

## **Mayumi – Panay Island, Philippines (1881)**

### **1.**

The night was heavy on San Isidoro de Silangan, a burden of darkness upon the earth. Even the moon – as if it knew its light would not be welcomed – was in shadow, the stars alone in the ether. The town plaza was littered with things left behind in a rush: a crumpled mat, a turned-over table, a few woven trinkets that had been brought from a neighboring barangay to be sold. The Christmas decorations were still waving in the cool breeze, unbothered that the celebration had been cut short. Northwest of the plaza was the Church of San Isidoro, Patron Saint of the Farmers, tall and looming, with the convento as a bent arm stuck fast to its torso. Behind it some yards away stood a belete tree, its trunk a mass of hanging, wooden vines. It radiated eons, as though it had stood there since the dawn of Creation. And by its base, hidden by its tendrils, was Mayumi and her older brother, Dakila, with their eyes focused on the silhouette of the convento ahead.

“Can’t we hide elsewhere?” he whispered, hovering close to her. She felt his fear like pressure against her shoulders. Mayumi laid her palm against the ropes of the tree. In the dark they seemed to pulse and wriggle, alive under her touch. She shook her head.

“The Diwata are protecting us. The tree is safe.” The pressure stayed even.

“Do you think, or do you know?”

“I know.” She could feel them, the gods, humming from between the ropes. From within the crevices. She could feel that they understood why she needed their shelter and so kept the other inhabitants of the tree at bay. Dakila shifted behind her, keeping some distance between himself and the balete.

“If you say so.”

The two kept still and waited. Watched. Whether they were there for minutes or hours, Mayumi couldn't tell. Then finally, a dark figure on the roof of the convento caught her eye as it moved swiftly over the edge began to scale down the wall. She turned to Dakila.

“He's coming.”

He frowned. “Are you sure it's Luis?”

With the way the figure moved she had no doubt in her mind, but rather than explaining that to him she simply said, “Yes, I'm sure.”

“And you're sure he can help?”

Mayumi hesitated. If the help in question wasn't so risky, she wouldn't have to think twice. Luis was an anchor: whether she needed food during a dry harvest or extra cloth when a dress wore thin, Luis found a way to get those things to her to keep her tethered to life. Even her very first conversation with him had etched his role in stone; he had spoken out of line just to help her.

It had been six years ago, during his second visit to Mayumi's barangay a mile and a half away from San Isidoro. He was accompanying the head of the San Isidoro Church, friar Domingo de la Cruz, as his translator. Mayumi later learned that his young age didn't matter – the church's change in friars was sudden, and unlike his predecessor, Fray Domingo was far from fluent in Visayan. He needed someone who could speak it as well as they did Spanish. Luis, a local fourteen-year-old orphan boy raised by the church, was the only one near who matched that demand. For Mayumi, seeing him side-by-side with the friar was enough for her to decide what she thought of him.

He was a traitor. A dog for the Kastila. Although his youth made the other girls of her barangay swoon, the boys envious and the adults awestruck, Mayumi nursed hatred in her little heart. Whenever she heard him speak Spanish, it was clear that he was one with the enemy. When he spoke Visayan, his learned vowels mirrored the previous friar and it cemented that he could never, ever be like her. So, she was shocked when he paused his translations to address her directly. She was kneeling in front of Fray Domingo, her hands clasped for Confession, when he asked her, “Are you certain you want to confess that?”

It took her a second to realize that she hadn’t imagined it, him speaking to her. She thought over her sins again, ignoring the ache that was growing in her knees: I had killed a chick in anger and swore at my brother when I lost to him in a game. It didn’t sound all that terrible to her. The friar turned to Luis and exchanged some words with him in Spanish. Her eyes went back and forth between them. Mayumi swallowed, her throat suddenly dry. Then, returning to Visayan, he said, “I told the friar that I am clarifying what you mean as I don’t fully understand. But are you sure you want to confess that you’ve killed out of anger and swore?” Mayumi was confused. She had killed a chick, not a person. If anything, it had been an accident: she’d been holding one when she’d seen a man do the Sign of the Cross upon passing her home, a habit people fell to when they wanted to ward off evil. She was sick of the villagers doing this. Of their avoidant eyes and whispers. By the time she looked down at her hands the chick was limp, its bony beak open but silent.

“Is it that bad?” she asked Luis.

“No, but to them, you will be listed as violent. They will watch you more than others.”

Mayumi's breath halted in her chest. She was bolted to the ground, her mind churning. How did she not think of that? How was she so careless? She couldn't risk drawing keener eyes to her, to her mother. She wanted to – had to – change her confession. But like that bony beak, nothing came out of her mouth.

Then Luis told her, "Let me make something up."

