

1965

by Brit

Enough.

Everyone in his company knew there would come a point when Corporal Ken Hutchinson would simply have had enough, and this was it.

Ten minutes ago, the eighteen-year-old had simply been exhausted. He was on his twenty-third straight hour of standby while the war—or whatever the press was currently calling this version of Dante’s Hell—raged less than a mile from camp. His relief had gotten dysentery and was out of commission, at least for another twenty-four hours. That left Hutch, his commanding officer, and two other medics to deal with the aftermath of 7th Cavalry’s assault below Chu Pong Massif.

Ten minutes ago, he’d simply been disgusted. By the fighting. By death. By the inhumanity of mankind. It was amazing what a tiny piece of metal, either in the form of a bullet or a piece of shrapnel, could do to a body. He was disgusted with Vietnam, his own government, the “conflict” they were engaged in, and the whole human race at large.

Ten minutes ago, he’d been furious. Their medical unit was a joke, not having half the materials or skills critical for preserving the lives of the soldiers and civilians who were brought in to them with little or no hope. It was a joke, but no one was laughing, except perhaps the devil himself.

He didn’t think he could possibly feel any more rage or disgust until ten minutes ago. That was when a pair of Vietnamese nationals was ushered into the medics’ tent. The man, though probably only in his late teens, was dressed in American clothes. Why he wasn’t serving with the Vietcong was enough to put Hutch on guard. He’d heard of Vietnamese soldiers infiltrating U.S. compounds in civilian guise and taking the soldiers by surprise with deadly results. Aside from that, there was something about the young man that made Hutch instantly dislike him, though he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was. The national stood off to one side, smoking what smelled like a laced cigarette, fidgeting with a chain that ran from his belt to his wallet. “She got a accident.”

The girl couldn’t have been any older than fourteen. She lay withering on the exam table, her hands grasping her slightly bloated stomach. With each new pain, her bruised face screwed up, leaving her panting, though she never once cried out. Blood pooled beneath her legs.

“Hutchinson, don’t give her anything!”

His captain’s bark stopped Hutch from drawing morphine into a syringe. “But—”

“It can’t be helped.” Captain Bullock began donning his examination gown and gloves, his disdain evident. “You know how low we are on supplies. We can’t waste it on...on *this*...”

“‘*This?*’ Captain, how can you—?”

“You want to be the one to tell *our* wounded that we’re out of morphine, *Corporal?*”

Hutch set down the equipment, his jaw clenched, and pulled on his own gown. “What do you need me to do?”

Bullock had moved around to the girl’s feet and pried her legs open to begin the exam. “Just hold her down. My guess is, this’ll only take a minute.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

Another contraction hit and the girl doubled over, jerking her legs away from Bullock and inadvertently kicking him in the mouth.

“Dammit, Corporal, I said hold her down!” Bullock charged to Hutch’s side and pressed one of the blond’s forearms across the girl’s thin collarbone, and the other across her hips, immobilizing her. Hutch’s face was merely inches from the teen’s as she silently gasped in pain, fighting against him. She opened her eyes once, her dark brown eyes beseeching him for help to end her pain or her circumstances. Or her life.

The girl finally made a sound, a long keening wail as Captain Bullock’s forceps entered her body. The cry died off only when she fell into unconsciousness.

Hutch felt the hairs on the back of his neck and arms rise as he slowly straightened. “What’s wrong with her?”

Bullock rose as well, a blackened, bloody mass in his cupped hands. “This.”

Hutch swore and turned away, the bile instantly burning his throat at the sight of the tiny unborn baby. Understanding began to dawn on him, and he swung his angry gaze toward the youth casually leaning against a tent post. “You said she had an accident. How did this happen?”

The captain placed the small body in a towel and covered it, then began stripping off his bloody gown and gloves. “Didn’t you see her bruises? Take a look at her abdomen and you’ll see a bunch that match her face.”

Hutch took a menacing step toward the Vietnamese teen, who met his gaze unflinchingly. “What happened to her?”

Bullock threw his soiled materials into a barrel. “Oh, for crying out loud, Hutchinson, figure it out. This guy sells her on the street—probably to our GIs. She got knocked up, but is so malnourished she probably didn’t show until now.”

Hutch’s mouth gaped. “She’s a prostitute? She’s just a kid!”

Bullock rolled his eyes at the corporal’s naivete. “Doesn’t matter. She’s probably the only one in her family who can earn any money to buy food and keep them alive. So, when Mr. Personality here finds out about the pregnancy, he works her over enough to kill the baby, knowing that her body’ll naturally abort it. Then he doesn’t have to pay for some back-alley abortion in the city. The only problem was that she’s so weak she couldn’t, and the dead fetus was poisoning her body.” Bullock looked back over his shoulder as he scrubbed his hands in the makeshift sink. “That about right?”

