

Prologue

Waterspouts rose towards the sky while waves lunged against each other, bursting in an explosion of sea foam and salty spray. The rain fell hard and the wind's howl roared across the boats, tossing and turning them like leaves on a pond. Yet on their decks, men, women and children stood like pillars, their voices rising over the storm.

They sang together in a steady rhythm. Like the beats of a drum, their voices roared against the gale, mixing together into a melody full of resolute strength. The music pierced through the din and wrapped around the fleet.

Steadily, as they sang, the wind swirled to a halt around their boats. The raging waters around them calmed into a gentle flow. All around them, the fury of the storm thundered, yet within a paddle's reach, the furious gale mellowed into a breeze that brushed softly against the bamboo hulls.

A sigh of relief washed the decks. Everyone sprang to action, some ladling water overboard, while the others checked the condition of their boats. While they moved, they continued humming a tune. The entire fleet of turtle-boats chugged along, moving forward towards their destination.

On the leading turtle-boat, bathed in the spray of seawater, Balod stared at the distance. The depths of the ocean reflected in his gaze. Looking like waves crashing against a sandy beach, wrinkles and salt marred his youthful face that was deep in thought.

"I am not worried for this journey, but now I am worried, seeing the face of my handsome son ravaged by the storm in your mind." an old woman broke his train of thought, as she walked up to him. When he looked at her, his mind brightened up and the lines on his face disappeared.

"*Ina.*" He turned to hug her as she draped a thick cloth threaded with swirling patterns over his shoulders. She looked at him with her black eyes full of concern and spoke with a sonorous voice.

"My child, there is a lot in your mind, why don't you share it with your mother?"

"I am just nervous."

"About the Harana?"

"...yes."

His *ina* chuckled, “Are you worried that no one will like it? How could that be! Why, when your father sang in the Harana, his passion was so strong that I swooned. That very night, I slid into his boat!”

Balod blushed, the hints of a smile stretching his lips.

“But I am also worried.” she sighed, “Not for the Harana, but for this storm. In my youth, we did not have such anger from *Magwayen*. It is an omen.”

“Of ill or good?”

She contemplated for a brief moment, “Perhaps, of change.”

“Balod! *Ina!* The girl we fished! She! She!” a young girl shouted from inside the turtle-boat’s cove, running towards them with her face flushed and full of sweat. She moved deftly through the bobbing deck, unperturbed by the rocking.

“Calm down, Ngi-ngi. What happened?”

“She’s – she’s shaking and shivering and she’s going-” Ngi-ngi grabbed her head with her hands and shrieked as hard as she can, “-aaah!”

Balod and his mother stared at each other before hurrying down into the hold.

Inside the turtle boats were the dwellings for the seafarers. It was more spacious than it looked, enough to house a handful of people with their supplies, food and clothing. Inside were chests for storage, tropical fruits and dried fish hung on the ceiling, while hammocks were strung from poles, swaying in the bobbing ocean.

A girl was lying in one of the hammocks, shivering and gasping as if in a nightmare. Sweat stained her clothes that were already dampened with seawater, the patterns on which looked different from theirs. Stuck to her hair were several white and brown feathers, while the outline of an eagle traced on her shoulders. Several children looked at her worriedly, some trying to wipe the sweat from her brows while others tried to fan her with big leaves.

The children gave way as Balod’s mother strode over. She looked at the girl, before placing a palm on her forehead and singing a soothing lullaby. Her lilting voice filled the interior of the turtle boat, and slowly, color returned to the girl’s face. She stopped shivering and her tense shoulders relaxed.

The girl’s eyes snapped open. She looked around and locked gazes with the old woman, who was surprised to see terror and sadness in the girl’s sharp brown eyes. As she blinked out the sleepiness, she eyed her surroundings with wariness and confusion.

“Child. It is alright, you are safe.” the woman reassured her.

Ngi-ngi brought over a cracked coconut, offering the juice to the girl to drink. She looked at the child, before taking a sip.

