against their attacker. In the meanwhile, Anton crawled up behind Anne-Katrine and Erik and ducked in under the truck to take advantage of its large ground clearance. As soon as he was down on his stomach, he fired several short bursts with his Stengun at the spots where he thought their opponent could hide.

Anne-Katrine panted hard through clenched teeth. Their attacker sent out yet another burst of hot death that screamed through the air above and in front of the truck. "If that really is Arne bloody Willumsen, he's becoming a bloody great nuisance!" she croaked and shook her head angrily. "I knew I should have killed him when I had the-

Once again their attacker cut her off mid-stream, but this time, it was because she got a clear view of him as he stepped into a cone of light that shone down between two trees. She had been right, it was Arne Willumsen. The toothbrush mustache in the center of his ugly face was impossible to miss; even more so since that ugly face was drawn back in a toothless sneer as he held the MP40.

A moment later, a visual connection was established between the two old enemies that sent looks of pure shock, then raging anger onto Willumsen's face. He threw his gun up and sent a wild burst at Anne-Katrine and her fellow resistance fighters.

"Contact to the right!" Anne-Katrine roared at the top of her lungs at the exact same moment that Willumsen opened fire at her. Without stopping to think, she moved the Stengun up and fired off a long, staccato salvo at the man in the dark-brown Nazi uniform. He missed, but she didn't.

Four roses blossomed on Arne Willumsen's brown uniform, and he was thrown off his feet and onto his rear. He tried to get back up but couldn't. Eventually, he slipped down onto his back and became still.

In two heartbeats flat, Anne-Katrine jumped away from the truck and raced over to her old adversary. She kicked the MP40 away from his hand, but there was no doubt he was dead. His ugly face had turned even uglier in death. His eyes stared vacantly at the sky, and his toothless mouth was agape in a silent scream.

Taking yet another life left Anne-Katrine strangely empty. Her first kill had been a horrific experience, the second less so. Now that she had killed more than a dozen men, she felt nothing. She had killed four men on this sabotage operation alone, and yet she felt nothing inside. Grunting, she left Arne Willumsen's body in the dirt and picked up his submachine gun.

On her way back, Mehlborg came over to intercept her. "Bloody well done, Jensen," he said and patted her on the shoulder. "Don't bother with that MP40. We don't have any ammunition for it."
"Mmmm," Anne-Katrine said and tossed the German hardware into the shrubbery.

"All right!" Mehlborg continued in a bark, "Everybody, back to work! We need to get a bloody move on!"

_*-*_*

Ten minutes later, the two-truck convoy finally set out from the Gulbrandsen farm and drove onto the narrow, undulating side roads to find the backway into town. Erik Kvantorp and Anton shared Mehlborg's truck. Because it was much faster than Anne-Katrine's rickety old thing, they drove up front to clear the way.

Anne-Katrine tried to keep up with the other truck but had to admit defeat after a mere four hills as her Triangel would hardly drag itself up them despite its meager load of three people. She changed gears constantly to keep the engine alive, but the old, weak-chested truck was having a hard time of even the smallest hill.

She sighed and glanced to her right at Svenning Gudmundsen whose complexion had turned from average poor to utterly indescribable. Mehlborg was sitting to the right, holding onto the door with one hand while brandishing his Sten with the other.

"We should have swapped trucks, Mehlborg," she said in a despondent voice as she had to change gears yet again. "This bloody old thing is only slowing you down… hell, I'm slowing you down."

"It's not the world's best truck, that's for certain," Ernst Mehlborg said and let out a sound that could be perceived as a chuckle. "Why did you even buy it? Was it all you could afford?"

Anne-Katrine grunted and let the truck roll down from the crest of a hill. "Well… Arthur and I decided to buy a heavy vehicle when the truck from the dairy plant grew so erratic we couldn't count on it coming to the farm. We depend on it to swing by each day to pick up our milk churns. We badly need the money we earn from the milk, so…"

"But why this old thing?"

"It was the only one available," Anne-Katrine said with a shrug. "There were others, but they were all laid up because of the war. It would be too expensive to get them to run again. We had already bought the heavy vehicle permit from the city council so we had to do something. Good Lord, listen to me yapping…"

"Oh, that's all right, Jensen. That's all we can do at this point in time. Maybe it's your way of coming down after the fight?"

"Mmmm. No," Anne-Katrine said and changed down to climb another hill. She glanced briefly at the former Sergeant, but soon returned to the road ahead. *That'll happen later… in bed with my wife.*
They drove on in silence for a few minutes before they caught up with the other truck that had been parked at the side of the road. Erik Kvantorp stood next to it and flagged Anne-Katrine down.