The young man’s impassive expression never changed as he responded in Vietnamese.

Hutch was so stunned by the series of events that he remained motionless, even though every muscle was electrified with rage. He’d seen every conceivable wound over the past six months, witnessed every stage of death and dying among the soldiers. But this was beyond his comprehension. “What’d he say? Don’t tell me he’s asking how she is.”

“Nope. He just wants to know how soon before she’s well enough to go back to work.”

The Vietnamese man was battered to the floor by Hutch’s first blow, then pulled to his knees and knocked back down by the second. The captain pulled Hutch off the teen and thrust him outside the tent with orders to cool off and get something to eat before combat resumed and they sustained more casualties.

Hutch stormed away from the tent, seething. As much as he wanted to put some distance between himself and the horror he’d just experienced, he knew enough not to wander too far away from the safety of the makeshift compound. They’d been called in three days before to the thirty-eighth parallel—more affectionately known as Razorback Ridge—with the arrival of two divisions. The fighting had initially been overwhelming, producing hundreds of dead and wounded. The onslaught had slowed marginally, but everyone knew it was simply a matter of time before the Vietnamese pushed back to regain what ground they had lost.

Hutch’s Zippo lighter made its distinctive metallic snap as the cover was flicked open and he lit a cigarette to draw a steadying breath. His hands shook a bit as he rolled the Winston between his fingers, partially from fatigue, partially from rage. He wondered, and not for the first time, how much lower humanity could fall. The seemingly senselessness of the fighting, the war itself, and the lack of regard for human dignity and life was all too much for him. A tendril of cynicism wrapped itself around his heart, not unlike the cigarette smoke that encircled his tense face.

Finishing his cigarette, Hutch dropped the butt and ground it out under his boot. *That's it; I've had enough.* He wasn't sure what exactly he was going to do next, but he knew something had to change.

And if that happened, he knew with bitter assurance, there'd be no going back.

Hutch turned to make his way back to the darkened camp, when he heard the underbrush breaking behind him. He spun into a crouch, his weapon drawn, desperately trying to isolate the source of the noise. More than once over the past six months, his mobile medical unit had been under attack, both by Vietcong soldiers and by locals desperate for food and medication.

The movement in the brush sounded again, closer and to his right. Hutch took aim and began to cautiously back away to the cover of the camp. Before he got very far, a large shape began to form out of the blackness of the jungle, lurching and stumbling against the trees and large brush.

"Help...we need help..." The voice was faint, both from the distance and fatigue. Hutch froze for a moment, undecided.

"Help us...my buddy needs help."

As the form made its way closer to the outpost, the tent lights revealed two American soldiers, one slung over the shoulder of the other.

"Captain!" Hutch shouted back toward the tent as he sheathed his gun. He ran the remaining yards to the unsteady form. The man being carried was covered in blood and motionless. His rescuer wasn't much older than Hutch and was also covered in blood and dirt, his uniform torn in several places. His helmet was missing, and sweat matted the dark hair to his head. Hollows darkened his eyes, which held a dazed expression, and his left arm hung uselessly at his side. Hutch reached up to pull the lax body off the other's shoulder, but the soldier stared at him vacantly, not relinquishing his burden. Hutch grasped his arm, trying to get through to the shell-shocked man, but the soldier simply gasped in pain and flinched away.

"Easy, Sergeant, easy—you're safe now. I'm a medic. Let me help you." Hutch quickly moved so he was looking the soldier full in the face, trying to make eye contact and encourage a coherent response.

He was grateful when Captain Bullock rushed up beside him. "Let's get them inside."

When the soldier didn't immediately respond, the captain quickly assessed his unresponsive state. He also needed assistance, but they would deal with him later. First, they needed to care for the more seriously wounded man. The captain determined the best way to do so without causing him further damage by moving him twice was for him to remain on the sergeant's shoulder until they got to the examination room. Bullock

placed his hand on the dazed man's arm, his tone coaxing. "Can you make it to the tent, Sergeant? Bring your buddy inside so we can fix him up? Come on, soldier, just a few more yards."

The sergeant nodded once and moved unsteadily forward, medics on either side of him in case he toppled. Their progress was slow, but they were soon within the relative safety of the tent.

Bullock snatched up a clean pair of scrubs and nodded toward the examination table as he tied his gown closed. "Get him on the table, Hutchinson."

Hutch took the sergeant's wrist and forearm and gave it a gentle tug. He was met with considerable resistance at first, but the contact seemed to break through the soldier's numbness and his haunted blue eyes focused on Hutch. "We need help."

