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## *Upper Bavaria, May Day, 1992*

Germany was a mistake.

Quinn Guthrie had come only because his old captain, Nate Crawford, had asked him to. Nate said it would help Quinn put his grief behind him, and the FBI apparently agreed. Quinn knew better, and this luminous spring morning was proving him right again. Hiking up through dripping oaks and poplars on a Bavarian hillside, Quinn felt no easement of the heartache that had owned him these five weeks since his wife's death. It was immutably there, step after step on the rain-sodden path, and despite his intentions, Quinn kept lagging behind the long-striding black man in the silly Alpine hat who was ten years his senior.

"How you doin' back there?" Nate's deep baritone came floating along the path.

"Just fine, Cap," Quinn replied. He was doing just fine, for a zombie. He felt completely lost over here.

"You say 'jess fine,' but some of you mens ain't keeping up!"

Quinn glanced from the leaf-plastered path, still squishy from last night's rain, and looked at his old friend, or his old friend's back. For Nate's big fuzzy-bald head, riding along under the loden-green, grouse-feathered hat, did not turn toward him. But the rich baritone boomed out again in darkest dialect:

"Thass right, whiteboy, I'se talking to you."

"Hey, Cap, what is that supposed to be? Plantation talk or ghetto jive? I can't tell."

Nate's laugh detonated. "I don't know, man! I'm still looking for my fucking roots!"

"Your fucking roots are probably in the insurance business, Ordell, just like your dad's." This was an old game between them, Quinn invoking Nate's forbidden first name and making fun of Nate's white-collar upbringing in Hartford, Connecticut.

"Call me 'Ordell' once more, baby, and I'll kick your butt back to Phoenix. Is that understood?"

"Yessir, Nathaniel, sir."

This was a pretty fair imitation of the sort of banter they'd exchanged back in the early '80s when they'd both served in Bavaria with the Dragoons, as the 2nd Armored Cavalry was nicknamed. At least, Quinn thought, Nate would have to give him points for trying.

Hearing himself called "Nathaniel," Nate Crawford had whirled around. Thirteen years had carved and creased the sorrowful face of the ex-cavalry officer and ex-FBI man, and exposed a broad arc of coffee-bean-dark skull, a fact which the absurd Bavarian hat only pointed up. But the body remained lean and restless, the movements and gestures impulsive. And Nate's big gator grin was undiminished as he leveled a bony finger at Quinn.

"All right, trooper. Think you can keep up the pace now? I got something to show you up there, remember? I didn't bring you all the way over here to hold your lily-white hand. I be needin' yo hep, whiteboy."

"Yessir. Whiteboy, he do better, sir!"

Nate turned and led off again through the scraggly wet woods. Quinn strove to stay no more than a step or so behind, but let his thoughts wander back several days to the moment he'd picked up the phone in Phoenix and heard Nate's familiar resonance, the old command authority tempered by concern.

"I think you should get out of there, Quinn," Nate had said, "and so does John." John Bentley, the Special Agent in Charge of the Phoenix FBI office, was Quinn's boss. He and Nate went back a ways, having teamed up on a federal sting operation out of Kansas City. "He's worried about you, Quinn. Hell, they all are."

"What are they saying?"

"I just told you. They think you should get out of that house. And Ginny would tell you the same. You listen to me now. I want you to come over here for a while. Let me put you back in harness."

"At an amusement park?" Under pressure from his chronically homesick German wife, Nate had quit the Bureau to become director of security for a theme park under construction in northern Bavaria. "What do you call that place again, Nate? Krautland?"

"Try and remember it this time. Ringland. As in Nibelung."

"*Ja, ja*, Ringland. *Ach so!* Would I get to wear a uniform? One of those SS outfits with kneeboots and a riding crop?"

"I've heard all the Nazi jokes, Quinn. And this is not some bullshit offer. I got a situation over here. Radical environmentalists—a couple different groups—squatting on our boundaries, protesting the park's opening—"

"You're not open yet?"

