

7

-Balod-

The waters rose in streams, flying upwards as if the world had been upended. Balod hung on, his robes flapping in the gusts. Screams tumbled with the screeching gale and palm trees flailing, beating the ground, trunk bent to reach down then up. An orange glow burst in the sky, and as he looked, a shadow that covered the heavens slithered and disappeared above the clouds. He choked in disbelief.

And the storm cleared.

Debris clung to his skin, sand on his cheeks, robes heavy with water, breath coming as fast as his heartbeat. His arms screamed and trembled and he sank to the ground. Facing the sky, the moon shone on him, and a wave of weariness washed over.

He looked around at the devastation; trees wrenched from their roots, pieces of wood, what remained of their huts, their instruments, the festival. His hands reached for his *kubing* and found it tucked inside his robes. He sighed in relief and frowned in confusion. That was unlike any storm.

Balod groaned, finding his bearings. But when he stood up, he realized there was no one else left. Silence had taken root. It made his heart beat louder.

He stumbled to the shore, hoping. But only the boats remained, some, pieces of wood in the sand. Some overturned, riding on the waves. And someone else he didn't expect to see.

The girl with an eagle on her skin huddled, facing the moon and the waves, holding a pearl in her hands. The one Ngi-ngi had found.

“Why are you here?” Tears started blurring his vision. It faded, turning into a memory of the waves crashing and a voice from the ocean and a girl turning into an eagle. Fire burned in his throat.

“Where is everybody?” he spat. He walked towards her, hands trembling at the side. “Where is my sister?” He grabbed her by the shoulders and shook. “Bring them back!”

Her gaze held no answers. Only blood trickled out of her lips.

The moment stretched forever. His sister, lively, mischievous, diving for pearls under the ocean. Smiling under the sun.

Take care of them. His father had said before.

He let go. Knees slumped, arms digging tiny trenches as they clenched and he cried and grovelled.

“They are still alive,” a lilting voice whispered in his mind. “And you can still save them.”

“Is this your doing?” Liwayway said.

An unfamiliar woman walked from the waves, the waters swirling up to her in a dress, pearls strung on her neck. She smiled at Balod.

“No. It is theirs.”

“Who are you?” he asked.

“Poor child.” The woman shook her head, walking up to him to cradle him in her arms. “You have suffered for your ancestors' doings... but you must stay strong. You can still save her.”

“What do you mean?”

“You can hear it, can't you? The voice of the wind. The *Bakunawa*. It is your tribe's curse, why you must always flee the storms, why you cannot return to the land. The past haunts you.” the woman crooned, leaning in to whisper in Balod's ear. “Inside it lies your sister, and the others of your tribe.”

“You are tricking him.” Liwayway growled.

“I am telling the truth.” the woman said.

“Your truth comes with a price.”

“It is something they must pay.”

Then the woman disappeared, melting into a shower of mist and a warm breeze that licked at his skin, and his wounds closed and he felt a burst of energy.

“Who... what?”

Liwayway didn't answer. Balod stared at the ocean. Minutes passed.

“The deities are fickle, but they do not lie,” Liwayway finally said. “There is a way to save your sister, and everyone else.”

When she came to, everything was dark, wet, and dirty. She shook her head, patted her clothes and stood upright. The ground sank under her feet.

“Where am I?” she grimaced, rubbing her head. She looked around, but the darkness hid everything.

“Hello!?” she shouted. Only her own voice answered.

In the distance, spots of light bounced off the shiny walls of wherever she was in. She walked towards it, carefully trudging through the muddy, slimy surface.