

# **THE JUNKYARD DOGS**

## **Novels by David Sherman**

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*Main Force Assault*  
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*Onslaught*  
*Rally Point*  
*Gulf Run*

*The Junkyard Dogs*

*The Hunt*

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## **Novels with Dan Cragg**

	Starfist
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<i>Steel Gauntlet</i>	<i>Blood Contact</i>
<i>Technokill</i>	<i>Hangfire</i>
<i>Kingdom's Swords</i>	<i>Kingdom's Fury</i>
<i>Lazarus Rising</i>	<i>A World of Hurt</i>
<i>Flashfire</i>	<i>Firestorm</i>
<i>Wings of Hell</i>	

Starfist: Force Recon  
*Backshot*  
*Pointblank*  
*Recoil*

Star Wars: A Clone Wars Novel  
*Jedi Trial*

# THE JUNKYARD DOGS

A Novel  
by

DAVID SHERMAN

**WordCaster Novels**  
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Fort Lauderdale, FL

For  
Bob Patrikios and Rob Johnson  
Once upon a time, a couple of  
Badass CAP Marines

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The book you are holding in your hands is a novel, a work of fiction. I made it up. It's about two little known aspects of the Vietnam War: The US Marine Corps' Combined Action Program and the Central Intelligence Agency's Phoenix Program. The two programs have no connection that I know of. I served in a CAP, and never had any contact with Phoenix. But over the years, I have heard many rumors, innuendos, and accusations of a close connection between them. I've met a couple hundred or more CAP veterans over the years, and have only once heard one say he had any contact with Phoenix. In that instance, he said his CAP provided security for a team of American agents and Vietnamese police who went into a village to arrest an alleged high ranked Viet Cong cadre. Since these rumors, innuendos, accusations persist despite the lack of any evidence that I've ever seen or heard, I wondered how some CAP Marines might have worked with Phoenix. *The Junkyard Dogs* is what I came up with. How realistic is this story? Well, the method of operation and details of daily life of the US Marines and South Vietnamese Popular Forces of Combined Action Platoon Whiskey 8 are accurate—that's the way CAPS lived and operated. They are based on my own experience, that of other CAP veterans I know, and on the official record. The method of operation and details of the functioning of the CIA and Project Phoenix, on the other hand, are based on bits of information from a very few people, the little that I've seen published on the project, rumor, innuendo, and the secrecy that still shrouds Phoenix. Remember, this is a novel, a fiction. I made it up.



## CHAPTER ONE

Socrates stopped when Captain Hook said, "I'm dropping out here. Charlie's coming and I want a piece of his ass." He turned and peered hard at the dimly made out shadow in the darkness under the trees. It was still full night then, false dawn hadn't lightened the eastern horizon, and the moon had set, leaving only starlight filtering through the leaves to show where they were. Three of the five Popular Forces who'd spent the night on patrol with the three Marines had already dropped out and gone home.

"What makes you think that?" He asked after several seconds.

The shadow bunched in a shrug. Socrates looked around, he didn't need any light to know where he was though, he'd run enough night patrols in Khung Toi and walked the villages' hamlets often enough during the day to know exactly where they were. Fifteen feet away was the turn off to the skivvy house.

"Bullshit," Socrates said. "You just want to get your pipes reamed." Another shadow, dimmer because it was farther away, but easier to see because it was moving, was Sneaky Pete, jittering.

Captain Hook didn't say anything.

The corporal they called "Socrates" let the silence hang for a few seconds, just long enough to remind Captain Hook who was running this patrol. But the night was at its end, he thought, and they were on their way back to Fort Cragg, time for a few hours sleep before the day got too hot. "Boom-boom one for me," he said, then signaled Lim to lead off, he and the two remaining PFs would return alone. Sneaky Pete too, if he wanted. It was safe now, too close to dawn. Any bad guys in the area were gone by now, headed for safety.

Sneaky Pete stood uncertain for a moment. Did Captain Hook really think he could catch Charlie in the Junkyard at dawn? Or was Socrates right? Socrates was smart and could see through a lot of bullshit. Did Captain Hook really just have a hardon and want some early morning nooky? Sure sounded good to him.

Captain Hook didn't even glance at the skivvy house cutoff when Socrates and the two remaining members of Khung Toi's Popular Forces platoon headed down the path. He headed back the way they'd come, toward the river, and ducked through a break in the hedge that

lined the path. Sneaky Pete cast a regretful glance in the direction of the skivvy house, then followed.

A half hour later it was light enough to see. Not see a lot, not see clearly; but bright enough to make things out. Captain Hook rested easy, squatting over his heels, leaning back against a tree. His arms were draped across his knees, his shotgun held loose in his hands. He looked relaxed except for his eyes, his eyes never relaxed; they were eyes few men could look into for long. He sat motionless and ignored the itch low on his side, just above his belt where his meat packer's hook hung. He breathed silently through parted lips; his face was devoid of expression.

Sneaky Pete hunkered a few feet away, squatted behind his heels instead of over them. His eyes glistened and a twisted smile curled his thin lips. He looked like he could turn manic in an instant. The knuckles on the hand wrapped around the pistol grip of his M16 were white from the tightness of his grip.

The night screechers had just quieted into their nests and burrows, the day squawkers and buzzers were raucously greeting the rising sun. Spots of dim, dawn light showed through the brush screen in front of them. Not enough to show them the path on the other side of the screen, just enough to let them detect movement. Sneaky Pete looked at Captain Hook. He didn't wonder what made his buddy so certain Charlie was going to come along soon. He never wondered about that, that was something he knew he'd never understand. It was enough for him Captain Hook had decided to stop and set this impromptu ambush. Anything Captain Hook did was all right with Sneaky Pete.

Sneaky Pete was stiff from squatting too long. He leaned back more, put more of his weight against the tree, tried to ease the pressure on his ankles. Captain Hook responded to the slight noise only with his eyes, those eyes fixed on Sneaky Pete, told him to be quiet or leave. Sneaky Pete cringed. *Five more minutes*, Sneaky Pete thought, *then we can go, people are getting up now*. Behind him he heard human sounds starting in the background, throats clearing, mothers yelling at children, neighbors good-morning each other, the flip-flop of sandaled feet heading toward the river. Dawn in Nghia Toi hamlet.

The squawkers kept squawking, the buzzers kept buzzing; birds and insects only stop their noises when something unexpected comes along. They expected people to come along the paths near the hamlets in the morning. The light flickering through the screen suddenly flickered black as well as blue and yellow and green, someone was



going past. Sneaky Pete wasn't sure he saw Captain Hook move, he knew he didn't hear him, but suddenly the other man was half squatting, half kneeling, the shotgun held pointing at the path.

Captain Hook's head bobbed slightly five times as he counted the figures trot-shuffling past. He twisted partway to the right, brought the shotgun to his shoulder, and squeezed the trigger. The shotgun's muzzle flash strobed away the remaining darkness behind the hedge, the blast sent the squawkers screaming away. In one swift movement, Captain Hook shifted his point of aim and pumped another shell into the chamber. He squeezed the trigger and the muzzle flash strobed again.

He fired so fast the men on the path had no time to react before the second shot. Now came a scream of agony and a confused, angry cry. Sneaky Pete rolled onto his knees, his numb feet and ankles forgotten, and let loose with sprays of bullets from his M16.

Captain Hook fired a third time, then lowered the butt of his shotgun from his shoulder and listened. The noise of Sneaky Pete changing magazines was the only sound he heard. The birds were gone, the insect buzzing stopped, the rising people in the hamlet behind them were stunned into silence.

A low moan came from the path.

"Cover me," Captain Hook said. He slid two shells into the magazine of the shotgun, then stood and broke through the hedge, sliding another shell into the shotgun as he did.

Sneaky Pete hobbled forward on his knees to see more clearly. He didn't try to stand. Now that the shooting was over he felt the ache in his feet and ankles, he wasn't sure he could stand.

Four bodies sprawled grotesquely on the path, three dead. The wounded man lay supine, arching his back against the pain in his chest. His face twisted and sweat flooded over his forehead.

Captain Hook ignored the wounded man. He gathered the weapons and put them aside; two assault rifles, one American carbine, one Russian carbine, one handgun, three hand grenades. Next he frisked the corpses for documents. One body lay on its stomach, Captain Hook had to flip it over. He sank his meat packer's hook into the body's side to do it; if the man was alive and faking, there was no way he wouldn't react to the hook slicing into his side. Only then did he turn his attention to the wounded man. He tore the man's shirt open and dispassionately looked at the blood oozing from the fist-sized hole in the right side of his chest, blood with bubbles that grew, popped,

subsided. Two bullets from Sneaky Pete's rifle had hit close together in his back, they tumbled and tore out gouts of muscle and lung and shattered bone.

A small smile creased Captain Hook's face when he said, "You're dead," and put his hand on the wound. "Sucking chest wound. Couple more minutes." The man's back-arching and face-twisting were already weaker. Captain Hook heard something on the trail ahead of him. He wiped his hand on the man's shirt front, then stood and looked at the women who were approaching hesitantly. He didn't see the last spasm or the flinching of the eyes as the man at his feet died.

"You kill them," the oldest of the women said, looking first at the corpses, then at Captain Hook.

The younger women didn't look at Captain Hook; one looked at the bodies, one at the trail at her feet, the third at the hedge along the path.

Captain Hook nodded.

The bush behind him rustled and Sneaky Pete came out. He limped slightly, full circulation hadn't yet returned to one of his feet. He shook that foot and walked to Captain Hook's side, the limp eased with each step. "We killed them," he said.

Captain Hook nodded again.

"Vee Cee?" the oldest woman asked.

"Vee Cee," Captain Hook said.

Now the young woman looking at the hedge turned her face to him, she tried for blank but a trace of worry showed. She knew what Captain Hook always wanted after he killed a man. She wished at least he'd wash his hands first.

Sneaky Pete grinned at the taller man. "I guess Socrates was right. You wanna get your pipes reamed, right pano?"

Captain Hook didn't answer him. "Let's go," he said to Three Marbles, which was what the Americans called the young woman looking at him.

"Five dollah MPC," said the older woman. "Pay now."

"Pay later," Captain Hook said. He brushed past her and took Three Marbles by the arm to lead her to the skivvy house.

"Me too," Sneaky Pete said. "Who's ready?" He looked at the other two young woman. They looked at the older woman.

"Pay now." The older woman stood in the middle of the path, blocking it. She held a hand out for the money.

"Ah, come on, Mama-san Joy. I'll pay you later, samee-same

Captain Hook." He tried to step around her but she shifted and stayed in his way.

"Ten dollah MPC. You pay Cap'n Hoo-kah," she said. The top of her head only came up to his chest, but she wasn't intimidated by Americans. Especially not this American. "Pay now."

Sneaky Pete grimaced. He didn't mind paying for both, but he wasn't sure Captain Hook would pay him back later. Then again, sometimes Captain Hook paid for him when he was broke. Sometimes. Once or twice anyway, he did. He fished his wallet out of his shirt pocket and carefully fingered a few bills out of it; one five dollar and five one dollar pieces of the monopoly-sized Military Payment Certificates.

Mama-san Joy grabbed it from his hand. "Sue-sue," she snapped at one of the young women.

The one called Sue-sue nodded and turned back toward the skivvy house with Sneaky Pete following quickly until he was close enough to put a proprietary hand on her haunch.

Mama-san Joy glanced once more at the bodies, then gestured at the remaining young woman. The two of them picked up the weapons and headed toward the skivvy house. Mama-san Joy wished the Americans wouldn't leave the bodies on the path the way they sometimes did. And it was just plain stupid to leave the weapons laying where somebody could pick them up and return them to the VC.

The sound of boots running toward him from the direction of Fort Cragg stopped Sneaky Pete outside the skivvy house. He stood indecisive for a moment, bouncing from one foot to the other. The boots told him it was Marines coming his way, but not which ones. He already paid for this, it wasn't fair if he didn't get laid. If it was Socrates it was probably okay, same if it was Submarine or even Mad Greek. But Sergeant Slaughter wouldn't care he already paid. Inside the skivvy house he heard rustling noises, Captain Hook and Three Marbles dropping trou to get it on. Sergeant Slaughter wouldn't fuck with Captain Hook, he'd wait until he was through because Captain Hook just might shoot somebody for messing with him while he was getting his pipes reamed. Sneaky Pete knew Captain Hook's shotgun wasn't more than a few inches from his hand, hell it was probably in his hand—and a shell was in the chamber and the safety was off. But if Sergeant Slaughter came in and found Sneaky Pete and wanted to find out what happened, he'd probably grab him by the stacking swivel and yank him out, no matter how close he was. But damn, he'd already

paid. If he didn't get it now it was blown money. Mama-san Joy didn't believe in pay now, play later any more than she advanced credit. He teetered from foot to foot, knowing he didn't have time to get his rocks off before whoever it was showed up, knowing if it was Sergeant Slaughter he'd never get what he paid for.

The running boots pounded closer, then half a dozen Marines and a few PFs burst into view around the bend in the trail. A grin shot across Sneaky Pete's face when he saw the first was Socrates.

"What's going on," Socrates shouted between gasps.

Sneaky Pete didn't answer, just grinned and waved at him and started to push Sue-sue through the door when another shout stopped him and dashed the grin from his face.

"What the fuck's going on here, Sneaky Pete?" It was Sergeant Slaughter.

Sneaky Pete turned. "We zapped some gooks," he said.

Then Sergeant Slaughter was on him, standing toe to toe, staring up into his eyes from so close the breath snorting from his nose fanned the bare "V" at the top of Sneaky Pete's chest. It was a strange picture, the bantam sergeant standing half a head shorter than the other man and glaring up at his face, yet seeming to tower over him. "You just laid some Vee Cee low and now you want to get laid, is that it?" he demanded. Socrates stood next to the CAP commander, an expression on his face that Sneaky Pete couldn't read, though it looked like disgust. Sneaky Pete didn't know what Socrates had to be disgusted about, he wasn't the one who paid and might not get what he paid for.

Sneaky Pete shrugged weakly. "Well, Captain Hook, he, ah..."

Sergeant Slaughter cut him off. "Captain Hook's a crazy fucker. You should know better, have some respect for the dead." He nodded at the skivvy house. "He in there now?"

Sneaky Pete nodded.

"How many were there? Show me."

Sneaky Pete slumped, he wasn't going to get what he paid for. Hell, an early morning fuck was always good, especially right after he'd spent the whole goddam night in an ambush. Relaxed him so he could get to sleep and stay there for a while despite the heat of the day. How come Socrates didn't say something to Sergeant Slaughter, let him go inside and boom-boom Sue-Sue?

Sergeant Slaughter looked at Mama-san Joy and Poontang as though seeing them for the first time. "You shits even got yourselves native gun bearers, huh," he said to Sneaky Pete. "Or did you souvenir

them the weapons for some boom-boom?"

"Nah, we, ah," his voice trailed off, he didn't know what to say about forgetting the weapons, how to tell Sergeant Slaughter the two women were just policing up after them without being told to, making sure the captured weapons weren't taken by whoever came along for the bodies.

"Sneaky Pete, sometimes you're so damn dumb I don't know how you ever got into my Marine Corps." He spat to the side of the trail. "Sometimes you're so damn dumb I bet even the Army would reject you. Beast, relieve the ladies," he said to one of the Marines who had come with him.

A huge man stepped to the women. He was barrel-chested, boar-hog bellied, his head seemed to grow directly out of his shoulders without benefit of neck; he looked like the kind of man others call a knuckle-dragger. At first glance a wicked scar seemed to slash across the middle of his face. The second glance showed it wasn't a scar, it was a grin. He reached out a hand that looked big enough to pick up both women at the same time and accepted all four rifles. He used his other hand to stuff the grenades inside his shirt and tuck the pistol into his web belt.

"Fucking show-off," Sneaky Pete muttered.

"Killer Kowalski, stay here and bring Captain Hook along when he's through," Sergeant Slaughter said. Then to Sneaky Pete, "Show me."

Sneaky Pete led the rest of them to where they ambushed the VC.

When they got there Sergeant Slaughter looked at the weapons Beast carried. "Lot of fire power for only three men," he said.

Sneaky Pete looked at the bodies, confused. "There was five of them," he said softly.

"Be cool about it, spread out," Sergeant Slaughter said to his men, suddenly tense and alert. "They're probably real close."

The ten men rechecked weapons that didn't need rechecking, made sure they had rounds in their chambers and the safeties off. Doc Holliday drew his .44 and cocked the hammer.

"Where were you?" Socrates asked Sneaky Pete. They were his men, time he took charge of the situation.

"In here." Sneaky Pete broke through the hedge a few feet from where he and Captain Hook had come out of it. There were no breaks in it that hadn't been there before, if the bad guys had gone through this hedge, they did it where he and Captain Hook had come out and might

have left a booby trap—or somebody might be aiming a rifle at it. Socrates examined the mulch covering the soft dirt while Sneaky Pete watched for enemy. Socrates looked carefully, but didn't see sign of anybody coming through here since the two Marines came out.

Beast and Doc Holliday broke through the brush on the other side of the trail. Submarine and two of the PFs went down the trail toward Nghia Toi. Sergeant Slaughter stayed in the middle of the trail where he could control everybody if anyone made contact. The other PF stayed with him.

They didn't find any bad guys. But:

"Blood trail through there," Doc Holliday said when he and Beast came back. "Light one, looks like a last dribble from a corpse. We followed it as far as the river. Some scuff marks, too, like somebody dragged a body a little way."

"Did you see their boat?" Sergeant Slaughter asked.

Doc Holliday's expression said that was a dumb question. "Probably. I saw about thirty boats out there, going up and down the river and crossing it in both directions. One of them was probably the bad guys', but I couldn't tell which one. Everyone in the boats was in uniform." The Viet Cong uniform was the same black, pajama-like garments worn by the villagers.

Sergeant Slaughter's eyes fixed on Sneaky Pete. "You dumbass, don't you remember S2 wants us to secure all bodies? I told you that three days ago. Can't you remember anything I tell you?" "S2" was intelligence.

"Well, it was just me and Captain Hook," Sneaky Pete stammered. "Captain Hook, he," he looked at Captain Hook who had just arrived with Killer Kowalski, "well. I mean there was just the two of us." He squirmed.

"And you thought nobody would come looking to investigate the shooting so you left the bodies laying there."

Killer Kowalski snickered. Captain Hook didn't say anything, neither did his expression.

Sergeant Slaughter turned to Killer Kowalski. "I see he's finally through." Then to Socrates, "It was your men who bagged them. You police the three bodies that are left and bring them to Fort Cragg. Beast, Killer Kowalski, help them. I'll get on the horn to Company and somebody'll come and get them." He didn't say anything to Captain Hook.

Socrates looked at Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete and shook his

head. He reached behind himself for the folded poncho tucked under his cartridge belt. "Who else's got a poncho?" he asked. Captain Hook and Killer Kowalski each had one and got them out. Sneaky Pete acted like he was reaching for one too, maybe Socrates wouldn't notice he forgot to carry his poncho. They wrapped the three corpses. Socrates and Killer Kowalski carried one between them. Sneaky Pete staggered slightly under the end of the body he carried with Captain Hook. Beast casually tucked the third under his arm like a Sunday newspaper. They headed for the old French plantation house they used as a base.

## CHAPTER TWO

They rolled the bodies out of the ponchos and lined them up next to the bunker just inside the gate in the barbed wire perimeter fence, then covered them with a tarp. Beast dropped the body he was carrying and left.

"Hey, Baby-san," Socrates called to one of the half dozen children scampering around inside the wire, "lai dai," come here.

An eight-year-old looked up at him and ran over. "I not baby-san," the boy said stern-faced. "I big boy."

"Okay, Hien, you're a big boy," Socrates said. He looked down at the child and thought how he was about as big as a six-year-old American kid. "Take these, washee-washee." He handed his poncho to the boy and gestured at Captain Hook and Killer Kowalski to give theirs to the boy. Killer Kowalski handed his over and headed to the main house.

The boy's eyes opened wide at the blood on the ponchos. Then he seemed to notice the bodies for the first time. "Ooh, numba fucking one," he said. "You bang-bang boo-coo Vee Cee. I get Nancy, Fart, they help." He grabbed the ponchos and ran off to the other children who were playing quietly while they waited for the Marines who had come in from patrol earlier to wake up and come play with them. Two of the other children, a mid-sized girl and a small boy, detached themselves from the others and went with Hien to where two women were scrubbing uniforms at the wash table beyond the well. The other children looked indignant about not being picked to help, but only for a moment before returning to their play.

Socrates watched Hien for a moment, with Nancy and Fart, running with the bloody ponchos, drawing water from the well to clean them. He shook his head, wondering how they would grow up, their childhoods were so different from those of American children. Death was a companion, they even found it possible to join violent death into their games. Not playing some version of cops and robbers, or cowboys and Indians, like American kids did. The remnants of death



were simply other toys they played with. War was all they had ever known. He said to his men, "Rack time." Sneaky Pete grunted. Captain Hook was already halfway to the house. They followed him across the hard packed dirt in front of the brick plantation house.

Sergeant Slaughter was talking on the radio mounted on the shelf that ran the length of the wall under the windows on one side of the main entrance. He "overed," listened to the "out" on the other end, gave the headset to Motormouth, and turned to them. "Sneaky Pete, don't fall asleep too deep, I'm gonna wake you up when they come to get your bodies so you can tell them what happened."

Sneaky Pete groaned. Why wake him up? He'd been up all night. Besides, it was Captain Hook's ambush, he was the one who should tell what happened.

Socrates said, "Wake me too. I wasn't there, but they're my men." He added to Sneaky Pete, "I'll get Captain Hook there to talk to them."

"One more thing," Sergeant Slaughter said as they went through the side door to the room they used as a squadbay, "you've got a working party this afternoon. We gotta finish rebuilding that schoolhouse."

Socrates gave Sneaky Pete a look that said, Don't say it, don't even think it. Sneaky Pete stifled his groan.

The plantation house had nine rooms. The main room with the radio served as command hooch and classroom, and the Marines and PFs took their communal evening meal there. Two doors led out of the room on each side and four more in the back. One of the rooms on the left was Sergeant Slaughter's, the other was the corpsman's quarters and dispensary. One of the four rooms in the back was the kitchen—they all took turns in it except Sergeant Slaughter and Doc Holliday—two were a storage room and a spare. The fourth back room and the two on the right side were squadbays for each of the three fire teams. Because Socrates was senior fire team leader, he had first choice of rooms. He had picked the front corner room on the right, the one with the best ventilation; the better ventilation allowed him and his men more restful sleep. And it was on the west corner of the northwest-facing house, it took longer for the sun to shine into it in the morning, allowed them to sleep longer. Captain Hook was already in his skivvy drawers and on the wood-and-canvas cot under his mosquito net when the others entered the room.

"We probably have a few hours before anyone shows up from Company," Socrates said. "We can cop a few Zs before then." He lay

his rifle on the floor alongside his cot, where his hand would automatically fall on it if he had to wake up fighting, hung his cartridge belt off the edge of his ammo crate night table and his uniform on the clothes rack he'd built from scrap wood, tucked his boots neatly next to his Ho Chi Minh sandals, crawled under his mosquito net, pulled his beach towel over himself, and was out almost instantly. He nearly forgot to blow a kiss to the Ann-Margaret picture tacked to the wall next to the head of his cot. He didn't consciously notice the other photo tacked to the wall next to it.

The other photo was just starting to yellow, clipped from his high school newspaper; his mother had sent it to him. The photo showed him scoring the winning goal in the state soccer championship semifinal three years earlier. This year the school paper was running a series on past athletic heroes, a "where they are today" series. The photo caption said only that he was a Marine corporal, didn't say he was in Vietnam. There was no particular anti-war sentiment at the school, it just wasn't a popular subject and the students shied away from it. When he got the clipping he remembered how glad he had been during Boot Camp that he'd gone out for soccer in school. It was a demanding sport, one that required both close team work and individual initiative, the same as the Marine Corps did. It also required more endurance than the other team sports in the school's athletic program. It was good preparation for the Marines. Socrates hadn't been the most talented player on his team, but his coach said he had the biggest heart, played the hardest. That's why he was the middle halfback, the most demanding position on the team. The middle halfback didn't only play the center of the field, he played both sides and both ends as well. The middle halfback was the quarterback of the team, an extra defender, an extra scoring threat; he was the play maker. The children in the Junkyard wove small balls from palm fronds and used them to play kickball. Socrates was teaching some of them to play soccer with a larger woven ball.

The rising heat of the day woke Socrates before whoever was sent to collect the bodies and to debrief Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete arrived. He had a brief memory of having dreamed of playing in the championship semifinal game. Rising, he pulled on a pair of shorts and shuffled his feet into his sandals, grabbed a towel and his shaving kit, his rifle and cartridge belt, and headed to the wash table to brush his teeth. On the way, he rubbed his hand over his chin to see whether

he needed to shave. He decided he better if someone was coming, even though he didn't really need to. They were young men, these Marines of Whiskey 8, their average age was 19. Some of them had never shaved before Boot Camp. Few of them had beards heavy enough that if they were still civilians they'd have to shave every day. Most of them here only shaved every other day. Some only once a week.

A high bench with a bar above it to hang towels and field mirrors from was set up a few yards from the well, a few broad pans sat on the bench. This was the sink for shaving and tooth brushing and minor washing up. The shower was an equal distance on the other side of the well, it was a 55 gallon drum on stilts with a shower head spigot sticking out of its side near the bottom; a canvas sheet could be pulled around it for privacy. These were all on the northeast side of the house, halfway between it and the wire-and-wall defenses. The plantation house grounds had once been enclosed by a low brick wall. That wall was now gone in many places, crumbling in others; the French had also used it as a fort during their war with the Viet Minh. Immediately outside the wall was a barbed wire fence, coiled concertina wire stacked three high.

After Socrates flipped his towel over the bar, hung his mirror from it, and put down his shaving kit, a small voice by his side said, "I got water you."

Socrates looked down at Fart's tiny face. "Thank you," he said solemnly, and took the bucket the small boy offered him. He poured the water into one of the pans.

"You look, see," Fart said. "We washee-washee." He pointed proudly at the clean ponchos draped over the rack the women the Marines hired to keep their house clean and do their laundry used to hang the clothes on to dry after washing.

"You numba fucking one, Fart." The small boy beamed.

Captain Hook joined him while he was shaving. Fart and Nancy struggled with each other for the privilege of drawing water from the well for him. Nancy and Fart finally gave up their struggle and offered the water together. Hien was too intent studying the way Socrates shaved to notice until it was too late for him to take over from the smaller children and do the good deed. So Hien continued watching Socrates shave. It always amazed him that the Americans had to shave their whole faces so often, while his father and the other men only had to scrape their upper lips and chins once a week or so.

Captain Hook's face softened and he smiled at the children when he took the bucket from them. His face was reset into its cold eyed, blank mask by the time he looked into his mirror and dipped his toothbrush into the pan of water. The rules they followed, since they used untreated well water, were: don't swallow when you brush your teeth; don't cut yourself shaving. Well water might have cholera, typhus, typhoid, or other undesirable nasties swimming around in it.

"How'd you know they were coming?" Socrates asked. He whisked his razor out in the soapy water while waiting for the answer. Hien saw he was through and grabbed the pan. The boy ran carefully to the sump hole dug several yards on the other side of the bench from the well and poured the used water into it.

Captain Hook shrugged at the question. "Just knew it," he said around his toothbrush.

Socrates looked at him for a long moment, then said softly, "You always just know it. I wish to hell I knew how you always just know it." Captain Hook shrugged again.

A six-by truck pulled up to the main gate just then. The opening in the wire was wide enough to let a jeep through, but not a truck. One of the other children in the compound ran to the house to tell Sergeant Slaughter they had visitors. A man climbed out of the cab, two others—one had been manning the 50 caliber machine gun mounted over the cab—jumped over the side of the truck bed. All three wore Marine utilities and had .45 automatics on their hips, but they weren't from Whiskey Company headquarters. The driver stayed put. The three stopped at the tarp and one of them squatted to lift a corner of it.

"Getting ripe already," said one of the other two.

"That's why they bury them fast," said the squatting man.

Sergeant Slaughter emerged from the plantation house and strolled over to them. He wore cutoff tiger stripe camouflage trousers and a short sleeve utility shirt, its only ornament was the CAP patch on his shoulder, he wasn't even wearing his sergeant's stripes. The one who had commented on the smell was a stranger wearing first lieutenant's bars on his collars. He was a handsome, up right looking man, he looked in his starched and pressed utilities like he'd just stepped out of a recruiting poster. The squatting man was also a stranger. His uniform had no markings on it at all.

"Morning, Lieutenant," Sergeant Slaughter said. He didn't salute. Marines don't salute in the bush. Khung Toi might belong to the Marines, but it was still far enough from any base it was considered the

bush. "Morning Sal," to the other standing man. Sal was a clerk at 5th Combined Action Group headquarters, the parent unit of Whiskey Company, and probably volunteered for this run just to get out of the office for an hour or two. His presence told where these visitors were from.

"Good afternoon," said the lieutenant—it was just past noon. "I'm Lieutenant Convoy." He held his hand out to shake. "You must be Sergeant Slaughter. I've heard good things about you—and your CAP." He even sounded like one would expect a recruiting poster to sound.

"We do our best. Who you replacing?" He figured if this new officer came from CAG HQ he must be replacing one of the officers there, though he hadn't heard of any officers rotating out.

Lieutenant Convoy shook his head. "TAD." Temporary Additional Duty, he wasn't replacing anyone. "I'll be around from time to time."

Sergeant Slaughter looked at the squatting man and waited for an introduction. He didn't get one. The squatting man ignored the smell and examined the bodies, turned their hands over to look front and back, looked at the wounds, rubbed a thumb over the callouses on the soles of their feet. He looked inside their shirts and pants. Finally he looked up. "Think they're local?" he asked.

"I dunno," Sergeant Slaughter shrugged. "Could be. No gook sores. If not from here, then someplace else there's Americans." Open sores and skin lesions, the troops called them "gook sores," were epidemic among rural Vietnamese—except where there were Americans who provided them with medical attention and taught basic sanitation.

"Who got them?"

Sergeant Slaughter looked around for Sneaky Pete, he'd sent Motormouth to wake him when he heard that the truck arrived. Socrates stood nearby with Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete at his sides.

"I did," Captain Hook said.

"We did," Sneaky Pete said.

Socrates stepped back and to the side, obvious about making himself an observer; and as obviously their leader, the man responsible for them, someone who was going to take care of his men.

The squatting stranger looked at them steadily. He flicked his eyes slightly to the side to include Socrates in his look. "They call you Socrates, Captain Hook, and Sneaky Pete," he said after a moment.

Sneaky Pete sputtered. How did he know that?

Captain Hook kept his gaze flat, he'd known right away whoever this man was with nothing on his uniform, not even the stenciled Eagle, Globe, and Anchor on his shirt pocket, he was the real man in charge here and the lieutenant could be ignored.

Socrates nibbled his lower lip once and nodded slowly.

"Tell me about it."

Captain Hook used the minimum number of words to tell exactly what happened along the trail. He didn't mention Madam Joy or Three Marbles, or say anything about how two bodies disappeared. The recitation took half a minute. Sneaky Pete looked at him in awe, he knew he'd take at least five minutes to tell the same story—and he wouldn't be able to leave out the skivvy house.

"How'd you know they were Vee Cee?" the stranger asked when he was through.

"I know all the PFs in the Junkyard."

"Any armed Vietnamese who isn't one if them is a bad guy?" Captain Hook didn't think he had to answer. "What if they were Arvins?"

"Arvins don't wear pajamas."

The stranger abruptly turned to Sal. "Load them."

Sal looked at Lieutenant Convoy. Was he supposed to load the bodies on the truck by himself?

"Sergeant," Lieutenant Convoy said, "have somebody help with the bodies."

"Sneaky Pete, give him a hand."

Socrates nudged Captain Hook, the four of them together loaded the three bodies in the back of the truck. Sal used tiedowns to secure them so they wouldn't bounce out or roll into him while he stood at his machine gun.

While they were doing that, Lieutenant Convoy took Sergeant Slaughter aside and talked to him quietly. The stranger stood alone, arms crossed on his chest, looking around the compound. He looked like he was memorizing it.

"Socrates, front and center," Sergeant Slaughter called once the bodies were loaded and secured. Socrates joined him and the officer. Sergeant Slaughter looked very uncomfortable.

"Corporal," Lieutenant Convoy said, "you see that man over there? I want you and those two men of yours to talk to him. Listen very carefully to what he has to say. I'm not telling you what to say or

do, just give him a listen and then make up your own minds. Understand?"

Socrates looked thoughtful while the lieutenant was talking, he nodded just as thoughtful when he was through. "Yes, sir."

"Then do it."

"Aye aye, Sir." Socrates looked at Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete where they stood watching and jerked his head at them. They followed him to the stranger.

Sergeant Slaughter called after him, "Come to the schoolhouse when you're through," then went looking for Mad Greek. Submarine and his fire team were already in the Junkyard helping with the schoolhouse, he'd take Mad Greek and his team to help. Doc Holliday was going to come along for a medcap. Motormouth could stay and hold down the fort himself, but he'd send a couple PFs to keep him company as soon as he ran across some.

Lieutenant Convoy returned to the truck to wait with Sal and the driver.

"Let's go for a walk," the stranger said.

"How'd you know our nicknames?" Socrates asked his back. The three Marines hadn't moved to follow when he headed toward the gate.

The stranger turned back. "There's not much goes on in this country the Company doesn't know."

Sneaky Pete looked confused. "But you're not from Whiskey Company?" he said.

"Shut up," Captain Hook said. Sneaky Pete shut.

The stranger continued toward the gate. Socrates hesitated a second, then followed. He had a feeling this stranger was a civilian, no matter he was in a uniform. What was this man's authority, if any?

They walked through the original Junkyard, Toi Co 1, the closest of the five hamlets in the Junkyard. The Junkyard, Khung Toi village. Khung Toi was a fairly average Vietnamese village in some ways. It had a little less than three thousand inhabitants spread through its five hamlets. Most of the people were farmers, a very few were merchants. A few dozen were PFs; part-time soldiers, part-time farmers, defending their homes from the guerrillas. Nearly all of the farmers rented their land from absentee landlords and got their rice paddy water from from the owner of a dam and pump station upriver—absentee landlords tended to charge rents far in excess of the legal cap of one half of the principal crop, dam and water pump owners usually charged exorbitant fees. The village had no electricity,

running water was found in the river, cold was an esoteric philosophical concept that meant not-hot, a few people owned battery powered radios they didn't play very often because batteries were expensive and hard to come by. Most of the people had never gone as far from home as the district capital—that corresponds to an American county seat—almost none other than those in the Army had ever gone farther. Barely a dozen had ever seen a movie, fewer had seen a television. Extended families; grandparents, parents, several children, maybe an uncle or aunt of the parents, perhaps an unmarried brother or sister of the parents, sometimes cousins of the children, lived in small one- or two-room houses. There was a schoolhouse. They had livestock; water buffalo, pigs, and chickens.

But there were also several significant differences between Khung Toi and other rural villages. The people were clean and relatively healthy, thanks to the efforts of the Marines and their Navy corpsmen. The people no longer paid taxes to the Viet Cong —too many VC tax collectors had died trying to collect since the Marines moved into Fort Cragg. The village and all of the hamlets had functioning chiefs and councils—and all of them, except the chief and some council members in the Toi Mui, the hamlet most remote from Fort Cragg, felt secure enough to sleep at home at night instead of in the district headquarters. Few of the absentee landlords dared charge more than the legal rent. The dam and pump station owner lowered his rates when he found out the Marines were about to help the people construct their own dam and water pump so they wouldn't have to buy from him anymore. Down by the river there was a new, thriving mud-brick works and the homes were being rebuilt of this more permanent material instead of thatch. The schoolhouse had two college-educated teachers who lived in the village. The PFs were well trained and patrolled aggressively to keep the VC away—and they had a zero desertion rate instead of the 25% national average. The pigs and chickens were bigger and more healthy than usual because the Marines had imported a hog and two Leghorn roosters from home for breeding stock, and one of the Marines was a farmboy who knew some basic veterinary medicine.

The VC were understandably upset. A week ago they had sent a squad in to destroy the schoolhouse to demoralize the villagers. They were partly successful.

Toi Co 1 was dubbed "the Junkyard" by the first Marines assigned to CAP Whiskey 8. As they enlarged their patrol area to include the other hamlets of Khung Toi they applied the name to the entire village.



That was because of the depressed state of the village. The people wore clothing that was worn and tattered, their homes were in chronic disrepair, their material belongings were old and battered, trash littered the paths and lanes. "All they need is some rusted out cars on cinder blocks for this place to look like Dogpatch," one of those first Marines observed. There was already a place called Dogpatch at Da Nang, so they called it the Junkyard. It didn't look like that anymore, but the name stuck. Since they stopped paying taxes to the VC, and the landlords and dam owner charged less, the people of Khung Toi had money to buy clothes, fix up their houses, replace their most worn out belongings. And they started to take pride in their hamlets. It also helped that the Marines hired villagers, like the cleaning women, to do work for them at Fort Cragg.

The Marines were proud of themselves to begin with. They were full of piss and vinegar and knew they were the best fighters in the world, the baddest badasses on the block. Once they moved into Khung Toi this place was their home, these people their neighbors. Wasn't nobody going to mess with their friends and neighbors, not without paying with their lives. The Marines called themselves the Junkyard Dogs.

Khung Toi had rich farmland and all those people. The VC needed the food, lots of the food, grown by these farmers. They needed converts to their cause. They needed draftees to replace their combat losses and increase their ranks. They weren't getting any of that from Khung Toi anymore, but they kept trying. Not as hard as they used to. Junkyard Dogs are tough to deal with.

The stranger knew all of that, and the proof was before his eyes as he walked through Toi Co 2 with the three Marines. All the village people nodded or bowed politely and smiled at them. The teen-agers grinned and held up a finger or a thumb, shouted numba-fucking-one. The children scampered underfoot, wanted to play, wanted to carry things for the Marines. It wasn't until they were beyond the hooches and in a treeline that functioned both as a windbreak and a boundary line that they had the privacy the stranger wanted to talk to them.

"Before I say anything else there's something you have to understand and agree to," the stranger said. He looked at them with the same flat look Captain Hook looked at everything with. The Marines waited for him to tell them. "This conversation is top secret. You are never to divulge to anyone what we talked about. You are never even to tell anyone you talked to me. If anybody ever asks you

about me or this conversation you don't know what they're talking about. Do you understand?"

Socrates nodded slowly. Sneaky Pete followed his lead and nodded rapidly. Captain Hook returned the stranger's look and said, "Talk to us."

"You're good Marines, patriotic men. I thought you'd agree. Let's sit down." He squatted over his heels in the Oriental manner, so did Captain Hook. The other two sat cross legged. The four formed an inward facing circle.

"You think we're winning this war?" he asked when they were settled.

"We are here," Socrates said.

"Long as we kill Cong we are," Captain Hook said.

Sneaky Pete chipped in, "Yeah, we're sure winning, sure."

"Do you understand what we're doing here?"

Socrates looked at him curiously. "We're here to stop Communism," he said and paused for a second before continuing. "We're Marines, we go where we're sent."

Captain Hook didn't hesitate. "Killing Cong."

"Yeah, yeah, we're killing Cong," Sneaky Pete echoed.

"Those are good answers, but they aren't what I was looking for." Now he started sounding like he was delivering an oft repeated speech. "The international Communist Conspiracy wants to take over the entire world, turn everybody into slaves. They've already got Eastern Europe, Red China, North Korea, and North Vietnam, now they want South Vietnam. They take this country, Laos and Cambodia are next, then Thailand and Indonesia. Next thing you know they'll have all of Asia. Look at a globe. Once they have all Asia it'll be nothing for them to take Western Europe. Already they've got Cuba and are trying to spread their revolution to other countries in Latin America. We have to stop them before they get to us, before they become so powerful we can't stop them. And don't believe what anybody tells you about this being a war to reunite Vietnam. When the Commies took over in the north, two million Catholics fled to the south because they knew the Commies wouldn't allow them freedom to practice their religion.

"Now, how are they trying to take over here?" he went on. "Two ways. One, they send their own soldiers in to fight, that's the NVA. The other way is subversion. For that they use what they call 'political cadres.' Some of these are Commies from up north, some of them are

southerners they had up north and brainwashed. Whoever they are, they tell their Commie lies to the people and try to get them over to their side. Are you with me so far?"

Socrates dipped his head in nod. This was nothing new, he'd heard it all before, back in the World in the indoctrination lectures the Marines went through before being shipped to the war.

Sneaky Pete quickly bobbed his head.

"Keep talking," said Captain Hook.

"Good, you're with me. Some of these cadres cause a lot of trouble for us. The best thing to do when they have a power base someplace is send in a battalion and take it out by main force. But we can't always do that. Sometimes we can't because we don't have a battalion to spare, sometimes its because where the place is they'll have enough warning to get their important people out of there before we show up. Then again, sometimes the best thing to do is just shake them up a bit. Or maybe there's some political considerations."

He paused and Socrates broke in with, "Why are you telling us this?"

The stranger ignored Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete for a moment while he studied Socrates. Finally he said, "Because sometimes we send a few people to neutralize a cadre or a VC chief someplace."

"Neutralize," Captain Hook said slowly. "That means kill Cong?"

He nodded.

"That's why I'm here. Keep talking."

"Why are you telling us this?" Socrates asked.

"What do you think?"

"Sounds like maybe you want us to 'neutralize' these people."

"They said you're sharp. Keep listening."

"Who do you want us to 'neutralize'?"

He shook his head. "That'll come in time. Nobody here, someplace else. Are you willing to do it?"

"I kill Cong, anytime, any place," Captain Hook said.

"Uh, yeah, count me in," Sneaky Pete said. If Captain Hook was going to do it, he wanted to.

Socrates wanted to know, "How are we going to do it?"

The stranger shook his head again. "That's decided on a mission by mission basis. Are you in?"

"Is it going to help us win the war?"

"Yes."

Socrates looked at Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete. They were his

men, his responsibility. If they were doing something that might be dangerous it was up to him to be with them and make sure they made it through okay. And he wanted to win the war. "I'm in."

The stranger stood. "Good. I'll be in touch. Remember, as far as anyone else knows, this conversation never happened. Sergeant Slaughter wants you at the schoolhouse. Go."

They didn't go at once, Socrates wanted to know more. Starting with, "What's your name?"

Something that might have been the beginning of a smile twitched the stranger's lips. "We operate on a need to know basis," he said. "That's not something you need to know."

The answer startled Socrates. He skipped his next question, if the man wasn't going to tell them his name, neither was he going to tell them what his authorization was. So he asked, "How do we get in touch with you?"

He shook his head slightly. "I get in touch with you. Sergeant Slaughter's waiting for you." It was a dismissal, Socrates knew no matter what they asked the man wasn't going to tell them another thing.

They headed for the schoolhouse. When they were out of hearing Sneaky Pete couldn't contain himself anymore. "Who is he?" he asked.

Captain Hook glanced at him briefly, then his eyes shifted back to watching all around them. He didn't say anything.

"Spook," Socrates said.

"Huh? Whadaya mean? That's not Mister Spook."

"Not *Mister* Spook, *a* spook."

They went on in silence. Sneaky Pete was so confused he almost forgot to swivel-eye.

The stranger stood for a few minutes, watching them cross the paddies, then he returned to the truck and left Khung Toi.

### CHAPTER THREE

The hamlets of Toi Co 1 and Nghai Toi were about a half mile apart. Nghia Toi was on the river and Toi Co 1 straight inland from there, in the middle of the rice paddies. The people of Toi Co 1 were almost all farmers, the people of Nghia Toi were mostly fishermen. The schoolhouse was off the main trail between the two hamlets, in an area of light woods rather than rice paddies. It hadn't been a new building, the schoolhouse. It was wood frame and a kind of tar had been used to seal its joints. The schoolhouse proved to be highly susceptible to fire.

In the middle of the night six days before, five men crept under a moonless sky through the wooded areas between the hamlets of Khung Toi. They moved slowly and cautiously. Where there were no woods for them to go through they flitted along treelines rather than cross the open paddies or cane fields. When they had no choice but to cross the paddies, they lowered themselves into the water and crawled with only their heads breaking the surface. This was a very dangerous place for them to be, especially at night. They knew the danger from bitter experience. That's how they were picked for this mission; they had each survived at least one ambush from the American Marines and the PFs who patrolled Khung Toi, and were considered to have the best chance of success.

The leader carried an AK47 assault rifle, each of the others had an SKS carbine with its attached bayonet folded back against the stock. One of them carried an American backpack with four five pound blocks of plastic explosive in it, another had a hundred feet of detonation cord slung over his shoulders in a waterproof sack. The leader had five fuses, one with a delay mechanism, in a waterproof bag suspended from a cord around his neck. Their destination was the schoolhouse; their mission, destroy it.

They thought if they were careful enough they could accomplish their mission and, in the resultant confusion, make good their escape. They hoped they could.

When they reached the schoolhouse they were certain they had

done it undetected. The leader worked quickly in the dark, placing the explosives by touch only, implanting the fuses, and crimping them onto the detcord in a chain. Crimping the fuses without light was the most dangerous part of the placement; too much pressure and the cord would detonate in his hands and he and all his men would die. But he had practiced this operation blindfolded many times so he could do it without looking, and was successful. Then the five men withdrew from the schoolhouse, unreeling the rest of the detcord as they went. The cord allowed them to go less than fifty feet.

The leader sent his men into the woods away from the schoolhouse while he tied a length of fishing line to the arming pin of his delay fuse and crimped that last fuse onto the end of the detcord. When he reached the end of the fifty feet of fishing line he gave it a hard yank and sprinted deeper into the woods. The fuse gave him ten seconds to get away before it set off the cord. The detcord flashed along its entire length and set off the fuses in the blocks of explosive. The schoolhouse erupted apart and its parts burst into flames.

The sabotage party was far enough away by then they were in no danger from the explosion. They ran as hard as they could because now they were in danger of being discovered by one of the many patrols that they knew had to be converging on the schoolhouse.

They ran in the wrong direction.

When Socrates heard the explosion he thought quickly; should they head for it without waiting for instructions, or should they stay put in case anyone came into their ambush's killing zone? He made up his mind and saw Captain Hook's "stay put" signal so close together he never was sure whether he made up his mind on his own or the signal made it up for him. Whichever way it was, it was the right thing to do. The fleeing VC came straight to them. The Marines and PFs opened fire, the VC died without returning a shot.

The VC had partly succeeded in their attempt to destroy the schoolhouse and damage civilian morale. They destroyed the schoolhouse, all right. But the people's spirits were raised by their killing.

The next morning Major Wildroot, the 5th CAG executive officer, came out with a driver and a shotgun rider to survey the damage. Captain Vitale and Gunnery Sergeant Bryl from Whiskey Company were already there when the major arrived.

The destruction was nearly total. All that remained standing was a

few charred stumps of main support pillars. The walls and roof were gone, their only remains were black chips and ash. Fortunately, only the teachers had desks, the students sat on the floor, so there wasn't extensive loss of furniture. More fortunate, the teachers took their schoolbooks home at the end of each school day. They'd have to somehow come up with a new blackboard, but they could manage that easily enough. The building itself was gone. Except for the poured concrete foundation slab. They wouldn't know how badly damaged it was until the debris was cleaned off it.

Most of Whiskey 8's Marines were helping the teachers and many villagers with the cleanup when Captain Vitale and Gunny Bryl arrived. Major Wildroot joined the captain and gunny who were watching the cleanup with Nuyghn Phu Lai, the village chief. They briefed him as well as they could on what had happened. Sergeant Slaughter left off supervising his Marines to fill in the gaps for the CAG XO.

"I'm glad to see you jumped right in to help without waiting for instructions," Major Wildroot said when Sergeant Slaughter was through with his briefing. Sergeant Slaughter didn't think that deserved a response. "Any of your men know carpentry so they can really help with the rebuilding?"

"Yes, sir. Killer Kowalski came from an engineer outfit, he's pretty handy that way."

Major Wildroot repressed a head shake. He was used to it by now, the way so many of the CAP Marines used these juvenile nicknames. At first he'd thought Sergeant Slaughter was one of those nicknames, until he learned that was the CAP commander's real name, Slaughter. It had taken some time, though, for him to get used to hearing everybody call them by their nicknames, and to call them that way himself. Well, he supposed men in this kind of situation needed every little bit of bravado they could dredge up. Some of those names were certainly appropriate for men who were functioning like marshals in the Wild West.

"The local economy is in pretty good shape right now," the major continued. "Does the village treasury have enough in it to buy the lumber right off, or are they going to have to secure some credit?"

*Leave it to an officer to come up with the dumb questions,* Sergeant Slaughter thought. Out loud, "I don't know, Sir. Not really our business to know how much they've got in the till. We'll do what we can to help them get it back up most ricky-tick."

"I know you will, Sergeant." Major Wildroot stuck around long enough for the foundation to be cleaned off enough to determine it wasn't damaged in the fire—if it was, he'd have a job on his hands getting the district chief to come up with the wherewithal to lay a new one. Pain in the ass, that was. After all, the cement and tools were gifts from the American people. It was flat wrong that so many of the local officials would give you such a hard time about where to use them when there was a glaring need and the Marines were ready to help. By then he'd been on site long enough to be polite and said his farewells.

"How long do you think the rebuilding will take?" Gunny Bryl asked when the major was gone.

"Three, four days. Plus how long it takes to get the materials."

Captain Vitale stood off at a respectful distance while his NCOs talked about matters he probably shouldn't know about. Not officially know about, anyway.

"Think you can get what you need faster than Chief Lai can?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?"

"That's what I thought. Let me know if I can be of any official help."

"I'll do that, Gunny. Thanks."

Not long after that Captain Vitale and Gunny Bryl left.

When the cleaning up was done, Sergeant Slaughter met with his fire team leaders, Killer Kowalski the engineer, Nuyghn Phu Lai, the hamlet chiefs and council members who were present, and the two school teachers.

"First thing we need is a six-by," Sergeant Slaughter started the discussion. "Any ideas?"

"Leave that to me," Mad Greek said. "Let me have the car, Mister Spook'll get us a six-by." The "car" was a three-quarter ton truck the platoon used to pick up supplies and ferry small numbers of people.

"You got it, Mad Greek. He's your man so you're in charge. Who else do you want?"

"I'll take Rodin 'cause I need somebody big, strong, and dumb to do the heavy shit," said the corporal they called Mad Greek. Mister Spook and Rodin were in his fire team. "Also Socrates and Captain Hook. Anybody tries to stop us and Socrates can't talk him out of it, Captain Hook can give him his death look. Nobody's gonna hassle us. Oh yeah, Sneaky Pete, too. He's good at getting around behind people and picking their pockets without being seen."



Then they figured out what materials and tools they were going to need to rebuild the schoolhouse. Lai and the other village leaders volunteered their homemade bricks for the walls, they thought that was a great idea, especially since the Marines were going to supply everything else. Eventually they had the entire rebuilding effort planned and a temporary outdoor place to use for a classroom was settled on.

Sergeant Slaughter looked at his watch. It was too late for them to get a six-by today, if they got one now they'd have to bring it home overnight and it wasn't a good idea to have an unauthorized vehicle sitting around waiting for someone to discover it. "Okay, we'll get started on all this shit tomorrow. Anybody have anything to add?"

Nobody did so they broke up the meeting and went their own ways. For the Marines, that was back to Fort Cragg to draw up their patrols for that night and have their big evening meal with the PFs.

Early the next afternoon Mad Greek and the Marines going with him, along with Motormouth who was going to drive it back, piled into Whiskey 8's three-quarter ton truck, and headed east to find a six-by they could borrow for a day or two. Where they were going, nobody would believe CAP Marines stealing, it would work only if they could claim to be members of an infantry battalion. So they wore the spare shirts they kept that didn't have the CAP patch, and regulation soft covers instead of the unauthorized Australian-style camouflage bush hats they normally wore.

They found a truck before they reached Highway 1. A company-sized fire base was being built on a low hilltop that dominated the approach from a long ridge that came down from the mountains into the coastal rice paddies. Bulldozers had already scraped the hilltop down to its red dirt. A backhoe chugged loudly, digging a trench around the perimeter; it dumped the dirt it dug up onto the outer side of the trench to make it higher on that side. Sweaty men, mostly shirtless, were bunched here and there where the trench had already been dug, slowly filling sandbags and stacking them into bunker walls. Most of the other men on the hill were sitting or laying under whatever shade they could find, waiting for the early afternoon heat to ease off before continuing their work. Some of the Marines on the hill waved at them, they waved back.

"Bingo," Mister Spook said. "I'll roll out when we reach them. You keep going and hang a left when you reach Highway One. I'll

catch up a couple miles up the road." "Them" was half a dozen three ton six-by trucks sitting at the foot of the bulldozed road leading to the top of the hill.

"What if they catch you?" Motormouth asked.

Mister Spook grinned at him. "Nevah hoppen."

They didn't slow down when they passed the parked trucks and Mister Spook rolled over the side of the truck and continued his roll to the shelter of one of the trucks. He lay in its shade, watching the others head to the highway a half mile distant until they turned onto it. Then he scooted among the trucks, always keeping one of them between himself and the people on the hill. None of the trucks had the canvas tops on their rears. Their windshields were removed so a mine explosion wouldn't send broken glass flying about; the doors were off so the driver and shotgun could pile out more quickly in an emergency, and vertical six-foot-high poles were welded onto their grills to break any wires that might be strung across the roadway to decapitate a driver. He checked each of the trucks for cargo, he wanted an empty one—unless he found one that had everything that they needed. Also, he wanted to make sure nobody was near the trucks to stop him. He found someone, one of the drivers was scrunched down behind his steering wheel, taking a nap. If he stayed asleep long enough he wasn't going to be any problem at all. Matter of fact, if the people on the hill knew the driver was down there, when he started one of the trucks they might think it was the driver and not realize it was someone else until he was long gone.

Three of the trucks were empty. One of the three was facing the direction Mister Spook wanted to go, but it was behind another. He checked the ground to the side of that truck and decided it was firm and smooth enough to drive over with no problems. He settled down and waited until the other Whiskey 8 Marines had been out of sight for fifteen minutes. Then he eased himself into the driver's seat of the truck he'd picked, glanced all around to make sure nobody was approaching, flipped the ignition switch, and shifted into reverse. He gently tapped the accelerator and the truck rolled back a few feet, enough to give him clearance to go around the one blocking him. Another quick glance around still didn't show anybody looking in his direction. He shifted into first and drove around the other truck, then into second for a leisurely roll to the highway. After he turned onto it he looked back at the hill. A few men were standing on it looking at him, but he didn't see anybody starting a pursuit.

"Mister Spook strikes again," he shouted and laughed, he pounded the steering wheel and bounced on the seat. "Nothing is safe from the Masked Marauder when he needs it!" Then he settled down and drove at a stately 25 miles an hour. In five minutes he caught up with the rest of the scavenging team. They whooped and laughed and everybody but Motormouth piled into the six-by. Socrates was senior to Mad Greek, but Mad Greek was in charge of this mission, so he took the passenger seat in the cab. Socrates stood in the flatbed leaning against the cab.

"You make damn good and sure you don't go past that hill on your way back," Mad Greek said to Motormouth. He had to shout to be heard over the roar of the six-by's motor. "They stop you and it's all our asses."

"No sweat," Motormouth called back. "I'm taking the scenic route home." He floored the accelerator and the small truck sprayed sand taking off. It rapidly diminished in the distance up the highway.

Mad Greek twisted out the side of the cab. "You all secure up there?" he asked.

"Shut up and let's go," Socrates said back.

Mister Spook pushed the speed up to 40 MPH. Far ahead they saw Motormouth turn left off the highway. Soon they reached an infantry squad guarding a little used entrance to the Da Nang base. A man who looked like an NCO, probably a corporal or a sergeant, with no rank insignia it was impossible to tell, stood in the middle of the road and raised a hand for them to stop. He held his rifle loosely in his other hand. Mister Spook brought the truck to a halt less than three feet in front of him. The NCO walked around to the passenger side.

"Can I help you with anything?" he asked.

"Work party," Mad Greek told him. "We're from H&S Company, One/Twenty-six. Supposed to pick up some supplies."

The gate guard NCO blinked. He was from the Old Corps, before the 26th Marines was activated, and wasn't used to any Marine regiment with a designation above twelve. He recovered quickly and said, "Lemme see your requisition forms."

"No got." Mad Greek shook his head. "Gunny came on ahead of us with it. We're just supposed to pile the shit on and drive it back."

The NCO wore an expression that said he thought this sounded like a sea story. Then he said, "You come back out this way, have your Gunny come with you and show me the paperwork." He stepped back and waved them through.

"You know it, Marine," Mad Greek said back.

They drove into Da Nang. They had to drive around for more than an hour before they found a pile of lumber that wasn't too heavily guarded. The one they found had twenty 8x8 beams and a stack of plywood sheets. Next to it were several 5'x10' sheets of corrugated metal, half a dozen bundles of new sandbags, a roll of chicken wire, and one lone rifleman guarding all of it. The rifleman's uniform was so new he had to be fresh in-country. Mister Spook and Mad Greek grinned at each other when they saw the guard. The six-by pulled up and the Marines dismounted and started loading the truck.

"Hey," the lone guard shouted. "What are you doing? Put that shit back, it doesn't belong to you."

Socrates stopped loading and walked over to him. The others kept loading. "Who are you," he demanded.

"I'm PFC Cronley, I'm supposed to be guarding this shit until someone from battalion gets here."

"Well, we're here. Didn't Captain McAninley tell you we were coming?"

Cronley looked at him blankly. "Who's Captain McAninley?"

Socrates grimaced in disgust. "Who's Captain McAninley? How long you been in this battalion, Marine? He's the S4." "S4" was the logistics officer of a battalion or regiment.

"I don't know any Captain McAninley, Major Hearn is the S4."

Socrates shook his head in wonder at the ignorance of this PFC. "Major Hearn *was* the S4. Captain McAninley replaced him this morning. He sent me with this work party to pick this shit up and take it back."

"But who are you?"

"How long you been with us, PFC?" Socrates' voice dripped with scorn. "I'm Sergeant Crean, assistant supply NCO."

"B-but I'm in supply and I don't know you. Sergeant Crimmins is the assistant supply NCO." He looked at the other Marines loading the truck trying to remember which one of them got out of the cab with the driver; he knew this Marine had ridden in the back of the six-by and couldn't really be the man in charge. Could he?

"Sergeant Crimmins *was* the assistant supply NCO. I came in this morning with Captain McAninley."

"But," the PFC guard started to object again. He couldn't think of what to object to next, after all, this Sergeant Crean knew all the names. Finally he simply said, "Yes, Sergeant."

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Socrates looked at him levelly and got a confused look in return. "Give them a hand loading the truck." The PFC awkwardly put his rifle down and hesitantly went to help. Socrates assumed a properly supervisory stance off to the side and watched.

It didn't take long to load the truck. Then Socrates asked the guard, "What were your orders, I mean aside from guarding these supplies until we got here?"

"Staff Sergeant O'Boyle said he'd pick me up when he brought the work party to get it."

"Then you had best wait for Staff Sergeant O'Boyle to get here, hadn't you?"

"But you're the work party, shouldn't I go back with you?"

"I don't know that Captain McAninley told Staff Sergeant O'Boyle we were coming, so he's probably going to show up any time now. You better be here to tell him what happened."

PFC Cronley looked very worried. What if these Marines weren't the work party supposed to pick up the material he was guarding? The only ways for him to know were to go back with them, or wait for Staff Sergeant O'Boyle to show up. If Staff Sergeant O'Boyle didn't show up, how was he going to get back to battalion? What if he did and this wasn't the work party?

"You wait here," Socrates repeated. Then he climbed into the back of the truck and it went away, leaving an increasingly worried PFC Cronley standing there guarding a bare patch of ground.

They got back to Fort Cragg just before sundown. The next morning they delivered the lumber, corrugated metal, and chicken wire to the schoolhouse. Mister Spook drove the six-by to just within sight of the hill from which they'd taken it. Motormouth followed him in the three-quarter ton truck. Mister Spook parked and leaned on the horn until someone on the hill looked in his direction, then he jumped out and ran back to where Motormouth was parked out of sight. They raced back to the Junkyard without pursuit.

By the time Socrates, Captain Hook, and Sneaky Pete reached the schoolhouse following their meeting with the nameless stranger, the beams were all in place and the corrugated metal roof was up. The brick walls were rising ever higher.

"Let's get your asses in gear, People," Sergeant Slaughter said when he saw them. "We've got a schoolhouse to build." He didn't ask them anything about the stranger.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The bricks of the schoolhouse walls rose a tier at a time, but not evenly all the way around. The different people working on the different sides worked at different rates of speed, nobody was competing with anybody else to see who could lay the most bricks in the least time; it was too goddam hot for that. There were more Marines than Vietnamese laying the bricks. The Marines' time was basically theirs to do with as they chose and the Vietnamese were farmers who had to tend their fields. Today, Sergeant Slaughter chose for the Marines to spend their time working on the schoolhouse. Motormouth was at Fort Cragg, holding down the fort, watching the radios. Doc Holliday was holding a medcap at a small table set up under the trees nearby, the PF medic he was teaching basic medicine to was helping. Sergeant Slaughter was supervising the construction. Hank, the PF lieutenant, was helping supervise. At least that's what the two of them said they were doing. To the men working, they looked like they were taking a siesta under a shade tree. The other ten Marines were laying bricks. The oldest son of the Nghia Toi hamlet chief was working with the Marines, as were the PF sergeant and seven of the PFs. It wasn't until the teachers dismissed class early and came to help that the Vietnamese outnumbered the Americans building the Vietnamese schoolhouse.

By the time they stopped working for the day, one short wall had reached tree feet from the roof beams, the other was almost there, one of the long walls, the one with the door, had only two more tiers to go. When all the walls reached three feet from the roof beams they'd put up the chicken wire as screening to give the schoolhouse ventilation.

Sergeant Slaughter looked at his watch, showed it to Lieutenant Hank, stood up, brushed off the seat of his trousers, ambled over to the working men, and said, "Chow time. We can finish this up tomorrow."

Killer Kowalski looked at Beast and said under his breath, "'We?' What's he got, a turd in his pocket? I didn't see him doing nothing."

Beast shrugged his massive shoulders. "Fuck him." He left a

smear of dirt on his forehead when he wiped the sweat off it.

They left the building materials where they were, took their tools with them.

"You get the rest of the platoon," Hank said to his sergeant.

The sergeant nodded and gave an order to the other PFs. They headed in different directions, to the rice paddies and the vegetable fields; one went to the river, to gather those who were fishing.

Fifteen minutes later, the Marines were washing up. Sergeant Slaughter had to order Beast to wash his hands and face. "You doing the cooking, you do it with clean hands," Sergeant Slaughter told him.

Beast grunted. It was bad enough he had to do the cooking today, he wanted to get to the kitchen and get it over with, not waste time washing up. "I don't got no ptomaine," he muttered.

"If you don't that's all you don't got," Sergeant Slaughter said. "Wash so the rest of us don't catch what you do got."

Beast hulked over the smaller man and glared at him for a second before turning toward the wash bench. His hands were moderately clean by the time he got to the kitchen, and the smear of dirt wasn't on his forehead anymore. Motormouth had already started the fire in the cookstove and put a couple big pans of water on to heat. Beast rummaged through the K-ration cans until he came up with an assortment he could make a stew from.

The thirty-odd PFs started wandering in. They laughed and joked among themselves while they went through the ritual of washing their hands. They had never washed their hands before meals before the American Marines came and told them that would help them stay healthy. They weren't too sure that was true, but they did have to admit they no longer had the open sores they used to always have, and it was a while since the last time any of them was sick. Of course, that could be because the Americans sent in the truck that made the smoke that burned their eyes and noses until they got out of it and killed the mosquitoes. Or the medicine *bac si* Holliday made on them. Washing their hands before meals didn't necessarily mean anything, but it was a ritual the American Marines went through, so they'd do it too.

Various PFs brought rice cakes or yams or greens or a few fish with them to share with their American friends while they shared the exotic American food. Of course, they also brought along lots of good, homemade *nuoc mam* sauce to spread on the American food to give it some some flavor. That was something else odd about the Americans. Most of them acted like the *nuoc mam* tasted worse to

them than the American food did to the Vietnamese. *Nuoc mam*, the universal Vietnamese condiment, was fermented fish sauce. In the villages, the farmers put fish on a rack and let the sun bake the oils and other juices out of the fish. When the oils and other juices fermented it was ready to use. To the Americans, it looked like watery milk going bad and smelled like rancid fish. To most of them, it tasted the way it smelled.

The tables, simple boards laid over sawhorses for the evening meal and disassembled and stored along one wall the rest of the time, were set up by the time all the PFs had finished washing and they were able to sit down right away to eat. When they saw who did the cooking, most of the PFs only ate enough of the stew to be polite; instead, they concentrated on eating the food they brought themselves. A few of the PFs didn't feel like being polite and only ate their own food.

"Goddam," said Chickenfucker. "I think we should go to some grunt battalion and offer to swap them Beast for a cook, even up." He cocked a suspicious eye at the stew and poked at it with his mess kit spoon. "Anything swimming in there shouldn't be?"

"I think we should eat Cs when it's Beast's turn to cook," Motormouth said.

"Nah," Mister Spook chimed in, "*nuoc mam* is better." He picked up one of the small jars the PFs carried their sauce in and poured half of it into his stew.

Mad Greek, who was sitting next to Mister Spook, leaned over Mister Spook's aluminum mess dish and made retching noises.

Mister Spook yanked his dish away from Mad Greek and folded his arms protectively over it. "You barf on my chow, I'll shove it down your throat."

Mad Greek looked at him seriously and said, "If you can eat *nuoc mam* on Beast's cooking, you can eat my barf. Anyway, I'm a corporal and you're a PFC. I say you eat barf, you eat barf." He turned from Mister Spook with a superior expression on his face. The expression disappeared when he looked at his own dish. He jabbed at it with his spoon. "Beast, how long did this lay in the sun after it died before you found it?" he asked.

Beast smashed a fist onto the table. "One more crack and I ain't cooking no more," he shouted.

"Come on, somebody say something," Killer Kowalski said.

Before Beast could say anything Sergeant Slaughter raised his



voice, "Shitcan the grab-assing, people." He dug into his own stew and managed to eat it with a straight face. "Good shit," he said after a couple bites.

"Got half of that right," somebody muttered. Beast glared around, trying to figure out who said that.

"You heard what I said," Sergeant Slaughter said without looking up.

They all applied themselves to their meal. All the Marines except Mister Spook, who used *nuoc mam*, used liberal amounts of hot sauce on their stew, none of them cleaned their dishes. They never did when it was Beast's turn to cook. Even Beast didn't like his own cooking.