By the end of the Confession, Fray Domingo had absolved her sins of stealing a chick from a neighbor along with her impatience with her brother. For penance, she was ordered to pray five Our Fathers, three Hail Marys, and one Glory Be. That had been all; Luis had helped her when she hadn't even known she needed it.

Now, six years later, things were different. She knew that she needed it. Needed him, more than ever – to the point where she was prepared to get down, push her forehead to the floor, and beg.

Dakila took her hand. "Mayumi. Are you sure that Luis can help us?"

Keeping the desperation out of her voice, she replied, "He's our only hope."

Dakila took a shaky breath. "Okay."

Mayumi let go of him and turned back toward the convento. Luis was now on the ground, quickly making his way over to the small granary that stood between them. She stepped out from behind the tree and matched his pace. The closer she got, the clearer he became, like the darkness itself was slipping off his skin. First from his nose, then his eyes, then his mouth, until they came face-to-face by the granary door.

"I came as soon as I could," he said, his breath heavy.

“It’s okay. I was scared for a moment that you didn’t catch my signal.”

A small smile brushed his lips. Then, he pushed the tip of his tongue against the inside of his left cheek: their signal. If it had been the right cheek, they would have met in the outskirts of San Isidoro, by the river.

“It’s unmissable,” he said.

“But with all the commotion? Everything that was—”

Luis snapped his head to the side, ears snagged by a sound in the distance. They stayed still as they listened to the wind, waiting for the slightest disturbance. Nothing. Luis cleared his throat.

“Let’s go inside.” He guided Mayumi by the small of her back into the granary.

As soon as the door was shut, what little light they had under the stars was gone. If it wasn’t for Luis striking the tip of a match against a strip of sandpaper, Mayumi would have had none of her senses, save for smell. The granary held all the tributes and tax goods from the different barangays that circled San Isidoro, infusing the air with dried fish, rice, coconut oil, and more. Mayumi breathed it all in, taking a second to feed her empty stomach with nothing but fumes. The match’s strike came once, twice... On the fifth, an orange glow haloed Luis’ face, bringing her gaze to him from the nowhere it once was. He crouched before her, placing a thick candle onto the packed dirt floor and brought the match to its wick. She bent down and sat on her bare heels.

“Did you know they were going to arrest her?” she asked.

Luis flicked his wrist to put out the match. “No,” he said.

She shook her head. “I don’t believe you.” She suspected that someone from her barangay had reported her mother, and since none of them knew Spanish, Luis must have had been in the room when it happened. If it happened at all.

“If I knew, I would have found a way to tell before you came to San Isidoro. I swear.” He sounded earnest. His pupils looked clear. Steady.

“Then how? Why?”

“I don’t know...” he began like he had more to say, but whatever it was, it died in his throat.

“What is it?” she asked.

His stare faltered then, falling to the floor. She waited – watched him in the flickering light. A fleeting thought crossed her as she allowed herself to look at him: he was beautiful. With his dark hair messed by the day, the oranges and yellows casted by the candle dancing on his skin, it was incredulous. Even in this moment of chaos, he was still so beautiful. Guilt panged in her chest. Her mother was locked away in a cell, being watched by soldiers who probably believed that their God was too holy to see them there. How could she dwell on the frivolity of beauty now? Her stomach tightened: a sensation that often came before she lied.

“Is she... Your mother... Is she really a witch?” It was only after he asked that he looked at her again, holding her gaze with determination. His stare pierced through her eyes, into her skull, as if the truth would be written there in the bone. But Mayumi had prepared herself for this. Knew that the inquisition was bound to happen.

“No. No, she’s not,” she said. She echoed the words inside herself as though it would make it sound truer. And on some level, she did believe it. Her mother was not the witch that the Kastila

spun in their tales and sermons. She did not praise the devil or call upon it for power. There were no hexes, no newborn sacrifices. The Diwata were not evil, and the spirits of their ancestors were far from demons. Mayumi's mother was not a witch. She was a babaylan. Why was that so hard for the Kastila to understand?

“Luis, I promise. She isn't.” It came out with more force than Mayumi anticipated. The breeze outside snuck through any crack in the stone walls around them, softly whistling in the silence that followed. Her vision blurred. There was no one else she could turn to; no one she knew who was as close enough to the friar as Luis was. If he wasn't going to help her...

“They're going to kill her. You know they will,” she said.

“They won't. At most they'll flog her—”

“She's old, Luis. Weak. It will—”

“What am I supposed to do?” His voice cracked.

Mayumi stayed quiet.

He continued, “I don't have a say, Mayumi. I'm just a translator; I have no power – no *real* power.”

“But you do. You can speak to him.”

“And do you really think he would listen to me?” His stare hardened and stunned her. Mayumi had seen this look only one other time, this mix of hopelessness, frustration, and – was it? Yes, it was – anger.

