

## *Root That Mountain Down - Chapter 1*

It's an unspeakable smell. The smell of death. The ripping open of animal to let out the demons, loosing the jumble of organ and bone and tissue and exposing it to open air where microbe and maggot and mosquito can do their work.

Black piles of waste swarming with insects fill clearings in the woods, just beyond the demarcated perimeter where decrepit buildings totter in the heat. Two scraggly roosters barely muster up the energy to chase each other in languid circles amidst food wrappers and beer cans. Muddy men wearing flip-flops cradle tattered playing cards and AK-47s.

A voice booms from inside the long, flat building: "Hey! Hey! Hey!" over and over like a wicked hymn. A shirtless man emerges. Stretching from his right shoulder to his belly button is a long purple scar. The belly button protrudes like a tiny appendage. His arms are outstretched, and unlike the other men, he has a nice potbelly.

He stands with hands on hips, surveying. Slowly, he moves in little circles like an airplane, his arms straight at his sides. He stops, smiles. What's left of his chiseled and cracked teeth is canary yellow, matching the tincture in his eyes. The smile drops from his face as he slowly crouches toward the ground, eyeing, measuring, hunting. One eyebrow sinks low; he squints at his prey.

He picks up a rock and then straightens himself to his full height. He hurls the rock at a man dozing against a tree.

The rock explodes an inch above the man's right ear, chipping the tree trunk. He jumps up and falls into the dirt. He gets up again, grabs his gun and points—at nothing, no one, everyone and everything. He sees like a man coming out of drunkenness; the world sheds its rough corners and sharpens. He sees who has thrown the rock. He lowers the gun. Allows its metal to clang against his kneecap, drawing pearls of blood, and then he runs off behind a building.

"Now we go," the big man orders, laughing—a low growl of a laugh.

Two rebels with guns obey and push another man along a muddy path. A frayed rope binds his wrists. The twine digs into his wrist, searing the skin with each step and then etching the tissue until the twine stays with tendon. The man hardly registers this pain. It is nothing. It is a pain he knows he will wish for in the days and years to follow. He prefers this be his last day, his last hour, his last minute. The end of this world is a blessing.

They stop at the wide stump of a once mighty tree, pocked now with numerous blade chops and stained a berry purple. The rebels push the handcuffed man down to the ground and then pull him into a kneeling position in front of the stump.

The big man with the purple scar and protruding belly button spits in the wet grass. "Short sleeve or long sleeve?" he asks.

The man looks up, sputters, cries, pleads a gurgle of protest.

The big man leans down, kisses the other man tenderly just below his right eye, takes the salt of his tears and tastes it on his lips. He moves those lips to the man's ear and whispers, as if to a crying babe: "Short sleeve or long sleeve?" He places his hand gingerly on the back of the man's head as he asks this.

The tears come faster now, like the slow uncorking of a rusty and underused spigot. He opens his mouth to answer, the future before him an unwinding of terrible consequence. He tries to answer, but vomit fills his mouth, escapes his lips, spills to the log.

The big man grabs his arm, unlooses the chord, and forces his forearm onto the log. “Now!” he roars.

The machete drops, taking the right hand above the wrist in one clean sweep.

The big man grabs his other arm and forces it onto the log. “Go!”

They can hear this order above the man’s screams, dark unceasing howls that rattle the jungle and send the few birds and monkeys yet to have quit this place scurrying off for safer lands.

The machete comes down, but the angle is not precise and the hard bone does its good work of deflection so that the hand is not severed but rather broken, hanging and lifeless. The man stands, sees the dangling hand thumping against his forearm, and he crumples. The others hold him up, forcing him back to the stump. He does not resist, but rather helps by unfolding his legs and coming to rest on his knees. It’s as if there has been some terrible mistake and they all work together now to fix it. All of them precise and concerned. They take the arm and place it against the stump. The hand dangles over and one of the men grabs it and pulls it so that the tendon is stretched taut and clear and clean. The machete comes down and severs it.

Success. The tension gone now. Everyone stands in satisfaction. One of the men grabs the hands and tosses them into a pile. They twirl—the hands—they wave, giving one final salute to the world as they spin through the air, blood trickling from the wrists.

