

1

April 1970

Cambodia

Target Kilo 8: The Fishhook

Slithering the last fifty meters on his belly, Staff Sergeant Chris Hale reached the edge of the depression where the engine noise was coming from. Slowly parting the jungle growth to his front, he had his first clear view of the hollow. The sight caused his gut to clench.

Milling around as if they were about to start a parade were at least fifty North Vietnamese Army regular soldiers. Behind them was an elaborately camouflaged structure that looked like a large lanai that Hale had seen on his R&R to Hawaii, complete with wicker chairs and a ceiling fan lazily turning. Which explained the noise. There was a generator somewhere close by.

Hale continued to scan, peering intently at another intricately camouflaged structure about a hundred meters away. Trying to stitch together what he was seeing, like a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces, he realized it wasn't a

building, but a helicopter. A Soviet Mi-4. He couldn't believe it. What's more, he knew nobody at MACV-SOG headquarters in Danang would believe it. He inched up his camera, hoping the lens was good enough to make out the chopper from this distance.

After a couple of snaps, he turned back to the lanai, now full of NVA officers. *The mother lode*, he thought. Looking closer, he saw they weren't NVA, but something else. They were taller than Vietnamese, and wore a different uniform. *Shit, they're Chinese*. He watched them all turn at the same time and look toward the rear of the room, where another man entered dressed in civilian clothes. With a start, Hale saw he was a Caucasian. *A fucking Russian. No way will the FOB buy this*. He'd heard many strange tales about what recon teams had seen across the fence inside Cambodia or Laos, including Chevy station wagons with Texas plates or Soviet armor, but this compound was taking the cake.

The Caucasian walked to the edge of the lanai and stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the activity before him in the hollow. Hale snapped as many pictures of him as he could, no more than thirty meters away. When the man returned to the group, Hale continued to photograph, fired up with the thought of providing evidence of both Chinese and Russian advisors helping the NVA in supposedly neutral Cambodia. When he figured he'd pushed his luck enough, he slithered backward to Houg, the Montagnard native he'd left pulling security to his rear. After a brief exchange of hand and arm signals,

they began creeping back to the Remain Overnight Position, or RON, where the rest of the five-member team waited.

They crept very slowly, covering only ten or fifteen meters before stopping to listen. Such movement required extreme patience, as Hale fought the urge to stretch the fifteen meters into fifty. They had to cover only about a football field, but it took them close to an hour to reach the team.

Moving inside the small security perimeter of the team, Hale signaled his one-one, Sergeant Dickie Thomas. Second in command, Thomas carried the team radio, their only lifeline if anything went wrong.

Thomas crept up and whispered, “What about Cummings?”

Specialist Cummings was the only other American on the team. The remaining four men were Montagnard mercenaries recruited for their fighting prowess and their fierce hatred of the Vietnamese. All belonged to the Ground Studies Branch of the U.S. Military’s Studies and Observation Group, more commonly called SOG. The cover name made it sound like they were a bunch of scientists out taking soil samples to improve the South Vietnamese rice crop. In reality, they were Special Forces soldiers who’d volunteered for top secret cross-border reconnaissance missions into the countries neighboring Vietnam to develop intelligence on enemy movements down the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

Specialist Cummings was new to SOG’s Command

and Control South—the element responsible for Cambodia—and was accompanying Hale’s team as an orientation before assuming one-on-one duties of his own on another team. Hale had forgotten he was there. He motioned Cummings over.

Speaking in a whisper, he told the two men what he had found. As expected, they were skeptical, which aggravated him. How was he going to convince the boss at CCS if his own team doubted him?

“I got fucking pictures. I’m telling you, there’s a headshed meeting going on between the NVA and a bunch of foreign advisors.”

Thomas grabbed Hale’s arm as his voice began to rise.

“Shhh. Jesus, remember where we are?”

Hale abruptly became quiet, with the entire team straining to hear anything out of the ordinary in the jungle growth. His team was on day four of a five-day mission, and the strain of working alone deep inside enemy territory was wearing them down, with last night bringing them to the breaking point.

They had pulled up into the RON just as the sun began to set. After the darkness had descended, a black curtain that was claustrophobic in its intensity, they had noticed fires all around them, winking like fireflies and extending off into the distance. Cooking fires. For a large number of people.

