

DARKNESS
CALLS THE
TIGER

A NOVEL OF WORLD WAR II BURMA

JANYRE TROMP



KREGEL
PUBLICATIONS

Darkness Calls the Tiger: A Novel of World War II Burma

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Published by Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel Inc., 2450 Oak Industrial Dr. NE, Grand Rapids, MI 49505. www.kregel.com.

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Published in association with William K. Jensen Literary Agency, 119 Bampton Court, Eugene, OR 97404.

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Cover design by Faceout Studio, Jeff Miller.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Name: Tromp, Janyre, author.

Title: Darkness calls the tiger: a novel of World War II Burma / Janyre Tromp.

Description: First edition. | Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2024.

Identifiers: LCCN 2023048507 (print) | LCCN 2023048508 (ebook)

Subjects: LCGFT: Christian fiction. | Novels.

Classification: LCC PS3620.R668 D37 2024 (print) | LCC PS3620.R668

(ebook) | DDC 813/.6—dc23/eng/20231025

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023048507>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023048508>

ISBN 978-0-8254-4850-8, print

ISBN 978-0-8254-7165-0, epub

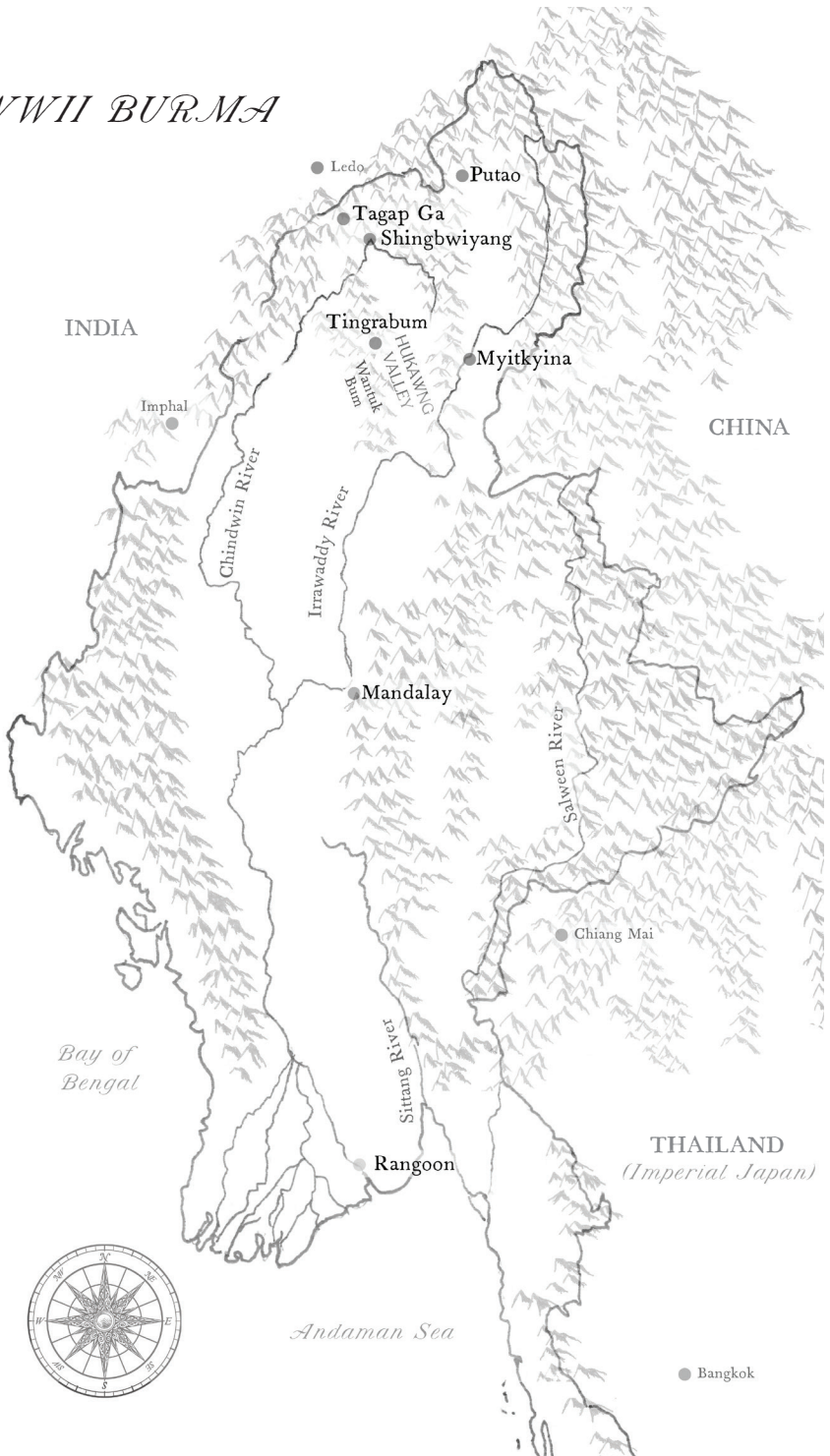
ISBN 978-0-8254-7164-3, Kindle

Printed in the United States of America

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 / 5 4 3 2 1

*To my beloved girl,
you are the very definition of strong and courageous.
I am in awe of you. May you choose to continue to trust and,
in doing so, find the peace no one can take from you.*

WWII BURMA





PART ONE

*Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep;
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take.*

—TRADITIONAL CHILDREN'S PRAYER

Chapter One

1933

The Village of Tingrabum

Kachin State, in the Himalayas of North Burma

THE BEATING OF ANCESTRAL DRUMS throbbed across the mountain, tangling with the rhythm of my thudding heart. Faster and faster, the pounding echoed between the jungle and the solid peak of Nojie Bum, reaching for freedom in the heavens only to collapse in on itself in a helpless chaos.

Despite the roaring fire in front of me, my bare toes were stiff with cold. My back ached from sitting tall on a log—I would rather have squatted with the other girls and joined in their whispers and camaraderie. But that would have been nearly impossible in the American skirt Mama insisted I wear to my ninth spring festival.

