

QuickRead

Roland's Time Patrol Mission A complete excerpt from: Ides of March



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The Time Patrol

There once was a place called Atlantis. Ten thousand years ago, it was attacked by a force known only as the Shadow, on the same day over the course of six years. The last attack led to Atlantis being obliterated to the point where it is just a legend.

There are many Earth timelines. The Shadow comes from one of those alternate timelines (or perhaps more than one). It is attacking our timeline by punching bubbles into our past that can last no more than twenty-four hours. In each bubble, the Shadow is trying to change our history and cause a time ripple.

By itself, a single time ripple can be dealt with, corrected, and absorbed. But a significant time ripple that is unchecked can become a Cascade. And six Cascades combine to become a Time Tsunami.

That would be the end of our timeline, and our existence .

To achieve its goal, the Shadow attacks six points in time simultaneously; the same date, in different years.

The Time Patrol's job is to keep our timeline intact.

The Time Patrol sends an agent back to each of those six dates to keep history the same.

*This is one of those dates: **4 July** .*

The Missions Phase I

Gettysburg, 4 July 1863

ROLAND WASN'T THERE, and then he was there, but he'd sort of always been there. Which was true in more ways than time travel, because he was on a battlefield and it seemed to Roland he'd spent most of his life on a battlefield.

It's the best way to explain how he arrived, becoming part of his current time and place without fanfare or excitement among those around him. Beyond the perplexing physics of traveling into a time bubble created by the Shadow without upsetting the immediate vicinity, the men littering the ground around him had more important things to concern themselves.

Like dying.

Roland was in the bubble of this day, not before, and hopefully he wouldn't be here afterward, because if he was, it would mean there was a good chance he'd joined these men on their horrible journey into permanent darkness.

There were, of course, given the nature of war in 1863, more dead than wounded, and Roland lay between two corpses, which he viewed as fortunate because they were field-expedient cover and concealment.

Warriors make do with whatever is available.

The night sky was overcast and as gray as the uniforms of the dead Confederate soldiers Roland lay between. The 3rd of July had just passed into the 4th and these two bodies were a small part of the debris left behind from the 'high water mark' of the Confederacy. It was downhill from here for the South strategically, but it would take another two years and hundreds of thousands additional deaths before it was finally finished.

'I can make this march, and I will make Georgia howl!'

Roland blinked, the quote popping up unbidden, a footnote by Edith Frobish. But Roland had heard it before: William Tecumseh Sherman, before setting out to the sea from Atlanta introducing the South to total war; and that was still over a year away. Right now, this war was being fought on Union soil.

But this field was the end of that.

Lee would retreat south in less than a day and the noose from north and west would tighten around the Confederacy to finally end at a small place called Appomattox. That was how his timeline's history had been recorded, and Roland had to protect the timeline above all else.

Lightning flashed, followed by rumble of thunder, a weak encore to the roar of artillery and musketry, which had scythed across this place the previous day. It would be called the 'Valley of Death' by historians looking back at the battle. For the men consigned to die here, now, who'd made that history, it was just a patch of earth they'd given their all lives for. The last place on Earth they would see, feel, hear, and smell.

The smell. That was the thing one who hasn't been on a battlefield would never experience or understand. The pungent copper smell of blood, gallons of it. So much so, that at the worst, right after the charge earlier that would get pinned on Pickett, it had flowed into Plum Run, a trickle of water that ran along the lowest part of the valley between Seminary Ridge to the west and Cemetery Ridge to the east.

Roland's nostrils flared. There was the smell of damp dirt from a storm earlier. The odor from the wet wool of the Yankee blue uniforms, surprisingly there were some of them mixed in among the battlefield debris, and the more prevalent smell from the lighter cotton of the Confederate grey. Voided bowels. The distinct tinge of gunpowder, despite the downpour earlier, still lay heavy in the low ground. The thick smoke from black powder, which had been a fog bank at the height of the battle, still lingered in tendrils.

Roland lay on his back, staring up at the overcast night sky, the flickering lightning off in the distance, indicating the storm was brewing. The sharpshooter's rifle lay across his chest, reminding him of his mission, which had seemed easy enough during the briefing, but they hadn't factored in how long it takes a man to die. Men. Men to die.

"Mama."

It was a plaintive cry from someone close by. A man, who sounded more like a boy.

"Mama. Please get me, Mama!"

Roland could hear other voices now. Lifting his head slightly, he could see there was a tree to his left, shot up, branches splintered from artillery, and grape shot but still a tree. And in the lightning, he saw the men gathered underneath. Blue and gray joined together in dying.

“Help me, Lord. Help me, Lord. Please, help me, Lord.”

Roland had to tune that chant out. The only way a benevolent God could help these men was to kill them faster. Many of these men would have survived their wounds in his time. Roland thought of pressure bandages, blood clotters, IVs, well-trained Special Forces medics, and, more urgently, morphine.

At the other end of the spectrum, someone else was cursing God in a very even, methodical voice, using terms Roland had never heard before. But no one was screaming, despite how much pain they had to be in.

There was a quiet bravery in that. There was whimpering. Crying. Praying, cursing, and above all, the cry for mother. But no incoherent screams. .

