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Martin O. Koch

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Beginning Part 3

Beginning of Glossary

About the Author

The Reef of Lost Fish

Novel

on the Philippines and on Diving



For my brother Andy

Prolog

Polo slowly followed his air bubbles to the surface. He grabbed the aluminium ladder and threw his mask and fins into the boat. Once on board, he took off the rest of his equipment and lay down in the sun.

He still enjoyed these somewhat dangerous solo dives at his favourite diving spot. Even though the small reef was no longer a secret after all the headlines.

A seagull screeched above him. What had it seen in its lifetime? Seagulls lived up to thirty years, so it was quite possible that it had witnessed the tragic events. Polo's face darkened. Maybe it even knew what had happened to the missing boat with the bodies.

Polo's real name wasn't Polo, it was Marco. Marco Berger, the boy from Seewen, a small village in the green hills of north-western Switzerland. Even as a child, he was fascinated by faraway countries, reading Jack London and Jules Verne, dreaming and talking about the most adventurous journeys. When their history teacher told them about Marco Polo, the Venetian merchant who had become famous in the Middle Ages for his fantastic travelogues, suddenly everyone called him Polo. Marco Berger became Polo, first for his schoolmates, then for his teachers, and finally even for his parents and himself.

But all the adventures in the novels were nothing compared to what he himself would later experience on the Philippine island of Coralia. It all started quite innocently, he remembered, as he followed the flight of the screaming seagull with half-closed eyes.

Part 1

Polo

Drizzle, Polo thought as he stepped out onto Westbourne Terrace, drizzle again. The same drizzle that plagues London every Monday morning. At least, that's how it seemed to him, especially in October. Like most people, he liked dry, sunny weather, but he also liked proper rain or even snow, but that was rare in London. Anything was better than this sticky drizzle. Only native English people seemed not to mind it. They probably had special organs for it, gills hidden behind their ears or something. Polo had been living in London for two years and had nothing against the English, on the contrary. On days like this, however, he had something against pretty much everything and everyone.

He buttoned up his trench coat, opened his umbrella and set off towards Lancaster Gate underground station. Next to him, rush-hour traffic slowly inched its way along the four-lane road, only to disappear further ahead in a cloud of spray and exhaust fumes.

The first day back at work after the holidays had always been difficult for him, and he was hardly alone in that. But getting back into the swing of things was becoming increasingly difficult for him. Even though he had a good job at a renowned private bank that many envied him for. But due to the economic crisis since the bursting of the technology bubble on the stock markets and the attack on the World Trade Centre, the working atmosphere there was just as miserable as in the entire financial sector. One crisis meeting after another, and everyone was trembling for their jobs, from the porter to the senior manager. Polo's position was not particularly at risk, but you never knew. He found everyday office life more torturous than ever.

As always during rush hour, he spent the 20-minute journey standing, wedged between wet raincoats. Since he didn't even have enough room to leaf through the Financial Times, he continued to brood in his Monday morning gloom. What was he doing in this crowd, in this hectic city, on his way to this greed-driven financial centre? Why on earth was he still in banking?

Of course, he remembered well how, after studying economics, he hadn't been able to find a job in development aid and had been left hanging in limbo for what seemed like an eternity. The situation on the job market had thwarted his plans. With little enthusiasm, he had accepted a job offer from a bank as a stopgap. But to his own surprise, he had enjoyed a meteoric rise there. One thing led to another, and now, almost twenty years after starting this temporary solution, he had a management position in the financial city of London. Nevertheless, he still felt like a guest passing through the industry, not only in bad times.

He was relieved when the Central Line finally pulled into St. Paul's station and poured its pinstriped contents onto the platform. Polo followed the stream of commuters through the endless tunnels with their leaden smell and up the equally endless escalators to the exit, and was somehow glad to be back in the drizzle.

Just a few days ago, he had been caught in a real downpour on the Philippine island of Palawan. He had just set off for his hotel, freshly showered after a dive, when the first huge drops fell from the sky. Polo had just managed to save himself by ducking through the open door into the dive centre office, and then it started.

"Welcome to the ark!" Tom, the Swiss owner of the business, had greeted him and made him a fragrant espresso. Polo had already met his compatriot briefly, and they had hit it off

right away. While a small tropical deluge was pouring down outside, the two had one of those spontaneous and open-hearted conversations that sometimes occur between strangers who will probably never see each other again.

Tom had been living on Palawan for many years, had founded the company and, despite initial resistance, had made it flourish. He also owned a diving centre on a small island called Coralia. But because of the distance, he could hardly take care of it. When Polo told him about his life in London and also hinted at his weariness with banking, Tom smiled almost without hesitation: "Why don't you join me as a partner? Take over half of the business on Coralia and run it locally. That would help us both." Polo laughed and did not pursue the offer. It was only later at the hotel that it occurred to him that Tom might not have been joking.

Polo walked along the north side of St Paul's Cathedral, crossed Ludgate Hill and, after a few more steps, entered the bank through the staff entrance. As soon as the heavy door closed behind him, he leaned against the wall for a moment, closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Polo's mood did not improve in the days that followed. And while the daily frustrations became increasingly difficult to bear, the potential exit scenario soon developed into a kind of place of longing, where he mentally escaped to in his darkest moments. At first playfully, then more and more seriously, he soon began to ask himself: Why not?

Something had to happen at some point, otherwise he would go crazy.

Finally, he picked up the phone. A few conversations, video conferences and emails later, the dreamy idea had turned into a contractually agreed business partnership. Polo had not only taken over the operational management of the neglec-

ted diving centre on a tiny island he had never set foot on, but had also invested a large part of his savings in it. With Tom's help, he brushed aside the doubts and concerns that kept cropping up. Although he had no experience in running a small business and was unfamiliar with local conditions, he was an economist, had gained experience in organisation and management in Western Europe, and had been an enthusiastic diver for a long time. He would learn the rest on the job and from Tom.

And in the worst case, he could always sell his share again. He might lose money, but he would certainly gain experience.

Polo flew from London via Manila to the 450 km long island of Palawan in the south-west of the Philippines. In the provincial capital of Puerto Princesa, often abbreviated to Puerto by the locals, he loaded his suitcases and bags into a van with a driver who was to take him to the small coastal town of Roxas in two hours. The bumpy country road led through lush bushland and small clusters of huts with banana trees and palm trees, as well as directly along the sea. The rainforest here had already been sacrificed to forestry. Again and again, they overtook tricycles, motorcycles with small passenger cabins, which are popular as local transport, and colourfully painted jeepneys pimped up with chrome parts. These jeeps, converted into public minibuses, could accommodate 14 passengers plus luggage, chickens and other small animals. Early in the morning in Roxas, Polo chartered a small bangka, one of the outrigger boats moored on the beach. During the crossing, he sat at the very front of the bow and watched spellbound as the island they were approaching gradually grew larger and revealed more and more details.

His island, Coralia.

He was completely exhausted from lack of sleep, but the excitement of arriving kept him wide awake. Tom had called him shortly before his departure to tell him that he would not be able to pick him up due to a staff shortage at the other diving centre. However, he would come to Coralia as soon as circumstances allowed to introduce Polo to his new job. Polo didn't mind that at all, as it meant he could first take a look around on his own and get an unbiased impression of his new workplace. Besides, the staff at the diving centre could help him: the Filipino crew and, above all, Jo, the Scottish diving instructor who was currently managing the place.

There was absolutely no wind and the sea was as smooth as glass. The island dozed in the morning sun, a picture of peace. It was bigger than he had imagined. But then there was also a small fishing village and three hotels with restaurants and bars for tourists. There were palm trees everywhere. There was not a single paved road, not even in the village, only sandy paths and trails.

"Is that the diving centre?" he asked the boatman, pointing to the small building on the beach. He had to shout over the roar of the outboard motor.

"Swiss Chalet," the young man shouted back and nodded. Noticing Polo's puzzled look, he explained, "That's what everyone on Coralia calls Mr Tom's diving centre." Like most Filipinos, he spoke very good American English. Since US colonial rule in the first half of the 20th century, English had been the second official language of the Philippines and was widely spoken.

The little blue house between the palm trees at the top of the beach resembled a Swiss chalet about as much as a coconut resembles Emmentaler cheese. It had a palm leaf roof and looked like a simple beach hut, but you could see that there was another building behind it. Polo knew from a sketch

Tom had emailed him that the back part housed the rooms for the compressor, materials and diving equipment, as well as a small workshop. The beach hut housed the office, a lounge for rainy days and a training room. In the forecourt, there were a few tables and chairs under a palm leaf roof. In the basins on one side of the building, tourists could rinse their equipment with fresh water after diving, and on the other side there were toilets and showers.

A few metres from the beach, the boatman stalled the engine. They glided almost silently past the two bangkas of the diving centre until the sand crunched under the bow. Then there was absolute silence. Polo heard no wind, no waves, nothing, not even birdsong. And there was no one to be seen far and wide. The welcoming committee consisted of a man-gy beach dog, who looked at him with little enthusiasm. Polo's watch showed twenty past nine, so presumably someone was already at the centre. The daily diving operations should have started long ago, but perhaps they were busy with guests or hadn't heard the engine noise from up there. Tom hadn't forgotten to announce his arrival, had he? Never mind, Polo thought, I can manage the few steps on my own. He threw his luggage ashore and jumped off the boat. His bare feet sank into the warm sand.

"Welcome to Coralia," he murmured to himself, "welcome home!"

He left his things lying there and set off. It smelled of the sea and tropical flowers. The air was humid and hot, just like on his last holiday. Sweat was already running down his back as he stood in front of the beach hut and let his gaze wander. The forecourt was a mess of overturned tables and chairs, empty beer bottles, cigarette butts and used crockery with leftover food. He entered the lounge, where he was met with a similar sight. A Filipino man was sleeping on the sofa.

"Good morning," said Polo in English.

No response.

"Good morning!" he repeated in a louder voice, with the same result.

Polo gently shook the man's shoulder, whereupon he sat up with a start and opened his eyes wide.

"What's going on?" he stammered in English, after first uttering a torrent of words in the local language, Tagalog.

"Good morning," Polo repeated kindly.

"Yes, yes, good morning, but why are you waking me up?"

"Sorry, but it's almost half past nine."

"So what? What do you want?" He stroked his thin moustache. "If you want to go diving, please come back at two o'clock."

"Two o'clock?" replied Polo, "Don't you do any diving in the morning?"

"Not today. Come back later. We'll do a nice dive this afternoon."

"And why aren't you going diving this morning?" Polo pressed.

The man looked at him in astonishment for a moment, then yawned: "Too much swell. The sea is too rough."

"The sea is as calm as a bowl of soup."

"It is now, but a storm might be coming."

"And you want to go diving this afternoon?"

"The storm will be over by then," the man waved him off. "In any case, it's not possible now. Come back later, then we'll see." He made a move to lie down again.

"Where's Jo? I'd like to talk to Jo."

"No idea." He seemed to be thinking. "How do you know Jo? Who are you anyway?"

"I'm Polo, the new base manager. And who are you?"

The Filipino looked at Polo as if he were dealing with a ghost. Suddenly he jumped up and held out his hand. "Sir

Polo from Switzerland! Welcome. I'm one of the two dive masters here. Everyone calls me Mr Lee."

"Very pleased to meet you, Mr Lee. Please don't call me sir. Polo and you is fine."

Mr Lee nodded and smiled warmly.

"And where is Jo, please?" Polo smiled back.

"Jo? You know, we weren't expecting you for another week."

"Sorry," Polo chuckled. "Where is Jo?"

"I'm not sure, maybe in the office?"

"Let's go and check." Polo turned and walked to the counter, behind which, according to Tom's sketch, was the office area. Sure enough, a man was sitting on a swivel chair, his head and upper body on the desk, snoring. The fingers of his right hand loosely enclosed a half-full bottle of San Miguel. Not wanting to play alarm clock again, Polo asked Mr Lee, "Jo has his nose deep in the files. Could you please get him out of there?"

Mr Lee looked at him questioningly at first, then hurried into the office.

Polo stepped back out onto the forecourt and sat down on the only wooden chair still standing at the long table. He could hear muffled voices from inside. He took off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from the sides of his nose. He had to squint his tired eyes, which hurt in the bright sunlight, intensified by the reflection of the sand and water. He quickly put his sunglasses back on and leaned back. The view was picture-postcard perfect: in front of him lay the white sandy beach with the three bangkas and behind it the turquoise blue sea.

After a few minutes, Jo appeared in the doorway. He wasn't particularly tall, nor was he particularly slim. His head was adorned with a few sun-bleached strands of hair. He staggered a few steps out onto the forecourt and bent down to pick up

an overturned chair, visibly struggling to keep his balance. After successfully grabbing the chair by the backrest, he placed it opposite Polo at the table and let himself fall onto it.

"Welcome to Swiss Chalet," he grinned, "How are you?"

"A little tired," Polo smiled, "but otherwise fine. And you?"

Jo rubbed his reddened eyes and finally hid them behind sunglasses as well. Then he shrugged his shoulders and spread his arms. "How could you not be fine, in the middle of paradise?"

"Did a typhoon hit here yesterday?" Polo asked, pointing to the mess.

Jo looked around as if he were only now really noticing his surroundings. "Oh, no. Just a little party."

"What was there to celebrate? Looks like a once-in-a-century occasion."

"Something like that, a birthday."

Polo studied Jo's face, estimating him to be around 40. "Your birthday, Jo? Did you have a milestone birthday?"

