NEEDLES AND DUST

by

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ABSTRACT

CHARLES TILLMAN DOUGLAS. Needles and dust. (Under the direction of Dr. AARON GWYN)

Needles and Dust comprises the first part, approximately 20,000 words of a novel in progress. In the summer of 1988, Thao Dena, a twelve-year-old girl in the Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand, befriends the picaresque Vang Neng, who enchants Dena with stories of their homeland and promises of adventure. Their friendship progresses quickly to romantic attraction, which troubles Dena because of cultural taboos and the strain that their clandestine relationship has on Dena's relationship with her mother, who is both indulgent and guarded.

After an escapade to the Mekong River, Dena is introduced to Chao Fa, a messianic Hmong resistance group that promotes a writing system similar to one her own mother uses in her personal writings. Hoping to learn more of her heritage, Dena studies the pahawh system, but finds both her mother and Neng disapprove the pursuit. As Dena navigates the different demands of family, romance, and the self, she becomes increasingly independent and confident in her own ability to decide her future. The sentiment is jarred, however, when she learns that Neng will be returning to Laos and subject to an arranged marriage.

PREFACE

I began this novel under the working title *Stowaway* as a part of my fiction workshop with Dr. Gwyn in the fall of 2014. The original outline was extremely derivative, basically a Hmong version of Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* (2003). In the original outline, my protagonist witnesses the brutal rape-murder of her best friend and then lives a terrible life of shame and remorse. In guilt, she assumes her friend's identity and immigrates to America, trying to live her friend's life until she finds atonement in reclaiming her own.

Like I said, it was derivative, but there was another problem with *Stowaway* that became apparent after I had written the first couple chapters: I really liked these characters and didn't have the heart to kill either one of them. I pondered various revisions (maybe it was a bride-napping instead of a murder), but ultimately decided the entire outline needed a major overhaul. I scrapped the decade-long epic in favor of a fortnight's bildungsroman, left the violence implied rather than explicit, and changed the protagonist's destination from America to Laos. The original chapters are virtually unchanged, but the story that exists now better fits the characters than the one I had initially imagined.

Although these characters are genuine to me, I am about as demographically removed from the pre-teen lesbian Hmong girls as an author could possibly be. I did live among the Hmong in Minnesota from 2004-2006, and I can still speak the language with some fluency. My wife is Hmong and my in-laws did flee Laos and lived in refugee camps in Thailand before coming to the United States. I have visited Laos and I have spent a night in a Hmong village near the Mekong River.

I mention these experiences for a number of reasons. First, I do have some familiarity with the culture involved, even if much of my experience is second-hand. I do not presume to be an expert, but I have at least enough exposure to approach my research with some basic vocabulary. Nonetheless, I hope the Hmong reader who chances upon this novel would forgive any incidental errors I make in the text and would appreciate the respect that I hold for the Hmong literary tradition. This novel is not meant to imitate the testimonies of the actual survivors of the Secret War or Ban Vinai, nor is it meant to replace the excellent fiction that already exists featuring this people. Instead, it is only my attempt, however clumsy, to tell a story about two girls who try to find happiness in a place where it is hard to come by. Their cultural heritage is a boon more than it is an obstacle. When I relate these girls' understanding of the supernatural world, it is not to suggest that their worldview is superstitious and obsolete, but rather genuine and supremely relevant.

I should add that there are intentional misrepresentations. For example, none of the stories Neng tells (including her creation story in Chapter 1 and her account of the Mother of Writing in Chapter 5) would appear in any codex of Hmong folklore. This is the advantage, I think, of the child characters. They play with legend and history the same way Anne of Green Gables might when she names Lover's Lane or the Haunted Wood.

I shifted the timeline around for artistic purposes, as well. There was a similar raid to the one I describe at the end of chapter 1 in March 1987, but this would have de-aged my already young protagonist another year, so I ignored the date entirely (Crosette, 1987). The camp had officially closed to new arrivals in 1983, which would have made Neng's more recent arrival illegal, and she likely would have been taken in the raid.

However, Neng's Laotionness is an important part of what attracts Dena to her, and although I could probably add backstory to justify her presence (bribes, perhaps), I ignored the task entirely. I have little excuse, except the argument that this is fiction and the dates are incidental inconveniences better off ignored.

I am not saying that *Needles and Dust* is pure fantasy, and I have been doing rigorous research. Particularly important for my work has been Lynellyn Long's *Ban Vinai: The Refugee Camp* (1992) and William A. Smalley's *Mother of Writing: The Origin and Development of a Hmong Messianic Script* (1990), the former a historical overview of Thailand's refugee crisis and a fascinating ethnography based on the author's stay with several refugee families, and the latter both a biography of Shong Lue Yang, the Hmong prophet who revealed the pahawh script and inspired the Chao Fa movement, and an explanation of the script itself and its different iterations during Yang's lifetime. Of course, there have been other significant works I have been reading, and a more comprehensive bibliography will be included at the end of the manuscript itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: RIVER SNAKE

My mother did not make it across Mekong River. Her uncle Toua had warned her to make no sound, but a water moccasin had jumped in the boat between them. Mother screamed, and the scream was followed immediately by machine gun fire from the Lao side of the river. Mother dove, or maybe the raft capsized, or maybe Great Uncle Toua had pushed her. Either way, she was in the river.

She did not know how to swim. "To fall into the river was a more certain death than being caught by the Pathet Lao," she told me. "So I did the only thing I could: I drowned."

And that is the story of my conception. According to my mother, a river spirit, in the form of a great fish, found her body and carried it to the shore. He was in love with her, so he asked the river for her life and then he put his magic inside her.

"When I awoke, I was wearing a silver necklace and a new embroidered skirt: as fine a dowry as anyone had ever seen. When I took them to the shaman, he told me that I was a woman wed, and that you, little Dena, are the child of the river itself."

It was a beautiful story, but like most beautiful stories, it had nothing to show for itself. Great Uncle Toua had died in the crossing, and mother never told me the name of the shaman who had declared my legitimacy. As for the dowry? "Oh, I sold the old necklace. It's what bought me the rice to keep you." She'd shake her head. "You are here, and you are proof enough for my tale."

There were other stories of my parentage, of course. Nasty ones, involving other Thaos or Thai guards or the Pathet Lao. Some were more romantic: my father was a childhood friend who had married my mother in secret because he did not have the money for a bride price. One old man had grabbed me by the chin, tilted it to the side, and then declared that I was the child of General Vang Pao himself.

But I am not the daughter of Vang Pao, and for now, I hold to my mother's story. First, for the obvious reason that it is a beautiful story, and I like telling it, and it is one that I have not allowed myself to tell for a very long time. But there are more significant revelations that this tale will offer anyone who really wants to understand my story. I am not an orphan, as are so many other children in the Ban Vinai refugee camp, and I do have a father, if a strange one. Also, my father was not a soldier, which the Americans said disqualified us for immigration.

It also explains my name. Dena. *Dej nab*. Water snake.

I told this story to Neng, for she had asked me for it on the first day we had met. I was much younger then. Twelve, perhaps. Too old to play guerilla with the other children in the refugee camp, which, of course, is exactly what I was doing.

The object of guerilla is simple enough: one child, the tallest, stands alone on the hillside, and the rest of us have to sneak up on him without being caught. At the end of the game, the boy calls "guerilla," and whoever manages to get the closest wins.

On this particular day, the hillside was still mud from yesterday’s rain, and it was nearly impossible to scale, except by the main path. While the boys kept to the path, however – sure to be caught - I snuck behind the homes, moving between latrines and occasional vegetable garden, avoiding the patches where the sewage had flooded. Once I

had climbed high enough, I ducked and then crawled in the mud between two houses, using my fingertips to inch my body closer.

That's when she stepped on me. She didn't trip or anything. She had come up behind and pressed her own bare toe against my back, triumphant.

"You'll ruin my clothes," I whispered, and turned to find the would-be assassin. It was just a girl, no older than I, though with her pristine white skirt, she probably looked more grown up than me, the spindly girl in western charity clothes soaking up the mud.

"I think you took care of that," she countered, but despite her censure, she sounded very pleased. "What are you doing?"

"Guerilla," I answered, still whispering.

She nodded and pointed. "Your target has quit the game," she said. "See? There he is talking with his mother."

"What?" I asked, much too loudly, and stood up. The boy was still manning his post, and he gave a start before calling my name. I was out.

"Cheater," I accused.

"You're too old for those boys anyway," the girl countered. "Help me prepare dinner for my sister and grandmother. After that, we'll play a real game."

We didn't even bother washing my feet. Like everyone in Ban Vinai, we did the food preparation in the makeshift awning branching from the back of the house. I didn't care for helping her with her chores, but she liked chatting, and I found the one-way conversation made the work light. As I ground the chili and cut the onion, I learned that Neng had actually come to the refugee camp only two years before, but that her father had been called back to Laos by General Vang Pao to bring military aid to the Hmong

villages near Luang Prabang. He was still gone, and probably would never be able to return, since the Thai government had closed the border last year.

"I still go out to the river, sometimes," she said. "But there is nothing to see but forest. He will come back, and when he does we'll tell the Thai that he has always been here, that he has been sick and stuck in the house, but is now finally well enough to make himself seen again."

"Are the Thai really that stupid?" I asked.

Neng shrugged. "My sister was the second wife of a Yang. The Thai said she couldn't go to America with her husband because in America, people can have only one wife. Her husband said, 'This is not my wife: this is my daughter,' and the Thai man admitted her. The Americans didn't buy it, though. The Americans have machines that let them know when you lie."

I nodded. I knew the Americans had machines for everything. She poured fish sauce in the cut vegetables and mixed it with a spoon.

"When I go to America," she continued, "It won't be as any man's wife, nor as any woman's daughter-in-law. How could it be a free land if you have to be a daughter-in-law?" The question was rhetorical, so I just waited. "No way," she concluded, satisfied with the wisdom that her twelve years had bought her.

I had stopped rinsing the rice as Neng gave her speech. *Was daughter-in-law so bad?* I wondered, but I didn't ask, for fear she would consider me stupid. Instead I turned and asked, "You said something about a real game?"

Neng looked at our work and nodded. "Come with me," she said and grabbed my hand.

* * *

We were waylaid briefly by a Thai guard, but since we were still in the camp with plenty of grown-ups around, I wasn’t afraid. He just stopped us to ask why we weren't in school.

Neng looked to me to answer, and I remembered that she had only been here a few years. Of course she couldn't speak Thai like me, who had been here my entire life.

"The teachers weren't in today," I answered. "The Americans or the Thai."

"All of the Americans are out," he said, but since he didn't seem to be talking to me, we gave our bows and left.

* * *

The kator fields took almost as much room as the rice fields. Boys of all ages would circle around in small groups and practice their lobs, passes, and strikes. The men of the camp occupied the actual netted courts.

"We can't be here," I told Neng. "Only the boys can play kator." As if to prove my point, one of the men nearest me flipped backwards, striking the wicker ball with the arch of his foot. I cowered as the ball struck a lone tree beside me.

"Dad told me that people will always tell you where you can't go," she responded, and she picked up the ball and threw it back to the men. "But when the Lao guard one side and the Thai guard the other, you can either listen to them and drown or you can sneak around and live."

"Your skirt," I said, but Neng only laughed.

"We're not here to play kator, Dena." She produced a cloth ball from her sash, much softer than the one the men were playing with, and she tossed it to me.

Pov Pob. It was a stupid game, really, one the boys and girls would play at the New Year celebration. The boy tosses you the ball, and you toss it back. Drop it and you sing poetry to your partner. I didn't know any songs, so I determined not to be the first to fumble.

"How is this a real game?" I asked, and threw the ball back. It went wide, but Neng was quick, and returned it easily.

"Just wait, little Dena; it's about to get interesting."

It wasn't long before a boy tried to intercept my toss. "Don't leave me out!" Neng said. "Go get a friend if you want in." He did, and they brought a wicker kator ball with them. When he tossed Neng the ball, however, instead of catching it with her hands, she bounced it off her chest, juggled it with a few brief kicks, and then passed it back to the boy.

I dropped the cloth ball. The two juggled the ball deftly, and the stakes were high. "Drop it, and you'll have to sing poetry to Dena!" Neng called out, and she gave a lob over her head. Others soon joined, and a circle formed around Neng.

How long they kept the ball going, I couldn't have guessed. More than once, a boy tried to end the match with a spike, but Neng saved it every time, once diving in the dirt to catch the drive with the very tips of her bare toes. She was amazing. Finally, one boy's shot went wild. The boy fell in the dirt and covered his head.

"You can't get out of it that easily!" Neng warned, and the boy, red in the face, got up and sang to me:

You have the face of dead snake,

I said to the little girl,

For you have poison in your belly

And fangs coming from your cheeks.