The daily routine at Fort Cragg was for Sergeant Slaughter to get together with his three fire team leaders and Hank after evening chow and draw the night's patrol routes while everyone else cleaned up after the meal. The five of them were sitting around a small table, looking at the topographical map of the Khung Toi area when Nuyghn Phu Lai walked in with Nuyghn Lo Xa. Nuyghn Lo Xa was the hamlet chief of Toi Mui, the hamlet most remote from Fort Cragg.

The two could have come earlier, Lai knew he was always welcome to join the Marines at their dinner, and he did so sometimes. But only when he knew either Submarine or Rodin was cooking. He thought they were the only Marines who could fix a meal fit for a human to eat. Soon he would have to talk to Sergeant Slaughter about this matter, talk him into hiring two of the village women to do the cooking for the Marines. There were two women, both widows, he had in mind. They were burdens on their families, not having husbands to support them, and needed the income. The husband of one of them had been a PF who was killed before the Marines came. The other's husband had been conscripted by the Viet Cong and nobody knew if he was alive or dead. As far as the villagers were concerned, he was dead. But right now Lai had a more pressing matter to discuss with the Marine leaders.

They exchanged pleasantries, then Lai got down to business. "You listen Xa," he told them.

Xa had few English words and not much of the pidgin the Marines and PFs used to talk to each other. The Marines had a little Vietnamese, enough so that with Lai and Hank translating the more difficult passages, they were able to understand Xa's problem.

Toi Mui was nearly two miles from Fort Cragg. Although the

Marines tried to give it its fair share of attention, it lacked the level of day and night patrolling and casual visiting the other hamlets received. Consequently, it was the only place in Khung Toi where the Viet Cong felt any bit of security and was the hamlet they visited most often. Toi Mui was the one hamlet in the village that wasn't safe for the hamlet chief to spend the night at home. The people there didn't know the Marines as well as did the other villagers, and didn't have as much trust in them, were less likely to come to the Americans with information and requests for help.

The Marines knew this and wished they could change the situation; but they had four other hamlets to keep safe and only had enough men to put out three patrols a night. They were quiet about it, but they didn't trust the PFs to do any aggressive patrolling on their own, and they weren't comfortable enough to send fewer than three Marines on one patrol. Even if all three patrols were out from dusk to dawn, Toi Mui couldn't get more than four or five hours a night coverage. And if all the Marines were out all night every night they would then spend so much of every day sleeping that they'd hardly have any time to patrol or visit any of the hamlets during the day before the evening meal. Everything considered, they were pleased that Xa came to them with his problem. When they heard what the problem was, they became downright excited.

"Are you sure?" Sergeant Slaughter asked when Xa was through.

Nuyghn Lo Xa wasn't an old man by American standards, in his mid-fifties, but for a peasant he was an old man. His face looked like an unskilled hand had carved it from some hardwood and left it out to weather. His wispy mustache and chin whiskers were turning white, a lifetime of chewing betel nut had stained his lips a red so deep they were almost black. When he nodded, his head resembled a marionette's head bobbing from the puppeteer's string. He was positive. The VC came to him yesterday and said a cadre was coming tonight to talk to the people of Toi Mui—and was bringing a tax collector and a squad to carry the rice and other goods that were the taxes. The VC also said if he, Xa, wasn't there when they came they would send someone during the day to kill him and his family. The people of Toi Mui were finally getting back on their feet after so many years of paying taxes to both Saigon and the VC and paying the landlord and dam owner too much. He could not let them go back to paying taxes to the VC. What convinced him to turn to the Marines for help was the way they supplied materials and labor to build a better

schoolhouse when the old one was destroyed. Nobody had to ask the American Marines for this help, that told him they were good men and had the welfare of Khung Toi in their hearts.

"Don't you worry, we're gonna get these sons a bitches for you," Sergeant Slaughter promised. His mouth was set firm, his eyes glistened. "They want to take your rice, they're going to die trying." He stood and bowed to the two headmen, a polite signal he wanted them to leave. The fewer people who knew what they were going to do tonight the better. Best if only those involved knew. Lai and Xa both stood and bowed back. They headed into Toi Co 1, it was too late for Xa to head for the district headquarters, even if he was following his normal routine. Tonight he couldn't follow that routine. He would eat at Lai's home, then go back to Toi Mui. No matter the personal risk, he must be there tonight for his people.

The Marine NCOs and Hank hunched over the map again. Sergeant Slaughter wadded up and threw away the tracing paper he'd been drawing the overlays on and put a fresh piece over the map. He started talking, his voice was faster than usual, his words were clipped.

"*Ong* Xa doesn't know what direction they're coming from, but that's okay." He drew an oblong around Toi Mui and two paired dashes through the line. "This is the hedge and these are the only two ways through it." Toi Mui was surrounded by a generations old tree-and-bush hedge that was thought to be impenetrable except by two openings in it, the main and back gates. A broad foot path through the rice paddies led to the north corner of the hamlet from the main dirt road that headed east to the district headquarters, near where the southbound road to the next village branched off from it. A smaller gate on the long, southeast side led through the narrow band of paddies there into the woods a hundred yards south. "There's no treelines go right up to it, so the bad guys are gonna have to walk in the open. No moon tonight, but if the sky stays clear the stars will give us all the light we need, they can't get to Toi Mui without us seeing them."

The three corporals looked at each other. "We? Us?" Was he going with them? They were used to running their own patrols and preferred that he didn't come along.

"The way I see it," Sergeant Slaughter continued, he hadn't noticed the exchange of glances, "is we can set up one patrol here," he made an "X" on the edge of the woods fifty yards from where the trail came out of them, "and another one here," he made a second "X" in a treeline a hundred yards north of the hamlet. He looked at Hank. "Six

of your people with each of my fire teams, can do?"

The PF lieutenant nodded.

"That's two," Socrates asked, "what about the third?"

"Two patrols should be more than we need," Sergeant Slaughter answered. "The third one will patrol in here," he drew a large triangle that included the schoolhouse, Nghia Toi, and Toi Co 2. "That's a lot of ground for one patrol to cover, but we've only got one patrol to cover the rest of the village. Hank, you put a squad here at Fort Cragg in case anybody decides to pay a visit tonight, then you be here with the rest of your platoon as a reaction force," he marked a treeline just east of Toi Co 2. The rest of Hank's PF platoon was seven men, including Hank, his platoon sergeant, radioman, runner, and the medic.

Socrates didn't think much of that as a location for the reaction force, it was a mile from Toi Mui. He didn't object, though. With twenty of them out there, they should be able to handle anything short of a whole company. Nobody else objected either.

"Socrates," Sergeant Slaughter kept talking, "take your patrol out half an hour before sunset and follow this route," he drew a line along the trail to Nghia Toi, from there along the river almost to the main path to Toi Mui, across the paddies to the treeline he designated as the ambush site there. "Mad Greek, you go out fifteen minutes later and go this way." He drew an almost straight line through the woods east of Fort Cragg to the rice paddies between it and the woods south of Toi Mui, through those woods to the ambush site he'd marked there. "I'll go with you. Send Chickenfucker with Socrates, he'll probably need a fourth man more than you will."

Mad Greek grimaced; that meant Sergeant Slaughter was running his patrol. Submarine looked away, disgusted. He was going to miss out on the fun.

"Doc Holliday comes with us," Sergeant Slaughter said to Mad Greek. "If one of those little bad bastards is still alive when we get through with them, I want a medicineman there to keep him alive long enough to get back to S2. The Toi Mui patrols stay put all night or until we catch them. Submarine, your patrol goes out an hour after sunset and stays out until dawn irregardless. Motormouth stays here on the radios. Call signs are the bases." He looked up from the map and at the others. "Questions?" There weren't, not even what "the bases" meant. That was one common set of radio call signs they used. Fort Cragg was Dugout, Socrates was First Base, Mad Greek Second Base, Submarine Third Base, and Hank's reaction force was Home

Plate. "All right then, let's get ready." Sergeant Slaughter ducked into his room to prepare himself. It was going to take him a while, this was the first time in a month and a half he'd gone out on a night patrol.

The three fire team leaders went to brief their men and get them ready for the night's work. Hank had his sergeant get his platoon in formation so he could give them their patrol assignments. Half an hour later everybody but Sergeant Slaughter was ready to go out on their cake walk.

There was something they didn't know, though. Xa had lied when he said the VC were sending one squad with the cadre. They told him they were sending a reinforced platoon. He was afraid if the Americans knew how many VC were going to be there they'd be too afraid to come.

## CHAPTER FIVE

They took it slow and easy getting there. In a straight line the treeline north of Toi Mui was a little less than two miles from Fort Cragg; the route they took was nearly twice that. It was almost an hour and a half after sunset when they settled into the ambush site. They didn't snoop and poop and creep like a grunt battalion in the field, slow-going movement a klick an hour. They went like men who were at home and confident about it, men who knew they might run into someone they'd have to fight, men they wanted to shoot first. Their pace was a slow stroll. The ten men followed treelines for the most part once they left the woods that lined the river East of Nghia Toi. When they had to cross open areas they waited until the intermittent clouds blocked the starlight from the openness they had to enter.

They were close to Toi Mui, close enough that if the bad guys had come early they could hear the cadre haranguing the villagers.

And Mad Greek's patrol was already in position. If the bad guys had arrived earlier he would have radioed that information; he didn't. Instead, they heard an occasional voice in the hamlet raised in laughter or exclamation. Now and again a dog barked. Someone played a radio. Gradually, over the next hour, the flickers they could see through the hedge fence of the orange glow of oil lamps in the hooches blinked out, the laughs and shouts came less frequently, the radio went off, the dogs quieted down. Except for one lamp that stayed lit for another hour—Socrates thought that lamp was in Xa's hoots. He figured the hamlet chief was sitting up, waiting for his unwanted visitors. But that lamp finally went out too, and Toi Mui was just a dark shadow against the dark woods in the dark night.

Every half hour Socrates radioed in his sitrep, then listened to the sitreps of the other two patrols and Hank's reaction force. They were always the same: Situation as before. There was nothing else to do except listen to the cicadas buzz, the bats squeak, the night fliers squawk, the lizards fukyo. That's the way it was for two hours. After

that, Socrates let Sneaky Pete and two of the PFs go to sleep while the others stayed alert.

Socrates lay awake in the treeline. It was hard staying awake. If the bad guys didn't come soon this could be a long night—he wasn't going to sleep until they were all safe back at Fort Cragg. It was just like on the soccer field, he had to be alert all the way, everyone depended on him. Chickenfucker was awake on the left side of the line, farthest from Toi Mui. If the VC came from the north he'd be the first one to see them. One awake PF was between them, two others were awake to his right, one PF watched their rear. Captain Hook held the other end of the line. The first time Socrates had seen a treeline, it reminded him of the hedgerows in France his uncle Jim had described to him—Uncle Jim had fought through them in World War II. They weren't simply lines of trees, they had been there for too many centuries to be that simple. Over the generations the ground in the treelines built up while the cultivated ground next to them sank, the treelines were high, thick dikes with vegetation growing on them.

The clouds thickened during the night, blanked out the stars more frequently, making the night sometimes too dark to see across the paddies. Despite the lack of a moon the stars gave enough light to see by—when they weren't blocked by the clouds.

On an ordinary night he might let half of his men sleep at a time and take a turn dozing himself. Not tonight, though. Not with company definitely expected. Not when something didn't sound right about the information they had on this visit. Not when he had the stranger to think about.

*"What's your name,"* he'd asked the stranger. *"We operate on a need to know basis,"* the stranger had replied. *"That's not something you need to know."* And *that's a crock of shit*, Socrates thought. First things first, though. As much as he wanted to figure out who the nameless stranger was and what he wanted, he had to be on the alert for bad guys to show up here tonight.

It didn't surprise him that Charlie would come to Toi Mui for food and supplies. Toi Mui was the logical choice in the village. But sending a cadre to talk up the people? That didn't make as much sense. There would be noise and probably lights, they could attract the attention of the Marines. The VC couldn't know the Marines didn't plan to patrol Toi Mui, the patrol routes were never drawn until an hour or two before the first one went out. So they were taking a chance. He thought about it, did the patrols follow any sort of pattern?

No, none he could think of. Toi Mui was patrolled at least once every four nights, sometimes two nights in a row. It hadn't been covered last night. Or, he remembered, the night before. That made it at least fifty-fifty they'd have a patrol in the area tonight. He grimaced. If Charlie was sending a tax collector, he'd send more than a squad to carry the food he'd collect. And he'd need to send protection along with the two officials and the bearers. Also, it bothered him that the VC told Xa they were coming. Why did they tell him? He could understand if the VC told Xa late this afternoon so he'd be there when they showed up, but why so early? Did they really think he wouldn't pass the word on to the Marines?

The more Socrates thought about the situation, the more it felt wrong, the more uncomfortable he became. He wasn't aware of what his body was doing while his mind was working; his body was trying to sink into the hard dirt of the treeline.

There was no question about it; there was a whole platoon coming. Maybe even more than that. Still, the twenty Marines and PFs here could take them, drive them away without the VC getting any food and supplies, kill enough to hurt them badly.

Cautiously, careful not to raise up far enough to make a silhouette against the horizon, Socrates lifted his head and shoulders and looked all around. No movement caught his eye, no night shadow seemed out of place. He hadn't expected to see anything, the area around this treeline was too open for anyone to think they could cross it without being spotted, not unless they knew the clouds better than anybody could expect, well enough to be confident the clouds would cast their blackness long enough to get through the open before the clouds rent again. Then he thought about Mad Greek's ambush, south of Toi Mui, inside the woods. Suddenly he realized the VC were setting a trap, there was no other explanation for what was happening. And Mad Greek's ambush was in the middle of it.

He grabbed for his radio, to warn the other patrol, but stopped himself before he pressed the speak-lever on the side of the handset. If the VC were being sophisticated about this they had a radio set to the Marines' patrol frequency and someone who spoke English was monitoring it. There was no way the VC could tell where the Marines were from what they said over the radio because they never described their locations, only used checkpoint designations that weren't decided on until the patrol routes were drawn. So how could they do it? If this was a trap that meant there had to be enough bad guys in the area to



cover every possible place the Marines and PFs could set their own ambushes. Or did it? He pictured the map in his mind and thought about how he'd set a trap here if he was certain he could lure a VC platoon into positions around Toi Mui.

Toi Mui only had two entrances, so the most likely places for the people he was trapping to set their ambushes were the two places the CAP had set its ambushes. So he'd station a platoon in the woods to the south, deep enough that if the squad setting in on that side wouldn't find it if it swept the area before going to ground. That platoon could assault the southern ambush once it knew exactly where it was. There were two treelines within easy small arms distance of the one his ambush was in, they could catch him in a crossfire when he pulled his men out to go to the aid of the other ambush. But that didn't make enough sense. If they opened up on him at that range at night they probably wouldn't hit anyone, only keep them pinned down. Then again, pinning him down here would allow the force on the south side to deal with Mad Greek without fear of reinforcements arriving. He was suddenly very afraid. The Marines had set their ambushes in the obvious locations. The enemy knew, had to know, almost exactly where they were—if they were here like he thought. And he was sure they were. His body tried again to sink into the earth of the treeline.

How would they spring the trap, how would they do it to make sure they got as many Marines and PFs as possible? Then he remembered that the Viet Cong sometimes sacrificed men, used them as decoys to lead Americans into traps even if it meant their own men being used as the decoys were going to get killed in the process. Then he knew how they were going to do it. By now, the VC might even be moving closer. Now, how to warn Mad Greek without letting any listeners know he figured it out?

He thought of something Mad Greek would understand that a Vietnamese probably wouldn't and picked up his radio. "Second Base, Second Base, this is First Base, over."

Rodin's response came immediately.

"Gimme your actual, Two."

"Ah, my actual, One?" Rodin asked slowly. In radio communications, the "actual" was the leader, tonight Rodin had two "actuals" with him.

"Your usual actual, Two."

"Wait one."

Socrates guessed Mad Greek was napping, which was why Rodin

had the radio. You never used names over the radio, that's why he had to be circumspect about saying who he wanted to talk to. He wondered why Sergeant Slaughter wasn't on the radio if Mad Greek was sleeping, but was glad he wasn't, he wanted to talk to the Greek about this. Mad Greek's voice was slightly foggy when he came on the radio, he must have been asleep.

"Listen closely and only answer yes or no, understand? Over," he said when he got Mad Greek and got an affirmative response. Where he was, as long as he kept his voice low, it was safe to talk as long as he wanted, that wasn't the case in the woods. "You know what happens when Randolph Scott gets drawn into a box canyon?" Mad Greek answered yes. "Well that's where you are, you're in a box canyon, over."

Mad Greek didn't say anything for a long moment, then, "You sure?"

"Sure as I can be. You're on the pitcher's mound." Socrates had no compunction against mixing metaphors. "You know where homeplate is, right? You've got a runner on first, leading off. You're going to have to throw to the second baseman to get him out. Understand?"

There was another long pause while Mad Greek figured it out. Homeplate is always at the southwest corner of a baseball diamond. The second baseman positions himself to the east of the pitcher's mound. South was behind Mad Greek's ambush. Finally he figured it out and yessed.

"Hang tight, I think the visiting team brought a big rooting section."

Mad Greek rogered and Socrates signed off. A moment later Submarine spoke briefly, he said he was headed toward the first base bleachers. Good, that could put him in a position to help Mad Greek when the bad guys hit, on the flank of the attacking VC unit. Motormouth and Hank didn't say anything, but Motormouth must have understood what it was about. Good thing this wasn't Japan or Formosa, they played baseball there as well and an eavesdropper might figure out what he meant. The Vietnamese didn't play ball, though, not baseball. Socrates grinned slightly, wondering what the PF leader made of the conversation. He'd find out later. Then he wondered how Sergeant Slaughter was going to react when he found out his patrol leaders were changing the plans without consulting him—especially when he was out there with them. But that was Mad Greek's problem.

For now, anyway.

Next he let his own men know what he'd figured out.

Chickenfucker agreed that it sounded possible, but he didn't sound convinced. The PFs didn't say much, but they all looked more alert—and seemed to become more tense than they had been.

"You sure about that?" Sneaky Pete demanded when Socrates woke him. "What are we going to do if you're right, huh? What're we going to do?"

"Kick ass," Socrates told him, and headed to Captain Hook.

Captain Hook didn't say anything, not even an acknowledging grunt, and it was too dark under the passing clouds to see any expression on his face. His posture didn't change when he went back to watching over the paddies. If Captain Hook hadn't pointed his face at him while he talked, Socrates wouldn't have known he'd heard him.

Socrates returned to his position in the line. Now all they could do was wait, but that was all they could do before, so not much was changed. Damn, he wished he had a Starlight scope so he could check out those other treelines. He had long forgotten about the stranger.

Another hour went by with nothing happening but the half-hourly sitreps. Socrates was beginning to have trouble staying awake, the earlier adrenaline rush was wearing off. The radio whispered at him. It was Sergeant Slaughter.

The squad leader wanted to know what made him think it was a trap, but couldn't say more than a few words because the woods he was in could conceal many men fairly close to him. "Explain yourself," was all he said. He had been prowling the area behind Mad Greek's ambush earlier and only now heard about what Socrates figured out.

"It bothered me," Socrates answered. His mind churned, looking for a way to tell his honcho how he figured it out without saying it in the open, "the story we were told. Why would somebody take a chance on it getting to us unless they wanted it to?"

There was a long quiet on the radio, Socrates wondered if Sergeant Slaughter was waiting for him to say "over" before speaking. Maybe he should use better radio procedure when talking to him. But he didn't when Sergeant Slaughter was on radio watch back at Fort Cragg, so it shouldn't make any difference when he was on one of the patrols.

"You know what you're going to do?" Sergeant Slaughter finally asked.

"Yeah." Socrates sighed. If he was right, all he could do was

keep his ambush in place. If they pulled out when the shooting started on the other side they'd expose themselves to a crossfire. Unless the sky was solidly socked in so they could move without being seen.

"Third Base, are you in the bleachers yet?" Sergeant Slaughter suddenly asked.

"That's an affirmative," Submarine said. He sounded nervous, the "bleachers" were far from where his patrol was supposed to be. What would Sergeant Slaughter think about that?

"Good, stay there. Second Base out."

They waited until the wee hours of the morning, when the clouds were breaking up, before anything happened. When it did, it wasn't quite the way Socrates had it figured.

The PF on Socrates' left tapped his shoulder and pointed, then leaned close. "They tell me," he said, passing the word, and gestured to his left. Socrates nodded at that and looked where the Vietnamese was pointing.

Clouds cast their shadows where he pointed making it too dark to see anything, even shadows, but he thought he saw a flick of movement on the paddies. He looked to the sides of where he thought he saw it and it came again. He tapped the PF on his right and pointed. He said, "Pass the word." The PF looked, went briefly rigid, then shifted to his right to pass the word on.

Socrates picked up the radio handset without taking his eyes from the movement. "Everyone, this is First Base," he said. "I have movement to my front. Acknowledge, over."

Motormouth acknowledged, so did Submarine. Then Sergeant Slaughter said, "To *your* front?"

Socrates swallowed. "Roger."

"How many?"

"Too dark to tell."

"Well, stop that movement."

"Roger," Socrates said again. Then he tapped the two PFs on his sides and signaled them to alert everybody to open fire on his command.

A break in the clouds beyond where he saw the movement provided back lighting. Eight men walked on the main dike path through the paddies toward Toi Mui. Three of the silhouettes carried rifles, he couldn't make out weapons on the others. That didn't mean they weren't carrying them. He sighted on one of them and pulled the trigger rapidly three times. Captain Hook's shotgun belched to his far

right, though the walkers may have been out of his shotgun's range. Chickenfucker's and Sneaky Pete's M16s stuttered full automatic on his left. The PFs' carbines chattered in the night. In seconds there was nobody walking on the dikes.

"Cease fire, cease fire," Socrates shouted. The shooting stopped. As far as he could tell, none had been returned. "Report," he ordered anyway.

"Yo," Captain Hook grunted.

"I'm okay," Chickenfucker said.

"No problem with me," Sneaky Pete.

The PFs also said they were all right. Good, no casualties. How many of the bad guys had they zapped? There was only one way to find out, but that meant exposing themselves to the enemy he was still certain were in the nearby treelines. Too bad they weren't closer to Fort Cragg, he could call in for the mortar to fire a couple illumination rounds and maybe they could see bodies without having to go out there.

"Cover me," Captain Hook said. "Lim, come with me," he added to one of the PFs. He was crossing the paddies before Socrates could order him to stay put.

Socrates reported on the radio they were checking it out and would report when he had info.

Lim followed close behind and to Captain Hook's left. They went bent over, as fast as they could slog through the shin-deep water of the paddies. Captain Hook didn't bother zig-zagging. The rent in the clouds that had back lighted the men they'd hit moved so the dike-path was lit by the time Captain Hook reached it. He crouched low behind the dike, exposing as little of himself as possible. Socrates saw him put his head close to Lim to say something, then the two split up for a moment. When they came back together they were both carrying extra weapons. They squatted alongside the dike until the clouds darkened where they were again, then headed back. No one fired at them the whole time they were out.

"Don't shoot, it's us," Captain Hook said loudly before they reached the ambush. He dropped beside Socrates. "Five bodies out there," he reported. He and Lim brought back three rifles and a handgun.

"No sign of the others?" Socrates asked. He sensed more than saw Captain Hook's head shake. He held the handset to his head, pressed the speak lever, and reported the bodies and weapons. Then he said,

"Wait one," in response to a question. "The one with the pistol, what was he wearing?" he asked Captain Hook.

"Pajamas, samee-same the others." Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't the cadre or the tax collector. If they were all dressed the same the only way to tell was to check the bodies for documents. That could wait.

Socrates told Sergeant Slaughter. When the radio conversation was over he said to his men, "We stay put."

Now Socrates wondered if he'd been wrong, maybe this squad was it, maybe there wasn't a trap. Maybe. And maybe Crazy Horse was a scout for the Seventh Cavalry. So what were the VC going to do next? He looked at Toi Mui; no lights had come on, no voices were raised. That seemed odd, the fire fight must have woken people up. Then again the villagers had to be frightened. If the eight men they'd caught crossing the dike were a ploy to get the men in Whiskey 8's ambush to expose themselves to a counter-ambush, it didn't work.

The clouds continued to diminish, the sky cleared, it became easier to see in the light of the stars. People who have never been in the tropics don't know how bright a clear night can be, even without a moon. It can get bright enough for someone with strong eyes to read a newspaper by the starlight. It was turning into that kind of a night. Three-quarters of an hour passed.

"I have movement," Mad Greek said over the radio. A moment later he added, "Shit, they're between me and the ville." He couldn't have his men open fire because they'd be shooting into Toi Mui. "Looks like a squad."

Socrates wondered how they got between Mad Greek and the hamlet without being spotted. Then realized the clouds were still spotty, they came out of the woods under cover of clouds a little east of the hamlet and weren't exposed to the starlight until they were right there. He concentrated his attention on the hamlet they were guarding. No lights came on, no voices raised. They continued to wait with no indication of what was going on inside Toi Mui. The cloud cover dissipated more, to where it was almost completely gone. At length Socrates looked at his watch, it was getting close to false dawn, when the eastern sky would lighten but the sun was still far below the horizon. Had the VC managed to slip out unnoticed? Had the Marines failed in their mission to keep the villagers of Toi Mui from being robbed?

"They're coming out," the radio suddenly kicked out Mad Greek's

voice. "I see twelve of them."

"Don't shoot anyone who's only carrying rice," Socrates said urgently into the radio.

"No shit, Sherlock," Mad Greek said back. "We can see." He'd probably say something to Socrates later about thinking he was dumb, that he wouldn't realize if more men came out than went in, it meant the extras had to be conscripts. That was okay with Socrates, better safe than not. A minute later fire erupted briefly, then reedy Vietnamese shouting came from south of Toi Mui. Socrates knew enough Vietnamese to understand it: The PFs were shouting at the villagers who were being taken to stay down, they were safe now.

Mad Greek radioed he was checking the bodies. Moments later heavy fire broke out, most of it the distinctive cracking of AK47s.

"We need help," Sergeant Slaughter shouted over the radio. "Third base, hit their flank. Now, move it." He didn't call for Hank's reaction force, it was too far away to get there soon enough to help.

Captain Hook looked at Socrates, his barely visible expression was a demand that they go to the aid of the others. Socrates thought about the other VC he was certain were nearby to catch them when they moved. But they couldn't stay here, he knew that.

"Chickenfucker, you and two PFs stay here, don't let anybody take those bodies." He wanted to keep the proof of their kills. To the others, "Let's go. Keep low." He left the radio with Chickenfucker.

They were able to make it halfway to Toi Mui in the treeline before they had to go into the open. He didn't object when Captain Hook, who was in the lead, ran on a dike instead of through the paddies where they'd present smaller targets. They had covered most of the remaining distance to the hedge-fence around the hamlet before a few shots were directed at them from their right rear—from one of the two treelines Socrates thought VC were hiding. Chickenfucker and the two PFs with him answered the fire and it stopped, they'd gotten far enough before being spotted to foil the VC plans to pin them down.

Then they were running around the side of the hamlet. Captain Hook started shouting before they got all the way around, letting Sergeant Slaughter and the others know help was arriving from that direction, asking where they should go to give the best assistance. Sergeant Slaughter shouted directions and Captain Hook led them on a tangent to the firing. He didn't hit the deck and open fire until someone started shooting at them. This time they were within the shotgun's range.

At almost that same time more fire broke out to their right; Submarine and his patrol had arrived. Whistles blew from the VC position which was now inside a curved front of Americans and PFs. The VC fire slackened, most of them broke and ran, only enough stayed behind to prevent pursuit.

Socrates heard Sergeant Slaughter talk to Motormouth on the radio, telling him to call for air support to hit the retreating elements of the VC unit, and for a medevac. Then he asked Submarine where he was and told him to sweep up the flank of the VC who were running the delay. Socrates had his men cease fire so they wouldn't hit their own people. It was all over in only a few more minutes. Only a few, but long enough to make pursuit of the main body fruitless.

"Team leaders report," Sergeant Slaughter bellowed. Socrates was sometimes surprised at how loud a voice that small man could project. Socrates and Submarine reported they had no casualties. Two of Mad Greek's PFs were down and so was Mister Spook.

"They're alive," Doc Holliday called; he was already working on the casualties. The promise he made to the Marines and PFs was; no matter how badly they were wounded, if they were still alive when he got to them he'd keep them alive until a medevac arrived.

"Let's check it out, people," Sergeant Slaughter next ordered. "How many bodies do we have. If any are alive, remember I want prisoners.

Five of the men who came out of Toi Mui were down, three dead. One of the two wounded was a young village man who had been taken as a conscript; he'd been hit in the thigh. Doc Holliday said he'd work on him next. False dawn was now lightening the sky, it helped a little when they searched the woods. They found three more bodies, no wounded.

"Got some blood trails though," Submarine reported. He looked deeper into the trees. "Maybe the wounded will slow them down enough we can catch them," he said.

"Don't bother," Sergeant Slaughter said, "we've got our prisoner." He looked at the wounded VC, at the man's arm, shattered from an M16 burst, and asked Doc Holliday, "He will live, won't he?"

Doc Holliday was now working on the wounded civilian. "If he don't bleed to death by the time I'm finished here, he will."

The radio crackled and Chickenfucker told Sergeant Slaughter, "There's a squad headed toward our kills and another one coming to us."



"Socrates, Submarine, come with me," Sergeant Slaughter ordered and started running around Toi Mui. On the way he shouted at them, told about Chickenfucker's message.

Ground mist was beginning to rise from the paddies when they reached them. The mist blocked their view, they couldn't see anything in the paddies. Sergeant Slaughter yelled out, asking Chickenfucker where the bad guys were. Chickenfucker started to answer, then shouted, "They're running away." He and the PFs with him started shooting.

"Well, shoot their dumb asses," Sergeant Slaughter shouted needlessly. He told the six Marines with him to hold their fire. No point wasting ammunition when they didn't know where the targets were. "Submarine, take your people back. Socrates, secure those bodies of yours, bring them to where the others are." He followed Submarine and his men. Socrates heard him muttering, "Where the fuck's that air?"

Socrates directed his men in picking up the dead VC. Two helicopters, the air Sergeant Slaughter requested, arrived right after they rejoined the rest of the unit on the south side of Toi Mui. Sergeant Slaughter talked to the flight leader on the radio and the two helicopters flew east in a search for the fleeing Viet Cong. They probably wouldn't find them now, it had taken too long for the birds to arrive. No telling what direction the VC had taken once they broke contact. Then Hank arrived with his reaction force. Lai was with him, and went directly into Toi Mui. Only after he entered the hamlet and talked to Xa did any of the villagers come out.

The medevac arrived while the people were milling around as Xa supervised the return of the VC "taxes" to the people they'd been taken from. Mister Spook, the two PFs, the civilian casualty, and the VC prisoner were helped aboard the medevac bird. Doc Holliday spoke briefly with the corpsman on it, telling him the condition of the wounded and what he'd done for them in case anything further developed with them during the flight to Charlie Med.

Motormouth relayed a message from company headquarters to guard the bodies, someone was on their way to get them.

"Tell them they gotta send birds," Sergeant Slaughter said. "A six-by can't get in here." Motormouth did, but it didn't do any good and they had to carry the eleven bodies more than six hundred yards to where the truck waited on the road.

Gunny Bryl whistled when he saw them. "How many casualties

you say you took?" Sergeant Slaughter told him. Gunny Bryl shook his head. That was a better kill ratio than he'd ever seen against human wave assaults in Korea. Maybe he should take back *all* of the things he said about the men who were enlisting in this "New Corps." Then he took fifteen minutes to debrief Sergeant Slaughter and his corporals on the night's activity. He wanted to be more thorough in his debriefing, but these men were tired and still had to walk back to Fort Cragg, a complete debriefing could wait a few hours. Besides, he had to ride back to company HQ with those bodies in the truck. They were going to start to stink soon and he wanted to be rid of them before they did.

The sun had been up for two hours by the time they got back to Fort Cragg. Sergeant Slaughter and Hank talked briefly, then Hank set a watch rotation from the men who had spent the night there and a few of the men who'd been in his reaction force so the men who had been in the battle could sleep. Only a couple of those men bothered to eat anything before collapsing exhausted. The children who came to play with their Marines amused themselves quietly until the Marines woke up. The cleaning women decided to stay away until the Marines were up, they didn't want to disturb them either.

## CHAPTER SIX

The Knights won the state soccer championship that year, despite losing their captain for the final game. Socrates stood on the sideline, leaning on his crutches, cheering on his teammates. He swung up and down the sideline during that game, looking so much like a three legged dog some of the fans who didn't know the Knights thought he was the team mascot and forgot his costume. He kept his left knee bent, the foot lifted safely off the ground and didn't put any pressure on his sprained ankle.

He frequently called out things the players should be watching for, just like he was playing in the middle where he belonged. From time to time a teammate came to the sideline to ask strategy or get tactical advice: Socrates wasn't missed as badly as he might have been. A couple of times he pointed out to a lineman a mis-called offside, once he mentioned an offside play that was simply missed. He was polite about it, didn't want to get an official mad at him and take it out on the Knights. The referee told him once to take his place on the bench, he wasn't allowed to go along the lines like that. He went to the bench until the referee's attention was distracted by the game, then headed for the sideline again. The action was too furious for the referee to bother with him again.

With less than a half minute left in the game, the score was 3-2, Knights, and the Bisons had a corner kick, one of the most dangerous offensive set plays in the game. Socrates stood ten yards back from the sideline, about as far from the goal line as the front of the penalty area, he didn't want to give the referee a chance to call him for interference and maybe give the Bisons a penalty kick. He stood quietly, politely though intensely staring at the halfback taking the kick.

The referee glanced one at Socrates, then turned back in time to see the halfback take his last two steps, shank the kick off the side of his foot, and charge off the field. His attention returned to the play so he didn't see where the halfback went. All he saw was the Knight's goal keeper get the ball and throw it to midfield, where one of his own

men got control and started dribbling down field. He ignored the sudden commotion behind him as he watched the time run out. It wasn't until he blew the whistle ending the game and looked around that he saw where the Bisons' halfback went after his shanked corner kick.

He heaved a deep breath and ran toward the melee of black shirts and red shirts around the kid on the crutches, blowing hard on his whistle. As he drew closer he saw the black shirts of the Knights far outnumbered the red shirts of the Bisons. He waved at the nearer lineman, urging him to stop standing there talking to one of the red shirts and do something about it. The lineman looked away from the referee and didn't move toward the melee of young athletes. Before the referee reached the melee it split, some of the black shirts moving the red shirts away, while the others hoisted the youth on crutches onto their shoulders.

As tired as they were from the hard fought game, the players from the field reached the milling boys on the side before the referee did, even though most of them had farther to run. Why not, they were a lot younger than he was. The black shirts from the field converged on the other black shirts, the red on the red. The two teams went their separate ways, with some angry yelling back and forth, mostly from the red shirts. The referee stopped running and stood bent with his hands on his knees, gulping air into his tired lungs, shuddering from the effort of officiating what might have been the toughest game he'd ever refereed. The near lineman stopped ignoring him and sauntered over.

"What was that all about?" the referee gasped.

"I don't know. Number eight said the kid on the crutches said something to number six." Number eight was the red shirt the lineman was talking to, six was the one who shanked the corner kick.

"What'd he say?"

The lineman shook his head. "He wouldn't tell me."

"Couldn't have been important. Let's go." They left the field. The other lineman, his signal flag neatly rolled up and tucked under his arm, joined them on the way.

The Bisons vowed revenge but none of them, even though it was obvious they all knew, ever divulged what it was Socrates said to number six that made him mis-hit his kick. Socrates feigned innocence and neither admitted nor denied anything when asked about it.

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"For the rest of your lives you're going to remember how splendidly you played today," the Knights' coach told his team while they were waiting for the trophy presentation. "Every last one of you, whether you were a starter or reliever, whether you played the whole game or only a few minutes, you played a major role in this championship." They all cheered at that. The coach gave Socrates a broad smile. "Even our twelfth man contributed." They cheered even harder.

Socrates, crutches and all, not in uniform, stood with the rest of the team for the award ceremony.

That game was on a Saturday. The team met again on Monday, after the last class of the day, for their last team meeting of the season. For the graduating seniors, their last team meeting ever—at least with this team. They voted Socrates Most Valuable Player. The coach pointed out to them that he hadn't played in the final game, maybe he shouldn't be eligible. He was argued down. The team members said they wouldn't have made it that far without him, and his sideline coaching during the game gave them the edge they needed to win. The coach gladly backed off.

The acclamation made Socrates so high he put his crutches aside and hobbled around without them for the rest of the day. The swelling was gone and the tape gave the ankle enough support that as long as he was careful how he put his foot down, he could walk without too much pain. The next day he used the crutches for the last time.

Later that week the coach took him aside for a little heart to heart. "You start making applications to college yet?" the coach asked.

Socrates told him which ones.

"Good schools, all of them. But, listen, pick one with a good overall athletic program. You're a natural athlete on that soccer field. If we had a pro soccer league in this country you'd probably wind up being a first round draft pick, you're that good. So what you should do is go out for the football team as well as soccer."

"Football? I don't have the bulk or the hands to play football on that level."

The coach waved that off. "There's a new style in place kicking coming on in the pros. Soccer style. Most of the top kickers coming up now kick the ball from the side like they learned in soccer. It isn't going to be too long before the straight-ahead kicker is gone. You do this, go out for football. Then you've got a good chance to play pro

football. I'm only thinking of your best interests."

Socrates wondered about that. Was playing professional football what he wanted to do with his life?

His parents were just as proud of him as his coach and teammates. Especially his father. His father had had to work after school to help support his family during the Depression and wasn't able to engage in interscholastic athletics; he'd had to drop out halfway through high school to work full time. Later, before his marriage, he played semipro football for \$5.00 a game. His right arm got shattered by a vicious tackle in the first game of his second season and he was never able to play again. While he was in the hospital he met the woman he later married, she was a student nurse there. The arm kept him from being drafted during World War II, so he missed out on that man's adventure as well. At least that's how he saw war, a man's adventure. It didn't matter what his brother Jim, who was a tanker in Europe, told him about the horrors of modern warfare; it was a manly thing to do and he was deemed not manly enough.

During the war he worked in a plant that made bomber engine parts. He didn't see that as a worthy part of the war effort, regardless of how important it was, or that *somebody* had to do it. Hell, it was Rosie the Riveter's job. He was laid off after Hiroshima put an end to the need for bombers, and his wife—they were married in 1944—went back to work until he could find another job. There's always a need for nurses, even when there's no need for bombers. After a few months he found work driving a delivery truck for a canned goods wholesaler. Local delivery driving wasn't the same as long haul. Long haul was where the better money was. Real men drove long haul—not like the pansies who made local deliveries.

He always said, though, it was a good thing he landed that job when he did. While he was out of work he knocked his wife up. When the kid was born he was so glad it was a boy. He was even glad when the next two to pop out of the oven were girls. The fourth kid was another boy. They decided then that four were enough. That was enough to prove that someone who never excelled in sports, wasn't fit enough to fight in a war, was pansy enough to drive a local delivery truck, still had some manhood in him. Dad never said that to Mom, though. She always thought he was man enough, a far better man than he could ever admit to himself.

Junior played Little League and Pop Warner and pick-up

basketball, Dad saw to that. Dad made sure he went out for every possible sport in high school as well. He was good, the kid was. Not great, but good enough. Until he found soccer; that sport with the curious combination of tight teamwork and individual initiative. There Junior excelled. Dad couldn't have been more proud. He might not have been able to do it himself, but his kid sure could. That proved he had it in him. So what if he was still driving a wimpy delivery truck after eighteen years?

Mom saw things differently. Not that she wasn't proud of her first born for being an athletic hero, she was certainly proud of any exceptional thing any of her children did. Neither had she ever thought her husband was anything other than manly; he'd never demonstrated by word or deed that he was not. Except for his fixation that there was something weak about a man who wasn't an athlete, didn't fight in a war, didn't hold down a rugged job. She thought the only thing wrong was he hadn't been as lucky as she was as a kid. He'd had to quit school to help support his family while her family was well enough off to send her to nursing school and get an education. If her husband had an education, and it wasn't his fault he didn't, he could have a better job, maybe even one at a desk, a supervisor or manager. She knew he was smart enough. And a good enough man.

Education, that was Mom's bug-a-bear. She saw what the lack of one did to her husband, how it worked on his mind. He never let his imagined lack of manliness hold him down, but neither did he ever really rise above it. She wanted her offspring to have an education. Not merely go to a trade school, or even a one year nursing school. College. Get real degrees, all four of them. She made sure they studied every day after school, did their homework. She even checked their homework to make sure they had it right. Every day. When they were young she turned it into as much of a game as she could so they wouldn't learn to hate school and study. They didn't get straight "A's," none of them; there were a few "B's" sprinkled in with the "A's". It was good enough.

Mom knew how expensive a good education could be. Especially since they'd have to pay for more than one. At least the kids were two years apart so they'd never have more than three in college at one time, and then for only two years. Once all the children were in school so she didn't have to be at home all the time she worked as a nurse part-time and all of her income went into the college fund. Dad agreed to that; putting her money into a college fund didn't seem to him to be

any reflection on his masculinity, not like if she had to work to help feed them.

Still, seven years wasn't long enough to put aside enough part-time income money to get them through it, not unless one or two of the kids worked for a year after high school, or one got a full scholarship. That's what really lifted her heart about her first born being a good athlete. Most colleges gave out athletic scholarships. if he was a good enough athlete he might get one. His grades were good enough to get him into almost any school he'd want. Did any schools give scholarships for soccer? She knew they did for football and basketball, she wasn't sure about any other sports.

Socrates did very well on his SATs and duly made application to fifteen different colleges, twelve of which offered soccer scholarships. Eleven schools accepted him. One offered a partial scholarship based on his academic record. Three offered full athletic scholarships. Dad was proud again. So was Mom. She was also relieved; she knew better than her husband did what the status of their college fund was, and what the costs were going to be.

Those were their plans and desires for their offspring, especially their first born. It never occurred to them to ask him what his plans were. After all, they had his best interests at heart.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Captain Vitale came out with Gunny Bryl in early afternoon to finish debriefing them. Nobody, not even Sergeant Slaughter, worried about the fact the company commander had to cool his heels while they brushed their teeth, shaved, did whatever else any of them needed to do first. Captain Vitale let them eat while he caught them up on what happened to the men who were evacuated. Gunny Bryl looked on approvingly.

"Mister Spook got hit by a five round burst," Captain Vitale told them, "but all of you probably know that. The good news is, the bullets that hit him didn't penetrate into his chest, so he doesn't have any organ damage. All they did was chop up his side and crack a few ribs. He'll be out for a month or so, but he's coming back."

"We going to get anybody to fill in?" Sergeant Slaughter asked. "Whiskey 8 is already short-handed."

"Everybody's short-handed," Captain Vitale answered.

Gunny Bryl mouthed, "I'll see what I can do."

The two wounded PFs were also going to be all right. As for the civilian, "They're going to keep him for a few days observation, make sure an infection doesn't set in, then they'll send him home." To Doc Holliday, "He'll be in your care then."

Doc Holliday nodded, it was what he hoped for. Be nice to have a long term patient to deal with for a change, to treat something other than emergencies, skin conditions, and bad teeth. So what if the patient in question started out as an emergency?

"The prisoner's going to survive as well. We hope the Arvins get some good scoop from him. So far, he told us one of the men with his squad was a political cadre," Captain Vitale continued. "Evidently they meant to get an earlier start getting into the hamlet, get there early enough to proselytize the people, but were delayed somehow, the prisoner didn't say what happened. By the time they had everyone in place they thought you probably went back in—if you were out there at all. Then when nobody reacted after you zapped those few in the

paddies, they figured that ambush was all that was out there. They still needed the rice and some conscripts, so cadre decided go in anyway, but not talk up the villagers because it was too late. Also, it seems the cadre had already left. At any rate, the prisoner didn't identify him when we showed him the bodies. I believe he was telling the truth about that because he identified one of the other bodies as an officer." He looked directly at Socrates and said, "Probably the one with a handgun you killed north of the ville." He gave a wry, admiring grin. "What made you sit tight after you ambushed that first bunch?"

"The whole damn setup didn't feel right," Socrates said, then explained why he thought it was a trap.

"But how did you know that?" the captain asked after the explanation.

Socrates shrugged. "It was the only thing that made sense, Skipper," he answered, and took another bite of C-ration beans and pork.

"You always do that, don't you? Think about things, I mean."

"Yes, sir. It's helped keep me and my men alive so far."

Captain Vitale nodded as though that statement explained everything. Maybe it did. Gunny Bryl thought it explained more than the few words said. He smiled and started thinking about getting Socrates a promotion to sergeant and assigning him to command of a CAP of his own. Whiskey 5's commander was scheduled to rotate back to CONUS in about six weeks. Gunny Bryl decided to start working on it.

They finished their early meal and Captain Vitale started his debriefing, asking questions to get as complete a picture as possible of what happened. "Why do you think they kept their reaction force in place after you hit them in the paddies?"

Socrates grinned. "They know when they fuck with the Junkyard Dogs they gotta be ready for anything."

Captain Vitale cocked an eyebrow.

Submarine laughed. "Shit, sir, half the time we don't know what we're going to do next. No way Charlie can figure it out."

Gunny Bryl laughed out loud at that. Hell, this Submarine might just be a short-round, but he was a gutsy little bastard who had the makings of a damn good Marine NCO.

The debriefing continued until Captain Vitale thought he had everything he needed for his report to Fifth CAG, and Gunny Bryl couldn't think of anything else either.

When it was over they headed back to company HQ. By that time it was too late for the Marines to organize themselves to do any more work on the schoolhouse that day. Instead, they relaxed, played with the children, wrote letters, or what have you. Eventually it was time for evening chow. It was Motormouth's turn to cook. He wasn't exactly gracious about it, but he was a better cook than Beast—anybody was a better cook than Beast. Then it was time to assign patrol routes for the night.

Nothing happened that night. For the next week the only thing of any note that happened was they finished building the new schoolhouse. Captain Vitale, Gunny Bryl, Major Wildroot, and Captain Thien, the district chief, came to the dedication.

Somewhere during the proceedings Major Wildroot said in aside to Captain Vitale, "You know, it's absolutely amazing how quickly these people can get the materials they need and erect a building when the Vee Cee are off their backs."

Gunny Bryl and Sergeant Slaughter were standing close enough to overhear. They looked at each other and had a hard time repressing the laughter that tried to bubble up.

When he regained control of himself Gunny Bryl nudged Sergeant Slaughter and whispered, "I heard a rumor about some PFC at Da Nang almost got himself court martialed because he let some unidentified Marines walk off with some lumber and corrugated sheet metal he was guarding. You hear anything about that?"

"Not a word," Sergeant Slaughter said straight-faced. Which was absolutely true; he hadn't heard about the near court martial.

A couple of days more than a week after the ambush outside Toi Mui Socrates got a strange letter at mail call. The envelope had "FREE" written on it where the postage should have been, which meant it was mailed in-country, and had no return address. Inside was a small sheet of plain, white paper with a few words typed on it: "Dump your PFs and meet me on the trail a hundred yards east of Nghia Toi at 2000 tonight."

The letter was undated and bore no signature.

Socrates stared at it for a long time. It had to be from the spook who met with him, Captain Hook, and Sneaky Pete a week and a half earlier. He hadn't thought of him since the night of the Toi Mui ambush. He thought now that was probably a mistake, this was a man

who bore thinking about. He remembered he had never heard Sergeant Slaughter ask Captain Vitale or Gunny Bryl about Lieutenant Convoy, either. He wondered who Lieutenant Convoy was. Now the stranger wanted to meet them again. Socrates wondered what would happen if they didn't meet him. No, he decided, may as well find out what he wants. How the hell was he going to dump the PFs?

Before they went out that night something else happened that made Socrates wonder what was going on.

"Radio check," Motormouth said half an hour before the first patrol was to go out. "We got new batteries for everybody, got a fresh shipment in today, no one should have any problem with communications tonight. Come on, fire team leaders, get your radios. One to a customer, step right up. Don't go fucking with the freq dial, I already got them set to the right frequencies."

Socrates, Mad Greek, and Submarine picked up the PRC20 radios mounted on pack boards and headed outside. Socrates turned right and went beyond the well and the laundry table, Submarine went outside the main gate, Mad Greek went around back. When he reached the concertina wire and brick wall fence Socrates turned on the radio and held the handset to his head. There was no buzz of static. He twisted the volume and gain controls all the way in both directions and still didn't get anything. His fingers hovered over the frequency dial, then pulled away. Motormouth said they were tuned right, so they probably were. Anyway, the frequency didn't matter, he should still hear some static.

He depressed the speak-lever and said, "Blue House, Red Rover One, Blue House, this is Red Rover One. Over."

No response. He tried again, "Blue House, Red Rover One, Blue House, this is Red Rover One. Over." Still no response. He looked beyond the main gate for Submarine and saw the small Marine fussing with the controls on the top of the radio.

Just then Motormouth shouted from the door of the building, "Will you people stop fucking around and somebody answer me when I call you?"

"How 'bout you answer when I call you," Socrates shouted back. Submarine shouted something similar, so did Mad Greek.

Motormouth looked startled. "What do you mean? Nobody called me," he called.

"Bullshit, nobody called you," Submarine said. He had the radio

off the pack board and was opening it. "You sure you put a fresh battery in this fucker?"

Motormouth called the three patrol leaders back in. In the next fifteen minutes they checked all the batteries in the new shipment. They were all dead. Three of the older batteries still had life in them. One of those was in the PRC20 Motormouth used for communications with the patrols, the other was in the PRC24 he used to contact the outside world. Sergeant Slaughter decided to put the remaining battery in a hand-held PRC6 and give it to Mad Greek, who had the all night patrol-the PRC6 didn't use as much power and the weak battery would last longer in the less powerful radio. Socrates and Submarine went out without radios.

"Shouldn't be any problem," Sergeant Slaughter said, "I believe Charlie's going to leave us alone for a while longer."

They stopped near the skivvy house cutoff about 9:30 that night. Socrates signaled the PF they called "Tank." They called him Tank because he was broadly built and very tall for a rural Vietnamese, nearly as tall as Submarine. Had Submarine been any shorter the Marines wouldn't have accepted him when he enlisted.

"No Vee Cee tonight," Socrates whispered to Tank. "You go home, boom-boom wife. No patrol."

Tank looked at him curiously, but it was too dark under the trees to see his expression. The half moon they had tonight gave enough light he could have seen if they were in the open, but not here under the trees. This was a strange request, as far as he knew none of the Marine corporals ever canceled a patrol after it started. Then he thought of where they were along with what Socrates told him. He looked in the direction of the skivvy house and grinned. Now it was obvious, the Marines wanted boom-boom. He looked back at Socrates and grinned wider. These Americans always wanted boom-boom. Why not? They were young men, young men always want boom-boom. And the Americans were so big they must have much boom-boom in them. He almost laughed out loud when he noticed Sneaky Pete rubbing his crotch.

"Sergeant Slaughter say okay?" Tank asked.

"What Sergeant Slaughter doesn't know isn't going to hurt us," Socrates said back.

Now Tank did laugh, but softly. "Numba fucking one. We go home, boom-boom wife. No tell Hank. You do boom-boom numba

one." He grabbed his own crotch and laughed softly again.

"You numba fucking one, Tank," Socrates said. He clapped the PF squad leader on the shoulder and gave a slight push. Tank huddled with the other four PFs, then the five of them headed home to Toi Co 1 and their unsuspecting wives.

Sneaky Pete didn't wait until the PFs were out of sight, he immediately brushed past Socrates in the direction of the skivvy house. He already had his rifle slung and was starting to take off his cartridge belt.

Socrates grabbed his arm and said, "Belay that, Sneaky Pete. I didn't say we were going to any damn skivvy house."

"But I heard you and Tank talking, you said we were going to boom-boom."

Socrates shook his head. "I didn't say that, Tank did."

"But..."

"If Tank wants to think that, that's fine with me. We're going somewhere else."

Captain Hook had listened to it all quietly. At first he was surprised that they were getting rid of their PFs, but it didn't seem likely that Socrates would really cancel a patrol so they could get laid. Now he understood. "You heard from the spook," he said.

"You got it. He wants us to meet him in half an hour."

Sneaky Pete was confused. "But Mister Spook isn't back yet."

"Not Mister Spook, the spook," Captain Hook said. Then to Socrates, "Where?"

"Outside Nghia Toi. Let's go."

Captain Hook took the lead along the trail to Toi Nghia. Socrates followed close behind. Bewildered, Sneaky Pete brought up the rear. He'd forgotten about the stranger.

The stranger was in the driver's seat of a night-lit Jeep, only its parking lights were on, and they were visible only through slits in their covers. "Get in," he said when they arrived.

Socrates held out his hand to stop Sneaky Pete who automatically started to obey. "Who the fuck are you," he demanded.

"You don't need to know who I am. Get in."

"We aren't going until we know more than we do."

Captain Hook moved a step or two to the side so he could better cover Socrates if he needed to. Sneaky Pete aped him.

The stranger gave no notice he saw the movement. "You need a

name?" he said after a moment. "Call me Mister Smith."

"That your real name?"

"Does it matter?"

"What does Lieutenant Convoy call you?"

The stranger paused long enough before saying, "Mister Smith," that Socrates was sure he was lying.

"So you're Mister Smith.

"That's right. Now get in."

Socrates wanted more information, but decided he wasn't going to get any more until they went with this Mister Smith. He got into the passenger seat. Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete got in the back. They had to arrange their feet around packages on the Jeep's bed.

As soon as the three Marines got aboard Mr Smith put the Jeep in gear and drove slowly east. The only thing he said in the next half hour was, "What time are you due back in?"

"Oh three hundred," Socrates said.

Shortly after that Mr. Smith eased the Jeep over a narrow bridge to the other side of the river and drove north for another mile before pulling into the trees along one side of the one-track road. The other side was open land, the moon gave enough light for them to see anyone approaching from that direction.

Mr. Smith took a folded shelter half from the Jeep bed and erected it against its side as a sort of low tent with its bottom open all around. He crawled halfway under the tent from one end and told them to join him. Socrates and Captain Hook got half under from the long side, Sneaky Pete got in from the other end. By the time they were settled, the stranger had a map covered with an unmarked sheet of tracing paper overlay opened on the ground and was shining a red shielded flashlight on it. They didn't recognize the map, but they were familiar with its type; it was an ordinary military topological map.

"Here's where we are," Mr. Smith said and made a mark on the overlay. "Here's where you're going," he said and made another mark two grid squares, two kilometers, away. While he drew a wavy line between the two places he said, "This is the best route for you to take getting there. Take a few minutes to study it, let me know when you've got it committed to memory." He said that last to Socrates.

"You sure I can read a map that well?" Socrates asked.

"I told you, I know everything about you."

Socrates didn't say anything to that, didn't even raise his eyebrows. Yes, he could read a map that well. He started studying it, looking for

any landmarks he could use to orient himself on the ground once they started going that way. A couple of times he pulled his head out from under the shelter half and looked around as though he could see past the Jeep and the men around him to orient himself on the map. After a few minutes he was satisfied he could find his way to where they were going and back without having to refer to the map again. "What are we supposed to do when we get to that hoots?" he asked.

"I didn't say there was a hoots there."

"You'd know there was if you could read a map as well as you think I can."

Mr. Smith grunted what might have been meant as a laugh. "There is a hoots there, I was testing you."

"Testing me? I thought you knew everything about us."

"Whenever possible I do my own verifying of data. Enough of that. There's a main force company been working east of here, harassing the Marines there, hurting the locals. Couple of days ago half of that company ran into a Marine platoon and got the shit kicked out of it. They're looking for a place to hole up while they get some replacements. A cadre is in this area preparing the villes to receive them. Our intelligence tells us he's in that hoots tonight. You're going there and terminate him."

"How good's your intelligence?"

"Never been wrong."

Socrates thought about that for a minute, he didn't believe anyone's intelligence was never wrong, but... The political cadre was a member of each Viet Cong or NVA unit all the way down to platoon. A non-fighting member of the unit, but still an enemy soldier. That made him fair game.

"The route you drew follows paths all the way. Who are we likely to run into on the way? How safe is it on the paths?"

"It's safe, no problem there. You won't run into anybody on the paths. The Americans and Arvins don't have anyone operating in this area, neither do the Vee Cee. The villagers obey the curfew. That's why the bad guys picked it to hole up in. The only forces around are a PF platoon that hides in its fort at night. Nobody's there for you to run into."

Socrates thought again for a moment, then asked, "What do we do if he's not alone?"

"He's not, he's got two soldiers with him as bodyguards. They're probably asleep, too. If so, leave them alone. If they're awake



terminate them also."

A wry smile twisted Socrates' mouth. "If he's not alone, how are we supposed to know which one is him?"

"He's got one arm. Lost the other when he was a fighter. Any other questions?"

Socrates patted his M14, nodded at Captain Hook's shotgun and Sneaky Pete's M16. "How are we supposed to do this without waking up his bodyguards?" He didn't ask why leave the bodyguards alive if they were sleeping, he understood the psychological effect on the survivors of sneaking in to kill a man while his companions slept. They would see someone came in and pick one of them to die, it could just as easily have been anybody else—or all of them. The psychological effect could be devastating.

"Leave your weapons here and take these." He scooted out from under the shelter half. When they joined him outside he picked up another package from the Jeep bed and unwrapped it. It held two handguns and a small rifle. All three weapons had long, thick, round barrels. He pointed one of the pistols at the ground a few feet to their side and pulled the trigger. It made a pop about as loud as a B-B gun, the slide didn't recoil. "That's not loud enough to wake anybody."

Sneaky Pete reached for the pistol and was given it. He pulled the slide back, saw the glint of a round in the magazine and chambered it. He pointed it and pulled the trigger. "Son of a bitch. I didn't feel the kick, I wouldn't believe it shot. Not much of a kick."

"It shoots. Twenty-two long rifles. Put one through an eye socket, it'll bounce around inside and turn the gray matter into mush."

Sneaky Pete held the silenced pistol in front of his face and turned it around, he felt it all over. "Hey, this is neat," he said. "I'd like to have one of these. What is it?" He pointed it away and fired another round. The moon gave enough light for the others to see the glee on his face.

"You will return that piece to me when you return," Mr. Smith said.

"Huh?" Sneaky Pete looked at him, startled.

"You will return it to me.

"What if we have a combat loss?" Captain Hook asked.

"I don't want to hear about any 'combat losses'." His voice was stern. "Equipment isn't the only thing that gets lost in combat."

"What do you mean by that?" Socrates asked.

"You heard me, you know what it means." Had the night been lighter, Socrates though he would have seen threat on Mr. Smith's face.

Captain Hook wasn't as impressed with the silenced weapons. He said, "Can't do much fighting with those if we run into some shit." He hefted his shotgun.

"If these are all you're carrying, you'll try harder to avoid shit," Mr. Smith said. He handed the other pistol to Captain Hook and held his hand out for the shotgun.

Captain Hook hesitated before handing over his weapon. "Make sure I get it back in good shape," he said.

Socrates couldn't think of anything else, not even a good objection to following Mr. Smith's orders, so he exchanged rifles. He also got the red-shielded flashlight.

"One more thing. Don't take any documents."

"What? We always take documents. What do you mean, don't take any documents."

"Exactly what I said. If you take any documents they'll know we did it. If you leave them, they'll wonder, but they won't know. Anyway," he shook his head, "I already know what's on the documents he's carrying."

"How do you know that?" Disbelief was evident in Socrates' voice.

"The same way I know who he is, where he is, what he's doing there, and who's with him. Now, meet me back here at oh two hundred. I'll take you back to where we met."

"You sure you're going to be here when we get back?"

"Trust me."

Socrates stared for a long moment at the shadow that was Mr. Smith's face. Then, "Right," he said. He looked in the direction of their objective, then said to his men, "I've got point."

"One more thing," Mr. Smith said. "Terminate him with extreme prejudice."

"What does that mean, extreme prejudice?"

"Cut off his balls and stick them in his mouth."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Socrates looked back once, when they had gone fifty yards. He made out a faint shadow of the Jeep with a smaller, taller shadow next to it, the spook. He hadn't called him by that name, Mr. Smith, the whole time they talked, he didn't believe it was really his name. He guessed Mr. Smith was going to wait until they were out of sight before breaking down the shelter half they had examined the map under. *I hope he really is there when we get back*, he thought. *We'll be in deep shit if he isn't*. He wasn't worried about whether or not they'd get back. There'd have to be an awful lot of bad guys in the area for them not to get back. If there were that many bad guys, there was no point in worrying.

"What did he mean, equipment ain't all that gets lost?" Sneaky Pete asked when they were far enough away he was sure Mr. Smith couldn't hear.

"Man gets wasted, that's a non-equipment combat loss," Socrates answered.

"You're shitting me," Sneaky Pete said. He held the silenced .22 in front of his face, wondered what was so important about it that a man could get killed for losing it.

For the first few hundred yards Socrates paid close attention to the sparsely wooded farmland they traversed, making sure he understood it in relation to the map he'd memorized. Socrates was one of those men who found land navigation a snap; give him a fairly accurate map and he could find his way from anywhere to anywhere, even if he'd never seen that land or that map before. Navigating strange terrain at night was tougher, but he could do that as well. The night insects buzzed, bats squeed, night birds cawed, lizards fukyo'd. An occasional dog bark punctuated their cries; the dog barks were somehow reassuring.

Once Socrates felt confident about his navigation, he started thinking about that strange Mr. Smith and this even stranger mission they were on. Socrates was a Marine, a warrior. It was his job to kill enemy soldiers. Out there were enemy soldiers whose job it was to kill

him. In a fire fight, combat was boiled down to its essence: your own personal survival depended on killing the other man first. He understood that his very life depended on him understanding and acting on it. As a CAP Marine he was adept at the quintessential form of combat; the ambush. In an ambush one group of armed men lays hidden, waiting for another group of armed men to appear in what is aptly called their "killing zone." When the others walk into the killing zone the men laying in ambush attempt to kill all of them before they have a chance to fight back. It's a vicious thing to do, but killing the other man that way insures *your* life—until the next fire fight. As horrible and contradictory as it may sound, to the man in combat killing means preservation of life.

But what they were doing tonight was something else, Socrates didn't feel at all comfortable about it. Sure, Marines in earlier wars had sometimes crept—one or two or three at a time—into the enemy lines and killed individual soldiers as they slept, sometimes killing one man in in a many-man position to demoralize his buddies when they woke up and realized what had happened. And he had heard stories of Marines mutilating enemy bodies in reprisal for atrocities the enemy committed on Marine dead—or for Marines they'd tortured to death. Some of those stories even said the atrocities escalated until the *enemy* could no longer stomach it and stopped.

Going into an area where there wasn't any fighting going on, to find and kill a specific man, then mutilate his corpse, that he had never heard of. This didn't feel like combat, it felt more like assassination. Were Marines assassins? He couldn't think of any stories he'd heard about that. Small raids aimed at taking out an enemy commander, yes, he'd heard of that. Still, that didn't seem to be quite what they were doing here. And why mutilate the body if it wasn't in retaliation for the bad guys doing it to Marines?

Who was this "Mr. Smith," this stranger? What was his authority to give them missions? Lieutenant Convoy had told them to do what he said—if they were willing. But who was Lieutenant Convoy and what was his authority? He said he was on temporary duty with 5th CAG, but what was that duty and who was he on loan from? Who did he report to above CAG?

Socrates was so wrapped up in his thoughts he almost missed a turn. He stopped, looked around, reoriented himself. "What the hell are we doing here?" he muttered. He wanted to turn back right now and scrap this mission.

Sneaky Pete looked startled, he thought Socrates knew where they were. If he didn't, where were they? Were they lost? Were they going to be able to find their way back? He gave Captain Hook a worried look.

Captain Hook knew what Socrates meant. He shook his head at Sneaky Pete; don't be worried.

Sneaky Pete shrugged. If Captain Hook said it was okay, it was okay. Even if it didn't feel okay. Even if Socrates did have him worried.

They were only a few hundred yards from their objective now, they had been going at the same speed they walked in their night patrols in the Junkyard, a slow amble. Socrates slowed the pace. If Mr. Smith was right there was no need for great stealth, they could walk right in. But what if he wasn't? There's no future in taking unnecessary chances. Finally he stopped at the edge of a small woods and drew the other two close.

"If I'm right, we're only fifty yards from the hoots. We go real slow from here on. When we reach it, I go in first. Captain Hook, let's swap weapons." They traded. "I go in first, you guard the entrance. Sneaky Pete, you come in right behind me. I'll use the light to see if any of them are up. If they are, waste them. Questions?" There weren't any. "Let's do it."

He led them through the trees parallel to the path they'd been following. Fifty yards on was a lone hoots in a small cleared spot along the path. No light was visible in the hoots. It was small, looked like it had one room, maybe twelve feet square. There was one window on the side facing them. No other windows were visible through it, though there was a slanting moon-lightness that indicated either there was another window or the door was open.

Socrates patted the air, stay here, and moved a few yards toward the path so he could see the front of the hoots. He saw a door that was ajar. He knelt on the bare earth under the edge of the trees and listened. After ten minutes in which he heard nothing other than the normal night sounds he returned to the others and looked a question at them.

Captain Hook couldn't make out Socrates' expression in the dark but he understood the meaning of the position of the shadow of his head. He hadn't heard anything either, he nodded toward the hoots.

Socrates turned toward the front of the hoots and stood crouched. He signaled the other two and they followed him. At

the door Socrates stood back to the wall, pistol ready in one hand, the flashlight was in the other with his thumb on the button. He beat the air with the flashlight, one, two, three, then twisted and darted inside with Sneaky Pete right behind. They went to opposite sides of the door, hit the walls and froze, listening. At first they heard nothing but their own breathing, then the soft sounds of sleeping men came to them.

Socrates thumbed the light on and swept it through the room, beam low so it wouldn't show through the window. There was a low wooden platform along one wall, the bed. Two men lay on it asleep; one of them men seemed to have only one arm. A third man lay curled on a reed mat on the floor at the head of the bed. A small table and two flimsy looking chairs sat under the window. A black, peasant pajama shirt with a red armband lay over one of the chairs. A small chest and two tall wicker jugs were against the front wall. A tiny table with pictures of Buddha and Ho Chi Minh on the wall above it was centered against the far wall. Two rifles stood in one corner.

Socrates soft-stepped to the bed. Careful to keep the light away from the faces of the sleeping men, he shined the light on them. Now it was clear, one of the men on the bed was missing one arm from above the elbow. Quickly, not to give himself time to think about it, he pointed the light and the pistol at the face of the one-armed man. He aimed and pulled the trigger. The pistol popped and the man's head jerked slightly, one eye socket flattened with a red spot in its middle. Then the limp, sleeping body went limper and darkness pooled out of the flattened eye socket and flowed down the side of the face.

