

Khath's body hit the ground before his mind registered the reason for it, so ingrained was his response to gunfire. Three years of fighting the Khmer Rouge in his native Cambodia had left an indelible imprint on body and soul.

Tasting dirt, breathing dust, Khath lay still for a moment listening for the whine of bullets overhead, the shredding of vegetation, the thud of lead embedding itself in wood, the spattering rain of dirt thrown up by a near miss burrowing into the earth. All was quiet in his immediate vicinity, but not too far away, he heard more shooting, shouted commands, and cries of protest, pain and fear. Here? In broad daylight?

He heard the sound of approaching voices and watched a group of men in ragged shorts and bare feet run past on the trail, heading toward the shots, sporadic now, slowly dying away like the hopes of so many in this refugee camp.

Khath's days had been free of gunfire in the fourteen months since he and his brother Pra Chhay arrived at Khao I Dang Refugee Holding Center in Thailand. Located a few miles west of the Cambodian border, the camp was staffed by Thai government officers and military personnel, and many foreign volunteers. Khao I Dang in daytime had been relatively safe, a haven for refugees seeking shelter and a chance for a new life.

But at night, after the foreign aid workers left the camp, Khao I Dang was a dangerous place. From the watchtower, the night guards routinely swept the perimeter wire with staccato bursts from their automatic weapons, and in the early mornings Khath often saw bodies scattered along the fence. The guards said those who tried to slip illegally into the camp at night were Khmer Rouge, but Khath wondered. In the dark, one starving Cambodian face looked like any other—how could they tell?

Cautiously, Khath stood and continued down the path toward the camp's administrative buildings, senses alert. Near the open receiving area adjacent to the camp gates, a large throng of refugees milled about, churning up billowing clouds of dust. Most had wound cotton scarves around their noses and mouths to keep their lungs free of the choking powder; dry cough was already rampant in the camp. Loudspeakers mounted on tall poles around the receiving area crackled on overhead, the sound quality distorted and tinny: *Return to your scheduled activities. Do not approach the perimeter fence. Clear the area immediately.*

Khath reached the outer edge of the crowd and stopped an old woman who was walking away, a listless child in her arms.

"Tell me, elder sister. What happened?" he said. "Are we under attack? Is it the Khmer Rouge?"

The woman looked at him. "I don't know." She waved a hand vaguely. "They shut the gates." She set the child down on the ground where it stood passively, one dirty hand grasping a

fold of the woman's wrapped skirt. The woman placed her hands on the small of her back and rubbed absently. Her feet hung over the edges of flip-flops meant for a smaller foot, perhaps one not so flattened by years of field labor and a starvation diet of rice gruel.

Khath wondered suddenly how old she was. He had used the polite form of address meant for an elder, but everyone in this camp looked old beyond their years, even the children.

Even me, he thought. I am not yet 40 years old, yet my face is withered like a dried-out mango. He dug in his pocket and found the remnants of a box of candied ginger, holding it out to the woman. "For your child," he said.

Edging deeper into the crowd, Khath moved toward the gates until he was blocked by an armed Thai guard. Beyond the soldier, through the iron gates Khath could see two men, supporting a companion who limped between them, making their way slowly back toward the border. The injured man's right foot dragged behind him, shoeless, scraping against the hard-packed dirt road leading to Cambodia. Khath looked away, his brain already too full of accidental images of the everyday pains of warfare. "I try not to notice them; they torment me so," he had said just yesterday to his older brother Pra Chhay, a Buddhist monk and scholar. "Can you help me not to see them?" But Pra Chhay had no satisfactory answers for him.

Khath risked a sidelong look at the soldier blocking his way. Some of the guards were kind, showing compassion for the refugees they were there to protect. Others were cruel and preyed in unspeakable ways on the refugees' vulnerability. Most, like this one, seemed simply to be obeying orders. Not sensing active hostility from the man, Khath ventured a question.

