

CHARLES NATON

SECTION 12
(SAMPLE CHAPTER 1)

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A darkening summer sky glimmered with halos of red and gold as Colonel Kurt Stryker stared out through the taped windows of his French headquarters. As he shifted his gaze away from the heavens and down to the earth, he sighed sadly at the tyre tracks and bouquets of barbed wire scarring his extensive requisitioned lawns. Stacks of sandbags, concrete pillboxes and searchlights stood scattered among a mosaic of paths and flowerbeds, like fruit fallen from the tree of war. They were ready, and Stryker had even installed a wounded Panzer tank on the front drive to properly greet their approaching guests. Although one track was broken, it remained a dangerous monster, always eager to blast the foolish straight into the afterlife.

The Standartenführer could easily hear the dull thud of artillery shells in the distance, and he mentally noted that the incessant rumble had grown steadily louder during the past two hours. A sooty black smudge creeping across the golden, glowing horizon confirmed that those mass produced Americans would soon arrive with their mass produced chewing gum, cigarettes and cheap chocolate. Everything cheap to please the man in the street as that dull green machine prepared to crush the Brotherhood between the grinding gears of an illusory ideology.

Those self-appointed arbiters of liberty could never succeed. Not entirely. Not irrevocably.

Stryker looked around and surveyed the skeleton of what had once been a sumptuous private library. All the books had vanished, as had most of the paintings and fine furnishings, and yet he could easily imagine what a dazzling display of seductively effete European culture the house had once been. Alas, anything truly valuable had been methodically plundered over the years, first by a penniless French aristocracy and later picked over by the Reich. That last thought finally raised a smile on the

Standartenführer's face. *Too bad, Uncle Sam. There's nothing left to feed your gluttonous appetite.*

Not only was the chateau virtually devoid of material wealth, it had been stripped bare of any strategic value too. All items of real importance, the files and other evidence of their work, had already been destroyed or transported to a much safer place. Not even the Reichsführer-SS was privy to the Colonel's personal contingency plans. Time and adversity had re-cast the balding, bespectacled men of the High Command as small-minded despots bent on slaking their own base desires, while sheltering behind a thin pretence of serving some irrefutable natural order. They cared for nothing but themselves, and they had proved to be unworthy masters.

The artillery bombardment was definitely getting close. The windows were starting to rattle and Stryker's keen hearing discerned the sharp pop and crackle of small arms fire, along with the distant groaning of heavy armour lumbering forward to capture his command post. However, there was still time to take care of one final thing before the inevitable fall of Chateau Dessous.

Stryker paced across the empty library, his boots clicking against bare floorboards before padding softly across the once rich but now threadbare rugs scattered about the room. He strode through the library's large double doors and onto the landing, then down the grand, sweeping staircase and into the sumptuous lobby. The chateau's front doors were already sealed and sandbagged against explosive blasts, and the small fountain which had once chuckled in the foyer was silent and dusty. The chandeliers were all gone, although they'd been taken long before Stryker and his staff had ever arrived. Sold by an aristocrat with no means of support perhaps, or maybe spirited away by some enterprising local before he'd had a chance to appreciate their craftsmanship.

The Colonel clicked rapidly across the lobby and entered the huge dining room. Although his tread was light, his footsteps still echoed throughout the large and gloomy space. The staff had all departed, evacuated eastwards at least for the moment. He already knew that several would be silenced for the sake of security, but that was the inevitable price of questionable loyalty.

Stryker swiftly crossed the banqueting hall and entered the labyrinthine world of the servants, quickly making his way along echoing tiled corridors and into the cavernous kitchen. The enormous hearth was long cold, dark and dead, just like the rest of the house.

Pausing to ensure he was completely alone, the Colonel took a key from his pocket and opened the stout cellar door. He clicked a switch and smiled to see the electric lights were still working despite the battle raging nearby, although they flickered occasionally as the front line marched ever closer. Stryker could feel the vibrations of war through the earth, disturbing ancient dust which filled the air with strangely swirling phantasms as he descended the steps.

The large vaulted cellar was perfect for his needs, and it was one of the main reasons he'd chosen this great house as his HQ. The round subterranean chamber appealed to his sense of order within the wider cosmos, and this was expressed by the black painted ceiling that glittered with hundreds of gold-coloured glyphs and sigils. These were in turn mirrored by other symbols of black and deepest red, meticulously drawn out across the swept stone floor. The scent of charcoal drifted lazily from an oversized brass burner squatting on a heavy table at the room's centre. An ornate and lovingly carved chair was drawn up close to that table, while its twin sulked several feet away, close to the cellar's curved and decorated wall.

