



# THE SOLSTICE TREATY

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## PROLOGUE

Mark Steele shielded his eyes as the people of West Virginia died.

The light from the detonation grew bright and then impossibly brighter. It was not the kind of light one would see after staring blindly into the sun. It was a pure white light that refracted off every stone and laid bare every building, tree and shrub in the lush valley. It was the kind of light that heralded the devastation to come—a silent siren before an impatient furious tempest.

In an instant, a malefic mushroom cloud ascended as if from nowhere, like a smoke billowing from the outstretched hats of a million, million sideshow magicians. At the hypocenter of the surging mass, the temperature reached one-thousand degrees Fahrenheit, creating startling orange and violet rings that continued to expand and change color. Brilliant blues and greens danced within the rising column, intertwined with thousand foot spears of red and yellow flames.

A shock wave of relentless power pulled itself free of the explosion, steamrolling its way through abundant foothills of pine and oak, spreading a malignant gospel of decimation. Pursuing the afterwinds, a massive firestorm followed, feeding on the dreams of every living thing it touched, incinerating organic and nonorganic matter without prejudice or care.

Clutching the ancient parchment to his chest, Mark stood upon the rock precipice, unable to tear his attention away from the devastation being played out so cruelly before him. With each passing second, the suffocating temperature rose and his skin began to swell and blister.

“This can’t be happening,” Mark whispered.

“It will,” answered a dulcet voice from the shadows as the blast of heat slammed into Mark, ripping the hope of the world from his grip and sending it high into the angry sky above.



## BOOK ONE

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### OF BLUE MOUNTAINS AND MADMEN

It is a mistake to try to look too far ahead. The chain of destiny can only be grasped one link at a time.

*Sir Winston Churchill*

## CHAPTER 1

### Lilting Whispers

A stiff breeze blew a swirling cloud of dust from High Rock, down past mounds of pulverized stone and into Bobby McCoy's weathered face.

Surveying the excavated mountain top, the young miner slowly pulled off his safety helmet and ran a dirty sweat-soaked bandana through his hair and down past the nape of his neck. This wasn't just hot, Bobby mused, it was Africa hot. Twenty-three straight days over ninety-five degrees.

Twenty-three straight miserable days.

Local forecasters provided little hope the heat wave was relaxing its tenacious grip on the Mountain State. In fact, the hillbilly prognosticators, as Bobby often referred to them, seemed to revel in the feverish power of Mother Nature's headlock, incessantly searching for new adjectives to describe Bobby's misery. As the summer wore on and the temperatures climbed, common words like *hot*, *stifling*, and *muggy* were apparently inadequate and systematically replaced with the much more colorful *scorching*, *blistering*, and *sizzling*.

Twenty-three freaking straight miserable days.

As he waited for the blasting team to make their final preparations, Bobby returned the red bandana to its proper place, stuffing enough of the handkerchief into his back pocket to keep it from escaping. He put his helmet on as slowly as he had taken it off, adjusting it with a few tugs of the plastic brim before glancing over at one of the company's yellow pickups, no more than fifteen feet away.

*Raleigh Removal and Renewal!* the logo on the dented door shouted at him.

Bobby shook his head and rolled his eyes for the thousandth time. He had devised countless names for his long-time employer—some followed by well-deserved expletives—but none of them ever featured the word *renewal*.

Triple R, as it was commonly referred to, was a mining company. More specifically it was a surface mining company that secured contracts from various coal plants throughout the southeast and, basically, blew the tops off the mountains of West Virginia. Bobby began working for Triple R soon

after graduating from Beaver Hollow High School. During his seven-year tenure, he had successfully stripped thousands of vertical feet of subsoil and rock from the mountains, providing access to the mineral deposits and underlying coal seams below. The ‘useless’ soil and rock was then pushed into the valley below as land fill.

Even though numerous watchdog groups labeled him—and everyone else associated with Triple R—environmental terrorists, he did his best to distance himself from it. It’s not that he didn’t appreciate the ‘Wild and Wonderful’ landscape the state tourism board tirelessly touted, it’s just that half-hidden behind the vast number of towering mountains and rolling foothills was the proverbial other side of the coin—a disproportionate number of decent jobs. Raleigh County was one of the poorest in the nation and despite the accusations (or the heat), Bobby was grateful to bring home a steady paycheck.

“Detonation in ten seconds,” crackled the radio strapped to Bobby’s belt, bringing the young man back to the reality of his work.

This was the fifth and final blast of the day, a rather minor one on the east side of High Rock. Among the seven crews, Triple R had already discharged approximately 600,000 pounds of dynamite today alone, all without a hitch. This small controlled detonation was to remove an outcrop of rock that had somehow survived previous larger blastings.

A trickle of sweat ran down Bobby’s cheek and disappeared into an unkempt beard as he unconsciously adjusted and secured his ear plugs.

“Fire in the hole in three, two, one!” the foreman bellowed and turned the red igniter switch.

Bobby waited for the dull roar of an explosion. When five seconds had passed and he had still heard nothing, he removed the plugs and glanced up at the mountain.

