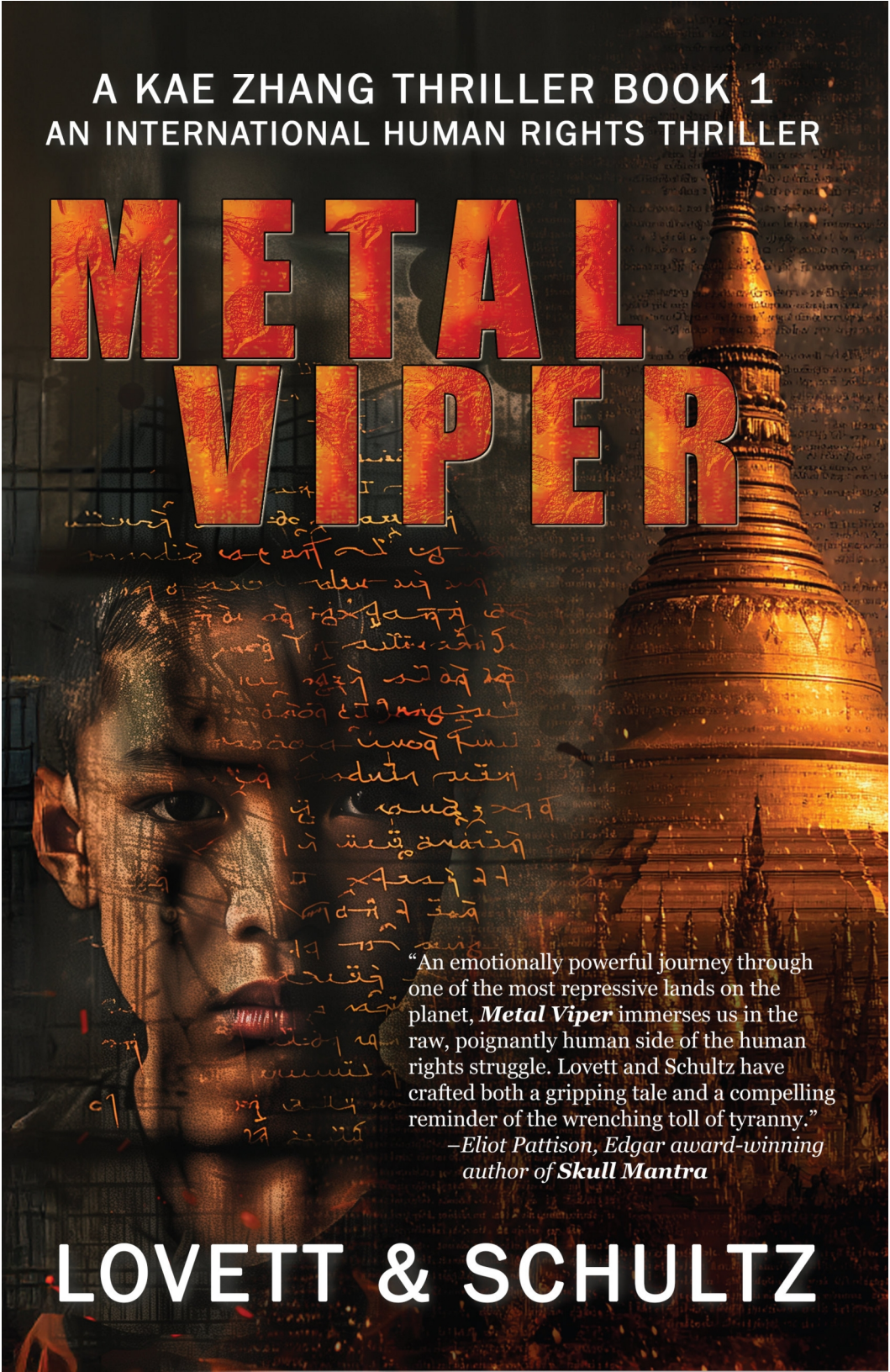


A KAE ZHANG THRILLER BOOK 1
AN INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS THRILLER

METAL VIPER



“An emotionally powerful journey through one of the most repressive lands on the planet, *Metal Viper* immerses us in the raw, poignantly human side of the human rights struggle. Lovett and Schultz have crafted both a gripping tale and a compelling reminder of the wrenching toll of tyranny.”

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LOVETT & SCHULTZ



METAL
VIPER
*An International
Human Rights Thriller*

A Kae Zhang Thriller
Book One

S. Lovett &
R. Schultz



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For privacy reasons, some names, locations, and dates may have been changed.