“What’s your name?” Ngi-ngi asked her curiously.

“I am...” her voice was hoarse and rough, telling that she had not spoken in a while.

“Liwayway.”

-Liwayway-

Sunlight bounced off the waves, dancing coruscating rays on her skin. A strong breeze whipped past the boat and brushed against her nape and shoulders; it seized her hair which unravelled across her face. The wind tasted differently here. *Salty*. It stuck to the roof of her mouth and coated her tongue.

It was unlike the scent of the forest. She missed it; the warm fragrance of the leaves and the earth. As she closed her eyes, rough bark slid under her hands and the cry of birds echoed overhead while twigs crunched underfoot. The shouts and shadows of her people danced in the open fire as they celebrated. But then those flames in her mind grew, roaring.

The sky turned into violent shades of ochre and crimson. The trees turned into soot and cinders that filled the wind and stung at her, the whole valley was raging with lava; her hell. Wetness gathered into tears, and a desire to flee took hold once again and the tattoo on her shoulders warped and shifted and...

“Hello? Are you okaay?” A little voice tore her away from her daydreams.

Liwayway blinked back to the boat, exhaled, and wiped the tears away. Someone was staring up at her. The tip of her head reached only to Liwayway’s chest. *Ngi-ngi*, she had heard the others call them. Her big, brown eyes wandered curiously from her head to her shoulders, exploring the lines and figures woven into her skin.

Liwayway nodded.

“You look sick.” Ngi-ngi leaned forward, brows crossed.

“I’m fine.” Liwayway shook her head.

“I know! I have something that will make you feel better!” Ngi-ngi shouted, springing back to the innards of the boat in a flurry.

“Here!” Ngi-ngi ran back, lugging a worn leather bag and presenting it to her. She received it with both hands, feeling something round and heavy. As she turned it with her hands, she spied something white and shiny inside.

“What is this?”

“It’s my treasure! I found it while swimming under the ocean,” Ngi-ngi explained with a grin and a missing tooth. “It always makes me feel better when I’m sick. But I’m not sick so I’m letting you borrow it for now.”

Her lips twitched as she looked at the child’s upturned eyes and chubby cheeks full of pride.

“I like you.” Ngi-ngi blushed and twirled around the deck while gesturing at the sky as she asked. “Can you tell me where you are from? You just fell from the sky like *woosh!*”

Grief gripped Liwayway’s throat. She wanted to speak of her land, of the towering trees and the flowing rivers. But wasn’t it all gone now? Hadn’t it all burned down? Her lips searched for answers on her teeth.

“...I came from a land we call *Pinawa*.” She pointed to the distance. “My homeland’s over there.”

Ngi-ngi scratched her head. “Over there? But it’s all water over there! How did you get here? Did you swim? What is it like over there?”

“N-No.” Liwayway stuttered, she never had a little sister nor much experience taking care of children. Her tongue was a boar in a trap and Ngi-ngi’s questions were the ropes tying it down. “My homeland is... where the land rises from under the sea and reaches for the sky. It’s full of trees and animals and birds and rivers...”

Ngi-ngi’s mouth widened at her words. “*Wooooow!* I never knew there was land so *biiiiig!* I want to go there too! But...” Ngi-ngi paused, thinking. She popped her finger in her mouth and gnawed on it. “...everyone says that the people from over the water are bad people who turn into monsters and eat children,” Ngi-ngi finally said. Then she added. “But I don’t think you’re bad!”

Laughter broke free from the confines of Liwayway’s mouth. Surprise colored her face red. “I’m not going to eat you.”

Liwayway patted Ngi-ngi’s head, and Ngi-ngi lunged at her to hug her, giggling.

“You smell nice.” Ngi-ngi said, burrowing into her arms. “I want to visit the big land! Bring me there someday okay?” And then she ran back to the interior of the boat.

