

Companions of Hope: Erik's Search

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Erik's Search

Jörg Krämer

A Post-Apocalyptic Fantasy Adventure

Copyright

Companions of Hope: Erik's Search

An Urban Fantasy Novel of Survival, Friendship and Hope

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Eriks Suche”

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*Even if the muse didn't kiss me, she still
guided my fingers to give the story a different
twist than the one my mind had conceived.*

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The Abduction

Since only a few people still lived in this area, the air had become much clearer and the green of the plants much more intense. I couldn't find anything wrong with that.

If you looked closely, you could make out my silhouette beneath the shimmering silver moon.

It was a balmy summer night.

The warm air beneath my wings made me barely feel my weight of just under a pound. I savored the freedom. Nothing disturbed my flight.

Slowly, I glided over Witten's largest contiguous forest area: my territory.

In the distance, I heard a mouse squeak. I approached my prey silently. Only a tawny owl like me could move so quietly. The mouse didn't stand a chance.

My razor-sharp talons sank into the back of its neck. With its head thrown back, I swallowed the still-warm, bloody body in one gulp.

Satisfied, I took to the air again. Food was plentiful for me.

Ever since the plague had swept away most humans and many of the large mammals a few years ago,

the small rodents had multiplied in droves. And only an old hawk gave me any competition when hunting.

In Durchholz, a tranquil suburb of Witten, where I had my hideout in the gable of an abandoned farmhouse, there had been only a few people even before the catastrophe. Now only one family lived here: Erik, his wife Irinskat, and their little daughter Nanuk.

The large house where they lived was a little paradise. The couple had gathered the finest things to be found in the deserted

Durchholz. In the garden, there were jungle gyms and a large swimming pond for Nanuk. The property was secured by a large rough stone wall. An razor wire wound its way along the wall for several inches.

The garden was Nanuk's kingdom. She would run around there all day long. When I flew over to her at dusk, she would always screech and pretend to be startled by me. Then she would burst out laughing.

The game had already become a ritual.

Sometimes, though, she would just sit quietly by the pool, staring sadly into space. „Mom, why aren't there any other kids here to play with?“ she would ask, and Irinskät would simply take her in her arms without saying a word.

Erik, the man who stood nearly six and a half feet tall, had walked past me this morning on his way into town. The rhythmic movements of his supple muscles made his long brown hair fly wildly around his head. Despite his worn-out clothes, he cut an imposing figure with his sword strapped across his back.

At his side was Odin, the large Germanic Bear Dog, one hundred fifty pounds of muscle. His head was enormous. Those huge paws would completely bury me beneath them.

Most of the time, he looked at the world with a slightly sleepy expression, and no one would have thought that this animal could move quickly.

I felt a connection with Odin. I didn't understand it, but it was there. He noticed immediately whenever I came near him. Then an amused gleam would always creep into his eyes. I felt something like a gentle touch in my head.

It scared me!

Out of sheer boredom, I accompanied the two of them through the seemingly peaceful forest to the city limits. Then I was distracted a little by Lea, a cute little tawny owl girl. Lea was the

hottest little owl in the area. My heart was pounding in my throat, and I felt all warm under my feathers.

I tried everything to lure her into my nest.

Today I brought her the fattest mouse ever caught by an owl.

I performed the most daring flight maneuvers a tawny owl can pull off. It was all for nothing, she turned me down.

As always.

After this disaster, I flew around the forest in frustration.

It wasn't until I had a little snack that my mood improved again.

It was now unnaturally quiet in the woods. Not a sound could be heard. Alarmed, I soared high into the air. Something wasn't right here.

Then I saw Erik darting through the forest like a will-o'-the-wisp. The big dog ran silently at his side. I soared higher into the air. Now I saw the reason for Erik's haste: a dozen Roks rushing across a clearing. Mutants who barely had any human features left. Disfigured by the plague. Bald skulls, with teeth like predators, and hands that resembled claws.

Covered in hair from head to toe, they wore nothing but shorts. All of them were armed. I could make out rusty swords, jagged knives, and heavy axes.

Roks killed everything in their path. They were driven by an unbridled hatred of all living creatures. Some of them even ate human flesh.

This pack of mutants was moving purposefully toward Erik's house. They were surprisingly quiet. I hoped Erik would stop them in time.

As if he were reading my mind, the big dog looked at me right in the middle of running.

I let out a shriek. Something touched my mind, more firmly and intensely than usual.

The dog looked at his master.

„Okay!“ Just that one word, and Odin took off. In a split second, he caught up to the mutants.