"Khmer Rouge?" he asked, nodding toward the camp gates. Who else would draw the guards' gunfire at this time of day?

The soldier, a mere boy really, gave a faint shake of his head, but that was all. "Clear the area," he said, gesturing toward Khath with his weapon. The conversation was over.

Khath turned away from the soldier and walked toward the thatched bamboo structures housing the offices of the camp commander, the International Red Cross, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and numerous other humanitarian agencies that provided food, medicine and instruction to the residents of the camp. Usually, the veranda was deserted when Khath made his daily pilgrimage to these buildings, but not today.

Drawn by the commotion at the gates, foreign aid workers lined the railing, talking loudly and waving their hands. *What are they saying? What has happened?* The jabber of foreign tongues swelled around Khath as he neared the building, his sense of unease growing. He could tell that these people were upset, anger making their pink faces redder and sweatier than usual.

Keeping to the back edge of the veranda away from the

foreigners, Khath made his way toward the cork boards outside the door of the Red Cross office. Today, as it had every day for the last 14 months, his heart beat faster as he neared the boards. Hope, wrapped with fear, squeezed his lungs and forced quick, shallow breaths from his chest. He averted his gaze as he approached the boards and stared at the floor, watching his feet carry him toward great joy or crushing disappointment depending on what he found posted on the cork surface. Centering himself in front of the boards, he squared his shoulders, murmured a prayer and raised his eyes. His pent up breath escaped in a whoosh as he stared, shocked, at nothing. The lists were not there.

Khath passed a hand over his face and looked again. No lists. He stepped back, uncomprehending, then tapped on the Red Cross door frame before entering the room where a lone worker sat typing at a desk. Her yellow hair was tied back from her forehead in a ponytail that swung free from high on the crown of her head in the manner of a schoolgirl, though the lines on her face showed she was long past those days. She did not look up until Khath coughed politely.

“Yes? Can I help you?” she said.

Khath kept his eyes lowered in respect. “The names,” he mumbled, pointing toward the door.

“Excuse me?”

Anxiously searching his mind for the English words, Khath tried again. “Every day, I come. Look names. Today, not.”

The woman’s face cleared. “Oh,” she said, and then launched into rapid-fire English for several moments.

Khath watched her lips moving as the sounds tumbled from her mouth. He noticed she had large teeth, very straight and white, evenly spaced with no gaps. Not like refugee teeth. When she stopped speaking, he looked at her helplessly. “Sorry?”

She pointed to a chair against the wall. “Sit. Please,” she said. She walked out the door and to Khath’s relief soon returned, followed by one of the camp interpreters.

The young Cambodian greeted Khath politely and introduced himself as Youk. “I was just on my way to the canteen for lunch,” he said. “Walk with me, and I will tell you what I know.” He lit a cigarette as they made their way out of the building. “I recognize you. You come every day to check the Unaccompanied Minors List for new children who have been registered with the Red Cross.”

Khath nodded. “My two daughters, Kamala and Sitha are missing. I pray to find their names on the list.”

The interpreter glanced at Khath. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I hope one day they will come. What are their full names?” He drew a small pad and pencil from the breast pocket of his shirt and made a note, promising Khath that he would watch the lists of arrivals. “When did you last see your daughters?” he asked.

“About eighteen months after Phnom Penh fell,” Khath

said. "Our work unit was being moved from Khompong Cham to Phnom Bros. The Khmer Rouge took the children to a youth work brigade to dig irrigation ditches." Khath felt his facial muscles tense at the memory and a twitch began to plague his left eye. "My daughters were eight and ten years old, but their bodies were so small, with stick legs and big bellies. There was so little food by then..." He stopped walking and turned to face the interpreter. "How could they expect such little girls to work so hard?"

Youk let the question pass. "Phnom Penh fell in 1975. You last saw your daughters in 1977? Four years ago?"