My days spent playing in the jungle had slipped through my fingers and trickled into the past. Already Papa expected me to read and write in both English and Latin. And Mama, despite the fact she couldn't even speak Latin, agreed.

Why I must look and act like an American was beyond me. I would never leave my mountain—the place that held me safe like Aunt Nang Lu's arms.

I studied Mama, sitting next to me ramrod straight like a mountain queen, despite her belly full with another baby.

Across the fire a neighbor woman stared at me. Baw Ni's mouth was coerced into a perpetual sneer by a rosy scar, and I swore it moved in silent incantation. Shivering, I wondered what curse she was calling down on me today.

Another animal scream ripped through the jungle, and an answering gasp slipped from my lips.

The *jaiwa* swiveled toward me, as if my movement had called his attention. Fresh blood trailed down the wrinkled face of the traveling storyteller, and I cringed into Mama's side. The black-and-white striped feathers of the old man's headdress lifted, fluttering in the breeze—a bird frantic to escape a snare. Throwing his head back, the *jaiwa* cackled at the starless sky.

I traced my knuckles with a finger, concentrating on the steady motion.

The stench of burned flesh and hide shrouded me, and I swallowed the sting of dinner rising in my throat. I wished we could simply dance and listen to the stories of Aunt Nang Lu's people without witnessing an angry old man burn food in sacrifice to the *nats*.

Papa sat on the distant side of the circle, just inside the ring of light. His white skin glowed against the darker sea of the others I considered family. He saw me and tilted his head in question.

I smiled, knowing the answer. *The nats have no power here.*

I started to tuck a strand of dark hair behind an ear but dropped my hand. Mama ignored my squirms and watched the *jaiwa* in stony silence. But Papa's shoulders were relaxed, sympathy for the storyteller playing on the edges of a small smile. Squaring my shoulders, I watched the drummers play, their wild beating trembling in the flickering firelight.

With one last thud, the drums stopped, and the *jaiwa* lifted his hands. Aided by the flames, his shadow danced across the village path, alive in its own right.

"Ah." The *jaiwa* leered at me. "The tiger-eyed one. A story, perhaps for you, Moran Kai?" The points of his yellow teeth shimmered in the firelight.

“It is okay, little tiger. He cannot hurt you.” Mama’s hand gripped my fingers, but though a smile hovered on her lips, her fingers shook against mine. The jaiwa was no friend of the foreign missionaries or their daughter.