I pushed the boy and he fell in the dirt. I ran. I heard Neng laugh and say, "You sing like a goat, Yi Leng!" but I didn't stop to look.

I ran past the market and stopped only when I reached my unit in center 5. I was about to go in when I heard Neng call after me.

"He was a clever little poet, wasn't he?" she asked when she caught me.

"Tiger bite you," I said, for it was the best I could come up with at the time.

She just grinned. "He's just a stupid boy. How did you get a name like water snake?"

And then, for some reason I may never fully understand, I told her.

She nodded. "There was a French Christian once who visited our village in Laos. He spoke Hmong like he was always spitting out hot pepper, but he told me a story about snakes."

I didn't ask, but she continued.

"When *Saub* made the world, one of his children didn't like it. This child turned into a snake and he decided to kill all of the people so *Saub* would have to start over. So he tricked the women into eating poisonous apples by telling them they were sweet and would make them live forever. When *Saub* discovered this, he turned the women into *dab*, the demons, and all of the men into *neeb*, the good spirits. The snake he turned into *Dab Ntxwg Nyoog*, the demon chief and powerful. And then he started over."

"I'm not *dab*," I said.

"I know that," she answered. "But you are chief and powerful. You can slither in the mud one moment and draw a boy the next. You can make a poisonous fruit look sweet and you can tell me a story that makes me cry, even if it is just a lie."

"You didn't cry," I pointed out.

"No, but everything else I said was true." To prove it, she kissed me. Or I kissed her. I can't tell exactly what happened, but the next moment we were a few paces back and facing each other.

It seemed we would never say another word to each other, but soon enough she resumed her chatter. "You've never been there, have you?"

I shook my head, still unable to talk to her.

"The Mekong? It isn't far, you know. A few hours' walk at most." She leaned in close. "I went there last night. If you look closely, you can see the Lao swinging from the trees. They're invisible except for their red bandanas they wear from their arms. They look like birds from this side of the river."

"Have you ever seen a *neeb*?"

Neng smiled, apparently pleased that I was talking again. "No," she said, "but I have seen a snake skin before. It had a diamond pattern and looked like a Hmong embroidered skirt."

“The spirit gave my mother an embroidered skirt.”

Neng shrugged. "I will take you there if you like. Like I said, I go there often, and it is not far from the camp."

"Yes," I said. "I want to go."

* * *

When I went inside, I should have been thinking of the Mekong, of what I had agreed to. I should have been thinking of the Thai guard I saw beat a man who did not stop his work for the national anthem. I should have been thinking of the dead girls discovered by the road only a few weeks ago. I should have been thinking of the soldiers who killed my grandparents and my great uncle.

I wasn't.

I was thinking of a scrawny girl in a white skirt who was now my best friend in the world.

I wished my mother were home, so that I could speak with her. I also wished mother would never come, for a part of me felt like she wouldn't understand. I wasn't a loner, and I had made friends before. But they were all children. Born in the camp, none of them could even imagine the old country, much less visit it themselves on dark nights. Neng was just older, even if she didn't look it.

And then I thought of the kiss we had shared. Of the fear that everything was over and we would never speak again. It wasn't over, I decided. It's just that, like Neng, I was growing up, too.

That night, I awoke to the sound of men shouting and children crying. I sat up, but mother put a hand on my shoulder.

"It's alright, little Dena," she said. "It will be over soon."

Someone opened the door, breaking the simple latch we had been using for a lock. I wriggled free of my mother's grasp but I still couldn't see anything in the darkness.

"You cannot hide here!" my mother said, in Hmong, so I knew it wasn't a Thai guard.

"Please, *Niam* Thao!" It was a man. I could tell even though he was whispering in abbreviated breaths. He had been running. "Think of my family! They will die without a father."

"They will live," said my mother, her voice low and even, "As Dena and I have lived. I think of my family too."

"But I fought with the Americans. The Lao will kill me when they send me back."

"You cannot stay here!" Mother said again.

The man came in anyway, slamming the door behind him. I screamed, and he covered my mouth with his hands. I bit down, catching nothing but sweat and dirt.

It might have been a moment or an hour, but eventually the Thai guards came in and took him away. They dragged us all out as they searched our house for whatever else we could have been hiding in our one-room, dirt-floor shelter.

They were loading people onto busses. They weren't all men, and they weren't all Hmong. I recognized a Lao boy who had come to our class only a month earlier. Another I recognized: he had only been here two months.

In a moment I understood everything, and in the same moment, I thought of Neng, who did not know enough Thai to respond to a guard's greeting. I broke free of my mother and ran to the busses.

There were so many! I ran from bus to bus, calling out for my friend. Someone pushed me to the ground. It could have been a Thai or a Hmong or my own mother. I didn't care. I started crying.

Neng had said she had been here for two years, I told myself. That's before the Thai closed the border. They wouldn't take her back to Laos if she was here legally.

I don't know if I walked home or if someone carried me. But I do remember staying up the rest of the night, listening to my mother breathing, dreading the news that would come with the morning.

CHAPTER TWO: A PLACE WITHOUT CAIV

The camp was dying before that summer night in 1988. Every few weeks, new rules would tighten the stranglehold the Thai held over the refugees. Hmong were no longer allowed outside the camp to work in Thai farms. Hmong could no longer sell their wares in Thai marketplaces. Even the camp schools were no longer allowed to teach past grade six. Little by little, they whittled away at us until the night when they could come into our homes and take our friends and cousins onto their busses and cart them back to the country that had pledged to exterminate them down to the last root.

By then, most took no notice. What can you do? They have a country. We have food rations. If we became a nuisance, they wouldn't even have to shoot us. They could just stop feeding us until we disappeared entirely.

When I passed the ration line that morning, the men – patriarchs and elders – said nothing. I think I could hear their silence, much louder than I could ever hear their chatter. In the distance, someone was singing *kwv txhiaj*, like a ghost chanting a requiem for all that had been lost. Or maybe I was dreaming, as I often dreamed while awake when the American teachers would talk their strange language.

I wanted to ask the men if they had seen Neng, but I didn't know how. What was her clan? Who was her father? Have you seen a girl my age? Skinny? The camp had no shortage of hungry children. I passed the line and stationed myself at the threshold of the still-vacant school building.

An hour passed. Other children came and saw the closed door. “Maybe it would never open,” one said. “The Americans have been gone since yesterday, and the only Thai you see now are the guards.” They turned home to tell their friends not to come today.

I was hungry and tired and sorry that I had skipped breakfast.

I decided to check the kator fields, but it was on the way that I saw her sitting with another girl at the market, sewing *paj ntaub* as if she had always been there. She ran to me as I approached

“Your clan,” I said. “I need to know your clan.” Next time I would know what to ask the men.

She nodded. “Vang,” she said. “General Vang Pao is our clan leader.” She paused her work a moment. “You aren’t a Vang, too, are you?”

I shook my head. She smiled.

“My sister once kissed a Vang boy. She didn’t know he was until one of his brothers caught them kissing. He beat her and threatened to tell our mother if he caught them again. She didn’t know it was *caiv* to marry a Vang.”

I frowned. I had wanted to embrace her, to tell her that I had run after the busses and had searched the camp for her. But she continued to tell her stories as if nothing had happened, as if her sister’s trysts were the most important thing in the world.

My head ached, and I had trouble following her conversation. I needed sleep.

“It’s *caiv* to kiss a girl, too,” I said, and was sorry that I’d said it.

Neng didn’t mind. “Only in the camp,” she said. “It’s different outside.” She pointed across to the hills, in the direction that may have been the old country or the new.

It was a strange idea: that something can be *caiv* in one place and not be someplace else. I pondered the idea for a moment before making a judgment.

"It isn't different," I said at last. "*Caiv* isn't made by the Thai or the Hmong. It's made by the gods and spirits. It's everywhere."

Neng took a breath, and I knew she was about to tell another story. "Imagine a man has a daughter-in-law and a grandson. His house catches fire and the baby grandson is still in the daughter-in-law's room. What does he do?"

"I save the baby," I said.

"Not you," she said, "the father. It's *caiv* for a father to enter his daughter-in-law's room."

I saw what she was getting at and found it unsettling. "He should find someone to save the baby. Or he should get a stick and fish the baby out."

"With a stick?" Neng laughed.

I blushed and became very conscious of my pounding headache.

"What do you think he should do?" I challenged.

Neng shrugged. "*Caiv* disappears in a fire. There are places where *caiv* doesn't exist. You just have to go out and look for them."

The river, I thought. The river is a place where *caiv* doesn't exist - where anything is possible and nothing is forbidden.

"When can we go there?" I asked.

I didn't need to specify. "Soon, Dena," she said. "I can't go in a Hmong skirt. Find us some food, and I will finish up here."

I wanted to embrace her, but I didn't know how. I bowed and left, frustrated by the formality of the motion.

* * *

My mother was embroidering *paj ntaub*, as she often did. She had a cousin in America who paid her ten dollars for every story. With the Thai markets closed, American money was the only cash coming into the camp at all. Still, we traded it in our own market as if it really meant something.

This particular *paj ntaub* was a familiar story. In the top right field she stitched the airplanes dropping their bombs and yellow rain on the village beneath them. Hmong men and women, all in traditional clothes, would follow a path that zig-zagged until it came to the river that cut across the blue ground. The Hmong crossed in rafts and tubes. In this one, she stitched an empty raft and a chain of bullets leading to a Lao rifleman. She also stitched a snake into the river, which she always did when she made this story. The bottom half featured a man at a table, processing the refugees as they came into the camp. I have seen others that include an airplane carting us off to America, but mother never stitched that part of the story.

"No school today," my mother said when she saw me. It was not a question.

"No," I said, looking down.

She never asked me where I had been. Once, a man had dragged me to her and reported that I had snuck into a Thao clan meeting. She promised to censure me, but when the man left, she asked me all of the particulars from the meeting: who needed money for a bride price, who would be responsible for Old Man Kou's children after his suicide, who would pay for his funeral. When I told her all of these things, she said she

wished she could have been there with me, and she held me as I told her other things I had learned in my day.

You can always tell me anything, she had said. *There's so much to be afraid of here, too much for a little girl. You don't need to be afraid of your own mother.*

I went inside and lay on our bed. My mother followed and brought a bowl of boiled squash.

"What made you run out last night, after the busses?" she asked.

I wanted to tell her about Neng and how afraid I'd been. But if I did, I'd tell her everything: kisses and the river and *caiv* and so much that I didn't understand well enough to articulate. Instead, I asked her, "What's going to happen to them? The people they took?"

She was quiet for a while before she said, "I don't know. They'll go back to the old country, I suppose. They never really belonged here. That's why the Thai took them back."

"I don't think we belong here, either," I said.

She smiled. "I used to think this was where we'd become strong again. Everyone did. General Vang Pao would send us letters from America and tell us that in Ban Vinai, in this little camp, we'd become a great people and would someday go back and drive out the Pathet Lao and the Vietnamese from the old country. Some people turned down the Americans who sponsored them because they believed that lie."

This was new. I had never heard anyone call Vang Pao a liar, much less my own mother.

"Haven't we gotten stronger?" I asked. "Every year, the camp gets bigger – more families and more children, even after the Thai closed the border."

"What do you think, little Dena?"

"I think if we were strong, we wouldn't let the Thai beat us or tell us what to do. We'd protect each other and they'd know that they can't come into our houses and take us away into their busses."

She kissed my hair. "You are very brave, little Dena, but very young. You cannot protect everyone, and sometimes not even yourself."

I sat up. "If I were on that bus, what would you have done?"

"I'd have felt really sad, and would have sung *kwv txhiaj* in your honor."

I knew she was joking, but a part of me still wondered. *What could anyone have done?*

* * *

Neng woke me before I got any real sleep. "We have to hurry, Dena," she said. "The men are crowding the administration building. All the Thai are there, and nobody will notice us leave."

She was wearing western charity clothes: pink shorts and T-shirt. I didn't recognize her.

"Where's mother?" I asked. But Neng was too busy stuffing her pockets with our rice dumplings to answer.

I sat up. My head still ached and the light was no longer coming through the front window. It was noon or afternoon.

"Come on!" Neng said again, and I got up.

She grabbed my hand.

* * *

We passed one of Neng's cousins as we made our way across the camp. Neng stopped a moment to beg a Pepsi. If he was curious about me, he didn't say anything. Neng didn't allow time for questions.

We crossed the camp on the eastern side, away from the main gate. As Neng had said earlier, the grown-ups were all on the other side.

"What's happening?" I asked.

"The Americans are back," she said. "The Thai kept them out for the raid yesterday. Now everyone wants to know what's going on. There're teachers and social workers and news reporters. People think the Americans are going to make everything better."

It didn't really matter, I suppose, but a part of me felt angry when she said that. After all, it was the American's war that got us here in the first place.