The explosives had failed to discharge.

The other miners were obviously not pleased and indiscriminately let anyone within 150 yards of them know it. It had taken a good hour to set up this detonation and would take at least double that to reset for another blast.

For Bobby, this turn of events was rather unfortunate. First, because he was the one to place these particular explosives, it was his responsibility to drive up the mountain, locate the problem and fix it. Second, because it was so close to the end of the workday, he was now the object of scorn for the entire crew, and soon, angry wives and girlfriends as well.

Under the contentious eyes of his co-workers, Bobby walked slowly toward the yellow pickup, offering a weary thumbs-up to the detonation crew. The D-crew would ensure that the initiator was disconnected, eliminating the threat of an uncontrolled explosion. He cursed Triple R, climbed into the stifling cab of the Dakota, started the engine and guided the truck up the east side of High Rock.

As he bounced over the rough make-shift road, a rare sense of melancholy emerged, squeezing its way past Bobby’s frustration and discomfort—an almost palpable impression, filled with wistful memories not so distant. As a boy, he, his older sister Tess and his best friend Mark Steele had climbed to the top of High Rock many times. They played games amid the oak and firs and never tired of collecting acorns and pine cones. He could imagine the overwhelming scent of the tall pines and feel the sticky sap nearly impossible to remove from between his fingers.

From the cab’s open window, a hot gust of air blew the greasy hair from Bobby’s eyes and the recollections of childhood follies from his mind. There would be no more games played beneath the

trees on this mountain, he thought. The age-old timbers were forested months ago, the first things stripped from High Rock and sent north to the sawmills.

It took ten minutes before Bobby reached the general area where the explosives had been placed. He turned off the engine, stepped onto the loose gravel and walked in small circles, gazing intently at the scorched ground around him. Barely three minutes later, he located his prize: a black and yellow-striped primer cord. Bobby knelt beside it and tilted back his helmet. A tear in a line this long would be difficult to find and he prayed that the problem lay in the connection to the explosives themselves. Bobby picked up a loop of the heavy cord and let it run between his fingers, allowing it to lead him up a small incline.

\* \* \*

The late-afternoon sun, a belligerent swollen thing, beat down on the mountainside as Bobby obediently followed the primer to a spot near the top of a summit. Twenty yards to the north, a small dust-devil failed to conceal the dynamite, half-buried in the dry red dirt. The heavy bundle was exactly where he had placed it—between the large overhanging rock and a small shallow grotto to his left. He carefully skirted a dicey patch of ground that an earlier explosion had turned into nothing more than marble-sized gravel. One small slip, he reminded himself, and he might be falling head first into the adjacent drainage valley.

When he reached the cave opening and was within ten feet or so of the charges, the cord went slack. Bobby gave it a firm yank and caught the end of the primer in his free hand. The thick plastic casing that housed the wires was a melted mess. It was not serrated as he might expect from an encounter with a sharp rock.

It was melted.

“What in the world?” The young miner said, shaking his head, staring intently at the black and yellow oddity. As Bobby ran an improbable list of possible causes through his head, a flicker of movement to his right caught his eye.

A small blue glow flitted up from behind the rocky outcrop.

Bobby tilted his head forward, squinting through the haze to get a better look, confident that what he was seeing was nothing more than an illusion created by equal parts fatigue and sweltering heat. The glow remained, however, hovering above the very stone that he had targeted for destruction. The translucent object was about the size of a baseball and while it emitted no discernable noise, he could hear it quietly calling his name.

He reached absent-mindedly for his bandana and wiped at his forehead, never taking his eyes off the luminous curiosity. It was beautiful, Bobby thought, perhaps the most beautiful thing he had ever seen or heard. The sultry intonation in his head spoke to him as a lover might. He was convinced it was the voice of an angel and soon he could hear nothing else on the wind-swept mountain but its lilting whispers and calming assurances.

After what seemed to Bobby an eternity, the glow dropped to perhaps six inches off the ground, fluttered for a beat and began to glide with intelligent purpose toward him.

It pulsed as it moved, lifting dust from rock and leaving a trail of colorful sparks that floated away like glitter in the wind.

Still mesmerized, Bobby could not will himself to move. His legs seemed more than content to wait for the wonderful singularity to reach him. Unfortunately, he failed to realize that while the glow was in fact moving in his direction, he was not its target.

Bobby McCoy's eyes went wide as the strange blue glow gently came to rest on the charges he himself had set.



## CHAPTER 2

### A Thin Black Binder

*Berlin, Germany*  
*June 3, 1944*

The political office of Director Fritz von Ehrlichmann was to be kept shuttered, an order given by the Director himself. The only source of light tolerated in the large mahogany-paneled room was that which came by fireplace, lantern or candle. And there were a great many candles.

Ehrlichmann sat in a deep leather chair, eyes intent on the changing shadows that the flickering light created. He pushed the chair back thirty or so centimeters, allowing himself room to relax and reflect as he listened to his favorite opus *Das Lied von der Erd*. He chuckled at the irony of selecting this particular composer. Gustav Mahler was a Jew—brilliant, talented—but a Jew nevertheless. If the Fuehrer were here, he would not approve.