"Not exactly. A friend of Mr Lee's cousin. He turned 27. Or was it 26?" Jo looked around again. "Things got a little out of hand, which can easily happen here."

"Aren't you going diving this morning? Don't you have any customers for the morning dive, any courses running?"

"Nope, not much going on at the moment. The dry season has only just begun, so the tourists may not have noticed yet. The season always starts a bit slowly here. Then there's the incident in Puerto Princesa. The attack by Abu Sayyaf, the Islamic extremists, maybe you've heard about it. Last year, they kidnapped and beheaded several people from a beach hotel. That might scare some people off from spending their diving holiday in this region. But maybe the visitors will still come, as I said, the season has only just begun."

"And what do you plan to do?"

“Do? What do you mean?”

“Have you planned any measures to boost business?”

“Oh, marketing and stuff?”

“Something like that.”

“We don’t get any of that here,” Jo waved it off, “the boss takes care of that personally.”

“But don’t you and Tom discuss it at all? He can’t really get the shop going without your support from afar. You’re his representative on site, after all.”

„Sure, but only recently. And I’m only doing it temporarily, I made that clear to Tom. It’s worked out quite well so far, but Tom hasn’t been in touch for a while now. So I’m not quite up to speed. With you, we finally have a boss on site, a real professional. City banker, right?” He smiled inscrutably. “Nothing can go wrong now.”

“OK,” Polo replied, ignoring the hint. “We’ll manage. But right now, I need some rest.”

“Yes, relax. Lie down in the hammock with a beer and get settled in.”

“Not a bad idea,” Polo yawned. “Could you please show me this beach house that’s waiting for me?”

“Sure, I’ll take you to the property.”

A smile played around Jo’s lips.

“Great. I’ll leave my luggage on the beach for a moment.”

Jo remained motionless with a frozen smile.

“So, shall we go?” Polo stood up. When Jo still didn’t move, he added, “Is something wrong?”

“Well, we weren’t expecting you for another week.”

“Really?” Suddenly it dawned on Polo: “Is the house not ready yet?”

„Well, no one has lived in it for quite a while. But that’s no problem, it can be fixed in no time. I’ll send some of our people over to take care of it. By the way, it’s not a real villa

with a swimming pool and all that, more like a kind of ... bungalow.”

They hadn’t walked more than 150 metres along the beach when Jo pointed to some undergrowth at the edge of the palm grove: “There it is.”

On closer inspection, the undergrowth turned out to be an overgrown garden with a large but rather neglected beach hut in the middle. Rubbish and flotsam were scattered everywhere, and the local flora and fauna seemed to be reclaiming the man-made structure.

Polo had originally planned to join the afternoon dive, but now he decided against it. He wanted to brief the two assistants that Jo wanted to send him right away. He would have plenty of opportunities to dive in the near future.

When no one had shown up after an hour, Polo grabbed some tools and a broom and set to work alone, despite the heat. Another hour later, Jo and Mr Lee showed up. They explained somewhat contritely that the outboard motor on the dive boat had not started and the afternoon dive had been cancelled. They assured Polo that the mechanic was on his way and helped him repair his accommodation in return. Shortly before sunset, the worst of the work was done and Polo was finally able to put Jo’s suggestion into practice: he fetched a cold beer from the dive centre and retired to the hammock in front of his hut. He enjoyed the view of the beach, the sea and the sunset for a few sips, then jet lag overwhelmed him.

Polo intended to take two weeks’ holiday after his arrival and not get involved in the business if possible. His business partner Tom had told him that until a few months ago, a Swiss friend had been looking after the centre. However, he had quite unexpectedly lost interest, quit his job and travelled to Australia. But not without first relieving the cash register of

some cash. Since then, Jo had been running the company, but only temporarily, as he had neither the desire nor the talent for it. At least the business should be able to continue running reasonably well without Polo, he tried to reassure himself, at least no worse than before.

Before throwing himself into his new job, he needed to recover from his last few rather hectic weeks in the City of London. He wanted to get to know the island and its inhabitants without any time or work pressure and take part in the diving trips as a guest. This also gave him the opportunity to get to know his employees and the work processes a little, but as far as possible only as an observer, without intervening. He didn't want to criticise, make suggestions for improvement, or solve any problems. He would have time for that later.

However, it wasn't easy for him to put this plan into action, because everywhere he looked, he discovered problems, or at least opportunities for improvement. And despite his presence, Jo and the rest of the staff's enthusiasm for work showed no signs of overflowing in the days that followed. The Scotsman seemed strange to him. Although Polo had agreed with him that he would continue to bear full responsibility as base manager during these two weeks and would be paid for it, he was demonstratively indifferent to business matters. On a personal level, he was reserved and not exactly friendly towards Polo. Polo hoped that this would improve, because he was dependent on Jo.

On his first day, Polo settled into his bamboo hut. It was just far enough away from the diving centre that the noise of the compressor didn't bother him, but he could still keep an eye on things.

After his afternoon dive, he set off on his own to explore the island. Coralia was a little paradise. An idyllic microcosm

where one could live peacefully, without noticing much of the rest of the world. There wasn't much here, but there was everything one needed. During his walk, Polo had the vague feeling that he had been searching for something like this for a long time without realising it.

Surrounding the village were vegetable fields and orchards for personal use, as well as palm groves. Just beyond that was dense tropical forest. Almost the entire island was surrounded by a white sandy beach, interrupted by short rocky sections that were controlled by seabirds. The Swiss Chalet was located about a 15-minute walk west of the village and was the only diving centre on the island. Not far away, set back among the palm trees, were three simple beach hotels for individual and diving tourists; otherwise, there were no neighbours. In just under an hour, he had walked around the entire island.

From then on, several diving trips were offered daily, and apart from Polo, there were usually a few paying customers, all guests from the surrounding hotels. Together they prepared their equipment, sat down in the *bangka* and were taken to one of around 40 dive sites. There, the guide briefed them on the local features of the reef and fauna, and then they jumped into the bright blue water.

The underwater landscape was overwhelming. The coral gardens were teeming with an incredible number and variety of fish, crabs and molluscs. Ghost pipefish, mantis shrimp, anglerfish, seahorses and many other creatures rare elsewhere populated the reefs. During the day, the divers observed groupers having their gills cleaned by cleaner shrimp and turtles nibbling on sponges. And before they slipped into the hunting scenes of the trevally and moray eels on night dives, they gathered around staghorn corals at dusk and watched the mandarin fish mating.

When the divers emerged from the water, they were usually in good spirits from their shared experience in this enchanting world, a world of bizarre shapes and colours, of whimsical creatures and behaviours so different from their everyday surroundings. Often there was a gleam in their eyes that one would otherwise associate with yoga, tai chi or other forms of meditation, or with drugs. After just a few dives, Polo felt light and relaxed, and the City of London seemed infinitely distant, and not just geographically.

On the fourth day, between the second morning and afternoon dives, Polo took a short trip with Jo. Barefoot and silent, they strolled along the beach. At the fishing boats, they slipped into their flip-flops and took the sandy path into the village – essentially the main street. There was hardly any wind, and the hot air made everything feel sluggish. Most people were probably taking a siesta in their huts, which were built on stilts to protect them from flooding and vermin. Some had made themselves comfortable in the shade underneath or on the veranda in hammocks. Half a dozen children were playing near a kind of concrete base. They splashed each other with water and screamed with delight.

“One of the village wells,” explained Jo. “Not as pretty as the ones in London.”

“True.”

„It’s not just for decoration either. Most of the villagers don’t have running water. They have to fill their containers here and carry them home. Unfortunately, this fresh water is undrinkable. It can only be used for washing clothes, personal hygiene and the like. Filipinos are a very clean people, even the simple folk. Drinking water is brought twice a week by boat from Palawan and has to be carried from the landing stage through the whole village to the huts.“

“That’s quite inconvenient.”

“The downside of the picture-postcard idyll. Running water and flush toilets are only available in the homes of the wealthiest, and of course in our homes and in hotels.”

“And what about electricity?” asked Polo as they continued walking. “Do people have electricity?”

“That’s not so easy either. There’s no power station here, and no high-voltage power lines from Palawan. The wealthier families, like the Swiss Chalet and the hotels, have their own diesel generators – smaller ones, of course – while others have bought one together. Those who don’t have one have to buy their electricity from their neighbours.”

“So we live quite comfortably in our bungalows.”

“And the hotel guests even more so. We don’t have luxury resorts here on the island like in the Maldives, and our own huts are also quite simple, but there is still an enormous wealth gap between us and the locals.”

They continued their walk through the sleepy village. There were a few stone houses and mostly the traditional nipas, picturesque bamboo huts with palm leaf roofs. Jo stopped in front of one.

“This is where our guide, Mr Lee, lives. Pretty, isn’t it?”

“Oh yes, just like my hut. I feel very comfortable in it. Pure nature.”

“Except that Mr Lee doesn’t live here alone, but with his whole family. Parents, wife, children, brothers and sisters with their children. A total of about a dozen people live in there.” Jo turned away and walked on.

Polo took in the hut with his eyes, then followed him.

A few steps further on, they stopped in front of a wooden shed with a corrugated iron roof. Above the door hung a weathered board with the hand-painted inscription “coop”.

“That’s the name of one of the big supermarket chains in Switzerland,” Polo smiled.

„This is also a general store, with things for everyday needs. However, the range is probably a little more modest than in your Swiss supermarket. The people here are mainly self-sufficient. They live off fishing, grow some vegetables and, of course, coconuts, bananas and other fruits, such as the disgustingly smelly durian. They trade any surplus among themselves or sell it in Roxas, the small coastal town over on Palawan. And with the few pesos they earn, they buy what they still need in this shop. Soap, pots and so on.“

They had to get back for the afternoon dive. Jo hurried ahead with his eyes downcast and did not seem to want to continue the conversation. Polo hurried after him and was just able to call a thank you to the Scotsman as he turned off towards his hut.

Over the next few days, Polo took several short walks through the village. The locals smiled at Polo warmly and were happy to engage in brief conversations in simple English. In his eyes, they lived very simply by European standards, but they seemed content. At least, that was the impression he got as he strolled along the sandy paths between the huts. Children were playing everywhere, and the adults sat or stood together in small groups, mending fishing nets, cleaning vegetables or coconuts and chatting. However, he was aware that he had no idea about the circumstances behind this tranquil backdrop, about the problems and hardships of these people. After all, the simple life that seemed so romantic to tourists’ eyes could also be seen as bitter poverty.

The weather had been very unsettled since Polo’s arrival. Every day there were several abrupt changes between sun and rain, which was not unusual for Palawan and the surrounding

islands in November. Sometimes, even the last typhoons of the season swept across the archipelago from the Pacific, causing considerable destruction, but gradually the dry season began. The monsoon winds shifted from southwest to northeast, the rainfall decreased and the sunny periods became longer. The humidity remained high, but the average daytime temperature fell below 30 degrees, and the night-time temperature even below 25 degrees. However, even in the dry season, there were still frequent short and heavy rain showers, often as sudden as if someone had flicked a switch.

On the Saturday morning of his first weekend on Coralia, a bright blue sky shone over Polo as he strolled to the dive centre after breakfast, as he did every day. It was suspiciously quiet there.

“Not a single customer today,” Jo grunted by way of greeting. He had made himself comfortable in a wicker chair on the shady forecourt and was smoking a cigarette. “There are no bookings for tomorrow either. So I’ve given almost all the staff the day off until Monday morning. That way they can spend Sunday relaxing with their families. I hope that’s OK with you, boss.” He emphasised the last word.

“Not a single customer!?” Polo repeated, wrinkling his nose. “Then there’s really no point in everyone hanging around here doing nothing. Business really doesn’t seem to be going well. We definitely need to come up with something.” He wiped the sweat from his forehead. “And I would have loved to go diving today.”

“We can still go out,” Jo suggested, “I kept a boatman here especially for that. I thought you might want to go in the water.”

“OK, sounds good. Where are we going?”

“I could show you an interesting cave. We discovered it by chance just two months ago. However, the entrance is 42 me-

tres deep, so we can't include this dive site in our normal programme. It's more for people with a lot of experience, or for technical divers with their special breathing gas mixtures." In a slightly mocking tone, he continued: "But as a financial shark, you're well suited to the water, so the two of us could explore the cave a bit, if you like. It would be a kind of pioneering work. And afterwards, we'll do a leisurely dive somewhere in the shallows."

"OK," Polo agreed, "I'm in."

"I thought so. That's why I had your equipment brought to the bangka. We can set off right away." He stubbed out his cigarette in the sand, got up and headed for the water.

Polo picked up the cigarette butt and threw it in the ashtray, then followed him down the beach. He didn't really feel like spending the whole day on a small bangka with the arrogant Scotsman and one of the silent boatmen, but the dives appealed to him. Exploring virtually untouched dive sites, just the two of them, sounded good. And caves were always interesting, mysterious, sometimes even a little scary. But Jo had already dived there and knew his way around. He would get along with him anyway, sooner or later he would have to. And you couldn't talk underwater.

When they arrived at the Sleeping Butterfly, the smaller of the two outrigger boats belonging to the diving centre, the boatman was just hoisting the compressed air cylinders on board.

Polo climbed over the railing and checked his equipment while Jo pushed the bangka through the gently lapping waves and then climbed aboard as well. They chugged north along the coast of Coralina for about ten minutes, then turned east into the open sea. The outboard motor roared and the fabric roof fluttered in the wind. Polo dozed on one side, Jo on the other, and the boatman crouched at the helm in the stern. To protect himself from the sun, he had wrapped himself from

head to toe in cloth, as is customary among local fishermen, with only his eyes visible. He looked a bit like a Tuareg.