She pulled over onto the soft, grassy verge and rolled down the window to hear what the former Staff Sergeant had to say, but he went over to Mehlborg's side of the truck instead and climbed up on the lower rung.

"Mehlborg, we've found a barn that Anton knows is abandoned and empty. I suggest we store our weapons, coveralls and remaining equipment there and drive into town like the group of casual laborers our forged papers claim us to be."

Ernst Mehlborg nodded and climbed down from the old truck. "That's a sound plan, Kvantorp. All right, let's get to work. We haven't seen any motorcycle patrols yet, but our luck can't hold up forever," he said and ran ahead to scout out the barn they had found.

Kvantorp nodded back and signaled Anton who was still sitting in the other truck that he could start unloading their equipment. When the man from Southern Schleswig climbed down to begin the procedure, Erik shuffled back to Anne-Katrine's side of the truck. "No offence, Anne-Katrine," he said, once again climbing up on the lower rung, "but perhaps we should dump this old crate as well? You can hardly reach twenty-five kilometers an hour going up the hills…"

"I know, Erik," Anne-Katrine said and scrunched up her face. She craned her neck to look at their surroundings, but couldn't see any dangers lurking in the shadows. Everything around them was painted in a palette of strong colors: gray asphalt, brown dirt, green trees, a milky-blue sky and the crimson that seeped out of Svenning Gudmundsen's wound. "All right. Let's do that. It's an old, abandoned barn?"

"Anton says so, yes."

"Mmmm. Give me two minutes to find a door that works. Then I'll drive the truck inside it so it'll be out of sight from the road. I'll need a hand shifting Svenning to the other truck, though. He's still poorly."

"You have it," Erik said and jumped off the rung, "By Jove, Anne-Katrine, you're the most unusual woman I have ever met! Is there anything you can't do?" - The comment had been delivered with a few cheeky winks, but the grin on his face was real.

Anne-Katrine drew a sharp breath to fire off a broadside at the older man, but she decided against it at the last moment. Instead, she shot him a dark glare as she found a gear and began to roll forward. "Careful, Kvantorp… you're beginning to sound like a broken record," she grumbled, shaking her head in frustration.

-*-*-*-*
It didn't take too long to hide the truck and shift all the weapons and the remaining equipment into the dusty, warm barn that looked and smelled like it hadn't been used since before the war.

As Anne-Katrine closed the barn door by dragging it on a rusty rail - creating an ear-splitting screech akin to nails on a chalkboard - she couldn't help but glance warmly at her old Triangel. It was a recalcitrant, stubborn piece of machinery, but it represented something in her that she was fiercely proud of, namely a strong urge to protect and support her family through any means necessary.

Mehlborg had agreed that she could come back for it as soon as she wanted to, and she planned on doing it the same afternoon unless the Germans turned too aggressive in their quest to find the resistance fighters who sabotaged the railway line. All she had to do was to make sure the weapons and the equipment were safe from prying eyes.

Nodding to herself, she closed the barn door shut and worked the latch to keep it secure. The others had already moved to Mehlborg's own truck and sat on the flat bed in their regular clothes; the coveralls had been dumped with the equipment.

Like before, the cab was shared by Mehlborg, Gudmundsen and Anne-Katrine, but now the spot behind the wheel was occupied by the former Sergeant. "Are we all set?" he said to Anne-Katrine as she climbed up into the cab and shut the door behind her.

"All set, Mehlborg. Let's go."

---

The drive into town through back roads and quiet streets went without dramas, but it was clear the Germans had reacted strongly to the sabotage. They had placed heavily armed checkpoints at all the main roads into town, and motorcycles equipped with machine guns raced up and down the streets and the square to keep everyone in check.

Similar to a majority of German military operations in Denmark, all they achieved with their massive presence was to attract growing crowds of citizens who simply had to see what the hubbub was about. All the usual scenes unfolded: little boys standing in groups admiring the weapons and the motorcycles while their teen sisters admired the dashing soldiers in their gray uniforms. Beyond that, the bourgeois with their shiny coats, tall hats and wooden canes rubbed shoulders while they spoke in hushed tones that the Germans had only harvested what they had sown.

Mehlborg drove his truck through an alley that really should have been too narrow for the large vehicle, but they made it through in one piece. They turned left, then right, then another right and finally a left until they came to a stop. "We're behind the health center now," Mehlborg said and looked everywhere for potential trouble. "Hmmm... looks clear so far. Jensen, can I count on your help?"
"Always, Sergeant," Anne-Katrine said decisively as she helped Svenning Gudmundsen sit steady.

"We don't have time to run the gauntlet or play games with the bloody Germans, so I think the best approach will be to knock on the door… that's where you come in, Jensen. You already know Doctor Meincke."

