

Deep in the Ozark mountains giant trees swayed against the earth. No birds chirped. No bugs squawked. The forest was petrified as the sun set below the mountains. The 41st battalion Search and Rescue team had been annihilated. Heads ripped from torsos had been strewn across a rocky ledge. Near the back of the ledge sat an ominous cave. A headless body lay just inside the cave opening. From deep within the cavern a single scream broke the silence, “No, No...” Splintering and deafening cracking sounds echoed out of the darkness. Then silence once more.

Twenty-four hours later across the forest and down the other side of the Mountain Colonel David Winn was aboard an Air Force helicopter soaring across the tops of the forest. He looked around nodding at four other men. Sitting next to the Colonel was sergeant Green. He nodded back at the Colonel. Across from Sergeant Green sat Tech sergeant Maxwell and Staff Sergeant Garcia.

Garcia winked at the Colonel, “We got this sir.” He nodded and then leaned across the aisle. “What are we doing here sir. Really?”

Colonel Winn looked at the General who was talking to the pilots and then back to his men. He leaned into Garcia and said, “A two-man team was sent up the mountain because one of our antenna arrays had gone offline. Contact was lost with the men after a few hours. After twenty-four hours a search and rescue team were sent in.” He looked back at the General and then back to the men. “Now here we are. I’m particular curious because one of my friends leads the 41<sup>st</sup>.”

“We’ll find them sir,” replied sergeant Green, a tall blond-haired Texan.

I’m sure we will,” said Colonel Winn, “We are locked and ready to roll General,” he said as the General was returning from the cockpit.

“Outstanding,” replied the General. “Remember gentlemen the 41st platoon has been missing and out of radio contact for twenty-four hours. The last transmission received was a garbled communication about a dead black bear. I don’t have any idea what may have transpired up there, but we need to keep our eyes sharp and our sixes clear.”

The three non-commissioned officers in unison yelled, “Yes sir.”

Colonel Winn nodded at the General then stood up and quickly checked his gear again. He grabbed his forty-five-pistol, checked it and then re-holstered it.

The booming voice of the pilot came over their earpieces. “General, Colonel we are over the coordinates now.”

“Let’s roll gentlemen,” yelled Colonel Winn as the helicopter doors automatically opened. The wind burst through the helicopter making speech impossible, even with the earpieces. One by one the men rappelled down to the forest floor below as the pilot hovered a hundred feet of the ground. Colonel Winn was the last man out of the helicopter. He silently unhooked his line and picked up the tail of the squad as they descended into the forest. The six men climbed through the rocky, densely wooded area with speed and efficiency. After a forty-minute hike up the mountain the squad began to see signs of distress.

A grove of pine trees with thick brush was the first indication that things had gone horribly bad. Across the brush and tree trunks a dark liquid was splattered everywhere. A lone black boot with a severed leg hung awkwardly from a low hanging branch. Littered along the ground was the hundreds of shell casings from the other platoons’ weapons.

“It’s all blood,” stammered one of the sergeants.

“Stow that fear soldier,” replied Colonel Winn. He looked at the General, who was on the satellite phone with HQ. The General was no doubt relaying their grisly find to Command.

Colonel Winn barked to the other four men. "Go weapons hot." The group quickly pushed through the scene of carnage and followed a crimson trail up the mountain.

Twenty minutes later the group had crested a large ledge formed into the side of mountain. Strewn across the ledge were even more shell casings and pools of crimson. A giant opening lay at the back of the ledge. An undesirable feeling crept over the men, as if an evil wavelength blasted from the depths of the hole. Almost as if the mountain itself had opened some unholy orifice to consume any unwilling prey that stepped onto the ledge.

The five men began to cross the ledge heading to the cave. The Colonel led the men in a single file line as the General brought up the rear.

"Pheff," came a whistling sound. It was followed like thunder to lightning by a gigantic spear piercing the General through the heart. The spear slammed into him with such violent force that it exploded his entire chest cavity and thrust him back at least twenty feet.

Colonel Winn opened fire into the cave, the source of the spear. He looked at the other three men. They had crouched down in an almost fetal position. He screamed, "What the hell are you doing? Get up, get..."

With speed the Colonel wouldn't have believed if he hadn't witnessed it, two humans burst out of the darkness of the cave. But they weren't humans, not exactly. These things, these beasts stood at least fifteen to twenty feet tall, he thought. The giants headed right for the three crouching men.

The first giant took a long gait before leaping into the air. It soared and landed squarely on two of the soldiers. It was horrific, the crunching and gelatinous like explosions of the two men echoed across the forest. "Eh, ha ha," laughed the giant. It had popped the two men like jelly being squeezed onto a sandwich.

Colonel Winn watched in horror as the second giant leaped in the same manner but nimbly landed next to the other two men. It was toying with them. He opened fire with his assault rifle, but the giants looked at him as if he were a gnat, a nuisance.

The second giant looked steely at Colonel Winn as it picked up the two remaining crouching soldiers.

“Do something soldiers,” said Colonel Winn. He continued to back up in horror. He peppered his retreat with random gunshots. Then he watched as the giant did something Colonel Winn would never forget.

The second giant looked at Colonel Winn again laughed and then one by one he ate the head off each soldier. It spit the second head out at the Colonel who narrowly avoided it. The giants began to speak to each other in series of words and clicks that the Colonel couldn’t understand.

Colonel Winn had gotten within fifteen feet of the cave opening. He knew they were discussing him. They seemed to be studying him. They seem perplexed he thought. He used their confusion to his advantage. He quickly grabbed three grenades from his bag. He unpinned them all and rolled one towards the giants. The first grenade exploded catching the giants off guard, it stunned them giving the Colonel the opportunity he needed. In the melee he darted through the cave dropping the other two grenades in the opening. A thunderous explosion rocked the cave, the blast knocked Colonel Winn back into the cave. Then with groans and cracking the entire cave opening collapsed into itself. The Colonel was safe for now he thought. He was wrong.