After half an hour, he said something to Jo in Tagalog, whereupon Jo got up and went forward. As the captain slowed down at that moment, the boat began to rock, but Jo didn't budge. He stood at the bow like a figurehead, staring into the water. Polo could see the reef, but apparently they weren't in the right spot yet. With hand signals and short shouts, Jo indicated to the boatman which direction to steer, so they continued to bob along very slowly.

"Where on earth is it?" Polo could finally hear Jo mutter, probably another little joke. "It was still there last week."

Polo didn't know exactly what Jo was looking for. Probably a reef formation that marked the spot with the cave, or a distinctive coral. They all continued to stare intently into the crystal-clear water. Polo could easily spot parrotfish, sea bass and surgeonfish from the boat.

"Hopefully we'll find the cave," Jo called over his shoulder after a while. "I haven't been here very often either."

Polo leaned back. It didn't really matter whether they found the dive site or not; the underwater landscape here was probably worth seeing everywhere.

"Bingo," Jo suddenly called out. With a few quick hand signals, he guided the bangka through the corals, which almost touched the water's surface here, then the anchor plopped into the water.

"The usual dive site briefing," said Jo with a smile as he sat back down, "will be brief here. There's not much to tell." He scratched the back of his head. "We'll go down, into the cave, take a leisurely look around, and then swim back out and slowly ascend along the reef wall."

Polo didn't feel like asking for more information about the cave; he would probably only get a flippant answer anyway.

It would be best to take a look around down there himself. He strapped his buoyancy compensator to the compressed air cylinder and wanted to connect his regulator. But the aluminium cylinder had an INT valve, and he used the DIN system. He could have sworn that an adapter had been attached when he checked it shortly before departure.

“Do you have an adapter?” he asked Jo.

“Wrong valve?” grinned the Scotsman. “Didn’t we check our equipment carefully, Mr Banker?” He shrugged. “That’s how quickly a day’s diving can come to an end.”

Polo sat back down in the shade and was annoyed. How could he have overlooked something like that?! Back to base, then.

When Jo held the missing adapter under his nose, still grinning, he didn’t say a word. With some effort, he managed a smile, grabbed the part and screwed it back on. The pressure gauge showed a pressure of 208 bar. Polo squeezed into his 3mm tropical wetsuit and strapped the dive computer to his wrist. Now he was sitting in the sun, and it was getting very hot very quickly in the neoprene. He grabbed the tank and put it on his back, then slipped on his fins and diving goggles.

“On three, go,” said Jo, who was already sitting in full gear on the opposite edge of the boat, also with his back to the water.

Shortly afterwards, they both put the mouthpiece of the regulator between their teeth and let themselves fall backwards. After the sauna feeling just now, the 28-degree water was pleasantly refreshing. Polo sank like a parachutist; he loved this feeling. Shortly before reaching the sandy bottom, he pumped some air into his buoyancy compensator to counteract gravity. He looked at Jo, who was floating at the same depth, and they assured each other with the usual hand signal that everything was OK. Jo swam off and Polo stuck to his fins.

For a few minutes, they leisurely followed the gently sloping seabed, the reef on their left. It consisted mainly of hard corals with scattered soft corals and sponges in shades of orange and red. Above them were schools of tiny colourful bannerfish and groups of surgeonfish. Butterflyfish sought shelter in pairs, and every now and then a moray eel poked its head out of a crevice and showed its sharp teeth. Jo spotted an octopus in a crevice in the reef, but couldn’t coax it out, so they moved on. They crossed an edge behind which the reef dropped steeply and followed this wall headfirst downwards.

When Polo’s dive computer showed a depth of 40 metres, the underwater landscape appeared mainly blue, but in different tones and shades. The water down here had filtered out almost all the other colours from the sunlight. Jo turned to Polo and signalled to him to ask if everything was okay. In his other hand he held a small lamp. Polo answered in the affirmative, took his own lamp out of his vest and followed Jo to a jagged coral formation.

The cave entrance was hidden behind it and quite narrow, just wide enough for a diver lying calmly in the water. In order not to damage any coral, Polo swam into the dark hole and through a no less narrow passage with sparing fin movements. Only after about ten metres did the corridor gradually widen into a space the size of a detached house. The ceiling was up to five or six metres high and arched, like a medieval cellar vault. There were protrusions and niches everywhere, some of which could only be guessed at in the light of the lamps.

If Polo had known how large and rugged the cave was, he would have brought the more powerful underwater lamp. But they only had a short time to explore the cave anyway. In a few minutes, they would have to ascend again to avoid decompression problems. Besides, their 12-litre tanks would

not last long at this depth. Jo, of course, needed less air with his diving routine and his supply would last much longer, but as a professional, he was certainly aware of that.

In slow motion, they followed the cave wall, shining their lights into every crevice and niche. Every now and then, the beam of light fell on small fish, which immediately fled into the darkness. Red sparkling dots revealed pairs of eyes, which, when illuminated directly, turned out to be crabs and crayfish, some of which looked like pocket-sized UFOs.

Several niches went so deep into the cave walls that Polo's lamp could not reach the end of them. Curious, he followed these passages for a few metres, sometimes even around the next bend, but then he turned back. After all, he couldn't leave his diving partner alone, because even for experienced divers, the first rule was still never to dive alone, especially in such deep cave systems. Besides, he had no idea where the branches led. To other caves, or out of the reef? Into a maze from which there was no escape? Or did they simply get narrower and narrower until you got stuck in them?

After about ten minutes, Jo signalled to Polo to follow him. They climbed up to the ceiling of the cave and swam behind a kind of rock balcony, where they deflated their vests and knelt down. Jo asked Polo to turn off his lamp and look up, where the entrance to a tube was visible. In the darkness, Polo understood what Jo was getting at. High above their heads, he noticed a faint glimmer of light. The tube apparently led to daylight somehow. They turned their lamps back on and Jo indicated that he wanted to leave the cave via this exit. He ended with the hand signal for "OK", in this case meant as a question. Polo glanced up again, but apart from the distant glimmer of light that suggested the end of the channel, he could see nothing. He felt uneasy about the situation and was annoyed that they hadn't even discussed the approximate

course of the dive beforehand on the surface. But he agreed. Jo was an experienced guide. He knew the dive sites and knew what was feasible without danger.

At first, the passage sloped upwards and they had plenty of room to move. Nevertheless, they used their fins sparingly, because there was hardly anything more dangerous for divers than ascending too quickly. Then the tube gradually became steeper, almost vertical, and they no longer needed their fins. Metre by metre, they let themselves drift upwards very slowly. However, it was now also getting narrower, and there would have been hardly any room for swimming movements. Polo had trouble holding the lamp so that it didn't bump into anything, but he could still see where he was swimming. Although some daylight was now falling into the canal, most of it was blocked by the person in front of him.

He was glad that he couldn't do much damage here, because even though he was careful, he kept bumping into the walls with parts of his body or equipment. It was a strange feeling, he thought, when Jo's fins remained in place for a moment, stuck in the middle of the reef, under many years of coral growth. The limestone that now surrounded them and looked like rock had been secreted long ago by polyps on what was then the surface of the reef. Meanwhile, modern coral life continued further up. Where he was, there was only dead material, a kind of graveyard for the flower animals.

Shortly afterwards, Polo understood why Jo had stopped at that point. From there on, the passage was so narrow that he could only get past bends and protrusions by carefully positioning his body and equipment and manoeuvring through the bottlenecks. He had to screw his way up through the reef, so to speak, and even squeeze through at one point. He wondered anxiously whether Jo was aware of their difference in size and that Polo couldn't fit through everywhere he could. That

Polo used much more air? Had Jo chosen the right path, or were they possibly at a dead end? What if they suddenly got stuck, or at least Polo did, and he couldn't move forwards or backwards? There wasn't much left here, it was a matter of millimetres.

Polo reached a particularly narrow spot where Jo had lingered in front of him for quite a long time. He stretched both arms above his head, got himself into a good position and filled his lungs with air to gain more buoyancy. Nothing happened. He didn't move forward a millimetre. He exhaled to make himself narrower, tapped his heels for a foothold and tried to push himself off. Again, nothing. He probably wasn't in the optimal position yet. Despite the narrowness, he tried to get into a different position, wiggling his upper body back and forth, trying all possible positions for his head, arms and legs, breathing in and out again. Without success. No matter how much he wriggled, he couldn't move forward at all. Nor could he go back. That wasn't an option anyway: he couldn't crawl backwards and downwards through all the narrow passages, blind, with his fins first. He didn't have enough air for that, and he would certainly suffer decompression sickness.

His worst fears had come true: he was stuck. He was stuck about fifteen metres underwater in a coral reef at the end of the world. No help far and wide. The only person near him was the Scotsman, and he was stuck in the same tube. Even if Jo could free himself, how could he help Polo? Time was running out. Polo had enough air for about twenty minutes. Then it would be over.

Part 2

Polo

After the evening at the Tiki Bar, Polo limited his communication with Jo to strictly business matters. How could the Scot have behaved so inappropriately, considering his sensible remarks just moments earlier? Was it solely due to alcohol, or were there deeper underlying issues? Polo preferred not to delve into that, and Jo seemed to respect that. However, Polo was annoyed not only by the dive instructor's behavior, but also by his own reaction—his passivity. At their next meeting, he would formally apologize to Eileen and Maggie; perhaps he could salvage something that way. If he ever met them again, that is.

But Jo's information about everyday Filipino culture and his advice had sparked something in Polo. He tried to take things a little more lightly and not let the constant setbacks affect his mood. While it took effort each time, it gradually improved his overall outlook. He delegated only manageable tasks with clear instructions to his employees and was more understanding when things went wrong. Indeed, their work ethic visibly improved, and there were fewer mistakes, communication problems, and customer complaints.

But to ensure that guests would return in future years, and that they would enthusiastically tell their friends and travel agencies back home about their diving holiday at the Swiss Chalet, their offerings also had to improve. They were located in the heart of the Coral Triangle, the area between the Solomon Islands, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Their dive sites boasted the world's greatest biodiversity, healthy coral

reefs, and abundant marine life. But they had to make this underwater paradise more accessible and present it in a more engaging way.

The dive guides had been far too passive until now. They helped people into the water, swam in front of them for an hour, and then brought them back to the boat. Polo wanted them to transform the excursions into small adventure trips. They were to prepare the tourists for the dive with detailed briefings and illustrative sketches, and point out interesting marine life underwater. Unlike many guests, they knew exactly where certain animals were located, sometimes well camouflaged or hidden, and how they behaved. Together with Jo, he therefore practiced with them on how to give exciting and informative briefings. He approached this with great respect, so as not to offend their professional pride.

As fewer problems arose in the day-to-day operations, Polo could finally focus on attracting new guests. With the help of a small agency in Puerto Princesa, he revamped the website and produced flyers, brochures, and other promotional materials, which he distributed via email and mail to potential business partners worldwide, especially dive tour operators. The Swiss Chalet had had good, long-standing business relationships with the three guesthouses on Coralia, which Polo continued to cultivate. He also didn't hesitate to personally visit all the resorts along the Palawan coast, from nearby Roxas down to the provincial capital of Puerto Princesa, where the planes carrying tourists landed. Gradually, the first successes began to emerge. Travel agencies and resorts with whom they had never previously worked started sending them client bookings. Direct bookings via the website also increased. Their guests seemed increasingly satisfied and were spreading positive word-of-mouth recommendations.

More and more inquiries came in based on the express recommendation of previous guests or tour operators. Or from diving journalists who had visited the Swiss Chalet on invitation and had featured it in their magazines. Business was picking up, and if things continued this way, they would eventually turn a profit. They still had plenty of room for improvement, and they certainly weren't yet the best dive center in Southeast Asia. But they were making progress. Polo was proud of this development, and also of his employees. They had worked well together, overcome many difficulties, and even had fun along the way. Now they were enjoying their initial successes. Over the past few months, they had truly grown into a kind of family.

Polo sensed that this meant a great deal to everyone and motivated them, including himself. He therefore made the barbecue party a weekly event with numerous guests. Besides the employees themselves, relatives and friends came, as well as other people from the village, and often some divers.

Polo also regularly invited key local figures, such as the mayor and the managers of the neighboring hotels. He provided food and drinks at his own expense, but most guests brought something of their own, and everything was shared.

Meanwhile, Polo had also made up with Jo again. The Scotsman had his flaws, but who didn't, and otherwise he was a decent guy. You could count on him when you needed him, at least when he wasn't drunk. He was an excellent diver and knew the local underwater world like no other. He was also very popular as a dive instructor, as long as he wasn't too hungover. What he lacked in politeness, he made up for with his Scottish humor. Polo especially appreciated that he always told him his opinion straight out.

Since the dive center was doing better, Polo would occasionally go out with Jo to the local bars. Sometimes

they would take a bangka to Roxas, where there were some popular sing-along bars, the Philippine version of a karaoke bar. If Jo got loud or started flirting with some girl later in the evening, Polo would finish his drink and take a bangka back home. But often they would just have fun on Coralia itself, in the restaurants and bars of the three hotels. Since these outings also served to maintain relationships with the staff and guests, they called these evenings „business trips.“

On one such outing, they ended up in the Tiki Bar late at night, as usual. When Jo had to go to the restroom, Polo noticed Eileen on the opposite side of the horseshoe-shaped bar, again with Maggie and their umbrella drinks. Behind them was the sea, bathed in moonlight. Polo immediately perked up. He hadn't seen Eileen since the first time a few months ago and assumed she didn't live on Coralia, but only visited occasionally.