When we passed the last of the shanties, we kept going straight into the woods. I was exhausted at this point, and Neng allowed us to continue at a brisk walk.

"It will take most of the day," she said. "And we'll have to take the road home at night. For now, though, we stick to the woods and keep going east."

I leaned against a thick persimmon tree to catch my breath. Neng handed me the Pepsi. I took a swig and let it fizzle against the inside of my cheeks before I swallowed. We shared a persimmon, too, but the taste was bitter after the Pepsi.

Our way wasn't easy. There was no path or road, and bamboo can grow in tight clusters making impenetrable fences. We also had to be wary of snakes, as reports of cobra bites were common in the camp.

Neng didn't talk much along the way. Perhaps she couldn't, as I could barely find the breath to speak myself. At one point we saw an animal trail, and Neng asked if I had ever heard the story of the tiger who dressed in the hunter's skin that he might also eat the daughter-in-law. I said I had, and then neither of us said anything.

Eventually, the forest gave way to rice fields. Neng pointed beyond the fields to indicate a village, and beyond that, the river. We celebrated the milestone by finishing the Pepsi and eating the rice dumplings.

* * *

The Mekong was not blue and white, like the *paj ntaub* always depicted it. It was brown. There were no refugees crossing or Pathet Lao firing bullets or snakes or *neeb* anywhere that I could see. It was just brown moving water. And across the river, just as Neng had told me, was more forest.

"It doesn't look like another country," I told her.

"It is," Neng said. "It's as different from Thailand as a man is from a woman."

She had removed her clothes and was waist-deep in the water. I looked at how her body disappeared beneath the muddy water, and I wondered how many other bodies had similarly vanished beneath its current. I shuddered.

"But it's just more forest, no different than the forest we crossed to get here."

"It is different," she insisted. "In Laos, there are no ration lines and no guards. We don't go to school or sing the national anthem. We wake and we can do whatever we want." She flung herself down into the water and then disappeared completely.

"Neng!' I called.

"Come here, little water snake," she said as she reappeared. Her muddy hair was matted to her and she looked like a horrifying *dab,* black runes tattooed across her body. "You can't have come all this way just to look at it."

I didn't bother stripping. I got as close to the river as I dared and tentatively put a cupped hand in it. I took a sip. It was just water, even if it looked like mud. I stood up.

"Can we go across?" I asked her.

"No," she said. "We wouldn't want to. There's freedom over there, but there's also death."

"The yellow rain," I said.

She shrugged. "And tigers." She splashed at me on the shore. In the fading sunlight, it looked like yellow rain.

"Have you ever seen a tiger?" I asked.

"You should stop asking things like that," Neng said. "I will soon run out of things to show you."

I did come into the river then. It was cold and terrifying, but Neng held me by the arms until I stopped crying. Slowly, the water turned warm and it was the exposed half of my body that was cool. Holding Neng's hand, I dipped my head under the water and listened.

The river spoke, I knew. It was some unknown language, but it was distinct and intelligent. I remembered my mother telling me that I was the river's daughter, and I wondered what secrets the river would tell me if it could. I was sure that it was affirming its role in my conception, claiming me as its daughter. It was telling me where I belonged, and that it wasn't on either side, that Thailand was never my home and Laos would not be until it was safe again. It was telling me that I was at home in the river, with Neng.

"Thank you," I said, and though Neng said it was nothing, I think she knew I wasn't talking to her.

* * *

The sun went down behind us, as we sat on our clothes and watched Laos slowly fade from view.

"We can't go home in the dark, can we?" I said.

Neng pointed downstream. "We can follow the river until we get to the village. Taking the road will get us back faster than it took for us to get here, even in the dark."

I stood up then, and dusted myself off. I was dry, and we had both removed our leeches, but I still felt the chill from the water. Neng followed suit, and soon we were dressed and again on the road. As she had predicted, it was slow going at first, with no road and no lights. It wasn't uncomfortable, as the forest had been. The rice fields were open, and in the moonlight, it seemed we could see for miles, even if the ground beneath us was dark.

There was something beautiful about the effect, and I paused to scan the ocean around me.

And then I noticed the break in the uniformity. “Neng!” I whispered sharply and pointed behind us. There was no mistaking it: a flashlight, men’s voices.

“They shouldn’t be here,” Neng whispered, much too loudly. “We’re too far from the village for there to be any guards here.”

“Shut up,” I whispered. It had to be Thai guard: a farmer wouldn’t have a flashlight.

It was like playing guerilla, except that this time, we had to get away from the target. Only problem was in this game we were disadvantaged, unable to see when the target had a flashlight.

And it wasn’t a game. We had to be real guerillas now.

I showed Neng how to get into the mud, to disappear completely and become a part of the earth.

She was terrible at it.

A man spoke. “If you want to be shipped right back to Laos, then go ahead and make for the village.”

I froze. Did he see us or was he addressing his companion?

“It’s that or starve in the forest,” the other said, “Do *you* know the way to Ban Vinai?”

They were speaking Hmong! I realized, but I knew that wasn’t reason enough to trust them. Not every Hmong had fought with the Americans, and some Hmong wore red bands just as well as the Lao. There were also Hmong in Thailand, free people who had crossed the Mekong generations before the war.

Neng stood straight up and turned to our hunters. I tried to grab her, but she broke free and ran.

“Daddy!” she called.

I stood and watched as the light shone on my friend and then dropped and went out.

CHAPTER THREE: POINT AT THE MOON

It can't be her father, I told myself. Neng had told me that Vang Pao himself had sent her father back to Laos, to be a warrior and guardian of the people in Luang Prabang. To me, the shadow that Neng approached was more terrifying than heroic. Heroes should evoke awe and respect, but all I felt was afraid.

But what was I to do? Duck down deeper in the grass and let the shadow take her? I remembered the previous night, when I bolted past the guards with their guns and shouts. I had that courage in me. I knew I did.

The words of my mother echoed in my mind: *You are very brave, little Dena, but very young. You cannot protect everyone, and sometimes you cannot even protect yourself.* These were two grown men, soldiers for all I knew.

I stood, fully exposed in the moonlight. *I should run,* I thought. Either to save Neng or to seek the safety of the woods. I couldn't move.

"Please," I said. "Tell me who you are." I spoke Thai, perhaps hoping they may mistake us for Thai villagers.

I took a breath and walked forward. Suddenly, one of the men grabbed my arm and shone a flashlight into my eyes. I screamed, and he pushed me to the ground. I heard Neng call my name, but the other man shushed her.

"I killed my son for crying," my assailant said in a harsh whisper. "I'll kill you, too, if you can't shut up."

I should have run, I realized. Or fought. Instead, I just curled up on the ground and braced myself for the next blow.

"Don't frighten the girl, Kou" the other man said. "Scaring the locals is a good way to get us caught."

"She's not a local; she's my friend." Her arms fell around me, and I lifted my head. As I embraced her, my nerves returned, and I turned to our captors.

"How did these two get here?" my assailant asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" the other said. "They're little Thai spies, here to arrest us and cart us back to Laos. Come on, Kou, they're little Hmong girls – we're close to Ban Vinai and soon this whole nightmare will be over."

Kou spat, though not on me. "Some nightmares never end," he said, which may have been the saddest thing I've ever heard.

* * *

Neither of the two were Neng's father. Jinou, the older man whom Neng had earlier run to, said he had crossed the Mekong a million times in his life.

"The king himself came to me once, and asked that I carry him across to Thailand so he could run from the red Lao," he boasted. "When his foot touched my boat, though, he smashed a hole in it and the whole thing sank to the bottom of the river."

Neng laughed at this. "They're opium smugglers," she whispered as we made our way through the forest. It was harder than our initial trek, but would probably have been impossible if not for Jinou's flashlight. "No one else crosses the river anymore, Hmong or Lao."

"I bet they're murderers, too," I whispered back.

Kou, as if in answer, threw his knife into the air, letting it catch a glint of moonlight before it disappeared again into the darkness. He could kill us easily, I thought, and I remembered what he had said about murdering his son. It wasn't an unheard of story: the running parent snuffing out a crying baby with opium or a cloth so the Pathet Lao wouldn't catch them both.

Men get addicted to cruelty, my mother had once said to me, *just like opium or beer. When you see the men – the former soldiers – and they look sad and angry at once, it is because they haven't been able to kill since the war and their head hurts.*

Kou was a cruelty addict. I felt the back of my head where he had grabbed and pushed me. My ear stung when I touched it. Sticky. I licked my middle finger to be sure.

"Blood," I whispered to Neng, and held my finger for her to inspect.

I must have spoken too loudly, because Jinou shone the light on me so I couldn't see, and Neng came immediately to hold and inspect me.

"Shit!" Kou said, but Jinou told him a tiger would bite him if he didn't shut up. Neng ran her hand along my ear and I winced.

"Kou's right," Neng said, and she spit on my ear. "Chicken shit, pig shit, bull shit." She rubbed the spit in. "You pointed at the moon."

"I did no such thing!" I protested, but thought back to when I was in the mud, or when I was protecting my eyes from the flashlight, or when I fought off Kou's first assault. There were a dozen times I may have done so, even if not on purpose.

Jinou sighed. "There's a woman *dab* on the moon," he said to me, even though it was common knowledge. "She's marked you and a little spit and rhyme aren't going to

change that." He cursed Kou again, but turned the light away, effectively ending the respite.

Neng put her arm around me and slung mine across her back, as if I had sprained an ankle instead of cut an ear. I didn't protest, since she was warm and the way was lonely without her.

I felt my ear with my free hand. People say you have seven spirits and that when all seven get along, your body would be healthy and your mind sharp. But when different forces started yanking the different spirits this way or that – say a Christian prays in your house, or a spirit is lost or stolen when you trip or cross a bridge – you get sick and have nightmares. I wondered what I was: child of *neeb* and marked by *dab.* How many forces were waging inside my own body?

"Dena," Neng whispered. "When you get home, be sure to pray to the forest and moon. People lose their spirits in the forest, and it's *caiv* to go into the forest at night."

"I thought you don't believe in *caiv*."

Neng shrugged, which I only knew because my arm was wrapped around her shoulder. "I believe," she insisted. "I just said that there are places without *caiv*. But most of those places are full of *dab*, so you still have to pray."

Neither of us said anything for a while. Maybe it was because we were both thinking of our kiss, now over a day old, or maybe we just had nothing to say. We were in the wild, a land without *caiv*, but not without reason. If you point at the moon, you get your ear cut. If you get lost in the forest, you freeze or get eaten by a tiger. We picked up our pace to keep up with Jinou and his flashlight.

I had no idea how far we had gone. If the first trip had seemed long, the return was forever. The darkness had its part in that: I could barely see my footing and our going was much slower than it was in the daylight. But there was also the fear: fear of the forest, fear of being caught by the Thai, and fear of our strange companions – especially Kou. The fear stretched every moment, and time inched its way into meaningless eternity.

"I will," I said, at last. "But you pray, too. I don't want your spirit left here either."

She squeezed my shoulder and kissed my cheek. "I will."

* * *

We approached Ban Vinai from the southeast hills – not the way we had come in, but familiar enough that I could find my way back in the dark. As soon as we hit the peak, Jinou killed his light.

"What gives?" Kou demanded.

"We know the way from here," Jinou answered. "But lights draw Thai faster than moths, and it's bad luck to speak Thai in the dark."

I'd never heard that saying, but then I thought of what Neng had said about their being opium smugglers. Maybe *dab* and spirits weren't the only types of bad luck in the world.

"You're leaving us with him?" Neng asked, indicating Kou. The thought hadn't occurred to me that Jinou and Kou might not be together. The prospect of walking alone with Kou in the dark made me shudder.

Jinou just laughed. "You and your *dab*-marked friend just go on home," he said. "Kou and I have some work to do out here."

I pulled Neng's hand. *Let's go,* I thought to her, and I hoped she could hear me.

And then she did the strangest thing I'd ever seen a girl do. She ran up to Jinou and threw her arms around him, as she had when she had thought him her father.

"If you see my daddy," she said, "bring him here the same way you brought us." She sniffled and her next words were cracked. "Vang Tsu Kou," she said. "He's in Luang Prabang, but he needs to come home."

Jinou set her down. "I'll keep an eye out," he promised.

We left them then, holding hands until we reached the first of the shanties.

Neng brushed her hand behind my ear when we got to our section. It no longer stung, and I thought I could hear her skin scrape against a new scab. "You really are brave, Dena," she said, almost as if she were echoing my mother's pronouncement from earlier. Only when Neng said it, I believed her.

She followed a strand of hair and brushed her hand down my arm until she was clasping my hand again. I shivered, but said nothing. "You followed me to the edge of the country and chased after me in the dark when I was surrounded by strangers."

I turned away. We were right outside my building now, and I didn't want my mother to witness this. Not yet.

