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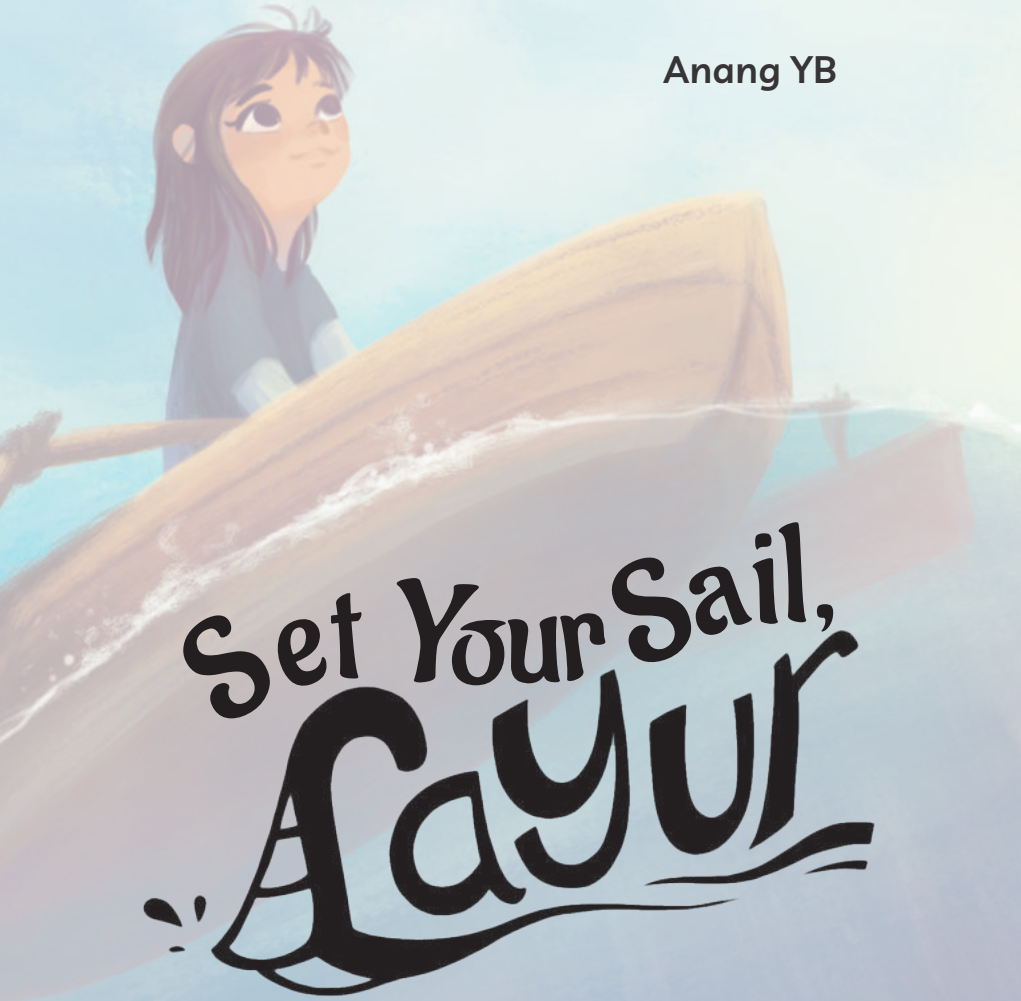

Set Your Sail, Layur

Illustrated by Naafi Nur Rohma

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Message from the Head of The Center for Book Affairs

Hello, young creative and book-loving Indonesians!

We're thrilled to introduce you to a collection of books that are not only fun and entertaining but also enriching and inspiring. These stories will broaden your knowledge, inspire, and cultivate good character. Along the way, you'll also discover the vibrant richness of Indonesian culture! With unique, colorful, and captivating illustrations, these books are a visual delight—a true treat for the eyes.

My dear children, a great book is one that can touch and move us, and the one in your hands is just that.

Happy reading!

Head of the Center for Book Affairs,

Supriyatno S.Pd., M.A.

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Foreword

Instead of aiming to be a champion, I encourage Indonesian youth to become an outstanding individual. While a champion defeats external opponents, an outstanding person defeats himself/herself—and you, young Indonesian, are fully capable of doing just that!

This novel follows a teen your age. At first she wants to seem truly outstanding, but life soon shows her that her true opponent is herself. Every trace of ego must be shed, allowing virtues and good deeds to spread.

My deepest gratitude goes to all who made it possible for Indonesian youth to read this novel.

Bekasi, November 2023

Anang Y.B.

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Prologue

I only have one leg,
and I cannot run.

I have a father,
but no mother.

I'm a fisherman's daughter
Longing for the day I raise my sail

I want to dream
simple dreams,
so that they may come true before they disappear.

List of Characters

** Bapak or Pak (lit. Mister/Sir or Father/Dad)—an Indonesian term used to address a male parent or an older man, as a sign of respect*

Chapter 1
Waiting for Bapak

Tambaksegaran Beach, Friday, 16:50

Layur shifted on her seat as the sun-baked outrigger of the *cadik* boat warmed beneath her. Sweat beaded on her forehead while her hand lingered over the sketch pad for ten long minutes. Only half of the underwater realm had taken shape on the white page: fishes gliding through a barren sea, no coral in sight.

"*Bapak*, please come home," Layur whispered her hope. Six days had already passed, far longer than a fisherman should be at sea. Fishermen never stayed at sea for more than three days. Bapak and the other fishermen had no means to store their catch for too long. Without enough ice and preserving salt the fishes would definitely begin to rot after three days.

The cadik let out a weary creak, its wooden outriggers turning brittle. Laborously, Layur slid down into the aging boat. Her village's fishing boats are now dwindlings, fewer vessels could brave the sea. The fishes appeared reluctant to come ashore, and only a sturdy boat could withstand the three-day surge of currents and waves.

Layur remembered the past fondly: her father would leave at dusk, come back at sunrise, and bring home a bountiful catch.

"Who wants some shrimp, anyone?!" Bapak would say.

Rushing over with her friends, Layur and the group crowded around the fishing net, picking the small shrimps that were caught inside, one at a time. To the fishermen, the little shrimps have no value; anyone could claim them as long as the net was cleaned.

But that was a memory from a decade ago. Nowadays, shrimps and small fishes are highly prized, and they must still be hauled from the open sea, requiring at least three days for a round-trip sail.

"Layur! Want to join me for a dive?"

Suddenly, Dini patted Layur's shoulder from just behind her. The tomboyish fisherman's daughter, skin bronzed by the sun, waited, already wearing goggles crafted from light wood shavings.

Layur chuckled softly.

"You're kidding, right? You're just pulling my leg. You know I can't even swim, let alone dive."

Dini nodded and smiled before she walked away, waving.

"Watch your legs. Those reefs are razor-sharp!" shouted Layur.

Indeed, the coral reefs surrounding the village have long turned into a jagged field of spear-like rubble ever since the fishermen started using fish bombs, known locally as bondet. The reef is now sharp and broken, and the fishes have lost their spawning grounds.

Layur could remember it clearly. Her father, a courageous and most esteemed bondet's maker, was the village's pride. Their house is the grandest in the village, the only pendopo-style building. Every day, fishermen came, one after another, to order bondet.

Years went by, and the village's fishermen grew ever more prosperous. Fishes were so abundant. A lone *bondet* hurled into the water and ... *boom!* dozens upon dozens of fish would float up to the surface, ready to be scooped up with nets.

Until one day....

KABOOM!

Half of Layur's house was shattered when the stash of fish-bombs in the warehouse blew up, not only

destroying the home but also wounding the bondet-maker's only child— a turning point Bapak would forever regret.

From then on, Bapak gave up making *bondet* entirely. The villagers of Dusun Prau followed by slowly abandoned bomb-fishing, turning away from the destructive practice.

"Cah Ayu ... apa ora eman? Aren't you afraid the sun will scorch your fair skin if you keep staying out here all day?"

The gentle voice reached Layur's ears. She didn't need to turn around, because she knew that voice very well.

"Yu, nothing's going to happen to Bapak, is it? I'm worried to death."

Tears welled up in Layur's eyes as she faced the woman she'd come to think of as her own mother.

Yu Semi set the bucket brimming with *jingking* crab, her day's catch, down on the sand. She removed her tattered *caping* hat; her sweaty hair, still tied with a rubber band, clung to her forehead.

"Don't cry, *Nduk*. You're already a high-schooler, so you must stay strong. Pak Kadus has asked the fishermen to look for your father. He'll be home in no time, *Nduk*."

Yu Semi stroked Layur's back a few times before walking away to prepare her catch into *rempeyek*.

Oh, if only I had a mother, I wouldn't feel so lonely while waiting for Bapak to return home. I could munch

on tiwul, *or assist* Ibu *in preparing* gatot *as we waited,* Layur sighed.

Bapak was the only person who accompanied Layur at home every day, as Layur had no siblings.

Is that Bapak? Layur snapped out of her reverie. A blue-sail with a Garuda's head painted on it loomed in the distance. No mistake—it was Bapak's boat, drawing nearer to shore.

Layur slipped down from the boat she'd been perched. Her father, a round-bellied man with thinning hair, waved, becoming clearer and nearer as the boat approached.

"Bapak, where have you been? You're three days late!"

Bapak's face had grown darker from the sun exposure, and he chuckled softly, his strong jaw unmistakable.

"Sorry, *Nduk*. While out on the sea, I've just encountered a ministry-run conservation team. They were looking for fishers to assist in planting coral reefs," Bapak said.

Layur, whom he called *Genduk*, beamed with joy.

"So, is the sea going to recover as it once did, and will the fish start laying eggs here again?"

Bapak nodded, and took Layur's hand, as they walked back home together.

"Wait a second!" Layur rushed to grab her forgotten sketch pad and pencil.

"I'll add coral reefs and fish eggs to the drawing," Layur said cheerfully.

The beach fell silent again, its sand marked by tiny holes left by the crutches supporting Layur's remaining leg.

Chapter 2
Layur has Disappeared

Bukit Merana hill, Tuesday, 10:48

"Layur ... what kind of name is that?"

Alun gave a cheeky grin, "I've never before had a female friend with such a name."

Layur glowered at her best friend, pretending to be annoyed; yet the girl chose to ignore him. Instead, she continued making *wayangs* out of cassava leaves. She had already made two characters: Arjuna and Gatotkaca.

Alun inched forward to get closer, but Layur was quicker. She pointed her crutch at the face of her friend, who had a phone hanging around his neck.

"Don't come near, or you'll step on my wayang!" Layur retorted sharply.

Alun burst into a loud laugh. "Whoa, fierce! I only wanted to tell you that layur is a fish. It's flat and stretched out like a belt or a sash. It makes excellent salted fish."

"Now I know," Layur said, her voice softening as she finally stopped glaring.

"I've been called Layur from the moment I was born. It's a tribute to my mother, who..."

Layur paused for a moment. "My mother...."

Before she could finish her sentence, Alun jerked back all of sudden. "Good grief!"

"What's the matter?" Layur asked, startled as well. "Oh, right ... it's almost 11 a.m., isn't it? Hurry, just go up there!"

Alun quickly put on the sandals he had used earlier as a seat mat. He stood up, brushing off his pants covered in dry grass and dust. Then, nimble as ever, he stepped along the footpath leading to the summit of Bukit Merana hill .

"Watch my bike, okay!" Alun shouted from above, before disappearing behind the bushes.

Who would want to take a bike in such a barren place? Layur thought to herself with a smile.

It wasn't midday, yet the sun was mercilessly burning the skin. Layur edged closer to the solitary teak tree at the foot of Bukit Merana.

The area was encircled by limestone walls with bushes growing sporadically. This harsh, barren place quickly made Layur's lips and mouth dry. Struggling, she tried to stand with the help of her two crutches, which had accompanied her for some time. Those two wooden supports were her loyal companions, besides Alun.

In just six steps, Layur reached Alun's black bicycle. She grabbed her water bottle, which adorned with a sailboat image, hanging from the bike's handlebar.

Glug! Glug! Glug! So satisfying.

Layur tilted her head back high. She stretched out her right palm in front of her eyebrows to shield the eyes from the glare. Yet, she still couldn't see her bestfriend Alun anywhere. He must be busy chatting with his mother at the top of Bukit Merana.

Layur sighed. How lucky Alun was. He had a whole family and wealth to match. His mother was overseas, studying in Germany, while his father was a mining director in Kalimantan.

Her friend was the only teenager in Dusun Prau who owned a cellphone. Every Tuesday, his mother would call him. So Alun always asked Layur to accompany him to Bukit Merana. Only there, at the hilltop, could he gets a phone signal. Indeed, Dusun Prau was surrounded by limestone hills, stretching high like a tall, natural fortress.

“Hey, snap out of it . You lost in thought again!”

Startled by Alun’s sudden shout from behind, Layur nearly jumped, but luckily she held onto her three cassava leaf wayangs without dropping them.

“What about the order I asked for?” Layur asked impatiently.

Alun handed his phone over, and Layur immediately took it. She searched for the photo album icon and...

“Wow, *amaaaazing*!” Layur exclaimed, growing even more envious of Alun. Earlier, as they set out for the foot of Bukit Merana, she had insisted that Alun capture as many photos and videos as possible from the summit. It’s a-must!

“That line of cars and buses marks the parking lot for Parangtritis Beach. And those huts are vendors selling young coconut drinks and various fish dishes. It looks really crowded, doesn’t it?” Alun said, swiping two fingers on his phone screen to zoom in on the picture.

“That’s quite far down, isn’t it?” Layur asked as she browsed through the other photos.

“Yes, it is. It’s in a completely different district from our village. And with that, comes a different fate as well. Our village isolated and secluded, enclosed by these towering white limestone walls, hahaha...!”

With a piercing look, Layur turned to Alun. “It’s your turn to stay here. Wait for me and watch your

bike yourself. I want to see that beautiful Parangtritis Beach with my own eyes."

Alun's eyes widened. "No way, you're going all the way down there, Layur? It's really far. It only looks close thanks to my phone's quality camera."

Layur pinched her friend's left ear in annoyance. "I'm not going down there, you clueless. I want to go up. To see it from above. Got it?"

Alun suddenly felt weak. His face went pale. *Oh no, I'm probably going to get in trouble with Layur's dad. And I'm the one who invited her to Bukit Merana*.

"Why are you so nervous? Don't you believe I can climb this hill using crutches? Here ... I'll prove it!" Layur confidently swung her crutches one after the other, climbing the steps made of stacked stones. "Don't follow me! You stay right there. Hey, but come here ... get my water bottle first. Tie it to my left crutch."

Alun obeyed, though feeling uneasy. Even if told not to, Layur would only get more annoyed and ignored it. His gaze stayed fixed on his shoulder-length haired friend as she struggled to climb the loose stone steps, until she was out of his sight.

One minute—two minutes—five minutes.

"Aluuun help!"

Alun was startled, almost paralyzed with shock. The scream was faint, but there was no mistake, it was Layur's. The boy hurriedly hung his phone strap around

his neck and leapt up two steps at a time, rushing to the top.

Where is she? Where...? Ah, that's the water bottle with a sailboat on it. Alun picked up the bottle, noticing its broken strap. Layur must be nearby. Alun spun around quickly, left and right, like a carousel he once rode in the city. But Layur was nowhere in sight!

"Layuuur! Where are you?" No footprints or any marks could be found around Alun. The earth was hard, blended with limestone, so it couldn't hold any crutch traces. Only bushes and pale, brownish-white walls stretched out before his eyes.

"Aluuun! I'm here. Inside!" The sudden echo of the voice seemed to come from nowhere. Alun lightly darted around, his eyes scanning left and right.

"Layur! Keep shouting. I'll track your voice!"

"Heyyy! Heyyy! Aluuun, you ugly! Ugggly! Uglllyyy!" The voice grew louder and more echoing, coming from just behind Alun.

There were only bushes around ... but hold on. The bushes seemed to have been pushed down partly. The leaves were still vibrant green, but many branches were broken. This must have just happened. Could it be...?

With a surge of curiosity, Alun hurriedly brushed the bushes aside and...

"I'm here! Right below you, Alun!" Layur shouted.

Alun couldn't believe what he was seeing. Behind those bushes was a hole as tall as he was. It was a natural cave, untouched until now. Layur must have accidentally fallen into it.

"Snap out of it, Alun ... Come over here. Get inside."

Alun peeked inside, the cave's length stretched about twice his height. Layur remained sprawled on the damp cave floor. She struggled to reach for her crutches to get up. Fortunately, the crutches were not broken.

"I'll help you out!"

Layur furrowed her brow. "Hey, who wants to come out? Did you hear that rumbling? There must be an underground river back there. I'm going to check it out!"

"That's crazy! Don't be reckless, Layur." Alun panicked. He didn't want to make the same mistake, leaving Layur with her unexpected plan. Hurriedly, the 15-year-old boy descended while turning on his phone's flashlight. *Flash*! The entire white cave wall became clearly visible.

Alun stood open-mouthed. Layur's jaw dropped even further! Oh my God...

What a beautiful natural cave. The walls rise high, curving like the domes of a fantasy palace.

"Is that a stalagmite?" Layur muttered, eyes fixed on the amazing formation before her.

Alun shook his head. "Stalagmites form on the cave floor, but those spear-shaped formations hanging above are called stalactites."

"Yeah, I was going to say stalactite too," Layur joked. "Now, help me get inside. I'm curious about that rumbling sound. It must be a river or maybe even a waterfall in there."

Alun glared. He stood still.

"You won't come with me inside? Fine ... just wait here." Layur took a step forward before letting out a shrill scream that bounced off the cave walls multiple times.

"What was that?" Layur muttered nervously. Her eyes quickly searched for whatever creature that had suddenly struck her head.

Alun burst out laughing. "It's just a bat. You sure you want to stay here? Well, let them keep you company." Alun pretended to walk toward the cave entrance.

"Wait! I'm scared!" Layur staggered away, trying to distance herself from the cave's interior. The inclined floor made it hard for her to climb up.

Alun quickly reached out his hand.

"Hey! Don't hold me unless I ask for help!" Layur snapped, pouting her lips.

Layur and Alun sat down, leaning against a teak tree near the bike. They were trying to steady their breath, which had been ragged just moments before.

"Maybe we don't need to go to Parangtritis Beach," Layur muttered suddenly. "We'll create a tourist spot better than there."

Alun quickly glanced at his friend. *The scorching sun surely making my friend starts to hallucinate!*

"Finish your drink, and then I'll ride you home," Alun persuaded before his friend could get any strange ideas.

"I'm serious, Alun. I'm sure there are more caves like that around our village. People in Parangtritis don't have tourist spots as cool as the one we just saw!"

Alun had had enough. "Your head is already overheating. Let's go home now."

Brrrrrr!

Layur and Alun were taken by surprise. The ground beneath them trembled fiercely.

"Earthquake?" Layur murmured with a panicked expression.

Alun didn't answer. The trembling in the ground grew stronger, mixed with a noise...

"Watch out, big freight trucks!" Alun yelled. The narrow path, usually only crossed by villagers on foot or bike, was suddenly overtaken by a massive truck. The engine roared, deafening. Every time the truck crushed over the rocks, the ground trembled like a prolonged earthquake.

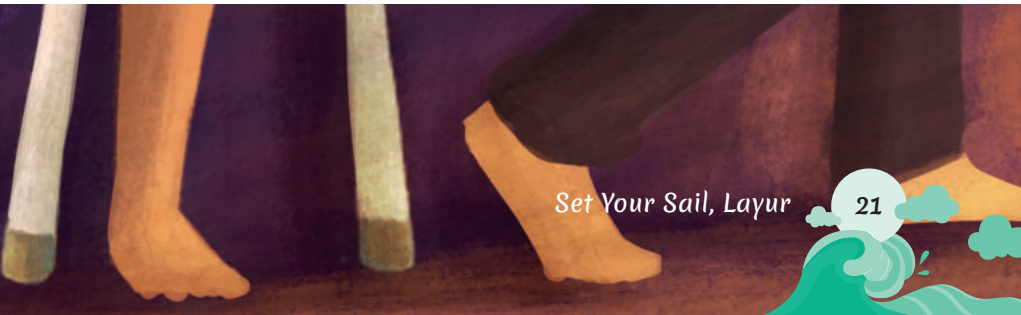
"What kind of trucks are those? Whose trucks are they? Five trucks!" Layur exclaimed, confused.

"Military trucks? All green. Are they here for war drills?" Alun guessed.

