**Pitschen ma en gamba - Small but powerful**

by **buxy04**

**Summary**

Ella Sawyer had not expected to end up with Easy Company when she had enlisted as a nurse. But who could have known that the Army decided to experiment with women in combat? Thrown into the world of soldiers and paratroopers, Ella quickly has to prove that strength can have many forms.

**Notes**

My first work on AO3. It's already on Fanfiction.net and wattpad, but I decided to share it on here, too. Hope you like it.

Disclaimer: I only own the characters you don't recognise. I do not wish to offend anybody by writing this story. I deeply admire the real members of Easy Company and I do not mean any disrespect. I write only about the actors portraying these extraordinary men in the HBO mini-series.

All translations are at the bottom, in chronological order.
"Easy Company! Listen up! Gather up around me."

Slowly, the men followed Lieutenant Meehan's request.

"Move it up! Come on, gentlemen! Let's go!", he called, waiting for the soldiers to gather. Standing on the hood of one of the jeeps, he continued: "The Channel coast is socked in with rain and fog. High winds on the drop zone. No jump tonight."

Some of the men groaned and muttered complaints to each other as Meehan finished: "The invasion has been postponed. We're on a 24-hour stand-down."

"Son of a bitch", Bill Guarnere swore, voicing what many of them thought.

Ella patted him on the shoulder in consolation before turning around and facing 'her boys'. "So, any ideas on what we're gonna do now?", the girl asked, tilting her head and innocently blinking up at her friends. Being only 5'2, she looked even smaller next to her fellow paratroopers.

"Get rid of all this shit", Joe Toye huffed, tugging at his chute.

She scratched at the grease paint on her cheek and pulled a face. "Guess we'll get to smear this stuff on each other's faces again tomorrow", she said, getting a few smiles and chuckles out of her disgruntled friends.

Ella Sawyer hadn't expected to end up with Easy Company. Not at all. When she had enlisted, she had expected to become a nurse. She couldn't have known that the Army had decided to experiment with females in combat.

"You what?" Ella ducked her head at her mother's startled exclamation.

"I want to sign up for the Nurse Corps, Mama", she quietly repeated.

Isabel Sawyer née Tomascchett sank back down onto her chair and took a deep breath in an obvious effort to calm herself.

Ella stood there in silence, waiting. The only sounds that filled the kitchen of their tiny home were the ticking of the clock on the wall and the birds singing outside.

Finally, Isabel spoke. "Ella, charina, you know being a civilian nurse is hard enough. And you want to volunteer for the Army Nurse Corps?"
"Yes." It was all that needed to be said, no use beating about the bush.

"Why?"

Ella raised her head to look at her mother. Her expression was calm and open, genuinely curious. The young girl sighed. "I..." She faltered. "I just... I need to do something, Mama. We barely get by, even if I help out on the farms and at the clinic. I can't bear it anymore, being here, being reminded of-" She broke off and dragged a hand through her caramel-brown locks, exhaling heavily. "I just want to help", she finished weakly, looking at her mother, hoping that she would understand.

A soft, fond smile spread on Isabel's lips. "I know, love, I know. And I think, those men will be very lucky to have you as their nurse."

"Really, Mama? You...you'll allow it?" A bright grin lit up Ella's face, making her eyes sparkle with excitement.

Isabel's smile widened at her daughter's joy. "I will get Dr Miller to vouch for you and give proof of your skills. And I am coming with you to the enlistment office", she declared.

Ella flung her arms around her mother's neck. Isabel stroked her daughter's wavy locks and gently whispered in her ear. Her daughter's reply was slightly muffled, but no less heart-felt.

The next day, the two Sawyer women sat side by side in a small, bleak office in front of a large desk that had seen better days. Ella had just had a complete check-up where she had been weighed, measured and had even gotten vaccinated. It had been rather uncomfortable for her, but she had swallowed her embarrassment and endured the examination stoically.

"And you work at the clinic of this Dr Miller?", the nurse in charge of enlistment asked Isabel after she had finished reading Dr Miller's letter of recommendation.

"I am the nurse there. My daughter has been helping out for a long time and has often assisted me and the doctor. She didn't go to nursing school, but she is just as competent", Isabel replied politely.

"And you are 18 years old, Miss? Pardon the question, but you look a bit young."

Ella smiled brightly at the woman. "Thank you, how very kind of you, ma'am."

Nurse Adams laughed.

"I can assure you, Ms Adams, Ella was born in 1924. She was born a few weeks early, you see", Isabel explained. Ella had indeed been born prematurely, almost 6 weeks before the due date.

Nurse Adams laughed lightly. "Oh, well, that'd do it. As long as you are strong enough, size doesn't really matter. 5'2 is within the requirements, after all."

A few minutes and a signature later, Ella had officially signed up for the Nurse Corps.

Isabel squeezed her daughter's hand and returned her proud smile.
It was early summer in 1942 and time to say goodbye. Ella was going to be trained at Camp Toccoa, Georgia, and would go there by train. Isabel had taken Ella to the station in Dover.

She hugged her daughter tightly and said: "I am proud of you, charina. Don't you ever forget that."

Ella smiled and straightened her uniform jacket. "Grazia, Mama. Ha di liab."

Isabel dropped a kiss on the crown of her head and gave her a light nudge towards the door. "Don't forget to write", she called as Ella got onto the train.

"I won't!", the young girl called back. She leant out of the window to wave at her mother as the train pulled out of the station.

The journey to Atlanta was long and boring. Ella had read her medical manuals from cover to cover more than once and was pretty sure that she would be able to quote them verbatim by now. She had also written in her journal, a gift from her mother for her 14th birthday.

Nobody had wanted to sit next to or across from her. Probably because she was a woman. Or because she wore an army uniform. Or both. It suited her just fine. Ella spent her time wondering what the future held for her. She was under no illusion about the training. It would be extremely hard and she didn't expect the men to welcome her with open arms. They were bound to be sceptic.

In Atlanta, a driver picked her up. Special arrangement, he said. "The Lieutenant Colonel wants to see you right away, Miss."

Ella asked him why, but the man didn't know anything else.

"'s all I know, Miss. 'm just a corporal, Miss, they don't tell us all that much."

Arriving at Camp Toccoa, Corporal O'Leary guided her to one of the buildings. "Don't worry about your bags, Miss, I'll take care of 'em."

Ella stifled a snort. As if she worried about her luggage. There was hardly anything worth stealing in there, apart from a few pictures and a knife, but those items just held sentimental value. Her family didn't have the money for extravagant clothing or luxuries. All she had – and all she needed, really – were the basics. Most of her clothes, except for the underwear of course, was army-issue anyways. She thanked him none the less.

Another corporal ushered her into the office.

"Miss Sawyer, sir", he announced, saluting.

"Thank you, Lorraine. Dismissed."

A tall man with a serious face stood before her. He wore a moustache and the lines on his forehead made him look stern. He shook her hand, his grip firm just like she had expected. "Miss Sawyer, I am Lt Colonel Sink, Commander of the 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne
Division. Please, have a seat."

Ella sat down, hands fidgeting in her lap. She waited as Sink settled into his chair behind the desk. 

"I would like to discuss something with you", he spoke, looking her in the eyes. "You have signed up to be a nurse, am I correct?"

"Yes, sir", Ella answered, wondering where this was going. Was there a problem? 

"As you know, the Army relies on the people of our country and their effort to help the war", the Lt Colonel continued, "For that reason, they have started a whole new experiment to ensure that our boys get the best medical care possible. And you, Miss Sawyer, are seen as the ideal candidate."


Sink regarded her with a serious expression. "To become the first female combat medic in the history of the United States Army."

For a moment, there was silence. Ella had just barely managed to keep herself in check, otherwise her jaw would have dropped. They wanted what now?

"I realise, this is a lot to process", Sink allowed, "You would go through the same training as our other medics, that includes physical training as well. You would receive no special treatment whatsoever, meaning you would have to work even harder than any of the men." He folded his hands. "But as I said, this is a trial run and nobody would think any less of you if you'd rather become a nurse instead."

Ella had listened quietly to Sink's words. She had heard the underlying tone and didn't miss the implication. Finally, she wondered: "Why me, sir? Surely, there are more suitable candidates?"

He seemed surprised. "You are young, fit and healthy. Combat medics have to be quick and agile and judging by your stature, you are very nimble. You were top of your class in high school and you have already gathered some experience in the medical field beforehand. Plus, your presence would certainly help boost the morale of the men. You have a very particular charm, Miss Sawyer, if I may say so."

The young girl nearly scowled at the words about boosting the morale. But she expertly schooled her expression into neutrality and inquired politely: "Sir, if you don't mind me asking, what do I get out of this?"

An amused look appeared on Sink's face. "You will be payed 50 $ more as a paratrooper. And if you succeed, you have the gratitude of the men, the Army and the country. Your story could inspire hundreds of people here, especially young women like yourself."

The girl contemplated the Lt Colonel's arguments. A bigger salary would mean more money to send home to her mother. Fame and gratitude weren't things she was interested in, but a small voice inside her whispered: "Aren't you tired of people looking down on you? Belittling you?"

All her life, Ella had been told so many times she couldn't do this or that. Because she was too small, too young or simply because she was a girl. And so, she made her decision.
"I want to become a combat medic, sir", she spoke.

Lt Colonel Sink nodded approvingly. "Excellent." He stood up, Ella quickly following suit. He shook her hand. "Welcome to the 101st Airborne Division, T-5 Sawyer."

Ella beamed at her new commander, saluting him.

"The men have been arriving all week, training begins tomorrow. You'll be assigned to Easy Company. I will inform your company commander now. He intends to make Easy Company the best of the best."

He called a runner. "Get me 1st Lieutenant Sobel", he ordered. The private saluted and scurried away, but not before staring at Ella with wide eyes. Sink turned to her again. "Well, Corporal. I wish you good luck", he said, effectively dismissing her.

The stares and whispers around her made Ella uneasy. There had been some wolf whistles and lewd comments before, but they had quickly been silenced, thankfully. Her cheeks were still burning with embarrassment. What were you thinking? Basically living in the middle of a bunch of men?, she berated herself inside her head while at the same time being grateful that she had a bunk on the far end of the barrack. She was all too aware of the eyes boring into her, studying her intently as she quickly put away her meagre belongings, trying to keep her trembling hands busy.

She heard them talk quietly to each other.

"Who's the chick?" "What's a girl doin' here?"

Taking a breath, the young girl steeled herself for the onslaught of questions that was sure to come. Her shiny new dog tags tinkled lightly when she righted herself.

"Say, baby-doll, didya get lost or somethin'?"

It was the same man who had leered at her. He was wearing a suggestive smirk that sent a cold shiver down her spine and made her shoulders tense.

"Knock it off, Archer", the man on the bunk to her right said. His name tag read 'Martin'.

"Well, he's got a point", a third, redheaded man remarked.

"I heard that the Army was experimenting with women in combat. I thought it was a joke", commented another guy. He had a twinkle in his eyes that gave him a mischievous sort of charm.

Ella swallowed. "I'm one of your medics", she explained, praying her voice didn't betray how scared she felt.

"What? C'mon, you're tiny! I could lift you with one hand!", a dark-haired man with a prominent jawline burst out.

"Better a small medic than no medie", Ella replied dryly, looking him straight in the eye. She wondered where the sudden burst of courage had come from.
To her surprise, the man laughed and effectively broke the ice. "I like her", he declared, getting up and offering his hand. "Bill Guarnere."

Ella shook it and smiled tentatively. "Ella Sawyer."

One after the other, the men introduced themselves. "Damn, girl, you're skin and bones!", one of them – his name was Joe Liebgott – remarked.

"Thanks. You're of course the bulkiest person in the world", she replied, but there was no bite in her words. He winked.

"Hey, why's your footlocker labelled J.V. Sawyer? I thought your name was Ella." Don Malarkey looked utterly confused.

"It is. Everybody calls me that."

"What's the J.V. stand for then?", Muck wondered.

Ella flashed them a dimpled grin. "That's for me to know and for you to hopefully never find out."

"Get dressed! We're lining up! Move it, people!"

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

charina: darling, sweetheart
Grazia: Thank you
Ha di liab: I love you (can also be used for family or close friends)
Foes and Friends

Chapter Summary

Ella starts making friends in the company, as well as learning who her adversaries are. Also, the company bonds over their dislike of their CO while undergoing rigorous training.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take a genius to figure out that some people didn't think Ella belonged in Easy Company. The dirty looks and whispered comments said it all. But the worst of all of them was the CO. The first day was all it took for Ella to know that Lt Sobel hated her very presence.

"You people are at the position of attention!", an angry voice yelled.

Immediately, everybody straightened their backs and turned their gaze forward. Ella focused on the back of one of her platoon leaders, Lewis Nixon.

Lt Sobel stalked down the lines, glaring at the men. He stopped in front of Frank Perconte. After Ella, he was probably the shortest person in the outfit. "Private Perconte, have you been blousing your trousers over your boots like a paratrooper?", Sobel questioned.

"No sir.", Frank replied.

"Then explain the creases at the bottom", the CO demanded.

Ella swallowed. Her mouth was uncomfortably dry and it had nothing to do with the heat of the Georgian sun.

"No excuse, sir", Frank answered after a moment.

"Volunteering for the Parachuting Infantry is one thing, Perconte", Sobel lectured, "but you got a long way to prove that you belong here."

Without further ado, he revoked Frank's weekend pass. The same happened to Luz because apparently, there was dirt in the rear side aperture of his weapon. Lipton lost his weekend pass because of a loose thread.

Ella bit her lip. This man wasn't just a perfectionist, he was unfair. And that made her nervous. Sobel stopped in front of her. "Name", he snapped.

"Sawyer, Ella", she answered calmly.

His gaze scrutinised her. "Age?"

"Eighteen, sir."
His eyes narrowed and he leant a little closer. Ella felt herself tense up and hoped that Sobel wouldn't see it. "You look like twelve", he sneered. *What a charmer.* "How tall are you, Sawyer?"

"5' 2, sir." She forced herself not to look at him and kept her eyes trained on the back of Nixon's head.

Sobel was still looking her up and down. "Your hair is too long. Revoked.", he finally proclaimed, taking away a weekend pass she didn't even have. "If I see it touch your collar again, I will cut it myself, is that clear?"

"Yes, sir." She had no doubt he would act on his threat.

"If you can't keep up, I will have you kicked out. I will not allow one *female* to hinder my company." The last words were said with a menacing twitch of his upper lip.

"Understood, sir."

He moved on.

Ella let out a breath. The man to her right, Randleman, shot her a sympathetic glance.

After revoking Liebgott's pass, Sobel stomped to the front of second platoon, holding up Liebgott's bayonet. "I wouldn't want to take this rusty piece of shit to war!", he ranted. "And I will *not* take you to war in your condition!"

He threw the bayonet down. It stuck in the ground, hilt up.

"Now thanks to these men and their infractions, every man in the company who had a weekend pass has lost it!" He paused. "Change into your PT gear, we're running Currahee."

With that, he stalked off.

Lt Winters about-faced and addressed the platoon: "Second platoon, fall out. You have two minutes."

Ella had changed into her PT uniform in less than a minute. It was a matter of taking off her uniform and retying her boots. She wasn't foolish enough to undress in front of a room full of men. She jumped when the door flew open and her bunk neighbour Johnny Martin stormed in.

"Dammit, Perconte, what are you thinking of, blousing your pants?", he groused angrily.

Ella sighed and turned her attention on braiding her hair again, making sure that it didn't touch her collar. Plaiting her caramel-brown locks while walking out of the barracks, she passed Sergeant Lipton, who gave her a small smile.

"How come I don't see you yell at the girl for having too long hair!?", they heard Frank snap at Martin inside.

Ella just sighed and continued walking, her braid finished. *I do have a name, you know.*
"Ah, Easy Company", a man from another company chuckled just as Ella fell into step next to George Luz. "Hey, while you're running, don't worry, we'll take your dames to the movies for you."

Liebgott retorted: "Yeah, good, they need some female company."

Another man called to Ella: "Speaking of movie, doll, wanna join us? You look like you could use some experienced company."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "Sorry, wouldn't want to trip over your ego", she shot back, shoving down the discomfort his words caused.

Easy Company laughed and they ran past the men, knocking their caps of their heads.

Out of all the training Ella got over the next weeks, Sobel's was the worst. All the instructors were strict and unrelenting, but Sobel was actively trying to break her. He was only waiting for an opportunity to yell at her in front of everybody, belittling her and sometimes even calling her names. But in all fairness, she mused one night, it was Adrian Michaels who bothered her the most. He was part of Dog Company and did everything to sabotage her. Trying to inconspicuously shove or trip her when the companies trained together was common practice and usually resulted in her getting chewed out by Sobel.

The worst part about it, she actually knew him – far too well for her liking. They had gone to high school together for a while and he had taken a special interest in her. In the worst way possible. He had made it his mission to make her life miserable. Cruel pranks, taking away and breaking her things. Over time, he had escalated his bullying more and more, locking her in a closet for hours, hitting her, at one point even- No, she didn't want to think of that.

Anyways, Ella was very careful to ensure he wouldn't catch her alone. She wouldn't admit it out loud, but she was scared of him. She still had nightmares sometimes about the things he had done to her in high school.

Her friends did the best they could to shield her from the insults and always found a way to cheer her up when Sobel revoked another weekend pass or issued another punishment. Within a few weeks, Ella had become like a little sister to basically everybody in Easy Company, right up to the platoon leaders, Lieutenants Winters and Nixon.

Winters was always very polite and respectful, but seemed a little aloof. Ella guessed that was just his personality. But she noticed the subtle glances he cast her way, the tiny concerned frown when he noticed her struggling or the slight quirk of his lips when she excelled.

Nixon was almost the complete opposite. He was easy-going and had more than once joined her during meals, striking up a conversation. At first, Ella had been slightly bewildered why an officer would choose to sit with her, an enlisted and a woman no less. When she had finally worked up the nerve to ask him about it, he had simply shrugged and said: "I like you. You remind me of my sister." Ella enjoyed his sarcastic, dry humour and after a while even felt comfortable responding with her own witty remarks.
Apart from Michaels, only Cobb and Archer treated her with little to no respect. Cobb gave her dirty looks and disagreed with everything she said, but otherwise pretty much left her alone, so Ella simply accepted that they didn't get along. Archer, with his insulting comments and almost predatory stares, was really making her nervous though. Sometimes, she caught him watching her while she was changing, openly eyeing her up. It made her skin crawl and she dreaded the day that she let her guard down and didn't have any of her friends near her.

Some of the men in the regiment naturally still had doubts, but they seemed to at least tolerate her. Most changed their mind after they found themselves on the receiving end of her medical skills, usually after a bar fight or just a night of excessive drinking. Each of them was pleasantly surprised by how unfailingly friendly and considerate she was while treating them.

As Skip Muck put it, Ella was the epitome of "kill 'em with kindness".

Joe Toye, probably the biggest sceptic of them all, who kept calling her 'shorty' or variations thereof, warmed up the small girl after a particularly boozy night. In hindsight, he'd had to admit that he had overdone it, waking up with the hangover of the century that made him even crankier than usual. They had lectures all day and he could barely concentrate with the killer headache pounding behind his eyes. The instructor's loud voice made it even worse. The rest of the guys left him alone, some of them nursing their own hangovers.

Slumping into his seat for lecture number 2, he groaned when a small figure slid into the seat next to him, shooting him a shy, sidelong glance.

"I ain't gonna help you out, shorty, so fuck off", he growled.

The girl shrugged, not batting an eyelid at his rudeness. She smiled at some of her friends as they walked by and greeted her. Even Joe had to admit she had a beautiful smile.

To his relief, Ella left him alone. Not that she'd ever spoken much to him, or asked for his help. She sat there quietly, taking notes with the tip of her tongue stuck out between her lips in deep concentration.

Toye, on the other hand, lost the thread about 5 minutes after the lecture had started. He just wanted to curl up and die. Wrapped up in his own misery, he completely missed the slim hand that stealthily placed a water bottle and a couple of aspirins in front of him.

Staring at the medicine for a long moment, Joe blinked and looked over to his seat neighbour. She was scribbling in her notebook, just like before. But when he grunted a grudging "Thanks", the corner of her mouth quirked up a fraction.

The aspirin soon kicked in and his headache lessened a little. Not much, but at least it didn't feel like his head was splitting open anymore.
Over the course of the day, Ella slipped him five bottles of water and four aspirin tablets, shyly tapping his shoulder to get his attention.

By the time Toye felt the fifth light tap on his arm, his headache was almost gone and his thanks was no longer a reluctant grunt, but a sincere whisper. It was the smile, he thought to himself. She had taken his grumpiness in stride, giving him a cautious smile every time he acknowledged her stealthy care. He felt a bit guilty for the insecurity and wariness hidden in her eyes. Maybe he had been too hard on her. But she looked so small and fragile!

When their last lecture ended and the instructor dismissed them, the men were hungry and everyone was eager to get to the mess hall. Toye heaved himself out of his chair and stared blankly at his painfully empty notebook. Maybe he could borrow Bill's notes in the evening and copy them.

"Here."

He raised his head. Ella was standing before him, a couple of papers in her outstretched hand. Frowning, Joe took them and blinked in surprise. She had handed him all her notes from today. They were neatly structured, with detailed sketches and little mnemonics. Her handwriting was small, but clear.

"I thought you might need them", the young girl spoke, shifting from one foot to the other. A light blush appeared on her cheeks.

"Thanks", Toye managed, "I'll... I'll copy them tonight, give 'em back tomorrow?"

She shook her head. "No, no, you can keep them. I"", she cleared her throat and broke eye contact for a moment, "I have mine."

Completely dumbfounded, Joe gaped at her. "You wrote everything out twice?"

Ella nodded, blush deepening. "I hope you can read it", she offered, starting to walk away.

He stared after her. Then, a thought struck him. "Hey, wait up!", he called.

When they walked over to the mess hall to join their comrades, Toye glanced at the girl walking beside him.

"Ya know, Shorty, you're actually quite alright", he admitted quietly.

Ella gave him a tentative, but warm smile. "Thank you, Toye. You're not so bad yourself." And he would deny it to anyone who dared ask, but the way her eyes lit up made him smile, too.
The medical lessons were demanding, but Ella enjoyed them nonetheless. Her experience from helping out at the local clinic back home gave her a slight advantage as some of the medics had no medical background at all. She got along great with Easy's other medic, Eugene Roe. Although Roe was quiet and liked to keep to himself, the two of them sometimes spent hours studying together, going through their manuals and playing round after round of 'How do you treat...?', 'What are the signs of...?' and 'What do you do when...?'

Roe opened up around her, asking about her family and telling her about himself in return. He even told her to call him Gene, saying that he liked that better. He had taken to calling her Ellie whenever it was just the two of them. She loved working with him, he was level-headed and had a calming effect on people.

Apparently, so did she. At least, that's what her friends told her.

"You got a gift with people, Shorty", Luz said one day while they were eating lunch. The nickname Toye had given her had stuck. "You just know what to say or do to make 'em feel better." He waved his fork at her in emphasis.

Gene, who had been listening quietly as usual, nodded. "It's true, Ellie", he spoke in his soothing Louisiana accent.

Ella just blushed.

When they were helping at the infirmary, their days got a bit more hectic, but also a lot more interesting. Though some of the tasks were not exactly fun, Ella could think of worse things to do. She didn't even mind doing inventory as long as she could do it her way. The repetitive motions of counting, organising and cataloguing supplies gave her time to think.

If she was paired with Gene, they entertained themselves by teaching each other French and German respectively. Although Ella already spoke some French thanks to her mother, she was nowhere near as fluent as him, and Gene only knew a few basics of German. They figured it would come in handy if they were sent to Europe at some point. Plus, they both liked languages, so it was a good way to pass the time.

It was a day like any other. They were lined up and waiting in the heat of the Georgia summer for Sobel to arrive and revoke half the company's weekend passes.

"You people are at the position of attention!", he barked.

Ella no longer jumped at his yelling. She simply wondered if he might have a problem with his hearing.

Sobel stalked down their lines and began his inspection. He found something to criticise on everybody and was revoking weekend passes left and right. He then stopped in front of her and looked her up and down with the same disgusted look he always wore with her. "Name."
"Sawyer, Ella."

"What are you still doing here, Sawyer? How can you think anybody even wants you here?"

*Ouch.* That had stung.

"I am their medic, sir." Did her voice tremble? No, she must have imagined it.

"And what makes you think you'll succeed? You're a woman."

Sobel really was in top form today, she thought to herself darkly. "I do what I do best, sir", Ella responded before she could stop herself.

His eyes narrowed and he glared at her. "And what would that be, Sawyer?", he spat.

"Being a medic, sir." *Phew. That was close.* It wouldn't have gone down well with him if she'd said 'being stubborn'.

Sobel scoffed. "As long as you don't get any of the men killed, girl. Make sure the men get *everything* they need?" He revoked her pass, claiming some hair had fallen out of her braid.

Ella bit her lip. His parting remark had hit a nerve. While Sobel was busy revoking more passes, the girl quickly blinked a few times to push back the tears that gathered unbiddenly in her eyes. *Pull yourself together!*, she scolded herself. Normally, Sobel's insults never got to her this much. Then again, he had never indirectly called her a whore before.

Revoking Darrell "Shifty" Powers' pass, Sobel stomped to the front and informed them that once again "thanks to these men and their infractions, every man in the company who had a weekend pass has lost it!" before telling them to change into their PT gear. They would be running Currahee. For the ten thousandth time.

Getting an odd sense of *déjà vu*, Ella hurriedly changed into her PT gear. Like on the first day, she only had to take off her OD's and retie her boots. It was just easier this way. They had all gotten over the initial discomfort of her changing in the same room as the guys, but Ella still didn't want to show too much skin. She wasn't ready to answer the questions that would come with it.

Lipton glanced at her. "You alright there, Ella?", he asked as they were preparing to run.

The girl simply nodded and forced her facial muscles into a thin smile. Now was not the time to talk about her feelings.

Running up Currahee Mountain wasn't so bad in itself. It was Sobel that made it a nightmare. Especially because he seemed to follow the exact same pattern every single time. Right down to the phrases he liked to yell.

"Where do we run?", he shouted, running in the front.
"Currahee!", they responded.

"What's Currahee mean?"

"We stand alone!"

"How far up, how far down?"

"Three miles up, three miles down!"

*Depends on how much equipment we carry.* A small huff escaped her.

"Now, what company is this?"

"Easy Company!"

"And what do we do?"

"Stand alone!"

Next to her, Muck stumbled and twisted his ankle when he hit a pot hole. He cried out and Ella immediately grabbed his arm to steady him.

"Do not help that man! Do not help that man!", Sobel cried instantly. "You do not stop!"

She shot Muck an apologetic look. He waved it off. ",’s okay”, he panted.

"You have 13 minutes to get to the top of this mountain if you want to serve in the paratroopers!", Sobel shouted. "Hi-yo, Silver!" And he ran ahead.

"God, I hate that phrase“, Ella ground out before increasing her own pace. She had had enough of Sobel's insults. Today, she was going to wipe that condescending sneer off his face.

Her lungs and legs were burning. Her foot slipped on the gravel and she had to put a hand on the ground to steady herself.

"Come on, you can make it!" God bless Lt Richard Winters. He was always encouraging them, telling them to keep going, that they could do it. "Come on!", he called to her when she stumbled again.

Ella grit her teeth and regained her footing.

"That's it, Shorty, you can do it!" At his praise – and the use of her company nickname – a beaming smile lit up her face. She looked at him over her shoulder, winked and willed herself to go faster. The prospect of seeing Sobel's smirk drop off his face was totally worth the sore muscles she was no doubt going to have for the next few days.

Sobel's expression went from bored to shocked and angry when that insufferable girl came racing up to the top stone, slapping her hand down onto the marble surface. She whirled around and grinned cheerfully when she passed him on her way back down.

Her voice rang through the air as she called to her brothers in arms. "You can do it, boys! Come on,
your legs are longer than mine!", she taunted in jest.

"Just wait till I catch you", Toye yelled after her between panting breaths.

Sobel heard her laugh. He scowled. Because it slowly dawned on him that this girl was still refusing to give up. If she continued like this, she would actually become a paratrooper.

Ella was among the first to return to camp. She dropped to the ground and rolled onto her back, chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath.

"Damn, Shorty", Wayne "Skinny" Sisk panted as he dropped next to her. "That was brilliant."

She huffed out a wheezy laugh. "Yeah. Thankfully, we have lots of lectures coming up", she said. "Because I'm gonna be sore as hell tomorrow."

"That", Joe Liebgott shouted as he came stumbling over to them, "was fucking amazing!"

Ella laughed and forced herself to stand up and move around so that her muscles wouldn't cramp up. "Danke, Joe", she said, wincing in pain. Her leg muscles were protesting so vehemently, they were almost numb. "Ich werde es aber nie mehr machen."

One after the other, the men came back. And each of them hailed Ella as a hero. When Skip came hobbling in, the girl immediately made him sit down and checked his ankle. "Probably just a sprain, but you should come to the infirmary later to be sure, alright?", she advised.

Skip just waved it off. "Nah, if you say it's fine, it's fine."

Lt Dick Winters watched as the men surrounded the small girl, all exhausted and drenched in sweat, but with wide grins on their faces.

"What're they all so happy about?" Nixon was observing the excitement with a crooked smile. Skip had just given her a smacking kiss on the cheek, causing Ella to blush furiously while the men cheered and howled with laughter.

Winters had to smile at their antics. He told his friend how Ella had grinned at Sobel.

Nixon laughed. "That kid really is something", he said, shaking his head in disbelieving amusement. "Smiling and laughing when running Currahee", he muttered, "unbelievable."

"Sawyer, J.V.!

The girl in question raised her hand. "Over here!"

Vest ambled over and handed her a letter. An excited grin lit up her face as she read the sender.
"Who's it from?", Luz asked around his cigarette.

Ella ripped open the envelope and unfolded the letter. "My mother", she replied, eyes fixed on the paper.

"Yeah? What's she writing?", George inquired. Ella usually shared the contents of her letters, as did many of the other men. It was just another way of bonding and getting to know each other better.

My charina Ella,

How are you? Does your CO still give you trouble? If so, know that whatever he tells you is wrong. You are an extraordinary girl, charina, and I don't just say that because I am your mother. Don't let him get to you, he is just another one of those ignorant people.

I enjoyed your last letter very much. Your friends sound like quite the characters. I would love to meet them one day. I'm glad Joe Toye has become your friend. I know his scepticism bothered you, don't you try to deny it, Ella. Tell him, he should try drinking at least one litre of water before going to sleep after a night at the bar. That always helps with a barbagiat.

The papers have written a few articles about you. I'm sure you can guess what they wrote. I couldn't even finish some of them, they made me too angry. It is a shame, I wish they could see you for the person you are. If you ever read one of those articles, please, don't take them to heart. These reporters are simply looking to make the front pages and you know they would do anything for that. Scandal sells and they don't care whose name they ruin. But don't worry, I am sure it will soon quiet down. It always does, doesn't it?

I have exciting news for you, mia figlia. I met somebody. His name is James Buchanan. We met at the library, would you believe that? He is a wonderful man, Ella, and I like him very much. He is funny and caring and the way he looks at me makes me feel special. You would like him, too, I'm sure of it.

I know this comes very unexpected, but you have a right to know, charina. James makes me happy. And believe me when I tell you, I will never forget you and I am not trying to replace you. Nobody can ever take your place in my heart. I still think of you very often and I miss you every day.

Jau hai gugent tai, charina Ella.

Your Mama

Isabel

Ella smiled. Noticing Luz looking at her expectantly, she started telling him what her Mama had written. She left out the parts about Toye and the newspapers, though. Some things she wanted to keep to herself.

"And she met a man. She really likes him", Ella concluded.

George grinned. "That's great. I hope it works out for her."

She nodded. "Me too. She deserves to be happy." Her smile faltered a bit. Her mother had had it hard in life, even before she'd had to rear her children on her own.
Friday night meant for most people that the weekend was near. For Easy Company, it meant marching 12 miles in the dark with full pack. Sometimes without being allowed to drink even a sip from their canteens.

This Friday night was no different. Ella was merely functioning, the monotonous trot causing her to shut down. She had a headache and was feeling almost numb from the tough day she'd had with many lectures, medical training, getting shouted at by Sobel and so on. Plus, the lack of sleep was starting to get to her.

Ever since Sobel had made that comment about her getting the men killed, Ella had begun to have troubles sleeping. Sometimes she lay awake for hours, listening to the breathing and snores of the men she had come to call her friends. Other nights, she would jolt awake after a nightmare and be unable to go back to sleep for a long time. It wasn't the first time that this happened to her and Ella knew it would pass, but she still worried it would affect her performance. She couldn't afford to make mistakes, especially not with Sobel just waiting for a chance to get her kicked out. Secretly, she hoped the training would tire her out enough so she could get a night of undisturbed sleep.

This night was particularly dark, the moon only a small glimmer behind the dark clouds. Almost all of them had stumbled at some point. Just now, Ella tripped over a rock and would have fallen if Johnny Martin hadn't quickly reached out to steady her.

"Ouch", she winced. "Thanks, Johnny" She gave him a grateful smile and got back into the steady pace, limping with every other step for the next few minutes until the pain subsided.

"Imma say something", Bull muttered behind them.

"To who?", Luz asked, just as bored and frustrated as the rest of them.

It was silent for a moment, before Bull called out: "Lieutenant Winters?"

"What is it?", Winters asked from where he was marching.

"Permission to speak, sir?", Bull requested.

"Permission granted."

"Sir, we got nine companies, sir", Bull drawled.

"We do", Winters confirmed.

Bull paused for a second before continuing: "How come we're the only company marching every Friday night, 12 miles, full-packed uniform, in the pitch dark?"

Winters asked back: "Why do you think, Private Randleman?"

"Lt Sobel hates us, sir", Bull answered.
Lt Winters didn't reply straight away. He let himself fall in line with Ella's row. "Lieutenant Sobel does not hate Easy Company, Pvt Randleman." He was silent again for a second, before adding: "He just hates you."

That got everybody laughing. It wasn't often that Winters smiled or made a joke. Bull didn't seem to take it personal when he responded: "Thank you, sir."

The men now started telling each other that Sobel hated them, too. Johnny Martin looked over at Ella and remarked dryly: "I think he hates you the most."

Ella chuckled sardonically. "Lucky me."

At the end of the march, Ella was convinced she was going to collapse if she had to stand around any longer. Her vision was already starting to blur a little. They were standing in line, Sobel pacing before them.

"Lt Winters, I want canteens out of the belts with the caps unscrewed", he demanded.

Winters relayed the order to the company: "Easy Company, canteens out and open."

They obeyed. When they were ordered to pour the contents onto the ground, Ella didn't think much of it except that it was a waste of water.

"Who is this?!", Sobel suddenly yelled. "Christenson! Why is there no water in your canteen? You drank from your canteen, didn't you?"

He stormed through the lines until he was right in front of Christenson, who tried to defend himself. "Sir, I-" He didn't get any further.

"Lt Winters!", Sobel bellowed.

"Yes sir?"

"Was this man ordered to not drink from his canteen during the Friday night march?!", Sobel questioned, glaring at Christenson.

"He was, sir", Winters confirmed.

Christenson was sent to repeat the entire 12 miles of the march. Sobel stormed back to the front of the company to quietly chew out Lieutenant Winters. Ella just wanted to sleep. She heard her own blood rushing in her ears.

Finally, they were dismissed. The young girl felt bad for Christenson and resolved to check on him in the morning as she staggered to her bunk. Getting changed took longer than normal, her motions sluggish and a bit uncoordinated. Ella collapsed onto her bed, not even bothering to pull her blanket over her slim body. She was asleep as soon as her head made contact with the pillow, not bothered in the least by the noise of her comrades bustling around.

Lipton looked over to Ella's bed and smiled softly. They had all noticed the dark smudges under her eyes. Wordlessly, he manoeuvred between the bunks and grabbed the blanket that was in a
heap at the foot of her bed. Silently wishing her a good night, he tucked in the small girl before getting into his own bed. Nobody said anything about it.

The next morning, Ella stood in line behind Lieutenants Nixon and Winters at the mess hall. She had never been particularly hungry in the morning, a remnant of times when her family could only afford food once or twice a day, but she had to eat before the lectures.

Gene nudged her forward and gave her a pointed look when she grimaced at him. "You gotta eat something, Ellie", he reminded her seriously.

She nodded and gave him a smile.

"So, what did you do?", she heard Nixon ask his friend.

"Picked six men and gave them latrine duty", Winters responded. They moved to sit down at a table, while Ella got her food – or whatever slop was dished out. She could still hear them.

"The lucky six?", Nixon wanted to know.

Winters listed them off: "McDonald, Toye, Perconte, Lipton, Muck and Guarnere."

Ella smirked. So that's why Bill had been so annoyed. He hated latrine duty. She waited for Gene to join her, still listening to her superiors' conversation. She knew she wasn't supposed to eavesdrop, but it wasn't like she was going to tell anybody what she overheard.

"Why them?", Nixon questioned.

Winters shrugged. "It was their turn."

"Sobel's a genius", Nixon huffed, "I had a headmaster just like him in prep school; I know the type."

"Lewis, Michelangelo's a genius, Beethoven's a genius", Winters pointed out.

Gene grabbed his tray and the two medics walked past the lieutenants' table just when Nixon leant forward and asked his friend: "You know a man in this company who wouldn't double-time Currahee with a full pack, just to piss in that guy's morning coffee?"

A light snort escaped Ella as she fought to keep in her laughter.

Nixon glanced at her and grinned. "See?" He gestured at the girl, who hastily moved on to the other table, cheeks flushed.

Winters just shook his head, but there was a small smile on his lips.
Translations:

Danke: Thanks
Ich werde es aber nie mehr machen: But I won't do it ever again
charina: dear, darling, sweetheart
barbagiat: hangover
mia figlia: my daughter
Jau hai gugent tai: I love you
The going gets tougher

Chapter Summary

Obstacle courses and conflict in the barracks

Chapter Notes

I just wanted to say thanks to all who have given this story a chance. Please be patient with me while I figure out all the formatting etc on this website. Posting on here is quite different from fanfiction.net or wattpad... :)

Jump training was something Ella found highly amusing. It was very important that they landed correctly, she understood that, but she still felt absolutely ridiculous jumping off a platform with a full pack and counting out loud. At one point, she had to bite down hard on her lip because the urge to laugh got so strong.

When it was her turn to stand in the door, though, her face was totally blank.

"Go!", came Sobel's command.

Ella jumped and counted: "1000, 2000, 3000, 4000." Her feet hit the ground and she let herself drop to absorb the fall, just like she had been taught. As per usual, she ignored Sobel's disparaging comment. She had gotten so used to them by now, she barely registered them anymore. She got up and cleared the way, moving to stand with her comrades and watching the others.

They all winced in unison when Walter "Smokey" Gordon basically fell head first from the platform.

"You just broke both your legs, Private Gordon!", Sobel shouted, sounding even more exasperated than usual, "are you trying to get yourself killed?"

Smokey stood up and shook his head. "No sir!"

He came over to them, looking a bit flustered.

"That was a hard landing, Smokey. Anything hurt?", Ella asked, genuinely concerned. Instinctively, her eyes flicked up and down his body, searching for injuries.

He smiled bashfully. "No, it's alright, Shorty. Thanks for asking though."
The medical training now became more hands on. They still had lectures, but they had now moved on from dummies and puppets to living 'test subjects', as their instructor morbidly called the people they practiced things like applying bandages or setting up IVs on.

The instructors were very pleased with the Easy company medics. Although each had their own personality, method and style, they were efficient, calm under pressure and able to think on their feet, all valuable qualities for a good combat medic. They were especially impressed by Ella's natural ability to focus on multiple things at once. She could be clamping the artery of a panicked man, while giving directions to the inexperienced men assisting her, and still manage to make conversation with her patient on top of that, calming him down and distracting him from the pain.

Lieutenant Christian Everett, who was often overseeing the medics' training, even mentioned that in his regular progress report to Lt Col Sink.

The men also started going through the obstacle course in more than just their PT gear. Ella had done it many times already under Sobel's watchful eye as punishment for perceived infractions. Her fellow paratroopers had sometimes 'casually' walked by and stopped to cheer her on as she had raced from one obstacle to the next, sometimes shouting loud enough that Sobel's jabs faded into the background.

Now, they all had to do it. Yelling encouragements to each other as they went, everybody tried to get through the course as quickly as possible.

Hopping in and out of the rope squares with their hands behind their heads was the easy part. Ella had had plenty of practice at home already, playing jump rope with her brother as kids. Crawling through the narrow wooden tunnel wasn't that hard either for her, after all she was small and wiry. Somersaulting out of the tunnel, the next obstacle was the wall.

And boy did Ella hate that wall!

It was perhaps just over 7 feet high and during her punishment runs, this had usually been the one where she had lost the biggest amount of time. After all, that thing was almost 2 feet taller than her. But thanks to all the times she'd been through this course, the girl now knew exactly how to overcome the obstacle.

"Come on, Ella! You can do it!", Malarkey called from the top of the wall.

Ella was already running full-tilt at the obstacle. Planting one foot firmly against it, she propelled herself upwards and grabbed on. She didn't even feel the splinters embedding themselves in her palms. Using nothing but her arms to lever herself up, she heard cheers and applauding whistles from around her. Grinning, she jumped down on the other side, immediately dropping onto her stomach for the next round of crawling, this time through the mud, under coils of barbed wire. Unlike the rest of the men, the medics didn't have to carry a rifle, which allowed them to move a lot quicker.

"Jesus, what the hell is this?", Muck panted out next to her.

It really was an appalling sight. And the stench was even worse.
"That's pig's guts, boy!", Bull informed them.

Ella was once again glad to be small, because she could easily shimmy past the barbs over their heads and not have a face full of mud. Wrinkling her nose, the girl tumbled into the ditch and nearly gagged as the animal blood soaked through her ODs. While no stranger to having blood on her clothes – it really was inevitable when working on farms and at a clinic – that was vastly different from rolling through a ditch filled with innards and blood.

Getting back to her feet, she could already see the finishing line getting closer as she broke into a run again, dashing across the field towards where some of her friends were already standing and cheering for their comrades.

She came flying across the finish line with so much speed that Luz put an arm out to catch her so that she wouldn't crash into anyone. The girl's momentum nearly made him stumble, but Lipton and Floyd "Tab" Talbert steadied them.

"Whoa, kiddo, where's the fire?", Luz joked, smiling at the way her green orbs sparkled.

Ella simply laughed, still breathing heavily. "Nowhere, I was just so excited to see you", she replied, eyes dancing with mirth.

Then, she took a look at their clothes. Everybody was covered in sweat, dirt and blood. The small brunette scrunched up her face. "Well, gentlemen, I guess it's safe to say we all need a shower."

The three men laughed.

Luz wiggled his eyebrows. "May I escort you to dinner afterwards, Miss?", he asked in a very good posh accent, taking her hand.

Ella fluttered her eyelashes at him and pretended to be flattered, putting a hand on her heart. "I would be delighted, good Sir."

In that moment, Skip came by. He had heard the exchange and decided to get in on the fun. "What? You go out with that guy, but not with me?", he cried in mock outrage.

Before Ella could say something in response, Guarnere came up behind her and said: "Get outta here, ye idiots, this girl's already taken", draping an arm over her shoulders and glaring at the other men.

Ella let out a startled noise that sounded vaguely like a mouse being stepped on and the men that witnessed the charade exploded with laughter.

Nixon and Winters had observed the interaction from afar. They only shared a meaningful look.

"Look at Sobel", Nixon muttered out of the corner of his mouth, dark eyes fixed on their CO.

"He looks like somebody pissed in his morning coffee", Winters remarked dryly, quoting Nixon's words from a few days ago back to him and making him snort.
Even though the men in Easy company loved the young girl like a sister, there were still some men in the 506th that did not want her there. One incident made it clear to anyone in Camp Toccoa that if anybody messed with Ella Sawyer, there would be hell to pay.

Private Jackson Archer had given up trying to sabotage her after a while, seeing that she had gotten extremely good at avoiding him. Even his whispered comments about how he liked to watch her shower didn't work anymore. Probably because she now knew for certain that he had never even gotten close to the shower while she had been in it. There was always at least one of the guys keeping watch in front of the door.

Instead, Archer had now devised a new plan to get rid of the girl he hated so much. Everyone in their barrack knew where Ella kept her journal, the one she wrote in regularly and that she put all her letters in. The letters weren't what Archer was interested in. After all, she usually shared their contents with them when they asked. No, it was the journal that he was after. And he knew exactly how to get it.

One of the rare times Easy Company actually had the afternoon off, the medics still had lessons. The rest of the men were outside, playing basketball and enjoying their downtime. It was a simple thing for Archer to stroll into the barrack, rummage through Ella's footlocker and take her journal. Smiling evilly to himself, he settled on his own bunk where he spent the rest of the afternoon reading the young girl's journal.

Ella stumbled out of the infirmary that evening after a long, tiring session of training, head swimming from the many different scenarios that had been covered in class. Yawning widely, she stretched out a kink in her shoulder and headed to the barracks. A few of the guys were there, playing poker, writing letters or simply lounging on their bunks.

"Long day, Shorty?", called Frank Perconte.

Ella nodded and gave a tired "Uh-huh" as she walked by. In the middle of the room, she froze.

The men looked up. The girl had turned to face Archer, who had been sitting on his bunk all evening, reading something. They hadn't really cared what he was reading.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was casual, but it had a dangerous edge to it.

Her friends glanced at each other in confusion.

"Oh, just reading somethin', baby-doll", Archer replied, the picture of innocence. If it weren't for the smug look hidden deep in his eyes.

"I can see that. Why are you reading my journal?", Ella repeated, a trace of stone behind her words.

Luz and Frank traded shocked looks, cigarette nearly dropping from Luz' lips.

"What the fuck, Archer?", Liebgott called.

Archer looked at the notebook in his lap. "Oh, it's yours? I didn't know", he exclaimed, opening his
eyes wide in feigned shock.

The girl's green eyes flashed. "Really? That's funny, because it is written on the first page." Her entire demeanour was still deceptively, almost eerily mellow. She pointed at the journal. "It says: 'This journal belongs to Ella Sawyer.' And below that, there is an inscription from my mother, which you won't be able to understand because it's not English. Plus, you took it from a footlocker labelled J.V. Sawyer, and if you look very carefully where the 'Ella' stands, those two initials have been crossed out."

A smile appeared on her face and the ones watching the scene unfold gulped. It was so out of place, just like the rest of her behaviour. Most of them knew they would be shouting at Archer, some even getting physical. And yet, their pint-sized medic did nothing of that sort. Ella was as sweet and friendly as ever.

"Now would you please give it back?", she asked.

"Archer, what do you think you're doing?", Martin questioned.

"You stay out of this!", Archer snapped.

Ella glanced at them and nodded. So, they kept quiet, but watched, ready to come to their girl's defence at any moment.

Archer shrugged, getting to his feet and looking back at Ella. "Hm. I guess I did know it was yours. But I read it anyway. Good stuff. A bit too soppy for my liking."

She raised an eyebrow and made a non-committal sound. He mistook it as an invitation to provide examples.

He flicked through the pages. "Here, for example." He started reading in an overly dramatic voice: "Mama took it surprisingly well. I'm glad she understands why I have to do this. Now I can really help provide for our family."

"Aw, how touching. Couldn't you have gotten a job at a factory if your family's in so much need for money?", he questioned.

Upon receiving no answer, he went back to reading: "I do worry about Mama, though. I hope she'll be alright. I shouldn't be leaving her all alone after Papa, but I couldn't stay."

Ella had gone white, her body taut as a bowstring, expression shifting to something raw.

Encouraged by the lack of protest, Archer continued: "Or this one, this one's great, too. Had another nightmare tonight. Couldn't go back to sleep, so I wrote to Mama. I'll probably rip up the letter in the morning. She doesn't need me adding to her worries. It would only hurt her, too. I thought I was past this. Lucky Sobel doesn't know how miserable he can make me. And I sure as hell won't tell him."

He laughed.

The men were nervously looking back and forth between the two, highly uncomfortable at hearing their young friend's private thoughts, her innermost feelings.

There were tears starting to gather in Ella's eyes now. She took a step towards the man. "Archer,
you had your fun, please give me back my journal", she said, voice pure steel.

He chuckled, completely ignorant, and sifted through the pages. "How about this one, this one's my favourite. 'We had to run Currahee again. Sobel revoked everybody's weekend passes, even the officers'. Told me I would get the men killed. Made me think of Nico-"

"Stop." Ella stood right in front of him, teeth grit tightly. She was visibly shaking. It was clear to everyone in the room that it took every ounce of restraint she had not to lose her composure. "If you ever use his name again", she said slowly, looking him straight in the eye, "you'll be living on liquid food for a long time. Now give. me. my journal."

Archer paled slightly at her tone and the intense gaze. But he still had a few cards up his sleeve. "Fine." He tossed her the journal.

She caught it, gave him another dirty glare and started turning away.

"I know about Adrian Michaels."

Ella stopped dead, the last bit of colour draining from her features.

"I know you're scared of him", he continued triumphantly.

Her breathing hitched.

Archer continued goading her. "I know what he did to you", he sing-songed.

The look on her face was heart-wrenching.

"I know what he-"

He didn't get any further. There was a loud SMACK! and Archer was lying on his back, holding his eye.

Ella stood above him, trembling like a leaf, fist clenched, eyes burning.

"Sawyer!"

Everybody jumped.

Lipton was standing in the doorway, taking in the scene.

"It wasn't her fault, Sarge!" "Archer provoked her!" "He's been harassing her all the time!" "Shorty was only defending herself!"
Lipton held up a hand to silence the men's protests.

Archer got himself up from the floor. "That bitch punched me!", he shrieked, stabbing a finger in the girl's direction.

The sergeant looked at Ella, who was staring fearfully at him, wide eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Is that true?", he asked calmly.

The girl dropped her gaze. "Yes, sir", she mumbled.

"But-", Luz started to protest.

Lipton cut him off. "Why did you hit Private Archer, Corporal Sawyer?"

Ella swallowed and forced herself to meet his eyes. "He took my journal and read from it. He- he wouldn't stop, sir. I'm sorry, Sergeant, I shouldn't have hit him."

Lip felt bad for the young girl. He had seen enough of the exchange to know that Archer was the only one to blame. He looked at his comrades. They all looked agitated. "Is it true?", he asked them.

They nodded as one.

Luz said quietly: "Look at her, Lip." Shaking his head sadly, he added: "Any one of us would have punched him a lot sooner."

The masks of fury on some of the men's faces spoke loud enough.

Lipton nodded. "Archer, go put some ice on that eye", he ordered.

The private huffed and stormed off.

Ella was still standing in the same spot. "I just wanted him to stop, sir", she whispered.

Lip put a hand on her shoulder, not missing the light flinch she gave. "I know. Don't worry about him. Go take a shower and then try to get some sleep. We'll take care of the rest."

The girl managed a trembling smile and went to grab her shower kit.

"Liebgott, go with her", Lipton ordered.

The lanky man nodded. The two of them left the barrack, Liebgott's arm slung around Ella's shoulders.

The men chuckled when they heard him say: "Well, kiddo, that was one beautiful right hook. Say, are you ever gonna tell us what those initials stand for?"

It was the first time Ella cried since arriving in Toccoa. No, that wasn't right. It was the first time
since arriving in Toccoa that she cried while awake.

Standing in the shower, hands slapped over her mouth, the young girl sobbed, tears of shame, humiliation and pain streaming down her face, hoping that Liebgott wouldn't hear her where he was keeping watch outside.

Archer was gone before noon the next day. At breakfast, everyone, not just the men from Easy Company, knew about the incident. It was conversation topic No. 1.

The entire company, led by Winters and Nixon, marched into Col Sink's office after breakfast and demanded that Private Jackson Archer be transferred. Each of the men that had witnessed the altercation handed the speechless Colonel a detailed report of the incident. Winters and Nixon gave their personal assessment of Archer and Ella, both commenting how Archer had been treating the young medic with little respect.

Private Archer was called into Sink's office as soon as Easy Company left and was informed of his transfer.

During all this, Ella was at the infirmary, getting her knuckles checked out at Lt Winter's insistence.
Becoming paratroopers

Chapter Summary

Sobel is his usual pleasant self, fostering the company's closeness in the process. And they move to Fort Benning where Easy gets their jump wings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sobel's regular raids for contraband were always a cause for annoyance among the men. Even if everything was in order, everyone's property was still strewn all over the floor. The barracks generally looked like a tornado had gone through afterwards.

This time was no different. The men returned from their training and got quite worked up about the state of their quarters. Grousing and cursing, they started sorting through the mess, gathering up what was theirs and putting everything back in order.

Ella dug around in her footlocker, muttering under her breath. "Kumm scho, das gits doch nid. Wo isch es?"

Johnny Martin, who was just putting away the last of his possessions, looked over. "What language is that even?", he asked.

He wasn't a big talker and could come across as slightly bitter or aggressive, especially when he used his stern, bitchy glare. But underneath all the sarcasm and snarky remarks, he was a good guy. One night, when Ella had woken up in cold sweat, he had quietly stated: "You must miss home."

When she'd affirmed, Johnny had instigated a hushed conversation, talking about Ohio and his wife, while she in turn told him about her mom and her brother. From then on, he would surreptitiously check on her every once in a while, making sure she was doing okay. And he would never admit that the 'Good night, Johnny' she whispered each night after lights out made him smile. Or that he actually returned it.

"Huh?" Ella turned her head, still rifling through her things. "Oh, I can't find something."

She sat back on her haunches and scowled. "For crying out loud!" She gave the footlocker a frustrated kick and plonked herself onto the floor, back leaning against her cot.

"What you looking for?", Luz wanted to know.

She looked up. "My knife." Her dark expression mellowed. "My brother gave it to me before...before he enlisted." She was silent for a moment before her temper flared once more. "And now Sobel had to wreak goddamn havoc in here and fucking confiscate my knife!"

The men turned and stared at her like she'd grown another head. They had never seen her angry or
heard her curse like that.

Guarnere guffawed. "Jeez, I didn't think ya even knew how to swear, kiddo", he said, "Guess we're rubbin' off on her, guys."

The rest of the men laughed.

Ella huffed, but in the end, she couldn't help but join the laughter.

In the evening, Ella walked past Winters on her way to the mess hall and stopped abruptly.

"Lieutenant?", she called.

He turned around. "What is it, Corporal?", he asked in his usual calm and friendly manner.

Suddenly feeling self-conscious, Ella blushed and said: "Congratulations on your promotion, sir."

Winters smiled. "Thank you, Corporal."

She saluted and continued her way.

The newly appointed 1st Lieutenant shook his head in amusement as he watched the young girl walk to the mess hall. He hadn't quite managed to make sense of her yet. There were so many sides and layers to her, she still was a bit of a mystery to him and the rest of the company. But that didn't matter. They all had a right to privacy. What mattered was that Ella was extremely likeable and fit in perfectly with the men.

"Didya hear?" Penkala leant over the table. "Sobel was made Captain."

Ella nodded and replied after swallowing her last mouthful of whatever the kitchen was trying to pass off as food. "I saw Lt Winters earlier. He's 1st Lieutenant now."

"Jesus Christ, Shorty, how the hell can you eat so fast?", wondered Malarkey, sitting to Penkala's left.

She shot him a bland look and deadpanned: "Because I eat and don't talk all the time."

Next to her, Muck snorted and nearly choked on his water. Penkala and Malarkey laughed.

"And", the girl added, twirling her fork in her fingers, "I try not to taste it. God knows I'm not picky but this stuff-" she motioned to the mystery meat on their plates – "this does not deserve the title 'food.'"

"No argument there", Gene muttered on her other side. "It's a miracle we don't have half the Company lying in the infirmary with food poisoning."

Ella's giggle quickly turned into a cough as the water she had been sipping went down the wrong pipe. "Damnit Gene, don't make me laugh when I drink", she rasped out, trying to clear her throat. He just gave her a semi-apologetic smile.
The young medic was surprised to see Winters overseeing the kitchen staff the next day. But not as surprised as she was about the meal itself. "Spaghetti?", she marvelled. It had been ages since she had seen food that was actually identifiable. Squeezing in next to Guarnere, the girl inspected the content of her plate.

A guy across from them complained: "This stuff's orange. Spaghetti ain't supposed to be orange."

Perconte remarked: "This ain't spaghetti. This is Army noodles with ketchup."

"You ain't gotta eat it", Guarnere pointed out.

Ella chewed thoughtfully. While it certainly wasn't Mama's cooking and didn't exactly taste like spaghetti, it wasn't half bad. Apparently, many others thought so, too, because they were eating like starved wolves, shovelling as many noodles into their mouth in one go as possible.

Perconte wasn't done complaining. "Oh come on, Gonorrhoea, as a fellow Italian you should know that calling this crap spaghetti is a mortal sin."

Hoobler leant over from the other table and went to grab Perconte's plate. "I'll have it", he said, mouth still full.

"I'm eating here!" Perconte pulled his plate closer.

"Hey! Get outta here", called Guarnere.

Ella just shook her head at them and shoved another fork of noodles into her mouth.

Right then, the door flew open and Captain Sobel stomped in. "Orders changed! Get up!", he bellowed. They all shot to their feet. "Lectures are cancelled, Easy Company is running up Currahee! Move! Move!"

In all the commotion, Ella sought out Gene's gaze, worry filling the pit of her stomach. *Uh-oh.*

Just like the medics had feared, running Currahee on a full stomach didn't go too well. All around them, the men were vomiting up their lunch. Ella didn't feel too peachy either, but as she hadn't eaten as much as the men, her nausea came more from the sight of her sick comrades. Sobel, who was of course running with them, didn't help matters either.

"You're a washout, Private Hoobler! You should pack up those ears and go home!"

"Looks like Gordon's done! Aren't you, Gordon! You finished? You do not deserve to get your wings!"
He came up to their row. "What about you, Sawyer? Still think you can become a paratrooper? You have no place here, women don't fight, they knit and gossip!"

The girl didn't bother reacting. Sobel had yet to realise that all his insults and jabs only spurred her to try harder.

"Private Randleman, you look tired.", the Captain continued his taunting, "There's an ambulance waiting for you at the bottom of the hill. It can all be over right now. No more pain, no more Currahee... no more Captain Sobel."

"We pull upon the risers", Luz intoned.

Everybody joined into the song, Ella providing the top voice.

"We fall upon the grass.
We never land on our feet, we always hit our ass.
Highly tighty Christ Almighty, who the hell are we?
Zim Zam, goddamn, we're Airborne infantry!"

They continued chanting and making their way up to the top.

The infirmary was busy that afternoon. The entire Easy Company was sitting on cots, chairs or even the floor, heaving up their spaghetti.

Ella, who was one of the last people to keep her lunch down, was walking between the rows, checking on the men and making sure they stayed hydrated. She came up to Gene, who was leaning against the wall, his complexion pale with a slightly green tinge. He was sweating and swallowing convulsively. "Gene, per l'amur da Dieu, sit yourself down and grab a bucket or go to the latrines."

Her Cajun friend gave her a grateful look and hurried out of the room.

Ella turned back to the rest of 'her boys', as she had come to think of them. "Feeling any better, Shifty?", she asked, handing him a glass of water. "Rinse and spit, drink the rest", she instructed. He did as he was told.

"I'm not feeling sick anymore", he then announced, sounding very relieved.

Ella smiled. "Good. Lie down for a bit and give your body some rest. The worst is over", she said before moving on.

Finally, everybody was settled. Gene had come back looking a lot better. Some were still throwing up a bit, but they had a bucket close by. The others were resting, talking and laughing, distracting each other from the unpleasant experience.

Wiped out, the young girl blew a few stray locks out of her face and leant against the wall. Her
stomach had been churning ever since the run and the smell hadn't made it any better. She took a few deep breaths in an attempt to quell her nausea.

Gene appeared next to her. "Ça va, petite?"

She nodded. "Yeah, yeah. Just need some air."

They had opened the windows wide as soon as they had gotten to the infirmary to help with the sickness and the stench. Gene took her by the elbow and lead his young friend to the window.

"Merci, Gene." Ella stuck her head out and inhaled deeply, relishing the feeling of the cool air on her face.

"Hey, Shorty! Since you've now seen the mystery contents of our stomachs, don'tcha think it's time you tell us a secret of yours?", Muck called over.

"What do you mean?", Ella asked back, already knowing the answer.

"What's J.V. stand for?", the men chorused.

She laughed. "Sorry guys, you're gonna have to guess."

The mystery surrounding her initials had become a running joke in the unit. Every now and again, somebody would ask her, hoping she would slip up. They had even started betting on when she was going to reveal the truth and what her real name actually was. Ella let them have their fun and even made a few comments about certain names, boosting the betting pool even more.

"How about Jasmine?", Talbert offered.

"Nah, she don't look like a Jasmine", Guarnere countered.

The girl chuckled. "What does a Jasmine look like, then?", she challenged, mouth curling into a sly grin.

The Philadelphian immediately launched into a description of a Jasmine, the rest of the guys throwing in their own suggestions.

In early November 1942, the Regiment moved to Fort Benning for parachute training. If they completed 5 jumps successfully, they would finally be real paratroopers.

Sitting between Luz and Toye, Ella was quietly humming to herself, letting the vibration it created in her chest soothe her nerves. This was the first jump they would do from a C-47. The young medic wasn't scared about jumping per se. It was the unfamiliarity of the situation that made her slightly nervous. What if something went wrong? What if somebody's chute didn't deploy?

What if, what if. Tons of those questions raced through her mind.
"Get ready!", their jump teacher yelled over the noise of the plane. "Stand up!"

They stood and on the command "Hook up!", they hooked themselves to the static line.

"Check equipment!", the instructor called.

Dutifully, Ella checked her own webbing and made sure that everything was where it should be on Toye's gear, too, while she felt Luz checking her equipment from the back. Giving Toye's harness a few experimental tugs, she then heard the command: "Sound off for equipment check!"

"Five okay!", Luz yelled behind her, slapping her on the arm to indicate everything was okay.

"Four okay!", Ella shouted and clapped Toye firmly on the shoulder.

"Three okay!", he continued the procedure.

Then, suddenly, they were moving forward and the door came closer. One after the other, the men jumped from the plane on the instructor's command.

"Go, go!", he called and Toye disappeared.

Ella took his place by the door. The sergeant gave her a cheerful grin. "Ready?", he yelled over the noise.

"Yes, sir!", she shouted back, adrenaline rushing through her veins.

"Go!"

She jumped before the rational part of her brain could inform her how insane she was for doing this. The prop blast tore at her, jostling her around, making her lose her orientation for a moment. Her training kicked in a millisecond later and she was counting the seconds, reaching up to grab the risers. Her free fall slowed with an abrupt jerk when her main chute deployed.

All of a sudden, the air became very peaceful, only the wind whispering softly in her ears. A huge smile broke out on her face. It was amazing.

She landed safely on the ground, absorbing the shock just like she'd been taught. Disentangling herself from her parachute, Ella couldn't stop a whoop of laughter from bursting out of her.

Joe Toye came over to check on her.

"That was fantastic!", she exclaimed, smiling brightly at him. "Oh, I can't wait to do it again."

"Ya won't have to wait long, Shorty. We got 4 jumps left", he reminded her.

"Hi fellas, lovely day, isn't it?" Luz strolled up to them. His shit-eating grin widened even more when he saw the small girl's eyes glowing with excitement.
Ella was all smiles for the rest of the day. And even the grumpiest of the men had to admit it was cute. And contagious. Everybody had to smile at the way she was beaming with innocent joy, how she was almost bouncing with glee.

"Like a goddamn puppy", Martin grumbled good-naturedly as he watched her.

Bull and Muck, who were standing next to him laughed and Muck added: "That's why we love her."

Johnny cracked a smile.

4 jumps later, the men from Easy Company were officially certified Army paratroopers. At the ceremony, some of them even got promoted. Col Sink pinned the jump wings to their uniforms, a proud look on his normally stern face. When he got to Ella, he smiled. This extraordinary young girl had managed the impossible.

"Congratulations, Corporal Sawyer", he said.

A radiant smile lit up her pretty face. "Thank you, sir."

After the ceremony, a celebration was in order. Which meant lots of alcohol for the men. Ella didn't drink – her mother would kill her – but she still had a great time. She sat at the bar with Luz and a rather drunk Toye, watching in amusement how some of the men chanted "1000, 2000, 3000, 4000, 5000, 6000, 7000, 8000, 9000" while Guarnere was downing his beer. He set down his empty glass and grinned, revealing the jump wings held between his teeth. The men cheered.

"Corporal Toye."

Ella turned in her seat, half-expecting Sobel to stand in front of her. She laughed when she realised it was only Luz, impersonating their CO.

"There will be no leaning in my company."

Toye got himself into a more upright posture.

"Are those dusty jump wings?", Luz continued his impression. "How do you expect to slay the Huns with dust on your jump wings?"

Toye grabbed him by the jacket and pulled him closer. "Luz", he growled. "Just give me a drink."

A smile spread on Luz' lips. "Hell of an idea, Joe." He put a beer in front of him and reached for his own glass. "Three miles up, three miles down."

Suddenly, somebody called: "Ten-hut!"
Everybody got to their feet and stood at attention. Col Sink had joined the party.

He smiled congenially at the men. "Well, at ease, paratroopers." They relaxed. "Good evening, Easy Company!"

"Evening, sir!", the company responded.

"Now, Parachute Infantry is a brand-new concept in American military history. But by God, the 506 is gonna forge that brand-new concept into victory!", the Colonel spoke.

"Yes, sir!", Easy company shouted as one.

He carried on. "I want you to know that I'm damn proud of each and every one of you. Now, you deserve this party."

Chuck Grant stepped forward and handed him a beer before returning to his place.

Sink looked at his men. His eyes searched the crowd and finally landed on Ella.

"Another brand-new concept in American military history is the introduction of women in combat." The young girl blushed right up to the tips of her ears. "And I think you all agree that we can be damn lucky to have such a fine young woman in our regiment."

The men cheered and clapped her on the back. Ella shuffled her feet, clearly not comfortable in the spotlight.

Sink smiled and directly addressed her. "You have worked hard, probably harder than anybody else in this room. You have shown remarkable strength and extraordinary tenacity. Therefore, I would like to be the first to congratulate you on your promotion. Congratulations, Sergeant Sawyer!"

The room erupted with cheers and applause. Ella's jaw dropped. Mortified, she hid her face behind her hands. She, Ella Sawyer, had been made a T-4! She now held the rank equivalent to an NCO. That meant she was the ranking medic, too. Oh God.

Luz enthusiastically clapped her on the shoulder, a wide grin on his friendly face.

Sink finished his small speech by returning to address everybody: "Also, I want you to have fun, and remember our motto: Currahee!"

"Currahee!", Easy Company echoed, raising their glasses.

It was Lieutenant Winters who presented Ella with her new uniform jacket, the chevrons already neatly sewed on. They had all received a new set of dress uniforms, complete with shiny, high-laced boots. And Ella had been the only one who hadn't gotten a new jacket. She had gotten both a male and female uniform, which she – and the men – had found hilarious. But no jacket. She had already wondered why. Now she knew.
Lieutenant Nixon came up behind her and helped her out of the old jacket, handing it off to the Colonel's aide.

"Congratulations, Sergeant", Winters said, a proud smile on his lips.

Ella saluted him, beaming up at him. "Thank you, sir."

Nixon, always less formal than his straight-laced friend, simply hugged the girl and said: "Congratulations, kid."

As soon as the two lieutenants stepped back, Ella was swarmed by the boys. They shook her hand, hugged her, a very tipsy Penkala even planted a kiss on her cheek.

Somebody put the music back on and soon, people were talking, laughing, drinking and dancing. Ella was content to sit at a table and chat with her comrades when Malarkey came over and held out his hand.

"Wanna dance?", he asked cheerfully.

"Uh... sure. But I'm warning you, I'm out of practice", she replied, allowing him to pull her to her feet.

They danced to a lively jazz song and enjoyed themselves immensely. Ella, who had learned how to dance at a very young age from her mother, found that her body still remembered exactly what to do, although it was quite different dancing in jump boots than in normal shoes or pumps.

"You call that out of practice?", Malarkey laughed.

Soon, Liebgott came over. "Mind if I cut in?", he asked.

Malarkey shook his head. "Nah, I need a drink. Dancing makes me thirsty", he said and excused himself.

Ella was convinced she must have danced with at least half the company. After Liebgott, it was Guarnere, then Muck, Popeye, Shifty, Gene, Luz... the list was seemingly endless. At the end, she was exhausted, her feet hurt and she was thirsty. But she'd had a wonderful time.

She asked Luz for a club soda and sat down at the bar. Some of the men were pretty sloshed, but as long as nobody got violent or did something stupid, it was fine. She had an eye on them to make sure no-one got alcohol poisoning by accident, but she wasn't the only non-drinker that looked out for the guys.

She talked to Gene for a while before an intoxicated Skinny came over and dragged the introverted Cajun to another table, insisting he had to see something. Ella took that as an opportunity to call it a night. She bid the boys goodnight and went outside.
For a moment, she simply stood there and breathed in the cool, clean night air. The men had been smoking inside and while she didn't really have a problem with it, the smell could get overwhelming after a while. Plus, the silence out here was a stark contrast to the noise inside the bar.

"Mind if I join you?"

Ella turned around. Lt Winters stood next to her. "No, sir, not at all."

They stood in comfortable silence. Finally, Winters asked: "Were you planning on going back in?"

The girl shook her head, making her ponytail swish from side to side. "No. I was about to head back to the barracks."

He nodded. "Would you like me to walk you back?", he offered.

"I wouldn't want to keep you from the party, sir", she immediately said.

"You wouldn't. I was about to call it a night, too."

A smile spread on her face. "Well, then yes, that would be nice, sir. Thank you."

They walked in silence for a while, the only sounds their footsteps and the occasional hoot of an owl.

"How does it feel, being the first female paratrooper in US military history?", Winters inquired finally, looking over to the small medic. Molten silver reflected in her eyes as she looked at the path in front of them.

"I don't know, it's... I never thought about it that way. I just want to help", she answered. "But... it's nice. I had to prove it to myself. That I could do it, I mean. That I wasn't weak."

A quick frown passed over his face. "You are one of the toughest people in the entire Company, Ella."

She glanced up at him, his unexpected use of her first name taking her by surprise. "Thank you, sir. You cannot imagine what this means to me." She gave him a smile full of gratefulness.

"Why did you volunteer, Ella?", Winters asked after a pause.

"Many reasons, sir", she responded, thinking about it. "One was the money. My family isn't exactly well off, especially after Papa...and after my brother died, my Mama and I, well, it was hard. But...I also had to get away, sir. Too many memories."

She didn't elaborate any further and Winters didn't pry.

They arrived at the barracks.
"Thank you for walking me home, sir", Ella said.

"It was my pleasure", he replied, a sincere smile on his lips.

"Good night, sir." Ella opened the door to her billet.

"Good night, Ella."

He started to leave, but stopped and turned back a few steps later. "Oh, Ella?"

She looked at him.

"What does J.V. stand for?"

Ella laughed. A very pleasant sound, he thought. "Sorry, sir, can't tell you."

He chuckled. "It was worth a try." Then he went on his way.

Lying on her bunk later on, Ella looked up at the ceiling. "Hesh das gseh, Nico? I muas glaub öppis richtig gmacht ha." A happy smile on her face, the young girl fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Kumm scho: Come on
Das gits doch nid: This can't be possible, this is impossible
Wo isch es?: Where is it?
Per l'amur da Dieu: For God's sake, for the love of God
Ça va, petite: Are you alright, little one?
Merci: Thank you
Hesh das gseh?: Did you see that?
I muas glaub öppis richtig gmacht ha: I must have done something right
Training continues as Easy first moves to Camp Mackall before boarding the S.S. Samaria that takes them to England. In Aldbourne, they prepare for war and watch as Captain Sobel gets defeated by a barbed-wire fence.

A few months later, the company was sent to Camp Mackall, North Carolina. Now, the focus was on manoeuvres. Unfortunately for everybody, Sobel proved to be thoroughly incompetent in the field.

Ella was squatting next to Gene and watched the Captain as he beckoned Petty over to consult the map. She traded a frustrated glance with her fellow medic and rolled her eyes.

"We're in the wrong position!", she heard Sobel hiss. Great. Fantastic.

They looked on as Winters came up to their CO and discussed the situation quietly. Apparently, Sobel gave him a direct order, because he then whispered: "2nd Platoon, move out! Tactical column!"

"He can't be serious", Ella muttered to Gene as they got up.

He shrugged, just as lost.

They didn't get too far. After only a few steps, the 'enemy' team popped up from the ground, weapons trained on them. The drill leader came up to Easy company, announcing gravely: "Captain, you have just been killed, along with 95 % of your company." His pencil hovered above the clipboard in his hand. "Your outfit?"

Sobel gave him the information, after which the instructor ordered: "Leave three wounded men on the ground and report back to the assembly area."

As Sobel picked out the three men, the two medics traded another glance, this time filled with
unease. What if this happened in the field?

Ella shared her worry with Gene that evening.

"There isn't much we can do about it", he said, toying absent-mindedly with his fork. "We do our job, that's all there is."

The girl nodded, twirling a lock of hair between her fingers. She would have to cut it again soon, it kept growing like crazy. "I know. And I know we can't stop the guys from getting hurt. But I'm afraid if he stays our CO, it won't be long till there's nobody left who needs us."

Gene sighed deeply. He was thinking the same thing.

Soon, they were moving out again. 1st Platoon had gotten a new leader after Nixon had transferred to Battalion Intelligence; Lieutenant Harry Welsh.

Ella wasn't entirely sure what she thought of the man, but he seemed nice enough. And he didn't give her any trouble for being a woman. When he'd first been introduced to the men, he had walked up to her and shaken her hand.

"Nice to finally put a face to the name. I've read a lot about you, Sergeant Sawyer", he'd said.

"Sir?", she had questioned, unsure what he was referring to.

"Oh, your name has been in the papers quite a few times now. But don't worry, they have no idea what they are talking about."

Ella had nodded and watched him go. She knew she'd been in the papers a few times, but she'd figured that they had lost interest by now. Were they still saying the same things about her? She would have to find out.

And find out she did. The same day, when Vest was doing mail call, she received a letter from her mother. Filled with the most recent newspaper articles about her. Because they were in a hurry to pack and leave, Ella tucked the letter into her pocket to read later on.

They were loading their bags onto the trucks and waiting to leave. Ella was chatting to Martin and Guarnere, fiddling with her now shorter hair. It was still long enough so that she could put it up in a ponytail or bun, but as it reached just past her chin, she could even wear it down without getting yelled at by Sobel. It didn't touch her collar, after all.

"Ya need help with that, kiddo?", Bull drawled, pointing to her bag.

She nodded. "Please." The tall man picked it up and effortlessly flung it onto the back of the truck. "Thank you, Bull", she called. He just waved it off.
Aboard the train, Ella was – just as luck would have it – seated across from Sobel. She decided to ignore him, busying herself by writing in her journal and reading her mother's letter. Isabel had only recently moved to Ohio with James Buchanan. It had been a strange feeling, knowing that she wouldn't go back to Delaware when she came home, but Ella had discovered that she didn't mind.

Luz, who had plopped himself down next to her, leant over and snagged the letter from her hand.

"Hey!"

"C'mon, just tell me what your initials stand for and I'll give it back." He looked at her with such pleading eyes that she had to laugh.

"This is not seriously still about that bet, now is it?", she asked.

Luz nodded.

"My goodness, you don't give up, do you?" Ella shook her head in amusement.

"Why is it such a secret? It can't be that bad", Luz wanted to know.

Ella shrugged and chewed on her bottom lip. "It's not. It's just... nobody calls me by my given name anymore."

"Why's that?"

"Because that's no longer me." She looked at him and there was a certain haunting darkness lingering in her eyes. "Luz, please, can we talk about something else?"

Luz was nearly bursting at the seams with curiosity, but he didn't want to cause her any pain by pushing. Especially not in front of Sobel. He gave her one of his trade-mark smiles and waved the letter in his hand. "So, I wouldn't find out if I read this?"

"No. Why don't you go ahead and read it, I'd tell you what she wrote anyways", Ella offered.

He grinned happily and started reading, ever-present cigarette dangling from his lips.

Meanwhile, the girl began looking through the newspaper articles. They were mostly just like she'd expected. One or two painted her as a hero, a symbol of women's rights, some called her an 'experiment bound to fail' and a fair few speculated who she'd had to "charm" to get into the Airborne. They all claimed to have 'close friends of Miss Sawyer' as informants, which she knew was rubbish.

Ella shrugged it off. Sure, it wasn't nice to see her name get dragged through the mud, but in the end, it didn't really matter. Her comrades respected and liked her for who she was and wouldn't believe a word of those articles. At least she hoped they wouldn't.

A few hours later, they were still on the train. Ella had long since fallen asleep on Luz' shoulder. Careful so as not to wake her, he had repositioned her, her head now resting in his lap. They all loved the girl to bits and always tried to make her as comfortable as possible when she fell asleep.
on one of them, most thinking of their own sisters back home. Ella tended to forget about herself while making sure that everybody else was alright and so this was their way of giving something back by letting her rest.

*One day,* Luz thought to himself, gently running a hand through the girl's locks and smiling fondly when she unconsciously leant into his touch, *maybe one day she's gonna tell us.* And he vowed not to pester her that much anymore. A little, sure, but not enough to make her sad.

They ended up in New York, Brooklyn Naval Shipyard, boarding a huge troop ship, the S.S. Samaria. It took an entire day to get the 5000 soldiers on board and assign them to their bunks.

Ella felt mildly claustrophobic in the belly of the ship, where hundreds and hundreds of soldiers were packed together like sardines. There were rows upon rows of bunks rising towards the ceiling, at least 6 on top of each other. And Easy Company was allocated a space right in the middle. It was tight and hot, the air stale and filled with the smell of hundreds of unwashed bodies cramped together.

Ella was extremely grateful to be a medic; she could bring the sea-sick men up on deck to get some fresh air. And there were many who got sea-sick. All medics carried pills against motion sickness, but they were of little use when the men just threw them back up.

"Deep breaths, Web, that's it", she cajoled, rubbing his back comfortingly as he gripped the railings.

He groaned.

"I know, it's nasty. But it'll pass. Just try to take it easy." She helped him sit down and lean his back against the railings before squatting down before him. "We'll stay here for a moment alright? Fresh air always helps with nausea."

Webster's face was still an impressive shade of green, but he managed a weak nod.

After a while, his stomach settled and some colour returned to his cheeks.

"See?", Ella smiled. "Now why don't you go back and lie down a bit? If you're asleep, you won't feel the movement either."

Webster nodded and got up.

"Need a hand?", she asked.

"No, I'll be fine. Thanks, Ella."

She waved it off and ambled across the deck, checking on other soldiers who were hanging over the railing.

"Hi, Chuck. Feeling a bit sea-sick, hm?"
He nodded, leaning heavily against the railing. She handed him one of the pills and motioned for him to take it.

"Just take deep breaths. And try to focus on something else", she advised.

"Like what?", he asked, grimacing when his stomach roiled uncomfortably.

The girl moved to stand next to him, back to the ocean. "On the sounds of the ship. On the conversations around you. On the game of cards you might play with the guys. On the feeling of your pillow. Anything at all."

Grant smiled gratefully. "Alright, Shorty, I'll try. But...I think I'll stay up here for a while."

She chuckled. "Good idea", she commented.

They struck up a conversation that did wonders to distract him from his nausea.

Ella was sitting on her bunk, fourth from the ground, nestled into the far back corner. She was leaning against the cool metal of the ship wall and sorting through her medic satchel, trying to see if she needed to resupply on anything. So far, it was only the sea-sickness pills.

"Hey Shorty!"

She leant over the rim of her bunk to look down. "Yeah?"

"We were just talking about you", Guarnere said.

"Uh-huh."

"Yeah", Malarkey piped up. "So, is your first name Janet?"

She sighed and suppressed the urge to roll her eyes. She was tired, hot and the closed quarters were starting to set her on edge. *Nid jetzt*. "No, it's not."

"Damn", Hoobler chimed in from his own cot. "That was my bet, too."

"Mine, too", Smokey sighed.

Now she did roll her eyes.

"What's the matter?", Perconte grinned.

"You're annoying, that's the matter", the girl grumbled. She loved the guys, she really did, and normally, she easily put up with their nonsense and teasing, but being stuck with them on this ship was just too much. They were all bored and restless and they had been unusually relentless with their pestering.

"Aw, c'mon, don't be like that", Christenson chimed in.

"Yeah, you're usually not so grumpy", Muck observed. "Normally, you're our very own ray of sunshine." That comment almost made her smile.
"Maybe it's because it's, you know...", Penkala lowered his voice to a stage whisper, "that time of the month."

Most of them didn't see how Ella's expression shuttered closed, as they were laughing and grinning at each other. Only a few noticed the shift, the darkening of her eyes. One of them was Joe Toye.

Since the day she had given him a complete copy of her lecture notes, the two of them had become friends. And while he wasn't someone people would call exceptionally perceptive or considerate, he could tell this was a sensitive topic for the girl. He glared at the sniggering men.

Ella shoved her supplies back into her satchel, swung her legs out of her bunk and jumped to the ground. "I'm going to the sick bay, I'm low on sea-sickness pills", she informed a surprised Gene. "You need anything else?"

He shook his head.

"Alright. Be back in a few." With that, she elbowed her way past the many soldiers, leaving a group of puzzled Easy Company men in her wake.

"What was that?", Muck wondered.

Nobody had an answer.

Returning from the sick bay with a satchel full of sea-sickness pills, Ella was back to her normal self. She hummed quietly to herself and went under deck, squeezing past unfamiliar men and expertly ignoring the catcalls. She had just reached Easy Company, when-

"What the hell is going on here?!"

The men jumped, looking thunderstruck. A few of them scattered immediately. Ella got a good idea of what had occurred: Liebgott and Guarnere were both being held back by several others, both breathing heavily, a few scrapes and bruises on their faces.

"Guarnere called Sobel a Jew", explained Talbert.

"Liebgott took offence to that, cause he's, too", added Penkala.

Ella looked from one man to the other. Liebgott looked angry and affronted, Guarnere irritated and just this side of sulky. She raised an eyebrow.

"He threw the first punch!", Bill stated indignantly.

Liebgott shot back: "Only after."

"Enough!", Ella cut them off, stepping right between the two. She gave them both a stern glare. "Look at you, you're acting like children", she pointed out incredulously.
They both averted their gaze and stared at their feet.

"Of all the things you could start a fight over, you chose Sobel? Seriously? We haven't even been on this ship for 3 days and you're already squabbling and brawling like teenagers."

The bystanders watched in something akin to awe as the young woman reprimanded the grown men like boys fighting on the school yard. It was almost comical to see these two tough soldiers look properly chastised.

"I'm sorry", Liebgott said contritely, "His comment just really rubbed me the wrong way."

She sighed. "I get it, I do. But it's not me you should apologise to."

Guarnere swallowed when the girl's eyes landed on him and looked at Liebgott. "I'm sorry, man. I shouldn't have said what I said."

Liebgott nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry, too." A signature smirk crept on his lips. "Hope I didn't break your nose."

The Philadelphian snorted, fight already forgotten. "Ha!"

Ella shook her head. "Alright you two, sit down and let me have a look."

The two immediately obeyed. While she checked their scrapes and bruises, they watched her closely, trying to gauge how mad she was at them. They had never been on the receiving end of her glare and they also didn't know how much it would take for her to become truly angry. They didn't want to find out either.

"You're lucky, just a few scratches", she declared, a light smile playing around her lips. "Now get to your bunks and try not to bash each other's faces in." She fixed them with another stern look.

"Yes ma'am", they automatically responded.

"Sobel? Ernsthaft?", Ella muttered, moving to the back of the room and climbing up to sit on her bunk. That's when she noticed everybody staring at her. "What?"

The men, including Guarnere and Liebgott, all of a sudden burst out laughing. It really had been a sight to behold, two of the most hot-headed soldiers of the company being glared into submission by a sharp glance of their small medic.

"Oh, the look on their faces!", Malarkey crowed, wiping tears out of his eyes.

Ella couldn't help but laugh, too. Below her, she even heard Gene's laugh, a sound she heard only too seldom.

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In the middle of September, 1943, Easy Company set up camp in Aldbourne, England.
Ella ended up being billeted together with Johnny Martin. Their host was Mrs Elaine Morris, a motherly woman in her late thirties whose husband was away at war. She was quite baffled to see that one of her guests was a young woman. Somebody – most likely Sobel – had neglected to inform her of that fact.

That they had to share a room wasn't a problem for Ella and Martin. After all, they had been sleeping in the same barrack from over a year now. Sleeping in the same bed didn't bother them either. Johnny was married and Ella's family was poor, so she had shared a bed with her brother for a long time.

"Well, in that case, I'll let you get settled", Elaine, as she insisted they call her, said.

She showed them to their room. It was small, but tidy and bright. There was even a bathroom right next door, only for them.

Ella beamed at that luxury.

"Why don't you come down afterwards and have some tea with me?", Elaine offered, smiling at the young girl's joy.

"That sounds great, Elaine, thank you", Martin said.

Ella nodded. "We'd love to."

When Elaine had gone back downstairs, Ella looked at the bed. It was easily big enough for three people and there were two separate blankets. "Which side do you want?", she asked.

Johnny shrugged. "I don't care. Left?" It was the side closer to the door.

"Okay." She bounced a little on 'her' side, then flopped backwards and let out a content sigh. "This is great", she declared, still grinning blissfully. "A huge bed? A heated bedroom? A bathroom inside the bedroom? This is paradise."

Johnny chuckled, clearly amused by her excitement.

That night, Ella took her first real shower in ages. The water was hot, even after Johnny had taken his own lengthy shower. There was soap and shampoo. Two toothbrushes. Grinning like an idiot, she even took the opportunity to shave. While she had been blessed with only very little body hair, Ella just felt more comfortable without it. Washing herself and lathering her hair, the girl quietly sang a lullaby her mother liked while rinsing the suds out of her locks.

On the other side of the door, Johnny smiled to himself as he listened to Ella's singing. She had a beautiful voice. He didn't recognise the language, but the melody was soothing. Soon, the water stopped and a few minutes later, the door opened and Ella leant against the doorway, dressed in her sleep clothes, happily humming around the toothbrush in her mouth. She leant out of sight, spat and rinsed her mouth, turned off the light and crossed the room, running nimble fingers through her damp locks.

Yawning, the girl crawled onto her side of the bed, snuggled into the blanket and blinked owlishly. "G'night, Johnny", she mumbled, eyes already closing.
"Night, Ella", he said, getting into bed as well.

Their training was now all about realism, preparing them for the upcoming invasion of Europe. The medics still trained with the rest of the soldiers to some extent when it came to hand to hand combat or digging trenches and foxholes. Sure, they could fire a gun if need be, but they were medics first, riflemen second. So, while the others were at the shooting range, they were busy at the infirmary, getting further training from Army nurses and doctors.

Ella, as the highest ranking and most experienced medic in their company, even had the honour of teaching the men about first-aid. She was extremely nervous about speaking in front of so many people. Thankfully, Gene was there to help her out during the lectures and the practice lessons, so she wasn't entirely alone.

"Very good, Lip", she praised as she walked down the lines, watching the men practice applying pressure bandages. Her voice was clearly audible in the room as everybody was focused on their task. Only sporadically, a mumbled comment or remark from one of the men was heard.

"Nice work, Christenson." "Don't make it too tight, Hoob." "One knot is enough, Shifty, you don't need to make 8." "Easy does it, Toye, you're doing fine. It took me a while, too, until I got the hang of it. There, that's it."

Her calm assurances did wonders for the men's concentration and motivation.

Lt Welsh uttered a low curse after his fourth attempt to tie the bandage had failed. It just kept slipping away.

Nixon, who was next to him, shot him an amused look.

"It's alright Lieutenant", Ella said lightly, popping up next to them from out of nowhere. "Here, I'll show you."

She knelt down next to him, took the bandage and slowly demonstrated the motions again.

"You want to put this on the wound. If possible, someone applies additional pressure to it. Then, you wrap this around, like so." She glanced at the Lieutenant to make sure he was following. "It has to be tight, but it mustn't cut off the blood circulation, because then you run the risk of losing a limb. Tie it off and there, you're done." With deft fingers, Ella opened the knot and took the bandage off. "Now, why don't you try it on me."

Patiently, she let Welsh bandage her arm. "That's it, very good. Pull it a bit tighter. Bit more- there we are."

In no time, the Lieutenant had flawlessly applied the bandage. The young medic smiled encouragingly and got up, moving down the line.

Welsh looked over to his fellow Lieutenants, newfound admiration for the young girl on his face.
"Damn, Dick. She's good", he muttered to Winters, who simply nodded.

The men learnt a lot during the few lessons of first-aid they had. At the end of the last class, Ella said: "Now you know all you need to administer first aid in the field. Generally, if you or your comrades are wounded, you call for a medic and you don't stop calling for a medic until one shows up."

A few chuckles drifted through the room.

"If, for whatever reason, we don't come to you immediately", she continued, "try to stay calm, remember what you've learned and keep shouting. We'll get to you as soon as we can. Thank you for your attention, that's all folks."

"That was great, Ellie." Gene leant against the desk, smiling lightly at her.

"You think?", she asked, feeling rather self-conscious.

Her Cajun friend nodded. "Sure. You know what you're doing and they know it, too. You'd be a good teacher."

Ella smiled shyly at his compliment.

The medics were constantly rotated through the platoons and squads, allowing them to get used to the individual dynamics. On one of the days Ella was with 1st Platoon – lead by Captain Sobel – she once again got proof of just how poor the man's sense of direction and his map reading skills were.

They were jogging through a field when Sobel suddenly signalled for them to stop. He called for Tipper before ordering: "Perconte. Luz. Get the men...get- Take cover behind those trees!"

Ella sighed.

"Alright, let's go", Luz called, "Move it out, fellas."

"Sobel's lost again, isn't he?", Skinny asked.

Frank groused: "Yeah, he's lost." Then, he quietly called over to his friend: "Hey, Luz! Can you do Major Horton?"

George answered in a dead accurate imitation of the major: "Does a wild bear crap in the woods, son?"

Ella giggled as Frank suggested: "Maybe the good major can goose this schmuck, get us moving?"

Luz was hesitant. "No, no way. I'm not gonna..."

Muck pitched in: "Oh yeah! Luz, you gotta! Come on."
Resigned, Luz gave in. "Alright, just this once." He shushed them as they got into position.

Ella had the perfect view of Sobel as she lay on the ground as their look-out, peering through the shrubbery. She could see him in deep conversation with Evans and Tipper, obviously trying to work out where the hell he had led them. Tipper looked rather exasperated with the CO's ineptitude, while Evans seemed just as confused as Sobel.

"Is there a problem, Captain Sobel?", Major Horton's voice rang out.

Sobel whirled around, looked their way and bellowed: "Who said that?! Who broke silence?!"

Ella could see Tipper saying something while trying to keep his facial expression under control. Sobel's face fell and he nervously glanced around. A small wheezing sound escaped her as she bit back a laugh.

"What is the goddamn hold up, Mr Sobel?!", Luz called again, still using Horton's voice.

"A fence, sir, a – A barbed-wire fence, sir!", came Sobel's reply.

"Oh, that dog just ain't gonna hunt."

She bit her lip. Her shoulders quivered from suppressed laughter. Behind her, she could hear the guys desperately trying not to ruin the whole thing.

"Shut it, shh", Luz hushed them before falling back into his impression. "Now you cut that fence and get this goddamn platoon on the move!"

Ella buried her face in her arms, shaking with barely contained laughter.

While they were running along the road to make up for lost time, Ella wondered if she had actually cracked some ribs from trying so hard to stifle her laughter. Her sides hurt like nobody's business. She and Luz couldn't look at each other for the rest of the way because they always started giggling.

As soon as they were back at headquarters and away from Sobel, 1st Platoon just lost all sense of self-control. Some of them were laughing so hard they couldn't even stand anymore. They were howling and roaring, doubled up with laughter. From other soldiers, they just got confused and slightly worried looks.

It took a long time until Ella didn't burst into fits of giggles anymore whenever she thought of Sobel's panic-stricken look. When they told the other platoons what had happened, they had a hard time finishing the story because they couldn't stop laughing.

Of course, Sobel found a way to retaliate once he was informed that Horton had actually been on leave. He never found out who had impersonated him, but that didn't matter to him. He just took it out on Winters.
Ella had been speaking to Nixon and Winters when Evans came barrelling down the road in a jeep. He got out, marched over to Winters, handing him a letter and saying "With Captain Sobel's compliments, sir" in a tone that was far too smug to be good news.

The brunette medic's eyebrows shot sky-high as she watched him strut away. She then looked over to Winters, who sighed: "Oh, for crying out loud..."

Nixon leant over to read as well. "Misspelled 'court-martial'...", he pointed out, taking a drag from his cigarette.

The young girl blinked in surprise. Realising, that she was essentially listening in on her superiors, Ella blushed right to the tips of her ears, muttered a hasty apology and hurried away.

Nixon looked after her retreating form. "Something I said?", he joked.

Winters cracked a small smile. "She's a T-4, Nix. She just realised we're officers."

Nixon shrugged. "So? I can still talk to her from person to person, can't I?"

"Some might think it's inappropriate, Nix", Winters pointed out, only for the sake of it.

"I don't care", came the predictable reply.

They both watched as some of the guys playing basketball nearby roped the girl into playing with them. She was shorter than all of them, downright tiny in comparison to Bull Randleman, but her agility easily levelled the playing field.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Nid jetzt: Not noq
Ernsthaft?: Seriously?
Preparing for the Invasion

Chapter Summary

A mutiny leads to changes in command and the paratroopers move to Upottery, preparing for D-Day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"We're gonna mutiny", Johnny quietly revealed the night after Winters had demanded trial by court-martial.

Ella turned to face him, propping herself up on her elbow. He had to force himself to return her piercing gaze. It was as if she could see right into him. She was quiet for a long time, simply looking at him from her side of the bed. "You do realise that if it fails, you could be shot", she then remarked mildly.

Johnny did a double-take. He had expected her to try and talk them out of it. "Yeah. But Sobel's gonna get all of us killed in the field", he pointed out.

Ella nodded sombrely. "I know. Just... I don't want you to get shot, Johnny. Or any of you guys.", she whispered, her hand briefly touching his shoulder.

He shrugged, a small smile playing on his lips. "Don't worry. It'll be fine."

"Then I'll come with you", she resolved.

Martin shook his head. "You can't turn in your stripes, kid, you'd be kicked out. The guys need you."

"Maybe, but I can still be there."

The next day, Ella anxiously paced the hallway in front of Sink's office. She heard the Colonel yell at the NCOs. Not that she could fault him for it. A mutiny was the last thing he needed on his plate when preparing for the invasion of Europe.

Suddenly, the door opened. Harris came out. "See ya around, Shorty", he said, giving her a resigned smile. He had been transferred out of the 506th.

A few moments later, the rest of the guys came out, looking a little shaken, but relieved.

"Got busted to Private", Ranney explained, sounding not even remotely angry.

Ella expectantly looked at the others.

"We're fine, Ella", Lipton assured her.

She let out the breath she had been holding and gave them each a hug. "Thank God."
They left the building. Up ahead, they saw Winters overseeing the kitchen staff unloading a truck. They all saluted him in unison as they marched past. Winters returned the salute, a look of worried bewilderment in his eyes.

