

Chapter One

Whack! Whack! Whack! Thunk!

Glen Martin laid the pickax against the side of the hole he was digging before cautiously probing the loose dirt with his shovel. The tip hit something hard. Glen grinned when he remembered that as a boy he had started to dig a hole to China at his grandfather's farm in upper New York State during the summer of 1969. The soil was rocky, he didn't get two feet down before he hit a large bolder. Now more than thirty years later, he was in China digging the other way and again found a big rock. Carefully, Glen scraped the loose soil away. A flat stone was buried about ten centimeters down; a deep inscription was chiseled into its surface.

"Professor! I think I found it!" he called.

The lean, wrinkled face of Professor Otto Neustadt appeared at the edge. The old man studied both his younger partner and the pit Glen had dug while the still-cold spring winds played with his long, straggly white hair, blowing it first one way and then another. Chilled, he clutched the front of his jacket and wondered how Glen could stand the cold without wearing a jacket or even a sweater.

Obviously an American, Glen was dressed in jeans and a tan twill shirt – his bush jacket lay carelessly heaped on the top edge of the hole behind him. Although his rugged face was still unlined, the gray streaks shining through his dark brown hair betrayed his age to be mid-fortyish.

"Yes, it's about the right depth, nearly two meters," the professor said in accented English. "Clean the dirt off the stone. If it is a tomb entrance, then it should be about a meter square."

Glen nodded and began shoveling the dirt out of the

excavation as Professor Neustadt watched. The younger man's body was lean, hard and as vigorous as any twenty-year-old's. It was the result of the hard manual labor that Glen had engaged in ever since they had begun their quest for buried treasure in central China. His back muscles rippled under his shirt as he methodically removed the layer of dirt over the stone. The hard clay proved particularly resistant in one corner, so he picked up the pickax and raised it over his head.

"Careful!" Professor Neustadt warned. "You're excavating a Han dynasty tomb, not digging a ditch!"

The American grimaced. "You can dig it out yourself, if you want. I know what I am doing."

Glen swung hard and buried the pick deep into the yellowish soil. The professor heard a dull whacking sound. Somehow, Glen had avoided hitting the stone.

The old man nodded to himself. *Yes, my friend, you do know what you are doing. Perhaps too well.*

Their relationship was unusual. It was that of a father and son, as well as professor and student. However, it was Professor Otto Neustadt who worked for Glen Martin.

Years earlier, when the Cold War was still bubbling over, Otto Neustadt had been a professor of anthropological archeology and Chinese antiquities at the University of Dresden. During that era, the German Democratic Republic considered the People's Republic of China a sister socialist state and so encouraged cultural exchanges between the two countries. Although chronically short of funds, the German Democratic Republic nevertheless somehow always found money for both international sports and cultural exchanges. Professor Neustadt therefore spent each summer in China, leading well-funded joint archeological expeditions in search of antiquities.

All that ended soon after the Berlin Wall fell and the two Germanys became one. The German government's

interest in China first waned and then evaporated. A letter arrived one day, informing Professor Neustadt that he no longer had an academic position. He could retire, if he wished, the letter stated, but on his former East German stipend. That pittance barely paid for his food, and only if he ate no meat.

So Professor Otto Neustadt, once a leading authority on ancient Chinese culture, found himself unemployed, impoverished, and reduced to doing odd jobs and selling his few worldly possessions. The Ming vase was to change that. The old man reminisced about how he and Glen had met.

The knock on his door was gentle but firm. Self-confident might describe the knock better. Otto Neustadt answered it and found a man of average height and with graying hair standing in the hallway of the shabby apartment building. The man was an American – one glance at his clothing told Otto that. It was Glen Martin.

“I understand that you have a Ming vase for sale,” Glen stated matter-of-factly. “May I see it?”

Professor Neustadt invited the man in and after exchanging introductions and pleasantries, the vase was brought out and inspected. The American asked how much. He seemed surprised at the price quoted.

“Ten thousand deutsche marks? That all? That’s too low for a real Ming vase. It should be worth at least twice that,” Glen asserted.

“Ah, Mr. Martin,” Otto replied, “value is a relative thing. A Ming vase is of little value to a starving man. On the other hand, ten thousand deutsche marks are enough for me to live on for two or three years.”

