

"THE BLOOD OF THREE"  
A Novel  
by  
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CHAPTER ONE

July, 1942.

Heaven rumbled. The wind howled.

Agitated from its sound slumber, the South China Sea suddenly burst into a ferocious mass of black menace, trying, in a futile attempt, to claw at the imminent danger that hung low above it.

Yet the dark clouds stubbornly challenged and speared lightning and torrential rain into the sea.

Wind, in apparent connivance, lashed across the ocean and in one final act of retaliation, the South China Sea rebelled against the chaos in its midst and fought back, rolling into stampede of raging waves.

"Mommy! Daddy!" The shrill cry of a girl escaped from the small fishing boat that got caught in the tumultuous battle of the elements around it.

More like a tiny toy, the boat, just a speck in the expanse of darkness, struggled as it was mercilessly tossed about.

"We'll survive." The man reassured himself, running back and forth through the full length of the bamboo outrigger of their boat as he maneuvered to stabilize it. But the waves kept coming, growing bigger and higher.

The woman clutched on to one side of the boat forcing her full weight to counter the pull of the water, to no avail. And one gigantic wave swallowed them.. .then spat them out.

"Help.. .Mommy. . .Daddy...!"

The woman turned to the shed. "My baby..." She cried and braved the water that separated them. All she could see were the white arms flailing

helplessly, struggling to reach her. Once more, the wave struck and the girl disappeared. "Joy Bell.. baby!"

"Hold tight." The man shouted and jumped to the struggling body, in complete disregard for his own safety. He swam toward her. He was almost there - just an arm length when a huge wave caved over her. And more waves kept rolling, one after another.

"My God!" the woman gasped and for a moment just stared - numbed. She waited. Prayed. Endlessly. Forever.

And the crest subsided. She opened her eyes. Scanned the sea, straining for signs of life. Nothing. "Please God save them."

Once more thunder and lightning cracked through the clouds. Then there was light. She scanned the sea but saw no one. She found herself all alone.

"Lota. . . Lota..." It came from the man clinging to the outrigger. "Pull her up." His right arm hugged the white body of a girl.

"Thank you, God," she whispered as she sank to her feet, stretched out and grabbed her.

For two more days and nights, the monsoon rain continued.

And there they were, still all together, cold and hungry in their ravaged boat. The boat was still afloat after they had patiently scooped out the water from the boat that threatened to sink it.

How such a frail structure withstood the brunt of nature was beyond their comprehension, but life, as they knew it could be one unpredictable enigma. No one could fathom its mystery. No one could know what tomorrow holds. And no one could ever underestimate the inherent capacity for survival of anyone, or anything for that matter.

They were reminded of the bamboo - that tall, pliant, resilient tree that seemed to acknowledge its being by looking up to the heavens, as in prayer. That bamboo that recognized when to fall back. Swaying and humbly bowing to the wind. Not out of weakness, but of wisdom to know when not to resist. Like the bamboo outriggers of their boat that bounced back and forth with the waves, ravaged maybe, but not broken.

On the other hand, they thought of the strong and majestic narra tree, always erect and proud, confident as if arrogantly taunting the elements,

yet the same force that rocked the bamboo uprooted and toppled down the narra tree. The story of life, they thought.

There was very little the wooden shed could do to shelter them from the wind and the rain. Besides, the restless sea drenched them and left them too sea-sick to even eat the boiled "cassava" roots and dried fish, which they brought along. The woman never stopped praying.

The girl, too, burned with fever and there was nothing to give her except the home-made salve from herbs. And yet, the woman never stopped praying.

On the fourth night, the sea was calm again. Finally, the three succumbed to sleep. But not for long. They were awakened by the roar of the engine. The man cautioned the two to stay quiet while he crept out of the shed to see what was coming. The woman cuddled the girl close to her, covering her with the quilt; her mind cramped with fear.

"A motorboat," the man whispered.

They had no way of knowing whether the boat belonged to the Filipinos or the Japanese. But either way, they were in danger.

Escaping from their home province in the Visayas, in central Philippines and moving from one unfamiliar place to another for safety, they braved the treacherous South China Sea after learning of Japanese families camped together in a town in Luzon. Their lives were endangered by the increasing guerrilla activities, for the man, being a Japanese was liable to be suspected as a spy.

The sound came nearer. . . nearer and louder. Suddenly it stopped. The glaring search light pierced through the black curtain that hung between them. Instantly their hearts stopped; their breath suspended.

Finally, the man exhaled, relieved when he heard the command in Japanese. He stood up and bowed his head. In the shed, the woman buried her head to the trembling body of the girl. "What if they see her? What if they take her away? She is only fourteen - just a child." The thought stabbed her heart like dagger. She blanked out her mind afraid that her fear would actually happen.

In Japanese, the man explained that he was a fisherman, caught in the storm, with his wife. Unexpectedly, the Japanese soldier jumped into the

boat, barged into the shed and snatched away the blanket that covered the girl. The girl shrieked, as her pale face shone clearly against the black night.

"American girl... you guerrilla hide American!" The soldier dragged the girl out of the shed. And the woman stumbled trying to hold her back.

"Bring her here," the Corporal commanded, brandishing a bottle of whiskey and apparently drank. The sight of his condition heightened their fear.

"Please leave her alone." The woman pleaded, sobbing and clutching on to the girl.

"We bring girl to garrison," yelled the Corporal.

"Please don't take her away. She is my daughter." The man begged, but the Corporal ignored him. He looked intently and incredulously at the girl.

"She American.. .you Japanese..." he laughed then abruptly stopped and sneered. "You don't fool me." He barked. "Bring American girl here." The soldier pulled the girl away from the mother.

"Don't touch her.. .she has fever.. .contagious fever." The woman warned in Japanese.

As if in answer to her prayer, the soldier jumped back to their motorboat, cursing and leaving the girl behind. They were afraid of the fever. There was an epidemic at the time.

The man and woman sank to their knees hugging the girl as the Japanese motorboat sped away.

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Mr. Miura's hands pressed his eyes, in an effort to obliterate the picture of those three people. It had been two years, but the whole incident still seemed too recent to forget. It had been a frequent visitor in the abyss of his sleep.

"I'm ready, Daddy!" Joy Bell's voice broke through the darkness that had haunted Mr. Miura and brought him back to the present.

Turning from the window, where he stood for sometime, he walked toward Joy Bell's room. And smiled. And smiled again - his grin wider than the first.

"It's too good to be true. If this is a dream, let me not awake from it." He thought looking at Joy Bell, immaculate in her white bouffant dress, dotted with prints of pink roses.

Today was Joy Bell's birthday - her sixteenth!

"Coming, Daddy! Joy Bell chirped when she saw Mr. Miura peep at the door.

"Hold on a minute, Joy Bell, baby." Lota held her back, gathering her long platinum hair behind her nape with a blue ribbon that matched the azure of her eyes. Mr. Miura was amused watching her wife trying to hold still a very excited girl. How could one hold back a bubbling spring? Joy Bell glided out of the room, her mother behind her. Mr. Miura approvingly nodded at his wife.

"Happy birthday, Joy Bell, sweetheart!" He greeted her with a distinct Japanese inflection, something he hasn't dropped from his accent. He planted a kiss on her cheek and gathered her in his arms.

"Oh, I'm so thrilled, Daddy! It feels great to be in this pretty dress." She exclaimed.

Mr. Miura nodded and smiled following Joy Bell and Lota down the stairs. "She's right, poor girl." He thought. For almost three years now she was content wearing faded and patched clothes. He felt a lump in his throat. If only times were different. But this was war and nothing was the same.

The Philippines had been in the throes of the third year of the Second World War. Every city and hamlet in this Pearl of the Orient Sea still smelled of fresh blood. Countless lives, mostly of youths, who were just beginning to seek their ideals and pursue their dreams had been prematurely snapped from their buds. Civilians had undergone unbearable and harrowing experiences that made them shudder at the mere thought of reliving those years again. Children were left fatherless ...families rendered homeless.. .people robbed of their peace.

Amazingly, one family survived all this. Undoubtedly, the bond of love proved stronger than the forces of war. It had endured its tribulations.

Queerly enough this family was composed of a Japanese father, a Filipina mother, and an American daughter!

Such was the Miura family!

As the three walked through the town, Mr. Miura gazed far out to the sea. Yes, a great change had taken place in the town from when he first visited it before the war.

This once peaceful haven of contented fishermen was now an entrenched fortress of huge and powerful cannons. Mortars lined its shores, uniformed Japanese soldiers marched along its streets. Gone were the once quiet moments when only the majestic waves dashed against the shore bringing to the land the tranquility of its sea.

Now, the roars of cannons rocked the sea, the sound amplified as it echoed back from the mountains sending tremors to the earth that once yielded only abundance of greens.

Fishermen no longer ventured to the sea.

Mr. Miura stopped and stared at the distant towering bastion, its shadow spread like an eagle closely watching its prey. "What a way to keep peace," he murmured, sadly shaking his head.

The Japanese Imperial Forces had made a stronghold of this town - hemmed in by the sea on one side and walled by the mountain ranges on the other. A strongly-barricaded fortress stood bare breasted against the sky. Acres of thickly-walled-in garrisons surrounded this seemingly impregnable fortress, which three centuries ago served as a fort against the fierce marauders from the islands south of the Philippines, later reconstructed into a church and now once again, converted back as a fortress. Barracks now sprouted like mushrooms all over the grounds, sheltering its man-power.

At its outskirts was the town, where Japanese and Filipino civilians stayed, for their protection, they were advised. The Miuras occupied a very inconspicuous "nipa hut," the thatch house he built himself.

To reach the chapel they had to go through the public plaza and the numerous checkpoints at every street intersection. He sighed as they passed by the

town government building, a concrete edifice, which was commandeered by the Japanese and turned into their garrison. The same thing was done to the school buildings, a couple of blocks away. The only place still unoccupied by them was the concrete market shed in the center of a clearing spattered with a few more small thatch sheds used by the vendors on Sundays - the town market day.

They reached the chapel which was partly damaged by the elements. Its door had been closed for years and no masses were conducted under its roof. The parish priest died shortly after the outbreak of the war. But, the Miuras had been devout visitors to this long-deserted chapel.

All three meekly bowed their heads before what was once a beautiful altar.

"Our gratitude is endless Oh Lord for saving our daughter," mumbled Lota, "and for keeping us safe together."

"I ask for Thy blessings dear God, not for me but for my Daddy and Mommy." Whispered Joy Bell, pressing the cross of her rosary to her lips.

"Make me Thy instrument, to keep peace where there is war...to sow love, where there is hatred. Whatever I may lack in body, please let me have in spirit." Mr. Miura's lips quivered, his eyes closed in prayer.

After closing the chapel door behind them, Mr. Miura put his arms around Lota and Joy Bell, as he deeply inhaled the cool morning air. They radiated joy on their faces and serenity in their hearts, greeting civilians along the way. They were loved and respected by the townspeople. They belonged.

It was so different from the time they first arrived, two years ago. Passing the same streets haggard and worn out from their long arduous sea voyage, they were regarded with contempt and suspicion because of the make-up of their family. Joy Bell was almost placed in the concentration camp, but spared, not only because Mr. Miura pleaded but also because the commander found his trade useful to them. "Quid pro quo." He heard that from the wealthiest man in town with the politicians before the war. It worked in peace. It worked in war, as well.

The very first time people set eyes on them as a family before the war, they were eyed with



mockery, even sneered upon with malicious gossip; the gossip that helped the town folks survive the boredom of the day and made it a little more bearable. At their expense. Yet, they responded with friendship.

"We must try to avoid fighting hostility with hostility. It seldom works," was Mr. Miura's mantra.

"How could you be so patient? Lota wondered.

And he always had a ready answer. "Is there any other way?"

"Yes, but they seem to always end up in tragedy."

"Like what happened many years ago?" Joy Bell cut in.

"The one that involved the town grocer and the town cop?" Lota recalled.

"Yes, Mommy. First they argued then there was cursing, then groceries flying, then a fist fight. The crowd became bigger. I squeezed myself between excited feet so I could see better. Then a gun went off. The grocer never got up. And we attended his funeral. My friend, Lita, never smiled again. She was the grocer's daughter."

"An accident, I gathered. And for what?" Lota sighed. "For an argument, that started in a disagreement about a shouting match between the husband and wife, that they overheard the previous night. They couldn't come to terms as to which of the spouses turned unfaithful ahead of the other.

"How something as trivial as minding other people's business could escalate into a fight in defense of ones ego and pride or the so called "amor propio." Mr. Miura pondered. "If only we can learn to hold back and think before we hurt one another."

"We won't let that happen to us, Daddy, would we?"

"No, we shouldn't. There are better alternatives." And so the Miuras tried patience and understanding.

As they passed by the checkpoint, they greeted the sentry in unison, "Ohi-o!"

The guard smiled and bowed. Their appearance became a familiar and an accepted sight to both the Japanese and the Filipinos.

They had long passed the checkpoint when Joy Bell sensed the guard's eyes still on her. She

turned and waved. The guard grinned widely which made his eyes disappear. But he jerked back at attention when a group of soldiers passed him.

Joy Bell skipped to catch up with her parents. Mr. Miura whistled an old familiar Japanese melody with Lota and Joy Bell singing the words in perfect Japanese.

Reaching home, Mr. Miura threw open the three windows, letting the sunlight flood their small living room. The bamboo floor shone as this caught the light. The whole day yesterday, Mr. Miura scrubbed the floor. They looked forward to this day. The vase on the small round table was fragrant with "ilang-ilang" flowers and rich with the colorful bougainvillea. The bamboo rocking chair, the favorite of Mr. Miura underwent a washing, too. The bamboo bench had been wiped. And so with the three chairs.

Joy Bell picked a flower from the vase and tucked it in her hair. She turned around before the small mirror that hung in a corner of the living room. Mr. Miura smiled then went to the kitchen where Lota was preparing their food. Joy Bell hopped after her father.

The rice cake was being baked in a round shallow tin pan between the flaming charcoals beneath it and the glowing ember on a flat tin above it. Lota poured the coconut juice into a pitcher and Mr. Miura made himself useful by scraping the young coconut meat with a thin strip of tin. They looked forward to a delicious coconut punch.

Joy Bell sat on the arm of her father's chair as he sang a Japanese song joined in by Lota. "Well, Lota, my darling, you sing just like a Japanese. He winked at her.

"And you, "mahal" more Filipino than I am." Bantered Lota and smiled at him with an impish side glance that deepened her dimples. She loved to call him "mahal," the Filipino word for "love".

Joy Bell was sure she saw a hint of flirtation between her parents. She loved it. How they've maintained their love and passion, awed her. "Would she experience the same, someday?" She wondered. But that day would not come yet. Not for a long, long time.

When the cake was done, Lota carefully shook it down on a platter, which she earlier garnished with

"sampaguita" petals. For icing, she dripped steaming molasses on the cake and arranged sixteen small candles. The day before, she liquefied slabs of pork fat, poured it into the small rolls of banana stalks with wicks in each center and allowed the liquefied fat to set overnight. And voila. Sixteen birthday candles.

They carried the cake to the round table. Lota had also prepared biscuits from cassava flour, lots of this. And boiled cassava roots and sweet yams, corn porridge and candied banana peels. And of course, their favorite coconut candy. It was a feast. But they didn't have this often. In fact they only had one or the most two types of food for their daily meals. But today was special and not only for them.

Mr. Miura was proud at his wife's ingenuity and Joy Bell could only gape in amazement as she snipped the cake and ran a finger along the dripping molasses and licked it. Just like a child would. After all she was still just a child. "It shouldn't be the number of years that should count but how young one felt." Mr. Miura always reminded themselves, whenever they felt down and blue and wondered where the years have gone.

"Everything looks delicious! May I bring some of these to my friends...to Michiko, Rosa, and Mario, Umeki and Nora and..." she rattled off breathlessly.

"Of course. . .why do you think your Mommy prepared all these?"

"Oh thank you. .thank you. .thank you, Mommy," she showered her with kisses.

"Now, that that's settled, we have to move on to this special moment." Mr. Miura lighted the candles, one at a time, very slowly, as if in a ritual.

Together, they sang the "Happy Birthday" song. Joy Bell put out all sixteen candles in one blow. Jubilant applause echoed drowning her silent wishes that, "we may live together happily and peacefully for as long as God wills it." Her mother often said that "we can wish and dream to our hearts' desires, but to ultimately accept with gratitude, God's will. For not everything we want is what we need." Joy Bell learned well.

"Haven't we missed something, Lota dear?"

"We almost did, didn't we?" Lota hurried to the wooden trunk in the bedroom and came back with two wrapped packages.

Mr. Miura handed his gift to Joy Bell. Wrapped in dried pulped banana stalk, thin as paper but more textured and ribboned with twisted "abaca" fiber. After opening the gift, she refolded the wrapper appreciating the work that went into its creation and planned to treasure it. She was amazed at the beauty of the carved wooden jewelry box with an embossed dove, a leaf in its beak, delicately etched on its cover.

"I wish everyone loves peace as much as you do, Daddy." She hugged him.

"We can start here, fill our hearts with peace and reach out with it.

It was Lota's turn to hand her present. The small box was wrapped in white Japanese paper, topped with a single fragrant gardenia. What Joy Bell uncovered, teared her up. It was a two-inch heart locket carved from lacquered clam shell with a butterfly metal clasp and a braided "abaca" cord for chain.

"It's so beautiful, Mommy." Joy Bell gasped.

"It was a gift from your Daddy. And now, it's our gift to you."

Lota glanced at Mr. Miura. He had tears in his eyes. They both had. Both thinking of the same thing. Their precious Joy Bell. And grateful to one special man. How proud and happy he would have been. But he was dead... thirteen years ago. He was Joy Bell's father.

Joy Bell opened the locket. In it was a faded photo of a family - their family of four. Joy Bell, Lota, Henry Howard. And Mr. Miura.

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When Shiro Miura first came to the Philippines, he was a young man of nineteen, with thick dark hair that framed his pleasant face and a pair of lively eyes that seemed to shoot out sparks through the thick straight long lashes every time he smiled. Which was often and generous. Quiet, almost shy, he had a cheerful outlook that concealed an inner

serenity. All this gave him an aura of quiet charm. Over all he was a good-looking man.

He was an orphan. And poor. Yet through hard work and the love for the trade, he turned out to be a skilled carpenter and mason. The young Miura was an adventurer. He loved to see places and meet other people. How he loved people. Upon learning of the need for men of his trade, in the Philippines, he scraped his meager savings for the trip.

However, things did not come easy for him. Knowing no one in Manila, he found himself jobless for a while. He accepted any work then, from gardener, to cook, to house-boy. Anything that came along. This took him to many parts of the country.

Then in his thirties, he met Mr. Henry Howard, a fortyish American engineer, who had a thriving construction business that took him and his crew to wherever the job was, all over the country. The American took an immediate liking for the Japanese carpenter because of his honesty and sense of loyalty, besides being a hard-worker. And a jolly company.

Mr. Miura, as Shiro was later called by everyone, became Henry Howard's right-hand man. They had many common interests, which included admiration for the same qualities and traits in people, and especially in women.

Soon, Mr. Miura fell in love with a young and charming Filipina teacher named Lolita Ligaya, whom he later on fondly called Lota. But he kept his feelings to himself, painfully shy to express it. The most daring thing he did was bribe one of Miss Ligaya's pupils with candies just to send a red rose on St. Valentine's Day. And anonymously.

They were of greeting acquaintance, their construction project at the time located along the teacher's route to and from school. But she never knew how much she meant to him. In fact, Mr. Miura sensed that all the men in his crew were smitten by her genuine interest in and kind regard for them as she called out her much-anticipated "good mornings" and "good afternoons." Music to their ears! These men who couldn't resist to whistle at any female passer-by, never did it to Miss Ligaya. That's how much they admired and respected her.

Before Shiro could muster the courage to make known his feelings, he noticed his boss' endless

talk about "the sweet young teacher," who had asked him for donation to their school library funds.

One evening, Shiro couldn't sleep. Looking at the full moon through the window of his bedroom, he imagined himself with Lota, strolling along the grassy lane in the town plaza, with the full moon above them.

Henry Howard, too, couldn't sleep. "You know Shiro," he turned to Shiro, who was on a bed across from him, in the small bedroom of their boarding house. "I think I'm in love."

But Shiro was still strolling along the lane under the full moon.

"Did you hear me?"

"Uhummm. You are in love... with your work." Shiro was still strolling.

"No, Shiro. I'm in love... with the teacher!" Shiro froze. It was the moment he dreaded.

"Help me out here, Shiro. I'd like to serenade Miss Ligaya but you know I can't hit a note." Henry wanted his intentions known by serenading her, this being the custom of the place.

There was silence. Shiro could hardly breathe.

"So, what do you say?" He persisted when he didn't get a response.

Without turning to Henry, for fear his friend might see the image now indelibly imprinted in his mind, Shiro mumbled, "Have I ever refused you, my friend?"

Henry jumped out of bed. "Then you'll do it?"

"Of course, you know, I will." Shiro joined in the enthusiasm of his friend.

"It's still an hour before midnight. Let's do it tonight."

Midnight was the time when young men would sing to their ladies, hoping to gently wake them up, but praying that like them, they, too, were unable to sleep.

Shiro was known for his mellow and soulful voice. Henry heard him sing during the afternoons and the evenings when he joined his crew celebrate the completion of a project or during weekends, when those far from their families would unwind, drinking the native coconut wine accompanied with the dishes of raw de-veined shrimp and de-boned fish steeped in spiced vinegar. He admired the simplicity of it all - everyone getting drunk, just merrily drunk. There

would be boisterous laughter, and singing and dancing among themselves. Just pure, clean fun. Their version of the happy hour.

Standing beside Henry Howard and a crew member, who played the guitar, Shiro Miura sang from the heart. Henry thought he noticed the dept of emotion from his friend's voice, but dismissed it as Shiro being himself, doing his best in everything he did. The song floated through the night carrying the plea of a heart aching for the love of his life.

Soon the window creaked open and a kerosene lantern lit the serenaders' eager faces. Miss Ligaya gave Henry Howard a demure acknowledgement and a quick glance at Shiro, who touched heaven, when she smiled at him.

After the last song was sung, the goodbyes said, and the window closed, Henry patted his friend, placed his arms around his two friends, and together, the three went home. They did very well!

After a few months, Henry Howard and Lolita Ligaya were married with Shiro Miura as the best man. He prayed for their happiness. That day, Shiro buried his lost love in the deepest recesses of his being and sealed it - never to be reopened - ever again.

The couple invited Shiro to stay with them in the first floor of their newly-constructed home. Again Shiro accepted. It was an agony he was willing to bear just to feel her daily presence.

A year passed swiftly and the Howards were blessed with a beautiful daughter, they named Joy Bell. She was indeed a joy to those around her. She was all American from her platinum blonde hair, to her bright blue eyes and creamy complexion. Her cleft chin was unmistakably her father's. And the two dimples, her mother's. She had Lota's sunny and sweet disposition, her charm, and her generous heart. She was Mr. Miura's joy.

When Joy Bell was baptized, the Howards offered Mr. Miura the honor to be Joy Bell's godfather - the sole godfather. With Mr. Howard's position in town, Joy Bell could have had a couple or more, even a dozen godparents as was a practice at the time. But the Howards decided, the honor was for Mr. Miura alone. And he deserved it.

Watching Mr. Miura and Joy Bell was like watching a doting father with a beloved daughter. He

pampered her. Even boiled water for her bath, his own version of the Japanese hot bath. The sight was a pleasure for the Howards, who felt safe leaving their daughter with him whenever they went out. From the three of them, Joy Bell had all the love she needed.

The Howards, too, were a refreshing couple to behold. Many of their friends wished they, too, had the Howards' kind of relationship. He was a devoted father and a thoughtful, loving and deeply-caring husband as much as Lota was a wife to him. Lota felt blessed for having a husband, who adored her and valued her opinion. She felt a sadness for her friends, who she thought were short-changed in their marriage; who were there mainly to serve and to bear their husbands' children.

At an era, when most marriages were arranged, or when courtship, a period for knowing each other was chaperoned and closely-watched by the entire neighborhood; where even a kiss or a hint of intimacy was considered immoral and a reason for rush to marriage; where being a spinster was frowned upon and became a subject of ridicule, Lota felt truly grateful to be where she was.

Their own courtship allowed them to see each other in various situations and how they reacted to these; really knowing their respective values and beliefs and enabled them, without pressure, to mutually agree that they had a viable relationship and the love to commit themselves to marriage.

She was glad she took her time and waited for the man she could love and respect. To her marriage was not a requirement but a choice. And she chose well.

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One particular morning, while Shiro waited for Henry to go to work, he noticed him to linger longer than usual. Lifting Joy bell, swinging her around, ticking each other until they bent over from laughter. He kissed her and kissed her again and again. Perhaps a dozen times.

"Lota, sweetheart, remember to pick up the prettiest dress for our baby when you go shopping today. Only the best for this angel." He raised her daughter above his head.



"Sky's the limit?" Lota teased.

"No limit for our princess." He playfully pinched Joy Bell's cheek. "And don't forget her favorite chocolate."

"I wouldn't dare." She kissed her husband.

Once again Henry kissed Joy Bell and rubbed his nose against her cheek, and she did the same to him. He hugged her tightly and she clung to him, hesitant to let go. The scene was moving but the look in Henry's eyes seemed much stranger to Shiro, but he dismissed it as one of those father-daughter rare moments. He would have loved to capture it in print, tuck it away and reminisce with it later.

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That afternoon, Shiro came home running... panting... catching his breath. "Lota, come...take along Joy Bell."

"I know...I know, Shiro. Henry must be planning to work over-time." Lota matter-of-factly answered, now accustomed to her husband's habit of asking for Joy Bell whenever he could not go home before Joy Bell's bedtime.

"No, there's no overtime. But please hurry." He tried desperately not to appear frantic.

There was no further conversation as he drove them taking another route than the one that led to the construction site.

As soon as they arrived at the hospital, Lota rushed to Henry. He managed to smile but she knew he was being brave for Joy Bell.

"Henry, darling, what happened?"

"Nothing to worry about, sweetheart." He whispered, motioning her to keep calm.

There was a confused look in Joy Bell's eyes as Shiro led her to her father. She had never seen her Daddy look weak and pale. He had always been robust and strong.

"Hi, princess." The effort made him gasp for air.

Shiro turned away unable to bear the sight before him. "What a moment could do to change peoples' lives." He pondered.

Earlier that afternoon, there was jubilation at the construction site. They were ahead of schedule and they had another contract underway. Mr. Howard announced a raise for everyone besides the customary bonus, a practice he adhered to for years. He was well liked by his men because of the fair way he treated them and his generosity. In return his crew delivered and never failed him.

They were to celebrate that evening - with drinks and "pork adobo," his favorite Filipino dish. As he went around handing out cigarettes, everyone noticed the extra bounce in his characteristic long strides. At one point he waved at Shiro and called out - "Good job, Mr. Miura!"

Then the men screamed, warning in unison - "Look out!" But there was no time for Mr. Howard to react. The scaffolding directly above him gave way and fell fast... very fast. . . crashing down on him. Yet he just grimaced in silence - this stoic man.

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Joy Bell had a restful sleep that evening at a friend's home, by the hospital. Lota and Shiro stayed with Henry, who was in great pain. The broken rib had punctured his lung, which made breathing difficult. Between gasps he asked for Lota to fetch Joy Bell and for Shiro to stay behind.

Once they were left alone, Henry clutched Shiro's hands. "Please take care of my family. Especially Lota. I'm not worried about Joy Bell. She had already a big place in your heart. But Lota, she is young and would need someone to love her."

Shiro turned pale. "Did he give himself away with the way he felt for Lota?" He swore he was very discreet.

"Come now, Shiro. No need to be embarrassed. We always admired the same qualities... in women. No guilt trip, my friend. No apologies necessary. I know you love her as much as I do. And I thank you

for that and for your friendship." He was sweating profusely.

Shiro nodded silently and pressed his friend's hand. He gently wiped Henry's face now drenched with tears and perspiration.

Weak as he was, Henry managed to hold back more tears that have welled in his eyes, once he heard the slow opening of the door and the light tiny footsteps. He had not cried in Joy Bell's presence. He was a jolly fellow... that was how her daughter knew him.

"Daddy," Joy Bell often said whenever her father let out his hearty chuckles, "you sound like that old fellow with big tummy and big blue eyes - the fellow who came to put dolls in my stocking every Christmas."

Tonight, Joy Bell, unaware of what was happening, once again broke the silence. "I miss your laugh, Daddy. The one that sounded like Santa Claus."

And so, even in the hour of pain, Henry tried to laugh. To Lota, it was painfully different but to Joy Bell, it was the same full.. .loud laughter.

"Look at my new dress, Daddy. Mommy bought this today. Isn't it pretty?"

"Yes, darling."

"I'll wear this on my birthday." She proudly pirouetted, her plump hands holding wide the hem of her pink pleated bouffant dress.

Her father nodded approvingly and gave her a huge smile.

"Oh, Daddy, you are the most wonderful Daddy in the whole wide world!" She showered him with kisses. "I promise, you'll have the biggest slice of my birthday cake! And to show you that I'm a big girl now... I'll put out the candles with just one blow. You and Mommy don't have to help me."

"That's my girl." Henry whispered and reached for her. Joy Bell hugged him. "And you're my dearest Daddy!"

"Yes, you're a big girl now and will grow up just like your Mommy.. .very beautiful and kind. His eyes clouded.

That Sunday was to be Joy Bell's third birthday.

Henry Howard's eyes longed for Lota and sensing this, Lota moved closer to him. He cupped her face between his two cold palms and kissed her lips, ever so gently. "I love you, sweetheart. Very much. Thank you for your love. Thank you for enriching my life."

It was all he managed to whisper but his eyes wanted to say more. Lota had to choke back the surge of emotion that quivered inside her.

Joy Bell did not fully understand her mother's pain for she broke the cold stillness in the room and blurted out with child-like enthusiasm. "Daddy, promise you'll be home on my birthday! Cross your heart and hope to die. Okay?"

"Okay. I'll be home, my princess..."

There was a tight embrace and he reached for Joy Bell's face. Then Henry Howard's arms dropped...limply. Lota closed her eyes to force back the tears and everything within her screaming for release. She remained strong in the presence of their daughter.

Mr. Miura knelt and made the sign of the cross. Seeing him, Joy Bell did the same then softly kissed her Daddy, good night. She hushed Mr. Miura, putting a tiny finger across her lips. "Don't make any noise. Daddy is asleep."

Mr. Miura took her hand and walked her out of the room. She, not knowing that, that was her last talk with her dear Daddy.

In this cycle of life, the moment must come when people have to part from those they love. To the Howards, the moment came too soon. For Mr. Henry Howard had passed!

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The memories flooded back so intensely and so fast, Mr. Miura and Lota only then realized that the tears have flowed freely. Tears streamed down Joy Bell's face, too. They were all thinking of the same

thing. They've shared with her everything including the time her mother finally decided to marry the endlessly-patient, ever-faithful, and devoted Mr. Miura.

"I have to share a secret with you, two." Mr. Miura interrupted, in his jovial tone. He found it the right time to intrude into their silent grief. "I had planned to sing for you and put in a little dance routine, however, I don't think I'd be able to go through it without first, filling my gnawing tummy with all this nourishment that had been screaming to be devoured." He turned dramatic and theatrical, which sent them reeling with laughter.

They left their tears unwiped and allowed these to dry on their own as they thanked their Creator. Strangely enough, Joy Bell set aside a big slice of her birthday cake...as he had always done...for her Daddy!

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CHAPTER TWO

Early the next morning, after a tepid bath, which as usual was prepared by Mr. Miura, Joy Bell bounced down the stairs, through the streets.. .out to the fields in the outskirts of town and up the hill, her light blue balloon skirt flying behind her; her favorite dress sprinkled with colorful butterflies.

She loved butterflies and often romped in the fields, her arms fluttering high and wide, basking in the warm sun; allowing the fresh balmy breeze to wash over her face. It was a daily joy for her, picking wild flowers from the field and the hill. As her own private ritual, she offered fresh flowers on their small altar for the Holy Family; a wooden statuette that Mr. Miura chiseled from teak wood. It had traveled with them everywhere and had protected them. This they truly believed.

Singing a cheerful ballad, taught her by Mr. Miura, Joy Bell pranced up and down the hill, picking the most colorful of the flowers. She loved the song, for it was funny and lively. She loved it so much that she taught it to her friends, on the afternoon of her birthday, when she brought all the food to them. They feasted, singing Japanese songs, Filipino songs, American songs.

That was how she was brought up. Her knowledge about the United States, Japan, and the Philippines was extensive. She appreciated the uniqueness of each country and its people, be it their love for freedom, nationalism, culture, or conviviality. Thus she treated people - all people equally with compassion, respect, and friendship. Indeed her parents bestowed on her the greatest gifts of all. Understanding and tolerance, compassion and love.

At sixteen, she was the picture of pure innocence and an exhilarating spirit. Watching her was like gazing at a placid lake. . . cool and serene when the full moon glided on its surface, yet warm and bright once it reflected the glorious morning sun. In her youth one could see the blossoming of nature's endowments.. .her ripening to the enchantment of maidenhood.

On the hill, Joy Bell paused, and standing on her toes, she took a good serving of fresh air, as the soft breeze whipped her flowing hair. She sat down beneath the lone tree, cupping the wild flowers between her palms, her eyes closed, a hint of smile on her lips. Undoubtedly, she was weaving beautiful thoughts into her reverie.

How she wished she could be like her mother. Then, she would be as happy. And she would have a man, like her father, Mr. Miura. If she could have her man, then she would love him with all her heart, and mind, and soul.

And he would love her forever. He would work and provide for her.

She would work, too, perhaps, as a nurse. And be his nurse, as well. She would cook for him, wash his clothes, mend his shirts. And yes, make coconut candies, too.

They will have long talks, endless talks. There will be lots of kissing, hugging, and loving. They would have children, not one but many, maybe a dozen, if God wills it. Like her mother, she would sing lullabies for them, tell stories - happy stories, not the horror and scary stories Mario's mother told her children during dark rainy nights. Not those types of stories.

She would tell stories about fairies and angels, about the wonders of art, music and dance, love and friendship, children and beautiful places, huts and palaces, princes and princesses, nature and its animals, both big and small, birds that sing and birds that talked, insects, those that crawl and those that fly.

Yes, she will weave stories about butterflies, and dragonflies, fireflies and even houseflies. Then she would mesmerize them about this enchanting earth and the mystical sky. Whimsical tales, biblical parables. Just nice stories. Pleasant, uplifting stories.

Her smile widened, her dimples deepened. "I wish, my wish will all come true." She tightened her already shut eyes and crossed her fingers.

"Good morning!" A husky voice startled her. Joy Bell leaped to her feet, pale and shaking, unknowingly dropping the flowers, and clasping her hands against her chest. "Oh, I'm sorry." The voice was apologetic. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Joy Bell looked at her intruder, embarrassed at her reaction. "You didn't scare me. Oh no, not at all. You just startled me..."

"You're Joy Bell, aren't you?" He ventured, his eyes fixed on her.

"Yes." She hesitated then stood up still clasping her hands against her breast. "But, how did you know my name?" The color had returned to her cheeks and she looked radiant when the sun blinded her, sending out sparkles from her eyes.

She never saw this man before. . . not one as young and yet as big as he was. She only saw Japanese soldiers, Filipino and Japanese children and old people. "Well?" She pressed him when she saw the amused look on his face.

"I just know. You haven't changed a bit. Same old clasping of hands whenever you got excited or scared. His smile broke into soft chuckles. "You're still the same cute and sweet Joy Bell I know. And beautiful. But much, much more beautiful." His eyes mellowed. Almost dreamy.

Joy Bell felt the heat rush to her face. No one had talked to her this way except her father, who was lavish in his praises of her. His compliments, sincere and real. This man seemed to know her well, including her peculiar habits. She swore she didn't know him, yet there was something familiar. Was it his smile, perhaps his eyes? She bit her lips, sending wrinkles on her nose as she searched her mind.

"Of course, you're Joy Bell. That wrinkled nose when you have doubts. It's you." He laughed, showing a set of well-chiseled pearly teeth between pinkish full lips. "Come on Joy Bell. It's Ernesto, the boy who used to pull your pigtail because it was silky and long and shiny like silver!"

Joy Bell's eyes grew big as she jumped and hugged him exuberantly, like a child of eight. "Oh, my goodness, Ernesto is it really you?"

"Phew, I thought you've forgotten me." He wiped off an imaginary sweat on his forehead and gave out a mock sigh of relief.

"How could I forget you?"

"But you almost did."

"Well," she stammered, "but you look so different," and continued with a child-like look, as if pondering, biting a nail, searching the air. "so



unlike the once gawky, reed-like, skinny, lanky boy I remembered. The one with the squeaky voice." There was a hint of naughtiness in her voice. Of course, she was teasing; making light of what just happened.

Joy Bell was embarrassed. Suddenly, she felt strange. She just hugged a man. No! In her mind she hugged a boy. Her friend, Ernesto. They were very good friends, before the war. They were neighbors. He was just a lanky boy of thirteen and she was eight. He often joined them for dinner every time he took her home late after playing hide-and-seek.

"I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you immediately."

"Don't apologize." He smiled and gently held Joy Bell's chin and slowly raised her face, searching her eyes. "You still don't believe I'm Ernesto." He wanted so much to reassure her.

Joy Bell stared at him, speechless. Something she couldn't quite explain, happened. Suddenly she felt an inner strange sensation. A chill but a wonderful chill. Yet, his touch sent sparks of heat through her. She felt her face turn red. Like being scorched.

Before she could react, he unbuttoned his shirt and displayed his chest. "Look!"

She gaped at the scar. Dumbfounded. Yes, indeed it was Ernesto. She never forgot that scar. She made it. They were playing patient and nurse and she got carried away and used a real knife on him. Ernesto didn't cry. Not a whimper. He was so brave. That day, he became her hero. She worshipped him.

"You are such a grown up man now." She smiled as she allowed her eyes to scan Ernesto from head to foot and back. He stood tall and erect before her - all five foot ten, maybe eleven, broad shoulders, strong arms. The sun caught his shiny dark wavy hair and shone on his complexion; smooth and evenly tanned, reddish like a bronze statue, with his well-sculpted face. She was drawn into his deep brown smiling eyes shielded by thick curled lashes. His feature more Spanish than Filipino. He got his finely-chiseled features from her "mestiza" mother, a Filipina of Spanish heritage. And his physique from his well-built Filipino father. A perfectly-carved statue and yet he was just twenty one, five years her senior.

And now, here they were, face to face, both grown-up, both radiant with youth.

Joy Bell stirred and started to pick up her flowers. Ernesto bent and helped her.

"How are Mr. and Mrs. Miura?"

"Daddy and Mommy are fine." She proudly announced. "And your Mom and Dad?"

He looked down. Joy Bell sensed that he wanted to avoid the subject.

"Come, I'll take you home. I'm sure Mommy and Daddy would love to see you."

"I'd like that. But first, let's stay a little longer and talk."

"Well...okay." She sat down beneath the tree. "Sit down. It's nice and peaceful here."

"Indeed, it is." He sat down beside her. The town could clearly be seen from where they were. "You're right. The breeze is cool and the grass, soft. Nice place. You come here, often?"

"Oh yes. I like it here. I always come here every morning and whenever I feel lonely."

"Lonely...but why?" He was curious.

"Oh I mean I come here whenever I feel like being alone, and just to think...and dream." She groped for the right words trying to avoid his searching eyes.

"Do you think of any particular thing...or person? I mean...you must be thinking of... something or...someone..." Ernesto stopped, concerned that he might embarrass her with such an intimate question.

"No," she cut him short. "I just think of beautiful things...of people. People are good, you know. And of Daddy and Mommy..." she was rambling.

"How about me? You didn't even think of me, did you?" He knew this would provoke her but he did it, anyway, hoping they could be kids again, free to tease each other.

"I didn't know you are..." she pouted.

"Now, that's more like it." He laughed heartily. "As always, same Joy Bell."

Joy Bell smiled and realized they were no longer kids. This was the first time she talked with a young man. And she was not even scared. In fact, she enjoyed it. "Was this how being a grown-up would be?"

When they were children, they ventured to the nearby fields on Saturdays. Ernesto would fly his kite, especially, when the wind was strong and she would tag along, running after him.

One such afternoon, tired from running and from the hot sun, they sat under a tree, as they were doing now. They shared their dreams. Ernesto wanted to study at the Philippine Military Academy and become an officer and she hoped to be a nurse.

In fact they often played wounded soldier and nurse, until Ernesto got that scar on his chest and they stopped. Not that he was scared to get another one but because he was reprimanded by his mother. He had fever and Joy Bell cried and promised never to do it again.

They also dreamed of going to America someday, after they finished their studies. They would have a stopover in Japan and visit the place of Mr. Miura's childhood and on to San Francisco to meet, for the first time, her father's family - the Howards. Once, they promised each other that they would always be friends. Ernesto went further and vowed that wherever he was, he'll always come back to her.

"Like I promised, here I am, my dear friend." Ernesto gazed at her round blue eyes.

"And like I promised, I'm still your friend." She playfully bantered but when she noticed the burning sun, she began to rise. "Come on, let's not make Daddy and Mommy wait." Ernesto helped her up and hand and hand, they romped down the hill.

Joy Bell took the longer route to avoid walking through the town and its many checkpoints. They passed the creek that sneaked beside the hill, reminiscing about their childhood.

"Stop guerrilla!"

They stopped. Petrified in place. Joy Bell bowed and elbowed Ernesto to do the same. He threw her a concerned side glance. She straightened up.

"Oh no, he is not a guerrilla. He's my friend.. when we were this high." Joy Bell explained in Japanese, gesturing with her hand.

Ernesto heard many stories of Filipino civilians mistaken for guerrillas and summarily punished. He kept still but alert. He felt the soldiers squinting eyes pierce through him, scrutinizing him with suspicion. His stomach tightened. But he decided not to show fear.

The two fierce eyes glistened and relaxed. "Okay... okay," the guard nodded and smiled. "You friend Joy Bell, also friend Japan. Joy Bell good girl. Father Japanese." The soldier motioned them to go on and executed a brisk bow, then continued on toward the town.

Ernesto felt his muscles relax. He took a deep breath and thanked Joy Bell. She reassured him that everything would be fine. He was safe with her.

It was almost noon when they reached the Miura's home. Joy Bell ran up the stairs, panting with excitement, which concerned Mr. Miura and Lota. Ernesto was behind her. After she stammered through her hurried introduction, Ernesto politely greeted them. Simultaneously, Mr. Miura and Lota hugged Ernesto, overjoyed at seeing him again.

"Goodness, we hardly recognized you." They chorused as they led Ernesto to a bench by the window. "Now tell us, how are your father and mother?"

Ernesto paused and took a deep breath as if preparing himself for a challenging task. Indeed it was to be an emotional journey back to the chasm of his memory.

He told them in between breaking voice, how his parents died after the outbreak of the war. Four Japanese soldiers dragged them out of their home while they were having dinner. The rumor about their providing food to the guerrillas reached the Japanese. Ernesto, just past eighteen, with a body that shot up rapidly before he could be filled in, survived when his father pushed him out their rear window, just before the Japanese broke down their front door.

From where he landed he caught sight of what the Japanese did to his parents. They beheaded them right outside their home and took their bodies away. He didn't even cry. It was not real. There were no tears. No time to mourn.

That evening, he ran as he had never ran before. And escaped.

There was silence. The news shocked them. They had fond memories of David and Isabel. He was a portrait painter with promise and she was the daughter of a land baron. Instead of following her father's order to stop seeing David, Isabel eloped with him and later with their four-year-old son,

ended in the same town with the Howards and Mr. Miura.

It was Shiro Miura who helped him get a job as a painter in Henry Howard's construction company. David was the guitar player Henry asked to accompany Shiro when they serenaded Lota.

David, like Mr. Miura, loved fishing and the two enjoyed this pastime together. Isabel ran a small convenient store and dabbled in embroidery. She made Joy Bell's baptismal gown and later, the veil for Lota's wedding to Shiro.

They imagined their children getting married to each other someday, but only if they fell in love. They decided it was time to set the new generation free - free to choose and to live their own lives, without intervention. After all, they agreed, marriage was not a business merger or partnership, not a requirement, nor a perfunctory ritual, but a choice.

Their friendship survived through the laughters and tears of their lives. From the Howards' wedding and Joy Bell's birth, to Henry's death, and the Miuras' wedding, and their parting, years before the outbreak of the war.

Their children were both grown-ups now but the good couple was gone.

Lota excused herself and went to the kitchen to prepare lunch. Joy Bell followed her leaving Ernesto and Mr. Miura to themselves. He showed Ernesto all the pictures he had of Joy Bell from the time she was ten. Before they could move on to other subjects, Lota called them for lunch.

They had a hearty meal. They shared jokes as they relished Lota's delectable mudfish dish. And, of course, her home-made coconut candy.

After their hour-long lunch, they shifted to other subjects, varied ones but they lingered more on peace and brotherhood, a subject closest to Mr. Miura's heart.

"I wonder how long it will take for man to realize how utterly useless and tragic war is." Mr. Miura shook his head in frustration as the three listened. "War. What a way to deal with issues." Mr. Miura's lament was deeply-felt.

"Yes, a tragic short-cut to manage human differences. However, it appears that big corporations seem to benefit whenever there's war.

Doesn't that look a bit suspicious?" Ernesto commented. He kept himself abreast of world events. "Greed. Selfish agenda. Power. Disguised motivations. Could those be the other suspects?"

"In the end it's the civilians, especially children who suffer. And for what? Material gains?" Lota was upset.

Joy Bell looked enraged. "Do you know that children are now doing their fathers' work because their fathers have to escape to the hills?" Her voice mellowed almost to a whisper when she thought of her friends. "Children no longer have the time to act like children. They seem to have forgotten to play...to laugh...to dream."

This tagged at Mr. Miura's heart. "We're killing the dreams of our children. And we're doing it in the most horrendous way. Their experiences will forever be imprinted in their memories and in their nightmares."

"I have seen what they underwent." Ernesto volunteered, his eyes flickered between sadness and frustration. "Yes, I have witnessed the madness of it all. It is a sight one couldn't easily forget. A travesty."

"It must have been a torture for you." Joy Bell wished she had shared the sight and lightened the burden in Ernesto's heart.

"I have seen first hand, how the city folks had suffered the most. Unlike civilians in towns and other rural areas, they don't have the same resources available to them. Most of the cities are in ruins. Civilians live in makeshift homes of crates and burned scrap metal sheets. There are no places left to plant vegetables, nor water to fish. The people, instead, scramble for food, rummaging through garbage and anywhere else they can find anything edible. This burden have fallen on the children, who are more able to move around undetected. The children are suffering from scabies and mal-nutrition. They are the innocent victims."

The Miuras listened to Ernesto with sadness.

"I don't understand why we have to resort to war. Could we not at least try to get along?" Joy Bell was confused. It saddened her to think of the fear inflicted in young children, when in the middle of the night they scurried into air raid shelters, swamps or thickets at every rumor of impending enemy

raids; when a girl, her age, in her panic stumbled on a pointed tree stump that gored through her thigh and almost bled to death. "By the way, who decides to wage war?" She was aching to find out. For if only she knew she surely would love to talk to them. Oh yes, she would make them understand and see that war was not a game to be toyed with.

"Head of nations have the wisdom and the capacity to settle issues without resorting to war. If only they could, with humility put themselves in each other's shoes and really try to understand what each one is trying to say. Without minimizing or putting this down. And perhaps put aside their machismo and ego to admit that others, besides themselves, have legitimate reasons to be addressed."

Mr. Miura heaved a deep sigh. "Man hasn't learned from the past. Not yet."

They all agreed. At the moment that was all they could do. Agree and pray in silence.

It was almost four o'clock in the afternoon when Ernesto asked permission to leave.

"Do you stay far from here?" Lota was concerned. She had treated Ernesto like her own son. She feared he might be mistaken for a guerrilla.

"Yes, quite far."

"How did you know we were here?" Joy Bell was curious.

Ernesto seemed uneasy. "When I heard about the three of you, I knew it was your family. So I came."

"We're glad you did. You will visit us again, won't you?" Joy Bell couldn't suppress her enthusiasm at seeing Ernesto again.

This pleased him. "Of course, of course. I'll be seeing you again, all of you."

"Joy Bell will accompany you to the outskirts of town." Mr. Miura added, after Lota handed Ernesto some food to take with him.

"You take care, Ernesto. Times are not the same anymore." Lota reminded him.

"It's best that you stay away from the Japanese soldiers." Cautioned Mr. Miura. "But just in case they mistake you for a guerrilla, tell them you are our friend and asked them to call me."

Joy Bell and Ernesto didn't tell them about their encounter earlier with a Japanese soldier. They didn't want them to worry.

Ernesto thanked them and hugged them good-bye. He thanked Joy Bell, especially for the many things he could not say at the moment.