Liwayway watched her leave, before opening the bag. It unfolded to reveal a pearl the size of her fist. As she raised it in the air, the sunlight reflected off of small ridges, causing a faint iridescent glow to shine on her. Her blurred and distorted face appeared on its surface, and she saw herself.

She was *smiling*.

-Balod-

Tonight, Balod was the moon's lover. Under the cover of darkness, he sat on the deck, and, as she peeked from above, in her balcony of clouds, he pressed his *kubing* to his lips and whispered her a sweet serenade.

The stars twinkled at the sight, mischievous eavesdroppers were they. Slowly, the twanging of bamboo strips coaxed the moon out of hiding. She glowed bright, but gentle. A pearl in the sky. Revealing blurred lines and forms concealed under the water; shadows of reefs and hills and ridges and cliffs.

A blotch appeared in the waves, a silhouette growing larger than the turtle-boat. Balod's world bobbed and tilted but he remained unperturbed. A pair of flukes breached the surface, splashing him with sea foam in greeting.

They sang together with him. Like old friends. Whispering how close he was — if it were daytime, he might've already spotted sandy beaches glittering in the distance. But no matter. Balod liked the night, and he wasn't one to look forward to the *Harana of Magwayen*. He preferred the quiet solitude of the ocean to the ceaseless noise of land. The expectant gazes of others on him. So what if he hasn't got a woman? He has his family.

Footsteps from behind makes him pause. He sets aside his *kubing* and glances back, seeing the girl wearing an eagle on her skin.

"Did I disturb you?" she spoke. "I heard you were the one who pulled me out of the waters, I wanted to thank you."

"It is nothing."

A momentary pause. Whale song kept the quiet at bay.

"It was a nice melody." Liwayway said.

"Ngi-ngi told me you came from the land over the ocean." Balod studied her, a human from a life unlike his own. "Those lines on your skin, what do they mean?"

"They are the marks of a warrior, our connection with the spirits"

“A warrior huh,” Balod said. “We weren’t always at sea, once we too were warriors of land, - at least that’s what the elders tell us. But one day, a storm came and, in its fury, swept our tribe’s treasure into the waves, and we set out to find it. Since then we have taken to the waters as nomads, too ashamed to ever return.”

He looked around, gazing at the ocean in its tranquil slumber. “It is a tall tale, but good for me. The sea is peaceful, and there is no need to be a warrior, for I am not very brave.” Balod chuckled, amused at his own tale while Liwayway listened. “You told us where you are from. But you didn’t tell us where you are going.”

She kept her silence.

“Perhaps it is not my place to pry.” Balod said. “I doubt what you are looking for is something in our tribes. But there are traders from distant shores that will come to the *Harana*, you might find what you are looking for there.”

Then he started to play the *kubing* once again.

-Liwayway-

Morning. The sun rising lazily above the horizon. A puff of air escaped from Liwayway’s lips at the chill as she lowered the tips of her toes, then her ankles, and up to just below her knees, down into the water. The waves wobbled, crest to trough, and her feet swayed in kind. The coolness crept up, while a wild breeze blanketed her and she shivered.

The ocean was much more vast than she imagined. Bigger than a hundred *Pinawas* put together. She swung her feet back and forth, and the waters protested with froth and spray that splashed back at her.

Ngi-ngi’s head emerged from the waves, wet hair splayed across her face and a wide smirk on her mouth. “Come with me! I want to show you something!”

“What is it?” Liwayway asked. Ngi-ngi giggled, before grabbing her feet and pulling her down. “Hold your breath!”

The waters come crashing around her. She opened her eyes and looked at Ngi-ngi, who motions with her hands. *Down*. Her gaze followed. And there everything was.

A forest; of red, and orange, and pink, and green, and yellow and fish for birds and animals, of all sorts. They swam through crevices of rock, and under the canopies of such unusual plants that had no leaves instead full of spines, nubs, ridges and shells. Her eyes widened and Ngi-ngi gave her a spin and descended. She followed through, and in that moment, she forgot everything.