"I didn't do all that," I said. "I just tagged along."

Neng shook her head. "You shouldn't lie like that." She opened my palm and placed in it a single coin. I didn't have to look at it – I knew what it was.

"I have to go," I said, stuffing the coin into my shorts. My voice was cracking, and I didn't want her to see me cry again.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Dena" Neng said, and if she said anything else, I didn't hear it.

* * *

Our room was full of grown-ups. I knew them: my mother, of course, and my aunt and uncle Zhe. *Pog* Houa, the shaman, was dozing on our only stool.

"See Kanbao?" Aunt *Niam* Zhe said as I opened the door. "She hasn't been bride-napped yet."

"Stupid girl," my uncle added. "The Thai are looking for you, and we had to wait for some go-between to tell us who married you."

I wanted to protest, but I knew I shouldn't open my mouth. The Thai weren't looking for anyone, I knew. The entire camp fell asleep after dark, and Neng and I had been alone as she had walked me to my home.

"Are you alright?" my mother asked. When I nodded, she turned to my uncle. "You should tell the commander that she's come home."

My uncle glared at me and then turned back to my mother. "Make sure she's punished," he said. And then he left. As he walked past me, he said, "stupid girl," in case I didn't hear him the first time. He never motioned his wife to follow, but she did.

All that left was the shaman. My mother touched her shoulder, and she shot awake.

Pog Houa looked like one of the shamans from the old Hmong stories – the kind that Neng loved to tell. She was old and she needed a cane to walk, but when she entered her trance, she could jump on and off of her wooden horse, wield her wooden sword, and

maintain her chant for a half hour straight. She was half way to the grave herself, and that made her connection with the spirit world doubly strong.

"She's here," she said, looking past me. I wondered if she would be able to sense my run-in with the moon. I resisted the urge to brush my ear.

But she just stood and grabbed her cane. "Did you go into the forest or the river?" she asked.

I said yes, and I heard my mother gasp. *Pog* Houa just nodded and hobbled closer.

"Did you remember to call your spirit home?" she asked.

I had not, even though I had promised Neng to pray. I told said as much to *Pog* Houa.

She opened the door behind me and called out, "Dena, come home!" I imagined one of my wandering spirits hearing her call and rushing back into my body. "If she turns ill," she said to my mother, "find a chicken and call on me. If a *dab* has her spirit, we may need to trade for hers."

"I will," my mother said, even though we didn't have any chickens.

Pog Houa then turned to me. "You aren't a shaman," she said. "So you don't know. The wilderness is full of spirits and *dab.* They are in the camp, too, but not so many as outside. Here you can scrape a knee or get a splinter. Out there a *dab* can tempt you to crawl right into a tiger's gut, and you wouldn't know the difference. In the future, stay here, where it is safe."

I didn't tell *Pog* Houa that it wasn't safe here either, that grown-ups – Hmong and Thai alike – hit the children, or that people were sick and hungry, or that old veterans were still killing themselves – many by opium or drink and others by knife or noose, or

that the Thai could still come into our homes and take us away. I didn't tell her that in the forest, if a *dab* had led me into a tiger's gut, Neng would have saved me. Instead, I just nodded yes.

Pog Houa gave a grunt and turned to my mother. "I need an escort," she said.

"Of course, *Pog*," my mother said, taking her arm. I ducked my head, hoping my mother wouldn't ask me to come along with them. She didn't.

When they were gone I fished Neng's coin out and held it by the lamplight. *REPUBLIQUE FRANCAIS COLONIES 10 cent*. The silver glistened in the light – not at all like the tarnished *baht* or American money we used in our marketplaces. But I had seen coins like this before. There were a hundred of them in my mother's box of beautiful things. Every New Year, she would sew them onto her skirt and sash, and they would jingle when she walked or danced. She said she kept them that she might one day sew them onto my own wedding dress, which she would give me as my dowry, but I never believed that. She kept them because she loved beautiful things and she loved keeping them in her box.

Neng hadn't said a word when she gave me the coin, but there was only one place it could have come from.

My mother had once told me to never accept a gift from a boy because when you accept a gift, you are giving the boy permission to bride nap you. Little things like sodas and snacks didn't count, but there was a point where the gift was so big that you really owed the giver, and he could take from you anything and be within his rights. Flowers, silver jewelry, and *paj ntaub* were the most common, but poorer boys could give even more humble gifts.

The coin seemed suddenly heavy. I imagined Neng coming into our home and stealing me away. It was romantic and monstrous at once. A few secret kisses were one thing, but this?

The door opened, and I tucked the coin away.

"Kill the light, Dena," my mother said. "Or the mosquitos will suck us dry."

It was the only thing she said to me the entire night.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BOX OF BEAUTIFUL THINGS

I was sick the next day, so my mother allowed me to stay home and sew *paj ntaub*. She said nothing of spirits or the shaman, and I didn't want to remind her. She didn't talk much, but she wasn't sullen from the night before. If anything, she was almost cheerful, as if the stories she told through needle and thread made her forget the one that she lived with me.

I worked the borders of one of her old projects, stitching in triangle patterns while my mother continued her project from yesterday.

The one I was working on was a folktale about a woman who married a tiger, but didn't know it, for the couple met only in the dark. Her sister was jealous and followed her one evening with a torch that she might discover her sister's source of happiness and take it for herself. When the tiger was discovered, however, he grew angry and ate his sister-in-law up. His wife grew morose and lonely, until finally she asked to be eaten as well, that she might be with her sister in the next world. The tiger ate her up, but she had secretly tucked away a knife, so she cut herself and her sister free of the tiger's gut. In the end, the sisters are reconciled and agree to abstain from secret lovers and live free of jealousy. It was another Neng story, I knew, but also my mother's, and I didn't know what to make of that.

I looked at my mother's work. She had finished with the river and was embroidering all the activities that defined the Hmong life in Laos – women threshing

rice or men playing the *qeej* pipes. There were even boys and girls playing *pov pob* with each other.

"In Laos, did you ever play *pov pob* with a boy?" I asked. I cursed myself for having said it, though. The last thing I wanted was for my mother to ask about a sudden interest in *pov pob* and boys.

But she just smiled and brushed her fingers along the stitches. "Not me," she said at last, "but I did sing *kwv txhiaj*. There was an old Hmong soldier, rich and decorated with French medals, who would come to our New Year to watch the girls dance and hear the girls sing. He once said if a girl could make him laugh, then he would give her his highest medal. He was a stone-faced man, but a hundred women lined up and told their favorite jokes. None made any progress. Then it was my turn, and I sang him *kwv txhiaj* about a love lost in war, and he began to weep like a baby. When he collected himself, he said, 'why did you do this, when I wanted to laugh?' and I answered that tears are married to laughter, and if a man doesn't cry he cannot hope to laugh. 'Now that you have cried,' I said. 'I will come back tomorrow and make you laugh.' And he said there was no need, and that he had had enough jokes in a day to last him a lifetime. 'Come tomorrow and make me cry' he said. 'And I'll give you your medal.'"

It struck me how similar my mother was to Neng, and I had an image of her and Neng sitting cross-legged at the women's store as they stitched *paj ntaub* and told ghost stories to each other. If they had been the same age, Neng would have befriended my mother instead of me. It didn't occur to me that Neng could have more than one friend.

"Do you still have that medal," I asked. I thought I knew the answer already – it had been left in Laos or sold or stolen. Beautiful stories, and all that.

To my surprise, however, my mother answered, “Of course I still have it.” She set her needlework down and got the box of beautiful things.

It was a plastic lock box, the kind with the dial lock, and though I have seen many such boxes since then, at the time, I had only known this one. I don’t know where my mother got it or how she had learned the locking mechanism. I just knew that it had always been there, and though it was outwardly plain, mother always called it her box of beautiful things.

She twisted the dial, back and forth, and the latch clicked open. She laid the silver coins carefully on the table, and then the *paj ntaub* ornaments she had made as a child. She sifted through the papers and photos that were left over. And then she found it.

It wasn’t a medal. It was a photograph of a girl, younger than me, wearing the medal. She wasn’t smiling, as if she’d won a contest. She was just looking back at the camera. The medal rested on her left breast.

“The soldier took this picture,” my mother said. “But I didn’t see it for many years. When I arrived in Ban Vinai, I met him again, and he gave it to me. He said he kept it for all that time and when he wanted a laugh, he had only to remember that smart-mouthed village girl who broke his competition.”

I had no idea all of these things were inside the box. I looked at some of the other photos – mostly family pictures with people I didn’t recognize, or could only guess at (Uncle Zhe, for instance, must have been the serious boy in military uniform). Some of them had writing on the back, and there were whole note papers written in a script that wasn’t Hmong or Thai or English.

"What is this writing?" I asked, but mom didn't answer. Her eyes were looking at the picture of the little girl, but I could tell that her mind was somewhere else entirely.

"Mother?"

She shook her head. "It's nothing, little Dena." She gathered up the pictures and put them back in the box. "Just some scribbles. We never went to school, and didn't learn to write like you did. So we played at being smart." Soon the box was locked and the *paj ntaub* and needle was back in her hand.

"We've taken enough of a break, I'd say, and had better get back to work."

"Of course," I said, but my mind was still locked on that script. That wasn't just scribbles, I knew. Some of the letters, I recognized, or looked close enough to letters I could decipher, but most were strange, alien. But it was writing, I was sure, and I didn't know why my mother would hide it from me.

And then a thought hit me: it was a code, a secret code that nobody else in the world knew, save the two people who were privy to it. It was the kind of thing Neng would have created with me, had we the time together to create it. My mother, who couldn't read a word of Hmong, may have come up with this code with a person equally important to her – more important, perhaps.

"Mother," I said as I went back to my own spot on the floor to continue my needlework. "Who was my father?"

Mother stopped her work and looked up at me. I froze, too, but then gathered my courage and pursued the question. "I mean, not the river and spirit and shaman story. I mean the true story."

She turned back down to the *paj ntaub*, where the snake and the river and the fleeing Hmong told her story again and again. “You’re my child, Dena.” She said. “That’s all you need to know.”

But it wasn’t, and I realized that I no longer believed her, especially when she says she never *pov pob* and the only time she sang *kwv txhiaj* was for an old man. I looked again at the box of beautiful things.

I went back to the needlework, but my strength was gone, and I needed sleep. I lasted only about ten minutes before I gave up entirely and went back to bed.

* * *

I awoke to Neng’s voice, calling me from behind the door. My mother got up from her sewing to shoo her away.

“Don’t!” I said, throwing on my shirt and shorts more quickly than I ever had in my life. I was dizzy and I groaned involuntarily, but I found if I concentrated on my movements, then I could manage the nausea.

My mother turned. “It’s just one of your rascal friends. You’re too sick to play today.”

“I know,” I replied. “I just want to tell her myself.” I opened the door, and Neng smiled in greeting. Instead of inviting her in, however, I stepped out and closed the door behind me.

Neng was all care and worry, but I batted away her condolences.

“That coin you gave me,” I said, “It’s from your dowry, isn’t it?”

Neng nodded. “It’s from a sash my grandmother keeps under the bed. She’s never said it was for my wedding, but I know that it is.”

I put my head in my hands and sat in the dirt. I thought I would throw up, and I wasn't sure what was causing it: missing spirits, the flu, or my own warring emotions.

"What are you planning?" I asked, but I knew the answer already. I knew this wasn't about plans. It was about something neither of us could fathom. It was about *caiv* and spirits and Hmong. It was about her and me, which was more than either of us could understand.

Neng shook her head. "Dena, you are sick and need a spirit calling. I'm sorry to make you worry about a coin. I'll tell my grandmother I traded it for a Pepsi, take a whipping, and no one will know the better."

That was the problem, I wanted to say, that no one would know. But she was right: I was sick and it was more than I could wrestle with today.

* * *

"Get undressed," My mother ordered as I came back. I obeyed and then lay down on the bed.

She started at my belly, where all the pain from the day was. She kneaded roughly and repeatedly, until my skin turned white and then pink under the pressure and friction. She ran the pain along my sides, always pushing it up my body. My chest was next – she was tenderer here, perhaps in deference to my changing body, but she kept the movement continuous. If ever she let up, the pain would go back into my belly, and we would have to start the entire process over again. Then she began my arms, pushing the sickness down to my hands, and then my little finger. When all of the bad blood was in my finger, she gripped it tightly to keep it from going back into the body, and then she pricked it with a needle. Black blood oozed out. She continued massaging it until the

blood turned red, and then she let go. She wiped my hand with her shirt, and I stuck my finger in my mouth.

"How do you feel, Dena," she said.

"Curious," I answered.

She nodded. "You have too many questions for a sick girl. Your brain will hurt from all the learning you do." And I knew she wasn't going to answer any of my questions.

