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The Mango Tree

After she showered, Elaiza pulled a long red tee shirt over her head as a full-length dress and went outside to sit on the patio off her first floor room. Thornton's place in Toril, a village west of Davao City, was nice enough, small but with four bedrooms, she guessed. He apparently had a master suite on the second floor. Her small room must have been for one of the servants. She thought he must have two or three, probably an entire family working for him; in the Philippines, that would not cost much. She looked around her room. The few personal things lying about showed that others lived there. They must have pushed together into the other rooms to make a place for her.

The aroma of sizzling pork fat and onions meant someone was cooking a hearty breakfast in the "dirty kitchen," the outdoor cooking area in the back. She walked around the side of the house from the patio to the source of the cooking aromas.

Thornton was making fried eggs and ham. He looked interesting but

out of place, wearing old jeans, well-scuffed Tony Lama boots and a safari shirt.

“Good morning, ready to go to war?” she asked.

“*Magandang umaga,*” he answered, smiling, “not if I can help it. Let’s try to do this job as quick and easy as we can.”

“Do you mean the STAGCOM mission, or breakfast?” Elaiza teased Thornton, who gave her a warm smile.

“First one, than the other,” he responded. “Breakfast sounds better than STAGCOM, but we’re stuck with the acronym, not as bad as Strategic Support Command, the name Hargens *wanted* to give us.”

“It sounds silly.” Thornton thought she looked like a schoolgirl when she talked that way.

“Well, General Hargens created the name for us while I was with him in Manila. It sounds official and gives our team status with the paper shufflers at the embassy. They had to name the operation something to get the project funded.”

“And you’re the boss, right, Kapitan Tomas?”

“Yep. It’s my command. First one since Vietnam. Just you and me—a young woman and an old guy—taking on an entire insurrection.” Thornton winked at her. She turned her back and made it clear she didn’t like to be winked at.

“You know there will have to be more than just me.” Elaiza wanted to be professional. “My boss told me you needed some men with guns, a few really good warriors who know their way around. Maybe I can hook you up with the Otazas, Manobo natives from Agusan who can shoot and fight.”

“If you say so, I’ll check them out. I have another guy joining us, if I can convince him. He’s younger than me and older than you, a retired U.S. Army combat veteran. We worked together before on a project like this, and we work together now in my construction company. We should be able to train the guys you get.”

“I know you have to count on me to provide your ‘local assets,’ as you Americans refer to the people who work for you here. I want only to recruit from my region, from my tribe, that’s where I have contacts I can trust.”

“Right. Thanks. The man I want is Starke, Hank Starke, he would be my tactical leader, our First Sergeant.

“We’ll see how he works with my guys. Nice place you have here.”

Thornton and his company had built the house as a model home. First it served as his showroom and office, but as the business grew he took it for his own. Now, in the early morning and over breakfast, still tired after having spent most of the previous day traveling and then getting briefed at the consulate, Thornton talked with Elaiza about the mission from General Hargens.

Thornton had already accepted the deal, and Elaiza had been assigned to him as part of her job, but he wanted to sense her active involvement and personal commitment. While it was still cool, with an early breeze coming in off the Celebes Sea, Thornton quietly talked about his meeting in Manila with Hargens. He told her about the Turkish terrorist who was bringing in money from Syria to finance revolution in Mindanao, and that someone highly placed in the American government wanted his help to take the guy out.

Damn him, just enough info to get me involved and not enough to answer my questions, she thought, and broached the subject by asking, “Kapitan Tomas, it sounds to me like you have already decided on something, I see from how you squint and focus your eyes when you talk. What would you do if I didn’t come along?”

Thornton told her the simple truth. “I would still do it, you know. But you’re a volunteer, you could go back to Manila, or simply quit. I wouldn’t want you on this mission unless we’re in it together, as partners. I need you.”