“You’re starving?” Glen questioned as he contemplated the German.

“I am lucky to eat more than once a day,” the old man

complained. "And even then it is usually just potatoes."

Glen Martin held the vase in his hands and glanced back and forth between it and his host. "Then I won't buy it." He carefully placed the vase on the table.

"What?" Otto was clearly shocked. He had already planned his dinner for that evening – a trip to the restaurant, starting with *bohnenuppe*, then *wiener schnitzel* with *spätzle* and at least a liter of beer to wash it all down. Finally, he would have *palatschiken* for dessert. His stomach growled in protest when he realized that he would be eating his last remaining potato instead. "But you must!"

"No, I'll not take advantage of you, Professor. You have something far more valuable to me than this vase, or any other knickknack you might have around here." Glen eyed the old man. "You were a professor of Chinese antiquities, weren't you?"

"Yes," Otto responded softly, ashamed of his present status. "For nearly twenty years, at the University of Dresden."

"And you are currently unemployed?"

"Yes – for several years now." Embarrassed, he looked down to avoid the American's eyes.

"Then I wish to hire you as a tutor. I have need of your expertise. The job would require you to travel extensively, but I will pay you, say, fifty thousand deutsche marks a year and expenses."

Fifty thousand marks! Otto's mind shrieked in disbelief. *That's a lifetime of money!* Shocked, he gazed up at his visitor. Otto's stomach rumbled. He waited for the noise to subside before he spoke, "I'm just an worthless old man."

"But of value to me," Glen replied. "The offer is real. I urge you to accept it."

Otto Neustadt stared at his visitor, wondering how he

could make such an offer and do it so casually, as though he was bargaining over the price of used clothing at the flea market.

“You’d have to move to Switzerland where I live,” Glen continued, “near Lausanne, on Lac Lemman. You do speak some French, don’t you?”

“Yes,” old man answered.

“Then you’ll take the job?”

“I meant yes, I speak French – as well as German, English, Dutch, Spanish and Chinese – two or three dialects of Chinese, that is.”

“But will you take the job?”

Otto Neustadt breathed deeply, wondering if this were some macabre dream that would end when his growling stomach woke him in the morning. “Yes,” he whispered, praying that it was real, “I agree, but under one condition.”

“And what’s that?”

“You take me to dinner tonight.”

Otto Neustadt smiled while he watched Glen hack away with the pickax. The meal that sealed their deal had ended in a disaster – Otto overate and remained in bed for two days, sick. Soon after, his benefactor moved him to a house near Glen’s villa overlooking Lake Geneva. Then began a whirlwind series of trips to every museum with a major collection of Chinese art. Glen Martin shamelessly used the professor’s connections to get into otherwise closed museums as well as their archives and storerooms where additional treasures were studied. And study them he did – voraciously. They would often work late into the night in the museum workrooms, pouring over odd bits of pottery or bronzes, as Glen absorbed, no, consumed, every detail. And through it all, Glen took great pains to treat his tutor with deference and respect,

habitually calling him “Professor.” Never once did he raise the issue that Otto Neustadt was actually his employee.

That was typical of Glen, however. He could be harsh and arrogant, yet tender and caring at almost the same time. Although Otto was an insightful person, it took him months to even start understanding the American. This was partly due to Glen’s intense sense of privacy – Otto still had no idea how Glen had earned all his money except that it was in Silicon Valley. And he didn’t even know that Glen had been married until a week ago when Glen mentioned that he had been divorced.

While Glen’s background remained an enigma, Otto had at least come to a basic understanding of his benefactor, even though it was still evolving. Until recently, he thought that Glen was compulsive – not in the usual sense of the word for he ate and drank in moderation and appeared uninterested in gambling. But he was certainly compulsive in matters of honor, being careful to scrupulously guard his own honor as well as that of others. For one thing, he would never take advantage of anyone. A good example of that was when Glen refused to buy Otto’s Ming vase because its price was too low. He always insisted on paying full value for whatever he received.

Perhaps related to this trait was his concern for other people’s sensitivities, which was ironic because he often offended people with his brash behavior in the first place. He was like a bull in a china shop who apologized profusely for the damage he did, first making an incautious statement and then making amends a moment later.