Roland closed his eyes, wishing he could turn off his ears. He let Edith intrude, grateful for anything, but it veered toward the hard data. When the Civil War began, there were 113 surgeons in the entire U.S. Army. 24 of them went to the Confederacy. Both armies, like all armies, were prepared to fight the last war, not the next war. The preparation for recovering and treating battlefield wounded was essentially non-existent at the start of the war.

The war will be over by Christmas was the refrain of excitement in the Spring of 1861, and it seemed in the first year of every war. That had passed. Then the battle of Shiloh in April 1862, which stunned the nation with gruesome reality, tallying more casualties in two days than all previous American wars combined. The Union, with greater resources, reacted better, but not adequately, trying to design a system to handle the wounded, but the reality was that it was less of a priority consideration than things such as bringing ammunition and reinforcements forward, rather than sending men who could no longer fight to the rear.

Gettysburg double-downed on Shiloh. Eventually climbing to over to 50,000 total casualties. 3,155 Union killed; 4,708 Confederate dead. But it was the difference between those two numbers that Roland could hear right now, some of the remaining 40,000: the wounded.

Roland remembered his medevac flight in Iraq. How quickly he'd been snatched from the battlefield; although he hadn't been retrieved quickly after being wounded. He had flashes of memories of the modern and well-equipped emergency room in Baghdad where his life had been saved.

Many of the wounds these men suffered from could be treated. But not in this time. In this place

A light rain began to fall and the downpour informed him it would get heavier and heavier and last all night and into the following day.

It is 1863 A.D. John Tyndall is the first to explain the greenhouse effect; Ground is broken in Sacramento, CA on the construction of the 1st Transcontinental Railroad; the roof of a church in Switzerland collapses, killing 47; two midgets, General Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren get married with PT Barnum charging admission to the wedding; the first meeting of the Red Cross; the Treaty of Hue is signed between the French and the Vietnamese which would lead to a war a century later; in the battle of Camaron in Mexico, 65 French Foreign

Legion battle 2,000 Mexicans; the New York City draft riots kill 120; British forces in New Zealand battle the Maori; the Confederate submarine Hunley sinks the first time killing its crew of five; Union forces begin a bombardment of Fort Sumter; President Lincoln proclaims the final Thursday of November to be Thanksgiving; the Coney Island railroad opens; the CSS Hunley sinks a second time, killing its crew of eight, including inventor Horace Hunley; The Geneva Convention is signed; linoleum is patented; Winged Victory is discovered; Henry Ford is born.

President Lincoln makes a very short speech of 272 words at a place called Gettysburg;

Roland wondered how Lincoln would feel if he were here, right now, in the middle of all of this?

Some things change; some don't.

Roland rolled over and scooted up, his chest on a dead man's arm, his chin on the guy's chest, trying to orient himself. He could see fires in the higher distance, east and west. Campfires battling the rain. Checking the terrain against the 3D images of the battlefield in the download, he fixed his position. To the east was Cemetery Ridge, where the Union army was entrenched. To the west, Seminary Ridge, where Lee's army was encamped. Many Southerner's were praying to the same Lord as the wounded but with different intent: that the Union would attack the next day, so they could litter this same ground with more bodies, except those would be all Yankee blue.

Vengeance. The bitter drink of the veteran.

Roland saw two rock-strewn knobs to the south: Little Round Top and Round Top. *Chamberlain*, Roland thought. He didn't need Edith's download to know about Chamberlain and the 20th Maine saving the Union two days ago on the very left flank of the line by doing the unthinkable: just as they were about to be over-run, attacking.

The Devil's Den was in front of him. To his right rear, the Peach Orchard.

That put him at the southern edge of the large field across, which Pickett's charge had occurred during the previous afternoon, although technically Pickett was only one of three division commanders, and it was Lee who'd ordered the charge over Corp Commander James Longstreet's objections. No one ever mentioned the other two division commanders, Pettigrew and Trimble. Pickett commanded only 3 of the 11 regiments that took part, yet his name was forever linked to it.

History is a bitch.

"Mor. Please, mor." A strange accent, Scandinavian, but the Union army was full of immigrants.

Dogs wouldn't be allowed to suffer like this, Roland thought, anger flashing at the Generals on either side, sitting tight, not sending help out to recover the wounded. Or end their suffering. This was a part of war no one dared talk about any more.

The dying time.

Roland thought of Cannae where the Roman wounded were dispatched with a quick thrust of the sword. Their medical capabilities were so much less, the issue of the wounded was solved so much more expediently. Neither Union nor Confederate would consider such an action. Things had become more civilized, so leaving men to die slowly in their own piss and shit was considered ethical and moral. The makeshift ethics were ahead of the medical capabilities.

Maybe they *should* be screaming? All of them screaming, making the men safe on those ridgelines on either side listen to it all night long; the sound of hell on Earth.

'There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all Hell.'
Sherman got that one right, Roland thought.

The rain came down harder and Roland checked the piece of oilcloth guarding the rifle's percussion lock, insuring it was secure.

The other problem with the rain was it would keep many of these men alive longer. A flash of lightning revealed faces turned upward, mouths open, tongues out, welcoming the water, lapping it. Roland saw a man with his back to the tree, staring at his leg, or where his leg had been. Neatly clipped off just below the knee, probably by a cannonball. He, or someone around him, had had the presence of mind to put a tourniquet on the thigh, a bayonet twisted through a shirt, but blood was seeping out of the severed limb, joining the rain to form a reddish puddle.

