

A LION'S DANCE



VINCENT LE

PRELUDE and CHAPTER I

PRELUDE

Chatter regressed to commotion. The Spring semester had just begun, yet the University of Lunglin was already at arms. The students of the prestigious University erupted from their seats while quieter peers buried their heads in books, scribbling to drown out their worries. Though absent of blood and gore, the classroom had become a front line of its own.

“How close do the Vukhi have to get before President Sai does something?” A student’s voice arose from the clamor.

“What will happen to us if they reach Lunglin?” Another one asked.

“Why aren’t we doing anything to stop them?” A third voice interrupted.

“Quiet!” A final, decisive command silenced the room. Professor Lam Hoang stood at the front, sturdier than a garrison. He adjusted his glasses as he leaned over against the podium, his fingertips tapping on its surface to reinforce his words.

“The Vukhi will not make it to Lunglin,” he said, confident.

“How do you know?” A student in the front row asked. Hien Le was one of the quiet ones, whose head had always hung low, weighed down by the magnitude of her intellect or obedient to her fears which held above her like a guillotine.

“The papers say that the First have stopped the Vukhi above the Cai Khien,” Professor Hoang answered. “All reports state that we have them, that we will defend ourselves. That South Quhoung will stand.” Professor Hoang peered at his students, trying to dissect their hesitancy. “But that’s what the papers will tell you, and the papers are not why I have confidence” he continued. “The truth only follows action. History is a result.” Professor Hoang adjusted his glasses, feeling the weight of their stares. “But confidence won’t win this war. Only actions will.” A student raised their hand, but Professor Hoang couldn’t allow them another moment. “We won’t win this war by waiting on President Sai or the First to save us. Our actions—your actions—will decide this war,” Professor

Hoang clarified. “The Vukhi have gotten as far as they have because they are united; we are anything but. Only each of you, with your talents that you have cultivated here, can win us the war. Together.”

The moment held still. Professor Hoang’s words dissipated, but not before staining the air with optimism. This was his favorite part of the job: inspiration.

“But what if we can’t?” One of the students asked. “What if we fail to recognize our faults as a nation? As a people?”

Professor Hoang’s eyes steeled, themselves becoming a weapon. “Why are you here, Tien? Why are any of you here? Why do you, as a class—no, as a generation—come to my history course?”

Then, Professor Hoang experienced his second favorite part of the job: watching the students unfold their own conclusions, develop their own solutions.

“I believe you’ve found your answer.”

The class dismissed, disseminating the students’ worries into the hallways. It was cruel the way the students’ voices were more comprehensible outside of the classroom than inside, as if fear was the only thing that could truly project their voices. But soon enough, their collective anxiety dispersed onto the streets before the University of Lunglin, leaving the building quiet for the older minds—the working minds.

Professor Hoang rocked a glass of beer, his fingers spidered above the glass. His other hand rested against his forehead lightly clutching an exhausted cigarette. Open letters spread across his table like a feast. Despite his filled appetite, departmental concerns couldn’t seem to stop being served to him.

Languidly, he picked one up: another complaint on how the students of the University have become too armed with words, another professor’s concern with his students becoming too intelligent—disgusting. Professor Hoang reached for another. This time it was from a student, a letter of resignation. Another mind lost to the duty of war, wasted to expend its capacity on positioning, precision, and post-traumatic stress, if they made it that long. He inhaled from his cigarette once again, the smoke trailing out of his mouth as his eyes latched onto another letter, one sealed by an emblematic buffalo whose horns outlined the stamp, the mark of President Sai.

Eyes wide, Professor Hoang removed the seal, adjusting himself in his seat as if the President were before him. He pulled out the envelope as his eyes began to follow the words down the page. They sprinted across the first couple of lines before apathy caught them and rage consumed them. He cast the letter aside, feeling a deep pit open inside him—his anger tempered by betrayal. For a moment, he simply stared at nothing, processing the enormity of its contents. A hand hovered above the buffalo stamp before resting on the desk beside it, a subconscious act of submission. Lap Troung, the head

minister of the University, stood tall with his barely retained hair and slightly sweat-through suit.

"Another rejection?" He asked.

"Another mistake," Professor Hoang exhaled slowly. His shoulders briefly sunk under unseen weight. "It's as if they want to remain ignorant to our advice."

"We are only academics," Minister Troung said, the statement bellowing from his larger frame as he started to walk the perimeter of the desk. "The battlefield isn't always in our control."

"*Only academics?*" Professor Hoang repeated like a curse. "That should be the reason why they include us, Lap. Are we not the ones that are fueling their future? Nurturing the ever-evolving ideas of our people? Challenging the beliefs that fracture us?"

"Quiet down, Lam," Minister Troung stopped. "People might think you're on the wrong side." His eyes flickered to the letters before snapping back.

Professor Hoang grimaced at his friend's warning. "Since when have you cared about what the department thinks? If that's what they get from my rhetoric, then they are either lost or stupid," Professor Hoang smothered the cigarette, "as if they are not the same these days. It's really a miracle that you allow them to work here."

The Minister returned a tactless smile, one that was oddly incongruent with their normal, friendly visits.

"Spit it out," Professor Hoang said.

"You know that you're one of my dearest friends..." Minister Troung paused. "You're an astounding professor and an excellent academic." Despite the kind words, Minister Troung swallowed carefully and handed him a letter like it was a weapon. "But we all have to compromise sometimes."

"What is this, Lap?"

"A miracle cut short."

The letter shrieked open. Professor Hoang had already known what it would say, but he needed to digest the words for himself. The only truth was what he could see before him.

