



*Black
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DEATH RIDES THE VALKYRIE

A Black Bat Adventure

by
Andrew Salmon

Chapter One

AN URGENT REQUEST

The sharp, muted rap on the stateroom door intruded upon the conversation Tony Quinn was having with his valet and confidante, Silk Kirby. Silk raised his tall, slender form up out of the club chair and strode to the door.

In the few seconds it took the man to cross the cramped quarters a strange transformation took place on the face of his employer. Until the knock had sounded, Tony Quinn's deep blue, keen eyes had been alive and vital. Now, swiftly, they changed. When Silk put his hand on the doorknob, Quinn's eyes were suddenly still, fixed and dead, staring straight ahead at nothing. In short, Quinn's eyes had become like those of a blind man.

Silk yanked open the door to reveal the inscrutable countenance of Hugo Vaeth, Captain of the *Valkyrie*.

"Who the devil is it?" Quinn demanded, his gaze seemingly rigid though he saw the airship captain plain as day.

Captain Vaeth, an emaciated-looking, tall man with hawk-like features strode in, his cap under his arm. His rubber-soled shoes squeaked slightly on the floor.

"Please excuse the intrusion, Mr. Quinn." Vaeth went on in clipped Austrian tones. "It is I, Captain Vaeth. I would have a word with you."

"My, my," Quinn grinned, beckoning Vaeth further into the room. "At this hour? Don't you Zeppeliners ever sleep?"

Vaeth frowned. "For this voyage, sleep is a luxury my Masters did not consider."

Quinn laughed easily, his gaze still fixed straight ahead. The two men had gotten to know each other in the ten hours since the airship had departed

from Lakehurst, New Jersey on its journey west across the United States.

Deliberately baiting the captain, Quinn said, "Then again, what need have you of sleep? Or is it possible Chancellor Hitler neglected to appoint one of his Aryan supermen to command *Valkyrie*, the greatest technical marvel of the new Reich?"

"Bah!" Vaeth waved a hand dismissively though he was aware Quinn could not see the gesture. "My country is the deck beneath my feet and the metal, linen and gas around us. Hitler and his thugs... The less said about them, the better."

Quinn's acute hearing revealed to him the genuine ire in Vaeth's tone and he did not continue with his joke. "Captain Vaeth," he said, "your company is always appreciated. What can I do for you?"

Silk motioned the captain to the seat he'd been occupying when the knock had sounded. Vaeth lowered his ungainly form into it and regarded Quinn anxiously.

Quinn, for his part, kept his gaze slightly to the left of the man though he noticed the worry pinching his new friend's features.

"I do not have to impress upon you the importance of this tour my *Valkyrie* is making across your United States. There have been great changes back home in the three years since Hitler became Chancellor. Great unrest as well. And danger rises from that unrest. I have spoken out against these changes, mostly to deaf ears. For this reason, I feel a terrible storm is on the horizon and thus I was motivated to undertake this 'good will' tour – as your press so colorfully dubbed it. I do so in the hopes of fostering amity between Germany and your country."

"And we here in the US appreciate the gesture. When I lost my sight, my hearing became rather acute in compensation, but I don't need it to hear the war drums you speak of."

"The cretins ruining the Fatherland wish to use my *Valkyrie* as a symbol of National Socialist superiority. That is nonsense. However, we cannot escape the symbolic nature of our journey and it must proceed without incident. Factions in both our countries wish to sow distrust and fear for their own purposes."

Quinn leaned forward in his seat. "Has something happened to jeopardize this?"

Vaeth nodded.

"Captain?" Quinn prompted. "Has something happened?"

Vaeth recovered quickly. "Yes, forgive me. There has been an incident."

"Does this incident involve one of the dignitaries on board?"

"Yes and no. Allow me to explain. The eyes of the world are on my

Valkyrie. The half-dozen diplomats and their wives know this and have stuffed the ship's safe with all of their finery."

Quinn saw where this was going. "There has been a theft."

Vaeth nodded again, but added. "Yes. A grievous one which may have harsh consequences on international affairs. The Heart of the Empire has been taken."

A reformed thief, Silk stepped forward at the mention of the heist. "What the deuce is that?"

Quinn replied to his friend's query. "It is a rather large ruby believed to have been originally atop the scepter Charlemagne was buried with. When the body was exhumed for reburial decades later, the scepter went missing. Only the ruby has been passed down to us by time. Christened the Heart of the Empire by Charles I, it is a priceless relic of a unified Europe."