No, he would not approve at all. Beethoven, Wagner or Bruckner, no doubt, but not Mahler.

The Director looked about the room, noting how the light reflected off the few photographs that adorned its walls. He despised clutter and permitted himself only a handful of personal possessions. A picture of his father, a German diplomat who paved the way for his successes, hung over his desk. True, he was a cruel middlebrow man but certainly no crueler than Fritz himself. The things the son had done might even make the old man envious.

Next to the photograph was a painting that he had commissioned in 1921, a self-portrait. The Director barely recognized the soldier from the Great War. He was so young and full of false dogmas, some that would take decades to subdue. He had been a daring pilot who had brought down twenty-four enemy planes. This achievement alone earned him a promotion to squadron leader and later, the decoration of the prestigious Iron Cross.

His hand moved unconsciously to his immaculate uniform where the cross still held its proper place. There were a number of other distinguished medals there but this one always garnered the most respect. He had taken men's lives from Riga to Romania to Poland and it was important that those who served under him knew this as well.

Ehrlichmann left Germany after the war to work abroad as a commercial pilot. He had met a good woman in Sweden and fathered a son. And while it was a good life, he knew he could not remain. His heart belonged elsewhere.

Like many of his comrades, their defeat had left a bitter taste in his mouth and he searched desperately for a sign, a reason to return to the fatherland. When the sign finally appeared, it took the form of a thin charismatic man who spoke passionately of a new and glorious Germany.

The Director recalled meeting the Fuehrer for the first time in 1939. It was at a banquet in Hamburg and the Director himself was a guest of Heinrich Himmler. Despite the chill of an uncommonly bitter October night, the men had taken to the veranda, drinks in hand. The Fuehrer was waiting and it was immediately obvious to Ehrlichmann that these great men had already engaged in more than a few discussions about him. After perhaps ten minutes of polite conversation, the Fuehrer nodded to Herr Himmler and returned to the banquet. Shortly after, the leader of the SS introduced Ehrlichmann to the Sicherheitsdienst.

He had known little about the Sicherheitsdienst and what he did know was the stuff of rumors. The SD, as it was called, was a powerful intelligence and security organization that infiltrated all departments within the government, obtaining information about actual and potential threats to the Nazi leadership. With several hundred full-time agents and several thousand volunteers, the SD spied on everyone from state officials to common shopkeepers, assuring loyalty to the Fuehrer's ideologies.

Ehrlichmann was delighted at the opportunity to work within such a great agency. His enthusiasm, however, was short-lived. Appointed the Director of Inland SD and in charge of Cultural and Religious Matters, Ehrlichmann quickly discovered he was primarily burdened with what he secretly called the Fuehrer's 'verrücktheit' or madness.

His mission, as it was described to him, was to aid the war effort by deciphering the writings of Austrian occultist Guido von List and directing the thinking of the members of the Ahnenerbe, an order created to harness not only natural but supernatural forces. He built the order per instructions from Herr Himmler himself and populated it with mystics, psychics and seers that he recruited from all over Europe. In the first few weeks alone, Ehrlichmann learned exactly how deep this madness went.

Herr Himmler was drunk on it.

The man's thoughts were consumed with the inner workings of the Ahnenerbe. He spent uncounted hours with the Director, introducing him to the arcane things he had discovered in dark places. Himmler, along with the Fuehrer's deputy Rudolph Hess, belonged to clandestine societies that practiced reticent rituals in the castles of Wewelsburg, Westfalen and elsewhere. The leader of the SS was so obsessed, he actually believed himself the reincarnated Saxon king Henry the Fowler.

Verrücktheit.

While the Director had obtained a high ranking position in the party and had everything a man could ask for, including wealth and women, he knew that his peers looked down on him and secretly laughed at the tasks he was assigned. Ehrlichmann gazed down at his hands and clenched them into fists. He seethed with the memory of those first few years in the Inland SD. He remembered watching other Directors detaining party officials or executing foreign conspirators while he himself was denied his due glory, wasting time searching Scriptures or some ancient tomb for the stuff of children's stories.

He turned his chair toward the credenza and slowly uncurled his fingers. Ehrlichmann stared

down at the stack of gray folders, the factual reports from the last eighteen months.

The top file was easily recognizable. It was labeled ‘Wilhelm Wulff.’ He had read it many times. Ehrlichmann’s life was forever changed after he met the German astrologer and witnessed implausible events that he would later call preternatural. While the Ahnenerbe were studying ancient history and divining runes, he impelled Wulff to combine his work in astrology with religious artifacts.

Ehrlichmann spared no expense dispatching SS officers to plunder historic sites to retrieve these relics. Although he was unable to obtain specific items coveted by the Fuehrer, he did locate and acquire other minor pieces. He remembered holding the Spear of Longinus, which had pierced the side of the Lord. He had beheld thirteen of thirty silver coins, given as payment to Judas the betrayer. He had touched bloodstained slivers of wood, taken from the timber of a thief crucified but forgiven.