In addition, Glen had an almost pathological fear of hurting others. This is particularly true with his women, of which there are dozens. Glen apparently knew women everywhere in the world except perhaps China. No matter wherever they were, Glen usually did not sleep alone. But his women always benefited from his largess in return –

in any way but one, Otto noted. Although Glen would buy them whatever they asked for, or take them to wherever they might wish to go, or even simply give them money, he would not give of himself. At first Otto thought that Glen was incapable of love and finally mentioned it to him. His reaction surprised Otto. Glen laughed and replied, "I love too passionately to ever permit myself to do it again."

Otto nodded his head as he thought about Glen's statement.

"Yes, my friend, you are passionate about doing whatever it is you do. It's a pity that I could never interest you in archeology," Otto murmured to himself as he watched Glen dig.

The hole that Glen had dug in a few hours should have taken weeks of careful excavation with trowels and small paintbrushes, with every artifact tagged and carefully mapped. However, Glen was not interested in archeology but art. It pained the old man to see so much history being dug up and tossed over the top of the hole. Yet he was resigned to it. It was part of the price he had to pay to eat and survive. *We're all whores*, he thought. *It's just a question of price.*

Otto's thoughts returned to his relationship with Glen. Next came the buying trips. Together, they combed the galleries and shops of Paris, London, Tokyo, New York – or wherever – for whatever it was that pleased Glen. His tastes were eclectic, varying from prehistory Chinese Zhou bronzes to modern works. Soon, he exhausted the supply, and Glen's thoughts turned to finding his own source of material. He inquired about Otto's summer expeditions to China and what might still be unearthed.

At first, the old man was horrified. Not only was Glen proposing to loot archeological sites, but also the Chinese had no compunctions about executing those caught doing so. However, a rumble in Otto's stomach and Glen's

promise to pay off the appropriate officials settled the argument. A few weeks later they were in Xian, in central China.

Once, two millennia ago, Xian was known as Chang'an and served as the capital of China. Back then, it was the eastern terminus of the Silk Road made famous by Marco Polo. Today, it is a dusty city best known for the terracotta armies of Qin Shi Huang, China's first emperor and the countless Zhou, Qin, Han, Sui, and Tang dynasty tombs located nearby.

Glen and Otto were there ostensibly to visit the terracotta armies and the tombs. After a week of making very private arrangements with local officials, they rented a Chinese jeep and headed into the Qingling Mountains of Hubei Providence, some two hundred kilometers south-east of Xian. There they rented a room in a humble inn in the small, almost minuscule, hamlet of Wushan and spent each day visiting the many sites that Otto had explored during his summer expeditions of years gone by.

“Hand me the pry bar.”

The old man awoke from his reminiscing. “What?”

“Give me the pry bar,” Glen repeated. “I’ve got the entrance uncovered. It has some markings on it, but I can’t read the script – it’s too old.”

“Let me see,” the old man insisted as he slid into the hole. Although frail looking, he moved with surprising agility. “The least we can do is find out who it is we’re planning to rob.”

Glen glared at his companion. “Okay, if it makes your conscious easier.”

The ex-professor removed a small paintbrush from his back pocket and began brushing the loose dirt from the inscription chiseled into the stone.

“It’s in an early *lishi* or clerical script,” he said while

he worked. "See how the lines are uniform in thickness and the characters are formed in a squarish manner. Notice how the corners are not rounded, but formed by separate strokes to make the corners square. It's the style used by officials from the Han dynasty to...."

"Can you read it?" Glen interrupted.

"Certainly," Otto Neustadt replied disdainfully. "I am a professor of such things, you know."

Glen silently cursed himself for his disrespect. "Okay, okay, Professor, I apologize. It's just that it's already five o'clock and the sun sets in just another hour."

"The tomb has been here for over two millennia," the old man noted absently while he dug some clay out of the detail of the inscription with a dental pick. "I'm certain that it will be here tomorrow."

Three hundred kilometers to the southeast, at the Wujia Chi Air Base near Jingmen, Captain Hu studied the small knot of men moving around his aircraft, a bomber. He had to use binoculars to do so for he was almost a kilometer away.

"We have to hurry those fools up, it's getting late," he muttered angrily to his companion, Second Lieutenant Kong, his bombardier.

"You can go over to help, if you want," the lieutenant replied, "but if those idiots make one false move and let that bomb slip, there won't be enough of you left to bury."

