

CRAIG KEE STRETE: THE GAME OF CAT AND EAGLE

The Marine band played the Air Force hymn loud enough to scare the eagle. He wasn't happy in the cage anyway, no eagle ever is. When I stepped off the chopper at Cam Ranh Bay, the caged eagle under my arm, made me conspicuous.

Colonel Ranklin, a very correct soldier, impeccably starched, met me with a jeep at the end of the pier. The smell of the harbor, a heavy tang of oil and salt water mingled with sewage, struck my nostrils.

"I have orders to take you to your next transport," said Colonel Ranklin, saluting smartly.

There was a look of displeasure on his face. He expected possibly high brass, or somebody with appropriately high covert status, anything but a long haired Indian with a caged eagle.

I got into the jeep, glad to drop the cage. I had a couple of wounds where the eagle had got at me through the bars.

It was hot and the heat rolled over me like a wave, the uncomfortable way it does when the air is dark and heavy before a storm. The air seemed to burn my lungs and there was a sharp metallic taste in my mouth.

The sky above me glowed strangely with a blue that I had never seen before. It hurt my eyes and the sudden pain forced me to close them. The pain told me that I was in another world. A world where death has another color.

"You are the Mystery Guest?"

"I guess so. I've got a name too, call me Lifeseeker. You can't blame the code name on me. They always make a game out of everything."

"Right," said Colonel Ranklin, climbing into the jeep. He threw the jeep into gear and we were off. He never looked back, driving at a half slow and very cautious pace through the dock area.

In the distance, I heard the sharp crack of automatic weapon fire, and the dull baroom of incoming mortars. It sounded close enough to be a threat but we drove on as if it was all very far away. We threaded our way through what seemed like millions of tons of military cargo, awaiting transshipment.

Colonel Ranklin kept his back straight. Perhaps he had been born with a back like that, formed to fit against the wall.

There was a coldness about him I didn't like, and he hadn't asked for proper identification or shown his own either. He had the eyes of an animal that kills for the joy of it.

They had issued me a standard sidearm but I had turned it back in. Where the eagle and I were going, guns wouldn't help. But now, pondering the silent figure driving the jeep, I felt threatened and wished I had a weapon.

We went past a large storage shed and he turned the wheel abruptly to the right.

Two men lounging beside the shed sprang into action. They jerked on ropes and a steel-shuttered door slid up. The jeep slewed, righted itself and we shot into the open doorway.

As soon as we had made it inside, the heavy doors clanged shut behind us with a bang. It was pitch black inside and I reached for a gun that was not there.

The lights went on, flooding the interior with blazing light. The eagle screamed in fury beside me, shaking its cage.

A tall man in a crisply laundered business suit sat on a chair, flanked by heavily armed men of the 315th Air Commando Group. Even sitting, he seemed to tower over those men standing around him.

My driver got out of the jeep and walked away, not looking back. He lit a cigarette and strolled behind a stack of ammo cases.

"Don't bother getting out of the jeep, Lifeseeker." said the man in civilian clothes. "I won't keep you very long."

"Who are you? Why am I being detained?"

The man winced. "Hardly detained. Let us say momentarily delayed. I'm Hightower. I'm with the CIA."

"Somehow, I'm not surprised," I said.

"You know, this is a war we could win, I want you to know that I honestly believe that. I don't think I would like to see it end prematurely. We still need more time," There was a great deal to be read in his face. It was as much a warrior's mask as it was a human face.

I studied him. He had a lean face, a killer's face but a kind of sadness suffused his features. He projected a fatherly aura, radiating a charm and warmth that probably did not exist.

"What does this have to do with me?" I asked. The eagle shrieked and flung itself at the bars of its cage as it had done many times before.

He smiled and I felt a cold wind as if something had stirred the air above a grave. "Let us say that civilized as we may seem, America is no more civilized than we choose to be. Do we make war with logic and precision and science? The Pentagon would have us believe so. But you and I, Lifeseeker, we know differently. Hitler had his astrologers. Eisenhower had a rabbit's foot in his pocket throughout the war. War brings out the mystic need for answers in the most civilized of men."

"I am surprised. You seem to know what my mission is. I was told that no one would know," I said and I knew this was truly a dangerous man. And a dying man as well. I could feel it, almost see it glowing beneath his skin, an unstoppable cancer, a shadow riotously burgeoning with dark unlife.

"How I know is unimportant. But make no mistake about it, my friend, I am deeply concerned by what you are about to do. I don't like it. I detest it just as I detest all of the tired old, mystical, religious mumbo jumbo of the past. I am an irreligious man. Winning is my religion."

"If you were to ask me, I would say you are a very religious man," I said, borrowing some of the eagle's wisdom. "If you were not, you would not so deeply fear what I am about to do."

The man jerked as if struck. his face greyed and he looked down at his hands. They were white, long and pale, like blind worms from a subterranean cave. There was a pallor about the man that suggested that he seldom saw the sun, sitting like a spider in his dark web, spinning shiny nets to entrap his prey.

"Perhaps you are right," he said and he looked at me strangely. "You are not what I expected."

He looked at me carefully, as if trying to figure out just how dangerous I was by the way I looked.

I did not make an intimidating figure. I have long black, very unmilitary hair. I am not tall, neither am I particularly handsome. My face is too thin, my eyes are too large with things that walk through the thousand thousand dark nights of man. The military uniform I wore was much too big for me. I was more bone than muscle. Hollywood would never have cast me as a warrior or a medicine man.

In my own way though, I was both.

"I think you expected to see an old man, rattling skulls and waving eagle feathers and chanting mysterious chants. Something like that."

"Yes." His smile was almost real now. "Perhaps, if you looked like a fake, I might be more inclined to dismiss you as a childish whim on his part. But then I've read your dossier and the background information. Even if only a tenth of it is true, it disturbs me. It's well outside what I consider my, uh, well, call it sphere of influence, in a manner of speaking that is. Consequently, I can't make up my mind if you are dangerous or just a particularly clever hoax or a

combination of both. Whether you are or not, you are a serious inconvenience. I may act to remedy that."

"What do you want with me? I don't think you have the authority to stop me, if that's what you've got in mind."

"I could kill you," he said smoothly, his tone devoid of menace. "Perhaps you'll be unfortunate enough to attract a sniper. This area is hit so often with snipers, we call them duty snipers. I could arrange it."

Colonel Ranklin had returned. He seemed nervous, a cigarette burning in the corner of his mouth. I noticed he had one hand on the butt of his sidearm. He was the kind of man I sensed would be a duty sniper, if required.

"I'm sure you could," I said and then I lost all fear of Hightower, suddenly knowing he was just scared. Terrified. Of me, of what I stood for.

I motioned to Colonel Ranklin. "Let's go driver. We've wasted enough time here."

Hightower stood up, moving angrily toward the jeep. He put his hand on the door of the jeep, his mouth set in a grim line.

"I haven't said you could go yet. I haven't decided if you'll EVER go."

"Yes you have." I felt sorry for him. "Because you want to know the answer as badly as the man who sent me. You'd kill me because you wanted to change the answer, that I believe, but you'd never kill me, knowing that I may be the only one who can reveal the answer. You are more afraid of not knowing than knowing."

Colonel Ranklin now had his weapon out. I heard a click as the safety of the weapon was disengaged.

Hightower turned and looked back at him. Their eyes met and for a second it almost seemed as if he would attempt to stop me in a forever kind of way. Ranklin waited for an order.

"Drive him," said Hightower, and his shoulders slumped.

Ranklin looked disappointed as he reholstered his gun. The heavy doors went up and Ranklin got back into the jeep.

Hightower put his hand on my arm, like a supplicant seeking favor from the gods. "I'd rather have it that this little detour I arranged for you never took place. Don't tell anyone I talked to you. I'd appreciate it." The sadness was on his face again.

"Who would I tell?" I said, as the jeep began backing out of the shed. "I never met you, and if anyone asks why we're late, I'll tell them Colonel Ranklin stopped to pay a visit to a whorehouse to pick up his laundry and have his back ironed straight in the usual military fashion."

I heard Hightower laughing as we drove away. Even laughing, the man sounded scared.

Ranklin never spoke again. I knew he was a skilled assassin, and looking at him I dreamlooked to see how he would die. The great lizard spoke to me and the wind of vision was at my back.

I saw Ranklin in a Saigon bar, drinking whiskey with a Vietnamese whore. He never took his eyes off of her. She preferred to be with him when her eyes were closed. She liked his money very much and that was about all she did like.

He thought she loved him.

I looked up at the sky to the strange blueness. I saw things where the clouds walked. I saw the other color of death here. I dreamsaw a Vietnamese woman pull the pin from an American grenade and toss it into the nightclub. It hit the back wall of the club and rolled toward Ranklin's table.

To save the girl, Colonel Ranklin fell on the grenade.

It was a good death for an assassin.

A little honor for a man who had none.

Now that I was here and another might come after me, his death would happen but perhaps in a way less honorable but just as swift and sure.

CHAPTER TWO

I made my next transport in time. Another chopper. On board, I fed the eagle another chunk of raw meat.

Ungrateful, the eagle expressed a preference for my fingers as I tried to thrust the meat through the bars of the cage.

The eagle and I are not friends. My totem and my vision ally is a lizard, the Ancient of Reptiles, the Eagle's enemy. Perhaps the eagle senses this and regards me as its enemy, perhaps I am simply contaminated with too much contact with men.

The unrelenting heat seemed to strike against us as the chopper sped toward my next jumping off place.

The chopper pilot noticed my discomfort. "Welcome to Sauna City," he said, waving his thumb to the left toward Da Nang as we passed near it. "At noon, you can fry rice in your helmet while you're wearing it."

"Any advice for a new recruit?" I asked.

"You mean other than shooting yourself in the foot so you can get the hell out of here?"

"Other than that."

The chopper pilot looked at my dark skin, dark eyes and slightly built body in the uniform at least a size too big for it.

"I guess the standard warnings apply, you know, don't volunteer for anything except sex. Think with your legs when there's more of them than there are of you. Shoot first, find out later. When in doubt, it's the enemy. Back where you did basic, you probably already heard all that gas being passed. It's the unofficial truth."

"I'm not a regular recruit. I haven't had basic training. I haven't heard the standard things. I don't know what to expect."

"That makes sense. You all pardon me saying so," he said in a lazy Texas drawl. "But you ain't exactly sporting a military look with the hair there sport. Now I see lots of long hairs, after they've parked here for a while, but you're the first greenie to arrive with it. You must be an Indian or a Mexican."

"I could plead guilty to one of those," I said, looking back to see how the eagle was taking to the chopper ride.

He seemed fairly quiet. I found that strapping his cage near an open door seemed to make him content. The air rushing in must have made him think he was flying.

"So what?"

"If I were you Tonto or Pronto or whichever you are, I'd practice looking as white as possible. Over here the weirdness swallows you. It's best to look like just one side not two."

We had arrived at our destination. I meant to ask him what he meant by that statement but he got busy landing us so I let it ride.

He hunched forward over the controls as he brought the chopper in. I saw the darkening spot on his back where the flak would catch him and tear his insides out.

I jumped out the door of the chopper as soon as we touched down.

"Eagle for eating or do you ride it around?" said the pilot, as he began handing down the cage to me. "This not eagle, white boy, this is Texas chicken," I said with a grin.

The pilot touched the door frame of the chopper. "Hell boy, you just rode in a Texas chicken! That scrawny thing...." The eagle got him by the hand and bit down hard. "Christ! He cut me to the bone!" moaned the pilot, holding his bloody hand.

"Sorry about that. Guess I should have warned you."

He shrugged. "No problem. Y'all watch your ass and have yourself some good luck there Chief." He waved his bloodied hand at me. "And thanks for the Purple Heart!"

"First blood," I said under my breath to the eagle with a smile on my face and turned to look around at my surroundings. Behind me, the chopper lifted off, driving the eagle in the cage wild again.

I was on the helipad at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, temporarily assigned as a door gunner to the 145th. At least, that was the paperwork designation that hid my real mission there.

I heard a high pitched whine and turned to see a F-100 taxi by on an adjacent runway. I wondered what the hell the chopper pilot had meant by what he had said.

The weirdness swallows you? How does one look like one side and not two?

I hadn't spoken it aloud just thought it, but a voice answered.

"He meant you look too Vietnamese." This came from a pilot sitting in the cockpit of a blunt nosed Supersabre. "And you can bet your brown rear end, that's no real asset here. Sure as hell some trigger happy cowboy is going to nail your ass thinking you're a VC infiltrator in a good guy suit. Maybe you ought to curl your hair. Maybe they'll think you're a Jew with a severe tan," The pilot laughed at his own joke. "Christ, I'm getting almost too damn funny to live!"

"How could you have heard what the chopper pilot said to me over the whine of the rotors? And how did you know I didn't understand what he meant?" I said.

"Welcome to Vietnam. It ain't what people say that you got to hear, it's what they don't say that counts," said the pilot, giving me a double thumbs up and a wink.

In the distance, I spotted the chopper that was to take me to Bien Hoa.

I turned to say thanks for the advice, lame as it was, to the pilot in the Supersabre, but the plane was gone.

Where it had stood was a burned hulk of a jet in a mortar crater. The wreckage was at least six months old.

In spirit quests, by the Sacred Lake of my people, after long fasts and much suffering, I have seen animal spirits that were not there, and sometimes in dreams of fire, the dead spoke to me. But never in the real world have the dead spoken to me.

This then was a new thing. I felt the icy hand of terror stroke my skin. I no longer walked in my own world.

I was in the blue of another sky and could almost feel my power going from me.

I looked all around me then and I saw that I was in a place that was unlike itself. I looked in the old ways of my people, where a tree stood, I saw not the tree but it's shadow.

This was a shadow world, half robed in the strange clothes of the dead, and alive only with the things of another world.

CHAPTER THREE

I approached the chopper I had been ordered to report to, staggering under the weight of the cage and eagle. A line of bullet holes ran across the middle of the craft. Somebody had stuck plastic roses in the holes.

I knew the pilot, by name at least.

I saluted stiffly.

Lt. Colonel John North Howton regarded me with a strange look on his face. "Can the salute, pinhead! You must be Lieutenant Lifeseeker. What the hell is it you do boy? The brass said you were a very hush hush secret weapon."

"I'm sorry. I have been instructed to say that the information you have requested is classified."

Howton jumped out of his craft, circling it. "OK, high hat me, I don't give a shit! Just get your classified ass in the chopper. I'm preflighting it, it won't take long, just a few extra minutes of insurance."

I saw another man standing in the back door bay of the chopper. His face was in shadow and all I could see of him were his hands, cradling a weapon with apparent ease that I would have had trouble just picking up. From the hands, he must have been as tall as a tree.

Howton turned back to me. "You a weapons specialist?"

"I have been instructed to say..." I began.

"Aw shut the hell up with that crap, will ya!" he growled. "Stow your equipment on board. If you don't know much about choppers, climb topside with me and I'll fill you in. Also you can count the bullet holes on your side. If we come up with the magic number, we win a magic elephant, personally autographed by General Westmoreland himself."

I stowed the cage in the back and then I climbed up after him. He pointed out the rotor head, and then indicated a large retaining nut which held the rotors to the mast.

"Just thought I'd tell you, this dingus keeps it flying. If this whatsis comes off, we lose the blades and we take on the aerodynamic capabilities of a pregnant rock. We call the dingus the Jesus nut."

"It won't come off," I said. "A Russian made Surface to Air Missile will down this chopper and fuse it in place."

"What did you say?" Howton had a strange look on his face.

I shrugged. And pretended to look at something in the distance. The man in the back of the chopper leaned out and I could see his face. He was all kinds of big and carried himself like a man who knew it. He regarded me with cheerful distrust.

"You're a strange one, Lifeseeker," said Howton, standing arms akimbo, regarding me with even more obvious distrust. "How many bullet holes on your side?"

"I count ten, eleven, uh, fourteen," I said, staring down the length of the fuselage.

"Damn, there's only twenty two on my side! Never going to break no damn records this way," said Howton with a good natured curse.

We climbed down and entered into the chopper. The floor of the cockpit was almost an inch deep in cigarette butts and crumpled beer cans. Howton apparently ran a less than tight airship.

I already was wearing a flak vest but once inside the chopper, Howton insisted that I put on a fifteen pound chest protector of laminated steel and plastic.

"Bet you never thought you'd ever be wearing an iron brassiere," said Howton as he buckled himself in at the controls. The door gunner fitted ammo belts into his M-60 machine guns.

I was given a flight helmet and settled it on my head. I adjusted my headset so I could hear the radio transmission between our craft and Saigon Ground Control.

"Helicopter Nine Nine Four. Departure from Hotel Three. East departure mid-field crossing." That was what Howton said into the radio. What I dream heard was Howton's life twisting in the dark like a lost white bird. I heard his heart stop in the crash that was yet to be and almost cried out because though Howton's heart died with no pain, it caused a hole between the two worlds of home and here and the hole let the dark wind in.

All my life, I have feared the dark wind.

In a strongly Vietnamese accented voice, Saigon Control replied, "Roger Nine Nine Four. Takeoff approved. We have you for a cross at one thousand feet."

We lifted with a thump, hovered over the adjoining runway, our nose tilted down and then there was a larger thump as we went through transitional lift and soared up and away.

"Your first eyeball of the terrain," asked Howton over the roar of the blades, "or did you scope it on the flight in?"

I looked down at the land which I knew I would leave my bones in. I did not see what Howton saw. I saw the flat tabletop lands of my people, the great stone mesas, the pueblos gleaming in the shimmering heat.

I didn't speak.

My silence seemed to bother him. "You still with me chief?"

Howton dropped the chopper until we were flying just above the treetops.

More for his benefit than from really wanting to know, I asked, "Why are we flying so low?"

"Heavy VC batteries in this section. I'm not cleared for the upper lane, so if I can't go high, I go as low as I can get it. Harder to hit us. Our exposure time is shorter this way."

The UH-1D chopper vibrated a lot as we skirted the treetops. Two gunships joined up with us, taking up a position on each side of us.

The radio crackled, giving off a brief series of orders in code which I did not recognize. It was half in code, half in slang. It also contained a liberal sprinkling of good natured obscenities.

Howton spoke into his headset, "This is Hownow Howton. Nine Nine Four. I'd like permission on a divert to extradite ARVN's at Phui Loi."

"Negative. Continue with mission," was the immediate reply.

Howton regarded me sourly, as if I were to blame. He glanced upward. The sky was filling with jets, F-100s.

He began a rapid upward climb, which pushed me back hard against the seat.

"Your nursemaids are here. Time to take the high road!" He stared up through the canopy in growing amazement at the number of jets filling the sky.

"Jesus H. Christ! It looks like you got the whole goddamn flock! They're sure giving you the big dog treatment!"

"If that's true, I hope I have the bite to live up to my bark."

"Wish I knew what the hell it is you do," said Howton. "You're becoming an itch I can't scratch."

We gained a fairly high altitude, paced by the gunships on each side and the ever present jets.

"You're a short timer," I said to Howton. "Your wife, Annie, loves you very much."

"Don't recall mentioning her name Chief. Somebody brief you on me or what? Maybe you're one of those psychic types?" Howton regarded me with cynical distrust.

"I just know things," I said.

"Not in this case partner," said Howton, hunched over the controls. "I've got a big 438 days to go. A long hard winter and a long hard summer and another goddamn winter to boot. Sort of like a two-for-one sale."

At times like this, when I know too much, I find myself growing quiet and cold and remote from life. Remote and cold because there is nothing I can do for those around me. Death is my strength. Knowledge of what is yet to be is not always a way to change what is about to become.

I knew that in less than twenty days, Lt. Colonel J.N. Howton would die in a fiery helicopter crash. I knew his wife Annie, who hated war, would slowly drink herself to death and would know no other men in her life.

And so, two lives would burn in the crash of a helicopter in this place of shadows. I would have grieved but the wind came to me from my mesa, rose up strong at my back and the wind from that sacred place, can change the world.

Howton spoke into his headset, talking to the bay door gunner. "What's the good word from the back of the bus?"

"This is Doctor Death, in basic black, here, talking the stuff at you Big Pilot. I got zero unfriendlies. I got Rattlers on my sleeves and we is A-Fine and Butt Ugly!" Doctor Death was a huge black with gold teeth. Huge muscles threatened to burst the shoulders out of his olive drab tee shirt. He wore a baseball cap decorated with chicken feathers and a huge button that said, I LIKE IKE. HE'S DEAD.

"That's the meanest son of a bitch who ever squatted over a quad 7.62 machine gun. They tell me he shot his mother. Claimed she was a VC infiltrator."

"He'll survive the war but not the heroin," I said and then wished I hadn't said it. I hadn't meant to.

Howton shook his head. "You're a little too weird to live, if you ask me Big Chief. How about you do me and mine a favor and lay off the heavy gloom and doom?"

"Sure," I grinned at him. "Maybe it's just Indians are naturally pessimistic. Probably has something to do with losing a whole continent."

"Hey! How come I gotta ride shotgun on this here wild ass chicken? The damn thing just bit the hell out of me!" said Doctor Death.

"That's an eagle, numb butt! It's on the cargo manifest and classified top secret so keep your paws off it! It's worth more than you are on this mission!" snapped Howton.

I could tell Howton wanted to ask me about the eagle but perhaps he knew I couldn't tell him anything.

"Listen, since I am goin to be the last to know, maybe you can tell me what kind of traffic we're heading for?" asked Howton. He motioned upwards with his thumb. "Judging from the umbrella floating up there in the fast lane, we must be heading for something as prickly as freaking Mother Russia itself. What's the story on that Big Chief?"

"I know even less than you do. All I know is, I'm to join up with a unit called the 145th, at a place called Phu Loi. After that, I can not tell you anymore."

"You ain't been out to fight no war yet, Big Chief. You smell green to me. So where do they get off calling you a secret weapon? You some kind of super skunk? Is that it Big Chief, you lift your legs and squirt smell juice on old Uncle Ho Chi Minh?"

"This war does not find me unblooded. In a manner it can be said, that I have shed blood on a battlefield in another world. But it is not a world as you know worlds or war as you know war," I said but I knew it was not something I could explain.

"Yeah. Well you're a freaking Martian and I'm Doctor Death's toothless old mother," said Howton, scanning the horizon. "This is it. Our Landing Zone. At least they've told me this is Staging Area One, that much I know but you're supposed to route us from here, and I hope to Bloody Christ, where we're going isn't going to need all that hot thundergun traffic upstairs!" He glanced over at me then and there were lots of unspoken questions in that look.

"Where are we exactly?"

"As the cootie flies, we're north west of Saigon, near the Michelin Rubber Plantation, if that tells you anything."

He made adjustments to some of his instrument settings and we began our descent. He spoke into the headphones, his eyes on the control panel. "Well, the no smoking sign is lit, Black Ass Lady and Mystery Guest. We are beginning our descent."

"Thanks for flying Fugazi Airlines," chimed in Doctor Death to finish the routine, in a squeaky falsetto imitation of a stewardess's voice. "The temperature outside, is a nippy 110 in the shade with light to moderate gunfire."

We landed on what was obviously a hastily constructed helipad. We were some distance from Phui Loi. Once safely down, the air cover scrambled and headed

back to Saigon. Howton eyed the perimeters of the airstrip with suspicion. He obviously felt more comfortable in the air than on the ground.

Howton turned in his seat, as the blades began slowing and looked at me expectantly. "Looks like we got the field all to ourselves. I don't see a welcoming committee. I don't see zip. So now what?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I guess we wait."

We did not have long to wait.

CHAPTER FOUR

Howton was getting nervous, eyes constantly searching the perimeter. "I'm one of those guys who likes being up and not down. I don't feature this! On the ground, with the engines shut down, we're just begging for something nasty! When you're upcity, you make a high speed pass that kind of lets you out of any detailed look at VC on the ground. I don't look forward to meeting him right here where he lives. Flying wise, I favor taking an inch or two off the tallest trees enroute but that's as close to the ground as I want to get, for any length of time."

"Hey Howton, did you hear any news about is this a secured area or what?" sang out Doctor Death. "I am reading something definitely unfriendly in the air. And get a whiff of that air, somebody burned a lot of something with napalm!"

"Negative, Doctor Death," said Howton. "But it's goddamn awful quiet here and from the size of the craters and the amount of butchered landscape, I'd say somebody did one hell of a lot of house cleaning before we got here."

"Do you expect us to be under attack?" I asked, and I would have journeyed through the ruined land in the eyes of a beast but none were there to answer my call. Destruction had carried life before it, and the animals of this blasted place, were gone, dead or driven to hide. "I don't think there is any danger here. I would know of it and from where it would come."

"Is that a fact, Chief? Well I know lots of dead guys who said they knew what you said you know. It's when you think you're safe, that somebody shoots your butt off."

"No one will die here. I do not know how I know, but I do. There is much death out there in the jungle that I clearly sense but none of it waits for us now. We are safe for now."

"The last crazy wienie I heard say he was safe was standing on the bomb bay doors high high in the friendly sky and ended up with his ass where his head used to be when he and the bomb touched down. But nice to have the inside track on who's gonna pop ya, if it works for you." Howton gave me a contemptuous smirk.

"But let me tell you, I am not thrilled about catching a mortar round in my teeth. I couldn't stand the excitement. Not to mention what it's gonna do to my beautiful smile!" Howton barked into the headset. "Keep your eyes peeled, Doctor Death! Shoot anything that moves or looks like it might move!"

"I reads you loud and clear," sang out Doctor Death. "A bowel movement ain't even gonna get past me!"

"Come on!" Howton fiddled with the radio. "I wish I knew what was coming next?"

The radio kicked in. "Nine Nine Four. This is Gunship Tiger Fifty Seven Seven. Standby for new orders."

"Ask and you shall receive," said Howton. "Got your ass covered back there, Doctor Death?"

"Wrapped in a pimp Cadillac, you limp ass white boy. What's the poop?" sang out Doctor Death.

"No poop. We hang onto our Mystery Guest and wait for the sun to shine."

"I'm getting restless back here boss. I ain't killed nothing all goddamn morning and I am getting a considerable mad on."

"How do you think the war is going? Are we winning?" I asked Howton, although that was what I myself was here to find out and I knew Howton had no answers.

"War can't take you no place but cold and old. You ask me how the war's going, I'll tell you I miss the hell out of my wife and I don't think I'm ever going to be young again."

"You ought to be asking Doctor Death," suggested Howton. "If he don't exactly know the answer, he's sure ass good at making up one that sounds good."

"Doctor Death?"

"Who that yammering in my ear?" said the big black with a wide grin splitting his face. "Is that the baby we want to throw out with the bathwater?"

"Affirmative."

"Welcome aboard Chief. You out here trying to do to Vietnam what your folks done did to Custer?"

"Something like that," I said. "How do you think the war is going?"

"Just like a waitress with her legs crossed and her arms folded. The frigging service here is terrible!

Howton smiled and jerked his thumb back at Doctor Death. "His name is actually Jackson Jackson, but Doctor Death suits him better. Unwise to try to unconnect him with his own label. Ain't saying he's mean but his pockets are full of teeth donated by second place in arguments with him."

"Sounds mean," I said.

"Ain't no sounds about it!" yelled Doctor Death. "I am THE MEANEST MOTHERF'ER in the jungle! I am mean on the installment plan with payments every day for the F'ing week! I am so bad, I am loan sharking it."

I spoke into the headset. "Once a tribesman, Elk Shoulder, fought many enemies single-handed, as many as the bar could hold, I guess. He said he didn't like the damn white man music on the juke box. He survived the fight without a scratch. He grabbed some guy's head, tore the leg off a bar stool and beat on the man's head right along with the music and all the time singing he didn't know exactly what because he couldn't speak any English. But it didn't matter because he had got the rhythm down, that's for sure. And everybody in the bar was trying to kill him and couldn't even come close."

"Sounds like my kind of dude," said Doctor Death. "The white boys could always use a faceful now and then, present company excepted."

I went on and said. "And he walked off, where somebody else would have died. If you get the rhythm, it is said you can walk off. When you talk, I hear the same rhythm."

"Hey! That's me to a T! I am the King of Walking It Off!" said Doctor Death. "I am so goddamn mean I am going to survive Vietnam! Man, you can't get no meaner than that!"

We heard the rushing downbeat of helicopter blades and another chopper, a gunship, joined us on the helipad.

It discharged several men, two guns at ready, obviously guards, with a prisoner between them, and a man walking like an architect's idea of what a human would walk like if he was a high rise.

"Big lettuce coming Massa," said Doctor Death. "Look like to me we done getting the head dude."

Howton snapped a crisp salute, his face blanking, becoming an expressionless mask. Even Doctor Death stopped smiling as the General approached the craft.

The General spotted me, smiled warily and gave a brisk salute. I did not return it. He did not seem surprised by my lapse.

"You're Lieutenant Lifeseeker? You know who I am. Well then, let me make this perfectly clear, I have no part of this project, other than arranging its

final implementation. I authorized your temporary military rank but not at my own instigation. You need not thank me for that because I decidedly do not approve of your mission. Is that understood soldier?" The General's face was red, his voice clipped mean like overmown grass.

"I understand General."

"I don't think you do," snapped the General. "In any case, I am delivering for interrogation purposes, or rather for what I have been told to assume is, interrogation purposes, the highest ranking VC prisoner we've got. His name and rank is..."

"I don't need to know that."

"Will you need an interpreter?" asked the General. "It wasn't mentioned but I have prepared for the contingency."

"That won't be necessary."

"You speak Vietnamese then?" said the General, looking surprised.

I shook my head no. "I'll find out what I want to know from him anyway. It doesn't matter if I can't understand his language. What's important is that I understand his dreams."

The General contained his fury but it was an effort.

Through clenched teeth, he said, "I have been instructed to make a chopper and crew available to you with unrestricted flight plans. The craft you are now aboard, and those two men, which I have personally hand picked for this assignment, are at your disposal. I have also been instructed to provide you with anything, in the way of hardware, ordnance or men, you need in order to accomplish your mission."

"I have what I need now. Nothing else will be required. Unhandcuff the prisoner and we'll be off."

"Would it be out of line to ask where the hell you intend to go?"

"Probably not, but I don't know where we're going, so I can't tell you."

The General looked troubled. "Is it true, the rumors, the upside scuttlebut, all those things I've heard them say about you? Personally, I think its utter crap but I'd be interested in whether you deny or admit..."

I smiled. "I don't know what you're talking about, sir." I said but I did know and understood his fear.

I gave him a sloppily executed salute, my hand coming off my nose like an inept karate chop.

That seemed to be the final straw for the General. He barked commands at the guards who quickly unhandcuffed the prisoner and helped him up into the bay door of the chopper.

The General spun on his heel and marched stiffly off like a man going to his own execution.

Howton shook his head. "Bloody M.F-ing Christ! I don't know what you're up to Chief, but any one who can twist the Old Man's mammaries in the wringer, has sure got my vote."

Doctor Death regarded the prisoner balefully. "Hey, do I got to baby-sit and protect our ass too?"

Howton turned to me. "He ought to be tied up. You can't trust the bastards any farther than you can..."

"No need for that. He'll be on his best behavior," I smiled at the prisoner. He seemed relaxed and cheerful. Undoubtably, he already sensed that I would be setting him free. I send a lot when I begin receiving.

Howton growled. "Hell, they don't got no BEST behavior."

"He'll be OK. Give him a cigarette, if you have any," I said into the headset.

Doctor Death looked disgusted, at the idea of sharing with the prisoner.

"Man, I got bullets extra I could spare but smokes, you must be funning?"

"Where to?" asked Howton, cranking the chopper up for flight.

The General's craft lifted off abruptly and sped off towards Saigon. I watched it disappear in the distance.

"I don't know yet. I think I and the prisoner will just take a little walk and then perhaps I'll know."

Doctor Death's voice boomed over the headset. "Hey! I am just the man to help you out on that one!" He flexed his muscles. "I got me some of the most persuading ways of making some one talk you ever did see!"

Howton grinned in affirmation. "He could make a dead guy squeak all he knows."

"That won't be necessary," I leaned back and motioned for the prisoner to step out of the chopper. He understood and scrambled out at once.

Howton handed a .45 out to me. "Christ Chief! You can't go fooling in the bushes without no artillery. The bastard will gut you before you can blink."

I waved the gun away. The prisoner witnessed this exchange and laughed.

I laughed too. I bowed to the Vietnamese General and he bowed in turn. Side by side, we strolled off the helipad. I created an image, like a ghost escaping from a sand painting in the mind. I sent this mind shadow, and he caught it and was greatly amused.

A white man is a hunter sitting on a buffalo, talking of the rabbits he hopes to catch.

We both laughed louder and passed out of sight of the helicopter into the thick jungle. The air was thicker here with the smell of napalm and burnt flesh.

Before I dismissed them from my mind for the time that was to come, I cast my thoughts back to Howton and Doctor Death.

"Well it beats the hell out of me," I heard Howton say and I was sure it did.

The Vietnamese General and I found a place to sit, out of sight of the men in the chopper. He spoke to me but I shook my head. Words I could not understand, only dreams and shadows of the mind. I emptied my mind of this world and prepared to enter his. I opened myself to the pain of his blue sky which was not mine.

Now I go where the white man can not go.

With the grace of a man who knows how to survive, he let the blue sky open above me. I closed my eyes in my world and in the world of the White Man's Vietnam.

And opened them again in his.

CHAPTER FIVE

We sat side by side in the ruined jungle. I put my hands down to the ground, finding it damp. My fingers came away bloody.

Anointed with the blood of a sacrificial cow, a supplicant had kneeled here once, and had chanted to the rice god, Yang Coi. It was a place where death and the spirits walked together in harmony.

It had been profaned by bombs and napalm and death from above and had become deeper and darker in its sacredness.

I looked into the Vietnamese General's eyes and saw his child self dancing around a bamboo pole. On an altar at the bottom of the pole that stood in the center of his village, were rice and bananas and steamy, meaty flowered orchids with petals like the fingers of dead men.

A sorcerer with the face of his father chanted in the child mind and said, "Don't let the rainbird destroy us! Its lightning can not touch us! Yang Coi, we make an offering to you!"

And the child that was the man in the jungle beside me, stepped forward and lifted his ceremonial ax.

The blade flashed in the sun and came down quick and clean and killed a young cow.

The women of the village rushed forward, with eager heat to catch some of the blood of the freshly killed animal.

This sacrificial blood was the red treasure, the holy water that healed in this world.

But when I touched it, it burned. Like a small fire lit by playful children.

He spoke then, but the words could neither heal nor help and I went from him, went past his words to chase his dreams of blood and sacrifice.

The eyes ask and I turn them inward to seize the Vietnamese General's dream of a beautiful drowned man.

The rotting jungle of the corpse, a reeking, blue sky color, bursts open and the gentle rains, the red life fluids of the drowned body come with their fire quenching ruin.

And in my mind, I am a changed me and washed away is the sandpainting of what was.

The prisoner had a name then, for I, Lifeseeker, saw it clearly now in the Vietnamese General's dream. With the name came the faces of those he had come from.

His father had named him Bual. It meant Lizard. It was a bad name. His father had named all of his sons in a like manner. One was called by a name that meant Dung, another by a name that meant Drunkard. In such a way, in a world where the spirits rule, with names like those to trap the young men's bodies, no evil spirit would bother to inhabit the boy's souls.

Bual had been born dead. But only in a strange way and only if you were a believer in an old dream of his people. His mother Xuac, came hard against the night when giving birth to him. Bual had come as the last of his father's sons. He had tried to enter the world with his face turned aside as if the world was too horrible to look at.

A breech birth. Xuac was in labor a long time, too long but finally gave birth to Bual, whose face ever after would be turned away from the world. He was a healthy, hungry baby.

Bual's father took the wife out into the sunshine and built a fire in the face of the wind and warmed a blanket woven with signs of the spirits to wrap mother and child in, as was the custom.

As his father had done and his father before him, and so on, in a thousand year old dream, the father then rubbed his wife's stomach with the leaves of healing but the woman died.

That made Bual dead too, even as he squirmed with new life in her dead arms. By the right of a thousand years dreaming, the baby, alive or dead, must be buried with the mother. So they hollowed out a log for the burial of both of them.

But the war had changed dreams in ways that men could not understand. Even Bual could not understand it.

Boy children were needed to fight the enemy, the enemy that changed them all, so the child was taken to be raised by others who changed the dream.

And as Lifeseeker went back in a journey into the other's life, he found himself falling.

He fell beneath the same silences all Americans fell into.

How did the enemy hide themselves?

That was a silence the Americans met. Why did the earth glow red and the night seem to seethe with a strange life of its own? Again a silence.

Were they the children of shadow, these ghost people who created Bual, these people who were Bual and not Bual?

Did they fly at night, pass through rock like smoke, eat their own dead? Silences.

The drowned do not speak with their mouths, swim in a darker night than man can dream of.

Silences.

Each terrible and unanswered.

Where did they bury their dead, or did they really die? It seemed to the Americans, that they killed the same faces, counted the same bodies, stacked the same ones endlessly, row by row. One had to kill the same men again and again and there was no end to it.

Silences.

What strangeness drove them to turn their children into bombs, into walking booby traps for unwary Americans? How could they love death more than their own children?

Terrifying silences.

Even the land itself, poisoned, a nightmare when the sun shone, death in the water and wind and air itself, but at night, a thousand thousand times worse. As if night itself was a killing instrument.

Bual dreamed his strength, the strength of them all.

The land.

It was the biggest silence of them all.

Bual spoke to me, to the changing face and being of me, Lifeseeker, as if he were speaking to his son, not dreaming.

"Go home. You can not kill the land. It is the land that is the enemy. We are but simple soldiers. We have no special powers, no great killing gifts."

"It is the land that makes us invincible."

And there was a word for world.

And there was a word for this drowned night.

It is Xa.

Now there was a name for the silences.

Xa. It is the meaning of all meanings. It is earth. It is sky. It is sacredness. It is community. It is death to all who do not dream it. It is the heart of our spirit, Xa, the land, where our ancestors feast on the bodies of our children yet to be and the rice grows when it rains blood. Xa. The thousand named thing. It is your enemy.

I Lifeseeker saw it.

I saw the hungry green jungles, defending themselves.

Xa. It was a prison where the only freedom was death.

Bual himself was a prisoner.

He had believed in Xa, but not in the war.

He had been raised in the city, far from the village of his people. In that place, the thousand year old dreams of his people faded. New dreams were possible. Reared by someone high in the party, he had been well educated and had planned his life carefully. He would build great buildings. His life was to be blueprints, load bearing members, stress coefficients but the war ruined it.

Xa reached out for him, Xa, and no one can refuse the invitations of Xa.

He had tried.

When the draft notice came, there were frantic attempts to refuse. Letters from influential friends of the family, his priest went to Dak Soh to plead with the governing board but it was not a decision made by men on a governing board, it was made by Xa.

He had seen the face of the enemy. He had seen into his eyes and Bual knew he would die trying to kill them for Xa. It was something he knew and could not change. It just was.

I in that remnant of me that was still Lifeseeker, moved in the man's dream. My voice asked. "And how can Xa be defeated?"

If a man can laugh in a dream, Bual laughed.

Bual thought, Xa defeated? To defeat it, one must join it, become one with the strangeness of it, and it is not defeat for Xa. You just become Xa and there are no enemies anymore.

Lifeseeker understood. Those I came from had a Xa once, until the white men came and became Xa and Xa became them. It was the only way worlds could be conquered, wars could be won.

It was the first taste I had. It was the first taste of real knowledge, of a sense of what I had come to learn.

And the bitter taste of defeat stirred on my tongue.

America did not fight to win the land, they fought to win the people.

They had forgotten the lesson of Xa they had learned once, long ago, when they won the world from my tribe long long ago.

This was in the blood of Bual's dream. And the dream changed and I saw its savage center, its secret of secrets.

I saw the great mountain that no white man had ever seen.

It was Xa, the land's sacred heart. The mountain. Yes, to the mountain.

Now I could step out of the Vietnamese General's dream.

I had our destination.

CHAPTER SIX

Lt. Colonel Howton leaned out of the cockpit as we came back into sight from the jungle that had hidden us from view. He had a .45 aimed at us which he grudgingly lowered once he was sure who we were. He stared at the prisoner as we approached the gunship.