The last truck passed by carrying heavy iron poles. A banner draped along the length of the truck bed read:

"National Strategic Project: TONAS".

WHAT IS THIS ABOUT?



Chapter 3
Gripped by Fear

Southern Sea, 14:10

Splash! Splaaaash!

"Watch out, Kang! Hold on ... hold the rope tight. I'm pulling you from here."

A sun-tanned fisherman wearing a worn-out *caping* hat shouted loudly to his friend slipping off the boat. He quickly stretched out his arm as far as he could to grasp his friend's fingers. The waves of the Southern Sea were fierce, rolling and towering nearly as high as the boat's sail.

The man who fell into the water held onto the cadik tightly, wrapping the sail rope he had managed to grasp around his hand. His trembling lips seemed to whisper something inaudible.

"Move over here slowly, Kang. Yes ... keep going! Keep going!"

He made it. The fisherman, stocky and breathless, struggled to pull himself back into the boat. Exhausted, he lay on his back, catching his breath. For a moment, he looked up at the sky, already softening into gray. Saltwater soaked through his white t-shirt, dripping steadily onto the deck.

"What were you thinking, Kang? You spaced out, and you slipped right off the boat," asked the fisherman with a caping hat on. He opened a vacuum flask of steaming tea, poured some into a cup, and handed it to his friend who was shivering, soaked to the bone.

"Suddenly, I got a bad feeling, Mas," his friend murmured after drinking half the cup. "What if my daughter's in trouble..."

His friend gently patted his shoulder. "Kang, it's time to let Layur have more freedom. She's not a child anymore and can take care of herself. And remember, she has plenty of friends."

The other man still looked uneasy. "Let's just go back, okay."

"Hush! Don't be ridiculous ... we haven't catch much, Kang!"

As the evening crept over Bukit Merana, Layur and Alun kept watching the large trucks unloading their cargo. The workers hurriedly moved in silence, all wearing orange construction helmets. Oh no, there were two people whose helmets gleamed bright white.

"Those two wearing white helmets are higher-ups. Usually managers or, in some cases, directors. That's what I often see in books," Alun whispered, and Layur just nodded.

The two teenagers stared in disbelief when strangers from outside the village started setting stakes and raising a corrugated iron fence. The work began from the footpath that Alun had taken earlier, the one he'd once climbed to the top of Bukit Merana.

"You can't make calls from the hilltop anymore, Alun. They've shut off access to the top," Layur shouted in panic. Alun was equally puzzled. What would happen if the entire hill was sealed off, preventing him from calling his parents?

"Look, they're putting up no-trespassing sign!" whispered Layur. There was a large sign that read:

No Trespassing.

This area of the National Strategic Project is under CCTV surveillance.

On the left side, TONAS logo caught the eye.

Alun, who thought he knew a lot, still didn't understand what TONAS was.

"I have to get closer," said Alun, ignoring his friend beside him.

"I'll come with you! Don't say I can't!" Layur quickly responded.

Alun sighed. "Fine. But stay behind me all the time."

With a tense gaze, Layur followed about five steps behind Alun. She carefully swung her crutch to avoid stepping on dry leaves that might attract the workers' attention. After ten steps, they were close to the newly installed corrugated iron wall. Alun signaled Layur to go five steps to the left, where a large tree provided enough cover to hide and spy on the workers' activities in the distance.

"What are they building?" Layur wondered.

Alun squinted to see more clearly. In the distance, the workers were unloading long metal rods and large cables coiled onto wooden reels as tall as themselves.

Alun thought really hard. *Who were these people? What were they doing? Were they bad people? Maybe...*

"Hey! Who are you?"

Out of nowhere, a muscular hand poked Layur and Alun's arms from behind. The two children were shocked beyond words. As they turned around, all they could see was the towering silhouette of a giant-like man wearing a white helmet.

Bapak ran frantically. He hastened to get his fishing done more quickly, his heart certain that Layur was facing trouble while he was away.

"Layur was riding a bike with Alun. They headed up there," Yu Semi pointed toward Bukit Merana.

"Has it been long?" Bapak quickly replied.

"Well, Layur left immediately after she found out that you had gone out to sea," added Yu Semi, the seller of jingking rempeyek.

Bapak anxiously ran his fingers through his hair. The western sky was already tinged with red, signaling that evening was drawing near.

"Hey, Basri!" Bapak shouted to a sarong-clad teenager exiting the mosque courtyard. "Have you seen Layur and Alun ride their bicycles past here?"

Basri shook his head, and so did Wawan, who was walking with him.

Bapak grew more anxious. He questioned Sisil and Vani, who lived across from his house. The two often played with Layur. However, not a single one of Layur's playmates had seen her return from descending Bukit Merana.

Layur was no longer a little child, and her school uniform, gray and white, marked her as a high school student. Indeed, Bapak gave his daughter full freedom to socialize and play with anyone, anywhere. However, a father's instinct could not be fooled. Especially since Layur was a girl, and she would certainly have difficulty running if she faced danger.

Bapak quickly gathered six men from the Dusun Prau village to help search for his daughter. Bukit Merana was uninhabited, and as nightfall approached, the area would soon be pitch black. There was simply no reason for any Dusun Prau villagers to step into that desolate and quiet area, where not a single house stood.

"Bring flashlights, everyone! Also, prepare some medicine. Just in case...," Bapak could not continue his words.

Pak Kadus, the head of the village, joined the group. He led the Dusun Prau villagers on their one-kilometer march from home to Bukit Merana.

"Let's just walk!" Pak Kadus commanded. "We have no idea where Layur and Alun are, so we must leave at once before nightfall."

Along the way, Bapak kept softly mumbling prayers for his daughter's safety.

One or two flashlights were already switched on. The path they were taking consisted of roughly arranged limestone rocks, just enough to keep the villagers from slipping on the wet ground after rain.

The path began to slope upward as the group reached the end of the village road, a clear sign they had started to climb Bukit Merana. Bapak quickened his pace, leaving the group behind.

They were now far from Dusun Prau, and from atop Bukit Merana, the village looked like a row of flickering candles, speckled with red glimmers. The group paused briefly, still flashing their lights, in hopes that the two missing children could see them.

"Have you spotted any suspicious signs?" Pak Kadus asked. Naryo, the group's youngest, strained his ears to catch any unusual sounds.

"There's a rumbling sound, like a machine running somewhere. But where exactly?" said Naryo.

Pak Kadus and Bapak fell silent. It was indeed the faint but unmistakable sound of a machine, resonated around their location.

Bapak said, "That sound can't be from a boat engine. It's too far from here."

The group continued on, and then they reached the cluster of teak trees often used by the villagers as a resting spot.

"*Pak*! Is this Alun's bicycle?" Pak Kadus, who led the group, called out. He pointed to the black bicycle left lying under a teak tree.

Bapak replied, “Yes, and this is Layur’s water bottle too,” holding up his daughter’s favorite item high.

Pak Kadus quickly shone his flashlight down the cliff in front of the row of teak trees. Bapak gasped. Could Pak Kadus be thinking the same as him?

“Shine your flashlights down there. Look for any signs you might see, like Layur’s crutch!” ordered Pak Kadus.

And then, the group dispersed along the cliff’s edge. Their flashlights flickered like spotlights at a grand performance, while the shrubs and jagged rocks lay silently in the beams.

Pak Kadus gave Bapak a reassuring pat on the shoulder, and Bapak responded with a nod of understanding.

“Yes, I am relieved. There’s no sign of the two kids down there,” Bapak whispered.

“Hey, look over there! Who’s responsible for this fence?” Naryo exclaimed, catching everyone off-guard.

The group was taken aback by something unusual in front of them. Just yesterday, this place looked the same as it had for decades. Now, a corrugated metal fence stood there. The fence has only been installed for a few meters, but the supporting posts are already

lined up, indicating that soon there will be a corrugated metal wall stretching along that area. The flashlight beam clearly lighted up the writing and the TONAS logo, though none of the villagers managed to make sense of it.

Bapak moved aside. In the distance, the faint rumble of a diesel engine could be heard.

"Shhh... it's from over there," whispered Bapak.

Nodding in agreement, the group tiptoed toward the source of the rumbling noise. Soon, they came upon a partially open corrugated metal door.

Pak Kadus held up his finger to his lips. "Turn off your flashlights!"

Bapak peeked inside, tightly gripping a stick he had prepared for self-defense. Who knew what dangers might be lurking ahead? Despite several large trucks blocking the view, he was sure there were people inside, conversing.

"Stay here, all of you. I'm going inside!"

"Be careful, *Kang*," warned Pak Kadus. "Don't bring a club, it might just cause a commotion."

Bapak, ignoring the warning, had already moved forward about ten steps. He strained his ear, and was

sure that there were people conversing in the middle of the open field illuminated by the light from the diesel engine.

Moving cautiously, Bapak jumped over thick cables lying on the ground. Nearby, piles of long iron rods, each with a diameter the size of an adult's thigh, were stacked in a corner. Opposite them, two containers had been transformed into makeshift offices or living shelters, equipped with a door and two windows.

Taken aback, Bapak blinked. Layur and Alun sat on a long bench, with several tall, large men standing around them.

Bapak's blood seemed to boil.

No one could lay a hand on those children! With a surge of resolve, Bapak brandished a stick tightly clenched in his hand and rushed toward Layur and Alun!

"Get lost, all of you! Stay away from my chiiiildren !"

Chapter 4
Misery

Pak Kadus swiftly grabbed Layur's father arm.

"Calm down, Kang. Look, there are more than a dozen of them standing there," Pak Kadus said firmly. He quickly snatched the piece of wood from Bapak's tight grip. Naryo also grasped Layur's father's arm to keep him from charging forward. The muscles in his arm tensed, and sweat formed. Layur's father's breathing quickened—a clear sign his blood was boiling with rage.

Oh my! The whispers and rustling made by Pak Kadus were heard by the people gathered in the open field. In front of the villagers, the ones surrounding Layur and Alun stood alert, as if a confrontation between two factions was about to erupt in the middle of the night.

"Bapak!" Layur exclaimed, joyfully. She stood up, holding onto her crutch. Her three steps encouraged Bapak to move forward as well.

"Kowe ora opo-opo, Nduk? You're not hurt, aren't you?" Bapak asked with concern.

"We were invited to eat, Pak!" Alun interrupted, still holding half-eaten banana in his hand.

Bapak looked puzzled. He surveyed the table in the middle of the open field. Yes, there were many plates and bowls filled with vegetables and various dishes. He moved closer to Layur's ear and quietly asked.

"Who are they?"

"Ah, yes. That's Pak Tonas!"

Layur gestured with his right thumb toward the man standing at the end of the table. A tall, sturdy figure. This was the very man who had caught Layur and Alun sneaking around earlier.

This man was surprisingly friendly. His thick beard and mustache didn't hide his humble and welcoming demeanor toward the strangers. He stood up, wiped his palms with a tissue, and then approached Bapak.

"I'm Sasmito. These two smart kids prefer to call me Tonas, hahaha..."

The man reached out his hand to Bapak and bowed respectfully as Layur introduced him to his father.

Although Bapak didn't fully understand, Sasmito's friendliness softened him. He introduced himself and then introduced Pak Kadus to the unfamiliar faces.

"It seems there has been a misunderstanding between us," said Sasmito. "Possibly, our notification letter hasn't reached Pak Kepala Dusun yet."

Sasmito proceeded to explain who they were. The group was a government-appointed team responsible for speeding up the development of telecommunication facilities in underdeveloped areas.

"I am the leader of this team. We're from Tower Nasional, also known as Tonas. This hilltop is the perfect location to set up a telecommunications tower. Imagine, with just one tower here, five villages will be freed from signal blank spot. Including your village, Sirs."

Pak Kadus approached Alun and whispered, "Opo kuwi blank spot? I don't understand it."

Alun glanced at Sasmito, who acknowledged him with a nod.

"Allow me to explain, Pak Tonas," said Alun.

"*Blank spot* means an area that does not get phone signal, Pak Kadus. Like our Dusun Prau. Look at the tall hills surrounding us. The signal gets stuck behind the hills. That's why we need towers on the hilltops to retransmit the signal."

Sasmito gave a thumbs-up with both hands. "You're smart, Kid. I'm impressed you frequently hike up this hill just to get a phone signal! Imagine if the tower we're setting up is installed on time...."

Alun interrupted again, "Yes, and we would all be able to receive phone calls easily."

"That's right. We are currently accelerating the development of digital villages, particularly in the 3T regions—tertinggal (underdeveloped), terdepan (frontier), and terluar (outermost) areas. Although located in Java, topographical factors have resulted in this area becoming a government development priority."

"Why didn't I, as the head of the village, receive any notification? I could have mobilized the villagers to help you with this project at Bukit Merana," Pak Kadus inquired.

"*Nyuwun pangapunten*. Please forgive us. The notice for the socialization may still be held up at the district or sub-district office. By the way, does this hill have a name?"

Pak Kadus explained, "*Leres*, Pak. That's right. Our villagers have called it Bukit Merana for a long time due to its barren nature and only suitable for planting cassava. *Merana* means misery ."

Sasmito nodded. "Oh, excuse me. I haven't even invited you all to sit down. Please join us. We will prepare some tea and coffee."

Sasmito's subordinate promptly tidied the table and cleared away the plates and bowls, then replaced them with coffee cups emitting a distinctive aroma. Any awkwardness between the villagers and Sasmito soon vanished as they engaged in a warm and friendly conversation.

Sasmito politely invited Pak Kadus and the villagers to enjoy the coffee and snacks available.

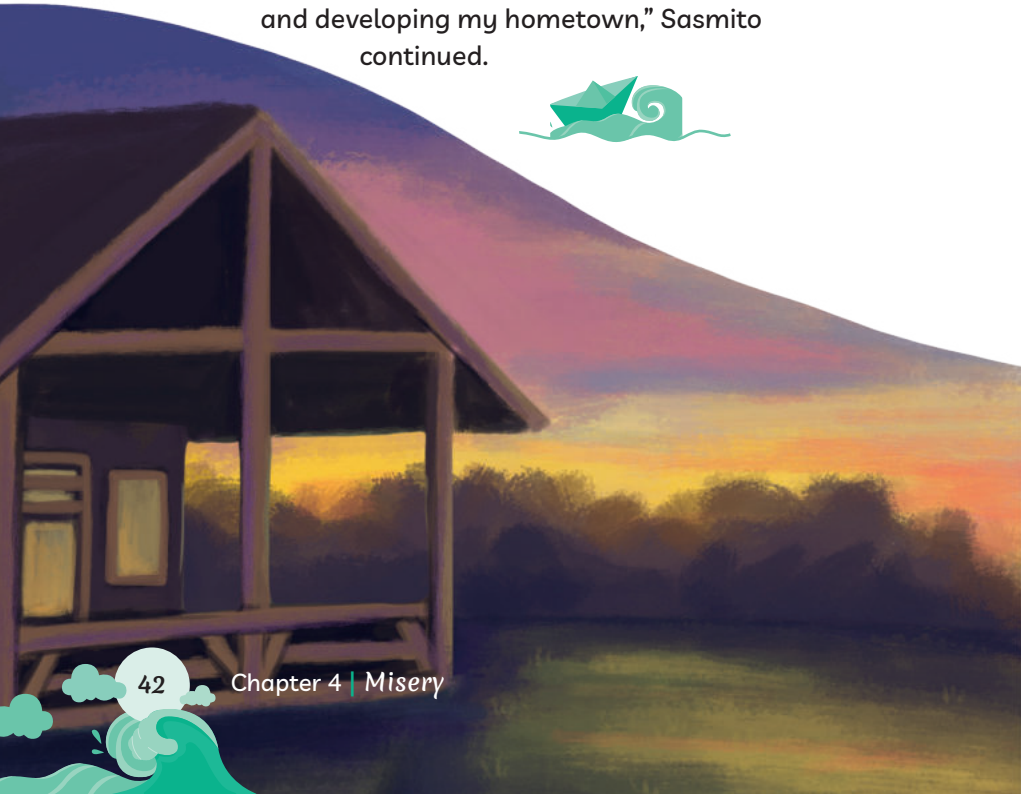
"I was born in Dusun Wadas, about half an hour's journey from here, Pak. So, you could say I am a local ," Sasmito said.

Pak Kadus immediately said, “Well, I used to attend school there, at SMP 5.”

Sasmito was surprised. “Wow, we went to the same school, Pak. However, I only studied there for one year before moving to Batam and continuing my studies in Germany and the United States. Alhamdulillah, I received a scholarship.”

Bapak, Pak Kadus, and the Dusun Prau villagers who were listening to the conversation felt proud. This was because Dusun Wadas, Sasmito’s birthplace, is known as the poorest hamlet and lacks adequate water sources.

“The only way I can express my gratitude to my father and mother who raised me is by coming back and developing my hometown,” Sasmito continued.



Layur quietly moved away from the table, and strolled to the other side. For her, the twinkle of the stars and the flickering light set up by the villagers below Bukit Merana were equally mesmerizing.

"Alun, come here!" Layur threw a small pebble at Alun's foot to draw the attention of her friend busy with his phone. Alun was thrilled, imagining he would get free Internet access constantly transmitted from the Tonas workers' shelter.

Alun approached Layur while putting his phone into his pants pocket.

"This is the first time I've been up this high at night," Layur said, almost talking to herself.

"Usually, down there, I can only gaze at the twinkling stars above. Now, from this place, our village looks like a sky full of stars too."

"But our village must be quiet at this hour. The people don't have much to do after maghrib," Alun replied.

Layur quickly turned to Alun. "Take out your phone. Come!"

Alun was confused, but he did as asked. He took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to Layur. The girl fiddled with the phone a few times before she finally gave up.

"I don't know how to use it. You do it, just open the photos from earlier today," said Layur quickly.

"Here, the photos of Parangtritis, right?"

"Exactly!"

Layur looked at the photos on the phone with a faint smile. Alun grew even more confused.

"Can you imagine if this photo was taken at night?"

"Wow, it must be really beautiful. The lights from the restaurants and guesthouses there would be bright. And the headlights from passing cars and buses must create a stunning view," Alun replied.

Layur's face lit up even more, especially when the dim light from the shelter fell on her. "Now, imagine if that's not Parangtritis Beach!"

"What do you mean?"

"Imagine, that's our village, Dusun Prau. And, all those lights and the crowd are the view at Tambaksegaran Beach."

"Are you tripping?"

Layur chuckled. “With your phone and the Internet tower, Dusun Prau can be transformed into a place full of flickering lights and a much improved life. I’ve read a lot about it in the books at school’s library.”

Alun began to grasp the idea. Layur didn’t wait for him to reply and went on.

“Can you imagine if this place became a campsite at night? Tents all around, with people standing right where we are now, gazing up at the twinkling stars above the hills, alongside the flickering lights of fishermen and village homes below.”

Layur gave Alun a single pat on the shoulder. “Do you remember the cave where I slipped in?” she said. “That’s our treasure, Alun. I don’t know how it works, but surely it’s something many tourists would be interested in. Even I, a simple village girl, was really excited to enter such a natural cave!”

Alun moved a step away as Layur seemed ready to pat him again. “Just imagine if fried walang and peyek jingking were advertised using your phone? You...”

“Stop!” Alun caught on excitedly. “You’re thinking of turning Dusun Prau and Tambaksegaran Beach into tourist destinations like that beach over there?”

Layur snapped her fingers. “Since the Internet will be available soon, let’s showcase all the places I mentioned earlier online. I’m sure your smart Internet expertice will come in handy.”

*BUKIT MENARA TOURIST SPOT

Alun felt proud to be called smart.

"I think this place shouldn't be called Bukit Merana anymore. Merana means misery, right? It sounds sad. Now that there's a tower here, how about we suggest a new name: Bukit Mena...."

Suddenly, Bapak's voice interrupted their conversation mid-sentence.

"Layur! Alun! Come here. We're about to say goodbye.""

Chapter 5

Dusun Prau Springs to Life

Three months later.

"What are you looking for, Pak?" Layur tried to follow his father, who was pacing back and forth like someone who had lost a chicken.

Bapak did not respond. Instead, he headed toward *gandok*, a room at the back of the house used for storage. Layur's house was indeed spacious. There was the *sentong*, where the family slept; the *pringgitan* as a guest reception area; and the pendopo that had stood empty since *bondet* explosion damaged it ten years ago.

"I can help if you tell me what you're looking for," said Layur again.