Captain Hu nodded. Normally, he would be supervising the loading of a bomb onto his airplane. But not this bomb. One false move and the four *Qiang-5* attack bombers circling the base would swoop in and incinerate the bomb, the bomber and anyone nearby with napalm. Each of the four attack planes was carrying four canisters of the terrible weapon, and they had orders to use all of it should anything go wrong. Nothing but charred cinders

would remain when they had finished.

“I think they have the bomb aboard, sir,” Lieutenant Kong announced. “We can go over and start our pre-flight check.”

“Let’s give them a few more minutes to be certain,” the captain responded cautiously. “I think that we have plenty of time. The village is going nowhere.”

“Ah,” Professor Otto Neustadt cried joyously when he’d finished translating the inscription on the tomb entrance. “We’re in luck, Glen! This is a Western Han dynasty tomb. See, it says ‘General Huo Anlu, servant of Emperor Wudi.’”

“He couldn’t have been much of a general, if he’s buried here,” Glen commented dryly. “Most of the important people of the imperial court were buried some twenty kilometers west of Xian, not out here two hundred kilometers to the southeast.”

“I’m impressed, Glen,” Otto beamed. “You’ve been reading, haven’t you? Perhaps you can date this tomb?”

“Emperor Wudi, also known as Liu Che, ruled from 187 to 156 BC.”

“Excellent!” The professor was ecstatic.

“Now can we open the damn tomb? It’s getting late, and the sun going to set. I’d like to find out if it’s worth our while to come back tomorrow.”

Professor Neustadt’s expression changed to a frown. “Always the barbarian,” he mumbled while he moved out of the way.

Glen, out of deference to the old man’s sensitivities, resisted the temptation to smash the stone entrance of the tomb and instead carefully jabbed the pry bar down beside it.

“Give me a hand, Professor!” Glen called as he

strained to lift the heavy cover. The old man complied and added his scant weight to the steel pry bar. However, it was enough and the stone lifted.

“Get the other bar into the crack, so that I can reposition this one,” Glen grunted as he strained on the bar to hold the stone up. A few minutes later, they had the stone slab moved aside enough for a man to crawl through into the darkness beneath.

“Whew,” Otto exclaimed in relief. “That was a lot heavier than I remember the other stones being.”

“You’re older – this one just seems heavier,” Glen laughed while peering into the darkness. The sun was now low in the sky and no longer shone into the hole.

“I also had ten or fifteen coolies to do the heavy work back then,” the ex-professor said. “You’re rich enough to afford a whole army of laborers, Glen,” he added. “Why don’t you get a couple to help us?”

“Because they’ll help themselves to whatever we found when we’re not watching them,” Glen answered. “Besides, I want to keep this whole operation as low profile as possible. We can’t afford to have a whole lot of tongues wagging. If word gets out, those people I paid to look the other way will be forced to investigate and....” Glen left his last point unspoken.

It didn’t need to be explained. Otto Neustadt had once witnessed a Chinese execution. The condemned man was forced to kneel in the middle of the field with his hands tied behind his back. A militiaman then walked up behind him, stuck the barrel of an AK-47 into the man’s back and pulled the trigger. Although it was a very short burst of gunfire, it nevertheless tore a hole through the man’s chest. Otto could clearly see light through it as the man’s body fell over.

The old man trembled while reflecting upon the execution: Justice in China was quick and harsh, and thus best avoided.

“Let’s see just how deep that hole is. After all, this could be an old well or something,” Glen said as he dropped a small stone into the opening.

He heard a gentle thud an instant later. “Good! It’s not very deep. Hand me a flashlight, if you would. I want to take a look inside.”

Otto dug into the haversack slung over his shoulder. “Here.” He handed a flashlight to Glen. “I have two. This is the more powerful one.”

Glen turned on the flashlight and shone it into the gap. “Well, it’s not a very big tunnel, if that what it is, because it’s hardly a meter deep.”

“Let me see,” Otto said. He lay down and slowly inched more and more of his head and then shoulders into the gap.

“Careful,” Glen warned, “I don’t want you falling into the hole.”

“Ah, it’s okay,” Otto muttered. “I’m not going to do that. What I’m worried about is why there is so much dirt in the tunnel. It should be deep enough to stand in, or almost. The average height of a upper class Chinese back then was about one seventy.”

