

One Tongue Tiger

by Ka Vang

The stars exploded in a million pieces above the jungle's green canopy. Their broken pieces flickered and whistled as they rained on his yellow and black fur, burning him on contact. But he did not feel pain. It is like asking granite if it feels pain when the earth shifts and breaks it in half.

His onyx eyes saw through night's black blanket. He watched patiently for his opportunity to eat. Since the war began, he had hunted nightly. Most of his victims were soldiers who already feared death, which made them easy prey. The hunt had become routine, even boring for him. But the soldier he watched tonight did not fear death. Colonel Chue Chang Moua would be a challenge.

Through his binoculars, the colonel saw the outlines of ridges, and shimmering purple karsts, but he did not see the Tiger. Flares of white phosphorous illuminated the sky so Chue Chang saw Communist soldiers who surrounded the city of Long Cheng, a sprawling CIA military airfield in northern Laos. The thunder of American bombs broke the night into jagged stripes as the American aircraft probed the ancient fields for their hidden enemy. From the distance, fools might mistake the scene for something beautiful, thought both the Tiger and Colonel.

Since the beginning of the year the Viet Cong and Pathet Lao forces had shelled the town while their foot soldiers crept close, hoping to crawl into the base. Thousands of Hmong lived and worked for the Americans in Long Cheng, Americans who weren't even supposed to be there.

The Hmong fought America's secret dirty war in Laos, while the world focused on Vietnam. This war was not on paper, only spoken about in the back corridors of the Pentagon.

The Communists labored to capture Long Cheng, to

drive the white giants out of Laos. After nearly two decades of fighting, Long Cheng was now more of a prize than the capitol of Vientiane. The enemy would be surprised when all they found were shacks made from flattened aviation petrol drums, USAID cast-off rice bags, and an assortment of used military scraps, Chue Chang thought. His job was to repel the enemy's ground attack.

A ripple of explosions went off near the eastern horizon, and he spotted shadows moving around the ridge, just west of his position. Others would have missed it, but not Chue Chang. A skilled soldier, his friends said he could see in the dark, while his foes claimed he used black magic to enhance his skills. The colonel jotted the coordinates on a piece of paper and handed them to a young major so they could start firing at that position.

Sue Vue saluted his commander and sauntered away to do his bidding. The major came back minutes later with a man, who Chue Chang did not recognize.

"Sir," said his second-in-command. "There is a soldier here to see you."

"I'm busy right now," said the colonel, without looking away from the binoculars.

"The soldier said he is from your village and has a message from your younger brother," replied Sue. "It's about your wife and the baby."

Chue Chang took the soldier into his tent, and offered him a drink. The shabbily dressed man eagerly accepted the rice moonshine. Chue Chang swung the glass cup, allowing the liquor to burn down his throat.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I don't have a lot of time," he said. "What's the message?"

"Your brother has asked me to tell you that you have a boy," the man said, wincing from the drink. Chue Chang was elated, but did not show it. Pa Kou, his wife, had wanted a child for a long time, but he was always away