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E-TICKET TO 'NAMLAND

by

Dan Simmons  
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INTRODUCTION

I was born in 1948. By the time Kennedy was elected in 1960, World War II seemed like ancient history. Not just to me ... everything is ancient history to a twelve-year-old .... but, I believe, to most people in America then. The countless veterans had come home, and while many individuals had to deal with the traumas of war, the vast majority of them put the war behind them in various ways: went on to school on the GI Bill or got on with starting families, bought homes, and renewed their lives. Many of the men and women in my parents' generation had changed during the war, but most for the better. Travel and combat had brought some half-sensed maturity to the men; work and participation in the war effort had brought some inexpressible confidence and widening of horizons to the women. America had changed forever-gone forever was the isolationist, essentially rural nation recovering from the trauma of the Depression. I was born into the world's greatest superpower. We had the Bomb, economic prosperity, an unlimited future, and a young president who promised a New Frontier.

World War II was ancient history. Fifteen years had passed since our victory over the dictatorships, and even the brutal dress rehearsal of Korea hadn't changed our optimism. The real war was long ago and far away.

As I write this, fifteen years have passed since the last Americans fled Vietnam. Seventeen years have gone by since we withdrew our fighting forces. Two decades-a fifth of our century-have elapsed since the height of our involvement there. Yet, I feel, we're just beginning to find some collective peace of mind about Vietnam.

I suppose someone has suggested the parallel (it may be a cliché by now, for all I know), but it occurs to me that the stages of our national response to the trauma of Vietnam closely reflect the classic stages of response to the death of a loved one or the reaction to learning one has a terminal illness. just look at our movies about Vietnam over the past twenty years.

First, denial: No major films. Nada.

Then anger: The cathartic "Coming Home" mental rewrites where the veterans were either anti-war martyrs or nutcases, followed by the revisionist fantasies of Rambo and his clones.

Then depression: The one brilliant depiction of the war was "Apocalypse Now," but Coppola jumped a stage in our recovery cycle so his effort was shunned. If he had waited until after we'd sickened of our Rambo fantasies, the film would have been received quite differently.

Finally, acceptance: "Platoon" and "Full Metal Jacker" and "Casualties of War" and the other post-trauma films have--despite the ballyhoo to the contrary little content, less philosophy. What they do have is a shockingly correct texture--something quite close to the real smell of sweat and crotch rot, something surprisingly near to the actual language and true fatigue and terrible claustrophobia of a patrol in the boonies, something almost right about the fear that rises from the actors on the screen and spreads to the audience like the stench from a day-old corpse.

And so, after two decades and with an entire new generation which has grown up bored with the whole topic, after more changes in the texture of daily life than we can imagine or accept, I think we're finally beginning to fee--if not really understand-the true dimensions of the terrible national traffic accident that was Vietnam.

But for some people, that's just the beginning of the process.

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The twenty-eight Huey gunships moved out in single file, each hovering a precise three meters above the tarmac, the sound of their rotors filling the world with a roar that could be felt in teeth and bones and testicles. Owe above the treeline and gaining; altitude, the helicopters separated into four staggered V-formations and the noise diminished to the point where shouts could be heard.

"First time out?" cried the guide.

"What?" Justin Jeffries turned away from the open door where he had been watching the shadow of their helicopter slide across the surface of the mirrored rice paddies below. He leaned toward the guide until their combat helmets were almost touching.

"First time out?" repeated the guide. The man was small even for a Vietnamese. He wore a wide grin and the uniform and shoulder patch of the old First Air Cav Division.

Jeffries was big even for an American. He was dressed in green shorts, a flowered Hawaiian shirt, Nike running sandals, an expensive Rolex comlog, and a U.S. Army helmet that had become obsolete the year he was born. Jeffries was draped about with cameras-, a compact Yashica SLR, a Polaroid Holistic-360, and a new Nikon imager. He returned the guide's grin. "First time for us. We're here with my wife's father."

Heather leaned over to join the conversation. "Daddy was here during ... you know ... the war. They thought it might be good for him to take the Vet Tour." She nodded in the direction of a short, solid, gray haired man leaning against the M-60 machine-gun mount near the door's safety webbing. He was the only person in the cabin not wearing a helmet. The back of his blue shirt was soaked with sweat.

"Yes, Yes," smiled the guide and stepped back to plug his microphone jack into a bulkhead socket. His voice echoed tinnily in every helmet and from hidden speakers. "Ladies and gentlemen, please notice the treeline to your right."

There was a lurch as the passengers shifted their positions and craned for a view. Ten-year-old Sammee Jeffries and his eight-year-old sister - Elizabeth shoved their way through, the crowded space to stand next to where their grandfather sat by the open door. The barrel of Elizabeth's plastic M-16 accidentally struck the older man on his sunburned neck but he did not turn or speak.