Liwayway broke through the surface with a splash. She sputtered, gobbling up the sweet, intoxicating air. It tickled the insides of her starving lungs - she coughed at the sensation. Then laughed at the beauty of the reefs, at the myriad schools of fishes, in their rainbow colors and blurred patterns, streaming in and out of the shoals and occasionally bumping into her as she swam.

She clambered into the boat and lay on the deck. The sun stared at her as she unfolded her fist, revealing a single pearl held in her palm. She rolled it in her hands, waiting. The tribe of the sea had told her that distant people, traders, would take these pearls in exchange for goods in the *Harana*. She didn't understand, what could a pretty trinket possibly do?

Ngi-ngi and the others remained under. Liwayway could only wait for them - they could dive for as much as ten full breaths of hers.

You reek.

She jumped. A faint voice flowed into her head. It sloshed around, reverberating, resonating, rising and falling in intensity with the waves as if it were being carried from a great distance.

What is someone with the taint of flames doing here? Are you here because of the 'gift' of your homeland?

“Who are you?” She growled.

It chuckled.

I am the ocean. Stillness filled the air, yet the water moved, undulating with every syllable.

Tell me, how is Lalahon, has she finally broken free? Or not, since you seem to have taken a part of it.

“What are you saying!”

She gripped the edge of the railings with such force the wood shattered. Splinters buried themselves in her hands. Blood trickled down, but she ignored the pain. She closed her eyes shut, her breath coming in bursts, jaw clenched, teeth gritted, but the burning forest showed itself once again.

Hot ash filled her lungs and she choked. The stench of charred meat assaulted her. Her saliva turned bitter. The obsidian black deity with rubies for eyes walked towards her, leaving a trail of lava.

The lines etched on her skin moved. The tattoo of the eagle shook away its slumber, spread its wings, and soared up her shoulders and her neck and up to cover her face. The wind picked up in anger, engendering waves that tussled and tossed the boat around. Her hair thickened, forming into needles, that then bloomed into a crest of brown and white feathers.

She opened her eyes.

They had turned blue; cerulean as the sky and as sharp as the rays of noon sun.

“Show yourself.” she said. Beads of sweat dribbled down from her forehead, gathering on her chin to drop down on the deck.

Why don't you come to me? I'll tell you something, something you might want to hear.

The voice tempted her.

She held up her hands, morphing into wings, staring at the blood flowing. Painful, it cleared her mind. The pace of her breath lulled. She spat the bitterness away.

A pair of dolphins breached the surface. They looked at her, beckoning her to follow.

She hesitated. Should she?

Was this even a question? Hadn't she left her homeland to look for answers? She unfurled her wings, talons poised on the deck, and with the gale on her, took off after the dolphins.

Her wings grabbed the wind and pulled her upwards. She bathed in the feeling of flying, of soaring. The boat turned into a speck and disappeared into the distance. Then she spotted it.

A throne, grown of corals and seashells, rising to the surface on a small islet of sand that should have been claimed by the waves. A man sat on it, petting the dolphins who had led her there. They snuggled against his hands, chattering while he stroked their snouts.

Liwayway landed in front of him. The man looked at her, the hint of a smile on his face. Water crept up around him in defiance of gravity. It swirled up to his chest, in deep blue and seafoam, as if he were wearing the ocean like a robe.

“Who are you?” Liwayway asked.

“My, my, so much anger.” He shook his head. A crab climbed up his body as he spoke, then skittered through, disappearing into the folds of water. “Didn’t I tell you already? I am the ocean. But if you prefer another name, then call me *Magwayen*.”

“The deity of the tribe of the boat.”

Liwayway stared at the deity atop a coral throne. A fierce breeze raged around them, pressing against her skin, pulling the breath from her lungs as if she were being drowned.

