

AGE OF  RISTOCRACY

HOPE LOST

HOPE LOST
END DAYS # 1

Eduard Meinema

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END DAYS SERIES

The End Days series includes four books:

1. Hope Lost
2. Best Worst
3. All Nothing
4. Every Nowhere

1

Washington, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue

The twilight helped him remain undetected. Unnoticed to the people, the officers of the TIA, the *Terrorist Intelligence Agency*; not to the AI.

Jager Thompson was aware of the danger. Knew that the AI saw everything. Day and night. And he knew it was only a matter of time before the AI sent TIA officers after him.

He was hiding among a few feral bushes that had grown spontaneously between the tiles of the sidewalk in front of the White House fence. Nobody cared about sleek and well-maintained public gardens or walkways in these days. Survival. That was all that mattered now.

Jager had to swallow. It had been years since his wife had worked here. Years since he himself had been inside. And even though he was used to some things by now, the sight of the White House made him shudder. Nothing reminded him of the grandeur of the past. An old dilapidated building; that was what he saw here in the semi-darkness.

“There!” someone shouted right behind him. Jager reached for his weapon. An old gun. Old, but it still worked. Frantic, he looked around to see who had caught him. With difficulty, he saw two young people standing on the sidewalk overgrown by bushes and plants. A boy and a girl. He thin and lanky; about twenty years old, Jager estimated. She slightly younger, dressed in weathered but decent clothing. He

had to swallow. In the little light of the moon, she looked exactly like Juna, his daughter.

“See? It’s still there,” the boy said. “I told you!”

The girl grabbed the rusted trellis with both hands and stared in awe at the dilapidated White House. “My father said it had been flattened,” she said.

“Well, it’s still there, tell that...” He stopped talking. Realized he hit a nerve.

“To my father? He’s not there anymore, Joey,” the girl said with a sob in her voice. Her hands squeezed the fencing even tighter.

“Sorry,” Joey simmered. “I ... sorry.”

Jager Thompson looked up. The sound was unmistakable. A drone. From the sound of it, even more than one. But he couldn’t see them. He ducked as far as he could. Should he warn the two?

“Joey?” the girl said. She let go of the gate and looked up. “Do you hear it, too?”

“Fuck! So soon already? We have to leave,” the boy said. He grabbed her by the hand and pulled her along. After only a few steps, they stopped. From the sky a bright beam of light shone on them. So here they were suddenly standing open and exposed; in full light.

“It’s right above us,” the girl said anxiously.

The drone buzzed downwards, hovering just above the two. The cameras scanned their faces. “Joey Whitaker. Amber Vonn. *Unaffiliated, not connected,*” came a cold voice from the drone.

Jager Thompson pointed his weapon at the drone, considered shooting it out of the sky, until he heard a whooshing sound on the road. An electric car hovering above the road surface had

approached unnoticed. The car stopped in front of the caught pair; two officers in black uniforms got out. A man who immediately grabbed his weapon and a woman who first straightened her cap and then bent down to grab something from the car. Jager decided to point his gun at the man.

“What are you doing here?” the man asked gruffly.

Joey squeezed his friend’s hand a little harder. “J-just ... taking a look at um ...” He nodded his head toward the remains of the White House.

“Why,” the officer snarled. “Who do you think you’ll find there?”

“No, no one,” Joey said softly, fearful of what was to come.

The female officer held up a tablet. “You are UNAF. Not affiliated. Why not?”

Joey shrugged his shoulders after which the male cop unexpectedly kicked him fast and hard in the stomach. Joey cringed, spluttering and coughing.

“No, don’t!” Amber screamed.

“She asks why? Answer!” the officer said.

“J-just...,” Joey stammered.

The officer gave him another kick. “Everything is “just” with you, huh?”

“Gauff, take it easy,” the female cop said soothingly. She helped Joey up. “Tell me...” She looked at her tablet again to check his name, just to be sure. “Joey. Why are you UNAF?”

Gasping for breath, Joey answered. “My mom and dad said that...”

“No, no, don’t blame your father kid,” the female officer now said in a compelling tone. “You’re old and wise enough to

make your own decisions, so tell me. Why did you choose not to join?"

Bent over in pain, Joey looked at the officer. "For the future."