With the Ahnenerbe’s help, Wulff used these artifacts, and many others, to further develop his thoughts on rituals and procedures. The breakthrough came in July of 1943 when on a moonless night, a ceremony was performed at a cemetery outside of Strasbourg.

With his own eyes, Fritz von Ehrlichmann saw three dead men raised from their tombs and reanimated.

The macabre feat lasted no more than fifteen seconds but it was enough to convince the Director that the Fuehrer’s Verrücktheit was anything but madness. The raising of the dead was merely the first of many things that Ehrlichmann had seen and forced himself to believe. He sent copies of each report to Himmler and received much deserved recognition from not only the head of the SS but the Fuehrer himself.

Ehrlichmann leaned back in his chair, savoring the praise of his leaders once again. He laughed at the thought that he once believed he could not surpass these accomplishments.

What a fool he had been.

The Director swept the gray folders aside until he found it—a thin black binder. He carefully, almost lovingly, picked it up but did not open it. He had long ago memorized the contents.

11 November 1942, the German army invades, captures and occupies Vichy France.

24 December 1943, the Ahnenerbe divine an unprecedented ‘anomaly’ farther south of Vichy, in a small town named Le Puy-en-Velay.

21 May 1944, Director Fritz von Ehrlichmann travels to Le Puy-en-Velay and secures victory for the Third Reich.

Ehrlichmann unbuttoned his right sleeve, pulled it back slowly and studied the pink scar tissue on his forearm. A small price to pay, he thought ... a small price indeed.

The Director closed his eyes and, with a smile spreading across his lips, *Das Lied von der Erd* played on and the candles flickered in concert.

## CHAPTER 3

### Past the Levees

Astraman stared down at Mr. Okahara.

More specifically, a life-sized resin statue of Astraman stared down at Takashi Okahara, the president and CEO of Yokoto, Inc. The sculpture, hanging in the executive conference room of the Tokyo office, had been a gift to Okahara when Yokoto bought the rights to feature the famous Japanese superhero on many of its popular gaming machines.

Astraman was only one of many properties that Okahara had licensed but it was perhaps his most celebrated, especially in Macau. He had originally underestimated the appeal of the forty-year-old property when he acquired it but like most things that Okahara touched, it turned to gold in his hands.

The CEO looked around the opulent conference room at the eight men waiting for him to speak. He had handpicked each member of the board long before he had decided to take Yokoto public. Between them, he had experts in the fields of aerospace, economics, political science, biotechnology, infrastructure and alternative energy. He, of course, was an expert in global entertainment—gambling to be precise.

Okahara smiled, remembering the first time he and Akio Nishimura developed and designed their first casino gaming machine. He and Nishimura had become fast friends during their second year at Kyoto University, each sharing a love for engineering, mathematics and hot sake. Inseparable, the two reverse-engineered radios and televisions by day, stumbled through the Kyoto bar scene by night and formed a brotherly bond that continued to this day.

With the financial help of Okahara's mother, they left school and started Yokoto to escape the unsatisfying allure of home electronics, a field into which many of his friends had fallen victim. Neither young man was interested in developing watches or cameras or calculators. Both agreed that the entertainment field not only held their interest, but could also make them quite wealthy.

The two immediately hired a handful of friends—young engineers who shared their same vision. For the next eighteen months, Yokoto focused on building cabinets, acquiring licenses and developing the software that would drive a good gaming experience.

Through a chance meeting with an investor from Monaco, Okahara placed twelve slot machines

in the Four Suns Casino in Monte Carlo. Because the software they had developed offered a slightly better payout than their competitors, the games thrived, pulling in forty-five thousand yen a day. By the end of their second year in business, Yokoto had placed nearly four hundred machines in Monaco alone.

The men quickly outgrew the small warehouse they had rented in Osaka and moved into a larger facility outside the bustling city of Tokyo. While Nishimura worked on hiring more engineers, mathematicians, and artists to meet ever-increasing demand, Okahara made the deals necessary to take the company its next stage. His travels took him to Germany, Australia, the Netherlands, China and finally, the United States of America. Using historical revenue information from the machines in Monaco, Okahara had little difficulty placing their games in these new markets.

By 1996, Yokoto had sales, service and manufacturing sites in Asia, Australia, South America and Europe. They had more than 3,000 employees and a net income of 600 million yen. Debt-free and armed with a diversified portfolio of games, gaming partners and markets, Okahara and Nishimura decided to take the company public. In June of 2008, Yokoto Inc. was listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange and the two long time friends became instant billionaires.

Mr. Royota would be most proud.

At the thought of his father, Okahara's eyes shifted to the smog-choked horizon, moving past the levees surrounding the distant Tama River before finally settling on the Metropolitan Hiroo hospital. Even now, more than half a century later, it was difficult to think of the last time he saw his father alive. Mr. Royota, the famous Japanese naval commander, was nothing more than skin stretched painfully across bone.