Socrates swallowed the gag that suddenly filled his throat and he turned to leave.

Sneaky Pete grabbed his arm. "What about," was all he had time to whisper before Socrates jerked his arm free.

"No. We go," Socrates rasped. He took only one step toward the door before spinning at the sound of rustling cloth from the bed. He brought up the flashlight and pistol, ready to fire as soon as he saw where to shoot, then lowered them and left the hoots when he saw what made the noise. It was Captain Hook opening the pants of the corpse to emasculate it. He didn't say anything to the other Marines when they came out, didn't even bother to exchange weapons with Captain Hook. All he did was make sure they saw him and started along the path, back to where Mr. Smith waited for them. He followed different paths on the way back. Mr. Smith was sitting in the unlit

Jeep, patiently waiting when they got there.

Mr. Smith didn't say anything right away. He held out his hands to take the silenced weapons from them, then returned theirs. After they got in he said only two words; "With prejudice?"

"With prejudice," Captain Hook said.

"Oh yeah, we sure did," Sneaky Pete said.

"Shut up," Captain Hook said. Sneaky Pete shut.

Nobody said anything else until they got back to where they started and dismounted.

"I'll be in touch," Mr. Smith said, then turned around and drove east.

"Damn, I'd like to keep that piece," Sneaky Pete said. He pointed his right hand like a child pretending to hold a six-shooter and jerked it.

"Not for long, you wouldn't," Captain Hook told him.

Socrates looked at his watch. "Time to go back in," he said. "Let's hope nobody came looking for us while we were gone."

No one had. Socrates didn't say anything to anyone, but he thought it was very convenient that all of the new batteries they got the day before were dead. Entirely too convenient. Did "Mr. Smith" have anything to do with that? If he did he had more power than Socrates might have guessed. Who the hell was he? All the puzzling did was add to the questions he had about this whole Mr. Smith business, he had no more answers than before.

He dreamed that night.

The Lancers' forwards and halfbacks were lined up behind the midfield line, effectively blocking the Knights from keeping control of the ball if they tried to dribble through. The defenders on both teams stayed safely behind the other players to intercept any play that made it through.

They played man-on-man while maintaining that line, so the only way the Knights could spring a man free to take a pass behind them was to send a defender up; but that would weaken the Knights' defense if the Lancers managed to get the ball and go on the offense. Play was stalemated, with the edge going to the Lancers. Suddenly, Socrates saw how the Lancers weren't sticking to their man on man, not totally—their striker, the center forward, stayed with the ball, switching men with whoever was covering the Knights' ball carrier.

Now he knew how to break the play open. He darted right, toward the far sideline, past his teammate with the ball.

"Get it to me," he yelled as he ran past the ball carrier. Ten yards farther he heard a shout from behind, spun to face backward as he continued toward the sideline, and caught the pass with his instep. He got control and twisted around again, dribbling laterally across the field. Sure enough, the opposing striker was pacing him, five yards off. Simultaneously, the two slowed down to avoid going out of play. Socrates kept his eye on the striker, and when the other player glanced to see how close to the sideline he was, he struck. His pass flew hard and fast. It hit the striker's shin and glanced out of bounds. The striker yelped and bent over, clutching his leg.

Throw in, Knights, in the Lancers' half of the field; the stalemate was broken. Advantage shifted back. Socrates positioned himself a few yards down field from the throw in, just on his own side of the midfield line, a third of the way across the field. He looked all around, fixing the position of all the players in his mind. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the coach standing by his left shoulder. He ignored the coach, he wasn't involved in the play. Anyway, he wasn't their regular coach. Socrates wasn't sure who this coach was.

Socrates shouted and waved his arms to reposition the other two halfbacks and the left forward; this put the left halfback a few yards deeper than he was. Most players from both teams were bunched within fifteen yards of the throw in point. The right forward stood a few yards out of bounds, both hands on the ball, arms bent, cocking the ball behind his head. He looked left and right, picking his throw and avoiding telegraphing to the Lancers where his throw was going. He took two quick, short steps forward, twisted right, then swung left and threw the ball to Socrates. The Lancers went with the fake to the right. The Knights' left halfback sprinted forward and Socrates kicked the ball ahead and left, where the left halfback would intercept it. He was far enough to the side to go around the players at the side where the ball was thrown in. Socrates started forward himself.

"Stay back," the coach said.

Socrates looked at the coach, saw him from the corner of his eye.

"Move to the middle of the field," the coach said.

Why? Socrates wondered, but didn't ask out loud. He did as he was told. Then he saw why he should stay back; everybody, even the Knights' defenders, was ahead of him, only his own goal keeper was to his rear.



"Wait," the coach said.

Socrates bit on his lip, he wanted to move up, there was a clear lane between him and the goal. If someone got him the ball right at the middle edge of the penalty area he could score. He danced from foot to foot, watching the play. The coach stayed visible in his peripheral vision, right there at his shoulder. He resisted the almost overpowering urge to join the fray at the other end of the field. Someone centered the ball, it went right where Socrates wanted to be. He threw his arms up and screamed. The Lancers' goal keeper was out of position, covering the angles from the left side where the ball had been—nearly the entire eight yard width of the goal was open. There was a scramble for the loose ball. The Lancers got it and headed upfield on the left side. Socrates started back and to his left to intercept the play.

"Stay right," said the coach.

Socrates turned his face to him, the coach was still in the corner of his eye. "Why?" He did ask out loud this time.

"Stay on this side." The coach didn't bother to explain.

Socrates back-pedaled, nearer the right side of the field than the left. The Lancers' striker sprinted, barely controlling the ball he dribbled down field. He was so fast he already passed all the Knights except one defenseman who he was pulling past. And Socrates. Only one player, a Lancers' midfielder, was on Socrates' side of the field, coming straight at him. He turned to run with him, stayed between him and the striker to intercept or break up the play if the ball was passed his way.

Socrates saw the line he should take to intercept the striker. It would be close, but was the only chance of anyone getting into the play before it was the striker one on one against the Knight's goalie.

"Stay in this lane," the coach said from his position at Socrates' shoulder.

Then it was one on one, the striker feinted one way, passed the ball to himself in the other, kicked, and bounded around the penalty area, fists pumping into the air as his kick scored.

Socrates turned to the coach to yell, "Why?" He didn't see him anywhere.

## CHAPTER NINE

Socrates woke with a start, sat bolt upright, trembled violently for a second or two before realizing where he was, before remembering the dream was about a game he played three years ago. The semifinal of the state championships. He took a deep breath and lay back down. His mind swept back and he remembered the play. He had run into the open in the middle, not stayed back like in the dream. His kick went wide. A few minutes later the Lancers' striker was alone sprinting down the left side and he had managed to intercept him, broke up what might have been a scoring play. Who was the coach in his dream? The coach is never allowed on the playing field during the game, and that wasn't the Knights' coach he saw from the corner of his eye.

Dreams. Hell. He sat up again. He was alone in the room. Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete must be out in the Junkyard, their weapons were missing. No, not necessarily. They never went anywhere, not even to the shower, without their weapons. He stood up, gathered his own rifle and shaving kit and headed outside to brush his teeth and shave.

He didn't see Captain Hook or Sneaky Pete anywhere in the compound. On his way back in he thought of asking Motormouth if he knew where they were. He didn't, instead he headed straight for the room and got dressed. Then he climbed through the window and left Fort Cragg.

Sergeant Slaughter had been standing over Motormouth when Socrates entered the main room after shaving. "Are you sure you checked them all out right?" Sergeant Slaughter demanded. From the tone of Motormouth's yes-I-did, Socrates thought it must be the tenth time he'd answered that question in the last five minutes. Sergeant Slaughter's rigid back was to Socrates as he went past. The CAP commander was very angry about the batteries; Socrates decided he wanted to be somewhere else.

Doc Holliday was sitting on top of the bunker next to the main gate, playing cards with a couple PFs.

"I'll be in the Junkyard if anybody needs me," Socrates told him. Doc Holliday gave him an uh-huh look. "In the Junkyard" didn't mean much, Khung Toi was a big place. But he didn't bother asking for anything more specific.

Socrates ignored the minor grumbling his stomach made about being neglected, he was headed to the skivvy house—not for a morning boom-boom, but because it was the closest place where he could get a home-cooked meal—and because that was probably where Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete were.

Captain Hook was sitting at a table under the awning when Socrates arrived. He lounged on a straight backed chair that was as rickety as it looked. A plate of rice with bits of chicken and pieces of green vegetable was on the table, along with a small dish of store-bought *nuoc mam*. The store-bought *nuoc mam* was an amber fluid that imparted a mild zest to the food it was used on, a totally different condiment than the bad-milk colored, rotten-fish smelling concoction the villagers made. Mama-san Joy bought it for the Marines because she knew it improved her meal business. She knew few of them would eat the homemade sauce she and her girls contented themselves with. Captain Hook was alternately nibbling from the plate and sucking from a bottle of *Ba Mui Ba* beer he held in his left hand. His rifle was propped against his thigh. Sneaky Pete was nowhere to be seen. Three Marbles squatted in arms' reach, available to waitress or anything else Captain Hook wanted her for. She stood at Socrates' approach.

Socrates pulled up another chair and sat easily on it, then adjusted his position, carefully so the chair wouldn't collapse under him, until he was lounging as casually as the other man, he propped one heel on a block of wood.

"Anything alive in that?" he asked.

Captain Hook shook his head.

Socrates pointed at the plate. "Samee-same me," he said to Three Marbles.

"Bee-ah too?"

"No, tea. Boo-coo tea."

She darted inside. There was a sing-songing of feminine voices from the skivvy house, then she came back out and resumed her position. A moment later Poontang, looking like she'd just been roused from sleep, scurried out with a small tray in one hand. Her other hand held closed the thin silk kimono that was probably all she

was wearing. She confirmed that it was her only garment when she let go to remove the small teapot and dirty glass from the tray.

"Poontang very pretty," Socrates said, openly looking into her open robe.

Poontang smiled and giggled, hastily closed the kimono. She scurried back inside with the tray.

"That's what this world needs," Socrates said, looking at the skivvy house door, "more women running around naked. If there were enough women running around naked, men would be so busy running around getting laid they wouldn't have enough time and energy left to fight wars."

Without looking, Captain Hook slid a hand inside Three Marble's tunic and squeezed a breast. "Wouldn't work," he said slowly. "Can't spend all your time fucking. No man's got that much jizz. Need something to do when you're not getting boom-boom." He withdrew his hand and patted his rifle. "Still gonna have war. Especially when more than one man wants the same woman."

"You're not the only man gets Three Marbles, and you don't fight about it."

Captain Hook looked at him with hooded eyes. It was an expression that meant, don't say another word. "I'm the only man gets her when I'm around."

Socrates was one of the very few men who could get away with saying another word when Captain Hook looked that way. "And you could get a drip because other men do," he said.

Captain Hook shrugged. "Doc's got plenty of penicillin."

Poontang came back out. This time there was a plate on the tray and her kimono was belted. Socrates looked at the belt and shook his head. "Poontang not pretty now," he said.

She made a face at him. "Poontang boo-coo pretty all time." She put his plate down and went back inside.

Socrates sat straighter to eat. The two men didn't do any talking while he ate. Captain Hook was still picking when Socrates finished. They sat quietly, enjoying the late morning. A slight breeze blew under the awning, the day felt comfortable. A little later, after the sun had beaten down for enough hours and the air stopped moving, that's when the temperature would become insufferable. For now, it was comfortable. Submarine joined them.

"Hoo man, I got out a there just in time," he said as he pulled up yet another chair and sat. He hopped right back up to adjust the chair

which had threatened to collapse under him, then sat more gingerly. "*Ba Mui Ba*," he told Three Marbles, then to the Marines, "I think I was the last one out before Sergeant Slaughter put everybody to work. I think he's even got them digging a new shitter hole."

They all shook their heads at that; digging a new hole when it was time to move the four-holer that was Fort Cragg's outhouse was something they always hired villagers to do.

"Sounds like the honcho's in a shitty mood today," Socrates punned.

"I don't know about him, but Sneaky Pete was throwing a shit-fit. I think he got stuck digging the new shitter."

"Where'd he come from? He wasn't around when I got up."

Submarine shrugged, it didn't matter, Sneaky Pete was in the wrong place at the wrong time. When his beer arrived he ordered food to go with it. Captain Hook was still picking at his.

Socrates tried to look into Captain Hook's eyes, but the other man wouldn't look at him. He wished Submarine hadn't shown up, he wanted to talk about what they'd done last night but couldn't while someone else was there. "Let's go take a look at the schoolhouse," he said to Captain Hook.

"Wait'll I chow down, I'll join you," Submarine said.

Captain Hook grunted in response to Submarine, subtly shook his head at Socrates.

The three men small-talked through Submarine's meal. Then Socrates said he didn't feel like checking out the schoolhouse anymore. Submarine suggested they take a walk to Toi Mui, see how the folks there were doing. Captain Hook agreed. They went.

Socrates didn't say much along the way, Captain Hook seldom said much. Submarine did most of the talking. At one point he said; "Too bad Sneaky Pete or Motormouth isn't with us. One a them was with us, I could be Silent Sam, just like you two."

Captain Hook grunted. Socrates said sorry, his mind was somewhere else.

Headed east, they stayed out of the wooded areas, even where the north and south groves closed to two hundred yards of each other—easy ambush range in which to catch men in the open. The three Marines casually walked on the paddy dikes until they reached the cane fields beyond them. In the fields they walked on the well established paths. Khung Toi was home, they didn't have to fear the booby traps the Viet Cong often set along obvious walkways in

contested areas. Along the way they exchanged greetings with the farmers tending the paddies and fields; the Marines in Vietnamese, the villagers sometimes in English.

"*Chao ong*," they said to the men, and added their names when they knew them. "*Chao ba*," to the women. Sometimes there was tittering when the Marines spoke. Vietnamese is an inflective language, how a vowel is stressed will totally change the meaning of a word—this is what gives the language its sing-song quality to Western ears. "*Chao ba*" could mean "hello Missus," if said with the right inflection. Or it could mean "hello bait," or one of several nonsense meanings if given the wrong inflection.

"He-low, Ma-deen," the women said back. Vietnamese is also nearly totally monosyllabic so the people usually had problems with polysyllabic English words, and turned them into several monosyllables. The men often raised a thumb and said, "Am-ed-i-ka num-ba fuck-in one." When they did the Marines flashed a thumb back and said, "Vietnam numba fucking one."

By the time they reached the north-south motor road half a mile west of Toi Mui the temperature had risen so much they shifted to the treelines for the relative coolness of their shade. People worked more slowly now than they had before, but they continued their field work.

Inside the living fence around Toi Mui they saw women and old men going about whatever work they did at their homes: Food was being prepared, a couple of women were making rope, some people were engaged in the never-ending chore of mending their thatch hooches, a hoots was being rebuilt with adobe brick from the new riverside brickworks, someone tended a grill on which lay fish dripping their oils to ferment into *nuoc mam*, people were visiting each other. Small children, none more than waist high to the Americans, scampered about in play.

"See him anywhere?" Socrates asked. "Him" was Nuyghn Lo Xa, the hamlet chief. Captain Hook and Submarine didn't. They didn't see anyone obviously go in search of the hamlet chief, either, but a moment later Xa walked around the corner of a hoots and headed toward them, hand extended, smile splitting his aged face.

Xa gripped their hands, each in turn, and pumped vigorously, all the while grinning around the betel nut blackened stumps of his teeth, bobbing in bow and saying, "He-low Ma-deen. Num-ba one." His smile faded slightly when he shook hands with Captain Hook and looked into his eyes.

"*Chao, Ong Xa. Numba one,*" they said back and bowed respectfully.

Conversation lagged beyond that. Because they had so little direct contact with the Americans, Xa and his people knew few of the English and French words used in the argot the Marines and villagers of the other hamlets used to communicate; they weren't used to the Americans bumbling of the inflections of their vowels and had much trouble understanding the Vietnamese words they used, they didn't know to talk slowly enough for the Americans to figure out what they said in their own language.

But not all was lost, Xa understood goodwill visit. He proudly showed the Marines around the hamlet and pointed out the food stores to them. "No Vee Cee, no Vee Cee," he told them at each cache, obviously very happy that the tax collection attempt met with such total failure.

The adults crowded around as Xa escorted them around the hamlet. It was odd, though. The way the people got close to and touched Socrates and Submarine but tried to avoid touching Captain Hook. That they did that wasn't so odd, not with the face he showed the world. What was odd was the way the adults avoided Captain Hook but the children crowded him more than they did the other two Marines. Captain Hook tousled their hair, knuckled their cheeks, allowed them to climb on him. His expression softened when he looked into their tiny, shining faces. Mothers kept wary eyes on these proceedings but did nothing to interfere.

They met the young man who had been wounded in the fight. He proudly peeled back the loose bandage covering his wound to display the drainage plug Doc Holliday kept in it to facilitate healing from the inside out. He grinned and shook his homemade crutch and said, "Ma-deen bang-bang Vee Cee. Num-ba one." His argot vocabulary was above average for Toi Mui because he saw the corpsman every day or two. He showed them the prescription bottle of antibiotics he took, raised a finger, said, "One," pointed to the eastern horizon, pointed straight up, said, "one," again, to the western horizon, "one." He beamed. "Num-ba one," he finished and put the precious bottle away.

The Marines bowed to him. "Numba one," they agreed. "Very good," they said. He understood when to take his medicine.

There wasn't much reason to stay after that so they said their goodbyes. Xa had mixed feelings when he watched them leave. He had wanted the honor of feeding them a meal, making them real guests

of Toi Mui. At the same time he was glad they had left without eating, he was afraid men that big would eat enough to deplete his larder.

Doc Holliday had his gear spread on two tables under the awning in front of the skivvy house when they got back to it. The skivvy house wasn't one of his normal medcap stops, but, "It's centrally located," he explained to their unasked questions. "Besides, I was in Toi Co 1 yesterday and don't feel like humping all the way to one of the other villes." He didn't bother saying that he suspected many people who didn't have any real complaints, just wanted the treat of being looked at by a *bac si*, wouldn't come to the whorehouse for treatment, so his workload might be easier. If that was his idea, he was right—the line of people to be treated was shorter than usual.

Rodin and Beast were with the corpsman as security. They were drinking beer. Rodin was playing with three children who had fresh, white, adhesive tape bandages on their arms. "They ain't hurt, but it's easier to stick a Band-Aid on them than listen to their whining," Doc Holliday sometimes said when he stuck one on an unmarked arm or leg where a child said it hurt. Beast held Sue-sue in his lap. He fondled her until Doc Holliday said, "Wait until you get her inside to do that." Then he'd stop until the corpsman's attention was on his current patient and go back to fondling her.

Socrates, Captain Hook, and Submarine sat on a bench. Poontang brought them beers, she stuck her tongue out at Socrates.

"I'm sorry, Poontang," Socrates said. "You're very pretty. All the time."

"You talk boo-shee-ick," she said, stuck her nose in the air and flounced away.

Submarine looked after her and said, "I don't know what that was about, but I do believe you're gonna have to wait until Captain Hook leaves so you can grab Three Marbles if you want your pipes reamed." He turned his head to Socrates. "Unless you're willing to take on Beast."

"If you did it, you better believe I can."

Submarine laughed. The only reason he had successfully taken Beast was he caught him by surprise.

They had nicknames, and everyone of them was earned. Beast got his by being big and crude; he had been a bully as a child and still liked to throw his weight around. Captain Hook was named for the



meat packer's hook he carried on his belt. Socrates was the thinker, the wise man. Doc Holliday carried his unauthorized .44 revolver slung low like a Western gunfighter. Rodin was named after a Japanese-movie-monster-that-ate-Tokyo.

Submarine earned everybody's respect at the same time he got his nickname. It was on his first day with Whiskey 8, as a Junkyard Dog.

"Well lookee this," Beast had growled. He loomed over the small Marine who'd just joined them and was being given a tour of the compound by Socrates and Mad Greek. "I didn't know they made Vietnamese without slanty eyes. He's just a little bitty fuck, ain't he." Beast was wearing jockey shorts and Ho Chi Minh sandal—he was the only man in Whiskey 8 who wore civilian jockey shorts instead of the Marine issue boxers.

"That's Corporal Little Bitty Fuck to you, Beast," Mad Greek said. "I heard Sergeant Slaughter say he's gonna make him your fire team leader, get you outta my ass."

Beast leered down at the small man. He figured that was true, Sergeant Slaughter would do something dumb like that. If it was, may as well let the new guy know right up front who was going to be who in this fire team. "Ain't no short-round man enough to be my fire team leader." Very often the shortest man in a Marine unit was automatically nicknamed either "Short Round" or "Mouse."

Submarine didn't let any emotion show on his face as he looked up at Beast. "Don't call me 'Short Round,' Beast. A short round is one that misses its target, falls on its own men and hurts them. I never hurt another Marine." He paused for a beat. "Except on purpose."

"Why you little," Beast reached for Submarine, but never got out the rest of what he was about to say.

Submarine grabbed the reaching wrist, spun, and threw his hip into Beast's thigh, throwing him off balance. He used the leverage he had on the arm to spill the bigger man onto his face, then dropped across his waist to pin him down. Beast was enough bigger that Submarine had no chance of holding him down, so he slapped a hand between the big man's legs and grabbed his testicles.

"Hey, you leggo a my balls!" Beast shouted and tried to roll away from the grasping hand.

"Don't you move, Beast," Submarine shouted back and squeezed.

Beast yelped and slammed his legs together. All that did was increase the pressure on his testicles. He loosened his thighs and bucked. Submarine held on and squeezed harder. Beast's face started

turning red. He struggled to his hands and knees and threw himself to the side, intending to crush the small man underneath.

Submarine let go and landed beyond Beast. He spun around and gave the big man enough of a nudge for his momentum to roll him back onto his stomach, then pounced onto his back and grabbed hold again.

Mad Greek dropped to hands and knees in front of Beast, head low so he was almost face to face with him. "I do believe the man's got you beat."

Beast bellowed and swiped a fist at Mad Greek, who didn't roll out of the way in time to completely avoid the blow. Beast screamed when Submarine applied more pressure and flung his arms backward to beat on his tormentor.

Socrates said from a safer distance, "Better quit, Beast, or you're going to be talking soprano most ricky-tick."

"I'm gonna kill the little fucker!" Beast bellowed, and struggled until the added pressure made him scream.

"Maybe I'm a little fucker," Submarine said through clenched teeth—holding on was getting harder—, "but you won't be doing any fucking at all."

Sergeant Slaughter had stepped outside and watched when the sounds of the fight started. Since only Beast was getting hurt he let it go on for a while, let the big bastard learn some respect for NCOs. Now he decided it had gone on long enough and marched over to them. He stood erect with the toes of his sandaled toes nearly touching Beast's face and roared, "A-ten-TION!"

Submarine glanced up at the bantam sergeant, then back down at the huge body he was holding down. He gaged everything and jumped nimbly up and away, coming to attention when he gained his balance.

Beast scrambled to his feet and spun, looking for Submarine. He was panting and his face was bright red. Later, Mad Greek swore flames were coming out of his nostrils.

"You heard me!" Sergeant Slaughter roared even louder.

Beast flinched at the commanding voice and pulled himself to a semblance of attention facing the sergeant.

Sergeant Slaughter stood arms akimbo, leaning forward at the hips. "Would someone mind telling me what the fuck's going on here?" he asked in a slightly lower voice.

There was a slight hesitation before Submarine said, "Just getting acquainted with the men, Sergeant."

"Checking to see if his asshole's the right size?"

"No, Sergeant."

"Beast?"

"Nothing's going on, Sergeant Slaughter," Beast said, surly, "just a little grabassing."

"Well belay it," Sergeant Slaughter said, glaring at Beast. He turned to Submarine. "And you, Corporal, listen up. Any Marines around here get wasted, it better be the Vee Cee do it. You understand?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

Sergeant Slaughter looked from one to the other of them; he included the other two corporals in his look, made sure they also understood the fun and games were over. Finally he asked Submarine, "Have you met Killer Kowalski yet?"

Submarine hadn't.

"You better meet him, he's the other man in your fire team. Carry on." He returned to the main building. "Beast, get some damn clothes on. Where the fuck you think you are, Coney Island?" he called back over his shoulder.

Submarine stood ready in case Beast wasn't ready to let matters lay.

Beast glared back, he clenched his fists a few times but made no move to advance.

Mad Greek doubled over laughing. "See, Beast, you fuck with corporals," he said when he stood back up, "you get your ass kicked.

"Ah, fuck you assholes," Beast said and stomped away.

Submarine held his hand out to the side. "Where can I wash up? I need to get the crud and corruption off me."

That set Mad Greek off again. Beast's back went rigid, but he kept going away.

"Come on, really," Submarine said to Mad Greek. He waved his hand under the other's nose. "See, it stinks."

"Oh god." Mad Greek staggered back with a hand in front of his face. "Socrates, take this man to Doc Holliday, get him disinfected before he spreads it."

"Wash table's right over there," Socrates said and directed Submarine to it.

Even though it infuriated him, there was nothing Beast could do when everyone discussed the fight over evening chow.

Killer Kowalski had the final word on the subject. "Maybe my

new honcho ain't big enough to be a full-sized Marine, but he starts off low, comes at you from below, and hits you like a torpedo. That makes him a Submarine." It stuck.

Socrates didn't have a chance to talk to Captain Hook the rest of that day. But the patrols were all quiet again that night, so he had plenty of time to think. No matter what way he turned it, no answers came.

## CHAPTER TEN

It seemed to Socrates that Captain Hook was avoiding him. He got up first and headed to the Junkyard as soon as he'd shat-showered-shaved. Sometimes he went along as security on Doc Holliday's daily medcaps, sometimes he went alone. Sometimes Sneaky Pete was up early enough to go with him. Socrates never had a chance to talk to him alone, and he wanted privacy when they talked. There was no point in talking to Sneaky Pete about it. Sneaky Pete wouldn't really comprehend any of his questions, couldn't supply any answers. And if Sneaky Pete was there when he did confront Captain Hook, all he would serve to do was confuse matters so he wouldn't get any answers then either. This was definitely not something he could talk about in front of anybody else. He even left a wake-up call after Captain Hook sacked out after one night's patrol, but Captain Hook was still up and out before his call.

It wasn't until the sixth morning after they killed the cadre that Socrates finally caught up with Captain Hook when there weren't any other Marines around. He found him in the rice paddies west of Toi Co 1, walking west, below Hat Reo Toi, the westernmost hamlet of Khung Toi. Socrates spotted him a half mile away, but Captain Hook was instantly recognizable even at that distance; there was a tension, an alertness in Captain Hook's posture, even when he was at rest that Socrates had never seen in another man that made him instantly recognizable anywhere. Even then he wasn't alone, two young children were with him. Nancy was riding his shoulders and Fart struggled along under the weight of his cartridge belt. Captain Hook ambled very slowly so Fart could keep up. Socrates was able to close the distance rapidly. When he neared, Captain Hook lowered Nancy, who eagerly took the cartridge belt from Fart and hung it around her own thin shoulders. Fart clambered to Captain Hook's shoulders. The children loved to be carried by the Marines, they also loved to carry things for them. It was very difficult for one of the Americans to go about the village during the day without at least one or two of the small

children scampering around him. Even Beast usually trailed a train of the tiny ones. Socrates was unaccompanied today, but that was only because he had shooed away more than a dozen children.

Captain Hook was talking to the children in a soft voice, telling them about America in a matter of fact manner, not trying to make anything sound like magic even though all of it sounded magical to the children, when Socrates caught up with them. Socrates was still fifteen feet away when Captain Hook, without looking around or even changing his voice, said, "Morning, Socrates." He hadn't looked back the entire time Socrates was gaining on him. Somehow, he always seemed to know when people were around, where they were and who they were, even if he didn't see them.

"Good morning yourself, Captain Hook. You know, you're a hard man to track down," Socrates said, joining them. He bent to give Nancy a hug.

The little girl giggled and handed Captain Hook's cartridge belt back so she could climb onto Socrates.

"I like it that way. Man can't find me, he can't waste me."

Socrates snorted. "I'm not going to waste you, Captain Hook, I'm your damn honcho."

Captain Hook didn't say anything. He still hadn't looked directly at Socrates. His face was looking ahead, but his eyes were constantly on the move, taking in everything to his front and sides.

"We gotta talk."

"Talk."

Socrates smiled at Nancy, who was rubbing her cheek against the stubble on his, and glanced at Fart. He wondered how much they were going to understand, decided not enough to matter. "Why'd you do it?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"You know what I mean. Cut him."

"You didn't do it." Captain Hook shrugged, it was a matter of no consequence.

"I told you to stay outside on guard."

"Mister Smith said to." He dismissed his disobedience of orders without an acknowledgment. That, also, was irrelevant.

"Why?"

Now Captain Hook turned his face to Socrates. "Why what?"

"Why did Mister Smith want us to cut him?"

A shrug. "Scare Charlie." It was obvious to him, that kind of

mutilation was something the VC did. Give them a taste of their own, shake them up. He looked away.

The children weren't smiling anymore, they were looking at each other and wondering who it was their friends had cut. It must have been somebody important or Sok-a-tee-sah wouldn't be concerned about it. Chah-lee meant VC, they knew that. But the Marines hadn't fought any VC in more than two weeks now. Nobody had said anything about them cutting VC then. And two weeks was a very long time, too long ago to bring it up now. Also, they wondered, who was this Mee-sta-Smee-tha? They listened harder.

"Just killing him was going to freak them out."

Captain Hook didn't say anything or make any gesture in answer.

Socrates looked at him hard. "Did you enjoy it?"

"No." A flat, emotionless word. He could have been saying breathing was something he took no active enjoyment in.

"I don't understand why he wanted us to cut him."

"Need to know'," Captain Hook quoted.

It was a frustrating answer that didn't answer anything.

Socrates glanced at his wristwatch, it was just past noon, nearing the hottest part of the day. It was also nearly time to eat noon chow. "Let's go back."

Captain Hook turned right on the next northbound dike and headed toward Hat Reo Toi. "Visit," he said. The Marines visited Hat Reo Toi more often than they did Toi Mui, but not often enough. Except for Doc Holliday's weekly medcaps and frequent stops made by Killer Kowalski. Killer Kowalski was infatuated with one of the teenage girls there and visited two or three times a week. So far, as far as any of the other Marines knew, his suit wasn't getting anywhere. The girl's mother always hung around suspiciously whenever Killer Kowalski visited. Socrates went along. The children smiled again, they became animated and eager. They sometimes went to Hat Reo Toi with their parents or the teachers, but any trip with their friends the Marines was an adventure. It distracted them from thoughts about who did their friends cut.

Hat Reo Toi was the middle sized hamlet in Khung Toi; Toi Co 1 and Nghia Toi were bigger, Toi Co 2 and Toi Mui were smaller. It was almost totally residential, though one merchant had a stall that sold cloth by the yard, and farming and fishing implements, and the other odds and ends of peasant life. That stall had a small picnic table

with benches under an awning on one side where people could sit and drink beer or tea—even eat a meal if they felt like spending the money instead of doing their own cooking. Until the Marines had come and established themselves at Fort Cragg food had never been served; peasants can't afford to eat out.

Three wizened ancients with wispy Ho Chi Minh whiskers were seated at the picnic table drinking tea when Socrates and Captain Hook arrived. They smoked hand-rolled cigarettes held French fashion, between forefinger and thumb, so their palms cupped their chins when they raised the cigarettes to their mouths. Their dark, deeply creased faces that cracked into smiles when the Marines arrived looked like they had been carved by an inept Gepetto. Socrates and Captain Hook bowed back, helloed, and asked permission to sit. The two children stood quietly behind the Marines until permission was granted, then climbed onto the table itself and faced the Marines rather than sitting on the benches. They wanted to be in dominant positions, the better to flaunt their ownership, when the local children they knew were going to congregate showed up.

The merchant, a middle-aged man the Marines called Seller Sam, came out and bobbed a bow at them. They exchanged pleasantries, then the Marines ordered tea and food for themselves and the children. Seller Sam brought the tea out in a pot, he knew the Americans liked to drink a lot of tea and didn't want it served one glass at a time like normal people. They drank the tepid tea from plain soda fountain-type glasses. The food took a few minutes longer. Today it was a noodle and vegetable soup and dishes of plain rice with homemade *nuoc mam* sauce on the side. Seller Sam understood the Americans liked a varied menu and did his best to accommodate them, but the variety was from day to day rather than a choice all at once. He did too little business in prepared food to cover the inevitable wastage if he offered more than two items on any one day. The Marines let the children have the lion's share of the rice and all of the *nuoc mam*.

More than a dozen toddlers and slightly older children soon were crowded closely about, jostling each other and pressing themselves against these foreign giants by the time the soup and rice were served. Older children, the age of Nancy and Fart, stood more sedately a few feet away. The occasional shoves they delivered to one another and the envious looks they cast at Nancy and Fart ruined their poses of dignity.

Socrates and Captain Hook smacked their lips over the soup and



made complimentary noises about it. Seller Sam was very pleased at this appreciation of his wife's cooking. The Marines didn't like the soup as much as they pretended, but it did beat the C-rations they would have eaten at Fort Cragg.

After they ate, the Marines played with the children and made small talk with the three old men for more than half an hour before heading back to Fort Cragg. The gaggle of children from Hat Reo Toi followed them halfway to Toi Co 1. One of the most important reasons for the impromptu visits to the various hamlets was some of the people might know something about VC plans and tell the Marines. Nobody had advanced to tell them anything. Maybe that was because they were afraid to, maybe because there was nothing to tell. Still, they had let the people know they were in and part of the village, another dab of cement to weld the two groups together.

Socrates didn't ask Captain Hook anything else about the incident nearly a week earlier, he was going to have to get his answers somewhere else. Except for one rhetorical question.

"Who the hell is Mister Smith?"

"Spook." That was all Captain Hook knew, all he cared to know. Mr. Smith gave him another opportunity to kill VC, and that was the only thing of importance.

The children in Toi Co 1 didn't mob them as usual when they passed through on their approach to Fort Cragg. They came around, but kept a slight distance. Instead of shouting and laughing and wanting to be carried by or carry things for the Marines, they looked at them with solemn eyes. The adults were more polite than usual. Socrates and Captain Hook exchanged glances, but didn't ask anyone what was going on. Nancy and Fart dropped away and ran to join the other children. They wanted to know what was going on and that was the fastest way to find out. Socrates and Captain Hook had to wait until they got back to Fort Cragg to find out.

Beast was the first to spot them when they got back. "There he is, the number one his ownself," he shouted.

"How's it feel to be the most wanted man in Quang Tin Province?" shouted Killer Kowalski.

"Number one on the hit parade," Sneaky Pete added.

"Hey, I'm number two, I try harder," Doc Holliday called out.

"I'm insulted," Motormouth said. "Twenty-five dollars? Well, fuck them. And their grandmothers wear combat boots."

"You forgot the mattresses their round-heel mothers wear on their backs," Killer Kowalski said.

Socrates looked about quizzically, wondering what it was all about. Captain Hook glared at the catcalls, he wanted them stopped right now. Sergeant Slaughter was lounging on the veranda, watching them expressionlessly. He hooked a finger at them. Some sheets of paper were tacked to the wall by the door. Socrates headed for him, Captain Hook went a little faster.

"You think we're doing a good job here?" Sergeant Slaughter asked when they reached him.

"Yes," Captain Hook said.

Socrates looked at him like that was a dumb question. "No shit, we're doing a good job."

"You think you two are doing a good job?"

Captain Hook didn't bother answering.

Socrates said, "A number-fucking-one job."

"Well you ain't the only ones think we're doing a good job." He jerked his thumb at the pinned up sheets of paper. "these got distributed in Toi Co 2, Toi Mui, and Nghia Toi last night. Chief Lai brought them in this morning while you two were off gallivanting all over the place."

Socrates and Captain Hook looked. There were twenty sheets of paper in all. Eight were regular 8 1/2 by 11 sheets of typing paper, the other twelve were sheets cut in half. They were crudely mimeographed. Each sheet had one man's name on it; the smaller ones named the five hamlet chiefs and each of the Marines below the rank of corporal except for Captain Hook. The full-size sheets also had faces drawn on them. The faces were so rudely caricatured as to be unrecognizable. The messages were written in Vietnamese and poorly translated into English. The smaller ones offered a bounty of fifty dollars for the death of each of the hamlet chiefs, twenty-five for the named Marines. Those with drawings offered more.

The three larger sheets on the top row were for: "Village Chief Nuyghn Phu Lai, chef agent of Saigon illejitamate government;" "Man Calld Hank, leader of Popular Forces trators to the people;" and "*Trung Si* Slaughter, so called leader of American monsters who kill inocent peoples who only seek to live in peace." Each offered \$250 to anyone who killed them. Socrates found his poster on the bottom row along with those for Submarine and Mad Greek, they each had a hundred dollar bounty on their heads. There were two posters in the

middle row. One offered \$1,000 for "*Dai uy* Hook, secret leader of American monsters. Murderer of hundred of innocent Viet Nam peoples. He use cruel hook to hang children and woman until dead." The other put a price of \$500 on the head of "*False Bac Si* Holiday. He give poison to people and say it good medicine. He poison water in river of Gian Sap village when he ther so fish poison people. he poison rice padde there also."

Socrates examined all of them before saying anything. When he did, "I think they must have dropped a zero from mine." He looked at Sergeant Slaughter. "Think we can send it back to the printer for a correction?"

"This is no laughing matter, Socrates," Sergeant Slaughter said. "That twenty-five bucks for the men or the fifty for the hamlet chiefs, that's nothing. There's no one in the Junkyard bad off enough to waste one of us for that kind of money, not unless he's pissed off at someone." He angled a quick look at Beast. "But the hundred for the fire team leaders, that's beginning to be serious money. You have any idea what five hundred, a thousand dollars means to a Vietnamese farmer?"

"Yeah, I know." In a country where \$30 a month was a good income for a family, a thousand dollars represented several years of high living. "You don't think anybody's going to try to collect, do you?"

"Shit," said Beast, "if I didn't like him so much, I'd waste Captain Hook's ass my ownself for a thousand bucks greenback."

Captain Hook cocked an eyebrow at Beast, but didn't say anything.

Sneaky Pete spoke for him. "Beast, maybe if you had an ICBM you could waste Captain Hook. Anything else, you'd have to be too close and he'd zap you first. Go ahead, try it. You'll see." He laughed at the glare he got from Beast. He didn't worry about that monsterman, not with Captain Hook around.

"Belay it, people. This is serious. I want everyone, especially the people with real money on them, to be extra careful. And be real good to the Junkyard people, it'd piss me off something fierce if one of us got wasted so someone could collect on this. Bad enough we got to contend with Charlie without having to worry about the people. I've already notified Company, someone's coming out to collect these wanted posters, hand them over to S2."

"What's that going to tell anybody?" Socrates asked. He didn't

think there was any information to be gotten from the wanted posters.

Sergeant Slaughter grinned. "It'll tell the powers that be how good a job we're doing, that Charlie hates us bad enough to circulate rewards to waste us." That drew a laugh that he let run its course before continuing, "Until further notice, Chief Lai and Hank spend their nights in Fort Cragg, so do any of the hamlet chiefs that want to. And I'm going to start enforcing the rule that no swinging-dick in this unit goes out the gate alone. No time, no how, for no reason. Understood?" That drew a chorus of complaints, but nobody objected too strenuously. As it was, few of them went out alone except to join somebody who was already out and nearby. "I'll let you know if the Skipper comes down with any new directives for us to deal with this situation. Carry on." Before they scattered he got their attention again. "Some of you go into the Junkyard, show them little bastards their rewards don't scare us."

"Anybody got a marking pen?" Rodin asked. "Twenty-five dollars to waste me? That's pure bullshit, my carcass is worth more than that."

"What do you need the marking pen for?" Submarine asked.

"Gonna post another reward. Fifty bucks to the Junkyard's village treasury if I make it back to The World alive."

Submarine, the smallest Marine in the unit, looked up at Rodin, the biggest, and said, "You know, it's damn unusual, but for such a big man, sometimes you seem like you've actually got more than two brain cells to rub together."

Rodin looked down at Submarine and asked quizzically, "What do you mean, are you saying big men are dumb?"

"You know how it is, always hitting your heads on things. Tree branches, high buildings, mountain tops, low flying aircraft. Knocks dumb into tall men."

Rodin continued to look down at Submarine for a moment, then said, "It's a good thing for you I don't believe in picking on midgets. You'd be in deep shit."

"Nah. What you mean is it's a good thing I've got more stripes than you do. Otherwise you'd wind up in the brig for manslaughter. Listen, I'm gonna go talk to Mad Greek. He won't swap you straight up for Beast, but maybe if I kick in Killer Kowalski. How'd you like to be my fire team?"

"No way, Submarine," said Mad Greek, who had overheard the exchange. Beast and Killer Kowalski together aren't half the Marine

Rodin is."

"Sure they are. All by himself, Beast's almost as big as Rodin."

"Ain't what I meant, Submarine. Ain't what I meant."

They had another two and a half hours before evening chow, so all of them went out into the hamlets of Khung Toi. They went to all of them except Toi Mui, which was too far away to get to and back in time, not if they were going to spend any time there. Doc Holliday decided to run a medcap in Toi Mui the next day.

Rodin got a marking pen and made his sign. He posted it in the Toi Co 1 square. Consequently, the people in Toi Co 1 relaxed with the Marines. It was the only hamlet they visited where the people did.

Gunny Bryl had come and gone by the time they reassembled. In addition to his driver, Gunny Bryl brought along one of the clerks from company headquarters to be an extra rifle. Just in case there were more wanted posters out there nobody'd seen yet. Like one on him.

"Yeah," Gunny Bryl said when he saw the wanted posters, "it's like I said, you're doing a good job out here. This'll tell higher-higher that. If I haven't already convinced them. Wanted posters on Marines." He shook his head. "What the hell kind of war is this? Wanted posters. Jesus." He shrugged. "Guess it just goes to show who the baddest bastards on this block are."

Spirits were higher than usual at the evening meal. An observer who looked closely might have spotted the nervous undercurrent to the high spirits. All five of the hamlet chiefs chose to spend that night in Fort Cragg, even Xa came there instead going as usual to the district headquarters. Xa brought his entire seven member household. Lai and the other hamlet chiefs only brought their wives and any small children living with them, a total of six more little ones. Hank brought in his wife and four children. Sergeant Slaughter assigned an open area of the compound to the nearly thirty civilians. They lay out their sleeping mats and prepared for the night as though it was a treat.

The PFs who weren't patrolling were all assigned to night security for Fort Cragg because of the threat posed by the wanted posters. Eventually the three patrols went out for an uneventful night. The next day Sergeant Slaughter, Lai, and Hank decided there wasn't really much point in assigning so many men to the night security of Fort Cragg, more of them should get a solid night's sleep so they could be properly rested for their day's work in the fields.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Up 'n at 'em, Socrates. No amount of beauty sleep is going to do you much good."

Socrates stirred at the shaking of his cot. He rolled away from the voice and pulled the beach towel over his head. "Go 'way," he mumbled. It had been a long, boring night on patrol, he didn't want to wake up yet unless it was an emergency. "Lemme know when Charlie's through the wire." *That* would be enough of an emergency to get up for.

"I plan to go away," the voice said. "And you're going with me."

The cot was shaken again, more violently than the first time. A couple of other voices in the background impinged on Socrates' consciousness, but not enough for him to make out the words. He swiped backward with a hand, trying to make the voice go away. All he accomplished was pull the towel off his head, letting the bright light of day slam against his eyelids. He groaned and tried to pull the towel back, but it was jerked out of his grasp.

"Come on, I need company and you're it."

"O-oh, what time is it?" Socrates draped an arm over his eyes.

"Reveille time."

"Bullshit." He groaned again and rolled into a sitting position. He blinked against the strong light in the room and rubbed his eyes. Doc Holliday was standing at the foot of his cot, hand on its end, ready to give it another shake. He let go and looked at his watch. "You've had six hours sleep, that's enough," he said. "Get dressed, you're going to Toi Mui on my medcap."

"Why me?"

"Because Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete are going and I want somebody along to control them, that's why. Now get up. That's an order, Marine."

Doc Holliday was a Pharmacists Mate Second Class, a higher rank than Socrates, equal to Sergeant Slaughter. Technically, though, a medical corpsman was out of the chain of command and can only give orders to a Marine when it's a medical matter. And then the relative

ranks of the men doesn't matter, a PM3 can give orders to a lieutenant. In theory, that is. Who went along as security on a medcap wasn't exactly a medical matter. None the less, when Doc Holliday said who he wanted to go along with him, he was obeyed.

Socrates turned and lowered his feet to the floor, they slipped right into his Ho Chi Minh sandals. "Gimme half an hour," he mumbled.

"Don't need a half hour," Doc Holliday said. "You can get away without shaving, all you gotta do is wash your face and brush your teeth."

Socrates squinted up at him. "Gotta chow down, too."

Doc Holliday shook his head. "We'll eat when we get to Toi Mui. Move it, time's wasting. I want to get there and be working before the day gets too hot. Besides, *Ong Xa* has already taken his family and gone home. We shouldn't leave them alone for too long right now."

"Eat there?" Socrates, fully awake now, looked directly at Doc Holliday.

"Eat there." Doc Holliday returned the look.

"You know what that means?"

"No shit."

Sniping and booby traps aren't the only ways of killing a man who has a price on his head. Socrates thought about it for a moment, wondered what kinds of poisons the villagers might have available, what kinds of native foods might prove to be toxic. He didn't like what he was thinking, but, "You're right," he said. He stood up and headed out to the wash table. They had to show the VC the wanted posters didn't scare them; and they had to show the people they weren't suspicious of them, didn't think any of them would try to collect.

When he got back to the main house he found Sneaky Pete with Sergeant Slaughter, trying to talk him into letting them take the truck on the medcap.

"No, you can't have the car," Sergeant Slaughter said decisively. "You're gonna walk, just like always."

"Ah, come on, Sergeant Slaughter," Sneaky Pete wheedled, "we already seen the whole damn world." He referred to the Marine in-joke that said when you joined the Marines you saw the world—one step at a time.

"You can good damn well see the whole world again. No car." Then Sergeant Slaughter noticed Socrates and said to him, "Explain to this dickhead why you're walking to Toi Mui." He went into his room

and closed the door.

Sneaky Pete pouted at Socrates. "Why do we gotta walk? It's a long way to Toi Mui. Besides, there might be snipers out there."

Socrates looked at the closed door of Sergeant Slaughter's room and wondered why they had to walk. Sneaky Pete was right about it being a long way, and about the possibility of snipers. Snipers who would have a harder time getting a hit on a truck moving at 25 miles per hour than on a walking man. "Because we're C-ration fed, foot-operated, killing machines," he said. "How the fuck do I know why we can't take the car? Get ready."

"You can do better than that," Sergeant Slaughter said through his door.

Socrates looked at the door again, then repeated, "Get ready."

"I am ready." Sneaky Pete didn't look at Socrates.

Socrates went into their room and got dressed. He was back out in a couple of minutes. Sneaky Pete was no longer in the main room. Socrates found him on the veranda with Captain Hook and Doc Holliday. They were ready to go, though Sneaky Pete still looked cross. He also an extra magazine bag.

"Put it back," Socrates said.

"Why?" Sneaky Pete asked, putting a protective hand on the magazine bag.

"Because if we're going to show everybody Charlie don't scare us and we trust the people, we have to look normal, that's why." Then Socrates knew why they couldn't use the truck. He'd explain as they went along. "We're carrying more than enough ammo for anything we might run into. You don't need all that extra ammo. Put it back." Sneaky Pete normally carried 200 rounds for his M16, doubling it would be a sign of fear. Socrates carried his usual four magazines on his belt in addition to the one in his M14. Captain Hook and Doc Holliday had their usual compliment of ammunition. "We aren't going to see any thing bigger than a squad. If we don't have enough ammo for that, we're fucked no matter how much we're carrying. Put it back."

Sneaky Pete went reluctantly, but he put the extra ammo bag back. Captain Hook watched the exchange expressionlessly, Doc Holliday nodded approval of Socrates insistence on looking normal. When Sneaky Pete came back out, carrying only his usual daytime weaponry, he was mumbling, "Goddam corporals gonna get us all wasted. Got money on us now, peoples gonna try and kill us. Then what's my



mama gonna do, she gets her boy back in a goddam bodybag."

"Shut up, Sneaky Pete," Doc Holliday said. "Anybody tries to collect, they're going for Socrates before they go for you because he's worth a hundred bucks and you're only worth twenty-five." He looked at Socrates. "And Socrates is safe when he's with me because the little bad bastards put \$500 on me and they want me first. That's why I'm going with Captain Hook, he's primo, so they're going to ignore me in favor of him. And you just know nobody's going to get Captain Hook."

Captain Hook grunted. He stepped off the veranda and headed toward the main gate without bothering to look if the others were following him.

"Let's *di di*," Socrates said. He and Doc Holliday caught up with Captain Hook in a few steps.

Sneaky Pete stood scratching his head for a few seconds, thinking about what Doc Holliday said. It seemed to make sense, but he wasn't quite sure. Yeah, the others had higher prices on their heads, but twenty-five bucks meant something to these people. How could Doc Holliday be that certain nobody was going to try to zap him for that kind of money? He looked up and started. The others were already halfway to the path leading east from Toi Co 1. He ran to catch up. No way was he going to get caught alone out here, not when somebody could collect a month's wages for wasting him. How come we gotta walk, he demanded when he reached them. Captain Hook told him to shut up. He shut and listened while Socrates explained why they had to act like nothing was out of the ordinary, and that taking the truck to Toi Mui was out of the ordinary. He puzzled over it the rest of the way. What continued to worry him was; maybe nobody in the Junkyard could believe the grand on Captain Hook was for real, maybe none of them could imagine that much money in one place at one time and all of it belonging to one person. But he just knew they all knew what twenty-five dollars was. That was almost as much as most of them made in a month, that much money they could understand. Sneaky Pete was aware that no children were mobbing them on their way to Toi Mui, but only slightly aware. He didn't notice how tentative the people tending the paddies and fields were when they greeted the passing Marines.

"I do believe these people are more freaked out about those wanted posters than Sneaky Pete is," Socrates said when nobody shouted out greetings when they entered Toi Mui and none of the

children crowded around them.

"That's why we're here," Doc Holliday said.

This time Sneaky Pete noticed how the people were keeping their distance. "Oh shit," he said, voice barely above a whisper. "What do you think, you think maybe somebody set a booby trap, gonna blow us away and nobody wants to be close to us when it happens?"

"Shut up," Captain Hook said.

Sneaky Pete flinched.

"Be cool, Sneaky Pete," Socrates said. "It's just they don't know how we're going to treat them, if we're going to think some of them want to try for the bounty."

Sneaky Pete blinked at the unexpected word. "Like a bounty hunter you mean?" He tried to imagine someone riding up on a horse, with a sawed-off shotgun in a pistol holster like he remembered seeing Steve McQueen doing on TV every week when he was a kid.

"Not quite," Doc Holliday said. He grinned a bit crookedly at Sneaky Pete. Then to all of them, "Let's find the honcho."

They didn't have to look far. Suddenly Nuyghn Lo Xa darted into the square, hands clasped, bobbing at them. A roll of paper was gripped between his gnarled hands. Xa trotted to them and stood bowing and talking far too fast for any of them to catch more than an occasional word.

"Slow down, slow down," Doc Holliday said softly, he patted the air with his right hand. When Xa paused to catch his breath he said, "*Bac si, bac si,*" and patted his medkit.

Slowly, Xa realized the reason for this visit wasn't to threaten him or his people to not try to collect, but to help. He looked into their eyes one at a time, did not linger when he looked at Captain Hook. With trembling hands, he gave the paper roll to Socrates. It was more copies of the wanted posters. Haltingly he explained they had shown up in the hamlet overnight.

Now Socrates understood these people were more frightened of them than he had anticipated. He had to do something direct, more direct than a medcap, to tell them the Marines weren't angry. First thing was to get as many of the people together as possible. Using a few words and many signs, Socrates told Xa he wanted everybody who wasn't out in the fields to gather in the square. Xa understood quickly and started running around shouting in his old man's high, thin voice. Soon a thick gaggle of old people, middle-aged women, children, and three PFs who had patrolled the night away and hadn't yet gone into

the fields, was gathered in one corner of the square, nervously watching the medcap members.

Socrates looked at them solemnly for a long moment, long enough to make sure he had everyone's attention. He could feel the fear radiating from them, even the PFs. He held the posters up, unrolled, his own on the top facing the small crowd; they were held in his left hand. People in cultures that don't have toilet paper clean their anuses with the left hand, that made offering the left hand an insult, holding something in the left hand could indicate its worthlessness. Rural Vietnam was such a culture.

"Vee Cee," Socrates said clearly and shook the wanted posters. "Vee Cee numba ten, *muoi*. He held the sheets of paper in front of himself and tore them in half. He spat on them, then, still using his left hand, threw them onto the ground and stomped on them. "Toi Mui," he held up his right index finger, "numba one, *mot*.

"Toi Mui, *mot*. Toi Mui, Ma-deen, friends, *ban*. Numba one friends." He held his right index finger high and jabbed at the sky. He smiled broadly, clasped his hands and bowed deeply. Then he pointed at Doc Holliday and said, "*Bac si*, we *bac si* Toi Mui," and bowed again. The other Americans bowed with him, Sneaky Pete a half beat behind the others.

Audible sighs came to them. Xa sagged with relief, then scurried about, shouting at his people. They set up a table with two chairs for an impromptu clinic. Three children drew buckets of water for the corpsman and a few people lined up to have their woes tended. The three PFs crowded close to the Marines, stood arm to arm with them, clearly aligned themselves with the Americans. Socrates noticed a few children running out of the hamlet. *Going to get folks from the fields if any of them wanted to see the bac si*, he thought.

Doc Holliday put out his medical equipment and supplies, then sat on one of the chairs to treat his first patient, a young boy who had a fresh cut on his forehead.

Socrates' stomach growled, reminding him he hadn't eaten yet.

"I'm almost hungry enough to eat one of those pigs," he said, looking at one of the pigs rooting in the dirt along a path between houses.

"You probably could and not get sick," Doc Holliday said without looking away from disinfecting the cut. "I think we've got them cleaned of their trichinosis."

Socrates looked at Xa and said, "Chop-chop?" He held his hands

in front of his face and made feeding motions.

Xa looked at him wide-eyed, then exposed nearly all of his betel-nut blackened tooth stumps in a grin. If these Americans were willing to eat the food of the villagers, they must really trust them. He felt proud to have protectors such as them. He shouted a few orders to the people standing in line. Some of them rushed away. They were back in moments with another small table and three more chairs. In a few more minutes someone placed a large bowl of rice and smaller ones of *nuoc mam* and an unidentifiable green vegetable on the table, someone else set small plates and spoons on it.

"*Cam on*, thank you," Socrates said. He and Captain Hook sat to eat. They took only a token dip of *nuoc mam*.

Sneaky Pete looked uncertain. "You sure it's all right?" he asked.

"They're too afraid we're going to do them to try to poison us," Captain Hook said. "Sit down and eat."

Sneaky Pete sat and ate. He didn't use any *nuoc mam*. The three PFs stood at their backs, looking suspiciously at everyone. They were as obvious as they could be about protecting their Marines while they ate.

Between bites, Socrates raised his voice to say to Doc Holliday, "Looks like we got us a winner here."

"No shit," Doc Holliday said back. "Took you long enough to figure it out. By now even Sneaky Pete should understand that."

Sneaky Pete looked pained. "How come everybody's picking on me?" he said around a mouthful of rice. "What do you gotta go calling me dumb for? Just because I'm not as smart as you or Socrates, that's no reason to call me dumb."

"I didn't call you dumb," Doc Holliday said. He didn't look up from his patient, now he was working on an old woman with a tooth abscess. "Did anybody hear me use the word dumb?"

"He was calling me dumb, Sneaky Pete," Socrates said to stop it before it went too far.

Sneaky Pete didn't say whatever was next on his mind, he went back to the rice and greens. But he wasn't mollified.

Socrates used many gestures while he ate and made appreciative noises to let Xa and the watching villagers know how good the rice and greens were, let them know how much he liked eating their food. Sneaky Pete made fewer gestures and noises. Captain Hook ate silently, his eyes constantly on the move, not missing anything in the hamlet square or on the paths leading into it.

Xa skittered about the eating Marines, making sure they were satisfied with everything. The watching villagers smiled, pleased that instead of being angry about the rewards placed on them, the Marines were siding with the people against those who placed the rewards.

When they were through with their meal Socrates used all the parts of his Vietnamese vocabulary that had to do with good food and enjoyment. His body language was more effusive. When he was certain he had gotten his point across he said to the other Marines, "Let's take a walk around." Then he noticed the odd look Sneaky Pete was giving him and laughed. "Don't sweat it," he said. "Remember, before we came over here the indoctrination we had about the war and Vietnamese culture? Remember the question we were asked? 'How would you feel about it if there was a war going on here and a race of seven foot tall giants armed with weapons more powerful than anything you had came in and said they were on your side?'"

Sneaky Pete nodded.

"Seven foot tall giants gotta try harder to be liked because everybody's going to be scared shitless of them."

Sneaky Pete considered that, then nodded; it almost made sense to him.

Socrates invited the three PFs to join them. In minutes what must have been every child in Toi Mui was mobbing them, every one of the children wanted to be close the the three Americans, more clung to Captain Hook than to either of the others. There were so many children even the PFs had a sizable compliment of tiny, scampering bodies wanting to be carried or carry things for them.

The Marines and their contingent strolled the paths and by-ways of Toi Mui. Everything looked normal, though some of the villagers still seemed wary of them, they saw no hostility, no furtiveness of people trying to hide something. Although Toi Mui was incredibly poor by American standards, it displayed none of the abject poverty the Marines had seen when they first named the Junkyard. Socrates was pleased by the new hooches he saw being constructed of river-mud brick that was as strong an indicator of freedom from over-charged rent and dual taxation as was the lack of litter along the paths. He led them out the back gate. When the children saw they were headed to the woods where the fight between the CAP and the VC had taken place two and a half weeks earlier they ran ahead, holding imaginary rifles in their tiny hands, shouting bang-bang as they ran. They played they were Marines, none of them wanted to be PFs, none

could be forced to play the role of the VC.

Captain Hook waited patiently while Socrates examined the area for signs of the battle that had taken place there. Sneaky Pete hung near Captain Hook. The PFs squatted in the shade and smoked cigarettes; they enjoyed this respite from their normal daytime farming duties—the cane fields and rice paddies would still be there tomorrow. The children simply enjoyed being with the Marines.

Except for a few bullet gouges on tree trunks, there was no evidence of the murderous fight in which so many Viet Cong had died so recently. More of the normal detritus of a forest had fallen on the ground to conceal the places where men lay and ran and fell, winds had shifted leaves to hide more. Ground-scavenging insects had long since recycled spilled blood into the life chain.

Socrates rejoined Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete. "They policed up the brass," he said. He hadn't found any empty cartridges.

Captain Hook didn't bother to respond to something so obvious.

"Really?" Sneaky Pete said. "All of it?"

"Every bit of it," Socrates said. He looked around once more. "Let's get back to Doc Holliday."

Sneaky Pete suddenly realized they'd left the corpsman alone. "Oh yeah," he said. "Before anything can happen to him. Nothing happened to him, did it?"

Nothing had happened, except Doc Holliday had treated everyone in Toi Mui who had real ills, and quite a few who had only imaginary ones.

"About time you got back," Doc Holliday said when they entered the square. "I'm out of penicillin, almost out of APCs and cotton swabs, and my Band-Aids and sugar-pills are going fast." As he said that he placed a tiny, white pill in a child's mouth and held it closed while the girl swallowed. He carried a large supply of placebos for "patients" who didn't have any real problems, but just wanted some attention from the *bac si*. He turned away from the next child in line, a boy who was holding up a clearly healthy arm for attention, and asked, "Can we leave now?"

Socrates laughed. "Suture up that compound fracture and put a cast on it, then we can go."

Doc Holliday laughed back and turned to the boy. They discussed the best place to put a Band-Aid, he did, then packed up.

Xa and the other villagers were all smiles when the medcap team left. There was much bowing and many words of friendship on both

sides. A band of children accompanied the Americans halfway to Toi Co 1. The people in the fields and paddies were much less restrained in greeting them now than they had been in the morning. They went to the skivvy house for lunch.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Over the next several days all the people of Khung Toi saw the Marines acting quite normally, fully as though absolutely nothing had happened. They gradually relaxed until their relations with the Americans were as they were before the wanted posters scared them into thinking these foreign giants might punish them in advance of any of them trying to collect on the rewards. Already they appreciated the Americans for what they did for Khung Toi; stopped VC taxation and conscription, compelled the landlords and dam owner to reduce their exorbitant rates, helped with various reconstruction efforts, pumped money into the local economy by hiring people to work for them and by patronizing local merchants. So what if a whorehouse had sprung up to tend to their needs? They deserved something in return for all the good they did. Besides, they were young men without wives.

But now, with this added threat against them, a threat to be carried out by the people, the Americans were still friendly, still gave medical attention. The people of Khung Toi came to appreciate the Americans for themselves, a group of very nice young men, far from home, family, and friends. The mother of the girl Killer Kowalski was wooing even stopped hovering quite so suspiciously whenever he came to visit. She still hovered, of course. After all, her daughter was no boom-boom girl. But she admitted to the possibility that Killer Kowalski's intentions might be honorable. Maybe.

The Viet Cong didn't make any appearance during this time. Which isn't to say they weren't around. It so happened that they had a paymaster staying in Hat Reo Toi. He was from Hat Reo Toi originally and came back now to visit relatives. Nothing unusual about that, the VC got leave from time to time and visited their families, just like members of regular armies did. When they were on leave they didn't carry weapons, do any fighting, or destroy any property. His relatives knew he was VC, of course, but didn't report him to the Americans or to village chief Lai or to PF lieutenant Hank. After all, blood is thicker than water. Besides, he was only visiting. And they



were glad to see him and that he was well. Some of his relatives even harbored hopes they could convince him to *cheiu hoi*—turn to the government side.

Except they didn't know he was a paymaster and that he wasn't just visiting. His true purpose in being there was to be on hand to make payment when one of the villagers killed one of the Americans for the reward.

After a week's stay, during which he had a bothersome skin ulcer on his leg treated by Doc Holliday—Doc Holliday didn't give voice to it, but he suspected there was something not quite kosher about this particular patient—he realized that no one was going to try to collect. He said his good-byes to his relatives and headed back into the bush to give the bad news to his commander. The commander was going to be no particular problem, he was a pragmatic man who hadn't really expected the wanted posters to do a great deal of good. It was the battalion's political officer the paymaster was concerned about. The rewards for killing the Americans were the idea of the political officer and he was going to be very upset that none of the villagers wanted to kill an American. He'd have to be careful how he told him about that. Maybe he could convincingly tell the political officer that some of the people wanted to kill an American, but the Americans had increased their security too much, so no one was able to. He knew he wouldn't be able to explain to the political officer's satisfaction that the people would rather have the Americans protecting them from the VC than collect money for killing any of them.

Such is war. You picks your side and you takes your chances.

Subsequently, the Viet Cong decided that since the villagers won't going to do anything about those pesky Americans it was up to them. It took three days for them to decide what to do and put it into action. They thought it had a reasonable chance to succeed.

"Listen up, goddammit," Sergeant Slaughter almost shouted, "I don't give a rat's ass we ain't had any action in a month. Last I heard there was still a war going on in this country and Marines are still fighting in that war." He glared at his three fire team leaders across the map on which he had been drawing the night's patrol routes. He picked up and glanced at a sheet of paper he had shown them earlier. He didn't read from the sheet, he had read it often enough he didn't have to. The sheet was a summary of enemy contact in the district over the past few days. He restated a few of the short paragraphs on it.

"Three days ago a Marine platoon-size patrol ten miles northwest of here was hit by an estimated company of Main Force Vee Cee, two Marines KIA, four WIA. Two days ago a Marine company fire base fifteen miles south of here was assaulted by an estimated Vee Cee battalion, suffering twelve casualties that had to be evacuated. Yesterday Fifth CAG Headquarters took sniper fire, one Marine lightly wounded. There's other mentions here about Marines killed or wounded by booby traps. And that's all in this district in the last three days."

He put the sheet down and drummed his fingertips on the table. "Are you getting the idea there's still a shooting war going on and Marines are still getting hurt?"

"Yes, Sergeant Slaughter," they mumbled, or variations on those three words. Socrates more slowly than the others. He noticed when he read the summary that there were no reports of enemy activity in the area where he and the other two had carried out the mysterious Mr. Smith's operation.

"Good. Then you will belay the grabassing. What you're doing out there is serious. You go fucking off on patrol and the wrong people can get killed because of it."

Mad Greek looked angry. "I don't care who told you what," he said, his jaw clenched. "My patrol didn't spend the night at the skivvy house last night. We did our patrol like we were supposed to."

That's what had caused Sergeant Slaughter's outburst, he had casually pointed out that none of the patrols were near the skivvy house so nobody better spend the night there. Mad Greek had objected. "And if Chickenfucker comes down with a drip he had best provide me with documentation he got it some other time," Sergeant Slaughter said back.

"Hey, it was just a short-time, whadaya want?" Mad Greek objected, sitting back and spreading his hands in innocent defense. "He was in and out and we were back on our patrol, it was only a ti-ti time."

"I don't care how ti-ti it was," Sergeant Slaughter said in a lower, more threatening voice. "You do that on your time, not at night when you're supposed to be goddam patrolling. That's dereliction of duty and you could get your ass court martialed for it. And ti-ti wasn't the way I heard it."

"Who told you?" Mad Greek demanded. "And it was so a short-time."

"It doesn't matter who told me. You don't do it. The next time any swinging dick in this unit goes into the skivvy house on patrol his ass is in a sling. And so is his fire team leader's."

Mad Greek fumed, but didn't say anything. Socrates and Submarine were silent also.

"I take it you all understand and will follow the directions," Sergeant Slaughter said after a moment.

Mad Greek nodded. "Yeah," he said.

Socrates and Submarine mumbled assent.

"Good. Now for tonight." He went back to the map and finished detailing the patrol orders.

An hour later Mad Greek took his patrol out and headed east, toward Toi Mui. Later, Submarine and his men left to spend a few hours patrolling the banana grove south and west of Fort Cragg. Last, Socrates took the third patrol around Hat Reo Toi and then to the river.

