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**Endland**

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**Prologue**

‘Scram!’ the young woman calls out. She’s limping across shards of glass. She’s supporting a man. Despite the cut on her leg. He’s not much older than her. He’s wearing a uniform with a rubber truncheon hanging from the belt. ‘Get out of here!’ She doesn’t mean the security guard by her side – he can’t get away on his own, he needs a medic. She means the other man.

Flashing blue lights from the direction of the main road. Sirens wailing. Must be five or six vehicles. Ambulances, she hopes. A police van comes around the corner. The man with the truncheon collapses. The young woman drags him up again. Behind her, flames rise from tables, chairs, cupboards, bedding, clothes, suitcases and paper, a great deal of paper. Everything has caught fire.

It doesn’t matter. They’re out, they’ve made it out alive.

A ton of cement ceiling thunders to the ground. The earth trembles. Ash whirls through the air and adheres to their sweat-soaked bodies.

The other man is standing a few metres away. He’s clutching a phone in his hand, about to take a photo. His whole body is shaking. But he takes the picture. Sends it to all 532 friends. Then he throws the phone in the flames.

Minutes later, over twenty thousand people have seen his picture. And shared it. That same night, half of Germany finds out about the disaster. The television

outside broadcast vans pull up. The photo is on the front page of almost all the next day's newspapers. 150 injured, 94 dead. So far.

It's a photo like a war shot. When the armed drone misses the enemy outpost and hits the hospital alongside it. By accident.

Except it didn't happen there, in a war zone; it happened here.

□In Germany.□

And there's that woman in the rubble, supporting the injured man in an embrace. They don't actually belong together. You can tell at first glance. Despite the ash, smoke and flames all around them.

Someone's written something on the wall behind the two of them. In body-height letters.

Not visible in the photo because he's on the other side of the wall, inside the collapsed building: a man. He's kneeling, leaning forwards, pressing his head and hands to the floor. He's praying. He's staying. Until the concrete ceiling buries him beneath it.

## **Chapter 2: Anton**

I switch to night vision and wipe off the raindrops. The black world turns green. Nothing else. No one's out here. Not even a deer, a fox or a couple of boars. Everything's motionless. The forest is sleeping. Perhaps they're sheltering in one of the caves, the people we're looking for. Or they've dug themselves a hole in the ground, covered themselves up with wet leaves, laid down in a hollow tree trunk. And are waiting there. Waiting not to be discovered. For Noah and me to go away again.

I zoom in on the wall up on the hill. An eight-metre concrete wall topped with barbed wire. Three rows of it. Not even a hand would fit between them. I can't see anyone up there. And what happens behind the wall isn't my concern. That's up to our Polish counterparts.

The barbed wire's not damaged – not cut open or torn down. No ladder, no rope. It all looks normal from here. No idea why the alarm went off.

'Negative,' I say, and flip up the night vision goggles. I roll up the wet sleeves of my camouflage jacket. Find a dry spot to wipe my face with. Water and sweat. The sweat stings my eyes.

We ran up the hillside with our equipment. That would make anyone sweat. I'm fit, otherwise I'd be panting like Noah. Not that he's not the athletic type.

Our off-road vehicle is down in the gully by the river. We couldn't get it up the hill, even with 4-wheel drive. The motorbikes are fastened to the load bed. But they'd just get stuck in the mud, today. And they're far too loud. Everyone would hear us coming.

We only take the motorbikes when someone makes it out of the forest. Onto the fields or one of the country roads. And we're only deployed there until the police arrive and take over the pursuit.

Noah's breathing is still heavy. No sound from the headphones either. So I break the silence.

'False alarm.' I wait for three seconds. I want to sound like I'm thinking hard.

'Withdrawal?' I suggest. There's nothing more I can do. The commanding officer decides. And Stahlke's the only one who gives us orders, no one else.

'Don't be in such a hurry,' a voice sounds in our ears. 'Deploy infrared camera!'

Noah shakes his head, annoyed, and holds his microphone closed. Now all Stahlke can hear back at base is crackling. ‘He’s all right, nice and dry with his coffee,’ Noah says. ‘I wouldn’t be in a hurry then either.’

We exchange grins.

I sit down on a moss-covered tree stump. It’s all wet. Never mind. I’m soaked through already anyway. This might take some time.

‘Lads,’ says Stahlke, ‘when I hear crackling I know one of you is talking crap.’