A cough from across the room startled Okahara, pulling him back into the present. He looked from the window to the men in the room and tilted his head in their direction.

"Thank you for coming to our quarterly directors meeting, gentlemen," Okahara said, placing his fingertips against the glass conference table as he sat. "Before we review the second-quarter financials, we have a report from Mr. Sato."

A small, balding man in an impeccable suit stood and bowed to the participants.

"I am honored to present you with excellent news," Mr. Sato said with a nod. "If you will kindly turn to page three, I will share it with you."

Almost as one, the directors opened the portfolios that had been placed neatly in front of them and Mr. Sato returned to his seat.

"Last September, Yokoto had the opportunity to meet with nine operators of Native American casinos in California," Mr. Sato began, gesturing to the Astraman model. "As you are aware, with the exception of certain licensed products, the problem with selling machines to gaming destinations is the lack of an ongoing revenue stream. Once we sell a gaming device, we are no longer entitled to further revenues attributed to that device."

Okahara interrupted his comptroller. "I believe that the board is well-versed in Yokoto's current business model."

"Yes, Mr. Okahara," Mr. Sato replied, "We have, however, modified our gaming software to create a new business model, one that allows for sustained revenue sharing. Casino operators in California can now choose from our extensive library of games and download them instantly from our servers into generic slot cabinets. All ninety-seven of our current titles have been approved and found

in compliance with the National Indian Gaming Commission, the regulatory agency responsible for overseeing gaming on tribal land. I am happy to report that because of this server-based initiative, we were able to secure long-term contracts with all nine operators, commanding a significant revenue split.”

Okahara raised his eyebrows. “Impressive, Mr. Sato.”

“Thank you, sir,” replied the comptroller, before addressing the board. “Gentlemen, if you will now turn to page six, you will see that as of last week Yokoto has placed 1,700 generic cabinets in California using the new revenue sharing model.”

“How many additional machines can be placed this fiscal year, Mr. Sato?” Okahara asked.

“Sales projects another 6,300 can be installed by the end of the fourth quarter.”

Okahara nodded and looked down at the numbers, unable to suppress a smile. Revenues from Native American gaming in California alone would not only be substantial but further diversify the company’s portfolio. Once this news was reported to the shareholders, share prices of the company would soar.

“Thank you, Mr. Sato. We look forward to—”

The polished metal door to the conference room swung open and Miss Yoshi, Mr. Okahara’s assistant, burst in.

“Mr. Okahara, my sincerest apologies but there is a call for you and—”

Okahara cut her off with a wave of his hand. “Can this not wait? Can you not see that the meeting has begun?”

“Mr. Nishimura is on the line and he says that it is important that he speaks with you at once,” Miss Yoshi stammered.

Okahara thought about chiding his assistant a second time but decided against it. If it was anyone other than Nishimura, he would have told her to take a message and then, most likely, clean out her desk.

“Very well, Miss Yoshi,” Okahara finally said, rubbing his forehead above his right eyebrow. “Transfer the call to my mobile phone.”

His assistant was gone less than ten seconds when the phone in front of the CEO rang. Okahara picked it up.

“Nishimura-san,” he said, greeting his old colleague with a mixture of courtesy and annoyance, “As you know I am holding the quarterly meeting with our illustrious board and—”

Okahara abruptly paused and for the next minute or so, merely listened. His lower lip began to tremble as Nishimura spoke of things he had waited a quarter of a century to hear.

“West Virginia ... you are ... you are sure?” Okahara stuttered.

He listened for a few moments longer before pressing the END button, shaking nearly uncontrollably as he did.

Takashi Okahara stared at the phone, silently repeating Nishimura’s words, ensuring that what he had heard was beyond mere speculation, beyond mere hope.

Setting his phone on the glass table, the CEO of Yokoto rose to his feet and, like Astraman above him, looked down at eight very anxious board members.

“Gentlemen, this meeting is adjourned.”

## CHAPTER 4

### Three Reds

*Somewhere over the Mediterranean Sea*  
*August 16, 1944*

The C-47 Skytrain ‘Gypsy Belle’ bounced up and down like the Wonder Wheel.

Captain John Roberts had flown inside the Douglas transport dozens, if not hundreds of times, and each time he was reminded of that damn Coney Island ride. It didn’t matter whether he was flying on a bright, windless day or caught in a sudden, off-shore squall—he got bounced.

Roberts adjusted his helmet and looked down the line of soldiers that made up part of the 517th Parachute Regimental Combat Team. The men had come from various divisions including the 460th Parachute Field Artillery Battalion and the 596th Parachute Combat Engineer Company. In total, the 517th PRCT had approximately 2,500 of the best trained men of any regiment.

He had twenty of those men for this mission.

The captain studied his paratroopers. Most of the soldiers had their heads down, some preparing themselves mentally for what was to come, some surely praying to a higher power. Gutsy, however, belonged to neither camp. Second Lieutenant Jimmy ‘Gutsy’ Gustafson was carving a four-inch-long whale out of wood. Roberts would have found this mildly interesting if the pockets of his drab uniform weren’t already bulging with three of the ‘good luck charms.’