"I do," Anne-Katrine said and reached for the door handle. At the last moment, it struck her like a bolt from the blue that Meincke had once told Lydia and her that he had retired from his practice to write a book. She groaned inwardly but didn't let it show. She narrowed her eyes and looked at the back of the building housing the health center in the hope it would give her a helping hand when it mattered the most. "I'll… I'll get on it right away, Mehlborg."

She climbed down from the truck and ran over to the back door of the health center. The dark-brown, wooden door was unlocked so she stepped inside. At once, the familiar scent of disinfectants assaulted her nostrils and gave her an unfortunate flashback to when she had spent several days flat on her back upstairs while her shot-up foot healed sufficiently for her to travel home.

The pale-green, nondescript walls and dark-brown doors at the ground floor of the health center didn't offer much help, but she finally found an office that belonged to E.S. Meincke, MD.

After tapping her knuckles on the door, she peeked inside and saw the elderly gentleman with the white hair and the impressive whiskers fast asleep at his desk despite the early hour of the day. "He's probably been here all night," she chuckled as she stepped into the office that was overflowing with hefty, dusty medical tomes. "Doctor Meincke… Doctor Meincke?" she said quietly so she wouldn't frighten him.

The retired doctor awoke with a surprised snore and sat up straight. "Oh… I must have dozed off…” he mumbled, patting the desk for his metal-rim spectacles.

Anne-Katrine helped him by guiding the spectacles over to his hand. "Doctor Meincke, it's Anne-Katrine Jensen. I know you've retired, but a friend of mine needs urgent medical attention. A gunshot wound in the upper chest. He's bled for a while now."

"A gunshot wound?" Edvard Sigurd Meincke said as he put on his spectacles. He narrowed his eyes and shot Anne-Katrine a knowing look over the rim of the metal frame. "But not from a hunting rifle, am I correct?"

"Not a hunting rifle, no," Anne-Katrine said drolly.

Doctor Meincke nodded and rose from his desk. When he stood up straight, he pressed a hand to his lower back like he really had been sitting there all night. It took him a few seconds to take the next step, but once he had cleared the initial hurdle with a few grunts and groans, he was able to move freely. "Bring him inside, Miss Jensen. The room just across the hallway labeled Operating Theater, if you please."
"I'll find it," Anne-Katrine said and left in a hurry.

---

"How is he, Doctor Meincke?" Anne-Katrine said quietly fifteen minutes later. She wrung a sleeve of her jacket in her strong hands as a substitute for the Powhatan that she needed so badly she could already taste it.

"In a poor state, Miss Jensen. If you had arrived any later, it would have been too late," Meincke said and ran a comb through his white hair. He cast a wary glance at Mehlborg, Kvantorp and Anton who stood around him in silence. "I've patched him up as best I could, but he's lost a lot of blood. He isn't over the hill yet, I'm afraid. The next twenty-four hours will be critical. When Doctor Halvorsen and Nurse Frederiksen get here, I'll fill them in. Oh, and you needn't worry about Doctor Halvorsen… he's a friend."

Mehlborg grunted and put out his hand. "We thank you, Doctor. We need to leave now before our neighbors from the south show up and spoil the broth, but I'll be back regularly to see how our friend is doing."

Doctor Meincke shook Mehlborg's hand, but looked at Anne-Katrine while he did it. "Very well. Am I right in thinking I shouldn't ask what you've been up to last night?"

"Oh, last night, well…” Anne-Katrine said, thinking about the glorious time she had spent making love with Lydia. 'I better not mention that,' she thought with a wry smile on her face. "Last night we were all asleep, weren't we?"

Everybody nodded.

"A-ha. That makes me feel so much better. A good night's sleep is very important with the busy lives we lead these days," Doctor Meincke said and reached over to shake Anne-Katrine's hand as well. "Goodbye for now, Miss Jensen. Please give Mrs. Jensen my regards when you meet her. I've missed her steady hands on a couple of occasions."

"I shall, Doctor Meincke," Anne-Katrine said with a proud smile as she shook the elderly doctor's hand. "She's often spoken warmly of the time she spent here, too."

Back on the street, and back in the truck - Mehlborg and Anne-Katrine shared the cab while Kvantorp and Anton had climbed back up on the flatbed - they had barely driven two hundred meters on the main road out of town before a German motorcycle patrol drove in front of them and forced them to pull over at the curb.

"No panic!" Mehlborg said through the small peephole that he had shoved aside on the back wall of the cab. "Do you have your forged papers ready?"
Erik and Anton nodded, but Anne-Katrine groaned and shook her head.