Elaiza wasn’t satisfied with his sketchy answer and asked him, her voice the slightest bit skeptical, “Why such a change in attitude toward me? I thought you wanted some muscle. You’ve been out of the army a long time. Why not let your old army buddies and younger volunteers fight this war.” She looked up at him with her brow wrinkled.

“It’s not an army thing. Downs’s position in our government now is much higher than an army job. He gets some of his information from the CIA, but doesn’t believe all of it. He doesn’t trust their competence on the ground, certainly not in Mindanao. Here, they’re clueless, but they don’t know they’re clueless, a fatal combination.

“And as far as my Army buddies are concerned, my old roommates know me. I did a job for a guy named Charlie Downs in Eastern Europe one time, as the Cold War ended. There were some problems.

“But you’re a combat veteran, right?”

“Yes, even wounded in the Tet offensive when the First Air Cav Headquarters in An Khe was mortared, but I didn’t want to go to Viet Nam and if I could have gotten out of it, honorably, I would have. It was a waste of time.”

Elaiza saw that he wanted to talk, and was quiet as he continued. “I reported to the office of the Vice Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army in 1967 and told him I thought we were fighting the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time. I actually used those words, long before they became trite. The old general listened and was quiet, then called me to attention and said, ‘Captain Thornton, you are going to Viet Nam!’ Somehow, having told the Vice Chief of Staff what I thought, I felt OK with going. I had made my statement. I served my year there and got out after a tour back at the Point teaching German. I enjoyed being an instructor and teaching a foreign language, but that was not a career path for me. Got out as fast as I could for a career in international business. I still got to travel, but that led to complications. I left a wife and child behind to take that assignment in Eastern Europe for Charlie Downs, who was in the CIA then.”

“I thought you were a businessman. I didn’t know you were an agent.”

“I’m not, never was, not a professional. I was a businessman, but they needed a businessman. Their guys on the ground were too conspicuous.”

“Just like here, it’s easy for us to tell who they are.” Elaiza had to agree with him. “Missionaries, someone as obvious as Santa Claus in the jungle, or big white guys in blue jeans bumbling around the hotels and bars.”

“I’m a big white guy in jeans.”

“Yes, but you don’t pretend to be anything else.”

“That’s why Hargens and Downs came after me, again. Elaiza, this shouldn’t be a difficult thing for us to do. It could earn me enough dollars to really disappear, or reappear wherever I want, anywhere.”

“Well, I like it here; and I can’t take any money. I’m a government employee.”

“You won’t like it here if Mindanao becomes a war zone. But if we take this guy out, I can keep the cash, and you will surely be promoted.”

“But how will you do it? You’re just another Yankee who doesn’t

speak our language too well, you can't hide, and if the CIA is lost in the woods, you will be too."

"No. I won't be. I know my way around in the *bundok* a lot better than you think I do. And Hargens and Downs know it. They know that when the time comes I'll make the decisions they would like to make, but can't in their positions. I'll make the right things happen this time, for sure. I think that with a team of men from your tribe, if we organize them and give them the right tools, we can keep the Turk from delivering the money to Kumander Ali. That way we all win, big."

"We'll see. I hope to be able to convince Uncle Pedro. Maybe he could get his brothers, the Otaza brothers. But I want to hear more about the deal you made."

"It's straightforward. The U.S. Embassy in Manila has tracked the infiltrator as far as his landing in Mindanao. He's a Turk, Mahir Hakki, and he has hooked up with the local Al Qaeda cell, the Abu Sayaf, headed up by some joker called Lateef, and they're moving around and already active in Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat provinces."

"They've been doing things like that for years. So what?"

"This time it's different. The Turk has five million U.S. in cash. If he can get it to Kumander Ali, they can use it right now to start a revolution your Filipino brothers might not win." Now she had the essential background and information.

"How would you end the fighting, forever? What would you do?" she asked.

Thornton pretended to be serious, but had a slight grin. "*Mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.*"

"That doesn't sound like German." Elaiza's brow wrinkled again.

