

Returning Home

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The rotors of the UH-1 Huey were loud but rhythmic above, and the smell of oil in the air was euphoric. The tree line of the jungle below ended, and Sergeant James Rogers could see a military encampment in the clearing. He'd spent the last three years of his life as a prisoner of war, and it was a relief to see an American outpost. As the helicopter approached, the details of the camp became visible, and its age showed. A single dirt road ran through the camp from north to south, with several jeeps and transport trucks parked along it. The camp consisted mostly of military tents, a few dozen of them, set up on hardwood floors. Below, a man was waiting for the helicopter to land. When it touched down, the man walked towards it.

"Right this way," the man shouted over the sound of the rotors. The man wore the insignia of a captain, and his nametag read 'Williams'. Rogers climbed out the helicopter.

Williams led Rogers into one of the tents. The air was stale inside. A generator hummed outside. A single light bulb hung from the center of the tent, but more light came through an open flap on the side. Two officers were sitting at a table, one was reading an issue of *TIME* magazine, and the other was playing with a deck of cards. They both stood up and saluted Williams as he entered. Rogers stood still, staring at the men.

"At ease," Williams said.

Rogers took note of the officers' insignias. One was a first lieutenant, probably with one to two years of service, maybe even with combat experience. The other was a second lieutenant, perhaps fresh out of Officer's Candidate School. Rogers felt slightly out of place, with all these uniforms around him. He was wearing the clothes he'd been given the day before his release; a plain button up shirt and loose fitting draw-string trousers, very civilian compared to these men. It didn't help his comfort level that everyone in the room outranked him either.

Williams introduced the two officers. "This is Lieutenant Hammond." The first lieutenant stepped up to Rogers and offered him a firm handshake and a friendly smile. "And Lieutenant Winfield." The second lieutenant also shook his hand. This man was less enthusiastic, his handshake was weak, and he hardly glanced at Roger's eyes. His skin was not calloused either,

confirming that this guy was fresh out of the States. A cat mewed. Rogers looked for it, and saw it sitting on a file cabinet. It was strange to see a domesticated pet in the jungle. He figured one of the locals must have brought it to the camp for trade.

“And this,” Winfield said, as he walked over to the cat and took it from the cabinet, “is LBJ, Jr.” He stroked the cat’s head and back.

Rogers raised his brow as he watched Winfield caress the cat. Winfield had certainly been in Asia only a few months, and had likely gotten a commission as an officer simply to be able to *say* he had served his country. It wasn’t a surprise that this guy was holding a cat in the middle of what had been a warzone.

Winfield continued, “After a late night at the Officer’s Club we thought we’d give tribute to the man that started this chaos.” He let out a brief chuckle. Hammond half smiled as he watched Winfield stroke the cat.

Williams cleared his throat and Winfield let the cat leap from his arms onto the floor. The cat quickly returned to the top of the cabinet. “Winfield and Hammond will debrief you shortly, and then we’ll see if we can’t get you a steak dinner.”

Steak sounded a lot better than the usual rice and occasional vegetables of the prison, but Rogers had eaten a C-Ration on the ride in, which had sated his appetite. “Okay,” he said, speaking for the first time. He had spoken so quietly that he wasn’t sure if the men had heard him.

Williams walked to the table where Winfield and Hammond had been sitting, then he picked up some papers, and as he looked through them he said, “You’ll be at Clark Air Base tomorrow, and then off to the States. You’ll have to spend the night here, but you’re lucky. This place may look primitive, but the USO has provided us with movies, hot showers, and...”

“Showers?” Rogers cut him off. That was what he really wanted. For the past three years bathing had consisted of a bucket of water and rags. “Could I...” His throat was dry, his voice was weak. “Could I get one now?”

Williams looked away from the papers in his hands. “Of course.” He turned to the second lieutenant. “Winfield, why don’t you get Sergeant Rogers some soap and show him to the showers. We can worry about the paperwork later.”

Winfield raised his eyebrows at Rogers, looked at the cards on the table, and then to Williams. “Yes, sir,” he replied. Winfield led Roger’s out of the tent.