“Haunted, aren’t you?” Magwayen mused. His voice was soft, distant, yet even in the seething gale, she could hear it clearly. “I see a shadow lurking around your heart, waiting for the darkness to strike. I can guess where it comes from.”

“What do you want from me?!” she shouted.

“I want to help you,” he said. “Whatever is it you need? A wish, a boon? answers to whatever it is you seek? Perhaps, even a way to restore a land ravaged by flames.”

The words struck her mind. A way to restore her land. Her hands trembled, the thought of the towering trees and flowing rivers, the air; free of ash and the earth, full of life.

“And in exchange?” she whispered.

“What about a story?” Magwayen smiled, standing up from his throne. “It is a tale, about a lost treasure, and a tribe *cursed* to wander the seas for all eternity till they find it.”

“It is something dear to me.” He held up his hands and the wind stilled. A vortex swirled in his palm; small, gray clouds billowing into a miniature storm. Veins of lightning snaked out, writhing in the water.

Liwayway felt an eerie hum, a strange attraction that made her hair rise. He explained, “Once, a human tribe stole something of mine. A *peculiar* thing. They used it to control the weather—the storms, the rains, the floods—and their land grew prosperous, rich. Yet it was all in folly, for balance must be kept; and one day, a storm, more violent than any other, tore their land apart and swept them into the sea, along with that treasure.”

“And now, they roam the ocean, looking for it once again.” Magwayen paused, walking towards her. “I have long desired for it returned. And it just so happens you are capable of getting it.”

He stopped, so close she could see the murky depths in his robes. He crooned. “What do you say? An exchange with a deity; a quest, a perilous journey. A hero, alone, fighting against all odds — my, my, how *epic*. Don’t you humans just love your songs?”

The forest grew clearer, swaying leaves on the trees just within reach of her fingertips, and yet,

“I refuse.”

It disappeared.

Magwayen’s smile stuttered. The waters stumbled in kind, droplets spraying all around as the waves hesitated in their tracks. He turned to stare at Liwayway, a squint in his eyes, but hers held firm.

“Why?”

“There’s a trick to this, isn’t there?” Liwayway ventured, her heart beating faster and faster. “Why all the deities ask us for their favors.”

Magwayen stared at her, then laughed. “Interesting.” The wind purred, the sea resuming its perpetual journey. “One way or the other, you will set out to find it. And when you do, I will be waiting.”

The deity shook its head. “That is what all you humans are good at: drifting in the waves of fate.”

“And what are deities good at?” she scoffed. “Suffering? Destruction?”

Liwayway turned and flew off.

-Balod-

Balod studied the droplets of blood staining the cracked wood. The scene recreated itself in his mind. The anger of the ocean, the boat tossed around by a strange wind. Then a bird of prey, clad in feathers of brown and white, flew into the distance.

“Brother, Liwayway is missing.” Ngi-ngi tugged at the hem of his clothes.

The elder’s songs echoed in his head.

Where the land rises above the water; there roam monsters in human skin. They prowl the earth for their once-kin, souls once human, now filled with slaughter.

“Brother?”

So, when you see a land of never-ending green, never venture deep inside...

“Brother!”

“She left.” Balod said, tossing a shard of maroon tinted wood. He turned to Ngi-ngi. “You should stay away from her.”

“What?” Ngi-ngi frowned. She scanned the horizon, trying to find the girl. “But why?”

Balod felt a quiver in his throat. He gripped the *kubing* in his hands. They were trembling. Up ahead, a flock of boats were gathering on Sing-sing, the island of the *Harana*. But the winds washed his gaze further beyond, at the billowing storm clouds in the distance.

The island of *Sing-sing*, a ring of sandy shores crowned by coral reefs, rested on crystal clear waters in the middle of the ocean. Palm trees moved with the night breeze, their fronds filtering moonlight on the people underneath. Busy steps and chatter filled the open air as they danced and made merry, burying the weariness of their journey in smiles and laughter. And when they grew hungry, they’d feast on briny oysters, and sweet succulent crab, caught fresh from the shallows. Thirsty, and they’d partake in spirits, brewed of coconuts and plums.