Suddenly a series of flashes erupted from the treeline along one rice paddy. The passengers gasped audibly as a line of magnesium-bright tracer bullets rose up and lashed toward their ship, missing the rotors by only a few meters. Immediately one of the gunships at the rear of their formation dove, curved back the way they had come in a centrifugally perfect arc, and raked the treeline with rocket and minigun fire. Meanwhile, at the guide's urging, Sammee stood on a low box, grasped the two-handed grip of the heavy M-60, swung it awkwardly to bear in the general direction of the now-distant treeline, and depressed the firing studs. The passengers instinctively clutched at their helmets to block their ears. Heavy cartridges, warm but not hot enough to bum anyone, clattered onto the metal deck.

An explosion split the treeline, sending phosphorous streamers fifty meters into the air and setting several tall palms ablaze. Bits of flaming debris splashed into the quiet rice paddy. The passengers laughed and applauded. Sammee grinned back at them and flexed his muscles.

Elizabeth leaned against her grandfather and spoke loudly into his ear. "Isn't this fun, Grandpa?"

He turned to say something but at that second the guide announced that their destination would be coming up on the left side of the ship and Elizabeth was away, shoving her brother aside to get a better view, eager to see the village appear below out of the heat-haze and smoke.

Later that evening five men sat around a table on the fifth-floor terrace of the Saigon Oberoi Sheraton. The air was warm and humid. Occasional gusts of laughter and splashing sounds came up from the pool on the fourth floor terrace. It was well past nine, but the tropical twilight

lingered.

"You were on the village mission-tour this morning, weren't you?" asked Justin Jeffries of the young Oriental next to him.

"Yes, I was. Most interesting." The man sat in a relaxed manner, but something about his bearing, the precisely creased safari suit, the intensity of his gaze, suggested a military background.

"You're Nipponese, aren't you?" asked Justin. At the man's smile and nod, Justin went on. "Thought so. Here with the military mission?"

"No, merely on leave. 'R and R' I believe your people used to call it."

"Christ", said the overweight American who sat next to Justin's father-in law. "You've been up north in the PRC fighting Chen's warlords, haven't you?"

"Just so," said the Nipponese and extended his hand to Justin. "Lieutenant Keigo Naguchi."

"Justin Jeffries, Kansas City." Justin's huge hand enclosed the lieutenant's and pumped twice. "This here is my father-in-law, Ralph Disantis."

"A pleasure," said the lieutenant with a quick nod.

"Pleased to meet you," said Disantis.

"I believe I saw you with your grandchildren at the village today," said Naguchi. "A boy and a girl?"

Disantis nodded and sipped his beer. Justin gestured to the heavy-set man next to his father-in-law. "And this is Mr. . . . ah ... Sears, right?"

"Sayers," said the man. "Roger Sayers. Nice to make your acquaintance, Lieutenant. So how's it going up there? Your guys finally getting those little bastards out of the hillcaves?"

"Most satisfactory," said Lieutenant Naguchi. "The situation should be stabilized before the next rainy season."

"Japanese brains and Vietnamese blood, huh?" laughed Sayers. He turned to the fifth man at the table, a silent Vietnamese in a white shirt and dark glasses, and added quickly, "No offense meant. Everybody knows that your basic Viet peasant makes the best foot soldier in the world. Showed us that forty years ago, eh, Mr. . . . ah ... ?"

"Minh," said the little man and shook hands around the table. "Nguyen van Minh." Minh's hair was black, his face unlined, but his eyes and hands revealed that he was at least in his sixties, closer to Disantis's age than that of the Others.

"I saw you on the plane from Denver," said Justin. "-visiting family here?"

"No." said Minh " I have been an American citizen since 1976. This is my first trip back to Vietnam. I have no family here now." He turned toward Naguchi. "Lieutenant, I am surprised that you chose to spend your leave on an American's Veterans' Tour."

Naguchi shrugged and sipped at his gin and tonic. "I find it a sharp contrast to modern methods. Up north I am more technician than warrior. Also, of course, learning more about the first of the helicopter wars is valuable to anyone who is interested in military history. You were a veteran of that war, Mr. Disantis?"

Justin's father-in-law nodded and took a long swallow of beer.

"I just missed it," said Sayers with real regret in his voice. "Too young for Vietnam. Too goddamn old for the Banana Wars."

Justin grunted. "You didn't miss much there."

"Ah, you were involved in that period?" asked Naguchi.

"Sure," said Justin. "Everybody who came of age in the discount decade got in on the Banana Wars. The tour today could have been Tegucicalpa or Estanzuelas, just substitute in coffee plantations for the rice paddies."

"I want to hear about that," said Sayers and waved a waiter over to the table. "Another round for everyone," he said. From somewhere near the pool a steel drum band started up, unsuccessfully trying to mix American pop tunes, a Caribbean beat, and local musicians. The sound seemed sluggish in the wet, thick air. Tropical night had fallen and even the stars appeared dimmed by the thickness of atmosphere. Naguchi looked up at a band of brighter stars moving toward the zenith and then glanced down at his comlog.

"Checking azimuth for your spottersat, right?" asked Justin. "It's a hard habit to break. I still do it."

Disantis rose. "Sorry I can't stay for the next round, gentlemen. Going to sleep off some of this jet tag." He moved into the air-conditioned brightness of the hotel.