"It's all right, Jensen. You don't look suspicious," Mehlborg said and rolled down his window to greet the German soldier who had jumped off the motorcycle.

A second German soldier remained seated in the sidecar where he pointed the machine gun directly at the people sitting in the cab. Anne-Katrine recognized the type of gun from her brief stay at the front three years previously. She knew that small flames would lick out of the perforated barrel when the weapon was fired, but she would rather not experience it again if she had any say in the matter.

It soon became clear the Unteroffizier at the door wasn't satisfied with simply seeing the identification papers. "Alle runter vom Laster!" he shouted, yanking open the driver's side door while pointing an accusing index finger at Mehlborg - 'Everybody down from the truck.'

Anne-Katrine's heart thumped a painful double-beat at the harsh sound of the barked command, but she opened the passenger side door and climbed down. She realized too late her jacket still had Svenning Gudmundsen's blood on it. She had washed her cheek at the health center, but not her jacket. The thought of what might happen when the German saw the blood made her stomach clench, but she knew it was far too late to take off the jacket without arousing undue suspicion.

Swallowing down a bitter surge, she walked around the front of the truck and joined Mehlborg, Kvantorp and Anton who had both jumped off the flatbed. They already held their papers ready, so Anne-Katrine dug into her pocket to find hers.

"Ihre Papiere! Sofort!" the Unteroffizier barked and held out his hand.

While he was given the identification papers and began to study them, Anne-Katrine studied his appearance in return. A podgy man with the kind of face that typically went with such a stature, the Unteroffizier had angry eyes under a pair of dark eyebrows, a potato-shaped nose and a slight double chin. He wore a standard gray uniform with a metal shield around his neck that identified him as a member of the Field Police. He wore a battle helmet that was free of scratches, hinting at a career spent behind the front.

"Sie sind alle Hilfsarbeiter?" he said in German. When it became clear none of the people he had pulled over spoke German, he narrowed his angry eyes and tried again in broken Danish. "Hired hands at farms, it says?"

"That's right, Herr Offizier -" Mehlborg said, but he was stopped by the German who held up a hand.

"Unteroffizier Henker," the man said and pointed at his epaulet.

"I beg your pardon, Herr Unteroffizier . But yes, we are hired hands working at farms on a day to day basis, except Miss Jensen here. Today, we're headed out to her farm east of the town. She has promised us work moving their dunghill. It will take us all day."
The Unteroffizier scrunched up his face with a clear thought of the dirty, disgusting work etched across his features. "How much you earn for that?"

"Oh, not enough," Erik Kvantorp said with a grin that split his bony face apart, but it disappeared at once when Unteroffizier Henker didn't see the humor.

Instead, the man with the angry eyes moved over to Anne-Katrine and slapped her identification papers against her chest. "You are woman," he continued in broken Danish, looking at the peaks in her shirt. "Why you work with men? Why you not home on farm?"

Anne-Katrine licked her lips that had turned bone-dry along with the rest of her system. "I own the farm with my brother, Herr Unteroffizier," she said, trying to keep her eyes stuck firmly to the asphalt so he couldn't accuse her of mocking him.

"Woman owning farm? Odd."

"I own it with my brother-"

"Halten Sie den Mund! Reden Sie gefälligst erst, wenn Sie gefragt werden, Fräulein!" Henker barked in German - 'Don't speak unless you've been asked a question' - before he took a step back and scrutinized Anne-Katrine's papers. Several times, he looked up at the woman who was a centimeter or two taller than he was. His expression proved that he wasn't a fan of women doing any kind of work beyond producing babies, cooking dinners and ironing shirts.

'This is it…' Anne-Katrine thought with a sinking feeling in her gut. 'This is where it all ends… bloody hell, we made it through the worst part only to be stopped by some would-be Reichsführer with a misogynistic streak…'

"Where blood from?"

"I'm sor-"

"The blood," Henker said, slapping the identification papers against the dried blood on the jacket. "Where blood from?"

"It's old blood. I didn't have time to wash the jacket since I had a little accident. I cut myself when I cleaned… uh, a pitchfork."

Unteroffizier Henker took another step back and studied Anne-Katrine from her boots to her dark locks, clearly undressing her with his eyes as he went along. The scrunched-up expression on his face proved that he was suspicious of something that was just out of his grasp.

Suddenly, he threw down Anne-Katrine's identification papers on the ground so she had to bend down to pick them up. "Next time you in town, wear a skirt like real woman. Not pants like man," he said in broken Danish before he handed back the forged papers to Mehlborg, Kvantorp and Anton. "Go. You're wasting my time."
While Anne-Katrine bent down to get her papers, Mehlborg bowed to Unteroffizier Henker and opened the driver's side door. They all climbed back aboard the truck and reversed away from the motorcycle so they could continue their journey.