But seeing the photograph, seeing a little girl who sings *kwvtxhiaj* and wins medals, I had to know more. About the girl, certainly, but more about who would trade secret messages with her.

I was like the spying sister from mother's story cloth, the one who is eaten by the tiger. Or was I the other sister, hiding my own secrets?

I rolled back over in bed, not bothering to get dressed again. "She's a girl I met in the fields," I said.

"Who?"

"Neng," I said. "I met her in the fields two days ago, and I ran after her because I thought the Thai had taken her in their busses. Her father is in Laos, and she took me to the river because I wanted to see the old country, and she's the one who got me back safely."

My mother brushed my hair. It was wet with sweat, as my fever really had broken.

"Who is she, that she makes you so reckless?" she asked.

I didn’t answer, but turned the question over in my head. She’s my friend. She’s adventure and romance. She’s the heart of the old country, a fellow daughter of the river, the incarnation of the fairy and spirit.

“It’s not reckless,” I said finally. “She makes me brave.” It was as close to an answer as I was ready to give.

So I didn’t tell her about the kiss or the coin, but it was a start, and for today, that would have to do.

CHAPTER FIVE: THE LAST REAL SOLDIERS IN THE CAMP

My Thai teacher made no remark on my absence. Most of the girls in my class had already dropped out, and I had about outstayed my welcome anyway (Of forty students, I was one of four girls). I took my seat at the front of the class and echoed back phrases like, “My favorite day is Valentine’s Day” or “My favorite day is Wednesday” and copied down the script from the blackboard into the notebook the Church World Services brought us every other year or so.

It was when I was working with Ms. Lineburg, the American English teacher, that I realized the ***P*** looked exactly like one of the characters from my mother’s box. I tried to remember other characters I had seen, scribbling at random to see if any looked familiar. Was there an ***m*** or a ***u*** in there? Or numbers? I tried *1-9* and studied each. The ***3*** looked familiar, but it may have been an inverted ***m***.

I had just written the Thai alphabet and was puzzling over those characters when the book flew from beneath my pen. English came faster than I could keep up with, and Ms. Lineburg slapped the desk with my rolled notebook. I yelped but shut up when I heard the next words*: shut up, girl.*

Some of the other students started laughing, and something hit the back of my head – a pen, I think. I turned and jumped at the kid behind me, landing two punches before being thrown to the ground, though I can’t say whether it was the teacher, my

opponent, or someone else who brought me down. I struggled under the weight and shouted “Move!” in both English and Hmong and grappled for something to bite.

Whoever was on me pressed harder, and my eyes were forced closed as my cheek scraped harder against the dirt floor. My world was noise and pain and black. People were shouting Thai and English, and I was screaming, or was until my mouth filled with dirt.

And then it was over. A man ordered everyone home and I was left alone on the floor.

“Get up, girl,” the man said in Hmong, and I obeyed and brushed myself as best I could. I looked up at the man. Young for a teacher, pale for a Hmong, kind for a man.

“It wasn’t my fault,” I said, but then stopped when I saw that Ms. Lineburg was still there, slumped against the wall like she was in the waiting line at the clinic.

I bowed my head. “I’m sorry, sir.”

He said something in English to Ms. Lineburg, and she replied, gesturing at me with my notebook. I knew what was happening and I didn’t know how to stop it.

“Please,” I said in English. “I come tomorrow?”

But the two adults didn’t even look at me. Ms. Lineburg continued her damning account in English, and the Hmong man just nodded and listened. I wondered how long I should wait for a response. I started for the door.

“Wait,” the man commanded, and I stopped. He held out the notebook.

“I come tomorrow?” I repeated.

“No.”

My heart sank and I felt the tears coming, but I had no way to hold them back.

"Do you know where the temple is?" the man asked in Hmong.

The temple was just another mud and bamboo room next to the rehabilitation center. Some of the adults met there for informal English lessons or held clan meetings there in the evenings, but it had never seemed relevant to me. Still, I nodded.

He opened the book at the last page, the one with all the scribbles and my desperate codebreaking.

"Are you a shaman, little girl?" he asked.

"No, sir."

He nodded and then offered the book again to me. "Come to the temple after lunch, and we'll talk about your notebook."

I took the book and left in a tizzy.

* * *

"He's probably a child molester," Neng said. "Think of it." She rolled *tuj lub* and threw the top into the circle we had drawn in the dirt. It seemed to stand perfectly still as it spun. "He knows you aren't going to tell your mother about being expelled, so you'll come to the temple without anyone knowing where you are or where you should be. Why else would he say that part in Hmong, when the English teacher is right there?"

"Or he's a tiger in a man's skin, or a dragon transformed to look like a pale Hmong man," I countered. I threw the second top, but it landed on its side and well outside the circle. "Not everything is *dab* and adventure. Some things are just what they appear."

Neng laughed at that, though I could never guess why. "To me, he appears like a child molester. Besides, what could you possibly hope to learn from him?"

I hadn't told Neng about the box of beautiful things or about the papers with the strange script that my mother kept hidden inside of it. I knew that if I did, Neng would understand why I wanted to go to the temple, but I wasn't completely sure how to explain it. I wasn't sure I wanted to.

"You're just jealous because you can't read."

Neng just threw the top again. It landed in the center of the circle and spun in perfect stillness. *You don't learn that at school,* it seemed to say.

"It's just another boy's game anyway," I answered and threw my pole and line at her top. I didn't wait to see if I hit, but turned and grabbed my book.

"Stop," Neng commanded, but I was feeling petulant. Then I felt the sting – her pole on my calf. I spun in a fury and almost attacked her as I had the boy in class, but Neng was battle-ready, her pole and line raised above her head like she was going to drive a herd of water buffalo.

"I'm not your wife, that you can beat me."

"No" Neng said, lowering her whip. "I'm your friend, Dena. And I won't let you get yourself raped."

Friend. For some reason, the word stung more than the whip. It was a lie, too, or I thought it was. I couldn't figure it out, and I knew everything that ever mattered depended on my understanding what was truth and what was false. But I was too tired, too angry, and too desperate to puzzle it through.

"Come with me," I said. "If he's a child molester, you can scream for help or fetch a guard for me."

She stewed over it a moment, but I already knew her answer.

* * *

The temple looked like another classroom, only with fewer supplies. There was an altar for the spirits in the corner, with shelves decorated with yellowing spirit paper and red ribbons, and there were a few burning candles, but mostly it was just a room with a lot of benches and a chalkboard up front. A few men sat in a small circle. They took turns drinking beer from paper cups, like they would at a wedding.

They paused only a moment when we came in, and one of them, the same teacher from school, waved us over to join them.

"This little thing," he announced so loudly that I wondered if he was drunk, "is the girl-*dab* who bloodied half the school."

"Not her," said an old bearded man, "She's just the Water Snake. Half-Lao girl with a bad temper." I wanted to protest, like I always did when someone told nasty stories about my parentage, but I knew to do so would only give credit to his story.

"I know her," one man said, and I froze. I knew the voice, and it wasn't one I expected to hear again. "Both of them." Kou looked up from where he had been drinking. He pointed at me with his cup. "This one's got a cut behind her ear. I got a Her partner that said it was a *dab* that did it, and she's seething with bad luck. The other one's cute, but she talks too much."

He was going to attack me, I thought. He'll grab me and push me to the ground again, and then all of the men here will beat and rape me to death. I turned to Neng, but she squeezed my hand in reassurance.

I felt brave.

"Sit down, Kou," the teacher said. "If she had bad luck, she's already dumped it in the school. And if she's half-Lao? I've never seen a Lao girl write pahawh have you?"

The old man spit. "I had a monkey who could copy symbols."

"Your regard for my students is touching," the teacher said. "But if I let you praise them all day, their heads will get to big and I won't be able to teach them anything." Then he turned to us. "Come to the front, and we'll talk language and letters."

"You're wasting your time, Xiong Pao!" the old man called. "Let them sew *paj ntaub* at the widows' store. Learning will just ruin them."

"You should come to America sometime, uncle," the teacher answered. "And you'll see how far sewing *paj ntaub* gets your daughters."

I looked at the front, where the chalkboard was. There would be plenty of room for the three of us to talk in relative isolation, but the exit would be behind us. And Kou would be guarding it – there was no way to exit without facing him first. I remembered his hot breath on my neck: *I killed my own son for crying. I'll kill you too, if you don't shut up.*

Neng didn't want to be here, either, I knew. She wouldn't tell me, and her hand didn't shake in mine, but I knew she wanted to leave. I had never known her to be afraid, but she was afraid of these men, or maybe it was the altar or the blackboard, for all I knew. Or maybe it was me – maybe she was as terrified of me as I was of her.

But then there was the script, pahawh, he had called it. This man had to know something of it. And there were the papers in the box, and I truly believed that if I knew what was written on those papers, I would know everything that had never made sense: not only about my father, but about the old country, why we left, or why we stayed in

Vinai when so many others went to America, why my mother never sings *kwvtxhiaj* anymore, or why I feel such fear – and yet such need - of Neng.

"I'm staying," I whispered to myself. I let go of Neng's hand and walked to the front. I sat down, wary of Kou, just a few paces behind my back, but I refused to look.

I almost jumped when I felt Neng's hand on my shoulder. "I know," she said, "and I'm staying with you."

* * *

After introductions, Mr. Xiong began his lesson by producing a sheet of paper covered in strange script. I recognized a few of the letters, but it wasn't the same script as was written in the box.

"This is a spirit letter," he said. "When I was sick, my mother took me to a village to meet *yawg* Lao Chang, an old shaman. He smoked opium and chanted, and then wrote this entire page – blindfolded. He was then able to read words, an incantation, and the next day I felt better. It worked as well as a spirit calling and sacrifice."

"Anyone can scribble on paper," Neng said. "That doesn't make him a genius."

"No, he wasn't a genius," Mr. Xiong said, smiling. "He could talk to the dead, but had no idea I screwed his daughter." I clenched my teeth and looked at the ground. *What had I gotten us into?* "But he did write this page," Mr. Xiong continued, "and that one page is better than the entire Hmong Bible."

He waited for us to challenge his assertion, but when we didn't he continued. "Because what he wrote is Hmong – true Hmong invented by Hmong and given to him by the Hmong gods and spirits – not some borrowed American letters reconfigured to say

stuff that sounds Hmong. This," he waved the paper for effect, "is what we were meant to be – independent."

I couldn't hold back the disappointment. "But it's meaningless. Neng's right – these are just scribbles." I looked back at the exit. Kou was still there, but so was the exit.

Mr. Xiong shook his head. "This is a story. A Hmong story about Hmong writing. It's a short one, because this Hmong text used a short-lived script. There's a longer story about a longer script, but right now I want you to focus on the short one."

Neng suddenly shot up. "You're going to tell us about the Mother of Writing."

Mr. Xiong smiled. "You know the story, Neng?"

Neng nodded. "It's your same story, but different."

"Most stories are," Mr. Xiong said.

"It wasn't spirits who taught the Mother of Writing, it was the gods Shao and Vah. And it wasn't in a moment, but over years. He went into an opium trance and Shao and Vah told him that the Hmong would never be free if they used missionary writing. They said every great people had their own letters, and the Hmong needed them too. So they took him to heaven to teach him the letters, but he grew lonely without his wife, so he left early. He had mostly Hmong letters, but he used Lao and English ones to fill in the last few he hadn't learned. Vang Pao was angry that he had done this, so he killed him to please the gods."

Mr. Xiong laughed. "You embellish too much, Neng."

Neng shook her head. "It's the story my father told me."

"Your father loves stories more than truth," Mr. Xiong said. Neng stood up, but Mr. Xiong just motioned her to sit. "But there's enough truth in it for a first lesson." He turned to the blackboard and began writing.

And I barely caught my breath – There could be no mistaking it. I had found my code.

* * *

The first lesson was a frustration and disappointment. I didn't understand how I could already read and write two languages with two very different scripts, but when I tried a third – of a language I already knew, no less – it lost all meaning and became nothing more than a child's nonsensical scribbles.

"You're still thinking in missionary script," he'd tell me. "Write the vowel first – the consonant isn't spoken first, it just 'flavors' the rhyme." Or – "Stop thinking ***b***, ***j***, ***m***. They're French guesses at what we really say. Think '*liver-tone, sky-tone, and mother-tone.*"

Neng fared no better, and at one point she just crossed her arms and stopped responding altogether. I felt bad for her, but I pushed the guilt aside as I clumsily imitated Mr. Xiong's steady handwriting.

When he wasn't badgering me about rhymes and tone marks, he would just talk. Pao Xiong (he always gave his clan name last, as was the American fashion) had never lived in a village. He grew up in Vientiane, where his father worked for the royal government. He went to a Catholic school and when he was old enough left for America to go to college. Being Hmong never meant much to him – it was a language he spoke at

home and a religion his mother observed once a year - until he received word that his family had fled to Thailand when the communists took over.