A vicious snicker gurgled low in his throat, and he swayed on his feet.

A log cracked, falling from the fiery heap in front of me, sacrificed to the huge appetite of the fire. Sparks leaped in celebration of their victory. My mother’s adopted sister, Nang Lu, hunkered next to me on the log. Another woman to defy the jaiwa. Mimicking my *amoi*, I fixed my stare on the fire, chin lifted. I would not allow my courage to flee with the setting sun.

The jaiwa frowned at Aunt Nang Lu and wheeled to his audience, gathered from the surrounding villages.

“The legend of the *sharaw*.” His nasally voice penetrated to the edges of the village. The story of the tiger-people. I clenched my fists as the crowd shifted, no doubt watching my amber eyes glow in the firelight. Let them be afraid, then. I summoned anger and lifted my chin higher.

The jaiwa flung his hands out into the darkness, his lilting words summoning the imagination of the people.

“In the darkest night of the jungle,
When the sun turns his back and swallows the moon,
When the sky collapses and the great mountain gasps in
terror,
Sharaw—the tiger—will come.

“She is tiger’s youngest sister, born of fire,
Birthed of midnight and brilliant flame.
Man and beast bound together,
Darkness and Light tormented forever.

“Screaming silence on footed paws she stalks,
Anger and fear twisted, prowling revenge for our people.

DARKNESS CALLS THE TIGER

Slashing through the jungle she roars for justice;
Destruction seethes behind her.

“Consuming herself, she rages;
Ashes cover the jungle, clinging, choking, dying.
When there is no more,
Broken and alone she collapses.

“And there is no more.
No more.”

As the last echo ran into the jungle, the jaiwa glared at me, daring me to challenge his prediction. That, somehow, I would become the twisted beast of darkness.

The circle of girls stared at me, leaning away, as if I might slash out at them. Mama stood, bowing to Papa and the leaders of the gathered villages.

“Thank you for the entertaining story. We bid you good night.” Mama’s fingers tightened on mine as we strode to the mission *basha*, my home.

She swung my arm back and forth, and I wished Papa were on the other side, the two together lifting my whole body between them—my toes reaching to the starlit sky, our happy chatter erasing the images in my mind. But Papa had stayed, smiling at me as we left. He stayed so they would know we were not afraid.



Inside my room, fingers of light from the main fire pit reached my woven bamboo pallet.

Mama groaned as she leaned over me, her hand pressing into her belly, before kissing my forehead.

“My little tiger, do not listen to that old man or Baw Ni. They cling

to the old ways and fear the coming of a new, more true, more powerful way. The sharaw is merely a dream, a flimsy shadow vulnerable to the light of the moon.”

She held her red prayer bag against her as if she were pressing her prayer for me into it. “Sleep well.” She turned and shut my door. I squeezed my eyes closed against the darkness and the murmuring of the village.

There is nothing there. Sharaw is not real.

No matter how many times I repeated Mama’s words, my belly still twisted.

That night I knew the tiger would visit my dreams and repeat the whispers of the villagers, luring me into the fire, where I would join with him and become a strange blend between a tiger and a human—a sharaw.

I tucked my knees in.

“There is no darkness in me. I am a worshiper of *Karai Kasang*. The supreme God will protect me. You have no power over me. No power over me.”

Heat flicked across my back, flames licking at my heels. A taste of my foretold future as destruction seethed behind me, consuming both me and my jungle.

A scream ripped through the basha, and I bolted upright, the fibers of the woven bamboo floor digging into my clenched fingers. The sting of my cry lingered in my throat, the echo of laughter ringing in my ears.

When no one raced to my aid, I knew the others were still at the celebration, and the sounds of joy were theirs. I prayed no one had heard me. Baw Ni would hold up my fears as proof that Papa’s God wasn’t real.

I stole out the door and down the ladder. Papa would know how to destroy the fear creeping inside of me.

At the center of the village, the shadows of my adopted family bent and flickered. Papa sat at the edge of the circle, talking to Mama, his

body leaning into hers. I paced toward them, but then the dark silhouette of the jaiwa danced between us, the shape of hands becoming jaws, swallowing. I shrank away. Perhaps I would be safer at the basha.

