

MEMO TO THE LEADER

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MEMO TO THE LEADER

WILLIAM WALLING

The future ain't what it used t'be.

Yogi Berra

PROLOGUE

Solitude was the truly maddening aspect of perpetual confinement. His faceless captors treated him with neither respect nor disrespect, neither kindness nor unkindness. Their Olympian detachment made his isolation inhuman, his existence pointless, as if he were already dead. And in a sense he was dead, but living burial was a lame substitute for extinction. After endless weeks of sleep deprivation and deftly applied psychological pressure interspersed with exhausting, medication-enhanced interrogations, his keepers took exquisite pains to deny him the solace of oblivion.

Stolid guards with bland Sinitic features rarely uttered a syllable when meal trays were shoved through a slot in the steel door and retrieved. Infrequently, at what might be noon, midnight or any hour in between, he was escorted from the suppurating, jackhammer-scored walls of the limestone cell to a natural gallery in the caverns. Encouraged with gestures to shuffle to and fro, he performed lethargic calisthenics, his every move scrutinized by taser-armed guards. On these occasions he was conducted down an artificially hewn side passageway from where distant voices and occasional cries of anguish could be heard. He saw no other prisoners.

Ever.

The invisible days and vacuous nights dragged past in sunless isolation, strung together end-to-end like evil beads into anonymous weeks, empty months. He had ample time—all the time there was—to examine, re-examine, reflect upon, evaluate and re-evaluate the confluence of circumstances, personalities and events culminating in the Great Mistake. Everlastingly, elliptically, his thoughts went back to the complex jumble of schemes, encounters, endeavors and actions in which he had played the pivotal role.

Take care what you ask for!

The unspoken caveat reverberated in his mind more and more

often and circled there, spinning round and round until he could not stop second-guessing his part in the triumph *or* the tragedy, and then second-guessing his second guesses until the riddle had neither beginning nor end, and reflexive hindsight crowded his mind into shadowy labyrinths.

Perhaps if he had firmly declined the mission, had irrevocably refused to go on the night Bernard Omsley put in an impromptu appearance at the chalet, events might have taken a different, more laudable course. But that was wishful thinking, and wishful thinking was the essence of futility. Bernard's unheralded visit had made a beginning of sorts, but there had been more.

Much, much more . . .

ONE

GREATER DENVER GAULEITUNG, MAY, DWR 142

James Silverthorne leaned forward in the leather armchair. “But today, Herr Gauleiter,” he said in German, “looking back from our vantage in Deutscheswelanreich year one forty-two, what strikes me as important—

An imperious hand lifted to stifle the plea. “Professor,” declared Dr. Kästner, “your command of our language is excellent, but will you mind if I brush up on my nodding acquaintance with English?”

“Certainly, sir; as you wish.” James knew the other’s “nodding acquaintance” for what it was—pure sham. Ever mindful of his high office, it was second nature for the erudite official to disarm lesser mortals with false modesty. His real reason for abandoning the mother tongue was the third person in the high-ceilinged, austere decorated chamber. A political attaché assigned to shadow Kästner wherever he went, then file a report cataloging everything he said and did, the black-uniformed SS Sturmbahnführer sat stiffly erect beside the obligatory oil portrait of Adolf Hitler, his body language denying Silverthorne’s very existence.

Reclaiming his train of thought, James began anew. “What I hope to put across, sir, is that in looking backward twenty centuries professional opinion varies. Most colleagues believe the annihilation of three Roman legions was of vital importance. Others view the event, while important in itself, as no major milestone, just another of the great battles peppering antiquity.”

“And your view, Professor?” At ease behind his massive rosewood desk, Ernst Kästner toyed with a signet ring symbolizing membership in the Ancient Order of Teutonic Knights. “Your personal opinion,

please; I've no wish to be inundated with historical expertise. What is your, um, gut feeling, if that's the appropriate Americanism?"

Viscerally certain his interpretation was correct, Silverthorne did not equivocate. "I firmly believe it was a major turning point in European history, sir. At that point in time, you see, numerous legions under the supreme command of future Emperor Tiberius had barely finished putting down a massive, drawn-out uprising in the Roman provinces of southeastern Europe. The erupting insurgency threw a roadblock in the path of imperial expansion. It aborted the conquest of a vast hinterland of forested hills and riverine bogs the Romans knew as Germanorum. That is documented fact, not surmise. Had Arminius failed to gather a huge army of Cheruscan and allied warriors, I doubt whether the outcome would have been —"

"Hermann!" said the Gauleiter forcefully, a disagreeable burr sharpening his diction. "You meant *Hermann der Cherusker*, did you not, rather than 'Arminius'?"

