

Chapter 1

All Saints Day 1942

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Hidden by the thick pine forests of the Julian Alps, three hundred Slovenian guerrillas gambled that their mountain refuge would not be discovered. There had been no respite, no quiet from the war since the Germans invaded Yugoslavia. It was a foregone conclusion that the Partisans holding the mountains north of Ljubljana would be surrounded. They would fall that day. The combination of Nazi will, Italian numbers, and Ustashi treachery was irrepressible. There would be no surrender; only defeat and death.

The guerrillas were to hold the peak at all costs. They were to insure the safe retreat of their comrades, to insure an escape from Ustashi and German forces rapidly closing in on them.

It was fall. The rainy season. To the west of the Partisan encampment, the constant retort of German guns could be heard. It was November 1, 1942 and there was no more Yugoslavia.

"When will the rain end?" a young soldier asked nervously.

The youth strained his eyes. Cold November rain washed bits of native soil from his face as he spoke.

"I don't know," whispered an old man lying next to the boy. Both soldiers shivered, immersed in the mire that defined the Partisan position. The old man did not look up as he spoke. He did not allow his son to see the desperation, the hopelessness in his eyes. Instead, Frederick Kobe stared ahead, in the direction of the enemy.

"Maybe they missed us in the storm," the son offered, speaking their native Slovene tongue.

"I doubt that. Keep still."

The old man, a veteran of the Great War, turned his good ear to the wind. He strained to hear movement. He heard nothing. Nothing but the dripping of rain through the pine boughs. Nothing but the rumbling of the gale as it traversed through the trees.

Frederick's weary eyes surveyed the ragged barrier his men had erected to provide a defense. He bit his lip to ward off a deep, unrelenting feeling of death. A wave of dread began to overwhelm him. He fought against its power. He was their leader. He could not allow himself to become clouded by emotion. If his men perceived fear, they would run, and running would guaranty their slaughter.

Perhaps if the Chetniks under Colonel Mihailovich and the Partisans loyal to Josip Broz had united in their resistance to the Germans, Frederick Kobe and his son would not have come to the mountain to die. But there was only hatred between the factions of the Yugoslav resistance.

Waiting for the Germans, Kobe considered the history of the invasion. He knew that Prince Regent Paul had signed an agreement with Hitler in a feeble attempt to forestall war. What was the word the English used for Austria? Czechoslovakia?

"Appeasement," he murmured.