EXCERPTS FROM **SALVAGE**

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About The Author

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Chapter 6:

An Unfortunate Dinner Party, Kamikaze Speedboatmen, and the Map

IN THE RECLAMATION OF CORREGIDOR ISLAND from the Japanese during World War II, American paratroopers dropped onto the island, catching the Japanese defenders by surprise. The island was fortified against sea attacks. Malinta Tunnel, which was where the Americans before them had held out for months, was prepared for any kind of siege that the Japanese would have to go through (the Tunnel was so powerful that it withstood all the bombs that were dropped on it by both sides throughout the war; it was only destroyed when the Japanese, sensing their defeat, decided to detonate bombs inside the tunnel, causing it to cave in). But none of them expected the Americans to come from the sky.

Least of all their commanding officer. It was a good dinner up to that point. Of course anyone crashing through your roof while you're chowing down makes things go sour, but when they start firing M14 rifle rounds into your chest, that's a whole other level of things going bad. The paratroopers had no idea of the luck they had had, dropping in on the island's top officers in the middle of a dinner meeting. Once they took out the Japanese commanding officers just as they were about to dig into their Chawanmushi, cutting off command to the rest of the island, taking back Corregidor was easy pickings. Left without a leader the Japanese troops were disorganized. Couple the disorganization with the sheer power of surprise and there wasn't much of a battle. It was only the aforementioned Malinta tunnel that would offer resistance.

Ittōhei Makoto Kajiwara on the other hand, along with his companion Nitōhei Tetsuya Nagai, offered absolutely no resistance at all. They were Kamikaze speedboat men. While the best known Kamikazes were those piloting planes and crashing them into battleships and aircraft carriers, embodying the "Divine Wind" concept and coming from the air, the Japanese forces developed other types too. And with Kajiwara and Nagai both unable to pass flight tests, and unable too to hit targets with firearms, they had been tasked with sacrificing themselves for the greater good by ramming their boat filled with explosives into any American watercraft that might show up.

Though during training they showed extreme fervor in following the code of the Bushido, as their stay in the Philippines drew longer and longer, each day the prospect of suicide via blowing themselves up and turning into a fireball became less and less appealing. It was then that they began their plans.

Nagai had a cousin who was serving as aide to General Tomoyuki Yamashita. So one night, when Yamashita swung by Corregidor (it being an island paradise after all, even in the midst of the vicious war), Nagai and Kajiwara lathered up Nagai's cousin with a fair amount of whiskey and sake. And as Nagai and his cousin sang

rousing war hymns and as Yamashita enjoyed the waters of Corregidor—a privilege that would not be available to Filipinos for almost a century to come as the debris of war would give way to the black waters of pollution from Manila Bay, but on this night the water was still blue and clear and in the moonlight it was brisk and refreshing—Makoto Kajiwaru was in Yamashita's quarters, drawing a copy of the map to what would become known as the Yamashita gold.

The original map would be lost in the mountains of Ifugao province a few years later. In an encounter with guerrillas Yamashita's uniform would get ripped, the secret pocket giving way and the map tumbling out and onto the muddy ground. The precious map would get trampled by the guerrillas and ground into the mud, eventually biodegrading in the rich Ifugao lands, and Yamashita, shamed by the loss and his subsequent surrender to Generals Wainright and Percival, and eventual walk to the gallows, would never have an opportunity to find the map and return to the gold he had amassed.

The Kajiwaru-Nagai map was a different, much more interesting story, altogether.

The two faux-Kamikazes planned that once they had an opportunity to get out of Corregidor, they would take the speedboat back to the mainland and then find the gold. They would take just enough for the two of them to disappear somewhere, maybe South America, so that no one would suspect anything. And they would leave the fiery deaths to whoever wanted them.

The Americans retaking Corregidor was exactly the opportunity they were waiting for. Once they heard the sounds of combat in the distance (their boat was stationed in a cove that seemed etched into the rock face) they chucked all of the explosives out of the speedboat and made their run to Manila. The problem was, well, neither of them was very good at navigation. There was a reason, after all, why they were speedboat Kamikazes and not anything else higher up in the chain of command. Where they were trying to get to Manila Bay, and then eventually to the coordinates on Yamashita's map, they wound up farther south, along the beach of Cavite.

And along the beach of Cavite was Carlito Salvador, who would father Danilo Salvador, who would father Johnny Boy. Carlito had been stationed on Corregidor, fighting alongside the Americans until the Island fell to the Japanese. He, along with the other POWs, had been marched through the streets of Manila, on his way to being jailed in Bilibid Prison.