"An invitation?" Professor Hoang asked, his voice restraining to lift. "To resign?"

"I'm sorry, Lam," Minister Troung said. "Truly."

Silence settled like dust between them, disturbing only by distant footsteps echoing from the hallway. The air became stale as Professor Hoang's eyes hardened, but refused to return any cordiality that the two may have once shared. Instead, they lingered coldly on the Minister, unspoken resentment heavy in the stillness. He stood and began to stuff his bag with his belongings. "If you were sorry, then you would have fought back."

"You think I didn't try?" Minister Troung tried to maintain eye contact. He was unsuccessful.

Professor Hoang continued to read. "*Dangerous relationships?* What does that even mean?"

“Who you see in your personal life is your business, but some faculty have taken concern,” Minister Troung said.

“Have you been following me?” Professor Hoang stood. “What business is it of yours to take concern of my life?”

“We are in wartime, Lam,” Minister Troung said softly, almost convincing himself. “We all have to make sacrifices. For the school to survive, we need to keep up appearances.”

“Appearances?” Professor Hoang scoffed. “The only thing you appear to me as is afraid. Afraid of standing your own ground. An unfortunate trend of the people within our great nation.” He paused, glancing towards the door. “What about my son?”

“Your son can remain here,” Minister Troung placed his hand on the desk, acting as some sort of treaty between them.

“He *will* remain here,” Professor Hoang corrected before continuing to pack. “I’ll burn the school down faster than the Vukhi if he doesn’t.”

“There were no ways around this,” Minister Troung leaned against the desk, ignoring the statement. “The departments were breathing down my neck,” he said quietly, his eyes shadowed by worry. “I had no choice. I couldn’t figure out a tactic to evade them.”

“Tactics,” Professor Hoang chuckled in disbelief. “Leave the tactics for the battlefield, Minister. What you needed was belief.”

“Belief in what?”

“Just about anything.”

Professor Hoang ashed the rest of his cigarette and swallowed the remainder of his beer. “I’d be careful if I were you, Minister.”

“And why is that?” Minister Troung adjusted his suit and corrected his posture to meet him, only to freeze at Professor Hoang’s cold eyes. Whatever stood before him was not the man he had first met, that aspiring scholar with bright ideas for the future. Now, there was only a man sculpted by the paranoia of war, one whose soul has been burdened and buried by the grim calculations—of which he’s done thousands—of casualties. The shell of a leader who has been punished by the few that remain above him or surround him.

Yet, his voice was willing to endure. To survive. To correct.

“If Lunglin continues in its inevitable direction, then the need for your tactics may come sooner than you realize.”

Meaningless papers scattered into the air as Professor Hoang pushed open the doors of the University, trails of smoke following them abound from his newly lit cigarette. He loosened his tie as the Spring

heat engulfed him. The words of the letter still rang through his head, percussively shaming him with each step across the cobblestone path. The students stared at him as if he were on fire. As if he were the source of the blazing heat of day. As if he were the light that kept the University bright and kept young minds burning. What remained in his absence was unknown and, consequently, terrifying.

The young boys and girls crowded around, like vultures to scraps, though much more vocal. Questions were fired at Professor Hoang like arrows, but he couldn't say a word, both due to his own personal astonishment and the threatened repercussions outlined by his letter of resignation. If there was something he still retained, it was his prestige and nothing in history was stronger than a name. A name produced inventions. A name united communities. A name started, and finished, wars. If Professor Hoang was not one of those names to be read in the future, he would be sure to be the one to ink it.

Emerging onto the main street, the heat clung instantly. From where he was standing, he could see the Imperial Palace. Standing in the same place every evening, he would watch, wondering if the Imperial Palace was magically going to transform into a house of solutions, or imagining that it would grow legs and storm off to dismantle the war itself. With each evening, he found himself disappointed and this time was no different. The upside of his current situation: this would be his last time conjuring such fantasies.

Carts stuttered by him, led by the syncopated rhythm of hooves atop uneven cobblestone. Together, they created a song so dissonant and irritating that Professor Hoang needed to move. He started down the road, passing by the stacked homes and shops, each one a milestone to his final destination. Pacing down the road, he caught the attention of hunched strangers looking up from their bowls of soups and rice. The aromas of cinnamon, peppers, and beef stirred the air with a luxurious taste that Professor Hoang knew was more than a privilege of status and residency within the Shimmering City.

But soon, the air caught a different flavor. The scent of leaves and steam bolstered the Spring heat and, within its intensity, brought kindness and ease. Burrowed into the wall, sharing all of its walls with another residence or place of business, was a tea shop. Though not quite elegant to the eyes, the taste was consistently exquisite; that happened to be the one thing that he needed most desperately: consistency. Entering the shop, Professor Hoang's eyes met with the owner's. They traded nods as he removed his jacket, folding it before placing it on the back of his chair. He loosened yet another button and gave his tie yet another yank to provide some more breathing room. It was probably the heat's fault that he couldn't breath so well. Probably.

Curling beautifully, the steam of Professor Hoang's tea embraced his face, his nose inviting its essence. There it was, that peace. The peace of the tea's heat was not quite the scorching property of

the weather, but the warmth of comfort. The peace of the flavor and the fragrance and how it would permeate throughout the body, calming every nerve and every thought. The peace that, in moments, would disappear along with the contents of the cup. And so it did, as Professor Hoang drank the last of the tea. Disappointed, he placed the cup back on the table. Once again, he was fooled to think that peace would ever remain permanent.

Professor Hoang slid the tea cup forward, enough to leave room to put down a journal that fit perfectly within his hand. Annotations poked out of the top and sides, the sheer amount of them rendering organization meaningless. Still, Professor Hoang decided to add another.