“One seventy?”

Otto pulled his head out of the hole and peered at Glen. “One meter, seventy centimeters,” he explained. “About five foot, seven inches.”

“That means that they were almost as tall as they are today.”

“Exactly.” The old man glanced down into the tunnel again. “That also means that the tunnel is partially filled in – the question is why?”

“The dirt could have settled though the stones covering the top,” Glen suggested.

“Possibly,” Otto agreed, “but it’s much more likely

that somebody made a hole in the roof of the tunnel and that the dirt washed in with every rain storm.”

“So this tomb could have been robbed already?”

“There’s only one way to find out.” With that, Otto swung his feet around and dropped then into the gap between the stones. An instant later, he disappeared into the tunnel.

Captain Hu put his binoculars into the case lying at his feet and threw his cigarette away.

“I guess it’s time to go,” he told Lieutenant Kong. “We have to be airborne in a half-hour, and we still have to walk back to the plane.”

“I wish we had our bicycles,” the lieutenant complained as he threw away his own cigarette.

“Where could we put them on the plane?” Captain Hu questioned. “We had to park the plane well away from everything else on the base so they could load that devil bomb. If we wanted, we could have stayed with the ground crew while they loaded it.”

“No,” the lieutenant replied with a vigorous shake of his head. “Not after that first mistake. There was nothing left of the bomb, the plane or the crew. I’d rather walk a kilometer.”

“Let’s go.” The captain began walking.

“Be careful of the ceiling,” Otto warned as Glen slipped into the tunnel. He noticed that Glen had finally put his bush jacket back on. Although it was actually chillier in the tunnel than outside, the old man somehow felt warmer now that Glen had his jacket on.

“Not to worry. Where’s the tomb?” Glen replied.

“About three meters that way.” The old man aimed his flashlight toward the end of the tunnel. There was a dark

hole that the light didn't penetrate. "It appears that the seal stone on the tomb itself has been broken. I think this one has already been excavated."

"When?" Glen crawled up to where his friend waited.

"Probably a thousand years ago," Otto guessed as he gazed around. "See how flat the floor of the tunnel is? The dirt has had a very long time to settle. Fortunately, the dirt stopped washing in, or else the whole tunnel could have been filled by now."

"How about the tomb itself?" Glen worried. "Did it get filled in, too?"

"I don't know – I haven't checked."

"Let's get on with it, then. I want to know if I spent the day digging a hole for nothing or not."

"Follow me," Otto said. "And try not to break anything."

As Glen watched, his companion crawled on all fours, holding the flashlight in his right hand. He moved quickly, surprising Glen just how spry the old man still was.

A few moments later, they were at the stone that originally sealed the tomb proper. The top part of it had been smashed in.

"It appears that the tomb itself is okay. That is, it's not filled with dirt," Otto announced. He peered in and flashed his light around. "However, it has been ransacked. Maybe there were two sets of robbers – the first group broke open the tunnel but didn't get into the tomb, and then later, a second set got in and broke open the tomb. See how they broke the seal stone level with the present floor of the tunnel? The tunnel had been partially filled in long before the stone was broken."

"So the tomb has been robbed?"

"Certainly."

“Let me see.” Glen crawled up next to his colleague. The old man moved over, and they lay side-by-side studying the tomb. Together, they played their flashlights around the room. It was smaller than Glen had expected, at least when compared to the royal tombs they had visited near Xian a month earlier. This one was barely four meters long by three meters wide. Miraculously, no dirt had washed in.

“What’s that?” Glen called when he spotted something white in the far corner.

Professor Neustadt added his light to the area. “Bones. A skeleton,” he said.

“Not the general’s, I hope.”

“Oh, no,” the old man replied. “General Huo Anlu is probably still in that stone sarcophagus.” He played his light on the large stone coffin in the center of the room. The top had been pried off.

“Maybe they threw his bones out?” Glen suggested.

“If they had, then the bones would have been in a pile, not laid out like a skeleton. The reason why they opened the sarcophagus was to get whatever jewelry that may have been buried with him, not to throw the bones out. I suspect that our friend over there was on the losing end of an argument. Greed does funny things. I suspect that that skeleton is one of the last group of robbers.”

“The next to last group of robbers,” Glen corrected. “We aren’t exactly saints ourselves, you know.”