Raging from both defeat and humiliation, Carlito would escape from Bilibid, with members of his squad. The escape involved wire cutters, shivs, and a few slit Japanese throats (which was all very good for Carlito, who had watched many of his friends fall to the Japanese, and even worse who had witnessed the brutality of the Japanese who would throw babies up into the air and then catch them with their bayonets). Once away from the jail they followed the shoreline to Cavite, where Carlito's relatives had settled. Said relatives and their community housed and fed

the escaped POWs who would turn guerrilla and mount regular raids against the enemy.

Kajiwara and Nagai were a sloppy duo who functioned well on the conceptual level, but had difficulties with execution. As such, when they tumbled out of the speedboat Nagai accidentally flipped over the side and his leg caught on Kajiwara's upper garment, pulling the unprepared man down into the water with a sudden force. Kajiwara would register his excitement with an open mouth that made to scream, but that instead took in a mouthful of water and swallowed it all in. Kajiwara would throw off his upper garment as he struggled out of the water and for a breath of air. Nagai would help his partner up; if Kajiwara had bothered to try and stand, he would have found himself a head and a half above the water, but in his panic he was drowning. When Nagai made to steady him, Kajiwara pulled up and managed to steady himself, but wound up pulling Nagai down into the water, accidentally drowning him. Then Nagai would pull up and push Kajiwara down. This happened a few times until both men finally managed to get pushed to the shallows by a strong wave.

The two tumbled onto the sand a mess, drenched and gasping for breath. All their splashing had drawn Carlito's attention and as they crossed from sand to grass and neared the tree line, Carlito trained his pistol on them. The duo didn't notice him because they were busy bickering over the map, trying to figure out where they were and in which direction they were supposed to go.

Carlito approached stealthily, but then he made a misstep and a twig cracked under his foot. When Kajiwara and Nagai heard the twig break, they both jumped back, and in doing so tore the map in two. In Kajiwara's hand was the bulk of the map, revealing the general vicinity, while in Nagai's hand was the X that marked the spot. With the two still recovering from the surprise, Carlito pounced and he was quickly on Kajiwara. He pinned his target down and pistol-whipped him in the face. Meanwhile, Nagai took off into the forest, not bothering to look back. Not bothering either to consider where he was going or what he would be doing out there.

Nagai would be a good 200 meters away by the time he heard the gun report behind him. It was a clean shot to the forehead, and much more mercy than many Filipinos got at the hands of the Japanese during the war. Carlito would go through Kajiwara's pockets, checking for rations or weapons that he might be able to use, and he would almost walk away without noticing the map. Almost. But just as he was heading off he saw the torn sheet in the dead man's hand and he took it. At first he thought it was a map that revealed Japanese positions, which he could use in the war effort. But upon closer inspection (he'd been trained to read some Japanese when the war started) he saw the words "Treasure Map" scrawled on one of the map's edges. He put the pieces together when, hours later, he would hear a campfire story about the gold that Yamashita had been amassing, while he mulled over another scrawled bit he had translated, "Yamashita's a dick."

Carlito would spend the next few decades searching for the gold. With the Kajiwara half of the map, he knew that the treasure was somewhere in Antipolo. But with the bit that was torn lost to him, he never got an exact location. He would wind up selling his family's lands in Cavite so that he could buy lands in Antipolo that he suspected might have the treasure.

While Carlito would father a number of children and sustain their educations and living expenses and all of that through his legal practice, all of the family's savings and assets were utilized for the treasure hunt. After suffering a severe stroke in his early 50s, Carlito would have to stop looking for the treasure, and it was only after his death five years later that any of his children found out about his quest. They were all expecting part of the Salvador family lands in Cavite and elsewhere, and all they got were emptied out lots in Antipolo, middle of nowhere bits of land that none of them could hope to build houses or make lives in. But to Danilo was entrusted the map, which he would, for the larger part of his adult life, resent. He would resent it until he found the other half.

This other half had not traveled far from the beach in Cavite. Nagai ran into the forest and despite his lack of military skills, he managed to avoid capture. Nagai was no navigation expert, and though he thought he was making his way out, he had been going in circles for years. For almost twenty years after the end of the war, Nagai would circle the small forest landing in Cavite, living off tubers and bananas and whatever else he could get. This diet and lifestyle of course took its toll on the man, and by the time that a small subdivision was being constructed a few kilometers from his forest, whatever marbles he had were long lost.

When occupants began to move into the subdivision, garbage started getting dumped into Nagai's clearing. This helped to vary Nagai's diet. But it also drew him towards the subdivision. By that time he was, for all intents and purposes, a *taong grasa*, which was to say that he had had a break with reality and in that period of history, when knowledge of psychological disorders was extremely limited, Nagai was from the perspective of other people, a raving lunatic.

