

Focus

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When the news rippled through the classroom in a flurry of smartphone beeps, almost nobody reacted. My Linh knew, though, that she must've done *something* right, and Huong's beaming smile was all the confirmation she needed.

Still, she felt a nagging sense of worry, too. A riot was a riot: unanticipated things happened. Fires, street fights, and eventually a wave of arrests. And then there was her father: she hadn't said a word to him about what they were up to, but dedicated revolutionary that he was, he never missed a good riot. Yet for nearly everyone else in the room, the task of memorizing English vocabulary lists took priority over the events unfolding in Bin Duong City. My Linh sat watching her classmates speed-memorize their way through the boring lists of vocabulary, wondering how many of them had parents working in the factories, and how many would've panicked by now if they weren't high on Focus?

She caught Hoc's eye and noticed Huong nodding toward the exit. A glance at her teacher assured her that he wouldn't stop them leaving. Even on normal days, she didn't have to ask permission to go to the toilet: Mrs. Tran just smiled at her slightly pityingly, not bothering to caution her against skipping class. She was a kindly sort, and vaguely encouraging, but she'd clearly long ago given up on the kids who weren't dosing, even the ones like My Linh who had no choice. "Nobody asked to be born allergic to Focus," Mrs. Tran had sometimes said to her, about My Linh and her dad alike, before glancing at Hoc and Huong and saying, "Or immune to it . . ." But that didn't stop her concentrating her teaching efforts on the kids who *were* dosing. They were the ones who were going to succeed, and the kids who couldn't use Focus would never catch up to them anyway.

Out in the hallway, Hoc was grinning like a maniac. "It worked," he half-shouted.

"Of course it did!" My Linh said, almost convinced by her own bravado, though deep down she was worried it'd all backfire and about what might happen if enough arrows pointed in their direction.

"No, I mean it *worked!* Look," he said, holding up his cell phone. The graph on the screen wasn't so much an exponential curve as an almost-vertical line. "That's way *beyond* viral. That's *nuclear.*"

"Let's go," Huong hissed anxiously.

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"*Yeobo,*" Yoon-Seok said sweetly into his phone, looking out across the nearly empty dorm managers' cafeteria. "Uh, I think I'm stuck in Binh Duong for tonight. Maybe."

It was a courtesy *maybe*: When riots broke out, there was no uncertainty about his being marooned in the industrial zone for the night. Especially when a power cut had shut down all but the emergency power supply to the factory.

"Are you safe?" was all his wife said, her voice flatter than it should have been: he hadn't said a thing about this to her the night before.

"Yeah, it shouldn't be a problem. We're well-prepared," he said as their baby son squawked hoarsely in the background. That was the understatement of the year, he thought.

"Good," she said, after a moment's hesitation. Their son's voice crescendoed into a shrill howl. "I, uh . . ."

"That's fine, *yeobo*," he said. "I'll call you later."

"Mmmm," she said and disconnected.

Yoon-Seok glanced at his lunch, but he wasn't hungry. He gestured for an attendant to remove his tray, and the nameless Vietnamese woman who took it thanked him with heavily accented Korean, an inauthentic smile on her face. He half-expected her to frown: people as badly paid as their workers didn't waste food this way, after all, and staff protests had exploded over such waste in the past.

Of *course* she didn't, not with what that woman had flowing through her veins. Yoon-Seok knew what it was like to be Focused: he'd dosed himself back in college, secretly, before everyone had started using it. He'd studied through things that had sent other students into the streets in droves. You could tell who was on Focus at the time: they were the only people left in the library, the only people whose priority was grades, and not ousting a corrupt president or opposing the sweatshopification of newly liberated North Korea. When the woman emerged, he found himself looking into her blank eyes, wondering if he'd unsettled his friends back in university the way she did him now. His wife sometimes complained when he had one of his episodes, but he'd come to enjoy the passivity they brought on, the silent . . . well, not contemplation, but just single-minded attentiveness. Sometimes, it was more confusing than peaceful, sure, but that was only occasional.

Without a word to the attendant—she wouldn't care anyway—he walked out into the factory's courtyard, ignoring the automated clank of the building's massive steel locks behind him. He was alone now, the security guards stationed inside the dorms at his insistence, to keep the Focused workers and the Korean management safe. That was how sure he was of his plan, of the facts on which it was founded.