Colonel Sink was a well-informed man. His job required him to be. And it wasn't a secret that Ella Sawyer was close to almost everybody in Easy Company, from privates right up to Lieutenants Nixon and Winters. So, he figured that if anybody apart from the NCOs had known about this act of mutiny, it would be her. Plus, she was reputed to be honest and he hoped to get a different perspective of what could have driven nearly every NCO in the company to turn in their stripes.

"Sergeant Sawyer? Colonel Sink wants to see you in his office", the runner informed her when he found her chatting with the NCOs in the barn that served as mess hall.

The men looked at each other, dread filling the pits of their stomachs.

Ella simply got up from her seat, called a friendly "Later, boys" and left.

"Shit." Guarnere spoke, voicing what they all thought.

"You wanted to see me, sir?", Ella asked politely after saluting the Colonel.

"I want you to be truthful with me, Sergeant Sawyer", Sink said without preamble. "Did you know about the mutiny Easy Company's NCOs planned?"

Ella didn't hesitate. "Yes, sir, I did", she replied candidly.

"And did you try to deter them from seeing their plan through?"

"I informed them of the consequences their actions might have, sir."

Sink raised an eyebrow at her. "Did you consider participating in their plan?", he continued his interrogation.

"Yes, sir, briefly."

"What made you change your mind, Sergeant?"

"One of the men discouraged me from it, sir."

Sink nodded. She didn't want to give any names and he respected that integrity. "Did you, in any way, convince any of the NCOs to take part in this?", he asked.

Ella frowned. "Sir, I'm only a Technician Fourth Grade. I don't have the same authority they have. I'm in no position to convince them to do anything, sir", she answered.

"Alright." Sink knew she hadn't been directly involved, but he wanted to see if she would admit to knowing about it. "Tell me, Sergeant, why did the NCOs mutiny?"
For the first time in the conversation, the girl hesitated. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

"Sir, we fear Captain Sobel might put Easy Company in more danger than another CO would", Ella explained, trying to express herself in a diplomatic way.

"How so, Sergeant?"

"Captain Sobel has gotten his platoon lost repeatedly on manoeuvres, sir. I witnessed a few of those mishaps myself. Additionally, he has gotten almost his entire platoon killed in a training exercise, once again because the map was misread. The NCOs only worry about the safety of the men, sir."

Sink nodded, thinking about her words. Ella's heart hammered against her ribs, but she forced herself to keep her face blank and look into the middle distance.

"Thank you, Sergeant Sawyer. I will take your account into consideration. You can return to your outfit."

Ella saluted, turned and left.

As soon as the door fell shut behind her, she leant against the wall and blew out a breath, knees suddenly turned to jelly. She felt like she had been put through the wringer and Sink hadn't even yelled at her. This is definitely worse than being called to the headmaster's office in high school, she thought to herself as she headed outside. Opening the front door of the building, the young medic was surprised to see the worried faces of the NCOs.

"What did the Colonel want, Ella?", Lipton asked.

"He wanted to inquire about my involvement in the mutiny", she responded, running a hand through her hair. A few strands fell out of the neat bun she wore at the back of her head, tumbling forward to frame her face.

"And?", Johnny probed, an anxious look on his face. He was seriously worried that he had gotten her into trouble by letting her in on the plan.

She smiled. "Don't worry, it's fine. I told him I knew about it, nothing more. He then wanted to know why you did it, so I told him."

Talbert frowned. "What exactly did you say?"

Ella looked at them. "That Sobel has no sense of orientation whatsoever and that he is going to get us killed."

"No way", Grant marvelled.

She grinned. "I might have formulated it a bit less directly. But in essence yes, that's what I said."

Guarnere laughed and clapped her on the shoulder. "You, lil' lady, are a genius", he said in all seriousness.

"Thanks. But I'm no lady, or do you see me wearing a dress?", she retorted.
They walked back to the mess hall in good spirits.

Sobel was transferred out of Easy Company and the men couldn't have been happier. Their new CO, Lt Thomas Meehan, had been in Baker Company before. He was well-liked and wasn't at all bothered by Ella's presence. He sought her out only hours after being appointed their commander to discuss certain matters with her.

"I understand you are one of Easy's medics and you have been with the men from the beginning.", he said. "I'm not going to tell you how to do your job or how you interact with the men, that is none of my business. I know you are aware that fraternisation is illegal and will result immediately in your dishonourable discharge and despite what the papers might say, I have no doubt you don't have intentions of that kind."

Ella had to smile at that.

"If there is any problem at all, if one of the men mistreats you in any way, I want you to come to me or one of the officers. I guarantee you, your side will be heard", he promised.

She appreciated his openness and told him so.

He dismissed her with a smile. He didn't know that Lt Winters had told the young girl almost exactly the same thing during their first week of training at Toccoa.

They also got a new platoon leader, Lt Buck Compton. He had strikingly light hair and eyes, and got along great with the enlisted. He was slightly sceptical of her first, but changed his mind after he saw Ella could hold her own just fine during a session of hand to hand combat training.

Suspecting the men were going easy on her, Buck requested to be partnered with her. Despite the fact that he was notably bigger than her, the young girl did remarkably well. What he had on her in height, strength and sheer body mass, she compensated with speed, extraordinary agility and an audacity that bordered on recklessness sometimes.

One time when he threw a punch, Ella stepped right into it, blocking his arm and swiping his feet from under him. He landed heavily on the ground and blinked up into her face, where a cheeky, infectious grin was spreading.

"Well, sir, I see she had you fooled, too", Luz quipped, ambling over.

"Don't worry, it happened to all of us, sir", Lipton assured the man, helping him up from the ground.

Not one to hold a grudge, Buck held out his hand to the small girl. "Well, Sawyer, you are full of surprises."

Ella shook his hand. "Thank you, sir. Keeps the guys on their toes."

Because Buck hung out a lot with the enlisted men, he soon got wind of the betting pool on Ella's
"I could just order her to tell me", he said to Winters, Nixon and Welsh one evening.

Nixon snorted around his glass of whiskey. "That won't get you anywhere. Don't you think we already tried that?"

They hadn't. It was an unspoken agreement among those with a higher rank than Ella. While not knowing bugged the hell out of them, it was a way to keep the men entertained. And they figured Ella had her reasons for keeping her full name a secret. Nixon, as intelligence officer, knew a bit more than the others of course, but he wasn't revealing anything either.

It was now the end of May 1944 and they had moved from Aldbourne to Upottery. They were doing regular training jumps and they all sensed that something was going to happen soon. The only question was when.

Ella was sitting next to Gene while Lt Meehan outlined the operation. It was huge.

"Each trooper will learn this operation by heart, and know his and every other outfit's mission to the detail", Meehan finished his briefing.

Dukeman stood up and raised his hand. "Lt Meehan?"

"Yes, Dukeman?"

"Sir, are we dropping tonight?", he asked.

Ella wondered the same thing. It would be an awful hurry to get geared up and ready till nightfall.

"When it's time for you to know, we'll let you know", Meehan answered. *Guess that means 'I don't know either' in Army-language.* "In the meantime, study these sand tables, maps and recon photos until you can draw a map of the area by memory", he ordered. "Now, we will drop behind this Atlantic Wall five hours before the 4th Infantry lands at Utah. Between our assembly area and the Battalions' objective, there is a German garrison." He pointed at the map. "Right here in this area, Sainte-Marie-du-Mont."

He looked at the men. "Easy Company will destroy that garrison."

By the end of the day, Ella was ready to scream if she had to catch one more glimpse of anything related to the operation. She knew everybody's mission inside and out, she had actually drawn a map from memory, burning it immediately afterwards of course. The young medic decided she needed a distraction from all the names, times and places swirling around in her brain.

Walking down the long line of tents, she settled on the hood of one of the jeeps, a slight distance away from the soldiers' billets, and lay back. Breathing deeply, she felt her headache abate as the cool air filled her lungs. What her mother was doing right now? Ella didn't even know what time it was back home.
She pulled out one of the first letters from home. She had read it so many times, she knew its contents by heart. Her mother had been livid when she'd found out her only daughter wasn't a nurse but a combat medic, in the Airborne of all places.

'I do not want you there! You will tell your commanding officer immediately that you are transferring to the Nurse Corps, do you hear me! I will not lose you in this blasted war, too!' her letter had said.

Ella, knowing her mother needed some time to wrap her head around the idea, hadn't done anything of that sort. And sure enough, a few days later, she had received the letter she now carried with her wherever she went.

My dearest Ella,

I have to apologise for my harsh words. I only want you to be safe, you know that. I take it from your last letter that you have found friends among the soldiers. I am glad to hear that and I hope you are happy. Tell me, do you trust these men? Will they protect you in the field?

My charina figlia, I would be very grateful for your swift reply. I would love to hear more about your friends, they sound like good people. And promise me, you'll tell me AND your superiors straight away if they ever do something to hurt you.

Don't forget to take care of yourself, child. I am very proud of you. Jau pens a tai.

Lots of love

Your Mama

Isabel

Ella missed her mother. She wanted to hug her one last time, tell her how much she loved her. They would be jumping into occupied France in the next few days and who knows if or when she would get the chance to write again.

"Nice night, huh?", a voice pulled her from her thoughts.

It was Liebgott. He crossed the distance between them and leant against the jeep. "What are you doing out here, all on your own?", he wondered.

Ella ran a hand through her hair. It was already getting in the way again. "Needed some peace and quiet. I felt like my brain was going to explode if I looked at that intel for another second."

Liebgott chuckled and hopped onto the hood.

They were quiet for a while.

"Lieb?", she asked softly.

"Hm?" He had stretched out and was gazing at the sky. He turned his head to look at her.

"We're friends, right?"
He propped himself up into a sitting position. "Course we are. Why you askin'?"

The young girl shrugged. "I don't know. Wasn't sure."

He frowned, but kept silent, waiting for her to go on.

"I never really had friends before, you know? My brother was my best friend. But that's different."

That confession left Liebgott dumbstruck. This kind and sweet girl had never had any friends? He couldn't believe it. It must have shown on his face, because Ella let out a small sigh.

"I was always the odd one out. I mean, who would want to hang out with the weird girl that always wore her brother's clothes and helped at the clinic instead of going to the movies or the park?" If only those had been the only reasons why nobody had wanted anything to do with her...

The self-deprecating shrug she gave, along with her sad and lost expression, nearly broke Liebgott's heart. "I would. Hell, any of us would", he said with conviction. "You're our girl, Shorty. And I don't think any of us guys care what kind of clothes you wore."

That got a small laugh out of her. He ruffled her hair fondly. "C'mon kid, let's get you back to your tent."

They ended up getting pulled into an animated game of Blackjack by Luz and Perconte. Ella played a few rounds teamed with Liebgott while the boys taught her the game. Then, deciding she was ready to play on her own, the girl slowly but surely drove Frank up the wall by cleaning him out more with each hand.

"Jesus Christ, this is impossible!", the short Italian ranted. "Ey, Luz, you sure she's not cheating?"


"You don't even smoke", he nearly whined.

"No, but I won them."

"I still can't believe you didn't know Blackjack. Everybody plays Blackjack", Luz stated as he was shuffling the cards.

She shrugged. "There was a lot of gambling at the local bar. But it's no fun playing when you have nothing to bet. So we always played stuff like Crazy Eights, Go fish or Bullshit."

Luz grinned widely. "Just you wait, kiddo. We'll teach you Poker and Rummy and Craps and then you can fleece Perco like nobody's business."

Ella knelt on the ground, her entire gear spread out in front of her. "Segner char!", she huffed.
It was ridiculous how much equipment they were carrying. As a medic, she had a load of medical equipment whereas the rest of the guys had weapons. Kindly enough, command had issued them with a leg bag just a few hours before. Nobody had any clue how the thing worked, but they meant more space for gear.

Joe Toye wasn't amused at all. He was circling his tarp, listing off everything he had to stuff into his bag in an annoyed fashion.

"Three-day supply of K-rations, chocolate bars, Charms candy, powdered coffee, sugar, matches, compass, bayonet, entrenching-tool, ammunition, gas mask, musette bag with ammo, my webbing, my .45, my canteen, two cartons of smokes, Hawkins mine, two grenades, smoke grenade, Gammon grenade, TNT, this bullshit", he tossed down a coil of rope, "and a pair of nasty skivvies!" They too ended up on the pile in front of him.

Frank asked: "What's your point?"

"This stuff weighs as much as I do!", Toye bitched. "I still got my chute, my reserve-chute, my Mae West and my M-1!"

Ella sniggered quietly.

Frank joked: "Where're you keeping the brass knuckles?"

Toye seemed to seriously contemplate this. "I could use some brass knuckles."

Vest came by on mail call, yelling for Sergeant Martin. Ella pointed him into the vague direction where she had last seen Johnny, then tossed a packet of cigarettes at Toye to make him turn around. She had started hoarding them early on and mostly used them for bargaining, bribery or sometimes as a consolation.

"What?", Toye griped.

"You should be glad, I'm about half your weight", she pointed out, waving to her own tarp full of equipment.

He scowled. "You don't have to carry any weapons."

"Which is extremely comforting, seeing that we'll be landing behind enemy lines", Ella shot back dryly, shoving a bundle of undergarments into her musette bag. She didn't see how Toye's jaw flexed briefly. "All I got to defend myself is a scalpel, a pair of scissors, a bunch of needles and a knife that technically got confiscated 2 years ago."

He looked up sharply at her last comment. "What?"

She gave him a cheeky smile. "Remember how Sobel confiscated my knife? I may or may not have reclaimed it the next day."

Toye gaped at her, blinking in disbelief. "You broke into Sobel's office?"

She looked scandalised. "Are you joking? No, I bribed Vest. Had to give him 2 packs of smokes. And a chocolate bar!"
He barked a laugh. "Who'd'a thought! By the way, I'm keeping those cigarettes."

Ella was quite happy with her packing skills. She had managed to fit everything essential in her musette bag. She didn't trust those leg bags as far as she could throw them, they were only attached with a flimsy cord.

She squeezed as many medical supplies into her pack as she could and shoved part of her stash of bargaining material right down with it. In case of emergency, she had a complete med kit stashed in the pockets of her uniform while her belt pockets were filled with any odds and ends that were small enough to fit in there. Her precious knife was tucked away safely in her belt, her jump knife strapped to her boot like everybody else's.

Putting on the webbing was an adventure in and of itself.

Ella stopped offering to help after a few of the men made a fuss about her hands checking belts in the vicinity of their private parts. "Kinder", she muttered, shaking her head in amusement.

Gene was one of the few who had no problem accepting her help. "You're a medic", he said with a shrug, and it really was as simple as that.

The girl efficiently cinched the belts, tucked away any loose ends and gave the whole thing a few firm tugs. "There you go", she said.

Gene shot her a quick smile and moved off to get his face covered in grease paint.

Ambling over to her own gear, Ella started shrugging on her webbing, thanking the powers that be for her dexterity, which allowed her to reach the straps behind her back without a problem. She took the paper Vest handed out with the remark "From Colonel Sink", skimmed it quickly and put it away, returning to putting the straps in their proper places.

Luz, ever the comedian, started reading in Sink's voice: "Soldiers of the regiment. Tonight is the night" – he slipped out of his impression – "of nights. Today, as you read this, you are en route to the great adventure for which you've trained for over two years."

Guarnere, who had been eating ice cream sitting on the floor and leaning against his full pack, put down his spoon. "So that's why they gave us ice cream."

Ella heaved a sigh. She wasn't even half-way geared up and she already felt like a pack mule. Luz stepped over Guarnere's legs and started helping with her webbing. Ella watched him cinch the straps just as calmly and efficiently.

When he was done, he righted himself and gave her an enthusiastic grin. "Ready for some face paint?"

Luz smeared a liberal amount of the greasy black goo across her cheeks. Automatically, she closed her eyes.
"Stop wrinkling your nose", he said at one point.

"Sorry. It tickles." She relaxed her facial muscles. Luz' fingers ghosted over her face, up her nose, down the chin to the neck, leaving dark streaks.

"There, you look fantastic", he cracked when he had applied the finishing touches to his work of art.

"Well, if you say so. Think I'm gonna win the beauty contest?", Ella joked back, throwing herself into a pose and making Luz laugh. She then returned the favour, taking the tin of paint from his hands and reaching up to apply it to his face. "Close your eyes", she instructed. "I wouldn't want any of this stuff getting into them."

Luz did as he was asked. Her gentle, nimble fingers brushed against his skin, leaving smears of war paint. It was an odd sensation, intimate, but in a completely non-romantic way. More like a moment shared between siblings. That's what Ella was: Easy Company's little sister.

"My brother and I once did the same", she spoke, spreading some of the greasy goo on his nose. "We played by the river and decided that mud made fantastic camouflage paint."

George smiled softly.

"We thought Mama was going to have kittens. But she just laughed and took us back to the river, forcing us to wash the dirt off in the cold water."

He could hear the wistful smile in her voice. Her fingertips drew a few more random patterns on his forehead, then he was good to go.

"Oh, if you could see yourself. It's the crème de la crème", she quipped when he blinked his eyes open.

24-hour stand-down. Ella suddenly had too much time on her hands. After she had gotten rid of the grease paint and dumped her fully-packed gear in her tent, she found herself wandering through camp. Humming a small tune, the girl passed the movie tent and walked on. She saw Nixon and Winters leaning against a jeep, talking quietly. She saluted them and continued her aimless stroll.

With the jump postponed, it now meant that they would be dropping behind enemy lines in Normandy on June 6th. She had to smirk at the irony that was only known to her.

A light breeze had come with dusk. It lightly caught her hair and blew it into her face. The young girl smiled and pushed the wayward strands back. She had wanted to cut it for some time now. "Now's as good a time as any", she said to herself and headed towards her tent.

Fishing a pair of scissors from her pack, she went to the latrines and stared pensively at the person in the mirror.

It was a far cry from the girl she had been when she'd enlisted. There was not an ounce of fat on her body. She had always been slim, but now, she was downright wiry. Her eyes sparkled in the same
deep green as always. Just like Mama's, she thought. Her skin was tanned from the hours training in the sun, a few freckles peppering her nose and cheeks. The scar through her left eyebrow was still there, a white line interrupting the dark brow.

Ella smiled. The crescent-shaped dimple on her right cheek appeared, making the smile look lopsided. And finally, her hair. There were lighter strands in it, bleached from the sun. It had fallen past her shoulder blades when she'd signed up. Now, the caramel-brown locks brushed only just past her shoulders. Taking a few strands into her hand, Ella brought the scissors up.

Carefully, the girl cut her hair, trimming it properly just like her mother had used to do it. Checking and rechecking the length, she was finally satisfied. Because they were now lighter, the curly strands curled even more, while the waves in the other ones became more pronounced. Tugging the ever-present hair tie off her wrist, Ella experimentally put her locks into a ponytail, then into a bun, before letting them down again. Grinning happily at her reflection, the girl cleaned up the cut hair and left the latrines, feeling strangely content with herself.

It was pitch-dark outside. But thanks to Sobel's notorious Friday night marches, Ella had no trouble locating her billet. Slipping inside, she found Johnny Martin sitting at the small makeshift desk, writing a letter. Bull and Christenson weren't there. "Hey, Johnny", she greeted quietly, putting the scissors away.

He turned his head. There was an odd look in his eyes.

"What's wrong?"

The man from Ohio sighed. "My wife wrote me. She keeps up with things back home. Guarnere's brother... he was killed in Monte Cassino. Wherever that is."

Ella sat down on her bunk, a sharp twinge stabbing through her heart. "Oh. Does he know?"

"I couldn't tell him", Martin confessed. "So, I swapped our jackets. I don't know if he found the letter. Or if he read it."

The girl nodded, pulling her feet up to sit cross-legged on her bunk. "He'll find out sooner or later anyways. Better now than in 5 months."

"You think so?" Johnny clearly didn't agree. "Now? Hours before the jump?"

Ella shrugged. "There's never a right time to find out", she stated, arms coming up to wrap around her shins. "All I know is that I would want to know from a friend. Not find out months later through some impersonal telegram or form letter."

Martin's frown deepened. He didn't know her to be this bitter.

She yawned and hastily covered her mouth. That innocent gesture, a relic from more civilised times, always made the men smile. It was one of those things that reminded them that Ella was still an innocent young girl at heart. Sure, she could banter and joke with the best of them and hold her own just fine, but she barely swore and had a lot better manners than some of the men.

The girl let her body tilt over to the side, head hitting the pillow. "I'm going to get some sleep while I can", she declared, wriggling around to get comfortable. Once she was settled, Ella rubbed her nose, yawned again and closed her eyes. "Night, Johnny", she mumbled sleepily.
June 5th was coming to an end, and they had once again geared up, checked, double- and triple-checked their equipment and smeared their faces with black grease paint.

Ella and Gene were the last people standing. Everybody else was half-lying on the ground leaning against their packs, the only remotely comfortable position. They sat in two rows in front of their assigned aircrafts.

Meehan called: "Gentlemen, Docs Roe and Sawyer are handing these out for airsickness." He waved the small packet in his hand. "Orders are every man takes one now, another 30 minutes later."

The two medics walked along the line, handing out the small packets before letting themselves flop to the ground at the end of the line. Ella winced as one of the straps bit into her thigh and reached down to pull it in place.

Winters addressed his stick: "2nd Platoon, listen up. Good luck. God bless you. I'll see you in the assembly area." He then pulled each soldier to his feet, looking them in the eyes. It was a nice and comforting gesture.

Ella, the last person off the ground, gave her lieutenant a smile.

Getting into the plane was harder than it looked. With all the bulky equipment, they had to practically shove each other up the steps. Ella felt Winter's hand on her back, keeping her from toppling backwards. Several hands reached down to pull her up. She grabbed on and hoisted herself into the plane.

Falling into her seat opposite of Gene, she took a deep breath. This was it. They were going to war.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Jau pens a tai: I think of you
charina figlia: dear daughter
Segner char: Good Lord, dear God
Kinder: children
D-Day

Chapter Summary

The jump doesn't go as planned. Ella has her first encounter with the enemy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The tension was awful. Ella glanced at the men in her stick. Some were praying, some smoking, some were completely still. Gene across from her was clutching his pack close to his chest. She was humming to herself. Over the noise of the plane, nobody else heard her.

The man next to her – she didn't see who it was – was nervously checking his webbing. On impulse, the girl reached over, gently brushed his hands aside and cinched the harness a bit tighter. Smiling at him, she nodded. From the corner of her eye, she saw Winters giving them both an encouraging smile.

Distant thunder rumbled.

As their plane continued towards the drop zone, the thunder became louder, sharper. It wasn't thunder. It was the sound of explosions.

Ella took a deep breath. Welcome to war.

The C-47 rattled on.

Her heart pounded in her chest. The red light flashed on.

Lieutenant Winters got to his feet. She could only just hear him above the noise of the plane, but his hand gestures were clear enough. "Get ready! Stand up!", he yelled.

Ella got to her feet and got in line behind Gene.

"Hook up!"

They did. Her hands were clammy inside the jump gloves.

"Equipment check!"

She quickly felt her chin strap and the straps her gear, then checked Gene's. She tested the knots, tucked away the laces and gave the whole thing a firm tug. It held. The hands of the man behind her trembled as he tightened one belt.

"Sound off for equipment check!"

Ella didn't hear half of the numbers over the ruckus of the plane. The trooper behind her yelled "Four okay" and slapped her on the shoulder.
"Three okay!", she announced, giving Gene a pat on the arm.

"Two okay!", he shouted.

Winters finished the line, calling "One okay!"

Suddenly, their plane jerked violently, knocking a few of them off their feet. The man behind her steadied himself by grabbing her shoulder. Another jostle and the C-47 swerved. She couldn't see a thing behind Gene, but she heard detonations all around her. Lightning flashed and someone – maybe Skip? – shouted: "We get any lower, we ain't gonna need any friggin' parachutes!" Yes, definitely Skip.

Another explosion rocked the plane and the small girl was nearly brought to her knees. Regaining her balance, she stared intently at the red light, willing it to turn green. Miraculously, it did.

"Let's go!", Winters called, jumping out the doorway.

Gene didn't hesitate and followed immediately after.

Ella was just at the door when the plane jolted again and sent her flying backwards. Scrambling to her feet, she didn't even have time to look back.

She jumped.

The few seconds it took for Ella to land were some of the most terrifying she had ever experienced. All around her, she saw fellow paratroopers get shot down, their canopies deflating, riddled with bullet holes. Aircraft plummeted from the sky or just burst into fireballs. Tracer ammunition zipped through the air. A plane narrowly missed her as it screamed past, the sound of stalling engines getting cut off by a deafening crash as it hit the ground.

She slammed against something hard. There was a ripping noise and the brunette medic tumbled to the ground. She hit the earth with a thud and a small grunt. Hurriedly getting rid of her chute and the reserve chute, the girl looked around and recognised what she had hit during her less than perfect landing: A tree. She had landed right at the edge of a forest. *Min eigna Fallschirm het mi könna erwürga*, she realised. It was a miracle she hadn't got stuck. The canopy was ripped to shreds, half of it dangling from the branches.

Shaking her head, she reminded herself that there were more pressing matters at hand. The first question popping up in her head was: *Where the hell am I?* Seeing that it was dark and there were no prominent landmarks at all, she decided to put that off for later. A quick inventory revealed that Ella had been wise to put the most important things in her backpack. Her leg bag was gone, probably ripped off by the prop blast. Her musette bag was still there, so were her knife and satchel. Her helmet had been knocked askew, but it was held in place by the chin strap.

Gunfire erupted around her. The young girl flinched and instinctively ducked low. There were muzzle flashes a few yards away. That was enough incentive for Ella. She crawled until she was
sure the trees provided enough cover. Then, she carefully got up and continued through the forest, constantly trying to orientate herself. Unfortunately, there was nothing but trees, trees and a few more trees.

*Where is everybody? Did they make it? Please let them be okay.*

Ella had no idea how long she had been walking. It might have been an hour, it might have been five. She noticed something wet on her cheek. Touching it, her hand came away bloody.

"Oh", the girl mumbled quietly. It was a small cut, possibly from a twig. Feeling a stinging sensation in a few other places, she figured there were similar cuts on her face, neck and hands. The young medic shrugged. They would stop bleeding soon enough. A number of spots on her body ached dully. She was going to have some bruises later, but that was to be expected after colliding with a tree. She could be thankful that she had gotten away with a few scrapes.

Senses primed to register any change in her environment, the small girl pressed on, only the moon keeping her silent company. Nothing crossed her path. Not even a rabbit or a bird. The only sounds that disturbed the quiet were the distant rumbling of artillery, the crunch of her boots and her soft breathing. She didn't know which was worse: The unbelievable noise of the battle or this thick, oppressive silence.

Ella didn't let her guard down. The white brassard on her upper arm clearly identified her as a medic. They were protected by the Geneva convention, but she was well aware of the fact that some soldiers – be it Allies or enemy – didn't care about that.

Dawn was approaching. When Ella noticed the first rays of sunlight creeping through the trees, she smiled for the first time since she had landed in Normandy. So, this was D-Day. 6th June, 1944. *If Mama knew...* The girl shook off the thought. She had to get to the assembly area. Everything else had to come afterwards.

"Finally", she muttered to herself when she made it out of the forest.

Taking a moment to look around, the brunette saw a run-down farmhouse to the east. Its roof was caved in and the walls were blackened. Trying to remember any lone, burnt down farms near a forest on the maps she had studied, Ella quickly managed to figure out where she was.

"Jeez." She scrubbed a hand down her face. She had missed her drop-zone by miles. But now she had an idea of her position, the young medic knew she wasn't too far from the assembly area. Doing a few rough calculations in her head, she estimated it was going to take her another two hours to reach the assembly area.

She was walking through a field lined with hedges and trees when suddenly, Ella heard voices. Taking cover behind some shrubs, she fished the metal cricket from her pocket and gave two clicks. No reaction. The voices came closer and her heart stumbled, nearly skipping a beat. They were German.
Listening closely, she determined there were only two of them.

"Warte, ich muss mal kurz hinter die Büsche", one said.

Shit!

Footsteps approached.

Silently, Ella's hand moved to her boot and drew the knife from its sheath, a constant string of Scheisse, scheisse, scheisse going through her head.

The soldier came into view. Before he could make a sound, Ella rushed him.

A silent life-and-death struggle ensued which ended with the German soldier kneeling over the girl, large hands around her throat. He yelled for his comrade.

Ella frantically clawed at the hands strangling her. Bucking and writhing, she tried to dislodge the soldier. But the lack of oxygen was starting to make itself known. In her panic, she fumbled for the knife which had been knocked from her hand. Grasping it, the girl thrust it upwards, driving it deep into the German's neck.

Abruptly, his calls for his comrade turned into a choked gurgle. Then, he went limp.

She shoved the body off her with a strangled cough. Scrambling to her knees, Ella barely had time to yank out her knife before the second soldier came crashing through the bushes.

The German raised his gun. Reacting on pure instinct, the girl twisted and hurled her beloved knife at the man, ducking out of the line of fire at almost the same time. The knife hit its mark, but only after a shot went off, possibly alerting other enemy soldiers of her presence.

Not keen on finding out if there actually were other Germans around, Ella shot up from the ground and made a break for the trees.

Running, she kept listening for potential pursuers. Even though she couldn't hear any, it took a while until she found it safe enough to slow down.

Falling to her knees between thick bushes, Ella felt her neck with trembling hands to check if there was any damage. Her carotid was pulsating fiercely under her finger tips. Taking stock of herself, she added a few more bruises and scratches to the list of her – relatively minor – injuries. Her throat throbbed a little, but that wasn't much of a surprise. Her ODs, though, looked horrendous. Her jacket was slick with the German soldier's blood, the fabric darkening as it soaked through almost her entire front.

She tugged her helmet off and raked a blood-caked hand through her locks. Her heart was still racing.

A twig snapped, making her inhale sharply. Up ahead, rifles clicked. Please be allies, please be allies, Ella begged in her head, replacing her helmet.

"Flash?", a voice whispered.
The girl sagged with relief. *Per fortuna da Dieu.* "Thunder", she hissed back, getting up from her crouched position. She couldn't see the people through the thick undergrowth.

"Who is that?", somebody asked tensely.

A smile broke out on her face and she stepped out onto a mud path. "Good to see you too, Guarnere."

Several familiar faces greeted her. Winters, Lipton, Malarkey, Popeye, Toye and Guarnere. Automatically, her eyes swiped over them, trying to detect any signs for injuries.

"Are you okay, Ella?", Winters questioned, eyeing her bloody uniform with concern. She looked a bit pale under the grease paint and scratches littered her face.

She nodded. "Fine, sir."

Winters accepted it and got the group, now counting 10 people, moving again.

Ella didn't have time to get introduced to the 3 men she didn't know. She got hugged from all sides and her friends hounded her with questions: "What the hell happened, Shorty?" "Whose blood is that?" "How was your jump?" "Were you alone all this time?"

Feeling her heart growing warm at their concern, residual fear dissipating, the young girl told them what had happened since she'd landed. "...and then I found you guys", she finished her tale. Looking around her, she saw anger, worry and disbelief on their faces.

"Dang, Shorty" Malarkey found his voice first. "Thank God you had that knife."

She nodded. "I had to leave it behind, though", she said sadly, looking down. The last thing her brother had ever given to her was now gone. It felt as if she had lost the last part she'd had of him. *Es tuat mr leid, Nico.*

Ella was walking with Toye when they reached the assembly area. They shared a relieved look when they saw other people from the 506th. They were not the only ones.

"Easy Company! Hey!"

Liebgott had spotted them. He shook hands with Popeye and got introduced to Hall, then he zeroed in on the other newcomers. "Shorty!", he shouted.

"Hi, Lieb", she smiled.

"Jesus Christ, what the fuck happened to you?", he asked, staring at her blood-stained jacket.

"Had a run-in with a pair of Germans", the girl replied, accepting the hug he gave her.

"No shit! How'd you get away?" Liebgott was still scanning her for any hidden injuries.

"Stabbed them." It was the truth. No need to worry him more than necessary.
His eyes fell on the already darkening bruises on her throat and flashed with fury.

Ella put a hand on his arm. "They're dead, Lieb. I'm okay."

Grudgingly, he nodded. "Good", he growled.

In order to snap him out of his mood, the young medic changed the topic. "Do you know if there's an aid-station set up? I should go see if they need any help."

It worked. Liebgott's expression softened a little and he pointed to one of the derelict buildings on the other side of the street. "Over there."

"Thanks. I'll see you later", she promised, giving him a peck on the cheek before hurrying off.

Liebgott watched her go and decided to find out what exactly had happened to their youngest. So, he tracked down the guys Ella had arrived with. Hopefully, they could tell him more. Rage bubbled in his chest. Their first day in combat and their girl had nearly got killed already.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Min eigna Fallschirm het mi könna erwürga: I could have been strangled by my own chute
Warte, ich muss mal kurz hinter die Büsche: Hang on, I gotta take a leak (literally: I have to go behind the bushes)
Scheisse: Crap
Per fortuna da Dieu: Thank God
Es tuat mr leid: I'm sorry
**Brécourt Manor and D-Day+1**

**Chapter Summary**

Easy Company is tasked with capturing a German artillery battery firing upon Utah Beach. The guys decide that the back of a truck is the ideal spot to cook rations. Ella has her hands full taking care of the wounded and worriedly waits for her friends to return.

**Chapter Notes**

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The make-shift aid station was tiny and from the looks of it, there were only two other medics around, both not from 2nd Battalion. There weren't many wounded and Ella was grateful for it. She quickly got to work, cleaning and bandaging injuries. Most of the wounds were relatively minor and didn't require evacuation to a hospital. Still, patching up all those bloodied soldiers took time and energy.

When she finally had some time on her hands, the girl carefully checked her ribs to see if anything was broken. It wasn't, but there were already bruises forming, spreading across her midriff like spilled ink.

"Are you okay, Sergeant?", one of the other medics – Olson – asked as she re-buttoned her shirt.

Ella turned around. His eyes became wide as saucers when he noticed she was a girl.

"I'm fine", she smiled. "Just some scratches."

The man didn't react, just kept gaping at her.

The brunette raised an eyebrow. "Are you alright, Olson?", she inquired concernedly.

He blushed furiously. "Oh, ah... yes, Miss, I mean, Ma'am- uh...Sergeant." He hurried away.

She shook her head with a smile.

"Anyone seen Sergeant Sawyer?", someone called from the door.

"Over there", O'Hara – the second medic – pointed.

Ella raised her head. It was Malarkey. He waved her over. "C'mon, Shorty, the lieutenant wants us at the CP."

She tossed down the towel she was holding, grabbed her helmet and followed her friend.
The orders were to take out the German 88s firing on Utah Beach. There were two they knew of, but Winters said to expect at least two more. He calmly laid out the plan, the men listening closely.

"How many Krauts do you think we're facing?", Guarnere inquired.

Ella studied him from her position in the background. He looked on edge, angry. She couldn't pinpoint why, but it almost seemed as if he had a problem with Winters. That's new, she thought, because Guarnere had always respected the Lieutenant. Then she remembered the letter Johnny had mentioned just two days before. *That would explain it. Poor guy.* She resolved to check on him later, let him know that he didn't have to deal with it on his own.

"No idea", Winters admitted freely.

"No idea?", Guarnere repeated, an incredulous look on his face.

The lieutenant didn't react to it. Instead, he continued: "We'll take some TNT along with us. To spike the guns." He looked at Lipton. "Lipton, your responsibility."

"Yes sir", Lip acknowledged.

Winters assigned Liebgott, Petty, Plesha and Hendrix to the machine guns. Compton, Malarkey, Toye and Guarnere would be doing the main assault with him.

"Alright", Lipton said, "let's pack it up, boys."

Outside, Ella packed all the supplies she could fit into her satchel, musette bag and pockets.

"Just weapons and ammo, drop everything else!", Winters called. "Got any spare ammo in a pack or a musette bag, bring it along!"

He then turned to their young medic. "Ella, you stick with me."

Even he had stopped addressing her by her last name. Only the higher-ups did that now. Everybody else called her either by her first name, or by her nickname.

"Yes, sir", she affirmed, giving him a nod.

The blasts of the German canons were deafening. The fact that they weren't 88s but 105s didn't affect the plan at all. Winters had handed out orders and everybody was getting into position.

"Ella, find some cover close by, stay low and wait for my signal. Follow as soon as you can", he instructed.

She nodded and snuck over to Petty and Liebgott. Lying down a few feet away from them, she was practically invisible to the enemy, but had a perfect view of the field below.
The machine guns started firing. Ella heard the Germans shout. Explosions rocked the ground. Bullets peppered the small dike in front of her. The girl ducked lower, cheek pressing against the earth. She cursed silently when some dirt got into her eyes, stinging and blinding her for a moment.

Tensely, she waited for the signal.

"Let's go! Let's go! Follow me!"

There it was. Winters was out in the open, Toye, Popeye, Hall and Lorraine hot on his heels. Bullets whizzed past them, grenades and mortar shells blew up around them.

When they were half-way across the field, Ella popped up from her hiding place and started racing through the hail of bullets. Not a moment too soon, because only seconds later, all that was left of the spot she had been lying in was a crater of dirt and debris.

She pelted towards the trench in a mad dash and threw herself in right next to Guarnere, who was already firing at the Krauts.

He actually had time to send her a grin and shout "Hiya, lil' lady!" over the racket.

"Ah, fuck! My ass!", they heard Popeye yell.

"Medic!", Toye hollered and Ella took off, weaving through the maze of trenches.

She skidded to a stop next to a downed Popeye, who kept rambling: "I'm sorry, sir! I screwed up!"

He sounded on the verge of tears.

"You're okay, Popeye, you're okay", she soothed, eyes already zooming in on his injury. He had been shot in the ass. Toye, kneeling beside her, was patting down his jacket for a bandage.

"GRENADE!"

"Toye! Ella! Roll out! Roll out!"

The blast of the Kraut potato masher, which had landed just around the corner in the trench, knocked them forward. Toye fell on top of her, and consequently on Popeye, who screamed in pain: "Get off!"

The weight holding her down lifted as Toye sat back on his haunches. Ella got to her knees, too, and gave him a quick once-over. He seemed a bit stunned, checking if every important body part was still there, but otherwise, he looked okay.

"One lucky bastard, Joe!", came the comment from Guarnere.

Ella only listened with half an ear, already focused on her task again. "Take it easy, Popeye."

Looking around, she tried to figure out a way to get him out of the combat zone. Sprinkling some sulfa onto Popeye's wound, she grabbed a bandage and applied pressure.

"Argh", Popeye groaned between his apologies.

"Shush, Popeye, it's alright", she assured him.
Buck knelt down beside them. "Where you hit, Pop?"

"I can't believe I fucked up my ass, sir", the wounded man stated unhappily.

"Your ass?", Buck repeated incredulously.

Winters popped up next to them. "How bad is it?"

Popeye immediately apologised again: "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to fuck up. I don't...I don't think it's too bad."

When the lieutenant's gaze flickered to her, the small medic confirmed with a nod. A close blast showered them with debris, making them duck.

"You think you can make it back yourself?", Winters asked Popeye.

"I think so, sir."

"Let's move out.", he ordered, "Ella, with him."

"Yes, sir."

The two men hoisted Popeye out of the trench, the bandage coming loose. Buck tossed him his rifle. "Get down, Popeye, get down!", he called before turning his attention back to the battle going on around them.

"Down!", Ella yelled as a mortar shell came whistling their way. Winters shielded her with his body. The explosion made their ears ring. Dirt rained down on them.

"Grenade!"

Buck's shout had everyone scrambling out of the ditch. Toye grabbed their small medic around the midriff and hauled her out of the trench with him. They were a second too slow.

"Get out of there!", Buck screamed.

The grenade went off, sending them flying for the second time within minutes. Ella had the wind knocked out of her when her back collided with the wall of the trench, Toye half landing on her.

Again.

Winters crouched down before them and grabbed Toye by the jacket, pulling him upright a little.

Ella moaned and coughed weakly. She was pretty sure she was going to have a bruise the shape of her dog tags on her chest later on. They had been pushed into her skin by Toye's elbow slamming into them.

"Jesus Christ. Fucking twice!", Toye cursed shakily.

The girl wiped a sleeve across her face and allowed Winters to pick her up and give her a boost out
of the trench.

"Stay low!", he shouted after her. "Toye! Cover her!"

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Ella was crawling through the field as fast as she could. Dirt and shrapnel showered down on her as the ground shook with explosions.

Another shell hit very close to her, sending up a spray of dirt. "Herrschaft nomol!", she groused, stopping for what felt like the hundredth time to press herself flat against the earth, arms flying up to protect face and neck. Shrapnel bounced off her helmet with a resounding *pling*! "At this rate, I'm gonna get to Popeye tomorrow! At the earliest!"

Serious or not, Popeye was still wounded and his injuries needed to be treated ASAP to prevent infection. Which made the shelling that slowed her down all the more irritating.

Finally, she seemed to be out of reach. Still, she didn't dare get up and belly-crawled the rest of the way. *You're no good to anyone if you get blown to smithereens, Ella.*

"Think this is a ticket home?", she heard Popeye ask.

"Maybe", Lipton replied.

"Shit, I just got here..."

Sliding down the embankment, Ella pushed her helmet out of her eyes. "Hey Popeye, how you doing?", she asked. "Oh, hi Sarge." She had almost bumped into him.

Lip gave her a short smile before slapping Ranney on the arm, signalling him to get moving.

"You're not going home, Popeye, don't worry. It's not that bad", the girl reassured the wounded soldier as she prepared to haul him to the aid station.

"I'm real sorry, ma'am." He still sounded close to tears.

"Nah, don't apologise. 's not the first ass I've patched up", she joked.

"Really?" He perked up.

She chuckled. "Yeah. Back home, there was this guy..."

By the time they arrived at the aid station, Popeye had calmed down and was listening intently to Ella's story. He even laughed a few times.

"Now, I gotta dig that bullet out", she said when they got him settled on one of the tables.
"I'm sorry, ma'am. You shouldn't have to." He sounded so upset, it was almost funny.

Ella laughed. "Relax, Popeye. It's my job."

He refused the morphine she offered him.

Carefully, she wiped away the blood that still seeped from the wound. "Alright, here goes."

The rest of the day, Ella was at the aid station. While there were many walking wounded coming in, the number of serious injuries was still blessedly low. Nobody else from Easy Company had made it back yet.

The door flew open with a loud crash. "Medic! Doc!" Two men barged in, carrying a wounded comrade between them.

"Put him over there."

They hauled him up onto the table. Ella looked the moaning man up and down, cataloguing his injuries. Bullet wound to the abdomen, shrapnel wound in his arm. Massive bleeding. One syrette stuck to his jacket. "Give me a hand. Get him to stop moving", she ordered over the man's grunts, grabbing sulfa, bandages, morphine and gauze. "What's his name?"

"Uh... Jimmy. James Brittley", one of them supplied.

"Jimmy, I need you to calm down", the girl spoke gently, looking him in the eyes. "It's alright, we got you."

The poor man was still writhing in agony.

"Why isn't the morphine working?! I gave it to him 10 minutes ago!", his buddy questioned, a hysterical edge to his voice.

"Because he's panicking and morphine needs time to get into the bloodstream", Ella answered calmly, swiftly cutting away Brittley's uniform shirt. "One of you will have to assist me", she informed them. "The other will have to keep him steady."

She was wiping away the blood from his torso, trying to see if any major vessels had been hit. "I gseh nüt bis gar nüt. Get me some gauze." It was put into her hands.

"Ah. Alright, not the artery. Lovely. You", Ella glanced at the guy to her right, "put on a pressure bandage here when I'm done." She ripped open a packet of sulfa with her teeth and poured a liberal amount onto the bleeding hole in Brittley's stomach. Hands flying to pack the wound, the girl glanced up at the wounded man's face.

He was staring at her, pure fear shining in his eyes. She gave him a soft smile, gently squeezing his wrist. "It's okay, Jimmy", she soothed, "you did good. You can relax, you're gonna live."

He must have needed to hear that, because his eyes rolled back in his head and his body went slack.
"Jimmy!"

Ella moved to check his vital signs, just in case. "He's out", she confirmed. "Morphine's kicked in. Bandage that wound."

The man did as he was told.

The young medic turned her attention to the shrapnel sticking out of Brittley's arm. Occasionally, she glanced at James' two friends who worked together on bandaging the stomach wound. They did a good job.

"Aren't you guys from Dog Company?", Ella asked, plucking pieces of metal out of her patient's skin.

"Yeah... I'm Al Riley, this is Jack Vittora", the taller of the pair introduced them.

"Pleasure. Ella Sawyer." She glanced up to give them a smile.

"We heard a lot about you, ma'am", Riley said, looking almost embarrassed.

"Yeah? How so?", the girl distractedly wondered. The tip of her tongue stuck out between her lips as she focused on grabbing the smaller shrapnel pieces with her forceps.

Vittora shifted uneasily. "Uh... well, there's been some stuff about you in the papers, ma'am. And, you know, on base, people sometimes talked about you."

Ella chuckled quietly. "Yeah, I read the articles. Not very creative. What do people say about me then?" She grinned at the men who seemed to be expecting her to bite their heads off.

"Well...", Riley hesitated before he confided: "Some think the same as the papers. But not us, ma'am!", he immediately assured her. "We, and lots of others, think you're really brave for doing this." He cleared his throat and awkwardly shuffled his feet.

Her cheeks heated up at his sweet compliment. "Thank you. I just wanted to help, though."

Finally done debriding the wound, she wrapped Brittley's arm and asked the pair to carry him to a cot. "He'll be evacuated later", she informed the two concerned men.

The relief was clear on their faces. "We better tell Lieutenant Speirs", Vittora said.

The young medic nodded. "Tell him that barring any complications, Brittley's gonna make it. Take care, guys."

After they left, Ella slumped down onto a chair, wiping her hands on a wad of gauze. Blowing out her breath, she scrubbed a hand over her face. She hadn't slept in over 30 hours, she'd been on her feet for at least 24, and she was starting to feel it.

"Hey, Sawyer, why don't you take a break?" Leslie O'Hara suggested. "You were out in the field and you've been doing most of the work here."

Ella nodded her thanks and shuffled outside.
Winters found her minutes later, sitting on a stack of crates, taking a sip from her canteen. Her face was still smeared with grease paint and covered in a layer of dust and dirt.

"Good job today, Ella", he said.

"Thank you, sir." She gave him a tired smile.

"How are you doing?", he asked.

The girl stifled a yawn. "I'm okay, sir." He clearly wasn't entirely convinced, but didn't push it.

He sat down on another crate, grateful for a chance to be off his feet for a bit. Ella slanted him a knowing glance, fished something from one of her many pockets and handed it to him.

Surprised, Winters stared at the chocolate bar in his hand, then at the young medic. He raised an eyebrow in a silent, amused question.

She shrugged. "You look like you need it."

"Thank you." He unwrapped it and took a bite, relishing the sweetness.

"I gotta go, sir. I have go check if Joe's alright after getting almost blown up twice today", the young medic spoke after a few moments of silence, a lopsided grin on her face. Getting to her feet, Ella turned to track down her friend.

Winters looked after her. She didn't wear her helmet. Her hair, its colour obscured by dirt and grime, bounced a little with each step. A tiny smile tugged at the corner of his lip as he took another bite of the candy. That girl sure was something else.

By nightfall, they were in Sainte-Marie-du-Mont. Most of the company was still unaccounted for. Ella tried not to think about it as she scrubbed the last of the grease paint off her face. They would come. They had to. After all, they were the best.

She ambled through the streets when she heard some familiar voices and laughter.

"Jesus! Let me outta here!

Liebgott hopped down from the back of a truck and disappeared into the night. From the brief glimpse the girl got, she could see her friends sitting there, a small fire in the middle. Grinning, she shook her head. Only her boys would light a fire in the bed of a covered truck and cook something.

Ducking under the tarp and leaning against the tailgate, she was greeted by grinning faces.

"Hey, Shorty. Want some food?", Malarkey asked, brandishing a pot.

"Only if it tastes better than it smells." She fully understood why Liebgott had taken flight. The stench was most unpleasant, not to say awful.
The men snickered.

"It is", the cook said, pretending to be offended.

Ella gratefully accepted the hands Buck and Guarnere extended and let them pull her up. Sitting down in the space Guarnere and Lipton made for her, she turned to face Malarkey. "You do realise that the tarp is smouldering?", she asked innocently.

They just laughed.

The tarp moved again and Lieutenant Winters appeared. "Evening", he greeted.

"Hello, sir", Guarnere replied.

Their leader crinkled his nose in disgust and questioned: "Did something die in here?"

"Yeah, Malarkey's ass", Petty answered, making them cackle again.

"Any word on Lt Meehan, sir?", Buck wondered. They sobered a little.

"No, not yet."

Guarnere looked at Winters. "Don't that make you our commanding officer, sir?"

Ella turned her head to study him. It seemed that whatever beef Guarnere had had with the lieutenant was now a thing of the past. He was relaxed and smiling lightly. And that wasn't just because of the alcohol somebody had managed to find.

"Yeah, it does", Winters confirmed.

Toye offered him a drink. "Sir."

"Joe, the Lieutenant don't drink", Guarnere reminded his friend.

The girl smiled at his way of showing his respect for Winters. The smile soon turned into a yawn, which she quickly smothered. Sleep could wait another hour, food couldn't. Gene would be upset with her when he found them and discovered she hadn't eaten properly.

Winters accepted the bottle. "It's been a day of firsts." He took a gulp and made a face. "Don't you think, Guarnere?" He handed the bottle over to him.

The Philadelphian nodded. "Yes, sir."

"Carry on."

"Good night, sir", Ella chimed in with the others.

He stopped and turned back again. "Oh, Sergeant?"

Guarnere looked up. "Sir?"

There was a half-smile on Winter's face. "I'm not a Quaker." Then, he left.
They burst out laughing, having all heard Guarnere's speculations about their leader's beliefs.

"If he's from Lancaster County, then he's probably a Mennonite", Guarnere guessed.

"What's a Mennonite?", Toye questioned.

Ella didn't care. Winters was a good man and would be a good CO, no matter his religion. She quietly ate her food – which didn't taste half-bad – and relished the company as a comfortable warmth spread through her. They would move out again soon, heading for Culoville, but right now, she just wanted to enjoy the moment of peace and quiet.

"Hey, Shorty, ya hear about that stupid stunt Malark pulled at Brecourt today?", Guarnere asked, grinning gleefully.

She shook her head, swallowing down a bite of the Irish man's cooking.

"Idiot ran out into the field to search a dead Kraut for a Luger", the Philadelphian explained.

Ella's dark green-eyes widened, then narrowed, darkening a few shades. "What?"

"They didn't even fire at first, probably thought he was a medic", Petty added.

The girl fixed Malarkey with that intense gaze that seemed to look straight into people's souls and he swallowed. The guys held their breath. She couldn't stay mad for long though and laughed. "You're such an idiot."

The men cackled.

Guarnere ruffled her hair. "Damn, lil' lady, that look of yours is more effective than the biggest dressing-down", he joked, making them laugh even harder.

Ella was at the aid-station, holding the fort. The other medics had moved out with their companies, leaving her as the only medic in town. It was the afternoon of D-Day plus 1. The seriously wounded had been evacuated, the rest had been treated and sent off to rest.

Men had been trickling in all the time, and Ella had greeted each member of Easy Company with relief and enthusiasm, the knot of worry in her chest loosening with every familiar face that joined them. They returned her hugs with just as much fervour, having missed the young girl's likeable, caring persona, the easy smiles and light touches that she gave so freely.

The brunette medic took the down-time to write in her journal. She wrote down all the things that had happened over the past 2 days, wrote about the fear and chaos. And about the joy she'd felt seeing her friends alive and well. *I hope the others are alright.*

Nixon had swung by at one point and been just as shocked at the state of her ODs as everybody else. Now that the blood had dried, it looked even worse.
"Jesus Christ, kid, the guys weren't kidding. You look like hell." Lt Lewis Nixon, charming as ever.

She had raised an eyebrow at him, but smiled. It was nice to see him.

Nevertheless, she had taken the hint and tried to wash the blood out of her jacket. She had soaked it in cold water and scrubbed at the large stains with soap. Repeating the process over and over, Ella then used a small amount of ammonia on the garment.

Now, the wet jacket was draped over the back of a chair to dry with only a light-brown patch on the front. Since it was June, it was warm enough to move around in only OD shirt and undershirt. All the while, Nixon had kept her company, talking about things that she wasn't exactly supposed to know. But they both knew she was fantastic at keeping secrets, those of others and her own.

Plus, he liked the girl. She was whip-smart, honest and had a huge heart.

"That betting pool on my name's still running, huh", Ella stated while organising the supplies in her satchel.

"How would I know? I'm an officer", he responded.

Ella snorted. "Intelligence officer, sir", she corrected wryly. "You're bound to know stuff like that. 'sides, it's not exactly a secret."

Nixon chuckled. "Alright, you got me. But stop calling me sir when it's just us, wouldya? Makes me feel old. Call me Lew or Nix."

The girl giggled. "Okay, Nix." For the fun of it, she saluted him, smirking cheekily.

The lieutenant rolled his eyes, but looked satisfied. Winking at her, he got up and took his leave. "See you around, kid."

With nothing else to do, Ella checked her scratches and bruises in the dirty, cracked mirror over the sink. The cuts she'd gotten from her landing were all healing nicely, some of them already fading. The bruises on her torso and arms were a bit tender and turning blue. The ones on her throat were a spectacular sight: Predominately a deep purplish-blue colour, they had spread, now nearly drawing a closed line across her neck, disappearing from view under her collar. Thankfully, breathing, speaking or swallowing didn't hurt at all.

Footsteps sounded against the wooden floor. Ella turned around and a bright grin lit up her features. "Gene!"

Her fellow medic gave her a soft smile and easily caught her when she ran over and hugged him tightly. "Hi Ellie", he spoke softly.

"I'm so glad you're okay", the girl confessed, pulling away to look at him. "How was your jump?"

He shrugged. "Missed the drop-zone, but I guess most of us did. I met up with Luz and Perconte about an hour later."

Her smile widened even more. "Luz and Perconte are here, too? They're okay?"

Gene nodded. "What about you?" He pointed to her throat. "What happened there?"
Sitting down on one of the makeshift examination tables, Ella explained: "I landed in a tree, nobody else around. So, I got out of the forest and came across these two German soldiers. I ducked behind a hedge when one of them decided he needed to pee. Naturally, he picked the bushes I was hiding behind. Long story short, we fought, he tried to strangle me, I stabbed him, his buddy tried to shoot me, I threw my knife at him."

A small frown marred the Cajun medic's face. He was silent for a while, processing her words. He trusted her when she said she was alright, but he couldn't help but worry about the what-ifs. He liked the young girl and he couldn't bear think about the dangers to a woman that fell into the hands of the enemy.

"How did you have a knife?", he finally asked.

A sly smirk twisted her lips as she hedged: "I may or may not have convinced somebody to retrieve it from Sobel's office after he confiscated it."

Gene chuckled. "How about you go find Luz and Perconte and I'll take over here? You look like you could use a break", he then offered.

"You sure you don't mind?"

He just gave her a nudge towards the door.

Ella laughed and took off.

Luz and Perconte were just looking for a place to sit down and stretch out for a bit when somebody caught Perconte's eye. "Luz." He tugged on his friend's sleeve and pointed down the street. "Ain't that Shorty?"

Squinting against the setting sun, Luz had to agree that that small figure looked a lot like their favourite female combat medic. "Think it is. Hey! Shorty!" He waved his arms.

The figure stopped, head whipping around to look in their direction. Seconds later, the girl had sprinted over to them and Luz gathered her in an affectionate hug. "I missed you guys", she mumbled into his jacket.

"Aw, we missed you too, kiddo."

She let go and turned to hug Perconte, beaming smile as radiant as the sun. "C'mon, I'll get you to HQ", she offered. "They'll be happy to see you."

They walked down the street, swapping stories. The two men had to chuckle at her narration of how Popeye had gotten shot in the behind. "He asked Sergeant Lipton if that was a ticket home. You know what he said when Lip said 'Maybe'?", she told them, "'Shit, I just got here.'"

Luz and Perconte nearly fell over with laughter.

That night, Ella sat amidst her friends, listened to their jokes and stories and silently thanked Fate, Lady Luck or whatever deity was listening for protecting her boys. She munched on her K-rations.
– trying not to notice the odd taste and texture – and threw in some offhand comments.

"C'mon, Shorty, budge over." Joe Toye plunked himself down next to her, effectively wedging her in between him and Liebgott.

The girl shot him an amused look and continued spooning food into her mouth.

"You got any smokes?", Liebgott asked. He'd been hunting for cigarettes the whole day, having lost his cartons in the jump, along with the rest of his leg bag. So far, he hadn't had any luck and he was starting to get frustrated.

Toye shook his head. "No, lost them."

Without a word, Ella pulled a pack of cigarettes out of one of the many pockets on her belt and handed one to Liebgott, who looked at her like she had hung the moon.

"I thought you didn't smoke?", he sputtered.

"I don't. You do." She gave him a dimpled smile and passed a cigarette to Toye as well.

Liebgott shook his head, laughing. "Damn, Shorty, if I'd known..."

"Don't count on it. I gotta have something as a bargaining chip." She couldn't keep the impish grin off her face while she was chewing.

"Why?"

Ella shrugged. "Can't make a bargain without anything to trade."

"Bargain for what?"

"You mean like your knife?", Toye chipped in from her other side.

Liebgott's eyebrow shot up. "Your knife? The one Sobel confiscated? You got that back? How? When?"

The girl nodded sheepishly, cheeks flushing. "I bribed Vest to get it for me. But I lost it yesterday", she added sadly.

Ella looked down at her knees and missed the glance the men shared over her head. She felt stupid, being sad about losing something as trivial as a knife. But it had been her brother's. He had given it to her when he had gone off to war. "I can't protect you now, so maybe this will", he'd said.

Liebgott draped an arm across her shoulders. "Guess that means we get to look out for ya a bit more", he said, giving her his best crooked grin. He received a small smile in response and considered it a win.

A jaw-cracking yawn escaped Ella. She had been catching one or two catnaps during breaks, but in total, she had probably slept less than 5 hours in the last three days. Blinking tiredly, she unconsciously snuggled up closer to the source of warmth that was Liebgott. Her eyelids grew heavier with each blink and soon, they closed on their own accord. Within seconds, she was sound asleep.
Liebgott simply pulled the young medic closer and made sure she was comfortable. No point waking her up right now. She always looked so young and peaceful in her sleep. Doc would come check on her anyways and he would get her to her sleeping bag with little fuss. Besides, it wasn't the first time their girl fell asleep on one of them, and it surely wouldn't be the last.

Her head lolled against his shoulder, locks tickling his skin. Her even, slow breathing was warm against the crook of his neck.

He sighed quietly. The bruises on her throat still made anger flare up inside him. But he was also oddly proud of the girl. She wasn't a damsel in distress. She had defended herself against a superior enemy and come out on top. Sure, he – and the rest of the guys – would always worry about her a little. Not because they thought she couldn't hold her own, she did that very well, but because they hated to see the girl they had come to love like a sister get hurt.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Herrschaft nomol: For Pete's sake, for Heaven's sake
I gseh nüt bis gar nüt: I can't see a damn thing
Carentan and onwards

Chapter Summary

Easy Company fights at Carentan. Ella encounters a ghost of her past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

D-Day plus 2.

The aid station was practically empty. Ella and Gene were going through their already severely diminished supplies and trying to decide who would be making the trip to the supply office. Since neither of them were really keen on debating with the notoriously pedantic supply officers, they found themselves at an impasse. Of course, they had both offered to go, but they also both knew the other was just doing it by courtesy.

"Rochambeau?", Gene suggested.

Ella shrugged. "Sure. Otherwise we're still standing here tomorrow, none the wiser."

They held out their hands and played one round of rock-paper-scissors.

"If I'm not back in an hour, I probably got tossed in the stockade for strangling a supply officer", Ella joked, grabbing her jacket.

Gene cracked a smile. "I doubt that." She had too much patience and was too good a person for something like that.

She gave him one of her innocent toothy grins, waved and left. The door closed behind her.

The young medic had to try very hard not to pinch the bridge of her nose in frustration. "I understand that, Corporal, but I need bandages", she said for what seemed like the thirty-seventh time. "We're almost out and it's only a matter of time until we get new wounded."

The man before her had a ratty sort of face, a reedy voice and a truly abysmal attitude. It was almost like addressing her by her rank caused him physical pain. "Sergeant, everybody wants something these days. Weapons, ammunition, clothing, each soldier wants to replace the things they have lost on the jump. And right now, those things are priority", he droned, sounding just as bored as he looked.

Ella sighed. "And how do you expect us to treat our patients? I wouldn't be here if it wasn't important, Corporal."

"Well", he fumbled for a reply, "just do what you can. We have only limited supplies, Sergeant, a lot was lost during the past week."

"Look, Corporal", she replied calmly. "I understand that your job is hard, but so is everybody else's."
And unfortunately, we can't just heal the wounded by clicking our fingers, so unless you have a better idea on how to keep a soldier from bleeding out, I suggest you give me that box of bandages back there." She pointed to a crate sitting on the ground and flashed him a shrewd smile.

Realising that he had been caught, the supply officer tried one last excuse: "Those aren't for your battalion, Sergeant."

The girl raised an eyebrow, thoroughly unfazed. "Then why are they here? Because as far as I know, we're the only battalion around. Now hand me those bandages, Corporal, before I start thinking of other things we're running low on."

The ratty corporal grudgingly handed over the crate.

Cheerfully, Ella thanked him and sauntered off.

Shaking her head at the pettiness of the man, the brunette walked back to the aid station. Some people... "Luckily, it's too much effort to get worked up about those people", she said by way of greeting.

"For who? You or him?", Gene asked.

"Both. I know people who would have ripped that guy's head off after two minutes. But it doesn't do your blood pressure any good if you fuss about all the stupid, annoying and useless people on this Earth", the girl replied, setting down the box.

Gene chuckled. "Guess it's good ya got the patience of a saint then, Ellie."

She shrugged. "It's not his fault there's shortage on, well, everything. He just really screwed things up for himself when he blatantly lied to my face. But what did I expect? I'm a woman, what do I know?"

He frowned at her self-deprecating comment. He hated it when she did that. "Next time, I'll go. He shouldn't have disrespected you. You outranked him after all, woman or not", he stated.

His young friend shot him a sweet smile. "Thanks, Gene."

They put away the supplies, then Gene dragged the girl to get some food. "Ya gotta eat, Ellie, ya know that." She had a tendency to forget to eat when she was too immersed in a task. More precisely, she had a tendency to take care of everybody else and forget her own health in the process.

In the afternoon, Ella was lounging outside with everybody else, enjoying the sun. Her head rested against Martin's leg as she lay on the steps of a war memorial – talk about irony. She had her eyes closed and listened to the idle chatter around her, when suddenly, Luz' unmistakeable voice rang out: "Well, look who decided to show up!"

Blinking, the girl raised her head and a bright grin spread on her lips. Talbert, Smokey and Shifty had finally joined them, along with Blithe, the shy, dreamy guy from 1st platoon. She settled back
down as the guys started comparing their spoils of war.

She snorted when she heard Hoobler say: "My Luger's gonna put you all to shame when I get it." She didn't understand the fascination the guys had with those pistols. It was bad enough that Malark had already stupidly risked his life to search a Kraut for one of those coveted guns.

A rustle of gear and a thump told her that somebody had sat down on the steps below her.

"How was your jump?", Dukeman asked the newcomer.

"Well, I missed the DZ", Blithe's soft voice replied.

Ella chuckled to herself. Didn't we all?

Perconte was thinking the same thing because he scoffed. "Yeah, that goes without saying."

Blithe replied something that was too low for Ella to hear, but she guessed it was something along the lines of "I guess so." She shifted and grunted a little when the movement jarred the bruises on her torso.

"Got any souvenirs to trade?", Frank asked eagerly. He had been picking Kraut watches off their previous owners and was far too proud of them for it to be proper. "They're all ticking, unlike their previous owners. Got anything good?"

"Not yet."

Ella frowned. Blithe had always been a bit dreamy, but now his voice sounded off. Almost like he was stuck in his own mind and only half listening. Her pillow moved and nudged her. The girl opened her eyes and craned her neck slightly to squint up at Johnny, who was regarding her with a quizzical look that said What are you frowning about?

She rubbed her forehead. "Not sure yet."

"Hm." He nodded and took a drag from his cigarette, blowing the smoke away from her face.

"So, have we lost anybody?", Blithe asked.

Dukeman filled him in: "Tommy Burgess took one in the face."

Ella grimaced at the memory. It hadn't been a pretty sight and the poor guy had been in a world of pain until the morphine had finally provided the much-needed relief.

"Popeye Wynn got pinked in the behind", he continued, "They're gonna be okay."

"That's good", Blithe mumbled.

As they were discussing the whereabouts of Lt Meehan and who was in charge now, somebody yelled: "Easy Company! On the road!"

Sighing, Ella sat up. "Been fun while it lasted", she murmured.

Martin gave a dry snort and helped her to her feet.
"Let's go! 1st Platoon!", Lieutenant Welsh shouted.

"On your feet!" The call was directed at the other platoons as well.

Shuffling over to where Welsh was standing, Ella shouldered her pack and closed a few pockets here and there.

"Listen up! It'll be dark soon", the Lieutenant began. "I want light and noise discipline from here on. No talking, no smoking and no playing grab-fanny with the man in front of you, Luz." A few of them laughed.

The man in question leant over to Ella, who happened to be standing next to him, and whispered: "Guess that only leaves you." They both knew he didn't mean it, but for the fun of it, the girl gave him a look that would have frozen his insides if it weren't for the grin tugging at the corner of her mouth.

"So where are we headed to, Lieutenant?", Boyle asked.

"We're taking Carentan", came the response.

Perconte commented sarcastically: "That sounds like fun."

"It's the only place where armour from Omaha and Utah Beach can link up and head inland", Welsh explained. "Until we take Carentan, they're stuck on the sand. General Taylor is sending the whole division."

Luz huffed derisively. "Remember boys", he drawled in the general's voice, "give me three days and three nights of hard fighting, and you will be relieved."

Ella giggled.

Hoobler stepped forward. "Lieutenant? Lieutenant, I'll take point."

Welsh approved. "Corporal Hoobler will be lead scout." He then looked at Blithe. "Blithe", he said, "glad you could join us."

He meant it. Like the rest of Easy's Lieutenants, Welsh cared about his men. Raising his voice, he ordered: "1st Platoon, fall in behind Fox Company. You people from 2nd and 3rd Platoon, follow us. Shake a leg."

They started walking.

Luz decided to continue his impression for a moment: "Another thing to remember boys: Flies spread disease, so keep yours closed."

They laughed. One could always rely on Luz to brighten the mood with his quips and impressions. Ella shook her head and muttered: "Dork", but there was a chortle in her voice.

He smiled at her and gave her a friendly nudge with his shoulder.
They were walking along a lake. It was night, but burning wreckage shone an eerie light on their path. The smoke irritated their lungs and stung in their eyes. They stepped over stiff corpses, enemy and ally alike. Even the water was blazing in some places.

They stopped. Ella heaved a sigh.

"Ten bucks that we lost F Company again", Luz whispered in her ear.

She just nodded, pulling a face. If there was one thing that bugged them all, it was things like these: Having to hold up and wait until they found their sister company again, because Fox's officers had no idea what to do during a night march.

Checking on the men, she heard Nixon ask: "Why are we stopped?"

"This is about officers crapping out on their training, Nix."

Winter's reply made her scoff. They could count themselves lucky to have had him and Nixon as officers in Toccoa. They had stuck with them through every training exercise, no matter how shitty it had been.

Finally, Hoobler and Blithe returned after they had relocated F Company. Silence descended once again, the only sounds the rustling of ODs, the creak of leather and the crunch of the soil beneath their boots.

Four days later, they were lying in the ditches along the road into Carentan, waiting for Winters to call high noon.

Ella was gnawing on her bottom lip.

A dog barked in the distance.

Birds sang. Crickets chirped.

Something, maybe a sign or a lamp, swayed in the light breeze and made a high-pitched, squeaking noise that grated on her nerves.

"Go!", Winters hissed.

"Let's go, First, let's go!", Welsh whispered, spurring them into motion.

Winters moved down the line, motioning for them to get up.

The first men weren't even halfway down the road when a shout cut through the air: "FEUER!"

Instinctively, Ella ducked lower as bullets started flying. Machine guns rattled as the Germans defended their position.
"Get those MGs moving, will ya!?", Major Strayer shouted, "Let's get them outta there!"

Nixon screamed: "They're in the open, for Pete's sake!"

She couldn't discern if that was directed at the Major or at Winters.

Winters was racing up and down between the men, yelling at them to get moving. "Move out! Move out! Get yourselves out of that ditch! You got no cover here!"

Ella had to get closer or she wouldn't be able to hear the call for a medic when it came. A line of bullets riddled the road and kicked up dirt far too close for comfort. She dove for cover, slamming against the wall on Welsh's right side. She barely had time to catch her breath.

"Medic!"

Off she went.

Running and ducking at the same time made for an extremely awkward way of moving, but it beat getting shot anytime. Ella slid to a stop next to her first patient, grateful for her kneepads. Yanking out sulfa and a bandage, she poured the powder onto the gunshot wound in the man's shoulder, wrapped the bandage around it and patted him on the unharmed shoulder. "You'll be okay", she wanted to say. The next cry for a medic cut her off.

Being a combat medic was about the most insane thing you could do. You were zipping around on a battle field, under fire, and trying to patch guys up without getting riddled with bullets or blown up by artillery and grenades. It was absurd really. Nothing would protect you from a stray – or a purposefully aimed – bullet, nothing would stop a shell from blasting you to tiny pieces.

Yet, Ella didn't think twice about it. She dashed through the rubble-filled streets and responded as quickly as she could to each call. More than once did she throw herself over her patients, shielding them from flying debris with her body. And more than once was she too late and the man was already gone by the time she arrived.

Lipton's scream made her heart skip a beat. "They got us zeroed! Spread it out! Spread it out!"

Explosions showered the girl in rubble as she dragged a downed man to relative safety. "Help me!", she shouted to Tab. He grabbed the other side of the man's webbing and they hauled him behind a wall, artillery exploding all around.

"Medic!"

Tab's hand jerked like he wanted to hold her back, but Ella had already burst out into the open again, dodging mortar blasts as she ran across the street. She huddled down against the wall of a house and fished another bandage from her bag. The man wasn't seriously injured and could get himself to the aid station.

"Move! Move! Get out of the street! Go! Go!" Lipton's yells were cut off by a deafening blast. She watched in horror as the Sergeant was catapulted backwards. He hit the ground hard and didn't move. "Shit shit shit", the small medic cursed under her breath.
She shot up and raced over to him, kneepads smacking against the asphalt as the smoke cleared. "Hey Lip. Take it easy", she spoke, gently manoeuvring him more upright.

"Lip!" Talbert came running and knelt down next to them. Lip dazedly tried to push himself into a sitting position against the wall. "Hey buddy."

Ella noticed it first. She followed Lipton's stunned gaze down to his groin, where blood was pooling on his trousers. "It's okay, Sarge. We'll check", she said calmly as she ripped the cloth. She glanced at Tab. "Can you-?", she asked.

He quickly leant over to peer inside the hole she had made. He looked up to Lip again. "You're okay, Lip. Everything's right where it should be", he assured the man. Lipton nodded shakily. Ella helped Tab pull the sergeant to his feet. "C'mon, upsy-daisy", Tab encouraged.

"Medic! Mediiiic!"

Tab saw the indecision flickering in her eyes. "Go, I got him!"

She didn't say anything, just shot him a grateful look and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Ella very nearly yelled at the private who had called for her. There was nothing she could do for his buddy who had his brains splattered across the pavement. But she didn't yell. She just took a deep breath and said: "I'm sorry."

"SHORTY! ELLA!"

If the girl wondered why they screamed for her personally, she didn't let it slow her down as she hurried towards the voice. Liebgott was crouching on the ground, cradling a bloodied figure in his arms. Ella's stomach plummeted. It was Tipper.

"You hang in there, buddy. Shorty's gonna get you fixed up, alright?", Liebgott whispered. He was doing his best to stay calm, but it was clear he was rattled by Tipper's state.

Ella dropped to her knees on his other side and gave the wounded man a soft smile. "Hey Tipper. Let's have a look at you, okay?"

"What happened?", she asked Liebgott.

He opened and closed his mouth, but couldn't form the words.

The girl reached up, put a steadying hand on his shoulder and nodded.

He nodded back.

She glanced at the demolished shop behind them. A mortar blast, most likely. Quickly, Ella turned her attention back to Tipper. Her hands hovered above his body, moving up and down without touching him, assessing his injuries. His face was badly cut up, the concussion of the blast had taken out his right eye. Blood was dripping from his mouth. She could see the bone in his right leg. The blast had taken a chunk out of his foot, burning a hole into the boot.

Liebgott kept up his soothing mumblings, gently rocking Tipper like a child. Ella's comforting presence, her collected, reassuring demeanour, her voice, it all bleed into him, calming him as
"It's alright, Tip, we got you. We're gonna get you out of here, okay?"

He finally looked at her. "Sh-shorty?", he stuttered, blood dribbling from his lips.

Ella smiled at him. "Hi Tip."

He grabbed her arm. "H-help me", he begged. "Please." Tears ran down his bloodied and dirty face, leaving white streaks on his cheeks.

Her heart clenched painfully and she swallowed.

"I will, Tip. I promise. I'm here."

He clung to her arm like a life line. He barely flinched when she stuck a morphine syrette in his shoulder.

Liebgott shot the two guys before them a look. "Okay, guys, wanna give us a hand here?", he asked.

Together, they lifted Tipper up and carried him to the aid station that had been set up in what had once been a bar. All the while, Tipper clutched Ella's arm tightly and she talked quietly to him.

"Set him down here", she directed, taking off her helmet and rolling up her sleeves.

The men soon left, going back out into the battle. Ella grabbed supplies with her free hand and gently started cleaning Tipper up. "It's okay", she said, over and over, looking him in the eyes.

The morphine did its job and finally, the wounded man relaxed, eyes fluttering closed, his grip on her arm loosening. Gently, the girl took care of him and set up an evac. While she filled out an EMT – emergency medical tag – for him, Ella still held a one-sided conversation with him, telling him about some of the shenanigans she'd gotten into in her childhood. "You'll be alright, Tipper", she whispered in his ear when they got ready to evacuate him. "Just hang tough and it's gonna be okay."

Ella hurried from one patient to the next. There were many severe injuries. Gunshot wounds, missing limbs, blast injuries. Some were not so bad, shrapnel wounds and ricochet hits, cuts and broken bones. Still, they evacuated as many as they could to keep the aid station clear, not knowing how many more casualties they were going to get.

"You'll be good as new in a few weeks", she predicted as she cleaned Lipton's wounds. His wince of pain didn't go unnoticed. "Sorry."

"It's alright." He was no longer in shock thanks to her caring ministrations. Now he watched the young girl as she expertly dressed his injury.

She gave him a bashful smile, tips of her ears flushed pink. "Sorry about your pants. On the bright side, you'll get new ones for free", she said, trying to cover up her embarrassment with a cheeky
"grin.

Lipton chuckled.

"Although", Ella continued, sitting down and pulling out her EMT booklet and a pencil, "as I found out, some supply officers are really stingy." She shrugged. "Maybe you'll have better luck." She started scribbling down Lipton's details, occasionally asking when she wasn't entirely sure.

Lipton smiled fondly. He appreciated her nonchalant, unobtrusive way of talking to people. The brunette medic just knew how to make others feel at ease. He assumed that was also the reason why people seemed to gravitate towards her when there was something on their mind: Ella was a great listener. She was honest, open-minded and she didn't judge.

"There", her voice pulled him from his musings. "Evac's gonna be a while, so why don't you lie back and get some rest?"

Lying down, Lipton found he was indeed feeling pretty worn-out.

Ella easily interpreted his expression and assured him: "You had quite the shock today, Sarge, it's completely normal." With one last smile, she disappeared from his line of sight to tend to other wounded.

Out of all the patients, the strangest was no doubt Blithe. He was being guided in by Skinny.

"What happened?", Ella asked, coming to meet them half-way.

"I...", the blond stammered, "I can't see, Ma'am."

Skinny shrugged. "We found him sitting behind a wall. He didn't even react until we said something", he explained.

She nodded. "Alright, thank you, Skinny."

Taking Blithe by the arm, she steered him to the corner. "Come on, Albert. We'll get you settled here. Just take it easy for a bit, alright? I'll come check on you in a minute."

He nodded shakily, eyes looking emptily at a spot over her left shoulder. She squeezed his shoulder and got up, only to be met with the disapproving mien of her Cajun friend.

"Ellie, go get some air. You need a break", Gene insisted. He crossed his arms and gave her a stern look.

For a moment, it looked like she wanted to protest. Then she nodded. "Thanks, Gene."

Walking outside, Ella spotted Liebgott sitting with his back against the wall, cigarette in hand. She sat down next to him. "Hey Lieb."

It took him a moment to raise his head. "What?", he snapped, perhaps a bit harsher than intended.

She didn't take it personally. "I just wanted to check on you", she offered.

He hummed and stared darkly ahead, taking another drag of his cigarette. "I'm fine."
Ella called bullshit on his lie. "No, you're not."

"He was right there, Shorty! One second he's there and the next-" He roughly raked his fingers through his hair. "I turned my back for one fucking second and artillery blew up the fucking house!", he ranted, flinging his cigarette away.

Her hand lightly landed on his knee. "Joe", she said, meeting his angry glower with a soft, empathetic expression. He stilled. "It's not your fault."

He exhaled, letting his head drop between his arms for a moment. "He walked out of there, Shorty. Like nothing happened."

"He was in shock. It can happen. You did good, Lieb, sitting him down and keeping him calm."

He looked up and searched her face for any sign that she was just saying that to make him feel better.

A small smile spread on her lips, correctly reading his look. "I mean it, Lieb."

He returned the smile. It was shaky and sad, but it was a start. "Guess I paid attention in your class."

She chuckled.

"Now get outta here, you look like crap", he said, lightly nudging her with his shoulder.

"Thanks. You're one to talk", she replied with a teasing grin.

Ella stood up and turned around, offering him her hand. Raising an eyebrow, he grabbed it and let her pull him to his feet. She waved and walked back to the aid station. The door closed behind her. That's when he felt something in his palm. Glancing down, he had to smile. "Sneaky little girl", he muttered.

"Pour l'amour de Dieu, Ellie!", Gene sighed. The girl was back already, only 5 minutes after he had told her to take a break. "Did you at least get some food?", he questioned.

She shook her head. "I'll eat when we're done here." Arching her brow in a silent challenge, she asked back: "Have you eaten yet?"

"No", Gene had to admit.

Ella laughed lightly. "Pot, meet kettle." They were both equally dedicated to their job and stubborn to boot.

Gene just smiled to himself as he wiped his hands on a rag that had seen better days.

"Hey Blithe. How are you doing?" She crouched down before him and pulled out her penlight.
He still sat in the same spot, stared into the air and wrung his hands. "Uh... still can't see, Ma'am."

The girl shifted and checked his pupil reaction. Completely normal. "Huh", she made. Clicking off the penlight and rubbing at her forehead, she continued her examination. "When you say you can't see, do you mean it's pitch black or is it blurry? Is everything white or is there just like a grey fog over everything?"

He blinked a few times. "Um... just black, Ma'am. It all just went dark on me."

Sitting down cross-legged across from him, careful not to block the corridor, she addressed Blithe again: "Okay, so it went dark on you. Can you tell me what happened?"

Nodding, he started explaining how he had covered his comrades' backs and had wanted to follow. "And then, I don't know, I just couldn't see."

Ella noticed how his breathing picked up and sweat glistened on his forehead. She reached out and touched his elbow. "It's okay, Blithe. You'll be fine. We'll arrange for you to get back to England, hm?"

He hung his head. "I didn't want to let anyone down, Ma'am", he mumbled.

"You didn't. It's not your fault, Blithe." She patted his elbow and stood up. "Just call if you need anything."

Turning around, Ella was surprised to see Lt Winters sitting on one of the tables. Gene, who was prying away the bloody sock that stuck to the lieutenant's shin, gave her another pointed look. "Ellie, what are ya still doing here? Your shift's over." Early into their training, they had established their own system of shifts and turn-takings to ensure each of them got enough rest, ate enough and got a chance to take a breather.

Winters studied the young medic. Her ODs were dusty and smeared with the blood of numerous soldiers. There was a hole in her trousers, revealing a glimpse at the kneepad beneath. The bruises around her neck were slowly changing from a deep purple to green. She had dust and dirt smudged across her face, specks of blood sprinkled on one cheek. But her green eyes were soft and warm.

Ella shrugged. "Had to check on Blithe."

Gene rolled his eyes, but it was good-natured. "Vas-y. Ouste", he said, shooing her away.

The girl laughed, giving him a playful salute. "Oui, mon commandant", she quipped as she left.

Ella was lying on the landing, sun shining warmly on her face. More, Malarkey, Skip and Penkala were sitting on the steps, debating about something or other. She didn't really listen, content to let the familiar rhythm of their voices carry her to a state of calm weightlessness.

"Ma'am?"

She opened her eyes.

Blithe stood before her, a shy smile on his face. "Thank you."
For a moment, she didn't understand what he was talking about. Then, it clicked. "You can see again?", she asked. Of course he can, otherwise he wouldn't be here.

"I don't know why... Lieutenant Winters talked to me and... it just came back."

Ella smiled. "I'm glad to hear that. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Is it... is it alright if I sit down here, Ma'am?"

She nodded. "Only if you drop the Ma'am and call me Ella, Blithe. I'm not that old."

"Yes, M- Ella. Thank you."

The boys laughed, but gregariously made way for him.

Ella was dozing, just on the verge of sleep, when Skip's shout startled her awake again.

"Oh God! This Kraut cheese tastes like... It stinks!"

"Bread's stale, too", Penkala commented, sounding disappointed.

Chortling, Ella sat up and brushed a tousled mop of hair out of her eyes. Tying her locks up into a ponytail, she listened to More insisting: "You mark my words, Mal: Berlin by Christmas."

"Enjoy while it lasts."

They looked up to see Lieutenant Speirs standing behind them. "We'll be moving out soon."

"Out of town, Lieutenant?", More asked, "Already?"

Speirs' eyes bored into them. "That's right." He walked down the steps, Penkala getting up to make room for him.

"Don't they know we're just getting settled here?"

More's grumbling made Speirs stop in his tracks. He turned around and fixed him with his intense stare. Then his gaze shifted to Ella, who had just rolled her eyes at More. His eyes flickered to the fading bruises around her throat. "Sergeant Sawyer?"

Her spine straightened in an automatic response to being addressed by rank and last name. "Yes sir?"

"A word?" It wasn't exactly a request and she knew it.

Slightly bewildered, the girl got up. "Yes sir." She didn't miss the worried and confused looks her friends were trading and frowned. Was hän si de? She hadn't heard the rumours yet, and even if she'd had, she wouldn't have believed half of them. She followed the Lieutenant until they were out of earshot but still in plain sight of the stairs.

"What's that about?", Skip wondered.

They watched how Speirs studied the girl intently, then said something. Her expression went from
puzzled but curious to apprehensive, then to distraught as he kept talking.

"What the-?", Malarkey muttered.

Ella hung her head and seemed to compose herself before looking back at Speirs and answering. She was shifting uncomfortably, fiddling with the chain of her dog tags. Then she dropped her gaze again. Speirs nodded, his expression unreadable as always. He spoke to her. Something he said made her raise her head. She smiled a little. The lieutenant pulled out a pack of smokes and held it out to her, offering her one.

"Jesus", Penkala breathed.

The young medic took the proffered cigarette. She said something, tilting her head. Speirs responded. Ella nodded, turned and came walking back to them. She was pale.

"What the hell was that?", Skip burst out.

The young medic shook her head and picked up her gear. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"Did he threaten you?", Penkala questioned.

Her eyebrows rose up. "No? Why, should he?" She grabbed her helmet.

"Let's go! 1st Platoon! Weapons on me!", Welsh called, "We're moving out!"

Ella nudged them. "C'mon, up."

They were trudging through another field. There seemed to be an awful lot of those in Normandy. It was drizzling.

Frank, sunny as always, asked: "Hey Luz. How far are we going?"

Luz rolled his eyes. "Oh Jesus Christ, Frank, I don't know", he answered, giving him a flat look. "Until they tell us to stop."

"High ground", Hoobler chimed in, "There's high ground up ahead."

Frank was on a roll now. "Okay, genius. Answer me this then: " – Ella and Luz shared an amused smile – "Why is Easy Company the only company who's either at the front of an advance, or, like now, exposed at the far edge of the line?"

"To keep you on your toes", Hoobler said dryly.

"To give you something to complain about", Ella stated at the same time.

Frank shook his head. "No, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that we're never in the middle, and we're the fifth of nine companies of this regiment. Able through Item. Think of it."

"I rest my case", the brunette deadpanned, making Luz snicker.

Just then, machine gun bursts ripped through the air. Everyone hit the ground. "Incoming!",
somebody oh so helpfully yelled.

"Contact right!", Welsh bellowed, "Get in the hedgerow!"

Ella was crawling as fast as she could through the wet grass. A soldier went down next to her. She reached over and searched for a pulse. She found none. Biting back a curse, the girl pushed herself forward. Welsh was still shouting orders over the noise. Reaching the hedgerow, she stayed low and waited, heart hammering in her chest. The enemy fire soon abated and they dug in for the night.

She was soaking wet and shivering lightly. The Germans were singing in their trenches across the meadow. Ella couldn't make out the words as she made her way to the foxhole she planned on spending the night in. Or most of the night anyways. She had informed Gene that it was her shift now and that she would do the first rounds.

Nearly slipping in the mud, the girl slid into the trench next to Johnny, who sullenly glanced at her. She wiped the rain out of her eyes and yawned, reflexively covering her mouth. Johnny huffed in amusement.

Blithe came sliding down from the dyke, settling on Martin's other side.

"What have they got to sing about?", Johnny wondered out loud, sounding just as frustrated and peevd as probably most of them felt.

Ella shrugged and wrapped her arms tighter around herself. She generally liked the rain. She even liked thunderstorms. She and her brother used to sit at the window, listen to the thunder and watch lightning flash across the sky. But sitting in a muddy trench that was slowly filling with water, with Germans only yards away, that was not her idea of a good time.

Up on the dyke, twigs rustled. Johnny grabbed his gun, twisted and called: "Flash!"

Lieutenant Welsh slid down into the trench. "Thunder." He was far too cheerful for this situation. "Catchy tune, ain't it?"

Johnny relaxed and sat back, expression turning sullen once more. "Hey lieutenant", he said, "what's the news?"

Welsh craned his neck to look over the edge. "Same as it was this afternoon. They're in their hedgerow, we're in ours."

"Spell me a minute, sir?", Johnny asked.

Welsh asked back: "You gonna let Blithe get some sack time?"

"My back teeth are floating."

He nodded. "Get back here ASAP, Martin."

"You can count on me, sir", Johnny said, hurriedly getting up and disappearing.
Ella snickered quietly before standing. "I gotta make my rounds, sir. Get some rest, okay?" She expectantly looked at both men. Blithe nodded, while Welsh just winked and waved as she left.

The medics always made rounds whenever the company dug in somewhere for the night, especially after they had been under enemy fire. There was always the possibility that somebody was hiding an injury, or simply hadn't discovered it yet.

The girl went from foxhole to foxhole, talking to everybody and making sure they were okay. In the dark, it was sometimes difficult to keep track where one company's position ended and the next began. It had happened before that a medic from another company came to their trenches and vice versa. Usually, it didn't bother anybody, the men would exchange some words before the medic returned to his – or, in Ella's case, her – unit.

This time however, the young girl stumbled upon the wrong trench.

"I was wondering when I'd see you."

She froze, breath catching in her throat. Oh nei. A face that often visited her in her nightmares stared back at her, lazy smirk playing around thin lips. Pale eyes watched her intently, feasting off the terror on the young girl's features.

"You know the broad?", the other man asked curiously.

Adrian Michaels smiled.

Ella felt sick. She had seen that same smile far too many times, the predatory curl of his lip. An icy shiver ran down her spine.

"We go way back, don't we, Ella?"

She wanted to run, but her body refused to cooperate. Breathing was incredibly difficult all of a sudden. Her throat was too tight and her lungs wouldn't expand properly.

"Oh yeah?", Michaels' buddy perked up.

"Yeah. We were really close in high school", he drawled, eyes never leaving the girl, gauging her reaction.

"No", she managed to choke out. "We weren't."

"Come on, you gotta admit, we saw each other a lot." He grinned.

Ella regained control over her legs. She backed away and hurried off into the night, panicked breaths wheezing their way past her closed-up throat. Unbeknownst to any of them, somebody had watched the short exchange with a deep frown on his face.

Shaking all over, the girl stumbled back to Easy and slid into the first foxhole with friendly faces in them. It happened to be Luz and Perconte's. Frank was dead to the world, but George took one look at his young friend and immediately reached out, pulling her closer. She curled up against his side and buried her face in her hands.
"What happened? Are you okay?", he asked after a while. When she had come by on her rounds, she had been wet and tired, but comparatively cheerful like always. Now, she was trembling all over, white as a sheet and breathing like she'd run a marathon.

She shook her head. "I...I was doing rounds", she whispered, not wanting to wake Frank. "I walked too far, found some Dog Company soldiers. One of them-", she took a shaky breath, "one of them was Adrian Michaels."

Luz frowned. "The guy from your high school? The one Archer mentioned when...", he trailed off, not really knowing what to say.

Ella nodded. "I shouldn't have let him get under my skin like this", she mumbled. "It's been three years."

George tightened his hold on her. "Hey", he said, giving her a little jostle. "don't beat yourself up. You know, there was this woman that lived down the street from us? When we were kids, she once yelled at us because we were playing ball and being noisy. We never spoke in more than a whisper in front of her house."

She looked at him, a small, sincere smile forming on her lips. "Thanks, Luz." She appreciated what he was trying to do.

He ruffled her hair.

"I gotta get back to my foxhole", Ella spoke after a few minutes of silence, "before Johnny sends a search party." She hopped out of the foxhole. "See ya, Luz." He waved as she disappeared into the night.

She was on her way back to the ditch she shared with Martin and Blithe when she heard Liebgott exclaim:"- the hell are you doing!? That's Talbert!" Somebody moaned in pain. Worry tightening in her stomach, the girl rushed to where she had heard the sounds.

"Medic!", somebody called.

It sounded close and it didn't take long for Ella to reach the scene. Tab was half-sitting, half-lying slumped against a tree, Liebgott kneeling beside him, hands pressed against Tab's stomach. Smith, Talbert's foxhole buddy, was stammering: "I didn't mean to. He looked like a Kraut!"

Ella dropped to her knees next to Tab. "Move your hands, Lieb, I gotta see it", she spoke calmly, hands already moving to check Tab's wounds. Gene suddenly appeared next to her.

"Can you breathe?", Liebgott asked.

Talbert nodded. "Yeah I can breathe." He was tossing his head from side to side in pain.

"Look at me. Look at me!", Liebgott urged, a slightly frantic edge to his voice.

"Yeah I can breathe!", Tab repeated.

Ella ripped open a packet of sulfa "I'll put some sulfa on the wound, Floyd", she warned the wounded man, "you'll be fine." Her hands still trembled a bit.
Gene studied his fellow medic. She was pale and looked a bit rattled, which was odd because he had seen her treat worse injuries without batting an eye. "Ellie", he said, getting her attention. "I got it. My shift."

The girl nodded and sat back on her haunches. "Wake me in a few hours?"

He hummed in assent and she turned to Liebgott. "Take care of Smithy, okay? I'll check in with you later."

Liebgott rolled his eyes good-naturedly. "Just go get some sleep, Shorty."

She chuckled slightly and headed towards her foxhole, Tab's moans following her.

"Flash!"

Ella jumped. "Thunder", she replied shakily.

Two figures stood in the small clearing. "Sergeant Sawyer", one of them acknowledged her.

"Lt Speirs, sir." Her eyebrows creased. "Blithe, shouldn't you get some sleep?"

The blond private shook his head. "Wanted to check out the noise, ma'am." He was scared, it was written all over his face.

She nodded. "It's fine, Doc Roe's taking care of it, Blithe."

They started walking back towards the foxhole.

"Got some nervous privates in your company", Speirs said.

Blithe stammered: "We do, sir. Yeah, we do... I can vouch for that."

Ella shrugged. "Can't really blame them." How could she? She was just as scared as any of them, she just hid it better. And she could distract herself by focusing on her job.

Speirs scrutinised the girl next to him. "Are you alright, Sawyer?", he asked.

"Uh... yes, sir. Just tired, sir."

He raised an eyebrow. Ella didn't see that as she was looking straight ahead. "Then I suggest you get some sleep", he offered.

She stifled a yawn. "Was on my way there, 'fore you decided to scare the living daylights outta me, sir", she replied, exhaustion removing the filter between her brain and her mouth. The lieutenant didn't reprimand her for her statement, which bordered on insolence. He didn't even seem to have noticed it.

"Carry on then, Sergeant", he said.

In the moonlight, it almost looked like he smiled. But Ella decided that her tired mind and the light were just playing tricks on her.
They reached the foxhole. Ella slid in without second thought and huddled close to Johnny, who blinked awake.

"What's going on at 3rd Platoon?", he asked.

"Talbert accidentally got skewered by Smithy. Nothing serious", Ella replied, head coming to rest on his shoulder. She was too tired and scared to care about personal space. "G'night, Johnny", she mumbled, not bothering to wipe away the wet hair plastered to her forehead.

Martin frowned down at her sleeping form before shrugging to himself and closing his eyes again, trying to block out the quiet conversation between Blithe and Speirs. It was no use and after the lieutenant had left, he gave up all hope of getting some shut-eye.

The comfortably warm body pressed against his side gave him a bit of comfort and eventually, he slipped into a light doze.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Pour l'amour de Dieu: For the love of God, for God's sake
Vas-y: Go on
Ouste: Shoo
Oui, mon commandant: Yes, sir
Was hän si de?: What is going on with them?
Oh nei: Oh no.
Fighting in Normandy

Chapter Summary

Easy Company fights in the Battle of Bloody Gulch and gets pulled off the line at the end of July, after three weeks of fighting and tending to wounded.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ella had slept fitfully. She had heard every word of what Speirs had told Blithe and it had taken her a long time to drift off. She woke up way before dawn after far too little sleep when somebody tapped her on the shoulder. Shaking her head to clear the cobwebs of fatigue, the girl carefully got up without disturbing Johnny, who was dozing. Grabbing her gear and scrambling out of the foxhole, she gave Gene a smile as they walked side by side.

"You get any sleep?", she asked innocently.

He nodded. "Got a few hours. You?"

"Not much. How'd it go with Talbert?" He had been evacuated during the night.

Gene scratched at a spot under his helmet. "He'll be fine. Missed everything vital."

"Yeah."

They were silent for a while, walking by the foxholes and checking on the men, most of them still asleep. Ella looked in on Liebgott and Smith while Gene set off to track down Winters and probably get the lieutenant to sit down long enough for the Cajun medic to change the dressing on his foot.

Liebgott was awake and gave her his signature smirk. "Hi Shorty."

She smiled and crouched down at the foxhole. "How's it going, Lieb?"

"Eh, alright. Took me almost an hour to calm the idiot down", he grumbled, but there was no heat behind it.

"It was a mistake. Could have happened to any of us", the girl said.

"Yeah, well... wearing a Kraut poncho wasn't exactly the smartest thing either", Liebgott allowed. Then he really looked at her. "Jeez, did you get any sleep?", he asked incredulously.