It didn't help that he was screaming in Japanese. Even if they could have understood him, it was all gibberish anyway, but the sound of the language brought back bad memories that the older subdivision dwellers had long buried and hoped to forget. When Nagai came walking through the subdivision's streets hollering, still wearing his uniform that was now all in tatters, people first reeled in fear.

Then a war veteran, a cousin of Carlito's, grabbed Nagai and threw him to the ground. At this point the *kuyog* commenced. The word *kuyog* is meant to refer to a bunch of snakes that are knotted together, but this original meaning is rarely used now. Rather it refers to a horde of people. More specifically it refers to a horde of people who all gang up and beat down one person. The mass of people converged on Nagai, or whatever was left of him, and when they walked away he was just a corpse from a long-ended war.

One of the neighborhood children, Abigail, would find the piece of the map which flew from the corpse, while she was playing with her friends a day later. She wouldn't know what it was exactly, but she had a sense that it had come from the Japanese man, and she would put it into her scrapbook.

Years later Abigail's scrapbook would make a trip across the world with its owner. It was packed with letters and cut-outs and the piece of the map, but more importantly for Abigail it also contained the love letters from Ulysses, her adventurer abroad. Ulysses, like his namesake, would take to the seas on a quest. His was to sail the seas on cruise ships, making sure that the engines were running right. Ulysses would spend days in the engine room and nights in his quarters in the bowels of the ships writing long love letters to his high school crush. "When, when will you let me hold your hand, Abigail? I sail the cold lonely oceans of the world and all I can think about is you."

Ulysses's letters would be collected by Abigail, and once these had filled two scrapbooks, she felt she could be certain of his commitment to her, despite her short, curt replies: "I'll think about it; Maybe someday; If it's so cold out there, then wear a coat, you can afford it." She gave him no clear signs of encouragement in her letters, though in truth she wanted him to whisk her away. She would wait and be buoyed by each of Ulysses's letters, saving them in her scrapbooks so that she could re-read them and feel again the passion and longing that he sent from all over the world. And finally, after two years of courtship, during which Abigail finished her internship as a nurse, she would assent to marrying Ulysses.

The two would settle in California, Ulysses taking an early retirement package from the cruise company which afforded him enough to buy a small house in the LA suburbs. Here he would continue work at a manufacturing plant for soda and juice drinks, his job being to make sure, as ever, that the engines kept running.

Abigail would care for the elderly in convalescent homes, and as a result she would have the chance to chat with one of the elderly Japanese women there. The Japanese woman, Kaneda, was something of a romantic, and as she whiled away her remaining days, waiting for the cancer to finally take her, she would find comfort and entertainment in hearing about Abigail's long distance courtship. Mere days before she passed, Abigail would do something for her that she never did for any other patient. She brought her scrapbooks for Kaneda to read through, so that Kaneda could be first-hand witness to the kind of love with which Ulysses had courted her (and be sure that for all the other kinds of love: lost, failed, unrequited, misunderstood, taken for granted, whatever, which you find elsewhere in this book, there is this one pure and true love story at least, which has a happy beginning, middle, and end).

Kaneda would read through all those letters, poring over them and imagining, first, herself, as a recipient of such letters. She would recall the time when she too was young and attractive. And she would remember too how her own husband courted her, how he had loved her for most of their lives before he passed from

an aneurysm in his early 40s, and she would never recover, never remarry. The scrapbooks rekindled a fire of life and love that she had long lost, and it was good for her to have in her final moments. She would not tell Abigail, for fear of betraying her trust, but Kaneda would steal one of the letters on the day before her last (and she seemed to just know it), so that she could hold some kind of love when she left this world.

But before she left, she saw the scrap of map. She would never know where it was or what it had that X mark on it for, after all in context it could have just been a romantic thing, and once she read it she assumed it was something to do with Abigail and Ulysses's courtship, as beside the X was written Antipolo Church in Japanese. She would ask Abigail where Antipolo Church was, and she would mention the map. Abigail would shoot her a look of surprise, ask how she knew of it. Kaneda would point to the map and then scribble the words in English beside the Japanese characters.

The two would never speak of it again, but Abigail's son would inherit his mother's scrap books and find the bit of map, which he would recognize as WWII memorabilia. It wouldn't fetch as handsome a price because it had been written on, but it would change hands through collectors before finding its way to Danilo.

Chapter 8:

MG, The Philippine Drug Game, and How to Become a Henchman

What you learn quickly in the Philippine drug game is that it isn't about slinging rocks on corners. There's no McDonald's style corpo-drug hierarchy where young hoppers can work their way up from soldiers to bosses. Because on the take and at the top are the politicos, negosyantes, and opisyaes, and running a lot of the big game are their coño kids.

These coños start out small fish too. They don't shoot all the way to the top right away. They start off with a taste. Then they work up the appetite for the drugs and the game. That's just how it was with Miguelito Gerardo de Guzman.