He had to act quickly. Before someone else sat on the empty bar stool next to her. And before Jo came back. The two women were deep in conversation and probably hadn't even seen him yet. So he ducked, slipped behind the other customers to their side of the bar, and sat down.

“Oh, hello, Eileen,” he said to her, spontaneously and casually.

“Oh, hello.” She glanced briefly at her seat neighbor, then looked back at him. “Your name is Polo, isn't it?”

“That's right. Nice to see you.” He looked at Eileen's acquaintance. “Hello, Maggie.”

“Good evening.” She smiled politely.

“How are you?” Polo turned back to Eileen.

“Pretty good,” she replied slowly. “So far.”

“I'm sorry my friend behaved the way he did when we last met. He's actually a decent guy, but he was quite drunk.”

“Well ...”

Polo saw that Jo was sitting on his bar stool again. He seemed to have just spotted them and made to get up. Polo gave him a quick grimace to indicate that he should stay where he was. Jo grinned and sat back down.

“I really am sorry. I wanted to apologize to you for a long time, but I haven't seen you since. Why?”

“I've been traveling a lot for work. To Palawan, to Manila, then to England for a while, and finally back to Palawan.” After a short pause, she added: “And when I'm on Coralia, I'm not exactly partying every night at the Tiki Bar.”

“Me neither. Although I am quite often these days. Also for work reasons. I like this beach bar, and there isn't much else going on on the island. I live and work right next door.”

“Oh, I see.” She made to turn back to Maggie, but paused. “What kind of work brings you to this bar?”

“I run the small dive center over there, the Swiss Chalet. This hotel is one of our business partners, and many of the guests here are also our customers. What do you do?”

“Environmental protection.” She paused briefly, then continued with a reproachful look, but a smile on her face: “Among other things, we try to keep the damage caused by dive tourism to a minimum.”

“Ouch, that's a direct hit,” said Polo, his face contorted with pain, but then he added: “We are very committed to preserving a healthy underwater environment. For example, we are currently installing buoys at as many dive sites as possible to avoid having to drop anchor. We also make sure that tourists don't touch anything underwater or damage anything with their fins. Besides, our guests bring money to the island, which benefits the local residents.”

“Especially when the profits end up going abroad.”

“Maybe with some resorts. But the income from my dive center and the guesthouses here stays in the country. And

many locals have jobs with me or at the hotels. An income with which they can support their families. They don't have to fish for fish, lobsters, or octopuses."

"Agreed," she replied. "Tourism brings both good and bad things for the island and its inhabitants."

"I agree. And the most serious environmental damage is caused not by diving itself, but by the travel to and from the destination. The same applies to cultural and city tours, beach holidays, and business trips." He paused briefly and continued with a mischievous smile: "Where have you been recently? Palawan, Manila, England, and then back to Palawan?"

"Ouch, you hit the nail on the head," Eileen said with a pained expression.

They both laughed.

"You said you were English?"

"I have a British passport." When Polo didn't say anything, she continued: "Now you're probably wondering how a person with slanted eyes acquired such a coveted nationality?"

"I don't care about passports or skin color. Until recently, I lived in London as a Swiss citizen. There are many Asians with British citizenship there, with very different life stories." He smiled. "What's yours?"

After a quick glance at Maggie, who had listened to their conversation in silence, she looked at him thoughtfully. "Just this: My father was stationed in Manila for several years as a diplomat for the British Crown. Through his work, he met my mother, a Filipina. They married and later moved to England, where I was born."

"Oh, I see. Then Maggie is probably a relative of yours?"

"No," they both laughed, looking at each other briefly, with Maggie again covering her mouth with her hand.

"We work together," Maggie explained with a slight Filipino accent.

"Good evening, ladies," Jo chimed in, suddenly appearing behind the two women.

With forced smiles, they returned his greeting.

Slightly swaying, Jo put a cigarette in his mouth and offered them one, but they both shook their heads.

Polo tried to save the situation by pointing to the empty glasses and asked, "Another round of the same?"

The two glanced at each other briefly, then Eileen politely declined. "We were just about to leave anyway. We have to get up early tomorrow." They stood up and wished Polo goodnight.

"Good night," he replied, "we'll see each other again sometime?"

"*Bahala Na*," Eileen smiled, "if God wills it."

"Party-pooper," he hissed at Jo after they left.

The Scotsman raised his hands.

"I didn't say anything, I didn't do anything."

"Why didn't you just stay over there?"

"It got too boring. Am I some kind of leper?"

"After your stupid behavior the other day, they don't want anything to do with you anymore. You boobie, you scared them off again."

"Well," Jo mumbled, "there are other girls."

"Not for me!" Polo snapped. "I mean ..."

Jo raised his eyebrows in amusement and pursed his lips.

"Oh, whatever," Polo sighed and ordered two beers.

They wouldn't be the last of the evening.

The next morning, Polo woke up with a hangover and decided to take the day off. For him, the best remedy for a hangover and a bad mood was some time alone underwater. He waited until Jo and the guests had set off on the half-day dive trip with the *Dreaming Bird*, and then he took the *Sleeping Butterfly* out.

He wanted to visit his favorite dive site again, the small reef in the channel between Coralia and the uninhabited neighboring island. To avoid having to anchor every time he visited, he had a mooring buoy installed there. This protected the seabed and reduced the risk of finding his boat gone when he returned from his solo dive.

After securing the *Sleeping Butterfly*, Polo put on his 3mm shorty wetsuit—the sleeveless, legless neoprene suit was perfectly adequate in the heat. Now sitting in the direct sunlight with no breeze, he soon started sweating profusely, and the throbbing headache became unbearable. He quickly put on the rest of his gear and eased himself backwards over the side. The water was only slightly cooler than the air, but it felt refreshing nonetheless. Polo descended to 30 meters and then followed the lush coral wall, every square inch of which he now knew intimately, along with all its inhabitants. His little paradise, his sanctuary. He swam against the current for a while, gradually ascending, and then returned along a shallower route. His mood improved with every breath. After just a few minutes, his headache was gone, and he could fully enjoy the dive.

Most of the marine life was about its usual business in its usual spots. Just another day on the reef. The only surprise was an octopus, which is usually nocturnal. Polo also noticed that the largest of the three Napoleon wrasses, which usually hung out there, was missing. Probably on vacation, Polo thought, grinning as he breathed through his regulator during his safety stop near the Bangka. To prevent decompression sickness, he made a mandatory five-minute stop at five meters depth before surfacing. That's why he knew the coral formations around the buoy so well. Just before he was about to surface, he had a vague feeling that something wasn't right in one particular area.

He swam over and saw several pieces of coral lying on the sand. Directly above them was a huge hole in the reef. Polo looked around, but he couldn't find any other damage. What had happened? It didn't look like a storm had caused this localized destruction, nor did it seem to be the result of currents or waves. Could it have been caused by animals? White tip reef sharks off the Costa Rican island of Cocos and in the Fakarava Atoll in French Polynesia, for example, were known to go into feeding frenzies when hunting in packs at night. When they chased prey that had taken refuge among the corals, they could destroy entire sections of the reef in their wild frenzy. That could have been the case here, Polo thought. Incredible what those things had managed to destroy. Suddenly, he noticed that the coral around the hole was bleached, practically dead. It couldn't have anything to do with predatory fish. Besides, there were hardly any sharks left here anyway. Strange, he thought, as he ascended to the Bangka, he'd never seen anything like it before.

"How big was the hole?" Jo asked, looking up from the regulator he was repairing.

Polo gestured with his hands, indicating a distance of about one meter.

"And no other damage to that section of the reef?"

"No, just in that one spot."

Jo thoughtfully bit his lower lip. "Looks like a mermaid escaped from the reef again," he finally concluded, and returned to working on the regulator.

"Very funny. I first thought it was reef sharks on a feeding frenzy. If it weren't for the bleached coral."

Jo fiddled with the screwdriver for a moment longer, then turned around and leaned against the workbench. "Sounds like cyanide."

Polo looked at him questioningly.

"Cyanide fishing. It's been illegal in the Philippines for a long time, but they still practice it. Just like dynamite fishing."

"So why the broken coral and the hole?"

"Cyanide isn't just used here to stun and capture small ornamental fish for aquarium enthusiasts, but also for larger fish used for food. Grouper, Napoleon wrasse, and so on. These delicacies fetch top prices in Chinese and Japanese restaurants in Asian cities when offered alive. They're displayed in aquariums in the restaurant, and the customer points to the desired fish. Then it's slaughtered, cooked, eaten, and a hefty sum is paid at the end. Many Asians believe that this way they can absorb the life energy of the freshly killed fish."

"And how exactly do they catch these giant fish?"

"The cyanide is poured into a plastic spray bottle from a lab." To stun a large fish, the hunters have to drench it in the poison, practically spraying it directly into its face. To do this, they have to get very close. This is easiest when the fish has sought shelter among the corals, perhaps to sleep, and feels safe. Naturally, the corals around it are also sprayed with cyanide. For the tiny coral polyps, this concentration is lethal, hence the bleaching. Finally, to reach the stunned prey, the hunters have to break away the corals with tools. Then they can pull out the fish and place it in a water container waiting on the surface. They take it to the dealer, where the fish are transferred to transport containers. And off they go on their journey to the gourmet temple in Tokyo."

"You know those three Napoleon fish that always hang around there?" Polo asked. "The biggest one was gone today."

Jo nodded.

"You might not see it again. Unless you're planning a gourmet trip."

"Those bastards."

"It's a terrible thing. They especially target the species whose populations have already dwindled. They get the most money for those. But only if they deliver them alive—that's why they use cyanide. Which, of course, destroys the reef at the same time."

"My little reef," Polo sighed.

"Right: your little reef. And many other small and not-so-small reefs before it. And more will follow."

"Damn it. Has anything like this ever happened around Coralia before? In our diving area?"

"Over the years, I've come across traces of illegal fishing methods, mostly dynamite fishing. But compared to other places, we've been spared so far. That's why the underwater world is still quite intact. And because there are still more fish here than elsewhere, the locals can still catch enough using traditional methods to support their families. But even here, the fish stocks are declining rapidly. The population is growing, and people's needs are increasing. Everyone wants to eat, send their children to school, have a generator, a mobile phone, and maybe even their own TV. That costs money. To get that money, you have to catch a lot of fish. It's a vicious cycle. If legal, somewhat sustainable methods no longer bring in enough, people resort to illegal ones, plundering the sea. But it's about the well-being of the family, without any restrictions. So, it's to be feared that these destructive fishing methods will become more and more common, and the fish stocks will continue to decline."

They sat there for a while longer, lost in their gloomy thoughts. Then Polo retreated to his hammock. He wanted nothing more to do with that day.

Ruben

The repair of the broken boom had actually been quite simple, and the *Talisin* was soon back in service. Ruben now set out every day with Tata and his crew, even before dawn. They often fished around their usual atoll, where there were still quite a lot of fish. But even there, finding worthwhile schools of fish became increasingly difficult. Therefore, they tried their luck at other remote locations, where the risk of being caught by the coast guard or other fishermen wasn't too great. Truly rich fishing grounds were hard to find, but with dynamite they still usually managed to catch a good haul. Their latest discovery was the small reef in the channel between Coralia and the uninhabited neighboring island. Thanks to the depth and the current, there were plenty of fish there, including species with high market value.

As soon as they set off back to shore each afternoon, Ruben would try to persuade others to join him for an evening fishing expedition. He had to act quickly, because everyone would soon be drunk and good for nothing. If he managed to gather a few sober people, they would meet again on the beach after sunset and get the *Talisin* ready. They installed old spotlights on the bow to illuminate the seabed, started the compressor, and slowly cruised through the reefs at night. Using air hoses, the divers would spear squid and other nocturnal creatures. Many were attracted by the light of the spotlights and presented themselves like living targets. Day-active animals, such as the brightly colored parrotfish, which had only partially hidden themselves in crevices on the reef to sleep, they simply speared and tossed into their hand nets. It was like picking mangoes.

Like all fishermen, Ruben knew that compressor fishing was prohibited. But the coast guard patrol boats never ventured

into the waters around Pescora and Coralia at night. Unlike many of his colleagues, he had always disapproved of this fishing method, just as he disapproved of dynamite fishing, because it decimated the reefs and gave the fish no chance. But now these lucrative fishing trips were a welcome source of extra income. If he wanted to save Tong, he had to set aside all his reservations. Once, he even went out fishing with one of his new buddies, a man who knew about using cyanide. They had managed to sell their catch—including a large Napoleon fish, among other valuable food fish—for incredibly high prices.

He had also put aside his doubts about exorcisms. Tong's condition hadn't improved at all since the ceremony, but perhaps it would improve later. In any case, the priest's visit had calmed Malyn, and that was very important. And Ruben agreed with her that they had to do everything they could to increase Tong's chances of recovery, even if only slightly.

Malyn hadn't been back to her home on Pescora Island for a long time now. She continued to lovingly care for her son. Family members and friends kept traveling to Puerto to visit her and Evelyn to offer their support.

Ruben also visited her whenever he could, especially when the *Talisin* couldn't sail out due to bad weather or other reasons. Besides their daily phone calls, these visits were the only bright spots in the lives of the two spouses, who were otherwise separated, each struggling to ensure their son's health and the well-being of their family.

Every time he saw her, Ruben was amazed at how big and round Malyn's belly had become during his absence. And although she was under considerable emotional and physical strain, and spent her days surrounded by sick people in the hospital, she remained healthy, and the pregnancy progressed

quite smoothly. He was very proud of his brave wife and felt that she felt the same way about him.