Balod sat on the edge, away; disinterested. He looked at the clear sky, harping on his *kubing* to settle weary nerves. A seagull cried out and he jumped.

Ngi-ngi sat by his side, legs held together by her arms, head buried on knees.

“Brother, we need to find her.” Her muffled voice came through sharp. “She’s all alone out there! What if—”

“Shush. It is starting soon. Stay quiet or *Ina* will have your head.” Balod shook his head, remembering the scent of blood on dried wood. His fingers grew limp, and shook, and the notes clashed and jumped out of tune. He set his *kubing* aside, brows furrowed.

“But she must be so scared! Something must’ve taken her!” She pouted, “If you won’t go then I’ll go!”

“Ngi-ngi!”

She stormed back to the boat. Balod watched her run away, he thought, perhaps being alone would calm her down. He had no desire to appease her; the scene kept repeating in his mind. Those feathers growing out of the girl’s skin, and her arms turning into wings. And the voice of the ocean, and the anger of the wind.

He did not wish to see the girl with the mark of an eagle again.

A veil of silence blanketed the surroundings, the *Harana* was starting. People gathered round as the matriarch stepped forth in robes of swirling blues and swaying greens. She held an aged *kudyapi*, resting it on her knees.

Her steady fingers strummed the boat lute, it droned, humming as she plucked, slowly at first, notes growing into a steady rhythm. The air danced with the strings and the music coursed a shiver through Balod's skin, and up to the back of his neck. He raised his *kubing* to his lips and played in kind, the twang of bamboo joining in, as the rest played on their own *gambang*s and *kubings* and *kudyapis*.

The wind, summoned by their playing, moved with the melody, swaying palm trees casting moving shadows waving like an audience to a symphony. Waves rolled from the sea, rumbling with applause.

Laughter and cheers rose up, the chorus, as spirited boys pulled on enamoured girls to dance. The mothers and fathers followed with slower steps and calmer hearts. The children chased each other, playing in the maze of twirling robes and moving bodies.

The ocean breeze struck his cheek and Balod frowned. He stopped playing. It blew different tonight; there was a hint to it of something foreign, almost hostile. The wind whispered in notes he didn't understand and voices he didn't recognize. He looked around; the surroundings had grown dark, *too* dark.

Raindrops came in bursts of cold on his skin. Flickering flashes of light foreshadowed a thunderclap's roar above. Clothes drenched, a chill ran up his spine and he glanced up.

Darkness swallowed the moon and the stars.

The wind came in anger. His robes flapped and tugged at him. Confusion crept up like a ghost. The people stopped, music replaced by hushed murmurs and the cries of babes. Balod's heart beat faster. Words fled his lips, as far as he could remember,

"...there are no storms on the feast of *Magwayen*."

The gale broke into a roar; a beast in the dark that snapped branches from trees and hurled rocks in the air. The rain hit like fists. Wind drowned their screams. Waves surged and lunged at their boats as if the sea had gone mad. Balod grabbed at the closest trunk, pressed to the ground by the sheer force. Bolts of lightning flashed scenes of people tossed and dragged around.

And then quiet. Moonlight glimmered again, and the wind slowed to a caress. The surroundings trembled in disarray. Balod looked to the sky. A hole peeked in the swirling clouds, the beast circling around them.

"It is the curse!" the matriarch shivered, wailing. "Hold on! We must appease it!"

A scream escaped from the boats and Balod's heart sank, his head ringing.

Ngi-ngi!

6

-Liwayway-

Eyes glazed, Liwayway slumped on the sand, feeling its roughness with her toes, on a lonely island, in the middle of open seas, while her mind flew miles away; soaring through endless forests and raging rivers, through craggy mountains and clear skies.