Anne-Katrine sat to the right and stared wide-eyed at nothing at all while Mehlborg drove around the roadblock and headed out of town. The thumping pulsepoint on the side of her neck proved how great the storm that raged inside her was.

She let out a deep sigh and looked at her ID card that identified her as 'Name: Jensen, Anne-Katrine. Occupation: Farmer. Address: Egon Mathiesens Vej 144. Born: 17 Feb 1914. In: Haderslev.' Her signature had been scribbled at the foot of the card next to the stamp and signature of the chief constable who had issued it.

'Marital status: Married. Name of spouse: Lydia Jensen,' Anne-Katrine thought as she put the papers back into her pocket. 'And after all this, I will never leave her side again. Ever. I can't bloomin' wait to see her. And hold her. And kiss her…'

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

After driving around the streets and roads near the town for close to fifteen minutes to make it appear they were there for a specific purpose - in case they were stopped by another German patrol - Mehlborg pulled the truck over at the forecourt of a closed petrol station on the main road out of town.

Both pumps had been covered by dusty tarps that had been there since mid-1940. Petrol couldn't be sold to members of the public unless they held positions vital to the society, like doctors, veterinarians or firefighters, so there wasn't any point in keeping the station open.

"All right," Mehlborg said through the narrow peephole at the back of the cab, causing Anne-Katrine to look back at him instead of at the desolation outside. "Finn and Anton, you'll be able to get back into town from here. I'll drive Gertrude home. It's been a solid operation… but remember it isn't over yet. No talking to anyone about anything. We never know if Adolf is listening."

The two men nodded and jumped off the flatbed. Anton never even looked back but simply started shuffling along the sidewalk back to town with his head ducked down between his shoulders and his hands buried deeply in his pockets. To the world, he was a destitute on a quest to find himself a morning pick-me-up.

Erik let out a grunt as he watched Anton shuffle away. "He's a strange fellow, that man," he mumbled as he opened the driver's side door and stepped up on the lower rung.

"Yes. But he has his reasons," Mehlborg said, reaching out to shake hands with his old colleague. "Stay safe, Kvantorp. I'll be in touch."
"Understood, Mehlborg. You too," Erik said and hopped down on the asphalt that was cracked after years of disuse. His entire demeanor changed when he walked around the front and climbed up on Anne-Katrines side of the truck. Beaming, he put out his hand at Anne-Katrine. "And you, Miss Jensen! I certainly hope we shall work together in the future. If nothing else, I shall fondly remember this encounter!"

Anne-Katrine didn't quite know how to respond to that, but her lips formed a tired smile as she shook the former Staff Sergeant's hand. "Thank you, Sergeant Kvantorp. I'm afraid this was my first and last operation. I think I'll retire to lead a quiet life in the countryside… milking cows, shoveling dung… that's what I do best."

"A ghastly existence for such a skilled soldier," Erik said with a grin before his bony face mellowed into a darker mask. "On a more serious note, thank you for taking care of Svenning Gudmundsen. He's just a kid, but-"

"But he's our brother in arms," Anne-Katrine said with a dark nod.

"Indeed. Well, I'm off. Sergeant Mehlborg, Miss Jensen… it's been a privilege," Erik Hartvig Kvantorp said and quickly saluted his comrades.

---

The next ten minutes of the journey went by in silence, but when Mehlborg drove off the main road and onto the side road that would eventually come past the Jensen farm, he cleared his throat like he was about to say something important. "Jensen… Anne-Katrine, are you sure I can't persuade you to come with us another time?"

Anne-Katrine sighed and looked over at Mehlborg's profile while he drove the truck. She had come to admire the gruff, dour, perpetually po-faced former Sergeant's skills in the field of warfare, even if his curt ways caused her the occasional confusion and frustration.

She looked back out onto the colorful landscape they went past that she called home. Dark-green trees and rows of hedges gave way to off-yellow fields of wheat that stretched out to the horizon. On other fields, groups of cows or horses stood by wooden fences munching on grass, drinking from troughs or simply spending the day in the open. Now and then, buzzards tore down from the heavens when they had spotted a juicy rodent-snack on the ground, and other birds circled just over the fields in search for insects.

The Dannebrog, the Danish national flag, flew proudly from a flagpole near a farm they went past, showing the world and the Germans that Denmark may be occupied, but not defeated.

