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Tannenstein

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TANNENSTEIN,
CLOSE TO THE GERMAN-CZECH BORDER

No one ever came to the village—not intentionally, at least. It was thirty kilometers south of Dresden, just shy of the Czech border, and it boasted no tourist attractions or resorts, and there were no highways passing through on the way to better-known destinations. Tannenstein stood at the end of an elongated valley, densely surrounded by dark forest. The only reason you would come here was because you lived here or wanted to visit someone who lived here. If anyone ever did come, they came by car.

The Hiker arrived on foot one chilly, late-autumn morning, just as the first gentle rays of sunlight were burning off the fog. He wore clunky shoes and dark blue jeans, plus a plaid flannel shirt and a large backpack, the kind backcountry hikers use. The residents of Tannenstein, who were just starting to head in and out of the bakery to pick up their fresh breakfast rolls, squinted at him suspiciously. Their faces reminded him of rats that had been flushed into the open and now longed to scurry back into the dark, where they could continue living in safety.

No one spoke to him.

The Hiker thought that was just fine. He didn't want to talk. Not about himself, and not about his past. His experiences were always with him anyway, bundled in a second, invisible backpack whose load weighed down his shoulders.

He stopped in the dawn-lit village square and looked around. The narrow streets, the old houses, the surrounding forest. He saw uneven cobblestones and electrical lines running through the façades of buildings. No bright colors, no flowers in window boxes, only dirty white and monotonous grey. The place looked like a universe cut off from the rest of Germany, lost between yesteryear and now.

He stayed for three days in the only house in the village that had a room to let and then found something better. A log cabin on the outskirts that some or other townies were trying to sell after they realized there wasn't anything going on in this area, which got him a few more days' stay. The townies and the landlady of that first room were also the only people who initially knew his name—at least, the name listed on his papers. The Hiker spent his days roaming the dark forest, over hills, through valleys, and into an area where the vehicles had Czech license plates. He read a lot, at least two books weekly, and his only greeting to people when he went shopping at the little village grocery was a nod. Otherwise, the stranger kept his distance from everyone. He never ordered food in the village pub, and he never stopped in for a drink. At first the locals studied him keenly: this man who was neither old nor young, whose shoulders and chest looked muscular and whose dark-blond hair was streaked with its first strands of grey. His face was hidden under a full beard, and Erika Pohl—the retired school teacher—later thought he looked a bit like that actor in *The Last Cop* on television.

Then winter came, followed by spring and summer, and the attention from the inhabitants eased up. He had become a part of the village, though not of the community. A bit like a street sign put up by the authorities that initially jars drivers until at some point they get to accustomed to seeing it, as though it had always been there.

The man always paid for his purchases in cash, and sometimes he disappeared for several days at a time, which hardly anyone noticed. The villagers left him alone. After a year had passed, he set foot in the pub on Market Square, the hub of social life in the village, for the first time.

His entrance was like a thunderbolt.

Conversations fell silent, and heads turned his way. A sign on the door had said Private Gathering—it was the night of the local cultural association's monthly meeting—but no one had made him aware he wasn't part of it.

The Hiker nodded silently at the eleven patrons, taking a spot at the bar and ordering a pilsner. When the bartender placed the beer in front of him, he picked up the glass, took a sizeable gulp, and wiped the foam from his upper lip.

The other patrons observed him in fascination, as if beholding a miracle, as if they had just seen a mythical beast. There were seven men, who were under no illusion, and four women, who were disillusioned, each with a novel theory about what was up with the stranger. Some suspected he was a criminal—a criminal who had been released from prison and wanted to start a new life here.

No, others thought. He's probably just got some tragic marriage behind him, and now, let down by love and human beings alike, he wants to lead the life of a hermit. The women of the village especially tended to prefer this version, likely because they found him attractive.

The Hiker didn't care about any of this. He downed his beer and ordered a second. Then, he looked around. The walls of the pub were paneled in wood, the tables near the window bleached by the sun. Tiny vases holding plastic flowers stood on them, alongside glass shakers of salt and pepper.