Liebgott's eyebrows creased. "Something happened last night."
It wasn't a question. She could deflect. She could lie. She could walk away. But she didn't. He cared and just tried to look out for her. She saw it, right there in his eyes. It wouldn't be fair to him to not give him an answer. Sighing, the girl sat back on her haunches. "I ran into Adrian Michaels", she admitted.

Liebgott's mien turned downright murderous. "Did he do something? I swear to God, I'm gonna find that bastard and kill him", he growled, already moving to grab his weapon.

"No, please." She looked at him pleadingly. "Nothing happened. Just... seeing him... it brought some stuff back." When he didn't react, Ella put a hand on his shoulder. "Please, Lieb. It would only make things worse if you got into a fight with him. I'm...I'll be okay."

Slowly, reluctantly, he nodded. "Alright. But if he ever, ever, touches you, I'm gonna kill him."

She smiled. His concern made her feel all warm and fuzzy. "I don't think you'd be alone with that, Lieb", she replied.

"Damn right I won't be."

When the artillery hit, Ella narrowly escaped death. She heard the mortar shell only a second before it hit.

The blast knocked her off her feet. Searing hot shrapnel flew through the air, bouncing off her helmet, tearing her jacket and one piece leaving a deep gash across her left forearm. Coughing, she rolled onto her stomach and waited for the cries that were sure to come. She didn't notice the blood running down her arm, dripping from her fingers.

"Medic!", Luz shouted as the man next to him collapsed. Out of nowhere, Ella popped up and dragged the wounded man away from the rattling gunfire.

Blood was spurting from the soldier's chest and gurgling in his mouth with each breath. Tearing open his jacket, the young medic pushed her hand into the wound, trying to find the artery that had been cut. "Kumm scho, bitte, bitte", she begged, desperation beginning to set in as the man's life was literally slipping through her fingers.

"Medic!"

"Merda!", Ella cursed as she found the source of the bleeding. The man was now choking. With her free hand, she tilted his head to the side. Blood flowed from his lips, staining his teeth a light pink.

"Medic! MEDIC!"
"It's okay, Private, it's okay", she soothed as the man floundered weakly. "I'm sorry", she whispered. There was nothing she could do for him. Not when the bullet had punched a hole through his lungs, leaving him to drown in his own blood. Soon, the struggling abated and his chest stilled.

"MEDIC!"

Ella ducked as bullets whizzed past and started running again. She heard Winters yelling orders over the noise of war.

"MEDIC!"

It was Sergeant Grant. He was kneeling beside a soldier, trying to apply a bandage to the man's thigh. The soldier was writhing in pain, groaning and clutching at the grass beneath him, making it almost impossible for Chuck to hold the bandage in place.

"I got it!" The girl had to scream over the explosions and gunfire. Swiftly taking over, she stuck a syrette in the man's intact thigh and then forced the soldier to look at her. "Breathe, Corporal. C'mon, I need you to calm down." He was terrified. "It's alright, it's just a gunshot wound. You'll be fine."

Suddenly, there were tanks. Ella had no idea where they had come from, but they were causing a lot of damage. It rained dirt and shrapnel. The situation looked even more dire now that they were facing an enemy that ridiculously outgunned them.

"Is he insane?", Smokey shouted from where he was manning the machine gun with More.

Ella was lying next to them, covered only by the small dyke. She had only just realised that she had been bleeding for a while. Her left sleeve was soaked, blood flowing in rivulets down her forearm and dripping from her fingers. Sloppily bandaging the gash, she peered over the dyke to see what he was talking about. Welsh and McGrath were out in the open, a bazooka trained on one of the approaching tanks.

The tank fired. Trees exploded, sending splinters in all directions. Ella ducked quickly enough and was spared from any shrapnel flying their way. Gordon hadn't been so lucky. A piece had grazed his head, the gash bleeding freely.

The bazooka fired. It didn't do much, the tank kept advancing. The next tank shell hit the ground, dirt spraying up.

"I swear, if one of them gets hurt, I'm gonna slap them", Ella yelled to Smokey, wiping some dirt out of her eyes.
He laughed.

The bazooka fired again and this time, the shot hit its mark. The Kraut tank destroyed, Welsh and McGrath came racing back to their line, jumping into the trench.

Now the calls for a medic became more frequent as the Germans retaliated. Ella was trying very hard to be everywhere at once. Of course, it was impossible, but to the men, it seemed like she could actually do it. She was rushing from wounded to wounded, fishing bullets out of wounds, taking out shrapnel, applying bandages and comforting her patients.

"MEDIC!"

Ella slid to a stop next to a grenade launcher team. One of the men was screaming in agony, a hole in his skull. Plunging a syrette into his shoulder and pressing a bandage against the man's head, the girl heard a strangled yelp before a body slumped against her. The other soldier had been shot straight through the heart. She was still tending to the man with the skull wound when all of a sudden, there were a lot more explosions on the enemy side. And it sounded like tanks being blown up.

Looking up, the young medic saw a huge line of Sherman tanks rolling down the road, attacking the Germans. The 2nd Armoured had come to provide back-up. From somewhere to her right, she heard Lt Welsh shout: "Oh, you beautiful babies, you!"

With the shift of power, the Germans started retreating very quickly. The cries for a medic became fewer and fewer as they pushed the enemy back.

And then, it was over.

Ella slumped down where she was, adrenaline fading. Medics from the newly arriving companies took over, giving her and Gene a respite. She stared down at her hands. They were slick with blood. The bandage on her forearm had been white when she'd put it on. Now it was an unidentifiable reddish-brown colour that made her think of Toccoa. Blood was trickling out from underneath the bandage, leaving drops on the ground and on her trousers. Slowly, with unsteady fingers, she tugged it off and discarded it. Pulling out a packet of sulfa, she ripped it open with her teeth.

Gentle hands stopped her.

Blinking in surprise, Ella looked up. "When did you get here?" It slipped out before her brain could catch up with her mouth.

Gene chuckled softly, sitting down next to her. Carefully, he positioned her injured arm in his lap and took the sulfa off her. Ella grit her teeth, but couldn't stop a hiss from escaping her lips.

"Are you hurt anywhere else?", he asked as he put a new, clean bandage over the wound.

She shook her head. "Thanks", she spoke quietly when he was done. Looking at him, she inquired: "What about you? You okay?"

He nodded. Getting up, he offered the young girl a hand. With a tired smile, she let him pull her to her feet. Together, they walked back to where the rest of Easy was.
The men had noticed that Ella had been quieter than usual, almost withdrawn. They had also seen the white bandage on her forearm, but since she was still here, they all knew that it wasn't serious.

They were sitting in clusters, talking and eating their evening rations. So far, they had all given the girl the space she so obviously wanted and needed. But now, they were starting to worry. They saw the way she glanced at everyone, how she tried very hard not to jump when somebody walked past, how she chewed on her bottom lip.

"Anybody know what's going on with our girl?", Guarnere asked, looking over to where Ella sat alone, journal open on her knees, pencil trembling slightly in her hand.

Malarkey shook his head, so did Toye and Skinny.

"Maybe Doc knows", Skinny suggested.

They went to ask Roe. He didn't know anything either. But he had also been watching her closely.

"So you see it too?", Malarkey confirmed.

Gene nodded.

"See what?", Luz asked. He had overheard Malarkey's question as he was walking past.

Guarnere jerked his head in the direction of their youngest member. "She's been acting off all day."

Luz hummed. "Yeah, she came to our foxhole last night. Pale and real shaky."

"Who's shaking?", Skip wanted to know, strolling over to them.

Luz sighed and went on to tell them what Ella had told him last night.

Bull and Johnny had been discussing the same thing with Buck, Grant, Dukeman and Christenson, while Penkala, Shifty, Hoobler and Perconte were talking to Liebgott. It didn't take long until everybody knew what had happened.

"God, I can't stand this anymore!", Toye huffed and swiftly walked over to the small girl. The others watched as Ella's shoulders tensed and then relaxed when the temperamental man sat down next to her.

They sat in silence for a while. Ella closed her journal with a sigh, dragged a hand through her already tousled hair and guardedly looked at him. Looked at him with big, dark-green puppy dog eyes. Slowly, she lowered her gaze to her hands. "Luz told you", she stated quietly. There was no trace of anger in her voice.

"Yeah."

They were quiet again.

This time, it was Toye who broke the silence. "He won't try anything. Not when you got a whole
company watching out for you."

Her laugh sounded a little bit too much like a sob. "I know", she said. "He...he just gets to me."

Toye nodded. Without saying anything, he pulled something from his pocket.

Ella looked at it. Then at him. Then back at the object in his hand.

He held it out to her.

A tiny, sweet smile pushed back the sadness on her face as he wrapped her small fingers around it. Her eyes lightened. "Thank you, Joe." She looked back down at her hand. He had given her a knife. It was similar to the one she lost on D-Day. The weight was familiar. And just holding it made her feel safer.

Another person settled down on her other side. It was Guarnere.

"Hiya, lil' lady. How's it going?", he drawled in his distinct accent, reaching up to ruffle her hair.

Slowly, in small groups, her friends came over, pack and bedroll in tow, and sat down until they were forming a protective circle of small clusters around the small girl.

Ella smiled. You just had to love those guys.

She didn't resist when Gene insisted on checking her arm, despite her assurances that it was just fine. She didn't object when Luz plopped himself down next to her and bopped her in the side. And she didn't question it when they settled down for the night and she was flush in the middle, tucked safely between Luz and Toye, with the rest of the men around them.

It was D-Day plus 17 or 18 and they finally got the chance to rest. They had taken the village the day before and Battalion, in its never-ending benevolence, had allowed them a small break. Ella was grateful that they didn't move out until late in the afternoon. It had become a habit for the men to be sitting in small clusters, talking, smoking, eating or sleeping.

Surprisingly, Vest started handing out mail.

"Sergeant Sawyer, J.V.!", he called.

The girl raised her hand. "Here!" She was laying on her back, head pillowed on her musette bag. Sleep was starting to reach out to her, but she would never pass up an opportunity to read a letter from her mother.

"There ya go, Shorty." With his mail-call duties, Vest had quickly gotten to know those who regularly got letters from home.

"Still with the initials, huh?", Skinny teased her. "And you really won't tell us?"
She shot him a dry look, amusement curling the corners of her lips. "Where would the fun in that be?", she teased. "Besides, I know that betting pool still exists."

They chuckled.

"What's your mom writing?", Toye asked, leaning over from where he was sitting.

"Give me a minute to read, would ya? I haven't even opened the envelope", Ella laughed.

She didn't know why, but many of the men in Easy Company were always eager to know what Isabel had written to her daughter. Some had been really excited when they'd heard Ella's mother had met somebody and had wanted to know everything about the man.

One of Isabel's letters had thus been filled with almost nothing but information about James:

*You wanted to know more about James. There is so much I could tell you about him. I feel like I am 16 again, Ella, I feel like when I met your father. He is 38 like me and he is a teacher in Ohio. When we met, he was visiting an old family friend. None other than Dr Miller! The world is a small place, wouldn't you agree? He is taking some leave to finish his novel. We have been going out for a month now and I cannot say how happy I am!*

The men had taken great delight in debating whether or not he was a good fit for Ella's mother, which left the girl feeling rather confused and slightly embarrassed. After all, they were discussing her mother's love life!

"C'mon, Shorty, don't leave us hanging here", Guarnere whined.

"Have some patience, Gonorrhoea", she grinned, eyes never leaving the letter.

*My charina Ella,*

*Cordialas gratulaziuns per l'anniversari, mia figlia! My dear Ella, you have achieved so much in your life already. I am so proud of you. And I am sure both Nico and your Papa are, too.*

*I know this letter won't reach you for a while, still, I hope you and your friends are alright. The news of the invasion has reached us this morning. You can imagine how worried I am. If you need to talk about some of the things you'll certainly experience over there, know that I am always here for you.*

*James and I have been talking about our future together. I love him very much and we are happy, charina. We are considering marriage, but we both agreed that you should have a say in this, too. You know Papa has told me a long time ago that I should move on with my life. For years, I couldn't. Part of my heart will always belong to Thomas.*

*I know how much you love Papa and I understand this is a lot to ask, especially when you are on another continent fighting a war. But will you give it some thought? We will of course wait for your answer, Ella, no matter how long it takes.*

*Work has been keeping me busy lately. The hospital is a lot bigger than Dr Miller's small clinic*
and there are many accidents in a city this big. If I remember correctly, John Martin is from Ohio? I think I might have met his wife, Pat, at the shop last week. Such a lovely woman. Turns out we even live on the same street! The world sure is small...

My sweet Ella, I think of you every day and I pray that you are safe. How are your friends? Does George still steal the letters from you because he is too impatient to wait? If he’d done that with me, I’d have given him a slap on the wrist. Although...no, I don’t think I would, he sounds like too nice of a man for that.

Do you still practice French with your fellow medic, Gene? I am looking forward to your letter, charina.

I love you, Ella.

Your Mama

Isabel

Ella left out the passage about Johnny's wife, because she wanted to ask Martin first. She also kept the part about her mother possibly getting married again to herself, she had to think about that before she told them and got them all excited. And she didn't tell the boys about the birthday wishes at the beginning as she didn't want to celebrate. It was only a date after all.

Toye, Guarnere, Buck and Skinny laughed when the girl got to the part about George.

"Ey, Luz!", Guarnere hollered over to the man in question, who sat a few feet away, tinkering with his radio.

"What?", Luz called back.

"Ella's ma here talks about you in her letter!"

"Really?" He looked over at her with a mixture of confusion, expectation and excitement. Rolling her eyes in fond amusement, she read the sentences aloud. Half the company heard them of course and cackled loudly.

Luz grinned widely. "Aw, your mother loves me", he said.

The brunette smiled. "I guess she does." Not that she was surprised, it was hard not to like Luz.

Over the next three weeks, Easy Company cleared one small town after the other. Battalion apparently wanted to know the contents of every single house, shack and stable on the entire peninsula. Nixon became a regular on their patrols, pointing out the buildings that needed to be checked. Thankfully, the number of injuries stayed comparatively low. The wound on Ella's forearm scabbed over and faded to a thin, red line.

The medics were rotating back and forth between the platoons as per usual. Whenever they were with 1st Platoon, they payed close attention to Blithe. After the Battle of Bloody Gulch, as the papers apparently called it, the blond had lost all fear. Which would have been a good thing if it
weren't for the fact that fear was essential for survival.

Ella knew what Lt Speirs had been trying to tell the frightened private that night, but he had phrased it rather poorly and so, Blithe had taken the wrong lesson to heart.

On D-Day plus 25, they were hiding in the thick undergrowth while Nixon and Welsh discussed the mission.

Welsh turned around. "Need to take a look at that farmhouse. Who wants to go?" Unsurprisingly, nobody volunteered.

"I'll go", Blithe offered quietly.

The lieutenant studied the rest of his men. "Anybody else?"

They looked anywhere but at him. Sighing, he said: "Martin, Dukeman, you just volunteered. Hubba hubba."

The young medic watched with baited breath as the three men stealthily crept towards the farmhouse.

Blithe was in the lead. He made it to the upturned cart that was lying a few yards away from the building. He paused, then turned towards Martin and Dukeman.

A single shot rang out.

Blithe collapsed.

"Covering fire! Covering fire!", Lt Welsh yelled.

The girl ducked out of the way from where she had been crouching next to Shifty and got ready to move.

Johnny and Dukeman grabbed Blithe by the jacket and pulled him back.

"Medic up!", Welsh shouted.

Ella couldn't obey his command. She wouldn't be able to help Blithe if she got shot by one of the guys first.

"Medic! We need a medic down here!", Martin cried.

Oh what the hell, she thought and leapt to her feet.

"Cease fire! Cease fire!", the lieutenant then shouted.

Zu giatig. Ella ran, sidestepping man after man. "Move! Coming through! Outta my way", she called. Crashing to her knees, she immediately focused on Blithe while telling Dukeman: "I got it."

Johnny was pouring sulfa onto the bleeding wound on the blond man's neck, muttering: "Take it
easy, Blithe, take it easy." His hands shook.

"We got you, Blithe, it's alright", she said gently, pressing a bandage to his neck to stop the blood from spurting out. It soaked through within a minute and she hurriedly pulled out another to put on top. "It'll be okay."

When she cast a quick glance at his face, her stomach filled with ice. He was calm, way too calm and his eyes stared up towards the sky, empty and dull. She had to put her ear over his mouth to make sure he was still breathing. Because usually, only the dead had such lifeless eyes.

Johnny Martin fought the urge to punch something. He was kneeling on the ground next to Blithe, helplessly watching Ella work on him, his own hands slick with blood. The young girl was moving with the brisk efficiency of someone who knew what they were doing. She seemed to be doing seven things at the same time: Checking his pupils, making sure he wasn't choking on his tongue, keeping pressure on the wound, tying the bandage...

All the while, light, soothing words spilled from her lips, a stark contrast to the frantic, angry thoughts racing through his mind. "It's okay, Blithe, you'll be just fine. Stay with me, alright?", she spoke in that friendly, soft tone of hers. Her hands were still applying pressure to Blithe's neck, fingers caked with blood. Her eyes flickered up at Johnny and she gave him a small, reassuring smile.

"Don't give up, Albert. You made it, you'll be okay."

He was still staring at the sky.

"You're not dead, Blithe, and you won't be for a long time."

Johnny's eyebrows shot up when he realised what Ella was referring to.

Slowly, Blithe's gaze wandered towards the young girl kneeling beside him, her small hands pressed against his neck.

She smiled warmly at him. "Hi there, Albert."

He just stared at her, blinking a few times.

"It's alright, Albert", she said, looking him in the eyes, dark green orbs filled with reassurance and warmth. "You're not dead. You're going home and you're going to live a long and happy life. It's okay." There was more than understanding on her face. It was pure empathy.

The last thing Blithe saw before he succumbed to the darkness was her smile. It was beautiful. It made him think of home. Of sunshine. Of peace.

After a month of almost non-stop fighting, they were pulled off the line. Ella had stared at
Lieutenant Winters for a good ten seconds before the news finally sunk in. He had found her shock rather amusing, much to her embarrassment.

A bunch of trucks brought them to a field camp north of Utah Beach. It was packed with wounded, some walking around, some lying on stretchers. They were all awaiting passage to England. In the medical tents, a foul stench lingered in the air, the smell of blood and infection.

Ella and Gene had accompanied the last of their wounded and ended up helping where they could. The medical personnel were glad for the extra pairs of hands. None of them considered that these two combat medics had been on the line for over a month and could do with a decent meal and some sleep. Ella had almost pulled rank on Gene to make sure he got exactly that. But she herself got so distracted with all the wounded that needed care, she simply forgot and kept going.

Until Captain Marcus Dunn, one of the very few surgeons, found out what outfit she belonged to.

"You're with E Company? 2nd Battalion, 506 PIR?", he questioned sharply. "And what, pray tell, are you doing here?" He was met with a confused look. "Jesus Christ, you've been pulled off the line after 4 weeks, don't you think you should eat, shower and sleep like the rest of your unit?"

The girl blushed, which was barely visible under the layer of dirt on her face, and said: "Sorry, sir. I got carried away."

Dunn sighed. "You should look after yourself, Sergeant", he chided. "It won't help anybody if you collapse from malnourishment and exhaustion."

She nodded. "Yes sir."

The doctor smiled. "Good." He wanted to say more, but was cut off by a shout from the tent entrance.

"Shorty!"

The young medic jumped and turned around, looking like the child caught with a hand in the cookie jar.

"I take it you know those men", Dunn remarked dryly.

She nodded sheepishly and plastered an innocent smile on her face as the men advanced.

"You, young lady, are in big trouble", one of them, a shorter fellow with unruly hair and brown eyes, stated gleefully.

"I take it you asked Gene where to find me?", the girl said, shifting a bit.

"Something like that", the next man replied. He was a tall, dark guy with a smoky voice.

The little frown cleared up quickly and she laughed. "Oh, that traitor!"

"Alright, get yer scrawny ass in gear, Shorty", the last of the men drawled, clapping her on the shoulder, "ye need a shower."

She shot him a playful look. "Are you saying I stink, Gonorrhoea?", she challenged.

He just laughed unrepentantly.
Ella was nervous about showering. At Toccoa, there hadn't been as many people and the thought of being alone in the shower with all those men around made her slightly queasy.

Luz must have noticed her discomfort, because he said: "We'll be right outside."

He then went on to produce a bar of soap and a set of fresh ODs seemingly out of thin air. Her shower kit was dropped into her hands. They all kept a change of clean undergarments in their shower kits, it was just more practical that way. And for Ella, it made things a lot less awkward.

Toye peered through the door and gave her a nod.

"Thanks, guys", she muttered, slipping into the empty shower.

The three men sat down in front of the door, Bill pulling out a deck of cards.

Quickly shedding her grimy clothes, Ella turned on the water. She barely registered how cold the spray was. Moving on auto-pilot, the girl watched the water run down her body, washing away the grime and revealing her sun-tanned skin beneath. Scrubbing the dirt out of her locks, she quickly lathered up and washed her hair. It felt strange, being clean again. Sure, they had all dunked their heads in a stream or in a bucket from a well every few days. But that was completely different to a real shower.

Shutting off the water, the girl shook herself like a dog, drops flying everywhere. Towelling herself dry to the best of her ability, she put on the blessedly clean uniform. The cloth was stiff and starched, the complete opposite of her old ODs. Leaving her hair down to dry, she grabbed her kit and the soap and slipped outside.

"Alright", Luz called when he saw her, "Food!" He eagerly clapped his hands and the three of them flanked the young girl on their way to the mess tent. She looked even more tired after her shower with no dirt covering up the dark smudges under her eyes.

Grabbing a tray, Ella didn't pay any attention to the slop that was put on her plate. She slumped down at the first table within reach and waited until the guys were seated, Joe on her right, Bill and George across from them. Then, she shoveled the first bite of food into her mouth and sighed contently. A hot, nicely prepared meal. After living off K rations for days on end, it was almost a dream. Of course, it was Army food, but everything was better than those rations.

Her three escorts traded fond smiles when they saw how their young friend had to fight to stay awake. By the time she had polished off the last of her food, her pupils were tiny and her eyelids on half-mast. Chuckling, Bill ruffled her hair, the strands still a bit damp, and grabbed her tray to take it away. George and Joe coaxed the sleepy girl into a standing position.

"C'mon, kiddo", George prompted, "bedtime."

Ella gave a small whine and rubbed at her eyes. She didn't want to move. She just wanted to sleep.

Bill joined them again and grinned. "Alright, lil' lady, let's find you a rack."
"You're gonna fall asleep walking", Joe observed after less than a minute, slanting her a dry look. The young girl blearily blinked up at him. "'m fine", she mumbled. A huge yawn betrayed her words immediately.

Rolling his eyes, Toye easily picked her up and shifted her onto his back. She was so light, he thought to himself, probably just about 100 pounds.

Loosely slinging her arms around his neck to hold on, Ella murmured drowsily: "I can walk", despite making no move to get back on the ground.

"Sure you can, Shorty", Toye replied, hoisting her up a bit higher.

"Well, ain't you lucky. Getting’ a piggyback ride from the great Joe Toye", Bill joked.

The girl hummed contently and rested her chin on Joe's shoulder. Her even breaths brushed warmly against his skin.

"Awww, isn't that the cutest thing?", Luz gushed as they neared the large tent where most of their company was billeted. Ella's head was nestled against the crook of Toye's neck, her eyes closed, arms slack. Bill grinned widely at Joe, who tried to glance at the girl from the corner of his eye. A small, rare smile appeared on his features.

There weren't many of the guys in the tent, most of them still outside, soaking in the sun, playing cards, smoking or just relaxing. The few men that were inside were all deeply asleep. George, Bill and Joe had all claimed a bunk as theirs already and were looking forward to grabbing some shut-eye.

Getting Ella settled on her bunk took some manoeuvring, but they succeeded eventually. With an efficiency that comes from years of practice as older brothers, the three guys took off the girl's boots and jacket without disturbing her much-needed sleep. She turned and snuggled into her pillow.

Satisfied that she was comfortable, they stumbled to their own bunks. They were asleep before their heads made contact with the pillows.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Kumm scho: Come on
Bitte: Please
Merda: Crap
charina: dear, darling
Cordialas gratulaziuns per l'anniversari: Happy Birthday
mia figlia: my daughter
zu güatig: too kind (mostly sarcastic)
The company returns to Aldbourne. After a well-earned week's worth of R&R, training resumes. The replacements aren't all too eager to be in the same unit as the female medic.

Returning to Aldbourne, Ella was very excited to find that she would be staying with Mrs. Elaine Morris again. The woman had been so kind and welcoming to them when she had been billeted with her before D-Day.

Johnny had to smile at the young girl's joy. One of his wife's latest letters came to his mind.

*My dearest Johnny,* she had written, *you have told me about Ella, the young woman in your company before and you have spoken very highly of her. You mentioned that her mother moved to Ohio some time ago? I might have met Ms Sawyer at the store last week. Such a wonderful woman and imagine this, she lives on the same street as us! I really must invite her over for tea some time, I would love to get to know her, and Ella by extension.*

*My dearest husband, you are the kindest man I know, and I hope you will look after Ella. She sounds like an amazing person and I admire her courage. The vultures from the newspapers are still writing the most appalling things about this poor girl. My heart breaks for her, Johnny, and for her mother, who has to read all these awful stories about her daughter.*

"Ella!", he called.

Her head whipped around. "Yes?"

"Looks like I got stuck with you once more", he commented.

Her head tilted in curiosity, reminding him once again of a puppy. "Oh, you mean we're both housed with Elaine again?" Excitement glowed in her eyes, then a flicker of uncertainty crossed her young face. "Is that okay with you?"

He couldn't help but grin at her apprehensiveness. "Course it is."

She beamed happily, bouncing a little on her feet.

Elaine was just as thrilled to see them again. The woman engulfed both soldiers in a tight hug, tears of joy in her eyes. "Oh, I am so glad to see you are both alright!", she sniffled, "come in, come in, you must be tired after the long trip."

They couldn't deny it.
Making them sit down at the kitchen table, Elaine served them tea and excused herself to get their room ready again. "I didn't expect any guests so soon, so I haven't made the beds yet", she apologised before bustling away.

Ella stared at the steam curling up from her tea cup, a faraway look in her eyes. Johnny studied her over the rim of his own cup. The girl blinked, shaking herself out of her thoughts.

"Are you going to London tomorrow?", she asked.

They had all received two new uniforms each, all their back pay and a 7-day pass. The biggest part of Easy Company would set off tomorrow morning to blow most of their pay in the city. Since they were the first soldiers to return from the victorious invasion of Europe, there would be plenty of free food and booze around, according to Malarkey and Skip.

Martin shook his head. "Nah. Gonna enjoy the peace and quiet around here for a while. What about you?"

She took a sip of her tea. "Same here. I'm sure the guys will have a great time, but I'd only end up playing chaperon for them."

He chuckled. It had happened before that the young girl was the one to ensure they didn't do anything stupid and that they got back to their billets. Johnny grinned as he remembered one time where Ella had manhandled a completely wasted Don Hoobler out of a bar and back towards base.

"What?" the young girl smiled, intrigued.

"Just thought about how you almost carried Hoobler to his bunk."

She snorted. "Yeah. That was fun. He thought I was his girl back home, told me how much he loved me. It was embarrassing to no end." She scratched the side of her neck, just below the jawline. "I was about six seconds away from smacking him."

His eyebrow rose at that. The way he recalled it, Ella had been kind and indulgent like always, nodding along to Hoob's drunken ramblings and reassuring him that his girl would surely still be there when he got back. "Huh", he made. "Didn't look that way."

The brunette shrugged and gave him one of her lopsided smiles that showed how much more there was to her than meets the eye.

Ella, and the few others that had opted to stay in Aldbourne, enjoyed the simpler routine of the English village. Every morning, she went for a run, past the shops and towards the open fields. After a quick shower, she had breakfast with Johnny and Elaine, at the woman's insistence.

"I know well enough what the Army thinks they can call food", she had said, "besides, it is so nice to have company."

Then, Ella would help Elaine around the house or simply do whatever she felt like. She spent a lot of time with her friends, playing cards, relaxing or walking around town, talking about this and that.
She wrote to her mother the first evening back, telling her that she was safe and healthy. She didn't say much about what she had experienced in France, but she mentioned some things. She asked how things were back home, how she liked Ohio, if she had made any new friends, how James was.

Ella hadn't forgotten about the question Isabel had asked her in her last letter. During their time in Normandy, the young girl had had enough time to think about it.

*You deserve to be happy, Mama*, she wrote. *You have given up so much for us, for Papa, Nico and me. I would not presume to stand between you and James. He makes you happy and that is the only thing that counts for me.*

*Tell me about your wedding plans, assuming you have already made them. Oh, Mama, I am so excited and happy for you! I can't wait to tell the boys, they will surely be excited, too.*

She brought the letter to an end and signed her name at the bottom. Sealing the envelope, she felt a pang of homesickness hit her. *I vermiss di, Mama*, she thought, dashing away a tear that had escaped her. *I vermiss di so sehr.*

Gene and Ella took to sitting in the library together in the afternoon and reading about new medical discoveries and procedures. They both wanted to be as well-prepared as possible. After dinner, she often found herself at the local bar with Bull and Johnny, the two close friends teaching the girl how to play darts and pool.

One night, as they were walking back from the pub, they passed Lieutenant Speirs.

"Good evening, sir", Ella said politely after he had returned their salute.

"Evening, Sergeants", he replied calmly, nodding at her before continuing on his way.

"You know him?", Johnny asked.

The girl shook her head. "Not really. We crossed paths once or twice and he spoke to me once after we took Carentan."

Bull looked down at her. "What did he want to speak to you about? He ain't Easy Company", he drawled.

Ella chewed on her bottom lip and stayed quiet for a moment. "He...he wanted to know about a rumour about me that had gone round in his company", she answered eventually.

The two men frowned.

She sighed. "It's a long story and I haven't really told anyone about it", she said, looking at the ground.

"You don't have to tell us, Shorty", Bull assured the small girl, his large hand coming up to squeeze her shoulder.

They didn't speak about it any further. The haunted look on the young girl's face was something neither man wished to see again, so they let it lie. The next time, it would be Ella who brought up the topic.
She got many odd looks from the British people when she walked down the street in her uniform or her ODs. Some commented that it wasn't proper for a pretty young girl like her to wear trousers like a man. But many came over to shake her hand and congratulate her on her bravery and strength. It confused Ella because she didn't view herself as particularly brave or strong. She was just like any other paratrooper.

When the girl mentioned it to Elaine one evening as she helped her host lady with dinner preparations, the woman smiled.

"To the people, you are a hero, love. You all are, but being the first female combat medic in history, it is inspiring", she spoke. "We have been at war since 1939 and the people get tired of it. Your unique story gives them something to hold on to."

Ella cut the vegetables in front of her in deep thought. Elaine turned back to her cooking, chattering about the goings-on of the small village.

The young girl wasn't sure she was this beacon of hope the people wanted her to be. She had read enough disparaging articles about herself in the newspapers to know that not everybody saw her as an inspiration.

Soon enough, the week was over and the soldiers returned as their leave was up. Ella listened to the stories of their exploits with great amusement, laughing as they told her about all the things they had seen and done while in London.

Lipton returned from the hospital and everybody was excited to have him back. The small brunette bounded over and hugged him, a huge grin on her face. Lip smiled and returned the hug gladly. He hadn't realised how much he had missed the young girl with her never-ending kindness and easy smiles.

Winters, now promoted to Captain, put them back to work without delay. Training resumed and despite the jubilant atmosphere, they all took it very seriously. Each of them knew that the consequences could be fatal if they treated it as a joke. Having jumped into combat, watching their friends die, it gave an entirely new meaning to the drills. Sure, they grumbled and complained half-heartedy, but what would the Army be without soldiers bitching about training? Everyone acknowledged the importance of the varied lectures and manoeuvres, knowing that they needed to be able to fight on any terrain, in any weather.

There was a lot of more serious complaining about the replacements. To fill their diminished ranks as quickly as possible, the Army had condensed paratrooper training to 8 months. Each of the new guys were certified paratroopers, but it was a far cry from what the original Easy Company had gone through under Sobel. Especially in the physical fitness department, the replacements lacked the stamina and strength the Toccoa men had built up over their two years of training.
Ella couldn't really blame them for it; it wasn't their fault. What bothered her was the replacements' eagerness for combat. She couldn't fathom what could possibly be exciting about watching fellow soldiers get hurt and killed.

Broken bones, burns, bullet and shrapnel wounds, missing limbs, blast injuries that turned men's torsos to mush and spattered their brains in all directions. There was absolutely nothing to look forward to. Still, Ella treated the replacements with decency and friendliness and took care of them when they got injured in training.

When she wasn't busy bringing her own skills up to scratch, the brunette sometimes helped out training the new guys. She proved to be a real asset, especially in hand to hand combat, where she forced them to be creative and react to less than clean moves. Medics went through the same training as any other soldier and as a T-4, she held the rank equivalent to that of an NCO. Formally, she didn't have any authority over the soldiers, but Easy Company had always treated their technicians with the same respect as any other enlisted man.

Her friends were incredibly grateful for her calming presence, because especially the more temperamental among them were sometimes about ready to strangle the replacements.

"I swear to God, Shorty, that guy can't shoot his way out of a paper bag!", Liebgott cursed, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

"Deep breath, Lieb", she advised, putting a hand on his shoulder. "They didn't have as much time to hone their skills. Maybe get Shifty to take a look at his technique, he'll probably see the problem."

Blowing out a frustrated breath, Liebgott nodded. "Alright. Thanks, Shorty."

The girl grinned and advised casually: "Versuch bitte, niemanden umzubringen, Lieb. Zu viel Papierkram."

His mouth curled into a smirk. "Not making any promises", he grumbled.

Unfortunately, some of the replacements were less than happy about having a woman in their company. The veterans didn't pick up on it at first since Ella was mostly instructing the new medics together with Gene and therefore didn't have that much contact with the replacements like the rest of them.

But after the first lecture on first-aid which was held only for the replacements, the original Toccoa men started paying closer attention.

The first-aid lesson had been 'replacements only' for the simple reason of determining how much they knew. The results had been disheartening. They could stick a syrette into somebody's arm and pour sulfa onto a wound. That was about it. They didn't even know how to properly apply a normal bandage, let alone a pressure bandage. Again, neither Ella nor Gene could fault them for it.

It was the disrespectful behaviour of some of the replacements that infuriated Gene. His friend had countered all the remarks, eyerolls and scowls with the same friendly nonchalance as always, seemingly taking the mockery in stride. She patiently answered even the most ridiculous questions that only served to try and catch her off-guard, giving a detailed explanation and not showing any weakness.
And if there was a hint of sarcasm in her words, he pretended not to notice it.

Entering the barn that served as Easy's mess hall, Bull nudged Johnny and pointed towards a table in the back. Ella sat there with Roe, her back to them.

"What the hell?", Johnny muttered. He had never seen the quiet Cajun medic this tense and angry. Studying Ella, he noticed the tell-tale slump of her shoulders.

They slid into seats next to the two medics who both greeted them with a nod and, in Ella's case, a tiny smile.

"You alright?", Johnny asked.

Doc glanced at the girl, who shrugged. The clench of Roe's jaw and the furrow of his brow were answer enough.

"Grub any good?", Bull changed the topic, poking at his own portion of slop.

Ella shot him a wry look. "Is it ever?"

The tall man chuckled.

They didn't talk much during their meal, too busy trying not to guess what their food actually was. But none of them missed the way Doc's mien darkened as a group of replacements walked by, laughing and joking with each other.

When Ella had left the table to dispose of her tray, the normally private Roe fixed them with a look and asked: "Have you heard the rumours about Ellie?"

They frowned. What rumours?

Doc clarified: "Some replacements gave her a lot of shit today. And I heard some of them talk about her."

Johnny's eyes narrowed and Bull's expression turned dead serious.

"What did they say?", the snarky man demanded.

The Cajun scowled and replied: "Some stuff about not wanting a dame in the company." His voice was uncharacteristically sharp, the drawling accent filled with anger and disgust.

There was bound to be more, Bull thought, shooting the replacements in question a scrutinising look.

*If these stupid replacements disrespect our girl, there'll be hell to pay*, Johnny said to himself, an enraged look on his face.
By next morning, several other Easy Company members had heard the rumours. A few of them were inclined to sock the mouthy replacements in the face. They kept themselves in check, though, knowing full well that Ella would not be happy if they got into a fight with those dumb kids.

Lipton was aware of the replacements' attitudes towards their female medic. He advised the men to stay calm and give their girl a chance to take care of it. "She can handle herself, boys. You know that", he said.

Toye, who was looking especially murderous, sighed and nodded, trying to rein in his anger. He hated it, hearing these kids talking about Shorty as if she was some sort of trashy wench.

Ella had overheard her fair share of the slander. Most of the replacements involved didn't notice that she had caught their whispered conversations, but a few of them deliberately spoke loud enough for her to hear. She ignored them, walking by as if they weren't there. But it hurt.

When Leelan, one of the bolder guys, insolently asked during class if, since she was a girl and bound to have them, she treated gunshot wounds with tampons, she froze.

Thankfully, Gene stepped in and gave the kid a stiff talking-to while Ella distracted herself by answering Private Jackson's question about why shrapnel should not be pulled out immediately.

That afternoon, it was her turn to do inventory at the infirmary and she was glad for it. The question about the tampons had rattled her more than she cared to admit. So, she used the boring, mind-numbing task to soothe her frayed nerves. Little did she know that her friends were planning to put the replacements in their place.

"Lip!", Bill called, hurrying to catch up to the man.

"What is it?", Lipton asked.

"Did ya hear what happened this morning? Doc yelled at one of 'em replacements." Trust Bill to know all the gossip and share it with anyone in the vicinity.

"What happened?" Lipton knew Doc Roe as an even-tempered, quiet man. It seemed rather out of character for the level-headed medic to lose his cool.

Guarnere's expression turned to a scowl. "Fuckin' replacement said something nasty to Shorty. What I heard she was really upset. Didn't let it show of course, but you know..."

Lipton frowned as they reached the mess hall. Sitting down at a table with his food, he asked Bill to tell him exactly what he knew.

When Buck sat down next to them a few moments later, he immediately joined in, having heard many rumours and disparaging comments about Easy's girl himself. He suggested discussing the issue with the rest of the NCOs.

They held an impromptu meeting after dinner, before another scheduled drill. They unanimously
agreed that something had to be done. Lipton cautioned that any direct interference on their part might make matters worse since it would give off the impression that Ella couldn't handle the problem herself. They turned it over and over in their minds, trying to come up with a solution that wouldn't undermine their girl's authority.

The drill was scheduled from 1930 to 2200. It was hand to hand combat training and the non-coms knew exactly who would be supervising the disrespectful replacements.

The Toccoa veterans kept glancing over to them as Ella let the new guys grouse and cuss at her, seemingly impassive. They all saw the sharp edge behind her patient smile, but the replacements were completely unaware of the gathering storm.

"What do you know about fighting?", Corporal Leelan complained when she corrected his stance for the third time, "you're a medic, a goddamn broad."

Ella arched an eyebrow, looking quite amused. "Your point being?"

"Everybody knows women don't belong in combat. They are too faint-hearted", he proclaimed, loudly and full of misplaced confidence.

Around them, the men had long since given up the pretence of sparring.

Ella looked completely unimpressed. "I see", was her flat reply, "Unfortunately, only one of us has been in combat before, and it's not you, Corporal Leelan." She gave him a hard look, the same look that had called Liebgott and Guarnere to heel on the Samaria ages ago. When she continued, her tone was still conversational, but there was pure steel behind it.

"Now, Corporal", she said, "I'm going to say this once and only once, so you better listen up real good: I don't care what you think about me, I couldn't care less. You can hate me all you want. Just keep in mind that pissing off a medic is not the smartest thing to do." Another dangerously innocent smile appeared on her lips. "And you royally pissed off Doc Roe today. So, you might want to watch your mouth a little with me, Corporal, because otherwise my gender will be the least of your problems when you get wounded. Am I understood?"

Leelan was gaping at her with wide eyes and managed a strangled "Yes ma'am" along with a frantic nod.

"Good, now get back to training", Ella ordered.

Lipton ambled over, hiding his own grin behind a stern mask. "You heard Sergeant Sawyer, Corporal, get moving!", he barked when the replacement didn't immediately comply.

"Yes sir." Leelan hastily saluted and scurried away, face flushed beet-red.

Ella turned to Lip, a soft, grateful smile on her face. "Thanks, Lip", she said quietly.

He squeezed her shoulder in response. He could feel the tension of her muscles under his hand. He sent her over to her friends, Buck stepping in to supervise the formerly cocky replacements.

That night, when the guys invited her along to the pub, she begged off. "Sorry, boys, it's been one heck of a day."
They kept their pleading and pestering to a minimum, they could all see that today's events had taken a bit of a toll on their girl. They patted her on the back, mussed her hair and waved, wishing her a good night.

"Night, boys. Don't do anything stupid", Ella said, grinning cheekily.

The men laughed, some already heading towards the bar, some lingering to chat for a bit.

Luz beamed gleefully as he said: "Boy, you sure showed that idiot. I think he nearly pissed himself."

"Yeah, he won't give you any more trouble, I'm sure", Toye agreed. A scowl darkened his face. "He'd better not, if he knows what's good for him."

Luz nodded along, far too happy with that statement to mean anything good.

The girl shook her head, but gave her two friends each a peck on the cheek before shooing them off to the pub.

In the end, only Ella and Lipton remained. Being the gentleman that he was, Lip offered to walk her home. "It's on my way and I don't mind", he said, giving her his soft smile. Ella graciously accepted and they started walking down the street in comfortable silence.

"Thanks, Lip."

He looked over at the young girl. She raised her head to meet his gaze, a placid expression on her face. A small smile played around her lips.

"For what?", he feigned innocence.

The smile tilted a little, taking on the amused quality of someone who knew exactly what the other was trying to do. That kid is too perceptive for her own good, he thought fondly.

"It was only right", he said. "They were openly disrespectful, you don't deserve that."

A blush crept up on Ella's cheeks, but thankfully, it was invisible in the dark. She shrugged. "I've had worse", she offered, aiming for nonchalant.

"Doesn't mean you have to bear it, though", Lip pointed out calmly.

She gave a low hum. A warm, fuzzy feeling spread inside her and she couldn't help but grin.

They arrived at Elaine's residence.

"Thanks for walking me back, Lip", Ella said, turning on the porch to smile at the sergeant.

"No problem, Ella. And if replacements give you any more trouble, let us know. We got your back."

She nodded. "I will, Sarge", she promised, eyes twinkling. "Good night, Lip."

"Good night, Shorty."
Ella waved and then let herself in, grimacing at the squeaking of the door hinges.

Shaking his head and smiling to himself, Lipton continued on his way.

On the kitchen table lay an envelope addressed to Sergeant J.V. Sawyer. Picking it up, Ella immediately recognised her mother's writing. Climbing the stairs to her and Johnny's room, the girl clicked on the light of the bedside lamp and sat down on her side of the bed. She carefully opened the envelope and pulled out the letter.

My charina Ella

Your letter arrived this morning and I had to answer it right away. How are you, mia figlia, and how are your friends? I hope they are treating you alright or I might have to send them a letter, too.

To answer your question, I have indeed made a few new friends. Apart from Pat, who has become very dear to me, there are some other women that I regularly have tea with. Mary is a soldier's wife, too. Elizabeth and Grace work at the hospital with me, they have a fantastic sense of humour. And Grace bakes the most amazing pies! Then, there is Larry, he is an orderly at the hospital. Such a sweet man. But there is a fiery temper beneath the surface, so it is better not to try his patience too much. And finally, Carlo, he runs the hospital cafeteria. He is Italian and prides himself of making the best cannelloni in town.

Pat is with me right now, writing a letter to her husband. She says hi and hopes that you are well. She has heard a lot about you from John and always tells me that she cannot wait to meet you in person.

My charina figlia. I cannot tell you how much your words mean to both me and James. We are glad that you have given us your blessing, I know this must be a rather strange situation for you. We have not set a date yet, but I would love to have a spring wedding. Think of it, all the flowers blooming, the warm weather, it would be fantastic. James prefers summer, which has its own appeals. Nothing is set in stone and I reckon we will just wait and see.

As for the dress, I still have Oma Johanna's dress, the one I wore when I married Thomas. It is timeless and with a few small adaptations, it will fit me without any problems. I asked James what he thought about me wearing the same wedding dress and he said he would marry me and not the dress.

We have not made any further plans as we both would like for you to be included. After all, you would be my bridesmaid, if you want to, of course.

I miss you very much, mia figlia, and never forget that I am so proud of you.

Lots of love

Your Mama

Isabel
Smiling, Ella folded the letter and set it on the nightstand. Changing into her sleepwear, the young girl looked out of the window. "Buna notg, Mama", she whispered before closing her eyes.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

I vermiss di: I miss you
I vermiss di so sehr: I miss you so much
Versuch bitte, niemanden umzubringen: Please try not to kill anyone
Zu viel Papierkram: Too much paperwork
charina: darling, sweetheart
mia figlia: my daughter
Buna notg: Good night
Jump or no Jump

Chapter Summary

Wounded return to Easy and the company gets orders for a new mission.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Celebrating the return of some of the wounded was always a merry affair. Talbert and Smokey had come back from the hospital a few days ago, giving the men a perfect excuse for a celebration. They donned their dress greens and had dinner at the mess hall, the food actually identifiable once.

Ella had arrived fairly early, sitting down at a table with Luz and Skip who were engaged in an animated debate over the latest comic books.

"C'mon Shorty, help us out here", Skip said, "Superman is better than Batman."

"No way, Superman is boring, he is basically all-powerful, it's just no fun", Luz immediately protested.

Ella laughed. "I'm afraid I don't know much about superheroes, guys", she apologised. Which was probably the wrong thing to say, because the two immediately launched into an incredibly detailed description of various comic book heroes, their powers and their weaknesses. Skip, of course, advocating for Superman; Luz praising Batman.

It continued even as the tables filled up, Bill playfully bumping into her as he jauntily slid into the seat next to her.

Ella gave a small yelp when he nearly shunted her off the bench, earning her a round of laughter from the guys.

During dinner, Luz and Skip somehow roped the entire table into their argument. Unfortunately, each of the guys had their own favourite superhero, making it even more impossible to reach an agreement.

"Seriously, Shorty, you gotta know some of those", Perconte stated from her left.

She sighed and scratched her forehead, just along the scar running through her eyebrow. "I heard of some of 'em", she admitted, "only comics I ever got to read were Disney comics, though. You know, Mickey Mouse, Tarzan and the likes." A light blush blossomed on her cheeks. "But Nico loved Green Lantern", she added.

"Oh, he got good taste, your brother!", Skip approved.

The rest of the table nodded in agreement, each wearing the serious expression of a connoisseur.
"So, what's your favourite then?", Luz questioned.

Her blush deepened. "Donald Duck. It's funny how he likes to annoy people, but gets all riled up when the tables turn."

"So, kinda like Perconte", Johnny snarked, making the whole table – including Frank – laugh.

Stomach filled, Ella sat back to listen to Smokey's poem which he had created during his stay at the hospital. "The Night of the Bayonet", he announced the title.

She snickered, knowing full well what it would be about.

"The night was filled with dark and cold, when Sgt Talbert, the story's told,
pulled on his poncho and headed out, to check the lines, dressed like a Kraut.
Upon a trooper our hero came, fast asleep, he called his name:
Smith, oh Smith, get up! It's time, to take your turn out on the line."

Ella laughed along with everybody else. Behind her, she heard the replacements wondering where the heck this was going.

"But Smith, so very weary, cracked an eye, all red and bleary.
Grabbed his rifle, he did not tarry, hearing Floyd, but seeing Jerry."

"Oh my God!", poor Smithy cried out, burying his face in his hands, as the men laughed.
Smokey continued cheerfully:

"'It's me!', cried Tab, 'Don't do it!' and yet Smith charged toute suite with bayonet.
He lunged, he thrust both high and low, and skewered the boy from Kokomo."

Under the applause, Ella heard a voice behind her declare: "I'm heading back to barracks." Her eyes narrowed as Bill turned in his seat, stopping the red-headed replacement she recognised as Heffron with a hand on his chest.

"You Heffron?", he questioned.

"Yeah", the private confirmed.
"Where you from?", Bill continued his interrogation.

"Who's asking?", Heffron asked back.

Ella had to suppress an eyeroll and exchanged an amused glance with Johnny. Skip's expression switched from confused to excited.

"You from Philadelphia?" Bill knew that everybody at his table could see through his act, but it was just too good an opportunity to mess with a replacement. He didn't miss the glance Ella shot him, silently telling him not to take it too far.

"South Philly, yeah", Heffron confirmed, a frown creeping up onto his youthful features that was somewhere between confused and annoyed.

"I could tell", he remarked, keeping the sneer on his face for a moment before he broke. "17th Street." He grinned at the kid with a triumphant 'gotcha'-look.

"Yeah?", Heffron's face lit up in surprise. "Front Street! Hey!" He enthusiastically shook Guarnere's hand.

Ella and Luz looked at each other with grins tugging on the corners of their mouths, shaking their heads.

Bill invited Heffron to sit down, which he happily did.

"Fuck, you see that?", Skip asked Johnny incredulously as the two Philadelphians started talking about the characters they knew back home.

"Small world", Ella shrugged, still grinning.

Smokey grabbed their attention once again. "Since you weren't wounded by the enemy and thus didn't qualify for a Purple Heart, we've taken matters into our own hands", he announced, taking off one of the 3 medals on his chest. He held it out. "Tab, this is for you."

Luz leant back to clap the man on the back as they cheered and applauded.

"I could have shot the kid a dozen times", Tab claimed.

"Yeah right", came Liebgott's dry remark. Ella could hear the grin in his voice.

"I just didn't think we could spare a man", Floyd finished, making the men laugh again.

She called over: "How very gallant of you, Tab!"

He turned in his seat and pretended to be offended. "Are you calling me a liar?", he cried.

"No, I just remember you cursing a blue streak before I even used the sulfa", she shot back, eyes
twinkling with mischief. The dimple on her cheek made her smile look lopsided.

"She got you there, Tab", Malarkey joined the teasing.

Talbert bore it good-naturedly, laughing at his own expense.

Ella immediately knew that it was bad news when Lipton got up. If not by his expression, she could tell from the set of his shoulders.

"Couple of announcements to make, men!", he spoke, voice loud enough to carry over the chatter.

"And woman!", somebody shouted.

An indulgent smile appeared on his face. "And woman", he amended, glancing at Ella, who blushed. "First, the training exercise scheduled for 2200 has been cancelled."

Muck raised his hands in a 'Thank you, God'-gesture. "Oh yeah!"

"Secondly." Lipton's face grew serious. "All passes are hereby revoked. We're heading back to France, so pack up all your gear. We will not be returning to England, boys and girl."

Ella sighed heavily as resignation washed through her. She had expected it, they all had, but it still left an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"Anyone who has not made out a will, go to the supply office. Trucks depart from Membury at 0700. As you were", Lip finished.

The mood killed, the young medic decided to leave. It was quiet, the men all sombre, in their own thoughts.

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Dear Mama,

I'm not sure if you have received my last letter yet. By the time you read this one, I won't be in Aldbourne anymore. We're moving out again and we won't be returning to England. Please don't worry about me, Mama, I'll be fine. Like you said before, I have the best company in all of Europe looking out for me. Besides, I can't leave the others alone, it would hardly be fair to make them do all the work.

Don't get me wrong, Mama. I'm not looking forward to going back. I think none of us are. But this is what we signed up for. It's my job and I'm going to do it to the best of my ability. And if that means being on the front line for weeks and months, I'll do it. All I want is to be with the guys.

They remind me of Nico, Mama. In some way, they have become my brothers, too. Each in their own way. Some probably a bit more than others, but I think of them as my second family now.

Today, George and Skip were arguing about comic books. They were just as enthusiastic as Nico. I told them that he liked Green Lantern the best. Do you know what Skip said? "He got good taste, your brother." He would have liked Skip. Or any of the boys, really. I think they would have gotten along great.

How are you, Mama? I'm sorry, I should have asked first. I got a bit carried away, I guess. I
remember you telling me about Pat, Johnny's wife. I would love to hear more about her. And how is James?

It's late and I should get some sleep, we're leaving early tomorrow.

I miss you, Mama.

With love

Your daughter

Ella

They didn't make the jump. Or the next. Or the one after that.

Each time they were geared up and almost in the plane, Patton or one of the other Allies overrun their drop zone, accomplishing the mission. On one hand, everybody was glad. On the other, they were starting to get annoyed by this constant back and forth between getting ready for the drop and going back to training.

Ella was one of the few people who didn't seem bothered by the strange sort of limbo they lived in. She continued to work with the new medics, improving their ability to function under pressure. She and her colleagues trained with the rest of the men and helped at the aid-station. Most of the injuries they tended to there came from bar fights or accidents. They patched up the men's scrapes, chided them for being reckless, careless, stupid or all three, and sent them on their way.

In their free time, Ella and Gene still liked to go to the library, but they had also taken to going on leisurely strolls through the fields around Aldbourne. Sometimes, the girl went on her own, sometimes her friend joined her. They would enjoy the peace and silence of nature, dwell on their thoughts or talk about everybody and his dog.

The brunette somehow found time to talk to everyone in the company, getting to know the replacements and strengthening her bonds with the original Toccoa men. She gathered gossip, joked and laughed with them, listened to them complaining, calmed them down and cheered them up when they were frustrated.

The men, replacements and veterans, enlisted and officers alike appreciated the young medic, her unwavering altruism and her cheerful, genuine personality.

Her friends, especially Luz, Guarnere and Toye, dragged their girl to the pub with them. Not that she put up much of a fight. Ella loved spending time with the boys and so she found herself walking down the street with Toye one night, wearing her dress greens and laughing at the story he was telling.

While she still had the female version of her uniform, she hadn't worn it at all. Every time dress uniforms were required, the girl showed up in pants and jump boots just like the guys. She had told Lt Col Strayer point-blank that she wouldn't wear a skirt just because she was a woman when he had inquired about it. She would decide for herself when and if she dressed in the women's
uniform.

The good colonel had graciously accepted it and simply cautioned her that the higher-ups might have more conservative views on that topic. Ella had assured him she would take it into consideration if they ever got high-ranking visitors.

"Hey, Shorty, you made it!", Luz cried as she entered the pub with Toye.

She smiled and let him throw an arm around her neck. Chattering animatedly, the man steered her towards the bar, ordering a beer for himself and a club soda for Ella. "Still don't know why you don't drink", he commented, handing her the glass.

The small medic shrugged. "Guess I just don't like the taste of alcohol", she said, taking a sip of her drink. Some of the soldiers saw it as a sign of weakness when somebody didn't drink.

"Eh, who cares anyway?", Luz stated, knowing what was going through her head, "you don't drink, so what? We still love you, Shorty." That earned him a bashful grin. He clapped her on the shoulder and they went to see where Toye had gone off to.

Ella stopped at several tables, exchanging greetings with the boys, sometimes lingering for a quick chat. She yet again marvelled at how happy and excited the men were to see her, still not entirely used to having so many friends.

"Hiya, lil' lady", Bill drawled as she approached them. "You up for some darts? Johnny here needs a good luck charm." He pointed over at the other man with a grin.

Martin pierced him with a flat look and shot back, a teasing smile tucked into the corner of his lip: "Only one who needs luck to hit the board is you, Guarnere."

She laughed.

Toye kicked out a chair for her at the table he was occupying with Bull and Luz.

"Thanks, Joe", she said, sitting down and angling herself so that she could watch the boys play darts. The way the participants were goading each other, it looked almost hostile, but they all knew it was good-natured. The peanut gallery joined in on the heckling, being more or less successful in distracting the players.

After the first round, Bill called over: "Ey, Shorty? You know how ta play?"

She looked up from her conversation with George and Joe and nodded. "Yeah, Bull and Johnny showed me."

"Good, c'mere, we'll play a round."
The girl raised an eyebrow and asked dryly: "Ever heard of the word 'please', Gonorrhoea?"

"Sure I have, ye just said it", he cracked, wiseass that he was. "Now get your tiny ass over here."

Shaking her head in amusement, she got up. "Excuse me", she said to Toye and Luz with a smile.

"Go get 'im, kiddo", George called after her.

Ella wasn't all that bad at darts, but compared to Bill, who had years of practice, she felt like a raw recruit. The boys in the peanut gallery didn't think so, though, and their comments soon turned into cheering for her and offering advice. It boosted her confidence and soon enough, she could laugh at her own mistakes.

She still lost to Guarnere, but she hadn't expected anything else.

He clapped her on the shoulder and said: "Just you wait, lil' lady, you'll be a champion at darts in no time."

"Nice going, kiddo", Johnny complimented.

"Good job", Buck Compton, who had drifted over to watch some time ago, agreed.

Blushing at their sincere compliments, Ella sat back down and nodded her thanks to Toye, who had kept an eye on her drink.

She was nursing her second club soda and watched from the side-lines as Luz and Buck lost in the most spectacular fashion against Toye and Babe Heffron, the red-headed replacement from Philly that Bill had befriended. Sharing a look with Johnny, Ella swallowed the grin trying to steal itself onto her features.

"Nice shot, sir", Bull said as he handed the lieutenant the dart that had missed the entire target. He was chewing on his ever-present cigar, most likely to keep a straight face.

"Thank you, Bull" Outwardly, Buck looked sheepish and Ella had to admit, he played the role well.

Babe was decent enough at darts. And even though they were hustling him, the guys had to acknowledge his skill.

"Ye're embarrassing the lieutenant", Guarnere said, handing him a pint. "Here, have a drink."

"Don't mind if I do, Sarge", Heffron replied, taking a gulp.

"Better start winning money soon, think your buddies are starting to miss you", Bill commented, glancing at the three replacements sitting at one of the tables.

Babe smiled. "Yeah. They do look kinda sad, don't they?"

"They're jus' serious fighting men, that's all", Bull remarked.

Ella nearly choked on her soda. It didn't help that the tall Arkansas native warned Bill not to set his guys off when the Philadelphian decided to introduce himself.

"Yeah, you got some wild-eyed killers right there, Bull", Johnny mocked, making Ella cough even harder.
"Don't do that", she forced out when she finally got her breathing back under control, wiping tears from the corners of her eyes.

The three men just snickered at her predicament.

Turning her attention back to the darts game, Ella watched as Luz and Buck shrewdly manipulated their opponents, especially Babe, into making a wager. Poor, unsuspecting Heffron took the bait hook, line and sinker. He didn't know the boys well enough to recognise their tells, so he was somewhat excused. Ella, who had known George for over two years, could see the eager gleam in his eyes and the mischief in his friendly smile.

"You wanna bet?", Toye jumped in, "Pack of smokes?" He had probably saved Heffron's pay with that move, but unfortunately, he seemed to be too caught up in the moment to realise they were being hustled.

"Oh, I'm not much of a gambling man", Buck stalled.

If Ella hadn't had that much self-control, she would have burst out laughing, ruining all the fun. So n quatsch, a fadagradi liüüg wiani scho lang keini me gseh ha. Instead, she watched in amusement as Luz and Compton turned the wager into two packs for the first one to hit the bull's eye.

As Buck lined up his shot, George asked: "Ah, Lieutenant, are you gonna shoot lefty all night?"

Realisation sank in with Toye after a second. "Hey come on", he protested.

"Just curious, 'cause he's right-handed", George replied far too innocently.

Toye already knew he'd been swindled and started cursing under his breath.

Babe was still not catching on.

"George! What would I do without George Luz?", Buck asked jovially, switching the dart to his right hand. It sailed right into the bull's eye.

Now, Ella started laughing, unable to hold it in any longer.

Babe closed his eyes in pain while Toye physically turned away before glaring at Luz.

"Two packs, gentlemen!", George called, grinning widely. Pointing his cigarette at Toye he said: "I know you got 'em, pay up."

Buck looked at the observant girl and winked.

She just shook her head, these guys were incorrigible.

Still shaking with laughter, Ella turned around to see Guarnere sitting at the replacement's table, presumably hassling them about something or other. "Stop harassing the privates, Bill", she chided, eyes sparkling.
"Shorty! I was just tellin' them about how Babe don't have to risk getting inside Doris again." He grinned widely at her.

The girl rolled her eyes and whacked him on the shoulder – not too hard of course – with the back of her hand. "Oi, be nice, Gonorrhoea. What happened to neighbourhood solidarity?"

Miller, Hashey and Garcia watched in mild awe as Sergeant Sawyer interacted with Sergeant Guarnere. They hadn't had a real chance to get to know Easy's female medic, but they had been very impressed during the first-aid classes. The young woman was friendly, kind and highly competent. During training, she had proved many times that she was just as good as the other Toccoa veterans.

Contrary to what the papers back home said, she wasn't above getting her hands dirty and, if the stories the veterans told about her were true, didn't hesitate to jump right into the fray to help her comrades.

"Hey Bull", Bill called to the man standing behind him with Johnny, "your squad listens up real good." He lit up a smoke.

"Yeah, they're being polite, like whenever Bull opens his mouth", Johnny smirked.

Bill turned in his seat. "Johnny, what are you saying? That Bull's men are just humouring him?", he asked, sounding serious.

Martin threw Bull a teasing look. "Yeah like whenever he gives out some of his folksy wisdom from back on the farm."

The brunette chuckled. Johnny, Guarnere and Bull were very close friends, had been since Toccoa days. And while Bull was calm and mostly a gentle soul, he could give as good as he got, teasing the two louder men just as much as they teased him.

"They probably think he's a fuckin' hayseed", Bill agreed. "They're right!"

Ella laughed with the others, knowing that Bull found it just as amusing as they did.

The replacements had laughed at Bill's last comment, too. They immediately sobered up when Johnny stared them dead in the eye and asked: "What are you laughing at?"

The young medic smiled softly, he was just pulling their leg after all. The replacements had no way of knowing that. Johnny could look quite mean if you didn't know where to find the hidden smile. But the sentiment was genuine. Bull was a good man and a great soldier and deserved respect.

"You new boys, you pay attention to Sergeant Randleman. Got that?", Bill spoke, fixing the replacements with a stare of his own.

They nodded hastily.

"That's the smartest man in the company."

As Bill left the table, Ella looked at the three men. "They're just messing with you", she said, the
smile still on her face. She sat down in the seat Bill had abandoned. "But, they're also right. Listen to your sergeant, he knows what he's doing."

They nodded. "Yes, Ma'am."

She waved it off. "Please, if you wanna use military curtesy, call me Sergeant. Otherwise, just call me Ella like everybody else."

They blinked in surprise. Miller was the first to find his voice. "Uh...yes Sarge."

She smiled, accepting that they were still green and hadn't gotten around to shaking the more formal, more impractical side of military discipline. In the field, the veterans had all quickly stopped things like saluting and standing at attention as it would only slow their efficiency.

Cobb appeared behind the three guys. Ella stifled a groan. He had been drinking. He wasn't the nicest person sober, but after a few drinks, he turned downright nasty. He rudely shoved Miller's shoulder and pointed at the blue unit citation on the private's uniform. "Where'd you get that?", he sneered.

Miller answered nervously: "It's a Presidential Distinguished Unit Citation. For...uh, for what the Regiment did in Normandy."

"Uh huh", Cobb made, sneer still on his face. "That's right. For what the regiment did. You weren't there."

Hoobler, who had been listening, jumped in: "Hey, hey, ease up, Cobb. It's a unit citation."

Ella's eyes darkened as Miller took off the pin and laid it on the table, shame written across his face. He got up and left.

Cobb looked almost proud of himself. The look vanished when he was faced with the disapproving glare of the company's female medic.

"Congratulations, Cobb", she said, sarcasm dripping from her words, "you've just earned yourself the title of Asshole Nr. 1." Getting up, the girl fixed him with her infamous Look and arched an eyebrow. "Where were you in Normandy, then?" She took Miller's pin, placed it in Bull's hand and went to get another drink as the one she'd had seemed to have vanished into thin air.

Bull watched Ella disappear into the crowd before turning back to Cobb. "Shit, Cobb, Shorty's right. You didn't fight in Normandy neither."

"Listen up!"

Ella stopped where she was and turned her attention to Smokey, who had clambered onto a barstool. "I got us an announcement to make", he hollered. He towed Lipton over to stand in front of him, a grin on his face. "This here is Carwood Lipton."

"He's already married, Smokey!", Malarkey called from the bar.
"This here's Carwood Lipton", Smokey reiterated, completely undeterred by Malarkey's joke, "The new Easy Company First Sergeant!"

Cheers went up in the pub. Everybody loved Lipton and he was the ideal man for the job. Come to think of it, he had been doing a First Sergeant's job since before D-Day. They all respected him and usually when there was a problem, he was the first man they went to.

When Smokey declared that Lip had an announcement to make, Ella could already guess what it was. Lipton's sombre expression said it all. She knew what he was going to say before he even uttered the first syllable. We're moving out again.

The young girl couldn't help but wonder if they would actually make the jump this time.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

So n quatsch: Such nonsense, Bullshit
A fadagradi lüüg wiani scho lang keini me gseh ha: an outright lie like I haven't seen one in a long time
Chapter Summary

Operation Market Garden begins.

Chapter Notes

So, I survived the last exam of the semester. French grammar, brrr... I wonder what possessed me to chose that course.
Anyways, I just wanted to thank you all for reading, leaving kudos and commenting :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Turns out, the mission was too important to be scrapped. They would be under British command this time, a fact that many of the men were not too happy about. Their objective was to liberate Eindhoven and hold the road for the tanks to move in. According to intelligence, the Krauts in Holland were mostly kids and old men. All in all, it sounded simple enough.

Which was exactly what made Ella nervous.

Gearing up for the jump was vastly different from D-Day. The veterans had learnt their lesson that day. Everything essential had to fit on your body, otherwise you would lose it. They made sure the replacements knew what to pack and what to leave, how to best stow their gear and how to ensure they could jump ready to fight.

They had gotten a new set of uniforms, complete with ridiculously huge flags on their arm, about as subtle as a stab in the eye. They had also been issued new jump gear, with an improved release mechanism for the parachute.

Ella meandered through the platoons, helping out wherever an extra set of hands was needed. Sometimes, she only exchanged a few pleasantries, but it was enough to ease the replacements' nervousness and soothe the tension of the veterans.

Winters watched her from where he was gearing up, a small smile on his face.

"Thank God for her, huh?", Nixon remarked, standing next to his friend.

Easy's CO nodded. "Yeah."

The brunette looked up at the sound of a jeep horn and a bright grin spread on her lips. Popeye Wynn stood in the back of the jeep that cut through the crowd of paratroopers. Her smile fell when she recognised the person in the passenger seat.
"Holy shit", Dukeman muttered next to her.

Johnny said something similar.

Ella couldn't find the appropriate words to express what was going through her head. Finally, she settled on something simple and concise. "Fuck." She didn't see the raised eyebrows of her friends as they glanced at her. None of them had forgotten about all the times Sobel had put her down, belittled her, insulted her during basic.

Thankfully, Sobel left her alone.

She walked over to greet Popeye, who beamed at her.

"Hey Shorty!" He happily gave her a hug and ruffled her hair.

"Hi Popeye, back so soon?"

"Sure, didn't wanna get reassigned."

It was stupid, but it was SOP. Ella and her friends assumed that it was just another way of the higher-ups to ensure the men didn't stay off the line for too long.

"Welcome back, Popeye", Bull drawled before nodding to Sobel and asking: "What's he doin' here?"

Lipton smiled. "Who, Sobel? Well he's the newly appointed regimental S-4."

"Supply officer?", Bull questioned.

Lip nodded. "Yeah, you got it."

Ella sighed in resignation. "Damn, now resupplying is gonna be an even bigger pain in the ass."

The men chuckled at her pained expression.

The jump went over without a hitch. The sky was a beautiful blue, with a few clouds floating high up. There was no ordnance trying to blast them to smithereens, everybody landed in the drop zone, it was almost too good to be true.

Ella absorbed the fall and rolled back to her feet, slamming the release button for her chute with one hand, the other already tugging off her life-preserver. Looking around, she found Gene only a few feet away from her, discarding his chute. She smiled at him before making her way to the assembly area.

Nobody had expected the citywide party in Eindhoven.

Never a fan of huge crowds, especially in confined spaces, the small medic stuck close to the men
around her. But the sheer mass of people soon swept her away, separating her from her friends.

In their exuberance, the Dutch didn't notice the young woman's discomfort as she ducked and dodged the people reaching for her. She was fairly successful in escaping the hugs and kisses, probably more so than her comrades. It didn't do anything to ease the panic spreading in her stomach.

In a desperate attempt to locate either an officer or somebody, anybody from Easy Company, Ella climbed the brass base of a lamp post and looked around. She spotted some helmets with a vertical stripe up ahead. Squinting, she recognised one of the men as Winters. Deciding to get to them as quickly as possible, the girl slipped through the crowd, trying not to lose her bearing again. Clutching her medical bag tightly, Ella weaved her way through the celebrating people.

Out of nowhere, someone seized her around the waist.

Ella struggled, but the hold was too strong. "No, please. Bitte lassen Sie mich los. Please, let me go. Laat me gaan." The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"Easy, kiddo, it's just me", a familiar voice spoke close to her ear.

Turning her head, she relaxed a little when she realised it was Lt Nixon. He was watching her with concern etched onto his features. "Sorry, sir", she mumbled, looking away, panic easing up slightly.

He waved it off and started leading her through the sea of jubilant civilians, effectively shielding her from the over-excited people that tried to smother them with kisses and hugs. "You alright?!", he called over the singing and cheering.

The girl nodded. "Yes sir. Thank you."

They reached Captain Winters, who was standing with Welsh and Buck Compton.

"Dick", Nixon said, "clock's ticking."

Winters nodded, tucking his binoculars back into his jacket. Immediately, he was swarmed by women who had apparently only been waiting for that instant. Nixon met the same fate, getting hugged and kissed from all sides.

Ella flinched and let out a small, startled yelp when men and women alike grabbed her, trying to pass her around and cover her in kisses. Her pleas were ignored, or simply misunderstood since they were a jumbled mess of at least three languages.

This time, it was Captain Winters who came to her rescue, pulling her back to the relative safety between him and Nixon.

She gave him a shaky, yet grateful smile.

The officers began tugging at their collars, turning them up. It took Ella a moment to comprehend what they were doing.

"What's up, Welshy?", Buck asked.
"Snipers", Welsh replied, fiddling with his jacket to hide his insignia.

Over the singing, laughing and general happiness of the people, they almost had to shout to make themselves heard. Ella had no idea where her friends were. She only caught glimpses of them, the NCOs spurring them into motion.

The young girl was yanked away from Winters and Nixon's protection once again as somebody bumped into her, shoving her aside. It was a group of men, each wearing an orange band around their bicep, roughly dragging women into a crowd that was not at all like the rest.

These people, mostly men, were angry, disgusted, bitter. Ella caught words like 'traitor', 'slut' and 'whore' being yelled. She pushed past some people and froze, completely transfixed with horror.

In the centre of the angry circle, members of the Dutch resistance held down women, tearing their clothes. The women screamed and cried as their hair was roughly shorn by unforgiving hands. Crude swastikas were drawn onto their foreheads. The men forced the begging women to be still and bear the humiliation, ignoring the pleas for mercy.

A different sort of crying reached Ella's ears, breaking through the shocked trance she was in.

"Mamaaa!"

A small boy stood there, howling as huge tears rolled down his flushed cheeks. One of the women tried to reach out for him, but was shoved back.

Tears threatening to spill from her own eyes, the brunette medic swiftly pushed past the onlookers and knelt down beside the child. His body shook with ugly sobs as he attempted to get to his mother.

"Hey buddy", Ella spoke, keeping her tone light.

He stopped his struggles to look at her.

"C'mon, you don't have to see this." Picking him up, she gently put a hand on the back of his head, blocking the horrifying view with her body. The distraught boy wailed, burying his face in her chest, tiny fingers clutching a fistful of her jacket.

"Shh, it's going to be okay", she soothed.

Slowly, he quieted down, the sobs becoming hiccups.

Winters, Welsh, Buck and Nixon had apparently followed her and quickly closed ranks around her. Whether it was a conscious decision or not, Ella didn't know. They all saw the raw emotions on her face, the horror and anguish in her eyes as she bounced the child on her hip, keeping up a steady stream of soothing murmurs.
"What did they do?", Welsh asked, appalled. They hated it, but none of them could interfere. The Dutch were their allies, they couldn't afford to alienate them.

"They slept with the Germans", a man who had come up behind them answered, his accent and the orange bandage denouncing him as a member of the Resistance.

Ella's stomach turned and all colour drained from her face. She tightened her hold on the boy in her arms and walked away, feeling the worried looks of the officers on her back.

The man's words rang in her ears as the young girl shouldered her way through the exhilarated crowd. *How could they know that they did it voluntarily? Was wenn si kei wahl ka hän? Was wenn si vergewaltigt worda sin? Was wenn...?* A thousand similar thoughts raced through her head, making her stomach roil.

For the small boy's sake, Ella forced a smile onto her face. "Do you have any siblings?", she asked him.

He nodded, beaming brightly, and told her about his sisters Annika, Veerle and Lynn, and his brothers Thorben and Marius. "And I'm Lars", he introduced himself proudly.

"Hello Lars", Ella replied, "my name is Ella. What do you say we go and look for your siblings?"

Lars nodded eagerly and started looking around, searching the crowd for a familiar face.
Surprisingly enough, it wasn't long before he cried out: "Veerle!", followed by a string of rapid-fire Dutch that Ella only understood partially.

A pretty, blonde girl came over to them, looking extremely relieved. Ella explained that she had found Lars alone in the crowd. She didn't mention that he had been screaming for his mother who was being mistreated by the Dutch Resistance members.

Veerle thanked her over and over, taking Lars from her arms. "Dank u, heel en gedankt", she said, slipping back into her native language in her emotional state.

Ella nodded and managed another smile before she beat a hasty retreat, unable to stand the exuberant surroundings any longer.

Toye and Luz stuck to her for the rest of the day, never leaving her side. But with all the commotion around them, they couldn't ask what was bothering her. So, they offered comfort by just being there and letting her know she wasn't alone. Toye casually slung his arm around her shoulders and Luz expertly diverted people's attention.

They weren't the only ones that noticed their girl's distress. Many of them saw the screaming emotions hidden deep in her dark green eyes when a gaggle of children surrounded her, chattering away and begging to be picked up. Sure, she smiled and laughed, listened attentively to the kids' ramblings and encouraged their stories. But there was a look of painful longing and melancholy that flickered across her youthful features whenever she thought nobody was watching.

When the company set up camp in an orchard on the outskirts of town, Ella first checked her supplies to see if she still had everything. Then, she fished out her ratty old journal, blocking out the rest of the guys to write.
They didn't bother her, knowing that she needed the time to sort her thoughts and feelings. But they watched her closely, taking in how she chewed on her bottom lip, how she fiddled with the knife Toye had given her in Normandy.

Finally, she put away her journal and ran a hand through her tousled locks, blowing out a deep sigh. The men took it as a signal that they could approach now. As one, they moved over to the young girl, settling down around her, just like they had in Normandy. Nobody pried. Those who had seen what had happened to the women could guess what made her so uneasy. The others knew that their girl would open up when she was ready.

They struck up light conversation among them. Ella, who realised what they were doing, let it wash over her for a while, allowing it to push back the dark thoughts. In the end, she joined in and her smile was real again, reaching her eyes.

Those who payed close attention still saw the darkness lingering deep down in a far back corner of her face, but they let her be. They simply stayed close and as they bedded down for the night, nobody questioned it when their girl ended up snuggled closely against Toye's side, the man's arm wrapped securely around her small frame.

Travelling atop a tank was awesome, Ella concluded. She was chatting amiably with Grant as the ranks slowly rattled down the road, only the scouting squads walking beside them. The early autumn sun was warm and a light breeze whispered through the fields on either side of the road.

Shortly after they had passed the Nuenen town sign, they spotted something, someone on the side of the road. It was a woman, waif thin and dressed in dirty rags, clutching a small bundle to her chest. Ella's heart clenched when she realised that the bundle was actually a baby. Before anybody could react, the young girl had slid down from the moving tank and walked towards the lone figure, digging through her bag.

The woman watched her warily, but relaxed when she saw the brunette's warm smile. Everybody's eyes were on the small medic as she gently handed the woman some of her rations, a chocolate bar and a full first-aid kit.

The mother burst into tears, thanking her again and again.

"Get a move on, Sawyer!", somebody – presumably Lt Peacock – called. Basically nobody apart from the replacements called her by her last name.

Even though it technically was insubordination, Ella took a moment to touch the woman's shoulder and whisper something with her limited Dutch vocabulary.

The woman smiled.

"Move it, Sawyer!", Peacock barked again.

Oh shut up, sir, she thought.
Glancing apologetically at the mother, Ella obeyed. She didn't hear the woman say "Je bent een engel", but some of the men did. And even if they didn't know any Dutch, they all understood that one sentence: You are an angel. Privately, each of them agreed wholeheartedly.

They didn't travel much further. Lt Brewer, also a new guy, was standing in the middle of the road, scoping out the town of Nuenen with his binoculars. He didn't even realise that he was making an outstanding target of himself.

"Lieutenant!", Bull shouted, alerting him of the danger he was in.

He turned. A shot rang out and he crumbled to the ground, blood spurting from his neck.

"Sniper!"

"Clear the tracks! Get in the ditch!"

"Move, move, move!"

Ella hurriedly skidded down the embankment, dragging a few replacements with her. The tank bursts nearly ruptured her ear drums. Around her, the men opened fire on the Krauts that had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

When Bull called "Medic up front! Medic up front!" squatting beside the lieutenant's head, she saw one of her fellow medics farther up the line race forward. Judging by his stature, it was Spina.

"Get up! Keep moving!", Bull bellowed from the road, desperate to get them into motion, but he couldn't abandon the lieutenant.

"Move!", Johnny shouted. They were sitting ducks, but the replacements in Bull's squad had stalled, lost without their sergeant's guidance. Someone had frozen up and was now leaving them all in a vulnerable position.

Ella peered over the dyke just in time to see Spina get shot in the leg and go down. Cussing under her breath, she scrambled up onto the road and rushed over to the two wounded, relieving Bull and sending him to his squad. "Go, get them outta here!", she called, kneepads scraping across the road surface as she dropped next to Brewer. The man was writhing in agony, hands pressed against his neck, panicked eyes staring up at her. "I'm here, sir, I'm here, keep still." She applied pressure with one hand and grabbed her bag with the other.

Glancing at Spina, she asked: "You okay?"

He nodded, grunting an affirmative through clenched teeth, hands moving to his satchel for bandages.

Ella kept a hand pressed firmly against the gushing wound on Brewer's neck, yanking out bandages and sulfa, a steady stream of comforting nonsense spilling from her lips. "It's okay, Lieutenant, you'll be just fine. Take it easy."

Doc Mampre, another medic for Easy Company, appeared next to her. "I got 'em, Shorty, go!", he
urged.

The girl didn't put up an argument, she deftly switched places with him and darted off, following the soldiers now moving into Nuenen, all the while wiping her hands on her trousers.

Ella was ducking from cover to cover, but there was no enemy in sight. She watched the guys clear each building and hiding spot, systematically scanning the area for Krauts. Apart from the vehicle the British tanks had destroyed, they had yet to see an enemy soldier. *Wo zum Geier sin si?*

She was squatting behind a mural, anxiously waiting for the other shoe to drop. To her, this whole thing screamed 'ambush'. The uneasy feeling in her gut persisted.

Peeking around the corner, the brunette saw Johnny and Babe run towards the British tanks advancing on the road. The driver paused just long enough for Johnny to climb up. He got to the turret and spoke with the tank sergeant, gesturing towards the large building on her right.

*Something's wrong*, her instincts informed her.

Johnny soon jumped down from the tank, looking extremely unhappy. The tanks kept rolling forward as the two soldiers made their way back to their squad. Ella frowned. There was only one reason for Johnny to talk to the tank sergeant.

Glancing over the mural in the direction he had indicated, her eyes grew wide.

Hidden behind a haystack was a Panzer. Their own tanks would see it too late if they kept advancing the way they did.

"*Merda*, the girl cursed, leaving her position and making a break for better cover. She wasn't keen on getting hit by blistering hot tank shrapnel, German or Allied.

She didn't get far. The Kraut tank fired and all hell broke loose. Machine gun fire riddled the ground and the sniper started shooting again.

"*Medic!*"

Ella changed directions mid-sprint and ran down the road, ducking when the Sherman tank behind her exploded. Pieces of metal flew through the air, whizzing past her ear and bouncing off her back and helmet.

The girl dropped to her knees beside a wounded soldier, hands immediately going to his neck. The person who had called for a medic had already left. Before she had a chance to even check his pulse, a twinkle caught her attention from the corner of her eye.

Raising her head, another flash registered in her brain before a searing pain ripped through her skull and everything went black.

She didn't feel her head getting knocked to the side.

She didn't feel her body toppling over backwards.
And she didn't hear Johnny screaming her name, voice cracking with horror.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Was wenn si kei wahl ka hän?: What if they didn't have a choice?
Was wenn si vergewaltigt worden sin?: What if they were raped?
Was wenn...?: What if...?
Wo zum Geier sin si?: Where the heck are they?
Merda: Shit
Bull was crawling through the ditch, trying to outrun the dead tank that was somehow still moving forward. Over the general ruckus, he heard somebody scream. Was that Johnny? A few yards ahead of him, a figure tumbled down the embankment, the momentum knocking the soldier's helmet off.

A loud crack tore through the air behind him and sparks flew. Bull glanced back, hoping that the snapped powerline would be enough to stop the tank.

It wasn't, the machine just kept going, slowly heading for the ditch. Hurriedly, the tall man continued his crawl. As he neared the slumped-over figure, he caught a glimpse of caramel-coloured hair. His heart nearly froze in his chest and he doubled his speed, scrambling forward as fast as he could.

Even from a few feet away, Bull could see the blood pooling under the girl's head. Oh no. Dear Lord, please let her be alive, he prayed. With the gentleness of a brother who gets to hold his newborn sister for the first time, he turned Ella onto her back, trying to find the source of the bleeding.

His stomach dropped.

Blood was streaming down the left side of her head, staining her collar and crusting her hair. He couldn't really see how big the wound was, there was just too much blood, but it didn't take a genius to figure out what happened. Her sun-tanned skin was abnormally pale, probably even more so in contrast to the red coating half of her face.

With trembling fingers, Bull searched for a pulse. He let his head drop in relief when he felt a regular throbbing. Her chest rose and fell in a slow, but steady cadence. She was alive. Thank you, God.

Bursts of gunfire hit the dyke, reminding him that they were still in danger.

They were retreating. For the first time, Easy Company was retreating. Lipton was gathering the sergeants' reports as they loaded onto trucks, taking stock of who was where. Guarnere had just told him that they didn't know where Bull was. That made four dead, eleven injured and one missing.
"First Sergeant Lipton?"

He turned and was faced with an uncharacteristically nervous Doc Roe.

"Sir, Ella hasn't made it back", the Cajun said, wringing his hands.

His heart sank. Four dead, eleven injured, two missing. He nodded and the medic bustled off again to see to the wounded. Lipton took a deep breath and went to report to Captain Winters. Their CO crouched behind a jeep, Lt Nixon leaning against the tire. "Captain, we got four dead, 11 injured", he said.

Winters nodded. "Okay, let's move them out." He started to get up, but was stopped by Lipton's hand on his chest.

"Oh and sir, Randleman and Ella are missing."

Once they had retreated far enough and were digging in for the night, Lip asked around, trying to find out what exactly had happened to their missing man and woman. Guarnere decided to accompany him.

Johnny Martin had been the last one to see the two and by his account, Bull had been trying to outrun a burning Sherman tank. The normally fiery man was pale and shaken.

"Ella was on the road, checking on a soldier", he said. "She looked up." He swallowed and looked at Lipton, eyes burning. "She must have spotted the sniper before... before she fell into the ditch", he finished weakly. He couldn't say it. Saying it out loud would mean accepting it was real. It would mean acknowledging that their girl, their bright young Shorty, had been shot in the head.

Lipton only managed a nod, exhaling slowly as his stomach clenched with grief.

"Now hold on a fucking minute", Guarnere snarled, staring at them with angrily blazing eyes. "If there ain't no body, then there ain't nobody fuckin' dead!" He didn't know it yet, but he would be repeating this phrase quite a lot over the course of the night.


"This is Shorty we're talking about", Bill growled. "That kid single-handedly killed two Krauts on D-Day with nothing but a goddamn pocket knife! She ain't dead until you show me her body! And don't you dare tell anyone anything else!"

Johnny found himself agreeing with the fierce Italian. Maybe there was still hope that both she and Bull were alive. "Ella did turn her head", he recalled.

"See?!", Bill gestured at Johnny, glaring pointedly at Lipton. "There's a good chance she'll show up tomorrow, fit as a fiddle." Maybe he was exaggerating, but hell if he let them give up on their girl. "She's probably with Bull and they'll both be fine."

They had to be.

The First Sergeant nodded, a tentative spark of hope igniting in his heart.

That they had been forced to leave two of their own behind didn't sit right with the men. Nobody
slept that night, they were too stunned, worried and angry. More than a few cursed the Brits and their blasted strategies. The rumour that Ella, the clever, unassuming girl they loved and respected, was considered KIA by command was like a punch to the gut.

Guarnere found himself wandering from foxhole to foxhole, telling the guys over and over that "if there ain't no body, then there ain't nobody fuckin' dead."

Several of the NCOs started following his example, talking to the men, assuring them that the two MIA would find their way back.

The mood was sombre and tense. A lot of the veterans kept looking up every time they heard footsteps approaching their foxholes, half-expecting to see Shorty come by, making rounds with her sweet, easy-going smile on her face.

Bull was crouching in the shadow of an old storm drain, waiting for the Krauts to disappear. He glanced down at the small girl cradled in his arms. She was still unconscious, but the bleeding seemed to have slowed after he had applied sulfa and a bandage to the deep gash on her head. The sniper's bullet had left a 3-inch gouge across her temple, starting very close to the corner of her eye and disappearing in her hairline.

Bull knew how incredibly lucky Ella had been. Only a fraction of an inch to the right and she would have lost an eye, at the very least. He just hoped that her injury wasn't worse than it looked, because it looked downright awful.

Ella slowly crawled back towards consciousness. Her mind was filled with cotton-y fuzz and the painful sensation of a herd of elephants tap-dancing in her head.

A low moan slipped past chapped lips and her brow furrowed as she tried to pry open her eyelids. A large hand suddenly covered her mouth. Eyes snapping open in alarm, she struggled against whoever was silencing her.

"Shh, kiddo, it's alright", a familiar voice whispered in her ear. Her feeble attempts subsided as her brain finally caught up with her vision.

"Bull?", she mumbled, confusion filtering through the daze. Why was Bull here? And where the hell was here?

The big man nodded, worriedly studying her eyes. He had paid close attention in all her first aid classes and remembered that pupil size could be indicative of brain damage. Her deep green orbs were slightly clouded, but her pupils seemed to be the same size.

Despite the headache and dizziness, Ella realised what he was doing and somehow managed a small, reassuring smile.

Bull grinned back at her.
Slowly, her thoughts became a bit clearer and she noticed a strange throbbing in her temple. Reaching up, her fingers brushed against the sticky cloth of a blood-soaked bandage.

Wiso hani n Verband a?, the girl wondered. Snippets of memories popped up in her mind. Oh. Right. Figuring that a saturated bandage was just as useful as no bandage, she felt for the knot and managed to undo it after a few tries.

Wincing, Ella dropped her hand again, discarding the red cloth. She felt exhausted. That was odd. Because she knew raising her arm normally didn't take up that much energy. The medic in her stirred and began mentally cataloguing her injuries.

Nid guat, she realised after assessing her condition. Gar nid guat. She had to tell Bull. He needed to know.

"Bull?", she breathed.

He glanced down at her. She peered up at him, green eyes as innocent as a child's, and whispered: "I got shot in the head."

Ella woke up when Bull lightly shook her shoulder. When did I fall asleep?

"We gotta move, Shorty", he muttered.

It was dark now, the girl noticed. She took a deep breath, trying to get her bearings, and gave a toneless hum in acknowledgement. At least the world wasn't spinning like a carousel anymore.

Crawling out of the drain on hands and knees, the pair silently climbed up to the road, Bull lending the brunette medic a hand.

It was quiet, the only sounds coming from nature and the fire licking away at the still burning tank.

Bull kept looking over to his young friend to make sure she was following. She stumbled a few times on shaky legs, but even in the dark he could see the stubborn set of her jaw. That's Shorty alright, he thought proudly, no stoppin' her once she's set her mind on somethin'. Eventually though, to steady her and ease his fear of her falling too far behind, he simply slung his arm around her back, under her shoulders. That way, he could catch her if her legs gave out. She was still paler than the moon, but her eyes were alert, scanning the area for threats. Her right hand was curled tightly around the hilt of her knife.

They made it to the barn and slipped inside. A wave of dizziness hit Ella and she screwed her eyes shut. The elephants in her head had disappeared, a harsh throbbing taking their place. Bull helped her stagger over to a small pen filled with hay, gently easing the girl down before settling next to her. The brunette watched as her friend tugged off the stupid flag on their uniforms, folded them and tucked them into his breast pocket. She didn't miss the wince accompanying the movement.

"You're hurt!" Worry swirled in her eyes as she abruptly sat up a little straighter. Why hadn't he said anything?
He tried to wave it off, but the young girl's sharp look stopped him. "Shrapnel from the tank", he explained quietly.

She motioned for him to show her.

Approaching footsteps made them both freeze. Bull took his bayonet and got up, signalling to the girl to stay low. Ella nodded, grimacing when it aggravated her injury. Despite the world tilting precariously for a moment, she gripped her own knife tightly and slunk backwards into the shadows.

The barn door opened and a man came in.

In a flash, Bull had grabbed him and pushed him against a beam, knife at his throat. The farmer stared into the soldier's dirt and sweat covered face, eyes wide with fear.

Struggling to her feet and only swaying a little, Ella stepped forward and put a gentle hand on her friend's broad back. "I think he's okay", she spoke softly. With a careful incline of her head, she directed Bull's attention to the young blonde woman that had entered after the man.

Her friend relaxed, lowering his knife.

Wheels squeaked outside.

Exchanging a quick glance, Ella and Bull hurriedly herded the two civilians to the pen. They cowered in the corner as Bull grabbed his rifle and knelt down in front of them, ready to fight. The small medic crouched next to the farmer and his daughter, knife in hand.

When Bull rose from his position and sat down beside them, Ella put her knife aside and shuffled over, kneeling behind him to get a good look at the injury. Widening the tear in his jacket, she murmured an apology when she felt her friend stiffen in pain. The shrapnel was lodged quite deeply in his shoulder. Her fingers, slick with blood, couldn't get a proper grip on the piece of metal.

"Just pull it out", Bull huffed, teeth clenched.

Ella fished a packet of sulfa from her satchel. "You know I can't do that", she replied, voice strained.

Bull couldn't tell if it was because her own injury was causing her pain.

She dumped the sulfa onto the wound, biting her lip when the tall Arkansas man ground out a low "Fuck."

Taking a laboured, shaky breath, the small medic had to lean her forehead against Bull's uninjured shoulder in an effort to quell the dizziness that overcame her once more. "I'm sorry", she mumbled. "I...I just need a second."

She felt Bull nod. "'s okay, Shorty, I'm fine." His hand reached up to squeeze hers, anchoring her while the nausea dissipated again.

Righting herself through sheer stubbornness, Ella reached for her jump knife. "I'll be quick", she promised. Willing her hands to stop shaking, she took the fragment between her fingers, using the blade to lever it out of the wound.
Bull tensed and fought to stay still. The girl whispered reassuring words, the familiar melody of her voice soothing him. He wondered absent-mindedly what language she was speaking. It had a nice, lively quality to it that made him think of happy, carefree children.

Depositing the offending shrapnel in the hay, the brunette tucked a wad of gauze into the hole in his jacket, fingers trembling ever so slightly. Just as she wanted to pull a bandage from her satchel, they heard machinery. Bull jumped to his feet, grabbed his rifle and snuck to the window while the girl slid closer to the two civilians that had watched them with an expression that was equal parts scared and awed.

Bull came hurrying back, making a couple of clipped hand signals to his comrade, who immediately understood. Neither of them noticed the bloody strip of gauze that had fallen to the ground. Together, they shooed the civilians to the backdoor of the barn. Unfortunately, they didn't have time to get them out. The front door opened and a group of Germans entered, chatting among themselves.

Ella raised her jump knife while a chill ran down her spine.

His small friend had beads of sweat on her forehead, Bull noticed. Her eyes stood out darkly against the pallor of her skin and she looked like about four seconds away from keeling over. She met his worried gaze with an impressively composed one and honest to God smiled.

The Germans left. All except one.

Ella's nose crinkled in disgust as she heard him tell his comrades to go ahead without him because he had to relieve himself.

Bull peered around the corner and watched the Kraut zip up his trousers and head towards the door. When the man stopped and picked up something from the ground, Bull cursed inwardly and silently fixed his bayonet onto his rifle. Nobody could know that they were here.

The young medic strained her hearing, listening for any sign that the German was gone. One glance at Bull's taut shoulders told her all she needed to know. From the corner of her eye, she saw the farmer's daughter lean forward to see around the corner. The Kraut dropped the bloody gauze and was almost out of the barn when the blonde's foot jostled a bucket.

Within the blink of an eye, the girl had pushed the civilians behind her and braced herself for a fight. The adrenaline pumping through her veins did an excellent job at keeping her upright.

"Hallo? Komm raus!", the Kraut called.

Bull watched with baited breath as the soldier moved through the barn, weapon at the ready. When he had his back turned, standing only a few feet from where Ella was hiding with the Dutch folks, Bull charged.

The fight was brutal and fuelled by fear.
Ella had her knife gripped tightly, ready to jump in if necessary. Her heart was thundering in her chest, each beat like a hammer blow inside her head.

Bull delivered a blow with his bayonet. It wasn't lethal. The Kraut's scream was drowned out by the noise of planes flying overhead. He recovered. His own bayonet swiped across Bull's forearm and the tall man recoiled. The German saw his opening and charged, weapon raised. Bull struggled to fight him off and was forced back a few steps.

Suddenly, the enemy soldier froze mid-movement, a choked noise escaping him. Then, he collapsed, falling forward like a sack of potatoes.

Stunned, Bull stared at the knife sticking out of the dead Kraut's back. Slowly, he raised his head and looked directly at Ella, who had stepped out of their hiding place. She was trembling all over and her hand clutched the wooden post with a white-knuckled grip. He could hear her short, strained breaths.

The girl held his gaze for a moment and gave him a weak smile.

A heartbeat later, her knees gave out.

Bull managed to catch her before she could hit the ground and possibly make her head injury even worse.

Blearily, she blinked up at him, the smile still on her lips. "Are you okay?", she mumbled, words slurred slightly with exhaustion.

He had to smile at that. On the verge of passing out, the brunette medic was still not thinking about herself, but rather making sure he was alright. Nodding, he said: "I'm okay, Shorty."

Sighing in relief, she replied in a weak whisper: "That's good. 'cause...", she wet her chapped lips, "I'm a bit dizzy."

Bull had to chuckle at that gross understatement. Picking her up, he carried her back to the haystack and carefully lay her down. "You should get some rest."

She hummed in response, eyes closing.

The two civilians, especially the daughter, were looking at them both in horror. Bull didn't waste any time pushing them out the back door. It was dangerous enough for them, they didn't need to be caught by the Krauts hiding two American soldiers. Returning to the pen, he found Ella sitting up and leaning against the wooden planks, the moonlight illuminating her blood-covered features. Her canteen was lying in her lap.

