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SANDY COHEN

The Viper's Son

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Detroit • Michigan

THE VIPER'S SON

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Chapter 1

Off the Northeast Florida Coast Well after Midnight, April 9, 1945

The stars could be clearly seen, for there were no clouds. But the moon was down and the sky was thick and dull with a humidity so heavy the air seemed to take away more light than it reflected. It was if some great primordial hand had cut a hole in the atmosphere and poured in lead to fill the entire canopy from heaven to horizon. And the lead had been thickened and weathered by corrosion and the slow, wearying decay of time and the elements.

The ocean, too, was made of lead, and the stars were not reflected. Old sailors say it is the blood in the sea, the blood of sailors drowned, or crushed by storm, of war dead blown apart by shot that takes the light of heaven and absorbs it.

So even if a coastal watch had been standing on the beach just east of Surf-tow, Florida, and looking straight out to sea, he would not have seen the German U-boat surfaced there. The vessel was so close to shore the band of strong Aryan warriors on board could have swum in easily had they wanted to.

Instead, they used two deep-drafted, compact, inflatable rubber dinghies. The small black boats rode the ocean deeply, like lead weights in soft tar. But though they rode the water heavily, they rode it steadily and smoothly despite the enormous weight of their cargo. The SS had hastily commandeered marine engineers to design these boats especially for this project.

The boats' secret cargo had been carefully padded, shielded

and crated for its journey overland to the U-boat base in northern Europe and loaded into the submarine's torpedo storage room under the deep set, wolfish eyes of Lieutenant-Colonel Hans Johan Grüber, the same man who now stood comfortably on the rolling U-boat deck off the Florida coast. With legs slightly spread, knees bent, Grüber grasped the cable that led from the conning tower to the stern of the Unterseeboot. He peered intently through the leaden tropic night to supervise the placement of his crew, and his precious cargo.

Regular Lieutenant Grüber had been overseeing this project almost since its frantic inception in Germany less than ten months ago. The leader of the SS himself had chosen Grüber personally for this assignment. Grüber had considerable administrative background for a man so young. He had proved twice over his ability to function under the stress of combat. He seemed quite capable of following orders without becoming too curious or creative. But above all was his mastery of American English.

Somewhere in the bowels of the submarine, a door closed with a hollow, metallic ring. Like the metal door of his apartment in Berlin. He thought about the last time he had closed that door. Or, rather, when it had been closed for him.

He had been re-assigned back to Germany from Norway, where, for almost one full year he had been supervising the design and packing of containerized cargo for trucks. It gave him a niche from which he could wait out the war undiscovered, and return some day to America. It was an innocuous job that would not hurt the war effort. He hoped to continue performing it until the war was over and the Nazi regime crushed forever. It could not be too much longer now.

Then, suddenly, without warning, he had been sent for, told to pack his bags and report to Berlin. He was given a small apartment near Wilhelmstrasse and told to wait.

Two weeks.

Then came the knock on the door. Grüber opened it a crack. They were waiting for him in the hall. A shudder ran through him. How did they find out?

He took a deep breath and opened the door all the way. He made his voice sound as calm and as innocent as possible. Just as he had been trained. "May I help you?" he said aloud. Well, best to smile. Got to confront them now.

The leader of the troop, a weasel-faced young man, hardly more than a teen, stood before him. He wore the black leather trench coat and black hat of the SS. His sparse, blonde mustache was almost laughable in its pretensions to manliness. But the tall, muscular SS guards flanking him were not laughable.

Weasel face stared at Grüber for a long moment. Then he nodded slowly and said without emotion, "Heil Hitler." He gave the perfunctory salute.

Grüber returned the salute. "Heil Hitler."

"You are Colonel Herr Stein Johan Grüber," the blonde man said. It was not a question but a confrontation. He read from a small, crisp sheet of paper. Then he crumpled it and put it into his pocket. Grüber felt as if his whole life were that paper, crumpled into nothing, into garbage.

"Yes. I'm Colonel Grüber."

Now the man pulled the brim of his hat low over one eye. "You are requested, please, Colonel, to come with us at once. We are to escort you."

Requested? Please? Grüber thought, my God, they're going to murder me! How did they find out?

The two uniformed guards sandwiched Grüber in the doorway and pulled him roughly into the hall. They were indifferent, almost passionless. Obviously following someone else's orders. What the hell does the SS want? What do they know? What are they going to do to me to find out everything?

In the hallway the three men stood rigidly in front of him, staring. The blonde man motioned with his eyes and a slight nod of the head toward the door that let out to the street. Grüber nodded and said, "All right," and turned to walk down the hall with them. As he did, one of the guards slammed shut his apartment door. It closed with a hollow, metallic ring. Forever, Grüber thought, forever. I'm dead.