My stomach complained, and I rubbed my middle. The only food in the house was hard beans soaking in the cooking room. But a few days ago I had found a handful of red berries on the mountain. Perhaps more had ripened since.

During the day, the jungle was as much my home as the village, but at night . . . I faltered, thinking of the bears, the snakes, the tigers.

My cramping stomach made my decision. Surely my mountain, Nojie Bum, would protect me. I clambered up the ladder and snatched the cooking room lantern along with the bow and arrow Papa had made me and then trotted into the waiting arms of the mountain.

On the far side of the rice paddy field, the darkness embraced me. With the feeble beam barely lighting my feet, I followed the path more from memory than actual sight until the towering mass of elephant grass gave way to an enormous rock overlooking the village—my sanctuary.

Tiny people wavered in the light of the bonfire. But distance swallowed the sound of the celebration so that all I heard were the gentle chirps that formed the language of the jungle.

My bare feet slid silently across tiny rocks, my legs brushing against fingerlike ferns. The maple tree towered ahead, and the berry bushes should be off to the right—above a little opening in the jungle.

A snuffing came from my left.

I stopped, my fingers tripping across the bow strapped to my chest. It sounded almost like a muntjac deer barking. Almost.

I lifted the lantern, willing the light to cast farther into the darkness.

The jungle went quiet, and I eased back, searching for the disturbance. A twig snapped, and I spun.

The lines of trees shifted, and a scream ripped through my throat. I dropped my lantern and flung myself into the nearest tree, scrambling into the limbs. Light from my lantern flickered at the base of the tree.

Sharaw is not real.

The huffing again. Closer this time. Amber eyes reflected the shifting flames—a hunter come for me.

I unslung the bow, my fingers shaking as I nocked an arrow, the tip soaked in the poison from the *upas* tree. My only hope against a tiger.

A shape stalked in the jungle undergrowth, and I released the arrow.

Please run true.

The animal roared with rage and stumbled into the light—the ripping of orange and black stripes stealing the last bit of hope from my heart. It was the largest tiger I had ever seen.

My tiny arrow stuck out from his shoulder and bounced with his loose-limbed march around my tree.

My arrows would never be enough. Even Papa's rifle might not be enough.

I huddled in the protection of the leaves, biting my lip. *Be one with the leaves. One with the leaves.*

He snuffled at the lantern and knocked it over with his paw. The glass shattered, and the flame sputtered before catching in the grasses.

A shout came from the village. Papa. Lantern light sped up the mountain.

Papa. Please hurry.

But the hope rising inside me fell when the tiger lifted his head and leaped into my tree. The enormous trunk shivered with the impact, the ancient rigid strength no match for the tiger.

A limb the size of my arm poked the tiger, and he lashed out, his jaws snapping the branch like a twig. He lifted his head, grinning at me, enjoying the chase. A warm wetness spread from between my legs, and I whimpered.

His roar snatching my mind back, I released another arrow. The creature shrieked as the arrowhead pierced his eye. A huge paw slashed at the tree, nearly dislodging me from my perch. I matched the creature's scream and scrambled to a higher limb.

Please, Karai Kasang. Please.

The tiger shook himself and climbed higher, its claws shredding the flesh of the tree. It groaned under his slowing attack.

I fumbled for another arrow, my quiver tipping, the arrows raining useless to the ground, consumed in the growing fire below.

A sob strangled me, and I eased higher, the branch bending hard against my weight. I launched my bow at the creature, and the tiger's growl vibrated through the tree and into my very bones.

A cry rose from the village, the lights weaving up the path.

They would not make it in time.

"Papa!" My voice cracked under the strength of my fear.

The tiger was so close, I could smell the dead sourness of his breath, see the roundness of his remaining amber eye as it rolled, trying to focus.

Hurry, Papa.

Papa would not fail. Could not fail. I scooted backward along the branch, my legs wrapped under me, whimpering, heaving air in snatches, trying not to look at the tiger but knowing he would attack if I glanced away.

Lights bounced at the base of the hill, shouts echoing around the clearing. The tiger swung his head back and slipped, cracking its lower jaw on the branch. I clung to the limb as the tiger shook his head, slid, fell, crashing to the ground, the poison finally working its deadly task.