The download said that parties would come out later on the 4th from both sides, recovering dead and wounded, but most of the latter who were here would be the former by daybreak. Without a formal truce, those parties wouldn't venture too far from their own lines and it would be the 5th before anyone got to this area; only after Lee began his withdrawal.

Roland remembered when he was a boy and he'd watched nature documentaries. He'd wondered why someone would film a lion sneaking up on a baby gazelle or a snake slithering toward a nest of eggs. He'd wondered why, if someone saw it, they didn't stop it? He'd cried, and like these men wished they could do now, he went to his mother and asked her.

Why?

And she'd told him it was nature, son, and the TV crew was recording it and not interfering. That it was God's will.

He hadn't really understood it back then, but in retrospect, Roland stopped believing in the certainty of his mother's God at that moment, before he even got to his first battlefield and saw it first hand. He hadn't understood it then, he'd known it wasn't God's will, if there was a God. But it was nature.

He understood that now.

He'd also never cried again.

And he still wasn't sure about God, not like most people thought of it, but he was sure there was something out there, some Higher Power. Traveling in time, seeing the things he'd seen, Roland knew there was something.

But there was also Fate. With a capital F. Scout had seen her. So had Ivar. *She* was real.

The rebels and the Yankees who'd crawled under trees or next to the creek were just part of nature and doomed by Fate. The natural result of this war and this battle. That's the way it was and he couldn't interfere. He especially couldn't interfere because someone *was* over there on the Yankee side interfering with the natural history of things and that's why he was here. To make sure the Shadow's attempt to change what shouldn't be changed was thwarted.

So he rolled over, put his chin on the stock of the Whitworth rifle and waited for daylight and a clear shot and tried real hard to ignore the voices all around him.

"Mama? Come get me. Please. Mama?"

The Missions Phase II

Gettysburg, 4 July 1863

"MISTER?"

Roland was thoroughly soaked, through and through. But as he'd been told in Ranger School so many years ago, many more years in the future from now: the human body is waterproof.

"Mister?"

Roland didn't have a watch, but he knew it was just before daybreak. BMNT: begin morning nautical twilight. *Stand to* in every unit Roland had ever been in. According to Edith's download, *stand to* was a military tradition dating back to the French and Indian War when attacks came just before dawn. Roland figured it went back long before that, to when the first guy picked up a club and went to war.

It was growing lighter, but low clouds pressed down, dropping a steady rain. He could make out the contours of Cemetery Ridge in the dim distance.

"Hey, mister?"

Voices had faded out during the night. Not all, but a lot.

"You got any water, mister?" The voice was low, weak, barely audible above the patter of rain.

Roland looked to the side in the growing light. About fifteen feet away a soldier, a boy really, was curled up on his side next to a boulder, bloodied hands wrapped around his midsection. Water coursing sideways across his face, but not enough, as he desperately tried to draw it in with his tongue.

"No." Roland checked beneath the oilcloth by feel, making sure the percussion cap was still dry. He wondered if he should have taken a Sharps instead of the Whitworth. True, the Whitworth gave him much greater range and accuracy, always a plus in sniping, but the Sharps loaded faster and—

"Please, mister. I'm begging you."

"It's nature," Roland said. "I can't interfere."

"Just a little drink and I'll be okay," the boy said.

"How old are you?" Roland knew he was making a mistake, he was engaging. Nada would have bitched him out.

But Nada was dead.

"Fifteen. Well, I will be in two weeks."

Roland winced.

The boy kept talking. "My brother was seventeen. I see you got one of them there long British rifles. My brother, he was in the Sharpshooters too. He had him one. Please, mister. They said he was a hero. Shot him seven Yankees with his long gun at Fredericksburg."

A deeper, more mature voice with a Southern drawl spoke up, "They paid us back for Fredericksburg yesterday, boy. Didn't you hear them damn Yankees behind that stone wall chanting it? They remember Marye's Heights. Shooting fish in a barrel is what

Fredericksburg was. I was there. Didn't need to be no sharpshooter with a long gun to shoot Yankees there. Just aim downhill and pull the trigger they was so thick and packed in. Yeah, them blue boys paid us back good and hard yesterday. Always knew it was coming. Things always have a way of coming 'round."

The download helped. Not particularly the information, but as a distraction for Roland. Fredericksburg. December 1862. The Union made fourteen uncoordinated charges all day long up Marye's Heights, never reaching the Confederate lines. It had been a slaughter. And the wounded then, like now, spent a night, a freezing December night, less than two weeks before the second Christmas of the war, huddled among the bodies of their fallen comrades. That had been Chamberlain's first action and he'd written about it, words that Edith's download echoed Roland's current situation:

'For myself it seemed best to bestow my body between two dead men among the many left there by earlier assaults, and to draw another crosswise for a pillow out of the trampled, blood-soaked sod, pulling the flap of his coat over my face to fend off the chilling winds, and, still more chilling, the deep, many-voiced moan that overspread the field. It was heart-rending; it could not be borne.'

The boy's voice was plaintive. "I got to get back to Mama. She can't work the farm alone for long. Just a little water, mister. I'll feel better. I know I will if I just get some water to drink."

The drawl: "You're gut-shot, boy. Aint you never seen what happens when someone's gut-shot?"