But Yoon-Seok did not feel afraid: he only stared up into the smoke-clotted sky, as the noise of the tumult several streets away washed over him. Despite the reek of burning plastic, the shouts in the distance, he was calm. The gentlest of breezes, almost undetectable, cooled his face as he made his way to the main factory building.

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"Together, we're strong!" Tuan repeated, and the crowd marching with him repeated the words in unison. "Together, we're brave!" he shouted, and he knew that if they repeated the words often enough, they *would* be brave.

They would need it: Binh Duong was about to become a war zone: factories burning, exploiters cowed into submission, the people finally rising to frighten those who abused them into good behavior. You could never quite *win* against the factory owners—Tuan had fought through more than enough uprisings to know that—but you could force them toward human decency.

He looked into his group's faces: Binh, the young orphaned woman who'd been fired from her textile factory after ten years' service because she'd missed a week of work taking care of her stricken sister. Thanh, a middle-aged man who'd lost an arm to a laser cutter and then been "retired" with a paltry compensation package. Quy Thi, an elderly woman struggling to support her granddaughter, whose mother had slammed her scooter into a tree and died on the way home from a factory that didn't subsidize the Focus antidote patches, only the on-shift doses.

Everyone had a story, and Tuan knew *every* story mattered.

"Now!" he shouted, and they marched.

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“How’d you cut the industrial zones’ power supply without knocking it out everywhere else in town?” Huong asked it a little too loudly, her eyes bright with excitement.

But My Linh just grinned and shrugged as she continued to type on the ancient netbook’s keyboard: Huong wouldn’t understand, even if she did explain. After all, *that* was nothing compared to anonymously springboarding SMS updates across the cloudnet to almost thirty million cheap, pay-as-you-go cell phone accounts—the sort of accounts used by the poorest, the likeliest to riot.

But after a few dozen keystrokes, her confidence wilted. She frowned at the netbook’s dim little screen.

“What is it?” Hoc blurted, trembling with worry.

“The VPDN,” My Linh said. “I dunno why, but it’s down.” She tapped a few more commands into the thing, frowning as each seemed to fail.

Hoc gasped. “What if they’re tracing you back . . .” he hissed, his voice diminishing to a whisper, “. . . to *here*?”

Huong wasn’t worried, though: “It’s just someone doing *con viec nha*,” she quipped. *House-keeping*: that summed up what most young people thought of the bigwigs up in Hanoi for you: cutting both the transatlantic trunk cables at any sign of a controversy had become typical, after all.

My Linh and Hoc laughed, though, and finally Hoc relaxed with a sigh and sat down. *Finally*, My Linh thought. He’d begun to get on her nerves. And then she was in.

“Got it,” she said, sounding very relieved all of a sudden.

“Got what?” Hoc blurted loudly, as Huong rolled her eyes at his recurring panic.

“I’m inside the Communication Ministry’s system, and . . .” My Linh stopped, her eyes running over a phrase again as her breath caught in her throat. “I gotta text my dad,” she said, her hands trembling as she scrambled for her phone.

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There was nothing to do but finish up his preparations and wait for the first mob to arrive, so Yoon-Seok rolled out the last cooler of ice, made sure he had a generous supply of paper cups on the table, and then took his place at the doorway of his uncle’s airbag factory. To pass the time, he tried to pick out which of Bin Duong’s factories were burning, and which had bribed the right officials for advance warning.

Some part of him had been waiting for this day for years, since his uncle had decided—against his advice—to make mandatory Focus prescriptions official company policy for all workers. Stupid Uncle Min-ho, and his all-important bottom line. Why invest in robotics, however affordable, when you could just dose your workers and save the maintenance costs? Uncle Min-ho hadn’t factored in the costs of dealing with an angry throng of locals with nothing to lose. He’d spent five whole days in Vietnam the last five years, and here, he’d spent all five on booze and golf. To Yoon-Seok’s objections, all he’d offered was a dismissive shrug and a grin. “It’ll be fine,” Min-ho had insisted, and that was that.