Khath nodded, hating the sound of defeat that had crept into Youk's voice. Four years wasn't such a very long time, was it? "I searched for them in Cambodia in 1979 when the Vietnamese soldiers drove the Khmer Rouge into the jungles. For almost a year, my brother and I went from village to village, searching the streets and orphanages. We checked the border camps as well when it was safe to do so."

"Any trace of them? Any sign at all? Were you able to find where the Khmer Rouge took them?"

Khath shook his head and sighed heavily. "No, nothing. But I always felt we should go to the next village, and the next. Because they could always be there, at the next village. Or the one after." Khath saw the now familiar pitying expression begin to spread itself over Youk's face and dropped his eyes. "I would know if they were dead," he said defensively.

They stood outside the canteen, an open air thatched roof pavilion filled with orderly rows of eight-foot tables and plastic chairs. Around the edges of the pavilion, Thai vendors sold snacks, beverages and meals, mostly to foreign aid workers. There was no electricity in the canteen. Hot meals were made with single burner stoves fueled by portable propane tanks; refrigeration consisted of bins of ice, refreshed twice daily.

"We will continue to watch for their names," Youk said. "But I am afraid that there will be no more lists for a while."

"What do you mean, no more lists?" Khath asked.

"Well," Youk said. "You heard the shooting this morning?"

"I thought it was Khmer Rouge attacking the camp like they do at the border," Khath said.

Youk shook his head. "No, the Khmer Rouge would not dare to enter Thailand to attack Khao I Dang."

Tell that to the guards, Khath thought. Obviously, this boy went home at night with the foreign aid workers, even if he was Cambodian. He'd not seen the bodies outside the fence in the early morning hours. Of course he hadn't. The guards always carted them away before the foreigners returned to camp. Khath envied the boy his innocence. "Then what was the commotion this morning?" he asked. "Who were they shooting at?"

Youk looked uncomfortable. He cleared his throat. "You know that Khao I Dang is filled to overflowing—over 100,000

people, yet still more refugees come,” he said. “Now that the camp is officially closed, the refugees bribe the supply truck drivers or even climb into the trucks when the drivers aren’t watching. Other countries are too slow to accept our people for resettlement.” Youk tossed his spent cigarette on the dirt, then paused to grind it into the earth. “So now Thailand is strictly enforcing its policy not to accept any more refugees. This morning, a large group was caught sneaking through with a supply truck. Once inside, the guards pushed them back to the gates but they refused to leave.”

Khath stared at Youk, aghast. “The guards were shooting at the refugees?” he asked. An image of the man with the dragging foot flashed in his mind.

Youk lit another cigarette. “Not exactly,” he explained. “They aimed high. I heard the commander tell the soldiers to aim above their heads. Just to frighten them back to Cambodia.”

“But the Khmer Rouge will kill them for trying to escape!” Khath stared at Youk angrily.

Youk nodded his head. “I know. It is a terrible situation. But this is all political, don’t you see? Once the international news gets wind of this, it will force other countries to take more refugees for resettlement. At least, that is what the Thai government is hoping to accomplish.”

“No. This can’t be. It is too cruel.” Khath was filled with the horror of what awaited any returning refugee unfortunate enough to be caught by the Khmer Rouge forces still hiding in the border jungles. It was forbidden to try to escape to Thailand and the Khmer Rouge liked to make examples of those who disobeyed the rules. Tears filled his eyes. What if his girls tried to come to Khao I Dang now? They would die, if not at the hands of the Khmer Rouge, then surely from pure despair. “Thailand is supposed to help us,” he cried. “Not send us back to be murdered.”

Youk reached out a soothing hand, but Khath backed away from him. “How long?” he asked, his voice hoarse. “How long will the borders remain closed? How many of us must die before we’re allowed back in?”

Youk took a quick drag on the cigarette, looking down and away as he blew the smoke from his lungs. “I don’t know. No one knows. We must hope for the best outcome,” he said, still looking at the ground. “Please,” Youk gestured toward the canteen. “Come drink some tea with me and calm yourself. I’ve done wrong to upset you like this.”