Before going to his own room, Disantis looked in on Heather and the children. His daughter was in bed already, but Sammee and Elizabeth were busy feeding data from their father's Nikon through the terminal and onto the wallscreen. Disantis leaned against the door molding and watched.

"This is the LZ," Sammee said excitedly.

"What's an LZ?" asked Elizabeth.

"Landing Zone," snapped Sammee. "Don't you remember anything?"

The wall showed image after image of dust, rotors, the predatory shadows of Hueys coming in above Justin's camera position, the thin line of passengers in combat garb, men and women instinctively bent low despite obvious clearance from the rotors, tourists clutching at their helmets with one hand and hugging cameras, purses, and plastic M-16s to their chests with the other, groups moving quickly away from the raised landing platform along rice paddy dikes.

"There's Grandpa," cried Elizabeth. Disantis saw himself, aging, overweight, puffing heavily as he heaved himself down from the helicopter, disdaining the guide's outstretched hand. Sammee tapped at the terminal keys. The picture zoomed and enlarged until only Disantis's grainy face filled the screen. Sammee shifted through colors and widened his grandfather's face until it became a purple balloon ready to pop.

"Stop it," whined Elizabeth.

"Crybaby," said Sammee, but some sixth sense made him glance over his shoulder to where Disantis stood. Sammee made no acknowledgment of his grandfather's presence but advanced the picture through a montage of new images.

Disantis blinked and watched the jerky newsreel proceed. The abandoned village of rough huts. The lines of tourist-troops along each side of the narrow road. Closeups of huts being searched. Heather emerging from a low doorway, blinking in the sunlight, awkwardly lifting her toy M-16 and waving at the camera.

"This is the good part," breathed Sammee.

They had been returning to the LZ when figures along a distant dike had opened fire. At first the tourists milled around in confusion, but at the guides' urging they finally, laughingly, had taken cover on the grassy side of the dike. Justin remained standing to take pictures. Disantis watched as those images built themselves on the wallscreen at a rate just slower than normal video. Data columns flashed by to the right. He saw himself drop to one knee on the dike and hold Elizabeth's hand. He remembered noting that the grass was artificial.

The tourists returned fire. Their M-16s flashed and recoiled, but no bullets were expended. The din was tremendous. On the screen a two-year-old near Justin had begun to cry.

Eventually the guides helped a young tourist couple use a field radio to call in an airstrike. The jets were there in less than a minute—three A-4D Skyhawks with antiquated U.S. naval markings bright and clear on the white wings. They screamed in under five hundred feet high. Justin's camera shook as the explosions sent long shadows across the dikes and made the tourists cringe and hug the earth from their vantage point six hundred meters away. Justin had managed to steady the camera even as the napalm continued to blossom upward.

"Watch," said Sammee. He froze the frame and then zoomed in. The image expanded. Tiny human forms, black silhouettes, became visible against the orange explosions. Sammee enlarged the image even further. Disantis could make out the silhouette of an outflung arm, a shirttail gusting, a conical peasant's hat flying off.

"How'd they do that, Grandpa?" asked Sammee without turning around.

Disantis shrugged. "Holos, maybe."

"Naw, not holos," said Sammee. He did not try to hide his condescension. 'Too bright out there. Besides, you can see the pieces fly. Betcha they were animates."

Elizabeth rolled over from where she was sprawled. Her pajamas carried a picture of Wonder Duck on the front. "What'd Mr. Sayers mean on the way back, Grndnpa?"

"When?"

"In the helicopter when he said, 'Well, I guess we really showed Charlie today.'" Elizabeth took a breath. "Who's Charlie, Grandpa?"

"Stupid," said Sammee. "Charlie was the VC. The bad guys."

"How come you called him Charlie, Grandpa?" persisted Elizabeth. The frozen explosion on the wallscreen cast an orange glow on her features.

"I don't remember," said Disantis. He paused with his hand on the door. "You two had better get to bed before your father comes up. Tomorrow's going to be a busy day—"

Later, alone in his room, sitting in silence broken only by the hum of the air conditioner, Disantis realized that he could not remember why the Vietcong had been called Charlie. He wondered if he had ever known. He turned out the light and opened the sliding doors to the balcony. The humid air settled on him like a blanket as he stepped out. Three floor~ below, Justin, Sayers, and the others still sat drinking. Their laughter floated up to Disantis and mixed with the rumble of thunder from a storm on the distant and darkened horizon.

On their way to a picnic the next day, Mr. Sayers tripped a claymore mine.

The guide had. put them on a simulated patrol down a narrow jungle trail. Sayers was in the lead, paying little attention to the trail, talking to Reverend Dewitt, an airwaves minister from Dothan, Alabama. Justin and Heather were walking with the Newtons, a young couple from Hartford. Disantis was further back in line, walking between Sammee and Elizabeth to keep them from quarreling

Sayers stepped into a thin tripwire stretched across the trail, a section of dirt erupted a meter in front of him, and the claymore jumped three meters into the air before exploding in a white puff.

"Shit," said Sayers. "Excuse me, Reverend." The Vietnamese guide came forward with an apologetic smile and put a red KIA armband on Sayem The Reverend Dewitt and Tom Newton each received a yellow WIA armband

"Does this mean I don't get to go to the picnic?" asked Sayers.

