**Chapter Three**

Back at the VFW, the Reverend got tired of waiting for everyone to leave. The band had quit and gone home, even the bartender was gone, but there were some stragglers trying to hold onto that feeling of omnipotence that only comes from booze or sucking on your mother’s tit. Finally the Reverend lost patience and he picked up his broom and began to sweep the suckers out of the bar.

“Jesus, Reverend,” Bill Fusco said. “Can we finish our drinks?”

“Finish your drinks? My ass, you’ve been suckling on that bottle for the last half hour. Get the hell out of here, all of you. I have work to do.”

The Reverend swept Bill Fusco and his party out the door. Then he began to place the bar stools on top of the front bar. As he worked his way down the bar, he came to Bud Schooley.

“Stand up for a minute, will you, Bud.”

Bud stood up, and the Reverend put Bud’s bar stool on the bar.

“You got no heart, Reverend.”

“Out.”

Without a word of protest, Pete, who was sitting next to Bud, got up from his seat and headed for the door with Bud. At the door, Bud turned and said, “Reverend, this is not a Christian thing to do.”

The Reverend held the door open and said, “You’ll thank me tomorrow when you wake up feeling like shit. You’ll remember how I saved you from yourself, and if you’re wise, you’ll glory in the pain of revelation, for verily I say unto you Brothers, the only proof of God is a hangover.”

The Reverend closed the door and locked it for the night. He wasn’t going anywhere. The Reverend was the post chaplain and the janitor, and he lived at the VFW. He slept on the couch in the back room, and he seldom left the bunker-like-building except for funerals and to resupply. The Reverend swept the plastic cups and cigarette butts off the floor then cleaned the tables. He cleaned the back bar and the kitchen, and then he mopped the floors. When he was done, the kitchen and barroom were spotless and ready for military inspection. The tables and chairs were in straight rows like little soldiers. He used a heavy disinfectant and detergent to rid the place of the smell of dying men and dying dreams, frustration, disappointment, and rotten old farts. He left the bathrooms for last. It was in the shithouse, the temple of death, that he could inhale the pure essence of reality and recall the biggest shit hole of all, Vietnam.

The sun was setting in South Vietnam, and the Reverend’s reconnaissance unit was in a Huey helicopter flying over the border from South Vietnam into Laos. The Reverend was called Doc when he was in Vietnam. There were six men in his unit - Doc, Rocker, and four Montagnard tribesmen from the central highlands of Vietnam who they nicknamed Happy, Grumpy, Sleepy, and Sneezy after the dwarfs in the fairy tale, *Snow White*. Rocker’s real name was James Graves, and Lieutenant Graves was the leader of the unit. The team was part of a special SOG unit involved in covert missions that took them “over the fence” into Laos to find and track the movement of the enemy on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. SOG stood for Studies and Observation Group, a very innocuous name for a top secret recon and strike force that worked behind enemy lines and in “neutral” territory. Nobody knew they existed except the President of the United States and his immediate advisors, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Westmoreland, and the CIA.

They carried no identification, and they wore nothing that would identify them as members of the American or South Vietnamese armed forces. Doc wore gray jungle fatigues and carried a M45 9mm “Swedish K” submachine gun and an HD.22 caliber pistol with a silencer. His Vietnamese rucksack contained a poncho, extra socks, foot powder, a plastic bottle filled with salt tablets, a bottle of Tabasco sauce, a hammock, black duck-tape, two claymore mines, and twelve magazines of ammunition. Two canteens of water were packed in pockets on his rucksack and two more hung from a pistol belt. Also hanging from the pistol belt were four M26 fragmentation grenades and two ammunition pouches holding four magazines of ammunition each.

A sheathed bayonet and first aid kit were attached to one shoulder strap and a container of battle dressing was fastened to the other. Doc tied bandages together to make a sweat band and wove more bandages through his belt loops. His pockets were stuffed with medical supplies, and GI socks packed with cooked rice tied end to end hung around his neck. He also wore a Stabo rig, a chest harness that enabled him to be plucked out of the jungle by a hovering helicopter. Every potential noisemaker was taped.

From where Doc was sitting he could see the second Huey helicopter trailing behind them. It was a cloudy day, and the clouds seemed to be coming up from the steaming jungle below where a whole world of plants struggled against one another for sunlight, the losers rotting on the jungle floor.

Doc heard Rocker shout over the sound of the helicopter, “Doc, tell the Dwarfs that there’s seven hundred bucks a piece in it for them if they can capture a North Vietnamese soldier and bring him back alive on this trip.”