Khath studied the young man for a moment. No one who had lived under the harsh rule of the Khmer Rouge could be so matter-of-fact about this. “You’ve been away from Cambodia for a long time, haven’t you?”

Youk blushed. “My father was a diplomat. He sent me to France to study when the war broke out, and would not let me return. He was killed when the Khmer Rouge captured Phnom

Penh.”

Khath nodded. Many wealthy Cambodians sent their children abroad to keep them safe when the war drew too near. Those who didn't probably regretted it until their dying breath, which, for them, usually occurred not long after the Khmer Rouge entered a town.

“Your father was a wise man,” he said to Youk. “But I have no time to drink tea. This new policy of Thailand...it changes everything.”

Two

“Go back to Cambodia?” Pra Chhay stared at Khath with puzzled eyes.

Khath nodded. “What choice do we have, brother?” he said. “Our people are being forced back across the border into the arms of the Khmer Rouge. My daughters will have no chance now to get into Khao I Dang. We must go back to continue our search for them.”

Pra Chhay, dressed in saffron monk's robes and cracked rubber sandals, stood framed by the setting sun outside the open doorway of the bamboo and thatch shelter he shared with Khath and five other families. The odor of too many human bodies crowded into a small living space hung heavy in the air spilling across the threshold.

The rectangular shelter was partitioned by side walls into six open-faced cubicles, three to a side, facing a center corridor running the length of the shelter. There was no privacy other than what could be attained by turning one's back to the open side of one's cubicle or crawling inside a mosquito net hung over the thin kapok sleeping mattresses on the floor. The shelter's only doors were located at each end of the central corridor, opening directly to the outside.

With no way to secure themselves or their meagre belongings, the refugees lived in helpless fear of night visits by bored Thai soldiers, whose transgressions ranged from theft to rape. Pra Chhay and Khath occupied an end cubicle by the door, making them even more vulnerable to unwanted attention from the soldiers, but because of Pra Chhay's position as a monk, they were usually left alone.

As Pra Chhay slipped his calloused feet out of his sandals, stepping barefoot into the corridor, a gentle breeze puffed out the hem of his robes and blew camp dust into the shelter. Khath motioned to Pra Chhay to shut the door. Careful not to waste a drop of the day's ration of precious water, he barely moistened the corner of a rag and ran it over random surfaces in their cubicle that might attract and harbor dust: the wooden altar in the corner, the cracks and edges of the bamboo slats that

formed the walls of the hut, the straw mats that covered the floor. A squat wooden bench, left behind by the prior resident, completed the amenities of the living space.

Pra Chhay took off his outer layer of robes and hung them on a sliver of bamboo pulled out from the wall to serve as a peg for clothing. Turning, he watched Khath rub his cloth over the wooden bench, back and forth, back and forth, harder and harder, the knuckles gripping the cloth turning white with effort.

“Khath, stop it. You will polish our only seat away to nothing,” Pra Chhay said. “Tell me exactly what you heard today that makes you say we must return to Cambodia.” The monk settled himself comfortably on the floor.

With an effort, Khath slowed his rubbing and carefully folded the rag and laid it on his lap. His eyes followed the tiny particles now dancing in the single ray of golden sun that slipped through the crack between the outer door and its frame. He laced his fingers tightly together to stop their reaching for the rag as, mesmerized, he watched the motes settle onto the areas he had just cleaned. The sight of dust on surfaces where it ought not to be was still intolerable to Khath, though nearly six years had passed since his obsession was born on the day the Khmer Rouge killed his wife and son.

“Silence that boy,” the soldier had said to his wife on that awful day. Khieu gathered their son Bunchan into her arms, but how is one to soothe a toddler who cries from hunger when there is no food? Khath, Khieu and their three children had been walking for three days in the heat and humidity, shoulder to shoulder with thousands of other refugees inching their way out of Phnom Penh by order of the Khmer Rouge. Already hunger, thirst and exhaustion had thinned their ranks: the elderly and the ill simply dropped along the sides of the road, patiently awaiting the mercy of death.