"No, French. Voltaire. The last line in *Candide*. 'Let us go work together in the garden.'"

"More riddles."

"Maybe. Here's another. Life in Mindanao is like that mango tree." Thornton pointed to a huge tree growing across the street from them and told her the story.

Evenings when the moon rose early it would outline the ancient mango tree on the opposite side of the road, its branches reaching upwards at sharp and variant angles to form ominous shapes. The tree

must have been only a seedling when the Japanese invaded Mindanao, perhaps one of hundreds in a commercial plantation. Now it stood alone. Some said the tree was split when it was a seedling, as a marker by the withdrawing and defeated Japanese soldiers who had hidden gold under it, so they could find the tree when they returned. There were many legends of gold stolen by the Japanese and hidden in Mindanao. But the Japanese never returned, and over the generations the split tree grew, the forks divided just above the ground, growing into two huge trunks of equal size a yard thick and standing sixty feet into the sky.

After the yearly monsoon season, the mango tree burst forth with thousands of small, sweet mangos that struggled to ripen in the sun, but few managed to hang connected to their mother tree long enough to turn golden. Every day the tree was attacked by its only natural enemy, the young men who lived on the other side of the wall. Early in the morning on their way to work, at noon when they sneaked some *shabu*, illegal crystal meth, or when they returned in the evening and gathered to smoke, they would assemble behind the wall. When the farmer who owned the land was not there, the hoodlums would charge across the cornfield planted around the tree to throw anything heavy they could find at its fruit-laden branches. With stones that returned to earth to be used again, heavy wooden clubs, and rusty tools they attacked the old tree, violated its branches and brought down the unripe, green fruit still attached to the young outer branches of the cruelly assaulted tree, mangos that had to be eaten immediately or would soon rot in the heat after they split their skins when they hit the ground. Some of the more enterprising boys climbed the tree to its higher branches where from their perches they shook the outer limbs and dozens of green mangos would fall, delivering them to the giggles of the men below. At least once a year, one of the hooligans would accidentally fall along with his harvest, breaking a bone falling from such a height, and there was rumor of a death some years past. The young men ate the unripe harvest on the spot, before the farmer could chase them away. The boys thought it was great sport to get free fruit and to outwit the old farmer.

The farmer and his lame wife lived directly across the street from Thornton's house, at the end of a two-acre cornfield, in a shack against the hollow block wall the farmer was gradually constructing around his

cornfield and his mango tree to keep the young men out. His wife sold their crop of sweet corn, roasted one ear at a time to passersby from the window of their shack. The farmer rotated crops, one year corn and the next year peanuts, which his wife would fry slowly with garlic in a pan, add some salt, and sell, one small paper bag half full for five pesos. They would have sold mangos from their tree also, if they had any. At one time they had considered the old tree to be their retirement fund, since the harvests of the golden crops would be greatest when the aging farmer would no longer be able to work the cornfield. But the gangs of shabu-addicted thieves always beat them to the crop. To secure his future and his mango tree, the farmer would invest any pesos left in his wife's cash box after they purchased necessities to buy a few more hollow concrete blocks, which he cemented into the extending wall. For the last ten years the war was waged between the farmer and the marauding bands of mango thieves. With the farmer now nearing retirement and looking forward to securing his pension, the wall was nearing completion, but rather than stopping the marauders, it just made them more inventive. They hid behind the wall, and when the farmer was in one corner of the field hoeing corn, they struck at the tree from the opposite corner, trampling the corn seedlings from every direction until the farmer's basic existence was threatened. He gave up the idea of ever having a retirement funded by the mango tree.

With that Thornton paused. After sitting in silence, Elaiza said, "Maybe we can do something to help change that." The story made Elaiza think. "Let's get moving, Kapitan Tomas."

Thornton liked the way Elaiza said his name, not Thornton or Thomas like everyone else, but a name she conjured, with a flourish of old Spanish music. "So be it. We're on our way to Agusan."