Doc turned to the Dwarfs, and in Vietnamese he translated what Rocker had said to him. Sleepy held up two fingers and said, “Maybe we can get two.”

“One’s good enough,” Doc said.

Happy pointed to the 22 pistol that Doc was carrying. The main purpose of the pistol was to wound a soldier and disable him. Happy laughed and said, “Remember the last time that Doc tried to shot a VC in the leg, and he shot him in the head? We’ll never snatch anyone with Doc doing the shooting. He can’t hit shit with that thing.”

The Dwarfs all laughed at Happy’s joke.

“What the hell are you spear-chuckers laughing at?” Doc said. “I was shooting a gun when you assholes were still shooting bows and arrows.” That wasn’t that long ago, Doc thought to himself. When he and Rocker first came to the central highlands to pacify and train the mountain tribe people, the only weapons they had were bows and arrows, spears, and a few front loading antique rifles.

Grumpy pointed at the pistol and said, “I can shoot a bow and arrow better than you can shoot that.”

“I can shoot a stone better than Doc can shoot that,” Sleepy said.

Sneezy laughed and said, “I can piss better than Doc can shoot.”

“My wife can piss better than Doc can shoot,” Grumpy said, and they all laughed as one.

“Fuck you guys.”

Rocker leaned towards Doc so that he could heard, “What’s going on?”

“They’re busting my balls.”

The pilot rapped on the sidewall of the helicopter to get their attention and pointed down below, and Doc could see the landing sight up ahead, a clearing of elephant grass.

As they neared the landing sight and began to drop down, the wash of the helicopter blades matted down the elephant grass. Doc and Rocker looked for any signs of booby traps, mines, or bamboo stakes tempered in fire and planted by the enemy to pierce them like skewered meat when they jumped from the helicopter. The site looked clean, so Rocker motioned to the pilot to touch down. As the helicopter came down to land, the trailing helicopter passed overhead to hide the sound of the landing. To anyone nearby who heard the helicopters, it would sound as if they were just passing overhead.

Doc and his team hit the ground running, and when they got to the edge of the clearing and merged with the jungle, they stopped and listened for gunshots. Some Laotian tribesmen worked for the enemy as sentinels. They were armed with obsolete weapons, so they didn’t pursue the recon and strike teams. Their function was to be lookouts and warn the enemy that the Americans were coming. They did this by fired their rifles in the air. They fired a prearranged number of shots when they spotted a helicopter and when it landed. The pattern of shots signified in what sector the helicopter had landed and in what direction the recon or strike team was traveling.

Doc heard no warning shots. For twenty minutes they crouched at the edge of the clearing, motionless. They were all equipped similarly, except three of the Montagnards wore black pajamas and carried AK-47 machine guns to look like the VC. Sleepy, who hauled the “Puck 25” radio on his back, wore a tiger suit and was armed with a 5.56mm Colt Command submachine gun, and Rocker, who wore gray fatigues like Doc, was armed with a M76 grenade launcher and a 9mm Beretta in a shoulder holster*.*

Rocker motioned for them to move out. They moved slowly and quietly, and after ten minutes, they stopped again and listened. It was nearly dark now. If they could get far enough into the jungle and hide for the night and become part of the darkness, they might be safe.

For twenty minutes they waited and searched the night. There is no hurry here to get killed. If they have to, they will take a day to travel a mile, so they just squatted there and listened. The air was electric with a symphony of insects gnawing and rubbing their stick legs together like violins. Doc could hear the jungle devour itself, the silent screams of plants and trees strangling each other, but he couldn’t hear the enemy. He couldn’t hear their footsteps or smell their scent. He couldn’t hear anything human,only the sound of his own breathing and his heart beating like a single drum calling out for help over and over again.

Rocker called in their location to one of the high flying recon planes that bird dogged them at all times. He would communicate their location to the recon plane every thirty minutes. When he was finished, they moved out again.Doc was sweating profusely. His shirt was buttoned tight, and he wore a bush hat pushed down over his head to keep the ticks and blood suckers off his face and skin. One blood sucker that dropped from the trees attached itself to the barrel of his machine gun and another latched onto his boot. Doc imagined ticks crawling all over his shirt searching for access to his flesh. From time to time Doc tried to brush them off, but most of the time Doc suffered silently the agony and fear of being eaten alive piece by little piece.

Rocker pointed to a spot on a knoll. Doc saw it, and he pointed it out to the Dwarfs who nodded in recognition. They walked on until Rocker stopped at a clearing surrounded by needle trees and dwarf bamboo and motioned for them to make camp there. They took out their ponchos and tied them together to make a shelter from the rain. Doc mixed cooked rice with some water from a canteen and poured some Tabasco sauce over it, and he began to eat.