"I'll see you all again." Ernesto waved at Mr. and Mrs. Miura as he followed Joy Bell down the stairs.

"May God be with you." Whispered both Mr. and Mrs. Miura as they followed him with their sight.

Joy Bell and Ernesto took the path behind the Miura's house, and retraced their earlier route. As Ernesto and Joy Bell walked, they could hardly take their eyes from each other, knowing that it would be long before they could be together again. And as they reached the outskirts of town, near the creek, Ernesto clasped Joy Bell's hands, tightly as if not wanting to leave her and she looked at him with an unspoken invitation to stay longer.

"I'll be back. On the hill." He whispered. He kissed her on the cheek and walked away.

Joy Bell called and ran after him. He stopped and turned around. She hugged him. "I'm glad you came."

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It was dark! The sun had long gone down the distant horizon when Ernesto arrived. It was quiet all around except for the occasional sound of the birds and crickets and the rustling of the leaves in the thicket. Ernesto walked straight through the towering trees, passing a narrow zigzag trail that cut beneath the cliff by a stream, walking above and below fallen logs. The trail was damp and smelled of earth long deserted by the sun, of rotten leaves and dead worms, of stale muddy water. No sunlight penetrated this place walled and roofed by the aged trees.

Ernesto whistled softly as he passed through the gloomy, eerie pathway, to divert his thoughts



from the dreadful feeling of being suffocated in the endless tunnel. After walking for what felt like forever he came out to a clearing in the heart of the forest. He had just wiped the sweats from his forehead when he heard the warning.

"Halt! Who goes there?" The voice rang loud and echoed back, but he remained calm and composed.

"Capt. Duran!" He answered then continued walking to the lighted hut.

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That night, after dinner, Joy Bell excused herself and went straight to her bedroom window, cupping her chin with her palms, wistfully looking up at the myriad stars that seemed to have suddenly burst through the clouds, their sparkling lights dancing gloriously for Joy Bell to relish. And to nourish her dreams. Many dreams. But above all - of Ernesto!

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CHAPTER THREE

The night had enveloped the area. Night always came early in this place where the sun barely shone through. There seemed to be no day time, in its place there was only twilight. The bamboo torch was a necessity and it kept burning.

Ernesto's strides got slower and heavier, but the memory of his visit buoyed up his spirit. He felt light and happy. He had just come down from the clouds. It was a trip he would very much like to repeat.

Walking straight to a hut, he knocked on the door and a voice answered for him to enter. He pushed the door open and the gush of wind from outside made the light from the table lamp flicker. He closed the door after him.

"Capt. Duran, reporting, sir!" He saluted as he stood in front of Col. Holt's desk. The table and everything in the room, including the two bamboo chairs and the bench were all make-shifts from bamboo and rough wood. The Colonel, an American, in his late forties, acknowledged him with a salute and signaled him to a nearby bamboo chair beside his desk.

Col. Holt looked older than his age. Deep lines were readily seen on his forehead and under his eyes. The thick eyebrows that drooped at the sides have further sagged down. Black rings appeared around his eyes, apparently from lack of sleep. For several nights he couldn't sleep. Besides his problems in his own group, he received news of the hostile rivalry between the two leaders of their two operating units in the adjacent provinces. He knew that such a situation would not be good for the now weakening morale of their men. It was incumbent on him to do something before the enemies could capitalize on such dissension and disunity among the guerrilla units in his sector of responsibility. He looked drained after he just wrote an appeal for harmony and cooperation to the two warring factions. Yet, his deep blue eyes still projected his drive and self-confidence that gave his men courage and hope.

He threw Ernesto a searching look then clasped his fists together on his desk. "Were you able to enter the town, Captain?"

"Yes, sir!" Ernesto replied without hesitation.

Again Col. Holt paused then continued. "Did you arouse any suspicion?"

"At first." he quickly answered with a faint smile. "I found the girl, the one I told you about. Her family stays in town."

"Good!" Col. Holt leaned back and relaxed. For the first time that day. Then looking at Ernesto again, this time more intently, as if trying to read his thoughts... "The girl was your childhood friend, I understand."

"Yes, sir. She is now sixteen." Ernesto's voice belied his thought as the image of Joy Bell played in his mind. But his happy thought did not last long when he saw the Colonel's serious face. Ernesto straightened up and waited for the Colonel to continue.

"A dispatch had reached me today about the rivalry between our two units in the adjacent provinces, which may prejudice our movement. But I received another message, too, that the rest of the guerrilla units all over the country are coordinating for a most effective solidification of forces in preparation for the coming return of Gen. MacArthur. It is our responsibility now to prepare for this by first of all, securing reliable intelligence about the enemy forces.

Ernesto listened intently.

"Of course you are aware that our first concern is to know for sure the exact strength and capabilities of the enemy in that fortress in the town."

"Yes, sir."

"We need as much information as we can gather through your friends." The Colonel continued without taking his eyes from Ernesto.

Momentarily Ernesto was silent, hoping that the Colonel would move on to another subject. Yet, he nodded in agreement.

"The girl must be beautiful." Col. Holt presumed. "But remember that your mission will enable the landing forces to gain a strong foothold in Luzon. It is of gravest importance to us, for the

resistant movement." He paused. "You need a good rest."

That concluded their talk for the evening. After the usual salute, Ernesto left. He realized the gravity of his mission.

That night, Ernesto could not sleep. He got out of his hut for even its "nipa" palm roof had not helped alleviate the heat. The night was hot. The rain would surely follow soon. He strolled around the clearing, passing by the guards, without seeming to see them. Casually, he went beneath the tree, sat down and leaned against its trunk comfortably, arms crossed. He took a deep breath. It was Joy Bell he remembered. "So lovely and so sweet." He mused. A moth alighted on his arm. He picked this gently, "so young and gentle and so innocent." He whispered addressing the tiny insect. Then he let it fly away. His hand laid on the tall grass beside him. He pulled a blade and instinctively bit it with his lips; his thoughts flying, following the moth as it traced the light back to the torch. And once again, he sighed.

One of the guerrillas, Sammy, just seventeen, from the contingency of the Philippine Scout, who like him could not sleep that evening, strummed his guitar, letting a soft, nostalgic ballad, a "kundiman," softly fill the air. The tune was so reminiscent of a quiet evening in a peaceful village; of lovely maidens strolling the green fields, fragrant with the smell of ripe rice grains, under the full moon; of tanned young men trailing behind them, armed with guitars, their melodious voices singing of their plight and their young love. The maidens would start whispering to one another, giggling modestly as each young man would approach his lady.

Ernesto smiled. He could be one of those men and Joy Bell one of the lovely maidens. If only there was a full moon and the green fields and a peaceful village. But it was war! And Joy Bell was so far away!

Ernesto looked around at his companions, men of varied ages, some very young, the others wrinkled from the burden of their many years. They were all out from their huts, maybe because of the heat. Or maybe, like Ernesto, they could not help but remember the loved ones they left behind. He could

only guess what each one was thinking but he was sure that each nursed a beautiful memory, from years back, with his wife, mother, children, sweetheart.

It was painful to be so far away from ones beloved but there was that certain feeling of pride, of self worth, of commitment as each one thought of fighting for his country and for those dear to his heart. It was the thought of doing ones share in restoring peace and bringing back the interrupted tranquility of their life. It was this all-consuming patriotism, which gave strength to these men, who have come from all walks of life, to gather in this forsaken thicket and called themselves guerrillas.

This resistant movement was willing and ready to fight the invaders of the country they love.

They all dreamed of one common goal, to see their children free to roam the streets, and walk to school, to see their wives happy doing their household chores, to see their family praying together in church, to see young men serenade their maidens and to see old people enjoy the blessings of their ripening years. They all wished to see their loved ones free again from fear and abundant with peace and joy. These were what they were fighting for - these brave guerrillas.

The strumming from the guitar had stopped and the men slowly walked back to their huts, except for one. He must be reliving the nightmares that haunted him for years.

Ernesto knew him well. Tommy was young and had suffered much but in spite it all, he had a ready smile for everyone. His charm and love of life remained intact and endeared him to all. Ernesto remembered when he first joined them. Tommy was very ill. The camp had a hut for those who managed to escape from the death march, providing them a place to hide and to recover.

In Tommy's case, his Battalion surrendered in Maraviles, Bataan and barely survived the scorching death march that ended in Group 13, where one hundred fifty prisoners were dumped in one structure. Their group was in that 10,000 prisoners in Camp O'Donnell in Capas, Tarlac where half perished from torture, starvation, and diseases. Their existence was sub-human - served a bowl of thin broth once a day, filthy water, ravaged by malaria, beri-beri, skin ulcers, tuberculosis. The

prisoners dropped dead like flies. The sick digging graves for the dead. Until only fifteen were left. The Japanese found no use for them, not even for torture. There was nothing left to torture but the staggering, gasping, gaping skeletons. The breathing dead. More appropriately, the gasping dead. That was what they were. And so they were released. No! Discarded!

Tears never failed to burn Tommy's eyes whenever he related his story. Which was very rarely. One had to force it out from him. With Ernesto, however, because of their developed friendship, sharing it with him, was quite therapeutic. As crying - was to the cleansing of the soul. One just had to believe in it.

He had enlisted with the USAFFE and was proud of it. Despite the torture and assault to the mind, he had imprinted his identity into his soul and could recall instantly, who he was, anytime, any place. He was Tommy Valente, tag-115741. Sgt. D Company Coll., 31st Med. Bn., 31st Div. He slept and woke up with it. A week into training, Manila was bombed, same day as Pearl Harbor. Part of his duty with the Medical Battalion was to collect dog tags of their casualties, something that still haunted him. But his nightmare was of their Medic's brain splashing into the patient he was attending to when he received a direct hit.

Many of these men have their own stories. The horrors that stuck like glue and refused to be scratched off. Ernesto thought of sitting with Tommy but he decided, that leaving him alone to himself would do him more good.

"Tito is back.. .Tito is back!" The look-out announced. This was followed by the jubilant cheering from the guerrillas, who came out from everywhere to greet Tito. His name echoed through the clearing as each man repeated it to the next. The throng gathered to receive Tito.

Everyone had great expectation that morning when Tito and three others left to meet with the "teniente del barrio" - the Barrio Lieutenant nearby. A sort of the village group leader, Abruptly the cheering stopped. Ernesto made his way through the crowd.

"Oh, no!" Ernesto gasped as he saw the bloody body of Tito.

Tito sank to the ground. His back showed a deep wound. Blood flowed every time he moved. Ernesto turned Tito around. His face was bathed with blood from a head wound. "Fetch the doctor." He turned to one of the men. Ernesto cuddled the head of Tito on his lap. He looked around and found every man with bowed head, bitter and heart-broken. They were silent but Ernesto knew how they felt. Everyday their hope was ebbing away; their strength and spirit weakening.

By now Col. Holt appeared. The men stepped aside to give way to him. Ernesto and Col. Holt just exchanged looks and read what the other was thinking.

"Tito.." the Colonel bent to talk to the man. "What happened?"

"Col. Holt..." Tito tried to speak although blood oozed from the side of his mouth every time he spoke. "My three companions are all dead!" He continued with effort. "I managed to escape." He gasped.

"Go on." Col. Holt encouraged.

"We succeeded in getting the food from the barrio Lieutenant, but...but before we could even finish loading into the cart, a truckload of Japanese soldiers arrived. The barrio Lieutenant and his wife and their three children were shot and killed. "Tito shivered. "But worst of all was what they did to their four-month-old baby...Oh God...it was horrible..." Tito sobbed. "A soldier tossed the infant up into the air... right in front of her screaming mother.. .then. . .then caught him with the bayonet." Tito was now sobbing and covering his face as if trying hard to erase the scene. Everyone was silent but their fists were clenched and their jaws, clamped. "I'm sorry Colonel."

"You did your best. We will have another chance. Somehow we'll manage." Col. Holt assured him but he knew that everything would not be all right from then on. No civilian would risk his life to help them. Their sympathizers were all brutally killed, hanged and exhibited to the public to serve as a lesson. From then on they have to look for other ways and spare the civilians from the retaliation of the Japanese.

Tito stopped. He lost so much blood, he was too weak to even move his hand. He closed his eyes. Then

the doctor came. He had been fetched from another unit at a nearby hill. The guerrillas trailed behind Tito's body and converged outside the hut, where he was taken. He was placed on a bamboo bench with a flickering torch beside it. The doctor tore his shirt open. On the makeshift table was a few surgical instruments.

Ernesto and Col. Holt joined the men outside the hut. For hours they waited as the doctor sweated it out performing major surgery without the proper instruments to retrieve the bullet that had lodged in Tito's left chest.

There was total silence as everyone squatted on the ground, waiting and praying for Tito's life. It was almost midnight but no one had gone to sleep. No one could sleep. Then.. .the sound of the surgical instruments stopped. There was a cold stony silence as they heard the door creak open. The doctor stood there, drenched in sweat, arms hanging down limply by his sides. Col. Holt and Ernesto stood to meet him. The doctor shook his head.

"He's gone." We don't have the necessary instrument and medicine to save him." The doctor's words were said in almost a whisper but everyone knew what he said.

"Tito is dead." Col. Holt solemnly announced. "But he died a hero." The four of them died heroes." Then he entered the hut.

Slowly and quietly each one stood to pray for the souls of the four guerrillas and the civilians who gave up their lives trying to help their cause.

Tommy had one more tag to collect.

Ernesto stood solemnly before the body of Tito. A torch flickered just above his head. He laid on a bamboo bench and a torn grey blanket covered his limp body. Although there were no tears in Ernesto's eyes, his heart wept.. .everybody's heart wept for Tito and the others. Ernesto's heart wept for his own parents, who met the same fate as the barrio Lieutenant's family for helping the guerrillas.

Tito was a young man full of life and vitality. He was the live wire of the group. His presence meant laughter and his enthusiasm was contagious. He joined the guerrillas just a month after he married his wife... a dark-eyed beauty from the village. Maybe, she would never know...maybe Celia that was



his wife's name would be waiting for him... but she would be waiting forever.

Col. Holt was looking down, too, at the lifeless body of Tito and as he stared at his bloody face, a kaleidoscope of scenes played before his eyes. There were the panicked civilians, the groans of soldiers, both Filipinos and Americans as their bodies stiffened from the hot leads of the machineguns, the deafening sounds of the bombs as these dug into the earth around them, the smoke and the flames turning into an earthly inferno. And slowly the kaleidoscope of scenes settled down into one clear picture of thousands of captured Filipino and American soldiers, dragging their tattered shoes against the hot gravel and stones that cut their largely-exposed feet, their emaciated bodies beaten both by the scorching sun and the heavy rains along the long road to the concentration camp of Camp O'Donnell in Capas, Japanese soldiers prodding them all the way with beatings.

Col. Holt should have been one of those captured soldiers of the Death March but he and a few of his men who survived their last encounter defied the order of Gen. Wainwright to surrender. They decided to fight rather than surrender. And fight, they did. Only for a few days. Ultimately, they were captured and forced to follow the thousands of Filipino and American soldiers in a march that promised no end. He banded together with his men, supporting each other, when some of them lagged behind. But at one point, the sight of a river drove his men mad as they stumbled and staggered to the river to quench their thirst. He did not have the heart to stop them. But a barrage of gunshots from the Japanese did. He ran after them and used his body to shield them but one body was not enough. Even in death their hands were reaching for the water that was not even there. The river was dry for the last drop of water was either swallowed by the cracked silts or by the scorching sun.

Together with his men, he, too, was left behind for dead. After the last man from the long line of prisoners had passed him, he crawled as far away as his body could carry him. What he saw from where he hid, reinforced his decision to escape and do something. He saw Filipino and American prisoners, unarmed and hungry, sick and wounded, beaten,

kicked, bayoneted and shot for being unable to keep up with the long torturous march. He resolved then and there that he would continue to fight. After days of hunger and hiding with untreated wounds, he joined a group of unyielding Filipinos, who like him went into hiding somewhere in the mountains of Luzon. These men have now become part of him. They have suffered together the cruelty of the elements and the constant bitter struggle for survival. Every pain suffered by his men became his own, their every loss his agony. He died a little as each of his men met his end.

Col. Holt stood immobile staring down at the still tense face of Tito. Even now the strain of the war was markedly visible there even in death. Gently, Col. Holt pulled up the blanket and covered Tito's face hoping to blank out the suffering that war had inflicted on this young soul. "Capt. Duran," Col. Holt addressed Ernesto. "Assign a detail to dig Tito's grave." Col. Holt's eyes were red and his face tense.

Yes, sir!" Ernesto answered.

Then the Colonel walked out...in slow heavy footsteps. His figure, all six feet and five inches drooped heavily with the burden of his loss and responsibility. He was tired... very tired!

"May God bless his soul and the souls of Fermin, Molong and Joaquin. And may they find eternal peace!" Ernesto silently prayed and walked away.

The torch flickered as a soft wind blew. The night suddenly turned cold!

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CHAPTER FOUR

Every week at one in the afternoon of Sunday, Mr. Miura went to the garrison kitchen and collected the left-over of the food that his friend, Tanaka, the cook, secretly kept and set aside for him. Mr. Miura even volunteered to wash the dishes so he could salvage every bit of food left in the plates. Sunday was when Tanaka prepared hearty meals at the garrison and leftovers were more plentiful. Mr. Miura placed all kinds of food into two big pails, a mixture of left-over rice, chicken bones, fish bones, mashed vegetables, potatoes, or anything he could lay his hands on. Happily he carried the pails out of the garrison. "For our pig," he always told the guards whenever they got curious. They did not question him again after one look at the unsightly mash inside his pails.

Mr. Miura was excitedly greeted by Lota as soon as he reached home.

"How is it, mahal ?" she lovingly asked him.

"Not as much as last week's." He sadly answered, showing his wife the two half-filled containers.

"Food must be really scarce even inside the garrison." She shook her head. "But don't worry I have some boiled cassava, which I was able to dig out from our garden, to supplement this."

"Don't you think this smells a little? Mr. Miura was a bit concerned.

"I'll do something. Don't you worry. I'll re-cook everything that's safe to eat." Lota hurriedly went through the picking out of the raw potatoes from the mixture, separating the rice soaked in broth, rinsing this from its usual sweet-sour taste, taking out the chicken bones to re-boil with the hope of extracting flavor, if there was still any left. She re-cooked the food with her home-grown herbs, giving the food a much improved taste.

From their garden, they were able to supplement whatever Mr. Miura got from the garrison with green bananas, yams, vegetables, cassavas. Joy Bell became an expert in wrapping food. She was now part of all this and enjoyed the opportunity.

The first time Joy Bell witnessed this unusual undertaking of her parents, she did not have an

inkling of why they were doing it. "Daddy," she once asked. "Where are you bringing this food?"

"To the poor and hungry children outside the next city."

"But Daddy, do you think it will taste all right?"

"I see to it that it does." It was Lota who answered. "Your Daddy won't give anything to the children that would make them sick."

"But they are just left-over," she reasoned unable to comprehend how such kind of food could still be good for the body.

"Yes," Mr. Miura answered with a sad look in his eyes. "But it is all we could afford to give."

"Who tells you to do this, Daddy?"

"No one." He replied while passing the banana leaf over the fire, to make it pliant.

"Then why do you do it?"

"Because I love children, just as I love you." He explained wiping clean the heated banana leaf.

"Those little children are hungry." He started to cut the heated banana leaf into small portions.

"I see," Joy Bell sadly nodded. "We always have food."

"Because we are outside the city and able to produce our food. I think you better come with us. Then you would really understand what I mean."

At first Mr. Miura did not want Joy Bell to see the sufferings of children for he wanted to spare her the sight but now he believed it was time for her to really understand the meaning of charity and the joy there was in giving.

"What a big heart you have...you and Mommy."

"What good is the heart, if it could not feel love and compassion? And charity?"

Joy Bell sighed as she looked at her parents again, this time wrapping their preparations into small packs in banana leaf. Each contained a slice of boiled cassava, a half ladle of rice mixed with vegetables and potatoes cooked in chicken bone broth, with salt and herb for flavoring.

She remembered that first trip she made with her parents. They rode a cart pulled by a "carabao," the water buffalo which her mother had borrowed from Joy Bell's friend Mario's family. It took them close to two hours to reach the fringes of the nearest city, which was totally in ruins from the fire

started by the guerrillas to prevent the Japanese from occupying the buildings and finished by the Japanese, who retaliated and burned down the rest of the city, rendering the civilians homeless. They walked toward a group of children, who were rummaging for food through piles of flies-infested garbage damped in a muddy ditch. They scoured the rotting pile, digging frail fingers like chicken searching for worms. They were in rags and reeked of sweat. Their haggard faces begrimed with dirt, their arms and legs, scaly and dry and ravaged with skin ulcers, their wrinkled skin, loosely wrapped their visible bones.

As soon as Mr. Miura put down his basket and called out to them, "Come, I have some food for you," the children, almost as one, turned to his direction, and their sunken eyes suddenly brightened with excitement. Then like a herd of cows they stampeded toward him, pushing him out of balance as they frantically dig their hands into the basket and devoured the food, including the banana wrappers.

Joy Bell was later informed by Mr. Miura that this was a new location they visited since the first one was abandoned by the children, when dead bodies were dumped there by the Japanese.

"No, don't touch that!" A chorus of frantic voices came from the direction of their mothers who rushed toward their children, each one pulling her child by the hand, snatching from their mouth the little food that was left there and throwing those to the ground in front of Mr. Miura, Lota and Joy Bell.

"Don't eat anything that he gives you." One mother, so frail, she didn't have the strength to pull herself back from leaning to her side, but fired with enough anger to admonish them. "He is a Japanese. He will poison you."

Mr. Miura was dumbfounded.

"He is a good Japanese. He is your friend." Lota explained for it broke her heart to see her husband treated this way.

"You are a traitor." Shouted another woman at Lota. "You befriended the Japanese so you could eat. We are not your kind."

"He is my husband. He only gives your children food, which they badly need."

"We don't need your food. We will die of hunger, but we will die with honor. You make us suffer because of your war." A woman stepped forward pointing an accusing finger at Mr. Miura.

"Please, give my husband a chance to help your children. He is a Japanese but just like you he does not like this war. Believe me, we don't want this war. And just like you, we suffer, too, in ways that you haven't." Lota could no longer hold back her tears as she held Joy bell close to her.

"We don't need your help. Go back to where you belong." An embittered woman picked up stones. "You killed my husband, you Japanese, you tortured him. You forced a pail of water into his mouth and hanged his bloated body at the public square for display." She was now sobbing. "Go, leave before I kill you." The woman was hysterical throwing stones at Mr. Miura.

Mr. Miura tried to shield himself from the stones with his bare hands. "Lota, we better leave. It was Mr. Miura who calmly took his wife and daughter away.

Tearful, Lota glanced back at the woman not with anger but with empathy. The raging woman was now laughing; laughing hysterically and cradling a piece of burned wood close to her bosom. Then she was calm and she hummed a lullaby as if putting a baby to sleep as she walked away from the group.

"She must have lost her baby." Lota mumbled.

After throwing the Miura's a last look which was filled with contempt, the women turned away leaving their children behind.

The Miuras had not yet gone far when they heard a sudden commotion. Together they turned to look. The children were competing with three skinny dogs fighting over the scattered food on the ground, now powdered with dust. And as they looked farther, they saw the group of women, the mothers, looking back in pain at the sight they just witnessed.

It was a bitter experience for Joy Bell, but she had learned to adopt her father's philosophy of sowing love where there was hatred until love replaced hate. They did not stop. They understood how the civilians felt about them. They knew that it would take time and patience, love and understanding to make the civilians accept them.

The next time they visited the children, the mothers were no longer there to stop them. Perhaps, they deliberately did it to enable their children to partake of the food that the Miuras brought them. They were about to leave, when they heard a moaning from a nearby sagging structure that was once a public toilet, one of the children informed them. Mr. Miura peeped in, but stepped back from the stench. What they saw shocked them. Lota pulled back Joy Bell but she insisted she could handle whatever it was. Yet she staggered back from the sight.

It was a man - an old man, his body nothing more than a skeleton wrapped in gnarled scabies-rotted skin, half-clothed in tattered sack cloth that must have stuck to his body for months, curled in a corner, his head resting on the toilet seat, flies picking on his body, his gaping lips cracked, his sunken eyes blank but something from within was crying out for help. "Water....food..." he whispered, gritting a couple of blackened teeth, as he struggled to move his crumpled leg.

"Who are you?" Lota was in tears.

The man tried to mumble, "Naaa. . .nooo."

"His name is Nano." A small boy behind Lota answered. He is twelve years old, like me. He was the town water boy. Mother used to pay him a nickel for two pails of water he fetched from the well.

"My God." Is all Lota could utter. He looked so old, one could mistake him for an old man. His mangy hair completely gray, became the breeding place of the buzzing flies. "Why do you stay here?"

Nano just pointed to his leg that was swollen to his thigh. Slowly he tried to pull the newspaper he used as bandage over the skin ulcer that had eaten his flesh to the bone.

Lota was aware of the affliction of the civilians, especially of children; an epidemic caused by malnutrition and poor hygiene. No medicine was found effective or even available except for boiled guava leaves, which, if it helped, did not do much.

"Water.. .food. .." Nano moaned again.

But the Miuras had given away all the food they brought along. Joy Bell found a banana leaf on the bottom of their basket with morsels of food that had dropped from the wrapped packs. With hesitation, she pushed the basket to Nano, hoping he wouldn't take

it. But with feverish speed and shaking hands, Nano snatched the banana leaf, ran his tongue all over it and licked it clean, then proceeded to eat the leaves, as well - all of it.

The boy of twelve came back and pushed a rusty can half filled with water that must have come from the nearby ditch. But Nano gulped it down before Lota could protest.

"We'll be back with food and water." Mr. Miura mumbled.

Joy Bell was crying when they turned away. Their hearts were breaking.

The next day, the Miuras came back with food and water for Nano. There was no moaning. Instead, they heard the buzzing of a swarm of flies hovering over Nano's body. They came too late for him and before they could react, someone snatched the basket from Lota. It was an old woman digging into the food meant for Nano.

Joy Bell had painfully lived with the memories. She was determined to do her part, wherever and whenever she could be of help.

"Well, we're all done." Lota announced, after she finished wrapping the last unfinished pack she took over from Joy Bell's hands.

"Let's hurry. The children are waiting." Mr. Miura's voice jolted Joy Bell from her thoughts.

As the Miuras continued to visit other areas of the city fringes, they witnessed children doing, at their tender age, work which were formerly done by older people, by their fathers who had fled to the mountains to escape captivity and became guerrillas. The children helped their mothers build their homes from scrap wood and crates and scorched corrugated metal sheets.

Later, the Miuras avoided the city and concentrated in the outskirts of their own town, where they found children in houses which were built either with "nipa" palms or "cogon" leaves and bamboo, usually a one-room hut where everything from cooking to washing, eating to sleeping was done, the floor always smelling of dried fish. Some lived under thatched roof with only the earth for floor. An outhouse toilet was usually shared by several families and so with the common ground well. People would take a bath beside the well and the same water



would flow back into the well, yet people did not seem to be bothered by it.

Babies were born without any assistance or on occasion with the help of a midwife, who had to use whatever improvised equipment was available. Babies had their first crawl on the damp earthen floor. It was all God's will that they survived the hunger and the cold nights.

Most families subsisted on just one meal a day consisting of corn porridge with salt or boiled banana stalks, a kind of food usually fit only for pig's meals. These scenes spurred the Miuras to do even more for them.

Their desire to help grew stronger every day. This was partly due to the experiences Mr. Miura had when he was still a small boy back in Japan. He had come from a poor family. And later orphaned at a very young age. Life had been hard but people in their small fishing village helped one another. The meager food seemed to exponentially multiply when shared. From those beginnings, he took with him the value of neighborliness and sharing. That and his marriage to an inherently generous Lota, made it a second nature for his family to embark in what they considered a God-given opportunity to live their lives for the highest good. This had been a way of life for them. In peace and in war.

The Japanese did not extend them any help except for the cook, Tanaka giving him access to the left-over from the garrison kitchen. And from Oku, the dishwasher, in exchange for Mr. Miura taking over his dishwashing job and for a free haircut. As always, "quid pro quo."

Mr. Miura tried to be self-sufficient without, if he could help it, depending on others, especially those who extended help only if they got something in return. The "quid pro quo," "I scratch your back, you scratch my back" kind. To him generosity was outright giving and sharing without expectation for returns.

With this in mind, he created his own source of food to share with those who needed the most. So, he painstakingly moved, in his makeshift wheelbarrow, the soil from the garrison damping place and converted it into a fertile and productive garden of vegetables, yams, cassavas, banana plants and herbs. He would have loved to raise pigs or chicken

but by doing so, feeding these would be taking away some of the food meant for the children.

Having learned to fish, as a child in Japan, he tried fishing at a nearby river. But after seeing children catching fish that moments before were biting on human waste floating all over, apparently coming from the previous night users at a nearby bridge, which served as the communal latrine, he gave that up. Then he tried harvesting mushrooms that sprouted overnight after the rains, but that, too, he had to let go. He found out no place was spared being used as public toilet. Under bushes, beneath coconut groves, everywhere. And since paper was not available, sticks, any stick and corn husks became substitutes, which by necessity were used and reused after a cleansing from the rain. Unfortunately, those were the sites where mushrooms flourished.

Their giving of food to their neighbors' children was only one of the many more kindnesses which the Miuras practiced. He made toys such as small carts, tops, yoyos, and kites for the boys and small nipa huts, pots and pans out of clay for the girls. Lota sewed rag dolls, too. He hated to see children become involved in the cruelty and ugliness of war. He wanted them care-free and happy. Joy Bell found new friends - many of them.

The Miuras taught the children how to sing. They taught them Filipino, American and Japanese songs. The Filipino children began to get less fearful of the Japanese soldiers as they were the very first time they saw them. They even started to venture to the garrison gate and sang for the guards, who handed them candies in return.

They became audience to one Japanese soldier's magic, as he boasted to them, holding a rolled handkerchief in one hand and pulling with another the tip of the handkerchief. "Look... America big, tall," and continued to pull up the handkerchief until it bent over, "but weak and falls." Now he pushed back the handkerchief and pulled up an inch. "Now Japan, small, short," the handkerchief remained erect, "but STRONG!" He prodded the children to applaud. And they did, hesitatingly. Mario scratched his head and looked up at Joy Bell, who smiled back and nodded at him.

The children became so comfortable with the soldiers that one dusk they overstayed at the public square playing around when suddenly, from the ditch at both sides of the street, soldiers jumped up and lunged at the opposing group, with bayonets on rifles' ends. A drill that almost gored one of the children had Joy Bell not grabbed the girl on time. That put a stop to the children's sauntering in the public square after dark.

In so many ways, the Miuras made every effort not to allow war to dampen whatever little joy there was left in the children.

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CHAPTER FIVE

It was dusk and the Miuras sat on their stairs with eight children enrapt at Mr. Miura's story. They were so engrossed that there was total silence only to be punctuated by an occasional outburst of laughter at Mr. Miura's jokes. That was how he held the attention of his listeners.

This particular afternoon, he told the story about three friends of different races, a story he conceived himself.

His five-year-old listener could not hold back but asked out of curiosity. "Is that why you love Mario, and Umeki, and Rosa, and Joy bell.. .and me?"

"Yes, Dante, that's exactly why we should all be friends. We are all brothers and sisters. We are all the same human beings with feelings. Mr. Miura was quite serious and convincing. He emphasized his point by lightly touching everyone on the head.

"But why am I dark, Boy is pug-nosed while Rosa is mestiza and very pretty?" Queried Nena unable to comprehend their contrasting features.

Mr. Miura smiled. He knew he should be prepared to answer the children's inquisitive minds but he welcomed how they thought. Nena was right. Before him was a variety of faces. Some pug-nosed, others dark faced, light skinned, cross-eyed, hare-lipped. "Yes, Nena. Each one of us is different in appearance. You see, if you look exactly like Rosa and I look exactly like Mario or Boy, then how would you know I am Boy or Mario? Or whether you are Nena or Rosa? If we all look alike, then we wouldn't know one from the other."

The children gaped, looked at one another and nodded in agreement. Lota smiled impressed at how her husband could bring home his point in the simplest terms.

"Wouldn't it be a riot if Mario's mother took Boy home and Boy's mother would be screaming her lungs out searching for him?"

There was an instantaneous laughter. Joy Bell's was the loudest.

"If we're the same, then why can't I run as fast as Sato? Andy butted in.

"But you could climb the coconut tree faster than anyone of us." Placated Michiko.

"Hmmm. .." Andy's smile was ear-to-ear.

"As you can see we each has a special talent which evens out things. What we lack in one thing we have in another." Explains Mr. Miura. "So there's no reason to feel less or more than your friend."

"So that makes us even and the same." Concluded Ben.

"Precisely. Isn't that wonderful?" Joy Bell chimed in.

"Sometimes we tend to judge others by how they look. You see, we are more than how we look. It's how we treat each other that counts and that makes us what we are. We can be kind, helpful, friendly. We choose what we want to be."

Mario, the tiniest in the group, about six but smaller than a three-year-old, gazed up at Mr. Miura with a confused look. He had been very quiet from the start.

"Yes, Mario?" Mr. Miura ran his hand over Mario's head.

Mario had no hair. His head was shiny and smooth. His mother shaved it just the day before due to head lice infestation and subsequent head scabies.

"Mr. Miura, you are a Japanese, why are you not a soldier?" Mario's curiosity was triggered when he saw from a distance a group of Japanese soldiers.

"I am not a soldier because I am a civilian."

"What's the difference between a soldier and a civilian?" asked Raul.

"A soldier has a duty to follow. They kill, if necessary. Civilians are not bound by that duty." He dreaded to talk about the subject.

"Don't you like to kill?" Mario persisted, eyes wide.

"Of course not. Why should I kill my own brother?" Mr. Miura's response was instantaneous.

"I don't like war." Mario concluded. "The sound of guns wakes me up."

"Then throw away that gun you're holding." Nena snapped at him.

"I won't. My gun doesn't make any sound." Mario resisted.

Nena was about to snatch the wooden gun from Mario when Mr. Miura smiled at them, shaking his

head. The two kids sat back with heads low. Then Nena leaned over to Mario and hugged him. Mario smiled at her.

The children cheered but Lota hushed them when a drum roll from the garrison was heard.

"The flag is being lowered." She stood up facing the direction of the garrison. Mr. Miura, Joy Bell and the children followed. "A flag stands for a country and should be respected." Lota had previously touched the subject with the children in one of their sessions.

Momentarily, the children seemed to forget war and hate and fear. They accepted everyone as friends, be he an American, a Filipino or a Japanese.

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"Mr. Miura. . .Mr. Miura!" A shrill voice pierced through the night

Lota, who was just about to sleep, got up and lighted the lamp. Mr. Miura and Joy Bell, who were both light-sleeper hurried to the window and checked. They always responded, with anxiety at every noise, especially the howling of dogs.

"What's the matter, Mario?" Lota opened the door to let the child in.

"It's mother.. .please come..." Mario blurted. "She is in pain. She's going to have a baby."

Lota knew Mario's mother was pregnant but the baby shouldn't come this soon. "I'll go with you." Lota hurriedly put on a shawl and a bandana.

"Mahal," she turned to Mr. Miura. "Please go to the garrison. Perhaps Dr. Kamiko could spare you some alcohol. "Joy Bell, bring along a clean blanket and my clean white chemise.

"Yes, Mommy.. .but why?"

"We'll need those for the baby."

The three left, Joy Bell and Lota with Mario and Mr. Miura for the garrison.

The entire neighborhood have gathered in front of Trina's shack, when the three arrived. Her screams were heard as the Miuras got inside the low-ceilinged hut.

"Boil some water." Lota instructed one of the neighbors.

The neighbor poured water into a small earthen pot and put this on top of three small rocks that served as stove, just a few feet from where Trina lay on a bamboo floor a few inches off the damp ground.

Lota felt the tightened muscles of Trina's belly while Trina dug her fingers deep into Lota's hand. She twisted and stretched screaming out a litany of complaints, from her husband fleeing to the mountains leaving her two months pregnant, to how she stumbled that afternoon while carrying a can of water from the well.

At the top of her voice, she professed her love for her husband but cursed him for her sixth pregnancy, while Mario and his four siblings huddled at the corner crying as they witnessed their mother in pain. Lota learned from Trina's wailing that she was only in her seventh month.

"Easy now.. .the pain will soon subside." Lota appeased Trina, wiping the perspiration on her forehead. .

But Trina was kicking and yelling. "It hurts... God help me."

"Try to relax. Breathe. It will soon be over." Lota coached her, while she washed her hands and laid out the mat for the baby, that Mario handed her. Before Mario could step aside, her mother suddenly screamed and grabbed him, digging his fingers into the frightened boy. It took Lota and the neighbor great concerted effort to unlock Trina's hands from her now hysterical son. "Now.. .give it a push.. .a real good push!" Lota coaxed her knowing that the moment had come.

Trina pushed with all her strength until she stiffened. Her muscles tensed; her lips clamped; her fists clenched. A tiny cry rang through the night. Trina stopped groaning.

"It's a boy!" Announced Lota with excitement and relief, as she patted the buttocks of the baby. Carefully, she wrapped the soft red body with the

chemise and covered him with the blanket. Joy Bell stood beside her mother, transfixed and amazed. Just then the midwife, who was fetched by a neighbor from the adjacent village, arrived. She took over from Lota and proceeded to cut the umbilical cord with a strip of sharp reed, with no benefit of proper sterilization except passing it over a flame. Mr. Miura was not able to procure alcohol for the garrison clinic was closed and Dr. Kamiko was on call at one of their barracks.

Trina smiled as she glanced at her baby and closed her eyes. She was drained of all energy but she was now calm and relaxed.

Lota stood by the midwife who cleaned the baby with plain warm water. Her job was done. She turned to Mario and his siblings, who crowded around the baby, huddled together by Mr. Miura. Joy Bell, overwhelmed by what she just witnessed, hugged her mother and Mario and her father.

There was a sense of pride in Mr. Miura as he guided Lota out of the hut. She may not have given him a child but she helped another mother deliver a baby into the world. The Miuras walked home silently sharing the deep joy of the experience. Especially for Joy, who couldn't stop smiling.

The following day, Lota and Joy Bell rummaged through their trunk of old clothes. They also prepared hot corn soup and boiled yams, while Mr. Miura watched, with amusement, her excited wife and daughter. They couldn't wait to visit Trina's baby.

"How's the midwife feeling today? He teased his wife.

"Great!" she waved high Mr. Miura's undershirt before putting it in the basket with the rest of the goodies. "For the baby...to keep him warm."

"Take another one, I won't mind." He laughed.

They were ready to leave when Mario came panting just like the previous night.

"Please come, our baby....it's our baby...please come!" Mario's words were incoherent but they got the message. Without hesitation, they all ran down and joined Mario.

The midwife stared helplessly as Trina cuddled her baby, mumbling as in prayer. The baby was burning with fever and the rapid but faint heaving of his chest indicated his serious condition. The midwife had done all she could, robbing the baby



with oil and salve from some medicinal roots and herbs.

"He has infection." The midwife turned to Lota, shaking her head. "I can't do anything more to help."

"Oh no!" Lota gasped. "There must be something we can do."

Just then, Pedro, Trina's husband, arrived with an old man. Pedro came earlier that morning from the mountains upon learning of their baby's arrival and immediately fetched a well-known "albulario" or quack doctor from the adjacent barrio.

"There is a way." Pedro barged in. "Give way to Apo Lucas."

The neighbors who gathered, stayed close to the walls, crowding the shack, leaving only a very narrow space for the old man to pass through. The old man sat flat on the floor, tied a red band of cloth around his forehead, closed his eyes and raised his arms upward, reciting an incantation of incomprehensible words then bent down low to the floor. Once more he raised his arms and placed his right palm over the head of the baby. "He's bewitched!" He announced, shaking his head.

"Oh no!" Trina exclaims. "Please do something, Apo Lucas. Do something."

The old man stood and fished out from his pouch a tin plate and a short steel bar. He turned to Pedro. "Bring me an egg and a chicken with pure black feathers." Pedro looked around him feeling lost, not knowing where to secure the things asked by the quack doctor.

"Come with me, Pedro." It was an elderly woman who volunteered. "I have a pure black chicken at home."

Pedro quickly left with the old woman. Apo Lucas danced around the sick baby, chanting while beating the tin plate. In a few more minutes Pedro arrived with a black-feathered chicken and an egg.

Apo Lucas sat before the baby and after a short ritual, hacked the head of the chicken with his bolo in one stroke. Holding the jerking headless chicken, he let its curdling blood bathe the baby.

"Oh, God!" Joy Bell gasped and closed her eyes.

Lota hushed her. Again Apo Lucas danced around the crowded shack, drumming the plate, as he crossed with blood each post of the four corners of the hut.

He broke the egg on the baby's belly and covered it with a fan leaf. Brandishing his arms, he commanded, "Leave evil spirit!" He smiled triumphantly. "They're gone." Apo Lucas stood with arrogant confidence.

"Thank you, thank you." Trina sobbed.

"Pedro, tonight I need sweet coconut wine, a pot of rice and one whole broiled chicken. Put everything together in an unused earthen pot. I need to offer these at eight tonight on the anthill beside the creek." Then he turned to Trina. "You bathed in the creek while you were pregnant. Yes?"

"Yes, yes, I did, Apo Lucas."

"You see," he nodded, "the goblins did not like your intruding into their space, the playground of their children. Unless we give them the offerings tonight, they will take your baby!"

"No.. .please don't let them do it.. .please." Trina begged holding on to Apo Lucas' leg.

"Keep calm." Pacified the midwife. "Getting excited is bad for you."

"Be sure to prepare what I asked you Pedro. I'll wait for you in the house." Then with an authoritative gait the stooping figure of Apo Lucas disappeared from the crowd.

There was whispering all around. The women began to talk about witches, dwarfs, and the unseen spirits.

"My baby.. .his eyes are rolling up, Pedro. I can't stop him from shaking." Cried Trina.

Pedro reassured Trina that everything will be all right. "Apo Lucas will not fail, Trina. Our baby will be fine."

"No, Pedro.. .the baby has convulsion." It was the midwife who was alarmed. "The infection has to be stopped."

"We have already done that." Interrupted Pedro. "He will be well."

"He will die unless he is given the proper medicine."

This time Lota could no longer hold back. She hustled through the crowd and faced the midwife. She respected people's beliefs in superstition but the baby needed more than that.

"Tell me what we can do." She asked.

"The infection should be stopped or this baby will not survive. We need medicine to counter it. It is our only hope."

"Then let's look for medicine. There maybe some, somewhere." She turned to Mr. Miura. "Let's bring the baby to the garrison clinic."

"No!" Pedro cut in, upon seeing Mr. Miura step forward. "The Japanese are our enemies. They wouldn't help us."

Trina looked at Pedro and pleaded. "Listen to them, Pedro."

"I believe in Apo Lucas. Wait until we give him the offering tonight and our baby will be well."

"Apo Lucas may be able to help in cases which are not very serious but not with infection. Not in this case." The midwife explained.

Pedro was about to answer but Trina held him by the arm. "Pedro let them help our baby."

"All right, take our baby but remember this." He pointed a finger at Mr. Miura. "If he dies, you'll pay. I'm not leaving, not yet. I will wait. And I'll kill you and all the Japanese. Pedro shouted then embraced his wife after she handed over their baby to Lota. And like a child, the man wept.

The Miuras brought the baby to the garrison. They were stopped twice by the guards but with Mr. Miura's explanation and Lota's pleas, they were admitted in. Dr. Kamiko was just leaving for the barracks of sick soldiers so he instructed his assistant, Mitsi, to attend to his friends. In silence, Mitsi did what he had to do for the baby.

The next half hour was the longest that the Miuras experienced as they watched the baby fight for his life, trying to take in as much air as his little lungs could hold. Mitsi gave the baby a sponge bath. From the way he handled the tiny body, one could already sense that he was a gentle and kind young man.

The baby slept after Mitsi gave him a shot. The four waited for the baby to wake up. Only then did Mitsi notice that the three had been standing for sometime. He offered a stool, the only one in the room, to Lota, but discretely glancing at Joy Bell.

"Please sit down, Ma'am." He spoke in soft and measured Japanese-accented English, with a slight bow of his head.

"Thank you." Lota slumped down on the stool, apparently exhausted from her experience. "Come sit with me, Baby." She offered and Joy Bell sat inching close to her mother and feeling a little embarrassed.

"I'm sorry, but it is the only one we have here." He addressed Mr. Miura.

"Don't worry. We understand." Answered Mr. Miura without taking his eyes from Mitsi. "Have you been long here in the Philippines?"

"No. I came just a week ago."

"Have you been to the front line?" Mr. Miura asked with concern.

"Not yet." He humbly replied. "I wish they wouldn't send me there."

"You don't like being a soldier?" There was a feeling of relief in Mr. Miura's voice.

"I was a medical student when I was called to the army." There was sadness in his voice. "I love my studies. My dream is to help people live, not kill."

"I can see that." Mr. Miura nodded.

"But it is our country first."

"You look very young, son." It was Lota who spoke.

"I'll be eighteen a month from now. You know, my mother always baked me a birthday cake back home. Delicious cake." He smiled making him look even younger. "You see, I am an only child and my mother is a widow."

"Why don't you visit us?" The mother instinct in Lota took over. "Our home is just outside this garrison. You can ask from the civilians and they will tell you. Then maybe, we can have a little party for your birthday and I'll bake you a cake. Maybe not as delicious as your mother's but it'll be a cake nonetheless."

"Oh, that's very kind of you, ma'am." Mitsi threw a shy side glance at Joy Bell.

"She's my daughter, Joy bell." Mr. Miura volunteered.

"Nice to know you, Miss." Again he bowed and his face turned red as he glanced at Joy Bell. "My name is Mitsi, Mitsi Suginami San. Please call me Mitsi."

Joy Bell smiled.

"May I be your friend, Miss?" Mitsi could hardly look straight at her and his voice quivered slightly.

"Sure, and you may call me Joy Bell."

"Thank you very much, Joy Bell." He bowed again.

"You will visit us, Mitsi?" Lota urged him.

"Yes, yes, Ma'am. . .I will."

The baby gave out a soft cry and Mitsi went to him and checked his vital signs. His breathing had returned to normal and his fever had gone down. "He'll be just fine. But he needs more medicine and good care. I'll give you some medicine to take home."

"Thank you, Mitsi. Don't you think we'll have to wait for Dr. Kamiko?"

"He'll be back very late and it won't be good for the baby to be out in the evening. He wouldn't mind. A baby's life is more important." He handed the medicine to Lota. "Please give him two drops of this three times a day. He'll be fine."

"Thank you, again."

"I'll visit you Ma'am, sir...as soon as I am off duty. He bowed again and gave a timid smile at Joy Bell.

With Trina's permission, the Miuras had the baby stay with them that night. That gave Trina sometime to rest and it assured the baby the necessary care and medication.

The next day, Mitsi paid the Miuras a visit. He pronounced the baby well enough to be taken back to his mother. For the half hour that he stayed, he did not talk much. Just smiled and threw shy glances at Joy Bell. The cassava cake that Lota had baked for him was a welcome treat and he seemed happy just being there with them.

That afternoon, Lota together with Mr. Miura, Joy Bell and Mitsi took back the baby to Trina. Trina could only sob not knowing how to thank them for saving his son's life. Pedro was silent as he looked up at Mr. Miura and Mitsi and looked down again. But as the four were about to leave, he raised his head. "Thank you." The voice came like a whisper then he lowered his head again. He felt so small before the two Japanese who have shown him that people could still care and be merciful in spite of war.

CHAPTER SIX

"Banzai!" A dozen Japanese soldiers shouted in unison, facing the huge portrait of Emperor Hirohito on the wall of Sgt. Mamoto's office after he concluded his instructions with "in the name of Emperor Hirohito." The soldiers marched out of the room, stomping their heavy boots.

Sgt. Mamoto sat back putting his legs on his desk and lighting the cigar in his long pipe. He grinned, confident that his every word would be followed to the letter. He arrived in this garrison just a few days ago and now he could sit comfortably as long as he wanted, now that he was no longer just a private in the Japanese Imperial Forces. He inhaled and gulped down the aroma of the first-class tobacco he commandeered from the wealthy landlord when he ransacked his estate after raping his wife and only daughter. That was just before he was assigned to this town. He felt great to be able to smoke real vintage tobacco. Taking his pipe between his fingers, he patted the ashes ceremoniously in the ash tray, a Spanish porcelain he had also taken from the landlord. He loved to own expensive objects. This had been an obsession ever since he was a mere private.