The speaker was the man who's lost his leg. Roland was impressed he was still alive and so coherent. He'd have been better off without the tourniquet and bleeding out.

The kid ignored him. "Just some water, mister. Please."

But Drawl had changed his focus to Roland. "You aint hurt. Why don't you go get us some help? Them Yankees aint gonna move today. They'd be fools to."

They would be, Roland agreed. *But they're gonna unless I stop it.*

Drawl chuckled. "Cause, you're right to hunker down, now that its getting light. You stand up, might be someone just like you, with either a Whitworth or a Sharps, will plug you, although it aint likely unless they crawled out from the lines. What you doing out here if you aint been hurt? Why didn't you go back with Pickett and the rest? You crawl out from our lines to kill some Yankees?"

Roland heard someone splashing, sputtering, gasping for air. Looking behind him, he saw that Plum Run was overflowing its banks. A wounded man was trying to keep his head out of the water, unable to move his broken body. From the way he lay, and his inability to even crawl away, Roland figured the soldier's spine was broken. Explosion? Fall from a horse? A bullet severing it?

"Mister, I could use some water," the boy asked, unaware that someone had the opposite problem just forty feet away.

Roland saw the guy's head thump down, face in the water and he really hoped it stayed down, but then it came up, neck muscles straining. Mouth wide open, gasping for air. The one thing more important for survival than water.

Cruel, cruel, cruel, Roland thought.

Roland stopped watching, turning his attention the other way, toward Cemetery Ridge. All was gray up there, not light enough to make out details at this distance. Roland estimated now that he was about nine hundred yards away; just over half a mile. Even with a modern rifle, like the Barrett .50 caliber, it was a tough shot, especially with the uphill

angle. Now he was glad he hadn't opted for the Sharps. Its cartridge could reach that far but with little accuracy. The Whitworth had much better range with its unique barrel and bullet.

He only needed one shot.

There was no more gasping for air or splashing.

Roland looked over his shoulder and the head was under the swiftly flowing water. It didn't come back up. It was hard, but it was mercy. He was at peace.

"Mister, please? I'm so thirsty."

Frak it, Roland decided. He knew if he stood, Drawl was right. There was a slight chance he could get shot by some sharpshooter looking to etch another notch, although he now knew no Yankee with a Sharps could reach this far from the ridge. But he had no doubt a couple of them had appropriated Whitworth's via battlefield scavenging, as smart soldiers were wont to do. Overall, though, it was very unlikely anyone would shoot.

Still, best to be safe.

Roland slithered back from between the two bodies, leaving his rifle in place, double-checking the priming one more time. Another rule violated, but he didn't want to crawl with it through the mud. He had the Colt 1851 in the holster on his belt and that would have to suffice along with the Bowie.

Roland made it to the boy. His wide eyes had tracked Roland's progress. Gut shot for sure, the kid's hands held a rag, so he'd had the smarts to try to plug the wound. Reaching over his body, Roland found the boy's most immediate problem: a gaping exit wound in his back. The Minie ball had gone through, avoiding any vital organ, vital meaning something that would have brought a quick death.

"I'm gonna move you a little," Roland said. "Might hurt." But as he said it, he was already grabbing the boy, adjusting his position, sitting him with his back against the boulder so that he was now facing up.

The boy whimpered in pain at the movement he'd been unable to complete himself. He had his eyes closed, his mouth open to the rain, tongue extended.

As Roland turned to crawl back to his rifle, the kid opened his eyes. "Am I going to die?"

A bullet through the stomach, not just a bullet, but a .55 caliber Minie ball? The download confirmed it would take five days for the battlefield to be cleared of the dead. Two days before the last of the wounded was brought in. This part of the battlefield, where most of the casualties were grouped, would be the last taken care of.

Edith's download had a lot on the matter, but it boiled down to deadly facts: even if the kid were stretchered out of here immediately (not going to happen), the surgeons in both armies were overwhelmed. A wound to the chest or abdomen was considered a guarantee of lethal infection and wasn't even treated in their primitive triage system, other than to give painkiller.

"Yes," Roland said.

"Was afeer'd of that," the kid said with the fatalism of a soldier. "Kind of knew. This is how my brother died. Gut shot. Slow burn from the gut spreading out; he had someone write us in a letter to me a day after he was wounded. Told me not to tell Mama that by the time I got the letter he'd be dead. Told me not to join up. Told me to take care of the farm. To tell Mama he was so sorry and he loved her. Loved us. Shoulda listened to him. Last letter. We didn't get the death notice for three more weeks and that was in the paper. Don' even know where he's buried."

Shoulda listened, Roland mentally agreed.

"Could you get my pistol, mister?" the kid asked. "Make sure it's got a shot ready and primed?"

Roland nodded, impressed. He pulled the gun out, checked it.

"You got one bullet," Roland said. He looked at the cap. "Wet." Roland reached into the pouch on his side and retrieved a cap. He replaced the wet one.

"Just put it on my lap," the kid said.

Roland carefully laid it on the kid's lap, covering it with a piece of cloth. He turned away and slithered back to his spot.

"Thanks, mister."

Roland wished with all his heart that all the suffering men would die, like the one who'd just drowned. Quick and easy. The night had been too long.

Some others had seen and called to him. Asking for help. Roland wanted to cover his ears, stuff something in them, get pulled back to the Possibility Palace, mission be damned, because none of those animals on those nature shows had ever begged for help.