Sneezy nudged Doc and held up some dried fish that the Dwarfs had prepared. Doc took the fish and mixed it in with the rice and water. Rocker took some too.

In sign language, Grumpy said, “Doc, can you explain the meaning of our name again. Who is Thor?”

Doc had been with the four Dwarfs and the mountain people for over two years. He first encountered them when his Special Forces unit was sent to the central highlands to pacify the Rhade tribesmen and train them to defend themselves. As part of the educational program he taught them how to read and write in their own language. He also developed a sign language based on the sign language for the deaf and dumb. This was the language they communicated in when they were on a mission. It was a silent language, but it was a language nevertheless, and to the Montegnard tribesmen words were very important. Words were powerful. With words the shaman cast spells. For weeks now they had been worrying over the new name of their unit, Thor’s Hammer.

Doc, in sign language, began his story again. “Thor is a Norse God that lives in the land of snow and ice where everything is cold.”

Happy pointed to Doc and Rocker, “Like you and him.”

Doc shrugged and said, “Yes.”

“What’s snow?” asked Sleepy.

“I told you before, Sleepy. It’s white rain. Remember when we went to Saigon, the shaved icy in the glass, frozen water?”

Sleepy nodded.

“Snow,” Doc said, and he went on with the story of Thor. “Thor lives in the land of snow, and he carries a big hammer. All our lives, from the day we are born, he bangs down on us with his hammer. The more we try to grow, the more he pounds us down. Every time we get uppity, he bangs us down again and again until he finally bangs us down into a grave. Then he puts a rock over our head that we call a “gravestone” so that we can’t get uppity again. Thor is the God of Gravity.”

Doc smiled. He liked making up stories for the Dwarfs. He especially liked this story. It made a lot of sense.

All the Dwarfs nodded, and then Grumpy said, “But what happens to the spirit?”

“It’s trapped under the rock,” Doc said.

“Is Doc saying that they trap the spirit of their ancestors underground forever?” Sleepy asks Grumpy.

“Yes, it’s like when we cut off the head of our enemy,” Grumpy said.

Sleepy looked at Doc and Rocker and said, “Cold.”

It was getting very dark now, and Doc could barely see their hands, but he sees one hand say, “Maybe we should change our name.”

Another hand said, “We should call ourselves, Snow Ghosts.”

There was instant approval by all the Dwarfs. Their hands worked as one now as they told Doc that this was what they wanted.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Doc said. “Major Shaman says we have to name our units after an animal or a tool.” Major Shaman was the nickname that Doc had given the CIA intelligence officer who ran the SOG operations.

“You try. We are uneasy.”

“I will, but…”

Rocker who was keeping watch nudged Doc, and Doc signaled the Dwarfs that it was time to break camp and move out.

They quietly took apart the shelter that they had made with their ponchos and silently crept away. They moved by inches through the darkness until they had reached the first spot that Rocker had pointed out to them. This would be their real campsite for the night. Setting up a false campsite and then moving to another one was a precaution that they always took in case they’d been spotted at the landing sight, and someone was following them. Normally, the enemy would not take on a fully armed SOG unit in daylight. They’d rather wait until the SOG unit bedded down at their overnight camping site and then attack them when they were most vulnerable.

The new campsite was on top of a knoll with good cover. They silently set up their shelter again and bunched together so that they were within arm’s reach of each other. Everyone went to sleep except Happy and Sneezy who had the first watch. Four hours later, Doc was woken up. He and Grumpy had the next watch.

Starring out into the darkness, Doc remembered his first encounter with death. He was a little boy, eight years old. His family lived on the edge of a gorge, and it was a two hundred foot drop to the falls below, certain death, but his parents seemed totally oblivious to the danger. Maybe it was the frontier mentality of his parents who came from old American stock. His father’s family went west in a covered wagon in search of a homestead and settled in Ohio, and his mother claimed that she was a Daughter of the American Revolution, a descendant of Arthur Middleton, one of the original signers of the Declaration of Independence. Whatever it was, the pioneering spirit or utter neglect, Willie and his two sisters were allowed to run wild in the forests and along the edges of the gorge.