The guide smiled and directed the others on how to prepare a medevac LZ in a nearby clearing. Lieutenant Naguchi and Minh cleared underbrush with machetes while Headier and Sue Newton helped spread marker panels of iridescent orange plastic. Sammee was allowed to pop the tab on a green

smoke marker.

The dust-off bird came in with a blast of downdraft that flattened the tall grass and blew Disantis's white tennis hat off. Sayers, Dewitt, and Newton sat propped on their elbows and waved as their stretchers were loaded. The patrol resumed when the dust-off 'copter was just a distant throbbing in the sky.

Justin took point. He moved carefully, frequently holding his hand up to halt the line behind him. There were two more tripwires and a stretch of trail salted with antipersonnel mines. The guide showed them all how to probe ahead with bayonets. For the last half-kilometer, they stayed in-the-grass on either side of the trail.

The picnic ground was on a hill overlooking the sea. Under a thatched pavilion sat dim tables covered with sandwich makings, salads, assorted fruits, and coolers of beer. Sayers, Newton, and Dewitt were already there, helping two guides cook hamburgers and hot dogs over charcoal fires. "What kept you?" called Sayers with a deep laugh.

After a long lunch, several of the tourists went down to the beach to swim or sunbathe or take a nap. Sammee found a network of tunnels in the jungle near the picnic pavilion and several of the children gathered around as the guide showed them how to drop in CS gas and fragmentation and concussion grenades before actually searching the tunnels. Then the children and a few of the younger adults wiggled in on their bellies to explore the complex. Disantis could hear their excited shouts as he sat alone at one of the picnic tables, drinking his beer and looking out to sea. He could also bear the conversation of his daughter and Sue Newton as they sat on beach towels a few meters away.

"We wanted to bring my daddy but he just refused to come,- said the Newton woman. "So Tommy says, 'Well, shoot, so long as the government's paying part of it, let's go ourselves.' So we did."

"We thought it'd be good for my father," said Heather. "I wasn't even born then, but when he got back from the war, way back in the Seventies, he didn't even come home to Mother. He went and lived in the woods in Oregon or Washington or somewhere for a couple of years."

"Really!" said Sue Newton. "My daddy never did anything crazy like that."

"Oh, he got better after a while," said Heather. "He's been fine the last ten years or so. But his therapy program said that it'd be good for him to come on the Vet's Tour, and Justin was able to get time off 'cause the dealership is doing so good."

The talk turned to children. Shortly after that it began to rain heavily and three Hueys and a lumbering Chinook picked them up to return them to the Sheraton. The dozen or so people in Disantis's group sang "Ninety-nine Bottles Of Beer on the Wall" during the short flight back.

There was nothing scheduled for the afternoon and after the storm passed several people decided to go shopping at one of the large malls between the hotel complex and the Park. Disantis caught an electric bus into downtown Saigon where he walked the streets until nightfall.

The change of names to Ho Chi Minh City had never really taken and the metropolis had officially been renamed Saigon in the early Nineties. The city bore little resemblance to the excited jumble of pedestrians, motorbikes, strip joints, bars, restaurants, and cheap hotels Disantis remembered from forty years earlier. The foreign money had all gone into the tourist enclaves near the Park and the city itself reflected the gray era of the New Socialist Reality more than it did the feverish pulse of old Saigon. Efficient, faceless structures and steel and glass high-rises sat on either side of busy boulevards. Occasionally Disantis would see a decaying sidestreet which reminded him of the cluttered stylishness of Tu-Do Street in the late Sixties.

Nguyen van Minh joined him as Disantis waited for a light to change on Thong Njut Boulevard.

"Mr. Disantis."

"Mr. Minh."

The short Vietnamese adjusted his glasses as they strolled past the park where the Independence

Palace had once stood. "You are enjoying the sights?" he asked. "Do you see much that is familiar?"

"No," said Disantis. "Do you?"

Minh paused and looked around him as if the idea had not, pertained to him. "Not really, Mr. Disantis," he said at last. "Of course, I rarely visited Saigon. My village was in a different province. My unit was based near Da Nang."

"ARVN?" asked Disantis.

"Hac Bao," said Minh. The Black Panthers of the First Division. You remember them, Perhaps?" Disantis shook his head. "We were ... I say without pride ... the most feared fighting unit in all of South Vietnam ... including the Americans. The Hac Bao had put fear into the hearts of the communist insurgents for ten years before the fall."

Disantis stopped to buy a lemon ice from a street vendor. The lights were coming on all along the boulevard.

"You see the embassy there?" asked Minh, pointing to an antiquated six story structure set back behind an ornate fence.

"That's the old U.S. Embassy?" asked Disantis without much interest in his voice. "I would have thought that the building would've been torn down by now."

"Oh, no," said Minh, "it is a museum. It has been restored very much to its original appearance."

Disantis nodded and glanced at his comlog.

"I stood here," continued Minh, "Right here ... in April of 1975, and watched the helicopters take the last of the Americans off the roof of the embassy. It was only my third time in Saigon. I had just been released from four days in prison."

"Prison?" Disantis turned to look at Minh.