"They came to Ban Vinai," he explained. "My father, minister of the king himself, stood in the ration line with soldiers and farmers, opium addicts and old women with gnarled hands and bad eyes from sewing too much *paj ntaub*. 'That is the communist dream,' he told me once. 'To have the wealthy and poor stand in line together for food rations.' He doesn't much care for communists."

It didn't add up, I knew. If Hmong meant nothing then why would he know pahawh, and why the speech about how corrupted the missionary writing was? "What changed?" I asked.

"In him? Nothing. He's a grocery clerk in Sacramento, and still he thinks his every utterance bears the force of royal decree."

"I mean in you."

"He's a liar now."

We both looked at Neng, who stood and faced the teacher. "Do you tell every girl you're royalty, or just the pretty ones?"

She's bored, I thought. *Bored and tired and ready for a fight.* I remembered how Mr. Xiong had called her father a liar. Tit-for-tat, as Ms. Lineburg would say.

"Actually, you two are the first," he said. "To everyone else, I'm just another Hmong American UNHCR brought to preach the wonders of emigration. Only you know that I am the best of our people."

"Too pale," Neng said.

"Neng," I cautioned, but Mr. Xiong laughed.

"Gold, perhaps – but true Hmong, with an understanding of our past and a vision of our destiny. What about you, Miss Vang?" He grew suddenly stern. "Are you more Hmong, being dark?"

Neng nodded. "I don't like you. You keep bad company and lie to get us to listen to you. You claim you're the best Hmong but you're just another social worker." She turned to me. "We can go now, Dena."

I shook my head. A part of me wanted to beg her to stay, but how could I? She was obstinate and a disrespectful, and if I went with her, I might never come back.

"I'll catch up," I said.

She must stay, I thought. She thinks they're all rapists and murderers. She wouldn't leave me with them, not if she thinks I'm in danger.

I was still thinking that when she disappeared behind the altar, out the door.

* * *

The rest of the lesson was uneventful. I made small progress and was able to at least trace the characters to Mr. Xiong's satisfaction. "You're a natural," he said in English, even though the script seemed as foreign to me as when I had first seen it. I thanked him and he invited me back tomorrow.

Neng wasn't outside the temple when I exited, so I headed instead to the women's store. Mother was selling *paj ntaub* to one of the Americans. It was the one I had worked on the day before, and the man paid twenty dollars for it.

In the evening, the women left, one-by-one. I didn't tell my mother that I wanted to stay, but soon we were alone, and I told her about the fight at school and the lesson at the temple.

"Chao Fa," my mother said when I told her about the circle of men. "They're the last real soldiers in the camp." I couldn't tell if she said it with pride or derision.

I had heard of them before, I realized. They were one of the many back-to-Laos groups in the camp. But it didn't make any sense: why would Mr. Xiong, as American as he is, be Chao Fa?

"I think they're monsters," I said. "One of them told me he killed his son for crying too loudly."

She said nothing for a bit, and then she sighed. "He wouldn't be the first."

I took a breath. I wasn't sure how she would take the next part, but I knew that her reaction may be the most important thing I learned today.

"They taught me pahawh today," I said, and braced myself.

But she didn't even look at me. Instead she put her face in her hands. Disappointment, then? I discovered how wrong I was when I heard her sob.

My mother was crying.

* * *

I should have kept it to myself, I realized. It wasn't that my mother was crying. But if I had kept it to myself, she wouldn't know I was breaking her code. I could wait until I had mastered the script and then open the box when she wasn't looking – once I puzzled out the dial lock. Now she knew my plan, and she would never trust me around the box of beautiful things. Or even worse, she might just torch the papers to keep me from getting at them.

I placed my hand between her shoulders, which seemed wrong, since so often it was she who would comfort me. She looked up at me and I almost started crying, too.

Why does it hurt? I wanted to ask. *What are you hiding?* Instead I embraced her and she held me.

Neither of us said anything for a while, and when she was done crying, she set me down and grabbed her needle and cloth.

And that was it. She sewed for a while and I worked the borders. We may have done this for a half hour before it became too dark to work.

"Now that you are done with school," my mother said as I gathered our work. "It is time you learned real *paj ntaub*. Two of us could make twice the story. Make twice the money."

This was as close as she was going to get to forbidding my lessons at the temple. I knew I should accept it – fill in the words she wouldn't allow herself to say.

Neng wouldn't, I knew. She'd ask if she didn't want me to go to the temple. My mother would shy from such directness.

But I didn't have the heart, not after I had seen her cry. "Yes, mother," I said. "I'll come with you in the morning."

CHAPTER SIX: PEACE IS A POPPY FIELD

Paj ntaub is all wrong for me. It wasn't just that I didn't have the dexterity, that my thread would get tangled or my **x'**s would be far too wide and my mother would have to rework my mistakes. I just didn't have the endurance, the patience, to sit down and watch my fingers move in that same loop, again and again.

And there was no progress, no end. My mother was still working on her story cloth – the one of the exodus. She had been working on it for days, and would continue working on it for days yet before it was complete. Me? I had spent hours already, and all I had was a small black circle against the blue ground.

I set the cloth down. "This is impossible," I said.

"It's tracing a pattern," *Tais* Pa said. "It can't get any easier than that."

I looked down at the pencil lines my mother had drawn on the blue ground. It would be a geometric jungle when it was completed – squares inside circles with triangle borders. It would include bright greens and pinks and white. And everything would be so thick, so thick you wouldn't be able to see the ground beneath it. But how many stitches would that take?

"It's too easy," I said. "It's so easy I'm about to die."

Mother only rolled her eyes.

"Can't I sweep the store?"

"Sweep the store?" Aunt Zhe said. "You think people come here to clean their feet?"

"If you stir up the dust, it will get on our work," my mother added.

I stood up. "Anyone want a Pepsi?" I said. "I can run to the market in a moment and –"

"Sit down, Dena," my mother ordered.

I sat down but didn't pick up the cloth. I watched my mother work. There was something transcendent about it – her sewing as had her mother before her, as the Hmong always had since time can remember. She was beautiful and serene and wise. I'd be able to sew, too, if I looked like her. I giggled at the thought.

"Your daughter is going braindead, Kanbao," said Aunt Zhe. "Did she drop her spirit in that forest?"

I sighed and picked up the work. I put in another black stitch, imagining it was to be the blackhead on Aunt Zhe's cheek. It made it a little better. I imagined Neng bursting in laughter when I told her what it was, and then I just felt lonely.

I continued the needlework, and soon my hand worked without me at all.

* * *

Neng showed up in the early evening with fish and rice. She greeted everyone and my mother excused me to eat with her on the porch. "It's cold now," she apologized. "I went first to the temple and then to your home. It's hard to know where to find you from one day to the next."

"You should talk," I accused. "I've spent my own hours looking for you, too."

Neng shrugged. "Have you ever seen a poppy field?" she asked.

I said I hadn't.

"It's breathtaking," she said, "to see the entire hillside turned to a bright embroidery. It's beauty and fortune and home all mixed in together. Our family used to farm opium, and we had the poppy field run right up to our house. I'd step out in the morning, and flowers would kiss my feet and ankles."

I closed my eyes and tried to envision it – not just the flowers, but the child Neng, floating among them. It was beautiful, and it made my own flower cloth, Aunt Zhe's blackhead, seem an obscenity.

"Is that where I look for you next time?" I asked. "In your poppy field in Laos?"

"No," Neng said. "I just wanted to tell you where I am."

"You're impossible," I said, and gave her a shove.

Neither of us said anything for a bit.

A thought struck me. *Thajyeeb yog thajyeeb*: "Peace is a poppy field." I said as much to Neng.

She smiled, and then grew somber. "The Pathet Lao tried to arrest my father in that field. The officer said he was growing illegal drugs, but my father accused the officer of trying to resurrect the old war. The officer left, but that night the field caught fire. My father woke me and my sister, and we ran into the jungle. My mother was with us too, but then-"

"Stop," I said. I knew how this story would end – how all of these stories ended.

"I'm sorry," Neng said. "It's just since yesterday – since the temple - it's all I can think about. My grandmother wants to go back. She never saw the field burn."

Tears were running down her cheek, and I couldn't make sense of it. I mean, yes, I knew she was sad, but this was Neng. She was the optimist, the courageous. She was never sad, never vulnerable.

Except once, when she threw her arms around Jinou and asked him to look for her father.

It was a stupid thought, and I knew it. She could be a romantic and be hurt, just as I could be a child and be an adult. I just didn't understand why when all she shows the rest of the world was the athletic tomboy, she shows me the girl who misses her home.

I put my arms around her, and I wondered that this same motion had seemed so strange the night before.

"I wish I could go there," I said, "to see your village and fields."

"I wish I could take you," she answered, and it was only then that I understood what she had just told me.

Neng was going back to Laos.

I held her more tightly, but the motion was entirely impotent.

* * *

When my mother and I got home in the evening, Mr. Xiong was waiting for us outside our building. He introduced himself to my mother, stating his clan name last. He was smooth and fluid, while my mother was awkward and rigid. They shook hands and I think I saw her blush.

"I apologize for the abrupt visit, *Tais* Thao" he said. "I am Dena's teacher. She wasn't in class today, so I came here."

"No teacher has ever come before," my mother answered. "Why do you come today?"

"Because no teacher has known what kind of child she is. They're blind to her talents and her prospects."

"Prospects?" my mother asked, as if she knew what kind of prospects he was referencing.

"Absolutely! They think she'll never be anything but a daughter-in-law – that the best she can learn in school is how to flush a western toilet or how to count to a hundred in Thai. That's all they see in anyone, and they expect all the girls to eventually drop out so they can learn the 'more practical' work of sewing *paj ntaub*, cleaning a home, or cooking a meal."

"And you don't."

Mr. Xiong smiled. "For the other girls, actually, I agree. They'll make a thousand daughters-in-law in a thousand families. But not Dena. Dena has the spirit of a scholar."

I almost laughed at this. I had attended school longer than most other girls, yes, but that hardly made me a star student. In truth, I never really cared for academics – I learned because it was something to do. Mr. Xiong spoke the word scholar with reverence – like it was the highest calling the gods could give.

"The spirit of a scholar," my mother repeated.

"She's curious, Lady Thao. Curious and passionate and intelligent. I can't think of a greater waste of that mind than to spend the day sewing *paj ntaub*."

My mother bristled at that. Even I was put off by the affront. "And that's why you are teaching her pahawh?" she asked. "Because she is passionate?"

"Yes," I said suddenly, and both adults looked at me.

I knew I should explain myself, but how could I? He was heaping praise on me and my mother doubted his intentions. "I want to learn," I said. "Isn't that passion?"

"She was teaching herself pahawh." Mr. Xiong explained. "She was about it when she got in trouble at school."

"So you think Chao Fa should teach it to her?"

"Chao Fa, or you, *Tais* Thao."

Neither of us said anything to that, and he continued. "If you don't trust me, that's fine. I'm not a Thao, and I am a stranger in the camp. If you don't want to, there are Thao in Chao Fa who could teach her."

"I don't want her in Chao Fa!" My mother grabbed my hand and held it so tight it turned white. "Did writing pahawh get you this job, Xiong Pao?" She didn't wait for his answer. "Of course not. Will knowing it make Dena richer? A better wife and daughter-in-law? Will it get her out of this camp and give her a better life in America?"

It was a stupid argument, I thought. Sewing *paj ntaub* wasn't making us any richer either, at least with my blackhead-sized contribution. And it certainly had nothing to do with being a wife or going to America.

"No," Mr. Xiong said. "You know it won't."

"Then you have my answer. Please do not ask again." Still gripping my hand, she walked past him and shut the door.

* * *

My mother pulled out the box of beautiful things and opened the lock. She dug through the coins and grabbed one of the papers.

"Read this," she ordered.

It was pahawh, without doubt. I recognized the characters just as I had the day before in the temple. Some I even knew, but not well enough to read.

When I shook my head, she snatched it from my hands.

"Everything in here is yours, Dena. The pictures, the *paj ntaub*, the coins, these are my legacy to you. For your dowry. For your own children." She slammed her hand on the table and the box fell. Coins sang as they chinked against each other and rolled across the floor. "Except for this. Do you understand? This is mine."

It was so uncharacteristic – to see my mouse of a mother in such a fury.

"What is it?" I asked.

She crumpled the paper in her hand. "Mine."

For a moment, I thought she would cry again, but instead she slumped in the stool and just stared at it. "The schoolteacher doesn't know anything about us." I had no idea who the *us* was. She and I? Chao Fa? The refugees?

"He doesn't," I assured her.

She sighed and looked at the glittering ground.

"Come on, let's pick this up."

* * *

That night, after I had gotten up to pee, I pulled out Neng's coin again. It was impossible to see in the dark, but I could still feel the inscription. I gritted my teeth to keep from crying.