One day Willie slipped and fell into the gorge, but as he fell over the edge, he became entangled in the limbs of a baby tree that was growing out of the fissures on the side of the cliff. As he dangled from the limbs of a tree, he looked down into the gaping maw gorged out in the last Ice Age ready to swallow him up. He could hear the falls, the water that would flush him away down jagged stone steps, and he screamed for help. Suspended in air, he could see his parents in the living room. His dad was probably telling his mother about his latest book, and his mother was probably telling his dad about her latest real estate deal. They were both drinking martinis, and they were totally oblivious to his screams. It was his sisters who heard his cries and saved him by climbing out onto the limbs of the tree. Katie held Susan by her ankles as she pulled him to safety. When Doc looked over at the house, he could see his father in the window vaguely wave to them then say something to Doc’s mother that made them both laugh as he turned away and left the living room for his study.

Doc’s father was a sociology professor at Cornell University, and he was totally caught up in his work and spent most of his time in his study writing and researching books or going off to give lectures here and there. He had no time for James Caleb Brown III, or “Jimmy” as his parents liked to call him. His mother was in many ways worse than his father because he expected more from her. He expected love, but his mother had very little time for her children. She had other interests. His mother was obsessed with social status, and despite her claims of an illustrious family past, his mother’s immediate family was at best middle class, and her father was a low level supervisor at a food processing plant. To her credit she climbed out of those poor beginnings and a small town in South Carolina to go on to achieve a degree from Harvard University in English Literature. It was at Harvard that she met his father, and they got married soon after graduation. Now many years later she lived on the top of the hill in Ithaca, New York where she could play the professor’s wife at cocktail parties, organize charity campaigns to get her name in the paper, and buy real estate all over the county so that she could become the queen of the plantation once again. Doc’s mother was incapable of true love. She was the kind of woman who would embrace you and push you away at the same time. Doc hated them both. She was vain and self-absorbed, and he was pompous and bubbling over with self-importance. His father’s eyes sparkled with the knowledge of his own intelligence.

Nothing Doc did seemed to please them. The fact that he got all A’s, and he was considered gifted and talented was taken for granted. After all, he was their child. He tried to get their attention by being bad. He got B’s and C’s which to his parents were worse than F’s. They were average, or as his father would say, “normative,” which made him just another statistic. He began to smoke. No response. He hung out with the wrong boys. Nothing. He did drugs. Nothing seemed to phase their tranquility. Oh sure, he would get the perfunctory lectures on responsibility and maturity. Coming from them, it was a joke. Somehow they had managed to never grow up. His mother played monopoly and the southern belle, and his father played the wizard with cap and gown.

His sisters couldn’t get their parent’s attention either. Katie married a junkie, and Susan went off to live in a sod hut somewhere out west. Nothing his sisters did seemed to affect his parents. They would just send them money when they needed it, and his father would go back to his study, and his mother would go back to saving some poor unfortunate children half way across the world, and, at the same time, she would be evicting some poor unfortunate family half way across town because they couldn’t pay their rent.

When Doc graduated from high school, his grades were less than normative, they were downright deviant, but his father pulled some strings to get him into Cornell. He was classified as an underachiever with one special and unique talent. He had an extraordinary ability to pick up languages. When he graduated from high school he could speak French, Spanish, and German fluently. He had even invented his own language. After one year at Cornell he spoke Russian and Mandarin Chinese fluently, and he was well on his way to mastering two African tribal languages. However, no matter what language he thought in, except Mandarin Chinese, Cornell seemed like bullshit to him, so he decided to drop out of school and join the Army. It was one of the most satisfying moments in his life. His father was a dedicated pacifist, and when Doc told him that he was joining the Army, his father’s face registered total disgust, total disapproval, and, more important, his father’s face registered pain. Doc was so pleased with his father’s reaction that he signed up for the Special Forces.

As Doc stared out into the jungle, he had to stop himself from laughing into the darkness. What a fool he was.

Grumpy tapped Doc on the shoulder. His fingers played in front of Doc’s face so that he could see them. “Listen,” Grumpy said, “they're out there.”

Doc listened. At first he thought he was hearing the wind and the usual buzz of insects, but then he realized that he was listening to the sound of men creeping through the jungle and whispering to each other. The recon team must have been spotted by the enemy when they hit the landing zone, and the North Vietnamese soldiers or the Laotian tribesmen who acted as lookouts must have followed them to the original camp sight. Now the enemy was slowly encircling that spot believing that the SOG team was still there. All night, they would slowly tighten the circle. Then when daylight came, they would toss grenades into the tightly bunched SOG team and blow then into bits and pieces of dead meat to be swallowed up by the jungle.

Grumpy had awakened Rocker and the three Dwarfs, and they all stared into the darkness and listened. It was weird watching their shadows being stalked as prey. Maybe the Dwarfs were right. Maybe they were the Snow Ghost.

Just before dawn they moved out. They moved by inches, then feet, and when first light came, they moved out more quickly. They could hear the grenades go off, and they quickened their pace so as to distance themselves from the enemy.