Somehow, they had managed to penetrate inside the perimeter of a large enemy base camp without either them or the enemy realizing it. As the one-zero, or team

leader, Hale had made the call to use the RON instead of trying to thread their way back out in the darkness, then thread their way back in during daylight for the recon. The night had been sleepless, but the decision had paid off big-time. All they had to do now was live to talk about it.

Hale whispered, “Let’s get the hell out of here. Before some idiot out to take a shit stumbles over us. We’ve still got a day’s walk before we exfil.”

Thomas grimaced at the thought of walking all the way back to target area Lima 7, but understood why. Lately, it seemed as if the NVA knew the SOG Recon Teams were coming. Even if they managed to insert across the border, the NVA found them within hours, forcing a running gun battle for survival. Several teams had vanished without a trace, the last contact by radio simply saying they were okay, then nothing. The rumor going around was that there was a mole somewhere within higher headquarters. A plant that was feeding information to the enemy.

This, coupled with the importance of Team Anvil’s mission, led their commander to use a little misdirection, hiding the team’s true objective. The operations plan was fake, detailing the team moving northeast into target area Lima 7 after infil. Instead, they had walked southwest into Kilo 8 for their real objective, but due to the sensitivity of this undeclared front, they would need to return to Lima 7 for pickup.

Hale waited for the team to ruck up, then gave the

signal to move. They had gone no more than seventy meters when the point man signaled enemy to his front. Shortly, Hale heard the sounds of movement from their left flank. A lot of movement. He felt his adrenaline spike, the blood flooding into his muscles in preparation for the fight. He looked at Thomas with an unspoken command. Thomas prepared to call the Forward Air Controller flying somewhere nearby to let him know the situation, as seconds would be precious.

Hale waited until he could clearly see the first five men of the platoon-size patrol before he opened up with his CAR-15. Immediately, the rest of the team began firing, killing man after man as the surprised NVA tried to understand how they were being attacked in their own backyard.

Hale gave the order to break contact, and the team began an intricate dance to the rear, with half firing while the other half moved. Hale could hear Thomas trying to remain calm on the radio.

“Covey, Covey, this is Anvil, contact. I say again, contact.”

“Anvil, this is Covey. I copy. What’s your location?”

While still on the move, Hale pulled out his signal mirror and sighted into the sky.

Changing magazines, Thomas said, “Using a shiny. Do you see it?”

“Roger. Got you. Stand by.”

They had managed to break from the engagement but were moving in the wrong direction due to the contact,

perpendicular to where they needed to go. Hale knew they were on the verge of bumping into another enemy element and that everyone in this world would do whatever it took to kill them. The team was holding up, but he could feel the fear surrounding each man like a physical thing. He felt it himself. Abruptly, they were hit again, from the direction of the lanai.

The team began to pour fire out again, repeating the dance, but they had lost the element of surprise. The NVA came in looking for a fight.

Hale screamed, "Claymore!"

Cummings ran over and took a knee, firing at the enemy while Hale tore into the rucksack on his back, pulling out a claymore mine rigged with a thirty-second time fuse and a white phosphorus grenade taped to the front. He jammed it into the ground and set the fuse while Cummings provided cover, then both bounded back to the team.

The ball bearings of the claymore shredded the lead NVA element in pursuit, with the white phosphorus grenade spewing out a blanket of fire that incinerated anything it touched. The enemy response died off, replaced by the screams and moans of the wounded.

The team continued running, everyone panting. Hale did a head count and saw he was missing his tail gunner.

He shouted, "Where's Houg?"

"I don't know," Thomas said. "He was right with me when we started to break."

They both knew there was no way they could search

for him. To do so would cause the entire team to be annihilated. Hale strained to see some indication in Thomas's face, but it was his decision to make.

Hale paused for a moment, torn, then said, "Fuck. We can't go back in. Call Prairie Fire."

He got the team up and moving again, hearing Thomas relaying the call to Covey. Prairie Fire was the code word for a team about to be overrun. It was used only in absolute need, because everything available was dedicated to that team. No one-zero wanted to call Prairie Fire and have another team die because he had taken their support.

Thomas said, "Covey's got two Thuds inbound with some ordnance left from a run to Hanoi. No idea what they're carrying."