“No,” Otto agreed huffily, “but you could at least let me have my illusions, couldn’t you?”

Glen laughed. “Let’s look around inside anyhow. Maybe they left a knickknack or two for us. I sure would hate to have done all that digging for absolutely nothing.”

It took Captain Hu and Lieutenant Kong less than ten

minutes to walk back to their bomber, a *Hong-5*. It was a Chinese-built version of the Russian Ilyushin Il-28. Although obsolete, the forty-year-old, twin engine, straight winged Il-28 was still in service in China. It was strong, durable and easily maintained, ideal qualities for a third-world economy with a limited pool of highly trained maintenance engineers. This particular aircraft was among the last built and so was only about thirty-years old. It had also received far more meticulous maintenance and care than the other *Hong-5s* based at Wujia Chi air base, for it had a special mission.

The plane stood by itself, shining in the late afternoon sun, near the far end of the runway. The base commander insisted that the plane be armed with its special bomb well away from any other aircraft, building or installation on the base. So Captain Hu and Lieutenant Kong had taxied out to the run-up area near the end of the runway and parked. Several minutes later, the ground crew arrived with the bomb in a truck as both Hu and Kong took a long walk to have a cigarette.

Their task now complete, the ground crew, dressed in blue denim uniforms and conical straw hats, squatted around their truck and waited. Neither Captain Hu nor Lieutenant Kong spoke to the ground crew when they returned from their walk. Instead, they both went to the still open bomb bay to inspect the weapon.

The bomb was a special device with four small fins on the nose and larger, almost wing-like fins on the tail. It was clearly a guided weapon. The large lens in the nose suggested that it was guide by television. Tentatively, Lieutenant Kong reached up and touched it. It was icy cold. A shiver ran down his back.

“It even feels like a devil bomb,” he murmured.

“Check everything,” Captain Hu commanded. “Once we’re in the air, there’s no returning with this monster aboard.”

“I know,” Lieutenant Kong answered in a whisper. “We....”

The roar of the four jets loaded with napalm drowned out his words as they flew overhead, perhaps to remind them that they were running late, or perhaps to see what was happening.

Spurred by the reminder, both men quickly checked the shackles holding the bomb as well as the arming wires. Satisfied, they climbed their ladders and boarded the plane as the four jets returned. Lieutenant Kong was still squeezing himself into the bombardier’s position in the nose of the bomber when they flew over again.

Captain Hu, who had to climb all the way to the bubble canopy on the top of the airplane, paused to wave at his companions in the air more as a reassurance that all was well than as a greeting. He waited until they were well away before hurrying into the cockpit and strapping himself in. Six and a half minutes later, just as the sun set, they were airborne. Their tail gunner had been left behind as unnecessary.

“Look at those murals!” Professor Otto Neustadt exclaimed. He flashed his light on the wall. Glen Martin glanced up. The wall had a finely painted battle scene. Armored soldiers riding on horseback were charging a phalanx of equally well-armed soldiers on foot.

“You should take a picture, Professor,” Glen commented as he returned to his search of the tomb. It had been thoroughly ransacked, with remnants of smashed furniture scattered in the debris littering the floor.

“I think that you’re right about our friend over in the corner,” he added. “It certainly looks like there was a helluva fight in here – what’s that?”

He paused. The glint of gold flashed through the litter

covering the floor. Glen reached down and gently brushed the debris away with his hand. Gradually, a small figurine appeared.

“What did you find?” Otto asked when he saw his companion stooping.

“A small bronze horseman,” Glen replied. “See.”

He held out his prize. It was a bronze casting of a horse and rider, perhaps five centimeters tall. The rider was gilded and so still glittered, while the horse was covered the rich green patina of old bronze.

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Otto Neustadt murmured as he reached for it. The figure fit easily in his hand. The horse, obviously a taohe, was well muscled. The breed is revered even today in China for its strength and stamina. The gilded rider, an archer, was carrying a double curved bow with a quiver of arrows hung from the saddle.

“It’s Western Han, all right,” Otto continued. “See how the tail is long and flowing. It’s obviously done in an earlier style than the more stylized Eastern Han bronzes.”