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The Dam on the Agusan

The group of Elaiza's young cousins from Davao City made their trip look harmless, but Thornton worried about them being in the line of fire should the group be attacked or stopped and examined for ransom potential. Occupying the low-horsepower, brashly painted jeepney—an open-air public transport adapted from old American jeeps that legally carries twelve or illegally as many as can fit in it—they slowly rode up the long, winding incline out of the Compostela Valley and into the province of Agusan del Sur. Travel became hazardous as the oncoming traffic careening in downhill spirals toward them had trouble maintaining control of their vehicles. The saddle they eventually crossed over was the watershed where streams first flow north into the valley of the Agusan instead of south to the Gulf of Davao.

Thornton wondered if unseen adversaries knew where he was, whether a rebel noticed him among the colorful band of natives and whether they believed this apparently tranquil domestic scene was

posed, if they were watching. Today's trip may have been a dumb idea, Thornton thought, but since he had encouraged Elaiza to recruit men from her extended family to join STAGCOM, he had to make the trip so they could get a look at each other. Of course the Otaza clan, the Manobo family on her mother's side, had heard about Elaiza's prestigious position with the American Embassy and knew she was involved in some things she could not talk about. Exactly what she was doing they were not sure, but she traveled to other countries, and anything "overseas" was a goal they all dreamed about. Anything was better than working in the rice fields or banana plantations in the steamy heat along the banks of the Agusan River.

A young boy, skin burnt almost black by the tropical sun, hurried along the side of the road, happy with the flapping stack of dry coconut fronds balanced on his head, and proudly taking them home for the family cooking fire. Thornton watched other images roll by. A thin, evenly brown young girl trotted behind her mother, followed by a single member of an indigenous armed force mounted on a horse of acceptable character and carrying a newer looking M-16 rifle. The single component of military dress signifying his membership in any kind of organized unit was his floppy camouflage hat. But everyone in the jeepney knew that the rebels, in this area the NPA, the communist New Peoples Army, controlled this province in central Mindanao. The NPA owned this land.

The jeepney continued north, more slowly now as an eight-wheeled trencher leased by the Japanese multinational Marubeni was laying fiber optic cable alongside the main highway and obstructing progress. Eventually that cable would bring Internet access to the inhabitants of the tree houses along that road. The hope was that the next generation of children would become just as literate and able to compete for overseas jobs as their brethren in the big cities. If they had been hooked up to the Internet today, they might already have the news that Thornton did not, and the villagers might not be quite as happy as they seemed to be, waving at the stranger as he passed by in the jeepney.

Bringing the kids from Davao along on a holiday junket was meant to serve as a cover for Thornton. But some eager NPA patrol might take an opportunity to make a name for its leader if they had any idea that an American was in their domain.

There was no obvious place to stop and eat, until they found an unnamed roadside stand with only a dirty, hand-painted sign advertising “Grilled Chickens” in Visayan and English. Fresh lemon grass gave a sweet aroma to a rich fish soup with rice. A few extra kilos of steamed white rice were served cold with smoky-tasting taro root. Three street chickens, somewhat burned, were torn apart by greasy fingers and eaten by hand. Lunch for about a dozen Otakans, Otazas and Thornton added up to a total cost of \$19.37.

Thornton shaded his eyes to watch a large bird soaring high above rice fields bounded by banana trees in the near distance and a mountain range on the horizon.

“That’s Kabayan, the only Philippine eagle living in the wild.” Elaiza followed his gaze. “A few more are in captivity, near here in Malagos. Eggs are being incubated there. Maybe someday they can release more. When I was in school, we had projects to save the eagles. Even the President came down to see.”

“It’s so quiet and peaceful.”

“It won’t be if you guys mess it up.”

“Maybe we can keep it this way.”

“What do you really think will happen, Kapitan Tomas?”

“We’ll win another war. I’ll get the money. What do you think will happen, Elaiza?”

