

## DISPENSARY

She collapsed at the triage station, sprawling over the desk, sending its contents crashing to the floor. Her arms reached to embrace the startled nurse, seizing an amulet of the Buddha hanging from a chain around the nurse's neck.

“Bac Si...Bac Si!”

Her muffled cries were barely intelligible over the screams of protest from a toddler I was wrestling in the back of the dispensary. He had a splinter the size of a pencil jammed under his toenail and wasn't about to let me touch his toe, which stunk with infection and was swollen. His hysterical mother wasn't much help either.

That morning, the tiny dispensary seemed even smaller than usual with the din of sick call; it was pandemonium. The room was packed with patients from our mercenary encampment across the road, triaged and waiting. When I was in camp, the indigenous medics and nurses deferred to me. *Breathe*. I wanted nothing more than to join the European vacationers down the beach at the pink and cream-colored French-era hotel. Their children frolicked in the surf while they relaxed on the veranda, gorging themselves on shrimp and sipping champagne. The acrid early morning air, heavy with the scent of burning brush from a thousand cooking fires, was a ready reminder that life on this beach was anything but a day at the beach.

“Bac Si...Bac Si!”

I handed the boy off to a nurse and ran up to the triage station where a pregnant young woman had collapsed and fallen to the plywood floor. Sand swirled around her body like she was a piece of driftwood. One of the medics and I carefully lifted her flaccid form onto a stretcher, hands still clutching the nurse's Buddha in a death-grip.

“Loan, take her to one of the tables in the back.”

Loan, a nurse, had no formal training. A Cambodian woman, about thirty years old, she was good with patients, but spoke little English. Her vocabulary was limited to dispensary-talk, like ‘take her to the table’, ‘take her blood pressure’ or ‘give her a 5cc injection of Penicillin’.

The patient was an adolescent, probably not more than fourteen, small in stature with high cheekbones, raven hair and supple bronze skin. She looked like so many of the vacationers' children seen romping on the beach across the road. But she was a Cambode, and females in peasant families were married off early.

Pupils dilated. Breathing labored. Fever of 104. Blood Pressure of 94/60. I palpated her abdomen. It was distended and taut beyond pregnancy. I passed smelling salts under her nose with no effect. Her airway was clear but she had a weak pulse. Dehydration. Or worse. She was alone. Her husband was probably out on one of our search and destroy missions, gone for a week or two.

“Tran, get me a liter of Ringers lactate and a setup. We need to get some fluid into her.”

I looked at her lying on the table and thought about possible ailments. I knew she was dehydrated, but that could have been caused by any number of things. Dehydration and diarrhea were rampant in-country. An hour on a fast drip IV and she would show signs of improvement. Could she have an ectopic pregnancy? God, I hoped not. We couldn't treat her here. Resources

weren't available for anything more exotic than common ailments, cuts and bruises; sepsis was a joke. The dispensary was little more than a beach cottage. In a pinch, we did minor surgery, but serious cases were referred up to the Special Forces C-Team in Bien Hoa or to one of the regional Vietnamese hospitals.

“Tran, what do you think?”

He was my senior medic, a middle-aged Vietnamese man who had trained with the French in the early fifties, and after Dien Bien Phou, went to work in a hospital in Vung Tau. When the US started sending Special Forces A-Teams into country in the early sixties, he came to work for us. Tran was only proficient to a point, but spoke English well.

“Bac Si, I think she has a complication with her pregnancy.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She has come to the dispensary before. Last week she complained of lightheadedness and tenderness in her belly.”

“What did you do for her?”

“I told her to go to bed and stay off her feet.”

“Tran, why didn't you tell me that before?”

“Bac Si, I was helping another patient and forgot. She was here last week when you were out on a mission.”

Why should I be surprised? I spent most of my time on missions. None of my teammates wanted to go in the field without a medic. Since I was the only one left, it was me. I didn't chew Tran out because he hadn't diagnosed the problem last week when we might have had time to get a consultation from the doctor at the C-Team. Sick call went on, whether or not I was in camp.

Tran's comments confirmed my diagnosis. She needed to go to a hospital, but Cambodians were at the bottom of the ethnic ladder in Vietnam and she might not receive treatment. It was the only option to save her life.

“Tran, can you find someone in the village who can take her to the Vung Tau hospital?”

Top Sergeant Brown wouldn't let me use one of our Jeeps. I'd already wrecked one the week before on a similar mission to Vung Tau racing to the hospital. He didn't want me risking my life on the highway, which was often mined.

“Bac Si, isn't there anything we can do?”

I wanted to call in a chopper and whisk her to the MASH in Bien Hoa, but there was no way that Top would authorize it. Our Cambodian mercenaries, and by extension their families, were expendable.

“We can't treat her here, Tran. She needs surgery ASAP or she'll die.”

Tran worked his network of contacts in the village and soon an old man with a tiny three-wheel Lambretta truck pulled up to the dispensary, backing up to the door. We gathered up the young woman on a stretcher and carefully placed it in the bed of the truck. It didn't fit well, sticking out about two feet beyond the bumper, but it was the best we could do.

The little truck bobbed and struggled through the beach sand on its way to the highway at the edge of camp, its cargo bouncing around like a load of lumber. Weekenders from Saigon and Vung Tau clogged the highway with their ancient Peugeots and Renaults. They cruised among military vehicles, on the way to resorts along the South China seacoast. I knew it would take at least two hours to go to Vung Tau with all the traffic, assuming that the old man wasn't forced off the road by an Army deuce and a half. Crushing Lambros was considered a sport by some GI's. Anyway, I guessed she'd be dead by then. Top didn't want anyone dying in our dispensary. He said it was bad for mercenary morale.

“Bac Si...Bac Si!”