She opened her eyes when he sat down next to her and smiled tiredly at him.

"Thought you were asleep", he commented quietly.

Ella took another sip from her canteen. "Too dizzy", she answered, grimacing in disgust at her own weakness. "And I gotta rehydrate. Don't want to swoon like a maiden every time I have to stand for
more than a few seconds."

Bull chuckled and looped his arm around her, tucking her against his side. She rested her head against his chest.

They were quiet for a while, the only sound their breathing and Ella occasionally swallowing another mouthful of water.

"Thank you for saving my life, Bull."

Her words were soft, but the sincerity and gratefulness in her tone rang clear as a bell.

"Think it was you who saved my hide there", he replied, glancing down at her.

Her laugh was little more than an audible, staccato exhale, but it was like balm for Bull's soul, banishing the last remnants of fear and worry for her.

The small medic put away her canteen and sighed, breaking the stillness. "I don't like concussions", she stated, sounding almost as if she were pouting. "They are annoying."

Bull smiled softly. "Sounds like you got some experience."

A mischievous grin spread on Ella's face. "Well, I got my share of 'em as a kid", she answered, a small hand lifting to tick off a list with her fingers: "Cracked my head open on the kerbstone and gave myself the scar on my eyebrow when I was four. Fell out of a tree when I was seven. Slammed into...a cupboard. Poor Mama", she sighed with a soft chuckle, "had to put up with the two of us, always going on adventures and getting into trouble."

He shrugged. "That's what kids do", he said. "My mother used to say 'there's something wrong if your kid's not sometimes got a skinned knee and grass stains on his pants.'"

The girl glanced up at him, a warm smile on her lips. "Your mother is a wise woman."

He nodded. "That she is, kiddo."

They lapsed into silence again. Soon enough, as the dizziness finally disappeared, Ella felt her eyes closing on their own accord. Yawning lightly and snuggling up closer to her tall friend, she was soon swept away into the land of dreams.

Bull looked down at his friend, pulled his rifle closer and got ready for the wait. Dawn was still hours away and during that time, a lot could happen.

The Germans were long gone when they left the barn at first light. Ella was still a bit unsteady on her feet, but the hammering in her head had lessened a little. She watched silently while Bull collected the dog tags of their fallen.
When they came to one of the trenches, they saw Private Miller lying there, rifle still clutched in his hand, head gaping open. The brunette sat down on the edge of the trench and sighed sadly. Miller had been a good kid and, like all the others that had died, way too young. I hoff er hät sin Frida gfunda, wo au immer er jez ish.

The sound of a jeep made her look up. As it approached, the machine gunner pointed his weapon at them, ready to shoot.

Bull calmly raised his rifle in greeting, signalling that they were allies. He helped the girl up and kept a hand on her back as they walked over.

They told the driver that they were looking to find Easy Company.

"They're camped out not too far from here", the driver informed them. Glancing at their tired, dirty and bloody faces, he added: "Hop in."

The two siblings in arms gladly obliged, Ella settling in the middle between Bull and the driver.

"What the hell happened to you?", the gunner asked as they started driving.

"He got hit by a piece of exploding tank, I got shot in the head", the brunette explained, carefully tipping her head back to grin up at the baffled soldier.

They came across Bull's squad not long afterwards.

Hoobler was the first to reach them, a shit-eating grin on his face. "Where the fuck you been?", he asked, almost giddy with relief.

"Glad to see you boys", Bull said, smiling.

When they saw the blood on Ella's face, hair and uniform, their eyes grew wide as saucers. "Oh my god! Are you okay?", Garcia gasped.

She smiled lightly, touched by their concern. "Sure, nothing serious."

"Nothing serious?", Webster sputtered. "Your head is bleeding!"

"Not anymore. It's just a graze", she assured them. The shock and panic faded from their faces, the happy, relieved smiles returning.

The driver glanced at the two soldiers they had picked up in Nuenen before looking back to the five men that obviously belonged to Easy Company. "You wanna save the hen party for later?", he questioned, his grumble rather unconvincing because the corners of his mouth just wouldn't stay down.

"Mount up, we don't have all day", his colleague in the back added, amused smirk evident in his tone.

The guys piled into the back, balancing precariously on the small bed of the jeep.

"Sweet ride, Sarge", Cobb grinned.
Ella and Bull simply traded a knowing look and chuckled.

Dukeman walked over to where Johnny was talking with Skinny and Ramirez. "Hey, Johnny, look." He indicated something behind them with a jerk of his head.

Johnny turned around and his face lit up with a smile. "Bull!"

The overloaded jeep came to a halt and the missing Arkansas man got out of the passenger seat while the rest of his squad hopped down from the back.

Bull smiled as he shook his friend's hand. "Hey Johnny."

"Get a little lost?", the smaller man asked with an arch look.

"Something like that."

Johnny nodded. "It's good to see you" These simple words said it all: We were worried about you. I'm glad you're okay.

Bull returned the nod. "You too."

Ella shimmied out of the jeep after thanking driver and gunner for the ride.

"Jesus Christ, Shorty!"

She turned and was nearly smothered in a hug by a relieved Johnny Martin a second later.

"Don't you ever do something like that again", he chided.

"I'll do my best", she responded, beaming at him with twinkling eyes.

He couldn't help but return the smile.

"I don't know whether to slap ye, kiss ye or salute ye", Bill proclaimed as he came over to greet the two lost Easy members. He too pulled Ella in a tight hug and planted a smacking kiss on the crown of her head. The girl laughed and as he let go, the rest of guys swarmed her, passing her around like a small human teddy bear.

The other squads came over to greet the returnees. Many of them were first shocked by all the blood on their girl's face, but her radiant smile quickly assuaged their worries.

Luz, the big goof, picked her up and – mindful of her injury – swung her around like a child before handing her over to Toye, who squeezed her tightly and passed her on to Popeye, who passed her to Liebgott, who passed her to Malarkey.

Ella felt like every single man in the company shook her hand, ruffled her hair or enveloped her in a fierce hug. She also got more kisses on the cheek, forehead and top of her head than she could
count in the flurry.

She wobbled a little, feeling light-headed after the exuberant greetings of her friends.

Johnny, who was closest, reached out and looped an arm around her back. "C'mon, kid", he said quietly. "Let's get you checked out."

Bull and Guarnere fell into step next to them as they headed for the trucks.

"So", Bill drawled with a grin, looking over at Bull, "they found ya."

"Wait, what did you say?", Johnny asked innocently, a teasing smirk on his lips.

Bill rolled his eyes. "Johnny, don't irritate me."

"They found you?", he repeated amusedly, making Ella giggle. "Now I don't know who's more stupid, you or the hick."

The four of them laughed, enjoying the companionable banter. The normalcy of it chased away the anxiety and tension of the night.

"Alright, mount up!", Lipton's voice called from atop a tank up on the dyke. "Hop hop, let's move out!"

The three men turned to face their squads and platoons. Guarnere echoed Lip's orders, barking: "Second platoon, grab you gear! Let's go!"

"First platoon!", Johnny called, his arm still supporting their favourite female medic.

"Second squad, fall in now!", Bull hollered. "Cobb, move it! Dukeman, round 'em up!"

As the men started collecting their gear and moving up to the road, Johnny adjusted his hold on the young girl. She was a bit paler than before and was eyeing the slope doubtfully.

Biting her lip, Ella felt a blush rising on her cheeks. "Uh... I'm not sure I can make it up there", she admitted in a hushed tone.

"We got you, Shorty", Bill said, clapping a hand on her shoulder.

True to their word, they helped her up the embankment, Johnny and Bull on either side of her, Guarnere behind them in case she slipped and fell.

On the road, Bill left to see to his platoon. Lipton came over to the remaining trio, a warm smile on his features. "Glad to have you back, Bull", he said, shaking Bull's hand.

"Glad to be back, Lip"

"Go get yourself checked out", Lip instructed.

Then he turned to Ella, who was now leaning rather heavily on Johnny, white as a sheet and with
drying blood crusting the side of her face, but facing him happily. "Hi Lip", she beamed.

"Hi Ella." He met Johnny's eyes. "I got her."

Johnny nodded, nudged the girl with his shoulder and said: "See you later, kiddo", before reluctantly transferring her over to Lip.

The newly appointed First Sergeant slung an arm around the woozy young girl and guided her towards the waiting trucks.

"You gave us quite a scare, Shorty", he said.

"Sorry, Sarge", she mumbled, eyes fixed on the pavement before her, focused on placing one foot before the other. Walking required an almost obscene amount of concentration, she found. "I didn't mean to."

"I know, kid. We're just glad to have you back."

Ella smiled. "Hey Sarge?", she said, tilting her head to peer up at him. "Think Sobel's gonna let me have a set of new ODs?"

Lip chuckled. "Maybe. Though he might make you run Currahee first."

The brunette snickered.

Gene was just helping Bull sit down in the truck bed when he heard Lipton call: "Doc? You got a minute?"

Turning around, he probably aged 20 years on the spot. Supported by Lipton was Ella, covered in blood and pale as a ghost. But her deep green eyes, sparkling in the sunlight, were very much alive, just like the happy smile on her face. "Mon Dieu, Ellie!", he sighed, rushing over to envelop her in a gentle hug.

"Salut Gene", she mumbled against his shoulder. "Tu m'as manqué."

Releasing her, Gene shot an asking look to Lipton. The First Sergeant easily lifted the girl onto the bed of the truck, right next to Bull.

She let her feet dangle and contently leaned against Bull's uninjured side, waiting for the horizon to right itself again. "Thanks, Lip", she said.

Lipton patted her on the knee before he went to check on the rest of the men.

Gene hopped on and settled on the bench beside Ella.

Nixon and Winters watched the trucks pull out.

Bull had wrapped his arm around Ella's slim frame. Seeing the two officers' solemn looks, the girl gave them a bright grin and waved.

Nixon snorted and shook his head with a fond eyeroll. He glanced over at his friend and saw the fond smile on his lips.
"I'm glad they're back", Winters spoke quietly as they started walking down the road.

"Yeah", Nixon responded. "Me too."

They were both thinking the same thing. Ella was the heart and soul of Easy Company. If it hadn't been clear before, it had been after D-Day at the latest when the men were making their way back to the company and found themselves looking forward to seeing their girl again, giving her a hug and getting one of her brilliant smiles.

The doctor at the aid station was reaching the end of his tether. He knew of course that soldiers could be stubborn and that medical personnel often made the worst patients. But never in his entire time as a doctor had he met a more wilful and tenacious, yet sweet and considerate person than this one. It would have been amazing if it weren't so confusing and frustrating.

To complete his misery, the medic sitting on the pallet was a woman.

"Sergeant, you need to go to the hospital and get your wound treated properly, it is a dangerous injury", he said for the umpteenth time.

Technician 4th Grade Ella Sawyer smiled patiently and replied: "It's just a graze, sir, I'm fine. You said it yourself, the concussion should clear within the day. Put in those stitches and I'll be out of your hair."

Throwing up his hands in exasperation, he turned to face the medic that had come in with her and the other wounded from Nuenen, Technician 5th Grade Eugene Roe. "Can't you talk some sense into her?", he almost pleaded.

Roe shrugged. "If she says it ain't serious, then it ain't serious."

Sawyer looked up at Roe. "Merci, Gene", she said. Looking back to him, she spoke: "Sir, I assure you, my wound doesn't warrant a trip to the hospital."

Sighing and running a hand through his hair, the doctor looked her in the eye. "You are serious about this, aren't you?"

She grinned cheerfully. "Yup. I'm not gonna skip out on my boys, sir."

Roe's lips quirked up into a smile as he said: "Better give up, sir, 'cause Ellie here's going back with or without your permission."

Heaving another resigned sigh, the doctor nodded. "Alright. Just... take it easy for a while? You lost quite some blood, and even if it was just a graze, you were still shot in the head."

Sawyer promised to be careful and Roe assured him he would look out for her. Admitting defeat, the doctor had a nurse bring over a suture kit.

The young woman was the perfect patient from then on, lying still while he sewed up the gash on the side of her head. She even made friendly conversation with him, completely untroubled by the fact that she was getting stitches because a bullet had grazed her head, missing her left eye by mere
As he watched the two Easy Company medics leave with some of the men that had only minor injuries, the doctor could only shake his head and silently hope for his own sake that the woman would never be his patient again.

The company was spending the night in an abandoned barn. Ella sat on her makeshift bunk and wrote in her journal. The men shot glances her way from time to time as if to reassure themselves that she was still there. If she noticed it, she didn't let it show.

"Do you have a moment?"

She looked up at the sound of Bull's voice. "Sure." His pensive, serious expression worried her slightly. "What's going on?"

He led her to a corner, away from prying ears and sat down on the rickety bench, waiting for her to do the same. For a moment, Bull simply studied her.

"Why did you kill that Kraut?", he finally asked.

Realisation crept up on her. "He was trying to kill you", Ella answered earnestly.

"I would have managed. You didn't have to do it."

The small girl shrugged. "Maybe", she said, "But the longer that fight went on, the bigger the risk got that his buddies would come looking for him, and then we would have all ended up dead." Her hand moved up to the fresh stitches on her temple as if to scratch, then dropped into her lap again.

Bull's features were still filled with tension. "Doesn't it bother you?", he wanted to know.

Ella wasn't offended by the possible implication in his question, she understood the underlying sentiment. "Course it does", she admitted freely. "It bothers me just as much as the two Germans I had to kill on D-Day, maybe even more." Her expression shifted, guilt and sadness bubbling up to the surface.

The tall blond frowned. "Then why? Why'd you do it?"

She looked him in the eye. Bull could see the small gold flecks on her deep green irises. "Because, Bull, I couldn't just leave you hanging." She pushed some unruly strands out of her face. "I don't like what I did and I'll probably hate myself forever for having to do it, but I'm not sorry. If it means saving one of you guys from injury or death, I would do it again in a heartbeat."

Pausing, Ella studied the man in front of her. There was still remorse etched into his features. Leaning forward, she put a hand on his arm. Sincerity was written across her face, shining in her eyes and echoing in her voice. "It is not your fault, Bull. It was my choice", she implored. "I saw the way that woman looked at us. We're not monsters. We were just trying to stay alive."

Bull stayed silent for a while, contemplating her words. Finally, a small smile broke out on his face
and he squeezed her hand. "I guess you're right, Shorty."

Ella gave him one of her cheeky smiles, eliminating the last traces of the sombre mood. "Happens from time to time."

He chuckled and stood up. "You should get some rest, don't think I didn' hear that doctor tell ya to take it easy."

Laughing softly, she let him pull her to her feet. They walked back over to the rest of the guys.

Most of them were still awake and watching them, having witnessed their short conversation. When they noticed the smiles on Ella and Bull's faces, they relaxed. Their two friends were back and they were okay. For the moment, that was all the boys needed.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Was machen Elefanta i mim Kopf?: What are elephants doing in my head?
Wiso hani n Verband a?: Why do I have a bandage on?
Nid guat: Not good
Gar nid guat: Totally not good
Hallo?: Hello?
Komm raus!: Come out!
I hoff er hät sin Frida gfunda, wo au immer er jez ish: I hope he's found peace, wherever he may be
Salut: Hi, hello
Tu m'as manqué: I missed you
Merci: Thanks
It was about two weeks later when Ella ran into Lt Speirs. Literally.

She had been knee-deep in soldiers' guts all day with Operation Market Garden going about just as well as their battle at Nuenen: disastrously. The young medic had seen the result of the not-yet-declared-as-failed operation with her own eyes and she was still tussling with the Grim Reaper for the life of each soldier she treated, be it in the field or at the aid-station.

She had no idea what the town they had liberated was called and she frankly didn't care. She was too busy picking up the pieces during and after each fight, especially with them being one man short. Spina was still at the hospital with the gunshot wound to his thigh and the remaining medics felt the strain. They kept up their rotation through the platoons so that each of them got a chance to stay in reserve or man the aid station and take a break from running around on active battlefields.

That morning, Ella stumbled out of the aid station after an exhausting, way too long shift. She had lost count of the number of casualties she had treated. She had sent Gene off to eat and sleep hours before and stayed behind to oversee the last evacs. Now, she was hungry and in a desperate need for a dose of sleep that lasted longer than the 15- to 30-minute cat naps she had caught in between the arrival of two transports.

As she turned the corner, she didn't see the person walking in the opposite direction and smacked straight into them. The unexpected impact made her lose her balance and she would have fallen if it hadn't been for a pair of strong hands catching her by the forearms.

Her startled yelp attracted the attention of Johnny and Bull, who happened to be heading in the same direction as the brunette. When they saw that she wasn't in danger, they decided to hang back and watch the exchange, prepared to intervene at the first hint of distress from their girl.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant, I didn't see you", Ella stammered, pushing a few strands from her eyes and waiting for her erratic heartbeat to slow again.
A small smirk curled Lt Speirs' lips. "That I could see."

His sharp gaze flicked to the red, still swollen scar on her head. Gene had taken out the stitches a few days before and the wound – which was healing nicely – was covered with dark scab. The bruises around the edges were slowly fading. "Rumour has it you were killed in Nuenen, Sergeant Sawyer", he commented.

Her eyes twinkled as the corner of her mouth lifted to form a wry grin. "I don't make a habit of listening to rumours, sir", she replied. The young girl had noticed that most of the guys were scared of Lieutenant Speirs, but she found that his grim expression and intense stare didn't intimidate her in the least.

He hummed in acknowledgement. "Seems like this one was unfounded", he agreed before turning serious again. "You haven't been bothered again by anyone from my company, have you, Sergeant?"

She shook her head, swallowing. "No, sir."

"Good." The threat – though not directed at her – behind that short statement was loud and clear. Nodding at her, Speirs continued on his way.

Ella turned to watch him leave, thoroughly confused. Why would he care? I'm not in his company, why does he care if his guys bother me? As usual when the topic came up, she felt a restless unease settle in her chest.

"Hey Shorty. Everything alright?" Johnny's voice yanked her out of her thoughts and she jumped a little.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, I'm okay", she said, flashing them a quick smile as they started walking down the road towards the ramshackle barn that served as their mess hall for the day. It didn't escape her notice that they had moved to flank her. "Remember how you wanted to know why Lt Speirs talked to me?", she asked, breaking the comfortable silence. The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. There was no turning back now.

Bull gave an affirmative hum, allowing the girl to continue in her own time.

It was quiet for a while. They could practically hear Ella sorting her thoughts to try and find the right words.

"He... There's a guy in Dog Company", she explained. "He and I have a history together. Speirs wanted to hear my side of it, because apparently, Michaels said some things about me."

"Michaels?" Johnny turned his head to look at her. That name rang a bell. A bad feeling crept up on him.

"Michaels?" Johnny asked sharply, shoulders tensing. He watched her narrowly, picking up on the way she seemed to shrink in on herself, shoulders hunching forward, her arms wrapping around her lithe frame. She ran a hand through her hair, blowing out a breath.
The young girl didn't answer right away and they arrived at the mess hall. Johnny opened the door and motioned for them to enter. Ella chose a spot close to the door and slumped down onto an old crate. The barn was empty save for a few small clusters of men sitting together towards the back.

"I...I don't really know where to start", she admitted, voice small.

Bull took a seat to her right, fishing out a can of rations. Johnny followed suit, sitting down on the girl's left.

"The beginning is as good a place as any", Bull said.

Ella nodded, more to herself than anybody else. Her slim fingers fidgeted around the canteen she was cupping with small hands. "We were in high school together", she began, eyes fixed on a smear of dirt on the floor. "And I was his favourite target. At first, it was just normal things, calling me names, taking away my stuff, tripping me in the hallway. But over time" – she took a steadying breath – "over time he escalated it more and more."

A shudder ran through her as she remembered some of Michaels' cruelties. "I tried to tell the teachers. They said I shouldn't provoke him."

"Assholes", Johnny ground up, hand clenched tightly around his spoon.

Ella wanted to smile at that. But the order got lost in translation between her brain and the muscles in her face, so she just dropped her gaze again. "I don't know why he hates me so much. Nico protected me, but he couldn't be there all the time... I tried to defend myself, but-", her voice caught, "it only made things worse."

Her throat started to close up and her mouth went dry. Blinking rapidly, the young girl bit her lip and sniffled lightly. Flashes of pain flickered before her eyes, cries and whimpers.

A crate squeaked and a warm hand landed on her forearm, right above the scar she had gotten in Normandy. She startled out of her memories when Johnny's voice reached her. "You don't have to continue."

Ella shook her head. "No, I... I want to, I need to."

Bull didn't say anything, but rested his hand on her back, between the shoulder blades. The tension melted slightly under his warm touch. With each shaky breath, her ribcage expanded against his hand.

Trying to focus on the steady, grounding touches, the brunette medic braced herself to tell her friends about that Wednesday 3 years ago when Adrian Michaels had almost killed her. "I was a junior in high school. He cornered me after class and" – she swallowed – "made a grab at me." She ducked her head, cheeks flushing with past humiliation.

A muscle jumped in Johnny's jaw and Bull's eyes turned to ice. Both men grit their teeth, forcing themselves to stay calm for the girl's sake.

"I tried to fight him, but... he was too strong. I bit him a-and got thrown into a glass case. He... he laughed." Tears trickled down the girl's cheeks as she remembered the fear, the desperation, the pain.

A strangled gasp echoed in her ears, a whispered plea for help, her chest tightening. Her voice
trembled as much as her body when she continued. "I got pierced by some shards when I landed, right through the stomach. If my brother hadn't come looking for me..." She had been just barely awake, blood pooling beneath her, four shards protruding from her abdomen, moving with each shallow, gasping breath. She remembered her brother's panicked expression as he begged her to hold on. Then, only darkness.

Johnny abruptly got up and stormed from the barn. Ella flinched at the door banging shut.

"He'll come back", Bull assured her, running his hand up and down her back. "He just needs to cool off a little."

The girl nodded, breath hitching in an attempt to stifle the sobs clawing their way up her throat.

Johnny felt the overwhelming urge to punch something as he paced up and down along the side of the barn, fists clenching and unclenching at his sides. He couldn't shake the image that had formed in his mind while listening to Ella's story. If he ever came across Adrian Michaels, he would rearrange that bastard's face.

As the flaming fury died down a little, he thought about the protectiveness the brunette medic evoked in him and the rest of the guys.

He thought about how his stomach had plummeted when he had first seen the young girl again after D-Day, the front of her jacket covered in blood, scratches on her face, bruises around her neck. And how her radiant smile and exuberant greeting had let him breathe a little easier.

He thought about the terror he had felt when he had watched her fall backwards and disappear into that ditch, and how all the worry and fear had disappeared as soon as he had seen her cheerful grin.

"If my brother hadn't come looking for me..." That sentence echoed in his head while he resumed his pacing. Running a hand through his dark curls, Johnny noisily breathed out. "Fuck." Suddenly, some of the things he had noticed about his small friend made a lot more sense.

Bull looked up when the door opened. Johnny came back. The set of his shoulders was still tense, but he seemed a bit calmer. The tall man glanced at the young girl by his side. Ella was hunched forward, head buried in her arms that rested on her knees, face hidden beneath a mop of unruly locks.

"Hey kiddo", Johnny said quietly. He immediately felt guilty for storming off the way he did. *Kid probably thinks we'll hate her.*

The curtain of hair shifted to reveal a pair of too bright green eyes peering up at him. "I'm sorry", she whispered hoarsely.

Both men frowned in confusion. Then it clicked and the anger came back in full swing. Luckily, Bull was a second quicker than Johnny. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and titled her chin up with two fingers, forcing her to meet his eyes. Unshed tears still shone in her beautiful orbs. "Hey. It ain't your fault, ya hear? None of it."

Years of insecurity were written across her face. *People blamed her*, Bull realised. The injustice of
"I got kicked out of school for it", Ella continued, "They...they said my condition would...would only encourage the boys to-" She shook her head, voice deserting her.

"What condition?" Johnny's tone was unusually soft with apprehension.

"They...when I woke up in the hospital, the doctors told me I...", she sucked in a trembling breath, avoiding their gaze, "they had to do a hysterectomy. They, uh, they said it had been my only chance."

Not familiar with the medical jargon, Bull gently probed: "What are you saying, Ella? What does that mean?"

She looked at them, eyes filled with agony and heartbreak, her words broken: "I can't have children."

The silence was deafening. Both men were at a complete loss for words in light of that revelation. Ella cast her eyes to the floor, fiddling nervously with a loose thread on her sleeve.

The door opened and Lipton entered. "On your feet, we're moving out again!", he called. "Come on, people, let's go!"

They jumped to their feet, grabbed their equipment and hurried to get to their units. Ella managed a tiny, tired smile before she left to check in with the other medics, forcing all thoughts of the conversation out of her mind.

Bull and Johnny shared a look filled with swirling emotions.

Morale was getting lower and lower. The men were in firefights and skirmishes almost non-stop, barely getting any rest. They were tired, filthy and frustrated, making them tense and short-tempered. Ella was doing her best to cheer the guys up by talking and joking with them, but the medics were often swamped with casualties and their days were just as long and exhausting as the soldiers', leaving little time for pleasantries.

When they moved to The Island, things didn't really get better. They probably got worse, because the stale-mate they found themselves in was driving them up the wall. They were holding their assigned piece of the line, but they were shorthanded, so the officers regularly sent patrols to check the significant gaps between the OPs. Their patrols sometimes penetrated the Kraut line and vice versa. Apparently, the enemy was stretched just as thin as they were.

Ultimately, neither side had sufficient manpower for a proper assault, so they simply held their position and waited, hoped that the other party made a mistake that they could use to their advantage.

Sitting cross-legged on an empty cot at the aid station, Ella tried to catch up on all the paperwork
that came with being a medic and not fall asleep while doing it. Casualty reports, supply requisition forms, accounts for supplies used... the list went on and on. And since it was difficult to write all these forms in a foxhole or under fire, there was always a huge stack of paperwork waiting to be filled out when they actually had a roof over their heads and enough time on their hands.

Sighing, she stuck her pencil into her hair, stretched and stood up, shoulders popping. Ambling through the rows of cots, the young girl checked on the few patients that were there.

"How are you doing, Johnston?", she asked with a smile.

"Okay, Ma'am. Can I get back to my squad?", he asked hopefully.

Ella gave him an amused look and took his temperature. Out of all things, Johnston had come down with a nasty bout of the flu. The fever had weakened him so much, he hadn't been able to stand for almost four days. Thankfully, his temperature had gone down on its own and he had slowly regained his strength. "Well, your fever has been gone for a few days now. If you feel up to it, I don't see any reason to keep you here", she said.

Johnston beamed happily, jumped out of bed and planted an exuberant kiss on her cheek. "Thanks, Shorty!" He got dressed in no time, gave a jaunty salute and rushed off, throwing a cheerful "See you around!" over his shoulder.

Shaking her head fondly, Ella finished her rounds before going back to her paperwork. The pile had already diminished significantly and she was hoping to get everything done before the end of her shift. Scribbling a signature under the last supply requisition form, the brunette picked up the remaining casualty reports. Some had already been written by her fellow medics, thankfully.

The men on the cots smiled and traded knowing looks when Ella absent-mindedly started humming to herself. She often did that while carrying out boring tasks.

Gene came in moments later and watched his friend with a small smile tugging at his mouth. She looked so young and innocent like that, chewing on her bottom lip, a stack of papers in her lap. Quietly, he moved over and sat down next to her.

Ella only acknowledged him with a quick glance and a quirk of her lips. Wordlessly, he took half of the stack, dug in his pocket for a pencil and started writing. They worked in companionable silence, the girl's small tune enough to fill the aid station with a rare sense of peace and content. Together, they managed to finish the paperwork in less than two hours.

"Alright", Ella smiled, getting to her feet and stifling a yawn, "My shift's over anyways, so I'll drop this off at HQ." She waved the stack of paper in her hands.

Gene nodded. "Don't forget to eat", he reminded her.

The girl slanted him a playful look. "Never."

He just raised an eyebrow in response. Giggling, Ella left the aid station and headed for HQ's command post.
"Heads up, Shorty!", Talbert called when he saw the brunette heading towards HQ.

Ella turned and was barrelled over by a mass of fur and paws. Her eyes grew huge with wonder and she let out a delighted squeak. Jumping around her was a beautiful German Shepherd, tail wagging as it yipped excitedly. "Oh, was bish du denn für n hübscha?", she gushed, sitting up and stroking the dog's surprisingly soft fur. He barked once and licked her hand, relishing the attention. The girl scratched behind his ears and petted his head, grinning from ear to ear.

"Like him?", Tab asked.

She nodded. "He's a beauty. Where'd you find him?"

"Don't know. He just started following me last night."

The dog snuggled up to her, panting and rubbing his head against her. Laughing, the small girl bent her head so that their noses were nearly touching and looked the dog in the eyes. "Bish a ganz an feina", she cooed, face filled with sheer joy. He licked her cheek in response, making her laugh. "Jo jo, ish doch guat." Looking up at Tab, who was watching her with a silly grin on his face, she asked: "You got a name for him yet?"

He shook his head. "No. But I'll think of something. Right boy?" He reached out and stroked the dog's back.

Getting to their feet, they walked to the huge brick and mortar barn where they had set up their quarters, the dog leading the way.

Ella flopped down onto a seat next to Luz, who tousled her hair before going back to tinkering with his radio. Tab went over to Dukeman, his new pet right on his heels. Captain Winters was cleaning his rifle at the table. He acknowledged them with a friendly nod and a scanning glance.

Having nothing else to do, Ella pulled out her ratty journal. Carrying it with her wherever they went, it had a lot of creases and dog-ears by now. Flipping through the pages, the girl noticed she hadn't written anything in over a week. Scratching at a spot on her forehead with her pencil, she began writing about what had happened over the last few days. It wasn't a dry, factual report like the ones she'd filled out earlier. She just wrote down whatever came to her mind. The events mixed with thoughts and emotions. Fear, hope, frustration. Even joy.

To some, it might seem odd, but Ella had made a habit out of finding at least one good thing to write about each day. Lives saved, friendly civilians, nice weather, a few laughs shared with her friends. Even the smallest thing like a colourful leaf or the smell of autumn.

"You okay?"

"Hm?" Ella looked up into Luz' warm brown eyes. His ever-present smile had a small edge of concern to it. "Yeah, I'm okay." She smiled back at him and the worry dissolved.

"Good. You wanna give me a hand?"

She leant forward, tucking her journal away. "Sure, what do you need?"

George handed her a bunch of wires and asked her to disentangle them. "If the wrong wires get
crossed, we could accidentally transmit to the Krauts", he mumbled around the screws he was holding between his lips.

The girl chuckled. "Well, wouldn't that be fun?", she asked, a teasing smirk creeping onto her face. "We could chat about the weather and swap recipes."

Luz laughed so hard he nearly swallowed a screw.

Their conversation was interrupted by Tab's Shepherd bounding over to Ella and dropping a stick in her lap. "Oh da ish abr liab", the girl smiled, scratching behind the dog's ears. "I'm assuming you want me to throw that for you?"

He gave a short huff and waited expectantly, tongue hanging from his mouth.

Talbert came over to them, shaking his head. "The new guys giving the replacements the what for and why is. I swear, one of them has never shaved."

Winters, who was blackening the iron sights of his rifle, nodded. "Yeah. Kids."

Ella didn't say anything. It wasn't about age. Well, not all of it. The replacements were too green, too wide-eyed, too eager for action. They didn't go through the same training as the Toccoa veterans and they hadn't seen combat yet like the new guys.

The dog had now turned to Luz for attention. George smiled, ruffling his fur and feeding him a cracker from his rations. "This is one hell of a dog, Tab", he said.

Tab grinned proudly and took the stick from Ella to toss it.

"What did you call it, Tab?", Winters asked.

"Trigger", Tab announced.

Ella huffed a small laugh.

Luz nodded approvingly. "That's good, I like that", he said, the words muffled by the crackers he was munching on.

Trigger came back and deposited the stick in Ella's lap, tail wagging happily. "Guata Buab, ganz toll", she praised, scratching his neck. The dog licked her face, the men laughing as she returned the favour and placed a kiss on his forehead.

Suddenly, the door banged open. Trigger barked nervously. "We got penetration!", somebody shouted.

"Alley's hurt, we need a Doc!", Liebgott hollered.

The patrol came bursting in, carrying a badly wounded Alley between them.

Ella was on her feet in a flash, meeting them half-way. "Get him on the table!", she called. All
around her, the men jumped up from where they had been reclining in the hay, rushing over to help.

"Alright, I got this", Winters took charge, "Alley, you're gonna be okay."

They got their comrade settled on the table, Ella already pushing up her sleeves, eyes raking up and down his body, assessing the extent of the injuries while she quickly cleaned her hands with a bunch of iodide swabs. "Boyle, get Doc Roe", she ordered before turning to her patient. "Hey Alley."

He looked at her, eyes glazed with pain, his face pale and bloody. Blood was gushing from his torso. "Where am I? What happened", he asked dazedly.

Lipton held his hand and wiped some blood off the side of his face. "It's alright, take it easy", he soothed.

"Keep him calm and awake, Lip", the young medic directed from the corner of her mouth, prying away the blood-soaked uniform shirt to get a better look. "Somebody get me more light!"

Dukeman scrambled away and returned with a lantern a few beats later.

Glancing at the two men closest to her, she then said: "Tab, elevate that leg. Luz, get his boots off." They hurried to comply.

"Where was it?", Winters demanded.

Liebgott was unrolling the pressure bandage from his own aid kit. "Crossroads", he responded, "where the road crosses the dyke."

Lesniewski accused: "If it wasn't for your loud mouth, they'd never known we were there!"

"Hey, you know what, Joe? Back off!", Liebgott shot back.

Dukeman put a hand on his shoulder in an attempt to calm him down.

Ella's head snapped up. "Give it a rest!", she called sharply. Her hands constantly moving, pouring sulfa onto Alley's wounds and pulling out bandages. The two men were instantly cowed into silence by her Look. She noticed Liebgott tying a bandage around his own neck and made a mental note to check on him afterwards.

Winters cut in again, stopping the argument before it could get started. "Lesniewski, send a runner for Lieutenant Welsh! Lipton, assemble me a squad!"

"First squad on your feet!", Lip hollered, relinquishing his position at Alley's side. "Weapons and ammo only, let's move!"

The circle around the table split, everybody hurrying to grab their gear. At that moment, Gene appeared and immediately moved to assist his friend. "Liebgott, use the sulfa", he directed, "not too much." He leant forward to look Alley in the eyes. "Hi Alley", he greeted the wounded man.

If it hadn't been such a chaotic situation, the men would have stopped to admire how well the two medics worked together. Like a well-oiled machine, they manoeuvred around each other, passed
paraphernalia back and forth, filled each other in on their diagnoses.

Ella gave her helpers a smile. "It's okay, guys. We got him", she assured them, effectively dismissing them. She let Gene handle the sulfa, taking up holding Alley's hand and trying to keep him calm. He was still a bit confused, gaze wandering across the ceiling, flickering in and out of focus.

"Hey, Moe", the girl spoke softly. She waited until his eyes found her. "Do you know where you are?"

He blinked. "In...a barn?"

"That's right. We set up shop here, do you remember?"

"Yeah."

A relieved smile broke out on her face. "Good. You got hit and you're bleeding pretty bad, but we got you, okay? Just take it easy and we'll get you outta here."

Alley had tears in his eyes as he clutched her hand, possibly leaving bruises. "I don't wanna die! Please Shorty, don't let me die!"

She reached out and brushed his hair back from his forehead. "Shush, it's okay", she soothed. "We're here, you're not gonna die." She quickly met Gene's gaze and tilted her head in a silent question. He nodded.

"Alley? You got a girl back home?", Ella asked, expertly distracting him from his pain and fear.

He sniffled, trying to catch up with the abrupt change of topic. "Yeah."

The brunette smiled. "Tell me about her", she prompted. "What's her name?"

While they waited for evac, she attentively listened to Alley as he talked about his girlfriend. The glow of love and utter admiration on his face made the two medics smile. Gene filled out the tag while Ella continued holding their patient's hand. When the jeep arrived, she squeezed Alley's hand one last time and said: "See you soon."

She and Gene watched the jeep roar off into the night. When it was no longer visible, the girl let out a sigh and turned to her friend. "Let's go check in with Lt Welsh. He'll probably want us on stand-by in case they need reinforcements", she spoke.

They started walking, wiping their hands on their trousers.

They hadn't been at the CP for long when the call for reinforcements came over the radio. "Tell Peacock to bring the balance of First Platoon! On the double! And another machine gun squad!", they heard Winters shout.

Welsh was already hollering for a runner to get to Lt Peacock.
Ella and Gene looked at each other. Who would go with them? Since they had arrived on the Island, the medics' platoon rotation had been interrupted.

"Shorty!" Lt Welsh came over to them. "Is there a medic with Dick?"

She shook her head. "No, sir."

"Alright, both of you, with Peacock", he ordered. That solved one of their problems at least.

The two medics nodded in unison and rushed off to grab their gear and helmets, quickly snatching a few supplies from the aid station on their way to meet the rest of First Platoon.

They reached Winters and First squad in the early hours of dawn. Ella and Gene briefly reported to the captain, making him aware of their presence, then quickly went to check on the men. They had one casualty: Dukeman had been hit by a rifle grenade. The fragment had gone in one shoulder, out the other, straight through the heart. He had been killed instantly.

When Captain Winters outlaid his plan, Ella had half a mind to tell him how crazy it was. Then again, they were paratroopers, crazy was in their job description. Moving into position, she and Gene traded a glance. Nothing more was needed.

"Go on the red smoke", were Winters' instructions. He pulled the pin from the smoke grenade and tossed it. At the same time, he took off across the open field.

The two or three seconds it took for the smoke to manifest felt like a piece of eternity. Ella's heart was pumping so loud, she was convinced Hashey could hear it next to her.

A red cloud wafted across the field and they scrambled out of the ditch.

The sound of an M1 being fired ripped through the air. Another shot followed, then another and another. Soon enough, the distinctive *chink!* of an empty clip being expelled reached her ears. Her boots pounded on the ground. The sight cleared. The men were running in front of her.

Ella could see the guys dropping to their stomachs at the crest of the hill, guns barking. She heard a flurry of German commands over the yelling and the screams of pain.

The two medics took cover behind the hill, only the road between them and the platoon. This was SOP: Medics had to stay back a little during an engagement in case things went south. They were no use to anybody if they got killed or needed a medic themselves.

"Holy shit!", somebody yelled.

Ella peered over the dyke to see what he was referring to. She was inclined to agree with the assessment of the situation.

A second later, Peacock cried: "It's a whole other company!"

"No shit!", Martin snapped back. Trust Johnny to have a sarcastic retort ready during a firefight.

Over the rattling of the machine guns, the M1s and the clamour of the Germans, Ella could only just hear their CO calling in heavy artillery support.
Only a few heartbeats later, the dyke on the opposite side of the field exploded. The ground shook. Dirt and shreds of skin, bones and organs flew everywhere as the artillery came to life. She plastered herself flat against the grass, arms coming up to cover her head. "Is it just me or are the hits coming closer?!", she screamed over the thundering noise.

Gene shook his head. Despite being right next to his friend, he could barely make out her voice. Ella repeated her question, throat protesting the pitch and volume she had to use to make herself understood.

"Incoming rounds! Easy Company, take cover!", Winters roared, unwittingly giving the answer to the girl's question.

Boyle, who he had sent to spot the artillery, went down as shells exploded around him.

"Boyle's hit!", the CO yelled. "Get Boyle!" The man was lying in the middle of the road, curled up in a fetal position. Winters jumped up from his position and ran over. "Come on, help me!", he called.

Luz followed him, the only man within hearing range.

They had not yet reached Boyle when suddenly Ella was beside them, grabbing the wounded man by the straps of his webbing. Together, they hauled him into the ditch. Boyle howled in agony. His leg was bleeding heavily, completely mangled by shrapnel.

"Shh, I know, I know", Ella cooed, plunging a syrette into the opposite thigh. Like magic, Boyle calmed immediately upon hearing the brunette's gentle voice. As always, she kept talking to him, mixing light conversation and soothing nonsense.

Luz dug through his pockets and yanked out a sulfa packet. He started pouring the powder onto Boyle's wounds. The man screamed again, jerking and trying to get away from the burning sensation.

"Hang on, Boyle, it'll be over soon", Ella promised, shifting to prevent any further escape attempts. Pulling another two packets of sulfa from her satchel, she traded places with George, trusting him to keep Boyle calm while she worked on his injuries. The morphine soon did its job and her patient went lax.

Bull and Christenson helped her carry their wounded comrade to the evac jeep. Doc Oats had hitched a ride and took over from her. Grateful, Ella gave him a quick run-down and told him to keep an eye on the blood loss, even though all necessary information was written on Boyle's tag. Easy's medics had made a habit out of that brief report, it was their way of reassuring themselves and each other that they were okay.

Oats patted her shoulder, then gave the driver a nod.

Watching the jeep leave, the young girl saw Liebgott herding a group of German prisoners down...
the road, jaw set and a mutinous look in his eyes.

"Lieb?", she called.

"Goddamnit, what now?!", he snapped.

She raised an eyebrow at him, not impressed by his outburst. "Go to the aid station and get your neck checked out", she instructed. "I don't like the way it's still bleeding."

He rolled his eyes, but didn't offer any protest. "Yeah, got it", he grumbled before shooing the prisoners along.

According to Peacock, they had been lucky.

When they overheard him say it to Nixon, Ella and Gene traded a disbelieving look. Lucky?! They had 22 wounded and one dead. "Klar, üs kunnt s Glück sho zu da Ohra usa", Ella muttered to herself, shaking her head in disgust.

It took a while to get everybody ready for transport. Most of the injured were walking wounded and could make the trip back, but the medics preferred to at least examine the wounds beforehand and apply bandages to avoid contamination through dirt, sweat and bacteria.

The men – as per usual – had quickly congregated into small groups. Sitting in the grass on either side of the road, they ate breakfast and smoked. Ella had taken over the task of checking the rest of the prisoners, leaving Gene free to serve coffee and make sure nobody hid any injuries.

The Germans were SS soldiers and as cold and brutal as they come, but not even they had expected to see a female medic.

"Ein Weib?", one of them sneered.

Ella ignored him and went on to the next soldier. So far, they only had some insignificant scratches and bruises.

"Muss schlecht stehen, wenn die Amis schon kleine Mädchen in den Krieg schicken", commented another man, earning a laugh from his neighbour.

The brunette gave them her patented Look, sharp enough to cut through reinforced concrete. "Und deshalb seid ihr die Gefangenen?", she asked back with an eyebrow raised.

The pointed answer, coupled with the look and the realisation that the girl understood them was very effective in shutting them up.

She gently probed a soldier's injured shoulder, her patient hissing and cursing under his breath. "Ich weiss es tut weh", Ella replied, "aber du hast Glück, nichts gebrochen."

"Hey, Sawyer!", Cobb called, "don't bother with those bastards."

She rolled her eyes and shot back: "I'm doing my job, Cobb."
He shrugged. "Well, don't get too friendly, it might give off the wrong impression." His tone made it very clear what he meant.

"This is a war, Cobb, not exactly the place to go looking for a husband", Ella stated dryly, purposefully misunderstanding him. "But your concern for my honour is touching."

He scowled, but left her alone.

She knew well enough that the Germans wouldn't be so nice if the roles were reversed, especially the SS. But for her, that was exactly the point. How could they claim to have the moral high ground if they were as cruel to the Germans as they would be to them? Wouldn't that make them just as bad as their enemy?

She understood the men's resentment and anger, sometimes she felt the same. The Germans were the enemy, they had wounded and killed their friends and comrades. But so had the Allied. Ella wasn't a judge. She was a medic and she was there to help, to heal. A patient was a patient, no matter what language he spoke or what uniform he wore. That was her job and she took it very seriously.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Oh, was bish du denn für n hübscha?: Who are you then, beautiful?
Bish a ganz an feina: You're such a good boy (only used with dogs)
Jojo, ish doch guat: Alright alright (or something along those lines)
Oh da ish abr liab: Oh that's nice; oh how lovely
Guata Buab: Good boy
ganz toll: very good, fantastic
Klar, üs kunnt s Glück sho zu da Ohra usa: Sure, we have luck coming out of our ears.
Ein Weib?: A broad?
Muss schlecht stehen, wenn die Amis schon kleine Mädchen in den Krieg schicken:
The Yanks must be pretty desperate if they sent little girls to war
Und deshalb seid ihr die Gefangenen?: And that's why you are the prisoners?
Ich weiss es tut weh: I know it hurts
Aber du hast Glück, nichts gebrochen: But you're in luck, nothing's broken
**Driel and Mourmelon-le-Grand**

Chapter Summary

An incident causes frayed tempers to ignite. In late November, Easy finally gets taken off the line and moved to the staging area of Mourmelon-le-Grand.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Halloween's Eve, in a town called Driel, disaster struck once more for Easy Company. Captain Winters and Lieutenant Heyliger were walking along the line, discussing the company and how they adjusted to their new CO and vice versa.

"Halt!", came the call from a sentry.

Stupidly, Heyliger responded: "It's Moose!"

The last syllable hadn't left his lip when four shots rang out in rapid succession. Moose went down.

"Hold your fire!", Winters screamed, catching the wounded lieutenant and lowering him to the ground.


The sentry, a fresh-faced kid, came running. He stared at the two men, all colour draining from his face. "Oh my God", he moaned.

"Send for Lieutenant Welsh", the battalion XO ordered.

The kid stood frozen in shock as Winters pleaded with Moose to stay awake.

Looking up, Winters saw that the sentry hadn't moved an inch.

"Send for Lieutenant Welsh, NOW!", he bellowed. His friend was bleeding out on these railroad track. He needed a jeep, medics and an ambulance right now!

The private startled out of his trance and hurried away, hopefully to carry out Winters' orders.

Ella had just delivered a pile of requisition forms to HQ when the rapidly approaching rumble of a jeep caught her attention. The hair on the back of her neck stood up and she was racing down the last few steps before the jeep even appeared out of the fog. It barrelled down the road and came to a screeching halt in front of HQ.
Lieutenant Welsh was keeping a barely conscious Lieutenant Heyliger propped up against him, his flashlight shining from his breast pocket into the man's face to help keep him awake. Captain Winters jumped out of the driver's seat and hurried to open the ambulance doors.

"What happened?", she asked, eyes fixed on the wounded man. Four bullet holes, one in the shoulder, one in the gut, two in the leg.

A replacement kept babbling about how sorry he was and that he didn't mean to.

Ella tuned him out, focused on Welsh's report. "Hey Lieutenant", she spoke to the wounded man, shining her own pen light in his eyes. "It's alright, we got you. Just stay awake."

Without needing to be told, Welsh leant him forward so that the small medic could bandage the hole in Moose's gut where the bullet had gone right through. Fishing out more bandages and tourniquets from her satchel, Ella didn't pause for even a second as she raised her head and hollered: "Medic for assistance!"

An inconsequential thought crossed Lieutenant Welsh's mind in that oddly detached fashion that wasn't uncommon in stressful situations. For such a small person, Shorty sure can shout if she needs to. He watched as the girl treated her CO with brisk, precise efficiency, all the while chatting to the bleeding man. She looked neither scared nor hectic and her gentle assurances didn't just calm down her patient.

"Stretcher!", Winters shouted.

In the same moment, Gene came flying over to them. "I got him Harry", he spoke to Welsh, looping his arms around Heyliger's chest.

"You give him morphine?", Ella inquired as she kept pressure on the injured lieutenant's gut wound while the two officers took Moose's legs.

"Yeah", Winters confirmed, voice tight with worry and fear.

"How much?", Gene asked.

"Uh, can't remember. Two, three syrettes maybe?", Welsh stammered.

"Three syrettes maybe?", Gene repeated sharply before exploding: "Jesus Christ, were you trying to kill him?"

"I think it was two", Harry tried to amend his statement.

But now it was too late. Although usually soft-spoken, the Cajun harboured a fiery temper beneath his calm exterior that could put some of the fiercest men in the company to shame.

"You don't think it might be important to let us know how much medication the man's had?! Huh?!", he spat, "because I don't see one syrette on the man's jacket!"

Ella didn't intervene, even if it was fully within her authority as ranking medic. She was pretty angry, too. How could they make such a rookie mistake after months and months of training and combat? Sure, friendly fire incidents were unsettling, but they kept their cool in the middle of fire-
fights where artillery blew up around their ears, for crying out loud!

"Sorry, Doc", Winters apologised as they heaved the stretcher into the ambulance.

Ella hopped in and continued to apply pressure to the gut wound, pinning the two officers with her Look. Its effect was intensified tenfold by the anger blazing in her green eyes. "Good thing he's a big man, maybe he'll stand a chance", she snapped. Perhaps it came out harsher than the young girl would have normally put it, but with the sleep deprivation and the nerve-wracking stress and emotions of being on the line for nearly two months, even her patience was wearing thin. And she sure as hell didn't blame Gene for losing his temper.

"He was in a lot of pain, Doc", Harry weakly tried to reason. "We didn't know what to do."

Gene whirled on him, completely livid. "Well, you oughta know. You know, you are officers, you are grown-ups, you oughta know!", he ranted, finger jabbing towards them to accentuate his words.

Jumping in, the fuming medic barked to the driver: "Alright let's go! Come on, move it!"

Winters closed the door and rapped the window twice.

The two medics saw the bloody handprint only when they got back into the ambulance at the field hospital.

They had been too busy keeping his blood inside Moose before, packing layers upon layers of bandages onto his wounds. They had soaked through far too rapidly for their liking. At the hospital, the doctors hadn't wasted any time getting Easy's CO prepped for surgery. After receiving a run-down from the medic pair, one of the surgeons had told them that Heyliger's chances were fair thanks to the speedy first aid he had received.

They were silent on the ride back at first. Gene was still seething, judging by his stormy expression. Ella's anger had cooled a little, but she wasn't in a talking mood either, fed up with losing men, watching her friends suffer, picking up the pieces after this complete and utter shit show of an operation.

Raking a hand through her dirty, too long hair, the girl sighed heavily and leant her head back against the cold ambulance wall, resting her eyes a little. She didn't bother wiping her blood-caked hands on her trousers, so used was she to the feeling of dried blood on her fingers.

"They could have killed him."

Gene's bitter words pulled Ella out of her thoughts. She opened her eyes and turned her head. "I know", she spoke with a sigh. "He was lucky."

He scoffed. "Yeah, lucky that you were at HQ by sheer chance."

Ella shrugged, rubbing his knee in consolation. "They'll know better next time. Let's just be glad that he's a strong man."

Gene sighed deeply, jaw unclenching. He nodded.

They lapsed into silence once again. Then, Ella giggled quietly and faced him with an expression
that was part guilty, part glee. "We're sooo in trouble", she said with a small laugh. "We yelled at our officers!"

Gene's lips twitched against his will. Despite the anger still simmering inside him, he couldn't stop a chuckle from escaping. Of course, Ellie would manage to calm his frayed temper with such a left-field comment.

"I guess we owe them an apology", he allowed. He realised that while it was quite justified, they had still been out of line rebuking their superiors the way they had.

At HQ, Winters and Welsh sat in Dick's office, feeling about two inches tall.

Nixon, who – as always – already knew what had happened, took a gulp from his flask. "I don't think I have ever seen either of them angry", he commented.

"Yeah", Dick spoke. "You don't want to, either."

Harry nodded, taking a gulp from his cup which was filled with something that was definitely not water. "They were scary. I have never gotten yelled at by an enlisted man... or woman for that matter." He winced as the memory sent another wave of guilt through him.

Lew found that rather amusing and chuckled. "Guess we now know that the rumours about Shorty's infamous Look are true, huh?"

"Girl made me feel awful without even saying a word", Harry stated.

Dick added: "What makes matters worse is that they were right. We completely lost our heads there, Harry."

The curly-haired lieutenant sighed. "I know."

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Ella wasn't one to shirk her duties, and as both a non-com and a decent person, that meant taking the responsibility for her actions and those of her subordinates. Which was why the next morning, she left the aid station after her shift and headed over to battalion HQ, ready to face the music.

Captain Winters looked up in surprise when the small girl stood before him at attention, a formality most of Easy Company had long since abandoned in the field.

"Sir, I would like to apologize for Roe's and my unseemly behaviour last night. We were out of line, sir", she said.

He managed to keep himself from staring at her in bewilderment. "I accept your apology, Ella, although I think it is unnecessary", he spoke, getting up.

Seeing her confused expression, he elaborated: "You and Doc Roe had every reason to be angry; we acted rashly even though we knew better. I'm very sorry about what happened and we hope it doesn't compromise Moose's recovery."

She blinked, completely perplexed. Was he apologizing to her?
It must have shown on her face because Winters looked her square in the eye and said: "You are a good medic, Ella, as is Doc Roe. I know how much you care for the men in Easy Company and if looking after them includes yelling at a few officers who behaved badly and messed up, then that is what I want you to do. You have my permission to be out of line whenever you deem it necessary. And make sure to inform me of any deficiencies in medical training that come to your attention. Mistakes like these should only be made once, if at all. Is that understood?"

A relieved grin spread on the girl's face. "Yes sir."

He nodded. "Good. Can you tell Roe that I'd like to speak to him when he's ready?" He had a hunch that the Cajun might need more time to cool off after his unexpected and rather impressive temperamental outburst.

Ella smiled. "Of course, sir. I think he planned to come and see you after his shift, anyways."

Winters gave her an appreciating nod and the young medic left.

After bouncing around Holland and getting into almost daily skirmishes with the Germans, Easy Company was finally pulled off the line in the night of November 24 – 25. Ella, like most of the guys, couldn't remember much about the journey to Mourmelon-le-Grand. They were all completely exhausted after two gruelling months on the front line.

Mourmelon itself had been turned into a proper staging area. There were huge rows of canvas tents, just waiting to house the tired soldiers. Ella hopped down from the truck and stretched, joints popping and vertebrae cracking.

"Man, I'm gonna sleep for a week", Luz proclaimed with a huge yawn.

Lipton commented: "There's showers."

The young girl perked up. "Showers?", she repeated, looking as if Christmas had come early.

The first sergeant chuckled. "That's right. And fresh uniforms, too."

A huge grin spread on her face and she tugged at Toye's jacket. "You hear that? Showers and new ODs!", she gushed. The small medic was almost bouncing with excitement.

"I heard, Shorty", the man replied tiredly, stifling a yawn.

"Well, what are we waiting for? Come on!" Ella snatched his wrist and pulled him along to the supply tent, leaving a bunch of snickering guys in their wake. It wasn't every day that they got to see tough Joe Toye being dragged around by his sleeve.

"Like a friggin' puppy, I keep telling ya", Johnny said to Bull, shaking his head fondly. The tall man simply smiled, cigar stump between his teeth.

As always, some of the men stood guard while Ella was in the shower. This time, it was
Christenson, Grant, Hoobler and Gene.

"Thanks, guys", the girl said. She tossed them a chocolate bar each, slipping inside before they could say anything.

They simply sat down by the door, content to wait in silence. They were too tired to talk anyways after their own shower. Hoobler devoured his chocolate bar, chewing with a dramatic sigh and closing his eyes in bliss.

The brunette felt like a different person after shutting off the water. The layer of filth she had grown accustomed to was gone, her hair was soft and clean. Even the handful of freckles that were sprinkled across her nose and cheeks was visible again. The skin around the healing scar on her temple was smooth and no longer bruised.

Wringing out her dripping hair, she slipped into her fresh clothes, picked up her stuff and went outside. She had already opened her mouth to apologize for keeping them waiting, but then she stopped short at the adorable sight. Hoobler was out like a light, head tipped back, mouth hanging open. Gene had also fallen asleep and Christenson looked about five seconds away from following suit.

Grant spotted her standing there and gave her an amused smile.

Ella whispered: "What I wouldn't give for a camera."

The two sergeants chuckled.

With a bit of gentle cajoling, the small medic managed to coax Gene into a semi-awake state. Grant and Christenson opted to let Hoob sleep and carry him to his billet.

"Debout, Gene", Ella crooned.

He mumbled something under his breath, to which the girl replied: "Je sais. C'est pas loins, allons-y."

Guiding her three-quarters asleep friend towards their tent, she helped him take off his satchel, jacket and boots. Then, she watched with fond amusement as the Cajun collapsed in a boneless heap on the bunk, already fast asleep when she tugged the blanket over him.

Shuffling to her own bunk, she toed off her boots. Her satchel was placed next to them. Slumping down, she marvelled the feeling of real sheets, a luxury she had last had in Aldbourne, months ago. Smiling to herself, the girl crawled into bed and closed her eyes, not even bothering to pull up the covers.

Ella woke up the next day and was momentarily disoriented, confused by the soft, clean pillow under her head. Was she still dreaming? There weren't any pillows in foxholes.

Pinching herself, the brunette blinked a few times. No, the pillow was still there, as was the roof.
over her head and the bunks to both her sides. Her tired brain finally decided to remind her that they had been pulled off the line yesterday.

*Mourmelon. Tönt wie Murmeltier.*

She frowned. Obviously, one night of actual deep, uninterrupted sleep wasn't enough to stop the odd, random thoughts that popped into her mind when she was exhausted. Rubbing her eyes, the brunette sat up and stayed like that for a few minutes, enjoying the feeling of a warm bed just a bit longer. It was quiet, except for the men's steady breathing and occasional snores.

"Mornin'", a sleep-filled voice croaked on her left.

"Morning", she greeted a bleary-eyed Skip, whose hair was sticking up in about 14 different directions.

He yawned widely and scratched at a spot on his neck.

Chuckling, Ella got up and dressed, washed her face in the sink and walked over to the mess hall. Just as she was leaving, the lumps under some of the blankets began to stir.

Grabbing her tray, she sat down at an empty table and slowly began to eat. Turns out that it wasn't morning anymore, but more like 1315. Not that she cared. The young medic decided that it was well within her rights to sleep late after weeks and weeks of being on 24-hour duty and stand-by. Slowly, a few men from Easy Company came trickling in, all looking less than 100 percent awake.

Babe flopped down onto a seat across from her and hid a jaw-cracking yawn behind a hand.

Shifty was cradling his cup of coffee like it was the holy grail.

Ella was poking at her food, pushing it around more than actually eating. Malarkey, blinking blearily, slid in next to her and started stealing bits from her plate. She let him.

After a good ten minutes, coffee and food began to take effect and idle conversation was struck up, a lightness settling over the table that could never be there in the field.

The mail caught up with them the same day. Sitting on her bunk, the girl read her letters from home, one after the other. Isabel talked about work at the hospital, about the acquaintances she made, about her life in general. The last letter, though, was a bit different.

*My charina Ella*

*It has now been almost two months since I have last heard from you. You know I worry about you and I do so every day, but lately, it has been more difficult. I keep waiting for Pat to come to my door, holding the latest casualty list in her hand. Every morning when I see the Western Union boy make his rounds, I can't help but wonder if there is a telegram addressed to me in his bag.*

*James tells me that I'm being paranoid, that you are probably too busy to write, or that the mail just doesn't reach you. Fa il bain, mia figlia, write to me as soon as this letter reaches you. I know I'm working myself up into a frenzy, but this silence reminds me all too much of Nico.*
I have been thinking about him quite a lot lately, for obvious reasons, and I have even told Pat and Mary of him. It wasn't easy and it hurt, but I have found that it is a different sort of hurt now. You spoke about that in one of your early letters when you mentioned that you talked to your friends about your brother. I can now see what you meant.

How are you, charina? I cannot shake the feeling that something happened to you. Call it intuition, or a mother's instinct, but I just know. Remember when Nico got into a fight at school? That same odd sensation struck me one afternoon this September. Maybe I read too much into this and I was simply a bit unwell that day.

James is convinced I must have imagined it. I guess he just doesn't understand. He keeps assuring me that you are alright and while I appreciate what he is trying to do, they are just empty words. He has never met you, charina, he doesn't know how much trouble loves to follow you. Though, he doesn't know either just how much luck you have, mia figlia.

Oh Ella, I just miss you so much. It has been more than two years now. I see many girls your age around here and I keep thinking that you would find their behaviour either annoying, embarrassing or hilarious. Probably all three. Have you even worn your female dress uniform yet? If you ever do, please send me a picture. It has been ages since I have seen you wear either a skirt or a dress. I'm sure your boys are curious to see you wear one, too.

It's getting late and I have to work tomorrow, so I must finish now. Remember that I love you, mia figlia.

Lots of love

Your Mama

Isabel

A frown settled on Ella's features as she followed her mother's simple handwriting. Especially the second week of October was difficult for the Sawyer family, but she'd never have thought that it would be this bad. Last year you weren't in the middle of a war yet, a tiny voice in her head pointed out.

Her sombre mien darkened even more as guilt made its presence known, digging sharp claws into her heart. No wonder Isabel was scared for her. With a heavy sigh, the small medic picked up the letter again, reading it once more. The way her mother talked about James in this letter was bothering her a little. Sure, Isabel didn't explicitly say anything, but then again, she didn't have to. Between the lines, the statement was clear enough. Sighing a second time, the small medic dug through her belongings for some paper.

When Joe Toye entered the billet a good hour later, he found his young friend sitting cross-legged on her bunk, a small stack of letters before her, a nearly blank piece of paper in her lap. She was chewing on the butt end of her pencil and staring into space, brows furrowed in a troubled expression.

"Everything alright, Shorty?"
Ella startled, her head whipping around to him. "Madonna!", she exclaimed, "Spinnsh? Giving me a near heart attack!"

He chuckled, a rueful smirk on his lips. "Sorry, kiddo. Didn't mean to. But you really were away with the fairies there."

She hummed in acceptance, frown returning to her delicate features.

Toye sat down next to her. "C'mon, what is it? Your Mama okay?"

Sighing, the girl handed him her mother's letter, making a 'go on'-gesture with her hand before returning to composing her reply.

It was quiet for a while, only the occasional scratch of Ella's pencil filling the silence.

Toye set down the letter and ran a hand through his hair. "That James character is doing a piss-poor job supporting your Mama", he stated bluntly.

The brunette snorted. "Yeah." Frustrated, she pushed a few stray locks out of her face and looked at him. "It's just annoying, you know? October is a bit of a bad time for us and with me in the middle of a war, it's makes everything worse for Mama. And now with James being so... well, not understanding, I can't help but feel guilty."

Toye frowned. "Why would you feel guilty?"

Her gaze dropped. "Cause I'm not there to help Mama and I'm causing her all this worry."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and jostled her affectionately. "Hey, c'mon. Your Mama's tough, she'll make it. And when you told her you wanted to enlist, didn't she give you her blessing?"

Ella nodded, slowly realising what Joe was getting at. "Yeah", she allowed.

A smile crossed his features. "See?"

"Thanks, Joe." He received a peck on the cheek and a bright smile. "You wanna help me write to Mama?"

Readjusting his position to get comfortable, Toye fished a pack of candy from one of his various pockets and put the bag between them. "Currahee, Shorty."

She grinned. "Currahee, Toye."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Debout: Rise and shine; up and at 'em
Je sais: I know
C'est pas loins: It's not far
Allons-y: Let's go (I'm sure the Doctor Who fans among you recognise this one :D )
Tönt wia Murmeltier: Sounds like 'Murmeltier' (Murmeltier is the German word for marmot or groundhog)
charina: darling, dear
Fa il bain: Please
mia figlia: my daughter
Spinnsh?: are you out of your mind?, are you crazy?
Chapter Summary

October brings more fighting and a night-time rescue mission for Easy.

They lost Captain Winters. After Major Horton had been killed, he'd been moved up to battalion as Strayer's XO. Easy was sorry to see him go, because each and everyone in the company loved and revered him. He was a good leader and a great man. He had looked out for them from day one and he had never let them down.

After a string of COs that ranged from useless to downright awful, Lieutenant Moose Heyliger took over Easy Company. He was a Toccoa man and well-liked. Unlike some of the other commanders that had come and gone, he cared about the guys and didn't have a problem with getting his hands dirty. He made a point to learn their names and gave the NCOs and officers a lot of freedom in choosing who they assigned to which task.

The company was in battle almost every day. They basically lived in foxholes, most of the manoeuvring was done at night. Each day, the number of casualties rose. The medics had their hands full and were stretched out even thinner than the guys holding the ever-lengthening line. They ducked and weaved between flying bullets and whistling mortar shells, running from patient to patient. They manned the aid station, oversaw evacs, rotated through the platoons, checked on the men after each fight, made sure they ate and slept.

Most of the time, they forgot about themselves in the process and had to be reminded by their fellow medics. Though in that aspect, the medics agreed unanimously that Gene and Ella were the worst.

Plus, not being allowed to carry a rifle made them feel vulnerable and the issue of the blocked road, which meant no supplies, made them feel powerless. In short, they were in desperate need for a break, just like the rest of the soldiers. The dreadful weather – it was either drizzling, raining or muggy like in the jungle – didn't help matters either. Being stuck in foxholes with the temperatures steadily growing colder, sickness was bound to strike. But nobody complained. They tried to keep their spirits up and hold on to their sanity.

Ella often walked the line and stopped at each foxhole, simply to reassure the guys that they were not alone. She didn't even need to say anything. The smile she gave her friends and comrades was enough to push fear, cold and dread back for a moment. Technically, the brunette wasn't responsible for morale, but in her eyes, the health of the mind and heart were just as important as the health of the body.

At night, when they weren't on manoeuvres to push the Germans back, they often started singing. Somebody would kick off a song and soon, the whole line would join in. No matter how many times they sang the same tune, it always lightened the mood and eased the tension a bit, if only for a short time.
It had been Ella who had inadvertently started the habit. Humming to herself to keep the boredom, anxiety and demons at bay, she had picked a tune her foxhole buddy and neighbours had known. They had begun belting out the lyrics with such gusto that everyone up and down the line had first laughed, then sung along.

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October 14th had begun as a bad day. By evening, it had turned into one of those days that one just wanted to be over.

Ella had been at the aid station since before dawn, patching up walking wounded, discharging some, arranging and finalising evacuation for others. She looked after the patients that had come in with dysentery, gangrene or hepatitis. The smell and sight of diarrhoea, vomit and pus had effectively killed any residual appetite she might have had. In addition, she had filled out enough paperwork to plant a new forest and noted once more that their supplies were dwindling rapidly. She had set out to scrounge whatever she could and had even gone as far as to wheedle HQ staff and higher-ups that clearly didn't see battle out of their spare aid kits. Spare aid kits! What did they need those for?!

Returning to the aid station with a few more supplies and the beginnings of a truly spectacular headache, Ella let out a long-suffering sigh and ran a hand through her tangled hair. Slumping down onto an empty cot, the young girl decided to grab a little shut-eye. Sleep had become a very precious commodity and being in a warzone, they had long since gotten used to being on constant alert, even while sleeping. So, Ella didn't worry about not being awake if an emergency came in. She, like most of the guys, could go from dead asleep to battle-ready in less than a heartbeat.

She woke up twenty minutes later, not in the least refreshed, when Gene shook her shoulder.

"Shift's over, Ellie", he spoke.

Groaning quietly, the girl heaved herself into an upright position. She gave him a sit rep on all the patients and showed him the scrounged supplies. "We're low on serum, penicillin and just about everything else, so nothing new there", she remarked, reaching over the table to grab her satchel. A medic never went anywhere without his bag.

"Alright", Gene nodded. "Go get some food. And then sleep, you're running yourself into the ground."

The girl chuckled bitterly. "No less than the rest of you." A cheeky smirk stole itself onto her lips. "But I'll do my best, since you asked so nicely."

Her Cajun friend rolled his eyes and gave her a playful shove towards the door.

She didn't get any sleep. The Germans launched another attack, leaving all available medics – minus Gene who was on aid station duty – rushing to the line. They went from foxhole to foxhole, checking on the men. Later, they were answering cries for help all night.
Especially the replacements were scared out of their wits. Many a Toccoa man and veteran was glad for Ella's presence. Their girl managed to calm down the most terrified guy with a few understanding words. Her smile could make them feel safe during the craziest artillery barrages.

There was something inspiring about her, Babe mused as he watched the small medic from the foxhole he shared with Guarnere. Despite the miserable conditions and the constant fighting she was kind, compassionate and never in a bad mood.

"I can hear ya thinking over there", Bill drawled, nudging him with his foot.

Babe ignored the good-natured jab. "Just thinkin' about Sergeant Sawyer", he explained.

Guarnere's eyes narrowed. "Whatcha mean?", the platoon sergeant inquired, already preparing to give the kid a good lecture.

"Ya know, she's always got a smile for everyone. And she's kinda... well, she always knows what to do", Babe tried to articulate his thoughts.

Bill chuckled. "Yeah, Shorty's a damn good medic. Never have her seen out of her depth. Her and Doc Roe, they're the best. Nothing against the others, but those two just got this gift." He studied his buddy intently. "Ella is the strongest girl I ever met", he said, "but she's our girl and nobody gets to mess with her but us."

Babe nodded quickly, picking up on the subtle threat underneath Guarnere's fond words.

By the time they finally got a chance to rest, Ella and her friends were completely exhausted. They staggered to the closest available horizontal surface, deposited their satchels on the floor and collapsed right then and there. The thought to take off boots or jackets or at least wash the blood off their hands didn't even have a chance to cross the medics' minds.

It didn't take a genius to realise something was up when one day in late October, a British colonel swam across the Rhine and appeared at HQ. Naturally, everybody knew about it thanks to the soldiers' love for gossip.

Apparently, Operation Market Garden hadn't gone too well for the British either. An entire division of British paratroopers had gotten stranded on the other bank of the Rhine. There were only about 140 men left. Like with the Americans, their number of casualties was disgustingly high.

While the men trained with the boats the Canadian engineers had brought with them, the medics went about their business as usual, following the roster they had re-established during the last week. They weren't part of the rescue mission, they would be on stand-by at the aid station and at the river bank.

"My men might need medical attention", Colonel Dobie stated in the briefing, "but the priority for them is to get across the river, so they will ignore any injuries and ailments in order to achieve their mission."

That made the men snicker. The medics took their job very seriously and while they understood not
noticing a wound or not seeking immediate treatment in the heat of battle, they absolutely hated it when the soldiers didn't bother having their injuries looked at, often leaving them to fester and get infected. The guys had learned early on that it was better to have a quick check-up rather than get a tongue-lashing from an irate medic.

"Sir, it would be easiest for us if your men report to the aid station first thing when they arrive here", Ella spoke up from where she was leaning against the doorframe. With the shadows partially covering her face, the only way to tell that she was a girl was by her voice, but since she had spoken quietly and the acoustics of the room were not the best, the Colonel didn't notice.

"I shall discuss that matter with your company's ranking medic, Sergeant", he acknowledged.

She grinned.

Nixon, who was also part of the briefing, chuckled. "Well, you'll have to put up with her, Colonel. That's Technician 4th Grade Ella Sawyer, our ranking medic", he introduced as the girl pushed off the wall, stepping into the light and giving a proper salute.

It was almost comical to watch Colonel Dobie realise who he was looking at. But he composed himself quickly enough. "I apologise, Sergeant. I didn't realise you were a woman", he said sincerely. "I have heard of the first female combat medic, but I thought that to be a rumour."

The brunette waved it off with a smile. "Ah, not to worry, sir. I've been called worse."

Ella had taken to stopping by Captain Winters' office once or twice a day. She knew how much he missed being their CO. It was also rather apparent that he didn't think much of all the paperwork he suddenly had to complete. It wasn't a bother to her to keep him some company, writing her own reports, chatting or simply enjoying the quiet for a while.

"How are the men?", Winters asked, studying the girl over the typewriter.

She smiled. "They are doing fine, sir. Moose... Lieutenant Heyliger does a good job looking after them."

He nodded distractedly, glaring at the report before him. "Good. That's good."

Tilting her head, Ella inquired: "Is everything alright, sir?" A hint of concern laced her tone.

"Yeah, sure. Just a lot of reports to write. Never knew how much work it is", he replied, a small smile curling his lip.

The brunette laughed, her eyes sparkling. "It is. You would not believe the paperwork we medics are required to fill out. And for the ranking medic, it's even more. Lucky me." That drew a chuckle from the red-headed battalion XO.

The sound of a door and footsteps heralded the arrival of Nixon and Moose.
"I guess I should let you get on with it then, sir", she said, getting up. "If you need something...", she trailed off, leaving the offer open.

"Thank you, Ella."

The young medic smiled and left, nodding to the two entering officers as she passed them.

The captain watched her go. He appreciated what she was trying to do. He had come to look forward to her short visits as the small girl always brought some life and light to his office, especially when he was stuck with the bothersome task of doing paperwork. Her light, easy-going way of making conversation with him lifted his mood and he was once again reminded why Ella was so cherished by Easy Company.

The rescue went over without a hitch. The British greeted Easy with "Never been so glad to see a bloody Yank" and variations thereof before they piled into the boats and rowed back to the other side of the Rhine.

There, the medics were already expecting them.

The Red Devils, as the British paratroopers called themselves, were rather astonished to see a small, young girl among them. Intrigued, they watched how familiar the nurse – that's what they thought her to be – seemed to be with the American soldiers.

"Colonel Dobie, I would like to examine your men briefly", Ella addressed the man.

"Of course. You have our full cooperation, Sergeant", he assured her with a meaningful glance at his men.

The girl nodded. "Thank you. If you would follow me to the aid station, gentlemen?"

"Why? We're just fine, there's no need", one of the men protested.

Her eyes quickly found him in spite of the dark and she grinned cheerfully. "Surely you won't mind humouring me then", she replied. Hearing them grumble under their breaths, she added: "It will only take a moment, afterwards you're free to attend the party that is no doubt going to take place."

As she had expected, the men perked up at the mention of a party. "Right, lads, come on", another Brit said, "let's not argue with the lady."

The examinations were indeed brief and mostly painless. A few of them had injuries that warranted a trip to the hospital, but none of them required immediate evacuation. Therefore, Ella and her fellow medics let the Red Devils have their fun, on condition that the persons concerned took it easy and reported back to the aid station in the morning for another check-up and evacuation.

The men were only too happy to agree, eager to get a drink or five.

No one bothered cleaning up. They all gathered in the barn that served as their mess hall, grabbed a
drink and started celebrating, with dirt on their faces and hands. Nobody cared. After all, they hadn't had a shower in over a month, they were all equally filthy, but that wouldn't stop them from having a good time.

The British were eager to learn more about Ella, especially when Easy pointed out to them that the girl with the caramel-brown locks was the first female combat medic in the history of U.S. warfare.

Not a single one of the Red Devils made an improper remark or looked at her the wrong way: They were all highly impressed and extremely respectful as they talked to or about her. Of course, the men from Easy Company loved to brag a little about 'their girl', but they kept the embellishing of their tales to a relative minimum, especially with her within earshot, ready to correct them.
Chapter Summary

Easy greets the returning wounded and gets a new CO. And a vicious attack leaves one of their own reeling and the company out for blood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With their back pay coming through, most of the soldiers rushed to use their 48-hour passes. They went to Reims or Paris, some even travelled to London. Ella sent a big part of her money home to her mother since she didn't really have any use for it. She wasn't a good gambler and usually paid people in smokes and chocolate bars, which was actually much more effective. Besides, she had no desire to go sight-seeing. She used her pass to rest and catch up on her sleep.

Training resumed soon enough. For the veterans, it was a piece of cake, especially for the Toccoa men. But the new batch of replacements badly needed to get their skills up to scratch. It was a cause for frustration among platoon and squad leaders, who had to spend hours and hours teaching the new kids things they should know by heart after basic.

It didn't help that their new CO, Lt Norman Dike, was a stickler for rules and regulations. He was one of those types that only went into the field long enough to fulfil their requirement to move up the career ladder.

Easy Company had learnt not to trust the man right away. He disappeared to god knows where for long stretches of time, sometimes in the middle of a battle. He was a poor leader and the NCOs took it upon themselves to do his job – taking care of the men, working out the best tactics, leading the men in combat.

Lieutenant Welsh, the company's XO, became their de facto leader and he was great. Of course, he was no Captain Winters, but he was a good tactician and cared for the men.

Because of his love for textbook training, Dike had them doing close-order drills on the parade ground each day. They marched up and down the tarmac in parade formation, about-facing ad nauseam. Other than that, they were busy training for combat, doing more useful things like weapons training, field exercises and night problems.

The medics also had a lot to do. They helped at the field hospital, polished up their own knowledge and trained the new medics. They went on all the manoeuvres with the platoons, day or night, they watched some of the combat drills and discussed the best positions and strategies to get to the wounded in the shortest amount of time.

Whenever they had some of the guys playing casualties, one of the experienced medics would sit the exercise out and act as an observer. That way, they didn't just evaluate the replacement medics' performance under pressure, but they could also pick up on shortcomings in the men's medical training and address them later on the refresher first aid classes.
Ella was once again in charge of those classes. She and her fellow medics had noticed a few faults and she was eager to eradicate them before going back into the field.

Predictably, a replacement asked: "But why do we need to know this stuff? We're not medics."

"No, but we can't be everywhere at once and time is often your biggest enemy when it comes to wounds", she replied evenly, "If you don't know how to treat your buddy's wound, he might catch an infection or experience severe blood loss. Both of these things can kill a man."

She released him from her gaze and went back to speaking to the room at large: "When you're in the middle of a firefight, with adrenaline running high, you're bound to make mistakes. It's only natural and happens to everyone. But if you don't know what you're doing, you might actually kill your buddy; because you pulled the bandage too tight or not tight enough, because you pulled out shrapnel that you should have left alone, because you administered too much morphine."

She didn't miss the meaningful look Captain Winters and Lieutenant Welsh exchanged. They hadn't forgotten about their own blunder that could have cost Lieutenant Heyliger his life.

"Therefore, it is extremely important that you know these basics. They might just save your or your friends' lives one day", she finished before dismissing the men for the day.

Even with the replacements, Easy was still at only 65 percent fighting strength. They had taken heavy casualties and many of the wounded wouldn't return from the hospital. One who did return however, was the one and only Bill Guarnere. He had gotten hit by a sniper while joyriding a stolen motorcycle. After a few weeks at the hospital, he'd had enough and gone AWOL to re-join his company.

"Hiya lil' lady."

Ella swirled around and with an excited shout jumped into Bill's arms. "When did you get back?", she asked, a beaming grin lighting up her face.

"Today. Went AWOL from the hospital."

She laughed. "What, got tired of the nurses?"

"Nah, missed my favourite combat medic", he responded, ruffling her hair. He slung an arm around her shoulders. "So, what did I miss?"

The young girl filled him in.

Another returnee was Buck Compton. After getting shot in the behind in Nuenen, the light-haired lieutenant was back from the hospital. He had changed. He had been a boisterous, loud fellow who got along with nearly everyone. Now, he was quieter, almost subdued. But he still hugged Ella enthusiastically when she made her way over through the crowded pub.

"Good to see you, kid", he said, smiling and clapping her on the shoulder.
"You too, Buck. C'mon, let me buy you a drink." While she didn't drink any alcohol, the brunette had no trouble paying for her friends. They did the same for her as well, so they were even.

Sitting down at one of the less busy tables, Compton took a sip from his beer and asked: "Say, Ella, what did you do before enlisting?"

"I worked at the local clinic and helped out on the farms", she answered. "My family is poor and I left school during my junior year", she added as an explanation.

He nodded. "You ever considered going to college? You're plenty smart, you'd be accepted easy enough."

The girl shrugged. "I don't know. I haven't really thought about it. Mostly because it's expensive and they don't take people without high school diplomas, right? But... I guess it would be nice. You went to college, didn't you?"

Buck's eyes came to life and he started telling her about UCLA. Ella listened, fascinated by the picture he painted with his words.

"The great thing is, you can study basically anything. Whatever you like."

Thoughtfully, she chewed on her bottom lip. "Hmm, you have to be really good at something to get in though. I mean...I did okay in school, but there's nothing I'm great at."

He blinked in surprise. "Are you kidding?", he sputtered, "Of course you are! Heck, you're the best medic in the whole regiment, maybe even the entire ETO. You speak what? 3 languages? You could become a professional translator, they are in high demand and earn good money."

She smiled at his praise, feeling her cheeks heat up. Did he really think that of her? Promising him to give it some thought, their conversation turned to other topics.

Some of the guys came over and commandeered the empty chairs. Luz plopped down next to the girl and stole her soda from her. Gulping down the half-full glass, he looked at her and grinned.

Ella had an eyebrow raised, humour dancing in her green eyes. "Thirsty?", she asked.

He nodded emphatically. "Very. Don't worry, I'll get you another one", he placated.

The girl chuckled and waved it off. "Nah, it's alright. Help yourself."

"No, I couldn't possibly. As apology for my unmannered behaviour, allow me to ask the lady for a dance." He jumped up from his seat to give an elaborate bow.

She laughed and gracefully stood up, letting him lead her to the dance floor, where some soldiers were already dancing with WAC nurses, Red Cross women and local girls.

"Ya know, I wonder how good you can dance in proper women's shoes if this is how you dance in jump boots", George commented as his young friend twirled around him.

She grinned. "Trust me, it's easier in boots." She spun towards him.
He caught her and they pulled off a Hollywood-worthy dip, Ella's now slightly too long locks nearly brushing against the floor. "Oh yeah?", he questioned as they switched sides. "So, you won't go to a dance in the women's uniform?"

The girl flashed him a cheeky, lopsided smile. "You just wanna see me in a skirt, don't you?", she teased.

Luz laughed and wiggled his eyebrows. "Damn, you got me."

Rolling her eyes, she laughed as well. "One day, George", she promised. *Dang, Mama was right. Again.*

Satisfied, Luz changed the subject and they kept dancing for another song before they went to the bar to get a drink.

"Where'd ya learn to dance like that?", Toye asked when the two returned to the table.

Ella brushed a few stray hairs out of her eyes. "My Mama taught me. She loves dancing. She always says 'Tanza ish guat für d Seel', dancing is good for the soul."

Buck nodded approvingly. "Your mother is a smart woman."

The young girl beamed brightly at him.

The hospital was packed with flu patients. It was one of those nasty strains that didn't just bring a fever and aching joints with them, but rather a mean combination of fever, chills, headache, nausea and in some cases also diarrhoea. The medical staff was busy administering medication, changing bedpans and sheets, taking temperatures and dabbing at burning skin with cold compresses.

Stumbling out of the hospital after a long shift, Ella just wanted to sleep. Forgoing a trip to the mess tent since her appetite was all but gone, she waved at Spina – he had returned from the hospital the week before – and headed towards the barracks. A yawn forced her jaws open and she ran her fingers through her hair.

The brunette had just rounded a corner when out of nowhere, a large hand grabbed hold of her wrist and forcefully yanked her around.

"Told ya I'd see you again."

Her stomach dropped and all her tiredness went up in smoke. This could not be happening. Shoving down the inky feeling of terror spreading in her chest, Ella asked flatly: "What do you want, Michaels?"

He eyed her in that particular way that made her skin crawl. "Well, you're a medic... you tend to the men's needs."
The insinuation made her feel sick. Still, she didn't let it show on her face. She wasn't going to give him that satisfaction. "Leave me alone", she said and turned to leave.

He didn't relinquish his hold on her, but rather pulled her closer.

"Let go!", the small medic demanded, struggling.

"I know who you are", he purred like the predator he was. "I know you're just a scared little kid."

Ella fixed him with a blank stare. "Let go of my wrist, Corporal." Her tone could have made boiling water freeze on the spot. Inside, however, she was starting to freak out as the onslaught of memories and deep-seated fear threatened to drown her.

He grinned. "Or what? Are you gonna scream? Like last time?"

The girl didn't deign to reply. She ripped her wrist from his vice grip, kneeing him in the stomach at the same time.

He released her abruptly, cursing viciously. "You little-" That was all the warning she got before Michaels lunged at her.

She ducked and threw a punch, morbid satisfaction cursing through her when it connected with his jaw.

Enraged, he charged again, pure hatred in his eyes. He snatched her wrist once more and forcibly twisted her arm behind her back.

Ella cried out. With the pain, instinct took over.

Kicking out backwards, her boot hit his shin, eliciting a yelp. His grasp slackened a little and she managed to turn around. But Michaels hadn't let go completely. Her right arm still incapacitated, the young brunette turned to more desperate measures. Putting her entire upper body into the movement, her elbow swiped through the air. Judging by the resounding crack, accompanied by an angry howl, the small medic thought it safe to assume that she had just broken Michaels' nose.

In his pain and fury, he released her, bringing his other hand up and backhanding her hard across the face.

Black stars exploded in the girl's field of vision and she fell to the ground. Michaels' blow had landed right on her still healing bullet graze. As Ella gasped for air, trying very hard not to pass out, she dimly heard Michaels spit out. A boot connected solidly with her stomach, forcing the breath out of her lungs. Then, the heavy footsteps faded into distance.

It took a few minutes for the darkness hovering at the edges of her vision to retreat. Shakily getting to her feet, Ella felt her throbbing cheek and temple. A thin trail of blood dribbled down from her split lip. And seeing the nasty red mark the shape of Michaels' hand that adorned her wrist, she was going to have one spectacular bruise there tomorrow.

Pulling herself together and swallowing back tears, the young medic staggered towards HQ, arms
"Jesus!" Lieutenant Welsh nearly dropped his mug when he caught sight of the company's ranking medic hovering in the doorway.

"What the hell?", Nixon asked, quickly getting up from his seat.

"'s nothing", Ella mumbled, eyes on the floor.

Winters, though just as taken aback as his friends, tried a more collected approach since he hadn't missed the way the young girl had flinched at the exclamations of his fellow officers. "What happened, Ella?", he asked.

Nixon directed her to a chair. His concern sky-rocketed when she all but shied away from his touch. Her entire demeanour was reminiscent of that of a flighty filly or a kicked puppy. It reminded him of the very earliest Toccoa days when the small girl had been shy and a little wary of them.

The brunette swallowed, fingers fidgeting nervously in her lap. "Sir... you said back in basic that you would listen to my side if... if something happened?" Her voice was quiet, almost timid, and there was something raw and terrified in her eyes as she looked at the captain.

He nodded. "That's right."

She nodded jerkily, more to herself than anybody else. "You read my file, right, sir?"

"I did", Winters confirmed.

"So, you know why – why I was deemed an ideal candidate for the experiment?" The words left a bitter taste in her mouth.

The captain rubbed his forehead. "Yeah. Though I think there are many other reasons why you belong in this company, Shorty."

Her lip twitched, but the smile flickered out before it could fully form.

Winters leant forward in his seat and caught her skittish gaze. "What happened, Ella?", he repeated carefully.

Her breathing hitched. "I ran into the man who is responsible f-for the condition that...is in my file." Tears sprung to her eyes and she hastily brushed them away, cheeks flushing with embarrassment. Slowly, haltingly, Ella gave an account of what had transpired between her and her high school bully. She didn't give his name, the thought didn't cross her mind. It was hard enough to recount the fight in a coherent way as the fear and desperation threatened to overwhelm her. She struggled to find the right words, sometimes resorting to rephrasing the sentence because she couldn't think of the proper expressions in English. "...and then he left. I didn't see which way", she
concluded.

Welsh couldn't stay in the background any longer. "Who did that?", he asked, gesturing to the growing bruises on her face, the blood drying on her lip.

"Give me a name and I'll have that bastard in the stockade faster than he can think", Nixon chimed in, jaw set in a grim expression.

Insecurity crossed over her features. Ella looked torn, a series of emotions dashing across her face, most of them too fleeting to be identified. "A- Adrian Michaels. He's in Dog Company, sir", she whispered.

"Not much longer if we can help it", Welsh commented uncharacteristically darkly.

Nixon was already out of the office. They could hear him bellowing orders, no doubt lighting a fire under the MP to find the man.

Winters addressed his young medic: "Ella, I want you to go back to barracks and get some rest. We will treat it as an assault of a superior and try to keep your name out of this, but you will have to write a report on the incident."

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

The captain then faced his friend. "Harry, escort Shorty to the barracks, then go find Lieutenant Speirs. We have a court-martial to discuss."

The short Irish man's grin was all gapped teeth. "With pleasure, Dick", he said, patiently waiting for the small girl to get to her feet.

To say the men were shocked when she entered the barracks was a gross understatement. There was only a small group of them there, talking, smoking, playing cards. Everybody else was either on duty or had passes. They looked up when they heard light footsteps and their jaws went slack.

"What the fuck?!", Joe Toye exploded, voicing what just about all of them were thinking.

Ella flinched, wide eyes darting over to him before dropping to the floor again.

"What the hell happened?", demanded Malarkey.

A barrage of similar questions rained down on the girl who was getting closer to bolting by the minute.

Luz was the first one to register the panicked look on her face and quickly stepped in. "Hey! Guys, back off, you're scaring her!"

Sheepishly, everybody went silent.
He got up from where he had been playing poker and slowly approached her. "Hey, kiddo", he spoke softly.

Her gaze flickered up to him.

"It's alright, you're safe now. Nobody's gonna hurt you. Promise", he continued, careful to keep his tone light.

Perconte, who happened to be closest to the door, scurried away to get the Doc.

George reached the distraught girl and carefully put an arm around her. He could feel the tremors running through her. "C'mon, Shorty, let's get you to your bunk, watcha think?"

Her answer was a tiny nod.

He kept up a soothing stream of reassurances while guiding her to her cot. The men gathered around, forming a protective circle around their youngest. Sitting down next to her, Luz took the blanket Lip handed him and loosely wrapped it around her shoulders.

Ella sniffled quietly and murmured a small thank you, pulling her feet up to sit cross-legged on her bunk.

Toye muttered "Whoever did that to our girl's a dead man" to Johnny.

He nodded, lips pressed in a tight line, eyes blazing with murderous fury.

Perco came back, a highly concerned Gene in tow.

The Cajun medic made a beeline for the girl, the circle of worried men closing behind him. "Hi Ellie", he spoke, crouching down in front of her. He took in the bloody lip, the already darkening bruise on her cheek and temple, the scrape on her cheekbone that looked like road burn. The way she seemed to curl in on herself, arms wrapped protectively around her midriff set off the alarm bells in his head.

Lipton stepped forward. "Do you want us to leave while Doc checks you over?"

After a moment of contemplation, Ella shook her head. "No, it's fine, sir." She still hadn't raised her head.

"But you could move back a little", Gene remarked, "give her some space."

The men obliged, settling on the surrounding bunks.

In the meantime, he turned his attention to the girl before him. "What's your diagnosis?", he asked, voice and eyes gentle.

"Just a scratch", she replied in a dull mumble, referring to her split lip.

He hummed non-committally. "What about your wrist?" It hadn't escaped him how she cradled it in her lap.

His small friend shrugged. "It hurts, but I think it's not broken, just bruised." Finally, she raised her
head to meet his eyes, silently giving him permission to examine her.

Gene carefully felt the injured joint, registering every small wince she gave. "Just bruised", he confirmed her suspicion. Allowing her to pull her hand back, he put a soothing hand on her knee. "You know the drill", he said.

The corner of her mouth twitched slightly.

They were both aware of the anxious bunch of men around them. So, Gene applied one of the many things he had learned from his young friend: give them something to do. "Somebody get me a bag of ice", he requested.

Lipton, who had been watching the guys closely, chose to send somebody who wouldn't erupt at the drop of a hat. "Bull, get some ice for Shorty."

The tall man nodded and quickly left the barrack.

Ella hissed as Gene prodded the bruise on her face.

He sent her an apologetic glance. "Did he hurt you anywhere else?", he asked.

She nodded, eyes avoiding him and falling to the floor again. Luz' hand kept drawing mindless patterns on her back, easing some of the tension in her shoulders.

"Where?"

She motioned to her stomach, where a dirty shoeprint was visible on her OD jacket.

Anger surged through Gene, but he pushed it back. Now was not the time. "He kicked you?", he clarified.

Ella nodded again. "Once."

"You think anything's broken?"

Truth to be told, she didn't know. Breathing hurt a little, but she didn't feel any bones shift. "I'm not sure", the girl admitted in a small voice.

Gene gave her a comforting smile. "It's okay, you know how it is with adrenaline and shock. Do you want me to check?"

In a not completely fluid motion, Ella pulled up her jacket, jumper, shirt and undershirt, revealing her stomach. All around her, she heard sharp inhales, muttered curses and gasps. She bit her lip and closed her eyes. Her cheeks started to burn and she shrunk deeper into the blanket.

For a moment, Gene was just as stunned as the rest of the guys. Not because of the dark red, boot-shaped bruise on her flank, but because of the five white scars that were scattered over her stomach. Four of them were jagged, varied in size and had the typical double line of small dot-shaped scars that came from sutures along them. The longest one, though, was clearly a surgical scar, thin and neat. Gene gave himself a mental shake, turning back to the task at hand.

He gently prodded the bruised area and was relieved to discover that her ribs were all intact.
"Nothing broken, Ellie", he informed her.

Again, a silent nod was all she could manage.

Bull, who had quietly returned just moments before, also had a hard time reining in his ire. Seeing these scars and remembering what the young girl confided to him and Johnny almost two months ago made his jaw clench. But when Ella pulled her clothes back down and still refused to make eye contact with anyone, he shoved his fury aside.

He stepped forward and handed her the ice pack. "Here you go, kid."

The warm, gentle drawl did the trick. Slowly, her eyes travelled up to meet his gaze. There was no disgust or judgement or pity in the Arkansas man's blue eyes. Just concern, understanding and acceptance. A shy glance at the rest of her friends showed her that all of them wore a similar expression, mixed with a varying degree of anger.

Swallowing, a tiny smile blossomed on the young girl's lips. "Thanks, Bull", she whispered.

He squeezed her shoulder, then settled back in his spot next to Johnny.

Seeing as there was nothing more he could do, Gene got to his feet, patted her on the shoulder and said: "Je retournerai plus tard, d'accord, chérie?" Even if he didn't want to, he had to get back to the infirmary.

Ella knew it, too and she didn't hold it against him. She acknowledged it with a nod and a soft "Merci, Gene."

Luz gently nudged her shoulder. The girl looked so young and vulnerable. She was pale and he could feel her shivering slightly under the blanket. As enraged as he was, he forced himself to be calm. Ella didn't need that, she was scared enough as it was. "You okay, Shorty?", he asked quietly.

She looked up from where her fingers were picking at the hem of her blanket, dark green puppy eyes studying him for a moment before she shook her head, gaze dropping back into her lap.

"What happened, lil' lady?", Guarnere probed gently.

The brunette shrugged and shook her head again slightly. A blush of shame was colouring her cheeks and the tips of her ears. Her jaw moved a bit as her teeth began worrying her bottom lip.

The guys looked on with a mixture of concern, fury and helplessness.

Johnny decided to take action before one of them, including him, blew a fuse. He settled on their girl's other side. "Hey Shorty", he spoke up. "Remember what Bull told you back in Holland?"
Her head came up, eyes searching his face for something. She must have found it, because she nodded. "Yeah."

"Hasn't changed", Johnny continued, ignoring the puzzled looks the others were shooting each other. "It ain't your fault."

The corner of her lip quirked upwards in a shadow of her usual lopsided smile.

"You can trust us", Luz piped up, his joking and jovial persona replaced by a serious look on his face. "We look out for each other."

The rest of the men in the room agreed whole-heartedly.

"Yeah, nobody gets away with hurting our girl", Perconte proclaimed fiercely.

"That's right. Only we get to mess with ya, Shorty", Guarnere agreed.

Touched by the overwhelming show of support and loyalty, Ella decided to tell them. They had a right to know, after all, they really cared. She took a deep breath and found herself unsure of where to start.

Lipton gave her an encouraging smile. "Who did that to you, Ella?", he prompted.

"Adrian Michaels", she confessed.

