

Dạ Nương



By Bewci



CHAPTER 1



War has a sound you don't forget. It's not just the gunfire or the screaming, it's the snap of a bullet cutting air an inch from your head, the ringing in your ears when mortars thump the earth, the way your own heart threatens to split your ribs as you pray the next one isn't meant for you.

We were deep in the Central Highlands, thick jungle all around, moving in staggered file. The heat was unbearable, the humidity sticking to our skins like a second uniform. My M16 felt heavier than ever, the sling biting into my shoulder. Sweat ran down into my eyes, stinging, but I didn't dare raise a hand to wipe it away. Sergeant Davis was ahead, crouched low, motioning silence. Charlie country. Every step felt like we were walking into someone's mouth, waiting to be swallowed. And then it came.



The first crack split the silence sharp like a whip. The man behind me dropped without a sound. Before my brain caught up, the whole treeline lit up, AK-47s spitting fire. Muzzle flashes bloomed in the green, and the air exploded with gunpowder and splinters. I hit the dirt, finger on my trigger. My rifle roared back in three-round bursts, brass flying, the recoil familiar, grounding me. For a moment, it felt like I had control. Then it jammed.

The bolt jammed halfway back; the cartridge stuck tight in the chamber. I cursed, slammed the forward assist, yanked the charging handle. Nothing. Just the clatter of a useless weapon in a war zone.

“Fall back! Fall back!” Davis’s voice was hoarse, cut short by another burst.

I looked. Two men dragging a third, intestines trailing like rope, another sprawled in the mud with his eyes gazing at the sky. The jungle was tearing us apart, chewing through our line like paper. My chest burned, my throat raw, and I knew if I stopped to help, I’d die with them. So, I ran.

The jungle swallowed me whole. Bullets hissed past, branches tore at my sleeves, mud sucked at my boots. As the sounds of battle faded, only my own ragged breathing and the buzz of insects remained. I stumbled through vines and ferns, my useless rifle still clutched in my hands like a crutch.



Hours passed, or maybe it was minutes, I don't know. The jungle is a labyrinth. Every tree looks like the last; every path circles back on itself. I pushed until my legs shook, until every step felt like dragging dead weight. My canteen was dry, throat scorched, tongue like sandpaper.

The sun hung overhead like a molten coin, pressing its heat down on the jungle and squeezing the life out of me. My boots sank into the soft soil with every step, my legs trembling from hours of stumbling through the undergrowth. The taste of iron and smoke still lingered in my mouth from the ambush earlier, and my head pounded with the memory of gunfire echoing across the valley. The war had its own sound, a deafening symphony of bullets, screams, and the sickening thud of mortars tearing into the earth. But here in the jungle's heart, silence was worse. Silence meant I was alone, and vulnerable.

When I finally broke through the tangled brush and dropped to my knees at the riverbank, I felt as though I'd stumbled into a shrine. The water sparkled in streaks of sunlight that slipped through the canopy above, so clean it mocked the filth caked on my skin. I cupped it in my hands, shaking so hard most of it spilled down my chin, but what little I swallowed revived me for a moment. My rifle rested by my side, useless against the weight of exhaustion dragging me down.

I pressed my head into my hands, whispering, "Mary..." Her name was the only thing keeping me upright. I thought about her letters, her smile, the way she promised she'd wait for me. I wanted to believe I'd see her again. But on that riverbank, with my body screaming for rest, part of me wanted to give up. To sink into the mud and let it end. I might have let go entirely, closed my eyes and let the river take me, if not for the sudden sound of snapping twigs behind me.



I spun around, hand on the M16, but what stood before me was no soldier.



He was small, only five and a half feet, with bones jutting sharply under tattered rags that might once have been a shirt and trousers. His beard was nothing more than a thin, scraggly collection of hairs clinging stubbornly to his chin. His eyes, however, were alive—black, piercing, and far older than the body that carried them. He leaned on a crooked stick as though it were the only thing keeping him upright.

“Water good, yes?” he said, his voice rasping with a strange rhythm, like English patched together with spare words.

I blinked, trying to process what I’d heard. “You speak English?”

“Little. Little,” he said, showing his teeth in something between a smile and a grimace. “Long time... learn. Soldier... before.”



I narrowed my eyes. “Before what?”

He tapped his chest with a bony finger, then waved at the forest. “Before... all gone. Family. House. Money. Boom.” His hand flared outward as though mimicking an explosion. Then he tapped the ground. “Now... here. Long, long.”