Given only minutes to prepare for their exodus, the food Khath and his family carried was gone in a day. After that, they bought, scavenged and bartered for whatever nourishment they could find along the way. Now, they stood next in line before a table of grim-faced cadres in the simple uniform of the Khmer Rouge: black cotton shirts and pants with *keramas*, red-checkered scarves, wound around their heads or necks. The cadres were checking identity papers and quizzing the refugees about their prior occupations.

Bunchan’s incessant crying enraged the soldier. “Silence him or I will,” he warned Khieu.

Khath saw the man’s tight lips and clenched jaw and stepped between his wife and the soldier, doing his best both to shield his family and appease the angry cadre. “Please,” Khath said. “If you could spare just a few grains of rice. Or perhaps there is some place nearby I could buy or trade for food. I will go immediately. The child is hungry, that’s all.”

Khieu’s frantic attempts to calm Bunchan had the opposite

effect. Red faced, the toddler screamed his hunger to the skies above.

The soldier flicked his eyes to one side, turning slightly. Following his gaze, Khath saw a man standing a little apart from the check-point, watching the scene impassively. As Khath waited, his heart thudding inside his chest like the heavy, dread beat of a death knell, he saw the man glance at the position of the sun and cast a look at the road behind Khath, densely packed with men, women and children yet to be processed through the checkpoint.

The man rubbed his left jawline as though he had a toothache, but perhaps it was his ear, missing its earlobe, which was causing the pain. At any rate, he frowned and seemed to come to some sort of decision, for he looked at the soldier and gave a barely perceptible nod.

At that, the soldier moved quickly, brushing past Khath and yanking Bunchan from Khieu's arms. "You had your chance," he said to Khieu, and began striding toward a large tree not far off the side of the road, the bawling toddler slung under his arm.

"My baby! Give me my baby!" Khieu screamed and rushed after the soldier, grabbing at Bunchan, whose angry howls had turned to terrified shrieks.

Khath's daughters, crying, tried to run after their mother but Khath held them back. A terrible dread filled his heart as he watched the scene rapidly unfolding before him for he knew that the Khmer Rouge were ruthless when crossed. He pressed the girls' faces to his body to shield them from what he feared would follow.

The soldier swung his rifle and knocked Khieu to the ground where she sprawled, tears streaming down her face, her arms reaching for Bunchan. She grabbed for the soldier's leg and held on, moaning "My son. Please, oh please give me back my son."

Struggling to manage both his weapon and the squirming child, the soldier's face darkened in anger; his eyes narrowed. He drew himself up, trying to shake Khieu off of his leg.

Khath stood transfixed, knowing a line had been crossed. "Khieu," he whispered. He gripped his girls in a rigid embrace as the world narrowed to a tight circle encompassing himself, his daughters and the scene before him.

The man with the missing earlobe burst into Khath's world, standing beside the soldier, the drawn revolver in his hand pointed squarely at Khieu's forehead. "Rubbish," he spat, and pulled the trigger. Khieu was flung backwards by the shot, a tidy red hole in her forehead belying the spray of brain, blood and bone that spewed out behind her as she flopped back onto the ground. "Rubbish," the man said again, and kicked dirt toward Khieu's face. An eerie silence descended over the scene.

Dangling from the soldier's grasp, Bunchan stretched his chubby arms toward Khieu's body. "Maa," he wailed.

The soldier whirled, took the remaining several steps to the tree, and grasping the crying child by the legs, swung him in the air. A dull squashy thud silenced Bunchan's cries, followed by a soft thump as the earth received his lifeless body, tossed aside by the soldier.

The man with the missing earlobe turned his cold eyes toward Khath. "Clean up this mess," he said.