"What?! That guy from Dog?", Malarkey frowned.

Ella nodded.

"Hang on, Adrian Michaels from... that Adrian Michaels?" Frank was so baffled, he couldn't even manage a complete sentence.

The girl nodded once again, her caramel-brown locks falling forward.

Toye jumped to his feet. "Where is he?! He's a dead man!"

The young girl shrunk back slightly and Johnny gave him a sharp look.

"Nobody is going to do anything, is that understood?!", Lipton barked, glaring at the more volatile and rash men in particular. They settled down quickly. He then turned back to the small brunette. "Can you tell us what happened?"

The young medic took a shuddering breath and relayed – for the second time that day – what had transpired between her and Michaels.

Bull winked at her, a dangerous glint in his eyes that went completely against his even-tempered, friendly nature. "Bet you gave him hell, kiddo."

That got a tiny, bashful smile out of her. "I punched him in the jaw and kicked his shin. And broke his nose."

"Atta girl", Luz grinned, ruffling her hair.
"He nearly killed me in high school. I figured getting me kicked out of school would have put an end to it", she sighed sadly, some of the tension leaving her, "guess I was wrong."

"He did what?", Lipton asked, a deep frown marring his forehead. He desperately hoped he had misheard what the girl had just said.

Leaning a little closer into Johnny and Luz' touches, Ella revealed how the scars on her stomach had come to exist. Her voice shook and cracked as she spoke and a few single tears dripped down into her lap.

The men felt sick to their stomachs. How could anyone do something like that to their girl? Of all the people to lose their ability to bear children, why did it have to be loveable, kind and generous Ella? Luz tightened his hold on the small medic.

"Have you reported this?", Lip questioned.

She cleared her throat and wiped away a few stray tears that had escaped the corners of her eyes. "Yes sir. I went to Captain Winters. He, uh... I knew he would hear me out."

They all knew what she meant.

Lipton nodded. "Good."

Knowing how uncomfortable Ella was with being in the spotlight, Luz decided that she needed a distraction. "Hey, you up for some poker? I need someone to help me win my smokes back", he said with a big smile. If anybody noticed that it was put on for their girl's benefit, they didn't say anything.

She shrugged. "I don't know how to play", the brunette medic muttered, half-heartedly trying to find an excuse even though she already knew it was useless.

"We'll teach you", Malarkey chimed in, having caught on to what Luz was trying to do.

"Yeah, c'mon, it's fun", Johnny added. "We're only playing for smokes, you got nothing to lose."

Frank remarked: "Well, she don't, but I do! Last time we taught her a game, she cleaned me out."

That made Ella huff lightly. There was still a shadow hovering at the edges, but her eyes lit up with a faint flicker of her usual spark. "Alright", she gave in.

Happily, the men went about explaining the basic rules as they moved their make-shift poker table to their new position.

Lipton reclaimed the dealer's job and was already shuffling cards. Joe sat down next to their girl and it was decided that she would team with him until she got the hang of the game.

It was a merry round and their joking banter slowly but steadily drew their small friend back out of the shell she had retreated into. She didn't play alone all night, content to lean against Toye's solid, reliable shoulder to see the cards, but she enjoyed studying the guys and picking up on their subtle
– or not so subtle, depending on the person – tells.

All the while, she kept alternating between icing her wrist and cheek.

When they decided to call it a night, nobody was surprised when Toye and Guarnere commandeered the bunks on one side of Ella's, Johnny and Bull on the other. Luz simply stretched out on top of the covers of her bed.

The girl gave them all a grateful smile and snuggled closer to George, glad that he was sharing with her. With the adrenaline and shock waning, sleep came quickly, whisking her off into a world of peaceful dreams.

By that time, the entire company had heard about the incident and in the morning, nobody commented on the fact that the barrack was filled to almost three times the capacity it was intended to hold.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Je retournerai plus tard: I'll come back later
d'accord: okay, alright
chérie: sweetheart
Into the Ardennes

Chapter Summary

Easy Company gets sent back into combat unexpectedly when the Germans launch a surprise attack in the Ardennes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The men stuck close to their girl. Ella was still a bit withdrawn and quiet, but thanks to her friends, she soon returned to her lively, easy-going and caring self. Her smiles regained their warmth and brightness with each minute she spent with them. They were glad for it because seeing her so scared and defeated had frightened them quite a bit.

Lieutenant Speirs approached her in the evening. The young medic had just delivered her incident report to Captain Winters – it had taken her all day to write it – and was walking towards the mess hall with Smokey and Popeye when the platoon leader from Dog Company came their way.

"Sergeant Sawyer?" His dark eyes were studying her intently, seemingly watching her every move. They flickered to the deeply purple bruise on her cheekbone, to the scabbed cut on her lip.

"Sir?", she inquired. Already knowing what he most likely wanted to talk about, the girl glanced at her friends, communicating loud and clear without uttering even a sound.

They nodded in understanding, patted her on the shoulder and retreated to a distance out of hearing range.

"Corporal Michaels will be detained until his trial, where he will be court-martialed for assault and insubordination", Speirs informed the girl. His expression shifted to something darker. "It shouldn't have happened."

Ella sighed and ran a hand through her locks. "To be honest, I should have seen it coming, sir", she said. "He had it in for me in high school and in basic. It was only a matter of time."

Something dangerous flashed in the lieutenant's eyes before it faded. The corner of his lip curled up in a sharp smile. "From what I hear, you put up quite a fight."

The brunette chuckled bitterly. "Which ended with me on the ground, trying not to pass out", she finished.

He raised an eyebrow and offered: "I would say it ended with him in stockade, nursing a broken nose and a bruised jaw." His look told her that he thought Michaels had gotten off far too lightly.

"I guess you're right, sir", she admitted after a small pause, a soft smile tilting up the corners of her mouth. Michaels was no longer a threat to her and that realisation alone lifted a huge weight off her
Speirs nodded. "If you ever have any more problems with soldiers from Dog Company, you come to me, am I understood?"

"Yes sir", Ella responded.

His intense gaze scanned her for a moment. "Good", he then said before turning to walk away.

"Sir?"

He stopped and turned.

The small medic had a sincere, warm smile on her face. "Thank you", she spoke.

He nodded at her, then took his leave.

Smokey and Popeye came over to the girl.

"Everything alright?", Popeye asked, casting a critical glance at the lieutenant's retreating back.

"Yeah." She looked at them. "I'm okay." And oddly enough, it was true.

Jostling her amicably, Smokey said: "Good, let's get some food."

Laughing and shoving back, Ella agreed.

Joe Toye had an arm wrapped around the girl. She was snuggled against his side, her head resting on his shoulder while they watched the latest USO movie. The bruise on her cheek still made anger boil in his stomach. Luckily, the offender had been caught and was awaiting trial.

"Ya still awake there, Shorty?", he asked, frustration about Luz' incessant ramblings and impressions still in his tone.

Ella hummed and pushed a few loose strands from her forehead. Toye made for a fantastic pillow and the warmth of his embrace along with the constant murmur of background noise was lulling her to sleep.

The door banged open and the lights switched on. Voices of protest rose. "Quiet!", the technician called as he and his colleague marched up to the stage. "I said quiet!", he barked, turning to face the soldiers. "Elements of the 1st and 6th Panzer Division have broken through in the Ardennes forest."

Ella sighed, already expecting what was about to come next. Her shoulders slumped as the by now familiar weight settled.

"Now they've overrun the 28th Infantry and elements of the 4th", the man continued, "All officers
report to respective HQs, all passes are cancelled." Over the outcries of frustration and disbelief, he shouted: "Enlisted men, report to barracks and your platoon leaders."

*Mid-March action at the earliest,* the young medic thought dryly, getting up. *Was für en Witz.*

Luz came over to her, slinging an arm around her shoulders. She had noticed that the guys tended to do that a lot.

"You got a light?", Joe asked George, twirling an unlit cigarette in his fingers.

He nodded and fished a lighter out of his coat.

They left the movie tent and split up, each reporting to their stations.

They had 24 hours to get ready.

"Alright, guys, pack your gear as quick as you can", Ella said to her colleagues before beginning with delegating tasks. "Oats, Mampre, check the inventory and take as many supplies as possible. We don't know if we're gonna be resupplied."

They nodded and rushed away.

"Spina, work with the platoon and squad leaders, make sure everybody has at least one fully equipped aid kit. Steal them from other divisions if you need to."

"You got it, Shorty", he acknowledged, leaving just as quickly.

Blowing out a breath and pushing a hand through her locks, the young girl looked at Gene. "You and I better get ready to beg and scrounge. It's the middle of winter and we don't have adequate clothing. Whatever we can get our hands on, we take. Clothes, blankets, ammo, rations, all we can find. Did I miss something?"

Her Cajun friend gave her a comforting smile. "You got it covered, Ellie. We ain't the only ones looking out for the company."

She nodded solemnly. "I know. But we can't afford to forget something."

"We won't", Gene promised as they hurried to their barracks to pack.

Everybody was in a frenzy. The soldiers were scrambling to get their gear together, to get their squads and platoons supplied and organised, to get weapons and ammunition.

Ella was searching for the company commander, she had requests from both Dog and Fox company to borrow medics from Easy. But, as usual, the man was nowhere to be found. She spotted Captain Winters, along with Lieutenants Peacock and Compton standing around an oil drum bonfire.

"Sir!", the girl called, weaving her way through the rushing stragglers.

He smiled at her. "What is it, Shorty?"
"Sir, Dog and Fox are seriously short-handed on medics and have asked for some of Easy's to transfer, but I can't find Lieutenant Dike", she explained when she reached them.

Their former leader nodded seriously. "How many medics do you have?"

"Five, me included", the brunette answered.

"How many can you spare?"

She sighed. "Two, at the most. You know we need at least one medic per platoon, sir." Not that other companies had been forced to make do with less than that...

Winters didn't take long to make the decision. "Then assign one each to Dog and Fox company, who you send is your call. And Ella", he called as she was already turning to hurry away. The girl stopped and gave him an inquiring look. "Keep up the good work."

She grinned proudly, then vanished into the night.

Ella's mind was buzzing, running through a list of necessities. She had packed as fast as she could, shoving her entire stash of smokes and chocolate bars into a musette bag. She had a feeling it would come in handy at some point. She had conferred with the other NCOs and knew that there were huge shortages on - well, everything. Checking in with each platoon and squad leader, she made a mental note of all the things they still needed.

Winter clothing was at the top of the list. They had blankets, but not enough for everybody. There were sleeping bags, but again, far too few for around 120 men. Every man in Easy Company had been given permission to take any supplies that weren't nailed down. After all, the camp could order new supplies whenever they wanted.

When the order to mount up came, she had just finished handing out the assignments to her fellow medics. "D and F company have lost some of their medics", she told them. "They have a handful of replacements, but they need experienced men. I'm sorry, guys, but I had to lend out two of you."

They chuckled, not taking it personally. They all knew this might happen and they had all assisted other companies before. They had jokingly called it 'playing musical companies', especially during the periods when they were bounced from one company to the next in a matter of days.


She gave them both a tight hug. The men shook hands. Then, Oats and Mampre grabbed their gear and went to join their new units.

"Mount up!", the call came from somewhere up the line.

Ella accepted the hand up from Liebgott and huddled on the floor of the crowded truck. She was squeezed in between Malarkey and Skip, her back leaning against Guarnere and Toye's legs. Soon enough, the first truck in the convoy lurched into motion, a long row following behind.
They barrelled down the road, headlights glaring at full brightness. The cold crept under their clothes far too quickly, draining every ounce of warmth from their bodies. The young girl was glad that she had pulled on a pair of jump gloves over her fingerless gloves, providing at least a small amount of protection against the chilly wind.

"I guess the blackout's not in effect", Buck commented. "Luftwaffe must be asleep."

Ella only managed a small puff of laughter. Her teeth were chattering already, the sound drowned out by the roar of the truck engines.

"Christ, I miss those C-47s", Bill stated.

Tab responded dryly: "Got a tailgate jump here", eliciting a few chuckles.

"I just wanna know where they're sending us", Babe spoke up, words tumbling out in a rush from the cold, "and what the hell we're supposed to do with no ammo."

Bill looked across the truck to one of the replacements, who was just lighting a cigarette for Popeye. "Hey, kid. What's your name again?"

"Suerth", the kid answered, "Suerth Jr."

"You got any ammo, Junior?", Babe asked. His persistence was understandable. How were they supposed to fight without ammunition? It was like expecting a medic to treat patients without bandages or sulfa. Which, Ella had to admit, was looking increasingly likely.

"Uh, only what I'm carrying", Suerth replied, an apologetic look crossing his face. He was surrounded by veterans and many of them had been in the company since Toccoa. He didn't want to let them down.

"What about socks, Junior?", Toye questioned, "Got extra socks?"

"A pair", came the answer.

"You need four minimum", Skip chimed in, wagging a finger like a professor giving a lecture, "Feet, neck, hands, balls-"

"Extra socks warms them all", the truck finished with him.

"Yay, we all remember that one!", he grinned, looking pleased. "But did we remember the socks?"

Ella chuckled. She was wearing two pairs and had another two stuffed into her pack.

The guys started badgering Suerth, asking him if he had this or that. The girl rolled her eyes at them and fished out a pack of smokes that she had in one of her pockets.

"Per l'amur da Dieu, leave the poor kid alone, would ya?", she said, handing out cigarettes. "He's got just as much nothing as any of us."

A cheer went up and they reached out to grab the coveted smokes from her. The small medic batted their greedy hands away. "Settle down, boys, everybody gets one."
Malarkey laughed. "Ah, you are a godsend, Shorty!"

She rolled her eyes at him.

Ella winced as she unfolded herself to get off the bed of the truck. The bumpy ride had jarred her bruised ribs and with the cold, her whole body was stiff. Toye helped her hop down and they headed to the fires burning in some empty oil drums. The shivering, which had taken hold of her slim frame, slowly abated again.

Movement caught her attention and her jaw nearly dropped. A long line of soldiers came their way, with slow, shuffling steps. Her trained eye immediately spotted the blood-stained bandages.

Moving closer, the young medic saw the dazed look of trauma and shock on the men's faces. *Du mini Güati, dia luagen us als wären si dur d Höll ganga*, she thought. Then, her mind snapped to more important matters. She approached the walking wounded. "You guys got aid kits?", she asked.

Some didn't even acknowledge her, too caught up in the horrors they had seen.

Some shook their heads or mumbled a low "No."

But a few nodded and pulled out their med kits. "You gotta get outta here", one of them said.

She gave him a rueful smile. "I'm afraid we can't. We have our orders."

The soldier looked close to tears and he grabbed her shoulder. "They'll slaughter you!", he cried, completely distraught.

The small girl gently patted his arm. "Take it easy, private. You made it."

He sniffled and released her, joining the line again.

All around her, the guys were asking the retreating soldiers for ammo. The horn of a jeep, accompanied by the shouts of "Make a hole!", made Ella turn her head. A lieutenant guided a jeep packed with boxes down the road, manoeuvring through the crowd.

"I got ammo, grab what you can!", he hollered.

The soldiers quickly made their way over and helped unloading.

The lieutenant filled in Captains Nixon and Winters on the situation. It didn't look good. Before he drove off, he promised to try and make another supply run. "Looks like you guys are gonna be surrounded", he said.

"We're paratroopers, Lieutenant", Winters replied calmly, "we're supposed to be surrounded."

Ella felt the corners of her mouth quirk upwards at that statement. He was right. This was exactly what they were trained for.
She went to help distribute the ammunition among the platoons and squads. The sergeants worked quickly to unpack the boxes. There was no joking or bantering between them. Most of the time, they didn't speak at all, each wrapped up in their own thoughts, mentally preparing themselves.

Freezing, Easy Company headed towards Bastogne. They would set up the main line of resistance a few miles east of the Belgian town, in the Bois Jacques. They had no artillery or air support. They were short on food, ammunition and winter clothes. They had less than the bare minimum of medical supplies.

They were being deployed to hold the perimeter around the town. None of the three companies of 2nd Battalion were up to full battle strength and there was a lot of ground to cover. They would be spread out even more than on the Island. Their CO was an empty uniform. It would be up to a handful of officers and the NCOs to keep Easy together.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Was für en Witz: What a joke.
Per l'amur da Dieu: For the love of God; for God's sake
Du mini Güati: My goodness
Dia luagen us als wären si dur d Höll gnga: These guys look like they've gone through Hell
Chapter Summary

In the Bois Jacques, Easy does its best to hold the line while surrounded and lacking supplies. They weather the cold and the artillery barrages and the medics are running themselves ragged caring for the men.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ella had no idea what day it was. The freezing, grey weather took away all sense of time. The artillery barrages and sporadic enemy fire blurred the days together. But she knew one thing for certain:

She had never been so cold in all her life.

It wasn't the first time the girl had cursed her own body, but that had always been in a different context. Being small and having virtually no fat reserves, it was much more difficult to keep her body temperature up without proper clothing or blankets. Considering the circumstances, the young medic was quite surprised that she hadn't fallen ill yet. Spina was another one of the fortunate few who had neither a runny nose nor a cough.

The Germans had cut the road behind them. They were surrounded and there was little hope for a supply drop with the heavy fog that clouded the forest.

But stubborn as she was, the small girl refused to let that get to her. She had to stay positive, for the boys' sake. She did what she could to cheer the guys up, smiling at them and exchanging jokes and pleasantries on her rounds. She kept a close eye on all the men, including officers and medics, watching out not only for signs of injury or illness, but also combat fatigue and stress reactions.

It was snowing lightly as the brunette finished her rounds. Spina had taken over digging their foxhole. Gene was off trying to find his way to 3rd Battalion, hoping to get some supplies.

They had lost so many men already.

Some had simply frozen to death in their foxholes, falling asleep and never waking up. Others had been killed in the artillery and sniper fire the Krauts liked to send their way. And a fair few had turned themselves in to the hospital in Bastogne with trench foot or frostbite, though those returned to the line after a few days.

Sighing, Ella shook herself out of the bleak thoughts as she neared another foxhole.

The mood was depressed enough without her adding to it. Keep smiling. The snow crunched beneath her boots.
Hands buried deep in the pockets of her jacket, she took a knee at the edge of the hole, hiding a wince as her bruised ribs protested before peering inside. "Hi guys", she greeted her friends with a smile.

Liebgott and Alley smiled back at her. Their faces were a chalky white from the cold, noses and cheeks flushed.

"Hey Shorty, fancy meeting you here", Alley quipped.

She chuckled, glad to see them in relatively good spirits. "You keeping warm?", the young girl asked.

"Trying to", Liebgott responded. She could see that both men were shivering despite the blanket wrapped tightly around them. "And you?"

Ella shrugged. "As warm as it's gonna get."

She had been scrounging coats and blankets for the boys, ensuring that especially the skinnier men had at least one extra layer to compensate for their bodies' lacking insulation. But she had yet to appropriate a coat for herself and she would wait with that until everybody was outfitted.

For now, the ranking medic kept warm by being on the move as much as possible and curling up under her blanket whenever she was in her foxhole, which was rather seldom.

"Don't forget to move around a bit, keep the blood flowing", she reminded them, straightening.

They nodded and waved as she left, their mood brightened a little.

Walking back from the OP, shivering had taken hold of Ella. She pulled up her shoulders and tugged her scarf higher, never missing a step. Gunfire rattled in the distance. The girl didn't even bother looking up. It was too far away to be from their part of the line and frankly, she was too exhausted to worry about the other companies as well. She had her own share of worries with Easy.

Already, quite a lot of the men were coughing, not surprising considering their miserable conditions. Combined with the lack of food and medicine, the brunette and her fellow medics could do nothing but advise them to stay warm and rest as much as they could. Which was pretty useless, because nobody got much sleep around here.

"Ella?"

She stopped and turned.

First Sergeant Lipton approached her, a small frown on his forehead. Like her, he was one of the people who was constantly working to keep up the guys' morale. His warm eyes studied her. "How are things?", he inquired.

Heaving a small sigh, Ella shrugged. Lip knew how bad it was, he always knew just about everything that concerned the company.
"We're almost out of supplies", she confided. "Gene went to find 3rd Battalion. I tried to get to the 501st last night, but I couldn't find them. We're out of food and if we don't get resupplied soon, we're gonna have to live off my stockpile of chocolate bars, which is not big enough to sustain Easy." She had made the last comment with the sole purpose of making the worry lines disappear from Lip's face.

It worked. He chuckled and put a steady hand on her shoulder. "I'm sure you can figure something out", he said, referring to the situation in general. "You already found coats for the guys."

The girl nodded. "Luz helped me."

The radio tech was a real asset when it came to getting things they needed. He had wheedled a good deal of blankets and coats out of the people in Bastogne when they had gone into town as runners to gather everything they could to keep warm.

"And I stole some from Battalion HQ", she admitted with a bashful grin. She had hitched a ride there with one of the jeep carrying wounded and stopped off at the comparatively cosy building. Bribing a couple of privates with a pack of smokes, Ella had then convinced the jeep driver to drop her off at Easy's CP, a pile of warm coats in her arms. She hadn't told anyone where the rest of the coats had come from.

Lip smiled. "And how are you doing, Shorty?", he then asked.

Before she could answer, a nervous voice rang out through the fog.

"First Sergeant Lipton?"

The small medic suppressed an eyeroll, but exchanged a glance with her friend. The voice belonged to none other than Lieutenant Norman Dike, their frustratingly inept and indecisive commander.

Lipton pulled a face, making the young brunette giggle. Giving her a parting smile, he headed over to see what the CO wanted.

Ella found both Spina and Gene at their freshly dug foxhole. "Anything new?", she asked, slumping down next to them.

"First Battalion pulled out of Foy. Heavy casualties", Gene replied.

Spina frowned. "So, if they're pulling back, what the hell are we doing sitting here?", he wondered, glancing at their ranking medic for an explanation.

She only offered a shrug.

"We need morphine", Gene said, steering the conversation back to more pressing matters. With clipped, jerky movements he pulled out one syrette from his satchel. "This is all I got."

Biting her lip, Ella dug through her own bag and produced another one. "Maybe five or six bandages, a few half-filled aid kits", she listed off, "and a German suture kit, that's it."
Her fellow medics raised their eyebrows in surprise. "Where'd ya get that?", Spina questioned, frowning in confusion.

"Found it last night", the girl answered. "It's basically like ours."

Gene tossed her the Kraut bandage he'd gotten off the prisoner. "What about this one, Ellie?" It looked very similar to their own, but he wasn't taking any chances.

She quickly skimmed the small-print instructions before handing it back. "Just a different packaging", she assured. "Rip it open at the top and that's it."

Gene nodded and put the bandage back into his satchel. "You got extra scissors?", he asked his colleagues. Somehow, they had vanished into thin air after they had left Mourmelon. Spina denied, while Ella pulled her pack into her lap and started rummaging around in it.

"I thought I had another pair...", she mumbled, tip of her tongue poking out between her lips.

"First Sergeant Lipton?" Lieutenant Dike's voice penetrated the fog once more, a slightly hysteric edge to it. He came stumbling over to their foxhole, apparently still looking for the long-suffering Lip.

"Sir?", the man in question responded from somewhere off to the side.

"What's this?", their CO snapped, "Three medics in one hole?"

"Uh, yes sir", Spina replied.

Dike stared at the three of them. "Well, what's gonna happen to us if you take a hit, huh?", he questioned.

"We're not much in here anyway", the brunette piped up, "and I switch foxholes all the time to keep a better eye on the men."

Her calm, unperturbed response had taken the wind out of his sails and he deflated like a balloon.

Lipton took this as his cue to step in. "Sir?", he asked again, coming to stand next to the small group.

Dike turned to him. "First Sergeant, where's my foxhole?"

Ella would have gaped at the lieutenant if she hadn't been this good at schooling her features. That man was so incapable, it was unbelievable. If it weren't so tragic, it would be downright ridiculous.

"It's back there, sir", Lipton spoke, pointing into the whiteness. To the small girl, he sounded tired and exasperated. No wonder... "Maybe you missed it, huh? I'll walk you back, sir", he offered. "You're a bit close to the line here."

Cursing, the lieutenant stalked off. After a quick glance, which spoke volumes, to the company medics, Lip followed him.
Getting to her feet, the youngest of the three handed Gene her blanket. "Here", she said, "try to get some sleep. I'll see if somebody still has morphine in their aid kits."

The Cajun hesitated, looking ready to protest.

"Gene" her hand touched his forearm, "t'es épuisé."

Shoulders sagging in defeat, he acquiesced and accepted the proffered blanket with a small smile. "Merci, chérie", he muttered.

Eyes sparkling from the smile on her lips, the girl gave Spina a pointed look. Look out for him. He nodded.

"Alright, boys, I'll come by later." With that, she set off, the mist soon swallowing her slim frame.

Teeth chattering, Ella weaved her way through the trees, heading towards the officers' foxholes. The only one occupied was Colonel Strayer's. "Sir?"

He looked up. "What can I do for you, Sergeant Sawyer?" His brows furrowed when he noticed how badly the medic was shivering.

"Uh...do you have any morphine in your aid kit, sir?", she asked, voice shaking nearly as much as her body.

Strayer pulled his aid kit from a pocket of his coat and opened it. It was still full.

Her face lit up. "Can you spare anything, sir? We're short on, uh, everything", she said, shifting from one leg to the other to keep the soles of her boots from freezing to the ground.

He glanced at her, then at the small box in his hand. Shrugging, he handed the entire thing to her. "You have more use for it than I", he decided.

She smiled. "Thank you, sir."

The colonel waved it off. "Keep up the good work, Sergeant."

Unfortunately, her hunt for morphine was just as unsuccessful as expected. Most of the guys had either already used the syrettes, handed them over to the medics or simply didn't have any in their aid kits. Nearly an hour later, after checking the OP, Ella found herself walking between the foxholes once again, chatting amiably with the guys.

"Hiya lil' lady", Guarnere greeted the girl in his signature drawl. "Listen, I gotta talk to you."

Concern immediately stirring, her eyes automatically flickered up and down his body to try and find an injury. "Is it your leg?", she questioned.

"Gah, to hell with that leg, I'm pissing needles!", he complained. "I tried telling Doc but he didn't have time."
Ella's face clouded as a frown settled on her pretty features. "Gene was here?", she wanted to know.

"Yeah, was askin' for morphine. Why?"

The brunette medic rubbed a spot on her forehead, just under the rim of her helmet. "I told him to get some sleep."

Bill shrugged. "Maybe he caught a nap. But seriously, can't you do anything? It hurts like hell!" He looked at her with desperate, pleading eyes.

She gave him an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Bill."

Any further explanation she wanted to offer was cut off by the screaming of an incoming shell and the subsequent explosion. A tree burst into millions of splinters. While Bill dived into the nearest foxhole, Ella raced off, boots kicking up snow.

"Medic!"

Over the noise, she couldn't make out who was calling. She followed the voice, throwing herself onto the ground as shrapnel flew through the air and ducking behind trees as the earth beneath her feet shook.

"Mediiic!"

Her lungs were filled with shards of glass and each breath tore at her throat with razor-sharp claws. The girl hurtled through the woods, a mortar shell knocking her off her feet as it blew up far too close for comfort. She was up again a second later, a low moan drowned out by another shell destroying a tree nearby.

"Medic!"

It was Penkala.

"Hang on, Penk!", she called over the bone-rattling explosions, scrambling across to them on hands and knees.

"It's the artery!", he yelled back, "I can feel it!"

"Doc!", Bull shouted from where he was crouched in the foxhole.

"You gotta let go, Penky", Ella prompted, "you gotta let me see."

In his panic, he didn't listen, repeating over and over that it was the artery.

"Penkala!" Gene came rushing over to them, stumbling as another shell hit.

"It's the artery, I can feel it!", Penkala screamed again, tears spilling down his cheeks.

Swiftly, Ella slid in next to him, wrapped one arm around his shoulders and with the other hand
took hold of his wrist. "It's alright, Alex, relax, we're here", she whispered in his ear.

"Penkala, let go!", Gene barked over the shelling.

The man writhed in the girl's grip. "It's the goddamn artery!"

"Loosen your fingers, goddamn it!" With the tremendous stress of the artillery barrage and the fear that it might actually be the artery adding to the general exhaustion and misery of their situation, Gene's nerves were too frayed for him to stay calm.

His colleague shifted and gently started prying away Penkala's bloody fingers, soothing words spilling past her chapped lips, just barely audible above the pandemonium around them.

"I'll bleed to death", the injured man whimpered.

Bull joined in. "Relax your arm, Penk, come on", he encouraged, rifle gripped tight in his hands as he scanned the area for enemies.

Finally, their words got through to the terrified man and he obeyed.

"Ah. Not the artery. Good.", Ella determined at a glance. The blood wasn't bright red and didn't spurt out like it would have if the artery had been hit.

"I ain't going back, Doc", Penkala suddenly stated.

Gene's eyes snapped up to his face. "What?"

He sniffled. "I ain't going nowhere, not in this shit!", he insisted.

"You don't wanna go out in this shit and you're yelling 'medic'?", the dark-haired medic shot back incredulously as he yanked out a bandage.

"I don't need to go back to no aid station", Penk proclaimed vehemently.

The brunette let out a small huff of laughter, her hands holding his arm still for Gene to bandage it. "Well, you're in luck, Penky", she commented, a caricaturesque tone of humour seeping into her voice despite the forest blowing up around their ears, "we don't have an aid station."

They ducked again as another blast sent dirt and splinters in all directions.

Then, the echo of the last explosion faded out and it was quiet again. The four of them lay there, panting and anxiously glancing around. Was it over? Was it safe to move again? Ella's erratic heartbeat began to slow down, the fear reducing to a feeling of unsettled butterflies in her stomach.

"Penkala, scissors", Gene broke the eerie silence, "I need scissors. You got scissors?"

Penkala stared at him in bewilderment. "The hell I need scissors for?"

"You got your aid kit?", Ella asked, catching onto her friend's train of thought.

He handed it to the girl who passed it to Gene.
"Right, well, you don't need this. Not yet", the Cajun said, sitting up, "we do."

He got himself into a standing position and held out a hand to his small colleague. She took it and let him pull her to her feet. "I'll come by later and stitch that up, alright?", she said with a reassuring smile.

Penkala nodded, still shaky.

Locking eyes with Bull, Ella didn't have to say a word to get her request across. A small incline of his head was all she needed as a response. She couldn't stay, there were other things to do, people to check on. But she did leave them a couple of cigarettes, sneaking them into Penkala's coat pocket before hurrying off.

As they made their way back to their foxhole, Gene looked over at his young friend.

Her normally sun-tanned skin was pale, only a few shades darker than the snow. The bruise colouring her cheekbone was turning purple, the new scar on her temple fading to an irregular pink line. Her lip had healed. She had her arms wrapped around her midsection. Her cheeks were red from the cold and she had dark rings under her eyes.

Worst of all, she had lost weight. Albeit slim and wiry before, Ella was now hovering on the edge of being seriously underweight. But despite all that, her deep green eyes held their usual spark of life. Not for the first time, he admired her gift to smile in the face of adversity.

"Are you okay?" Her light, friendly voice pulled him out of his musings.

He nodded. He didn't need to vocalise the terror he had felt, the helplessness, the frustration. He was sure that Ella knew those feelings just as well, even if she didn't let it show.

Gene settled into the foxhole with a grunt.

"Who got hit?", Spina inquired.

"Penkala", he replied, shifting around to get a little bit more comfortable.

Ella gave Spina Colonel Strayer's aid kit. "Right, here, this is what I want you to do: I want you to take someone and work your way over to 3rd Battalion, alright?", she said.

The Philadelphian nodded.

"You know what we need", she continued, "bandages, plasma, whatever you can beg, you beg. Okay?"

"And get me some goddamn scissors, I can't get any", Gene chimed in.

Spina hummed to indicate he had heard his colleague and got ready to climb out of the foxhole, when Easy's ranking medic caught his gaze again. "And get yourself a hot meal, too, huh?", she
"Yeah." He hoisted himself up and went to find somebody who would accompany him.

As Spina's footsteps faded away in the distance, Ella turned to Gene. He had taken off his helmet and was running a hand through his hair, breathing heavily. She simply put a blanket over him. His dark eyes watched her, a silent question in them.

The brunette gave him a warm smile that by rights should have been able to melt the snow surrounding them. "Sleep, Gene. I'm taking over your shift."

Closing his eyes, he listened as his friend started humming a quiet tune, the melody lulling him to sleep. The last thing he heard before he dozed off was a soft whisper. "Dors bien, Gene."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

t'es épuisé: you're exhausted
Merci, chérie: Thanks, sweetheart
Dors bien: Sleep well
Ella makes her rounds, the list of things the medics are searching for growing to include morphine, scissors and boots.

Gene was woken by a small hand shaking his shoulder. Prying open his eyelids, he blinked the sleep out of his eyes. Ella was crouching at the edge of their foxhole, lips quirked up into a smile.

"Rise and shine", she said with a cheerful sing-song in her voice. "Dinner time."

He wiped a hand over his face, eradicating the last traces of sleep, and scrambled out of the hole. Absent-mindedly, he noted that their hole was now covered with a tarp.

"Spina back?", he wanted to know as they set off to get some food.

"Uh-huh", the girl replied, shoving her hands into her pockets. "They got a few things. Babe managed to fall into a Kraut foxhole with a German in it."

Gene's eyebrow rose. "He alright?"

She laughed lightly, though it was rather a puff of air escaping her lungs. "Yeah. But Hinkel is now the boys' new favourite name", the brunette said, amusement twinkling in her eyes.

"Hey, guys, come on over!", Malarkey called when he spotted the two medics.

Ella glanced at her Cajun friend. He smiled and nudged her towards the guys that were sitting in a small circle. He himself sat down on an empty crate and used a tree as backrest. He preferred to keep a certain distance between himself and the men. It made it easier. He dug around in his pockets for a cigarette, longing for the tiny bit of warmth they gave.

The small girl plopped down between Skip and Malarkey and poked at the slop in her mug. She had absolutely no idea what the cook had doled out, but whatever it was, it was sustenance. Chewing slowly, she listened to the guys cackling and giggling about Babe and Spina's encounter with Hinkel.

"Should have shot Hinkle in the ass", Malarkey suggested.

"Hinkle nearly shot him in the ass!", Skip immediately pointed out, making them all laugh.

Joe Domingus, their cook, came over and scooped out another set of heated ration bars.

"Thanks, but I'm good", the brunette medic mumbled around a mouthful of her own K-rations, hand moving to cover her mug.

Malark pulled a face. "These smell like my armpit!", he complained.
Muck inspected his own ration bar and waved it at his buddy, a disgusted look on his face. "At least your armpit's warm", he groused around the cigarette between his lips.

Joe turned back to them. "You want syrup with that?", he asked.

"Hey Joe, be honest, what's in these things anyway, huh?", Malarkey wanted to know.

The cook pointed his spoon at him. "Nothing you won't eat, Malarkey."

"I won't eat Malarkey", Skip cracked dryly.

Ella couldn't stop herself from making a quip. "How kind-hearted you are", she deadpanned, sending them into a new fit of giggles.

"Hey, maybe Hinkle would like your share", Julian, the replacement that shared his foxhole with Babe, pitched in.

"I should have shot him when I had the chance", Babe sighed.

Penkala raised an eyebrow at him. "You were running backwards, Babe?", he reminded the redhead.

Lieutenant Peacock approached them. "Anybody seen Lt Dike?", he asked, sounding equal parts hopeful and exasperated. Their not-so-esteemed leader was rarely around and most of the time, nobody knew where he was off to, leaving the NCOs and lieutenants to do his job for him.

"Uh, try Battalion CP, sir", Malarkey answered.

Peacock walked off.

"Try Paris", Skip suggested bitterly.

"Try Hinkel", the brunette muttered under her breath, just loud enough for them to hear, earning her another round of laughter. She glanced over to Gene, who was smoking and listening to their conversation. He smiled around his cigarette.

Ella got up to rinse her mug, hiking up her shoulders until she could hide her nose in her collar. "Be right back", she said.

"Watch out for Hinkle", Julian called after her.

Her fingers were clumsy from the cold as she fumbled with her canteen. She had taken off her fingerless gloves whenever she was treating a patient to avoid contamination and at one point hadn't found them again. They were probably lying around somewhere, buried under the snow.

Shaking her second canteen, Ella determined that she needed to fill them soon. Staying hydrated was crucial in this weather, else the blood would thicken, making it even harder for the body to heat the extremities.

Gathering her supplies, the girl headed back to the small group. The snow had picked up.
Gene got up from his seat and the two medics left to resume their scrounging.

"I'll go check Dike", the Cajun offered. It was common knowledge that the man liked to avoid any direct interaction with Ella, probably because he had no idea how to address the girl, both as a medic and a person.

"Okay, then I'll do rounds and see if I can find out who's hoarding the contraband, because there must be some out there", she replied.

Before they split up, Ella turned back once more. "Oh, and Gene? Get some more rest, will you?"

He nodded, knowing well enough that it wasn't merely a suggestion, despite her friendly tone. And he was no fool, he had no desire to be on the receiving end of her Look. "Alright, Ellie. Make sure you get some sleep, too."

She grinned. "Will do. I'll find myself a foxhole."

With that, they both went their separate ways.

Night fell quickly. Ella came to More and Smokey's foxhole. Peeking under the tarp, she saw both of them awake. More was cleaning the machine gun and oiling the parts. Smokey was making coffee in his helmet.

"Hey guys", she whispered, slipping under the cover and pulling her knees to her chest as she sat down. The icy night air caused her to fight off a persistent attack of shivers. "Smokey, you got something?"

He smiled and fished something out of his jacket. "Yeah, morphine. 3rd Platoon ponied up the contraband."

The small medic took it gratefully, but her mien darkened. "They had this stuff the whole time and didn't bother handing it over? Those-", she caught herself. "I asked them about it just half an hour ago!", she hissed in disbelief.

More looked up from his cleaning at her tone. "Grant came by about ten minutes before you and dropped it off", he explained. "He looked pissed."

That really said something, because Sergeant Charles Grant was one of the most even-tempered and level-headed men in the company.

A mellow smile chased away the stirring anger on Ella's face. "Well, we have it now, so that's something." She would stop by 3rd Platoon later to thank Chuck and probably tell the men a little something about coughing up the precious medication when asked repeatedly by their rather desperate medics.

"Doc still looking for scissors?", Smokey inquired.

She nodded and suppressed a yawn. "Mh-hm."
"Perconte", the machine gunner continued.

Rolling her eyes in a 'I knew it'-expression, the brunette sighed. "Of course. Perconte." That man always packed everything, no matter what it was. His pack was often the biggest, even though he was one of the smaller guys in the company. "Thanks, Smokey. I'll tell Gene."

"Here." He offered her his steaming mug. Despite her efforts, he hadn't missed the shivers running through her body. She was the smallest and skinniest out of all of them and had only a few layers of summer ODs to ward off the chill.

Ella took a sip and relished the feeling the hot beverage left as it trailed down her throat. "Thank you", she said with a content sigh, handing the warm mug back. Her hands already ached, missing the heat the mug had given off.

"Hey, Shorty? You better check on Joe Toye out on the OP", More mentioned as she got ready to head back out into the cold.

A frown flickered in her eyes, but the girl smiled her thanks, told them to keep warm and crawled out of the foxhole.

Although she wasn't sick yet, Ella could feel it approaching the same way some people could feel it in their bones when a storm was nearing. The biting cold drained everybody of their energy, but this kind of tiredness told of fever and illness. She refused to acknowledge it, though, because she couldn't get sick now. From experience, the girl knew that she could delay it for a while, as long as necessary. But when they got out of this hellhole, it would only be a matter of time before sickness struck.

The snow-covered shape of the OP came in sight.

The young girl got onto her stomach and crawled forward. The Germans knew they were there, but she didn't fancy getting shot again. Toye had a pistol trained on her as she reached them. He tucked it away as soon as he recognised her, turning back to face the line.

"You guys okay?", Ella asked, voice no more than a whisper.

"They got hot food", Earl McClung answered, sounding put-out, "Can you smell it?"

She made a confirming noise, turning to the reason she was here. "Joe, you missing something?"

"Home", he answered promptly.

"Ask him to dance, Shorty", McClung butted in.

Toye shot him a disgruntled look, not happy with being ratted out.

Machine gun fire cut through the silence and they all ducked. Seeing the muzzle flashes far away, they relaxed again. For now, it was safe.

Eyebrows furrowed in concern, the girl poked Joe in the shoulder. "Show me your feet", she instructed.
He growled at McClung to "watch the goddamn line", then he twisted to do as his small friend had asked.

Ella's jaw nearly dropped. "Where are your boots at?", she asked in consternation.

"In Washington, up General Taylor's ass", he grumbled.

The medic chuckled bitterly. The good General wasn't exactly popular with the men right now. They felt abandoned after he went back in Washington to participate in conferences about something or other. "What happened?", she wanted to know. Boots didn't just disappear like that.

"Took 'em off to dry my goddamn socks and they got blown to hell, okay?" The frustration radiated off him in waves.

She sighed and wiped a hand over her face. "I don't believe this", she muttered to herself. Then, louder, the small girl inquired: "What's your size?"

"Nine, just like everybody else." He paused. "Well, except for you. You're what, a four?"

She huffed a laugh and swatted at his shoulder. "Watch the goddamn line, Toye", she said, quoting him to himself. From her satchel, she produced a couple of chocolate bars and handed them to the two men.

"If I wasn't so goddamn cold, I'd kiss you right now, Shorty", McClung stated, holding the small treat in cupped hands.

She grinned. "Nah, I'll pass, thanks. Keep warm, boys." With that, Ella pushed herself back and disappeared between the trees, the darkness quickly swallowing her.

A tickle started at the back of her throat and the young girl hid a cough in her sleeve. She pulled a face at the wet, rattling sound it made in her chest. But it was a far cry from the barking cough some of the guys, including Babe Heffron, had, so she didn't think much of it. Clearing her throat, Ella continued on her way, ignoring the twinge of her ribs.

"Ellie."

She jumped and swallowed back a startled curse. "Gene, did you get something from Dike?", she asked, paying her racing heart no mind.

He pulled out the aid kit. A smile ghosted over her lips and she dug the contraband morphine from her satchel. "Here", she said, giving him a few syrettes, "3rd Platoon finally forked it over."

His features hardened, anger flashing in his eyes. "But we asked them at least twice today", he glowered.

"I already talked to them, so did Sergeant Grant", the girl placated, hand coming to rest on his arm. "Oh, Smokey said Perconte had scissors", she added as an afterthought.

Gene rolled his eyes and sighed. "Perconte", he muttered, unintentionally mimicking her own response. He nodded, then took a good look at her. "Alright, Ellie, get some sleep, I'll finish the rounds", he decided. She was trembling, her lips had a slight tinge of purple and knowing her, she
hadn't gotten a wink of sleep since around midnight last night.

"Okay", Ella agreed, too tired and too cold to argue. "Merci Gene." And while he went to get some scissors from Perconte, she set off to find herself a foxhole.

Luz looked up when the cover of his foxhole rustled. A pair of boots appeared, followed by a small body as Easy's female medic slid down next to him. She was shaking like a leaf and the tip of her nose was a fiery red. A clacking sound reached his ears. It took him a moment to realise that it was the girl's chattering teeth.

"You got a buddy for the night?", Ella asked. She practically had to force the words out of her mouth, her voice sounding thin and breathless from the cold.

"Jesus Christ, Shorty, you're gonna freeze to death", George exclaimed quietly, pulling her close and wrapping a blanket snugly around her trembling form. "Look at you, you're like a human popsicle."

She sniffled and wiggled around a bit to get at least in the vague vicinity of comfortable. "That means I'm sweet, right?", she mumbled.

George chuckled and patted her shoulder. "You, young lady, are adorable", he stage-whispered.

"Uh-huh", the girl made, a yawn drawing it out. She buried her nose in his side and closed her eyes, quickly dropping off into an exhausted sleep.

George watched his small friend. His concern flared up when she coughed a little. It sounded quite nasty and reminded him a bit of a barking seal. But she didn't wake up, so he figured it wasn't too serious. And he hoped it stayed that way. They couldn't lose her. As long as their girl was around, smiling and toughing it out with them, they could get through anything.
The number of wounded rises. Roe connects with a nurse at the aid station in Bastogne.

They were under mortar fire once again. Ella was barrelling through the snow, following Skinny's screams for a medic. She reared back as the treetops above her were hit. The branches shattered with a loud crack, splinters of bark and wood raining down on her. Thankfully, her helmet and jacket deflected what shrapnel flew her way.

Luckily, the medic had good aim as she jumped into the foxhole with Skinny and Perconte, otherwise she might have hit the wounded man, possibly aggravating the grisly injury even more. Sharp splinters had embedded themselves in his lower leg, sticking out like spear heads. Skinny's hands were shaking and it was all he could do to keep them away from his bleeding shin.

"It's okay, Skinny, you're doing great", the girl assured him, grabbing her satchel.

He replied something that was drowned out by the shelling.

Glancing at Perconte, she asked: "Frank, you getting a jeep?"

He nodded, fiddling with the radio controls. "I'm on it."

Gene came to a sliding stop next to them. Neither medic hesitated for even a second, they immediately jumped into action. Gene cut away the fabric of Skinny's trouser leg while Ella got sulfa and a bandage ready.

"Look at my leg", Skinny moaned.

"Bear with me", Gene spoke softly, "bear with me." He held the leg, immobilising it so his friend could treat the wounds.

Next to them, Perconte yelled into his radio. "Get it moving god damnit, we need it now!", he snapped at whatever HQ radio operator he had on the line.

Ella was sprinkling sulfa onto the countless bleeding wounds, not even noticing the blood flowing over her fingers anymore. After all these months in the field, it was actually something of a rarity to see Easy's medics without red-tinged hands.

Skinny hissed and gasped in pain.

"It's okay, Sisk", Gene soothed, "ain't that bad."
"Ain't that bad?", the wounded man repeated breathlessly, staring at his mangled leg.

Another shell zoomed overhead as the girl prepared to apply the bandage. Gene raised his head to look if somebody got hit. When no cries for a medic rang out, he returned his focus to the patient in front of him.

Skinny let out a guttural sound as Ella pulled the straps of the bandage tight. "I know I know", she said, a small apology in her voice.

Gene fumbled a syrette from his pocket.

"No, Doc, save the morphine! I can make it", Skinny interrupted. "I can make it, save it."

Gene nodded and put it away again. "Alright, let's get him outta here", he said.

The two medics both clutched a fistful of his webbing and hauled him out of the foxhole. Perco scrambled after them to help. He and Gene lifted Skinny in a more or less upright position, Ella close behind them. "Gene, we gotta get supplies!", she called as they ran towards the rear, hopefully towards the jeep.

"Yeah", he grunted before cursing: "Where's the goddamn jeep?!

"I don't know, but I hear it", Frank panted.

The ground bucked and Perconte slipped. The sudden weight change made Gene lose his balance and they went down, Skinny falling on top of them. He threw his head back, an agonised scream tearing from his throat. Ella had jumped aside to avoid getting knocked over as well and was already by his side.

"Argh! Jesus Christ!", Skinny ground out through clenched teeth.

The brunette crouched behind him and helped him into a sitting position, Gene and Frank wiggling free.

Perconte looked down himself and complained: "Ah, Skinny, you got blood all over my trousers."

"I'm real sorry, Frank", he bit back sarcastically, in too much pain to care about other people's garments.

Ella shook her head and managed to pull Skinny up so the two men could hoist him up again.

A jeep appeared out of the fog. Together, they carried their comrade over and got him settled on the stretcher that was laid out on the jeep's nose.

"Tell Spina I went in for plasma", Gene called to Perconte, sliding into the passenger seat.

The small girl hopped into the back and shouted to the driver: "Go!" The man didn't need to be told twice.
Bastogne was three miles from the front line. They reached it within five minutes.

"All the tanks, artillery, all pulled back to here", the driver told them as they drove into town. Rubble and debris lined the road. "We got no backup beyond Bastogne, this is it! The Krauts captured the 326th Medical. They took everybody: Doctors, medics, the whole shebang. We got nothing!"

The buildings were damaged, walls crumbled, holes gaping in snow-covered roofs. The church was still standing and it had a Red Cross flag hanging over the entrance.

"They're giving the boys hooch for the pain", the driver continued.

The two medics shared a look. How were they supposed to get supplies when the people here didn't have any either?

They pulled to a stop in front of the regimental aid station. Ella and Gene transferred Skinny onto a fresh litter that two soldiers had brought over.

"He took a mortar hit", she advised them, "Watch the leg."

"Yeah, watch the leg", Skinny pleaded weakly.

"Get him in", Gene ordered, following them into the chapel.

They had both seen the piles of dead bodies outside the church. There was no way to bury them in the frozen ground and probably no time either. Ella's gaze was torn away only when they entered the church. She couldn't look at Gene, knowing that he had figured out where she had gotten that many coats for the boys in such a short time.

The chapel was filled to the brim with wounded. They lay on every available horizontal surface, hooked to plasma and saline drips and covered with threadbare blankets.

"No, no, here", an accented voice called to the two litter bearers, "Put him here."

A pretty nurse came bustling over, pointing to a nearby table. The two soldiers heaved Skinny onto it, Ella moving to stand next to him. He clutched her hand. She let him, smoothing back his hair and smiling gently.

"It's okay, you'll be fine", she spoke, her natural ease soothing him.

His smile was more of a grimace, but the effort was what counted for the young medic.

"Is he bad?", the nurse asked.

"No", Gene replied, "lower-leg wound, no morphine."

She nodded and moved away, Gene following her. "Nurse? Have you got plasma we can-"

"Wait", she interrupted him with an apologetic look. "Please."
Understanding, he backed off, taking a look around instead. Some of the men were severely wounded. Why were they still here? He exchanged a glance with Ella. His friend looked just as shocked and saddened as he felt.

"Hey, what's going on here", he asked one of the medics. "Why ain't these men evacuated?"

The man straightened from where had been tying a bandage and replied: "We can't evacuate, we're cut off." He sighed. "This is as far as it goes."

Ella, who had heard him, turned her attention back to Skinny. The pretty nurse came back, carrying a bottle filled with a yellow liquid. *So the driver was right, they do give them hooch for the pain.*

Another woman joined them, shorter than the first and with dark skin. The two nurses conversed quietly in French, the blonde handing Skinny a glass full of alcohol.

The injured man looked at the nurses, then at Ella, then at Gene. "I'm in heaven, Doc", he stated dreamily.

Gene smiled, while the young girl chuckled and patted his arm. "Now Sisk, no bothering the nurses, alright?", she teased as the blonde nurse walked past, Gene on her heels.

Skinny grinned at her. "No ma'am, wouldn't dream of it."

The brunette waited outside for Gene. She had already found them a ride back to the line and was clutching a pair of boots in her hand, size 9. She coughed into her sleeve.

Just then, Gene came hurrying out of the chapel, clutching a crate full of supplies. The sight of the box alone was enough to make her smile.

The driver took the crate from him and carried it to the jeep. The two medics turned to follow him when a clear voice called: "Eugene!"

They both looked up to see the blonde nurse walk out of the church. Her blue head scarf shone in the sun. Ella smiled and climbed into the back of the jeep, giving her friend some privacy but watching. The woman tossed something to Gene. He caught it against his chest and blinked down at it in surprise. From her position, Ella couldn't make out what it was.

"Chocolat", the nurse said with a smile. "Pour vous."

Gene thanked her with a nod, then hurried to slide into his seat. There was a smile spread on his face.

As they drove off, the girl twisted and waved at the pretty woman. She waved back before heading inside the chapel again.

"What's her name?", Ella asked.

Gene looked over his shoulder at her. "Renée", he answered, the smile still lingering on his lips.
"Renée", she repeated slowly, testing the feeling of the name on her tongue.

He waved the small package in his hand. "She gave me chocolate", he said, admiring it like a piece of gold. Though on the line, it was worth even more.

The brunette smiled. "Bless her."

Chocolate and cigarettes were the main currency in the field. Money was nice and all, but they had no way to spend it. Smokes provided a small sliver of warmth, at least temporarily. And chocolate? Well, chocolate made everybody happy, simple as that.

They arrived just in time to hear Father Maloney finish his mass. Gene grabbed the crate before Ella could even blink, so she simply picked up the boots and jumped down from the jeep, studying the boys. Something was up and she wanted to know what.

"That's it guys", Skip announced to the assembled group, his typical smirk on his face, "nothing more to worry about. We gonna die now, we gonna die in a state of grace."

Spina approached the returning medics. "Battalion want a reconnaissance patrol", he explained, "Kraut hunting."

"Alright, we'll go, you went last time", the small sergeant said. She put the boots on top of the crate that Gene handed over. "Take these. Give the boots to Joe Toye, tell him they're a nine."

They followed the patrol that was gathering and beginning to gear up. Their roster had been thrown into disarray since they had moved into the Bois Jacques and none of them really knew who should be with which platoon. Instead, they all checked on all platoons and took turns to join the patrols.

"Peacock's leading, right?", they heard Luz ask.

Hoobler confirmed.

"Great", George grumbled, "that asshole couldn't find a snowball in a blizzard."

Ella snickered, but didn't comment. Peacock's orientation skills were about as bad as Sobel's had been, probably even worse.

"Tactical columns, gentlemen", Martin hollered just before the two medics reached him. He stopped them and led them back a few paces with a hand on Gene's chest. "Doc, Shorty, it's a combat patrol. Why don't you stay back and keep your asses out of trouble, huh?"

The two friends glanced at each other for a moment before nodding. "Yes, Sergeant", Gene acquiesced. Ella stayed silent, a sceptical expression on her face.

Johnny gave them a fleeting smile. "Yeah." He patted the young girl on the shoulder before catching up to his squad.

They watched them go, their silhouettes quickly fading in the fog. An uneasy feeling had settled in their stomachs and they shared an apprehensive look. They both understood Johnny's need to keep the medics out of danger, after all, they had lost too many people already. Still, they couldn't help
but have doubts. What if something happened?

"This is a bad idea", Gene broke the silence.

"I know", the younger medic replied quietly as they sat down. She was biting her lip and her fingers fidgeted in her lap. What made her this restless wasn’t the feeling itself, but the fact that she’d had a similar sense of foreboding during the briefing and after the jump of Market Garden.

With a sigh, she leant closer against her friend. This blasted forest was making her paranoid now. It began to snow more heavily, thick, dry flakes falling from the grey sky. The temperatures had dropped well below freezing point.

Ears primed to register even the smallest sign of trouble, Ella steeled herself for the nerve-wracking wait.

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Martin and Julian took cover behind a pile of logs. "Go", Johnny hissed, giving the replacement the signal.

He hadn't taken five steps when a distant shout tore through the air: "Feuer!"

A machine gun opened fire on them, the rounds hitting the dirt around them. "Get down! Get down!", Johnny called.

Julian stopped, but it was too late.

A bullet ripped right through his throat, blood spurting out. He collapsed on the spot.

"Jesus", the squad leader swore, staring at the kid in shock. He ducked as another salve hit the logs before adjusting his rifle and returning fire.

Julian lay on the ground, feet kicking weakly as he tried to gasp for air.

Taking cover again, Johnny faced the woods behind him and shouted at the top of his lungs: "BULL! CHRISTENSON! UP ON LINE!"

Grief and anger twisting his features, he turned around again and fired another salve into the fog. 

*God, why didn't I let a medic come with us?*

When the gunfire erupted, Ella tensed. Gene sat motionless, staring into the distance, brows furrowed tightly.

*Öppis ish schiaf glaufa*, she thought. But Johnny had told them to stay put, and so, as much as she hated it, she obeyed. *Please let them be okay. I have collected too many of my friends' dog tags already.*
"What have we got?", Bull yelled over the rattling of the machine gun.

"Kid's down – Julian!", Johnny shouted back.

Ducking his head as round after round hit the pile of logs, Bull hollered: "We gotta make a move!"

"I can get him, Sarge!" Babe was already getting ready to crawl towards his wounded foxhole buddy.

Johnny's answer was clear enough. "Suppressing fire!", he screamed, his voice skipping an octave. His order got echoed by his fellow squad leaders and they heard Luz report their casualty on the radio. Christenson had their own machine gun set up and began returning fire.

Babe lay flat on his stomach and waited for a chance to snatch Julian.

"Covering fire!", Martin bellowed.

Julian was still writhing on the forest floor, clawing at the frozen dirt. Babe tried to crawl forward, but jerked back quickly when a salve punched holes into the ground an inch away from him. The poor replacement reached out to his friend, pure, unadulterated panic in his eyes.

The redhead sat up and found his foxhole buddy's pleading gaze. "Stay down!", he shouted hoarsely, "Don't move! Stop moving or they'll keep shooting!" He launched another attempt, but once again, enemy fire stopped him from advancing.

A blurry shape approached in the fog. Coming closer, the two medics could make out Lieutenant Peacock. Gene and Ella shot up from the ground.

"What's happening, sir?", the dark-haired Cajun asked.

"We're pulling back", the lieutenant answered, out of breath, "We made contact. I gotta get to the CP." He walked straight past them and disappeared into the whiteness.

As soon as the words had left his mouth, the two friends shared a horrified look.

"Go!", Gene called, giving the girl a push in the direction of the gunfire.

She didn't need any other encouragement as she took off like the wind, her feet kicking up a spray of snow.

_They made contact and he just left?_, the brunette wondered as she careened through the woods, flabbergasted by Peacock's behaviour. _'I gotta get to the CP' What does he think a radio is for?_ The noise of the ongoing firefight became louder with every flying step and soon enough, the mist spat her out into the clearing.
The sudden arrival of their female medic caused some confusion among the men, but they were too busy to spend more than half a second dwelling on it. Babe was still trying to get Julian to stop moving, voice cracking with desperation.

Ella crouched next to the redhead, using the slim tree as cover, and assessed her patient's injuries from afar. Loath as she was to admit it, there was little hope for him: The bullet had ripped a chunk out of his neck, either nicking or severing the major blood vessels that were located there. From the looks of it, his trachea was ruptured as well. A steady stream of blood flowed from his mouth. It poured from his neck in rivers.

"Don't move! Don't move or they'll keep firing!", Babe screamed. Then he turned to the small medic. "Do something! Why aren't you doing something?!"

With the guys providing covering fire, Ella now started her own attempt to reach the bleeding boy. All she needed to do was grab his outstretched hand and haul him over to them. Her hand shot out from behind their meagre cover.

But it was no use. As soon as she got close enough, the German machine guns took aim at her and she had to pull back.

"Fuck", Babe cursed. He turned to Martin. "Sarge, what-?" In his desperation, he didn't find the words to finish his sentence.

Christenson yelled over the rattle of his machine gun: "Pull back! We gotta pull back!"

Johnny looked at him, then at the frantic Babe, then at Ella who met his gaze with a pained, heartbroken expression.

"Let's get out of here!", Bull shouted in his friend's ear when he struggled to make a decision.

And so, Johnny made the hard call.

"Go, go, go!", he screamed, signalling them to fall back.

Babe turned back to Julian. "Come on, stay with us!", he encouraged, "stay with us!" His voice, already hoarse from his cough, was now completely raw with emotions. "Hold on! Look at me!"

Johnny fired another salve to cover the retreating squads. "Heffron, move!", he barked. "Shorty, get him outta here!"

Ella grabbed him by his webbing. "Babe! We gotta move!"

She nearly had to yank him up, but he found his feet and they ran. He tried to look back. The small medic didn't let him, forcing him to keep moving forwards and blocking his attempts to turn around. Eventually, Babe stopped trying and they caught up to the rest of the guys.
When the girl finally reached the spot where she had left Gene, her colleague was already kneeling on the ground, tending to another wounded. Luz was next to him, calling for a jeep. She dropped down beside her friends, blocking any thoughts and emotions about Julian from her mind to focus on the task at hand.

The two medics worked in silence, a stark contrast to the soft melody of calming words that usually accompanied them whenever they took care of a patient.

The patrol was setting up their defensive position again, ready for a counterattack.

"Martin!" Nixon showed up out of nowhere as was his wont. "Martin!", he barked sharply, getting the man's attention.

"Sir?", he called back, skidding behind a tree, half twisting to look at the Intelligence officer.

"What's going on?!" Nixon's eyes flickered back and forth, doing a quick headcount.

"They got Julian!", Johnny replied.

Immediately, Babe screamed in denial: "He's still alive!"

"We don't know that!", the sergeant snapped back, readying his rifle.

Babe couldn't let it lie. "We gotta go get him, sir!", he insisted.

Secretly, Ella agreed, but for another reason. By now, the poor kid would have succumbed to his injuries, either due to the blood loss or the lack of oxygen. In any case, it would be a recovery, not a rescue. Still, Julian was one of them and shouldn't be left behind. They should get his body so he could be sent home to his family.

Nixon addressed Martin again: "Did you hit an OP or their line?", he questioned.

"Their line, sir!", Johnny answered, eyes wide with fear and grief.

"We gotta go back to get Julian out of there, sir!", Babe cried.

The young medic wanted to say something, anything to comfort him, but her lungs were too depleted from the two mad dashes she had just performed. So, she stayed silent and tried to catch her breath as Nixon pushed them to fall back.

"We lost Peacock!", somebody announced worriedly.

"No, he's back at the CP", Nixon informed them before raising his voice again: "Come on, Martin!", he urged, "Fall back! Get 'em outta here!" Since Peacock had left the patrol high and dry, Johnny was leading and it was down to him to give the order.

The men shot into the mist, returning the now distant enemy fire.
Luz urging Gene to get moving reached Ella's ears, pulling her from her breathless trance. She shook her head to clear the cobwebs and grabbed a handful of the wounded man's webbing, Gene mirroring her actions, Luz taking the feet. They hoisted the unconscious replacement into the air.

After emptying his clip into the thick white veil, Johnny finally ordered the men to fall back.

The two medics and Luz ran for the rear where a jeep was already waiting for them. They heaved the man onto the stretcher and the jeep roared off.

Completely spent, Ella's knees gave way and she slumped down where she was, sitting on her haunches. Her chest was still heaving. Trembling fingers fumbled with the cap of her canteen. Taking a sip, the girl tried to get her breathing under control.

But somehow, she breathed in the wrong way and something caught in her windpipe. A cough forced its way up her throat and stole what little air the cold had left her.

She doubled over as the cough attack took hold, choking and fighting for each wheezy, trembling inhale that wasn't nearly enough to count as a breath. Time adopted the consistency of syrup and panic started to rise inside her, the age-old fear of suffocation rearing its ugly head.

When the fit finally began to subside, the young medic became aware of hands on her back and an arm around her chest, bracing her, keeping her upright. Breathing slowly returning to normal, she sagged against whoever was holding her, not caring that tears were clinging to her eyelashes and trickling down her cheeks. Her ribs were aching fiercely with each breath she took.

"That's a bad cough you got there, kid."

"I'm fine, sir", Ella answered weakly between abating gasps, "Wrong pipe."

She could almost hear the eyebrow ticking up.

Captain Nixon slanted the brunette medic a disbelieving look. "Uh-huh", he made, dry as sand. "Anyway, what did I tell you?"

She gave a shaky laugh. "Sorry, Nix. But really, I'm alright. Only too stupid to drink, apparently."

He snorted and helped her to her feet. Scrutinising her, he decided to drop the subject. While paler and skinnier than normal, Ella indeed looked fine, barring the grief, fatigue and frustration glowing in her eyes. "C'mon", he said instead, "go to the others."

The girl nodded and took a deep breath, releasing it slowly. As the air streamed out of her lungs, Nixon watched in sceptical astonishment how the emotions faded in her green orbs, changing to something softer. The anger, bitterness and exhaustion drained away, allowing her inner strength to shine through behind the sadness. She gave him a small, but genuine smile and left to re-join her friends.

"We couldn't get to him, Captain", Martin said regretfully. "We tried. Babe tried. Shorty tried. We
couldn't get to him." He shook his head dejectedly and moved back to his seat in the small circle. The patrol sat close together, the usually vibrant group glum and quiet.

Captain Winters sighed. Another man – no; boy. Julian hadn't been more than a kid – lost. Clear eyes roaming over the men, he noticed they were short one person. Just that moment, the missing individual walked up.

Ella passed Gene, stopping to put a hand on his shoulder. She waited until he raised his head and met her gaze. She tilted her head in a silent question.

Gene didn't break eye contact as he pondered her question. He searched her face and found the guilt gnawing on him lessening slightly at the warmth of her expression, glowing right underneath and mixing with the sorrow in her eyes. When he nodded, it was resolute and his young friend nodded back.

The short, wordless exchange didn't escape Easy's beloved former CO. Once more, he was beyond glad that Ella was with them. She had always been one of the most important people to keep the company together; she was their heart and soul, their little sister. Now, in this never-ending landscape of frost and ice, her smiles and gentle words were often more effective than a fire.

When she sat down next to Toye, the man's arm immediately coming up to sling itself around her shoulders, Winters took a moment to study her. There was sadness on her features, but beneath that, he could clearly see the same stubborn resilience like that day – it felt like ages ago – in Camp Toccoa, when the small brunette had had enough of Sobel's insults and had ran past him at the top of Mount Currahee with a huge grin on her face.

Ella felt somebody's eyes on her. She looked up and was met with Captain Winters' pensive gaze. She could see the weight on his shoulders, the concern that was etched into the small, tight lines around his eyes and mouth. Although she was exhausted and her heart was heavy from all the losses they had already suffered, she gave him a smaller version of her dimpled, lopsided smile.

When some of the worry lines faded a little, the small girl considered it an accomplishment and leant closer into the warmth that Joe gave off.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Pour vous: For you.
Öppis ish schiaf glaufa: Something went wrong
A ray of hope

Chapter Summary

A supply drop gives the exhausted members of Easy Company some hope.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Anyone seen Shorty?"

Lipton came up to the CP late in the afternoon. He had been looking all over for the small medic and was starting to get worried.

"Right here, Sarge", her voice answered mere inches away from his ear.

He jumped, barely stifling an expletive.

All around him, the gathered men hooted and howled with laughter. The guilty party was grinning all over her face, giggling while her eyes gleamed with good-natured mischief.

On a whim, Lip decided to go along with her spiel, which was successful in its aim to brighten the guys' mood. Quick as a flash, he snatched her and threw her over his shoulder. Her laughter was interrupted by a surprised yelp and climbed an octave. Promptly, the girl began to squirm in his grip, squealing and trying to get down.

"Serves you right, scaring me like that", he declared as he carried her around, stopping in front of various snowbanks as if contemplating which one to dump her into.

The men were cheering and pointing to the largest piles of snow.

"Thanks a lot, boys!", Ella called over to them from where she was hanging upside down over the First Sergeant's shoulder. "Nice to know how much you love me!"

"We love you, Shorty, but Lip outranks you, see??", Skip explained.

She laughed and resumed her attempts to escape Lipton's clutches. "I swear, Lip, I won't give you any of my chocolate", she informed him, twisting her upper body to see the side of his face.

He turned his head to look at her. "Hm...you drive a hard bargain", he said, clearly debating how serious her threat was.

"Careful, Lip, or you won't get any dessert!", Luz crowed.

Lipton laughed. "Alright alright, you win." He set the young girl back on her feet. She gave him an indignant glower, or tried to, at least. It was utterly ruined by the grin on her face.
Later, when Lip made his way to his own foxhole to try and get some rest – Ella's orders – he stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. His fingers brushed against something he couldn't recall putting there. Pulling it out, a fond smile spread on his lips. "Sneaky little girl", he muttered to himself, quickly pocketing the chocolate bar again.

Even after knowing her for over two years, the young medic continued to surprise and amaze him. It wasn't just for her medical expertise or her unique way of interacting with the men and getting them to behave that made Ella such an indispensable member of Easy Company.

It was her entire personality, her charm that she was completely unaware of, her calming presence. It was her small quirks and mannerisms. Her smiles, the way she nearly bounced on the spot with excitement. The soothing melody of words that flowed past her lips when she treated a patient. The way her head tilted in curiosity like a puppy. How she always seemed to know what her friends needed.

When Lipton closed his eyes, he sent a small prayer heavenwards. Thank you, Lord, for Ella Sawyer. Please don't take her away from us. We need her.

The evening meal was just as cold and bland as the other ones before. Ella gave up about half-way through, passing the rest of her portion to Perconte before getting up and walking away. Although the constant shivering burned up energy that didn't get replaced, she just couldn't eat. She was in desperate need of sleep, just like the rest of the men, and the exhaustion was beginning to steal her appetite.

The NCOs got basically no sleep and it was no different for the medics: They survived on cat naps of an hour max, scattered throughout day and night. Coupled with the cold, supply shortages and artillery barrages, they were running on fumes. Ella was watching her friends and comrades closer than ever and made daily reports to Captain Winters, keeping him informed about the physical and mental status of each and every man in the company.

She stumbled for the tenth time over a branch hidden beneath the snow as she looked for a place to catch some shuteye. The small girl had finished her rounds, reassuring herself that everybody was as well as could be expected. Gene was trying to find Heffron, but so far, he hadn't had any luck. Ella had promised him to be on the lookout for the redhead from Philly.

Sliding into an empty foxhole, she dimly noticed that she forgot her blanket. My word, I sound like a two-year old missing her favourite 'Nuscheli', the young medic thought with mild amusement, pulling her satchel into her lap and wrapping her arms around herself.

A tiny voice in her head suggested getting up and fetching the blanket, but it quickly fell silent as sleep swept her away like an avalanche.

Gene wasn't surprised to find that Ella wasn't in their hole. The brunette had a habit of drifting from one foxhole to the next. It made sense, after all, it really was too dangerous for all three medics to share a hole. But it was also a bit frustrating because it made it more difficult for him to check on her without her noticing.

His small friend was almost unnervingly capable of hiding her own sufferings, dismissing them as
This time, it was Bill Guarnere who found her.

Sitting down and promptly wrapping her blanket around the small girl before scooting closer, tucking her against his side and draping his blanket over both of them, he studied her closely. The rocket flare that the Krauts sent up to pick out targets illuminated Ella's features in a sharp light.

"Watcha doin' here all alone, lil' lady?", he mused quietly. "Ye're freezin' and ye go off to sleep alone?"

Even asleep, she was shivering badly and the purplish tint of her lips that presented a stark contrast to the chalky pallor of her skin spoke for itself. As if the young medic had heard him, she shifted in her sleep. Her eyebrows scrunched together in discomfort and a cough pushed past chapped lips.

Bill frowned. Was she sick? He prayed that she wasn't. Thankfully, the coughing spell was short and after a few slightly wheezing breaths, Ella settled again.

He shrugged mentally, deciding that it was just a fluke. Everybody was coughing. He was sure she was keeping an eye on it herself and would tell the officers, or the Doc, if it was serious. After all, her highest priority had always been looking after the company. She wouldn't risk that by hiding a severe illness.

Sighing, he closed his eyes. No use worrying about something he couldn't change. And he'd better catch some sleep as well before the Krauts once again started their favourite pastime of showering them with artillery and mortar shells.

The fog had cleared.

When Ella opened her eyes after a few hours of less than restful slumber, it took her a moment to comprehend what she was seeing. Or rather, that she was seeing something other than a white haze that washed out all the colours. What surprised her even more was the distinct, softly tingling feeling of sunrays on her face. *D sunna ish duss*, her tired brain supplied as a side note.

A jolt went through the young medic as she realised the meaning behind that seemingly random thought. *D sunna ish duss!* A surge of energy hit her and the girl turned to her foxhole buddy, who was still asleep.

"Bill! Bill!"

Guarnere was pulled into wakefulness by a very familiar, very excited voice. He blinked reluctantly and was met with the pale face of Easy's female medic. A beaming smile had lit up her youthful features and her eyes sparkled.

"What?", he grunted, not entirely awake yet.
"D sunna ish duss", she relayed, hands enthusiastically pointing upwards.

"Huh?" He had seen her lips move, had heard that words had left her mouth, but the sounds that reached his ears made absolutely no sense.

Ella gestured up again. "D sunna! She's out! Luag!"

All the Philadelphian could make out was 'She's out', which didn't help him understand what had the girl so thrilled. His gaze followed her finger up into the blue sky. *Hang on, blue?* The platoon leader did a double take.

"The sun's out", he mumbled, completely stunned. "The sun's out", he repeated, relief and excitement growing in his chest as the realisation sunk in. "Shorty, the sun's out!"

"That's what I've been saying the whole time!", the girl shot back half-indignantly, scrambling to her feet and pulling him up with her.

Just then, an unmistakeable sound tore through the silence of the forest. The two sergeants looked up and whooped with joy as they watched planes zoom over their heads.

"C'mon! Those are ours!", Bill called, clapping his small friend on the shoulder as they both raced off.

Everybody was up and running for the clearing. The men were shooting red smoke grenades to signal their location to the planes, to let the Allied pilots know that they were here, they were still here. They were cheering, standing right in the open and waving at the planes.

In their exhilaration, they all forgot that from a cockpit, it was impossible to discern friend from foe. Fliers were therefore trained to fire upon anything and anyone that moved and they enforced that rule especially on supply drops.

Sure enough, a plane dived and started sending a hail of bullets towards the soldiers.

"Take cover!", Lipton hollered.

Ella didn't need to be told twice. Seeing Gene still staring at the planes in a mixture of confusion and betrayal, she snatched him by the arm and pulled him back. "Allons-y, Gene!", she urged, anxious to reach the shelter of the treeline.

Around them, the boys returned fire. They had lost enough men as it was, they didn't need the additional abuse from their own Air Force! The two medics ducked out of the firing line and took cover behind a fallen tree.

"Cease fire!", the First Sergeant screamed over the ruckus, "Cease fire, god damnit!"

Immediately, the rifles fell silent.

"Sergeant, I don't understand! It was our own planes!" Gene stared at Lipton, completely lost.

The man hushed him as a deeper rumble filled the air.
"C-47s." Ella would recognise these aircraft anywhere. They all would. You don't forget the plane you jumped out of on various occasions. And right now, they were a sight for sore eyes, because in her mind, this could mean only one thing.

"They're bringing supplies", Lip confirmed. "It's a drop." A grin broke out on his face, chasing away the worry lines on his forehead. "It's a drop, come on!" He signalled for the soldiers to follow him, tugging at the two medics' sleeves to get them moving.

Ella sent Gene to retrieve the supplies from the drop zone in Bastogne. He would be accompanied by Lipton and an entire squad. "Say hello to Renée from me", she called after him.

He waved, then the jeep drove off.

After her rounds, the small girl trudged towards the CP to report to Captain Winters. Arms wrapped tightly around herself, she listened to the crunch of her boots in the snow, relishing the fact that for once, the forest wasn't blowing up around her ears.

"S-Shorty?"

The hesitant voice made her look up and turn her head.

Babe Heffron caught up to her, muffling a cough in his gloved hand. "Uh..." He fidgeted with the strap of his gun, looking quite uncomfortable. "Can I...can I talk to you?"

"Sure, what is it?" Instinctively, her eyes quickly flicked up and down his body, checking for injuries. She was relieved to find none.

"Well... I just wanted to apologise, I guess", he stammered.

Her eyebrows pulled together in a small, confused frown. "Apologise? For what?"

Now it was Babe's turn to be confused. "I was really awful to ya yesterday!", he pointed out incredulously. "I kinda, uhm, I mean I accused you of-" He broke off, shook his head and tried again: "I shouted at you. And basically said that you weren't trying to...ya know." He trailed off.

It dawned on her what he was talking about. "Babe, you don't have to apologise for being human and having feelings", she spoke, her hand reaching out to touch his shoulder.

"But-"

The young medic held up a hand to stop his protest. "Please, listen to me. I'm not mad at you, I never was." She looked at him imploringly, willing him to believe her.

"It's not right", he mumbled, gaze dropping to the snow-covered ground. "I didn't want to insult you or question your abilities. After all", he started rambling, "you're a really good medic and a
great girl and you're always looking out for us and making sure we're alright and-

"Breathe, Heffron", she gently reminded, a soft smile spreading on her lips. He obeyed, mouth closing. She squeezed his shoulder, making him look at her. "You have nothing to apologise for. You didn't insult me. Don't worry about it."

Babe nodded, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. "Okay", he responded slowly, the first smile since that patrol appearing on his lips. It was small and unsure, but it was there.

The brunette nodded back and patted him on the arm. "Good. Now, how's your cough? Any better?"

He shrugged. "Uh...a little. I got some coffee, that helped."

Ella smiled. "That's good. Unfortunately, there's not too much we can do, except wait. Try to keep warm and don't take off your scarf."

"Yes Ma'am", the redhead replied, saluting in jest. She gave him a bemused look and a playful shove.

They reached the CP, Babe moving to sit with Hashey, Garcia and Hoobler while the ranking medic went to report to Captain Winters. The man had already spotted the young sergeant and they stepped a few feet away from the small group.

"I sent Roe with Sergeant Lipton to gather the supplies", she said. "They probably won't be back for a while. We'll start sorting and distributing the stuff as soon as they're here, sir."

Their former CO nodded approvingly. "Good, good. How are the men?"

Brushing a few tangled strands out of her face, Ella sighed. "Hanging on, sir. Morale is alright, not stellar of course. A lot of the boys are sick and that probably won't get better without proper winter clothing and hot food. Luckily, most of them only have a cold, nothing too serious, but I keep an eye on them in case they get worse."

She didn't bother mentioning that they could do next to nothing if someone developed pneumonia, bronchitis or any other more severe condition. Winters had enough to worry about as it was and maybe, just maybe, there was penicillin in the packages.

The captain had listened quietly to her report, the small crease of worry between his eyebrows deepening a little. Now, his gaze took on a searching quality. "And how are you, Ella?"

The girl shrugged, scratching absently at the dried blood that stained the sleeves of her jacket. "As well as can be, sir." His expression told him that he wasn't completely convinced, so she allowed: "I would feel a lot better if we had proper supplies."

If Winters still wasn't buying it, he didn't let it show. He gave her a tiny smile and patted her shoulder. "You and me both, Shorty. You and me both."
There wasn't any penicillin in the air-dropped packages.

Ella, Gene and Spina didn't need too much time to sort through the boxes and divide the supplies amongst themselves. Plasma, bandages, suture kits, that was about all they had. Still no morphine for them. The aid station had been resupplied, but it wasn't enough to share with the various medics up on the front lines.

"I tried", Gene professed, "I told them we were down to our last syrette, but they wouldn't listen."

Ella gave him a sympathetic smile. "We know, Gene. It's not your fault that munition was prioritised." Though who's supposed to fire the ammo when we all die due to the lack of clothing, food and medical supplies is beyond me.

She banished that thought as soon as it occurred to her. *Jetz ish wohl kaum dr richtig Ziitpunkt zum zynisch si!*, the girl scolded herself. They had plasma, which was a big improvement. They had proper, sterile bandages and suture kits to take care of minor wounds themselves.

Spina sighed. "At least we finally got enough blankets for everyone", he commented, pointing to the large crate sitting beside him. "Maybe more."

The brunette's eyes lit up. "That's great!", she enthused, "now the guys out on the OP have at least something to keep them warm. They can't move around to keep the blood circulating and they can't very well double up under one blanket."

Infected by her excitement, Gene cracked a tired smile and grabbed an arm full of blankets. "I'll take them", he offered, getting to his feet.

"Alright", Ella nodded. "Then get some rest, you've been running around all day. Spina and I will-" The rest of her sentence got cut off by a rattling cough.

The girl grimaced and hid her face in her sleeve as her body tried to expel whatever gunk had been gathering in her lungs. She was well aware of the concerned looks her fellow medics were giving her, but too breathless to reassure them. Her stomach muscles were starting to ache as she tried to stop coughing.

When she finally had her breathing under control again, the brunette managed: "Ergh. Sorry. As I was saying."

This time, it was Spina who interrupted her. "How long have you been coughing?" His face was a mask of worry.

Taking a small sip from her canteen, she swallowed and answered with a shrug: "A few days."

Gene was studying her, a deep frown marring his pale features. She met his gaze calmly. "I'm fine", she said, "it's just a cough."
A moment passed.

And another.

And another.

Then he nodded, lip twitching lightly. "Alright, Ellie. Mais fais attention, d'accord?"

The young medic gave him a cheeky grin. "Aren't I always?", she asked back.

The look he sent her way before leaving spoke volumes.

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Gene had just left the OP, his quiet footsteps fading in the distance. Silence reigned once more as slow lightly fell from the sky. Buck, Guarnere and Babe were manning the outpost and thanks to the supply drop, they now had blankets to wrap up in.

"Never calls anybody by their nickname", Bill commented, handing out the blankets the Cajun medic had delivered.

Babe remarked: "He once called me Edward", sounding somewhere between confused and mildly affronted.

Bill glanced at his friend. "That right?"

Buck turned to look at the youngest – and greenest – of their small group. "Edward?", he repeated. "That's your name?"

The redhead nodded awkwardly. "Yeah."

"Funny", the blond lieutenant said. After a beat, he continued: "You don't look like an Edward." The words hung in the air as their eyes turned back to the line, a renewed hush falling over the three men that was only broken by Babe's wheezing cough.

"So..." It was no surprise to them that Babe was the first one to shatter the tired, tense silence with that hesitantly uttered word. "I heard Doc call Ella a nickname. Why her and nobody else?"

For a minute, nobody answered. Then, Guarnere said: "Cause it's Ella."

"Huh?"

Bill shifted a little so he could look at his fellow Philadelphian buddy. "It's Ella", he repeated as if that tiny sentence explained everything.

Buck nodded. "Can't imagine calling her Sergeant Sawyer", he agreed softly.

"Yeah. That's why Doc calls her Ellie", Bill continued, "'s why we call her Ella, or Shorty."

Babe gave an understanding hum.
"And because we still don't know her given name." The dry statement Bill added like an afterthought coaxed a smile out of them. For the blond lieutenant, it was the first real smile in weeks.

While the men pondered the medics and their unique mannerisms, Ella had other worries. She had been watching her colleague very carefully and she didn't like what she saw. Gene was starting to show signs of battle fatigue and frankly, the young girl was scared. Dealing with shell-shock and combat stress was a tightrope walk, one mistake and the patient could either become violent or completely listless.

But that wasn't what she was afraid of. It was more the fear of losing her friend with his subtle, sly humour, his dry retorts and his calm nature.

Get a grip, Ella! She shook her head, shoving the thoughts into a far-back, dusty corner of her mind. She couldn't afford to second-guess herself. She would do what she always did when she noticed one of the boys struggling and hopefully, they would be out of this god-forsaken forest soon.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Nuscheli: a type of muslin cloth, can be used as almost anything. (Babies often love them just like plushies. It's a Swiss thing. Google it if you want to know more)
D sunna ish duss: The sun is out
Luag: Look
Jetz ish wohl kaum dr richtig Zitapunkt zum zynisch sii: Now is hardly the right time to be cynical
Mais fais attention, d'accord?: But be careful, alright?
Chapter Summary

Christmas in the Ardennes has its ups and downs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning, the Germans decided to up the ante. Tanks came rolling towards the tree line. After another nearly-sleepless night, Ella couldn't find it in her to do more than sigh, put on her helmet and take a deep breath. The latter turned out to be a stupid idea because it made her cough. Luckily, it was over in less than twenty seconds, which she counted as an improvement.

First Sergeant Lipton hurried past her, telling the soldiers in their foxholes: "Hold your fire, boys. Don't let them draw you out."

The brunette knelt in her hole, fingers fiddling with the strap of her satchel, teeth biting her lip.

Not too much later, Alley shouted for a medic. Hopping out of the foxhole, the young girl hurried towards the line.

"Smokey's hit!", somebody called to her as she ran past.

They had already pulled the wounded man from his hole and dragged him back. He was gasping and had tears in his eyes. Gene was trying to find the wound when Ella skidded to a halt next to them.

"I can't feel my legs", Smokey cried, hands searching for something to hold on to.

She reached out and gripped his left hand, thumb stroking over his knuckles. "It's okay, Smokey, we're here."

The roar of the tanks picked up and they heard Lipton holler: "Machine guns, open fire!"

The medics worked quickly on their patient, long since accustomed to the noise of battle around them, but anxious to get the wounded man to the rear.

Gene ripped a bandage from his satchel and together they hauled Gordon in a sitting position, Ella bracing him. At the same time, she fished the last remaining syrette out of her pocket and stuck it in Smokey's arm. The poor man was panicking, his breaths coming in short panting puffs, and he was almost grey.

They prepared to haul him back towards the CP. Gene raised his head and screamed for Lip. The First Sergeant was with them in a heartbeat and switched positions with Ella, leaving her free to ready the plasma drip.
"We gotta get the hell outta here", Lipton said to them before turning to Smokey. He patted his cheek to try and rouse him. "Hey, hey, come on", he urged, "stay with us, Smokey, stay with us." Grabbing their fallen comrade by the straps of his webbing, they double-timed it away from the line. Behind them, the tank shell bursts sent up fountains of snow and dirt.

After a distance, Gene ground out: "Stop, we gotta stop." It wasn't easy dragging a fully grown man through the snow, especially when he was in no condition to assist them in any way.

Ella dropped to her knees next to her fellow medic, tourniquet between her teeth, pushing up Gordon's sleeve. While she and Gene worked to give Smokey the infusion he needed, Lip rubbed the wounded man's sternum in an effort to wake him from where he was hovering on the edge of unconsciousness.

Slowly, Smokey's eyes fluttered open. "Lip", he mumbled.

"Yeah, buddy?"

"You're standin' on my hand", the machine gunner spoke quietly.

Lip glanced down and hurriedly took his foot off Gordon's appendage. "Sorry, pal", he apologised breathlessly, head swivelling when another salve of gunfire rattled behind them. He needed to get back to the line! "Look, I'll get you another Purple Heart for it", he offered, getting to his feet.

Ella's head snapped up when she heard a jeep approaching. "Give me the plasma, Lip, and stop that jeep", she instructed in that calm tone of her's that brooked no argument. She tucked the bottle under her jacket just like he had done and turned back to Smokey, while Lipton flagged down the jeep. "Don't worry, Smokey, you'll be alright", she said, smiling at her patient.

He managed a tiny, wobbly smile in return and squeezed her hand. "Thanks, Shorty", he croaked. "See you after the war."

Lipton enlisted the jeep driver's help to get the wounded man onto the stretcher.

"I got it, Ellie", Gene said.

She nodded and handed him the plasma. Then the men picked Smokey up and carried him away. The young girl watched as the jeep barrelled off. "See you later, Smokey", she whispered into the frigid air, words curling in the vapour of her breath. She was pulled out of her thoughts by Lip's hand on her shoulder.

"C'mon, Ella, we gotta get back to the line", he spoke.

Clearing her throat, the ranking medic nodded and immediately shifted back into her medic mode. "Let's go", she said and they took off hurrying back to the boys.

Something in Gene had changed when he came back from Bastogne. Ella found him in his foxhole,
staring blankly ahead. She sat down next to him, picked up the discarded blanket and draped it over both of them. "Gene?"

It took him an alarmingly long time to react to her presence. He blinked, eyes regaining their focus. "Oh. Salut, Ellie", he muttered, gaze skirting away from hers, roaming over the trees before them instead.

She pulled her musette bag into her lap, deciding to inventory her cigarette and chocolate stash while waiting him out. Counting wasn't an easy feat when one was shaking and almost numb from the cold. The cigarettes slipped through her stiff, uncoordinated fingers and she kept losing count because she either got distracted by other thoughts or simply skipped numbers.

"He's paralysed."

Ella looked up, a wave of sad resignation washing through her as her diagnosis was confirmed. "Yeah", she acknowledged quietly, putting away the musette bag.

Gene sighed heavily, some of the emptiness disappearing from his face. "Bullet brushed his spinal cord", he relayed.

Her mien brightened a little. "So it might only be temporary." Spinal injuries were unpredictable and if the spinal cord wasn't severed, there was at least a chance of recovery.

"Hmm", her friend made in response, eyes straying into the distance once more. They shot back over to the small girl when she made an odd strangled noise and broke out into a coughing fit. She bent forward, red-tinged hands coming out of equally stained sleeves to cover her mouth. Gene watched with fast rising worry as she kept coughing and choking, the noisy, laboured inhales few and far between.

Ella was struggling to pull in enough air. She couldn't stop coughing, no matter how hard she tried. Her lungs, no scratch that, her entire chest was on fire and she was starting to feel light-headed. *Bitte los es ufhöra*, she pleaded with whatever higher power was listening.

Gene let out a relieved sigh when the coughing spasm began to die down and his young friend was actually getting oxygen into her lungs again. Exhusted, she slumped against him, eyes closing as her complexion returned to normal, or at least to its previous pale colour.

"I'm alright", she rasped.

"No you're not. You're sick", he countered, a deep crease of concern on his forehead.

She shook her head, a few dirty strands tumbling out of her messy hairdo. "I have a cough, 's all. Always had a cough when I caught a cold as a kid."

He stayed silent, quarrelling with himself. On one hand, he was inclined to believe her. He hadn't seen her display any other symptoms and in these conditions, a cough was nothing unexpected. On the other hand, though, he was scared that it might be more serious than she let on. The company couldn't lose Ella. *He couldn't lose Ella.*
"Gene, regarde-moi", she gently asked. When he lifted his gaze, she clasped his shoulder. "I'm not going anywhere. There's nothing we can do about that cough, so I'll just have to ride it out." His conflicting emotions must have shown on his face because a soft smile appeared on her features, warmth glowing in her green eyes. "I promise, if I get worse, I'll tell you at once."

He studied her intently, searching for any sign that she was either holding back or telling him a fib. All he saw was earnest sincerity and a wordless reassurance. Sighing, he conceded with a nod. He got a sweet smile in return.

It was Christmas Eve. Or so Ella had been told. She shifted from one foot to the other as she stood a little distance away from the chow line, gaze roving over the men around her. It came to rest on her friend and fellow medic, Gene. He was sitting with his back against a tree, staring fixedly at a point beyond the snow and cold that surrounded them.

Babe walked up to him, two mugs in his hand. "Doc?" He held out one of the cups.

Gene blindly reached up to accept his portion of food, eyes still looking at a spot hundreds of miles away.

Sighing, the youngest member of Easy made her way over and sat down next to the Cajun. Raising her head, she saw Captain Winters watching them closely. Before she could make a move to respond to his worried expression, the rumbling of a jeep caught everybody's attention.

It was Colonel Sink. "We're all sitting down to a Christmas Eve dinner of turkey and hooch back at the Division CP", he announced.

Ella scoffed quietly.

"Damned if I don't like old Joe Domingus' rancid-ass beans better", he continued with a smile.

_Oh, so that's what this is supposed to be!, the girl thought. Beans! Could have passed for cat food. Never mind, food is food._

She glanced at Gene. He was still holding his mug and showed no intention of eating. Inwardly, the brunette cursed. He was shutting down faster than she had imagined. Outwardly, she simply scooted closer to her friend, trying to share some body heat.

"Hello Easy Company", Sink greeted them genially.

A murmur of "Hello sir" rang out from the men who didn't have a mouthful of beans. The colonel exchanged a few quiet words with Winters, then addressed them all once again while the boys quickly gathered to hear what he had to say. The two medics stayed where they were.

"Men...and woman", he sent the female combat medic a smile, "General McAuliffe wishes us all a merry Christmas. 'What's merry about all this?', you ask? Just this: We've stopped cold everything that's been thrown at us from the North, East, South and West. Now, two days ago, the German commander demanded our honourable surrender to save the USA encircled troops from total annihilation. The German commander received the following reply: 'To the German commander:
That got a few chuckles and laughs out of the guys and they shared amused and smug looks.

"We're giving our country and our loved ones at home a worthy Christmas present", the colonel continued, "and being privileged to take part in this gallant feat of arms, we're truly making ourselves a merry Christmas."

The small girl turned her gaze away from the man, eyes falling to look at the snow-covered ground before her.

Sink finished his speech with a sincere: "Merry Christmas to y'all and God bless you."

The boys smiled and cheered: "Nuts, sir! Nuts!"

The only ones who didn't join in the laughter were the two medics that sat side by side, both clutching their cooling mugs in their hands.

Gene was still in his zone, likely not even registering most of what was going on around him. Ella looked pensive, her green orbs gazing into the distance, thoughts swirling behind them. She was worried. About her friend, about all her boys.

Peering into her cup, the brunette forced herself to take a spoonful of the beans. They had gone cold and she wasn't hungry at all, but she had to eat. She had already lost weight and she could ill afford to lose even one more pound. She heaved a sigh and immediately regretted it as it caused her to cough. Her face twisted into a pained grimace as the spasms aggravated her sore stomach muscles.

Ducking her head, Ella rode out the unpleasant but comparatively mild coughing fit. As soon as it was over, the girl took a swig from her canteen, pretending to have choked on a bite of her meal. A quick glance around told her that most of the guys were still too busy celebrating the defiant reply the German commander had received. A few concerned gazes rested on her, but those were quickly eradicated when she gave them a brilliant smile.

"Gene?"

As the young medic had guessed, her coughing had pulled him back into the here and now.

Blinking a few times, he looked at her, instinctively flicking his eyes up and down her thin frame to assess her condition. "Huh?"

"C'mon." She got to her feet, pulling a face when her stiff limbs and joints protested the movement. Waiting for her friend to follow suit, Ella sought out the Battalion XO's gaze that she knew was still trained on them. A small nod indicated his approval. He had spoken to her before dinner and expressed his worry about the quiet Cajun. She had promised to do all she could to help her friend.

Gene studied the brunette discretely as they walked through the woods. Her placid, open expression gave nothing away and he turned his attention to their surroundings.
The snow crunching beneath their boots was frozen. The air was clear and night was approaching. Their breaths came out as puffs of steam. Frost was forming intricate patterns and designs on their clothing and helmets.

They reached their empty foxhole. Their blankets lay inside, sprinkled with snow. Hopping down, Ella waited for her fellow medic to settle against the cold, hard dirt before covering him with one of the blankets, tucking it around him. Grabbing the other blanket, the girl then sat down beside him. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Talk to me, Gene."

He looked up, a frown of confusion clouding his pale face. "About what?" He tried to keep the tension out of his voice.

The brunette quirked a small, sad smile. "It's just me, Gene", she said, hand rising in a pacifying gesture. "You don't have to put on an act for me."

With a deep sigh, the Cajun's entire posture sagged. "You've noticed?" It wasn't really a question, of course she had seen it, but a tiny part of him had hoped to deal with this himself.

She nodded. "It's not a shame, Gene. Everyone's struggling."

He scoffed. "Right. Except for you. You have a smile for everyone and make them laugh." The bitterness in his tone was directed more at himself.

Her responding chuckle had a pained edge to it. "What else can I do?" Her eyes locked onto him, gaze soft, yet piercing in a way that made him feel almost sheepish. She smiled. "Look, I can't force you to do anything and I can't look inside you...much", she amended after a tiny pause, earning her an amused twitch of her fellow medic's lips. "So I need you to talk to me."

It was quiet while Gene mulled over her words.

Ella leant back, letting her gaze and thoughts drift idly as she gave her friend time to think. A cough attack crawled up her windpipe and pushed past her cracked, purple-tinged lips. She hurriedly tugged up her blanket, muffling the sounds in her sleeve under the coarse fabric. Thankfully, with half her face covered by the blanket, the girl could hide the wince that accompanied each rattling, barking cough. Her airways hurt from all the coughing spells, from her throat right down to her diaphragm. It was a miracle in itself that she hadn't lost her voice yet.

"You could force me, you know", Gene broke the silence. "You outrank me."

The brunette smirked mischievously. "I knew you'd get hung up on that one", she replied before quickly sobering once more. "You're right, I could order you to turn yourself into the aid station. And then what? They are packed and short-handed as it is. And...if I'm honest, I'd rather have you here with me."