Polo

The damage to his little reef upset Polo. His paradise was threatened, his refuge, his little, perfect world. A few days later, he went back to assess the damage. Perhaps the big Napoleon fish was back, and everything wasn't so bad after all.

As he entered the channel, he saw another Bangka boat already anchored near his buoy. Hopefully not divers, he thought, because occasionally tourists from other islands or diving safaris would come to visit, and Polo wanted his peace and quiet.

"You little Swiss snob," Jo teased him sometimes, "you act as if this reef belongs only to you." Jo wasn't entirely wrong, Polo admitted to himself. But he was so attached to the dive site that he would have preferred to forbid all outsiders from visiting it.

On that day, however, he didn't have to worry, because the other Bangka immediately started its engine and left. When he arrived, he had his little paradise all to himself.

Polo dove straight to the affected area. Since nothing had changed there, he swam in ever-larger circles, carefully examining the coral formations. No further damage.

And what about the Napoleon fish family? Polo followed the coral wall into deeper water and found them in their usual spot. They approached him slowly, eyeing him curiously, and then turned away, seemingly bored. But there were only two. The largest one was nowhere to be seen.

Since the pressure in his air tank had already dropped to

50 bar, Polo slowly ascended to the reef's edge. He wanted to swim back to the buoy in the shallow water, as that would save him air. Halfway there, he noticed something moving on the seabed, shimmering silver in the sunlight.

He swam over and saw a mackerel wriggling in the sand, obviously close to death. "The eternal cycle of life and death," he thought, recalling Goethe's quote. This ecosystem, in such a small space, demonstrated to the observer the simultaneous processes of predation and being preyed upon, reproduction and birth, and, right next to it, death.

Then he noticed another mackerel, just two meters away from the first. This fish wasn't wriggling anymore; it was probably already dead. Right next to it lay another one, half-devoured. Two more were stuck upside down in the stag-horn coral. And one more was lying nearby, thrashing wildly. Everywhere there were dead and dying fish, large and small, mackerels and other species. It looked as if a bomb had exploded.

And that was probably exactly what had happened here, he realized. There hadn't been divers in the Bangka earlier, but dynamite fishermen. They had probably detonated a charge just before he arrived, and he had interrupted them while they were collecting their catch. He might not have even heard the explosion, since he had been motoring along the other side of the island with his noisy outboard engine.

Polo's compressed air tank was almost empty, and he swam back to the buoy. He climbed into the Bangka and scanned the surroundings. The other boat was nowhere to be seen. He took off his gear and rested his head in his hands. When the sun had dried the saltwater from his skin, he started the engine and headed home.

“Apparently, the abundance of fish on your little reef has caught other people’s attention,” Jo said, sitting down on one of the chairs in front of the dive center. It was just before sunset, and the guests from the afternoon dive had just left.

“There won’t be any fish left there soon if they keep doing this.” Polo sat down astride a chair next to Jo. “They use cyanide to catch the grouper, Napoleon wrasse, and so on, and dynamite for the schools of fish. And that kills all the other fish species, the young fish, and the corals as well.”

“Sad, but true.” Jo stood up and disappeared into the office. Shortly afterward, he returned with two bottles of San Miguel.

Polo shook his head. “No, thanks.”

“Take it,” Jo insisted, “you need a beer right now.”

Polo took it, and they raised their bottles with somber expressions.

“It’s not just about my little paradise. They’ll wipe out the whole area. We can just shut down this place then. Everything we’ve built up.”

“A tragedy,” Jo agreed. “We are located right in the heart of the world-famous Coral Triangle, with its magnificent reefs and the greatest biodiversity on the planet, and we have to watch helplessly as it is being destroyed by human activity.”

“An environmental catastrophe. And once again, it’s just a few rogue individuals who don’t abide by the rules at the expense of everyone else. They are destroying an entire ecosystem, and with it, the livelihood of all the legal fishermen and the employees in the tourism industry.”

“The coral reefs and fish stocks are already being exploited to the limit by legal methods, especially by the industrial fishing fleets. Add to that water pollution, climate change, acid rain, and non-human-caused stressors such as typhoons, earthquakes, El Niño, and so on. We mustn’t forget that.”

“That’s bad enough already. But destructive fishing is the final straw for the already damaged ecosystem.”

“Unfortunately, this is probably an unstoppable process.”

They watched silently as the setting sun touched the horizon and disappeared a few minutes later. An overwhelming spectacle of nature, as every evening for millions of years. Beautiful, majestic, pristine. They sat in silence, finishing their beer bottles.

“Do you think so?” Polo suddenly asked into the silence.

“Do I think what?”

“Is this process really unstoppable?”

“What do you want to do about it?”

“I don’t know. What are the authorities doing?”

“Nothing. Or at least far too little. They lack the resources, and there are conflicts of interest. Corrupt politicians, nepotism, and so on.”

“And the environmental movement?”

“There are some interesting projects. But they are like a drop in the ocean.”

They were silent again for a moment.

“Another beer?” Jo asked, getting up.

“No, thank you,” Polo mumbled. “I’ve had enough. I’m going to go lie down in the hammock.”

He suddenly felt incredibly tired.

The next morning, Polo found out that the international environmental organization BlueGreenPlanet had an office for reef and marine conservation in Puerto Princesa. Their website described several projects along the Palawan coast, particularly marine protected areas. He called them and asked if anyone could give him information about destructive fishing practices in the Coralina area. He was told he was lucky; the project leader and marine biologist, Dr. Jennings, was

currently on his way to Zabriskie Point at the northern tip of the island by zodiac, to assess the feasibility of establishing a protected area there. Dr. Jennings was very familiar with the local conditions and would be the ideal contact person.

Zabriskie Point was on the way to Polo's reef. He boarded the Sleeping Butterfly, and ten minutes later he saw the inflatable boat on the beach. But there was no sign of Dr. Jennings. Perhaps he was in the water. Polo landed his bangka next to the zodiac and sat down in the shade of a palm tree. He wanted to wait until this marine biologist turned up.

After half an hour, he noticed bubbles on the water's surface, slowly approaching. Shortly afterwards, a diver surfaced about ten meters from the shore. Polo stood up and walked towards him. The diver, or rather, the diveress, removed her fins and waded ashore. Now Polo recognized the mole above her mask.

"What are you doing here?" Eileen asked, standing in front of him after removing her mask.

"I'm looking for a Dr. Jennings."

"Well, you've found him."

She tossed her mask and fins into the zodiac and turned her back to Polo. He took her water tank. Slightly embarrassed, he watched her peel off her wetsuit.

"And what do you want from Dr. Jennings?" she asked, removing the elastic band from her ponytail. She shook her head to loosen her wet hair, which now glistened black in the sun. "Oh, I'm so sorry," she apologized with a half-smile, noticing that Polo had gotten a few drops of water on him.

"I'm interested in cyanide and dynamite fishing in this area. Your people told me you're an expert on the subject."

"Well, I've been working in this field for a while."

"Do you have a moment? I have a few questions."

She glanced at her dive computer and raised an eyebrow, along with the freckle on her forehead. "Not that I'm exactly

without work, but okay. We can sit over there in the shade." She gestured to the driftwood log from which Polo had just gotten up.

They sat side by side on the weathered log, looking out to sea.

Polo carefully picked up a seashell from the sand and turned it over. After making sure there wasn't a hermit crab inside, he began to fiddle with it. He was looking for a way to broach the subject.

"So, you want to go fishing with dynamite and cyanide?" she prompted him. "Doesn't the dive center make enough money?"

"No, of course not," Polo laughed, "quite the opposite."

She looked at him questioningly.

Continued with the beginning of Part 3

Part 3

Polo

Polo Two days after the exchange of gunfire, Polo and Hein went to the small cove. It was ideally suited for their purposes. The entrance was narrow and led between overgrown rocky outcrops. Right behind it, the *Sleeping Butterfly* could be moored, ready to depart and invisible from the sea. On one of the rocky outcrops, they could hide in the shade of the palm trees among the bushes and keep watch. From up there, they could spot any approaching bangka from a long distance, and minutes later they would be at the boat, ready to leave.

The rifle was heavy, and the metal felt cold. Polo hadn't held a gun in his hands since his time in the Swiss army many years ago. He took aim at a boulder, just to practice, but without pulling the trigger.

"You can rely on this gun," Hein assured him. "I tested it myself. It's in good working order."

Polo didn't ask what Hein had used it to shoot at, hoping it was only at target practice. With the firm intention of never taking it out again, he put the rifle back in its case.

Armed only with their binoculars, they climbed onto the rocky outcrop and scanned the horizon until sunset. Not a single suspicious bangka, only fishing boats they knew, most of them no bigger than a kayak.

For two weeks, they took their observation post on the rocky outcrop for a few hours every other day, but they didn't see any dynamite fishermen. They couldn't identify several bangkas, but since they didn't arouse the slightest suspicion, it wasn't worth giving up their cover.

"Did you see the storm warning?" Polo asked Hein on the phone one evening. "A typhoon is supposed to hit us the day after tomorrow."

"And a powerful one at that. It's going to be pretty rough."

"Then we can't keep watch, of course."

"But the dynamite fishermen won't venture out to sea either."

"Even the fish will stay home."

That was the second joke Hein had made in just a few weeks. Polo was starting to like him a little more. "And Jo is coming home from the hospital tomorrow."

"Right, that's true."

Polo refrained from making a comment. Eileen and he had visited or called Jo every day since she was in hospital, but Hein hadn't once.

"Let's go out fishing again early tomorrow morning," Polo suggested. "And then we'll pick up Jo. You're welcome to come with us to Coralina, where we'll be safe from the typhoon."

"I'll come along for the fishing, but afterward I'd rather go home."

"Leave at four? Then we can reach our spot above the bay before dawn. They say the fish bite best at first light. Maybe the dynamite fishermen, too."

It was still pitch dark when they climbed onto the rocks. They ate their provisions, drank tea from thermos flasks, and watched the night sea. As the sky began to lighten and the first birdsong could be heard, they spotted a faint light in the distance, which was coming closer.

"Can you make out anything?" Polo asked.

"They're still too far away for these light conditions."

"A night-vision device would be ideal right now."

"But they're heading toward the small reef."

Both of them stared silently through their binoculars for a while.

Suddenly Hein jerked. "That's them!"

"Do you think so?"

"I could swear it. I recognize the guys and the bangka. The whole picture."

"They could indeed be them. But it's still quite dark, and they're far away."

Polo stared so intently at the approaching boat that his eyes started to hurt.

Hein lowered the binoculars. "We have to leave right now."

"Patience," Polo urged, becoming increasingly agitated himself. "Let's wait until we can see them more clearly."

"We have to act now, not wait!" Hein gasped.

"Especially if they are who we think they are, we have to wait. We don't want to scare them off or ambush them, but to apprehend them at the scene of the crime."

Hein clearly struggled to remain calm.

"And please don't forget what we agreed on: We'll use the megaphone to call on them to negotiate peacefully."

"But I'm certainly not going to let myself get shot!"

"The weapons stay in the case," Polo said, partly to himself.

"Except in an emergency. Do we agree on that?"

"Okay." Hein packed his things.

In those poor visibility conditions, the boat and its crew really did look like the men who had shot Jo. Polo tried to suppress the mixture of fear and anger welling up inside him. But when the bangka reached the buoy and the engine stopped, he could no longer hold it back. They climbed down to the *Sleeping Butterfly* and set off, Hein at the helm.

"They've spotted us," he reported shortly afterwards.

Polo scanned the scene with his binoculars. Indeed, there seemed to be sudden commotion on the other boat. The men

were running around and gesturing. Law-abiding fishermen would have no reason to panic at the sight of a patrol boat. Polo grabbed the megaphone.

"We're from the Swiss Chalet," his voice crackled. "Please stay where you are, we just want to talk to you briefly." For a moment, nothing moved on the bangka. Then Polo saw something glint in the sun. A rifle barrel?

"I think we're still out of range, but you'd better duck," he advised Hein, turning to him. The Dutchman was crouched over the tiller, already holding his rifle.

"Put that thing away!" Polo snapped.

"I just want to be ready for anything."

"Okay. But make sure they don't see the gun."

"We just want to talk to you," he repeated through the megaphone. "We mean no harm."

In the distance, there was a bang, and he saw muzzle flash.

"Please don't shoot!" his tinny voice sounded again, "we just want to talk."

For a while, he only heard the engine of their own bangka, speeding towards the other fishing boat.

Another shot rang out, now much closer. If they turned around immediately, they might stay out of range.

"Turn around immediately. Head left, towards the open sea."

They continued straight ahead at full speed.

"Turn around immediately, Hein, we have to get out of here!"

The Dutchman pretended not to hear him.

Polo was about to crawl to him at the stern when a bullet struck the side of the boat right next to him. Hein immediately slowed down, grabbed the tiller, and fired back. Polo then also took his rifle out of the box. Together they fired at the fishing boat, from which a second weapon was now also being used.

Polo noticed that they were rapidly losing speed. The throttle probably slipped when Hein let go of the tiller, and soon their outboard motor was just idling. Perhaps that was for the best, he thought, because they had gotten quite close to the Bangka.

He fired shot after shot without thinking further about it. Occasionally he ducked behind the side of the boat. He didn't know how well the wooden side would protect them from the bullets from the obviously old, muzzle-loading muskets at this distance, but at least it offered some cover. This allowed him to reload, compose himself, and then reappear a half meter away from his previous position, above the gunwale, and continue firing. He now functioned like a killing machine, completely automatic, wanting only to survive and finish off the attackers.

