

I listened.

I absorbed.

I relished and gleaned, as a wanderer walking the outlying roads to Jerusalem.

His words and thoughts delighted me. At the same time, I stared into the soft, emerald terrain. Listening, I thoroughly comprehended every idealistic sentence and precise word. He astounded me!

I wholeheartedly agreed with Muller. "Yes, the wilderness is an ideal home for mankind. Yes, it would be wonderful to escape from the thieving insanity of civilization. To vanquish the burden and noise of its machinery."

Each word that he revealed to me presented me with an incredible truth. Fascinated, I leaned closer to him to hear more. Pleased, Captain Muller formed his lips to pronounce new words.

His keen eyes penetrated into my mind.

His wavy hair happily danced with the wind.

His intricate gestures, so faithfully coordinating his intonations, began their symphonic rhythm.

His first vowel started.

Then, unexpectedly, bright flashes of rifle fire burst out.

Instantly, our Huey helicopter UH-1 angled into a sharp ascent. Captain Harris' voice bellowed through the microphone, "Spray the area! Incoming fire! Incoming!"

Immediately, I whirled my M-60, pointing the muzzle down toward the foliage where the flashes originated. I spotted a slight movement within the depths of the branches.

"To my left! Enemy movement."

"Nicewander, it's your game," Harris calmly directed. After an undetermined delay, followed by several more sharp whistling sounds, Harris' voice intensified. "Nicewander, what are you waiting for? A white Christmas?"

Still, Nicewander's gun remained quiet.

Again the bullets whizzed by. I saw the wiggling red flairs and trails of smoke.

"Damn your ass, you fucking Jesus-preaching freak! Jarrett's not in position! Fire, damn you, fire!"

At that Nicewander released a barrage of bullets into the darkening forest below. He fired irregularly, irrationally, spraying into the treetops, tearing the branches from their trunks.

"Fuck the branches! Kill the people!"

"Jack! I see a hamlet! There's activity near it," Muller warned through my microphone.

"Then no more shall you see," Harris brutally, effectively stated before turning his craft around toward the running figures of men. "Jarrett, it's your view. Don't freeze up on me. Don't freeze! Just think, just think. Concentrate. We're moving in! We're moving in! Now, man! Now!"

At his command I shook away my fear.

With deep, jerky breaths, I cleared away the sensations of cold that lingered on the back of my neck and squeezed the steel trigger of my M-60. I concentrated with all my skills and intellect and logically followed the red wiggling tracers as they flew viciously toward their targets. In an instant, with an expert's eye, I readjusted my muzzle sight. As I wiped away the blurring sweat, I released a long series of tracers and ammo into the figures of running men.

"Damn Jarrett! Good, good!" Harris screamed while Muller nodded with appreciation.

Through my earphones, I heard Nicewander's heavy, irregular breathing.

Not satisfied, Harris ascended again and returned to the hamlet. He released a rocket. It flew straight ahead of us and swiftly destroyed the hamlet. Brilliant leaps of flaming, erupting, expanding, swirling, engulfing yellow, red and blue fires bellowed and consumed everything in its path. A mushroom cloud briefly hibernated, then woke, high above the treetops.

Several more villagers appeared. When they noted our position, they aimed their rifles at us and fired haphazardly as they ran in various directions. Their flights away from us made it almost

impossible for me to eliminate their attacks. Muller also unstrapped an M-16 and assisted me. He took a careful aim and fired at the running villagers.

"It's no use chasing after those men," the lieutenant advised. "There are other men running toward a clearing up ahead."

"Then those are the ones we'll burn. Nicewander, you better get a confirmed. Hear me, boy?"

"Yes, sir. I'll try."

"Try or die. I don't care which. But it better be one of them," Harris spat.

The shadow of our Huey UH-1 helicopter followed the running figures. Instead of diving away to the shelter and protection of the overhanging leaves and branches as we anticipated, they continued toward the clearing.

Soon we raced directly over the men themselves. At that second they dove under the canopy of growth. Our ship's shadow passed them by. The sound of our rotating blades hovered directly over their position.

Suddenly, in a swift, perfect movement, the villagers jumped out from their sheltering concealment and their bold, perfectly coordinated effort surprised us. We watched in disbelief as they snapped back a camouflaged tarp cloth and unveiled an armored pit. Concealed in that brilliant deception, a fifty-caliber machine-gun pointed its barrel straight toward us.

"God, no!" Nicewander cried. "Fly! Fly! Fly!"

"Shut up! You're confusing me! Jarrett! Cover our ass!"

Harris forced our aircraft into a sharp climb while Muller and I, and finally Nicewander, fired on the men below. As we climbed, we felt the breeze of the wailing projectiles scream by us. Again we aimed our M-60's and released another continuous burst of projectiles against the enemy below us.

In horror, we watched as our tracers uselessly fizzled out before they reached the villagers. We were too high to be effective against their fifty-caliber, yet theirs was too deadly a weapon to escape from.

Their first, short burst barely missed us. The muzzle of the fifty-caliber followed us, regardless of the pattern Harris flew. Skillfully maneuvering the ship, Harris turned and faced them directly. Confident, self-assured, without hesitation, he released another rocket.

Our hearts anticipated victory. Instead, our throats choked when the rocket missed and exploded harmlessly into the woods behind the villagers. However, the sight of the smoking rocket and the shattering sound of its impact momentarily froze the men in fear.

Quickly, Harris fired his third rocket. It struck the armored pit with a deafening, enveloping roar and plumes of smoke. The cracklings and popping of the burning pit sounded louder than the twirling and thumping of our blades. We ceased firing. An overwhelming relief overtook us.

We, we alone, survived. We alone emerged triumphant from the contest of the forest.

Before leaving, Harris decided to survey the area a second time to reconfirm his sightings and action. We descended to treetop level, and flew past a group of mourning women who slouched over the four men whose bodies I ripped asunder with a merciless hail of bullets. The four bodies lay face down in a sea of blood. Their backs were gashed open. Even from my height I could smell their mangled, burnt flesh. Transfixed by the hideous sight, I thought not on their humanity, but rather on the clothes that they were wearing. They became a collection of nothingness, wearing rags. Entities into nonentities. In stark contrast, I continued breathing. I wore a freshly starched uniform. The tips of my highly polished boots reflected the corners of my ammo container and the leg of my tripod.

The dead had no shoes.