The man knows to hold his arms up, but he’s having trouble. The others remind him, grabbing his arms above the elbow and pointing the fresh stumps to the heavens. The veins have recoiled, snaking back toward the heart, their tension released like ripcords.

“Hold them up,” they remind him. “Hold them up or you will bleed to death.”

He wishes to bleed to death. It is all he wants. And yet he listens to their instructions. He relies upon them. He stumbles down the trail, his arms pointing upward. He approaches the next group: three more men with another being dragged down the trail, arms tied behind his back with a plastic chord. The soldiers laugh. They joke that “the surgeon” is done with him and is ready for his next patient. When he sees the man without hands come toward them, the man with his hands tied kicks and squeals and screams and fights. The others wrestle with him. But he is strong and he kicks one in the groin and gnashes his teeth until he catches another in the cheek and he butts his woolly head against another until blood pours from his nose, and then the third man takes a snub nosed pistol from his belt and shoots the man in the head so that they all are covered with blood and brain matter and they have to angrily wipe it away and they turn on each other and scream and yell as if doing so will allow them to decide whose fault this all is anyway and why it is they live in a world of jungle and death and things that they long ago decided are just not right and yet because they are so wrong they must have some natural place in the world, a certain rightness more true than all the right in the world combined.

Their argument is a kind of music, a discordant jangle of things limned into the music of the living and the dreams of the newly dead.

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In the capital, Freetown, hundreds of miles away, the rebels walk together like an army. They don't slide on their bellies like their jungle brethren, out in the Kono hinterlands cutting off limbs. They don't hide behind trees. Or behind broken cars, their windshields shattered, wipers dead and useless across the dashboards.

Those who have guns carry them with both hands, palms on the underside of the faux wood, near the banana curve of the clip. The others, most of them, have machetes.

The people are moving away, shielding children, not looking the rebel men in the eyes. Moving away quickly, but not running. Panic, they reason, will only inflame the rebel men, like wild beasts that attack only after they see a person turn and run.

The men continue their march through the streets of Freetown, past Siaka Stevens Stadium, taking the Main Motor Road toward Aberdeen Bridge, then march north toward White Man's Bay, crisscrossing a series of filthy streams, fetid ravines, sprawling shanties.

They reach the entrance to the Amputees Camp. A satellite dish. A lone palm tree, its fronds stilled in the motionless blister of mid-afternoon. The white and blue sign, "Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme." Under the sign, propped against the left pole, a discarded prosthetic leg. Like a cobbler's model, a wooden substitute for a foot.

Inside the camp, a man on crutches makes his way over a big rutted gash full of dirty water in front of tents covered in plastic sheeting spread out in haphazard rows, each the same dreary off-white interrupted by thin horizontal blue lines. Figures line the dirt pathways. If they have hands, they wave halfheartedly at flies. A group of children, all missing one body part or another—hand, leg, nose, lips—playing a game with stones, throwing or pushing or blowing them into a circle drawn in the dirt.

Inside the tents: A woman bathing a boy in a plastic tub, his right arm gone to the shoulder. A nurse holding the hook of an artificial arm while the owner tries to write with a pencil, but dropping it instead onto the page. He shakes his head when he drops the pencil; hopeless, his head shake says. A girl, a double amputee, on a bed asleep, the ends of her stumps looking like they've been pulled with drawstrings. A teenage boy, the sunlight glistening off his stumps tied off like sausage ends. A man in front of a mirror, moving his one remaining arm up and down, back and forth, a plastic limb sitting behind the glass.

A boy in a tattered white shirt is the first to see the rebels. Frays of white thread from the end of his cut off jeans hang limp in the air above where his right leg used to be. He's been left with only one finger on each of his hands, a perpetual pointing over the rubber handles of his crutches. He just stares at the men with machetes; he has little left to lose.

Some of the nurses see. They run. But one nurse confronts the men. A man with a machete intercepts her and thrusts his machete into her stomach. He pulls up and then down, a jagged line like the lion's mane of hills outside the city that gives this country its name. When he pulls out his machete, her bowels spill to the ground.

Now everyone runs.

But Francis Laszlo, the white man in Tent No.3, does not run. He does not know what's happening outside the pinstriped sheets of nylon that make up the walls of his new home. But he will know soon. It will be the last thing he will know.