

## Prologue

The time is now. James Caleb Brown is at Arlington Cemetery amidst an army of white gravestones. He is standing in front of the graves of his two best friends, Charlie Tremaine and Bob Sumner. In the background, he hears gun fire coming from the direction of the Capitol Building and the National Mall where supporters of the president have assembled. The president, whose supporters like to call him The Boss, was recently indicted for crimes against the State; and in Congress, the House has initiated impeachment proceedings accusing the President of colluding with a foreign power for personal gain.

Recently the president called on his followers to march on Washington in protest, and they have come, and they have come armed, thousands upon thousands of them, many of whom are veterans. Based on the news that James Caleb Brown was receiving from his cell phone, one hundred thousand people are laying siege to the Capital and the battle has begun.

How did we get to where we are now? It seemed to James Caleb Brown, who was called the Reverend by his friends because he was the post chaplain at the VFW, that with each war that we have fought, we have become madder and madder, and, now, in an ultimate act of madness, we have turned against each other, and we are at the threshold of a civil war. What have we done wrong? What is it that we have left unresolved? What have we lost or ignored? What is gnawing at our bones?

The ancients believed that everyone of us is a reflection of the universe, and the universe reflects us, that we are the microcosm of the macrocosm, and like the DNA in each individual cell, we can recreate the whole body of truth in our individual stories. That may be so, the Reverend thought, because, somehow, he believed that the answer is here, with Bob, with him, with Charlie, and with all the men buried here who sacrificed their lives for their country and haunted our history. Here, today, the past that has been buried in our forgotten memories has risen from the dead and is alive amongst us raging at the nexus of are being.

“Beware!” the Reverend shouted to no one and everyone. This is a cautionary tale that we ignore at our own peril.

## The Snow Ghosts

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, and he was a part of a six man unit that included Doc, Rocker, and four Montagnard tribesmen from the central highlands of Vietnam who they nicknamed Happy, Grumpy, Sleepy, and Sneezzy 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.

Doc was observing the Huey helicopter trailing behind them and listening to the racket they were making and smiled to himself and thought, the American eagle sure makes a hell of a lot of noise for a stealth operation. He then looked down at their target zone, a steaming jungle where a whole world of plants struggled against one another for sunlight, the losers rotting on the jungle floor, food for the winners.

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. 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 to the other Dwarfs, "Remember the last time that Doc tried to shoot 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 hear, "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, they merged with the jungle and listened for gunshots. Laotian tribesmen were paid by the enemy to work as sentinels. They were armed with obsolete weapons, so they didn't pursue the recon and strike teams or engage them in battle. Their function was to be lookouts and warn the enemy that the Americans were coming by firing their rifles in the air in prearranged patterns that would not only tell the Viet Cong that the Americans were coming but also from where, what sector.

Doc heard no warning shots. For twenty minutes they crouched at the edge of the clearing, motionless. Doc was carrying a M45, 9mm, "Swedish K" submachine gun, and a HD 22 caliber

pistol with a silencer. In his Vietnamese rucksack, along with his jungle survival equipment and supplies, he was carrying two claymore mines and twenty magazines of ammunition. Hanging on his pistol belt were four fragmentation grenades and two ammunition pouches holding four magazines of ammunition each. Because Doc was the medic in the unit, along with a sheathed bayonet, he carried a first aid kit attached to one shoulder strap and a container of battle dressings were fastened to the other strap. Doc had tied bandages together to make a sweatband and wove more bandages through his belt loops. His pockets were stuffed with medical supplies, and his socks, packed with cooked rice, were tied end-to-end and hung around his neck. Every potential noisemaker was tied down.

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.

They were only the tip of the eagle’s claws. The modern version of the American eagle was a bio/mechanical monster that through an electronic nerve network of communications connected them to the recon plane flying high up and out of sight that would dog them night and day, and it was connected to the command post that, with a word, could unleash back-up attack units on the border and the Super Sabers, Sky Raiders, F-4 Phantoms jets and B-52s nesting in Vietnam, on carriers, in Thailand and Japan. The wings of the American eagle cast a vast dark shadow of terror, but in the end, Doc thought, it was boots on the ground that won a war.

Rocker motioned for them to move out. They moved slowly and quietly, and at staggered intervals, they stopped, listened, and scanned the jungle for the enemy. They meticulously repeated this procedure again and again using all their senses to determine if danger was near. It was nearly dark, and the objective was to get far enough into the jungle so they could hide for the night and become part of the darkness.

Rocker signaled for them to halt their movement. For twenty minutes they waited and searched the night. They were in no hurry to get killed. Sometimes, they would take a day to travel a mile.

Doc 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, again and again.

Rocker called in their location to the recon plane. 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 Montagnard 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.

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

“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 saw one hand say, “Maybe we should change our name.”

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

There was instantaneous 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 to 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 by Happy. He and Grumpy had the next watch.

Staring 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 deep gorge, 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 they settled in Ohio. 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 ran 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 like it was his crib, he looked down into the gaping maw that had been gorged out in the last Ice Age ready to swallow him up. He could hear the falls, the water that would flush him away over 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 at him then turn away, say something that made his mother laugh, then turn away and leave 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 Williamson 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 send them money when they needed it, and his father would then go back to his study, and his mother would go back to her charities and save some poor unfortunate children halfway across the world. At the same time, she would be evicting some poor unfortunate family halfway



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, but only God gets to do that, laugh at death in the face of folly.

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 them into bits and pieces of dead meat to be swallowed up by the jungle and all the carnivores out there ready to join in the feast of flesh and body parts.

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 heard the grenades go off, and they quickened their pace to distance themselves from the enemy.