After a while he heard three more shots from the enemy side, but he couldn't see them. He crouched next to Hein, who was reloading his rifle.

"Damn it," he shouted, "there are more of them!"

"The shots from the new guns are coming from a different direction."

Hein peered over the railing and quickly ducked back down. "A second Bangka, on the port side!"

As if to confirm this, Polo immediately heard gunfire from the left, and then again from the front. After a quick glance over the side, he had the impression that a firefight was now taking place between the two other boats. Who had come to their aid? Were they rescued? The new bangka was much larger than their own, and also larger than the one belonging to the illegal fishermen.

"Who are they? Do you know these people, or the boat?"

Hein shook his head. "No idea."

"Doesn't matter. The enemy of our enemy is our friend."

Polo fired two shots at the dynamite fishermen, but

immediately they came under fire from the newcomers. He dropped to his knees and looked questioningly at Hein, who shook his head again. During a brief lull in the firing, he risked a glance over the side of the boat and was immediately fired upon again.

Together with Hein, he returned fire. Now they were shooting at the new bangka along with their original adversaries. More and more rifles and pistols appeared on board, firing continuously at both boats. These men must have had a large number of weapons and gunmen. Who were they? Where had they come from, and what were their intentions? They certainly didn't look like law enforcement officers or rangers, and they didn't act like them either.

"They're not from around here," Hein gasped, as it became quiet for a moment. "Maybe they're opponents of the dynamite fishermen."

"And why would they attack us then?"

"No idea. Maybe because they fish illegally themselves and don't like patrols. Competitors of the others, but not our friends either."

The thought flashed through Polo's mind, like two rival gangs in a big city fighting over territory, and they, as a civilian militia, were in everyone else's way. Perhaps the armed conflict over fishing grounds had progressed further than he had thought.

Shortly afterward, authoritative shouts in Tagalog, the local language, came from the port side, followed by quieter replies from the fishing boat. A motor started, and Polo risked a glance over the side. Just a stone's throw away, the large bangka was approaching the smaller one, whose crew now stood on deck with their hands raised. Several shots broke the silence, and all the fishermen except one slumped to the deck. The survivor, a young man with a shaved head,

pleaded with the attackers and was finally allowed to climb aboard.

Polo looked at Hein, who had also watched the scene with wide-open eyes. They were too close to the enemy boat to escape, and they didn't have enough firepower to defend themselves. They could only wait and hope. The engine roared, and the bangka slowly moved off, pulling the rope tied to the fishing boat taut. With a slight jerk, the two boats started moving, to Polo's relief, away from them. But after a few meters, the bangka turned around and headed straight toward them.

When it almost came to a stop right in front of them, the engine idled, and several armed figures appeared at the bow.

"Drop your weapons and raise your hands!" one of the men shouted, like in a cowboy movie, but in barely understandable English.

Polo and Hein glanced at each other briefly, then they lowered their rifles and raised their hands above the edge of the boat.

"Stand up."

They did as they were told. Without a weapon and without cover, Polo felt completely vulnerable.

The engine was switched off, and all that could be heard was the gentle lapping of the waves. Five armed men stood at the bow of the bangka, looking like scruffy Filipino fishermen. Three of them had wrapped scarves around their heads, presumably to protect themselves from the sun or something else. The one in the middle had a piece of cloth tied around his forehead as a headband, and his face beneath it looked young. The man next to him wore a thin beard and was the only one without a head covering.

"What are you doing here?" the man with the headband asked.

"We're divers," Polo replied.

The man mumbled something and looked at them questioning.

"Excuse me? I didn't understand that."

The other four laughed at the speaker and patted him on the shoulder. The eyes beneath the headband flashed angrily.

"Where are your diving equipment?" he snarled.

"We don't have any with us, since we're not going into the water today. We're from the Swiss Chalet dive center on Coralia, and we're just scouting for new dive sites for our guests."

"And you're messing around with fishermen? Are you Americans?"

"I'm Swiss, and my friend here is Dutch."

"Where is that?"

"In the middle of Europe."

"Give us your money!"

"I don't have any money with me." He glanced at Hein.

"I have some, but not much." Hein nodded downwards. "In my pocket."

The man with the headband spoke a few words in Tagalog to one of the masked men, who immediately jumped into their bangka. He picked up the two rifles and passed them on. Then he patted Hein down from head to toe and pulled a small wad of dirty banknotes from his right trouser pocket. After handing over the money as well, he turned to Polo. He found nothing in his pockets, but he took off the Omega watch that his father had worn until his death.

"Who's the boss here?" asked the man with the headband.

"He's the owner and manager of the dive center," Hein replied.

"And you? Who are you?"

"I'm just a casual employee."

With a barely perceptible movement, the leader aimed his rifle at Hein and shot him in the stomach. The victim slumped to the ground with a soft sigh.

Polo stared, stunned, at Hein, who was writhing on the ground beside him, whimpering. Now it was his turn.

"So you own the dive center?"

"That's right." Did that mean life or death?

"And what else?"

The man with the headband smiled contemptuously. Polo thought frantically. What should he say?

"Are you rich?" The grin vanished.

"Neither poor nor rich."

"But you have employees and several bangkas?"

"Two bangkas." Polo's raised arms ached.

"And you have a bank account."

"Yes, everyone in my country does."

"Do your parents have money? Is your family rich?"

"My parents are dead. I have no relatives left."

The apparent leader spoke to his accomplices. He probably had to translate what he had said into the local language.

"You Americans are all rich," he turned to Polo again, his eyes narrowing. "Even if you don't admit it."

They had spared one of the fishermen, Polo thought, and the leader had spoken rather contemptuously about wealth. Perhaps it wasn't primarily about their money after all? What else could it be about?

"We're not Americans, and we're not rich either."

"Do the people at the dive center know where you are?"

"Yes, of course," he replied. Perhaps that would deter them. But the leader now pointed his rifle directly at him. Polo stared into the barrel. Would he feel anything?

"Get into the boat," the man with the bandana finally ordered.

He moved the barrel of the rifle to the side, where one of the masked men held out a hand. The guy behind him pushed him in that direction. So he placed one foot on the edge of the *Sleeping Butterfly* and let himself be pulled and pushed up to the railing of the enemy boat. From the deck, he looked back. Hein lay curled up in a pool of blood, his eyes closed, but he seemed to be breathing.

“May I help my friend?”

The man gestured silently with the rifle barrel.

“He’s bleeding a lot. Please help him, otherwise he’ll die.”

The leader repeated his gesture and smiled coldly.

Polo obeyed as if in a trance. In the middle of the *bangka*, next to a mast without a sail, the bald-headed dynamite fisherman sat on the floor, guarded by a rifle. He glanced up briefly, then stared at the side of the boat again. So this was one of the criminals they had had the shootout with, the one who had gotten them into this mess in the first place. One of the guys who had destroyed his little paradise. The missing Napoleon fish, the blasted coral, and all the mangled fish—it was all his fault. Maybe he was even the one who had shot Jo and put him in the hospital. This bald-headed young punk.

But now they both had other problems. The men on whose boat they were being held captive seemed to be heavily armed, determined, and cold-blooded. And utterly inscrutable. Were they also dynamite fishers? Competitors of the guy lying on the deck?

At a signal from the leader, the bald-headed man was grabbed by two masked men and pushed up against the mast, his back to the mast, his face facing forward. They dragged Polo to the other side and positioned him so he was facing aft. Then they bound their wrists together. They tied Polo’s right wrist to the fisherman’s left wrist, and his left wrist to the fisherman’s right wrist, with the mast between their backs.

They tied the ropes so tightly that they cut into their skin, allowing them to move slightly, but not to stand up.

“Now you two can get to know each other,” the leader grinned.

Polo watched as they towed the *Sleeping Butterfly* to the stern and tied it to the stern of the fishing boat. He tried in vain to catch a glimpse of Hein, who must still be lying in his pool of blood. One of the masked men took the helm and started the engine; the others disappeared below the wheelhouse. The engine room was probably located there, and perhaps a cabin as well. With a jerk, the whole rig started moving. The fishermen’s boat danced in the wake of the lead boat, closely followed by the *Sleeping Butterfly*.

Just behind the towed boats, *Coralia* came into Polo’s view. He could even make out the entrance to the small bay they had used as a hideout. So they were heading out to the open sea, but where to? If he turned his head to the side, he saw only the side of the boat. Only when the boat rolled heavily with the swell could he catch a glimpse of the surroundings—so far, just water and waves. To look forward, he had to contort his upper body and neck and half-drag the dynamite fisherman chained to him around the mast. But even then, he couldn’t see much more than the side of the boat and the deck planks.

“Please take care of my injured friend,” he pleaded with the leader, who, after a while, walked past him towards the front. The man didn’t even slow down.

“Give him some water,” Polo called after him.

When the man returned, he asked, “Where are we going?”

The kidnapper continued walking and disappeared towards the stern.

Polo had no choice but to wait. It was uncomfortable and tiring to sit chained to the dynamite fisherman at the mast. The *bangka* rocked more and more wildly on the waves, and

they were tossed about. To compensate, they shifted their upper bodies, thus pulling the other along, usually quite forcefully and deliberately.

Soon everything hurt for Polo, especially his wrists. The bald man was also breathing heavily. Gradually, the constant struggle for balance led to a strange kind of routine. Exhausted and dazed, both men reacted automatically and increasingly in sync to the movements of the bangka. Their bodies worked together against the pain and fatigue.

But the guy behind him was a dynamite fisherman, Polo reminded himself. He resisted the apparent harmony with this violent criminal and fought against the coordinated movements. Immediately, he lost his balance and fell to the side. The bound arms twisted painfully behind his back, and he made a counter-movement. Supported by the sway of the bangka, he swung forcefully to the other side, his arms twisting even further. Again, he jerked back, his head slamming hard against the mast.

"Damn it!" he groaned. A throbbing pain pulsed in the back of his head. He pulled his arms and upper body forward.

The dynamite fisherman behind him let out a hoarse cry. Then he pulled Polo towards himself.

After a wild struggle, they both leaned back against the mast, pushing their arms forward with all their might. It was like an arm-wrestling match between evenly matched opponents.

"Bravo!" The leader stood at the stern and clapped.

Polo stared at him, his face contorted with the effort.

Gradually, the strength of both men began to wane, until their arms hung limp at their sides.

"Great show," the kidnapper grinned. "Like a cockfight. We should take bets."

"Where are we going?" Polo asked, exhausted.

"You'll see soon enough."

"Please, give my friend some water and treat his injuries."

Smiling, the leader disappeared below deck.

Too tired to resist any longer, Polo swayed back and forth in time with the dynamite fisherman, to the rhythm of the waves.

"Tilimoli," he suddenly heard from behind. Polo straightened up slightly and turned his head. "A remote island near Coralina," the bald man explained in broken English. "They're seeking shelter from the typhoon there."

"How do you know that?" Polo asked.

"They discussed it earlier. In Tagalog."

Polo was less surprised by the content of these words than by their source. "What kind of island is it?"

"Tilimoli is very small and doesn't have an English name."

Polo had seen the island during his patrol missions, but had never set foot on it. "Is there a doctor on Tilimoli?"

"No, there are no people. Just jungle, rocks, and sand."

In Polo's mind's eye, the image of the uninhabited island appeared. It was bordered by sandy beaches and mangroves, and on one side rose a rocky cliff. Hein wouldn't get any medical treatment there. If he even needed any. "And where will they take us after the typhoon?"

"They didn't say that. Probably Basilan or Jolo."

"What? Those islands are south of Mindanao, on the other side of the Sulu Sea. Incredibly far from here."

"I know. But that's where they come from."

Now Polo began to understand. "So they're not fishermen?"

"Of course not." The bald man looked around nervously before continuing: "These people are Abu Sayyaf. They belong to the Abu Sayyaf group."

Polo froze. Abu Sayyaf, the terrorists from the Muslim south of the Philippines. Islamic fundamentalists who wanted

to use the most brutal methods to force the secession of their region and establish an Islamic theocracy. "What are they doing here? They usually fight much further east."

"Normally, yes. But last year they attacked this area. They raided a beach resort near Puerto and kidnapped tourists and staff."

Polo had heard and read about that, even in *The Times*.

"They demanded ransom for the tourists," the dynamite fisherman continued. "Probably to buy weapons." He paused, which didn't surprise Polo, because he knew the tragic ending. "They beheaded several tourists and Filipinos and sent the heads home to their families."

The events had made headlines around the world, as they were almost unparalleled in their brutality. However, the Abu Sayyaf's modus operandi was less unusual than the location. They usually operated in the predominantly Muslim islands of Mindanao and Sulu. But for this attack, they had crossed the Sulu Sea westward and ventured into Christian territory. Just like now.

Polo knew of another incident where the Abu Sayyaf had operated far from their home base. In 2000, they had crossed the Sulu Sea to the south. In the nearby Celebes Sea, they attacked Pulau Sipadan, a small Malaysian diving island off the east coast of Borneo. They kidnapped 21 tourists and staff members and held them for several months. They orchestrated this operation for maximum media impact, repeatedly releasing photos and poignant interviews with the hostages. Polo had followed the events closely, as he had recently enjoyed a fantastic diving holiday on Pulau Sipadan himself.

"Did they say what they plan to do with us?" he asked.

"I haven't heard anything. They'll probably demand a ransom for you." He hesitated for a moment.

