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Chapter Three: Man and Mandala

Danang Vietnam, March 1975.

It was only a matter of time. The North Vietnamese Army was on the verge of taking Danang, at about the same time the Americans were ready to abandon it. The South Vietnamese Army had neither the will nor the means to intervene. For one man, Captain Nguyen Van Thanh in the South Vietnamese Army, there was no more hope for him and his family in Vietnam. Their future lay only in escape.

Van Thanh stubbed out his cigarette and placed an envelope of cash onto the table. Opposite him, three fishermen counted and sorted the greenbacks, the Aussie dollars and the French Francs.

One nodded and placed the envelope inside his shirt. 'Tonight at eight o'clock we go. Bring only clothes and water. There is space for four of you only.' He stood and left with the two other fishermen.

Thanh watched them leave. Soon he would be watching his family leave also. He could only find space for his wife and three children. His friend who was also leaving that night would look after Thanh's family during the trip. Thanh would take another trip after he had secured his family's exit and collected his gold bars and stolen artefacts for his own exit. He dreamt of a new life in a free country like the Philippines or Malaysia. He had chosen a refugee boat that was headed towards the Philippines as the chance of pirate attacks there were much less, compared with the Gulf of Thailand.

Thanh was a soldier and really knew nothing about the ocean, which in turn could be warm, tender and calming, then cold, merciless and murderous. He was not prepared for the possible dangers of the South China Sea, which lay between him and the Philippines. He placed his faith and hope, and the safety of his family in the Gods and in the fishermen.

Van Thanh lifted his three children onto the deck of the small and crowded vessel, next to his wife. It was dark and as his night vision strengthened, so did his apprehension. The boat was no more than 40 feet in length and looked more like one of the thousands of the round bottomed riverboats that plied the Mekong River, rather than an open sea vessel. And there were at least 50 people on board he counted. He turned and spoke to his wife Huyen and clutched her hands in his, hard. The moment of separation was fast approaching he knew, and he wanted to give courage and hope to his young family.

'Huyen my wife, take care of our children. I will follow you in the next month and see you in the Philippines.' He pressed a heavy gold chain into her hand. 'Wear this and use it when you land to give you a start.'

She did not look back at him, but he knew she was crying and trying to be brave for her children's sake. All around him, Thanh could hear the whimpers, the soft and urgent goodbyes, the laughter and squealing of young children, oblivious to the peril their parents had placed them in. He reached out and hugged his three children and wife, and kissed the tops of their heads. He closed his eyes, to stem the tears and to inhale and imprint into his mind forever, the scent and sound of his family.

For he knew there was a strong chance they would never meet again. But he would rest better knowing they had more chance in escaping a communist Vietnam, rather than staying and facing the 're-education camps', the suffering of post war famine and the retribution that would be inflicted on the traitorous South Vietnamese people by the fanatical North Vietnamese.

Three days out to sea, the ocean turned from a gentle blue and lazy swell, to a frenzied, foaming cauldron that tossed the boat like a cork in all directions. The people roped themselves together and to the boat. Their clothes were soaking; their bodies were cold and their bellies empty. Then the storm stopped, the sun came out and their spirits lifted again. The ocean was once again calm and still, and mothers busied to dry the clothes of their children. The fishermen were able to catch some sea birds and they all ate a simple stew and rice.

On the fifth day, they sighted the first of a group of islands in the distance. The fishermen told the passengers they would soon be on dry land, as they were approaching the Southern Philippines. Huyen's hope and confidence grew. She knew they were getting close and soon would be in a new homeland. To start a new life. With the blessings of the gods, Thanh would soon join her and the children.

She smiled as she tussled the head of her youngest son. She hugged her children and told them soon they would be in their new country and their father would be with them next week. She closed her eyes and remembered their house in Vietnam and her mother and father. Despite her happiness tears fell. The sorrow of having to make choices and leaving loved ones behind. And her country and way of life.