The first hit came crouched in a corner of the classroom, the fumes from the foil minty cool as the shabu mixed with the crushed Halls Menthols. From there it was a clear line to a habit that needed to be sustained. Miguelito, who adopted the moniker MG when he started dealing, would go from shabu pick-ups in the Arayat slums that he would repack and sell at clubs to other coño kids, to moving up the chain and acquiring from big bosses and distributing to those Arayat dealers he used to score from.

That's where the connections came in. Even though those dealers in the slums had been in the game longer, they couldn't move up the chain because of what they looked like, where they were from, and who they didn't know. You couldn't have some dark-skinned tattooed kid from Arayat or Cambridge or Area-2 or Old Balara or the dingy streets of Caloocan driving around with a bunch of bricks in the trunk, their eyes pinballing around the sockets, lips smacking from being dry. You couldn't have them getting pulled over by the po-po, their hands greasy, fingernails gone from the gnawing, necks jittery and snapping like Velociraptors pouncing on prey, their teeth chattering, those teeth a dead giveaway, all rotting and blackened, thinned and sharpened from the shabu fumes that wore away at the enamel. But MG, in his F-150, pumping bass from his expensive speakers, with his father's friends' calling cards all in the glove, his Tisoy skin and Chinito eyes screaming money and power, him getting pulled over by some big-bellied parak was no worry. MG would flash his teeth, all pearly whites, and when he was doing his biggest business they were even in braces, and he'd speak in his Loyola Schools accent about how he was on his way to his father's law office and a few seconds later he'd be driving past with the whole stash in a secret panel hidden beneath the armrest.

And seeing as to how he was from the upper crust of society, and said crust was susceptible to Kidnap for Ransom gangs, carjackings, and other acts of violence, no one would ever question his modifications to the vehicle, the adding of bulletproof glass and reinforced steel on its sides. Nor would anyone question the MP5 he kept tucked in a special sling underneath his seat. His Papa had paid a handsome

amount for those modifications, but when MG, his baby Miggy, told him that he needed those things so that he could be safe, Papa handed him a wad of cash with a little extra for the mechanics, and some so Miggy could load up on a few full tanks and go on joyrides.

And thus MG was born into just the right circumstances, and developed just the right tastes, to become a big boss running shabu in Kamuning, Cubao, and parts surrounding, dealing to the people who used to be his dealers. He'd never sell the stuff on the street himself, no, his direct sales were of the decidedly higher end kind. Serving up coke and E, palming packets to partying rich kids, MG knew which club to hit and which event to go to; his name was always on the guest list, and each night was a unique business opportunity.

MG got good, he got real good at what he was doing. He got so good that he caught the attention of the cops, particularly a Colonel de Legazpi, who would take MG into his employ. MG would leave the drug game to become one of de Legazpi's main men, running not just drugs but jueteng and other "unofficial business enterprises" that the big boss had.

But before all of this, MG was just Miggy. And Miggy used to play Cops and Robbers with a kid named Johnny Boy.

Didn't matter who your parents were, where you went to school, or that in a few years you all would have to acknowledge your class differences making the rare instances post-adolescence when you would run into each other on the street awkward affairs as those middle- and upper-class kids felt the guilt of having been born into relative privilege. As kids everyone wore the same loose-fitting shirts, the same puruntong shorts, the same tsinelas the rubber thongs of the cheap slippers popping out after you tried to make a sudden stop. Everyone would amble out onto the streets once the noonday sun had passed and various games would be played in the middle of the street, pausing in the middle of games to let the traffic pass.

Miggy and Johnny Boy's homes were right next to each other. Johnny Boy's family lived in a row house, third unit in from the street, and Miggy's family lived on the street corner, their compound a sprawl extending itself to the next corner. They'd sometimes play video games or watch TV. In adolescence Johnny Boy and Miggy would play billiards on Miggy's dad's Brunswick table or at the basketball court in the compound that Miggy usually had to himself. But as little kids Miggy would walk from the tall gates of his compound out to the gates of Johnny Boy's place and clap his hands together producing a fantastically big sound for such small hands, calling his best friend out, and they would walk together down the street to meet up with the other kids. It was a mix of kids, from the various kinds of houses in the economically diverse community, including a lot of the kids who lived in the squatters' area just two blocks down. The neighborhood was one of the common intersections of privilege and poverty, as they say in classic Filipino literature, the rich and poor living cheek to jowl.

