

-Liwayway-

Pulong Hanginin, windy isle; it deserved its name. Liwayway's world swelled upwards. The wind bit her hard and she grabbed tight on the rails. Then the boat plunged down. The pull of gravity shifted, and she was weightless for a second. It passed, and froth swallowed them in a mist of white that filled her sight.

"Are we there yet?!" she yelled.

Everything rose again. The mist disappeared and she came face to face with the sky. The earth's pull returned. It doubled down on her; buckling her knees. She closed her eyes, trying to keep the contents of her stomach.

"Yes!" Balod replied.

Her gut churned again as it dropped. "Then hurry up!"

The boat slowed to a gentle swim on the water's surface. Liwayway looked around. They were a stone's throw away from an island. Rocks shaped like crocodile's teeth peered just above the water's surface. The boat swiveled and danced around them as they approached the shore.

"We're here!" Balod called out from behind.

Liwayway dropped on the beach and breathed hard. Her vision swam, and she massaged her temples while her last meal fought up her throat.

Balod walked over, carrying a mooring rope from the boat and wrapping it around a palm tree.

"Doesn't look like it's here." Liwayway said.

"There's someone who lives here,"

"Who?"

"We call him *Pagong*." Balod scratched the side of his head. He pointed to a house on top of a rocky outcrop that flattened on top, like a pair of whale's flukes. "He's a bit old, maybe he can help. But he's a little... off."

Liwayway nodded. The gust screamed as they walked forward, tugging at their clothes and pulling on their hair. A leaf smacked her face, torn from a tree inland. She held it in her hand and sniffed. A refreshing coolness entered with her breath. It made her remember *Magwayen*.

A wish, a boon, a way to restore a land ravaged by flames.

She shook her head.

A quest, a journey—

“You sure you can’t hear the voice of the wind yet?” she shouted at Balod’s back. “It seems pretty loud here.”

He didn’t answer.

They found the house empty, save for a fat bird ambling in front of it. It raised its short, stubby wings and screeched at them.

“Ah, the wind brought visitors, Nene.” An old man walked up from behind. He carried a basket of leaves and walked up to the bird, patting it on its head. It snuggled up to him and he reached to feed it a couple of seeds from his basket.

“Tandang Pagong!”, Balod said, “I was hoping you could help us—”

“Ah Balod!” the old man said. “What brings you here? Want some leaf?”

“No! Something terrible happened. A monster ate everyone! We need your help to find them!”

The old man scratched his beard. He looked at Balod, then at Liwayway, then at the bird.

“Oh dear Nene. And those bunch of fools told me I was crazy.”

“Tandang Pagong.” Liwayway said. “Do you know how we can find the *Bakunawa*?”

The old man’s eyes narrowed. He studied Liwayway.

“The *Bakunawa* you say?” he mumbled. “Come, come inside. This isn’t something for Nene to hear.”

“So you want to chase after the *Bakunawa*? And save everyone?” Pagong said after Balod had relayed the events. They sat inside the house made of stone flakes stacked together.

Liwayway nodded.

“You must be stupid!” Pagong roared. He slapped his thigh like a drum and quaked with laughter. Outside, the bird screeched in fits. Liwayway frowned. She looked at Balod, who shot back a wry smile.

“This is important Tandang Pagong.” Balod said. “If we don’t find it then...”

“Then you’ll still be alive!”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s dangerous.” Liwayway said. “I have to save her.”

“Then how can I help you?”

“You know a lot about the tribe’s customs. What is the *Bakunawa* exactly?” Balod paused. “And... what did it mean that I should follow the voice of the wind? How can I even talk to the wind?”

The old man shook his head. He walked outside and returned back with a leaf on his hand.

“You can’t hear the voice of the wind you say?” Tandang Pagong pointed at Balod. “Chew on this, then you will.”

“That’s not real.” Balod frowned.

“It isn’t because you do not believe that it is not real.” Tandang Pagong grinned, showing his yellowing teeth. “You do not believe that you can hear so you will not hear it.”

“Is it a spiritual plant?” Liwayway asked.

Tandang Pagong laughed. “Young lady, why don’t you chew on it so *you* can listen to the voice of the wind?”

Liwayway took it from him. It brought back to mind her tribe’s potions.

“Roll it and chew on it.”

“Wait—” Balod shouted.

She rolled it and placed it on her mouth then chewed. It tasted acidic, slightly bitter even.

“Li?” A familiar voice called out to her. Her gaze shot to the door. Her father stood there, clad in the garbs of a *Lakan* and the hide of a bear. He looked down at her, and Liwayway suddenly turned small.