Then she heard the noises. Something had changed. The fishermen began shouting and ordering the passengers to get down inside the boat's hull, and they turned the boat away from the island group. That was when Huyen saw the boats fast approaching from in front of their boat. Soon the first of two boats was alongside them and fired two shots at the fishermen, wounding them both. Huyen could see about ten heavily armed men dressed like fishermen in the first boat, who yelled and jeered at the boat people. Then their own boat slowed and stopped and the men climbed aboard.

Huyen now felt great fear and helpless. It seemed to her that they were so close, and had survived the cruelty of sea. Now she did not know if they would survive the cruelty of these pirates. With great speed and ruthlessness, they clubbed and hacked at the men with big sticks and machetes and soon the deck was red and slippery with blood. They stole the valuables from the men and then turned on the women and children.

Huyen held her children to her and pushed her way to the back of the boat. She watched helplessly as her friends were raped and brutalised. Children were snatched from mothers and thrown overboard, despite the pleadings and offers of their mothers. Huyen saw two men advancing towards her. She grabbed her children and tied them to her with a rope from the ship, then jumped into the ocean. The pirates laughed and waited for them to surface, and when they did, they used bamboo poles to hold them under the water. Huyen and her children could not swim and soon they stopped struggling. The pirates left them, and the sea took them from this life and from their father and husband.

Van Thanh made his plans to follow his family. First, he had to gather his wealth and collection of temple statues and artefacts he had obtained as an amateur treasure hunter, from historic sites across

Vietnam. Especially those from the Champa holy lands. Thanh had seen much of his ancestors' monuments and buildings obliterated in the past 10 years. He had seen some spectacular temple treasures seized by the South Vietnamese Army from museums and archaeological sites, ostensibly to be sold to finance the war effort. But in reality, it was the Generals who hoarded them or sold them on to wealthy Thai black marketers.

Thanh had been involved in such dealings and with each one his desire and interest in the artefacts increased. Now he had his own modest collection, many of which he believed to be of great archaeological value and spiritual powers. Thanh had become knowledgeable about the ancient empires that flourished before modern day Vietnam came into being, along the ancient Nan Hai trade routes. Especially the Champa Kingdom. He had been to many Champa sites as a young man during French colonial times. Working on excavations. Getting to know and trade in the black market for antiquities.

For a weapon, he chose a 38 Special revolver and three boxes of bullets. Inside his bag, he also carried three grenades, which he could use in the event of a pirate attack. Yes, he would take no chances, and with luck and good planning would soon be again with his family.

It was almost a month after his family had left that Thanh found out what had happened to them. An American Radio Operator at the Danang airbase was destroying radios and other communications gear, when Thanh walked in for a routine Viet Cong status report. That was when he spotted the Manila Bulletin newspaper and the story of a pirate attack on a refugee boat in the Southern Philippines. Van Thanh felt sick and his heart was beating very fast. With dread, he read on and then he saw the name of the boat. The same boat that he had put his wife and children aboard.

Thanh hurried to the house of his friend who had also been on the boat. He spoke to the family members but they had no news from their son and his family. They were deeply worried, but Thanh did not tell them what he had read in the newspaper. He was now too numb to care or think about others.

He made his way back to his house and entered the neat but now so lonely, little cottage. He saw the pictures of his wife and three children; he went to the cupboard to smell some of their clothes they had left behind. That same scent he had inhaled in the boat, a mixture of pandan leaves and jasmine flowers. Then he saw the toy boat he made for his son just a few days ago, a model of the boat they had died on. He remembered the squeals of delight, the laughter from his son and the enjoyment they both had shared from this small and simple toy.

Tears fell silently down his brown and parched face, at first slowly like the first drops of a tropical storm. Then they came in a torrent and with it, Thanh unleashed his sorrow, in a squall of shouting, anger and frustration. As the storm ebbed, he came to a decision and reached for his service revolver. He placed one round into the chamber and spun it, then placed it back onto the table in front of him. He walked to the kitchen and fetched a ceramic teacup and a bottle of Xeo, rice wine favoured by the village people across much of Vietnam.