Still, Yoon-Seok had successfully dealt with such situations before; between his Vietnamese skill—he’d soaked up the vocabulary and grammar in six months, thanks to Focus—and his understanding of Vietnamese culture, he’d quelled several riots the old-fashioned way: respectful lip service, some ice water all around, and good old cooperation. And that had been without the added security prepared today.

The heat troubled him more than his anxiety, what with no air-conditioning inside the darkened factory. The stick-on patch on the inside of his left bicep itched beneath his white shirt-sleeve. He did his best to ignore it, for fear of loosening the adhesive if he scratched, and returned to his place beside the massive, blue iron entryway door that stood open to the world. He smiled patiently, a well-practiced, understanding look in his eyes.

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The sky-darkening swarm of drones above astonished My Linh as she looked up from the back of Huong’s whining scooter. The drones sported the logos of all the local news networks, but

also many foreign and online ones, along with lots that were illegally unmarked. Squeezing her knees hard against Huong's hips, she checked her smartphone for a tracker pingback from her dad's phone, but the city's 5G network was completely clogged.

They were overloading the system, she realized with a rueful shake of her head. More *con viec nha*, for all the good it would do. Not everyone on the street was heading to Binh Duong, but surely a number were: young punks, dissidents and malcontents who'd done their years on Focus through high school and uni still wound up penniless, those born early enough to miss out on universal dosing . . . anyone who had a right to a grudge was headed straight for the industrial zone.

My Linh suddenly wished she had an unmarked drone of her own that could track her dad through crowd-pings—the least blockable of all network systems—but Hoc had crashed it months ago and still hadn't worked up the cash to buy a replacement kit yet. She tried to set up a ping through the drones—they were all networked anyway, to prevent aerial crashes—but all she could get back from them was a bird's-eye view of Binh Duong's main thoroughfares, which resembled hopelessly clogged arteries through a haze of dust and black drone-exhaust.

Then a pingback came through. Somehow, her dad's phone had responded to hers despite the chaos and the overload.

"Huong!" she shouted, but when Huong didn't reply right away, My Linh looked up ahead to see what the distraction was. She saw a brutal pile-up of five scooters, dark bodies tangled among the wheels and broken machinery. A cop stood, talking to a young, well-dressed, pale couple beside a sports car with a nasty dent on the left side. The young man had his wallet in his hand, as the cop waved his phone toward a nearby camera mounted on a lightpost.

She stared, disgusted at the scene. All they'd done so far was only a small step. As she and her friends roared past the sordid scene, she frowned. The factories weren't the only thing that needed to be burned right down to the ground. . . .

Just then Hoc pulled up alongside them, driving one-handed as he punched a button on his phone. He'd gotten video of the cop, she realized, and was uploading it now, for the world to discover—and castigate—when the dust settled. It was enough to make My Linh smile a little, as she turned back to her own phone and zoomed the map till she could see where her dad was. "Doobong Autofact," it said.

It wasn't until after she'd squirted the text to the nav screen of Huong's scooter that she recognized the name.

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The Korean manager—Tuan couldn't remember his name, though he recognized the man's face, his dull eyes—stood alone at the doorway. That was . . . *brave*, if nothing else.

"Come in," the man said, smiling graciously, waving the mob into the factory with a well-coiffed hand, the nails trim and the fingers clean. It was a soft, feminine hand, to be welcoming a mob armed with baseball bats and sections of pipe and the odd molotov cocktail. This was the *true* Binh Duong, Tuan thought proudly: their faces were proud, angry—they knew they were angry, that they had a right to their outrage. This pride, this spirit of resistance, was what mattered. And this was what workers dosed on Focus would never, ever do.

When the crowd was inside, the Korean manager gestured toward a seating area already set up. There were paper plates with croissants on them, one on each plastic chair's seat. The mob muttered among themselves, laughing as they mocked the ridiculous gesture. The Korean didn't seem to be bothered by this: He just gestured to the customary table of iced water.

"Ha!" Tuan blurted out, as dramatically as he could, and he declared, "We know Focus is water-soluble!" He said it in Vietnamese, both because he remembered that the Korean spoke enough to understand him, and because he was saying it for the benefit of his fellow dissidents anyway.

"Aren't you thirsty?" the sweating Korean said in passable Vietnamese, as he took a cup from the table and drank the water. "It's so hot today . . ." Tuan realized the man was looking at him, a curious expression on his face. Did the man recognize him? And why did the possibility make him feel *relief*, of all things?