Papa burst into the clearing, clutching a lantern in one hand and a shotgun in the other. "Kailyn?" The light landed on the tiger. "Dear Lord. Kailyn."



Somehow the villagers smothered the fire licking the dry grasses, and Papa eased my hands, legs, body off the branch, tucking me in his arms. His heart beat slow and steady against my cheek, not quite drowning out the whispers of the villagers.

Over Papa's shoulder, I watched a group dragging the dead tiger down the mountain. They would skin it and give me the pelt—a reminder of conquering the beast. Of defeating the king of the jungle—a tiger.

JANYRE TROMP

Papa sat me in front of our home's chief fire pit, a blanket over my shoulders. Mama set a bowl of water in front of me and wiped away the tiny streams of blood covering my body. I stared at my reflection in the bowl, my teardrops battering the water's surface. Everyone knew the only animal who could face a tiger and survive was another tiger.

I touched the surface of the water, shattering my image.

Mama had promised there was no truth in the legend of the sharaw. But I'd stood against the tiger and won.

Perhaps the jaiwa had been right. I shivered under the heavy blanket.

"You are safe, little tiger," Mama whispered into my hair. "There is no great darkness in you or this world."

I laid my ear against Mama's giant belly, her dark hair tangling in my own. Her stomach tightened, and Mama groaned, bending against the obvious pain.

It had been the first and last time Mama was wrong.

Chapter Two

February 1942

Tingrabum

I SAT HUNCHED IN THE shade of the enormous teak tree at the edge of the village. The sun stretched high, the sky as blank as the slate on my knees. It was the beginning of dry season, and the air trembled from the heat. The spicy scent of Aunt Nang Lu's curry simmering next door mixed with the heavy aroma of the jungle plants. There was no better smell.

Down the mountain, the boys played some sort of game with the new missionary, Ryan McDonough. They hit a knot of fabric with a stick and ran in circles, shouting to one another as the others ran to catch the knot.

The tall, narrow basket behind my back pressed on my shoulders and reminded me of my duties. A woman's basket was unbearably un-gainly in the forest. But I dared not take it off and lose anything in it, least of all my books.

Little Tu Lum caught the makeshift ball, and Ryan's loud American guffaw burst across the forest. All the boys called to Tu Lum, patting him on the back—all but Baw Gun. He threw the stick on the ground and stalked into the jungle.

Far older than the others at the school, Baw Gun might even have surpassed my own eighteen years. Old enough to take a wife and be re-

sponsible for his own home instead of playing with schoolboys. But that was Baw Gun. Never one to do as he should. Rumor said he planned to join the Burmese army in the south—trading his heritage for money. Though his mother, Baw Ni, and most of the villagers would be upset, his leaving would be no true loss.

Ryan clapped, signaling the end of the game. The students jumped and ran to the open-sided porch of the mission school, no doubt expecting harsh words and perhaps the sting of a switch if they dawdled. Papa had trained the students well. Ducking under the thatched roof that hung like the long hair of a wild dog, Ryan chuckled, the gentle sound floating into the sudden silence. He never carried a switch.

I dragged my attention back to the Latin book I'd abandoned in the dust and sighed. Latin held no appeal, despite Papa's vigorous determination to convince me otherwise. I traced the thin scabs beaten into the soft palms of my hands, a reminder of how much he had changed since Mama had left us for Karai Kasang.

Papa would ask Ryan if I had done my work, and the new missionary would never lie, even for me, even when my schooling seemed pointless. Who needed Latin to either keep my father's house or be sent to America to marry and do the same for some stranger? Not a single other girl in the village had been subjected to school.

Still, Ryan would test me this afternoon, but as the boys quieted for more learning, I doodled sketches of monkeys and leaves instead of conjugating verbs. Latin was nearly as useless as I was.

At some point Papa would tire of thrashing me and fulfill his threat to send me to my grandparents in America.

And Mama wasn't here to stop him.

I ran my thumb over Mama's woven red pouch hanging from my neck. It bulged with the secret of a white stone from the river. Fear roiled in my belly, and I rubbed the stone again, pushing my fear into its surface.

Please, Karai Kasang. Don't let Papa send me away. Don't make me leave home.