A roaring filled Khath's ears and he fought the urge to vomit. His pores opened and acrid sweat soaked his clothing. Still shielding his daughter's faces, he urged them with trembling hands to the side of the road and sat them down with their backs turned toward the carnage. "Hold each other tight," he whispered, squatting down beside them. "Do not turn around. Do not make a sound. Do you understand?"

The girls nodded, their frightened eyes brimming with unshed tears.

"Wait for me. I won't be long," Khath said. He hurried back into the road and dropped to his knees beside Khieu's body. He tried to brush away the dirt from her clothing, but it merely settled into the neckline of her blouse and the dark tendrils of hair that curled about her neck. He reached out a hand to lower her eyelids, but stopped in horror at the sight of a light sprinkling of dust and dirt particles kicked up by her killer and stuck fast to the orbs of her eyes. "Blink, Khieu. Oh, my dearest, please cleanse your eyes," Khath moaned. He glanced helplessly toward the line of refugees still shuffling along the road and saw only averted faces. Scooping Khieu up in his arms, Khath carried her a little way into the roadside field and laid her gently beside some bushes. With dread in his heart, he approached the tree where the soldier had taken the life of his son. The sight of Bunchan's crushed skull brought the bile back to Khath's throat and he swallowed hard. Then in a rush of panic, he spun around to check on his daughters, finding them still huddled on the side of the road as he had left them.

There was no time to spare in grieving. Khath cradled his son's body in his arms, saying a prayer as he hurried back to where he had laid Khieu to rest. He placed the boy in the crook of Khieu's right arm, then drew a length of Khieu's long wrapped skirt from underneath her body, bringing it up across her chest to cover Bunchan. Pausing, he stroked the face of his dead wife, then, gently drew the cloth up and over those dusty eyes, tucking it carefully around her head.

A pain in his hands made him glance down, and he saw only a damp rag twisted around his fingers here in this hut in Khao I Dang.

"Are you all right, Khath?" Pra Chhay squatted down and began to untwist the rag from Khath's grip. "Have some water." Khath took the proffered glass and raised it to his mouth with a hand that trembled. Then, clearing his throat, he began to tell Pra Chhay what he had learned that morning from the

interpreter. “So you see,” he said as he finished. “We must return to Cambodia, otherwise, we will never find my Kamala and Sitha.”

“Perhaps,” Pra Chhay replied. “But I think we should talk directly to the Red Cross and not base such an important decision on the words of an interpreter.”

A dull brown lizard, about six inches long from snout to tail tip, clung to the interior wall of the Red Cross office. The lizards were a common sight around the camp, useful for catching beetles, killing their prey with a rat-a-tat-tat banging of the struggling insect against the wall. At times, the lizards would lose their grip and fall—plop!—on top of whatever surface was below them, whether it be the floor, a desk or someone’s head. They would lie stunned for an instant before scuttling off to seek shelter.

Khath imagined that was what it would feel like to be resettled in another country—one just fell from the sky into a new land, gathered one’s wits, and then tried hard just to carry on with life.

Seated on uncomfortable wooden folding chairs, Khath and Pra Chhay waited silently while the officer at the desk, identified as Mr. Ames by a badge on his chest, rifled through the contents of two slim file folders: dossiers on him and his brother. An interpreter sat nearby, an older man who emanated sadness and looked beaten down and tired. And who wouldn’t be, listening to the sad stories of so many thousands of refugees day after day, Khath thought.

Finally, Mr. Ames closed the file folders and mopped his face with a handkerchief. “Damn this heat,” he muttered. He leaned forward and, with the help of the interpreter, began to speak with Khath and Pra Chhay. “Given your histories,” he said, “you would both be granted preference for resettlement. As a monk,” he nodded his head toward Pra Chhay, “you would receive favorable treatment under the Religious Persecution category. And you,” he said, turning to look directly at Khath, “would certainly merit Political Persecution status because of your history as a government soldier fighting the Khmer Rouge. Especially, and correct me if I misunderstood this part...” Mr. Ames paused, peering over his spectacles at Khath, his arched eyebrows and wrinkled brow suggesting dubiousness mixed with awe. “What I mean to say here is that your file indicates that you were held at Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh for some time. About six months, wasn’t it? Is that accurate?”