This time of year, the river meandered slowly past Khung Toi on its way to the sea. During the monsoon season and for weeks afterward it was half a mile broad, and raged with the rain water flowing down from the mountains in the west. The rest of the year it was a gentle thing that followed a cut it had made in its broad bed. The cut wasn't particularly deep, just deep enough to channel the river. It ranged in width from less than a hundred feet to nearly a hundred yards. In most places it was so shallow a man could wade across it without getting his waist wet, in the widest it was shallower yet and the tradesmen's sampams could only navigate it if they weren't heavily loaded. The cut swerved and gently swooped from side to side of the broad bed. The main banks stood five feet above the main bed, in some spots even higher. They were why the villagers had to depend on an upriver dam for the water for their rice paddies, the paddy-land was too high above the river. Except at Nghia Toi, where uncounted generations of fishermen and tradesmen had dug and maintained a boat ramp through the bank, the banks hung high over the river bed until well downstream of Khung Toi. The houses nearest the ramp stood on short stilts because sometimes the monsoon-swollen river flowed into the market square and flooded ground-standing houses near it. Notches in the bank here and there through Nghia Toi gave mute evidence to periodic shifts in the dry season river course; each notch represented an earlier boat ramp.

Socrates, Captain Hook, Sneaky Pete, and four PFs walked the top

of the bank, along a treeline, the roots of whose trees held the bank from eroding and collapsing. A half mile west of Hat Reo Toi they stopped and sat in an ambush. The river here was six hundred yards away, near the north banks of the flood-bed. Orange lights bobbed on the water, randomly dotted it up- and downstream as far as the Marines and PFs could see; night fishermen advertising their presence to any and all watchers, notifying them that they were fishermen, not Viet Cong. An unlit boat at night was always suspect and subject to being shot at by anyone who spotted it. The lights also attracted fish to the gigs and nets the fishermen used.

South of the river bank treeline, starlight glinted frosty on the paddy water. The quarter moon trailed a thin river of white across the paddies, broken here and there by dikes. Cicadas buzzed, bats squeed, lizards fukyo'd. Far off, a bored, insomniac dog barked in Hat Reo Toi, seeking company in the long, lonely night. A second dog responded, they conversed briefly, then both fell silent. A gentle breeze wafted through the night. All was peaceful for the first of the two hours they were to sit there.

Socrates sensed a sudden tension from Captain Hook, even though when he looked he saw no difference in the silhouette of his shadow. He crawled over to him, saw Captain Hook was intently watching the river, and looked at it himself. He looked in the manner of night fighters the world over; eyes wide and unfocused, never looking directly at anything. His eyes moved in jerks from point to point, never stayed long at any one place. He saw nothing but the orange dots of the fishermen's lamps. At that distance he could barely make out the shimmer of the flowing water. He could make out nothing on the flat bed between their bank and the river.

"What?" he finally asked.

"Don't know," Captain Hook said back. He paused for a moment, then added, "Something's wrong. Look at the boats." His right hand twisted around the small of the stock of his shotgun. The river was far beyond the range of his weapon.

Socrates watched the orange dots for several seconds before what Captain Hook saw registered on him. Half a mile upstream the random scattering of the boats had changed; eight or ten of them of them were clustered together, several others seemed to be drifting toward the cluster. "They found a school of fish and everybody's getting in on it," he said. He didn't believe it, river fish don't school the same way ocean fish do.

Captain Hook shook his head, he didn't believe it either. "Watch," he said. He thought there was more than just boats gathering.

Socrates watched, and wondered. Why would the boatmen group like that, were they taking a break from their night's work and getting together to gossip? He had spent many nights laying in ambush along the river and didn't remember seeing boats cluster this way before. After a few minutes he counted fourteen boat lights bobbing close together. No others were joining them; if anything, the other boats on that stretch of river were drifting away. Then a few of the clustered boats detached themselves from the main group and moved with the current.

Socrates wondered what was happening now, then he blinked and counted lights again. There were six going downstream and ten still in the main group. Where had the other two come from? Then something blocked his view of one of the lights in the bigger group. He watched for a moment and saw two more lights come to life, now there were twelve there. Six split off and drifted with the current. It happened again, then the final two boats became four and drifted downstream. The other boats they passed on the way gave them as wide a berth as the river allowed. Socrates made a quick calculation. If the extra eight boats were VC who were headed downstream disguised as fishermen, using the real fishermen as camouflage, and each of their boats were carrying four or five men, there was more than a platoon of Viet Cong headed somewhere. There could even be more—if they had some larger boats that held more than four men, or if he'd missed some of the new lights.

Socrates wondered what to do. It was turning into a wondering kind of night for him. With the channel on the far side of the river bed from where his ambush was the boats were too far away for him to do anything direct about them from the bank. The boats seemed to be merely drifting with the current. A slow enough pace they could leave the bank, run across the bed, and intercept the boats. But still, the boats were in the water and he and his men were on land and they wouldn't be able to get right up close to check them out. Even if they could they were outnumbered three or four to one and there was no cover on the flat river bed. Moreover, it was too dark for them to be able to see who was in the boats. He raised Sergeant Slaughter on the radio and explained the situation to him. Sergeant Slaughter agreed it was odd. Socrates suggested a course of action. Sergeant Slaughter agreed.

After Sergeant Slaughter signed off someone else said a few words over the air. Socrates recognized Submarine's voice; he was moving his patrol from the groves to the river between Hat Reo Toi and Nghia Toi. Socrates understood; even though they couldn't arrive in time to help with the initial interception, they might be along the river early enough to intercept the boats if they got past Socrates.

"Listen up." Socrates gathered his men into a tight group and spoke to them in a voice that wouldn't travel more than a few feet. "Something funny's going on down on the river." He pointed out the drifting boats and explained what he and Captain Hook had seen. "We're going closer to take a look. We'll get some light from the fort when we get in position. Captain Hook's got point. We go low and fast. When the boats come near us, Lim, you challenge them, tell them to come to shore to be inspected. Questions?"

Lim hastily translated for the PFs who didn't have enough English to understand all of it. No one had any questions. Socrates gestured at Captain Hook, who found a cut in the top of the bank and slid down it to the river bed. The others followed. It only took a minute for all seven of them to reach the hard-packed sand of the river bed and get in line. Captain Hook trotted in a crouch at an angle that would get them to the water's edge at a point a hundred meters ahead of the drifting boats, time enough to get into position. Socrates had them lay prone along side the river; alternating PF, Marine, PF from one end to the other. He was in the middle, Lim on his left. Captain Hook to the right—the entire width of the river was now in range of his shotgun.

While they waited, Socrates used his compass to shoot an azimuth on the opposite bank and radioed it in, along with their estimated position. With that information, the men at Fort Cragg could fire the mortar and have a reference to use when they adjusted their fire.

The first group of boats came near and Socrates spoke into his radio. A minute later they heard a whoomph from Fort Cragg. A moment after that a brilliant light flashed high above the river, less than a hundred yards south, behind, them. Socrates thought it was a good thing they were laying on the wet, sandy ground; or they would be silhouetted by the light. The lead boats were directly in front of Socrates' line, but barely within the circle of light thrown out by the flare's glare. Socrates immediately radioed a range correction and called for a second flare.

The lead boats stopped their drift and milled about. They were close together and their hulls banged each other. The Marines and PFs

heard excited voices coming from the boats.

"They honcho say turn around, go back," Lim translated for Socrates.

"Tell them to stop," Socrates said. The mortar at Fort Cragg whooped again while he gave his order.

Lim shouted in a high pitched voice, all Socrates could understand in the rapid string of Vietnamese was, "PF, American Marine," and, "*Lai dai*," come here.

The voices in the boats became more excited and the milling increased and the boats got themselves turned. The second flare popped over the river, a little upstream from the Marines and PFs, and illuminated the first and second group of boats, both turned now and headed rapidly for the opposite bank.

"Hold your fire," Socrates shouted, which was the opposite of what he wanted to order his men to do. The only reason for the boats to flee was they were Viet Cong. But he had no choice. If he was right, the VC were using civilian fishermen as shields. He couldn't order his men to fire into the very people they were there to protect. Not unless they were fired on and had to shoot back in self-defense. He got back on the radio and told Sergeant Slaughter what was happening.

Sergeant Slaughter ruled out pursuing them across the river, they'd be too exposed crossing the water—and the other side of the river was beyond their area of operations. Instead, he opted for caution. "We'll keep popping illum to keep them going," he said. "Call in adjustments for as long as you can see them."

Socrates asked for a third illumination round another hundred yards upstream. No boats were visible under its glare. The light closest to them was getting close to the water, he called for another over the opposite side of the river, where the boats he could see were beaching themselves. It looked like half of the boats on the river were going to shore.

"Captain Hook," he called, "take a PF a hundred yards to our left rear and watch. Some of them might have come ashore on this side." He didn't have to explain what that meant. Captain Hook didn't use words to reply, he just tapped the PF on his right and gestured. The two men rose and ran to where Socrates wanted the rear flank security.

Socrates called for another flare, farther inland, to keep the running men moving. Ten minutes after the first flare popped, they were out of the range of the 60mm mortar at Fort Cragg. The Marines

and PFs waited. Sooner or later someone would come by who they could take for questioning. Socrates hoped it was sooner rather than later. It took a middle amount of time.

"*Chao*, PF, Ma-deen," someone called from the north side of the river.

Socrates nudged Lim, who called an answer. The two men shouted back and forth across the river for a moment, then Lim said, "He say they fisherman, Vee Cee gone. I know him, he who he say."

"How many are there?"

"Eight."

"Tell them to come over here."

"I tell them, they coming."

They were. The noises of boats being pushed back into the water came to the men on the south side of the river, then the muffled swishing of poles through water. Four of the orange lamps still glowing on the far side of the water detached themselves from the many lights on the opposite shore and moved toward them. In a couple of minutes four sampams, half filled with fish from the night's work, nosed to shore. The fishermen got out and pulled their boats' prows onto the shore, just far enough to keep them from drifting away. Socrates and Lim stood to greet them. Socrates set Sneaky Pete and the other two PFs in new positions to provide a circle of security, then he and Lim sat with the fishermen to hear from them what had happened.

The story came out in not too many bits and pieces. Under Lim's skillful questioning, guided by Socrates, the fishermen didn't fragment their story much. The VC had stolen boats from another fishing hamlet a mile upstream—one of these fishermen recognized one of the boats the VC were in, that's how they knew they were stolen—and drifted unlit downstream. The hamlet they took them from was in a village the government claimed as secure, but the VC moved pretty much at will during the night in that village. When the VC reached the Nghia Toi fishermen, as the CAP ambush had seen, they mingled with them and used them for shields and camouflage for their trip along the stretch of river that might be patrolled. They said they were fishermen, not VC. They were lying though, they weren't very good at handling their boats and didn't act like fishermen. They were going, they said, to Nghia Toi to collect the rewards offered for the Marines. If they collected they would share the rewards with these fishermen. They



needed the fishermen to go with them to Nghia Toi, they said, to show them the way through the waters, they didn't want to go aground on anything. That was something else that said they weren't real fishermen, all the fishermen along the river knew its channel was kept clear all the way during the dry season.

When the first flare popped overhead they thought they were in a trap and made the real fishermen go along with them so they wouldn't get shot. That much of what they planned worked. The VC kept the fishermen with them for ten minutes after the last flare went out. Then, thinking they were out of range, they made the fishermen sit down and told them not to move for one hour or they would be killed. The fishermen didn't think the VC would leave anybody behind hidden to watch them for an hour, so as soon as the noise of the running VC receded, they ran back to the river. Of course, they had no intention of doing anything they didn't absolutely have to to help the VC. Neither did they want to share in the rewards; after all, the Marines were their friends and kept the VC away. They said that last with such animated sincerity, Socrates wondered how true it was. He knew they probably did have honestly good feelings toward the Marines of Whiskey 8, but that didn't change the fact they were poor fishermen and could use some extra money.

Lim wrote down the names of the fishermen while Socrates reported the results of the interview to Sergeant Slaughter. Probably Lieutenant Hank or village chief Lai, or district chief Thien would want to question them more.

Sergeant Slaughter said the stolen boats would be returned to their owners upstream tomorrow, just how could wait until morning. Then Socrates waited while Sergeant Slaughter talked to Submarine. That patrol had indeed reached the river a few hundred yards downstream. Sergeant Slaughter ordered the two patrols to merge and continue to watch the river for a few more hours. Exactly how they watched the river and for how long was at their discretion.

Two patrols meeting at night is a risky proposition. Even if you think you know exactly where the other patrol is and you are expected, you never know whether or not there are bad guys nearby. The shadow you think is one of your own men from the other patrol could be an enemy soldier until it identifies itself. If it is an enemy, you don't want to let him know who you are until you at least have the drop on him. Nor do you want to loudly announce your presence, in case that shadow is who you seek but there are enemy soldiers close enough

to hear—they will know where you are but you won't know they are there. Thanks to the fishermen's boats, Socrates had an easy solution to the problem.

"Do you see the boats parked on the shore?" he asked Submarine over the radio. He did. "How many?"

"Four, all together on this side," Submarine said. "I see a shitload of boats on the other side." It was necessary for Submarine to identify what he saw so Socrates could verify and they would both know they saw the same thing.

"Okay, that's where we are. Identify yourself when you get close."

Submarine rogered. They had no problem linking. Socrates was the senior of the two fire team leaders, he took command of the joint patrol. While all this was going on, he had Lim question the fishermen about who was on the other boats the VC commandeered as camouflage. That delayed them getting back on the river until the two patrols were together. The fishermen went back to work.

They searched the south side of the river for half a mile upstream, but found no clear evidence that any boats had come ashore, all of the VC must have fled to the north, or gone back up the river. Probably none were left. Two and a half hours after joining forces, they went back—the PFs to their hamlets, the Marines to Fort Cragg—for some welcome sleep.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Chief Lai and Lieutenant Hank did question the fishermen the next day, but the fishermen didn't have anything to tell them about the VC they hadn't already told Socrates. Or if they did, they didn't say it. It went down in the record as one of those amorphous sightings of suspected enemy that can mean the enemy are preparing for combat activity in the area, are moving through or out of the area—or could mean absolutely nothing. But it couldn't mean absolutely nothing, not to the men of Whiskey 8. Sergeant Slaughter made sure they all understood that.

"It's like I said," he said. It was early afternoon, he and Hank had all their men assembled in the shade of the main building of Fort Cragg. The men sat in tight ranks along the side of the building, facing their leaders, who stood side by side. The two leaders alternated speaking, each saying the same thing in his own language. What they figured was all their men would listen to both of them, match what his own leader said to what the other did, and increase their knowledge of each other's language. It was a good idea, but wouldn't work on everybody—some people simply have no aptitude for languages. They talked anyway.

"Charlie's still around, we can't relax and assume we've got it made in the shade," Sergeant Slaughter said. This is one area where the purported language lesson fell apart, the use of colloquialisms and slang. "We have to be alert out there, never assume any place is safe. That goes for day as well as night. When we run into Charlie we have to put him so deep in the hurt locker so fast he he doesn't have a chance to put any kind of hurting on us. Remember, when you assume, you make an ass of U and me." Word plays didn't translate well either. "And when you make an ass of yourself here, you die—or somebody else who shouldn't does."

The two leaders stopped talking to give their men a chance to absorb what they'd said. There were enough hunched shoulders and side- or down-cast eyes they thought they had gotten their message

across.

"When the war's over, that's when you can go traipsing through the toolies and have circle-jerks out there," Sergeant Slaughter started again. He forgot about the language lesson, but remembered the sensibilities of the Vietnamese. *His* men might only have to wait until their tours were over, but the Vietnamese had to wait until the war was over. When they went home, the Marines could traipse through the toolies with round-eyed women. If that bullshit anti-war movement back in the World eased off by then. Not that he objected to people being against war. Hell he didn't like war himself, that was one reason he volunteered for CAP instead of staying in a regular grunt company. The problem with the anti-war movement was it was directed at the men who did the fighting, not at the bad guys who caused it. Anyway, he said when the *war* was over to show the PFs they were in it with them. "Be cool, stay alive. I don't want to lose any men. And you better believe Captain Vitale don't want to write no letters to your mamas, neither."

Hank said something similar in Vietnamese. He noticed and appreciated that Sergeant Slaughter told the Marines they had to wait until the war ended before they could relax and have fun, not just until their tours were over. These Americans, and others he had known, were very aggressive in their patrolling, very brave in their fighting. But their time at war was only thirteen months, then it was their choice if they wanted to stay longer or not. The Americans had only been in this war for little more than two years, he himself had been fighting it for six years—and the war had been going on longer than that. Sometimes he wondered how aggressive the American Marines would be if they had to stay here and fight until the war was over like he did. No matter. They were here and they were helping, that's what was important.

The pep talk was over. "Whose turn is it to cook?" Sergeant Slaughter asked before dismissing them. Nobody answered with words, but even if Sergeant Slaughter hadn't already known, he would now. Everybody cringed except Beast, who glowered. "Go take a shower first, Beast," Sergeant Slaughter said. "Submarine, supervise, make sure he washes his hands at the same time."

Submarine and the other two fire team leaders were in the back of the formation where they could watch their men. Submarine's eyes widened at the order. Beast focused his glowering on his fire team

leader.

"Aye aye," Submarine said out loud. In a lower voice he added, "What's he think, I'm some kind of pervert I wanna watch Beast play with his skuzzy balls?"

Mad Greek chuckled and elbowed him in the ribs. "You try'na say you aren't a pervert?"

"It's a dirty job, but somebody's got to do it," Socrates said, and laughed behind his hand.

"You wanna watch you're a fucking faggot," Beast snarled. "You stay away from me." He stormed inside to get his shaving kit and a towel.

"Don't worry, Beast," Submarine said to the spot where Beast had stood. "No way I'm going to get close enough to catch anything you got."

The banter at Beast's expense over evening chow was milder than usual, too many of them were thinking about the implications of the boats on the river the night before. Charlie wasn't ready to give up on the Junkyard, not yet. What did he have planned next? When would he try it? Many of the Marines discussed that as they ate. Some of the PFs, those with the most English, joined in the discussion. They didn't find any answers.

Sergeant Slaughter and his fire team leaders were just settling down to draw the night's patrol routes when Gunny Bryl showed up with a driver.

"Socrates and Captain Hook are wanted at CAG HQ," Gunny Bryl said after he and Sergeant Slaughter exchanged pleasantries.

"Tomorrow?" Sergeant Slaughter asked hopefully. But why would the gunny come out today unless they were wanted today? And if they were wanted today, why wait until too late to get them back for their patrol tonight?

Gunny Bryl shook his head. "Right now."

"Why now?" Sergeant Slaughter asked his questions.

"Word just came down half an hour ago. Fucked if I know why now. I'm just the company gunny, nobody tells me nothing."

"We've got patrols to run tonight," Sergeant Slaughter objected. "They go now, there's no way they'll be back before sundown."

Gunny Bryl shrugged. "If you had some heavy shit going down I would of said no way, wait until tomorrow. But you don't have anything happening, so I couldn't."

"Didn't you get the report about the Vee Cee boats last night?"

"Yeah, I got it. There were some boats on the river, the people in them ran when they were challenged. Some fishermen reported they were Vee Cee. CAG HQ says so what, there wasn't any shooting, it don't mean nothing." He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I gotta take them now. I wouldn't do it if I could get out of it, but the orders I got said right now."

Sergeant Slaughter grimaced. Dumbasses up higher never did understand what was happening in the units doing the fighting. They always seemed to think the warriors were just there to do whatever somebody wanted done that nobody else was available for, never mind what their jobs were and how many lives counted on them doing those jobs. Well, Charlie didn't usually come around two nights in a row anyway. Probably wouldn't make much difference. He glanced at the clean sheet of overlay tracing paper on his map. At least he wouldn't have to throw it away and start all over again.

"When are they coming back?"

"Tomorrow," Gunny Bryl said. *I think*, he added to himself.

Sergeant Slaughter looked at Socrates, the three fire team leaders had sat quietly during the exchange. "Get Captain Hook and get saddled up," he said. "You leave in..." he looked at Gunny Bryl for a time limit.

"Five minutes," Bryl said.

Socrates ran outside to get Captain Hook. They were right back, headed to their room to get whatever they needed for an overnight trip. Sneaky Pete followed, crest-fallen. He stood alone in the middle of the big room, looking alone and lost. Sergeant Slaughter twisted his mouth in disgust. Sneaky Pete wasn't going to be one damn bit of good tonight.

He looked at Gunny Bryl, wasn't given a negative, and said, "You can go along for the ride, Sneaky Pete."

Sneaky Pete's face brightened and he ran to get what he needed. He didn't know what he needed, he'd take his cue from Captain Hook, he'd know what to take.

Sergeant Slaughter shook his head. "If it wasn't for Captain Hook, I do believe that man wouldn't be able to wipe his own nose."

Gunny Bryl nodded understanding. "The kind of man who can't pour piss out of a boot with the instructions written on the heel."

There was another Jeep waiting when they got to the company

HQ, Gunny Bryl hustled them right into it. "I don't want you somewhere between here and there when the lights go out," he said in explanation of the hasty transfer. The driver asked, "You in?" and floored the accelerator without waiting for an answer. He didn't want to be somewhere between here and there at sundown either.

They were a few hundred yards from CAG HQ and the trees were casting shadows about as long as they get before the abrupt falling of night when they spotted a Jeep parked on the side of the road. Its driver got out when they drew near and flagged them down.

"You come with me now," he said to Socrates and his men. He glanced without comment at Sneaky Pete. "Driver, you had best get inside before the big bad wolf comes out."

The driver took off as soon as they dismounted.

"All right, I'll bite," Socrates said. "What the fuck's going on, Mister Smith, or whatever your name is."

"I'll tell you on the way. Get in."

Socrates wanted more information so he stood his ground and tried to think of the first question to ask.

Mr. Smith noticed his hesitation and asked, "If you don't get in, how are you going to explain what you're doing out here?"

Captain Hook got in the back of the Jeep, Sneaky Pete climbed in with him. Socrates hesitated for another second, then got in the passenger seat. Mr. Smith had already flipped on the ignition, he started off as soon as Socrates was in.

"Here's what we've got," Mr. Smith said. He spoke in a low voice, just loud enough for them to hear him over the purr of the Jeep's motor. It was night already. "The Vee Cee have decided to pick up their activities in a district north of here. To do that they've sent in an NVA major to coordinate their activities and increase training of the local Vee Cee companies. You're going to take him out."

Nobody said anything for several minutes, this was too shocking to Socrates and Sneaky Pete. Captain Hook probably didn't think anything beyond it was another chance to kill Cong.

Finally Socrates broke the silence. "An NVA major. He's probably pretty heavily guarded. Am I right?"

"He's guarded."

"And you expect us to be able to waltz right in and zap him and nobody's going to notice?"

"Something like that."

"How?"

Mr. Smith chuckled. It wasn't a friendly sound. "How good do you think security is around Three MAF HQ?"

"Heavy."

Mr. Smith chuckled again; it still wasn't friendly. "All the Vietnamese they've got working at Da Nang, it'd be the easiest thing in the world for Charlie to send someone in dressed as a peasant with explosives under his shirt. He could walk right up to the window of Walt's office and blow it all away."

"III MAF" was the Third Marine Amphibious Force, headquarters of the Marines in Vietnam. Lieutenant General Lew Walt was the commander of III MAF."

"Sounds like suicide to me," Socrates said. Mr. Smith shrugged. "But the Vee Cee don't have Americans working in their camps, so we can't walk like that anyway."

"Same idea. Nobody at Da Nang expects Charlie to do something like that so they don't guard against it. Charlie doesn't expect two or three Americans to come traipsing into some isolated hamlet in the middle of the night, so they don't guard against that, either. Near dawn they'll be alert for a company or a battalion, but they aren't going to be looking out for a small team at 0200. Shit, remember, they think they own the night. Dumbasses think Americans are afraid of the dark. Their security's going to be pretty damn minimal." He glanced away from the roadway that was dimly illuminated for a few feet to their front by his nightlights. "You're not afraid of the dark, are you?"

"You're trying to play on our pride." The muscles between Socrates' shoulder blades bunched from tension.

"No shit."

They drove on for another hour at an average speed that hovered around 10 MPH. Then Mr. Smith turned off into a narrow track and stopped. "We walk a little," he said. "Bring the stuff from the back." Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete picked up the two canvas bags from the bed of the Jeep and followed Socrates who was only a few feet behind Mr. Smith.

Fifty yards up was a small thatch hoots Mr. Smith walked in without checking if anyone was in the area. He stood just inside with his hand on the door and watched the three Marines. They hesitated before following him in. He closed the door tightly and switched on a red-shielded electric lantern that was inside waiting for them. There wasn't much to see; a flimsy table sat in the middle of the small room that was the entire interior, leaves and other trash littered the floor, the



two windows were shuttered and heavy curtains hung over them. There was thick dust on the table.

Mr. Smith took the bag Sneaky Pete carried and took a map and compass from it. "Gather around," he ordered.

"You didn't check," Socrates said softly. Mr. Smith had walked right up to this hoots and into it without looking to see if anyone was around, or looking for booby traps. Socrates shoulder muscles stiffened, added to the muscle bunching lower down, he wasn't sure he could raise his arms above his head.

Mr. Smith shrugged. "No need to." He spread the map. A tracing paper overlay, already drawn on, was attached to it. "Here's where we are, here's where you're going," he said briskly, tapping marks on the overlay with each "here." "A battalion of the Fifth Marines is operating over here," tap, "so Charlie probably has patrols and LPs out that way. However, we don't have anybody operating in this direction," tap on a curved line that connected here to here, "so he likely doesn't have much out in that direction. That's the direction you're going in from."

"How many people does he have?" Captain Hook asked. There was no fear or concern in his voice, he was merely asking for tactical information.

"An understrength mixed local and Main Force company. Maybe seventy-five men. Not more than fifty of them in the hamlet. At least half of them are clerks, cooks, and laborers—unarmed. There's a few women with them. I don't know if they are soldier's wives or nurses or clerks. Whatever, there's not many fighters for you to worry about. Most of the soldiers are going to be out here," tap to the northeast. He looked at Socrates and grinned. "You aren't afraid of a few local force Vee Cee, are you?"

Socrates ignored the question, he was more concerned with the numbers and disposition of the enemy troops. "You seem awful sure of that," he said, not at all sure of it himself.

"It's dictated by the tactical situation. That's the direction of the nearest American troops, if anybody's going to come around, that's where, so they'll put out a screen to cover the major, give him a chance to get away if anyone comes along." He looked sternly at Socrates and added, "You have no choice, you have to go in there and do this. Otherwise you're in too deep shit with too many people."

Socrates grimaced and his muscular tension increased, he understood the threat all too well. If he refused to go in there he'd not

only be in trouble with Mr. Smith and whoever he represented, but he might get left out here; and then how would he get back? How would he explain what he was doing? If he managed to get back to friendly forces. "What's the layout like in that hamlet?" He saw no way out of this at the moment, therefore he must know everything he could to increase the odds of him and his men getting in to accomplish the mission—and back out alive and unharmed.

Mr. Smith unfolded another sheet of paper, a sketch map that showed the hooches and pathways in the hamlet. He also showed them some photographs of the major who was their target. "Listen closely." When he was sure they had absorbed all of his information he opened the bag Captain Hook carried from the Jeep and handed over the equipment for this mission. This time there were two silenced rifles and one pistol. Socrates was again given a red-shielded flashlight. There was one additional item: a canister. It wasn't as big as a can of shaving cream foam, it was shaped more like a compressed air cartridge, and it was tightly wrapped in dark paper.

"This isn't like the last time, when there were only two people with the cadre," Mr. Smith said when he handed Socrates the canister. "There's likely to be several people inside with him. That means more chance somebody will wake up. First thing you do when you get inside is spray everybody with this." He demonstrated how to hold the canister a foot from a sleeper's face. "Just a quick squirt, only about a second. It'll keep any light sleepers out for long enough for you to complete the mission and get away. Don't breathe it yourself."

"Hold our breath the whole time we're inside?" This mission had seemed exceptionally difficult to begin with, now it was sounding impossible. His neck grew rigid. Socrates was beginning to think taking his chances on being stranded were better than carrying on.

"Don't breathe while you're spraying. This stuff's heavier than air, it won't come up to where you're standing." None of them had any other questions.

"We'll rendezvous back here at 0330. Go."

*Go? I gotta go out of this whole business,* Socrates thought. He waited for Mr. Smith to put out the lantern, then led the other two out of the hoots. Sweat flowed down his forehead, drenched his shirt under the arms; he was certain his muscles would creak from their tension.

The hoots where the briefing was given was three miles from the hamlet where their target was. Three miles of unfamiliar territory. They started in light woods that in less than a half mile turned into rice

paddies that weren't all cultivated. At some fairly recent time the war had raged here and most of the population was gone; some voluntarily, some forcibly moved into strategic hamlets. The few remaining farmers tended what paddies they could and let the rest of them lay fallow and dry. The three Marines stuck to treelines going through the paddies.

The night was full of the noise of cicadas buzzing, night birds squawking, bats squeeing, lizards fukyooing, somewhere a lonely dog barked; all the familiar sounds they'd hear in Khung Toi. But his tension didn't ease with the movement. Socrates shivered crossing the empty paddy land—it was too eerie. The paddies *felt* as though no one friendly was anywhere near, no one friendly had been there in a long time, only danger was to be found here.

He sensed a similar feeling coming from Sneaky Pete, a bone-deep fear of this strange place. Captain Hook seemed to take it all in stride. Socrates longed to be back in the security of the Junkyard, a place where he knew every night-thing, the place where the rest of the Junkyard Dogs were around to help him if he needed them. Not here, not in this place where ghosts prowled and enemy soldiers ate the living bodies of Americans.

A heavily wooded ridge rose a hundred feet high halfway to their destination. Socrates found a game trail to follow to its top. He knew there might be booby traps along it, left over from when this land was fought over. He also knew those booby traps were old enough they might no longer work, so he ignored the prospect. The ridge was steep enough they had to grab tree trunks for balance, in some places steep enough they had to pull themselves up. They wanted to be quiet so it took nearly as long to climb the ridge as it had to cross the mile of paddies. The descent didn't take as long because the land on the other side was higher.

Here they had a broad expanse of cane fields to cross before reaching more rice paddies. These paddies were fully tended, the people hadn't left this area. Socrates slowed their pace, he told himself it was because they were now in danger of running into patrols or listening posts, the ones Mr. Smith said weren't there; he was afraid to think it was because his tension increased, he couldn't admit that increase to himself. All too soon a smudge in the distance showed where the hamlet was. No lights were visible in it. They stopped for a while to watch and listen.

There was no sound other than the normal night animal noises,

nothing seemed to move except for bats and birds flitting across the stars. It seemed like a peaceful farming hamlet sleeping the night away, there was nothing to indicate the presence of enemy soldiers.

*Don't mean nothing,* Socrates thought. *Walk through the Junkyard at night, unless you see Fort Cragg or get ambushed by us, there's nothing to indicate we're there, either.*

They set out again after twenty minutes. Captain Hook took the point. They weren't concerned with navigation now, now their concern was stealth, and Captain Hook was better at spotting the enemy than Socrates was. Only once, for less than fifty yards, did they have to leave the cover of treelines before they reached the hamlet. There they got low and crawled along a dike instead of going through a paddy. They crawled to stay dry; wet uniforms might make noise when they went through the hamlet, the paddy-wetness would certainly carry a noticeable aroma that could give them away.

The hamlet had the same kind of hedge fence that surrounded so many in rural Vietnam. Thirty yards from it Captain Hook froze. When he sensed Socrates close he pointed. Socrates had already seen what made him stop: the faintly seen glow of a cigarette coal partly concealed. There was a guard on the entrance and he was smoking on duty.

*Damn,* Socrates thought, *he must feel secure, he must believe nobody's around.* He watched the sometimes-seen, sometimes-not coal for a moment, then it hit him; he was trying to hide the glow from his own people, he didn't want to get caught smoking on duty. For the first time since Mr. Smith picked them up he felt an easing of his tension, for the first time this mission began to feel like they could accomplish it and live to quit this damn program. He swiveled his head on his neck, rolled his shoulders and felt the muscles loosen. For a few seconds he lost track of where they were and what they were doing there. Abruptly he jerked, Captain Hook had moved away without him noticing. He came back to here and now and followed.

Captain Hook angled toward the hedge on the side of the treeline opposite the sentry. Up close Socrates could see this fence wasn't as old as the ones he was used to in the Junkyard, it wasn't as dense and had an occasional break in it—more than just the breaks children maintained so they didn't have to bother going through the gates. Captain Hook lay next to a break in the hedge listening for a couple of minutes, then slithered halfway through and lay there for another minute looking and listening. Then he moved through the rest of the

way and to one side for Socrates to come past and take point again.

Socrates squatted on the other side of the opening from Captain Hook and looked around to orient himself. He didn't bother checking for sign of anyone awake nearby, he trusted Captain Hook's judgment. If Mr. Smith's sketch map was right, they had to go two hooches to the left and then turn right into the heart of the hamlet where they would find the one they wanted.

Somewhere deep inside the hamlet a dog barked and Socrates cursed silently. He should have thought of dogs. His tension started to return, the dogs could give them away. Well, nothing for it, they were here now and had to go on. He gestured and rose to a crouch to head into the hamlet. He pulled the canister out of his shirt and held it ready in his right hand, he reasoned it might work on dogs as well as people. At least he hoped it could knock out a half asleep canine.

He had a chance to find out before they reached the hoots the NVA major was supposed to be in. He saw movement from the corner of his eye and froze, except for the slow turning of his head. He saw a blurred white shape moving toward them, an investigating dog. The dog hadn't started barking yet, Socrates thought that must mean it was accustomed to people moving about at night. The thought that the dog might be used to that bothered him. Slowly, he stretched out his right hand to the dog. It leaned forward to sniff at the offering and yelped at the sudden cold spray in its face, then drooped and lowered itself to its elbows and knees. Socrates kept the spray plunger depressed until the dog lay on its side. Only then did he tremble with the fear of what-might-have-been.

He glanced back. Sneaky Pete's eyes were wide enough to clearly see their whites. Captain Hook was looking into all of the surrounding shadows. Socrates shook himself, then moved on. Soon they were at the hoots he was looking for. He was sure it was the right one: next to the closed door a man squatted on his heels, his head bowed, a rifle lay at his feet. Socrates edged close, treading softly as he could. He held the canister out and gave the plunger a short squeeze. The bowed head sagged deeper and the body slumped. Socrates caught him before he fell over and gently lay the man on his side. He let his breath out and only then realized he'd been holding it.

Now for what might be the most dangerous moment of the entire operation; he eased the door open and stepped through. The windows were open and starlight flowed through. Inside he saw six men, two on the wooden platform bed, the others on mats on the floor, all were

sleeping quietly. The room was bright enough he wouldn't need to use the flashlight. He gestured to Sneaky Pete to stay in the door as a lookout and for Captain Hook to come in and cover him. He stepped softly around the room, giving each of the floor-sleepers a squirt from the canister before reaching the bed. Yes, he recognized one of the men on the bed as the man in Mr Smith's photographs, the NVA major. That's also when he saw the other person on the bed wasn't a man but a woman. Her tunic was open except for one button that held it closed across her breasts, its snug cloth swelled to the sides of the one fastened button, that's what caught his eye and made him notice. He felt his penis start to grow rigid. The man, the major, lay on his back with his shirt thrown completely open, one hand lay on his thin chest, the other on her smooth belly. Socrates looked at her more closely, at the major's hand on her and wondered what their relationship was, how she would react in the morning when she woke up and discovered what had happened during the night. She had a very pretty face, though he thought her expression was probably harsh when she was awake.

A soft pop startled him and he spun toward it. He saw Captain Hook shoving his silenced pistol into his belt and a pool of darkness welling in the eye of the major. A low moan brought him back to the woman. She was stirring, he thought waking up. He sprayed her and she moaned softly, then her stirring stopped and she looked to be deep in sleep. Socrates turned away from Captain Hook, back toward the door and walked away. Faint sounds told him Captain Hook was cutting the dead man's genitals off. His beginning erection went away.

Leaving the hamlet was no more difficult than getting in had been. The trip back to the isolated hoots where Mr. Smith waited took less time. Socrates told himself it was because the deserted paddies on the other side of the ridge were no longer so alien to him. It was really, though, because he wanted to get away from the dead man and the woman sleeping next to him as fast as he could.

Mr. Smith called to them from deep shadows under some trees near the hoots when they got back. He didn't wait until they reached him, simply walked briskly to his Jeep as soon as they started toward him. They hurried to catch up, but he was already behind the wheel and had the ignition turned on by the time they did.

"You didn't tell us there was a woman there," Socrates said. His voice was harsh, accusing.

"Did you complete the mission?"

"Yes. Now answer me."

"Would it have made a difference for you to know? What, would you have asked if she had any diseases so you'd know if it was safe to gangbang her?"

Socrates snarled and grabbed for him. It was a long reach because he stood on the passenger side. Captain Hook pulled him away before he made contact.

"Be cool, don't mean nothing," Captain Hook said into his ear. He held tightly until Socrates eased, then asked, "You cool?"

"I'm cool." He jerked out of Captain Hook's grasp and got into the seat. The other two climbed into the back.

"Sneaky Pete," Mr. Smith said, "gather the special equipment and put it in the bags. Name each item as you put it away."

Sneaky Pete did it; two silenced rifles, one silenced pistol, one canister, one shielded flashlight. Mr. Smith didn't say he picked Sneaky Pete because he didn't think he was imaginative enough to stick something in his pocket while saying he was packing them.

They didn't say anything else until they reached Whiskey Company HQ. Which was fine with Socrates. His mind was filled with that woman. And memory of another woman.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The young and healthy heal fast. Three weeks after that semifinal game his ankle sprain was almost fully mended. He only infrequently felt any twinge in it, mostly when he ran and jumped down, hitting his foot at an odd angle when he landed. Then pain lanced through his ankle and he limped for two or three steps before he straightened out and forgot about it. Still, it gave him an excuse to skip the hop that Friday night and made it easy to talk Jane into going to a movie. The pressures at home were mounting, and there was what Coach said. He didn't feel like going to the hop, he knew other members of the team were going to be there and they'd want to talk about the future, their college athletic careers. Theirs and his. He didn't want to talk about it, not until he made up his mind.

Jane objected briefly, she liked going to the hops with him, she enjoyed being seen on the arm of one of the Knights' sports heroes. It was only fitting, after all. I mean, she was a cheerleader. But more than that, she simply enjoyed his company and would agree to almost anything. Besides, they needed to walkabout college, right?and it would be easier to talk privately after a movie than trying to get away from the other kids after the hop.

They were both going to be accepted into college, she had no doubt about that, and had both applied to many of the same schools. They had to decide once and for all that they were going to go to the same place. They better decide on the same school. So what if they weren't going to get their acceptances until spring? Anyway, she just wanted them to be alone later tonight. It was so good being alone with him, it made her feel all tingly inside. She was in love, and being alone with him was only right. No matter what anybody else said. It wasn't a sin being alone together, she knew that, not when you're in love. Never when you're in love. Your parents and everybody only told you that because they were afraid you'd do it and get pregnant. Well, they were wrong. I mean, there are things nice girls don't do.



She wasn't too sure the stories she'd heard about diseases were true, either. Besides, she was in love and that made every difference. Even if they did, which they weren't going to, she didn't have to worry about getting pregnant. Not the first time. Not that they were going to anyway. I mean... Besides, getting pregnant didn't happen until you'd been doing it a lot for a long time. And they had been going steady since spring of their junior year. She knew most of the girls who had been going steady for almost that long had already done it, but they... Stop that. No need to think about all this, they *weren't* going to. . . . After all, they were just going to neck. His mouth felt so good, tasted so good. And pet a little. Mostly light petting, through their clothes. She loved the way it felt when he touched her breasts, it made her all tingly. Especially when he slipped his hand inside her bra. Maybe a little heavy petting. *But not.* . .

They saw *Night of the Iguana*, with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. Oh, they were so good, Burton and Taylor, and acted so well together. Richard Burton brooded so much in that movie, he reminded her of Marlon Brando. He was really sexy. So was Elizabeth Taylor. She knew what kind of effect Richard Burton had on her watching him on that screen, and hoped Elizabeth Taylor had the same kind of effect on him. No she didn't, she didn't want him getting *too* hot.

They went to the Malt Shoppe after the movie and held hands on the table while she had a strawberry shake—they didn't have cherry, which is what she wanted. Why did she want cherry? It wasn't her favorite flavor, but tonight it sounded right. He had a root beer float. They talked about the movie while they held hands and drank their malt and float. Or they tried to talk about it. Her mind was too scattered and she had trouble thinking clearly about anything. She wondered if he was having the same problem thinking about the movie, he was quieter than usual, like he had something on his mind.

When they finished she ignored the fact they'd just had something and said, "Listen, they say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Let's go to my house, I want to find out for myself." She felt her face turning red when she thought that's not the only way they say.

He looked at his watch, she loved the way her hand felt in his when he twisted his to look at his watch, and asked, "What'll your parents say if you bring me home this late?"

Her hand tingled from the pressure of his, it tingled more when she squeezed him back. "They're not home," she said. Outwardly she was very calm, inside her blood was racing, she hoped it didn't show.

He blinked. She had to smile, almost giggle, at that. "Are you sure it's okay?" he asked.

She couldn't say anything because she was sucking on her lower lip to keep from giggling, so she nodded.

"Is your sister home from college yet?"

"No she comes home next week," she said, as fast as she could so she could suck on her lip again and not giggle.

"Okay." He shrugged and a giggle did escape her. He was trying so hard to be blasé she couldn't hold it in; he had to have guessed, she was sure he did. What did he have to guess? She didn't know. Everything was okay, and it would get more romantic later.

She let go of his hand and held a finger up to him. "Wait," she said as fast as she could get the word out. She jumped out of her chair and darted to the ladies. She didn't have to pee, but she did have to get control of herself and she couldn't do that with him watching. In the ladies she realized she really did have to pee, she wondered where it all came from, she had to pee so badly. When she wiped herself... Oh! She dropped the toilet paper and touched again with her bare finger. Oh! All of a sudden she couldn't wait to get him home and feel his mouth on hers. And his hand on her breast. Maybe even inside her bra.

He was waiting by the cash register when she came out. She took his hand and they went out to his car. She snuggled as close as she could get to him without putting their arms around each other. Her breast tingled where it pressed against his arm and her head was light. She was talking, knew she was probably babbling, but couldn't help it, and wasn't aware of a single thing she was saying.

In the car she said, "My parents have gone away for the weekend, so there's no rush for anything. What time do you have to be home?"

She thought he looked at her strangely when he answered, "There's no school tomorrow, I don't have a curfew tonight," but she couldn't tell for sure, because she was curled up against him and could only see part of his face.

She was so excited she fumbled with the key and had to give it to him because she couldn't get it into the lock. This time she was sure he looked at her strangely. She mumbled something that meant yes when he asked if she was okay, something that meant no when he asked if he should leave. Inside she took his hand and dragged him right into the kitchen. After all, she *had* said she was going to test out the way through the stomach.

Then she couldn't wait any longer, she spun around and threw herself into his arms, kissed him like she'd never kissed anybody before. His mouth popped right open to her thrusting tongue, then he was kissing her back, and his hands were roaming all over her back and sides, even a little down below the waist. When she pulled away her face was all flushed. She wanted to giggle at the silly expression on his face, but was panting too hard to.

"Let's," she gasped, "let's..." She wasn't sure what "let's" so she pulled him into the living room and onto the couch. Her mouth found his again.

He didn't need any prompting. They were kissing and kissing and kissing and his hands were going all over her, even below the waist. *EVEN IN FRONT!* Her thighs were close together the first time he did that. The second time, *POP!* her thighs opened up and his hand fell in between. He stopped kissing for a moment and his eyes went wide because his hand had never been there before. *SLAM!* she closed them on his hand and squeezed as hard as she could and her eyes went all fuzzy and out of focus and all of a sudden she couldn't breathe it *felt* so good, gooder than anything she'd ever felt before.

She moaned and her moan turned into a scream. He jerked his hand out and she grabbed it and put it back and squeezed even harder so he couldn't pull it out again then his fingers started moving and the feeling was so intense she thought she'd die.

Suddenly she released his hand and rolled away from him on the couch. Not to the other end, just with her back to him. She needed to catch her breath. He pulled back and said he was sorry he hadn't meant to... She reached behind and pawed at him until she had hold of something and pulled him close. "It's okay," she gasped. "I'm out of breath, that's all. Let me catch my breath." She gasped and panted and finally started breathing again, but her heart was pounding so it was about to burst out of her chest but she didn't care if it did. She twisted back around to look at him she knew her eyes were as big as saucers big as dinner plates big as turkey platters and she couldn't see him not clearly. She smiled and knew she looked silly and didn't care. She threw her arms around him and kissed even harder than before.

Her body was feeling all so... there weren't any words in the whole world to describe how her body was feeling she never felt anything like it before and it was all so good and what did it all mean and... Oh!

She bolted upright and blurted, "I have to pee," and grabbed his hand and ran upstairs and it wasn't until she reached the bathroom door

that she realized he was right behind her and she wondered why then noticed she was holding his hand. She let go said "Wait" and closed the door behind her. She peed as fast as she could and instead of pulling her panties back up kicked them off because that was faster. She told herself it's not a sin while she was washing her hands but wasn't sure what it was that wasn't a sin she was in so much of a hurry her hands were still wet when she opened the door and he was still standing there looking so dumb and funny with his mouth hanging open looking confused. She put her hands on his chest and laughed at his expression and pushed and kept pushing not that way this way and didn't stop pushing until he fell backward and she fell on top of him. And then she knew they were in her bedroom and on her bed and wondered what happened next.

"Let's do it," she said in such a rapid husky voice she didn't recognize it herself.

"Are you sure?" he said. Gulp.

"Yes I'm sure let's do it right now." They were awkward getting undressed, undressing each other.

Suddenly, she remembered romantic and realized she wasn't quite sure of what came next. "Do you know what to do?" she asked in a voice that almost didn't exist. She wanted him to say yes, she thought one of them should know what they were doing. And she hoped he'd say no, he was her first and she wanted to be his.

"Yes," he said.

"What?" she squawked.

He rolled them over so he was on top and kissed her and felt between her legs and she'd never been so absolutely *wet* before it felt to her like his hand was under a *faucet* and then he pushed her legs apart and lowered himself between them. She forgot all about what she just asked. The next thing she was conscious of was their clothes had disappeared like magic.

All of a sudden she remembered it was supposed to hurt the first time. How much did it hurt? Then she realized he was already *INSIDE* her and it didn't hurt at all and she got all giddy and then it *did* hurt but not a whole lot only enough to make her gasp and then she forgot about the pain because it all felt so good. She thought she had already felt the best sensations she could ever possibly feel and this felt even better and she started crying because it felt so good. She screamed when he came even though she didn't know he came had no idea what that sensation was only that it felt so good. She wrapped her

arms and legs around him so tightly and her body convulsed so violently, she thought she might hurt him. And didn't care at that moment. Then she relaxed and loosened her hold on him and enjoyed so much how good it had all felt. When she opened her eyes all she could see was his eyes hanging above hers looking so deep into them it was like he could see into her soul and she knew he could. She smiled and pulled his mouth to hers and kissed his lips.

"I love you," she murmured. "I want us to be together always.

He kissed her back.

After a while he rolled off her and they lay side by side, softly holding each other, whispering sweet nothings. They had to be nothings because she couldn't remember any of them later but she knew they were sweet from the way they made her feel.

It seemed like both half of eternity and the briefest moment when he looked at his watch and said, "I have to get home, my parents will start wondering what happened to me."

"I thought you didn't have a curfew tonight."

"I don't, but it's after one o'clock. I'm usually home before now."

They kissed several times, more passionate with each, then did it again.

Then he laughed and said, "I hate to fuck and run, but..."

*Fuck and run!!!* Oh, what a horrible thing to say!!! But he had a little boy look on his face when he said it, so she forgave him. If he hadn't looked at least a little embarrassed at being so crude she didn't know what she would have done. She let him get dressed and go. "I like the way your body looks," she said as he was buttoning his shirt, she was afraid to speak sooner.

"I like the way yours looks, too," he said, bending over to kiss her and put a hand on her breast. She lifted into his hand before realizing she was laying there *all naked* and he could *see all* of her and she grabbed the sheet and pulled it over herself and he laughed but it was a nice laugh and after a moment she turned red and laughed with him. But kept herself covered with the sheet.

"Good night," he murmured, kissed her again and left.

The front door locked itself, so she didn't get up to go to the front door with him. She would have to put clothes on to go to the door and she didn't want to put anything on right now, she wanted to leave her body bare, to remember the feel of him on her. She rolled off the cold spot without wondering about it and drifted straight to sleep. She dreamed of trailing, white gowns and veils. Her sister was maid of

honor in the dream.

In the morning she saw the blood on the sheet and screamed, she'd forgotten all about the blood. She didn't even notice the dried wet spot. At first she didn't have any idea how to get rid of it and shrieked, "What will my mother say when she sees that?" After a few minutes she pulled herself together and rushed to run the sheet through the washing machine—with lots of bleach. There was still stain left but she'd tell her mother her period snuck up on her when she wasn't expecting it and her mother would maybe, probably, believe her. She hoped. While making her bed with the clean sheet she realized they had been so occupied the night before they'd never gotten around to talking about going to the same college. She smiled softly and thought, *Next time*. Then she wondered how he knew what to do next and stopped smiling.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mr. Smith dropped them off near the entrance to Whiskey company headquarters half an hour after dawn. "See Gunny Bryl," he said. "He'll arrange for transportation back to the Junkyard for you." He drove east without saying anything else; not an I'll see you later, not a good job, nothing.

Socrates stood in the dusty road watching the Jeep recede. Captain Hook stood watching him. Sneaky Pete just sort of idly looked around.

"Let's go find him," Socrates finally said. He wanted some answers. Lieutenant Convoy would have at least some of them. Socrates needed to know what the authorization for these missions was. If Mr. Smith wasn't going to tell them anything, surely Lieutenant Convoy would. He didn't know where the officer was, but that was okay. There was a proper procedure for seeing an officer, go through the chain of command. That meant start with Gunny Bryl. The gunny could tell him where to find Lieutenant Convoy.

Gunny Bryl wasn't in the office yet, the only man in it was a clerk standing the duty—mostly overnight radio watch. The clerk looked pointedly at the wind-up clock on his desk when asked for the gunny. "We keep civilized hours around here," he said. "The Gunny isn't due in until oh eight hundred. Don't bother looking for him, he's probably shit-shower-shaving right now. You can get some coffee. If you ask real nice at the mess hall maybe some chow too while you're waiting." He jabbed a pencil in the direction of the infantry battalion HQ mess hall the CAP company headquarters people ate in. "You'll have to check your weapons before you go in, though."

Socrates fidgeted, he didn't feel like waiting another hour before finding the officer who could answer some questions for him, so he asked the clerk.

"Who?" the clerk asked when Socrates asked if Lieutenant

Convoy was around.

"Lieutenant Convoy," Socrates repeated. "He came out to visit the Junkyard three, four weeks ago." The clerk looked like he didn't comprehend, so Socrates continued. "New guy, assigned to Fifth CAG, TAD. Looks like he just stepped out of a recruiting poster."

The clerk shook his head. "News to me. I've been with Whiskey Company three weeks, before that at CAG HQ. I never heard of Lieutenant Convoy."

"You sure?"

"I wouldn't shit you." The clerk started to say the rest of it, but the look in Captain Hook's eyes stopped him. The rest of it was, "You're my favorite turd." Instead he said, "Maybe if you visit CAG HQ sometime you can find him."

Socrates grunted. "Maybe." He looked absently out a screened window. Then he noticed the field telephone on the clerk's desk and remembered someone else who might know. "You know Sal?" The clerk nodded. "That phone connect with CAG?" The clerk nodded again. "Call Sal, ask him. When Convoy came out to the Junkyard, Sal was along as shotgun."

This time the clerk shook his head. "No can do. Sal rotated back to the World last week."

"Shit." He looked out the window again. Well, asking the clerk had been a long shot and it looked like he had to wait to see Gunny Bryl after all. May as well eat something in the meantime. "Where'd you say that mess hall was?"

Five minutes later they were side-stepping through the chow line. Nobody had challenged them, it seemed the CAP patches on their shirts were all the ID they needed to get in. Nobody tried to engage them in conversation, either. Inside they were all pogues; clerks, truck mechanics, and other rear area types who preferred not to associate with grunts. That was fine with them, they didn't much care for pogues either. Neither did anyone tell them to check their weapons. That was even better, no fighter is ever comfortable unarmed in a combat zone. They did, however, unload and lock their bolts to the rear. Captain Hook ejected the shells from his shotgun and left the slide racked back, anyone could see into the ejector port and know the weapon was unloaded.

The mess hall tables were long picnic-style tables with attached benches. Socrates picked one in a corner for them to sit at. They sat at its far end, right in the corner, where they had a clear view in two



directions through the screening that formed the upper halves of the building's walls. No one else came to sit at their table, no one sat at the near end of the parallel one, they had privacy if they wanted it.

Socrates wanted privacy. "What do you think's going on?" he asked Captain Hook.

Captain Hook looked at him steadily and didn't answer, just chewed his reconstituted scrambled eggs.

"Lieutenant Convoy introduced us to Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith won't tell us anything, now we can't find Convoy."

Captain Hook continued eating. His expression said, *So?*

Sneaky Pete looked around furtively. He hadn't thought of Lieutenant Convoy in weeks and wished Socrates wouldn't mention him now. Officers were a different life form as far as he was concerned, a dangerous one. The best thing to do with officers was ignore them and hope they went away. That way you keep out of trouble.

"I want to know what the fuck it is we're doing out there," Socrates said.

Captain Hook swallowed. "Killing Cong," he said, then took another mouthful.

Socrates muttered something unintelligible, Captain Hook didn't care or didn't want to talk right now. He attended to his food.

Captain Hook waited until Socrates' mouth was full and said, "You only asked one pogue. You think pagues know everything?"

Socrates cocked an eye at him, then slowly shook his head. Captain Hook was right. He'd ask Gunny Bryl later, the gunny would know where Lieutenant Convoy was. And if the officer wasn't around he'd ask Gunny Bryl what was going on, what the authorization for what they were doing was. Hell, maybe he should have just gone to the gunny in the first place. After all, Gunny Bryl came out to the Junkyard to get them yesterday, he must know what was going on. Anyway, even though company gunnery sergeants don't always tell the troops everything they want to know, if you ask them the right questions you can get a lot of answers just from what they *don't* tell you.

Gunny Bryl didn't know. "You mean some lieutenant went out to Fort Cragg, messed with my troops, and did it without so much as a by-your-leave to me?" he demanded. He was steamed. The chain of command didn't only go up, it went down as well. Military courtesy, if

nothing else, required an officer to clear his visit to someone else's unit, let that unit's chain of command know he was there. Especially clear it with that unit's senior NCOs, they were the ones responsible for the troops.

Socrates' heart sank. He decided this wasn't wasn't the right time to tell him about Mr. Smith and the operations he had the three of them running. Jesus, he might be in deep shit, he better find out more about what was going on before telling him. For that same reason, he was glad he had left Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete sitting in the mess hall with their coffee when he saw the gunny walking past. Now if only the gunny didn't ask what Lieutenant Convoy did at the Junkyard. For a moment he thought he was going to, the look Gunny Bryl gave him.

He didn't. "You take care of what CAG wanted you for?" is what he did ask. His teeth were clenched, obviously he wanted to ask why CAG had asked for Socrates and Captain Hook to visit overnight.

"Yes we did." Hastily, before the gunny could ask what the business that couldn't wait was, he added, "Just some administrative shit."

"Uh-huh, just some administrative shit. Sure. I wonder," Gunny Bryl's voice trailed off and his eyes unfocused for a moment. Then his eyebrows pulled together and a deep crease furrowed between them. He looked as though he was struggling with whether or not to ask a few pointed questions. Then a subtle change came over his face; he looked resolute rather than curious. "Where are Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete?" he abruptly asked. "Get them and I'll get you a ride back to Fort Cragg. Then I'll track down this Lieutenant Convoy for you."

Socrates turned to the mess hall. He only had to go part way before he saw them watching him through the screening of the walls. He raised his right hand and swung it around his head, the hand-signal for come here. Behind him he heard Gunny Bryl mutter about how he'd tell Socrates how to get in touch with Lieutenant Convoy *after* he told this young officer the proper procedure for visiting someone else's people.

All the way back to the Junkyard Socrates didn't think about Mr. Smith. Now he was wondering who Lieutenant Convoy was.

Half the Marines were already up when they got back. It was still cool enough half were sleeping after the quiet night's patrols. Not for much longer, though. The temperature was rising rapidly. The three

of them would be able to cop a very few Zs before it got too hot.

"You get it taken care of?" Sergeant Slaughter demanded. He took Socrates off to the side as soon as they arrived so they could talk without being overheard. Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete headed straight for their cots.

"Yes we did, Sergeant Slaughter."

"So what the fuck was so important they had to haul you away and leave Whiskey Eight so short-handed a Vee Cee squad could have come in and taken the Junkyard all by its lonesome?"

"Uh, nothing much. Just some administrative shit." Socrates swallowed and looked aside. "You know what those pagues are like in the rear. They don't know shit about what a Marine should be doing. When they need a piece of paper taken care of they think the whole damn war can stop."

Sergeant Slaughter jammed his fists into his hips and leaned forward slightly so he could stare up at Socrates from under lowered brows. The moment stretched long enough to become uncomfortable before he said, "Don't try to snow the snowman. Maybe they pull that kind of happy horseshit in battalions, they don't in CAG. We never have near enough men to do what we need, they don't pull you out overnight unless they really need to. What did they want you for?"

Socrates realized this was the question he hadn't wanted Gunny Bryl to ask. Now it was being asked and a lie didn't do the trick.

"Well?" Sergeant Slaughter shoved his face to a few inches from Socrates'.

"Would you believe me if I told you they said I wasn't to tell anybody what they wanted us for?" That was as much of the truth as Socrates thought he could tell right now, not until he knew more.

Sergeant Slaughter jerked upright and his hands dropped from his hips. "Don't tell anybody!" he bellowed. He dropped his voice. "I'm your commander, they didn't mean don't tell me. What did they want you for?"

"They meant everybody, including you." It took effort, but Socrates kept his face straight and his posture erect and still.

Sergeant Slaughter kept Socrates pinned on his glare while he thought about it. This was no good at all, what was going on?

"How the hell am I supposed to run a CAP if my men are being pulled away and I don't even know why?" he asked out loud. He didn't expect an answer and didn't get one. Gunny Bryl, he'd know. He decided to talk to Gunny Bryl. Sometimes, people have a lot of faith

in the ability of a company gunnery sergeant to accomplish anything. If nothing else, the gunny would back him up the next time someone came up with something like this—next time he was going to refuse to let anybody go overnight unless he knew why. Get this straightened out most ricky-tick. "Go get some sack time, you've got a patrol to run tonight," he said after making his decision.

Socrates got away before Sergeant Slaughter could change his mind. His mind wanted to wrestle with the problem instead of sleeping, go ahead and let his body toss and turn if it wanted to. But the long night and into the morning were tiring enough his brain soon gave up and he dozed off. His sleep was fitful, he dreamed again of that game.

He didn't know what the score was, but it seemed the Knights were behind. All he was aware of was the constant running up and down the field, from side to side, marking the Lancer with the ball, trying to block or intercept passes, breaking up plays before that striker could break clear and get a good shot on goal. It seemed the game had turned into a franticness, a constant scramble for control of a ball that constantly eluded him. When he did manage to get a foot on it, redirect the ball, none of his teammates were ever where the ball went, no matter how hard he tried to aim his kicks at them. Or he kicked it to one of his own men and his intended receiver turned the wrong way and missed it.

Why did the Lancers always have the ball? What was wrong with the referee? That last Lancer batted the ball out of play with his hands and the referee gave him a throw in. The crowd roared its approval. But that's not right, the Knights should have a free kick from where the Lancer hit the ball with his hands. He looked around for the referee, as team captain he could question him about his calls—as long as he was polite and didn't do it too often. There he was. Socrates trotted toward him. A shout made him look away. When he looked back the referee had moved to the other side of the field. He headed toward him again. Then the referee wasn't there, he was at the far end of the field, the Knights end.

A Knight got the ball and charged the Lancers' net. He faked the goal keeper and set up for a quick shot into the undefended net. Suddenly, from nowhere, a Lancer slid feet first into his legs, tackled him instead of tackling the ball. The ball took a crazy bounce and the goal keeper caught it. The tackled Knight fell to the ground and

writhed in agony. From the other end of the field the referee blew his whistle and signaled a goal kick for the Lancers. The crowd's roar was deafening.

Socrates screamed, unheard in the din, at the wrongness of the call. The Knights should have a penalty kick, the tackle was illegal and in the penalty area. He ran to the referee, who was now somewhere else. He ran and he ran and he ran. He completely ignored the game now, now he was just trying to reach the referee. The game wasn't being called right. This was all wrong. But every time he looked away or blinked, the referee was someplace else. A long way off someplace else.

He ran again to reach the referee, he tried to keep his eyes open, tried desperately not to blink or turn his head. The roaring of the crowd shook the very ground, made him stumble.

Noises woke him shortly after noon. He opened his eyes and jerked them around. Where was the crowd? Where was that referee? He had to get to the referee. Then he saw Captain Hook dressing and realized where he was.

"What time is it?" Socrates asked, sitting up, rubbing the grit from his eyes, shaking his head to clear the dream from it.

"Late enough."

Great. How late was that? He looked and saw Sneaky Pete's cot was empty. "Where is he?"

"Shaving."

Socrates sat up and rubbed his hand across his chin. He needed a shave, too. "Going anywhere?"

"For a walk."

Sometimes Captain Hook was too damn hard to talk to. "Wait, I'm going with you." Something told him he shouldn't let Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete wander around without him until he found out more about Mr. Smith and Lieutenant Convoy. He stood and reached for his shaving kit.

"We're leaving in five minutes." Captain Hook buckled his cartridge belt, hefted his shotgun, and walked out.

There were also times when Captain Hook seemed to forget who was in charge. Or ignored it. Socrates looked at his shaving kit and thought Captain Hook probably would leave in five minutes, whether he was ready or not. He decided to take care of his whiskers later and got dressed. It took more than five minutes for him to get ready. From

his position at the piss-tube he saw Captain Hook standing easy at the main gate. Sneaky Pete jittered next to him. They saw him and waited. He finished and joined them.

"Where we going?" he asked as Captain Hook walked out and turned right.

"For a walk."

"You know, Captain Hook, sometimes you're the most aggravating man I ever met."

"I got C-rats for all of us," Sneaky Pete said. The other two ignored him. He made a face at their backs and followed.

They went around the east corner of Toi Co 1 and cut around to the hamlet's north, going between it and the schoolhouse. The sun beat down, reflected glare off the rice paddies. The temperature was near the day's peak, not as many people were working the paddies now as had in the morning. Sweat poured off the three Marines but they were used to it and hardly noticed. They took their salt tabs daily and carried two canteens each. They expected without thinking about it that both canteens would probably be empty when they returned to Fort Cragg. It didn't take Socrates long to figure out Captain Hook was headed toward the river. They zigged and zagged along the paddy dikes, but were generally headed in a direction that would get them to the river just west of Nghia Toi. The route they took avoided the children. Socrates wondered if Captain Hook had anything special in mind. Probably. He seldom did anything without a reason.

Captain Hook quick-footed down the steep bank to the dry river bottom, he didn't use his hands. Socrates slid one hand along the dirt wall for balance. Sneaky Pete jumped, stumbled, almost fell, but somehow managed to keep his balance on the way down.

The channel was tucked in close here and wider than most of its length. Captain Hook went straight to the edge and turned left to walk along the hard, gray, sandy mud near the water. Their footsteps dimpled the mud. Behind them the dimples filled with water, gradually evened out. In a couple of hours there would be no trace of their passage.

Captain Hook didn't seem to be looking for anything in particular, his head moved back and forth, his eyes swiveled in their sockets. His shotgun rested easy in his right hand, it looked like some primeval extension of his arm. He looked normal and natural, not as though he had anything particular on his mind. He didn't even seem to be paying the top of the bank any more attention than he did anything else.

Socrates did though. He thought there was next to no chance there were any VC in Khung Toi today looking for unwary Marines to ambush. It was months since the last time they came during the day. Still, if there were any nearby, that's where they'd hit from. He didn't worry about the far bank, it was too far away for an effective ambush. A glance to his rear told him Sneaky Pete was also watching the bank. Socrates stepped out for a few paces until he was alongside Captain Hook.

"Okay, we're here," he said. "Why?"

Captain Hook didn't answer right away, didn't even look like he'd heard the question. The corner of Socrates' mouth twitched, he knew he'd been heard and didn't feel like repeating his question. Damn, he didn't want to have to wait for an answer, either. But wait he did. He hated it when Captain Hook got into these quiet moods. He was bad enough normally. Socrates watched where they were going and all around—especially the high bank.

Finally Captain Hook said, "Charlie came down the river two nights ago."

"Yeah, so?"

"First time in a long time we set an ambush on that part of the river. We caught him."

"Bullshit, we have an ambush on the river almost every night."

Captain Hook looked directly at him. "At Nghia Toi, not upstream." He looked away.

Socrates blinked. That's right, they seldom bothered with riverside ambushes away from Nghia Toi. They thought any VC on the river were headed to the fishing hamlet and they could catch them there. "You think maybe Charlie uses the river more and we've been missing him because he comes ashore someplace else?"

"Maybe."

"Sneaky Pete, what're you looking at?" Socrates asked.

"Everything." Sneaky Pete hadn't listened to the exchange between the other two. He didn't know that he was supposed be looking at anything in particular, but he knew what the generic answer to that question was, even though if asked he wouldn't know what a "generic answer" was. So he said it again. "Everything." He was a combat Marine on patrol, even though the patrol was just a casual daytime walk in the Junkyard. He was supposed to look at everything so they could spot an ambush or booby trap before they found it the hard way. "Everything," he said a third time.

"That's good, keep doing it." Socrates started looking more at the river bed. "Let me know if you see anything that looks like boats being dragged out of the river."

Sneaky Pete considered that open-mouthed, beetle-browed. "Right," he said and puzzled over it. What would look like a boat being dragged out of the water that wasn't a boat being dragged out of the water? Shit, if he saw somebody dragging a boat out of the water, Captain Hook and Socrates would see it too, wouldn't they? Or were they walking with their eyes closed? Nah, they were looking all around just like he was. Well, what the fuck, he'd say so if he saw somebody dragging a boat out of the water, even if he could tell they already saw it themselves. A few paces farther he realized maybe Socrates meant behind them. The other two weren't looking back very much. Then again, neither was he. Let's see, the last man in a column is supposed to watch the rear. Now he got it! He was supposed to be keeping an eye behind them. He shook his head and grimaced. *That's the problem with the smart guys*, he thought, *they say things so they're hard to understand instead of saying outright what they mean so people know what they're supposed to do*. He started paying more attention to where they'd been than where they were going, even walked backward part of the time, almost like a proper rear point.