Feigning chagrin over the purposeful gaffe, James tendered a left-handed apology. He explained that either name was equally suspect, since both derived from ancient sources, most credibly in surviving books of the ANNALS written a century after the fact by Tacitus. "Whether or not Arminius," he concluded, "is a Latinization of Hermann, which some consider to be the hero's indigenous name, is doubtful. It's just one more item of conjecture I hope to resolve."

Somewhat mollified, Dr. Kästner nodded encouragement. "Do go on, Professor."

"Conjecture," pursued James, "has been rife for generations. Intriguing historical quandaries arise from what Rome termed the 'Varian Disaster.' For example, what if three veteran legions had opposed Hermann's forces instead of scrambled together armies led by Varus, and the battle had gone the other way? Would Tiberius have returned to mastermind a conquest, extending Roman hegemony eastward to the Elbe? Would passive Germanic provinces like those of Gaul have been created; and if so, would the western empire have later fallen into eclipse with the Gallic *and* Germanic populations under Caesar's thumb? Would a coalition of tribal-nations like the Goths have congregated and marched on Rome. And what of Charlemagne's much later attempt to resurrect the empire, or of greater significance to we ourselves, what of the modern German Empire?"

"Provocative questions," admitted the official, but a refractory glint had invaded his dark eyes. "Yet referring to *Tausendjahr Deutschesweltanreich* as an 'empire' strikes me as rather tactless. Empires are transitory; they form by aggrandizement, exist for a time,

and eventually dissolve for numerous reasons. Should anyone in the presence of our noble Reichsführer refer to the New World Order as an 'empire,' I daresay he would take umbrage."

As if he had accepted the mild chastisement, James said, "Your pardon, sir. A slip of the tongue."

The official glanced down at his guest's thick dossier, resting on the immaculate desk next to a red-leather folio edition of *MEIN KAMPF*. His manner softened. "Dr. Silverthorne, no one would dream of belittling your accomplishments, nor most certainly your qualifications to undertake the proposed research junket. Your book on eighteenth century Potsdam electrified historians and literati everywhere, including our leadership in the capital." He paused reflectively. "Refresh my memory. What was the nickname his beloved subjects called the aging Frederick?"

"*Der Alte Fritz*," supplied James, reverting to German.

A dry chuckle. Despite the Gauleiter's wish to "brush up" on English, he likewise switched languages. "Of course, of course. Yet one glaring omission in your narrative piqued my curiosity. How in the world were you, a friendless stranger, able to infiltrate *Schloss Sanssouci* in seventeen eighty-two and actually stand in the presence of *Friederich der Grosse*? I was fascinated by the word picture you drew of the era's preeminent ruler shuffling about the palace in his faded uniform, leaning on a silver-handled walking stick."

"King Frederick was an accomplished flutist and composer. He apparently devoted his declining years and waning energies more to music than statesmanship."

"So it would seem . . ." The other heaved a theatrical sigh. "You have been enormously privileged, Silverthorne. I confess to having enjoyed your Potsdam book equally during a second reading. But you haven't explained how you wormed your way into the palace."

A self-effacing smile. "The practice of looking through servants, not directly at them, was ingrained in the era's Prussian elite. As a provincial from southern Germany—a pose my accent reinforced—I talked my way into a position as footman. Later, a friendly equerry helped me obtain posting as a bewigged usher. The only glitch in the junket took place on the night my locket and snuff box disappeared."

"Glitch . . . ? I fear you've lost me."

"Sorry, sir; a colloquialism for . . . a problem. Dean Omsley had the locket fashioned in the institute's nanotechnology lab. On the outside, it looked like an ordinary bauble on a tarnished silver chain—the sort of thing any servant might wear—but inside was a

sophisticated audiovisual recorder. The unprocessed images I had snapped in secret, salted with snatches of overheard conversation, were digitized in the snuff box. I've often wondered what the thief—another servant, surely—thought when he or she prized open the locket and tried to make sense of the molecular device. Both trinkets were probably thrown away."

"A dreadful loss." The Gauleiter clicked his tongue. "Authentic glimpses into that rich era of our past would have added enormously to your book."

Professor Silverthorne was forced to agree.