I knew he was looking for signs of a beating. He saw none and looked disappointed.

"Didn't tell you anything, huh, Chief? You should have taken Doctor Death up on his offer."

"I know what I need to know," I said.

Howton looked surprised and disbelieving. He began cranking the chopper up for lift off. "OK. Sure I believe you. You drained him dry. You danced a rain dance and it was so bug ass frightening he puked his guts up to you. That about the size of it? So where to?"

"North, I think. For a while anyway. I'll tell you when to change direction as soon as I know."

I heard automatic weapon fire from the direction we had just come. I turned and looked back and saw the bright blips of incoming rounds. Jets screamed by overhead and the clatter of heavy guns pocked the air. There was a white-orange flash and the world exploded in a wave of napalm.

My stomach turned and the smell of burned flesh assaulted my nostrils. In the wind, I heard the screams of men dying and the harsh thut thut of metal striking flesh. I heard the shrill whine of incoming mortar rounds.

If it was real it happened before we came to this place. It was as if the memory of it had reached out to me and seized me in its strange hand.

A bomb exploded and metal fragments went whirling past in a killing arc.

I had stayed too long in a dream and now things began to reach for me. I closed my eyes and saw inward no more.

And the war went away and the wind died around me.

I was back in the ruined land.

Howton seemed to be glad we were leaving. "Bout time we got our asses out of here."

He had not reacted to the sounds of battle. Our prisoner had calmly and unhurriedly climbed back into the chopper. Doctor Death, smoking a cigarette with watchful boredom, rested his heavy gun against the door frame. He too had not reacted to the sound of the fire fight.

"Are we heading for some real deep stuff. I mean, give me some kind of idea what to expect. North to what, over what?"

"Don't expect anything," I said, and I had a pain behind my eyes from watching what they did not see. It hurt to come back to the world. "That's probably the best way. I'd like to fly slow and fairly low. We'll be in the mountains mostly, is my best guess."

"GUESS!" Howton lifted us off. "It don't sound like you know what the hell you are doing! This ain't no place to be guessing about anything! Just thinking about it makes my BVD's want to seize up!"

"You copying this, Doctor Death?" said Howton into the headset.

"Somebody better tell this dude that low and slow is full of lead and dead! Lordy, Massa, this fool Indian keep pulling our tail with this kind of thing, I am going to frag his act right where it live!"

"He ain't happy," said Howton, as the chopper began flying over low lying mountain ranges. "And I ain't getting ready to write you no love poems either. You're beginning to sound like a raffle ticket for buying the farm."

I pointed. "Go in that direction. Toward the highest mountain peak."

"I think there's a mountain over there beyond that one and that is where we are going," I said, not knowing it for sure until I had said it. Once spoken, it sounded strangely right.

We ascended. It took a while but we cleared the peak and then Howton was staring at the horizon, his eyes searching for the mountain I had said was beyond the one we had just traversed. I could see a look of puzzlement on his face.

From somewhere to the left and a little behind of the chopper, anti-aircraft guns began rattling at us.

Doctor Death leaned out the door, gun at the ready. He turned and looked back at us.

"Unfriendlies, a day late and a dollar short."

Howton was about to speak. I knew exactly what he was going to say.

In front of us, a jet dropped down at us seemingly from out of nowhere.

Howton grabbed the controls, ready to jerk us into an evasive pattern, expecting a missile launch from the Russian built plane.

He hit the controls and our craft lurched sickeningly to the left and then shot forward with a body shaking thump as he turned up the burn.

"Relax," I said. For I had done something he was not able to understand or believe. "The sun is in front of us and a little to the right. If this were noon, we might be in a lot of trouble but it's late enough that we..." I stopped talking because I knew that I could not explain. It was not a thing of his world.

Howton knew then that I was crazy. I could see it in his face.

The sweat poured from Howton's face, his body tensed, and his hands were rock steady as they danced on the controls.

The jet roared down out of the sky.

A missile was launched. It screamed by us, close but striking to the left and behind us.

Howton jerked the chopper into a screaming turn, trying to get out of position before the next pass.

"I'm going down," said Howton. "We'll have to abandon the baby. I haven't got enough gojuice to beat the..."

The jet flipped over, pulling out of the dive, and put itself into a pattern for another pass.

The next missile was launched. Howton calculating, was ready to make an evasive maneuver. I put my hand on his arm and shook my head no. He shook my hand off angrily but I had held him up too long.

The second missile followed the same trajectory as the last one, exploding harmlessly against the lower slopes of the mountain.

It hadn't even been close.

"That is some real damn lousy shooting!" snapped Howton.

In the back bay door, Doctor Death screamed obscenities at the jet and sent a burst of futile rounds in its direction. At that distance he had no chance of hitting it, but the action made him feel better.

Perhaps only the prisoner understood what had happened. He was at least very unconcerned. He was sitting comfortably on the floor of the chopper, his legs propped up on an ammo box. He had a smile on his face and looked as if any minute he might fall asleep.

"The jet pilot can only see our shadow. But to him, it seems real," I said, looking back at the rising mushroom of smoke from the missile. "Trust me. He can't see us. No one can until we are on the way home."

As if to further prove my point, the jet returned on a strafing run. It streaked down beside us and laid a perfectly executed fire pattern across our moving shadow.

Howton muttered something under his breath and made the sign of the cross. "I don't understand it. I must be stoned on my F-ing Ass!"

"There!" I said, pointing at the horizon. "You'll have to go up a couple thousand feet. Where we're going is just beyond that mountain peak. There should be a valley up there."

The jet peeled off and fled away to the North. Either out of ammo or out of patience with a target it seemed to have clearly hit three times without causing any damage.

"I don't see any mountain!" Howton had a haunted look on his face. "What goddamn mountain! All I see is jungle! Goddamn jungle!"

I spoke into the headset, "You see the mountain, Doctor Death?"

"You order me to see a mountain, I'll see a frigging mountain, but you ask me, I see one ugly goddamn jungle, is all," The big black had a firm grip on his machine gun, as if its proximity gave him security of some kind.

I didn't tell them that I saw only jungle too when I looked out the cockpit window.

The eyes can lie, in a world of shadows.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maybe the eyes lied, but the dreams did not.

But to remember a path, a mountain seen only in a dream is hard.

I was aware of Howton and Doctor Death's distrust in me, and I felt their hatred and fear. I might be the cause of their deaths, a thought that was strong in both of them and it was not reassuring that I could only tell them that we followed a dream.

To find what I dreamsaw, I went back into my mind, to the inward seeing eyes that looked into the Vietnamese General's dreams.

And saw the mountain. Not jungle, or green forest.

Just a single great mountain shining in the blazing sun.

Yes, it was there even though I could not see it with my eyes in this world.

At my insistence, we gained altitude.

Howton was flying blind. I signaled when I thought we must be well clear of the highest reach of the mountain peaks.

Over Howton's silent protest, we spiraled in for a landing.

"Better slow your descent," I said. "And go a little to the left. There's a flat place where we can land just a little beyond the ridge."

"I don't know what you're smoking, Tonto," snapped Howton. "I don't see a ridge. I don't see anything, except jungle. And I think, considering just how stoned you sound, that you are about to get the full benefit of a personal

mutiny! I mean I ain't going to play air hockey up here without a puck. So you better just...."

I had my eyes closed, my eyes journeying back to the depths seldom traveled, and I could see the mountain as well as I could see the secret faces of my own people.

"Just humor me. I won't ask you to do anything that will put you or your craft in danger," I said. "Make a descent, slow and gradual. I don't know how to make you see what I see, so just kind of drift down. I'll tell you when we're on the ground."

"They told me to cooperate. So I do it but I'm warning you right now, don't push it too far!" Howton complied with murder in his heart.

There was a soft thump and our descent halted.

"Hey, what was that?" said Howton, his stunned eyes on the gauges. "We've stopped moving!"

I opened my eyes, and looked out the chopper window. By eye, it still was a long way down.

"I know it looks like the ground is still a long way down but we've actually landed. Turn the engine off. Once you step outside, I think everything will be alright."

Doctor Death leaned out the bay door, looking down. "Hey Hownow, my underwear is seizing up on me back here! Tell me you ain't going to shut the engine off!"

Howton was sweating, his hands white on the controls.

I opened the door on my side. Howton turned to look at me.

I leaned forward and then jumped out of the chopper.

Doctor Death shrieked. "Howton! The man done killed himself!"

As I stepped out, I saw only the ground thousands of feet below me. But the fall ended abruptly.

Once my feet hit solidly and I had my balance, I saw the mountain.

Howton stared at me, his face showing a considerable strain. I did not know what he saw when he looked at me, but from his face, it was not something he wanted to see.

"I'm standing on the mountain," I shouted, over the roar of the blades. "Shut the engine off."

Howton took a deep breath before coming to a decision. His hands kept clutching and unclutching on the controls. The gauges told him nothing. He had no choice but to give up believing in them.

Howton shut it down.

Doctor Death crouched in the bay door, a look of absolute terror on his face as the blades slowed.

"Everybody out," I said, as the whine of the blades subsided. "You only can see the mountain when you're on it."

The Vietnamese General smiled and walked calmly past Doctor Death. The black soldier pivoted, brought his gun up to cover him. With an ironic smile, the General stepped out of the bay door and dropped down.

He fell a few feet and stopped.

Doctor Death shook his head, rubbed his jaw once as if trying to erase the whole crazy thing, then said, "Ah what the hell, you only live once."

He got a firm grip on his gun and jumped out of the chopper.

He nearly dropped his weapon. He looked around in disbelieving wonder. "Christ on crutches! I'm on a goddamn mountain!"

Howton climbed out slowly, hesitated a second or two before putting his foot down on what seemed like air. Then he too saw the mountain.

"I don't understand it! There's no mountain here! It's not on any of the maps! There's not supposed to be anything here but jungle and swamps! Where the hell are we?" said Howton. "If this mountain has never been mapped, somebody has

really screwed the pooch! It doesn't make sense to me, somebody has to have seen it before! It's too big to damn well miss!"

"No American has ever been here before. We are the first and maybe the last," I said, reaching through the back door and dragging out the eagle cage.

"But what is this place? What kind of mountain is this? How come we couldn't see it until we stepped out on it?" asked Howton, the shock large on his face.

"Vietnam is a land of shadows. America is fighting a war against something it can not feel, can not see or sense. This mountain is the center of what can not be seen."

"What we doing here Chief?" said Doctor Death. "This place gives me the shrieking freakings!"

"I have been sent to find out if America can win this war. Now that I've found this mountain, I think I'll soon know the answer."

"Is that where the eagle comes in?" asked Doctor Death. "Everything here is so messed up, the craziest answer got to be the most logical one."

"Yes. That's why the eagle is here. That's why we're all here. We've come all this way just to play the ancient game of Cat and Eagle."

"The game of what? Playing diddybop games? You don't know what you talking about Chief! The more I be around you, less I want to be part of your act! Me and Howton don't PLAY at nothing! We're guys serious about duking it out, but around you serious is canceled!" said Doctor Death, sweat shining on his face.

He was scared and didn't care who knew it.

"No man on a journey is the same as he was when he began it," I said in answer to that. "You will be changed by what you see."

"I like me the way I was. But I'm spooked good and this game of Cat and Eagle bullshit sounds like a spook one step higher up!" Doctor Death turned to Howton, "Man, I'm not digging this at all!"

The VC General turned and spoke to me. I did not know what he said in words but sensed his meaning. I nodded and pointed up the slope of the mountain, then smiled at him. In a way that even I did not understand, we had an understanding.

"What did he say?" asked Howton who looked like a man awakening from a deep sleep. "I thought you didn't understand his lingo?"

"I don't know the words, but I understand some of the sense of it. We've got some climbing to do. The General has graciously agreed to lead the way."

"He'll lead us right into an ambush," snarled Doctor Death, raising his weapon. "No way I'm going to follow him. I want him walking ahead of me but just so I can keep my gun aimed at his goddamn....."

"He is free to go at any time," I said. "And he knows that."

"Are you authorized to let him go?" asked Howton. "Or shouldn't I be asking?"

"I have no choice. This is a strange place we are in. You'll see what I mean. This is an ancient place, as old as the earth. For one thing, I don't think your weapons will work here."

"Say what?" said Doctor Death. "What kind of craziness are you talking about boy? If I aim at something, it's dead!"

"Not here. Hand me your weapon, I'll demonstrate."

"You find yourself your own weapon, boy, this one is done occupied!" said Doctor Death, gripping his gun even more tightly. "I don't let Baby out of my hands but never!"

Howton reached into his flak jacket and started to pull out a .45 pistol.

I motioned for him to hold onto it. "OK Doctor Death, if you don't believe me. Try to shoot me."

Doctor Death looked at Howton. Howton shrugged.

"Just aim at me and fire."

Doctor Death just stared at me. He seemed paralyzed. I looked at Howton and nodded to him. He understood.

Howton took the .45 pistol, extended it two handed until it was pointed at my head.

Doctor Death's face was blank with shock. "Hey, get a grip on yourself Howton. You can't..."

"You get what you ask for in this man's...." Howton pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

Howton dropped the pistol. "OK, you've proved your point. If you can see a mountain that ain't there, I figured just about anything you say is gonna happen, like a gun that won't shoot. So I took you up on it. Where do we go from here?"

"We leave the weapons behind. We've got a bit of a climb ahead of us. On this trip, they would be just so much dead weight. I don't know how far we've got to go or what's waiting for us when we get there. I don't think the General knows either. He's never been here awake before. So most of what he knows of this place, is only half remembered or very hazy."

"Now you messing with my religion. I don't go nowhere without my weapon," said Doctor Death.

"The eagle is our only weapon, and if you don't believe in the strength of the eagle's heart, this last part of the journey may not be for you. There is no dishonor in not going."

"Man, you have got to be kidding. You can't kill no VC with a frigging eagle! I don't want no part of this action!"

"Then stay with the chopper," I said. "If you sense danger, your weapon will work if you get back into the chopper. But remember, once back inside, to your eyes, you will be several thousand feet high in a stalled chopper. If you can stand that, you may even choose to stay inside it until we return, if we return at all that is," I turned to Howton. "You can stay too Howton, if you want to. There's really no need for you to go."

Howton scowled, straightened his shoulders and looked up at the ridge ahead of us. "I'm going to see what's on the other side."

I nodded approvingly. Howton was a brave man. Brave yes, but if I were going into combat, I would rather have had Doctor Death at my back. Howton would walk into the unknown, pretending not to be afraid. Only Doctor Death, who believed only in his weapons, had enough fear to be truly brave. He fought scared and therefore more truly alive than Howton who tried to bury his fear.

We set off at a brisk pace until the going got rough. The landscape was misshapen, like a mad artist's hand had touched it here and there, altering it beyond recognition. Even with the General leading, we were in danger of getting lost.

And even as the chopper passed from our sight with the grim figure of Doctor Death crouching in the shadow of the craft, I knew suddenly, that we were lost. The General stumbled and turned to look at me. There was a look of profound apology on his face, and disappointment in himself. He too was completely lost.

This was the most dangerous thing.

It was the only thing I had no defense against.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I motioned for a halt. Howton put his hands on his hips, stood flat footed and looked back in the direction we had come. He seemed to sense the problem.

"We're lost aren't we?" There was a strange look on his face, as if he had overheard something he did not want to hear.

"Yes. And on this mountain, that is a dangerous place to be. There should be a trail here somewhere, but the General doesn't remember where it is or has never seen it in a dream. And I myself am as one blind at birth."

Howton looked uneasy. "This is going to sound weird, but since you mentioned it, I think the trail is to the left about a hundred feet. Don't ask me how I know, it just seemed to pop into my head."

I turned and walked in the direction Howton had indicated.

I saw the trail but only when my feet were on it.

"I'm glad you decided to come along," I said. "This will save us hours." And maybe our lives as well I thought, but did not say it.

The General walked up the trail ahead of us. He acted like a man in a dream, eyes nearly closed in sleep, stumbling like a lightning blinded beast up the path.

Perhaps in his dreamwalk, he was pursued by his great enemy, My Lord the Tiger. That beast I too once had seen in his dreams, a thing that seemed to stalk him at the edges of sleep. It may have had some meaning to him but to me it was another cipher, a key to a door I could not open.

Chased or chasing I knew not, but he plodded down the path with the drowned look of a sleepwalker. This place of shadows had drawn him into a darkness that I did not yet share or sense.

The path came to a fork. The General stopped and looked back at us. He motioned first to the left and then pointed his finger at his chest. He pointed to the right fork, then signaled that we were to go in that direction.

I nodded. The General waved slowly as if we were already far away and then turned and stumbled off to the left. He walked as a man dead.

"He's escaping!" said Howton. "And we just let him, right?"

"Yes. But it's more than that. It is a question of choice. Try to walk down the path he is taking."

Howton moved to the intersection of the two paths.

He regarded me strangely for a few seconds then tried to follow the General. He seemed to freeze in mid-air.

Only by moving back, could he free himself.

"Just like the weapons, right?"

I nodded. "And the General couldn't have gone down the path we're going to take. This is where two worlds meet and this place has its own ways of being and not being. I knew something like this would happen, didn't know how or in what way, but it's what I meant when I said we had no choice but to let him go."

"I think I can say, with 100% accuracy, that I am scared out of my freaking gourd!" said Howton. "I'm not that far away from screaming for mamma and my...."

I interrupted. "I feel worse than you. What lies before me is black and dark and destroys my spirit. You do not know the terror that walks with me. I have seen a sky that is not good to look upon. But if it helps any, I can tell you that you are going to come out of this alive. You will make it back to the chopper and you will make it back to base. So will Doctor Death."

I didn't tell him that I would die here on this mountain even though I was as sure of it as I was of anything. Already I sensed dark things stalking me, angry things just beyond my sight.

It surprised me that Howton was admitting he was afraid. Maybe he had passed his limit.

We topped a rise and stood in a small clearing. Below us, we saw a valley, lush with vegetation. I knew we must be nearing the end of our journey. My arms were aching with the strain of carrying the heavy cage. The eagle had not remained quiet in its cage. It had protested loudly and vigorously the many jolts and bumps of the journey.

This strange place had affected him too. I had more scratches where the eagle had got at me again through the cage bars.

The trail led downwards.

We began our descent.

I watched Howton now as much as I watched my footing on the path. My blindness was growing as his own vision grew. It was a thing beyond my understanding.

He stopped suddenly, staring at something I could not see.

"What is it?" I asked, and stared in the direction Howton was looking. I saw nothing but trees and vegetation and even that not very clearly.

"I see people. At least, I think it's people. And a village, but it doesn't look like a Montagnard camp."

"I can't see it but let's leave the path and walk toward the village," I said and the Ancient of Lizards seemed to move in the desert of my memory, seeking a distant sun. Was his ancient face turning away from me in my time of need?

"What do you mean, you don't see it?" He scuffed the red dirt of the trail with his dusty boots. "It's right here."

"You knew where the trail was and I didn't, neither did the General. Now you see the village and I can't. Like I said, this is a strange place and things happen here I can't explain."

We left the path and moved farther down into the valley. It was a rough descent for a while and then suddenly, it was much easier.

"We're on another path," said Howton. "It seems to lead directly into the center of the village. Do you see it?"

I shook my head no. My blindness was growing. I looked back the way we had come. The mountain behind me seemed to vanish in the distance. Perhaps I was near my own death now, I could not tell.

We walked on, Howton leading, me stumbling along in the growing dark behind him.

Howton stopped.

"Where are we?" I asked.

Howton turned and looked at me. "Either I'm having the granddaddy of granddaddy hallucinations or we're standing in the center of a village and we're surrounded by the entire tribe it looks like."

"What do they look like?"

"Shit! You mean it's only me that sees them! Christ! They look like something out of a bad trip. Like if there was a magazine called Supernatural Geographic, they'd be on the cover. Their eyes are strange. Like they are looking at things I can't see. I got the feeling they weren't born, kind of grew like mushrooms in the dark somewhere. They don't look like they could ever laugh at anything, let alone my jokes. And the smell, like something old that died a long time ago. This will really freak you Chief, I think they got too many fingers on each hand. You don't suppose they are cannibals, do you? I don't like the way they're looking at us!" There was an edge of hysteria in Howton's voice.

"Describe how they are dressed," I said, cursing my blindness. All I could sense was the sweet, sickening smell of death in the wind.

"In all the colors of the rainbow," said Howton, awed.

"Can you hear them speaking? If you can, how does it sound?"

"Yeah. They're jabbering a mile a minute. It sounds like wild animals grunting at each other," said Howton, fear etching the lines of his face. "You ask me, I'd say they are definitely hostile!"

"Do you see a tall bamboo pole in the center of the village with an altar beneath it? And is there rice and bananas and strange flowers laid across the..."

"Hey, great! You see them too then! Cause it's right over there and they've got this large water buffalo cow tied to..."

"No. I don't see it. But it was something from a dream that I thought I understood."

"Look carefully. Are you sure they are not Montagnards?"

He shook his head. "No way man! They're like no Montagnards I ever saw. They're taller, and they've got..."

"I have to try to see them. I want you to close your eyes and keep them closed."

"You sure that's a good idea Chief? They're brandishing weapons and looking downright deadly. I don't want to close my eyes on these freaking spooks! No way!"

"You haven't got any weapons that work anyway so what difference does it make? You can't hurt them. But I sense that they can't hurt you, in some ways perhaps they do not even see you. So do just what I tell you," I said and I closed my eyes, confident that he would obey.

To move out of darkness, one must only ask for light.

When I was a young man climbing the lodge pole into manhood, I sought visions of power and wisdom. I chose the road of the shaman and my vision ally was the spirit of a Great Lizard.

I called up the Great Lizard to make my eyes unblinking and terrible like his.

I conjured him and brought him forth so that I might see into the shadows of this place that is the heart of Vietnam no white man has ever seen before. But the one called moved slowly under the threatening blue of this sky.

If the Ancient of Lizards was my ally, far greater was my Night Father, the Great Ancient of Snakes, whose tail was wrapped around the center of the earth.

For my dream quest to have its dream ending, it was not a simple village that I sought but a great stone city that grew out of the heart of this mountain.

Fearing from what the white man had described to me, that the Ancient of Lizards could not help me, for my own powers seemed under a cloud, I also summoned the Great Snake.

In him, terrible and grim, lie all the truths of man.

My hands went up to him like corn in the fields, reaching for the sun. And was answered.

CHAPTER NINE

I felt the presence of the Great Snake and the blindness, which was the blindness of the white man, dropped from me.

In my vision, I stood alone on the mountain.

Howton, the white man with closed eyes, was gone. Then my aloneness was pierced by the war cry of the people of Vietnam's hidden heart and the color in the sky penetrated me with its final and vast strangeness.

Suddenly, I saw a great walled city, lifting its stone head above the tall trees. Walls entwined with the roots of sky-reaching trees rose like a barrier against the wind.

Here enthroned was a desolation so great that it seemed to echo to the sounds of a great life-drinking mystery.

Like an army of giant skeletons, bone-white fromager trees bent toward me on the path. Ghostly figures moved in their deep green shadows. The spirits of jungle and lake and mountain made animate in the shimmering heat, quivered half seen at the edges of the path.

Beside the path, unseen until this moment, unsensed, a river ran from a jagged scar in the mountain's side. Across the water which seemed to steam like molten metal under a strange sun, naked men and women, faces painted like death, stood watching, awaiting me.

The sun seemed to rise and flash and flare with a new brilliance and the dank, unbreathable heat of the forest enveloped me. In the open spaces, was a

deadly light from above, that seemed to burn under the skin like the bite of a venomous snake.

The Great Snake at the Center of the World, arched its back, and scraped its skin against the ribs of men. My power seemed to go from me and I called to my spirit allies for help but the wind that would have carried my words was not a wind that reached into my world.

My eyes looked into bamboo thickets where dense blue shadows seemed endowed with movement and malevolent personality.

No man of my race or the white race had ever passed this way before.

This was a land as it was when the old Gods breathed first on the face of the water.

I turned from the path and looked at blazing many-hued flowers that seemed to drip the bloody sap of otherworldly life. I saw flaming birds and chattering gibbons chasing shadows in the depths of trees. Sometimes, in the shadow, I caught glimpses of a striped cat, lean, graceful taloned death. The forest quivered in the waves of the sun and above it all, the stone towers of the city rose dizzily into a melting sky.

I saw rock apes chattering in the bamboo and fromager and banyan. The path we trod was not man-made but a great trail left by elephants. All around the mountain hummed with mysterious voices that seemed to be echoes in silence, and out of the green distance, rose the vast bones of a forgotten city.

I heard drums, dull, insistent, pounding like blows against the skull, in an end-of-time cacophony.

I could not see it but I sensed that the leg bones of men fit the drummer's hands and that the skin of the loose headed drums, seemed much too smooth and soft to just be wild animal skins.

The crack of bone against skin filled the forest with shivering echoes.

The naked men and women of the walled city, came forward on the path to meet me. I saw my face painted in death.

They attacked. And I raised no hand against them because my body had ceased to be. I had become only a pair of eyes, staring captivated at a sudden beauty. Such beauty was my undoing.

They were strong, clean limbed people, tall and golden in color. Skin as smooth as mountain water, hair thick and black like that of my own people. But their eyes, those horrible staring things of stalking light, glowed with the strange blue of their sky.

They walked in beauty that could not be resisted.

They killed me and cut my head off.

My head was impaled on a spear made of gold, carved in the shape of an entwined snake. The eyes of the snake were red gems, gleaming in the blazing sun.

My eyes were still open and I still saw.

I saw what the white man could not see.

Beneath the shadows and smoke, lived another Vietnam. These were the unseen ones, the ancestors of the people yet to be.

In the center of their great city, was a not-alive, not-dead statue of the Great Cat of Death.

It was the one true symbol of this world the white man could not see.

This was a city that had been here since the beginning of beginnings and would exist long after the white man was gone.

The ground opened at my feet and smoke and foul smells came out. Out of the smoke, stepped an old man with ivory pegs in his ears, all dressed in flame-red winding cloth.

His eyes were gone, carved out crudely with a knife and two rounded pieces of ivory sat where the eyes once were.

He wore a necklace made of his own teeth. There was a smell about him of death and decay, of things that crawled and oozed under the ground where the dark things grow.

He came and sat beside my disembodied head.

"Why have you come so far to die?" His voice was faint, as if he had not spoken in a hundred hundred years and had to make an effort to speak once again.

"I have come to play the game of Cat and Eagle," I said, speaking from my ghost mouth.

"No man has ever played it before. Perhaps it is a game best left to the old Gods. Already you are dead and have nothing left to win. Would you still play?"

"You know in your heart, why I must play. Dead I may be, but I yet clearly see."

"Yes I know much. But should I heal you because there was no wrong in your heart? Should I put spiders on your head that you may be whole again?"

"If I win the game of Cat and Eagle, my wholeness will come whether you wish it or not."

"Perhaps," admitted the old one "But it is from my hand, the healing will come, willing or not. The spider soul is the most important spirit that lives behind the eyes. You have entered our darkest night and the spider soul has left your body now that you sleep. If it returns, you will awake. If the screaming bird of the Western Lands wins, it is I who will dare to put the spider behind your eyes to encourage the spider soul to go back to your body. If the eagle destroys the Great Cat of Death, I will give you back your life, your head back to its body. But know you that the Great Cat is strong and clever! He fights in his own land where none but he is kin and king. Does your eagle see, heart true, so far from home, dead man, this is what I ask you?" said the old man.

"Only by playing the game, will we know."

"Let it be so then," said the old man.

He took the cage of the eagle and held it out in front of him at eye level, as if it weighed nothing. Carefully, he opened the cage door and reached in with one hand and took hold of the eagle.

The great bird tried to attack him but the old man seemed made of granite, not even flinching as the bird tried to sink its talons in the old man's arm.

The old one held the bird aloft, firmly holding it by the legs.

"Great Bird, you see before you your enemy, the Great Cat. I make ready to send you to him."

My ghost eyes saw the living-not living statue of the Great Cat twist and arch its back, rising up off the great block of mountain stone.

It snarled, its eyes coming open and seeing its enemy, preparing itself to meet the great bird in combat.

"Go Eagle! May you fight well and find a good wind!" The old man released the bird.

The bird shot up like an arrow into the sky, thrusting up on wings of death. Beneath it, the Great Cat crouched, its eyes turned skyward, seeking the enemy.

The Great Eagle rose up so high it was almost invisible. Then it dove down, in its long, graceful killing swoop, claws flashing, eyes burning with great hunting wisdom.

The Great Cat seemed to stand helplessly in its path, making no move to avert the Great Eagle's killing plunge.

The Great Cat screamed.

The Great Eagle struck, winged lightning falling upon its intended prey.

The screaming bird's talons closed on air.

Unseen, the cat came up underneath him, and in one murderous lunge, seized the Great Bird of the Western Lands and defeated him.

The Great Eagle's skull was crushed in the unseen jaws of the Great Cat of Death.

"The stranger is dead and the Great Cat has triumphed," said the old man. "So do the dreams of men die, when they are not alive in the world they belong in. You have come from a great farness to see my people and our ways. Your people long ago walked in the same path as we once walked. The white man is not of your way or of ours. They come upon our path but the way is forever barred to them. So it is with your people and ours."

I spoke from my dead mouth. "I knew that my bones would dwell among your people. The white men sent me to find out if he could win the war."

"They seek and we hide," said the old man. "So shall it always be. The white man can not defeat what he can not see, can not conqueror a land he can not find. That is your answer."

"I wish to go home and be among my people."

"Leave your body with us and go back in the mind of the white man," said the old man. "We shall grind up your bones and flesh and eat of them, so then shall your ancestors join us in the flesh and blood of our children yet to be."

I closed my eyes for the last time.

I had died.

Lt. Colonel John North Howton sat in the cockpit of his chopper. The green jungle was a blur beneath the rapidly moving craft. Doctor Death stared at the still twitching body of the Vietnamese General.

His gun was still smoking.

Howton was half turned in his seat, startled by the sudden burst of gunfire.

"What happened?"

Doctor Death looked apologetic. "I don't rightly know. One minute I'm watching his ass and the next minute he's charging down my gun, trying to push me out the door. He just freaked out!"

"We'll probably get our noses ripped off for losing him," said Howton with a scowl.

"And Jesus, the bastard somehow must have killed the eagle! I don't know how because I had my eye on him all the time but this damn bird is sure enough dead! Ripped to shreds! How do you figure it Hownow?" asked Doctor Death, his hands shaking on the gun.

A sudden burst of flak from the ground caused Howton to veer sharply to the right. Holes appeared in the sides and bottom of the craft.

"Heavy duty unfriendlies! We're stung!" shouted Howton. "We're going up and away!"

The craft bucked at the impact of more incoming rounds.

Howton turned to me with an apologetic grin, keeping his hands busy piloting the craft. "Sorry Chief about your prisoner. Guess he did in your eagle too. I told you that you can't trust the.."

He stopped talking when he realized I had been hit.

I could feel blood running down my neck. I didn't feel any pain, just a great coldness from my shoulder on down.

"Oh Christ! Doctor Death, we got a casualty up here! The Chief picked up a package!"

"Head for home, Hownow! We got us a blown gig for damn sure!" cursed Doctor Death, leaning out the bay door, his heavy machine gun spitting angry death at the jungle below.

Howton increased the chopper's speed, as he spun in a wide turn, heading back for base.

Howton spoke into the radio headset. "This is Nine Nine Four on the LIFESEEKER run. We've got one dead VC and Mystery Guest wounded! We must abort! Requesting medical assistance."

"How bad Mystery Guest?" I heard the radio immediately reply. It was the voice of the General himself. I motioned weakly at Howton, but he didn't see me. I wanted to tell the General something but my mouth couldn't form the words.

"Very bad! Looks critical!" said Howton, staring at me. "Head wounds at the base of the skull. Don't know if he'll make it."

"Get back as quick as you can!" said the General. "And I'll want a full report of just how this thing got screwed up! You did your best men, considering the assignment," said the General, signing off.

"Jesus Howton, I expected you to get your ears pasted back!" said Doctor Death. "But the Man sounds like he's glad the whole thing went into the toilet!" I was beginning to lose consciousness. I knew I was dying.

"Tell the General we can't..." I could hardly get the words out. Seemed so tired, so cold.

"Take it easy," said Howton. "We'll be home soon."

"No!" I said and the pain began and almost obliterated me.

Doctor Death grabbed me gently under the arms and tried to drag me to the front of the chopper. "Man, where's the damn medi-kit?"

"War...can't win...white men...in wrong Vietnam..." And by saying it, I finished what I had set out to do. It was the last thing that had to be done. They would take back my words and the dead Eagle and my disrupted body and what I had been sent to do, was now done.

I died in the cockpit of the UH-1D.

At the moment of my death, in the ancient stone city on the mountain the white man could not see, the women ground up my bones and flesh in a stone bowl.

The old man, the World Knower, came to sit beside the statue of the Great Death Cat. When the women had finished their task, they brought the stone bowl to him and he offered some of it to the Great Cat.

Then the people of the forgotten city came with bowls of food and in each bowl, he put a small ancestral piece of me.

They ate of me and I became one with their children to be, one with the children that would live on in that world long after the white man was gone.

In a vision, in a rapidly moving helicopter, somewhere above a Vietnam the white man couldn't see, a Great Eagle died in the unsensed jaws of a Great Cat.

CHAPTER TEN.

Hightower viewed the body of Lifeseeker with a grim look, his body tensed with inner anger and frustration. He let the sheet fall back over the bloodied neck of the corpse and turned to look at the General. For a second, I sensed that his eyes darted about the room and then came to rest on me. My presence there made him very uncomfortable.

Although I was there, living and breathing in the room with them, I saw neither the General or Hightower. The mark of death was upon them both and what is not green and growing, is not mine to see.

The body of my dead brother, Lifeseeker, that I too could not clearly see. I had been told it was in this room in this land so far from my own and I mourned for him in the manner of my kind.

And so I turned to look towards my unseen dead brother and his dreams left the shattered body and rose to meet the light in my eyes.

Death did not diminish him. It was his strength and it survived. His dead mouth opened and words came to speak of the Game of Cat and Eagle. A wind seemed to blow through the room, and on that wind, I heard his voice and it cried out to me of what had been and what would be.

And his dreams were in the room and I read them like a talking book that spoke on the wind. My heart though saddened at his death and the larger death, went beyond it, to the greater understanding.

The General was, if anything, even angrier than Hightower. Without seeing him, I knew his face was mottled with anger when he spoke. "So the shape and scope of our war strategy is now to be changed completely because of this mindless piece of mumbo jumbo! I can't accept it. Well, it's bullshit, if you ask me, just damn bullshit!" The General went on. I sensed that his eyes touched on me briefly, glinting with anger, as if I somehow shared some of the responsibility for what had become. "How do we really know he found out what he came to find out? A dying man, his thoughts would be cloudy, confused, he might well make a mistake, his perceptions altered, even scrambled."

Their anger, that I could sense, and their outrage and lack of understanding, these things clearly came to me as I stood vigil with them over my dead brother.

"If anybody's perceptions were scrambled, I would say it was the two men in the chopper who were with Lifeseeker," said Hightower, standing with fists clenched at his sides. "As far as they both know, they were airborne only a few minutes, ran into heavy traffic, a few clicks out from Phu Loi."

The General shook his head. "I've heard their story. It made no sense to me. I would have sworn they were on drugs, but they held on to their story, both of them, from beginning to end. This is a hard goddamn pill to swallow!"

"Yes, and I think they told us only what they think they knew, or were allowed to remember. We gave them lie detector tests, and sodium pentothal. They passed both with flying colors. They are convinced that it happened the way they remember it. They claim Lifeseeker caught some flak while airborne and the VC prisoner went berserk and had to be killed. They had to abort without reaching their original destination. They also swear up and down that Lifeseeker was still alive and able to talk and that he told them the war could not be won!"

"You mean they don't remember what happened? That for all the damn hours they were gone, their minds are now blank?"

"Affirmative, General. Our support aircraft reported they proceeded north into a jungle area. The copter about one hour into the flight, rose in the air as if dodging a mountain and then began a slow descent. The surveillance cameras on board show that the craft began a gradual descent and then seemed to hover at about 2000 feet. Then incredibly, before the craft disappeared both from radar and from our onboard cameras, the engine seemed to be shut down and the blades began to stop spinning. There was no indication that the craft was falling. We lost contact with it at that point for about six hours. It was there and then suddenly it was gone."

I wanted to stand beside my brother, to touch his shoulder and offer him comfort. What I could not see I could at least touch but the men I could not see, would have been most uncomfortable at my nearness. So I sensed it.

"When did it reappear?"

"At 1600 hours. At approximately the same position it had been in before the divert to the north. It just came out of nowhere. An F-100 pilot on a strafing run over a VC held area in that vicinity almost nosed in trying to avoid it. The pilot swears there was nothing in front of it, and then bang, like a light bulb going on, the UH-1D chopper was right there. How he missed them, is a wonder in and of itself!"

"You heard Howton's testimony. We threw everything at them just short of pitching the moon and they stuck to their guns. They both claim Lifeseeker said we couldn't win the war. You were apprised as was I, that his death would most probably indicate the negative answer we both feared. The verbal confirmation just makes it more emphatic! Well, I just don't see any way out of this. Too many people know too much. Perhaps we screwed up at that point but that's hindsight. Anyway you cut it, the information will have to be sent back to....."

They were just talking for show. If they meant it, his death would have been an end but they came for me before my brother's body was cold. His journey had been for nothing. Because they had not believed in it, because they let it

happen beyond their control, it unfolded before they could contain it, and now the end result was an abomination to them.

Their words meant nothing to me. My brother tried to dreamspeak to me and although I could only dimly hear him I answered him in kind.

My voice startled the two men in the room but I spoke in the old language and they could not have understood me.

I could sense the General looking at me as I sat quietly at the end of the room.

I heard him wipe his hands nervously against the sides of his uniform.

"Does he have to be in here? Who the hell is he? You know this is a classified project! Who authorized the presence of this other Indian?"

"He's here at my request," said Hightower with a note of mystery in his voice, of an unspoken agenda. "He may be of some use."

"Who the hell is he?"

Hightower ignored the question for the moment, his mind on other things. "The plain fact is General, like it or not, we are going to have to live with this thing. It isn't going to go away by itself or blow over after a while. They were out for blood on this one and they got it."

"How can this be possible, that anyone would so seriously consider this, this damn hallucination as a real piece of active intelligence! My God, Hightower, how could Lifeseeker have possibly spoken to Howton and the other man in the chopper? Tell me how that is possible?"

"You know I don't know how," said Hightower.

"And bloody hell, we showed them the goddamn corpse, and they still saw evidence to back up their story! I could have pushed their damn noses into it, and they would still claim to see what they saw!"

"Neck wounds from shrapnel. That was how they reported it."

Hightower lifted the sheet off the corpse again. The bloody stump of the neck seemed to stare up at him like some glaring obscenity.

"They didn't mention that he had no head," said the General bitterly. "They saw a head. They heard it talk. They look at the corpse and still see the head! They claim they brought back the body of their Vietnamese prisoner too, that they were forced to kill him. The black named Jackson, who calls himself Doctor Death, swears the guy tried to take his gun away, consequently, he had to shoot him. So what do I see, I see two men unloading a stretch of air the length of a body. They swear they see it! Nobody else does! What can we do? We have to accept the unreal as the real in this situation. This is not a problem you and I are equipped to deal with."

"If you don't like the answer that has come out, General, there's always my suggestion that we do something about changing the question!" I felt Hightower glance in my direction, with probably a look of grim determination on his face.

"And how the hell would we do that? By now, the man who instigated this...this... damn freak show has already proven his case! It's a dangerous world we've come to when wars are decided by the actions of madmen and lunatics."

"Well General, I couldn't agree with you more. But you must admit, there is a lot about this, that we can't understand. Something damn strange DID happen! The answer however weirdly presented may well be the correct one. Certainly the means, whatever they were, are spectacular enough for us to seriously consider that the answer is correct. God knows, the man in Washington, will accept this conclusion as the right and definitive one! IF it gets back to him as it is now, we might as well prepare ourselves to accept it too," said Hightower, looking grim.

"I never figured you for a quitter, Hightower! Goddam, I know we can win this goddamn war! It's the goddamn politicians that are losing the war for us....why if they gave me half the..."

