

CHAPTER ONE

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Now long shadows were falling upon the hushed silence of the great forest. Dancing violet streaks of the dying sun penetrated the trees, revealing flitting butterflies and crawling insects. Fireflies were flashing their scintillating tiny lamps in the underbrush and there was a slight flutter of frightened wings nearby. Suddenly there was a violent crushing of dry leaves and dead twigs in the wake of a fleeing wild animal. Then cicadas burst into glorious song in a voice so multitudinous the whole forest seemed to float away with its thrilling beauty.

Hassim crept quietly on the soft carpet of the pine needles to the edge of the forest. His guide, who was called Old Bio, followed close behind him. They stood side by side near a fallen tree and looked eagerly toward the dark hills beyond the silent valley below them. They scanned the foothills and hillsides to the treetops and back to the foothills, but saw no sign that the other party had arrived from its long trek across the wide plains on the other side of the mountains.

"Are we in the right rendezvous?" Hassim asked.

"Yes."

Hassim's face showed concern. He took a map from his shirt pocket and unfolded it.

"There is no need for that," Old Bio told him. "I am sure we are in the right place."

Hassim knew the old man was right. He said as an apology, "I look at maps because I can't rely on my memory anymore. I have seen so many places, but they all look alike to me. I know you are right about this spot, old man."

Old Bio nodded his head. "I was born in this part of the country," he said. "I know the whole region by heart."

Hassim knew that was true; to hear it from the old man made a definite confirmation of his knowledge.

"They must have been delayed," Hassim said.

"I have great confidence in their guide."

"Do you know him?"

"I know him well. He is a boy who had lived in a village not far from where I was born, and like a grandson to me, considering the fact that I am the oldest living person in this part of the country. I saw every child come into the world in this territory. Look," Old Bio said, pointing to the far end of the valley, "that is his village. On the other side, running westward, is the river where the villagers used to wash their clothes and clean their animals. The farmers dug a canal there years ago so the rice fields will always have an abundant supply of water. There was fighting at the beginning of the war, so I doubt very much if it is still working. You should have seen the grain they produced in those fields."

Hassim noted a wistful reminiscence in Old Bio's voice. Looking in the direction of the old man's pointing finger, he took the field glasses from the pocket of his sweat-soaked khaki shirt, wiped the lenses with his sleeve, and adjusted the eyepieces until the river showed like a taut blue ribbon stretching westward across a wide plain and disappearing in the darkening horizon into a tall black mountain that stood guard against heavy storms and the yearly encroachments of the angry sea; and as he screwed down the lenses to the village, he saw the coconut trees clearly and the remains of burned houses and the mass of rubble that was once the town hall; and he saw that the village was deserted because there was neither man nor beast within the periscope of his vision. He saw the awful emptiness of the place and the river stretching westward into the coming night.

"It looks deserted," he said.

"Yes. The people left after the last raid of the enemy," Old Bio explained. "Those who had survived the terror. But they were very few."

"I commanded a squadron of the underground against that raid," Hassim told him. "But we arrived too late. Our courier met difficulties in penetrating enemy lines and reaching our bivouacs."

Old Bio turned to his companion, and his whole being suddenly surged with conflicting emotions; an inner voice told him to study Hassim's face and remember it as long as he lived. But in the

gathering darkness, he saw only the sharp profile of an intelligent peasant face, unsmiling and brooding to the point of agony.

"They killed one of our best men," Hassim said as if in afterthought. "Lising is the name. The younger brother."

"I remember him," Old Bio said, turning his face away from Hassim. He looked down the darkening valley. Then back to Hassim's face, he saw again the impeccably dressed young Lising in his glittering black eyes, incredibly alive and piercing now that the sun was gone.

Hassim's eyes were used to the darkness of night and the dead silences of the forest. His were eyes that lived vividly in the night and the silences. His were eyes that revealed their agonizing visual memory when remembering unforgettable events of the past, reflecting them in lucid images and deflecting them sharply upon your conscience, so that they seared your mind until your face became contorted with pain, because of that horrible remembrance.

It was this momentary revelation of Hassim's fierceness that disturbed the old man, even more so now, for it seemed unbelievable to him that this young man of twenty-one could strike fear of tremendous proportions in the heart of the enemy. So he repeated to confirm what he already knew, "I remember him."

"Do you remember how they tried to make Cy a traitor?" Hassim asked.

"The first director of the Political Committee?" Old Bio answered, turning his face away again. There was a rising note of respect in his voice, even though he tried to suppress it. "How can I forget him when it was you, alone, who rescued him? How can I forget when a whole division of the enemy pursued you to the jungle where you had hidden Cy so that our people could nurse him back to life? Everybody in the plains was talking about you then, Hassim. You were the bright evening star that shown gloriously in the dark sky of our peasant life."