"You're early," a voice crunched as a hand clasped Professor Hoang's shoulder.

"Found myself with some free time," Professor Hoang rose to meet his wiry associate. The man shook Professor Hoang's proffered hand, his smudgy fingers like ink on Professor Hoang's parchment-like skin. Shortly, the man took a seat opposite of Professor Hoang.

"They finally fired you, huh?" The man raised a hand to flag down the owner, another exchange of nods confirming his order.

"Dangerous relationships," Professor Hoang recalled, causing the man to chortle. "Don't sound so happy. It's a backwards move."

"Backwards or not, it was bound to happen."

"So you kept telling me."

"Maybe you'll finally listen to me."

Professor Hoang turned back towards his journal as he noticed the owner approach. "Good to see you, Minh," the owner said, placing the tea on the table and a hand on the man's back. His drink was pungent and colored; one might never think there was water to begin with.

"Thanks, Nam," Minh took a sip, loudly and gloriously. "Perfect, as always."

With a nod, the owner turned, leaving the men alone again.

"How's Vinh?" Minh asked, his head cocking to try to comprehend Professor Hoang's frenzied writing. "What's his situation?"

"Fine," Professor Hoang said, his eyes still guiding his pen and his mind elsewhere. "He'll stay in the University."

Minh made a sound of dissatisfaction before returning to his tea, which immediately ameliorated whatever discontent he had. "You sure that's a good idea?"

"It's not an idea," Professor Hoang said. "It's a fact."

"And you think that's okay?" Minh asked. "They're already annoyed at your attempts to intervene in the war, you don't think that they're going to restrict your son?"

"That's correct," Professor Hoang said, still attracted to the page. "My son is not me."

“Sure.”

The scribbling stopped as Professor Hoang’s eyes peered upwards. “He’s not.” His pupils were cloudy, more opaque and foggy than the steam arising from Minh’s freshly brewed tea. But as the steam dissipated, so did his expression as Professor Hoang adjusted his glasses, tempering his eyes back to their fierce temerity and austerity. “He can’t be.”

The journal recalled Professor Hoang’s attention as his pen began to move. Leaning back in his chair, Minh continued to enjoy the tea, much more than he was enjoying the conversation. He had no issue leaving his friend to his work, as long as he had something—anything—in his cup.

“So what’s the plan, then?” Minh asked as he sipped the last of his tea.

“I’m still working on it,” Professor Hoang returned.

Minh allowed a moment to pass by, a ruse of reflection. “I have a few ideas.”

The response was not so patient. “No.”

“You know it’s the best option.”

The pen halted once again. “Suicide is not an option.”

“The battlefield is not suicide. Nobody ever lives if they believe death is imminent.” Minh said. “Besides, they need people like you. Tacticians, strategists, leaders.”

“I’m none of those things,” Professor Hoang said. “Apparently, I’m just an academic.”

The man’s face drooped, dejected. “Now we’re in the realm of nonsense.”

“You think that I can be a leader? A sort of general?” Professor Hoang slammed the pen against his journal. “I don’t know the first thing about battle or bloodshed.”

“I do.”

Professor Hoang flinched. The terseness of Minh’s words was much more effective than any sort of speech he could have composed. Minh was simple, he didn’t care for much in life. He had his family and he had his country and he would die fighting for both.

“I’m just an academic,” Professor Hoang repeated as he glanced back down to his journal.

“Then why have these meetings?” Minh asked. “Why invite the company of a veteran? A disliked one at that.”

“Is it so bad to want to talk to an old friend?” Professor Hoang reached towards his cup, toying with its handle.

“You do have very strict requirements,” Minh said. “*Very* strict requirements. If it weren’t for our political alignments and the fact that we knew each other as kids, then I don’t think you would even deign to look at me.”

Professor Hoang wanted to protest, but he would not pay Minh in the disrespect of ignorance.

“So why have these meetings, Lam?” Minh pressed on.

The journal trembled in Professor Hoang's hand as his knee bounced violently. All of those ideas: criticisms of the government, statements of retort, concepts and proposals to develop the war in ways that would not end in bloodshed—were they merely speculation?

"You want to make a change," Minh said as he placed his foot on top of Professor Hoang's to smother the shaking. "So make it."

"What I write about," Professor Hoang started, "What I *think* about, they're not tactics. They're systematic processes for change. It's governmental and political progression, not strategies that denigrate the lives of soldiers to the empirical values of casualties and sacrifices. I'm afraid I'm not fit for that kind of oversight."

"Whether or not you believe you're fit or not is irrelevant," Minh said. "I've seen enough thinkers on the battlefield to know that you've got more than what it takes." He raised his foot to allow Professor Hoang the space to breathe. The space to think. "The Vukhi won't surrender to words, Lam, at least not words that will allow us our integrity as a nation. You always expect your students to take action, but how can they follow your directions if you've never taken action yourself?"

Professor Hoang leaned back, his arms crossed tightly against his chest, as if to trap the weighted feeling of Minh's words. He had considered this path abstractly and without much serious thought. But now, it felt real. Necessary.

"And let's be honest with ourselves," Minh leaned forward. "We do not fight for us. Whatever outcome we desire, it's for them. Our children. Think about Huy, Lan, or Vinh. Your newborn, Lin. What kind of world do we want to sculpt for them? Whatever it is, that result of victory, we can't sculpt it without getting our hands dirty."