His eyes hooded, the Gauleiter regarded his visitor circumspectly. "A darker aspect of your proposed venture occurred to me. Visiting that troublesome era of antiquity might be, shall we say, overzealous. No, let's be frank and call it foolhardy. The prospectus submitted by Dean Omsley, underwritten by the Reich's Retrotemporal Research Agency, describes a return to the North German plain in year nine of what was then called the Common Era. It cites your unswervable desire to be present during the actual conflict."

"Learning the details prior to engagement," said James, "and the battle's immediate aftermath, will be crucial to establishing historical integrity."

"Umm-m-m . . . perhaps." The other pondered. "A second, even harsher reality will go hand-in-hand with the inordinate degree of risk associated with your proposed venture."

"It's an extremely long jump," admitted James, hoping to deflect what he thought might come next.

A sober nod. "Two millennia, and then some—far the longest retrotemporal transposition thus far contemplated. Which serves to point up a secondary consideration our leadership must be weighing in the balance. An exorbitant quantity of ultra-expensive thorium isotope will be required to drive you and your accoutrements that deeply into the past."

"Granted, sir."

"Yet in mentioning personal risk," added Dr. Kästner, "I wasn't referring to the time jump itself. Of far greater concern, at least in my opinion, will be the extremely risky business of encountering proto-Germanic tribesmen of that bygone era. You mean to boldly thrust yourself into their midst armed with only sketchy knowledge of then-

current manners, mores, cultural taboos, local dialects, and so forth. Coming into contact with touchy, clannish Germanic warriors seems unavoidable—warriors, so I’m told, whose avocation and principal pleasure in life was wielding their weapons.”

“I’m taking advanced fencing lessons.” James cringed inwardly at how weak it had sounded. “And as you can see, I’ve let my hair and beard grow. Aside from unavoidable language difficulties, I have few qualms about giving offense among the locals.”

As if to reassert the authority and dignity of his office, Ernst Kästner fingered the Heidelberg scar disfiguring his cheek. Upon first being introduced to the Gauleiter, Silverthorne had intuited the scar to be a product of inner Party surgery—a “signature” of political favor bestowed in secret on *Herrenvolk* destined for government service.

“The difference,” remarked Kästner with droll inflection, “between a fencing foil and a honed, double-edged battle axe is something with which you may not wish to become intimately acquainted.”

Realizing any response would be meaningless, James nodded as if in resignation. He did not bother to inform the Gauleiter that the “touchy, clannish Germanic warriors” who inhabited early first century Germanorum had not yet developed battle axes, honed, double-edged, or however fashioned.

“Ah, well.” The patented, lackluster smile of a professional politician clicked on, then clicked off just as quickly. “I must say you plead a winning case, Professor. After all, in the final analysis it’s *your* neck you wish to place on the block. The prospectus forwarded by Dean Omsley was taken under advisement weeks ago. I invited you here this afternoon because of a call yesterday from the Reichsleiter’s executive assistant. She dropped a broad hint that your junket to antiquity was due to be either sanctioned, or denied, within a matter of days.”

“Wonderful news! Thank you, sir.”

“Oh, don’t thank me. It is I who should be grateful for being allowed to participate in your fascinating ventures into the past.” The official pushed back his chair and rose. He turned to the political officer. “Dieter,” he said in German, “I find myself in need of a breath of fresh air. Relax, go have coffee while I walk Dr. Silverthorne to his car.”

The SS *Sturmbahnführer*’s only response was a solemn blink.

Nattily attired in a fashionable smoke-gray tunic replete with a wraparound collar, Dr. Ernst Kästner emerged from the massive, neo-classic capitol with Silverthorne in tow. Donning dark glasses upon

encountering the brilliant wash of sunshine outdoors, he acknowledged with a regal head-dip the salutes of paired *Ausländische Staatspolizei* guards who braced to attention on either side of the columned entry.

The old Denver Civic Center, razed decades earlier, had given way to parklands surrounding Colorado Province's seat of power. Each time he visited here, the capital complex struck James as ultra-pretentious, if not grandiose. The neo-classic architecture was reminiscent in style and scale of the grainy, black-and-white films he had studied depicting the previous century's annual Nuremberg Rally. Descending the broad-risered marble steps at Kästner's side, he reaffirmed his earlier conviction. The government center looked as if it had been designed to impress anyone already afflicted with terminal megalomania.