Bapak remained silent. His hands sifted through the cluster of rusted keys, hanging on a wire loop. He opened the door halfway, and then... *cough! Cough!* At the same time, Bapak and Layur were coughing. Dust and stale air wafted from the tightly shut room. For a decade, the warehouse windows and doors remained securely closed. It was as if Bapak wanted to forget

the heartbreaking event ten years ago when their house exploded along with the fish bomb factory at that place. A blast that also crushed Layur's leg.

"*Nduk*, wait right there. I'm going to open the window from inside," Bapak ordered, holding back Layur who was about to pass through the door.

Click! The dim light in the room flickered to life as Bapak turned it on. The light bulb seemed old, blinking like a child who had slept through many years.

Sunlight immediately poured into the room as Bapak pushed open the two wide window shutters. The beams formed white streaks through the windows and cast light on a foreign object covered with a wide, dusty *pandan* mat.

"Is that what you're searching for, Pak?" Layur pointed the mound beneath the mat.

Bapak gave a wide smile. "Yes. All my weapons are kept beneath that *pandan* mat."

Layur was confused. Bapak still told Layur not to come closer. Slowly, her father rolled up the pandan mat, revealing a neatly arranged row of gamelan instruments. Layur couldn't recall ever seeing them before. Perhaps she had, but it was definitely before she turned five.

"This one is called saron," Bapak said, pointing to the iron-bar instrument under the window. "The round ones are bonang. Now, as for that one..."

"Wait, let me guess," Layur interrupted quickly. "I've seen that many times. That's a gendang, isn't it, Pak?"

Dad confirmed. "Around here, it's called kendang. That's your father's signature instrument."

Layur couldn't wait to find out what Bapak's true intention.

"Are you going to sell this gamelan to buy a new boat, Pak?"

Layur silently hoped it wouldn't happen.

"Hahaha...."

Bapak broke into laughter. He rested both hands on Layur's shoulders. His only daughter was annoyed at being laugh at.

"*Ora*, *Nduk*. No. Bapak wants to become a *niyaga*. To be part of *pengrawit*, playing this gamelan together with Kang Wasis, Pak Sutar, Naryo, and Yu Semi, who is the *ledhek*."

"*Ledhek*?"

Bapak led Layur out of the gandhok and told her to sit in the pringgitan.

"Yu Semi, back in her youth, was a renowned tayub dancer from Dusun Prau. The title for a *tayub* dancer is *ledhek*."

Layur nodded but was still confused.

"Is *ledhek* a traditional performing art native to this area?"

Bapak patiently explained, "Ledhek can be found in several regions of Java. Besides our place, this performing art is also present in Blora, Central Java, Sleman, and a few other areas."

"Dancers like Yu Semi must have been beautiful in their youth, right, Pak?"

"Are you seriously asking that, or just making fun of the *rempeyek jingking* seller?"

Both father and daughter laughed together.

"Wait a moment, I'll show you something," said Bapak, as he quickly walked into a room.

Bapak emerged from the room carrying some papers. His face was beaming with joy.

"Here are some old photos. The paper has yellowed, but can you recognize the people in these pictures?" Bapak asked, in playful manner.

Layur was observing the first picture. Some *niyaga* can be seen sitting in front of the *gamelan*. They are still young, handsome and beautiful. Layur took the second photo; these must be the *sinden*, judging by their sitting positions. The third photo is a half-body shot of a handsome man with a thin mustache. He is holding a gamelan mallet that looks like a toy car wheel.

"So, which one is Yu Semi, Pak?"

Bapak was pleased because Layur showed considerable interest in traditional arts. He explained, one by one, about the friends from his youth in that *pengrawit* group.

"The handsome guy in that single photo is me."

"Wooow... if only you could maintain your handsomeness until old age, surely I would be proud," joked Layur.

Dad chuckled. "Are you embarrassed to see your dad's face now?"

Then Layur burst out laughing in return.

"Now, take a guess... which one is Yu Semi and which one is your late mother in this photo!"

Layur frowned, staring at the photo. After a while, she gave up. She couldn't tell. All the women's faces in the photo were lovely.

Tap! Tap! Tap!

The bamboo stake was hammered repeatedly until it was securely planted to support the janur tied to a bent bamboo pole. Two janur decorations stood gracefully at the front edge of Dusun Prau. Meanwhile, a dozen young people were busy setting up a grand tent in the open field not far from Tambaksegaran Beach.

Dusun Prau suddenly buzzed with activity. Men and women, young and old, were busy preparing every corner of the village. Yes, in just two days, the "Digital Village" program, centered in the fishing hamlet, will be officially inaugurated. It is said that a minister will be attending.

Alun leaned his bicycle against a *gayam* tree close to the *buk* where Layur was sitting quietly. The *buk* is a half-meter-high wall that stretches along the edge of the stream bridge. From that spot, Alun and Layur could watch the activity in their hamlet.

"Do you still remember what I told you when we were up there at night?" Layur asked Alun, pointing towards Bukit Merana.

Alun sat beside Layur and reached into his pants pocket to take out his phone.

Layur glared. "Never play with your phone when someone is trying to talk to you!"

Alun looked shy. With the Bukit Merana tower now functioning, Internet access from mobile phones is incredibly convenient. Alun seems almost inseparable from the device in his hand.

"Yes. I still remember."

"Remember what?"

"Making Tambaksegaran Beach and Dusun Prau like the tourist spots over there in Parangtritis. Right?"

Layur sighed. "My father doesn't agree."

Alun surprised. Then, he stood in front of his friend. “Your father said no?”

Layur shook her head. “Last night, I told my father about my plan. He just stayed silent and left. He said he wanted to practice the tayub dance for tomorrow’s performance. If Bapak stays silent and leaves when spoken to, it means he does not agree.”

“He’s just like you, hahaha....”

Layur frowned and grabbed a dry gayam fruit near her feet, and then threw it with all her might towards Alun. The chubby boy easily blocked Layur’s throw.

Layur changed her mind about hurling the second dry gayam fruit when Alun sat back down beside her.

“Bapak once told me not to do unnecessary things. He just said I should focus on studying. I’m not even allowed to play too far away. Could it be because I walk with crutches like this?”

Alun winced. He did not want his best friend to be sad. Quickly, he changed the subject. “But I was all set to help you promote our village on the Internet! Did you know that just this year, tens of millions of Indonesians have Facebook accounts? Do you know Facebook?” asked Alun.

Layur looked at Alun blankly. She felt embarrassed even to shake her head.

“Just say if you don’t know,” teased Alun. “Facebook is called social media. People can see what

others are doing and sharing through the Internet. Whether it's photos, videos, or stories. Imagine if I showed the beauty of Tambaksegaran Beach and the nighttime atmosphere on Bukit Merana there, millions of people in Indonesia and even around the world could see it instantly."

Layur's eyes lit up immediately. Alun's idea was truly brilliant. "You're smart, Alun. We're definitely going to use the Internet to introduce our village. We'll use your phone and my laptop ... oops!"

Layur accidentally blurted it out. Too late, Alun had already heard. With a scrutinizing gaze, Alun stared at Layur without blinking.

"So, is it true what the kids around here are saying? You are among the top ten outstanding students who will be granted a laptop when the Minister comes here?"

Layur chuckled softly. "Uh, well ... It's not that I didn't want to share. It's just...."

"It's just what? You're just worried that I'm jealous, right? Yeah, I'm jealous. Really jealous, hahaha...."

Layur seemed to be holding back her curiosity. Unable to keep it inside any longer, she finally voiced a request to Alun.

"I'm clueless, I don't understand what the Internet is, or what Facebook is. You'll teach me later, right? Once I get the laptop," Layur requested with a serious expression.

Alun blinked both of his eyes several times, and it prickled Layur's nerves.

Alun joked, "How much you are willing to pay me? Hahaha!"

Layur burst out laughing. "Alun, Alun! You're just like a fish porter, always demanding payment for everything."

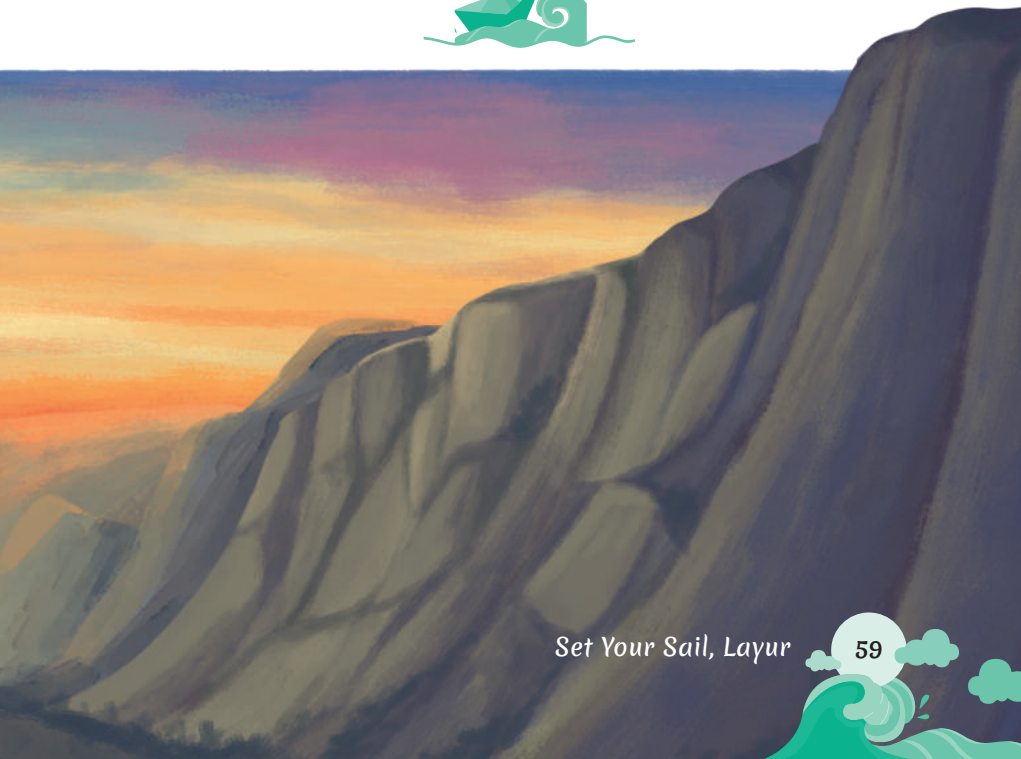
And then, Alun went on to convince Layur. "Come on, of course I'll share my knowledge with you, Layur. In fact... I'm willing to train you and your friends who'll receive the laptops so you can surf the Internet smoothly. But first, you've got to make sure you can clearly present your idea for building a tourist village to the people here."

The wind blew stronger at that moment. The call to prayer echoed, whether it came from the mosque in Dusun Prau or the neighboring village. The afternoon was giving way to evening. The two teenagers rode together on a bicycle, inched steadily down the undulating village path, its surface a patchwork of stone and earth.

Schmack!

Layur slapped Alun's back hard. Her best friend jolted in surprise, the bike wobbled.

"I've got a brilliant idea!" shouted Layur. "I have a perfect way to present my idea in front of a crowd. Yes, it's definitely going to work!"



Chapter 6
Against All Odds

Plak ketuplak neng nong neng nong gong!

The sound of clapping and cheering followed by barrage of whistles reverberating around the large tent. The Dusun Prau villagers seemed nostalgic, dancing Tayub and enjoying the rhythmic cadence of Jawa's melodies that sounded familiar.

Bapak wiped the sweat streaming down his forehead and neck. His *surjan* shirt darkened, it was soaked through. Beside him, Yu Semi descended from the stage, repeatedly waving her hand toward the audience calling her name. In that instant, she looked absolutely radiant, her makeup styled like a big-city celebrity, as she stepped down toward the beach. Yu Semi's red lips and her thick makeup left all the villagers of Dusun Prau utterly amazed. Her *kebaya* and *selendang* made her nearly unrecognizable. Could that graceful dancer really be the *jingking rempeyek* street vendor who every morning wandering around in a simple house dress, carrying a bamboo basket?

"Sssh... keep it quiet," Yu Semi chided the children who kept on talking and laughing. The emcee can already be seen holding the microphone on stage.

"Next, the moment we've been waiting for, the handover of educational tools to our brilliant young achievers. We now invite, Pak Bupati, the Head of Gunungkidul District, to kindly present the handover...." The emcee's voice snapped Layur back to moment, for she had been staring at his father in awe the entire time.

"*Child*... smooth your hair. It's all *messy*," whispered Bapak, who had suddenly appeared beside her. With deft hands, he settled the crutch into the crook of Layur's arms.

"Here, use my comb!" cried Yu Semi, joining in the fuss too. Bapak swiftly took the comb and tenderly smoothed his daughter's hair.

Layur froze. She couldn't remember the last time Bapak had brushed her hair. Maybe, this was the very first time. She felt like crying, but dared not, for fear one drop might ruin her powdered face.

Bapak watched Layur climb the wide stage stairs, one step at a time. His eyes filled with tears . "If your mother were still alive," Bapak whispered softly to himself, "she would be just as proud as I am."

Nine high-achieving children were already standing in a row on the stage, like puppets in a shadow play. But who was the tenth?

"And ... we call upon the tenth outstanding student ... Alun Saptata. Please come up to the stage!"

Thump! Layur's heart seemed to stop for a second. Oh my ... That boy's really good at keeping secrets. He didn't even tell her he'd also gotten the grant. Layur was so exasperated, she nearly punched Alun in the arm.

Applause echoed once more, reverberating off the limestone hills that ringed Dusun Prau, as Pak Bupati handed over educational equipment in the form of laptops.

"Wait...," Pak Bupati suddenly stopped Layur as she stepped down from the stage. She was the last one still standing there. "I'd like to have a brief conversation with you, Lass."

Layur felt like she wanted to scream with joy. *This was my golden opportunity*!

"You are ... Layur, right?" asked Pak Bupati, glancing at the certificate held by the girl in front of him. Her name was clearly written on the document, one of the top-performing students.

"Yes, I am, Pak Bupati...." said Layur, her heart pounding faster and faster.

"Today I'm representing Pak Menteri, who is unfortunately unable to attend. He sent a message urging all of you to make the best use of this government public aid," said Pak Bupati, pausing

briefly. "How do you plan to use that laptop?" he asked, his tone casual.

Dear God, please let me speak clearly the words I've memorized since last night, Layur whispered silently in her mind.

"I want to conjure up Tambaksegaran Beach and Dusun Prau, Pak Bupati!" said Layur with firm determination.

Conjured up?

Silence. The people surrounding the stage looked at one another, puzzled. What could the girl possibly mean? Even Pak Bupati furrowed his brow.

"Go on, how would you conjure up this beach right here, using just a laptop?" Pak Bupati inquired.

Layur moved the microphone into her left hand because her right hand was already damp with sweat. Alun raised his right thumb to encourage Layur. *Come on, you've got this, Layur. Go! Go!*

"I want to transform this fishing village into a tourist destination, Pak Bupati," replied Layur firmly. "I envision the fishermen's houses around this tent turning into guesthouses for tourists. And those warungs over there ... why, they could become culinary centers for various seafood products."

Pak Bupati looked intrigued. "But you haven't answered me yet.

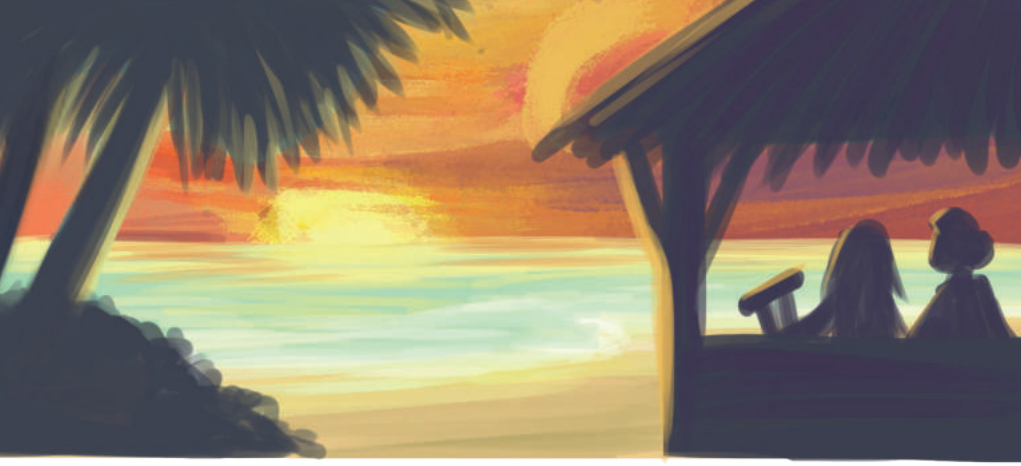
How are you going to use your laptop to make all of this come true?"

Layur lifted her laptop box high into the air. "Use the Internet, Pak Bupati. We are deeply grateful that Dusun Prau has been designated as one of the Digital Villages. I'll be capturing countless photos and videos of village life, sharing them on social media with my friends, who have just received their laptops today. Especially my chubby friend over there..." Layur pointed at Alun, who suddenly looked shy.

Pak Bupati seemed utterly speechless, hearing Layur's brilliant idea. And then, his arms stretched wide as he said, "Why hasn't anyone clapped yet? Don't you see? This is a genius idea from this outstanding student."

All at once, applause roared thunderously again. Everyone clapped, but Bapak remained silent. His hands hung stiffly at his sides.

Bu Narsih hurried toward Layur. Her right hand carried a ripe banana, her left hand extending a three-tiered food container.



"Is this really for me, Bu?" Layur was delighted. Of all the fruits, banana was her top favorite. Understandably, the only fruits she'd ever known were bananas, guavas, salak or snake fruit, and ceplukan or groundcherries.

"I'm serious! I cooked this gori dish with off-cut iwak beef. It's delicious! You should take some home, too." Bu Narsih handed the food container. In Dusun Prau, all meat is called iwak, a word that literally means fish.

Layur stood awkwardly.

Bu Narsih was puzzled. Something was off. And then, it dawned on her and she finally understood.

"Oh dear... forgive me. You must've had a hard time carrying it, huh? Alright then. Come on, I'll walk you home so you can drop off the banana and the food container."

Layur winked mischievously. "Aren't there any plates at your place, Bu Narsih? Why didn't you invite me over, instead?"

Bu Narsih laughed heartily. Her home was just twenty steps away from where they were chatting. But to reach Layur's? You'd have to cross a stream and several garden plots belonging to neighbors.

"Why are you suddenly giving me banana, Bu Narsih?" asked Layur, innocently. She chose to sit on Bu Narsih's veranda, which faced the sea. Several wijayakusuma flower pots hung neatly along the gutter's iron railing. Two of them were in full bloom, their white petals unfurling like rolls of tissue paper. Layur enjoyed staring at them.

"I'm a bit embarassed to say..." Bu Narsih blushed. "My youngest son, who's studying in Semarang, sent me a new phone. He heard there's Internet in here now. Help me, okay, Layur? Teach me how to use the phone."

Layurs eyes widened in surprise. And then, she burst into a long, hearty laugh.

Bu Narsih pouted. "Why are you laughing at me, Layur? Well, I am a simple person..."

Layur laughed even harder.

"If you keep teasing me, Layur, I'll take back the banana!" Bu Narsih joked playfully.

"Awwwwww, please don't, Bu. I'm so sorry. But I just have to laugh when I hear your request."

"Why is that?"

"Forget teaching you. I haven't even owned a phone myself, let alone touched one! I understand

nothing about it. I'm only going to ask Alun to teach me how to use the laptop tomorrow!"

The two women, twenty years apart in age, shared a laugh. And then, Bu Narsih entered the house, prepared two plates and a serving of rice, and invited Layur to enjoy the savory gori dish.

"Just one more request from me, Layur. This one, I'm sure you can help with. Or, well... let's say I'm helping you in return."

"Why are your words so tangled, Bu Narsih, like a knotted braid!" teased Layur.

Bu Narsih quickly replied, "I was thinking about what you said to Pak Bupati. You know, the idea of creating a tourism village here. Is it possible for me to get your help turning this house into a guesthouse?"

Layur's eyes widened. *Wow, Bu Narsih enthusiastically welcomed the idea I'd just proposed in front of Pak Bupati and the villagers of Dusun Prau.*

"There are three bedrooms in this house, and the common room at the center is spacious too. I renovated the kitchen and bathroom last year. You've probably heard that my youngest son won't be returning here anytime soon, because he's going straight into a master's program after graduating, thanks to the scholarship. Meanwhile, the room once used by my late first son has remained empty ever since," Bu Narsih explained at length.