Doc, Rocker, and the Dwarfs searched for the trail that the enemy would take. Their plan was to turn things around and ambush the NVA unit that had just tried to ambush them. They had to be careful because the enemy had many trails, and often you found the one that they wanted you to find. What you would sometimes find was a pit covered over with dirt and leaves, and at the bottom of the pit, you found bamboo spears to impale you with, or in a shallow stream you found a board studded with iron barbs. Sometimes you found a crossbow primed and attached to a trip wire or a mine made out of a coconut shell filled with gunpowder. The inventiveness of the human mind when conjuring up death never ceased to amaze Doc, but when they came to one clearing, HappyGrumpy uncovered something that they had never seen before and only heard about. They discovered a Malay Whip, a fifteen meter long thick log attached to two trees by a taunt vine rope and triggered by a trip wire. When it was tripped it would whip through a ninety degree arc one foot off the ground. It was like a giant baseball bat that could kneecap a whole patrol.

Rocker whispered to Doc, “Why not here? We can re-rig the “Whip” so that they will trigger it. We can make the snatch from the rear and wipe out everyone else. There can’t be more than fifteen or eighteen NVA in that squad. We can also rig claymore mines in back of the clearing and rig some more up front, so if the tree doesn’t get them the mines will.”

Doc nodded approval then looked around. There were some beautiful purple and blue orchids growing near some rhododendrons, and in the tree where the Malay Whip was nestled was a parrot-like bird with a long gold beak and black feathers with beautiful blue and red markings on its wing.

“God,” Doc said, “this is the most beautiful restaurant in the world. That is, if you don’t mind being on the menu.”

He turned to the Dwarfs and explained to them what he wanted them to do. They liked it. Happy and Sleepy would hang back in the rear and make the snatch. Grumpy and Sneezy would handle the claymore mines on the backside of trail and take out the NVA from there, and Doc and Rocker would spring the Whip and the claymore mines on the front side of the trail. Doc gave his twenty-two pistol with the silencer to Sleepy who smiled in triumph. Doc and Rocker quickly set the mines, and then they rearranged the trip wires for the trap.

The Malay Whip was suspended high above the trail, and the trip wire was strung between two small trees. Rocker and Doc suspended a new trip wire five feet beyond the original wire, and they hoped the NVA wouldn’t see. Doc and Rocker then camouflaged themselves and became a part of the jungle. As Doc was waiting and wondering if the NVA would come down the trail that they had chosen for the ambush, Doc heard something strange behind him. He listened more carefully then signaled to Rocker to listen.

“What?” Rocker whispered.

“Don’t you hear it?”

“What?”

“It sounds like a truck.”

Rocker listened more carefully then whispered, “You’re right. It does sound like a fuckin truck, more than one, maybe a mile or less away.”

Doc put his finger to his lips and pointed.

The first NVA soldier appeared on the pathway. The rest followed. They were moving slowly in single file, and they were following the trail that he and Rocker anticipated that they would follow. When the NVA got to the trip wire that they themselves had set for the Malay Whip they simply stepped over it, warning each other of its presence, but then one of the North Vietnamese soldiers tripped the second trip wire that Doc and Rocker had set, and the log whipped across the clearing. The NVA soldiers were knocked over like bowling pins. Mangled bodies flew in the air. One soldier was minus a leg and spraying blood like a red jungle flower in bloom. The six NVA who had avoided the trap ran forward across the clearing. Rocker fired his grenade launcher, and Doc set off the Claymore mines that fired 700 steel pellets each. The blasts from the grenades and the Claymore mines, the thousands of flying steel pellets, and the grenade fragments cut the NVA soldiers into shreds. Doc should have been horrified, but over time he had become anesthetized to the blood and gore. He had become a butcher, and he could only be amazed by how human beings could so easily become monsters or saints.

The silence was deadening after the explosions. There were no screams from the wounded. They were all dead except for the two handcuffed North Vietnamese soldiers that Sleepy, Sneezy, and Happy led into the clearing. Doc noticed that Sleepy, Sneezy, and Happy had tears in their eyes. Doc became alarmed, “Where’s Grumpy?”

“He’s dead,” Sleepy said. “He was shot in the head during the fire fight.”

Doc felt a deep sorrow. He had grown to love the Dwarfs.

Rocker felt bad too. The Reverend could see it in his face, but there was no time for sorrow in the middle of a battle. Rocker picked up the phone from the radio that Sleepy was carrying, and he contacted the high flying reconnaissance plane that was always trailing them. He told him the situation. A few minutes later the recon pilot got back to him. “Charlie-Charlie has an extraction team on the way, Hammer. They will meet you at the alternative landing zone at 0200 hours, over.”