Just the thought of having been a private made him sick, so making a swift and swirling turn of his swivel chair, he spat into the nearby waste basket. He swirled back and resumed his former position, legs crossed on top of the desk. Again he inhaled and blew out the smoke into a circular hollow, following this with his sight as it slowly ascended and disappeared into the air. He raised his ring finger high before him, making the huge ruby stone in his ring sparkle against the glow of his cigar between his lips. "I never had this kind of ring." He murmured. This, too, he took from that old landlord. Now, he had this beautiful ring, a watch with gold chain and the cigars - a dozen of these. He opened the side drawer of his desk without moving his legs then took out a brown box. He lifted its lid and relished the scent of the rows of aged cigars. After another sniff of the special aroma, he carefully tucked the box inside the drawer of his

desk. "War is good." He mused. He looked up the ceiling and hummed a Japanese melody. "It's nice to be a Sergeant," he thought. How he detested the time when he was a mere private. He was assigned to an inconsiderate, domineering and egoistic commanding officer. How he hated him. No matter how right he was, his commander always won over him. He still could not fully understand up to now, why the Sergeant found him a very convenient target for his tantrums. Sometimes he thought that perhaps he envied his charm with women.

Sgt. Mamoto was in his early thirties. He believed that women were simply attracted to him like bees to honey. Of course, he was tall and well-built, his dark hair kept in place with pomade. He sported side burns and a big mole accentuated his strong chin. His commanding officer for one thing was old and fat, who Sgt. Mamoto called "the old hog," every time he was reprimanded for making so much noise. Mamoto was an incessant talker. And he was proud of it. He was never short of opinion in everything. Now, he relished being an officer for he could talk as much as he wanted. His English was fairly good, enough to be understood. Again, he inhaled from his long pipe and stretched his arms high.

From the distance he heard the greeting of a guard accompanied by the quick click of his boots as he returned to attention. The greeting was repeated from one guard to the next. Sgt. Mamoto jumped up to his feet as the door opened. He sneered. "Why should there be a Colonel in this office?" He murmured.

"Sgt. Mamoto!" the powerful voice rang. Mamoto stood, body erect. "I would like to talk in private. Allow no one into my office." He continued, his bearing dignified as he walked to his office at the adjacent room. The name on his door read - Col. Hiroshi.

Sgt. Mamoto bowed again then walked out of his room without any word, throwing a sharp look at the young man who had come with the colonel. Sgt. Mamoto closed the door behind him with a disgruntled attitude then walked along the corridor and down the steep stairs, his face stern and body rigid as the guards bowed. This gesture flattered him. This was the other reason that made army life attractive to

him. Besides, of course, the looting of precious things and taking of women at his whim.

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The colonel sat behind his desk, firm chest out, his uniform crisp and neat.

"Sit down, Lt. Dizon." His voice was deep, as he relaxed brushing his well-trimmed moustache with his ring finger.

The young man walked forward and calmly sat down facing the colonel's desk. He was in his early twenties, about five foot nine, robust and fair-complexioned. His eyes have the slant but he was unmistakably Filipino.

The colonel smiled, the scar on his right cheek deepening. He was physically fit for one in his fifties and showed he was a man of culture. "Your training at our Intelligence Academy will serve you well, Lt. Dizon." Col. Hiroshi started, his face very serious yet friendly. "You are well-prepared for this important mission." the colonel spoke in fluent English with British accent, having studied in England. In fact he could easily be mistaken for an Englishman whenever his oriental slants were concealed by his dark glasses, which he often wore. "We need to procure intelligence of the guerrilla movement in this area of Luzon. Information have reached us of the solidification of their forces now that Gen. MacArthur had returned. We do not have a definitive outcome yet of the encounter in Leyte. Our forces, I'm sure, would stop them at any cost. But in any event we have to be prepared. We have to get hold of their plans for their next target here in Luzon." There was determination in Col. Hiroshi's voice.

Dizon, his real name Ronaldo Dizon, smiled, nodding with confidence. He projected a serious and disciplined persona. A Filipino, he had stayed long in Japan before the war and had some schooling at a Japanese Detective Academy when his father was an



Instructor there. Upon his father's retirement, their family returned to the Philippines. Soon after, his father died of cardiac arrest. His mother followed a year later from a broken heart.

Now, Dizon found it very convenient to work for the Japanese government, having the advantage of Japanese education and the mastery of their language. His alliance with the Japanese assured him of protection and sustenance for his ten orphaned brothers and sisters, aging from five to twenty, who were in Manila. He wanted to spare them from the poverty that his fellow countrymen were suffering and from the torture which the Filipino civilians and guerrillas were being subjected to.

"I understand from Capt. Taguri that he had fully briefed you regarding the specific nature of your mission."

"Yes, sir!"

"Here are your credentials and other necessary papers." Col. Hiroshi handed over the papers, all bound by a rubber band. "Remember, you are Lt. Ronaldo Dizon of the 12th Battalion stationed in northern Luzon. The rest you already know. You will join these subversive elements who call themselves guerrillas. Be sure that you are beyond suspicion. You have to report here, through the various ways and means taught you by Intelligence, on the guerrilla Forces operating in the mountains. Any of their plans for future attack should be reported to this Headquarter at any cost. We should be alerted of any reinforcement and especially on their plans for the exact site of the landing of Allied Forces here in Luzon." Col. Hiroshi uttered every word clearly and deliberately in a low resonant tone. "It is your responsibility to look for and infiltrate those guerrilla units operating in this sector."

"Yes sir." Dizon took the bundle of papers then went through every page.

"This password will insure your safety through all our checkpoints." Col. Hiroshi showed him the card in Japanese writing. Commit this to memory and discard it."

"Arigato." He smiled after he was sure he had memorized his password.

"Now, you are on your own, Lt. Dizon." Col. Hiroshi extended his right hand to Dizon. Then a quick smile flashed on his face. He grasped Dizon's

hand with his other hand and shook this briskly.  
"Good luck."

Dizon bowed then turned toward the door. He had the gait of a military man. Col. Hiroshi regarded him with pride. With a big smile on his face, Col. Hiroshi turned to the portrait of Emperor Hirohito. Looking at the small Japanese flag on his desk, he nodded, fingering his moustache. "He will not fail us." He said as he leaned back on his desk. Dizon had been given several missions before and he never failed. Col. Hiroshi knew that the American fleet was coming and they have prepared for it, but he also knew that the guerrillas were by now preparing to attack and neutralize their fortress in order to clear the passage for the landing fleet. It was Lt. Dizon's mission to spoil that plan.

Ever since Col. Hiroshi was assigned to this important Japanese garrison in Luzon, the Japanese have minimized the harassments and sneak attacks of the guerrillas around the area. The last attack was when they were celebrating a National Feast Day of Japan. Everybody was having a good time, drinking. The sentries were drunk. Col. Hiroshi was then offering a toast with the other officers when suddenly, gunshots rang outside the garrison. The raid was fast and the guards caught unprepared. Although the encounter lasted only for less than ten minutes, the guerrillas withdrew leaving eleven Japanese guards dead and a big portion of the garrison guardhouse damaged. It took them almost a week to have the ruins repaired.

That one incident impacted the Col. Hiroshi's policy. Much as he wanted his men to experience some sense of normalcy through occasional fun, from then on, there had not been any celebration of any kind. Not even his wedding anniversary which was a week ago.

He remembered having stayed in his room and meditated for sometime, asking for good health, clear mind, right judgment and a long life to spend in peace with his wife and family back in Japan. The day made him nostalgic of home. His wife never missed that special occasion, preparing a small party for their family. Their three sons, all married and have children of their own, who also studied in the same school he graduated from in England, always came home for their yearly wedding

anniversary. Their twenty five years of marriage would had been a grand affair - a happy family reunion.

Col. Hiroshi blinked his eyes to force back the thin mist that have formed there as he thought of how things would have been. He stood and walked toward the window, his hand clasped together behind him. He looked down at the well-barricaded garrison. It was a strongly-secured garrison, surrounded by twenty-foot high and six-foot thick walls. It would take powerful guns to break through its walls. The fortress towered at thirty feet based on a solid rock beside the sea. It was a well-chosen garrison - able to accommodate its machine and man power. The enclosed area alone was several acres and a large portion of it was covered with barracks for their soldiers. Air-raid shelters had been dug near the walls for refuge in case of air attack.

The colonel turned and leaned against the window admiring the beautiful intricate designs at the ceiling of his office. And frescoes of religious images. He felt like being in a sanctuary every time he entered his office. This room was once used by the Spanish priests for this garrison was once a huge church during the Spanish regime in the Philippines. It was one among the biggest and the most beautiful. The other four rooms in the rectory were now occupied by the rest of the officers both as living quarters and offices while the belfry was used as a watch tower with powerful search lights. The church itself served as a meeting hall.

Col. Hiroshi turned back to the window and took a deep breath. The air from the sea was fresh and pure, unpolluted even by war.

"Forward march." The command from the commanding officer made him look down to the far end of the grounds. Rows of soldiers, thousands of them marched and went through rigorous training.

"Hiya!" Choral growling filled the air as two groups of soldiers simulated a fight with fixed bayonets. Those were the daily activities of those men who stood guard over this formidable stronghold of the Japanese Imperial Forces.

Col. Hiroshi looked at his watch. It was almost ten in the morning and time for his daily inspection. Pressing the crease of his pants and fixing his collar, Col. Hiroshi quickly walked to

the door, saluting back every guard as he walked down the steep stairway leading down to the church. Looking around for a quick check, Col. Hiroshi nodded. He looked back at where the altar was once and he smiled as he saw the huge Japanese flag covering the entire area - twenty feet high.

With well-paced strides, Col. Hiroshi walked out of the big hall, the sound of his footsteps magnified by the huge dome. He paused in front of the Roman facade for a moment and got a good full view of their fortress. Briskly but regally, he walked down the stairs and got in the waiting car. The Colonel sat erect and ordered the driver to proceed. As the car passed by the soldiers at drill, the officer-in-charge barked his order and the rows of soldiers stood at attention and saluted the colonel. He acknowledged this with his slow, precise salute. The drill resumed as the car passed.

"Stop the car." The Colonel ordered. He watched with approval at the way the soldiers fired at the firing range. He was a sharp-shooter himself and had won medals from the academy where he attended. He still did some target-practice to keep him sharp with his accuracy. Unable to resist the urge, he alighted from the car and stood beside the line of men. "Hand me your rifle."

The soldiers turned to his direction. A young soldier handed him his gun. They were all aware of the strict discipline of the Colonel.

"Thank you." The Colonel took hold of the rifle and before the men could resume their position, the Colonel had fired. He shot a series of bulls-eye which left the men's mouths gaping both from disbelief and admiration. He returned the rifle without a word and strode calmly back to the car. The soldiers were dumbfounded remembering to salute him only after his car had sped away.

The car slowed down at every gun emplacement, which faced the open sea. Every cannon was guarded by two soldiers in round-the-clock rotation. Satisfied at the security all over the garrison, he ordered the driver to return to the church through its rear entrance.

The Colonel entered the church through a concrete stairway then turned to the right where the baptismal font was situated. This area was separated by steel bars. He entered an opening beside it just

beneath the side altar and walked down the stairway cut from solid rock. He turned right passing through a hallway, solidly-walled on the left and filled with old church ornaments and statues of Saints at its right. After walking about a couple of hundred feet, he stopped before a huge twin-door guarded by two soldiers. The guards were about to open the doors but the Colonel signaled them not to. He already felt the heat and the lack of fresh air. He quickly retraced his way up, confident of the maximum security at the basement.

His long inspection finished, the Colonel got back to his car, flashing a smile that made him turn pink with no effort at all. Fixing his uniform, the Colonel leaned back, crossing his right leg, folded his arms and relaxed. The car sped away, this time to the Officers' mess hall. It was almost twelve noon.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

It was Sunday morning - market day! Three truckloads of Japanese soldiers from the adjacent town have arrived passing through the crowded market square. Civilians from the outlying barrios and villages have come down to the market place bringing their harvests such as corn, cassava, yams, fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh and dried fish, and poultry products either to sell or to barter for second-hand clothing, salt, sugar, and other household necessities.

Civilians in the town who saved their bedspreads, table cloths and curtains were lucky for the materials were readily altered into dresses and shirts and fetched a lot of money and became excellent trades for the farmers' crops. However, people preferred to barter instead of selling for Japanese money which they regarded as play money. They just had a mistrust in the profusion of the Japanese paper bills. Food had rapidly become scarce for the Japanese were confiscating a large portion of the people's harvest while the guerrillas at the same time relied on the farmers for their food supplies.

Everything came in small measures making it very difficult for the civilians to save and store for the ensuing days. Even dried salted fish, which had become the basic commodity since it could stand long storage was now much harder to obtain. Salt, sugar and soap could only be had at very high prices. Most of the people resorted to eating roasted coconut meat in place of the missing three meals a day. This had been the meager subsistence of the civilians for the past three years. And it was getting much worse from day to day.

Like the past Sundays, people came to town. Although there was not much anymore to buy or barter, still they gathered as if their being together in a crowd could bring back a semblance of their peaceful and happy prewar days. Yet, wherever they turned, fear was their constant companion. Japanese soldiers marched along the streets and

around the market place, just a clearing with spattering of thatched sheds for the vendors. The old concrete market place was no longer available since very recently, the Japanese used it as concentration camp for the civilians who were ordered to come down to town. The Japanese were more strict and alert than the previous week, watching the civilians and guarding against the possible infiltration of guerrillas into the town.

Lota, hustled her way through the crowd to barter some of her used skirts and Mr. Miura's old shirts. She readily acceded to having her two skirts traded for a dozen eggs and Mr. Miura's two shirts and a pair of pants for one chicken and one litter of corn mill. She could have asked for more since these were the last clothing she could spare, but seeing the old woman, her back bent from age, made her feel more liberal. Putting the eggs in the basket and carrying the chicken by its tied legs, Lota walked back home.

"Good morning Ma'am." It was Mitsi who caught up with her.

"Good morning, Mitsi." Lota was pleased to see him. "You look fine."

"Thank you. Not much work today." He shyly smiled. "May I walk you home, Ma'am?"

"Oh, of course, Mitsi. I'd love that."

"May I help you with that Ma'am?" He offered a hand.

"Yes, you may. Thank you so much." Lota handed the chicken and the basket to Mitsi and together they walked home without much exchange of words.

"Ohi-o, Miura San." Mitsi bowed upon seeing Mr. Miura walk toward them.

"It's nice to see you, Mitsi." He took the chicken and the basket from him. "Domo arigato."

Mitsi stood for a while looking around and seeing that there was no one except for Mr. Miura and Lota, he hesitatingly asked their permission to leave.

"You are leaving so soon?" Lota was surprised. Mitsi nodded.

"Where are you going from here?" There was concern on Lota's face.

"I'll walk back to the market."

"Thank you for helping Mrs. Miura and for walking her home." Mr. Miura acknowledged with a bow

as Mitsi bowed and sadly walked away. He could have asked Mitsi to stay but he had an important matter to discuss with his wife.

"Doesn't he look so sad and so alone?" Lota followed Mitsi with her look.

"He certainly seemed unhappy."

"We should have asked him to stay for lunch."

"Next time, Lota. I'm afraid we have a problem." Mr. Miura sounded serious as he led his wife away from the stair.

"What's the matter, mahal?"

"Something's very wrong, Lota." Mr. Miura hushed her to keep her voice low. "It's Joy Bell."

"What about her?" Lota became suddenly concerned.

"Our girl seems very lonely, too. She hasn't spoken a word since you left."

"Is she sick?" Lota was frantic.

"I don't think so, Lota. I guess, she must be missing someone." Mr. Miura explained as he patted Lota's back. "I'm afraid our Joy Bell is no longer a child."

"What do you mean? Joy Bell missing someone? We really should have asked Mitsi to stay."

"No. I don't think it's Mitsi either that she misses."

"Who then?"

"Ernesto, who else? He was the only visitor she was excited to be with. I mean the only male visitor, whose company she really enjoyed."

"Poor child. But it's just normal. I miss Ernesto myself. After all, that boy was an old friend and a very close one at that."

"Lota, you better do something. That's your job, mama." He teased her.

"My job? You mean, our job!" Lota contested.

"Now...now...go ahead, talk to her. Tell her, maybe Ernesto would visit us again.. .maybe today or tomorrow or maybe soon. Tell her anything that would make her smile again. I can't bear to see her this way." Mr. Miura was worried. He loved Joy Bell so much that seeing her unhappy disturbed him no end. He would do anything just to make her happy. But now, he had asked Lota. He believed that in this matter it should be a woman who should talk to another. "A woman?" He just thought of Joy Bell as a woman.



Lota braced herself as she walked up the stairs. Mr. Miura stayed behind and squatted before his garden, pulling the few weeds that have grown overnight; his mind in deep thought.

Even the sound of the opening door seemed not to draw Joy Bell away from her thoughts. She had been sitting the whole morning by the window, her chin cushioned by her folded arms on the window sill. Her thoughts far. Her eyes fixed at the far horizon. She would occasionally breathe deeply. Lota shook her head as she passed by her. Hurriedly placing her goods on the kitchen table, she went back to Joy Bell and lightly placed her hand on her shoulder. Joy Bell did not seem to feel her presence. Lota kissed her hair. Only then did Joy Bell notice her.

"You are back, Mommy?" Her question was perfunctory and lifeless.

"Yes, dear. Got a dozen eggs for my skirts and a chicken and one liter of corn mill for your Daddy's shirts and pair of pants." She reported enthusiastically with the hope of diverting Joy Bell's thought from whatever she was thinking of. But this did not help for she did not even turn to face her. Lota was again at a loss on what to do. This was the first time that she had noticed Joy Bell to be somber. She had always been spirited. After an awkward silence, Lota brightened up and hurried to her room. She came back, holding a pink silk dress. "Look Joy Bell. I have a surprise for you."

"What is it Mommy? She asked without turning. Lota was a little hurt, but she went on. "I made this for you." She continued sounding very excited as she raised the dress. She made it from her old long skirt she found while she was sorting out her old clothes to be bartered the other week. She had planned to give this as a surprise to Joy Bell for Christmas which was yet months away. She decided to show it now hoping to cheer her up. "Would you try this on?"

Joy Bell touched the dress with one hand and picked it up showing no delight at all. "It's beautiful, Mommy." Not really looking at it.

Lota was a bit disappointed but she did not easily give up. "Come on, dear, put this on. I'm dying to see you wear it."

Maybe not wanting to frustrate her mother any further, she obliged and walked to her room with the dress.

Lota waited, hoping that the dress would perk up Joy Bell's spirit. After what seemed like forever, Joy Bell emerged from the room with the pink dress on.

The dress was cut along the slim line putting to advantage her youthful body; the first such dress Lota made without the balloon or shirred skirt. Even its neckline was far from the usual ruffles or Peter Pan collars. This one had a round neckline which extended off her shoulders. It looked very becoming to her. It showed off her swan-like neck and creamy shoulders. She approached her mother in measured steps, her hands hanging down at her side, making her look even more vulnerable. Lota was unable to suppress her joy upon seeing her daughter so pretty and ladylike. "Joy Bell, you look lovely. See for yourself." She took her hand and made her face the mirror.

Joy Bell brightened as she saw her image, so different... so grown-up. Light twinkled in her blue eyes.

Lota felt triumphant. She had succeeded. Carefully, she gathered Joy Bell's hair at the back and tied it with a pink ribbon from the dress material. "There, that completes the ensemble. Now, let me call your father. Let's show him your new dress." She coaxed Joy Bell as she hurriedly walked toward the door.

Joy Bell, carried away by the enthusiasm of her mother readied herself for her father's viewing. Mr. Miura had very good taste when it came to art and fashion. He liked elegance in its simplicity. Lota knew this and she never disappointed him in her choices of materials, color and cut for her and Joy Bell's dresses.

"Well, come on mahal. You are in for a big surprise." Lota called her husband unable to hold back her excitement.

Mr. Miura walked up and stood transfixed before her daughter, who smiled at her father as she showed off her dress.

"Beautiful, beautiful. You look very much like your mother the first time I saw her." He kissed her and holding her by the shoulders, stepped back for

another good look at her daughter. "You remind me so much of your mommy." With misty eyes, he cuddled Lota to his side.

"Would I be like mommy?" Joy Bell asked for reassurance.

"Far more beautiful." Cuts in Lota. "You are young and fresh and vibrant."

"Then, may I take a walk? I mean may I go down and just, just...be out there?" She tried to choose the right words. She had suddenly become self-conscious before her parents.

"Of course, you may go and enjoy the beautiful Sunday morning." Mr. Miura and Lota answered in unison with the same glee in their voices. "Take your time."

Joy Bell hopped to them and after hugging and kissing each, she ran down the stairs, waving at them and disappeared. Mr. Miura and Lota exchanged very meaningful looks. In deed, they did well.. ..very well.

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Joy Bell reached the top of the hill, panting and gasping for air. She had run the long distance from their house through the outskirts of town and up the hill. She turned around, inhaling as much fresh air as her lungs could take, raising her arms high above her head, laughing. Then she stood still and leaned back against the tree, looking down to the town.

Something told her he would come. Ernesto would come. They would be talking more and longer. How she missed his voice. A welcomed reveille.. .the sweet chirping of birds. She could hardly wait to see Ernesto again.

Ever since they saw each other, she always thought of him, not knowing exactly why. She often saw his face wherever she looked and especially at night when she opened her eyes in the dark. He appeared like an apparition; his light lifting her, its warmth wrapping around her. She even saw him among the cloud formations, smiling at her; beckoning her to join him. Thinking of him was like waiting for the breaking of dawn with its glorious colors transforming into a rainbow. He would be at the end of the rainbow reaching out to her. She liked the picture. It made her feel... nice. No wonderful. Exquisitely.. .nice. She could not remember having felt like this before. In fact she had never experienced this wonderful feeling ever. Never ever. But she never asked herself why. Maybe it was always like that with good friends, she reasoned.

Joy bell sat there under the lone tree for an hour, waiting for Ernesto.

But the minutes passed without any sign of him. She began to feel uneasy thinking perhaps he was not coming at all. Maybe he did not come to town to sell his crops on Sundays. Or maybe he was not feeling well. Joy Bell imagined all sorts of reasons why Ernesto had not come. She simply must see him to be assured that he was well.

After another hour of anxious waiting, Joy Bell decided to go back home. Her steps were heavy as she retraced her way back but decided instead to pass by the market. Suddenly, she heard screams and saw people scamper in all directions.

There was a commotion in the market area. She could have run home, but something told her to go and see what was happening. She ran as fast as her feet could take her toward the market place. She was shocked to find people cower in fear. Then she saw men.. .civilians being herded by the Japanese soldiers toward the center of the clearing. They were ordered to kneel; their hands behind their backs.

From behind the soldiers emerged an arrogant-looking Japanese officer, Sgt. Hiroto, his eyes fierce and blood-shot as he walked toward the row of captured civilians. He was dark and stern-looking, short and stocky with a bushy moustache.

"You guerrillas we kill!": He yelled at the row of men, brandishing his swagger stick up the air. His voice was high-pitched and irritating and his English poor and heavily accented. "Take guerrillas to garrison and ask questions. If not answer, kill." He ordered then marched away followed by his soldiers.

"Wait!" Joy bell screamed after she recognized one of the men, running toward the center pushing aside one Japanese soldier who tried to stop her. "They are not guerrillas. They are just civilians."

Ernesto was both surprised and relieved when he saw Joy Bell.

"Please, believe me, they are not guerrillas. They are farmers. I know all these people. They came to sell their produce."

The crowd listened dumbfounded by the exceptional courage of Joy Bell who appeared unafraid of the Japanese.

"Yes, guerrillas kill." Hiroto reaffirmed his order.

"I'm Sgt. Mamoto. I'm in charge here." Sgt. Mamoto, who just arrived, stepped forward.

Sgt. Hiroto realized that he was a newcomer in town and Sgt. Mamoto had seniority, so he backed off and walked away in a huff.

Sgt. Mamoto looked at the direction of Joy Bell. His mouth twisted, nodding his head slowly as if contemplating what Joy Bell had just said. Actually he heard nothing that Joy Bell had said. He only saw her lovely face and her soft milky skin.

Sensing an opening, Joy Bell lost no time. She lunged toward Sgt. Mamoto, faced him squarely, and spoke in Japanese. "I know you are a kind man. So please free these men. They are your friends." Joy Bell pleaded, praying that this Japanese whom she had just seen for the first time, would listen to her.

Sgt. Mamoto smiled within himself, devouring Joy Bell with his penetrating look but Joy Bell did not waver. All she wanted at that moment was to see the men go free. To see Ernesto free.

So thinking it might hasten Sgt. Mamoto's decision, she stepped closer to him. Then clasping her hands together as in prayer, her eyes pleaded. "Hope this works." She wished.

Mamoto felt flattered to be approached by a pretty young girl, much more to be asked for his mercy. He stood erect, expanding his chest and broad shoulders and with hands akimbo, he stood with feet wide apart. He loved to be looked upon as a God. "You are an American!" There was suspicion in his look.

"Yes, but my father is Japanese. He is Japanese just like you." She lowered her hands.

"How do I know you are speaking the truth? How would I know that these people are not guerrillas as you claim?" He demanded.

"I do not lie. My father tells me always to tell the truth. I repeat my father is Japanese. We stay just outside the garrison." Joy Bell reasoned with all the innocence of a child.

"You stay near the garrison?" Sgt. Mamoto's appetite for young beautiful girls was aroused. "Why had he not seen her before?"

He fixed his eyes on her full bosom. A glint of lust shone in his eyes. "I must have this girl." He vowed to himself. "I hate it when someone fools me." He sneered. "I don't believe you."

"She's telling the truth." A chorus of children's voices penetrated through the crowd and about six children, mostly Japanese came forward and faced the Sergeant.

"Joy Bell doesn't lie." It was Michiko who faced Mamoto. She spoke in Japanese. "Her father, Mr. Miura is a good and kind Japanese."

"Now you believe me?" Joy Bell persisted.

"Okay, okay. I believe you beautiful lady. Okay, let these men go free. I can't refuse this beautiful lady." Mamoto announced. "Release them!" He ordered.

"Sgt. Mamoto." A Corporal stepped forward. "Sgt. Hiroto's order is..." Before he could finish, Sgt. Mamoto cut him off. He felt insulted by the Corporal's interference especially in front of a beautiful lady.

"I said... release them!" He firmly reiterated.

The civilians cheered and the men stood relieved as they dashed to their families.

Joy Bell was so overwhelmed that she literally jumped up and held Sgt. Mamoto by the hand. "Domo arigato, domo arigato." She bowed twice and turned to the children and hugged them. "Thank you Michiko,

Umeki. Thank you all. Now go home all of you." She urged them to leave.

Joy Bell tried to restrain herself from rushing to Ernesto, who before she could take a step, had disappeared from the crowd. She was relieved for she decided it was not wise to call attention to him. Especially if Sgt. Mamoto saw her with him.

Sgt. Mamoto walked triumphantly and with an arrogant gait marched through the opening in the crowd that was paved for him while the crowd cheered him for his benevolence. He felt like a returning war hero, welcomed by a grateful people.

Joy Bell caught up with Ernesto, who surreptitiously walked away as fast as he could.

"Thank you, Joy Bell." Ernesto whispered when Joy Bell held his arm.

"Come with me. We better get away from here fast." Joy Bell led the way toward the hill.

Meanwhile, Mitsi who had just arrived caught a glimpse of Joy bell. He smiled and paved his way through the thickening crowd to reach Joy Bell. But as he got near her, he saw her holding on to Ernesto and leading him away. His smile of anticipation was dampened and slowly, he turned away.

Joy Bell and Ernesto have just left the market clearing and the people have resumed their interrupted business when the truckload of heavily-armed Japanese soldiers returned. The soldiers jumped down from the truck. Sgt. Hiroto came down with his swagger stick in hand, looking around sharply. "Gather all men...guerrillas here. Fast!" He yelled.

This was followed by the horrified screams from the women and children as the Japanese soldiers roughly gathered all the men pushing them down to their knees.

"I am not a guerrilla." Pleaded an old man, his body shaking from fear.

"He's an old man and he is sick." Sobbed an old woman as she stumbled to hug her husband.

Sgt. Hiroto just stared at them, unmoved, then gave a signal to a soldier beside him. The Japanese soldier pushed the old man aside.

"You lie. Guerrillas here to buy food." Sgt. Hiroto exploded as he scanned the crowd. "You tell where guerrillas, you free." He announced. "Who guerrillas here?" He shrieked but there was complete

silence in response. "All right, you not fool Japanese. Come!" He beckoned a hooded man from the truck and the man stepped down and walked toward Sgt. Hiroto. Arrogantly. Confidently.

He was of strong built and from the way he moved he could be in his twenties. A woven palm tote bag with two holes to see through, covered his entire head.

"All right, point guerrillas." Commanded Sgt. Hiroto to the man - a Filipino spy.

The man walked deliberately in front of the kneeling line of men looking intently at each one. The men bowed their heads and prayed in silence, holding their breath as the spy walked past each of them. Then he went back and stopped before a young man of about twenty with long hair. He pulled his hair up for a good look and with conviction pointed at him. "He is a guerrilla!"

The word fell like a death sentence and in desperation, the man stood up and grabbed the spy's hood. As his face was exposed, there was a chorus of shocked reaction from the crowd. They all recognized the spy.

The old man gasped. "Oh God. No! No! Luis, my grandson!"

"Hang guerrilla!" Sgt. Hiroto's voice went through the roof. "Teach you lesson."

The young man was immediately hog-tied.

"Point more guerrillas. You said three guerrillas here." Hiroto impatiently demanded from the spy.

The spy walked back to the line of men and disregarded the old man.

"Luis, why do you do this?" The old man's voice quivered with both fear and anger.

But Luis was unmoved. He showed no recognition of his grandfather.

The old man stopped him. "Don't do this, Luis! They are your brothers. Your countrymen."

Luis pushed the old man toward the crowd without even looking back and proceeded to the next man. He was about to point to another young man when a teenage boy darted through the crowd and stabbed the spy with a kitchen knife. The crowd gasped. Before them slumped in a pool of his own blood, was the spy.

"Kill boy!" Screamed Hiroto.



Like a caged animal, the boy struggled as he was tightly held by the Japanese soldiers and his eyes were full of hate as he looked at the prostrate body of the spy. As the spy staggered to his feet, he threw a look at the boy. He turned pale; shocked and speechless.

"Kill boy. Cut head!" Ordered Hiroto and a Japanese soldier drew his bayonet.

"No!" The old man screamed.

The Japanese raised the bayonet and the crowd held its breath.

"No.. .don't kill him, no!" The spy cried but the bayonet landed with full force on the boy's nape. "You killed my brother! You killed my brother, damn you." He was in hysterics and had to be subdued as he lunged at the soldier.

Mitsi covered his eyes with his hands. He had seen more than he could stand of this horrible war.

Hiroto was unmoved as he continued. "Let this be lesson to you." Then he turned to the spy and slapped him. "You lie!" You said three guerrillas here!"

But the spy was too shocked and distraught to hear his words.

"Look for guerrillas.. .search everywhere... every home."

The Japanese soldiers deployed and spread out in all directions with fixed bayonets, toward the houses and the outskirt of town toward the direction of the hill.

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Ernesto hasn't said a word until they reached the hill. "You should have not done it, Joy Bell."

"But why not? I don't want you or any civilian killed."

"But what you did was very dangerous. You took so much risk."

"Oh no," Joy Bell laughed. "Daddy is Japanese. The Japanese believed me. They believed my friends, too. They will do me no harm."

"Yes, but that Sergeant...what's his name?"  
Sgt. Mamoto. He is new here."

"That Mamoto...I don't like the way he looked at you."

"Why?" Joy Bell chuckled. "What's wrong with the way he looked at me?"

"Please, Joy Bell, promise me, you'll not go near the Japanese soldiers again.. .ever!"

"But I can't understand. Daddy is Japanese."

"Yes, but he is a civilian. Those Japanese are soldiers. This is war. Things are different now."

"You mean, you don't want me to get hurt." Joy Bell felt flattered.

"That's right. I don't want anything bad to happen to you. You see, ever since I knew you were staying here, I couldn't help but think of your safety. These are very dangerous times."

"Don't worry, Mommy is a Filipino. We are safe with the Japanese or the Filipinos or the Americans." Joy Bell did not show any sign of concern.

"Oh Joy Bell." Ernesto sighed. "I wish I could make you understand that this is war and things are not the same as before."

"I understand but don't worry. Everything will be all right."

"Very well." He paused finding it difficult to say what he felt. "You are beautiful and you are a lady now. You should be more careful with the Japanese, especially with that. . .that Mamoto. I would be hurt if..." He found it very hard to continue as Joy Bell looked at him with innocence trying to grasp what he wanted to say.

"Why do you worry so much about me?"

"Look Joy Bell. Ever since we were small, I took it upon myself to protect you. We were good friends... very close friends."

"Oh yes.. .I haven't forgotten those days."

"My feelings toward you haven't changed. I like you."

"I like you, too." Joy Bell cut in cheerfully.

"But this is different...it is not just mere liking. Believe me Joy Bell.. .I mean...Oh listen to me very well. This maybe the last time we would see each other."

"What?" Joy Bell was concerned as she looked up at Ernesto's face.

"But I would like to see you again."

"It has become more dangerous now. Recently the Japanese have become more suspicious of civilians."

"I understand but we can see each other here...in this hill, if you like. Nobody would see us here. This is far from the town and the garrison. The Japanese won't come here. That's why I like this place."

"God, Joy Bell, how I would like to see you again."

"Really? Then I will wait here...in this hill."

"I wish it's possible. I only wish time permits"

"Why? Why should time not permit? Maybe you don't want to see me again." Joy bell looked hurt.

"Joy Bell," Ernesto held her by both shoulders making her face him. "Heaven knows how much I want to see you. How much I wish we could always be together."

"Then...if you really want that, we could see each other as often as we want."

"But we can't." He was dead serious.

"You've made yourself clear." Joy Bell mumbled. Then slowly taking off Ernesto's hands from her shoulders, she turned away. "You better go now."

"No Joy Bell," Ernesto held her back. "Not until I tell you how I feel."

"But you should go now. You shouldn't see me again. Isn't that what you just said? Joy Bell got out of Ernesto's arms and ran down fast.. .sobbing.

"Joy Bell.. .please wait, wait for me." Ernesto called racing down the hill after her until he caught up with her. Swiftly, he pulled her toward him and embraced her, tightly, panting. "Joy Bell.. Joy Bell...I love you!" His breathing gradually slowed down as he waited for her response.

Joy Bell was still sobbing but when she heard what Ernesto just said, she felt her heart stop beating.. .then resumed, this time more rapidly. Erratically. She felt a cold sensation running through her veins then a sudden warmth rushing to her cheeks. She was stunned for, perhaps a second, until she realized she was cuddled very close to Ernesto, her face against his chest. She could hear his heartbeat. She could feel his breath against her face.

"Joy Bell, did you hear me? I meant every word I said. I love you!" Ernesto's voice quivered as he uttered the words again. This time more slowly. He raised Joy Bell's face and gazed into her eyes searching for any reaction. She was no longer sobbing but there were still teardrops on her cheeks. Ernesto gently wiped her tears with his hand then held her chin up gently. "Joy Bell, I had to tell you." He apologized. "Tell me, please tell me if, if I mean anything to you."

"You are the only man I ever want to talk to." Joy Bell was groping for the right words to say. "You are the only man I like to see."

Ernesto was still holding her by both shoulders and she looking up at him, their bodies close to each other.

"I always see your face!" Joy Bell continued innocently. "Everywhere I look, it is your face I see... especially at night."

"Then you, too, love me. You love me!" Ernesto was so overcome with joy, he embraced Joy Bell, this time even more tightly.

She could feel the warmth of his body. She was no longer cold. She was on fire. Pleasant fire. Not scorching fire. She had awakened to a new world. A new dawn. The clouds had parted and the sun shone... smiling down at her. "Ernesto, Oh Ernesto!" Joy bell hugged Ernesto and raised her voice to the heavens. "I love you!"

Ernesto's heart was racing. Joy Bell's words were like an aria that reached its crescendo. He wanted to catch each note, each word and cupped them in her hands. Enclose those three most magical words within the walls of his heart and nourish with each breath he took. "Joy Bell, you've breathed life back to me. You are the only one I ever loved." And gently as if handling a priceless fragile work of art, he lowered his lips to hers. They both closed their eyes, relishing every drop of the beauty God allowed them to savor. And they stayed that way for what seemed like eternity.

Joy Bell was motionless and when at last she gazed at Ernesto's eyes, she saw herself swimming in ecstasy.

"I love you Joy Bell." Ernesto did not tire of saying it over and over again.

"Then we will see each other again?"

"Nothing will stop me. I'll come back here in this hill." He promised her.

"I'll wait for you here." Joy Bell whispered.

They embraced again and Ernesto flew down the hill. Joy Bell waved at him. Ernesto turned back and threw her a kiss. Joy Bell leapt and caught it. Closing her eyes, she pressed her hands against her heart until every essence in that kiss seeped into her every fiber to stay there forever.

When she opened her eyes, what she saw wiped out all the magic from her face. Panic took its place. A group of Japanese soldiers was heading toward the hill. "Ernesto!" She called seeing Ernesto, not far from the hill. She sprinted after him. "Ernesto, wait!" She called again.

Ernesto stopped and turned then ran back toward Joy Bell, surprised. "Joy Bell, why? You look pale." Ernesto held her.

"The Japanese are coming. Run Ernesto. They should not see you.

"Don't worry. Go ahead. Go home before they find you here." Ernesto persuaded her.

"But I am afraid for you."

"Please Joy Bell, I can not leave until I'm assured of your safety." Ernesto's eyes pleaded. Then he kissed her, this time passionately. . . both of them clinging to each other. There were tears in Joy Bell's eyes as Ernesto released her. "Go home please. I'll be safe. I'll see to that ."

"Promise?"

"Yes. I promise with all my heart."

"I believe you. God bless you." Joy Bell whispered then hurried back to their house through a different path.

As soon as Joy Bell was out of sight, Ernesto dashed toward the safety of the thick bushes to the direction of the mountains.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

The crystal clear water that streamed down the rocks was just the relief that Ernesto needed after walking under the burning noonday sun. Several palmful of the cool spring water instantly rejuvenated him. His thought was still of Joy Bell and he preferred to linger in it. As he splashed the cold water over his scorched face, he jerked back when the sound of gunshot interrupted the silence around him.

Instinctively or more as a sharpened reflex reaction Ernesto dived into the nearby bushes and landed flat on his belly. The thought that a Japanese soldier had followed him from the town concerned him. "Had someone suspected him? Or even worst identified him?" He waited and remained where he was. Three more continuous shots followed and then silence. And another shot. Moments of quiet eased the tension. He was about to stand when from afar he saw a figure suddenly appear at the top of a hill, tumbled down and quickly got up. The man looked back and almost simultaneously with another gunshot, rolled down the hill.

Ernesto watched aghast at the man still rolling down. He could not ascertain whether the bullet got its target but he admired the man's agility and quick reaction. Just as the man limply dived into the muddy creek, another shot rang from the top of the hill. A Japanese with fixed bayonet, stooped down and looked around for his intended prey.

As Ernesto watched wide-eyed, hoping that the Japanese would not go any farther, he suddenly felt something creep up his leg; something cold and wet snaking up high and higher. Fear gripped Ernesto upon realizing that it could be a leech. The creeping sensation almost made him jump but biting his lips served as a better alternative. Beads of perspiration trickled down his forehead as he thought of the tiny slimy thing sucking his blood. But it was far less deadly than the lead from the Japanese's rifle. Ernesto held his breath. He peered at the Japanese once more. A few seconds later, he saw the Japanese survey the surroundings from a vantage point. Apparently satisfied that he got his

target, he replaced his rifle on his shoulder and climbed back up and down the other side of the hill. Only after making sure that the Japanese had already gone far did Ernesto jump up to his feet, simultaneously clutching with his two hands the object in his leg. Twisting and wrenching with all his strength, Ernesto triumphantly pulled out from under his pants the object which almost gave him away to the Japanese had he reacted foolishly. "An earthworm!" Ernesto laughed to himself with great relief. "Poor thing, I crushed its body to death." Brushing his pants and shirt with his hands, Ernesto stood up quickly from the ant-inhabited bushes. He was shocked to discover the ant bites all over his arms and legs. He realized that he had not even felt a thing while he was being feasted upon. He shook his head in disbelief, feeling funny at what he had just undergone. He laughed at how one Japanese soldier could scare one out of his senses when one was unarmed.

Ernesto went straight back to the spring to wash his hands. It was only then that he remembered the man the Japanese was shooting at. Without stopping to wipe his hands, Ernesto ran as fast as he could to the creek by the side of the hill. He stooped down to take a good look. The man must be dead as there was no movement from where he fell. But after another look, Ernesto smiled, shaking his head. "Hey, you, get out of there!" Ernesto chuckled as he found the man still burying himself in the muddy creek.

Carefully and hesitatingly, the man got up, his face covered with mud.

"The Jap is gone." Ernesto continued trying to get a good look at the man.

Upon hearing the reassurance from Ernesto, the man stood, tidying himself up, feeling a bit embarrassed at his condition. "That Jap almost got me." He explained. "You saw him?"

"Yes, I saw everything. Say that was a good rolling feat you did." Ernesto jokingly remarked trying to minimize the tension.

"Oh, that, I almost broke my leg."  
"Are you hurt?"

"Not much I suppose. Just some bruises." The man answered as he examined his arms and legs.

"That's a big cut on your right leg." Ernesto pointed to the blood streaming down the man's leg.

"It's not fatal. It can be fixed." Assured the man, pulling out a handkerchief. He sat down and proceeded to wrap it around his leg. "This should stop the bleeding, I hope."

"That Jap...why was he after you?" queried Ernesto.

"Say, would you tell me where I could buy some coconut wine?" Diverted the man.

"Sweet or sour?" Ernesto retorted, this time scrutinizing the man more closely.

"Either." Concluded the man.

"Well," Ernesto smiled extending his right hand. "We speak the same language." He chuckled. This man knew their pass word. He was one of them.

Briskly the man extended his right hand. "Lt. Ronaldo Dizon, from the 12th Battalion."

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Joy Bell was as white as paper. She could not stop shaking as she related to her father and mother the incident at the market place. It was only then that her nerves gave way. A case of delayed reaction. And the outburst of accumulated anxiety considering everything that transpired that day.

"What you did was admirable, Joy Bell. Saving those civilians took courage. You're a brave young girl." Mr. Miura was proud. And touched.

Joy Bell saw the pride in her father's eyes but she did not tell him everything. Not about Ernesto being with the group. She could not tell him that she took the risk primarily because of him. "Or could she have done what she did if Ernesto was not there?" She now wondered. "Would her father still consider her courageous and be proud of her?" Her father was a fair man. That she was sure. "But yes,



if the same happened in my presence, I would do it again." She reassured herself and felt better.

"However, the new arrivals of Japanese soldiers may be more hostile. Besides, they don't know you or our family." Mr. Miura was concerned. "Please, child stay away from the soldiers." Lota could not conceal her fear.

"Don't worry. They won't harm me. You always told me that if we treat people with respect and value who they are, then there's nothing to be concerned about." She reminded her parents about all that they had taught her. Not just in words but above all, in deeds.

Her father did not argue with her. "She was right. They taught her and she learned well. Belief in the goodness of people. Courage to stand for one's conviction. Compassion and willingness to extend help where needed." She did all this today. "You did what you had to do, my child." He had to commend her yet something inside was nagging him and would not let go. "But how could he now tell her otherwise? Because this was wartime?" The irony hit him. "Would he make her change because of the war? No." He still adhered to his belief in the goodness of man, both in peace and in war. However, there was something he could still say. "Please be careful."

"I will, Daddy." Joy Bell just now realized how her father wrestled with himself and ultimately decided that he was indeed his daughter's father. He had shown her respect. She felt suddenly so grown up. She was no longer a child.

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"Capt. Duran." Ernesto introduced himself and shook Dizon's hand.

"Glad to meet you, sir!" Dizon executed a quick salute which Ernesto acknowledged.

"Come, you better wash your face." Ernesto led the way to the spring. As they walked, Ernesto's

curiosity was aroused. "Why were you chased by that Jap?"

"Oh, that? He must have suspected me. I was with some civilians from town. We were able to pass through the checkpoint. I thought I got through all right. I was alone by the narrow trail when I found myself being trailed by that Japanese. I had nothing except this." Dizon showed a hunting knife. "I ran when he ordered me to stop. It was a gamble but it paid off." Dizon drank from the spring. "This is refreshing." He washed his face.

Ernesto watched him closely and listened carefully to his every word. "If he came from town, why did he not see him among the line-up of men? He should have noticed him. And why didn't the Japanese shoot him while they were still in the narrow trail? Why?" So many questions. But he did not have the answers. "Not yet anyway. Of course in any given situation, anything was possible." He witnessed how the Japanese pursued and shot at this man.

Dizon finished washing his face and left it with droplets of water sparkling against the sun.

"You should be more careful next time." Ernesto warned him. "Where do you go from here?"

"Nowhere. Our group had dispersed. We were outnumbered in our last encounter. Many in our unit got killed, including Capt. Mendez. But luckily, I was able to escape."

"Yes, we heard of your unit. That was a horrible incident."

"It was a massacre." Dizon shook his head. "I would like to get to Headquarters and receive another assignment. I want to fight. I'm dying to have a chance to be in another encounter." His jaws tightened.

"Well then, come along. We need men with your spirit," Ernesto smiled as he walked ahead, followed by Dizon.

The trail was long and arduous but Dizon tried to remember their whereabouts and every detail along the way.

"When did you come to this place?" Ernesto broke the silence as they walked into the thicket.

"Yesterday.. .yes. . .that's right. I got lost for a while. I heard of a group operating in this area so I thought of joining it. The situation in Manila and the adjacent provinces is quite dangerous

now that Gen. MacArthur had returned. I don't want to be left out of the action. I have to join a group."

"Well, I guess, you are in the right place. We need more men, especially now."

"Is your Headquarter far from here."

"Yes, the Japanese haven't been successful in zeroing in on us."

Again they stayed quiet as they ascended the rising terrain; both of them going out of breath. The trail was winding and carved by the mountain side; the steep precipice below it. Ernesto intentionally took the more intricate route - just to play safe. He observed that Dizon had stopped and was looking down.

"That's where the town is." Ernesto pointed to the far south. "See that tower? It's the garrison."

"Yes, sir, I can see it."

Their long trip continued. They descended into the damp path under the tall trees. The Headquarters was not very far from there. Now and then they talked about the terrifying experiences Dizon had with the Japanese and the strength and capabilities of the enemies. But there was more silence as they continued.

"We're here." Finally Ernesto announced as they reached the clearing.

"This is a good place, sir. It's far enough and not easily accessible." He took a deep breath.

"Come, follow me."

Dizon looked around, observing several guards posted at short intervals. Some were look-outs at the top of trees. Guerrillas stopped and saluted Ernesto as they passed them beside their makeshift huts.

All over the clearing, Dizon saw the intensive training the men were undergoing. There were groups in hand combat drills, others shooting arrows. Many were working on arrow and knife production. Dizon was taking in everything very discreetly.

"That's the hut of Col. Holt. I'll take you to him." Ernesto pointed to the one at the far end of the clearing.

"Thank you, sir." Dizon followed Ernesto, fired up inside, which showed in his determined long strides. "This is it." He thought.

"Come in," came the answer to Ernesto's knock at the door. The voice was full and resonant.

Ernesto pushed the door open and saluted as he stood in front of Col. Holt's desk. The Colonel was relieved to see him. "I have someone with me, sir. He came from the company of Capt. Mendez."

"Yes, I remember, Capt. Mendez." Col. Holt murmured. "Let him in."

Ernesto peeped out of the door and summoned Dizon in. "Come in, Lieutenant."

Dizon walked in with his impressive military gait. He stopped beside Ernesto and executed a salute. "Lt. Ronaldo Dizon, reporting, sir."

After acknowledging his salute, Col Holt straightened himself and clasped his hands on the table before him looking up at Dizon from head to foot and back.

"How did you know about our place?" Asked Col. Holt.

"Capt. Mendez had briefed us about the other guerrilla units operating in the nearby provinces, sir. When our group had that last encounter, the ambush, I was hoping to find a group around this area that I could join."

"How did you come to know Capt. Duran?"

"He saw me while I was being chased and shot at by the Japanese, sir."

Col. Holt threw Ernesto a look for confirmation.

"He used our pass word, sir so I allowed him to come along."

"Your credentials, Lt. Dizon?"

"I have them here, sir." Dizon quickly reached for his right shoes and pulled out a small bundle of flattened papers. "My credential, sir." He handed the papers to Col. Holt and stood back at attention.

The Colonel carefully went through every paper, occasionally looking back at Dizon. This did not alarm Dizon in any way. He had been well-briefed and prepared to answer any question about himself and the many encounters of their group. Finally, the Colonel looked up at Dizon, this time more relaxed. For the first time, he smiled at him.

"All right, Lt. Dizon, since your group was disbanded, you are welcome to join us. You will take your orders from Capt. Duran." Col. Holt handed back his papers.

"Thank you, sir."