They followed the river channel far beyond where they'd spotted the VC boats merging with the fishermen a couple of nights before, nearly halfway to the next village upstream. The whole distance there was no sign of boats being beached regularly. The marks would have to be recent, very recent, because of the quickness with which the riverside repaired itself. There were no particular scuff marks or gouges on the drier dirt away from the water. The boats they saw poling up and down the river all seemed normal and innocent; farmers hauling produce, merchants moving goods, folks visiting relatives, very few were fishermen during the heat of the day. The three Marines recognized a few of the people in the boats, waved to them all and shouted greetings to the ones they knew.

"Let's go back," Socrates said when they'd been trekking along the water for more than an hour.

Captain Hook grunted and turned toward the bank. Instead of climbing to its top he walked along its bottom, examining the slope of the bank and its surface undulations. Most of the time they could look to their right and see through the trees, their sight skimmed the tops of the paddy dikes. The farmers working the paddies seemed to hover



legless above them.

Socrates did the same, looking for any sign of disturbance in the dirt. He didn't think it was likely, but guessed it was possible that the VC buried caches of supplies or weapons in the bank. There might even be a cave entrance. He didn't remember anyone taking a walk along the bank like this since the last flood. It was possible the VC had dug a cave in preparation for the next rainy season, a cave they could use to hide in when the river was high and they needed to go to ground because the Marines and PFs were pursuing them too closely. They did that sometimes, though he couldn't think of any instances he'd heard of them doing it in riverbanks as seasonal as these, certainly not this long before the water rose again.

They didn't find anything on the face of the bank, Socrates would have been surprised if they had. There were many disturbances, but all of them proved to be natural erosion slides. Socrates and Captain Hook probed some of them with their knives. Sneaky Pete didn't understand what they were doing, they didn't bother explaining, and joined in the game, probing into random slides. He didn't find anything either. They had looked without finding anything, Socrates wondered if Captain Hook felt frustrated at that. There was no way to tell by looking at the man, his face was expressionless as usual. He hadn't expected to find anything himself and didn't feel any frustration. It was a good idea anyway, that Captain Hook had, take a look just in case. Captain Hook probably thought the same. The other night must have been a one shot deal. Unless the VC came ashore on the other side or downstream below Nghia Toi.

When Socrates judged they were near Hat Reo Toi he said, "Topside." If that was the way Captain Hook wanted to talk, he could talk the same way.

Captain Hook nodded and clambered up the bank. He was already walking through the paddies toward Hat Reo Toi by the time Socrates and Sneaky Pete gained the top. They hurried to catch up.

Sneaky Pete caught on right away to where they were headed and licked his lips in anticipation of a meal at Seller Sam's. He was hungry, they hadn't stopped along the way to eat the C-rations he still carried. Not stopping was all right with him, there wasn't any shade on the riverbed—except along the bank, and he didn't like the idea of sitting there without someone on top to cover them from that direction. If he knew these two, they would have made him be the one to sit on the top and not take their fair turns watching. He started looking for

the children who were sure to join them.

The first wave of children engulfed the three Marines halfway from the bank to the hamlet. By the time they reached its pathways nearly every child in the hamlet was in attendance. One small one was being carried by each American, at least two more were grasping at each to be carried in place of the one already up. Three of the bigger children, barely big enough to not stagger under their burdens, proudly carried the Marines' cartridge belts, and another had the pack with their C-rations slung over his thin shoulders. Three of the middle-sized marched cock-of-the-walk under the Marines' bush hats. The Marines politely, playfully, refused all offers to carry their weapons. Parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, paused in their chores to smile indulgently at them as they passed. The mother of the VC paymaster who had recently come home for a visit raised a finger and shouted out, "No Vee Cee. A-med-i-ca numba one." The Marines raised a finger back and smiling, replied, "Vietnam numba one." Even the mother of the girl Killer Kowalski was sweet on—they saw him visiting his girlfriend and exchanged brief greetings—broke off from her hovering long enough to beam at them and cry out a word of greeting. They returned all greetings, but didn't stop until they were able to sit at Seller Sam's picnic table.

Hat Reo Toi was a happy hamlet today. Several of the fishermen who had been stopped on the river and used as camouflage by the VC were from here. The Marines had detected it and stopped the VC from carrying out their nefarious plan—whatever it was. And they didn't shoot at the VC when there was a chance they might hit one of the fishermen by mistake. That proved to the villagers that the Marines and PFs of Whiskey 8 were doing their job. Khung Toi in general, and Hat Reo Toi in particular, were safe. Reason enough for happiness.

Seller Sam was happy to see them. But he was always happy to see the Marines. They did business with him, that's all the reason he ever needed to be happy. He didn't ask what they wanted to drink, he simply brought three bottles of *Ba Moui Ba* beer and a pot of tea with three stained glasses. They could help themselves to what they wanted. The tea was free with food. Seller Sam looked forward to the day he could get Falstaff or Schlitz, or one of the other American beers. He was sure his business would improve if he could serve the Americans the same beer they drank at home. Food today was rice with greens and bits of fish, and rice with a few pieces of chicken. The store-bought *nuoc mam* went without saying. A smile split his face

when they ordered three bowls of each rice dish.

"Take it easy on the chow," Socrates cautioned. "We're going to be having evening chow back at Fort Cragg in a couple of hours."

"Don't want us to spoil our appetites, mom?" Captain Hook asked.

"You got it, sonny."

Once they started eating all three ignored the warning—it was getting on to late afternoon and they hadn't eaten since before they left company headquarters that morning. Well, they were young enough they still had some growing to do. They could afford to eat a full meal now and another one in a couple of hours. At least it wasn't Beast's turn to cook.

They had a second, leisurely beer after they ate. They played with the children and gossiped with the hamlet elders who drank tea under the shade of Seller Sam's awning. After a peaceable time Socrates sent one of the small children to get Killer Kowalski. Two other tots joined in the mission, it was more of a game if two or three went.

"Where's whoever came with you?" Socrates asked Killer Kowalski when he joined them ten minutes later.

"Huh?"

Nobody's supposed to go out the gate alone, so somebody must have come with you."

"Uh, yeah. He must have gone back," Killer Kowalski said, looking around nervously.

"They must have," Socrates said dryly. "Had to have been at least two, one man who knows the rules wouldn't take off alone." He cocked an eyebrow at Killer Kowalski. "Did they say when they'd come back for you?"

"Uh, no."

"Maybe we'll run into them on the way. Let's go." Nothing except the suspicious boats had happened since the wanted posters went up and the Marines were starting to disobey the order to not go out alone. As an NCO, Socrates was supposed to take action against any man he caught disobeying any standing order. This was a gentle way of reminding Killer Kowalski that order still stood.

They saddled up and said their good-byes to Seller Sam and the elders. The children gaggled along with them until well into the paddies between there and Toi Co 1.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They got in from another uneventful patrol about three in the morning and shucked off their uniforms to hit the sack for a few hours sleep. Sneaky Pete tumbled under his mosquito net and stretched out as fast as he could and was snoring lightly before Socrates had carefully laid out everything he would need if he had to wake up fighting, and fingered a good night kiss to his Ann-Margaret picture. He stared for a long moment at the photo of himself scoring that winning goal before he got under the mosquito net, carefully tucked it in all around, and lay down to sleep. Briefly he wondered whether if he took the photo down he'd stop having those dreams. Then, in the starlight streaming in the window, he noticed Captain Hook standing in the middle of the room in his skivvy drawers and socks, looking out, motionless. He watched him for a long moment before quietly saying, "Problem, Captain Hook?"

"No problem."

"Why are you standing there looking out the window? We've got PFs keeping watch, they'll let us know if anybody's coming through the wire."

Captain Hook shook his head, that wasn't why he was still up, staring out the window.

"You're usually the first one of us to rack out. What's happening?"

Captain Hook continued to stand motionless; he looked part shadow, part marble statue, for a long moment. Then: "I'm going to transfer."

Socrates sat bolt up, his head bulged the top of his mosquito net. "What do you mean, transfer? You want back in a grunt company with all kinds of sergeants and staff sergeants and lieutenants watching over you all the time?"

"No." The negative was a grunt.

Socrates drew up his legs and wrapped his arms around them. "What then?"

"Too quiet here. I want more action. Go to one of the Quebecs."

Quebec Company was new. Its platoons were farther west than the other CAPs, far enough some Marines said they were right next to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They had more fire fights than any of the other CAPs did, more action than many battalions on operations. The battalions on operations eventually came in off those operations and didn't have fire fights for a while. The Quebec CAPs were out there all the time.

A month ago Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete had ambushed the five VC near the skivvy house, there was the big fight with the VC tax collecting party at Toi Mui. Since then there had been the boats on the river—though there was no shooting on that one, and the two missions for Mr. Smith. A quiet time, but still an average of better than one action a week. That should be more than enough action for any man. But, Socrates knew, Captain Hook wasn't just any man, he seemed to thrive on defying death. So far he'd been lucky. He spent seven months in the grunts and gone on more than half a dozen operations, more than half of them major ones, before transferring to CAP. He'd even been in those damn Hills Battles near Khe Sanh when the Marines first got the M16 and many of them died because their weapons jammed on them. When he first joined Whiskey 8 nearly four months ago the Junkyard was still contested and the VC weren't ready to give up on it yet. It was only in the past month and a half that it had eased off. Two months to go on his tour, a time when most combat troops were counting down the days and starting to find ways to get out of combat, here he was wanting more action. He was as deadly a night fighter as they came, more competent and cooler under fire than any other Marine Socrates had ever met. But there's a lot of luck in who gets hit and who doesn't. He could push his luck too far and wind up going home in a bodybag. Socrates had seen that happen to more than one Marine who everybody thought was lucky.

"You want to talk about it?"

Captain Hook's head shake was almost imperceptible.

Socrates sat looking at him for a while longer. Of course, there was an excellent chance that if Captain Hook was in a situation where he was in constant action for the next two months he still might not get hurt, that's the kind of fighter he was—and there was nothing to say his luck wouldn't stay good. But what would life be like without him around? He was a damn hard man to understand or get along with. Sometimes impossible to understand. Socrates himself still had four months to go on his tour and wanted every edge he could get to

survive. Having Captain Hook in his fire team was one of the best edges he could think of. He didn't want him to transfer. But Captain Hook didn't want to talk about it now.

"Get under your mosquito net before you catch malaria. There are some bugs around that quinine doesn't work on."

Silence, then Captain Hook made a throat noise and turned to his cot. He understood if he got malaria it might keep him out of all action.

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," Socrates said.

Captain Hook didn't say anything. In a few minutes Socrates could tell from his breathing he was asleep. It took him longer to get to sleep himself. Now he added the complication of Captain Hook transferring to his concerns about Mr. Smith and his strange missions that they weren't supposed to talk about.

They didn't talk about it in the morning.

"EVERYBODY UP!"

Socrates rolled off his cot and grabbed his rifle and cartridge belt. His ears were straining before his eyes were open and focused. Where were the VC, where should he and his men go to defend Fort Cragg? He stayed down, armed and ready, listening for orders, or anything else that would tell him something. There was no gunfire, no other sounds of fighting. He looked around. The sun was up, the room was bright. Captain Hook was as ready and alert as he was, Sneaky Pete also was on the floor, holding his rifle. Both were looking at him for instructions.

"ON ME. EVERYBODY, RIGHT NOW! FALL IN ON ME." It was Sergeant Slaughter bellowing from out front. He sounded fighting mad, but not like he was fighting.

Fall in? What the hell was going on? Socrates jumped to his feet, pulled on a pair of utility shorts, shoved his feet into his Ho Chi Minh sandals, and headed out. Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete dressed similarly and followed on his heels.

Sergeant Slaughter looked furious. Socrates had never seen him this livid. Also unusual for him at this time and place, Sergeant Slaughter was in full uniform and wore a pistol belt. Village chief Nuyghn Phu Lai stood next to him. Lai didn't look angry, Socrates couldn't read his expression.

In seconds all the Marines except Motormouth, who was on radio watch, were milling around in front of Sergeant Slaughter, asking each

other what was the problem. Except Socrates, Submarine, and Mad Greek—they wanted to ask Sergeant Slaughter, but his contorted face told them not to say anything yet. Doc Holliday stood to one side of the small crowd of Marines; he was with them, but his quiet attitude kept him apart.

"What is this happy horseshit?" Sergeant Slaughter shouted. His eyes swept the small mob but didn't fix on anyone. "Is this the way my Marine Corps taught you to fall in? Or have you all been on this picnic so long you've forgotten the military way to do things?"

They flinched and their milling became frantic as they sorted themselves out and got into a line. The three corporals were the first in position and added their own shouted orders to the confusion. It wasn't as confused as it looked at first, it only took a few seconds for everyone to find his place in the line and stand at attention. It wasn't as sharp an attention as they learned in Boot Camp—they *had* been away in this picnic for long enough to become completely out of practice at parade ground formations. But they got into squad formation, standing at attention. Sergeant Slaughter's behavior was so outre that Doc Holliday decided to take no chances, he came to attention at the end of the line.

"Do you people know what our mission is in this village," Sergeant Slaughter asked rhetorically, "or have you forgotten that too?" He clasped his hands in the small of his back and paced to and fro in front of the squad without looking at them. "In case it's slipped your minds, people, our mission is to protect the people of Khung Toi village from the bad guys who want to come in here and make life difficult for them." He stopped in the middle of the line and faced them from ten feet away, his eyes bored briefly into each of theirs. Small muscle groups bounced at the points of his jaw, cords stood out in his throat. "We are here to protect them," he continued after staring into the eyes of each man in his command, "and help them, and enable them to lift themselves up so they can stand on their own against anyone who wants to do them harm. Does any of that sound familiar to you?"

The ten men at attention kept their eyes front and mouths closed.

"You're not answering me," Sergeant Slaughter said in an ominously lower voice. "I want to hear you answer me."

"Yes, Sergeant Slaughter," they said, some clearly, some mumbled, some softly. None loud.

"I can't hear you!" Sergeant Slaughter's voice raised again.

"Yes, Sergeant Slaughter," they shouted back. None softly, none mumbled.

"Well, we aren't doing a very fucking good job, are we, people?"

A few broke their strict attention to cast worried or confused glances at each other. What's he talking about, not doing a very good job?

Submarine was the first to break the silence. "*We are* doing a good job, Sergeant Slaughter."

"Is that a fact," Sergeant Slaughter said dryly, in a more conversational voice. Now that he had yelled and a dialog was starting, he was calming down; face less livid, jaw less clenched, throat cords less prominent. "Is that a fact."

"You know it is," Socrates spoke up. As senior fire team leader he should be the spokesman—even if he didn't know what the problem was. "Whiskey Eight is doing a numba fuckin' one job here. Everybody knows that. Including Charlie. He's so shook up he hardly ever comes here anymore."

Sergeant Slaughter took a few quick strides and stood nose to chin with Socrates. "You think we're doing a number fucking one job here?"

"Fucking A."

"You think we're protecting these people?"

"I know we are."

"You think Charlie doesn't come around anymore?"

"He does sometimes. We catch him and put his ass deep in the hurt locker when he does."

"Is that a fact?"

"You better believe it."

During this exchange both men had stood erect at attention, faces bare inches apart, eyes straight front; Sergeant Slaughter's eyes were on Socrates' lips, Socrates' eyes were level with the edge of Sergeant Slaughter's hat brim. Now Sergeant Slaughter took half a step back and tipped his head to look directly into Socrates' eyes.

"Then would you mind explaining to me," he started in a conversational voice, "how it happened that someone walked into Seller Sam's hoots last night when we had three patrols out, including one in Hat Reo Toi, and shot him dead and nobody did anything about it?" While he spoke his voice rose until the last words almost came out in a scream.

"WHAT?"



"I didn't stutter!"

Captain Hook slowly turned his head to look at the CAP commander. Submarine broke ranks to stand near Socrates, facing Sergeant Slaughter. Mad Greek joined him, so did Doc Holliday.

Sergeant Slaughter didn't acknowledge their movements, he continued looking into Socrates' eyes. "Can you tell me that?" he asked softly.

Socrates was too stunned to say anything. Twice, before he joined Whiskey 8, VC assassination teams had murdered people in Khung Toi. The Marines caught and killed the second team. The VC tried twice more after he joined. He was one of the Marines who destroyed the third team after it made its kill. They got the fourth before it reached its intended victim. The VC were willing to lose some assassination teams to gain their ends: terrorize the people into cooperation. But the Marines getting the second and third teams, and then catching the fourth before it could do its job, told the people the VC couldn't get away with it, so they were upset and outraged but not terrorized. The VC cut their losses and quit trying.

Now Sergeant Slaughter looked around at the Marines surrounding him and loudly, angrily asked, "Can any of you explain to me how a VC assassination team gets into the Junkyard, kills a prominent citizen, and waltzes back out again, and none of us knows anything about it until the next day when the village chief brings it to my attention?"

Nobody said anything. They looked dumbly at each other, no one had any idea how this could happen. They were deeply shaken that it had.

Socrates looked past Sergeant Slaughter to Chief Lai. The village chief stood unmoving where he was when he first saw him. His expressionless face was as unreadable now as it was then. He looked back to Sergeant Slaughter.

"The only gunfire I heard all night was far away and to the north," he said, "nothing from the west." His patrol had been mostly around Toi Co 1 and went all the way to Toi Mui briefly.

Mad Greek looked at Rodin and Chickenfucker, their faces told him they hadn't heard anything either. "We didn't hear anything," he said. His patrol had been in the area of the schoolhouse and Nghia Toi.

"He was killed in his hoots?" Submarine asked.

"That's affirmative."

"This is bullshit." Submarine turned to his men. "Saddle up, we're going to take a look." His patrol had spent most of the night in and around Hat Reo Toi. Sergeant Slaughter made no motion to stop them when they headed toward the main building to get dressed and properly armed.

"If they shot him, they had to do it somewhere else and they returned his body after," Socrates said, "or we would have heard."

Sergeant Slaughter shook his head. "That's not what Chief Lai says."

"Where's Hank?"

"He's there keeping everybody out of Seller Sam's hoots until the National Police arrive to conduct their investigation."

Socrates looked at him oddly. The National Police? He shook his head. This was a military matter, not police. "I'm going with Submarine." He went to get ready. Captain Hook went also. Sneaky Pete followed.

Sergeant Slaughter didn't show it, but he was happy to let them go. It was good that his fire team leaders were taking this so seriously, taking responsibility for what happened. He looked at Doc Holliday and jerked his head to the side. Doc Holliday nodded and ran into the house to get his medkit and go with the others.

"The rest of you stay put."

Mad Greek glowered and blew hard, ruffling his mustache. Rodin and Chickenfucker also looked unhappy. They were the only members of the squad not going. Along with Sergeant Slaughter and Motormouth. And they weren't too sure Sergeant Slaughter was staying. Good thing they weren't expecting him to keep them company because a few minutes after the others took off for Hat Reo Toi Sergeant Slaughter left with Chief Lai.

The Marines and Doc Holliday crowded into Seller Sam's house. Hank was already there along with two PFs. One of the PFs was in the second room with the bed to keep anyone from climbing in through the windows and disturbing anything. Hank told them Seller Sam's widow was with relatives. The seven Americans and two Vietnamese were in the main room. Socrates looked at Submarine to see if he wanted to run things for the moment. When he didn't do anything fast enough, Socrates did.

"Sneaky Pete, Beast, go outside and keep guard," he said.

Beast gave him a who-are-you-to-give-me-orders look, Sneaky

Pete looked pained, but they went outside without verbal complaint. Socrates looked around, this was the first time he'd ever been inside Seller Sam's home.

Seller Sam's house was big and well appointed by Khung Toi standards. It had two rooms, a very large house for only two people. The second room was added when the hoots was rebuilt from thatch to river bed brick. Making the house bigger did cut down a bit on the kitchen garden, but the business conducted from the adjoining shed more than made up for the loss. Besides, as everybody knew, Seller Sam and his wife were very happy about the extra room. As for furnishings...

The chairs that stood at the table under one awninged window were heavier and more sturdy than the village's average. The table itself was metal instead of too-often painted wood and not too much of its thick, white enamel was chipped off. It was only rusted through in two or three small places. The ancestor shrine wasn't on a small table; it was on a small, standing chest that had doors that didn't jam. The photo frames on the chest and the wall behind it bore traces of gold leaf. Reed mats covered most of the hard-packed dirt floor. The storage urns along one wall were all full of rice and other foodstuffs; one was even given over to small objects that Seller Sam and his wife suspected they might some day find a use for. The clothing chest was large, nearly the size of an American foot locker, and still wasn't big enough to contain all of their clothes—Seller Sam's wife had to hang her three flowing *ai daos* on nails pounded into the wall behind it. *Three ai daos*, most village women were quite content to own one of the traditional dresses. All of the cooking utensils were metal, instead of only the knife and the wok and possibly one or two other pieces—even the skimmer was metal instead of wicker. There were other objects in the room, all in good condition, all usable, half of them unpresent in most other homes in Khung Toi because few people were able to afford them.

The sleeping platform, it was large enough to hold an entire family even though Seller Sam and his wife didn't have any children or relatives living with them, nearly filled the smaller room. Here was what might be the richest luxury item in the entire big house: There was a blanket made of actual cotton on the bed. Ordinary people covered themselves with flexible reed mats if they needed a covering while they slept.

The bedroom was too small to hold everyone. Hank let Doc

Holliday, Socrates, and Submarine go in and kept Captain Hook and Killer Kowalski out. The PF guarding the corpse took advantage of the presence of the Americans to leave the sleeping room.

"This is how his wife find him when she wake up," Hank said. He spoke from the main room, he'd already been in there and didn't feel any need to look again.

Seller Sam's attitude was almost that of a man sleeping peacefully, but he was dead, that was obvious at a glance. His head was canted back so his neck peaked, not a position anybody asleep would hold for more than a few seconds. The angle his head was at hid his face from the Marines in the doorway. There was some blood on the platform around his head. He wasn't heavy, not even by rural Vietnamese standards, but even so his body looked like a balloon that had so much of its air let out it was losing its shape. The thin, pink blanket was mostly thrown aside; it was spotted with dark red that looked like dried blood. Seller Sam's shirt was open and bunched along his sides, leaving his chest and belly completely bare, which was normal for a sleeping man. What was below that wasn't normal.

"Oh, shit," Submarine said and turned away.

Doc Holliday didn't say anything. He shook his head and chewed on his lip for a second, then climbed onto the bed to take a closer look.

Socrates felt bile rise in his throat and tried to quiet his suddenly roiling stomach.

Seller Sam's pants were pulled down to mid-thigh and he was torn and bloody where his thighs came together.

"You were wrong, Socrates," Doc Holliday said. "He wasn't killed someplace else and brought back here. This is where they did it. The blood tells the tale." He gently straightened out Seller Sam's head and neck and looked closely at his face, somehow managing to avoid looking at his mouth for the moment. He opened his medkit and rooted for something in it. "One of you come here and give me a hand."

Socrates wanted to run. He wanted to run away. Anywhere away from here. He wanted to leave Seller Sam's body and hoots so far behind he'd never think of them again. Instead he climbed onto the sleeping platform and knelt across the corpse's head from Doc Holliday.

"You're my witness," Doc Holliday said. "I'm conducting a preliminary autopsy here. "It's completely unauthorized, but I'm the only medical personnel on the scene and it has to be done. I want a

witness because I'm staking my professional reputation on this. Understand?"

Socrates nodded. His mouth was too dry for him to speak. He understood, though. As the only doctor for all of Khung Toi village, Doc Holliday had experience and medical knowledge far beyond what anyone would expect of a junior enlisted medical corpsman. He probably even knew enough to be a general practitioner back home, certainly if he was in an area that didn't have enough doctors to go around.

"This isn't precisely how Seller Sam's wife found him," Doc Holliday started. "From the position of his head and where it lay on the blood puddle, I'd say she woke up, saw the blood, and grabbed him. This his how he fell when she let go. He brushed the flies from Seller Sam's face. They buzzed angrily away. "Keep them off my work," he said, then, "Look at that." He pointed with the scalpel he took from his medkit. "It must have been fired through something because there's not much powder burn." Seller Sam's right eye was covered with a pancake of dried blood which had an indistinct ring of black near its middle. "They had to have used a flashlight or oil lamp to see, it's too unlikely that is a random hit." He started flaking the dried blood away with the point of his scalpel. Under the scab was a pool of blood with some clear fluid mixed through it. "Get me some cotton."

Socrates stopped waving flies away to look into the medkit. He found a box of cotton balls in it, opened it and handed over a couple. He was marginally aware that Captain Hook had entered the room and was standing at the foot of the bed, watching intently. Shot through something, he thought, and nobody heard a shot. It had to be a silencer.

Doc Holliday used the cotton balls to soak the blood out of the eye socket. When enough was out to expose the eyelid, it proved to be concave instead of convex. "One shot right through the eye, through the thinnest part of the skull, right into the brain case." He placed the flat of his scalpel against the small hole nearly centered in the eyelid. "Small hole, maybe .22 caliber. We open his skull, we'd find mush. The bullet probably bounced around in there and messed everything up something fierce."

*Same caliber, Socrates thought, with a silencer.*

Finally Doc Holliday turned his attention to Seller Sam's mouth. He pried the jaw open and gingerly removed the severed genitals.

Socrates turned his face away and tried to swallow. Instead of forcing saliva down, he almost pushed stomach fluids up; his eyes fell on Seller Sam's mutilated crotch. He closed his eyes, hung his head, and took a few deep, slow breaths. A silenced .22, genitals cut off and stuck in his mouth. The similarities were too much for coincidence. When he opened his eyes again he found Doc Holliday looking at him inquisitively.

"I'm surprised at you," Doc Holliday said. "You've seen dead men before."

Socrates managed to find a little saliva to moisten his throat with. "Not like this," he croaked.

Doc Holliday considered him for another moment, then returned the scalpel to his medkit and snapped it closed. "Cause of death has been determined." He pinched the flesh on Seller Sam's arm and manipulated an arm to test for elasticity, not much in either. "Time of death, about six hours ago." He scootched back. "That's all we can do for now. Back off." He reached for the blanket and threw it over the corpse as soon as Socrates was out of the way.

Sergeant Slaughter and Chief Lai arrived in time to hear the diagnosis. He looked at his watch, then turned to Submarine. "You came in off patrol four hours ago. Where the fuck were you six hours ago?"

Submarine blinked at the accusing voice, then his face set hard. "We were around here on our patrol," he snapped.

"Yeah? You sure you weren't patrolling the skivvy house? Or were you copping some Zs in Killer Kowalski's girlfriend's hoots?"

"No way, Sergeant Slaughter. You know I don't pull that kind of shit," Submarine said angrily.

Sergeant Slaughter backed away from his accusations. Submarine and his patrol probably had been doing what they were supposed to do. Besides, both of the other patrol leaders said they hadn't heard anything from this direction. And neither had he, and he was on radio watch himself during the time Doc Holliday estimated the murder had taken place. He looked at the blanket covering Seller Sam's body and wondered how he could have been shot and nobody heard it. "Think they used a silencer?" he asked no one in particular.

Socrates snapped his eyes toward him and swallowed. How did he know about the silencer? He shook his head. No, that's not what the man said, he *asked* if it was a silencer. A silencer was the only thing that made sense anyway. He brushed past everyone in the main

room and stepped outside. He looked back in, Captain Hook was the only person looking at him. He signaled him, come out with me. Captain Hook did.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Shit," Socrates said softly.

Captain Hook didn't say anything, but he knew what Socrates was thinking.

They were walking through Hat Reo Toi to its surrounding hedge-fence, looking for a place to talk privately. Most of the people in the hamlet seemed to be going about their normal morning chores. The problem was they were ignoring the two Americans. Nobody was acting hostile, nobody overtly turned away at their approach. They just acted as though the two men weren't there, weren't walking within arm's reach of many of them, within talking distance of the rest. The adults didn't have any noticeable expressions; most of the children looked sullen. Socrates grimaced when he saw the mother of the girl Killer Kowalski liked hustle her out of sight.

"Shit," Socrates said again.

This time Captain Hook grunted softly. But he still didn't say any words.

"They think we let them down," Socrates said softly. He looked at the people not looking at them and worried. The worry showed on his face. "Dammit, we did let them down." In a way that was true. The Marines and the PFs they worked with were the guardians of Khung Toi. They were supposed to keep the people safe from the Viet Cong. Letting Seller Sam get killed that way wasn't keeping them safe from the Viet Cong. And the way Seller Sam was killed, that bothered him. As distracted as he was by his worries, he noticed that the farther they walked through the hamlet the fewer people they saw. He didn't think that was coincidence; word was out they were coming by and people were avoiding them.

Outside the gate Socrates turned onto a broad paddy dike and followed it for fifty yards before stopping where another broad dike intersected it. Captain Hook sat not quite next to him, not quite facing the same direction. By simply turning their heads the way men at war learn to do automatically they could spot anyone approaching them



from any direction across the broad paddies. They heard, but paid no attention to, the droning of a engine somewhere on the other side of Hat Reo Toi.

"You were in that room," Socrates said as soon as they were both down. "You saw how it was done."

Captain Hook nodded.

"Who did it?"

"Charlie." The first word Captain Hook said since they arrived at the hamlet.

"Do you really think so?"

Captain Hook nodded again. Socrates stopped swivel-necking and looked at him, waiting for him to say something. Captain Hook cleared his throat. "That's the way Charlie does it."

"Does he? Are you sure?"

"That's what Mister Smith says." He shrugged.

"Right, that's what Mister Smith says. But do we really know that? Goddammit, we don't even know who Mister Smith is. Why should we believe him?" He still watched Captain Hook, he didn't know why, maybe he was searching for some expression that would tell him what the other man was really thinking.

"He's a spook."

"Right, at least that's what he wants us to believe. But he doesn't tell us a damn thing."

"We're killing Cong."

"One more time; that's what he wants us to believe."

"He says they are."

"Right, he says. How do we know he's right? How do we know he knows it? He always says not to take any documents because he already knows who they are and what documents they have. Have you ever heard anyone else say something that dumb? How can he know what documents they're carrying."

Captain Hook looked at Socrates. "It's supposed to look like Charlie did it. Americans always take documents off corpses. If we take the documents then it'll look like it was Americans trying to make it look like Charlie." He went back to looking around.

Socrates snorted. "Charlie takes documents, too. You have any idea how many dead Marines have to be identified from their dental charts because their dogtags and ID cards are missing when they're found?"

"Neither do you."

Socrates blinked. That wasn't a point he'd expected Captain Hook to challenge him on. But the man was right, he *didn't* know how many dead Americans were stripped of documents. Maybe it wasn't worth it to the VC unless they killed someone who was obviously an officer. Americans didn't carry as much paper on them as the Viet Cong did, when they did carry something it was usually letters from home. It seemed every VC carried papers of some sort on him. Not only letters from family and friends, but diaries, unit rosters, orders, maps, plans, something. Some of it had military value, which is why the Americans always took whatever they found.

"All right, why would they want to waste Seller Sam?"

Captain Hook looked at him again. "Dumb question. Who is Seller Sam?"

Now Socrates looked away. Of course. Seller Sam the merchant. The man was clearer proof than anything else that prosperity came to people who were on the side of the Americans against the VC. But was that good enough reason to risk an assassination squad? He asked the question out loud.

"It worked." Not by any means a detailed argument, but Socrates had to admit to himself that the logic was unassailable. It worked, that made it reason enough.

"Submarine was here last night." Socrates looked at Captain Hook again. "How did they get in and do it without getting caught? Charlie just doesn't sneak in and do shit here anymore. We always catch him."

"Last night we didn't catch him, he was too good."

"That's what I've got a problem with. The Vee Cee around here aren't that good, they can't do dickshit without us spotting them."

Captain Hook shrugged. "They got lucky."

Now Socrates finally said what was bothering him most. "Bullshit, lucky. I'll tell you who's that good; we're that good. What if it was someone doing the same shit we are? Somebody from somewhere else? Someone working for Mister Smith or somebody like him." He had to avert his eyes from the look Captain Hook gave him.

"Why? Mister Smith has us killing Vee Cee. Why would someone who wasn't Vee Cee kill Seller Sam?"

"I don't know." He shook his head. "There hasn't been one damn little thing that could make us think he was one of the bad guys."

"Charlie did it. That's why we do it the way we do, people will

think Charlie did it."

"And it sure as shit freaks people out." He had known intellectually before, now he knew viscerally how the quiet assassination of a man in his own bed could unsettle people.

Captain Hook nodded agreement.

They sat, each in his own thoughts for a few moments before Socrates said, "He was a specialist from outside, the one who did it. Like us. Nobody local did that, we're the only ones around here good enough to pull it off." He said "like us," but he didn't mean necessarily American. The bad guys had their specialists too, he knew they did. Captain Hook didn't say anything.

After a few more minutes they heard raised voices from inside the hamlet. Socrates looked at Captain Hook. Captain Hook was casually looking all around, looking to see if there was anything in the paddies to excite anyone. There wasn't.

Socrates stood. "Let's go see what's happening."

Sergeant Slaughter detached himself from a small knot of men when he saw them approach the outdoor cafe area of Seller Sam's place. "Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you," he snapped. He hadn't been looking for them, he knew they'd show up when they heard the commotion, he just wished they hadn't gone away.

"We were out looking for sign of whoever did this," Socrates snapped back. A lie was a lot easier than the truth. He knew looking for sign was wasted effort, but he also knew it was a good idea—just in case. He studied the newcomers who had caused the commotion.

Captain Thien, the district chief, was there, along with four men in white uniforms. The white uniformed men were "white mice," the Vietnamese National Police. The police weren't often seen in the farming hamlets except for those close by major cities. Less often were they seen in those hamlets wearing their white uniforms. Captain Thien and one of the policemen were talking to Chief Lai, Doc Holliday, and Hank—that was the knot Sergeant Slaughter had broken from. The other three policemen, notebooks and pens in hand, were methodically questioning the villagers who were being lined up by several PFs—the shouting of the PFs getting them in line was what Socrates and Captain Hook heard in the paddies. Submarine, his two men, and Sneaky Pete were standing aside, merely observing, looking uncomfortable.

"Tell Captain Hook to stand with them," Sergeant Slaughter said,

nodding to the four Marines who were probably wishing they were somewhere else.

Socrates looked at Captain Hook and nodded; he went to do as he was told.

Sergeant Slaughter made a head gesture and walked over to the tight group. "You were inside when Doc Holliday was examining the corpse," he said on the way, "you back him up." Then to the others, "Here he is, he was inside with Doc and saw the same as he did." Thien, Lai and Hank nodded greetings, the policeman ignored him.

Doc Holliday finished describing what he deduced from the discoveries in his examination and the policeman nodded. He turned to Sergeant Slaughter and asked, "So you assume it was done with a silenced .22, is that correct?" He spoke with a British accent.

"That's right. If he didn't use a silencer we all would have heard it. Last night none of our patrols heard any gunfire from anywhere in the village."

"Toi Mui is how far, six kilometers from here? If you had a patrol at Toi Mui, would it have heard?"

"Socrates here was at Toi Mui last night, let him answer."

Socrates made a slight smile. "I guess you don't spend many nights out in the boonies." The policeman nodded slightly. Nobody introduced him. Though he didn't come much above Socrates' shoulder he was a relatively tall man for a Vietnamese. He was obviously from the city somewhere, his face had none of the deep creases that made the farmers' faces look like wood carvings, and no dirt was embedded in the deep recesses of his skin.

"Out here you can hear things a long way off at night. We heard a fire fight somewhere north, maybe three, four miles. But nothing in Khung Toi." He almost said "the Junkyard," but remembered in time so he didn't even hesitate at the change.

Hank said he agreed, sounds travel very far at night. The policeman didn't seem to hear him, he knew who he wanted information from at any moment, anyone else he wanted information from would give it to him when he asked for it.

"If the shot was fired during that fire fight, would you have heard it? I mean if it was fired at the same moment as one of the other shots."

"Maybe not," Sergeant Slaughter took over the answering again. But we had a patrol in and around Hat Reo Toi, they would have heard it regardless."

"Who led that?"

Sergeant Slaughter indicated Submarine.

"I will question him later." He turned back to Doc Holliday. "You said something else, something about powder burns. Tell me again."

"I figure the shot was at point blank range because it was right in the middle of the eye, not likely the bullet would hit there if it was fired at a longer range, it's too much of a coincidence for it to smack in the middle of the eye like that otherwise. The thing wrong with that is there should have been a lot of flashburn and gunpowder on Seller Sam's face. There wasn't, only a little ring that was hard to see. I don't know what they used, I didn't see anything in the hoots with a fresh bullet hole in it, but it had to have been shot through something."

The policeman nodded. "That is consistent with a silencer. A silencer acts as a baffle, much of the gas is trapped inside to bleed off slowly." For a moment he looked like he was thinking everything over, then said, "Now I will look at the body." He led Thien and Lai inside. The Americans stayed outside.

"Looks like he thinks you did the right thing," Sergeant Slaughter said to Doc Holliday, "checking him out right off."

"He needed to be looked at right away," Doc Holliday said. "No telling when a civilian coroner would get to him. Or even the Arvins." He stood with his arms crossed, looking at the door of Seller Sam's hoots. "Besides, you know how things are. If I didn't scope out the situation, maybe nobody'd tell us anything about it. What we don't know can kill us."

There was nothing anybody could say to that.

Shortly the policeman came back out and walked past the Marines without even looking at them. He went to the policemen who were questioning the people and conferred with them. Thien and Lai stood next to Sergeant Slaughter and Socrates. They waited to see what the police did next.

What the policemen did next was put their pens and pads away and their leader came back.

"The family can take care of the body now," the chief policeman said. "I will inform you of any developments." He gave a perfunctory bow to Thien and Lai.

Before he could turn to leave, Doc Holliday asked, "Aren't you going to take him in for an autopsy?"

The policeman looked at him curiously. "Why would we want to

conduct an autopsy? We know what killed him. All an autopsy would do is confirm that he was killed by a .22 caliber bullet. The size of the entrance wound tells us that. Besides, the Viet Cong use the silenced .22 for assassinations. There is no need." He turned and left without another word. He looked back when Sergeant Slaughter called, "You said you were going to question my men who were here last night," and replied, "No need. None of the people my men questioned heard anything, so neither did your people."

The four men in their white uniforms went out the north gate. They had a short walk to where their half ton truck was waiting on the road near the river; it couldn't be seen from where Socrates and Captain Hook had sat and talked in the paddies.

Thien spat to the side when the policemen were out of sight. "I do not like him," he said. "He is National Police inspector, he think he does not have to answer local officials."

"This happened in your district," Sergeant Slaughter said. "How come he came?"

"He was visiting my headquarters when I heard of this." He waved a hand at Seller Sam's hoots. "I had no authority to tell him no. Now the investigation is a National Police matter and nothing will happen."

"Why not?"

"It is a Viet Cong assassination. There is no criminal to track down, only enemy soldiers to hunt and fight. They will not do that, it is too dangerous. That is what the army is for, they say." He stared into Sergeant Slaughter's eyes. "That is why you are here."

Chief Lai spoke for the first time since Socrates got back from talking with Captain Hook. He talked in Vietnamese too rapid for the Americans to follow. They caught enough words, though, to know he was telling Thien how Sergeant Slaughter got his Americans together and chewed on them about it as soon as he got word of the murder.

When Lai was finished Thien said a couple of words in Vietnamese, then in English. "I know. You do your best. Sometimes you cannot do everything." Then he said something else to Lai and the village chief started shouting and walking to the hamlet square. The people of Hat Reo Toi gathered quickly to listen to what he had to tell them.

The Americans stood, as unobtrusively as they could, out of the way to the side. *It didn't matter*, Socrates thought, the people were ignoring them anyway. This was worse, far worse, than right after the

wanted posters were circulated and the villagers avoided them out of fear. Now the Marines were non-persons, they had let the people down. Socrates groaned inwardly. He saw Killer Kowalski's girlfriend look beseechingly in their direction, then groaned again when he saw her mother shoo her away. He glanced at Killer Kowalski and saw him swallow, turn his eyes down sadly.

Lai spoke to the people, then Thien did. When they were through a few people called out questions, they deferred to Hank to answer a few of them. After a while the people disbursed; several women went with Seller Sam's widow to prepare the body for burial. The leaders joined the Marines.

"It is bad," Thien said. "The people, they are afraid. The Vee Cee have not done this in a long time here. They are afraid this will start again. They know there was patrol here last night. They are afraid you can no longer protect them."

Hank put his hands on Sergeant Slaughter's shoulders and looked deep into his eyes. "No worry. Thien say no happen here, long time. This is true. Now no happen long time again. People will see, they are safe because Ma-deen here. Be okay."

"Yeah, I know," Sergeant Slaughter said. He put his right hand on Hank's shoulder. "They'll get over it. We'll all get over it. And we're gonna get those son of a bitching Charlies. They can't do this and get away with it."

Then Captain Vitale and Gunny Bryl showed up.

Thien immediately grabbed the Marine officer and pulled him into a corner of the square, where they talked rapidly in hushed voices. Gunny Bryl joined the other Marines, Lai, and Hank. Their hellos were glum.

"We got this clerk I'm going to fire," Gunny Bryl said. "I swear, next time he screws up like this he's going to find himself humping a rifle in a line company. Your message came in this morning and instead of getting it to me right away, he just stuck it in with everything else I had to deal with so I found it in time-of-receipt order." He shook his head. "Soon as I read it I grabbed the Skipper and high tailed out here. Poor bastard didn't even know why we were going until we were already on the road, I didn't want to waste any time telling him first." He looked Chief Lai square in the eyes, very man to man. "What I'm trying to say is, I'm sorry we're late."

Then he kept quiet while Sergeant Slaughter caught him up on what had happened. None of the others felt he left out anything or that

anything needed amplification. Sergeant Slaughter left out what Thien said about the police inspector, that wasn't part of what they found or did.

Captain Vitale and Chief Thien joined them. "Let's get out of here and leave the people to mourn in private," Vitale said. "Sergeant Slaughter, send someone to my Jeep and have it driven to Fort Cragg. We can talk while we walk."

"Sneaky Pete, you heard the Skipper. Ride back with the Jeep." Sneaky Pete ran, a wide grin split his face.

The Vietnamese leaders stayed in Hat Reo Toi to help the people, the nine Americans walked bunched up along the path that meandered along the paddy tops to Toi Co 1; they had no concern of ambush or snipers, not here, not now. On the way Captain Vitale told them what Chief Thien said about the police inspector; the men of Whiskey 8 let him, Gunny Bryl hadn't heard about it yet. There were people working in the paddies, farmers from Toi Co 1. About half of them didn't bother to look up at their passing. The Marines called greetings to those who did, not all of them answered.

"Shit, let's go around," Gunny Bryl said as they neared the hamlet that stood between them and Fort Cragg. The silent treatment they were getting bothered him. Captain Hook was in the lead, he turned off the main path onto the next south-bound dike that would lead them through the paddy maze around the hamlet.

An old man was weeding alone in a paddy on the southwest side of the hamlet. He approached them and, using sign language, asked them to wait for a moment. He shuffled to the hedge and cried through it in his thin, old man's voice. There was a rustling of leaves in the hedge, then little Hien broke through it. The old man took his hand and walked back to the waiting Marines. He said a few words to the boy, then turned to the Americans and spoke directly to them. Hien translated, "You are men, you cannot do everything. People die in war." The child had to struggle with the words, his knowledge of English wasn't as great as he needed to say all those words, but he tried and that's what they thought he meant. The old man raised his right hand to the Marines, it looked like a benediction, then went back to his weeding.

Hien looked somber after delivering the old man's words. He climbed onto the dike. His shorts were soaked from the water, but he didn't seem to notice either that or the water dripping from his thin



legs. He grabbed Captain Hook's hand. "We go," and led the way to Fort Cragg.

Nobody else said anything until they were all behind the barbed wire.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mad Greek was climbing the walls by the time they got back. That was the one thing that probably more than any other upset his equilibrium, standing around waiting to find out what was going on, and knowing he had no choice but to wait until somebody came by and told him. A few PFs had wandered in to keep their Marines company at Fort Cragg while the rest of the Americans were doing what investigating they could at Hat Reo Toi, but none of them had been there and didn't know any more than Mad Greek did—or so they claimed. Or maybe they went to Fort Cragg for what protection the Americans could offer them. Or maybe they were keeping themselves out of the way because they thought the people of Hat Reo Toi would blame the PFs for Seller Sam's death. Actually, they didn't say why they were there, but they were welcome anyway. Motormouth and Chickenfucker were merely anxious to get the news. Rodin was the only Marine who seemed calm about the wait. The PFs seemed calm too, but it was an apprehensive calm, and after a while watching Mad Greek's agitation they had started wondering if visiting Fort Cragg was the best thing they should have done.

There wasn't much Captain Vitale or Gunny Bryl could say except question the men of Whiskey 8 to get every detail they had about what had happened. They got all of it—except the missions Socrates and his men had run for the mysterious Mr. Smith. There was nothing anybody had to tell they didn't already know.

Gunny Bryl managed to spend a couple of minutes alone with Socrates. His face was a melange of expressions; anger and frustration paramount, confusion not too far behind.

"I couldn't find out a damn thing about this Lieutenant Convoy of yours," he said. "Every swinging dick I talked to at CAG either said he didn't know or told me to ask someone else. "S2 told me I'd have to talk to S1, but he's on R&R so I couldn't. And the damn assistant S1 said he couldn't tell me a damn thing because he didn't have complete

rosters, especially not on TAD personnel." He looked like he wanted to say more, this was where confusion came up and almost nudged frustration off the surface of his face, but he let it go. What more he wanted to say was; S2 told him to let it lie, he didn't want to know who Lieutenant Convoy was, Lieutenant Convoy reported to someone much higher in the chain of command, Gunny Bryl never heard of him. Instead he said, "It looks like this Lieutenant Convoy, whoever he is, isn't around any more. Forget him." He shook his head and repeated, "Forget it." The promotion he'd thought about for Socrates a few weeks earlier, he was thinking maybe he should forget about it, too. He went away before Socrates could object and found Sergeant Slaughter for whatever final details the two NCOs had to deal with before he and the captain departed.

Sergeant Slaughter almost caught him off balance.

"What the fuck did CAG want with Socrates and Captain Hook that was so damn important I had to lose them for a night?" Sergeant Slaughter demanded. "Socrates first said it was some kind of administrative shit, then came up with he wasn't supposed to tell anyone—including me!"

Almost caught him off balance, but not quite. Gunny Bryl grimaced and swore under his breath. Then he swore out loud to vent steam so he wouldn't take it out on Sergeant Slaughter. "I went to CAG yesterday myself to find out," he said once he was back under control. "They told me it was just some administrative shit and, anyway, it was none of my damn business and I should forget about it." Forgetting about that promotion was beginning to sound better all the time.

"You're shitting me," Sergeant Slaughter said, incredulous. You don't talk to a company gunnery sergeant that way, not unless you swing a lot more weight than a battalion staff officer does.

"I shit you not. That's what they told me."

"Gunny," Sergeant Slaughter lowered his voice to a conspiratorial level, "you swing too much weight, they can't say that to you. And these are my men, you can tell me what they were doing. Hell, I've got the right to know why when my men get yanked out from under me."

Now frustration was topmost on Gunny Bryl's face. "That's about what I said. But the man I said it to said his railroad tracks outweighed my three up and two down. He said if an officer wants men he doesn't have to tell the NCOs dickshit about why."

"What does that captain think, this is the fucking Army?"

Gunny Bryl shook his head sadly. "Some of these young officers, they've got funny ideas about how things should run."

"You talk to the Skipper?"

"Not yet, but I'm going to. I think he's senior to any of the captains at CAG. They won't be able to pull that kind of bullshit on him. I want to know, too. Don't worry, I'll find out."

"Thanks, Gunny, I know I can count on you." He wasn't being fulsome, he meant it. Gunnery Sergeant Bryl was the kind of NCO who firmly believed if you take care of the men under you, they'll take care of you. And NCOs, not officers, run the Marine Corps.

Then Captain Vitale and Gunny Bryl left.

Sergeant Slaughter gathered his men to discuss the problems they were encountering from Seller Sam's death, but before they could get very far Chief Lai and Lieutenant Hank showed up. It was good they came, none of the Marines had much constructive to say about what to do.

When the commotion surrounding his arrival died down Lai talked to them. "The people of Hat Reo Toi, they are frighten. I also talk to people in Nghia Toi and Co Toi 1, they are upset but not so frighten. Only a few people say Seller Sam die because Ma-deen not do their job." You remember," he gestured because he couldn't remember the English words, "papers with names on them, say people kill Ma-deen, chiefs, they get money. You remember what you do then, you go into village and hamlets, show people you trust them, you not afraid. Now you go into village, let people know you mad at Vee Cee for do this, let them know you kill VC. You kill next Vee Cee come to Khung Toi. Then people remember how good you are for village. It take a few days. You know, I know, we work together, numba-fucking-one. Soon Vee Cee go away, not come back, leave Khung Toi alone always." There was more he wanted to say, but he didn't have enough English to express everything he wanted. The nodding and murmuring of the Marines told him they understood.

Lieutenant Hank had a turn. "Today, tomorrow, you go into village, you go with PF, people see America, Vietnam work together, they see PF trust you. Will be okay."

More PFs drifted in while they were talking. Some of them brightened up at Hank's idea of pairing off with the Marines for the next few days, others didn't. None of them could deny, however, that it was a good idea. If nothing else, they figured they were on the same shit list the Marines were, and misery loves company.

"You heard them," Sergeant Slaughter said when Hank was through. "Get out there and mingle, let them see us being determined to not let it happen again. Be alert, let them see you being alert. Charlie ain't through fucking with us yet. If we let him get away with what he did last night and we pull out of here, this village is going down the tubes. Charlie will come back in and these people will be worse off than they were before. A lot counts on us, let's do it. Just stay away from Hat Reo Toi until the funeral. I'll talk to Chief Lai about the funeral. I want as many of us as possible to go to it. Be back in time for evening chow. Whose turn is it to cook? Dismissed."

All the Marines joined with PFs and left, except Motormouth who, as usual, stayed behind for radio watch. Sergeant Slaughter was the last to leave, he went with Hank, just the two of them.

When Sneaky Pete saw they were headed north, he rubbed his crotch and asked, "We going to the skivvy house? I gotta get my pipes reamed, ain't done that in two, three days, and I'm feeling horny."

"Put a band-aid on it," Socrates said. "We're going to Nghia Toi."

"Ah, come on, Socrates. Let's get laid."

One of the two PFs with them giggled nervously at that and looked at Socrates hopefully. He didn't like the idea of having to face any of the people right now. Going to the skivvy house sounded like a much better idea than going to Nghia Toi.

Socrates didn't bother answering.

"Skivvy house, right?" Sneaky Pete asked again.

"Nghia Toi," Captain Hook said.

Sneaky Pete sulked. The hopeful PF tried to look like going to Nghia Toi was what he wanted to do all along.

A large group of children was playing at the schoolhouse. They stopped playing when they saw the Marines and watched in that solemn way children have of looking when they aren't sure what they are supposed to think. Socrates called out and waved at the children. One started to come toward him, but stopped when one of the others shouted at him. In seconds all of the children were yelling at each other.

"Keep moving," Socrates said when Sneaky Pete and one of the PFs stopped to watch. "This is something they have to straighten out themselves."

The yelling children started shifting about and kept shifting until there were two distinct groups yelling at each other. A child in one of

the groups looked at the Marines, who were now at the far side of the schoolhouse clearing, about to enter the woods on that side, let out a whoop to his mates, and ran after them. The others in his group heard and saw and took off after him, throwing a few final taunts back at the others. The second group stood for a moment in consternation. Then some of them trailed along. After everybody who was leaving had entered the woods, the remaining children went back to their play, though with far less enthusiasm than before.

The first child caught up with the Marines and grabbed Sneaky Pete's hand. In seconds, fifteen children were milling around the three Americans and two Vietnamese, wanting to hold their hands, carry things for them, be carried by them. There were too many for all of them to get to the Marines so even the PFs were included.

"They say you not do," said the first boy who reached Sneaky Pete. He looked up with soulful eyes and fumbled for words he didn't have. Finally he gave up and said, "They say you not numba-fucking-one, you numba-ten-thou. They wrong."

Sneaky Pete heaved the boy into his arms. "We're numba-fucking-one, you know that."

"No shit, Joe," the boy said and wrapped his arms tightly around Sneaky Pete's neck.

"You numba-fucking-one."

Socrates swore silently. It flat wasn't right that the little ones were being involved this way.

Sneaky Pete looked hopeful as they approached the cutoff to the skivvy house. He looked wistful as they passed it by.

The people in Nghia Toi mostly ignored their visitors. They were polite about it when they had to pay attention to them, but few initiated any contact with the Americans. Most of them treated the PFs the same way they did the Marines. Maybe worse; they didn't have any particular fear or awe of their countrymen, not like they did the giants from across the sea.

Socrates couldn't stay away from Hat Reo Toi, he felt he had to visit the widow they called Missus Sam and express his condolences, just as he would if someone he knew at home died and left family he knew. Captain Hook wasn't going to let anybody's fear of the Viet Cong keep him from going anywhere he wanted. Sneaky Pete tagged along when they went there the next day. Three PFs reluctantly went with them; reluctant because they weren't too sure of their reception.

Six tiny children, each gleefully riding a thousand pound water buffalo along the five foot wide road-dike that led from Hat Reo Toi south to the banana grove, turning solemn when they saw the three Marines and three PFs crossing the paddies to their home hamlet. They chattered among themselves. The adults told them the Marines weren't coming to visit for a few days, but here they were. The children knew some of the adults were angry at the Americans because Seller Sam was killed, but they thought that was unfair. They liked the Marines and wished they had their fort next to their hamlet instead of next to Toi Co 1. They talked it over and decided the Marines needed to be escorted when they arrived. There was no help for it, the roadway wasn't wide enough to turn their buffalo around so, even though they weren't supposed to do this, they turned them off into the paddies and made their way through the water back to a place where the huge, lumbering beasts could climb back onto the road. Near the Hat Reo Toi gate was a thorn-bush corral. The corral wasn't strong enough to keep the buffalo in if they wanted out, neither were its thorns long and sharp enough to keep them from trying. But, big as they were, the buffalo were docile animals who understood the concept of "fence." The children led the buffalo into the corral, the buffalo let the symbolic corral contain them. Then the kids ran, shouting, to join the Marines and PFs. They had decided each of them would go in holding the hand of one of the men. So this was a serious race, each wanted to hold the hand of a Marine, not a PF.

"Where do we go?" Socrates asked rhetorically once they were inside the hamlet. Now that he saw the somber atmosphere he was having second thoughts about the visit.

"Samee-same," Captain Hook said.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Socrates said. He led the way to Seller Sam's hoots

Their reception was cool. Most of the few villagers they saw chose to ignore the intruders, though none of them acted overtly hostile. Those who did acknowledge the Marines and PFs greeted them with polite restraint. Many of them looked at the children. One said something the Marines didn't understand to the children.

"Probably said, wait'll your parents' hear about this," Socrates said to the others.

"Probably." Somehow, Captain Hook made the word come out as a monosyllable.

"Why do you say that?" Sneaky Pete asked.

"Think about it."

Sneaky Pete eventually figured it out.

Chief Lai was sitting on a bench in the shade of a house near Seller Sam's. He gave the impression he was waiting for the American visitors. He rose to greet them and invited them to sit. The Marines sat on the bench with him. The PFs squatted in the dirt a few yards away and tried to be invisible. The children huddled near the Americans, they looked apprehensively at the village chief.

"We are very sorry," Socrates said after a respectful time of silence. "Seller Sam was a good man."

"Yes," Chief Lai said. It wasn't clear whether he was acknowledging their sympathy, accepting it, or agreeing that Seller Sam was a good man. Probably all three.

"Seller Sam was a friend of ours, we want to pay our respects," Socrates said, then his face contorted slightly. He didn't know Vietnamese for "pay respects," and he didn't think Lai knew those English words.

It didn't matter that the exact words weren't understood, Lai knew the meaning. He picked up a parcel that had sat unnoticed underneath the bench and handed each of them something from it. Socrates got a paper bag filled with bananas, Captain Hook a bottle of rice wine, Sneaky Pete a handful of piastres—Vietnamese money. Then Lai stood. "It is custom to bring gifts. Leave here." He gestured at their weapons. The Marines gave their weapons and cartridge belts to the PFs to guard. "You come." Lai said something to the PFs in rapid Vietnamese, then led the way to Seller Sam's. The PFs followed at a slight distance, carrying the Marines' gear.

About twenty people were sitting around the picnic table or squatting in the shade of the shed awning outside Seller Sam's. They said polite hellos to Lai, looked at the Marines. Lai went inside with the Americans, the PFs stayed outside, beyond the shade of the awning. The children were uncertain, but finally opted to wait with the PFs.

The inside of Seller Sam's house was even more crowded with people. Village men sat at borrowed tables placed around the main room, women sat on chairs placed against the walls; they were talking quietly among themselves. Two of the oldest women sat next to Missus Sam at the head of the coffin. The widow wore roughly made clothes with patches rudely sewn on at seeming random places, obviously they were special clothes for high mourning. The couple



had no sons, Ho Van Nien, the Hat Reo Toi chief, stood in place of the sons at the foot of the coffin. The coffin itself lay on trestles in front of the ancestor shrine. Candles burned on the altar, a lamp burned on the floor under the coffin. The room was festooned with small banners bearing prayers written in Chinese ideograms.

The most surprising sight to the Americans was all the people, inside and out, were dressed in white, the Vietnamese mourning color; they were used to seeing them in the loose black garments they called pajamas, though sometimes the women wore form-fitting, pastel tunics over the baggy black pants.

Lai ignored the sudden cessation of conversation when they entered and led them to Chief Nien. He drew the Marines close and spoke quickly and softly to the surrogate son.

Nien studied Lai's face for a long moment, his own expression unreadable. Then he turned to the Marines and held his arms out to embrace them. He accepted their offerings in the name of the widow. There was an air of tense expectancy when Lai led them to Seller Sam's wife. She looked at them impassively.

Socrates bowed to her, then squatted down. Not quite the same squat the Vietnamese villagers sat in, Americans lose the necessary flexibility in their joints for that by the time they become adults, but one foot flat, the other foot bent, sitting on its heel. "We are sad, Missus Sam," he said slowly, clearly, hoping she knew enough English to understand. "Seller Sam was a good man, a friend to us. We grieve." He hung his head in obvious sorrow.

The widow looked at him for a long moment, not a muscle had twitched on her face while he got down and spoke. The people in the room were already quiet and tense, watching. Now they seemed to hold their breath waiting to see how she would react. The widow then reached out with her right hand and placed it on Socrates' shoulder. "Thank you for come," she said softly. Breath was collectively released, conversation picked up again.

Socrates looked at the body in the coffin and suddenly realized he didn't know what to do now. At home he would know, he had gone to two viewings; once as a child, when his grandfather died, once in high school, when the mother of a teammate was killed in an auto accident. But here, he didn't know what was expected or acceptable. So he merely looked and moved his lips as though praying. It wasn't hard for him to assume a mourning expression, he'd known this man in the coffin, had spoken with him only two days earlier, eaten his food,

drunk his beer.

Seller Sam didn't look as deflated as he had when Socrates first saw his corpse, but still seemed shrunken. He was wearing pants of the same cut as the black pajama pants he normally wore, but these were white. The white, Western style shirt he wore seemed far too big for him and flowed out to the sides. A long strip of clean, white cloth was wrapped around his head in a turban; a corner of it was pulled down, partly concealing the bullet hole in his eye. A small bowl of rice sat next to his head.

Finally Socrates said out loud but softly, "Goodbye, Seller Sam. I'm sorry this happened to you." He turned from the coffin and saw his men right before they turned away. For an instant, Socrates thought he saw sadness in Captain Hook's expression, but that couldn't have been, could it? Sneaky Pete seemed to be gawking.

One of the men stood and opened a bottle of rice wine. Two women saw and jumped up to pass around glasses. Two more men opened bottles so there would be enough to go around. Conversations became more lively as the people drank. They included the Marines in both drink and talk. Someone started passing around plates of small foods the Americans didn't recognize. Glasses were continually refilled, more plates were passed, the wake was growing into a feast.

"We should leave," Socrates said after they'd been in attendance for half an hour.

Captain Hook stepped toward Missus Sam.

"Huh?" said Sneaky Pete. With all the food and rice wine, he was getting into a party mood.

"Let's go," Socrates said. "No argument."

Sneaky Pete saw Captain Hook talking to the widow and reluctantly went with Socrates.

"We go now," Socrates said to the widow. "Look for Vee Cee. Come back tomorrow."

She nodded and raised a hand to the Marines. "Thank you for come," she said. "You come tomorrow, we..." her words ran out, she made digging motions, faltered, then started sobbing.

Socrates cringed, but was almost successful in hiding it.

Behind him a few people noticed and nodded, the American was being properly respectful, he realized his responsibility.

Outside, the PFs were glad to see them. They took back their weapons and cartridge belts and left the hamlet.

"Let's go to the river," Captain Hook said outside the hamlet gate.

Socrates thought he was over-concerned with the river since the night they saw too many boats, but what the hell. He shrugged. "Do it."

They didn't see anything they hadn't seen two days earlier.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"You want to talk about it?" Socrates asked when he and Captain Hook got back from Seller Sam's wake. They were sitting in their room working on one of the never ending chores of the warrior: cleaning their weapons. Sneaky Pete was busy by himself in the kitchen.

"Nothing to talk about."

"If you're thinking of transferring, there's something to talk about."

"I'm not going." His movements in cleaning his shotgun were as economical as his words.

Socrates didn't say anything for a moment while he finished swabbing out the muzzle of his rifle and peered down the bore. "What changed your mind," he asked as he started brushing out the trigger group.

"I want him."

Socrates waited for Captain Hook to amplify. When he didn't he asked, "Who do you want?"

"The one who did it." His movements stopped being so economical, became harsher. He plunged his bore brush fiercely, as though stabbing someone."

"It? You mean killed Seller Sam?"

"Yes." He dragged out the word.

Socrates looked at him for a long moment, observed his concentration. Someone who didn't know Captain Hook might have thought the concentration was on cleaning his shotgun. Socrates did know him and knew the concentration was on how to find whoever did it. "Any ideas?" Ideas on who did it or how to find out, it didn't matter, either would do for now.

"No." His tone of voice left no doubt he'd get some ideas.

"Me neither."

They stopped talking. After a few more minutes Captain Hook was through with his cleaning, reassembled his shotgun, and went out. He didn't say where he was going, didn't even say goodbye or see you

later or anything. When Socrates finished he lay back on his cot and thought about it.

Not that he had much to think about. The details were sparse. Seller Sam was murdered as he lay sleeping next to his wife. He was shot in the eye with what was probably a silenced .22. The corpse was emasculated and the severed organs placed in his mouth. It was the exact same method he and his men used on the two missions they'd run for Mr. Smith. That's all he knew, that and the approximate time—a time when there was a Junkyard Dog patrol in the hamlet. Which told him whoever did it was good, damn good. Nobody walked through a hamlet where the Junkyard Dogs had a patrol without being discovered, they were positive about that—or had been until somebody did it less than 48 hours ago.

They had done it, Socrates, Captain Hook, and Sneaky Pete, just three nights earlier, the night before Seller Sam was killed. Walked through a hamlet that had VC in it and they weren't spotted. That's how good the Marines were.

Everywhere in the country the Viet Cong were said to own the night. The CAP Marines disputed that ownership, they went out at night and beat the VC at their own game, took the night away from them. They did that everywhere they established a CAP. Socrates thought the same was true anyplace the Americans decided to aggressively go into the night; they took it away, claimed it as their own. He didn't believe the bad guys had people as good at night movement as Marines dedicated to owning the night.

So either Seller Sam had been killed by Americans working for Mr. Smith or someone like him, or by very good Viet Cong specialists. Did they have anyone that good? The sappers. He heard tales of the sappers, how they could slip through heavy barbed wire, thick with trip flares and mines, without being discovered, then go through a camp and do anything they wanted and leave, still without being discovered. He wondered just how true those stories were. He'd never seen the evidence of it himself, and neither had anybody whose word he trusted enough to know he wasn't being told a sea story.

If the Americans did it, why? Seller Sam had never done or said the slightest thing to indicate to the Marines of Whiskey 8 that he was an agent for the bad guys. Chief Thien, Chief Nien, Lieutenant Hank, they all trusted him. The people of Hat Reo Toi were obviously convinced the VC killed him. There didn't seem to be any reason for the Americans to do it. Neither would the VC kill one of their own.

Or would they? If they thought he was changing sides, then they might. But Seller Sam had never given any indication that he knew anything about the VC that only a VC agent would know, nothing that wasn't known to everyone else. All the evidence about him said he was exactly what he appeared to be, a local merchant who catered to the Americans. That was enough reason for the Viet Cong to kill him. But was it enough of a reason for them to risk losing a specialist? They should have known the risk, their last three assassination teams were killed one even before it reached its intended target. That risk had made them stop sending in assassins months ago. And their most recent attempts, the team they sent to destroy the schoolhouse and the cadre at Toi Mui, were even less successful than the earlier ones.

That raised another question. If they had people good enough to slip unnoticed into a patrolled hamlet, commit a murder, and get out undetected, why didn't they use them on those other occasions? That didn't make sense, not unless they had new people who just arrived.

Back to was it done by Americans. Seller Sam was an obvious civilian. Both times they'd gone out for Mr. Smith, their targets were obviously military. The cadre they killed was armed and had two armed guards with him. The VC chief they just killed was in a VC hamlet, they'd seen armed guards around it. And there were weapons in the hoots where they found him sleeping. Theirs were military targets. Was there any way Seller Sam was a military target? He'd already been over the question of Seller Sam being a VC agent. Unless Seller Sam was VC he couldn't possibly be a military target for the Americans, and there was no evidence anybody in Whiskey 8 or Khung Toi had that he was VC.

This was leading nowhere. It had to be the Viet Cong who did it. But, dammit, they used exactly the same method he twice used. It scared him that there was someone around good enough to slip in and kill a villager like that without being caught. It upset him that the victim was someone he knew personally. What really bothered him, though, was the method used. Mr. Smith told them this was how the VC did it and they were using the enemy's tactics to confuse them. That must be true, it was certainly confusing him. What the hell are we doing here, he wondered, this whole insane business of war?

His thinking stumbled here. The next thing for him to think about was the nature of war, what war is at its most basic level. That's something the warrior almost never thinks about. It's not that he lacks the intelligence or education to understand what war is, it takes little of

either to understand what participating in a war is. He can't think about it because that way lies madness. The man in combat lives by rules that are absolutely unacceptable anywhere else under almost any circumstances whatsoever. He routinely performs acts that run counter to every belief, every social stricture he has been brought up to believe in and act by.