As Minh finished his sentence, the world stopped. The song of the carts had ended, the cacophony of conversation ceased, even the air had finally cleared of the odor from Minh's tea. Professor Hoang wielded his pen, neatly composing a final note. He tore the paper of the journal and handed it to Minh.

"Give me until the end of the Summer," Professor Hoang said. "I'll need time to prepare my family for my departure." He pointed to the words on the paper, "you can find me at that address."

Minh waved the piece of paper in his hands. "Vangpho? Didn't take you as rural folk."

"It's peaceful," Professor Hoang rose from his chair. He picked up his briefcase and folded his jacket over his arm. "Truly peaceful."

If only peace ever lasted, he thought quietly.

CHAPTER I

“I don’t think it’s that simple,” Duy said as he stuffed rice into his mouth.

“Why not?” Vinh asked, watching the grains fly around the room due to the velocity of Duy’s appetite. “It’s a completely reasonable conclusion if you’re not a complete idiot.”

“Are you calling me an idiot?” Duy narrowed his eyes as his cheeks rested full of food.

“Take it how you want,” Vinh turned around to face his desk. “I’ve provided my evidence.”

“It’s not enough,” Duy’s voice croaked clear as he swallowed.

“What else do you need?” Vinh asked. “Just because Ms. Duong doesn’t teach night classes doesn’t mean that she’s an agent of the Vukhi. She’s like 70.”

“That’s why you wouldn’t expect her!”

“You’re a dumbass,” Vinh chuckled. “Her family owns the supply store a few blocks away,” he continued, “she goes there after classes. You’d know if you ever left our room.”

“But—”

“And they run incredibly high prices,” Vinh interrupted. “I mean the moxie of that woman. No, definitely not a Vukhi agent.”

Silence built between them as Duy patiently waited for Vinh to finish ruining his hypothetical. Finally, he received the infamous Vinh nod that allowed him to continue.

“Like I said,” Duy started. “That’s why you wouldn’t expect her.”

Vinh’s eyes rolled out of his skull. “You know for a student of a very prestigious university, you

are horribly unreceptive to an entertaining and-or logical debate.”

“For a student of a university,” Duy leaned back, “you’re horribly unreceptive to having fun.”

And the conversation resurfaces.

“What fun is there to have?”

“Parties. Drinks.” Duy leaped close and hooked Vinh into his arm, his awful breath curling up towards his ear. “Girls.”

The chair rocked as Vinh pushed him off, his mirthless expression fending off Duy’s smirk. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know, I know.” Duy twirled around and landed on his bed. “The war is coming—blah, blah, blah—people are dying—blah, blah—I’m depressed.” He started to chuckle at his own impression, but Vinh did not share such humor.

“I don’t quite understand what’s so funny.”

“You!” Duy shot up. “You’re the most serious college student I’ve ever met.”

“Which is actually quite worrying,” Vinh turned back towards his desk, faced by the spread of paper, each of which holding some threat over his future. “I really don’t understand how you aren’t more serious.”

“Because the Vukhi are never gonna reach here,” Duy said confidently. “We’re safe.”

“*You’re* safe,” Vinh responded. “Your family lives here. You’re offered the most shelter. But people like me, who live on the direct warpath from the Northern border to Lunglin, it’s over for us if they take Vua or even, heavens forbid, sneak through the border itself.”

Duy stuttered. He was a little too self-centered and not nearly aware enough to make that conclusion. But he had to come up with something. “The government will keep us safe. And soon we’ll be up there too, making decisions. That’s what we’re here for.”

“You’re here to party, drink, and fuck,” Vinh could feel his anger bubbling. “And you’ve already insinuated that everyone else is just like you and very much not like me. So, tell me, Duy, will our government keep us safe? If our generation doesn’t have the simple discipline to learn in times of war, how can we be sure that our current leaders have even an ounce of brains to be able to navigate us through?”

The words took a moment to bleed.

“You sound like your father.”

Vinh flinched. He heard that comment often, but from Duy, it felt like a curse, the way it slithered out of his mouth. “What are you going to do about it?” He challenged as he started to cram his papers together into his booklet. “Will you invite me to leave too?”

“I’m not against you, Vinh. I just want you to enjoy your youth like the rest of us.”

Swiping up the booklet, Vinh turned to face Duy, his face sculpted by solemnity. “My youth won’t matter if there’s no nation to grow old in.” He opened the door and took a step out, refusing to spend another second to hear Duy’s rebuttal.

It was not preferable to be the son of the recently-resigned president of the historical department at the University of Lunglin. Vinh found that it came with a lot of odd stares, covered mouths, and shadowed words. Since his father’s resignation, Vinh’s waking hours were spent either with his eyes glued to a paper, his fingers glued to a pen, or rumors glued to his ears. He used to love the University; it brought him regimen and opportunity. Now, it only seemed to taunt and threaten him.

As the Spring semester crawled to an end, Vinh isolated himself more and more. Duy, who he once talked to daily, only had his attention on the weekends. Otherwise, he was drawn to his books and his work. He sheltered himself from the judgment of the outside world by keeping his thoughts internal. Vinh had written many essays on the topic of the war, but every one he submitted came back bleeding red ink. It wasn’t criticism that hurt—it was censorship masked as correction, as if speaking the truth was a grammatical error. The subjects that Vinh had thought important and critical—ideas that he was convinced could allocate actual support from the nation—were struck down before they had the opportunity of exposure.

Eventually, he grew tired. Vinh regressed to formulaic hypotheses and sequacious arguments in response to irrelevant and anachronistic disputes posed by his professors. Moreover, he started to feel the effects of his father’s absence. The students who were once fiery with the passion to serve grew complacent. The education they were once promised no longer existed and, as a result, they no longer cared. The North had brought about terrible things but the abjection of academia, to Vinh, was the fault of the South.