"Capt. Duran, Lt. Dizon will be under your command. Assign him his own team as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Ernesto replied.

"That's all." The Colonel acknowledged their salute as they left the hut. He was pleased to have another officer in his group for they were badly in need of good officers. He had heard many good things about Capt. Mendez and his unit, their rigid discipline and daring operations. Lt. Dizon gave a good indication of this from the way he conducted himself. "He could be a great asset to their unit," the Colonel thought.

Ernesto walked out toward the clearing with Dizon. He pointed out to Dizon their guards, the mess area and the guerrillas who camped all over the place. Ernesto went to a group of about twelve men; their ages ranging from fifteen to fifty who stood at attention and saluted as Ernesto stopped before them.

"Men, this is Lt. Dizon from the company of Capt. Mendez. He'll be with us."

The men saluted him then stepped forward and shook hands with him. From there, Ernesto took Dizon to his hut. "You will stay with me, Lt. Dizon."

"Thank you, sir. I'm sure I'll like it here, sir." Dizon had just sat down to relax when he heard the sound of a gong.

"What's that, sir?" Dizon was fast on his feet and looked out the window. He saw all the men hurrying toward one direction. He was sure it was not a raid for the men did not show signs of alarm or panic.

"Time for lunch. We eat quite late here you know, about two in the afternoon. Come, you must be hungry."

"I am." Smiling, Dizon followed Ernesto to the mess area.

One of the men handed Dizon a half coconut shell which served as his plate. He followed the man to the mess shed.

"All right...come and get it...food taste good...move on." Rattled off Rudy, the mess boy, a young man of about eighteen, plump and with a goatee that hung down his chin. "You'll love this." He looked up at Dizon, grinning as he slapped down one

ladle of mungo beans soup with greens and one or two small dried fish. "You must be a new addition." Rudy commented. "You like mungo beans?" He joked upon seeing a hint of smirk in Dizon. With his left hand, he put another ladle of corn mill. "Corn's good for you.. .move on." He sang on as Dizon sprightly walked to a nearby tree.

Dizon sat down beneath the tree and feasted heartily on his meal. He disliked the taste of mungo beans and dried fish but he pretended to like this. He must show this guerrillas that he was one of them. He took extra care not to give any indication that he had been used to the savory and delectable food of the Japanese especially the sweet-sour taste of their meals served him while he was in training at the Japanese garrison.

"How's the food, Lt. Dizon?" Ernesto sat beside him.

"Okay, sir. It's good." Dizon made every effort to look genuinely pleased with the food. "It's a feast for a hungry man like me."

"This is what we lack here - food. We started eating corn instead of rice for several months now and we have had nothing to go with it except dried fish or salted fish with sweet potato leaves and at times just salt. Sometimes we have only boiled cassava for breakfast and toasted corn for coffee or ginger tea drink."

"The same problem we had with Capt. Mendez, sir. But we managed to buy other necessities from the town, often disguised as farmers or old folks. I'd been assigned to that job several times."

"You're lucky. The Japanese in this town are very suspicious. I almost got trapped this morning. We also find the civilians too scared and hesitant to cooperate with us. The situation had become more tense."

"Guess so, sir. We had received messages from Manila about the recent Japanese order of mass hoarding of civilians from the rural areas to the towns and cities especially here in Luzon. For centralized control over the civilians, I suppose. But they just watch and see when Gen. MacArthur finally lands here. They'll find no place to hide."

"Not here. The garrison had been the strongest so far. It's a hard nut to crack." Ernesto offered.

"I hope we could do something to neutralize the Japanese Forces in the town." Dizon started to lead the conversation to the forces in town, which Ernesto noticed. But he smiled wryly and continued to eat his lunch.

"You seem not to like the food, Lt. Dizon." Dizon was jolted. He hurriedly gulped down the thin soup from his coconut shell. "Oh no, sir. I love this, very much." But he almost choked. This had not passed Ernesto's keen eyes.

"Come over here, Joe." Ernesto beckoned a young American who was about twenty. The latter briskly walked toward them. His six foot built had the casual and easy gait of a young boy but one could sense that he was not only a bright young man but one who had the street smart and fiery temperament.

"Hey, you have new company, Cap." He grinned as he threw Dizon a scrutinizing look. Joe was young but quick and good in judging people.

"Lt. Dizon here. He just joined us. Lieutenant, this is Joe - Lt. Fern. He's our radio wiz. In charge of communications."

Dizon was about to extend his right hand to Joe but he was caught off guard by the casual greeting of the young American.

"Hi, there, Lieutenant! Everything here comes in small quantities, so just make the best of it." He winked at Ernesto and gulped down the thin mongo soup from his coconut shell. "See you, Lieutenant, Captain!" He waved at them and walked away.

"Does he really operate the radio?" Dizon seemed doubtful.

"Oh yes, he does and very good at it. He has the talent and aptitude for anything electronic."

Dizon was about to ask more about Joe as his mission involved communication but before he could do so, someone interrupted.

"Capt. Duran, Col. Holt would like to see you." The messenger addressed Ernesto.

"Thank you." Ernesto stood. "I'll see you later, Lt. Dizon. Enjoy your meal." Ernesto walked to Col. Holt's hut and Dizon became uneasy. He thought something must be wrong.

"An important message perhaps, or did they have doubts about him?" He could not just sit there and pretend to like the food. He must know what was happening. But then the guerrillas could readily

suspect him if he moved around too much this soon. "A little more patience," he told himself.

"How's Lt. Dizon?" The Colonel did not waste time as soon as Ernesto had settled down.

"I can't say much, sir."

"Hmmm...he seems all right. I don't see any reason why we should not take him in. He appears well-informed about Capt. Mendez' group."

"Maybe, sir."

"You have any misgivings?"

"Oh no...no sir."

"As a matter of fact, it's best to make sure." The Colonel leaned back on his chair. "We have to make sure about who we trust. Especially during this critical time."

"It must had been an impulsive decision on my part in inviting him to come along, sir. Must had been our need for men." It is only now that Ernesto realized what he had done. He should have been more careful. Now he must really make sure that Dizon was on the level.

"Don't let this bother you, Captain. Your intention is good. I trust your judgment."

"Thank you, sir."

"Well, Captain, how was your trip to town?"

"There was a round up of male civilians today, at the market place. I was one of them. A Filipino spy had tipped the Japanese."

"The Japanese must be getting very nervous. So, how did you get away?"

"My friend, Joy Bell, that's her name, vouched for all of us being civilians coming to town to barter our crops and goods."

"And the Japanese bought it?"

"She was very believable. Even the Japanese children, apparently her friends, all stood up behind her. She took a big risk there." But what Ernesto did not say was his concern over Sgt. Mamoto's obvious interest in her.

"She is one courageous young girl." The Colonel was impressed.

"I don't know, sir. I'd call it naivety. And courage, too. Her belief in the goodness of people concerns me. She doesn't seem to realize that we are at war."

"Well, maybe she has a way with the Japanese that gave her confidence to deal with them. Which



means that her father must have some clout in that garrison."

"From my memory of her father before the war, he is a peace-loving person."

"But that was before the war. You know how war could affect people's beliefs."

"I don't think so, Colonel. My previous talk with her father, assured me that war had just intensified his belief. He is still the same man of peace. He doesn't believe in this war."

"Whatever the position of that family with the Japanese, saved you from disaster."

"Not any of us could safely walk into town anymore with this recent development of alertness in the part of the Japanese. I noticed the arrival of truckloads of soldiers. Apparently they are solidifying their forces in the town."

"That has to be expected. We can't be naive to think that they are not preparing for Gen. MacArthur's imminent landing in Luzon. They are not naive either to think that we won't infiltrate the town to gather intelligence on them. And that's exactly why utmost care should be taken."

Ernesto was silent. His thought went back to Joy Bell.

"You must be tired Captain. I guess that will be all for now."

As Ernesto stood up to leave, a soldier came in helping another with bloody face.

"Sir, Lucas is back." The soldier reported.

"Sir, we were caught by the Japanese. A hooded spy recognized Bert." Out of breath, Lucas explained.

"And where is he?"

"He's dead, sir. They hanged him. The spy was about to point at me when a boy stabbed him. The commotion that followed enabled me to escape."

"I didn't know you were in town." Ernesto said in disbelief. He had not seen all of the men who were rounded up. But, of course he did not even lift his face, to avoid calling attention to himself.

"I made them follow you.. .for cover." The Colonel answered.

"But how did it happen?" Ernesto was curious.

"Bert and I saw how the American girl saved you and the rest of the civilians." Lucas answered.

"You did?" The Colonel was impressed.

"And they killed Bert." Ernesto bowed his head sadly. But how did this happen? I didn't hear about it."

"As soon as you left with the America girl, sir, all the male civilians were rounded up again even before we could get far."

Ernesto remembered the group of Japanese soldiers coming toward the hill. They must have been looking for him.

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That same afternoon back in town, the rumors spread fast of the massacre of prisoners in the concentration camp in the adjacent province, mostly Americans who were imprisoned at the outbreak of the war. It came about as a retaliation of the Japanese for the guerrillas' ambush of their reinforcements. The condition had been tense the entire day as Japanese soldiers in large groups deployed around the town.

Joy Bell and Lota were eagerly waiting for Mr. Miura who went to the garrison for the left-over food. They waited for hours until it was already past their dinner time. Lota and Joy Bell had already finished their vesper prayers, a thing they had never done without Mr. Miura. Lota became more anxious when the children came wondering why they were not visited. They looked hungry. A small boy collapsed not just from hunger but from beriberi, as well. He looked pale, yellowish and bloated. When Lota pressed his leg, the flesh sank deep and remained dented as she released the pressure. She gave him one raw egg to take although she knew that she had to stretch the remaining eggs to one week, the eggs she had bartered that morning, half of which she had already shared earlier with a sick neighbor. After letting each child sip a couple or more ladles of chicken soup, which she had prepared for their supper, she asked them to go home.

"Mommy, why is Daddy not home yet?"

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"I don't know." She was anxious but tried to cover it up. Something was not right, she could feel it but she did not want to alarm her daughter.

"Maybe he met some old friends from Japan. I heard there were some new arrivals of soldiers from the adjoining province this morning."

"Oh yes, Daddy loves to talk with old friends." Joy Bell smiled. "How he loves to talk about Japan."

A few moments more and the tension became unbearable. Lota could no longer hide her anxiety. "Something must be wrong. Stay here, Joy Bell. I'll go to the garrison and check."

"I'll go with you, Mommy."

"No you stay home. I'll be fine."

"But Mommy I want to see Daddy. Please."

"All right...let's hurry."

The two, nervous and worried, walked through the night to the garrison. A guard who knew them well, led them to a structure where they found Mr. Miura bruised and bleeding.

"Oh Lord! What have they done to you?" Lota hugged her husband.

"Daddy, why did they hurt you?"

An outburst of laughter frightened them. Sgt. Hiroto stood before them, hands akimbo.

"Now, you can not deny this." He kicked Mr. Miura. You traitor to Japan. You have American and Filipino friends."

"She is my wife and she is my daughter." Mr. Miura explained hoping that Sgt. Hiroto would now believe him but also scared that he might harm Lota and Joy Bell, as well.

"Liar!" Hiroto slapped him again and blood oozed from his mouth. This was followed by another vicious kick which knocked Mr. Miura unconscious.

A shrill shriek emanated from Joy Bell. "Stop it! my Daddy is a good person. Why do you do this? You are both Japanese." She sobbed.

Sgt. Hiroto looked at her intently and closely. "You the same girl who lied to me this morning. You said those civilian farmers. We caught guerrillas among them."

"Oh no, there must had been a mistake."

"And this another mistake?" The angry look in his face broke into a sarcastic smile. "You only fool me once. Understand? I always right. This war

game for wise and clever people like me. Game of wits. It is gift to know truth from lie. You still very young to outsmart me."

"Please, believe me, my husband is a good man. He hasn't done you wrong." Lota explained. "Please set him free."

"I not believe he good Japanese. He gives food to the guerrillas." With blood-shot eyes, Sgt Hiroto yelped at Lota brandishing his swagger stick.

Joy Bell was shaking with anguish as she cradled her father.

"Please, let my husband go. He did not help the guerrillas. The food was for the children."

"I not pardon bad Japanese. He must be punished." His voice rang with finality as he turned away when Lota crossed his path.

"My husband is a Japanese but he is a good and kindhearted Japanese. My husband is just doing what he can to help his fellow human beings, be it in time of war or peace. Is it a crime to feed those hungry children... those innocent children who suffer because of your war? Is it a grave offense to give them what you throw away?" Lota became emotional. "You also must have children back home, children who have only love and respect for you. Do you find yourself worthy of their love and respect? If your children were hungry like those sickly and mal-nourished children, would you not wish other people to feed them. Would you not thank a man who would defy danger just to relieve your children from hunger? Can you understand how it feels to be a parent?" Lota's voice quivered and broke into sobs.

Joy Bell was amazed and deeply touched by her mother's words. She had never heard her talk this way before, with so much passion. She had always been serene and composed. Joy Bell regarded her mother with admiration and respect.

Silence followed. They waited. Sgt. Hiroto was still. His face was tense, his eyes unblinking and red. The strain of anger was no longer on his face. There was only the tightening of his muscles, pulled by his quivering tight lips. He stood there motionless, after listening to the tirades of a woman who had nothing but love for her husband and the little hungry children.

He was silent but his thoughts were far, far away, perhaps out to Japan, where his own children

were. He was a soldier and his training and discipline had been rigid and exacting to the extent, unfortunately of robbing him of his feelings. And numbing him that he must have forgotten that he had a wife and small children at home who were unaware of what war had done to him. Without any word, Sgt. Hiroto walked away. Suddenly he turned and still with a face devoid of emotion, spoke. "Go home you idiots." Then he strode away.

"Oh Mommy, Mommy, you saved Daddy. You've saved him." Joy Bell ran to Lota shaking and crying.

"Help me with your Daddy." These were the only words that came out from Lota as she held her limp husband and gazed at his pale bloody face. In that one split moment, Joy Bell witnessed an all-consuming love and devotion of a woman for the man she truly loved.

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CHAPTER NINE

Very early the next morning, Dizon walked out of the hut after making sure that Ernesto was still sound asleep. He looked around trying to appear very casual, checking the guards, who were stationed at short intervals all over the camp. He had made an estimate of the number of guerrillas in that group maybe over a hundred based on the number of huts and what each could accommodate - most of these overflowing with occupants.

After pacing back and forth in front of the hut pretending to do his morning exercise, he succeeded in getting out of the clearing unnoticed and managed to survey the camp's surroundings, taking every precaution not to attract the attention of the guards who he knew were concealed in the thicket as well as on top of the trees.

He committed to memory a mental picture of the entire camp and its surroundings, noting weak spots for possible target of attack and possible escape route when the need arose. He memorized every detail then retraced his route as casually as when he went out.

Whistling an unmelodious tune, he leisurely walked straight to their hut. Ernesto was by now standing by the door of the hut, hands akimbo and with a serious look on his face.

"Good morning, sir." Dizon greeted Ernesto throwing him a disarming smile.

But Ernesto just nodded and remained silent, his mind obviously preoccupied with other matters.

"The air out there is refreshing, sir." Dizon continued trying to break the uncomfortable silence, indicating with one hand the direction outside the clearing.

"Be more careful next time." Ernesto's face was still serious. "The guards excuse no trespassers. They could mistake you for one. Not everybody knows you are one of us."

"I'll remember that, sir." Dizon apologized then sat down on the log just in front of the hut.

"I had to look around, sir. You see I almost got lost last night. Personal necessity prompted me to go out there, sir."

Ernesto listened. "Was Dizon lying or was he just being too paranoid?" But before Ernesto could answer this himself, a young man came.

"Capt. Duran, Col. Holt needs you right away."

"I'll follow." Ernesto dismissed the man. After tucking his pistol in his waist, Ernesto left.

Dizon was left thinking. "Why this sudden change in him? He was no longer the amiable man I met yesterday. Does he have doubts about me?" His mind was running wild. He was aware that he must be more careful but just now he did not feel comfortable just sitting there while Ernesto and the Colonel were having some kind of private meeting. Bothered by this situation, he was justifiably restless. He desperately needed to secure as much information as possible in the shortest time. Prolonging his stay in this camp where food was scarce and all the men on edge, built up his desperation. He thought fast on how to get near the hut of the Colonel without arousing the suspicion of the guards, one of whom was in front of the hut and the other just a few feet behind it. "But there must be a way." He insisted trying to mentally figure out. "This is not going well."

Inside the Colonel's hut, the atmosphere was quite tense.

"But Colonel, it's not right just now. Sending Lt. Dizon to town is too risky." Ernesto argued.

"As a matter of fact, this is the best time if we have to test him before we take him into our confidence."

"I have my own doubts, sir." Ernesto firmly retorted.

"Have you got any concrete proof, Captain?"

Ernesto did not make any comment as he recalled the incident that evening in their hut. At about midnight the creaking of the bamboo bench woke him up. Standing close to the wall was Dizon, peeping through an opening. Without reacting, Ernesto pretended to be asleep and waited. Soon the silence was followed by the soft opening and closing of the door. Allowing a passage of time, he got up and looked through a small gap by the door. It was dark outside except for the light from the torches. Dizon

was not in the clearing. Ernesto had no idea where he went. He wanted to search for him but decided against it. Anything that could lead to a misunderstanding would not be to their interest. That prompted him to remain inside. His imagination was running wild over Dizon's strange behavior but he decided to lie down and wait. By the time Dizon came back, he was already sound asleep.

"Well?" The Colonel waited for Ernesto's response but he just shook his head unable to give a categorical reply. "I'm sending Lt. Dizon to town this morning, in disguise. He will be assigned to buy dried fish and sugar." The Colonel continued. He would not know the way yet, sir. He'll get lost." Ernesto tried once more to dissuade the Colonel although he knew it was not Dizon's getting lost which bothered him, but the fear that he might turn out to be a spy for the enemies. It was common knowledge that some Filipinos, in their desperation or in their hunger for power and easy access to riches, collaborated with the Japanese. He found Dizon's bravado a likely suspect. However, Ernesto knew he could not just tell the Colonel of his suspicion until he had enough concrete proofs, as the Colonel himself required. He remembered, too, the incident of the previous day. He had been very accommodating and unsuspecting all the way. In fact he was too sympathetic of him on account of what happened to their unit. Yet he was sure that what he did was a good idea as opposed to leaving him out there and taking the risk of his, perhaps surreptitiously following any of their men and giving away the site of their camp. "Why was he, all of a sudden being so paranoid?" Of course it never dawned on him that Col. Holt would give Dizon this assignment or that he would have so much trust in Capt. Mendez' man. "Well, he just had to keep an eye on him."

And so Dizon was assigned to buy some supplies from the town. He was provided with a guide up to a point and from there left by himself to proceed to town. On learning of this assignment, Dizon could not help but feel the surge of adrenaline. Everything was happening just the way he envisioned it. From his simulated escape from the Japanese soldier, his supposedly accidental encounter with Capt. Duran, his acceptance into the guerrilla camp,



his survey of the guerrilla hide-out and finally, this trip to the town. Everything was going his way - perfectly.

Attired in an old man's clothing, Dizon wore a pair of cheap eyeglasses and a "buri" hat over his disheveled hair. He successfully passed through all the checkpoints along the way without much problem. Feeling triumphant in being able to accomplish his mission, Dizon was about to take the road leading directly to the garrison's gate when he noticed an old beggar tailing him. He already sensed that he was being followed as soon as he entered the town. The figure of the man although appearing bent and supported by a cane, reminded him of someone quite familiar. Suddenly something hit him. Of course, regardless of the disguise he recognized some of Capt. Duran's mannerism. He smiled. "He was still the smarter one."

And now for the next move. Smoothly and casually, Dizon stopped, acting confused and lost. He had taken the wrong way and so he turned at the next corner toward the market place.

It was only then that Ernesto was able to relax and breathe a sigh of relief. "He must have really gotten lost." He tried to justify Dizon's behavior. Still he had not relaxed his vigilance. From where he was, he saw Dizon walk to a stall, where sugar and other food supplies were sold. The elderly put together a number of goods into a jute bag. And away walked Dizon.

After all the scenario he wove, Ernesto decided it was just his over-active imagination playing on him and followed Dizon back to their camp without any further incident.

As soon as Dizon had gone, the elderly vendor looked around watchfully then turned over the stall to his nine-year-old daughter. He hurriedly left for the garrison.

In the office of Capt. Taguri, the elderly vendor reported the information which Dizon had given to him. Sgt. Mamoto, who was behind his desk was an attentive and interested listener. The Captain, a middle-aged officer spoke in a low-pitched voice. "Go ahead."

"Lt. Dizon wanted you to know that he located the guerrillas' camp and was taken in as one of them. He wanted to report here personally but he

suspected he was being followed. He did not want the guerrillas to find out about his identity." The elderly vendor continued. "He'll get in touch with you soon."

"How about the plans of the guerrillas?" Asked Capt. Taguri.

"He didn't tell me."

"That's all." The Captain picked out from his pocket several Japanese hundred bills and handed to the man.

"Thank you, thank you. Domo arigato." The elderly vendor grinned greedily snatching the paper money.

Capt. Taguri motioned Sgt. Mamoto to lead the vendor out. He then looked at his desk seriously pondering the report he just received.

"The Colonel should know this at once." He thought and stood up and walked to the Colonel's office. He was about to knock on the door when Sgt. Mamoto returned.

"The Colonel stepped out earlier."

"That's all right." Then he walked back to his desk, his mind preoccupied with the report.

"You always give money to your spies? Sgt. Mamoto's question came as a surprise to the Captain.

The Captain nodded. "As a reward for their cooperation."

"And you believe them?"

"They do not lie. They need the money."

"And that Lt. Dizon, do you pay him, too?"

"His brothers and sisters are taken cared of. He is a disciplined and loyal one."

"But he is a Filipino." Sgt. Mamoto interrupted. "I doubt his loyalty in helping us, Japanese."

"What makes you say that?" The Captain straightened up waiting for the Sergeant's reply. The Captain was aware that Sgt. Mamoto often went out the garrison so it was possible that he had come across some information concerning Lt. Dizon. "Well, Sgt. Mamoto?" The Captain persisted.

"If he wanted to help the Japanese, why did he not sketch the guerrilla camp?"

"You heard what the old man said. Lt. Dizon's suspected that he was being followed. He was wise not to compromise his identity. I trust that he'll be able to provide us with what we need soon."

"He is a Filipino and he is betraying his own country. Don't you think the day will come when he will betray us Japanese?" Sgt. Mamoto emphasized his point by spitting audibly into the nearby waste can and proceeded to read the papers on his desk.

The Captain looked at Sgt. Mamoto then considered his words carefully. However he had observed Lt. Dizon personally and had supervised him during his training. He had faith in Lt. Dizon.

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CHAPTER TEN

A rough sketch on a Manila paper was carefully laid on the table of Col. Holt. With him were Ernesto and Lt. Toribio. It was about ten in the evening and most of the guerrillas have retired to their huts except for those assigned as guards.

"This is the church-fortress," Col. Holt pointed to a square area on the paper. The sketch was of the Japanese fortress in the town. "And this is the tunnel." He traced the line ending by the church inside the fortress.

"Tunnel?" Ernesto repeated with amazement.

"Yes, Capt. Duran. For about three weeks now, Lt. Toribio had been researching about this tunnel."

"How did you learn about the tunnel, Lieutenant?"

"Lt. Toribio, take over." The Colonel turned to the Lieutenant, a short stocky fellow, barely five feet, serious and scholarly. He was only in his mid-twenties but his hair had prematurely receded from his forehead.

With a cracked voice he started with authority. "Based on my interviews with the old folks in the area, who had their information handed down from generation to generation, long before the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, the natives built this fortress for protection from the marauders from the sea - coming from the neighboring islands south of the Philippines. They dug the secret tunnel under the fortress as escape route to the mountains in the event that the fortress was not able to withstand the attack. Finding the fortress a suitable site and this being well-constructed, the Spanish priests built their church utilizing the existing structure." Lt. Toribio had apparently researched thoroughly.

"And you personally saw it?" Ernesto became eagerly interested.

"I was able to locate the mouth of the tunnel. It was just about eighty yards outside of the

garrison wall here." He pointed to the northern wall of the garrison.

"Where exactly does this tunnel lead to?" The excitement in Ernesto was palpable.

"That is what we are going to find out, Capt. Duran." Col. Holt addressed Ernesto. "Lt. Toribio here had been able to enter the tunnel one evening about two weeks ago by timing and avoiding the search light that swept this area at night."

"The Japanese must surely be aware of this tunnel."

"Absolutely not. The mouth had been well-covered with rocks and soil and a few feet from it were thick bushes connected to the tall trees of the forest leading to the mountains. It took me several nights to locate the entrance helped by the description of the old folks I had interviewed. And another five nights until I succeeded in clearing the entrance and concealing it again."

"Lt. Toribio had already entered the tunnel up to its end." Col. Holt continued.

"The tunnel must surely lead to the church." The possibility excited Ernesto.

"Right. But what lies immediately behind the end of the tunnel is for you to find out." Col. Holt had the assignment all planned for Ernesto.

Ernesto knitted his brows trying to comprehend why the Colonel would find him just the person for the job.

"The end of the tunnel was sealed with a slab, a marble slab, its dimension enough to accommodate an average person. And in its center was a steel ring, apparently for handling. During my stay there for almost twenty four hours, I was able to get a sort of clue. At exactly eleven thirty in the evening I heard a dragging noise followed by the unison treading or stomping sound right at the end of the tunnel. This went on for a few seconds then followed again by the same dragging noise. But the sound was quite muffled and faint." Toribio paused and referred to his notes.

Both the Colonel and Ernesto had their full attention taking in every word of the Lieutenant knowing that this may very well be the break they had been hoping and waiting for.

"We're listening Lt. Toribio." Ernesto wanted more information.

"There would be silence until after eight hours which was 7:30 in the morning and again at 3:30 in the afternoon. It was the same noise and the same sound all the time. At first it all sounded strange to me. I could not make out what it was. Then I observed using binoculars, from the nearest hill and timing the changing of the guards. After several nights of continued observation I am positive now that the sound came from the stomping boots of the guards as they marched on the concrete floor. As to the dragging noise I have no idea what produced it."

"What is your observation about the changing of the guards." Ernesto was thinking.

"Let's take the evening changing of the guards, which was done at eleven. The guards, all thirty six of them started changing guards at the main gate at exactly eleven in the evening. It took the detail twenty minutes to change all the guards at the various posts and gun emplacements. The remaining ten minutes was used up inside the church and beyond observation."

"This means that at exactly eleven thirty in the evening, wherever such group of guards were marching was also the exact spot where the tunnel ends." Concluded Col. Holt.

There was silence. Ernesto considered seriously the information. The tunnel was their only hope of overpowering through surprise attack, the superior Japanese forces in that seemingly invulnerable garrison. But they have to make sure where that tunnel leads and what was behind it in order to infiltrate the garrison and have the element of surprise work in their favor.

"What are my instructions then, sir? Ernesto was anxious.

"Find out where the tunnel ends and what exactly lies behind it. I'm aware that it'll be extremely dangerous, if not impossible, for anyone of us to do this job."

The Colonel began weighing his every word very carefully, clasping his hands on the table. "What we need is someone who has access both to the compound and to the church."

"Do you have anyone in mind?" Ernesto wished he could read the Colonel's mind but afraid that his fear would be confirmed.

"I have," Col. Holt nodded and looked Ernesto in the eye. "That American girl in the town!"

"Joy Bell?" Ernesto looked shocked although he had suspected all along who was in the Colonel's mind.

"Yes, Captain."

"But Colonel, Joy Bell is just a young girl." Ernesto protested. "and she is an American. It will be too risky for her and I cannot in conscience allow her to be used this way." Ernesto's voice was indignant yet low and controlled as the vein in his neck tensed but Col. Holt remained composed.

"I know how you feel Captain. Unfortunately in this time of war, sometimes we are forced to put aside our personal feelings... even forced to disregard relations, if necessary." The Colonel sadly but authoritatively spoke.

"You are aware, of course, of all the dangers that a young girl like Joy Bell would be subjected to." Ernesto's concern was discernible.

"I am. You must also be aware, however, of the many lives which had been lost and would be lost in the battle field. If one life could save the many thousands who are presently suffering the slow death of starvation and epidemic - would the use or even loss of that one life not be worth it? Even if it's that of a young American girl? Or even a girl friend?" Col. Holt's words were uttered in a dead serious tone.

Ernesto was left speechless. He was impressed at the way the Colonel justified his decision and in turn made Ernesto feel the burden of his responsibility as an officer. More than that he was surprised at how the Colonel arrived at such a conclusion about him and Joy Bell.

"Your mission will mean just two things. The Colonel's voice interrupted the thought of Ernesto. "Two sharply contradicting ends. Either it will mean the capture of the Japanese Forces in that bastion and the bloodless landing of Gen. MacArthur's Forces in Luzon or the massacre of thousands of both Filipino and American soldiers when the day of that landing comes. And saving the lives of those helpless and dying POW's and the civilians in many concentration camps in the town. We all know that the Japanese would not hesitate to use the civilians and the POW's in the event of an attack of their

fortress. Think clearly Capt. Duran. You are an intelligent man but above all you are a brave and dedicated officer."

Ernesto listened in silence. How could he deny the Colonel's logic?

"That is your mission, Capt. Duran!" The Colonel said with finality.

"Yes, Colonel." Ernesto saluted then exited. Lt. Toribio followed.

And Col. Holt was left alone. Sadness could be discerned in Col. Holt's face as soon as he was by himself. He looked at a picture from his pocket; a mixture of sadness and nostalgia clouded his face. The photograph was that of a young American girl, about sixteen bearing a striking resemblance to the Colonel's features, just softened by the girl's youth. The strain on the Colonel's face broke into a smile as he read the flowing and artistic inscription on the picture which read - "Darling Daddy - you're a great guy. I'm mighty proud of you! -Your darling daughter - Nida Gay."

Suddenly he longed for home. And with it came the gnawing pang of guilt. How could he ever face his daughter and still be the great guy that she could be proud of after what he just ordered Ernesto to do? While he would do everything to protect his daughter back home, here he was handing down his decision to use an innocent American girl to attain their purely military objective. That girl in the town was as young as his own daughter back home. Just the mere thought of it sickened him. This was one of the many unpleasant and painful decisions he had to make in this war and he knew that he would never approve of doing this if only he had a choice. However, being the dedicated officer that he was, he could not spare one if to do so would mean the loss of thousands. Even if the girl in the town were his own daughter he would still make that decision knowing it would break his heart. For Nida Gay was the only one he had left of his family - his wife having died at child birth. His older son, Chuck, was one of the first casualties in Pearl Harbor. The strain of this conflict within him had weighed heavily on him. For the girl, especially an American girl was just like his own daughter. His heart bled for making such a decision but he had thousands of



other people to think of, whose lives depended on this one important operation.

That evening, Ernesto could not sleep. He knew he could not back out from his responsibility and he had no intention of doing so. The eventual capture of that impregnable fortress now largely depended upon him and the way he carried his mission. It was only now that he felt the heavy weight in his conscience. To use Joy Bell was killing him. To gamble with the life of an innocent girl was unacceptable. Whatever would happen to Joy Bell would now be his sole responsibility - entirely his. Had he not told the Colonel about the Miura family, Joy Bell would never be involved in this mission. But he never expected this to happen. From the start he was under the impression that he was just to secure from the family, in a casual way, information about the Japanese movements in the town. But never this.

Keeping his real identity from the Miuras and especially from Joy Bell at the outset was already a betrayal of their trust for he had never lied to them and to her ever since they were children. How he would manage to take up the subject with Joy Bell about his mission was an even much harder task. It would mean straining their relationship. Worst of all it would completely change how Joy Bell would regard him. She could rightfully accuse him of making her fall in love with him with the sole purpose of using her to accomplish his mission. Convincing her of his pure and true intentions would be like grasping for something that did not exist. To make things even worst was his not telling her that he was a Captain in the United States Arm Forces Of the Far East, the USAFFE and now one of the organizers of the guerrilla movement. If she would accuse him for lack of being forthright with her from the start, he had no defense for, obviously, it was true. His predicament was suffocating him. He was trapped. He felt helpless. And hopeless.

Dawn came and with it an idea rejuvenated Ernesto's spirit. After so much soul-searching he arrived at an alternative that could spare Joy Bell from all this. Although he had some misgivings, he firmly decided right then and there to try this alternative. So he faced the morning sun feeling

energized and with a renewed hope that could mend the imminent snags that could threaten his promising future with Joy Bell.

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#### CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I had to talk to Mr. Miura." Ernesto had made up his mind. For over an hour he watched the house of the Miuras from behind the house across the street, this time no longer in disguise. But he took all necessary precautions as he crouched behind a pile of firewood. From where he hid, he saw Lota and Joy bell leave the house, the latter carrying a basket. "They must be going for their afternoon marketing for it was almost four," he thought. Anyway, Ernesto presumed that they may be just doing that. This fitted his plan to see Mr. Miura alone. As soon as the two were out of sight, Ernesto surreptitiously reached the house.

Mr. Miura was both surprised and glad to see Ernesto. He had enjoyed his talk with him at his last visit. For he seemed like a young man with a good head on his shoulders. "You just missed them. Lota had made some cassava biscuits and they were taking those to our friends by the ruins by the Municipal building. But I could still catch up after them." He wished they could enjoy Ernesto's visit. Especially Joy Bell.

Ernesto handed Mr. Miura a bunch of ginger torch flowers.

"Joy Bell would surely love these." He placed the flowers on the table nearby. "I hope they wouldn't stay out long."

"I came to see you, alone."

"Just me?" Mr. Miura's eyebrows knitted. "Well, sit down."

Ernesto sat on the bench and Mr. Miura pulled his rocking chair facing Ernesto.

"Let me serve you a cup of ginger tea. He stood to go to the kitchen.

"Thank you but please don't bother."

"Come on, at least try Lota's cassava biscuit." He insisted.

"I can't stay long." This time Ernesto looked serious so Mr. Miura settled back in his rocking chair anxiously waiting for what Ernesto had come to talk to him about.

"I came to talk to you about a very important matter."

"Are you in trouble, son?" Mr. Miura looked concerned.

"Not exactly. I'm afraid this is something more serious."

"All right, then tell me." Mr. Miura pulled himself nearer to the edge of his rocking chair not wanting to miss any word Ernesto was about to tell him.

"I came to ask for your help, Mr. Miura." At last the words came out, although not as freely.

"Why didn't you tell me immediately." He chuckled. "You know I'll never let you down. Now what kind of help do you need from me?"

"I...you may..." Ernesto groped for the right word to say. "I need your help...against the Jap... Japanese."

"You mean..." Mr. Miura was too shocked to continue. "You're not saying that you're a guerrilla."

"I'm a USAFFE Captain with the resistant movement, Mr. Miura."

"Oh no!" Mr. Miura felt like the whole world fell on him. He found himself gasping for air, his lung so tight, no air could pass through. He looked pale staring at Ernesto like he had suddenly turned into a stranger. "You never told us this before." His tone was more hurt than accusing.

"I wanted to but, but there was no need for it yet. I thought, it was not the right time. I, I had to be sure where your sympathies are. And I know now that it's not with the Japanese."

"That doesn't mean that I am their enemy, either." Mr. Miura clarified. "I don't agree with this war. This killing."

"I know how much you value peace. I respect that. But to have peace, to restore what we had, we have to do something."

"By betraying my own brothers?" The emotion welled in Mr. Miura's voice. "No, Ernesto. I could never do that. Not against the Japanese, or the Filipinos or the Americans."

"I understand. Please hear me out. You love peace. I do, too. But we can't just sit down and watch."

"I don't sit down and just watch. I do my part. The best way I know how. The only way my conscience would allow me. I live by what I believe in. I live my life in peace. I do what count most, especially to the innocent children. In my own small way, I've done that and will continue doing as long as I can."

"I admire you for what you believe in. What I'm asking is not for you to fight or to use force. It is for your access to the garrison that I need ... just that. Your access to the garrison."

"Please, Ernesto don't ask me to do anything I don't approve of." He was so emphatic, Ernesto was sure there was no way he would change his mind but he had to try.

"Be reasonable, Mr. Miura." Ernesto's voice became emotional as well. "You can't just watch people die. If you can do something about it, do it please."

"Ernesto!" Mr. Miura stood and for the first time the vein on his temple bulged. Don't ever think that loving peace is unreasonable. I love peace yes but I just don't watch the world go by. I just don't dream. I do it in my own peaceful way. I do not condone killing. I do not fight like you... guerrillas."

"Who likes to fight anyway?" There was pain and bitterness in Ernesto's voice. "We are forced to defend our country from the invaders. If the Japanese could kill in their desire to dominate, in their hunger for power, for expansion, then we

Filipinos, we guerrillas have all the rights, legitimate rights and the sacred duty to fight and defend our land and die to preserve what belongs to our people."

"I understand where you're coming from, Ernesto. Don't underestimate my capacity to understand the situation. My heart bleeds and I hurt very deeply because I find myself in a situation where whatever I do would hurt people. My family, my friends, my neighbors, our people. Everyone. No one wins. And the children. Right now, what I can do is for the children. They need me. I have work to do for them. I am sorry, I can't help you in whatever mission you have to do."

"If it is your life you're concerned..." Before Ernesto could finish Mr. Miura stop him.

"I am not afraid to die if it is for what I believe in. If I accede to your request and I am discovered, both Lota and Joy Bell and the civilians would be in danger, as well. You have heard of how the Japanese retaliate. They take it against the civilians. Let me make this very clear. If my death would help end the war you don't have to ask me twice. But will it? Could you honestly answer me that it will? On the other hand, there will be retaliation. More killings. There's no end to this. My help will further fuel more hatred. And accelerate drastic action on the part of the Japanese." It broke his heart to think of the consequences.

"I don't disagree with you but do you know of any other way?"

"Now that Gen. MacArthur had landed in Leyte and the American forces gaining grounds, why can't you wait for them to liberate this town?" It was obvious Mr. Miura was trying hard to convince Ernesto that patience maybe the alternative.

"That's exactly why we have to act now before the American forces land in Luzon. That bastion with its powerful guns could annihilate the Forces before they reach land if we don't neutralize it. This impending huge encounter is making the Japanese very nervous. You've seen what they've done to this town and its civilians. They've gone mad and every hour of delay means lose of more lives." The impassioned words of Ernesto was now thoroughly clouded with

bitterness as he continued. "I thought friends should help one another. That's why I came to you."

"We took you into our confidence, we treated you like a son and we never doubted your motives. If your intention is to trade our affection for you with what you want me to do, if your sole purpose in getting in touch with us is to use me, you disappointed me Ernesto. I had only admiration for you before this."

"I did not plan this thing, Mr. Miura. Please believe me." Ernesto wished he could cut open his heart and bare his soul for him to see. "If you can only see how miserable this is making me. How difficult this had been for me to approach you for your help. But my duty to my country compelled me to do what is expected of me."

"We each have our own burden of responsibility. Mine is to my family. I've done everything in my power to spare my daughter the brunt of this war. So, I repeat, don't ever make the mistake of seeing me again, especially my daughter if it is for the same purpose."

Mr. Miura turned away from Ernesto, looking far toward the hill. An uncomfortable silence followed. From where Ernesto sat he could see Joy Bell and Lota coming home from their trip. Ernesto's heart pounded so fast as if racing to meet Joy Bell. And abruptly the beating stopped. The sight of a young man - a Japanese walking with them, whose company she seemed to enjoy descended on Ernesto like a dark cloud.

"They're back, Mr. Miura. I have to go. I'm sorry, sir." Ernesto's heart was broken and he could not mend it.

Mr. Miura nodded without turning to look at Ernesto; the disappointment still visible on his face. Ernesto left without bothering to look back. The visit with Mr. Miura was a disaster. His heart wept for the friendship he just lost. Yet the knife that stabbed him and twisted and slashed into the very core of his dying heart was the looming loss of Joy Bell to that young Japanese.

Mitsi silently walked beside Joy bell strumming a Japanese love song in his ukulele. It gratified him that Joy Bell and Lota looked pleased at his rendition. As soon as they reached home, Mitsi hesitated but had to bid them good-bye.

"Won't you stay a little longer?" It was Lota who invited Mitsi.

"It's all right ma'am. Thank you but I'm needed at the clinic. Good-bye Joy Bell." Mitsi smiled timidly then threw a shy glance at Joy Bell who was already on her way up their house.

"See you." Joy Bell cheerfully waved at him.

Mitsi walked away with an extra bounce. He was not touching ground. He was soaring so high he thought he was actually walking on clouds.

The smiles on the faces of Joy Bell and Lota abruptly disappeared as soon as they got upstairs.

"Why mahal?" Lota was concerned at the long-drawn face of Mr. Miura. "Don't you feel well?" She felt his forehead.

"I'm fine."

"But you look tired."

Before Mr. Miura could answer, Joy Bell saw the bunch of flowers on the table. She picked these up and excitedly inquired. "Are these flowers for me Daddy?"

"Yes.. .yes Joy Bell."

"Oh, how beautiful. I know where these came from." She smelled the red ginger torch flowers. "From Ernesto, right? Where is he Daddy?" Joy Bell was beaming as she waited for her father to confirm her wish. But her father remained silent. "Daddy, where is Ernesto?"

"Gone." He answered without looking at her.

"But why?" There was no way Ernesto would just leave without seeing her. "Never mind, I know where to find him." She turned to leave when the voice of her father stopped her. It came so sharp it cut through her.

"No Joy Bell. You stay! You are not to see Ernesto." A spear hit Joy Bell. Straight to her heart. For the very first time her father wounded her. She was bleeding. Profusely. Joy Bell stood, frozen in place; stunned in disbelief at what she heard. It was so unlike her father. Slowly, she turned toward him, searching for the father she knew. But he was not there.

"You don't want me to see Ernesto?" Joy Bell echoed the line tentatively, not believing that the words actually came from her father and uttered in the manner that it was delivered.

"Yes, Joy Bell." The answer came short and terse. "From now on, avoid him."

"But Daddy, Ernesto is good to me. We're friends. What have we done to deserve this?" Joy Bell fought back.

"Follow what I say, child. It is for your own good." The words came firm and final.

"How could you be so sure? What do you know about what is really and truly good for me?"

Instantly she turned rebellious as she confronted her father, something she had never done before.

"Joy Bell!" Lota was shocked at her daughter's behavior but the latter turned a deaf ear to her.

"She's just a child, Lota. She's hurting and doesn't mean what she's saying." Mr. Miura was calm and unemotional.

"I m no longer a child. I have feelings. I know what I'm doing!" Joy bell's emotion was now uncontrollable.

"I repeat, you are not to see Ernesto if you still value your mother and me." There were both authorities and a hint of threat in his voice.

Joy bell stood transfixed, the words of her father ringing in her ears. Her eyelids grew heavy with tears. Unable to bear her agony any longer, she ran to her bedroom and slammed the door behind her.

Lota watched helplessly. She could feel the hurt of her daughter and the sorrow of her husband. She knew her husband too well to understand that he would never do anything to hurt their daughter or anybody else without a very good reason. She could feel the turmoil in him. He was gasping for breath and he was drowning. Gently she placed her hands on her husband's shoulders as she stood behind him. But Mr. Miura seemed so far way, so distant, so remote. She wanted to talk to him, to find out what had transpired during the visit of Ernesto. But she felt she must not trespass into his boundary. Not yet. It had been her experience that to push someone when one was not ready, would just be counter-productive. She found it wiser to give him the space to be alone with himself, with his thought, to think without the added pressure of an intrusion. So she left him alone and went straight to the kitchen to prepare their dinner.

An hour passed and Joy Bell kept to herself. Lota had finished her cooking. Mr. Miura asked her



to join him for a walk. She got the message and immediately accepted his invitation. She had a feeling he wanted to tell her something away from the presence of their daughter.

"Lota." Mr. Miura started as soon as they were a little distance from their house. "I have something to share with you."

Lota stopped and looked at her husband. She could truly empathize with him for the agony that was torturing him. "Is it about Ernesto?"

He nodded. "Ernesto is a guerrilla officer."

"He is?" Lota gasped. Did he tell you this?"

"Yes, he came to ask for my help."

"What kind of help?"

"To use me against the Japanese. It's my access to the garrison that he needed."

"And you refused him." Knowing her husband, Lota was certain he would never do such a thing.

"I told him my own reason. But we seem to belong to two different schools of thought." He sighed. "I wish he could read what's written in my heart. Perhaps he did but refused to accept it. He has his reason and I can understand that."

Lota kept silent. She did not know what else to say. Her husband loved peace and hated the brutality of war and what it did to the innocent people. But he was never a coward. This she knew. "Your disagreement with Ernesto should not prevent him from seeing our daughter."

"Do you think I like this? I know it would break our daughter's heart. But if information about Ernesto's affiliation with the guerrillas would reach the Japanese they would surely torture him to death."

"My God!" And he is only twenty one." Lota was distraught.

"And our daughter might be involved, too. Joy Bell should be spared this information."

"Now go ahead Lota, tell our daughter what she is supposed to know. I love them both. Joy Bell and Ernesto. More than they realize."

Lota left her husband alone and hurried back home. She knocked on the door of her daughter's room but there was no answer. Slowly she opened it. She found her daughter lying on her bed, her face buried against the pillow. Lota sat beside her gently

stroking her hair. Joy Bell, child..." She whispered.

"Oh Mommy. . . Mommy..." Joy Bell sobbed as she turned and hugged her mother. "Daddy doesn't love me anymore. He has changed."

"No baby, he loves you, more than ever."

"But he was angry at me."

"He was just upset. But not at you."

"Why doesn't he want me to see Ernesto? He hates him."

"No Joy Bell. Your Daddy hates no one."

"But he told me to avoid Ernesto. Why?"

"Because he doesn't like him to get hurt. You see child, the Japanese are becoming stricter especially to people of Ernesto's age. If they should mistake him for a guerrilla he could be killed. And that would devastate us. Your Daddy loves you so much and he wants Ernesto to live."

"I am sorry Mommy. I was rude to Daddy!"

"You were hurting, child. But soon you would learn to listen and consider things before acting on impulse."

"Thank you Mommy. You know how much I love Daddy. I'm so sorry." She embraced her mother tightly.

"I know. And he loves you very much. You'll know what to do, darling." She kissed her and left her to herself.

Lota was preparing the table for dinner when her husband came back. He went straight to his rocking chair and gazed at the star-filled sky. From her room, Joy Bell emerged with a towel without a word, proceeded to wipe her father's sweat as she had often done. Mr. Miura held his daughter's hand and looked up at her with unspoken remorse. Joy Bell smiled and burst into tears.

"Daddy, Oh Daddy." She sat on his lap and hugged him. "I'm sorry, Daddy!"

Mr. Miura patted his daughter. "Everything will be all right." He embraced her, feeling much relieved.

"Why can't I be like you, Daddy? You are always so wise and understanding."

"Just be yourself. You'll know what you need to know when the time is right. We may not be all alike but we're endowed with the capacity for understanding. All we need to do is open our hearts

and mind and take into consideration every avenue, every possibility.

"But why can't I see your point? Why do I feel so bad? Oh, I hate myself for being so thoughtless and so unreasonable."

"In time you'll acquire the wisdom to understand both the complexities and even the simplicities of life. It's all part of growing up. When I was your age. I used to blurt out whatever came to mind without thinking about its consequences."

"How I wish we would not have this misunderstanding. It breaks my heart. How I wish everything would just be fine."

"As long as we live, there could be problems and heartaches, small ones, big ones. But solutions are always available if we're willing to seek these. We just have to choose what works. You see, it's not the number of times we fail but how we surmount these that matters. But whatever the outcome, treat yourself with kindness for trying and face life again with courage and faith. We have to learn and profit from our every encounter. And be forgiving. To ourselves.

"It is so good to hear that, Daddy."

"Come on, wipe your cheeks." He cajoled Joy Bell, both of them smiling now. Joy Bell wiped her tears with the back of her palm.

Lota who had all this time been watching them from a discreet distance, felt relieved of the pain that had burdened her. They had proven once more that nothing could break that intangible tie which bound them to each other.

And so at dinner time, the same old happy and intimate atmosphere prevailed. They took their supper amidst jokes and lively conversation.

The night being warm and bright with stars scattered like white sparkling sands all over the sky, the Miuras went out for one of their much-welcome night strolls together, a practice they had long been enjoying ever since before the war. Hand in hand they sauntered along lazily, noticing every flower along the way, grateful for every upright tree and relishing the sweet scent of the green velvet meadow around them. This particular night they lingered long on the hill.

With child-like enthusiasm they embarked into a guessing game figuring out the fast-changing cloud formations, excitedly pointing out every discernible shape.

"Look Daddy, it's a white cross this time." Joy Bell jumped up directing them to the perfectly-shaped figure. "And there's another one. Oh, it's coming close to the first cross. And there's a smaller one. How perfectly formed!"

