

LIFE AND DEATH

My Other Self

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There was a large explosion. I had no idea what to do. Soon, much of my body went numb, and then the flashbacks began.

I was just a child. I didn't have the *binh linh's* spirit. Yet, it was *ton kinh* to protect the land from these foreigners. Why did they have to come now? So many things were going for me. Why are they here? Why? I don't understand all of this fighting. I am no hero.

Cha anh, they are heroes. I cannot live up to the *thanh danh* that the many before me have brought. The Trung Sisters, Tran Hung Dao, and Le Loi, these were *binh linhs*, but I am not. I cannot destroy *gia ddinh thanh danh*. This *tac chien* is not mine. But, I must fight. It is *ton kinh*. I hope with all my heart that I may see my love again.

I remember in school, I loved books, none of that normal childish stuff ever appealed to me. I was frail. I developed a cold after I was born. It attacked my immune system, making me an easy target for some. The kids, they all thought that I could never be a real man, a *binh linh*. But

what happened, I took it all. I didn't have to, but I let my anger out in my books. Math was my greatest outlet. *Me truang vioen* always said that I could be a great mathematician. She was like a stone for me to lean on. Always kept me stable. How could I dishonor this? I escaped the village. Although it was my home, I could not escape the torture of the residents. My Khe, just wasn't for me. But, I will always uphold *gia ddinh*. That is why I had to go away--for further learning. *Me truang vioen* told me, "My child, you must go to university and succeed, bringing the name of this family *ton sung*." Thanh danh. Why does it always come down to *thanh danh*?

I went to Saigon University. It was a beautiful place. The sprawling grounds. I fell in love. Love does so many things to your heart. You run through the ups and downs, almost like the hills of My Khe. Ironical that my love stems from the place that I cannot love. But, without mother, I didn't know how to convey my thoughts. So I started writing them down. Writing, a small piece of heaven. It is just you and the paper. Nothing can tell you that you're wrong, or you will never live up to fulfill your *gia ddinh thanh danh*. Thanh Danh, it is something that

I cannot escape. The *tac chien* came. The University

kept me safe. I could not hide for long, though. I guess my honor had to be thrown into my safety bubble at the university. I knew that once my degree in math had been completed, I would be thrown into the cruel world, even possibly to die. Fate, is something that we cannot escape. My families honor must be upheld. No simple degree would cure that, only *tac chien*.

A twist, I met a beautiful girl. She was just something that one could not live without. We ended up exchanging gold rings. All of this came so sudden. I now had a beautiful new wife. I had to tell my parents. But, going back to the village, would mean that I would have to enlist in the army. So what did I do? I ran. I did not want to die. You might lose all that you have. I have gained so much in my escape from My Khe. But instead, it keeps calling to me. Telling me that I have to uphold *gia ddinh thanh danh*.

My wife and I stayed with a friend who had graduated a year earlier than me. We told him we were searching for a house. A horrible lie, but it worked. But it is funny. When you are alone, you start to think to yourself. Thinking can make you go a little bit crazy. Doing

it too much can put any man out of his mind. I had writing when I was alone in College, but now with my wife, being alone was very hard to get. Not that it is a bad thing at all, but sometimes a man needs to think. My *thanh danh* had been itching under my clothes for the past month. And still, I could not get myself to go back to My Khe.

Soon my wife began to ask when we would go see my parents. She was the one that wanted to get to know her mother-in-law, as I had talked so highly of her. Well that did it. I could not escape my call any longer, My wife had sealed it. Her lust to see *gia ddinh* had overcome *so hai* to stay away from home. Was I a coward for avoiding the call of *gia ddinh thanh danh*, or was it something deeper? My life had become a giant puddle of muck. Like things that you would find around the Song Tra Bong River. But, then why must I stay, can't I keep running, or is *gia ddinh thanh danh* always going to haunt me.

I went back, I enlisted in the Vietcong. I had fulfilled my family's wants. The *thanh danh* had beseeched attacking my mind. Instead now it seemed that a butterfly was crawling on my chin. I thought it just was a routine patrol. "Check for the *ma vuong*," my sergeant said. I would be safe, just keep quiet, and no problems. I was a lead

scout for the main branch of my platoon. I had my typical meals of rice, ammo, and of course a picture of my precious wife.

After an eternity it seemed, I had not seen the *ma vuong*. I thought to myself, "No one is around, I will be safe, and I will get to see my wife again." There it was again. I was scared. Why should I be scared? No one is around I bet I could waltz down an open path without harm. I'll show you *thanh danh*. Throwing me into *tac chien* that I did not want to fight. I could have been so much more. But you, you had to make me fight like the great *binh linhs*. I'll show you by walking down an open path. Just to prove to you that you mean nothing to me, I only care about *gia ddinh* and my beautiful wife.

By the time I had stumbled down that path my *thanh danh* slapped me in the face. I crumpled to the ground, one eye gone, part of my cheek ripped, and a gaping hole in my neck. Is this what I had deserved? Was my *thanh danh* worth it *Cha anh?* I don't understand. I should have been more. I could have been a great mathematician. Why did *tac chien* come along? Why...why...why!!! Why did I have to die? Was it destined for me? Did I deserve it? Too many questions were

popping into my head as the light slowly faded.

The man that killed me approached. He looked nothing like a great *binh linh*. He was just like me. A man that didn't want *tac chien*, but didn't want to seem like a coward. What would he be destined for? Was his *thanb danb* greater than mine? Did it make him come here? What would his family think of him now?

The butterfly on my chin slowly moved upwards on my deformed face. That was the last thing I'd see, not my own child, not my beautiful wife. Are you happy now Cha anh, now that your only son is dead? Did he give *ton song* to his family in the right way? Did.... I felt myself losing consciousness, but as I started walking towards the light, my last look saw the soldier approach me, with the same look I had many years ago. He and I were one in the same, we were just taking the burden of our worlds. That was the last thing I could grasp, as I left this world on the wings of the butterfly.