"I only agreed with the answer. I didn't say I would agree to let it stand," said Hightower and I looked in his direction. I could not see it but I imagined his face was a sullen mask. "It seems to me General, that when something like this occurs, there are ways to fight back. To overcome the result and retry the case, as it were." I knew Hightower turned his eyes on me, with much malice in the glance and calculation.

"What have you got in mind, Hightower, you sneaky bastard?" said the General and I knew that he turned to follow what Hightower was looking at. He regarded me with suspicion and outright hostility. I sensed it but could not see it.

"Simply this, if the answer is challenged by another like Lifeseeker, and the answer he gives is the opposite of Lifeseeker's, the game would come to an end. The war would go on. We might not win, that isn't my province anyway, that it continues, that is my goal!"

"Confuse the issue in other words, yes, a good idea but how Hightower? I was given to understand Lifeseeker was the one and only!" Both men had their eyes on me.

"You might as well face it, Hightower. The war is over!" The General seemed to be in mourning for what might have been.

Hightower struck his fist against the shrouded figure on the table. "I won't accept it! I refuse. It may come as a surprise to you but I and another anticipated this, General."

"You don't have to tell me his name but I bet its that bastard Houston. Houston must have a hand in this! Damn his black soul! The two of you together are quite a piece of work. I know you too damn well, Hightower!" said the General, and his voice mirrored his unease. If he found my presence disconcerting, he almost seemed to find Hightower even harder to take, as if something about Hightower caused him great distress. "If there is some nasty or dirty way out of this, I'd bet you and that bastard Houston damn well know what it is!"

"I have the means and opportunity to do something about it. Yes, you're correct. The project was first proposed to me, remember, so I had some advance warning. And you might say Houston and I arranged a back door in case it blew up in our faces."

"But how do you intend to..."

"With the help, willing or not, of this other Indian standing in the corner here. If all goes well, I may be able to use him as a stalking horse to overturn the conclusion you and I can't abide."

"Who are you?" said the General, speaking to me. "Look at me man, when I speak to you!"

I could hear the words clear enough but I could not see him.

"He can hear us General, but he can't see us. Not that he is blind. He just can't see us because you and I are not long for this world."

"More bullshit, Hightower. I'm really fed up with this.."

Hightower held up his hand. "No more than I, General, I assure you. But what I say is, unbelievable as it sounds, true. He's my involuntary guest. I arranged to bring him here, an unwilling volunteer but a volunteer just the same. This is Lifeseeker's brother. His name is Deathseeker. And they tell me he can only see people who have a long life ahead of them. Call it a special talent or a special madness, Deathseeker can't see those about to die. How was it they put it, "Those about to die, so it is said, are less than shadows, vague indistinct beings beyond his perception." That is a direct quote from his chief."

"My god, who is shoveling all this?"

I knew Hightower's face was dark, his expression bleak. "What does it matter if it is true or not, General. It could all be bull. From the getgo it could be crap, but whether it is or not, they believe it in Washington, or rather he believes it, has been shown enough evidence to believe it. Somebody who is supposed to be able to sort these things out, God knows I can't, has tugged

somebody's chain and I have been given to understand, both Lifeseeker and Deathseeker, are the genuine article. Unquote! Those are the cards. They are to be played as dealt. We accommodate ourselves to it or lose from day one."

"It stinks!" said the General. "It damn well stinks!"

"Well, whether it does or not, I have a plan."

They put their heads together and talked in whispers so that I could not overhear.

They need not have done so, for I walked now only in my dead brother's dreams. I heard only the war screech of the Eagle and the battle cry of the Great Cat. My eyes saw the great combat as my brother had fought it and saw it lost now and lost for all time. The face I had made for him had found an answer to this world of Vietnam but the white men want only their own answer and his death had not conquered them.

My brother and I travel in many worlds. But not in the world of the General and Hightower.

In their world, the earth has no center. It is not a world I want to travel into.

But then I had had no choice.

I had left the reservation, hands cuffed behind me and with a gun at my head.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I was not born with the name Deathseeker. Like my brother Lifeseeker who now took his name out of the world, I became my name.

We were twins but not twinned. We shared a face but lived behind two faces, like the masks of the old Gods that show one face going East and another pointing West, front and back, both true to the heart. As a tree sends out many branches, so our lives had gone in different paths.

He was the darker brother.

His spirit world was not mine.

He danced with the dead in the scalp house while I was a seed in the ground, listening to the sound of grass growing.

I knew his death would come in this far away land, as did he. The old people had said as much when the white men came to take him to this place and they had ways of knowing. It was not a truthful journey or a willing one but it was said that his death might end a war. And that would have been a good thing for the world has too much death.

It was said by the white man that his help may be the cause of this thing happening, but like a promise made in a treaty, what the white men say will happen and what actually does, who can really say?

That the war would end, this was something the old men could not know about. They understand death in all things, in whoever and in whatever race of men it touched but the insanity of war as the white world made it, was beyond understanding.

I stood in a place far from the eyes of the whites. It is a place sacred to our people. It is the source of my strength.

My thoughts were not of the white men and their war or my brother who would never walk the earth again. His face was now on the back of the mask.

I cast my body aside, in the old way I have been taught.

I let my spirit crawl out of my skull, on the backs of ants. The ants traveled with the burden of my spirit and climbed the black feathers of a hawk no man would ever tame.

The ants crawled up to the head and into the open beak of the black one and he ate them, swallowing my spirit and I became one with the hawk. And looked out of his eyes, and heard the things on the wind that were the hawk's to hear.

I had left the walking trap of earth behind and mated with the wind.

The hawk lifted his great wings and together, as one, we soared in the blue sky. My human body slept on the green hair of mother earth, as my spirit traveled in the body of the hawk.

I saw much as we rushed across the upper world. The eyes of hawk are sharp and see much. Perhaps too much. Through the eyes of brother hawk, I saw something moving across our sacred land.

And as that thing moved across the heart of our people, I saw that its movement meant my human brother had failed. Or those who had brought him to the war in a place far away, had failed him.

I spoke to brother hawk and we plummeted down like an arrow from the sun, so that I might see more of the thing that had come for me.

We hovered over the intruder, close enough that I might hear and better understand.

The sun flashed on the binocular lens as the white man completed his sweep of the box canyon.

The man in the jeep put the binoculars back in the case. The scar-faced Indian in the jeep beside him cradled his gun comfortably against his chest. The Indian spat at the ground like he had something unpleasant in his mouth. He was a man known to me. His name was Horseboy.

The jeep had pulled to a stop at the head of the box canyon. Hawk and I alit on a tree nearby, seeing but unseen.

"You sure Deathseeker's there? I'm getting sick of chasing all over hell and gone!" said the man, his back military stiff against the hot leather seats.

"He's there."

"How do we take him?"

"Just walk up to him I guess and then ask him to get into the jeep. That would seem the best way. He won't be armed," said the man known to me.

Brother hawk did not understand the words but I did. He was restless, sensing no prey here and his belly cried for food. I chanted softly to calm him.

"Deathseeker's out here in the middle of nowhere, without weapons? I find that hard to believe. This is dangerous country."

"Maybe for you, and me. Not for Deathseeker. The only danger for him out here is probably white people, so until you came along, this was a pretty safe place for him to be."

The white man put the jeep in gear and they began moving down into the box canyon.

Hawk followed at my urging, riding the wind in a glide just above them.

"I got a feeling he's watching us," said the white man.

"What if he doesn't want to come with you?" said the Indian with a trace of defiance in his voice. "I don't think Deathseeker's gonna be all that interested in your thing of utmost importance."

"Then I will persuade him otherwise."

"Meaning, he comes with you or else. That's why you got the guns, I guess. Deathseeker is a holy man, a sacred person. If you threaten him, only bad can come to you," said the Indian, looking scared.

"I'll keep it in mind," said the white man, carefully steering the jeep to miss the ruts and rocks.

"You don't like me much, do you," said the white man suddenly, pleased at the other man's obvious hostility.

The hawk could not know a man's heart but I had seen such men before. The white man was the kind who thrived on opposition. He liked bending things to his will.

"I don't remember having a choice about being your guide. I like having a say in what I'm going to be doing," said the Indian. "And I don't like having to go against my own kind."

"As I stressed to your chief, this is a matter of utmost importance. If I were you I wouldn't buck me on this. I always do what I set out to do!" said the white man.

"Yeah. You told me already."

They reached the bottom of the canyon.

In the shadow of a large rock, that had pictographs from the old ones who no longer walked the earth, my sweat lodge stood in the shade. A coyote and a deer sat beside my body, standing guard over it while my spirit traveled with the hawk.

The white man saw a long haired Indian, naked except for a small flap of cloth wrapped around his loins. Perhaps he thought I was asleep because my eyes were closed.

Brother hawk flew over my body and spat out my spirit and I fell back to the world of the walkers of the earth.

The pain of becoming made me scream. The animals who watched over me bolted suddenly. I would have kept them by me but the noise of the jeep scared them off.

At my feet, was a small sand painting. My body had done it while my spirit had been gone from it.

This in itself was a strange thing.

It had never happened to me before.

The meaning of it was clear.

Evil must now walk in the land, if things could grow without the spirit to guide it.

In the center of the painting, was an incongruity, a strange figure, that was no part of traditional sand painting. It was an eagle with a man's face. The face was white and a fairly good representation of the man who drove the jeep.

I stood there, trying to make my eyes see again and not give in to the pain of being as feeling came back into my arms and legs.

I felt my whole body again. I lost the feeling of feathers and was aware of my long black hair blowing in the wind, caressing my back and shoulders.

I was among those who had come for me, alive again in my body. My eyes saw the intruders and they did not. The Indian known to me, I saw him clearly. But the white man in the jeep I had seen with the eyes of brother Hawk, was no longer visible to me.

"I'm Colonel..." began the white man, killing the jeep's engine.

"Yes, I know who you are. And why you have come," I was not interested in the white man or why he had come. I would have found his absence good company.

The white man thought I was bluffing.

"More of that damn Indian mumbo jumbo."

I turned my back on the white man and began to walk away. The white man loosened the flap of his holster and put his hand on the butt of his .45.

I would have been angry with Horse Boy the Indian who had brought the white man here to this place but from his face, I knew his own anger at himself, was punishment enough.

He was not here by choice. White men own the world, or at least think they do.

"I'm not finished talking with you," said the white man, and I knew his hand was touching the gun. The idea of the gun was in his tone of voice.

Horse Boy beside him shook his head, not liking any of this.

I turned and looked in their direction. I could not see him but I could hear him. "Your name is Colonel Ranklin. You work for A.S.A. but now you are working for Hightower of the CIA It is a favor you are doing for him, and it is a secret thing that you do, unknown to those who are your immediate superiors. You are armed, a .45 I think, from the way the gun handle feels when you touch it."

"I thought you said he was blind?" said the white man, in a whispered undertone to the Indian beside him in the jeep.

The Indian shrugged, fingering the knife scar on his face nervously. It was obvious he very much wanted to be somewhere else.

"You have the advantage of me," said the white man. I touched his skin with my breath and smiled. He was feeling suddenly cold in the hot sun.

"Yes," I said.

The Indian in the jeep finally answered Ranklin. "No use whispering at me. He hears everything you say, maybe even everything you think. Who knows? Not blind, but he can't see people who are going to..."

"Bullshit!" said the Colonel. "Hey you, I've come a long way to see you. I made a special trip. I'm not accustomed to..."

"Only a white man would take so much trouble and bring so much death with him. I would ask you to go away but I know it is not in you," I said calmly.

I had one hand balled into a fist. A thing was happening that I had long awaited. I opened my hand and a wriggling mass of baby rattlesnakes hatched from leathery eggs on the palm of my hand.

I bent down and studied the tiny creatures, struggling to break out of their shells. I had been with them so long in their struggle to be new in the world that I regarded them with almost maternal interest.

"Christ! What the hell is he doing?" said Colonel Ranklin, feeling unnerved.

"An old shaman's trick. The heat of the palm, hatches the rattlesnake eggs but it takes days. He may have been holding those eggs in his hand for weeks," said Horse Boy, shifting uncomfortably in the jeep, shuddering. "I have only heard of it being done, never seen it. It is not a thing one wants to see."

I raised my hand up until it was level with my face. I stared up at the white man, not seeing him. Just seeing the Indian in the jeep beside him. A part of me was somewhere else. My eyes chanted a summoning.

I moved quickly then, like brother hawk swooping. My hand moved and then my mouth closed over the baby rattlesnakes, taking them all into my mouth.

There was no expression on my face, for the wind was behind me and I felt nothing.

It was all over in a second. It was as if it had never happened. I felt the white man's skin jump like a snake trying to loosen its skin against dead rocks. I could not see his stiff, rigid mask of a face but I knew the white man was badly shaken.

I felt his thoughts scatter like waves in a pool. It was a struggle for Colonel Ranklin to remember what had brought him to this hell he thought he was in. But the burden of mission rose up in him and brought him back.

"I think if you let me explain why I am here, then maybe..."

I just shook my head. The Colonel stopped, not knowing what to think or what to expect. Maybe he thought I was dying from rattlesnake bites?

Brother hawk screamed in the sky and came plummeting down at us, following the ancient chant of the eyes.

It wheeled up at the last instant, wings planing out, to come to a fast, abrupt stop on my shoulder.

The force of the landing made me step forward, into the sandpainting. My boots cut the surface of the painting, destroying the eagle image with the face of the white man.

The hawk sat on my shoulder and screamed defiantly at the white man.

I opened my mouth and there was something red and wet on my tongue. The bird thrust its razor sharp beak up into my opened mouth and plucked the red thing out.

Brother hawk took it in its maw and in a flash of wings, rose up into the air. The hawk screamed in flight and the wind carried the sound back to us.

The Colonel was shocked. There was a reality here that was not of his world, I sensed it and it was beginning to affect him. His hand rested on the gun but it was no comfort. His hands were trembly.

The Colonel was sweating heavily, but not just from the sun.

"Save your explanation," I said understanding all too well what was to be, and I lifted my hands out to the white man, wrists held together. "Better use the handcuffs. It is the only way you'll get me to go."

They didn't take the cuffs off until I was on the plane bound for Vietnam and even then, it was done over Colonel Ranklin's protests.

It wasn't that I tried anything, or threatened to do anything, it was just that, Colonel Ranklin, as tough as they come, sitting as far forward and away from me as he could get, was terrified in my presence. Absolutely undeniably stark raving all out scared to death.

It was something in my eyes. Something in my eyes as old as the world, as old as evil itself.

As old as the world, and from a world the Colonel had never seen before.

Perhaps it was this that melted the Colonel's spine.

CHAPTER TWELVE

It was a gray room in a gray hotel. Not the military lockup I had expected. But then I was pretty unofficial, any way you looked at it. The hotel was called Than Tien, which meant spirits of the mountains, an irony in itself.

I was not free to go and come as I pleased. I had been kidnapped after all.

A hard faced MP stood just outside the door and the windows were barred and overlaid with heavy wire mesh to stop hand grenades from rearranging the cheap furniture.

I sat on the floor, finding it more comfortable than the rickety bed but I find no place really comfortable where I can not see the sky.

The door opened and a presence that breathed heavily as if some corruption grew in its lungs came into the room. Two men carrying automatic weapons flanked the unseen one. The guards had the hacked from granite look of intelligence officers, and not lower echelon either. The guns looked out of place in their possession. I sensed they would have been more comfortable holding dossiers and computer printouts. Both wore wire rim glasses and had the washed out look of men who spent most of their time in air conditioned offices. These two guards I saw clearly.

"Are you comfortable here?" the unseen one asked and then I knew him to be Hightower of the CIA

I stared at the space between the two men I could see, so that I would be talking at him.

"It is my wish to go home."

"Tough!" said Hightower. I heard his arm move. "I expect the General shortly. Then we'll brief you in full."

"I already know what you want," I said. And I did. I often know what I can not see.

"Whatever," snapped Hightower impatiently, as if already tired of the subject. "Let's not talk. We'll just wait, OK."

I heard the scratch of bamboo bending and knew that he had sat in the room's only decrepit chair.

We had about a silent half hour to wait.

I heard him drumming his fingers nervously against the arm of his chair. I sensed an inner anger in this man. A stiffness that would not bend with any wind.

There was a curt knock on the door and Hightower jumped to open it.

Another man I could not see, came into the room. The armed men saluted. From their expressions, it had to be the General. The guards weren't military men themselves, obviously Hightower's men. It was their distrust and fear of the General that was evident on their faces.

"Dismiss these men, Hightower," ordered the General. "Their presence here is a violation of security. I told you to leave your dogs at home."

"You get no apology from me. They go where I go and what I know, they know too." The General did not react to this so Hightower reluctantly added. "But if you insist."

Hightower barked an order and they left.

The General stood near the door, Hightower was farther into the room, somewhere to the General's right. I could not see them but heard them breathing.

"Stand up soldier!" snapped the General.

I did not move. I did not intend to move. I yawned. The stale air in the hotel room made me sleepy.

"God damn it! I gave you an order, soldier! Snap to it!" raged the General.

Hightower said. "He's still a civilian General. He doesn't have to obey."

"Oh yeah, well, I draft him, effective immediately! If I shoot your ass right now, the paperwork would say you were an army K.I.A. So you better get your ass up off the floor. You're army meat now!"

I closed my eyes. "I would sleep now if you could promise to make less noise."

"I'll have you shot!" roared the General.

I couldn't see it but the General might even have been holding a weapon on me as he spoke. He sounded provoked enough to use it.

"Good," I said. "I would be grateful for that. I feel death would be far less noisy than listening to you. You make a screech owl sound pleasant."

Hightower spoke up. "Now you understand the presence of my men. Our brand of persuasion seems indicated. He's not going to be cooperative. After all, General, he isn't exactly a volunteer."

"He's in the army now! He'll do what he's told or suffer the goddamned consequences!"

Hightower's voice expressed doubt. "I don't think he cares about consequences."

"I'll string him up by his"

"It is not possible to threaten me. You could kill me but what would that bring you, not anything you want or need. So that threat means nothing," I said. "I can not feel pain. I can not be imprisoned. I can be restrained for a time but I can always be free of you. So I am and will always be in my world which is not yours. You have no power over me."

"Bullshit!"

With that, the General lashed out at me with his fist. The blow landed on my face solidly and I rolled back with the punch. It caught me along side my right eye.

"You felt that didn't you, you son of a bitch!" roared the General and I heard a tiny sucking sound as if he had put a bruised knuckle in his mouth.

A red haze settled over me, as if I had leaped skyward into the brightness of sunset.

My eye began to blacken, the bruised tissue swelling until the eye threatened to close.

I put my hand to it. In my hand was the wing feathers of a hawk. I brushed the eye lightly, chanting the green song of grass and summer and smoke.

Looking inward, I saw the healing. The General was a man about to sleep with the dark night woman of death. His black earth was my blue ocean. I moved with the tidal change of life.

My bride was the eyeless green woman of spring and the healing came. It danced along the edges of the feathers I held. The green reached for me and I let it root in me.

The darkened place on my face, paled and ebbed. The swelling stopped and then receded.

I blinked. No blow had struck me.

It was as if the General had never lifted his hand against me.

I could not see them seeing me. But I could hear them breathe and in that I read their shock, even their horror.

Those about to die, can not hurt me or reach me. A man full of life, whose life may ask mine to make way for his, yes, that was a threat and a danger but from such as these with a dark tomorrow, they are as nothing.

There was a silence in the room.

I was content upon the floor, not in their world but in mine.

What they thought, what they knew now, I had no way of knowing.

But I sensed they were scared.

Some children are afraid of the dark, and some are afraid of the truth.

Hightower was the first to break the silence. "I guess we are going to have to proceed on a different basis."

The General grunted either in affirmation or denial.

"Perhaps we could appeal to him on the basis of patriotism?" suggested Hightower. "American Indians have the reputation of being ultra-patriots. I have never had the distinction of serving with any myself but that reputation is supposed to be supported by the facts."

"I don't think he gives a good God Damn about our country at all!" snarled the General. "He's just some kind of goddamn freak! I shouldn't have let you talk me into this mindless f-up in the first place! It's one thing to fiddle body counts and something else again to kidnap a civilian! I knew this idea was strictly from the toilet! Well, screw him! He won't play ball, we can't let him walk away from here. We kidnapped him! He's got no status. So we send him home in a box and that's the end of it! I wash my hands of the whole damn sorry affair!"

"Yes, of course if we abort we'll have to kill him but we didn't go this far just to give up on...." began Hightower, trying to snatch something from the fire.

I interrupted.

"I weary of this room. I wish to be outside and so that may come to be, I will do as you wish me to do."

"What?" Unbelief was plain in Hightower's voice.

"You want proof that the war can be won, to undo the wisdom of my dead brother who gave you an answer and a truth you can not live with."

"Yes, but..." began the General.

"I can prove that. I can prove that the war can be won. I will do it."

And I meant it but not in the way they would understand or accept but I did not tell them that.

"You would be willing to....to propagate that lie...I mean to help manufacture such a piece of intelligence? I don't understand....." Hightower was wary, distrustful.

"I will tell no untruths. I do not deal in them. They belong to you. I spin no webs, no nets to catch men in as you do, but you may make any of my truths into lies if it suits you."

"Why this sudden change of heart? Why would you undo what your brother has done? Is it possible you do not know what effect, in what untenable position, the intelligence your brother offered, has presented us with?"

"To end a war you do not want to end, to prove that the war could not be won. I know his death was in that cause. But you would overturn his cause with

or without my help," I smiled at them. "The world is full of men who are your kind. I may not see you but I KNOW you."

"Why would you help us?" asked the General with far more distrust than even Hightower displayed. It was plain he loathed me, was very uncomfortable in my presence.

"I will prove that the war can be won," I said simply.

"But why?"

I said nothing.

"Why? Because after all you've said to the contrary, you really are afraid of death? That threat really got to you, right?" suggested the General.

"Death has no meaning to me." I said. "You have heard things about me. Perhaps enough to know that is true."

"I'm not saying I believe you, but damn it, yes, I just read your dossier. I won't venture an opinion on it. But just supposing what you say is true, then tell us why, if it's not that?" said the General.

I had no cause to answer them.

Hightower insisted.

"We have to know why? You can't expect us to go into this blind."

"You are blind," I said.

And that was all I would say.

They left the room like two men who had seen ghosts.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

He had falsely identified himself as somebody from Supply named Arven.

Arven was his name but he was Hightower's dog.

"I'm here to see that you get what you need. Hardware, ordnance, men." He didn't so much speak as read from a list. He was one of those kind of men. Such a man, with much to hide and everything to lose, was a man I might sometime pursue.

I was at the window and I did not turn to look at him. From the window, I had seen the sun set over Saigon, but not the night.

I was not able to speak yet because I was still journeying to return to my body. A small bird had perched on the screen of my hotel window and then carried me beyond the limits of the room. Now I ran in the body of a small lizard back to my body, my claws rasping against the tiles of the floor.

I had night journeyed until I saw the moon rise out of the Mekong river like a great silver drum.

I had found the river wide and deep and without movement save where clusters of green foliage floated gently down the back of the river from the North. With the moon at its highest in the silver night, water and sky turned the same color of glowing blue. Palm branches bending in the wind my wings rode, sampans adrift in dreams of rivers gave the scene below me its owly shadows.

Below me in the darkness of the river, I had heard the drums of war beating with tuneless hysteria. And the river went a thousand thousand miles into a deepening mystery. Somewhere, it began in a cloud, and endlessly rolling down into a silence it ended at the gates of a hell the white man had brought with him.

The pain of becoming again, left me, and I was able to speak once more. "I wish to see Hightower. I want to get out of this room." I smiled then but knew Arven as he called himself would not understand the joke.

I was still in the hotel room, under guard. I had promised them what they wanted but they were still guarding the barn door in case the horse tried to escape.

"Hightower is not available at this time. I'm here to see that you..."

"Make him available."

"My orders are to supply you with any necessary..."

I could see by his face that he really wasn't listening. So I reached out and put my hand on his arm and he looked up at me then and I opened my eyes wide and let him look in at me.

He ran out of the room.

What he couldn't hear, he could see.

I didn't have long to wait.

Maybe an hour.

The door opened and Hightower came in.

"I was told you wanted to see me." He nodded curtly. "Well, I'm here."

"I'm leaving this room now. You will go with me."

"What?"

I started for the door.

"Wait!" Hightower's voice was harsh. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"To find a war that can be won."

"And I am supposed to go along? Is that the routine?"

"Yes. You and some others that I will need. Yes."

"What did you do to my man Arven?" asked Hightower. "I've never seen him spooked before?"

"Nothing. I just let him look at me."

"Yeah!" said Hightower. "I bet you did."

He opened the door wide, stepped back and waved me through. "Never let it be said, that I'm not accommodating. I'm ready when you are. Just tell me what you need and where!" He was sarcastic.

To see the sky was what I needed most but I did not tell him that.

"Well, what are you waiting for. I'm holding the door open for you. What more do you want, an engraved goddamn invitation?" snarled Hightower.

I walked to the door and went on through. "You forget Hightower. I hear you but I can't see you."

"Yeah. Right. My mistake, I won't make it again," said Hightower insincerely.

He did not trust me, never would. To him I was an instrumentality, a weapon to blind truth.

But when he reached out to take me in hand, to bend me to his purpose, the weapon twisted in his hand and he could not aim it. He wanted what I could do, but only if he could control it. That one thing, control, which was his totem and his strength, the thing he desired above all else, I denied him by the simple fact of being.

And so he was and would ever be like a knife pointed always at my back.

Under his breath, I heard Hightower curse me but he followed me on out the door.

I could hear him walking behind me.

He walked like a man with broken legs.

I stepped out into the Saigon street, Hightower a surly shadow at my back. Outside, it was hot enough to knock a man to his knees. The life of Saigon flowed about me. I savored it, the throb and hum of it. It was a city that would never die, conjured out of the dead ages by the necromancy of unseen dancers. I could feel the ancient breath of snakes in the wind, roiling in a tumult of birth and ruin. There was a persistent smell of burnt flesh, gasoline and fear.

I heard voices in languages I did not know.

I saw buildings glistening white with ritualized stone snakes embedded on their roof edges and gilded spires at the top.

I saw strange women with drug stained teeth and close-cropped hair, their faces hard and masculine and unforgiving, as if forever seeking the right to be warriors. I saw men in the orange robes of their God Buddha, like packs of tamed

dogs trailing the flame of their yellow robes through the twilight of the shaded streets.

"Where to now?"

"Take me to the charcoal market."

I heard Hightower gasp. "You ever been to Vietnam before?"

"No."

"How could you have heard of the black market then?"

"It lives. It thrives. All of such things that do, I know."

"I'm getting a little sick of all this mystic crap. Why don't you save it for the F-ing marines! I'll give you credit for being the eighth frigging wonder of the world and you can knock off the bull....."

He was interrupted by the arrival of the General's staff car. The rear door swung open and the General stepped out. I could not know what was on his face but much must have been written there.

"It's official. Project Ghost Dance is on. It's a green light!" said the General. His voice managed to convey both triumph and doubt.

"Confirmed? 100%?" asked Hightower.

"Right from the get go. We've even got commended for being, uh, impartial, I think was the designation. The groundwork we laid made it sound like we were being thorough, getting a second confirmation of the intelligence conveyed by Lifeseeker. We've even been praised for taking the initiative."

The General laughed bitterly.

There was a silence. I sensed they were both staring at me.

Hightower moved closer to me, his shadow blocking the sun.

I turned away from them and looked up at the sky. They talked to me but I did not hear them.

The journey had already begun.

I looked at the sky and saw things.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was consulting the twisted things that swim in dreams.

They had left me alone in my room for a long time. Arven came to see to my needs and we talked for many hours about things. I spoke and he listened. Arven was a man in ways that other men are not. He had strange needs and desires and I knew his deepest secret fears. Words can be a storm. They can sweep things before them. I tried to be thunder and lightning and had some hope that in Arven's mind, a sudden rain brought a flood to the desert. He left to go and bring me things. I had a sudden need of things.

Hightower and the General were consulting maps in one corner of my room. They had been doing it from the moment they arrived, barely speaking to me at all. I could hear the paper rustle.

Dawn was a few hours off. I could feel Saigon stirring in its sleep. Outside the hotel window, the old Gods spun their webs on the lathes of heaven. Siva the destroyer had four faces for dawn. The old Gods of this place sat in the dark, awaiting another day.

Somewhere burning in the night, bringing the dawn, in those dreams that had once danced for my dead brother, there was a great dragon and flowing from its great stone heart was a river. It was a river as old as time.

The Vietnamese called it the River of the Nine Dragons.

I had seen it from the eyes of a bird on a night journey. It was on the maps Hightower and the General were studying. But it was not the river I sought.

I sought another river, more ancient, of a greater and more deadly wisdom. A river that came not from the great heart of China as the Mekong did but came out of the mouth of darkness and fire and endless night. A river lost to men a thousand thousand years ago.

The River of the Seventh Dragon, whose name is dragon but whose terrible form is that of a Seven Headed Cobra.

It came from the black bowels of a great mountain that my brother had seen. On that mountain, my brother slept forever to the heartbeat of distant drums and marched into his death.

"What I don't understand is this set up," the General was saying to Hightower. "I mean, I was given to understand that the first answer was that this was a war we couldn't win, at least not by whatever lights these Indians are going by. And the new deal was, at least I think it was, to overturn the first answer with a lie. So how come he's offering to do what he's doing? Is he actually saying this is a winnable war? I mean, is there something he can do to make that reality seem possible? Or is he just agreeing to lie to save his own skin? I'd like it a hell of a lot better if I knew what was in it for him!"

"We could ask him. How about it Deathseeker?"

I smiled at the walls. "My brother puts on the cloak of ancient darkness and becomes one with the secret ones of the mountains. He dances the ancient dances with the people who send the wind that blows over all in Vietnam. That wind blinds white men who fight against enemies they can not see. I am a rider on the storm, I shall lead you into that wind. Truth, if that is what you are asking me about, is something that has two ancient faces. My brother wears one face but it is not the face you want to see. It is a simple thing to change the world to see the one beneath it. Surviving that wisdom is hard. But I can make you see what you want."

Oh yes, I could show them the wind but would they be ready for it?

I did not think so for it was the kind of wind that tears the skeletons out of trees and shows that as its true face.

"What kind of answer is that? Is this war winnable? Is it provable?" insisted the General.

"You will think it so after you see what there is to be seen," I said.

Hightower laughed. "But would it be a lie? You are carefully not mentioning that, I notice."

"Does it matter to you if it is a lie or the truth?"

"Not so much as making somebody think its the truth," said the General.

"I bring back words and visions. How you sell it, as truth or lies, is of no concern to me. You are the ones with the obligation to convince. I only invoke but you are the bringer of the message." I turned my hands down.

That answer seemed to please them in some way but it was no answer to anything.

I knew this about them. Hightower and the General gave battle to skeletons, throwing their young men on the funeral pyre to light the way, so that they might catch a fleeting glimpse of the army of ghosts they fought.

To me, as seen in my brother's dead dreams, they were all ignorant phantoms that did not understand the lesson of death.

And so in blindness, the war was waged in every night of nights.

The General and Hightower went back to arguing over the maps. I had given them a destination. Described a place that we had to go to. It wasn't on their maps.

It was a place I knew as well as I knew the lands of my own people. I had seen it in my dead brother's dreams.

In that crystal clarity that his talent for death had given him, he made the path clear and the way certain.

The River of the Seventh Dragon. The Nameless One. The Great Destroyer. The Picker of Bones. The Cobra of Seven Stings. Those names and no name.

Arven, Hightower's faithful dog, a man I would have bent to my path, knocked and was told to enter.

He saluted the General stiffly, nodded curtly in Hightower's direction and approached me, waving a sheaf of papers. There was a strange, almost frantic look on his face.

"I have the information you requested. I've put all your requests through. They couldn't believe you asked for... Well, Christ...they raised holy hell but what you've asked for is on the way."

"Everything I asked for?"

I did not take the papers from his hands. I can know what is said on paper if someone is there who has read it. But I can not read.

I walked the path of a shaman. I do not know the white man's symbols for his sounds but I speak and understand all that they say. And sometimes what they don't say too.

He nodded. "That too."

I had asked for a locomotive.

Only if they had one to give me, could our journey begin. In my brother's dream of the journey, I rode a great iron dog that breathed fire.

"And a crew? The engineer?" They probably did not expect me to use the locomotive but that did not matter. For whatever reason, they had given it to me, it was the starting place.

Arven nodded. "Everything as you requested."

"What information? What Goddamn requests! Who authorized this?" snapped Hightower. "What did he requisition and when? Nothing goes out of here that I or the General don't clear first! Why wasn't I goddamn informed!"

Arven went white. I knew he had no answer to that. His hands were shaking.

"Where the hell are your brains Arven? Who told you I died and made the f-ing Chief here God!" raged Hightower.

The General chimed in. "I don't like this, Hightower."

I heard the sound of a fist striking wood.

"We're running one of the hottest covert operations going and this bastard is undermining us from the getgo! There's a hundred ways to Sunday this thing can go in the toilet and now this bastard is moving without us! Can't you control your own men, Hightower?"

"I feel ill sir!" said Arven.

"You'll feel F-ing dead if you can't come up with some explanation!" said Hightower and his voice was cold enough to dispense ice.

"I have no explanation sir!" Arven was trembling uncontrollably. "I was aware that I was acting without authorization. I signed your name to the requisitions sir!"

Now Arven was really sweating, a sheen of perspiration soaking his forehead and dripping into his eyes. He was like an addict trying to kick a drug. His body jerked spasmodically.

"But I have no explanation sir..I....I....I can't explain sir!" Arven looked like cardiac arrest was going to be his next activity.

I could feel Hightower's eyes burning into me. "You been messing with my men, Deathseeker!" he said and he sounded outwardly calm but violence was near the surface. I had done nothing to increase his trust of me.

"I do not interfere with anyone. I am not a big wind that pushes all before him." I spread my hands, protesting an innocence I did not possess.

"Son of a bitch!" snarled the General. "Let's get one thing straight! This is our operation! This is our show and you better toe the mark or get burned! You don't take a goddamned shit unless you clear it with us first, is that understood?"

The door opened and men I could not see came into the room. I could not see them but I knew who they were.

One was a chopper pilot named Howton who was to die on this day in a helicopter crash as my dead brother's dreams clearly saw.

My brother could not have known I would be here. His talent was for death.

He could never see me or the effect I would have on those around him.
I was his great blindness as he was mine.

My talent was for life. And so I had called Lt. Colonel John North Howton away from his duties and in that way, spared Howton so that he might ride with me. Through him I would be able to talk with my dead brother.

I could not see him for he would still die and soon but for a time I had delayed it.

At his side, I knew stood a huge black man, whose name was Jackson Jackson but known by all as a man called Doctor Death. He seemed to walk like a great black tree dragging its branches across the ground. The floor shook when he came into the room. He had great strength and of all those I could not see, he was the closest to being visible, as if there was a possible turning in the path and Doctor Death might have the strength some day to take it, and live instead. He too was summoned by that greater thing that takes a man's name out of this world, but I had called him to me. To take the long journey with me and in that calling forth, his death too, was delayed.

There was a crisp knock on the door. The General bellowed, "Enter."

Colonel Ranklin came into the room, the man who had first met my brother when he arrived in Vietnam. My kidnapper and Hightower's favorite killer. The smell of death was on Ranklin. The assassin saluted smartly. I knew because I heard his crisp starched uniform bend.

"Who sent for you Ranklin?" said Hightower. "I knew he looked in my direction. "Never mind. I know who. Ranklin brought you here Deathseeker, but that was where his responsibility in this thing was supposed to end. He has another assignment elsewhere. I can't spare him. But now you've brought him here. The question is why?"

"He may be necessary. My brother told me of his peculiar talents. He works for you General as an adjutant but he kills for you Hightower. It is a skill that we may need on the journey we are about to make." I knew Ranklin very well indeed. I knew where the dark part of his life lived and I could reach it.

"OK. Enough of the... the mystical bull! Lieutenant Colonel Howton and door gunner Jackson...all back for a second time...?" began the General.

"Just call me Doctor Death," interrupted the black man.

I could not see him but I knew there must be a smile on his face. It fit the image of him my brother had given me in dreams.

"...and Colonel Ranklin...is it just because they all met your brother? Ranklin picked him up the first day he was in-country. Howton and"

"I know who they are. My brother spoke of them to me. That is why I had them brought to me."

"He's dead but he speaks to you, is that about the size of it?" said Hightower. "Cause I don't recall any phone or radio calls when he was alive and well."

"I hear and I see what he knows, what he has done, before and even now. His voice is in mine," I said calmly.

"Naturally! What an asshole I must be for not realizing that right off!" said Hightower sarcastically.

"You have no need to be afraid of me Hightower. I pose no threat to you. Nothing outside you can kill you. The seed is rotten and the fruit rots outward to the skin."

I could not see fear on Hightower's face but I knew it must be there.

"Reporting as ordered!" one of the newcomers to the room said. I sensed that the men who had come in were standing at attention.

"At ease men. Perhaps you men better wait outside. We'll call you when we need you, if we need you at all, that is. You especially Ranklin, be ready in case we need you!" The hostility in the General's voice was overt, the threat plainly stated.

I heard the door open and the sound of them walking out.

Arven moved then. I did not know why but he went across the room toward Hightower. He bent forward and a piece of paper was in his hand. I could not see it until it appeared there so Hightower must have handed it to him. I looked at it with Arven's eyes. Just a glance but enough to know its purpose.

Arven turned and with a brief, haunted glance in my direction, left the room.

I smiled. "When Arven comes back, I will have some more names to add to his list. Not many but you will want their dossiers too."

Hightower cursed.

The General marched heavily to the door, his steps sudden and hurried as if something dark was about to overtake him.

"I need a drink. I need a lot of drinks. Put guards on the doors, Hightower.... Nobody goes in, nobody goes out. Seal this place up tighter than..."

"You won't have time for that General."

"Says who?" demanded the General.

"Arven did not tell me but he knows they are loading our train with supplies right now. They've only had an hour or so with the locomotive but I understand it was stored in pretty good shape so it should be fueled and ready for us by no more than two to three hours at best."

"You know what he's talking about Hightower?"

"I'm afraid we're going to find out," said Hightower. "You're way out of line Deathseeker! You've taken on too much authority."

"If you truly want what you said, then you go with me. If not..." I shrugged.

"Where the hell are we going!" demanded the General. "If that's not too much to ask, since I can't find the f-ing place you mentioned on any goddamn map?"

I told them as much as I knew how to say, about the railroad and where I thought it would take us. They were not pleased to hear it.

I could hear paper crinkling in the air. I knew Hightower was waving a map at me and that he was mad as hell. "Listen Deathseeker. I know what you're talking about. The railroad is marked on the map. It runs along what used to be the old Mandarin Road, that ran from Saigon to China. But we're not going to go diddy-bopping along in a goddamn locomotive!"

"Goddamn right we aren't!" growled the General and I heard him pick up the phone. He barked into the phone. "Get me the 315th Air Commando Group. Hello, Taggart, this is Blue Father, I'm not on a secured line. I want what you've got in F-105's gassed to go. Dust off Puff the Magic Dragon, have it up and ready to go. I'll want cover from F-102's and on standby your least shot up piece of hardware CH-3 wise. You read me Taggart? And don't give me that you call, we haul crap. I want something the first bird shits on it, it won't fall out of the sky. You copy that Taggart?"

"How many men we need? A company? I can get as many as you need with as much air cover as..."

He must have been asking me.

"Sorry General," I interrupted. "We can't get there by air. We'll be leaving by train as I have arranged."

"Where the hell does he get off with this bullshit?" demanded the General of Hightower. He spoke into the phone. "No, not you Taggart, although you're full of bullshit too. Hold on Taggart."

Hightower sounded thoughtful. "I don't know General but then I don't know how a helicopter can land on a mountain that isn't there. Or how a headless body can appear to have a head to two men who both report hearing it talk. I guess it's on a par with having to accept that the war is going to be over because somebody topside sent an Indian medicine man with an eagle over here to do battle with some damn invisible cat and the eagle got his butt kicked."