"Why?" He stared at her in puzzlement. He was zoning out, his reaction time had slowed down considerably, and if he wasn't doing rounds, he was sleeping. He knew she had seen those signs, too, so it was a mystery to him why she would want to keep him around instead of taking him off
Ella shrugged, a lopsided, slightly self-deprecating smile making its way onto her features. "I guess I'm just selfish", she said softly. "I can't take care of the entire company on my own, even with Spina's help. And feel free to correct me anytime, but I think transferring you to the rear would do more harm than good." She got to her feet and draped her blanket over him, too. "Think about it and we can talk some more in the morning."

Gene nodded. "Okay Ellie." He paused for a long moment, before adding: "Thank you."

She patted his shoulder and hopped out of the foxhole. "That's what friends are for, right?" With a gentle reminder to get some rest, the young medic disappeared into the night.

As Ella ambled through the forest, hands buried deep in her pockets and shoulders hunched up, a distant sound reached her ears. She stopped and listened. From the German lines, the familiar verses of 'O Christmas Tree' floated across the clearing. Sighing softly, the girl put her head back and looked up into the clear night sky. Stars twinkled down on her. *Must be nice up there,* she thought. *Away from all the pain, the fear, the death.*

Absently, the brunette began singing along with the Germans under her breath, a mere whisper on the winter breeze. The words slid from her lips, tongue not even noticing the different language, switching effortlessly with the ease of yearlong practice.

With the song, homesickness came. Wrapping her arms tighter around her shivering frame, Ella spoke quietly: "Hey Mama, fröhlichi Wianachta. I hoff, es got dr guat. I ha di liab." The stars didn't answer, but she found their light slightly comforting.

Footsteps approached. "Hello, Ella."

The small girl tore her gaze away from the sky to glance at her former CO. "Hello sir", she greeted.

After a beat, she looked at him again, a genial smile on her face. "Merry Christmas, sir."

Captain Winters returned the smile. "Merry Christmas, Ella."

He came to stand next to her.

"You're shaking", he noted.

Her eyes flickered over to him for a moment, glittering. "So are you, sir." She looked up. "Clear nights are always colder", she added quietly.

It was indeed brutally cold, more so than the previous nights. Each breath was like a mouthful of needles travelling down her throat. She had asked the NCOs to ensure that at least 3 people shared a foxhole. She didn't want to find any more men frozen to death the next morning.

Over on the enemy line, the singing picked up again, the tune changing to 'Silent Night'. Ella fell
"Where did you learn German?", Winters asked softly after listening to her a while. He already knew she was at least bilingual, some foreign words sometimes sneaking into her speech, but he hadn't heard her speak German before.

"Oh, my Mama taught me. It's my second- no hang on...my third? Ach, never mind, it's one of my mother tongues", she answered, a touch of pride underneath her normal nonchalance.

"How many languages do you speak at home then?", he inquired.

The brunette coughed into her sleeve-clad hands. "Pardon me", she said before answering: "Well, growing up, we spoke English with my Papa. My mother switched between English, German, Swiss German and Rumantsch. It was her way of giving us a connection to our roots, to her side of the family." A gentle smile appeared on her lips. "Mama is Swiss, you know. They have four national languages there and she said almost each part of the country speaks a different dialect."

The captain was impressed, and intrigued. He smiled at her enthusiasm. "That sounds confusing. Do the people even understand each other?"

Ella nodded her head vigorously. "Oh yes, sir, most of the time. Where my Mama grew up, they spoke Rumantsch and Swiss German. And everything written – or almost everything – was in German."

He frowned. "So, the people in Switzerland have an own version of German?"

"Uhm... yes, those dialects. But in school, they all have to learn the German that's spoken in Germany, but it's not the same German, because some words are different." She broke off and frowned as well. "You're right. It is confusing."

Especially for someone who was suffering from sleep deprivation, exhaustion and the onset of hypothermia. Her puzzled look made the redheaded officer chuckle again.

"You should get some rest, Ella", Winters spoke after a period of silence, taking a good look at the ranking medic. The dark rings under her eyes had the colour of coal while her tan had given way to a pallor that rivalled the whiteness of the snow below their feet. She was shaking visibly and he could hear her teeth chattering.

Knowing full well that it wasn't a mere suggestion, the girl gave in. "Yes sir", she said, "I'll just finish my rounds."

He nodded his approval and watched her go.

When the artillery hit, Ella had just been on her way to check on Gene. She heard somebody
scream in pain, while another voice roared for a medic. *They can't even give us a break for Christmas*, she cursed as she tore off through the snow.

The flashes of the explosions, along with the shrapnel and splinters that flew everywhere, left her disoriented. Panic seized her as the small medic found herself at a total loss as to where she was. But she didn't stop. She kept running, relying completely on her sense of hearing and ignoring the burning in her lungs and throat.

"Medic! Doc!"

With a jolt, the young girl recognised the voice as Captain Winters'. *Keep shouting*, she pleaded in her mind, *keep shouting*. After a few more seconds, she managed to localise the direction from where the yells and howls of the wounded came.

A tree close behind her took a direct hit, the treetop bursting into millions of deadly pieces. The force of the concussion knocked her forward, making her stumble. Ash and dirt rained from the sky, mixing with the snowflakes. Getting her feet under her, Ella kept running, irrespective of the forest exploding all around her.

When the brunette reached the source of the calls, Gene was already there. But he wasn't his normal flurry of motions. He stood stock-still, no doubt staring blankly at the wounded man writhing and moaning on the ground.

"Gene, bouge!", she called as she rushed past him, battered kneepads hitting the ground with a dull thud. A glance revealed that her patient was Lieutenant Welsh.

"Roe", Winters spoke to the frozen Cajun, trying to pull him from his zone.

The medic blinked slowly, his gaze coming up to meet the Captain's.

Ella pushed the scarf acting as a make-shift bandage out of the way to get a good look at the wound. "Alright, Lieutenant, take it easy", she said, registering how the man relaxed slightly in response to her voice.

A rustle of clothes followed by a body appearing in her field of vision told her that Gene had broken out of his trance. The two officers shifted, giving the medics room to work while they took over the task of calming down their comrade. Peacock was just sitting there, looking completely helpless.

Gene was moving to apply the tourniquet while Ella pulled a bandage out of her satchel, her blood-stained hands leaving red prints on the package. She looked at Welsh's face, his screams having turned to groans and gasps. He was shaking.

"Shock", she informed her friend under her breath as she wiped away the blood on the patient's thigh to see the actual injury before applying pressure to the grim wound with both hands.

"We're out of morphine", Gene murmured back, ripping open a packet of sulfa with his teeth.

Turning to Harry, whose complexion was more grey than white, the ranking medic smiled
comfortingly. "I know you're in pain, but we're out of morphine", she spoke gently. His eyes widened in horror and she quickly continued: "But there's something else I can give you. It's a new drug, only just introduced. We got it with the supply drop and it's even stronger than morphine."

From the corner of her eye, Ella saw Gene's head snap up for a second before he took over applying pressure and tying the bandage, leaving her with both hands free.

"Just give me something", Welsh ground out through clenched teeth, chest heaving with pained gasps.

She nodded and reached into her bag. She fished out a syringe filled with a clear liquid, flicking it to get rid of the small air bubble. Pushing up his left sleeve, the girl expertly stuck the needle into his upper arm and injected the substance. "There. Don't worry, in two minutes, you won't feel a thing", she promised with a smile. "And in five, you'll be fast asleep."

"Elevate his head", Gene instructed Lt Peacock as they prepared to lift him.

Having been completely focused on her patient, Ella hadn't noticed that the shelling had stopped or that the jeep had arrived. Rising to her feet, she followed the officers to the jeep, getting in and helping transfer Welsh onto the gurney. She caught Captain Winters by the elbow. "Sir..."

Knowing he would follow her gaze, she let her eyes flicker to Gene, who was still kneeling on the ground.

The Battalion XO nodded and strode back to the Cajun. He spoke quietly to him. Gene got up and jogged over to the jeep, hopping in beside her.

"Let's go!", Ella called to the driver, who didn't need to be told twice.

True to her words, Welsh fell asleep even before they got out of the forest. When they finally reached the open road, the medics' hearts nearly stopped. The sky was alight with flak and tracer ammunition, dying planes and burning structures. The Luftwaffe was bombing Bastogne.

Nevertheless, they drove into town, hoping, praying that the hospital was still standing.

Ella and Gene threw themselves over their patient, protecting him with their own bodies as buildings blew up on either side of the street, showering them in dust, embers and debris. The whistling of the incoming bombs was near-constant and there were corresponding explosions all over.

The jeep came to a halt and they jumped out, squinting through the haze. The eerie light of the fires cast ever-changing shadows over ruins and half-collapsed walls. The smoke cleared a little and revealed a huge pile of rubble behind the archway of the chapel.

Sharing a distressed look, the two medics rushed forward.

"Stay out of there! Are you nuts?!", a soldier shouted at them as he ran past.
They ignored him, coming to a halt in front of the heaps of broken planks, bricks and mortar.

The ground shook as bomb after bomb hit, tearing apart the small town that surely had been pretty once. The destroyed houses expelled plumes of dust and smoke through paneless windows and gaping doorways. Glass tinkled and jingled as it fell to the ground in thousands of shards.

Gene took a few steps forward and reached into the rubble, pulling out a piece of dirty, blue cloth. She recognised it and a cold, sinking feeling spread in the pit of her stomach. He turned and looked at her with wide, grief-filled eyes.

All she could do was shake her head and put a hand on his shoulder. Were there any words to explain, to comfort? She didn't have them.

"Medic! Get your asses out here! Come on!"

The driver's shout shattered the small sphere of sadness and silence that had engulfed them for a moment and they forced themselves to turn around and leave.

"We gotta get outta here!", the driver called over another explosion.

Ella nodded. "Get us to the next aid station, this man needs a surgeon!", she ordered.

He didn't need any more incentive, turning the jeep around and barrelling back the way they had come. Fascinatingly enough, Welsh was still out cold, completely oblivious of the world burning around them.

Gene was silent, eyes fixed on the headscarf clutched in his hands.

On the drive to the next aid station a few miles out, Ella couldn't suppress the coughing fit any longer. One hand bracing her against the cold metal of the folded down windscreen, her body shuddered and flinched as her lungs attempted to explore the outside world.

Short, wheezing gasps interrupted the convulsions of her diaphragm, dragging in a meagre amount of air. Her entire upper body screamed with pain, the not entirely healed bruises on her ribs making their presence known. Each cough tore at her throat and made her stomach hurt.

Black spots began to pop up in her vision field. No no no no no, I can't pass out now!

With trembling hands, she fumbled for her canteen while forcing herself to take slow, deliberate breaths. It made her head pound like it was about to explode and her lungs felt ready to burst at the seams, but it stopped the coughing long enough for her to gulp down a few mouthfuls of icy, stale water. Swallowing, the cough was already a little better and soon died down, leaving her drained and out of breath.

A warm arm wrapped itself around her shoulders. She didn't have to open her eyes – she couldn't remember when she'd closed them in the first place – to know who it was.

"You're getting worse, Ellie", Gene said, worry reverberating in his voice.

"Breathing in dust and smoke didn't help", the young medic answered hoarsely. "Hot food would, though."
She felt him nod. "Captain Winters told me to get ourselves some." He shifted, leaning forward, then sat back again. "Lieutenant Welsh is still out. What the hell did ya give him, Ellie? Cause there ain't been any new drugs in that drop", he stated, sounding somewhere between curious and puzzled.

The brunette opened her mouth, but was saved from answering as they reached the aid station. Two corpsmen came rushing over and took the stretcher, the two medics quickly following them inside.

"Caught in an artillery blast, shrapnel wound to the thigh", Ella informed the surgeon who immediately set to work examining the lieutenant. "No morphine", Gene added.

He froze and stared at the pair. "No morphine?!", he sputtered. "How is that possible, this man's solidly knocked out!"

Easy's ranking medic awkwardly cleared her throat and produced an empty syringe from her satchel.

The surgeon looked back and forth between her, the syringe in her hand and the patient. Then, realisation spread on his face, rapidly overshadowed by denial. "No."

She nodded. "Yes. I had no choice, we're completely out of syrettes and he was already going into shock."

Heaving a huge sigh, the doctor scrubbed a hand down his face. "Well, in that case, the lieutenant can be glad to have such quick-thinking medics", he said. "There's no way he would have survived otherwise." He called over some nurses and corpsmen, telling them to get the patient ready for surgery. "And somebody get these two something to drink and a hot meal", he finished.

The two medics were lead over to the small mess hall. "I'll have something ready for you in a minute", the cook promised after taking one glance at them and shoving two steaming mugs of tea into their hands. "You just go ahead and sit down."

Gratefully, Ella and Gene plopped down on a couple of old chairs, tugging off their helmets and running blood-crusted hands through their hair. Gene rubbed his eyes and blinked blearily. According to her watch – which surprisingly enough still worked – it was just past 0300. No wonder they were both ready to fall asleep right where they sat.

The girl took a sip of her tea and very nearly began to cry. The hot beverage soothed her raw throat and started warming her stomach. For the first time in almost a week, she was experiencing at least some semblance of warmth. Sure, she was still wearing nothing but a few layers of summer ODs, a stolen jacket and a pair of scuffed boots, but her limbs no longer felt stiff as icicles and there was no wind or snow crawling under her uniform, biting at her skin.

"There you go, guys." The cook placed two bowls in front of them. "There's more where that came from. Just holler if you need something."

They thanked the kind man and he bustled back to the kitchen. They grabbed their spoons and started eating. Each mouthful of the warm stew was chewed slowly, carefully, almost reverently.
All too soon, the bowls were empty. Ella closed her eyes and rested her head on her arms, tangled locks tumbling forward.

Gene yawned and was about to follow his young friend's example, when it occurred to him that he was still waiting for an answer. "What was in that syringe, Ellie?", he repeated his earlier question.

Her head lifted and she sighed tiredly. "Saline."

He gawked at her like she had just grown another set of arms. "S-saline?", he repeated.

"Simple, ordinary saline", the girl confirmed. "I swiped it the last time we were at the aid station. Figured it would come in handy."

He shook his head in disbelief. "You knew it would work?"

"No. But I hoped it would."

He pulled a face, looking somewhere between incredulous and uncomfortable. "Ellie, you said yourself that it's not good to lie to the patients", he reminded her.

The brunette smiled weakly. "And that still stands. I told him I had something that would take away the pain and make him fall asleep, which it did. The only thing that could be considered a lie was the part about it being a new drug."

"So you gave him a placebo? But how could he sleep through that air raid?" That was still a mystery to the Cajun medic.

"By getting Welsh's mind to expect a pain relief soon, his body reacted and released the necessary chemicals and hormones on its own", she explained. "All I had to do was make him believe that the drug he got worked."

Gene shook his head, this time in amazement. "The power of the mind, huh?", he said, the first real smile in almost a week tugging at his lips.

Ella gave him her best lopsided smile. "That's right."

They stayed for another cup of tea, then they had to get back to Easy. Their driver had already been called away again, but fortunately, another jeep was headed in the right direction. They hitched a ride and returned to the line just after dawn had risen.

Gene went to do rounds, but not after sternly admonishing the small girl to get some sleep. "And not in an empty foxhole!", he added, fixing her with his own signature look.

She raised an eyebrow at him, a good-natured grin on her face and gave him a shove. "Get outta here", she said, chuckling.

The smile on her face broadened a little when she walked past Captain Nixon, who was dressing down a rather befuddled looking Lt Dike. She couldn't help but snicker a little. Reaching Captain
Winters' hole, she crouched down at the edge.

He looked up at her with an inquisitive expression. "Everything all right, Ella?"

She shrugged. "Jury's out on that one, sir", she replied. "The aid station in Bastogne is gone, destroyed in the bombings last night, so we had to take a detour. But Lieutenant Welsh should be fine, sir."

He nodded. "All right." His eyes flickered into the direction Gene had disappeared in. "I see Roe's feeling better."

Ella pushed her helmet back a little and rubbed her hands together in an effort to warm them. "Yes sir, he does. I guess a hot meal and a few moments of peace were all he needed."

Her brilliant grin said it all for the Battalion XO. He knew that the small girl had been exceedingly worried about her friend and colleague and if his own relief was anything to go on, a huge weight had dropped from her shoulders when the Cajun's mind and soul had settled again, the inner turmoil coming to rest.

A huge yawn overcame the youngest medic and she hastily slapped a hand over her mouth. "Pardon me, sir", she apologised, a light blush colouring her cheeks that had nothing to do with the freezing cold.

Winters chuckled. "It's all right, Ella. Maybe you should get some sleep."

She nodded and got up. "Yes sir. I'll find myself a foxhole that is not empty. Wouldn't want Gene to get angry with me", she added, tongue-in-cheek, before waving and strolling off.

Ella was almost asleep when she reached a suitable foxhole. The rowdy trio, meaning Malarkey, Skip and Penkala, were inside, huddled together under their blankets.

"Hey guys", she whispered, teeth chattering again already.

Penkala was sleeping and he didn't even stir when the other two scooted closer to make room for their small medic.

"Hi Shorty, how's it goin'?", Muck asked cheerfully.

"Eh, same old", the brunette answered, rubbing her eyes.

Malarkey tucked the shivering girl into his side, Skip fussing with the blanket.

"Hey, you want some Lucky Strikes?", Malarkey offered, suddenly remembering the pack he had in his pocket.

"Nuh-uh", she mumbled, curling up and sniffing. "But I'd love a lucky streak." With that, she was asleep, head coming to rest on Skip's shoulder.
Skip grinned. "Boy, sure is funny when she's bushed like this. Filter between her brain and mouth? Poof. Gone. Remember how she told Sobel to put a sock in it, back in basic? I thought he was gonna explode."

Malarkey nodded, laughing quietly. "Yeah, with that stupid medic call response training and night exercises specifically for the medics, they were dead on their feet and that ass was yelling at them for looking tired."

"Gee, the look on his face when Shorty said that. Priceless! He puffed up like those balloons they sell at the fair."

Don smiled as he thought back to that day. "Oh yeah. Best thing is Shorty didn't even notice."

They snickered and spent the next hour reminiscing about some of the funny things they had experienced with their girl, Penkala joining them when he woke up.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Salut: Hi, hello
Bitte los es ufhöra: Please let it stop
Regarde-moi: Look at me
Fröhlichi Wianachta: Merry Christmas
I hoff, es got dr guat: I hope you're well
I ha di liab: I love you (can be used between friends, family, lovers...)
bouge!: move!
"Rescued"

Chapter Summary

Easy gets "rescued" by Patton's Third Army breaking through the lines of the Germans surrounding the paratroopers.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Sorry for the less than regular updates, I just have a ton of stuff on my mind and so I completely forgot about this website's existence... And my bachelor thesis isn't writing itself either - I know, rude, right? - so I'm trying to get things organised there, too.
Well, despite my lack of a clear posting schedule, I hope you like the story and I appreciate each and every read :) Let's see what the next chapter has in store for Ella and the boys, shall we?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Christmas Day came and went just like the days before. They cleared small sections of the forest, they patrolled, they got shot at. In the meantime, they slept and ate and tried to keep warm. Since the supply drop, they actually had ammunition to fire back at the Germans, which was a big relief.

For the medics, though, the conditions hadn't changed all that much. They still had no morphine or penicillin and the men around them were falling ill by the dozen, coughing and sniffling. They had to send man after man to the aid station to get treatment for trench foot and other ailments common for their situation.

Ella rubbed her forehead and stifled a sigh, eyes roaming the monotonous scenery. The lukewarm mug in her hands was untouched and had since gone cold. After a week of dealing with a persistent and deep-sitting cough that had nearly made her pass out on several occasions, she wasn't too sure anymore that she could fight off the approaching illness long enough. *I can't get sick, I can't do that to Gene and Spina.* She kept repeating that thought in her mind like a mantra.

The three medics were burning the candle at both ends, the ranking medic even more. When she wasn't out with a patrol or racing around answering cries for medics during the latest attack from the Germans, the young girl was constantly walking between the foxholes, shooting the breeze with the boys, trying to hold the company together and keep morale up.

In addition to that, she did rounds at least three times a day to check on the men's health, physically *and* mentally speaking. She reported to Captain Winters down at the CP every day. She scrounged, begged and stole rations and supplies whenever she had the chance; though to be fair, Luz deserved the biggest part of the credit for that.

And when she wasn't doing any of the above, the brunette was either trying not to freeze to death,
coughing her lungs out, eating or sleeping, in that order. In short, Ella simply didn't have time to be sick.

"You okay, Shorty?"

The brunette raised her head to meet Bull's concerned gaze. "Hey Bull", she greeted him with a sincere smile. "Sure, you know how it is: A little hard to sleep when the neighbours are so noisy."

He studied her sceptically for a moment. When she remained unaffected, smile never wavering, he nodded. "Yeah." He sat down next to her and pointed at her food. "Not hungry?"

She shook her head and offered it to him. Food was still pretty scarce, so Bull took it gratefully.

They sat in silence for a while; the tall man eating, the small girl staring out into the woods, deep in thought.

Suddenly, Ella snorted and a big grin spread on her face.

Bull frowned. "What is it?"

She giggled, obviously trying to contain herself. "Just a silly thought. I just wondered if the Germans would settle for a snowman-making contest. Best snowman wins the war. And now I can't get the picture out of my head." Another series of giggles slipped from her lips before she started chuckling in earnest, hand clamped firmly over her mouth to muffle the laughter bubbling up from her chest.

Bull began laughing as well. He shook his head in fond amusement and clapped the young medic on the shoulder. "Only you, kiddo."

Johnny spotted them after he had grabbed his portion of the daily slop. "What are you two laughing about?", he asked as he plopped down next to them.

Ella was still too busy trying not to burst into a full-blown laughing fit to answer. By now, her eyes had started welling up with tears of hilarity and her entire frame was quivering from suppressed laughter. She didn't even attempt to speak, just waved vaguely at Bull.

The Arkansas native managed to compose himself enough to explain what they found so funny.

Johnny raised an eyebrow, fixing them both with his exasperated, bitchy 'I am so done with you' – look. But faced with their girl's contagious happiness, it didn't take long for him to crack up, too.

Hearing her friends laugh made Ella relax slightly. There was preciously little to laugh about in this forest, after all. She fought to make the boys smile, to keep the depressing thoughts and emotions at bay.

They sat together, talking about nothing in particular, just enjoying the peace and quiet while it lasted.
"You got a foxhole buddy?", Johnny asked when they got to their feet and headed back towards their holes. He knew that she hadn't slept last night, too busy soothing frayed nerves and calming anxious replacements.

The young girl shook her head. "Not yet. I gotta check in with Gene and Spina first, see who's up."

He nodded. "Alright. There's a space with your name on it in our foxhole, if you want."

She smiled. "Thanks, Johnny. I'll keep it in mind." Then she glanced over at Bull. "You're out on the OP, aren't you?"

"Yeah", the tall man answered. "noon shift with Tab and Liebgott."

Ella stored that information for later and gave an acknowledging hum. "Stay warm guys", she reminded them as they split up.

While Bull responded with a genial "Sure, kid", Johnny rolled his eyes at her and grumbled something under his breath.

The small medic countered it with a cheerful grin, not in the least bothered.

Reaching her fellow medics' foxhole, she found Spina fast asleep. Gene was writing a letter.

"Hey Ellie", he greeted her.

"Hi, Gene", she responded, taking a knee at the lip of the hole. "Listen, I need to sleep a little, so would you mind doing rounds this morning?"

Predictably, he frowned and set his half-finished letter aside. "Are you alright, chérie?" He studied her worriedly before reaching up to feel her forehead. This was the first time the young girl actually asked one of them to take over her shift. Normally, she would either just tell them when she wanted them to do something or they would be the ones to speak up.

Ella sighed and rubbed her eyes. "I'm fine, Gene. I just haven't gotten around to sleeping in nearly two days."

His jaw dropped. "T-two days?", he sputtered. "Jesus Christ!" Receiving a warning look from her, the Cajun quickly lowered his voice again, "Both of us got a couple hours each day!", he hissed, pointing at Spina and himself.

"I know", she said wearily. "As ranking medic, it's my responsibility to ensure you get the rest you need."

Gene stared at her, somewhere between stumped and concerned. "And what about you, Ellie? You have to rest, too."

"And normally I do, you know that. But with how crazy things have been, I just didn't get a chance."

Pushing a hand through his hair, Gene shook his head. "Dammit", he muttered before assuring her:
"Don't worry, Ellie, we got you covered. Get some sleep."

Grateful, the brunette smiled at him. "Thank you, Gene. Call if you need me." When he made a face that told her exactly what he was thinking, she added: "Please. I don't want to, but I'll make that an order if I have to."

Gene gave her a dark look, clearly unhappy with it, but it quickly disappeared as he realised that any protest would be futile. They were only three people and taking care of an entire company – no matter how depleted its ranks – was a full-time job. Staying in their foxhole during an emergency because it wasn't 'their shift' was unthinkable.

"Alright, Ellie", he agreed.

She smiled, squeezed his shoulder and left, heading for the foxholes of 1st Platoon to take Johnny up on his offer.

General Patton and his Third Army broke through the German lines in the afternoon. According to them, they had come to rescue the surrounded paratroopers. When Ella heard that from a scowling Johnny Martin, she burst out laughing. Rescued! They didn't need rescuing, they weren't some damsels in distress. All they needed were decent supplies!

To her misfortune, laughing was just about the worst thing to do apart from running or shouting when it came to triggering a cough attack. Within the blink of an eye, she was choking and wheezing, small face scrunched up in pain as her whole upper body rebelled against the spasms.

Johnny caught her before she could topple over while Lipton, who happened to be nearby, grabbed his canteen, his other hand reaching out to rub the girl's back in an attempt to soothe her.

"Gah", the young medic made as the fit ebbed, "this is starting to get annoying." She gave Lip a grateful smile as he handed her his canteen. "Thanks, Sarge." Her voice sounded rough, even after she had swallowed a few mouthfuls of water. "But it always gets worse before it gets better."

Johnny's eyebrows rose, nearly meeting his hairline. "Yeah?"

She looked at him, an infuriatingly chipper grin on her lips. "Gee, one might think you don't trust me, Johnny", she teased, eyes sparkling with humour.

He rolled his eyes at her. "Shut up, Shorty", he grumbled good-naturedly, making her and Lipton chuckle.

As it turned out, the Third Army guys had remembered to pack ammo and winter clothes before they had embarked on their 'rescue mission'. Finally, Easy was outfitted with proper greatcoats, overshoes and lined clothing. They were resupplied with munitions and food. But unfortunately, medical supplies had been at the bottom of the priority list.

It was no surprise that the three medics weren't best pleased with being told that.
When their ranking medic walked past their foxholes with purposeful strides, jaw set in grim determination, the boys shared gleeful looks and snickered, knowing that somebody was going to get an earful.

True to her nature, Ella didn't raise her voice at all while chewing out the man in charge of supplies. She didn't have to. The carefully controlled ire behind her words, coupled with her Look was all that was needed to make beads of sweat gather on Corporal Newman's forehead.

He feebly offered to contact the supply depot which seemed to appease the brunette medic a bit.

"Tell them to come with penicillin and morphine or not come at all", she said sharply. "Whose idea was it to declare medical equipment 'non-priority' anyway?"

"Uh..." Swallowing hard, Newman gave her the name. "He's at your CP now, Ma'am, if you want to speak to him", he added, looking as if he was seriously afraid she would bite his head off.

Her features softened and a rueful smile blossomed on her face as she reigned in her ire.

The corporal caught himself staring at her. How could one person go from authoritative and almost scary to sweet and friendly just like that?

"I'm sorry, Corporal, that was rude of me. It's not your fault when the higher-ups make a decision", she apologised, her tone no longer filled with icicles. Now, her voice was gentle, with a pleasant melody.

"Uhm... it's alright, Ma'am", Newman assured shyly. "It must be pretty tough for you medics to take care of a company when you have no supplies."

The girl's smile widened and her eyes warmed up even more. "It is, yeah. But we managed. Now, I'll go and have a word with Lieutenant Carrows. Thanks for your help, Newman." She grinned and walked away. He could only nod, thoroughly confused.

Ella trudged towards the CP. Arms wrapped tightly around herself as she had started shivering again, she had to stop once to endure another cough attack that sent her to her knees. Sniffling and wiping a few stray tears from her cheeks, the small medic muttered a curse before righting herself.

She brushed the snow off her ODs and pulled up her scarf, then continued her trek through the snow. She had a stingy supply officer to talk to.

The officers looked up when light footsteps crunched in the distance, instantly on alert. Squinting, Captain Nixon was the first one to make out the slight frame of Easy's girl. "It's Shorty", he announced and the men relaxed again.

"Who?", Lt Carrows questioned.

"Sergeant Ella Sawyer, Easy company's ranking medic", Nixon clarified.

"Sorry to interrupt, sirs", the brunette apologised as soon as she had reached them. "But I have an urgent matter to discuss with Lieutenant Carrows."
Captain Winters frowned. "What is it, Ella?" Was something wrong with the men? Had something happened?

She looked at him. "Sir, it's about the well-being of the company." There were lines of tension around her mouth and a hard edge in her voice. Her eyes were steely when they flickered over to Lt Carrows.

"I don't see how that concerns me", the man said.

When the small medic turned and fixed the lieutenant with a smile, the former officers of Easy traded meaningful glances. They knew that smile. It was sharp as a razor and meant only one thing: Their girl was not happy.

A couple of minutes later, Ella left the CP, feeling rather content with herself. Lieutenant Carrows had collapsed like a house of cards under the combined force of Captains Winters and Nixon's glares and her own infamous Look. He had hastily promised to get medical supplies delivered as soon as possible and apologised profusely for his mistake. Now, the young medic was on her way to tell her colleagues the good news.

"We're getting a shipment of meds by the day after tomorrow", she announced, plopping herself down at the edge of their foxhole.

Spina blinked at her. "H-how d'ya manage that?", he blurted. "When I went to pick up the supplies, they told me that was all we would get."

She smiled deviously, eyes alight with mischief. "What can I say? I can be quite convincing."

Gene chuckled. "Which means she stared down whoever decided to cross medical supplies from the priority list with her Look", he explained.

Luz popped up beside them, grinning all over his face. "Did he piss himself?", he asked excitedly.

"Probably", Toye chimed in.

"Definitely", Muck corrected, beaming wickedly.

Suddenly, the medics' foxhole was surrounded by a gaggle of very eager looking men who all urged her to tell them what happened.

The brunette shook her head, chuckling. "You guys are a bunch of hyenas", she said.

Luz shrugged, completely unconcerned. "C'mon, spill!" He nudged her with his elbow.

Rolling her eyes, the brunette recounted what had transpired at the CP. The boys cheered and laughed, clapping her on the back and ruffling her hair. "Damn, Shorty", Malarkey said, "what would we do without you?"
She blushed and found a sudden interest in her scuffed boots. "Ah, you'd be fine."

Protest rose all around, the men fiercely proclaiming how, without their favourite female medic, they would be doomed. When it became too much, the girl raised her hands and called: "Alright, alright, that's more than enough flattery, please!"

Slowly, their small group dispersed as the guys went to perform their numerous and varied duties. Ella did her rounds and checked in on the OP.

Walking back, she was accompanied by Shifty, who had just finished his watch. It didn't escape the young medic's notice that the shy Virginian always stood upwind, shielding her from the icy breeze that had picked up a while ago. She didn't call him out on it, though.

"Say, Shorty, don't you have your winter kit yet?", he inquired, eyeing her thin summer ODs.

"Yeah, I have but I haven't gotten around to changing", she answered, rubbing her hands together. "I'm not too keen on taking off any of my layers."

The sharpshooter chuckled. "Well, you could always just put them on over your other clothes", he pointed out with a thoughtful expression, "with your size, they should easily fit."

"Huh", the girl made, "Now that you mention it? Sounds like a good idea." She smiled at him. "Thanks, Shifty."

He blushed a little and mumbled: "You'd have thought of it sooner or later."

She shrugged and gave him a bright grin. "Maybe, but now I don't have to think of it 'cause you already did."

He smiled.

The next day, while they were sitting around eating lunch, Vest came by. Ella had to do a double take because she just couldn't believe it. After spending a week cut off from the rest of the world, stuck in these woods fending off the enemy, mail call seemed like a dream to them.

When the call for "Sergeant Sawyer, J.V." came, it took her a moment to snap out of her surprised daze and respond. She laughed and rolled her eyes at the various joking and teasing comments from her friends, who still hadn't given up on uncovering the secret behind her initials.

"Letter from your Mama?", Buck asked, glancing up from his own letters.

The young medic nodded, prying open the crinkled envelope. "Yeah." She unfolded the paper and began to read.

*My charina Ella*

*You can imagine my reaction when Larry showed me the newspaper during our break and I read*
which units are part of the siege in the Ardennes. I actually dropped my coffee and Elizabeth later said she’d thought I had a heart attack. Which isn't too far from the truth, but what can I say? I think any mother would feel that way if they had to find out from a news report that her only daughter's unit is stranded in Belgium, surrounded by the enemy.

Despite the siege, I hope you are well – or at least as well as you can be under the circumstances. The last few weeks have been quite turbulent here at home. Work is extremely busy, especially because we are short-staffed at the moment: Everybody is sick with the flu. Grace came into work last week, alv sco ina crida. Our boss, head nurse Marlene Brown, sent her home immediately and told her to come back only when she was completely healthy again.

Fortunately, I haven't fallen ill. James, however, caught the bug a couple of weeks ago and was bedridden for a few days. Segner char, one might think he was moribund, the way he acted. We both know that men get a lot sicker than us women, charina, but it was pretty ridiculous. He wanted me to stay at home and care for him around the clock, bring him tea and keep him company. He nearly pouted when I told him I had to work.

You mentioned in your last letter that I have been speaking about James differently than before. It is true. We have both settled into a routine and I guess I have taken off the rose-tinted spectacles. We have discussed the issues and smoothed out certain difficulties, but I have to admit, I sometimes have doubts about marrying him. It saddens and also worries me, because James is the same smart, funny and caring man I fell in love with. Still, something has changed and I don't know whether it is me or him.

Anyways, I won’t bother you with my sorrows, mia figlia. I’m sure you have plenty of things to worry about. How are you and your friends? I trust they are looking after you just like you are taking care of them? If the weather is in any way the same as it is here, I hope that you have enough warm clothes and food...

We celebrated Mary's birthday a few days ago. Pat and I spent an entire day baking cakes and pies, and we had so much fun! The party was quite lively and as it got later, everybody started dancing. Oh, it was marvellous, charina! My friends showered me with praise for my dancing, it was almost embarrassing. It's been a while and I was afraid I had gotten rusty, but that was not the case. As it turns out, Carlo is also quite the dancer. We enjoyed ourselves immensely on the dance floor! His wife Loretta had no objections at all, she even said it was a pleasure to see Carlo so happy. Not that she's a not a good dancer herself, mind you.

Knowing how slow the Army is when it comes to delivering mail, I estimate that Christmas will already be over by the time this letter reaches you, maybe it's already the new year. In that case: Bellas festas da Nadal ed in bun onn nov, mia charina figlia. I love you very much and I am so proud of you.

Take care of yourself, Ella.

Your Mama

Isabel

Ella tucked the letter into her pocket. She missed her mother terribly, but it was always good to hear from her. The thought of her Mama dancing made her smile. It was her Mama's passion, one that she had shared with her children early on.
Ella and Nico's Papa, Thomas, had been a professional dancer and on rainy weekends, they often turned the living room into a ball room. Even after Thomas had been taken from them, the small family kept the tradition alive and Sunday evenings in the Sawyer-Tomaschett household were still reserved for dancing.

In the afternoon, the brunette was curled up in a foxhole, snuggled into Toye's side. She had fallen asleep almost instantly upon sitting down, eyelids fluttering closed on their own accord. Joe wrapped the blanket around the two of them, carefully manoeuvring his small friend into a more comfortable position.

He knew just as well as the rest of the guys how little sleep the medics got. The dark circles under their eyes got darker and thicker with each passing day. They were running themselves into the ground taking care of the company, so the least they could do was make sure that they actually got some rest.

When Ella coughed herself awake, Joe tightened his hold on her. The barking quality worried him, it was a sound that he was sure healthy lungs didn't produce. She was struggling to breathe as her entire body shook from the spasms. Her small face scrunched up and tears trickled from the corners of her eyes. His left hand moved up and began to stroke her tousled hair in an effort to soothe her.

Releasing a sigh when she finally stopped coughing, Toye pulled his canteen from his belt and handing it to the young medic. She rasped out a thank you and took a few sips, her eyes already starting to close again. Toye adjusted his grip on her and kept running his hand through her locks. The calming touch quickly lulled the girl back to sleep and he slowly relaxed again, following his little friend into the Land of Nod.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

chérie: sweetheart, darling
charina: darling
alv sco ina crida: white as a sheet (literally: white like a piece of chalk)
segner char: Good Lord
moribund: at Death's door, deathly ill
mia figlia: my daughter
Bellas festas da Nadal ed in bun onn nov: Merry Christmas and a happy New Year
Casualties

Chapter Summary

Even with supplies, Easy's situation doesn't improve much.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

New Year's Eve came and went. They were still in the Ardennes, holding the line. With a batch of replacements coming in, the company had undergone a reshuffle, squads and platoons being reorganised. They cleared the forest slowly, sector by sector, while still getting shelled and shot at on a daily basis. They had food, ammo and winter clothes, but the weather was still cold and miserable. The medics had received their supplies and could finally give penicillin to those who showed first signs of pneumonia or bacterial infections.

Ella was still coughing. It sounded awful and her voice had become slightly rough from it. But while the cough didn't get better, it didn't get worse either. She hid the true extent of her illness from the boys, not letting on how much pain the coughing fits really caused her. She worked tirelessly to keep morale up. She chatted with the guys, joking around and telling stories. The men's spirits were lifted by the sunny smiles and warm hugs that she gave so readily. Her friends returned the favour as best they could; sharing a foxhole with her, steadying her when she coughed, keeping her warm and reminding her to eat and rest.

The number of casualties climbed constantly, but many wounded found their way back to the company within few days.

On New Year's Eve, Joe Toye got pinged in the arm. The medics could hear him cussing and griping from a mile away and shared a relieved look. When a man was cursing a blue streak like that, it usually wasn't too serious.

Ella let him grouse while she tended to his injury, chuckling at the sour look he shot her.

Guarnere materialised out of thin air to reassure himself that his friend was alright. He ended up staying and egging him on even more. The friendly banter between the three of them became a source of amusement for the rest of the men. Bill patted Toye on the good shoulder. "Don't worry, Joe, we'll keep an eye on our girl here."

Toye pinned the young medic with one of his dark glares and grumbled: "You'd better not do anything stupid, Shorty, while I ain't here to keep your tiny ass outta trouble." The message beneath the threat was clear enough to anybody who knew what to listen for.

She smiled, retorting: "You'll be back before we know it anyways."

"Damn right I will be", he affirmed.

He protested going to the aid station of course, but it was purely for the sake of form. Even though he could be one of the most obstinate guys in the entire company, he didn't stand a chance against
the small girl's Look, or worse, her innocent puppy dog eyes.

On January 2, the brass once again wanted Easy to help push back the Germans in the Bulge. They had been overlooking the town of Foy for a while now, clearing the forest to all sides of the village. They all knew that this was all in preparation for the actual assault on Foy.

Ella had joined the NCOs in their meeting and listened while the squad and platoon leaders discussed which tactics to use. This kind of information helped the medics immensely. They could reduce response times by strategically choosing their positions, which was a lot easier when they knew approximately where the men would be and how they would move.

On the one-thousand-yard attack, they were met with only sporadic enemy machine gun fire, no infantry. They suffered two casualties. The ranking medic was in two minds about the lack of resistance. On one side, she was relieved. On the other, she was nervous. After all these months in battle, the brunette had learned that if something looked or felt too good to be true, it often was.

It was snowing again and the fog had crept back in. Even with greatcoats and overshoes, scarves and gloves, it was freezing cold. Since Patton and his Third Army had broken through the German lines, there were enough blankets to go around, but the woollen cloth wasn't thick enough to completely hold off the chilly wind. As the smallest and skinniest of the company, Ella was fighting a constant battle against hypothermia. When she was on the move - doing rounds, digging foxholes - it wasn't so bad, she sometimes even worked up a sweat. But as soon as she stopped moving, the cold seeped under her clothes, having her shivering violently in a matter of minutes.

The young girl had just sent off the two wounded to the aid station when Hoobler came bounding over to her, Hashey and Christenson in tow.

"Guess what, Shorty!", Don cried, beaming with excitement.

She sent Christenson an inquisitive look. When he just shrugged, she decided to play along. "What?", she asked, watching bemusedly as his face lit up even more.

He pulled out something from his belt and held it out. "I got myself a Luger!", he proudly announced, showing her the gun.

The brunette smiled. Hoobler had wanted one ever since before D-Day. Frankly, she didn't understand what was so special about those guns, apart from the fact that they were the enemy's standard-issue officer's sidearm.

"That's great, Hoob", she said. "Where'd you get it?"

He immediately launched into the tale of the encounter they'd had with the Kraut officer on horseback. The ranking medic listened patiently, amusement glittering in her eyes. She had no doubt that Don was going to go from one foxhole to the next and show off his prize, telling everyone how he got it, if they wanted to or not.
Hoobler had a spring in his step as he left with Hashey to find Bull, his former squad leader. Ella watched them go, then glanced over to Christenson. They shared a meaningful look and shook their heads, laughing quietly.

"First, he doesn't shut up about getting a Luger, now he won't quit jabbering about having one", Christenson sighed as they started walking the line together.

She snickered. "You'll survive", she said, patting his arm in mock consolation.

"Yeah, I'm just glad I don't have to share a foxhole with him."

They split up at Christenson's hole. The small medic kept walking and soon came across Shifty and Lipton digging a foxhole. She saw Malarkey and Buck approaching from the other side.

"Hey Lip, you got a sec? Shorty, you too?", the lieutenant asked.

Ella moved over to him, an inquisitive and slightly worried expression settling on her face.

"Yes", the First Sergeant groaned, before correcting himself: "Yes sir."

Digging in the frozen ground was hard work and he was glad for the break. Climbing out of the hole, he handed his shovel to Malarkey, who had been watching the two diggers idly. "Give 'im a hand!", he asked, order disguised as a friendly request. Don nodded, took the shovel and jumped into the hole, getting ready to dig while Shifty took a smoking break.

They stepped some little ways off.

"Where's Dike?", Buck wanted to know, an urgent undertone in his voice.

Ella shrugged, having become rather indifferent to the continuous absence of their CO.

"He's, ah..." Lip hesitated, not one to fault others, especially officers. "He's around", is what he offered eventually.

Buck looked amused when he asked: "Could you be a little more specific there, Sergeant?"

"Not really, sir", Lipton admitted.

The lieutenant muttered an oath and continued: "I haven't seen him all day. I didn't see him when we were coming through the woods and I have to figure out how we ended up."

"Two wounded", the First Sergeant and the ranking medic responded simultaneously, neither surprised that the other knew. It was their job to know, after all.

Stopping, Buck faced them. "Who?", he demanded, a hint of panic flashing in his eyes.

The girl supplied: "Brown and Stevenson."

"God damnit", Buck sighed. "Now where is Dike?", he wondered, voice picking up speed in his frustration, "Where the hell is he? Where does he ever go?"
Malarkey, who had heard every word, chimed in: "I don't know, but I wish he'd stay the hell there."

"It'd be nice if he took Lt Shames with him, too", Shifty added, thinking of the rather unpleasant leader of 3rd Platoon, who felt the need to scream his orders through the entire forest.

Lip sent them a look. "Shut up, boys", he ordered, although he privately agreed.

"Shutting up, Sarge", Malarkey agreed around his cigarette.

The pop of a gunshot sent them all scrambling into the half-finished foxhole, guns at the ready. Lipton pushed Ella into the middle so they could protect their quasi weapon-less medic. She had one hand fisted tightly around the hilt of her knife. It wouldn't do much good against a bullet, but it gave her a feeling of security.

"What the hell was that?", Buck asked.

"Patrol?", Malarkey suggested.

Lipton disagreed. "Nah, we woulda heard."

"One man, maybe a sniper." Buck's eyes were scanning the treeline, his rifle clenched tightly in his hands.

"That was no rifle", Shifty weighed in. Nobody argued. If there was one man in the company who could distinguish between the sound of a rifle and a pistol, it was Shifty.

"What do you see, Shift?", Lip asked.

Tensely, they waited for the sharpshooter's verdict. The small medic had to resist the urge to jiggle her knee or fiddle with the strap of her satchel, so she settled on biting her bottom lip.

"Nobody out there", Shifty finally declared.

Buck glanced over. "Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"Aw Jeez, it's Hoob!", Hashey's cry rang out, "he's shot!"

Ella was out of the foxhole and running before anybody could stop her. She vaguely heard Hashey explain that Hoobler had shot himself, then Perconte's call for a medic echoed through the forest. She dropped to her knees beside the wounded man. Frank was kneeling in the snow, holding him still.

"What happened?", she asked, trying to see where he'd been hit.
"It's my leg", Hoobler moaned.

The brunette could barely hear it over the cacophony of shouts coming from the soldiers who had come to help, each of them asking the same questions, talking over each other.

Frank pried the Luger from Don's hand and handed it to Lip.

Meanwhile, Ella tossed her scissors aside and reached for her knife to cut through the many layers of cloth that hindered her access to the wound. All the while, she kept up a steady stream of soothing words, trying to calm the situation. "You'll be alright, Hoobs, breathe, everything's gonna be fine."

He hissed and cursed in pain before saying: "I wasn't touching it or nothin'!"

"It's okay, Hoobs, try to relax", the girl replied calmly, prying away the fabric of his trousers. Blood was gushing out of his leg, staining the snow and her hands. Whipping out a wad of gauze, she tried to clean away some of the blood. Oh Maria!

She couldn't even see the wound with the heavy bleeding and her patient's agonised squirming didn't make it any easier.

"Don't look, Hoob", Buck spoke, "It'll be fine, don't look."

He whimpered. "Hurts like a son of a bitch! Think maybe I hit bone."

"Just breathe", the brunette responded gently, "just breathe and I'll have a look, alright?"

Glancing at her helpers, she instructed "Keep him warm" when she felt tremors running through Hoobler's body. Her hands never stopped moving, applying a tourniquet, digging sulfa, forceps and gauze from her satchel.

She wasn't going to explain her order and by the look on Lipton and Buck's faces, she didn't have to. They quickly spurred the enlisted men into motion, shrugging off coats and draping them across Hoobler's torso. They took over reassuring him and keeping him calm, allowing the small medic to focus on stopping the bleeding.

She could see the wound now that she was putting a tourniquet in place, but the blood was still pouring out, soaking into her own trousers where she was kneeling.

"How are we doing, Shorty?", Lipton asked.

Ella didn't take her eyes off the leg as she answered: "I can't see a thing, we have to get him back to an aid station." The faint trace of an accent coloured her voice.

"Alright, let's get ready to move him", Lip addressed the men.

A shudder went through Hoobler as she reached into the wound with thumb and index finger and she mumbled a soft apology. Her fingers felt something inside Hoob's leg and her stomach plummeted, dread pushing against her chest.
She didn't hear Buck calling her name, her mind racing. Then suddenly, the loud, clattering thoughts came to a screeching halt when a terrible realisation slammed into them.

Hoobler had ceased struggling.

She froze.

"Ella", Lip said softly.

The young girl didn't react, too absorbed in what the touch receptors of her fingertips were, or rather weren't, reporting.

"Shorty?", he tried again. Everybody went quiet.

With a shaky sigh of resignation, she sat back on her heels, bloody hands dropping listlessly into her lap. "Scheisse", she murmured, hanging her head.

Buck quietly told Perconte to get a jeep, then went back to staring down into Hoobler's greyish, slack face.

Lipton studied Easy's female medic closely. Her throat bobbed as she swallowed hard and she was shivering visibly again. She wiped her hands on a bit of gauze, then fished a pencil and an EMT tag from one of her pockets. She sniffled quietly, but filled out the tag with her usual efficiency while they waited for the jeep.

Nobody spoke.

Returning from the aid station, Lipton said: "I'll inform Lieutenant Dike."

Buck nodded gratefully, seemingly elsewhere with his thoughts. Perconte was steering a stunned Hashey away, presumably to his foxhole, while Shifty left to finish digging in.

Ella stood quietly, her green eyes dark over pale cheeks. She watched the men around her, taking in each movement, every little detail. Her gaze settled on the First Sergeant; sad, but strong, just like after Julian. "I'll go with you", she spoke, voice soft and warm.

He smiled. He hadn't expected anything else. No matter what, the small girl was there, offering support, consolation, reassurance. Somehow, she always seemed to know what to say, or when to stay silent. She had a sympathetic ear for everybody and the entire company drew strength from her gentle, steady presence. Even now, with all the responsibilities and worries she had and her cough on top of that, the brunette often had a smile on her face and always took the time to exchange a few words and pleasantries with the men. He often wondered how she handled the immense pressure.

They didn't speak much while they hunted for Lieutenant Dike. They didn't have to. After canvassing Easy's position, they extended their search area, straying as far as Dog and Fox's
foxholes. But their elusive company commander was nowhere to be found.

Ella sighed. She could practically see the frustration radiating off her friend in waves. No wonder, they had been searching for over an hour.

"Where the hell is he?", Lipton questioned in a tense voice.

She shrugged. "I don't know, Sarge." A twinkle lit up in her eyes as her usual humour returned. Her lips quirked into a wry half-smile. "Maybe he had urgent need for a bathroom?"

He snorted. While he knew the young medic was just as unhappy with their CO as him, she kept her thoughts to herself and never let anything on in front of the boys. Therefore, he let it slide and responded: "For an hour?"

Her smile deepened and turned devious. "What do I know?"

Her teasing expression morphed into a grimace as she broke into a cough, the force of the hacking causing her to bend over double.

"Whoa", Lip exclaimed, quickly wrapping his arms around her shaking frame to keep her upright. This was the second fit he witnessed up close and despite her assurances, he couldn't help but be concerned. Ella was one of the key players when it came to Easy Company's morale, which would take a plunge should their girl get taken off the line because she was sick.

"I can hear you worrying, you know", the raspy voice cut through his thoughts.

He looked down at the girl, who was in the process of getting her breathing back under control. "Sorry", he said, releasing her from his tight hold, but keeping a hand on her back. Just in case.

Ella chuckled and took a swig from her canteen. "Nah, that's why you're a great First Sergeant. But you do know that I won't go to the aid station because of a cough?"

He sighed. "It does sound pretty bad, Shorty", he pointed out.

She smiled. "I know. But it's always been that way. Mama was beside herself with worry when I first had a cough as a baby. She thought I had pneumonia, at the very least. Turns out, I just had a cold."

Lip gave her a smile, understanding what she meant. "Alright", he acquiesced. "Just...do me a favour? Get some rest?" It was a bit hypocritical, he had to admit, because none of the NCOs really got any sleep, he as First Sergeant least of all. She, as ranking medic, was probably on her feet even more than him.

The brunette grinned innocently. "Sure thing, Sarge. Do me a favour as well?"

He nodded, waiting expectantly.

"Get some, too", she said, her bemused, shrewd gaze telling him that once again, she had somehow known exactly what was on his mind.

He smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. "You got it, Shorty. You go ahead, I'll just check the CP."
She obliged, wishing him luck and changing direction.

Perconte crossed her way when Ella reached the foxholes. "Oh, hi Shorty", he greeted her, still a bit sombre. "Hashey's with Garcia now if you're looking for him."

Hashey had been hit hard by Hoobler's death. They had been in the same squad since Holland and Don had been nice to him and the other replacements from the start.

She nodded. "Okay, thanks, Frank. I'll check on him later. You alright?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. You?"

The girl's lips curled into a tired smile. "Fine."

They continued talking for a moment, then returned to their previous occupations; Perconte brushing his teeth, the small medic making her rounds between the foxholes.

She sat with Hashey for a while when Garcia was out on the OP. They told some light stories of their childhoods before the conversation inevitably turned to the unfortunate, sad incident that had taken their friend's life.

Ella shared a few fond, happy and funny memories of Hoobler with him, eventually coaxing a smile and a couple of chuckles out of the man.

"You know, back when we came to the unit and those idiots were talking shit about you, Hoobler looked us right in the eye and said: 'If I ever hear you speak about Shorty like that, we're gonna have a problem. A big one.'", Hashey said. "We later heard some stories from the replacements in other squads who had gotten the same speech. Made me glad it was Hoob who talked to us."

The young medic chuckled, tucking a strand of matted hair behind her ear. "I bet. Badmouthing another member of the company is frowned upon. If there are legitimate concerns or problems, the NCOs are always ready to help. But if it's just sheer malice, it won't be long before one of the more hot-headed non-coms straightens out the offender."

Hashey nodded. "Yeah. Good thing, too."

She smiled. Good thing, indeed.

When Garcia came back from the OP, Ella got up to continue her rounds. "Get some sleep, boys", she said, climbing out of the foxhole. "And keep warm." With a parting wave, the girl checked her surroundings and disappeared into the fog.

Chapter End Notes
Translations:

Scheisse: shit
Chapter Summary

Dike contributes to the frustration of Easy's members. Ella and Lip gain a deeper understanding of each other during a night sharing a foxhole.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After another long, cold night, the brunette found herself sitting on a log a few paces away from their makeshift mess tent, a hot cup of coffee clasped tightly between her hands. Buck had sat down beside her, wordlessly reaching over and pulling the trembling young medic into his side.

"I swear", she spoke up, pushing the words out between her chattering teeth, "every time I get a hot drink, I end up shaking even more. How does that make any sense?"

Buck laughed. "Well, you're the medic."

She snorted. "Oh, now you tell me", she jested half-heartedly.

"Yeah."

They were interrupted by Lipton, who strode over to them. "Hey Buck. Lieutenant Dike wants the leaders to join him for some kind of meeting to go over the next patrol", he said.

The blond lieutenant nodded and got up with a reluctant noise that was somewhere between a sigh and a groan.

Lip looked at Ella who had stayed where she was. "Wanna come along?", he asked. "Thought you might like to know the formation and things like that."

The girl hesitated for a moment. Dike avoided any sort of interaction with her like the plague. Then again, he usually didn't even acknowledge her presence. Plus, she needed to know what they were planning so she could plot the medics' strategy. And finally, Lip had said the CO wanted all the 'leaders' in the briefing. As ranking medic, she therefore had a right to be at that meeting.

Decision made, she got to her feet as well. "Alright."

They gathered a few feet away from the foxholes, huddling together in a circle. Ella greeted Lieutenants Foley and Shames with a smile, Peacock with a nod. She still hadn't entirely gotten over the incident where he had left a patrol in the middle of a firefight to report to the CP.

Dike ambled over. "All here?", he asked, not bothering to wait for an answer before he began.

Ella had a hard time paying attention to the man. To her, it seemed like he was just stringing big words together. Five minutes in, she still had no clue what formation he wanted to use. She shivered violently as a gust of wind blew snowflakes down her collar. She wrapped her arms
around her thin frame, shoving her bare hands under her armpits. Like all of the men, she had mastered the art of constantly shifting from one foot to the other without looking like she needed to pee about two days after they had moved into Bastogne.

"Now, Battalion S3 is planning a move, so I will probably be called away regularly", Dike finished his sermon. The brunette traded a puzzled look with the First Sergeant, her forehead crinkling into a small frown. 'Called away'? There is no way Winters and Nixon would call him away while he's supposed to be leading Easy in the field, she thought.

"Are there any questions?" Dike's voice indicated clearly that he didn't really care.

"Uh, yeah", Buck spoke up, incredulous. "What's the formation you want us to go for?", he asked the question they had all been waiting for the CO to answer.

Inwardly, Ella was shaking her head. How could someone as incompetent as Lt Norman Dike be appointed company leader?

"At present, as per usual, but I'll clarify that with you at a later time, Lieutenant Compton", was the reply.

The small girl only just clamped down on the frustrated sigh that threatened to escape her. Her jaw muscles clenched as she gritted her teeth, not just to stop them from chattering. This was unbelievable. If it weren't for Lip, Buck and the non-coms, they would never get anything done. She coughed into her sleeve-clad hand and ignored the scrutinising look she got from Buck.

Dike yawned, declared he had to make a call, and marched away without another word. The ranking medic pinched the bridge of her nose, feeling a headache building up. Unglaublich, einfach unglaublich. Looking after the useless man, she couldn't help but snicker.

"What is it, Shorty?", Buck asked, bewildered by the unexpected sound. Lipton just studied her, curious as to what had caused the girl's mood to switch back to cheerful so quickly.

Ella motioned towards the retreating form of their CO. "That's, that's not the way to the CP", she giggled.

Perplexed, the three lieutenants and the First Sergeant blinked, then chuckled as well.

As they turned to walk back to the foxholes of 2nd Platoon, Buck stopped her, saying he wanted to discuss something, while Lip went ahead to check on the boys.

Judging by the look on the tow-headed man's face, the brunette decided to take the formal route. "Something on your mind, lieutenant?", she inquired.

"Yeah. Be careful, okay, Ella?", he said, looking sternly at her. "I don't want to take any chances, you hear?"

Slightly taken aback by his seriousness, she nodded, a tiny frown of confusion appearing on her forehead. "Uh, yes sir."
His bright eyes pierced into her. "The guys need you out here, so stay safe."
"You got it, sir", she replied, giving him her brightest smile.

Satisfied, the lieutenant smiled, patted her on the shoulder and left.

Wandering between the foxholes, the small medic was pleased to see that nobody was alone in a hole. There were always groups of two or three and they all had their own blankets.

"Ella?"

She stopped and turned when she heard the First Sergeant's friendly voice. When he caught up to her, she gave him a smile. "Yes, Sarge?"

"You got a foxhole buddy?", he asked, returning her smile.

She didn't and told him so.

"You can share with me if you like", Lipton offered.

The girl looked at him with a hint of insecurity flickering in her eyes. "You wouldn't mind?"

He smiled. "Not at all."

Happily, the brunette accepted. "I'll just do my rounds, I won't be long", she promised.

"No worries."

Bitching about Dike was the number one topic of conversation between foxhole buddies. Ella had heard the guys ranting about him on numerous occasions. While she was helping them cover their foxholes with greenery, she had to steer the conversation away from that particular subject more than once. Not that she didn't understand their frustration.

She felt much the same way, but it didn't change the fact that they were stuck with the man. The only one who could possibly replace him was Buck Compton and he wasn't at the top of his game either.

Since he had returned from the hospital after getting shot in the ass in Holland, Buck had become more serious, more tense. He was doing a great job as a platoon leader and was as reliable as they come, that hadn't changed in the least. But he had lost his joyfulness. His laugh was no longer as boisterous as before and he didn't smile half as much as he used to. The additional strain of being responsible for not just a platoon but an entire company wouldn't do him any good.

Ella found Spina working on the cover of his foxhole. "Hey, Spina", she greeted him, watching as he hauled another branch over.

"Hi Shorty. What's up?"
She shrugged. "Nothing much. Need any help?"

He shook his head and wiped his hands on his trousers. "Nah, I'm good, thanks."

"Alright. Say, is it still us three in a hole?"

The Philadelphian hummed an affirmative. "Not that we're in here much anyway", he added.

"Yeah." The girl chuckled. "I end up in a different foxhole each time, so I don't bother digging one of my own."

"And you don't have an entrenching tool either", Spina remarked.

She grinned. "That too. She had lost that thing somewhere in Holland. She had lent it to a replacement and never got it back. It was probably still lying in an abandoned foxhole, gathering rust. "Gene at the CP?", she then asked.

Spina nodded.

"Good. I walked the line, the guys are alright. Check the usual suspects for any signs of deterioration when you do your rounds in a few hours", the brunette instructed.

"You got it.", he replied, before remembering something else: "Oh, that reminds me, McClung and Babe both got a shot of penicillin for their cough, right?"

The small medic cocked her head, immediately alert. "Yeah, why? Something wrong?"

"No, no. Babe's cough is almost gone, but One Lung's not improving", he told her. "Some of the others said, too, that they noticed no change."

She nodded, a pensive look crossing her young features. "Which means it's we also have a virus on our hands." Sighing, she raked slim fingers through her growing hair. "Great", she muttered, sarcasm and frustration ringing in her tone. "Well, not much we can do about that. Penicillin combats illnesses caused by bacteria. Everybody who's sick gets a shot – we have enough of the stuff – and at least those with bacterial infections will get better."

"Okay. I'll tell Gene when he comes back", Spina agreed, "We'll give the guys the injections on our rounds."

The young girl smiled. "Good, thanks. Right, I'm with Lip tonight, so if you need something, you know where to find me."

The Philadelphian chuckled and made a shooing motion with his hands. "Yeah yeah, now get some sleep, Shorty. You look like hell."

She gave him a deadpan look and retorted: "So does everybody else." Then, a grin split her face and she added: "But I hide it better."

As he watched her disappear into the darkness, Spina murmured: "Yeah, an' that's the problem." He and Gene would ensure that their ranking medic got her own dose of penicillin tonight. Hopefully, it would help with her cough.
Approaching the foxhole, Ella caught the tail end of Lipton's conversation with Lieutenant Dike. When the CO wandered off just like that, she rolled her eyes and slid into the hole with as much grace as she could muster. Noticing that the First Sergeant didn't have a blanket, the ranking medic swallowed an amused chuckle and spread her own blanket over the two of them.

Lip raised an eyebrow at her, then smiled and shook his head as she mirrored his expression, her dark green orbs almost daring him to protest.

"What about you then, Shorty?", he inquired, shifting a little to accommodate the small girl. "Where are you from?"

She dug half a chocolate bar from her pocket and offered it to him. He took it with a smile. "I grew up in Frederica, Delaware", she responded. "And you?"

"Huntington, West Virginia", Lip answered. Then, he wanted to know: "Small town?"

The young girl grinned. "Smaller. I think there's about 500 people living there. Lots of farms in the surrounding area."

Lip chuckled. "Huntington is small, too, but not that small."

They fell silent for a while, savouring the sweetness of the chocolate they were sharing.

"What did you do before the war?", Ella asked, unaware that she was repeating Dike's earlier query.

"My brother and I helped my mom run a boarding house", Lip replied. His posture tensed a little as he waited for the inevitable follow-up question. But it never came. Instead, the brunette nodded and said: "That must be interesting. You get to meet so many different people from all over the country."

He smiled, more to himself than to anyone else. Why was he surprised? This was Shorty he was talking to, the embodiment of tact and empathy. "It's hard work, but it's nice, yeah", he agreed. Looking at her, he asked: "Why did you sign up, Shorty?"

She sighed, a small, sad smile on her delicate features. It took her a moment to reply.

"I wanted to help", she eventually said. After a pause, the young girl continued: "But... I was also running away. So much had happened, and I just couldn't stand it anymore. Everything was filled with these painful memories. Though without Mama's blessing... I don't think I would have left without that."

Again, Lip wasn't surprised. "How did you convince her?"

"I told her the truth. She understood." Ella huffed a short, silent laugh. "She got her boss, Dr Miller, to vouch for my skills and she came with me the next day when I signed up for the Nurse Corps."

He blinked and did a double take. "The Nurse Corps? So you really joined the paratroopers as part of an experiment?"
The small medic nodded. "That's right. I wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. People said that I was too small, too weak or too young for a lot of things."

Lip snorted. "Those people obviously didn't know you all that well", he remarked, eliciting a chuckle from her. "Though I have to admit, I was sceptical at first, too."

She gave him one of her soft, warm smiles. "I don't blame you. I doubted myself many times as well", she confided.

"And yet here you are."

Her signature lopsided smile widened and took on a determined, almost stubborn note. "That's right. And I'm not going anywhere."

The First Sergeant smiled. "You're a grown woman and you can take care of yourself", he said, relieved and proud at the same time.

"Now I am."

Lip wasn't sure if he had been meant to hear that muttered statement, but it made him pause. A critical look settled on his features and he studied her intently as if seeing her for the first time. "How old are you, Ella?", he asked.

The girl let her head drop into her palms with a small noise that was a mixture between a groan, a cough and a laugh. "I was wondering when this would come up", she confessed, voice muffled behind her hands. But she looked him openly in the eye when she answered: "I was born in 1926."

For a moment, Lip could only stare at her, completely dumbfounded. Then, as the shock wore off, he noticed the look of trepidation on her face. "You have every right to be here", he said. "Hell, if it wasn't for you, some of us wouldn't be here."

Her mien remained unsure, so he continued: "Look, I'm sure you're not the only one who lied on their papers. But none of that matters. Age doesn't define you. You're a good person and a great medic, Shorty. That's what counts."

"Does that mean you won't report me?", she asked, pure hope shining in her eyes.

The First Sergeant shook his head. "No. You're too important to this company, to the boys. We can't lose you because of something stupid like that." Involuntarily, his gaze flickered to the faded pink scar on her temple. He would never forget the dread and sorrow he had felt when she and Bull had been lost in Holland. In his mind, he altered his last statement to *We can't lose you, period.*

A relieved smile filled with pure happiness spread on Ella's features and in a burst of exuberance, she planted a kiss on Lip's cheek. "Thanks, Sarge", she grinned.

He chuckled and kicked her boot, pretending to be indignant. Her eyes sparkled with that special kind of innocent joy that always warmed the boys’ hearts.

They settled in as darkness descended. Then, Lipton broke the silence again: "I can't believe
nobody noticed you were underage."

The ranking medic shrugged. "Like you said, age doesn't define us", she spoke. "I have seen thirty-year-olds behave like children, and I have seen children taking on the role of an adult."

He hummed in agreement. "Still, I think you're extraordinary."

The young girl blushed. "Nah. I'm just me", she tried to wave off his compliment.

"You jump out of planes and run around on active battlefields helping wounded", the First Sergeant pointed out, a sly smile making its way onto his face.

She snorted. "That makes me either stupid or crazy. Though I wouldn't have made it through basic if I were stupid", she amended, "so that leaves crazy."

"Then we're all crazy."

He wasn't going to let it go. Ella was too humble and often forgot her own value. The boys loved her like a little sister and even the brass recognised the worth of Easy's female combat medic.

"Well, aren't you?", she countered, expression shifting into a full-on Cheshire cat grin.

Lip chuckled. "Probably a bit", he had to concede. "But you chose to join up along a bunch of guys to become our medic. Only a really special girl would have done that."

The brunette smiled, touched. "Alright. If you say so, Sarge, it's gotta be true."

He slanted her a look and asked: "Would I lie to you?"

That made her laugh. "No. No, you wouldn't."

Eventually, Ella dozed off. Now that they were more or less out of reach of the German artillery, everybody hoped to get a bit more sleep.

She barely stirred when Gene came by on his rounds and gave her a shot of penicillin, so deep ran her exhaustion.

The First Sergeant traded looks with the Cajun medic and wrapped an arm around the young girl, pulling her closer to his side to conserve body heat.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

einfach unglaublich: just unbelievable
Chapter Summary

The return of a wounded sparks a discussion about the wounds the soldiers have incurred during their time in Europe. After they move back to their old position, Easy is dealt a devastating blow during an artillery barrage.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Lieutenant Peacock was going home. Word had it that division wanted an officer from each company involved in the heroic defence of Bastogne. They were to be sent home on a 30-day furlough to help with the war bond drive and Captain Winters had chosen Peacock.

Ella was happy for the man. He was a good guy, just not a good leader. When they were saying good-bye to him, she shook his hand and gave him a sincere smile. "Congratulations, lieutenant", she said. "I hope you'll enjoy your extended R&R."

He beamed at her and shook her hand enthusiastically. "Thank you, Ella."

After 1st Platoon had congratulated their platoon leader and bid him farewell, they stayed to watch as the jeep carrying Peacock rumbled off, the fog quickly swallowing the sound of the engine.

The brunette turned to throw Luz a wry look. "Really glad you're going home?", she repeated, one eyebrow lifting in amusement.

He simply grinned at her and gave her a nonchalant shrug. "What? It's true, isn't it?"

The girl chuckled. It was true alright, just for a very different reason than Peacock had thought.

There was a film crew and reporters coming to the front lines. They had to smile and pretend that all was fine and dandy, that they weren't fighting to survive day after day. Most of them weren't too bothered, they simply joked around and goofed off. The photographers filled film after film, taking pictures of everybody and everything. They were particularly eager to get Easy's ranking medic in front of the camera.

The brunette didn't pay them much notice, too busy checking on her boys and making sure nobody was taking a turn for the worse. She didn't actively hide from the reporters, but she didn't seek them out either. Also, the men were happily running interference for her, keeping the photographers distracted and out of her way. They could all remember the nasty newspaper articles about their girl and wanted to protect her from further muckraking.
Standing next to Johnny in line for chow, Ella shivered and stifled a cough.

"Hey, Shorty", a raspy voice spoke behind her.

Instantly recognising it, the small medic whirled around and with an excited noise jumped into Joe Toye's arms, nearly tackling him with her tight hug. He adjusted his stance a little to catch her. Even with his injury not completely healed up, it was an easy feat. She was too light.

Around them, the men smiled.

Letting go and stepping back, she beamed, her eyes twinkling with pure, undiluted joy. "Good to have you back, Toye."

He smiled and jostled her helmet affectionately. "Good to be back, Shorty."

One of the replacements wanted to know: "Where'd you get hit?"

Joe turned to size up the kid. "What's that?", he asked.

"Ah, that's Webb", Skip replied, "Replacement."

He eyed the replacement. "Really?", he wondered, sarcasm seeping into his voice. "thought it was some guy I've known for two years and I forgot his face."

Ella snickered. She had missed Toye's snark. Nevertheless, she lightly smacked his side and chided playfully: "Oh be nice, Joe."

He sent her a half-glare that didn't have any effect whatsoever on his little friend. Not that he'd expected anything else. Instead, he reached out and swiftly pulled her into his side, looping an arm around her neck.

"Joe got hit in the arm", Penkala informed Webb. "New Year's Eve gift from the Luftwaffe."

Curious, Webb inquired: "Lot of you guys been injured?"

Johnny Martin rolled his eyes. "It's called wounded, peanut", he corrected with feigned patience, "injured's when you fall out of a tree or something."

Skip turned to add his two cents to the conversation. "Don't worry, there's enough crap flying around here, you're bound to get dinked some time." He motioned at the assembled men. "Almost every single one of these guys have been hit at least once."

He ambled through the group, pointing at the guys and narrating how they had gotten their wounds. The men chuckled, exchanging looks and teasing each other about their injuries and mishaps.

"And George Luz here has never been hit", Skip declared, continuing his showboating. He tapped his finger against Luz' chest and marvelled: "You're one lucky bastard."

"Takes one to know one, Skip", Luz retorted around a mouthful of bread.

Skip shrugged, glancing at Webb. "Eh, consider us blessed", he said. "Now, Liebgott, that skinny little guy?" - He gestured towards the man in question - "He got pinged in the neck in Holland. And right next to him, that other skinny little guy, that's Popeye. He got shot in his scrawny little
Malarkey picked up the thread and added: "And uh, Buck got shot in his rather large butt in Holland."

Buck turned, lifted his coat and poked at one of the wounds.

"Yeah", Penkala commented, "kind of an Easy Company tradition, being shot in the ass."

Ella, who had been following Skip's narration with great amusement, accepted her mug of unidentifiable but hot food. Moving to sit next to Toye, she laughed quietly as Muck continued: "Hey even First Sergeant Lipton over there! He got a couple pieces of a tank shell burst in Carentan. One chunk in the face, another chunk almost took out his nuts."

Bill, standing beside Lip, looked at him and asked in a tone that was just a bit too innocent: "How are those nuts, Sarge?"

"Doing fine, Bill", Lip replied nonchalantly, stirring his food, "nice of you to ask."

The young medic hid a giggle that turned into a cough behind a sleeve-clad hand. She fished out her canteen and took a sip. Her cough was finally getting better. The coughing fits no longer brought her to the verge of passing out and they became less and less frequent. Maybe it was the penicillin Gene had given her last night, maybe it had just improved on its own. Although... it probably was the penicillin.

She was pulled out of her thoughts when Guarnere decided to put her in the spotlight. "You forgot Shorty", he reminded Skip, making a lax gesture towards the brunette. "She got a piece of shrapnel in the arm in Normandy, and got shot in the head in Holland."

The expression on the replacement's face was priceless. His jaw dropped as his head swivelled to stare at her. A mixture of shock, horror and confusion painted his features. "S-shot in the head? And, uh...she?", he stuttered.

The emotions displayed on his face only intensified when Ella tugged off her helmet to reveal a mop of matted brown locks and a pink scar on her temple that was unmistakably from a bullet graze.

"Yes, she", Skip confirmed, grinning widely. A warning glint lit up in his whiskey-coloured eyes.

Bull looked at the replacement. "That a problem?", he asked in his usual calm drawl.

Webb gulped when he realised that everyone's eyes were on him, levelling him with looks that ranged from cautious to 'one wrong word and you'll be missing a few vital body parts'. He vigorously shook his head and squeaked out a "No."

The ranking medic's humour-laced voice cut through the taut silence: "Alright boys, stop scaring him and eat your food before it freezes."

Tension shattered, the men laughed and idle chatter picked up again.
Shaking her head in fond amusement, the small girl leant against Toye. He scowled at her even as he pulled her closer. "Fuckin' Christ, Shorty, you're shakin' like a goddamn earthquake", he grumbled.

She gave a soft, breathy huff of laughter. "Can't help it."

Every time she ingested something that was at least lukewarm, her shivering turned into visible trembling and her teeth started chattering. She knew that it had to do with being dog-tired and trying to stall an approaching illness, but it didn't look like their situation was going to change soon, so she just dealt with it.

In the afternoon, they moved back to their old position overlooking Foy. Only a few men remained behind to watch the line, temporarily attached to D Company. The guys didn't pass up the opportunity to tease those who were staying.

"Good luck, ladies", Guarnere said, grinning at them as he walked by.

"Been nice knowing you", Toye offered.

Shaking her head at her friends' antics, Ella tossed Perconte and Christenson a pack of cigars. "Take care, boys", she smiled.

The young medic knew about the stories that followed Lieutenant Speirs like an ominous whisper. She just didn't care about them too much. Many paratroopers had shot POWs on D-Day. They had been under orders not to take any prisoners because they would hamper the soldiers' ability to achieve their mission. And if Speirs really had shot a Sergeant of his own company, then it surely wasn't just because that man had been drunk. From what she had learned of the lieutenant, he was tough and disciplined, but not power-crazy.

First Battalion had occupied their position while 2nd had been in the Bois Jacques. The Germans had shelled them pretty heavily. Signs of tree bursts were everywhere, the stumps ending in sharp, jagged splinters. Branches and felled trees littered the snow-covered ground.

While the men set to work fortifying the covers of their foxholes, Ella inventoried the medics' supplies. They were pretty well stocked, especially in comparison to their first week in Bastogne. Spina took over from her, leaving her and Gene free to work on covering their foxhole. Even if they didn't spend much time in that hole, their supplies were in there.

She was debranching a shattered tree limb when the artillery hit. The high-pitched, whistling whine of the incoming shells gave her a split-second's warning.

"Incoming!", someone – probably Lipton – shouted.

The brunette was already running.

"Take cover!", she called, yanking a few stunned replacements off the ground and shoving them into the first foxholes she came across.
Staggering when the earth beneath her feet bucked and shuddered, the girl barreled through the trees that burst into millions of deathly projectiles.

"They got us zeroed!", she heard Buck bellow.

She slipped on a patch of ice hidden under a thin layer of snow and fell. Explosion after explosion rocked the ground, thwarting her attempts to get back up.

Only a few steps away from her, another man got knocked off his feet.

Ella regained her footing and hurried over. Her already affected lungs sent fiery pain radiating through her chest, the smoke and stench of gunpowder nearly making her gag. "On your feet!", she screamed over the infernal blasts, grabbing a fistful of his coat. "Find a foxhole!"

She wasn't sure if he heard her, her voice sounding like a mere whisper against the deafening booms of the bombardment. Releasing him, she continued her race up the line, shepherding those who had been stranded, disorientated by the world blowing up around them.

A shell hit close by and the force of the detonation threw the small medic to the side. Her back slammed into the frozen dirt. Her helmet went flying as her head hit the unforgiving ground. The moan she gave came out as a strangled wheeze as she had the wind knocked out of her. Black stars danced in front of her eyes and for a moment, her ears were filled with a roaring white noise that drowned out the racket around her.

The cold snow bit into the back of her head.

Shaking her head and blinking furiously to clear her vision, the small medic scrambled to her feet, ignoring the pounding in her head. Dirt rained down on her. A spray of debris left tiny, stinging cuts all over her face. Her ears rang and the flashes made it almost impossible for her to get her bearing.

Then, her diaphragm seized and she couldn't breathe.

Gasping, choking, she stumbled, terror clamping a steely hand around her racing heart. *I werd versticka! In the middle of this fucking forest!* Tears of despair sprung to her eyes. Yet she didn't stop moving.

Another explosion pulled her legs out from under her. Ella threw up her arms to protect her head as she got showered with dirt, slush and ash.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, her airways returned to duty.

On all fours, she pulled in huge gulps of air between winded coughs, all the while trying to get back on her feet.

A hand grabbed her by the shoulder. She was hauled a short distance across the snow, then the ground disappeared beneath her and she tumbled into the relative safety of a foxhole. Arms wrapped around her chest and pulled her close.
It was Luz.

His body curled itself over hers, shielding her as the barrage lit up the woods in terrifying hues of orange and yellow. It was so loud; the young girl couldn't even hear herself think. Even when her coughing finally ebbed, all she could hear was the ringing in her ears and the shells pummelling on their position.

And suddenly, it was silent.

There was a long moment after the last echo had faded where nobody moved. The wind howled and blew snowflakes into their collars, but they didn't dare move. It was like the entire forest was holding its breath.

The moment passed and slowly, they peeked out of their foxholes. Luz shifted off his young friend and they raised their heads over the lip of their hole, his arms still around her.

"Stay in your foxholes!" Lipton's voice rang through the fog.

Ella swallowed and chewed on her lip. She hadn't heard any cries for a medic yet. Part of her needed to get out, needed to make sure her boys were alright. The other part of her wanted to stay where she was, tucked against George's side. Her head was pounding dully, in sync with the hammering of her heart.

"You okay?", she asked softly. Her voice sounded too loud in the eerie silence.

"Yeah. You?" Luz' eyes scanned her. Dirt and tiny wood splinters had gotten entangled in her unkempt, matted hair. A layer of grime turned the usual caramel-brown colour a dull, dark brown. There were small scratches on her face, along with smudges of ash and dust. Her eyes were wide; her pupils blown, leaving only a small circle of green around them.

The brunette gave a nod. She was grateful that he held her. She knew that the second he let go, she would be out of the foxhole to survey the damage, even if that was exactly what the Germans wanted. Her stomach was churning with that same uneasy feeling she'd had before Julian's death.

Something was wrong. Very wrong.

Moments later, the second attack began. Lip roared "INCOMING!", then the first shells blew up.

Ella and Luz ducked under the cover of their foxhole as the explosives rained down, huddled closely together and their eyes squeezed shut. The small girl prayed to whatever deity or entity was listening, prayed that they protect her friends. She hoped, hoped with every fibre of her being that her instincts, which were screaming at her, were wrong. Bitte bitte bitte. It became her mantra as she cowered in that hole.

"Medic!"

Before she even fully realised what she was doing, the young girl was out of the foxhole and dashing through the woods.

In that strangely disconnected way that sometimes came with high-stress situations, she remembered the conversation she'd had with Lipton. Definitely crazy, she determined, then shoved
all thoughts out of her mind, focusing solely on finding and treating her patients. Through some miracle, she managed to evade the artillery that kept reducing the trees to sawdust.

Ella nearly collapsed with relief when the whistling of the shells slowly faded into the distance to target another piece of the line. She finished putting a bandage on a replacements' arm, then carefully climbed out of the foxhole. Staying low, she let her gaze sweep across the area.

There were felled, burnt and shattered trees everywhere. Half the ground was no longer white, but rather green, brown or black.

Wiping her forehead with a trembling hand, the brunette took in the destruction around her. She had been raised as an agnostic and yet, all she could think of was: This is Hell. This is Hell on Earth.

"MEDIIIC!"

The guttural cry jerked her out of the slight trance as effectively as a slap in the face. Legs moving instinctively, she hurtled through the snow, her stomach twisted in knots tighter than any sailor could make. Dread was bubbling inside her, that awful sense of foreboding.

Then, the girl reached the scene and stopped dead, feeling like she had just smacked into a concrete wall.

On the ground lay Bill and Joe.

Underneath them, the snow wasn't just pink, it was deep red. From the looks of it, both were unconscious. Joe's right leg was only a stump. Everything from the knee down was gone. Bill's right leg was mangled beyond recognition, held together only by tendons, ligaments and some scraps of skin.

Buck, who was standing a few steps to the side, was staring down at the two men. His rifle and helmet lay abandoned in the snow, like he had dropped them.

After being frozen in shock for a moment, the ranking medic took action.

Gently, she manoeuvred her two friends off of each other and tried to rouse them. They came around pretty quickly and they were in a world of pain. Administering morphine, Ella took a deep breath and bellowed: "Medic for assistance!", meanwhile fishing out a stack of bandages from her satchel.

She then began wrapping what remained of Joe's leg, carefully keeping their attention on her. She told them about her Mama's last letter while her hands hurried to wrap bandage after bandage around Joe's stump. They soaked through in a matter of seconds.

After running out of things to say about the letter, the girl switched to her usual easy-going chatter, keeping her tone light despite how frantic she felt inside. She noticed her two friends relaxing
minutely at the soothing sound of her familiar voice.

Bill got himself in a sitting position and leant against a tree.

Rushing footsteps announced Gene's arrival. He too had to take a moment to process the scene before he moved in to help. The two medics swapped places, the brunette looking after Bill now.

Malarkey joined them. Eyes wide with concern and horror, he asked: "Doc, what can I do?"

"Hold this", Gene replied, busy stopping the blood flow.

Malarkey quickly knelt down beside Joe, propping him up and doing as the Doc asked.

Between groans of pain, Toye got out: "You got a smoke?"

Involuntarily, Ella's lips quirked up at that. When Don patted his pockets and came up empty, she dug a pack from her own coat and tossed it to Malark before returning her attention to Bill. There wasn't much she could do except sprinkle sulfa onto the bleeder's and hold his leg still. She wasn't qualified to perform a field amputation and she was quite glad about it, too.

The mangled limb twitched and Guarnere pulled a face.

"That's disgusting", he gasped.

She glanced up at him and tightened her hold on his torn-up leg.

"Jesus. What's a guy got to do to get killed around here?", Toye complained.

She sent him a warning glare that came very close to her patented Look, but was filled with a turmoil of emotions. Fear, anguish, sadness. "Don't say that", she growled, voice both steely and cracked. Then, her eyes calmed and she added softly: "You survive through sheer obstinacy."

He huffed a pained laugh and grumbled: "Yeah, love ya too, Shorty." Despite his rough voice and the dry tone, he was 100% sincere and they both knew it.

Spying the stretcher and First Sergeant Lipton arriving, she said: "Bill, you're going first."

"Whatever ya say, lil' lady. Whatever ya say."

The small girl smiled at him and gave him a warm, tight hug. She poured all the feelings into that hug that she couldn't express, all the words she didn't have.

He leaned into her embrace, put a kiss on her forehead and ruffled her hair. "See ya after the war, lil' lady", he whispered in her ear.

Gene waved the two litter bearers over. "Over here! Take this man", he instructed.

Letting go of his young friend, Bill looked over to Lipton.

"Hey, Lip", he spoke, "they got Old Gonorrhoea this time." Fear was written on his face as the words rushed out, but he managed a fairly nonchalant tone.
Moving back to let the litter bearers through, Ella sat down next to Joe and wrapped an arm around his shoulders, squashing the sob that tried to work its way past her closed-up throat. He was still in obvious pain if the crushing, vice-like grip his hand had on her knee was any indication.

As Bill was carried off, he teased his buddy: "Hey, Joe, I told you I'd beat you back to the states."

Another pair of corpsmen came to take Joe away a few minutes later.

As they got him settled on the stretcher, he grabbed the brunette's wrist. "Don't you do anything stupid, Shorty", he pushed out between clenched teeth, repeating his order from New Year's Eve. "Ya hear? You still gotta introduce me and Bill to your Mama."

With a bittersweet smile on her pale face, she promised.

Then, Toye was carried off as well.

Gene and Ella shared a sombre look as they got to their feet. Malarkey left to check on the guys from his platoons. He would most likely take over as platoon sergeant for 2nd Platoon now that they had lost Guarnere. The two medics observed as First Sergeant Lipton talked to Buck. The lieutenant was sitting on a log, his head in his hands.

Raking blood-stained fingers through her hair and dashing away the tears that had gathered in her eyes, Ella sighed. "I'm gonna take him off the line", she said, voice barely above a whisper.

Her friend nodded. They had both seen the signs, as had many others in the company. Now, Buck had well and truly been overpowered by combat stress.

Sighing again, the ranking medic squared her shoulders and made her way over to the officer. Even though she wanted nothing more but to curl up in a ball and weep, she had a job to do. Easy Company was her responsibility. She could deal with her own emotions when the work was done.

Speaking with Buck was a delicate affair. He was extremely upset and first, he even tried to hide his face from her, ashamed that the young girl saw him in such a state.

"There's nothing to be ashamed off, sir", she said gently, kneeling down before him.

She waited until he made eye contact with her, then she continued: "Nobody is going to think any less of you. You'll be transported to the rear so you can get some rest. How's that sound?"

He nodded shakily.

The brunette smiled. "Yeah? Good. You've earned it, you really did, Buck."

The lieutenant sniffed and wiped at his eyes. She sat down next to him on the log and kept him company until a jeep arrived to take him to the aid station. Helping him up and giving him a hug,
the ranking medic guided him over to the vehicle.

"We'll see each other again someday", she told him.

And another man down, Ella thought to herself as the jeep rumbled off, rubbing her temples. Her head was still aching a little. Dragging her fingers through her locks, she went to find her colleagues to get a sit rep.

"We got all the wounded treated or evacuated", Spina told her.

She nodded. "Alright, good job. Go and get some sleep", she instructed.

The Philadelphian acknowledged it with a "Right, Shorty" and headed to their foxhole.

 Turning to Gene, the girl tilted her head in curiosity. "What's on your mind?"

He looked her in the eyes. "Are you okay, Ellie?", he wanted to know.

Sighing heavily, she conjured up a weak smile. "I'll be fine. They're the toughest soldiers in the entire company, they'll be okay."

Understanding that his small friend wasn't ready to say more on the topic, the Cajun nodded.

She nodded back, grateful that he didn't push. "Get some rest, too, Gene", she said. "I'll do rounds."

He hesitated and opened his mouth to protest.

"I need to see for myself that the boys are okay", she explained.

Accepting her explanation, Gene gave her shoulder a squeeze and followed Spina, but not after reminding her to get some sleep as well.

The young medic chuckled sadly. Sleep. As if she could sleep after this. She had seen two of her closest friends since Toccoa days lying in their own blood, moaning with pain and even crying out in agony. Tears filled her eyes and tightened her throat. Biting down hard on her bottom lip, she swallowed the rising emotions. She didn't have time to deal with them now. She needed to check on the boys.

Taking a few deep breaths, the exhausted brunette began her rounds.

Ella ended up in Luz' foxhole again. He had just finished a cigarette and greeted her with a sad smile when she slid in. He had been close with Bill and Joe, too.

"Hey, George", she greeted through chattering teeth, adjusting her satchel so she didn't crush anything in it. Her lips had a blueish tinge.

"Hey kiddo."
Reaching out, he pulled her close, just like he had during the first barrage. She leant into his embrace, wrapping her arms around him and burying her face in his chest for a moment. She closed her eyes and listened to the steady thrum of his heart. He ran his hand through her hair, resting his chin on top of her head.

When they finally pulled apart, they both felt a little better, light finding its way into their eyes again.

"Thanks, Shorty", Luz said, shifting so they could sit side by side.

She smiled and it was warm and sincere. "You too, Luz."

He fussed with her blanket for a bit, tucking it snuggly around her and then draping his own over both of them. It was still freezing and it was only going to get worse when night fell.

They struck up light conversation to chase away the suffocating quiet. The snow and the fog muffled sound extremely well, creating an illusion of safety and peace that neither of them believed anymore.

When Luz eventually dropped off into a much-needed sleep, Ella fished out her ratty journal and flipped through the pages. Even now, she still wrote in it, recapping each day. Sometimes, the entries weren't longer than a few sentences. Other times, they covered a double page.

Flicking to the last entry, the young girl twirled the pencil stub in her fingers, wondering just where in the blue blazes she was going to start. Her head was filled to the brim with jumbled thoughts, emotions and events that only waited to be poured onto the paper. Was für a Chaos, she sighed internally.

Deciding to begin where she had left off, the brunette started writing.

The words spilled out without prompting and when she was done, Ella felt a little bit more settled. However, she wasn't ready to try and sleep yet, so she pulled out a few clean sheets of paper and got ready to compose a letter to her Mama.

Then, finally, the small medic gathered the courage to give falling asleep a shot. Curling up against Luz, she closed her eyes and exhaled slowly.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

I werd versticka: I'm gonna choke to death, I'm gonna suffocate
Was für a Chaos: What a mess
Ella struggles to keep morale up as the company continues to hold the line in the woods of Bastogne. Another nightly artillery attack takes its toll, pushing them closer to the breaking point.

Over the next week, they cleared the woods west of Foy. They met little resistance. They were getting shelled on a daily basis again and their numbers continued to dwindle rapidly. The three medics were back to an hour of actual sleep on average. The NCOs got some more and the enlisted even a little more than the non-coms, but all in all, sleep deprivation was the number one ailment in the company once again. Or number two, constantly being cold usually took the top spot on the list.

Ella drifted from one foxhole to the next, catnapping whenever she could between her rounds. She kept up her tireless work to cheer up the guys, to chase away the shadows and pains for a few blessed minutes.

Now that her cough was actually getting better thanks to the penicillin, she found a bit of energy returning that she hadn't even noticed she'd been lacking. She used it to pay special attention to Malarkey. Since Buck had been taken off the line with what she had reported as a 'severe case of trench foot', Don had become subdued and more serious. With the added responsibility of technically being in charge of 2nd Platoon and losing three of his best friends, it wasn't a surprise.

None the less, the ranking medic was worried. She did not want a repeat of what had happened to Lieutenant Compton, so she took the time to have a friendly chat with Malarkey whenever she had the opportunity. He appreciated it and soon enough, his smile lost some of its hollowness again.

But then came the night of January 9th, a night which added another bunch to the ever-growing pile of terrifying, painful and horrible memories that would stay with Ella for the rest of her life.

The small girl was ambling through the woods, on her way to Grant's foxhole to grab some shuteye when she caught sight of the small group. Just from the way they were holding themselves, she could tell who it was. Walking closer, she heard Luz' rendition of the story he'd told her a few days ago.
Voice pitched in an extremely good imitation of Dike, George said: "First Sergeant Lipton? You organise things here and I'm gonna go for...help."

His audience, none other than the rowdy trio – Skip, Penkala and Malarkey – cackled.

"I need to go polish my oak leaf clusters", Luz tacked on, still in his Dike voice.

Ella smiled and was about to make her presence known when Lipton, who happened to walk by and overhear them, beat her to it.

"Hey Luz", he called, beckoning the radioman over.

George shared a look with his friends, mumbled a "See you, fellas" and went to receive his scolding.

The other three broke up as well, heading to their own foxholes.

"Night all", Malarkey said.

"Yeah, see you, Luz. See you, Malark."

Malarkey turned and was only mildly surprised to see Easy's female medic standing there. That girl had the uncanny ability to be everywhere at once. She had a small smile on her face, but a furrow in her brow. He got the distinct feeling that something was wrong and he walked over to her.

"Are you okay, Shorty?", he asked.

She shrugged in a 'yes and no' kind of way. "I know Dike's a bad leader", she said softly, looking him in the eyes. Don liked how she could spread this sense of calm with nothing but her smile or a few kind words. "But there's nothing we can do to change that. So... don't tell anybody else?"

"Yeah. You got it, Ella."

She nodded at him, then started walking away before stopping and quietly calling after him: "Night, Don."

Grinning, he replied: "Night, Ella."

Luz, smiling and finishing his smoke, headed towards his foxhole. He flicked the cigarette butt away. Right at that moment, an explosion ripped through the night, sending dirt everywhere. He hit the ground.

"Incomiiing!", somebody cried.

The artillery raid was the wildest one yet. Shells detonated in rapid-fire succession, the flashes blinding in the pitch-black night. The shockwaves felt like physical blows when they hit the soldiers.
Ella plastered herself flat against the frozen earth when the tree top right above her shattered. A scream of terror tore itself free from her throat as it rained branches, oversized woodchips and pieces of bark. Over the deafening noise of the attack, she could hear Muck and Penkala shouting for Luz. 

Blinking the dirt out of her eyes, she squinted through the haze, flinching at each blast. Faintly, she could make out Luz' silhouette. He was running, tripping as the ground jerked beneath him. The shells seemed to blow up closer and closer to him with each hit. He got knocked off his feet again. 

"Get in here!", Muck screamed to his friend, who was crawling towards them, when out of nowhere, like an angel swooping down from Heaven, Ella came flying out of the dark, rushing over to Luz. 

"Luz!", she hollered. 

The soil jolted and she tumbled, the concussion causing her to lose her balance. The forest was exploding all around them, as if the barrage was zeroed in on them. With the shells pounding into the ground, it was a fool's errand to try and get up, but they did it anyways. 

"Luz! Shorty! Come on! Move!" 

Muck and Penkala were still yelling, hands waving erratically as though that would somehow pull them closer to their foxhole. "Come on!"

They were so close, but not just the relentless bombing was slowing them down. The fear coursing through them was seeping into their bones like the melting snow beneath them, infiltrating their muscles and making their movements weak and sluggish. 

Gritting their teeth, the two friends pushed on. 

And then the world exploded in their faces, abruptly cutting off Skip's shout. 

Ella was paralysed. For one moment, in the middle of a brutal artillery attack, she lay there, unmoving, despite the bombs tearing holes into the landscape. 

A grunt from Luz tore her out of her shock-induced immobility. Forcing herself to look away from the smoking crater, she focused on her priority: Get Luz into a foxhole. 

He had a burn on his cheek where a piece of hot debris had struck him. 

He managed to get up, pulling her along with him. 

Together, they stumbled on, holding each other up as the ground did its damnedest to knock them down again. 

A close blast sent them sprawling. 

"Luz! Ella!" Lipton! 

The brunette felt Luz shove her forward, then Lipton's hand pulling her into the hole. A second
later, she couldn't stop a yelp from escaping when Lip hauled Luz in, the two men throwing themselves protectively over her.

"MUCK AND PENKALA!", Luz cried over the maddening racket, "MUCK AND PENKALA GOT HIT!"

Buried beneath her friends, Ella felt and heard rather than saw the cover of their foxhole getting blown away. Her fingers dug into Lip's jacket and they all screamed as shrapnel and hot ash hit them.

The last explosions quieted down and they lay there, panting and clinging to each other.

"Stay down! Incoming!", a voice called somewhere up the line.

A whistle sounded, followed by a smack. The three paratroopers flinched and stared at the shell that had landed at the edge of the foxhole. The young medic's stomach turned and her heart froze, skipping several handfuls of beats. She was shaking all over and it had nothing to do with the cold.

As Luz fiddled a smoke and his lighter out of his coat, the small girl carefully sat up and crawled out of the hole. Calls for medics filled the air. Trembling, she willed her jelly-like legs to cooperate.