He was ushered rudely down the hallway, onto the street and into the back of a waiting SS staff car. Should I ask them where they're taking me? Probably useless. If they were going to tell me they would have done so already.

In this Germany, saying nothing was the only resistance he thought he should dare. He had his orders. Say nothing. Even if they torture you. Say nothing. Give nothing away.

Once in the car, the guards placed a thick black hood over his head and pulled the draw string about his neck. The mask smelled of sweat, vomit, and the fear of those who had worn it before him, perhaps into death.

In jerks and leans and shudderings of clutch and strained whinings of the transmission, the car moved through the night. Grüber tried desperately to keep his bearings, and his sanity. He counted every railroad track they crossed, listening for clues, to people crossing in front of them, to dogs barking, and twice, to the soft lowing of cows in the distance. But it was no use. He was hopelessly lost.

Once they stopped for over half an hour. Even through the thick, foul odors of his cloth hood, Grüber could detect the aroma of real coffee. His captors were laughing. Cups tinkled on saucers. Would they offer any to him? No. Soon they were moving again. Where did they find real coffee? Well, I don't need anything to stimulate my nerves right now. Or my kidneys.

As they traveled on and on, gradually, through his hood Colonel Grüber could feel the warmth of the morning sun striking the side of his face. His last sunrise, no doubt, and he couldn't even see it. Then he smiled and relaxed. Wait a minute, they're not gonna kill me. Otherwise they wouldn't have bothered to put this hood over my head! They just want something from me. But what? And, dear God, what are they going to do to me to get it? They couldn't have found out the truth or they would have shot me on the spot in the back alley of my apartment house. Hell, I don't know anything they can use. Not anymore. I'm isolated now. Working alone. No contacts anywhere anymore. And I

don't have anything they can use. Not that I know of. Maybe they mean to torture me to find out what I know, then murder me. Well, I suppose that's the way it goes. If you're happy, it's either because you're between disasters or you don't know what the hell is really going on.

The tightness in Grüber's throat returned, together with the pounding pulse thumping in his ears. His nasal passages were so closed and swollen he could hardly breathe. His mouth dried out and his cheeks drew tight against his throbbing gums.

The car stopped again. But this time they turned the engine off. Someone tapped Grüber's shoulder. The weasel man said, "We have arrived, Herr Colonel. We do hope you were comfortable on our little journey. Get out, please."

The SS guards "helped" him to his feet. One grabbed his upper arm and pulled him forward. They walked him through a door. One of them removed his hood. They were inside a building with no windows. Only flickering, artificial light, and precious little of that. The dim walls were overly decorated in the grandiose manner favored by the architects of the Third Reich. The pressed tin ceiling was high, dark, and pseudo-vaulted. For all Grüber knew he could have been in Hamburg, Poland, or around the block from his apartment in Berlin.

"Come with me," the weasel man said. "Follow close behind. If you linger or fall too far back, you will be shot."

Grüber followed the SS man into a long corridor. They moved forward, quickly. Are we moving down as well? What are we descending to? The walls were ashen gray, plastered to look like the uneven but smooth stones of a cave. Obscure shadows shivered over the irregular surface of the hard stone floor as they passed one by one the widely spaced bronze sconces cast into massive Aryan arms holding electric torches tipped with blown glass, flame-shaped shades with bulbs designed to flutter like dim fire.

Down and down, and Grüber could not tell if he were hot or cold, so shocked were his nerves by his own terror. He could only smell the faintly rancid, slightly uranous odor of his own fear, and

somewhere in the distance the sulphur smell of burning coal.

They reached the end of the corridor. Before them was a massive door of black bronze metal, with great black bronze birds cast on the lintel, cormorants, perhaps, with drooping necks and piercing eyes. The cormorants' heads seemed to move as he approached them. The door itself was bronze as well, with a serpentine design copied from the ancient Viking ships.

The SS man then pressed a monumental buzzer. Grüber stood three feet behind him, breathing heavily. The two massive uniformed guards were three feet behind Grüber. On his tiptoes now, the weasel-faced man spoke as if into a mouth on the door. The hinges shuddered open as an electric switch was thrown with a loud click, then opened almost silently, save for a slight electric hum. Inside the room was a sickly, yellow, flickering light, and a fire in a massive, gaping fireplace. The weasel-faced man turned to Grüber again, and inclined his head sideways nodded toward the door. He stepped back. "Colonel, I dare not go in myself."

And so, Colonel Grüber entered, alone.