The poor kids would become construction workers and mechanics, machine operators and garbage men (Keep in mind dear reader that garbage man in the West and in the Third World/Global South are very different things; our garbage men literally spending the whole time in and around the filth as they drive around whole days in the backs of the garbage trucks, half the group hopping off at one street corner and then picking up and heaving the garbage bags onto the truck where the other half of the garbage men wait to push the bags further into the truck bed.), water delivery boys and pahinantes, and if they got lucky, sari-sari store attendants, Public Use Vehicle drivers, or pulling barangay tanod duty. A good number of them would pool together their meager earnings and utilize the sum to score from MG. Sometimes MG would feel magnanimous and give them a free round, just to keep them all loyal and to make sure he was always in their hearts and minds. Even when MG had transcended the drug game he made sure his boys from Kamuning were taken care of.

Miggy always liked the idea that he could draw people to him, that he could be important to them. Trace it back to a father who always had a few Tito, Vic, and Joeys, in his pocket to hand his son, but never really had the time to do anything with him. Or the fact that his mom was always too busy too, doting on his sister. Or maybe it was just plain something with the way MG was wired. No matter what it was, the plain fact of the matter was that despite all the privilege, the car and driver, the exclusive school upbringing, the trips abroad and that he never wanted for anything material, he always felt this need to be loved. And he connected this with some kind of external approval.

It's why he always played so hard at everything. It's why he always had to make the big shots, even when they were just playing pick-up basketball games. It's the drive that made him the ideal hustler for Colonel Legazpi's operations. He had an ambition, a desire to show people that he could be good at something, and this drive, albeit subconsciously, was all tied to a need to be shown some kind of love and affection. Sounds terribly pop-psychology-Dr. Phil, but even in this cold, hardened heart that would see its share of shootings, tortures, beatings, and all other manner of brutality, it still boiled down to that love that he felt he was denied, even if he would go to his grave never becoming aware of this tragic flaw of his.

Who knew that this could all have been averted, his life of violent crime, his betrayal of friends and family, his destroying of so many lives, if only his mom had hugged him a little more and his dad had shot a few hoops with him every weekend? No one could have known, least of all Johnny Boy, who thought that Miggy was the luckiest kid on earth.

How could Johnny Boy not want Miggy's life? Miggy got the Unicron toy just after asking for it. Johnny Boy had to struggle to be good all year long so he could ask Santa Claus. And then Santa Claus gave him Grimlock (granted that was a toy he would love for many years); he never got a Unicron. Johnny Boy had to bunk with his many young cousins in their small apartment while Miggy had his own

room. Miggy got to eat whatever he wanted. Once he had Johnny Boy over for breakfast before they went out to play, and all they had was chocolate ice cream. Miggy never had to eat soggy monggo or slimy okra or other vegetables that Johnny Boy was expected to eat. And Miggy had a basketball court and swimming pool!

The material comforts that Miggy took for granted Johnny Boy appreciated whenever he was allowed into Miggy's house. Eventually, Miggy's parents would recognize Johnny Boy and would regularly mention to their son that he should have his friend over more often. Johnny Boy had received a barangay scholarship, which let him study in the same school as Miggy. But where Miggy was in one of the lower sections struggling to get by, Johnny Boy found himself at the top of the class, acing subjects and getting sent to school competitions for writing and art. It's this aptitude which led to the souring of their friendship.

Miggy's mother would dote on Johnny Boy. It wasn't too much of a thing until the boys hit high school and Miggy started feeling a growing resentment to the over-achieving Johnny Boy. Things came to a head when, while making his transition to MG, Miggy's mother told him, "Why can't you be more like Johnny Boy? There's a boy who is doing something with his life."

This exchange would lead to the friends' falling out, though Johnny Boy never knew of it. It also led to MG's addiction to narcotic substances and his rise in the criminal underworld, a field of work that Johnny Boy would never best him at. And it left him with a lifelong hatred for Johnny Boy that he would never admit to.

Their falling out would be attributed to a nasty blow at a basketball game. By then MG had become notorious for his fiery persona, he was magnetic in drawing people in, but also quick to anger and he was known as a person who always got his way. His always getting his way in the neighborhood were a mix of the strength of his personality and everyone knowing who his father was and knowing well enough not to cross that family.

After years of suppressing ill feelings toward his best friend, years of jealousy being pushed downward in his psyche, all the bile had built up and came surging forward as Johnny Boy caught the ball from a quick pass.

Playing 3-on-3 on the half-court down the street, their opponents had insisted that the friends play on opposing teams, since they played so well together and they were almost evenly matched, with MG having a slight advantage with his shooting touch while Johnny Boy was a slightly better defender. Normally Johnny Boy would have to go through a series of fakes and dribble moves to get past MG. But with MG's head out of the game and stuck in a stew of resentment it was a simple head fake to the right, quick first step to the left and past MG, and a straight lane to the basket for a quick lay-up.