"Just like us on this hill." Mr. Miura remarked in a light tone. Yet there was wistfulness in his voice.

"Doesn't that one look like an angel? Lota wished they did not linger on those crosses and was grateful for this new cloud formation. What she did not say was that those fast-changing cloud formations gave her a sudden chill creeping up her spine.

And they found many other figures. They all enjoyed it immensely, surprised at how enchanting and yes, mystical cloud formations could be if one just took the time and concentrated on them. As they walked home, Lota obliged to Joy Bell's request and sang a simple but melancholy Filipino lullaby

"I'll never forget that song, Mommy. That song is so you!" She praised her mother after she hit the last note. It was the song that Lota used to sing to her to lull her to sleep when she was a small child. And every-time Joy Bell had that whim of wanting to enjoy a little bit more of childhood, she always asked for that song.

It was such a touchingly beautiful and memorable evening in their lives that they all knew it would stay part of them, always to be cherished and remembered.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Col. Holt was restlessly pacing the earthen floor of his hut while, a guerrilla stood at attention nearby. Then he stopped and faced the young man.

"As soon as Capt. Duran arrives, tell him to proceed here immediately."

"Yes, sir!" The young guerrilla saluted and left.

Col. Holt was apprehensive over the long delay of Ernesto. He was concerned at what could happen to him. They all could not afford to lose an officer right now - much more one as valuable as Ernesto. Although at times they had disagreed on some matters yet Col. Holt believed in Ernesto. He admired his courage, intelligence, dogged determination, undaunted spirit and sense of responsibility. Col. Holt went over some of the papers on his desk just to take his mind off from his anxiety.

It usually took Ernesto five hours to hike the distance from the town to their Headquarter, the way back about an hour longer due to the uphill climb. But this time it took him six hours, his legs getting heavier not from the long journey but more from the strain of the incident which happened earlier that afternoon. His unsuccessful meeting with Mr. Miura had left an imprint on him. The bitterness in Mr. Miura's voice still clearly bothered him.

Far more painful, however, was the thought which seemed to linger and to nag his consciousness. It was of Joy Bell and the young Japanese with the ukulele. Although his sight of the Japanese was brief and passing and from a distance, yet the latter's features were distinctly clear in Ernesto's mind. It was the face of an innocent boy glowing with the wonders of young love - that newly-discovered indescribable feeling. Ernesto sensed that he was a truly good young man but he also

represented a threat to his own happiness. The two unpleasant experiences had sapped Ernesto of his energy and spirit.

As Ernesto reached Col. Holt's hut he practically slumped down on the bamboo bench. His frustration did not escape the Colonel who guessed instantly that Ernesto's trip was far from success.

"Is the girl uncooperative?"

"I didn't talk to her, sir."

"What? You spent the entire day and almost half of the evening and tell me that you didn't talk to her?" Col. Holt stood visibly upset and disappointed. "What's the matter Capt. Duran? Don't you realize what any delay in the accomplishment of your mission means?"

"I am aware Col. Holt. I talked with the girl's father, instead."

"That Japanese? Do you realize what you've done? You can't entrust your top-secret assignment to a Japanese." The Colonel's face turned so red like every drop of blood in his system had rushed up to his head.

"Mr. Miura is more Filipino than Japanese. He maybe a Japanese by blood but he is really a Filipino at heart."

"And in principle? And in mind?" The Colonel was visibly upset.

There was silence. Ernesto understood what the Colonel meant.

"Did he accede to your request?"

Ernesto just shook his head.

"That is to be expected. You should have not talked to him in the first place." He was more alarmed than disturbed. "No matter what you say about him, he is still a Japanese."

"I only tried to spare the girl."

"You defied the order because of the girl. I hope you understand the gravity of what you've done. That Japanese could alert the enemies of our plans. It's not like you to disobey your superior's instruction. I'm sorry, Capt. Duran, you disappointed me."

The jaw of Ernesto tightened. Twice today he disappointed two people. Many times he had been entrusted with delicate and dangerous assignments and had never failed. He had received praises. But now, after all he had done, he was diminished into a

disappointment to the Corps because he preferred to act with compassion. Ernesto could not help but feel bitter at this turn of events. Although painfully aware of his duty as an officer, nonetheless he just now realized what life in the army demanded. It was always one's duty above all others. Above oneself.

"I'll give you this one last chance. You know, I'm sure what it means if you fail this time, so remember it is either your mission or the girl. I want your answer, Capt. Duran."

"I am an officer and I shall do my duty as an officer, sir!"

"Good. That's more like it." The Colonel relaxed back on his chair. The red flush on his face had faded and his color returned to normal. The blood have rushed back to where they belonged.

Ernesto appeared stoically composed. But inside him was another story. One of chaos - of grief, of loss, of utter hopelessness.

Three consecutive knocks on the door crossed the barrier of eerie silence between the two men.

"Come in." The Colonel straightened up.

The door opened and a Courier from the guerrilla unit of the adjacent province came in followed by two American officers. The Courier saluted and handed an envelope to the Colonel.

"A message for you Col. Holt. These officers are here to see you, Colonel."

The lanky officer stepped forward and executed a salute. "Captain Smith from Central Intelligence."

The American Lieutenant with the broad heavy built followed. "Lt. Adams from G-2."

After acknowledging their salute, Col. Holt introduced Capt. Duran to the new arrivals. He then signaled the Courier to leave them.

"Welcome officers. Please sit down." Col. Holt motioned the two American officers to the bamboo chairs. They sat down and waited while the Colonel read the message handed to him. After folding back the paper, he looked at the two officers. "You came direct from Gen. MacArthur's Headquarters?"

"Yes, Colonel. We came by submarine last night. We brought you new radio equipment. It would speed up communication with you. Ammunition and arms would follow soon.

Col. Holt smiled with relief and suppressed joy. Capt. Smith took from Lt. Adams a large package

and handed this to Col. Holt. The Colonel's face beamed as he opened the package on his desk and saw the gleaming new radio receiver-transmitter. It was the first and most modern equipment they had received for a long time. With their old radio equipment, their communication with the Allied Forces had been very limited.

"Bring this to our communication hut, Capt. Duran. Have Joe install this immediately. We should now be able to receive all messages without interference. We can't afford to miss messages from Gen. MacArthur's forces."

Ernesto took the radio and left for the communication hut. Col. Holt and the two American officers continued to confer on the latest developments on Gen. MacArthur's landing in Leyte and the ongoing offensive.

"I can't offer you coffee but we have "salabat," a ginger drink, if you care."

"No thanks, Colonel."

"When is Gen. MacArthur coming to Luzon?"

"That's what we are here for. To help prepare for the next landing here in Luzon. We were sent to assist you coordinate the necessary assaults on the remaining enemy defenses in the provinces in Luzon."

"We have been waiting long for your help. We lack men, ammunition and food and almost everything needed to fight a war,"

"Very soon arms, ammunition and food will be here."

"That will help much in boosting the morale of our men."

"I have a pack of cigarettes and some bars of chocolate. You may have these, sir." Capt. Smith placed on the table the pack of cigarettes and a dozen bars of chocolate, all with U.S. brand or blue-seal as was more popularly known.

Col. Holt's eyes brightened at the sight of the items on his desk. Now he could feel the tangible proximity of American aid and eventual liberation.

"Thank you. My men would welcome these very much."

"Col. Holt, we will be visiting the other units at the other side of this mountain before morning."

"Thank you again for the help. Good luck officers."

The handclasps were strong and warm and carried with much reassurance and confidence. The two



Americans joined their guide outside for their next destination.

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Ernesto pushed the door of the communication hut and walked to where Joe sat.

"For you, Joe!" Ernesto put down the package on the table.

Joe unwrapped the package and his eyes glistened with excitement. "Baby, baby, you're a darling." He kissed the radio with loud smacking sound. "Thanks Cap."

"Shall we try her, Joe?"

"Oh boy! I'm dying to do that." With adept hands, Joe handled the radio as if it would break while Ernesto observed with admiration.

As soon as the new radio was installed Ernesto decided to stay a little longer hoping for incoming messages, but the commotion outside drew his attention. He went out of the hut to investigate and saw Col. Holt surrounded by the men, practically being mobbed by them. Ernesto hustled his way through the crowd. The cheering of the men was hysterical and deafening.

"Blue-seal goods. chocolate... cigarettes... U.S.-brand... boy this is heaven!" The shouting and the dancing turned wilder. All their men, more than a hundred of them were passing from one another the bars of chocolate, each one taking just a bite thus allowing everyone a taste of the precious manna which carried the promise of imminent aid.

"Easy men. Enjoy!" The Colonel tried to appease them but his voice was drowned out by the maddening shout of his men. The pack of cigarettes was distributed, a cigarette for every ten or more men, each one eagerly inhaling from the cigarette. It was both a heartening and pitiful sight. Ernesto stood silent as he pondered and witnessed this joyous yet pathetic scene.

"Capt. Duran, come, a message is coming." Joe called Ernesto who ran back to the communication hut.

Joe listened holding his breath afraid his breathing would interfere with his hearing. He scribbled the message as fast as his hand could write and handed it to Ernesto. After a quick glance at it, Ernesto hurried back to Col. Holt.

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"This message just came in sir." Ernesto handed the paper to the Colonel.

"Come with me, Captain." The Colonel walked to his hut followed by Ernesto. As soon as they were seated, the Colonel read aloud the message. "A reconnaissance plane will fly over your area of operation at 800 hour tomorrow. Give cover. Pilots are on important mission concerning landing." Col. Holt went over the message again and Ernesto listened intently. The Colonel stood and went near the old map on the wall. "Organize three teams, Capt. Duran. You lead the first, Lt. Toribio will head the second and Lt. Dizon will handle the third. Spread them around this area." The Colonel traced with his finger the coastal portion of the town and the perimeter of the garrison. "See to it that these areas are well-covered. Give strict instructions. The pilots must not fall into the hands of the enemies at all cost."

"Yes, sir."

"Any question, Captain?"

"Regarding Lt. Dizon, sir, don't you think it's too premature to let him lead a team?"

"We badly need officers, Captain. He had already passed the test. Anything else?"

"That's all, sir."

"Organize the teams right away."

At the communication hut, Joe was intently listening to the clear sound of his new equipment. He brushed his palms against it as if it were his baby. A rustling sound outside the hut interrupted him. He looked around trying to trace the source of

the sound then quickly but quietly rushed out to the back of the hut. There was a shadow of a man standing very close to the back wall, his back against the wall. As Joe approached, the man jumped out from where he stood and hurriedly walked away. Blood rushed to Joe's face and with lightning speed gave chase to the fleeing figure and tackled him, pinning the man to the ground.

"Lt. Dizon?" Joe could hardly believe it was Lt. Dizon as he got a closer look at his face. "So it's you?"

"So what?" There was irked impatience in Lt. Dizon's voice.

"You were behind the hut...why?"

"None of your damn business. Let me out of here." Dizon brushed Joe aside but Joe firmly kept his hold.

"Hey, Lieutenant, what gives?" Joe got more suspicious of the reaction of the Lieutenant.

"Let go!" Dizon forcefully pushed Joe sending the American rolling on the ground.

Joe got up, furious at what the Lieutenant had just done. "This will reach the Colonel."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Dizon faced Joe squarely, his face flushed.

"Why were you behind my hut?"

"I can go anywhere I please." He retorted sharply.

"Not around my territory, man. I saw you with my own eyes. You were snooping behind the hut. And I saw you run away. You surely smell fishy, and this time I caught you in the act. This time, man, you're hooked. You're not getting away with this." Joe pointed a threatening finger at him.

"Put that damn finger down!" He brushed aside Joe's hand from his face. "This is for playing so smart!" Dizon gave Joe a swift upper cut straight to his jaw.

And an exchange of blows followed. The guards a few feet away saw what was happening and ran to fetch Ernesto. Ernesto arrived at the scene and saw a throng of men already gathered around Joe and Dizon, cheering them on and turning the impromptu boxing bout into one exciting amusement.

"Attention!" Ernesto's voice rang loud but he had to bodily and forcibly separate the two. "What's the matter men?"

"That power-drunk S.O.B., sir, thinks he could boss us around." Dizon pointed a finger at Joe.

"He poked his nose around too much, Captain. That's what's wrong with that guy. I caught him snooping behind the communication hut."

Ernesto was visibly concerned at what Joe had just reported.

"He smelled mighty fishy, Captain!" Joe sneered.

"That's a big lie! I'm fed up with your know-it-all attitude. Lording over people and getting away with it. You think you're the only smart ass around here. You don't have the monopoly on that. Think about it. Dizon blurted the words without hesitation and with an air of injured pride.

"Stop it!" Snapped Ernesto. "Right now we have more important matters to do than this bickering. Lt. Toribio," Ernesto addressed the Lieutenant beside him. "Assemble the first platoon right away at the conference hut."

"Yes, sir!" Lt. Toribio saluted and did what he was told.

"Lt. Dizon, there are restricted areas in this camp. I don't want this incident to happen again. That goes for you, too, Lt. Fern."

The two Lieutenants stood at attention. "Join the men. Lt. Dizon. I'll follow."

Dizon did as he was instructed only after throwing a sharp disgusting look at Joe.

"Well, Joe?"

"I'm sorry Cap, but I don't trust that guy."

"Be more careful, Joe. We don't have the evidence. Just be watchful though. Protect the secrecy of our communication."

"Oh, just leave him to me, Cap. Traitors and spies have no place here."

"Easy, Joe. We can't afford to have trouble in our camp just now."

"You don't believe me then, Cap?"

"I do believe you, Joe but we just can't do anything right now. What we got is just not enough."

"I'm glad you believe me, Cap. Back home, Mom and Dad never believed in me nor thought of me as someone who could make something of himself. I was a good-for-nothing. That's how they looked at me. Mom called me a coward 'cause I refused to hit back at Dad whenever he came home drunk. A hopeless

coward, they both said. But they never got to really understand me. But you haven't heard the best yet. You know how they dealt with problems? They got dead drunk. And I told myself then that they were the cowards, not me. I'll show them...they'll see. I'll show them I'm worth more than a penny! Put me to the front line, will you, Cap?"

"Your time will come, Joe. Go back to your post. We can't miss a message now." Ernesto patted Joe.

Joe appeared touched by the gesture and walked back to the communication hut while Ernesto proceeded to where the men have gathered. Joe's report bothered him but he just had to put this aside for now. With an important mission at hand, he needed every man available.

Upon reaching the assembled group, Ernesto quickly made the announcement. The men were all eagerly attentive and Lt. Toribio and Lt. Dizon were intently listening to Ernesto's briefing on their mission for the next morning.

Ernesto walked to the big sketch of the town on the manila paper which hung on the only wall of the conference hut, the three other sides left open in order to accommodate the men outside the hut. Ernesto briefed them on their assignments and pointed out on the sketch their respective areas of responsibility. "Lt. Toribio, you take the northern most area of the town along the coast. Take the first squad with you. And Lt. Dizon, you lead the second squad. You will cover the southern side of the town. And the third squad will go with me. We shall take the central area. Take every precaution not to attract attention along the way. Since we are specifically to provide cover to the plane and rescue the pilot if necessary, we must use our firearms only at any gun emplacement that target the plane. We are not there to take on the entire Japanese forces, therefore as soon as the plane had safely turned around and left, leave immediately and be back here. Take as much rest as you can. We leave at 0002 hour in the morning."

"Yes, sir." Toribio and Dizon answered in unison.

"Follow me, men." Toribio signaled his squad to follow him toward the fallen log. He sat and his men did the same. He gave instructions in a low,

deliberate and clear voice. "Take over your squad, Lt. Dizon."

"Yes, sir." Dizon saluted Ernesto. Dizon looked at his men briefly then stood before them with confidence. "Men, from now on you'll take your orders only from me." He started to eye each intently and searchingly, walking back and forth. "Tomorrow, I want every man to follow instructions and to do his job well. I want discipline in my group. That's all."

The men broke up and walked to their respective hut. Dizon was left, half-smiling and thinking. "Tomorrow is my big day!" He told himself. "I have to get hold of the plan. Even if I have to kill for it."

That night Dizon could not sleep thinking of the plan. He was restlessly thinking of a way to slip out to alert the garrison about the next day's operation. But Ernesto was always there at his side - as if watching his every move. Dizon could sense Ernesto's extra vigilance and this gave him no small amount of discomfort. It was driving him crazy.

At exactly two in the morning, the three squads prepared for their trek to town, well-briefed on their operation. They had rifles, three machineguns, and a few hand grenades and even hunting knives and bolos, which were all concealed in many different ways; the rifles and machineguns in jute sacks and the rest in "buri" bags. The men were all disguised as farmers and vendors. They all deployed around the town by two's and three's.

Part of Ernesto's squad was to enter the town in a cart filled with coconuts. Two of Ernesto's men were dressed in women's attire. Ernesto himself was in old man's clothing complete with glasses and "buri" hat.

"Be very careful and always watch for your signals. Avoid engagement with the enemies in populated areas." These were the last instructions of Col. Holt as the three squads left their camp.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

At the first crow of the roaster, Lota woke up and could not go back to sleep for she felt well-rested. She just lay beside her husband, who seemed to enjoy his very sound sleep. Lota knew he was sleeping soundly as his snoring had become regular. She got so used to his snoring that it served for her as counting sheep or rhythmic breathing did for others. An effective sleep inducer.

This morning, she felt content just being there next to him - thinking good thoughts. Early mornings were her best time for thinking, for meditation or for counting her blessings. Gazing at the somber face of her husband, now lined with maturity and wisdom, gave her that feeling of fulfillment. She had lived with him for thirteen full years and she could not remember a moment of bitter quarrel. They had friendly discussions but never serious disagreements. This they tried to avoid and successfully did it for thirteen years. For her, life with Mr. Miura had been marked only by beautiful memories. She felt exceptionally fortunate.

Noticing the beads of perspiration that have formed like pearls on her husband's forehead, the morning unusually hot, she wiped these ever so gently, so tenderly as she had loved doing it for thirteen years.

Thirteen years, a number dreaded by many, the number believed to be associated with bad luck, the number that saw its demise from elevator floors and rooms and stores, before all of this were razed down by the bombs and fires. She did not have any opinion on it. It was just a number. So whatever thirteen would bring, she would welcome it and be grateful for the life she lived.

Tip-toeing out of their room like a ballet dancer, she floated into Joy Bell's bedroom, feeling so light and buoyant.

Finding the room suffocating with warm air, she carefully opened the window and allowed the fresh air in. She thought she saw Joy Bell smile in her

sleep. "Is she somewhere visiting enchanting places?" She smiled.

Joy Bell looked so restful, so angelic, so innocent, so sweet, so exquisitely lovely - her baby. Yet no longer a baby. Her hair like silver, framed her face now gradually turning oval. Soon she would be a full-grown lady and she would marry and have children of her own. The thought gave her butterflies in her stomach. But the idea of being a grandmother excited her. "How wonderful it would be to be a grandmother." She mused then sat down on the bed beside Joy Bell. Even her daughter's soft and light breathing smelled like perfume to her. Ever so gently she smoothed her daughter's hair, brushing aside a few strands from her forehead and planted a kiss on her cheek then slowly rose and like before, tip-toed out of the room.

Lota went on with her daily chores, washing clothes, she had quite plenty to wash that day, having skipped four days as she was not feeling very well. But today, she felt rejuvenated and unusually cheerful, having regained her vitality. She went on with her laundry, humming her favorite song. In between she checked the rice she was cooking. This had been a habit with her; cooking while doing her laundry. By doing this, "I do more things at the same time and finish my chores early." She would often justify to her husband who showed concern over her giving up an hour or two of her sleep at dawn, which were her husband's best hours.

Lota was now hanging her laundry, still humming. The rice was done and the coffee brewing. She had roasted some dried fish for breakfast. Everything was ready for her husband and her daughter.

Knowing she had still time before they woke up, Lota took her bath, not hurriedly but taking her time, still humming. At once, the bath refreshed and reenergized her. What else would this beautiful day bring, she wondered.

Returning to their room, she pulled out from storage and put on a light blue dress, actually a long skirt and blouse ensemble. The skirt of thick satin accented with a single huge lotus blossom and the blouse, of thin, flimsy material. She made it herself for their tenth wedding anniversary, just before the outbreak of the war. She had not worn it



since that day they heard mass to celebrate their wedding anniversary. She put on her "tambourine" necklace, a gift from Mr. Miura. They were fond of giving gifts to each other, occasion or no occasion.

Still humming. Lota went out to their living room where the small mirror hung on the wall. She let her long ebony hair fall freely down her waist. She patted drops of coconut oil on her hair, combing briskly until it shone and sparkled. This would be the first time in three years that she had let her hair down. She got used to wearing this into a bun on top of her head. More practical and easier to manage. Although Mr. Miura loved her bun, which reminded him of his mother, Lota knew that he loved it more to see her hair down gathered with a clip just below the ear to keep this off her face. She viewed herself once more before the mirror and smiled with approval. She always liked to look good to his husband. But she loved to please herself, first.

"Good morning, Lota, darling." Mr. Miura greeted her. "Let me look at you!" He stood before her.

Lota turned to face him and took a couple of tentative steps. She suddenly felt shy, just like the first time they looked at each other the day they were married. That was thirteen years ago but the years have not changed her reaction to the admiring look of her husband. The same look that made her heart melt.

"Oh Lota, you take my breath away." He whispered holding her chin and kissing her on the lips softly. "I love you."

Lota embraced him and leaned against his shoulders. They stayed that way for a while as if reliving their years together.

"You are beautiful, Lota."

"I want to look beautiful for you. If only I could do it everyday." Lota whispered, too. "You've made me so happy, mahal. "

"I'll never stop making you happy." He ran his fingers through her shiny hair.

"Good morning," Joy Bell cheerfully greeted them making them both blush.

Lota pushed her husband gently, winking at him to indicate Joy Bell's presence.

"Mommy, you look gorgeous this morning!" She viewed her mother with admiration.

"Oh, come on, you two flatter me." Lota laughed. "Breakfast is ready." She hurriedly turned to the kitchen and Joy Bell and Mr. Miura followed.

"But Mommy, honestly, this is the first time I have seen you really dress up. I mean after the outbreak of the war."

"I like to look nice, at least all right to your Daddy." She winked at her husband, throwing a meaningful smile, her two dimples like geysers spewing out bubbling cheers. "Now, drink your coffee while it's still hot."

"Hmmm, fragrant." Mr. Miura closed his eyes, enjoying the sweet aroma of the home-grown coffee which Lota had brewed.

"Mommy, Oh I love the smell of the dried fish." Joy Bell took from Lota the plate of broiled dried fish.

"My favorite." Mr. Miura added then took one and took a quick bite. "Hmmm it's crispy. I like it this way."

"Mommy, sit down. Your coffee is getting cold." Joy Bell took the rice from her mother and placed it on the center of the table.

The three went through their meal with pleasant conversation but this time mostly centered on Lota. They always enjoyed their meals. Everyone had finished eating when Lota excused herself. Joy Bell and Mr. Miura winked at each other knowing they had a surprise coming. True indeed for Lota came back holding a bunch of yellow sweet-smelling, big and long bananas.

"Ripe from the bunch." Lota beamed with pride. "The first harvest from your latest banana plant, mahal."

"Daddy, the first ripe fruit of your plantation!" Joy Bell took one and quickly ripped its skin open and took a big bite. "Yummy, it's delicious, Daddy! Thanks!"

"Well, let's feast on this." Mr. Miura chuckled watching her daughter swallow one big bite after another.

Lota joined in the laughter, amused at her daughter's huge appetite. They finished a half dozen ripe bananas from the whole bunch. Still laughing at

the way they devoured their first harvest, they all stood up, each one helping in gathering the dishes.

"I'll do the washing, Mommy." Joy Bell took over the dishes from her mother.

Lota wiped the table as Mr. Miura gulped down a big tall glass of water. Joy Bell was humming when suddenly they heard the sound of an airplane. They all rushed to the window and looked up.

"It's an American plane." Announced Mr. Miura. "Thanks, at last they have come!" Murmured Lota.

Suddenly their excitement was cut short by the rattling of machineguns and anti-aircraft guns. Joy Bell dropped the plates she was holding while she stood still with her hands over her breast.

"They are shooting down the airplane!" Mr. Miura exclaimed. "Quick Lota, Joy Bell, to the air raid shelter."

Lota quickly took Joy Bell by the hand then raced down the stairs to the air raid shelter which Mr. Miura had built behind their hut. Banana plants were planted on its top. Just before reaching the opening of the shelter Joy Bell stumbled through the thick sweet potato plants. Lota turned back and pulled her by the hand, practically dragging her.

"Mahal, come hurry!" Lota got out and called her husband who was still at the hut closing their windows. "Please hurry!" Lota shouted nervously.

Mr. Miura jumped down the stairs and ran crouching low, brushing aside the thick bushes which surrounded their air raid shelter. Catching his breath, he jumped into the entrance as bullets rang.

Down in the air raid shelter, Lota was praying, her hands trembling as she cuddled Joy Bell close to her. Mr. Miura was quiet, his hands pressed against his head, elbows on his knees. He hated the sound of guns.

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Japanese soldiers flooded out of the big gate of the garrison. A truck carried a powerful machinegun and sped toward the center of the town

square. The anti-aircraft guns at the garrison were aimed at the plane. Screams were heard from the frantic civilians as they panicked for a place to hide. Many dived into smelly and muddy ditches. The cart filled with coconut husks had reached the first checkpoint. The guerrillas sprang out with rifles and ran for cover.

"Aim at the checkpoint." Ernesto commanded. The guerrillas opened fire as the two guards aimed their machinegun at the airplane. The guards fell dead before they could fire. The truckload of Japanese with the machinegun arrived.

"The anti-aircraft should be silenced. Follow me!" Ernesto led his group ready to ambush the approaching truck. "Fire!" He shouted and gunshots rattled. Ernesto pulled out a hand grenade and threw it toward the approaching truck. The Japanese at the machinegun fell but another soldier took over and directed the gun toward Ernesto's men.

The firing continued unabated. The anti-aircraft unceasingly fired at the airplane which expertly tried to evade their bullets. The airplane was finally turning back to leave, apparently done with what it came for, when its tail section got hit sending a trail of smoke behind it.

From the way the plane wavered from side to side, it was obvious that the pilot had lost control of his plane. The engine roared and coughed and swiftly the plane plummeted down. The shootings stopped.

"Get to the pilot!" The order came from Ernesto.

Mr. Miura peeped out of their shelter. "The plane had been shot down." He gasped.

Lota and Joy Bell joined him.

"Oh God, the poor pilot." Lota whispered.

"An American pilot?" Joy Bell was concerned.

They all got out of the shelter. They saw the airplane crash land in the open fields just at the outskirts of the town.

"Back to camp!" Dizon shouted at his men but lagged behind, made a detour and raced to the site of the burning plane. One of his men trailed him. "Stay back!" He ordered. "The damn fools!" He cursed. "They must not stop me from reaching the pilot. I have to get hold of their map." He panted as he continued running. "I'll kill them if

necessary. I'll kill any one of them who comes in my way. I must get there first."

Dizon was the first to come close to the burning plane but the ensuing explosion threw him back. Black smokes and flames enveloped the plane. He defied this and ran toward the burning fuselage. A shot rang past Dizon and hit a Japanese sniper who had his gun still directed at Dizon. The sniper fell down. Dizon turned and found the one man who tailed him still aiming at the fallen sniper. The man had saved him but he had no time for that. He plunged forward with just one purpose. To get to the pilot first. Before he could penetrate the thick wall of black smoke, another explosion followed and agonizing cries from the Japanese soldiers erupted.

Ernesto dived flat on the ground after he had thrown the hand grenade toward the direction of the approaching truckload of Japanese. Quickly getting up, he sprinted to the American pilot who was crawling away from the plane. With two of his men, Ernesto carried the pilot and scampered away. His men gave cover and exchanged gunshots with the Japanese separated by the burning plane. "Take him to camp, fast!" Ernesto ordered.

His men carried away the wounded pilot. Ernesto remained near the plane to get to the co-pilot who was still trapped inside the plane. But he saw that the Japanese had reached the other side of the plane. Then another explosion and thick black smoke enveloped the plane. Whether the Japanese had taken the co-pilot or whether he was trapped to death, Ernesto had no way of knowing. "Get to the co-pilot!"

At the town, having done what they came to do, Lt. Toribio's group now moved away, back to camp. But before the last three men could get out, another truckload of Japanese reinforcement arrived. The three men were fired at. Civilians were caught between the melee. Screams and gunshots drowned out each other.

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At the site of the plane crash, more truckloads of Japanese reinforcement were sighted.

Ernesto found the superior number of the Japanese overpowering. He ordered all his men to move out. "Retreat!"

The guerrillas withdrew leaving behind their casualties. Dizon joined them frustrated at his failure to get hold of the valuable map.

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Back at the town, the last three guerrillas initially refrained from firing back when they saw the civilians scampering in panic. The Japanese jumped out of the truck and deployed, leaving the three men very little leeway for escape.

There was a short moment of silence. Lota, who got concerned at her husband, ran through the street looking for him, hoping he had sought shelter in one of the ditches before the barrage of gunfire.

"Mahal, where are you?" But there was no answer. Just then Lota remembered Joy Bell who did not have time to run back to the air raid shelter. She turned to go back but firing resumed and she docked into a ditch. As she peered out, she saw a Japanese boy frantically crying, lost between the two wounded guerrillas and a group of advancing Japanese.

The third guerrilla turned back to give cover to his two wounded companions and fired back.

Lota got out and ran to the little boy just in time to push him down as bullets rang and earth flew all around them. Lota suddenly jerked back and staggered down but succeeded in pinning down the boy with her body. But a bullet from the guerrilla hit her right through the forehead before she could duck her head.

From where Joy Bell was, she saw what happened. "Mommy, come back!" She jumped out from behind a cart and raced to her mother. "Mommy!" She took her in her arms but Lota just stared at her. Joy Bell shrieked when the oozing blood drenched them both. As she looked up she saw the shocked and remorseful

look of the guerrilla whose bullet hit her mother, just before he himself was gunned down. Frantically and in panic, Joy Bell wiped the blood off her mother's face only to be covered with more that seemed to just keep on flooding. She forced her mother up, her own body shaking.

Mr. Miura came running and caught her wife's limp body from her daughter. A scream so primal followed, one could have mistaken it as coming from an enraged beast. But it came from Mr. Miura. And not just from rage but from a pain so deep he could not even reach it. "Lota! God help.. .please God!" With shaking hands, he shook her, again and again in a frantic and desperate attempt to revive her, to make her talk, to save her but Lota was motionless. "Lota, please talk to me!"

Lota looked up at him, helplessly. . . passively. Her mouth quivered and gaped but no words came out; while he watched, waiting...breathlessly waiting. Her eyes blurred with tears looking at him. And the gaze stayed that way. Just staring - blankly. Fixed. The light from her eyes flickered... fading away. And dimmed. And was gone.

Mr. Miura's scream pierced the stillness and echoed back but he did not hear it. Again his mouth opened. The scream came out soundless. And his mouth remained open; painfully opened and locked for the longest time.

Lota was dead! Their world shattered into shreds and they could not put it back together. Their morning that started so blissfully, so magically was gone with the now silenced guns. A few moments of gunfire snatched Lota from them. Without warning. Without good-byes.

Mr. Miura, his face begrimed with dust and sweats and tears, pain and loss, his whole body tensed, every nerve knotted, his entire being unhinged, dangling, his jaws still fixed opened as in a frozen soundless scream, buried his head against her face. And finally a hoarse, hollow, gasping voice managed to vent his pain - "Lota... my love! Lota, "aisitemasu"... "gosaimasu"..."

With eyes blurred with tears, Mr. Miura struggled up carrying the limp body of Lota. Joy Bell trailed him dazed as in a trance, tears endlessly streaming down her colorless face, eyes blankly staring at an infinite distance. Passing

through the ground spattered with blood and lifeless bodies, a place suddenly engulfed in a deafening silence as in an aftermath of a devastating storm, Mr. Miura walked unseeing - shocked to blindness to notice a baby crawling...lost...searching for a mother among the dead.

Both father and daughter seemed unmindful of the scene around them - numbed and unfeeling as if following the hearse of a loved one.

Lota was dead. They were in a procession of two. His beloved wife was forever gone. Her dear mother no more. Both robbed of an irreplaceable part of their lives. Both died inside.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Several wounded guerrillas arrived in their camp, some just slumped down at the clearing where they were helped with whatever treatment was available. Col. Holt and Ernesto sadly inspected their wounded.

"There are eleven wounded." Ernesto reported.

The Colonel shook his head. "And how many casualties?" He asked.

"Two, sir." Ernesto could hardly say the word. "The co-pilot was trapped in the plane. Not sure up to now whether he died or..."

"Captured?" There was a tone of desperation in Col. Holt's voice. He did not wish the American co-pilot dead but he did not want him captured, either. Very much aware of the punishment and torture the prisoners were subjected to by the Japanese just so they could extract valuable information from them, he dreaded the thought. How long the American would be able to endure the punishment and how steadfast in his silence he could not be sure. "I'll be in my hut, Captain. I would like to talk with the pilot as soon as he is treated."

"Yes, sir!"

The Colonel walked back to his hut, greatly devastated.

Ernesto remained - waiting and hoping that Toribio's three men would be back just wounded and not dead as he feared. This sad episode will have great adverse effect not only in their number but more so in their morale.

From the hut emerged a young and lanky American, his right arm wrapped in bandages. Were it not for the bandages, nothing else showed the horrible experience he had just undergone. He looked admirably unshaken and strong except for a shadow of sadness in his liquid gray eyes.

"How is the wound Lt. Moore?" It was Ernesto who met him.

"Not as bad, Captain." The Lieutenant matter-of-factly replied. "Any news about Jimmy? I mean Lt. Walter?"

"None so far. But I left two men in town and before the day ends, we will know."

"Say, thanks for saving my life." There was a grateful tone in his nasal voice.

"Forget it. We failed to save Lt. Walter." Ernesto still felt the guilt of not being able to save the co-pilot.

"Oh, you did your best, Captain."

"Are you ready to meet Col. Holt?"

"Sure."

The two walked to meet with Col. Holt.

"He's such a nice fella, Jimmy." Lt. Moore casually opened the subject again. "And he was quite young. Just twenty three."

"Does he have a family?"

"He's got a pretty wife. Blanche and two darling kids. Never met them personally but he showed me their pictures and endlessly talked about them. He had plans of buying a farm and settling down there when the war was over. He's such a dreamer of a guy. I like him very much."

"I'm sorry about that. But as you've seen the enemy forces are very much superior and better armed. If we only have those arms we would at least have a chance and minimize casualties and prevent great losses."

"Very soon you'll receive the arms and supplies."

"We're here Lt. Moore, waiting and ready to fight." Ernesto pushed open the door of Col. Holt's hut and Lt. Moore followed him. "Col. Holt, this is Lt. Moore."

Lt. Moore saluted and shook the Colonel's extended hand.

"We're sorry about your co-pilot, Lieutenant. Please sit down."

"Your men did their best, sir."

"But if he were captured?" Col. Holt's voice was filled with anxiety.

"I doubt it if he survived the explosion but if he did, he'll manage, sir."

"I'm afraid the Japanese may find a way of extracting from him the classified nature of your mission."

"Jimmy, Lt. Walter is a brave young man and a born soldier, sir. He'll die rather than give away our mission."

There was a brief silence and then after talking a little more about Lt. Walter, Lt. Moore proceeded to render his reconnaissance report.

"The fortress looked menacing and formidable. From the aerial view, the garrison is well protected and its manpower is staggering. We understand there is a huge number of prisoners. It won't be advisable for an aerial attack."

"How soon would the American Fleet come?"

"Within a couple of weeks, maybe. The final decision would depend on our findings. I'll have to get in touch with Headquarters right away, sir."

"Captain, take Lt. Moore to the communication hut."

"Follow me, Lieutenant."

Ernesto left followed by Lt. Moore. He saw Dizon briskly walking away from the direction of the hut and apprehension immediately crept in. "But why would Lt. Dizon eavesdrop?" He asked himself. "He must be quite a curious man. But Ernesto was sure it was not mere curiosity this time. He promised to get to the bottom of this. However, he had more urgent matters to attend to. "This way, Lieutenant." Ernesto walked ahead closely followed by the American pilot.

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Dizon had by now gone far from the camp. He had reached the creek where the men bathed. He took a quick swim and casually checked around for the presence of any guerrilla, dressed and left taking the winding narrow path that led to the town. Pumped up and optimistic, it took Dizon three hours to reach town. He could hardly wait to deliver to Col. Hiroshi his newly-acquired information. With his pass word, Dizon easily got inside the garrison. He was instantly led to the office of Col. Hiroshi, where a closed conference was held for him alone. After sketching the site of the camp, Dizon proceeded with his report. "The American pilot had

information of the landing of Gen. MacArthur's forces in two weeks."

"And the site of the landing?" The Colonel was barely able to conceal his excitement.

"This province." Dizon was positive. "The reconnaissance plane was in preparation for the coming landing."

"You have done a good job, Lt. Dizon." Col. Hiroshi commended him.

Dizon felt proud and relieved. Now he could stay in the garrison and enjoy once again the bountiful food and comfort he missed during his stay with the guerrillas. "May I visit my brothers and sisters in Manila?" There was happy anticipation in Dizon's voice having missed them.

"You'll go back to the guerrilla Headquarters. Your job is not finished." The Colonel's order abruptly dampened Dizon's spirit.

He did not feel safe going back to the camp for he had sensed the growing suspicion directed at him especially from Captain Duran.

"Be sure to obtain the exact landing site of Gen. Mac-Arthur's forces. I need the information fast."

"Yes, sir." Dizon was a trained and disciplined man and he knew it was futile to argue with the Colonel. "One more assignment and he's home free."

The Colonel pushed a button under his desk. The door opened and Capt. Taguri entered.

"Capt. Taguri send out your men. Gather all Filipino civilians and concentrate in the town. In this crucial time we need complete control of everyone's movement." The Colonel meant business.

"Yes, Colonel." The Captain saluted and bowed.

"You have other instructions, Captain Taguri. Wait."

"Yes, sir."

"Lt. Dizon, I expect your report soon. Don't fail me"

"I won't, sir."

"That's all Lieutenant and good luck."

Dizon executed a salute and walked out of the room.

"Any report from the American pilot?" The Colonel asked Capt. Taguri.

"None, sir. The American won't talk."

"This pilot was here for an important reconnaissance mission. Lt. Dizon had confirmed the landing by the Americans within two weeks."

"Do we have the location of the guerrilla camp, sir?"

"Yes, but I don't intend to use it now until Lt. Dizon had acquired details of the landing operation."

"What would you want me to do, sir?"

"Talk to the pilot. But do it gently. I don't want any brutality toward our officer prisoners."

Outside the Colonel's office, Sgt. Mamoto was obviously bothered long after Dizon passed his desk. He had never been called to the Colonel's office for a conference. How he hated to see a Filipino, an enemy over-shadow him. He detested the idea of employing Filipino spies. They took too much time. He believed in efficiency. In fast results.

Soon the Captain emerged from the Colonel's office. Sgt. Mamoto could see the problem visibly lined on his face.

"Sgt. Mamoto, I have a job for you to do." A complete defiance of the Colonel's order. But if the Colonel needed it desperately, he, Capt. Taguri had to do what would work. "Not persuasion. Not doing it gently." And the Captain knew just the man to do it. "I want you to extract information from the American pilot and fast. Do it your way."

"It's done, Captain! The Sergeant grinned with a feeling of exhilaration. Finally he could lay his hands on the enemy - especially an American. This was his one big chance to have the enemy at his mercy.

"I want results at once!"

"Yes, sir." Sgt. Mamoto fished out from a side drawer of his desk a polished brass knuckle, straightened his shoulders and marched out speedily. Passing through the guards stationed along the corridor leading to the stockade for prisoners, Sgt. Mamoto was flattered by the salutes he received from all of them.

"Open the door to the American pilot!" He barked at the last guard.

The bolted door was opened and Sgt. Mamoto proudly strode in. He walked to Lt. Walter whose two hands were tied up to a steel hook on the concrete wall. The head of the American hung down. With the

brass knuckles in his right hand Sgt. Mamoto turned the prisoner's head to face him.

"Start talking. When and where is the exact location of Gen. MacArthur's landing here in Luzon?"

The American just looked at him sharply through his half-closed eyes.

"Talk I said!" He shouted but just like before, Lt. Walter did not budge. He stared at him with contempt. "You fool. Talk or you'll regret it right this moment and not the rest of your life."

"Never!" Snapped Lt. Walter.

"You will tell me the truth if you want to go home to your wife and children." Mamoto tried every way he could but he saw an inner strength and determination in the American.

"It won't work Sergeant."

"You will live if you cooperate but you will die if you don't."

"Suit yourself!"

"You make me angry!" He slapped him.

"This will get you nowhere." Lt. Fern spat at him.

"You hard-headed fool. You will suffer for this." Mamoto hit him across the face with the brass knuckles. An ugly cut oozed out blood. "Idiot!" He struck him in his stomach in rapid succession. Now he was furiously shouting filthy words but Lt. Walter stoically remained silent gritting his teeth in pain as the steely knuckles found its mark and he crumpled into a ball. But not a sound escaped from the American. This further infuriated Sgt. Mamoto. "Talk...Where is the exact landing place? Talk!" In obvious exasperation, Mamoto struck Lt. Walter's head and his cracked skull spurted blood. "Talk!"

But Lt. Walter just looked up at him blankly and passed out.

"You will talk!" He grumbled. "Guard!" The Sergeant screamed.

The guard entered. "Pour water!" Sgt. Mamoto paced the stony floor, his whole body shaking from the fury of his frustration. He was given this mission and he swore he would not fail. He never failed. In anything. Never! And not now. "I swear it, you will talk." He cursed as the guard poured a pail of filthy water over Lt. Walter's face.

As soon as Lt. Walter regained consciousness, Sgt. Mamoto started all over again, interrogating

and hitting the prisoner but just the same, he got no answer. Just a weak shaking of the American's head and a blank stare. Lt. Walter was hardly recognizable but his will was as indomitable as ever. He remained unshaken.

Overcome by an uncontrollable madness, Sgt. Mamoto ordered the guard to force open the prisoner's mouth. He poured water, an entire pail, into the gurgling mouth of the prisoner. Not content, he stepped on his bloated belly and water flushed out in streams.

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At the gate of the compound, Dizon was escorted by the Japanese soldier after having been served a sumptuous meal. He was being led out when a group of suspected Filipino civilians were dragged in, one of them resisting violently. The man had been beaten and was bleeding but he kept on hollering back at the Japanese soldiers.

"God forgive me for what I'll do as soon as I get out of here. You beasts. My wife and children are harmless but you have imprisoned them, too." It was Pedro venting out. His wife, Trina, their son, Mario and their three other children and the baby were placed in the public market herded together with the rest of the civilians. Without thinking for his own safety and the consequence from his act, Pedro followed them and demanded their release. The Japanese had to drag him out and drove him to the garrison for questioning. Now they suspected him to be a guerrilla. "Let me go!" The sight of a Filipino appearing friendly with the Japanese drove Pedro crazy. He struggled and confronted Dizon. "Spy!" He yelled and spat on Dizon's face.

The Japanese escort of Dizon struck Pedro on the head with the butt of his rifle.

Dizon walked out of the compound, seething. As soon as Dizon was out of the garrison he checked around to assure himself that no one had seen him. He hurriedly walked away but caught a glimpse of a figure that quickly disappeared. He was not certain if the person was following him but that made him suspicious and alert.

From where he was he saw trucks filled with civilians who were herded then dumped into the public market. He had to get out of there fast. He could hear the wailing and cries of women and children packed like sardines in the barb-wired market place with just the cold concrete for floor and the roof over their heads. But the sight had not touched Dizon. He just passed by and continued walking until he reached the outskirts of town. Once again he noticed the same figure which seemed to be following him. When he reached the field outside of town he caught a full view of the man - it was Rudy, the mess boy at the guerrilla camp. Now he was sure he had been followed. He was now sure that he will be in trouble as soon as Rudy reached the camp. Dizon thought fast and a bright idea dawned on him. He continued to walk very casually appearing not to be aware that he was being followed. Just like before, he could sense Rudy tailing him. And as soon as he got to the winding narrow trail leading toward the mountains, he quickly turned and drew his pistol and fired twice at Rudy. Hurriedly he walked back to where Rudy had fallen. The bullets have pierced his heart. But he was still breathing. Rudy looked at Dizon with a look of contempt.

"Who sent you to follow me?" Dizon questioned him, his right foot on Rudy's belly as he looked down at him.

"Damn you traitor!" Rudy coughed and blood flowed from the side of his mouth.

Dizon fired another round this time to his head. Rudy jerked and stiffened, his eyes still wide open, still looking at him, as if mocking him for his treachery and warning him that he would never get away with it. Dizon kicked him to make sure he was dead then hurriedly left for the mountains.

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At the Japanese barracks, Sgt. Mamoto had lost his patience with the very uncooperative American lieutenant. Walter had been so weakened by the torture he was subjected to, that he could no longer look up from where he was sprawled on the filthy, bloody pool on the cold stony floor. During the several hours of continuous and grueling interrogation and torture, Lt. Walter had steadfastly maintained his silence. But he was so weak he could no longer lift his head. Sgt. Mamoto found this a good opening for him. He grinned confident that this time he will succeed. He had drained the prisoner's resistance. "Just tell me the location and day of landing of Gen. MacArthur's forces in Luzon and you're free."

Walter looked blankly at Sgt. Mamoto through his half-opened eyes then turned slightly to one side, his jaws clenched with rage.

"Come on.. .just the day and the place and you will live happily ever after." He mocked him. This time Sgt. Mamoto bent down and held the hair of the American. "Now talk..."

"You'll never get what you want from me."

"Fool!" St. Mamoto pushed the Lieutenant's head then stood and kicked him on the head. "You'll die moron!" Then he kicked him again and again as more blood came pouring out of his mouth.

"You'll never win a war through your filthy barbaric tactic, you sonofabitch." In spite of his condition, Walter managed to spit out in gasping yet unfaltering words his rage inside. "You can't win this war through your treachery."

Infuriated, Sgt. Mamoto humiliated him further by spitting on his face. "You deserve that stubborn American!"

"In our prisons, we care and protect our prisoners, much more an officer." There was a marked sadness in Walter's dry voice.

"You talk too much!" Sgt. Mamoto pulled out his bayonet and raised it before the American Lieutenant. "This will shut you up!" He plunged the bayonet through his body.

"Stop it! The powerful voice made Sgt. Mamoto freeze in place. But the bayonet's blade had already landed on its mark through Lt. Walter's heart. The voice came from Col. Hiroshi who had just entered the cell.

Sgt. Mamoto pulled out his bayonet, blood dripping from its shiny tip. He bowed and simultaneously brought his feet together, the bayonet by his side. Lt. Walter was now gasping, his wound spitting out blood. Upon seeing the Colonel through his half-closed eyes, he opened his mouth with great effort. He did not beg for his life nor invoke his captor's mercy.

"Colonel, I thought we are fighting a civilized war. Is this your idea of war. . .your treatment of your POW? Haven't you heard of the Geneva Convention? He coughed. "My regret in dying in your hands is that we Americans all this time treated our prisoners with respect, decency and kindness. It's..." The Lieutenant failed to finish his line.

Col. Hiroshi was dumbfounded for the American spoke the truth. "Fetch the doctor." He ordered.

"It's too late.. .for that." Lt. Walter finally closed his eyes. At last he won over his agony. He was faithful to his duty. And he did it his way.

Col. Hiroshi stood transfixed before the dead enemy realizing what this one American's death would mean for him. Japan may win this war but in Col. Hiroshi's conscience, would forever live this one big mistake - the death of this prisoner of war. He just now realized that he was not the only Commanding Officer who shall suffer that guilt for the mistakes and arrogance of every Sergeant and Corporal under their command. He bent to get the identification tag of the dead American. He stared at it and hoped to send the tag back to the American's family, if he was lucky to survive this war.

"Give him a decent burial." He addressed the guard. "Follow me to my office, Sergeant." The Colonel walked out, his mind heavy with the great burden of guilt for the American's death.

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Dizon had reached the guerrilla camp, after taking a quick swim in the creek. Now he could breathe. Rudy was out of the way. He went straight to their hut and fell asleep the moment he hit the bed. But not for long. He was awoken by the familiar dull sound of the mess call for supper.

"Rudy!" He sucked in. His last look haunted him. If Rudy made it back then he was in trouble. He jumped up and looked out the door. The mess boy was there all right but it was not Rudy. It was his assistant. Dizon exhaled. Suddenly he felt the pang of hunger but he did not want just now to join the group or partake of the food. It would surely remind him of Rudy. He took off his pistol and put it above his head as he lay down on the bamboo bench. He stretched his aching muscles, his two arms crossed above his head. It had been a most trying day, from his frustration at Col. Hiroshi's decision ordering him back to the guerrilla camp, to the dagger look of Pedro which seemed to penetrate his being and the mocking grin of Rudy even in death. That last scene would always remain in his mind, forever fresh and vivid. Dizon forced himself to sleep just so he would free himself from the haunting scene and eventually he succeeded for his tired muscles have really taken a punishment.