I flew lower to get a better view.

Two of the Roks were already lying in the dirt with their throats torn open. The rest of the pack formed a circle so the dog couldn't attack them one by one.

Furious, they swung their weapons.

At that moment, the man pounced on them. They realized that the greatest danger did not come from the dog. He was the harmless one of the two. Erik was holding his ancient samurai sword. The delicate runes on the hilt glowed. They were the same runes that were tattooed on Erik's shoulder.

Before the first mutant could react, the blood of three of his brothers was already soaking the

forest floor. As Erik tore another opponent's body apart with tremendous force, the leader of the pack swung his axes at Erik's head.

Erik ducked.

The axes sliced through nothing but air. The Rok snarled furiously.

Erik appeared behind him and severed the tendons in the backs of his knees. Their leader's agonized roar sent the rest of the pack fleeing. Erik put the mutant out of his misery.

„Well done, Odin.“ The man lovingly ruffled his big dog's head, then cleaned his sword of the creatures' greasy blood. Neither Erik nor his dog was breathing any faster.

Erik seemed completely relaxed. This pack no longer posed any danger. „Come on, Odin! The girls are probably already waiting for us. I found some nice things for them in town. The looters missed quite a few things at the jeweler's.“

Slowly, the two of them set off again. Meanwhile, I flew ahead to Erik's house.

Sometimes Irinskat would leave a treat out for me. But today she was nowhere to be seen. Instead, smoke was billowing from every window. Loud rock music blared from the stereo. I flew lower and glided through the skylight into the house. The cabinets had been knocked over, the mattresses slashed open, all the glass was shattered, and there were small fires burning everywhere. But there was no sign of life.

Shocked, I flew back and reluctantly made contact with the dog. I have no idea how Odin managed to inform his master, but the two of them immediately set off at a run.

Then Erik cautiously approached the property. He pushed open the front door with a stick. Shots rang out. Erik threw himself to the ground. Someone had secured the door with an automatic trigger device. If Erik had walked through the door, he'd be dead now.

That couldn't have been the Roks, because they didn't use firearms, I thought.

Tense, Erik entered the house and searched every room. The violence that had raged here made him tremble. Then he sank into an old chair and buried his hands in his face. „No sign of them, Odin. But no bodies either. They must have taken them with them. Those weren't Roks, Kat would have handled them. What on earth do they want with those two? Damn this uncertainty!“

Even as he said this, his shoulders straightened, and an icy determination appeared on his face. „We have to go, Dog. Make sure the Owl comes with us!“

After casting a sympathetic glance at his master, the dog made it clear to me that I was part of the search. I would be the scout.

A slight shiver ran through my body. If they have guns, I won't be safe even in the air. On the other hand: Don't girls love adventurers? Lea is going to love me!

Excited, I took flight. We're going to save Erik's family!

Military Service

Engineer Barracks on the Schanz (Ingolstadt).

Erik lay on his bed, bored. He had now been serving as a lone soldier in the unit for two years. But apart from occasional maneuvers, his life was uneventful. Only the removal of the Syrian biological weapons last year had broken up his monotonous daily routine. The mission, which he had accompanied with the Mountain Engineer Battalion, had gone off without a hitch.

„Hajo, want to spar a bit?“ Erik kicked the bed above him.

„Nope, it's too boring with you. You're just going to lose anyway.“

„True, but only because you use dirty tricks.“

„The end justifies the means. You've never won.“ Hajo jumped out of bed. At five feet seven inches tall, he was more than two inches shorter than Erik. His blond hair was cut short. A stark contrast to Erik's long mane. They were both from Witten. They'd even gone to elementary school together. As they got older, they thought it was cool to train as lone fighters. That sense of adventure had since given way to pure boredom.

„So what are we going to do?“

„Let's go to *the Shamrock*. A little dancing, darts, a Kilkenny or two. That'll keep us going for the evening.“

„Dancing? What does your wife say about that?“

„What she doesn't know...“

Erik had to laugh. Hajo was an incorrigible womanizer. But he loved his wife and his two kids more than anything. So, at the end of the evening, he ended up sending every other woman home alone.

„Okay, give me another half hour. Then we can go.“

Erik was on his own. He was looking forward to the pub. They didn't get out here very often. Plus, Henry, the owner of *the Shamrock*, was a nice guy.

As they set off, the sun was just sinking like a glowing red ball behind the horizon.

The *Shamrock* was still empty. Irish music played softly from the speakers. Henry was busily polishing the bar.

„Two Kilkennys and a bottle of your best whiskey!“ Hajo called out.