Vinh walked out of his final exam disturbed. They had taken the divisive history of Quhoung and pacified it with an edge of pointless censorship. The students of the University were no longer learning, they were being brainwashed. If Duy was correct in his statement and the students were to elevate to a more prestigious, more powerful position, South Quhoung would be more of a danger to itself than the Vukhi—if they were to survive that long. But Vinh didn’t have the heart to ever tell him that. Instead, he packed his bags quietly and allowed the Summer air to flush his side of the room until the Fall.

Outside, the sounds of the city began to seep in through the open window, horses and carts signaling it was time to leave. The bags amalgamated into a sort of armor around Vinh. Though not as protective, it was surely as heavy. It was full of clothes his father bought him to survive the one type of weather in Lunglin while retaining professional style in the case of emergencies or celebrations. Vinh

thought about giving away some of his clothes to those who actually needed it from time to time; father would never notice a couple of missing shirts.

Swaying with the weight of his bags, Vinh made it onto the street outside of the University, where he was greeted by the chaos of street life. Horses passed by him, their hooves in sync with the drumming of the cart it pulled across the cobblestone. The way it chewed grass so nonchalantly reminded Vinh of Duy. They were probably just as smart as each other too. Veering between the hurried carts and the traffic of University students bound to reunite with their families, Vinh arrived at a store. He peered into the windows, which had been freshly cleaned, as a smile crept onto his face. The bell announced his entry as he pushed the door open. The aroma of warmed leather and fresh parchment was restorative as Vinh gazed upon the endless journals and notebooks, the different types of papers, and the variety of writing utensils. As Summer approached and the term ended, the supply store had simmered to a lull. The cramped spaces Vinh used to fight through had now opened their narrow paths to allow him to peruse at a comfortable cadence.

“You’re back,” a young, delicate voice said.

Vinh spun around to see Lien, the store clerk, who always greeted him with a smile unfitting of wartime.

“And so I am,” Vinh’s nod turned into a slight bow as Lien’s eyes drifted to the table beside them.

“Exams are over.”

“And so they are.”

“Doing some extra studying at home?” Lien’s hand drifted across the rows of journals on the table. “Or have you come for something else?”

“Well, you know me,” Vinh grinned as his hand followed hers onto the table. However, instead of grabbing it like she had hoped, his hands clasped one of the leather-bound journals and raised it in front of her. “Always studying.”

“You’re such a tease,” Lien swiped the journal out of the way, her voice returning to its typical disgruntlement. “Do you really have to be so boring?”

“Boring?” Vinh exaggerated a gasp. “I am *not* boring.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Lien walked over to the counter. As she rounded it, she glanced up towards Vinh, analyzing his features. “If you’ve been sleeping at all.”

“Exams,” Vinh gestured vaguely. “You know how they are.”

“Not really,” Lien started to wrap the journal. “It’ll be 6,300.”

“6,300?” Vinh slumped. “Come on. Can’t you add a little discount?”

Lien tapped on the table impatiently. “I could add even more for all the games you’ve played

with me.”

“You’re evil,” Vinh murmured as he counted up the coins and slid them across the counter.

“It was alright doing business,” Lien grinned as she bounced the pouch in her hands. She looked up as Vinh grabbed the journal, inspecting each side of it. “You coming back next term?”

“Yeah,” Vinh said. “No reason not to.”

“And your dad?”

Vinh placed the journal back onto the table, his fingers dancing across the wrapping. “Doubt it.”

“Sorry,” Lien rested on her arm, trying to get a good look at him. “Again.”

“Nothing to apologize for. It wasn’t your fault,” Vinh flicked his head out of the door. “It was theirs.”

“Nevertheless,” Lien’s head fell, weighed down by a choice she didn’t make. “Sorry.”

Vinh placed his hand on hers. “No need to feel bad.” He lowered his head so his eyes could meet hers. “I’m not upset. At you or at anybody. What happened happened.” His smile was able to lift her chin ever so slightly. It was enough to know that she would be okay. That they would be okay. “I’ll see you next Fall.” His hand moved from hers to the journal as he arranged it carefully within his front bag. “Have a good break. Tell your mom I said hi.”

“Send my best to your family,” Lien rose as she watched him leave.

“Will do,” Vinh lifted his hand to wave as his back pushed open the door, the bell chiming for his departure. He took a moment on the threshold, savoring one final glance into the peaceful stillness of the store before stepping into the long journey home.

It would take four days for Vinh to get home. Due to the mobilization of the army, the typical transport roads were restructured, often forcing carriages to take alternative, more difficult routes. Vinh wished that he could at least have done some reading to help the time pass, but the constant bumping of the cart transformed each character into a flurry of other ones every time he tried to digest a sentence. Instead, he was forced to engage with other University students traveling back northward with him.

“Is it true?” One of the boys asked him. Vinh didn’t recognize him, but he had heard this question a thousand times. Still, he had a couple days left and didn’t want to make the worst impression, especially not in front of a crowd.

“Is what true?” Vinh asked.

“What they say about your father?” The boy leaned in. The other students around also seemed to bend an ear.

Vinh took a deep breath to prepare for a multitude of conversations. “Depends what they say.”

“That he was found working with a Vukhi member.”

“Ah,” Vinh said. He should’ve expected less. “No. That’s not tru—”

“How do you know?” The boy shot back prematurely.

Taking a moment to fully witness the boy’s instigation, Vinh’s brow furrowed. He was no longer concerned about impressions. “How do you?”