Gutsy looked up, perhaps sensing the captain’s eyes on him. The lieutenant’s hard face gave way to a boyish grin as he raised his latest masterpiece, nearly finished except for a bit of the tail. Roberts nodded and smiled back. Gutsy took the gesture as nothing less than high praise, motivating him to finish the soft green beast before they got the call.

Gutsy was one of his boys. Hell, they were all his boys at this point. Six months ago, Roberts and eighteen other officers were sent to Camp Toccoa for one purpose—turn these soldiers into the first elite US combat team to be deployed into the European theatre. Every last man qualified as an expert with his individual weapon and a sharpshooter with another before undergoing extensive combat maneuvers and jump training at Fort Benning. After that, they were loaded onto a Skytrain and sent

into something the press was calling the ‘Second World War.’

Within a week they were stationed in Naples, Italy and within three, their gun batteries were pounding the Krauts, driving them past the Hitler line. After that, it was a blur. They pushed the Germans farther, retaking the cities of Anzio, Montesario and Sticciano before eventually linking up with the 142nd Infantry past the Piombino Valley.

Following these victories, the 517th went into IV Corps reserve, backing up the US 1st Armored and 6th South African Armored who had successfully liberated Rome. The paratroopers remained there until early July when Roberts’ combat team got the call to participate in Operation Dragoon in Southern France.

Or so he was originally told.

Roberts craned his head to look out the small dirty window. Although it was nearly midnight, he could see that all four serials, nearly 180 C-47s, were dropping in altitude, signaling that they were approaching their staging target—a small town their invasion scripts called La Ciotat. The soldiers on the Skytrain could hear the changing pitch of the propellers as the transports around them slowed and opened their doors for the jump.

The Gypsy Belle, however, did neither.

“Captain?” inquired First Lieutenant Henderson.

“Not yet, Lieutenant.”

“But our orders, sir, our orders are—”

“We have new orders, Lieutenant,” the captain said, abruptly.

“Sir, yes, sir,” Henderson acknowledged.

Roberts didn’t like keeping his men in the dark but he had been given no choice. The night before they were to ship out of Rome, Roberts was paid an unexpected visit by Lieutenant Colonel Armistead Farnsworth. The Colonel had told him to pick twenty men from the 517th and be ready for an unusual mission. Because of its critical nature, he was to remain quiet about the details until the drop zone was in sight.

The captain met the eyes of his men, their stubbled faces etched with curiosity and anxiety. Roberts thumbed his Benrus watch and glanced at it. They had perhaps ten minutes until the jump. It was time. He stood and took a deep breath, grabbing hold of a cargo net to offset the turbulence.

“Men, we will not, I repeat, we will not participate in Operation Dragoon with the rest of the 517th,” Roberts yelled over the drone of the props. “Every man on this transport has been personally selected for a covert mission code-named Ash Storm. The drop zone is outside of a town called Latour, France.”

The captain gave the paratroopers a moment to chew on this bit of intelligence before continuing.

“We have eyes on the ground and will rendezvous with a unit from the 143rd Airborne. We are to then proceed west and infiltrate a small base located in the Auvergne Mountains. It is unclear how heavily guarded the base is. We will know more when we make contact with the 143rd and receive further information. Either way, our mission is to eliminate the base ... one way or another.”

He paused and contemplated telling them everything, including the parts he had trouble believing, parts that had kept him from sleeping at night. He had no doubt that he could trust these men, men he had trained and fought side by side with. But after a few moments, he felt the opportunity pass and he was glad for it.



“Any questions?” the captain said.

The soldiers sat in silence; some shook their heads while others stared down at their feet. A few pulled out their carbines and double-checked them. Roberts wanted to give the men their time so he waited, allowing the noticeable tension to rise even as the Gypsy Belle slowly descended.

Finally, when he was about to finish the orders with a few personal remarks, Gutsy raised his hand.

“Lieutenant,” Roberts acknowledged with a nod.

“We gonna have French toast for breakfast?” the soldier said casually before breaking into a wide grin.

At once, the tension gave way to the whale-whittling lieutenant and the laughter of the 517th rose above the props and reverberated through the steel cabin. Shaking his head, even Roberts managed a wry smile.

“All right, if you ladies are finished, let’s—”

Master Sergeant Benson interrupted the captain and the light hearted moment vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

“Jumpers! One Minute! Stand up and hook up!” the Jump Master shouted at the troops over the dropping pitch of the propellers.

Their uniforms laden with extra ammunition and equipment, Roberts’ men stood and began to make final preparations in an orderly manner, hooking the static lines of their chutes to the anchor cable that ran the length of the fuselage. Each soldier checked the man in front of him and after sounding off on equipment check, waited silently as the Master Sergeant readied the Skytrain for the jump. Roberts yelled up to Lieutenant Mulkey, one of the two pilots flying the old girl through the August heat toward the drop zone.

“Lieutenant Mulkey! Do we have three reds on the ground?”