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*Dedicated to all those who fight for the
rights of those who are denied them.*

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Table of Contents

PROLOGUE.....	8
Chapter One.....	10
Chapter Two.....	16
Chapter Three.....	21
Chapter Four.....	29
Chapter Five.....	40
Chapter Six.....	46
Chapter Seven.....	52
Chapter Eight.....	57
Chapter Nine.....	62
Chapter Ten.....	68
Chapter Eleven.....	77
Chapter Twelve.....	86
Chapter Thirteen.....	92
Chapter Fourteen.....	98
Chapter Fifteen.....	103
Chapter Sixteen.....	106
Chapter Seventeen.....	111
Chapter Eighteen.....	118
Chapter Nineteen.....	125
Chapter Twenty.....	130
Chapter Twenty-one.....	134
Chapter Twenty-two.....	146
Chapter Twenty-three.....	148
Chapter Twenty-four.....	159
Chapter Twenty-five.....	165
Chapter Twenty-six.....	175
Chapter Twenty-seven.....	186
Chapter Twenty-eight.....	198
Chapter Twenty-nine.....	207
Chapter Thirty.....	220
Chapter Thirty-one.....	231
<i>About the Authors.....</i>	<i>234</i>

PROLOGUE

The early morning raid was swift and unexpected. There was no gentle knock on the door, rather a brutal forced entry into the homes of Myanmar's duly elected party leaders. Within a matter of minutes, they were "taken" into custody.

In those first chaotic moments, all attempts at outreach failed. The frantic dialing of cell phones was for naught. Services had been cut. No tweets, no emails, no calls for help. Cell service throughout the country had been cut. "Kill switch" tactics, employed in previous conflict zones, were mirrored now throughout the country. All financial services were suspended. A placard on the state-run TV network, not prone to irony, said only – "We are unable to broadcast due to technical issues."

Coups are meant to be violent eruptions in the lifecycle of countries. They are lawless, disruptive events designed to overthrow a government that, in the eyes of the coup plotters, has crumbled, lost its guardrails, or is simply ripe for takeover. They are extraordinary acts, perpetrated by a small group of powerful players, against a system that has not operated in their interests. When the military decides to take control, it's called a *coup d'état*. Myanmar was subjected to just such a coup d'état, perpetrated by the Tatmadaw, its military forces.

Ultimately, coups are about control. They are a revolt against civil authority. They are illegal attempts to wrest power through force.

On the morning of February 1, 2021, in the country formerly known as Burma, the Tatmadaw deposed the National League for Democracy (NLD), which was duly elected the year before. Ceremonies were set to begin that day to install the recently elected government. But before that could happen, four hundred elected

members of Parliament were arrested and placed under house arrest. They also “replaced” the twenty-four government ministers and deputies that the NLD had installed.

On day two of the coup, the Tatmadaw installed their own council, and Min Aung Hlaing, commander-in-chief of Defense Services, assumed command. The next day, authorities brought criminal charges against the former leaders of the overthrown government, and in the days that followed, they meted out the same fate to Myanmar’s former ministers and deputies. The Tatmadaw acted quickly, without mercy. Fear was their primary weapon, and it was wielded without limit.

Protesters were dealt with brutally. Media licenses for local media outlets were revoked. In less than two months, Myanmar found itself thrust, once again, into a military-imposed terror, with thousands of its own people dead despite their overwhelming landslide majority victory at the polls. Those democratic days were now over.

These events are all true and well-documented. The story that follows, however, is fictional. It is based on the efforts of organizations still working within Myanmar to help those who have fallen prey to the siege and to restore the rule of law. To protect the identities of those organizations and their workers, who are operating at great risk, all names have been changed to protect the innocent.

Chapter One

Yangon, Myanmar (formerly Rangoon, Burma) 2021

Vika wrapped three loaves of freshly baked naan in “forests,” “freedom,” and “love”—words on the pages of his father’s poems now used to enfold the most staple food in Myanmar.

Even as he worked to make perfect creases, Vika could feel his father, Dampa, standing next to him, nodding and taking coins from a customer, a portly man buying his daily Sanwei Makin. Vika’s mouth watered. He smiled with thoughts of his favorite cake and the way his father baked their special family recipe with a perfectly crispy crust and a soft fudgy center. He could almost taste it. His father had promised to teach him its secret, one he had learned from his own father, both men Vika deeply loved.

He ran his finger along the last paper crease and tapped the naan gently. Vika inhaled the sweet scent of Dampa’s breads and cakes; one day he would be following in his father’s footsteps, providing for the family. If the world smiled upon Vika, he would become a poet like his father. For good luck, he touched the head of the serene Buddha statuette whenever he entered the shop.