I heard the scrape of Hightower's hand against his unshaven chin. "The more I get involved, the more the weirdness seems to swallow me. I guess if he says we can't get there by air, then we can't."

"What happens when we get there? What's his plan for proving we can win the war?" said the General. He spoke into the phone. "This is Blue Father, again Taggart. Cancel the take out order. Won't need you this trip. No Taggart, you wouldn't believe me if I told you. Even I don't believe me!" He banged the phone down hard enough to break it. He seemed on the edge of abandoning the project altogether.

"I will prove that the war can be won. I will prove it to your satisfaction. I have said that I would do so. And I say I have given my word, and then if the wind is at my back and it is in my power to do so, it shall be done."

"What can you tell us about the place you want us to go? Other than the description of it you already gave us. What can we expect there? What do you intend..."

"When you are there you will know."

"We want to know now!" insisted the General.

"If that were possible, then we'd never have to leave this room. Or I could have told you back on the reservation, when I first knew what it was you desired. No General, if I could tell you, I would but I can't."

"Then what the hell can you do?" demanded the General. "And with the goddamn train?"

"I can take you where the answer is."

"I guess if we start believing you about one thing, we'll have to believe in you about everything else too," said Hightower with a profound sigh. "This is one piss poor way to run a war!"

I felt a sudden chill in the room, the icy edge that fear travels with when it steals over men who pretend mightily against it.

"How many of the people who were in this room could you see?" asked the General.

"One."

"Who?"

"He said his name was Arven, which I think was a lie."

"You don't see Ranklin or Howton or the black..."

"No. I see only those who will live long."

"You don't see me or the General either because.." began Hightower, his voice sounding strained.

"Because soon you're both going to die," I finished for him.

"War is hell," said Hightower. "Only it's worse lately."

I heard the door slam.

If the General agreed with him, the only one who was going to know was a bottle.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"It's a suicide rap," said Doctor Death. "This Indian is a surprise autopsy waiting to happen."

He was regarding the crowded Saigon Passenger Train Terminal with distrust. Spare ammo clips were fastened all over him like strange mushrooms growing on a black tree. He carried two M16's, one resting on each shoulder.

Howton kicked at the steel-sided doors of the train. "I'm a good damn chopper pilot! What the hell am I doing on a frigging train! Why us? Why don't they call out the Marines? We got no business being on the goddamned ground!"

I was standing in a crowd of Vietnamese peasants waiting to board a train, with their livestock and seemingly all their worldly possessions in tow. I was

not hiding there or making any special attempt to overhear Howton and the black man. But I was glad I had found them. There were things I wanted to talk to them about. And now was a better time than later.

"What you are doing here, is you are surviving," I said, coming up behind them. "which you wouldn't be if you were elsewhere."

I sensed they both turned to look at me and that I had startled them. At least I had got their attention.

"Sorry about your brother man," said Doctor Death. "He died a stand-up death. It was over pretty quick. He didn't suffer much."

"Death was good to him," I said but they could not possibly know what I meant by that. "You are here because I asked for you both to come. I chose you for reasons that shall be explained in time. Perhaps now is that time. Sides have to be chosen."

"Thanks a heap and a half!" said Doctor Death. "But really, you shouldn't have. I mean, getting whacked in the air is one thing but getting my black ass creamed on a pogue train...Man, I can't begin to describe the un-thrill!"

"There should be truth between us. There are things you know. You do not know that you know them. But they will be revealed to you and through your eyes I will see them too. You were with my brother. Where he journeyed, we must journey now, but by a different path."

Howton acknowledged. "Your brother was a brave man, I will say that. Real sorry he couldn't complete his mission. Kind of bad catching it the way he did, didn't even make it to our drop off....."

"The mission was completed," I said and I felt sorry for them. As I am being used, so too were they being used. "They didn't tell you that because you don't remember what happened."

"I figure it's the stuff these Indians smoke, Hownow!" said Doctor Death. "They all got this pronounced case of off-white weird. Or maybe it's that cactus grease they smoke, what they call it, Pepote?"

"I have come to undo what my brother has done. That is our mission."

"You mean to say getting hosed good and proper was our mission? Man, we sure did that great then! We came away with more holes than the Indians put in Custer. So like how could we have succeeded when everyone we were carrying got smoked in transit?" said Doctor Death. "I mean maybe you should just take your song and dance and song and dance it somewhere else."

"But it didn't happen in transit. It happened on the ground, on a mountain deep in the secret heart of Vietnam. On a mountain white people have never seen before. Your mind tells you of another reality, the experience went away from you and your mind made you see things so that your reality would not drive you insane. But I do not lie to you, your mission was a success and it is our mission now, to make it so that it was not a success."

"Great!" said Hownow. "We didn't know what the hell we did last time out or why or what, and now knowing even less, we're going to go out and undo what we don't know we did before! By God, just when you think the military can't possibly screw it up any worse than it has before, the sky opens up and it pisses bullshit on you up to your neck!"

"Why us?" said Doctor Death. "This some kind of punishment for bitching up the milk run with your brother?"

"No. It will be hard to make you understand. They intended to punish you. Not for failure, but because the mission succeeded. Those who sent you, did not want it to succeed. Your lives became as nothing when my brother completed his mission and died. He saw your deaths and told them to me."

"Well, do tell, was it the cosmic Black Clap that kicked my mortal black ass or was it just too much party hearty fun from a gun that turned off my ticker?" said the big black with an uneasy laugh.

"No. Hightower saw to it that you got a lethal dose of adulterated heroin. Somebody you thought was a friend of yours, gave you just a 'taste' of it before you were to go upcountry with Howton. And you were dead within thirty seconds."

I turned so that I faced in Howton's direction.

"And the General had already made arrangements for you to take a solo divert to Bien Hoa. They had located a heavy concentration of enemy anti-aircraft hardware and they hoped you would get blown out of the air. And you would have been today, because the air cover had been ordered to pull back and leave you up there all alone. But if you had somehow managed to escape the ground fire, the jet assigned to you as air cover had orders to shoot you down with a missile. You had both become an embarrassment."

"How you know this shit?" asked Doctor Death. "Man you're wasted!"

"You know what the General is like. I suspect you know what kind of man Hightower is, what they are both capable of. Knowing them as you do, does not what I have said to you sound possible?"

Howton's voice had a strange quality to it. "I do have a lot of weird nightmares about that last outing. And they made us go over that story so many times in debriefing, I knew something was screwed up somewhere but I could never put my finger on it. I got to tell you that my head said we were in the air only a few minutes on that last milkrun with your brother but my watch said we were gone for hours, and the fuel tanks said we were up and out for hours too. So maybe something happened like you say. But why can't we remember the mission?"

"Because you are not in the place where it was real."

"We'll remember it again when..." began Howton, leaving it hanging.

"When we arrive at our destination. To a place you have seen but can not now remember," I finished for him.

"So why tell us all this stuff? I ain't saying its anything but a bunch of Indian hoo doo, mind you, but why tell us all this here stuff?" Doctor Death asked. "I could get a big mad on if what you are saying is true. Would they if they had the tiniest reasons? Sure the sons of bitches would! It ain't like I'm gonna think they give a rat's ass about a poor black boy like me, but what's the reason? I can't see them wanting us dead for just nothing, for something we don't even remember but the way you say it, this Frag Thyself crap don't ring my chimes."

"I tell you these things because it is not clear who the enemy is. Because you fought with my brother, you walked with him into danger and he found strength in you. I face the same darkness and I wish to have you at my back, so that together we face what comes. I can not walk into the mouth of the dragon when all around me are against me."

Howton said. "Maybe something did happen on the last mission. Maybe we don't remember because the boy scouts messed with us chemically and erased our tapes, maybe all that but I don't believe zip of this other stuff. This is an acid rap! This is the old raving paranoid butterfly in a power dive trip and I get enough of this black rap fantasy from Doctor Death without I got to add this Medicine Man Spook Show."

"Yeah. As a song, it don't sing!" agreed Doctor Death. "I can't think of no reason those bastards would have us killed not that they ain't above killing somebody like you say. But ain't no whyfor."

I looked around the station, looking to see where Hightower's men were. Now was not the time and place to try to prove what I said to them.

It might make things difficult but it was worth much to have them on my side. For I had nothing but enemies around me and death stalked me like a swooping hawk.

Near the head of the train, where they were hooking three flat bed "sleepers," ballast cars that would detonate any pressure mines and save the locomotive engine from destruction, I could hear Hightower and the General

conferring with a group of Vietnamese officials. They seemed to be in a rather heated argument, their voices carrying half way down the length of the train.

They were far enough away that I felt I could risk it.

"If I convince you that what I say is true, do you follow me or the men who have ordered your death?"

"Can't tell you that." said Howton. "My vote don't change just cause the wind shifts. I'm an American and damn proud of it. Maybe they had a good reason. Prove something first, then I'll talk turkey."

I had to settle for that.

I put my hand out to Howton.

"Give me your hand."

He put his hand in mine and I placed it on the top of my head. "Grip my hair. Hold it firmly. And whatever you do, don't let go."

I motioned for Doctor Death to come closer. "Watch him. Don't touch either of us but watch his hands."

"What's supposed to happen?"

"This..." And I twisted and stepped away into nothingness.

Howton held the severed head of my brother in his hand. Blood dripped on the stone floor.

Doctor Death dropped one of his M16s. It hit the ground with a clatter. His eyes were wide with horror and he stared in absolute terror at the blood dripping from the severed head. Touching was belief. He put his hand out. Blood dripped on the palm, warm and red and all too real.

The eyes of the head opened slowly and turned in their sockets and then the mouth opened and began to speak.

"Warriors we have walked the same path," The voice was a whisper from the grave, the sound of wind rattling the skeletons of trees. "I thank you for the death you have given me."

I heard the words as I had once heard them in my dead brother's dreams. The voice went on.

"It shames me brothers, that those who have sent me to die here, now seek your death. Listen to me, as I call you from the path of war and you prepare to take your names out of this world, listen to the words of those, who ask your death, so that you may know how you died, so that you may gaze upon the truth in the jungle of their lies."

There was the sound of the General's voice, giving orders to a jet pilot about downing an American chopper.

Hightower's voice merged with that voice and seemed to be offering money and drugs to someone to deliver something.

Doctor Death turned his head slowly to look in my direction.

For a second only, I could see him and then I could not see him again.

I heard him say, "We're on a Goddam mountain!"

Howton appeared before me suddenly then winked out like a light. I heard him say. "Down there, about a 100 yards to the left, is a path."

And then they were gone from me.

They were someplace inside themselves. In the nightmare that a sleeper can never remember on waking, in the land at the edge of the eyes.

They walked again with my brother. They saw once again the ancient game of Cat and Eagle.

But this time, because of me, they saw the head that was twice dead, once in each of two worlds. And the twinned deaths of my brother had dual meanings for them now to live through and know.

I twisted back toward them.

Howton could not move his hand. I had to force his fingers apart to free my hair from his grip.

Doctor Death was staring at his hand. I could not see him staring at it but I knew he was.

And his hand was soaked with the blood of the two deaths of my brother.

"Walk with me into the wind. Help me against my enemies which are your enemies!" I said and I did not wait to hear how they would answer. They had seen too much for words.

I walked toward Hightower and the General. I saw Arven, surrounded by a group of gesticulating Vietnamese men. On either side of him, Hightower and the General must have been standing and both were fully enraged, judging from the sound of their voices.

"Trouble General?" I asked as I approached the group.

Hightower spoke first. "Nothing that a little indiscriminate rapid arms fire wouldn't cure." He sounded fed up with the whole business.

"What seems to be the trouble?"

A man pushed himself forward and bowed slightly. "I am Nguyen Ngoc Lam, Chief of Operations. We must not get to be to approving this venture until our president Pham has seen with his eyes what you ask. I am most sorry. He left the orders most explicit. Please to wait. It is too dangerous. It is no."

"Yes," I said. "Its OK to wait. I understand your feelings in this matter. It is proper to wait."

Nguyen's eyes glowed with sudden respect for what I had said.

"Wait hell!" snapped the General. "The Goddamn locomotive was paid for by US Aid for International Development money! It's our goddamn train! We don't need their permission to take the ..."

"We need not only their cooperation but much help from them as well."

"Let us talk in your language. There are things I wish to say that they do not need to hear," I said to Nguyen, indicating the General and Hightower. "There is much I wish to know from you."

Nguyen was shocked.

"How is it that you speak my language? They say you are like the ones in movie Westerns. An Indian."

He smiled and made a gesture, using one finger at the back of his head to mimic a feather.

I saw Arven frown, and get suddenly intent. And then lean forward as if tugging on somebody's sleeve. He bent forward and seemed to be whispering. So he too spoke Vietnamese.

"I speak the many tongues of the Great Lizard. He lives against the wind and hears much. A warrior learns many tongues so that he may always understand and in that wisdom, know his enemies and his friends."

I would have to deal with Arven more completely and soon.

It was a matter of seeing beyond him. I dropped the Vietnamese and switched to Cham.

"You are Cham, Nguyen. A proud kingdom, may Champa walk again in the sun, I too live for the day when its emperor sits once again on the Throne of Heaven. I am as you say, an Indian, from a people far away, but as you dream, we dream. May the spirits move in a straight line and carry Champa to the new day of glory!"

"By the eyes of the Sacred White Tiger, I too await the coming of the kingdom of Champa! It is a dream, and such a man as you, from the far West, seems to understand dreams. Then you too must know of the potency of My Lord the Tiger's region, glorious Champa that calls men back from the ashes. May the curse of the high gods be upon this forest of rice-faced fools! May the pale ones explode from their own smell! I did not believe you existed except in white man movies but you are not like the men in the movies. With such a spirit, you could have been Cham!"

"You praise me highly."

"But someday Cham shall rise again, it shall happen. If you need my help, you who see into my heart and know my Great Dream, I will help."

"What do you mean you can't follow it?" snapped Hightower.

I heard Arven say, "They WERE speaking Vietnamese but they've switched. Sounds like an upcountry Montagnard language. Can't be sure which one."

"Goddamn you Deathseeker! What the hell are you two jabbering about?" said the General. "And how is it that you....never mind...I probably don't want to know." The General sounded tired.

Hightower's voice sounded amused. "So he speaks Vietnamese. And whatever garbage the Montagnards speak. And I figured we'd have a hard time understanding his reservation English! Well, it's getting a little too strange for me."

I switched back to English.

"The strange has not yet begun."

I turned back to Nguyen, continuing in English. "If you have a map of the railroad, I will show you where I wish to go."

Nguyen nodded and turned to one of the men standing beside him. The man handed him a rolled tube and Nguyen unfolded it.

I took one corner of it to keep it from rolling back up.

"Here is our railroad. No finer railroad exists in this part of the world," declared Nguyen. "As you see, it starts in Saigon and follows the old Road of the Mandarin Lords north to China."

I put my finger on a line on the map. "Here. This line that runs to Loc Ninh. I wish to go in that direction."

"No. You must not! We do not go to Loc Ninh anymore! The lines north are blown up! The Viet Cong control them. It is not possible to go North there! I am most sorry."

"With your help, it is the direction we will go."

"But it is madness! You jump into the mouth of the dragon! I do not wish to lose my locomotive!"

There was a commotion and the crowd of Vietnamese around us parted and a Vietnamese man of obvious importance pushed his way to the front. He began without preamble. "I am Pham Minh Duong. They say you wish to take my locomotive. Why is this so?"

Nguyen looked at me and I nodded. He spoke in Vietnamese to Pham, explaining what I had requested.

Pham listened stoically, glancing in the General and Hightower's direction from time to time as the explanation was made.

The General interrupted. "I don't know who you are or what your position is here with this damn railroad but speaking for the Army, I can commandeer this train with or without your approval! Just keep that in mind. We lent you people the money for the damn locomotive in the first place!"

Pham did not react to the General at all.

He looked in my direction once. He seemed to be thinking.

Then he said in heavily accented English. "In the last twelve months there have been 300 attacks by the Viet Cong on my railroad. More than 100 of my locomotives have been damaged. Eight of them so badly they had to be scrapped. I have lost more than 30 loyal employees to these attacks and over 300 more have been wounded. I have 23 new locomotives from the A.I.D. this year. 12 of them already have been mined and derailed. Now you tell me you want to go on the most dangerous part of my railway, from Saigon to Loc Ninh. 88 miles of danger and death. We suspend service on this line completely. The VC control it, despite all that you Americans do. I will lose another locomotive. I will lose more men. Already my engineers are young men, too young to handle well my locomotives, but I have no choice. All of my older engineers are dead, killed by the VC. I tell you I am against this but I can not stop you. Take the locomotive but you will get no help from me or my people. I so order it."

"If your precious damn locomotive is lost," raged the General, "I'll personally see you get ten damn engines to replace it!"

"I would have that in writing and even then I would not believe it," said Pham. "But do as you wish. I have made my objections. I have said no to this thing. When I go to talk about my loan, my protest will be in the record."

He bowed formally and turned and withdrew.

"Goddamn gooks!" muttered the General under his breath.

Nguyen folded up the map. The men at his back stirred restlessly, as if they sensed it was now time for them to all leave.

He spoke to me in Cham.

"I have been ordered not to help you."

"Yes. Do not let it trouble you. I journey to the great cities the giants built when the kings of the Seven-Headed Cobra ruled Champa. I have need of your help but you must serve those who"

"My heart is with Cham. That is who I serve. Can you tell me, you who are so strange but not strange, this thing that you do, does it serve the kingdom of Cham? It is a thing I wish to know."

"It touches the heart of Cham. It walks with the spirits of the old kingdoms. I can look at the sky and see things but I do not know if the journey is a step on the road to the return of Champa."

Nguyen turned to his associates. He barked an order at them and they quickly turned and moved away.

"You have my help," he said simply. "For I would wish to walk with you where the spirits of the old kingdom walk."

"Make this train ready. I see you have attached six cars, far more than we need. I'd say take five of them off but if it takes extra time, leave them on. We want to get started as soon as possible. Arrange it so this locomotive is headed to run on the tracks that go to Loc Ninh. And find me an engineer to drive it."

"It is madness. It is suicidal. It is done. And I myself will go with you! To the great glory of Cham!" he said and left.

"I don't give this expedition a mile before we bite the bullet," said the General. "I think the only place that rail line exists now, is on an old map!"

I heard the sudden thunder of marching feet. The train station doors flew open and a company of Marines swarmed into the station, in full battle gear, moving at double quick time towards us.

"Right on the dot!" crowed the General. "Time to saddle up."

"Get rid of them."

"What?" The General sounded shocked.

Hightower spoke up. "You don't intend to go incountry on..."

"Dismiss them. Send them back where they came from," I said.

"No!" The General was adamant.

"It would be better..." I began.

"They go or nobody goes," said the General. "It's not discussible. Those are my orders."

"They won't arrive at our destination," I patiently explained.

"If they can't get there, nobody can. That's the goddamned 7th Marines and nobody but nobody keeps them..."

"Tell him Hightower. If I say they won't arrive. You tell him Hightower," I said. "I do not want to waste my breath."

"They won't arrive," said Hightower and there was a strange, defeatist quality to his voice. "If he says it General, he's probably right, as much as it burns my ass to admit it."

The General ignored it. He turned and began barking orders.

In response to his commands, the Marines entered the last four cars of the train, and took up firing positions in the windows. Others lugging heavy machines guns, set them up on armored turrets on top of the cars.

I stared at Arven. He shifted uncomfortably under my gaze. "Have you brought those people I requested."

I heard a harsh bark of laughter from the General.

"Not all as you requested, no."

"Why not?"

Arven looked toward the General.

Hightower spoke up.

"The General went over your list and decided..."

I spoke to Arven.

"But they are nearby?"

Arven nodded yes.

"Bring them in."

Arven started to move.

The General must have seized his arm because he jerked to a halt.

"This is a top secret military operation, you son of a bitch! Two of those names didn't pass our security check. I can't see any goddamn reason to..."

Hightower broke in. "I assume you requested the Doctor and Army nurse because they were the ones that had contact with your brother's body but they were unacceptable to us for reasons of..."

"Bring the people I asked for."

"They aren't available. But I have a doctor and nurse waiting over there, both of whom are acceptable to us." The General motioned in the direction the people he had chosen were standing, near the flower stand. I did not look to see them. They were not going to come along.

"Where are the two I requested?"

"Shut up Arven!" snarled Hightower.

"Outside in the General's car," said Arven. His mouth jerked spasmodically as if the words had been torn involuntarily from his mouth.

"That nurse is a drug addict!" said the General. "Christ! I'm not going to..."

"When they are on the train, we can begin. Those of us who are making this journey, carry these names in this world," I motioned for Arven. "Yesterday I gave the names to you. Read me the names you have taken down in your white writing."

Arven pulled a list out of his breast pocket unfolded it and began haltingly to read from it. "Lt. Colonel John N. Howton, doorgunner Jackson Jackson, nurse Leslie Ann Burton, doctor Philip Callard, CIA Operations Chief, Prentice Hightower, Director of Operations, Saigon-Hue Railroad, Nguyen Ngoc Lam."

He licked his lips nervously before saying the next name. "Jameson Armitage Mott"

"Who the hell is..." began the General.

"Me sir," said Arven. "It's my real name, sir."

"You told me a guy named Mott was CIA but you didn't tell me he was your own personal dog Arven, Hightower," said the General with a bitter laugh. "Read on Arven, er, Mott. I notice this isn't exactly the list you gave me yesterday!"

"I'm sorry sir. I tried to give it to you sir. I....I couldn't help myself..I.." Arven's lower lip was trembling.

"Never mind. Just read on," said the General.

"The last name on the list is.....is you sir," said Arven.

"I don't remember volunteering," said the General.

"My name wasn't on the list yesterday either. What makes you think we'd risk ourselves on something as crazy as this suicidal train ride upcountry? You know what happened to your brother?" said Hightower.

"If you walk in the path of the man who started all this, if you were that man, whose word would you believe if they had witnessed proof that the war could be won? Would not you believe a very high ranking General and the highest ranking CIA man available if they had personally witnessed the unfolding of the answer they seek?"

I heard the rough sound of Hightower's hand brushing against his unshaven chin. He seemed to be thinking. "Well, he's got a point there General. We'd carry quite a bit of weight if we were bringing back first hand reports. Sounds like we could get our asses shot off too, but if we didn't, and the mission was a success, we'd be in one hell of a good position to make the trade off we want. We could sell it to our buyer. Guaranteed."

"Well hell, after all, we've got a company of Marines. A man couldn't ask for better protection. You know Hightower, I may just go along with this. I'll have to clear it down the line a bit, but I think maybe you're right!" He didn't sound too thrilled by the prospect.

"And you will bring the others I asked for?" I said.

"Hell why not!" said the General. "I guess we have ways we can protect ourselves from any possible security risk. Go ahead, Arven, or should I call you Mott, bring in that nurse and doctor."

Nguyen returned, bowed and announced in English. "I have arranged all. But it will take time to disconnect the extra cars."

"We're taking the extra cars," said the General.

Nguyen had a small, somewhat battered suitcase dangling from one arm. "I myself am ready to begin. We have diesel fueled the engine and my most dependable No. 1 engineer is already aboard. I await your commands."

In Cham, he added for my benefit. "Perhaps the trip would be better if we did not have to travel with fools such as these," And he indicated the white people.

I said, "If we could avoid fools, the world would not be as it is now, and you and I should never have to make this journey."

He smiled.

The General excused himself to make a phone call.

Hightower clambered aboard the train.

"I have had food and provisions packed and loaded on the train for everyone who is to travel with me," I said.

He gave no indication that he heard me.

Arven brought two people, a doctor and a nurse, into the train station. I saw him open the doors for them and then he brought these two strangers to me. I could hear them walking together, their footsteps hesitant and uncertain because they did not know why they had been called to this place.

I knew almost nothing about them, except that they had seen my brother in death. They were the last faces in my dead brother's dream.

That I knew and that they would die soon. Unless something in this world became somehow different.

I could not see their faces in my mind.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

With a jolt, the train lurched forward. It rolled a few yards and jerked again as if only begrudgingly accepting the weight of the cars.

I heard the sound of a body falling on the roof above us, the clank of metal striking metal and a string of lengthy curses in extensive four letter American English. Slowly the train picked up momentum.

"In my estimate, three miles before the first attack," said Nguyen, in English. "I sent a track walker that far ahead to look for mines. After that point, we can expect trouble."

"Great!" said Howton. "We're going to be sitting ducks in this tin can."

"Not to worry. Built by the French. First rate workmanship. Our railroad cars very sturdy," said Nguyen cheerfully. "Have myself survived many ambushes. However, not personally have tried to go this direction to Loc Ninh. Much too dangerous!"

"You don't need to sound so goddamn cheerful about it!" snarled Doctor Death and I heard the sound of ammo clips being snapped into a weapon. "We gonna get our butts kicked." Another clip snapped into another weapon. Doctor Death must have been loaded for bear.

"Is part of my duties on railroad to be cheerful, also helpful. I give you now advice on how to survive ambush. Stay on floor of car. Never leave car if we stop. Most peoples killed or injured when they leave car. If train hits mine, grip solid thing. Do not stand up and wait. If mine exploding under car, car will come to fast stop. Be ready for that," said Nguyen.

The train rocked along, the click of the wheels sounding like guns being cocked.

"Also not wise to be near window," Outwardly calm, Nguyen was worried. It was in his eyes, which darted about rapidly.

"Or anywhere else," said Howton contemptuously. "Can't believe we're on this slow frigging iron pony! What I wouldn't give to be upside. Give me a good Cobra gun ship over this any day! This is you know what on a stick!"

The General was on the radio. "I don't care what shape your craft is in," he roared into the set. "You're flying FAC until Silver King puts in your replacement! Copy?"

"This is Cowboy Six. I read you. Can do. You're coming in broken. The engine is fine." There was a burst of intermittent static that drowned out the transmission. "It's the radio. I think I took...." Static drowned out the rest.

Above the train, the sky was filling with support aircraft. The General seemed to value his hide rather highly. The roar of many jets was an unmistakable thunder. I had been afraid of something like this.

There was a lot of traffic in the air. Enough to tell everyone within twenty five miles that something big was happening and in what direction.

I had hoped that our journey by train would carry us a good distance before trouble hit, because of the element of the unexpected. Nobody would believe or understand why the journey was by train.

There was another reason why the iron dog was necessary. It was the shadow of the spirit that the white man thought he could bring to this land. There was a symbol painted on the side of the American made locomotive. It was the symbol of two hands, locked in brotherhood, bordered with the red, white and blue of America. It was meant to represent the kinship of the people's of America and this land but both hands were white, as if even the artist knew it was a lie.

America controlled the air, but the air was not the land. The train ran under the sky, across the heart of the land, and it was the iron dream that America had always believed in.

This train was the eyes from which all answers led. And as the engine burned diesel fuel in its American belly and streaked across the land of another world, I wondered just how far this dream of the Americans could walk.

As they had once laid their iron footsteps across our sacred tribal land, here too, the white man walked with iron. But what the white man did here by day, the enemy undid at night. So I believed it to be so.

It was a journey on a broken path. Not that I had ever expected to make it all the way by train. My dreams had seen the journey completed in a different way. Of course I had not told that to the General or to Hightower.

Our journey must begin by train but we'd arrive by other means.

But I had told Arven. Which as I looked around the car, was why he was not on board. I wondered if the General or Hightower had noticed his absence.

Hightower's dog had become my stalking horse.

The General insisted on leading the expedition. He was acting like a General. There was nothing I could do to stop that kind of madness.

I had power only up to a certain point. Beyond that, no wisdom awaited me. The General might as well have sent out invitations to the enemy telling them

where we were going. If we had done it my way, a single car and engine, without troops, we would have gone twenty miles before trouble even started.

Now it would be trouble all the way. I was powerless to stop it.

"What is a FAC?" I asked of no one in particular, speaking of what the General had said into the radio.

We were all jammed into the first car. The heat inside the metal sided cars was bone melting.

"Forward Air Controller," said Howton, and I heard the pop of chewing gum in his mouth. He didn't explain it beyond that. My puzzlement must have shown on my face.

"Functions like a spotter plane. Coordinates the bombing and strafing runs. Usually a light plane that goes slow enough to eyeball the ground situation." It was a voice I had never heard before. A nervous voice, unstable, erratic. I thought it might be the voice of the army doctor, Phillip Callard. It was coming from my left.

I was in the back of the car. At my request, Nguyen, Doctor Death, Lieutenant Col. Howton and the army doctor and nurse were all in the back with me. Hightower and the General were in the front of the car where they had set up an operations center. The rest of the car was taken up by heavily armed Marines who were in position at the windows and doors.

"Does anybody know what this mess is all about?" said the nervous voice at my left. "Anybody know why we're here and where we're supposed to be going? They dragged me right out of my bunk."

"I thought Army doctors were like civilians. Couldn't be sent anywhere unless they volunteered," said Howton. "Doctors. Not as screwed up as an officer and actually a gentleman."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. But same boat everybody else is in, I'm afraid. They aim my pointy head, kick my butt and I go whatever direction they send me. Only I'm used to a little more advance warning. Or at least half an idea what I'm in for." A match flared and cigarette smoke drifted my way. The flame shook before the cigarette smoke started. A very nervous man.

"Ask the Chief," said Doctor Death. "The high brass in the front of this car only think they know what's happening. Its the Indian here, who's calling all the shots if you ask me."

"You must be Doctor Callard. I'm afraid I am to blame for your being dragged out of bed. I requested you on this mission," I said.

"Just call me Phil. Pleased to meet you," said the voice but sounding anything but pleased. I heard a body shift on the hard wooden floor and there was a short expectant silence.

Lt. Howton nudged me in the ribs. "The man has got his hand out to shake."

I nodded and put my hand out. A delicate, long-fingered hand, wet with sweat found my hand and shook it. His hand was shaking so badly that it jerked my whole arm.

"This man is blind!" said the Doctor. "Excuse me."

I felt his hands on my face, around my eyes. I felt his breath on my face. I smelled blood and excrement and ether on his clothes. The way his hands shook, it was like being touched by a tree branch, bending in the wind.

"No," said Howton, his voice strained. "The man isn't blind. You don't want to know why but he just plain can't see ya."

"There's no indication of damage. Those are healthy eyes," said the Doctor. "What do you mean he can't see me?"

Doctor Death laughed. "Welcome to the Indian weird-out. The fun in the sun is just about to begin."

"Psychological blindness?" asked the Doctor. "I would think that..."

I interrupted. "You asked what this is all about."

The constant clack of the train wheels beneath us was hypnotic.

"Yes," said the Doctor "but your eyes..."

"Please. Let it not concern you. We are making a journey to a place in Vietnam, as to the place you do not need to know where or why we go there, but a man who can heal and take care of the wounded was required. And I chose you and your nurse."

"Pull our goddamn names out of a hat? How did we ever get to be so sumbitchin lucky!" A woman's voice, slurred and fuzzy. The voice of someone very heavily drugged.

"I know you. From a patient of yours who has taken his name out of your world. Someone of my own blood. This patient has told me much of you."

"Screw you," said the nurse. "We shouldn't be punished for.."

"Leslie. Be quiet," hissed Doctor Callard.

"Blow it out your..." Her voice was ugly with pain and whatever drug she had taken. The sentence faded out. She was barely conscious. She sounded like a lost swimmer in deep water.

"Sorry about that," said Doctor Callard. "Leslie's been under a strain. She's not herself. She just needs some rest."

"Snowbird," ventured Doctor Death, "or a big Horse woman, take your pick."

"Are you aware that I was, uh, about to be relieved of all duties? I am not a well man," said Doctor Callard. "And Leslie here was already on report. She's developed an unfortunate...."

The train hit a rough section of the track and slewed wildly left and then righted itself. There was another thud from the top of the car, the same sound of metal hitting metal and more curses. Someone in the car laughed.

"Yes. Don't worry about it. It no longer is important. Later you and I will talk."

"What I am trying to say, what I meant to inquire into was, well, if it'...." Callard plainly did not know how to say it. "Well, what I mean is, I don't know what your rank is or why you would be in a position to choose us for this mission, whatever it is." He paused to take a breath and then went on with a tremor in his voice. "Understand, I don't care what happens to me, I deserve whatever comes but if this whole thing is a punishment, I just want to go on record by saying that Leslie does not deserve...."

"Please. Do not think badly of me. I held out my hand to touch his arm but did not connect. I wanted to reassure him, for he sounded like a man who had suffered much. "I can not know the future. I am not here to hurt you or see a punishment done. In my heart are no thoughts of revenge or punishment, only a love of life as I once lived it. Trust me, if the wind is at our backs, what would have come for you, a military punishment, may not happen."

"I don't understand," said Callard.

There was the sound of a hand thumping against someone's back. Howton said, "Join the club Doc. The minute you realize nothing makes any goddamn sense, that's when you know you're in the Goddamn Army!"

Howton's voice went on. "I can explain the whole thing Doc. This is the world's weirdest monopoly game and we're taking a ride on the Reading Railroad. We're gonna pass Go and collect two hundred bullets in the ass! Just a bunch of good old boys having some good old boy fun!"

There was the sound of a beer can opening. And then another. "Jesus, Hownow, look what Red Riding Hood done packed in his little basket! Blatz!" crowed Doctor Death.

There was a gurgling sound and then a loud belch from Doctor Death. "Hey thanks Red Riding Hood. Just what I needed."

Over the click of the wheels, came the sound of automatic weapon fire. Something metallic clanged into the steel sides of the car.

I heard Doctor Death bolt for the window, and the sound of his guns hitting the window frame. His guns cocked. He must have had his head sticking out the window.

Howton's terse "What do ya see?" rang out from the window on the other side of the car.

Doctor Death opened up on full rock and roll with his M-16, "It's that bitch old lady with the big teeth!" he said, emptying the full clip.

All hell broke loose from all sides as all the Marines on the train opened up, following Doctor Death's lead.

Another voice came on the radio.

"This is Silver King. New FAC Alpha One on top. We have position and are scrambling. Willy Peter sighted on target, beginning our run."

I sensed that the General turned and looked back at us in triumph. He called out. "Don't sweat it! My boys'll burn 'em right to the ground!"

The roar of jets in a bomb and strafe run got louder. The whine of afterburners seemed to split the sky above us like an angry metal knife.

We heard the loud whump of ordnance going off and the thock and swoosh of air displacement as napalm went off, the barrage bracketing the train on both sides.

Nguyen handed me a beer. "Do you drink? You will excuse me please if I do." He chugged half a can down at one gulp. "I am most unhappy in ambushes. Sorry to say."

"I do not drink."

The offered beer can disappeared from Nguyen's hand. "I need that," said Doc Callard and his voice was close to a scream.

Nguyen opened his suitcase carton and came out with a double handful of assorted fruits. He offered them to me. "Perhaps you are hungry. You, like me do not have a gun. They must fight but you and I are men of better dreams, come let us in kinship share food together."

I shook my head. In Cham, I said, "Thank you for the offered kinship. But I refuse you because of no discourtesy. My ways are not the ways of men. I do not eat," and added, "Not ever."

Nguyen looked into my eyes and then looked away as if he had seen an angry spirit from fallen Champa stalking him there.

When the strangeness is on me, I can not hide all that walks in me.

Somewhere behind us, a mortar round struck one of the cars. There was the sound of metal striking metal and the screams of men, in the path of the explosion.

I heard the whine of incoming rounds. The windows of the trains were ablaze with automatic weapon fire. Howton and Doctor Death seemed to be firing as fast as their weapons would shoot, judging by the unending noise and the steady ping of empty ammo clips hitting the floor.

Something large and metallic tore through the side of the car just above our heads and exited out the other side of the car with a blast of streaming metal. A shaft of sunlight pierced through the ragged hole like a war lance of the old gods.

There was a scream like a wild cat and the sound of a body thrashing on the floor. I looked around in confusion. I smelled no blood. No one in this car had been hit. Blood is life, a smell I always sense.

Nguyen's eyes met mine. "Your nurse lady, I think she have attack."

I groped on the floor. Fists assaulted me, nails tore at my face. A wildly gyrating body, thudded against my chest. The screams rose in intensity.

I put my arms around her, pinning her arms against her sides. It was like trying to stop a mountain lion mid-spring.

I struggled with the body I could not see. My eyes went inward as the body struck against me again and again.

Her pain cut me like a knife. I burned in her personal fire and saw her face screaming in my dead brother's dream.

And the dream grew until it looked at what I had not seen before. As I had ridden the wind on the wings of brother hawk, as I had seen with hawk sharp eyes

the world far below me as I soared, now I traveled into the pale dream of the woman I held.

The stranger before me became known to me.

I chanted and twisted and felt the drugs in her blood and the darkness in a river flowing through the mind of the white woman. I closed my eyes and the train car full of half unseen men vanished. The death I could not see vanished. Deathseeker vanished.

I opened my eyes. I was Leslie Ann Burton.

And I saw too much.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

I have been hawk and snake and lizard and a thousand crawling, flying, swimming creatures of night and air and shadow. I have crouched, bloody-jawed over my kill, swooped on wings of thunder, ran with a heart beating with fear against my rabbit breast. In cool and ancient majesty, I have sped up the river to spawn in the age-old frenzy and die. I have been the scorpion, climbing my sting in the heat of day. I have been the honey-hungry bear eating the sweet moon. I have crawled into the dark underbelly of earth and soared into the fatal blue of the sky. All of these have I been and many more. From a thousand dark eyes, I have looked at the sky and seen things.

I had never been a woman before, not a woman of my own tribe, never a white woman.

Now I was Leslie Ann Burton and I did not know there could be so much pain in the world.

I was not a hawk that soared above life. I was on the ward with her and we put our hands out and took the child's hand in ours. He was five years old and would never see six. He had napalm burns over one hundred per cent of his body. He was coughing and with each cough, he shed the insides of his lungs. He just kept coughing and the blood came up. The other little hand was gone, just a stump burned away.

He opened his brown eyes, gasped for the breath that would not come and died. This was the third night he had been here. It had taken him this long to die.

All around were horrors, that seized the heart and burned deep and screamed soundlessly and for all time back there in the brain where there was nothing but pain.

Legless, armless children were all around her. They came and went and died and as soon as one bed was empty, another exploded piece of flesh that had once been a whole human being came to fill it. As young as newborn babies, as old as nineteen or twenty, burned, maimed, chopped, blown apart, dying, or more horribly living, with most of their fleshly being destroyed.

The horror for her did not go away. It pursued her. It made sleep impossible. She only slept if she was drunk or if she had shot dope.

She would do anything to keep from going to bed. No, she must never sleep, never close her eyes, the horror would get you, the eyeless heads that could not see why would roll after her, the dismembered limbs would crawl across the bed, like obscene spiders without bodies, waxen dead fingers reaching up for her. No sleep. In sleep, an army of dead children awaited her.

To escape was what she craved, to find the exit from the highway of pain, to go back and not be Leslie Ann Burton anymore but be a mindless someone else who saw nothing and felt nothing.

Maybe she would have made it. Maybe she could have gotten by if it hadn't been for that day...that day when it suddenly got to be just too much to be the feeling and thinking and caring Leslie Ann Burton.

I wanted to twist back, to not be Leslie Ann Burton anymore but that day came again and I could not escape.

The Commanding Officer found her bouncing off the walls, so fatigued she couldn't keep her legs straight under her.

She was only half way through her first shift. A nineteen year old named Jeff from nowhere in Iowa with his legs blown away, had held onto her hand that morning and begged her not to let him die. He had so many shrapnel wounds they couldn't stop him from bleeding. And his liver was jelly so there he was, pushed off into the corner, the one they put them in when there was nothing that could be done except leave them there to die. They had run out of morphine and had no way to knock him out so he was awake and writhing in pain and screaming for his mother and all Leslie Ann could do was hold his hand and promise that she wouldn't let him die while he did it in front of her by inches and her mind screamed why don't they kill him and get it over with! And she wished he was dead which was against everything she had ever been taught but it was just too much. Why didn't he just die!

The base had been under mortar attack all night and she had spent the night huddled on her face in a bunker, giving suction to a patient with no arms or legs for surgery that wouldn't take place because some time in the night, in the dark, just when she did not know, he had died.

And anyway she hadn't slept in two nights. She was dead on her feet.

The CO grabbed her just as she was about to go down, face first on the OR floor.