Stryker's favourite possession was just where he'd left it, slumped silent at the table with arms bound, head bowed and a Hitler Jugend uniform hanging about him in stained and bloodied rags. It was a pity it had to end like this as the boy had shown some real promise, at least in the beginning, and Stryker fondly remembered the youth's confusion and fear in the days following his arrival at the chateau. For a short while the foolish child had believed that *he* was one of the elite, a true Aryan and a born ruler. Frankly though, the young man was pitiful in comparison to the Brotherhood. He might well have stepped into some useful supporting role given time, if the damned Gestapo hadn't poisoned his young mind before sending him to spy on them.

The Colonel crossed the cellar and put his head next to the teenager's lips, feeling the faintest breath warm his cheek.

Excellent! Still alive - for the moment. Stryker quietly slid his dagger from its scabbard. The blade's motto of *Blood and honour* always raised a rueful smile as it was so nearly right. He sighed wistfully as he gazed at the unconscious youth. They could have been happy together, but a young and idealistic man like this could serve only one master at a time. In the end their differences had condemned the boy to serve a different purpose, albeit a noble and necessary one.

Stryker had patiently tried to explain all this over the screaming and the tears, but the boy was too young and too selfish, and far too infatuated with the foolish idea of his own existence. He'd wept and questioned his fate with all the delicious pain and vigour of youth as he clung tenaciously to vague concepts such as life, death and loyalty, although he knew nothing of any of them.

With a well-practised motion, the Colonel pushed his razor edged dagger between the young man's ribs and gave the hilt a sharp twist.

The youth's eyes jerked open and he opened his mouth to scream, but he was too weak to manage more than a dry rasping cough. Most of his youthful potential had already been stolen, and Stryker had resolved to requisition the rest before his departure from this place. The Colonel clung fiercely to his dying prisoner, not wanting to miss a single moment of this most intimate exchange as the last of that young, vigorous blood coursed over the dagger's cold blade to soak his hand. After a regrettably short embrace, he gently let the lifeless boy's head fall forward.

Stryker stood up, his own head swimming as the shadows of another life flooded into his mind, drowning him in the memory of a different childhood lived somewhere else, as *someone* else. There was a beloved sister, and a mother that Stryker had never known, attractive but downtrodden by the grinding years of a loveless marriage. Mother had doted on her now dead son, and Standartenführer Stryker of the SS nearly wept as he felt the passion and love for life she'd selflessly poured into her own offspring. The two of them had been happy together, and were secretly made happier still when father had been called away to serve the Fatherland.

The Colonel suddenly remembered cobbled streets he'd never visited, and a modest town house he would never see with his mortal eyes. There was a small garden with allotments at the back which mother had tended with the utmost care, mindful that the Reich demanded strong and healthy children if it was to seize its true destiny.

Stryker shuddered as that stolen past clouded his mind like ink poured into water. The youth had enjoyed arithmetic and had a natural flair for art, just as he now enjoyed arithmetic and had a natural flair for art. He wanted to run upstairs, grab some paper and begin sketching at once before those second-hand skills began to fade after just a few short days. However, like a new trail in the forest of his mind, the path that stolen soul had carved out could never be entirely expunged from the landscape of Stryker's consciousness.

At last the Standartenführer blinked and opened his eyes, finding himself staring at the black and gold ceiling of his makeshift temple once again. After gathering his faculties for a moment, he reached across and checked the boy's pulse. Gone forever.

He shook his head to clear it and did his utmost to concentrate on the pressing matter at hand. There was still much to be done and very little time to do it in. The Americans were close, and their untimely arrival in this sector had seriously threatened the Colonel's carefully laid plans. Stryker estimated that a delay of one, perhaps two hours would suffice for him to complete his own evacuation, and the remains of his garrison should hold the Yanks off just long enough for him to escape. He knew it was a risky strategy, but by now every possible course of action was fraught with danger and uncertainty.

Stryker pulled the second, empty chair across to the large table and sat down. Wiping his hands on a white handkerchief, he removed the top of the incense burner and tossed the fabric onto the glowing coals, followed swiftly by a handful of dried herbs. Immediately a cloud of foul smelling smoke billowed out, curling across the chamber like a dark genie set free after centuries.

The Colonel sat back in his chair and closed his eyes, inhaling deep lungfuls of the heavy, powerful incense. The chamber around him seemed to shift and turn as Stryker sensed a subtle

change in that thick, swirling smoke. For a fleeting moment the odour of arcane spices was replaced by the bitter taste of ageing dust and charred wood. Although the Standartenführer tried to grasp that strange portent and apprehend its meaning, it was already too late. The potent hallucinogens had quickly seized his consciousness and he felt himself rising inexorably, first to the stone ceiling, then up to ground level and out into that golden August evening.

Time to take a closer look at these olive-green pretenders.