The flight of F-105 fighter/bombers would help, but only if they got to the team soon. Hale knew it would be a matter of minutes before the NVA gained control and began a methodical hunt, using what appeared to be an entire regiment around them. After what he had seen at the lanai, he was sure they wouldn't quit until the team was dead, and maybe not even then. He could see the team knew it as well, the fear pulsing off them, the whites of their eyes stark against the camouflage greasepaint on their faces. He was reminded of a treed raccoon from his youth, hissing and snarling while the dogs barked in a frenzy below. He'd often wondered how the raccoon felt right at the end. Now he knew.

Still on the move, he heard Cummings empty a maga-

zine at the rear of the formation, screaming, “B-40 rocket! B-40 rocket!”

An explosion lifted Hale off of his feet. Momentarily stunned, he saw his right side covered in blood. The team lay scattered, some still firing, others in a daze. Shaking the haze from his head, he moved from man to man. Reorganizing the defense, he was relieved to see that, despite various wounds, everyone with him was still alive and ambulatory. In front of him he saw nothing but khaki uniforms darting between the trees, perhaps a hundred NVA advancing toward them. The sight caused him to momentarily freeze, the sheer magnitude of their situation sinking in.

We're dead.

The enemy unleashed everything they had, the rate of fire preventing the team from moving, the bullets snapping through their small perimeter like a swarm of angry bees and shredding the vegetation around them. Hale scrambled through the fire to Thomas, intent on breaking the NVA momentum before they realized they had it. He took over the radio, talking directly to the inbound F-105 pilots, giving them instructions on where to drop their load.

He dropped the hand mike and shouted, “Hug the ground! Danger close! Danger close!”

No sooner had he said it than the earth rocked violently, literally lifting the team into the air, the shock wave of the ordnance hammering them. The firing from the enemy slacked off to nothing.

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Hale said, urging the team forward before the enemy could recover. He heard Thomas asking Covey for an exfiltration LZ, and heard Covey reply that the closest one was two kilometers to the north.

We aren’t going to make it two clicks through this. Hale said nothing out loud.

After ten minutes of movement without contact, Hale began to think that maybe they’d broken through. That now it was just a footrace, with only the team knowing the location of the finish line. He began to hope. Five seconds later, something slammed into his chest, knocking him to the ground. The air around him erupted in pops from incoming rounds. The team immediately returned fire, with someone grabbing his combat harness and dragging him forward. The Yard pulling him was hit, causing him to let go. Immediately, another took his place, continuing to drag Hale to cover.

Amazingly, the enemy fire grew fainter the farther they ran. After the experience with the claymore, the NVA were pursuing cautiously, not wanting to charge into another wall of ball bearings and fire, giving the team some much-needed breathing room.

Hale shook the hands off of him and tried to stand up, then sank back to a knee. He felt like he couldn’t get any air, like he couldn’t inflate his lungs.

Thomas checked him, then began to work, putting a plastic strip over an entrance and exit wound on his breast. He said, “You got an in-and-out. It’s sucking.”

Hale saw the look of fear on his face and nodded. He slowly stood up, adrenaline alone willing him forward.

“Let’s keep moving. Those fuckers will be back on us soon.”

To confuse the enemy tracking them, they took a right turn, walked for about a hundred meters, then continued toward the LZ, now moving at a much slower pace. Hale was struggling to keep up, the gap between his diaphragm and left lung filling with air and preventing him from inflating it. He heard Thomas get confirmation that three helicopters were five minutes out, two slicks with gunship escort. Hale figured the team was at least thirty minutes from the landing zone.

It dawned on him that with the loss of Houng, they were down to a normal team of six men, which could be extracted by McGuire rig—a simple sling seat that was dropped from both sides of the aircraft, three to a side, allowing exfiltration without having to land.

“We aren’t going to make it to the LZ,” he said. “We get hit again, and we’re done. Tell Covey to pick us up here, with strings.”

Thomas relayed while they moved. Minutes later, he was talking directly to the helo, coordinating the extraction with the team spread out in a perimeter around him.

“I’ll pop smoke. You identify.” He pulled the pin and tossed the grenade, knowing it would be a beacon for the NVA but vital to get them out.

The pilot’s voice came back calm and mechanical. “Roger. I see green smoke.”

“Roger. That’s us.”