Then she knit her brows together. Her mind caught fire, burning so hot she grunted and groaned and laid flat on the sand, pounding it with her fists.

Magwayen's voice whispered. *Do you want to restore your land?*

"No!"

She rolled on the beach, trying to rid herself of her thoughts. Breathing the harsh breeze, she covered her face with her hands. The rough sand clung to her, glued by sweat.

She thought to herself, *was I wrong...? Is it my fault? I want to know. Is there a way?*

Liwayway sighed.

And...why can I do this?

She sat back up, cupping her hands together, and a tongue of flame lapped at her palms. A snuggling warmth against the cold. But she grimaced and frowned, closing her hands. It disappeared, bathing her in darkness. She looked up, *has the night already come?*

Surprise made her squint. Darkness had seized the moon in its jaws. She shut her eyes, rubbed them till spots of light blinked inside and opened them again.

It was still there. In the faint glow of the stars, a serpent of clouds and lightning snaked around the sky.

Her heart raced faster. A stray breeze wrapped around her shoulders. It hummed with a faint and unfamiliar power, calling to her. Another chance at a clue?

She stood up, turned into an eagle, and flew towards it.

Up close, she saw a pillar of storm clouds reaching towards the heavens. They coiled over an island barely visible in the thickness of the rain. It reminded her of the day she fell from the sky. Her feathers bristled as she circled around, trying to peer inside.

Then a gust carried a cry through to her.

She recognized the voice. Ngi-ngi. They were supposed to go to the *Harana*. *What happened?*

Only the wind's howling answered her. Liwayway shot through the storm, pushing aside the buffeting gale and the lashing rain. Corpses of boats, overturned and broken apart, littered the roiling seas.

The screams led her to Ngi-ngi, hanging on for life in a boat. Liwayway landed on the deck, and the child screamed at her arrival. She wrapped her in wings, talons sliding on the wooden floor.

Ngi-ngi stared at her with wide eyes, scrambling to get away. Liwayway morphed back, feathers disappearing into the storm, grasping at the air with both her hands and wresting control of the wind. It stilled around them, gust against gust, the air shrieking as she concentrated on holding it back.

"It's alright!" Liwayway shouted. "It's me!"

Ngi-ng took her in, speechless.

"Where are the others?!"

She pointed to the shore. Liwayway grabbed her, ready to fly away, but stumbled as a wave slammed against the boat and she lost focus. The storm broke through, surging, hammering against her skin, the world tilting and bobbing.

Lightning blossomed, revealing a silhouette filling the entire **world** high above. Liwayway's hair rose on end. The darkness was a maw wide open, swallowing everything in its path.

The wind spun in a vortex, sucking in water and debris up towards the titanic figure. Screams rang out from everywhere. She grabbed the edge and watched as a huge wave hit the boat head on. The bow rose, pointing towards the sky.

Ngi-ngi screamed as she was pulled into the air.

"No!" Liwayway reached for her, but the boat shook and she missed.

She watched her disappear into the storm.

Like her father falling into the volcano.

“No!”

She turned into an eagle and shot upwards. Tumbling through spouts of water and streams of wind, at times she'd catch up, so close she'd almost reach her but she'd be pulled away. Up and up they went on the chase. Thunder drummed out in a beat, striking faster and faster as she went higher.

Lightning raced across silver scales and jagged teeth. A jaw revealed itself, wide enough to swallow the whole world.

The sight struck her frozen in place, shivering. The distance between them increased. Before she could swallow her fear, Ngi-ngi disappeared inside the creature.

Liwayway couldn't reach her.

“I'll save you,” she growled.

Flames bloomed in all directions. Steam hissed. The wind howled in pain. The world creaked, the jaws slamming shut. The flow reversed, the waters falling down again. The gale smashed into her and blew her away. The creature turned back into the clouds.

And the storm disappeared as if nothing had happened.

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. The silence was deafening.

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 on the sand, arms digging tiny trenches as they clenched and he cried and grovelled.