"Yes. I had been arrested by the government after members of my unit commandeered the last Boeing 727 out of Da Nang to Saigon. We fought civilians-women and children-to get aboard that plane. I was a lieutenant. I was twenty-three years old."

"So you got out of Vietnam during the panic?"

"They released us from jail when the North Vietnamese were in the suburbs," said Minh. "I was not able to leave the country until several months later."

"Boat?" asked Disantis. The lemon ice was melting quickly in the warm air.

Minh nodded. "And you, Mr. Disantis, when did you leave Vietnam?"

Disantis tossed the paper wrapper into a trashcan and licked his fingers. "I came here early in '69," he said.

"And when did you leave?" Minh asked again.

Disantis lifted his head as if to sniff the night air. The evening was thick with the scent of tropical vegetation, mimosa blossoms, stagnant water, decay. When he looked at Minh there was a dark gleam in his blue eyes. He shook his head. "I never left," he said.

Justin, Sayers, and Tom Newton came up to the guide as he sat alone at a table near the back of the hotel bar. The three Americans hesitated and looked at each other. Finally Justin stepped forward. "Howdy," he said.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Jeffries," said the guide.

"We ... uh ... we'd all, I mean the three of us and a couple of other guys, we wanted to see you

about something.

"Ahhh, there is some problem with the tour?" asked the guide.

"No, no, everything's great," said Justin and glanced back at the other two. He sat down and leaned toward the Vietnamese. His voice was a hoarse whisper. "We ... Ah ... we wanted a little more than the regular tour."

"Oh?" The guide blinked. His mouth was not quite curled in a smile.

"Yeah," said Justin, "You know. Something extra."

'Extra?" said the guide.

Roger Sayers stepped forward. "We want some special action," he said.

"Ahhh," said the guide and finished his drink.

Justin leaned forward again. "Nat Pendrake told us it was OK," he whispered loudly. "He said he ... uh ... arranged it through Mr. Tho."

"Mr. Tho?" the guide said blankly. But the smile was there now.

"Yeah. Nat said that ... uh ... a special action would be about a thousand."

"Two thousand," the guide said softly. "Each."

"Hey," interjected Sayers, "Nat was here just a few months ago and . . ."

"Quiet," said Justin. "All right. That's fine. Here." He slid his universal card across the table.

The Vietnamese smiled and pushed Jeffries's card back. "Cash, please. Each of you will have it tonight. American dollars."

"I don't know about ..." began Sayers.

"Where?" asked Justin.

"The frontage road beyond the hotel maintenance buildings," said the guide. "Twenty-three hundred hours."

"Right," said Justin as the guide stood up. "See you then."

"Have a nice day," said the guide and was gone.

The trucks transported them to a point in the jungle where the road ended and a trail began. The five men jumped down and followed the guide through the darkness. The trail was muddy from the evening rains and wet fronds brushed at their cork-smudged faces. Justin Jeffries and Tom Newton kept close to the guide. Behind them, stumbling occasionally in the dark, came Sayers and Reverend Dewitt. Lieutenant Naguchi brought up the rear. Each man was in uniform. Each carried an M-16.

"Shit," hissed Sayers as a branch caught him in the face.

"Shut up," whispered Justin. The guide motioned them to a stop and the Americans pressed close to peer at a clearing visible through a gap in the dense foliage. A few kerosene lanterns throw cold light from the doorways of a dozen huts of the village.

"Vietcong sympathizers," whispered the guide. "They can tell you where the cadre headquarters is. Everyone in the village knows the VC."

"Huh," said Sayers. "So our job is to get the information, right?"

"Yes."

"And they're VC sympathizers?" whispered Tom Newton.



"Yes."

"How many?" asked Lieutenant Naguchi. His voice was barely audible above the drip of water from palm leaves.

"Maybe thirty," said the guide. "No more than thirty-five."

"Weapons?" asked Naguchi

"There may be some hidden in the huts," said the guide. "Be careful of the young men and women. VC. Well-trained."

There was a long silence as they stared at the quiet village. Finally Justin stood and clicked the safety off on his rifle. "Let's do it," he said. Together they moved into the clearing.

Ralph Disantis and Nguyen van Minh sat together in a dark booth in an old bar not far from what had once been Tu-Do Street. It was late. Minh was quite drunk and Disantis let himself appear to be in the same condition. An ancient juke box in the corner played recent Japanese hits and oldies-but-goodies dating back to the eighties.

"For many years after the fall of my country, I thought that America had no honor," said Minh. The only sign of the little man's drunkenness was the great care with which he enunciated each word. "Even as I lived in America, worked in America, became a citizen of America, I was convinced that America had no honor. My American friends told me that during the Vietnam War there was news from my country on the televisions and radios every day, every evening. After Saigon fell ... there was nothing. Nothing. It was as if my nation had never existed."

"Hmmm," said Disantis. He finished his drink and beckoned for more.

"But you, Mr. Disantis, you are a man of honor," said Minh. "I know this. I sense this. You are a man of honor."

Disantis nodded at the retreating waiter, removed the swizzle stick from his fresh drink, and placed the plastic saber in a row with seven others. Mr. Minh blinked and did the same with his.