Hanging lamps with ceramic shades dangled directly in front of him over the bar, which ran the length of the wall. Nothing here was reminiscent of the present, even the beer tap system was ancient, and naturally the pub had no cell reception, as the Hiker determined from a glance at his phone. For those present, this was the first sign the stranger still had some connection to another life.

He then drank his second beer more slowly and with greater enjoyment as he realized he was going to miss this area. Especially the afternoons, when the setting autumn sun would set the countryside aglow. He enjoyed the solitude whenever he made his way through woods, the forest floor crunching beneath his feet, squirrels seeking higher branches in the trees where they could watch him from a safer distance. He had seen roe deer and red deer, and even a wolf, the sight of which had pleased him. He judged the predator just as strong as he was shy—it almost reminded him of himself.

Then he paid.

He stood, nodded at the other patrons, and slowly made his way to the door. It was nearly ten o'clock at night now, and as always, the bartender had stuck the key in the lock on the inside of the door, although he wasn't quite ready to close up shop.

The Hiker locked it for him.

With a firm twist, he separated the world within the pub from the world without and slid his hand into his coat pocket. When his hand reappeared, it was wrapped around a Glock 17 semiautomatic, nine-millimeter, seventeen shots in the magazine.

Plenty.

He had selected the weapon with care beforehand. The built-in compensator made it easier to control during rapid fire, which resulted in a more precise hit pattern. Guns felt completely natural to him; over the years, they had become an extension of his arm.

Then he turned around, and all hell broke loose.

His first shot struck the man sitting closest to the door midforehead. The next shots hit the two men behind him. Shards of bone flew through the air, grey matter emerged, a warm mist reddened the face of a forty-something woman.

She was the fourth to die.

Only then did the place break out in panic. Only then did the other patrons grasp what was happening. They leapt up, screamed, and begged, searching frantically for cover.

There was none.

Number five died running toward the restrooms. The Hiker's sixth shot struck next to him, lodging in the wooden bar. Then a man in his early fifties with a buzzcut, his face like a bulldog's, stormed toward him.

Maybe he didn't see any other way out; maybe he thought he had a chance.

He had none.

The seventh shot entered the side of his neck and passed through his Adam's apple. He fell to the floor, blood pumping in waves from the wound. A red puddle spread beneath his body, discharging all of his vital energy.

The second-to-last man had hidden behind a bench, whimpering. Below him: a puddle of urine smelling of ammonia, which was quickly expanding. The Hiker came closer, placed his weapon at the back of the head, and pulled the trigger. He watched the skull explode, and then he finished off the last man at the bar.

Finally, the stranger looked around, taking stock. Seven men were dead; there were three women still left. He was merciful and killed them quickly; the shots rang out, fired without hesitation.

The man then turned to the bartender, who stared at him with eyes full of nothing but fear and disbelief. He didn't move. He stood silently, pressed to the wall as though paralyzed.

"Do we have a problem with each other?" the Hiker wanted to know. His voice sounded rough, almost hoarse.

The bartender shook his head.

"Good," the stranger said. "That's good."

Then he turned around and left.

The Hiker knew it would take certainly ten, maybe as much as twelve to fifteen, minutes for the first squad cars to arrive. More than enough time for what he still had to do.

He ran at an easy pace to his cabin, where he had previously gathered all his possessions and doused them with gasoline. When he arrived, he dug in his pants pocket for the windproof lighter, flicked it on, and tossed it through the open doorway. The arc-shaped trajectory was followed by a smile on his face.

Shortly afterward, flames began flickering upward, like the tongues of hungry beasts. It would take only minutes for the cabin to be fully engulfed in purifying fire and then cave in like the final monument to a decaying culture.

The Hiker enjoyed the heat on his face for a few seconds, and then he turned and ran over to the nearby edge of the forest. Fallen branches cracked under his feet, small stones crunched. He moved through the night as swiftly as he did carefully. Roots and holes created tripping hazards in the undergrowth, and a sprained foot was the last thing he needed now.