Another color came to Anne-Katrines mind - green. Or more to the point, the shade of green only found in Lydia's expressive eyes. They were able to change their hue depending on her mood. If she was happy, they could turn almost pale and transparent. If she was angry or upset, they would grow darker or even shoot fire.
However, Anne-Katrine's favorite look was and would always be the hue Lydia's eyes would gain when they shared an intimate moment. Then, her eyes would grow into a deeper green that Anne-Katrine simply could not escape from. Time and time again, she would drown in that deeper green; she would be swept away on a wave of love that made everything around her fade into insignificance.

She sighed again and returned to the real world. Her country meant a great deal to her, but Lydia meant everything. Without Lydia, there was no point to even living. "I can't," she croaked, clearing her throat to make her voice appear less raw, "I'm sorry, Sergeant, but this was my last operation. My last sabotage. My family is just too important to me to... to... risk-"

"Say no more, Jensen. It's noted. If you ever change your mind, just call Birthe, the telephone operator, and she'll get in touch with me. There's always a spot open for you on my team."

"Well... thank you for the vote of confidence. But it won't happen."

"All right. Let's hope the Germans will soon lose interest in our little country... the model protectorate as they call it. With the war coming to their own doorstep now, they'll be too busy on the home front to pay any attention to what's going on up here."

"Let's hope so. I can't help but think the Germans aren't ready to call a defeat yet... plenty of blood will be shed in the coming months and years. None of us can predict what's going to happen..."

"True," Mehlborg said darkly as he activated the turning arrow so he could pull over onto the soft shoulder. "Jensen, I don't want to alert your family, so I'm going to drop you off here. You only have a kilometer or so to march before you're home."

Anne-Katrine chuckled and reached over to shake Mehlborg's hand. "I'm a bloody civilian, Mehlborg, remember? We walk, we don't march."

They shook hands in silence and offered each other looks of gratitude. Nodding, Anne-Katrine stepped down from the truck and waved at the former Sergeant as he turned the heavy vehicle around and headed back to his hiding place. She didn't even know where it was, but what she didn't know, she couldn't pass on under duress.

The morning was warm and pleasant so she took off her jacket and flung it over her shoulder. She took a deep breath of the rural air and set off for home. Two steps into her journey, she dug into her pocket to find the Powhattan she had craved for better part of four hours. She lit up in a hurry and inhaled the oddly-tasting smoke that didn't have much to do with tobacco - but right now, she didn't care a bit.

---
Anne-Katrine walked jauntily along the side road that she had used countless times for all kinds of purposes, but never for returning after a sabotage. Quiet reflection on what had happened in the early hours of the morning came to her, spurred on by the solitude.

With nature going full song all around her in the shape of birds chirping from a clear blue sky, insects buzzing around the colorful, strongly aromatic plants and flowers in the ditches next to the road, and the distant sounds and smells of livestock and horses, it was difficult to imagine that she had once again taken lives. That men had died because of what she had done; and not just involuntarily, but through a conscious, determined decision to pull a trigger that would snuff out a life.

A flash of Arne Willumsen's face twisted in death came to her unprompted and caused her to take a deep puff from the Powhattan to make it go away. When she had finished the cigarette, she dropped it onto the asphalt and crushed the butt with her heel so it wouldn't be a fire hazard in the dry landscape.

Death had once again visited her, and had once again chosen against taking her life. The Grim Reaper was becoming a steady acquaintance of hers, and she hated it. It was almost like she could sense its presence at times; a cold, clammy figure just out of focus, but always present. After killing more than a dozen men, she had a score that needed to be settled once her time came, she knew that.

Svenning Gudmundsen was hit in the upper chest, but Anne-Katrine was taller than he was so the bullet would have struck her heart. If she had been standing five centimeters to the left when the German soldier had snuck up from behind at the overturned box car, she would have been killed. For a second or two, she thought she had been when Svenning's warm blood splattered her cheek.

Dying was easy; it was surviving that was the tricky part, and Anne-Katrine couldn't keep Lydia's face out of her mind's eye. She wished she was still smoking to combat the sense of sorrow that rolled over her at the thought of how Lydia would react if the dreaded news of Anne-Katrine's untimely end ever came.

Even apart from that, she had been involved in blowing up the railway tracks and derailing a train. She would never forget the insane forces at work when the C2 charges had gone off underneath the locomotive. She thought the world had come to an end, and that apocalyptic explosion had been produced by only four minuscule packs. The metal container the explosives had arrived in had carried one hundred kilograms of plastic explosives - "Such an amount would be enough to obliterate most of the city…" she mumbled, already searching her pocket for a second cigarette.