The lieutenant looked down and to his right. It was a cloudless night with an uncommonly full moon. From their current height of fifteen hundred feet, Mulkey could easily make out the French terrain below. His eyes darted back and forth, searching for the reds.

“Lieutenant Mulkey!” the captain repeated.

“Searching sir!” the lieutenant said quickly.

Roberts considered aborting the jump—an option clearly available to him if the 143rd failed to show three red beacons, a signal that the drop zone was secure. They were running out of time and he needed to make a decision now.

Fortunately, the choice was made for him.

“Three reds, sir! I have a visual on three reds!” shouted Lieutenant Mulkey.

On cue, Master Sergeant Benson pulled open the large steel door, creating a hollow metallic boom. Hot air flooded the plane, causing Roberts’ eyes to tear immediately. Near the middle of the line, he looked past the men in front of him toward the Jump Master. He nodded as he counted down the last few seconds in his mind.

“Jumpers! Go! Go! Go!” screamed the Master Sergeant.

The men shuffled forward and one by one, fell silently toward the earth.

## CHAPTER 5

### A Small Green Tendril

The attractive woman reminded Mark Steele, in no uncertain terms, that not only did the young man need the thermal insulated eighty-four-inch curtain panel but there were only fifty-eight still available.

Mark looked past the television and considered her pitch for a few moments. He had always believed that the window in his drab bedroom demanded such a beautiful, if not expensive, curtain. Certainly, someone of his stature within the West Virginia Department of Forestry deserved such a remarkable window treatment.

Mark smirked and shook his head even as the woman stroked the cloth and declared that this quality item could not be found in department stores. He ignored her and slowly flipped through the channels before settling on the OFF button at the top of the well-worn remote. He dropped it on the bed, reached for the warm beer on the nightstand, chugged the last few swallows, crushed the can in his right hand and flung it into the corner of the small room.

Mark then jumped up, walked briskly to that same corner, picked up the crumpled can and headed toward the kitchen. While he was far too much a neat freak to leave the can lying on the floor, he never grew weary of the boorish display of machismo.

He padded into the great room, passing a bookshelf sagging from the weight of Civil War novels and other history books and one of only two fans he owned. Thinking twice, Mark stopped and backed up, taking the full brunt of the unsatisfying breeze in his face. He didn't need to look at the thermometer outside to know the temperature; it was hot. In fact, it was much too hot considering the hour. He allowed himself another moment before moving on toward the fan-less kitchen.

The kitchen was actually part of the great room. Mark had built most of the cabin himself, having decided early on that with the exception of the bedroom and bath, every room would have an open plan. He liked it that way. Closed spaces, he always said, suck.

Mark flipped on the kitchen light and deposited the can in the garbage under the sink, forcing its current contents down a few inches to make room. He closed the cabinet, swung open the door to the fridge and peered inside.

“What to eat when you shouldn't be eating?” Mark said aloud to himself.

He pushed aside a jar of dill pickles and bent lower, hoping to find some hidden gem that had eluded him the last twenty times he searched within the white plastic walls. The same items stared back at him—three beers, a half carton of week-old milk, various containers of leftovers (courtesy of his grandmother Grace, God bless her) and the pickles.

Mark looked deeper before finally settling on one of the tinted plastic bowls near the front. He pried open the corner to reveal what appeared to be meatballs. He smelled them to ensure that he wouldn't wake up in the Emergency Room, grabbed one of two remaining forks from the silverware drawer and headed for his favorite recliner.

After pulling the comfortable leather chair forward a few feet until it was in line with the fan, Mark stabbed at the cold meatballs, absent-mindedly looking past the stone fireplace, flanked by tall pines and cedars. About two miles from his foothill and just beyond the north fork of the Yellow River were the twinkling lights of the small West Virginia town he called home.

Beaver Hollow.

While lacking the color and flavor of larger louder cities, Beaver Hollow—or, as most of its denizens pronounced it, 'Beav-ah Holl-ah'—had been good to him. It's not that he had anything against big cities. He had traveled to several neighboring states for training and even been to New York City once. It's just that he liked his skies blue and his jungles not to be made of concrete. Beaver Hollow was where he grew up, where he had built friendships and where he had once fallen in love.

Mark smiled. He had lived in the blue-collar town his entire life and had no doubt that he would kick the proverbial bucket within its narrow oak-lined streets as well. Actually, he reminded himself, that wasn't technically true. He was born in Gladstone, Mississippi but was raised in Beaver Hollow by Charlie and Ginny Steele.

As painful memories of the accident that took his adoptive parents from him threatened to push themselves to the surface, the wind kicked up and the heavy trees answered, creaking as they swayed under its influence. It was a sound that had always brought Mark comfort and he was glad for it. To this day he was still mesmerized by the towering giants, their leafy shadows dancing across the room, illuminated by a lazy summer moon. He knew from a young age that he would eventually work in the woods. While other kids in town were playing soccer or riding ATV's, he was hiking through Beaver Hollow, Yellow River or some unnamed forest. Big open spaces, he always said, do not suck.