Pushing everything, the terror, the anguish, into an empty room in her mind, she forced herself into her medic mode. Just like she had done after the barrage that had cost Bill and Joe their leg, Ella shoved the emotions down. Secretly, she knew that it was definitely the wrong way to handle the situation, but for now, it was her only option. Fear was dangerous, it was contagious and destructive. As ranking medic, she could not show any fear, especially not while treating patients. The company was hanging on by a thread, they needed her to be strong and keep a level head, not burst into tears and fall apart.

So, she put her thoughts and emotions aside and focused on her job.

When all the wounded were taken care of, Ella stepped away from the foxholes and retreated a short distance into the woods. She was out of sight, and out of earshot, of the boys. She needed to be alone. She couldn't let them see her in this state. Her entire body shook from all the suppressed emotions. Her breathing, on the border to hyperventilation, hitched.

Clenching and unclenching her fists, she paced while trying to calm down. Sobs tried to past her chapped lips and her stomach roiled. A pair of tears trickled down from the corners of her eyes.

"Shorty?"

She jumped. Sniffling, she quickly scrubbed away the moisture from her cheeks and turned. "Uh-huh?"

The First Sergeant stood there, watching her closely. "Are you okay?" As soon as the words left his mouth, he wanted to take them back. What a stupid question!
The brunette nodded. "Uh, jo klar, I mean yeah, I'm fine. Or, well, I will be", she replied, tongue stumbling to form the right words. Clearing her throat and walking over to meet him, she arranged her facial muscles into a small smile. "What do you need?"

Lip hated asking, seeing that the girl was upset, but he had to. Ella had her finger on the pulse of the company, she had a special connection with the boys and she knew best what they needed. "Have you talked to Luz yet?"

She shook her head. "No, we only just finished treating the last wounded. Why?"

He shifted and allowed: "He's got a burn on his cheek. You might wanna have a look at it."

Ella knew that there was a lot more to this request than he was letting on, but she decided to go along with it. She brushed a few dirty locks out of her similarly dirty face. "I'll go check on him. Don't worry", she assured him, giving his shoulder a light squeeze.

It was ridiculous to tell Lip not to worry. It was like telling the sun to stop shining. But she did it anyways.

Finding Luz wasn't too hard. He was sitting in his foxhole, smoking as if his life depended on it. Maybe it did.

Sighing softly, Easy's youngest member slid in next to him and waited. He acknowledged her pretty quickly and began rambling at her. She let him, knowing that he needed to get it out of his system. While she cleaned the injury, Ella listened to him prattling away about Skip and Alex. Inane things, most of them she had heard already.

But she didn't interrupt, she just listened.

He told her that Skip had envied the soldiers bound for the Pacific while they had been on the USS Samaria. He spoke about how Alex had worked as a cook before enlisting. He talked about how Skip had swum across the Niagara on a dare.

And then, finally, the stream of words drained off and all that was left was the pain.

Luz looked at her, face twisted in a mask of heartache and anguish while tears filled his brown eyes. "They're gone, Shorty", he said, voice breaking, "one moment they were there, and then they were gone."

"I know, George. I know", the small medic muttered, wrapping her arms around him.

That was all it took. The dam broke.

Time slowly drifted by as she held him, rocking him gently like a child. Her hand rubbed circles on his back while she made soft, shushing noises. He sobbed freely into her chest, releasing the grief that was burning inside him. Ella choked on her own emotions and a few stray tears ran down her face as well. But unlike Luz, she couldn't just let it out. She simply couldn't.

Suppression was a dangerous and definitely unhealthy coping mechanism – if it could even be
called that. But not dealing with all the loss and terror was the only way the young girl saw to make sure the painful emotions wouldn't interfere with her ability to do take care of her boys.

So, she concentrated on being there for her friends, giving them a shoulder to lean and cry on, offering comfort in the form of kind words or silent company. They were her brothers and she never judged them for what they often regarded as a weakness. "Crying doesn't mean you're weak", she would reassure them, "it means you had to be strong for too long."

"Do you think they are in Heaven?"

Luz's hopeful expression reminded her of a little boy.

The brunette smiled lightly. It wasn't a fake smile, no, it was completely genuine, even if she didn't really feel like smiling. "Yeah. I'm sure they are", she said. "They're probably on a tropical island, sitting under a palm tree with six naked native girls helping them cut up coconuts so they can handfeed them to the flamingos."

George gave a wet chuckle. "They would love that."
Chapter Summary

The long-awaited attack on Foy brings about a change in the ranks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, in the afternoon, they moved out again. They were overlooking Foy once more, each of them knowing that soon, they would spearhead that assault. That knowledge had been there all along, niggling at the back of their minds. Many of the men, including the NCOs, the medics and their First Sergeant, were dreading it. They couldn't trust their useless CO, who had left to 'go for help' in the middle of a devastating artillery barrage, not to lead Easy Company into disaster.

The assault was scheduled for January 13th, at 0900. A few hours earlier, Captain Winters held the briefing for the officers and platoon sergeants. He outlined the plan, highlighted the difficulties and emphasised the key positions. Just like when he had been Easy's commanding officer, he listened to the suggestions and misgivings of the assembled men and took them into consideration.

At the end, he peered over to the ranking medic, who had yet to say something. Her eyes were riveted to the map. He could almost see the gears in her head turning as her sharp mind mulled over the ideal strategies for the medics. Her dark green orbs danced over the map, stopping here and there as she considered different scenarios. Finally, she raised her head and met his gaze, a determined look on her face.

"All set, Ella?", he asked.

The small girl nodded decisively. "Yes sir." She quickly described her planned course of action, which was met with all around approval.

Ella filled in her colleagues right after the briefing. They sat together while the men around them got ready for battle, checking their gear and weapons a second or third time.

"As by SOP, we'll follow a short distance behind the guys", she said. "Each of us will be attached to a platoon for the initial assault. But when we get into the town, you know how we do it, we're not exclusively responsible for one platoon. Find cover as quickly as possible and stay there until you hear the calls."

Gene and Spina nodded.

"Alright, the attack is gonna kick off at 0900, so I suggest we all rest up a bit now while we still can. Get your gear ready, stock up your supplies if you need to, then sack out", the brunette instructed with a smile.
When the machine guns opened up, spewing covering fire onto the Germans, the company poured out of the woods, anxious to cross the snow-covered field that provided virtually no protection. The three medics stood under the cover of the tree line, fidgeting nervously as they watched their comrades, their friends run towards the town they had been watching for so long.

Ella's teeth dug into her bottom lip as she counted the seconds until all the soldiers were out in the open. Then, on her signal, they burst out of the shelter of the woods.

The Germans didn't wait long to return fire. 88s and tank shells shook the ground while bullets flew through the air. The girl caught up to 1st Platoon just as Bull and Liebgott tossed grenades into a barn. She skidded to a stop, taking cover beside Lieutenant Foley behind a shed.

Out of the blue, Dike screamed: "EASY COMPANY! HOLD UP!"

The brunette froze and ducked on instinct so as not to get hit should the guys redirect their fire. She looked over to 2nd Platoon. They were without cover, kneeling, lying and crouching in the snow while projectiles of various sizes whizzed past them.

Thankfully, Lipton – who was leading 2nd Platoon – bellowed: "Find some cover!" over and over again.

The men were all too happy to comply.

Mentally, Ella was seething.

In her head, she was flinging a tirade at their CO, laced with expletives that would have made her fellow paratroopers blush. On the outside, however, the only signs of her ire were her flashing eyes and the set of her jaw. The artillery hits came closer as the enemy zeroed in on them and she watched as her friends scrambled for cover.

Perconte handed his radio to Foley and from her position, the ranking medic could hear Dike yell at him to "get back here where I can see you, goddamn it!" His voice had taken on a slightly hysterical quality and the brunette couldn't stop a small volley of curses from escaping her, which garnered her a few surprised looks from the men next to her.

Foley rattled off orders to his platoon, telling them to hold up and take cover before he himself left to find out just what the hell their CO was thinking.

They heard Dike shouting: "Fall back! Fall back!"

The artillery gunners had them in their sights. Men got flung through the air like ragdolls as the shells exploded around them.

Ella was biting her lip so hard she was drawing blood. Her boys were dying and there was nothing she could do to help them.

After a moment, though, the desperation turned into fury.

Her temper, well-hidden, hard to ignite and usually quick to cool down again, boiled over. Her
wrought-iron thread of patience had been worn thin by the annoyance about their CO simmering under the surface, adding to the big enough strain that their situation had brought with it.

Now, it snapped.

Leaving their meagre cover, Easy's ranking medic pelted over to the haystacks behind which the officers and a portion of 2nd Platoon had hunkered down. She arrived just in time to hear Dike admit that he didn't know what to do.

"What the fuck is going on?!", she barked over the bombing, which was getting more accurate by the second. She pushed herself through the knot of people and grabbed a fistful of Dike's coat. The flaming mad look on her face was enough to make the others back away slightly.

Nobody dared intervene as the small girl unleashed a storm of epic proportions on the empty uniform that was supposed to be their CO, her tone and expression getting the message across loud and clear even if half the words that surged from her mouth were most definitely not English.

Luz didn't bother to mention that Captain Winters – and possibly others as well – could hear her every word over the radio.

Being read the riot act by someone who was a subordinate, a medic and a female all rolled into one had at least some effect on Dike.

Seeing some clarity return, Ella released him and sat back on her heels, chest heaving with ragged breaths.

He tried to pull himself a bit more upright and muttered: "Okay. Okay" before raising his voice. "Foley! FOLEY!", he yelled, "You take your men-" He paused and it was apparent to everybody that he was doing this on the fly. "You take your men on a flanking mission around the village and attack it from the rear!"

They ducked as another couple of artillery rounds blew up, showering them with dirt, ice splinters and shrapnel.

Lipton bellowed: "We cannot stay here!"

"You want 1st Platoon to go around and attack the village by itself?!", Foley questioned incredulously.

"We will provide suppressing fire", Dike responded, now looking close to tears, completely out of his depth.

Foley's eyebrows shot up and he pointed out bitingly: "We're gonna be kinda alone out there, Lieutenant."

"We will provide suppressing fire!", the CO snapped, slamming his fist down like a kid throwing a tantrum.

The young medic decided to leave it to the officers to hash out the details. Giving Gene, who was crouching behind the haystack as well, a reassuring pat on the shoulder, she dashed back to her assigned platoon, weaving her way around exploding shells and sidestepping bullets. She slid in
behind Martin.

A moment later, Foley appeared next to them, his face a mask of frustration.

"Sir", Johnny acknowledged him, waiting for orders.

Their platoon leader blew out a breath. "Okay, here it is. We go on a flanking run around the back of the village, and we attack from the rear."

Martin turned and selected a Toccoa man. "Ramirez: Two guys, take them. Find some cover behind this table."

It was a complete and utter mess. One of the men got shot down the second he stepped out from behind the shed. The Krauts turned their attention to them, showering 1st Platoon in a hail of bullets as the machine guns shifted their fire. The soldiers reacted without hesitation, opening up on the enemy, trying to keep them pinned so that the guys in the open could move forward and find cover.

The small girl watched the disaster unfold, kneeling there in the dirty melting snow and feeling absolutely powerless.

The guns of the rest of the company came to life, providing suppressing fire for the singled-out platoon.

A shot rang out. Perconte fell backwards with a choked-off cry.

"Perconte!", Ramirez called, "I got you!"

Johnny dashed forward, throwing a clipped "Give me some cover" over his shoulder. He slid behind a board fence and shouted over: "How you doing, Perconte?"

"They shot me in my ass, Martin!", the wounded man hollered back, writhing and trying to get up again.

"Stay down, stay down", Ramirez urged. No need to make an even bigger target out of themselves for the snipers.

Behind the shed, Ella had moved up and was now crouching just behind Bull.

Foley was on the radio with 2nd Platoon. "I think we lost five men! Can you locate?", he called.

She heard Luz' voice relaying: "The building with the caved-in roof!"

The other platoons' guns rattled as they fired upon the sniper perch.

The young medic keenly felt the rage still burning in the pit of her stomach and another string of colourful language slipped from her lips, even as she jumped up and got ready as the soldiers began
to tow their wounded back to cover. She helped Bull lower the wounded Frank to the ground.

The short Italian groaned and the brunette muttered comforting words, shoving away her anger to slip into her medic persona. "Hang in there, Perco, it's not that bad", she soothed, pushing a bandage against the entry wound.

Suddenly, something changed. The sniper perch, the building with the caved-in roof, went up in flames.

Then, they heard Lipton bellowing over the blasts of the tanks: "You heard the word! 2nd Platoon on the CO!"

Foley burst out from behind the shed, hollering: "Okay, First Platoon, move out!"

The small medic finished treating Perconte's wound as best she could.

"Go", he said, giving her a push, "I'm not going anywhere."

Nodding, she followed the men, breaking out into a dead run. She had no idea who the CO was, but she didn't care. Anybody was better than Dike.

As she raced after the men, another enemy sniper shifted his focus onto her. Dodging bullets left and right, the girl ducked behind an upturned cart. Eyes darting back and forth in search of better cover, she spied Luz, hot on the heels of a man with an officer's stripe on his helmet. They were heading for the corner of a house that provided solid cover against bullets at least.

Taking a deep breath, the brunette shot out from behind the cart and veered to the side.

She had always been fast, even as a child. Despite her diminutive size, Ella could build up an impressive speed. Dirt sprayed up where bullets riddled her weaving path. She threw herself forward, narrowly escaping getting shot in the head – again. So viel zur Genfer Konvention.

"Shorty!", Lip cried out.

Hands grabbed her by the jacket and pulled her to relative safety. Luz was on her side, yelling into his radio. On her other side was the CO.

A grin spread on her dirt-streaked face when she recognised the man. Hallelujah!

It was Lieutenant Speirs.

Lipton peered around the corner, scanning the battle field. A burst of machine gun fire shattered the wall right by his face and he jerked back with a yelp, curling up to protect his injury.

Ella leant forward, reaching around the lieutenant to touch Lip's shoulder. Their gazes met and she tilted her head in a silent question, brows furrowed with worry. You okay?

He gave her forearm a pat and she retracted her hand. Then, he turned back to take stock of the situation.
"What do you see, Lipton?", Speirs demanded, filing away the interesting communication between
First Sergeant and ranking medic for later.

"Armoured infantry", Lip reported. "A lot of infantry."

"I Company's supposed to be on the other side of town. Do you see any sign of them?", he asked.
The First Sergeant denied.

Speirs looked at Luz. "Radio, anything?"

"No sir!"

Lip took cover again, back leaning against the wall. "Sir, I think they're gonna pull back", he said,
"If we don't connect with I, they're gonna slip away."

The CO nodded. "That's right. Wait here!" Giving Lip's knee a reassuring pat, he darted out into the
open.

"What the hell?", Luz asked.

The brunette blinked, not really sure if she could trust her eyes. "Genau, was zur Höll", she
muttered.

Lipton raised his M1, covering Speirs as he fearlessly ran through the line of fire.

It was an unbelievable sight. At first, it seemed like the Germans couldn't believe what they were
seeing either, because it took quite a while before they shot at him. Speirs made it through their
lines practically unimpeded, scaling the low stone wall and disappearing from sight. But then, the
most astounding thing happened, something that left the three Easy company members completely
flabbergasted.

He came back.

After hooking up with I Company, Speirs pulled himself over the wall again and came back.
Nobody fired at him as he barrelled back towards Easy's position.

Lip turned to look at his friends, a smile on his face. Luz was grinning and a wide smile was
tugging at Ella's bloody lip. This was a man they would follow. This was someone who deserved
the title Commanding Officer.

They took over a hundred German prisoners. Ella asked them to report any injuries they had so
they could be treated. Her calm, polite demeanour helped dispel the initial scepticism and
reluctance and the Germans complied. There weren't many wounded and they were on their best
behaviour – probably due to the soldiers guarding them and because they hadn't expected the
medic in charge to be a woman – so the medics' work was soon done.

Suddenly, shots were fired and men went down.
"Sniper!", somebody yelled.

"Take cover, take cover!", Lipton shouted.

The brunette scrambled behind a corner and pushed herself as far back as she could. She hadn't seen any muzzle flashes, so she had no idea if she actually was safe.

Then, the shooting stopped. Ella didn't move a muscle. She didn't trust this silence.

True enough, another shot rang out.

Scanning the now empty square, she nearly jumped in surprise as somebody broke cover and ran directly into the line of fire. It was Lipton, she realised, who was making the suicide run across the square. The sniper fired again and the bullet hit the dirt mere inches away from Lip's boot.

The next shot came from a different rifle.

Lipton reached the building where she was cowering and slid down the wall, panting.

Cheers went up from the guys. Thank God for Shifty Powers.

The small girl scooted over to the First Sergeant, eyes filled with worry. "Don't do that to me", she reproached while her fingers gently probed the bleeding cut on his face.

He looked contrite and apologised breathlessly: "Sorry, Shorty", giving her a reassuring smile.

After that, it was clean-up. The medics set up their temporary aid station and got to work treating their wounded.

Ella couldn't hold back a giggle when Bull came in carrying Perconte on his back, walking nonchalantly as if he didn't feel the hundred odd pounds of added weight. It brought light into the aid station, a sense of ease that the men had all been missing for a while now.

"How are you holding up, Perco?", she asked after getting the short Italian settled on the make-shift table.

He shrugged. "Beautiful wound, Shorty", he commented. If his pallor and the light sheen of sweat on his forehead said anything, he was in more pain than he cared to admit.

"I'll give you some morphine", the ranking medic said, "then we'll see about getting the bullet out."

Frank nodded and after the morphine was administered, he was soon out like a light.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
So viel zur Genfer Konvention: So much for the Geneva Convention
Genau, was zur Höll': Exactly, what the hell
Chapitre Résumé

Easy enjoys a brief respite as they find shelter in a convent before heading out again.

Ella got called to the CP in the evening. Lieutenant Speirs accompanied her. They trudged through the snow, the newly appointed CO of Easy Company noting that the small girl was shivering badly. Still, her steps never faltered.

"Are you alright, Sergeant?", he inquired.

She nodded and replied softly: "Yes sir." She hesitated, then added: "Glad it's over, sir."

He frowned. "Glad that what is over?"

The brunette looked up at him, her dark green eyes sincere and warm. They were slightly red-rimmed and had dark circles underneath. "That Dike is no longer in charge of Easy, sir", she spoke candidly.

Speirs nodded. "I heard you were quite expressive of your opinion today", he commented neutrally.

The news that the young medic had torn a strip off the inept former CO had spread like wildfire. The men had hooted and laughed and Luz had proudly proclaimed: "I tell you, fellas, our girl sure lets ya know when she's pissed!"

Alley had agreed whole-heartedly. "I never wanna see her so angry again. If it had been me, I would have shit my pants, I won't lie."

Ella flushed right to the tips of her ears and kept her gaze firmly on the ground. With all the gossip factory working overtime, it had only been a matter of time until Captain Winters, or Colonel Sink, caught wind of her misconduct on the battle field today.

Still, she didn't regret it. Dike had put the entire company in jeopardy with his inability to make decisions and as a medic and a decent human being, it was her job, her duty to look after her friends, her brothers. If it got her kicked out, at least she knew she had done the right thing.

When they reached the CP, the Battalion XO and S3 were already waiting for them. Speirs took up position behind the two, crossing his arms and watching silently, his unreadable gaze on the ranking medic.

She swallowed nervously, her fingers fiddling with a loose thread on the sleeve of her jacket as anxiety began to itch in her frayed nerves. "Sir, I apologise for my inappropriate behaviour today", she said, automatically coming to attention, "I was out of line and I accept any punishment you see fit."
"You won't be court-martialled, kid", Nixon assured her right off the bat, never one to beat around the bush. That look of apprehension mixed with guilt and a dash of unconcealable fear in her eyes bothered him and he saw no need to torment the girl any more.

The tension didn't leave her body, but the fear in her gaze faded.

Captain Winters traded a glance with his friend, then took a few steps towards the brunette. "You remember when Lt Heyliger got shot in Holland, Shorty?", he asked, careful to keep his voice calm. She was on edge, no wonder after all the company had gone through.

Ella nodded. "Yes sir." How could she forget? She and Gene had both lost their cool then, too. They had scolded Winters and Welsh for accidentally giving Moose an overdose of morphine.

"And do you remember what I told you when you came to apologise the day after the incident?", the former leader of Easy Company inquired, studying the small medic.

"You...gave me permission to be out of line...", she started slowly, realisation spreading on her face.

"...whenever you deem it necessary", Winters finished, smiling lightly. "Exactly. And today, it wasn't just necessary, it was vital. By intervening the way you did, you saved dozens of lives, Ella. If you hadn't given Lieutenant Dike a piece of your mind, this assault would have ended in a bloodbath."

The officers watched as a myriad of emotions flickered across her young features. Then, she blushed a deep shade of pink and stammered: "Y-you heard me?"

Nixon grinned. "Half the Ardennes heard you, Shorty. But yeah, we got to witness your beautiful harangue thanks to Luz."

"Luz? What's Luz- Oh my God, the radio." Ella buried her face in her hands, completely mortified. How could she have been so stupid?! Luz had been right next to her, the radio receiver held out to Dike.

Winters chuckled and put an appeasing hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry about it, Shorty. We're all just glad that you're with Easy, looking out for the guys."

She lowered her hands and managed a bashful smile. "Thank you, sir."

After she was dismissed, the young girl returned to the aid station and saw her colleagues leaning on various surfaces, looking ready to drop.

"Go on", she encouraged, "get some sleep. I'll just go and have Luz ask for evacs."

Gene and Spina sent her grateful looks, settled down where they were and fell asleep in a matter of seconds.

Smiling fondly, the ranking medic grabbed a couple of blankets to cover her friends with. With a last cursory glance around the quiet room, she left to find George to call in transport for the
Unfortunately, there was no evac available for the casualties of Foy. Also, Easy Company wasn't taken off the line, no matter how much they deserved and needed a breather. Instead, the brass wanted them to join the attack on Noville, which was set to take place two days after Foy.

When Ella heard the news, she just sighed and plastered an optimistic smile onto her face. She didn't have the energy to get worked up over it. She was too tired.

"C'mon", she said to Spina and Gene. "Let's go."

They took Noville.

After the wounded were seen to, the three medics dropped right where they were, curling up on a piece of floor. Mud and blood stained their uniforms, their fingers were caked with it. But they didn't care. They were too tired to even think about finding themselves a more comfortable place to sleep. They fell asleep instantly and nobody had the heart to wake them.

Then, after Noville, they took Rachamps.

They spent the night in the convent of Rachamps. For Easy Company, it was the first time they slept inside in a month.

Ella's eyes were burning with exhaustion by the time she finally slumped down into a pew next to Luz. Spina and Gene had ganged up on her and told her in no uncertain terms that she was to get some sleep, no buts.

"We'll take care of the wounded, you take care of yourself tonight, Ellie", Gene had said, fixing her with a stern look.

Too wiped out to argue, the small girl had relented.

She let Luz manhandle her into lying down, her head pillowed on his lap. She peered over at Lipton, who was going through her reports and trying to put together a roster. Sadness filled her. She knew the score. The numbers had burned themselves into her mind.

They had left Mourmelon with 121 men and officers. While in Belgium, they had received 24 replacements.

Of those 145, only 63 were left.

Blinking blearily, the young medic rubbed her forehead and heaved a sigh. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes and she raised her gaze to look at the ceiling. Luz' fingers ran through her hair. Some of the tension that had been her constant companion over the past few weeks drained away and she let the soothing voices of the sisters' choir wash over her.
The pew creaked quietly when Lip got up to give his report to their new CO. The brunette watched them silently.

Speirs got up and said: "Well, I better get back to Battalion before they disappear."

Ella's lips twitched with the ghost of an amused smirk.

He began to gather his gear while he turned back to Lipton. "You wanna ask me, don't you?"

"Ask you what, sir?", Lip questioned with a disarming smile.

"You wanna know if they're true or not, the stories about me."

Lip stayed silent, not trying to deny it.

Speirs continued. He sounded calm, neither insulted nor defensive. "You ever noticed with stories like that, everyone says they heard it from someone who was there. But then when you ask that person, they say they heard it from someone who was there. Nothing new really. I bet if you went back 2000 years, you'd hear a couple of centurions standing around and yakking about how Tertius lobbed off the heads of Carthaginian prisoners."

Lip smiled and offered: "Well... maybe they kept talking about it because they never heard Tertius deny it."

The lieutenant slung his rifle over his shoulder and grabbed his helmet. "Maybe that's because Tertius knew there was some value to the men thinking he was the meanest, thoughest son of a bitch in the whole Roman Legion." He gave Lip a small, sincere smile.

"Like never having to share his smokes", Ella chimed in, voice pitched just at a whisper.

Luz, Lip and Speirs, the only three men who had heard her, chuckled.

Speirs nodded, corner of his mouth curling into an amused smirk. "For example."

Halfway lulled to sleep by Luz' hand smoothing her locks, her gaze slowly trailed over to Lipton.

"Hey Sarge?", she asked, peering up at him, looking young and innocent.

"Yeah, Shorty?"

"Who the hell's Tertius?"

He smiled and shared an amused glance with Luz. Producing a blanket from thin air, he spread it over her, tucking her in. "Go to sleep, Shorty", he chided lightly.

Eyes already reduced to slits, the small girl mumbled a sleepy "Yessir", then her lids closed.
The next day, they moved out again. Not to Mourmelon, though. They were bound for Haguenau to help hold the line against the German counter offensive in the Alsace. It was off the front lines and Ella was grateful for small mercies. The brunette was snuggled between Christenson and Babe on the truck. Her entire body hurt from all the shivering, her bones aching from the cold that had settled in them.

As they pulled out, Luz commented: "Hey, look. It's 1st Battalion."

He leant forward and called: "Hey! HEY!"

"Whaddaya want?", one of the men walking below asked, annoyed.

"Yeah, thanks for crapping in our foxholes, you shitheads", Luz grumbled.

Ella chuckled. She could still hear Toye ranting to her about that.

"Look at this shit!", he had exclaimed, gesturing irately. "These fuckers!"

One of the men from 1st Battalion grinned and gave a sloppy salute. "Hey, it's our pleasure!", he called back with a laugh.

"Enjoy the walk, boys", Bull drawled, smirking around his cigar stump.

"There they go", somebody said, "Easy Company's riding out again."

The ranking medic smiled to herself. *That's right. Here we go again.*
Haguenau

Chapter Summary

Easy is moved to Haguenau despite earlier promises of getting pulled off the line. Sickness strikes key members of the company.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lipton was sick. He tried to hide it, of course, but the medics soon cottoned on. It didn't take long for Ella to diagnose him with pneumonia. The crackling of his lungs was a dead give-away. Stubborn as he was, he refused to go to the aid station. Not that anybody would have expected anything different. She gave him penicillin, wrapped him in a blanket and kept a close eye on him. As they were bound for Haguenau, there wasn't much else she could do.

On the trucks, the girl used the chance to get some rest herself. She was still cold and miserable and she could feel the fever tugging at her, just waiting for a chance to sweep in and fully seize her in its clutches. Therefore, she wanted to conserve as much energy as possible. Wedged between Liebgott and Babe, with a blanket tucked around her shivering frame, she managed to drop off into a light doze that sometimes deepened into actual sleep.

The men on the truck glanced at her from time to time, glad that their small friend was finally getting some sleep. The rings under her eyes had darkened with each night she had stayed up in the miserable forest, making rounds and doing her utmost to keep their spirits up. Each of them had wondered at some point how Ella handled this huge responsibility, how she coped with all the stress. Those who were closest to her, however, had their suspicions that the brunette was worse off than she let on.

Ella woke when wet snow hit her face. Nose wrinkling in discomfort, she made a reluctant noise at the back of her throat and opened her eyes. "Verdammt, Petrus, mir wüssten au so dass Winter ish", she grumbled at the grey sky.

Babe, whose arm was slung around her shoulders to keep her warm and in her seat as the truck bounced over the seven hundredth pothole, looked down at her. "If you was talking to me, you gotta try again in English, Shorty", he said, a smirk on his face.

Rubbing her eyes, the brunette shook her head. "Nothing worth mentioning", she said, burying deeper into the blanket. If only she could stop shivering!

Another blanket appeared in front of her and got draped over her.

She raised her head and smiled at Malarkey. "Thanks, Malark."

"Anytime, Shorty. Least we can do", he waved it off.

The ranking medic gave him another warm smile and closed her eyes again. He had lost 5 of his best friends in Bastogne and now he had the
added responsibility of being a Platoon Sergeant. He was struggling. His eyes, once bright and filled with laughter, had lost their light. She tried to help him and she was slowly making inroads, but he desperately needed a break from the constant pain and death around them.

She had just slipped back into the comfortable place between sleep and waking when the truck jolted as it hit another pothole. The violent jerk nearly knocked her off the bench and into Liebgott.

"Sorry, Lieb", she apologised distractedly, burrowing deeper into the blanket.

He winked at her and wrapped his arm around her as well. "Ah, don't worry about it, kid." His smirk turned into a frown when he noticed the warmth radiating off her. Reaching up, he touched her forehead. His concern rose. "Shit, you're burning up, Shorty."

Ella sighed. "I know, I got a temperature, just like half the company."

McClung leant forward, worry etched into his features. "You're sick?", he asked.

She shrugged. "Who isn't?", she asked back. Noticing the worried looks, she said: "Honestly guys, I'm fine. It's just a fever, not pneumonia." She let a small smile ghost across her lips to reassure them.

"Sergeant Lipton's got pneumonia, right?", Jackson inquired.

The small medic nodded. "Yes he does", she confirmed, "but he'll be fine, too. Once we're in Haguenau, I'll get him to rest."

"Good luck with that", Liebgott snorted, getting a round of quiet chortles from the guys. They all knew Lip. Though, on second thought, they also knew their girl. It was a tossup who would out-stubborn the other.

Ella chuckled quietly, glad that the mood had lightened a little.

The next time she was pulled from her sleep, it was when somebody called: "Hey guys!"

It took her a moment to put a face to the gratingly cheerful voice. David Webster. He was a Toccoa man and had been... yeah, where had he been? He had been wounded during the battle at the crossroads on The Island, but it hadn't been a life-threatening injury. She had expected him to return while the company had still been resting and re-equipping at Mourmelon, but he had never showed up.

Guess he was in no hurry to re-join us. Not that she was particularly surprised. Webster wasn't a soldier in that sense. He did his duty, but nothing more. He never volunteered for anything and passed up any promotion that he was offered. So she should have known that he would follow the doctors' orders and go through the normal process of rehabilitation and the replacement depot instead of going AWOL like so many others had done.
The ranking medic kept her eyes closed and listened as the scene unfolded. She could almost taste the bitterness of her friends in her mouth. For such a highly educated man, Webster sure did a good job ticking off the men with his insensitive questions. When he asked about Guarnere, she couldn't take it any longer. She still hadn't really dealt with all the emotions she had bottled up inside her and being reminded of her friends by the clueless man hurt.

"Webster, do us a favour and please stop talking", she said quietly, eyes snapping open to pin him with a hard look. It didn't take a genius to notice if something was a sore topic and if he had been accepted into Harvard, he surely couldn't be that stupid.

He swallowed, shifting uncomfortably.

The truck jerked to a stop and Ella tore her gaze away from Webster. She had other, more pressing things to do than explain tact to an upper-class guy. Jumping down, she turned to Malarkey. "I'll come by to check on you guys later, okay?", she told him with a gentle smile, handing him back the blanket he had given her. The other stayed wrapped around her shoulders.

He nodded. He had yet to tell her how much he appreciated her efforts. He knew himself well enough to know that mentally, he was in a pretty bad place. The small girl's friendly presence and unconditional support helped immensely.

"Thanks, Shorty", he just said.

Her hand briefly squeezed his shoulder, letting him know that she understood.

"Sarge?" Webster reached Malarkey and Ella just as she turned to leave.

An incoming shell whistled over their heads.

The brunette didn't even bother looking up, already knowing from the sound that it was going to miss them by a good hundred yards. She simply kept walking, not exactly scared. Sure, shrapnel could fly quite a distance, but not through the solid wall which was between her and the place where the shell would go down.

She passed Captain Speirs – he had been promoted a few days after being appointed Easy's CO – who was standing in the middle of the road, calm as you please. Nodding at him in greeting, the ranking medic continued on her way.

Inside the CP, she made a beeline for the First Sergeant. Luz was talking with him while Lipton was in the process of shedding his webbing.

"Hi Sarge, George bullying you into lying down?", she quipped, taking off her helmet and putting it on the dusty piano.

Luz grinned around his cigarette, while Lip managed a tired smile. "He's trying", he offered.

"I'll leave it to you, Shorty, I bet you got better luck, being a pretty girl an' all", the radioman joked.
She rolled her eyes and gave him a good-natured shove. He retaliated by ruffling her hair, then ambled away to attend to the rest of his numerous duties.

The small girl helped Lip take off his webbing.

"Alright, let's get you settled", she said, guiding him over to the old couch in the middle of the room.

He didn't put up a fight, probably because he knew arguing with a medic on a mission was no use. He sat down with a groan and sank into the surprisingly comfortable cushions while Ella plopped herself down next to him, digging through her satchel for a thermometer.

"I know you don't like it, but you need to rest, Lip", the brunette implored the sick man. "It won't help anyone if you put yourself out of commission for even longer because you didn't give your body time to fight the illness. Pneumonia's no picnic."

He sighed. "I know, I know. It's just..."

"...you don't want to feel useless", she finished for him, an empathetic smile glowing warmly in her eyes. "I understand, Lip."

Popping the thermometer in his mouth, she ran a hand through her hair and swallowed a yawn. Despite spending most of the journey here asleep, she didn't feel in the least refreshed.

Luz came back, a report in his outstretched hand. Since Bastogne, he had been doubling as a supply officer and now, he had a lot to do. Cataloguing the new supplies and distributing them between the platoons, trying to figure out how to make the most of their too small shipments...

"Hey, look who it is!", he called, greeting the entering Webster as if he'd been gone for years. Looking down and taking in Lip's slumped posture, he cracked: "Nice digs, huh, Lip?", handing him the report.

"Yeah", the First Sergeant agreed around the thermometer, reading through the supply list.

The small medic pulled off the blanket wrapped around her shoulders and draped it over him, tucking him in with care. He gave her a look of amused incredulity. She responded with a sweet, innocent smile and took the thermometer from his mouth again. Glancing at it, she put it in one of her many pockets and got to her feet. "Still a bit high. I'll go see if we have any fever-reducers around, Lip. That would help you feel better", she spoke.

He nodded tiredly. "Thanks, Ella."

"Just doing my job, Sarge", the brunette replied with a smile. Pausing to grab her helmet, she rubbed her eyes with a small, weary grimace.

"You alright, kiddo?", Luz asked, studying her with barely concealed worry.

"Uh-huh", she responded vaguely. "I'll be right back, Lip."

He made a weak 'take your time'-motion with the report in his hand. "I'm not going anywhere, Shorty", he assured her.

"That's right, I won't let him", Luz piped up, winking at her. It got him a soft laugh from the young
medic and he shared a glance with Lip. They had both seen the shadows in her eyes, had seen them before, and knew that their girl was in a worse place than she wanted them to think.

The brunette headed over to the dry, spacious cellar they had commandeered as their make-shift aid station. Her fellow medics looked up when she came in.

"Hey Ellie", Gene greeted. "We got any supplies yet?"

She shook her head. "Vest and Luz are still sorting them out. I'll bring them over as soon as they're done." Scratching the side of her nose, she addressed her reason for coming: "Listen, we got any fever-reducers around? Lip's temperature is still high."

Scanning the equipment spread out on the tables, Spina shook his head. "I don't see any", he said regretfully.

"Alright", she sighed, raking dirty fingers through her equally dirty hair. "I guess I'll just have to make my own, then."

Spina frowned. "What do you mean?"

Ella smiled. "I'm going to mix a remedy my Grandma taught me." She started browsing through their supplies. "Let's hope we can get everything I need."

Between the three of them, they actually managed to get all the necessary ingredients.

Mixing them together according to a recipe only known to her, the ranking then poured some of the steaming liquid into a cup. "Well", she commented with a nonchalant shrug, setting aside the rest of the concoction for later use, "Lip might hate me afterwards, but at least it's going to help."

Returning to the CP, Ella didn't even notice the new arrival, a young lieutenant. She reclaimed her seat on the edge of the couch and handed the mug to Lipton, dropping her helmet down onto the floor.

"Here you go, Lip", she said, "Oma Johanna's recipe. Cures everything from a cold to stomach ulcers."

Lip glanced back and forth between the remedy and the girl. Her lips were quirked into her usual lopsided smile with the one dimple. But he knew she was also ill. Doc Roe had told him last night. She had a fever and looking at her now, he could see it, too. Her eyes were red-rimmed and slightly glazed and the pallor of her normally sun-tanned skin had changed from 'cold and exhausted' to 'cold, exhausted and sick'.

"You should lie down, Shorty", he said, more than a suggestion behind his tone.

Lieutenant Jones had been thoroughly baffled to see the small medic come in and walk straight past him to the couch without saluting any of the higher-ranking men in the room.
Even after she had taken off her helmet, it took him an embarrassingly long time to realise that this was none other than Ella Sawyer, the first female combat medic. He watched as she interacted with the First Sergeant, completely at ease and not bothering with military curtesy.

"So should you, Sarge", the brunette countered cheekily.

Lip wondered how she found the energy to be so upbeat despite being sick. He conceded, tentatively sniffing the steaming concoction. It was of an undefined brown colour and reminded him of thin, watery coffee.

"You should drink that in one go", she advised.

Deciding that it was bound to taste unpleasant, he took a deep breath – or as deep a breath as his lungs allowed – and knocked it back.

Immediately, his taste buds screamed and some would have fainted if that were possible. His face screwed up into a grimace as he forced himself to swallow the awful brew. "Jesus", he wheezed out, "what the hell was in that?"

Eyebrows furrowing together in a sympathetic wince, she asked, a doubtful expression on her face: "You really wanna know?"

Lipton shook his head emphatically and put the empty cup away. "No!" Giving her a stern look, the First Sergeant insisted: "Now lie down, Ella."

Chuckling softly, the brunette scooted over to the other end of the couch, curling up with her head on the arm rest.

Luz, who had appeared out of nowhere again, came over and fusséd with the blanket. It was big enough to cover both occupants of the sofa and he gently covered the resting girl.

Only a minute later, Captain Speirs burst into the room. He first caught sight of Lipton on the couch, then of the small bundle that was Easy's ranking medic. By the fireplace, the green Lieutenant snapped to attention. He paid him no mind.

Ella raised her head slightly and blinked at her CO with an innocent smile. "Hi, sir."

He noted that her eyes were bright with fever.

"Captain Speirs, sir", Lip spoke, gesturing towards the replacement officer, "this is, ah, Lieutenant Jones."

The brunette's eyes flickered over to the man. "Oh", she made. "Sorry, I didn't see you, sir", she apologised, looking genuinely troubled over her mistake.

Speirs ignored the introduction and rolled his eyes. "Lipton, for Christ sake! Will you two go back in the back and sack out?", he snapped around his cigarette, pilfered loot clutched in his hands.
"There are some beds back there with fresh sheets!"

His entire body language showed that he was seriously questioning the sanity of the two sick people sharing the sofa.

Ella giggled quietly and pulled herself into a semi-upright position, not in the least affected by the commanding officer's bark.

"Listen to the CO, Lip", she teased.

He kicked her boot, fond amusement spread on his features.

Speirs turned his glare onto her. "You, too, Shorty." Even he had adopted her nickname after she had told him straight-out that only replacements and outsiders called her by rank and last name.

"I will", the girl shrugged, unconcerned by the intense stare. "After I've checked on the boys and signed off on the medical supplies", she replied resolutely.

The Captain rolled his eyes in exasperation, muttered something about stubborn NCOs and marched over to Vest to hand him the spoils of war he had collected.

Chapter End Notes

Verdammt, Petrus, mir wüssen au so dass Winter ish: Damnit, Saint Peter, we already know that it's winter. (In the German-speaking world, Saint Peter is commonly regarded as the patron of the weather. He is often jokingly cursed or complained to when the weather is bad.)
Resignation

Chapter Summary

Orders for a mission come down from HQ. Nobody is happy about it.

Chapter Notes

It is really weird to be posting a chapter taking place in the middle of winter that has everyone constantly freezing and sick when it's currently 35 degrees (Celsius) outside and I feel like twenty seconds away from melting... And it doesn't help me write a chapter set in Bastogne for my other BoB fanfiction (which I haven't gotten around to posting here yet...)

Also, sorry for the irregular updates, I wish I could say they'd become more regular, but real life is such a mess right now that I sometimes literally forget I have an account on AO3... I hope you forgive me :))

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Captains Winters and Nixon entered the room, the young medic immediately knew that something was up. Winters had been promoted to Battalion CO after Foy when Colonel Strayer had moved up to Regiment.

The look on his face spoke volumes, so Ella sat up and focused on him.

"Listen up", Winters spoke, drawing all attention to him. "Regiment wants a patrol for prisoners."

He glanced at the brunette and saw her shoulders slump as an invisible weight slammed back onto them.

"This one comes straight from Colonel Sink", Nixon piped up, "so it's not my idea."

"Oh super", Ella thought to herself. It sure wasn't a good sign if Nix was passing the buck. *Grandios, usgerechnet jetzt.*

Winters stepped into the room and continued: "Since the river is the main line of resistance, we're going to have to cross it to get to them."

"What do we need to do?", asked Speirs, eyes riveted to the redhead. He, and nearly everybody else in the room, knew that Winters had a plan. He always did.

"There's a three-story building on the enemy side, up the embankment", the Battalion commander explained. "We know it's occupied. You can have fifteen men, think very hard who you want to lead the patrol." His sharp gaze added weight to his words. "You'll need a lead scout, a translator", he listed before trailing off.
He knew that Speirs knew what kind of men were needed for such an operation. They had run enough of them. To finish his outline, he added: "I've got the entire battalion on covering fire."

"When?", Speirs inquired.

"Tonight, 0100."

"Yes sir." His mind was already sifting through the possibilities, thinking over who he wanted for the job.

Winters spoke up again: "Speirs?"

The CO raised his gaze.

"I want this one to be as fool-proof and as safe as possible", the Captain insisted.

"Yeah, don't take any chances on this one", Nixon added seriously. "We're too far along for that."

Winters and Speirs stepped into a corner to discuss who should go on the patrol.

Ella shared a long look with Lipton, then twisted to peer over the backrest when her name was called. "Yes sir?", she asked, sliding out from under the blanket and joining the two Captains.

"I need a medic on this patrol", Winters informed her, a silent apology in his tone. "Who you send is your call."

The brunette sighed. "You already know who I'm going to send, sir", she replied, resignation filling her voice.

Speirs frowned in concern. "Are you sure you're up for this?", he wanted to know. "By rights, you should be in bed."

"By rights, we should all be off the line in Mourmelon", she retorted wearily. "I'm fine, sir."

Both officers still looked unconvinced, studying the small girl and taking in just how ill and exhausted she was. Her beautiful orbs only had a dull, dim glimmer in them.

Finally, Captain Winters nodded. He knew that glint of stubborn determination which grew in her eyes the longer he looked at her. She would not be swayed.

Seeing Winters' nod, Speirs also relented. "Alright, Ella. But you sack out until it's time to assemble, understood? Do what you have to, then come back. If you're not back in an hour and I don't get a report that you're asleep on a bunk somewhere, I'll come and drag you back here myself. Briefing's at 1700 and you will get some sleep before that."

Hiding a smile at his threat, she nodded. "Yes sir."

Beneath that distant, rock-hard exterior, the CO was actually a good man with a heart. It was easily visible from the way he interacted with Lipton. The two of them had developed a relationship similar to the one Winters and Nixon had.
Grabbing her helmet, Ella took a moment to make sure her remedy for Lip was starting to take effect. Then, with a light pat on the shoulder from Nixon, she left the CP.

After popping in on 1st Platoon, the ranking medic climbed the stairs to OP2, 2nd's temporary residence. Entering the room, she greeted the men with an easy smile. Malarkey, who was standing by the radio, returned her smile with one that almost reached his eyes. "How's it going?", he asked.

Flopping down onto an empty chair, she gratefully accepted the cup of coffee Grant offered her. "Speirs ordered me to grab some shut-eye", she announced to the room. "Said he'll hunt me down if he finds out I'm not asleep in...", she glanced at her watch, "forty minutes."

Taking a sip of coffee, she closed her eyes in bliss, relishing the warmth the beverage spread in her stomach.

"Good", Liebgott stated, smirking when she cracked an eyelid to glare at him half-heartedly.

"Yeah", Grant agreed. "You're ill, Shorty, you need the sleep."

"We all need sleep", she pointed out, shifting a little.

While she was touched by their concern, getting mollycoddled by a company full of seasoned and battle-weary soldiers was an odd experience. Sure, they were protective of her, similar to the way brothers would look after their younger sister, but even after nearly three years, she had some difficulties accepting what she sometimes feared would be regarded as 'special treatment' or 'favouritism' by others. Insecurities like that didn't disappear over night.

"You need it more. You got next to none in that fucking forest cause you was always busy lookin' after us", Babe drawled, his Philly accent thick from his own tiredness.

"Alright, alright", Ella surrendered, "I still got time, so I'm gonna check on 3rd." She stood and drained the last of her coffee. "Oh, by the way, we got a new Lieutenant."

Ramirez scoffed. "Jeez, what's that make now? Fifteen?" Since D-Day, they'd had over a dozen replacement lieutenants. Some had stayed a while, some had washed out after barely a week.

"Something like that", Malarkey offered.

The brunette shrugged. "I think so. Right, I'll see you later, boys. Gotta go before Speirs drags me back to the CP by the ear." With a cheerful grin, she bounded down the stairs again, the laughter of the men following her.

"Ella!"
Doc Mampre, formerly from Easy, now assigned to Dog Company, came rushing towards her where she was on her way back from 3rd Platoon. "I need your help!", he panted, skidding to halt next to the girl.

Not asking any questions, Ella followed her colleague as they hurried to the aid station D Company had set up. He lead her over to a table where a lieutenant rested. The man's skin was flushed with fever and he was unconscious.

"Lieutenant Davis. Injured by a shoe mine", Mampre explained. "Now the wound is infected and I don't know where to start. If we don't do something, he won't make it until evacuation. You were a nurse before the war, you got more training and experience." The words tumbled out of his mouth in a rush as he gestured agitatedly.

She nodded and gave him a smile. "It's okay", she reassured him, putting a hand on his shoulder to soothe his frazzled nerves. "Let's start with the basics, okay? Did you give him penicillin?"

He took a deep breath and tried to regain his professional composure. "Yeah. Last night when he came in and another dose just now. He also got morphine, that's why he's unresponsive."

"Good. Do you know if they put sulfa on the wound?", the girl asked, moving to examine the patient.

"No idea", Mampre confessed, helping her pry away the bandages.

The strong smell of infection hit their noses. The wound was red and inflamed, with pus leaking in a few spots.

"Looks like we're gonna have to drain it", she commented, already rolling up her sleeves and disinfecting her hands with iodine.

Mampre spread out all the necessary equipment, then said: "You do it. I don't think I can." He showed her his hands.

They were trembling and judging by his pallor, it was a mixture of nerves and exhaustion. They had all suffered in those woods and the medics were still trying to recover from their sleep deprivation.

Taking a steadying breath, Easy's ranking medic nodded.

"Okay. Let's do this." She held out her hand, eyes fixed on the angry wound. "Scalpel."

She was on her way back from Dog's aid station and had just rounded a corner when the mortars started again. Ducking behind a pile of sandbags, the brunette listened for any shells that might come too close.

Luckily, the Germans were just taking pot shots and most of the hits did nothing but spray up dirt
and debris. Still, the brunette waited until the all-clear came. She couldn't take any chances, not now. They had lost too many people already.

"Somebody's been hit!"

_Bitte nid scho widr_. Dashing up the street, Ella quickly recognised the casualty. Sergeant Kiehn. Only minutes before, he had showed her the sprouts he had found in one of the empty houses, grinning like he had just hit the jackpot.

Kneeling down, she reached up to feel for a pulse. Sadly enough, she wasn't even surprised anymore when she didn't find one. Sighing, she pushed her helmet back and fished her EMT booklet from her pocket.

"Ellie." Gene crouched down beside her, face clouded with sadness and worry. "Je prends soin de lui. Vas dormir, petite."

She nodded. "Merci Gene", she muttered.

He was worried about his young colleague. She was sick and exhausted. The thick black smudges under her eyes stood out darker than ever against her pale face and the expression deep in her green orbs was troubling. She tried not to let anything on, but he knew for a fact that she hadn't grieved properly yet for all the men they had lost in Bastogne, for her friends.

And he was sure she hadn't really dealt with the loss of her close friends, Joe Toye and Bill Guarnere, either.

A crowd had gathered around them. Christenson knelt down beside his friend. Alley stood staring blankly at the body, mumbling: "I just left him. I was on my way back."

Speirs arrived just as Ella got up to leave. He pushed his way through the crowd and assessed the scene. He took a brief moment, looking away and running a hand over his face, pinching the bridge of his nose for a moment.

Then, he took charge, assigning Christenson and Jackson to help with the body with nothing but a quick gesture and a soft word. Scanning the crowd, he found Malarkey and tasked him with looking after Alley before a small figure walking away caught his eye.

An arm wrapped itself around Ella's shoulders, making her jump. Turning her head, she was met with an unreadable look from her CO. "Where're we going?", she asked as he steered her into a different direction than the CP.

"Showers."

She blinked, not sure if she had heard him right. _I must be sicker than I thought_.

Her puzzled expression seemed to amuse Speirs as his lips pulled up into a tiny smile. "Showers,
He wasn't prepared for the brunette to miss a step and nearly fall over. "Whoa, easy there." He caught her in time, steadying her until she found her feet again. Should he really let her on the patrol tonight?

"Showers", she gushed, unaffected by her stumble. Her face was glowing with sheer joy. "Really, sir?"

Her hopeful puppy dog eyes made him wonder just how old the ranking medic really was, because right now, she looked like a young girl who had been presented with the prospect of getting the toy she had been denied many times before. Excited, but cautious.

"Look ahead and tell me what you see", he instructed.

She stayed silent for a moment, studying the shower tent contemplatively. Then, a beaming grin lit up her features. "Endlich", she said with a happy sigh. It had been months since her last shower and she couldn't wait to feel warm and clean, if only for a little while.

The small medic let Speirs guide her to the only private shower stall in the tent. He waited for her to take off her helmet, satchel and webbing.

She undid her bun, letting the dirty locks tumble down. They fell past her shoulders, too long for regulations. But who cared about that? None of them were dressed or groomed according to regulations.

He didn't bat an eyelid when he saw the definitely non-regulation knife she added to the pile. He simply dropped her shower kit into her hands and said: "I'll stand guard", then pulled the curtain closed.

After staring at the shadow beyond the curtain for few seconds, Ella shook herself out of her daze and stripped out of her ODs, which were by now stiff with dirt. Grimacing at the appalling state of her body, the brunette reached up and turned the showerhead on, muscles stiffening in anticipation of the cold splash that was going to hit her face as it always did back home.

Instead, she spluttered in surprise as an instant curtain of warm water cascaded down on her.

She ran her fingers through her lengthening hair, watching in disgust as a stream of murky, brown water pooled around her feet. Her fingers worked systematically through her mess of curls, disentangling strand after strand. Lathering up, she started humming under her breath as the warm water eased knots in her muscles, chased away the ache in her bones and soothed her tormented soul.

Outside, Speirs heard the young medic's soft tune and found himself listening. She had a pleasant voice, he noted.
In the tent, the men shared looks and smiles. It had been too long since any of them had heard their
girl sing or hum like that, seemingly without a care in the world.

With her hair finally clean, Ella started on her body. Scrubbing every inch of skin, she got rid of
the many layers of filth, grime and dried blood that had gathered over the last months. The various
scars on her body resurfaced from under the dirt as well as the freckles on her nose and cheeks.
Shutting off the water, she wrung out her hair, the excess water hitting the ground with a splash.

Before she could reach for her old uniform, the curtain moved. Startled, the girl took an
involuntary step back. But the fabric was only opened a tiny slit and a set of clean ODs was slipped
through. Carefully inching closer, she was beyond relieved that the curtain didn't move any further.
Taking the proffered uniform, she just managed a strangled thanks. The hand retreated, the stall
once again sealed.

Sliding into fresh underwear and a set of new clothes, the brunette actually teared up a bit. For the
first time since leaving Mourmelon, she was clean, dry and warm! Sniffling quietly, she noticed
that her old, scuffed boots had been replaced with a new pair. Apparently, the winter shoe packs
had arrived. *Im Februar, jetzt wo dr winter sho fash widr vorbei ish.* She put on the warm socks,
then slipped into the new boots. Lacing them up, Ella found a scarf and a pair fingerless gloves in
the pockets of her jacket. Sighing happily, she slid the curtain back and stepped out.

Speirs turned and had to do a double take. He had known that Easy's ranking medic was a pretty
girl, hell, even under three months' worth of filth it had been visible. Now, without the dirt, it was
really impossible to miss.

"Feel better?", he asked.

She smiled at him, eyes still a little glassy from the illness, but she was refreshed and alert. "Oh
yes."

"Hey Shorty!"

Luz came over, his hair still damp from his own shower. "Can you inventory the new medical
supplies? I got no idea what's what." And he didn't want to give her too much time to dwell on the
dark thoughts he knew were hovering in the corners of her mind. It wouldn't help her, but rather
make her sadder and possibly even sicker.

Ella nodded, grabbing her gear. "Sure, no problem. I gotta countersign them anyway." Glancing at
her CO, she added: "I still got fifteen minutes, sir." The corners of her mouth tilted up into a smile
that had a touch of smugness in it.

He rolled his eyes and gave her a clipped nod. "Clock's ticking", he reminded her before leaving to
take care of the other million things he needed to do.
Luz looked at her in confusion. "Fifteen minutes?"

"Before he comes and drags me back to get some sleep", Ella replied with a quirk of her lips as they turned to head to the CP.

He chuckled. "I would love to see that", he said, mirth sparkling in his eyes

She snorted. "Yeah", she laughed, "I bet you would."

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Grandios: Marvellous, fantastic
usgrechnet jetzt: Now of all times!
Bitte nid scho widr: Please, not again.
Je prends soin de lui: I'll take care of him
Vas dormir, petite: Go to sleep, little one
Merci: Thanks
Endlich: Finally
Im Februar, jetzt wo dr winter sho fash widr vorbei ish: In February, now that winter is almost over again.
Hershey Bars

Chapter Summary

A fight about chocolate bars wears down Ella's nerves. Captain Speirs does not get to drag her to the CP by the ear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Cataloguing the supplies was disheartening. The medics had had very little to begin with and even with the new shipment, they weren't much better off. Sighing, the brunette put the bottles of plasma back in their crate.

At least they had supplies now, she thought to herself. They would make do, they had managed with less. She never wanted to feel so helpless and desperate again like on Christmas Eve, where she'd been forced to administer a placebo to the wounded Lt Welsh.

"Hey Shorty, have you heard about the patrol?", Vest asked.

She shot him a quizzical look, barely glancing up while her fingers sorted through IV lines. Why does he sound so excited? "Which one? The one tonight?"

"Yeah, that one. You know who's going?"

Vest had yet to see any real action. As part of HQ staff, he was mostly in the rear, taking care of supplies, doing mail call and writing mourning reports. Just like all those who hadn't been on the front lines – or in combat at all – he was eager for stories and gossip.

Ella didn't answer for a moment, too focused on counting up the delivered IV kits. She had lost count once already. Comparing the number she got with the number on the form, she ticked the item off on the list and went on to put the kits back into the box.

Then, she replied: "From what I know, everyone from 2nd and Shifty are already fixed. Malarkey leads."

She had overheard Liebgott, Grant and Babe griping about the list in front of the showers. Try as she might, the small medic couldn't hide her discontent. Malarkey needed to stay behind and rest, not be thrown into another combat situation with the pressure of command. She couldn't help but think back to Babe's bitterly sarcastic remark: "He only lost his 5 best friends, what the fuck's he got to live for?"

It only confirmed to her that she had made the right decision to put herself on that patrol. If something happened, god forbid, if Don couldn't hold back the demons clawing at his soul, she would be there and could try to do damage control. She had done it before, she could do it again.
"Malark, you kidding?", Luz exclaimed. "Jesus Christ, can't he ever catch a break?"

Ella sighed. "Yeah. But I can't go to Speirs and tell him to draft somebody else. Everyone's running on fumes." She cursed under her breath as she lost count for the second time and had to begin all over again.

She had to count the syrettes a third time when Vest suddenly handed her a letter. "There you go, Ella, from your Mama."

Mumbling a thanks, the brunette tucked the crumpled envelope into her jacket for later. Now, she really just wanted to check her supplies, sign them out and deliver them to the aid station before getting some sleep.

She got distracted for the fourth time by the arrival of Cobb and Johnny Martin from 1st Platoon. They immediately recognised what Luz was counting up and began badgering him for some of the coveted chocolate bars.

"God damnit Johnny, you're breaking my heart, I'm telling you", Luz sighed distractedly as he counted the Hershey bars.

"Oh come on, George", Johnny said, "just give me, I don't know, ten, fifteen bars."

Rolling his eyes, Luz reached over into another box and slapped a pack on the counter. "Juicy Fruit", he declared tensely. "Happy?"

He would love to give them some, hell, if it were up to him, he would give everybody an entire box of Hershey's, but there weren't enough and it was his job to distribute supplies evenly.

A grin tugging at his lips, Martin gave him an assessing once-over, clearly debating if he should push more. A small shake of the head from Ella, who was inventorying the medics' supplies in the corner, made him back off. Angering a supply officer was about as stupid as pissing off a combat medic.

Vest returned – when did he leave? – with another stack of boxes. "Just got a report of movement", he announced. Looking at Luz, he continued: "First Sergeant Lipton wants you to lay a few bazooka rounds into a house across the river."

Meanwhile, Cobb was still griping about the Hershey bars. "Come on, Luz", he wheedled, "you're First Platoon at heart!"

"Jesus, Cobb, there's not enough!", Luz explained, frustration rising. Was it so hard to understand that he couldn't just hand out chocolate to some guys while others got nothing? It was unfair and morale was low enough without a fight over Hershey bars.

Stacking her boxes on the side where they were out of the way and in no danger to be knocked
over, Ella grabbed the next crate and tucked it under her arm. In passing, she placed a supportive hand on George's back for a second.

The momentary truce in the chocolate bar dispute was shattered when Liebgott came in and shouted gleefully: "Whoa, Hershey bars!"

"Jesus Christ", Luz grumbled, quickly piling the coveted treats back into their box.

"Who're they for?", Liebgott asked.

"Not you, Lieb", the radioman turned supply officer shot back, annoyance radiating off him.

"Oh come on George, one bar."

Irked, Luz exclaimed: "No, there's not enough to go around!" From the corner of his eye, he saw Ella putting down the hypodermic needles in her hands with a low curse, probably unable to focus between her fever and the frustrating, childish argument about the Hershey bars.

"Is Captain Speirs here?", the new Lieutenant, Jones, inquired.

Instantly, Luz' demeanour shifted to calm and respectful. It wasn't the lieutenant's fault that the guys were just relentless and even if he was new and looking a bit too polished and green, sticking out like a sore thumb among the battle-hardened soldiers, he still was an officer.

"Uh, down by the river, sir", he replied.

"Hey big mouth!", a familiar voice rang out.

They all turned and their faces immediately brightened at the sight of Frank Perconte standing in the doorway.

"Give the kid a Hershey bar, huh?"

"You gotta be shitting me!", Luz grinned.

Liebgott chuckled. "Look who it is." He plopped down into the seat Johnny had vacated a minute before.

Frank smiled. "Sup guys?", he asked. Taking a look around, he commented: "Like what you did with the place, George."

Beaming, Luz responded: "Yeah yeah yeah, I did good, huh? How you feeling?"

Johnny made his way through the small crowd to greet his returning platoon member.

"As long as you keep your hands off my ass, I'll be fine", Frank replied to Luz' question.

"Hospital run out of pretty nurses, Perco?", Ella piped up for the first time, smiling at him. It was
always good to see guys returning after a stint at the hospital.

He gave her a shit-eating grin. "Nah, just none as pretty as you, Shorty."

She chuckled. "Flattery won't get you anywhere", she reminded him dryly, her smile partially negating the words. It was nice to get a compliment every once in a while, especially from the guys she loved like brothers, but she wasn't open to bribery, least of all to sweet-talking.

"Have a Hershey's", Luz said, tossing his buddy one of the bars.

Naturally, Liebgott took offense. "Hey, he gets a fuckin' Hershey bar?", he protested.

"Well, he got shot in the ass", Luz explained like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Martin shook Perconte's hand, asking: "Did I tell you to stick your big ass out in the wind?"

"No, but I expect a little sympathy from you", the short Italian retorted, long since used to Johnny's teasing barbs. He looked at them for confirmation. "Right?"

"Oh, should I rub it for ya?", Johnny countered in a mock helpful tone.

Ella shook her head in amusement. Those boys. Glancing towards Lieutenant Jones, she saw that he was a little uncomfortable with this brand of humour. He would get used to it.

Johnny then addressed the room: "Hey, can you believe this guy? Try to get him out of the fuckin' war, he comes straight back."

"Yeah, well, that's not what I heard", Frank said, "I heard the Krauts are finished."

"Well, just to make sure, we gotta row across the fuckin' river tonight", Liebgott groused. "Grab a few and ask them in person."

Perconte stared at him for a moment before asking: "Are you kidding me?"

Liebgott gave a small shrug and tsked. "Wish I was. Welcome back, Frank."

"Yeah, Jesus, that reminds me. Web...", Luz broke the sombre silence before it could spread. He picked up a box. "I need you to run these to OP2 for me. Grenade launchers for the night patrol."

He held it out to Webster over the make-shift counter, waiting impatiently for the man to don his helmet. "Any day now, Web. There you go."

He then remembered something else. "Hey you know what, send these too", he added, tossing a couple of packages and cartons into the crate.

Vest leant forward. "Hey, did you hear what happened on D Company's patrol last night?"

Ella pulled a face and tried to ignore him while she finished checking the last things on her list, but it was no use.

"What?", Liebgott prompted.

"Replacement lieutenant blew his foot off, stepped on a shoe mine", Vest divulged, unaware of the
brunette's discomfort. He didn't know that she had been the one to drain, clean and re-stitch the infected wound less than an hour ago. "Fresh in from West Point. Had to come back empty-handed."

"No shit", Luz muttered around the cigarette that had found its way between his lips. "Maybe he was a friend of yours, Lieutenant."

The ranking medic couldn't help but feel sympathetic for the replacement officer. First day in combat and he already got to hear about potential friends of his getting mutilated by explosives. "He's going to be okay", she said flatly, giving Vest a reproachful look, "now that we got the infection's out of his leg."

George patted her shoulder in consolation.

"Hey Vest", Cobb spoke up, "whatchu got in there?" His tone turned nasty. "More Hershey bars and Lucky Strikes for you rear-echelon fucks to hoard?"

Patience snapping, Luz glared at the man. "Ey ey ey, Cobb, with the mouth, please!"

Ella speared him with her Look, making him gulp. "Kid's just trying to do his job", she spat, her own fuse shorter than usual, too. Snatching up the medics' supplies, she manoeuvred past Luz.

"How about you help him out instead of getting on everyone's nerves?", she suggested in a sharp tone, still glaring at the annoying soldier from First Platoon.

Whirling around, the ranking medic marched out, only stopping to give Perconte a peck on the cheek and to tell him that she was glad to have him back.

Luz tossed down the packs he was holding. "Jesus Chr- you know what? To hell with it. Count 'em up, Vest, I gotta blast this house", he said, turning and grabbing his gear.

Vest looked accusingly at Cobb and demanded: "You happy now?!"

"You coming Perco?", Luz wanted to know.

Perconte denied.

Gesturing at the supplies and speaking to his fellow radioman and Martin, George continued: "Alright, then make yourself useful and watch this shit for me, alright?" Shouldering his rifle, he ordered: "Web, you come with me."

Lieutenant Jones inquired: "Sergeant, is Captain Speirs going to be where you're headed?"

"Ah, same vicinity, yeah."

Jones nodded. "Alright, then I'll join you."

Carrying the crate with the grenade launchers, Webster asked: "Where are we going?"

Exasperated, Luz made a clipped gesture behind him, giving Webster a look that questioned the
man's intellect. "To the house I gotta blast."

"Is Captain Winters gonna be with 'im?", Vest wanted to know.

Luz threw up his hands. "Jesus! Look, I don't know, maybe!" How was he supposed to know? He was doubling as supply officer, not intelligence officer.

That answer was apparently good enough for the HQ staff man. He rounded the counter and declared: "Then I'm coming, too."

The group of four quickly exited the room. The sounds of the ensuing squabble about the supplies followed them out onto the streets.

Delivering the supplies to their aid station, Ella's offer to help was quickly refused by her colleagues.

"Captain Speirs is already looking for you", Gene informed her.

The brunette gave them a lopsided smile and shrugged. "He's welcome to drag me back to the CP when he comes by here. I'm already too late, so two minutes more won't change anything." She leant against the table and studied them seriously. "I'm guessing you already heard about the patrol tonight?"

"Yeah", Spina replied, restocking his satchel.

She nodded. "I would like one of you on stand-by, just in case. I'll be on the patrol, but if something goes wrong, I might need another set of hands."

It was clear from the looks on their faces that neither of her two friends was happy about this revelation.

"You're sick, Ellie", Gene pointed out.

"Shouldn't one of us go in your place?", Spina questioned.

The small girl shook her head. "No. It's my call. Yes, I got a fever, but it's low and after some sleep, I won't even notice it. It won't affect my performance."

Seeing that their expressions didn't really change, she sighed and explained: "It's not about skill or trust. I know you're as capable as me to go on this patrol. But I don't...I need to be there to make sure they are alright. I don't want a repeat of that FUBAR patrol in Bastogne. If- if something happens, I will at least have the knowledge that I did all I could. I won't have to ask myself the what-ifs."

Gene sighed and rubbed her forearm in consolation. "We understand, chérie. We're just worried
about you."

Spina nodded. "That’s right."

They knew how much responsibility their young friend had resting on her shoulders and they could see where she was coming from. As their superior, she had a duty to her subordinates and by putting herself on that patrol, she was protecting them in one of the only ways she had.

Ella smiled slightly and patted them on the shoulder. "Thanks, guys", she said. "I'll be careful, I promise."

"That's all we can ask", Spina agreed.

"Okay. Oh, could you also check on First Sergeant Lipton every once in a while?", the brunette asked. "He should be asleep by now and hopefully, he'll sleep through the night, but I really don't want to take any chances."

Gene nodded. "Sure thing, Ellie. Now, you go to the CP and sleep."

Giving him a cheeky grin, she snapped off a salute. "Oui, mon commandant", she joked. Then, she left, hoping that Speirs didn't catch her beforehand.

The girl slipped into the CP unnoticed. Ambling through the rooms, she found Lip in the back. The First Sergeant was asleep, resting on a real bed with fresh sheets. Ella breathed a relieved sigh. Her Grandma's remedy had kicked in if the lack of wheezing and rattling in his breathing was anything to go by.

Abandoning the pretence of being alert and healthy, she shuffled over to the next bed. What energy the shower had restored in her had been sapped by the frustration and annoyance of recounting supplies half a dozen times and dealing with Cobb.

With uncoordinated movements, she took off her helmet, satchel and boots before slumping onto the mattress. Lids slid over burning eyes and within a few heartbeats, the young medic had fallen asleep without even pulling up the covers.

Captain Speirs observed silently from the doorway as Ella checked on Lipton before stumbling to the other bed. Now that she felt like nobody was watching her, he could see her dropping the act. The small girl’s fingers were clumsy with exhaustion, fumbling with her bootlaces for a long moment before she managed to get them untied.

Then, the brunette collapsed onto the bed, half-dried curls tumbling over her face as her eyes closed and her breathing evened out.
"So she's finally in bed, huh?"

The CO turned around at the sound of Luz' voice. The radioman had a fond smile on his face as he stepped up to lean against the doorframe. There were many mixed emotions in his expression; sadness, relief, worry, amusement...

"You worry about her", Speirs remarked, the question behind his observation clear.

Luz nodded. "Of course. She's our girl, sir." Taking the ever-present cigarette from his lips, he continued: "She sometimes forgets to take care of herself because she's always looking out for everybody else."

"So I've noticed", Speirs replied. "She's very dedicated to this company and does whatever it takes to make sure the men are alright."

George grinned, knowing what the CO was referring to. "Shorty can be really intense if she wants to. With that Look of hers, she could make the Devil feel guilty."

The captain gave an amused half-smile. "I see."

Luz pushed himself off the doorway and quietly slipped into the room. Tucking in the sleeping medic, he brushed a few strands from her face and made sure she was comfortable, then stepped back out.

Noticing Speirs watching him, he just shrugged and offered: "It's not much but it's the least we can do."

The taller man gave a quiet hum of understanding. There was still a lot he had to learn about the company, its dynamics and its members' unique mannerisms.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

chérie: sweetheart, darling
oui, mon commandant: yes sir
Preparing for Patrol

Chapter Summary

Command wants a high-risk patrol across the river. Nobody is happy about it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ella felt like merely an hour had passed when a hand on her shoulder lightly shook her awake. The sound that left her mouth was much closer to a reluctant mewl than an actual groan and it made the person responsible for pulling her out of her sleep chuckle.

Sitting up, the ranking medic scrubbed a hand over her face. I bi wach, i bi wach, she told herself, as if thinking it would make it true. She was already in her boots and nearly done tying them by the time her brain caught up with her eyes.

Oh.

Sergeant Chuck Grant stood in front of her, waiting patiently for her to finish dressing. He was clearly amused by her groggy state.

"Sorry", she mumbled, pulling her soft, clean hair into a bun. "I think I'm gonna need a nap to recover from sleeping."

Grant laughed quietly. "You can sack out again after the briefing", he said, holding out her helmet and satchel.

She took the items with a grateful smile.

Before leaving the room, she quickly checked on Lipton and was happy to see him still sleeping like a log. His temperature was still up, but it seemed to be going down.

"Is he okay?", Chuck asked as they climbed the stairs to the dining room turned briefing room.

"I gave him something earlier", the young girl replied. "It's a bit of an all-purpose cure to be honest and the way it looks, it also helps with pneumonia, so I'm cautiously optimistic that he's getting better."

Grant nodded. They were all worried about the First Sergeant and hearing the small medic's prognosis was music to his ears.

Most of the men were already there, slouched in the chairs with their boots propped up on the
table. Ella saw Lieutenant Jones standing next to the door and Vest by the window. *Das dörf ez aбр nid wohr sii*, she cursed in her mind. *Who volunteers for such a shit mission?*

Giving the boys a smile, she settled on the armrest of Babe's chair, pulling her feet up to get comfortable.

"C'mon", Ramirez spoke into the tensely quiet room, "he can't be leading." It was clear to everyone who he meant.

"I'm not sure what they decided", Jackson offered.

Chuck shook his head. "No way. Not on his first day."

"Well, do you see any other officer here?", asked Liebgott rhetorically.

Ella had to admit they had a point. Lieutenant Jones had no experience whatsoever. There was no way Captain Winters would let him lead a high-risk patrol.

Footsteps clomped up the stairs. Cobb, Skinny, Garcia and Alley entered the room, all looking frustrated, resigned and exhausted in varying degrees.

Popeye glanced Cobb up and down.

"What?", the man snapped.

"They call you guys too?", Popeye asked the 1st Platoon men for the sake of breaking the tension.

A few disgruntled nods were the reply.

Resting his arms on the back of a chair, Alley groused: "So, who is in charge of this bullshit?" He glanced behind him at the green lieutenant.

"No he ain't", Grant answered the unspoken question.

"Well if he ain't, it's you, Chuck", Babe determined. "Or Shifty, or Moe."

"That would be better", Liebgott grumbled.

"Guys, pipe down", Ella spoke up quietly. Their complaining wouldn't change anything and it was just rude to talk about the lieutenant as if he couldn't hear them, as if he weren't there.

"Oh come on, Shorty, you think so, too, don't you?", Liebgott exclaimed.

"What difference does it make, Lieb?", she sighed, half-turning her upper body to look at him. "It's not our decision."

The men looked at each other. She sounded so tired, so resigned. Under the glaze of fever, her eyes were dull, and her shoulders slumped like she was carrying a huge weight on them.

It hit them that their girl had suffered and sacrificed just as much, probably even more than them. As much as she hid it, the ranking medic was hurting, badly. Her smiles, while still very real and genuine, had lost some of their brilliance.
Footsteps approached again.

"Ten-hut!", Jones commanded, nearly making the young medic fall off her perch.

_Madonna, what's with the formality? We're in a warzone, not on a parade ground,_ she wondered while getting to attention. _Er ish neu_, she reminded herself sternly. _He's just trying to do what he was taught at West Point._

The men rolled their eyes and reluctantly pulled themselves a little more upright, only to relax again when Captain Winters countermanded it with a passing: "At ease."

Behind him followed Johnny Martin.

The ranking medic swallowed, mixed feelings warring inside her as she put two and two together. _Oh nei._

On one hand, she was immensely relieved that Malarkey wouldn't be on this patrol, that he could get some rest. On the other hand, she felt bad for Johnny, who was about as happy to be part of this mission as the rest of them.

"Gentlemen", Winters greeted, nodding at them, "and Ella." He received a few smiles from the guys, while the girl in question blushed and lightly smacked Babe in the shoulder when he muttered a comment. Would she ever get used to being the centre of attention, even if it was only for a moment?

"As you can see, we've assembled 16 of you for this prisoner snatch tonight, 0100", their beloved former CO began the briefing. He looked around the room, meeting their attentive gazes. "Just a couple of points: We've secured four rubber boats to get you across the river. Lieutenant Jones here", he gestured at the young man, "is the ranking officer and he'll be along as an observer. Sergeant Martin here will lead the patrol in Sergeant Malarkey's place."

From her angle, Ella had to turn her head slightly, but she didn't miss the short exchange between the green lieutenant and Webster, and suddenly, it all made sense.

_Oh, dä Idiot_, she growled internally. Webster must have instructed Jones how to convince Winters, thinking that the lieutenant could take Malarkey's place.

From the scathing look Martin aimed at Webster, it was clear that he hadn't missed the glances either.

"The whole Battalion will be covering your withdrawal", Winters continued, seemingly unaware of the rising tension in the room. "We've identified targets, planned fire for 'em. We hear these whistles", he produced two whistles on chains, "we open up, so don't blow them 'til you're back in the boats with your prisoners." He handed the whistles to Johnny.
"And if the house turns out to be empty, sir?", Johnny inquired, turning to face him, releasing Webster from his glare.

"It won't", the Captain assured, "but in any case, we know it's an outpost and want it destroyed, so you'll have to lay some demo on a time delay." He glanced at the assembled men to check that he still had their attention and went on to outline the tactics: "You have to move fast, but carefully. Put a perimeter around the house. Once that's in place, get your rifle grenades in the first floor window, get your assault team in quick."

Catching Martin's nod, he focused on the guys again, reminding them emphatically: "Remember, it's about prisoners. Don't pop the first thing that moves. Clear?"

"Yes sir", they answered, some rather grudgingly.

The Captain nodded. "Good." He let his gaze roam over the assembled men, then looked over at Johnny, who was studying them intently. "Picked your assault team?"

Martin replied: "McClung, Sisk, Cobb, Garcia...and Webster, as translator. The rest of you guys a base of fire with Sergeant Grant." A quick glance to Ella confirmed that the ranking medic was already thinking about her own position.

He tossed Chuck one of the whistles before shifting to pin Webster with another heated stare. "You speak German", he bit out in a hostile tone, "right, Webster?"

"Yeah", Webster replied confidently, before amending: "A little bit."

Ella had to suppress a snort at his misplaced humility. The man who wouldn't shut up about Harvard in basic, suddenly embarrassed to admit he spoke German nearly as well as Liebgott? Riss di zäma, she chided herself, ashamed of her bitterness. He was trying to get back in their good graces, least she could do was give him a chance. Webster wasn't a bad guy, he had just made an unpopular decision.

"Good", Martin said. Turning back to the Battalion commander, he added: "That's my team, sir."

"Questions?", Winters asked. Unlike other officers, he actually waited for the men to speak up if they had any questions.

"No sir", the men replied as one.

He nodded, looking at each of them. "Good. Good luck."

"Thank you, sir", the guys chorused as he started to leave.

Winters clapped Martin on the arm and motioned to Ella, indicating that he wanted them to follow him. The brunette got to her feet and fell into step with Johnny, leaving the room just as Jones once again called: "Ten-hut!"

The Captain didn't even pause, tossing a "As you were; carry on" over his shoulder a split-second later.
Outside, Lieutenant Jones quickly joined them for the tactical conversation while Winters waved Speirs over to get an update on the preparations for covering fire. The young girl shivered as a gust of wind made a chill to run down her spine.

Johnny and Winters both shifted, causing their small circle to rotate a little so that they blocked the wind from her. "You picked your position yet, Shorty?", Johnny asked, pulling her attention back to the matter in hand.

Thinking it over for a second, Ella responded: "The only one I can think of is behind the assault team. I'll be within reach should something happen and I can assess the prisoners as soon as you have them under control, because there are bound to be injuries if we use grenades."

The men nodded along with her explanation.

"Good", Winters agreed. "But you stay low and covered until you get the all clear or you hear the call for a medic, understood?"

She smiled, knowing that he was just worried and not trying to tell her how to do her job. "Yes sir", she acknowledged with a nod.

Being dismissed, the brunette walked away, crossing Webster who headed straight for the leaders.

"What's that about?", she wanted to know as she reached Grant and Liebgott.

"Probably trying to get out of the patrol", Liebgott sneered.

Grant shrugged. "C'mon, let's go", he said.

As they passed the group, Speirs suddenly called out: "Hey Liebgott?"

They all stopped, turning to see what the CO wanted.

"You wanna sit this one out?", he asked.

A smile blossomed on Lieb's face. "Yes sir", he responded. Smirking, he winked at Webster. "Thanks, buddy."

Ella and Grant shared a look, both grinning as well. One man less in danger was always good news.

They ended up gathering in the kitchen of OP2. Malarkey, glad not to be on patrol, served dinner. "There you go, Ella", he said, scooping hot stew into her mug. "How are you feeling?"

The young medic shrugged. "Fine, I guess." Looking at him, she smiled and added: "Happy that you don't have to go."

He patted her shoulder. "Thanks, Shorty."
She watched him amble away, passing out the rest of the food. Grabbing a spoon, she dug into her portion, chewing slowly. Outside, mortars had started up again, the echoes only faint in the cellar-level kitchen. A close hit made some dust flutter from the ceiling. The small girl, like most of the other guys, didn't even pause.

"God damnit", Liebgott cursed, "got dust into my food."

Ella snickered and countered the scowl he shot her with an innocent grin.

As dusk approached, they prepared for the mission. Everything shiny was blackened or wrapped with strips of cloth. Anything that could potentially create a sound – belts, webbing, rifle straps – was either taken off or wrapped as well. Helmets were put on a stack on the side so that nobody would take it with them instinctively. The men took apart their weapons, cleaning and oiling the parts meticulously before putting them back together. They readied the explosive device, setting the timer and checking the charges. They didn't speak much, all engrossed in their tasks and own thoughts.

When everything was ready, the ranking medic shooed the men going on patrol off to bed.

"You got everything ready and we still have hours to go", she reasoned, "An hour is more than enough to assemble, so per l'amur da Dieu, grab some shut-eye."

The protests that were offered were only for form's sake or out of jest. They had all learned long ago not to argue with the medics.

"You heard the word, men", Johnny spoke from where he stood behind her. "Everybody sack out, we assemble at 2400."

As the men ambled off to their respective bunks, Ella gave Johnny a pointed look. "That includes you", she said.

He fondly rolled his eyes at her. "Yeah yeah, kid. Make sure you get some more sleep, too, you're still sick."

"I will, I'm just gonna check on Lip first", the young girl replied. She wasn't going to say anything, but she was already feeling tired again. The illness was eating up her energy quicker than she cared to admit, as were the bottled-up emotions she kept locked away in a far-back corner of her mind.

After reassuring herself that the pneumonia-stricken First Sergeant was still resting comfortably, the ranking medic sat down by his side. The bed was big enough that she could easily stretch her legs, her back resting against the headboard. She pulled out her mother's latest letter and began to read.

*My charina Ella*

*I am so glad to hear that you are no longer surrounded. I hope you are well. It was all over the*
papers how Patton and his Army came to the rescue of the surrounded troops. From your letter, I understand you did not need to be rescued. I have no doubt of that, but I am still extremely relieved.

Thank you for your birthday wishes, mia figlia. Your letter actually reached me right on time. It was the most wonderful birthday gift I could have wished for and I couldn't stop smiling all day. The ladies insisted on celebrating, so we had a small party on Saturday. We had a wonderful time, but I missed you. I would have loved to dance with you, share a piece of Pat's delicious cake with you and brag to my friends what a smart, talented, kind and generous young woman you are, charina.

James took me out to dinner. Things are looking up between us. I still don't exactly know why we had these issues, but I guess we just went through a rough patch. Every relationship has their ups and downs and this probably was the first 'down'. After dinner, we went for a walk in the park. You can see the stars there, Ella. Not as clearly or as many as in Frederica, but Mary told me that there are some beautiful hiking trails in this state. I might go camping when it gets warmer again and I'm sure there I'll have a fantastic view of the sky. Remember how we used to go camping with Papa and Nico? I would love to revive that tradition when you're back home.

Work is busy like always, but after the holiday craze, we are back to routine... as much a routine as there can be one at a hospital. Marlene Brown, our head nurse, approached me just last week and asked if I would like to help teach a few classes at nursing school, over at the university. I was so excited, charina! I have been supervising nurses in training a few times now and I found it quite enjoyable. Of course, I would never give up being a nurse to become a teacher, but this combination of doing my job and teaching trainees is quite rewarding.

I hope you will be relieved soon, charina. I am so very proud of you.

I love you, mia figlia.

Your Mama

Isabel

Ella folded the letter and tucked it back into her pocket. She loved hearing from her mother and she was happy for her. The twinge of guilt about making her Mama worry was still there, but it didn't hurt as much anymore. Still, as always, a pang of homesickness hit her. I vermiss di au, Mama.

Closing her eyes, the girl tried to get some more rest before it was time to assemble. The boys were right; she was sick and she couldn't afford to slack off because of that. Luckily, sleep came quickly, sweeping her away like a warm wave at the beach.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

I bi wach: I'm awake
Das dörf ez aber nid wohr sii: You've got to be joking; This cannot be true
Er ish neu: He's new
Oh nei: Oh no
Dä Idiot!: that Idiot!
Riss di zäma: Get a grip; Pull yourself together
charina: darling, sweetheart
mia figlia: my daughter
I vermiss di au: I miss you too
The Patrol across the River

Chapter Summary

The patrol crosses the river into enemy territory and a stupid mistake claims a life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Speirs woke her a few minutes before midnight with a hand on her shoulder and a small frown on his face.

Sitting up, the brunette nearly fell off the bed, catching herself only just in time. In her sleep, she had somehow managed to curl up dangerously close to the edge, probably in a subconscious effort not to disturb Lip.

"You still up to this?", the CO questioned, sharp eyes boring into her, almost daring her to lie.

Ella nodded, getting to her feet and brushing a few errant strands out of her eyes. "Yes sir", she replied resolutely. Redoing her bun, she followed the Captain out of the room, but not after giving the still sleeping Lipton a cursory glance.

Searchlights roamed across the sky, scanning for bombers. A lonely flare shot up, its light bright enough together with the full moon so that the small girl could just make out the swimmer climbing back up the embankment. The rope he'd had with him was already secured to a tree.

"Change into dry clothes and get yourself something hot to drink, alright?", she instructed when he passed her.

"You got it, Ella." Despite shivering so badly that he looked almost blurry, he managed a smile before stumbling off to get dry.

Waiting for the command, the ranking medic studied the rubber boats. The veterans of Market Garden and Operation Pegasus remembered how the Canadians had taught them to use the boats. She hadn't taken part in those drills, but she had watched a good while and therefore knew what to do.

Ella was the last one to get in and thanks to her light weight, the small vessel barely dipped. The coarse rope passed through her fingers as they pulled themselves across the river, making no sound at all.

Until a splash behind them shattered the silence.
Her heart leapt into her throat. Twisting to look back, she saw that the last boat had flipped, its three occupants landing in the icy water of the river.

"Oh shit!", Skinny exclaimed, flailing and thrashing in panic, "I can't swim!"

Cobb and Garcia, the other men who had been in the boat, quickly grabbed him and towed him back to shore.

Ella strained her ears for anything indicating that the Germans had heard the noise, while watching with her heart thundering in her throat as the three dripping wet men crawled back up the embankment.

Miraculously, everything stayed quiet. Slowly, she released the breath she had been holding.

"Okay, keep going", Johnny ordered, catching Lieutenant Jones motioning for them to continue. "Stay focused."

They reached the other side without any further incident. The ranking medic belly-crawled through the hole in the barbed wire behind Grant and Jones, alongside Shifty.

"Clear", came the whisper from Johnny.

Getting to her feet, she followed Shifty to the first check-point. It was supposed to be a small building, but the bombs had destroyed it beyond recognition. Only a few pieces of the walls were standing, the rest had been reduced to piles of rubble. Ducking behind a small heap of bricks and debris, Ella tensely waited for her cue, watching the men come in in pairs of two. The scouts, Shifty and One Lung, moved out, followed by Martin. Hitting the woodpile, Johnny gave the signal.

Slipping past Jones, the girl silently scurried through the snow, taking cover next to her friend. He glanced at her, then checked their surroundings to see if somebody had noticed them and was scrambling for a counter attack.

When nothing happened, he turned around and ordered: "In twos, up!", making the corresponding hand gestures.

The men advanced, crouching down behind a bigger pile of stacked wood, where Shifty and One Lung were already kneeling. Ella and Johnny were the last to join the group.

Johnny gave out the assignments, sending them off with a quiet: "Security out, go!"

He looked over to the young girl at his side. She met his gaze, a reassuring smile ghosting across her blackened face, and nodded.

Taking a deep breath, Martin turned around and tapped McClung on the shoulder. The assault team crept from one cover to the next, on high alert. They were moving almost soundlessly, the snow wet enough so it didn't crunch beneath their boots.

Reaching the target building, they inched around the corner, stopping in the blind spot beneath the
windows. Johnny and One Lung fixed their rifle grenades, McClung's as backup in case Martin's misfired.

As they had planned, Ella stayed at the back. Shifty would be there to cover her if need be. She could feel the adrenaline coursing through her veins, how it sharpened her senses. In front of her, Vest shifted nervously. A light clinking reached her ears, the uncanny rattle of a grenade, and her stomach tightened.

Johnny broke cover, whirling around and firing.

The window above them shattered with a crash, shards tinkling. A thump followed as the rifle grenade hit the floor inside.

Without warning, Jackson burst into the open and raced to the stairs.

"Jackson! Hold on!", Johnny hissed, but the young private didn't listen.

The rifle grenade went off, sending a rain of shards down on them. A second later, Jackson hurled his grenade through the window with a snarl, then took off.

The ranking medic moved to the bottom of the stairs and got into a low crouch, her gut clenching as she heard Johnny's call: "Jackson! Wait!"

Stop, you idiot!, she yelled in her mind, you're gonna run into frag from your own grenade!

She couldn't do anything other than watch helplessly as Jackson thundered up the steps and yanked open the door.

In that moment, the grenade exploded.

Segner char! Ella bit her lip and dug her hands into the gravel under her knees, Jackson's scream confirming her fear.

Shouts rang out from inside the building as her friends fought to get the Krauts they had encountered under control. For a few moments, it was sheer pandemonium, English and German blurring together into a garbled mixture.

Then, Johnny hollered: "SHORTY!"

Rushing up the stairs two steps at a time, the small medic dropped to her knees beside the gasping and choking private. Vest and Ramirez were already there. Their mailman was sitting uselessly on the floor, staring at his hand covered in Jackson's blood. Damnit, not again, the girl cursed mentally. She'd had enough cases of shell-shock for a lifetime.

Around her, the men were still shouting at the Germans, stripping them of their weapons and splitting them up.

"What can I do, Ella?", Ramirez asked, gaze flickering back and forth between her and the wounded Jackson.
Ella's eyes scanned Jackson's body, assessing his injuries. Half his face and his left shoulder had taken a load of shrapnel. He was struggling to breathe. "It's okay, Jackson, relax, I'm here", she soothed, her hand reaching out to touch the unharmed side of his face. He quieted a little and looked at her, tears flooding his eyes.

"We gotta get him back, now!", she ordered, "I can't do anything here." Answering Ramirez' question, she added: "Keep him calm and try not to dislodge any shrapnel."

Raising her head, the brunette saw that one of the prisoners was also injured. Webster, working on the detonator, was trying to tell the healthy two Germans that they were supposed to carry their comrade. It came out in a jumble, more English than anything else.

"Ihr sollt euren verletzen Kameraden tragen!", she called over the clamour, translating the order. She had no time for this, Jackson needed help and there was no way she could treat him here.

The German soldiers blinked and stared for a moment, their babbling ceasing. A sharp jab from McClung's rifle spurred them into motion.

"We're moving out!", Johnny barked, leaving any decisions about Jackson to their medic. He knew that his small friend had everything well in hand. She always did.

"Vest, Ramirez, pick up Jackson, we're moving!", Ella instructed, surging to her feet. When Vest didn't react, she snatched a handful of his collar and gave it a tug, snapping him out of his trance.

"Get a move on, Vest!"

A tiny voice in her mind scolded her for being so harsh, but she ignored it. Time was of essence and they were in immense danger as it was.

Behind them, Johnny was bellowing orders, at his men, at the Germans. "Come on, move it!"

They were still in enemy territory and the explosions had surely alerted the Krauts of their presence. Any second they lingered could spell doom for them.

"Alright, let's go", Ella prodded, supporting Jackson's head. Her fingers were slippery with blood and she had to readjust her grip every ten seconds. It was a balancing act between not stabilising his head enough or holding too tight and choking him as a consequence.

They hurried down the stairs and rushed back to the river. Around them, the rest of their guys opened fire, covering them as the assault team herded the prisoners forward.

"Go!", the ranking medic pushed out between panting breaths.

"We're falling back!", Johnny shouted. "Covering fire!"

Bullets flew from all sides, guns rattling and muzzles flashes flickering. Then, mortars began to fire as well.

Rounding up his men, he hollered: "Fall back to the boats! Go!"
Ella's group was the first to reach the boats. "Hurry up!", she yelled over the noise. She ducked and shielded her face when a shell blew up close by, spitting dirt towards her.

Ramirez swiftly manoeuvred the moaning Jackson into a boat, nearly lying beneath him, cradling him in his arms.

Vest was just standing there, making a target of himself.

"Diavel! Vest, get in!", the brunette snapped, too stressed out for molly-coddling.

When he didn't immediately react, she took matters into her own hands, pushing the man into the boat.

The shrill scream of a whistle rang out over the racket and the machine guns on the other side of the river responded instantly by pouring round after round onto the German position.

"In the boats!", Johnny called, urging the last stragglers forwards.

Vest came to life again as soon as he laid eyes on the prisoners. "I'm gonna shoot you, you fucking Krauts!", he shrieked, fumbling with his gun and trying to get back onto the slippery embankment.

In one swift motion, Martin confiscated his gun and pushed him away. "Vest! Shoot him and we'll have to come back for more!"

The ranking medic, with a strength only few would think she possessed based on her slim, wiry figure, muscled the hysterical HQ man off the prisoners and shoved him towards Babe. "Keep him in there!", she ordered.

Finally, Jones, the last man, made it to the boats.

In a mad scramble, everybody squeezed themselves into one of the three vessels. They had three more men to transport, plus one wounded. Doing the math, Ella made a split-second decision.

Tossing her kit towards McClung, the closest person in the closest boat, she took a deep breath and jumped into the river, nearly gasping at the icy water temperature. Surfacing, she sputtered for a second, her body protesting loudly against the painful cold.

A second splash made her whirl around. Lieutenant Jones had reached the same conclusion as her and followed her example.

"Come on!", he shouted, trying to make himself heard over the infernal noise.

The current was not too strong, but they had to work hard not to get carried downstream. Bullets flew overhead. A piercing whine split the air and Ella just barely had time to grab Jones by the collar before a mortar round slammed into the river, a fountain of water shooting onto the sky.

The two swimmers hurriedly sucked in a lungful of air, then they were dragged underwater by the
tidal waves crashing into them.

Breaking through the surface, the young medic still had a death grip on the lieutenant's webbing. Blinking water from her eyes, she dragged him along until he recovered from the shock of nearly getting blown up and drowned. The ice-cold water burned on their skin, their movements becoming more sluggish with each second.

"Come on, lieutenant, don't give up", she spurred him on breathlessly, "we're nearly there."

Somehow, in spite of the hail of bullets, the patrol made it across the river unscathed, the rest of the battalion doing their best to distract the Germans. Several members of Easy Company were already waiting for them and helped haul in the boats.

Ella and Lieutenant Jones were pulled out of the water by strong hands. They were shivering badly, their skin chalky and their lips deep purple.

"Where's the medic?!", Vest howled.

Despite being sopping wet and frozen right through, the brunette made her way through the crowd to get to Jackson, right back in her medic mode. "Move it!", she barked. Her teeth chattered so hard that she vaguely wondered if she might chip a tooth. She ran beside Vest and Ramirez, the two supporting Jackson between them. Ramirez had her satchel clutched in his free hand.

They burst into the building that acted as their staging area.

"Wounded, we got wounded!", Johnny shouted.

Skinny, Cobb and Garcia, who had been on the boat that had tipped over, jumped up from their seats and cleared the table. The blankets wrapped around their shoulders were quickly abandoned.

The ranking medic took charge, tossing her soaked jacket to the side. "Put him here", she instructed, blocking out the yells of her friends and the POWs alike. Getting Jackson settled, she looked around, finding the man she was looking for. "Johnny! Go get Gene, I need help!"

He nodded and disappeared.

"It's okay, Jackson", Ella spoke gently as she set to work, her voice thin and breathless from the cold. Her jaw was starting to hurt from trying to suppress the chattering of her teeth.

Her patient whimpered, gurgled and sobbed, writhing in pain.

Glancing at her helpers, she asked: "Hold him, please."

She quickly stuck a syrette of morphine into his good shoulder, then moved directly into his line of sight. "Jackson, listen to me", she ordered gently. "Listen to me."

His struggling abated and his eyes locked onto her face. The building shook and the ground
rumble, but the young girl smiled softly, her entire body language relaxed.

"I need you to calm down", she explained, tone light, friendly and completely calm. "I know you're scared, but you're not alone. We're all here."

He sniffled and nodded, but didn't relinquish his vice-like grip on Ramirez' hand.

Taking a pair of scissors from her kit and swiftly cutting away the private's shirt, her heart sank. His face, his shoulder, his neck, it was one big, bloody mess. The skin on his face was red and white where the explosion had caught him, some blisters already forming. One of his eyes was already a lost cause.

"Somebody get me more light!", the brunette demanded, taking out a burn kit.

Skinny flipped open his lighter and held the flame close. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing.

Ella then began to pour sulfa onto the bleeding cuts that had no shrapnel embedded in them. The stream of soothing nonsense that flowed past her chapped and purplish-tinged lips did its job and Jackson stopped struggling. He still sobbed quietly, tears of pain and fear streaming down his bleeding face.