A low barbaric scream reverberated through the rocks into the cave. Then huge boulders larger than cars were thrown aside like pebbles skipping across a pond. Within a minute streaks of daylight could now be seen. The giants were coming through and they’re coming through fast.

Colonel Winn hurriedly jumped up, lit a rescue flare and headed back into the cavern. He jogged as fast as he could navigate the crooks and turns of the deep cavern. He could still hear the scrapes and bangs of rocks as the giants continued to clear the opening. He had to put as much distance between them as he could before they made it through. They moved unnaturally fast, he thought.

The cavern had become narrower as it snaked around the darkness. Then it opened into a cavern, it was large enough that his flare couldn't find the walls. He continued following what he thought resembled a path. A stench had begun to waft back and forth. It was an awful putrid smell. The air had grown thicker, and smoke began to accumulate the further into the cavern he went. From a distance he could see a small hole in the ceiling. A lone ray of light tried to penetrate down into the darkness from the hole, but it was choked out by rising smoke. The smell had grown so strong it caused him to gag. Slowly he walked up upon a scene more gruesome than any movie, any book.

The smell and the smoke were coming from a skewered headless body that was being slow cooked over a pit filled with embers and burning wood. Nearby was a woman in Air Force camouflage. She had been hastily tied at the hands to the end of the spit. They obviously intended to cook her as well but had been interrupted by himself and the other men.

Captain Winn quickly cut her loose. He recognized her as Lieutenant Soto, she had recently graduated and been assigned to their battalion. He gently grabbed her shoulders, "Are you the only one left?"

She stared into the darkness in a catatonic state. She didn't respond.

"Lieutenant, can you understand me?" He shook her mildly at first and then began to vigorously shake her. "You need to snap out of it. The things will come back you need to snap

out of it,” screamed Colonel Winn. This seemed to spark some semblance of understanding in the Lieutenant.

“Yes, I can understand you sir,” replied the Lieutenant.

Colonel Winn looked around the cavern while he listened for the sound of the giants. He couldn’t hear the boulders clanging, it scared him. He stared back at the Lieutenant, “Where is Major Dempsey?”

The Lieutenant slowly raised her hand and pointed at the carcass cooking next to them.

Colonel Winn gagged. He knew this man. They played dominoes together, drank together, and spilled blood together. His body shuddered unnaturally as the horror of what his friend experienced dashed through his mind.

A different clamoring echoed through the cavern. It reverberated across the floor of the cavern. Thud, thud, thud.

Colonel Winn checked his weapons. He had seven 45 bullets and half a rack for his assault rifle and three grenades. He promised himself if he made it out of this he would never go out without a bag of grenades and a 12 gauge.

“They are coming,” screamed Lieutenant Soto. Like the other men outside the cave, the Lieutenant inexplicably began to crouch.

“What the hell are you doing,” screamed Colonel Winn.

Colonel Winn yanked the petite officer up off her feet and threw her over his shoulder. He grabbed a grenade. He unpinned it and threw it in the smoke pit. “Goodbye my friend.” He threw another grenade in the direction of the closing giants and then he raced towards the back of the cavern.

The grenades exploded within seconds of each other. The second explosion must've found its mark. From the darkness he heard a low guttural scream. Followed by a thunderous bellowing. Rage, he understood that sound. And then another gruesome noise he would never forget. A vicious crack followed by another scream of rage. Then a sound like a wild animal being put out of its misery.

Out of the darkness large rocks began flying through the air. The first one zinged the Colonel's head with such force that he lost his balance and fell backwards. The Lieutenant went flopping and rolling behind him. He watched in horror as she quickly crouched in a fetal position, again.

The next rock slammed into his left side shattering his left arm. He almost lost consciousness from the searing pain. Before he knew it the lone giant was on him. He struggled with his right hand to unclasp his pistol. The giant snatched him from the darkness. It held him tight, squeezing the life from him. The Colonel continued to fumble with his holster. He stared at the giant's teeth or what was left of them. Dried blood covered its mouth like a toddler eating spaghetti. Its eyes were brown and its hair ginger. It stared at him with utter hatred. Then he opened its stench filled mouth in anticipation.

The last thought through Colonel Winn's head was, "It's gonna bite my head off." At the last second the clasp unbuckled. The forty-five slung forward in his hand just seconds before the beast had his head in its mouth. The Colonel unloaded the barrel into its mouth right through its brain. Four rounds to the back of the head. The giant dropped him and fell backwards instantly and simultaneously. It was dead. Its entire skull had been disintegrated by the forty-five at point blank range.

Colonel Winn fell back into the dirt. The Lieutenant, as if released from a spell, snapped to attention and quickly helped Captain Winn to his feet.

“We need to go sir,” said the Lieutenant. “There are more of them deeper in the mountains. I think these two were just scouts.”

The pair lit another flare and quickly exited the cave. Once out Colonel Winn took his last grenade and threw it at the opening. The cavern entrance once more collapsed on top of itself. “Let’s keep moving down the mountain,” he said.

“Why did you keep crouching every time the giants came close,” asked the Colonel.

The Lieutenant looked at him, she studied him. “Those things invaded my mind every time they came close. It was like I was helpless; I have never felt so much fear and terror.” She tapped her head near the temple. “It’s like they somehow mentally entered my mind, my thoughts.”

“That sounds horrific,” he rubbed his own temple as they continued down the mountain. In his first tour in Bosnia, he had almost died from a shrapnel blast. The field surgeons had inserted a metal plate to hold his skull together. He wondered.

In the distance the beating of helicopter rotors grew closer.