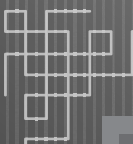


THE CROSSBOW OF DESTINY

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CHAPTER 1

“Freddie, you’re missing it!”

Freddie blinked herself awake, wiping the corner of her mouth, slightly embarrassed that she’d drooled in her sleep. The week leading up to the trip to Vietnam, Freddie tried preparing herself for the inevitable jet lag by staying up until odd hours. Apparently, her training didn’t work. The gentle, rhythmic clickety-clack of the train tracks didn’t exactly help keep her awake either.

“Sometimes I worry about you,” said Freddie’s mom, Diễm, nudging her. “I swear if I wasn’t here, you’d never wake up for anything.”

“What can I say? I’m a growing girl.” Freddie checked

to make sure she didn't get any drool on her cousin Liên's regulation-size Home Depot box. Liên specifically instructed Freddie to triple duct-tape it for extra security and sent her no fewer than four follow-up emails to make sure.

Mom put an arm around Freddie and planted a kiss on her daughter's forehead. "What do you think? Do you recognize any of it?"

Freddie gazed out the window. The train glided alongside perfectly symmetrical squares of rice fields, sunbeams gleaming off their muddied waters. Floppy-eared goats were free to wander on the side of the road, lazily hunting for patches of grass. A fleet of fishing boats bobbed in the sea. And beyond that was the mountain range from which her sleepy seaside town got its name—a small rock poking from the water like a turtle's head, followed by a jagged cliff that created what looked like a turtle's shell.

Vỏ Rùa Làng. Turtle Shell Village.

They passed houses with paint-chipped window shutters that had signs promising food like the spicy beef noodle soup bún bò Huế, or the refreshing tomato-infused fish broth made with jellyfish, bún cá sứa. Freddie used to pick around the gelatinous pieces of

jellyfish—that, she could remember. She wondered how any of these homes managed to get any business; there was no foot traffic and the homes seemed so isolated in their pockets nestled in the quiet countryside.

As to whether she remembered this seaside route, it was hard to say. There was a feeling, deep in her gut, that told Freddie she was back home. But these feelings were blips that fizzled out as quickly as they came, her memories more like echoes whose source she couldn't quite place. Being back in Vietnam after all this time felt like the first few moments after being woken up from a deep sleep, trying to collect her thoughts and orient herself.

“Sort of” was the best answer she could muster, and even that came out more of a grumble.

“Hey, hey, Mặt Xấu.” Mom tugged Freddie's chin toward her so she could look into Freddie's light brass-brown eyes.

Ugly Face? Freddie translated in her head, then sulked.

“What's with the frown? Let's check our attitude. You can't bring your usual brand of sass to this side of your family. Not on this trip.”

“I don't know why we had to come back *this*

summer.” Freddie rolled her eyes. “Nisa and Tash and I had the whole summer totally mapped out.”

Mom sighed. She was sighing more and more these days. “I think you could spend less time with Nisa and Tash covering our tax-funded sidewalk curbs with your skateboard wax and more time hitting that summer reading list.”

Freddie shook her head, tucked her knee under her chin, and went back to looking out the window.

“I’m serious, Freddie. I know things are a little . . . weird right now with your dad and me, but high school will be here before you know it, and that’s the real deal. Might as well lay the foundation now.” Mom reached to push a strand of dark hair behind Freddie’s ear. “You’re Vietnamese. You have it in you to push past whatever this is. You have to endure, my girl.”

Freddie pushed Mom’s hand away and mumbled something.

“What was that?” asked Mom.

“Half,” said Freddie. “I’m only *half* Viet.”

Now it was Mom’s turn to frown. She started to say something but checked her watch instead. “We should be there soon.”

Freddie took a deep breath, wrapped up her earbuds,

and clasped her video game shut. She pulled out her manga from the front seat pocket and read the same page twice before giving up.



The train squealed into the station. There wasn't much to it—a sagging roof and a small lemon-yellow building whose paint was peeling. A lone vending machine hummed next to the tiny ticket window. Mom reminded Freddie to triple-check that she had her bags and Liên's package, then made a special point to see Freddie hold out her dark blue passport.

Be very careful not to lose your passport, Freddie recalled her mother warning for the twentieth time before they left Oregon. *You can't get home without it!*

Once Mom was satisfied, Freddie shouldered her backpack and lugged her suitcase down the aisle.

A blast of warm air hit Freddie as she stepped off the train. She tugged on her button-down shirt, peeling the damp fabric away from her sweaty back. The humidity, the heat—it was all coming back to her. But she wasn't annoyed by the stifling air; it felt familiar in a cozy sort of way, almost like a warm hug.

Which was more than Freddie could say about her

mom, who hadn't waited for Freddie. She was clearly still annoyed at her daughter. Not that Freddie could blame her. Freddie hadn't exactly made life easy for anyone since Dad moved out, and it seemed she was about to do the same to this trip too.

Freddie felt a twinge of guilt. "Mom, I'm sorr—"

But the apology never left her lips because something caught her eye. Standing next to the vending machine was a somewhat lanky girl nervously tugging at a seafoam-green sundress, a matching hat with a bow, and a pair of chunky white sandals. Her black hair was cut in a neat bob down to her chin. The lenses of her enormous spectacles, which were at least a size too big for her round face, gleamed in the afternoon sun. When her eyes connected with Freddie's, she made a slight bow with her head.