“It will be like it has always been. Foreigners come and go, and we are left to fight each other over and over again, brother against brother.”

As they drove on she grew melancholy, and Elaiza told Thornton her story. The flood of ’89 took all their crops with it, and forced the family for the first time to work for others, in this case the Sime Darby group and their Chinese partners who planted coconut and rubber trees on what was left when the water went down. The Otakan family started over. While her father worked on the new dam, Elaiza’s mother sold dried fish and sundry items in her *sari-sari* store by the road, in exchange for gold flakes found by her customers in the clearer streams rippling into the Agusan. Elaiza was the youngest child, and slept with her hand on her mother’s breast, seeking security stolen by the flood. Sometimes she pinched her mother’s breast when the bad dreams came.

The next year, just as normalcy was returning, things got worse. The Otakans were playing a May Day softball game against the Otaza family, a happy rivalry and a great excuse to roast a pig. Elaiza's mother hit a long ball, and struck her head on the plate sliding safely home. As she lapsed into and out of consciousness, Elaiza sat fearfully beside her, touching her still beating breast. It took almost two months for the brain to swell until, without the relief of an unaffordable operation, the unavoidable end came. Elaiza's father continued to work on the dam, and the eight children had to be portioned out among older uncles in nearby villages. It would be a long time before Elaiza felt secure enough to slip her small brown hand under anyone's shirt again.

Elaiza continued to reminisce. Eventually, their troupe reached the dam on the Agusan River, the dam that Elaiza's father had helped to build with pride as the foreman of a carpentry crew using bamboo moulds to shape the concrete now holding back some of the river's force. Their northward journey ended, and the cousins spent the remaining morning in the village, Elaiza reminiscing about her youth, Thornton absorbing a new life, so foreign to his past and so full of uncertainties. Backed up against the dam where the road abruptly ended, Thornton thought maybe he had traveled as far in life as he could without turning around, in more ways than one.

Elaiza's extended family in Agusan were curious about the big white guy and why Elaiza had brought him there. Thornton, Elaiza, and the noisy children who were along only for the ride clambered up the steel grill steps on the side of the dam as though it was a tourist attraction. As a matter of concern, Thornton tried to observe the opposite shore, obscured where the brown water disappeared beneath overhanging palms. It was quiet except for bird noises and the gurgle of the water floating illegally-cut logs downstream to some secret saw mill.

Walking near the dam on a sticky mud path, Elaiza showed Thornton the coconut wood house built on stilts where she had once lived with her family. They climbed the ladder to the single room, where the bare hardwood floor of native yakal had been polished smooth by generations of bare feet. An open window framed palms standing quietly in regular patterns. Dark brown smiling children climbed up the closer trees, holding on to the trunks with their hands and grasping branches

with their toes, smiling back, wanting to be a part of the extraordinary event of a blond stranger in their domain. On the hard-packed dirt floor below the raised hut, women in knee-length sarongs, hand-woven in twists of black and red with bright white strands, and younger girls comfortably topless until they went into the village, were chopping the tops off coconuts to collect a refreshing drink of coconut water to offer their guests. Outside the house, eggplant, okra and a few stalks of corn grew in an area fenced off with flat bamboo sticks wired together. Half a dozen skinny goats with fat udders stretched full of milk nibbled at underbrush outside the fence. In some villages, the goat owners made a kind of cheese from the rich milk, but here it was reserved for the young goats, to get them to an age where they could be roasted over an open fire for birthday parties.

Although Thornton found the day interesting, he was worried about time, about when the Abu Sayaf would make their next move, and asked Elaiza, "Why did you bring me here? Couldn't we recruit these guys in a civilized place?"

"No. Being here is important. If you want the Otazas to work for us, you had to come to them first."