Khath nodded, noticing the interpreter's sharp intake of breath and narrowed eyes as he received, then interpreted, this bit of information.

Mr. Ames sat back in his chair. "But how on earth did you survive...when so many others..." His voice trailed off.

Eyes welling, Khath looked at his hands now curled in his lap. These battered hands had saved his life.

"My brother had skills," Pra Chhay jumped into the silence. "He was a railroad mechanic. It says so in his file. He can fix anything and the Khmer Rouge found that useful. They kept him alive and forced him to maintain the equipment in the prison. It was not his choice. He was their slave." Locking eyes with the official, Pra Chhay's stern expression dared the man to suggest that Khath might have been a Khmer Rouge sympathizer.

Stroking his chin, Mr. Ames considered this information. Then he nodded and picked up Khath's file and made a notation in it. "So far," he said, closing the file, "we know of just four other survivors out of the 20,000 who were imprisoned and tortured at Tuol Sleng. One was an artist, of all things, who was put to work painting pictures of Pol Pot. Did you know him?"

"I saw him," Khath said. "We were not permitted to speak. I am glad that he survived."

"Well, at any rate, I would suggest we forward your documents to the US consulate for resettlement consideration, since you were a soldier in the US-backed Lon Nol forces," Mr. Ames said. "That would be the most logical place to start. Is that what you would like me to do?"

"No!" Khath's head jerked up. "My daughters..."

Laying a restraining hand on Khath's leg, Pra Chhay said, "Before we decide, Mr. Ames, we have questions about how best to find my brother's daughters. We searched for them in Cambodia for nine months before coming to Khao I Dang about a year ago. Every day Khath checks the Unaccompanied Minors List, but so far we have not found them here, either. Is it true that no more refugees are allowed to enter Thailand?"

"Temporarily, yes. But, listen, if you've been looking for this long and haven't found them, your best bet might be to go to the US and register with the Red Cross over there. Our program is pretty local here."

Mr. Ames waved his hand around the makeshift office. "As you can imagine, we've had lots of technical difficulties here in Khao I Dang. It's possible your daughters might have already been sent abroad."

Khath's eyes widened in shocked disbelief. "Alone? Without their family?"

Mr. Ames spread his hands apart, palms up, a slight shrug of his shoulders acknowledging the brashness of the act. "It was a nightmare when all these starving, sick kids arrived at the

border,” he said. “We were desperate to save them, and sending them abroad by the planeload was the only way we could think of to do that, initially. They needed medical care and we had nothing to offer. Of course it’s different now with the clinic and children’s center here. But back then there was nothing. Don’t worry, though. Those kids are not lost. We are tracking them.”

He waved Khath, who had half-risen from his chair, back into his seat. “This is what I’m saying. You go to America, you register with the International Red Cross there. Get yourself in their computers, and then they can search our offices all over the world for your daughters. Meanwhile, you establish yourself, build a new life. That way, you can sponsor your daughters directly so when they are found, they’ve got a safe place to go and a much shorter wait to get there.”

“I don’t know,” Khath said. He tried to imagine his daughters loaded aboard a plane of child passengers, sent off to a foreign land to be raised by strangers. How terrified they would have been. His stomach clenched as his world crumbled just a little more

“Believe me, it’s your best option. With your histories, you could be on a plane bound for the US in three to four months.” Mr. Ames waited for a response.

With a question in his eyes, Khath turned to his brother.

“I think he’s right,” Pra Chhay said, after a moment. “I think we should leave. We can always come back later if we need to. But it’s your choice. We will do as you wish.”

A heavy silence descended, and then Khath sighed. “All right. Give them our files. If they accept us, we will go.”