Glen reached out for his prize and, reluctantly, Otto relinquished it. “It’s not much of a reward for all that work,” Glen said while he slipped the figurine into his jacket’s pocket. “But at least it’s something. And now, I think we’d better get back to the village. It’s getting late. We’ll come back tomorrow with your camera and take pictures of the murals, if you want.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Otto said. He flashed his light on the mural again. “And then we’ll reseal this tomb. It’s been desecrated enough.”

Captain Hu gazed out of the cockpit window into the dark night sky. The sun seemed to set almost instantaneously this time of the year. Unlike the long, lingering twilight of summer, day became night within minutes during early spring; almost as rapidly as it had during

winter.

Although there wasn't a cloud in the sky and the stars twinkled brightly high above, there was only a quarter moon. Below, the ground was dark and featureless. The occasional lights from the small villages or hamlets below twinkled the same way as the stars above did, mirroring the night sky. There was no horizon, no up nor down. It was like flying through the middle of the black cloud, and so Captain Hu was flying on instruments.

He scanned at the instruments again, as he did so every few moments. It was a habit instilled years ago and kept fresh by the constant need to know the moment the aircraft varied even slightly from its proper altitude, course and heading.

"Captain, sir?" the intercom crackled.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"We are about twenty kilometers from Wushan. We should be at five thousand meters when we drop the weapon."

Captain Hu glanced at his altimeter. It read exactly five thousand meters. "We are at the correct altitude and heading, Lieutenant. Do you have the village in sight?"

There was a brief pause. "Yes, Captain," Lieutenant Kong replied. "I have identified the target through the night-vision camera. We are ten kilometers from the drop point. Turn left five degrees to heading 335. There seems to be a slight cross wind at this altitude."

"Is it going to affect the accuracy of the drop?" Captain Hu demanded, concerned that something might go awry.

"No, sir. We're still well within mission parameters," his bombardier answered. "Opening bomb bay doors."

Captain Hu heard the motor whine as the doors opened. Then came the roar of air rushing around the inside the bomb bay.

Below, in the glass nose of the aircraft, Lieutenant Kong kneeled over the bombsight, making precise adjustments on the dials until he was satisfied. Slowly, cautiously, he moved his right hand to the bomb drop switch. A few seconds later, at precisely the right moment, he gently pressed down.

“Bomb away,” he said softly. The aircraft lurched slightly as the bomb fell.

Captain Hu instantly turned to the left. As he did so, he caught sight of the navigation lights of the four *Qiang-5* attack bombers that were following him. They were to play no part in the mission unless something went wrong. Their orders were to napalm the wreckage of Captain Hu’s aircraft should it crash before completing its mission. Fortunately, that was now behind them. His turn indicated to the attack bombers that the bomb had been dropped and all that remained was for the bombardier to direct it to its target.

In the bombardier’s compartment, Lieutenant Kong was busy watching the television monitor that gave him a bird’s eye view from the nose of the weapon. The small joystick to the right of the monitor allowed him to correct the weapon’s course.

“How’s it doing?” Captain Hu inquired over the inter-com.

“It’s headed right for target, Captain. I’ll have to increase its descent rate slightly, but it should be at one thousand meters when it crosses over the village. That should be in twenty seconds.”

As Lieutenant Kong watched, the image of the village – just seven houses – grew. The television camera in the weapon was equipped with an owl-eye light intensifier, and so he could see as well as if it were daylight. He glanced nervously at the miniature altimeter in the lower right corner of the screen. The bomb was a little bit lower than it should be, so he moved the joystick back to

decrease the bomb's rate of descent ever so slightly.

The village grew larger and larger in the screen as the bomb fell toward it. The lieutenant could now make out several carts and what appeared to be a jeep parked among the buildings. A moment later, he could make out movement as people walked around the village. He never thought of them as the enemy, or as victims, or even as things. They were simply the targets.

Without emotion, he pressed a button next to the joystick just as the bomb started to cross over the village.

At first, nothing appeared to happen. Inside the bomb, a pneumatic valve opened and high-pressure nitrogen gas rushed into a large cylindrical tank filled with an oily liquid. An instant later, the fluid burst out through a series of nozzles arrayed along each side of the bomb, spraying it in a fine mist, an aerosol, that began to glow a phosphorescent green the instant it touched air.