On the next play MG took the ball, dribbled with his right hand, crossed it left and then back to his right, and then he made his move forward to get past Johnny Boy. But MG's crossover was sluggish and Johnny Boy read it easily; in anticipation of the move he had blocked MG's path to the right and planted his feet solid and

steady while crossing his arms across his chest to take the charge. MG bowled right over Johnny Boy and the two went down to the ground a flailing mess.

MG was furious with the sudden, violent contact, when he had expected his own clear path to a lay-up. It wasn't enough that his parents like Johnny Boy more than they liked him, Johnny Boy had to show him up on the court too, MG thought. And with that he got up off the ground and picked the ball up. Johnny Boy stood up and when he held out his hand to MG for a high-five that was meant as a sign of peace MG hurled the ball into Johnny Boy's face.

The ball smashed into Johnny Boy's nose and mouth and blood came flying as it bounced off his face and back onto the asphalt. Johnny Boy's hands shot up to his face to cover the bloody nose. That left his eyes exposed and free to see MG charging towards him. Before he could move his hands in defense MG had lunged and tackled him, commencing a ground and pound, fists rising and falling, landing brutally against Johnny Boy's head and face. Johnny Boy, hardly able to keep his hands in front of his face to lessen the impact of the blows, weakened after taking a few solid shots to the forehead and with MG bringing down a haymaker, took one square in the face which also slammed the back of the head onto the pavement. It was like a flashbulb had gone off, everything went a shocking white before he saw the four other boys they were playing basketball with peeling MG off of him.

And though MG had literally crushed Johnny Boy that day, he would never be satiated. His taste for violence would only grow, and his desire for revenge against Johnny Boy would never waver. He would hear about Johnny Boy getting into the premier university (from his parents, of course, fanning the flames of his hatred) while his father had to pay someone off to get him admitted to a school which he would eventually get kicked out of because of possession of narcotics. He would hear about this or that thing that Johnny Boy had done, and the only comfort he got from that kind of news was when he heard that Johnny Boy's chance at becoming a comic book artist hadn't panned out. Elsewise he vowed some kind of definitive vengeance, some way that he would show Johnny Boy that he was better. Now was his chance.

Chapter 14:

Tito Ting and the Perils of Undercover Duty

Tito Ting, formerly PO1 Wilberto Lantakas, felt the cold nickel plating on his back and knew he was alright. It was his old .38. When he went around escorting the former child star-turned city councilor who he just called Boss, he would use the .45 that was issued to him. But here he believed the .38 would be enough. It certainly came through when he needed it most.

He didn't wear it on a hip holster, but rather kept it tucked between his jeans and the small of his back, concealed. It wasn't smart to let it all hang out when you were working undercover.

PO1 Wilberto Lantakas knew about working undercover. You probably couldn't tell it now by looking at him. His paunch made him look like he had swallowed a watermelon, and yet the rest of his body was still thin and fit. The paunch was the product of a nightly habit of drinking a Lapad of Tanduay, called so because its bottle was wide instead of round, and thus easily concealed in one's back pocket. It helped to calm his nerves, and served as a more manageable addiction than the one he had had to shake.

As a young cop Ting was assigned to a drug squad. He believed that he had been put there because he had showed something exemplary at Police Academy, that someone in the upper echelons of the Philippine National Police had seen a bit of himself in Ting's eye and Ting's gait, and had sensed that Cadet Lantakas was made for great things. While someone had sensed something about him, it was not that he had the potential to be one of the best cops the force had ever seen.

What got Ting on the drug squad was that he was young, and they thought he was gullible because he would, at times when thinking, allow his mouth to drop open and his tongue to hang out. This mannerism of Ting's had been observed since he was a little boy, and it was not sure whether he had picked it up from his dog, or the other way around.

The dumb look Ting would get masked the great processing that was going on in his head. Thanks to a youth where he was exposed to mahjong, cockfighting, and Teks-Money, he was able to process large sums. This was helpful especially when he was taking exams in the academy. It was also what led him to the realization that someone in his unit was dirty.

It sounds a cliché now, that a group of cops working vice would be dirty. But PO1 Lantakas wasn't a fan of movies, and thus hadn't seen much noir; heck when he was a cop *Miami Vice* wasn't even on the Philippine airwaves. If he were a pop culture aficionado like his nephew Johnny Boy, he might have been wary of things from the get-go. But he was an idealist and he believed that he could be a good cop and that he was doing the right thing.

So he had that hang-dog look on his face as he thought about things when he waited in his unit's safehouse just off Marcos Highway. It was a strip that, in the present day, would be congested with traffic and lined with shopping malls and little carinderias and jeepney barkers and street vendors and street urchins quick to pick a pocket or to squeeze a pretty girl's buttocks, or do both at the same time.

But in the days when the drug squad was using it as a safehouse it was a quiet, secluded area. Just a ten minute drive from the main thoroughfares of Cubao, it was a perfect place for bringing drug dealers that they had caught and salvaging them.