The team could now hear the chopper and smell salvation. The first Huey was sliding into position when a 12.7mm heavy machine gun opened up from the camp, strafing the tail. The gunship immediately obliterated the fire with its miniguns, but the damage to the first helo was done. Hale watched it pull off and begin limping back toward the South Vietnamese border. He prayed it would make it.

The second Huey came overhead and dropped the rigs, the rotor wash beating the brush around them in a mini hurricane. As the men were frantically getting inside the slings, one of the Yards began screaming and pointing. Out of the wood line, Hale saw Houng stumbling toward the hovering aircraft, weaponless, one arm dangling uselessly at his side, his face a bloody mess. In the distance behind him, he saw swarms of NVA drawn by the smoke and noise of the helicopter. He slipped out of his sling to give it to Houng.

Thomas shouted, “What are you doing?”

Hale looked at him with sadness and said, “You know what I’m doing.”

Thomas started to leave his sling as well, tearing at the slip noose around his wrist. Hale stopped him.

“No. You’re not getting off. Remember what I told you about the camp. Get that information back to the FOB.”

“Fuck that! No way! You die, we both die.”

Hale pointed to his chest and side, both freely bleeding from the multiple wounds. “I’m already dead. Go.”

Without waiting for an answer, Hale turned and assisted Houng into the last sling. Thomas helped as tears left tracks through the greasepaint on his face.

The NVA began running forward and firing through the trees in a desperate attempt to stop the extraction. Doing figure eights overhead, the gunship unleashed its twin miniguns, knocking soldiers down by the dozens as if they had been swatted by a giant hand.

“Go, go, go!” Hale screamed. He turned and stumbled away, wobbling toward the brush while firing his last magazine into the advancing soldiers. The enemy paid no attention to him—not even realizing he was there. Instead they focused all of their fire on the helicopter as it lifted off. Hale crawled forward underneath a tree that had been shattered by lightning, pulling brush over his body in an attempt to hide himself, the fear of death coiling in his belly like a snake. Wheezing from his destroyed lung, he watched the team lift off, dangling beneath the helo like spiders on a web, heading toward safety. Toward home.

He remembered he still had the camera in his rucksack, with the proof of the meeting. Intelligence of tremendous value to the war effort. He cursed himself at the oversight, knowing the information would die out here with him. Disappear as if it had never existed. At least Thomas would pass the basics along.

As the helo got smaller, another heavy machine gun opened up. The tracers arced through the sky and cut into the aircraft, punching through the thin skin to the

avionics beneath. Hale watched the bird lose tail-rotor function and begin spinning out of control, the team now flung out on the end of the ropes like a pinwheel from the centrifugal force. He watched in disbelief as the helicopter slammed into the earth in a fireball. He heard the NVA cheering.

The fear left his body, replaced by despair at the futility of it all. He closed his eyes and drifted into unconsciousness.

2

Two Years Ago Central Sudan

Brett Thorne's head jolted forward, snapping him awake, as the decrepit Japanese pickup hit another rut. He gazed at the stars above his head as they drove through the Sudanese desert, the sky infinitely brighter than anywhere he had been in the States.

He nudged a form in front of him with his boot. "How much longer?"

The man, a tall, lanky member of the Zaghawa tribe from the Darfur region of western Sudan, said, "Another hour, maybe less. Are you regretting your decision to ride back here with us? I can have him pull over."

Brett shook his head. As a CIA operative, he could have easily traveled in the cab of the pickup, but he wanted the ability to fight—and run—without restriction. The cab was too confining. Even if it meant being crammed in the back with five other men, all smelling like they hadn't bathed in over a month. It was like rid-

ing in a basket of clothes that had been dipped in sour milk.

Brett leaned out into the wind, catching the dust from the truck ahead of them but enjoying the escape from the fetid air. He sat back down and reflexively patted the rucksack at his feet.

If they fight half as ferociously as they stink, we might not need this anyway.

The truck abruptly slowed, shutting off its headlights and driving with parking lights alone. Brett stood up and noticed the lead truck had done the same. He heard excited murmurings from both trucks in the tribe's native tongue, something he couldn't understand.

He turned to the tribesman who spoke English. "What's going on? Why are we stopping?"

"Janjaweed. Over there."

He pointed to the north, and Brett could make out several sets of headlights bouncing across the desert, moving closer.

"You don't know they're Janjaweed, and even if they are, this mission is more important than killing some low-level militia. If any get away, we're screwed."