Our commanding officer knows everything. □

I yawn. It’s two in the morning. □

The alarm went off at the barracks twenty minutes ago. Noah and I had to leave our nice warm beds. The other four in our six-man room made the usual jokes.

‘Breakfast with Stahlke?’

□ ‘Don’t forget your umbrellas!’

And then they turned over and went straight back to sleep. □

We had to put on our cold camouflage and black combat boots. We’re both on standby. □

In the equipment room, an officer handed us our weapons. He was quite the sympathetic weatherman: ‘Pretty shit conditions out there, I’m afraid.’

Then I took a seat behind the wheel. The windscreen wipers squeaked. I couldn’t see five metres ahead. Noah studied the satnav and gave me directions.

The motion sensors on the wall had located something in section B-2 and set off the alarm at the barracks.

It was all clear up there though.

We're now in section C-3. Base tracked a phone signal to here. Ten minutes ago. And Stahlke sent the new coordinates to Noah.

So they made it over the wall somewhere. Obviously using a new trick, not damaging the barbed wire. They're presumably waiting for their smuggler now, a few hundred metres away from the wall.

Here, in other words. In theory.

Damn theory! □

Noah joins me on the tree stump, holding a broken-off branch. He starts making holes in the ground. He can't be bothered with looking. The branch sinks half a metre into the wet earth.

Ten minutes is a long time. They could be anywhere by now. Alright, they wouldn't get far with full bags or a backpack. But you can forget finding any traces in this weather.

'Hit oil yet, have you?' I ask Noah. The top of the stick is only just poking out of the ground now.

Stahlke hears me too, of course, and asks what's up. 'Have you found something warm?' He can't see us out here. 'I want a report.'

Noah hasn't even unpacked the thermal imager yet.

□ I nod at him.

He pulls the stick out of the ground and throws it into the woods.

Then he takes out the camera, points the sensors straight ahead and turns in a

circle. He follows two or three thick tree trunks upwards, ones with branches at shoulder level. Someone could climb them. Looks like no one has, though.

Noah turns around again and shakes his head. 'Negative.'

He picks up another branch and sits down again. But before he can start digging again, there's a bang and we jump with surprise. It didn't come from the woods; it came from our earpieces. That's what it sounds like when Stahlke slaps his hand on the table at base.

Noah told me that. He should know. He sits next to Stahlke four days a week. At the control centre. Noah only has one day a week on outside duty. Everyone in the back office has to go out once a week. 'So no one rusts away in front of a computer,' is Stahlke's motto.

I gather up sticks and hand them to Noah. □

He grins. □

We've got time until Stahlke gets back to us, and he can build whatever he likes. I'm glad Noah's out here once a week, at least. He's my best friend.

We've known each other for years, went to school together. Noah wants to be the heir to Mark Zuckerberg later on, and also invent a new Google. He's a modest kinda guy.

I'm not a nerd. I want to do something with people, not cyborgs. Maybe I'll do some more time with the army until I come up with something. You make good money here, after national service I mean. It's a safe job, and the National Alternative won't be making cuts to the army, that's for sure.

Still no sound from Stahlke. There's a lot of background noise. Not back at base. Out here. The noise of a wet forest. A thousand leaves rubbing up against each

other. A hundred drops raining down on us.

I turn my face upwards and open my mouth. I like the forest. Even in the rain, when it smells so musty. Doesn't bother me. Just getting up early. That's annoying.

Noah copies me, sticking his tongue out too. Catching raindrops. We're not going to catch anything else tonight. Stahlke has to realize that soon.

I swallow rainwater. It's not much.

Noah nudges me with his shoulder, nodding his head up at the tip of a tree. Something's moving there, behind the leaves, at the very top.

'Positive,' I whisper into the mic. I slowly position my G36. Stay cool. I've got an assault rifle – those guys up there sure haven't. I look through the sights and something large wobbles behind the leaves in the crosshairs.

How does anyone get that high? Do the branches up there still carry weight? The infrared camera didn't show anything. Not two minutes ago, anyway. Presumably thermal suits, with climbing equipment.

'They're professionals,' I whisper. 'Not cheap invaders.'

'You mean refugees,' Noah says just as quietly. □

Noah and his bleeding heart, as usual. They're officially called invaders, period. It's not like they're anything else. I can't make anything out through my scope.