"May twenty-ninth. A month to go. But we may not make it. They've knocked heavy equipment out of commission, cut power lines—"

"Sounds more like 'eco-terrorists.'"

"You're starting to get the picture. Yeah, real wild-eyed crazies. Like the Weathermen, back in the '60s when you were still in Little League. They think they can shut us down permanently, before we ever open. I'm getting my goddamn ulcer back, Quinn. I could really use your help."

"Okay. So nuke 'em."

Nate roared with laughter. "I like your thinking, man. 'Go Ugly Early,' right? Remember the old NATO doctrine? Solve the PR problems with that, and I'll do it. "

Before he'd hung up, Nate had extracted Quinn's promise to come over. Quinn hadn't felt like fighting it, especially with John Bentley on Nate's side. After all, Quinn had been going through the motions on the job, and there was nothing else on his personal horizon. Without Ginny, the days ahead—the whole rest of his life—stretched into the void like some meaningless marathon.

Three days after that phone call, Quinn had locked up the adobe-brick house that still echoed Ginny's footsteps and taken a cab to Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport. Two flights and fifteen hours later he touched down in Frankfurt. As they'd taxied in, he looked across to Rhein-Main Air Force Base as an old C-141 Starlifter went lumbering down the runway. The big "green lizard" had finally managed to heave its ungainly, camouflage-painted bulk skyward. Watching it, Quinn had been reminded of his own first arrival at Rhein-Main after basic training, hunkered down in the rickety cargo bay of a C-5A, and then his jubilant flight home two years later. Quinn hadn't figured on ever coming back here. He hadn't figured on a lot of things.

"Just about there," Nate said, as the two men followed the path around a big, lichen-splashed outcrop of granite. A moment later Nate paused for effect and made a sweeping gesture. "As the preacherman say, 'Lo and behold!'"

Despite himself, Quinn was affected by the panorama. Through a notch in the low hills to his right, a distant smokestack trailed a white plume into morning saffron haze, marking the eastern industrial precincts of Bayreuth. Further south he caught the metallic twinkling of traffic crawling along the A-9 autobahn. To the northeast, visible as a blue-green wave on the horizon, were the spruce-clad slopes of the Fichtelgebirge, where as a twenty-one-year-old GI Quinn had gone skiing for the very first time. Nearer, the mountains subsided into rolling farmlands, forming an undulant quilt of emerald pastures, green woodlots, and dark-brown fields bared for spring planting.

But none of this, obviously, was what Quinn's old commanding officer had brought him to see. For immediately before them the wooded hillside fell steeply away, and there, in a natural amphitheater, sprawled the new theme park.

From up here the place looked ready enough for business, Quinn thought, like a full-scale model on a giant tabletop. But construction sounds still echoed off the surrounding slopes—the salvos of a rivet gun, the steady thud of an air compressor, the bone-jarring dance of a jackhammer against concrete. To this fitful cacophany, which Quinn had heard during their hike, were now added the blatant harmonies of a brass choir, striking up a march. Quinn couldn't see the bandmen anywhere below. He guessed the tune to be Wagnerian.

It was like coming on a noisy Brigadoon, though there was nothing Scots about this improbable pocket kingdom. Judging by the structures Quinn could see, Ringland was a fantastic hodgepodge of styles and time-frames—old Norse, Gothic, early medieval, high-tech. A wattle and daub village abutted a Bavarian tourist-trap of steep-gabled, timbered storefronts. Miniature Viking longships nestled alongside the stone jetties of a miniature lake, which was anachronistically spanned by cables strung from tall pylons disguised as ferro-concrete pinetrees.

Critics would have their usual field day, Quinn thought, but he found the overall effect pleasing, and figured most people would agree. The architectural kitsch was whimsical, and attractively landscaped. Well-tonsured shrubbery and graceful willows bordered the lake, which, like the meandering watercourse into which it flowed, was now burnished by the morning sun. Maples, chestnuts and lindens in spring abundance shaded a network of asphalted pathways. These all radiated from a central square, in which stood a giant tree-pylon, half again taller than the others. Cables suspended from its branches led on to another clever fabrication—a dramatically sculpted, false-granite massif, crowned by a cable-car station and grooved around its steep flanks by a bobsled run. Yet as large as this manmade mountain was, it was overshadowed by the park's landmark attraction—a storybook castle of snow-white limestone, with clustering, neo-Gothic turrets that soared skyward, nearly equaling the elevation at which the two men stood.