"Nobody else drives around in convoys at night. It's Janjaweed." The tribesman smiled, his teeth gleaming white in the moonlight. "And I agree with you, Mister Brett, but I cannot make the others agree. They have suffered many times at the hands of the Janjaweed and will not be denied. We just need to make sure we kill them all."

Brett muttered under his breath, cursing his boss at the Special Activities Division in Langley and cursing his poor, dumb luck to be born African American. Because of it, he was always chosen for any mission in Africa that involved infiltrating with the natives, regardless of the fact that he was a five-foot-five-inch fireplug of solid muscle, and the Zaghawa were all six-foot string beans. He looked nothing like them, although he'd known that before he'd crossed the border at Chad. At the time, he'd laughed about it because all of his buddies in SAD had been denied a seat on the trip based on the color of their skin, no matter how hard they bitched that Brett looked about as native as they did. Bigotry at its finest.

Now, as he often did when plans started falling apart four thousand miles from help, he was wondering about his career choices. He tried one last time.

“We lose a single man, and I’m aborting the mission. The refinery is much, much more important than a random militia patrol. Think about that. You’re risking a strategic gain for a tactical one.”

The tribesman didn’t answer. He simply slipped over the side of the truck and faded into the darkness, along with everyone else. Brett cursed again and jumped over the side himself. Instead of following, he hunkered down next to the cab of the pickup, intent on hauling ass if things went bad.

The Janjaweed, an amorphous group of militias comprised of nomadic tribesmen, were responsible for a campaign of terror in Darfur, committing atrocities as a

matter of course in an effort to run out all of the sedentary farming tribes, such as the Zaghawa. In response, the farmers had banded together, forming militias of their own. The Zaghawa tribe belonged to the Sudanese Liberation Army and had formed ostensibly to take the fight to the Sudanese government for the perceived injustice of the government's lack of effort to stop the Janjaweed from raping and pillaging. The plan had backfired. Instead of stopping the Janjaweed, the government, fearful of the threat, began arming them.

As has happened throughout history, the conflict had escalated out of control until it was genocide, with civilians bearing the brunt of the damage.

Brett knew all of this, but he wasn't emotionally involved in any way. He was simply, as Clausewitz said over a century ago, the continuation of politics by other means. In this case, Chinese means.

Over the past decade, China's appetite for resources had grown along with its economy, until it was now a rapacious beast. China had begun pouring money into Sudan, becoming the largest investor in Sudan's petroleum industry, and the largest consumer of Sudanese oil. Thus, China had more influence in Darfur's war than perhaps any other country.

Unfortunately for the victims of the genocide, China had little interest in Sudan's conflict. Chinese arms kept the Sudanese government and the Janjaweed fighting, and because of it, a symbiotic relationship had been created: Sudan favored the Chinese for their support, and

China used its sway within the UN Security Council to prevent any meaningful UN action.

Brett hoped to change that equation, if he could keep these backwater natives focused on the mission.

He patted the rucksack again, ensuring the device was with him, then crouched next to the cab of the pickup, hearing the tick of the engine and the clink of weaponry around him as the men deployed in a half-assed tactical manner. Eventually, he heard the groan of the Janjaweed vehicles, steadily growing louder.

The Zaghawa tribesmen had tucked inside a small wadi, preventing him from seeing the approaching vehicles, which was the only tactical thinking that Brett could spot. There was no security to the flanks or rear, no discernible ambush line, and no way they would ever know if anyone escaped. He sighed. *Another kindergarten fight.*

He prayed the Janjaweed were just as bad. He pulled on a pair of night observation goggles, the darkness immediately replaced with an eerie green.

He saw the glow of headlights against the brush on top of the wadi, bouncing in and out and growing stronger, along with the Zaghawa tribesmen waiting to ambush the convoy in a formation that guaranteed failure. The lead Janjaweed truck reached the edge of the wadi and stopped, its headlights silhouetting the Zaghawa formation. He heard the shouting of the men in back; then the night erupted into gunfire.

It seemed that the Zaghawa had surrounded the trucks and were now firing wildly into them, regardless of the

friendly men on either side. Tracer fire arced through the air, most of it harmlessly over the heads of the Janjaweed. Miraculously, they began pouring out of the trucks unscathed, shooting just as wildly as the Zaghawa tribesmen.