Larger-than-life, the imposing bronze figures of Nazi demi-gods Erich Lustmann and Adolf Hitler gazed fondly at one another from the far end of the kilometer-long reflecting pool. On either side of the water, lesser statuary groupings featured Reichshelden of a secondary and tertiary order. The bronze likeness of Generalfeldmarshal Erwin Rommel, celebrated "Desert Fox" of the *Afrika Korps*, mastermind of the stubborn defense of *Festung Europa* that so frustrated the Allies, and eventual conqueror of the Americas, stared across an infinite battlefield with sightless metal eyes.

Opposite Rommel's shrine, across the breeze-rippled pool, hulked an authentic, rust-proofed King Tiger Tank—a nostalgic relic of what the *Deutschesweltareich* Ministry for Peoples' Enlightenment and Propaganda habitually referred to as, "The War of World Liberation." Beneath the snout of the ugly machine's turret-mounted cannon, the bronze figure of *Waffen SS Panzergruppenführer* Sepp Dietrich knelt down and held a map flat-pressed to the ground, pointing out a salient ripe for attack to his bloody-handed henchman, Joachim Peiper, once the commander of *Panzergruppe Leibstandarte-SS Adolf Hitler*.

Huge, red and black swastika banners rippled along the broad, tree-lined boulevard. School buses had pulled up curbside and were disgorging excited, clamoring files of children bound on a field trip to the adjacent *Reichsmuseum*. Flocks of tourists strolled the plaza, chatting and posing for digital snapshots. Somewhere in the sprawling adjacent parklands band music played in erratic counterpoint to the faint, rhythmic wheezing of a giant carousel.

The limousine's driver had been waiting outside the underground executive parking garage. Noting the approach of the *Gauleiter* and the passenger he had dropped off earlier, he emerged from the vehicle and made ready to hold open the limo's rear door.

Halfway along the broad, tree-line walkway Dr. Kästner took

Silverthorne's elbow with untoward familiarity and drew him aside. Head lowered as if in thought, the official covered his lips with be-ringed fingers. "Jamie," he said softly, "I hope you realize why the brainwashed minder sitting in my office made it necessary to restrict our conversation."

Minder! His consciousness jarred by a Briticism the other had probably picked up during his former post in Cambridgeshire Province, James said, "Don't give it a thought, Ernst."

"It would pain me to have you think I'm less than sympathetic to your proposed junket. Be assured that I'm every bit as eager as you and Dean Omsley to learn the factual details of Hermann's heroic crusade. Why if it were up to me, my chop would be on your petition and you'd be off to Carlsbad and antiquity before the ink was dry. Alas, like most other important matters in our world it's a committee decision. And you know how *that* goes."

A hearty nod. "Hope springs eternal, Ernst." The Gauleiter had been rhetorical in saying "our world." James thought he might as well have spoken literally. It *was* their world.

Exuding sincerity, Kästner smiled. "Optimism, Jamie, forever optimism. It's the only sensible credo. We must have dinner together again soon, eh? Please convey my best regards to your lovely wife, and to Dean Omsley when you see him next."

"I certainly will, Ernst." They shook hands. "Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder. I appreciate your thoughtfulness."

"My shoulder is available at all hours, day or night. *Wiedersehen*, Jamie."

As a matter of professional courtesy, the Gauleiter had dispatched a staff limousine to fetch Silverthorne from the institute. The taciturn, middle-aged driver ushered James into the vehicle's rear seat. Resuming his place behind the joystick, he asked in German, "Where do you wish to be taken, sir?"

"Back to my office, *bitte*." *This smarmy fellow*, thought James, *should have Geheimstaats Polizei stamped across his forehead*. On second thought, he was most likely one of the Sicherheitsdienst snoops from Herr Direktor Jürgen Müller's stable, not some off-the-shelf Gestapo thug.

The silent electric limo swept around an access ramp's ascending loop, slowed at the crest and automatically inserted itself into the smooth, regulated flow of autobahn traffic. The vehicle de-energized

internally and began drawing power and guidance from an induction strip running beneath the roadway.

Having no desire to converse with the driver, James depressed a switch plaque, raising the tinted-glass partition between the front and rear seats. He laid his head back against the cushion and pretended to doze, not rousing until the Flatirons came in view.

The limousine left the Autobahn and took its time negotiating downtown Boulder on manual control. It turned into the entrance of what had once been the University of Colorado, where bold, arching gothic letters now proclaimed the complex INSTITUT JOSEF PAUL GOEBBELS.