Point of clarification for those unfamiliar with the Philippine usage of the term salvage. While the term might normally mean to save, to rescue, or to retrieve from doom or destruction, it means quite the opposite here. In the Philippines it's closer to "being disappeared" or to being summarily executed. It's got an extra letter, as it should probably be savaged, as these killings are often savage, the victims often being beaten or tortured before finally being killed and dumped in nearby fields.

And this safehouse of theirs had been the site of a number of such salvagings. When they found a drug dealer (PO1 Ting just took it as a given when a partner of his suddenly showed up knowing the exact location of a drug dealer without having done any prior investigating; in truth these were merely the drug dealers who were not playing by the squad's rules, usually those who hadn't paid their dues to the boys in blue) they would usually grab him somewhere in the Cubao area and drive him up. No need to worry about anyone looking for him, people disappeared all the time without warning under the Marcos regime. No need to worry about forensics either, as even in the narrative present of this novel the PNP continues to struggle to develop its forensics program. Depending on the squad's mood, there could be some torturing, or they could just pop a round into the dealer's skull, then leave him in a ditch somewhere nearby.

What PO1 Lantakas was thinking, hangdog expression on his face, was about how he had heard two vehicles park outside, but no one had come into the safehouse to join him yet. And as a third parked and still no one had come into the safehouse the gears were spinning in his head and his jaw was going slack, sagging, drooping as he went deeper into thought.

He had, as of late, started developing shifty eyes, the kind that would dart back and forth as if they were looking for something, as if they were expecting an attack from somewhere. It was as if his amygdala were in full control, that primal part of his brain activating his instincts so that all his senses were heightened, awaiting the pouncing of a predator. His muscles were taut, one of his legs always pumping up and down, an erratically timed overactive piston, and he gave the general impression of tension. This was, of course, the drugs.

In particular it was shabu, otaba, bato, hits, or what is more scientifically known as methamphetamine. Once again Ting was mistaken about motives when his squad buddies had him take a few tokes regularly, as they said, to build up a

tolerance for it. Their reasoning: Ting had to know what it was like, and had to use it regularly so that he wouldn't be found out for a narc, and if he did it enough and managed to control himself, then he wouldn't get hooked. Ting failed to realize that they were doing that precisely so that they would have something on him, that his boys were doing it so that if he ever did decide to turn them in, they would have enough dirt to discredit him.

Ting was obviously smart in some aspects, and not so smart in a lot of others.

One of the things he was smart in was counting things, like bags of meth. Using the kind of mental math that you could take on a roadshow and pass off as magic, just by looking at a pile of bricks he could tell you how many bags there were, how much it all weighed (with an error margin of plus-minus two kilos), and compute for the street value of it within about ten seconds of making a bust.

At the start of his undercover career, after his team had made a bust, they would take all of the meth and the cash and tell Ting to meet them at their safehouse while they surrendered the stuff to evidence. This was a fine arrangement as Ting was blissfully unaware that what was getting busted was mostly going back on the street.

Once he found out, everything changed. Just as they were dumping a body the squad's leader, Boss Roy, got a call on his radio. It was a girl from one of the bars they were regulars at. It was a slow night and they needed their favorite customers; they were going to get treats. Roy and his boys couldn't resist, and so they had the new guy clean up after them. Ting would meet them at the bar after he delivered the evidence back at the camp.

The squad rode off, sirens blaring, while Ting packed up the bricks of meth. Thing was that he knew that some of it was missing. He didn't say anything that first time. But the next time he knew something was wrong. And the time after that he knew that he had to do something about it. Someone in his squad was pinching meth and putting it back on the street. He just couldn't be sure which one of them it was. So he had to take this up the ladder.

Kap, short for Police Captain Martin Peloseco, had been a friend of Ting's uncle, who had been shot down during a drug bust years earlier. And Kap had taken care of Ting when he was in the academy. It was Kap who had gotten Ting placed in the drug unit. And it was Kap to whom Ting ran with the revelation that someone in his squad was dirty.

Kap calmed him down, told him that he would take care of it, that he would figure out who it was and make sure that Ting came out alright. He told PO1 Lantakas that he was a good cop, that he did good by bringing him that information. Then he sent Ting to the safehouse to wait. Kap would sort it out, he'd call the squad in, get to the bottom of it all, then send someone out there to pick Ting up when it was all settled.

The police captain had hoped that Ting would have better senses (or worse, depending on how you see these things) than his uncle. When he picked Ting out,

he thought that the boy would turn out to be somebody he could use, somebody he could rely on.