“Everybody’s saying it,” the boy looked proud of his established hearsay.

Vinh looked around to the other students, who seemed to watch in correspondence. “And just because everybody’s saying it, it’s the truth?”

“It’s a lot more likely,” the boy smirked.

“And who exactly is everybody?” Vinh continued to interrogate.

For the first time during this conversation, the boy paused. “You know,” he gestured towards the rest of the cart. “Everybody.”

“No, I don’t know,” Vinh pressed, looking around. “I’ll need names to be able to credit your sources.”

The boy looked towards the rest of the students, who were too afraid to speak up. “Do you know Ngoc and Quy?” The boy asked. “Or Chau?”

A cackle escaped Vinh’s mouth. “Wait. You’re not serious, right?”

The boy frowned. “And what if I am?”

“You’re telling me that the Silks are spreading these rumors abouts my dad?” His head poked around. A song of chuckles floated around the cart. “Are they here?”

“*The Silks?*” The boy asked.

Vinh wiped a tear from his face. “Never mind, you might as well have had a more credible source with your”—he raised his voice to match the boy’s—“*you know, everybody.*”

“Why did you call us *the Silks?*” The boy asked, his face blooming with irritation.

“Hold on. *Us?*” Vinh’s chuckling started to die as his mind turned. “Don’t tell me that you’re Chien.”

The boy straightened his posture and his face became stupidly serious. “Why did you call us *the Silks?*” He repeated.

Vinh took a moment to terminate his laughter. “Because you’re smooth.”

“Smooth?” Chien asked.

“Smooth-brained,” Vinh put a finger to his temple. “Stupid.”

“We are not stupid,” Chien asserted, reactively wanting to stand.

“Careful there,” Vinh said as the cart shook due to Chien’s sudden movements. Ashamed to

have only provided his title more truth, Chien lowered himself back down.

“Who calls us that?” Chien asked.

“You know,” Vinh guided Chien to their audience, who had now avoided Chien’s gaze. Vinh smirked. “Everybody.”

“So what? I’m stupid, but at least I’m not a fucking traitor.”

That was the first time Vinh had heard it so bluntly. “Watch it.”

“Watch yourself,” Chien barked. “If you know what’s good for you.”

“You wouldn’t know what’s good for anyone if it hit you on the head,” Vinh yelled. “So who the fuck are you to tell me who or what my dad is?”

Chien lunged forward, the cart buckling beneath their weight. Vinh scrambled backwards, his palms slipping across splintered wood, but Chien was already upon him. Fists collided wildly, each blow desperate and furious. Pain shot through Vinh’s jaw as Chien’s knuckles found their mark. In rebuke, Vinh spit blood into his face before driving his elbow into Chien’s stomach. The world tumbled around them as they wrestled across the cart. Finally, they broke as Vinh attempted to crawl away, reaching towards his bags. A hand wrapped around his leg, recalling him back to danger. Cresting a bag, Vinh’s fingers dug in as he felt himself slide backwards like water down a stream. Vinh twisted around sharply, swinging his heavy bag upwards with dire strength. It smashed into Chien’s face, snapping his head back. Taking advantage, Vinh shoved him down against the wooden planks. He lifted the bag high again, poised like an executioner’s blade.

But fate had a different ending.

Two pairs of arms restrained Vinh from each side, forcing him to drop the bag onto the cart. They yanked him backwards and forced him to kneel. Helpless, he saw Chien rise, fury burning in his eyes as he wiped the blood off of his face, scattering the river of red across his wrist. He rolled up his sleeves as he approached Vinh.

Chien’s boot slammed into Vinh’s stomach, driving air violently from his lungs. His vision blurred as pain radiated through every fiber of his being. A blur of pale torment, another strike cracked across his temple, sending him sprawling against the floorboards. His mouth tasted of iron and dust.

“*The Silks*,” Chien spat. “You think you can fuck with me? You think you’re better than me?”

Vinh clawed at the ground, struggling to find balance. Yet, his words were clear. “Is that all you got?”

Chien’s expression twisted. “You’re dead.” He raised a foot as Vinh prepared for the sky to fall.

“Hey!” A voice shouted. Footsteps shuffled across the dirt around the carriage, which the boys now noticed had stopped. The driver leaped onto the carriage, investigating the scene. “Get away from him!”

Chien stepped back. There was nothing scarier to a bully than somebody older. "I'm sorry, sir. He started it."

"Bullshit," Vinh drooled blood onto the carriage. "He lunged at me."

The driver looked towards Chien, who raised his hands and shook his head. Then, he looked towards the boys' audience, who had backed up against the far side of the cart.

"You University folk are all the same," the driver said as he bent down to help Vinh to his feet. "Don't you understand there's real things to be fighting for? Boys your age are out there dying fighting the enemy and you're here pummeling each other. Your allies."

Vinh's blackening eye looked over to the man shouldering him. "Sorry, sir."

The driver sighed. "Come sit with me in the front. And you," he pointed towards Chien, "if you touch another passenger, you can walk the rest of the way." The man carried Vinh towards the edge of the cart. "The same goes for everyone else."

After being placed in the front with the driver, Vinh sat with his blood and his bags. The rest of the trip went by quickly as Vinh spent the remaining three days healing. As the days passed, the bruises faded but the sting of Chien's words lingered, echoing through each restless night. Trying to ignore the words, Vinh—in between states of consciousness—stared out of the carriage as the country embraced them, trying to trap the image of home into his mind.

By the time Vinh arrived at Vangpho, his black eye had turned light purple and bandages were freshly applied to nearly-closed wounds. Still, Vinh's skin remembered the force of Chien's impacts and his abdomen throbbed with each step forward. The town's houses watched him as he passed, Vinh greeting each of them with a wave.