The limo crawled up Broadway, stopping and starting to let haphazardly jaywalking students cross the divided boulevard, then swung into Tenth Street. James asked to be dropped off in front of the high-rise Humanities Center. He got out and bent to thank the driver, but the other's head never turned as the sleek limousine surged away from the curb.

In a reflective mood, his thoughts centered on the potential ramifications of being summoned to an audience with the Gauleiter, he made his way to the elevator, nodding absently to one or two students. A glance at the antique Seth Thomas analog chronometer on the office wall told him little more than an hour remained in the academic day. He considered chucking it, reclaiming his 'copter from the roofpark and heading home to the mountains. Deciding to review a term paper or two before departing, he verbally commanded the computer to wake up. The flat-panel display obediently slid out of its integral nest within the desk and glowed to life. He commanded open the voluminous European History 230 folder and scanned the list of student names. Before he could order up a particular file, an uninflected computer voice announced, "New news is good news, Boss."

James eyed the blinking mail icon. "Open," he instructed, and a brief phrase instantly appeared: BIRDWATCHING TIME, JAMIE.

"Reply to sender," he instructed the computer. "Think I'll beg off, Bernard. Too late in the day."

Seconds later the screen read: BETTER LATE THAN SORRY. SPOTTED A NICE PURPLE FINCH DOWN NEAR THE CREEK. BIRDWATCHING TIME, JAMIE. DON'T LET ME DOWN.

Silverthorne felt tiny hairs lift at the nape of his neck. A literal translation of "Don't let me down" was, "Hie your arse over here now, now, now!"

Ordering the computer to go back to sleep, he collected his topcoat and left the office in something of a rush.

T W O

GOEBBELS INSTITUT, MAY, DWR 142

Silverthorne spotted the rotund figure of Bernard. Omsley prowling near the bank of Boulder Creek. The Dean of the History Department carried a used-but-never-abused, tripod-mounted monocular and a shoulder-slung digital camera. He was peering up into the branches of a tree in the copse of yellow pines, ostensibly searching for birds. James knew better. His senior colleague was trying to spot surveillance devices concealed in the layered branches.

Conventional wisdom espoused by the Deutschesweltsanreich hierarchy had it that inherently rebellious students, not to mention a cadre of liberal-minded professors and left-leaning teaching assistants, were especially prone to social unrest in general, and political dissent in particular. With maddening regularity night-prowling technicians therefore relocated about the campus a ridiculous quantity of nano-video cameras, pinhead-sized audio pickups, and miniaturized motion detectors.

When he came within earshot, James called, “So where’s this prize Finch of yours, Bernard?”

Omsley’s welcoming smile never got past his lips. “Must’ve taken wing.” His eyes bright with an excess of nervous energy, the middle-aged educator asked how the interview had gone. “Any resolution?”

“Not yet. The wheels of Reichskounzel not only grind slowly, they grind exceeding fine.” Worried without knowing why due to the imperative summons, Silverthorne tried to make his response sound casual—no easy task when every word and movement was being observed and recorded for further evaluation. “As always, the Gauleiter was sympathetic,” he told Omsley, and garnished the statement with a dollop of exaggerated respect. “Unfortunately, it isn’t his decision.

We're damned fortunate to have Dr. Kästner on our side. He's thoroughly professional, offers nothing but encouragement, and makes that extra extra-effort to understand what this junket will be all about, what it will mean to historians everywhere."

Omsley further buttered up the Gauleiter, putting in his two cents' worth for the benefit of unseen watchers. "His support has been invaluable. He never fails to throw his full weight behind our projects."

James resented the galling necessity of uttering sugared non-sequiturs. Nevertheless, he went on to say, "Dr. Kästner praised my book on eighteenth century Potsdam, but he seemed concerned about the risk involved in visiting early first-century Germania."

"Rightly so, Jamie. A heavy ration of peril is attached to the junket." Feeling enough had been said to satisfy ubiquitous surveillance, Omsley pointed to a nearby yellow pine. "Look, my bird's flitted to a higher branch." Erecting the tripod, he swung the monocular around and bent from the waist, looking directly down into the right-angle eyepiece—a posture making it impossible for anyone to read his lips. "Henny's cell went down last night," he announced in a stage whisper. "I found out an hour ago."

Silverthorne flinched. Forcing a cough, a pretext for covering his lips, he whispered, "*Henny* was taken?"