"They'll probably send the heads of my dead friends home to their families. I don't know what they plan to do with your friend."

"They don't seem to care much about his life," Polo muttered to himself. "And as soon as they realize there's nothing to be gained from me, my life won't be worth much either."

"And why did they leave me alive? I'm just a poor fisherman with a wife and two small children, one of them seriously ill. I'm just a burden to them. I'm a dead man."

Polo's sympathy was limited. The guy was a criminal. Besides, he was worried about his own life.

For a while, both men were lost in their thoughts. Polo barely noticed his surroundings. He leaned against the mast, dazed, staring blankly at the deckboards. Only his body still reacted to the outside world, automatically compensating for the rocking of the waves, in sync with the body behind him. It wasn't until the Bangka heeled over sharply that he noticed a change out of the corner of his eye. He straightened up and turned his head. As the boat righted itself, he saw land. They were following a palm-fringed beach. Probably the island that would offer them shelter from the typhoon, their temporary destination.

"Is that Tilimoli?" he asked the dynamite fisherman.

"Yes. We'll be there soon. I know where they want to go."

"Oh, really?" Rocks came into view. "Where exactly?"

"To a small cove in the middle of those rocks over there. The entrance is wide and deep enough for the three bangkas, and the rocks protect it from wind and waves. The only safe harbor on the island. It's inaccessible from land, only by sea, by bangka. If you know the reefs, the shallows in front of the rocks. The rest of the island is lined with sandy beaches, offering no protection from the typhoon."

"Do you know this island so well?"

"I've been to that cove many times, but never during a typhoon. There used to be lobsters there, but that was a long time ago."

"Because you fished them all out," grumbled Polo.

"We're fishermen."

"Yes, but you probably took everything, even the young ones. Then the population can't recover, of course."

"We try not to catch any young ones. But we have to live off what the sea provides."

"And now there are no more lobsters in the cove."

"I don't have a bank account, and we were able to live off it for a while."

"Sure. And when you've fished out one bay, you move on to the next. Until there aren't any lobsters left. You do the same with the fish, preferably using dynamite and cyanide."

"We're there," the fisherman whispered.

Indeed, the helmsman had reduced the engine speed and was now steering the bangka towards the shore. Two masked men hurried to the front, presumably to look out for shallow waters. Soon the boat stopped rocking and it became more comfortable for the prisoners, but Polo could no longer catch a glimpse of the island. Since he could only see planks on the sides, he looked back towards the wheelhouse with the towed boats behind. Hein must have been tossed around terribly during the journey. Had he even noticed? Was he still alive?

Polo and Ruben

As they entered the bay, high cliffs appeared above the edge of the water. They turned around and docked. The masked men tied the three bangkas to the rocks and unloaded several sacks

and crates. The leader held a water bottle to Polo's lips, and then to the fisherman's. Both drank greedily.

"How is my friend? Is he conscious?"

Polo received no answer.

"Is he even alive?"

"Don't worry."

"Please, let me go to him."

No reaction.

"Please, treat his wounds and give him something to drink."

"Shut up!" the Filipino shouted at him.

"You can't just let him die!"

The leader slapped him across the face with the back of his hand. Polo tipped to one side and his arms twisted painfully in the shackles. Immediately he straightened up again and let his head hang. He felt blood running down his cheek and dripping from his chin onto his legs.

All the kidnappers except the one with the thin goatee left the bangka. They followed a rocky path up the slope and disappeared among some palm trees. It started to drizzle, and their guard retreated into the cabin.

"What's up there by the palm trees?" Polo asked.

"A big cave that goes deep into the rocks. Good shelter."

"Well, that's wonderful. So those guys are going to roast a steak and snuggle into their sleeping bags after a few beers. And we can just die down here in the typhoon."

"I don't think so."

"Fine, you don't think we're going to die, huh?"

"No, they don't drink beer. They're Muslim."

"Oh, right, very funny."

Polo started to think. Could they really just sit there and wait? Was there no way to escape?

"Do you have a knife? Or anything to cut through the ropes?"

"They took my knife. And there's nothing sharp here, I already looked."

"A lighter or matches?" The guy must have used something to light the dynamite before he blew up the reefs.

"No," came the quiet reply. "Brother-in-law Tata had the fire."

Polo assumed that Tata was one of the men who had been shot.

"We can't escape," the fisherman sighed shortly after. "Even if we get the ropes off, where to go? You can only leave the bay by boat. And the typhoon will soon be raging outside. Very dangerous."

"Damn, so we can just sit here, try to survive the typhoon, and wait for the Abus to kill us."

The rain and wind grew stronger by the minute.

"Hein!" Polo called out several times, but received no answer. He raised himself up as much as his shackles allowed, but he couldn't see the Dutchman lying on the deck behind the bulwark of the ship. If he was still alive, he must be in a very bad state and unconscious; otherwise, he would surely have raised his head above the edge of the deck. The kidnappers hadn't even bothered to tie him up. That wasn't a good sign.

"Damn it," Polo snarled, "we owe all this misery to you!" He angrily thrust his arms forward.

The fisherman bumped against the mast, then half-heartedly pulled himself towards him and groaned: "I didn't shoot, and you?"

"We shot back. To defend our lives against you. You recently injured my friend."

"If we hadn't started it today, you would have. It doesn't matter."

"It does matter. We certainly wouldn't have shot."

"I don't believe that. What else are the rifles for?"

"We just wanted to talk to you. I said that several times over the megaphone. Even though you already injured Jo."

"What about?"

"About you having to stop destroying the reefs."

"We're fishermen. We have to feed our families."

"But with dynamite and cyanide, you destroy everything."

"We can't catch enough using other methods."

"When everything is destroyed, you won't catch anything at all."

"We only take what we need so our families can eat, stay healthy, and our children can go to school."

"But you take too much from the sea. And with your illegal fishing methods, you kill creatures that you can't use or sell, but which the sea needs to regenerate. You are plundering the very foundation. The sea can't regenerate like that. Without reefs and young fish, there won't be any big fish either. Until there are no more fish in these waters, not a single one, do you understand? You're not only destroying the diving spots and the jobs of us and your neighbors, but also your own livelihood. In the end, no one here will be able to make a living from the sea anymore. What will you do then? Grow vegetables on your tiny, salty islands, or raise livestock?"

"You rich people can talk so easily," the Filipino man began, "about the sea, fishing, and environmental protection. My family barely makes ends meet. Nobody in our village ever gets fat, not even in good years. And in bad years, we go hungry. We don't have a television, a car, not even our own electricity. And now my little son Tong is sick. Very sick. Tuberculosis. We have to buy expensive medicine, antibiotics. Very expensive, but they don't work. We need other medicine, a hundred times more expensive. I don't have the money, my family doesn't either. What am I supposed to do? Protect the environment and let my son die? I get much more money if

I fish with dynamite and cyanide. It's the only way to earn enough to support my wife and two children and get Tong well again. Hopefully."

The distant rumbling and whistling gave an indication of what was happening beyond the protective cliffs. Out there, it must have been hell. Even in the bay, the waves and wind had increased noticeably. The water bubbled and foamed impressively, but the rocking of the moored *bangka* remained tolerable. Only when two large waves bounced off opposite cliffs and then collided, did the resulting wave become twice as high. Just as Polo was about to reply to the fisherman's words, such a monstrous wave engulfed the boat and tossed it about in its moorings.

"But with dynamite fishing, you only make more money temporarily, then it's all over," he continued, as the water surface calmed. "Suddenly you earn nothing at all, because there's nothing left in the sea to eat or sell. Your destructive practices don't work in the long run."

"You can talk about the long run," the Filipino snapped. "The Americans and Europeans come to our islands and enjoy life." Even if they don't have much money at home, everything is cheap here with dollars and euros. You can even buy your own restaurant, or a dive center, or a hotel—we've heard of many people doing that. Protect the environment so everything looks beautiful and clean. Colorful fish and corals to watch and photograph. Do some business to keep things interesting. Earn extra income for a bigger house or car, or flights to visit family back home. If it doesn't work out or you get tired of it, you can go back home. We can't choose or just leave. Our lives are here. Our relatives, neighbors, and friends. We don't have the money for a plane ticket. We have to support our families here, just like our parents and grandparents did. Farmers have to grow vegetables and raise livestock, fishermen have to fish.

We only have fishing; we have no other source of income. And if my son gets tuberculosis, what am I supposed to do? Where will I get all the pesos when we already have so little? Either catch more fish, or my child will die."

A giant wave surged into the bay, raising the water level and lifting the *bangka*. The bearded watchman appeared on deck, clung to the railing, and inspected the ropes that held the boat to the rocks. They were taut to the breaking point, the wooden planks creaked and groaned. The incoming water lifted the *bangka* higher and higher until it tilted towards the shore. Suddenly, it capsized, and Polo barely saw the kidnapper being flung against the rock wall. Then, all around him was only spray and splintering wood. He was tossed about, his arms twisted in the shackles, and he struck the water hard several times. First he was pushed underwater, then pulled back up. As soon as he took a deep breath, he was forcefully pulled down again. The pressure on his ears increased, and he forced equalization by moving his jaw. Finally, there was a loud crack, then silence.

Polo looked around, but without his mask, he could only see vague outlines and shadows in the turbulent water. The *bangka* lay upright on the seabed, leaning against the rock wall. Above them, the water surface shimmered, and just below it floated what looked like a perfectly straight palm trunk. The mast!? Indeed, there was nothing left behind his head. Just a splintered stump reaching up to his waist. He was no longer tied to the boat, only to the Filipino. They had to swim to the surface to breathe. Together, using only their legs. He moved his arms, but the fisherman didn't react.

Polo reached back, grabbed the lifeless body, and pushed off the seabed with his feet. Every kick cost him oxygen and brought him closer to drowning, but he had no choice. Centimeter by centimeter, he pushed himself upwards,

carrying the weight of the other man on his back. Finally, he broke the surface and gulped in air. But immediately, he felt himself being pulled back down. With great effort, he managed to keep the two men's weight afloat. His already aching leg muscles wouldn't be able to sustain this strain for long.

Suddenly, the body behind Polo's back moved. Then, it kicked powerfully, propelling them forward. Together, they struggled, kicking wildly and gasping for breath, managing to stay afloat and reach the shore. Back to back, they washed up on a small patch of sand and crawled a few meters out of the surf.

Polo panted like he'd run a marathon, and his fellow prisoner seemed to be in the same state. After recovering somewhat, he looked around. They were in a rocky cove, not far from where the Abus' *bangka* had been. A few meters further, the dynamite fishermen's boat was still tied up. But the *Sleeping Butterfly*, with Hein on board, was gone. Polo scanned the water and saw it bobbing on the waves in the middle of the bay.

"Here's a sharp edge for the ropes," the fisherman whispered, guiding their bound wrists to a rocky ledge.

"Very good. What's your name?"

"Ruben."

"I'm Polo."

Together, they began rubbing the rope back and forth against the rock with as much pressure as they could muster. When they had worn it through and freed one hand each, they were able to loosen the other end of the rope. Then they sat side by side in the sand, each busy rubbing their wrists and moving their fingers.

"What now?" Polo finally asked.

"We have to leave here immediately."

"But we can only do that by sea."

"We'll take the *Talisin*, our *bangka*."

"And the typhoon?"

"We have to." Polo noticed Ruben staring at him from the side. Before he could turn to him, he received a push and landed face down in the sand. He scrambled to his feet and saw the Filipino climbing into the fishing boat. Polo sprinted forward, but slipped on the sandy rock surface and fell. It didn't hurt much, but when he got up, Ruben had already started the engine and cut the bow line. There was no way to catch up. Polo rubbed his elbow and watched as Ruben released the stern line. The Abus appeared from behind the palm trees. They had probably heard the engine noise despite the typhoon. Polo looked again at the fisherman, who stood at the stern of the *Talisin*, the loose line in his hand. Their eyes met. The roar of the storm subsided briefly, then swelled again. Ruben nodded almost imperceptibly. Polo ran and jumped. As soon as his feet touched the wooden planks of the boat, they pulled away and started moving. Only now did Polo see the bodies lying in a pool of blood on the ground. Ruben's friends, the corpses of the shot fishermen.

"Wait!" Polo shouted as Ruben was about to steer the *bangka* towards the exit as quickly as possible. He pointed to the *Sleeping Butterfly*, which was not far from them.

"We have to leave immediately. The Abus will start shooting soon."

"Ruben!" Polo shouted, "We can't leave him behind!"

A first shot rang out, but the Filipino ducked and turned around. When they reached the boat, he eased off the throttle, and as they glided past, Polo grabbed the bow line and tied it roughly to their stern. More shots rang out, and Ruben accelerated. Shortly afterward, they entered the channel, where the storm and the waves suddenly increased dramatically. As soon as they were out of the line of fire, Ruben steered the

Talisin into the lee of a rocky outcrop, where he had to be careful not to let the boat be slammed against the rocks by a wave.

Polo wanted to immediately board the *Sleeping Butterfly*, but hesitated, first glancing at the makeshift fastening, then at the fisherman. Their eyes met again. When Polo saw Ruben reach for the line and nod to him, he climbed over the gunwale.

Hein lay face down, his legs in the stern, where a few inches of water lapped. The rain had washed away the pool of blood, and his back seemed uninjured.

"Hein!" Polo called, "How are you? Can you hear me?"

No response.

He knelt down and placed his hand on the Dutchman's shoulder. According to his first aid knowledge, you shouldn't simply turn an injured person onto their back, and unconscious people were best positioned on their side. Hein was therefore not in a bad position, and Polo gently shook his shoulder. "Can you hear me?"

