

FIVE

EASTERN FRANCE

Vosges Mountains, Forty-five miles from the German border
October 14, 1944

“Come on Hiro, let’s go back. We’re not gonna find it.”
“Not yet, those Hawaiian Buddhaheads from the 100th said it’s close to here, I’m sure of it.”

Ray stumbled over a root trying to keep up with his friend Hiro. The forest’s dense canopy blocked most of the light on even the sunniest days. Today, a thick, low-hanging fog made it tough to see even ten feet away. A ground-hugging animal darted to the right, startling Ray. It skittered across the moss-carpeted earth and dove into the ferny undergrowth. Ray was beginning to regret this excursion.

“Do you think they could’ve purposely given you the wrong directions? They don’t like you, you know, being a *mainlander*.”

REPENTANCE

Hiro laughed. “Could be. Those pranksters would. You sure you’re from Hawaii, like them? Sometimes I ain’t so sure, you’re way too serious.”

Ray did not find this funny. It was a sore spot whenever anyone pointed out he was from Hawaii but wasn’t in the 442nd’s 100th Battalion; he was not one of those islanders who’d jumped at the chance to join the 442nd earlier in the war—these men had already distinguished themselves in combat in Italy. Ray had enlisted much later, and come into his battalion as a replacement.

Hiro shrugged, then added, “Can’t be helped now, and we didn’t come all this way to fail. Haven’t showered for almost two weeks.” He made an exaggerated show of sniffing under his armpits. “We stink, and if there’s a swimming hole within ten miles, we’re gonna find it. I don’t think I can stand sleeping in the same tent with you another night.”

Ray smirked. He had to admit, it would be nice to get clean. There’d been no time to rig running water and field showers at the regiment’s makeshift base. The boys from the 100th said the swimming hole was only a mile from camp, but Ray and Hiro had already hiked for almost an hour. Before much longer they’d be on report for being AWOL. More worrisome—the omnipresent chance of running into a German patrol. The Vosges Mountains were so wooded that the lines between the 442nd and the enemy were anything but clear. There’d been stories of men discovering Jerries to their rear, or not realizing they’d accidentally ventured deep into German-held territory.

“Don’t you think we should have taken the lower trail, instead of the upper?” Ray asked.

“What trail? You see any trails? I don’t.” Hiro turned around, facing the way they’d come. “You know, come to think of it, I’m not sure we’re going to be able to find our way back. Maybe we should’ve brought breadcrumbs.”

Ray glanced all around, feeling uneasy. The forest looked the same in every direction. We should have memorized landmarks, he scolded himself.

Hiro was grinning at him. A joke. He was making a joke. "Come on," Hiro quipped. "Don't look back. Only ahead."

The two men pushed on in silence.

Through a gap in the trees Ray saw a patch of grey sky. A hawk flew into view, visible for only a second, and he checked to see if it had a red tail or reddish shoulders, but the raptor was too swift for him. Wish I had your eyes today, he thought.

"Found it!" Hiro shouted, ten yards ahead of Ray.

"Shh!" Ray hissed. "Not so loud."

Hiro waved his hand dismissively. He was standing on a ledge of some sort. Ray came up behind him and the sky opened up quite suddenly. No trees. He looked down.

Oh my God.

They were standing on a rock outcrop, thirty feet above a crystalline pool of water that looked very small to Ray's eyes. Around its rim, the circle of water was translucent green; towards the center, the color changed to deep cerulean blue. A few boulders sticking out of the water made Ray think there might be more under the surface. The pool was ringed by ferns and a narrow circlet of yellow pebbles. Ray took a step back.

"We found it!" Hiro repeated, and it was as if he'd found the Holy Grail.

"We should have taken the lower path," Ray said, annoyed. "Now we'll have to go back around."

"No way. If we go back, we might never find it again. Plus, I bet you're worried that we don't have much time, right?" Hiro unbuckled his belt.

"You're not thinking of jumping, are you?" Ray peered over the ledge. "You've no idea how deep that water is."

Hiro, sitting down in the ferns, unlaced his boots and stripped off his shirt and pants. "True, it's far, and true, we don't know how

REPENTANCE

deep it is. But we're here. We found the pool. We're gonna get clean . . . at least I know *I am!*" Hiro stood up, naked.

"You're crazy."

Hiro grinned. "That's why we're friends." Ray watched him tie up his clothes with his bootlaces and then toss the bundle over the ledge. It landed with a thump on the narrow strand of pebbled sand.

Hiro laughed. Placing his hands on his hips, he threw back his head and said, as if to the sky itself—"Now I have no choice."

Ray was speechless.

Then he muttered, "What about me?"

"You can just watch me," Hiro taunted. "Or maybe you'll back me up, eh?"

Ray looked at the circlet of blue down below. It was a long way down. The bundle of clothes appeared small. The height made Ray's stomach clench and he felt a strange ticklish feeling in his testicles as a wave of fear rose all the way up into his chest.

Hiro rolled his eyes. "Okay. How bout I make it easy for you?" With one last look over the ledge, Hiro centered himself, and leapt off. Ray rushed to the edge, watched his friend plummet through space . . . down, down, and then a huge white plume of water. Dead center. Hiro disappeared, then shot to the surface in a boil of bubbles that exploded all around him.

"Woo hoo!" Hiro cried. His voice echoed along the chill walls of stone and limp hanging vine. "Plenty deep, feels great! Come on down!"

Ray felt the tightness in his balls. He stepped back into the ferns, sat down, head in hands. Every instinct told him not to jump. But . . . what choice do I have? Hiro always does rash and foolish things. Act first, think later, that's his philosophy.

And, when he was truly honest about it, Ray grudgingly admitted to himself that he wished that he could be more like his friend.

“Come on!” Hiro called, his voice spiraling an echo round the gorge.

Ray willed himself to stand up. He took a deep breath, and slowly, ever so slowly, he began to unbutton his shirt.