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## Chapter Eleven: The Apsara

Phnom Penh, November 1999.



The woman knelt before a small Buddha statue, her fingers touching together at her forehead. Brownish-black hair thick and silky fell straight to her shoulders. Three sticks of incense smouldered softly as she prayed. She bowed several times and then stood upright.

Her skin was a blend of soft shades of cream and tan. Elegantly long and thin eyelashes, shaped like the wings of a small and beautiful bird, sat over the bridge of her slender nose. A French man sired her mother, a Cambodian woman with Japanese ancestry. Her father was a mixed race Thai-Cambodian. The resulting genes gave out the best features of the four races.

Her heart was still scarred with the pain and loss, from so many years ago. Every day in some way, she was reminded of her sorrow and the brutality she and her family had suffered under the Khmer Rouge in 1974. Her solace now was from her work in Phnom Penh. And from her devotion to restoring the memories and treasures of the ancient Khmer Civilisation. She was an important team member of the *École Française d'Extrême-Orient*, doing ethno-archaeological research and fieldwork on the Khmer sites in Cambodia.

The phone rang and she turned and moved to answer it. She walked like a dancer: the movements fluid and timed. She was neither tall nor slender, short nor fat: people would call her well proportioned. She had the grace, charm and looks that one would expect to find in a stereotypically, beautiful young Asian woman.

But, she also had some Western ideas and attitudes. Women were equal to men, not superior nor inferior, just equal. Her career and lifestyle would be of her own choosing, and not subservient to

finding a man and getting married. Just over thirty years old, she was confident in herself, but not aggressive. Yet in many ways, she was reserved and withdrawn, perhaps a bit cold.

She stopped briefly at the phone, and flicked her hair backwards over her shoulders. A loose fitting, purple, cotton singlet hung from curvy shoulders. Loose, elastic gartered basketball shorts extended down to her knees.

She answered, her voice soft and gentle with the accent delightfully French. 'Bonsoir, this is Jorani Beauchamp.'

'Good evening Jorani. This is John...John Woods, Regional Advisor for Culture in Asia, from the UNESCO Office in Bangkok. How are you?'

Her excitement grew a little. 'Ah ... Jean, I am fine, thank you. Long time no see. And 'ow are you?'

'Well thanks, Jorani. Busy as usual. We have some new funding from the European Union, which is fantastic but a lot of extra work. This is why I need you to help us.'

Jorani sat down. 'Ah bien Jean. What do you 'ave in mind?'

'Well Jorani...we have a new excavation recently started in Butuan, Northern Mindanao, in the Philippines. I am looking for someone to lead the fieldwork with the Philippines team. In collaboration with the National Museum staff in Butuan. And I am interested in your ethno-archaeology skills to help us with reconstruction and restoration of the old boats they have found down there. It will be an assignment for about six weeks starting end of November or early in December. I am really hoping that you are available and interested.'

Jorani was several steps ahead of John, trying to figure out if she could be away from her current duties that long. She reached a decision quickly.

'Jean, we 'ave the rains right now, so most work are in office. I am 'appy to come to le Butuan and work for you.'

'Oh that's great news Jorani, wonderful. I'll send the contract for you to review today, then the tickets next week. Ciao.'

'Bye Jean and thank you.' She put the phone down slowly, deep in thought on the new assignment with growing excitement. To the Southern Philippines, and to investigate the old boats and artefacts found in the mud of the Libertad River, on the island of Mindanao.

She had never been to the Philippines before, but heard much about this troubled land. She knew of its rampant corruption, and unbridled population growth. The importance of religion and the central role of the Catholic Church, and its long history of contact with the Spanish culture and colonialism.

She had met many Filipinos, and had been struck by an apparently universal characteristic the people possessed. That was of a smiling and sunny disposition and a zest for life in the face of great adversity. The Latinos of Asia as some called them. Loud and fun loving, devoted to family. However, she knew also of the explosive forces that simmered beneath this external layer. An archipelago of 7107 islands and thousands of clans and chiefdoms, even kingdoms, brought together for a concept of one country by well meaning politicians. Held together by promises of development and prosperity for all. And by the concept of family, the social glue that was the building block in most relationships in the Philippines. An island chain that spread over nearly two thousand kilometres from north to south, that looked on a map like a jigsaw puzzle spilled onto the floor, with some bits joined, some linked and some missing. But, as someone had quipped to her, 'the sum of the parts is greater than the whole'.

'Butuan, Butuan where are you?' she softly sang to herself as she opened her atlas. She traced the coastal outlines until she found it. 'Oui, of course ... in Northern Mindanao.'

Mindanao: how exotic the name sounded. A place that hinted of colour, excitement and danger. The large island at the bottom of the archipelago, with a big hook of land that thrust out towards

Borneo. The evocative names such as Lanao del Norte, Zamboanga, Sultan Kudarat, Misamis Occidental spoke of the Spanish and Muslim past. And here lay the problem with Mindanao today. The age-old clash of two religions: Catholicism and Islam. The bounty of wealth and resources that Mindanao delivered was fractured by the armed conflicts that had raged since the fourteenth century. More lately by terrorist groups such as Abu Sayef. An island that could become a country in its own right, was now suffering from private armies, religious tension, terrorism and bloody conflict, which trapped so many in poverty and displaced them from their livelihoods.

Jorani thought again of her own troubled past, and the abject misery and torment that Cambodia and its people, slowly emerged from today. And her family, brutally killed in the name of political and cultural madness of the Democratic Kampuchea DK ideology. The time of no money, no markets, no education, no religion, no culture, no history, no property and no freedom, of any kind. The time of les misérables, misery, suffering and fear. For three years, eight months and twenty days the holocaust played out, leaving the family life destroyed by mad men, the fanatical and ruthless DK cadre.

*Why do we do this?*

An answer she could never find. Her way of dealing with the past was to rebuild it, to explore the wonders and unlock the secrets, of ancient cultures and kingdoms.

Her special area was the ethno-archaeology of the Indianised states of South East Asia. Those parts of modern day Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, once influenced by Indian Civilisation and religion.

*If only people knew how much we have in common with our shared past...*

She started reading in detail about Butuan, and was surprised about its long past, reaching back to the fifth century. The Kingdom of Butuan, was in turn, an ancient Indianized and then an Islamic culture that flourished near the present day Butuan City. It was well known for its gold and gold products, and had a well-established trading network across south East Asia, part of the Nan Hai route.

The large wooden boats called Balangay, were the means for how this trade was accomplished. Several of the boats had been found in the mud flats of the Libertad River. But the archaeological research and resources in the Philippines was both limited and fragmented. The picture of the history of trading ports across the Philippines was partly visible. There were some clues from old Spanish galleon shipyards, churches and watchtowers on the coast and old sites like that of Butuan.

In the Philippines, the history was not as evident as it was in Cambodia, where thousands of large temples, pagodas and other monuments and writings in stone, stood silent witness to the past. In the Philippines, history was much harder to see and touch. She would have a chance to help people see and touch a new part of their history.