“Chan-mul?” Tuan said. Even all these years later, he still remembered the Korean words for “cold water.” His words had the desired effect: The manager seemed surprised, even as he nodded. “What’s in it?” he asked, switching to English.

“Nothing,” said the Korean manager, his face so guileless Tuan believed him.

“We’re not thirsty,” Tuan said in Vietnamese, shoving the table aside. “You won’t stop us that easily.”

Now the man was really staring at Tuan, searching his memories for some hint, and Tuan’s earlier relief began to sour. He didn’t remember. This man who’d . . . ruined his life, he didn’t remember him at all. Tuan raised one foot and kicked over the table, sending the cups tumbling as the jugs shattered, their contents puddling on the floor. Members of Tuan’s group started shouting, and a few of them kicked the chairs away, the croissants flying off into the darkness of the factory interior. One of them even struck at the manager with a length of iron pipe, which the Korean blocked with his forearm, yowling in pain.

“I’ll tell you what we’re really here for,” Tuan shouted in English, straining to be heard over the crowd, and only then becoming aware of a strange scent in the air. Then he noticed a soft hissing sound that had begun earlier, but he hadn’t consciously registered. He coughed, his throat tightening as all the natural indistinctness of the world around him began to fade and as details began to jump out at him: the droplets of sweat on his skin, the dizzying lightheadedness, the Korean’s eyes with their vastly dilated pupils, staring at him in the darkness, and the creaking of a door somewhere in the distance.

It was the entrance to the factory being shut from the outside, he realized, as the interior of the factory was plunged into darkness lit only by the screens of a dozen cell phones. Tuan sniffed the air and realized that it hadn’t been the water that’d been dosed: It was the air. There was a gas, an invisible gas. And it wasn’t a sleeping gas, or tear gas. With a flicker of panic, and an astonishing clarity of mind, he realized why the sensation was so familiar: The knowledge simply snapped into focus, and Tuan immediately understood, without even the slightest inclination to panic, that the air inside the factory was dosed with Focus.

A drop of sweat trickled down the Korean’s forehead as he shook his head, and with a resigned smile, he said, “Oh, I already know . . .”

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As they passed the burning tire factory, My Linh gaped at what she and her friends had done. Trucks roared down the streets, loaded with young men and women armed with tools and pipes, cheering like fans at a soccer match. Past them wove hundreds of scooters piloted by angry young men and women, the passengers seated behind the drivers waving banners and flags that decried China, the Free Trade Agreement with America, the government approval of generic Focus for factory use, and three or four other issues besides.

But all of that was normal, or had been normal in past riots. What turned My Linh’s stomach was how the army had already shown up. It always took the army a day or two to show up: long enough for a few factories to burn down, for the crowd to vent for a while. Better they attack a few factories than the National Assembly, after all. Yet there were military trucks out already, only a few hours after the beginning of the disturbances. It made no sense at all.

She tried to call her father again but found her phone couldn’t even connect to the cellular network at all. Up the street, a group of university students—boys in clean white dress shirts, girls in jeans and blouses—clashed with a small group of soldiers who for some reason were all wearing gas masks. She sniffed the air for any hint of tear gas, but found none, and wondered what the masks were for. Debris—old tires, piles of products, desks and workbenches hauled doors—were all burning, black smoke and a heavy toxic stink filling the drones-choked air. Now, My Linh was suddenly certain that what she’d seen on the government’s hidden chat logs was true: this had been planned days before, and high-level people had known about it.

But then *why were all the factories burning?*

Except they *weren’t*, she realized. Only *some* of them were, she realized. They passed a Japanese tire factory wreathed in flames, a cheering crowd of rioters hauling enormous tires out and rolling them, ablaze, into the street. Just a little further down the road, a Singaporean textiles

shop sat placid and calm, its windows barred and its front gate locked with massive chains. In front of the burnt-out husk of a European light-bulb factory, a blackened effigy hung from a length of rope strung up over a light pole.