But all of that faded when the bells above the door chimed, and he saw his father watching the customer leave. These days Dampa’s forehead often creased with worry, and his eyes narrowed with suspicion. His father almost never spoke of it, but Vika saw that his father had changed since the coup in February. Where before he offered a friendly greeting, “*Nei kaurn thala,*” welcoming everyone who entered the quiet shop in Yangon, now he viewed strangers with suspicion. And Vika, who was twelve (but who felt much older now that he was helping his father after school), heard the whispers late at

night when his parents thought he and his younger sister were sleeping. His mother, rightfully fearful of the changes, spoke of friends who had disappeared and arrests for those who resisted.

Some nights, dreams of those dangers nagged Vika's sleep. Now, as he finished folding another of Dampa's poems over a loaf of bread, he gazed at other poems fluttering on the wall just inside the door to the shop. Vika knew his father was both stubborn and brave to post the poems where waiting customers could read them. As directed, Vika tacked each day's poems, one over another, creating a wallpaper of verse that was eagerly consumed by the regulars. That hadn't changed after the coup.

Dampa's poetry reflected the world around him—Vika and his father had discussed poetry man to man ever since Vika was old enough to ask his father to share with him. So, when their world had suddenly become terrifying, violent, and chaotic, Dampa's poetry reflected what he saw. And once the wall overflowed with his eloquent simplicity, he had instructed Vika to wrap each order of the evening's naan with a copy of a poem from the wall.

It was while he was performing just that task, handing the wrapped naan over the countertop to the customers who had purchased it, that his best friend and classmate, Khu, walked into the shop. Vika stepped out from behind the counter and gave his good friend a quick hug, as they always greeted each other. Then he quietly handed him two poem-wrapped toddy palm pancakes, Khu's favorite sweet.

"I should be done before seven for study," Vika said. "I'll ask my father. We've been busier than ever."

Khu, happily munching one of his cookies without reading its wrapping, quickly embraced his friend in parting and pushed his way out the door.

Had Khu taken the time to read the toddy palm pancake wrap he tossed aside he would have read a poem that called into question what Dampa and many others saw happening around him. They weren't screeds against the powers of the coup but clear poetic

observations of the world Dampa saw. Nonetheless, no questioning was safe. That is why it shouldn't have been a surprise when, right after Khu had made his way out onto the street, the shop at its busiest, the window at the front of the shop shattered abruptly. Glass and confectioneries sprayed everywhere, covering the now screaming patrons.

Dampa pushed Vika under the cover of the counter before he rushed to help a woman bleeding from glass shards. But only seconds later, a half dozen soldiers crashed into the shop, breaking display cases and smashing cakes with the butts of their guns. Two of them turned to the wall of poems and began ripping away Dampa's gentle verse.

Three others tackled Dampa to the ground, kicking him and wrenching his arms behind him into manacles.

Vika knew he was disobeying his father, but the fire inside him drove him from beneath the counter, and he began shouting at the soldiers to release his father.

One of the soldiers hit Vika with an armored forearm, slicing the side of his face and knocking him to the ground. He was quickly shackled. His eyes clouded by blood, Vika heard customers, pushing over those who were slower, escaping through the narrow door.

It was finished in seconds, but terror lingered in the air, an acrid burning smell.

Shivering with pain, Vika called out for his father, but all he heard in response was a soldier cursing.

Khu, huddling behind a cart on the street, caught a last glimpse of Vika and his father being pushed into a white police van that drove off in the direction of the dreaded Insein Prison—often the last place on Earth those who protested the coup would go.

The phone call jarred the air at the home of U Min Kan Nyan. He answered, knowing it would be urgent, and he was told of the raid at Dampa's bakery. Within an hour of Dampa's and Vika's arrests, U Min reached the prison. As a former police officer, and now the chief

Article 5 Public Defender in Myanmar, he knew minutes could mean the difference between life and death.

U Min's first job was to make sure those arrested were not tortured into confessing something they hadn't done, especially if they were children.

A phalanx of guards stood outside the walls of Insein, separating the entrance from the hundreds of desperate family members trying to get some word, any word, about their relatives thrown inside this vast hall of horror. U Min, a slight man in his mid-forties, moved haltingly, jostled by the panic-fueled push of the crowd.

When he finally made it to the entrance, he raised his ID to a scowling guard. Prior to the coup, that card identifying him as a chief defender had provided instant access. But things had changed. Now, there was a discussion among the guards until one stepped forward.