He smiled as he remembered being called into Big Ross Thomas' office for the first time. Thomas was the Regional Forester in charge of the Raleigh branch and had never spoken more than twenty words to him in the four months he had been with the department.

"Mark," Big Ross said after staring at him for a good thirty seconds, "Welcome to the Rangers. The green side goes up." With that, the Regional Forester put on his hat and left him standing alone in an empty office. Mark was dumbfounded. Everyone knew which way to plant a seedling. Surely the man had 'real' words of wisdom to impart on his new forester.

However, as his friendship with Big Ross grew, the advice took on new meaning and he would eventually immortalize those words with a carved plaque over his fireplace.

A loud peal of thunder startled him and rain began to dance on the copper roof above his head. Mark looked at his watch—11:57 p.m. He reckoned that the big comfortable chair was as good a place as any to have the hallucinations.

Make that singular, Mark corrected himself—*the* hallucination.

He had experienced the same damn head trip since he could remember. As a child, he was visited by the vision, as he ultimately called it, perhaps once every three weeks. Ginny would find him screaming in his bed, his face contorted in terror, his small body rigid as a board. As he grew older, the thing came a bit more often but he was able to exchange blood curdling shrieks for cold sweats.

Lately, however, the vision came to him almost every night.

Another crash of thunder appeared to signal the approach of midnight and Mark felt his arms stiffen, followed quickly by a similar sensation in his legs. Within seconds, he was completely immobilized, having lost all feeling within his body. It was as if someone or something demanded a captive audience before the red curtain was raised and the first terrifying act began.

Thick limbs from the trees outside smashed through the picture window, spraying the great room with shards of glass that transformed into golden leaves before falling around him. The walls of the room receded into the distance and shifted in shape until they became a dense green wood encircled by a snow-capped mountain range. The wide beams of the ceiling retreated as well, replaced by a rich blue sky that deepened near the horizons. The furniture melted into the wooden floor which was quickly consumed by green grass and thick mosses. Thousands upon thousands of wildflowers sprung up around him and the chair he sat on reconstructed itself into a gray stone obelisk. All other remnants of his home simply faded into the forest or were overtaken by its greenery until only a verdant glade remained.

The ground beneath Mark's feet immediately began to rumble; a small vibration at first that grew into a great tremor. A huge tree forced itself out of the wet ground, unfurling its branches as it rose into the sky. Grateful for the vast space, the magnificent gnarled limbs stretched outward, reaching so high that Mark thought they might touch the sun itself. Birds of every kind flew about the brightly colored trunk and beneath its heavy boughs while shimmering sparks of various hues and saturation floated between leaves and fruits of all sizes fell about him like a gentle rain.

A warm breeze blew through Mark's hair as the massive tree continued to rise, its trunk growing wider even as it slowed. Ancient runes and symbols covered its bark, each glowing and pulsing as if they had a life of their own. In the shade below, four large stags appeared, lifting their shaggy heads to eat from low-hanging branches laden with pink and white blossoms. Mark saw that while their imposing antlers were similar—a pair of twisting bones that mimicked the tree they now rested under—the color of the sinewy bodies of the bucks couldn't be more different: one brown as the dirt, one green as the grass, one golden as the sun, and one white as snow. Each stag was given a secret name by the tree but try as he might, Mark could not remember them.

A distant hunting horn sounded and the four harts lowered their eyes and beat their hooves upon the ground in unison. The deafening sound caused the tree to shake and the birds nesting within it to scatter to the safety of the sky above. Long strands of thick bark began to unwind, pulling themselves into the vast trunk and leaving behind a large gaping gateway. Within the portal, two huge figures wielding heavy broadswords emerged, their bodies shrouded in a white mist.

Hampered by the unnatural fog, Mark struggled to follow the twins as they swung their blades in wide arcs and with great fury, each warrior matching his opponent's skill with that of his own. It seemed to Mark that neither was likely to land a blow and the relentless battle would rage on indefinitely.

Enthralled by the combatants, Mark failed to notice the ground shifting below him once again.

It wasn't until thick strong roots from the great tree shot from the earth and wrapped themselves tightly around his legs that he remembered what horror awaited him. Mark opened his mouth to scream but the roots quickly advanced, encircling his torso and driving the breath from his lungs.

As Mark was pulled into the hungry soil, a small green tendril found his throat and a thrush landed on it. The bird ignored Mark's predicament and merely cocked its head.

*Deeper*, it said.

The green shoot constricted further and Mark was abruptly jerked underground, the earth immediately closing in around him. Soil filled his nostrils and he was choking. Mark was choking and he was going to die. He was choking and he was going to die and the phone was ringing.

The phone was ringing.

In a single heartbeat, the vision—the tree, the warriors, the roots—vanished and the great room was, once again, only a room. Soaked in perspiration, Mark held his head, trying desperately to gather his wits. It took a few moments before he finally recognized what the persistent sound meant.

Mark pulled himself from the recliner and stumbled into the kitchen.

He picked up the phone.

It was Tess McCoy.

Her brother Bobby is dead.