"As a man of honor you will understand why I have returned to avenge my family," Minh said carefully.

"Avenge?" said Disantis.

"Avenge my brother who died fighting the North Vietnamese," said Minh. "Avenge my father--a teacher--who spent eight years in a reeducation camp only to die soon after his release. Avenge my sister who was deported by this regime for ..." Minh paused. "For alleged crimes against morality. She drowned when their overcrowded boat went down somewhere between here and Hong Kong.

"Avenge," repeated Disantis. "How? With what?"

Minh sat up straight and looked over his shoulder. No one was near. "I will avenge my family's honor by striking against the maggots who have corrupted my nation," he said.

"Yeah," said Disantis. "With what? Do you have a weapon?"

Minh hesitated, licked his lips, and looked for a second like he was sobering. Then he leaned over and grasped Disantis's forearm. "I have a weapon," he whispered. Two of them. I smuggled them in. A rifle and my service automatic from the Hac Bao." He hesitated again. "I can tell you this, Mr. Disantis. You are a man of honor." This time it was a question.

"Yes," said Disantis. "Tell me."

Two of the huts were on fire. Justin and the other four had come in shouting and firing. There had been no opposition. The thirty-two villagers, mostly children and old people, knelt in the dust at the center of the village. Sayers had knocked over a lantern in one of the huts and the thatch and bamboo had blazed like an incendiary flare. The fat American had beat uselessly at the flames

until Justin called, "Forget the fucking hootch and get back here."

Tom Newton swung his rifle to cover the cringing villagers. "Where are the VC?" he shouted.

"VC!" shouted Sayers. "Where are their tunnels? Tell us, goddammit!" A kneeling woman holding a baby bowed her forehead to the dust. Flames cast bizarre shadows on the dirt and the smell of smoke made the men's nostrils flare.

'They don't understand," said Reverend Dewitt.

"The hell they don't," snapped Justin. "They're just not talking."

Lieutenant Naguchi stepped forward. He was relaxed but he kept his M-16 trained on the cowering villagers. "Mr. Jeffries, I will stand guard here if you wish to conduct an interrogation."

"Interrogation?" said Justin.

"There is an empty hut there, away from the fire," said the lieutenant. "It is best to isolate them during questioning.

"Yeah," said Justin. "I remember. Tom, cut a couple of them out of the herd. Hurry!"

Newton lifted a young man and an old woman by the arm and began moving them toward the hut.

"Not her," said Justin. "Too old. Get that one." He pointed to a wide-eyed girl of fifteen or sixteen. "She's probably got a brother or boyfriend fighting with the VC."

Newton pushed the old woman back to her knees and roughly lifted the girl to her feet. Justin felt his mouth go dry. Behind him the flames had set a third hut on fire and sparks drifted up to mix with the stars.

Disantis set the ninth plastic saber carefully in a row with the others. "How about ammunition?" he asked.

Minh blinked slowly and smiled. "Three thousand rounds for the rifle," he said. He lifted his glass in slow motion, drank, swallowed. "Thirty clips for the .45 caliber service automatic. Enough ..." He paused, swayed a second, and straightened his back. "Enough to do the job, yes?"

Disantis dropped the colored money on the table to pay the tab. He helped Minh to his feet and guided the smaller man toward the door. Minh stopped, grasped Disantis's arm in both hands, and brought his face close. "Enough, yes?" he asked.

Disantis nodded. "Enough," he said.

"Shit," said Tom Newton, "he's not going to tell us anything." The young man from the village knelt before them. His black shirt had been pulled back to pin his arms. Blood was smeared from the corners of his mouth and nostrils. There were cigarette bum marks dotted across his chest.

"Bring the girl here," said Justin. Sayers pushed her to her knees, took a fistful of hair and jerked her head back sharply.

"Where are the VC?" asked Justin. Smoke came through the open door of the hootch. "Tunnels? VC?"

The girl said nothing. Her eyes were very dark and dilated with fear. Small, white teeth showed between her slightly parted lips.

"Hold her arms," Justin said to Newton and Sayers. He took a long knife out of its sheath on his web belt, slipped the point under her buttoned shirtfront, and slashed upward. Cloth ripped and parted. The girl gasped and writhed but the two Americans held her tightly. Her breasts were small, conical, and lightly filmed with moisture.

"Jesus," said Newton and giggled.

Justin tugged her black pants halfway down, slapped her knee aside when she kicked, and used the

knife to tear the cloth away from her ankles.

"Hey!" yelled Sayers. The young Vietnamese had lurched to his feet and was struggling to free his arms. Justin turned quickly, dropped the knife, lifted the M-16, and fired three times in rapid succession. Flesh exploded from the boy's chest, throat, and cheek. He kicked backward, spasmed once, and lay still in a growing red pool.

"Oh, Jesus," Newton said again. "Jesus Christ, this is something.

"Shut up," said Justin. He placed the butt of his rifle against the dazed girl's collarbone and pushed her onto her back in the dirt. "Hold her legs," he said. "You'll get your turns."