Nate used the moment to match his old friend up against the matrix of his memories. Quinn, with his ex-jock nonchalance and freckled good looks, would undoubtedly hang on to his damned adolescence another dozen years, Nate thought. Maybe more, the way he was dressed now—stovepipe Levis and a paint-splotched Sun Devils sweatshirt. But Quinn's narrow gray eyes no longer looked out at life with the keen amusement Nate recalled. There was a subdued quality there now. Quinn had always been too damn introverted. It was high time for him to start getting over Ginny. If he kept up his tragic figure act much longer, Nate was going to do something to snap him out of it. For now, he only pivoted and punched the younger man in the meat of the shoulder.

“It's your turn to say something, trooper.”

Quinn rubbed his shoulder and smiled vaguely. “Nice layout. Where’s the parking lot?”

“Behind that hill. Also, under it. They can stack several thousand cars underground.”

“I would guess you can’t even tell the place is here from the autobahn.”

“Right. Notice anything else?”

“That castle looks kind of familiar.”

“It’s supposed to.”

“Yeah, but what if the Disney people sue?”

“You got it ass-backwards. This is Bavaria, man. We got the fucking patent on fantasy castles here. You heard of crazy Ludwig? All those Disney castles are knockoffs of his Neuschwanstein, even the new one outside Paris. If anybody does any suing, it oughta be us.”

“So that’s a replica of Neuschwanstein?”

“Well, no, it only looks like Neuschwanstein. That’s Valhalla down there. The sky-castle of the gods. Come on, Quinn, you spent a couple years over here. Didn’t you learn anything about Wagnerian opera?”

“Oh yeah, sure, Cap. How about you?”

“Are you kidding?” Nate flashed his gator grin. “All I know is what they made me read in the PR kit. Anyhow, here’s the deal. Ringland’s not even based on *The Ring of the Nibelung*, at least not directly, but on this action-adventure movie that came out a couple years ago. It probably played Phoenix. *Warriors of the Ring*. Starred Mr. Europe or some musclebound dude as Siegfried. Sword and sorcery, dungeons and dragons, all that crap.”

“Was Mr. Europe a baritone or a tenor?”

“You’re not listening, man. I just told you it wasn’t a fucking opera. No fat ladies in horn hats and brass bras. What they did is, they hired some rock and roll band to blast some of Wagner’s greatest hits in the background, heavy-metal arrangements. You really never heard of the movie?”

“Ginny and I didn’t go out that much. We, uh, liked to...”

Sensing his friend’s distress, Nate continued: “Guess you missed it, eh? Well, the damn thing grossed a couple hundred million marks worldwide. Now they got a weekly cartoon TV show over here, comic books, hand puppets, T-shirts, video games, you name it.”

“Gee, thanks, Cap. I feel a lot more educated now.”

“Don’t mention it. Now let me point out something else you apparently didn’t notice. Doesn’t this terrain look kind of familiar to you?”

“Should it?”

“Shit, yes. I sent you grunts on land-navigation exercises all over these hills, day and night.”

“Yeah, okay. This is Bindlach Hill, right?”

“Right.”

“So then, Christensen Barracks would have been around here somewhere?”

“How about you spent last night right on top of it?” Nate grinned at Quinn’s puzzlement. The younger man had had little chance to orient himself the night before, arriving late in a driving rain and promptly sacking out in Nate’s spare room. “Let me ‘splain, as Kingfish used to say. See, when the 2nd Armored Cav pulled out of all its border camps and bases in northern Bavaria, the German Army moved a tank company into the old Röhrensee Barracks down in Bayreuth, where we had the 84th Engineers. But then this Ringland consortium came out of nowhere fast, before the Bundeswehr could take over Christensen Barracks. They convinced the Bavarian government to sell *them* the land. They also bought up several adjoining farms and the old municipal airfield. So most of what you’re looking at used to be part of the old US of A. The

park's employee housing complex was built on 1st Squadron's old parade grounds. In fact an old Army buddy of mine tells me my apartment is probably right over where the fucking latrine used to be."