Outside, the brown dirt road might have looked plain and drab, but with the tents and vehicles surrounding it, it was a big improvement over the gray prison cell where Roger's had spent most of his time. Just the fact that the sky was visible above, made him feel comfortable there. The camp was far enough away from the tree line that the smell of plant life was present, but not too overpowering. It was quiet too, peaceful.

They went to another tent that was stacked full of tables, drawers, cabinets, and other unused equipment. Winfield managed to dig out a towel and a bar of soap, but that didn't seem like enough to Rogers. It hardly seemed better than what he had had as a prisoner. "Damn it, man," he said.

Winfield stood up straight and looked back at him with wide eyes.

"I need a sponge. I want to scrub the NVA stench out of my bones." It was strange to bark like that at a superior. Certainly he would have shown more respect to Captain Williams.

Winfield jerked hesitantly and narrowed his eyes. After a few seconds he raised his brows. "I guess there's probably one in the mess," he said.

"So what are you waiting for?" Rogers' voice was much stronger now.

Winfield handed Rogers the soap and towel, and disappeared out the flaps. Rogers left more slowly, eventually stepping out into the sunlight. A few soldiers were wrestling on the other side of the road. When they saw that he was watching them they stopped for a moment, acknowledging him, then they continued their games. The cat had also made its way outside. It was watching the wrestlers as well, and licking its paws.

Winfield returned with a sponge. Rogers took it, and examined it to insure that it wasn't covered in grease. It looked new, unused. He nodded slightly to himself, and was tempted to smile. "Now, point me in the direction of the showers," he said sternly. "I don't need anyone holding my hand."

"Just head north. Up the road." Winfield pointed. "You'll see it on the east side."

"Thanks," Rogers replied without looking back.

He rolled the sponge and soap into the towel as he walked. A jeep drove by, and stopped in front of another tent. Some of the men in it were drinking and singing something he had never heard before. He thought maybe he could join them later, after he was done showering, and try to catch up on the world around him. Find out if he still knew how to have fun. The men in the jeep got out and went into the tent that they had parked in front of.

The showers weren't hard to find. The building was a wooden structure, with a tin roof and a large water tank on top. Just inside the entrance was a bench. He unrolled the towel onto it and undressed.

A dirty mirror behind some wash basins let him see himself. His first reaction was to look away, but he looked at his reflection again. He had the rough look of dirt smeared with sweat on his face, most of it acquired during the day's travel. There were some grease stains on his hands and face as well. His hair had been unevenly trimmed. What really surprised him, though, was how much weight he had lost. He hadn't thought about that while in prison, but seeing the other soldiers in the camp made it more apparent. He laughed quietly. None of that mattered. He didn't think he looked that bad, and a long shower would help him feel that much better.

There were six shower heads in the building, but no one else was present. He'd have plenty of water form himself, and so he spent the next fifteen minutes scrubbing down. It felt good as the warm water rinsed away the humid sweat on his body. He enjoyed the rough feel of the sponge on his skin, and the smell of the soap was clean and refreshing. He went over every inch of his body twice, even blowing the snot out of his nose. After putting the soap and sponge down he ran his fingers through his hair, gentle at first, then rougher to make sure there weren't any flakes in it. When he finished cleaning, he let the water run over his body for a few minutes, stretching out his arms, and letting the tension in his muscles subside.

When he was finished he shut off the shower head and walked over to the bench where he had set the towel. He picked it up and started drying himself. Shoulders first, then chest and neck, then face, and that's when he smelled it. The sharp, acrid, foul stench of piss invaded his nostrils. The towel was covered in it. He threw it down immediately, and looked back and forth. Winfield's cat sat in the corner nearby. "Son of a bitch," he shouted. The cat looked at him, but didn't run away. He clenched his fist ready to express more anger, but then he relaxed.

Without shame, he left building, and walked, naked, toward the supply tent. The soldiers who had been wrestling cheered him on. When he arrived at the supply tent, he found a fresh towel, and made sure it didn't smell of cat piss, then wrapped it around his waist, and headed back for another shower. This time he would hang the towel high.