"Excuse me?" the officer said.

"My dad. He said ... I think we'd be better off in a world without ... without ..." He looked at her almost crying.

"Without what? Joey?" the officer asked. She got a mean smile on her face because she knew the answer for a long time, but necessarily wanted him to admit it.

"Without AI!" Amber screamed. "You know that!"

Officer Gauff stepped up to her and punched her hard in the stomach. "Did she ask you anything? *Bitch.*"

"Hey!" Joey said angrily. He tried to make himself bigger to protect his girlfriend. "Leave her alone!"

Officer Gauff was done with it. Grabbed the boy by his throat. His large hand, wearing a black leather glove, cupped the lanky boy's thin larynx and nearly crushed his throat. "If you ju-ju-just answer me," he said deliberately stuttering, "that gal of yours won't have to get hit. Pussy!" He pushed him back hardhandedly and released his throat.

Joey barely managed to stay upright. Amber hesitated. Wanted to grab her boyfriend and comfort him, but the female officer shook her head. "Uh-uh," the officer said. She focused on the boy again. "Why do you think a world without AI would be better off?"

Panting and gasping for breath, Joey stood in front of his friend. "Because we have a right to be free!" he shouted as loudly as he could.

Officer Gauff frowned. Looked at his female colleague. “I’m done with it, Muniz,” he said without any emotion. “We’re here to keep order. Not to convert people.” Before Officer Muniz could do anything, Gauff pointed his gun at Joey and cold-blooded shot him.

Jager Thompson shivered.

“No!” Amber screamed. She sank down next to her friend’s lifeless body. Grabbed him and kissed him. “No, no. Joey! Don’t leave me alone.”

“Bitch,” Officer Gauff said and also shot Amber.

Thompson bit his lip to keep him from making a sound and giving himself away.

The female officer stared impassively at the two dead bodies on the overgrown sidewalk of the White House. “I thought we should arrest them and hear them out,” she said.

“What else do you think they can tell you, Muniz?” Gauff said as he placed his gun back in its holster. “You’ve already heard all the information on the way here. Their parents were UNAF, they are UNAF. What more do you want to know?”

Officer Muniz took off her cap. “Sorry guys,” she muttered, inaudible to Gauff. Tapped the comm on her shoulder and spoke in a matter-of-fact tone, “Two bodies to pick up.” Turned around and walked back to the car. She paused halfway. Looked toward the bushes where Jager Thompson, several yards from the car, was making himself as small as possible so as not to be seen. She listened intently, but the hum of the drone was too overpowering. “Okay. Let’s go,” she said to Gauff.

Jager Thompson had kept quiet. He had followed everything and knew he could have shot the officers AND the drone from this distance. But he did nothing. “Sorry,” he whispered to himself. “If I had saved you, all three of us would have been

hunted down and killed afterward. To them, it's just a game. For us..." He stared in horror at the lifeless bodies. "*For me*, it's survival."

2

Pentwogon

General Atherton paced through the smoky room, munching on her cigar. She didn't give a damn that others were bothered by the smoke of her "*guilty pleasure*". In fact, nothing bothered her anymore these days. She stopped suddenly and walked with big strides back to the table where a large, crumpled sheet of paper lay. Pressed her index finger on a random spot on the paper and fumed, "It's god awful anyway. These old staff maps are the only thing we can use to get our bearings, without that damn AI figuring out what we're going to do."

"Yes," Major Bradley Williamson said, his uniform heavily battered and without recognizable distinctions. "That may be true, but it's virtually impossible to distribute those maps, or copies of those maps, undetected." He spread his arms in despair. "We can't even reach the other resistance groups. Let alone inform them of what we are planning. We are on our own."

"Resistance groups," Atherton said disapprovingly. "Do you even hear what you're saying? Since when are we a resistance group? We're the fucking army!"

"General," Eric Neill, the only civilian in the small space, said. "The AI has forced us on the defensive. And there are few of us left."

"Yeah, so?" Atherton snarled. Her gray hair was tied in a ponytail high on her head. "So, there are only few of us. But we're still here."

“General … Misty,” Neill said, deliberately addressing the general by her first name. He formulated his remark carefully. “Maybe it’s time we, um, realized there’s no going back?”