She walked on in silence for a while before her thoughts inevitably circled back to the death and destruction she had witnessed - and caused. 'I even killed a dog…for the love of God, I killed a dog today! But not killing it would have been suicidal…Good Lord, this madness called war,' she thought before she let out a loud grunt. "And I can't even tell Lydia! I can't tell her a damn
thing of what we did this morning… she'll know something's wrong, she just will. Oh, I wish this bloody war would hurry up and be over with…"

Sighing from the bottom of her soul, Anne-Katrine came to a stop in the middle of the road and looked to the heavens for guidance. Nothing came, as usual. The urge to smoke became too strong to ignore, so she dug into the crumbled packet and found her last Powhattan. Lighting it, she blew out a pale-blue cloud of smoke and carried on.

---

As she crested the final hill before she reached the Jensen farm, she came to an abrupt halt and stared at the black Horch limousine that was parked just outside the gates. The boundless joy of seeing her birthplace again was swept away by a wave of concern that grew into a knot of worry in her stomach.

"Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann… what the blazes is he doing here?" she said hoarsely. Continuing on, she walked slowly down the hill while she waited for something to happen at the farm. 'He can't see me with filthy hair and blood on my clothes… he'll know I've been involved in the sabotage. Maybe that's why he's here? Maybe he's trying to put a squeeze on my Lydia…?' she thought as she followed the scenic road down the hill.

She had lost all interest in nature and the romantic landscape surrounding her. All she had eyes for was the black limousine parked at the gates. There wasn't any activity at the car which left her puzzled as to the cause of the man's visit.

"At least there aren't any German trucks here," she mumbled, looking over her shoulder at the road behind her just to be sure she wasn't under surveillance.

Glancing ahead, she came to a dead stop as the white-clad driver came out of the gate carrying something in his hands that could be a tray of eggs. The driver opened the trunk and put the tray into the dark hold before he swooshed over to the left-hand side of the Horch to hold the back door open.

Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann and Lydia came out a moment later. The fop - who was dressed in black-and-white patent leather shoes and a white summer suit that clashed severely with Lydia's clogs and coarse, dark-tan dress - kissed Lydia's hand before he donned his stylish white fedora and climbed into the back seat of the limousine.

The driver honked twice as they left the Jensen farm, and Lydia duly waved back. After tracking the fancy car driving south towards the Lynge-Hoffmann farm, the petite blonde glanced left and right a couple of times, clearly hoping to see Anne-Katrine's old truck on the horizon. Her shoulders slumped as she turned around and walked back inside.

Though it tore at Anne-Katrine's heart to keep Lydia waiting, she remained in her temporary hiding place until Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann's limousine had crested the next hill. Once it had, she jumped up and raced down towards her farm and the woman who was waiting for her.
She hurried through the gate and into the courtyard as quickly as any human being could move across the uneven cobblestones. Every last fiber of her body screamed at her to find Lydia and smother her half to death with a kiss that would steal her breath away for a week.

Their special connection was alive and well, because it took Lydia less than two seconds to fling the front door open and run out to intercept her lover.

They flew into each other's arms and offered the strongest hug they had ever shared. Lydia promptly burst out in tears that nearly pulled Anne-Katrine along with them, but she held back. Her lover's scent, her sparkling eyes and her strong grip all worked together to soothe Anne-Katrine's soul. Little by little, the madness of the last few hours melted away which allowed access to the hard core of love for the woman in her arms that always remained rock solid inside her.

Pulling back, they gazed deeply into each other's eyes for a few seconds, exchanging looks of love, relief and a lingering, slight worry about what the future would bring. Gazing gave way to kissing, as promised, but unlike the ferocious kiss Anne-Katrine had fantasized about, their mouths met in a warm, tender declaration of love.

They didn't really want to separate, but they had to in order to breathe. When they finally did move apart, they kept close almost as if they worried about Fate having a final trick up her sleeve. "I love you so, dearest," Anne-Katrine whispered, leaning in to lay a few tiny kisses on Lydia's lips.

"And I love you… more than I can say," Lydia said in a voice that reached into the deepest, rawest register. She smiled through a veil of tears that were wiped away in a hurry. She briefly furrowed her brow when she noticed the blood on the jacket, but she already knew in her heart it wasn't Anne-Katrine's. "Oh… I didn't hear our Triangel. Did it break down?"

"No, but I had to leave it behind in a barn at the other side of town. Long story which I'll tell you later. How has your day been so far, love?" Anne-Katrine said quietly, caressing the smooth skin on Lydia's cheek.

"Awful. The high point came very early this morning," Lydia said and gave Anne-Katrine a little wink while she adjusted the collar of her shirt. "It's been going downhill ever since. And when Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann showed up… Good Lord, I… I just couldn't deal with him today."

Anne-Katrine pulled Lydia in for a new hug. "What was that all about? I saw his car leaving…"

"He wanted to buy a tray of eggs," Lydia said with a shrug.