"Where you from, mister?" the kid asked. "I'm from North Carolina."

Roland didn't answer. He could hear the kid licking and slurping at the rain.

Almost completely subdued under the sound of the rain, Roland heard a hammer being pulled back on a musket.

Drawl had his musket to his shoulder, trying to aim. Roland was pulling his pistol before he realized that Drawl wasn't aiming at him, he was aiming *past* him, although the muzzle wasn't very steady.

Roland looked over his shoulder. A man dressed in black pants and shirt under a dirty rain slicker, was kneeling next to a body, rifling through the corpse's uniform. He drew out a pocket watch and slipped it into a satchel. From the way the bag bulged, the scavenger had been at it for a while. He tugged at the corpse's hand, trying to get a wedding band off. Unable to do so easily, he gave up and drew a pair of shears from inside his coat. Severed the finger, took the ring, tossed the finger aside.

Roland turned back toward Drawl, signaling for him to stand down, but the wounded man didn't notice. The hammer clicked forward and nothing happened. Drawl dropped the musket to his lap in despair. Either it was empty or the rain had gotten to the powder. The wounded man didn't have the energy to reload it; he'd lost too much blood.

Roland didn't make a conscious decision; his instincts as a soldier took over. He crawled, head up, watching the scavenger move on to the man who'd drowned.

The man in black pulled the corpse out of Plum Run and turned the body over. The way the upper body twisted unnaturally there was no doubt the spine wasn't intact, not that it mattered now. The scavenger pushed the drowned man's lips apart. Drew a dagger and slammed the hilt down, breaking teeth loose. He retrieved a single gold tooth. Then began checking the rest of the body.

Roland was five yards away, when the kid called out.

"Watch out, Mister!"

The scavenger turned, his dagger in one hand and he drew another from somewhere inside his coat so fast, it just seemed to appear.

How had he known I was coming? Roland jumped to his feet and charged, drawing the Bowie knife from his belt.

Roland quickly became aware this wasn't his opponent's first knife fight, as the scavenger slashed at Roland in a whirlwind of both blades, halting his advance. The man's stance and the look in his eyes dictated there would only be one result, death, with two possible outcomes: Roland or him.

Roland was bigger and stronger, but faster was more important in a knife fight.

This guy was faster.

Then it got worse, as it usually did.

"It is an honor to meet you, Roland," the man said. "I'm going to kill you very slowly."

The Missions Phase III

Gettysburg, 4 July 1863

ROLAND TOOK A STEP BACK, re-assessing, considering drawing his revolver, re-assessing again as the man reversed one of the blades, readying it for throwing. As fast as he'd drawn the second dagger, Roland knew the man could throw the knife faster than Roland could draw the revolver, cock it, and fire.

Magnificent Seven, Roland thought. *James Coburn*.

Roland lunged forward. The scavenger re-reversed the blade and all Roland saw was a flurry of steel and then the bright burn of pain as one of the man's daggers cut a line across Roland's forehead.

He could have killed me, Roland realized, taking a step back. *He didn't kill me*.

He felt pain on the back of his knife hand and risked a glance. He'd been cut there too, not deep, but long. He didn't even remember seeing that.

"Who are you?" Roland asked, shaking blood and rain out of his eyes.

"Dead are dead," the man said, tapping the body he'd been plundering with his boot. "Why do you care what's done to them? It's weakness. It's what does everyone in. Weakness. Had a feeling that would draw you in."

"I'm guessing your name is Legion," Roland said, remembering Scout's debrief from her D-Day mission to ancient Greece.

"Technically, *our* name is Legion for we are many." He grinned, no humor or joy in his dead eyes. "You don't need my name, because you're going to be dust soon. Dust to dust, isn't it?"

Roland snorted. "Hell, a girl on my team has killed two of you guys. You're not so tough."

"By herself? I don't think so."

How'd he know that? Roland wondered. Both times Scout had had the help of Pandora, who apparently wasn't a Goddess, but something, whatever, right now that wasn't important because Roland began to truly appreciate he was in big trouble. Scout had been

cut on her last mission and reported that even with Pandora's help, they'd needed assistance from a priestess to take out the assassin. Three on one.

And they'd barely survived.

"You're bleeding," the man said. "Nothing major yet. I can make quite a few more cuts. It's a form of art. Using the body as a canvas, a blade as a brush, and blood as the paint."

He attacked. Roland did his best to defend, taking three superficial, but bloody, cuts in less than a second without even getting close to a strike with his Bowie. The heavy blade was much too big and cumbersome against the daggers. Sort of the way Roland felt about himself against this guy.

"Are you from the Shadow?" Roland asked, trying to gain time, which embarrassed him, but embarrassed wasn't dead and time was time.

"You are supposed to be their best warrior," Legion said. "It is Roland, isn't it?"

"You have the advantage," Roland said. "Your name? Not 'our' name."

He shrugged. "You missed a fierce battle the past few days. How does it go? *'What a piece of work is a man. How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty. In form and moving how express and admirable. In action like an Angel.'* Killer Angels. I like that. You can call me Angel for the minutes you have left."

"How did you find me?" Roland asked, running various tactical scenarios through his mind, rejecting one after another.

Angel was too fast.

"You had just enough information to know a warrior needed to be sent here and now." Angel nodded, looking past Roland toward the Union lines a half-mile away. "Right where I thought you'd be."