Her Commanding Officer cut her orders for some R and R on the spot. He had her carried off to bed and had her woken up promptly at ten the next morning and a jeep and driver assigned to take her into town to get her the hell away from it for a day or two.

Leslie just cared too much about all those dying young men for her own good.

She was half asleep in the jeep and only dimly seemed to see the town once she was in it. Her flak jacket was stuffed with Tampax, half in jest, and half in fear she would be evacuated some dark night and be stranded somewhere without any. One of the little paranoias, a lesser one than most, but still real enough to her and most of the other nurses.

She ate real food in a Vietnamese restaurant that overcharged her by 3 times too much but she didn't really care.

She had barely tasted the food and what little she had eaten, had been washed down with a bottle of whiskey, most of which she had downed since she got up at ten that morning. It was only noon now and she was half in the bag, eyes focused on nothing and everything.

She was trying very hard not to think about anything or remember anything. Despite that, when she blinked, she was back there on the ward and everywhere were the wonders wrought on the human bodies of young men by modern weaponry. So she tried never to blink, to stare blankly like a stone angel overlooking a tomb.

Her jeep driver had joined her at the restaurant, after doing a couple errands for the CO. She greeted him without much enthusiasm as he began to extol the relative merits of some of the nightclubs there in town. Her mind just didn't seem to be on it.

She was wearing a helmet and had a .45 pistol stuffed into her flak jacket, displacing some of the Tampaxes. Some of which had fallen out and now lay unnoticed like snow at her feet.

She said no to almost everything he suggested until he got crude and pretty direct and she sort of nodded at that. It was another way to escape and she didn't seem to care one way or the other. It would diminish Leslie Ann and anything that made her seem unlike herself, well, she was all for it. But first, they needed more whiskey, she said, holding out the empty bottle to him.

They got in the jeep and were bound for somewhere, he knew just the place he said. But they never quite got there. Where the place used to be, was a bomb crater.

So he parked the jeep in front of a hotel a couple blocks away from the place he had been meaning to go to and went in to get some whiskey for them and maybe a room for them. Although he hadn't been too clear on that point. Leslie didn't care either way.

The driver ran out of the hotel like the place was on fire.

He grabbed her by the arm and drug her inside. She was too tired to resist.

It wasn't a hotel, not any more at any rate, some kind of hospital for children. And there was this little baby laying there on the floor, right there where the hotel lobby used to be. Even with three patients to a bed, they had run out of beds. It was the floor or nothing for the kid.

"Man, this kid is real sick," said the driver. "I almost stepped on him when I walked in. You're a nurse. Do something."

The driver was a sucker for children. He had two of his own.

It was not what Leslie Ann needed right then.

She picked him up and tried to hate herself for caring. But she almost cried when she pressed the tiny face against her and he was burning up, like fire and nobody was around to say how long he had been like that. And if she hadn't picked him up, probably nobody would have noticed him or done much but let the fever take him.

She tried to get some kind of response from him, but the eyes didn't register, wouldn't respond to light and she wanted to scream. They had just left him there on the floor to die. They just didn't have enough of whatever, help, medicine, beds to go around.

It was like death was always going to win and she couldn't stand it anymore.

She snatched up the baby and ran out of there with the poor thing cradled on her chest. "Call the hospital! Tell them what we're bringing in and have them prepped for us!"

He ran off to call but she thought better of it immediately, realizing that the local phones were so screwed up it would take too long. Christ! He might not get through at all, the phone service was that bad.

She stripped the kid, trying to get him as cool as possible. Leslie Ann put him on the front seat of the jeep and got behind the wheel.

The driver could find his own way back. She turned the jeep around and went like a bat out of hell back toward the hospital.

She wasn't in the best of shape to be driving and she almost did up a few pedestrians on the way back.

But she made it. By the time she got there, she was frantic. The baby was going to die on her, she just knew it.

She jumped out of the jeep and ran into the ward with the kid and got him into a bed and started to put ice packs on him to break the fever. She ran out to get a doctor and to get some oxygen set up for the kid.

The doctor was playing poker in his hootch.

She burst through the door without knocking. "Hurry I've got a dying baby on my hands."

The Doctor threw in a card. "Hit me with one."

"Goddamn it! Didn't you hear me. He's going to code!"

"Vietnamese kid, huh, yeah. Be right there," he said looking up at her like she was out of her mind. The other faces at the card table were blank, avoiding looking at her. It was like she had never come into the room.

She turned and ran out of the hootch, expecting him to be at her heels.

She wheeled in an oxygen container. Strapped it up, and then tied off the kids tiny little arm to prep him for an IV. She was getting frantic.

The Doctor's hootch was right across the way. She went to the door. He didn't come out. The seconds ticked away, each one seemed to take forever. The sounds of the card game came to her.

Suddenly, she knew he wasn't going to come.

Had no intention of coming. And she knew why. They talked about equal treatment but G.I's got treated first, and ARVN's next and civilians, last, if there was time and if there was medicine enough to go around.

If there wasn't, that was tough. It was a decision made on an individual basis, every Doctor, within the limits of supplies and material, allowed or required to play God.

Apparently, this was a day of low supplies or as the CO had once stated it, a NO GOOK PRIORITY DAY.

And anybody Vietnamese, woman, child, VC, they were all gooks.

The baby was going cyanotic and she just flipped out.

She burst through the door of the hootch and she had the .45 out and she put it in the Doctor's face and he almost had a heart attack on the spot. It was cocked and her finger was tight against the trigger and she looked like she was going to let go then and there.

"You come take care of this baby or I'll blow your brains out!" And she meant it and the Doctor knew it.

He backed out of the hootch, propelled by the gun which was still in his face like a blunt spear and she marched him backwards, stumbling across the yard.

The Doctor was so stunned he still had his hand of cards cradled in his right hand.

A guard stationed at the perimeter of the camp saw the whole thing and screamed for the CO.

Before that, her screams at the Doctor had already attracted a lot of attention and the yard filled up with armed men and off-duty nurses and even some of the ambulatory patients.

It was plain to everybody she had flipped and was maybe gonna kill somebody.

She was screaming at the doctor. "You goddamn bastard! You save this little damn baby or I am going to blow your ass away!"

And she kept the gun right there in his face, so that he really couldn't do much of anything.

But finally, he did get to it, kind of got the gun pushed to the side, and was bent over the baby.

He put his head down to the kid's chest.

And she lowered the gun and moved to see what was with the kid and that's when they jumped her and tried to take the gun away. Somehow, she thought they were trying to kill the kid and it took five guys to get her down and get the gun away from her, she was that wild.

And the kid, they didn't even try, because he had been dead for about ten minutes, had undoubtedly died on the jeep ride over.

And they dragged her to her feet and she was screaming at them and the doctor and everything in the universe. By the time, she ran out of breath, and was just dangling there, from the arms holding her, the baby was wrapped up and stuffed into a body bag, out of sight and out of mind.

And then the CO came out and gave her holy hell, really ripped her apart! All this heavy verbal abuse for forcing them to treat that damn Vietnamese kid. Didn't she realize the kind of display she was putting on for the patients! Didn't she realize they couldn't treat every one dragged in off the streets, that they had other and more important priorities! Putting one of their own doctors at risk, actually threatening to blow him away!

He was screaming at her and her career was OVER AS OF NOW!

Then her eyes were starting to focus a little and she had her feet under her and was able to stand on her own.

The guys holding onto her, let go of her.

And she tried to hit the CO, went right for the throat, shrieking like a banshee, at which point he realized she was really out of it, and probably wasn't responsible for her actions.

And they had to jump her again and tranked her on the spot, enough morphine to make her sleep until twice tomorrow.

And after that, they never had to give her anything to keep her quiet.

Because after that, she always took it herself.

I twisted and went back inside me and felt sorry that I had ever been in this world.

It was a hurting that would not stop, this hurt that was Leslie Ann Burton. This joining was a mating and a marriage and I wept to hurt so bad.

And I went away from her, and no longer struggled in my own arms.

I stood up, letting go of her arms. She thrashed on the floor, still in the grip of the madness that had possessed her. The peace she sought could not yet come from me, but only from a needle and the dark drug that made her someone who was not the Leslie Ann Burton who saw too much, who cared too much.

I was back in the train car. I smelled blood. Death must be in the car now. I could not see it or sense it but I knew it was here.

Madness and death.

The train rolled forward, seemingly impervious to the ambush that beset it from every side.

Madness and death.

We journeyed on the great iron dog carrying the twin burdens of the white man.

And as Leslie Ann Burton was broken, so too, did the path before us begin to break.

My dead brother was on the train. He walked somewhere among us. He saw the faces I could not see. Sometimes I heard his voice in the rhythm of the wheels. He spoke to me. He told me about the journey. His dead voice spoke of things yet to be seen, of something dark that walked in the crystal caverns of the dragonsnake. The world here is divided into iron days and dragon nights. Cower upon the path, the voice cried, conqueror ironhorse, what the white man makes fire of here by day, the enemy drowns at night. So he believed it to be so. I tasted that knowledge upon my tongue and his voice was mine for a brief instant, for a flash of time, that opened the doors between the worlds.

I travel always between the worlds. I dreamed of my dream of a dead brother and was the dream he dreamed of me. Where did the wind say he walked, I asked his dream, what storm did I ride in his dream?

The iron horse ran straight at the wind but the dream said this is a journey on a broken path.

The steel wheels that broke the sacred hoops of the nations spun into the great oncoming dark. The war horse was blind and ran at the sharp edge of certain death. So the dream said it, so the wheels told it.

"This train is going to buy the farm," said Howton.

"You bet your ass," said Doctor Death. "Goddamn General got so much traffic going with us, he might as well paint a big bullseye on our butt and a sign that say, 'HEY, WE GOING THIS WAY ASSHOLES! SO WHY DON'T YOU ALL JUST SHOOT THE SHIT OUT OF US!'" He moved suddenly and his gun banged against the side of the train. He must have been facing me. His voice went on in my ear, pulling me out of the dream. "Hey Indian. What's the skinny here? I got a bad feeling about nine miles long? Is we is or is we ain't going toilet city on this damn train?"

"The train will die," I answered.

"That mean you can't see it?" asked Howton.

"I see it. It is not flesh. It dies in a different way."

"You see me and good old Hownow Howton yet?" said Doctor Death.

"No."

Doctor Death turned abruptly and walked to the front of the car. His feet crashed heavily against the metal floor.

"You're something else Indian. You can't see it, but that's maybe the first time I ever saw what I just saw in Doctor Death's face," said Howton and his voice seemed to echo, as if a shadow had spoken with him.

"I know that look. It gives dead men bad dreams."

"But if the train is going to..." he began.

"I did not expect to make it all the way by train. My dreams see the journey completed in a different way."

"You're a mysterious son of a bitch. I give you that. You told this to anybody else yet?"

I had not told that to the General or to Hightower. I would not tell them, the oncoming dark would tell them better than I could.

Our journey must begin by train but we'd arrive by other means.

"An arrow is aimed at the other shore. I tell no one the way the arrow goes."

I said it to him but it was not the truth as I knew it, for I had told it only to Hightower's man, Arven. I had made Hightower's snake my own and I was the rock against which the snake pushed, to shed its skin.

Arven was somewhere ahead of us, awaiting our coming. Arven went clothed in my new snakeskin. I had dominion over him. His old skin I fashioned into a whip, that beat him down the path I chose for him. That was why, as I looked around the car, that he was not on board. I marveled that the General or Hightower had not yet noticed his absence.

Hightower's snake carried my burden in its belly.

But my reign stopped there. Above us the sky was burning with a river of jets and the train itself swarmed with marines. The General insisted on leading this expedition, on forever acting like a General. Nothing prevails against that kind of madness.

So I sat quietly in the eye of the storm, and waited for what must be.

The train thundered forward, like a maddened bull, seemingly impervious to the ambush, to the burning metal stings that beset it from every side.

Madness and death.

We journeyed on the great iron dog carrying the twin burdens of the white man.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Something white and hot, shaped like the hammer of a vengeful god, slammed into the front of the train. The car beneath us shuddered like an animal whose lower limbs have been crushed. And then the convulsion shook the spine of the train.

Men were screaming. I felt someone's blood splash the side of my face.

The iron horse of America fell off the warpath. High explosives severed it's head. Men, supplies, and weapons tumbled around like broken bones inside the body of the dead horse.

I tried to hold on to those around me, seeking a center but the forward momentum of the train threw us all apart. The car lifted up in front and tilted and began to slew drunkenly to the left.

The dream that had been only a shadow, opened before me like a poisoned flower.

The train imploded, flying into darkness and oblivion, cars piling into each other with the metallic screech of a dying God. The sound we heard, was the way the world sounds when it comes to an end.

The car left the tracks, flipped and careened sideways. There was a thunderous crash as the car rammed the derailed car ahead of it.

It felt like a metal hook tearing into our bodies, throwing us all forward like slabs of meat, into the darkness. We were all violently hurled forward.

When the iron beast died, we were all that was left, human bones quivering in the dead meat, our forced screams were the great iron horse's last death rattle.

A part of me was still Leslie Ann Burton and I was afraid for her but my searching hands did not find her in the wreckage of the car.

I hit something, that once had been a man but now had a metal spine, where bones once were. The world of smoke and shadows and dreams went away from me, and for a time I knew nothing until a huge hand seized the front of my coat and I was myself again. The hand was steady, like a wind blowing true, and it brought me to my feet.

I heard Doctor Death's voice. "There you go chief. Lucky bastard, not even a scratch on you."

There was enough pain in his voice to tell me he himself had not been so well favored.

The car was laying on its side.

We had not all survived the wreck.

Nguyen lay at my feet, not dead, not dying, but badly injured. He had journeyed as far as he was going towards Cham, towards the land where the elephants of the kings walked the night.

He had lost one leg from the knee on down.

"Poor bastard." That was Phillip Callard's voice. I did not know who he meant. There were so many of them.

A figure climbed in one of the shattered windows. I heard the glass breaking as the man forced an entry. He seemed to be moving with some urgency. I sensed who it was, Ranklin, Hightower's assassin. Perhaps sudden death had stirred his appetite. Why he had not been with us, I did not know. Apparently he had been riding in one of the other cars.

"You OK Doctor Death?" That was Howton from someplace towards the rear of the car.

"Got an arm that needs help. But they ain't killed my black ass yet." He sounded cheerful. "How about yourself white boy?"

"Purple heart if a bruised butt counts," said Howton.

"Are you there Hightower?" I asked. "I think this is where we get off the train."

"You son of a bitch!" That was Hightower. "Somebody get me out of here! I'm trapped!"

"I've got you. Hold on!" I heard a thud and the sound of metal being forced. That was Ranklin, Hightower's assassin.

I made my way to the end of the car. The floor, now the side of the car, was slippery with blood. I stumbled forward, tripping over things I could not see, things that had once been men. The dream was calling me and I knew the path began somewhere outside.

I heard the others moving, the nurse moaning, crooning some strange repetitive mournful sound, not hurt from the sound of it, except in the head, and the heart, where it hurts the most.

The marines had taken all the casualties. Those I had chosen for the path of the dragon, had all survived. That too had been in the dream.

There time was not yet.

The rear door was sprung and I found it easy to make my way outside.

The sun was like an angry warm hand on my face.

I clearly heard the sounds of incoming rounds. They pinged and whined off into space as they slammed into the sides of the car. The iron horse was dead but its enemy still shot at its corpse.

"Where the hell you think you're going? Somebody stop that goddamn Indian!" That was the General but I did not answer him. He had apparently survived the crash unharmed. But there was fear in his voice and I liked the sound of it.

I heard the whine of incoming mortar fire. And the steel body of the beast shook as each metal fist drummed against its broken back.

We had not journeyed far. Because of the General, the train had died one day too soon. It was a day we would have to make up ourselves, for the path was still yet ahead and we were called to it. I looked back the way we had come. No we had not gone far yet it had been far enough.

I felt something hard in my back and turned my head. The barrel of a gun dug into my ribs.

"Did you think you were going somewhere?" a voice snarled in my ear.

"Ranklin. I'm glad you survived. I knew you would."

"Go back inside! That's an order!" He pushed the gun hard into my back.

"We have need of your talent on this journey, if killing is a talent," I told the man who talked as much with his gun as with his mouth.

"I got my eye on you. I don't know what your game is, you son of a bitch! But you better not be thinking of skipping out!" The gun poked me hard.

"I'm waiting for the journey to begin."

"I don't trust you. You make one wrong move and..."

A spray of bullets hit the side of the car almost where he was standing and he dove to the ground.

Doctor Death came stumbling out of the car, firing. It seemed to be effective. The unseen gun suddenly went silent.

"There ain't no cover out here. Better get your red ass back inside before it gets shot off." His voice was steady, almost amused. He did not seem to think much of me as a warrior.

"Thank you Doctor Death. But we are leaving the train now. Go back inside and tell them to get ready."

"Ask me if I'm surprised. Your choo choo got choked, chief." I could not see his face but I could sense his fear. He ducked back inside, leaving me with Ranklin.

"You're too stupid to duck," said Ranklin. "You don't wake up, you're gonna get your ass shot off. Personally, that's something I'd rather do myself."

The steamy heat from the jungle around us was almost unbearable. Dark black smoke, stinking of burning diesel fuel and burnt flesh, roiled across the ground in a thick choking wave. It was coming from the front of the train where the engine had left the tracks.

"It is good that you love death. It walks with you sooner than you know."

"Just doing my job," said Ranklin. I thought there might be a smile on his face. "Can I help it if I love my work?"

I heard him moving toward me.

"You know what I think? I think I'm along for the trip just to pop you. What do you think of that?"

Marines who had survived the wreck were coming out of the cars, returning fire. They had their weapons set to full automatic. The air became a storm of sound and confusion and death.

I turned to the north. I spread my eagle wings and tasted the wind.

I knew the river was there. I could almost smell it on the wind. Somewhere just ahead of us, the dark river called to me.

"Get your ass back inside! There's no cover out here. They'll be all over us like flies on a corpse!" That was Ranklin and there was a note of command and urgency in his voice. "C'mon goddamn you!"

"Do you see the river, Ranklin?" I knew I had nothing to fear and he had everything. "It's beyond those hills. There shall be a great going home there."

"I see a goddamn body bag if you don't get your ass back!."

I heard a thunder above me. The sky was full of jets. They came roaring down out of the sky like a swarm of angry hornets with fire tails. There was the sharp crump of a thousand things falling, incendiary stings, and the day seemed to explode on both sides of the train. A wave of heat and burning seared the air in my lungs. Twin oceans of flame boiled across the jungle around us, and in heat and hellfire, the jungle around us ceased to be.

Now the path before us was clear.

I looked back at the broken body of the train. The skull engine of the iron dream, gleamed bone white in the fire's red glare, staring with one dead eye at the world.

I started to walk toward the place where the fire walked.

I heard Ranklin moving behind me. I heard the metallic click of a cartridge rammed into a firing chamber. To him it must have been a sound of pleasure.

"You're about to make me a happy man." Ranklin was on his feet now and he spoke again. "One more step and I'll do you."

I took that step.

He fired once.

The bullet passed through my chest. I turned and looked back at him.

There may have been a smile on his face.

I heard the sounds of movement in the wrecked train car. The people inside were slowly making their way outside.

I walked back to Ranklin. I would have liked to be able to see his face, to know what he felt.

I know he was standing up, that the gun was still aimed, the finger on the trigger still eager.

I did not hesitate. I marched up to him. It had been a clean, killing shot, mid-chest.

I reached out. I could hear him breathing. My hand closed over the hand that held the gun.

"You are almost done with this. Soon you won't need this any more."

"I killed you!" Nothing but terror in his voice.

"Don't let your talent go to waste, killer of men."

His hand shook under mine. I touched my chest with my other hand, where the pain was supposed to be, where death was sent.

The blood stained my hand. Not the hand on my chest but the hand that held his.

"Go ahead. This is the moment your whole life has trained you for."

I felt his hand move in mine. The weapon turned and I heard him cry out. It was not words, more like a scream.

His finger tightened on the trigger and the gun boomed. Once.

It was a good clean professional shot. Nicely spaced, an inch away from the first shot.

Perhaps he looked down. Perhaps he had time to admire his work. The gun dropped out of his hand. I heard it hit the ground.

He fell backwards away from me.

I'm sure he was dead before he hit the ground. Two shots in the chest from a gun that big and at that range, would have made it quick.

If his mission had been to kill the enemy, he had succeeded.

With mistaken blood and borrowed fire, the journey had begun.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We were trapped there beside the train until the world around us burned itself out. The jets had done their work all too well. The smell of burned vegetation, burnt flesh and the sickly sweet tang of napalm was on everything.

You could almost drink the black poison from the air.

The survivors were doing the dance that survivors always do. I went away from them and sat on a log, waiting for the fire to burn out.

Those who traveled with me, were far from happy.

Hightower was angriest. His curses were louder than the ongoing exchanges of gunfire.

Ranklin's death seemed to hit him hard, as if Hightower had himself lost some of his secret strength. The dark cancer that ate him from within, seemed stronger now. It was in his voice.

Hightower had come outside and probably was the first to find Ranklin slumped down beside his gun. I could still hear his blood dripping from the wounds I could not see. There was a smell of sudden death in the air. I was standing ten feet or so away from where Ranklin's body must have lain. That was as I close as I wanted to be to it since he shot himself thinking he was shooting me.

"He killed himself," I said. I thought Hightower needed to hear that.

"Why? I don't believe it!" snarled Hightower but I could tell from the way he said it that he did believe it.

"He aimed at an enemy he couldn't see," I said to answer the question Hightower was too proud to ask.

Death was something Hightower understood but Ranklin's apparent suicide was beyond his understanding. It said all too clearly, that Hightower's world was spinning wildly out of control.

What Hightower must have felt, was beyond mere words. Control was Hightower's religion, and the world around him was losing faith. More of his strength had left him. Ranklin's bullets had touched Hightower's chest too. I heard the sudden heaviness of his steps as they zipped up Ranklin in a body bag.

The General was trying to make order out of chaos. Sending orders left and right to the surviving marines, assessing damage and staying constantly in radio contact with home base, wherever that was.

He ordered med-evac choppers for the dead and wounded and was burning the airwaves, calling up heavy duty re-inforcements.

I ignored him as much as possible. I was content to rest on the log, to save my energy for the journey ahead. What he did, was of no concern to me now.

I had made the first steps upon the path and I was dreaming about a river.

"You sick bastard!" It was the nurse Leslie and she was speaking to me. "Get the hell up from there!"

I looked in the direction her voice had come from. "What?"

"Take it easy Leslie." That was the doctor, Phillip Callard.

"What is wrong with her?" I asked, for I did not understand her sudden anger at me. I was worried about her because I had been Leslie Ann for a little while and she was now a part of me.

"You're sitting on a corpse. I think you might find another place to sit. Something a little, uh, less, grisly," suggested Dr. Callard.

I got up quickly. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I felt it with my hand as I was sitting down and thought it was a log."

Doctor Death spoke up. "The chief's got eye problems." I could tell from the direction of his voice that he was sitting down near me, on my left. Howton was behind me. They seemed to stay close to me as much as possible.

"Christ!" said Leslie Ann. "What the hell are we doing out here?"

Nobody answered her.

"I think we should chow down. Do we got some time for that chief, I mean before we make the next jump?" That was Howton. Apparently, he now trusted me as the source of the wind that took us on the path.

"When the ground cools enough for us to go through, we'll move on. Eat, rest while you can," I said. "The easy part of the journey is behind us."

"Let's hear it for the easy part. Nothing I like better than a surprise autopsy," said Doctor Death with a groan. His arm must be really hurting him now.

Dr. Callard must have been bent over Doctor Death, trying to patch up his arm. I heard Doctor Death's teeth clamp shut as he struggled against the pain.

Callard barked out, "Don't move until I get this bound up. Another inch and you'd have lost some bone. Hold still, Goddam it!"

"Jesus," moaned Doctor Death. "Take it easy there Doc. That goddamn thing is still attached. I need that. That's my trigger arm."

"Leslie help me out here will you?"

I heard the sound of someone being violently ill.

"Looks like your nurse is doing a rerun of lunch," said Doctor Death. "You'd think she'd be used to a few blown up bodies by now."

"It's the drugs. She's just a little too far between shots. She just needs a shot to get well," Doctor Callard said.

I understood that kind of sickness. It hurt so much to be Leslie Ann.

"But you have no medicine in your bag for her hurt. Soon she will be even sicker. It has been dreamed, it shall be so," I said which was more than he needed to know. I could not see the man but the dream had seen the branch of the tree bending this way in the wind. Her pain was just beginning.

"If I say she needs a shot, she gets one!" Callard was angry, at me, at the world.

I could have explained the next part of the dream, the pain yet to be for her, but what was to happen, would soon tell better than any word I might say.

"He's a mysterious son of a bitch, isn't he? How's he know so goddamn much when he can't even tell the difference between a corpse and a log?" said Doctor Callard, still busy with Doctor Death's arm. I could almost feel the doctor's piercing eyes staring at me.

Howton leaned over me, his shadow passing across my face and put an opened tin of rations in my hand. "Better chow down, chief."

I handed the tin back. "I don't eat now."

He offered me his canteen, trying to put it in my hand. I shook my head no.

Doctor Death spoke up. "You gonna dehydrate you don't drink something. It's hot enough out here to fry a duck on my ass!"

"I don't drink now."

I could feel the big black man staring at me.

"You don't eat and you don't sleep and you don't sweat. I hear incoming and I leap for the moon but you don't act like you even know what's coming in. Dead people ain't that cool! I'm frying under my helmet but you don't even sweat! I get the freaks just watching you do your thing, you know that Chief!" said Doctor Death. "You're a goddamn trip!"

"You said it Black Boy! Wouldn't we like to have whatever it is he's been smoking!" Howton withdrew the canteen.

"I don't believe anything you say about him, of course," said Doctor Callard. "I'm not buying into any of it. Personally, I'd just like to get the hell out of here."

"You gotta buy into it. It ain't real. In Vietnam, that's how you know it's real," said Doctor Death. Howton and Doctor Death might not understand but they knew enough to believe. They were becoming my allies in the dream.

"I got this theory Doc, the chief's got this radio in his head, or maybe it's tom-toms. He knows everything that can be known and we know all the rest. He's what you call a freak of nature. Me and Doctor Death, we swear by him. He says the sky is green, the sky is f-ing green. You can bet your BVD's on it Doc!"

Callard snorted with disgust. "I better see what I can do for the wounded. And Leslie needs..."

"Others are here to do that. You must stay with us," I said.

"Goddam your ass, I'm a doctor! There's wounded."

"If the Indian says you stay with us," snapped Hightower, reasserting his authority, "You stay with us."

"Who the hell is he to..."

I heard a cartridge go into a chamber and the sharp metallic snick of a safety clicking off.

"What he says, you do. Or die, do you get it?" said Hightower. He meant it. Hightower had a gift of mission. Everything could be justified.

Hightower had the dark force of a mad man, the hard edge of a man pushed beyond his limits. I would have guessed that his hand trembled on the grip of the gun, that his finger ached to move as it curled around the trigger. At such times, I am glad the faces of those who are to die, are forever dark to me. Such a man is not good to look upon.

"Do you get it?" If Hightower had to say one more word, it would have carried a bullet to back it.

"Sure. Why wouldn't I get it?" said Doctor Callard. It was an insolent answer but it was enough for Hightower.

I got up and began to walk north, toward the smoking, blackened land that lay ahead of us. The firestorm had passed. I sensed things moving on the wind. It was time to begin the last part of the journey.

There was a general scramble behind me.

"Where he's going?" It was the nurse, her voice shaky from throwing up.

"Trust me, lady. You don't want to know," I heard Doctor Death say.

Howton called out. "Hey chief! What the hell are you doing? Where are you going?"

I did not answer. I kept on walking. Into the land of the coiled snake, into a desolation that seems to be the twin brother of Death. The dense black smoke of napalm dissipated in the wind. Somewhere, beyond the temporary funeral pyre of this part of the jungle, the river waited.

I heard men running behind me and then the General's voice boomed in my ear.

"Hold your goddamn position. We're not ready to move yet. I got choppers and..."

"Seven of us can move on the path. Only those and no more."

I kept on walking.

The General screamed at me, a torrent of abuse but I did not hear the words anymore. My mind was traveling ahead. A white road of an ancient king spun before me, fanning out from the river like the veins of a leaf. Brown-skinned warriors and their dark-eyed wives of long ago came onto the path and the dust of their passing created a cloud of silvery dust.

I was moving. And something stirred and rose to meet me at the end of the dream.

The General had no choice but to follow. "Soames you and your men stay with the wounded. Patterson and Reade you move with me. Spread out your men! You and you! Take the point. Saddle up, let's go marines!" That was the General, assuming command of a march he could not control.

I stopped and looked back in his direction. I could see some of the marines coming toward me. Some of them would live, had many more days to walk the world. It was good to see some of their faces. Quite a few had survived the trainwreck.

"I tell you, you must leave them all here. Only seven of us are going on this journey. There has been enough death. When they walk further upon this path, I will not be able to see their faces in my mind." I felt it must be said even though I knew the General would neither believe me or heed what I said.

I turned again and began walking. The river was not far. It was beyond the rain yet to come. The one I had sent ahead should be waiting for me there. Arven

had made a promise to me but a snake can shed its skin. Did Hightower's kept one live long enough to fulfill it? I could not know until we arrived at the river.

I moved through a flat burned out hell. In the distance I could see the shapes and colors of jungle hills. Beyond those hills, lay the dark river.

Those behind me moved quickly, coming up around me on all sides, to cover me, to protect me.

Behind me I heard the thud of many feet, all moving on the path we now took.

I sensed a presence at my left, hurrying, out of breath.

"Where the hell are we going?" That was Hightower, taking a position at my side.

Someone else came up on my right and an arm stretched across my chest, stopping my progress. The General was making one last attempt.

"You're out-running my supply line. Goddamn you! The goddamn train got waxed, just like we said it would! You stupid bastard! Where the hell do you think you're going? This goddamn place is crawling with unfriendlies!"

"I've told you where we're going."

Hightower snarled. "Yeah and it isn't on any goddamn map!"

The General snarled. "Stay where you are. I've got radio contact established. Nobody moves till I say we move!" He barked out the order and then I heard him turn and run back toward the radioman some distance behind us. When he was out of earshot, I spoke to Hightower. "What happens on the journey, how we move, where we go, it is for you and I to decide. The General is here only to see and report back. You must take command Hightower."

"What you saying, too many chiefs and not enough Indians?" said Hightower with obvious sarcasm.

"Your man Arven if he is not too blood weary, will have supplied us with everything we need to complete our journey." I pointed at the edge of the forest beyond the burned land. "We'll find it by the river."

Hightower's voice was tense, edgy. "I never thought Arven would turn. What did you do to him? Not that it matters. He's a dead man if I ever see him again! What I feel like doing is kicking your ass from here to kingdom come because what you just said doesn't make sense. But everything around you doesn't make sense. Why the goddamn train? If Arven knows where to leave things for us, why didn't we just make a direct jump to.."

"Arven sent something in a direction. He does not know where it will end up. If he is still alive, there is one who would kill you, Hightower, if he could. You are no longer his religion!"

I sensed Hightower stepping away from me, as if I had suddenly become a mortal threat. There was both anger and terror in his voice. "Arven is going to pay a price."

He had not said it but I knew he intended to kill me too, when he got what he wanted out of me.

The General was back at my side.

"I've arranged transport for us and resupply. I've got choppers on the way. We're not going to go waltzing off." began the General.

"I sent someone ahead General. Resupply and transportation, all we'll need should be about several days walk from here. Probably no more than that."

"Why wasn't I informed?" snapped the General. "By whose authority?"

"Arven is waiting for us," I said. "Everything has been arranged."

"Did you know about this Hightower? Your own goddamn man!" The General was furious. "Are you trying to run this thing without me?"

"Arven doesn't seem to work for me any more. I guess he caught whatever it was that Ranklin..." Hightower let the sentence trail off. He coughed. "Believe me General, I know nothing about it. But I'm going to find out all about it and real damn quick too!"

I pushed the General's arm away and began to walk again.

They had no choice but to follow me.

"You don't seem to have very good control of your men, Hightower. They don't seem to be wrapped too tight!" said the General bitterly.

"When I get my hands on Arven, I'll tear him a new asshole!" said Hightower. "I'll make the son of a bitch wish he'd never been born!"

Someone was walking behind me. It was Howton. He said just loud enough for me to hear it, "Shit! What's he gonna do, send his ass to Vietnam!"

The dream grew in me and it made me have a sudden need to know where some of those who traveled with me were. We were on the dark edge of something.

"The people I asked for? They are with us? The woman will need help," I called out, worried the most about her.

A voice from some distance behind me called out.

"I'm taking care of her. She's doing fine." That was Doctor Callard and he was lying. Her pain was a silent scream I could almost feel through my skin.

"We are all present and accounted for chief," said Howton. "But you can bet your ass, we'd like not to be."

I sensed that a soldier was walking directly ahead of me, someone big by the heavy sounds his feet made as he moved through the burned vegetation. A hand grabbed my shoulder hard and stopped me mid-stride.

Howton's voice was in my ear. "Don't put your foot down."

"What's wrong?"

"Don't know. Might be a mine. Or some kind of freaking booby trap. Doctor Death is up front, you can't see him, but he just signaled to back off."

I gingerly pulled my foot back.

We had all come to a standstill.

"Are you sure about the booby trap?"

"Damn straight!" said Howton.

I looked all around me. The charred, jagged stumps of trees, still smoking, thrust up through the ash-laden air, like the blackened fingers of dead men clawing at the sky. It was a good place to die.

"Howton, move to my left and go on past me. How many men are directly behind me? "I asked.

There was a pause while Howton must have looked behind him. "A couple."

"Do as I say."

He moved off and stepped ahead of me.

"Are you close by? Do you hear me General?"

"I hear you, you son of a bitch!" The General was off to my right.

"When words do not carry a story into the heart, deeds do. Only seven.

Remember what I have said!"

I raised my leg and stepped down on the mine. I could feel the round metal disk with my foot.

"IT IS A GOOD DAY TO DIE!"

My war cry echoed from the hills.

"Jesus!" That was Howton. "He's standing on a mine!"

I walked on.

No explosion. No metal ripping into flesh, no limbs blown away.

I moved up beside Howton.

"It's a dud," said Howton. "You scared the..."

That was when it exploded, killing the two Marines behind me instantly.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The General was standing beside the two dead marines. If I could have seen his face I know what I would have seen there. Fury and rage and probably fear. If not in his face, it was there in his voice.

"Why don't you explain it to me in simple goddamn English!" snapped the General. I knew he was shouting in my face. The edge of a knife pushed hard against my neck. "Before I cut your goddamn throat ear to ear!"

The General's face must have been just inches from mine.

"I know you claim you can't see me you son of a bitch but you damn sure can feel this knife!"

I smiled at the face I could not see.

There was a brief struggle and the knife pushed against my neck dropped to the ground. I sensed Hightower had a hand in taking the knife away. It had not been a serious threat.

"Only seven can make this journey. That is what I know. Sometimes the truth is its own explanation," I said calmly.

"Listen you son of a bitch! You knew that mine was there! You stepped on it deliberately!" insisted the General.

"Yes, I knew it was there."

"Did you know those two marines were at risk? Did you know that setting off the mine would kill them? Answer me damn it!"

"Yes to both questions, General. This was their day to die. If they had not died now, they would not have lived to see the sunset."

"Why?" said Hightower. "You could have avoided the mine."

"It was an omen. Such things are to be embraced, not ignored."

"These are goddamn marines. The best goddamn fighting men on the face of this earth! You'd better have some goddamn reason, some real hard evidence to..."

Hightower interrupted. "I've got to understand something. I want to get something straight in my mind," There was an edge to his voice.

"Let me finish," began the General. "I'm not through with this bastard yet..."

I knew the shape of Hightower's thoughts. "You are going to ask me how many faces I see. Maybe twenty. But none if they try to go where we go." I had understood his question before he could ask it. "If I turn and look back at them, I can see some of their faces. But if they come on this path after me, I know that I will not be able to see them."

It was all there in the dream.

"You said you'd show us that the war can be won!" said the General.

"Nobody's going anywhere, until I get some goddamn answers! I want to know where we're going and how! I want to know just how the hell you expect to prove what you say you can prove! The train was your son of a bitching idea! Well, mister, we got our frigging asses shot off with the damn train! I told you we'd get..."

"I did not expect to arrive by train."

"So why did we go through all this bullshit?" The General was furious again.

"In the dream, I knew only that where the train would be wrecked, was the beginning of the path we must follow. It is a dream that I follow. Not a map that one can hold in the hand. I knew no other way to find the beginning of the path."

The General made a violent motion and I heard his helmet slam into the ground.

"I can't believe I bought into this son of a bitching fag fairy tale!" raged the General. "Hightower, why don't you just put a bullet in my head and put me out of my misery. I'm too f-ing tired to frag myself."

"If you remember, this damn rerun is to undo somebody else's damage," said Hightower. "Were dealing with what somebody topside believes, what we think about it doesn't mean a frigging thing! Keep your eye on the sparrow, General."

The General replied with a string of obscenities.

I tried to explain it once again. There was so much I saw that I could not tell them.

"The dream sees seven walking this path. Only those travelers. Either you trust yourself to me and to the dream that drives me, or you do not. If you turn back, I can not stop you. But have we come this far, only to go no further? Men have died to get us to this place."

"I'd like to know one f-ing reason why we should move one f-ing inch!" raged the General.

"Because the answer you seek is near. It is an answer that can not be denied or disbelieved. When you know the answer, will you not have everything you wish?"

I heard the General sigh. I heard Hightower move up beside him.

"General, I for one, am committed to going through with this." That was Hightower. "Whatever it takes, I'm 100% committed. And I'm talking the Agency's commitment here too. That's direct from topside, we're all right down the line on this one. Personally, I lost Ranklin. He was a damn fine man. If we get off the number now, he'll have died for nothing. I owe the loyal bastard something better than that, at least some kind of finish to this goddamn spook show!"

"I got two dead marines. The bastard knew they were going to get killed. He did it deliberately. Just to prove his goddamn point! Well the hell with him! They're marines and they'll by God, die like marines, every damn one of them if that's what it takes. But where I go, my men go! That's my final word on the subject. And we'll have air cover from hell to .."

I started walking. I knew they would follow me.

"Now we walk across the burnt land. We will see something on this path. What we find, will help us later. It will bring the answer you seek." It was the truth as I knew it. It was written in the napalm tainted wind.

Someone fell into step with me.

"If you can't tell me anything more than that shit, then this is where I cancel your frigging ticket!" I sensed the General was threatening me with a gun. To him I was an enemy and weapons were the only way he dealt with them.

I felt another presence at my side, heard the brief sound of a struggle and then Hightower's voice. "Don't make the same mistake Ranklin made, General."

I sensed that Hightower had taken the gun away. Maybe this time the General meant to make good on his threat. Glimpses of things that could not possibly be, made the craziness that simmered under his skin boil out.

From the hills around us came the sounds of gunfire. Marines on both sides of us, were making contact with the enemy or they were simply shooting at shadows. In this land they were one and the same.

The wreck of the train had spooked everyone. Despite the aerial barrage and the thunderous firestorm loosed by the jets, everyone was very much aware that the enemy was still out there. There was a whistling sound as snipers sent rounds above our heads.

I heard Hightower and the General exchanging angry words but I did not care. I moved past them and walked on toward the edge of a dream.

I did not look behind me to see if they were following me.

They had no choice.

When men are crazy, it is because they follow something in themselves only they can see. When they chase it too long, they become crazy.

They hated themselves for it, as if despising an inner weakness but the General and Hightower, both believed in my dark surprise, though their fine white American sensibilities were shaken to the very core.

My answer was something in themselves they had long sought.

On this journey, my promise and my threat, was their madness and they followed me or chased me.

In the end, it was all the same.

We crossed the burned land into a new country. I took the point and Howton and Doctor Death walked a little behind me. They seemed to want to stay next to me. I felt comforted by their presence although I could not see them.

Somewhere, ahead of us, was the river.

Purple hyacinths bloomed in great banks in marshy land ahead of us. Tiger lilies of orange and yellow stuck out of the swampy ground like the sun bleached teeth of dead dragons.