Jesus H. Christ. Fucking idiots.

Brett threw his AK-47 to his shoulder and began firing controlled pairs, dropping everything he aimed at in the dim glow of the headlights, his NODs giving him an unbeatable edge. An RPG sputtered through the air and managed to find the lead Janjaweed truck, exploding the gas tank into a fierce ball of fire and throwing Brett backward.

He rolled to the rear of his pickup, still snapping rounds, then realized he no longer had the rucksack. No way could he allow the Janjaweed to get it. If they lost this fight, he needed to ensure it was destroyed.

He sprinted bent over, losing the depth perception in his NODs, forcing him to pat the ground until he hit the rucksack. He snatched it up and continued forward, climbing the wall of the wadi. Rounds were blasting from all sides, going both in and out, the tracers and the fire from the exploded truck causing his NODs to white out. He ripped them off and surveyed the damage.

He was outside the ring of the fight and saw his intrepid Zaghawa tribesmen leaping forward, spraying rounds, then leaping back again. From all sides. *Jesus. A circular ambush. Are they retarded?*

The Janjaweed were more disciplined, controlling

their fire in a synchronized manner. And they had an edge: Using their trucks for cover, they could fire indiscriminately out three hundred and sixty degrees without worrying about hitting anyone friendly. With the Zaghawa's poorly chosen formation, the fire would devastate any ability to mount an assault. In an instant, Brett saw they were going to lose. They had maybe a minute to gain the upper hand before the Janjaweed men began a systematic attack on a flank and rolled up the entire crew. Brett knew his men would either die or throw down their weapons and run off into the darkness.

The second pickup of Janjaweed militia shifted attention to his side of the perimeter, the flames from the burning vehicle negating any edge his NODs would have provided. He could hear the second truck yelling to the third truck, and knew the assault was close. Rounds ripped the air around him, forcing him to push his face into the desert floor, worming backward for any low ground that would protect him. Bullets snapped through the fabric of the rucksack on his back, causing him to freeze and wonder if he would even feel the devastation should the device go off.

The shooting shifted to his right, and up the line, he saw the men from the third truck massing to flank, unmolested because of the protection provided by the fire from truck two. *Need to intercept them.*

He jumped up and raced through the darkness, screaming at any man he saw to follow him. None did. *Shit . . . No English speakers.*

He reached the apex of the perimeter just as the men from truck three began to move. He had run far enough to put the assault element from truck three between him and the covering fire from truck two. He dropped to a knee and began pulling the trigger, his aim much, much more devastating than any of the tribesmen around him. He hit five before the assault was broken, the men retreating back to the safety of the vehicles, unsure of who was killing them.

He followed at a sprint, needing to finish the job before they could regroup. He reached the trucks in the confusion of the enemy running back, with nobody realizing he was among them. He dropped the AK and pulled out his Glock 19, firing so close to the men that they didn't realize he wasn't shooting out. Within seconds, truck three was dead.

Not wanting to lose momentum, he grabbed a PKM machine gun and sprinted the forty meters to truck two, mowing men down from their unprotected rear like he was working a scythe. The last two men realized that someone other than a jittery tribesman was after them, and turned to face the threat just as the belt ran out on his machine gun.

Brett threw the heavy weapon into one man, knocking him to the ground, while he dove into the other. He grabbed a fistful of hair and pounded the man's skull into the rocky ground until he felt no resistance, then turned and jumped on the other Janjaweed recruit, using his knee to crush his face. He rolled off and drew his Glock

again, looking for another threat. None came, and the fire had slacked off to nothing from outside.

Slowly, men came forward, looking incredulous at his actions. The English speaker found him, his eyes wide.

“You are truly a lion among men.”

The adrenaline still burning, Brett spit on the ground and grabbed him by the chest. “Get me the leader.”

He saw that the tribesman’s grasp of English wasn’t strong enough to follow, so he got belligerent, like an ugly American tourist. He raised his voice, speaking slowly and distinctly.

“Get. Me. The. Fucking. Leader.”

FORTY-FIVE MINUTES LATER, he dropped down from the bed of the pickup truck, the land around him glowing from the myriad of lights emanating from the refinery. The tribesmen themselves were milling about with little thought to security, making Brett antsy.