He was going to die and he was going to fail in his mission. Roland was going to miss Neeley more than anything else if he was killed. He smiled and shook his head. Unacceptable. "Not today."

"I've heard that before," Angel said. "I've heard all sorts of words. Prayers. Begging." He swept his blades wide, taking in the Valley of Death. "Music to my ears. A symphony.

"Not today," Roland repeated.

Angel cocked his head, curious. "What is it?"

"Perfect," Roland said. "You're right. This is the perfect place. Reminded me of something."

"I hope it was—"

Roland charged, all or nothing, no options left. He took a cut on the forearm of his knife hand, another on the side of his neck, but instead of pulling back he took the pain and kept coming, surprising Angel.

Roland had him, sweeping one arm to grapple Angel and seize the assassin while slicing upward with the Bowie.

Then he didn't have him. Angel slipped underneath Roland's grasp and was behind him. Roland braced for the daggers in the back.

Then the shot rang out.

Roland spun about.

Angel was looking down at the exit wound in his chest in disbelief. Both his arms were raised, daggers ready to finish Roland off, but he'd been so rudely interrupted.

Looking past Angel, Roland saw the kid holding the gun in both hands, smoke drifting out of the barrel, the rain cutting through it.

"You people," Angel said, shaking his head. "Seriously?" He fell to his knees, then tumbled sideways into Plum Run.

Roland watched the body sink beneath the water, but it crumbled inward, dust to dust, before it was completely submerged.

Roland ran over to the kid, who'd dropped his gun. New blood was seeping past the makeshift bandage.

"Didn't think I could hit him," the kid said. "Where'd he go?"

"You got him," Roland said.

Drawl chimed in. "Good shot. He just disappeared. Like he was made of nothing."

"First man I ever killed," the kid said. He coughed, an attempt to laugh. "Last man too, I suppose."

Roland sat next to the kid. He ripped the sleeves off his shirt and used them to bind better makeshift bandages, front and back, on the kid.

He was violating nature. Delaying the inevitable. He'd interfered and he could imagine his mother's disapproval.

"What's your name?" the kid asked.

"Roland. You?"

"Jeremiah. But my ma calls me Tad." His eyes lost their focus for a moment. "She and Pa and my brother always called me that. Don't really know why."

"What happened to your Pa?"

"He left long time ago. Said he was going to find work. Never came back."

"Why'd you join up after getting your brother's letter?" Roland asked.

"I'm fighting cause they killed my brother."

Roland thought of the seven Yankees whom Tad's brother had killed at Fredericksburg and the cycle that never ended.

"Hey!" Drawl called out from the tree. "Who was that fella?"

"A bad person," Roland said.

"Aint never seen someone disappear like that," Drawl said.

Several of the wounded murmured assent. Roland supposed this had violated Rule Number One in some way, but what did it matter?

"Hey," Drawl called again. "Could you tighten this on my leg? I just don' have the energy. You saw me. I was trying to shot that fella. Help you."

"I'll be back, Tad," Roland said to the kid, who just nodded, his face turned upward to the water descending from heaven.

Roland walked over to the Dying Tree, no longer concerned if there was a sniper out there. They'd have taken their shot when he was fighting Angel. Both armies were spent, even the unscathed. Another reason Meade's officers had argued against counter-attacking Lee. After three days of fighting, most couldn't conceive of a fourth consecutive day.

Of the twenty-two men who'd crawled to the tree, six were still alive. Four Confederate and two Union. Roland did a quick assessment of all six.

They were all going to die before the day was out.

Looking toward Plum Run, he saw that only the lower legs and shoes of another man who'd drowned earlier was visible. The rain was moderate and the ridgelines east and west were visible, some movement here and there, but otherwise, everything seemed subdued. A great pause after great events.

Roland tightened Drawl's tourniquet.

He helped the other five as best he could, made them comfortable, if such a thing were possible.

"You are bleeding," the man with the Scandinavian accent said as Roland adjusted his position. He'd been shot in the groin and it was just a bloody mess down there. Roland didn't even deal with it, because there was no way he could bandage it with what he had. The man was so pale, Roland didn't give him long. He was surprised shock hadn't already consumed him.

The rain had washed the blood off Roland's face and he had barely registered the other wounds. "It's nothing." He noted the insignia on the man's collar. "First Minnesota."

The pale man shook his head. "It is no more." He pointed at a corpse dressed in blue. "Me and Bill, we tried to make it back. This was far as we could make it. He died yesterday. Guess today is going to be my day."

"I saw you fellows," Drawl said. "Two days ago. You were damn crazy the way you charged."

"Stopped you though," Minnesota noted.

"That you did," Drawl allowed. "That you did. And we had the numbers. Crazy."

The download updated Roland. "General Hancock knew Cemetery Ridge would fall on the 2nd unless something drastic was done. He ordered the First to attack."

Minnesota was bitter. "We knew it was suicide. Every one of us. We could see all the Rebs coming and how badly we were out-numbered. Attack? We should have hunkered down. But the Colonel, he ordered charge. So we charged. It all occurred so fast. Don't rightly know what happened. 'Cept it killed Bill and it's gonna kill me."

The download had the numbers. 262 men in the Regiment charged. 215 went down in five minutes. The 82% casualty rate was the largest loss ever for any U.S. military unit in history.