They don't all use the same words, but nearly every human society has as one of its basic tenets: Thou Shalt Not Kill. The warrior kills. He does it deliberately and he does it every chance he gets. Most peoples believe in some form of fair play, of not taking undue advantage. The warrior plays dirty, he takes every advantage he can and gives as few as possible. Civilization demands some degree of mercy, to grant a level of humanity to all persons regardless of their station or relationship to you. The man in combat must be merciless, he must deny the enemy any humanity at all. Every living thing has an urge for survival, will inevitably not willingly put itself in serious danger, except to insure the survival of its offspring. The combatant knowingly puts himself in harm's way—he may not be totally willing, but he does it without question.

All of that means; the warrior arms himself and goes into a place in which he believes there are other armed men who seek to find him and kill him. His intention is to find and kill them first. This is something no sane man will do. A sane man, examining the situation, will correctly pronounce this form of activity insane.

The young men who go off to fight in wars don't appreciate this nature of war when they first become armed. They are too inexperienced to believe such things are possible, they have been raised with a belief and behavior structure that outlaws what they do in war. However, they understand it thoroughly the first time they go into combat. The older men who send them off to fight don't concern themselves with that reality—they don't have to go. No one who has never seen, "up close and personal," the face of war understands this reality with the same degree of intensity the warrior does. Those who don't have to directly face war's reality philosophers, theorists, mothers are free to think about it. They come to understand the meaning of combat: young men go out and kill each other. The men who do the fighting, on the other hand are not free to think about it, not at all.

In order to be able to live through the fighting, the warrior sets aside nearly everything he believes about right and wrong. He

becomes the kind of person he has always been taught is bad. In a very real way, he becomes crazy. He is guided by one principle, *survive by whatever means*. Go knowingly into harm's way if you must—and no mistake about it, you must—but survive. He does not think about the jeopardy he is in. He never thinks these are human beings he seeks to kill. He never considers the rightness or wrongness of what he is doing. What he does is *a priori* right, no matter how heinous it would be under virtually any other circumstances. If he does not deny the humanity of the foe and do his best to kill him, he will die himself or his friends will die. It's that simple.

The warrior doesn't think about these things, not like philosophers, theorists, and mothers do. He can't. If he did he would realized what it is he is doing, the fullness of the jeopardy in which he is placing himself. That would drive him quite mad. He's already crazy, that's true. But it's a craziness most men will quickly recover from as soon as they are removed from the unnatural situation known as war. If he became quite mad, he might never recover.

That's why Socrates' thinking stumbled, he was getting too close to that edge from which there is no recovery. He shook himself from his reverie and went in search of a card game, or something else to occupy his mind.

Seller Sam's funeral was the next day. Chief Lai came to Fort Cragg early, most of the Marines were still sleeping after their night's patrols. That was fine with Lai, he wanted to talk with Sergeant Slaughter. Sergeant Slaughter was awake after having slept most of the night, as he usually did.

They sat on the veranda and drank tea, American style. American tea was a fascination to Lai, one he enjoyed immensely when he could get it. The Vietnamese people heated up their water in a vague attempt to kill off the bacterial beasties that lived in it, and added tea leaves to give the tepid water some flavor. The Americans, on the other hand, preferred their water cold and drank tea as merely one of many choices of beverage. American tea came in small bags made of some rich, exotic paper and was soaked in scalding hot water until it reached the desired strength. Some Americans wanted their tea much stronger than Lai ever would. Those who did not want their tea that strong would throw out the "tea bag" when it was strong enough. Rich Americans, always throwing things away when they still had use. The tea was served very hot, so it had to be served in cups; opaque, bowl-



shaped glasses with handles, instead of glasses—it was too hot to hold the glass. And Americans added sugar to cut the harshness of the flavor, though if they simply used less tea to flavor the water they wouldn't need to do that. Then, curiously enough, many of them added lemon juice which imparted a harsh flavor over the sugar. It seemed very strange. *Trung si* Slaughter said a favorite summer drink in America was "ice tea." Lai knew what ice was, sort of; it was hard water that wasn't warm. Some day he would have to ask *Trung si* Slaughter to show him ice. It would be very interesting to see. Or maybe it would be better to ask *Dai uy* Vitale. There never seemed to be any ice at Fort Cragg, maybe there was ice at Whiskey Company headquarters.

The two men sat and sipped their tea and discussed the weather and the farming for a few minutes, then Lai brought up why he had come.

"I have talked to Chief Nien, and the elders of Hat Reo Toi, and Missus Sam," he said. He didn't say "Missus Sam," he used her real name, but Sergeant Slaughter knew her as Missus Sam and automatically translated in his own mind. "They agree with me that it is wrong to blame our American friends for Seller Sam's murder." Again, he used the proper name and Sergeant Slaughter translated into the name he was used to. "We are fighting a strong enemy who wants Khung Toi and its riches. This enemy will not give up easily. This murder was committed in an attempt to divide us, to make the village and the CAP weak so they can come back in and take our food and money, conscript our young men. We must show them this will not happen, that we do not want them to come back, that they cannot frighten us away from our American friends." These aren't the exact words Chief Lai spoke, his English wasn't that strong. Part of the time he spoke in Vietnamese, he sprinkled a few French words into what he said, used what English he knew, even used some gestures and body language when he and Sergeant Slaughter didn't have words in common to express what he was trying to say. But this is what he meant.

"Seller Sam's funeral is this afternoon. We want you and all your Marines to come to it, to be with his widow and his friends and neighbors at that time."

Sergeant Slaughter was touched and pleased and relieved by this. He wasted no time in agreeing.

"We would also like for *Dai uy* Vitale and *Trung si nhat* Bryl to

come."

Sergeant Slaughter called inside for Motormouth to raise company HQ and bring him the headset as soon as he got Gunny Bryl on the horn.

"There is one more thing," Chief Lai continued. "When a poor man dies his male relatives carry his coffin to the grave. A rich man's family hires pall bearers. Seller Sam has only one male relative in the village, an old uncle. His death was unexpected, there is too little time to hire professional pall bearers. Chief Nien will be one, Missus Sam has a brother who will also. As a sign of determination, two PFs are going to do it as well. We would like a further sign of unity, so we ask, if you will, for two Marines also."

That's when Motormouth slapped the handset into Sergeant Slaughter's hand. "Hang on a sec," Sergeant Slaughter said into it. "We'd be honored," he said to Chief Lai. The village chief sighed deeply and looked very relieved. Sergeant Slaughter explained the situation to Gunny Bryl, who promised to come out with the skipper. "One more thing, Gunny. Bring a clerk for radio watch so Motormouth can go too."

Picking the first Marine pall bearer was easy. Submarine was the only one of the Americans who wasn't a lot taller than the Vietnamese, he wouldn't unbalance the coffin in carrying it. It took some discussion, though, to pick the other one. Sergeant Slaughter at 5'8" was the next shortest but, as CAP commander, he had to lead his men during the funeral. They finally settled on Doc Holliday. Having the *bac si* as pall bearer would show the respect the Americans had for Seller Sam in particular, and for the villagers in general.

It seemed to the Marines that the entire adult population of Hat Reo Toi was assembled in front of Seller Sam's house and in the hamlet square—along with at least half the adults from Toi Co 1 and Nghia Toi, and they recognized several people from Toi Co 2 and Toi Mui as well. Everyone was dressed in white. Sergeant Slaughter put his men in a parade ground formation of two short ranks, except for Submarine and Doc Holliday, who Chief Lai led to a small group of men standing near the door of Seller Sam's hoots. Captain Vitale and Gunny Bryl took parade ground positions in front of the small Marine formation.

The small group near the door was the other pall bearers. Chief Lai quickly briefed them on the procedure they were to follow once

they went inside; the briefing was almost totally for the benefit of the two Americans, the Vietnamese had seen enough funerals to know what they were to do. Then they went inside and stood quietly in a corner while a seeming endless line of friends passed the coffin, bowing at its foot. Lai unobtrusively let Missus Sam know they were ready.

The line of people saying goodbye at the coffin only seemed to go on forever, it actually only continued for another ten minutes. Then Lai quietly got everyone who had any sort of official function in the funeral procession in order. A group of people carrying small banners with Chinese characters written on them, gathered inside the door. Two men picked up a small altar with a framed photograph of a smiling Seller Sam sitting on it; the photo was surrounded with flower bouquets and burning incense. There was now space for the pall bearers to take their places. On Lai's signal, they lifted it to their shoulders—except for Doc Holliday, who had to hold it at chest height to avoid tipping it.

Lai nodded to the banner carriers, who solemnly filed out the door, followed by the two men carrying the small altar. The coffin went next. Missus Sam trailed close behind. Outside a few villagers with musical instruments; a couple of flutes, a drum, a guitar, and a stringed instrument that looked odd to the Americans, struck up a discordant tune and followed Missus Sam, who was joined by her relatives.

Gunny Bryl barked orders as the procession neared the ranked Marines and they came to attention and held their weapons vertically in front of themselves at present arms. They weren't crisp in their movements, it was too long since they had practiced the manual of arms, but looked very sharp to the villagers, who had no experience with military formality. Missus Sam passed and Gunny Bryl barked a few more orders. Then he and Captain Vitale joined the procession while the other Marines fanned out to provide a moving security screen.

The procession seemed to meander aimlessly through the hamlet, gathering people as it went. The marchers sang, not quite in accord with the music that swirled around them. The growing parade left by the north gate and followed paddy dike roadways until it reached the graveyard on the hamlet's west side. A hole was already dug. The people quieted as they entered the graveyard and milled about, coming to stand where they would, jostling as more crowded in.

Seller Sam was Buddhist, not Catholic, so there was no priest. There could have been a monk present to say prayers, his widow could afford any charges, but there wasn't enough time to make the arrangements. Instead, Lai chanted prayers while the pall bearers lowered the coffin onto the ropes that would lower it into the grave. Missus Sam, who had been quietly sobbing all the while, threw herself over the coffin and wailed until her brother took her shoulders and gently drew her away. The coffin was lowered into the hole. Then Chief Nien and her brother stood by Missus Sam's sides and supported her while leading her out of the graveyard. Everyone else followed until there were only two young men left who were charged with filling the grave.

The villagers split into two groups and trooped straight for the hamlet's two gates, not bothering with the circuitous route they had taken going out. Most of the people assembled in the village square, some went to their homes to bring out tables or food and drink for a post funeral meal. A few escorted Missus Sam back to her home. The Marines went with that small group. Captain Vitale stopped the Americans outside.

"I know you all want to pay your respects to the widow," he said. "It's small inside, so one fire team at a time."

"Protocol, Sir," Gunny Bryl murmured.

"Right," Vitale said to him, then to the others, "Gunny Bryl, Sergeant Slaughter, and I will go in first." They did as he said. When they came back out it was the turn of Socrates and his two men.

Missus Sam sat looking alone in what had once been her happy home. She wasn't alone; her brother, two neighbor women, and the two chiefs, as well as the three Marines were inside with her. Still, she sat on a chair against the wall, looking shrunken and much older than she was, looked all alone in the world, as though these people were not there.

Socrates bowed low to her and took her hand in his. "I am very sorry," he said, and almost choked. There was no way he could say how sorry he truly was, not without telling about what he had done twice at Mr. Smith's orders. He said a few more words that he could never later remember.

The woman looked deeply into his eyes and said softly, "Thank you for come today," almost as though she didn't remember seeing him the day before, saying the exact same words then. She looked away and he released her hand. Her hand barely moved from where he had

held it. Captain Hook took it, bowed, and said something. She thanked him the same way she did Socrates. Sneaky Pete aped the other two. They went outside to let Mad Greek and his men go in. Soon that part of the ordeal was over.

"All right, People," Sergeant Slaughter said when all were through. "Let's give these people some security, just in case. Two fire teams outside the fence. We'll rotate so everybody gets a chance to join in the party."

"He's back!" Killer Kowalski ran toward the Fort Cragg gate screaming at the top of his lungs. "He's back!" he bellowed and pointed back along the road toward the schoolhouse. His hat almost fell off as he skittered taking the turn through the gate. It was early enough in the day none of the others were out yet. He had only left a few minutes earlier himself, on his way to Hat Reo Toi. Somehow, he had to get back on the good side of his girlfriend's mother.

"Who's back?"

"How many?"

"Where?"

The questions came fast as the Marines in the compound ran toward him, buckling their cartridge belts, checking that they had rounds chambered in their weapons.

Killer Kowalski skidded to a stop and gaped at them; these Marines who had instantly made the transition from relaxed but armed, to armed and looking to fight. His mouth widened to match his eyes and he half doubled over in laughter. His laughter was silent because he was out of breath from his sprint.

"Are you okay?" Socrates, the first to reach him, asked. He put a hand on Killer Kowalski's shoulder and looked past him, out the road past Toi Co 1.

Mad Greek dropped to his knees next to him and tried to make him lay down. "Shit, man, you look like hell, your face is all red," Mad Greek said. "Where are you hit?"

Killer Kowalski broke away from them and forced himself to stand up straight. He managed to calm down enough to heave a deep breath before laughing again. This time his laugh was a roar. His face flushed redder and sweat flooded his face.

Socrates shot a glance at him, then returned his attention to the road. Mad Greek rocked back on his heels and looked astonished.

Sergeant Slaughter pounded up, shouting, "Everybody maintain.

We aren't doing a damn thing until we know what the situation is." His mouth was set grim, but his lips twisted so those who saw thought he looked like he was trying not to smile. "Submarine," he ordered the only NCO who wasn't occupied at the gate, "get them in some sort of formation."

There were a few PFs in the compound. They joined the Marines, looking confused and frightened, anxiously fingering their weapons. Submarine snapped a few orders, the milling about stopped and they arranged themselves to be ready to move in any direction a threat came from.

"Are you through with that cluster-fuck over there?" Sergeant Slaughter asked the assembled Marines and PFs. Without waiting for an answer he went to Killer Kowalski. "Shut up and tell me about it," he said. He wasn't able to hold it in anymore and smiled broadly. "How far out?"

"You, you know what I mean?" Killer Kowalski gasped between peels of laughter.

"No shit, I know what you're talking about," Sergeant Slaughter snorted. "I'm the Big Honcho here, nothing comes down I don't know about." He resisted looking at Socrates and thinking something that came down he *didn't* know about.

The sound of a Jeep came from beyond Toi Co 1.

"There," Killer Kowalski said. He dropped to the ground so he could laugh as hard as he wanted without having to worry about keeping his balance.

Now everybody was looking at the approaching Marine vehicle, looking confused, asking each other, "What the fuck? Over."

Sergeant Slaughter turned and slowly swept his gaze over all of them. "Is that the way you greet a returning buddy? I was him and saw you ready to rumble like that, I'd want to go back where I came from."

Now there were looks of surprise on most of the Marines' faces.

Rodin broke it first. "Mister Spook," he shouted, "Mister Spook is back!"

They boiled out the gate, racing to the oncoming Jeep, shouting welcome-backs to their returning buddy.

Mister Spook didn't get out of the Jeep until it was inside the wire. He walked gingerly when he did. None of the Marines thought his stiff walk was caused by stiffness in the new uniform and boots he was wearing.

"Oh man, you should a seen them nurses," Mister Spook said once the hellos and welcome backs were past. "I was in this Army hospital somewheres, they never told me what it was called and I never asked. Half of the corpsmen was WACs and there was a shitload more nurses than there was doctors." He made his eyes into large circles to illustrate his description. "Except on a California beach, you never saw so many beautiful women in one place in your life. I know I sure never did." He went on about the women hospital orderlies and nurses at length, never quite claiming to having had his way with any of them, but doing his best to convey exactly that impression. Everyone listened en rapt. Even the PFs listened. They couldn't understand all of his words, and none of them had ever seen a Western woman, but they got the picture. A picture anyway. What the PFs imagined was probably something more akin to an inflatable rubber doll than an actual woman, but they can be forgiven for that; they lacked the basic frame of reference.

When Mister Spook moved or waved his arms, he tried to twist from the hips and keep his shoulders still, not flex his ribcage at all. He grimaced when he moved the wrong way, but never once suffered a catch in his monologue. Finally he wound down. His listeners were filled with visions of the pleasures of pneumatic American women, some of them half wished they could get wounded badly enough to be evacuated to a hospital. None of them wished it all the way: Wounds could maim, cripple, or kill, as well as hospitalize a man where he would be tended by round-eyed women.

Socrates listened to Mister Spook's descriptions and watched the curves his hands drew in the air and thought of those nights with Jane and moaned softly.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

They loved as only the young can love. Their passion was so fierce and hungry it bordered on violence. Bordered? They both acquired bruises in intimate places. They wanted sex as often as they could get it, but the chances weren't anywhere near as often as they wanted. Only two or three times a week. On those occasions they tried to make up for the four or five days they couldn't. One could reasonably say they were insatiable. Only rarely were they sure one or the other's house was going to be vacant for long enough to use and enjoy each other, usually they used the back seat of his car. They never quite brought themselves to call that back seat the Passion Pit, but that was more because she was too typical a nice girl of 1964 to suggest it herself, and he was too conscious of what he thought her feelings were to mention it himself. But secretly, that's how each of them thought of the car's back seat.

The Passion Pit had its drawbacks. It was cramped, they weren't able to spread out or thrash about as much as they did in bed, and there was always the danger of being discovered by someone wondering what a strange car was doing parked in an alleyway, or an unlit side street, or a narrow lane outside of town. And they could never run the risk of getting completely naked or having some light. So they never in the car experienced the joy of looking at each others bodies, could only content themselves with what feelie-feelie they could with their clothes disheveled but mostly still on.

Actually, the whole business was so exciting neither of them minded the inconveniences. Besides, they didn't have the experience to know there was anything better.

After two weeks she said something to him. He gasped and slapped his forehead for being such a dummy. They he went on a quest for rubbers. No so easy for a brand new eighteen-year-old to find back in those pre-sexual revolution days. At first he didn't like how the rubbers eliminated the wet, slippery-slidy feeling for him, but she was relieved from fear of pregnancy and became even wilder than



before. It seemed a worthwhile trade off. But he still missed the wet, slippery-slidy feeling. He made a few discrete inquiries and learned the function of the female menstrual cycle and overcame her squeamishness about sex during her period. He kept a clean towel in a corner of the back seat for them to use then. Yea for the wet, slippery-slidy feeling! That must have been about February, they'd been physical for three months or so. If he'd hit home with a bullet on target each time—it would have to have been a different target each time, of course—they'd "done the dirty deed" often enough to get a good start on populating a small town.

By mid-April they had both gotten all of their college acceptances and scholarship offers—she had four scholarship offers of her own, three partial and one full. Her house was empty, nobody was going to be home until about 8:00 that Friday. They were lying naked on her bed, idly toying with each other's chests while they relaxed from their second or third frenzied bout of the afternoon, not yet ready for the next one. It seemed like a good time to talk.

"We need to decide pretty soon," she said, twining a few strands of chest hair around her finger.

"Decide what?" he asked, drawing gentle circles around a nipple.

"Where we're going to college." She released those hairs and started on different ones.

"Oh," he said, not sounding very convinced. He cupped her breast and gave it a friendly squeeze.

She rolled onto her side and snuggled against him. Her fingertips traced abstract patterns on his chest and belly. "This one's the best academically," she said, naming one of the schools that had offered her a partial.

"It doesn't have a good soccer program," he said. His palm brushed back and forth on her hip. "Anyway, they only offered me a quarter scholarship."

"Oh, right." She knew that but didn't let on. "That school," she named another that had offered her a partial, "has a better athletic department, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but," its offer to him was also a partial. How about," he named one that offered him a full. That school hadn't made any scholarship offer to her.

"What about?" she named the third school that had offered her a partial. She knew what she was doing. She wanted that full scholarship. And the only school that offered her a full had offered

him one also. He needed to go to a school that would pay his way to give his sisters and brother their chance for college. Her family wasn't much better off, the little better off it was because there were only three children to worry about educating instead of four. She was the last in line and most of the family's college fund had already been spent on the other two. She needed a scholarship to go at all.

"No." Again, an inadequate offer to him.

"That leaves," the only school to offer her a full scholarship.

"Uh huh." He stretched his arm out and his hand went to the bottom of her buttocks and his fingers quested between them.

"Oh," she said very softly. "Oh," when his fingers found their mark. "Oh." She rolled onto her back and opened her legs. His attention was totally on a nonverbal place when she murmured, "If we can live off campus we can get an apartment together. That'll save money," so he didn't hear her. Then something of him touched something of her just right and she gasped, got lost in that same nonverbal place, and was unable to talk anymore.

Later, but very soon later, he half heard her say something that sounded like maybe they would have to keep it secret from their parents until after graduation if they got married in college. It was too soon after, so the import of those words didn't immediately register on him, nor the other words she said just then. He was alone in his own bed by the time they did. And did she really say something about not having babies until after they graduated?

He made an excuse to cancel their Saturday night date.

Over Sunday dinner his mother asked, "You got a lot of scholarship offers. Have you decided which one you want to accept?"

He mumbled something about not yet, there were so many to consider, maybe the one that offered Jane a full. Then he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

His mother wanted to press the issue, but he clammed up, just saying it needed some thought. His father sided with him for the moment and stopped the conversation before it turned into an argument. His father said he and mom should go over the offers and the school catalogs themselves so they'd be able to discuss the subject more intelligently.

She reluctantly agreed. "But we need to decide soon so you can accept while the offer is still open," was her last word on the subject for the moment. This was a topic she wasn't going to give up on. She

had already narrowed down the list of acceptable schools to four; three that had offered athletic scholarships, and the one that offered an academic partial. The other full scholarship was an athletic factory without good academic standing and she didn't want her son going there.

On Monday he said he was sick and stayed home from school. His mother gave him a quick exam and said, "Something's wrong. What is it?" He said nothing's wrong, he just didn't feel well. She had to work that day and didn't have the time right now to force him to talk about it. She left and he was alone.

The phone rang at lunchtime; he answered because it might be one of his parents calling to check on him, or school calling to make sure he was home in bed. It was Jane wanting to know if he was all right, was anything wrong.

Everything's fine, he was just sick, that was all.

She wanted to skip school that afternoon and come over to take care of him.

No, she could get in trouble for leaving school early.

Okay, then she'd come over right after fifth period, she could skip sixth because it was a study hall where attendance wasn't taken.

*Better not.* He thought what he had was contagious and he didn't want her getting sick too.

She pleaded, he resisted. She cried, he almost gave in. Almost.

"My mother's a nurse," he reminded her. "she can take care of me fine. I'll probably be back in school tomorrow."

"You better. If you're not I'm coming over to take care of you and I don't care how contagious it is."

He went out the next morning, schoolbooks in hand, because he didn't want his mother grilling him about what the problem was, but he didn't go to school. He thought Jane would call him or come over and didn't want to talk to her or see her today. He wanted to think by himself without having to answer to anyone until he was ready.

When he got home his mother and Jane were sitting in the kitchen. Together.

Talking.

About him.

About how oddly he was acting.

When he came in they looked at him. Both of them. Together. He knew they were about to gang up on him. He didn't know what to do. He couldn't fight them, they loved him too much. They had too

many plans for his future. Plans that were for his own good.

What's the matter, they both asked. Tell me, tell us. I love you, we love you. Talk to me, talk to us. I'm concerned about you, we both are. I, we, care about you. I only we only want what it best for you. I/we, love you too much to allow anything to ever happen to you. Anything.

Anything. That was the problem. His mother, his girlfriend, his father—where was his father? He would be in on this if he was home from work—all wanted what was best for him, so did Coach. They each had his life planned for him. And while each had a different plan, probably they wouldn't be able to find any points in their plans to seriously disagree on. They just didn't bother to ask him what *he* wanted, that's all. They knew what was right and what was best for him. Sure, he loved them (didn't he?) and wanted them to be happy. But he had to live his life, none of them could do that for him. No matter what their plans were or how good they were or how they were in his best interest. It was his life to live.

Of course he couldn't say any of that. It would hurt them if he said any of that, they would feel rejected, unloved. And he didn't want to reject them, make them feel unloved. He did love them. Didn't he?

What he said instead of what the problem really was, picking a college when he had so many that wanted him was a big decision and he wanted to take his time, make sure he was right.

"This is a decision that can't wait," his mother told him. She spoke very sternly, but tried to leaven the sternness with love. "You want to go to a school where you will get the best possible education. That kind of school is going to fill its rolls very fast, there's no time to waste."

"We want to go to the same college, so I have to be in on the decision also," Jane said, a touch of pleading in her voice.

His mother darted a sharp glance at Jane when she said that and briefly wondered if anything was going on between them she should know about. No, Jane's too nice a girl for that. She dropped the thought before it could root itself in her mind. "Playing hooky in your senior year of high school isn't the way to start your college career," is what she said.

Jane wanted to hold his hand on the table top, but felt funny touching him in front of his mother. The older woman might suspect something if she did, she just knew she touched him differently since they started doing it, differently in a way that would show to adults

who did it all the time. She stole a look at his mother and tried to imagine her doing it. It was hard to imagine. Not that she was old or anything. Not *real* old anyway. But old enough that probably just about the only thing she still had to look forward to was grandchildren. Gee, she must be almost forty or something. Wow, forty. Maybe she should tell her about her plans, enlist her aid in her own plans. No, that wouldn't work. Almost forty, that was too old, she probably couldn't remember what it was like to be young and in love and wanting to get married and start your own family. Gee, at forty she probably didn't even have sex anymore. She tucked her hands into her lap so she wouldn't forget and touch him in front of his mother and give their secret away.

They went round and round some more but all that accomplished was they all got more frustrated, nothing got resolved. Then his father got home from work and they stopped talking about it, dinner had to be fixed. And his mother wanted to talk privately to her husband about it before involving him in the discussion, make sure they showed a united front. Jane had to go home before her parents started worrying about her. His father watched Jane as she left and thought what a fine little piece of ass she looked like. He wondered if his son was getting any of it and his chest swelled at the thought. *That's my boy*, he thought, banging the cheerleaders. *Go get 'em, kid, does the old man's heart good.*

Somewhere in that time period the coach cornered him and asked which schools offered him athletic scholarships. When he heard the names he said, "Pick this one. I know the head football coach there. He runs a good program and if I put in a word for you he'll give you a good shot at walk-on placekicker.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

After a while Mister Spook ran out of words and gestures he hadn't already used at least a half dozen times to describe the round-eyed women in the hospital. The only thing left was for him to describe how he got laid every night by a different beauty of mercy—and every morning and afternoon, too. Everybody knew it was time for him to talk about that. So somebody asked him to tell what it was like, getting his pipes reamed by a different roundeye all the time that way.

"If you don't mind," Mister Spook said with great dignity, head held high, hand on chest, "there are some things a gentleman simply doesn't talk about."

That brought on hoots of derision.

"Come on, Mister Spook, who ever said you were a gentleman?"

"You can dream your own dreams, you aren't going to dream mine," he said, looking down his nose.

"Dreams, that's what you had, I'll you didn't get any nooky at all."

"I don't want to dream your dreams, Mister Spook, just get off on them."

Mister Spook looked up and closed his eyes. "You know what they say. Those who don't get any talk about all they got. Those who get it don't talk about it. Well, I ain't saying nothing."

Raucous laughter met that.

Mister Spook stuck a hand inside his shirt and pulled out a large envelope. He held the envelope out. "Doc, they said for me to give this to you. It's my med records."

Doc Holliday took the offered envelope, opened it, and scanned the contents. He whistled softly. "Now we get to see why you're moving like somebody stuck a steel bar up your ass. Take your shirt off."

That immediately caught the attention of some of the Marines. After all, descriptions can only go so far. Others shifted their attention more slowly. After all, there's no such thing as too much of a good

thing.

Mister Spook was a bit awkward taking off his shirt, he had to do most of the unbuttoning left handed, he moved his right arm gingerly.

"When was the last time that dressing was changed?" Doc Holliday asked. There were four loose gauze bandages on his right side, the rest of his side was tightly taped. There was another bandage around his upper arm, its business side was against the inner part of the arm.

"Right after morning chow."

Doc Holliday looked at him without speaking.

After a moment Mister Spook realized the corpsman was waiting for more specific information. "About 0800," he said.

Doc Holliday looked at his watch. "Long enough," he said. "Long enough if I'm going to be taking care of you."

"Do you really got to do that, Doc?" Mister Spook looked worried. Peeling the adhesive tape off his side hurt.

Doc Holliday ignored him. "Socrates, get my medkit." Socrates went into the corpsman's quarters while Doc Holliday went into the kitchen to wash his hands. On his return he turned his attention to the bag. He laid out a selection of antiseptics, field dressings, cotton balls, surgical scissors, medical tweezers, tape, and a scalpel. Now he answered Mister Spook's concerns. "Don't worry, I'm only going to take a look under the bandages, I'm not going to take the tape off."

Mister Spook looked very relieved. The other Marines crowded around to watch.

Doc Holliday worked deftly with the scissors and scalpel, cutting the tape around the bandages. He had to cut a full inch of tape around them where the tape was holding down the gauze. Where he was able to slip the flat point of the scissors under the tape, he cut it through. Where the tape adhered too tightly he sliced into it with the scalpel, into but not all the way through, just enough to seriously weaken it. Once he had cut around all four bandages on Mister Spook's side he carefully peeled up one edge.

"Hold on, this is going to sting," he said, gripping one of the loose edges. He yanked up and out on the edge. There was a ripping sound and the gauze section came free. Mister Spook yelped. "What're you crying about, Mister Spock," Doc Holliday said in a poo-poo tone. "That didn't hurt." He grabbed a second bandage edge and yanked it off. This one didn't come off as easily, there had been some seepage under it and a crust had formed, binding part of the gauze to the

wound. Mister Spook flinched and sucked in breath. "What kind of Marine do you call yourself, Mister Spook? You didn't yell this loud when you got hit in the first place." There were two wounds under this bandage, the one that was stuck to it started oozing again. The third bandage came off as easily as the first, it and the first each covered one long wound. The fourth one adhered more to the flesh underneath and took two yanks to remove. When Doc Holliday cut off the binding on the arm bandage it fell off without having to be pulled.

Now they could see everything. The wound on the inside of his arm was scarring up nicely, it looked almost totally healed. Wide surgical tape bound Mister Spook's injured ribs on the front and back of his chest. In between, where the ribs were damaged, the cut away tape made a pattern of squares around the plowed up flesh. Three of the injuries were pink ridges with a few remnants of scabbing, red enough to look tender, not dark enough to appear actively painful. One of the others was oozing clear, glistening fluid through the scab at one end. The remaining wound, the one that didn't want to relinquish its bandage, was scabbed along its entire length and had blood slowly dripping from the scab in spots, as well as clear oozing. It was redder than the others, but didn't have any of the white spots that could indicate infection. Doc Holliday probed gently with a fingertip. That one wound was warmer than the others, but not hot to the touch.

"I'm surprised they didn't hold you for a couple more days to let this one heal more." He shook his head. "Sometimes I get the impression those people back in the hospitals don't understand how quickly infection can set in in this country."

Mister Spook shrugged. "There's a big operation going on someplace. They told me they had a lot of casualties coming in and needed the space."

Doc Holliday shook his head but didn't say anything. There wasn't ever quite enough medical care for the combat troops, far too many were sent back to their units before their wounds were completely healed. Still, he knew the Americans in this war had the best medical attention of any soldiers in any war ever fought by anyone in history. Far fewer limbs were chopped off, fewer eyes lost, more wounded men who would have died in any other war survived to live normal lives. It's just that there was still danger of this wound getting infected. If it was, Mister Spook would have to go back into the hospital. And some of these damn tropical infections resisted the best efforts of Western medicine. He knew of men who'd died from



minor wounds that got infections that wouldn't clear up. Well, he might not be in a hospital, but he was still a hospital corpsman; this is how he was supposed to earn his living. He scanned the paperwork again.

"Mister Spook," he said when he finished his examination, "I'm putting you on light duty. You do not go on patrol until this wound closes up, you don't even go into the Junkyard without my say so. Understood?"

Mister Spook nodded. He didn't like being confined to Fort Cragg, but if that was the price for not going on patrol... He looked away from his side to the corpsman. "Why can't I go on patrol?" He suddenly realized that not going on patrol or into the Junkyard meant he had to stay inside Fort Cragg all the time with Sergeant Slaughter.

"Because when you go on patrol you have to get down into the dirt and the paddy water. You would run risk of infection and I don't want to have to treat an infection, that's why," Doc Holliday explained patiently, as though to a child or a slow adult. "When that wound is properly covered over and your ribs are solid enough, then I'll let you go out. But not before."

"How long will it take."

"A week, maybe two."

"Oh."

Sergeant Slaughter watched and listened quietly until now. "Don't sweat it, Mister Spook. We need another swinging dick on patrol, I'll send Motormouth out and put you on radio watch"

Two days later Motormouth going on patrol became a moot point.

Gunny Bryl came out with a driver and met privately with Sergeant Slaughter. The two NCOs talked alone on the veranda for half an hour; they shooed away anyone who came close enough to hear what they were talking about.

During that time Socrates took a shower, and leisurely brushed his teeth—a between meals brushing no less—and shaved at the wash table. He took a few minutes to supervise a few children who were drawing water from the well for the women who were doing the Marines' laundry, and checked out the progress of the washing. When he couldn't find anything more to do there, he retired to the shade of the bunker guarding the main gate.

The significance of the things he was doing, none of which he

needed to do, certainly not then, is he was able to see Gunny Bryl from where he did each of them. He wanted to be sure he caught the gunny before he left, ask if he had talked to Captain Vitale. Not that he could imagine the gunny not making the chance to check on this mysterious officer, Lieutenant Convoy. He kept himself busy the way he did because he didn't want to be obviously watching; he only glanced their way once every minute or so. Several times he saw Gunny Bryl looking at him, once Sergeant Slaughter stared his way for several minutes. He started getting edgy, waiting for them to break up, waiting for his chance to talk to the gunny. The longer he waited, the more he wanted to fidget. It got real hard near the end when he was sitting quietly in the bunker's shade.

At last they stood. Sergeant Slaughter stepped off the veranda and shouted, "Fire team leaders, up."

Socrates jerked to his feet and forced himself to walk calmly toward him.

Sergeant Slaughter saw his three NCOs coming and went back into the shade. "Siddown," he said when the three corporals arrived. They sat, Socrates and Submarine on the railing, Mad Greek on a stool. "Who hasn't had R&R yet?" Sergeant Slaughter asked when they were settled.

Socrates double-took. Of all the things that ran through his mind that this meeting might be about, this wasn't one that crossed his mind.

Submarine was the first ready with an answer. "Everyone in my fire team has," he said.

"I had mine," Mad Greek said. "So did Rodin. I'm not sure about Chickenfucker or Mister Spook. I'll have to ask."

Sergeant Slaughter looked at Socrates for his report. "I had it," he said. So did Captain Hook. I think Sneaky Pete did too, but I'm not sure."

"Never mind asking, I know who didn't," Gunny Bryl said. "Chickenfucker, Motormouth and Mister Spook are the only men in this unit who haven't gotten R&R."

Sergeant Slaughter looked like he knew it too. "Just checking to see how much you know about your men," he said. They didn't believe him.

"Whiskey 8 gets an R&R," Gunny Bryl said. "So it's one of those three gets it. Which one?"

"Mister Spook's still recuperating," Mad Greek said, "may as well send him."

"Chickenfucker's been in-country longer," Sergeant Slaughter objected. "This is the first R&R Whiskey 8's gotten in close to a month and a half. If he doesn't get it now he might not get another chance. Besides, Mister Spook just had a long R&R, it ain't fair to give him another one right away."

Socrates and Submarine exchanged glances; they didn't think being hospitalized from wounds counted as R&R.

"If e send Chickenfucker, I'm short a man," Mad Greek said.

"I'll give you Motormouth."

Mad Greek's mouth twisted like he tasted something sour. "He ain't been on patrol in so long he'll probably sound like a herd of elephants out there."

"All right then, it's settled, Motormouth's going on R&R. Tell him to saddle up, he's leaving now with Gunny Bryl. Mister Spook stands radio watch until he gets back. You're dismissed."

Mad Greek and Submarine left immediately. Socrates stood and hesitated, looking at Gunny Bryl. The gunny almost imperceptibly shook his head and turned away.

Socrates trailed away. What did he mean by that? Why did Gunny Bryl just shake his head? He left Fort Cragg and headed in the direction of the schoolhouse. But as soon as he was inside the trees he stopped and waited by the side of the road. Pretty soon, he thought, Gunny Bryl would be coming by here. He'd stop him and ask about it.

It was a half hour before he heard the Jeep coming. He stood in the middle of the road, in a straight section where the driver would see him in time to stop. That was almost a mistake. The driver saw him in plenty of time, but thought he was going to get out of the way and only stood on the breaks at the last moment. The hard breaking threw Motormouth to the floor of the Jeep's rear. Gunny Bryl knew better and saw what was about to happen. He braced himself and got jounced but kept his seat.

"Wait one," Gunny Bryl told the driver. He got out and signaled Socrates to follow him into the trees. "Don't say anything," he said as soon as they were far enough from the Jeep. "You don't know nothing, you never saw no one, nothing happened. You got that? Now I don't want to hear another damn word from your from anybody else about some damn lieutenant who doesn't exist." He abruptly turned about and walked briskly back to the Jeep. Socrates was left alone in the woods, without even having had a chance to ask any questions.

What was going on? What the hell was he doing? Who was

Lieutenant Convoy and why was Gunny Bryl acting so strangely? Who did he think he, Socrates, was? He went back to Fort Cragg, maybe Captain Hook was there. If not, he'd look for him somewhere else. This whole business was too weird.

Captain Hook wasn't at Fort Cragg, but Sergeant Slaughter was. He fixed Socrates with a hard stare and motioned him over. He didn't say anything for long enough for Socrates to become very uncomfortable. When he finally did he spoke cryptically.

"I don't know nothing, Gunny Bryl don't know nothing, you don't know nothing, no-goddam-body knows nothing. You and your people didn't even go nowhere one night last week. That's a crock of shit." He spat onto the ground at his side and scuffed dirt over it. "Only you *do* know something, but you ain't supposed to say nothing about it. That's a crock of shit, too. There's something everybody seems to have forgotten. That's *I'm* the man in charge here; that means I'm responsible for every swinging dick in this unit and what he does. I could get my ass hung out to dry for something nobody wants to tell me about, something everybody says isn't happening and I don't have a clue what it is.

"Socrates, nothing better happen." He turned and walked away.

*Seems like my day for people walking off without giving me a chance to say anything,* Socrates thought. *It's like they think I'm somebody and I don't have any idea who it is they think I am.*

"I want to go to CAG," Socrates told Sergeant Slaughter a couple of days later.

"Is that a fact." Sergeant Slaughter looked at him levelly, his voice a monotone, his face expressionless.

*Ah shit, is he gonna give me a hard time?* Socrates wondered. "I need to see somebody."

"Some kind of administrative shit, right?"

Socrates grimaced. "No, not some kind of administrative shit. There's someone there I want to talk to about something."

"Am I allowed to know who, or about what?" Sergeant Slaughter's voice was still monotonal, but now there was a harsh edge to it.

Socrates hesitated, he didn't have to tell Sergeant Slaughter anything; then again, Sergeant Slaughter didn't have to let him go, either. "I want to find Lieutenant Convoy. I want to ask him what's

going on."

It took some effort, but Sergeant Slaughter managed to maintain his level gaze and keep his face blank. He wasn't quite as successful with his voice. "Sure you don't mean Santa Claus? Or the White Rabbit?"

Socrates held himself rigidly. "I mean Lieutenant Convoy. You know who he is, you met him the same time I did."

"Did I? Did I meet anybody?" His voice was a flat again, but his eyes were blazing now. "I don't know what you're talking about. There isn't anybody named Lieutenant Convoy at CAG. Not there, not anywhere. Gunny Bryl said so."

Socrates' head spun. He had to go to CAG and find this officer. But first he needed Sergeant Slaughter's permission to leave Fort Cragg. He made what he hoped wasn't a rash decision. "Sergeant Slaughter, I'm not supposed to tell anybody certain things. But I promise, after I find Lieutenant Convoy I'll tell you everything I can. Let me go to CAG so I can find out something. Dammit, I don't know what the hell is going on and it affects me."

Sergeant Slaughter considered that for a moment; he wanted badly to know what was happening, he knew something was happening. But all he'd been told was things he saw with his own eyes and heard with his own ears hadn't happened. Gunny Bryl wasn't lying to him, not the way he said it. Whatever it was, it was something secret. That wasn't good enough. It affected his men, and it affected him. He damn well had the right to know.

"You'll tell me what you can."

Socrates nodded.

"But not everything."

"What I can."

"You won't tell me nothing's happening."

"I swear."

"You have the early patrol tonight, right?"

"Right."

"You head for Company HQ at first light."

"Thanks, Sergeant Slaughter."

"And be back by sundown."

"No problem."

He didn't make it to 5th CAG headquarters. Mister Spook, feeling a bit more limber than he had three days earlier, drove him to Whiskey

Company HQ so the CAP wouldn't lose its truck for the entire day. Socrates was supposed to hitch a ride from there, Sergeant Slaughter had radioed ahead to make sure someone was going that way. All he had to do was check in with the company clerk and he'd get directed to his ride.

The clerk looked at a piece of paper on his desk, stood, and said, "Wait one, the Skipper wants to see you." He went to a door at the far end of the main room. The door had the words "Company Commander" and captain's bars stenciled on it. the clerk knocked and opened the door to poke his head in when a voice inside said, "Come." He straightened back up, looked at Socrates, and motioned.

Socrates walked past the clerk's desk and the desk with Gunny Bryl's name plate on it; he wondered where the company gunnery sergeant was, not that it mattered, Whiskey 8 was only one of the many platoons in the company, he was probably visiting one of the others. He heard the office door close behind him and came to attention two paces in front of the company commander's desk. He announced himself in proper military manner.

Captain Vitale sat back in his swivel chair, toying with a pencil held between his hands. His expression was one that a father might wear when deciding whether or not to read the riot act to a son who did something that might be wrong. Still sitting back, rocking lightly, he said, "Socrates. That's the thinker, a wise man. Right?"

"Yes, sir"

"You are a thinker, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir" When talking to an officer, it's best to use as few words as possible until you know where the conversation is going.

"Always thinking, always coming up with questions." Socrates didn't reply to that, he thought Captain Vitale was making an observation, not asking a question. "We like that in CAP, especially with our NCOs. You're out there pretty much on your own and every day you face situations and have to make decisions that only officers make in other kinds of units. Did you know that?"

"Yes, sir"

"But Marines are taught to obey orders without thought, that's what all the seeming chaos of Boot Camp is all about, that's why you learn close order drill, why you always march in formation when a unit of any size is going anywhere. Did you know that?"

"Yes, sir"

"Bet you figured it out on your own, nobody explained it to you."

Am I right?"

"Yes, sir"

"So." He sat straight and put the pencil down. He clasped his hands on his desk. "You're supposed to think and ask questions out there in the Junkyard. And at the same time you're supposed to obey orders without thought. That leaves you in a sort of shit or go blind position, doesn't it?"

"Sir? I don't understand the question."

Captain Vitale picked the pencil back up and tapped a slow tattoo on his desk. "It means that maybe you got some orders to obey, but you think you have some questions about them."

"Sir, Yes, sir"

"Forget it. There aren't any answers."

"Sir?" His mouth went dry.

"You heard me. You're looking for someone you'll never find. And even if you did find him, he wouldn't tell you anything. Now go back to the Junkyard. Dismissed."

"Sir," he swallowed to moisten his throat, "by your leave, sir. I'm going to CAG."

"No you're not. There's no one there for you to see. You're on your way back to the Junkyard. Dismissed." Captain Vitale picked up some papers from his desk and looked at them.

Socrates shivered inside, what he was about to say might border on insubordination. "Sir, how do you know there's nobody there for me to see?"

Captain Vitale looked at him. "Because if there was, his ass would be right where yours is, explaining to me why he's messing with my people without my approval. There's no one but you standing there." He sat back again. "So unless you want to request mast..." Every Marine has the right to "request mast," to take a problem up to the next higher commander in the chain of command. "Do you really want to discuss what you *think* is happening with a lieutenant colonel? Do you have any idea of the shit that could come down on you and on me and on everybody else if a corporal went to a lieutenant colonel with your story?"

Socrates blinked and swallowed a few times. He felt light headed. "Sir," his voice cracked, "what do you know about my story?"

"Nothing. There is no story. There is nothing to know because nothing has happened, because certain people don't exist. Now get out of my office and go back to the Junkyard before I get pissed off." He

returned to the papers on his desk.

Socrates hesitated, then said, "Aye-aye, sir," about faced, and left.

The clerk looked at him oddly, like he wanted to ask what it was about. Instead he asked, "You know where the battalion motor pool is?"

Socrates nodded and was told a six-by was about to make a supply run to Fort Cragg. He could catch a ride on it.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Socrates went straight to Sergeant Slaughter when he got back. He hesitated before saying anything, that was getting to be a habit, he thought. Only this time he wasn't hesitating about whether or what to say, he didn't quite know *how* to say it. So he just opened his mouth and started talking. "I didn't go to CAG. The Skipper wanted to see me as soon as I got to Company. He said there's nobody at CAG who can tell me anything. Not unless I want to request mast with the CAG CO." He stopped, he wasn't sure what else to say, what there was that wouldn't be repetition.

"And you don't want to request mast." It wasn't a question. Curiously, Sergeant Slaughter sounded sympathetic.

Socrates nodded, Sergeant Slaughter understood that any time a man took a matter up the chain of command he ran the risk of getting himself into even deeper trouble, it was always best to keep things at the lowest possible level. Almost always.

"So neither one of us gets to know what's going on."

"Maybe there's another way. If there is I promise to tell you anything I find out."

"Not only what you can tell me?"

Socrates hesitated again, wondering if that was really what he meant. He wasn't sure. He said, "I think so. Maybe."

Sergeant Slaughter noticed the hesitation and the degradation of "I think so" to "maybe." "Shut up before you take it back."

Socrates smiled wryly. "Aye-aye, Sergeant Slaughter."

Captain Hook was right, Socrates thought a couple hours before the next dawn, right after kissing his Ann-Margaret picture good night and tucking in his mosquito net. Aside from the two missions for Mr. Smith, and they didn't count, there wasn't any action in the Junkyard. In five weeks of going on patrol every night the only excitement they'd had was the boats on the river a week ago. And there wasn't a shot fired that night. It was getting tedious. Getting hell, it *was* tedious.

But no way he was transferring out of here. Some time later his thinking slowed down and his eyes started moving rapidly under his closed lids. He dreamed.

The game had been going on forever. He had no idea what the score was. It could be tied at zero, it could be 100-1, it could be tied at 100. It felt like it had been going on long enough for the 100-100 tie. Every time he tried to stop for a moment to figure it out the play came his way again and he had to stop thinking about the score to break up the Lancers' attack or advance the Knights'. It was the Forever Game, a kind of unrelenting hell. Something inside said if only he tried harder he could get control of the game and end it, the Knights would win. But he never had the chance to try, he was forever breaking up an attack or forwarding one.

Then it happened, just like that. No running to get into position, no maneuvering, it just happened. He found himself alone at the right corner of the penalty area. None of his teammates were near and he wasn't marked by a Lancer defender. To his left front the Knights' striker and left forward were passing the ball back and forth, playing keep-away with the Lancers' sweeper and one fullback. The other Lancer defenders were marking the rest of the Knights. Everybody was crowded in close to the goal—everyone except him. He wanted to scream at his striker, get the ball to me, over here. He had a clear shot at an open goal, the Lancers' goal keeper didn't see him standing where he was. He couldn't find his voice. All he could do was hop up and down in the one place and hope the striker or forward saw him and got him the ball before a Lancer spotted and marked him.

The Lancers' sweeper made his move, he stretched a leg out to three times as long as it should have been to tackle a pass from the striker. He made his move too soon, the ball was still in the striker's control. The Knights' striker angled his leg impossibly and redirected his pass to Socrates...

...Who was so thoroughly unmarked he had all the time he wanted to control the ball, place it, and smash it into the open net. He pumped his arms into the air and ran into the net behind the ball, into the net and through its back and all around the 440 track surrounding the playing field. His teammates ran off the field and pummeled his back and shoulders, shouted victory cries.

The Knights on the bench caught up with him as he completed his lap. They lifted him onto their shoulders and ran another victory lap.

But it wasn't the end of the game.

They lined up for the kickoff. The Lancers' striker stood bouncing with one foot balanced on top of the ball. He stared at the Knights' center halfback. Play was normally started by kicking the ball back to a teammate. The striker abruptly launched the ball directly where he was looking. It flew harder and faster than Socrates had ever seen a soccer ball travel before—straight at his face. He did two things at the same time: swerved to the side to let the ball pass him, lose altitude and speed before a Knight caught it; leaned forward to meet the ball with his forehead rather than be smacked in the middle of his face if he didn't dodge fast enough.

The ball was too fast. It filled his vision until it struck square on the bridge of his nose. It hit too hard. The universe exploded around him when the ball struck. He could feel he was supine, flat on his back. But he couldn't see, the ball was in his face. Not *on* it, it had caved his face in and was *in* the concavity, pressing down with the weight of the entire earth.

Then everyone was around him, playing the ball. They kicked it and kicked it and kicked it and kicked it and it wouldn't move. The ball stayed in the concavity of his face. Some of the kicks missed the ball, pounded in his ears, tore hair in gouts from his scalp, shattered his chin. Someone was jumping on his ankle, the spikes on the jumpers' shoes dug in and dug in and dug in until he felt them pulling turf up from the ground under his ankle, through his ankle.

He tried to scream but he couldn't, the ball pressing into the concavity of his face blocked his mouth, filled his mouth, crammed his mouth, prevented any sound from coming out. What was wrong with the referee, why didn't he stop the play? Couldn't the referee see he was being killed under these kicking, pounding feet?

Suddenly he screamed. He opened his eyes and looked wildly around. He was sitting upright on his cot. Captain Hook was standing next to him holding the beach towel Socrates used as a blanket as though he had just yanked it off him, a corner of the towel was wadded up and wet. Sweat flowed off him. Sneaky Pete sat on his own cot, staring at him. Several faces were crowded at the room's door, looking anxiously in. Sergeant Slaughter and Doc Holliday pushed through the crowd in the doorway. There was a lot of excited shouting, he couldn't make out any of the words.

Until Captain Hook said, "Nightmare. You had this stuck in your mouth." He shook the wadded, wet corner of the towel.

Then everything fell into place and Socrates realized where he was, that he'd been dreaming, the dream was a nightmare. About that game. His head twisted involuntarily and he looked at the newspaper clipping, the one that showed him scoring the winning goal. That part of the dream was right, the rest of it was wrong. Oh so wrong it couldn't be wronger it was nowhere near right. Except that his ankle did get injured later on a rough but fair tackle. He shivered. "I'm okay," he gasped at the Marines crowding around. "I'm okay."

Sergeant Slaughter looked at him impatiently and snarled, "Then what was all that yelling for?"

Doc Holliday looked at him hard, making sure he actually was okay.

"Nightmare," Captain Hook said again.

"You better never have a nightmare on patrol," Sergeant Slaughter said. He wheeled and left the room.

Doc Holliday was satisfied for the moment. "You come see me later," he said, then left.

Captain Hook looked at the others still in the doorway. "*Di di mau*," he said, get out of here now. They disappeared.

Sneaky Pete gaped the whole time.

"You sure you're okay?" Captain Hook asked.

Socrates nodded weakly. He was still shaken from the dream, still trembling slightly. But he was okay. Captain Hook backed off, turned to his own cot and started dressing. Socrates looked at his watch, saw he'd had five hours sleep, decided it was enough. Besides, he was too shaken by the dream to try to go back to sleep just yet. He could always cop a few Zs later. He got dressed.

Sneaky Pete lay back down. He wanted more sleep now. "Where ya gonna be?" he asked.

"Out," Captain Hook said. Socrates didn't bother answering.

"Okay," Sneaky Pete mumbled. "I'll find you." A moment later he emitted a quiet snore.

"We need to talk," Socrates said when he and Captain Hook were both dressed and had their weapons and shaving kits in their hands.

Captain Hook grunted and walked out.

It was nearly an hour later before Socrates said anything more. They had taken care of their morning toilet and were now at the skivvy house eating at the table under the awning. Mama-san Joy had Sue-Sue waiting on them, let the other two sleep later.

"I mean it, Captain Hook, we need to talk."

"You went to CAG yesterday." Captain Hook looked at his food rather than the man he was talking to.

"To find Lieutenant Convoy," Socrates agreed, then waited to see if Captain Hook knew anything else he wanted to say.

"The Skipper talked to you, said there's no Lieutenant Convoy. You didn't make it to CAG." Now he looked at Socrates; it felt like he was daring him to deny it, challenging him to add to it.

"That's right." Socrates looked at Sue-Sue. She was sitting on one of the rickety chairs a discrete distance from them, wearing a thin kimono she obviously put on when Mama-san Joy roused her, probably wasn't wearing anything under it. He didn't care, she could take the kimono off and sit there naked and it wouldn't interest him right now. Her eyes were closed, her head nodding, she looked more than half asleep. He decided it was probably safe to talk even though she was there.

"He said there's no one for me to talk to, that nothing's happened. Nothing." He spat the last word out bitterly. "He doesn't know what we've been doing for Mister Smith, I'm pretty sure of that. He would have said if he did."

Captain Hook grunted and went back to his food. At the rate they were going, he would finish eating before Socrates did; he ate so slowly it was usually the other way around. But Socrates was thinking and talking, and eating even slower.

"This is no fucking good, Captain Hook. What are we doing out there? Who are we when we work for Mister Smith?"

"We're Marines. We're killing Cong."

"That's what he says, that's what he wants us to believe. But is it true?"

Captain Hook shrugged.

Socrates looked at him for a long moment, watched him eating slowly, methodically, apparently unperturbed. He said, "I need some answers. Next time Mister Smith comes I'm going to ask him. I'm going to make him give us some answers. Are you with me?"

Captain Hook looked at him, slowly chewing, they could have been talking about the weather for all his expression showed. He waited until he finished chewing and swallowed before saying, "It's important."

"Fucking-A it's important."

Captain Hook spooned more rice and whatever into his mouth. He nodded. Socrates took that to mean he was with him. The next

time Mr. Smith came around he had some explaining to do.

Next time was sooner than he expected. And it made him wonder again just how much power this Mr. Smith truly had.

The first thing that happened was caused by Motormouth being on R&R and Mister Spook taking care of the radios. The problem wasn't with Mister Spook talking over the air, most Marines knew basic radio communications. The problem was he didn't know how to physically take care of them. After evening chow, while Sergeant Slaughter and the patrol leaders were drawing up the night's patrol routes, Mister Spook decided on his own that it was time to change the batteries in the radios. It was a simple enough procedure. You opened the battery compartment, pulled out the old battery, unplug it from the connectors, plugged a fresh battery in, replace it, and closed the compartment. Simple.

Except that there are people who can't quite grasp the notion that mechanical procedures they aren't familiar with are sometimes simple. To such people, all unfamiliar mechanical procedures are complicated, otherwise they would be familiar with them. So Mister Spook opened the battery compartment on each of the patrol radios, pulled out the battery, and disconnected the wires that connected the plugs to the workings of the radio. Then he opened the new battery packs and stared at the contents for a while trying to figure out what to do next. The problem he encountered was the lack of wires coming out of the tops of the batteries. It took a few minutes for him to discover that the plugs easily uncoupled from the battery tops. Once he did, he attached the plugs to the tops of the fresh batteries. Neat, right? Then he couldn't figure out how to connect the whole business back into the radio. The reason he couldn't figure it out was he now needed a soldering iron to reconnect the wires to the innards of the radio.

Next Mister Spook did one of the bravest things he had ever done as a Marine: He knowingly and willingly faced the wrath of a sergeant.

"Sergeant Slaughter," he said as soon as he saw the planning meeting was over, "we got a problem."

The three corporals heard him and hung around to hear what the problem was; whatever it was, it would affect them.

Sergeant Slaughter came over, thinking they had gotten some radio message that he wasn't going to like, not hardly expecting the truth. Hell's bells man, Mister Spook's voice was strong and hadn't wavered or anything. "What's the problem?" he asked, certain it wasn't

anything out of the ordinary, not unless someone was reporting a reinforced VC battalion headed their way.

"I fucked up the radios." Mister Spook's voice was still strong and even.

The three corporals gave each other *oh shit* looks.

Sergeant Slaughter stood there for a moment, as though waiting for the punchline. When none came he said, "Say again?"

"I fucked up the radios." Mister Spook's voice cracked in the middle and the last couple words were spoken in a higher register.

Sergeant Slaughter stared at him, spun about, walked to the opposite end of the large room, turned, walked back, glared at Mister Spook, turned, walked out the front door, bellowed something incoherent at the top of his lungs, turned, walked back to Mister Spook, and asked, "What do you mean, you fucked up the radios?"

"I changed the batteries wrong." His voice started in that same high register, cracked halfway through, and ended strong.

Sergeant Slaughter stared at him uncomprehending for a beat or two, then asked in an almost reasonable sounding voice, "Who told you to change the batteries? Did you run a radio check and discover they were weak?"

Mister Spook's shoulders writhed as he shrugged. He mumbled, "It seemed like a good idea at the time," so softly Sergeant Slaughter almost didn't hear him.

Sergeant Slaughter stared at him for another beat or two, then launched into the kind of tirade only Marine sergeants are capable of. Socrates timed it at two minutes, thirty-three seconds. It included the commoner things: Did your mother have any children who lived? Is it true your brother is an only child? You're lower than whale shit, and that's on the bottom of the ocean. You're so dumb if your brains were explosives you wouldn't have enough to blow a flea's nose. He also got imaginative and accused Mister Spook of being an Army plot to prove Marines are as dumb as the Army claims. And he told him if he was a tampon he wouldn't be enough to control a prepubescent girl's period. (Later Mister Spook had to have someone tell him what prepubescent meant.)

By the time he finished, after a full 153 seconds, Mister Spook almost looked as though he had crawled into a termite hole and left a cardboard mock up of himself behind.

Instead of showing any strain at the end, Sergeant Slaughter breathed in a deep breath, calmed down almost instantly, and asked in

a very calm voice, "Did you fuck them all up?"

"No Sergeant Slaughter," Mister Spook said. His voice was weak and trembly. "I didn't touch that one." He pointed at the one they used for communicating with the outside world.

Sergeant Slaughter picked up the handset, contacted Whiskey Company headquarters, told them he needed a radio technician ASAP, was told he'd have to wait until morning, said okay but he had to be there at first light, and signed off. Then, still calmly, he told Mister Spook, "If you ever fuck up the radios again you're going to be in some kind of deep shit." He walked calmly into his quarters and, still calmly, slammed the door so hard it rattled its hinges.

The patrol leaders, naturally, didn't like going out without their radios. Of course, for several weeks the only thing they'd had to use them for was their regular sitreps, "Situation as before." Except for the one night when Socrates saw unlit boats on the river. They didn't like it, but it was more in the category of nuisance than serious. The main function of the radios of late had been to help them stay awake on ambushes.

Next there was a second odd happening. A helicopter started flying around the area. It didn't get close at first, simply stayed within sight of Fort Cragg, though it did sometimes go so far away they couldn't hear it. What made the unknown helicopter even stranger was it was a Huey, a kind of helicopter the Army issued with C-rations, but the Marines—as far as any of them knew—didn't have. Sergeant Slaughter tried to raise it on the radio to find out what it was doing in his territory, but got no response. Then he radioed company headquarters, but they didn't know anything about any damn Army Huey and asked what they were smoking out there at Fort Cragg before finally promising to find out. Company's promise to find out went unfilled. The helicopter overflew Submarine's patrol at a couple hundred feet shortly after it went out at dusk, then went away. An hour later it was back, flying in the distance. Its wanderings took it over Socrates' patrol fifteen minutes after it left Fort Cragg, headed toward Toi Mui. Then the helicopter went away and wasn't seen from the fort again that night.

A third odd thing had already happened by then. Lieutenant Hank came to see Sergeant Slaughter after Submarine's patrol went out. Sergeant Slaughter was still in his room. He opened the door wide enough to let his Vietnamese counterpart in and closed it firmly behind



him. Low voices came through the door, too low for anyone to make out, for a moment, then Sergeant Slaughter bellowed, "What?" A moment later he slammed the door open even harder than he had earlier slammed it shut and stormed out.

"The next person to give me any bad news today will never give me bad news again!" he roared. Then in a hardly lower voice, "Socrates, Mad Greek, front and center!"

Socrates and Mad Greek front and centered warily.

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked in a suspicious voice.

They glanced at each other and answered, "Yes," just as suspiciously.

"What about your men?"

As far as they knew their men were fine.

"Well, all of Hank's men just came down with the shits. "You," he looked at Socrates, "are going to have to go out without them. You," he looked at Mad Greek, "will have PFs if any of them are over their shits by the time it's your turn. Now how do you feel?"

Socrates shook his head. "Pretty shitty," he said levelly.

Mad Greek me too'd.

"This has all the beginnings of one of those nights," Sergeant Slaughter said, looking off into a place only he could see. "No, this has more beginnings of one of those nights than have ever before existed for the beginning of one of those nights. Well," he said, looking back at them, "if nothing else goes wrong, at least there will be few enough of you out there that if Charlie comes around armed for bear, you should be able to evade him. Carry on." He shot a glare at Lieutenant Hank as he went past him on his way back to his room. The door jumped on its hinges.

Lieutenant Hank gave his back a spread-handed it's-not-my-fault shrug.

Halfway between Fort Cragg and Toi Co 2, Socrates looked up and wondered again what that helicopter was doing buzzing the Junkyard. The bird turned and flew away after flying over him and his men. If he hadn't known any better he would have thought it was looking to see who they were. But it was night, after all, and they couldn't be seen clearly.

So much for what he knew.

Three quarters of an hour later, the helicopter came back and landed a couple hundred yards from where they were then patrolling

north of Toi Mui.

"Let's check it out," Socrates said. "See what they're doing here."

They were still a hundred feet away from the helicopter that sat there with its rotor blades slowly rotating, when a voice said from the shadows, "Come with me, I've got a job for you." It was Mr. Smith.

Socrates and Captain Hook looked at each other. This was odd, very odd.

They boarded the helicopter, flew off, and were put down fifteen minutes later. An unattended Jeep waited where they set down.

"All right, how'd you pull this one off?" Socrates demanded before getting in the Jeep.

"I heard your radios were down and decided to take advantage of the situation," Mr. Smith said.

"How?"

"I have my ways."

"How'd you know where we were?"

"Starlite scope."

"What happened to the PFs?"

"That's what is known as a trade secret. Now, are you going to get in, or do you want to stay here and figure out on your own where you are and how to get back to the Junkyard?"

The helicopter had made several turns on its short trip, Socrates had no idea of what direction they were from Khung Toi. All he knew for sure was they were somewhere within twenty-five miles of it. They got in.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

"Got a cake walk for you tonight," Mr. Smith said as he drove.

"No Vee Cee ville this time?" Socrates asked.

Mr. Smith shook his head and chuckled. "Nope. This place has Americans in it."

Socrates started. Then he thought of Seller Sam. There were Americans in the village where he was killed, too. He stiffened and slid his finger inside his rifle's trigger guard. He felt Captain Hook's sudden tension. "Why don't they do it for you then?"

"Because I don't have any operatives in this town." Town. Not hamlet, not village. Town.

"What town?"

"Need to know."

"I'm tired of that 'need to know' shit."

"I don't care what you're tired of. That's the rules." Mr. Smith let the silence last maybe fifteen seconds before continuing his briefing. "This man's a black marketeer, he acts as a conduit for stolen Arvin goods going to the Vee Cee. The White Mice know about him, but haven't been able to get any hard proof. So the situation got dropped in my lap to resolve. You're my resolution. This town has been considered secure for so long all they've got is a few checkpoints around it and one motor patrol in it. Getting in and back out again without being seen will be no problem at all. His place is easy to find. All you got to do is walk right in, pop him, and walk right back out. No sweat."

"If the White Mice know about him how come they can't get any hard proof?" After his one, brief experience with the National Police Socrates wasn't surprised, he just wanted to hear it from somebody else.

"Because as cops they suck. Besides, some of them are probably on his payroll. Anyway," he sounded like he was smiling, "they say if he's supplying the Vee Cee, it's a military matter, not one for the police."

"If there's no proof how do we know for sure?"

"There is. But police haven't come up with any proof of their own and don't want to accept ours. We see this as a civilian arrest matter, but we don't have authority to arrest civilians. So we have to use other means."

"Us."

"You got it." He pulled to the side of the road and parked. He looked like he was listening. When the Jeep's engine noises quieted down he asked, "Hear that?" Far off there was the drone of an engine; it sounded like a mile off. "That's the town's motor patrol."

There was no nearby hoots for them to go into and Mr. Smith didn't bother setting up a shelter to duck under. He simply laid out a town plan that showed not only the foot- and roadways but all the structures on the bed of the jeep and held the shielded flashlight close to it.

"We're in this direction," he indicated one side of the plan. "Your target lives here," he marked a hoots on the plan. "These are the checkpoints," he indicated half a dozen marks around the town. "There's no wall, no fence. You can walk in here without being seen from any of the checkpoints, there's a dry drainage ditch there," he traced along a line that wasn't closer than a hundred yards to any of the marked checkpoints. "Then right along this route," his finger traced a route that had to make very few turns getting through back alleys to the target hoots "Study these photos, front, side, and back views." He laid out photographs of a small house with whitewashed masonry walls and a wooden roof. A few slogans were written on the walls and they bore a distinctive pattern where the stucco underlying the whitewash was flaked off. "Think you'll be able to recognize it?" he asked after a moment's study.

Socrates nodded. So did Captain Hook.

"It'll be easy to spot. The hoots on its left has corrugated tin walls, the one on its right is thatch. So is the one in back of it. If you get around to the front, there's a Buddhist shrine right across from it. You can go in the back door. Here's what he looks like." Another photograph joined the ones of the house. The man in it was middle-aged and round faced. His round face had a mustache but no chin whiskers, a pot-belly swelled his shirt.

"Got him," Captain Hook said after a few seconds. Socrates nodded.

"Good. Take these." He parceled out the silenced weapons and

took theirs. Socrates turned to lead off as soon as he was given the flashlight. Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete followed. He didn't want to do this, but he had no idea where they were. If he didn't do as Mr. Smith said, he had no way of explaining to anybody what he and his men were doing there wherever there was.

Mr. Smith stopped him. "He's probably not alone, so take this just in case." He handed him the canister.

"Has he got a wife in there with him?" Socrates asked, again thinking of Seller Sam.

"Not that I know of."

Socrates thought he smiled, but his face was in shadow and he couldn't be certain. He took the canister and went without another word.