Somewhere behind us, the Marines were engaged in a firefight. But ahead of us, all was calm. Languid birds perched in the lower branches of vine encrusted trees, undisturbed by our passage.

In the distance, the rising ground fell off steeply on one side and a butte, blue-black and hazy, rose out of the green ruin of the jungle like the tomb of an ancient race.

I turned and moved toward it. Those behind me, moved with me.

As we neared the top of the high ground I raised my arm, motioning for us all to stop. I turned and looked back the way we had come.

From this vantage point I could see the smoking ruin of the broken train. Howton and Hightower started to speak but I motioned them to silence.

"Come close to me. Stand here with me and look back to where the train was wrecked."

I heard them moving up next to me.

"What do you see General?"

"What do mean, what do I see?" he said belligerently.

"At the end of the burning, where the train is, what do you see?" I insisted.

"A goddamn wrecked train," said the General. "What was I supposed to see, buffaloes humping or..."

I cut in.

"Hightower, what do you see?"

He spoke hesitantly from my left, almost as if reluctant to put into words what he saw.

"It's... I see nothing. ..Just, just a wrecked train." It was obvious he was lying.

Doctor Death didn't wait to be asked. "I see a snake. A huge dead snake and men are cutting meat off it."

Howton stood behind me. "I see it too. It's huge and it only has one eye."

"Leslie, look back the way we have come. What do you see," I said.

I heard her gasp. "Nothing. I don't...it's just...too much smoke. I don't see anything."

"I thought you saw a dead baby," I said.

It was almost as if I had physically struck her.

Doctor Callard slammed his hand violently against my shoulder. "Leave her alone, you freak!"

"Doctor Callard, look at the place from which we have come. Where the train died, what do you see?"

"I see a river with fog rising off it," he said and there was horror in his voice. "Now that's got to be wrong. That just can't be!"

I knew then that Doctor Callard was the way and the path. The disbeliever who would bring belief. Him I would need most of all.

I turned once again and began walking. They stood there for a while, looking at the things they saw that could not be and then they came quickly after me, as if fleeing some hideous sight. The General's marines moved up around us on all sides. Somehow we had to lose them before we get to the river.

I heard a roar in the sky above me and looked up in surprise. I heard the General who was bringing up the rear with Hightower raise his voice in a cheer.

The jets came thundering down on our position. I heard the crackle of a radio set and the General's exuberant voice calling out our location and calling in a napalm run ahead of our position.

The jets came down out of the sky like obscene Gods of death and the daylight world of green in front of us, exploded and burned like the surface of the sun. Fire scarred the wall of the butte and in the sudden burst of light, I saw it for what it was, the great ruined wall of some long dead city.

The carved stone heads of elephants stood out in sharp relief as the firestorm raged all around them.

Tree roots, white as bleached bones, burst into flame and riot, and the green jungle that hid a dead city, shriveled and blackened, like skin rotting off the bone.

Like a Phoenix, the skeleton of the city emerged from the flame ruined jungle that had smothered it.

I could not see them but I knew somewhere to my right and left, the bodies of Marines, men about to die, came slipping through the fire-toned light. I heard them crashing through the underbrush, moving into the stealthy seductive embrace of the jungle. Moving like green-clad locusts, into trees that clutched at them amorously and would soon tear out their hearts.

"Jesus Christ! They blew the whole goddamn world apart!" said Doctor Death.

I walked on into a hell second to none in its devastation.

Howton was very close to me. His voice answered back. "Christ! If I'd called that up, I'd been lucky to get a flare!"

The wind changed and suddenly the sky went dark as thick black clouds of smoke roiled up and over us, blotting out the sun.

And then we were all running. Trying to breathe, desperately seeking enough air to stay alive. The firestorm ahead of us, seemed to eat the wind. I lost all contact with those around me.

They were blinded by the smoke. As one they all ran until they could run no more, their sides heaving, their eyes awash with tears. The heat came in waves and in the thick choking smoke we became separated.

For my part I did not run. But I let the wind turn me and went another way away from the General's fiery folly. In the heat and smoke, I felt like meat turning on the spit of my own ribs.

I stumbled on, blinded by the smoke until I fell to my knees, in a muddy brown pool of water. The wind changed again and the smoke cleared. The cool water touched me, seemed to swirl against my body as if doubting I was real.

I had reached the beginning of the river I had sought.

But I was alone.

And I began to doubt the dream that drove me here.

None of this had been foreseen.

Without the dream, I am nothing.

I cried out like a father seeing the death of his child.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

The air is still as the coffin of a child. The wind is scented with the humus and decay of a jungle that seems to go on forever.

I am beside a rivulet that seems hardly to be a stream at all, certainly not a river. But it is the beginning we must follow. I put my face down toward the dark unpalatable water and I seem to feel the breath of the dragon.

I have walked a little ways along the stream, seeking the direction we must travel to follow it to the river. The way South or West does not seem clear. The dream waits here somewhere. It can be sensed like an arrow of longing aimed at a distant shore.

The stream curls with snake-like hesitation through the dark jungle, twisting and turning on itself so many times it seems that it does not come from anywhere or could possibly lead anywhere. Matted bamboo and fromager crowd the banks, making travel difficult, almost impossible.

The wind shifts and suddenly I smell napalm. From a direction I would not expect it to come. From the other side of the stream. If they have moved beyond me, then all may be lost.

I do not know what else to do but wait.

The smell of napalm grows stronger. Then clearly on the wind, I hear the metallic whicker of helicopters. And the hard chatter of heavy guns. A battle is going on somewhere ahead of me.

I do not want to leave this spot. I am afraid I will never find it again. But the dream can not end without the others.

I do not know if I could live if this dream has no ending.

I crossed the stream and plunged into the dark jungle. I stumbled along through dense jumbles of intermittent jungle and craggy ravines. The sounds of combat increased. I heard the harsh metallic bark of weapons and the screams of the dying.

I stopped. Things were moving in the trees ahead of me, the fight was moving towards me. I hid in a thick stand of bamboo.

A helicopter clattered overhead, flying at treetop level, black smoke pouring from its wounded engines. Suddenly it dipped down into the black embrace of a huge tree and exploded in a sun-bright fire ball. None could have lived through that.

A wounded marine, one arm dangling useless, came running through the tunnel of trees. I could see his face but it was a blur, only partially in focus as if he were a man between two worlds. As he staggered toward me, he hurled his rifle away.

His face took shape. I could see him clearly now. He ran past me.

I heard other voices, the harsh breathing of exhausted men running. "Move it!" someone cried out. There was the rapid bark of M-16s on full automatic.

It was the General's marines, what was left of them. I could not see them. They moved past my position, firing, some screaming. Some fell around me. The harsh whir of bullets cut through the trees. A marine I could not see, thrashed in agony, screaming "Medic! Medic! I'm hit!"

A wave of brown-skinned men moved behind them. They fanned out in a half circle, some moving to the left, some to the right, all of them firing weapons. I could not see them all but there must have been a thousand of them.

They were moving past me now. I heard a burst of gunfire close by and the man screaming for a medic, fell silent mid-scream.

Another group of brown-skinned men came behind them. As the first group passed, the second wave reached my position. They spread out, moving all around me. I heard a harsh guttural scream. Another wounded marine was dead. I crouched down, pressed my face and body against the rotting ground and held myself still. Voices speaking a strange singsong language were all around me.

Someone moved into the stand of bamboo that hid me, looking for stragglers. Perhaps he knew I was there.

I could not see. The man moved through the bamboo with difficulty. He was almost upon me. He was coming straight toward me. His probing foot touched the back of my leg. He moved forward and his full weight came on me as he stepped with both feet on my back. I heard the snick of a rifle bolt being drawn.

I went away from him into death.

He was a Khmer warrior astride the stack of corpses piled in the chambers of the old Gods. Amazed he lifted his eyes from the blood-stained feast and saw the vultures wheeling in the gray sky overhead. Here besides the ancestral altars of human sacrifice, the old forgotten hunger for flesh flailed him like a whip from another age.

He jumped away, the rifle forgotten, his legs soaked in old blood and ancient combat. He moved away from me with a cry of terror and I heard his terrified plunge out of the bamboo.

Ancient dreams can burn.

I lay there in darkness, awaiting the coming of night. The echoes that sounded through the jungle around me were like the ghostly cries of the dead and dying.

The war moved past me, the sounds of guns fading with the setting of the sun.

Now there is nothing but the waiting. I move out of the bamboo and stand under a huge tree, scarred and ageless. I know neither hunger nor thirst and sleep will not find me here. I am simply the thing that waits.

The dream sleeps but does not die.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

If it was an animal, it was wounded. I tracked its clumsy progress for a long time as it smashed through the brush. It did not so much walk as stagger, lurch forward, hesitate and then move on again. A wounded animal moves like that when it is looking for a place to die.

I heard a man's voice, the sounds indistinct. I moved behind the tree. The sounds got closer. I could make out the voice now. It was Doctor Callard. "You've got to keep moving."

I moved toward them. I knew now who it was even though I could not see their faces. It was the doctor and the nurse.

They did not see me until they almost ran me down.

Callard, stunned at my sudden appearance, lost his grip on the woman for she fell heavily to the ground.

"You son of a bitch! I thought you..." He was apparently too exhausted to finish the sentence.

I bent down and felt for the body of the woman. I found an arm and helped Doctor Callard drag her to her feet. She was conscious but just barely.

"Is she wounded?"

"Fragmentation grenade went off and she caught some shrapnel. Not serious by itself," said Callard. "But she's already weakened from.."

"Yes, I know," I said and I knew all too well. "Don't try to talk. We have some hard miles ahead of us. Do you think you can make it?"

"Yes," said Callard, still sounding played out. "I can make it if you help me carry her."

"If you have your helmet on, throw it away. If you have weapons, canteens, rations, dump them now. Keep your medical kit, but get rid of everything else you can."

Callard's breath rattled in his chest. "Why?" he asked even though he obeyed. Shedding all that extra weight must have been a relief. I heard his helmet bounce off a tree trunk and the metallic clatter of his dropped rifle.

"I'd say with a wound like you've got, just getting where we're going is going to be enough for you."

I knew he wanted to ask me how I knew since I claimed that I could not see him. I could almost feel the questions boiling up inside him as we staggered along with the half-conscious form of the nurse Leslie Ann between us.

"If you can't see me, how did you..."

"Don't talk. The enemy is all around. Voices carry."

"But..." He could be stubborn to the point of stupidity.

"I can't see you but I can hear the blood dripping. Some place on your back or you would have stopped it. We'll talk soon, just concentrate on walking," I urged him.

For me the journey was neither hard nor easy but for Callard the way back to the stream and the beginning of the dream was a nightmare and an agony.

Several times he fell heavily. Whether he had tripped over something in his path or his legs simply gave out, I could not tell.

Each time he was slower in getting up, weaker. But he did not quit or give any sign that he could not go on. His legs seemed to stiffen, as if the elasticity had gone out of them. I could sense it in the shuddery stagger of his stride.

"Where's the General and the rest of his men?"

"Don't know," said Doctor Callard. "I got to stop."

Leslie stirred as we let her gently down to the ground.

"My back hurts," she said weakly.

"I'll give you a shot."

"No. We haven't got time for that," I said.

"But she's in pain!"

"Yes. I know."

I dragged them to their feet. Leslie was able to walk more under her own power now which made it easier to move her along. Callard's breath came in shuddery rasps.

I sensed movement off to our right. "Wait!" I jerked them to a stop. Somebody was coming through the trees. And not quietly.

We had passed into a clearing. There was no where to go, no place to hide.

About eight or ten marines came out of the tree line at a half run. Coming up on us unexpectedly, they almost opened fire. I could see three of their faces.

I heard the crackle of a radio and a harsh voice barked out. "Mystery Guest intact! Repeat! Mystery Guest intact!" The soldiers moved up around us and took defensive positions. I could not see the face of the man working the radio.

"That's affirmative. Two clicks west of our last position," The voice continued on the radio. "Affirmative. Doctor and Nurse too."

"Tell them we have two WIA's and we need a med-evac," said Doctor Callard.

The radio emitted a burst of static which almost obliterated the voice on the other end. The radioman spoke again in response to Callard's request.

"OK, we have wounded and we're going to need a..."

"Never mind the helicopters," I said. "Just get the rest of our group here as quickly as you can. We don't have much time."

"You son of a bitch!" raged Callard. "You get her out of here! Right now!"

The General's bull tones crackled over the radio, barking out instructions to the radioman.

The radio was handed to me, the handset thrust at my ear.

"Come as quickly as you can," I said into the radio, ignoring the torrent of words coming through the radio from the General.

I handed the radio back.

"When the General gets here, he'll put things right soon enough," snarled Doctor Callard. "She's going out on the first chopper, you son of a bitch!"

"No, wounded and in pain, she travels with us," I said. It was hard to say that, knowing the injury visited upon her. But there are those who can not be saved and it is a darkness to even try.

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

It was not a happy gathering.

Doctor Callard directed Howton in the application of a bandage to his back. Callard didn't seem upset about the location of the wound, and said little about it other than he thought the wound could easily be debrided although he didn't explain to Howton what that meant.

Considering it was his own wound and not someone else's, Callard took it all rather stoically. He couldn't see it but from their description of it's size and location, he claimed it was not serious except for infection which was something to always worry about. In Vietnam, a septic paradise, even a minor scratch could turn into something major.

But his calm did not extend to anyone else. "Leslie Ann needs medical attention!" So he loudly proclaimed to the General and Hightower. His voice was livid with anger and astonishment when they ignored him.

Hightower and the General were off by themselves, having a hurried whispered talk, with an occasional burst of loud obscenity which proved it was more argument than discussion.

I sensed the presence of Marines around us in a defensive position but could not see them. In the distance I could hear the sounds of mortar and small arms fire. Somewhere behind us, some of the General's Marines were engaged in a fairly heavy firefight.

Howton and Doctor Death didn't say much. They hovered around me, staying close, hands probably on their weapons. They seemed tense and uncomfortable but seemed genuinely glad to have found me again.

Howton said, "Least we got our Indian scout back."

Doctor Death said, "Yeah. But the bad guys is frigging everywhere. First time I ever felt like they is just too many damn people to shoot! Just thinking about it makes me tired. When you figure to lead us into the promised land Chief?"

I shrugged. "As soon as the General and Hightower stop interfering with me. Only then can we hope to arrive."

I heard footsteps approach me. Hightower was on my right, the General on my left.

I could sense the General's anger like the heat of a bonfire. When he spoke, his rage was barely contained. "My marines are heavily engaged about two clicks to the South. At our present position, most of the VC seem to be behind us. So where to now? What's next? Another train perhaps? Or how about a steamboat?"

I stood up. It was time to go.

"Put all the marines who have survived in a defensive position behind us. Leave the radio. It won't work where we're going."

"And my air support?" said the General.

"Where we're going, there won't be any."

The General was starting to speak again but Hightower cut him off in mid-curse. "It's me, you, the General, nurse, doctor, Howton and the black. Just those seven and what we can carry, is that it?"

"Yes. The marines will keep the enemy busy until we are well past them. Where this stream starts, somewhere along its banks is the path that only seven of us can take. You'll need enough food and water for a day, maybe two. I think we can go only as fast as Leslie Ann and Doctor Callard can stand it. Better figure on two days then until we reach our supplies."

"And if Arven hasn't done his job?" snarled the General. "No resupply. No transportation. What then? Do we tiptoe all the way back, living off the fat of the land?"

"Then I think we die," I said. "Sooner than we are meant to."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

The argument did not end there. It might have gone on longer but after a while I simply got up and started walking away from them. I was their obsession. They might fight against it, struggling to be sane, but I knew their madness

would win out in the end. I just kept on walking. If I am only a mad dream, for men like Hightower and the General, it is better to seize upon a mad dream than to have none at all.

The General gave up his Marine body guard like a good Catholic girl giving up her virginity. He was not happy about it and let the universe know.

I sensed them moving out on the path behind me. Just the ones I said could come and no more. I moved as quietly through the world as a bird flying overhead. Such is our way. They crashed noisily after me, unsure of foot, clumsy, like animals too large for their skins.

Howton was behind me, complaining loudly. Apparently the General had saddled him with a radio, which all too soon would become useless. I knew all seven were behind me but did not know in which order they marched. The nurse Leslie Ann and Doctor Callard with field dressings applied were ambulatory. But that was temporary. Soon we would have to carry them. I moved slowly, making allowances for them. I grieved for their hurt and injuries. If I could have set them free, I gladly would do so but the dream did not allow it.

We moved single file, across the outer rim of a forgotten city, smoking in fiery ruin. Beyond that city, the stream wound through tall trees untouched by fire and deep shadows.

Behind us the sound of mortars and small arms fire began to fade. I heard the whicker of helicopters and the harsh staccato roar of heavy machine guns. There were half-loud crumps, explosions I could not identify.

Howton said, "Sounds like our back door is getting the slats kicked out of it. We're missing all the fun."

Doctor Death's voice came from somewhere in the middle of the group. "I'd give my ass to have a chopper under me. You can get killed in one of those so fast you don't know you're dead! But I'd rather go out on the fly cause this walking to get whacked is bullshit! This slow slide is killing me!"

"Where we are going, choppers can't fly," I said "but death is very fast here too. I promise you. You will see quick death."

"Ain't he a frigging big ant at our picnic! We sure count on you to keep us cheerful, Chief," said Doctor Death.

The stream led us down into gullies and black stagnant pools of brackish water. Where the trail led away from the water, it was only a dim gap in the trees with the dense jungle so thickly matted we could hardly push through it.

We crossed trampled areas where wild water buffalo had gone across the path in the rainy season. Sometimes we came to low marshy flats, steaming in the heat of the sun, ground soft and treacherous underfoot. Harsh snake grass brushed against our faces and hands, making small cuts.

Leslie Ann gave out and Doctor Death hoisted her on his back. Doctor Callard was only a few steps away from the same thing. The General was strangely silent. Hightower was bringing up the rear. I could not see him but knew he was beginning to suffer from the heat and his disease. When we stopped once to give Leslie and Callard a chance to rest, it was a minute or so before he caught up to us. His steps were uncertain and lame.

He like the General did not speak. They were paying a price for their madness. Perhaps they meant to suffer through it in silence. In any case, I preferred it to anything they might say.

The world around us was alive with creatures. Now that we had passed beyond the sounds of combat, the animals of this place asserted themselves. Dark birds circled overhead, screaming at the sight of us, the whole jungle echoing with their cries. Snakes and reptiles crawled on their skins, slithering into and out of our way as we passed among them. Some raised their eyes wide in sudden alarm and opened their fangs in dark welcome. Others were content to watch and wait.

They were the children of the dragon and we were in their house.

When we stopped to rest, all animal sounds ceased at once. From riot of sound to quiet in one breath. The sudden silence was harder to take for those around me than the noise. It was as quiet as a grave.

Howton moved up beside me, a tinge of fear in his voice. "Hey! It's too damn quiet! Is something going on Chief?"

"Yes," but it was all I wanted to say.

Doctor Callard tried once more to protest, to raise his concerns about Leslie Ann being here. He was far more gravely wounded than she but to his credit, it was mostly of her he thought. His desire to save her was touching and noble and went beyond a doctor's professional concern for his patient. Did he love this shattered human being named Leslie Ann? It was not for me to know. But Doctor Callard was a man brave in the face of death and in his disbelief he was a man after my own heart.

Neither Hightower nor the General responded to his request to take her back. They were resolute in what they wanted and the death of a nurse was no concern to them. Other things were more important.

Doctor Death was troubled. I could tell by the way he shifted uneasily on the ground. When we stopped for a rest, he had lain Leslie Ann very gently down on the ground. She was feverish, moaning in half-sleep. Having her on his back as weak and fragile as a sick child, must have made Doctor Death think too much. She reminded him of too many things not in his life.

The sun moved higher in the sky and I knew it was time to set off again. The stream now passed through higher trees, more ancient and scarred by old storms.

Soon the path would reach a turning. One way would lead to answers, the other way to oblivion. Both directions were hidden from me.

As we moved on, the sounds of the jungle began again, the whispering presences of millions of animal bodies that marked our passing.

Callard collapsed suddenly either from the heat or from his wound.

The discussion as to who would carry him was heated. I took no part in it.

Howton wanted to abandon the radio. He pointed out that he couldn't carry it and Doctor Callard. That meant Hightower or the General had to shag the radio.

I sat quietly by the path, trying not to listen. The argument raged on, getting out of hand as arguments do when men are too tired and too hot and too crazy.

Finally I settled it.

"Give me the radio." If I had thrown boiling water on them, they could not have been more surprised.

I took the radio from Howton, lifted it over my head and smashed it against the bole of a tree trunk. It was not an easy thing to kill. I hit it again and again until it seemed satisfactorily smashed. I dropped it. "Now Howton is free to carry Doctor Callard. We have many miles to go before the sun goes down."

If they made a move to stop me, I did not know it.

I turned and began to walk again down into a bamboo grove. Here thick elephant grass leaned against the bones of fromager trees. The stream went into the darkest part of the bamboo thicket, dropping steeply, twisting at a sharp angle to the right.

I stepped into the gloom and came to a place where the stream split into two forks. This was as far as I knew how to go.

I sat down. They came up around me. I could sense them staring at me, perhaps hating me, certainly confused by me.

"What's wrong? Why are we stopping?" asked Hightower.

"I am lost."

The General bellowed obscenities.

Howton eased Doctor Callard off his back. "Well, that tears it."

Hightower moved in front of me. "What do you mean, you're lost?"

"The stream splits here. I do not know which way to go."

"Do you know what you expect to find in either direction?" asked Hightower.

"It is not for me to say."

"If we split up into two groups and explored in each direction, would you be able to tell if one direction was the right way?"

"No. We can only go in one direction and we must all go together."

"So what do we do?" asked Doctor Death, still carrying Leslie on his back.

"Are you awake Doctor Callard?"

A voice came from the ground.

"If half dead is awake, I am awake." He sounded bitter. "If she dies, you shithead, I'm holding you responsible."

"Now has come a time when I must ask you to do something," I said, ignoring his anger.

"More mumbo jumbo!" said Doctor Callard. "This is the kind of bullshit you're killing us all with. Leslie Ann needs to be med-evac-ed, goddamn it! Why should I frigging help you with anything!"

"Because you disbelieve and can therefore truly see. Because you are a healer of men and not a killer. That is why I hope you will do what I ask."

"And because I'll rip your heart out if you don't cooperate," said the General.

I shook my head. Threats were useless. "For my reasons only. What they say does not matter."

I could not see Callard's face but his hatred of me was as intense as a cobra's venom.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Look at the stream. Look deep into its depths. Do we go right? Do we go left? Look and tell me what you see."

"That's it. You just want me to look?" He sounded amazed, as if I were the simplest, most idiotic child he had ever met. "Jesus Christ!"

"Help me up."

I heard movement as they went to assist him.

"Which way are you looking?"

"To the right." He snorted with disgust.

"What do you see?"

"A stream and bamboo and jungle and nothing! Just nothing! What the hell am I supposed to see, for christsakes? A goddamn neon sign, saying this way to the frigging exit!"

"Now look left."

"Sure. Let's do all the bullshit up right. OK, looking left. Surprise! Hey! I see a stream. Amazing! And bamboo and jungle and nothing. Hey! It's the same nothing! Yeah this is really getting us somewhere! I see one big fat nothing, just..." His voice stopped suddenly. He gasped.

"What did you see?"

"I..." He could not speak. I could not see his eyes but I knew they burned with what he saw.

"Pick him up Howton. We are going to the left."

Hightower was almost in my face. "But he hasn't even told you what he saw! How do you know it's the right direction?"

"I know." I began to walk down the left fork of the stream.

"I want to hear what he saw!" said the General in a voice that brooked no argument. "I want a goddamn answer!"

"Just move upon this path and soon the answer will bleed on you," I said.

The stream got wider and deeper, joined other streams and became now a part of the river of the nine dragons.

We were on the last fatal part of our journey.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

We moved like insects with broken legs. The foliage and vegetation was thick and unyielding and our passage through it would have been slow anyway but the twin burdens of Leslie Ann and Doctor Callard made our progress even slower.

For those around me, the day was a kind of hell. Hacking at the brush, trying to widen the path enough for us to all pass single-file through it was nightmarishly hard work. The heat was unrelenting. Even the thick trees that screened out the sun, could not keep out the merciless heat.

Sometimes we had to move almost into the river in order to make any progress at all. We marched all that day and by my estimation we were less than half the distance we had yet to go.

It was a journey made for the most part in silence. What they thought, as we moved up the riverbank, I did not know. Did they hate me silently or fear me or curse me? It was no concern of mine.

The sun went down. It was too difficult to travel now so I called a halt for the night. I heard groans of relief.

Doctor Death was beside me. He whispered in my ear, "Hey bro, if my black ass pulls sentry duty tonight, are any unfriendlies out there Chief? Does your radar say there are any VC out there?"

"You can sleep," I said. "I will stand guard."

"You sure about that Chief?" asked Doctor Death, worry evident in his voice.

I spoke to them all. "We'll spend the night here. Move on again at first light. You must all try to rest. I will stand guard."

"I'll decide who stands guard," snapped the General. "Alright men, let's get some foxholes dug."

"I decide. Just stretch out where you are. Do not waste your strength digging in the ground. You will need everything you've got for what lies ahead."

There was some grumbling but a whispered conversation between the General and Hightower cut short the discussion.

Leslie was given a shot which put her to sleep. Without it the pain of her wound would have kept her awake. For once I approved. Callard saw to the changing of his dressing and self prescribed some Darvon for himself and offered some to Doctor Death. Doctor Death was in pain but he didn't want any painkillers. He was afraid they would mess up his head and he said he'd rather have the pain and still be sharp if he had to kill something.

They were all exhausted. They slept like men sleep who have been in combat, eyes almost open, ears attuned, just seconds from wakefulness, in the kind of sleep that gives no soothing rest or forgetfulness.

I sat among them, staring at the hidden heart of the night and seeing such things that stalked there. I was weary but sleep was not for one such as me.

Howton for a time struggled to stay awake, as if unmasked he was expected to be vigilant. But the effort was too much for him and he nodded off, sitting up, his rifle cradled in his arm.

I did not see him but I knew because when he was fast asleep, I took the rifle out of his hands and laid him gently back down upon the ground. He stirred restlessly at my touch and it was difficult to get the weapon away from him but I knew he would sleep more comfortably once I had shifted him around. Close beside him I knew Doctor Death lay, his breath shallow, asleep but I suspected very much aware of his weapons. He was not someone anyone would want to touch while he was asleep. I was careful not to disturb him because I knew startled he could kill quicker than recognition.

Sleep was no enticement for me. I had no difficulty staying awake. The moon came up in the sky, and turned fire red. It was bright enough to pierce the jungle canopy overhead. It bathed us all in fiery crimson, as if painting the sleepers with blood.

On the mesas, back in the lands I came from, our people call this a hunting moon. It comes only in the darkest of nights.

It's arrows of moonlight are made of desire and what it wants most, is the madness that brings battle slaughter. The General and Hightower turned restlessly in their sleep like unrequited lovers, feeling the tidal pull of the moon.

The night passed uneventfully. During the night, I thought I saw the faint glimmer of the dragon's breath on the surface of the river but I could not be sure. Dawn came slowly. I put Howton's rifle back in his hands and propped him up into a sitting position. He stirred but did not wake.

They would have slept longer and I knew they needed the rest but we had too many miles to go so I clapped my hands loudly and whistled.

Howton and Doctor Death almost came up shooting. I heard the click of their weapons being cocked and the sudden frantic movement from both of them as they raised their weapons but there was enough light for them to see me and they stopped in time. In the dark, it would have been different.

Callard was stronger after a rest and could walk. Leslie was strong enough and could walk but she was of no mind to do so. Doctor Death put her up on his back, making no complaint about the weight.

Howton said, "When she gets too heavy, I'll take a turn with her."

"An hour or two and she's all yours," said Doctor Death. "This heat is kicking my ass."

"I can take her now," offered Howton.

"Later," said Doctor Death.

Hightower was sick in the bushes, I heard the wracking cough of the dry heaves. The General wanted to make a meal but I felt no desire to linger here. They found things to eat, uncooked, candy or what have you, grumbled a good bit about the fare but walked on behind me.

Hightower offered me water and food but I had no desire for any.

Doctor Callard, marching immediately behind me, said "I think he eats and drinks at night when no one is looking. All part of the mumbo jumbo con. You know, add to the frigging mystery! Nobody's gonna tell me he doesn't eat or drink!"

"Man's a ghost," muttered Doctor Death, spitting out something that didn't agree with him. "Or he just wise enough not to eat frigging C rations! That's what I should have done. Not eat till I get back to the world. This shit'll probably stunt my growth."

Hightower was having difficulties. The General was not in the best of shape either. His breaths were ragged. We were making less progress than the day before. We marched all that day. Because of the heat, we stopped many times to rest. I myself was not tired and was eager to push on but there were limits to their endurance.

The river began to drop down, the water flowing faster. We were slowly moving downward. The terrain and vegetation began to change. Here the dense jungle did not have so good a stranglehold on the riverbank. We passed through several natural clearings.

The river turned slowly to the left and as we made the loop with it, the way became easier. I heard the sound of rushing water ahead.

Callard was walking again. Twice he had been carried. Leslie Ann never walked. Howton and Doctor Death traded off but Doctor Death carried her most of the way. She was still partially sedated.

"This is as far as we walk," I said as we reached the source of the rushing water. Another river ran into ours, dropping from a height of about three feet in a waterfall that roiled the surface of the river, sending up brown clouds of mud.

"Is this it?" The General came up behind me, almost bellowing into my ear. "Where the hell are we? "

"This is where we pick up our supplies and transportation."

"What?" The General marched around me in an angry circle. "I don't see jackshit! Well, Hightower, looks like your man Arven screwed up twice!"

"We wait." I sat down on the bank of the river.

"For what?" roared the General.

I stared into the water. The General was not finished with me but I was finished with him. He yelled and screamed and stormed around me, venting his rage and frustration.

Hightower for once said nothing.

Howton and Doctor Death stood on each side of me. I felt comforted by their presence.

Callard tended to Leslie Ann. She was half-conscious and in pain. I knew he would want to give her a shot soon. I also knew that I could not let that happen now. From this point on I needed the Leslie Ann in pain not the Leslie Ann that swam toward oblivion.

I stared unmoving at the river. I did not respond to the General's questions or to his threats. Hightower's urgings were of no concern either. There was nothing to be done but the waiting. I had nothing to say.

Doctor Death sat down beside me. Howton stood behind me. He was dog-tired but did not seem to want to rest. He seemed restless.

The sounds of the jungle were slowly replaced by a new sound. I heard the click of weapons being cocked and Howton and Doctor Death tensed around me. From somewhere in the direction of the river that met this one, came the sound of drums, dull-noted, muffled with a weary ancient beat. Bird sounds stilled in the trees around us as brazen metallic cymbals echoed like rifle shots from the surface of the river.

I did not move. I watched the waterfall. Waiting.

Howton asked, "See anything Doctor Death?"

"Hear it. But don't see it."

"What is it?"

Callard rushed up behind me, alerted by the sound.

"Son of a bitch!"

"You know what it is Doc? You see it?" muttered Doctor Death.

Hightower's voice came from the left. "Maybe now is the time for you to tell us what you saw on the left fork of the river, Doctor Callard. Not that it matters, but I am curious."

"Don't you see it?" snarled Doctor Callard. "There! Over there on the other side of the river!"

"Maybe your eyes are sharper than mine, but I don't see diddly," said Doctor Death. Howton must have made some sign to him then because he included Howton. "Correct that, me and Howton don't see squat."

"Are you nuts? It's as plain as..."

Hightower cut him off, "Just describe it."

"An Annamite funeral procession but it's..."

"Don't describe it. There is no point," I said. The sound of gongs and pipes began whirling around us, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere. "That part of the dream is not useful. We are beyond it."

The sounds of the unseen funeral procession died as suddenly as it began. Whatever it was on the far side of the river had passed beyond our position as if it rode a swift wind to another place.

"I'm freaked major league!" said Doctor Death. He moved suddenly, his weapon coming up. He yelled a warning. "Something's moving in the water!"

It came suddenly into view, long and black, riding the crest of the water. I dove into the river to meet it. It plummeted over the waterfall and came rushing down toward me.

I reached up to touch its shiny black skin and its twin plunged over the waterfall and came shooting up toward me. It was difficult but I got an arm up

as it tried to shoot past me and got enough of it with one hand to bring the black things together.

Doctor Death was in the water then, his hands seizing me from behind, pulling me and my burden toward the riverbank.

I could not see it, but I knew my hands were covered in blood. The odor of death was on everything.

Howton and the General and even Hightower were in the water. I felt them pulling on what I embraced and let them take it away from me.

"Zodiacs!" said the General, naming the twelve man inflatable boats Arven had set adrift to meet us.

The second raft had been the heavy one. It was loaded with supplies, food and ordnance, spare weapons and medical supplies.

"Arven seems to have done his job well," I said. "Except he was supposed to ride down with the boats."

"He did." Hightower pulled me out of the water, helping me up the steep river bank. Howton and Doctor Death were busily dragging the rafts up onto the bank until they were beached.

"Arven is in the second boat," said Hightower. "What's left of him that is. Can't really be sure it's him. His face is pretty much gone."

That would explain the blood which I could taste on my hands.

"Christ on crutches!" said Howton. "He looks like he swallowed a grenade!"

Callard had a better guess. "Birds. Carrion eaters. They had a few days to work on him. There isn't much of him left."

"Collect his tags and toss him overboard and wash out the boat as best as you can," ordered the General, glad to have something to command again, even if it was only two inflatable rafts. "Let's get these boats shipshape. I'll want to inventory our supplies. Find out just what we've got. Is there a radio on board?"

"Doesn't seem to be," said Hightower. "But there's enough supplies for a very long trip. I hope that's not what were in for. This is a real screwed up way to travel! Make's me wish we were back on the train."

It was obvious the idea of a boat made Hightower uncomfortable.

"You gotta dig the chief's means of transport, Howton!" enthused Doctor Death. "Now this is what I call style! No more humping through the boonies. Just sit on our asses and drift along like Huck Finn and Jim."

"Right, let the current take us to an ambush. It ain't flying but its way better than walking to get dead," agreed Howton.

"Do you know how Arven died?" asked Hightower suddenly. He was dragging the body out of the raft. "There's no tags on this body."

"No," I said.

"He didn't kill himself like Ranklin did or did he?" It seemed important for Hightower to know. Too much of the control he wrapped himself in was eroding away.

"I don't know. Perhaps Arven knows. In any case it was important only to him and not to us," I said. "Keep your mind on the journey yet to come."

I did not tell them that Arven's death was not in my dreams. It was a death ahead of its time. It seemed to me like an arrow sent by some unseen hand. This had not been the end of what I had asked him to do and how was I to make the rest of this dream flesh? There was terror in his unexpected death and I did not like it.

"I know the how but not where?" said the General. "I take it we are going downriver but to what? How far?"

"We must leave soon," I said not answering him directly, looking at the position of the sun in the sky overhead. "Bring Leslie and put her in the boat. Set her down in the middle of the first boat. Then I want you to all take defensive positions around her."

"Where you gonna be?" asked Doctor Death.

"In the second boat. From now on I travel with you, but not alongside you."

"And what's all this in aid of?" said the General.

"The answer you seek. We have reached the time and place where all you seek waits for you. This is the last part of our journey. Now I will tell you how to find your answer."

I felt their sudden alarm, and probably they cradled their weapons and thought of what lay ahead. Their fear and anxiety was palpable.

Leslie stirred, groaning with pain. She was close to the time of her next shot, a shot that would never come. She was conscious, now fully with us and hurting.

"It all comes down to one thing from here on. Until that one thing is decided, nothing else exists. She is your heart! Defend her, protect her. She will be in pain, lost in a dream, perhaps she will rave and rant and fight against you. She will curse you but you will do all that you can to keep her alive! If you can beat the enemy that waits here for her and for us, if you can see it for what it is, then you shall prevail. If she lives until we reach the place of the dragon, you will have your answer!"

Hightower spoke before the General could. "Can you tell us why this is the answer?"

"If I say it is the answer, it is the answer."

"Why the hell should we believe you?" That was the General, perhaps speaking for them all.

It was question that did not demand an answer. I turned away from Hightower and the General and looked down the river. Their silence, their lack of movement was answer enough.

I could not see their faces and I was glad. For Hightower and the General everything that lay ahead was full of questions and unknown terrors. They had come this far, driven by their madness. No one would question my description of what must happen next. We had journeyed too far for doubt. The means of arrival were objectionable. The General and Hightower had made that clear but the final destination once in sight was something they both devoutly wished.

I knew they were hardening inside, the steel gates closing down the human side of them as their final sense of mission was invoked. I could sense a new urgency and resolve in both of them. A let's finish this goddamn thing, let's wrap it up, let's get what we came for and get it over with.

They were no longer lost in a dream. They had a mission that could be clearly defined. Protect Leslie Ann from point A to point B.

Howton and Doctor Death scrambled to obey the flow of commands from the General and Hightower. Leslie Ann was lifted up and put in the raft. Supplies were checked, shifted so that a space was made for me in the second raft.

The position of the men in the first raft was discussed. A rope was brought out and both rafts were lashed together. Rations were opened and distributed. Leslie began asking for her shot.

It was the last time I spoke. "She must have no shots. If she is in pain, it is your own heart that rages and you must let it rage. Nothing can be done for her. She must suffer."

"Why?" raged Doctor Callard. We had passed the time when I needed to explain anything. I had nothing further to say.

"There is no why," said Hightower. "Just see that you do it. She travels cold turkey! If you disobey I'll put a bullet in your head!" Hightower meant it. His threats were more chilling than the General's perhaps because death was so easy for him.

"Howton, you keep your eye on Doctor Callard. If he tries to slip her something, I want to know," added Hightower.

"Yes sir," snapped Howton his voice flat and emotionless.

Callard did not say anything else after that but I felt his stare of hatred and loathing although I could not see it. I knew he would obey. He had the measure of Hightower and knew he was not a man to be denied.

The General had his command back, humble at best, five men, one of them a woman, in two inflatable boats. Not exactly Sherman's march to Georgia but at least he was back in control.

I sat in the center of the supply raft, content now to wait, like a rat tucked into a comfortable nest. I had no fears, no wishes or desires.

I pointed once up to the sun until somebody noticed me. I wished to use no words now. There was a scramble, and some confusion but they knew it was now time for us to set out. Leslie was not taking to the idea of being in a boat with or without a shot.

I felt a tug on my boat, heard the splash as the first boat was pulled off the bank and into the water. Slowly my boat was pulled down into the water.

I closed my eyes and laid back against the black shiny rubber bottom of the raft. It felt cool to the touch, smooth as a blacksnake's skin.

My raft began to spin lazily in a circle as the current caught it. The rope connecting the two rafts went taut and stopped the spin. I heard the sound of paddles dipping in the water and my raft straightened out and followed the other raft, drawn by the rope.

The rafts glided over the water like black ghosts that had swallowed its human cargo. I closed my eyes. I could feel the river rolling under the raft and with each ripple, seemed to feel the long curved body of the dragon swimming beneath the waves.

I smiled. We drifted. I could not see them in the first raft but I knew how it must be.

Safeties off, weapons loaded, eyes warily darting about, looking for danger in every direction but the one it would come from.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Leslie screamed. It brought me fully awake in the raft. Not that I had slept but I had given myself to dreams.

I opened my eyes and the world was different.

The river was choked with reeds and dense vegetation that hung so thickly down that it slowed the passage of the rafts.

Dark trees reached out for us on all sides.

Howton was struggling with Leslie in the first raft. She tried to claw his face, intent on jumping out of the raft. He was having a hard time containing her.

Doctor Death put down his paddle and grabbed her from behind, yanking her down into the bottom of the raft.

"Goddam it!" said the General. "She's going to..."

She struggled, twisting and turning, still screaming and trying to get away. With her violent thrashing it was all Doctor Death and Howton could do to keep her in the raft.

"Can't you keep her quiet?" That was Hightower's voice.

"If I could just give her a shot, this wouldn't be a problem," began Doctor Callard.