“Roger, Bird Dog,” Rocker said then turned to the Dwarfs and said, “You take Grumpy and the two prisoners back to the landing zone now. Make certain it is clear. Doc and I are going to check out something. I think we may have found the main trail.”

“Wait a minute, Rocker,” Doc said. “The NVA had to hear this fire fight. They’re going to be checking this shit out.”

“We got time, Doc. Come on. This is what we are here for.” Rocker headed for the other end of the clearing, and Doc took the radio from Sleepy and hurried to catch up to Rocker.

They picked up the trail and followed it up the side of a mountain. When they neared the top of the mountain, they could hear the sound of truck engines again, and when they reached the top of the mountain and looked down below, they could see trucks through the canopy of trees. Doc and Rocker slowly and carefully descended the slope. When Doc saw steps built into the mountain to make ascending and descending the slope easier, he knew that they were on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and below the NVA had built a road wide enough for trucks to drive on. That was what all the noise was about. The trucks were driven up to this point, unloaded, and then they turned around to go back home. They had hit the jackpot. This was the main trail, and there had to be a depot nearby.

Rocker motioned to Doc for the radio. Seconds later he contacted the recon plane. In a coded message Rocker informed the pilot of their sighting and gave him the coordinates. A few minutes later the recon pilot was back to him.

“The birds are on the way.”

“Let’s get the hell out of here, Doc.”

“That’s a fuckin understatement.”

They climbed back up the mountain. Near the top they looked back down and could see North Vietnamese soldiers climbing up the trail after them. Rocker and Doc dropped their packs and ran like hell. When they broke into the clearing where they had ambushed the NVA, Doc stopped dead.

On top of the log that had done so much of the killing were the heads of the NVA soldiers that they had killed in the ambush, all lined up in a one neat row. On top of each head was a rock.

“Jesus Christ!” Doc said, and then he started running for his life again. When he came to the landing zone, the chopper and the Dwarfs were waiting for him in the clearing. There was a gun ship overhead. With a final burst of energy he and Rocker raced to the chopper, jumped in, and they were airborne in seconds. As the helicopter gained altitude, they saw the recon plane swoop low and drop smoke bombs to mark the spot for the three F-4 Phantoms that appeared minutes later. They roared in low over the jungle and dropped cluster bombs on the coordinates that Rocker had given them. There were a series of flash explosions then a large secondary explosion that ignited the jungle into a barbeque.

The helicopter made a long sweep out of the flight path of the jets and headed home. Doc could see three more F-4s armed with napalm bombs coming in. They wouldn’t be seeing the rest of the cookout.

On the way back to their base camp, Doc stared into Grumpy’s dead face. Grumpy’s real name was Da KoHo. He was twenty-eight years old when he died. He had been a hunter all his life, yet he dreamed of being a farmer. He dreamt of his tribe being literate and healthy and prosperous and independent of both the North and South Vietnamese. At one time, Doc and Da KoHo had dreamed those dreams together, but many broken promises later, all that Grumpy had was a life insurance policy. This was why he joined SOG. His death would be worth something to his family.

Sleepy, Sneezy, and Happy were grief stricken. In a tribal society, the loss of a member of that tribe was like losing a body part. The pain was deep and organic. They looked at the two NVA prisoners with utter hatred. The prisoners’ hands were handcuffed behind their back, and their legs were tied. They had duct tape across their mouths, but their eyes expressed total terror as they stared back at the Dwarfs. God knows what they were told would happen to them if they were captured. Most of it was true. Cutting your enemy’s head off in this war was not unusual. The Vietnamese believed that if you cut a man’s head off he couldn’t join his ancestors, and he would be condemned to wander as a ghost. If the NVA had killed the Montagnards, they would have probably done the same thing and stuck the heads up on poles as a warning to others.

Doc noticed that Happy had a gash on his forehead. He had been creased by a bullet. Doc dressed the wound and then observed that one of the prisoners had a bullet hole in his leg. He examined the wound. It was from the twenty-two pistol that Doc had given Happy. The bullet had gone clean through the leg. Doc was about to dress the wound when Sleepy stuck his finger in the wound. The prisoner jumped so high he hit his head on the roof of the helicopter.

“Cut it out, Sleepy,” Doc snapped. Doc gave the North Vietnamese soldier a shot to prevent a possible infection and then dressed the wound.