"Getting into trouble, Vinh?" An older man chuckled.

"You know how it is, Mr. Long," Vinh shrugged. "It always finds its way to me."

Vinh followed the main road towards the town square, but decided to diverge after seeing the many bodies that filled it. Vinh ducked into a nearby alley and started to climb up the wall. It was a lot harder this time due to the arsenal of bags strapped around him and probably a broken rib. But he had done it a hundred—maybe a thousand—times.

As he reached the top, an older woman gasped from the other side of the wall.

"Vinh!" Mrs. Hong laughed at her own startlement with a hand on her chest. "My goodness, it's been a while, I wasn't expecting that."

"Hi, Mrs. Hong," Vinh waved as he regained his balance. "Sorry for scaring you."

"No, no," Mrs. Hong replied. "You're always welcome. Avoiding market traffic?" Vinh nodded as Mrs. Hong bubbled with nostalgia. "Tell your father I said hi. I'm sure he's beaming to have you back."

“Will do,” Vinh said as he walked on top of the wall. “Send my best to Mr. Hong and Nguyet for me too.”

“Of course,” Mrs. Hong said. “And you should stop by for dinner sometime,” a mischievous smile crept onto her face. “Nguyet would love to see you.”

“Oh,” Vinh continued across the wall, preparing to jump to another. “Yeah, maybe. See you around!”

Leaping across the alley, Vinh latched onto the opposite wall and continued following its rigid geometry down through the neighborhood, passing by seemingly every neighbor that knew his name. The roads winded and exhausted Vinh’s legs; his shoulders started to shriek as the bags crushed them with every second; his abdomen had started to fail him with each jump. But all of the pain and exhaustion was cleansed by the sight of home. Though it was always sweltering in South Quhoung, Vinh would never reject the warmth of the house that stood before him. It was strong, reliable, and loving. Despite the bright lights of Lunglin and its promises of prestige, Vinh would never be at peace until he slept in his own bed. Yet, when he stepped through the door, he was not embraced by solace, but by stares and strangers.

“You must be Vinh,” a man said as he stood up.

Vinh quickly searched the room for something or someone recognizable. Fortunately, he found the familiar faces of his older brother, Huy, his stepmother, Ly, and his father, who sat across from the stranger. Then, his eyes met another. A girl, about his age, stood patiently in the corner, her expression as straight as her hair.

“Hello,” Vinh said no louder than a whisper. His eyes looked towards his father, attempting to understand the situation. He was only met with furrowed brows and nervous eyes.

“No need to be so shy,” the man said. “My name’s Minh. Minh Nguyen. And that’s my daughter, Kim.” The young woman raised a stiff arm. “It’s great to finally meet you. Your old man’s told me a lot.”

“Enough,” Lam stood. “Welcome home, Vinh. Give us a minute, will you? Huy, can you help him settle in?”

Huy nodded as he approached to hug Vinh. His body was stiff and nervous. Whatever comfort Vinh was supposed to feel was overwhelmed by the crashing feeling of intrusion. Huy lifted a few bags off of his younger brother and started towards the hallway.

“Who’s that?” Vinh whispered as they separated themselves from the living room.

“I don’t know,” Huy said. “They got here an hour ago and dad’s been pissed ever since.”

“Are they leaving soon?” Vinh asked as the door to his bedroom slid open.

“Probably not.” Huy replied. “It seems like he—or, they—might be staying here for a while.”

"We don't even know who they are!" Vinh said a little louder than he should have. At the sound of his voice, another door slid open as footsteps pattered their way to his room.

"Vinh?" His younger sister, Lan, appeared with a smile and a baby in her arms: Lin, the youngest sibling. "You're home!" She shoved Lin into Huy's arms to free her own to embrace Vinh, forcing him to drop the remaining bag on the ground.

"Hey," Vinh greeted. "Nice to see you too." They let each other go as Vinh peered out the door. "Have you seen what's happening?"

"Only the beginning," Lan said as she reached for her younger sister back, Huy turning to reject her offer. "But then Lin started crying so I went to calm her down."

"She's gotten so big," Vinh said as he walked towards Huy, bending his finger in front of Lin, who watched it like it was the most important thing in the world before grabbing it with her greedy, little fingers.

"Don't let her cuteness deceive you," Huy said. "She threw up all over me this morning."

Lan started to laugh, recalling the incident. "You should've heard him, Vinh. I had never heard Huy scream like that before."

"Scream?" Vinh chuckled as he looked up to his older brother. "You?"

"That's an overstatement," the red in Huy's face revealing the truth.

"It was quite girlish," Lan said in the gaps of her laughter.

"What's wrong with that?" Huy snapped back. "Stop being weird."

"I'm not the one who screamed," Lan hit his shoulder.

This was the temperature that Vinh wanted: the heat that arose out of the banter of his siblings, not the bitter cold of strangers in his living room.

"How've you been?" Huy asked, noticing Vinh's stare into the hallway. Vinh's attention returned to his siblings, each one of them latched onto him with concerned eyes.

"Good," Vinh said. "Good. You know, exams and all of that."

"Exams give you that black eye?" Huy asked.

"They kicked my ass this term," Vinh reflected. "Should we go back out there?"

"What happened?" Lan asked, reaching towards him.

"I'm fine," Vinh stepped back. "I'm here, right?"

"Being *fine* and being *here* is not the same thing," Huy said. "Does he look okay?" He asked Lin as he bobbed her up and down.