„Coming right up. Don't go driving all the girls wild again tonight, Hajo.“

„I never do that,“ Hajo grinned, grabbed the darts, and dragged Erik over to the dartboard.

„The loser pays.“

„Okay, hope you've got enough money.“

Time flew by. After the first

bottle of whiskey, the darts rarely hit their mark anymore. By now, the *Shamrock* was packed to the brim. Hajo pushed his way to the bar.

„Another bottle, Henry!“ Staggering slightly, Hajo fought his way back to Erik. „Damn, it's packed in here,“ he slurred.

„Yup.“ Erik took the bottle from him, filled his whiskey glass, and downed it in one gulp. „And damn good Irish water.“ Grinning crookedly, he threw the darts.

„Three bull's-eyes? You're messing with me.“ Hajo's eyes nearly popped out of his head.

„It's all a matter of concentration,“ Erik slurred as he sank to the floor.

„You won.“ Hajo sank down next to him.

„Here's to your wife.“ Erik filled their glasses.

After they'd polished off the second bottle as well, they set off on their way back in high spirits.

Then Erik felt a blow to his back. Dazed, he stumbled forward.
„Shit, what’s that supposed to mean?“

„Stay down, and nothing will happen to you!“

As if through a fog, Erik realized that two guys were holding Hajo down while the talkative one leisurely punched him.

„Keep your hands off my wife!“ With every word, a punch to the face. Hajo didn’t look thrilled.

„Damn it, let him go! He’s definitely got the message.“ Erik struggled to his feet. „Ronk.“ Once again, he saw stars.

„Shut up! You’re on a break.“ After the guy had broken his nose, he turned his attention back to Hajo.

Erik felt a flame flare up inside him. He let out a low growl. A yellow glow crept into his eyes. The heat engulfed his head. The growl grew louder. As he stood up, he swept the speaker’s legs out from under him. In the same motion, his fist shattered the jaw of the man on the left.

The man fell to the ground screaming. The growl continued to swell. The third man, pale as chalk, made a run for it.

Not so the speaker. „What happens now is your own fault.“ With his arms and legs whirling, he lunged at Erik.

Erik took two blows and smiled. The yellow light in his eyes grew stronger. The speaker retreated uncertainly. Normally, anyone he hit like that would go down.

„Erik, cut it out!“ shouted Hajo, who was slowly getting back to his feet.

He might as well have been talking to the trees. Erik was in a trance. Smiling, he moved toward his opponent. The speaker had regained his composure

and attacked. Instead of dodging, Erik met the attack head-on and easily broke the speaker’s knee with a kick.

Even as the man collapsed, Erik’s knuckles struck his larynx.
Once! Twice! Three times!

„Erik, stop!“

Erik was still smiling. He spun around once and, as he spun, snapped the speaker's neck. At that moment, Hajo threw himself at Erik.

„Damn it, stop!“

„Hajo? What are you doing? Get off me!“ Erik could only feel a dull throbbing in his temples.

„Look to your left, you idiot! What were you thinking?“

Erik turned his head questioningly, and looked into the speaker's glazed eyes. Blood slowly trickled from his eyes and ears onto the asphalt. Erik's eyes widened. „What happened?“

„I thought you'd tell me. You're completely out of it. That guy is dead as a doornail. And you were trying to kill him even more.“

„I...“ Erik just felt empty.

In the distance, they heard the siren of the military police. Hajo helped him to his feet. „We'd better wait here. Running away doesn't make any sense. And after all, those three attacked us.“

„Okay, whatever you say,“ Erik whispered.

Erik appeared before the military court. And he was lucky, very lucky. Despite Hajo's testimony, he would have been locked away for a long time. If it hadn't been for the fact that, after half a year of solitary confinement, the army urgently needed volunteers to dismantle biological weapons from Syria.

When he got out of prison, Hajo picked him up. „Here, from my wife.“ With that, he handed Erik a large, homemade cake.

„Have you heard?“

„Thanks. What is it?“

„We're going to Syria together.“

„Why?“ Erik had been speaking even less since the incident.

„Adventure. Something's finally happening. I can't just stay here. Besides, you saved my ass. I'm not going to leave you alone.“

„What does Myrna say?“

„She’s letting me do it. She knows me, after all.“

„All right. Do you know when we’re leaving yet?“

„I don’t know exactly, but we’re supposed to be there next week. Plenty of time to have a proper farewell party.“

„Without me. Thanks again for the cake.

See you later.“

Hajo watched him go, puzzled, shrugged, and turned toward *Shamrock*.