Pedro Otaza, wearing floppy sandals, blue shorts and an almost white tee shirt, sat with his four brothers on logs or stools eating rice from a common bowl and scooping up pieces of fried pork with their fingers, laughing and smiling about whatever one of the others said, and drinking beer from cans while passing around a bottle of cheap brandy. The younger Otazas trusted Pedro to handle the planning. Elaiza introduced Thornton who shook hands with each of the Otazas in return and took a long swig of the brandy they offered.

"I hear that you and your brothers know how to shoot?" Thornton said to Pedro.

Pedro stood up with his .22 rifle and moved to the outer edge of the circle of people, took aim and a small bird fell from a nearby tree.

"We shoot birds with our .22s to feed the dogs. It's not difficult. We're good shots. We also have experience with knives, with our bolos."

Thornton asked, "How do you defend against an upward thrust?"

Pedro stood up and drew his bolo while Thornton tested him. "This is thrust, parry, slash." Pedro adequately countered the standard moves

in their mock combat, a stab from above defended by a raised forearm, a forward thrust parried and deflected.

“But have you actually fought other men?” Thornton asked.

Pedro showed Thornton his left hand. It had a fresh cut deep into the meat between his left thumb and index finger and had been sewn back together with a piece of cotton cord of the same texture and tensile that Americans would use to sew up stuffed turkeys at Thanksgiving.

“Sometimes you have to defend with your bare hands. It’s better than being stabbed.”

Thornton looked at Pedro’s wound. “Who fixed that for you?”

“I sewed it together myself. Luckily, I’m right-handed and could use my fishing net needle.” Pedro tightened the cord, poured brandy over the wound, and caught the run-off excess in a cup. He looked for a moment at the few drops of blood in the brandy, and drank it. “No reason to waste good Tanduay.”

“If his brothers are like him, I think we have our team,” Thornton later told Elaiza.

“He’ll drive the jeepney back to Toril. It will give you a chance to get to know each other. His brothers will do whatever he says.” Elaiza had already talked with Pedro.

When it was time to start back, family members respectfully pushed into the jeepney. One of Elaiza’s young cousins, the pubescent Jenyvie, crowded into the front seat and sat on Thornton’s lap. She was fascinated with the strange guy she saw as a great albino *carabao* in dark sunglasses, but also wanted to escape the squeeze of the other dozen or so cousins pried into the back rows of seats with their parents. Elaiza debated with the curious child in Visayan and after a few minutes the girl squeezed over the seat and joined her cousins.

As they drove on, the tinny sound from the jeepney’s radio entertained the travelers with Karaoke-suitable Rod Stewart sound-alikes, interspersed with news from the province capital. Things were heating up again in Zamboanga since the well-publicized arrival of the U.S. advisors now engaged in a joint military exercise—named Talon Vision—with the Philippine Army. The happily singing load of kids and cousins were oblivious to the news, which Thornton listened to closely. All the radio stations in Davao City were reporting the elevated threat of terrorist

activity and Mayor Fuentes had announced a red alert for the upcoming holiday parades. Task Force Davao and the local police would be putting up roadblocks and opening the trunks of every passing car to check for explosive devices.

The road they traveled was a rehabilitation project under the administration of the previous president, but it was still a two-lane muddy path. During the past few years over five million U.S. dollars had been spent on construction but almost no work had been done. The money sent down from the capital dissipated somehow along the way, as it filtered through the various layers of government on its path from Manila to Mindanao. The intended economic impact of immediate construction, jobs and the pathway for produce to move to the seaport of Butuan, the gateway to the impoverished province, devolved into just another slush fund program of graft and bickering. Maybe the vision of the NPA, the communist idealists, had some merit for this large island, divided by religious and commercial differences and unable to compromise with a central government so far removed from them in distance and in philosophy.

The stops along the way back to Davao City from the dam made Thornton nervous. Each stop ate up too much time and exposed them to close inspection whenever they were outside the jeepney.

North of Tagum the jeepney stopped along the road and the passengers moved respectfully into a small cemetery. "Please come with me." Elaiza invited Thornton to join her family and he followed her down a narrow forest path, scratching his head slightly on a low-hanging limb. Elaiza checked out the scratch, taking his arm for a moment to show him the way.