"You got it. Just take it easy, okay? Let me help you." Another pull from Hutch drew the soldier's arm away from his burden. With some effort, Hutch eased the limp soldier off the sergeant's shoulder and onto the examination table.

"Sit him down somewhere until we can get to him." Bullock nodded at the other and crossed over to the patient. He immediately checked the motionless soldier's carotid pulse with one hand while peeling back a bruised eyelid with the other.

Intending to offer some encouragement to the waiting man, Hutch turned back just in time to catch him as he passed out. Easing the sergeant to the floor, Hutch immediately assessed his breathing and pulse. He was surprised when Bullock left his patient and crouched next to him. "Poor SOB. He didn't even realize that his buddy's dead."

"No..." Hutch breathed. "How far do you think he carried him to get here?"

Bullock shrugged, his often-stony demeanor softening. "Hard to say. Fighting's at least a mile, mile and a half away." Bullock nodded toward the body on the exam table. "My guess is they were getting shelled and a round went off pretty close. The guy on the table's got some deep lacerations, but nothing that should have been life threatening. He took a blow to the head and it probably scrambled his brains. Just looked like he was unconscious to this one here."

Hutch had peeled back the remains of the sergeant's torn jacket and probed for internal injuries and broken bones. "Looks like his shoulder's dislocated. Possible minor concussion."

Bullock nodded. "I'll get the orderlies to move the body out and process it, then let's get Sergeant...what's that read?"

Hutch looked back down at the remains of the nametag on the soldier's jacket. "Looks like 'S-t-a—' something. Dog tags are missing, too."

“You wait here with him and take a breather. I’ll fill out the paperwork and get a toe tag on the other one. Then we can set his shoulder.” The captain pushed himself up with a groan, using Hutch’s shoulder for leverage. He gave the unconscious soldier one last look and shook his head as he left the medics’ tent. “All that way for nothin’.”

Hutch stared silently at the bruised face. “No,” he said softly. “Not for nothing.”



The shouting woke Hutch out of a deep sleep and sent him scrambling off his cot and onto his feet. Captain Bullock charged in, gathering up an armload of examination gowns and stuffing them into a duffel bag. “We’re bugging out, Hutchinson, get a move on and get your gear. Seventh Cavalry’s been ordered back to reorganize. Trucks are leaving in twenty.”

Hutch rubbed a hand across his burning eyes then reached under his cot for his own bag. “How close are they?”

“Too close,” Bullock grunted as he crossed to a trunk and flipped it open. He quickly began loading surgical tools and medications into it.

Hutch tossed his duffel bag onto his cot and joined the other in filling the trunk. “What about the patients?”

“Transported about an hour ago.” Each man took a handle on the chest and lifted. As they crossed toward the door, Hutch snagged his sack and swung it over his shoulder. The rest of the compound was a flurry of activity, with most of the other tents already torn down and loaded onto the trucks.

Bullock and Hutch swung the trunk up onto the platform of a waiting transport. “Hutchinson, you go ahead with the gear. I’m gonna make sure those idiots don’t damage the surgical lamps when they load them this time. I’ll catch up with you.”

The two men shook hands, and Hutch made to scramble up onto the back of the waiting truck. He paused first and called back to the other, “Captain Bullock?”

“Yeah?”

“The sergeant who came in last night—did he ever regain consciousness?”

Bullock nodded. “This morning. Just before we started evacuating.”

“Did you tell him?”

“That his buddy was dead before he even got here? No—no time. He woke up, saw everybody getting hauled out of here, pulled his uniform back on, and started helping move the wounded onto the trucks.”

Hutch looked at him incredulously. “His arm was in a sling.”

“Didn’t seem to slow him down any.” The truck’s horn sounded twice. “Get going, Hutchinson. I’ll see you at our next vacation stop.”

Hutch’s mouth lifted in a tired grin as he raised a hand in farewell. Pulling himself up onto the back of the truck, he sat down next to one of the other medics perched on a trunk. The transport’s gears squealed as it lurched forward, kicking up dust in its wake.

As the dirt two-track flowed beneath them, Hutch considered the events of the last twenty-four hours. He was still disillusioned, still felt he’d had enough, but his thoughts kept returning to the wounded sergeant who had staggered across a battlefield and through the Vietnam jungle in an attempt to bring his friend to safety. *Maybe that’s what this is all about—taking care of your friends. Watching each other’s back.*

The realization didn’t cause what was plaguing his heart to make any more sense, but it was enough to get Hutch off the truck when they finally made camp. He unloaded the medical gear, again ready to do everything he could to keep the next batch of wounded alive.