"Hardly seems worth getting out of joint over."

"You do not understand," Vaeth interjected. "The Heart of the Empire is revered throughout Europe. At this time of uncertainty, its importance cannot be underestimated."

"You are correct, Captain," Quinn agreed. "As the ruby is the size of a softball and its value beyond calculation, it's possible the theft was purely for monetary gain. However, the state of affairs you speak of might also be the reason for the crime. Perhaps someone is sending a message."

"Bah! Someone? Rowland Ardai has taken it!"

"Ha!" Silk barked a laugh. "I'd love to see the look on McGrath's pan if that's true!"

"You are certain of this, Captain?"

"No. But who else could have taken it? A master thief like Ardai on my ship! I should never have allowed it."

"Reformed master thief. Or so Lieutenant McGrath and the papers say."

"He is a lifelong criminal. How do you reform such a man?"

Quinn's expression grew thoughtful.

Silk offered one possible explanation. "The press has hinted at some sort of 'crime college' possibly in upstate New York. Rumors. Load of hogwash if you ask me."

"And could such a place exist?" Vaeth demanded.

A slight smile tugged at one corner of Quinn's mouth. "I have my own theories. Which are best left alone for the moment. Have you any evidence of Ardai's guilt – beyond his past, I mean?"

"None. But the ruby was removed from the safe. No one saw or heard anything. Who else but someone practiced at such action could have done it?"

A tense silence grew. Then Quinn spoke, "I appreciate your dilemma, Captain Vaeth, but I don't know what you expect me to do about it. Ar dai is in the care of Lieutenant McGrath for this trip – the police department's own good will tour of criminal reform – surely he can assist you in this matter."

"I have just come from seeing him!" Vaeth's manner took on a frosty tone. "He scoffed at the very idea. To him, Rowland Ar dai is a symbol of all that is good in law enforcement."

Quinn smiled slyly. "So he sent you to me."

"Yes! How did you know? He told me you were the Black Bat – a costumed adventurer."

Quinn's smile became enigmatic. "McGrath has an overactive imagination."

Vaeth lowered his gaze to the floor. "Then you cannot assist me." He wrung his hands a moment, then smacked them down on his thighs. "If only the Alle-Männer were here!" Seeing the blank look this exclamation drew from Silk, he added. "They are a group of costumed adventurers similar, I suppose, to this Black Bat."

"I have heard of them," Quinn said. "Their name is derived from a Germanic tribe of the Third Century. The name means All-Men in English. They wage war on crime in the streets of Berlin."

Vaeth nodded, impressed that word of the All-Men's adventures had reached the United States. Then storm clouds seemed to form in his eyes. "When word gets out no one will care for the message this trip was meant to convey. Germany will be dubbed a gang of bunglers. The integrity of my crew will be questioned. I cannot allow this to happen."

"Captain Vaeth," Quinn said, his voice firm. "I may be blind but your concerns have not fallen on deaf ears. The presence of myself and my staff on board this airship is no coincidence. In the days leading up to this flight, I learned that Countess Wagenbach would be taking the ruby along on the journey and that McGrath intended to parade Ar dai around the country like a prize steer. I booked passage on this flight in order to have my men keep an eye on things whereas I cannot. Therefore we will assist you in any way we can. And we shall do it quietly in the hopes the ruby can be recovered and returned with no one the wiser."

Vaeth's pinched features brightened slightly. "Thank you, Mr. Quinn. If you require anything from myself or my crew, consider both at your disposal."

"Very good. At first light, then?" Quinn offered.

The captain left them. After Silk had locked the door he turned and

regarded his friend and employer expectantly.

Quinn's eyes and body seemed to spring to life simultaneously. He got up out of his chair and, with eyes flashing, moved about the room.

"What do you make of it?" Silk asked.

"I think we were right to tag along. It was a long shot that a hardened criminal like Ardai could go straight."

Silk cleared his throat harshly. He'd been a second story man until being caught red-handed by Quinn while trying to rob the man's home. Quinn had talked him out of the disastrous course Silk Kirby's life had taken and the two now fought for justice.

"You, my friend, are an exception," Quinn clarified.

"Should I clear away for the Black Bat?" Silk asked.