The John Moran who had snuggled his daughter after a tiger attack

had died with Mama, burned in her funeral pyre. I knew only the papa who raged with the angry, powerful God throwing sinners into the pit of hell's fire. I had memorized the verses saying Karai Kasang loved me, but it was Papa's angry eyes I saw when I imagined God on heaven's throne.

The rock in my hand warmed, but no answering rumble from heaven interrupted the chirping jungle insects. No sign that Karai Kasang listened or cared at all. I dropped the rock into the pouch around my neck and wiped the sketch of a tree monkey from my slate. I needed to concentrate, prove to Papa I was helpful to the mission, that maybe I could put my schooling to work and teach.

From the school, Ryan's instructions rose and fell, stumbling over Kachin phrases and teetering on the edge of horrific offense.

The missionary had been here since the beginning of last rainy season, almost a year, but he was still a bumbling bear in a tiger's lair. Papa said Ryan would never learn, never be able to run the mission if we kept intervening when he failed. But somehow the man with a sloppy grin had won everyone's goodwill. Something I could not seem to do.

The boys bent over their work, and Ryan peered into the jungle before trotting to the village center, little Tu Lum shadowing the missionary. Dust from the road puffed from under Ryan's feet and coated his trousers.

I sighed, flipped the worn pages of my Latin book to the assigned page, and wrote the first verb on my slate, reciting the conjugations under my breath.

A movement caught my eye just before Baw Gun stepped into the path on the opposite side of the village from the mission. His dark skin, the color of polished teak, smoothed across high cheekbones. He studied the school, scowling, watching Ryan. The muscles in his arms flexed, straining against his dirt-streaked shirt. A magnificent jaguar prowling.

Baw Gun slipped into the nearest basha and came out moments later, arms loaded with a basket, obviously heavy—likely with things that did not belong to him.

I swallowed, shrinking behind the edges of a palm leaf. Time to disappear. I'd finish my Latin later.

A shout made Baw Gun turn.

Little Tu Lum shot out from under a nearby palm tree. "I saw you take that food. Put it back!"

Baw Gun sneered and pounced on Tu Lum, twisting his skinny arm. "Or what, little mongrel? Who would believe an abandoned pup over me?"

My fingers tightened around my slate. *How dare he?*

I jumped to my feet but then hesitated. Ryan might believe Tu Lum and me. Even Papa might. But the villagers? We both were, at best, inconveniences for them. At worst, the epitome of bad luck.

How I wished I had my bow or at least the long *dah* knife Papa made me leave at the mission. I would make Baw Gun do as he ought. But then Papa would lose face. I shifted. *What would Papa want me to do?*

Tu Lum's yelp propelled me forward, a heavy stone in my hand. The boy's wide eyes flitted to mine, pleading with me. Whirling, Baw Gun followed Tu Lum's glance. Baw Gun licked his lips and shoved Tu Lum away.

Baw Gun's face lit in a wicked smirk.

A blush crept up my neck as I realized I was alone and had drawn attention to myself, inviting a man to notice me. Baw Gun of all people. This was why Papa never allowed me in school with the boys. I spun and scurried toward my hiding spot.

When a dark hand seized my shoulder, I jumped, the rock slipping from my fingers, upsetting my basket before thumping to the dirt.

Baw Gun's body filled my vision. I was trapped between the post of the house and my tormentor. Baw Gun had hunted me for as long as I remembered. His fists were the ones that had given me my first black eye, and his words, joined with his mother's, that led the others in their whispers—tiger-woman, forever cursed.

"Moran Kai. A beautiful tiger lily should never be left to wilt on her own."

My knees shook as his calloused fingers traced my cheek and trailed down my neck. I had no weapons. No one to protect me.

I should run, but my feet had grown roots and my lungs refused to scream.

Baw Gun set down the basket, his grin growing, and yanked me into his chest, trapping my arms.

“Ryan sent me to find you,” Tu Lum squeaked.

“Let him come.” Baw Gun’s whisper, reeking of fish, crept across the hair on my neck. “I will taste the flower before I leave, and what will the fool do about it?”

My shudder drew a low bark.

“You will learn to like it . . . eventually.”