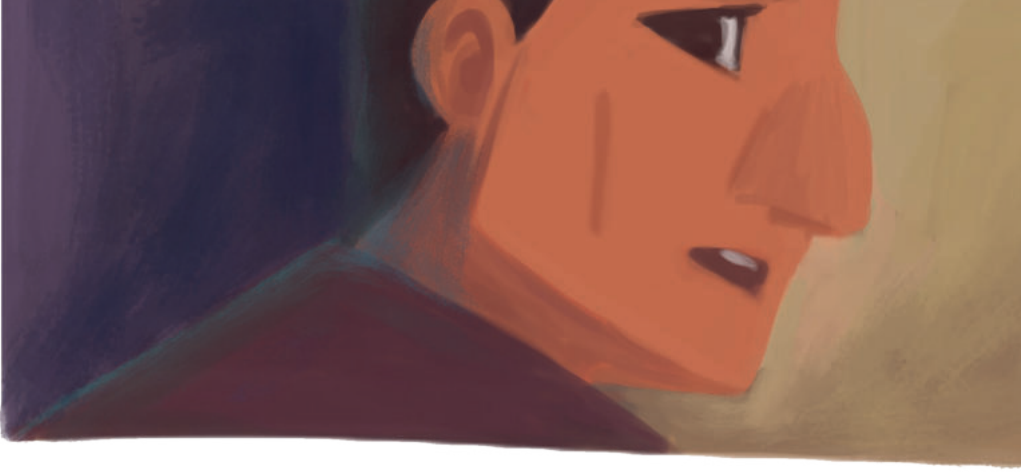
"Absolutely agree, Bu Narsih! Keeping the wijayakusuma flowers would be perfect—it's exactly what'll make guests truly feel at home in this house!"

Bu Narsih beamed with enthusiasm. "Help me design the room and the house walls so they're truly welcoming, even to foreign guests, Layur!".

Layur nodded three times quickly. She was absolutely determined.

Suddenly, Bu Narsih seemed to remember something. "By the way, your father supports your plans, doesn't he, Layur?"

Bapak sipped the strong coffee from the glass in his hand. The rice container was empty after the father and daughter finished dinner. Layur wiped her hands, and



then placing the plate and spoon onto the *para-para*, a wooden rack used for storing kitchen utensils.

"*Nduk*, I don't want you to be disappointed," said Bapak deliberately.

Layur sat down carefully. She leaned her crutch against the edge of the table.

"That's why you didn't join in clapping when the Bupati praised me, Pak?" Layur said matter-of-factly.

Bapak flinched. His hand holding the coffee glass trembled. He hadn't expected Layur to be so observant, to notice his reaction when she was on stage.

"Don't you agree with my intention, Pak?" asked Layur, as she wiped the table where coffee had spilled from her father's glass.

"*Nduk*, you should have told me about that before revealing it to the Pak Bupati."

Layur bit her lip, saddened.

"I already told you about that two days ago. But you stayed silent, Pak, and just walked away. Playing the kendang meant more to you."

Bapak sipped the last of his coffee. The bitterness grew stronger. "After the event ended, some villagers approached me. They warned me to advise you, *Nduk*."

Layur stared at her father. Advise? What kind of advice?

"You're free to do whatever good you wish. But some of the elders here urged me to stop you ... from making plans that change what's always been in this village," said Bapak.

"How many were there, Pak?" asked Layur, no longer wishing to carry the conversation further. "Did you know ... even after the ceremony, so many people came to shake my hand and hug me. They hoped so deeply that my dream to make the village thrive might finally come true. Yu Semi is even ready to open a fish grill stall. And Bu Narsih... she wants to turn her home into a guesthouse."

Layur sighed. "So many women are ready to encourage their children to practice *tayub* and *jaranan* dances. Vani, Yuli, and Ratna even told me they're willing to gather here when needed. The villagers are also asking if you'd lend the *gamelan* for *karawitan*. So tell me, Pak ... are there more people supporting my idea than those who want you to stop me from realizing that plan?"

Bapak put down his glass, got up from his seat, and went to stand behind Layur, who was still sitting on the chair. He gently stroked his beloved daughter's hair.

"*Nduk*, I just want you to consider my advice."

"Me too, Pak. I want you to trust me."

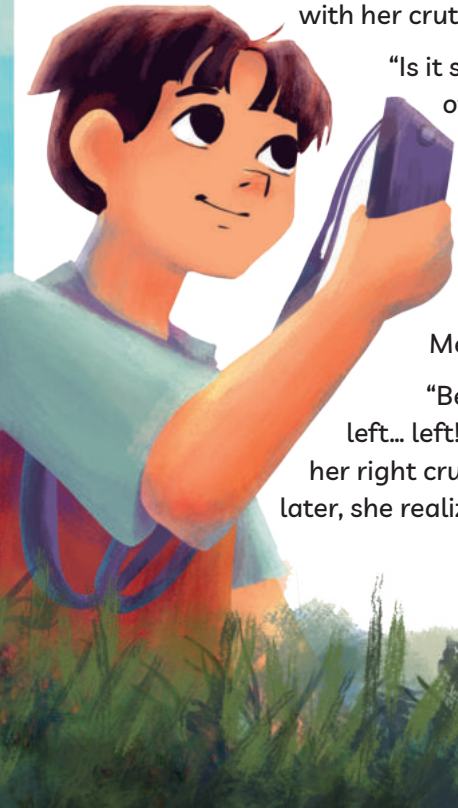
Screech ... screech. The crickets took over the night with their relentless noise. The father and daughter both became silent. It was so quiet that the gentle lapping of waves against the shore could be heard clearly. Bapak went into his bedroom, leaving Layur alone to stare into the dark night. Layur remembered the beautiful face in the black-and-white photo Bapak had shown her earlier. Her mother. *Surely, Ibu would have been deeply supportive of all her good plans. Unlike Bapak*.

Chapter 7

The Virtual Realm Turns Dreams into Reality

Noon, 14:20

Layur was panting heavily, yet bursting with excitement. She couldn't wait to show Pak Kadus what she had discovered. Alun stepped ahead of her without hesitation, making sure his friend could walk safely with her crutches.



"Is it still far?" asked Pak Kadus, a note of curiosity in his voice.

"Almost there, Pak! Just beyond that massive boulder!" Alun called out, dashing ahead of the villagers as they climbed the hill now known as Bukit Menara, or Tower Hill.

"Behind the bushes, Pak. To the left... left! Yes, there it is," Layur said, lifting her right crutch to point ahead. A moment later, she realized that her gesture might have

seemed rude, so she quickly switched to guiding Pak Kadus's gaze with her right thumb.

Pak Kadus was extremely enthusiastic. He stepped forward quickly, pushing aside the bushes. Behind him, several villagers couldn't wait to see the sight Layur had described ever since they left Dusun Prau.

Splash ....

Splash ....

The sound of trickling water came from the location they'd just arrived at.

Pak Kadus and the villagers were stunned, their mouths agape.

"Oh my ... I've lived in Dusun Prau for decades, yet I never knew there was a natural cave this beautiful?" Pak Kadus sighed. Just ahead of him stretched a limestone cave, its stalactites and stalagmites still in their natural state. In the dim light filtering through the entrance, the wet cave walls shimmered, and the sound of a small stream splashing against limestone echoed softly.

"Turn on the flashlight," commanded Pak Kadus. "Naryo, use the rope to measure the cave's depth. Hey! Alun and Layur, stay outside. It's dangerous, I don't want you to slip."

Both teenagers shook their heads in unison, protesting.

"We'd already been inside the cave before, Pak," Layur said. "It's safe."

Finally, Pak Kadus gave in and permitted them to step inside the cave.

The beam of the flashlight flickered, casting a mesmerizing glow that transformed the scene into something magical. Layur repeatedly reminded Alun to photograph every corner of the cave.

"Remember to post those photos online later!"

Alun gave a thumbs-up. "No worries. Definitely!"

Naryo, the young man walking furthest ahead, suddenly raised his right hand high into the air. "Stop! Don't go another step. It's dangerous."

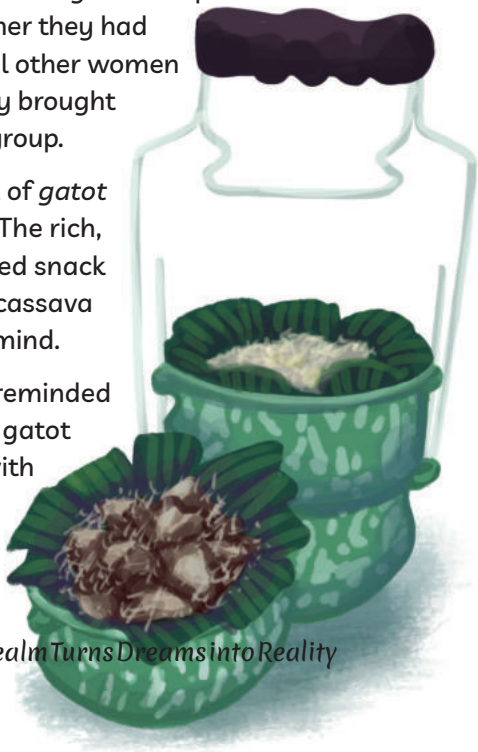
In front of them, the cave floor abruptly dropped, giving way to the edge of a calm underground river. Pak Kadus and Naryo swept the flashlight beams downstream. The river wound its way into the distance. Above it, the cave walls, standing as high as four adults, seem to form an alluring natural canopy.

"From the entrance of the cave to the river's edge, it's about sixty meters. The river is about eight to twelve meters wide," Naryo said, quickly tracing the segments of his index finger to estimate the width and length of the river. The young man was indeed adept at making maps, using his fingers as a scale. *I want to be a geographer too, just like Mas Naryo*, Layur thought to herself.

"Pak Kadus, with your permission, next week I will invite my campus's Mapala team to map this cave and underground river in more detail. I'm sure this natural formation is perfect for adventure tourism!" Naryo said, his eyes sparkling. (*Mapala*, short for Mahasiswa *Pencinta Alam*, is a university club for students who love nature, hiking, and adventure.)

Layur and Alun looked at each other and then bumped their fists. *High five*!

Pak Kadus helped Layur sit on the grass ten steps in front of the cave. The villagers were drenched in sweat after exploring the cave earlier. Layur then opened the three-tiered food container they had brought. Yu Semi and several other women from the village had willingly brought plenty of provisions for the group.



Layur plucked a tiny bit of *gatot* from one of the containers. The rich, savory scent of the dark-hued snack made from dried *gaplek* or cassava was already nestled in her mind.

Earlier, Yu Semi gently reminded her, "Make sure you eat the gatot first. I've already mixed it with grated coconut."

Next to her, Alun and Naryo settled in to enjoy *tiwul* from the other containers. They used teak leaves as a plate, savoring the brownish snack sprinkled with grated coconut and granulated sugar.

Layur shifted closer to Pak Kadus, who was deeply engaged in conversation with three other villagers. With quiet confidence, she shared her dreams of creating many tourist attractions in Dusun Prau and Tambaksegaran Beach.

"Beside exploration into the cave we've just entered, I am also convinced that Bukit Menara is an excellent spot for camping, Pak. At night, the view of the sky mixed with the distant roar of waves from down below would offer a kind of entertainment you simply won't find in the city," Layur suggested.

Pak Kadus raised his right thumb. "I will need to discuss it with the villagers first. This is because there's no electricity, no shelter facilities, and no *warung* here. Even for prayer, people would need a mosque and a place to perform ablution."

He's absolutely right, Layur thought . *So many things need to be prepared to make this plan a reality*.

"Pak Kadus, if you'll excuse me, may I also make a suggestion?"Naryo suddenly chimed in. "Look at the hill over there. That hill doesn't have a name yet. I'm confident it could be turned into a sports destination!"

Alun furrowed his brow. "What kind of sport, Mas? Rock climbing?"

Naryo shook his head. "Paragliding! You know, a kind of free flying sport that uses a parachute-like wing."

"But there's no airstrip here, Mas? How would you even jump?" Layur asked.

Naryo proceeded to explain: Paragliding doesn't require an airplane. The athletes will jump from the top of a hill and ride the wind currents to glide through the air.

"Is that place suitable for that kind of jump? Isn't it a bit too low, Naryo? And besides, the sea breeze could blow from any direction," said Pak Kadus, hesitating.

Naryo wasn't discouraged by Pak Kadus's pessimistic remarks. "Just let me handle it, Pak. I've got plenty of friends who are officials of FASI, Indonesian Aero Sports Federation. Let them do the measurements later!""

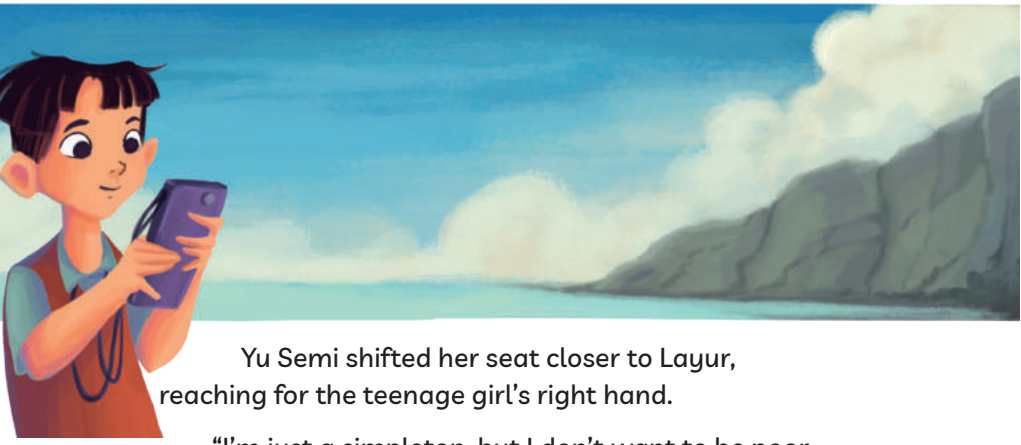
Layur lightly touched Alun's arm, earning a side-eye in return. It felt like their dream was getting close.

Layur's sweet iced tea was gone in an instant. Her face turned as red as a boiled shrimp after half a day climbing up Bukit Menara.

"You're the one being carried on the back of the bike, yet you look the most exhausted, huh, *Nduk*?" teased Yu Semi, offering Layur a pitcher full of fresh water. That afternoon, Layur and Alun had intentionally dropped into Yu Semi's *warung* for a break.

"Well, I've been only eating *gatot* and *tiwul*, Yu. That's why I get tired so easily," Layur retorted, in the same playful tone. "Unlike that kid. He eats fried chicken every day. That's why he's strong enough to carry me up and down the hill on his bike."

Alun pretended not to hear. He was busy browsing through the photos on his phone. There were almost a hundred images he had captured while circling Bukit Menara earlier. *I'll put all these pictures on Facebook tonight*, Alun thought to himself.



Yu Semi shifted her seat closer to Layur, reaching for the teenage girl's right hand.

"I'm just a simpleton, but I don't want to be poor like this until I die," Yu Semi whispered softly. "That's why, when you said in front of Pak Bupati that you'd like to build this village, I burst into tears, mbrebes mili. Your good aspirations will surely come true, Nduk. God will surely bless your intention."

Layur nodded twice. She took in the sight of the woman before her, a woman who looked older than her years. The woman who had, all these years, loved and cared for her as if she were her own mother, a mother long gone.

"Please help me with your prayers, Yu..."

"Of course, I'd also like to help by preparing *gatot* and *tiwul* again. Just let me know if you're meeting

with Pak Kadus or anyone else to discuss this plan, I'll send over some snacks for you all!"

"Usually, when someone sends over some food, there's always a catch!" Layur guessed playfully.

Yu Semi laughed heartily, ruffling Layur's hair.

"Are you thinking of building a guesthouse like Bu Narsih too, Yu Semi?"

Hey, you're teasing me. You're just messing with me, aren't you?" Yu Semi quickly retorted. "Come on, my house is just like a duck coop! That's not it!" Yu Semi shifted on her seat. She whispered something into Layur's ear. Alun got annoyed. How could they sit together like that, two of them whispering, while he was left out?

"Got it, Yu. I fully support this!" Layur shouted.

"Doesn't anyone want to tell me what this is even about?" Alun whined.

"This is a women-only matter!" Layur retorted, sticking her tongue out

Alun was serious about his plan. With swift efficiency, he created a social media account on his laptop. Regularly, he posted photos he had taken onto his homepage. At first, he barely got any visitors. Alun was nearly giving up hope until he suddenly came up with a clever idea.

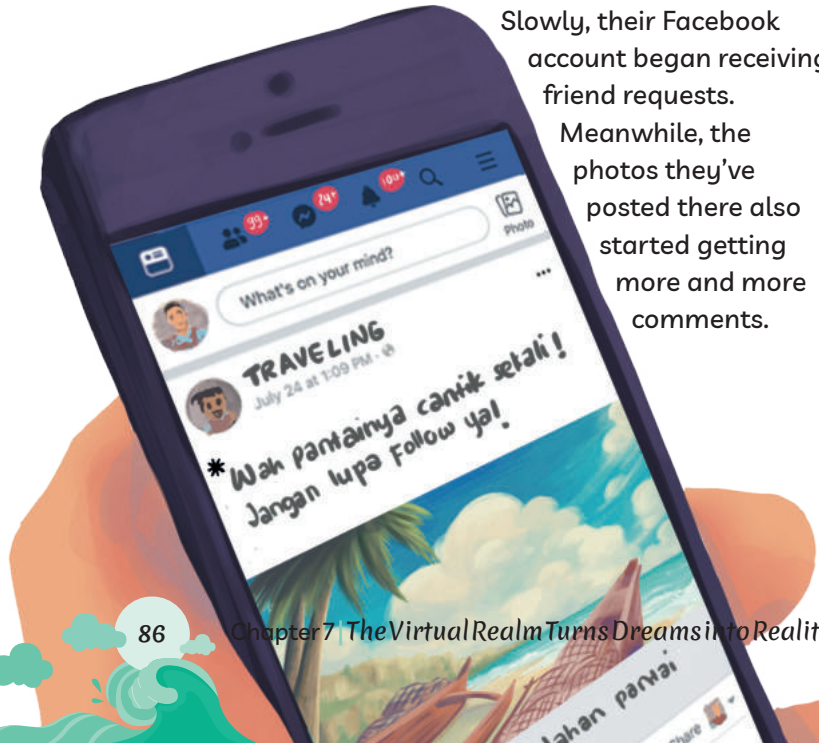
He immediately joined many Facebook groups, especially those buzzing with travel enthusiasts. There, he regularly left positive comments, carefully weaving in invitations for others to visit his account.

"Come on, you better keep teaching me how to use this laptop," Layur pleaded. "Cut the 'I'm so busy' act before I can actually use Facebook and email!"

"Should've taught not just you, but all the other laptop grantees together. That way, we can learn and get smarter as a group," said Alun, still focusing on the laptop screen.

Layur wasn't fond of the suggestion. In her view, she needed to learn it first before her other friends could use the laptop. She could teach them later, in turn.

Slowly, their Facebook account began receiving friend requests. Meanwhile, the photos they've posted there also started getting more and more comments.

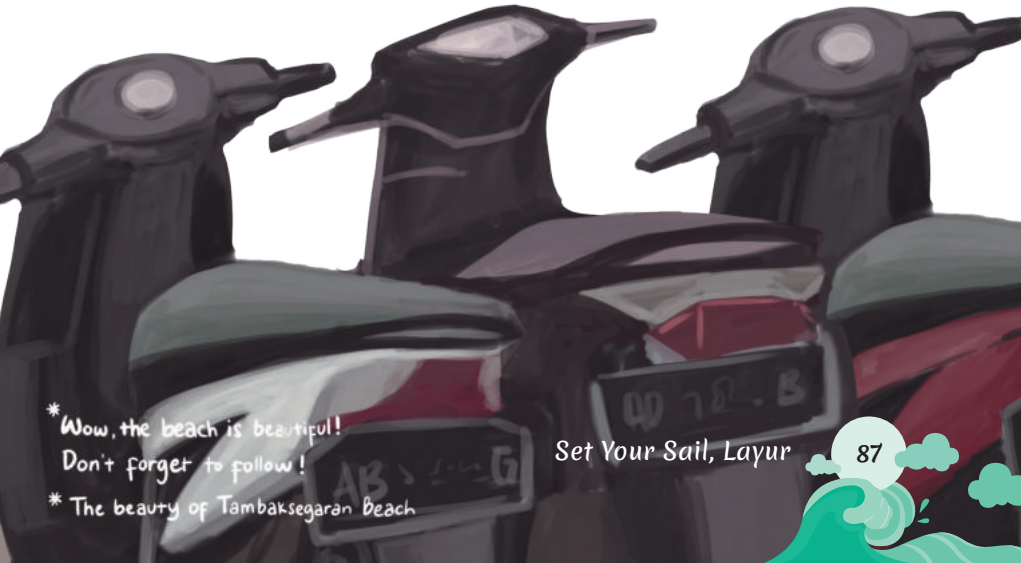


As a result, Alun and Layur needed to dedicate special time to reply to those comments. In the morning, Alun would post a photo; by the afternoon, he'd check and reply to every comment; by evening, it was Layur's turn to schedule time to visit the travel enthusiasts' group.