The men were now scattered beneath the trees feasting on the very scanty food prepared that evening. Ernesto could not eat. Something was bothering him.

"Not hungry, Cap?" It was Joe who joined Ernesto, his coconut shell almost empty by now.

Ernesto just shook his head.

"A penny for your thought?"

"It's our men, I'm worried about. Those I left back in town to find out the fate of Lt. Walter."

"You know, Cap, something is really fishy around here."

"What do you mean, Joe?" Ernesto faced Joe squarely, searching the face of the young American for an answer.

"Oh, the several incidents which have happened here recently. The alertness of the Japanese in town every-time we have our men there, their seeming preparedness today. Just thinking, you know. Well, must be the presence of someone.. .maybe a Jap contact."

"Joe...!" Ernesto brightened up. "What do you really mean?"

"Well, I saw someone.. .suspicious movements, you know."

"Lt. Dizon?" Ernesto wanted a confirmation of his doubts, too. He knew he could trust Joe. They had been close friends since they got together.

"There you are. That's the man. Well, it's not just the incident last night. I had been observing him. He really pokes his nose around. And I don't mean just twice or thrice."

"But we can't just point our finger at him."

"We will soon. You'll see." Joe gulped down the remaining thin broth from the coconut shell.

"Capt. Duran. . .Capt. Duran!" The frantic call came from a guerrilla carrying on his shoulder the limp body of a man.

"Hey, Cap, look!" Joe pointed at the men around the new arrival. Ernesto rushed with Joe to the crowd.

"Why...it's Rudy!" Ernesto gasped as soon as the body of Rudy was laid on the ground. Ernesto bent and listened to his heart but there was no movement. "He's dead!" He murmured. Three bullet holes riddled his body. Ernesto was quiet but his mind was busy. Now this was something concrete. He was sure Dizon must have something to do with Rudy's death for it was he who assigned Rudy to follow Dizon that day. If Dizon killed Rudy, it must have been to hide an important secret. Ernesto's eyes were burning with hate as he gazed at their hut. "Traitor!" He murmured to himself.

"Any news about Jimmy?" There was anxiety in Lt. Moore's voice as he struggled through the crowd.

It was only then that Ernesto remembered the assignment he gave his men.

"What's the news about Lt. Walter?" Ernesto addressed the two guerrillas who had brought Rudy back.

"He was captured by the Japanese, sir, and brought to the garrison." Reported one of the guerrillas.

"Oh no!" Ernesto closed his eyes as if shutting out the thought of the tortures which the unfortunate American must surely be undergoing. "I'm sorry, Lt. Moore. But there's nothing we can do

now." He sadly shook his head and patted Lt. Moore on the shoulder.

"Well," Lt. Moore sighed. "Jimmy's family sure would be proud of him." Lt. Moore turned to Joe.

"Let's send a message to Headquarters, Joe."

"The brutes! Let me lay my hands on those Japs." Joe struck his right fist against his open left palm. "Just give me the chance."

"Let's go Joe." Lt. Moore cajoled Joe to go back to the communication hut.

"Prepare a grave for Rudy." Ernesto gave the order to the guerrillas then walked to his hut, his mind in a whirlpool of anger and suspicion.

From the crowd Tommy emerged to do his job. One more dog tag for him to collect. He would miss Rudy, the one bright sun who could make him laugh.

Ernesto pushed the door to his hut. He found Dizon there, very sound asleep. With a sharp piercing look he stared down at him, trying hard to control himself from pouring his wrath on him. Then seeing Dizon's pistol lying just above his head, he picked this up and smelled its barrel. The barrel smelled of gun powder. It had been fired recently. Without missing a beat, he pulled out its magazine and found three bullets missing. But of course he could have used it earlier that morning during the cover operation. Ernesto wrestled with himself. But they were supposed to use their rifles. There was no need really for the use of his pistol unless he ran out of bullets in his rifle. Just the same it was highly suspicious - the number of missing bullets coinciding perfectly with the wounds in Rudy's body. Ernesto instinctively pointed the pistol at Dizon and the urge to pull the trigger was very tempting. Breathing deeply, he returned the pistol. The sound of the pistol striking against the bamboo bench woke up Dizon.

Upon seeing Ernesto looking down at him, Dizon rose with a quizzical look. He sensed the seriousness on Ernesto's face but tried to hide his anxiety. He composed himself and very casually broke the very uncomfortable silence. "I must have overslept." He stretched his arms high.

"You were out the whole afternoon, Lt. Dizon. Where were you?"

"I was out to the creek for a swim. After our operation this morning, I needed to unwind."

"And it took you the whole afternoon?" There was still the suspicious expression on Ernesto's face.

"I took my time, sir. Of course you don't mind your men resting for a while after a harrowing experience this morning?" There was skepticism in Dizon's voice.

"Not if they follow regulation."

"I can't remember going against any regulation here, sir. Unless swimming is one."

"You fired your pistol?" Ernesto's look was searching.

"Oh that?" Dizon grinned, looking very relaxed but could already feel the heat rapidly building up in him. "I shot a wild pig, sir. I missed it. Would had been a real good feast for all of us."

"Three times?"

"Yes, three times, sir."

"Next time use your bullets only when necessary." Ernesto meant business and his frustration could no longer be hidden from his face. Without waiting for an answer from Dizon, he walked out.

"That was a close call." Dizon wiped the perspiration dripping from his eyebrows.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The crippling venom of war had invaded the Miura home. It had robbed it of its priceless and irreplaceable jewel. The days that followed were dimmed with the shadow of the cruel incident that snatched the life of Lota. The once happy home was nothing more than a grave. For the loss of Lota had created a void - an emptiness that was there to stay. It had drowned their once bright and lively home into a bottomless darkness. No laughter was heard from where it once contagiously rang.

Two days had passed after Lota's body had been laid in its final resting place on the favorite hill of their family. Time stood still for Mr. Miura and Joy Bell and everyday was that day when the sharp cruel claw of war snatched away from their midst the woman who had been their source of faith and strength.

Mr. Miura could only weep silently in his rocking chair as he gazed far toward the hill where Lota now lay. "She loved people. She loved her countrymen yet she had to die from the bullet of her own brother." He could only sob at such ironic reality. But as he turned to the other window where Joy Bell was, he mustered all the remaining life that was still his for he realized that he still had a daughter who needed him. How he felt for her.

For two days he had not heard her talk. She just sat there by the window, looking at the hill - that hill where she used to gather flowers. For two days they had not talked - they just looked at each other - feeling lost and helpless - with nothing to talk about. Even their minds had been drained of the beautiful thoughts that once flourished in abundance. They could no longer think of anything else except the loss of Lota. But like the truly devoted father that he was, he forced himself to get out from this strangling grief that choked him. Though it was painful and extremely difficult for him to forget the nagging memories, he became

acutely aware that his daughter had nobody else to turn to but him. Mr. Miura tried to take hold of himself and decided to be strong. He had to set an example for his daughter to have faith by his acceptance of Lota's death and by being his old self again - jovial and attentive to their daughter's every needs. This, however, did not seem to do her any good for she had imposed upon herself a period of deep mourning. She was really too young to understand and accept the meaning of death. Too young to face the sad reality of parting from her beloved mother. She refused to be weaned from the comfort she lavished her.

Mr. Miura did the things that Lota did for their daughter. He cooked her favorite dish, even combed her hair - something Lota always did. Gradually but passively Joy Bell accepted the efforts of her father.

One morning Mr. Miura took Joy Bell for a stroll to the hill, a thing they used to do together when Lota was still alive. Missing her mother so much, she asked her father to sing for her. He obliged by singing the lullaby which Lota often sang for their daughter. With his sole desire to console Joy Bell, he went through the song, although every line was like knife slicing his heart to pieces. This was how much he loved and cared for their daughter.

And that afternoon, they went together to visit their neighbors but only the Japanese families were left in their homes. All the Filipino civilians were placed in the market place together with the civilians from the barrios outside of town and all its surrounding villages. The Japanese had imposed the "zona" or herding of the population in concentrated location. And worst of all, the Japanese had enacted the "Juez de cochillo" or literally, "justice by the knife." Just another term for martial law.

Mr. Miura was no longer allowed to get the left-over food from the garrison kitchen. So today all they had came from their garden. They also brought two pails of water.

The sight at the market place shocked them. It was overcrowded and the stench was suffocating. Children, women and old folks lay on the cold, damp filthy cement, almost one on top of the other.



Packed like sardines. Cries and groans of agony and pain from hunger and disease was all the sound that could be heard. Beri-beri, malaria, skin ulcers, lice infestation, diarrhea, dehydration had afflicted most of them. The condition was dehumanizing to say the least. A total travesty.

"Why must they do this to the civilians, Daddy?" Joy Bell was so disheartened by the sight.

"This is the ugliness of war, my child. Reason and compassion have no more place in man's heart."

"They must be terribly hungry."

"They are. Let's see if we will be allowed to enter."

Mr. Miura and Joy Bell approached the guards at the barb-wired gate and explained their desire to give some food to the civilians. They found it difficult to convince the guards, especially those who have just arrived. They were much more strict and more hostile than the ones who had stayed long in the town.

"No you can't go in there." Snapped the guard.

"I'll just give this food."

"No. We can't allow that. Knives and guns could be concealed. And we could have a riot. You don't want us to shoot them all, do you?" Explained the other guard.

"Then see for yourself. But please, give the food and water to the civilians. They are hungry. And thirsty."

"I know him." Another Japanese guard who knew Mr. Miura intervened. "Let's examine the basket."

And so the slices of boiled cassava were turned over and over and crushed and mashed.

"This is okay. We will give these to the civilians." Assured the guard.

"Thank you. God will be kind to you." Mr. Miura was profuse in his gratitude.

The basket and pails of water were taken by the guards to the civilians in the market structure. What happened next was sheer pandemonium. A sudden rush of people - like a bursting dam followed. The young and the old screamed as they got trampled by the stronger ones who by now were all fighting for a slice of boiled cassava. They pushed and shoved without regard to another human being. The animal in them emerged. Shouts, curses, screams, cries filled the air as the wild struggle for survival went on. A

dozen soldiers with rifles entered the enclosure and randomly struck anyone in their way. The mob, now cowered together like tamed wild animals. The sight from behind the barbwire was almost unbearable for Joy Bell. She turned away to her father, sobbing.

"Daddy, we did not help. We should have not come."

"I know. If only we have enough food for all of them." Mr. Miura could just shake his head for he knew they could no longer help. The basket of boiled cassava had not appeased their hunger. It had only magnified their want for food. Worse, it became so disheartening to see how human beings could forget basic consideration and compassion for the weak and the sick for a slice of boiled cassava and a drop of water.

The same guards who brought the basket to the civilians came back and returned to Mr. Miura and Joy Bell the basket - now completely torn. And the pails flattened. "I'm sorry but they had destroyed your basket."

Mr. Miura could just finger the unrecognizable object which was once his basket. How ironic that the guards would apologize for a torn basket. But not for broken bodies and human spirit.

"It's best if you do not come back." The guard advised him in a low voice. "The soldiers who have just arrived are very strict and suspicious. They may not spare your daughter. Keep her away." The guard hurriedly turned away before Mr. Miura could thank him for his concern.

"What is it, Daddy?" Joy Bell was curious at the almost inaudible conversation between her father and the guard.

"Let's go quick." He whispered.

"But, why?"

"It is dangerous for you. Come!" Mr. Miura held Joy Bell by the elbow and they hurriedly left the place. He felt uneasy along the way as groups of Japanese soldiers marched through the streets. The Miuras avoided the main road and took the side streets to their home.

"What would become of them, Daddy?" Joy Bell was in tears as they walked.

"I don't know. I don't know anything anymore."

"Will they kill the civilians?"

"Only God knows, child."

"But what have the civilians done? Remember what the Colonel told us and all the civilians when they came to town? That the Japanese were here to free the Filipinos from the clutches and domination of the Americans? That they will restore freedom and equality among the people? Remember, Daddy?"

"Yes, of course I do. The people believed them. But I had my misgivings then. Now all my doubts are confirmed. It's the same pattern that every colonizer always promise the natives and the citizens of every place they control."

"So why are they treating the people with brutality and inconsideration?"

"I, too would like answers to the same question. They asked the people to cooperate but in return they haven't shown respect or compassion or kindness. Yes, they made many promises so they could get the people to submit. At the beginning, from the town where we came from, they even put up a semblance of normalcy by enticing the town mayor and other town officials to collaborate with them and to stay in the position they held before the war. Those who stayed enjoyed many privileges but lost their lives when they did not accede to the Japanese agenda. The others who had doubts about the motives of the Japanese were forced to run to the hills."

"Is that why we left our town?" Joy Bell was starting to understand why they had to leave their friends and their home.

"That was part of the reason." What he did not tell her was that being a Japanese, he was no longer safe with the Filipino underground group so that they had to move from one place to the next until they came to this town with a concentration of many Japanese civilians.

"But many of our neighbors seemed happy and stayed."

"Not just happy. Excited. The businessmen who jumped at the opportunity to enrich themselves, the collaborators as civilians called them, who gained special favors. They are the ones who benefit from this war."

"Why are the Japanese suddenly becoming more mean?"

"Because they're nervous. And scared. They know that very soon their domination will come to an end."

"Then they should be more kind so that the people will testify that they are indeed good people as they promised they would be. Now they are killing people who haven't done anything to them."

"They're doing it as retaliation for the many surreptitious activities and sabotages, the ambushes and raids of the guerrillas; of the resistant movement. And so for every Japanese killed in those ambushes, they kill ten civilians."

"That's not fair. The civilians are innocent here."

"That's not the way they think. They believe that the civilians are helping the guerrillas and so they're teaching the civilians a lesson. Thus they're preventing them from sympathizing with the resistant movement. And even hate the guerrillas."

"Then the guerrillas should be more responsible in their activities because apparently their effort is more damaging to the civilians than their help. Isn't it kind of useless and futile? How could they overpower the Japanese with only their bolos and crude arms?"

"You're right but child, what they're doing gives them reason to live. Fighting to protect their country, our country from the oppressors is the last remaining power they could exercise."

"I wish we could be of help so this war will end soon and peace will be restored once again." Joy Bell was touched deeply by what she heard. For the first time her father opened up to her - completely. Now he was treating her as an adult. Not as a child to be protected. Especially from the truth.

"We're doing our part in our own way. Everyone has to do what one believes in. These guerrillas are trying to do what they can because they've been abandoned and have to fight on their own."

"I can't understand why they were abandoned. I thought the Philippines is a commonwealth with the United States. That's what we learned in school. That means the United States is supposed to be protectors of this country and to provide them support until they are ready to be on their own, as an independent country." Joy Bell remembered what she learned.

"You're a good student, Joy Bell. You've learned well. Yes, and the Filipinos have proven that they're worthy to be on their own. They fought

hand in hand with the Americans. They're still fighting."

"But they left them alone. Why did Gen. MacArthur abandon them?"

"It was not his decision. As a good soldier he had to follow what he was told to do."

"And who told him to do that?"

"The government."

"But they're not here to see that they're needed and the people are willing to fight. Don't you think the ones who see the actual situation should have a say?"

"You're so right. And I'm sure Gen. MacArthur did all he could to convince them otherwise. He loves the Filipino people. He didn't forget this country and its people who've welcomed and treated him and his family with love and respect. But Gen. MacArthur had returned as he promised. A little late for the many who lost their lives." Mr. Miura wished Gen. MacArthur had not left, in the first place. Then Lota would still be alive. He wished there was no war at all.

"It's really awful, Daddy. It's like you and me. I depend on you to help me but when the time comes when I need you, you wouldn't raise a finger and instead leave me to fend for myself. Or vice-versa. Wouldn't that be sad?"

"And I would never do that to you. Or vice-versa. You know that. You don't even have to ask me for help. I would know when you need it and I'll be there."

"Oh, Daddy, I know I'm safe with you. I know it in my heart that you will support me in things I believe in."

"Anything you do I'll help you to the end. And that's a promise to you and to your mother and father. I'll never abandon you and whatever you do."

"Just like Gen. MacArthur who promised - "I shall return. And return he did. Now that Gen. MacArthur has returned, do you think that war will be over soon?"

"Yes, and with the help of the Filipinos, hand in hand, they'll recapture this country. That's the reason for the guerillas. They can help facilitate the operations by clearing the way for the American forces in reaching us here in Luzon."

"They better hurry before all the civilians in all the camps are killed."

"Let us pray for that."

"Oh I will. I'll pray not just for the Americans and the Filipinos but also for the Japanese that they won't do anything drastic to the civilians before they're over-powered. I pray that everyone will exercise kindness. And I pray that everyone will be able to return back to their families. I really, really hate this war!"

"So with me. But let's be more discreet with what we say." Mr. Miura whispered and warned her upon seeing a group of Japanese soldiers eyeing them with suspicion. "It's not safe to talk about the war."

"Yes, Daddy."

And they walked home without saying anything more to each other. But Mr. Miura was in deep thought. He was thinking of what the future holds for him and Joy Bell. He had fears as to what fate awaits those poor and defenseless civilians. He could foresee the big fight that had to take place in this town on account of the great concentration of Japanese military power. If Gen. MacArthur would land in Luzon, it would not be easy. It would be at the cost of many lives. There would be a long and bitter fight and how many lives will be lost, only God knows. Mr. Miura felt a chill as he thought of the probable fate of the whole town and all its people.

And like Mr. Miura, Joy Bell was thinking, too. But not much about the battle that would take place, but more about how soon she would be able to see Ernesto again. The sudden loss of her mother and her exposure to the sufferings of the civilians have just compounded her need for someone to be close to, someone like Ernesto. She craved for him and longed for his voice.

As they reached their home, still silent, each quietly went to a window. Mr. Miura in his rocking chair and Joy Bell on the bench. She looking out to the hill, picturing Ernesto waiting for her. How she wished Ernesto were there to comfort her. And how she wished Gen. MacArthur would soon come to this place and liberate them. Then she remembered her father's promise. Mr. Miura will be there to be with her to the end.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The hours that passed within three days of mourning have created an inexplicable restlessness in the grief-stricken Joy Bell. Her young and tender heart was now rekindled with a strange longing which seemed to consume her. That feeling that emerged after the numbing shock of her mother's death, was totally new and unfamiliar. Every cell of her being was charged with some intense need - some craving for something unknown.

Finding her father engrossed in tending his garden, Joy Bell carefully sneaked out of the house. There was a sudden urge for her to visit the grave of her mother on the hill but instead of telling her father she decided not to, in this particular visit. Joy Bell passed by the bushes and the winding trail that led to the hill as she avoided the guarded streets where almost every intersection has a checkpoint. She was aware of the tense situation in town for even their closet friends in the garrison stayed distant and aloof.

As Joy Bell walked through the untrodden path leading to the outskirts of the town, her desire to be at the hill became almost an obsession, her steps progressively faster and her strides bigger. Even her heart was wildly beating. She was panting and catching her breath as she climbed the hill. The cross on top made her freeze for a moment but something mystical seemed to cast a magnetic force drawing her closer. This mysterious force was far beyond her power to resist. She continued running, her whole body driven by an unknown power to reach the top of the hill.

Once Joy Bell reached the top, she slumped down before the cross and before she realized it, she was uncontrollably sobbing before her mother's grave. She felt so guilty and so sorry for not remembering to pick some flowers for her.

"Oh Mommy please forgive me. I can't understand myself. Even the flowers skipped my mind. What's happening to me, Mommy? I'm so confused. Please help

me. help me." Joy Bell hugged the cross as if it was a living thing... as if it was her mother. "I need you Mommy." She remained in that position as she grieved.

Something warm and loving engulfed her. Something reassuring. In fact she heard her mother's voice. She smelled her. And she kissed her. She was smiling. Together they soared up so high, she must have touched heaven.

Time passed. Her tears have dried. She opened her eyes. And she felt rested and at peace. She was somewhere so beautiful she wanted to stay - forever. With her mother. She must have dozed off. Perhaps she had a dream. And yet she still smelled her mother.

A light touch on her hair and the distinctly warm breath against her nape startled her and she looked up.

"What does this mean?" A husky voice whispered in disbelief. "This can't be true."

"Ernesto!" Was all that Joy Bell could utter as her heart suddenly stirred with excitement. "Thank God, you're here." She whispered as she limply clung to Ernesto who embraced her so tightly there was barely space for a shaft of hair between them. "She's dead, Ernesto. Mommy is dead." She began to sob again.

It was a shock to Ernesto. He, too, felt the great loss and the emptiness left by the untimely death of their beloved Lota. For the next few minutes, they stayed in each other's arms hoping to fill the vacuum that seemed to suck every ounce of life from their being. Ernesto's eyes blurred with the mist that formed there. His heart wept for Lota, the mother he considered his own. And for Joy Bell.

They were both drowning, grasping for life. There was no need for words. And only they could restore it. When finally Ernesto kissed Joy Bell, he kissed life back into her ebbing heart. And his, as well. Rapid beating of hearts. Then silence.

"How did your mother die? How did it happen?" Ernesto wanted to know.

"Everything happened so fast, Ernesto. It was all so sudden that it's hard to believe that Mommy is gone. She was so happy that morning. Oh it was horrible."

"But how did she die? How?"



"It was the bullet from a Filipino guerrilla." The words were bitter and Joy Bell's voice even more poignant when she mentioned who did it.

"Oh no!" Ernesto could only gasp as he once more hugged her closing his eyes refusing to see the scene that materialized before him. "My God. She was an innocent victim!" Ernesto could only mumble his feeling of guilt.

"Yes, I have no one left except Daddy and you. I need you Ernesto. I want to be near you - always. Please take me with you." There was a passionate urgency in her voice.

"Joy Bell, darling, how I wish I could always be with you. But I could not do that just now. It is impossible even if I want it more than anything else." Ernesto felt like sinking fast in a quicksand with no way out.

"But we love each other. What could probably come between us?"

"I don't know how to tell you how much I need you. But we can't be together. Not just yet."

"Is it Daddy?" Her eyes were begging for an answer.

"Did your father tell you?" He looked at her searchingly, although he wished she was not aware of what transpired between Mr. Miura and him.

"He didn't want me to see you anymore. But I can't do that, Ernesto. I can't."

"You should obey your father, Joy Bell."

"You, too, would not like me to see you?" There was a sudden flare of disbelief in her eyes.

"It's not just what I want. It's the only right thing to do at this moment."

"Right thing?" She was stunned regarding him with disbelief. "Is it right that we don't see each other now, now that we know how much we love each other, how much we need each other? How could that be right?"

"Circumstances want it that way. That's why this will have to be our last meeting."

"Our last meeting?" She stammered through the words, unwilling to believe what she had just heard. Fear gripped her as she searched for answer from Ernesto who could only gaze down at her looking lost and unable to explain further. "We will not see each other again, is that it? Answer me please." Tears clung to her eyelids.

"I wish it were not so. I don't want to part from you."

"But why?" There was both exasperation and grief in her voice.

"Because I have my solemn duty to perform." He wished he did not have to do this but he had to.

"What do you exactly mean by duty?"

"I am an officer of the USAFFE and involved with the resistant movement - with the guerrillas!" Ernesto's face was dead serious. Waiting for Joy Bell's reaction was like waiting for a death sentence to be handed down.

Joy Bell could only open her mouth not knowing whether to cry, to scream, to talk or just die. Ernesto could see the quiver of her lips and the tightening of her jaw. The color left her face. And then returned this time more red - intensely red. Very slowly she released herself from Ernesto and stepped back, her eyes, now strained with tears, fixed on him. Ernesto watched Joy Bell but he did not make a move to stop her.

"Why did you lie to me?" Joy Bell asked as she kept backing off, her eyes now blazing with fury.

"I wanted to tell you but I was afraid."

Ernesto stepped forward and tried to hold her but she moved away further from him.

"Because you were not sure if you could trust me? Or you wanted to be sure first that I would trust you completely and give my heart to you. You might have successfully fooled me before and my Daddy and Mommy as well, but you have only succeeded in destroying my trust in you." She was now sobbing. "How could you ever make me believe in you again?"

"Please, Joy Bell, let me explain." He reached for her but she brushed him away.

"Don't touch me. First you lied and now you want me to listen to what you want to say." There was sarcasm in her voice.

"I know." He nodded in resignation. "But I didn't foresee this would happen. I never realized that my being a guerrilla would make a lot of difference. I didn't know that you would take it against me. Our intention is to help our people."

"Your guerrilla killed my mother. What good is your help to me and to my father? What has my mother done that she should die in the hands of her own people?"

"I know how you feel. It is not only you who suffer the pain of her loss. But you know and God knows that that guerrilla never intended his bullet for your mother."

"That's a lie. He saw my mother. He should have not fired."

"I really don't know what happened. But I am sure that guerrilla didn't intend to kill her."

"All right defend your fellow guerrilla. You can say anything. But what good is that to me? It doesn't help anymore. I don't want to hear anything about the guerrillas anymore." She was too filled with bitterness to listen to reason.

"I respect your opinion. I don't blame you if you hate me. Now that I've told you everything I'm relieved of the burden which I had been carrying all this time. At last I've done what you expect of me - tell the truth." He was finally resigned.

"Now I know why Daddy didn't want me to see you. He was right. I shouldn't be involved with a guerrilla like you. He knew what it would bring us." She was beyond anger. Her face was beyond flushed.

"Yes, Joy Bell. Your father was right. I should not see you anymore for it would only endanger your life and I wouldn't like that. Before I leave I want you to know that I tried to talk to your father into helping the guerrillas. He refused to and he was right. He loved you so much to get involved with our movement."

"I don't want to hear about it anymore. You may leave now. And don't ever see me anymore, Ernesto. My only regret is that I have allowed myself to fall in love with someone like you." There was so much bitterness.

"I have loved you truly and I have no regrets. I still love you. Not death or this war could stop me from loving you. My only consolation in all of this is having this last chance to see you one more time before I go on this mission of entering the Japanese garrison." Ernesto looked at her with a lingering and tearful look then turned away to leave.

"You mustn't enter the garrison! You must be crazy to do that."

The frantic voice of Joy Bell was like thunder that cracked through the dark clouds. Or was it a

gust of breeze across his face?. Ernesto stopped and incredulously turned.

"It's extremely dangerous."

"I'll have to take the chance. I only lose my life if I fail, but if I succeed I would save thousands of other lives. It's still worth the try." Ernesto briskly walked away leaving her behind. Joy Bell was in a state of shock and confusion at what she heard. Ernesto was ready to die to be able to save thousands of lives. The realization woke up the reasonable part of her. As if awakened from a nightmare, she ran after him and blocked his path.

"No, I won't let you go. It is madness."

Ernesto stopped in his track and faced Joy Bell with conviction. "It is my duty and I will do it! It is expected of a guerrilla officer. To fight as long as the enemy treads this land. I trust you completely that I had to tell you what I am about to do. Does that not say something to you? I am putting my life in your hand. But I trust you that you would never let this reach the Japanese." He paused and sadly continued "Now I can go with a lighter heart for you have shown me that you still care. That's all I need to know. Thank you, my love. I repeat, I never regretted loving you." He turned to leave.

"No, Ernesto. Please listen to me. You must not do it. It will be suicide."

"I don't fear death now - for without you my heart is dead, anyway."

"No Ernesto, that is not true. I love you. I love you very much." Joy Bell hugged him and cried.

"Thank you!" He was breathless and was bursting with joy. He felt her love breathe life back into his fading heart. He lifted her chin and crushed his lips to hers enfolding her in his arms. They both let go of all that was surging inside of them. The passion in that all-consuming kiss drowned them with the magic and the wonders of their love. Hesitatingly she released herself and looked up at him.

"I will help you, darling." It was almost a whisper but to Ernesto it was a glorious announcement. Like all the angels in heaven with their trumpets heralding dawn.

"You mean...?" He could hardly believe what he heard.

"Yes. I want to help you."

"No, there is nothing you can do to help me except to pray."

"I could enter the garrison, for you. I have a much better chance. The Japanese know me."

"Not all of them. Not the new arrivals. I won't allow you to put yourself at risk again."

"If you love me as you said you do, you won't begrudge me this privilege of doing my part."

"No. I'll never forgive myself if anything should happen to you."

"Nothing will happen to me. I've more chances of succeeding than you. I could enter the garrison without being suspected of anything. Please let me do this for you."

"If you feel you must go, just remember, you will be doing this not just for me. It is for a much greater cause, for our country and for our people. I know how you feel about the guerrillas and I don't want you to do anything against your will - even if it is for me."

"I'm sorry if I said all those things. I felt so lost and confused and bitter. I didn't know who to blame for Mommy's death. Now everything is clear to me. This war, this killing, all the sufferings and the starvation will not end as long as the enemies are here. I have seen what war has brought to our people, to innocent children, to women. Maybe, I'm not as strong as you are, or as courageous as the guerrillas but I want to do my part to help put an end to this war." Joy Bell was determined and spoke with conviction.

"I'm very proud to know your true feelings about this war but I need you. I don't want to lose you."

"I'll take care, I assure you. I'll be much safer than you."

"But that Sergeant, I don't like the way he looked at you."

"Oh you shouldn't let that bother you. I can take care of myself. Please, darling, let me do this."

"Are you very sure about this?"

"I am very sure. Trust me. I can do this."

"All right then if this is what you want."

"Thank you, thank you for giving me this chance. For trusting me. Tell me what you want me to do."

"Now listen. It is a very difficult mission. Just tell me if you can't do it. You need not go ahead with it."

"Just tell me. I'm sure I can do it."

And so Ernesto explained to Joy Bell with the help of a sketch in a small piece of paper, the nature of their operation and the need for pinpointing the exact location of the guard detail in the garrison at exactly eleven thirty in the evening. He also briefed her on the time she had to leave her house, the time allowance she should give her trip to the garrison and the other minute but important details.

"Just indicate on this sketch the position of the guards and the sentries to the place. Believe me, you are taking a great risk."

"I can do it. But I will need a time piece."

"Here, take this." Ernesto offered her a pocket watch. "This is synchronized with our time at the camp."

"Thank you." Joy Bell took the watch and the small sheet of paper with the sketch and tucked these in her pocket.

"When would you be ready?" Ernesto was anxious.

"Whenever you need the information."

"Tonight?"

"Yes, tonight."

"Are you sure you could do it?" Ernesto wanted to reassure himself.

"Yes, darling. I can. Definitely I can."

"Then I shall see you here on this hill tomorrow at noon."

"I will be here with the sketch and the information."

"You're really sure?" He could not restrain himself from worrying but she stopped him.

"You will have what you need."

"How could I ever thank you?"

"Love me, Ernesto. That's all I want of you." She looked at him pouring out everything she felt for him.

Ernesto gathered her in his arms and once again, their emotions surged through every fiber of their body, passionately pressing her against him, not wanting anything to come between them. She clung tightly and felt him burning, her hands entwined around his neck, her lips hungrily receiving his.

They could not let go of each other for every time they parted, their eyes would irresistibly draw them into each others arms, expressing all the pent-up longing in their hearts. They were in their own world.

That world was suddenly intruded and shattered by a gunshot. Together they looked toward the direction of the sound, still not parting from each other. From the field, they saw a group of Japanese soldiers coming toward the direction of the hill. A second shot followed. In a split of a second, Ernesto tightly enconched Joy Bell in his arms and tumbled down the side of the hill. With their bodies securely locked together, they kept rolling and finally stopped in the crevice at the bottom of the hill. Ernesto covered her with his body. They were both panting as they looked at each other in total silence except for the rapid beating of their hearts. Her shaking body was well-pinned down against the earth. They kept very quiet as they awaited the arrival of the Japanese, which seemed like eternity. Very carefully, Ernesto turned his head to look up at the hill and his eyes widened as he saw the familiar features of that young Japanese who was with Joy Bell one afternoon - the young Japanese with the ukulele.

"Mitsi!" Joy Bell whispered his name.

They could clearly see Mitsi placing flowers on the grave of Lota. Ernesto and Joy Bell watched with respect and admiration as Mitsi looked down at the grave, his face sad. His eyes closed as if in silent prayer. But their short moment of silence was disrupted by the frantic and angry voices of the Japanese soldiers.

"Where is guerrilla?" Demanded one Japanese who looked up at Mitsi from halfway the other side of the hill. "We were informed a guerrilla is here. We saw someone here. Where is he?"

Mitsi looked confused at the interrogation of the Japanese. He had not seen anyone, not even this group of Japanese soldiers. For he passed the same path that Joy Bell used. He had dropped by at Mr. Miura's place and was told that Joy Bell might be at her mother's grave. But he saw no one there. Then he looked around and caught sight of Ernesto and Joy Bell. The distance was quite far but they could see one another very clearly.

The look of fear on the faces of Joy Bell and Ernesto and the shock and disbelief on Mitsi were clearly and vividly marked as they exchanged looks for a brief moment.

"Where is he?" Again the Japanese soldier demanded for an answer. "Did you see the guerrilla?"

Cold sweats instantly bathed Mitsi while his mind turned into a whirl of confusion and great turmoil. He loved Joy Bell but another man was with her. Mitsi's eyes narrowed, his brows knitted.

"You saw guerrilla, where is he?" The question was more impatient now and Ernesto and Joy Bell were petrified as they waited for Mitsi to point at them.

"There is no one here except myself. "He calmly replied but feeling greatly anxious that the Japanese soldiers would climb up to where he stood. They would surely see Joy Bell and Ernesto, still in each others embrace, as they lay down at the foot of the hill. It was only then that Joy Bell and Ernesto relaxed their hold of each other, but just the same the fear lingered for the Japanese could still look around and find them.

Joy Bell and Ernesto could see the tension in Mitsi as he stood immobile not knowing whether he succeeded in convincing the soldiers for they continued to check around perhaps not fully convinced. Mitsi could hardly breath watching the soldiers brushing aside bushes with their guns. They were just a few feet away from the crevice when Mitsi stopped them.

"I repeat, no one is here." Mitsi tried to sound irked.

The Corporal looked up at Mitsi first with disbelief then nodded.

"It must be you who the informer saw." He bowed and Mitsi did the same.

"Let's go!" Ordered the Corporal and the soldiers followed him back to the field leading to the town.

Once more Mitsi threw a glance at where Joy Bell and Ernesto were and found them still there in the same position the first time he saw them. Sweats now dripped down Mitsi's face and drenched his whole body. He turned his face, his lips quivering from the emotional storm he tried to repress. The sight he had just seen struck him like a poisonous dart, leaving its venom deep down into his heart,



strangling every vein that had given him life, however briefly. Momentarily he felt faint and his breathing faltered. Whether to cry or to scream from the gripping pain was no longer a choice. Inside he was already screaming. His lungs raged and screamed but no sound came. He could not move from where he stood, feeling lost and confused not much from the incident with the soldiers but more from the torrent of emotion choking the life from him. He had loved Joy Bell with all his heart, his first love. A love that remained unspoken. To him it was almost a sacred vow. Something he kept carefully inside until the time was right for them. He had woven such a beautiful dream for them which he had secretly nurtured in his heart. A dream to be uncovered when the war was over and he could have the courage to ask Mr. Miura for the hand of his daughter. That beautiful richly-woven dream had been so suddenly torn into unmendable shreds. The broken pieces of his life.

The fog in Mitsi's eyes had now formed into droplets, too heavy to be kept within the rim of his eyes. Like a child who has just lost his favorite pet, Mitsi sobbed silently, as he walked with heavy steps down the hill... repressing the strong urge to turn and throw a last glance at the lovely girl of his dream. The love he cradled so gently was slipping from his grasp. Snipped so prematurely...so unfairly...so mercilessly before it had a chance to bloom. Those precious moments with Joy Bell which had been his hope.. .his light.. .his life... were slowly fading away with every step he took. Now gone. Lost to him. Never to be recovered.

Tears have formed, too in Joy Bell's eyes as she saw Mitsi disappear. Her heart grieved for such a dear and loyal friend. She had a feeling that it would be her last sight of the gentle, ever-thoughtful and faithful Mitsi. Her heart was boundless with gratitude for what he just did - for saving her life and that of Ernesto's.

"Oh Ernesto!" Joy Bell tightened her hold around Ernesto burying her cheeks against his chest.

"He's such a good man." Ernesto whispered. It was a simple line yet filled with unsaid admiration for a brave and decent young man. Ernesto knew it took more than courage and strength of character and lots of love to do such an admirable act. He saluted

Mitsi for what he just did not just for Joy Bell for he loved her but for him - an enemy and his rival for the girl they both loved.

"We can't meet here anymore tomorrow. I'll wait for you instead by the twin rocks by the creek." Ernesto was suddenly very concerned.

"I'll be there. With the information you need. Oh I need you Ernesto. I need you more than ever. Please don't leave me. I love you." Her pleas ended as sobs.

Joy Bell was now soaked with the scanty water that ran from the nearby spring to the ditch and the cold sensation of her wet body only enhanced her want for the warmth of Ernesto. She clung tightly to him. She could only close her eyes as Ernesto hungrily set his burning lips to her waiting and eager lips. They kissed with all the fire and passion of two mortals clinging to life only through the kiss that sealed them for eternity. They were determined to hold on to all the beauty of their discovered love, kissing as if it was the only act that could give peace to their anguished souls and appease their unquenchable need. That overpowering need for each other drowned them into the swift ecstatic fulfillment of their dreams!

They have reached their heavens and touched the face of God!

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At exactly ten thirty that evening, Joy Bell got up. She had not slept a wink. For several hours her mind had been occupied by nothing else except by what she was about to undertake. She had religiously watched the hands of the pocket watch which now indicated that it was time for her to start from their house.

She donned a semi-balloon faded black skirt with a secret side pocket where she had tucked in a short pencil and the small sheet of paper with the sketch. For the top, she wore a dark green cotton blouse. Her outfit was appropriate for the nature of her mission, as Ernesto had earlier advised her. She also wrapped her black scarf around her head covering her blonde hair from sparkling against the light. Ernesto had also reminded her about this.

Slowly and very carefully she tip-toed out of her room and listened. Everything was quiet. She stopped by her father's room and the impulse to open its door and rush to her father was almost overpowering but she stopped and resolved to take a grip of herself. Aware that her father was a light-sleeper like her, she was extra careful as she proceeded to the kitchen, opened the back door very quietly, stepped down the stairs and walked through the tall banana plants under the blanket of the pitch-dark sky.

Now safely out of the vicinity of their house, it took her just a few minutes to reach the first sentry at the street intersection. Before passing the checkpoint, she paused to steady her nerves.

"Halt!" Shouted the guard as he strained his bayoneted rifle toward Joy Bell.

Joy Bell felt her stomach tightened into a knot and her throat choked. "Friend!" She stammered as she bowed.

The Japanese pointed his flashlight through the darkness between them and as he saw Joy Bell, a smile flashed on his face. He lowered his rifle, stepped forward and sized her up from face to foot and back. It then dawned on Joy Bell that the guard

did not recognize her. For if the guard was one of those who knew her she would not have any problem. They had gotten used to her and Lota coming to the garrison especially in the evenings to check on Mr. Miura when he was called to do carpentry and mason repair work. And because of that access, she was acquainted with the area. She felt a sudden dryness of her throat and mouth. Nervously she groped for something to say.

"I just want to check on my father who's doing some masonry works in the church basement."

The Japanese ran his eyes once more all over Joy Bell's body, relishing her. His smile widened into a grin. He held Joy Bell by the shoulders which made her freeze but his grip tightened and his lustful stare became intense and sinister. She was paralyzed but she tried to think fast.

"Col. Hiroshi had always allowed me to come when my father was working here." She threw the line with authority. Her trick worked for the grip loosened and the eyes withdrew.

The guard jumped to attention and looked straight ahead. Joy Bell walked briskly away and closed her eyes in relief. But as soon as the darkness swallowed her from the guard's sight, she doubled her speed, almost running and barely catching her breath. She was now in the area of the garrison, after she had traversed the wide grounds.

Facing not just one but several more guards, who may not know her, made her shake. She knew she could not just give the name of the Colonel again for any of the guards could check this although she was almost sure that no soldier would dare wake up the Colonel at this time of the night for the presence of a girl who seemed to know her way around.

How could she give the same alibi she had earlier prepared if those assigned that evening were not the ones who knew her. She had to think of a more convincing reason - and fast.

As she neared the gate of the garrison, her mind turned numb on her from fear. And before she could think, the two guards at the sandbags just outside of the big gates of the garrison barked almost lifting her whole body from the ground.

"Stop!" The sound paralyzed her for a brief moment and she followed the order like a mechanical

doll, her feet firmly planted on the ground. The two guards walked to her with rifles menacingly pointed at her. "Guerrilla?"

"No! Friend!" Joy Bell forced the words out of her clamped throat.

"Friend!" Repeated the short guard with a naughty grin as he winked at his companion.

"Friend, she said!" Chuckled the taller one as he now put his arm around Joy Bell's waist. The touch was like ice which chilled her entire body.

She stiffened but her teeth chattered. The other guard ran his fingers up her face, pushing down her bandanna and caressing her neck. She held up her head, her neck tense. She was now trembling and her knees were knocking each other. "Please leave me alone." She managed to plead pushing her head away as far as she could.

"No, you are beautiful lady." Echoed the two guards who were feasting their eyes on the shapely figure of Joy Bell. "Night very cold. We need you." They dragged her aside.

"No!" Joy Bell struggled, her word choked but she was nonetheless heard by the other guard behind the gate. The guard inside the garrison stepped out and checked.

"Stop." He warned the guard in Japanese. "If Sgt. Mamoto catches you, you are in for trouble."

"He won't mind. He likes beautiful ladies, too." Answered back the short guard who has started sniffing the nape of Joy Bell.

Joy Bell suddenly straightened and composed herself. "You would not want Sgt. Mamoto to wait for me this long. You have delayed me already." The words were like hot bullets that hit the two guards who ran back to their posts almost as one. "This will reach the Sergeant." Joy Bell had gathered enough courage to threaten them and without waiting for anyone to answer, she marched briskly past the gate and past the other guards who were by the guardhouse gate inside the compound. They followed Joy Bell with their leery looks and winked at one another.

The two guards who were by now back at the sandbags outside the gate just shook their heads in frustration.

"So she's Sgt. Mamoto's girl. She's so pretty and so young." Remarked the short one.

"He prefers them fresh and young." Added the taller guard.

"Next time be careful." Warned the stocky one at the guardhouse.

Joy Bell had now crossed the barracks which lined the vast ground. She had taken the narrow dark alley between the rows of barracks and the thick wall. Her way around was long and difficult but she took good care not to hit anything that could produce any noise. Only the wall of the barracks stood between her and the hundreds of sleeping Japanese soldiers. She could hear their sonorous snores in varied pitch and tempo. She reached the rear portion of the ground.

Looking at the pocket watch she held in her palm, she found that she had used up about twenty minutes of her time. She had only thirty minutes left before the sound was supposed to be heard at the end of the tunnel. She was to know where exactly that sound was coming from at that precise moment. At eleven thirty. She stopped and listened for any noise. Faint but heart-tugging groans came from the barracks a few yards from her.

Standing behind the barracks, she peeped through a gap and was shocked at the pitiful sight. Skeleton-like and miserable-looking American prisoners lay on the cold earthen floor of the barracks with nothing but tattered clothing and many with none at all.

As brief as that exposure was to Joy Bell, she found the scene most painful. The cruel treatment of her fellow Americans ripped her heart. What she did not see was their shivering not just from the cold but from malaria. The disease that had inflicted most of them. Their feet chained which dug deep into their meager flesh. Their long emaciated figures arched as they lay side by side packed as if prepared for burial. How Joy Bell wanted to free the prisoner but she realized that it was totally futile for even if she succeeded in opening the door and releasing the prisoners, still they would not have the strength to fight their way out. They would not be able to stand on their own. She could only pray in silence for all of them. Her family were not aware of the presence of these prisoners. Even her father who was summoned occasionally to do some work for the Japanese had not known of the prisoners. The

Japanese were able to keep their presence a secret. They just languished there with no one outside of the garrison aware of their existence.

Just then, the sound of the heavy rhythmic treading of heavy boots made Joy Bell instinctively dunk down. She looked toward the direction of the sound and her eyes bulged as she saw a formation of soldiers, thirty six of them marching briskly toward the gun emplacements beside the barracks where she was.

It was the detail of guards who were replacing those on duty and who have started from the main gate at exactly eleven o'clock. They have already replaced half of the guards around the camp and after rounding up the other half of the garrison, they would proceed into the church at exactly eleven twenty, as Ernesto had briefed her.

The first impulse of Joy Bell was to cross the wide distance from where she was to the church in order to get into the church ahead of the guard replacements. In a crouching position, she ran across the open area, but an outburst of boisterous laughter made her dive on her belly, held her breath and listened. Luckily she fell under the shadow cast by the rows of barracks a few yards away. She determined the laughter to have come from one of the barracks of Japanese soldiers at the other side of the compound. Again Joy Bell propped up and ran toward the rear of the church.

Upon reaching the church, Joy Bell stopped to catch her breath and recalled the instruction of Ernesto. She had to enter the church through the rear entrance for the direction of the tunnel indicated that it ended somewhere in that vicinity.

She stealthily climbed the church stairway with her back against the wall. Stopping at the top of the five-rung stairway, she turned to listen for any guard behind the closed door. Everything was quiet. So she pushed the door open - very softly yet its creaking sound sent jitters to her nerves but she kept herself steady, got in and closed the door behind her.

Now she found herself by the altar with a light emitting from behind it. Again she listened but nothing seemed to move. She looked to her right. There was the baptismal font and a side altar - a door beside it. She concluded it must open to the

basement where the tunnel may probably lead. Sensing no one, she very carefully moved toward the door, her eyes alert as she scanned the surroundings that was familiar to her during those visits to her father.

Again she stopped and listened but there was only silence. With limbs shaking, she stepped down the lighted stairway. She kept praying as she descended each rung not knowing what awaited her. After what seemed an endless choking ordeal, she finally landed on the concrete floor - with the hallway along one side where old church statues of Saints were stored.

Fear suddenly gripped her for at the end of the hallway, stood two guards before a closed huge double-door. She lost no time. Swiftly she hid behind the statues. From there she advanced by walking in a stooping position between the statues until she reached a point where she could clearly see the guards. It was only then that she was able to relax as she stared in awe of the enormity of the double-door.

Once more she went over her mission. It was to determine the exact area where the guards were at exactly eleven thirty and to indicate on the sketch what could be found in and around the area. She was distracted by the rhythmic stomping of boots above her. Suddenly she felt her heart rise to her throat. Instantly she looked at her watch. It was just a minute and a half before eleven thirty. Her heart pounded wildly as the sound got louder and nearer and nearer. Then her heart stopped. Thirty six soldiers came marching along the hallway toward the two guards stationed in front of the huge double-door. She could hardly keep herself steady but she kept praying.

Now the two guards pushed the heavy doors to the sides, creating the dragging sound as the wheels rolled on the rail. She estimated the doors to be about ten feet wide each panel and eight or so feet high and made of metal and steel. The dragging sound was what Ernesto had described to her. Her eyes grew big at the unbelievable sight.

The doors opened exposing the brightly-lit huge room. Joy Bell's eyes grew big at the unbelievable sight that lay naked before her. An eerie sensation crept to her limbs as she discovered the room to be



a catacomb with all its three walls covered with tombstones one on top of the other. But it was the mammoth pile of arms and crates of ammunition at the center of the room which caught her attention. For there were racks and racks of powerful guns. It was the garrison armory!

Soon the guards - all thirty six of them, marched into the room and around the well-arranged armory as in a cursory inspection. The stomping sound was on. Instantly Joy Bell looked down at her watch - it was exactly eleven thirty. She had accomplished her mission. For she had pinpointed what was at the end of the tunnel. The catacomb that was now the armory!

The soldiers marched out and the huge doors were pulled close on their rollers. Again the dragging sound. And the stomping boots as the guard detail, all thirty six of them marched out the armory, up the stairs and to the church. They have left the two replacement guards behind.

Without wasting any time, Joy Bell hurriedly but very carefully indicated on the sketch every information that Ernesto needed. She did not miss to include the location of the stockade where the American prisoners languished.

Joy Bell finally felt relieved and triumphant as she hurriedly folded the sketch. She was about to put it inside her side pocket but she decided against it. The fear of what might happen to her between now and her exit from the garrison suddenly dawned on her. But whatever would happen, the sketch had to be protected and kept safe. It had to reach Ernesto. At all cost.

She now felt the panic as she thought of a place to keep it. And as she pressed her hands against her breast, a habit with her whenever she was nervous, her hand brushed against her locket. With unsteady fingers she opened the locket and nervously tucked in the sketch which she had folded several times to fit it in.

Carefully she crawled between the statues farther and farther away from the two guards until she was almost near the foot of the stairway.