The drainage ditch was where Mr. Smith said it was, and the checkpoints that were not supposed to be there weren't. Either that or they were well camouflaged and their occupants were asleep. The three Marines soft-stepped along the back ways and didn't encounter anybody. The motor patrol came and went, always somewhere else. The house was as easy to spot as they'd been told. The hinges on the back door were well oiled and it made no noise when Socrates opened it. It was very dark inside and Socrates had to flash the light to see where the bed was. In the split second he had it lit he thought he saw several shapes on it, but didn't want to risk alerting anyone who might be a light sleeper. In that same quick flash he saw the floor was clear between himself and the platform. In three strides he was at its side, the deep-sleep canister ready in his hand. Captain Hook was with him, ready to take any action necessary.

Socrates pointed the flashlight at his feet, he didn't want even the red glow shining directly in anyone's face when he turned it on, all he wanted was enough illumination to see the faces of the sleepers to aim the canister. His thumb flicked the light on and he froze at what he saw.

Captain Hook didn't freeze. As soon as he saw Socrates wasn't moving he held his pistol above the face of the man and pulled the trigger. There was a low pop, the man twitched, and his eye welled with blood.

It was too late, one of the three children on the bed was waking up. Socrates had to move. He sprayed quickly. The three children and a middle-aged woman. He put the light down and gripped Captain Hook's arm before he could open the dead man's trousers.

"No," he rasped. "We don't cut this one."

Captain Hook looked at him in the low, red light, shrugged, and sheathed his knife.

Socrates was trembling when he stuck the canister back in his shirt. "Documents," he said, "I want documents this time. I need to know who this man is."

Captain Hook nodded and frisked the body. It didn't have anything, he hadn't really expected it to, not in bed in his own home.

Socrates worked as quietly as he could, but not as quietly as he wanted to or as quietly as Captain Hook did. They rummaged through clothes, rooted through chests. Finally, in a hole hidden underneath a chest, he found documents. He folded them into his shirt pocket. "Let's *di di mau*."

Leaving the town was as easy as getting in. Once they were away from it Socrates asked, "That remind you of anything?"

Captain Hook grunted. "You know it."

"We're getting some answers this time."

Sneaky Pete didn't say anything, though he wanted to ask what it was all about. He had spent the entire time inside the hoots watching out a front window and didn't see who was on the bed, didn't know why they searched or what they found.

Mr. Smith was waiting for them, just like he always waited. Only this time wasn't just like always.

Mr. Smith took the weapons and special equipment and returned theirs. There was a brief metallic clatter as the Marines checked their weapons and he matched the equipment they returned to a mental checklist. Then he got behind the Jeep's wheel. "Get in," he grunted.

"You get out," Socrates said. He wasn't sure until he said those three words he'd be able to talk, he was so shaken by this mission they'd just run. On the way back even Captain Hook had seemed more silent than normal. Though Socrates didn't know how he could tell that because Captain Hook was normally silent out here.

Mr. Smith slowly turned his head toward him. The stars gave enough light for Socrates to see the slight smile on his lips. The smile stayed even when he saw the M14 in Socrates' hands aimed at him and Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete standing quietly at his sides.

"Get out," Socrates said again. His voice was confident.

"I don't think so," Mr. Smith said calmly.

"I want some answers. We aren't going anywhere until I get them."

Mr. Smith turned the ignition switch. "Get in. It's a long walk back to Fort Cragg. You'll have a hard time explaining where you've been if you don't ride back with me." He shifted into first gear.

"Get out or I'll waste you. I swear I'll blow you away."

Mr. Smith shook his head. "No you won't."

"I've been checking. You don't exist. Nobody'll miss you. Get out."

Mr. Smith shook his head again. "I know you've been checking. You were told Lieutenant Convoy doesn't exist. Nobody said anything about me. There are people who know where I'm at and who I'm with. They'll come looking for you if I don't show up where they expect me."

Socrates raised the rifle to his shoulder.

Mr. Smith said, "Captain Hook, Sneaky Pete, get in. He can walk."

Socrates wanted to look to his sides and see what his men were doing, but he didn't. Captain Hook hadn't actually said he was with him, only nodded when he asked. Well, he was about to find out.

Mr. Smith started to face front and froze when Captain Hook leveled his shotgun at him. Sneaky Pete was uncertain, but the other two were doing it, so he pointed his M16 as well. "Socrates won't shoot me, but you will," Mr. Smith said, looking at Captain Hook. "Is that it?"

"Get out," Captain Hook said.

"You're a crazy fucker," Mr. Smith said. He turned the ignition off and dismounted. "Now what?"

"Let's start with your name."

"Mister Smith, you know that."

"Cut the bullshit. I mean your real name."

Mr. Smith didn't answer immediately. He considered Socrates for a long moment, but his eyes kept drifting back to the shotgun pointed at his middle. Finally he said, "Peterson, Fred Peterson."

"Is that your real name?"

"Sure it's my real name. You think I'm going to lie to you now?"

"Maybe. I don't know that you've ever told us the truth."

"Peterson" smiled again. "Maybe you don't know if I've ever told you the truth, but you've got to take my word on something. How about on that?"

"Okay, your name's Peterson."

"That's what I said."

"Who do you work for?"

He hesitated again, his eyes still wandered to the shotgun. Even if he was sure of revenge, Socrates thought, he didn't act like he was in any hurry to die. It was obvious that Captain Hook was willing to kill him. "The CIA."

"What's your authority over Marines?"

"None."

"Then what are we doing running missions for you?"

Peterson made a noise that might have been a laugh. "Killing Cong," he said.

"Really? Are they really Viet Cong?"

"Oh, come on. You've seen their weapons and uniforms. A week and a half ago you even went into what you knew was a Vee Cee held hamlet. No shit they're Viet Cong."

"There were no weapons tonight, no uniforms. We don't know who it was we wasted." He had to swallow a sudden lump in his throat. "There was an old woman in bed with this man tonight, she had to be his wife. And there were baby-sans in the room, too. His kids."

"Even the bad guys have families. They have to live somewhere, some of them live here."

"That doesn't tell me this man tonight was Vee Cee. Hell, you don't even let us take the documents that'll prove anything." He thought of the slim packet of papers in his pocket; he hoped Sneaky Pete didn't mention them, he was sure Captain Hook wouldn't.

"I explained that to you. The Vee Cee don't take documents like we do, we want this to look like they did it. The man you killed tonight was a political cadre. The area he was in he couldn't travel armed or in uniform. That's why you didn't see any."

"We've only got your word for that."

"That's right."

"A civilian was killed in the Junkyard a week ago." May as well jump right on it. "He was killed the same way you have us doing it. Why'd you have Seller Sam wasted?"

"What?" Peterson flinched at this. "I don't know any Seller Sam, and I haven't had anyone neutralized in Khung Toi."

"Then who did?"

"You say it was done like I have you doing it?"

"That's what I said."

"Then it was Charlie that did it. The method is the same because



you're using Vee Cee methods. And I can assure you it wasn't done by Americans."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I'm the agent in a multi-district area. Nobody acts in my districts without clearing it through me."

"Uh huh." Socrates thought about this CIA agent using Marines without clearing it with the local Marine authorities and wondered how true that could be. Socrates went back to an earlier question. "You said you have no authority over us. I say again, what are you doing giving us orders?"

Peterson sighed. "All right, it's like this. Mind if I sit?" He squatted Vietnamese fashion without waiting for a reply. "I'm not in your chain of command, that's true. Your chain of command goes up through CAG to Three MAF, to FMFPac, to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, to the Secretary of Defense, and from there to the President. Somewhere along the line there's a side trip to MACV in Saigon. Mine goes on a different route and winds up somewhere else before it reaches the White House, and never goes through MACV. We've got this thing called Project Phoenix. Mostly what Phoenix does is gather intelligence on local Vee Cee infrastructure. When we know enough we neutralize that infrastructure."

"What does that have to do with us?"

"Somewhere along the line someone in my chain of command got together with someone in your chain of command and got permission for us to use you as operatives."

"Why us?"

Peterson shook his head. "Not you in particular. Marines."

"I say again, why us?"

"Because when I was told to use Marines, I checked on who was available in my districts. Your names cropped up."

"Who in our chain of command authorized this?"

The night was light enough they could see Peterson's head shake. "Remember, need to know. That's not something I need to know."

Socrates blew out a breath. The answers were coming too slowly for him. "Then how do you know using us for these missions is authorized? Nobody in my chain of command has told me it is. Or even knows anything about it," he added as an afterthought.

He thought Peterson smiled. "Lieutenant Convoy told you to listen to me and make up your own minds about whether or not to go with the program. He represented your higher-higher."

"I can't find Lieutenant Convoy to verify anything. And nobody in my chain of command knows anything about this. All they come up with when they ask above is, nothing's happening, there's nothing to know anything about. Anyway, you already admitted Lieutenant Convoy doesn't exist."

"He exists, though not in a way he can be easily found. It's not my fault if your people aren't passing the word down."

Socrates decided on a different tack. "All right, who showed you your orders, your authorization to enlist us?"

"Showed me? You mean written orders?"

Socrates nodded.

"I'm like you. I get my orders verbally from my immediate superior, not written."

"Then how do you know they're legitimate?"

Peterson chuckled. "The same way you do. My immediate superior tells me to do something, I do it."

"Does he have written orders?"

"I guess so. Does Sergeant Slaughter?"

"Written orders for units go down to company level. Captain Vitale has them."

Peterson grunted.

There was a long pause before Socrates said, "Next time you want to use us, I want to see written orders. I want to see an authorization."

He shrugged. "I'll try."

"Don't try. Do it. Or don't come looking for us." Socrates didn't think he was going to learn anything more now. "Let's go," he said to everyone. They got into the Jeep and headed back to Khung Toi.

Peterson had the last word on the trip back. "Remember, your superiors, at least up to company level, don't know what you're doing. If you tell them, it's going to come out like you're doing it on your own. You could find yourselves in a world of shit if you say anything more than you already have." They drove all the way, no helicopter ride this time.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Peterson," Socrates thought of him that way now, with the quote marks, because he wasn't sure that was his real name anymore than "Smith" was, dropped them off where the side road to Toi Mui cut away from the river road.

"I'll be in touch," Peterson said.

"With written authorization," Socrates said.

Peterson drove away without responding. The three Marines watched until he was out of sight and sound of his engine disappeared into the distance.

"Let's make a swing around, then go back in," Socrates said. They still had an hour and a half before they were due back at Fort Cragg.

He refused to think about it, about who was it really they killed tonight. Instead of weapons and uniforms there were a wife and children. Was tonight's victim really VC political cadre? He was doubly glad they took the documents, they'd read them and find out who he was, if he was VC. He followed blindly while Captain Hook led them in a roughly south by southeast direction, keeping to treelines when possible. He didn't bother waiting for clouds to make the in-between places dark before crossing. Toi Mui was a dark hole in the star-sparkle of the paddies on their right when Captain Hook suddenly froze, then lowered himself slowly to one knee.

Socrates went down and eased forward until his head was next to the other's. "What's the problem?" he asked as softly as he could speak. They were just off the trail leading east from Toi Mui, heavy brush was to their rear. They weren't silhouetted, no one could see them until they were on top of them.

"Someone's coming," was the terse reply. He peered down the trail in the direction of Toi Mui.

Socrates turned half back to signal to Sneaky Pete.

They waited. The land was mostly open between here and the hamlet fence. In less than a minute Socrates saw two barely lighter shadows bobbing against the darkness that was Toi Mui. The two

bobbing shadows quickly grew and became more distinct until they resolved into men coming toward them; armed men, he could barely make out the oddly shaped weapons they carried.

When the two men were only five yards away Socrates called in a low voice, "*Ai do*," who's there.

The two men froze, pointed their weapons in the direction of the Marines, then ran south. A bullet whistled past Socrates' ear. That's what was odd looking about the weapons these men were carrying, they were silenced!

"FIRE!" Socrates shouted. He cranked out rounds after the fleeing men. Captain Hook's shotgun belched, Sneaky Pete's M16 stuttered. There was a scream followed by a thud. "Let's get them."

The three Marines jumped up and ran after the two. Socrates stumbled and almost fell when he tripped on the body of one of them. Ahead they saw the other sprinting to the cover of the nearby trees. Socrates stopped, held his rifle in a proper offhand position as though he was on the rifle range, tried to hold his muzzle steady against the pounding of his heart and coursing of blood through his arteries. He sighted along his rifle and squeezed the trigger, one, two, three times.

Captain Hook also stopped to aim. His shotgun let out two blasts. Sneaky Pete sprayed his magazine empty. The shadow of the running man was no longer there.

"You two go find him," Socrates shouted. He ran back to find the other, the one he tripped over.

It only took a few seconds for Socrates to find the body he'd tripped over. A couple of moments later Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete came back with the other body and laid it next to the first. They were both Vietnamese, they were both dead. They gathered the weapons and other equipment from the bodies and frisked them for documents. The bodies gave up a silenced .22 automatic pistol, a silenced .22 single shot rifle, a red shielded flashlight, and a canister of something—it looked like the same sleep spray they used on these last two missions. The exact same weapons and equipment they carried on each of their missions for Peterson. The bodies had no documents, nothing to identify them, their unit, or their mission. Socrates used the flashlight to examine them; each had been hit by all three Marines, it was impossible to tell who had killed either.

"Oo-ee, we're good," Sneaky Pete said when he saw the hits.

Captain Hook grunted; it sounded like a satisfied grunt.

"Now what, Honcho?" Captain Hook asked, looking at Socrates.

"We carry them back," Socrates answered.

Sneaky Pete groaned, he didn't want to have to carry the bodies that far.

Captain Hook continued looking at him.

"All right, we'll take them to Toi Mui and come back with the car to get them in the morning." Captain Hook kept looking at him. "Yeah, he said. "The fire's going to bring people and we don't have a radio to tell them what happened or where to meet us." He lifted one of the bodies by an arm and said, "Sneaky Pete, take the other one. Captain Hook, let's go."

They dragged the bodies the couple of hundred yards to Toi Mui and dumped them inside the south gate through the fence.

"Let's find Xa," Socrates said.

They didn't have to. Nearby a match flashed and a lantern flickered to life.

"Ma-deen," they heard the old man's voice and Xa came shuffling to them, the sputtering lantern swinging from his hand. "We hear bang-bang," he said, pointing east. That depleted his store of English to describe what the villagers had heard.

"Yes, we bang-bang," Socrates said. He pointed, had the hamlet chief come to where his lamp would cast its light on the two bodies.

Xa gasped, then hovered over them, holding the light close, leaning close to peer into their faces. He stood, a veil of sorrow over his face. "Vee Cee," he said. And again, "Vee Cee."

Socrates tried to talk to him in Vietnamese, but the old man was too upset to make the effort to understand his limited vocabulary and poor pronunciation. Other people gathered, nearly all adults, most of the few children who came were chased away by their parents. Some of the people had lamps, three or four carried torches. The area inside the gate was crowded but well lit.

"Too many people here," Socrates said. "Let's get them into the square." He was looking around, trying to spot the young man who had been wounded when the VC tried to conscript him five weeks earlier. They needed him to be their translator. Captain Hook had already grabbed one of the dead by an arm and was headed deeper into Toi Mui. The people parted in front of him. "Do you remember his name, the one who..."

"I don't see him," Captain Hook said, anticipating Socrates' question. He looked sharply at Sneaky Pete who flinched, and grabbed the other body. The people gave them as much clearance as they could

in the narrow passages into the square, more clearance once they reached it. They huddled together, talked softly among themselves.

Captain Hook glanced quickly around once, then said something low voiced in Vietnamese. A woman shuffled away and out of the square.

"He's not here," Socrates said. "Do you remember his name so I can ask Xa?" It looked like most of the adults had assembled. He had a sinking feeling in his stomach. These men had been armed with silenced weapons, they came from the direction of Toi Mui, one of the few people the Marines knew in the hamlet wasn't present.

A scream pierced the night above the quiet murmuring of the people. All talking stopped, all heads turned in the direction of the scream.

"Go!" Socrates shouted. The Marines ran toward what was now loud sobbing.

The woman who had left the square after Captain Hook spoke to her knelt slumped inside the door of a small hoots, one on which brick reconstruction hadn't yet started. She had stopped there to light a lamp and not gone in any farther, what she saw in the light told her she didn't want to enter the room. A wood platform bed was the dominant feature in the room. Four bodies lay on it; a middle-aged woman and two children seemed intact. The fourth was the young man they were looking for, clothes open, blood on his face and pooled around his head, emasculated.

"Ah shit," Socrates said. He sagged against the door jam for a few seconds before stepping past the crying woman and going to the bed. He looked at the woman and children, then bent close and felt their throats. "These three are alive," he said.

Xa toddered in with two of the other hamlet elders at his sides. The old men started keening when they saw what was on the bed.

"Let's get them moved out of here," Socrates said to his men. He and Captain Hook turned to the other people who were gathering in the doorway. Using a few words and more gestures, they told them what they wanted done. They didn't bother talking to Xa. He had seemed distraught when he saw the two men they killed, now he looked on the verge of collapse.

Three men and a woman edged inside. The woman picked up the smaller child, one of the men took the other, the other men gently lifted the woman. They carried them away.

"No fucking radio," Socrates muttered. "We need

communications and we don't have a damn radio." He looked around the small room. "Everybody out," he ordered, and indicated to the people they should go. He roughly pushed those who didn't go fast enough. "Sneaky Pete, stay here and keep everybody out until I say otherwise. Understand?"

Sneaky Pete nodded.

"Let's do some signaling," Socrates said to Captain Hook.

Outside they tried to talk to the people and managed to find a few they could communicate with, communicate well enough to get across what they wanted them to do. Those people and a few others, little more than a dozen all told, trotted off to do his bidding.

Xa squatted, hunched into a small ball a few feet from the door. Socrates knelt low in front of him and put his right arm around the hamlet chief's shoulders. He said a few consoling words to him, it doesn't matter what they were, they could have been anything; it wasn't the words, it was the tone that got the message through. Xa patted Socrates' hand in thanks for his sympathy. An old looking woman, Socrates thought she was his wife, hunkered down next to the chief and held his hand in hers. She keened at him.

Socrates stood. "Let's do it," he said to Captain Hook. They left the hamlet the same way they came in and walked around to the west side. The people who they'd sent were starting to arrive, each carried two or three lamps. The Marines started lighting them and sent the people back for more. It wasn't a bonfire, but anybody looking this way would see it and know something was up.

In a little while most of the lamps in Toi Mui were burning on the west side of the hamlet. They settled down to wait for help to show up. The villagers again drew together in small clumps and talked quietly among themselves.

Marines and PFs from Fort Cragg and the other patrols had started in the direction of the original gunfire as soon as they heard it. The first arrived in fifteen more minutes. The mass of lit lamps in the open told them it was probably all right to approach openly. They saw the two silhouettes in front of the lamps looked like Marines, probably Socrates and one of his men they figured, and hallowed. The quietly talking people went silent at the call.

"Yo, Submarine," Socrates called back, "come on in."

A group of dimly seen shadows detached itself from the background and approached the flickering mass of lamps. As soon as the people saw they were Marines and PFs, they resumed their soft

conversations.

"Wha'cha got, pano," Submarine said when he joined Socrates and Captain Hook.

"Assassination team. Two men. We wasted them. But it was too late."

"Shit. Who'd they get."

Socrates told him.

Submarine shook his head. "Ain't it a bitch. How'd they do it?"

"Same as Seller Sam. We got their weapons. Silenced, just like we thought before."

"Strange looking things," Submarine said when Socrates showed the weapons to him. He passed them around for the other men with him to see. "Where is he?" he asked.

"In his hoots Sneaky Pete's keeping everybody out."

Submarine nodded. "Wish I had a radio," he said. "We could let Sergeant Slaughter know what's happening."

"You and me both."

"He'll be here," Captain Hook said, his first words since Submarine and his patrol arrived.

"Yeah." Then to Submarine, "Send someone to help Sneaky Pete. He's probably getting freaked out alone in there by now."

Submarine sent Killer Kowalski and one PF. They waited to see who would show up next. It was Sergeant Slaughter and Doc Holliday. Lieutenant Hank and half a dozen of his PFs were with them. Socrates wondered who stayed at Fort Cragg with Mister Spook. He told Sergeant Slaughter about it while taking them to the bodies that were still on the ground inside the south gate.

"Xa identified them as Vee Cee?"

"That's right."

"How'd he know for sure? Where's the victim?"

Socrates didn't answer the first question, he wondered the same thing himself. He answered the second by leading the way to where Sneaky Pete and Killer Kowalski and the PF waited.

"Anybody try to go in?" he asked.

"Nobody even came close," Sneaky Pete said. "Even old man Xa went away with his wife."

Doc Holliday went right in and was already examining the corpse by the time Sergeant Slaughter and Lieutenant Hank reached the bed.

"Same as Seller Sam?" Sergeant Slaughter asked.

"Samee-same," Doc Holliday said.



"Here's what they used," Socrates said. He and Captain Hook displayed the weapons and canister they took from the men they killed. "No documents, we searched the bodies."

Sergeant Slaughter nodded. "I'll look at them closer later." He left the hoots. Everyone followed except Doc Holliday who was still making his examination, and Socrates who stayed with him like he had during the examination of Seller Sam.

Sergeant Slaughter sent Submarine and his patrol back to Fort Cragg with a message to radio to company HQ. Then they had nothing more to do until morning.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Chief Lai came to Toi Mui first in the morning. So did Captain Thien. Captain Vitale and Gunny Bryl showed up not long after them. Fifth Combined Action Group also thought it worthwhile to be represented and sent Major Wildroot, though having farther to travel he didn't arrive until mid-morning. The Vietnamese were sorry that the young man had been killed, of course, but none of them seemed as distraught as Doc Holliday was. This man had been Doc Holliday's prize patient, he had nursed him back to health. And he thought through him the Marines of Whiskey 8 were making real headway with the people of Toi Mui.

More important to Thien, Lai, and Hank, and of equal importance to Xa, once he recovered from the shock, was the fact that the Marines had caught the assassination team. Just like in the bad old days of only a few months before when the Marines had first convinced the VC that murdering the people of Khung Toi wasn't such a good idea.

The Americans were interested in how was Xa able to positively identify the dead men as Viet Cong.

Xa pointed to one of the dead and spoke rapidly to Lai.

"Him," Lai translate, "he from Toi Mui. "Vee Cee come last year, take him away. Make him Vee Cee."

"Do you recognize the other one?" Captain Vitale asked.

Lai repeated the question in Vietnamese.

Xa shook his head.

"You say there were no documents?" Captain Vitale asked Socrates.

"No, sir. We searched them pretty thoroughly before we brought them here," Socrates answered. He made a concerted attempt to not think about the documents they took from the man they'd killed for Peterson earlier that night, the documents that were still in his pockets. "There was nothing on them except their gear."

Captain Vitale examined the captured weapons again. "These have to go to S2, you know," he said. The apology he wanted to make

didn't sound in his voice, but he felt it. Captured weapons properly belonged to the men who captured them. He knew these weapons had a pretty damn good chance of winding up as war souvenirs in the hands of someone who never heard a shot fired in anger, and he thought that was a major disservice to the men who were out here risking their lives. He could demand the return of these weapons once S2 had gleaned all possible intelligence value from them, but if someone in the rear wanted them he could demand until he retired and never see them again.

Captain Vitale had Socrates tell him again about how he and his two Marines were patrolling east of Toi Mui when they saw the two men approaching them, how they challenged them, the fire fight that resulted in their deaths, and what happened after they reached the hamlet. He had asked every question he could think of the first time Socrates told the story and couldn't think of any new questions now. But he asked anyway, just in case Socrates said something he hadn't before, or he himself heard the answers a different way this time. When Socrates was through Vitale said, "Major Wildroot will probably want to hear all about it. Hang around until he gets here."

Sergeant Slaughter overheard and said a few words to Gunny Bryl. Gunny Bryl took Captain Vitale aside to speak for a moment. Captain Vitale came back and said, "Major Wildroot can hear all about it from me. The only things I can't tell him are what happened that you were out without a radio or PFs, and you can't explain that to his satisfaction either. You've been up all night. Go back to Fort Cragg now and get some sack time."

Socrates thanked him, then trudged back with Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete. They were very tired after the long night and its periods of excitement and hardly bothered to undress before falling asleep on their cots.

It was early afternoon before the heat refused to let them sleep any longer. It had been a long night for everyone. Nobody had been up for long when Socrates made it to the wash table. He managed to find space between Mad Greek and Captain Hook; it was either squeeze in or wait.

Mad Greek looked at him, then past him at Captain Hook. He rinsed out his mouth and while toweling off his face said, "I might of known, no action for this long it'd be you caught Charlie snooping and pooping."

Socrates grunted. Captain Hook merely glanced at him.

Mad Greek packed his shaving kit and said, "Shit, I know Captain Hook, how bad he wants to kick ass on somebody, wouldn't surprise me you did all of it and those two didn't do nothing."

Then Captain Hook was holding him from behind, the point of his meat packer's hook poking into his throat. "I do anybody I want. I do it in the open. I never fake it when I do somebody. Understand?"

Mad Greek gurgled, his eyes were open wide, he pressed back against Captain Hook, trying to pull away from the hook.

"Understand?"

"Better close your eyes, Mad Greek," Submarine said from the other side of the bench. "Your eyeballs are liable to fall out."

"Understand?" Captain Hook said again.

"Yeah. I understand. Leggo a me."

Captain Hook released him and stepped back so suddenly Mad Greek fell to the ground. "Geeze," he said, rubbing his throat, "I didn't mean nothing. It was just a joke."

"I don't joke," Captain Hook said. He gave Mad Greek that cold look that scared people.

"Right. I forgot." Mad Greek scrambled to his feet and headed back to the house. "Hey, you better keep a leash on your people, you know what's good for you," he yelled at Socrates as he went.

"That wasn't cool, Captain Hook," Socrates said. "The man's on our side."

Captain Hook ignored him.

Submarine didn't say anything, he quickly finished cleaning and left. So did the others at the wash table. Soon the two were alone.

"We've gotta translate those documents," Socrates said.

Captain Hook nodded agreement. Or at least Socrates thought the nod meant he agreed.

Sneaky Pete joined them. "Hey, did you really cut Mad Greek?" he asked excited.

"No." Just one flat word. Captain Hook dismissed the topic.

"Did he, huh?" Sneaky Pete asked Socrates.

"No." The same one flat word.

"What's with you two? How come you don't want to tell me what happened?"

"Because nothing happened, Sneaky Pete," Socrates said patiently.

"Right." Muttering to himself, Sneaky Pete started cleaning up.

\*

They couldn't go to the skivvy house to do this, and they couldn't ask any of the PFs or villagers for help with the translation either. Socrates and Captain Hook pocketed their bilingual dictionaries, Socrates took a few sheets of stationery and made sure he had a pen, and they went out the back gate and took off on a round about route for the banana groves less than half a mile south of Fort Cragg. In a couple of minutes they were alone in the small woods behind the Marine compound; they'd managed to avoid picking up a following of children.

"We gotta go all the way to the banana grove?" Sneaky Pete asked. "We got nobody around here, we can read the documents without nobody seeing us. Why do we gotta go all the way to the banana grove?"

"Because we gotta," Socrates said.

"But..."

"Shut up," Captain Hook said.

Sneaky Pete shut up.

They couldn't stop in these woods to do the translating because there was too much chance of someone coming by, Marine or villager. Farther south, in the groves, there would be fewer people. Sure, people worked in the groves every day, but not as many as in the paddies. If they found people working where they were going and couldn't get privacy in the groves, they could go farther south into the uncultivated rough land beyond the groves. Obviously, they had to go all the way to the banana grove.

The banana grove was somehow cathedral-like. The serried tree trunks could be seen as rows of pillars; the broad, spreading leaves cast cool shadows, creating a quiet, worshipful dimness; sunlight slanted down through breaks in the overhead, giving an impression of light through stained glass windows. Even the muted thunking of knives against wood and the thinly raised voices they heard in the background sounded somehow liturgical. No one was in sight. It was as though they'd found themselves a secluded side apse, away from whatever congregation had gathered for the soft thunk-thunk of religious service.

Socrates picked a relatively dry place under the trees, a place where there was no underbrush and few fallen leaves; neither was it directly under any branches. There were snakes that lived in the groves, banana vipers. Small snakes, but their venom was very deadly and fast acting. He and Captain Hook sat cross-legged next to each other; Sneaky Pete sat opposite, not quite facing them. The two got

out their dictionaries, Socrates lay out the three documents they had taken. One, they saw at a glance, was useless to them; it was in Chinese ideograms. One was three sheets of paper, their top left corners folded back together and the middles of the fold torn and folded back again, stapling them together. It was the third one that he picked up to examine first.

It was a heavy piece of paper, almost cardboard, about five by seven inches, folded in half. The outside, evidently the cover, was worn from handling and had printing, largely rubbed off, on it. Inside was a small, grainy, black and white photo of a man's face staring sternly at the camera. There was more printing inside, along with blank lines on which words and numerals were written. They didn't have to use their dictionaries much to figure out this document. It was a paybook for a captain in the 143rd Independent Viet Cong Battalion.

"Hundred and forty-third?" Sneaky Pete said when he heard that. "They got that many battalions?"

Socrates shook his head. "They aren't like Marines," he said. "We number our regiments starting with one and going straight up. Battalions are numbered within the regiment." He didn't mention the 26th and 27th Marine Regiments which he had heard were now in-country, though he did wonder where the units between 14 and 25 were. "The Vee Cee use big numbers so we'll think they've got more people than they do. A lot more."

"Oh." It made sense. Sort of.

"That the man we wasted?" Socrates asked, looking at the photo.

Captain Hook nodded.

"You sure?" The man in the photo was awake, his jaw set firmly, his open eyes glaring. The man they had killed the night before was asleep, jaw slack, eyes closed. Then he was dead; one eye closed, one eye holed; as relaxed as a body could get without falling apart. Maybe if he had compared the photo to the corpse last night he could have told definitely, but this many hours later he didn't remember the once-seen victim that well. Or if he had kept the photo Peterson showed them. He saw a resemblance, but couldn't be sure without looking at them side by side.

"Looks like him, and he had the paybook. Wouldn't have it if it wasn't his."

"Okay." Socrates wanted to believe. But, "If this is him, 'Peterson' lied to us. He said the man was a civilian involved in the black market."

"He never said civilian," Captain Hook said. Socrates looked a question at him. Captain Hook smiled crookedly. "After, he said cadre. He could be their S4."

Socrates considered that. "Right," he decided, "the logistics officer. He's a long way from his own supply depot so he uses the black market. Makes sense."

The paybook seemed to be up to date. The man was, had been, an officer on active duty. They turned to the three sheets of paper attached together. Socrates took them apart and handed the second sheet to Captain Hook. He went to work translating the first.

It was difficult work. Close attention had to be paid to the marks above and below the vowels, each mark indicated how the vowel was to be pronounced; change the inflection on a vowel and the meaning of the word changed. Some words had more than one meaning, sometimes contradictory meanings, even with the same vowel inflections. Often, the meaning of a word changed according to what word was next to it, either before or behind; sometimes a meaning changed because of a word once removed from it. They often had to write down alternate word choices. There were only three sheets of paper that had to be translated and they had eight sheets of stationery on which to do it. They needed both sides of their own paper because of the alternate possible meanings of so many words. To further confuse matters, the keys of the typewriter used to cut the mimeo stencil needed to be cleaned, not all the letters and vowel marks were clear. Also the typist was inexperienced and sometimes hit the wrong letter or inflection key.

Sneaky Pete watched in all directions while they worked. After some time had passed he started fidgeting. "We gotta get back soon," Sneaky Pete said after a couple of hours. "It's getting close to chow time. We gotta go."

"Any of us doing the cooking today?" Captain Hook asked without looking up.

"No. No I don't think so."

"We don't have to hurry."

Sneaky Pete's fidgeting increased, but he kept quiet.

Socrates read over what they thought they had, he handed each sheet to Captain Hook as he finished reading. They looked at each other when they were through.

"We got a problem," Socrates said softly.

"Looks that way," Captain Hook agreed.

"Let's get back before somebody misses us."

"What do you mean, we got a problem?" Sneaky Pete asked, scrambling to his feet and brushing himself off. "What problem?" He looked worried.

"If we translated this right, company's coming."

"Lots of company." Captain Hook's eyes seemed to gleam.

The document that had taken so much work to translate was an order for a combat operation. The 143rd Independent Viet Cong Battalion was to attack a village that had a Combined Action Platoon. They were to destroy that CAP to the last man, both American and Vietnamese. The battalion was to take into custody the village and hamlet chiefs and councils, try them, and execute them. But Socrates and Captain Hook couldn't be absolutely certain the village to be attacked was Khung Toi: The village and hamlets were code named, the local officials were mentioned by titles only, the CAP was not named.

But each company's route into the village was described as was its objective.

One company was to follow the river that flowed north of the village. Bypass the hamlet in the middle of the paddies. Go through the hamlet on the riverbank, and take its chief and council into custody. One squad was to stay behind holding those officials prisoner. Assault south to the fort, which was located beyond another hamlet just west of the main trail from the river hamlet to the fort. Destroy the new schoolhouse it would encounter along the way.

The second company was to go north through the fruit groves south of the village and occupy the hamlet west of the fort—the hamlet the first company was to bypass during its assault from the river—take its officials into custody. It would launch its attack first, leaving one squad to guard the hamlet officials.

The third company (minus two squads) was to set up in the woods southeast of the fort as a blocking force in case the CAP attempted to retreat in that direction. This company would also be battalion reserve in case reinforcements were needed or a weakness in the defenses was discovered and neither of the assault companies could take proper advantage of it.

The detached squads from the third company each had a mission. One was to go to the hamlet northeast of the wood where the company set in, a small hamlet situated between cane fields and rice paddies, and arrest its chief and council and hold them there until the battle was



over. The remaining squad was to go far to the east, to the last hamlet in the village, capture its chief and council, and take them to the small hamlet where the other squad was located.

The remaining hamlet, the one in the middle of the paddies, that was bypassed by the company that went along the river, was to be left alone until the battle was over.

The village and hamlets weren't named, but the description fit the Junkyard exactly. There was one more piece of evidence that Whiskey 8 was the objective of this VC operation: There was a warning that all members of the battalion should be particularly on the watch for an American who was armed with a shotgun and carried an implement of torture on his belt. That sounded like Captain Hook.

The precise date for the attack wasn't set, or it wasn't clear to them from the way the orders read in their translation. It seemed likely it was going to be within the next week—maybe even the next couple of days. Neither was the time for the attack mentioned. That would most likely be determined by the reports of activity patterns brought back by the scouts the orders mentioned.

Socrates knew when the best times for a serious assault against Whiskey 8 was. Anyone in Whiskey 8 could tell you that: Late afternoon or early morning, an hour or two after dawn. In late afternoon they were all inside together eating dinner. An attack then would catch them by surprise and they could be hurt badly before they were able to defend themselves. Early morning, though, was better. All but three of the Americans and half of the PFs in the unit were out during the night. Most of the remaining members of the unit were up part of the night on watch. Most of the men of Whiskey 8 were asleep in the first few hours after dawn. Those were the best times for the VC to hit Fort Cragg. So far they hadn't. So far.

Company was coming. Lots of bad company. In late afternoon or early morning. Sometime during the next week. Now what could they do? How on earth could he tell Sergeant Slaughter about this visit?

"What do you mean, company's coming?" Sneaky Pete started right away. "I got a right to know, I've been in this with you right from jump street. You gotta tell me what you mean. Come on, what company's coming? And how's it trouble?"

"That document we translated, I think it's an operation order for a battalion assault on Fort Cragg."

"Oh shit, we gotta tell Sergeant Slaughter." He ran on ahead for a few yards, noticed they weren't running with him, stopped and looked

back. "Come on, we gotta hurry." He was bouncing up and down with anxiety.

"No we don't."

Captain Hook gave his head a slight shake.

"What do you mean? If Charlie's coming, a whole battalion, we gotta tell Sergeant Slaughter. Get a grunt company in here, get ready."

Socrates looked at him, it was a hollow, haunted look. "We have to think about it before we tell anybody anything."

"Say what?" He stopped bouncing, stood crouched, aghast.

"First off," Socrates said, catching up with him and putting a hand on his shoulder to pull him along, "we don't know for sure this operation is going to be here. If Charlie finds out this copy of the orders is missing, he might call it off. Mostly, if we tell Sergeant Slaughter we'll have to tell him how we know about it. How are we going to tell him that?"

"We tell him, we tell him—we tell him we took it off those sappers last night," Sneaky Pete said hopefully.

"No good. We already told him we searched those bodies and they weren't carrying any documents."

"Well, shit, we gotta tell him. Can't we tell him the truth?"

"No way. The truth is we were UA, on unauthorized absence. We were supposed to be running a patrol around Toi Mui, not out someplace else. That's a court martial offense." He squinted at him. "Sneaky Pete, do you want to get court martialed? Besides, how do we prove it? We don't even know how to get in touch with Peterson. By the time anybody found out enough to believe us it might be too late."

"But we gotta do *something*."

"Yeah. But we can't just go and tell him. We've got to find a way that he'll believe right off, and a way that won't get us into deep shit."

"Sneaky Pete," Captain Hook said, "you don't tell nobody nothing. You got that? Nobody, nothing."

"Don't tell nobody nothing. Right. Shit." Sneaky Pete stopped talking and stared unseeing into the distance. They were about to be attacked by a whole battalion and they couldn't say anything to anybody and they were going to die.

"We have to come up with something, Captain Hook."

"Right."

They were noticeably quiet during evening chow. The others figured it was because of their night at Toi Mui and didn't think anything of it.

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"I've got a bad feeling," Socrates said when the night's patrols were drawn. "It's been too quiet for too long. Charlie's got something planned."

"Sure Charlie's got something planned," Sergeant Slaughter said. "He plans to take over the whole country."

Socrates shook his head. "I mean here."

"You know something I don't?"

Socrates tried to look worried but not guilty. He certainly looked worried. "No, just a feeling."

"Everybody's got feelings. Talk to me when you know something. For the rest of you, it's a damn good idea to keep alert out there. So what if Socrates has feelings, he's right, Charlie's been too quiet for too damn long. Now he's fucking with the people again. He comes around here, I want his ass wasted." He dismissed the patrol leaders with a casual wave of his hand. He was thoughtful watching Socrates leaving. The man was quiet today, and it wasn't necessarily explained by last night. And Sneaky Pete was so quiet it was like he was sick. He wondered what they knew that he didn't—and hoped it wasn't something that would make trouble. He wondered if it had something to do with this business he wasn't supposed to know anything about. Too late to do anything about it today, though. Next time he saw Gunny Bryl, he'd talk to him about it.

Socrates wasn't alert that night. He kept thinking about those orders and what they could do about them. Captain Hook in effect ran the patrol. The PFs noticed and wondered what was wrong. It wasn't like Socrates to not be paying attention to what they were doing.

Socrates was scared, more scared than he'd ever been in his life. Three reinforced companies of Main Force VC were coming their way, close to four hundred men, maybe even more, against their fewer than fifty. And he couldn't figure out how to tell anybody without getting into trouble. He smiled inwardly at his dilemma. Say nothing and probably die because of it; tell what he knew and get into who knew how much trouble. That is, if anyone believed what he had to say.

The patrol went out at 2100 hours, came back in at 0330. Socrates spent the entire six and a half hours thinking about the problem. When they got back in he felt no closer to an answer than he was when he and Captain Hook finished translating the operation order. Before sacking out he lay on the floor under his cot with his beach towel

draped over his head to block the light from his flashlight and read the translation again. In less than a half hour his eyelids started drooping and he decided to sleep on it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

It was late April and he had decisions to make, decisions that would form the rest of his life. His father wanted him to be a jock, even if it was only in soccer rather than baseball or football. His mother wanted him to go to the best possible college and get the best possible education. Jane wanted them to go to the same college, and share an apartment as soon as they could both live off campus. He wasn't positive, she never openly discussed it with him, but he thought he heard her say things about it when he was distracted, wasn't in condition to really respond, but he was sure she wanted to get married. Soon. And make a family right after college. Coach wanted him to go out for football and become a placekicker, maybe even make it to the NFL.

He'd been accepted into a lot of colleges with scholarship offers. There were three more kids in the family coming up behind him, and the family college fund wasn't big enough, wouldn't be big enough, to see them all through. He had to accept one of the scholarships. The best academic school, the one his mother probably most wanted him to go to, didn't have a good athletic program. That one wouldn't satisfy his father because of its poor athletic program. And wouldn't satisfy Coach. And Jane needed a scholarship. The academic school hadn't offered her a scholarship, so it was out on that account as well.

The logical choice was the one school that offered Jane a full scholarship. It offered him one as well. Its academic credentials weren't the best, it wasn't Ivy League or anything like that, but it was better than the run of the mill state college—a lot better. Its athletic program was fairly good, both its soccer and football teams got occasional national ranking, though neither team ever really challenged for the national championship. The football team was good enough that it had a few alumni in the pros. That could satisfy both his father and Coach. Going there would certainly make Jane happy.

His parents, his girlfriend, his high school coach. They all wanted what was best for him. He knew they did, they told him so often

enough. What did *he* want? What was best for him, of course. But was going to college with Jane, living together, getting secretly married, playing sports, and maybe getting a crack at pro football what was best for him? Was that what he really wanted to do?

It was odd now that he thought about it; he realized he'd never really thought about what it was he wanted, he'd only gone along with whatever the people who loved him wanted, what they said was best for him. So what was best, what did he want? When you're only eighteen you can't come to a snap decision on a question that will form the rest of your life. Well, you can. But that kind of snap decision is liable to ruin the rest of your life, he was wise enough to instinctively understand that. You especially shouldn't make snap decisions when in order to make them you have to answer questions you never considered before.

That's why his mother and Jane were upset with him lately. And his father wasn't particularly happy either. The last time he saw Coach, Coach glared at him and snorted before saying a grudging hello. They all understood the decision he had to make. To them it was simple, chose what is best. They didn't understand what the problem he had was, while they knew what was best for him, he didn't. None of them understood the questions he had to answer first. He desperately needed time, time to think. But nobody wanted to give him that time, nobody understood the need.

That was the real reason he stopped in front of the post office that day. The immediate reason was the poster standing in a metal frame in front of the small, white, frame shack that stood on the sidewalk out front. It wasn't the flashiest poster he'd ever seen, he'd probably walked past it many times without truly seeing it. Now he saw something that caught his eye. The poster had a young man in a stock-collared, blue uniform smiling out of the foreground while in the back a team of men loaded bombs onto a white jet fighter. On the bottom the poster said "Join the Marines." What caught his eye, though, was the one word along the top; "Teamwork." Teamwork was something he knew about, something he was good at. He wouldn't have been captain of the state championship soccer team otherwise.

The Marines. War fighters. He studied current affairs in high school, he read the newspapers. He knew there was a good chance of America getting involved in a war in Viet Nam, or one of those Indochinese places with the impossible names. Matter of fact, it was getting to look pretty damn likely. Did he want to fight in a war? The

Marines. His father had missed out on World War II. He knew the old man felt less of a man because of it. He had also heard of the Marines' reputation: the best.

He stood there staring at the poster for several minutes, thinking. He needed time to think, time nobody wanted to let him have. If he enlisted he'd have time. How long was an enlistment, anyway, four years? Plenty of time. He'd know what he wanted to do with his life by the end of that four years. Four years, the same as college. But in the Marines he wouldn't be doing what everybody else knew was best for him until it was too late for him to do what he wanted. The Marines. His mother wouldn't like it, he knew that. She wanted him to get an education, him enlisting would probably make her feel betrayed. On the other hand, he thought his father would like it and back him up on that decision. The old man would probably think being a Marine was as good as being a college jock, maybe even better. Anyway, he could always argue that he was prime draft bait and it was better to do it now than wait to be called up and have to interrupt his education. An educational deferment never crossed his mind. He wasn't thinking of going to college, he was thinking about getting time to figure out what he wanted to do.

The shack was a Marine recruiting substation. He went up the three steps and through the door.

Inside were more posters on the walls, racks filled with brochures, a crammed metal bookcase, two filing cabinets. An Eagle, Globe, and Anchor plaque hung on the wall. A stuffed doll bulldog wearing a blue jacket with lots of stripes, and a Smokey the Bear hat teetered on top of the bookcase. At one end of the shack was a desk with two metal folding chairs in front of it. Behind the desk sat a man with an almost shaved head, lots of stripes on the sleeves of his khaki shirt, and lots of colorful ribbons on his chest. The name plate on the desk said "S/Sgt RC Tishner."

The man looked up from the papers he was working on and neutrally examined his visitor for a moment. Then said, "Can I help you with something?"

"Um." Now that he was here, what should he say? Well, why'd he come in? "I'd like to join the Marines."

The recruiter put down his pen, sat back in his swivel chair, grinned, and said, "That's the nicest thing anybody's said to me all day." Then he stood, showing the blue trousers with red seam stripe that were hidden by the desk when he sat, and extended his hand. "I'm

Staff Sergeant Tishner. What's your name?"

They talked for about an hour. Yes, the recruiter knew about the Knights state champion soccer team and its valiant captain—and was very glad to meet him. He didn't say so, but it was a big part of his job to be on top of the local high schools and their doings and their heroes. In answer to a question he explained the ribbons on his chest: Purple Heart for a wound received in Korea, Presidential Unit Citation, Good Conduct Medal with stars representing three subsequent awards, campaign medals for service in Korea and in Lebanon in 1958, Korean PUC. Five of the eight ribbons were for his Korea tour. He also had the Rifle Sharpshooter and Pistol Expert badges.

They talked about Boot Camp, and the recruiter was completely truthful on all accounts there except; no one can really get across the degree of stress recruits are under in Marine Boot Camp.

"What do your parents think of you enlisting?" the recruiter finally asked.

"They don't know yet."

"Are they going to approve?"

"I'm eighteen, I don't need their permission, do I?"

"No. But we prefer it if your parents approve."

"My Dad's going to love it. He has a bad arm and was classified 4F during World War II. He always wants me to do the things he never could because of his arm."

The recruiter noticed he didn't say how his mother would react, but his experience was if dad approved, mom usually went along with the program.

Then there was a short written test and a few papers to be filled out and signed. When he left the recruiting office he had an appointment in three weeks for further testing and a physical. Then it was going to be; Parris Island, here I come.

His mother was just as upset as he thought she'd be. "You did what?" she screamed. "The Marines?" she screamed. "What about college?" she screamed. She didn't buy his story about being prime draft bait. "They don't usually take boys out of college," she said. "They can't let you sign up without our consent, you're underage," she insisted.

His father was torn. He had looked forward to his first son being a college jock. But the Marines. Damn, being a Marine in peacetime was almost as masculine a thing as being a soldier in wartime. "They



have athletics in the Marines, don't they?" was the only question he asked right away. He had a vague memory of playing against some Marine football team back in his brief semipro days.

The look of anguish Jane gave him was almost enough to make him want to go back and un-enlist. Almost, but not quite. "Why?" she wailed. "We had plans," she cried. "We were going to..." she sobbed. "You're just doing this to hurt me," she accused. "Don't you read the newspapers?" she shrieked. "Don't you know there's going to be a war?" Current events wasn't one of her better subjects, that was a possibility she'd never seemed to notice before right then.

"You know, you're blowing what could be a very good career as a place kicker," Coach said and grimaced. He'd seen too many good young athletes throw away possible professional careers by getting bogged down on nowhere jobs instead of going on to college and taking advantage of the possibilities that were there for those who had what it took.

His decision to join the Marines caused so much unhappiness for the people who loved him and only wanted what was best for him. And all he wanted to do was buy some time to figure out what he wanted to do with his life.

In the end his father sided with him against his mother, just as he thought he would. His mother never came to like the idea, but maybe, just maybe, what they said was true, maybe the Marines really *did* build men. He would be more mature when his enlistment was over and that would help him do better in college. And he'd probably save some money in the meantime and that would help pay his way. Still, "Can't you go back and tell them you want to sign up for three years instead of four?"

Jane said she forgave him, and she promised to write every day. He promised when he got his twenty days leave after Boot Camp and infantry training, he'd spend half of it visiting her, wherever she went to school. She said she forgave him, and she did write every day—for the first two weeks he was away. Then it dropped back to two or three times a week for a few weeks, then to once a week. He didn't hear from her at all during his month in Infantry Training Regiment at Camp Geiger, in North Carolina.

He went home on Boot Leave in October.

"That girlfriend of yours, the cheerleader?" his father said. "She met somebody in that college she's going to, he's her new boyfriend." He sounded sorrier about it than his son felt.

"Are you sure you can't change your enlistment to three years?" his mother asked. "Can you go to college part-time while you're in the Marines? You're going to be stationed in California. They have a lot of good colleges there. Is there a good one near this, what's it called, Camp Pendleton you're going to?"

The Marines were getting ready to go to war. They kept him too busy to think about what he wanted to do with his life—or to go to college part-time.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Socrates woke up around 10:30; six and a half hours, plenty of sleep. Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete were already up and out. Socrates briefly wondered where they had gone. He only took enough time to empty his bladder and give his teeth a cursory brushing, just enough to knock the night gunk out of his mouth. Then he stuffed the orders, original and translated, and his dictionary into his shirt, grabbed his rifle and cartridge belt, and headed out himself. He'd find his men wherever they were.

"Yo, Socrates." Killer Kowalski stopped him at the main gate. "You going anywhere near Hat Reo Toi?" He looked around furtively, saw Sergeant Slaughter watching from the veranda, and stopped looking. "Sergeant Slaughter said he's enforcing the order nobody goes out alone. He's watching so I can't go out, not without somebody."

Socrates looked back at the veranda, Sergeant Slaughter stood facing them, arms across his chest, looking as though he dared either of them to go out that gate alone. He hadn't been there a moment before when Socrates walked out. "Yeah," he said, "let's go to Hat Reo Toi. I wouldn't want to keep you from your girlfriend." Why not, Hat Reo Toi was as good a place to start looking as anyplace else. "Her mama-san letting her talk to you again?"

Killer Kowalski didn't answer, he just wore a hopeful expression.

They started out and were stopped by Sergeant Slaughter's voice booming at them. "You two are going out together, you had best come back together." He spoke to both of them, but looked only at Socrates as though saying, I'm watching you.

Socrates turned back. "No sweat, Sergeant Slaughter." They started out again and once more were stopped by that voice.

"I'm going to be out there today. I had best see people together."

"Roger." They went.

"You going to stay in Hat Reo Toi?" Killer Kowalski asked. "I don't want you getting into any shit because you went out with me so I

could go, but then went somewhere else yourself."

"No problem. If I don't stay there I'll come back for you. He ain't going to see either of us out here alone."

"Thanks." Killer Kowalski was visibly relieved. He was just as visibly anxious about getting to see his girlfriend. The girl's mother had kept them mostly apart since Seller Sam's murder, only in the last couple of days had she let them see each other; and then only for a few minutes under her close supervision.

They went around Toi Co 1 rather than through it in an attempt to avoid the children. It was a vain attempt, there was no place for them to hide in crossing the mostly open area between the fort and the hamlet. The little ones were more eager about being with their Marines than usual this morning.

"You bang-bang Vee Cee last night," the children squealed, mobbing Socrates. "You catch Vee Cee snooper-poooper. You numba fucking one." They all wanted to carry Socrates' M14, though it was too big for many of them to hold both ends off the ground at the same time. They had to content themselves with patting or stroking its stock. The two Marines talked with the children, joked with them, made comments to each other the children didn't quite have enough English to understand, they ruffled the kids hair. But they didn't give them anything to carry for them, didn't pick up any of the little ones and give them rides.

Socrates wanted both of his hands free to fight; he knew something was coming down and wanted to be ready when it did. Killer Kowalski didn't know something was about to happen, he just followed Socrates' lead. It was the same as he always followed the example of corporals when he was in the field. He was too distracted, thinking about his girlfriend and what kind of response he was going to get from her mother to notice Socrates was more alert than normal this morning.

As the small, mostly gleeful, procession headed west, away from Toi Co 1, the smaller children dropped behind, obeying their mothers' injunctions not to go far from home. By the time they were halfway there only the three or four biggest of the little ones were still with the Americans. They were met by some of the older children from Hat Reo Toi, who had seen them coming, and there was a not very ceremonious changing of the guard as the Toi Co 1 children relinquished possession of the Marines to the newcomers from Hat Reo Toi. By the time they reached the hamlet gate the Marines had to

watch their step to avoid trodding with their boots on the bare toes of the multitude of tots who hemmed them in.

They stayed together until they came in sight of the home of killer Kowalski's girlfriend. Some of the children suddenly looked at him, momentarily surprised, then ran shrieking ahead to tell the girl she had company; and warn her mother, so they could watch what fireworks might erupt.

Killer Kowalski stopped and looked wistfully in the direction of the hoots. He chewed on his lower lip.

"Luck, pano," Socrates said. "I'm not going far, I'll be around if you need to find me."

"Thanks," Killer Kowalski said back. He grinned weakly. "I hope I don't need it. You-or the luck." He headed toward the hoots, in the doorway of which the girl appeared. He didn't seem to notice the young children who scampered around him.

Socrates watched him to the door. He saw a lighter shadow behind the girl, and thought it might be her mother. Killer Kowalski stood in front of the door for a moment, seemed to be talking to someone behind the girl, then bowed and stepped past her, disappearing into the hoots.

Socrates smiled slightly and shook his head. "Let's *di di*," he said to the children who had stayed with him. They went through Hat Reo Toi to the north gate and fifty yards beyond to a treeline. Socrates sat in the shade and leaned back against a tree. "You play, I'll watch," he told the youngsters who tried to clamber over him. At first reluctantly, but then with more enthusiasm, they left his side and ran about in the field in front of him. It was only moments before one had made a ball from palm leaf fronds and they started kicking it around. Socrates watched them for some time, thought not for the first time about organizing a soccer league in the Junkyard, remembered not for the first time that the team he'd coach would have unfair advantage, and finally got around to what he had to do.

He pulled out the orders and his translation and hunched over them to read again, checking various words in the dictionary. He did it several times. It always came out the same, even if a few words did change their exact meaning. Some day very soon now, the 143rd Independent Viet Cong Battalion, consisting of three companies of 125 or more men each, was going to attack CAP Whiskey 8, consisting of eleven US Marines, one US Navy corpsman, and a 35 man Popular Forces platoon.

As he read and translated, and read, and reread, and retranslated, he became totally immersed in the chore at hand and didn't notice when the shouts and laughing cries of the children petered out and came to a stop. After the passage of a length of time which he was unaware of, he put down the papers, leaned back against the tree, and rubbed the concentration from his eyes. Then he noticed the children sitting in a somber semicircle in front of him.

"Soc-a-tee-sah, you study," said the oldest, when he was sure Socrates was through with his reading. "You go to school?" It was an odd concept for him, one he had to struggle to frame. School was for young children. But the Americans knew so many more things than the Vietnamese did and had so many more things than they did, they must have to go to school for longer in order to learn everything they had to know to live in America. Five years of school were enough for normal people, he reasoned, but people like the Americans probably needed more, maybe as many as eight or ten years. He would have been astonished to learn that Socrates already had twelve years of school, and was planning to go to school for four more.

Socrates smiled gently at him. He realized the boy had probably never seen an adult working so hard at books and paper, the only thing he had to equate it with was school studies. "No," he said at first, then realized that in a very real way that's exactly what he was doing. "Yes, I go to school. But I am both teacher and student." He had to laugh out loud at the confused look the children gave him. "I read, teach myself Vietnamese. Teach myself about the Vee Cee."

The children looked at each other when he said this. They whispered among themselves, nudged one another, came to an agreement. The spokesman looked at their American and intoned, "Soc-a-tee-sah very wise man. You go home to your village, some day be chief."

Socrates laughed again, ruefully this time, and shook his head. "A chief is indeed a wise man," he told them. "The chief must make decisions for other people. His decisions must be right, the people depend on them. I'm not very good at making decisions for other people."

"You honcho now," they protested.

"Only *ti-ti* honcho," he said, holding his hand out, tips of forefinger and thumb close together to show how *ti ti*.

"Not *ti-ti*. Numba one. You in right place last night, boom-boom Vee Cee come Toi Mui."

He started to object again, then realized; yes, he was a leader, he did have to make decisions. And he had to make the right ones because people did depend on him; people could die if he made the wrong decision. He stuck the dictionary and papers back in his shirt and stood. "I go now," he announced and started toward Hat Reo Toi.

The children whooped and ran chaotic circles around him. They'd been sitting quietly for too long.

He headed straight to the hoots he hoped Killer Kowalski was still in. *He must be, he thought, he would have come looking for me if mama-san chased him away.*

Killer Kowalski was still there, still inside. He was sitting at the rickety table under the window. Mama-san sat opposite him; they were in earnest conversation. His girlfriend wasn't in sight in the room.

Socrates knocked on the door frame and bowed politely. Mama-san looked and gestured him in. Socrates approached, bowed to her, and told her in Vietnamese, Hello, thank you for inviting me in. Then switched to English to talk to Killer Kowalski. "Come on, Killer, we gotta go. There's something I've got to do and it's too dangerous out here for anybody to be alone."

Killer Kowalski looked pained. "I can't go now, we're talking some important shit. Real important."

Socrates looked at mama-san, pointedly looked at the room the girlfriend wasn't in, then back to Killer Kowalski. "You gonna marry the girl?"

Killer Kowalski swallowed. "No," he said weakly. Then added even more softly, "Not today."

Socrates heard all of it, implications and all. He looked at him for a moment, then asked, "She cherry?" and wondered why it mattered if the girl was a virgin.

"I believe so."

Socrates considered for a moment, then asked, "You're talking about it and Mama-san hasn't kicked you out yet?"

Killer Kowalski nodded.

"Good. That means you've got time to make the arrangements later. Let's go." He turned to the girl's mother and switched back to his halting Vietnamese to tell her he was sorry, but it was necessary for them to leave. He promised to get Killer Kowalski back to finish his discussion with her as soon as his important work as a Marine was through.

Mama-san nodded, said she understood the Marines had to protect the village, during war some things got delayed, that was the way of the world, and stood to bow them out.

"Where we going?" Killer Kowalski asked, slightly confused, when Socrates headed toward the north gate. The south gate was the way back to Fort Cragg.

"First I need to find Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete." They were both silent for several moments. The children started to mob them again, but backed off when they saw how serious they looked, and how they didn't look like they were interested in playing.

Then, "You know something I don't know?"

Socrates nodded, but didn't say anything.

"It's something important." Another nod. "More important than the important shit I was talking about to my girlfriend's mother." Nod. "Shouldn't you tell me about it?"

"You'll probably find out before the patrols go out tonight."

Then they didn't talk any more. Socrates led the way to the river. They stood on the high bank and looked as far as they could to the west but didn't see the men they sought. Socrates looked at his watch. Two PM, they should be back at Fort Cragg in two hours. They went to Nghia Toi and asked around. Nobody there had seen Captain Hook or Sneaky Pete all day, but they were all glad to see one of the men who had killed the previous night's VC assassination team.

As soon as they could break away from the people they headed along the trail that went through the woods southeast to Toi Co 2. Neither of the men they wanted had been there that day, either. Socrates stood for a moment, staring east across the paddies and cane fields toward Toi Mui; then decided it was too late to go that far now, that Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete probably hadn't gone there anyway. Maybe they went to the banana groves, maybe they went farther upstream. He checked the time again, a quarter to four. Getting close to one of the best times for an enemy to hit Whiskey 8.

"Let's go back."

Killer Kowalski agreed. When Socrates took him from his girlfriend's mother he noticed the corporal was acting oddly. That gave him a very strange feeling about being out here with only one other Marine. He'd feel a lot safer inside Fort Cragg—or anyplace where there were more Marines. He had long since stopped thinking about his future mother-in-law.

\*



Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete weren't back at the fort yet. Socrates closed the door behind himself when he went into their room and sat fighting while he waited for them to return. He wanted them, at least Captain Hook, with him when he went to Sergeant Slaughter.

They still hadn't shown up when it was time for everyone to eat.

"Where's your fire team, Socrates?" Sergeant Slaughter asked.

"Damned if I know," he said with more than usual passion.

"When Sneaky Pete gets back his ass is mine for being late."

"You're going to have to stand in line, they're mine first."

Sergeant Slaughter cocked an eyebrow at Socrates. His senior fire team leader wasn't known as an exceptional disciplinarian or for insubordination. That statement sounded like both. What *was* going on here? Later this evening, before the man went out on patrol, he'd demand to be told, order the corporal to tell him no matter who had told him not to say what.

Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete walked in a couple of minutes after Sergeant Slaughter, as usual the last man to get his food, sat at his place at the head of the center table, and headed straight for the chow line. Sneaky Pete cringed under Sergeant Slaughter's withering glare and the looks of everybody else. Captain Hook could have been the first in the chow line for all the reaction he showed. They took their usual places near Socrates and dug in. Sneaky Pete hunkered down behind his food and tried to hide from the banter tossed at the two of them. Captain Hook didn't seem to notice anybody saying anything.

When they were through eating Sergeant Slaughter announced loudly, "I'll see you two later." He didn't name anyone, didn't even look at them, but everyone knew he meant Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete. Then silence slowly fell as they looked at each other in wonderment. Sergeant Slaughter had just announced he wanted to chew out Captain Hook. Damn, the man *never* talked to Captain Hook. Then the susurrations of voices started again; or did he mean Socrates and Sneaky Pete?

He meant Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete. Socrates was there of course. They had just finished drawing the night's patrol routes.

"Get them," Sergeant Slaughter ordered Socrates after dismissing Submarine, Mad Greek, and Hank. He got them, then surprised his commander by interrupting him before he could start on them.

"We've got a problem," Socrates said.

"No shit. When people don't show up on time, I think that's a problem, too."

"That's not what I meant."

Captain Hook looked at him with an expression somewhere between passing interest and mild surprise. Sneaky Pete looked relieved, it sounded like Sergeant Slaughter wasn't going to chew on them right away. Maybe Socrates could keep him interested long enough he'd forget.

Socrates took a deep breath and dove right in. "I have reason to believe a Vee Cee battalion is about to hit the Junkyard." He said it out loud and in a clear voice, made no attempt to hide what he had to say from anyone not at the table with him.

The main room was abruptly filled with silence and all heads turned toward the open door to Sergeant Slaughter's room. Sergeant Slaughter looked at him, his face unreadable. A faint smile twitched the corner of Captain Hook's mouth, Sneaky Pete looked like he wanted to hide under the table. The others started edging closer to hear better what he had to say next.

"Say again?" Sergeant Slaughter asked, his voice was low but strong.

"I have reason to believe that sometime in the next few days, Charlie intends to hit the Junkyard, assault Fort Cragg, in battalion strength, for the purpose of wiping out the Junkyard Dogs and returning Khung Toi village to their control." He said it very firmly, in a voice loud enough to be heard clearly on the veranda. Half a dozen more people crowded in from outside.

"What makes you think that?"

Socrates tossed three sheets of mimeographed paper on the table.

Sergeant Slaughter picked them up and scanned them. His command of written Vietnamese wasn't very good. He looked up and saw Hank coming toward them. "What does this say?" he asked, handing over the papers.

Hank started to read, swallowed, then sat as though he'd suddenly gone weak. He read through rapidly, then flipped back to the first page and went through it again, slowly in some places, skimming others. He cleared his throat, then spoke slowly and clearly, articulating as well as he could so there would be no mistake of what he was about to say. "This is Vee Cee operations order. A battalion is about to attack a village with CAP. Village is not named, but sound like Khung Toi, it say where hamlet are, where river is, where groves is, where fort is. Sound very much like Khung Toi. Even describe one Marine, sound like Captain Hook, say he very dangerous."

"When?" Sergeant Slaughter asked.

Hank shook his head. "Not say. But very soon. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next day or next day. Very soon, in one week or less."

Socrates handed Sergeant Slaughter several sheets of handwritten paper. "Here's my translation."

Sergeant Slaughter read the translation. "Sure as shit sounds like us." He looked at Socrates, his expression still unreadable. "Where'd you get this document?"

"I'd rather not say. I have my sources and I don't want to compromise them."

Now Sergeant Slaughter's expression was readable: astonished. "You're telling me you think we're about to get hit hard, and you're not going to say how you know that? What the fuck are you trying to pull here?"

"You know how I know, you've got the document that told me."

"No good. How do I know it isn't a fake if I don't know where it came from?"

Socrates struggled with the question for a few seconds, then said, "I'm not trying to pull anything. That document came from a man I believe to be a captain in the Viet Cong."

"You said neither of those bodies had any documents. Do you realize how deep in the shit you can get for withholding documents?"

Socrates shook his head. "Those assassins didn't have any documents, that's not where I got those papers."

"Someone just diddy-bopped up to you, said he was a Vee Cee captain and handed them over, is that what you're telling me? You had a suspected Vee Cee captain and you let him go?"

"He's been neutralized," Captain Hook said.

Sergeant Slaughter had read spy novels and was conversant with military matters beyond infantry tactics, he knew what "neutralized" meant. He looked at Captain Hook briefly, then back at Socrates. There was concern on his face, concern that could be masking horror. "We're Marines, or did you forget that?"

"No."

"Mister Spook," Sergeant Slaughter shouted. He didn't have to shout, Mister Spook was just outside the door, listening intently. "Get me Gunny Bryl."

It took twenty minutes to raise the company gunnery sergeant on the radio. The conversation took a long time because they couldn't talk

in the clear and Sergeant Slaughter was unaccustomed to using the code book. By the time they were through it was too late in the day to round up the hamlet and village officials and bring them into the possible safety of Fort Cragg. And the Gunny could only promise to get a start on reinforcing Whiskey 8; he could only promise to try to get someone on standby.

Then they had to redo the night's patrol plans.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

They stayed close to Fort Cragg that night. The three patrols acted more as mobile listening posts than they did as their normal, aggressively patrolling selves. None of the three patrols went more than a half mile away. One went south by west, toward the groves, to see if anyone was coming from that direction. One went to the side of Nghia Toi to keep an eye on the river to the west. The third covered the southern edge of the woods behind the fort. They covered the three directions the attack was supposed to come from. The patrols stopped frequently to listen, but none of them heard anything other than the normal night sounds of Khung Toi. They all came in during the small hours of the morning.

Nobody spent the rest of the night in his cot, they all took defensive positions around the perimeter, maintained a one third watch through the darkness; one out of three men awake and listening. Always before, the Marines and PFs had felt safe behind the three-high stack of concertina barbed wire outside the fragments of wall around Fort Cragg, they'd been comfortable with their small bunkers; mostly below ground, three-thick sandbag walls above ground, topped with four layers of sandbags on four by four beams. With four hundred or more bad guys coming at them, all of a sudden the barbed wire seemed like no barrier at all and the bunkers felt downright flimsy.