At that moment, a wave seized the *Sleeping Butterfly*, flung it against the rocks, and tilted it so dangerously that it almost capsized. Polo fell on his back, and Hein landed on top of him, their faces only a few centimeters apart. Polo froze. He could see almost only the whites of Hein's eyes, so sharply were they rolled upwards. His face was pale and distorted, as if he had uttered a death cry.

Polo just wanted to get away quickly. From Hein, the boat, and this cursed island. But the lifeless body weighed him down, pinning him to the planks. A panic-stricken fear gripped him. He wriggled frantically and managed to crawl out from under the corpse. Immediately he jumped up, looked at the dead man, and then to the *Talisin*. To Ruben's questioning look, he shook his head and climbed over to him. "Let's get out of here quickly!" he shouted as he crouched beside Ruben.

"What?" the fisherman roared back over the noise.

"My friend is dead. Let's get out of here."

"Okay. We'll tow your *bangka* out to sea so the Abus don't have a boat and are stuck. But first we have to put my dead friends with your friend. And untie your *bangka* out there."

"And what about the bodies of our friends? Why untie it?"

Continued with the Glossary

Glossary

Abu Sayyaf: islamist terrorist organization in the Muslim south of the Philippines (Mindanao, Basilan, Jolo, etc.), which aims to establish an Islamic state there

Aft: the rear part of a boat or ship (maritime slang)

Anemones and corals: a diverse class within the phylum Cnidaria, comprising some 7,500 species, which have populated the Earth's oceans for over 600 million years; they are very sensitive to environmental changes; besides sea anemones and sea pens, this class mainly includes hard and soft corals (see there)

Anglerfish: unusual fish with a stocky and plump appearance, high back, well camouflaged, often resembling the reef environment, brightly colored, scaleless and smooth-skinned or with forked skin appendages, the first of the three spines of the dorsal fin is modified into a "fishing rod" with a lure, territorial, can move slowly by hopping and waddling on their pectoral and pelvic fins, prey is lured in and then sucked in by a lightning-fast opening of the mouth, 2.5 to 38 cm long

Angelfishes: a family of tropical marine fish with about 130 species, most of which are 12 to 22 centimeters long, with very vibrant patterns in black, white, blue, red, orange, and yellow; they usually live in pairs

Atoll: a ring-shaped coral reef

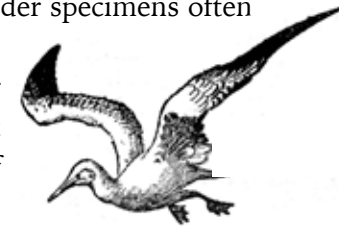
Bangka: a Philippine outrigger boat

Barracuda: pike-like, silvery, elongated body, head with fixed eyes and a large mouth, lower jaw protrudes beyond the upper jaw, large fangs, 20 cm to 2 m long, young



fish often in huge schools, larger and older specimens often found alone

Boobies: a family of seabirds, named for their awkward-looking gait on land, but excellent gliders; they spend most of their time over open sea



Buoyancy control vest: by adding or releasing air, the diver can regulate their buoyancy

Butterflyfishes: a family of perch-like fish (see *Perch*) with almost 230 species, found in tropical and subtropical seas, often swimming in schools of hundreds or thousands of brightly colored individuals, only a few centimeters long

Cleaner shrimp: belong to the crustaceans and live mainly in coral reefs, they remove parasites and dead skin from fish, with larger fish like moray eels and groupers they even crawl under the gill covers and into the open mouth to remove food remnants between the teeth, which the "customers" patiently tolerate, often brightly colored to attract fish („customers“)

Compressor: compresses breathing air into diving cylinders or supplies the diver directly with a steady stream of air through a hose; also called a *dive compressor*

Decompression problems: the deeper and longer one dives, the more nitrogen accumulates in the body tissues. Ignoring diving medical recommendations for maximum dive depth and duration, as well as ascent speed, can lead to serious health problems, such as a local interruption of blood flow due to the formation of gas bubbles in the tissue (embolism), also known as *decompression sickness*

DIN valve: see *INT valve*

Dive: an underwater excursion, usually lasting about an hour

Dive Master: a professional dive guide for underwater excursions

Durian: a tropical fruit the size of a coconut, yellowish, with many spines Its taste and smell are loved by some and hated by others, which is why it is strictly forbidden in many places

El Niño: a weather phenomenon that occurs in the equatorial Pacific every four years or so around Christmas, which, among other things, leads to significant changes in ocean currents

Freak Wave: see *monster wave*

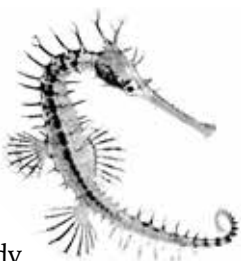
Frigatebird: open-ocean birds common in the tropics and subtropics; males have an inflatable red throat pouch; they often attack other birds to steal their prey; excellent fliers; wingspan 175 to 250 centimeters, body length 71 to 114 centimeters



Gecko: Scaly reptiles, small lizards, mostly nocturnal, can climb walls and even ceilings; have inhabited the Earth for approximately 50 million years

Ghost Moray Eel: Probably the most striking species of *moray eel* (see above); finger-thick and up to 1.2 meters long; leaf-like growths on the „nose“ and others on the lower jaw; during their lifetime, these animals change from males (young ones are black, adults then brightly blue) to yellow females; also called *snout moray eels*

Ghost Pipefish: striking, bizarre shape with many skin appendages; 5 to 17 centimeters long; coloration and skin growths can vary greatly; related to *seahorses*, see below



Groupers: various species with body lengths ranging from a few centimeters to 2.5 meters (giant grouper); primarily active at

dawn and dusk and are highly territorial; ambush predators; see also: *Perch*

Hermit crabs: they tuck their abdomens into empty snail shells, carry these shells around, and retreat completely into them when threatened.

They can range in size from a few centimeters to one meter. They can be found both in water and on land, but always near water. They are considered “ecosystem cleaners” because they eat algae and leftover food from other animals

Inboard engine: an engine that is permanently installed within the hull of a boat

INT/DIN Valve: different systems for connecting the regulator to the compressed air cylinder

Jeepneys: old Jeeps converted into small public buses for up to 14 passengers, small animals, and luggage; usually brightly and bizarrely painted with many chrome parts

Lambanog: Philippine coconut brandy

List (of a boat): a tilt to one side; verb: to list (to tilt sideways)

Machete: a large, heavy knife

Mackerel: schooling fish that live in coastal waters, 30 to 50 cm long, a popular food fish

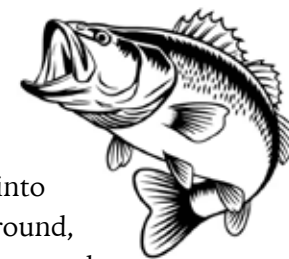


Mandarinfish: bright, colorful appearance, belong to the *wrasse* family, slimy skin instead of scales, large pelvic fins, protruding eyes, pointed mouth, 5 to 8 cm long, very shy

Mangroves: salt-tolerant trees and shrubs in the tidal zone of tropical coasts

Mantis Shrimp: a type of shrimp named for its grasping appendages, which resemble those of praying mantises; very agile and skittish

Mollusks: a diverse and abundant phylum of animals that have neither a shell nor a skeleton; includes snails, clams, and squid, among others



Monster wave: unpredictable, exceptionally high, steep, and fast wave; also called a *freak wave*

Moray eels: a family of eel-like bony fish, about 200 known species, in shallow tropical/subtropical seas, lack paired fins and gill covers, therefore look like snakes, can be between 17 cm and 4 m long; see also ghost moray eels

Napoleon fish: distinctive hump on the forehead, fleshy lips, usually blue-green to gray in color, large pectoral and dorsal fins, 60 cm to over two meters long, often approaches divers curiously, a prized delicacy in Asia, endangered of extinction; also called *Napoleon wrasse*

Nipa hut: bamboo house on stilts with a palm leaf roof

Octopus: with over 100 species, they form the largest genus in the true octopus family; all have eight arms (Latin: *Octo*) with two rows of suckers and an ink sac; their heads are variously shaped and distinct; they have neither a shell nor an internal skeleton (*mollusks*, see above); they are considered to be very agile and dexterous, and above all, exceptionally intelligent, with a central brain and eight peripheral brains in their arms; many species have not yet been scientifically described; they range in size from 3 centimeters to 1 meter in length



Outboard motor: a motor attached to the stern of a boat; often shortened to *outboard*

Outrigger boat: the hull is connected to one or two floats by crossbeams

Parrotfish: belong to the wrasse family, with over 70 species, often very colorful, their mouth resembles a parrot's beak, they live in reefs during the day at depths up to 30 meters and rest at night hidden among the corals, some species surround

themselves with a protective mucus cocoon, they use their beak-like teeth to crush corals for food or scrape algae off rocks, 20 to 120 cm long



Perch: the order Perciformes includes many suborders, families and species (including freshwater fish) with very different body shapes, all have two separate dorsal fins and an anal fin, typical for Philippine waters are ... e.g. snappers and *grouper* (up to 2.5 meters long), see above

Port side: the left side of a vessel, looking forward; adjective: *port*

Pressure gauge: a measuring and display device that shows the pressure in a compressed air cylinder and thus the remaining air volume

Red snapper: a reddish-colored fish, known for its large, deeply cleft mouth with large, needle-sharp teeth, body length up to 1 meter, weight up to 22 kg, popular as a food fish

Regulator: allows breathing air stored under high pressure in a scuba tank through a mouthpiece

Rip current: a strong, narrow current flowing from the shore out to sea

San Miguel: a Philippine beer brand

Sea cobra: considered the most venomous sea snake, black and white banded body pattern, not shy, ignores divers, up to 120 cm long

Seahorse: like *pipefish* (see above), belong to the seahorse family, head resembles that of a horse, worm-like tail, usually vertical posture, body covered with ring-shaped bony plates, elaborate mating ritual, after which the males become "pregnant" and carry the eggs in a brood pouch, can be from 2 to 35 centimeters in size



Seismic tremor: an earthquake on the seabed

Soft corals: like stony corals, they belong to the *cnidarians* (see above), are sessile, but lack a calcareous skeleton and do not form reefs. Instead, they have a flexible, fleshy or leathery structure that allows them to sway with the ocean currents; they often resemble plants, with vibrant colors and intricate, delicate shapes

Stonefish: they have a plump body, are extremely sluggish and well camouflaged, and lie in wait for prey up to their own size, either buried in the sand or in crevices in rocks; 30 to 40 centimeters long; they have a potent venom in their dorsal fin spines

Stony corals, hard / soft corals: colonies of tiny, sessile polyps that secrete calcium carbonate at their base, thus forming reefs that, over thousands of years, can grow into massive reef structures (e.g., the Great Barrier Reef in Australia) and can even form islands (e.g., the Maldives and the Bahamas); they are found primarily in shallow, sunlit, tropical coastal waters; like soft corals, they belong to the *cnidarians*, see above

Surface interval: a break of at least one hour between two dives to prevent health problems

Surgeonfish: name derived from the scalpel-like or horny blades in front of the tail base, which serve as defensive weapons; usually 30 to 40 centimeters long; some species have interestingly shaped “noses” and foreheads



Table coral: flat, horizontally growing *stony corals* (see definition), especially on rocky outcrops and reef slopes; diameter up to several meters

Tagalog: official language of the Philippines (along with English)

Technical diver (Tec diver): an advanced recreational diver who uses specialized equipment. For example, they can dive dee-

per and longer using technical breathing gases (instead of compressed air)

Threadfin snappers: a family of perch-like fish, 17 centimeters to 1.7 meters long; biologically similar to *mackerel*, see above

Tricycle: a three-wheeled motorcycle with a small cabin for passengers; also called a *trike*

Tuareg: African desert nomads; The men wrap their bodies and heads with cloth

Tuberculosis test: test to detect tuberculosis infection

Typhoon: a tropical cyclone

Whitetip reef shark: one of the most common sharks found on the coral reefs of the Indo-Pacific; average length 1.5 meters (maximum 2 meters); live-bearing; usually lie on the seabed or in reef caves during the day and hunt at night; territorial

Zodiak: inflatable motorboat

Readings & Book Presentations

Not every reading event featuring Martin O. Koch involves him appearing in a wetsuit and diving goggles, complete with oxygen tanks and a *pressure gauge* (see *glossary*, page 232). Nor does he always have to sit in a fountain or swimming pool while reading, as seen in the photo from Basel, on the left.



But his readings are always captivating and entertaining, and his novel “The Reef of Lost Fish” is a journey into the depths of human experience and the unique landscape of the Philippines – anyone who organizes an event with Martin O. Koch is guaranteed to have a satisfied audience!



Martin O. Koch

Martin O. Koch, born in 1964 in Lörrach, Germany, grew up in north-west Switzerland and lives in Basel. Educated at various Swiss Universities in economics and social sciences (Master’s degree) and sustainable development (postgraduate studies). Many years of professional experience in development co-operation, economics and journalism; lived in London for two years, many private and professional trips to Europe, North and Latin America, Asia, Oceania, Africa.

His previous publications: “Justitia”, serialised story in 27 episodes (“Schweizer Anwaltsrevue” / “Swiss Lawyer’s Review”, 2003-05), “Die Rache des Kaninchens” / “Revenge of



the Rabbit”, crime short story (2006), plus many specialist publications (1994-2022).

More about the author at [fb/Insta: Martin O. Koch](#)