□ Noah notices me getting nervous. 'Friend, not foe.'

I frown.

He grins. He knows what's up there. □

Never mind invaders. □

Now I hear the familiar sound as well, and I lower my weapon. The buzzing hardly gets through to us in all the wind. ‘Shit, man, did I get a shock.’

Noah looks over at me as if he feels sorry. No need for that though. He can’t help it.

It’s Stahlke’s fault, and now he laughs so hard it makes my ears hurt. ‘I sent Cindy over.’

‘You up already? Morning, Cindy,’ Noah says quietly. □

Cindy never says hello. Not to anyone. □

She’s Noah’s best friend at the base. Whenever Noah works alongside Stahlke at the control centre, Cindy’s cameras are Noah’s eyes. Now she’s watching us from above and someone else is steering her eight propellers.

□ Noah wants out of here. I can tell. He doesn’t like being watched by comrades. He prefers to steer the drone himself. □

Cindy buzzes busily above the treetops, turning in circles. Further and further. Comes back closer to us. Rain pitter-patters on her surface. □

We’ve turned into extras – this is Stahlke’s film now, he’s the director. Cindy’s the star.

□ ‘What’s up over there?’ I ask. □

Noah shrugs. □

Stahlke only ever answers when he feels like it.

□ Cindy’s hovering maybe twenty metres away from us. She’s hardly moved for

thirty seconds, only correcting buffets from the wind.

‘Noah,’ Stahlke yells into his mic. □

We jump again. □

Stahlke’s fine if you ask me. He knows his job. He’s fair. A good trainer. He takes responsibility. No one else has the guts for that. ‘Positive authority,’ Stahlke called it once. He’s got a point. But his yelling gets on my nerves.

‘Noah! That infrared camera’s a piece of junk.’

I look over at my buddy and upturn my hands in a question.

Noah raises his shoulders. □

‘I’m sending reinforcements,’ Stahlke says. □

I think I must have heard wrong. ‘Re... reinforcements?’

‘Stay calm.’

□ I leap up and turn in a circle. Never mind *stay calm*.

I flip my night vision device back down. But there’s nothing out there but darkness and woods – wet, muddy woods. I look over at Cindy: she’s hovering a few metres above several rotten, entangled tree trunks.

I’m getting scared, and that’s no good. My finger’s trembling on the trigger. It’s not just fear, though, it’s excitement too. Things are kicking off at last!

Noah knows me well. Too well, I sometimes think. He pushes my rifle downwards. As I’m about to protest he holds my mic closed with one hand and his with the other.

‘Them or us?’ I ask him.

He knows what’s at stake here. I don’t want to die. What if they’re armed? It’s called survival instinct. Nothing but biology.

‘We have to warn them first,’ Noah says calmly.

There’s a rustling sound near the rotten tree trunks, cracking branches. Cindy seems to be making the invaders nervous.

They must have spotted us a while ago too. If their smuggler’s worth his fee he’ll know what happens next. They have to get out of their hiding place, split up – a few of them will make it, a few won’t. If they stay where they are, we’ll get them all.

‘Warn them, warn them...’ I swear. ‘Why should I risk my life for them?’

‘Because we have to give forewarning. You know that.’

Noah’s right, of course. Forewarning, that’s what we learned. Give them the choice. If they come up with their hands up and go back of their own accord, all the better. That means less work for us.

But still, why are they still coming to Germany in the first place? Why don’t they get it? Germany’s closed its gates. If more of these invaders keep coming it’ll soon end up just like their countries. No one wants that.

Noah and I look for cover and lie down in the mud. They might get nervous any minute now. It’s easier to aim lying down.

‘We’re not the world’s welfare office,’ I mumble to myself. I speak loud enough for Noah to understand. This whole thing is getting to me.

Noah nods at me. ‘Alright.’

Movement in the bushes ahead of us.

□ ‘What’s going on out there?’ Stahlke asks, though he ought to see more with Cindy than we can. ‘I want a report! Two and a half minutes until the reinforcements arrive.’

*You just make sure your coffee doesn’t go cold,* I think.

Noah and I crawl towards the bushes. We need visual contact.

‘Forewarn them first! You hear me?’ Stahlke adds. Him too.

I refuse to look Noah in the eye. I don’t want to see his told-you-so look right now.

‘Remember the pensioners’ outing,’ he whispers over at me.