When his lips touched my neck, fear surged through my body, and I rammed a knee into his groin. Baw Gun folded across his injury, but his grip tightened. As he struggled to regain his breath, his dark eyes hardened. His nose flared—the panther, angry now, gathered to attack.

Pain burst across my cheek before I even realized he had struck. Again and again, his fists blurring in their attack. I raised my free hand to protect myself and wrenched around, my shoulder protesting, my ears ringing, my tears frozen in shock.

“I am glad you found Kailyn for me.” Ryan’s voice—low, hard, and unarguably in charge—stopped the barrage.

But Baw Gun still trapped my trembling arm behind me, shoving me between himself and the missionary.

“She needs to run an errand for me.” Ryan towered over Baw Gun and fingered the wickedly sharp dah strapped across his chest.

Would Baw Gun attack the bear of a missionary?

I stiffened as Baw Gun leaned into my back. “You will pay for interfering. You and that mongrel boy.”

What had I done?

“Do not fear.” Baw Gun spun me, his hand tracing my flat chest, narrow hips, and back up my chalk-dusted fingers and scrawny arm. “No one wants a pale-faced tiger-girl. You are almost beautiful . . . almost.” He shoved me backward.

I tripped over my basket, sprawling in the dirt, the wide skirt tangling in my legs. The basket spun, scattering dust, wobbling, stopping in the grass.

My cheeks burned in shame, and tears flowed down my battered face as I shoved my belongings into the basket, crushing the cascade of yellow *paduak* blossoms I had gathered, and then skittered into the jungle. Ryan called to me as he stumbled on the path behind me, but I clambered into a tree and disappeared into the embrace of my jungle.



All afternoon Ryan forced himself to concentrate on the boys—encouraging them, allowing them to explore and learn, while still keeping some semblance of order. But he struggled to concentrate. Kai had run into the jungle again. He couldn't blame her.

John wouldn't let her anywhere near the school while the boys were there. But it was a waste not to have her teaching. Capable female teachers had taught in the States for years. Why not at Kachin schools?

Tu Lum's squeals of delight broke through the general noise as one of the other boys dove to make a spectacular catch in the outfield. Ryan clapped and joined in the cheering, calling the teams in for another lesson. Tu Lum grinned and raced to Ryan. The dah hanging across his small chest clattered against a wooden toy gun slung over one shoulder and the hunting knife hanging from his belt. The boy reminded him of a miniature bandit from the dime novels back home—smooth, broad face, and dark straight hair. But the boy was more mischief-maker than marauder, unlike some of the other village boys.

Ryan scanned behind him, wondering if Baw Gun was plotting his revenge. Maybe Kailyn would be better off in America. At least there she wouldn't have the threat of being carried off and made a "wife" without ceremony or permission. He shook the thought from his head. There wasn't anywhere truly safe. He knew that better than most.

The day raced past in a blur of recitations and chatter until Nojje Bum's peak was half covered in the coming night.

Ryan's entire body ached as he wandered up the path to the mission, his mouth watering at the smell of curry wafting from the village. He was nearly home when Tu Lum raced around a corner.

"Have you seen Kai?"

Ryan glanced to the darkening jungle. "She's not home?"

Tu Lum peered over his shoulder, as if hoping she'd materialize on the path. "The Jungle Light is waiting for his dinner."

And John didn't like waiting for anything. "Ask Nang Lu to bring dinner, then you search on her sanctuary." Ryan pointed to the bare overhang. "I'll follow the trail down the mountain."

Surely she wasn't far.

The elephant grass edging the path swayed in the breeze, and the sharp blades dipped, narrowing Ryan's way, increasing the darkness, reaching toward him. He'd been walking long enough that he'd have to turn back soon when a strange scream filtered through the thick jungle canopy. He hesitated. It sounded almost human.

How close was it?

His skin crawling, he searched for the source of the sound.

The jaiwa's stories flitted through his mind—capricious nats tormenting the mortal world—and twisted through whispers of cannibals attacking the village and vengefully slaughtering neighbors for sport. Or was it . . . Baw Gun?

Another scream sent him running, slipping down the trail. He reached out to catch himself on the first tangled bamboo sacrifice pole, but he yanked his fingers back, as if a deadly krait snake were coiled at the top. No salvation would be found there.