He turned and looked back at me with anger and disgust. I could see his face clearly.

"Make for the bank," I said. "We have reached a place where we must rest."

Howton turned and looked back at me. I saw his face. He had the face of a man who has seen too much.

"Where are we chief?" said Doctor Death, still struggling to contain the nurse.

"The people of this place call it U Minh," I said in answer to his question. It was a word I had heard in my dream.

Howton translated, "The Forest of Darkness." He stared at me curiously, as if he sensed that something about me was different.

"Let her get out of the boat," I said as the first raft was rowed up on the bank. Hightower pulled on the rope connecting our rafts, dragging me toward the shore.

She broke free or they let her go and she half stumbled, half fell out of the boat with a splash. It was shallow and she waded ashore, cursing and snarling.

"Jesus!" said Doctor Death. "The goddamn water is full of leaches. Man, she's gonna be covered in 'em."

Leslie stood up on the bank, her back arched in pain, arms folded tight across her chest. Her voice was barely audible. "I gotta have a shot. I'm hurting so bad."

Howton was out of the boat, weapon up and ready, eyes scouring the dense growth of trees on all sides. Doctor Death hunched in the raft, his weapon held tight in his hand. I saw only a glimpse of him and then I could not see him.

My raft bumped against the riverbank and I climbed out of the raft. The General and Hightower were out of the rafts and in the water. Doctor Death helped them pull the front edge of the rafts up on the bank.

Doctor Callard was slow in getting out. He waited until the raft was well up on the shore before jumping out.

He rushed to Leslie's side, tried to put a consoling arm around her but she pushed him away.

I stood on the riverbank. I could see Howton and Callard and Leslie Ann. That was what was different about the world.

Howton stood beside her, weapon thrust out toward the dark trees, vigilant, tense. Doctor Death stood close to him, probably with the same watchful attitude but I could not see him.

"Why here?"

That was the General's voice.

"Something waits for us here."

Howton looked at me and I could see that he believed my words. I smiled at him. He looked confused, again sensing that something was different about me.

"Can you see me?"

"Yes," I said but now was not the time to explain things. "Beware!"

I moved down the river bank, past the beached rafts. I stepped into the water and saw the breath of the dragon rise like steam from its dark surface.

I stepped deeper into the water, the dream strong in me and burning.

There was a sound of something moving in the dense undergrowth. Howton encircled Leslie with one arm, slamming her to the ground, gun up, ready for whatever was coming. Doctor Death was somewhere to my right, his hard eyes probing for the danger they all knew was coming.

The General and Hightower were somewhere off to my left.

"You see it?" asked Howton of Doctor Death.

"No! Could be an animal!" whispered Doctor Death. "Maybe too small to be a man."

Leslie struggled against Howton's encircling arm, freeing herself. Unshakily she rose to her feet, stepped away from him, moving out to the edge of the water. Instinctively, everyone moved toward her, weapons up, eyes on the dense thickets hemming us in. Something acrid and sharp, like poison, seemed to ride the wind.

Leslie Ann was muttering something under her breath, a throaty, singsong rambling. She moved with the halting uncertain steps of a small child.

The thing in the dense undergrowth moved again, sounding closer. Howton and Doctor Death were keyed up, ready to fire. They moved directly in front of Leslie, shielding her from whatever it was that was moving in the thick bushes.

I could feel the tension, the death aching to move in their tensed trigger fingers, quick eyes probing for their prey.

"It's almost here!" I said, warning them.

I began to make my move.

Leslie Ann Burton bent and picked up a small stone. She leaned forward and tossed it in front of her. She lifted one foot, teetering uncertainly and began to hop in the direction of the thrown stone.

Her face was almost radiant and I could see the little girl she once was. She was back there in her childhood, playing hopscotch on a jungle river bank and in that momentary lapse, she traveled in playfulness and innocence, away from the pain and the hurt that was Leslie Ann.

Callard was not looking at her at the moment but in some ways he was always looking at her. His eyes scanned the jungle fearfully. He seemed the most concerned for her safety of any of them. They all wanted to keep her alive, each for his own reasons, but in Callard's desire to protect her was some other greater sorrow. He kept glancing back to look at her. Perhaps he loved her.

The water roiled and she screamed. It rose out of the water and seized her. It was the color of human skin and only a flash of it was visible and then it was down under the water, deep and moving with the current. The thing that moved so quickly had her in an instant and it was gone.

She had been pulled over and under so quickly, it was almost not real. They all turned when she screamed and almost but not quite saw it before it sank back into the water with her. Dazed by its suddenness, they were too stunned to react.

I saw unspeakable terror on their faces in one brief final glimpse.

Howton turned his gun up then, but too late and fired but there was nothing to see, just the thrashing water where something swift and terrible had passed through it.

Doctor Death was in the water first, scared half to death, but body acting almost instinctively. He thrust his arm down in the water, frantically seeking a body, anything, eyes wide in the face of the unknown.

"Did you see it?" cried Howton, easing up on the trigger, plunging into the river after Doctor Death. "Where is she!"

The General and Hightower hit the water with a simultaneous splash. I heard the sound of their guns thrashing the water, seeking the thing that had taken Leslie from them, stabbing futilely at the water with their gun barrels.

"Find her goddamn it!" screamed the General.

Did the thing in the water wait for them? Were there others like it waiting for them? The terror was there but they pushed out even deeper into the river.

"What happened? What got her Chief?" asked Howton, looking back to find me. His face searched the riverbank in amazement. I was no longer in sight.

"Jesus Christ! He's gone too!" He swore.

Doctor Death pulled his arm out of the water. It glistened with shiny black leeches. "Son of a bitch!"

Hightower splashed at the edge of the river bank, heading downstream. "I see her! This way!"

Howton scrambled up the bank, the others plunged ahead in the moving water down toward Hightower.

The General had a heavy pistol up, trying to make out the struggling shapes moving under the water.

Doctor Death grabbed the gun and forced it down just as the General expended a round. It plunked into the water at their feet.

"Not till you got a clear shot! You'll kill her for sure!"

There was no time for the General to protest.

Hightower staggered out of the river, to join Howton on the bank. They sprinted ahead. They were tracking something in the water.

Callard came up behind them, weaponless, frantic.

"Leslie!" he screamed. "Hold on! I'm coming!"

"There!" yelled Howton, and jumped into the river.

Callard and Hightower were a step or two back, ready to leap in after Howton.

Something seemed to seize Howton. The force of the blow turned him completely around in the water. His back arched and he struggled to lift his arms but something seemed terribly wrong with them.

He screamed involuntarily and something pulled him under the water. It happened so quickly his scream became a gurgle as he was sucked down.

Doctor Death came plowing through the water, his face hard as death, screaming his fury at the thing in the water. He plunged into the same place in the river where Howton had disappeared.

His fingers closed on something. His arms strained, every muscle in his huge body bent to the task. He had something but in the dark water no one could see what it was. It fought against him. The pain of the struggle was in his eyes. "Help me!" he cried plaintively.

Callard was in the water then.

The General and Hightower were like two men stricken by lightning. They moved down to help but the heart had fallen out of both of them. They walked slowly, as if in a daze, barely aware that they moved.

It was Callard and Doctor Death who fought it alone. Twice it seemed to get the better of them, two times it began to drag them out into the center of the river but they found strength they did not know they even had.

Suddenly it relented. Callard and Doctor Death were flung back with the thing they carried. They crashed against the river bank. Howton lay in their arms. He was very much alive.

He screamed. It was the scream of a man writhing in a private secret hell. He screamed and screamed as if each scream were a breath, coming one after another.

Callard and Doctor Death frantically scrambled up the riverbank, dragging the still screaming body of Howton. The thing in the river did not pursue them. It roiled the water behind them, and moving deep beneath the surface, seemed to move off downstream, causing a huge wake even at the depth it moved in.

Howton was dragged up on the bank and Doctor Death had his arms around him, like a mother protecting its child. Callard, white faced, staggered up, starting back toward the water. "Leslie!" he screamed. "I'm coming."

Hightower got him by the arm and when he struggled to break free, Hightower hit him once, effectively. Unconscious, Callard dropped at Hightower's feet. Hightower already knew it was too late.

Because that was the moment when Hightower and the General saw what Howton had in his hands.

It was a long bloody hank of Leslie Ann's hair.

And they suddenly thought they knew the answer.

It was not the one they had journeyed to find.

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Hightower's punch wore off long before Howton's hysteria ran its course. Callard woke with a sore jaw, a throbbing headache that made his whole body ache and a weariness as big as his own life. Howton had stopped screaming but he had the look of a man who's feet are trapped in a red hot fire.

Callard to his credit moved to Howton first, remembering his screams and thinking him most likely badly wounded. Dazed, disoriented he was still very much a doctor.

Callard struggled up to his feet and stumbled wearily to his medicine kit. His face felt raw on one side where Hightower had clipped him.

Callard allowed himself no time to grieve over Leslie Ann or perhaps his impulse to be useful was the way he buried how he felt. He kept his face blank but his eyes were two pools of silence and pain.

Howton was in shock. It took a hard slap and a shot from Callard before Howton came out of it. And even then, he was incapable of speech. His silence, the unseeing eyes staring at nothing were no improvement. Doctor Death's insistence that Howton tell what happened under the water got waved off by Callard.

"Not now. Maybe never," said Callard who had seen this sort of thing before in other men who had gone too far over the edge. Callard could see no obvious wounds, but Howton might have internal bleeding or organ damage.

"When he can talk about it, he will," said Callard, bending over to examine Howton for a wound.

Nobody felt like talking about anything.

Hightower avoided everyone else. Standing on the riverbank, staring into the unreadable depths of the river, he was a man abandoned by his own schemes. The General gave vent to muttered curses and paced futilely up and down the river bank as if there was something to decide.

The death of Leslie Ann was a battle they prepared for, fought and lost. They might forever argue if it meant what it meant but in some kind of primal unspoken way, it made sense to them. Perhaps it had been a direct challenge to their own sense of themselves, of their ability to make war, and this time they had not measured up. Not every battle was winnable, that was to be expected. Such things happened but it had happened so quickly, so suddenly that they had not even had a chance to show what they could do.

And then there was the disappearance of the Indian. It had them all spooked. It was insult to injury.

Neither the General or Hightower would have admitted it, but the disappearance of the Indian was almost as personally unsettling as the answer. He had given them direction and purpose. At the very least, he had given off a convincing notion that he knew what was coming, that the journey made some kind of sense.

"Are we done Hightower? Is that it?" said the General to Hightower. "Is this the goddamn end or what?"

"It would seem so," said Hightower.

"I don't like this Hightower!" said the General. "I am not happy with this. This is unsatisfactory!"

"Am I supposed to disagree?" said Hightower. "Just don't blame me for the screw up! I loaded the gun, Deathseeker was my idea after his brother bought it. He was our second bullet, but I can only aim the goddamn thing! I can't guarantee the target will pose in the crosshairs! You always knew this was a risky proposition and you knew that it was out of my control."

"I got a real problem with how this turned out!" said the General, his face dark with sullen anger. "I'd be happier if we had a dead Indian in a body bag. A KIA enroute, before anybody could find out anything!"

"Maybe Deathseeker knew that was always part of the plan. Maybe that's why he's missing," suggested Hightower. "Remember this General. We could have faked it from the getgo but topside wanted to know if there was a real answer here. This was not the answer we were led to expect. They can't fault us. We went all the way with it!"

"Oh hell yes, we did that. Now we're just a couple sentimental slobs!" said the General, staring at Howton and Doctor Death and Callard. "With too many witnesses."

"Armed witnesses," said Hightower, aware of the sudden apprehension of Doctor Death. His weapon was up, the safety clicking off. He moved protectively in front of Callard and Howton. Hightower wanted to tell the General that he talked too damn much but it was too late for that.

"Relax boy," snapped the General, aware that the big black had caught his drift all too clearly. "I almost never shoot my own men. Not only are there rules against that kind of thing but it's bad for morale."

"Hardly anybody ever calls me boy," said Doctor Death with a voice like a knife.

"No racial slur meant!" said the General quickly.

The safety stayed off but Doctor Death lowered his weapon enough so that it did not quite point in Hightower and the General's direction. Callard and Doctor Death exchanged a dark look between them. Callard picked up Howton's rifle and held it uncertainly. It was clear he was not comfortable with a weapon in his hand. Neither Callard or Doctor Death were reassured by the General's words.

"Getting harder to tell who the bad guys are," said Doctor Death, speaking to Callard. "Maybe old Deathseeker got himself the right idea. Maybe we ought to be wherever he is. I beginning to feel like a motherless child, here."

"Don't get the wrong idea here," said the General, trying to undo the damage. "My only concern now is that we all make it back alive. The mission may be dead but I assure you, my number one priority is the safety of my men. Don't let my..." The General was at a loss for words to describe his lack of discretion. "Well, you'll have to trust us. We're all on the same damn side here!" The General tried to sound sincere.

If the big black was going to be a loose hand grenade, nobody was going to try to pull his pin, thought the General. At least not now.

Hightower and the General had an even bigger problem.

They were lost.

The General had been poring over a map while Callard had been trying to deal with Howton. Apparently it had told him nothing which was why he was pacing.

Doctor Death was the first one to try to turn it around.

"So I'm for heading home. Now."

It got no response.

He got up, and brought his weapon up again. It was an unmistakably threatening gesture.

Hightower and the General turned to look at him. The General wasn't used to being talked to this way. The back of his neck was tight with fury. He had to make an obvious effort to control himself. Hightower seemed disinterested, almost amused at the exchange.

"Going on or heading back, which is it? Time to move on," insisted Doctor Death. "Howton here needs help."

"You're not in charge," said the General but his heart was not in it.

"Somebody better be," warned Doctor Death.

Hightower laughed.

"I think we need to find somebody before we head back," he said. "We seem to have lost our faithful Indian guide!" He smiled but he was not amused.

"The deserting son of a bitch!" said the General. "If he ain't dead, I'll pop him myself."

Doctor Death regarded the General. He took his time before he spoke. "I wouldn't try it if I were you."

He gave the General a look that was so intense the General shuddered. It killed the blistering remark he was about to make. Wisely the General sensed now

was not the time to brace him. The big black was deadly and no respecter of his authority, that was clear. Maybe even a little battle happy.

The General knew there would be plenty of time to deal with his insolence later.

Hightower asked the question that was on everyone's mind, the question that seized their minds and shook it like a bone in a mad dog's maw.

"I know what I think I saw in the water..." he began, not looking at any of them. If he meant to say more, the General cut him off.

"We all saw it!" snarled the General.

Howton was silent, not looking at anyone, there but not really there.

Callard motioned for Doctor Death to help him. "Let's get Howton's shirt off. I see blood and scratches but I can't tell if there are any other injuries. Maybe his ribs are broken."

The black man seemed reluctant to turn his back on Hightower and the General but he did as Callard bid. Doctor Death's hands were gentle as he held Howton up into a sitting position so the Doctor could get his shirt off.

There were no signs of claw or teeth marks on the front of the upper half of his body. Abrasions and cuts yes, but no sign of bite or claw wounds. Doctor Death was staring at Howton's back.

"You better take a look at this, Callard," said Doctor Death.

Callard moved around behind. His eyes widened in surprise. Two deep red bruises were on each side of his back. Whatever had seized him, the grip had been incredibly fierce to mark his skin like that.

"What does it look like to you Doc?" said the black man.

Doctor Callard just looked at him and that was answer enough. The angry red weals made the near perfect outline of two very human looking hands.

Hightower came over and saw it too. He shook his head.

"I saw a snake in the water. But that's not the mark of a snake," he said.

"I saw it plain," said Doctor Death. "Not a snake. Crocodile is how I figure it. They got these claws on their front feet, like a hand sort of. Maybe that's what grabbed him like that? Made those marks?" Even he didn't sound convinced.

Suddenly the General was there. He stared uncomprehendingly at the bruises on Howton's back. He swore vehemently. "I saw a snake! Biggest goddamn snake I ever saw in my life! Anybody who says he saw anything else, is full of shit!"

"Crocodile!" said Doctor Death. "Christ! I was in the water fighting the goddamn thing! I ought to know what I saw! The Doc will tell you, meanest goddamn crocodile on the face of the earth! That was one mean mother! Tell 'em Doc! That's what got Howton and pulled Leslie Ann under the water!"

Callard shook his head. Maybe he was the one who was spooked the most. Maybe even more than Howton who'd lost it completely.

His eyes were coming unfocused. His hands were beginning to tremble. Suddenly his whole body was shaking uncontrollably.

"What did you see Doc?" said Doctor Death, alarmed, reaching out to take the medico's arm. "Hey steady on,."

"His face," said Callard. "I saw..."

He fainted dead away.

Overcome by the horror.

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

It didn't become an argument.

Hightower said it for them all. "Maybe none of us is sure what it was in the water." He looked down at the almost mad face of Howton, staring into its own private dark. "But I'm damn sure Howton knows."

They stayed there like rats trapped on a board in a flood. Waiting for some sign or other. They used lit cigarettes to burn the leaches off their arms and legs. Doctor Death worked over Howton, stripping the loathsome things off his body. As they bent over their gruesome task, they all seemed like a troop of rock apes, busy with personal grooming.

Burdened with a revived but still shaky Callard, a half-conscious Howton, no one was up to a search to locate Deathseeker, the Indian who had been their guide. Doctor Death's fingers stayed always near the trigger of his weapon and he seldom turned his back on Hightower or the General.

Hightower was angry that the General's big mouth had made an already difficult task, all that more difficult. Letting someone know you intend to whack them was an incredible blunder. Besides it was his worry, not the General's and it was tough enough without this additional heat.

Hightower saw to it that they ate something. The General was obviously torn. To walk back up river, or to float down it on the raft? Neither way seemed attractive. Like the General, Highwater sorely missed the radio. They could chopper out if they could let anyone know where they were. But that was a problem too.

"I'm screwed if I know which way we should go," said the General. "I got a general sense, that this river might lead us close to our forces if we follow it downstream. I mean, it's gotta empty into the Mekong. That's how I figure it. But we know what's behind us, it's one hell of a hump back upstream. What do you think Hightower? Hump it back afoot or stick with the rafts?"

"I'm still curious about something General. Deathseeker said we'd know the answer if we could keep her alive until we reached the place of the dragon. Maybe we can't do that, but having traveled this far, if there is such a place, it might be worth seeing."

"Why?" asked the General.

Hightower said with a shrug, "I don't know. Just seems like turning back is leaving something undone. Besides, I got this feeling I can't quite shake that we got screwed somehow. That we were deliberately led astray. I don't trust that Goddam Indian any farther than I can spit. What did he do to Ranklin and Arven? How did Deathseeker get to them? There's just too much I don't know and I don't like it."

"This whole goddamn foray was bitched from the minute it began!" snarled the General. "You ask me, the top brass who bought into this Indian thing, were screwed right from the getgo! Those goddamn hemorrhoids for brains shouldn't have backed this thing in the first place! And now where are we, that's what I want to know?"

"What's the map say?" asked Doctor Death, taking a sudden interest now that they were talking about getting out of there.

The General unfolded a map across his knee. The General's voice seemed full of gloom. "I know a hell of a lot, all of it for shit. Everything but where in the hell on this map we are supposed to be! Anybody else got any ideas where we are?"

Callard spoke up, "If the Indian were here, he would tell you we are near the source of the ninth dragon."

Hightower stared at Doctor Callard with amazement. It was the Doctor's voice but it might have been the Indian talking.

"I know the Mekong river is called the river of the nine dragons. But every goddamn map I've ever seen only shows eight heads, one for each goddamn delta of the river," said Hightower.

"Eight would not have been a lucky number. So they found the hidden one, the dragon that can not be seen. It is on no map. But it exists," said Callard, his voice sounding calm and certain as he lay beside one of the beached rafts. "We're close to that, if that helps."

Nobody asked him how he knew.

"Up river or down?" said Doctor Death, looking up at the sky. The sun was beginning to go down and there wasn't all that much of the day left.

Hightower shrugged. "Any way out is a good way. If there is a way out."

"Howton won't make it walking," said Doctor Death. "None of us will. We take the raft, we've got food and Howton's got a chance to get back on his feet."

"It's still out there in the water!" said the General. "Maybe its waiting for us!" There was an edge of irrational fear in his eyes. He had truly lost his ability to command. He did not say he was afraid to get back in the raft, that the very idea terrified him but it was plain on his face.

Callard was laying down in the sand, letting the sun wash over his face, eyes closed.

He spoke without opening his eyes.

"It's not in the water anymore."

"How do you know?" snapped the General.

"I just know," said Callard. "It got what it came for. It isn't interested in us."

"You suddenly sound like the Indian's personal hand puppet," said Hightower. "I thought you were above all that Indian mystical bullshit. You're beginning to sound dangerously like a true believer."

"I see things," said Callard and that was all he would say.

Hightower sensed nothing would happen unless he made it happen. He would have liked to search for Deathseeker but he sensed that surviving, getting back in one piece was about the best any of them were going to be up for. And not everyone was going to make it back any way if he had anything to say about it.

"Back in the boats then," said Hightower, taking the decision out of the General's hands. "This goddamn river has got to lead somewhere."

Howton sat on the bank of the river, unmoving as the rest of them began to scramble back into the boats. "I'll get him," said Doctor Death, shifting his rifle so he could pick up Howton.

Howton put out his hand and pushed him away. He got up slowly, legs wobbling underneath him.

"I'm waiting for the Indian!" he said. "You go on without me."

"Jesus Howton! You're back! You're gonna be OK!" There was a look of pure joy and relief on Doctor Death's face. Howton nodded at his partner, face still tense but obviously self aware.

"Bullshit!" snapped the General, unimpressed with Howton's recovery. "Haul him in here."

Callard opened his eyes wide. A strange look passed over his face. When he spoke it was to Howton.

"Get in the boat. You will find me in time."

Howton nodded dumbly and staggered forward toward the raft.

They watched him moving into the raft with shock and turned as one and stared at Callard.

Callard closed his eyes. He seemed to be struggling with something inside himself.

They were all shocked.

This time for sure, it had been the Indian's voice, not Callard's.

CHAPTER THIRTY

They tried to keep the rafts in the center of the stream. It was slow moving here, thick bunch grass slowing their progress and sometimes they had to paddle to break free of the underbrush that blocked the stream.

Howton sat in the front of the first raft. Shaken but obviously more himself, he stared blankly from time to time at those around him. Doctor Death

sat in the back of the first raft, weapon up, safety off, ready for almost anything. Doc Callard was in the second raft, stretched out flat on the bottom, eyes shut, looking more dead than alive. He looked bloodlessly pale.

The General was livid. Hightower was tense and withdrawn.

"Is that really it then Hightower? Was that the real goddamn answer? Well, was it?"

Hightower shrugged.

"It's not acceptable!" said the General, loud voiced, eyes flashing. "It was a goddamn sideshow! It was pure bullshit! If I ever get my hands on that Indian bastard I'll tear him a new..."

"I wouldn't say bad things about the chief if I was you," said Doctor Death. He shifted his weapon so that the barrel moved in the General's direction. He seemed to like the effect it caused when he did it.

"Are you threatening me, you insubordinate simple son of a bitch?" roared the General, his face fiery red. "You don't know who you're dealing with!"

"Who me?" said Doctor Death with a steely smile. "I'm just saying the Indian knew what was what. You don't even know where we are."

Hightower stared up the river. He turned his head and looked contemptuously at the General. "Maybe its the right answer. We fell down doing a job here. Maybe what we can't do little, we can't do large. That could be what it's supposed to mean."

The General insisted. "He said he could show us how the war could be won."

Doctor Callard opened his eyes suddenly and laughed. It was a piercing sound, almost edged with hysteria. Everyone turned and looked back at him in the second raft.

Callard lifted his head and stared at them, a strange smile on his face.

"Who!" he said.

"Who what?" said the General, looking confused.

"What do you think Howton, Doctor Death? You think maybe they asked the wrong question?" said Callard, his eyes wild. "Not how it could be won but WHO was gonna win it?"

"Oh yeah!" Howton laughed out in answer. Doctor Death eyed Howton warily, still concerned about his partner's ability to track what was going on around them but he allowed himself a smile too.

Howton said "The brass never gets anything wrong. You ought to know that by now Callard."

Doctor Death chimed in. "Except twice. At night and during the day."

The rafts had slowed to a stop, impeded by the dense foliage growing down into the river.

"Cut the comedy and let's paddle!" snapped Hightower, digging his oar into the water. "We've got to find some place along the river to spend the night and we haven't got much time before the sun goes down."

"I wish we had stayed around to find that coward, Deathseeker! Nobody deserts in my outfit!" snarled the General. "I personally want to be the one who puts a bullet in his brain."

"Maybe what got Leslie, got the Indian too," said Howton, staring down into the dark water. He put his arms around his back, touching the bruises where something had got him. His voice was unsteady. "I think we'll find him but maybe he's dead too."

"If I ever find him, he'll wish he was!" said the General.

In the distance there was a dull sonorous explosion of sound, loud as distant thunder.

"What was that?" It was Hightower, holding up his hand, motioning them all to be quiet.

"Artillery?" guessed Doctor Death, struggling to hear. The raft slowed to a stop with no one paddling.

The sound came again. It seemed to echo, a vast rumbling sound.

"Not ordinance. Not jets. Sounds more like an avalanche. I heard one once in Colorado," said Howton, alert but dull-eyed.

"That's mortar fire," said the General. "Somebody's probing for an enemy position. They're shooting a ranging volley."

"Maybe it's the voice of a dragon," said Callard. His eyes were closed again. He did not look conscious.

They all turned to look at him.

There was nothing to see but too much to think about.

Hightower dug his paddle savagely into the water, thrusting the raft forward. The others moved with him.

"I say it's mortar fire," insisted the General. "Sounds like it's in the direction we're going. So let's look sharp. We're probably moving into a VC stronghold."

"Be dark soon," said Hightower, motioning to a fairly level spot on the right bank of the stream. "I suggest we pull in here. Whatever's out there, it'll take us almost a day to get to at the rate we're going."

They paddled the rafts toward the right bank. Doctor Death and a still shaky Howton were the first out and helped drag the rafts up on the bank.

At the General's insistence they chopped down some underbrush and used it to camouflage the rafts. The sun was down and the darkness was falling thick and fast all around them. It was still hot and the air was thick and humid and tainted with the smell of decaying vegetation.

They ate cold rations and made rude sleeping places for them all between the two rafts. They made no attempt to dig bunkers or establish a defensive perimeter.

Doctor Death had the first watch and Howton had second shift. The General said he'd take the last watch at dawn but Doctor Death said he only needed a few hours of sleep and he'd take the dawn watch himself after Howton's watch. Exhausted, the General did not argue.

Doctor Death wasn't trying to be kind he just didn't trust the General. He had this unshakable idea the intelligence types who were running this show weren't too big on bringing back a lot of walking talking survivors. Howton was still kind of out of it and it was up to Doctor Death to save his ass as well as his own. Just thinking about it made Doctor Death feel meaner than a snake's belly. Seemed like you had to kill the whole goddamn world just to survive this rat's ass of a war.

Callard was asleep almost immediately, his face against the cool black side of one raft. Hightower lay awake beside him, lost in dark and ominous thoughts. The General made a show of looking at his maps again, as if he had some kind of command decision to make.

The loud distant sound had not been repeated. The only sound now was the ever present hum of the jungle, lizards, birds and the whir of insects. The bank of the river teemed with small animals and reptiles.

As the night deepened, the General and Hightower followed Callard into uneasy sleep. Doctor Death sat on the bank of the river, rifle cradled on his knees. Howton sat up, his back leaning against the thick rubber side of one of the rafts. He was only a few feet away from Doctor Death but he acted as if he were a thousand miles away and not sure how to get back. His eyes were closed and he sat motionless like one asleep or dead.

The big black whispered, "You asleep Howton?"

"No. I don't want to sleep."

"Can you tell me what happened back there?"

Howton opened his eyes. Doctor Death could see them gleaming in the faint moonlight. He licked his lips and said in a very definite way, "No!"

Doctor Death knew that was all he was ever going to say about it now, maybe forever and he accepted it.

"OK bro, are you OK otherwise?"

"I feel different," said Howton.

"You just tired, man. You put up one hell of a fight back there. Man, I thought you was a goner! But you just put it behind you now, man, things gonna be fine from here on in. We're done here except for a little grief I might have to settle with these intelligence wrongo's and it's back to the friendly skies for you and me, man!"

"I'm not gonna fly anymore," said Howton.

"What you mean?" Doctor Death was shocked. Howton felt the same way about flying that most people felt about breathing.

"The war is over for me. I'm not going to make it," said Howton. "I'm just waiting for the body bag to take me home."

Doctor Death was shocked. Too shocked to say anything else. Howton was back, his mind was working but it was clear he had been over the edge of something.

"You try to get some sleep." said Doctor Death soothingly, rubbing his eyes wearily. "You're bagged. I'll take your watch too. You just lay back and let me do the worrying. I got enough steam here to do an all nighter. Rest and you'll feel different tomorrow."

Howton closed his eyes. It seemed like only seconds later and he was fast asleep. Doctor Death shook his head. He wasn't liking this one bit.

Doctor Death was the only one awake. And he felt for the first time very much alone.

He and Howton had been through plenty, seen too much, danced out there on the thin edge time after time, had death shaking their bones from sunup to sundown but always it had been the two of them up against it.

Now there was something childlike and vulnerable about Howton, a side of him that Doctor Death didn't know and wasn't sure he wanted to see. He always saw him and Howton as being invincible. Howton could fly out of most any danger and he, Doctor Death could kill off all the rest. Nothing could get by them, get over them, get to them. They had it figured. They were a team and death could just go screw itself and that was how it worked. Howton was magic when his hands were on the helicopter controls and Doctor Death owned death when he had a gun in his hands. Death was supposed to only happen to other guys, not them. Now Howton was here but gone, alive but believed in his own death. That wasn't how it was supposed to be. Something hard and cold, something that stirred along Doctor Death's arms and hands and ended with his trigger finger, got warm and then hot and uncomfortable. He held his weapon and it didn't feel like it always felt, an extension of his arm, an extra eye that saw the world.

He tried to figure out what was different.

But couldn't.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

I moved among them again. I meant to be with them in the beginning of the night, long before it had eaten the last sweet bite of the moon. With the moon yet to rise, the dark was very dark. I walked down to the river where they were.

I gently took the rifle from the unconscious hands of Doctor Death. He was fast asleep, sitting slumped against the river bank. He had the face of a nightmare plagued child. I did not fear his quick reaction time or that he would suddenly be startled awake and respond. He gave up his weapon easily, without struggle or unease. He slept now like a man whose arm is no longer a gun.

The night was hot but I had need of warmth and medicine for I had been cold and weary and long at my struggle. I built a fire, moving carefully and quietly, gathering dead wood and twigs. The soft pops and crackles of the fire did not wake them. The good clean woodsmoke rose up to the night sky like a fireborn prayer to the wind.

I put medicine on the fire and the fire flashed. The sweet scent of the medicine and the pleasant heat of the fire revived me.

Doctor Death came awake suddenly, like a man pulled from drowning. He tried to aim and fire the rifle he no longer held. The look of horror on his face did not fade until I spoke softly to him.

"I have your rifle," I said. "You are not to worry. I am watching over you. You do not need it anymore."

His whispered answer was harsh and bitter. "Jesus! How did you...This never happened to me before! Nobody ever got past me! I never slept on watch! Never!" He was furious at himself, about as angry as anybody can get. "Give me my goddamn gun back!" He got up, rising to his full height, back stiff with alarm.

"You are different now. This is the way you are now." I handed the rifle back to him as I said it.

He held the weapon fiercely, as if it were a thing alive that might try to get away. He felt betrayed by his body. His eyes wandered, taking in the sleeping forms of Howton, Callard, the General and Hightower. He eyed me uncertainly.

"You're back Chief!" It seemed to confuse him.

"You can't leave a place you have never been to," I said.

"Where did you go?"

"Nowhere. I have stayed in my somewhere."

Even I sometimes tell the truth when I am in no danger of anyone believing it.

Doctor Death motioned toward the fire. "You don't build a fire out here like that. You're gonna get us all killed! Build a fire like that you might as well paint a bullseye on our asses!"

"They already know where we are," I said. "The fire changes nothing."

"They out there? Did you see 'em?" His eyes widened with apprehension.

"They are always out there. We are in their place and they will come for us when it is time." Again I told the truth for there was a need for it now, for him and for me. Now was a time to see his face even if he could not always see mine.

"I'll wake them up, then. Course I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when the General sees you. He's gonna tear it off in you...The man is definitely pissed!" Doctor Death smiled.

"No. I want to talk to you before they wake up," I whispered. "But first, throw your rifle into the river."

"What?" His face was tense in the firelight.

"Throw your weapon in the river."

"I kind of don't understand that. You aren't speaking English are you, cause it sound like you trying to chicken lip me here, sound like gibberish to me. Everything you say, sound like 'throw my gun in the river' and that ain't my style. It definitely ain't my style!"

"Trust me. If you want to live, you must do it."

He didn't say anything. He just stared at me and his hands tightened on his rifle and the look he gave me was fierce and wild and defiant.

"We're going to be overrun. When we reach the place of the dragon, they will come for us. I will teach you how to be dead and then they will not kill you. But first you must throw away your weapon. You are no longer a man who kills. Let go of the darkness, it is time to make peace with your great killing heart."

"Why would I do this?" He seemed half afraid I might have a reason that might convince him.

"Because you carried a woman on your back and you could not save her. Because now you will always carry a woman on your back."

"Bullshit!"

"Because you want to live. Because you don't want Howton to die. You do not need to hear the reasons spoken. Just throw away your gun."

"No way chief! The day I give up my gun I'm a dead man. I don't do it sooner. Nothing you can say, can convince me."

"If you are not different, if it is not as I said, how is it that I could take your gun away while you slept? How is it that your gun no longer feels a part of you? It does not belong to you. Try to feel it in your hands and you will know what I know."

He turned his back on me. And I wondered if I had lost him. His dark figure cast strange shadows in the firelight. He stood silent and he seemed lost to me, a thousand thousand miles away.

Someone stirred in the dark and I turned to look at the sleepers.

Howton was awake. He sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes, noticing first the fire and then turning and looking in our direction.

"I knew you would come back," said Howton. "I knew you would want to be in at the kill."

I had no answer for that. Doctor Death turned around. There was a brief instant when his face was not clear in the firelight and I was afraid that I could not see his face, but then his eyes glimmered in the next flicker of the fire and I knew his face.

Howton got up slowly, his legs stiff, his body seemed pain wracked. He picked up his rifle, put it over his shoulder like a baseball bat and looked around at the surrounding jungle. He seemed unconcerned about any possible danger.

He came towards us and then hunkered down beside the fire, warming his hands over the friendly flame.

"Nice fire," he said, keeping his voice low so as not to wake the other sleepers. "Are we camping now? And singing campfire songs?"

Doctor Death smiled. This was more like the Howton he knew.

"Goddamn Indian is back, Howton. And messing with my head. Wants me to toss my rifle in the river! How's that for bullshit!"

"Interesting," said Howton. He looked at me. His face seemed kindly, and unafraid but his eyes were as tired of the world as human eyes can get.

"Your rifle too," I said, motioning toward the river. "And your helmet and the hand grenades hanging from your belt. Best to get rid of them now."

Howton didn't even think about it. He swung his rifle and let it go. It arced up high, like a well thrown baseball bat and splashed in the dark center of the river. He used both hands to strip the hand grenades off his belt and tossed them in a handful into the river.

"Goddamn it Howton! Are you out of your mind!"

Doctor Death's shout of amazement was loud enough to bring everyone awake. Hightower and the General sprung up in alarm, hands reaching frantically for weapons. Callard lurched to a sitting position like a man at the end of a two day drunk. He was bleary eyed from a lack of sleep and feverish from his unhealed wound.

Howton took his helmet off, unsheathed a wicked looking knife and dropped it inside the helmet. He grabbed the helmet with one hand and then threw it like an Olympic athlete throwing a discus. It too fell into the river with a small metallic splash.

"What the hell is going on here!" shouted the General. "Who built that goddamn fire! I'll have somebody...." He stopped when he saw me.

Hightower cursed and started toward us, face an unseen mask of frustration and rancor.

Howton looked at Doctor Death. Their eyes met and Doctor Death was about to speak but he choked it off because he saw things in Howton's eyes. He looked away and then looked down at his weapon. It seemed unwieldy in his hands as if it had suddenly become a size too large for his huge hands.

Hightower came up on my left and the General moved up on my right. Their anger was palpable, as real as a color. What they might have said, what they meant to do, did not happen.

Doctor Death raised his weapon. He clicked the safety off, switched to full automatic and began busting caps. His weapon danced in his hands and the bullets cut through the thick underbrush all around like a flight of angry bees.

He burned up the clip. Hightower and the General, thinking we were under attack, hit the deck, hands scrambling frantically to get their own weapons up and into play.

Doctor Death swung the empty weapon around his head like a flail. And then let it go. It slammed into the water with a heavy splash. Spare ammo clips, hand grenades, two knives and .45 automatic followed it into the river.

Hightower was up on one knee, mouth open in surprise. The General shot off two rounds, but was confused about the target and stopped and looked back at us. The big black man's shedding of his weapons left him as confused as he was about the enemy that didn't seem to be there.

"What the hell is going on here?" said the General.

It was just too hard to explain, so nobody tried.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

The General filled his helmet with water and put out the fire. Hightower led the assault. He stood in front of me, insistent, demanding. A barrage of questions assailed me, had no edge to stick and went unanswered.

The moon was up now, thick and full in the sky and made the world half shadow and half light all around us.

It was a dragon moon, the kind that made the night take wing, and soar like a dark phantom all around us.

I got into a raft, making it clear it was now time to go. A weaponless Howton and Doctor Death joined me. Working together, they launched both rafts into the water. The second raft was tethered at the end of its rope, riding low in the water under the weight of our supplies. Callard moved toward the other raft, wading out into the leach-infested water, intent on traveling alone in the supply raft, but I motioned him toward me. He saw my hand waving at him and looked back at me, eyes fierce as two smokeholes.

It was the first time I spoke since the General and Hightower awoke. I said to Callard, "We will all travel together now. We are entering the place of the dragon and this one raft is all we need. Leave the other one behind."

"We are not abandoning our supplies!" said the General. "I'm in charge here, Goddamn it, and I say we're taking both..."

Callard snarled, made a guttural sound, like the moan of some predatory animal. It shocked the General into silence. Callard had the look about him of a cornered animal, pushed too far, ready to lash back at his pursuers.

Callard stepped out of the second raft. He stared at me. His face was not good to look upon. That he hated me, that he feared me, that he wished me dead or in some private hell, perhaps that was in his face, but he obeyed me and I am sure not even he knew why.

"We're not going anywhere until we get some answers to our questions," said the General, arms folded across his chest. "Hightower and I have a real bone to pick with you. We ain't moving left, right, up or down, until you and I and Hightower have us a private ENLIGHTENING conversation! You left us high and dry you goddamn secretive son of a bitch! If you think desertion is something I take lightly, even though you aren't army meat, well I got one hell of a I beg to differ with you! Your cowardly ass belongs to me, goddamn it! Do you read me, Deathseeker, you insubordinate son of a bitch? Are you hearing me, loud and clear?"

"I hear death in the wind. I hear the voice of the dragon," I said. "That is all I need to hear."

The General had his .45 automatic out of his holster and chambered a round. Hightower reached to stop him but then seemed to think better of it.

The gun came up and the barrel centered on my chest.

"Kill me and you'll never know what happened. You'll never understand anything," I said. I did not fear dying nor did I care to live. I am in a place beyond that.

"Is there a way to know what happened?" said Hightower. "Is there more of an answer for us than the bullshit we're stuck with now? Is there more?"

"The big thing you are about to learn, is ahead of us, at the place of the dragon," I said.

Hightower motioned toward Howton and Doctor Death. "Why did you ask them to give up their weapons? Why them and not us? I think you know exactly what's ahead, maybe you were there and you set something up. I'm sick of this goddamn hidden agenda of yours! You haven't been straight with us yet. You're a clever son of a bitch, I give you that. But believe me Deathseeker, you try to do us, I'll make you wish you were tucked back in your mother's womb!" Hightower was angry enough to kill, but his mind raged with uncertainty and unfilled want, like an interrogator left with a tortured corpse that would not give up its secrets.