This was Ban Vinai. Every other week, friends and relatives would disappear. Most went to America, but some found other, equally exotic places as well: Canada,

France, Australia, Argentina. A few even became Thai citizens or returned to Laos. It was the nature of the camp. ‘This isn’t home,’ they would always say. ‘It’s just Vinai.’

I had lived here my entire life, and still nothing was permanent. Nothing, that is, except the fear – fear of the shell-shocked Hmong veterans, of the cruelest guards, or of the jungle and Lao that were only a few miles away.

And then Neng came and the fear was gone. I could face the jungle and the elders and the Thai. Ban Vinai had become my home.

What would it be without Neng?

I turned my newest acquisition over as well. Again, I couldn’t see it in the dark. I ran my fingers across it, wondering if I’d be able to read the inscription left by the pressure of the pen. I couldn’t, so I would have to wait until morning to examine it more carefully. But I knew what it was:

A single page of crumpled paper, filled from top to bottom with pahawh. I tucked both my treasures in my shorts and went to sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN: A RARE KILLER

In the morning, I went to the gate and waited for the Americans to come. I had no excuse for my absence at home, and I hoped that I would be able to get what I needed before my mother found me and dragged me to Aunt Zhe's for another day of nothing.

A guard came, and I tensed, preparing myself to scream or run. He half-saluted and called "Hello, girl" in bad Hmong. I said nothing, and soon he turned back to the road.

The camp woke up around me and soon the camp was filled with family and commerce. A boy peed in the street. A woman caught a chicken and cut its throat. A young man came out and played the *qeej*. He did a somersault when he reached one cadence, and though he was covered in dust and dirt, he kept the bamboo pipes pristine. I listened to the tune, a funeral dirge, for a while before I slumped against the wall of the administration building and put my head in my arms.

"In America, parents wait until their children are eighteen before they kick them out."

I looked up and Mr. Xiong laughed. He offered me his hand, and I took it.

"Walk with me. I have to do a workshop and I'm already late."

I thrust the paper into his hand. He took it, scanned it for a moment, and then put it into his pocket.

"What's it say?" I demanded, scurrying to keep up.

He sighed. “Does your mother know you’re here?” When I shook my head, he said. “A naughty daughter makes for an unfaithful daughter-in-law.”

“I’m not going to be anybody’s daughter-in-law,” I answered.

He laughed then, but he wasn’t mocking me. Actually, he seemed pleased. “You speak like an American,” he said. We had already passed the schoolhouse, and I wondered where *workshop* was.

“The paper,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “What do you think it is? A treasure map or a love letter? A magic spell or a rich relative’s will?”

“Is it?” I asked, annoyed.

“More,” he answered. “And less.” He handed the paper back to me. “It’s poetry. *Paj huam*. You can hear boys rapping it in the ration line any day.”

Paj huam. I stopped walking and looked at the paper. He was right: Even I could tell that every seventh word rhymed with the next line’s third. Mr. Xiong waited as I puzzled it through.

“Can you read it for me?” I asked.

“I could,” he said. “Or you could read it to me. Ten more hours, and I can teach you everything you need to piece through this and any other pahawh you come across.”

“I don’t have ten hours.”

He nodded and then turned away, walking towards the temple. I had seen the same move at the market a thousand times: The American turns away, thinking the vendor would now offer a lower price.

"I don't have ten hours," I repeated, but he didn't turn around. He shook hands with an American woman and disappeared behind the door.

I kicked a rock at him but only stubbed my toe.

* * *

I knew I should have gone home. I had been out much longer than I could explain away, and although my mother rarely scolded me, I didn't know what she was capable of now. Still, every time I started in the direction of home, the thought of sitting in the stool sewing for another day stopped me. Giving up, I went to the kator fields, to the very spot where Neng had told me that when the Lao and Thai guard the river, you must sneak around and live.

She wasn't there, but I was okay with that. I watched the boys play their game for a while and I imagined challenging all of them at once, the way Neng had only a few days earlier. I should go challenge them, I thought, and I thought of all the other things I should do.

I should learn pahawh. Even if it was just stupid poetry, I should learn to read it. I should learn of whoever wrote it – even if it wasn't my father or my mother. It was in my box, and it was my inheritance, whatever my mother said to the contrary.

I should talk to my mother. I should open up her secrets and share with her my own. I should tell her to give up on *paj ntaub* and teach me the things that really matter.

I should reclaim Laos and *pov pob* at the New Year, sing *kwv txhiaj* and charm old soldiers.

I should kiss Neng again. Or I should take her hand and dance among the poppies, letting the flowers kiss where I dare not.

The list was too long and each item was impossible for me. I didn't even know why I wanted these things, not really. But, looking at the camp, I knew I needed them.

I went down and approached one of the groups. They didn't acknowledge my presence, but they closed their circle tighter, effectively blocking me out. I wedged myself in anyway.

"Serve me one," I said. The boy with the wicker ball just laughed.

"It's *caiv* to play with a girl," the boy next to me said. "Dad would kill me if he caught us." He tried to step in front of me, but I pushed him out of the way.

"You didn't think it was *caiv* when Neng beat you the other day," I countered. I looked again to the boy with the ball. "Serve me," I said again.

"Just serve her," one boy said, "She's too ugly to be a real girl anyway."

The server tossed the ball and kicked it to me. I kicked at it, but the ball hit my toe and went wild. It hurt like hell.

I fetched the ball. I dropped it and bounced it off my sole, as I had seen the boys do. It fell short of the boy across from me, but he was able to save it. The boys juggled among themselves for a while. When it got back to me, I tried to kick it, but missed and the ball went dead.

"*Tam Tseeb!"* a boy cursed. He fetched the ball and kicked.

It exploded against my eye.

Pain ran through my head and ate the strength in my body. My knees gave out. I put a hand to my already swelling brow. A pulsating globe of white nothing engulfed my vision.

"Tiger bite you," a boy said. Or maybe it was me.

"God, Ger," someone said, "Wasn't she ugly enough?"

They were all shouting, fighting, running. Two tripped over me as they wrestled each other. I curled tighter, sucking in as a wicker ball hit my side.

Something wet – blood, tear, or sweat - ran down my face, down my nose, and into the dust.

And then there was quiet. The boys had run, chased off by the men or just bored with the game. I found my feet. My side ached, and one eye was so swollen, I could barely open it, but I wasn't blind.

"You really are touched by *dab*," a man said. I turned and Kou leered at me. I looked for help, but the boys had all left.

Or maybe they, too, were scared of him.

"What are you doing here?" I stammered, looking around for a weapon, anything.

"I just come to watch the pretty girls." He swept his hand, motioning the men in the courts behind me. He advanced a step and I retreated two. He stopped. "I really terrify you, don't I?"

"You're a killer," I said.

"All men are killers," he said. "Some of them just haven't realized it yet." He pointed again at the men. "How many Vietnamese and red Lao are dead because of these few? A hundred? Many more than the boys they've spawned in restitution." He nodded at the boys. "And those are just killers in embryo."

I didn't follow his gaze. "They aren't cruel," I said, but the pain throbbed and I knew that I was lying.

Kou smirked, as if he could sense my lie. “It doesn’t take cruelty to kill.” He advanced again, and again I retreated. “It only takes one of two things.” I stumbled and the dust rose around me, rose around him, framing him so all I could see was his stone face.

“Fear,” I said, the word drawn out of me involuntarily.

“Passion,” he corrected. He stepped up to me, but neither offered his hand nor came down to attack me. “Passion or apathy. When a man has either, he is already a killer, even if circumstance hasn’t made him kill yet.”

I scurried back and stood on my own, but he didn’t seem to notice me anymore. He was looking at where I had fallen. I turned to run away.

“Which do you have, I wonder,” he said, and I stopped.

“I’m not a killer,” I said.

He bent down and scooped up the dirt. When he came up, he was holding a piece of crumpled paper.

I reached into my shorts.

“That’s mine,” I said.

He opened the paper and I watched his eyes dart from line to line. His lips twisted into a sneer.

I could ask him to read it, I realized. I could ask anyone in Chao Fa and bypass all of mother’s misgivings and Mr. Xiong’s lessons. But if these really were my mother’s words – or my father’s – I didn’t want them in his mouth.

“Just give it back,” I demanded.

He dropped the paper on the ground. I looked at it, but I did not approach him, and he made no move to retreat. He turned back to the playing men.

"I'm leaving Ban Vinai," he said, still gazing at the men. "I have what I came for and I tire of killers who never kill. A few days, and then you can imagine me safely fighting red Lao in the jungle, never have to fear I'm going to haunt the temple or find you in the forest."

"Some nightmares never end," I whispered, remembering his words from our first meeting.

He laughed then. No magic amplified his voice or *dab* echoed it across the field. It was just human, if sardonic, like Uncle Zhe would laugh, and I found that chilling.

"Passion," he said at last. "You're a rare killer in this camp, little snake."

He left then, turning back to the camp. I waited until he disappeared before I picked up my paper.

* * *

"The camp will be better without him," Neng said she as she brought me into her home. It was one of the newer wooden and mud ones Christian volunteers had erected along the western hillside, not at all like the brick cubicle my mother and I lived in. The ceiling was shorter than ours, and even I had to duck under the wooden spirit swords that dangled over the entryway, but once inside, the earth was the same beneath my bare feet.

The furniture was more sparse – only a bed and a few stools. They were selling it off, I realized, remembering how my neighbor's home had similarly devolved until its life and clutter disappeared entirely when the family left for America.

An older girl, sitting on one of the stools scraped cucumber pulp into a bowl for *kua dib,* and except for the age difference, she could just as easily have been my mother or Aunt *Niam* Zhe. “A *dab* has eaten his heart and liver,” Neng said, and it took me a moment to realize we were still talking about Kou. “Now he can’t think in kindness.”

Neng led me to a stool. The girl ordered Neng to rinse the rice, but Neng told her to bug off. Once I had my seat, she brought a bowl of water.

“Your shirt,” she said, and I took it off.

Neng’s sister whistled. “Was she raped?” she asked Neng. I looked at my own body, scratched and bruised, and imagined for a moment that I had been. I shuddered.

“Shut up, Bao,” Neng said. Kneeling in the dirt, she dipped a cloth in the water and pressed it on the nastiest scrape. Blood and dust ran down my side. Neng traced my wound with her finger and I sucked in my breath. She withdrew.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I assured her. Neng smiled and resumed her work, brushing and rinsing. I closed my eyes and allowed myself to feel. The scrape of the cloth, the soft balm of her fingertips. Tepid water. Hot blood. *Your kiss,* I wanted to say. *Touch me with your lips, and nothing will ever hurt again.*

“What are you going to do about her face?” Bao asked. I opened my eyes and Neng was glaring at her. Bao had put her work away and dragged her stool next to Neng. She reached and brushed the hair from my face. “I mean the black eye,” she said. “You can’t just wash that off, too.”

No, I agreed, she can’t. I would have to face my mother sooner or later, and there was no hiding what had happened at the kator fields. I raised a hand to my temple, but couldn’t bring myself to touch it.

"Let's call a shaman," Bao said. "I could buy a chicken at the market, and you could fetch *Yawg* Youa."

Neng began washing my shirt, and water turned dark with dirt and blood. "Shamans don't fix black eyes," she said. "You just want chicken tonight."

I laughed. "Neng, you sound like a dutiful daughter-in-law."

She blushed, and Bao rallied to my side. "Oh she won't be!" she said. "Just imagine her and *Niam* Toua." She affected the hoarse grate of an old woman. "Tend the fire, daughter-in-law. Boil some water and feather the chicken."

"Bao!" Neng shouted, and I heard her voice crack.

I shivered, suddenly aware of my nakedness. I looked at Bao, gape-mouthed and frozen, and then at Neng, clenched jaw, with tears forming in her eyes.

"I don't understand," I said, but I really did. This was the work of the gods, the *dab* and spirits. I had kissed her, had broken *caiv* in ways no girl ever had since the beginning of our people. I had pointed at the moon and laughed.

And now the gods were taking her from me. Not just across the river, although they were doing that, too.

"When?" I managed.

Neng was sobbing now, and I looked to Bao, her face gone white, as if she understood what she had just trespassed. She shook her head. Resignation.

"Next week," she said. "In Luang Prabang. Her Toua is sponsoring our move. It is the bride price he is paying for his son."

There were too many names. Who were these people? These Hers in Luang Prabang?

I put my head in my hands. *I won't cry*. It was stupid to cry. I had already known Neng was leaving. This latest news didn't change anything. Even without a marriage, she was still leaving Vinai, still leaving me. *This doesn't matter*.

Only it did. It mattered more than anything else in the world.