His broken words landed heavily in the air, laced with something unspoken. I studied him closely. His frame was weak, but his movements weren’t those of a man frail with age; there was a wiry energy beneath the layers of grime. His eyes stayed locked on me — too sharp, too watchful.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

He hesitated, then said, “Bao.”

The name felt strange on my tongue when I repeated it. He tilted his head, listening to the sound as though deciding whether I was worthy of it.

I looked at Bao, his stick clutched in his gnarled hand, his dark eyes cutting into me like a blade.

“I need to get back,” I said, forcing steadiness into my voice. “My unit—they were ambushed. I got separated. If they’re alive, they’ll be



regrouping somewhere.” My throat tightened. “I can’t stay out here alone.”

Bao tilted his head slowly, listening. For a moment I thought he didn’t understand, but then he spoke, his words broken, threaded with his thick accent.

“Soldiers... I see,” he rasped. He jabbed his stick toward the trees behind us. “They go that way. Many men. Fast. Loud.”

My heart kicked in my chest. “You saw them? When?”

He shrugged, shoulders sharp under his ragged shirt. “Few hours. Maybe.” He squinted, searching for the word. “Smoke. Gunfire. They move.”

I stepped toward him, hoped sparking through the exhaustion weighing me down. “Can you take me to them? Please.”



Bao scratched his beard, then gave a crooked half-smile. “Jungle... big. Easy lost. But I know.” He tapped his stick against his chest. “I take.”

I studied him again. Everything about him screamed caution. His shabby frame, the secrets hiding behind his words, the cave that seemed too permanent a shelter for a man who claimed to have lost everything. But he was the only living soul I had seen since the ambush. If he could lead me even close to my unit, it was worth the risk.

“Alright,” I said finally. My voice was hoarse, but firm. “Lead the way.”

Bao nodded once, sharp and decisive. Without another word, he turned and slipped back into the jungle, moving as if the trees themselves bent aside for him. I had no choice but to follow, my rifle heavy in my arms and my mind full of questions I wasn’t sure I wanted answered.

His bare feet seemed to glide over the twisted roots and uneven ground while I crashed through like an intruder. Birds scattered from the branches, and lizards darted into cracks in the trees as we passed. The air grew heavier, the canopy darker, the smell of wet moss and rotting vegetation pressing into my nose.

I asked, “Why are you helping me?”

His eyes gleamed faintly in the cave’s half-dark. “You lost. Like me.” That was all he said.



We pressed on through the jungle, Bao cutting a narrow path with the tip of his stick like he had walked it a hundred times before. I followed in his wake, sweat rolling down my temples, my boots sucking in mud with every step.

For hours it felt like we were moving in circles. The same twisted banyan roots, the same hanging vines like nooses waiting for a neck. My pulse ticked higher with every step.

“Are you sure about this?” I finally muttered, my voice tight. “You said you saw them go this way. But we’ve been walking half the damn day.”

Bao glanced back, his teeth flashing through the scruff of his beard in something halfway between a smile and a grimace. “Jungle play trick. Easy lost. Not trust eyes. Trust me.”

I wanted to. God, I wanted to. But the longer we trudged, the more I started wondering, was he actually leading me to my unit? Or straight into a trap? He had said once that he was a soldier. That alone made my skin crawl. Was he Viet Cong? Had he been stringing me along, luring me deeper and deeper until his brothers in arms came crashing down from the trees?

The thought gnawed at me until my hands clenched tighter on the rifle. I kept stealing glances at him. If he were leading me to the enemy, I’d have no warning until it was too late.



By the time I noticed the shadows stretching long and the jungle dimming into a deep green gloom, I realized how late it was. Bao stopped, raising his stick like a signal. “No more walk. Night come.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but the jungle was already darkening, insects shrieking from every shadow. He nodded toward the thicker trees ahead. “My home. Safe.”

Safe. The word tasted strange.

But what choice did I have? The sun had already bled out behind the canopy. With no bearings, no stars yet overhead, and no chance in hell of making it back on my own, I followed him.

The path wound downhill until at last, half-hidden behind a curtain of vines, I saw it: a gaping mouth in the rock, a cave. Bao ducked inside like a creature returning to its den, glancing back just once to make sure I was still behind him.

I hesitated on the threshold, the last streaks of daylight gone from the sky. My gut twisted. Either I’d found shelter—or I’d just walked into the wolf’s lair.