"No, thank God!" was the sibilant reply. "Pure luck! A dedicated bachelor, he had a touch of the pip and went over to the infirmary. He thinks Müller's SD bloodhounds broke into his apartment and triggered the alarm. His encrypted e-mail message said he barely had time to bolt."

Unable to conceal his distress, James said aloud, "I think I see the Finch. Here, let me have a peek, Bernard."

Omsley relinquished the eyepiece and stepped back, allowing Silverthorne to bend over the monocular. "Whole damned cell," whispered James, "everyone except Henny?"

The other's affirmative nod was barely perceptible. Omsley gestured toward a random tree where the phantom bird had supposedly alighted. "Look a bit higher, off to the right."

James canted the monocular. "Where the hell is he? Without Henny's expertise, we haven't a prayer of doing . . . what has to be done."

"Damned bird's flown again," muttered Omsley. Easing James aside, he bent and looked into monocular's the eyepiece. "Can't say for obvious reasons. The Lebe Device and thorium are safely stashed, at least for the moment. A new scheme's in the works. Our last shot."

Still in something of a daze, James resumed his place over the monocular. "They're getting close, Bernard. *Too* close! What can we do?"

Omsley reacquired the monocular. "Not a thing. Any overt reaction by either of us would be a dead giveaway."

To keep up appearances, the birdwatchers chased the nonexistent Finch from tree to tree for another quarter-hour. Omsley attached the digital camera to the monocular's eyepiece adapter and busied himself snapping pictures of birdless trees. All the while he and James exchanged whispered suggestions, trying to thrash out an interim solution to the dilemma they both knew might prove lethal.

In a sub-basement of the institute's utility complex, Sicherheitsdienst Colonel Jürgen Müller punched a cypher combination in a recessed panel beside an unmarked door. Admitted to the antechamber, he nodded to the guard on duty and faced the eye-cups of a scanner beside the secured inner door.

The computer read his retinal patterns and deadbolts clicked, retracted. The pocket door slid into the wall, admitting Müller into a long, softly lit gallery lined with banks of flat-panel video displays. Students deemed politically reliable, hand-picked on a rotational basis from among overachievers among Greater Denver's Senior Hitler Youth were stationed before each pair of monitors.

Müller clasped his hands behind his back and strolled the center aisle, pausing now and again to scan a displayed scene. "Anything of interest, young gentlemen?" he inquired of the gallery at large. "Any bloody fistfights, juicy seductions, scurrilous graffiti? Anything above and beyond the ordinary?"

A mischievous grin in evidence, an adolescent with touseled, straw-blond hair swung around in his chair. "Just the usual losers smoking dope on the green, sir."

"Really? My, what a shocking surprise! Don't look at me," remonstrated the colonel. "Keep your attention on the task at hand."

"Yessir."

"Those two birdwatching nuts're at it again," informed a lad farther along the row.

Müller ambled onward and stopped behind the youth who had spoken. "Ah, yes; Dean Omsley and his time-jaunting companion. It never ceases to amaze me how, or for that matter why, noteworthy professors become so devoted to the activities of filthy birds."

“That pair, they wander around the campus darn near every day, checking-out the trees.”

“I know. But I doubt whether you will ever see either distinguished scholar do or say anything even marginally contrary to doctrine.”

“S’pose not, sir. What’s really weird is how they chase birds at all hours, rain or shine. Last winter I had the duty when the campus was two squaws deep in snow, and there they were, stomping around with nary a bird in sight.”

“Hmm-m-m, that sounds odd. But then a hobby is a hobby is a hobby. Mine’s fly-fishing. I know nothing of birds, nor care to learn. On the other hand, some of our feathered friends could be white. It would make them difficult to pick out against a snowy backdrop, especially on video.”

“Guess so, sir. Uh, can I ask what you meant when you said time jaun . . . ? Time something?”

Colonel Müller watched Silverthorne’s image bend over the monocular. “The younger ornithologist you see there,” he informed, “is rather famous.”

The youth tripped over “ornithologist,” but let it slide. “Had no idea. Famous for . . . ?”

“Professor Silverthorne has done remarkable research in several eras of our past.”

“You mean he’s gone back in time, like Herr Lustmann?”

“Not to the War Years, of course. He has written several fascinating books, including an insider account of doings in eighteenth century Prussia. He’s also the school’s foremost authority on the War of World Liberation. Last quarter I sat in on a lecture series having to do with the Barbarossa campaign.”