As days went by, slowly but surely, visitors' cars and motorcycles began lining up along the shores of Tambaksegaran Beach. Most were vehicles with local license plates.

"It's good that people are finally starting to come here, Alun," Layur said, gratefully. "It doesn't matter if they're only folks from villages around Dusun Prau. The outcome will surely reflect the hard work we've put in, won't it?" Layur encouraged Alun.

"Who would've thought, right? We can promote tourism without printing posters or shouting down the street. People come here because we share photos and videos online!" answered Alun.



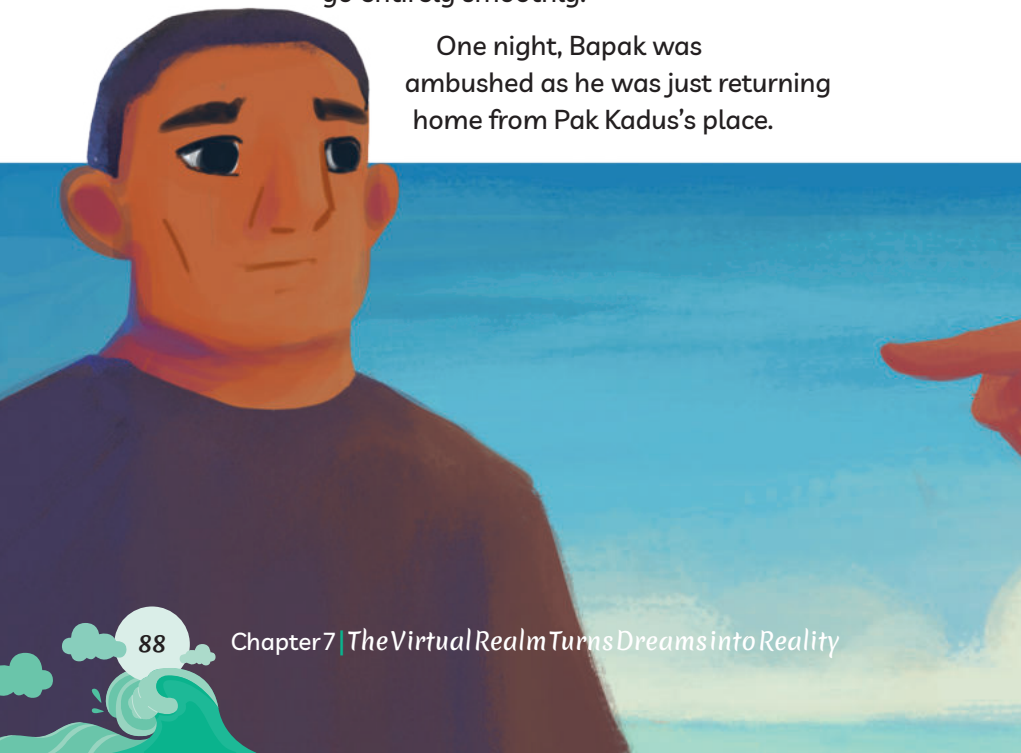
"What's the plan for tomorrow?" asked Layur, enthusiasticly.

Alun consulted his notebook. "We are going to make short video to promote cave exploration tourism. And then, we need to take photos of Bu Narsih's guesthouse. Now, this part hasn't been scheduled yet ... when should we invite our friends to practice digital skills?"

Layur wasn't responding. Is it fine if she felt that they didn't need to involve too many people yet?

Unfortunately, Layur and Alun's sincere intentions to boost their village's prosperity through tourism did not go entirely smoothly.

One night, Bapak was ambushed as he was just returning home from Pak Kadus's place.

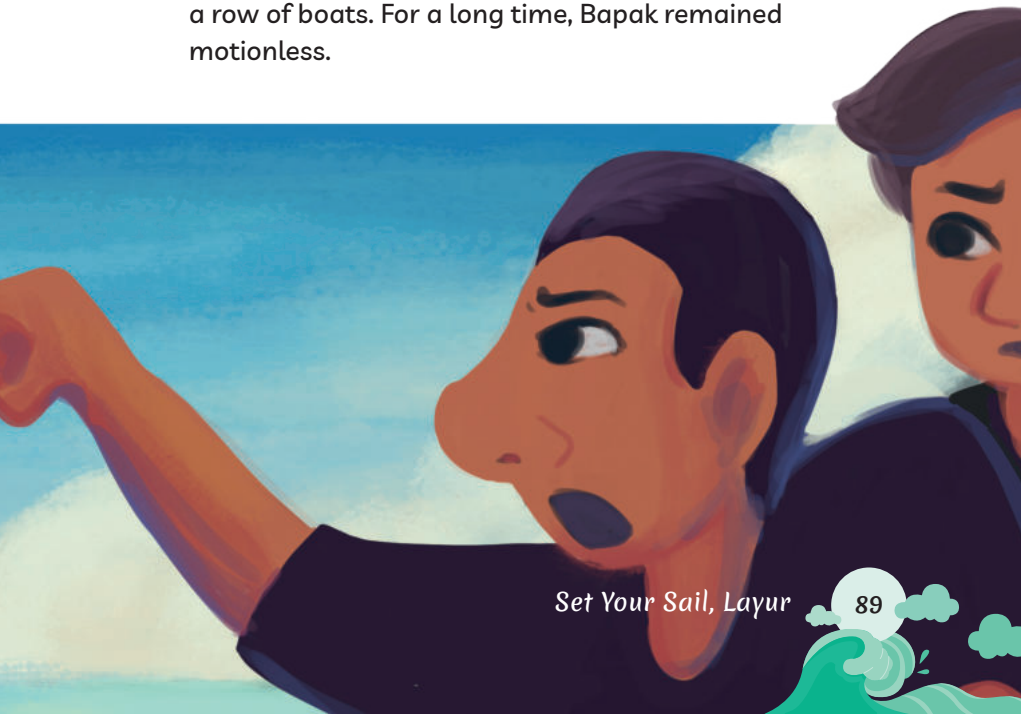


Rather than resisting, Bapak just stood frozen and bowed his head deeply. In front of him, two muscular men were pointing angrily. Their voices rose, unyielding. Layur's father couldn't bring himself to speak up.

"But you're her father. Teach your daughter to understand the rules around here. If there's any chaos later, you'll be the one held responsible!" shouted one of the thugs.

The other muscular man stepped forward, spewing threats once more. "Your debt to the boss is already sky-high. Your life means nothing without his help. Don't even dream of becoming rich again like before. You're nothing but a jobless nobody without someone to help you. So don't make the boss angry or he'll blow up."

After that, the two thugs swiftly vanished behind a row of boats. For a long time, Bapak remained motionless.



Chapter 8

Spotlight on Camera

Three months later.

"Bapak, aren't you going to accompany me for the interview?" Layur stopped her father at the front door. It was still too early in the day. Roosters still called back and forth, and the sun reluctantly showed itself.

"I must go fishing, *Nduk*. The catch has been meagre this weak. I have to go out and bring food to the table." Bapak waited patiently as Layur stepped aside. And then, the man with sun-burnt, dark skin finally stepped out of the house.

Layur followed her father's footsteps. "The reporters want to interview you, too. They want to hear how you raise me. They know you're a single parent."

Bapak did not speak a word. He reached for his net and caping hat that hung on the eaves of the roof.

"Will you be coming back this afternoon, Pak? I might still be outside until dusk or even night." Her tone was flat. Disappointed.

Bapak nodded.

Bapak walked barefoot along the wet sandy beach. His old rubber-tire sandals dangled from his hand. The net slung over his left shoulder. His head was bowed, half-covered by his caping. It had been a month that Layur had forgotten, again and again, to pack food for her father to take out to sea. Luckily, Kang Wasis, Bapak's fishing partner, knew about it and brought extra provisions.

Layur was hardly ever at home these days. Sometimes, she'd already be outside before the sky was fully bright. She was busy with Alun, going here and there to take photos and plan the village tourism project. Even after school, Layur remained caught up in her work, still busy until after dusk.

"If you're heading out to sea, don't scrunch up your face like that, Kang. The guardian of the sea will turn us away," teased Kang Wasis. They placed the net and oar in the boat and propelled it forward until it seamlessly blended with the sea.

"Does my face look unhappy, Kang?" Bapak tried to smile.

"Compared to when you play kendang, this face is definitely uglier, hahaha!"

Bapak managed to smile. His mouth tasted bitter, not only because there was no coffee on the table, but also because Kang Wasis's words were true.

"Arguing with your daughter again, huh, Kang?" Kang Wasis guessed.

Bapak glanced over. "She isn't a little girl anymore, Kang. Always demands more. Acting all smart, like she's got it all figured out."

Kang Wasis patted Father on the back. "Shh... don't talk like that about your daughter. She is indeed smart. The brightest in the whole village. You should be proud. After all, we're all from the not-too-smart generation, aren't we? Eh, *nyuwun sewu*, my apologies, Kang," Kang Wasis joked.

Bapak let out a long sigh. "I'm worried. My daughter has lost her way. She's strayed off her course. Her intelligence, instead of lighting the way, is ruining the life we've lived as fishermen, passed down from our ancestors."

"God forbid, Kang. Don't think ill of your daughter. If we can't keep up with them, at least we can push them to move forward. Well, come on, it's time to push the boat!" replied Kang Wasis.

"You are late!" Alun looked annoyed. Several television crews had already been waiting for Layur impatiently. That morning, they had planned to capture the tranquil

morning atmosphere in Dusun Prau. But even a moment's delay could cause the beautiful glow of the morning light to fade away.

With her agility, Layur performed several scenes requested by the travel-show's crew. She took a few steps using her crutches, with Bukit Menara in the background and the morning sun casting golden-red hues, while a thin veil of mist softly blurred the view.

"Okay ... take two! One more time. Please take three more steps forward, and then greet the *peyek jingking* vendor right away. Ready?" the show producer called out. "Action!"

Layur's hair fluttered, casting a striking silhouette. The camera glides smoothly around Layur from the front, rotating seamlessly as it captures the tender moment between the girl and Yu Semi, who was asked to pose while carrying a tenggok, a woven bamboo basket. From a distance, Alun was captivated by the scene, to the point that he forgot his promise to take as many photos as possible that morning.

"Shh, it's time to go to school," Yu Semi whispered to the girl beside her. The shooting had just wrapped up. "Have Alun take you there on his bike. I don't want you to be late."

Layur nodded twice. For some reason, she felt even more delighted about being carried on the back of the bike by his male friend.

"Just change into your uniform at school. Don't forget to wash your face first." Yu Semi paused and studied Layur's face with an intense stare. "You had another fight with your dad again, didn't you?"

Layur decided to change the subject. "Yu, don't forget, after this, they're going to shoot again at your *warung*. They want to document how you make fried grasshoppers!"

Layur headed towards Alun's bike, leaving Yu Sem, who shook her head. In the distance, rows of tourist cars lined the shore, and with each passing day, the sea of visitors to Tambaksegaran Beach kept growing.

Saturday, 10:05

"No need to help me, I can sit down by myself!" Layur brushed off Alun's hand as he tried to help her onto the stool. With great difficulty, she gripped the house post and managed to sit down. Reaching for a knife and a piece of cassava, her hands moved with skilled ease, peeling, slicing, and tossing the pieces

carelessly onto the floor. Two other village women worked just as quickly, making dried cassava known as *gaplek*.

"Hey, are you filming me?" Layur glared. She didn't like it when Alun recorded her, especially without her knowledge.

Alun grinned mischievously. "I'm making content about how the villagers make *gaplek*. Not bad at all, our YouTube videos are getting tons of views." He then asked the two women to arrange the cassava slices onto the trays and to act out placing them on the roof tiles. It would take about seven to ten days for the cassava to dry completely and be ready to be processed into *gaplek* or *tiwul*.

"You said many people also hate our content on Facebook, didn't you?" Layur asked, her voice tinged with worry.

"They are called haters, Layur. People who go on social media just to stir up trouble for attention."

"You shouldn't just stay silent. Especially when they're bad-mouthing our village," added Layur.

Alun pulled up a chair and sat next to her friend. He opened the Facebook app on his phone and showed it to Layur.

"This is what their negative comments look like. Read them yourself."

Layur quickly scanned the comments under each of the photos Alun had posted on Facebook. Most were positive, praising the quality of the shots. Many Facebook visitors even asked for the location of each photo. Yet amid the praises, a few insults stood out.

Layur was furious. "You should block people like this. Or give them a proper scolding so they learn their

lesson and stop blabbering nonsense. How can they call our beach barren and dirty? Have they ever been here?" Layur snapped.

"Take it easy, Layur. That's just how social media is. How can you be sure that their profile picture is real? Is their name even genuine? Probably not. Getting worked up over it won't change a thing," Alun responded calmly.

"Don't be so soft!" Layur snapped. "Random comments like that could be detrimental to us. It'll make people think, 'Maybe Tambaksegaran Beach really is dirty!'"

Alun took two glasses of water. He held one for himself and offered the other to Layur.

"I think you need a drink," Alun joked. Layur pouted, but accepted the glass anyway and downed half of it. Refreshing ice-cold water!

"What are our purposes in posting photos on Facebook, anyway? To attract attention and build a positive image of our village tourism, right?" Alun asked.

Layur retorted, "For sure. Are there even any other purposes?"

Alun was pleased that Layur was now thinking logically, and no longer emotional. "Think about it. What if we argue with someone who writes the

comments? They attack us and we fire back with anger. Is that nice? Wouldn't that just leave a bad impression on the other page's visitors?"

Layur nodded twice. "Yeah, you're right. Why should we entertain them?"

"Yeah, that's a smart move. Just respond casually. Say thank you and hit enter. Done. Or throw in a joke. Personally, instead of clarifying with a reply to negative comments, I'd rather create new content to explain it. Like that gaplek video I made earlier."

Layur was suspicious. "The video of me cutting up cassava?"

Alun nodded. "Yesterday, someone was bad-mouthing our local food. He mocked tiwul and gaplek as trash, fit for animal feed. Well, instead of getting upset, I'd rather have made a cool video. Let him know that gaplek is for beautiful people too. Like you."

"Aluuuun!"

Sunday, 16:00

Trrr ... trrr...! Alun's phone vibrated. He quickly turned off the video recording, removed the phone from its tripod stand, and answered the call.

"Oh, okay.... How many buses? Got it. We'll have it ready. Okay, Ma'am. Okay.... Thank you." Alun hung up the phone and turned to Layur, his eyes sparkling. "Yesss!!!!"

Layur was stunned, trying to figure out what great news her friend had just heard. That afternoon, Alun was teaching Layur how to create a Facebook account.

Alun couldn't wait to tell Layur what had just been said on the phone.

"The tour group from Jakarta is on their way! Yes! Yes! Three more buses." Alun jumped up and down with joy. Layur also couldn't contain her excitement. She screamed in delight, over and over again.

For the first time, a whole group came just to visit Tambaksegaran Beach. Alun, Layur, Pak Kadus, and Mas Naryo had worked tirelessly together to turn Dusun Prau into a tourism village, and every bit of effort was worth it.

"Are they going to stay in Yogyakarta or, as planned, stay at a local's house?" Layur asked curiously.

"They asked me to send pictures of the cottages here. They want to make sure the bathrooms, bedrooms, kitchens, and everything are clean and tidy," said Alun.

Layur grabbed her crutches and stood up. “Don’t worry about that. There are six houses here, all ready to welcome them.”

Alun stared at Layur’s face seriously. “Layur, don’t handle this alone. Always leave big matters to Pak Kadus and Mas Naryo.”

Layur hated being told what to do. “I already said, don’t worry!”

Alun was not satisfied with Layur’s response. “You haven’t involved our friends either, have you? There’s Vani, Basri, Petrus, Wawan, and several others. They can help us prepare a lot of things.”

Layur pretended not to hear.

““Oh, by the way, Layur. I just got a report from Mas Naryo. He mentioned that many of the tubes for river tubing were leaking. He still doesn’t have a clue about what’s behind it,” Alun said.

“Those tubes have been out on the river for two months,” Layur said quickly. “They bump into rocks every time they cruise. Of course they’re wearing down. And they’re secondhand to begin with. Just tell Mas Naryo to get a few spares.”

Layur walked slowly. The night had settled in, engulfing the evening. Out of the five grilled fish stalls that were open every day, only one still had its lights on. A group in two cars was having dinner there, likely the last customers of the night.

"Still out here, Layur?" a voice called out suddenly. She turned around and saw Basri.

"Hey, are you just back from the mosque?" Layur replied.

Basri nodded. Layur's friend had taught village children to read the Quran every evening. He was good at carrying himself and naturally in command at the mosque. Alun had long suggested Layur bring Basri in, especially since he'd also recently got a laptop. "Later," Layur replied. That's always the answer.

"Our village's really bustling now, Layur. You're amazing. If you need any help, don't hesitate to ask. Maybe I can help you lift a bench or run a cable," Basri joked, waving as he continued walking home

Indeed, as if by magic, the village that once fell silent after dusk now felt the nights pass too quickly. That's because after the sunlight fades the economic activity is still bustling. The camping ground at Bukit Menara began to welcome groups of tourists and families from the city.

A significant number of fishermen have stopped going to the sea altogether. They shifted into new livelihoods, such as running diners, offering accommodations, working as parking attendants, or renting out *andong* for beach tours. Some others are trying their luck by selling T-shirts and souvenirs supplied by entrepreneurs from Yogyakarta. In fact, only the elderly still persist in fishing. Meanwhile, the younger people in Dusun Prau prefer earning money on the sand and along the riverbanks, but not out on the open sea.

Layur felt deep gratitude, knowing that soon, the largest group of visitors ever to come would arrive by bus in Dusun Prau. For her, the true peak of success was when not just motorcycles and cars, but long lines of buses began pulling into the village.

Layur turned toward the beach. She saw her father's boat already there, nestled between several other boats.

Bapak must be home, Layur thought to herself. *I should have prepared dinner for him, and provisions for tomorrow's fishing trip*. Layur quickened the swing of her crutches.

Chapter 9

The Enemy Draws Closer

"Don't rub it. Just pat it gently with a handkerchief, so the powder won't smear!" Yu Semi was fussing over Layur's face, dabbing the girl's sweat using a handkerchief. The makeup Layur wore that day made her look more stunning than usual.

"Are the kids ready to dance?" Layur asked anxiously.

Alun put his thumbs up. "It's all set! Everyone's dressed up and carrying their *jaran kepang*. Only Azam has been peeing a lot. He's nervous."

Layur gave a faint smile. Her spirit was high that day. When asked to welcome the group of tourists from Jakarta, half the villagers rallied behind her. They'd been sweeping the streets and tidying their yards since dawn, especially the six homes set aside for the guesthouses.

Ten elementary school-aged children, dressed in traditional costumes with painted mustaches, each held a jaran kepang in their hands. *Jaran kepang* is a traditional mock-horse dance from Dusun Prau. Meanwhile, several mothers were preparing iced coconut water, drizzled with tantalizing red syrup.

"Make sure your camera and phone are charged!" Layur vented her frustration at Alun. "Don't let what happened last week happen again. You ran out of battery and need to recharge after just a minute of taking pictures!"

Alun responded with a crisp laugh, giving two thumbs up.

"Don't forget to ask the kids for a photo session first, Alun. Before their faces turn red and sweaty like boiled crabs!" Layur called out.

"Consider it done!"

Done? Thankfully, everything was taken care of. Yu Semi was Layur's go-to person for the guests' meals. She had meticulously prepared every meal from breakfast and lunch, to dinner and snacks. She was even highly effective at organizing the welcoming dance performance.

"Won't you be able to play the *kendang* tomorrow, Pak?"

Layur thought drifted back to the conversation with her father the previous afternoon.

"I'm sorry, *Nduk*. I have to go fishing."