Still was in Roland's day.

But they'd charged when ordered. It was either the worst of mankind or the best, but it was actually both.

The survivors who were within sight or earshot of tree, now began calling out for help, which wouldn't help them. Roland thought *I gotta get out of here*. He'd never abandoned a mission, but this, this was wrong. Nature was the lion and the gazelle. The snake and the eggs. There was nothing natural here in Death Valley. There was nothing natural about men killing each other; worse, men leaving other men to a hard, slow death.

Roland went back to the Whitworth.

He wanted to go from man to man and press on their jugulars until their voices stopped and they knew peace. Because it was possible some of them out there might actually survive. That would be interference.

He'd already broken rule #1, but he didn't think it would matter. Those six he'd helped. They'd be dead before the sun went down.

Roland lay back down between the two dead men. The cries seemed to be louder as the morning wore on and he continued to watch the ridgeline. He didn't know if that was real or some of it was in his head, echoing in his conscience.

He noticed motion to the left. A rider with a flag of truce was riding across the field, from the left to the right, about three hundred yards away. Dressed in sodden grey, the rider rode slowly, looking neither left nor right, picking his way through the dead and wounded.

The download answered the question as soon as Roland wondered: Lee was proposing a prisoner exchange for their 'comfort and convenience'.

Roland, for want of something to do, tracked the man through the Whitworth's sights.

Meade would reject the offer, desiring Lee to be burdened with Union prisoners, rather than giving him back soldiers that could fight once more.

Roland tracked him until he went through the Union lines and disappeared.

Where the hell was the target?

He knew he couldn't lie here all day long with the dying. If he had to, by the end, he would no longer be human.

The Missions Phase IV

Gettysburg, 4 July 1863

"MISTER?"

Roland recognized the kid's voice. He'd hoped he was already dead. The voices were less. In the real world. But in his head, even the few left were too many.

"Mister?"

Roland turned his head from watching Cemetery Ridge. "Yeah?"

"Is the battle over? Who won?"

Roland was surprised at the question, then knew he shouldn't be for two reasons. First, the battle was just over. Both armies were still here. Lee wouldn't begin withdrawing until darkness, disappointed that Meade didn't attack (hopefully, still to be seen).

From his experience, Roland knew the soldier on the battlefield had little clue how the overall battle went. They only saw this patch of Earth, and for these men, that patch was here and this patch was death. The Confederates who'd been in Pickett's charge knew it had been a disaster. That they'd been repulsed. Badly repulsed. None of these men had any clue that Lee would withdraw that night. As far as they knew, it was just as likely the battle would continue tomorrow after it stopped raining.

The Yankees had seen so many defeats, most of them had no expectation of victory.

But to tell a dying soldier he was giving it all in a defeat was worse than telling him he was dying.

"Bobbie Lee won't pull back," Drawl said.

"We're done retreating," 1st Minnesota threw in.

They were still caught up in it.

Roland spoke in a voice that carried above the rain, to the dying tree and beyond. "The battle. It's over."

"Who won?" Drawl pressed.

Roland ignored him. "This was a great battle. The greatest battle fought in this county up to now and far into the future. It won't ever be forgotten. And a hundred years from now Americans, and we're all Americans and we'll always be Americans, won't think of who was Confederate and who was Federal. Or even who won. Because we all win. All they'll think of and talk of about Gettysburg, is the bravery of the men who fought here. Blue and grey."

"You talk like you know what's gonna happen," Drawl said.

"We're all Americans," Roland repeated.

Roland broke the number one rule, sort of, but these were the dying. So he began to tell them of the battle that they'd fought in, but the entire thing. From the first day, when Hancock decided this was a fine place to defend. He told them all of it so they would know where they fit in.

The First Minnesota saving the Union line. The 20th Maine charging when they had no options left. How the men of Trimble and Pickett and Pettigrew's division came on no matter what. And Armistead in the center breached the Union line and lay his hand on a Yankee cannon. And how the Yankees who lived through that would never forget the bravery of the men in grey and that in fifty years survivors would meet on either side of that stone wall and they would cry and crawl over it, old men, hugging each other as brothers.

As he spoke, Roland thought that if any did survive they would think it was some sort of dream amongst the nightmare. They'd all grown quiet as he spoke and that's why he kept talking. No one asked for something. No one cried out for their mother or for God.

They listened. They were learning what great thing they had been part of it. They were listening to the reason why their dying here mattered. They forgot for a little while their fear and agony, as Roland explained it.

Roland talked for a long time as some of the men finally let go and became the dead of Gettysburg and not just the dying. He'd never talked so long in his life and when he finally stopped there was just the sound of the rain.

Roland searched the download and grabbed the most significant thing that popped up. He recited: "*Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.*

"Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

"But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth'."

Roland let out a deep breath and realized he was holding the rifle much too tight, his knuckles white. He had to be relaxed to shoot accurately.

“Thanks, mister. Them some mighty fine words.”

Roland winced. The kid had used his last bullet to save Roland’s life and now Roland owed him. He’d have been dead by now except for the re-bandaging and the story.

“Mister. It hurts real bad. Just like my brother said.”

Roland bit his lip so hard he tasted blood.

And the courage was gone as the boy began to whimper. “I want my momma. Please, momma, please help me. I don’ wanna die here like this.”