When the helicopter landed, Doc went to his tent to clean up and change his clothes, and when he got to the group’s headquarters, one of the prisoners was waiting for him in the interrogation room. Doc could hear Rocker in the office typing up a report. Sneezy was at the door guarding the prisoner.

Doc had been interrogating prisoners for a long time now. It was one of his main jobs, and he was good at it, primarily because he had a genuine sympathy for the prisoners.

Doc offered the prisoner a cigarette. The prisoner took the cigarette, and Doc lit it for him and asked in Vietnamese, “What is your name?”

“Le Tang,” the prisoner said.

“Well, Le Tang, let’s get right to the point. It’s useless to withhold information from me because if you don’t talk to me, I will have to turn you over to the Montagnards.”

The young man was frightened to death. He could hear his comrade being tortured somewhere outside. He could hear the screams, and he could see the hatred in Sneezy’s eyes.

“How old are you, and where do you come from?”

The young man glanced over at Sneezy and then said, “I’m twenty-two years old. I come from a farm cooperative outside of Hanoi.”

Le Tang was about average height and weight for a Vietnamese his age. Doc estimated that he was about five foot two and weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds. “Are you a party member?” Doc asked.

“No, I’m a Buddhist, but I believe in the revolution.”

“So you were eager to come down south and fight.”

“I didn’t want to leave home. I don’t like being away from my family, but it was my duty to fight the Americans.”

“Why do you think we’re here?”

“To take what the French lost.”

“And what is that?”

“The plantations, the rice, and when you have that, you’ll invade the North.”

“You hate us?”

Le Tang looked Doc straight in the eyes and said, “Yes, you have bombed our country and destroyed what took years of sacrifice to build. I myself have worked on two public works projects, but, now everything is gone. I think the communists are right. Nothing will satisfy you. The more you take, the more you want.”

“So then, you volunteered for the army.”

Le Tang smiled in triumph, “Yes.”

“Tell me about your trip down south. After your training where did you go from there?”

Le Tang hesitated, but then he heard the screams again, and he continued. “We were shipped by train to Dong Hoe in southern North Vietnam where we received a week’s supply of dry field rations - sugar, salt, tea, cans of condensed milk, salted meat, and rice. More rice was available to us along the way. To escape detection by American aircraft, we marched at night to the southwest corner of the DMZ where we rested for several days in a place called, “Ho Village”, several days walk from the Laotian border. There we exchanged army uniforms for the black pajamas of the VC, and we began our journey down a maze of paths, trails and roads that you call the Ho Chi Minh Trail.”

“How did you leave, in what numbers? Did you all leave together, or did you spread it out?”

“They broke us up into companies or battalions, and we left at two or three day intervals. We weren’t told where we were or where we were going. All we knew was that we were going south.”

“Who guided you?”

“We picked up different guides at different parts of the trail, and the guides only knew their section of the trail. I guess that was for security reasons.”

“I guess so. Tell me about your average day on the trail.”

Le Tang shrugged and said, “We marched.”

Doc saw Le Tang looking at his cigarettes, and he offered him another one. Le Tang’s hands were shaking. The screams from outside were even unnerving Doc, but he continued the interrogation. “So tell me more. How much did your pack weigh?”

“About sixty pounds.”

“So you got up in the morning and then what happened? What time was it?”

“We got up at three-thirty in the morning and marched from four in the morning to eleven o’clock. After breaking for lunch, we marched out again until six in the evening. We rested ten minutes for each hour we walked and took one day off out of every five. We covered some fifteen to twenty-five kilometers per day, depending on the terrain. It was very difficult. Many men died.”

“How did you end up where we captured you? What were you doing there?”

“When we came to the depot, my company was detached from the main body of the column. Our job was to patrol the area and protect the weapons and ammunition that were stored there.”

Doc handed Le Tang a map and a pencil. “Trace the trail for me. From Dong Hoe to where you were stationed.”

Doc watched Le Tang struggle with the task, but finally he was able to draw a snake-like line down the map to where Doc and his unit had snatched him.

“Where is the storage facility?”

Le Tang pointed out the location of the storage facility. It was about half a mile off the road.

“What about the road?”

“They have been working on the road for the last six months,” Le Tang smiled, “I was told that soon we would be driving tanks down the road on the way to Saigon.”

Doc had heard most of this before. What Le Tang was saying was generally true. The road however was new, and the storage facility was a stroke of luck.

A blood curdling scream came from outside the headquarters building, and it made the young man shit his pants. The stench was awful, and Doc felt ashamed, but Doc took advantage of the moment.

“Show me every god damned trail along the area you patrol, every trap,” Doc snapped. “And if I find out that you lied about anything, I’m going to turn you over to the Rhades out there.”