After seeing Minh to his hotel room and putting him to bed, Disantis went back to his own room and sat out on the balcony. Some time after three am., his son-in-law and four other men materialized out of the darkness and sat down around one of the round tables on the abandoned terrace below. Disantis could hear the sounds of beer cans being tossed into trash bins, the pop of more tabs, and bits of conversation.

"How the hell did all the firing start out there anyway?" asked Justin in the darkness. Several of the others giggled drunkenly.

A firm voice with a Japanese accent answered. "One of them ran. The Reverend opened fire. I joined him in stopping them from escaping."

"... damn brains all over the place." Disantis recognized Sayers's voice. "I'd like to know how they did that."

"Bloodbags and charges every six centimeters or so under the synflesh," came the slurred voice of the young man named Newton. "Used to work for Disney. Know all about that animate stuff."

"If they were animates," said the Sayers shadow and someone giggled.

"You damn well know they were," came Justin's voice. "We never got out of the damned Park. Ten thousand goddamn bucks."

"It was so ... real," said a voice that Disantis recognized as belonging to the airwaves minister. "But surely there were no . . . bullets."

"Hell, no," said Newton. "'Scuse me, Reverend. But they couldn't use real slugs. Customers'd kill each other by mistake."

"Then how

"Lasered UV pulses," said Justin.

"Triggered the charges under the skin," said Newton. "Easy to reset."

"But the blood," said Reverend Dewitt in the darkness. "The ... the brain matter. The bone fragments . . ."

"All right, already!" shouted Sayers so loudly that several of the other men shushed him. "Come on, let's just say we got our money's worth, okay? They can buy a lot of spare parts for that much, right?"

"You can buy a lot of spare gooks for that much," said Newton and there was a ripple of laughter. "Jesus," he went on, "did you see that gook girl wiggle when Jeffries slipped it to her the first time . . ."

Disantis listened for a few minutes more and then went into his room and carefully closed the sliding door.

The morning was beautiful with tall, white clouds piling up above the sea to the east while the family had a leisurely breakfast on the restaurant terrace. Sammee and Elizabeth had eggs, toast, and cereal. Headier ordered an omelette. Disantis had coffee. Justin joined them late, cradled his

head in his hands, and ordered a Bloody Mary.

"You came in late last night, dear," said Headier.

Justin massaged his temples. "Yeah. Tom and some of us went to the gaming rooms and played poker 'til late."

"You missed the excitement this morning, Dad," said Sammee.

"Yeah, what?" Justin sipped at his drink and grimaced.

"They arrested Mr. Minh this mornin'," Sammee said happily.

"Oh?" Justin looked at his wife.

"It's true, dear," said Heather. "He was arrested this morning. Something to do with illegal contraband in his luggage."

"Yeah," said Sammee, "I heard the guy downstairs tellin' somebody that he had a rifle. You know, like ours, only real."

"Well, I'll be damned," said Justin. "Is he going to stand trial or what?"

"No," said Disantis. "They just asked him to leave. They shipped him out on the morning shuttle to Tokyo."

"There're a lot of nuts around," muttered Justin. He opened the menu. "I think I will have breakfast. Do we have time before the morning tour?"

"Oh, yes," said Heather. "The helicopters don't leave until ten-thirty this morning. We're going up the river somewhere. Dad says that it should be very interesting."

"I think all this junk is boring," whined Elizabeth.

"Mat's 'cause you think everything's boring, stupid," said Sammee.

"Be quiet, both of you," said Heather. "We're here for your grandfather's benefit. Eat your cereal."

The twenty-eight Huey slicks moved out in single file, climbed above the line of trees, and sorted themselves into formation as they leveled off at three thousand feet. The panorama of highways and housing developments beneath them changed to rice paddies and jungle as they entered the Park. Then they were over the river and heading west. Peasants poling small craft upstream looked up and waved as shadows of the gunships passed over them.

Disantis sat in the open door, hands hooked in the safety webbing, and let his legs dangle. On his back was Sammee's blue backpack. Justin dozed on a cushioned bench. Elizabeth sat on Headier's lap and complained of the heat Sammee swung the heavy M-60 to the left and right and made machine-gun noises.

The guide plugged his microphone into the bulkhead. "Ladies and gentlemen, today. we are on a mission up the Mekong River. Our goal is twofold--to intercept illicit river traffic and to inspect any area of jungle near Highway I where movement of NVA regulars has been reported. Following completion of the mission, we will tour an eight-hundred-year-old Buddhist temple. Lunch will be served after the temple tour."

The helicopter throbbed north and westward. Elizabeth complained that she was hungry. Reverend Dewitt tried to get everyone to sing camp songs but few people were interested. Tom Newton pointed out historical landmarks to his wife. Justin awoke briefly, shot a series of images with his Nikon, and went back to sleep.

Sometime later the guide broke the silence. "Please watch the river as we turn south. We will be searching for any small boats which look suspicious or attempt to flee at our approach. We should see the river in the next few minutes."

"No, we won't" said Disantis. He reached under his flowered shirt and removed the heavy .45 from his waistband. He aimed it at the guide's face and held it steady, "Please ask the pilot to turn north."