"Huh… he came by just for that?"
"No, not just for that," Lydia said, clinging onto Anne-Katrine's strong hands. "He asked where you were. More than once. I said you were in town buying a few special items… was that wrong of me?"

"No." Anne-Katrice kissed the top of Lydia's head and gave her another loving squeeze. "No, that was very clever, love. I wonder which game he's playing? Hmmm."

"I don't know…"

"Me neither. Oh, I'm sure we'll find out eventually. Come, sweetie, let's sit down before you keel over," Anne-Katrice said and turned them both around. They shuffled over to the front door in a lazy stroll, not the least interested in letting go of each other.

Lydia went in first, but Anne-Katrice kept standing in the doorway a little longer. Furrowing her brow, she glanced around the courtyard to take in the old, homey sights: the cowshed, the chicken coop, the grinding stone, the flagpole with the Dannebrog, and even the old torches on either side of the door.

Everything seemed normal, yet there was something lurking just under the surface when it came to Flemming Lynge-Hoffmann's motivations. She couldn't figure out what it was, or what the wealthy landowner with the pro-German mindset really wanted. Perhaps he simply wanted her hand in marriage like he had done for years, or perhaps it was more sinister, like trying to get on the garrison Commandant's good side by exposing a Resistance group. 'Perhaps I should teach Lydia how to shoot… it might come in handy one day…' she thought, narrowing her eyes dangerously.

Whatever it was, being with her sweetheart was more important, so she stepped inside and strolled into the kitchen where a frazzled Lydia had already sat down. A used cup was in the wash basin and another stood on the table half-full of Coffee Substitute. "Is there more in the pot?" Anne-Katrice said and sat down.

"No. I only made enough for Mr. Lynge-Hoffmann and myself. Poul and Arthur are tending to the cows. We had a runaway earlier today."

"A runaway! I'll say… I leave home for a few hours and everything falls apart," Anne-Katrice said and let out a laugh that didn't quite have the warm timber it usually did.

Lydia offered her partner a wan smile, but it was clear by her gray complexion and the reddish eyes that the stressful day had taken a toll on her. "Dearest, can I make you a late breakfast, or…?" she said and made to get up.

"Later. I need to tell you something important," Anne-Katrice said and reached across the kitchen table to grab Lydia's hands. "My career in the resistance movement is over. I told Mehlborg that I'm retiring."

"Oh…"
Holding hands suddenly wasn't enough for Anne-Katrine so she pushed her chair back and swept over to the other side of the table. Kneeling down, she wrapped her arms around Lydia's small but strong body. "Sweetheart, you mean far more to me than... well, anything. We're still occupied by an aggressive, brutal enemy, but it means less to me than holding you tight... than hearing you whisper my name... than tasting your flushed skin when we make love. Simply having you near my heart means the world to me."

"Oh... oh, Anne-Katrine..."

"I don't want to throw that away on some foolish notion of bravery or national pride. It doesn't matter a damn thing if I fight the Germans or not. All that matters is that we're together... and that we're happy. And of course, I'm only truly happy when I'm with you... so..."

With a trembling chin, Lydia buried her face in the crook of Anne-Katrine's neck and let out a sob that became the first of many. "I'm so glad to hear you say that... what happened today, love? What happened to you today to make you-"

"I can't tell you," Anne-Katrine said quietly, stroking Lydia's golden hair.

"Was it that bad?"

"It was worse... but I can't tell you."

Lydia sniffled and moved back from her soft cushion. "I'll know, dearest..." she said and caressed Anne-Katrine's slightly filthy cheekbones. "I'll know at night when you have those bad dreams... when I hold you tight to comfort you."

Anne-Katrine nodded and offered her partner a listless smile. "And I love you for it. But I can't tell you. What you don't know can't hurt you."

"I hate this war with a passion," Lydia croaked. A moment went by where she could only stare at Anne-Katrine, but then she pulled her close and claimed the succulent lips.

They kissed for a while before they separated to gaze deeply into each other's eyes. Anne-Katrine noted that Lydia's orbs were indeed changing their hue, and it made her break out into a smile. "I have a question," she said and touched the tip of Lydia's nose just for fun - it earned her a little swat for her troubles.

"What?"

"If I said 'pretty please,' would you bake my favorite pastry for the afternoon tea? You know, barley macaroons soaked in the fine port and sprinkled with castor sugar?"

"Oh, Gawd... I would!"
"Pretty please..." Anne-Katrine husked and once again closed the distance between them. Leaning in, she claimed her sweetheart's lips in a warm, loving kiss. The world was at war, but the war would have to wait - the matters of the heart were far more important.

*

*

THE END.