Fray Domingo and his company had gotten stuck once in Mayumi's barangay due to a storm, and the friar fell ill. Even as the skies cleared, they stayed put as the friar tossed and turned

on a mat in the home of the Datu, the barangay's head. Or as the Kastila would call him, the Cabeza de Barangay. Mayumi watched from afar as the girls visited the Datu's wife and daughters during the day, food and gifts in hand, while the men divided themselves between the fields and structural repairs around the barangay. The women and girls were dressed in their finest for these visits, and Mayumi figured it was all for Luis. She hated it.

The years had only been kind to him. They pulled at his spine until he was taller than the friar. They drained his cheeks to accentuate the height of his cheekbones. They whittled his jaw, widened his chest, so that at eighteen he was a promising young man. All the while, Mayumi at fourteen, felt like the same years had punished her. She was scrawny, her filling chest awkward on her frame. Menstruation tore at her until she curled up on the floor, sweating through her clothes. Her features on her ever-changing face looked mismatched and her skin often broke out. She endlessly wished she could rewind time, back to when these things mattered less and she held onto the hope of maturing pretty.

Then late one night, Mayumi's mother sent her out to the river for water. Mayumi did as she was told, making her way over to the river with the moon as her guide. And as she neared the tremoring surface, she saw him. Luis. He was sitting on the bank with his legs crossed under him. He seemed lost in thought. Mayumi hesitated in her step, wondering if she should turn back and find a spot further up the river. She stayed there debating back and forth with herself, and before a side could win Luis turned his head. Their eyes locked. For a moment she forgot why she was even there to begin with.

“Getting water?” he asked her.

She did not reply. He gestured to the big wooden bowl in her hands. She looked down and saw that she, indeed, was holding a bowl, and remembered that her mother needed more water to brew some medicine for her father's sore back. She bit her tongue, realizing that this very brew would be seen as witchery. That Luis would probably not hesitate to report it. Mayumi paled. She should not have been seen.

"Here, let me help," he said as he got up.

"No," she said feebly, "It's okay. I can do it." She focused her sights on the river and walked to its edge, her heart pounding. Was he going to think it strange that she was out here so late? Alone and at night? These thoughts rumbled as she crouched and lowered the bowl into the water. The moonlight rippled inside it as she heaved it back up onto the bank. Its contents sloshed to-and-fro, some spilling over. Normally she didn't mind if the water spilled as she went along; whatever was left inside always seemed to be enough for her mother anyways. But with Luis there, staring at her, she was embarrassed. Like her strength was in question with every drop that escaped. She took a deep breath. Cupping the underside of the bowl with both of her forearms, she lifted it up as she stood.

"Is it heavy?" His voice made her jump, sounding a step too close behind her. The bowl slipped from her grasp and thumped on the ground.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you," he said. He bent down and reached for it. She watched him wrap his fingers around the rim. Blood rushed to her cheeks as he filled and lifted the bowl with ease. Mayumi looked up at him, afraid, but fear was a funny thing. It often sidled beside rage, and with Mayumi it was no different. The two walked hand-in-hand and suddenly she

was furious. Furious at herself for being weak, for allowing herself to be scared. Furious because she had to be scared. He began, “I can carry this—”

“No. Run back to your friar and leave me alone.”

His mouth parted, speechless. Mayumi held out her arms for the bowl. Slowly, he lowered it, their skins brushing in the exchange. And when she looked up at him again, she saw that his stare had hardened. Not menacingly or hatefully. True, there was some anger there, but she could tell that whatever this anger was, it wasn't aimed at her. Just as she understood, deep down, that her anger wasn't aimed at him, either. His stare looked as though this was where the passing storm had settled, and it was raining, raining, raining.

“I didn't choose this life, you know,” he started.

Mayumi said nothing.

“I didn't choose it, as you didn't choose yours.” With that, he turned and began to walk away.

Without thinking, Mayumi started after him as if to follow or stop him, but after three steps she faltered. She knew she had no comfort to offer. That she couldn't afford to, even if she had some. Nevertheless, she wanted to, and as she watched his frame disappear into the night, she couldn't believe just how badly this desire burned. That had been the only other time Mayumi had seen him like that, with that storm-filled look. Seeing it again in the granary, against the candlelight, made a slow and sharp pain bloom in her chest. She took his hand. His warmth seeped into her palm and at her touch, his eyes softened.

She said, “I don't know. I don't know if he'll listen to you.”

“I can tell you now that he won’t,” he whispered. He stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. “But I’ll try. For you, I’ll try.”

Tears ran from Mayumi, relief surging as she closed the gap between them. She wrapped her arms around his torso, burying her face into him as she sobbed.

“Thank you,” she said. She said it over and over again. She felt him smooth down the back of her head, planting kisses against her crown.

“I’ll try,” he said, “I’ll try.”