"Yes. He is needed," Quinn replied. "McGrath has already set the stage of suspicion thus the Bat will have to be one with the night. Hurry, Silk. There's work to be done!"

Chapter Two

A CALL TO ARMS

The path of justice had taken many turns for Tony Quinn. He began his journey as an up and coming young D.A. hounding crooks to the ends of the earth in the name of the Law. And it was in pursuit of this noble mission that fate dealt him a cruel blow.

While preparing to prosecute an important crime figure, he'd come into possession of certain documents vital to cement the man's guilt before a jury. However, in the midst of the trial, the crime boss's minions attempted to destroy the incriminating documents by hurling powerful acid upon them. Quinn had thrown himself in the path of the corrosive stream and it had struck him in the face. The acid had eaten into his features and he was blinded almost instantly.

Independently wealthy, Quinn had given up his position as D.A. and traveled the world in search of a cure for his blindness. The quest proved fruitless and his fortune useless in recovering that which had been taken from him. Resigned to the idea that he would never see again, Quinn settled into a hermit's existence, a virtual prisoner in his own vast estate. His only human contact was the reformed Silk Kirby.

It was when the future looked as black as the pall before Quinn's sightless eyes that Carol Baldwin appeared. She gained entry into his sanctum of sorrow by way of a strange offer. Her father, a police officer in a small mid-Western town, had fallen victim to a gangster's bullet and lay dying. Having followed Quinn's career as a junior D.A. and knowing his time upon this earth was waning, he wanted Quinn to have his eyes. Quinn, desperate and despondent, accepted the noble gesture and went West where a little known surgeon in Carol's hometown performed the operation, replacing Quinn's dead corneas with Sergeant Baldwin's

healthy ones. The procedure was a success and Quinn regained his sight – a fact he kept secret from the rest of the world.

For in the months of his restless solitude he had long ruminated on the red tape that was strangling the legal system, allowing the guilty to stroll from the halls of justice with a contemptuous sneer on their lips.

During these dark moments of thought Quinn came to believe that a free and independent investigator would make more headway in the war on crime.

And thus the Black Bat was born.

Attired in a close-fitting black hood to conceal the deep scars around his eyes which would identify him to any who caught a glimpse of the Black Bat, somber clothing and crepe-soled shoes, the Black Bat began a one man war on crime. His knowledge of the law proved crucial to this pursuit and the abilities of the Black Bat were greatly augmented by certain physical changes he had acquired while sightless.

His sense of touch had become highly acute, his hearing uncanny. And he had retained these abilities even after his sight had been restored. Also the operation itself had produced some unexpected yet astounding results. Tony Quinn could see in total darkness as if it were broad day.

So armed to fight crime, Quinn had returned East in the company of Carol Baldwin and the ever faithful Kirby. Back home they joined with hulking Butch O’Leary and these four were the only ones who knew Tony Quinn could see. And only they knew of his double life as the Black Bat for they joined him in the fight for justice.

There was one more element fate had in store for Tony Quinn. Working in such close proximity to Carol Baldwin had stirred the embers of love in Quinn’s heart. Carol felt likewise although neither would ever bring up the subject, knowing that married life was an impossible dream with the peril that came with the vocation the Black Bat had undertaken.

Now while the great airship slept, Tony Quinn began his transformation. Tight hood in place, covering everything but his eyes and crepe-soled shoes on his feet, he pulled on thin nylon gloves with rubber tips for gripping purposes. Two big automatics fit snug under each armpit and he clasped what appeared to be a large money-belt around his trim waist. In reality the belt held a number of tools and gadgets in hidden compartments. He slid a long, bat-ribbed cloak over his shoulders and the transformation was complete. Silk doused the lights and the room was swallowed by darkness.

The Black Bat crept to the door and his keen ears detected no sound from the corridor. An ebony gloved hand seized the door knob, turning it swiftly. As Silk’s eyes adjusted to the gloom, he thought he detected a dim

figure at the door. He blinked and the Black Bat was gone.

In the hallway, the sharp hearing of the Black Bat told him the way was clear and he sidled down the corridor to the stairs leading to B Deck. He was down them in an instant. Low voices coming closer echoed up the passageway. Darting his cowed head this way and that he spied a shadowed alcove and concealed himself there.

The voices came from two crewmen who passed bare inches from where the still form of the Black Bat hid and headed to a door leading deeper inside the vessel.