I have to go, I said. Or thought I said. I picked up my shirt, which was now just a dead fish in the bowl. Neng moved to take hold of it, but she had no grip. Her fingers dragged limply along the wet fabric, brushed mine, splashed in the bowl.

"I am sorry, Dena," she said, her voice a pathetic whine. "Please, believe me."

It wasn't her fault. I knew that. This was *caiv*, spirits, gods. There was nothing we could do. There was nothing anyone could do.

I hugged my shirt to my chest as I walked out.

* * *

"America," I answered when my mother asked what had happened. "Take me to America."

She looked at me, and I knew what she must have been thinking. I was bruised and dazed, and my shirt clung so tightly to my frame, I may as well have been naked.

Let her think what she will, I thought. *If it takes us out of here, let her think the whole camp raped me.*

She tried to scoop me into an embrace, but I pushed her away. *Look at me and choose*. *You can't coddle this away.*

"It's not so easy," she was saying. "No ties with the army. No one to sponsor us. Little Dena, what happened? Who did this to you? Oh God, who did this?"

No. No. No.

Language welled in my chest, but it stuck there. *Take me away from here. Don't let me be afraid. I tried, mother, I really tried. Sneak around and live. See me drown here. I can't stay here.*

The words were caught. I couldn't breathe.

My mother rushed to me again, and this time I couldn't withdraw. I couldn't do anything. *See mother,* I said, or didn't. *See me drown.*

DISCUSSION

Before I present the outline for parts two and three of this story, I wish to address some of the discussion I have had with Dr. Gwyn concerning the direction of the novel. In doing so, I hope to candidly expose some of my own flaws as a novelist, many of which the reader of the manuscript will already be well familiar with.

The foremost difficulty was pacing. We got to a point where Dr. Gwyn told me that without incident – the kind that would really move the plot forward – he would be unable to continue to help me produce a marketable manuscript. I am currently working on a much condensed version of the first act, one that would propel the characters into Laos immediately after their trip to the river in chapter 3. I apologize to the readers of this manuscript for the inertia and hope that my artistic merits make the reading an at least enjoyable stroll, if a bit of a slow one.

Our second most visited topic was bodies. If it is not already apparent, I was extremely cautious about physical descriptions or any hint of sexual attraction between the two characters. I am cognizant of how young these characters are, yet also aware that the culture would have required them to mature very quickly (my mother-in-law was thirteen when she was forced into marriage). I did not want the reader to think their friendship platonic, nor did I want them to seem precociously sexual. I toyed with the idea of aging my characters a few years, which honestly would have only compounded the problem. Ultimately, I try to use action – exchanged confidences, gifts, and the occasional kiss – to express the emotions that I shy from as a writer.

Finally, we have discovered that I am susceptible to all sorts of stylistic problems. I leave out important speaker tags and switch tenses on a whim. I have yet to find a

consistent way to express indirect speech, and my internal dialogue is only occasionally italicized. In short, I have 20,000 words that could have been written by five different authors, given the many inconsistencies that pepper the text throughout.

I recognize that the submitted draft is incomplete, a far cry from the original 80,000 words that I had originally proposed. I have included at the end of these notes a proposed second and third part of the book, and I trust that the committee will consider this outline, in conjunction with the original manuscript, as sufficient evidence of the rigor I have applied throughout the entire process.

Part Two

After a spirit calling ceremony, Dena's mother agrees to work for the volunteer agencies to prepare for emigration. Her mother's new job allows Dena a few hours away from sewing *paj ntaub*. At the first opportunity, Dena and Neng approach Kou to take them both to Laos. Kou refuses, and Neng leaves for Laos the next day. In desperation and anger, Dena steals the box of beautiful things, using a kitchen cleaver to pry it open. She packs the contents and offers the money to Kou for passage. He agrees, and the two leave the refugee camp that night.

During the crossing, Jinou urges Dena to return to Ban Vinai, but she refuses. Indeed, at the first opportunity, Kou tries to sell Dena as a prostitute. Dena, anticipating the betrayal, steals some money and spends the night with a group of monks, who protect her from Kou, but are quick to urge her on. She identifies a Hmong couple by a *paj ntaub* handbag. She does petty work for them, and that night she learns pahawh from the father, who agrees to purchase a bus pass to Luang Prabang for her the next day. She spends the ride piecing through her mother's writings, which tell the saga of her mother's

own affair with someone she addresses as Handosme Ong, and which she signs as Beautiful Ia – references to the Hmong progenitors, siblings who broke *caiv* to marry each other when a flood had killed everyone else in the world. Handsome Ong, it becomes apparent, is another Thao, now married in St. Paul and working as a clerk.

Her reading is interrupted by the Lao police. Dena is taken into custody, and her belongings are confiscated. She claims to be Neng to the police in the hopes of being sent to Luang Prabang. In jail, a Hmong inmate protects her from attempted rape. The man, soon released, claims Dena as his daughter, and provides sufficient evidence to corroborate her own story, so Dena is released with him. The police keep Dena's money as "bail," but she is allowed to keep the writings and the photographs.

Thus, Dena is introduced to Vang Tsu Kou, Neng's father. He is surprised to learn of his daughter's pending marriage and agrees to travel with her to Luang Prabang to confront Her Toua, at least to negotiate a fair price for his daughter. By the time they arrive, however, it is already the second day of the wedding celebration. Dena stays with Neng and acts as her green lady at the ceremony. Apart from rushed moments, from one part of the ceremony to the next, the two get little chance to interact. At the end of the ceremony, Neng's husband, Chai, takes her to his home, and Dena goes to stay with the Vangs.

Part Three

Dena writes home, detailing to her mother the entire adventure, including her love for Neng and of Neng's recent marriage. Tsu Kou is morose, eager to join with the Hmong resistance at the earliest opportunity, yet loathe to leave his mother and daughter.

Dena strikes an uneasy friendship with Bao, Neng's sister, and the two attend to the duties of farming for a late harvest.

It is in the barren fields that Dena meets Neng again. After they exchange their stories, Neng tells Dena that she and Chai are moving to Vientiane to find work in a textile factory. She invites Dena to join them, as doing so would allow her both some measure of independence and the opportunity to stay close. The two share a kiss, but Neng leaves to return to her husband.

When Dena returns to the Vang household, she finds Tsu Kou talking with a number of men, among them Kou, recruiters for Chao Fa. Neither acknowledges the other, and Tsu Kou contributes money, but doesn't join the cause, largely due to Dena's entreaties. Kou approaches Dena in the field, and the two have a heated conversation with echoes of the one they shared at the kator field in chapter 7, and then a violent altercation. Dena bests Kou (luck!), who is amused and sardonic in his way, but also promptly leaves their village to recruit elsewhere.

Instead of returning to the Vang household, Dena has dinner with Chao and Neng. It becomes apparent to Dena that Chao is sincere and good, and she decides against accompanying them to Vientiane. Neng walks Dena home, and the two embrace, but Dena also returns the Neng's coin, her own contribution to Neng's dowry.

In the morning, Dena goes to the city and enters a police station, presumably to begin the process of deportation.

The epilogue takes place in Sacramento six years later. Dena's high school graduation is attended not only by her family, but also Mr. Xiong, who tries to pressure her into enrolling in the local community college. Dena, however, wishes to move to

UCLA with her girlfriend, Mai Yang, but is unsure of what the move would do to her mother. It is in this context that she receives a letter from Neng, written in pahawh, which Dena can barely piece together anymore. After reading the letter (and looking at accompanying photograph of Neng's family), Dena writes her own letter to her mother, explaining her choice to move to Los Angeles.

APPENDIX: NOTES ON LANGUAGE

Most of the Hmong words in the manuscript are written in Hmong RPA (Romanized Popular Alphabet), a rather complicated code that uses final consonants as tone markers and double-vowels to signify a ŋ ("ng") ending. Thus the Hmong greeting "*Nyob zoo!"* would be pronounced "Nyŏ Zhŏng" ("Live well!"), with the *b* representing a high tone and the double *o* signifying the ŋ ending. In every instance that I use Hmong RPA in the text, I indicate using *italics.*

There are a few Hmong words that I wrote in their Anglicized version, proper names, most obviously, but also Chao Fa (*cob fab*), pahawh (*phaj hawj*), and kator (*kob taub*). I have included below the RPA versions of the names that appear in these opening chapters along with their translations in cases where the names do translate into common nouns.

Proper Nouns

Anglicized Name	Hmong RPA	Translation	Character
Dena	*Dej Nab*	"Water snake"	Protagonist
Neng	*Neeb*	"Spirit"	Dena's friend and love interest
Kanbao	*Kab Npauj*	"Butterfly"	Dena's mother
Pao Zhe	*Pob Zeb*	"Rock"	Dena's uncle (Dena refers to her aunt as *Niam* Zhe, or "wife of Zhe")
Yi Leng	*Yim Leej*	"Eight People"	Boy who teases Dena in the opening chapter
Kou	*Kub*	"Gold"	Opium smuggler
Jinou	*Tsim Nuj*	"Worthy"	Opium smuggler

Houa	*Huab*	"Cloud"	Dena's shaman
Pao	*Pos*	NA	Mr. Xiong, teacher and UNHCR worker
Lao Cha	*Laus Tsab*	NA	Mr. Xiong's shaman
Ger	*Ntxawg*	"youngest" (son)	Boy involved in the fight at kator field
Bao	*Npauj*	"Butterfly"	Neng's sister
Tsu Kou	*Txwj Kum*	NA	Neng's father
Toua	*Tuam*	NA	Neng's father-in-law

Clans

The Hmong clan is integral to Hmong custom and society, and it is not uncommon for new acquaintances to ask each other's clan name, sometimes even before asking the given name. The clan provides financial support in cases of hardship or large events (paying a bride price, for instance), and also governs more mundane decisions. The report that Dena gives to her mother in Chapter 2 would be of a rather exciting, but not totally unusual clan meeting. It is taboo for two members of the same clan to marry, which is why Dena lists her father being a Thao among the "nasty stories" of her parentage.

I used Anglicized versions of the clan names. Below are the Hmong RPA versions.

Clan	Hmong RPA	Some Member Characters
Thao	*Thoj*	Dena, Kanbao, Zhe
Vang	*Vaj*	Neng, Bao, Tsu Kou
Xiong	*Xyooj*	Pao Xiong, the social worker
Her	*Hawj*	Jinou (opium smuggler) Neng's fiancé
Chang	*Tsab*	Mr. Xiong's shaman

Titles and Honorifics

Dena would have addressed women of her mother's generation as "aunt," either *phauj* or *tais,* depending on whether the woman was a member of her clan. Men, she would have addressed as "uncle," either *txiv hlob, txiv ntxawm,* or *dablaug* depending on whether the man was a member of her clan older than her father would be, a member of her clan younger than her father would be, or not a member of her clan. The previous generation, she would address as either *pog* ("grandmother") or *yawg* ("grandfather"). This, by the way, is a simplified explanation of a complex system or relationships.

Niam is also a common title, which literally means "mother," but also "wife of.." Thus, *Niam* Zhe, Dena's aunt, would be the wife of Zhe.

For Mr. Xiong or Mrs. Lineburg, Dena is actually pronouncing the English title. Likewise, when Mr. Xiong addresses Neng as "Miss Vang," he is using the English title.

In this version of the manuscript, I used the Hmong words when using a kinship word as a title and the English when using it to express actual kinship. Thus *Pog* Houa is not Dena's actual grandmother, but Uncle Zhe is her uncle.

Puns

I do want to mention that Dena's comment in chapter 6, "Peace is a poppy field," is possible because the word for peace, *thaj yeeb,* also means "poppy field." The title of the book, *Needles and Dust,* would be *koob* ("needle") *hmoov* ("dust"), which as a compound word means "blessing" or "luck."

Short Glossery of Hmong Terms

Below are the terms in the book that I wrote in Hmong RPA. Most are very culture-specific, and the English equivalent did not seem appropriate in the text.

Hmong RPA	Rough Anglicization	Meaning
Dab	"Da"	Spirits or demons. There are benevolent house spirits ("*dab tsev*") as well, but most often the *dab* are dangerous and wild.
Caiv	"Kyai"	Taboo
Kwv txhiaj	"Koo Sia"	Sung poetry, often performed *ad lib*.
Pov pob	"Baw baw"	"Toss ball." A courting game played at the New Year.
Paj ntaub	"Pandao"	"Flower cloth." Hmong embroidery
Paj huam	"Pa Houa"	Rhythmic poetry
Qeej	"Kheng"	A pipe instrument
Kua dib	"Goua Dee"	A refreshment with cucumber pulp, sugar, and water
Tam Tseeb!	"Da Cheng"	An expletive, roughly equivalent to "Dang it!"
Tuj lub	"Doo Loo"	A game played with large spinning tops.

Finally, I should add that Dena speaks the White Hmong dialect, which affects choices in spelling, pronunciation, and diction.

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