Doc, Rocker, and the Dwarfs marked 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 found sometimes 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 from coconut shells 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, Happy 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 ready to be triggered by a trip wire. Doc figured that when it was tripped it would whip through in 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 NVA in that squad, maybe less. We can also rig claymore mines 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 wings.

“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 the trail and take out the NVA from there. 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 arranged the new trip wire 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 it. 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, “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 yet how fragile we were.

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 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, “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 him.

They picked up the trail and followed it up the side of a mountain. When they neared the top of the mountain, they heard the truck engines again, and when they reached the top of the mountain and looked down below, they saw 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, and 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. Doc saw three more F-4s armed with napalm bombs coming in, but they wouldn't be seeing the rest of the cookout. They were on their way home.

On the way back to their base camp, Doc stared into Grumpy's dead face. Grumpy's real name was Da Ko Ho. 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 Ko Ho had dreamed those dreams together, but many broken promises later, all that Grumpy had was a life insurance policy gratis the US. This was why he joined SOG. His death would be worth something to his family.

Sleepy, Sneezzy, 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 told Doc that 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. Not bad, the bullet had gone clean through the leg, and it didn't hit an artery. 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.

When the helicopter landed, Doc first went to his tent to clean up and change his clothes, and then he went to the group's headquarters. When he got there, one of the prisoners was waiting for him in the interrogation room. Rocker in the office typing a report, and 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 terrified. 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." He hesitates, then defiantly said, "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, the land, and when you have that, you’ll invade the North.”

“This is what your leaders told you?”

“Yes.”

“And you believe them?”

“Yes.”

“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, and I have lost friends, and they have lost family in those bombing raids. I think the communists are right. Nothing will satisfy you. The more you consume, the more you want.”

“So then, you volunteered for the army.”

“Yes.”

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

Le Tang hesitated, but Doc could see that despite his defiance and show of bravery, Le Tang was desperately afraid. Doc needed a convincer, a visual and audio aid. He picked up Le Tang’s rucksack and began to sort through it, and he was not surprised when he found an NVA uniform in Le Tang’s pack, it only confirmed that Le Tang was North Vietnamese Army. Doc dug through Le Tang’s clothes, his bivouac equipment and his mess kit. Under his mosquito net and some AK-47 clips, he found what he was looking for. He untied two pieces of cardboard and in-between the two pieces of cardboard, 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 pictures to the prisoner and asked, “Who?”

“My mother and father.”

In another picture were two girls and a boy in their 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 Le Tang the picture.

“My sisters and brother.”

The last picture was a picture of a single girl in her teens. It was a coming of age picture of a girl in love. She had a beautiful smile. Doc held up her picture as if she was Kuan Yin, the Vietnamese Goddess of Love and Compassion.

There were tears in the young man’s eyes, “My girlfriend. We are engaged to be married.”

Doc stood up and opened the door to the interrogation room so that the young man could hear the screams more clearly. Then he squatted down in front of him, eye to eye. He put his hand on Le Tang’s shoulder to comfort him. The young man was shaking. As he showed Le Tang the pictures again, one by one, he said, “Trust me. I don’t want to turn you over to them. Answer my questions truthfully and accurately, and I promise you, at the end of this fuckin war, you will be able to go back to them, to her. Don’t be a fool. There are no heroes here.”

Le Tang began to cry. Doc paused long enough for the young man to compose himself and then he said, “Now, where were we? Oh, yes, tell me about your trip south. After your training, where did you go from there?”

Le Tang seemed to have accepted the reality of his situation. He wanted to survive, so he began to tell his story. According to Le Tang they were shipped by train to Dong Hoe in southern North Vietnam where they received a week’s supply of dry field rations - sugar, salt, and tea, cans of condensed milk, salted meat, and rice. More rice was available to them along the way. To escape detection by American aircraft, they marched at night to the southwest corner of the DMZ where they rested for several days in a place called, “Ho Village”, several days walk from the Laotian border. There they exchanged army uniforms for the black pajamas of the VC, and they began their journey down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.”

Doc pressed the prisoner further, “How did you leave, in what numbers, Doc asked. “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. 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.”

Doc saw Le Tang looking at his cigarettes, and he offered him another one. Le Tang’s hands were still shaking. The screams from outside were even unnerving Doc, but he continued the interrogation. “So, 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. We were warned of your presence, and we picked up your trail.”

“And shit happened.”

The young man shrugged.

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 turning of the trail into a road, however, was new, and the storage facility was a stroke of luck.

“Continue,” Doc said.

Le Tang shrugged. “I don’t know anymore.”

Doc knew that the prisoner knew a lot more. but he was losing him because he was unwilling to give the inevitable command. Sneezy, who had been listening to the interrogation, knew too, and he did not hesitate. He came over to the young man, grabbed him by the hair, and dragged him out of the room so he could see what needed to be seen. Doc heard a blood curdling scream

and then a thud, the sound of the prisoner's decapitated head hitting the ground. Then there was silence.

Sneezy dragged the prisoner back into the interrogation room. He was squirming like a worm on a hook. Sneezy threw him down in front of Doc and said, "Now, you tell the Snow Ghost what he wants to fuckin know, or you are next."

Le Tang had shit his pants. The stench was awful, and Doc felt ashamed, but he 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 gone. He was broken. 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. Doc was an interrogator and a member of SOG, so he 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 knew 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.

Doc studied the prisoner. There was nothing left. 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 and 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 Montagnard that they had with them, someone Doc had never seen before. "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. He was desperately in need of a drink. Alcohol was his only escape.

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 believed 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 had 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 closely 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."