Twenty minutes later, he was sure he had crossed the Czech border. Fifteen more minutes, and he would make it to the small town where he had rented a parking space over a year ago. He had been there every two weeks ever since to move the vehicle he had parked there to make sure its battery was charged and the car would start when he needed it.

He kept running and running without turning around once, his eyes focused on the ground and on the densely packed trees before him. He no longer thought about what lay behind.

Why should he?

It was done.

BERLIN-TEGEL CORRECTIONAL FACILITY
THREE YEARS LATER, THE PRESENT

The day that had changed everything began with a knock on the door to his cell. Alexander Born swung his feet from his mattress and sat up. His temporary home was 2.6 meters deep, 1.1 meters wide, and 2.4 meters tall. It had a table, chair, and smooth-plastered walls, out of which the toilet and sink jutted like porcelain ulcers.

He hadn't moved in hours, listening only to the sounds of the routine operation of any prison: steel doors clattering, keys rattling, and toilets flushing. He could hear Lebanese inmates holding conversations through the bars in the windows, one television turned all the way up, and a boy crying in the cell next door. Nothing that concerned him.

The worst part of a stint in prison wasn't the boredom or the noise that incessantly reverberated in his ears. What really annoyed him was the sequestration from the outside world. He couldn't take any action, and the world outside was moving on while his world stood still. Within the concrete walls, bored guards dictated his everyday routine. People addressed him in empty voices and never looked him in the face, as though afraid of granting him a certain human dignity through mere eye contact.

Most of the time nothing at all happened in this sealed universe. Shortly after he was sent to prison, three Albanians had tried to work him over once they found out he was a former police officer. He had broken the collarbone of the first Albanian and the kneecap of the second, after which the third fled before he could take care of him, too. Peace and quiet ever since. No more hassles from other inmates, no sexual overtures in the showers.

Just waiting.

At first, Born would wonder what exactly he was waiting for, but it grew clear to him the answer was always the next meal, the next walk to the toilet, or the next circuit around the courtyard, when he could look up at one of the trees that towered proudly outside the prison walls. At some point he forgot what day it was, and eventually the month.

Until the pounding on his cell door.

Until he heard the keys rattling and a man wheezing.

The door to his cell opened, and a bald officer asked him to come along. They headed down endless hallways, whose color reminded Born of fresh vomit, as doors and bars were opened for them and closed again behind them. The officer stopped outside a room that was normally used for attorney-client meetings and wiped something imaginary off his shoulder. It couldn't have been hair or dandruff since he had neither. Then, the officer took a key from his belt, opened the door, and waved his hand for Born to enter.

Born's eyes found a woman sitting with her back to the window, sizing him up with curiosity. She was still young, maybe late twenties. Shoulder-length blond hair, a delicate figure, and deep blue eyes. She somehow reminded him of a little girl's favorite doll, which had never been played with for fear of breaking it.

The blonde was dressed in dark jeans and a light-blue blouse. A sand-colored blazer hung over the back of her chair, and Born immediately knew she was police. As though she was giving off a smell he could still detect.

His former colleagues had always sent men until now—maybe they were trying something new.

He slowly walked toward her and sat on the chair across the table from her. He studied her more intensely. She looked good, even in the cold glare of the neon light—an impression that might be due to his already-lengthy stay in prison.

The police inspector also looked at him silently, and the room with its naked concrete walls seemed to exaggerate the silence between them. Maybe she didn't know how to start; maybe she was too inexperienced to deal with a situation like this on her own.

He decided to help her out.

“Now that we’ve considered each other so thoroughly: What can I do for you?”

“I’m Police Senior Inspector Norah Bernsen,” she said, her voice subtly deeper than he had expected. “We’ve received another postcard. As we do on every anniversary of the Tannenstein murders.”

“So?”