"Liên!" Freddie beamed and raced toward the girl, dropping the box. She threw her arms around Liên, knocking her hat to the ground. "Don't hide that little head bow! Get outta here with the formalities!"

Liên chuckled, pushing her frames up the bridge of her clover-shaped nose. She'd worn glasses ever since she was a toddler, and for as long as Freddie could remember, Liên's glasses were always sliding down.

“I don’t know!” she said in perfect English. “We haven’t seen each other in person since we were little!” Somehow Liên managed to make her own form of English dialect cute, like a smooth, clean, meandering stream with only the faintest wisp of an accent. Unlike Freddie’s clunky Vietnamese, which was like a stagnant, murky pond.

“We FaceTime like every month! You *know* me!” Freddie stepped back to get a better look. “I can’t believe it. You really cut your hair! It looks great.”

“You think so? I’m trying something new. My mom thinks I committed some kind of crime by cutting it all off.” Blushing, Liên smoothed her hair before picking up her sun hat. “So . . . how does it feel to be back?”

Freddie put her hands on her hips, taking in the train station. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Well, maybe it’ll feel different when you see the house.” Liên opened a coin purse shaped like a cute kitten head and peeled out a colorful bill. “You thirsty?”

Freddie nodded, not realizing how parched she was. She hadn’t had anything to drink since Saigon—or Ho Chi Minh City, technically, but all her family just called it Saigon.

Liên inserted the bill into the vending machine, made a selection, and then handed Freddie a bottle with a

yellow label. Freddie could only make out the word *Lemona*. Probably something that tasted of lemons was the best she could deduce. The rest of the bottle's label was a total mystery as she'd never learned how to read Vietnamese. By the time she'd left the country when she was five, she was only just learning to.

"It's just mineral water," said Liên, sensing Freddie's hesitation. "With like a lemon twist, if that makes sense."

Freddie felt a twinge of embarrassment. "Yeah, I knew that," she said, quickly shrugging it off as she unscrewed the cap and guzzled the bubbly water.

Thankfully, Liên's attention was redirected to the box at Freddie's feet. "You brought it!"

"Of course," said Freddie, happy to skirt the fact that she couldn't read Vietnamese. "I mean, it was kind of a pain in the butt to lug around, but what are cousins for?"

Liên started after the box but stopped herself, looking at Freddie for permission.

Freddie laughed. "Go nuts. It's *your* stuff."

Liên tore into the box, pulling out items and ogling them as if she was excavating an ancient tomb. "Spicy Sweet Chili Doritos! Real Ranch dressing! Oh, and you even got good shampoo! Were you able to get any of those Sour Patch Kids?"

“Oh, uh . . .” Freddie had thrown together the items at the last minute, and that was only after her mom had harassed her about it three or four times. She may have forgotten some stuff on Liên’s wish list. “Sorry, the place I went to was fresh out.”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Liên with a shrug. “I would have been happy with anything you brought over. I’m telling you, you can’t get this stuff here. Cảm ơn! Thank you!”

“I’ll leave you alone with your bounty,” said Freddie. “If you see my mom, tell her I’m going to the bathroom.”

“Oh! Dì Diễm!” Liên blushed, covering her mouth with her hands. “I didn’t even say hello! What kind of niece am I?” She grabbed the box, Freddie’s luggage, and rushed off. “We’re parked out back when you’re finished.”

Freddie had no trouble finding the bathroom because all the signs had pictures on them. She finished up and headed to the parking lot to find Mom and Liên. But when she turned a corner, she slammed right into someone, causing her to stumble and drop her backpack, its contents spilling out.

“Hey! Watch it!” said Freddie, hurriedly collecting as

much of her belongings as she could. Then she looked up and froze, startled.

She saw the face of a stern station agent. He wore a permanent scowl on his face, his eyebrows bushy and wild. His thick neck bulged under a crisp, baby blue collared shirt. Yellow epaulets were planted on each of his broad shoulders and an official-looking blue cap was tucked under a muscled arm. A large knife was sheathed at his hip. The station agent made a few sharp tugs to his uniform as he growled something in Vietnamese. Whatever he said, his tone was dry, almost accusatory.

Freddie started to speak, but she couldn't find the words. Eventually she managed to choke out, "My Vietnamese is a little rusty . . ."

His expression softened but only slightly. He bent down and picked up her passport.

Freddie felt her cheeks flush again. "Sorry—uh, xin lỗi. I didn't know I—"

"Hãy cẩn thận . . . Freddie," said the station agent.

Freddie struggled to translate. *Be more careful?* There was something strange about his tone. It wasn't friendly advice. It felt more like . . . a warning. Before Freddie could process the situation further, the station agent

had already turned on his heel and disappeared out a side exit.

Freddie stood, finally allowing herself to blink before checking the passport. She opened it, turned it over. Everything looked fine. Freddie should have been relieved, but all she felt was a cold shiver down her spine.

How did this stranger know her name?