A month ago, we came across five pensioners. They were out picking mushrooms. When they heard our vehicle they got scared and hid. Maybe the old guys thought the Poles were attacking – what do I know? Anyway, they got away with just a shock.

It doesn’t matter, one day robots will be doing this job. They’ll just fire away. Maybe even programmed by Noah. Whether he wants it or not.

‘Forewarning!’ says Noah.

That’s my job. I know.

□ I take a deep breath and call out, in English: ‘You are in Germany illegally.’

A helicopter judders in the distance. The reinforcements.

□ ‘Hands up! Get out! We will take you back!’

*Back* means back to Poland. Then the Poles take the invaders to their outside walls in the East. Poland finished building its wall before Hungary and Germany had even secured the borders properly.

I can't explain all that to the invaders right now. I have to give them forewarning in three languages. I learned them all by heart like a good student.

'Hidshratak ila Almanian...' The helicopter's too close now. Doesn't matter what I yell in Arabic. No one can hear me anyway.

And now they run out of their hiding place. There's at least twenty of them. Noah's infrared camera really is a piece of junk. They all run in one direction. All together. No splitting up. Bad luck. They shouldn't have gone for a cheap smuggler.

'The helicopter team will take over now,' says Stahlke.

It's still his movie. Two spotlights follow the invaders. Six comrades abseil down into the forest.

'You take care of the others,' Stahlke yells.

I look at Noah. He points at the rotten trees. Cindy's still hovering above them. Maybe that smuggler's not so stupid after all.

Dogs bark behind the wall. They must be able to hear the helicopter over in Poland, of course. Who knows who else is holding out in the forest on their side.

Cindy turns away and flies towards the copter.

'Must be more complicated than they thought over there,' Noah says.

□ We belly-crawl closer to our target. There can't be many more of them. I try it again: 'Hidshratak ila Almanian...'

'Femije!' calls a man's voice.

□ 'What's he saying?'

Noah shakes his head. 'Don't know.'

'English?' I attempt.

□ 'Femije!'

□ 'Russki?'

'Jo, jo. Femije!'

□ 'What's this crap with Femije? Femije. What's it supposed to mean?' I yell. □

'Arabi?' Noah tries.

□ 'Femije!'

□ 'Femije?' I yell back. What does it mean?

□ 'Firing orders for all units,' Stahlke says. □

Something's escalating. □

'Femije!'

□ 'I hear shots. Is that our lads?' □

Something moves over here too. A figure jumps up and dashes into the bushes, bent double. I miss it by a few centimetres. Bark flies through the air.

The invader hides behind a tree trunk. It doesn't quite cover him. His lower arm is in my crosshairs, right in the middle.

'Psst,' says Noah.

What does he want now? I blink over at him and he gestures excitedly at the rotten trees. Five people are standing there. Their arms are up.

*Femije* – no matter what language it is, now I know what it means. Four of the five figures aren't even as tall as my hips. *Femije* means children.

I think about what language to use now. How should I tell them about being returned across the border?

*Femije*. Damn.

□ I look over at the guy behind the tree. What now?

And then □ Noah shoots. Mind you, shoot is the wrong word. He fires away, fires and fires his gun like he was playing a computer game. Branches and leaves whirl though the air. A piece of wood clangs against my helmet.

I hold my hands up to my face. Through my fingers, I see Noah throwing his gun down in the mud. Then he grabs mine off my shoulder and goes on shooting with that.

The magazine flies through the air. He loads a new one and fires every bullet of that one too. When I look up my gun is smoking.

'What the hell's going on down there?' yells Stahlke.

Noah and I don't reply. I don't get it. Only one thing is clear: no matter what I say now, Stahlke will hear it. If I tell the truth, Noah will be court martialled. If I don't say anything it'll make Stahlke even more suspicious. So I say the one thing that definitely applies: 'Firing orders obeyed.'

'Are you taking the piss?' Stahlke yells. 'I heard that. I've almost gone deaf. I want a report.'

Noah doesn't answer. He's kneeling next to me, crying.

□ 'How many have you got?' asks Stahlke.

□ I look over at Noah and wipe the tears out of his eyes.

He's still pointing the gun up at the sky. He's shot a line through the treetops above us. The leaves are all gone. I see rain clouds.

'We haven't got anyone,' I answer.

□ 'No one?'

□ 'No one.'

I don't know what else I could say. But then I do think of something. 'They were faster than deer.'