There are nights that seem like they'll never end, this was one of those nights. But eventually the sun rose anyway. They rose and stretched the night's tension out of their stiffened muscles. Loosely, unorganized, not all of them at the same time, they got their shaving kits and took care of their morning toilets. Some went straight inside the big house and collapsed on their cots for a couple hours of comfortable sleep. Some PFs strung string-net hammocks here and about and climbed in for a nap; others gathered around their lieutenant to ask if they could go home, get their families, bring them back for whatever protection the fort would afford them. Some, Marines and PFs both, stayed on watch around the perimeter. Here and there men,

Americans and Vietnamese, ate C-ration breakfasts.

Lieutenant Hank considered his men's requests to bring their families into Fort Cragg, and said it wasn't a good idea just yet. He didn't tell them he wanted to talk it over with Sergeant Slaughter and Chief Lai first; didn't say bringing them in might put them in greater jeopardy; didn't say moving them now would alert the rest of the villagers, might cause a panic, all of which he thought. All he told them was, "You stay here." It wouldn't arouse suspicion if none of the PFs went home to sleep or work the paddies. They didn't do it often, but once in awhile they all stayed at the fort for a class.

Socrates washed his face and brushed his teeth. Then he went to see what Sergeant Slaughter was doing, see what assistance he could offer. As senior fire team leader he was effectively the second in command among the Americans. Normally they didn't pay much attention to that, normally there was no need to.

Sergeant Slaughter was sitting at the radio, drumming his fingers on the bench, tapping one foot on the rung of the chair, swinging the other in a beat against a bench leg, staring at the radios, waiting for a call from somebody, anybody. Socrates pulled up a chair next to him. Sergeant Slaughter was glad to see him, it gave him something other than a radio message that didn't come to focus his attention on. "You got this off a Vee Cee captain, huh?"

Socrates bit his lip and nodded.

"And he was dead, so he couldn't tell you if it was true."

Another nod. Was Sergeant Slaughter only going to talk about that? Socrates didn't want to, they had other business to talk about, mainly the defense of Fort Cragg and the villagers.

"How many are on watch?" Good, Sergeant Slaughter was going to talk about the other things.

"Two on the main gate, two at the north corner, two in the back, two on the southwest side."

Sergeant Slaughter nodded, satisfied that all approaches were covered, they'd have warning of anybody approaching. "Where're Submarine and Mad Greek?"

"Submarine's sleeping, Mad Greek's on the main gate."

"Get them. Hank too."

"Right." Through the window, Socrates saw a PF on the veranda and sent him for Mad Greek and Hank. Then he went to rouse Submarine. In a minute they were assembled.

"First thing I want is for all ammo to be distributed to the bunkers

and everybody assigned to one so if the shit hits, everyone knows where to go," Sergeant Slaughter said. "Socrates, you're in charge of that. Hank, you work with him and assign your people." He laid out a chart that showed all the structures in Fort Cragg including the wire and wall defenses and the bunkers. "A Marine and two PFs go into each bunker except these two." He tapped a bunker on the northeast side and another near the south corner. "Three PFs go into each of those two. Hank, that's not all of your people, so assign the rest of them to the places we're most likely to be hit from. Then I want, Mad Greek, you work with Mister Spook to make sure the field phones in all the bunkers that have them are working. Put the patrol radios and the PF radios in the bunkers that don't have phones." Six of the eleven bunkers around the perimeter had ground wire phones in them. The phones were connected to each other as well as to the radio bench in the main house. Putting radios in the other bunkers would give them complete communications; at least between the CP and each perimeter position. "CP will be in here at the bench, under the window. I want a work party to fill sandbags and build a bunker around it. "Submarine, you're in charge of that. Hank, Doc Holliday, Mister Spook, and the PF medic will be with me in the CP group. Questions?"

"What else do we have to do?" Submarine asked. He was serious, that wasn't enough to defend against the odds they were expecting.

"That's the first shit. Get it done, then I'll give you more. Anyone else?" There were no other questions. "Then do it."

They did it.

All the Americans who had sacked out were woken up, so were as many of the PFs as were needed. Socrates took Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete and a few PFs to the ammo bunker. They stripped it of its crates of bullets and hand grenades and stocked each of the defensive positions. The main gate got fewer rifle bullets, but all of the machine gun ammunition. They didn't bother with the mortar's ammo bunker; it was right next to the mortar pit—and nobody was assigned to the mortar. Not yet anyway. Then Socrates sat down with a sheet of paper on which he quickly sketched in the defenses and started writing names next to each bunker. The only thing Socrates could do was assign the Marines, he kept them grouped by fire team. Lieutenant Hank wrote in the names of his men. Socrates didn't recognize all the names Hank wrote; Hank didn't use any of the nicknames by which the Marines knew so many of them. They made two copies, when all the names were down they went around the compound and showed each

man his assigned position. Socrates assigned the main gate with its machine gun to Captain Hook. He took the position between it and the north corner for himself, gave the north corner to Sneaky Pete. Only a few of the PFs got to sleep through the activity. At least everybody had gotten some rest during the night.

It took Mad Greek, Rodin, and Mister Spook much less time to run their comm-checks and determine that all the phones were in proper operating condition. Without being told, Mad Greek took his men to help Submarine and his men with the sandbagging.

Beast complained a lot when Submarine assigned his two men and a PF squad to filling sandbags, but Killer Kowalski didn't. Killer Kowalski was too busy worrying about his girlfriend and her mother to complain about the back-breaking work. They stacked sandbags two deep against the outer wall below and to the sides of the window. They were building one-sandbag walls on the inside, thick enough to stop grenade and rocket fragments, when they stopped.

While all this was going on, Gunny Bryl called. Once more the conversation went slowly because Sergeant Slaughter had to use the code book. What it boiled down to, though, was two things:

Intelligence says the 143 Independent Viet Cong Battalion is in Laos licking its wounds from a fight it got into near the DMZ. And: "There's no one available to reinforce you, the only battalion that can be on standby just came in from a major operation and isn't going on standby until somebody knows something more than what higher-higher regards as unsubstantiated rumor."

So they discussed alternatives, still using that cumbersome code book—after Gunny Bryl promised to send somebody out to get those orders to wave under somebody's nose at S2. Unsubstantiated rumor indeed. Didn't those people understand what was at stake here?

Gunny Bryl and Captain Vitale agreed this was a threat that should be considered serious. Later, probably this afternoon, they'd strip a few poguees from company headquarters and send them out to reinforce Whiskey 8. Granted, a half dozen—if they could come up with that many—clerks, mechanics, and cooks who had never handled their rifles except on the qualification range weren't much. But, hey, they were Marines after all, and did have basic infantry training behind them. A few extra rifles were better than nothing. Vitale and Bryl would do their best to come up with the transportation assets that would allow them to put a couple of their other CAPs on standby. They couldn't send a second CAP in to reinforce because each one had



its own village to take care of. In the meantime, they'd also try to convince 5th CAG of the need to reinforce and have units on standby.

It wasn't a whole hell of a lot, but it was all that could be done right now. Sergeant Slaughter had to be satisfied with it. In a way, he was. At least the people immediately above him in the chain of command believed him and were doing what they could, little though it was.

Then Sergeant Slaughter got his fire team leaders and Hank together again to continue planning. The first thing they did was correct the mortar situation.

"Chickenfucker knows how to use it, he goes into the mortar pit with two PFs. Mister Spook takes his place on the line. Socrates, Hank, adjust the defensive positions accordingly. The next thing we have to do is put out observation posts. Three teams, two Marines and two PFs in each, go to here, here, and here." He tapped the topographical map to show where. The three places were in the same directions the previous night's patrols had gone, but were farther out. "Take one meal of C's. At 1800 they will be relieved. Before that relief goes out I'll have a rotation worked out." He grimaced, remembering another detail. "Take the radios from the bunkers so you've got communications with us. Won't do to have one team spot them coming, then have to run back here to tell us and have the other two teams stuck out there not knowing what's happening. Last thing. Where's Chief Lai? Hank, did you tell him?"

The PF lieutenant swore, he'd been so busy he'd forgotten to send anybody to get the village chief.

"No problem. Send somebody now, somebody you can trust not to open his fucking mouth in front of civilians. We don't want to panic the people." He looked at the other four one at a time. "Can anybody think of anything else?"

"What about the hamlet chiefs?" Socrates asked.

"That's what I want to talk to Chief Lai about."

There were no other questions. Submarine took Killer Kowalski and two PFs south to the groves. Mad Greek, Rodin, and two PFs went through the woods in back. "Socrates, you're second in command, you stay here," Sergeant Slaughter said. So Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete went with two PFs to the river. At least they didn't have to worry about not picking up a train of children. For all the activity in Fort Cragg that morning, it was still only nine AM and the children were in school. On a normal day nearly all of the Marines

would still be sleeping at this hour.

The two PFs didn't want to be out here, and not only because they thought it was safer behind the thin defenses of Fort Cragg. Captain Hook had them walking too fast, for one thing. Sure, they didn't need to move stealthily, there was no point to stealth in middle of the paddies during the day; but it was too hot to be walking that fast, they thought. What the two PFs didn't know about that was; their diets had certain deficiencies—minor to be sure, but nevertheless deficiencies—that caused them to lack the strength and stamina for walking any distance at high speed. More than the exhausting speed at which they walked was the way Captain Hook looked made them want to be somewhere else.

Nearly all the fighting done in Khung Toi since he joined the Junkyard Dogs had been done at night. Neither of these PFs had ever before seen him at the beginning of a daytime fight. The intensity in his eyes and set of his jaw were terrifying to them. He had about him a ready tension they had never seen in a man. Captain Hook looked like he wanted to fight—and if he couldn't find an enemy he might fight whoever was handy. They didn't want to be anywhere near him.

Sneaky Pete saw the same things the PFs did—though the speed of their walk didn't bother him. He was nervous, even scared a bit. But not of Captain Hook. As long as he was with Captain Hook he was all right, that never changed. So what if a whole battalion of bad guys was coming their way. Right? Right.

The PFs were panting heavily by the time they reached the designated observation point. They were bathed in sweat and their eyes were out of focus. They collapsed in the shade of one of the trees that punctuated the high bank to cool off. Captain Hook ignored their distress, he stood and studied the land and river to the west for several minutes before taking the radio and announcing they were there. Sneaky Pete also stood looking west, but he stood in the shade.

Where they were was a slight promontory marking a bend in the river that was so slight it might be better described as a hiccup. To their left the rice paddies expanded to the groves far beyond. Hat Reo Toi was a dark hole in the glimmer of the morning sun on the water to the left rear. The river basin ran on their right with the water snaking along it. On the river's other side more paddies stretched out to the north. More than five hundred yards upstream the riverbed was lost to sight around a shallow bend that was marked by a stout tree. Farmers

were in the paddies, none close. No boats were coming downstream, the only ones they could see were behind them, near Nghia Toi. They didn't know if that was normal, they were too seldom out and around this time of day.

"I want to take a look," Captain Hook said after several minutes of study. He started west, shotgun held loose in one hand.

Sneaky Pete's jaw dropped he watched him walk away. What was this? This is where they were supposed to be. "Hey, wait!" he shouted. "Where you going? We're supposed to stay here until somebody comes to relieve us."

Captain Hook looked back, "I want to see beyond the bend," and kept going.

"Come on," Sneaky Pete said to the PFs and ran after him.

"No go, no go," the PFs shouted. They sat up but didn't attempt to stand.

"You stay," Captain Hook said without looking back.

"I'm not staying nowhere, I'm going with you," Sneaky Pete said, catching up and falling in step beside him.

Captain Hook didn't acknowledge. He walked briskly, though not at the same forced march pace he'd used coming from Fort Cragg. Sneaky Pete had trouble looking around, as he knew an infantryman in the field was supposed to do, and keeping up. Still, he managed to keep up and look around a little. In five minutes they were less than a hundred yards from the bend. Suddenly Sneaky Pete grabbed Captain Hook's arm and stopped.

"Look. What are they doing?"

Captain Hook looked to the left, where Sneaky Pete pointed. Halfway across the paddies he saw tiny, black figures, little more than dots at that distance, running east. Captain Hook put his shotgun down and curled his hand around his eyes, made tubes of them like binoculars. It was a field trick used to aid distant vision; it gave the impression of magnifying what was being looked at by concentrating focus. After a few seconds he said, "Unarmed. Must be running from something."

"Oh shit." Sneaky Pete turned to run back to the tree where the PFs waited, the tree where they'd left the radio. "We gotta go call this in."

"Call in what, we see farmers running through their fields?" Captain Hook picked up his shotgun and continued toward the bend. He went slower now, and bent over.

Sneaky Pete stood indecisive, then ran after him.

They were on hands and knees by the time they reached the bend, then lowered themselves to their bellies to crawl into the cover of the tree. What they saw shocked Sneaky Pete too much to say anything; he started trembling violently. Captain Hook's mouth curled into a smile; his body twitched with anticipation. Coming toward them in the river bed, alongside the high bank, was a long line of black clad soldiers wearing red armbands and checkered neckerchiefs. They were closely bunched, nearly within arms length of each other, their point man was little more than a hundred yards away. They were moving in the short-stepping trot the Americans called "the paratrooper shuffle;" it ate mileage without being too tiring.

"I make a hundred and twenty-five," Captain Hook said shortly. "You?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, yeah. Hunnert an tweny-five." *Shit oh my god they're coming to kill my young ass there's too damn many of them mama pray for your boy I'm fucked.*

"Put it on rock and roll," Captain Hook said. "That fourth man back, the one in front of the radio, looks like an officer. When he's in range I'm taking him and the radioman out. You fire at the same time, get the point and the people in back of him." His voice had a tremolo of eagerness.

Sneaky Pete looked at him, horrified. There were only two of them and more than a hundred Viet Cong coming at them. He couldn't be serious, the two of them couldn't attack that whole company. A reinforced company at that. "What?" he gasped.

Captain Hook turned his head. He wore the most genuine Sneaky Pete had ever seen on him. "We're going to fuck all over them. They're going to think they've run into a whole goddam battalion."

"But, there's only two of us!"

"Don't sweat the small shit, Sneaky Pete. We're Marines, we can do it. Just do what I said."

"Are you sure?" hesitantly.

"I shit you not." Captain Hook's eyes gleamed as he turned back to the approaching column and sighted in on the man he was certain was an officer. He held his finger loose over the trigger, it vibrated between the trigger and the trigger guard. He waited until the officer was in range, then forced himself to wait until he was five yards closer, then lay his finger on the trigger and slowly squeezed.

BOOM! the shotgun roared. He jacked another round into the

chamber as fast as he could and fired at the diving radioman. He fired another round at the radio. He took time to look before firing again. Both of the men he shot at were down and clearly out of it. More diving and crawling men twitched from the impact of Sneaky Pete's bullets. He picked two men trying to climb the bank behind the officer and BOOM! BOOM! shot them. The entire column was down, going for cover, out of his range. When Sneaky Pete stopped to reload Captain Hook ordered, "Rake up and down their line, empty that magazine fast." Some fire was being returned at them, but it was neither heavy nor well aimed—the VC hadn't located them yet. Most of the scattered fire stopped when Sneaky Pete let loose with his second magazine.

"Let's go," Captain Hook said when that magazine emptied. They reloaded as they ran; Captain Hook slid five shells into the shotgun's magazine and an extra into the chamber.

"I got four, plus the radio. How many'd you get?" he asked. He was calmer now that the battle had started. The exertion of running and excitement of the fight hardly showed in his voice.

"I donno, four I guess." Sneaky Pete grabbed the first number he thought of, which was the last one he heard.

Captain Hook chuckled. "I was watching. I think you got at least six."

The two PFs were down, staring along their carbines past them, concern clear on their faces. "What for you shoot?"

"Charlie's coming. Boo-coo Charlie."

The PFs looked at each other aghast, the concern turned to fear. Boo-coo Charlies coming, that meant more than four, they were outnumbered. Just how badly outnumbered were they? And this man attacked them. "You fucking dinky dow," one of them said, you're a crazy man.

"No screaming shit, Cochise. It won't take long for them to get organized. I want us to be ready when they do." He quickly looked around. "Sneaky Pete, down on the bottom, where you can see if they start to come around the bend. You two, get below the bank there. Don't go all the way down, just far enough you've got cover if they come across the paddies."

Sneaky Pete went over the bank where its hiccup was at its greatest bulge. The two PFs dropped behind it on the far side of the bulge. Captain Hook stood a moment longer, looking in the direction of the hidden enemy soldiers, excitement shining in his eyes. Then he

grabbed the radio and followed to the bank.

"They're coming," Sneaky Pete said at the same time one of the PFs called, "Look." In the riverbed some of the VC were edging around the bend. A platoon had gained the top and was angling quickly across the paddies.

Captain Hook looked at them and laughed. "They don't know where we are!" he shouted gleefully. He grabbed the carbine from the nearer PF and fired five rounds at the VC running across the paddies. They dropped, but he didn't know if he'd hit any of them. Fire came from the lead VC in the riverbed. None of it came near, they were firing wildly above the bank and couldn't see or hit the part where they were.

"Sneaky Pete, can you see them?"

"Yes," a trembling voice.

"Put a burst on them, keep those suckers down. You," he tapped the PF who still had his own weapon, "you help him." Captain Hook kept watch over the paddies, waiting for one of the VC hiding in them to raise his head. Long minutes passed with nothing happening on the other side. Finally he picked up the radio and called in. They were too far from Fort Cragg for the sounds of their fire fight to be heard there.

"Company's coming. About a reinforced company," he said when he got Sergeant Slaughter.

"How many's that?"

"Was a hundred and twenty-five."

There was a hesitation before Sergeant Slaughter said, "What do you mean, 'was'?"

"I mean there's ten or twelve fewer now."

"Goddam it, Captain Hook," Sergeant Slaughter roared, forgetting radio procedure, even forgetting that he never shouted at the man, or even talked directly to him, "you weren't supposed to engage. Can you move safely?"

"Shit yes. They're screwed down so tight I could walk right up and they wouldn't know I was coming until I pissed in their faces."

Sergeant Slaughter took the handset from his ear and looked at it, wondering what was going on out there. That was Captain Hook, all right, he recognized his voice. But, damn, he'd never heard the man talk so much before. He put the handset back to his head and snapped, "Well don't. Pull back. Get back here most ricky-tick. That's an order. Understand?" He forgot for the moment that he never gave Captain Hook orders, either.

"Roger, wilco. Over." That was the first thing said in proper procedure since Sergeant Slaughter announced himself on the radio.

"Do it. Out." Sergeant Slaughter spun and glared at Socrates, who was sitting looking at him astonished. Socrates never thought he'd hear him shout at or give orders to Captain Hook. "Don't say it. Don't even think it."

"I'm not thinking anything, Sergeant Slaughter."

"You had best not."

Chief Lai picked that moment to arrive. And at that same time Submarine and Mad Greek called in to ask what that was about; they'd only heard Sergeant Slaughter's side of the conversation. He told them Charlie was approaching along the river and to stay in place until they saw someone or had other orders.

The place was chaos for a few moments with Sergeant Slaughter, Socrates, and Hank trying to explain to Chief Lai what was going on; Socrates and Hank getting all the men into their positions; Sergeant Slaughter trying to get Gunny Bryl on the radio; Chief Lai trying to decide what to do about the hamlet officials who had Viet Cong headed their way to take them prisoner.

"What'd he say, Captain Hook?" Sneaky Pete asked when the radio conversation was over.

"He said pull back, but keep these suckers delayed," Captain Hook lied. He was having too much fun to just break off. He looked east and saw a small clump of trees about two hundred yards away on top of the bank; he knew there was a dip in the bank top there. "Sneaky Pete, you see that?" He pointed to the place.

"Yes."

"You and the PFs go there, I'll cover you. Take the radio" He handed back the borrowed carbine. "Now."

Sneaky Pete breathed a quick sigh of relief. He shrugged on the radio's pack, called to the two PFs and signaled them, come with me. They took off on the riverbed, tight against the bank.

Captain Hook watched until they were in full flight, then belly-crawled into the paddies. He pulled himself through the water and rolled over dikes until he was near where he thought the topside platoon was. Then he moved more cautiously to where he thought that platoon's flank was. Where he went was between them and the high bank. If more Cong came over it he'd be trapped between them, but he didn't think any of them would. He rose up and saw his guess was

right, there they were, huddled low behind a dike, none looking his way. He stood, sighted on the nearest crouching figure, KA-BOOM. As fast as he could pump the slide, he fired the other five rounds at the panicking VC, then ran away as fast as he could. He was almost back to the hiccup before anyone shot back at him. Then he was over the bank and running as hard as he could.

So it went for the next twenty minutes. Captain Hook let the VC advance to within his range, then they opened fire to halt them. They shot at any flanking unit to stop its attempt—after he flanked and hurt that first flanking platoon the VC were more cautious, even reluctant to move. The third time they pulled away from the VC they struck out across the paddies to lead them away from Nghia Toi, between there and Hat Reo Toi. It worked.

"I was right about that officer," he told Sneaky Pete sometime during the delaying action. He must have been the company commander and none of the other officers have enough experience to deal with us." He laughed loudly at that, somewhat maniacally.

Sneaky Pete and the PFs cringed at the laugh, but not as much as they would have earlier; they saw how cautious the bad guys were, how what the four of them were doing was effective, and they were in little danger themselves. So far, anyway, they were in little danger.

The radio crackled. It was Sergeant Slaughter demanding to know where they were. Both of the other observation teams were on their way back, they had both sighted VC companies coming.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Chief Lai understood the situation. The VC were coming to Fort Cragg. It was not possible to strip its defenses to dispatch any men to the hamlets to protect them. The orders said for the Viet Cong to take the chiefs and councils prisoner, not to harm them. Possibly they would hurt other people if they arrived in the hamlets and didn't find the officials they sought. Possibly they wouldn't. Hat Reo Toi was to be left alone for now. The company coming along the river was being slowed down, it would have to change its plans. It must change its plans. The Marines could possibly help with Toi Co 1. That left only Toi Co 2 and Toi Mui to worry about. They had to be warned; and both hamlets were small enough to evacuate without panicking the other hamlets. He went to lead those of his people to safety.

Sergeant Slaughter got bad news from Gunny Bryl. The one company available for them as a reaction force was engaged with a sniper, and one of Whiskey 8's patrols reporting an approaching company wasn't good enough to spring it loose. The gunny hadn't been able to scrounge up transportation to get any of the other CAPs to them either. Moreover, nearly every CAP in Whiskey Company was somehow engaged with enemy units at the moment. "I'll get you help as soon as I can, though," he promised in the open before signing off. "And let me know if you need air or big guns." He didn't mention the clerks, cooks, and mechanics he'd promised the day before.

"Sergeant Slaughter, look at them," Submarine said right away when he and his OP team returned. He pointed in a general westerly direction. "We can stop them right there."

Sergeant Slaughter looked and saw what he meant. A reinforced VC company was trotting in the open across the paddies on a tangent that would take them behind Toi Co 1. It was still early enough in the morning that normally most of the Americans and Vietnamese of Whiskey 8 would still be asleep. Evidently the Viet Cong didn't realize they were doing things differently today. "Somebody get on the gun and pin those suckers down!" he roared. "Chickenfucker, drop

some Hotel Echo on them," fire high explosive mortar rounds. He looked around for Socrates and found him standing a few feet away, looking at the enemy company, waiting for orders. "You as good with that thing as you say?"

Socrates looked at him and hefted his M14. "Would I carry an overweight weapon if I wasn't?" he asked grimly. The M14's official maximum effective range was 500 yards, but it was as accurate at 600 yards as the M16 was at 350, and had more one-shot killing power at its maximum effective range than the M16 did at its.

"Then take some of those suckers out."

"Aye-aye." He ran to the bunker in the west corner.

The machine gun started rattling, Submarine and Killer Kowalski were operating it. The leading Viet Cong were tossed aside by the first long burst. Chickenfucker had the mortar aimed and KA-BOOMed a round at the VC. He watched to see where it hit to check his aim and made an adjustment when he saw the fountain splash up twenty-five yards beyond them. "Get someone over here to hump for me," he shouted. A mortar needed three men to fire; a humper to take the rounds out of their packing tubes and hand them to the gunner, a gunner to aim and drop the rounds down the tube, and a spotter to watch where the rounds hit and give aiming directions. Chickenfucker figured he could be gunner and spotter, but he needed someone to get the rounds ready for him if he was going to put out any kind of effective fire. The two PFs assigned to the mortar ran to help him.

Socrates lay in a prone position on top of the corner bunker, just as though he was on the firing line on the qualification range. He wrapped the sling around his left arm to steady his aim, the same way as on the range. He squinted through the peep sight aperture and saw a tiny standing figure through it. He brought the focus of his eye back to the front sight blade, held it high on the blur of that tiny figure and gently squeezed the trigger until the rifle banged and bucked against his shoulder. When the muzzle came back down from the recoil he didn't see that figure anymore. He estimated the range at nearly six hundred yards; this was the first time he'd ever fired a carefully aimed shot at that distance. On a good day on the qualification range, he knew he could put ten out of ten rounds into a twenty inch bullseye at 500 yards—and at least five of them in the ten inch "X" ring inside the bull. There was a good chance he hit the man he'd shot at. He looked for another target, but nobody was standing anymore.

Submarine was putting out careful twenty round bursts and giving

the machine gun's barrel several seconds in between to cool down. The splashes in the paddies showed he was putting the bursts where the VC company was. Chickenfucker had a PF handing him ammo now and was walking a steady string of mortar rounds along the line of the enemy company. His hits were more irregular than Submarine's, he wasn't as good with the mortar.

"Everybody not firing at those people out there, get into your own positions," Sergeant Slaughter yelled over the fire. It was a necessary order, most of the Marines and PFs were standing in the open area between the house and the wall watching. Reluctantly, they scattered to their assigned positions.

Socrates scanned the paddies through his peep sight, looking for someone to shoot at. He knew how small a head would look at that distance, a tiny dot, almost impossible to see. It would be extremely difficult to hit so small a target at that range. He had his battle sights set, so he wouldn't be sure of his aiming point even if he saw someone. Battle sights for an M14 are where the aiming point is set for three hundred yards. An aimed bullet fired using that setting will not rise above the height of a standing man along its entire trajectory. He saw someone, a tiny dark dot above a paddy. He thought for a moment, to remember who was in the bunker he was on.

"Beast," he said, remembering, "spot for me." He took careful aim a hair's breadth above the dot and squeezed the trigger.

"You hit the side of a dike," Beast shouted, telling him where his bullet hit.

He looked through the peep sight again and saw the dot in the same place. "You see somebody looking over the dike near it?" he asked.

There was a slight pause while Beast looked. "I call it a finger to the right of where you hit."

A finger to the right, he missed the standing man by several feet at that range. He picked a new aiming point to the right of the head-dot and a touch higher than before. Squeeze.

"Bingo!" Beast shouted. "You're a number fucking one sniper, Socrates."

Socrates didn't allow himself time to enjoy the good shot, he might have to think about the fact that he'd just killed a man. He looked for another target.

The machine gun and mortar had the VC well pinned down in the paddies. For the moment, at least, it was a stand off with that

unit—edge to the Junkyard Dogs. Sporadic fire came from the paddies, but Fort Cragg was well beyond their accurate range and they weren't aiming anyway. The few rounds that hit inside the compound thudded harmlessly into the dirt.

Then Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete and their two PFs pounded around the corner of Toi Co 1, racing to the main gate of Fort Cragg. Sergeant Slaughter saw them coming and ran to meet them.

The four men were sweating and panting heavily. Captain Hook was grinning like a kid on Christmas morning who got everything he asked for—and no clothes or other junky stuff.

"There's a company coming," he gasped as soon as he caught enough breath to talk. "Used to be a reinforced company. We led them away from Nghia Toi."

"How close?"

"A hundred, two hundred yards. I'm not sure how fast they followed after we turned the corner." He grinned wider. "Probably stopped when we went out of sight. They probably think we're laying there waiting for them to show themselves."

Sergeant Slaughter used his binoculars to scan the paddies where they had the company pinned down. He saw the thin whip of one radio antenna. "I wonder how good their communications are?" he asked rhetorically.

"Not too good," Captain Hook answered. "I only saw one radio in the company chasing us, and I killed it." He hefted his shotgun.

Sergeant Slaughter looked at him and thought of how close those more than a hundred enemy soldiers had to be for him to hit their radio with his shotgun. Then he looked at him in awe and fear. Captain Hook never talked this much. He must really be enjoying himself. Everyone in Fort Cragg was frightened, except Captain Hook. His enthusiasm for combat was unsettling.

Sergeant Slaughter recovered almost instantly. "Take your positions," he ordered. "We've got one company pinned down in the paddies over there, and another coming up behind us. The shit's going to hit real quick."

"Aye aye, Sergeant Slaughter," Captain Hook said and ran to take over the machine gun. He looked like he wanted to salute. Sneaky Pete and the two PFs looked more like they were about to throw up; from fear or their exertion in the heat. They headed for their places; Submarine fired a burst to show Captain Hook exactly where the pinned down company was, then darted to his assigned bunker.

The PF feeding the belt for Captain Hook's machine gun shouted something. Socrates heard and turned to see. A man was running across the paddies. He was far away, but had been hidden by Toi Co 1 until now. He was headed toward the pinned down company; a messenger. A line of orange glowing tracers arched out from the gun toward the running man, found him, threw him away. The gun stopped, waited for another target.

Socrates looked through tubed fingers, sharply focusing his sight where the pinned unit lay in the paddies. He thought he saw movement going north from it, but the movement was low against the dike and intermittent—it could be nothing, it could be a messenger keeping down for safety rather than standing up for speed. He thought it was probably a messenger. He looked around for Sergeant Slaughter but didn't see him. "Beast," he shouted, "get on the horn, tell Sergeant Slaughter I don't have any more targets, ask if he wants me to stay here.

Sergeant Slaughter was checking the positions in back of the fort. Rodin handed him the phone.

"Lemme talk to the man," he said when he got the message. Beast handed the phone out through the bunker's aperture. Sergeant Slaughter asked for a detailed report.

Socrates told him about everybody staying down, then added, "Charlie's using runners to establish communications between the company in the paddies and Captain Hook's company."

"If you get a target can you hit him from your bunker?"

"Yes."

"Then move," Sergeant Slaughter replied. "And keep me posted." There was nothing he could do with the information right now, but it was a good thing to know. He considered for a few seconds, then ordered the gun and mortar to cease firing until they had visual targets. No point in wasting ammunition they were probably going to need later. He went back to checking the lines.

Several minutes later Socrates thought he again saw movement of a messenger crawling behind a dike, from right to left this time. Still not enough of a target for him to fire at.

The morning was unnaturally silent. The only noise any of the Marines or PFs in the compound made was Sergeant Slaughter on the radio in the newly made bunker inside the house talking to company headquarters, giving an update on their situation, and asking if there was any good news on reinforcements or help. But his voice didn't

carry outside. No sounds came from Toi Co 1, it could have been deserted from all Socrates could see or hear from it. No dogs barked anywhere. The birds and lizards didn't cry. He didn't even hear an insect buzzing. The silence increased the tension. He wondered how long it could last.

It didn't last long. The woods behind Fort Cragg came to less than a hundred yards from the back wire and wall. Suddenly that edge erupted into a wall of rifle and automatic rifle fire, and the wall of fire was studded with the blasts of six rockets.

It may have been that the Viet Cong firing the rockets weren't very good shots, either that or the rockets themselves weren't very well stabilized. The hits were all close to the two corner bunkers and the two along the back of the compound, but there were no direct hits. Some debris was kicked into the bunkers Mad Greek and Rodin occupied, each with two PFs, but there were no injuries. The VC stayed in the woods, some of their muzzle flashes were barely visible, but none were clear enough to aim at.

Mad Greek picked up his phone and cranked its handle. "Don't fire," he shouted. "Don't fire unless you have a target." Mister Spook, in the corner bunker on his left with three more PFs, was the only one who picked up and obeyed. Rodin had a radio, the four PFs in the other corner didn't know if they should do what he said and kept up a rattling fire at the trees.

Sergeant Slaughter, in the CP bunker, heard and used the radio to relay the message to Rodin. Hank used the phone to tell the PFs in the south corner bunker to obey Mad Greek until he told them otherwise. They ceased fire.

The fourteen Marines and PFs facing the fire from the woods hunkered down safe. The rest of them watched their sides. For three long minutes the VC in the woods kept it up, hammered away mostly with semiautomatic fire, they fired only an occasional automatic burst, there were no more rockets after the initial barrage.

Then Socrates shouted into his phone, "They're moving." The company that had been pinned down in the paddies since the beginning was up and advancing on line toward Fort Cragg. "Captain Hook, make them get back down," he ordered. "Sneaky Pete, keep a watch for the ones who followed you." Captain Hook, on the main gate, and Sneaky Pete, in a corner bunker, both had phones.

Sergeant Slaughter agreed that making the advancing company get back down was a real good idea he called Chickenfucker on the phone

and ordered him to drop a few mortar rounds onto them.

Socrates sighted in on the line with his M14, remembered how far off his sights were at that range, picked a target, and squeezed off a round.

"You numba one," one of the two PFs with him shouted, and slapped his shoulder. The shot had found its target. He shifted his sights and fired at another VC. Another hit. The company made less than seventy-five yards before the machine gun, mortar, and Socrates' sniping caused too many casualties and they had to stop their advance.

"Here they come!" Mad Greek screamed. His voice was loud enough he didn't need to bother with a phone or radio, everybody in the compound heard him.

The company that had been firing from the woods behind Fort Cragg was charging across the less than a hundred yards of open area. There were more than a hundred of them. Six more rockets lanced through their line at the defenses, hit in the barbed wire and in the wall sections, made holes in them; kicked up dirt and debris, obscured the vision of the defenders.

The three Marines and eleven PFs on that side opened up on the enemy, but they could see too little and there were too many VC coming.

Sergeant Slaughter cranked the phone and held both it and the radio handset to his face. "Mortar, pop some at them out back. Mad Greek, if you can see, give him fire directions. Everybody else stay put and keep your eyes out." He hung up and turned to Doc Holliday. "Doc, stay on comm." Then to Hank and his medic, "You come with me." He led Hank and his one inside man to the back of the big house. They poked their rifles out of windows and added their fire to try to stop the assault from the rear.

The fire from seventeen rifles and the mortar wasn't enough to stop the charge, none of the defenders could see enough to make their fire count for much while the VC rushed across the open. But the rockets hadn't torn enough holes in the defenses for the attackers to get through quickly, and the defenders could see those few holes. There, they were able to make their fire count. Whistles blew and the VC beat a hasty retreat back to the cover of the woods. They left a dozen bodies behind on the wire, blocking the holes. Once the smoke and dust cleared, four more bodies were seen laying broken in the open.

Sergeant Slaughter returned to the CP bunker in the main room and got on the phone and radio. First he asked for a report from the

back wall. There were no friendly casualties. The same clouds of dust and smoke that prevented the defenders from seeing well enough to hurt the VC during their charge prevented the VC from seeing the small openings in the front of the bunkers, so they'd had no targets to aim at. Then he asked for reports from the other sides. Socrates reported the company in the paddies was down, but a little closer, and had lost a few men in its attempted advance. There was still no sign of the company that Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete had delayed and drawn away from Nghia Toi. No one else had anything to report.

The Viet Cong in the woods fired two more six-rocket barrages, followed by a heavy fusillade of automatic rifle fire. All of the rockets were aimed at the wire and walls, none at the bunkers. The resulting smoke was too thick for Mad Greek or any of the other men on that side to see if the VC were advancing again.

In front, Socrates tunneled his hands in front of his eyes and scanned the paddies. What he saw made him swear. He got on the phone. "They're coming again," he reported. "Maneuvering by squads." A third of a mile away the Viet Cong company was surging in small groups over the dikes and running forward crouched low, exposing as little of themselves as possible.

"You and Captain Hook slow them down," Sergeant Slaughter ordered.

Socrates tried to pick targets, but it was difficult to draw any kind of sight picture on the distant figures running low from dike to dike. Captain Hook started putting out careful bursts of five to ten rounds, trying to make each burst count. Many of them did.

In back, the automatic fire eased off to a steady flurry of semiautomatic fire. Slowly the smoke cleared until the defenders were able to see no one was coming their way. They stayed down, protected from the enemy's fire.

Sergeant Slaughter called Company to give a situation report. He asked for air support; helicopter gunships would be more selective than artillery, cause less damage to the peoples' rice paddies. Gunny Bryl said he'd try and would get back to him as soon as he had word one way or the other.

The company in the paddies kept advancing, it had now closed the gap to about 400 yards. The fire put on them by Socrates and Captain Hook had little effect in slowing them down, though they were causing casualties. The company in back kept up its light volume of fire. Where was the other company?



The back wall was suddenly hit by eight more rockets. Eight, not six like all the previous barrages. Was this the last of their rockets Mad Greek wondered? Suddenly all the small arms fire coming in that direction shifted to the right side of the defensive wall.

"Mister Spook, they're coming at us," Mad Greek shouted over the phone. He couldn't see through the smoke, but he made an educated guess of the meaning of the shift in fire concentration. He told the PFs in the other corner to fire across the open area, not at the trees opposite them—and hoped he said it clearly enough for the little people to understand. Sergeant Slaughter relayed the command to Rodin. The fourteen men in the back of the fort blindly concentrated their fire on the left half of their line.

Sergeant Slaughter again took Hank and the PF medic to the back of the house and fired through the windows.

The company in the paddies jumped up and raced forward another hundred meters. They did it quickly enough, ducking and weaving, that Socrates and Captain Hook weren't able to get many of them.

"Beast, Killer," Socrates said on his phone, "Next time, they'll be in your range." The VC in the paddies were now only three hundred yards away. The next time they surged forward eleven rifles and the machine gun could be brought to bear on them.

In the back, Mad Greek had guessed right. Half of the Viet Cong in the trees stayed there, putting out automatic rifle fire in an attempt to keep the heads of the defenders down. The other half, more than fifty men, charged under their covering fire and the smoke from the last barrage of rockets. This time the seventeen rifles pouring into them caused damage. The VC started dropping; some hit, others trying to get out of the way of bullets that barely missed them. By the time they covered half the distance to the holes blasted by the rockets in the wire and walls, only twenty were still up and moving forward. Officers' whistles trilled, calling them back to the cover of the woods. The half of the company that stayed behind kept up its fire.

"Cease fire, cease fire!" Mad Greek shouted. They did, even Sergeant Slaughter obeyed the corporal's order. Through the smoke they heard the noise of bodies being moved. "Mister Spook, let's do them," he shouted. Bullets flew straight ahead from seven rifles to the sounds. The dragging stopped. Voices came to them, unclear because of the distance, then there were more dragging noises. The Marines and PFs in the two positions fired again and the dragging stopped once more.

The smoke started to clear, through a rift in it Mad Greek saw VC slipping out of the woods to drag downed men to cover. He sighted on one of them and shot him down. The others withdrew. More of the smoke cleared. Before there had been four bodies laying in the open, now there were ten; a few of those ten writhed in agony.

"Any of those little fuckers come out to get their buddies, we put them down," Mad Greek told Mister Spook over the phone.

"Right," Mister Spook said back.

Several minutes passed with no movement or fire from either of the assaulting companies. Sergeant Slaughter took that opportunity to call Gunny Bryl again. Whiskey 8 had suffered no casualties yet, but had inflicted more than thirty known on the enemy, higher-higher didn't consider their situation critical. Air support wasn't available for them.

Sergeant Slaughter grimaced and asked acidly, "Will they think it's critical when those little fucks get inside the wire?" He asked Bryl to check on the long guns of the one artillery battery in range.

Suddenly, three loud bangs came from the paddies. Seconds later whistles sounded coming at the fort, then three rocket propelled grenades crashed into it; one on the southeast wall, one on the northwest near the gate, the third behind the bunkers defending against the company in the woods. Everybody huddled down in their bunkers when they heard the whistling. They got up and looked out after the explosions. They saw three men, low in the paddies, half silhouetted against the distant sky, preparing to fire again.

Socrates aimed at one of them and pulled his trigger just as that man fired his second RPG. One of his PFs watched. "You hit," the PF said. But that rocket grenade was on its way. Again the three shots were spread out. Socrates looked again, but this time he didn't see the grenadiers until they popped up to fire their reloaded launchers. The one he'd hit was replaced. One shot from Socrates had taught the grenadiers to keep down while they reloaded, he didn't have time to aim before the RPGs were fired and the grenadiers ducked behind the dike again.

These grenadiers knew their weapons well. They fired at a rate of four rounds per minute. Their objective areas remained divided between the two western walls and the back of the southeast wall. There wasn't enough of a concentration to raise a smoke and dust cloud like the rockets had done in the back, but there was enough to keep everybody down. Socrates didn't have a chance to aim at any of

them. Once the RPGs were fired he had to duck and stay down until they hit. When he looked out again they were ready to shoot and he didn't have time to aim before they had fired and ducked back down again themselves.

When he looked back up after the fourth salvo he saw the company taking cover—they were twenty-five yards closer than before. And another twenty-five yards closer after the next salvo. The three grenadiers stayed where they were and fired over the advancing company to cover its movement.

"They're using the fire to cover their advance," he shouted into his field phone. "Next time they shoot, let's put some fire out there."

"You heard the man. Do it," Sergeant Slaughter said on the phone, backing up his order. He repeated it on the radio for the positions on that side that didn't have phones.

The next salvo hit and almost instantly the four Marines and eleven PFs able to bring their rifles to bear in that direction, fired at the still advancing VC. Captain Hook fired a burst from his machine gun before he had to duck from an RPG coming at his bunker. The advance from the west was slowed down but not stopped.

They still didn't know where the company that pursued Captain Hook and Sneaky Pete was, or what it was doing. The company in the woods stayed where they were and maintained a light suppressive fire while the company in the paddies slowly advanced under cover of its RPGs. When they were less than a hundred yards away, the Junkyard Dogs found out where the third company was.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

The entrance to Toi Co 1 was seventy-five yards from the main gate of Fort Cragg, a little offset from directly across from it. The entire northwest side of the Marine compound faced the hedge fence around the hamlet. Now, from that close range, a hundred rifles and automatic rifles blasted at the northwest side of the fort. They only had five targets to fire at; the machine gun bunker on the gate, the two corner bunkers, and the two in between. Bullets smacked and thudded into the sandbag walls of the bunkers, thunked into the wood beam overhead supports, twanged away in ricochet, wizz-buzzed into the bunkers through their firing apertures. The company in the paddies ran ahead until it was only fifty yards away and resumed its fire. Only Submarine and the two PFs with him and the four PFs in the south corner bunker were able to shoot at them when they ran forward; the others who could bring their weapons to bear in that direction were pinned down by the fire from Toi Co 1. The company in the woods behind them increased the volume of its fire.

Chickenfucker fired the mortar. Submarine directed him, but the VC weren't in one place long enough for him to get more than two rounds off before they were moving again. Then that entire company opened up on the three bunkers defending the southwest side and Submarine had to duck down to avoid being hit, he couldn't see to direct the mortar. Chickenfucker could no longer stand up to see where his rounds hit either, so he stopped firing.

Socrates pressed himself into the front wall of his bunker, squeezed his face against it, pulled up his right shoulder to protect the side of his head from ricochets. One of his PFs rolled into a ball in a front corner, the other flattened himself against a side wall. He heard the staccato of bullets hitting the bunker. The sounds came in the bunker, reverberated around inside it, joined with the reports from the rifles firing from Toi Co 1, drowned out all other sounds, went on unceasingly, increased in volume until they filled the world, seemed they'd never end, became the entire universe.

Thousands of rounds smashed into the bunkers or swept across the

compound from three directions, nobody in it could move. Inside, Sergeant Slaughter was on the radio desperately calling for air support. Air still wasn't available.

"I can get you artillery now," Gunny Bryl told him. "Tell me where you want it and I'll have them put it there."

Artillery gunners seldom fire at a target they can see, they rely on observers who can see the target and where they are hitting. The observer radios in aiming corrections which bring the rounds in on target. These "forward observers" are normally members of the artillery unit doing the firing. Fort Cragg didn't have an observer assigned to it. But Sergeant Slaughter knew how to call in artillery, nearly every Marine infantry NCO did. He knew that occasionally fire directions got garbled in transmission and the rounds landed in the wrong place. In this case, he had to tell Gunny Bryl and the gunny would relay the directions, compounding the possibility of mistakes. A third of the attacking VC were in Toi Co 1, another third of them were next to it. They couldn't be fired on at all because the 105mm rounds would hit in the hamlet, injure the people, destroy their property.

"Negative on the long guns," he said. "We need air." Helicopter gunships could get in close enough and low enough to see their targets—they wouldn't hit inside the hamlet by accident. Even the fast fliers, the F4 Phantoms and A4 Skyhawks, as fast as they flew, could see their targets, they could bomb the VC in the paddies and the woods, they wouldn't hit the hamlet either. "Negative on big guns," he repeated.

Gunny Bryl wanted to call in the artillery anyway, but he couldn't, not unless the man in charge on the scene said to.

There was a break in the storm of bullets. Fire still came, but less than before. Socrates noticed the abating of the death-roar that surrounded him and unglued himself from the wall. He looked at his PFs and went into action. One of them was holding his arm and moaning. Red ran wetly through his fingers.

The fire may have lessened, but many of the men doing the shooting were now able to put rounds into the bunker apertures, so the Marines and PFs weren't able to look out without getting hit. Killer Kowalski found that out the hard way when he tried. A bullet hit a sandbag at an angle, flattened and spun away. It hit him in the side of his head. The bullet hit sideways, smashing instead of penetrating. It shattered his temple and sent fragments of bone into his brain, killing

him instantly. One of his PFs fumbled with the radio, and reported it.

Sergeant Slaughter swore and pounded his fist into the sandbag wall of the CP. Then he got on the phone and radio and asked for a casualty report.

Socrates reported one PF wounded in his bunker, but alive and conscious. He had bandaged the arm; the bleeding was stanchd. There were no other casualties in the compound. Yet.

In the gate bunker, Captain Hook let loose with a long burst from his machine gun. He raked the hedge fence from one end to the other. He didn't look out, just pointed where he thought the hedge met the ground and sprayed. He didn't want to hit any civilians, but had to do something to the enemy and that was the only direction he could shoot in. An RPG hit next to the aperture and fragments hit the gun's barrel, bent it out of shape, and knocked it off its tripod. The belt jammed in the receiver when the gun fell. He went to work clearing the jam. If he got it cleared fast enough he could change the barrel. If he couldn't clear it, there was no point in changing barrels.

Whistles trilled and the fire rose back to a crescendo.

Socrates huddled as deep as he could get, wishing there was something he could do to fight back. Sand sprays from close hits and cracks of bullets flying through and thudding into the back wall were constant reminders of that. All he could do was wait until something happened. Suddenly he heard a difference in the enemy fire. He scuttled to the right side of the aperture and raised his head to look at the sharpest angle he could to the west. He grabbed the phone. "They're coming at us from the paddies," he shouted. "Submarine, get them!"

The few men able to shoot at the onrushing VC in the paddies did. But there were too few of them to do much damage in the time it took that company to reach the compound.

The companies in the hamlet and the woods kept up their fire. The company in the rear soon had to cease fire so they wouldn't hit their own men. The one in Toi Co 1 could continue shooting, leading their comrades on their way through the compound.

When they got inside, the Marines and PFs were able to see them again and started shooting at them, this time many of their bullets counted. But there were far too many VC. They crashed forward like breakers on a beach and a few got close to the bunkers and threw hand grenades into them. Submarine grabbed a grenade and threw it back out. It exploded next to a VC who was about to throw another one in,

it killed him and another VC running next to him. Then the wave was past them.

Beast kicked a grenade into the grenade sump dug into the floor of the bunker. The sump did its job, it contained most of the fragments. But it didn't do much about the noise or concussion. Everybody in that bunker went down, dazed. They weren't able to defend themselves against the next grenade that skittered in and lodged behind an ammo crate.

The bunker on the south corner, with four PFs in it, was completely bypassed by VC overrunning the mortar bunker and heading for the big house. Chickenfucker and the PFs with him were killed.

Submarine dove halfway out of the entrance to his bunker and shot at them from the rear. The two PFs in the bunker with Killer Kowalski's body did the same thing—so did the men in the bunker that was bypassed. Rodin, on the southeast side, saw what was happening and joined in to trap them in a crossfire. The VC survivors gained the house and fought from the ground at its side. A few managed to climb through the windows, others died trying.

The few inside ran around trying to find the command post, the radios, anything, anyone to kill or destroy. There was only one way they could run, into the big room. Sergeant Slaughter and the three men with him were behind their sandbags and blasted them away as they ran out of the two fire team rooms they were in.

The company in the woods assaulted again. They didn't fire as they ran this time, their commander guessed the defenders were distracted by the fighting inside the fort. He was right and they were more than halfway across before anyone looked back and saw them. Then it was too late to stop their charge. They had to slow down and bunch up to make it through the breaks in the wire and the wall and it turned into their third bloody charge and left the company at half the strength it had when the attack started an eternity earlier. But they were now inside and this one company alone outnumbered the defenders. They threw grenades into the bunkers as they ran past.

Mad Greek threw a grenade back out the aperture. Rodin scrambled the rest of the way out of the bunker he was half out of anyway, and rose into the middle of two mobs converging around the sides of his bunker. A grenade thrown in behind him killed one of the two PFs trying to scramble out. Mister Spook was still stiff from his wound. He tried to throw a grenade back out and missed. It exploded

and his body absorbed its entire blast. One of the PFs with him stuck himself half way out the entrance and started shooting at the black clad men he saw running all over the compound. For the first time the three PFs in the lone bunker in the middle of the northeast wall were able to get into the action. One of them lay in the entrance and fired at the running VC. One of the others in that bunker crouched low over him and fired as well.

The defenders on the northwest side turned to the entrances of their bunkers and started shooting at the men in their compound. Except Captain Hook, who was still trying to clear the machine gun jam, and the wounded PF with Socrates, Socrates told him to keep watch on Toi Co 1. That PF didn't look out the aperture, he was already hit once and didn't want to get hit again—he leaned against the wall under the opening and listened to the raging sounds of the battle, hoping he could hear if the company in Toi Co 1 started running toward them.

The two Viet Cong companies were now all over the inside of the fort. They did the same thing it seemed they always did when they got inside an American defensive position—they ran riot, totally unorganized, no one seemed to have an objective, no one seemed to be in charge. It was a wild, chaotic melee. The VC in Toi Co 1 had to stop shooting, they wouldn't be able to avoid hitting their own people now.

Socrates' wounded PF told him.

Socrates pulled back from the bunker entrance and looked across the short open area. All the battle sounds were behind him. He watched for a few seconds that seemed like minutes. Then the hedge fence came alive as men burst through it and ran, screaming, toward the fort wall.

"This way," he yelled, and started shooting at them. BOOM, his M14 went, and a running man somersaulted. He shifted aim, BOOMed again, and another fell. Next to him he heard the rattling of the two PFs' carbines. Among them they knocked down ten of the charging Viet Cong before they reached the wall and the gate. A few more VC went down getting into the fort. Socrates pulled his bayonet from its scabbard and fixed it to his rifle. There was going to be hand to hand combat.

There had been about 425 men in the three Viet Cong companies. The company that came in along the river lost about a fifth of its strength to Captain Hook and his delaying action. Then lost another



fifteen men getting into the fort. The company in the woods lost half its strength by the time it gained its objective. The company in the paddies lost thirty men crossing them. Ten more had died getting into the big house and trying to take the command post. At least that many more were down, scattered around the compound. Overall the Viet Cong force had already lost forty percent of its initial strength.

But the defenders had a dozen down out of a strength of 46 men. The odds against Whiskey 8 were horrendous—facing more than two hundred and fifty men. Except. . .

Except the defenders were protected by their bunkers and organized, the attackers were disorganized and in the open.

Each bunker, except the west corner where a second grenade had exploded after the first one dazed everyone, had one or two men in its entrance firing at the men milling in the open. Sergeant Slaughter and Lieutenant Lai were shooting through the window in the CP. Everywhere, Viet Cong soldiers were being hit, falling, pitching to the ground. The odds weren't getting anywhere near even, but they were becoming less severe.

Then someone started shouting orders. Then someone else, then someone else, then someone else. Soon the entire compound was ringing with the commanding voices of the VC company commanders, platoon leaders, squad leaders, shouting orders to their men. The VC started getting organized. Systematically, they tried to rush the bunkers.

Socrates saw a five man squad pull itself together at the near corner of the big house and race toward him. BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. He fired three shots as fast as he could, moving the muzzle each time. Two men went down. A PF was crouched over his shoulder, cranking out rounds with his carbine. One more dropped. The remaining two turned and ran to the cover of the corner of the house—right into fire from another bunker.

A flicker of movement in the corner of his eye made Socrates turn his head to the left. Another squad was almost on him. He barely had time to fire one shot before the lead VC in that squad threw a grenade at him. It bounced off his back and he scrambled out of the bunker. He didn't think about it, he just assumed the grenade went inside and he had to get out, into the open. The PF over him dove away from the bunker. The grenade went off inside, the wounded man didn't have time to get out.

Socrates swung his rifle like a quarterstaff. The bayonet slashed

one man across the chest, he felt bone breaking and splitting under it. Immediately, he drew it back and sent another VC tumbling with a solid hit to his face with the butt of his rifle. Another lunged at him with his bayonet. Socrates shot him. The PF at his side parried strikes with his rifle, shot attackers when he could. Suddenly they were standing there alone in the middle of a pile of bodies.

Socrates glanced around quickly and saw a squad rushing the machine gun bunker. Two of the VC were shooting at the entrance, keeping the defenders inside. The other two held grenades ready to throw. Socrates threw his rifle into his shoulder and snapped off two rounds at the men with the grenades. He hit them both. One dropped his grenade; the other tried to crawl to the bunker, Socrates shot him again. He looked for the other two, but they were hidden on the bunker's other side. The grenade dropped by the first one went off, followed by the other grenade.

Socrates tapped the PF and ran to the gun bunker. He found the two VC at the far front corner, trying to angle themselves around to shoot into the aperture, unable to get the angle because of the fire coming out of it. They shot them.

Socrates held his head near the entrance and shouted, "Outside, Captain Hook, they'll get you in there."

Captain Hook and two PFs scrambled out. Captain Hook had his shotgun in his hands, he hadn't been able to unclear the jammed machine gun. One of the PFs was bleeding from his shoulder and leg, but he held his carbine ready and he looked like he was ready to fight, to sell his life dearly rather than lay in the bunker and die.

The two Americans looked around and saw the same thing at the same time. They ran to it with the three PFs following closely. One VC squad lay on the ground, facing the corner bunker where Sneaky Pete was, shooting at its entrance, keeping the men it from fighting back. A second squad was scuttling around the bunker to get at its other opening.

As they ran they fired on the moving squad, trying to knock it out before it could do anything to the men inside. They sent three of them sprawling. The others broke away and dove over a section of wall. Then the Marines turned their attention to the squad pinning down the bunker. The PFs joined in with them. Thirty rounds chewed up the ground around their targets, slammed into the bodies, killed that squad.

"They've got the right idea," Socrates gasped, looking toward the VC who took cover behind the wall. Captain Hook only grunted. The

bunkers were useless now, they only served as traps for their occupants who could only fight in two directions and could be pinned down too easily.

They ran to the bunker to get Sneaky Pete and whoever was with him. Sneaky Pete was wounded in the side, but not too badly to move and fight. One of his PFs had a sucking chest wound. They couldn't take time to patch him up. He'd probably die.

"There," Captain Hook said and pumped his magazine dry at the northeast bunker.

Socrates looked in time to see a squad successfully throw grenades into the bunker. The three Americans and five Vietnamese fired at the VC who killed that bunker and killed them.

Socrates looked at Captain Hook, he wasn't sure he'd follow orders right now. Captain Hook looked back at him, he looked like he was waiting for something. Orders? "Over the wall," Socrates shouted. They went over it around the corner from where the VC had, Captain Hook was over it before Socrates was. They lay there for a moment to catch their breath and reload.

When his shotgun was ready, Captain Hook low crawled to the corner. He didn't look to make sure the VC were still there, he didn't want to take the chance of being seen. Instead, he gathered himself and leaped, rolling past the corner, firing as he went. He rolled into the barbed wire beyond the corner and looked at the three blasted bodies he saw where he shot. When he pulled himself away from the wire he was bleeding from a dozen places where the barbs pierced his back and legs. Then he got back behind the corner and watched along that wall, guarding one of the approaches to where the other men he was with were hiding.

Socrates crawled to a break in the wall and peered around it. He saw furious fighting going on around the bunker Mad Greek was in—but the fighting wasn't aimed at the entrance. Mad Greek and the PFs with him had gotten out and were fighting from its front, using the bunker's mass for cover. A knot of VC were on the main house's veranda, some of them were shooting in through the window. He couldn't tell if anyone was shooting back. To the right he saw no action around any of the bunkers on the northwest wall. His and Captain Hook's bunkers were empty; he knew Killer Kowalski was dead and had to assume so were Beast and all the PFs who'd been with them. All the other bunkers were blocked from his view. He wasn't thinking now, he had no plan in his mind, no idea how they were going

to survive this battle. He was operating on instinct.

"This way," he shouted, and started crawling to the next corner, where Mister Spook had died. He glanced back once and saw Captain Hook herding the PFs along, not letting any of them lag behind.

Past the next bunker, which now only held corpses, they saw a VC platoon laying on the ground shooting at Mad Greek and his two PFs. Beyond them another platoon was keeping Rodin and his men down—they were also behind their bunker, using it for cover.

Captain Hook held his shotgun ready, he looked like he expected Socrates to tell him to fire.

"Let's do them," Socrates ordered. "On three. One, two, three."

As one, they rose high enough to fire over the wall. Their bullets raked the VC platoon in front of Mad Greek. Mad Greek and his two PFs were able to rise up higher and add their fire.

The VC screamed. Some of them turned to shoot at this new threat, others tried to get away. But there was really nowhere for them to go. The farther platoon heard the change in the battle to their left. Some of them switched off from their own battle and into this new fight. One of them, with an automatic rifle, shot at Mad Greek and his PFs. He hit all three of them.

But now two of the PFs in the south corner bunker, they hadn't gotten out while they had the chance, were able to start shooting at them. That platoon crumpled. A few of the platoon's survivors managed to make it to the safety of the mortar bunker.

"Cease fire," Socrates shouted. He rose to a crouch and signaled. The others followed him as he continued around the wall to Mad Greek. This time, he didn't look to see what Captain Hook was doing.

Mad Greek was busy tying field bandages onto his PFs and ignoring his own wounds. He bled profusely from his scalp and moved his left arm gingerly. Neither PF looked as badly hurt as he did.

"Hang on, Mad Greek," Socrates said. He found two field bandages to put on him. "Can you walk?" Rodin and one PF joined them while he worked.

Mad Greek hawked into the dirt. "Shit, man, I'm hit in the fucking head. Ain't nothing wrong with my legs. What do you want to do?"

Quickly, for the first time consciously thinking about what they were doing, Socrates sketched out their mission. "Everything's clear all the way from the west corner around to here. We go the rest of the way and clear it. The rest of them are on the porch trying to get in.

When we get to Submarine, we join forces with them and blow those bad bastards away from the flank." The continuing gunfire from the other side of the house told him the desperate holding action by the four men inside was still going on.

"There's a few of them in the mortar pit, gotta take them out first," Rodin said. He signaled his PF and they bolted away. Socrates tried to call them back, but they ignored him.

"Let's go," he ordered, and led the rest of his men around the wall. Four more PFs came out of the corner bunker and joined them when they got there.

They watched Rodin and his lone PF creep up on the mortar pit. Rodin lobbed a grenade into it. The grenade flew back out, but exploded in the air above it. Rodin and the PF charged, rifles blasting. Satisfied they'd cleared the mortar pit, they stood on its edge for a moment looking into it. Then they ran to the wall and over.

Moaning came from from Submarine's bunker when they reached it.

"Yo, Submarine. It's me, Socrates," he said before lifting himself up to look inside. A PF, so heavily smeared with blood he couldn't tell where he wasn't wounded, "Submarine, he dead." the PF struggled to talk. "I hurt." Then he collapsed.

Socrates swore, but didn't let that slow him down in lining up his men. Eighteen Marines and PFs, seven of them wounded, knelt against the wall, waiting for his order. "They're on the porch, that's where we put our fire. They're bunched up, we'll wipe them the fuck out. Is everybody ready?" He looked at Captain Hook, who was on the other end of the short line. Captain Hook nodded, his expression was angelic. Socrates steeled himself, then shouted, "Now," and popped up to blast at the VC on the veranda. The others rose as one with him.

He didn't see what he expected. About twenty VC were still on the porch. The rest of them had separated into two groups, one going around the house to climb in windows and take it that way. Other VC were outside the wall, coming toward them.

The opening fusillade took out most the VC still on the porch, but the the other two groups turned toward them and charged. There were too many of them, too well organized, too close to stop. One aimed his rifle straight at him.

I'm dead, Socrates thought. Forty men were thirty yards away to his left front, charging at him, firing. Forty more, twenty yards farther

away, were coming from his right front. His sleeve snapped as a bullet ripped through it. *I'm dead.*

It doesn't happen to everybody, but some men in combat find themselves in a situation where they know they're dead. They know the only reason they know that they're dead but still breathing is the bullet hovering right there, an instant away from tearing their hearts or brains or other vital organs into death, hasn't hit them yet. But it will, just give it a second or so, it'll happen.

So what does a dead man do?

Socrates did the only thing a dead man can do: he fought. Every time he pointed his rifle and pulled the trigger, whoever he pointed at fell, dead or wounded. How many he shot didn't matter, there were too many of them, they were too close. He was dead. Fuck it, he was taking as many of them with him as possible. He saw a mass of small men swarm over Rodin, carry the giant to the ground. Some of them were thrown away, broken, before they did. Not all who went down with him got back up. As many as possible. *Just like him*, said some recess of Socrates' mind.

Suddenly there was something new in the fight. Beast was still alive, the ammo crate had deflected most of the shrapnel from the second grenade. So were two of the PFs with him. They barreled out of their bunker and hit the group between them and Socrates from behind.

"Stay down!" Beast bellowed as he blazed away. He looked like a John Wayne movie hero the way he stood flat-footed, knees bent for balance, firing from the hip. The two PFs unconsciously mimicked his stance. Those VC were mowed down.

Then Socrates turned his attention to the other charge. Those VC were on him. He barely noticed that the line extending to his right didn't have as many men in it as it had a moment earlier.

The fighting was furious and hand to hand. But the VC didn't have numerical advantage anymore. They'd lost men in the charge, Sergeant Slaughter and Hank's medic came out to help. Socrates and Sneaky Pete stood back to back, fighting off the VC until one got through Sneaky Pete's guard and he fell. Then Socrates had to spin round and round as he fought, to keep any from getting him from behind. Bullets cracked past his ears, tore through folds in his uniform. Bayonets flashed at him. He fought as only a dead man can fight.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Americans were much bigger and stronger than the Vietnamese, the PFs were better nourished and stronger than the VC. It was furious, but in the end it was the survivors of the Junkyard Dogs, CAP Whiskey 8, who held the field.

Socrates was dead. He knew he was dead, there hadn't one bit of doubt in his mind that he was dead. But here he was, after the fight and he was still alive and uninjured. He looked at the scatter of bodies around the compound and realized that any life he had now was borrowed. Or a gift. He might have to decide which some day, but today wasn't that day. Now he knew what to do with his life. The Socrates that had been was dead; the Socrates who everybody else had plans for, plans for his own good. Now his life was his to do with as he chose. Their plans didn't matter anymore, he was dead.

Dead men do whatever they damn well please.

They didn't have time at first to mourn their dead.

Sergeant Slaughter didn't give them time to catch their breath, they'd start thinking about what they'd just gone through if they had that time. He and Lieutenant Hank immediately organized their men to go through the bodies in the compound; separate their own wounded and dead, make sure the VC dead were dead. The seven Marine and thirteen PF dead were reverently laid out, the PF medic worked frantically to keep several others alive.

It was later, after villagers had come in and helped clear the Viet Cong bodies, after the relatives of the dead PFs took their corpses away to prepare for burial, after Killer Kowalski's girlfriend's mother wailed over his corpse, after helicopters came in to evacuate the American and PF wounded and take away all four of the VC who had somehow managed to live through it all, after Sergeant Slaughter talked to Gunny Bryl and made arrangements for more Marines to come in, starting today, and for assistance in the clean up. That's when Socrates and Captain Hook finally had time to take a break. Socrates

sat where he could see their dead.

"Why?" he asked. He swallowed and pointed at the bodybag Sneaky Pete lay in.

The last time he looked at Sneaky Pete's face he seemed to look back at him, jaw hanging loose, as though he couldn't even comprehend the question, much less answer it. But he hadn't been looking back. Not with that bullet hole in the middle of his forehead. Never again.

The silence hung for one of those moments that seem endless.

"Why?" he asked again, exhausted, voice flat.

"Because," Captain Hook answered, stating the obvious.

Socrates snapped his head toward him. "What do you mean, 'because'? That's no kind of answer."

"Because we're men," Captain Hook said. "Men fight."

"What?"

Captain Hook stared at Socrates, the stare that had told so many men so many times to back off. "Because men are monkeys," he said at last.

Socrates looked at him as though looking at a crazy man.

"You ever see a troop of monkeys out there?" Captain Hook jerked his head in some indistinct direction that indicated the bush, the jungle. "Ever notice what they do when they run into another troop of monkeys? They jump up and down and scream and chatter and shake branches and throw thing. Then they run away. We're big monkeys. And we've got weapons. When a troop of us runs into another troop, we don't jump up and down and scream—we shoot at them. We don't run away. If we did, the other big monkeys would shoot us in the back as we ran. You die if you run. That's why we do it." He paused to look out over the compound before continuing; he didn't seem to notice all the red staining the earth. "That's why I do it. If I don't fight, some other man-monkey's going to come along and kill me." He was through, it was his entire philosophy of life and war.

Socrates looked at him a while longer, then nodded. It made a sort of sense, he understood it. All too well.

Then Sergeant Slaughter called out for the men still there to join him. Socrates and Captain Hook joined him, so did maybe ten PFs. Sergeant Slaughter looked at them for a long moment, did a count in his head, realized Mad Greek and Beast had been evacuated, and the rest of his Marines were stacked in their bodybags. A dozen Americans and thirty-four PFs entered the fight, five Americans had



lived through it. He didn't know what the count was on the PFs.

"Gunny Bryl finally got some trucks to come get the bodies," he said. There was no negative emotion in his voice. There were men who might still be alive had those trucks been available earlier to bring reinforcements. But that's the way war is; sometimes men die for want of equipment, it was just one of those things. "A grunt platoon's coming out on those trucks to help us shitcan those bodies." He wagged a thumb at the VC corpses stacked cord-wood-style. "Socrates, let's get some patrol routes drawn up for tonight. The grunts're going to help run our patrols until we get some replacements."

Life went on.