My Linh glanced at Hoc, who was looking up into the drone-choked sky as he kept pace with Huong's scooter. Was there some clue to this mystery up there? My Linh followed his gaze, but found only writhing chaos above, mechanical disorder and the flickering of a dozen lenses, fixed of course on the raging industrial infernos. Somewhere, she heard a police loudspeaker announcement begin, commanding the crowds to go home immediately. She and her friends had barely made it past the trucks and tanks they'd seen on the road into the industrial zone. How could the cops have arrived so soon, unless they'd been waiting since the morning?

Before My Linh had time to consider this any further, Huong shouted, "It's here, right?" back to her, and she realized they were finally there: The massive, two-building Korean factory complex looked just like she remembered it, from a couple of visits as a kid. It was as placid as the Singaporean factory had been, the doors closed, though they weren't chained shut. The company sign, in cryptic Korean lettering on the left, and block Roman letters on the right, was the same one My Linh had seen years before: It read DOOBONG AUTOFACT in bright red beside neat lines of Korean lettering.

Every muscle in My Linh's body was tense, and she realized she was holding her breath. Some deeply buried fear arose, impossible to explain beyond the knowledge that this was not how riots were supposed to happen, and some sense that she, and her father, and the whole of Binh Duong—not to mention wherever else riots had broken out—had been terribly, brutally tricked. The fear seemed to be choking her, and she forced herself to inhale as Huong revved the engine and they pulled up the long, empty driveway toward the dark factory.

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It wasn't the fire that troubled Yoon-Seok, or the broken table, or the bruises on his forearm: He'd seen mobs do much worse in far less time. It was the way the leader had collapsed and gone into convulsions, frothing at the mouth. Yoon-Seok had seen a man react badly to Focus, once, but it was supposed to be one-in-a-million. Effortlessly, he recalled the statistics he'd looked up at the time: probability dictated that he ought never to see such a reaction again, much less so soon. And yet here lay the mob's leader, his body twisted a chillingly familiar way.

Before he had a chance to think, he shouted in Vietnamese: "Call an ambulance!" Poor though most of the mob was, half of them would have phones. But then Yoon-Seok remembered the phone network was down, and their calls—even repeated with Focused relentlessness—would never get through.

Suddenly, a teenaged girl, a local, appeared out of nowhere, trailed by some friends, all three of them in school uniforms. She ran toward the light, until she saw the convulsing man at Yoon-Seok's feet. She fell to her knees beside him.

"Ba!" she screamed, and Yoon-Seok's guts twisted, bile searing the back of his throat, as she turned to face him and, in astonishingly good English, shouted, "What did you do to him?"

"I . . . nothing . . ." Then Yoon-Seok realized, mathematical probability *had* held true. This was *the same man* he'd seen have an allergic reaction a few years back, right there on the floor of Doobong Autofact.

How could he have forgotten him? When the factory-wide Focus policy had come into effect, the worker had come to Yoon-Seok with a sob story about an allergy to Focus, claiming he'd discovered it the day his daughter had almost died getting her first routine dose at school. He'd been a good worker, otherwise, even management material: had he been Korean, the allergy ultimately might not even have mattered.

"But you aren't Korean," he'd said to the man, straightforwardly. It was fact, after all, and if only the man *had* been able to dose on Focus, he would have appreciated the primacy of facts: how simple and pure they are, how crucial to the constitution of the world.

And as the girl ripped open her father's shirt and slapped him on the face, shouting desperately, "Ba! Ba!", another fact nagged at Yoon-Seok: however implicitly the plan had been approved, and no matter which officials in Hanoi had quietly provided logistical support for

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it—the better to be rid of their own troublemaking dissidents—he knew the consequences for nonconsensual dosing of a worker were fatal.

The phone network was out: there was nobody to ask what to do, and Yoon-Seok realized—without caring, with that strange reluctance to move or speak that his wife so often had complained about—what was happening even as his senses sharpened, as the haze and noise and blur of everything drifted into clear, tight focus. The girl, starting to choke. The smudge of dirt on the shoulder of her uniform. Her friends' gasping nearby in the darkness. The choking sound of the stricken man. The beeping of phones being dialed, fruitlessly, over and over.

One droplet—whether a tear or sweat made no difference to Yoon-Seok—dropped from the girl's chin to her father's cheek. The faint trail it left there was the only thing in the world for Yoon-Seok now.