The phosphorescence was caused by a special dye that had been mixed into the liquid now being discharged so that those witnessing the test could tell when and where the bomb had released its load. It formed a long tongue of green flame arching high over the village of Wushan. Both Captain Hu and Lieutenant Kong saw it from their aircraft, as did the pilots of the *Qiang-5* attack aircraft. They all smiled. The mission was a success.

Glen Marten was standing with Professor Otto Neustadt. Guan Taibo, the owner of the inn they were staying in, was helping them unpack the jeep. Although probably not more than seventy, the innkeeper was ancient looking, wizened with age and with wrinkles on his wrinkles. As head of the large family of at least three generations living in the inn, he had long ago earned the right to sit in the place of honor and direct the others to do what was needed. Yet, as the proper host, Guan Taibo insisted on personally helping Glen and the professor pack their jeep

each morning before they set out for their day's exploring and then help them unpack it at night after they had returned. As usual, the innkeeper was waiting for them just outside the door of his inn when Glen and Otto drove up. They had just started taking the equipment out of the jeep when Glen heard the distant roar of jets and looked up.

"What's that?" he uttered when he saw the phosphorescent cloud overhead.

The two others paused from their efforts to look up as well. A long tongue of green flame streaked the sky directly over them. Slowly, it faded as the special dye exhausted its luminescent chemicals.

"*Long huo!*" Guan Taibo screamed in horror. "*Long huo! Long huo! Long huo!*"

Terrified, the ancient innkeeper dropped the parcel in his hands and grabbed both Glen and Otto by the sleeves of their jackets. With surprising force, he began pulling and yanking them toward the door, cajoling them with a stream of incomprehensible rapid-fire Chinese.

Amused, Glen permitted the innkeeper to pull him inside. Otto, following Glen's lead, went along as well. Meekly, they followed their host who never for an instant ceased his verbalizations. However, the instant they were through the door, Guan Taibo slammed it shut and barred it. Then shouting at the top of his lungs to the others in the building, he began rushing from one window to the next to pull the shutters closed. Through it all, the only words Glen could discern were *long huo*. An instant later, the old man disappeared through the door to the back of the house. Bedlam broke out in the kitchen as the members of Guan Taibo's large family joined in the uproar. Shutters and doors could be heard slamming as the entire family yelled at one another.

"What the hell is going on?" Glen Martin demanded. Suddenly, the old innkeeper burst back into the front

room, still ranting and raving in Chinese.

"I can't make a word out of what he's saying. He's speaking much too fast for me," Glen complained.

"Something about *long huo*, dragon fire, and that we're all going to die," Otto replied. Then, as the innkeeper darted by, Otto grabbed him by his shoulders and shook him while shouting in his own form of nearly incomprehensible Chinese. Glen was amazed at his partner's apparent strength for he reminded Glen of a terrier shaking a rat.

Guan Taibo fell silent as his eyes darted left, right and then back again, frantically searching for any window left open. Apparently satisfied that he had done all he could, he stopped fighting Otto's hold and began breathing in deep labored breaths, speaking in short bursts of words as he exhaled.

"That was the fire of a dragon we just saw, he says," Otto translated for Glen, "and anybody who breathes the fumes of dragon fire is surely going to die, for they are poisonous. We must stay inside tonight and not let the night air enter the inn for any reason for the dragon fire smoke outside will enter with it and kill us."

"Oh, boy, just what I need, a dragon myth," Glen muttered, glancing at the old man.

"Ask him why he is so sure of himself?" Glen suggested, hoping that he wasn't locked up with a lunatic.

Otto translated the question and got a panicked outburst of gibberish as the terror returned to Guan Taibo's eyes.

"Quiet him down again," Glen ordered.

"I'm trying to," Otto replied. He tried reasoning with the innkeeper, first gently and then more forcefully. Eventually, Otto succeeded and the old Chinese began to speak in a more moderate pace again.

"Guan Taibo says that this is the fourth time dragon

fire has been seen in this region in the last year alone. The other three times, the dragon attacked villages about thirty kilometers from here and everybody died. He is convinced that we're all good as dead."

"Oh, brother, just what we need, the rantings of a superstitious old man." Glen muttered disdainfully while shaking his head. "Ask him what's for diner."

Outside, a gentle mist fell. In a few minutes, it evaporated, leaving just a few oily spots on Glen's rented jeep.