“You and Peter Koller chaired the special investigation commission that was convened at the time. You were dispatched to Dresden to apprehend the man they call ‘the Hiker.’”

“I ask you again: so?”

Her eyelids twitched. Instead of responding, she reached into her shoulder bag and retrieved a postcard, which was sealed inside a transparent plastic bag.

He took it from her and studied it. As in previous years, the front of the postcard showed a hiker—which is how the unknown killer had earned his in-house nickname from the investigators. On the back, as always, was just one word: Tannenstein. He couldn’t make out the smeared postmark.

“Where was the card sent from?” he asked.

“Elbingerode, a little town in the Harz Mountains.”

He handed it back to her. The first card had been postmarked in Karlsruhe, the second in Frankfurt am Main. This was the third. All were places that had nothing to do with the crime and that the perpetrator had likely selected purely at random.

“That’s all you’ve got?” he asked.

She nodded.

“What about Lydia?”

A short pause. “Unfortunately, I don’t have anything new to tell you,” she finally said. “The investigations have run cold. I’m sorry.”

Lydia Wollstedt had initially been his police partner, and then his romantic partner until the Hiker had killed her at the Berlin Zoo. In one baneful night, just like that. She was the reason he was in here, actually, and her death was the reason he wanted back out.

Plus, a couple of other reasons, maybe.

...]

Born looked at her for a few seconds, and then he stood and gestured to the officer behind the glass that he wanted to return to his cell.

“Mr. Born?” she started, stopping him at the last moment. “I don’t believe you’re as indifferent to all of this as you act. You’ve had plenty of time in here to reflect on the case. Have you really never developed a theory about who was after your partner? Do you really have no suspicions about who or what might have been behind the Tannenstein murders?”

He cocked his head and looked at her. Her blond hair was shiny and soft, like honey. The blue of her eyes matched her blouse so perfectly. Her body language expressed both energy and power.

“Look for a Russian killer,” he answered. “Half-human, half-godly, and all deadly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re the police inspector. Figure it out!”

Twenty days later, the doors of the correctional facility finally closed behind Born. The guard at the outer gate said good-bye, wishing him well with a sideways grin that meant he would have preferred to say, “See



you soon.”

Then Born was alone.

Free.

The first few minutes were irritating. Too many noises, too many possibilities. It took him a moment to get oriented and cast his gaze across a sky that was as deep blue as the Mediterranean. No more concrete walls with concertina razor wire distorting everything in life. No cell door blocking his path. In a weird way, his memories of prison had already started dissolving. Not slowly fading away—more like they had never existed. As though the past few years had been only a nightmare he was now waking up from, bit by bit.

Then he threw his bag over his shoulder and hit the road, heading toward Holzhauer Strasse, where he would take the U6 subway line to Friedrichstrasse Station.

The center of town: Berlin-Mitte.

His old neighborhood.

He had attended elementary school a hundred meters away. At thirteen, he had bought his first bottle of beer right there from a street kiosk. After a crazy bike crash, he had been stitched back together in the emergency room at St. Hedwig’s Hospital nearby. There was the field where he had played soccer. And behind that building was the spot he would smoke as a teenager with his friends, waiting for the sun to rise.

These were his haunts, his neighborhood. There was no better place to start his life again.

He let the masses of people sweep him along as he smelled the exhaust of passing buses, the perfume of well-dressed women. Everything was new to him and yet familiar at the same time. Like in a movie you used to love but haven’t seen in ages.

He stopped amid the neoclassical buildings on Gendarmenmarkt Square and lit a cigarette. He thought for a moment. The last trace of the Hiker had been here, in Berlin. Lydia’s murder had been three years back, and the killer could be anywhere by now. Born knew it was going to be hard to track him down. Hard, but not impossible. He and Lydia had crossed the line many times back in the day, and now he was going to go even further. He was going to chase after the man who had dared rob him of the most valuable thing he had ever possessed.

Hunt him, track him down.

Make him feel what real suffering meant.