“For credit, sir?”

“No, only to audit. I’m something of a history buff, you see. My particular area of interest lies in the vicious urban fighting in and around Stalingrad, where a maternal ancestor of mine lost his life. Studied the War Years in Gymnasium, didn’t you?”

“High School, yessir. But Stal . . . The name doesn’t ring a bell. Where is it?”

A faint, knowing smile. “You would go blind looking for the city on a modern map as either Stalingrad, or under its original Russian name, Tsaritsyn. The Führer took to heart a harsh lesson taught by the ancient Romans. When hostilities finally concluded in Stalingrad, its fate was identical to that of Moscow, Kiev and Leningrad. The site where a good-sized industrial city once rambled along a bend of the

Volga River was turned into a barren wasteland devoid of every living thing.”

“Really?”

“Total destruction. Wehrmacht engineers razed the city to the ground, then poisoned the soil and rubble so that nothing could live there for a century or more.”

“Hey, that’s *wild!*” exclaimed the youth. “And your, uh, ancestor was . . .?”

“A Sixth Army Oberleutnant. My father left me a faded snapshot of him in uniform. Generalfeldmarshal von Paulus earned a Ritterkreuz for what Professor Silverthorne described as the most outstanding triumph of the Barbarossa campaign. He led a break-out of the encirclement trap set by desperate Soviet defenders. At the time, the Führer was far away in East Prussia, but as always his uncanny, intuitive grasp of distant military situations prevailed. A warning air-couriered to von Paulus alerted him to the encirclement threat. With the beastly Russian winter coming on, Hitler ordered cold weather gear and additional supplies dispatched to the front, including thousands of *Winterhilfe* garments collected at home . . .”

Sensing his tale of minimal interest to the youngster, Colonel Müller strolled onward. Offering each video display a cursory glance, he he made his way back up the long center aisle, stopping once or twice to speak to one youth or another.

But leaving the surveillance gallery, Müller slowed his pace. He reflected upon something the *Amerikanische jugend* had said—a tidbit about the learned professors birdwatching even when the campus was snowed-in, bereft of birds. Training and experience had attuned Müller’s mindset to automatically seize upon anything and everything the least bit unusual. Any outlier that fell marginally beyond the envelope of what he considered a conventional parameters caught his attention at once.

Presumably of no importance in itself, the information was nevertheless filed away in his keen, ultra-suspicious mind. He made a mental note to order a thorough backcheck on the youth’s reference to winter birdwatching by the professors, both of whom, in his opinion, were little more than intellectual poseurs.

In late forenoon the following day, Dean Omsley returned to his office from the lecture hall and found Colonel Müller lolling in the chair behind his desk. Larding his greeting with excess bonhomie, he

said, "Ah, there you are, Jürgen. Found a new hiding place?"

An emotionless nod. "*Guten tag, Herr Professor.*"

Dr. Omsley had for quite some time gone out of his way to cultivate the SD officer, believing it mandatory in light of the widespread revolutionary conspiracy in which played a key role. He adhered rigorously to a dictum that called for holding one's friends close, and one's enemies even closer. Except for a few liberal-minded, politically disingenuous acquaintances, selected relatives, and one or two firebrands within his current crop of graduate students, he and the handful of other highly placed co-conspirators scattered about the country considered everyone the enemy. At the head of the local queue, standing head and shoulders above the rest, was the SD colonel arrogantly plopped down behind his desk.

"You've turned your office into birdland incarnate," remarked Müller, eyeing a plethora of flat photos and holograms that graced the walls, depicting birds of every feather. "I've been sitting here admiring your gallery."

The avian reference raised Omsley's hackles a notch. He set his briefcase beside the desk with exaggerated casualness. "I've a nice pic to add to my collection, Jürgen. Yesterday, down near the creek, I snapped an excellent purple Finch."

"Finch . . . ? A rare bird?"

"Oh, no; quite the opposite. But nevertheless an exemplary specimen. Here, would you like to see it? I haven't had a chance to do a printout." Without waiting for a response, he ordered the computer to light up and verbally commanded, "Open *Fringillidae*." Orchestral music began playing softly.

"Odd-sounding word," declared the colonel. "Why the accompaniment?"

Omsley held his fixed smile. "Just one of my conceits. What you're hearing is the cuckoo section from Respighi's 'Ornithological Suite.' The *Fringillidae* belong to a family suborder of *Passeres*, the songbirds, which includes the Finches." Hurriedly surfing through five or six images, he settled on a stock shot of a purple Finch. "There! A beauty, isn't it?"