And so Kap was regretful to have to take out yet another Lantakas. If only that family would just play by the rules, he thought. He left his office and headed to the gentleman's bar he frequented along Quezon Avenue. Kap looked forward to a few hours of being regaled by milky-skinned big-breasted women, all of them aware of who he was and more than willing to please the man they called Chief, so that he wouldn't have to think of either Lantakas.

And just as the first dancer, Stacy, pronounced by the DJ/announcer as "Ztay-Zee" (for some reason announcers in the strip bars insert and over-inflect the letter Z whenever the opportunity arises, so you would have girls like Zummerzzz, Zoo-Zanne, A-leezzz, and ZZZ-sharon) was seductively thrusting her bush into Kap's face, a few kilometers away Ting's tongue reached full extension and the epiphany occurred.

Ting dove to the safehouse floor just as the Armalite fire pierced through the walls. Two Armalites were firing, along with two .45s, and he didn't even have to think twice to know that the big booming was coming from Boss Roy's .44 Magnum. A round from the smaller arms caught his left calf on his dive down, but he managed to crawl and shimmy to the bathroom as the fire perforated the safehouse walls. The tiles of the bathroom exploded into tiny sharp shards that found their way into Ting's skin, but it was all still better than taking another round.

When the gunfire stopped Ting made his move. He climbed out of the bathroom window and tumbled to the hard earth outside the house just as he saw his squad, the members wearing balaclavas, hustling into the house. Roy held the door open and waved the squad in with his Magnum. The two with Armalites went in first, then the two with .45s. Ting crawled around so that he was lying beneath the window that looked into the living room.

Peeking up, his bloody hands on the window sill, Ting tried to keep his breathing quiet. He breathed through his mouth, which was now gaping open as he tried to think of what to do.

"He's not here, boss!" one of the Armalite guys said.

"Putang ina, where is he?"

Ting saw the Armalite guy's eye fall on his blood trail.

"Go, check the bathroom."

Boss Roy sat down in the same chair Ting had been sitting in just moments before. He scratched his head with the hand-cannon and muttered a few more curses.

Ting rolled his tongue around, snapped his mouth shut, and then clenched his teeth. The time for thinking was over. His right hand left the window sill and went to the small of his back, taking hold of the .38.

In a matter of seconds two well-placed rounds had brought the Armalites and their wielders down to the ground, puddles of blood pooling around them. Ting

took a .45 round in the gut from one man, as he took down the other with another good shot to the chest. Ting's left hand drooped down and he felt the hole in his belly even as he swung his right hand across, putting the shooter's head right up in the .38's sights. Brain matter stained the safehouse wall.

Boss Roy had frozen when the gunfight had started but now he popped out of his seat. He looked around for Ting and found Ting glaring at him through the window. Ting's arm had in those few seconds grown heavy, but he managed to fire off a last round that found Roy's head. The bullet entered Roy's left eyeball and left through the side of his skull.

Roy shot at the same time and the force of the round making impact with Ting's shoulder made it feel like it had ripped his whole arm off. His right arm hung limp off his shoulder and blood soaked through his shirt and pants. Ting stumbled to his car.

No one can tell you now how Ting survived those gunshot wounds. Some will credit a doctor, others the drugs, one or two will say it was the anting-anting he wore around his neck that protected him from the bullets.

After that night he disappeared. The story of how he got along varies depending on which family member of the Lantakas clan you ask. They'll all tell you that he escaped to friends in the province, but which province will vary. Some will tell you that he spent years in a coma. Others will tell you the time was spent in rehab, getting over his shabu addiction. There are a few details that can be agreed upon. He almost died; in fact he should have. He found a way back into law enforcement, but only many years after, as he lived off of money sent to him by various relatives, spent either on medical treatment or his drug addiction (again depending on whose story you listen to). He changed his name, had a family, disappeared from them when things got too "hot." The family's supposedly abroad somewhere, living off the stash of drug money Ting's squad amassed. Ting will neither confirm nor deny any rumors about him. He will, however, under the influence of enough Tanduay Rum, show off the entry and exit wound scars. He'll also show off his .38 every once in a while.

When Johnny Boy Salvador heard of his uncle's exploits as a child, he thought his Tito Ting a hero. With the stories of the anting-anting, the drug busts, the hiding out in the provinces on the run from crooked cops, how could he not hold his uncle up as a mythical figure?

As a teenager, he watched his uncle stumble out of his owner-type jeepney, fall to the dingy floor of the family garage, and vomit all over the ground. He lay in the pool of his sick, bits of sisig in his hair which was matted down with his digestive juices. Johnny Boy pulled his hero up from the ground, and then dropped his uncle onto the living room floor. He got a hose and washed it all away, the mythical hero lost with the bits of sisig and the rotten-smelling rum down the drain.

But now Johnny Boy needed help. And no one could help him but Tito Ting.