

Excerpt from

# DEERKEEPER *by Geoffrey Waring*

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## PROLOGUE

### The Southern Alps of New Zealand.

The spiker first sensed pressure waves in the crisp alpine air. Its keen eyes searched the flats downwind then it lifted its muzzle to scent the drift from the valley head, finding only living beech and hinds with their young grazing further up the flats. It's pricked ears detected sound reflecting off the scree slopes above. The animal craned its neck seeking to establish the origin of the growling sound, then, from over the ridge in a burst of clattering noise, the helicopter.

From the pilot's seat, Tony 'Lucky' Lovell, quickly checked the river flats bursting into view and edged the cyclic stick forward. The Hiller began a smooth descent to the valley floor.

'There they are,' he shouted over the roar of engine and wind rush. At the door the shooter gripped his Armalite rifle. 'There's a bunch in the clear at the top. I'll come down on them first.'

'Righto.'

The descent rate increased as Lovell manoeuvred the Hiller for a clear shot. The shooter swung his legs out onto the skid and lifted his rifle. As the helicopter swept low between the bush line and the string of fleeing animals, he began firing.

'Nam surged back; the smell of sun-hot plastic, cordite, hydraulic fluid, sweat, and the cloying decay of Mekong paddies under the Huey. The cyclic pulsed gently in one hand as his other twisted the throttle open a little further; the turbine whine grew and the grind of the gearbox rose as airspeed increased. The sounds and vibrations flowed and merged with his blood and brain. The sensations were as real as the hot oil coursing through the hydraulics, as real as the flow of electrons in the cable runs, the gasping inrush of air into the compressor, and the pulsing thud of the fifty-foot rotor merging with the beat of his heart. Rodriguez saw them first.

'Charlie! Two o'clock, on the leveé! We've got the fuckers.'

'Going in.'

In the sights, little men in black pyjamas breaking cover and fleeing; toggle the switch and the rockets streak away, then the yammer, acrid scent, and vibration of the M60's - pyjama men scurrying, twisting, as the white fingers reached for them, and the pyjama men jerked and spun amongst the flowers of dust and fountains of yellow water.

In measured shots, animal after animal fell. At the sound of shots, the spiker's uneasiness turned to alarm. First it froze, and then circled before breaking into full panicked flight. It splashed across the river shallows towards the sanctuary of trees crowding the far bank. The sound increased. With a

flick of its hindquarters the spiker changed direction and raced upriver. The helicopter pursued the remaining hinds into their bush refuge, and denied, turned to head down the valley.

'There were a couple further down. See them?'

'I'm out, hang on a minute.'

Lovell edged the machine lower and flew down the right bank, skimming the long grass and jinking around the clumps of logs and scrub dotting the shingle islands. The shooter snapped a fresh magazine into the Armalite and raised it again. Out of the corner of his eye he saw, too late, the spiker dashing upstream in the shallows. No chance of a shot.

'Got the spiker?'

'Yep, hang on.'

Lovell increased power and eased pedal pressure allowing torque to spin the helicopter upriver. The spiker reacted to the growing volume of sound as the helicopter gained. Racing, twisting, stretching, its hooves barely brushed the ground as it hurtled up a low bank and dashed for the nearest thicket of scrub. It tunneled under the foliage and dropped instinctively to its last defence; the stillness of a threatened fawn rigid in fear. The helicopter came to a hover.

'See it?'

'I'll flush 'im.'

Lovell eased the Hiller down. As he searched the thrashing foliage for its rust-red coat the spiker hunched motionless, senses in overload. A minute passed.

'Can't see it,' shouted Lovell.

'Ahh, forget it. We'll start on the others.'

'OK. I'll go get Scuzzy. He'll be finished by now.'

The Hiller climbed again and flew unhurriedly up the valley to where the hinds lay crumpled along the river flat. Lovell brought the machine to a hover. The shooter jumped, and watched as the helicopter climbed out to the site of the morning's first kills. He stretched, filled his lungs with the purity of the alpine morning, leant his rifle against a sapling and went to the nearest carcass. He unsheathed his knife, and whistling tunelessly, commenced work.

Sun warmed eddies brought the scent of man to the spiker. It remained crouched, ears searching for untoward sound as its muzzle gave warning of man. The sun climbed and the helicopter returned. The valley once again echoed to its clatter as it dropped the gutter and lifted out the first load on the strop swinging under the machine. Later still it returned to uplift the last carcasses and the men who had prepared them for the hook.

As the roar of the helicopter faded above the peaks, a silence of cowed living things fell in the valley; only the perpetual river chattering its way seaward disturbed the stillness. The sun-line crept across the valley floor and birdsong returned. Keas, their courage restored by the absence of the bigger, noisier bird, screeched and fought as they picked out the eyes of the severed heads beside the river.

At sunset, high cloud drifted in blinding the first of the evening stars. It began to rain. The familiar rhythm of its fall eased the animal's fear until, in the comfort and gloom of the night, it warily worked its way to the edge of its sanctuary, then down from the hanging valley to the lower foothills, away from fear and the stench of death.