"It is time to go. The dragon waits," I said.

The General's finger found the trigger and started to squeeze. Hightower swept his arm aside and the weapon discharged either by the force of Hightower's blow or the pressure from the General's trigger finger. The round went through the bottom of the second raft.

Callard had something in his hand, something from the bottom of the supply raft. It was small and round and thickly coated with dried blood.

Angrily, the General shook free from Hightower.

Perhaps he meant to shoot again. Kill the Indian who had broken his war dream. Perhaps he had another round for Howton and Doctor Death and Callard, who had eyes that had seen and tongues that could tell. Perhaps he took it so personally, he needed just this one time not to delegate this task but to do it himself.

Callard chose that moment. There was a metallic ping and he tossed the thing in his hand into the supply raft.

The grenade exploded. The raft lifted up in the air like a speared whale and disintegrated, filling the air with blasted rubber, screaming chunks of exploded metal and canvas and ration tins. The black 12 man Zodiac raft settled back into the water, a flat lifeless black corpse, still tethered uselessly by rope to our raft.

One tiny fleck of shrapnel brushed against Callard's face, making a long thin cut across one cheek. A heavy chunk of metal spanged against the General's helmet, did not penetrate, and bounced off into the river.

The force of the blast drove Hightower and the General back away from the bank of the river. That no one was injured with the grenade torching off so close was a matter of some luck. Most of the force of the grenade had been taken by the body of the other raft. The raft was irretrievably gone and so were the supplies in it.

Howton asked the question for everyone.

"Callard. Why'd you do that?"

"It takes less words this way," said Callard, listening to something that seemed far away. "And now we can move toward the big quiet."

Howton and Doctor Death laughed at something only they thought was funny. Hightower and the General staggered on the river bank, dazed by the blast, stumbling like two harried drunks chased by nightstick wielding MP's. Callard stared at them all, unaware that anything was funny.

But I understood Callard now. I too sought the big quiet.

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

"Seems wrong, not having a gun," said Doctor Death, as we drifted into a stretch of the river green with algae and strewn with waterlilies. "But then, everything seems wrong now."

"It ain't real no more," said Howton.

"I got a bad feeling Howton," said Doctor Death. "This ain't like the world anymore."

"Are you scared?" I asked, looking at Howton and Doctor Death, watching their eyes.

"I don't know how to answer that. Are we scared Howton?" said Doctor Death. "Maybe we are too scared to be scared."

"When you learn how to die, then you will have nothing to fear. We walk into that time and that place but though I am far away I am with you," I said.

"We're following you because everybody else is lost," said Howton, "and us to."

Callard spoke up bitterly. "Have we forgotten what happened to Leslie? Who's to blame for that? He plays his little games and doesn't care who gets hurt! Are you sure the two of you want to dance in his little game?"

"The dead are not always dead. The living are not always alive," I said.

Callard regarded me with burning eyes. He meant to say more, to vent his anger. He did not have the heart of a killer but I might be the flame that could give him the fire for one. He would always blame me for the death of the Leslie Ann he had known.

This hatred for me must die or he would fail me when I had need of him, when lives were in his hand and only he could save them.

I leaned forward, seized Callard quickly by the face with both hands. I shoved his head aside, and made him look at something that moved on the left bank of the river. His eyes focused, anger and rage at being so roughly handled, boiling within him, and then he saw what I meant him to see. Just a glimpse, a flash of white as it passed near the river on the distant path, and I knew he knew.

I let go of him as suddenly as I had seized him.

Callard's eyes stabbed me, asking a thousand questions. I shook my head and put my finger to my lips.

I nodded yes. But it did not unravel the mystery I had just made for him.

The raft bumped gently over something in the water, and tears fell from the corners of his eyes.

"You can dance with me or you can dance with them," I said. "You must decide who is foe and who is friend. My heart belongs to no one. But soon it will."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand." Callard's eyes were blurred with tears.

"I see your face," I said as a father speaks to his child. "I give you back to your wife and child. When the snow comes, you will be with them again."

Callard looked away, hunched forward, shoulders shaking with grief. I knew that he walked on the path now with me.

The raft moved on down the river like a black ghost but we did not move unseen.

"They're out there. I can almost smell them," said Doctor Death and he shuddered as if suddenly cold despite the sweat that dripped from his face under the blazing sun.

"Yes. They are out there," I agreed.

Callard stared at the General's stiff back. "Kind of strange," he observed, his mind veering off to something else. His was a troubled, fragmented mind that knew too much and wished to forget.

Howton glanced at him. So did Doctor Death.

"They don't seem to mind that you gave up your weapons," continued Callard. "That's not the Army I know. That's what's so strange."

"Makes us easier to kill," said Doctor Death. "Less work for them, is how I figure it."

The General swung around like a man jabbed with a knife. He snapped, "You men have got to get a grip on yourselves. Hightower and I...well, you men have been under a strain. I want to assure you...we mean you..."

Hightower was grim. "Shut up General! This is not something we need to discuss right now."

"We are almost there. At the place of the dragon," said Callard and it was not a question. He simply knew.

"Yes," I said as we reached a part of the river, now peaceful and gracious with white clouds of waterlilies floating on the gray-green water. On the river bank, we passed the ramparts of a temple, with faded white stone cobras carved into the balustrades. The square tower of a city gate, in elegant ruin, lay directly ahead of us. The four faces of Siva, the Destroyer, decorated the span of the arch, a leering visage that seemed to mock us.

The bones of an ancient city pushed up out of the riotous jungle growth along the river bank. Here a wall, festooned with entangling lianas, here a carven image, rose above the dark green jungle. There was a sound on the wind like the whisper of a long dead city. It was a place of ancient slaughter, murdered children and poisoned dreams.

It was the place of dragons.

In the distance a sound, low and sonorous, echoed.

Hightower and the General dropped their paddles and took up their weapons. The stream moved languidly here, barely moving the raft as we drifted silently toward the heart of the ancient city.

"What was that sound?" asked the General. He looked back at me then, I think, but I did not answer.

The sound grew louder and the General and Hightower raised their weapons in sudden alarm.

"How do you read it?" asked the General of Hightower.

"Heavy machinery?" guessed Hightower. "Sounds like it's ahead on the right bank."

"I say we get out of the raft. Scout it out before we drift into something we can't handle. We're a little short of firepower if it gets big on us," said the General, meaning Howton and Doctor Death.

They paddled the raft toward the right bank of the river. The dense undergrowth was thick enough here to hide the boat. Everyone got out, and helped drag the raft up into the thick underbrush.

"You want me to go ahead and take a look?" said Hightower.

"I'd rather one of them went ahead. Checked it out," said the General, indicating Howton or Doctor Death.

"We got no guns," said Howton.

"You're goddamn choice not mine!" snapped the General. "Maybe you think the doctor here is gonna certify you battle happy when we get back so you get a medical out instead of a firing squad? Maybe that's your best shot. Cause you know I could court martial your ass, you know that. But I can be big about this, so maybe you can go out there now, without weapons, and do a little bit to redeem yourself. I could mention that in a report. You might even make it back from this little looksee in one piece. If you're lucky and can move quiet, you can be in and out before they know you were there."

"I'll go," said Doctor Death. "I wanna go somewhere and see the big something."

"I'll tag along. It may be so big, it'll take both of us to see it," said Howton and the two men turned their backs on the General and Hightower and began to walk through the stone gate of the ruined city.

"I got five bucks says they gut shoot us," said Howton, jerking his finger back in the direction of the General and Hightower.

"You gonna lose your money. They be pros. Go for the head shot. Smaller target but more guaranteed result," said Doctor Death, wincing with each step, expecting to feel the penetration of a round at any second.

I moved after them, for we moved on the same path and with the same shared heart. Callard stared at the General and Hightower with suspicion. The two men fingered their weapons uneasily, as if tempted by the targets Howton and Doctor Death presented. The kept glancing uncertainly back at Callard who was standing behind them, as if not quite comfortable to have him behind them.

Callard laughed bitterly and abruptly and then walked past them. He too moved toward the stone gate. As he walked he moved his head, glancing back at them.

Hightower had his weapon up now, his face probably as rough edged as the gun sight that did not waver on the backs of Howton and Doctor Death.

Callard seemed almost gleeful. He called back at them, "Remember, if you want to do it clean, the heart is on the left side but a head shot is more sure if you're good enough for that."

"You son of bitch!" breathed the General.

"We might need them," said Hightower. "We're still a long way from home."

"Without guns and guts, they aren't much use to us. I say we whack them," insisted the General.

"The Indian too?" said Hightower, raising his weapon.

"He's first and he's mine," said the General and his finger tightened on the trigger and then his hand leaped away as something plucked at his arm.

"Christ! I'm hit!" The General stared in amazement at the gaping through and through hole in the upper part of his arm. The rifle tumbled out of his hands.

Hightower got off a round but the zings and spiraling plummets of incoming rounds made him miss. The air seemed aswarm with angry metal bees.

He turned and looked behind him and saw the far bank of the river. It was like a teeming anthill of black-clad, dark-skinned riflemen.

He grabbed the General by the elbow and half dragging, half stumbling forced the General to run. They made for the stone gate and the protective cover of the ruined walls of the city. It was the only place to go and somehow, they made it.

"You gonna make it?" gasped Hightower, crouching behind the dark plinth of the stone gate.

The General nodded, cradling his bad arm in his other hand. "Let's move," snapped the General. "Before those sons of bitches can get across the river and outflank us."

They ran forward, ducking and dodging, moving after the now distant figures of Callard, Howton, Doctor Death and Deathseeker. They moved into the outer courtyards of the ruined city at a dead run.

The city was beautiful in death. Its towering stone walls, flanked by graceful alabaster carved dragon terraces, climbed in gold leaf splendor into the blazing sky. Dark galleries opened on the courtyards. Silence tumbled out from ashy white depths, dust marking the passing of the ancient gods of desolation.

The faces of dragons were endlessly repeated, eyes wide, mouths agape, looking down in haughty silence from every wall. The shrine in the center of the

city, which towered huge over every other thing that dwelt there, was carved in regal splendor, with only one image, the great dragon, the father of dragons.

Multi-headed serpents curled in obeisance around the bottom of the shrine, looking up to the vast radiant one, that was the source of all light.

Howton was the first to mount the staircase of stone that rose toward the first stage of the great dragon pyramid.

Doctor Death and Callard climbed behind him until they stood under an arch where snakes strained to break free of their stone nest and throw themselves into the sacrificial pits at the base of the dragon portico. I had moved with them but not ahead of them. I motioned for them to wait there for me and went beyond them. They looked now to me to lead them but they could not go everywhere that I must go or see what I had yet to see.

I know it was not easy to stand as they stood, unarmed, trusting in things beyond their understanding. They were in a place where their names did not belong, where everything they saw was edged with a weirdness and otherness. The seen and the unseen, both were terrible to see and not sense, each did dwell in mystery but still killed you straight off, whether you understood it or not.

I ascended the cold stone steps that circled the towers of Siva, the destroyer. Beyond the first high arch, I felt the hiss of the dragon's breath, rising from the tepid pools of brackish water. I went farther up, moving toward the high stone mesas made by the hands of long dead kings. When I reached the place where the chants of the ancients had touched the sky, I knelt in respect on the high terrace of the pyramid, and softly chanted. Somewhere in this ancient canyon of stone, the dragon awoke. My chant was the call to battle that brought him out of his dark lair.

I heard the sound of gunfire coming from the direction of the river. From my vantage point, I saw the scurrying figures of the General and Hightower, scuttling like insects into the outer reaches of the city. Beyond the crumbling outer walls of the city, I saw dark figures plunging into the river, moving toward the city. I saw the bright flash of their gun muzzles as they moved in a huge dark wave across the shallow river.

I looked down on the faces of those who now traveled on my path. Callard was outwardly calm. Howton and Doctor Death were tense, warriors without their weapons, feeling naked and vulnerable. They all looked up at me and past me until their eyes rested on the face of the great dragon. The blazing sun burned them, but the breath of the dragon, seeped out of the cold stone and laid a corpse cold touch on their bones.

Hightower and the General moved along the base of the sanctuary of the dragon god. They saw us, up there on the high ground, and came running up after us.

The General was fading fast and Hightower half carried him, half pushed him up the steep stone steps. Their pursuers were at the stone gates, moving slowly, uncertain of their prey, no longer firing. They seemed reluctant to enter the dark mazes of the city. They bunched up at the stone gate, like angry water collecting behind a dam.

It gave the General and Hightower enough time to get up as high as Callard and Howton and Doctor Death. They dashed off the steps, and moved quickly to the side, taking cover behind two thick stone colonnades that were a lacework of carved faces and stone eyes.

"Goddamn it!" snapped the General, voice harsh with pain. "You men are exposed! Take cover, for chrissakes, a whole goddamn battalion is behind us! Move it!"

If they heard the General they gave no sign. Doctor Death looked at the General briefly but did not meet his eyes. The black's hands were twitching, as if sensing the weapons that were no longer his. And then he looked up at me. I motioned them to move up to where I knelt on the highest platform of the temple.

They came up slowly, unhurried. Doctor Death led the way, followed by Callard, still weakened by his wound and Howton, who had his hands against Callard's back, pushing a little where the steps were particularly steep.

They stood beside me and watched the enemy move cautiously into the city. I turned toward the West and heard a sound, a harsh metallic whickering. It was the rotor-thud of a helicopter. It was part of the dream. I knew it would be here in this place of the dragon.

Howton stood like a man leaning into the wind. His eyes followed the enemies progress. They moved out in a circle, coming up on the pyramid from all sides. He said, "I think we're surrounded. Lot of them, not many of us. But I guess you expect this."

"They are going to overrun us," said Doctor Death.

"Yes. But the dead die only once."

"We owe God a death and he that dies this year is quit for the next," quoted Callard. "Shakespeare. I'm surprised I'm awake enough to remember that. Is that what we are all about now Deathseeker? Are we here to die?"

"Do you trust me?"

They looked at each other. From the look of dread on their faces, it was not something they could put into words.

"We got two ways to get dead," said Doctor Death. "The enemy gets us or the General and Hightower take us out. I don't know what you're promising us, or taking us to, cause you're weird beyond weird, but you go in some direction, any Goddamn direction, Howton and me are going with you."

Callard spoke for himself. "I understand them." He motioned back toward the General and Hightower. "But I'm with you, because you're out there in the twilight and I don't get any of it but I see things. If everything about you is a lie," something dark and uncertain passed over his face, "it's at least a better lie to die for than the other lies told to us. You tell us what to do, we'll do it." I knew Callard was thinking about something he had seen along the river bank.

"It is a good day to die!" I said.

The enemy began firing, in position now and the first angry whine of expended rounds began reaching up for us. Bullets spattered and careened off the hard stone walls and steps around us.

Hightower opened up with his rifle, stopping the first soldiers from ascending the base of the pyramid. He hit none of them but his raking fire on full automatic, sent them scurrying for cover.

"Move back from the edge. Follow me." I said.

Like sleepwalkers, they moved after me. A narrow stone staircase dipped down toward a sacrificial pool, hewn out of one solid block of stone. The rain water that filled it was brackish and black, almost congealed with debris like clotted blood.

I moved out and began down, bringing us closer to the enemy. Now the hail of bullets was thicker and more precise. Single-file, they moved behind me.

I took a round in the shoulder and they had to hold me up. Howton had one arm, Doctor Death put his arm under my other arm, encircling my waist, taking the weight off my legs.

"Keep walking," I said. We reached the rim of the sacrificial pit without further injury.

I stepped down the stone steps, until the dark water covered my feet. I shrugged loose from them, able to walk on my own, and moved down until the water covered my chest. "Howton! Doctor Death! Stay as close to me as you possibly can."

They moved behind me, following me into the water. Callard held off a little ways from us, but Howton and Doctor Death stood so close to me, I could feel their breath against my face. As we moved down into the pool, we moved out of rifle range, the bullets passing harmlessly over our heads.

The sacrificial pool was on the Western side of the great dragon pyramid.

I moved into the center of the pool and the water came up to my neck. I had a hand on both Howton and Doctor Death's shoulder, keeping them close to me as I could.

Now was the time of sacrifice.

Now we could hear the voices of the enemy as they scaled the sides of the pyramid. Weaponless, we waited for them to come.

The sound of the dragon grew louder. It too climbed the sides of the pyramid, growing large and angry at the sweet smell of blood. Its sides heaved, its jaws slavered, in delicious anticipation of a human feast.

My wound did not bother me. I was where I always am.

The other sound, which also was promised to me, came louder now, grew closer. Howton heard it and knew instantly what it was.

"Chinook!" he shouted.

Suddenly it seemed to fill the sky above us. It was forty foot long, rotors front and back glittering in the sun like dragonfly wings. From the opened rear hatch, a helmeted door gunner stretched flat along the door's edge, opened up with .50 caliber machine gun, strafing the climbing figures moving up the pyramid.

"Sweet Jesus! You beautiful sweet son of a bitch! Look at that baby!" said Howton, struggling to stand up tall in the water. My grip on his shoulder was firm despite my wound and kept him from moving.

Doctor Death smiled like a man who finds the hangman's noose is frayed.

In the distance, two other choppers appeared above the treetops. We were high enough, to see a large number of Marines moving toward the city from the West, coming up the river from the direction we had been traveling in.

Doctor Death laughed suddenly, with a edge of hysteria. "I think somebody up there likes us, cause he just saved our miserable asses! Goddamn Goddamn! Let's go Marines!"

The door gunner rained down death on all sides and we heard men screaming and the sound of bodies tumbling and crashing down the stone slopes of the pyramid.

The sound of running feet came to us and I turned and saw Hightower moving above us up on the highest platform of the pyramid. Another figure, bent double with pain, the General, appeared next to him.

They did not see us, their eyes were on the huge Army Chinook, faces lit with exultation, feeling the same wild surge of hope that Howton and Doctor Death felt.

The dragon reached up with one mighty claw and broke the back of the war machine. The fuel tanks burst and the doorgunner burst into flame and was blown out of the hatch, spiraling down toward the General and Hightower.

Callard struggled to rise up out of the water, eyes wide, staring up at the high platform.

The General and Hightower screamed in frustration and rage, looking around futilely for the source of the rocket that took out the chopper.

Callard saw the dragon rear up on his hind legs, jaws snapping, taking a hungry bite out of the flaming sacrifice. He was a man who now saw things.

He turned to look at me.

"You see what you see," I said and that was the answer.

There was the scrape of metal against stone, a gasp of exertion and two of the enemy came over the edge of the stone ledge.

My hands tensed on Howton and Doctor Death's shoulders and I spoke to them, "Now I sacrifice you to the dragon!"

My arms tightened, the old weapons of bone and muscle, and my hands gripped with the strength of the great eagle.

They were strong and they wanted to live but I was stronger.

I thrust Howton's head under the black water first for he was the weaker of the two. And then dragged under Doctor Death who fought like fury itself, the powerful muscles resisting with all their strength. But I stood in the ancient eagle's desert who's strength none can resist.

"Get behind me Callard, if you want to live."

The two soldiers had their weapons raised when Callard thrashed in the water, plunging behind me. He moved unhesitatingly, unquestioningly. I had made him see the dragon and in some small way he belonged now forever to me.

The water boiled, as two strong bodies fought against me, fought for life. The brown-skinned soldiers fired together and the bullets met in my body.

"Stay behind me," I gasped.

The faces of the enemy were faces I could not see. Hightower shouted from above.

They fired again and I tasted blood. Hard things tore at me like the angry beaks of predatory birds.

Doctor Death thrust with his legs against the stone bottom of the pool, thrashed my body with his fists, tore at me in a frenzy to be free, to breathe.

The enemy had all the time in the world to shoot Howton and Doctor Death, to kill us all. But they concentrated on me. The two drowning men, dying, were no threat. The Indian and the man cowering behind him were target enough.

Howton's hands tore at mine, trying to dislodge my grip. He was weakening first.

There was a metallic chatter from above, and I looked up. Hightower was firing down at the enemy soldiers, not at us. Perhaps he had a final moment of humanity. It was not for me to know. The blast drove the enemy soldiers out and off the edge of the pyramid, screaming to their deaths.

I would have been grateful but he saved nothing. I looked up at him but could not see him. The dragon struck. Callard saw it for me. Something took an angry bite out of the back of Hightower's head, and he went down like a legless doll.

The General was still up there too, still alive, badly wounded but alive.

Callard's hands came around me from behind, seizing me by the neck. "You bastard! They're drowning!"

"Yes. I give them in sacrifice to the dragon!" I swung my head back suddenly and smashed it against Callard's face.

Callard's hands fell away, and he moved, thrashing around in the water, trying to get in front of me.

He saw my eyes and he went still in the water.

"Remember what you saw moving along the river," I said and he did not move. His face was a mask of pain and confusion and horror.

Howton's hands slid away from mine, his back arched, his shoulder shook one final time, and then he was still, drifting softly against my side.

Life still burned furiously in Doctor Death. His hands dug into my sides, his legs leaped and bucked, trying to take his head up out of the water.

With Howton gone, my strength grew and held him all the harder beneath the black water.

"Why kill them now? Why?"

"I am not a killer of men," I said. "Life is sacred."

Now Doctor Death's struggles dimmed, the magnificent body that had carried him this far in life, now betrayed him. His legs barely moved now, the great neck no longer pushed against my hand. There was a final spasm and a shudder passed through the great body and then he too was gone. In the embrace of the dragon.

"Are they dead?"

"I have taught them the meaning of death."

I pulled their heads above the water and moved toward the edge where the stone steps led up out of the sacrificial pool, dragging their lifeless bodies along with me.

"I'm cold," said Callard, wrapping his arms around himself, shivering. "I'm freezing."

"The sun can not warm this water. It freezes with the icy breath of the dragon!" I said and went up the stone steps, dragging my twin burden.

Callard came up out of the water too, his face blue with the cold despite the hot inferno of the sun overhead.

He kept his eyes averted, not looking at their bodies until he was out of the water. He stood with his back turned to me, looking out over the ruined city. He knew the dragon was up there, knew that if he looked up he might see it again and he had already seen too much.

I laid them out on their backs. Their sightless eyes stared at the sky.

The dragon came down from the high place. I chanted the ancient chants and he fed upon the sacrifices and was content to be honored in the ancient way. He passed beyond us, moved down toward the combat, at the base of his shrine. The Marines, advancing into the city, weapons aflame with sun-driven death, the enemy retreating, trapped in the stone labyrinth of the city, caught in daylight which was not when they held sway over this land, did not see the dragon. He feasted and passed among them and went away, slaked and fed, well content with battle's delicious red harvest.

The Marines came on, killing everything and everyone in their path, advancing relentlessly into the stone canyons, taking no prisoners, as dragons take none.

"The dragon has accepted his sacrifice."

I struck Howton in the chest. His ice cold body shuddered. I struck again so hard his whole body bounced against the cold stone of the temple. My hands were like canoe paddles, raking flat against his stilled heart. I beat the rhythm, the drum beat, each note of the chant thudding against his body.

Red welts appeared, row after row, and I played the hideous song, making each word right and sacred.

I seized him by the neck and dragged him upright, put my mouth against his and screamed as loud as the end of the world of night.

His chest heaved, his arms flailed, his eyes opened and closed and I let him fall. His body fell heavily against the stone and the pain made him cry out. Only the living know pain.

Callard screamed. It told me that he was looking at me now.

Doctor Death's body was as heavy as the world. My strength almost failed me as I lifted him, forcing the dead to sit up. I drove my fist against his heart, against the life that had gone. His flesh resisted my blows. The chants glanced off the armor of his death and fell into the wind.

So hard did I strive, so deeply did I chant, that some of my life seemed to leak away. I felt my own death, my own mortality but yet the chanting, the song, the sacred thing must not stop.

I put my mouth to his, afraid that I had failed. I screamed and his scream met mine and I fell away. The sudden fierceness, the huge stream that was his life, suddenly rushing back into its human house, came near annihilating me.

Doctor Death came back to life, fighting, his great fists striking me again and again, and then he turned away, awake but not awake, and was still. Content to just breathe.

I lay against the cold stone, like a beast robbed of all its senses.

Callard's hands were on me, touching me, probing in a doctor's way for the wounds he expected to find.

"You're not hit. You're not bleeding," said Doctor Callard and there was no surprise in his voice or uncertainty.

A man who has seen dragons can never be surprised again.

"Help me sit up," I asked, for my strength was gone and I was alone. Gently, like a father lifting his child, he helped me sit up.

"There is no why," said Callard, his voice frail. "The dead don't live again."

But his mind would not let it rest. "But they do live again! I could say the water was cold, very cold but nothing in nature here is like that, not in this place, but there's a word I could think of, what is it, hypothermia, yes, drowned people have been revived when found in icy water. No. No." There was an edge of hysteria in his voice. "No. No. There is no why."

"We must talk, you and I," I said. "There is much you have yet to do."

The sounds of combat, automatic rifle fire, the crump crump of mortar fire and heavy roar of .50 caliber machine guns from the support helicopters began to lessen.

Callard shook his head. "I don't want to know anything."

He turned his back on me and walked away. Howton was on his back, wracked with pain, awake but sick. Doctor Death sat up under his own power, hands in fists, breathing in ragged gasps like a runner who has run until he drops.

He stood over them, looking at them. Then he bent down and began to examine them. He muttered to himself, opening their eyes, putting his head to their chest, taking their pulse which was ragged but steady. And then suddenly he turned back and walked unsteadily to the edge of the platform, looking down on the slaughter in the city below. The sides of the pyramid and the dark galleries and courtyards were littered with the bodies of the dead and dying.

"When they are awake, when they know themselves again, they will be hurt and broken. Their spirits must learn to fly again. The war must be over for them. I did not save them to send them back to war. The war is over for them. Do you understand?"

"No."

"I am a shaman. A healer. Like you I save lives. I see things. That is our strength."

"And our curse," said Callard looking at a world almost too awful to live in.

Callard stood there on the edge, unmoving, thinking thoughts he did not want to think. I did not disturb him. I looked up at the high platform. The General was moving away, using Hightower's rifle as a crutch, starting the long descent back to the war and to his world and to its comfortable horrors.

"There's not much I can do," said Callard. "I'm tired. I'm just so tired."

"Will you help?"

"Hightower is dead but the General isn't. You don't really think he's going to let them live do you?"

The General stopped and looked back in our direction.

The whick whick of a helicopter and the sudden violence of wind from its blades went across our bodies like a flail. The ship spun in the air, the door gunner leaned out, saw our motionless bodies over the barrel of his .50 caliber machine gun. We seemed non-threatening and he had time to see us for what we were and did not fire at us. The helicopter arrowed up, spinning and the doorgunner picked off some enemy soldiers climbing the tower of Shiva to our left.

The General shouted, his cry coming down to us in the wind and raised his rifle and hailed the chopper, his voice full of fierce pride and longing.

The doorgunner saw the gun come up, hit the levers full tilt and the burst of .50 caliber bullets cut the General almost into. It blew him back a full ten feet, and his head slammed against the great stone face of his true enemy, the father of dragons.

"The General walks with his ancestors. The dragon eats his bones," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"His death has made the world a better place," I said.

Callard looked at me, the ghost of a smile on his face. It was not a face that was good to look at.

"Heatstroke," he said suddenly.

"What?"

"They're sick. Considering what they went through, if their minds are intact, their going to have the symptoms of heat exhaustion, which I can push out to heat stroke. Right now they are too weak to ambulate but not unconscious."

"How will this help?"

"I'll tag them as chronic high fever. Mark it above 106 degrees, five days duration and they have their ticket home," said Callard.

"I do not understand," I said.

"Fever that high for that long, that's irreversible brain damage. They'll be med-evaced to the rear, then Stateside and out on a medical discharge. The war will be over for them. I guarantee it."

"Do that. You are a man of great heart. Of those I traveled with, you were the man closest to my own heart."

"I hated your frigging guts from the time I met you, for what you did to Leslie Ann. It doesn't make sense that you'd feel that way," said Callard with what might have been a real note of regret in his voice.

"You are not a killer. And you love your wife and child, such a man is a man forever going home. I would wish to be just such a man."

Callard looked troubled. "You think Howton and Doctor Death will agree to this? I mean, they're going to have to fake it a bit if we're gonna pull this off."

"Tell them it is what I wish, that it is the fulfillment of the promise that took the weapons out of their hands. Tell them it is my last wish."

"Listen, about Leslie? I still want to.."

"Never speak of her. It is forbidden. You must have your life back." My voice was firm. "Her name must no longer be in this world."

"But.." He saw the look in my eyes and did not finish the sentence. He seemed to be staring inside at something deep within himself and it spoke to him and his shoulders slumped and he let it go.

"The only sure way to get Howton and Doctor Death to cooperate is to ask them yourself."

"I do not travel with you."

"Where are you going?"

"I will stay where I am."

"Will I ever see you again?"

"Never."

"Howton and Doctor Death, if this is what they want, if this ticket home is something they owe you, they'll want to thank you."

"Some day they will see me."

"There's a lot of things I want to ask you."

"No. You know too much already."

"I saw you shot and yet there is no wound," said Callard and there was a hint of fear in his voice.

"You see things."

"Things that are not there?" Callard shook his head. "You're right. I don't want to know anything."

I turned then and began to walk up toward the high place. Each step was a thousand miles. I did not look back at them. Our journeys were in different places now.

I knelt in front of the great stone face of the dragon. I chanted. The song rose up on the wind. Howton and Doctor Death and Leslie Ann and Callard, the man who was going home. Their names sang in my heart.

They would come for me. I thanked the four directions for giving me life. I thanked the wind for making my heart useful. I thanked my enemies for the chance to be brave in the world.

I am in my place and they will see me.

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

Howton and Doctor Death were still in uniform but in name only. Their discharge papers were tangled up somewhere and they got bored in the VA hospital. Neither one was sure who thought of it first but they both agreed it was worth doing, in fact, had to be done. They owed a debt and before they started their lives over, there were things they wanted to know, questions that burned them for an answer.

Their nights were full of nightmares, their days were no more comforting. In some ways, they were still back there in Nam, and everything back here in the real world filled them with alarm and sullen dread.

Howton had it worse than Doctor Death. Something dark and awful was always pulling him underwater and he woke up screaming because he could never ever in this dream see quite what it was and that was the real terror.

The night screams, the cold sweats, all had one good effect. It was consistent with the medical condition Howton was supposed to be suffering from so he had nothing to fake.

Doctor Death didn't bother trying to fake anything. He was too big and too unsettling for anyone to bother challenging him. One look at his eyes, and whatever question any doctor had, stopped right there once and for all.

Doctor Death dreamed about things too. Some of them were nightmares, he called them the shrieking freakings, but that went with the territory. What he did not understand, was why he so often dreamed of the dead nurse, Leslie Ann Burton. It seemed that his shoulders were always hunched, his knees were tense with the weight and night after dark night, he walked through his nightmares, his own revisitation of war with the frail body of the woman on his back.

There was something else too, something they both couldn't put words to, couldn't quite describe, that kept picking at them, like a carrion eater worrying a corpse.

It was like they had made a long journey but could never hope to arrive because they somehow had missed the end of the journey. They felt cheated, because they were hurt, unconscious when the something that was real big happened. They knew right down to the bone, big important things happened then but they came away with little memory of that last day at the place of the dragons.

They never doubted the other thing. If anybody came home from that war, it was the Indian, Deathseeker.

Callard's jumbled, terse version of where Deathseeker went, what actually happened to them, how that whole strange day ended, just didn't sound right to them.

Howton knew where Deathseeker was supposed to come from and through a friend of a friend got a jeep from the base motor pool. Technically they were confined to the hospital so this little excursion made them AWOL.

They drove all night and most of the next day.

Exhausted, they fell asleep at the edge of the desert and woke up in Vietnam, white tracers coming down out of the sky at them like something obscenely beautiful.

The scrambled for weapons they didn't have, frantic in the jeep.

Doctor Death figured it out first.

"Shooting stars!" he said. "It's just goddamn shooting stars!"

They looked up at the night sky and felt foolish for getting spooked.

"The time there is a shooting star with my name on it, I quit," said Doctor Death. "Let's get there."

Howton started the jeep engine, slammed it into gear and they roared on through the night and into the broad mesas and high desert.

The Indian with the knife scarred face, was sitting on the discarded back seat of a '59 Chevy. It was tilted crazily against the front wall of a battered mobile home with busted windows and flaking paint.

He pulled out a cheap bottle of wine and did not stir when the jeep pulled up in front of him in a cloud of dust.

"You must be Horseboy," said Doctor Death.

The man tilted the bottle, took a long pull at it, said nothing, barely even looked at them.

"We're looking for somebody," said Doctor Death, standing up and leaning over the windshield. "Back in the village, they said you're the only one who knows the way."

The Indian with the scar just didn't move.

"Can you help us?" said Howton, adding his voice to that of Doctor Death.

"Some things aren't worth finding," said the man, staring at the wine bottle. "Some things can't be found."

"You know who we're looking for. There were two of them, brothers. One of them bought the farm, and one of them made it back from Vietnam. We're looking for the survivor. Deathseeker was his name. Can you take us to him?" said Doctor Death.

"Sounds crazy. Nobody with a brother living out there," said Horseboy. "You're wasting your time."

"He didn't make it back? Is that possible?" said Howton. "Damn!"

The Indian laughed. "He just makes you look foolish." He didn't seem to care that they didn't understand what he was saying.

"Is Deathseeker alive!" shouted Doctor Death, frustrated, suddenly getting angry.

"I don't know who you're talking about. There is a man up there on that mesa," said the Indian pointing off in the distance with a sly knowledgeable grin. "But he don't have a brother, never had one. If I was you, I'd just turn around right now and go back the way you came. Ain't nothing up there for you."

Howton and Doctor Death exchanged a puzzled look.

"He's a friend of ours," said Howton, trying another tack. "If he knew we were here, I think he'd want to see us."

"Big friends, huh? Don't even know the man's name! Hah!" The Indian spat in the dust and swallowed another gulp of wine.

"If we pay you, would you take us up there?" asked Howton, sounding almost humble.

"I guess that's better than threatening to shoot me if I don't take you up there," said the Indian. Horseboy fingered the scar on his face, and seemed to be trying to make up his mind about something.

"You pay me, I'll take you up there. But it won't work. You'll be talking to someone who isn't where you think he is when you try to take him out of there. He never leaves that place. You'll find out!" said Horseboy.

The Indian finished the last of the wine and tossed the empty bottle over his shoulder. It crashed against the side of the mobile home and shattered.

He moved slowly toward the jeep and jumped over the rear tire and crawled into the back seat. "Gonna cost you 50 bucks. I'm a class A guide, you bet."

"We're not trying to take him anywhere," said Howton, shifting gears. "We just want to see him."

"Last big shot military guy through here, used hand cuffs. Bout laughed my butt off, watching him stare at that useless pair of handcuffs, talking real big and tough to an empty seat. He thought he saw somebody, thought he had a

prisoner! The Man caught him a handful of empty. It ain't like it wasn't the first time either! Son of a bitching funny!"

Howton and Doctor Death turned and looked back at Horseboy.

"Is he having us on?" asked Doctor Death.

Howton shrugged. "Can't tell. I don't think he likes white people."

Doctor Death snorted, "Well at least he's getting something right."

They drove up the gully washed trail in silence.

The road was badly rutted, boulder strewn. It bounced them around like beads in a box. The trail seemed to wind around and around on itself, like a snake trying to touch its tail.

"I know who you are!" The voice came from a high rock to their left.

Startled, Howton slammed on the brakes, and they shuddered to a stop.

A white man, arms braced across his chest, face darkly hued with too much sun, stared down at them from a rock ledge. He had a dead deer slung over one shoulder, blood dripping down the front of a torn khaki shirt of Army issue.

"It's OK to bring them up. Never mind getting them lost, it isn't necessary this time," said the man who seemed to know about them, even seemed as if they were expected.

"You sure about that? I mean they got the damn uniforms on," muttered Horseboy, not sounding convinced.

"He said they would come," said the man. "You take the jeep back to your place, Horseboy. They can walk it from here."

"Who the hell are you?" asked Howton, finding the man vaguely familiar but unable to place him. Howton regarded Horseboy grimly, feeling no inclination to surrender the jeep to the surly Indian that had brought them there.

"Before I got killed in Vietnam, I met you once and my name then was supposed to be Arven. But I'm not sure what my name is now. It's one of those things I haven't decided yet."

"What do you mean you got killed?" said Doctor Death who had himself seen a world of strange.

"The Army thinks I got killed, so does the CIA Who am I to argue with them?" The man laughed bitterly.

"Get out of the jeep and walk," said the man and he turned and began to walk away. "He's waiting."

A solitary hawk rode the wind above them and disappeared in the blue of the sky. The wind blew down from the top of the mesa and the sun burned fire bright in the sky. These were things as real as the figure of the man with the dead deer, walking away in the silence and the desert heat.

"So whose body was that in the raft? I mean Arven's the guy who was supposed to have died in the supply raft, right?" asked Howton, who just couldn't quite figure it. "If he didn't die there, why is he here?"

There was only earth and sky around them and there was no answer there.

They stared after the retreating figure as it moved away from them on a narrow trail that ran toward the top of another mesa.

Slowly, reluctantly, they got out of the jeep. Horseboy jumped into the front seat, turned the engine on, and began backing down the trail. He did not look back at them.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come," said Howton, staring at the bleak and uninviting rock slopes of the mesa.

"You heard him. He said he's waiting for us. Let's go," said Doctor Death.

They went up the trail in silence, lost in their own thoughts.

The trail got narrower and steeper until climbing it became a real effort. They reached the end of the trail, had just a few final feet to go and they would be on top of the mesa.

Howton suddenly got panicky. He stopped dead, blocking the trail.

Doctor Death stared at him in alarm, tried to take his arm but Howton shrugged him off, motioned him to go ahead.

Doctor Death stepped past him, started to climb the last few feet and then looked back to see how Howton was doing. He offered a hand to help him up.

"Are you coming?"

"I can't!" Howton looked sick, face white, trembling.

"You got the shakes man? What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know! I don't know. Maybe it's that thing in the water. Maybe it's up there, waiting for me!"

"C'mon man. That's crazy. It's a million miles gone and in another life!"

"I don't know! I got this bad feeling!" said Howton and he looked haunted.

They just stood there, not moving, feeling the wind and the sun and the sky arching over their head like the hand of heaven.

"There's no jungle here," said Doctor Death, facing into the wind. "No dragons."

Howton looked up at the sky. A faint hope seemed to rise in him. As if something might be up there, riding on feathered wings, he could believe in.

"I don't know about that thing under the water. I don't feel it here but maybe you do. But you know what I think? I mean, I think she's up there," said Doctor Death with a look almost of hope on his face, as if he stared at things on the mesa he could not yet see.

"Who?"

"Leslie Ann, the dead nurse only she isn't dead. Cause he saved her just like he saved you and me."

"Let's go back," said Howton and the thing was reaching out for him again.

"Get yourself together," said Doctor Death. "Cause you don't go up there with me, this war ain't never gonna be over. It's just gonna keep right on chasing us!"

Howton wiped his mouth nervously, tried to straighten his back. Sweat beaded on his forehead and he looked up into Doctor Death's eyes. He took hold of his outstretched hand and Doctor Death pulled him up after him.

They stepped out onto the mesa.

Howton saw the solitary figure of a young Indian man he once knew. His name was Lifeseeker and he was supposed to be dead but he wasn't. He had a huge fierce eagle riding on his shoulder and he smiled and lifted his hand in welcome.

Doctor Death saw a young Indian man who once made him throw his gun away. His face in the bright desert sun was just like he remembered it. It was good to see Deathseeker again. He had made it back from Vietnam.

Leslie Ann stood next to him, her arm encircled his shoulders in a loving embrace and the pain that he remembered in her face was gone. She had one strange spot of white in her hair but she looked somehow beautiful.

A weight seemed to lift from Doctor Death's back.

The young Indian spoke, "My name is He Seeks Life and Death."

Howton saw a woman who had not been there before.

Doctor Death saw an eagle.

"Now you see me."

And it was the beginning of the end of the war.