"But it would be wonderful if there was music to welcome the guests when they step off the bus," Layur reasoned, swallowing her disappointment.

Bapak shook his head. Layur turned away in irritation.

Thankfully, Yu Semi acted fast, gathering a group of children to perform the *jaran kepang* dance.

"Don't be disappointed, Layur. Let's just go with the children's dance. It'll be just as lively," Yu Semi reassured her. Though, in truth, Yu Semi was also hoping to dance to the rhythm of Bapak's kendang.

"That won't be as good, Yu. Why use recorded music?" Layur complained.

"It's okay. It's better than having no music at all."

Layur snapped out of her reverie when Mas Naryo shouted, waving his arms high. "The guests are here! The bus is in sight. Let's get ready!"

At the distance, dust billowed in a swirling cloud, and then, a convoy of three luxurious blue buses emerged, inching toward the outskirts of Dusun Prau.

"Oh, they must be rich," Mas Naryo whispered, nudging Alun.

Alun nodded twice. "They're the bosses of an oil company."

"Pertamina?"

"No, a foreign company!"

Mas Naryo clicked his tongue several times.

"The internet is surely crazy, huh? People believe things just from the photos and videos we send," commented Mas Naryo.

"Don't think too hard about it, Mas. Hurry up and help those young men organize the bus parking. They're still inexperienced, usually just handling bicycle parking," said Alun.

Gamelan music, played on cassette tapes and loudspeakers, echoed loudly as tourists stepped down from the buses. One by one, their faces lit up with

bright smiles. Nearly everyone pulled their cameras and phones out to capture the children's energetic dancing. A few foreign faces were also spotted among the guests.

Hook yaaa! Hok yaa!

Some tourists even danced along without hesitation, sparking more festivities as the largest ever crowd of visitors arrived in Dusun Prau. The welcoming ceremony proceeded smoothly.

"Monggo, Bapak and Ibu, please try some iced coconut water. We've prepared a refreshing treat to cool you down," Layur said with a warm smile.

Yu Semi and several women from Dukun Prau escorted the tourists to bamboo-walled stalls along Tambaksegaran Beach. They served iced coconut water, *cenil*, and *jenang sumsum*, a tempting menu that kept the guests constantly aiming their cameras to capture the unique dishes.

Pak Kadus seized the opportunity to showcase the rich scenic spots around Tambaksegaran Beach. Layur was standing beside him, occasionally translating his speech into English for the visitors.

"You stay close, okay. Help me should anyone ask me in English," said Pak Kadus. Layur felt deeply honored to have the chance to use a foreign language.

As the plans seemed to be unfolding smoothly, Layur asked Alun to go with her to inspect the accommodation prepared by the villagers.

"Give me a ride to Bu Narsih's house. I want to check if her house is ready," Layur asked.

Alun grabbed his bike at once and took Layur to Bu Narsih's house.

It turned out that only Dini, who was hired part-time by Bu Narsih to help her run the guesthouse, was waiting at home.

"Why didn't Bu Narsih keep watch here?" Layur snapped. There was a flash of disappointment spilled out spontaneously in her voice.

"I already explained. She went out for a moment to get cloves and betel leaves. You were the one who told her to put them in the rooms to keep the ants away," Dini said, refusing to let Bu Narsih be blamed. "Mas Naryo also checked here earlier. He said that everything is safe and sound."

Then, Layur went to inspect the bathroom, living room, kitchen, and bedrooms in Bu Narsih's house. She was relieved. Everything looked orderly and spotless.

"Thanks, Dini, you're gorgeous. I'm moving to the guesthouses next door. Don't pout like that. It'll scare the guests away,"Layur joked as she said goodbye. She still had five more inns to inspect.

Dini looked away, scoffing. She hated how pretentious Layur could be, all bossy like that.

Layur could finally unwind only after dusk, when the visitors entered the guesthouses to clean themselves. She hadn't returned home yet, having chosen to rest at Warung Yu Semi. She watched as the warung owner approached from afar, a bundle of banana leaves cradled in her arms.

"Are the leaves used to make *pincuk*?" Layur asked.

"Yes, a substitute for plates. Tomorrow's menu is gudangan and urap vegetables. A healthy breakfast with leafy greens. I hope the guests like it," said Yu Semi.

"Hopefully, Yu. The dancing kids were so happy too. The tourists gave them money," Layur said.

"Wow, why didn't I get any?" Yu Semi said, feigning a pout.

"But you were given a sweet smile by the foreigner!" Layur teased, and Yu Semi erupted into laughter.

"By the way, why is your father nowhere to be seen? He should be welcoming and entertaining the guests. Instead, he's out there working. That's odd. He's just abandoning them like that," Yu Semi commented, muttering.

Layur nudged the woman next to her.

"Why are you asking more and more often about my father? Why, Yu?"

Yu Semi looked away, but Layur had already seen it, the flush on her cheeks. "It's not what you think. I never expected him to just walk away like that."

Layur sighed inwardly. Bapak was indeed the most heartless man to ever disappoint her.

"*Ciloko*! What a disaster!" Suddenly, Pak Kadus appeared in front of them. Face clouded with worry, he was upset.

"What is it, Pak?" Yu Semi asked, her voice rising in panic. Layur was also curious.

"A centipede. There's a centipede on the guest bed. They shrieked, convinced it was a scorpion."

That can't be right, I double-checked it myself after Mas Naryo had already gone over everything, Layur thought.

"I already told Naryo to make sure every room was spotless, including the toilets. Not even an ant was supposed to be there!" Yu Semi retorted angrily.

"Naryo was certain all the guesthouses were clean. That's so strange. How could there be centipedes in three huts?"

"Three?!" Layur and Yu Semi shouted in unison

"What about the guests?" Layur asked, her voice growing anxious.

"They're still waiting on the veranda and in front of the house. Many of them want to move to a hotel in Yogyakarta. But they're being persuaded to stay," said Pak Kadus, frantically.

Layur was equally on edge.

The sun rose over the eastern edge of Tambaksegaran Beach. Rows of *andong*, a horse-drawn carriage, stood in neat formation, waiting for guests to climb aboard, their faces bright with joy. The colorful tassels on the horses' heads fluttered as the beasts glided effortlessly across the sand. Some tourists chose to just ride the horses and ditch the *andong*. Alun was everywhere, frantically snapping photos and clips, to share the excitement on his social media.

Fortunately, all the guests remained at Dusun Prau, none insisting on changing hotels. The group leader's firm persuasion, and the reassurance that every room had been thoroughly cleaned, gradually eased the tourists' lingering fears. To top it off, an endless stream of delicious snacks flowed throughout the night, mirroring the host's boundless hospitality.

"Mas Naryo, are all preparations in the cave going well?" Layur asked, double-checking. The young man appointed as the cave exploration manager gave a thumbs up. He had personally checked every float and ensured they were fully inflated. In addition, cloth flags had been strung along the riverbank to mark the route. Naryo's crew had been stationed at the cave entrance since dawn.

"The prayer room is also ready for use. There's plenty of water available for ablutions and cleansing after the river exploration. Kang Wasis lent us a pump," said Naryo.

"Great job, Mas. Also, make sure you've got enough drinks for the three busloads of guests. You know how hot it gets here!" Layur replied.

"Hey, why do you look sleepy?" Mas Naryo inquired.

Layur forced a smile. "Yes, Mas. Last night I was so dizzy and nervous thinking about the guests' rooms that I couldn't sleep. I kept worrying there might be another animal that could startle them. Luckily, no one reported anything strange until this morning."

"Hey, Layur, want to come with me to the cave? I'm heading in shortly to check things out while the guests are having breakfast," Mas Naryo asked.

Layur lit up. Of course she wanted to go. She'd rather ride on Mas Naryo's motorbike than going on a bike with Alun.

Trrrr ... trrr!

Naryo's phone vibrated. He quickly picked it up and spoke seriously. Almost tense. His voice betrayed urgency, rising in pitch as he spoke repeatedly. Layur froze, sensing something was wrong.

"There's a snake in front of the cave!" Naryo whispered to Layur, his face tense.

"Didn't you say it was safe, Mas?" Layur couldn't understand.

"I don't understand either. We've been cleaning the area for a week now. Strangely, the snake my men caught was a paddy snake. That's not the kind of snake you'd expect to find on limestone hills."

"Let's go there quickly, Mas. Let's go!"

Yesterday there were centipedes in the inn, and now there are snakes around the cave. What in the world is going on?

Chapter 10
Crumbling

Naryo's motorcycle rocked as it climbed Bukit Menara. Layur waved at two men in hard hats walking along the road. They were employees of PT Tower Nasional, faces now familiar to Layur. Layur had no trouble asking many questions about the virtual world to them, something she was hesitant to ask Alun.

Naryo braked the motorcycle precisely in front of the cave. Though his heart raced, he brought it to a stop as gently as possible.

"Wait ... don't get off yet." Naryo quickly gripped the handlebars and spread his legs wide as he stood. He anchored the motorcycle to the earth, to make it immovable, just so Layur wouldn't fall.

"I've gotten off the back of a motorcycle hundreds of times, you know." Layur punched Naryo on the back.

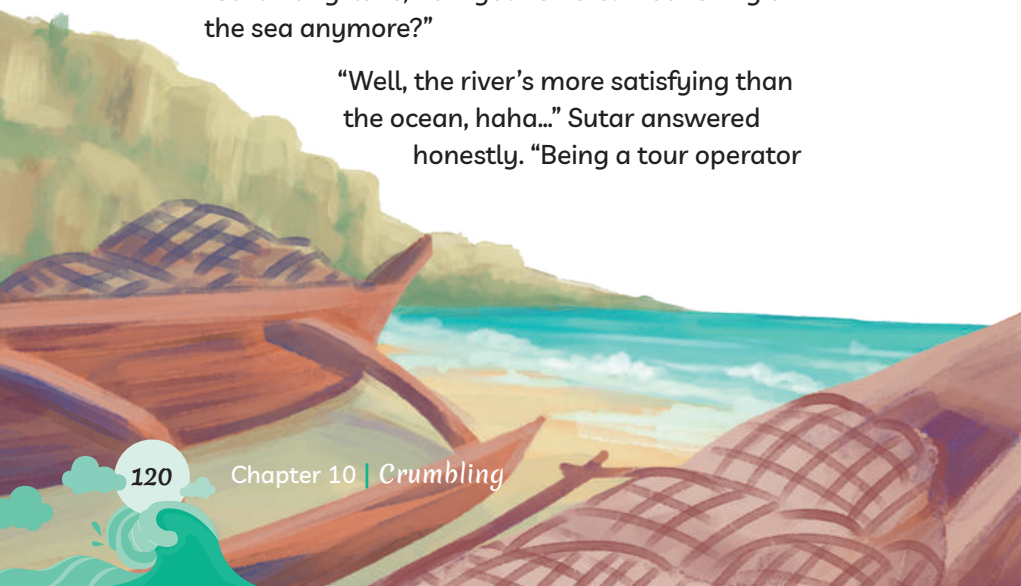
Layur got off easily. Two young river tubing operators reached out, guiding her to her feet with her crutches.

"*Matur nuwun*, thanks, Mas." Layur shared a smile with the two young men from her village. "Wait a minute... you're Sutar, aren't you?"

The young man with curly hair chuckled softly. "Yeah. I used to go fishing with your father back then."

"Saiki nang kene, now you're here? Not fishing on the sea anymore?"

"Well, the river's more satisfying than the ocean, haha..." Sutar answered honestly. "Being a tour operator



here is just ... better. More stable. I get food, get to cool off in the cave, and never get battered by waves. And on top of that, I get a decent fee from Mas Naryo!"

Layur glanced at Naryo, as if seeking confirmation. Naryo nodded, then gave her two thumbs-ups.

"Back then, guys like Sutar were just drifting without purpose. Sometimes they'd be called to go fishing, but mostly they'd just idle around on the shore. And even if they did go out to sea, how much money could they really make?" said Naryo. "Now? They earn a million rupiah a month. And if you add in tips from tourists? They can double that."

Layur frowned. "Are there many boats just sitting idle?"

Naryo shrugged, but quickly answered. "Tourists prefer river tubing like this one. They also enjoyed eating grilled fish and horseback riding along the coast. After all, this is the Southern Sea.

How would any tourist risk their life on a boat with such high waves?"

Layur stepped beside Naryo. She was both surprised and deeply impressed. Naryo and his crew had transformed the cave's surroundings into a serene and shaded space. Several bamboo huts, their roofs thatched with coconut leaves, surrounded the entrance. Guests could stash their belongings here before plunging into the cool river. A rinsing area stood nearby, its walls woven from strong, flexible bamboo. Everything should have been ready. Yes. It should have been.

"We've secured the snake, Mas," said one of the young men named Anung.

"Make sure there aren't any other dangerous animals!" Naryo instructed.

"*Nggih*, Mas, got it. Shouldn't be any problem unless someone deliberately disturbs us!"

Naryo was taken aback. *Is someone actually doing this on purpose? Could it possibly be?*

Layur quickly stepped in. "Oh, don't think about negative things."

Two hours later, the group of tourists gradually arrived at the river tubing site. Four young women swiftly prepared cold *dawet* with palm sugar for the guests. Couldn't get enough of the sweet dessert with topping of jackfruit slices and fragrant aroma of pandan leaves, the tourists couldn't get enough and kept asking for more.

"Can we have more, Mbak?" they cooed.

"Of course, Bu. Monggo," came the sincere warm reply.

Naryo and his team quickly explained safety procedures for the river tubing. While it's relatively safe, underground rivers are nothing like those on the surface. There are several things to be wary of: sudden rapids with powerful currents, sharp bends, and sections where even sunlight struggles to reach.

"However, Bapak and Ibu, there's no need to worry. Please enjoy the natural wonder of Dusun Prau. Our team is already stationed at several points along the riverbank," Naryo explained in detail.

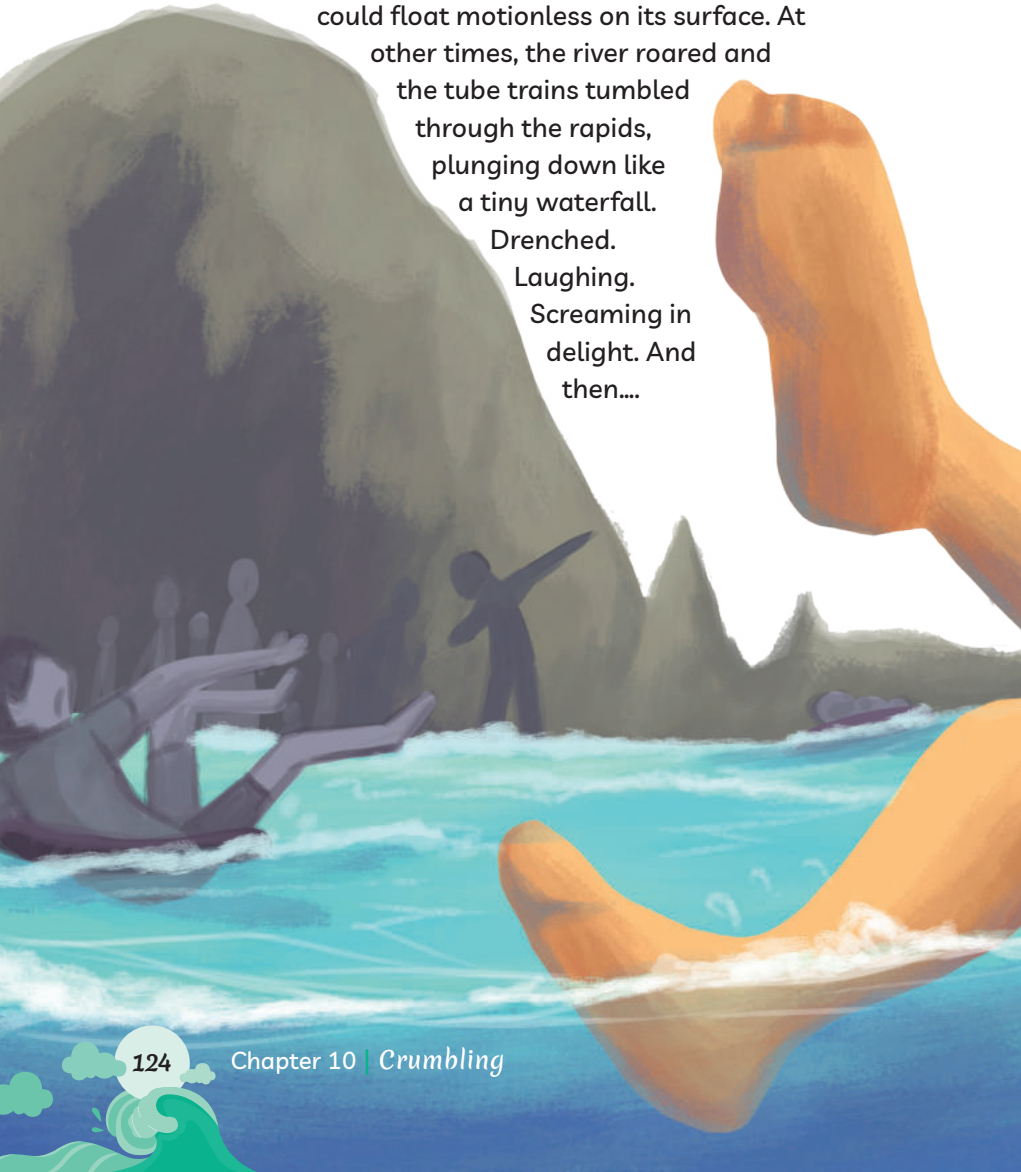
Next, the tour operator team led the tourists through the damp floor of the cave. Orange life jackets were handed out to each guest. Almost all were brand new, just like the tour coordinator had requested.

The sound of splashing water echoed through the limestone cave walls. The tourists loved the cool rush of water against their bare feet as they stepped over the knee-deep riverbed. And then, they were guided into a half-reclined position on a massive black float, wide enough to comfortably fit an adult.

"Wow!!! My back is cold and wet! *Anyep*! Hahaha..." shouted one of the middle-aged tourists. His friends teased him by splashing him with water. So much fun! Their screams and shouts of joy filled Layur's heart with pride. She was so proud and confident that all her plans would be even more successful.

"Alright, Bapak and Ibu.... Let's ride the rubber tube train through the underground river! Ready to get soaked through!!!" With smooth, confident guidance,

Naryo directed the tourists to float in line, one after another. Every eight rubber tires were released in turn, forming a steady procession, like a train. *Splash! Splash!* The flats zoomed across the underground river. Sometimes the water was so still, even a tiny twig could float motionless on its surface. At other times, the river roared and the tube trains tumbled through the rapids, plunging down like a tiny waterfall. Drenched. Laughing. Screaming in delight. And then....



"Arghhh ... heeelp!"