Again she stopped and waited. Closely watching the two guards until they settled down and started to fight the boredom by talking to each other and with one swift move, Joy Bell sneaked up the

stairway like a gazelle, swift and smooth, out of the baptismal font and finally out of the church.

Now she had only the wide expanse of drill ground to cross and the dark alley between the back of the barracks and the high wall of the camp and she would be out of there - mission accomplished.

At last, Joy Bell had reached the rear of the barracks but as she stopped, closing her eyes to catch her breath, a firm hand suddenly covered her mouth. She tried to struggle but she could hardly move and no sound escaped her throat. It was too dark to see the face of the man. She was briskly dragged into a room and the door slammed behind her. The dim light from the electric bulb above her head helped her see the room clearly and as she heard the door lock clicked she turned. It was Sgt. Mamoto grinning as he leered down at her.

Joy Bell stepped backward but Sgt. Mamoto advanced, hungrily devouring her with his bulging bloodshot eyes.

"So you are the girl." Sgt. Mamoto held Joy Bell by the hair pulling this back to give him a full view of Joy Bell's pale face.

"Please, please, let me go." Her broken voice was almost inaudible.

Sgt. Mamoto just grinned as he lusted at the petrified girl. She could no longer control the shaking of her whole body.

"You like me?"

"Yes, yes, I like you." She stammered. "Please let me go now."

"You came to see me. The guards told me." He chuckled flattered that a beautiful young girl desired him. His eyes scanned her then pulled her face closer to his. Joy Bell could smell the strong liquor as he breathed heavily. Only then did Joy Bell remember the alibi she gave the guards at the gate. She shuddered at the implication. "You know beautiful girls can't resist me." He proudly announced then greedily grabbed Joy Bell but she instantly turned her head away thus frustrating Mamoto's move. This drove him crazy. Like a beast circling its prey, Mamoto tried every sly move he could maneuver but Joy Bell was fast in evading his clutches. In spite of the uncontrollable shaking of her entire body she tried so hard to withhold her breath for fear that even the slightest heaving

would close the gap she forced between them. She dreaded his touch and everything associated with him. But everything happened so fast that before she could act Mamoto's entire body landed against hers like magnet to steel. Her frantic effort proved futile for Mamoto's frenzied grasp prevented her from moving an inch as he feasted like vulture digging into the flesh of its prey.

Finding a brief moment of opportunity, Joy Bell swiftly raised her knee with all her strength sending Mamoto reeling in pain. She was momentarily stunned as she stood staring down at the Japanese Sergeant coiled before her. Like a caged animal, she spun frantically searching for an escape. Hopelessly cornered, once again she had to ward off the impending onslaught. For Mamoto had recovered, his eyes inflamed with maddening fury. Joy Bell's heart raced to her throat as she desperately braced to thwart Mamoto, now advancing with outstretched arms, his fingers twisting and ready to claw on her. The menacing figure loomed before her as she kept backing away.

"Bitch!" He spat the word with a deafening slap on her face. Blood oozed from her mouth and her cheek burned. "Playing hard to get, eh?" Once more Mamoto landed a heavy hand against her other cheek and overcame with madness, he used his brass knuckles on her until she fell down - half conscious.

She tried hard to hold back the tears beneath her lids, resolved that however nerve-wracking this encounter with an ogre, it should not unhinge her.

"I could take you to the stockade and torture you as a spy." He sneered as he towered above her prostrate body. "But that would be a waste." Mamoto grinned lustfully, peering through half-closed lids, eyes fired up like an enraged dragon.

Joy Bell tried to extricate herself but was helplessly pinned down against the floor. With lightning speed, Mamoto tore away her blouse and the locket dangled before him but Mamoto had eyes only for this elusive trophy. His arms fell heavily like blazing iron, his breath like scorching wind on her skin. Joy Bell's last consciousness blurred into a whirlpool of blazing eyes, grasping hands, sharp fangs, black wall as she felt herself falling... faster...fastest into delirium of panic. Her cries

were drowned out by the heavy rain which had all too suddenly poured down like uncontrollable tears from an anguished weeping sky.

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The chilly early morning wind awakened the rain-soaked Joy Bell. She opened her eyes still in a daze and found herself caught in a clump of uprooted bush by the ditch. Every inch of her body ached, pulped into swollen mass, the blood caked her hair and face. Blackness whirled endlessly as she tried to focus her sight. Everything was a total blank. No recollection. No flashback. The harrowing incident completely blocked out. The one last kindness that life had bestowed on her.

After the entire travesty that Sgt. Mamoto had wrecked on Joy Bell late that evening, the least of the cowardice act he did was bribe Col. Hiroshi's driver and used the Colonel's car to transport the unconscious Joy Bell out of the garrison. Finding a least trodden path, he perfunctorily dumped her body, like a discarded object, into a ditch that had turned into a raging stream.

For over an hour Joy Bell was at the mercy of the wind and the water that threatened to carry her away. She fought the water and clung to the branches that tangled around her. One clear picture came back. The completion of her mission. The memory stopped there. Frantically she reached for her locket and clutched it, relieved.

"Thank you, dear God." She whispered as she convulsively sobbed, pressing the locket against her aching flesh, guarding it as one would an only remaining treasure. More than anything else, it was the sketch in the locket that gave her the strength to pull herself out of the ditch. She tried to prop herself up but staggered back. She had nothing left in her. Except the will to finish a job started.

Stirred with the determination to reach home, she crawled, digging her fingers into the muddy soil, grabbing at any object her hand could grasp, pulling, dragging her body inch by inch.

Finally, Joy Bell reached the stairs of their hut, barely conscious. "Daddy..." her voice was just above a painful whisper - hollow and drowning. "Daddy..." She stretched her arms and gripped the stairs then pulled herself up but her weak limbs gave way and the thud echoed from one step down the next.

The noise woke Mr. Miura up and hurriedly he lighted his oil lamp and opened the door. As the light shone on the crumpled body of Joy Bell, Mr. Miura gasped. Hastily putting down the lamp, he hurdled the stairs in one stride and gathered Joy Bell's limp body into his arms.

"My God!" His mind panicked as he carried her upstairs. Carefully and ever so gently he laid Joy Bell's body on the floor.

Unprepared for the impact of the realization of what befell her precious daughter, Mr. Miura's world whirled into a limbo and an unforeseen force ripped his heart out and with it, his breath. His bridge to life. "My God... my God." Was all he could utter as he stared at the bruised wet body of her beloved daughter. Her exposed body bludgeoned into a pulp. With the hem of his shirt, he wiped off the blood, and prayed, that he also wiped off her pain. He pulled together her torn blouse to protect her from all the ugliness that would dare leer at her.

Sobbing uncontrollably he hugged Joy Bell's shaking body. She was shivering from chill and high fever. He raced to his room, grabbed a blanket and covered her. Her breathing came in short, hard and heavy gasps.

"Joy Bell, darling, who did this to you?" His voice quivered. "Tell me baby tell me." He begged waiting for her answer but nothing came but the

painful mumbling. He listened more closely as Joy Bell opened her lips with great effort but the words were incoherent and inaudible.

She slowly raised her hand aimlessly then finally succeeded in holding the locket. She opened her heavy eyes and tried to say something with much difficulty. Mr. Miura listened closely, waiting, waiting for any word.

"Give...locket ... to..." she gasped for air and continued with more effort. "give... to... Ernesto..." Tears flowed from her blood-veined fading eyes, her eyelids slowly closed, her lips slightly opened. All became motionless. Still. Her grip of the locket was firm only to finally, almost hesitatingly loosen, leaving the locket dangling.

Mr. Miura gazed at her now calm face still waiting but the weak gasps had stopped. "Joy Bell baby, talk to me. Talk to me my darling. My God please let my baby live." He pleaded watching... waiting for any sound, a whisper, any sign of life ... a miracle." But there was none. Everything had suddenly turned silent.

Reality hit hard. Mr. Miura's tears began to flow, unabated. Cuddling her body, he stood slowly as if in a trance. He walked to his rocking chair and sat there cradling her daughter, his sobs rocking the chair. He kissed her many times, hoping in vain that death would leave them alone. His head sagged down, weighted by the grief that had engulfed him.

For several solitary moments, everything stopped except the endless flow of tears falling on Joy Bell's blonde hair. Time passed with him sitting there on his rocking chair which was now still. His arms cradled his daughter's lifeless body. The chilling gusty wind from the open window jolted him. He raised his face; the tears have dried; his eyes unblinking.

Slowly and still in a state of shock, he stood and carried his daughter's body to her room, placing her carefully on her bed. Almost mechanically, he cleaned her from the mud and blood that had now dried and dressed her with her favorite pink silk dress. Sitting by her bedside, he combed her hair with unsteady hand, allowing this to hang down her shoulders.

There was a sense of awe as he touched her face - once vibrant with life and the sweetest smile that would never appear ever again - now devoid of color. He was face to face with a future that promised nothing but emptiness. There would be no more cheerful morning greetings and prayerful good nights. The laughter which had been jingles of merry bells to his ears not to be heard again.

Fond memories flooded in - the morning rituals of preparing her hot bath which he had done for her for sixteen happy years. It was a chore he loved. How well he remembered the times Joy Bell would cuddle close to him and listen to his stories of Japan and its Fujiyama, of the United States and its skyscrapers...of the Philippines and its music - the sentimental flowing "kundiman" and of the conviviality of its people and insatiable passion for life. How well he remembered the times he sang for her.

"How could she be so silent.. .and so cold." His words stilled in his throat. "How could she be gone.. .this little angel? How could anyone do this to her? How?" The excruciating pain pierced so deeply it was beyond him to extricate it. "Dear God, please help me." The plea was so moving in its simplicity, there was no need for more. Mr. Miura's cries waned into inaudible moans.

With resolute and determined almost mechanical motion, he raised himself, put out his carpentry tools, pulled into the living room the hand-carved camphor chest which he had made for her daughter. After emptying the chest of all her belongings he took out and put aside the hand carved jewelry box where he found the sixteen birthday candles carefully preserved and wrapped in the thin textured banana stalk wrapper.

He proceeded to make the most beautiful coffin ever to be created by one grieving mortal for a loved one, sending through the silent chilly dawn the sound of hammer against wood. The sound becoming faster and louder as he assembled and nailed the wood piece by piece - like the scattered broken pieces of their lives.

The incessant rapid knocking at the door of his house had become impatient but Mr. Miura was too engrossed with his work to hear. Loud banging of rifles against the door followed.

"Open!" Ordered the voice outside but the hammering continued. The door was finally broken down and two Japanese soldiers barged in angrily. "What's the matter?" The soldiers confronted Mr. Miura who remained unshaken as he continued what he was doing. Hammering ... pounding ... nailing ... hammering.

"Stop this noise." One Japanese soldier roared as the other grabbed Mr. Miura by the shoulder.

Mr. Miura slowly and calmly looked up at the two Japanese. Their faces were unfamiliar. He never saw them before. The soldiers did not know him. They were new in the town. He looked at them with that passive and cold look then turned his head very slowly to the direction of Joy Bell's bedroom.

The soldiers followed his gaze with suspicion. What they saw pulled them back. They stood still - at attention.

On the bed lay the lifeless body of a young girl, serene and peaceful like an innocent child - immaculate and angelic and pure in death. Sixteen candles arranged on a small table by the head of her bed, illuminated her with the flickering lights dancing over her face.

The two Japanese soldiers stood motionless. They bowed their heads in respect and perhaps in prayer.

After all maybe they, too, may have their families, even children - yes daughters back home in Japan. Yes, they stood, solemn as if in prayers. Together they withdrew and as they passed by Mr. Miura, they bowed their heads. Without any word, they quietly left, slowly replacing back the door behind them.

The look in Mr. Miura's eyes deepened with bitterness and his fists tightly clasped the hammer until they turned white. The hammering resumed and the sound echoed once more through the quiet of the early dawn as he labored on, hoping somehow, with futile effort, to drown out his inconsolable grief. He was groping through a labyrinth of darkness ...sinking deeper into the abyss.. ...dying...!

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Alone by himself, Mr. Miura sat on his rocking chair, the chair steady now. He just sat there, not moving, just staring, not thinking. His mind had grown tired from the strain. It had become numb from the shock. The realization of Joy Bell's death started to sink in.

From the time he buried his daughter on the hill beside Lota's grave that morning, Mr. Miura had done nothing but sit there - totally detached from the rest of the world. The tragic incident left him so suddenly lost, deserted. It now came back to him like a dark cloud engulfing him into a kind of limbo... he hanging to nothingness, suspended indefinitely in mid-air not knowing when the last thread would break and plunge him down into oblivion.

Painful reality was tearing him apart, gnawing into his heart. He now hesitatingly grasped its full impact - that Joy Bell was gone forever, lying cold there in her grave, still and quiet never to return to him again.

Now his whole world seemed no longer to form part of him, his mind no longer comprehending his perceptions. His heart had momentarily become calloused and unfeeling. His eyes drained dry from tears, the eyes have sagged down, his face suddenly wrinkled. Even his shoulders which had always been firm, broad, and erect had shrunk and drooped. He had aged overnight.

That morning, he was alone, carrying on his shoulder Joy Bell's coffin. He told no one about his great loss. For he did not want to allow anyone to intrude into his grief. Yet, in spite of his self-imposed isolation, a child who saw him in that heart-rending act trailed behind him. One by one, they formed a procession - the children and soon their elders, most of them Japanese; many of the Filipino civilians had already been horded at the market place. Soon the hill darkened with bowed heads. They all came to bid Joy Bell good-bye and to offer their prayers.

Even in the midst of the crowd Mr. Miura was alone. He just stood there, seeming not to sense the

presence of friends. His face was pale and tense, his eyes red and hollow, his jaws clamped and his fists tightly clasping together as if squeezing out all his pent-up emotions that had been resisting to leave him.

The sobbing of the women and the wailing of the children only then made him aware, that others were grieving, as well. He raised his head and looked around stopping at each face, capturing the grief that was painfully etched there. And as his eyes returned to the cross on Joy Bell's grave, his grief burst out like a dam and he screamed and cried unashamedly.

Only then did he realize once again how death had robbed him of everything dear to him. He plunged himself over Joy Bell's grave, calling her, asking her to rise and go home with him and pleading to her not to leave him alone.

Mitsi came after the rest of the civilians had gone and Mr. Miura was left alone. He came with flowers and his ukulele, the only thing he possessed in which Joy Bell found a childlike fancy. Like his silent love for Joy Bell, Mitsi wept silently for her. He and Mr. Miura did not talk. They just looked at each other with sympathy and unspoken grief. He stood there for sometime, praying fervently. Perhaps hoping to please Joy Bell for the last time, he started to strum his ukulele. Every note seemed to weep for the girl he deeply loved. But before he could finish the melody, he turned away and ran down the hill... sobbing.

Mr. Miura remembered that scene vividly. He felt the great loss of Mitsi for he was once young like him and had loved secretly as Mitsi had.

For several hours, Mr. Miura stayed at the grave alone until his body was parched by the scorching heat of the noonday sun.

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The sun was directly above Ernesto and he cast no shadow. He looked at his watch. It was twelve noon. He had his rendezvous with Joy Bell. Hiding himself behind the twin rocks, he could not help but feel a knot in his gut. Joy Bell should come anytime now. And she would have the information they needed.

The new developments in their plans made Ernesto even more anxious. Just before Ernesto left the camp, he was summoned by Col. Holt for an emergency conference on the message they received from Gen. MacArthur's Headquarters asking for their clearance that evening for the projected mass landing of the Allied Forces at the beaches of Luzon early the next morning. Ernesto knew that until they took hold of the sketch, they could not give such clearance nor could they hope to pave the way safely for the landing forces.

He had been waiting for over an hour and the tension was almost killing him. He refused to be pessimistic about their mission but the delay of Joy Bell gave him no small amount of apprehension about its ultimate success. Unable to wait any longer, and wanting desperately to find out for himself what had happened to Joy Bell and her mission, Ernesto decided to alter their previous arrangement. He would get close to the Miura's house and hopefully ask someone to deliver a note to her. He suspected that the situation in the town must be that tense for Joy Bell to miss their appointment.

Hurriedly Ernesto left the twin rocks and following a rarely trodden trail toward the town, he walked the distance, his mind in a state of confusion and anxiety. Upon entering the town and sneaking beneath the seemingly empty houses, he sensed the eerie silence pervading all over the place. There was an obvious absence of civilians and increased numbers of checkpoints which made the house of Joy bell inaccessible without passing through the checkpoints including the road behind them. There was a drastic change in the Japanese security since the Sunday he was there. The town looked deserted except for the menacing presence of Japanese soldiers all over. Suddenly the place became a ghost town.

He decided to continue on crouching under and around the huts until he reached a point where he could see the Miura's house hut but there was no way

he could reach it. Not with the vigilance of the soldiers.

From the direction of the market, he heard the groaning of what sounded like hundreds of voices. He realized what the Japanese had done to the civilians. Now the fear that Joy Bell and Mr. Miura were among those in concentration gripped him.

A soft treading sound on the asphalt road made him turn and he was relieved to see a small Japanese girl getting nearer to where he was. The girl was skipping and rolling a ball made of woven palm leaves. He hurriedly wrote on the small sheet of paper he had with him. Then he waited. As the child got nearer he softly called her attention. The guard heard the sound and looked around. Ernesto lay flat on the ground. The child had not heard him. Again Ernesto tried by throwing a small pebble in her direction. The child turned only to step back upon seeing him.

He was sweating, concerned that the child might call the guard. But instead she just stood there staring at him. Ernesto fished out from his pocket a couple of Japanese paper bills and showed her. Still the child just stared. Ernesto motioned for the child to come, smiling and showing the money. After looking back at the checkpoint, she finally moved toward him. As soon as the child neared him, he pulled her away from the sight of the guard at the same time hushing her to keep quiet. He took her behind the hut and in a low gentle voice asked her if she could do him a favor.

"I'll give you this money, if you'll help me." Ernesto explained slowly in Japanese.

The child brightened, her eyes focused on the paper bills. "You give me money to buy food?" She asked him excitedly.

"Yes, yes, All this money I give you if you do something for me."

"Something? What something?"

"Listen. Listen carefully and remember everything I say." He was holding the child by the shoulders. The child nodded.

"You give this paper to that house." Ernesto pointed to the hut of the Miuras. "You see that house with banana plants?"

The child nodded again.

"All right then, you bring this paper and give it to lady." Ernesto decided not to give Joy Bell's name for fear of the consequence in case the guard got hold of the child and questioned her. Or worst, got hold of the note.

"Give me money." The child's eyes did not leave the paper bills.

"Here. I'll give you this money as soon as you come back. Now listen. You give this paper and stay there. You wait for answer then come back here. Then I give this money to you. Understand?"

The child at first looked at him with knitted brows then smiled and nodded. She grabbed the paper and was about to skip away when Ernesto pulled her back.

"Why? The child stammered suddenly caught with fear.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you. But you can't just carry this in your hand." The child looked at him without saying anything.

Ernesto smiled and the child smiled back. "May I borrow your Ball?"

The child first hesitated but as Ernesto showed her the money, she handed him his ball. "I'll pay for this." Then Ernesto parted the woven palm ball and inserted the folded paper inside it then smoothen the ball again. "Here, take this ball to that house. Tell lady there is something inside the ball. Okay?"

The child nodded. Ernesto kissed her on the forehead. Twinkles appeared in her eyes as she skipped away.

Ernesto nervously watched the child skip back to the street, rolling her ball once again. But the ball rolled instead toward the checkpoint. Ernesto held his breath. He looked back for a possible escape route, in case the note was discovered and his hiding place pinpointed.

The guard picked up the ball and gave it to the Japanese child and patted her head. The child bowed and continued to skip, rolling her ball until she reached the Miura's house.

That entire morning and afternoon Mr. Miura had not left his rocking chair, just sitting quietly, not thinking. He had not eaten at all. He shut close his hut wanting to be alone with the memories of his loved ones in that small hut they called home. He

had imposed on himself a period of deep solitary mourning for the successive loss of the two people dearest to him.

He did not hear the first soft knocking at the door. Several more rapid knocks followed and it was only then that Mr. Miura blinked his eyes, stood and almost mechanically, walked to the closed door. He opened it without any sign of anticipation nor concern.

"For lady." The small child handed her ball to him. He just stared down at her still with a passive face. "For lady." The child insisted. "Something inside. Look." The child pried open two strips of the woven palm.

Mr. Miura's eyes widened as he saw a sheet of paper inside the ball. He suddenly became interested. "Give it to me." He practically snatched the paper from the child and hurriedly read it. "Who gave this to you?" Anxiety was visible on his face.

"Man there." The child pointed to the direction of houses across the checkpoints. He pulled the child inside the house and closed the door. The child must have been new to the town for he hadn't seen her before. Apparently part of the new Japanese families that were moved in from the adjacent vicinities.

"Wait here." He told the child then read the note again, this time much more slowly. "Place sketch inside the ball. It will reach me. Will use it tonight. Don't come to me." A drawing of a heart and an E."

Mr. Miura felt like he was hit by lightning with the realization that the note might have come from Ernesto and presumably meant for Joy Bell. The note was for the lady, the child said. It was for Joy Bell. He suddenly recalled the last word of Joy Bell. To give her locket to Ernesto.

Hyperventilating, he took out the locket from his pocket and without delay opened it. There he saw the folded paper and unfolding it, he found the sketch of the catacomb of the church and its armory. This discovery shocked him. Now he knew what happened to Joy Bell. She risked herself entering the garrison and the church to help Ernesto.

"My God. What have I done to my daughter? I refused Ernesto but she defied me to help him." Now he was certain that it was a Japanese, maybe one of

the new arrivals who ravaged and murdered her daughter. The truth was strangling him.

Her daughter kept all this from him. She must have figured that by helping the guerrilla movement, it may hasten the end of the war. He was blind. He was a coward. Joy Bell showed more courage and conviction than him. She took the risk because no one else was willing to do it, including her own father.

His mind was in a turmoil. Was it because of the death of her mother that she decided all of this had to end? "Yes, this war had gone too long. And taken countless lives that even a young girl had decided to do something at all cost, including giving up her life." He mumbled between gritted teeth. "If an innocent girl of sixteen had seen this truth, why can't he?" He clenched his fists. He thought of the death of Lota in a Filipino's hand and the fate of Joy Bell in the Japanese's. Finally he saw the urgency for action.

His thought was disrupted by the rattling of machineguns followed by hair-raising cries and then silence. He raced to the window. A chill ran through his veins. "My God. They have killed the civilians!" Mr. Miura could hardly hear his own voice.

A few hours ago, some of those civilians were present at the burial of his daughter. The scene suddenly flashed back.

The coffin of Joy Bell was just being covered with soil when a truckload of Japanese soldiers barged into their midst and without further ceremony gathered the few remaining Filipino civilians, women and children leaving only the few Japanese civilians and himself. Their screams shattered the mournful silence as the civilians were dragged away and dumped into the truck.

Mr. Miura closed the window as if shutting off the ugliness he desperately wanted to block from his mind. But this time he knew he could not run away anymore for everything in that little hut reminded him of Joy bell, the horrible way she died and the noble and selfless sacrifice she did for the sake of peace. He saw how this once beautiful world which Joy loved so much was breaking into thousands of unmendable little pieces because people like him did not lift a finger to try to do something about it. Much as he loved peace, there came a time that one

had to fight in order to have peace and freedom from those who sought to destroy these.

He had decided to help. Not to fight and kill. But to help so people could live.

He would continue and finish what her daughter had started. And give meaning to Joy Bell's death. He could not allow her dying for nothing. A fire was rekindled in Mr. Miura's heart - the long-subdued yet innate fiery sentiments of a true samurai.

Once more Mr. Miura looked at the sketch and studied it carefully. Now he remembered the tunnel and he was sure he could be of great help to the guerrillas. He still vividly recalled how he was summoned to the garrison just a week after they arrived in that town almost three years ago.

News reached the Japanese top brass that he was an expert in masonry work. And so like any loyal Japanese, he accepted the job entrusted to him. He was assigned to reinforce the catacomb beneath the church for it was to be used as the armory. Toward the completion of the job, he noticed a beam of light coming out from one of the tombstones on the wall of the catacomb. He still remembered where that particular tombstone was. For he sealed around the marble slab after he explored what was behind it. It was a long tunnel that led towards the outskirts of the walled fortress. He knew exactly where its entrance was, for he got out of it after breaking through the thick bushes that concealed its opening for years. He was sure then that no one has found what he inadvertently discovered. He decided that no one else has to know of its existence. And just to reassure himself that it remained a secret, that evening he went back to the location and sealed the entrance by blocking it with a moss-covered boulder and replaced the aged bushes that he had earlier disturbed. At the time, it never occurred to him that one day this piece of information could enable him to finish his daughter's commitment to the early restoration of peace.

Mr. Miura's decision was final. He would help the guerrillas and accomplish what her daughter had started. He remembered having promised her that "he would be there for her and vice-versa." This was their last conversation a few days back, as they walked home from the debacle that resulted from their help at the market concentration site.



He knew what the guerrillas intended to do with the tunnel. With everything set in his mind, he wrote a note at the back of the sketch and affixed his signature. As much as he wanted to inform Ernesto of Joy Bell's passing, he thought it unwise to burden him with the news before undertaking an important and dangerous mission.

Carefully, Mr. Miura replaced the sketch inside the ball. He approached the child who was squatting on the floor and playing with an imaginary friend. "You are a good child." He spoke to her in Japanese. "Now go back. Give this ball to your friend." Mr. Miura patted the child's head and told her to go.

The child ran down the stairs and like before skipped through the street playing with her ball. Mr. Miura, anxiously peeped through the window and watched as the child neared the checkpoint. A loud screech from a speeding truck almost made Mr. Miura scream. For the child was on the path of the truck and were it not for its timely braking, the child would have been run over. He uttered a prayer of thanks as he saw the child safe with the ball still in her hand. The frightened child scampered away as fast as she could toward the direction of the shack where Ernesto was hiding. Only then was Mr. Miura able to take his eyes off the child and followed the now speeding truck. His hair stood on end as he saw the pile of the dead civilians in the truck. He could only close his eyes and pound his fists against the window sill.

As soon as Ernesto got the paper from the child, he gave her the money and anxiously unfolded the paper. Ernesto's face brightened upon seeing the information they needed.

Everything was just perfect. The tunnel led to the underground armory and no guard was stationed inside the armory itself except for the two outside its door. They have a good chance of entering the tunnel undetected and a sneak attack could catch the enemies by surprise.

As Ernesto folded the sketch he saw the note which read - "You may use the tunnel. I'll clear the way for you tonight, after the changing of the guard. Watch for my signal at entrance around midnight - Mr. Miura."

Ernesto went over the note again and again and wondered why it was Mr. Miura who had sent it

instead of Joy Bell. He was still confused why Mr. Miura had decided to help after he had vehemently refused him. But with time running out, Ernesto had no interest to debate the issue. He figured it was possible that Joy Bell could have convinced her father, considering how much Mr. Miura loved her. And maybe because of his wife's death he finally acceded to extend his help. Right now, however, Ernesto did not want to second guess. He got what he wanted and that was good enough for him.

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Ernesto's pace had never been this fast, sprinting through the winding path to the mountain. He felt very light and elated at Mr. Miura's help which he considered his acceptance into their family. He could not help but smile with excitement just thinking of asking for the hands of Joy Bell in marriage from Mr. Miura when the war was over. He would not have to deal with in-law problems, nor foresee any. It would be a perfect happy union. Joy Bell would be an ideal and loving wife to him. What they had the previous day would always remain a cherished part of their lives.

Ernesto knew down deep in his heart that he could only love and marry one woman - the woman he wanted to be the mother of his children - Joy Bell. He felt something very sacred in the love they felt for each other.

Ernesto's beautiful thoughts of Joy Bell had made his long trek seemed so much shorter. She had provided him with the magic that made him fly. He eagerly anticipated the final accomplishment of their one last important mission for it would mean the early end of the war and the end of the war meant his reunion with Joy Bell - for life!"

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

A top-secret conference was immediately conducted in the hut of Col. Holt as soon as Ernesto arrived in the camp. The Colonel had undergone the greatest tension and anxiety from the moment Ernesto left the camp until his arrival. Col. Holt did not hide the urgency to hear Ernesto's report even before he could settle down in his seat.

"You got the sketch, Captain Duran?"

"Yes, sir. Here it is!" There was both reassurance and quiet pride in Ernesto's face as he handed the paper to the Colonel.

Without wasting any time, the Colonel unfolded the paper and put it flat on the desk before him without blinking an eye. He studied it carefully, implanting every detail into his mind.

Something magical happened. The lines on his forehead, which had deepened by the anxiety of the long wait, gradually relaxed and disappeared. He looked up at Ernesto, a smile tightening his lips. A sigh of relief was heard as he inhaled and released the air from his chest.

"This is just perfect, Captain.

Congratulations!" The Colonel was not fond of long-winded praises and Ernesto knew that everything in Col. Holt's heart was said in that one short line. Ernesto smiled as his heart was filled with pride for the heroic deed of his girl. The Colonel looked down at the sketch. "We will launch a real surprise attack on the superior manpower of this bastion." He spoke with resolute confidence. "Getting into the armory," he continued, pointing at the catacomb with his finger, "will shorten the fight. We will overpower the enemies with their own arms, the thing we lacked all these years. This morning the first delivery of arms and ammunition from Gen. MacArthur had reached us. This, too, will be a great help for starter." Col. Holt's eyes gleamed with the fire of courage and the assurance of victory. He could almost taste it. "We will not fail!" He nodded his head. He stood from his chair and walked toward the big map of the town that hung against the wall. "Now

that we have all the necessary information, let us once more go over our plan of attack. I need an advance team to clear the end of the tunnel - I mean break through its opening to the armory. And that's where I need you and your men, Captain."

The Colonel faced Ernesto who was sitting on the bench secretly amused at the Colonel's plan. Ernesto had already a better plan in mind. "You start on your mission at 1800 hour. That will give you sufficient time to break through the armory. Have your supper early." Col. Holt threw Ernesto a confident look.

"That won't be necessary anymore, Colonel." Ernesto spoke with authority.

The Colonel knitted his brows as he stepped closer to Ernesto. "What do you mean by not necessary anymore? I could not risk all our men in entering the tunnel without an advance team clearing it first for them."

"An advance team is not necessary, sir. Someone had already volunteered to clear the tunnel for us."

"The girl?" Col. Holt asked incredulously, his mind revolting vehemently against the thought of having to use a young American girl take so much risk again.

"No, sir. The girl had already accomplished her job."

"She will be duly recognized for it. Who then is the volunteer this time?"

"The girl's father, sir."

"What?" the Colonel's eyes reflected shock, disbelief and anger. "You mean, that Japanese?"

"Yes, sir. Here is his note." Ernesto turned over the paper with the sketch. Col. Holt snatched the paper from him and after throwing a sharp suspicious look at Ernesto, read the note. His eyes widened and closed with repressed fury.

"Do you know what this means, Captain?" He uttered the words between gritted teeth as he looked at Ernesto through the wrinkled lids of his eyes. "We are about to launch a major and all-important operation and you entrusted this Japanese with our plan?"

"He is in a position to help us beyond our expectations."

"Yes, beyond our expectations, Captain." Col. Holt ground his words between his teeth with sarcasm

and repressed anger. "For that Japanese will open up the end of the tunnel where our soldiers will surely meet their death. It would be a massacre, Captain. A total gruesome massacre of our entire unit. The tunnel opened, the guerrillas trapped inside and the Japanese machine-guns rattling to meet them. Have you not thought of this, Captain?"

"I have, sir, but Mr. Miura is a truly sincere and loyal friend."

"After he refused to help you with the sketch, he now volunteered to clear the tunnel, through this note? He will help, just like that? It is highly suspicious, to say the least, Captain. Bluntly put, he is being used by the Japanese to trap us. Maybe his being a Japanese got to him."

"That is impossible, not with Mr. Miura."

"In what way did this Japanese differ from the rest? In the degree of his clever tactics? Oh, they are all the same, Captain, believe me. And I would not risk the lives of my men by trusting a highly-suspicious Japanese."

"We can't postpone the entire operation, sir. Gen. MacArthur's fleet would be coming tomorrow at dawn."

"I am aware of that, but that is not enough to stampede me to risk my men. This landing could wait for another time, if needed. I will send the message right now."

"Yes, sir, this landing could wait but the lives of the helpless civilians and the prisoners in that town could not, I'm sure. How about the American prisoners inside the stockade? You saw the sketch."

"Yes, I noticed. Everyone's life is precious. That goes for the guerrillas, too." Col. Holt sounded final. "I will not gamble with the lives of my men. The landing must be postponed." He pounded the table with his fist.

A gunshot rang and both Col. Holt and Ernesto rushed out of the hut. A throng of guerrillas were gathered twenty yards away beneath the trees and many more were converging toward the direction of the crowd. Col. Holt and Ernesto briskly walked to the scene and hustled their way through the thick crowd.

"That's the matter?" Col. Holt queried but his question was left unanswered as they pointed at the

body of a Japanese, his arms widely spread on the ground, his legs wide apart and his back pierced with a bullet hole where blood was still freshly flowing.

"What's the meaning of this?" The Colonel faced Lt. Toribio. "We don't kill our prisoners."

"He was tied up in the hut, sir. But he managed to escape. The guard shot him." Lt. Toribio explained. "The Japanese prisoner was entrusted to him earlier."

"Escaped?" Col. Holt became suddenly suspicious and Ernesto scrutinized every man that had gathered.

"The guard could not say how it happened for the prisoner was tied to the post."

"I was guarding him, sir. Then I heard movement behind the hut so I stepped out and checked and when I returned, he was gone. The rope used to tie him was cut." The guard, a middle-aged guerrilla explained. "I am sure he had no weapon to cut the rope."

Ernesto's mind grappled with the mystery. He turned over the Japanese and found him to be still alive. "Who helped you?"

Dizon who was among the crowd was tense for he knew that in case the Japanese was forced to talk, his position in the camp was in jeopardy. He was the one who created the movement behind the prisoner's hut and he was the one who untied the prisoner. He gave him the instruction to alert the Japanese garrison of the impending landing of Gen. MacArthur's fleet, a message he was able to surreptitiously gather.

"Who helped you?" Again Ernesto's voice rang but the Japanese coughed his last.

Dizon was able to breath.

"See me in my office after you are through here, Captain. Col. Holt spoke and then turned away.

"Where did he come from?" It was Ernesto who asked for this was the first Japanese they had in their camp. "An intruder?"

"No, Captain?" Lt. Toribio answered. "One of my men captured him at the creek at the adjacent village."

"Alone?"

"Yes, alone. He must had been left behind by the group which rounded up the civilians from that place."

"Probably taking a bath?"

"No, Captain. He was raping a young girl at the creek."

Ernesto stared down at the dead Japanese with a sharp look then gazed far. His thought suddenly flew back to Joy Bell. "The brute!" He murmured. "Finish your job Lt. Toribio." Ernesto ordered then turned to follow the Colonel.

"My men will take charge here, Lieutenant." Dizon volunteered. Toribio nodded and thanked him then walked away, too.

Dizon immediately bent down and turned the dead Japanese but in the process he swiftly and surreptitiously picked with his other hand a small sheet of paper in the Japanese's pocket. "You deserve this." He turned him over again then stood up and gave the order to his men to dig a grave for the enemy.

Just as soon as Ernesto was about to get into the hut, another commotion erupted. This time, a guerrilla arrived carrying a bloody figure - bruised and swollen. Like before, a crowd immediately gathered. The Colonel had also come.

"Pedro, you're back." Ernesto was both surprised and alarmed to see Pedro return. For he had asked permission to visit his wife in the town when he heard that she had delivered to their son. And he had not returned since then. For an answer, Pedro frantically moved his arms in a futile attempt to tell them of his horrible experience in the hands of the Japanese at the garrison and his subsequent escape. The sound he produced was incoherent and in warbled syllables. Blood accompanied his every effort to speak. The agony on his face clearly showed the suffering he had undergone.

"His tongue had been cut, sir." It was the look-out who explained.

"This is awful." The Colonel spoke in a bitter tone just a little beyond a whisper.

Pedro who was still brandishing his arms trying to say something about what happened to him; what he had overheard from the Japanese guard when they took him from the garrison to the concentration area at the market place and how he escaped along the way.

Ernesto tried to make something out of Pedro's words and his gestures. "Attack? Is that what you are saying?"

Again Ernesto was able to guess the right message for Pedro nodded his head successively.

"When? How?"

Pedro shook his head.

"Tonight?"

Again he shook his head and forced the right words out his mouth.

"Tomorrow?"

Pedro's eyes brightened as he nodded.

"But how did they know about this place? We had been successful in keeping the location of this camp a secret."

Pedro motioned with his hand as if indicating a square sheet of paper with sketch.

"What?" Ernesto was shocked. "They have a sketch of our camp?"

Pedro nodded. Pedro went on to uttering syllables and gesturing when suddenly he stopped, dumbfounded as his eyes darted at a direction, in disbelief.

Ernesto instinctively followed Pedro's sight but saw nothing except the crowd of guerrillas. What he failed to catch sight of was Dizon who was able to sneak out of the crowd. Ernesto bent down to listen closely to Pedro but nothing was audible.

"What is it?" Ernesto held Pedro by the shoulders.

Pedro tried to mumble as he strained to follow a direction but his eyes suddenly froze as he gasped and breathed his last. Ernesto put down Pedro's head, stood and walked to the Colonel who motioned him to follow. They were both tense and furious.

As soon as they reached the hut, no one dared say anything, both of them thinking of the incident that had befallen Pedro.

"Colonel, we need to move tonight. You saw what Pedro relayed to us. The Japanese will attack us tomorrow and they have a sketch of our camp. We can't wait for them here. We either move out or go ahead with our plan before they get wind of it."

"We still have an advantage here. They won't reach this camp. We can ambush them on their way here. Going ahead with our plans to get them at the garrison is suicide. And not with the knowledge of the Japanese in town. No we have to think of a better way. I can't afford to lose my men."



"That Japanese, sir, is helping us. Let's take the chance if you call it that. But tonight is the time, not later. As a Filipino, I beg of you to attack tonight before it's too late for all the civilians who are encamped in the town and for the many American prisoners in their stockade. I saw the sudden transformation of the town into a mass concentration camp. The town is under martial law now and just this afternoon, I saw a truckload of dead civilians, who took it upon themselves to fight their way out from the concentration area and were massacred. It must have been their feeling of hopelessness that spurred them to resort to such madness. They were all mercilessly machine-gunned and many more could be killed tonight or tomorrow if we delay any further."

"It's not you alone who want to save the civilians. And I'm aware of the many POW at the Japanese garrison," Col. Holt spoke in a low, controlled voice. "My concern can not be less for Filipinos than for the Americans. I saw you stand side by side with us. I saw you fight and die with us. My feeling is no different from that of a Filipino. But in war, it's not one's feelings that should decide for wars are not won through emotions but through right judgment and planning."

"Yes, Colonel, but I assure you Mr. Miura is one Japanese who simply could not do what you suspect him to be capable of doing."

"And if he does?"

"He will die from my own hands. I assure you that, sir."

The Colonel was silent, thinking and deliberating what Ernesto had just said.

"Col. Holt, this is our biggest opportunity. Someone will break the end of the tunnel for us - a Japanese. If it is the risk of losing many lives which concerns you, I will be the first to get in and the rest of our men can wait outside. And in case my judgment is wrong and Mr. Miura is used by the Japanese to trap us - then our entire unit can retreat in safety. You will only be risking me."

As Col. Holt looked at Ernesto, he could see the sincerity and the urgency of his plea. "All right, Capt. Duran, we will attack tonight!"

"Thank you, sir." The joy and relief of Ernesto was overwhelming.

"I'll send the message immediately to Gen. MacArthur's headquarter. It's a go for their fleets' passage tomorrow morning. Give out the order to assemble all the men. See me here after you've done that."

"Yes, sir." Ernesto wanted to fly out.

Col Holt found the determination and aggressiveness of Ernesto quite typical of the Filipino zeal and fire which enabled them to last for almost three years in the midst of an almost hopeless battle. The courage and undaunted spirit of fighting as long as an invader tread their land were to Col. Holt's mind, strong Filipino virtues which were their proud heritage from a noble history of ceaseless struggle for freedom and dignity. After sending the urgent message to Gen. MacArthur's headquarter giving the "all-clear" signal for the passage of their landing forces, Col. Holt buoyantly and spiritedly hurried back to his hut to prepare for the briefing of his officers on their plan of attack.

Ernesto, after giving the order to assemble all their men, raced back to Col. Holt, who stood before the huge map on the wall of his hut.

"At exactly 1800 hour tonight, we start." Col. Holt began. "We should reach this point before 2330 hour." He pointed the area near the entrance of the tunnel. "And from here we wait for the signal to get into the tunnel. Capt. Duran, you will enter the tunnel with one platoon."

Ernesto was pumped up.

"Lt. Toribio will lead the diversionary unit to this area." The Colonel pointed with his stick, the vast area fronting the main gate of the bastion. "Sgt. Cruz and his men will proceed directly to the concentration building of the civilians in the town while Sgt. Leon shall take charge of freeing the American and Filipino prisoners at the barracks inside the garrison. Assign a team to take over the gun emplacements facing the sea." The Colonel briefed Ernesto with the aid of the map on the wall. "The rest of the men will stay with me in this area." He pointed to a point slightly farther from Ernesto's position. "We will follow you as soon as everything is cleared. Remember, bows and arrows first should be used by Lt. Toribio's and Sgt. Cruz's units. Everything should be done to assure a

truly surprise attack. Assemble the men. I would like to speak to them, after you've briefed them."

"Yes, sir." Ernesto saluted. "Right away, sir." And left.

As soon as Col. Holt was alone, loneliness and the heavy burden of responsibility shadowed his face. Whether his decision was based on reason or emotion, nothing else could be done now except to hope and pray for the success of their operation. He had long been in the military and decisions like this are studied intensely but he knew he could not just disregard the opinion of an officer like Ernesto.

The great difference is he could not decide against the use of Mr. Miura for his judgment of him was based purely on a general prejudice against an enemy while Ernesto's was based on a more intimate and personal relationship. The conflict was there. But he had made the decision.

He now turned to his desk then gathered all his papers and put these inside a knapsack. He then threw a sad reminiscing look around his hut - the hut that had become witness to all his decisions, his anxieties and apprehensions, his grief and times of pain, his victories and failures over their many ambush operations and his many beautiful moments of recollections of home. It was the hut that had now become witness to a soldier's hours of seeming helplessness and renewed determination. It could be his last time in this hut that had become his lonely refuge through all the past three years of endless misery and struggle. The Colonel had now cleared his desk of all his personal effects. He walked toward the door and stood there scanning around the clearing that had been their camp for years.

Ernesto, now in his uniform, stood before the assembled men, more than a hundred of them. They have gathered at the clearing facing the three exposed sides of the conference hut.

"At exactly 1800 hour tonight we start for the town."

There was a wave of excitement among the men.

"Our mission is to clear the passage of Gen. MacArthur's Fleet en route to their landing destination."

Cheering erupted.

"This operation is to disable the gun emplacements of the Japanese fortress in the town." Ernesto saw the sudden anxiety on the faces of the men. Whispers of concern reverberated in the crowd.

Lt. Toribio, Lt. Dizon, Sgt. Cruz, Sgt. Leon, and Sgt. Manuel were in their uniform, too, that came with the arms and ammunition that morning. They have joined Capt. Duran inside the hut. Capt. Duran stepped up to the huge map on the wall.

"Lt. Toribio, you and your men will concentrate around the area of the fortress. Bows and arrows have to be around this wall and the main artilleries facing the sea." Ernesto pointed the areas in the map for everyone to see.

There was complete silence as they listened with full attention.

"Sgt. Leon, assign some of your men to disable the searchlight and the sentry at this tower and you and the rest of your men will follow me across this field between this area and this point. Once inside the fortress, your job is to protect and release the prisoners in this barracks. Entry to the fortress should be as quiet as possible. Assign one of your men to be in charge of the torches. These have to be lighted only at my signal." Ernesto did not mention the existence of neither the tunnel nor the armory at its end. He planned to divulge this at the appropriate time only to the designated group. The tension was palpable as Ernesto turned from one group to the next.

"Sgt. Manuel, you take care of the gun emplacements at this side of the fortress." Again Ernesto indicated it on the map. "And assign men to take out the guards at the concentration of civilians at the market structure. And take charge of their release."

The men were starting to be animated.

"Sgt. Cruz, your men should cover all this area. You are to take down every checkpoint with bows and arrows and take over their machineguns. Be prepared for any incoming reinforcement. These machineguns here should be directed immediately to the municipal government building and the school buildings, which are being used as barracks of the Japanese soldiers. We have to catch them unprepared. Watch out for the signal from your commanding officers and team leaders. Hand grenades should be

used into these barracks and be prepared to use the machineguns against the Japanese who will be scampering out unless they raise a white flag and surrender. Then it is your duty to round them up and secure them."

Now Capt. Duran turned to Lt. Dizon who had been waiting impatiently for his assignment.

"Lt. Dizon, assign half of your men to this area in front of the garrison gate and you and the rest of your men will join Col. Holt."

Dizon was not too pleased with his being with Col. Holt. That will limit his access to the garrison. But he would find a way.

"Details of your respective assignments will be given to you by your commanding officers after this briefing. Officers, when you are through with your men, reassemble back here for Col. Holt.

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When Col. Holt, in his full regalia, faced the men there was a burst of jubilation. What they saw pumped up their spirit.

"Before the sun is up tomorrow, you will be fighting side by side with your American brothers." Col. Holt started in a booming voice that raised everyone's adrenaline, way beyond the limit.

"Mabuhay!" They cheered raising their arms high in the air. "Long live the Philippines.. .long live America!"

The Colonel relished the energized atmosphere and with added vigor continued. "We had waited for so long for this moment to come. If we fought with sheer courage and determination before - this time we fight not only with courage and determination but

with ammunition and we will fight with assurance of victory. We will fight to victory!"

The men were now beyond reinvigorated. Each one was raring to fight. They had been preparing and waiting for this big offensive.

"And after this engagement, when we each pursue our own destiny, let us not forget that we had once shared a big part of our lives together - our most noble and challenging times. Let us remember our companions who have fallen along the way without having been afforded this opportunity that we are about to have. Let us remember that their spirit and courage shall be fighting side by side with us - for peace."

Emotion moved the Colonel to pause and his men responded with the silence so pregnant with admiration and respect. The guarded emotions of the men that had been kept dormant had been awakened by the soul-stirring speech of Col. Holt, the first and perhaps the last for every soldier knew that every encounter was either a beginning or an end.

After the impassioned speech, the Colonel continued, this time in a low, subdued tone.

"I came to your country to help defend it against the invaders and here I am still fighting but this time I am stronger with the greatness of the Filipino indomitable spirit and heart. It is a rare privilege for me to have had the opportunity to fight side by side with men of your heroism and guts. Wherever I shall find myself after this war, I shall always be proud to say that I had once fought with a group of small people who fought like giants. My last breath shall always carry memories of you and your beautiful native land. Good luck and may God bless us all." Col. Holt ended his talk and stood erect emitting pride and confidence for all the men to see.

"Mabuhay!" Once again the cheering blared throughout the camp.

"Three cheers for Col. Holt!" Someone hollered.

Instantly and in unison, the men jumped into the air. "Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray! Hip hip hooray!" Heads and arms popped up and down like waves.

After the frenzied exultation, the men as one, stood at attention and saluted the Colonel. Col.

Holt acknowledged and quietly strode back to his hut with a full heart. And rejuvenated spirit!

"Men, you have an hour to eat your dinner and get ready." Ernesto broke the silence. "Dismissed!"

The guerrillas slowly walked away, each to his own quiet corner, with his last fond thoughts of loved ones. And those who just gazed at the now yellowed and torn pictures of those they left behind. And still others, who just sat and stared blankly. But all in prayers. And like the rest, Ernesto wanted to be alone. He settled beneath a tree and stood there - his mind occupied with fragments of thoughts. Their mission, Col. Holt's mistrust of Mr. Miura, the heavenly yet courageous Joy Bell. He even dared venture to the years after the war when all this was over and he and Joy Bell would be living under just one roof, with their children, perhaps half a dozen of them scampering around their home; he proudly watching, his wife cheerfully chasing them. What a perfect couple they would be. His love will move heaven to earth, an offering of one mortal who will vow to continue loving her to eternity. She with all she had - her heart, her soul, her mind, will be his constant companion - the air that will sustain him. His life. These were his thoughts - so beautiful and inspiring. Thoughts that moved men to fight wars and to die if need be!

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CHAPTER TWENTY

The hours seemed to stand still for Mr. Miura. He had been ready with all the things he needed as soon as the last rays of the sun have bid good-bye.

He had on the table before him, two small lamps filled to the brim with coconut oil, a match, chisel, hammer and hunting knife.

The long wait had sharpened all his senses. Not once but several times he checked his tools and rehashed his memory of the catacomb, the location of the loose tombstone that he once cemented and the direction of the entrance of the tunnel. He knew exactly where to start and where to end.