He took U Min's ID and examined it carefully, checking the picture on the card with the person standing resolutely before him. "Even if you have permission from the Viper himself, my orders are no one enters."

Such were the times in Myanmar. The mere mention of the country's most treacherous military chief, known poisonously as the Metal Viper, was enough to stop most people dead in their tracks. Between him and the Viper's many cronies, dead in their tracks was as much sport as policy. But the invocation of the Viper did not intimidate U Min.

"Yee Ohmar, you know me," U Min said to the guard. "And as the local justice defender you know by law, I am to be admitted to see my client."

The guard laughed derisively into the face of the lawyer. "By law? I am the law here now!"

U Min took a step back, held out his arms to include the crowd, and said, "Sir, we all have our jobs to serve the greater good. Please let me do mine. You know it is right."

Yee Ohmar thrust the ID back into U Min's hand and, grabbing him by the arm, pulled him roughly forward. The guards closed ranks

around them. He then yanked U Min through a door that took them beyond the outer walls of the prison.

Inside the large, concrete cell, Vika couldn't stop shuddering. He had tried and failed to find his father amid the sweating, fearful throng, but the cell was overcrowded with men equally as frightened as Vika.

Terrified and overwhelmed, he pressed his back against the furthest corner of the teeming cell. The best thing to do was to make himself as small as he could. Huddled on the bare concrete floor, he pulled his knees close to his chest and laid his head on top of his hands. He could barely breathe. He tried to disappear.

To his shock and great fear, he was kicked by a large, unshaven, and battered prisoner who towered over him. "Are you Maung Vika Win?"

Vika slowly raised his head, his body still shuddering. He nodded meekly. The prisoner grabbed him by the arm and raised him up. Vika saw something shift in the man's eyes; they seemed to soften.

The big man lowered his voice and spoke into Vika's ear. "They're calling your name up front. Stay next to me. Your father meant a great deal to all of us, and this is no place for a child."

With eyes wide, hearing the reference to his father, he asked, "Is my father here?"

"Just stay very close to me," the man said as he began pushing forcefully through the crush of men.

When they had almost reached the bars at the front of the cell, the man shoved Vika forward before vanishing back into the swarm.

Vika stared through the bars. A man stared back at him. In a soft, calm voice that seemed completely foreign in this terrible place, the man said, "I am U Min Kan Nyan from Article 5, and I will be your advocate and hopefully get you out of here quickly. You can call me U Min."

He chose words carefully, and Vika knew this man named U Min meant to calm and reassure him. His face was gentle, and it reminded

Vika of his father.

Vika took a deep breath and held back tears that pressed hot behind his eyes. He must be brave. He asked the only question he could speak, “Are you helping my father?”

“I’m doing everything I can to help you first because that is what your father wants,” U Min said.

Vika knew it was a careful answer. It was also true that his father would fear only for his beloved son. “Can I go with you now?” he asked. If he were free, he could do something to help his father.

The man shook his head. “You must stay until I return. Is there anyone you recognize or who recognizes you?”

Vika made fists and brushed away the tears streaming down his cheeks. “I hid in the back in a corner,” he told U Min, speaking as softly as he could and still be heard. He did not mention the big man.

U Min’s face pressed against metal, and his breath brushed Vika’s ear. “Find your corner again until I can return. You are Dampa’s son, and you are brave, Daivika.”

Vika reached his hand through the bars and held onto U Min. He looked deep into U Min’s gentle eyes as he tried to will away the tears streaming down his cheeks. A guard immediately pulled his hand away and pushed U Min from the cell.

U Min was forced roughly down the long hall, but still, he called out over the din. His loud Burmese voice carried over every prisoner in every cell, “Article 5! Article 5!”

As Vika crouched and wove through the crowd of men to reach the back corner, the chant went up in the cells: “Article 5! Article 5! Article 5!”

About the Authors

Sarah Lovett is the internationally bestselling author of the Dr. Sylvia Strange thriller series—stories of psychological intrigue and moral peril published by Random House, Simon & Schuster, and Penguin Books. Her novels have been Book of the Month Club main selections, featured on NPR, and optioned for film and television.

Ron Schultz has written, co-written, and edited 30 published books on social innovation, meditation, science, and social entrepreneurship, receiving the 2014 Social Innovation Leadership Award. He's authored two thriller series, including The Dangerous Places series with Sarah Lovett, plus hundreds of magazine articles and numerous TV/film credits, including He-Man and the Masters of the Universe and the acclaimed CBS movie The Switch.