"Luckily I didn't notice."

"That's not all you didn't notice."

"There's more?"

"Uh-huh. What I dragged you all the way up here for."

"Not the park?"

"No. Something else."

When Quinn shook his head, Nate lifted a pair of compact binoculars from a pouch on his belt. "Take a look at the top of that big hill over there."

Quinn tracked the sector where Nate was pointing and saw it at once. Stretched across a green hillside, a long muslin banner proclaimed in blood-red, spray-can letters: "EIN DÜSTRER TAG DÄMMERT! — Erda."

"My German's a tad rusty," Quinn said. "Who's this Erda?"

"Erda's supposed to be the earth goddess. The word means 'earth' in German. Look farther downslope, you'll find an English banner. It's about doomsday. Wagner wrote a whole opera about it, except he was talking about gods, not an amusement park."

"I see it now. 'A DAY OF DOOM DAWNS!'"

"And see all that shit around it—cookfires, washlines, sleeping bags, bareass kids fornicating and crapping on the ground?"

"Yeah, okay, calm down, Cap. I see a few kids, mostly dressed, backpacks, tents." Quinn handed the binoculars back. "Those are your eco-terrorists?"

"You got it."

"And you can't run 'em off?"

"Right again. A no-fire zone. If it wasn't, I'd call in the coordinates right now, lob a few of those big 155mm shells we used to fire downrange at Grafenwöhr. Turn the whole goddamn hill into a compost heap." Nate bared his teeth to show he was kidding, but just barely. "Some old fart owns that hill and the farm behind it. Guy refused to sell out to the consortium. And let me tell you, the media just love those vermin up there. They get unbelievable coverage. *60 Minutes*, CNN, *USA Today*, you name it, they've been up there. We can't pay those guys to drop by our visitors information center."

"So who are they? I thought the Greens were on the decline since reunification."

"Maybe in the Bundestag, not here. We got all kinds of groups scattered around the park. Mostly the squatters up there call themselves Ragnarokers, which refers to some old Norse word for doomsday. *Götterdämmerung* is the German. This is supposed to show the assholes went to college. Then, beside Greens, there's Terra Sancta. They're mostly a pickup group, showing up whenever their media-crazed leader, Gideon North, senses a photo op."

"An American?"

"Way back when, I guess. He probably burned his passport by now. The guy teaches German philosophy to Germans, if you can believe that. The funny thing is, the Ragnarokers are also led by an American, a North American anyway. A big Canadian wildman called Ed Sojourner. Ex-mountain climber, looks like he just walked out of the North Woods."

"Okay, I get the general idea. Now you want me to tell you what to do, right?"

"Lay it on me."

“Make ’em part of the park. Charge people to look at ’em through telescopes, like a wild animal preserve. Call it HippieLand. Woodstockland. Whatever. Nate, you’re not laughing.”

“Not so’s you could notice.”

“Sorry. So fill me in.”

“All right, trooper. Let’s say we head back down to the cafeteria for coffee and *Apfelkuchen*. They’re like apple fritters. Then I’ll tell you some of the cute little pranks those eco-assholes have been up to, and then maybe you’ll understand why your old CO has lost his sense of humor.”

But Quinn didn’t have to wait for coffee and donuts to learn more about the Ragnarokers. The information was conveyed far more swiftly and dramatically. Just as the brass band below launched into something he *did* recognize—*The Ride of the Valkyries*—it was silenced by double sonic booms reverberating low off the surrounding hills.

“What the fuck was that?” Quinn shouted. But there was no one beside him to answer. Nate was already tearing down the path toward the park.