Vinh debated with himself on what lie he could tell. But they would find out the truth, sooner or later. "It was just a skirmish."

"A skirmish?" Huy scoffed. "Are you fighting on the front lines now?"

“Huy,” Lan warned him with a look before turning her attention back to Vinh. “Did you win at least?”

“Of course,” Vinh said.

“What’s their name?” Huy asked. “I’ll give them a piece of my mind.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Vinh sighed. “You wouldn’t know them.”

“Yeah,” Huy said as he looked down at his baby sister, transforming his voice. “But they’ll soon know me, won’t they? Won’t they?”

“Okay,” Lan said as she stole Lin away from him. “That’s enough of that.”

“Hey!” Huy said. “Give her back.”

“Let’s maybe not raise her to be violent,” Lan said. “There’s enough of that around here already.”

The two siblings made faces at each other as Lin tried her best to copy them, contorting her face with pathetic control. Vinh took a deep breath, inhaling the parts of home that wanted him: the scent of his bedroom that followed him around the house, the reposeful energy of Vangpho that weighed down on him like a blanket, and the taste of reminiscent home-cooked meals waiting to be eaten. Vinh would not allow a couple of strangers to ruin his much-needed break.

“Kids!” His stepmother’s voice yelled from the other room. The four children looked towards the living room, afraid of what lied before them. Nonetheless, they followed their orders. Consumed by the tense air once again, Vinh and his siblings reunited with their parents and their intruders. Their expressions were stale and severe. With heavy feet, Lam approached his children, softly grabbing Vinh by the shoulders, providing Vinh the warmth he was promised.

“You settled in alright?” He asked. Vinh nodded. “Good. Kids, this is an old friend of mine, Minh. He and his daughter Kim will be staying with us until the end of the summer. They are our guests and will be treated as such.”

“Where will they be staying?” Lan asked.

“Minh will be staying in Vinh’s room,” their father said. “And you’ll be sharing your room with Kim. So, Vinh, you’ll need to move your stuff into Huy’s room.” The children nodded. As much as they wanted to protest, their father’s word was final and they respected him too much to start needless arguments.

“Thank you for having us,” Minh and his daughter stepped forward. His eyes glazed eerily over them. “I’m looking forward to getting to know all of you.”

Despite the new guests, Vinh was more than thankful that the food had tasted the same. He was never the biggest fan of his stepmother—she was much too blunt and, at times, blatantly disrespectful—but

she could cook a damn meal. When they had all sat down to eat, conversation had sparked quicker than he had thought. Minh had many questions to ask and the family had many answers to give: the dynamic between the four siblings, the strenuous labor schedule that Ms. Bui has for Huy, Lan's intense studying for exams to gain entry to the University of Lunglin, and Vinh's current studies at the prestigious academy and how he came about to have that nasty black eye. By the end of the meal, it felt as if there was no subject that was left untouched by his curiosity.

Always dutiful, even during his break, Vinh was left to clean the table and the dishes. But he never had any complaints about doing chores. He smothered the dishes in soap as he had been trained to and reached for the rag, finding another hand already on it.

"Here," Vinh's father said.

"Thanks," Vinh said, taking the rag.

"Look at me."

Vinh turned his head to see his father's analytical eyes, the swiftness of his irises still slower than the thoughts that surged through his head. His father pinched his chin and tilted his head to the side, exposing the impish purple around his eye.

"The boy who you said did this," Lam said. "Is he from the University?" Vinh opened his mouth to speak—"don't lie."

"Yes."

"What's his name?"

"It doesn't matter, father," Vinh released himself and returned to his duties. "It's in the past."

His father leaned against the sink with a chuckle. "You know better than to tell a history professor to forget about the past."

"I've already learned its lesson," Vinh said. "No need to continue to ponder on it."

"There's always a reason to continue to ponder on it," Lam put a hand on Vinh's shoulder. "History is forever a lens to scrutinize the present and the future. Everything is connected." Vinh's hand dropped as he leaned against the sink.

"I'll shut up now," his father said. "The last thing you need on your break is another lecture. Just with everything that's happened, I fear I kind of miss it."

"Why did you resign?" Vinh asked suddenly. Lam straightened as the pressure pointed against his spine.

"I had a disagreement with Minister Troung," he said. "And I couldn't spend another second around the faculty."

"What kind of disagreement?" Vinh asked. "The things that people are saying about you—"

"Aren't true," his father interrupted. "I resigned because the University was content. Satisfied

with apathy. No efforts were being made to truly teach the students and the school refused to engage with our government. I mean, the listlessness of it all, it was infuriating—maddening! I couldn't stand there another second as my critiques and hypotheses were censored by inaction. So no, I am not siding with the Vukhi, I am trying my hardest to fend them off so we can remain independent. But right now we are caught between two malevolent forces with little trails of escape.”

Vinh was caught between the words, webbed by his father's concern. If his hands weren't full of soap, maybe he would have hugged him. Instead, he stood there, dumbfounded. Like an idiot.

“But you're young,” his father continued. “And you're incisive. You have your whole life ahead of you to create change. It's my job as a father to allow that for you. I am sorry for not telling you these things. I thought it was best to protect you from the dangers of my professional life.”

Fuck the soap.

Vinh grasped his father tightly, pulling him in as if he had risen from the grave. Spending the entire semester in doubt, he hadn't understood his father's intentions. But now it all made sense for Vinh had felt similarly and it was cathartic to know that he wasn't alone. All the taunts and whispers that snuck into his head melted away. Vinh could not have been prouder to be his father's son and—from the way his father accepted the dripping soap along his back and further embraced him—he must have felt the same.