He had nearly reached the prayer posts when a person shot out of the jungle and rammed into him, slamming him to the ground. The person slashed razor-sharp claws into Ryan's skin. Ryan snatched one hand and then the other and dragged the stranger to his feet.

"What in heaven's . . ."

The stranger jerked up.

"Kailyn?"

She stilled and threw herself into his arms. A chuckle exploded

through Ryan—relief tangled with amusement. He'd never seen her afraid on the mountain before.

"Shush. It's okay. I'm here." He settled her on her feet before she could object to his arms around her, but he still clasped one hand in his, holding her attention. "Are you okay?"

Kai nodded, and Ryan searched her face and bare arms for signs of harm, while she stared at the ground—whether out of fear or respect, Ryan didn't know. A few scratches spread across her cheeks, but she seemed unharmed. What were the screams?

"I've been searching for you for more than an hour."

"I'm sorry. I fell asleep."

And that explained it. Ryan had woken more than once to her unnerving cry in the night. He'd wondered what terrified her, had even asked once. But instead of helping his daughter, John had punished Kailyn for waking the new missionary.

"We need to get home before your father starts looking too."

Her eyes widened before she whipped around and dragged him down the path.

"Slow down, Kai. I'd prefer not to go head over heels."

Kai stopped, but not for him. Above them, the sky stretched enormous, with dark purples etched across a glowing pink. The brilliant color reflected on Kai's skin, and the fear drained from her face. Calm. Something Ryan rarely saw in the missionary's daughter.

He stepped back, letting her take her time. He'd think of some excuse to tell John about their late appearance.

Sometimes it's worth taking a breath. Ma had been right about that.

So much about Kai reminded him of home, and yet she was so different from anyone he'd ever encountered before. Her education, flawless English, and dark-brown waves were decidedly American, and her Italian heritage leaked through in her toasted skin. With her hair wrapped in a scarf, she almost appeared to be part of her adopted home. But the unusual amber color of her eyes gave her an otherworldly aura.

"Maybe you could remember this sky and draw it for me tomorrow. Or maybe you can re-create the monkey you drew on your slate earlier."

Kai drew a breath through her teeth and swung toward him, dropping his hand. "You can't tell Papa."

Ryan took a deep breath. He'd been teasing, like he would have pestered his sister. But he'd forgotten the nature of things.

He had no right to question John. Still, Ryan couldn't understand the man's harshness. His daughter was beyond brilliant. The young woman read ancient Greek poems, Shakespeare, and Augustine with as much ease as she scampered through the jungle. He'd never met anyone like her, and she had no idea how special she was. John had no idea how special she was. The whole situation made no sense.

And yet his job was to be sure she did her schoolwork and not spend all day drawing or traipsing through the jungle.

"We'll let your test scores speak for themselves." He nudged her shoulder. Her secret was safe with him, would always be safe with him. "Trust me?"

Kai rolled her bottom lip between her teeth, obviously debating. But she nodded and lumbered up the path. Slower this time. By the time they reached the village entrance, Tingrabum was empty, everyone inside their homes for the night.

Just as they stepped through the gate, Tu Lum trotted around the corner and threw himself into Kai's arms.

Kai murmured something to the boy, and he wandered off toward Nang Lu's basha. Ryan trailed Kai as she wove through the village and past the pigs under the porch of the mission.

Ryan tripped up the ladder of the mission as Kai burst through the narrow door. Home.

Smoke from the indoor fire pits burned Ryan's lungs, even from the doorway. He squinted, adjusting to the gloom of the windowless room.

"Kailyn Marie Moran, you are late." John stepped around the chief fire pit of the family room, emerging out of the haze like the devil himself. His eyes sparking, the anger there hot enough to start its own fire. "And I don't suppose you finished your Latin . . ."

In two long strides, the missionary stood in front of his daughter. Grasping her chin, he forced her to face him. From across the room,

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Ryan could see the dents in her cheeks, could nearly taste the blood in his own mouth.

Ryan's fist tightened on the doorframe, his body trembling against the effort to restrain himself. He wasn't her father. Wasn't her brother. Wasn't her protector.

"Where is that fool Ryan? What has happened?"

Kai gasped, her body weaving a moment before she collapsed to the floor.