The Black Bat stepped from his hiding place and dashed up the narrow corridor. Soon he was in the ship's offices, cubicles really, from which the ship's officers could carry out their daily duties. The first one on the left was the Navigation Room. The Bat put his back to it for across from the office, on the right was the Purser's Office in which rested the safe the Heart of the Empire had been taken from.

The office was locked up for the night but the lock yielded in seconds to one of the various lock picks carried in the belt of the Black Bat. Stealthily he made his way inside, easing the door closed behind him. He relocked it.

The Black Bat did not turn on the light. His probing orbs scanned the room as though it were lit by a spotlight, taking in every detail. The safe revealed itself on the floor behind the aluminum desk.

He did not touch it however. Rather he withdrew a vial containing a chemical powder. With the use of the powder he set about obtaining fingerprints left by those who had touched the safe, including the prints of the thief! The stygian darkness was nothing to him as he worked and two sets of fingerprints appeared on the cool metal following his ministrations with the powder. These he lifted with the aid of special tape and the impressions so preserved disappeared into a pouch on his belt.

The Black Bat wiped the powder from the drawer handle and from around the safe. Satisfied, he crouched before the safe and, placing the rubber-tipped fingers of one hand on the dial, set about opening the thing. His ears caught the clicks of the tumblers as if they were thunderclaps. The safe door swung open.

Inside were files, some bundles of German reichmarks and many jewelry cases – an inspection of the latter revealed them to still have their contents. A large, ornately carved onyx box, larger than the other cases, sat on the bottom shelf. He picked it up and could tell by the weight of it

that the case was empty. This was the case which had cradled the Heart of the Empire.

Footsteps approached. The Black Bat's uncanny hearing detected them long before they drew close to the office which gave him time to prepare. He returned the case and closed the safe door. Gingerly he spun the dial and straightened. An air duct high on the wall did not escape his notice and he was prepared to scramble into it should the approaching men try the office door.

The steady tread of the men and their relaxed conversation were all the indicators he needed that they suspected nothing. Sure enough they walked past the office without pause.

The Black Bat was free to take his leave.

The vent held his attention, though. He popped the screen loose and placed it on the desk. The shaft would be a close fit but it was manageable, leaving him free to return to his quarters totally unobserved. For the Black Bat had not forgotten that McGrath was aboard and if the Bat was spotted amongst so few passengers, McGrath would cast the light of suspicion on Tony Quinn.

Smooth as a gymnast, the Black Bat jumped and seized a pipe jutting from the wall in front of the vent. His sinewy arms hauled him up. He bent his knees and kicked up into the vent. Turning onto his stomach in the narrow confines, he reached down, took up the grill and replaced it.

Next began the painstaking process of inching through the vent back to his room. His progress was aided by the rubber gloves and soles which provided excellent purchase. The Black Bat snaked his way through the belly of the ship as silent as the grave.

Fifteen minutes later, Silk gave a slight start when a sudden knocking sounded from the vent grill in Quinn's room where the faithful servant awaited his master's return. Long accustomed to such nocturnal occurrences, Silk quickly recovered, removed the grill and helped the Black Bat descend from the vent.

While Silk replaced the grill, the Black Bat whipped the cowl off his head and strode to one of his suitcases. From this he extracted the court file on Rowland Ar dai he'd packed for the trip and opened it to the last arrest report filed against the career thief. Withdrawing the sets of prints and scrutinizing them, he instantly identified those belonging to the Purser and set them aside. The next set, belonging, he was certain, to the thief who had taken the precious ruby he compared to the set of prints taken when Ar dai was arrested. He compared the two and his suspicions were confirmed.

Silk rejoined his master who was shedding the costume of the Black Bat. "How did it go, sir?"

"We've made some headway on the matter," was all Tony Quinn would say. "There is much to do tomorrow. Let's turn in."

Silk headed to Quinn's bed to turn down the top sheet. He caught sight of the file with the print strips lying on top. Quinn was busy removing the garb of the Black Bat and did not see his servant seize up the file and compare the prints. The reformed thief studied the prints, holding them up to the feeble light.

"They are an exact match!" he exclaimed. He waved the fresh set. "Were these taken from the ship's safe?"

Tony Quinn nodded.

"That clinches it, then. I knew it all along. Ar dai stole the ruby!"