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## The Mango Tree

**A**fter 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. "Mats it 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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