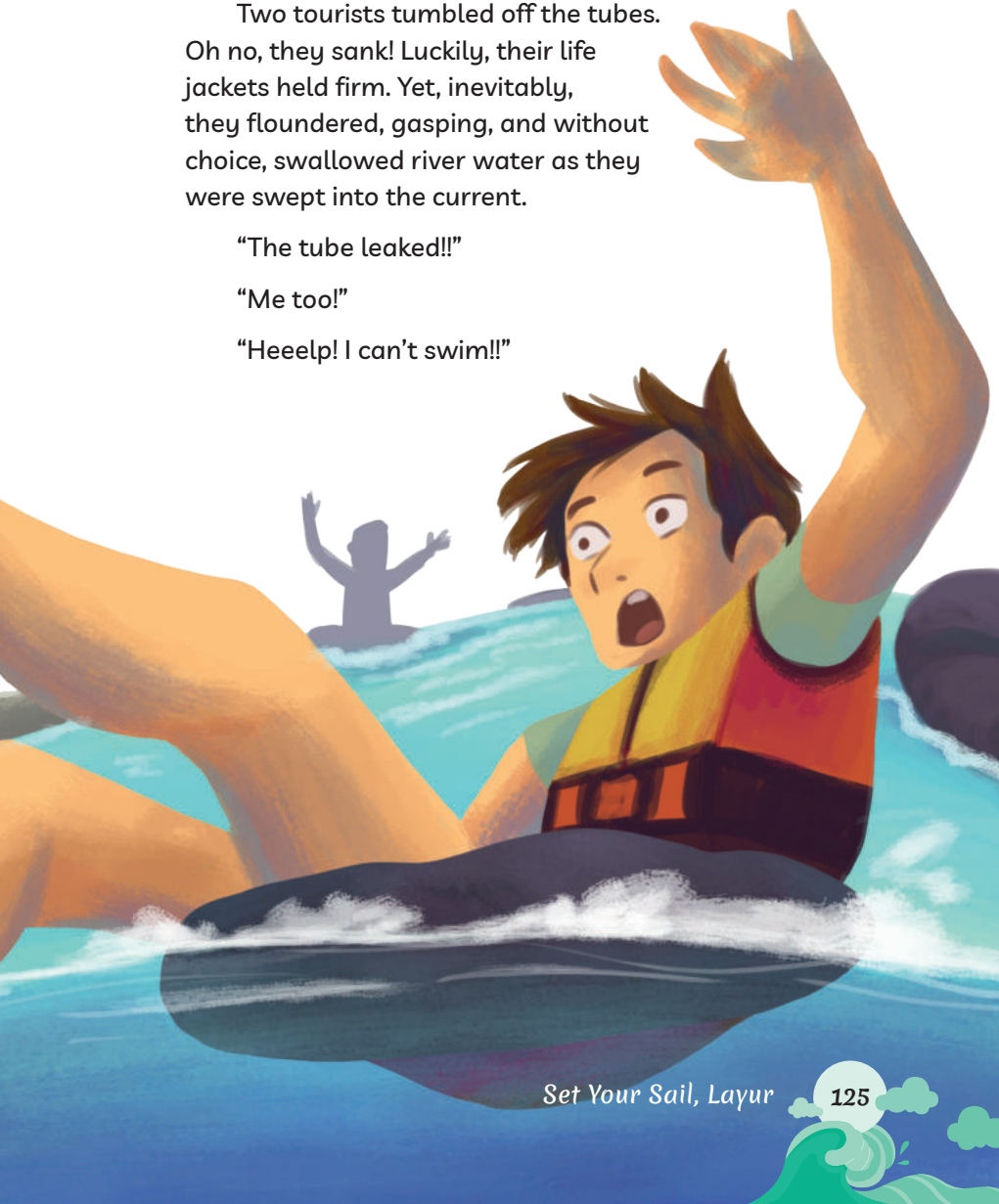
Splash! Splash!

Two tourists tumbled off the tubes. Oh no, they sank! Luckily, their life jackets held firm. Yet, inevitably, they floundered, gasping, and without choice, swallowed river water as they were swept into the current.

"The tube leaked!!"

"Me too!"

"Heeelp! I can't swim!!"



The dim atmosphere within the cave amplified the panic among the river tubing participants. Some tourists, feeling their tubes sink deeper into the current, struggled to stand and climb out. A few succeeded. Others were shocked to discover the river had already reached chest-deep. The tubes smashed together at the roaring edge of the rapid. Many elderly tourists gasped for air, waving their hands helplessly for help. Their faces pale, drenched from hair to skin, as the river rapids surged over them. Many of them were weeping.

"Quick, help them!!" one of the tourists shouted at Naryo's crew. In vain, the ten young guides tried to help—but they were no match for the group of tourists from three buses. Panic! Chaos!

Thud!

The last bundle of firewood had been placed in the centre of the field. At seven, a bonfire ceremony at the summit and a fish-grilling feast were scheduled to begin. A large tent was set up upright, each pole crowned with bright lamps. Pandan mats were laid out facing the open sea.

Layur turned around. A firm hand settled on her shoulder.

"Bapak?" In a mix of surprise and joy, the girl wrapped her arm around her sole remaining parent.

"You said this morning you were going out to sea for two days."

Bapak chose to remain silent. He canceled his trip to sea that day, his instincts told him that something bad was going to happen to his daughter.

"I heard from Pak Kadus that the police have sealed off the cave exploration site..."

Layur confirmed with a weak nod.

"I also heard that some tourists had to be taken to the hospital?"

Layur nodded again.

"Well, hopefully they only had minor injuries. They may be traumatized and need supplemental oxygen after being in the river. They need a day's rest in a quieter place."

Bapak decided not to share more detail, careful not to make Layur cry. In fact, the night's event had been cancelled since the incident when the tourists tumbled into the river. Through hard work and negotiation, Bapak and Pak Kadus pleaded for permission to hold the evening gathering. Finally, the bonfire was allowed, but only under police supervision. Several undercover officers in civilian clothing were stationed around the beach.

"I'm sad, Pak. I've put so many people in the hospital."

Bapak stroked his daughter's head.

"Just help the ladies over there season the fish, will you? Go ahead, *Nduk*."

Layur moved away, but her steps were slower than usual. She walked as if carrying a heavy burden within her. Bapak sighed. *I'm worried you'll be disappointed, Nduk.*

The feast by the sea was still festive, even though attended by only a third of the group. The rest of the tourists were either waiting for their friends at the hospital or chilling out at the guesthouse.

"Why won't you play the gamelan, Kang?" Pak Kadus suddenly appeared behind Bapak."

"There's Mas Sutar playing the rebab already," Bapak said, pointing to the traditional stringed instrument player, who was sitting cross-legged. "His delicate strings are heartbreaking. Look, the tourists are continuously taking his picture."

"Let's just stay here. Help the police officer keep an eye on this place," Bapak whispered. Pak Kadus nodded. He knew exactly where the plainclothes officers were positioned. Some were pretending to be parking attendants, some were selling ronde, and some were even pretending to be a newlywed couple sitting intimately on the beach.

"*Insyaallah*, it'll be safe, Kang," said Pak Kadus, handing him a plate of *mendoan*. Bapak took one enthusiastically. It should be safe.

"But I'm also nervous. Our village has never had this many guests from Jakarta. I worry the beds won't match their comfort, the food won't please their palate. We can only offer them traditional snacks," Bapak said.

"They're tourists, Kang. They're looking for all sorts of unique things. Sleeping with air conditioning and eating fancy meats is what they do everyday," Pak Kadus joked. "Anyway, I'll go there first, okay. Blend in with the guests."

The village's young men and women were busy serving appetizers of ginger tea and *ronde*. Various snacks from *timus*, roasted corn, and fried cassava, were laid out on each mat. The guests chatted while gazing out at the vast ocean, its horizon shrouded by a dark sky.

"This is called balok," Pak Kadus said, pointing to the food on the plates in front of them.

"So, are we eating wood, Pak?" a guest with graying hair joked.

"Now, that one is called manggleng. It's made from cassava, just like the others."

"In my area, this is called balung kethek!" replied a woman beside Pak Kadus.

"*Inggih leres*, you're correct, Bu. In Solo, this snack is called *balung kethek* but that's chunkier and firmer than this one," said Pak Kadus.

Baaang! Kabooom!

Suddenly, a loud explosion was heard from behind the guests who were sitting cross-legged. Their eyes snapped wide as fire erupted from the fish grill. The flames quickly licked the sky. The mothers and teenagers who were busy grilling the fish scattered away, screaming in horror.

"Quick, put out the fire!" Pak Kadus shouted, unable to hide his panic. The flames began to spread through thatched shelter of dried coconut leaves.

Bapak immediately grabbed a nearby jerrycan filled with water. It had been left for the guests to wash their hands after enjoying the grilled fish.

In a flash, Bapak unscrewed the lid of the jerrycan and poured its entire contents with all his might onto the roaring flames. But....

Booom!! Kabooom!!

The fire raged furiously. Within seconds, the shelter was completely consumed. It engulfed Yu Semi's warung, then another warung next to it ... and continued its unstoppable spread, fanned by the strong night wind. It caught the sails of moored boats! One! Two! Three! Up to five fishing boats ignited in seconds.

Bapak was shaken. His hands trembled. The jerrycan slipped down from his grip. There was a strange smell.

"Hey!! Who deliberately replaced the water in this jerrycan with kerosene?"

POLISI
*DILARANG MELINTAS GA
*POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS

Chapter 11
Dark Deep Wounds

The crackle of the *warung's* wooden frame snapping under the flames could be heard every now and then, the sounds a stark contrast to Yu Semi's piercing cries.

"*Gusti*, O Lord.... Everything is destroyed. My *warung* is gone!"

The *warung*'s owner sat on the sand, stomping her feet on the ground wildly, as if losing her last tether to her livelihood. Her eyes suddenly became sharp, flaring with rage, as she looked around. "There has to be someone responsible for this. Somebody has to rebuild my *warung*!"

Men and women kept their distance from the usually cheerful woman, whispering in hushed tone among

themselves, while the children stood frozen in a circle around her, waiting for Yu Semis next move.

Many police cars were parked across Tambaksegaran Beach, with two fire trucks stationed in between. Yellow police tape was strung across the beach, fluttering in the wind. Meanwhile, Dusun Prau villagers were in turmoil, never having expected a massive fire to break out in their neighborhood.

"There has to be compensation for my burnt boats! There has to be payment for the damage! Now!" bellowed Boss Kasno, the boat owner. Five boats, now reduced to charcoal on the sand, were his. Ash swirled above the wreckage, dancing in the grip of the relentless Southern Sea wind.

The man's shout ripped through the air, each loud note triggered the villagers' rage even more. Their eyes frantically searched for the figure who had set their village ablaze. Bapak, with the jerrycan in his hand, became the obvious suspect ... who else could they be pointing at? And they were also looking for Layur.

"We've been fooled by that insolent brat. If only we hadn't recklessly turned our backs on the sea, stayed true to the life our fathers taught us as fishermen, we wouldn't be in this predicament." Boss Kasno spoke even louder, his voice fueling the anger of the young men around him. They grabbed wooden sticks and clutched them tightly. It felt as though they had a common enemy who had to be destroyed.

Alun crouched behind a fish storage crate, just beyond the edge of commotion, his face pale and his palms slick with sweat. He yanked his hat down hard over his head, as if trying to make himself invisible. Meanwhile, the image of Layur flashed in his mind: *Where are you, Layur? Please be safe. The villagers are searching for you, armed with wooden sticks*

Boss Kasno marched at the front, followed by several young men brandishing sticks and clubs. Alun crawled forward, frantically searching for the figure he'd glimpsed near Yu Semi's *warung* just minutes earlier.

"Pak Kadus! Pak Kadus!"

The elder, who was busy salvaging several fishnets from the flames, turned sharply at the sound of his name.

Alun didn't have time to explain further. He yanked Pak Kadus toward the center of the beach, positioning him squarely in front of the angry mob led by Boss Kasno. Pak Kadus spread his trembling arms, his resolve wavering in the face of the furious villagers.

"*Hold your horses,* gentlemen. Let's resolve these peacefully. We can work these things out," Pak Kadus pleaded.

Juragan Kasno ignored his leader's plea. He walked past Pak Kadus brazenly, and at just arm's length, he shoved the village chief aside with a single forceful push. Alun rushed to catch Pak Kadus, who staggered backward. But instead, they both tumbled forward, crashing into the wet sand.

"*Pfft* ... *gaack*!" Pak Kadus spat begrudgingly, wiping the grit off his mouth.

"That Shark! What a real pain! I'm done with him. No respect for anyone at all!" Pak Kadus poked Alun. "You'd better stay away, Alun. Those reckless people won't hesitate to harm anyone who stands in their way."

"But I have to find Layur, Pak Kadus. She can't run and will be in grave danger if Pak Kasno and the mob get to her."

Pak Kadus was horrified. Alun was right! *But where were Layur and her father? Were they hiding somewhere, or....*

Alun stood up, brushing the sand off his pants. Suddenly, something familiar caught his eye. Beside a beach pandan tree on the sand, lay a pair of items belonging to Layur!

Bapak had already fled with Layur in his arms. "Layur, hurry, we have to get out of here!" Bapak shouted, his voice was thick with panic. He discarded the jerrycan that started the fire, throwing it far away. All he cared about was keeping his only daughter safe, ensuring she didn›t get a single scratch in case the villagers went amok.

The villagers were scattered as the fire was devouring everything in its path. They were running around to find water, just as Bapak had moments earlier before he grabbed a jerrycan he thought held water ... only to realize too late that it was full of kerosene.

While carrying Layur, Bapak zigzagged swiftly between the warungs and the undamaged boats. Layur's body jolted with each of Bapak's steps. It wasn't the gentle cradle she remembered from her childhood, nor the soothing rocking of the boat that she once loved, where she'd spent afternoons with Bapak on the lagoon. *Oh Lord... I'm scared. I'm so scared,* Layur thought.

"Hold on, *Nduk*. Be strong. We're gonna be alright. We just need to find a secure spot, okay?" Bapak murmured, more to himself than to Layur.

Bapak's breath came in ragged gasps, like a man pushed to the edge of exhaustion. Carrying a teenager like Layur while ducking and running wasn't easy. Still, he refused to give up until he found an empty *warung*, long abandoned. The warung had no door, but fortunately, its bamboo walls were thick enough to offer some shelter. Gently, he lowered Layur onto the sand. Bapak's knees trembled, struggling to hold on against the weight of fatigue.

"You're safe here. Just don't make a sound, and don't step out." Bapak wiped away Layur's tears with his thumbs, then gently swept her damp hair back from her forehead, brushing away the sweat now beading in her temples.

Layur gripped Bapak's arm tightly.

"Where are you going, Pak? I'm scared."

Bapak shook his head. "I won't let anyone get close to this hiding place."

Layur shook her head in return. "That's not it. I'm afraid the villagers will attack you. Just stay here with me, Pak."

"You know that we never run away from responsibility."

Layur hugged Bapak tightly. Bapak returned the hug with trembling hands.

Eventually, they broke the embrace. Bapak crept around, taking a detour so no one would know Layur was there. After walking fifty paces away, Bapak stood tall, making it easy for the villagers to spot him. They rushed closer, surrounding him. They tightened their grip on the wood they were carrying.

Splash!

"Take that!"

Broto, one of Boss Kasno's men, doused Bapak's face with smelly briny salted fish soaking water. Bapak quickly turned away and closed his eyes tightly, praying the liquid wouldn't burn his eyes. Fish scales clung to his face, neck, and every inch of his body. The more miserable he looked, Broto's gaze grew more menacing.

"Why are you silent, cat got your tongue?" Boss Kasno snapped. "You're going to pay for this. This is you and your daughter's fault, after all!"

Another man, Jarot, stormed forward. Bapak had once caught him trying to steal a fishing net drying in the sun, and scolded him for it. Now, he had his chance to finally retaliate. Jarot lunged, swinging a wooden club toward Bapak's neck, but the crowd pulled him back. Still, he wasn't going to be denied his moment: he shoved Bapak hard from behind.

Bapak staggered, but before his body crashed onto the sandy shore, Jarot seized the moment to trip him. The older man tumbled twice, amid a chorus

of jeers and insults. His humiliation was complete in every sense. His body soaked in filthy brine, fish scales clinging to every inch of his skin, and now the sand clung to his face and entire frame.

"Let's kick this man out of our village!" Broto shouted, fueling the crowd's growing wrath.

Boss Kasno glared at Broto, and then kicked his calf. "Not a chance! Do you want him to just run away and escape responsibility? Use your head! How many of my boats have been lost to fire? Count them!"

Broto's courage shrank at his boss's harsh rebuke. He stepped back, slipping behind the other villagers.

"The culprit behind all our predicament isn't this man. It's his child! His daughter! That's the one we must deal with!" Jarot roared. His hand shot straight out, pointing directly at Bapak. Hearing those words, Bapak could no longer hold back. He rose to his feet, ready to stand his ground against Jarot. But once again, he was tripped. This time, it was Boss Kasno's foot.

Bapak staggered, but did not fall. With a piercing, unblinking stare, he threatened Jarot. His right fist clenched tightly, while his left hand gripped Jarot's collar with iron strength.

"Don't you dare threaten me! Don't ever think you can harm Layur—my daughter!" Bapak's dry lips were trembling.

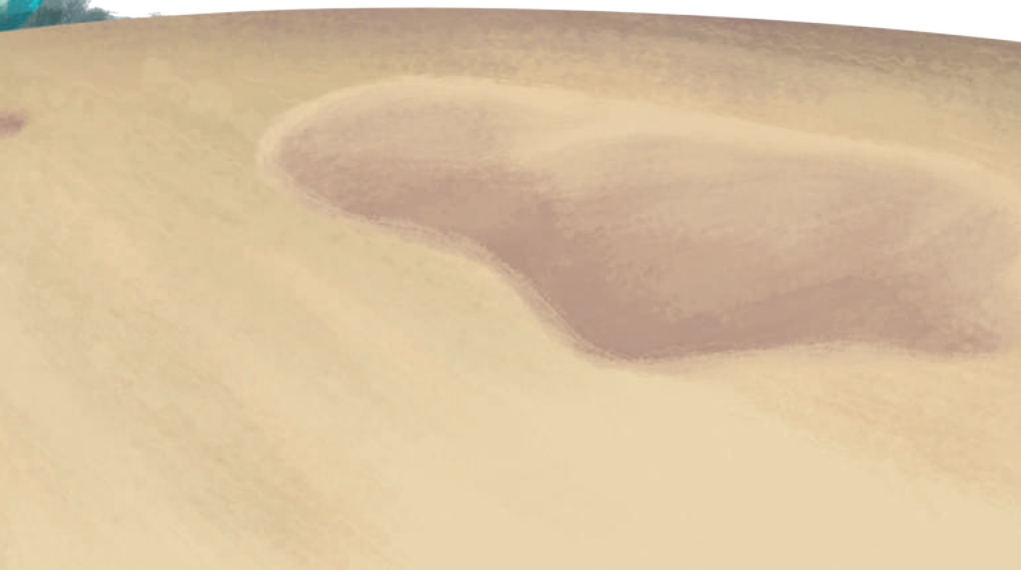
Unexpectedly, Broto stepped closer from behind and swung a fist at Bapak's jaw. Just before the blow could shatter the older man's face, a thin hand caught it mid-air.

"Stopppp! Don't get emotional!"

Chapter 12
Where's Layur?

Alun picked up a pair of items that lay upon the sand beside the pandan beach tree. Layur's crutches! Alun swiftly grabbed his friend's walking stick and let Pak Kadus rush off in search of Boss Kasno's frenzied group.

I have to find Layur, ASAP. Alun flipped his hat backwards to give him a wider view. He squinted, scanning the area, but saw nothing out of the ordinary that might suggest his friend was nearby. Everything looked the same.



The shore was lined with boats, nets drying in the sun, fish baskets, tangled ropes, and *para-para* where fishermen hung preserved fish. Even the beach pandan thicket was too short to conceal a person.

Ah, what was I thinking? I'm standing on sand—there should be footprints or something! Alun thought, face-palming. Panic had clearly clouded his judgment.

And then, he slipped into detective mode, retracing his steps and scanning the scene. At least he knew what to do, though his knowledge of detective work was limited to fiction, particularly the novel *Imung*, where a scrawny teenage sleuth solved crimes and mysteries with ease. The sand on the Southern Sea beach was fine and powdery, shifting easily in the wind. When pressed, it would form small indentations.

Alun crouched down, relieved that Boss Kasno's group hadn't walked through here and disturbed the tracks. He leaned his body to study the prints closely. He examined them carefully, searching for any important clues.

There were rounded tracks about half a meter apart, leading to the spot where the crutch had fallen. There's no mistake, it's definitely Layur's crutch mark. The traces stopped abruptly, replaced by ... footprints!

Alun carefully tried to fit his foot into the footprints. They were larger and wider. And there were no toe marks. His brow furrowed.

Definitely, it wasn't Layur's footprint. Layur's print appeared only on the right foot and was incomplete. Who made these larger footprints? It must belong to an adult, and definitely a man. In Dusun Prau, fishermen usually didn't wear shoes; if they did, they wore sandals made from old tires. Those sandals were durable in water, thanks to their thickness and glue-free design.

Alun straightened his head. His right fist clenched and punched his left palm repeatedly. That was his thinking pose, and he was also panicking!

Had Layur been caught by someone at this spot? If so, who was it? Who were they? The thought sent a chill down Alun's spine. *Oh God, please protect my good friend. Don't let any evil hands harm my friend.*

What's that? Alun circled around the footprint. There was a different-looking track. The tracks were too deep and looked like someone was walking in a hurry. The deeper tracks suggest this person is heavier than the previous one.

Does that mean two people found Layur here? Ah no! Alun followed the new tracks. Yes, there was only one pair of tracks. No others. The stride was long, and footprints looked as though they were dragged along the ground. Possibly, they were running while carrying a heavy load. Oh my god, did this person find Layur, snatch her from her crutches, and carry her away? Is this someone evil who wants to harm Layur?