"This is my mother's grave. We all stop here whenever we return to Agusan."

Thornton looked for birth and death dates on a tombstone, but the grave was covered only by a primitive, uneven concrete slab, with no dates or names.

Elaiza brushed shoulders with Thornton as they stood there, silent, thinking that someday she'd lie here beside her mother. It seemed to Thornton that she leaned ever so slightly against him for a moment of support and comfort.

As the group left the cemetery, Thornton took Elaiza's elbow and escorted her back to the jeepney. While she was fussing with the young girls to get back into the vehicle, without being seen by Elaiza, Thornton talked aside to the caretaker standing by the gate, an older man who seemed to be permanently camped by the entrance and nearly ready for a place there himself. The caretaker asked Thornton for a few pesos tip, which he received, along with an unexpected offer.

"Can you contract to fix up the Otakan grave?" and offered the man five hundred dollars in cash.

The caretaker beamed, "For that, I can do anything you want."

Thornton made a sketch in his notebook and tore out a page, which he gave to the caretaker with a combination lock he kept in his canvas backpack. "When the project is finished, put this lock on the compartment in back of the tombstone," and gave him the open lock.

Thornton jumped back into the jeepney as Elaiza made a place for him beside her.

South of Tagum, Thornton received a text message on his cell phone: "U.S. Consulate, Davao City, reports explosion, a taxi rammed through the gate, exploded, area sprayed with blood, crater blown into pavement, several known dead, the Homeland Security Officer on site. Confirm." He punched in "Roger, Out" to acknowledge receipt.

"Kapitan Tomas," Elaiza's intonation showed her concern, "I know that frown means something not too good."

"I'll explain when we have some time alone. The Abu Sayaf hit our consulate, but no need to disturb everyone else. Let it rest. Hayes is OK." From now until they arrived back in the isolation and relative safety of Toril, Thornton felt that the Muslim insurgents could sense them, small ants crawling along on the sticky, muddy road.

Pedro continued to drive the jeepney, and when they stopped Thornton gave him the additional duty to stay close and to watch—not near, but close—with his bolo sharp but hidden. Thornton hoped that in the coming days Pedro would recruit his Manobo brothers to work with him on the mission he was about to commence, now made urgent by the news he had just received.

Thornton decided it was too soon to brief Pedro, but Elaiza needed to know now. Following the bombing, there could be insurgent activity

on their return route, which meant she would have to re-direct their return to Toril and back to what he hoped was his safe house. Even though he was wearing a bush hat and unnecessarily long sleeves, anyone could see from a distance that Thornton was a white guy. But Elaiza blended in, or would if she didn't dress quite so uptown. Even under the most flowing native skirt, it would be hard not to notice her form when she moved, lean muscle tightened by hand-to-hand combat training and laps around the gym back in Singapore or Manila. They both would need to think more about their dress habits.

As the afternoon wore on, the Otakans and Otazas began to depart and return to their homes in nearby villages, except Pedro, who would stay near Toril, and some of the cousins from the city. While Pedro dozed on a bench in front of the restaurant, Thornton showed Elaiza the saved message from Major Hayes: "Abu Sayaf blew up consulate; dozen killed. Get back ASAP. Carefully."

She put her head down, straight black hair swinging forward, hiding her concern. He could almost feel the GPS signal searing into her brain. This territory was her home, and she knew where the paths and roads were and were not.

Elaiza woke Pedro and spoke intensely to him in Visayan, giving him all the information he needed to know at that moment. Thornton's cell phone vibrated again. He said nothing but showed Elaiza the new text message: "US Attaché and 20 civilians dead, suicide bomber with them, blast at Davao Airport, return. STAGCOM."

In Manila, the U.S. Embassy issued a warning to U.S. citizens not to travel in the Philippines.

Elaiza looked at Thornton seriously. "It's started."