

THESE HILLS HAVE TEARS

LUKE RIMMO LOYI LEGO
B.E. Candidate, Biomedical Engineering
Stevens Institute of Technology, Class of 2026

The roosters hadn't even crowed when Leyang's pebbles clattered against the bamboo wall—*tik-tik-tik*—our secret code. *Gosh*, it's 5am. Who gets up this early and goes to a friend's house to wake them up?

"Ai Faith! The beetles are marching!" he hisses. I stumble outside, still wrapped in sleep, and there he stands: barefoot, grinning, dawn's first light gilding his cheeks like stolen honey.

"Liar," I yawn. "You're just here to steal my rice cakes again."

"I swear!"

I don't believe him, but I follow him to the creek, still half-asleep. The elders have long gone to tend to the fields, yet the dawn has not yet taken a bite from the horizon. The silence is loud.

"Look," Leyang breathes, finally breaking the void of silence, crouching in the dewy grass. A battalion of jewel beetles crawls across a fallen log, their shells gleaming—green as snake scales, and blue as the river's deepest vein. Leyang scoops one up, its legs wriggling. "See? They're wearing armor."

I wrinkle my nose. "They eat poop, Leyang."

"So do you," he shoots back, grinning. The beetle flies at me. I shriek, swatting it away. It lands on its back, legs kicking at the air, its glorious armor useless now.

"That's a beetle, idiot, what's to be scared," Leyang giggles, poking my shoulder as I crouch by the bamboo grove.

I squint at the bug crawling over my toes. "Looks like your face," I say, sticking out my tongue. Leyang snorts, tossing a pebble into the stream below. Our laughter tangles with the wind chimes hung outside the church, the bamboo grove swaying like those gossiping aunties.

"Race you to the pine tree!" he shouts, already sprinting.

"Cheater!" I yell, but my laughter chases him. Leyang is always faster, his legs like bamboo shoots. He skids to a stop where the earth dropped sharply, and the whole world opened.

Our village lies below like a drowsing beast slowly waking for the festival. Smoke, sweet with the scent of slow-cooking gingerbread and spiced wine, curls from the chimneys. From the

churchyard, where we helped the elders weave pine wreaths just yesterday, a single new lantern gleams like a first star. The rusty bell at the schoolhouse is silent, but the dirt road coiling around the hills like a scar is already dotted with relatives from neighboring hamlets, their bright Christmas shawls like splashing of color against the winter-brown earth. In two days, it will be Christmas.

Not to say he wins, of course. He slaps the trunk with a grin. “*You run like a goat with three legs,*” he teases.

I punch his arm. “Shut up, jalebi-brain.”

We collapse in the grass, breathless. Above us, the sky’s so blue it hurts, dotted with the few clouds that had dared to brave the morning sun.

“That one looks like a water buffalo,” I say, pointing at a slow, lumpy cloud.

Leyang snorts. “A water buffalo? Your brain is cooked. That’s a helicopter. See? The rotors.” He traces a circle in the air.

“You see helicopters in everything.”

“Because they’re more interesting than your dumb buffalo,” he says, grinning.

Leyang then plucks a wild orchid, tucking it behind my ear. “For your funeral when Auntie finds out you stole her turmeric,” he says solemnly.

I throw dirt at him, knowing all well that I am dead if mum finds out about her turmeric.

Thup-thup-thup.

We freeze. The sound is foreign, metallic—like a giant dragonfly.

Leyang jumps up, eyes glittering. “Helicopter!”

We scramble to the ridge, hearts pounding. Below, three jeeps, armored and gleaming like dark beetles, crawl up the mud road. From their bellies, soldiers in olive green spill out, swarming over the dirt compound with a purpose that feels like anger.

Boots crunch. Voices bark.

“Are they here for the festival?” I whisper, a foolish hope rising in my chest. “Maybe they’ve come to see the Christmas lights.”

Leyang’s eyes follow the jeeps, not with my fear, but with a strange fascination. “The posters at the school say they are our protectors,” he says, his voice low. “I heard on the crackling

radio in the headman's house that they hunt militants in the hills. We all saw for ourselves how the militants forcefully tax us and shoot people. The army is there to keep India safe." He puffs out his chest slightly. "I want to join them one day. To protect our country... protect this."

His words hang in the air, borrowed and naive. The adults always speak of both the militants and the soldiers in hushed, careful tones when these jeeps come, their stories of distant villages burning like ghost stories we weren't supposed to hear. But Leyang always ...