"To me it looks like an ordinary sparrow."

"Similar, although slightly larger. Note the pastel purple-orange coloring behind the eyes, and mixed in with the cape feathers."

Müller studied the full-color display. "Professor, did you say this picture was taken yesterday?"

"Why, yes. In late afternoon."

"I hate to tell you there wasn't a cloud in the sky late yesterday

afternoon. As you will recall, a good-sized thundershower around three o'clock scrubbed the air crystal clear. Distinct bands of high cirrus can be seen above your bird's perch."

Omsley's breathing quickened. "Well, for the love of . . . ! You're right, Jürgen. I've called up the wrong photo." Sifting back through the ranks of finches, his hands palpitating slightly, he said, "Silly mistake. Ah, here we are."

"Yours," said the colonel, looking away from the computerized image, "is an interesting avocation. Tell me, why must you and your colleague abandon birdwatching in wintertime? Is it because snowbirds do not frequent this locale?"

The oblique query froze Omsley's smile in place. "Few snowbirds visit the region in winter," he said matter-of-factly, "unless you count the skiers who flock to Aspen and the other mountain resorts."

The colonel's lips twitched. "Snowbirds, *ja, ja*. A good one, Professor."

"In the winter," Omsley hastened to add, "Jamie and I . . . That is, Dr. Silverthorne and I keep a sharp lookout for woodpeckers."

"In the snow season?"

"It may sound unusual, but in the fall woodpeckers will often bore a hole in a tree trunk and cram it with nuts, then come back in winter when food is scarce and peck them out."

"*Nüsse* . . ." Müller revolved the notion. "I suppose that makes sense." The SD colonel rose and stepped around the desk. Sensing the approach of a warm body, the pocket door obediently slid into the wall. "Well, I'll be running along. Oh, yes. I almost forgot why I stopped by. Has your department's proposed venture to Germany's distant past been approved?"

Taken aback, Omsley said, "You . . . know of our proposal?"

"You act surprised, Professor."

"I am. Reichskounzel insists that we hold our retrotemporal research plans in strictest confidence until a venture is either formally sanctioned, or disapproved. May I ask how you learned of our latest proposal?"

"Oh, we have our sources," Müller said airily. "It sounds to me like a frightfully long jump—more than two thousand years. But after reading Dr. Silverthorne's book on eighteenth century Potsdam, I'm sure he has the sand and smarts to undertake the junket, if and when it's approved."

"Never doubt it," said Omsley emphatically. "The prospective venture is laden with excess baggage in the form of and inordinately high risk factor. But James is not only extremely knowledgeable, he's

very adept, very resourceful.”

“I am sure that it is so. Your program is an inspiration to us all, Professor. Keep up the good work, eh?”

“Thank you, Jürgen. We’ll do our best.”

The door slid closed with a faint electrical whine. Dr. Omsley slumped in the chair behind his desk, knees fluttery, his hands clasped to quell their palpitation. Aware that his office and every closet, lavatory, classroom and auditorium within the school’s confines, as well as a number outside, were bugged, under perpetual surveillance, he did not want to appear unnerved by Müller’s fishing expedition, because that was exactly what it had been. The colonel’s unheralded appearance was more than simply disquieting; it also struck a false note. Müller had no more interest in birds than did he himself, or for that matter Silverthorne. No, Colonel Snoop had not “dropped by” to pass the time of day, nor most certainly to inquire about Jamie’s prospective junket to antiquity. Omsley intuited that the bastard’s suspicions had been aroused.

But aroused by what?

He frowned. Had he or Silverthorne made a serious misstep somewhere along the way, a significant gaffe of some kind? He closed his eyes and spent a moment reconstructing the just-concluded conversation. Müller was o bird lover by any stretch of the imagination, but neither was he anyone’s fool. His remark about admiring the office’s picture gallery had sounded slightly off-center, too. Most of the holograms, paintings and photos in the collection had been lifted straight from Audubon stock shots or miscellaneous publications. But if the devious intel officer had no interest in birds, why had he even mentioned them? What had he said about winter, and snowbirds?

Snowbirds!

A tentative answer flashed in Omsley’s mind. Had surveillance caught he and Silverthorne birdwatching in the wintertime, when no birds were about?

The notion seared him.

Jamie was right, he thought. They are getting close, too damned close!