"They are still alive," someone else spoke. "And you can still save them."

"Is this your doing?" Liwayway said.

"No. It is theirs."

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.

"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.

8

-Balod-

A few days later.

Balod waded, waist deep in the water, towards the boat moored on the shore. On his shoulders, he carried a bundle of coconuts, fish—both smoked and fresh, gourds of rainwater, and other provisions for their journey. But on his chest, he carried a heaviness that made him pause to breathe.

He looked at his face reflected in the water. Distorted by the undulations of its surface, at times, it'd warp into a smile, at times a frown, and at times terrified.

"Do you think we'll find them?" he called out.

"I don't know." Standing on the edge of the prow, the girl cupped her hands over her head, looking out towards the seas.

He swept his gaze over the horizon. Not a single grey patch, nor a cloud blocking the sun. It was as calm and peaceful as a mirror's surface. "What if we don't?"

"We will."

He climbed up. Their boat had been one of the few that survived the storm, seaworthy enough with just a few patches. Before, he'd trust this boat with his life. But now, he didn't know.

"Are you ready?" she said.

He hesitated. That night had been just like a dream. His hair rose on end as he remembered the howling gale, dragging his tribe up towards the sky. He gritted his teeth, looked back at her. The deity's words rang back in his head.

They are still alive. Follow the Bakunawa, the voice of the wind.

"I am not sure of anything," he growled. "How can you be so calm?"

"You don't seem to trust the deity?"

"No, I've never met one before."

"Then you should trust yourself."

Balod took a deep breath and sighed. He stored the food and the water inside the hold, before climbing back up. He stared at the girl, her back turned to him. Who was she and how can she believe the deity so easily? As she moved, the *malong* slid just enough to reveal the head of a serpent wrapped in lines of fire, obsidian black on the edges of her shoulder.

"Do we have enough?" she asked.

"I don't know how long the journey will take. But this should be enough."

"Then have you figured out where we should go?"

Balod swept his gaze away. Half a frown rolled across his face.

“There is an island. A few days from here. It is always the first to get hit by the storms. Always raining, always windy.” Balod said. “Perhaps we will be able to find something there.”

“What about what *Magwayen* said. Can you hear the voice that deity spoke about?”

“I ... don't know.”

The other half of his frown flit past. How could he know? He was not some shaman who could hear the whispers of a monstrous creature beyond his understanding. He had only grown up with the sea, and sung with the waves. He had only wanted to live a quiet life.

“What about you? You can turn into a—” *monster*; Balod bit his tongue, drowning the word back into his throat. “...a bird. Can't you hear it? Can't you do something?”

“I don't understand it either.” She shook her head and waved her hand away. “Don't think too much about the deities' words. They may be true, but they will not help you. ”

“It is better to learn by yourself.” she said.

“You've met the deity before?” Balod asked.

She turned away, but he could see her grip on the rail tighten. The tattoos on her skin quivered, lines coming to life, flaring across her skin. He stepped back.

“The deities are not evil.” Her mouth stumbled from a grimace to a bitter smile and she exhaled a draft. She leaned back into the edge. “From what you said of *Magwayen*, they will not mean your tribe harm.”

He mulled over her words. They had long celebrated *Magwayen*, the deity of the ocean. He did not know what to make of the songs. *Magwayen*, a father during the day, and a mother during the night. They cared for the tribe, provided them with the fish to eat, the water to drink. But they also made the waves, and blew the wind, and their anger could claim their boats and their people.

But the girl in front of him? How can she control the wind, why did she have powers?

“You.” Balod said. “Who are you really? Are you also a..?”

She chuckled, “I am just me. Liwayway. Nothing else.”

“The journey is long.” Liwayway smiled. “If you're ready, we should get going.”

Balod nodded. It didn't matter who she really was. She was here to help. All he wanted was to save his sister and his tribe. He removed the line tying the boat, and the wind thrust them forward.

ACT I END