"I am glad you have not forgotten him," Hassim said almost inaudibly. He put the field glasses back in his pocket. The night had come now. He saw the old man's long white hair shining in the darkness and his gray stubble beard whose fringes reminded him of

the tangled roots of a dead banana tree. But he had long ago cast flattery aside, knowing it would lead him to self-immolation and softness if he accepted it foolishly. It was one of the cardinal rules of the underground, that a leader should not think of himself as a separate entity from the group or consider his achievements as his personal glory. He said, to depersonalize the incomparable achievement of that rescue, "I will never forget Cy. He opened my eyes to the world."

"Many of us will not forget him."

Hassim turned to the dark hills. It was still quiet. The valley below them was now strangely ominous in the darkness. He felt a little disquieted. He knew the other party had to cross unfriendly territories to make time. He had long ago known the hazards of secret missions such as this one tonight, and in that knowledge he hoped they had all come through successfully. He could not even offer a prayer; that was taken away from him.

The old man spoke again. "Tell me, Hassim," he said, "is it true that you joined the underground when you were only sixteen?"

"Seventeen," Hassim corrected him.

"Are you from this part of the country?"

"No, Old Bio. I was born in Bicol, but I grew up in Manila."

"You speak our local dialect fairly well."

"I have worked and fought with your people since the beginning of the war, as you already know. I have just organized a mass base up north, where you located me for the present mission. I speak a little now of the mountain people's dialect."

"Ay." Old Bio sighed. "I wish I were young again so I could work with you to the very end."

"You will see the end."

"I will see the end?" There was hope mingled with regret in the old man's voice. "The enemy will be destroyed? I would like to see that day."

"You will live to see it, and beyond that day, when we establish a system of government emanating from the needs and desires of our people." Hassim was not brooding now. He felt, from the old man's tone of voice, a sincerity that thawed down his consecrated distance, which was often his shield and weapon when he was sent on secret

missions, and seized him completely defenseless. Now he felt light and self-effacing. "You are still a strong man, making me run like a schoolboy across the plains this afternoon," he complimented Old Bio.

"Did I do that to you, Hassim?" Old Bio said, bewilderment enriching his voice.

"You sure did," Hassim answered, smiling a little. And he added, "Tell me, is it true that you defied two hundred soldiers with twelve men for ten months in one of these mountains during the revolution against Spain?"

"Where did you hear that?" Old Bio asked, his feeling of importance growing.

"I read it in one of our history books."

"An educated man wrote about me?"

"It is a newly written book," Hassim explained. "It is done by one of our men called Dante, tracing our history from the revolutionary viewpoint, from Chief Lapu-Lapu and his pagan men who killed Magellan and most of his mercenary soldiers and drove the others to their boats and thence to Spain, to the formation of the underground in Mt. Arayat, where Alipato took the military leadership in this our latest struggle against tyranny."

"Ay," Old Bio cried with delight. "I have heard of Dante but never saw him."

"He is too well known to the intelligence corps of the enemy. Of course, Dante is not his real name."

"What is his real name?"

"You will soon know."

"What part of the country did he come from?"

"That nobody knows. He speaks most of our dialects fluently."

"Ay," Old Bio said again, thinking of the book where his name was written. It was not vanity but a feeling of victory. All that fighting in the past had not been in vain. Then he frowned, knowing that even if he saw the book he would not be able to read it. Suddenly he asked Hassim, "Are you an educated man?"

"Not in the formal sense. As I told you a moment ago, Cy opened my eyes to the world. I am what professors call a self-educated man."

"Times have changed," Old Bio murmured. "I could not have done that under the Spanish regime. You could be garroted for possessing the most elementary books, even the Bible."

"That is why their government was overthrown by the revolutionary Katipunan organization. You can't hide knowledge; it belongs to the world. Education belongs to the people. Education is the prerogative of a system, if it wants to survive chaos. A system that tries to perpetuate itself on ignorance and slavery does not last. You see," Hassim touched the old man to emphasize his point, "mass education is one of the things we are fighting for. Our first objective is to destroy the enemy in such a way that he won't be able to reorganize himself, completely vanished from our midst and his poison purged to the last sediment of thought from the minds of those who believe him. Another thing is the exploitation of all our natural resources for all to share and use, each according to his needs and capabilities to produce."

"Is that possible?"

"Theoretically, yes. But we will have to give up many precious personal luxuries and enterprises to make it practically possible."

"We are used to living on almost nothing," Old Bio said. "And, besides, greed seems to be the common commodity nowadays."

"That, too, shall be done away with," Hassim said, his voice beginning to vibrate with excitement. But he suddenly remembered that he was talking about the old man's youth, during the revolution against Spain, so he said in a low voice, "Tell me about your war against two hundred soldiers, Old Bio."

For a moment, Old Bio was confused by the sudden change of subjects in their discussion. He was trying to assimilate what Hassim had said about their revolutionary tradition, then what they were fighting for in the underground, and now about himself and the revolution against Spain. Time and space seemed to converge in Hassim's mind freely, brilliantly, and compellingly, so that the old man was at a loss. And when he was able, at last, to keep track of Hassim's resilient thinking, he was suddenly transported to another time. He saw again the young man that he had been at eighteen, barefoot, hiding behind a big rock with a *campilan** in one hand and

*A cutlass.