“Neill … Eric,” the general spoke hatefully, “that road back has long been fucked up. The way forward. That’s the one we must have.”

“Do you still think we can move forward without AI?”

Atherton walked toward Eric. Stopped right in front of him and looked down at him. She was half a head taller than him, and she took advantage of that. “Don’t you?”

“Why are you acting like this?” Neill asked.

“Like what?”

“Patronizing. Irritating,” Neill said. “Why do you do that? You are and always will be my sister, right?”

“Half-sister,” Atherton said with a wrinkled nose. “And I don’t condescend. I just really dislike people who give up.”

“Tell me honestly, sis,” Eric said. “What else *can* we do? There are few of us. *Too* few if you ask me. The world is completely fucked up. Every move we make is recorded. We practically live underground. *What else can we do?*”

Misty Atherton had walked back to the old staff map. Leaned on the paper staff map with both hands and sighed. “Where are you?”

“General, with all due respect,” Major Williamson said. “The AI is everywhere. You know that as well as I do.”

“Yes, major. I know that. But I’m not looking for the AI. I want to know where the president is.”

Williamson shook his head pityingly. “General … The president was removed from office over a year ago.”

“Hmphh,” Atherton spluttered. “Removed from office? President Munn? He has given in, you’ll mean. That jerk. That ragamuffin. He shouldn’t even have called himself president.”

For a moment, Major Williamson didn’t know what to think. “He did sacrifice his life. And that of his family.”

“You call that sacrifice? I call it executing.”

“Alright. So, you’re not talking about Munn. Then who are you talking about?”

“Chestwright of course. Chris Chestwright. The only *real* president we’ve had in decades.”

“Sweetie,” Eric Neill said. “In your eyes Chestwright may have been a good president. He is now ancient. If he’s still alive...”

Atherton gave him an angry look. “First of all, I’m not your sweetheart. And second of all, Chestwright is alive. I know that.”

“How?” Neill asked. “You might hope so, but you don’t know for sure.”

“Wrong, Eric. I’m *pretty* sure!”

“But *how*? ”

“The Secret Intelligence Service.”

“Swee... Misty.” Eric carefully chose the right words to tell his half-sister the truth. “The intelligence service gets all its knowledge from the Internet and from computer files. And you know that everything digital is controlled by the AI.”

“That’s the former intelligence service, Eric. I’m talking about the *secret* intelligence service. *My* intelligence service.”

“Your...? You set up your own intelligence service?” Eric asked. He was impressed, almost proud of what his wayward

half-sister always managed to pull off. Now he was totally overwhelmed by something his half-sister had organized that he hadn't noticed.

Misty Atherton walked past Eric Neill, tapped him viciously on the nose. "Yes, Eric. My intelligence service. Completely autonomous. Operates as much as possible without using digital or audio links. And they operate entirely in secret." She walked on. Pulled open a cabinet and took out a binder, which she placed open on top of the staff maps.

"What's that?" Eric asked.

"They look like pieces of tree bark," Major Williamson said.

"They are," Atherton said.

Neill and Williamson exchanged quick glances. "Okay," Eric said. "And what are we supposed to do with a piece of tree?"

"Reading," Atherton said.

Again, the two men exchanged glances. Neither of them understood what the general was referring to.

"Never heard of B-mail?"

"Excuse me?" Eric said.

"So, no. B-mail. Birch mail. That used to be used to write down messages and leave them for others," the general said. "A birch tree loses its bark. That bark is thin and, when properly dried, writable. A kind of paper. If you know where to leave the messages, you can pass on a wealth of information almost without anyone noticing." She began to grin. "And certainly not a digital jerk like that AI."

Major Williamson stepped closer and read some of the handwritten messages. His gaze changed from dubious to hopeful. "But this is great! This information is priceless!"

“Exactly,” Atherton said. “But strictly secret.” She grabbed one of the pieces of bark from the binder and handed it to Eric. “In it is confirmation that Chestwright is alive.”

Eric Neill read with rising amazement the text on the piece of birch bark. He nodded in agreement. “That sounds good, Misty. Almost too good to be true. But...” Again, he chose his words carefully. “Apart from his good track record. Do you really think Chestwright can make a difference?”