"It's gonna be okay, Jackson."

Immersed in her task, she didn't even notice at first how Vest completely lost the plot and went berserk on the prisoners, yanking out his pistol and threatening to shoot them. Luckily, Lieutenant Jones and Shifty grabbed him quickly and contained him, pinning him in a chair.

Unfortunately, Jackson had heard the roaring voices and grew agitated once more.

Raising her head, the ranking medic immediately saw what had caused her patient's distress. "For fuck's sake, everybody who's not needed either make yourselves useful, sit down and shut up, or leave!", she snapped, her voice cutting through the clamour like a burning knife.

Pinning the prisoners with a sharp look, she added: "Und ihr haltet besser den Mund, sie verstehen euch nicht." Everybody, American and German alike, instantly went silent.

Turning back to Jackson, she gave him a smile, shifting back to her amiable, soft-spoken self. "See? It's all good now."

He choked on a sob and some blood dribbled down his chin. The worried frown returning to her features, the small girl fished a tongue depressor from her bag. "More light, please, Skinny." Jackson's breathing was laboured and with the blood coming from his mouth, she worried that his lungs had been injured in the blast. If they are, his chances won't be good.

And then, Gene was there. He pushed through the crowd, coming to stand opposite of his colleague. "What happened, Ellie?", he asked, eyeing her with thinly veiled concern.
"Grenade blast", was the distracted response. She had tilted Jackson's head back a little and was looking down his throat to see what was obstructing his airways.

Gene nodded and set to work treating the burns.

Jackson made another gagging noise and struggled to turn his head. The medics didn't miss a beat, rolling the wounded man onto his side with Ella bolstering his injured shoulder. He retched up a spatter of blood and bile. Most of it ended up on the girl's ODs, but she didn't even bat an eyelid at that. As a medic, her clothes had been covered in all kinds of bodily fluids. It was basically in the job description.

"I don't wanna die", Jackson cried when they laid him back down, "I don't wanna die."

"Sshh, take it easy", she shushed him, cold hand reaching up to smooth his hair back from his forehead.

"Let's get him outta here", Gene ordered, seeing the stretcher bearers arrive. He finished applying a bandage to the private's shoulder and moved behind his head, ready to lift. The men, who had been watching rather helplessly before, moved to help as one.

Babe took Jackson's hand and reassured him while the wounded man sobbed: "I don't wanna die!"

Ella was on his other side, making sure the dressings on the side of his face stayed where they were supposed to be. "Ssh, it'll be fine, Jackson", she soothed.

A blast rocked the building and they all ducked, the stretcher getting set on the ground. Jackson began to choke again and the two medics pushed everybody back. Two pairs of battered kneepads smacked against the concrete floor, the brunette moving to cradle their patient in her arms, propping up his torso to help him breathe.

"Oh my God!", the young man cried, panic setting in as he struggled to pull air into his lungs.

"Jackson!", Gene called, trying to reach him in his frantic state. "I need you to hang on!"

Another round hit.

Jackson coughed and gagged, his entire body seizing while his lungs desperately tried to expel whatever it was that hampered his breathing.

Another gust of blood spilled over Ella's arms and the front of her jacket.

Then, he went slack.

The two medics shared a sorrowful look, sitting back on their heels in unison. The small girl blew out a ragged breath and hung her head, wishing not for the first time that she'd been wrong. Judging by the heavy silence, the men knew what had happened.

There was no need for words.

Johnny grabbed a blanket and crossed the room. With Gene's help, he spread it over Jackson, covering the body.
Standing up, Ella swayed on her feet, nearly losing her balance. The adrenaline had drained out of her system, fatigue and illness slamming back into her, her cold and wet clothing doing their own part.

While the men still stood there, staring at the blanket-covered shape of their deceased friend and grieving for another good man lost, the small girl stepped around them and headed over to the prisoners.

The three Germans were still in the far corner of the room, looking confused and frightened mostly. The injured man was sitting on the ground, his two comrades standing in front of him as a last line of protection. As soon as they spotted the white brassard with the red cross on her arm, some of the tension left their bodies and they stepped aside.

"Ich werde mir deine Verletzungen ansehen, in Ordnung?", she told the wounded man, kneeling down before him. She waited until he gave her a small nod before making a move.

"Es war die Gewehrgranate", one of his buddies explained.

The brunette nodded in silent acknowledgement.

Carefully examining the man, Ella soon determined that his injuries were mostly superficial. He had a broken nose and a twisted ankle, but no concussion or broken ribs. Glückspilz. Unlike Jackson, it seemed that the German had been far enough away from the explosion so as not to contract any blast injuries.

Wrapping the ankle, she then told him that she wasn't going to have to set his nose. It wasn't going to be pleasant.

The wounded prisoner gulped, but hummed in understanding. "Ich will keine Hakennase", he confessed.

The ranking medic couldn't hold back a chuckle at his serious and worried expression and assured him that she was going to do her best. Prodding around the swollen area, she set the fractured bone with one swift motion. An ugly sound accompanied the quick procedure, followed by a scream of pain.

All colour drained from the prisoners' faces.

The wounded man's eyes rolled back into his head and he slumped forward.

"Oh my." Ella caught him and lowered him to the ground, deftly ignoring how the men behind her tensed up.

Her friends had whirled around at the scream, fearing that the prisoners had harmed their girl. Their hands stayed clenched around their weapons nonetheless.
Patting his cheek, it didn't take long for the ranking medic to cajole her patient back into consciousness. Telling him to take it easy, she got up, her job done.

"It's okay, boys, you can relax. They're not gonna give you any trouble", she said, scrubbing a hand down her face, unintentionally leaving a few small smears of blood behind. Tension drained from them as the adrenaline faded from their veins, too.

Stepping back, the brunette stumbled over to the first chair within reach.

At least she had stopped shivering.

Sighing, Ella closed her eyes, dropping her head onto her arms that rested on the table.

A small voice in her mind commented that maybe, she should change out of the dripping ODs if she didn't want to get any sicker. Before Ella could command her frozen muscles to move, exhaustion took over and she knew no more.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Segner char: Good Lord; God above
Diavel!: Damnit! (literally: Devil!)
Und ihr haltet besser den Mund: And you'd better be quiet
Sie verstehen euch nicht: They don't understand you
Ich werde mir deine Verletzungen ansehen, in Ordnung?: I'm going to look at your wounds, okay?
Es war die Gewehrgranate: It was the rifle grenade
Glückspilz: Lucky bastard, lucky duck (literally: lucky mushroom)
Ich will keine Hakennase: I don't want to have a hooked nose
Reprieve

Chapter Summary

Winters defies orders in a desperate bid to protect his company. A promotion and a medal are given out.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ella woke late in the morning, lying in a warm bed with what felt like a ton of blankets piled on top of her. Winter sunrays faintly tickled her skin.

Prying open crusted eyelids, the young girl realised she was back at the CP. Wia bini do hera ko?, she wondered, freeing a hand to rub her eyes. Last thing I know... Frowning, she rummaged around in her memory, pulling one blank after another.

"Ellie."

She nearly jumped out of her skin and just barely swallowed an expletive. "Hesh n Vogel?! Gene, you scared the bejeebus out of me!"

"Sorry, chérie", he said, though judging by the smirk on his lips, he wasn't all that sorry. "How are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "I'd feel better if I knew how I got here", she admitted, shooting him a questioning look.

"You fell asleep at the OP", Gene told her. "You were hypothermic, Ellie. Babe and I brought you here. We managed to rouse you a little, but you were still pretty out of it, so I'm not surprised you don't remember. We helped you change into dry clothes and then let you sleep."

Her expression shifted. "Oh", she made sheepishly.

Finally, the haze of sleep lifted, allowing her brain to return to full capacity. The events of last nights' patrol filtered back in, the by now far too familiar pang of grief hitting her. Digging herself out of the heap of blankets, the ranking medic looked over to the other bed. It was empty.

"How is Lip?", she asked, suspecting that the First Sergeant had woken up and refused to stay put. Getting up, she let out a quiet groan as her muscles reminded her of all the shivering they had done last night in an effort to raise her body's temperature.

Gene smiled. "He's doing better. Still a bit groggy, but his lungs are a lot clearer."

She sighed in relief. "Thank God. I'm going to give him some more of Grandma Johanna's remedy to help him rest later today", she decided, sliding into her webbing and lacing up her boots.

"You should take some, too", her colleague suggested. "You were already sick before you decided
to go for a swim in the middle of winter."

Ella chortled. "You're making it sound like I enjoyed it. Though, yes, you're probably right. But first, I gotta check on the boys."

Her Cajun friend patted her shoulder consolingly. "I wrote the casualty report on Jackson", he said. "All you have to do is sign it and bring it to Battalion."

She smiled gratefully. "Merci, Gene."

When Johnny Martin told her a few hours later that they were being sent on another patrol, Ella sighed heavily. "This is going to be a disaster", she stated flatly, looking at him.

Johnny blinked, surprised to hear his own thoughts out of the mouth of the small medic.

"I know, Shorty", he admitted after a moment, slinging an arm over her shoulders.

She ran a hand through her hair, eyes glowing with dread and fever.

They walked in silence for a while, ambling down the street.

"Captain Winters has a plan."

Johnny glanced over when his young friend spoke again. She met his eyes, trust and desperate hope shining on her features.

"I hope so, too", he said, "cause I'm sick and tired of losing men."

The ranking medic nodded, gaze dropping. "Yeah", she murmured. "Me too."

They were back in the basement, waiting for the next patrol briefing. Ella was writing in her journal, trying to get her thoughts and feelings organised while also watching with half an eye as the guys prepared their weapons.

Lieutenant Jones and Webster were both sat at the table. The bitterness against Webster had disappeared. He had redeemed himself, first by getting Malarkey and Liebgott out of the patrol, then by staying behind and taking Popeye's position to cover their retreat.

The wariness and judgemental attitude towards the lieutenant was gone, too, thanks to his quick thinking and brave actions. They had both proven themselves last night and the men respected that, acknowledging it by including them in their circle.
Cobb's slightly slurred voice made the brunette look up in mild alarm.

"Watchu lookin' at, Webster?", he asked, glassy eyes boring into the man sitting on her left.

Her eyes jumped to the bottle in his hand. *Wenn das kei Alkohol ish, denn bini n Storch*. She exchanged a look with Johnny and Lieutenant Jones, the corner of her mouth twitching. Mean as it was, she actually hoped he would cross the line this time. It would be in his best interest to get his attitude adjusted.

The two NCOs rolled their eyes, signalling Jones that this was nothing new for them. Cobb was a good soldier with lots of experience, but he was unpleasant sober and a nasty drunk.

He glared at Webster, who didn't reply. Instead, the former Harvard student returned his attention to his bowl of food in front of him.

"Yeah, that's what I thought, college boy", Cobb sneered.

Jones turned in his seat. "You drunk, trooper?", he demanded firmly.

"Leave me alone."

The lieutenant fixed him with a stern glare. "Answer the question." He may be new, but he wouldn't tolerate such blatant disrespect.

Cobb rolled his eyes, replying mockingly: "Yes sir, I am drunk, sir." He paused, then continued: "Drunk, sick and tired of fucking patrols..." – Johnny twisted to look at his platoon member, not exactly impressed – "...takin' orders..."

"Hey, Cobb", Johnny interrupted blankly. "Shut up. It's boring, okay?"

The drunk man scoffed. "Takin' his side, Johnny?", he questioned.

Martin turned back, biting his tongue. Then, he answered: "Yeah, I am."

Seeing that the platoon sergeant wouldn't rise to his bait, Cobb shifted his focus onto the only person returning his gaze unwaveringly. "And what are you looking at, girl?", he challenged, still gunning for a fight.

Ella leant back, deciding to wait and see how far he would push it. She let her eyes flicker over to Johnny for the fraction of a second, seeking silent approval. He nodded. Knocking the disorderly man down a peg would do him good.

"What? Nothing?", Cobb taunted. "You siding with the West Pointer, too?"

She shrugged. "I didn't know there were sides here", she commented blandly.

He huffed in derision. "No, of course not. You're just a medic, what do you know?"

That struck a nerve. The young girl gritted her teeth, but continued to look at him, her eyes filling with frost.
"You know", Cobb continued, "it kinda makes sense now. I always wondered how you could get into this company so easily."

The entire room tensed at the insinuation. The Toccoa veterans still remembered what had been dubbed the 'Archer Incident' from back in basic. Others like Babe or Garcia had heard that story too and they had both witnessed the girl's fury during the attack on Foy. Lieutenant Jones, who had yet to really get to know the ranking medic, only had to watch the soldiers' reactions to know that the allegations were completely unfounded.

Ella gave the man a smile. It was razor-sharp. "Really?" Her entire demeanour advised him to stop talking, her voice dripping with biting sarcasm.

"Yeah. You know, you pretend to be all sweet and innocent when in reality, you're just a lying, cheating-" A string of vile slurs followed, but it was drowned out by the shouts of the men.

As soon as the first insult flew from his mouth, the guys had jumped to her feet, ready to defend their girl.

"That's enough!", Lieutenant Jones barked.

"Settle down, boys", the brunette placated, her voice somehow audible over the clamour. Her gaze never left the drunk. "Cobb, you remember Archer?", she asked, nonchalantly twirling her pencil.

Wrong-footed, Cobb frowned. "Huh?"

"Private Archer. Remember him?", she repeated conversationally.

"Yeah, what about him? You smacked him 'cause..." He trailed off as realisation slowly reached his inebriated mind. "You gonna smack me, too?", he questioned, jutting his chin forward in defiance.

Ella chuckled and flashed him a toothy grin, unsettlingly cheerful. "I was thinking more along the lines of breaking your jaw", she offered lightly, "but that works, too."

In a fluid motion, she got up from her seat, winking at him and leaving the room, seemingly impassive.

Later, she would find out that Cobb had gone on to attack Lt Foley, who had come by to talk to Lt Jones, forcing Johnny to pull his pistol on him. The drunk man was arrested and court-martialed, but would return to the unit after his trial.

"Sarge, they're on their way in", Webster announced from where he was playing look-out in the doorway.

Johnny nodded an acknowledgement, then looked at the assembled men and woman. "Ten-hut", he
commanded.

Everybody rose to their feet and stood at attention.

Captain Winters entered, followed by Speirs and Nixon. "Martin", he greeted the Staff Sergeant, who responded: "Sir."

"At ease", Winters spoke, approaching the men. "This everybody, Grant?"

Chuck confirmed.

Moving to the head of the table, the redhead took off his helmet and began: "You men did an excellent job last night. I'm uh... proud, I'm proud. I just saw Colonel Sink, he's proud too. In fact, he's so proud he wants you to do another patrol across the river tonight." The disgust and anger in his tone rang loud and clear in the room, resonating with them all.

They had already expected it and other than a few resigned sighs, nobody reacted notably to that announcement.

Winters glanced at his watch. "Any moment now, the outpost we hit last night will go up in flames." He looked over to Johnny, asking for confirmation. "Martin?"

Johnny nodded. "Yes sir."

"Which means we'd have to venture farther into town this time", the captain continued. "Captain Speirs, can we have the map please?"

The company CO, who was standing next to Martin, pulled out the folded chart and handed it to Grant, who spread the map on the table. The men moved closer, forming a circle so that they could all follow the Battalion commander's briefing. Ella was gently nudged to the front, allowing her to see the map.

"We have enemy movement here and here", Winters pointed to the referred areas, "which means this is our new house target here. We recovered all the boats, so we'll be setting off from the same place as last night."

"We're not changing the plan any, sir?", Martin spoke up, phrasing his question as a statement, but the disbelief behind it didn't go unnoticed.

Winters' eyes flickered over to him, then returned to the map. "No. Plan's the same. It will be 0200 hours instead of 0100." Hearing no acknowledgement, he inquired: "That clear?"

"Yes sir", the assembled group responded sullenly.

Ella raked a hand through her hair, a few strands tumbling out of her bun to frame her face. Despair and resignation pooled in the pit of her stomach, creating a sinking feeling. We're going to need a miracle to get everybody back safe and sound after last night.

Winters nodded. "Okay. Good. Because... I want you all to get a full night's sleep tonight."
Everybody's heads raised, puzzled looks flying over to him.

"That means that in the morning, you will report to me that you made it across the river, into German lines, but were unable to secure any live prisoners", he continued.

Frowns of confusion settled on the men's faces, which then slowly turned into a stunned expression as realisation trickled through the daze of shock. The ranking medic was seriously worried that her fever had spiked and she was now hallucinating.

"Understand?", Winters questioned, studying them.

The "yes sir" came hesitantly this time, nobody exactly sure if they had heard right or if they were dreaming.

"Good."

He folded the map, then looked at them again, a small smile playing around his lips. "Look sharp for tomorrow. We're moving off the line."

As the officers – minus Jones – left, they shared a conspiratorial look and a smile.

Behind them, the guys began to laugh, relief hitting them like a freight train. "Did I fuckin' hear that right?", Liebgott asked, grinning from ear to ear.

Ella shrugged, a smile slowly forming on her face. "I honestly have no idea. Either we're all having the same dream or this really just happened."

*God bless Captain Richard Winters.*

She left the boys to celebrate, heading outside to clear her head. The small girl climbed the stairs like in a trance. She still couldn't believe it. Trudging through the melting snow, she took deep, deliberate breaths. The cool air filled her lungs and her thoughts began to take shape again.

Captain Winters had a plan. She felt a bit ashamed for even remotely doubting that. He had always looked out for Easy Company, even after he had been moved up to battalion. Gratefulness swept through her and she took a moment to thank whatever higher powers that were listening.

*No patrol. And we're moving off the line tomorrow. We're finally getting a break.*

Like the sun coming out after a long period of stormy, dark weather, her features lit up with a radiant smile. Relief glowed in her chest, the knowledge easing the pain inside her soul a little. On a whim, the young medic headed for the CP. Luz was probably still working on the supplies and wouldn't mind some company.

"Hey George."

Luz looked up from the supplies he was inventorying to see Ella standing in the doorway. Her
cheeks were flushed with fever and lines of worry and exhaustion marred her youthful face. But her eyes, they finally sparkled again, the smile on her face reflecting in them. He had been worried about her. She had been quiet and withdrawn, the beautiful green orbs dark and dim.

He couldn't help but grin widely. "Hi Ella", he said, "What brings you here on this fine day?"

"Nothing special. Just wondering if you needed any help." She leaned against the table, scratching at the scar on her temple and rubbing her burning eyes.

Luz shook his head. "Nah, I just got done", he waved it off. "But if you ask me, you could use some rest. You don't look too hot, kiddo."

She pinned him with a flat expression, the teasing grin on her lips taking the bite out of her words. "Are you saying I look like crap?", she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Maybe?", he hedged, slanting her a sly look.

The brunette gave an approving nod and chuckled. "Okay. I guess you're right because if I look half as good as I feel, I look awful."

Luz immediately stepped around the counter, worry flaring up again. For the young girl to admit that she wasn't feeling well was a huge deal. "Do you want me to get the Doc?", he asked, arm wrapping around her shoulders.

Ella shook her head, waving off his concern with a gentle smile. "No, it's just the fever. I'll get some sleep later, but I'm too wired to sleep right now."

He accepted it, ruffling her hair and smiling fondly when she leant into his touch.

"Ella?"

She turned to face Captain Speirs. "Yes sir?"

"Join us for a moment", he ordered, waving her over.

The ranking medic nodded and stepped into the other room.

There, she noticed two things in rapid succession.

First, she saw Lip, looking almost like himself again, the greyish pallor of illness gone.

Second, she spotted Lieutenant Harry Welsh, who had been wounded on Christmas Eve, an impish grin on his face while he talked to Nixon.

"Well, I'll be damned!", Welsh cried when he caught sight of the small girl entering.
She grinned. "Good to see you again, sir", she said sincerely.

He still had a slight limp as he crossed the room, but he didn't seem too bothered by it. "And you, Shorty." The lieutenant pulled her into an enthusiastic hug.

Letting go, he took a step back and turned serious. "That reminds me, I haven't gotten round to thanking you yet."

Her eyebrows furrowed into a light frown of confusion. "Thanking me?", she echoed.

He nodded, clapping her on the shoulder and beaming at her. "That's right. You saved my life and I want to thank you for that."

Ella blushed and dropped her gaze. "I was just doing my job, sir", she muttered, flustered.

Thankfully, Winters chose that moment to step in, saving her from further embarrassment. He cleared his throat. "First Sergeant Lipton?", he said, claiming everybody's attention.

"Sir." Lip pushed himself off the couch he had been leaning against.

Winters pulled some papers from his jacket and held them out to him. "Your honourable discharge as an enlisted man... and your battlefield commission as a Second Lieutenant."

Ella watched with a smile on her face as Lipton grinned, glowing with pride.

"Congratulations, Carwood", Winters said, shaking the newly appointed lieutenant's hand.

"Thank you, sir."

The men shook hands, all smiling, infected with Lip's joy. He deserved it, after all, he had been Easy's de facto leader ever since Captain Winters had made Battalion.

When it was Ella's turn, they looked at each other for a second, eyes twinkling with shared happiness. "Guess I can't call you Sarge anymore now", she commented off-handedly, a hint of regret tinting her voice.

He chuckled. "It's alright, Shorty, I don't mind."

A cheeky smirk stole itself onto her delicate features. "Permission to hug you, sir?"

Lip laughed. " Granted."

Beaming, the young medic launched herself at Lip, wrapping her arms around him in a warm, exuberant hug. He easily caught her, the men around them laughing, watching with smiles on their faces.

Releasing him, she leaned against the couch, grinning widely.
"Sergeant Sawyer."

Ella's heart nearly dropped into her boots upon hearing Captain Speirs address her so formally. *Hani öppis gmacht?* Instinctively, she straightened. "Sir?", she asked. Still, she couldn't quite keep the smile off her face. Lip's joy was just so infectious.

"It has been brought to our attention that you didn't put in for a Purple Heart after you were wounded in Holland." He raised an eyebrow in question, fixing her with an almost scolding stare.

"Uh...yes sir. It didn't cross my mind", the brunette replied truthfully, a slightly sheepish expression settling on her features.

Nixon laughed, sharing a look with Welsh. With the exception of Lieutenant Jones, none of the men in the room were too surprised.

The CO nodded. "Easy Company decided to rectify this", he said, "and put your name on the list. Therefore, Sergeant J.V. Sawyer, it's my pleasure to present you with your Purple Heart." He produced the award and handed it to her. "Congratulations, Ella", he offered with a small smile.

The girl marvelled at the medal in her hand for a moment before remembering her manners. "Thank you, sir", she smiled brightly.

She shook hands with Winters before nearly getting the life squeezed out of her by Welsh's hug. Lip and Nixon both gave her a hug as well, but they were more mindful of her now possibly bruised ribs.

Lieutenant Jones, who had been watching with slight consternation – he had never seen an enlisted so close with the officers – also offered his hand. "Congratulations, Sergeant."

She smiled and thanked him earnestly. "Oh, and call me Ella, sir. Or Shorty, whichever you prefer", she said.

The men shared meaningful looks. Their girl had just truly made the young lieutenant part of the Easy Company. It wasn't a secret that only outsiders called her by rank and last name, so by inviting him to use her nickname, she was accepting him as a respected and valued member of the unit.

Eventually, Speirs pinned her with a pointed look. "Bed. Now", he ordered, gesturing towards the back.

The ranking medic opened her mouth to protest, but was overruled by multiple voices telling her to get some sleep.

"You look like crap, kid." Captain Nixon, tactful like always.

For the fun of it, Ella snapped off an impeccable salute, grinning like a Cheshire cat. "Yes, sir." She recognised a lost fight when she saw one, and she really didn't feel too well.
Luz guided his small friend to 'her' bed. Gene met them about half-way. Feeling her forehead, he turned to go back to the aid station, promising to bring the remedy she'd concocted.

"Lovely", Ella mumbled, stumbling over to the bed, feeling drained and miserable after the excitement had died down.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she took off her helmet and satchel and was ready to let herself topple over, when Luz stopped her.

"Nu-uh, kiddo", he made, hands grabbing her shoulders. The girl blinked bearly at him, looking about half her age.

With some gentle cajoling, he got her to take off her webbing and boots. Then, he urged her to lie down and tucked her in, wrapping the blanket snuggly around her.

"How come nobody knows you're such a mother hen?", she asked with a sleepy smile, wiggling around a little to get comfortable.

Luz winked at her. "It's my superpower, it's a secret", he replied in a stage-whisper.

She snickered, pieces of a distant memory flashing through her mind. "I promise, I won't tell anybody", she said with the earnest seriousness normally only children possessed.

"Never doubted you, Shorty", George smiled, ruffling her hair.

Gene came back, the cup with the fever-reducer in his hand. "Voilà, petite", he said, helping her sit up a little so she could drink it.

The young medic wrinkled her nose. "This is gonna suck", she stated, but downed the remedy without hesitation or complaint. Unlike Lipton, she was prepared for the vile taste, having taken the concoction more than once in her childhood.

Shuddering and swallowing a few times to keep the disgusting brew down, the brunette blindly reached for her canteen and took a few gulps. "Eugh", she commented. "I forgot just how nasty this stuff is."

Gene chuckled. "You gotta teach me this recipe some time, Ellie. But now, you hafta sleep."

"Mh-hm", she hummed, eyes already starting to close.

"I'll stay for a while", Luz offered to the Cajun medic, who was looking conflicted about leaving.

He nodded his thanks, promised to check on his colleague in an hour or so, and left after wishing her a good night – even if it wasn't even dark outside.

Ella scooted over to make room for her friend, snuggling up to him as soon as he sat down. She blinked slowly, the remedy already beginning to taking effect. "George?", she asked in a small voice, breaking the companionable silence.

"Yeah, kiddo?" He looked down to see her gaze up at him with those big puppy dog eyes. A
turmoil of emotions swirled inside the green orbs, fully visible now that her walls, masks and shields were lowered, the combination of exhaustion, illness and medication baring the girl's soul.

"I got a Purple Heart", she revealed, sounding somewhere between amazed and puzzled as if she couldn't really understand the reason behind it.

"Yeah, I know. Congratulations, by the way", Luz said, smiling down at her.

The small girl gave him a sweet, but sleepy smile. "Thanks. But why did I get a Purple Heart?", she questioned. "I didn't put in for one. Ish doch komisch, ma kriagt n award for getting wounded. I didn't do anything, I was just shot."

Even if Luz didn't understand part of what his young friend had said, he had no trouble grasping the meaning. The look of complete bewilderment on her face spoke volumes. "I don't know", he admitted, before offering his explanation: "I guess it's to acknowledge that you made a sacrifice for your country, that you were in the field and not hiding in some office at the rear."

She was quiet for a moment, seriously thinking about his words. Then, a content grin spread on her features and she nodded. "I think you're right."

They lapsed into silence once more, neither feeling the need to speak.

Minutes ticked by and Luz thought she had drifted off, so he nearly jumped out of his skin when the ranking medic softly said: "Thanks Luz."

Realising what she was talking about, he couldn't help but grin. Damn, the girl was just too smart. Or too perceptive. Or both.

"You're welcome, kiddo. Now get some sleep, or Doc's gonna be mad."

She buried deeper into the pillow and mumbled, half asleep already: "Wouldn't want that."

Her lids closed and it didn't take long until her breathing evened out.

They were going off the line. Ella and her fellow medics got the aid station packed up in just over an hour, eager to get moving. They loaded everything onto a truck, then set off to help wherever another set of hands was needed.

A weight had lifted off the men's shoulders and everybody's step was somehow lighter, but also more careful. They had survived, against all odds. They were going into reserve and moving back to Mourmelon. Slowly, each of them began to feel that maybe, they might make it. They might get through this war and go home.

As the guys piled into their platoons' designated trucks, the ranking medic took a moment to say good-bye to Lieutenant Jones. He had been promoted to First Lieutenant and was transferred to a
"It's been an honour to meet you, Ella", he said sincerely, shaking her hand. "You're the bravest and most selfless woman I have ever met. The men are lucky to have you."

She smiled, a light blush creeping onto her cheeks at his praise. "Thank you, sir. It was good to work with you, too. Regiment is gaining a great man." And she meant it. He had promise and would do well on the regimental staff. He wasn't just after a career, he cared about the men and had a healthy mixture of guts and common sense.

Jones grinned, the glow of pride shining on his face. "Thank you...Shorty." The fond company moniker rolled off his tongue after a slight hesitation. He had learned a lot about the ranking medic – well, about the whole company – thanks to all the stories the men had shared last night as they had celebrated in the cellar. Easy sure was an interesting group. It made him almost sad to be leaving.

She chuckled, as if reading his thoughts. "Don't worry, sir", she spoke, "We won't forget you. Do the same, will you? Who knows, we might meet again someday." She wanted to say more, but the call to mount up interrupted her.

The lieutenant gave her a nod, appreciating her words. "So long, Ella."

"So long, sir."

Then, Jones walked away, heading to the jeep that would take him to his new posting.

Hands reached out to pull their girl onto the truck. "Up you get, kiddo", Bull said, smiling around his ever-present cigar.

Grabbing hold of two hands – she thought it was Tab's and Perconte's – Ella let them hoist her onto the back of the vehicle. The guys refused to let her sit at the edge, claiming that she would fall over the tailgate at the first pothole. The small medic couldn't dispute that, so she settled between Bull and Skinny.

A blanket was spread over her and she couldn't help but laugh. "I am getting better, you know", the young girl remarked.

"So?", Johnny challenged, giving her a look that dared her to protest.

Ella rolled her eyes and grinned. "You are all such mother hens", she teased fondly, a warm and fuzzy feeling spreading in her chest that wasn't an after-effect of the fever remedy.

"Well, someone's gotta look out for you, if you constantly forget it yourself", Johnny shot back. His sharp tone and glare were contrasted by the smile hidden in the corner of his mouth and completely negated when he reached over and affectionately tousled her hair.

Their girl did one hell of a job looking after an entire company, caring for each and every one of 'her boys'. They returned the favour only too gladly. So what if she wasn't so good at taking care of herself? She had the entirety of Easy, plus a couple of officers from battalion – or in Nixon's case regiment – looking out for her and for them, it was no bother at all.
Translations:

Wia bini do hera ko?: How did I get here?
Hesh n Vogel?: Are you crazy? (literally: Do you have a bird?)
cherie: darling, sweetheart
Wenn das kei Alkohol ish, denn bini n Storch: If that's not alcohol, I'm a stork.
Hani öppis gmacht?: Did I do something?
Voilà, petite: Here you go, little one
Ish doch komisch, ma kriagt n award: Isn't it strange, you get an award... (she shifts back into English at that point)
*awkward wave* um, hey folks... sorry for disappearing for so long and for not posting in even remotely regular intervals. I'm afraid it won't improve any time soon, especially in the next two months. November and December are always crazy busy months, both at work and outside it... I hope you can forgive me?

Anyways, I hope you guys still like this story :)

Un fortunately, moving off the line also had its downsides.

One of them were the nightmares. In the field, they were rare since most of the time, nobody fell into a deep enough sleep to dream. They had been constantly on alert, able to go from asleep to battle-ready within a heartbeat.

But the relative safety of the rear changed that. After the exhaustion was gone, the dreams came. Sometimes, they were pleasant, filled with light and hope and laughter. But often enough, they weren't.

Ella was there for her boys, offering comfort and a friendly ear. Sometimes, she stayed up for hours with them; other times, she shared their bunk with them for the remainder of the night, or she simply returned to her bed, giving them the space they wanted or needed. Waking them up to pull them from the clutches of terror, she had become an expert in dodging flailing limbs and wild punches thrown in a drowsy state.

She wasn't unaffected either. Mostly, her nightmares revolved around all the horrors she'd experienced in combat. Occasionally, some of her old dreams returned to haunt her. No matter what the topic, the small girl always woke up with her heart hammering in her chest and tears drying on her cheeks.

She had always been quiet in that aspect. She didn't cry out or scream or jolt awake with a gasp. She tossed and turned, maybe gave the occasional whimper, but that was it. Still, her friends did the same for her as she did for them and she couldn't be more grateful.

Despite all that, Ella had yet to really deal with all the bottled-up emotions she carried inside her since Bastogne.

Only a few days after the parade, the ranking medic could no longer keep that anguish locked away.

It was a mail call like any other at first. She was standing with a group of her friends, shooting the breeze before another combat drill. Vest hollered her name, she raised her hand and called: "Here!" He came over and delivered her mail.
"Thanks, Vest", the brunette said before turning her attention to the letters in her hand. The first
one was from her Mama, just like she had expected. But why would her mother write two letters
without waiting for a response? She studied the second envelope and frowned. The handwriting
looked familiar, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it.

Shrugging to herself, she turned it around to look at the sender.

Her heart stuttered and skipped a few beats while her stomach turned. A strange numbness
overcame her and the envelope nearly slipped from her fingers that had suddenly begun to tremble.

Blinking rapidly and shaking her head, the young girl tucked the letters in her pocket when the
instructions for the drill were given.

Focusing on the task at hand, she shooed the replacement medics off to join the platoons they had
been assigned to for this exercise. Glancing at Gene and Spina, the three experienced medics rolled
their eyes, then went take up their own positions.

Time passed quickly, one drill following the next, with only a short break for lunch. Their busy
day notwithstanding, most of the guys noticed that something was off about their girl.

She looked troubled and the shadows in her eyes were more prominent than they had been in a
good while. She didn't speak much, her orders to the replacements were brisk and her smile had
dimmed again.

Later, at dinner, Ella was notably absent.

"Where's Shorty?", Babe asked, scanning the crowd when he didn't see her sitting in one of her
usual places between the men.

"Probably still in the shower", Webster offered.

Johnny shook his head. "No, Bull and I waited for her." They still kept watch while she was
showering, not willing to risk her getting attacked while she was vulnerable.

"Better question: Anyone know what's up with her today?", Grant inquired with concern in his
voice.

Shrugs and head-shaking were the general response.

"She got some letters", Gene spoke up, his soft accent floating across the table.

"That's right", Malarkey remembered.

Grant pushed around the food on his plate and speculated: "Maybe she got bad news from home."

Luz took his cigarette from his mouth. "I'll go check on her", he decided. "She's probably back at
the tents. She's not on shift tonight, right Doc?"

Gene confirmed with a nod and the radioman left, cigarette abandoned on the ground.
Luz ran into Lipton on his way to the billets. "Hey, Lip, you seen Shorty?", he asked.

The lieutenant nodded. "She's in her tent. Make sure she's okay, alright?", he urged.

"Sure thing, Lip." George almost smiled when he thought about the nickname he had given him in Bastogne. 'Mama Lip' sure fit the caring West Virginian. Concern bubbling in the pit of his stomach, he entered the tent where his small friend was bunked. At first, he didn't see anyone.

"Ella? You in here?"

Soft snifflies reached his ears, followed by a quiet, slightly raspy "Yeah."

He crossed the room and sure enough, sat in the narrow space between her bunk and the tent wall, knees pulled to her chest, there was Ella. She looked up at him with too bright, tear-filled eyes. His heart clenched at the sight. "Hey, what are you doing down there, kiddo?", he wanted to know, crouching down before her.

She sniffled again and shrugged, fingers smoothing the fold of the letter in her hand.

Luz pointed at it, sympathy and worry shining on his face. "Bad news from home?", he asked. "Is your Mama okay?"

The young girl's eyes flickered down to the paper and she shook her head. "Yeah, I mean no. It's...it's not bad news", she replied, her voice rough with emotion.

Luz nodded, slightly relieved. "Okay", he said. "How about we sit down on your bunk and you can tell me what's going on?"

She took a shaky breath, then gave an equally shaky nod.

Smiling encouragingly, George reached out his hand. When she took it, he pulled her to her feet and gently guided her to sit down on the bunk. The brunette pulled up her feet to sit cross-legged, the letter still clutched in her hand. The radioman settled on her side and wrapped an arm around her, feeling her small frame tremble. Deciding to let her set the pace, he stayed quiet, waiting until she felt ready to speak.

Ella was quarrelling with herself. Luz was probably one of her closest friends. He cared and he wasn't afraid to show it. He was a brother to her. They all were. They had never looked down on her, not when she had opened up about her family, not when her painful connection to Michaels had come to light. They had been supportive, accepting, protective.

You trust them with your life, she reminded herself. And they trusted her with theirs. She had seen them at their worst. She had held them when they cried, she had calmed their anger, assuaged their worries. They trusted her enough to bare their souls to her, to let out their emotions.
Time for her to do the same.

"I got two letters today", she spoke quietly. "One from Mama. The other..." She exhaled. "The other is from Bill and Joe."

Understanding hit George like a truck and his heart ached for his friend. After weeks and weeks of blocking out her own pain, fear, helplessness and desperation to care for the guys, it had been pushed back to the fore by this letter. As he thought about it, he realised that in the three years that he had known her, she had never actually cried. Not even after the whole Adrian Michaels fiasco had she shed more than a few stray tears. Her breaking voice pulled him out of his thoughts.

Now that Ella had started speaking, the words just tumbled out. "They're going home soon and-", dry sobs began to punctuate her words, "and somehow I'm glad, because they're safe now, they're out of this fucking war, but I also want them back."

Her speech picked up as the flood built, pushing against the cracking façade of her mental and emotional fortifications. "I want them to be here, with us! I want Toye to bitch and cuss about the new guys, I want Bill to joke around and be a wiseass and call me 'lil' lady!'"

Her breathing hitched and she turned her head to look at him, raking a hand through her tousled locks. "And for that I feel so selfish", she confessed, her dark green puppy eyes filled with heartbreak, guilt, self-recrimination and pure anguish.

"Hey", he said, squeezing her shoulder. Her eyes didn't leave his, a storm of a thousand emotions inside them. "You're not selfish. I want them back too."

"I just feel so bad", she murmured, lowering her gaze. Her voice dropped to a hushed, ashamed mumble. "I never cried for them, I never cried for any of them. I always pushed it down." She raised her head again, peering up at him and looking so completely lost and scared.

But it was her next words that made Luz' heart break for her. Six words uttered so seriously and fearfully that they stole his breath for a moment.

"Am I a bad person, George?"

It took a lot to baffle George Luz, but hearing that question out of Ella's mouth rendered him speechless. Then, as the initial shock passed, he shook his head. "No", he stated firmly. "No, Shorty. You don't have a single bad bone in you. You're the best person I've ever met. After all the shit you've been through, you're still friendly and open and kind and goddamn amazing!" His expression softened again and he looked her straight in the eyes. "We love you, kiddo. And they all did too."

The walls crumbled. "I miss them", she managed to choke out before the tears came.

Luz pulled her close.

The brunette buried her face in his chest as harsh, broken sobs wracked her slim frame. Hot tears
soaked through his shirt, but he didn't even notice it. He simply cradled her in his arms and gently rocked her like a child, letting her know that she wasn't alone. The sounds making their way past Ella's closed-up throat were raw and full of pain. It was almost brutal to witness how her whole body shook from the force of her sobs.

"Shh, let it out", he soothed when he felt her diaphragm spasm in an effort to stem the flood of tears. He began rubbing circles on her back with one hand, the other stroking her hair. "Easy. Just breathe", he whispered as she came closer and closer to hyperventilating. "It's okay."

George didn't know how long he sat there with his small friend in his lap, holding her as she cried. It didn't matter either. Slowly, the storm of emotions abated, her sobs reducing to tiny hiccoughs before becoming snifflies. When she pulled back, he let her, but kept his arm around her shoulders. Ella wiped her face, croaking out a hoarse "Thanks."

Luz smiled and ruffled her hair. "Anytime, kiddo", he replied.

She picked up the letters, gently running her fingers over the slightly crinkled paper. "I shouldn't even be here you know", she said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Luz frowned. How could she think something like that? "You have every right to be here."

The ranking medic chuckled sadly. "Well, I would be here, but... I shouldn't have been on that plane on D-Day. I shouldn't have been in basic with you."

It began to dawn on him what she was talking about. "You mean...you lied on your papers?", he asked carefully, suspecting the answer but needing confirmation.

She nodded, sniffling and dashing away the moisture from her eyes. "Yeah."

Luz was so dumbfounded, he fell back on his default reaction: Humour.

"So that explains why you don't drink", he cracked. The left-field comment had the desired effect and made Ella laugh slightly. He grinned at her, glad to see her spirits return. "So, how old are you really?"

The small girl looked at him, the corners of her mouth tilting up. "I'll be turning 19 this year."

George just shook his head in amusement, smile still etched onto his features. "Does anybody know?", he then wondered.

"Lip does", she answered. "And I think some of the guys suspect it, but I'm not sure."

He chuckled. "Well, I'm not gonna say anything. We'd be lost without you, kiddo." He nudged her with his shoulder.

She blushed and nudged back, smiling.
An hour later, Johnny and Bull entered the tent, worry for their girl churning in their guts. They weren't sure what they expected, but seeing Luz and Ella on her bunk, playing what looked like Gin Rummy was a relief. They walked over, commandeering the adjacent bunks.

"Hi Johnny, hi Bull", the ranking medic greeted them with a smile on her youthful face. Her eyes were red-rimmed and still a little too bright, but it didn't escape their notice that she looked better. The shadows that had lingered at the edges of her features had retreated, the weight on her shoulders had eased.

"Hey kid", Bull replied. "Who's winning?"

Luz made a show of pouting and gesturing at their ranking medic in mock-frustration. "She is. Guys, I'm telling you, never play for anything more than toothpicks!"

Ella snickered and drew another card. "It's just luck", she shrugged it off, discarding.

"Ha!", George exclaimed after drawing. "Knock!" He arranged his hand into sets and runs, grinning triumphantly.

The other three laughed and the brunette said: "See, you won this time."

"Yeah, this is what? The first time in the entire game?", Luz retorted, but he grinned as he smugly shuffled the cards.

"Maybe your luck just took some time to kick in?", she suggested with an innocent smirk.

They played a few rounds of Rummy before switching to Poker when Perconte and Grant joined them.

"Jesus Christ, how is this possible?!", Frank cried out when he lost his cigarettes to Ella, who had teamed up with Grant because she still wasn't too sure of how the game worked. "How is it that every time you play, I get ripped off?"

She sent him her most charming smile and shrugged.

"Maybe because your poker face sucks?", Johnny snarked, garnering a round of laughter.

Chuck studied his newly dealt hand and commented: "Shorty's just our lucky charm." He received a peck on the cheek for that as the young girl leant over to peek at the cards.

That night, before lights out, Ella was curled up on her bunk, the letter from Bill and Joe in her hand. Reading the lines, she could practically hear them in her head, Bill's Philly drawl and Joe's raspy growl.
Dear Shorty

Lil’ lady, I miss you something crazy. Just ain't the same without your smiles and puppy dog eyes. I hope you’re doing alright, word has it you guys are going off the line soon. About damn time if you ask me.

Me and Joe are doing well, but I think the hospital’s gonna be glad when they're finally getting rid of us. We're shipping home soon. I don't really know how I feel about that if I'm honest. Sure, I'm looking forward to seeing my folks again, being back and all that, but I guess you know what I mean. But don't you go worrying about me or Joe, we'll be just fine.

When you get home, I expect a telegram or a call, alright, kid? No argument. Ain't nobody gonna stop Ol’ Guarnere from visiting his favourite medic. Send my regards to the boys, will you, and tell them that I expect to hear from all of them. I gotta stop now, Toye's glaring at me from his bed, so I'm handing over to him.

Be safe, Ella, and write soon.

Love ya, lil’ lady.

Bill

Dear Shorty

Bill finally managed to finish his letter. I miss you, kiddo, this place here would be a lot more bearable with you around. But the boys need you more, so it's alright. We heard you're moving off the line soon. Good.

I assume Bill told you that we’re going home soon. I don't know when we get when we’ll get out of the hospital there, but I hope it's not gonna be too long, because it's boring as hell! I think I might go and visit your Mama sometime after we get home. Bill wants to come too. I told him he would only scare her off with that ugly mug of his, but you know how he is. He's rolling his eyes at me now.

Take care of yourself, kid, you hear? You promised. And use that knife if anybody gives you any shit. Especially those damn replacements. Nobody get to mess with you except Easy. That reminds me: There was this reporter here a few days ago, asked questions about you. If he writes bullshit, Bill and I are going to find him and make him write the truth.

Say hi to the guys from me and get in touch as soon as you get home, alright?

Be safe, Shorty, and give ’em hell from us.

Don't do anything stupid.

Love

Joe

Ella smiled to herself and carefully tucked the pages back into the envelope, sliding it into her
journal. She would always carry these scars of war around with her. She would never forget the horrors she had experienced. But opening up to George and allowing herself to grieve had helped. She felt lighter, freer. It had been like reopening a festering wound and draining it. It hurt, it hurt like hell, but in the end, it was necessary for the healing process.

"Good night, Johnny", she whispered to the man she was curled up against. He had simply stretched out on her bed and told her to sleep when she had tried to protest.

"Night, Shorty", came the familiar response.

The girl sighed contently and closed her eyes. And with the comforting presence of her friends around her and the reassuring warmth of Johnny beside her, she dropped off into a world of peaceful dreams, filled with happy memories of her friends, her brothers.
**Change in the Ranks**

Chapter Summary

Ella gets promoted, training starts again and the company is awarded another citation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Predictably, the entire camp knew about Ella's pending promotion by the end of the week. So when the young medic was presented with her Technician Third Grade chevrons at the ceremony, she was swarmed by the boys as soon as the officers had offered their congratulations.

The small girl was nearly buried under the onslaught of pats, hugs and kisses on the cheek and head. Major Winters, promoted just as they had pulled out of Haguenau, Captains Nixon and Speirs, and Lieutenants Welsh and Lipton stood off to the side and watched the scene, looking a fair bit like proud parents or relatives.

In the evening, the guys insisted on dragging their favourite female combat medic along to a USO dance to celebrate. Not that she put up much of a fight. Ella loved dancing and spending time with her boys, so she quickly agreed.

While the men put on their new, perfectly fitted class A's for a second time, the brunette stood in front of the mirror, a pair of scissors in her hand. A haircut was long overdue and since she had a surprise planned for her friends, now was as good a time as any.

She studied her reflection as her fingers worked steadily to trim her locks.

The hollowness had left her features pretty much as soon as she had gotten decent food again. Her skin was no longer pale or flushed with fever, but had regained its healthy sun-tanned complexion. The scar on her temple was still a faint pink, the one on her forehead a white line interrupting her eyebrow.

Cleaning up and throwing away the cut hair, the ranking medic grinned at herself in the mirror, the crescent-shaped dimple appearing on her cheek. She couldn't wait to see her friends' faces.

Bull, who had offered to walk with her, wasn't easily baffled. True to his calm, usually mild-mannered nature, he looked at her in momentary surprise, then smiled widely. "Ya look gorgeous, kid", he complimented, standing up and offering his arm.

Ella gave him a radiant smile, blushing a little. "Thank you, Bull."

Reaching the large rec hall, the tall Arkansas native courteously held the door for his small friend. She thanked him with one of her sweet smiles and a little curtsy, making him chuckle.
"There you are!", Luz cried when he spotted her, pushing through the crowd to meet them. He beamed like a kid in a candy story, throwing an arm casually around her neck. "C'mon, lemme buy you a drink."

Ella listened as he chattered animatedly, relaying the latest gossip as they made their way to the bar.

"Soda?", he guessed, throwing her a questioning glance.

She nodded. "Please."

Suddenly, in the middle of ordering a beer for himself, he froze. His head whipped around as he did a double take, eyes wide as saucers and filled with sheer wonder. "Holy shit!", he exclaimed, completely taken aback when his brain comprehended what he was seeing.

The men, who had all turned when they had heard him, gaped. Ella almost expected to hear the crashing sound of everybody's jaws hitting the floor. A few echoes of "holy shit" and whispered variations thereof drifted through the air.

The young girl shifted, feeling a bit self-conscious. The entire room had fallen silent and all eyes were on her as the guys stared at her, stunned. A cheeky grin lit up her features and she waved cheerfully. "Hi guys!"

Slowly, the shock seemed to pass. The brunette looked at Luz and quipped: "Told you you'd get to see me in a skirt one day."

He beamed all over his face and declared loudly: "Well, you sure look different like this than in pants and jump boots."

Raucous laughter exploded all around. "Thanks", the ranking medic smiled. "Now, if you could all stop gaping at me like fish out of water? You're starting to make me think I have something on my face", she said, addressing her friends.

They snickered, sheepish grins on their faces. After everybody had come to greet her and shower her with compliments that left her blushing adorably, the boys returned to their previous occupations; drinking, talking, chatting up the nurses and WAC women.

Luz and Ella made their way through the merry crowd to a table, drinks in hand. Johnny kicked a chair out for her.

"Thanks, Johnny", she said, sitting down and smoothing her uniform skirt.

He waved it off. "That was one hell of a surprise, kid", he remarked with a congenial smile.

She giggled. "You should have seen your faces." Her eyes were alight with mirth and good-natured mischief.

Grant and Christenson joined their lively group of four, grabbing chairs and getting comfortable.
"Say, Shorty, does your job change, now that you're a T-3? Are you going to be reassigned?", Chuck asked, a hint of worry in his tone.

The small girl smiled softly. "No, I'm afraid you'll still be stuck with me as your ranking medic", she jested. "I'm now the highest-ranking medic in 2nd Battalion, but that doesn't make much of a difference", she continued.

Reassured, the boys relaxed again and conversation shifted to other topics.

Eventually, Ella stood up, excitement radiating off her slim frame. "Right. I don't know about you gentlemen, but I feel like dancing", she stated.

"Me too", Christenson agreed, getting to his feet as well.

She gave him a sparkling smile and let him lead her to the dance floor.

When the men saw that their girl had joined the dancers, they almost began to stand in line to cut in. It was an open secret in the company that the brunette loved dancing as much as she was good at it and they all wanted a turn. She was only too happy to indulge them, switching partners with graceful ease. Skinny, Liebgott, Malarkey, Babe, Shifty, Popeye... the list grew as song after song went by.

She even pulled Gene onto the dance floor, her infectious joy impossible to resist.

"T'es une danceuse fantastique", he told her as they danced to a slower song.

The younger medic pecked him on the cheek mid-move. "Merci Gene."

When the song ended, the quiet Cajun went back to his table, re-joining the conversation with Babe and Spina, while Lipton took his place. "Would you like to dance?", he asked, polite as he was.

"Of course, Lip", she beamed.

The music picked up again.

"You look beautiful, Ella", the lieutenant said.

Her caramel-brown locks flew behind her as she did a sweeping turn. "Thanks, Lip." She almost glowed with joy. "And I already apologise if I step on your toes, it's been almost three years since I've danced in women's shoes."

He laughed and lead her through another figure. "I think there's a bigger risk that I step on your toes", he countered.

The young medic shrugged, twirling out, then spinning back towards him. "Ah, you're fine", she assured him.

"Mind if I cut in?", Luz asked after the song ended, walking up to them.

Lip shook his head, smiling. "Not at all."
Ella agreed. "But I really need a drink first", she added with a laugh.

"Eh, that can be arranged", Luz grinned, holding out his hand and giving an exaggerated bow. "This way, oh my princess." He wiggled his eyebrows for good measure.

She giggled and played along. "Lead the way, Prince Charming."

He took her hand and they weaved their way through the room.

"So, my soda didn't survive", the girl commented, slanting him an amused look. Luz had made a habit of stealing her drinks, or as he put it: "sharing is caring."

"No", he confirmed with a shake of his head, "but it would have gotten warm anyways."

After quenching their thirst, the pair headed back to the dance floor. A fast, upbeat jazz song came on and they joined the other dancers.

"Jeez, how do you keep your balance in those shoes?", Luz wondered.

She flashed him a conspiratorial grin. "I'm just special that way, George", she joked before continuing: "And" – she leaned closer to whisper in his ear – "lots and lots of practice." She slid backwards, winking at him.

He snorted, nearly missing a step from laughing too hard.

The song came to an end and Luz scooped her up, swinging her around with his typical enthusiasm before gently setting her back on her feet. They earned a round of applause for their energetic performance.

Returning to their seats, Ella was glad to rest her feet a bit. After wearing jump boots day in, day out, heels were a huge change. Nevertheless, she had a wonderful time and would readily put up with having to patch up a blister or two. Sipping on her soda, the small medic let the jokes and idle conversation wash over her, throwing in some comments here and there. Otherwise, she was content to just sit there, enjoy the company of her friends and watch the people.

"I'll be right back, I'm just going to get some fresh air", Ella told her friends after a while.

"Want me to go with you?", Johnny offered.

She shook her head, smiling. "It's fine", she said. Patting the pocket of her uniform jacket, she added: "Plus, I still got my knife."

The boys chuckled and she stepped outside.

The quiet of the night was almost palpable. Breathing deeply, the brunette relished the feeling of
the cool air filling her lungs, the sense of serenity it brought. She sat down on the low mural, tipping her head back to gaze at the stars for a few minutes.

Footsteps approached and she didn't have to look over to know who it was.

"Good evening, sir", she greeted.

"Evening, Ella", Captain Speirs responded, coming to stand next to her. He pulled out a pack of smokes and offered her one. She smiled and took it, tucking it into her pocket to add it to her stash. He lit his own and leant against the wall, smoking calmly.

"You shouldn't be out here by yourself", he broke the silence after a moment.

Ella chuckled softly. "I'm not, though, am I?", she countered, eyes twinkling.

The CO gave her a shrewd look, but didn't argue the point any further.

"Besides", the girl continued, "I'm not foolish enough to be unarmed." She showed him her knife. The blade glittered in the outdoor lighting, the hilt warm and reassuring in her hand.

Speirs took it and examined it closely. "Where did you get it?", he asked, handing it back. It was not the standard pocket knife that medics were allowed to carry. It wasn't even a standard-issue switchblade.

A fond, slightly wistful expression crossed her features as her eyes stared into the distance. "Joe Toye gave it to me", she answered. "In Normandy. I had lost my other knife, the one my brother had given me, on D-Day."

"You managed to hold on to a contraband knife throughout basic training?", he inquired, sounding impressed.

The young medic grinned slyly and replied: "Well... it was confiscated once. But I got it back the next day and nobody ever noticed."

"I'll keep that in mind", he remarked dryly, getting a laugh from her.

Glancing at her watch, Ella said: "You know, I should probably head back inside before the boys send a search party after me."

Speirs nodded. "They would do that", he agreed. He was glad that the company always kept an eye out for the brunette.

A lot of terrible things could happen to a woman walking alone in a garrison full of men that had been in combat for far too long. He wasn't sure if he could keep the men from killing the offender if someone tried attacking their girl. Most likely, he wouldn't try too hard either.

She hopped down from the mural and brushed off her uniform, ready to go inside.

"Enjoy the rest of your night", the CO spoke, taking another drag from his cigarette.

She smiled. "Thanks. You too, sir." With that, she slipped back into the noisy, crowded rec hall.
The ranking medic drifted from table to table, getting pulled into various conversations and staying to shoot the breeze with her friends for a while. She endured some light-hearted teasing about her outfit, but she bore it with good humour.

Some of the nurses and Red Cross women were also delighted to meet her, having heard many stories about her from the guys and the rumour mill. The brunette talked with them a little before they soon turned their attention back to all the interested soldiers around them. Ella didn't mind that and was quickly dragged back into another lively debate the boys had going on.

Dawn was still a few hours away when the girl decided to call it a night.

Gene, Martin and Perconte headed out with her, the medics sharing amused grins and laughing quietly while the other two men bickered back and forth. They both had a temper and between Johnny's snark and Perco's passionate griping, their banter could be mistaken for spiteful arguing. But everybody in Easy knew that they got a kick out of riling the other up and engaged in those verbal sparring matches simply for the fun of it. Sometimes, others joined in or got pulled into the debate, making the whole squabble even more entertaining.

They reached their billets and lingered for a moment, enjoying the light mood and the good company. Ella jokingly mentioned that she couldn't wait to get back into her jump boots. In heels, the young medic was just about as tall as Frank, but she felt much more comfortable in her well-worn – make that worn-out – boots.

"Yeah, can't imagine that those shoes are comfortable in the long run. You look great, though", Perconte remarked.

Bidding her boys good night, the brunette gave them all a hug and headed to her tent. Only a few of the bunks were occupied, most of the men were still at the party. Smiling to herself, she carefully put away her uniform before getting ready for bed.

Today has been a good day, she thought as she climbed into her bed and fished out her tattered journal. 10th March, 1945 was a good day.

Finishing her entry, Ella pulled up the blanket and looked at the ceiling. "Buna notg, Mama", she whispered voicelessly, closing her eyes. Buna notg, Papa e Nico.

As usual, replacements had come in to fill their depleted ranks. And as usual, the veterans had their work cut out for them. Ella was in charge of the training of the battalion's new medics, who were trying their hardest, but had significant knowledge gaps. So she and her experienced colleagues found themselves covering basic topics, often combining lectures with practice and quizzing the replacements during their joint shifts at the field hospital.

Even if it wasn't the replacements' fault, it was frustrating. The veteran medics often traded
incredulous looks, swallowing heavy sighs and suppressing eye rolls. Just like the rest of the men, they complained about the new guys, sometimes about their ineptitude, but mostly about their wide-eyed, bushy-tailed eagerness, which was coupled either with glaring insecurity or nerve-grating cockiness.

"Bunch of kids", Sergeant Jeremy Byrant, the ranking medic of Fox Company, muttered under his breath. The newest addition to his team had just run for the latrines. Apparently, the smell of pus coupled with the gruesome sight of an infected shrapnel wound had been too much for his stomach.

Ella sighed and nodded. "How old is Markham, twenty-three?", she questioned, looking up from where she was sitting cross-legged on an empty cot, paperwork spread out around her.

"Yeah", Jeremy confirmed. "Kid's supposed to be my age. What a joke", he groused, flushing the wound to get rid of the infection.

The brunette gave a non-committal hum and offered: "Age doesn't really matter; the problem is that they are green as grass compared to us."

"I know", the man agreed with a weary sigh, stretching the kinks out of his back. "If it was about age, you certainly wouldn't be ranking medic for the whole battalion", he then joked.

She laughed, signing the next casualty report with a flourish. "Yeah."

If it were about age, she would be one of the replacements, arriving just now straight out of basic training.

"Makes me glad it's about experience and skill", Jeremy continued, chuckling. He scratched at his scalp, then said: "I better go check on the kid, I'm kinda worried he got stuck or something."

Ella giggled. "Go on, I'll keep an eye on things here", she said, gesturing at the rows of cots. There were a few nurses and a doctor on duty as well, so if something were to happen, help would be there immediately.

Byrant nodded and set off to hunt down his replacement, leaving the young girl with her reports and forms.

Sighing, she scribbled down another signature. After almost three months on the line, a mountain of paperwork had piled up and it was a tedious task to account for all the supplies. Administration wanted a detailed account of every single item used, down to the last scrap of gauze. Ella's memory was excellent, but how was she supposed to remember at which date, for what kind of wound and for which patient she had used iodine swab number 1052? It was like asking a soldier to recall in detail when and on what occasion he had fired a specific bullet.

Where was I? Right...

"Ellie?"

Gene stood in front of her, arms crossed, brows furrowed into that slightly worried, slightly disapproving frown.
She blinked, shaking herself out of the dry, facts and figures daze that she had been in. "Yeah?", she asked, muscles relaxing now that she realised there was no emergency or immediate danger.

"Your shift's over and you gotta eat", he informed her, corners of his mouth ticking up into a small smirk.

The girl pulled a face at the stack of papers still waiting to filled out, then decided that they could wait. "Alright", she grinned, unfolding her legs and climbing off the cot. "This stuff won't run away. And if it does? Good riddance."

The Cajun chuckled, sharing his friend's opinion on administrative paperwork.

They entered the mess hall and were immediately waved over by their friends, who were occupying a table at the back. It was common knowledge that the survivors of Bastogne nearly always sat together, a subset of the Toccoa veterans. Nobody mentioned it. It was just a fact.

The two medics got their food and slid into their seats, ignoring the odd appearance and texture of their meal with practiced ease.

"Say, Shorty, that kid didn't come on to you again, did he?", Shifty inquired. Several heads swivelled around, eyes flying to him, then to her, demanding an explanation.

She shook her head, swallowed and replied with a smile: "No and I don't think he ever will", before elaborating to the rest of the guys what had happened.

Like always when the replacements first entered the billets, they had tried to look tough in front of the veterans, one-upping each other constantly. One of them had thought it a bright idea to hit on her when he and his buddies had noticed the girl sitting on her bunk, reading the latest letter from home.

He had quickly realised his mistake and beat a hasty retreat when he had suddenly found himself face to face with Tab, Grant and Shifty. The three sergeants had formed an imposing protective wall in front of their female combat medic, glaring at the new kid with their arms crossed.

"Jesus Christ, will they ever learn?", Malarkey wondered, rolling his eyes.

Ella shrugged. "He was just being stupid."

Liebgott snorted. "Yeah right", he grumbled, "if he's stupid again, we'll sort him out." His statement, both threat and promise, was met with approval from the others.

The brunette put a hand on his arm and fixed them all with a half-pleading, half-warning look. "No", she said, "I don't want you to get in trouble over something like this. It's not worth it." Their expressions changed to grudging acceptance and they nodded, albeit reluctantly.

"Besides", she continued, lips curling into a sly smirk, "with the training schedule, we'll all be too busy for stupid things like these." Hoffentlich...
Major Winters had instituted a rigorous training regime, but the Toccoa guys took it in stride. It was still a far cry from what they had gone through under Sobel. There were also special exercises only for the replacements, meant to help them gain vital skills and also confidence that some of them so obviously lacked. Ella insisted that the medics go on all manoeuvres, day or night. Gene and Spina did so without protest, understanding the reason behind it.

After laying it on the line for the new kids why it was important that they knew how the company approached the countless problems they might encounter in the field, the replacements also didn't have any more objections.

It might have had something to do with the ranking medic telling them bluntly: "You're no use to anybody if you end up walking into friendly fire because you don't know where our guys are."

As she had done before when they had been off the line, the small girl helped out the other Easy members, who were trying not to despair of their own replacements. When she wasn't busy at the field hospital or training the new medics, the brunette could be found with her friends. They were extremely grateful for her presence because sometimes, they were highly tempted to deck the new kids.

She let them vent their frustration, listening to their rants before quietly reminding them that the replacements hadn't had as much time to hone their skills. Then, she gave them some gentle advice, a consoling pat on the arm and an encouraging smile.

To head off any possibly less than respectful attitudes and hurtful rumours, the officers decided to let Ella train with the replacements during their first close combat drill. With her creative, bold and sometimes downright unorthodox approach to hand-to-hand fighting, the brunette quickly got the new boys to re-evaluate their opinion of her. She pulled her punches like everybody else – no need for more injuries than necessary – but she didn't hold back. She had no qualms about using her size, speed and dexterity to her advantage, and, depending on the person and their abilities, defeating her opponents in mere seconds.

At first, the replacements taunted each other for getting overpowered by a girl. But soon, they realised that it wasn't about gender, but about skill. She quickly drove home the point that the enemy would most likely not care about gentlemen's agreements or honourable fighting.

Webster called it the 'Marquess of Queensberry Rules', which, in her mind, sounded very posh for a handful of boxing rules. But the ranking medic smiled and said: "You gotta know, Web. After all, you're our expert for upper-class stuff like that."

He laughed, quietly still a bit relieved that her tone wasn't mocking or derisive. The guys often teased him about his social status or prestigious education, had done so ever since Toccoa. But in Haguenau, their words, which had been companionable and joking before, had been callous and bitter. He now understood why, but it had still stung. Therefore, he couldn't help but feel glad that he was once again one of them and no longer the shunned outsider.
On 15th March, the garrison was buzzing with excitement. The 101st was to receive a Presidential Unit Citation for what their defence of Bastogne. Word had it that General Eisenhower himself would attend the ceremony. Easy Company had been through enough parades to know that it was mostly for show, and for the officers to congratulate each other on the men's accomplishments.

Still, they donned their dress uniforms, polished and cleaned every inch to make sure everything gleamed and shined.

The speeches were nothing out of the ordinary, long-winded and not too exciting. They didn't pay much attention to General Taylor's, still resentful because he had been attending some conference back in the States while they had been freezing to death in the Ardennes.

Ella, as ranking medic, even got a front row seat of the entire thing. It wasn't her favourite place to be since she'd much rather have sat in the back with the other medics. But, she determined, sitting beside Tab wasn't too bad either. Minutes ticked by and the longer it went, the harder it got for her to contain the urge to jiggle her knee to release the restless energy.

Finally, the entire division rose, standing at attention and saluting while they received their citation. For the 506, it meant getting an oak leaf cluster, the blue medal already glinting on their chests.

The highlight of the entire thing was when General Eisenhower, the legendary Ike, came down as the soldiers lingered, chatting to each other. He shook some hands and talked to a few men. Ella had already retreated towards the back and was standing with Luz and Malarkey when the General purposefully strode over to them.

The trio immediately snapped to attention, saluting as one.

"As you were", he said after returning their salute. As they relaxed, he took a moment to look at the smallest of the three troopers. "If it weren't for your hair, I wouldn't have recognised you, Sergeant Sawyer", Ike commented.

The two men chuckled while the young medic smiled. "Yes sir."

"Why aren't you wearing a woman's uniform, Sergeant? Surely you were issued one."

She grinned at the question, completely unperturbed by the fact that she was facing the Supreme Allied Commander. "I'm a paratrooper, sir", she said, turning serious, "I have earned the right to wear pants bloused over jump boots the moment I earned my jump wings. And with all due respect, I didn't do that in a skirt either."

The General looked momentarily stunned to receive such an outright answer, but then, he gave a hearty laugh. "That is a fantastic answer, Sergeant and I agree completely." He shook her hand. "This outfit is lucky to have such a strong-minded ranking medic."

Shaking Luz' and Malarkey's hand, Ike continued onwards.

The brunette looked after him and muttered: "Luz, pinch me, I dreamt I just sassed General
Eisenhower."

Her two friends exploded with laughter. George patted her on the shoulder in consolation. "Sorry, kiddo, that was no dream."

"Nope", Malarkey chimed in, grinning widely. "But it was beautiful!"

The young girl gave a pained groan and hid her face in her hands, mortification burning on her cheeks.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

T'es une danceuse fantastique: You're a fantastic dancer
Merci: Thanks
Buna notg: Good night
Hoffentlich: Hopefully; here's hoping
Off the Line

Chapter Summary

Going off the line brings several surprises, some more welcome than others. Ella is at the centre of attention at the USO dance where they celebrate a change in ranks.

Chapter Notes

So... I realised that it has once again been an embarrassingly long time since I last updated this story... I am so sorry! I just keep forgetting to post a new chapter because this story is already written and I am working on something else. I am not going to make any promises like 'I swear I'll update more regularly' or 'the next chapter will be up in two weeks, promise!' because I don't want to disappoint anyone when I don't deliver. I'll just say this much: I'm sorry for the few and far between updates, this story is not abandoned and I will complete it. It's just gonna take a little time :) In any case, I am soo grateful for all the kudos, follows, bookmarks and comments!

Easy Company was finally pulled off the line and they moved back to Mourmelon-le-Grand at the end of February. It had been around ten weeks since they had last been there. Much had changed in that time, but to the battered and exhausted soldiers, coming to Mourmelon was once again like a dream, at least for a while.

"I could sleep for a week", Luz declared through a huge yawn, stretching and wincing as his spine realigned itself with a crack.

Ella chuckled. "You know, you said that last time, too", she commented with a soft smile.

A stab of pain lanced through her heart. Last time, some of her friends had still been here. Stop! Nid jetz! Dafür ish ez nid dr richtig Zeitpunkt. Shoving the dark thoughts from her mind, the girl was determined to grab a shower and get some rest. Then, maybe, she could start to deal with all the loss and horror she had experienced over the last two and a half months.

"Hey, look who it is!", somebody hollered. "It's the Five-Oh-Sink!"

They turned and were met with a group of grinning faces that belonged to the 502nd PIR. The men came over to greet the returning soldiers, exchanging pleasantries, shaking hands and sharing their joy of finally being at the rear again.

The ranking medic smiled. "We didn't expect a welcoming party", she commented, shaking the hand of her counterpart from the 502, Leo Watson.
"Yeah, well", the lanky Texan drawled with a shrug, "we heard you were comin' and thought it'd be nice."

Ella had to agree. "It's always nice to see some friendly faces."

He clapped her on the shoulder. "That's right."

After the warm welcome from their sister regiment, Easy started gathering their gear to move into their designated billets.

"Heads up, Shorty!", Popeye called from atop one of the trucks.

She turned around just in time to see a pack flying her way. She caught it purely out of reflex, sending a huge grin up to her friend. "Thanks Popeye!"

"You're welcome, kid."

They were billeted in large twelve-man tents this time. They were comfortable enough. Their footlockers, that held all personal belongings, had already been pulled out of storage and sat waiting in front of their beds. The ranking medic sat down cross-legged on the floor and opened hers, tracing the letters written on the lid with a smile.

After almost three years, the mystery surrounding her initials was still a topic of debate. Every now and again, mostly during mail call or when something reminded them of it, the guys would ask or offer their newest speculations about her full name.

"Hey, ya heard, Shorty?", Babe asked, pulling her from her thoughts.

The small girl looked up from stowing her gear. "What?"

"We got showers! Real showers, not just some shitty tent! And proper latrines!", he told her, a wide grin splitting his face.

She was on her feet in a flash. "Really? With doors that lock and all that?", she asked. It sounded almost too good to be true.

"And toilet paper", Talbert added. The newly appointed First Sergeant couldn't help but smile when he saw the brunette bouncing with excitement, her eyes sparkling with wonder.

Ella beamed at the luxury. "That I gotta see for myself, otherwise I won't believe it!", she said, giving them a quick wave before dashing off.

The two men shared a look and chuckled. Even after everything they had gone through, their girl hadn't lost her lovable personality or her adorable quirks that were reminiscent of an excited puppy. They just hoped that the shadows lurking in her eyes sometimes would clear soon.

After a long, blissful shower, the brunette started to feel more like herself again. She had even shaved, wanting to be completely and thoroughly clean for once in a long while. Fatigue making its
presence known – the young medic wasn't the least bit surprised, after all the nights she had spent with little to no sleep – she made her way back to the tents, waving at her friends and stopping for a quick chat here and there before slumping down onto her bed and falling into a near-comatose sleep that told of bone-deep exhaustion.

Ella woke up after a night of actual, deep and uninterrupted sleep, momentarily disoriented. Sitting up and brushing a mop of too-long, unruly locks out of her eyes, she took in her surroundings. The quiet breathing of the men around her filled the air, interrupted by occasional snores and mumbles. Running her hands over the soft, clean sheets of her bed, realisation began to set in. Miar sin weg vor Front. Miar häns gschaft. Somehow, through luck or fate or divine intervention, whatever one wanted to call it, they were still here.

Getting up, the small girl washed up, got dressed and left the tent in search of the mess hall. Even if she wasn't particularly hungry, never had been in the mornings, she wanted to get her stomach accustomed to regular meals again. Grabbing a tray, she got in line and shuffled forward, still trying to shake the lingering vestiges of exhaustion that covered her mind with a thin, fluffy layer of fuzziness.

With her food, the young medic found an empty table and plopped down on the bench, quietly wondering how it was that every time they returned from the line, she was always the first one up the following day. Poking at her meal, she was startled awake by the shocking discovery that she could actually identify the food.

Was ish denn jetzt kaputt? She pinched herself, honestly fearing that she was dreaming. No, she wasn't. What the hell is going on?

"You okay, Ella?", a familiar voice asked, bringing her rapidly accelerating thoughts to a stop.

She looked up, still teetering at the edge of frenzy. "Uh...I don't know?"

Lipton sat down across from her, a worried frown marring his tired features. "What's going on?", he asked.

The brunette moved to gesture at her plate, then let her hand drop, mouth closing with a quiet click. She was panicking because the food was identifiable. She was being ridiculous. Her cheeks began to burn as fear turned to mortification.

"Nothing, sir", she mumbled, eyes downcast.

Lip frown deepened, alarm bells going off at her sudden change in behaviour. He lightly placed a hand on her forearm. "C'mon, Shorty", he pried gently. "What is it?"

After a moment, the ranking medic peeked a shy glance at him. "It's stupid", she said, embarrassed by her idiotic overreaction.

Lip smiled softly. "Whatever it is, kid, it upset you", he offered, "and that makes it important."
Taking a deep breath, Ella explained what had thrown her so off-kilter.

"I told you, it's stupid", she finished.

Lipton took a sip of coffee before answering: "I don't think it's stupid. Hell, I thought I was dreaming when I woke up and found myself in a real bed with a real pillow and a roof over my head."

Studying his face for a moment, the girl finally nodded, a small, bashful smile breaking out on her delicate features. "Okay." Her smile widened, gratitude glowing in it. "Thanks, Lip."

He smiled back. "Anytime, Ella."

They finished their late breakfast, making light conversation, the men trickling in as morning turned into noon.

Luz slumped down next to the ranking medic, unlit cigarette already dangling from his lips and hair sticking up in various directions. "Mornin'", he greeted, sounding a bit more alert than he looked.

"Morning, George", Ella replied, passing him her cup of coffee.

He downed it in one go, smacking his lips and giving a content sigh. "Ah, you're a godsend, Shorty", he proclaimed, eyes lighting up as the caffeine roused his usual energetic persona.

She chuckled and reached over to smooth his dishevelled hair.

The first few days went by in an odd sort of daze before the fear of waking up and finding oneself in a foxhole dissipated. Ella listened to the men when they shared their concerns with her and gently reassured them that with time, they would get used to garrison life again. For the time being, they simply enjoyed their well-deserved down-time, resting, recovering, re-equipping.

They were issued with new ODs, clean and without holes or unidentifiable stains. The medics got pristine white brassards to replace their old ones, which had adopted a dull greyish or black tint.

Their back pay came through, along with a flood of furloughs and passes.

"How did you adjust so easily?", Malarkey asked her as they walked back towards the billets one evening after dinner.

The brunette made a noise that was a cross between a self-loathing chuckle and an amused huff. "I didn't", she said. "Our first morning back? I almost freaked out because I could actually tell what kind of food they were serving."

Malarkey couldn't stop a laugh from escaping him. "No way!"

She grinned, a light blush colouring her cheeks. "Unfortunately, yes", she giggled. "Lip had to reassure me that I wasn't dreaming."
He couldn't hold in his laughter anymore. "Oh my God!", he crowed, wiping tears of hilarity from his eyes. "That...Jesus" He dissolved into another laughing fit. Ella cracked up too and they had to stop because they were laughing so hard they couldn't walk anymore.

"Sure says a lot about Army cooking", Malark got out between a set of giggles.

The ranking medic, already holding her sides, nodded. Gasping for air, she quipped: "Maybe, I can file a complaint against the cook for causing emotional distress for the soldiers."

They reached the tents, still giggling. After they managed to explain to their friends what was so funny, the story spread like wildfire. Within an hour, soldiers from other companies traded confused and worried looks because every member of Easy they came across was chuckling, grinning or howling with laughter.

Soon enough, the guys were back to their merry shenanigans, joking around and blowing off some steam. Ella was more often than not found in the middle of it, smiling and laughing with her friends. Or she was at the outskirts, observing with a fond look on her face, quietly making sure they didn't do anything foolish or dangerous.

One warm, sunny afternoon, the girl sat at the edge of the make-shift basketball court where some of the boys had whipped up a lively game. The weather was turning to spring now, the winds becoming warmer, the sun shining almost each day. She had declined the offer to join the game, wanting to write a letter to her mother. Her Mama's last letter had been filled with anecdotes, questions and the constant undercurrent of worry.

So here she was, composing a response letter while simultaneously keeping half an eye on the game. It was great to see the guys in good spirits, relaxed and almost carefree. It had been too long.

"Who's winning?"

The ranking medic raised her head and squinted against the sun. "Right now, they're even. But Bull's team has been going strong, sir", she answered, smiling up at her CO, who kindly enough shifted to block the glaring light.

Speirs hummed, surveying the game for a moment. Then, he said: "Regiment has decided to issue a blank promotion for one of Easy company's medic." He studied her intently, gauging her reaction. "Who would you recommend?"

Ella blew out a breath. "Eeh...that is a difficult decision, sir", she replied honestly, forehead creasing as she pondered the question. "Gene and Spina both deserve it, they have been doing a great job."

Speirs' lips quirked into an amused smile.
"Told you she'd say that", Nixon's voice piped up from behind her, a triumphant smirk on his face.

The brunette nearly jumped out of her skin, shooting up from the ground and taking a step back. "Madonna, got's no?! Mach gfälligsht a Grüüsch wenn laufsh!", she exclaimed, belatedly tacking on a sheepish "sir."

The two officers laughed.

Her startled, almost indignant mien softened as she began to chuckle at her own outburst. Clearing her throat and awkwardly scratching at a spot on the side of her neck, just beneath her jawline, Ella got back on track, asking: "Can I have some time to discuss it with my colleagues? I would like to get their opinion on this."

Speirs nodded. "Give me your answer tonight?"

"Of course."

Content with her answer, the CO left to attend to his other duties.

Nixon didn't seem to be in a hurry. When Ella sat back down, he followed suit, pulling out a flask and taking a sip. Catching her shrewd smirk, he simply shrugged and said: "It's evening somewhere."

The girl snickered, conceding the point.

"So, what are you gonna do with the promotion?", he inquired.

She liked that about Nixon, he was never one to beat around the bush. He was a straight-forward man who had little use for long-winded speeches and intricate wording. He was blunt and to the point.

"Well... Spina is only a private, so I could give it to him", the ranking medic began voicing her thoughts, twirling her pen in her fingers. "But he told me not too long ago that he's happy where he is and has no desire to become a corporal. Which leaves Gene. I don't know how he feels about becoming a T-4, so I'll have to ask him."

Nixon listened quietly, then questioned: "And if he takes the promotion, are you gonna share your job with him?" A dry smirk formed on his lips, as he already strongly suspected the answer.

"Of course", she affirmed. "Technically, I would still be the ranking medic due to seniority, but does that really matter? I don't think much would change. A slightly gleeful grin stole itself onto her face. "But he would have the pleasure of dealing with his share of the paperwork that I've got to do additionally."

He laughed. "Yeah, I heard you love it about as much as Dick does."

The brunette shrugged. "It's not so bad as long as I can work on it at my own pace", she amended.

They fell silent, both watching the game while Ella also continued her letter.

"Adrian Michaels' court-martial is today", Nixon broke the silence after a while.
Ella's hand froze mid-word. "Oh?", she asked, eyes widening in surprise.

Nixon continued: "He's being charged with insubordination, assault of a superior, being off-limits and conduct unbecoming."

The brunette nodded and gave an acknowledging hum. "His uncle won't be able to make this one go away that easily", she commented off-handedly, lips curling into a grim smile.

He glanced at her. "His uncle?"

"Yeah. He's the mayor's nephew back home."

"Ah", Nixon made.

Suddenly, it was a lot clearer to him why Michaels had never faced any consequences for bullying, attacking and nearly killing the young girl in high school. Disgust mixed with anger.

She huffed a humourless laugh and swiped a few errant strands from her forehead. "Yeah. But I'm done being scared of him. He can't do anything and I won't be in reach anymore", she said, a familiar edge of determination and stubbornness seeping into her voice.

He smiled and clapped her on the shoulder. That was the Ella he knew.

Later that day, Captain Speirs caught her when she left the field hospital on her break. "Have you talked to your men yet?", he asked without preamble, as was his wont.

Ella denied. "I was on my way to them now", she explained.

He nodded. "I'll go with you then."

Spina and Gene were both at the mess hall. The CO motioned for them to follow him outside where they had a bit more privacy.

"What's going on, Ella?", Spina asked, looking to the girl for an explanation.

She cleared her throat. "Regiment has given out a blank promotion for one of Easy's medics. I know you told me you didn't want a promotion, Spina, but I wanted to ask anyways."

He shook his head. "Nah. I'm happy where I am right now. I don't wanna be anything other than a private."

Speirs accepted it with a silent nod, while the ranking medic smiled. "Okay, that's totally fine", she said. "Gene? What about you?"

The corners of the quiet Cajun's mouth ticked upwards into a soft smile. "No, Ellie. That would be too much responsibility for me." He could still vividly remember the toll Bastogne had taken on him and he knew that his young friend had been under even bigger pressure. His smile turned slightly teasing as he added: "Besides, I ain't too eager for more paperwork."
She laughed. "Got it, Gene." She respected his decision, even if she thought he deserved a promotion and that he could handle it. She wasn't going to force him into a job that he didn't feel up to doing.

"What about you?", Speirs asked, studying the girl.

Ella's brows furrowed in confusion as she turned to look at the CO. "Me? What about me?"

He swallowed a huff of laughter. Why wasn't he surprised? "What if you got the promotion?", he rephrased his question.

She stared at him, bewilderment growing. "Why would I be promoted? I haven't done anything that merits a promotion."

Spina snorted. "No, of course not", he interjected dryly. "You've been going above and beyond for as long as I've known you, Shorty", he pointed out, completely serious.

The captain nodded in agreement, adding: "From what I heard, Ella, a big part of the credit for keeping the company together in those woods belongs to you. I've been told, and I've seen it myself, that you go to any lengths to take care of the men."

The ranking medic blinked. "But...that's my job!", she sputtered. "I just did my job!"

Gene shook his head, hand coming to rest on her shoulder. "Non, chérie. You did a whole lot more than that. You're the reason we're still here. We all made it through because you were there, because you never gave up."

Ella blushed to the tips of her ears, overwhelmed by the emphatic statement. "I...I didn't...", she tried to object, but the words eluded her. "I ha doch nu gmacht was jeder tua hetti."

Speirs fixed her with an unimpressed, flat look. "You ran yourself into the ground, Ella, ignoring your own needs and even neglecting your health in the process", he remarked, raising an eyebrow.

A bashful smile appeared on the young girl's face and she lowered her gaze. "But..."

"Ellie", Gene cut her off with fond exasperation, "take the goddamn promotion."

She stared blankly at him for a moment as his words put a halt to her feeble attempts at protesting. Then, she let out a small chuckle, raising her hands in the universal gesture of surrender. "Alright. If you're sure..." She trailed off, a grin spreading on her features.

"Yes, we're sure", Spina assured her firmly.

The CO agreed. "You'll get the official papers in a few days", he told her, the sincere smile completely changing his appearance. "Congratulations, Staff Sergeant." He nodded at them and took his leave, no doubt on his way to inform Regiment.

Ella turned to glare half-heartedly at her colleagues, arms crossed. "What the hell?", she asked, lips twitching into a giddy grin. "Ganging up on me like that?"
She received two not exactly innocent smiles and shrugs in return. "You deserve it the most, Ellie", Gene said simply.

The brunette gave a disbelieving laugh and ran a hand through her hair. "I don't even know what to say anymore", she admitted, helplessly throwing her hands up.

Spina chuckled: "How about: 'Let's get some chow'?

In good spirits, the three medics entered the mess hall. As they sat down at the end of a table filled with Easy company members and began to eat, Gene spoke up again: "You know, that makes you ranking medic for the whole battalion."

The girl just groaned, her two friends laughing. "Great", she sighed, "more paperwork. Freude herrscht." But despite the sarcasm in her voice, she couldn't hide her joy.

Apart from a pay raise and some added responsibilities, her job wouldn't change much. The battalion medics all worked closely together whenever they had a shared aid station set up, not distinguishing between companies when they treated their patients.

Paperwork was company-specific and supplies were also distributed separately, so ultimately, her promotion wouldn't have a big effect on the battalion. Only when something came up that concerned the medics of all three companies, Ella would be the one in charge of addressing the issue or handing out assignments. Otherwise, it would simply be business as usual.

Predictably, the entire camp knew about Ella's pending promotion by the end of the week. So when the young medic was presented with her Technician Third Grade chevrons at the ceremony, she was swarmed by the boys as soon as the officers had offered their congratulations.

The small girl was nearly buried under the onslaught of pats, hugs and kisses on the cheek and head. Major Winters, promoted just as they had pulled out of Haguenau, Captains Nixon and Speirs, and Lieutenants Welsh and Lipton stood off to the side and watched the scene, looking a fair bit like proud parents or relatives.

In the evening, the guys insisted on dragging their favourite female combat medic along to a USO dance to celebrate. Not that she put up much of a fight. Ella loved dancing and spending time with her boys, so she quickly agreed.

While the men put on their new, perfectly fitted class A's for a second time, the brunette stood in front of the mirror, a pair of scissors in her hand. A haircut was long overdue and since she had a surprise planned for her friends, now was as good a time as any. She studied her reflection as her fingers worked steadily to trim her locks.

The hollowness had left her features pretty much as soon as she had gotten decent food again. Her skin was no longer pale or flushed with fever, but had regained its healthy sun-tanned complexion. The scar on her temple was still a faint pink, the one on her forehead a white line interrupting her eyebrow.
Cleaning up and throwing away the cut hair, the ranking medic grinned at herself in the mirror, the crescent-shaped dimple appearing on her cheek. She couldn't wait to see her friends' faces.

Bull, who had offered to walk with her, wasn't easily baffled. True to his calm, usually mild-mannered nature, he looked at her in momentary surprise, then smiled widely. "Ya look gorgeous, kid", he complimented, standing up and offering his arm.

Ella gave him a radiant smile, blushing a little. "Thank you, Bull."

Reaching the large rec hall, the tall Arkansas native courteously held the door for his small friend. She thanked him with one of her sweet smiles and a little curtsy, making him chuckle.

"There you are!", Luz cried when he spotted her, pushing through the crowd to meet them. He beamed like a kid in a candy story, throwing an arm casually around her neck. "C'mon, lemme buy you a drink."

Ella listened as he chattered animatedly, relaying the latest gossip as they made their way to the bar.

"Soda?", he guessed, throwing her a questioning glance.

She nodded. "Please."

Suddenly, in the middle of ordering a beer for himself, he froze. His head whipped around as he did a double take, eyes wide as saucers and filled with sheer wonder. "Holy shit!", he exclaimed, completely taken aback when his brain comprehended what he was seeing.

The men, who had all turned when they had heard him, gaped. Ella almost expected to hear the crashing sound of everybody's jaws hitting the floor. A few echoes of "holy shit" and whispered variations thereof drifted through the air.

The young girl shifted, feeling a bit self-conscious. The entire room had fallen silent and all eyes were on her as the guys stared at her, stunned. A cheeky grin lit up her features and she waved cheerfully. "Hi guys!"

Slowly, the shock seemed to pass. The brunette looked at Luz and quipped: "Told you you'd get to see me in a skirt one day."

He beamed all over his face and declared loudly: "Well, you sure look different like this than in pants and jump boots."

Raucous laughter exploded all around. "Thanks", the ranking medic smiled. "Now, if you could all stop gaping at me like fish out of water? You're starting to make me think I have something on my face", she said, addressing her friends.

They snickered, sheepish grins on their faces. After everybody had come to greet her and shower her with compliments that left her blushing adorably, the boys returned to their previous occupations; drinking, talking, chatting up the nurses and WAC women.
Luz and Ella made their way through the merry crowd to a table, drinks in hand.

Johnny kicked a chair out for her.

"Thanks, Johnny", she said, sitting down and smoothing her uniform skirt.

He waved it off. "That was one hell of a surprise, kid", he remarked with a congenial smile.

She giggled. "You should have seen your faces." Her eyes were alight with mirth and good-natured mischief.

Grant and Christenson joined their lively group of four, grabbing chairs and getting comfortable.

"Say, Shorty, does your job change, now that you're a T-3? Are you going to be reassigned?", Chuck asked, a hint of worry in his tone.

The small girl smiled softly. "No, I'm afraid you'll still be stuck with me as your ranking medic", she jested. "I'm now the highest-ranking medic in 2nd Battalion, but that doesn't make much of a difference", she continued.

Reassured, the boys relaxed again and conversation shifted to other topics.

Eventually, Ella stood up, excitement radiating off her slim frame. "Right. I don't know about you gentlemen, but I feel like dancing", she stated.

"Me too", Christenson agreed, getting to his feet as well.

She gave him a sparkling smile and let him lead her to the dance floor.

When the men saw that their girl had joined the dancers, they almost began to stand in line to cut in. It was an open secret in the company that the brunette loved dancing as much as she was good at it and they all wanted a turn.

She was only too happy to indulge them, switching partners with graceful ease. Skinny, Liebgott, Malarkey, Babe, Shifty, Popeye... the list grew as song after song went by. She even pulled Gene onto the dance floor, her infectious joy impossible to resist.

"T'es une danceuse fantastique", he told her as they danced to a slower song.

The younger medic pecked him on the cheek mid-move. "Merci Gene."

When the song ended, the quiet Cajun went back to his table, re-joining the conversation with Babe and Spina, while Lipton took his place. "Would you like to dance?", he asked, polite as he was.

"Of course, Lip", she beamed.

The music picked up again.
"You look beautiful, Ella", the lieutenant said.

Her caramel-brown locks flew behind her as she did a sweeping turn. "Thanks, Lip." She almost glowed with joy. "And I already apologise if I step on your toes, it's been almost three years since I've danced in women's shoes."

He laughed and lead her through another figure. "I think there's a bigger risk that I step on your toes", he countered.

The young medic shrugged, twirling out, then spinning back towards him. "Ah, you're fine", she assured him.

"Mind if I cut in?", Luz asked after the song ended, walking up to them.

Lip shook his head, smiling. "Not at all."

Ella agreed. "But I really need a drink first", she added with a laugh.

"Eh, that can be arranged", Luz grinned, holding out his hand and giving an exaggerated bow. "This way, oh my princess." He wiggled his eyebrows for good measure.

She giggled and played along. "Lead the way, Prince Charming."

He took her hand and they weaved their way through the room.

"So, my soda didn't survive", the girl commented, slanting him an amused look. Luz had made a habit of stealing her drinks, or as he put it: "sharing is caring."

"No", he confirmed with a shake of his head, "but it would have gotten warm anyways."

After quenching their thirst, the pair headed back to the dance floor. A fast, upbeat jazz song came on and they joined the other dancers.

"Jeez, how do you keep your balance in those shoes?", Luz wondered.

She flashed him a conspiratorial grin. "I'm just special that way, George", she joked before continuing: "And" – she leaned closer to whisper in his ear – "lots and lots of practice." She slid backwards, winking at him.

He snorted, nearly missing a step from laughing too hard.

The song came to an end and Luz scooped her up, swinging her around with his typical enthusiasm before gently setting her back on her feet. They earned a round of applause for their energetic performance.

Returning to their seats, Ella was glad to rest her feet a bit. After wearing jump boots day in, day out, heels were a huge change. Nevertheless, she had a wonderful time and would readily put up with having to patch up a blister or two.

Sipping on her soda, the small medic let the jokes and idle conversation wash over her, throwing in
some comments here and there. Otherwise, she was content to just sit there, enjoy the company of her friends and watch the people.

"I'll be right back, I'm just going to get some fresh air", Ella told her friends after a while.

"Want me to go with you?", Johnny offered.

She shook her head, smiling. "It's fine", she said. Patting the pocket of her uniform jacket, she added: "Plus, I still got my knife."

The boys chuckled and she stepped outside.

The quiet of the night was almost palpable. Breathing deeply, the brunette relished the feeling of the cool air filling her lungs, the sense of serenity it brought. She sat down on the low mural, tipping her head back to gaze at the stars for a few minutes.

Footsteps approached and she didn't have to look over to know who it was. "Good evening, sir", she greeted.

"Evening, Ella", Captain Speirs responded, coming to stand next to her. He pulled out a pack of smokes and offered her one.

She smiled and took it, tucking it into her pocket to add it to her stash.

He lit his own and leant against the wall, smoking calmly.

"You shouldn't be out here by yourself", he broke the silence after a moment.

Ella chuckled softly. "I'm not, though, am I?", she countered, eyes twinkling.

The CO gave her a shrewd look, but didn't argue the point any further.

"Besides", the girl continued, "I'm not foolish enough to be unarmed." She showed him her knife. The blade glittered in the outdoor lighting, the hilt warm and reassuring in her hand.

Speirs took it and examined it closely. "Where did you get it?", he asked, handing it back. It was not the standard pocket knife that medics were allowed to carry. It wasn't even a standard-issue switchblade.

A fond, slightly wistful expression crossed her features as her eyes stared into the distance. "Joe Toye gave it to me", she answered. "In Normandy. I had lost my other knife, the one my brother had given me, on D-Day."

"You managed to hold on to a contraband knife throughout basic training?", he inquired, sounding impressed.

The young medic grinned slyly and replied: "Well... it was confiscated once. But I got it back the
next day and nobody ever noticed."

"I'll keep that in mind", he remarked dryly, getting a laugh from her.

Glancing at her watch, Ella said: "You know, I should probably head back inside before the boys send a search party after me."

Speirs nodded. "They would do that", he agreed. He was glad that the company always kept an eye out for the brunette. A lot of terrible things could happen to a woman walking alone in a garrison full of men that had been in combat for far too long. He wasn't sure if he could keep the men from killing the offender if someone tried attacking their girl. Most likely, he wouldn't try too hard either.

She hopped down from the mural and brushed off her uniform, ready to go inside.

"Enjoy the rest of your night", the CO spoke, taking another drag from his cigarette.

She smiled. "Thanks. You too, sir." With that, she slipped back into the noisy, crowded rec hall.

The ranking medic drifted from table to table, getting pulled into various conversations and staying to shoot the breeze with her friends for a while. She endured some light-hearted teasing about her outfit, but she bore it with good humour.

Some of the nurses and Red Cross women were also delighted to meet her, having heard many stories about her from the guys and the rumour mill. The brunette talked with them a little before they soon turned their attention back to all the interested soldiers around them. Ella didn't mind that and was quickly dragged back into another lively debate the boys had going on.

Dawn was still a few hours away when the girl decided to call it a night. Gene, Martin and Perconte headed out with her, the medics sharing amused grins and laughing quietly while the other two men bickered back and forth. They both had a temper and between Johnny's snark and Perco's passionate griping, their banter could be mistaken for spiteful arguing. But everybody in Easy knew that they got a kick out of riling the other up and engaged in those verbal sparring matches simply for the fun of it. Sometimes, others joined in or got pulled into the debate, making the whole squabble even more entertaining.

They reached their billets and lingered for a moment, enjoying the light mood and the good company. Ella jokingly mentioned that she couldn't wait to get back into her jump boots. In heels, the young medic was just about as tall as Frank, but she felt much more comfortable in her well-worn – make that worn-out – boots.

"Yeah, can't imagine that those shoes are comfortable in the long run. You look great, though", Perconte remarked.

Bidding her boys good night, the brunette gave them all a hug and headed to her tent.
Only a few of the bunks were occupied, most of the men were still at the party. Smiling to herself, she carefully put away her uniform before getting ready for bed.

*Today has been a good day*, she thought as she climbed into her bed and fished out her tattered journal. *10th March, 1945 was a good day.*

Finishing her entry, Ella pulled up the blanket and looked at the ceiling.

"Buna notg, Mama", she whispered voicelessly, closing her eyes.

*Buna notg, Papa e Nico.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

- Nid jetz: Not now
- Dafür ish ez nid dr richtig Züitpunkt: This is not the right time for that
- Miar sin weg vor Front: We're off the line; we're away from the front
- Miar häns gschafft: We made it
- Was ish denn jetz kaputt?: What's happening now? (literally: What's broken now?)
- got's no?!: Are you crazy?! (in this context)
- Mach gfälligsht a Grüüsch wenn laufsh!: Kindly make some noise when you walk!
- I ha doch nu gmacht was jeder tua hetti: I only did what anyone would have done
- Freude herrscht: What a joy. (always sarcastic. literally: Joy prevails)
- T'es une danceuse fantastique: You're a fantastic dancer
- Merci: Thanks
- Buna notg: Good night

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