The cabin resounded with babble and then fell silent as the guide smiled. "A joke, Mr. Disantis, but not a funny one, I am afraid. Please let me see the . . ."

Disantis fired. The slug ripped through the bulkhead padding three centimeters from the guide's face. People screamed, the guide flinched and raised his hands instinctively, and Disantis swung his legs into the cabin. "North, please," he said. "Immediately."

The guide spoke quickly into his microphone, snapped two monosyllabic answers to unheard questions from the pilot, and the Huey swung out of formation and headed north.

"Daddy," said Headier.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing. Ralph?" said Justin. "Now give me that goddamn relic before someone gets ..."

"Shut up," said Disantis.

"Mr. Disantis," said Reverend Dewitt, "there are women and children aboard this aircraft. If we could just talk about whatever . . ."

"Put the damn gun down, Ralph," growled Justin and began to rise from the bench.

"Be quiet." Disantis swung the pistol in Justin's direction and the big man froze in mid-movement. "The next person to speak will be shot."

Sammee opened his mouth, looked at his grandfather's face, and remained silent. For several minutes the only sound was the throb of the rotors and Heather's soft weeping.

"Take it down here," Disantis said at last. He had been watching the jungle, making sure they were well out of the Park. "Here."

The guide paused and then spoke rapid-fire Vietnamese into his mike. The Huey began to descend, circling in toward the clearing Disantis had pointed to. He could see two black Saigon Security hovercraft coming quickly from the east, the downblast of their fans rippling the leaf canopy of the jungle as they roared ten meters above it.

The Huey's skids touched down and the high grass rippled and bent from the blast of the rotors. "Come on, kids," said Disantis. He moved quickly, helping Elizabeth out and tugging Sammee from his perch before Heather could grab him. Disantis jumped down beside them.

"Me hell you say," bellowed Justin and vaulted down.

Disantis and the children had moved a few feet and were crouching in the whipping grass. Disantis half-turned and shot Justin in the left leg. The force of the blow swung the big man around. He fell back toward the open doorway as people screamed and reached for him.

"This is real," Disantis said softly. "Goodbye." He fired twice past the cockpit windshield. Then he took Elizabeth by the hand and pulled her toward the jungle as the helicopter lifted off. A multitude of hands pulled Justin in the open door as the Huey swung away over the trees. Sammee hesitated, looked at the empty sky, and then stumbled after his sister and grandfather. The boy was sobbing uncontrollably.

"Hush," said Disantis and pulled Sammee inside the wall of vegetation. There was a narrow trail extending into the jungle darkness. Disantis removed the light backpack and took out a new clip for the automatic. He ejected the old magazine and clicked the new one in with a slap of his palm. Then he grabbed both children and moved as quickly as he could in a counter-clockwise jog around the perimeter of the clearing, always remaining concealed just within the jungle. When they stopped he pushed the children down behind a fallen tree. Elizabeth began to wail. "Hush" Disantis said softly

The Huey gunship came in quickly, the guide leaped to the ground, and then the helicopter was spiralling upward again, clawing for altitude. A second later the first of the Saigon Security hovercrafts roared in over the treetops and settled next to the guide. The two men who jumped out wore black armorcloth and carried Uzi miniguns. The guide pointed to the spot on the opposite side of the clearing where Disantis had first entered the jungle.

They lifted their weapons and took a step in that direction. Disantis walked out behind them, dropped to one knee when he got to within five meters, braced the pistol with both hands, and fired as they turned. He shot the first policeman in the face. The second man had time to raise his gun before he was struck twice in the chest. The bullets did not penetrate the armorcloth but the impact knocked him onto his back. Disantis stepped forward, straightened his arm, and shot the man in the left eye.

The guide turned and ran into the jungle. Disantis fired once and then crouched next to the dead policeman as a wash of hot air struck him. The hovercraft was ten meters high and turning toward the trees when Disantis lifted the policeman's Uzi and fired. He did not bother to aim. The minigun kicked and flared, sending two thousand fleshettes a second skyward. Disantis had a brief glimpse of the pilot's face before the entire canopy staffed and burst into white powder. The hovercraft listed heavily to the left and plowed into the forest wall. There was the heavy sound of machinery and trees breaking but no explosion.

Disantis ran back to the jungle just as the second hovercraft appeared. It circled once-and then shot straight up until it was lost in the sun. Disantis grabbed the children and urged them on, circling the edge of the clearing again until they reached the spot where the guide had entered the forest. The narrow trail led away from the light into the jungle.

Disantis crouched for a second and then touched the high grass at the side of the trail. Drops of fresh blood were visible in the dappled light. Disantis sniffed at his fingers and looked up at the white faces of Sammee and Elizabeth. They had stopped crying.

"It's all right," he said, and his voice was soft and soothing. Behind them and above them there were the sounds of rotors and engines. Gently, ever so gently, he turned the children and began leading them, unresisting, along the path into the jungle. It was darker there, quiet and cool. The way was marked with crimson. The children moved quickly to keep up with their grandfather. -

"It's all right," he whispered and touched their shoulders lightly to guide them down the narrowing path. "Everything's all right. I know the way."

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