As the last word leaves his lips, a scream splits the air raw, a final sound that doesn't belong to any festival. The silence that follows is heavier than any we have ever known.

Then, movement. The soldiers kick down the door of our schoolteacher's house. The sound of splintering wood is a gunshot. Glass shatters. A baby's wail pierces the sudden chaos.

"Militants here!" one of them barks.

"No, sahib, please—only my grandson!" a frail voice pleads.

Another gunshot.

Leyang drags me behind the church wall, his hand clammy. He whispers. "I do not understand. Soldiers meant uniforms. Uniforms meant school posters: 'Our Brave Protectors!'"

Two soldiers yank our math teacher from his house. "Militant sympathizer!" one barks. A third soldier, tall, with a scar splitting his eyebrow like a fault line, presses a boot to the teacher's throat, grinding his face into the earth. "Filthy tribal," he spits. "You people never learn your place."

Something clatters to the ground, the teacher's wire-framed glasses. The left lens, its crack webbed from years of careful mending, stares up at the sky like a dead eye.

Another gunshot.

My knees buckle. Leyang clamps a hand over my mouth. The soldier laughs, high and sharp. "One less traitor!"

Blood pools in the dirt, a dark, thick paste that seemed to swallow the light. "Let's go back home, Leyang."

However as we are about to leave, a soldier catches a glimpse of us—we're found.

"Look what we've got!" A soldier with a ruddy, wind-chapped face yanks me up by my braid, his breath sharp with tobacco and something sour, like fermented rice. His fingers dig into my

scalp, rough as bark. Leyang doesn't even blink—he lunges, teeth bared, clamping onto the soldier's wrist with a crackle of bone.

“Run, Faith!” Leyang's voice cracks mid-scream.

A gunshot splinters the air, sharper than axe-blade on pine. Leyang's body arches, his fingers splaying toward the clouds we'd raced beneath moments ago. For a heartbeat, he hangs there, suspended. Then he folds, knees hitting the dirt first, his face tilting sideways as if listening to the earth's final secret. The orchid tumbles from my hair, its petals scattering over his still chest.

“Leyang?” I claw toward him, my throat raw. His eyes are open, fixed on something beyond the sky. I shake him, my fists tangling in his shirt. “Get up! Get up!” His eyes are open, fixed on the clouds we'd named just hours ago.

I shake him, my fingers clawing his shirt. “Get up!”

His head lolls, a thread of blood weaving through the dirt.

A shadow loomed over me. “Little rebel thought he was a hero,” sneers a soldier with a chipped front tooth. His comrade, a thick-necked man with a birthmark splashed across his cheek like spilled tea, grabs my arm, his grip like a vise.

“See?” the second soldier growls to the others. “They all fight like wildcats.”

They tear at my dress. The fabric screams as it rips. I bite down on his wrist, tasting salt and metal. A slap explodes against my cheek, and my vision shatters into a burst of white light.

“Feisty!” the birthmarked soldier laughs, pinning me down.

“Sir!” A voice slices through the violence.

A young soldier skids into view, his uniform too crisp, his Adam's apple bobbing. He freezes; his eyes locked on Leyang's body. “They're—they're just children, sir. This isn't—” he whispers, the words crumbling.

The chipped tooth soldier snarls. “Shut your gaddar mouth, Sanjiv—”

Sanjiv stands rigid, his rifle trembling. For a moment, I see it—the flicker in his eyes, as the candle flaring in monsoon gusts. Then his jaw tightens. “I said stop!”

Two shots. Crack. Crack.

Sanjiv yanks me up, shoving me toward the tree line. His name tag glints in the sun—*RAJPUT*, *S. A.*

“Sorry kid, I wish I had come earlier, but now Run! Don’t look back—don’t!”

I stumble, my legs jelly. “Leyang’s still—!”

Sanjiv’s hands dig into my shoulders, his nails biting through my torn dress. “Go!” he hisses, his voice raw and ragged. “Tell them... this uniform has forgotten its mother. It serves a trident and a sword, but not the earth that bore us.” His eyes flicker toward the shadows moving at the tree line—figures in olive green, rifles glinting like fangs. “The real India doesn’t burn children. It is in the eyes of our mothers, the soil of our villages... not in the barrels of their guns!”

I stumble back, my legs numb. “But you’ll—”

“Run!” He shoves me so hard I tasted blood. “And don’t you dare pray for me!”

The forest swallows me whole. Thorns tore my ankles. Branches slapped my face. Behind, shouts erupted. A single gunshot rings out—*kerrang*.