Roland let go of the rifle and walked over.

The boy looked up at him with pleading eyes. “Was you just telling us a story? Or is it true? Does our dying matter?”

Roland shook his head. “It’s true. You’re going to matter more than you could ever imagine.”

The boy closed his eyes, groaning. “I guess I can live with that.”

Roland killed him.

The Missions Phase V

Gettysburg, 4 July 1863

ROLAND SAW THEM just before noon. A cluster of riders, silhouetted on top of the ridgeline. Armistead was mounted, the wounds in his arm and shoulder bandaged. He was using the arm that wasn’t injured to point. Meade was next to him.

Meade had 65,000 men. Lee had 45,000 left. President Lincoln who would come here and make such an epic speech, was currently livid with Meade for not counter-attacking and crushing Lee’s army. But Lincoln was a politician, not a soldier. Meade had more men, but not a significant number more. Yes, there were militia and other units in the area that could bring his total to 6 figures, but he would have to gather them. And they weren’t regulars.

Meade’s men were exhausted after three days of non-stop fighting. Of 11 Corps commanders, only four were still standing, rather riding, with Meade and Armistead, arguing the day’s future. Down through the ranks, the Union army’s leadership had been similarly attrited. This was warfare where leaders were in the front and died first.

Meade had also only been in command of the Army of the Potomac for three days when the battle had started. He’d done a more than a fair job for someone so new to such immense responsibility. He’d actually considered retreating the evening of the 2nd. He’d presented that option to his Corps commanders, but they had decided to fight it out and thus Pickett’s charge.

From the download, Roland knew Meade had met briefly last night with his surviving Corps commanders. But the concern had been more about bringing up ammunition, shoring up the lines.

He'd issued a 'congratulatory order' to be read to the Union Army. Part of it indicated his uncertainty: *'Our task is not yet accomplished, and the commanding General looks to the army for greater efforts to drive from our soil every vestige of the presence of the invader.'*

And now there was Armistead. Gesturing, exhorting Meade.

Had he been visited by a Valkyrie during the night while he was laid up in a Union field hospital? Did he think an angel had visited him and given him a vision of a way to end the war, end the pain and suffering? It could simply have laid out the reality of the next two years to Armistead. Any sane man would see it was pointless. Sherman had seen it: *'War is cruelty. There is no use trying to reform it; the crueller it is, the sooner it will be over.'*

Meade had written his wife this very day: *'The most difficult part of my task is acting without correct information on which to predicate action.'* What information was Armistead giving him? That Lee had sent in his last reserves? That the Confederates could not expect any reinforcements? Both true.

The Shadow excelled in using the truth from future history to try to change it.

Roland glanced to the left. The dead kid by the boulder. Drawl and 1st Minnesota also dead by his hand.

No more suffering there.

He rested his cheek against the stock of the Whitworth, the wood damp and warm. Sighted down the long barrel, centering on Armistead.

Roland took long, slow breaths. His heartbeat slowed down and he found the rhythm.

With his thumb he flicked aside the oilcloth and pulled back the hammer.

There was no wind, just steady rain.

Roland adjusted for the altitude difference.

His finger caressed the trigger.

Exhaled. Didn't inhale. In between heartbeats, Roland smoothly pulled the trigger back.

The Return

ROLAND WAS IN THE TUNNEL OF TIME, moving slowly at first. On one side was another possible timeline, where his mission had failed. Where a wave of blue charged off Cemetery Ridge, into the Valley of Death.

Thousands died. And like Pickett's men two days earlier, only a handful of Yankees reached the summit of Seminary Ridge, only to be captured.

And the war went on. A haze of blue, grey, and most of all blood, that timeline arcing away to some dreadful end.

There was something else out there, outside of the time tunnel as Roland's return to Possibility Palace accelerated. A dark, twisted, braid that pulsed. Roland could swear it was making a noise and he winced when he realized it was the voices. The voices of the dead. Their cries were different now. Not begging for mother or God or cursing.

They were crying for peace.

**The End
For Now**

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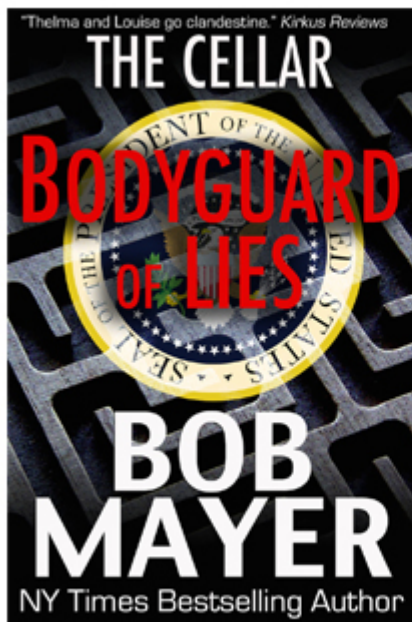
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Publishers Weekly



About Bob Mayer



Bob Mayer is a NY Times Bestselling author, graduate of West Point, former Green Beret (including commanding an A-Team) and the feeder of two Yellow Labs, most famously Cool Gus. He's had over 60 books published including the #1 series Area 51, Atlantis and The Green Berets. Born in the Bronx, having traveled the world (usually not tourist spots), he now lives peacefully with his wife, and said labs, at Write on the River, TN.

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