“Well and truly. Look, it may sound crazy coming from the words of an Army woman. But Chestwright is the ultimate politician. If anyone can win a war with words, it’s him. He’s the unifying factor we’re looking for.”

“Okay,” Eric said, still not entirely convinced. “So, what are we going to do now?”

“I sent one of my men, one of my best men, out to make contact with him.”

3

Olympic National Park

The old man lovingly placed his hand on the little boy's shoulder. He sank slightly through his knees, held his rifle firmly and whispered, "That's why they call this Cougar Country," he pointed to a brown feline among the trees of Olympic National Park.

"Are we going to shoot him?" the boy asked.

"Chris Chestwright vehemently shook his head, no. "Too dangerous Chester."

"Why Grandpa?" Chester asked. "In case you miss him, and he attacks us?"

"No," Chris said. "You know me, don't you? I never miss."

Chester laughed. "Didn't used to grandpa..."

Chris smilingly patted his cap. "Okay. Almost never," he corrected himself. "But it's not about that mountain lion, Chester. It's about not letting anyone know we're here."

Chester nodded understandingly. "For the AI?"

"Exactly." Chris straightened up, causing the cougar to notice his presence. In a flash he had disappeared among the trees. Fled and disappeared invisibly into the immense wilderness the park is known for. "This area, this inhospitable area, offers us protection Chester. Even for an AI, this area is difficult to control. Here we have a chance."

“A chance at what?” asked Chester.

“A chance for survival,” Chris said. Now that the cougar was gone, he hung the shotgun over his shoulder. “Come. We’re going home.” The sound of a breaking branch alarmed him. In no time he pushed Chester to the ground and managed to aim his shotgun at the spot from where he had heard the sound. “Who there?” he called out.

Chester lay startled at his grandfather’s feet. Wide-eyed, he looked to where Chris was pointing his gun. It remained silent. “There’s no one there, Grandpa,” he whispered, already wanting to get up.

The old, wrinkly hand pushed him back. “Yes, there is,” Chris said. “Show yourself!” he shouted to add quietly, “Chester, crawl away slowly. Go home and warn Mom.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to ask Dad for help?” Chester replied.

“No,” Chris hissed. “Mom knows this area like the back of her hand. Dad doesn’t. Go!”

Carefully Chester crept away. Once he could no longer see his grandfather, he was sure that the strangers in the forest could no longer see him either. Got up and ran to the cabin where they had been living in total isolation for several years.

Chris Chestwright was glad his grandson had gotten away safely, but he knew he was still in danger himself. Whoever was hiding among the trees; he could shoot him without mercy. However, nothing happened. Apparently, the great unknown had no intention of killing him. “Okay. We’re alone. Come out,” Chris said and lowered his rifle. “Then we can talk.”

In the shadows between the trees, a figure rose. A tall, dark man stepped forward. On his back hung a rifle. “Mister President,” the black man said to Chris. “Good to see you are still vigilant.”

“Quade?” Chris said happily surprised. “You here? Geez, man. It’s been a long time. Good to see you!”

Byron Quade approached. “I’m also glad to see you again Mister President.”

“Ah Quade. Drop the formal stuff, will you?” He pressed Quade against him and patted him firmly on the back.

Quade coughed. “Well, there’s still plenty of strength in those fists,” he laughed.

Chestwright took a step back. “Man, how good to see you again. What’s up? With you and, um … out there?”

Quade laughed. “Me? I’m doing fine. But out there?” He heaved a deep sigh. “Hell!”

Chris nodded. “It’s out of control huh?”

“Completely.”

“But there is still resistance. Right?”

“Still is,” Quade said. “That’s also why I’m here.”

Chestwright looked at him obliquely and suspiciously. “I understand that you don’t seek me out here in this wilderness to have a beer and catch up on old stories by a campfire, but I also hope you understand that I haven’t isolate myself for nothing?”

“Yes,” Quade nodded. “But I hope you will take the time to listen to me.”

Chestwright raised a hand to silence Quade. He reached for his gun while listening intently to the sounds around him. Quade heard nothing, but automatically reached for his gun as well. “Angie?” Chestwright said. “I can hear it’s you. Come on out. It’s safe.”