Thanh wanted to find out why the Gods had taken his family. He felt angry and betrayed. His faith and belief in the Gods was questioned. His own future was now doubtful. An hour passed with him staring at the bottle and the revolver. Then he reached forward, put the bottle to his lips, and drank. A long pull in one gulp, the wine was warm and with a strong alcohol taste. It burned his throat and stomach. He closed his eyes and waited. Nothing changed so he took another long sip from the bottle. Soon he began to relax a little. He knew that he would soon be weak having not eaten for a day now.

He leaned forward and stared closely at the revolver then picked it up and stroked the barrel. He fetched one of his temple treasures, a small silver statue of the Buddhist God Tara, God of

compassion, and placed this on the table next to the revolver. Then he lit some incense sticks, offered prayers, and sought guidance from this deity.

Virtuous mother, show me my way. Why was my family taken from me? Do you have another reason for me to live? Am I to stay here in this life or die now and join my family?

He chanted some verses and knelt silently, swaying from the alcohol, but his mind was clear.

At last satisfied, he sat back onto a chair. He placed the revolver onto his lap, and took another pull from his wine bottle. He lay back in the chair and closed his eyes. He was looking for an answer. But the question had always eluded him. Until now. He knew the question now.

Will the mandala protect me and keep me strong?

Thanh was calm and peaceful as he reached for the revolver and held it in his hand for a moment. Then he placed the barrel into his mouth, slanted upwards.

He had killed many Viet Cong. Some in sport, he had forced them to blow their own brains out. He now realised that feeling of terror they must have felt, and a sense of great impending loss filled him. The loss of his own life and the loss of his family, which he had caused.

He looked back to the statue of Tara and smiled. He did not close his eyes but turned his head to look at the picture of his family. His last image in this life, before he pulled the trigger.

A small click and nothing. The game of Russian roulette won, this round at least to Thanh. He spun the barrel again and placed the revolver onto the table. He made offerings and prayers again to the deity, then took another swig of the wine. This time he placed the gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger in one movement.

Another click and nothing. Thanh laughed out of relief and irony. He prayed again to his deity and knew that if he survived the third round, he would have his answer. He took the revolver and spun the chamber again, and watched it spin, mesmerised like a young child with a spinning top. He placed the barrel into his mouth and this time so casually pulled the trigger.

Silence followed a small click, and Thanh smiled thinly. He had his answer. He would live. His path now was with the ancient temple treasures and their Gods and deities, who would protect him, give him a long life, and keep him strong and virile. His family was sacrificed for him to reach this enlightened state. In return, he would assemble his own mandala, a sacred circle of Hindu deities as a symbolic representation of the world. He would seek these temple treasures and artefacts with the mystical and holy powers, to sustain him through his life. So that he could serve the will of his Gods. But for his own ends. By assembling his own mandala and being surrounded by the immortal gods who would give him the life energy he sought, he would become enlightened, but on his own terms.

Thanh placed the revolver with its single bullet into his two suitcases, along with his treasures and weapons. The photos of his wife and family, his life before today, would stay in the house, trapped in the past. Thanh knew there was no room for sentiments in the future, or memories of this life. His family was now dead, his old life dead. He felt relaxed, but not drunk as he gathered some clothes and dressed for his journey. He felt alive and intensely hungry.

He collected some water into plastic bottles, filled the rest of his suitcase with bananas, and dried fish. He wrapped some cooked rice in banana leaves. Satisfied and calm, he closed his suitcases and walked to the front door. He looked around the room a last time as he stood at the doorway. He would never return to this house, this village, his birthplace. Perhaps never to Vietnam again. Tonight he would join a people smuggler's boat bound for the Philippines. There he would start a new life and become an enlightened being. Close to his deities, Thanh would be protected and nurtured by them. He would amass a fortune and power to build his mandala, and to harness the life giving forces he believed this would give to him.