Now he had a very good idea of Ernesto's mission. It was to enter the fortress through the tunnel, take over the armory, and catch the Japanese forces unprepared. With the armory no longer available to them, the Japanese would have no alternative but to give up and should be wise to surrender, especially now that Gen. MacArthur had returned, as he promised. Ultimately, the impregnable bastion shall be disabled and fall without bloodshed. All would be able to return to their families and their homes and their countries - the Filipinos, the Japanese, the Americans. This is the only scenario that he could live with. He had to succeed. For he was not in this to kill but to help save lives.

But above all, he was doing this for his wife and his daughter - the two women who truly enriched him and gifted him his paradise. It will be the accomplishment of a young girl's daring attempt to put an early end to all these wanton killings and cruelty.

Earlier that evening, Mr. Miura prayed, not alone but in the company of his two beloved in the hill. They were his two silent witnesses to his thoughts. "Your deaths are not in vain. If death was intended to move me to act without renouncing my belief in peace then it had succeeded. My only regret is that I woke up too late. Had I acted earlier you may still be by my side. However, fate has its own way. I could not fathom my destiny but I



shall do everything humanly possible to do what I was placed here to do. My faith assures me that we will be together again. This is our privilege that even death could not begrudge us. We will finally find a place where our happiness would go on uninterrupted; where there no longer exist the concern over differences as race and creed and religion. God, our Creator, Allah, Yahweh, the Force, in its various forms and names, promised us that place."

The peace and solitude of that intimate moment with his beloved cleansed and purified his mind and heart and soul. The turmoil raged no more. Like the dew that vanished when the sun burst through the clouds.

Finally, Mr. Miura was ready and prepared to face the task he had voluntarily imposed on himself. He had finalized his own plan. To open the tombstone after the changing of the guards to insure non-interruption. By then there would be only two guards left in front of the huge armory door. If anything should happen he had a good chance to overpower them by surprise. His knowledge of "judo" and "karate" would come in handy, he was sure of that. At last, one quick glance at his pocket watch showed that the time had come.

Gazing back with a long lingering last look at his home, flooded his mind with all his treasured memories. His whole life.

Outside, the night was warm and the sky bright. The full moon hung like a huge lamp that seemed to have magically appeared just for Mr. Miura. To guide him and illuminate the path he was about to travel. Mr. Miura traversed his route through every unexplored trail until he reached the outskirts of the town where the thick bushes blended with the mountainside. Recalling the entrance of the tunnel, he prepared himself to negotiate the path of the roving searchlight from the watchtower. And so he waited for the long searching beam to pass his position then swiftly went for it in a semi-crawling position until he reached the location of the tunnel's opening some thirty yards from the walled fortress. It did not take long for him to locate the opening, which he concealed years back. He noticed that the boulder had been moved and replaced and the

bushes appeared to have been disturbed but carefully put back in place. With inspired agility, he cleared the bushes and pushed the rock aside. The tunnel's mouth was exposed in all its promise.

Upon entering the dark tunnel, Mr. Miura immediately lighted the small oil lamp, left the other unlighted lamp and proceeded to grope his way. It took him several anxious minutes to reach its inner end. He strained to listen for any sound and checked his time piece. It was already eleven twenty five and anytime now the detail would be coming down the basement to replace the guards. Mr. Miura squatted down to wipe the sweat that had drenched him. He shielded the lamp with his hat to make sure that no light from the lamp would seep through the crypt at the catacomb when the guards entered and inspected the armory.

As he waited, he recalled the masonry work he was called to do in the basement. The catacomb was a series of marble slabs of tombstones one above the other and covered the entire catacomb from floor to ceiling and from wall to wall. This must have been the burial place for the priests and nuns and others who were entombed there centuries ago. The top brass wanted the basement reinforced and so he was summoned to seal each tombstone slab. But there was one slab that emitted light and when he peeped there was no tomb. Just a marble slab like the rest. He figured that this tunnel must have served as an exit or an entrance depending on how it was intended then. "Did it serve its purpose well? Have lives been spared from intruders who threatened the peace of those who occupied this sanctuary? Will this same tunnel now save lives? Will his presence here tonight do just that? To save lives?" His thoughts vehemently refused to entertain anything else but to believe that he was there to save lives.

At long last, the treading stomping sound was heard. He instinctively held his breath. This was followed by the dragging noise. He was not quite familiar with the sounds heard behind the tunnel but he remembered the huge iron double-door and concluded that the dragging noise must be produced by the doors being pushed open to both sides. The sound came to a halt. The door to the armory was now opened and thinking fast Mr. Miura blocked the oil lamp with his body. He could not take any chances.

There might be a small hole left around the formerly loose slab and any light inside the tunnel would surely show through.

Then as he listened, the treading sound came nearer and louder. It lasted for several seconds and the sound moved farther. Again the dragging noise, then followed by the treading sound, and finally - silence.

Mr. Miura stood from his bending position over the lamp, the heat almost scorching his chest. Slowly, he walked close to the end of the tunnel and listened for any sound. There was none.

After hastily making the sign of the cross, he proceeded to work with chisel and hammer in hand. He must start now and work fast if he was to clear the tunnel for the guerrillas on time. He figured the guerrillas were now somewhere in the outlying area waiting for his signal. He must not fail them. Mr. Miura started to hammer the rectangular marble slab. He exercised care to minimize the noise for any sound could be a deadly signal to the guards stationed just behind the huge armory door. He held the steel ring handle at the center of the marble slab, and tried to push but he found the slab well-sealed with cement around its edges. He knew he had to do a lot of hammering and chiseling before he could loosen the cement but he would have to progress very slowly. With every restrained pounding of hammer on the chisel, beads of perspiration poured out his forehead. Every pore in his body was dripping sweats.

After each stroke he stopped to listen for any movement of the huge door. Little by little he could hear the cracking of the cement at the other side. He continued to hammer until his chisel broke through, producing a sharp sound. He stopped - immobile.

The noise reached the two guards - and although dull and remote yet it did not fail to alert them. The guards quizzically looked at each other as they listened intently. But only dead silence followed. The guards dismissed it as the usual noise of some rats and went on with their animated conversation.

Mr. Miura was now drenched with his sweat as he held on to his chisel wedged into the cement. The silence encouraged him to carefully pull out the chisel and repeated the process. This time he

progressed much faster as the cement had cracked all around the edges of the slab. He held the steel ring with one hand and pushed the slab with his shoulder and other hand. It produced a cracking sound and very slightly, it moved. A quick smile crossed his face. With a stronger push he was able to break the slab open but cement particles dropped on the floor producing loud clear sound. He once again stopped as he sensed the two guards suddenly stop talking. He clearly heard them stand almost simultaneously. His eyes grew big and his breathing momentarily suspended as he saw through the opening the huge doors being pushed open. Holding the steel ring with his two hands and replacing the heavy marble slab into its proper position, he remained motionless.

The dragging sound of the huge doors was followed by the heavy steps as the guards entered the armory. He could hear them getting nearer and stopping now and then as if inspecting the area. His knees were knocking against each other, his whole body shaking. As the boot-steps got nearer, Mr. Miura could feel his almost-numbed arms about to give way from the weight of the slab that seemed to double every second. Although every vein in his arms were strained from the effort and the tension, he closed his eyes and focused his strength to his arms, hoping he could hold on. Without realizing it, he was praying fervently - praying and sweating and not breathing.

He lost his heart when he heard the guards stop just a few feet from the loose tombstone he was holding onto. Fear engulfed him like a tidal wave. A lightning bolt struck and jolted him when the guards kicked an empty box nearby. Simultaneously shrill squeaks and scampering of tiny feet followed.

"Dirty filthy rats!" Cursed one of the guards and kicked the box again. Their boot steps receded followed by the dragging of the double door and its final interlocking.

"Thank you God." Mr. Miura gasped as he relaxed his hold and without losing any time, he pushed the slab with his shoulder while tightly holding on to the ring. As the slab gave way, he caught its bottom with his hand then slowly lowered it and laid it on the floor of the armory - as if handling a fragile relic. In one quick move he slipped in and stopped to listen.

Choosing a box filled with bullets, he carefully and very quietly lifted it and put it down right at one end of the door. He carried another box with its unbelievable weight and placed it at the end of the other door, hoping that the weight of the boxes which he could not believe he was able to lift, would not budge when the doors were pushed to the sides. To reinforce his blockade, he positioned two rifles as braces between the floor and the doors.

Assured that the armory was now secured for the guerrillas, Mr. Miura exited the catacomb and sped through the tunnel with the oil lamp in hand.

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Col. Holt and his men had now reached the designated point where the men will deploy to their respective assigned area. At exactly 2400 hour, they would stage their attack.

The fire and enthusiasm generated by the Col. Holt's speech back at the camp was clearly noticeable on the faces of the men but deep within, not discernible to anyone, was that nagging anxiety when death maybe near at hand. The Colonel tried to assuage this by appearing confident and assured although even within himself he knew that this was one operation the outcome of which was beyond his power to predict. He could only pray for the best.

The fast approaching hour of the attack on the formidable fortress was now slowly casting its shadow on this intrepid group of men. Col. Holt faced Ernesto, shook hands and nodded. "Capt. Duran proceed."

Ernesto saluted the Colonel and in that brief moment when their eyes met, a common feeling of mutual concern over the other flashed between them.

The signal was given and each officer led his men, except for Dizon who stayed behind hoping to provoke Ernesto into allowing him to join Lt. Toribio's at the garrison gate instead of rejoining Col. Holt. Ernesto was determined to prevent Dizon from jeopardizing this operation, that he intentionally altered Col. Holt's assignment for Dizon. He was aware of his insubordination but he was prepared to face the consequences for his decision.

"Your men are waiting Lt. Dizon. Proceed to your assignment. That's an order." Ernesto could not be dissuaded. His gut confirmed that Dizon was a threat.

Dizon executed a mock salute, turned and strode away in a huff to the direction of Col. Holt's position. He could not do anything now. Not just yet anyway.

"Mauro, keep an eye on him. He is not to be anywhere near the garrison gate. At all cost." Ernesto spoke to the stocky guerrilla in a low yet authoritative tone.

"Yes, sir." The order puzzled him but he promptly followed Dizon.

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As soon as Ernesto and his men left, Col. Holt hurriedly went back to his radio man, Lt. Joe Fern and resumed his communication with Gen. MacArthur's Forces and reported the progress of their operation before the final assault to clear the way for the landing forces on the beaches of Lingayen.

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"All right men listen up to your instructions carefully." Ernesto gave the final briefing to his men once they were by themselves. "We are here to penetrate the fortress through the tunnel below the church."

The gasp reaction was to be expected. This was the first time that the men were informed about their engagement.

"The tunnel ends at the armory. Arm yourself as much as you can handle and proceed up the church and into every nook and cranny of that fortress, as quietly and stealthily as situation dictates."

Dumbfounded was not enough to describe the men's faces. It was beyond stunned and then some.

"As soon as I receive the signal, I will cut through that clearing between here and where the light will appear at the entrance to the tunnel. Once I reach the tunnel, a lamp will be waved for you to follow. Remember if at that time the searchlight had not yet been disabled, proceed with caution. However, once Sgt. Leon's men have taken out the tower guards, move on fast. Cardo you follow after me with the torches."

"Yes, sir." Was the simultaneous respond.

"Good luck."

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Mr. Miura reached the entrance of the tunnel. He waved his lamp three times, left another lighted lamp and raced back in, hoping that the guards have not attempted to open the door and discovered the tunnel.

From about a hundred yards away, Ernesto saw a light flicker three times.

"That's our signal, men. Remember, one at a time. Avoid the search light and stay as low as you

can. When we get to the armory, arm yourselves to the hilt."

Ernesto crawled to the field and as the search light rolled past his path he stood up and dashed to the entrance of the tunnel. Cardo who arrived next, lighted the torches and followed Ernesto through the tunnel leaving the torches at short intervals. One after another, the men carefully avoided the path of the search light aware that one mistake by any of them would jeopardize their operation.

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Outside the fortress wall, three of Sgt. Leon's men were crouched low under the brush. They both aimed their bows at the tower guard and at the searchlight. Simultaneously they released their arrows and each hit its target. The guard tumbled down from the tower without a whimper. Just a hollow thud on the ground. The searchlight blacked out.

Ernesto's men, darted in droves toward the tunnel. He had a last minute reminder for Sgt. Leon, who was charged with leading all the men after him and sending a signal for Col. Holt to follow.

At the agreed time, concurrently as the arrows got the tower guard and the searchlight, Sgt. Manuel's men's arrows hit their marks at every gun emplacement above the fortress wall including the artillery and cannons fronting the sea.

Sgt. Cruz and his men have simultaneously silenced the guards at every checkpoint. They executed their order as quietly and as cleanly as the arrows flew and hit their targets, eliminating any resistance and sound that could have alerted the Japanese forces at the fortress.

All machineguns at every checkpoint had been taken over by the guerrillas and directed to the Japanese barracks at the municipal government building and the two school buildings. Bows and



arrows were used as well at the guards. They were ready to stop any enemy reinforcement.

The rest of the group of Sgt. Cruz had deployed around the market structure, where they found two guards at the gate and four more around its perimeter. At the signal, they took out the entire sentry with their arrows.

"Men move as quietly and as fast as you can. Remember, take as many ammo as you can carry when we reach the armory." Sgt. Leon had discharged his duty. "Let's go!"

The men followed him guided by the torches through the tunnel.

After the agreed time interval, one of Sgt. Leon's men sent the signal for Col. Holt and his men. With the searchlight disabled, Col. Holt and his men covered the distance to the tunnel in record time.

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The synchronized timing and execution of each team's assignment worked out perfectly as planned, without any loss of life.

Lt. Toribio's unit was, as well, at its position some twenty yards from the garrison main gate. Undetected. His men were all crouched flat on the ground, waiting for the signal. The first group with the bows and arrows were already in the firing position. He raised his hand and gave the signal. Arrows whizzed through the air landing on their targets - the guards at the southern watch towers and gun emplacements. Eerie silence filled the night as their bodies plunged down to the ground. The search lights abruptly stopped midway their sweeping paths.

After Dizon had deployed half of his men, instead of following his order to rejoin Col. Holt, he evaded Mauro and bludgeoned him when the latter tried to block his way. He scurried away then took a fast detour for the garrison gate. Crazy by his desire to warn Col. Hiroshi and be greatly rewarded, he defied his order and was prepared to take every risk necessary.

At the same instance, the two guards just outside the main gate of the garrison were silenced by the arrows. When they fell back, the guards inside the guardhouse stepped out to check with arms drawn.

Lt. Toribio was about to give his men the order to advance when they saw Lt. Dizon sprint the distance between them and the garrison. It was too late to stop him for he went straight toward the partly opened gate where he came face to face with the guard's rifle aimed straight at him.

Lt. Toribio's man released an arrow and the guard fell. Dizon had just barely enough time to look back at his savior and back at his attacker, when Sgt. Hiroto materialized from a distance.

"Don't shoot! Lt. Dizon here!" Dizon yelled in Japanese flagging down Hiroto. "I have come to warn you!" He panted but Sgt. Hiroto's long-suppressed hate for spies was evident all over his face.

"Traitor! Double-faced spy!" Hiroto shrieked and fired at Dizon who was stunned. "Fire!" He screeched at the soldier manning the machinegun at the gate, when he saw the stampede of Lt. Toribio's men rapidly advancing toward the gate.

The unexpected turn of event struck Dizon with instant clarity that he would always be a Filipino to the eyes of the enemies. The reaction from Hiroto proved that. Swiftly Dizon drew his pistol and shot the soldier behind the machinegun before he could follow Hiroto's order. His next target was Hiroto himself.

The first shot that Dizon's action triggered, foiled the seamlessly executed surprise attack of the guerrillas.

Now totally unhinged and fired up with rage and frustration, Dizon dived into the sandbags, pushed aside the dead guard and turned the machinegun toward the half-asleep and bewildered Japanese soldiers scampering out of their barracks in their

underwear. The fusillade from Dizon's machinegun cut them down before they fully realized that the firing came from their own weapon. This threw them into complete confusion and chaos.

Col. Hiroshi, who had been awake all night perusing over his strategy in their planned raid of the guerrilla camp that morning was jolted by the volley of shots. Drawing his pistol, he hastened to the window and was flabbergasted by the sight that greeted him. In spite of the distance to the main gate, he readily identified the man behind the machinegun. His jaws stiffened. It was his own spy, Lt. Dizon; the man he trained; the man he trusted. With fury in his eyes he aimed his pistol and pulled the trigger. His marksmanship once more did not fail him for Lt. Dizon staggered from just one bullet and he slumped against the machinegun.

"To the armory!" Col. Hiroshi's voice boomed above the din of the confusion below his window; his soldiers disorganized and running in panic into the grounds.

Officers from the quarters of the rectory sprang out teetering into their uniform and bellowing out orders to their men.

"Man your stations! Hold your ground! To the armory!" But they were too distant to hear.

Soldiers were scrambling into the church for the armory. From his vantage point, Col. Hiroshi witnessed his officers galloping out into the grounds to execute some order to their men who had deployed in disorganized directions.

The siren was blaring throughout the fortress and the grounds teeming with the Japanese soldiers armed with only what they had in their sleeping quarters.

Lt. Toribio's men have penetrated the gate, more armed than their enemies.

As the gunshots at the bastion were heard, Sgt. Cruz gave the signal for the use of hand grenades. Simultaneously, hand grenades were thrown into the Japanese barracks. A barrage of explosions rocked the town.

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At the armory, Mr. Miura was still alone for the group of Capt. Duran was still negotiating the long tunnel. With the entire garrison prematurely alerted by Lt. Dizon's act, the operation had lost its element of surprise. Alone and unprepared for the unexpected disruption. Mr. Miura waited anxiously as the double-door to the armory were being forced open by a mob of hands - pounding, breaking, pushing.

The crates of bullets at both ends of the two doors crumpled and forced out . . .the rifles cracked. The doors creaked against the rails.

Mr. Miura was petrified in place. What now? This was not what he volunteered for. Not the actual fighting. He was hoping that after he had done his part and upon the arrival of Ernesto and his group, he would walk away and out from the chaos of this encounter. Mission accomplished. Complete and smooth take over. No shooting. No killing. That's what he offered to do.

But he had to hold the armory for the guerrillas. He had to. Otherwise, what was Joy Bell's death for. He had to hold fort or it would be the total annihilation of the guerrillas if the doors opened and the Japanese got their hands to the limitless supplies of arms and ammunition. A massacre!

The huge doors were budging, the pounding, and the heaving of the push, deafening - the stampede of running feet rambling from the distance. He was caught between two factions - both his brothers and his countrymen. This was madness. A total catastrophe.

Then the doors flung open and as hundreds of fiery eyes loomed toward him, Mr. Miura went for the machinegun and manned it without a second to think. The rapid-fire rattled and echoed. Screams mingled with the groans and moans and falling bodies piled one on top of the other, as the bullets swept through the rushing Japanese soldiers. Like rice stalks rampaged by the wind. And flattened.

Mr. Miura could not stop firing, his fingers stuck in place, his eyes glued to the blurring of bodies. The Japanese were razed down before they could get anywhere near the armory door. His mind raced wildly. The guerrillas must be on their way.

They have to be. Then he would be through with this madness...this craziness... this killing.

Suddenly he felt his body stiffen with one, two, then three burning leads. He staggered back but he held on to the machinegun and just kept firing.

From the opening where the marble slab once was, Capt. Ernesto Duran emerged. And his men trailed behind him like a line of disciplined soldier ants. The sight of the superior fire power now available before them was like a burst of adrenaline that shot up into their veins. There was no holding them back. Starved for so long they rushed to the bounty of arms and ammo, and grabbed everything they could carry. Now they were ready for their enemies. The real encounter had just begun.

Capt. Duran's men were relentless as they mowed down the incoming unarmed Japanese. The table had been turned. Japanese soldiers were rushing in and falling in front and over Mr. Miura and guerrillas pushing from behind him. The stampede of running feet of eager men rushed in from behind. Men scampering all over the armory and frantically getting to the arms and the ammo, mowing down the Japanese who were desperately wrestling for their armory.

The fighting turned into a frenzied hand to hand combat but the greatly boasted morale of the guerrillas was unstoppable. A mix of foes against foes grabbing from one another what had now become the very contention of the encounter.

When col. Holt and his men poured in from the tunnel, Capt. Duran's men have overpowered the enemies and taken over the armory, providing Col. Holt's men an easy access to all the arms and ammo they needed. Before proceeding upstairs into the church, Duran caught the nod of gratitude and acknowledgement of the Colonel. Yes, he was wrong for questioning Capt. Duran and for doubting the loyalty and promise of his Japanese friend, Mr. Miura.

In the midst of the chaos no one noticed the absence or whereabouts of Mr. Miura. Not Capt. Ernesto Duran, nor Col. Holt. But from their brief exchange of looks they both knew that they thought of him. They acknowledged him. They were grateful to him. There was no need for more words. Mr. Miura was their hero.

Ernesto and his men hurdled up the stairs to the church leaving Col. Holt and his group that now filled the basement armory. More men, more feet, more arms grabbing the precious commodity.

"All right men, let's go!" Col. Holt turned to his men, all energized not just in their morale but with arms and ammo as well.

"How about me, Colonel." It was Joe, Lt. Fern still backpacked with their radio equipment. "I want to fight, too, sir." Joe tingled with the urged to be part of the action.

The Col. faced Joe squarely, pleased and proud of his fellow American. "Sure, Joe, give them a good beating. It's all yours, Lt. Fern."

Joe brightened and like a child grabbed the most powerful gun he could find and equipped himself with as many belts of ammo as he could grab.

"Yipeeee, watch out. Here I come!" He outran everyone else up the concrete stairs taking three rungs at a time.

The guerrillas have secured the basement. Guerrilla guards were posted above the church door that led to the armory. They were determined to give it their all before any enemy could pass through them. The armory was theirs. It was their air. Their sustenance. Their lifeline.

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Suddenly, the racket and the bloody scene that invaded the basement, turned quiet; eerily silent. Its peace hushed the dismal catacomb back into what it once was. Just a catacomb.

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In the stillness of death, Mr. Miura dug himself out from piles of bodies until he managed to prop himself up, staggering; his right hand firmly pressing his midsection, trying unsuccessfully to stop the spurts of bubbling reds. Slowly, almost unwillingly, he allowed his eyes to scan his surroundings. He was paralyzed. His whole being melted into tears that seeped through his eyes; endless flow of tears as if emanating from a bottomless source, somewhere deep down from inside him.

With heavy unsteady hand he managed to make the sign of the cross and mumbled what could had been a prayer. But his mind knew there was no coherence. His thoughts drowned by the unceasing and deafening sound of the guns that rang above him. His lips twisted into a bitter smile as he caught sight of the solitary broken marble slab on the ground beneath the opening of the tunnel that was supposed to had been a tomb. But there was no tomb. Just an empty space, an opening, an entrance or perhaps an exit way back when it was built as a way out, an escape, to save lives from the marauders.

However, at the present, on this particular dawn, the same opening became an instrument that made all these cruel slaughter and merciless killing possible. And he helped make it happen. He served as the catalyst!

The guilt was suffocating him; the tears blurring the profusion of red puddles coming from his Japanese brothers. He had done his job. He had finished what Joy Bell, her sweet and innocent Joy Bell, her precious daughter, started; who in death showed him that there comes in one's life a moment to choose, to act upon one's conviction, to unravel and prioritize conflicting issues, regardless of how one dreaded it. Joy Bell did it for him.

With one last look around him, Mr. Miura dragged himself, leaving a bloody trail, out the armory and into the tunnel.

At last, Mr. Miura could get out of this nightmare; bathed with the mingling of both his brothers' blood and his own. All he wanted now was to get out and drown out from his consciousness the din of the fighting, the rattling of gun shots, the groaning of the dying. To him there were no victors. Just losers. For even the survivors would forever see the images of this cataclysm long after all of this was over. Yet, Mr. Miura saluted both losers and victors. For they were players who performed their roles.

And him? He was just a dreamer.

Stumbling and crawling through the dimly-lighted tunnel, Mr. Miura felt his consciousness ebbing. "Fast.. .faster. .." he prodded himself. "Crawl, push, move, go before all semblance of light dimmed out."

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"Follow me!" Col. Holt turned to his men as he signaled them to cross the grounds of the bastion. Teaming from a distance barging toward them were the Japanese soldiers in their undergarment, awakened from whatever dreams they were having. Now turned into nightmares. What arms and ammunition they held were those they slept with. Their armory was no longer theirs to run to for replenishment.

Now, it was only them and their indomitable fighting spirit, of which they must have an endless supply. Their barracks were spitting out hundreds and hundreds of them, all lunging forward. No one was backing away. These men steeped in discipline and the large dose of kamikaze spirit. They would not run away.

From where Lt. Duran and his men were, the fighting was at its peak. Bullets criss-crossed the air and the smoke from the guns adding darkness to the gloomy garrison. The greatly outnumbered guerrillas were fighting like thousands against the



thick mass of surprised Japanese soldiers. However, the determination to fight and the bravery of both sides were just as strong. They were fighting as if it were their last. The dead Japanese were scattered like flies all over the vast area of the compound.

The fighting inside the church had long been ended by the rampage of Capt. Duran's men, who were the first to emerge from the armory and to overcome the disoriented Japanese waking from their sleep.

Col. Hiroshi, and some of his guards were barricaded at a reinforced room at the rectory. Capt. Taguri, who was able to escape the onslaught of Capt. Duran's men in the church, had joined Col. Hiroshi. The Colonel remained unshaken and was indomitable in his determination to keep their resistance. He had transmitted his order to his men who have solidified their last forces at the farthest rows of barracks in the compound.

Many of the Japanese soldiers who have utilized the air raid shelters along the walls of the fortress had been routed out by dozens of hand grenades that had become available to the guerrillas.

When Capt. Taguri directed his binoculars at the unguarded POW stockade, he saw that the guards were all engaged in combat. A brilliant idea crossed his mind. "Col. Hiroshi. . .Let's use the American prisoners hostage and demand for the surrender of the guerrillas."

The Colonel's look of disbelief and disgust at his Captain's despicable suggestion made Capt. Taguri recoil.

"Never! " He rebuffed the Captain.

But Taguri was not to be deterred. "Then give me the order to kill the prisoners!"

Col. Hiroshi was shamed by his Captain's cowardice. "We shall fight like soldiers. A real soldier does not fear death. Fight! That's an order!" He had called for reinforcement and was holding fort until their arrival.

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At another portion of the compound, a grinning maddened Sgt. Mamoto emerged from a bullet-ridden barrack, carrying a box of gunpowder. He was headed for the stockade of the prisoners.

"Death to you all. I, Sgt. Mamoto will free you from your misery. ...you are all dead anyway. So here I come. To free you from your hell!" He was cursing and shouting that he would kill all their American prisoners if it was the last thing he would do.

Mitsi who was desperately treating their wounded saw Sgt. Mamoto and heard his diabolical ranting. Without regard for his safety he darted after Mamoto and held him back.

"Sgt., please stop it. Think. Give up your plan."

But Sgt. Mamoto was too intoxicated with hate and power and ranted. "With this gunpowder I'll turn that stockade into an inferno and annihilate those dying American POW. They'll join us all in hell!"

The arrogance and sneers on his face stunned Mitsi as the Sergeant shoved him down and trudged on. Mitsi redoubled his determination to stop the Sergeant at all cost for he could not allow such dastardly and cowardly act on helpless prisoners. With just that thought in mind, Mitsi chased after Sgt. Mamoto and plunged into his back the bloody surgical knife he had in his hand all along.

Sgt. Mamoto crumpled and fell down with a loud thud, still tightly clutching the box of gunpowder. As Mitsi looked down at Mamoto, who was gurgling in his own blood, Mamoto's voice, steeped in arrogance kept ringing through his head.

Earlier that evening, Mamoto had bragged to the guards about his conquest of "the beautiful and young American girl." Without intending it, Mitsi was destined to take justice into his own hands. He had avenged Joy Bell's death. And the rape of her innocence.

Mitsi was shaken as bullets hit all around him. He dodged. An explosion rocked the earth behind him

and as he looked back at where Sgt. Mamoto had fallen he saw a column of fire and black smoke engulfing the Sergeant. The horror of the sight distracted Mitsi and before he could distance himself from the scene, bullets caught up with him. He writhed and coiled to the ground. With his ebbing consciousness, he struggled to crawl toward the clinic.

Just a few paces away, Lt. Joe Fern was in his elements, firing his gun swiftly from left to right and at all directions, cheering at his every fallen target. His unquenchable thirst to be part of the action, coupled with his fighting spirit turned him into one unstoppable destructive force, as he covered the ground leaving deaths behind him. His great agility and extraordinary courage gave him that feeling of invulnerability, forging forward and never looking back. His boyish grin suddenly turned into a grimace as he jerked back. This did not, in any way, stop him from firing.

The fighting in the open area of the compound had died down but the encounter between the farthest rows of barracks had become the fiercest, where the Japanese had solidified their forces for their last stand.

Bullets whistled as these ricocheted against the concrete walls. The Japanese continued to fire back at the guerrillas led by Col. Holt. He signaled his men to spread out and sneak behind the enemies as one group continued firing. The men moved around the rows of barracks picking off the Japanese one by one.

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The volley of grenade explosions roused the sleeping Japanese in their barracks at the municipal government edifice and the two school buildings. Sgt. Cruz's men threw hand grenades one after another into the barracks and routed out the

Japanese like scampering rats from their underground holes. They flooded out from each barrack, dazed and unprepared and still in their underwear. Some have hastily put on their uniform. Before they were fully awake they were gunned down by their own machineguns from their checkpoints.

Just then, the ground shook followed by the rumbling sound. A parade of truckloads of Japanese reinforcement have arrived. But the guerrillas were prepared for them. The engagement did not last long. Hand grenades, dynamites, machineguns and powerful artilleries have eliminated the last hope of Col. Hiroshi.

The radio transmission to Col. Hiroshi of the total annihilation of his reinforcement together with the weakening of his last stronghold at the compound drove him to make a drastic decision. He was a soldier and would die fighting like one. On his face was a resolute resolve to fight. He could have chosen to put an end to the needless prolonging of the hopeless fight and waste of lives but there was a tradition he had to uphold. A samurai must die rather than surrender.

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At their last stronghold, Col. Hiroshi's forces fought tenaciously and fiercely up to the last moment. These stubborn but brave breed of fanatical soldiers seemed to have made a common and irrevocable decision to fight to the end. Not one had surrendered until the last man had fallen.

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Col. Hiroshi, armed with his pistol and followed by his armed guards stepped out of the reinforced quarters and with dignity faced the guerrillas stationed inside the church and into the ground where they fought ferociously until all his men fell dead.

Capt. Taguri pointed his gun to his head and took his own life. An act of hara-kiri without its sacred ritual.

Standing alone and surrounded by the enemies, Col. Hiroshi fought until bullets mercilessly riddled his body. His last thoughts took a flight to Japan where his wife was reading the final letter he wrote. In his neat cursive writing, he promised he would breathe his last by her side. And he did. In spirit.

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The fighting ceased. Every gun emplacement behind the thick wall of the vast compound was now securely guarded by Filipino guerrillas. On their faces shone the indescribable feeling of joy and gratitude for having survived their fiercest encounter which may, perhaps and hopefully be their last. Hope and pride gleamed in their eyes gazing far toward the sea waiting for the landing forces of Gen. MacArthur.

When Sgt. Leon's men broke through the stockade, they were confronted by a sight so horrendous it literally immobilized them. These battle-hardened men, who fought and killed, were crying unashamedly as they unchained the stunned

POW; many of whom just stared blankly at their liberators. Others clutched tightly like babies as they were gently carried out. The few managed to wobble out with the remaining strength of their emaciated bodies, grasping to breathe the air of freedom, for the first time after a long period of sub-human existence. Some fell before they could take their first step. But they kept on trying to prove to themselves that they were still alive. Yet they appeared more dead than alive. The scene left no man unmoved.

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Bathed in his sweat and blood his shirt crumpled and torn, Lt. Ernesto Duran emerged from the long harrowing experience. He had just returned to the armory to look for Mr. Miura but he was nowhere to find. Frustrated and anxious he kept looking for him.

In the midst of the encounter, he did not have the opportunity to thank him. He felt remised and ungrateful. He had to let him know how big a role he played in their victory. And Col. Holt had to meet him and personally thank him for his heroism. Perhaps apologize even just in his thoughts for ever doubting Mr. Miura.

Searching for Mr. Miura in the church, outside the church turning over dead Japanese bodies, hoping against hope that he was not one of them, Ernesto kept looking; scanning the wide expanse of the garrison scattered with corpses all spattered with crimson... thousands and thousands of them. As he walked through the havoc of the sneak attack, and the fierce hour-long encounter, Ernesto felt drain and empty. After running from one barrack to the

next; from one stockade to the next - all now empty of their occupants, Ernesto stopped at a room that looked like a clinic.

His attention was caught by a ukulele dangling on its wall. He recognized that ukulele very vividly. It was something he could not ever forget for it stabbed his heart; not the ukulele itself but the young Japanese who was holding it. That sight on that particular afternoon stole away precious hours of his sleep wondering if the young Japanese had stolen his Joy Bell from him. But he also would never forget that young Japanese who lied to his own people to save Joy Bell and him. He entered the clinic and took the ukulele from the wall then looked around but no life stirred among the lifeless bodies.

Fearing the worst, he paused and just then noticed the writings on the ukulele which was inscribed with Mitsi's name. "Mitsi. It's such a good name. An innocent and pure name." He concluded that Mitsi could have been working at the clinic. Someone who was there to save lives and not to take. He was decided to find him. He could vouch for him and his goodness. His kindness and his sense of decency.

As Ernesto checked each of the bodies near the clinic, he spotted a familiar face. It was pale and the features were his. He recognized the fine and delicate innocent features of the man. Actually not of a man but of a boy.

"Mitsi...it is Mitsi!" Ernesto knelt down and touched Mitsi's cold face. He made the sign of the cross and said a silent prayer. It would be difficult for him to give the sad news to Joy Bell. Ernesto was sure that Joy Bell loved this boy as a friend would love another. Ernesto called one of his men. "Take Mitsi to the church. He is a good Japanese." After saying goodbye and throwing a last grateful look at Mitsi as his body was carried away, Ernesto walked away with a heavy heart for the death of an innocent and undeserving victim of a cruel war. He walked away carrying the ukulele of Mitsi - a Japanese he considered his savior... his angel ... a friend.

Along the way, Ernesto met Col. Holt, who was checking their casualties, giving orders to his men to gather all the dead, both theirs and the

Japanese. With Col. Holt was Tommy gathering the tags of the casualties. He took his duty seriously and did it with reverence, aware that he was holding in his hands, the last proof of these men's existence. Something their loved ones could hold in their hands and treasure their essence left in that small cold piece of tag.

At the garrisons there were no Japanese prisoners. No one surrendered. They came across Col. Hiroshi. The American Colonel, took the insignia of the Japanese commanding officer of the bastion and ordered his body taken to the church. He saluted his Japanese counterpart then went on followed by Ernesto.

"Col. Holt, all gun emplacements are secured. And manned by our men." Sgt. Manuel reported.

"Excellent, Sgt. Manuel. Lower the Japanese flag," Col. Holt gave the order but it sounded more like an invitation. "Raise both the Filipino and the American flags."

"Yes, Col. Holt. It's my honor and pleasure." Sgt. Manuel grinned from ear to ear and sprinted away to fulfill what seemed to be his lifelong dream. To see once again his country's flag flying side by side with the American flag. And hopefully, one day to fly alone up there - proud to stand on its own. This was one order he hungered to perform - his proudest moment.

From the guards at the gun emplacement that faced the sea, they heard the joyous shouts.

A guerrilla reported to the Colonel. "Col. Holt, the fleet of Gen. MacArthur had been sighted."

"Thank you." Col. Holt patted the man and gave a big smile. "Good job!"

The man grinned and like a boy yelled at the top of his voice announcing the arrival of Gen. MacArthur's forces. Hysterical cheering erupted all over the compound.

Ernesto heard the news but his attention was drawn to a familiar voice, a groaning just a few feet from him. He scanned the ground and finally found the source of the voice. The man, an American was still moving. He dashed to him.

"Joe, thank God." Ernesto was frantic at the sight of Joe who looked seriously wounded and drained of color. "Col. Holt, I've found Joe."



The Colonel strode to where they were and the sight of his radioman made him stop midway. "Joe!" Was all he could utter.

"Col. Holt. Thanks for the chance to fight."

Joe whispered. "How did I do?"

"You did well, Lt. Fern. We're proud of you."

Joe was too weak to move but he still managed to smile at his Colonel and Captain. His familiar naughty boyish grin which had won Ernesto's friendship the first time they met, saddened Col. Holt who had held a soft spot in his heart for his loyal radioman.

"Hold on Joe." The Colonel reassured him as Ernesto cuddled Joe's head.

The silence between them was abruptly broken by the whizzing flares from the American Fleet. The American and Filipino flags flying proudly at the Japanese stronghold with its silenced guns, signaled the clearance for their passage. They were safe to proceed to the beaches of their destination.

Joe looked up at Ernesto, the effort making him knit his brows. "Hey, what's that, Cap?"

"The flares from Gen. MacArthur's Fleet.

They're here Joe. We've cleared the way for them. You did a good job"

Joe grinned but his stare was blank and devoid of light.

"Do you hear me Joe? The Americans are here. Gen. MacArthur fulfilled his promise."

Joe remained smiling and a hint of light twinkled in his eyes. "You see.. .America fulfilled its promise. Tell.. .tell my mother and father.. .I'm not a coward. I haven't told them this but I love them." And Joe closed his eyes. His face radiated the joy he felt before life left him.

Ernesto kissed Joe's forehead. There were tears in his eyes. He had just lost a dear friend. He said a silent prayer and stood up beside Col. Holt, after taking off his tag. This he wanted to personally do and Tommy understood.

"He was a fine and brave boy!" The Colonel murmured. A couple of guerrillas lifted Joe's body while Ernesto and Col. Holt proceeded to the gate of the garrison where cheerful chaos was happening.

Tommy followed Col. Holt and Capt. Duran having combed the grounds for their fallen men. In his hands were a few dog tags. Their casualty was

minimal. It could be much worse but just the same every tag was a life he mourned.

As Col. Holt and Ernesto reached the sandbags where the machinegun was still directed to the garrisons, they looked at each other. Ernesto quickly turned the head of the man who was slumped against the machinegun and what he saw stunned him. The man was Lt. Dizon. He could hardly believe what appeared to be Lt. Dizon's last attempt at heroism. Something he never expected from him.

"He died a hero, sir." It was all Ernesto managed to utter and once again Col. Holt smiled and nodded at him in agreement.

They were both mistaken. But they were both very much aware that many unexpected acts happen in times of crises. People did things out of character. One could never be sure about what another would be capable of doing in times of war.

Mr. Miura did it. And now, so did Lt. Dizon. Each with his own personal reason.

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Just then the hundreds of released civilians from the market place led by Sgt. Cruz and his men, surged into the gate of the garrison. Jubilation and weeping mixed as the just released civilians turned into hysterical mob rejoicing and running toward their liberators - kissing their hands, their faces. The children jumped up to hug their fathers, wives reunited with their husbands. The guerrillas who have left their families were finally reunited. The young guerrillas cried like children as they reunited with their parents.

Sgt. Leon's men escorted the weak and sick prisoners from the garrison stockade. But they all

cheered and wept, rejoicing with the crowd, forgetting momentarily, what they had gone through. Filipino and Japanese civilians were hugging and dancing wildly to the unceasing bombardment from the artillery of the American Fleet. Their fusillade now directed at the beaches of their intended landing site.

Col. Holt was caught in the midst of the hysteria, his uniform torn and ripped as the exulting civilians gave him and the guerrillas a wild reception and adoration accorded to war heroes. He was being pushed and pulled to every direction imaginable like an inanimate object amidst grateful and rejoicing people. He allowed himself to be tugged, and kissed, and hugged. He stood in their midst, his smile drenched in tears, his arms outstretched as far as he could to shake hands and reach out to the hundreds of waving quivering hands - some firm and hard, others gnarled and shaking.

This boundless and sincere adulation which accompanied victory overwhelmed him. Yet he did not mind. Not at all. Was this not what this campaign, this operation was all about? The fog in his eyes blurred the beautiful and pitiful sight of the survivors of the sufferings and the starvation and the diseases. And this war.

Also caught in the midst of the celebration was Tommy, crying like a child. He remembered how far he had come. He was once one of them. Like them he survived. And who knows what his future would bring.

The beautiful thought of home, of his own daughter, Nida Gay, now overshadowed the jubilation around Col. Holt. He longed for peace and quiet and the days of long rest for his tired body. He just wanted to go home!

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Ernesto had successfully passed through the throng who mobbed him at the gate. He was now running through the surging crowd, craning his neck for a glimpse of a face in the crowd - the only face, at the moment, that he longed to see. All he ever wanted to see was Joy Bell. He had so much to say. To thank her for what she had done for the movement. And to tell her how much he missed her and longed for her and loved her.

Then he thought once again of Mr. Miura. He had so much to tell him, too. A thousand "thank yous" for his invaluable help - a great sacrifice in his part. To thank him and apologize for his intrusion into the peace and quiet of his family. But to reassure him that his intentions were pure and sincere and true.

Ernesto's call for Joy Bell was drowned out by all the rejoicing. And after a futile search through the crowd leaving him hoarse from screaming her name, he decided Joy Bell and Mr. Miura must have preferred to wait for him at their home.

So losing no time, he negotiated the distance from the garrison to the Miura home in the fastest record time ever done by anyone. He must have broken all speed record. For when the heart willed it, all systems went. No obstacle could stop it.

Taking the stairs all in one giant stride, he called out with all the love his heart could muster. "Joy Bell, sweetheart I'm here. I'm back. I've come home. We have won. We are free. Come and see for yourself." Ernesto was practically shouting at the top of his lungs.

Hearing no response, Ernesto knocked at a closed door with uncontrollable excitement, his face glowing with great anticipation of seeing Joy Bell again. "Joy Bell, my love, open the door. It's me, Ernesto." Still there was neither an answer nor movement. Not able to wait any longer, he pushed the door open only to be met by a total darkness. Anxiety could have crossed his mind but he was too overjoyed to entertain anything remotely near it.

He figured, she must be at the hill. Perhaps with her father, Mr. Miura sharing the good news with Lota. Who else to share such a profound event than with the woman they both adored?

And then the soft whisper came like a flash in his mind. She was at the hill waiting for him. The hill where he found her. The hill where they reunited after so many years. She must be there waiting for him for the most precious moment of their lives. "Joy Bell, here I come!" He screamed out like a child and jumped down the stairs.

Like a gust of wind at dawn, Ernesto whizzed - no flew through the winding trail amidst the most verdant greens of the field gloriously high-lighted by the lingering full moon.

A marvelous vision was beckoning him - the two of them up there overlooking this whole fascinating, magical, wonderful, challenging world offering them a promising beginning.

Ernesto found himself floating on air with only his heart guiding him to the hill. So great was his excitement that even the tree on the hilltop and the clouds above became nothing but hazy mist.

Glowing with exuberance, Ernesto dashed up the hill. And...

Everything whirled into a blur once Ernesto reached the top of the hill. The world stopped. So abruptly. So suddenly. He staggered, his mind in a dizzying spin as if looking down into a bottomless limbo, a darkness so black, nothing existed. Just a vacuum - no air... just nothingness. A blank. Not white blank. Dark.. .ebony black blank. He was beyond shocked. Beyond disbelief. Beyond stunned. Even beyond unfeeling. He was completely numbed. Cold, frozen, hardened, stiff numb. Was this what death felt?

He did not think of asking himself but the question was before him in bold letters. He knew he died in a wink of that moment. He knew...not just aware... knew... he died.

As his consciousness thinned before him, he did not even grasp for it. He did not want to hold on to it. For it was more merciful to let go. Let the last thread of consciousness just snap, break, and let go. Down...down far down into that chasm he could not see...that abyss that could be welcoming when the eyes ...and the mind fathomed nothingness.

How fast and how quick a beautiful dream could die. How sudden...how final things could change. How the world could turn ugly - and the dream vanish...Where did he go? In that split of a moment,

of no time, where was he? He did not want to be anywhere. He felt, yes, he could feel himself... saw himself reduced into an iota of dust...a speck of dust floating before him. Lost in space. And the dust exploded into nothingness and vanished. Gone. When the whirling blur tightened and focused into a form, a shape, he touched earth. He found himself standing wobbly, unsteadily but standing on top of the hill, before Joy Bell. Before a name carved on wood, a white wood, a wood shaped into a cross. Joy Bell in letters so artistically carved, only the hands of one with the heart of a true, pure, loving artist could have carved.

A dart, two darts, a dozen darts, a hundred, a thousand, myriad darts pierced Ernesto's heart again and again and again. The pain, exponentially sharp... sharper... sharpest...The most agonizing and powerful scream of the sharpest pain erupted reaching far and high breaking the clouds into a turmoil of indistinguishable shapes. And the pieces disappeared into oblivion.

Ernesto fell to his knees, his body crumpled hugging the white cross. His scream reduced into sobs choked so deep no sound could be heard. His body shook convulsively. He longed to encircle Joy Bell in his arms, it hurt. He hugged her, he hugged the white cross. And looked up to the heavens so high and so far away he could not reach it. How cruel could the world be to him and to Joy Bell? Unkind to two people so in love. But Ernesto's mind was too numb to comprehend what fate had dealt them. His heart too ill to accept the scene before him.

Time passed. Ernesto had not kept track of it. But in the in-between of that time, he experienced the most magical and amazing feeling. He had Joy Bell in his arms. The beautiful, enchanting, mesmerizing Joy bell. She welcomed him with her love so giving, so unselfish there was nothing left to ask for. She gave him her all. How beautiful their love was. Their love endured all. It was eternal. Everlasting. Forever alive. In their hearts. In their minds. In their souls. For eternity.

The smile lingered. It was still there on Ernesto's lips. the smile left there by the warmth of Joy Bell's kiss. He will always keep it there for the world to see. To share. To spread out. Their love did well. Very well, indeed.

And so Ernesto opened his eyes, the smile still on his lips. The tears have dried up. He was caressing the white cross that bore Joy Bell's name. Joy Bell had accomplished the job he had asked her to do for the guerrillas. She did it successfully. And not because he asked her but because she wanted to do her part for peace, a subject closest to her, to her mother Lota, and to her beloved father, Mr. Miura. They had adhered to their strong convictions and allowed it to guide them through the needs of times. And they stood by it to the end.

Now that the world cleared once again, his eyes was able to see what was before him. A poignant scene. A most tender and touching sight. It was only then that Ernesto noticed what lay before him.

It was Mr. Shiro Miura - his body cold and lifeless. Silent and still. His two outstretched arms hugging the two adjacent graves of his wife and his daughter. His bloody fingers had left their marks on both Lota and Joy Bell's white crosses when he clutched on tightly until life left every fiber of his being and drained him of the strength to hold on. Now the blood had dried but his marks remained as his love would stay with them...forever, beyond death. For the Miuras knew no goodbyes.

Mr. Miura's last moment of consciousness was his most eloquent expression of his love and devotion to the two people he treasured in his heart.

Ernesto could only stare down at this admirable Japanese with an impeccable heart of gold and a truly enduring and boundless love for his wife and daughter and an innate passion for peace and brotherhood among men.

As Ernesto stood on that hill, he could see the Filipino and American flags proudly waving over the bastion - the reveille from the bugle echoing through the air, floated above the din of the cheering of the freed civilians and released prisoners. And as he looked farther to the sea, he could see the horizon back-dropped the parade of the American Fleet speeding toward the beaches of Lingayen.

A smile appeared on Ernesto's lips only to quickly disappear for even the prospect of the forthcoming peace no longer held much meaning for him. All he could feel was utter emptiness as he

moved his eyes from the horizon to the two white crosses and to the rigid cold body of Mr. Miura - just emptiness and nothing else.

"What has war done to them?" Was all that Ernesto could think of. "And what can victory offer me now?"

He had no answers to both. Just the drops of tears on the hardened face of this lonely war survivor!

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EPILOGUE

The smoke of war had long gone. It now remains just a memory and, to some, a nightmare. Peace now reigns and if transient eyes would happen to look up from where the garrison once stood, these would see the hill. It still is there - that hill - with three white crosses, time-dulled, weather-beaten - standing defiantly against the elements, marking the graves of three people - three different races - a living and timeless testimonial of the GREATNESS OF LOVE. . .THE EMPTINESS OF VICTORY. . .AND THE FUTILITY OF WAR!

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And the survivors live on!

Hoping...wishing...praying that man would finally learn its lesson so that their children and their children's children and all the coming generations will not go through the horrors of their nightmares.

Fervently, they pray and will continue to pray that the Universe may live in harmony...brotherhood ... peace. And... LOVE!

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