Le Tang was terrified. He began to point out the trails to Doc. Doc gave him another map that was a much more detailed map of that sector. Le Tang was diligent. He was desperately trying to convince Doc of his truthfulness. Because Doc was an interrogator and a member of SOG, Doc had access to most intelligence reports, and he knew more about the war in Vietnam than most anyone. He knew more than this young man. He know that if Le Tang had continued his journey he would have been guided by Montagnards working for the Vietcong on a month long back breaking march through the highlands of Laos to the Vietnamese border of Kontum Province where he would join forces with VC units operating in the province. Doc knew that there were now three regiments of NVA totaling fifty eight hundred men fighting in the south and more were on the way.

Therefore, it was no surprise to Doc when he found a NVA uniform in Le Tang’s pack. Also in the pack were black and yellow underwear, socks, a sweater, a belt, and a khaki hat. His bivouac equipment included a sheet of nylon about eight feet wide that served as a ground cloth or tent, a length of rope to suspend the tent, a linen hammock, a mosquito net, an entrenching tool, a canteen, and a mess kit with a tin bowl, a water cup, and a spoon. The medical kit contained bandages and cotton, water purifying and anti-diarhea pills. Under the ammunition for the AK47 rifle, he found two pieces of carboard tied together. Inside the two pieces of carboard, folded carefully inside rice paper, was a picture of a couple who looked in their late forties. They were standing in a rice field, the sky was blue, and they were smiling broadly.

Doc showed the picture to the prisoner.

“My mother and father.”

In another picture there were two teenage girls and a boy in his early teens. They were standing in front of a statue of Ho Chi Minh. Judging by the traffic and the buildings in the background, they were in Hanoi. The teenagers were smiling broadly as if to say, look where I am. Doc showed the prisioner this picture.

“My sisters and brother.”

The last picture was a picture of a single girl in her teens. It looked like a graduation picture. She had a beautiful smile. She was coming of age, and she was in love. Doc showed the picture to Le Tang.

“My girlfriend. We’re engaged to be married.”

Le Tang looked Doc in the eyes. The eyes said, Look, I’m a human being too. I have a family, sisters and brother, and I have a girl who loves me, and I love her.

Doc took a pair of socks, underwear, a pair of khaki pants, a sweater, and Le Tang’s khaki hat from the rucksack. He put the clothes in front of Le Tang, unlocked the handcuffs, and said, “Clean yourself up, change your clothes.” He handed him the pictures. “Put these in your pocket, and don’t worry. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

Doc helped Le Tang up. Rocker was standing in the doorway of his office watching. There was a knock on the door. It was Happy, Sleepy, and another dwarf who Doc did not recognize. They had blood all over them. They looked horrible.

Happy pointed to the prisoner. “We want him.”

Behind him, Doc could hear Rocker say, “This is getting a little too fuckin’ rare for me.” He stepped forward and pointed at the Dwarfs. “You listen to me you little sons-of-a bitches. Because we snatched this guy alive, Doc and I are getting four days R&R in Saigon, and you’re getting seven hundred bucks a piece. Seven-hundred dollars is going to Grumpy’s family. If you touch a fuckin’ hair on this guy’s head, there’s going to be more heads rolling around here!”

Rocker turned to Doc, “You tell them that, Doc.”

Doc translated for the Dwarfs. They thought about it for a moment, then they saluted Doc and Rocker. Happy pointed to the new Montagnard that they had with them and said, “This is the new Grumpy.”

Doc shook the man’s hand and said, “Nice to have you back, Grumpy.”

Rocker shook hands with him too then ordered Sneezy to watch the prisoner.

Doc and Rocker walked out of the building. Sleepy, Happy, and the new Grumpy followed behind them. A helicopter was ready to take Doc and Rocker to Saigon. Doc couldn’t wait. A beer, a bath, some pussy, and a good night’s sleep would be like heaven to him.

On his way to the helicopter, Doc saw the body of the other prisoner. He had been gutted and beheaded.

The Montagnards were not monsters. They were an incredibly generous people who shared everything with one another. They believd that whatever was taken in this life had to be given back. It was sort of an eternal cycle of life theory of energy. By killing their friend, the enemy took vital life energy away from the tribe and that energy has to be restored. Grumpy’s life force had been lost, now it was replaced by the life force of the dead NVA soldier. It was more than an eye for an eye. It was a spiritual transplant.

When Doc looked more closly at the severed head, he noticed that there was a rock on this head too. He turned to the dwarfs and said, “When I get back, we need to have another talk about the God of Gravity.”