This refinery was built with Chinese dollars, manned by Chinese engineers, and guarded by Sudanese government troops. He had no doubt they were better than the Janjaweed he had just fought, which meant they were exponentially better than the men who accompanied him. He needed to find the critical components of the refinery and trigger his device, then get the hell out. If the tribesmen here wanted to continue attacking, so be it. He wasn’t going to stop them, since it would help him escape to the south, where his exfiltration vehicle was staged.

He pulled in the English speaker, reiterating what he had said before. “Nobody fires until I initiate. When you hear my explosion, start tearing it up. You understand?”

“Yes, yes. We will wait. Where will you go?”

“I’m going to cross the fence. You guys wait out here. Whatever you do, don’t initiate. Got it?”

“Yes. We are lions too. We will wait.”

Brett smiled and patted him on the shoulder, thinking he was about to take his life into his own hands. He turned and scaled the chain-link fence, then scampered into the first area of darkness he could find.

He put on his NODs and scanned the refinery one hundred meters away. He’d learned all sorts of terms when studying the critical components of the average refinery—from atmospheric and vacuum fractionating towers to fluid catalytic crackers—but the key wasn’t learning how they worked, only what they looked like. He had determined that the fractionating towers were the components to attack, given the parameters of the device he intended to use.

He saw a row of narrow columns to his front, four in a parallel line perpendicular to him, hissing steam out of the top. *The target.*

All he needed was to take out one, and the refinery would be put off-line for weeks. The end state would be a rebel success against a government facility, which would cause the Chinese to rethink their tepid efforts at stopping the civil war. Rethink their support for the Sudanese government because their own bottom line would now

be affected with the loss of oil imports. They couldn't help but wonder if this wasn't a precursor to another successful attack by the rebels.

Brett gave no thought to whether the strategy would work, only about the tactical method of engagement. The device he had brought was a test item. Something that should take out a tower with little effort, but he had no real idea if it would work. One thing was for sure: If it didn't, the clowns he was with would get nothing done.

He low-crawled forward until he was within eighty meters of the first column, then opened his rucksack. He pulled out a tripod and a device that was the same size as a gallon stewpot. He was preparing it for initiation when he heard gunfire outside the fence.

Dumb-ass bastards.

He frantically began aiming the device as the gunfire grew in volume. He saw men spilling out of buildings next to the columns, thankfully drawn to the sound of the guns. He rose up to check his aim and was caught in the headlights of a vehicle screaming down the perimeter fence, just to the right of the columns.

He hit the ground, breathing hard, wondering if he'd been seen. He glanced up and saw the headlights swerve toward him.

Holy shit . . .

He grabbed the initiation device and rolled away, frantically jabbing the button. The device exploded, sending its deadly payload toward the column.

He looked up and saw the first tower buckle. Then the

second. And the third. All spewed out an enormous amount of vaporized fuel in various stages of distillation. A split second later, the gaseous cloud erupted in a violent explosion, the shock wave slamming him to the earth.

He rolled around, his ears ringing, his conscious brain screaming at him to find the truck. Eliminate the threat.

He rose to his knees and saw the truck on its side, burning furiously, knocked out by the fuel-air explosion. The entire refinery was on fire, the battle to his rear now silent.

What the hell did I just use? What did they give me?

He began running flat out to the perimeter fence and his exfil to the south.

TWO DAYS LATER, Han Wanchun studied the reports on the demise of the oil refinery. As a partner in the Great Wall Industry Corporation, purportedly a Chinese technology consortium, there was no reason for him to be privy to the secret satellite data showing the destruction wrought by the rebel band. No reason for him to be allowed to read the sensitive firsthand reporting from the Chinese workers on the ground. But as a colonel in the People's Liberation Army, Han had access to whatever information he needed to conduct his mission, which, unlike the false statement propagated by the Great Wall corporation, wasn't to develop technology. It was to steal it.

Reading the reports, Han realized that something

more than a motley band of rebels was involved. There was no way the tribal members could wreak the havoc shown with small arms alone. He cared not a whit about the genocide occurring in Darfur, or about the loss of the refinery. Not his job to do so. But whatever had caused the damage was something to be concerned about. Maybe something to covet.

The strike on the oil refinery was designed to get Chinese attention. As often happened in the hazy world of covert operations, it had accomplished the task, but not in the way the United States intended.

Han put the reports back into the classified sleeve on his desk, the germ of an idea beginning to form.