Alun pushed aside his dark thoughts and followed the footprints, a pair of crutches in hand. The tracks didn't go straight, sometimes turning and zigzagging between empty *warungs*. Alun continued to follow them. *I have to save Layur, now!*

Layur looked out from behind a bamboo wall. She shivered. Her father was verbally abused by the villagers of Dusun Prau. He didn't retaliate. He became the scapegoat for the tragic event that day. Fortunately, some villagers still held respect for him. One of them was Pak Kadus, who saved her father from Broto's punch. After all, her father had done great services for them in the past.

Layur slumped against the wall of the abandoned warung, her hands clutching handfuls of sand in frustration. She longed to punch the flimsy wall, but she knew it would collapse at the slightest touch. Her gaze drifted upward, as if searching for the dreams she'd hung in the sky.

Some fragments of those dreams had come true. Layur recalled the pride she felt when she received a laptop award, her photo splashed across the newspaper. *Finally, I have a laptop! For over a decade, I've been dreaming of this thing.*

She felt immense pride when a radio station interviewed her as a teenage pioneer of the village tourism initiative; a rare honor that had the villagers of Dusun Prau buzzing.

Moreover, she still remembered the tremble in her hands when she signed the agreement for the arrival of a group of 100 guests in three big buses from Jakarta. *My name is in that document!*

For Layur, nothing beat the pride she felt when she distributed wage envelopes to the village youths who'd helped her as a river tour operator. Seeing the shining eyes full of gratitude was incredibly touching.

"Matur nuwun sanget. Thank you so much, Layur."

"Now I can pay off my younger sibling's school tuition, Layur. *Alhamdulillah*."

Everyone's mentioning my name! They're proud of me. Being thankful to me. Me. Me. Me.

Layur was startled. Something was off. But what was it?

"Layur! Layur!"

Layur's heart skipped a beat, but this time for a different reason altogether. She knew that voice all too well.

"I'm still here, Pak!" Layur tried to stand up, but without her crutches, she had nothing to hold onto for support.

Bapak stepped into the abandoned warung, his eyes locking onto Layur's pale face. The signs of recent tears and lingering fear were still etched on her features. He bent down, his gaze full of concern.

"No one's bothered you here, haven't they, *Nduk*?"

"Bapak, are you okay? Did anyone hurt you?" She quickly grasped and examined both of her father's arms. There were no injuries. Just a few bruises on the elbows of both arms, but not on his face. Layur felt a huge relief.

"We can go home now," Bapak said. "God has protected me before the villagers' anger got out of control, and the mastermind behind this chaos has been caught."

Layur's eyes widened in shock. *The mastermind?* So, everything that had gone wrong wasn't a mere coincidence after all?

"Who is it, Pak? Who?"

"Someone who felt they had the most to lose when the villagers no longer needed boats to go fishing. Someone who lost their only source of income when the youth of Dusun Prau chose to work with Naryo at the tourism site over the sea."

Layur couldn't immediately unravel the mystery. She waited for her father to explain further. But it was clear Bapak wasn't ready to say more, not yet.

"Let's go home." Bapak stood up and stretched out both hands towards his daughter.

"There's no other way." Bapak bent down again, placing his left hand on Layur's back and hooking his right hand behind her legs. "I'll carry you home, okay, *Nduk*? Because your crutches were left somewhere."

Layur shook her head. "No way."

Bapak was taken aback.

Layur smiled mischievously. "I'm embarrassed, Pak, to be carried like a baby. Just give me a piggy back."

Suddenly ....

"Here're your crutches, Layur!"

A grinning teenager burst into the abandoned warung, holding up a pair of crutches in his right hand.

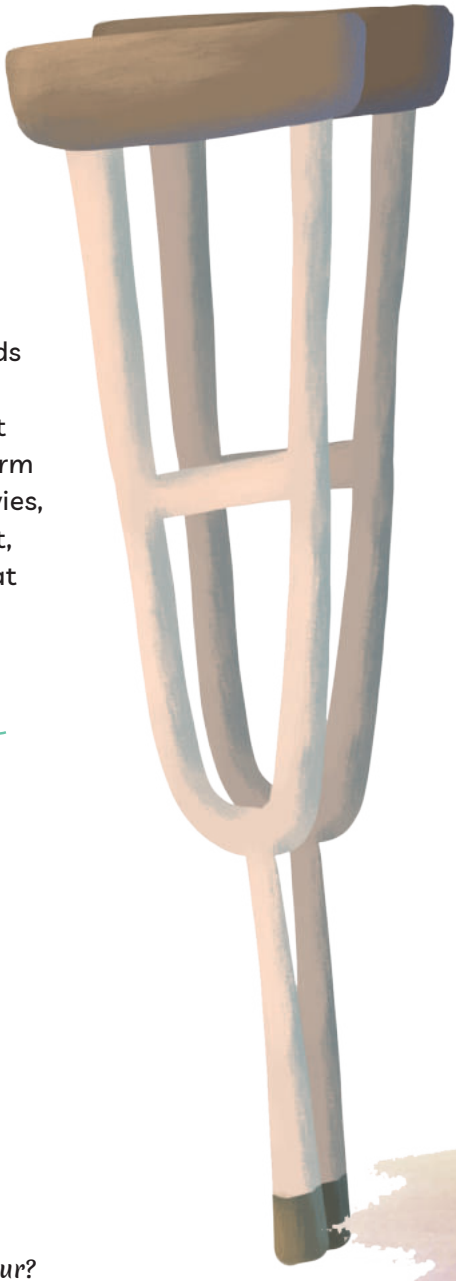
"Where did you find my crutches?" Layur exclaimed, shocked and delighted. "And how did you know I was hiding here?"

Alun still wore his wide, triumphant smile. "It was easy! I found your crutches on the beach and used my detective skills to track you down. And here I am!"

Bapak ruffled Alun's hair. Layur repeatedly threw sand at her friend. The three of them erupted into uncontrollable laughter.

"Enough! My stomach's protesting. It's time to go home and eat!" Bapak declared.

The three of them walked away from the empty warung. A beautiful, welcoming home awaited them. As they stepped towards the Dusun Prau settlement, a sudden wave of hunger swept over Layur... she imagined warm white rice, crispy fried anchovies, and shrimp paste sambal! But, wait ... didn't they have food at home?



Chapter 13
Old Wounds

Layur put down her plate, hastily chewing the last bits of rice, and stared in disbelief at the man in the distance. Her father emerged from his room. He ran his right hand through his damp hair. Strangely, Bapak never seemed to use a towel in his life. After bathing, he'd just shake off the water from his body and hair.

The sun wasn't high yet, and the clock hadn't struck eight, but her father had already taken a bath. Pak Kadus had summoned him for a meeting to discuss the previous day's chaos in Dusun Prau.

"I have to clear our name," Bapak told Layur, tidying up his thinning, graying hair. This time, he forced himself to wear a shirt over his "fishing uniform"—a singlet. It was the only shirt he owned. The others no longer fit him, especially around the waist.

Layur stood up, clutching her crutch under her arm and trying to balance her body without having to hold onto her crutches. Her hands were busy fixing the buttons on her father's shirt.

"When will you stop messing up buttoning your shirt, Pak? Look, one side is longer!" Layur muttered. Her hands moved quickly, undoing her father's shirt buttons from the top all the way down.

"You need to look neat. Don't just wear a singlet like a thug. Let people believe that we're not bad people. You know, defendants always wear long-sleeved shirts in front of the judge, haha!" Layur then unrolled the sleeves of the shirt, which was met with strong protests from her father.

"I'm embarrassed, Nduk. I'd feel silly with my sleeves down. People will think I'm some kind of government clerk!"

Layur burst out laughing. "No protests allowed! Besides, uneven rolls are even more embarrassing, like rolling one sleeve up once and the other three times. It's just easier to lengthen them all."

Layur swiftly buttoned her father's sleeve, earning a resigned sigh from him.

"You're just like your mother. Always fussing over my appearance."

Layur paid no heed. She just took her father's right hand, bowed her head, and respectfully kissed the rough skin. And then, with a gentle nudge, she encouraged him to leave the house.

Instead of rushing, Bapak just stood frozen. Layur furrowed her brow.

"Did you forget something, Pak?"

Bapak shook his head. There was a flicker of melancholy in his eyes.

"Maybe it's been ten years since you last kissed my hand," Bapak said softly. In many cultures, a hand-kiss is indeed used to show respect and affection, especially toward elders.

Layur was caught off guard. Was it true? Had she really shown no affection to her only parent all this time?

"Come on ... just go, Pak. Hurry up and leave!" Layur waved her hands dismissively, as though shooing her father away. She couldn't let the man in front of her see the tears welling up in her eyes.

Instead of leaving, Bapak stepped closer, and kissed Layur's forehead. The last time he'd done so, he'd had to bend his legs. Now, his daughter's height matched his. So this time, he kissed her forehead standing tall and upright.

Layur watched as her father walked away, thinking to herself, *It's no different with you, Bapak. It's been twelve years since you last kissed my forehead. And now, you're doing it again*. Layur quickly wiped away her tears with her right sleeve as she noticed someone entered their yard.

Alun had already told her he'd come over that morning. The boy immediately stepped into the empty *pendopo*, while Layur hurried to the kitchen. She said she needed to wash the dishes, but she also wanted to wash away the tears from her face.

"You drew this?" Alun asked, holding up a piece of paper with a picture of fish swimming in the sea. He had found it on the *lincak*, a bamboo bench in the *pendopo*.

Layur approached, wiping her wet hands on her skirt, a habit that often earned her father's scolding.

"I often spend my time at Tambaksegaran Beach, sketching while waiting for Bapak to return from his fishing trip. By the way, I've prepared two glasses of drink in the kitchen. Would you mind bringing them over here?"

Without needing to be told twice, Alun did what Layur asked. He knew that carrying a tray with two glasses of drink while using a pair of crutches was indeed quite a handful.

"Your drawing's a bit too simple," Alun commented, placing the tray down on the *lincak*. He grabbed one glass and downed half its contents in one gulp.

LaLayur shrugged. "Well, it's not done yet. I was planning to add coral reefs around the fish, but it slipped my mind. I just remembered now."

Alun handed the paper back to Layur, who was already ready with a crayon on the *lincak*.

"Corals take a long time to grow back after being damaged," Alun said.

"Like this," Layur said, showing the half-used green crayon. "You can't fix a broken crayon. Sadly... my father contributed greatly to the destruction of the coral reefs in this area."

Alun cast his gaze around the pendopo where they were sitting and talking. "I don't really understand what happened, but your dad and the villagers used to be rich, right? At least, this big house is proof to that."

Layur nodded and proceeded to share the history of Dusun Prau with her friend, who was new to the area. Yes, the golden years of Dusun Prau over a decade ago were largely due to her father's success in producing bondets. Many families depended on that industry, either as workers or distributors who sold the fish bombs to other villages.

"You know, back in the day, Dusun Prau was incredibly prosperous. Fish bombs made by Bapak revolutionized the fish industry and made fish catches skyrocketed! It was so easy to catch fish—just throw a bondet into the water, and hundreds would float to the surface, ready to be scooped up. Hundreds of kilos of fish were unloaded from boats every day. The fish market was buzzing with life. Traders rushed to buy the villagers' catch, loading up open-bed pickups. No wonder back then you could easily see the latest

model motorcycles zooming through Dusun Prau. At wedding celebrations, women adorned themselves with glittering gold jewelry wrapped around their wrists, necks, and ears. Men showed off by renovating their homes, from bamboo huts into brick walls. For them, prosperity felt like destiny itself."

Alun interrupted Layur's story. "If so many people benefited economically, then why did some people like the boat owner hate your dad so much? I saw for myself how he treated your father yesterday."

"Maybe he still holds a grudge against Bapak," Layur said matter-of-factly. "Pak Kasno was one of the young men Bapak took under his wing. He used to be an unemployed troublemaker, but Bapak hired him as a fish porter and took him along to sell fish bombs. As Bapak's business grew, Kasno was entrusted to collect debts from fish bomb agents in many places. He eventually became one of the new rich men in Dusun Prau. His fleet of boats grew larger over time, and the villagers began calling him 'Boss'. Unfortunately, Bapak stopped employing him after Kasno was caught embezzling money from the fish bombs sales. Maybe he's harbored a grudge since then."

Alun walked around the inner side of the pendopo while listening to Layur's story. He lingered in front of one of the hand-painted portraits hanging on a pillar.

"Is this your dad's portrait? Is this you? Actually, you're quite lovely back then," Alun said with admiration.

"How about now? My skin's all sunburnt and not as pretty as it used to be, right?" Layur said with a wry chuckle.

"Yeah, people around here say that ... I'm lovely and the most favored child in Dusun Prau. They say I'm lively, fair-skinned, with thick, wavy, long hair, and a sweet voice that warms the heart of mothers. It's as if everyone wants to be a second mother for me," Layur continued.

"There are just the two of you in this picture," Alun said. "I've wondered about your mother for ages, but I didn't have the heart to ask."

"It's okay, I'm not a little kid anymore. Yeah, I used to be sad when people mentioned my mom. The truth is, I never really knew the woman who gave birth to me. I don't even recall ever feeling a mother's loving affection," Layur replied nonchalantly.

"When I was seven, I started to feel like something was off. I was the only one dropped off at school by my dad, while all the other kids were with their mothers. When I played at other kid's houses, I often wondered ... Why was I different? They had both parents, while I had only one," Layur continued.

Alun couldn't hold back his curiosity. "Did your father hide it from you?"

"Not really. Maybe he was waiting for me to grow up a bit, or for me to ask. That's why one day, Bapak said he wanted to take me to visit Ibu."

"To visit your mother?" Alun asked, not fully getting it.

Layur nodded quickly. "Yeah. Funny thing, Bapak even bought me new sandals, a white dress that went all the way down to my ankles, and a crimson hairband to meet Ibu. He even gently combed my long hair and sprayed perfume on me. Hahaha... I had no idea where he bought that perfume."

"So, was your mother still alive back then? Where did she live?" Alun asked.

Layur fell silent for a few moments. "My mother lies at the edge of Dusun Prau. That's where she rests. Bapak told me Ibu was sleeping there. He took me to the graveyard in Dusun Prau and led me to a tombstone that read Laksmi Yuriah. He knelt down, and I followed. He pulled out the weeds around the grave without a word, and I just did the same."

"So, that's your mother's name, Laksmi Yuriah?"

Layur scowled. "My story isn't finished yet. And then, Bapak handed

me a bundle wrapped in banana leaves. The red-rose petals scent revealed what lay inside. 'Did Ibu smell nice?' I asked. Bapak nodded several times. 'Was she beautiful?' I pressed. You know what he answered? Bapak said, 'Ibu is as beautiful as her daughter' ... hahaha!"

Layur went on. "That day I found out the reason behind my name. It's short for my mother's name—Layur, from Laksmi Yuriah."

Alun interrupted. "There must be a meaning behind that name."

"Of course. I only found out about it when Bapak explained it to me at the graveyard. Laksmi means beautiful. Yuriah means brave and free-spirited. And, Layur—short for Laksmi Yuriah—is the perfect blend of all those virtues. My parents hoped that one day, everyone will call me the one who is both beautiful and free spirited."

Layur fell silent. She picked up a crayon again and added some blue onto her drawing.

"You know, after I found out about my mother, I was still curious about one thing. And I couldn't help but ask Bapak," Layur said without turning around. She was still focused on coloring the ocean.

"About what?" Alun asked, curious.

"Five years after Bapak showed me Ibu's tombstone, I just realized. It turns out, my birth date is the same as the date inscribed on my mother's grave—the very day she died."

Alun's jaw dropped. He was shocked, stunned, but didn't know what to ask.

"Bapak was surprised when I asked about it. Maybe he didn't expect me, a fifth-grader at the time, to ask such a thing. But his explanation made me realize... I was the cause of my mother's death." Layur's hand froze. The crayon fell from her grasp. Her fingers stiffened. And then...

Rrrrripp!

Alun was stunned. In front of him, Layur furiously ripped her drawing to shreds, overwhelmed with emotion. And then, she broke down. Silent sobs wracked her body as tears streamed down her face.

Through her tears, Layur said, "Bapak said Ibu lost too much blood. She was in a coma for three hours before Death took her, on the same exact date as my birthday. She passed away

because she gave birth to me. I am the reason she's dead."

Alun couldn't comfort her. He was left speechless, tongue-tied.

"I've been blaming myself since that day. But I also blame Bapak. He is more at fault!"

Alun was about to ask why, but Layur's next words answered the question.

"He was at fault. Ibu fell down next to the well. She had internal bleeding while she was unconscious there. She lay face-down for hours, soaked, until a neighbor found her and took her to the midwife. Do you know where Dad was? He was busy with his bondet orders. He wasn't there when Ibu fell."

Alun murmured sympathetically. He wasn't sure if it was enough. "I'm so sorry, Layur."

Layur sobbed quietly now. Her tears had dried up.

"My mother died because of me. And she died because Bapak wasn't there when she needed him! That belief has been deeply rooted in my heart ever since. It gnaws at my self-confidence, wearing me down, especially when I suddenly lost my leg in a tragic way. Bapak was to blame for that too."

Layur curled up and bowed her head low.. The sobbing had ceased, plunging the pendopo into silence. The traumatic memories of the explosion and fire that had ravaged her home years ago came

flooding back. The flames were eerily similar to the ones that destroyed Tambaksegaran Beach two days ago. The horror was tearing apart her fragile memories.

Everything is destroyed. Shattered completely. Not just once. It feels as if God have chosen me to walk this dark path, over and over again. What else will You take from me, O God? Or perhaps I don't deserve even a moment of happiness?

Layur hugged her knees tighter, turning them red. Tears streamed down her face, dripping onto her knees. The smell of soot and smoke suddenly flooded back into her mental refuge. Her chest felt tight, suffocated by the smoke and her own sobs.

Chapter 14
The Mastermind

Alun was at a loss. He wanted to comfort her friend but didn't know for sure what to say. He was shocked by Layur's story. Yet staying silent would make him seem uncaring.

Layur quickly wiped away her tears, and forced a laugh. She reached for her crutches to help herself stand up.

"Your drink's all gone. I'll get you another one. Would you like it with syrup and ice?"

"Oh, no! I'm the one who should be getting you a drink. Cold one, right? With syrup?" Alun replied.

Now, Layur burst out laughing. "Why are you so nervous, Alun? You're not used to having heart-to-heart chats with girls, huh?"

Alun hurried to the kitchen to hide the flush on his cheeks. With his back to Layur, he made two glasses of iced green-colored syrup drinks. Then, he brought them to the pendopo without a tray.

"My father and I have been distant for years. I guess it's because I'm still harboring anger towards him, especially after what ... happened to my leg," Layur said, taking the glass from Alun.

"Even until now?"

"What do you mean?" asked Layur.

"Are you still mad?"

Layur fell silent for a long time. She absentmindedly swirled her glass, making the ice cubes clinking against the sides. Her heart was restless.

"Before you came here, Bapak kissed my forehead." Layur hesitated to share, but the words already spilled out. "It had been years since he showed me that kind of affection. And strangely, it was the first time I wanted to kiss his hand back."

"Hasn't Bapak loved you enough, Layur?"

Layur bit her lower lip and hung her head low. Her emotions were still in turmoil. "You're right, Alun. For a long time I've blamed Bapak for my mother's death and for the loss of my leg. I've punished him by keeping my distance."

Layur looked up at her friend, and asked him seriously, "Was I wrong if I thought badly of Bapak? You know how incredible he was in saving me yesterday. He carried me all the way before facing an angry crowd. He put himself in harm's way to keep me safe. And... he hugged me so tightly yesterday, Alun."

Alun was just listening.

"Ah, never mind. Hurry up and finish your drink, Alun. Let's go to see Bapak at the community hall. I want to know what happened to him!"

Yu Semi stood firm, ignoring the requests to sit and calm down. With her arms crossed and her chin jutting out, she fixed Pak Kadus with a piercing stare. "Who's going to compensate me for my warung? Layur's father or someone else? Stop stalling, Pak, and give me a straight answer!"

Bapak, drenched in sweat, approached. "Yu, insyaallah—God willing—we'll rebuild your warung. I had no intention of burning it down, I've been framed. Now let's find the real mastermind behind the unrest in our village."

"Right! That's right!" the villagers chimed in, echoing each other. The village meeting had been going on for an hour, and several eyewitnesses had already shared their accounts.

"Yu Semi, we've all heard from Mas Bambang," said Pak Kadus, referring to the only kerosene vendor in the village, "the jerrycan that sparked the fire belonged to Jarot, and he bought it the day before. Is that correct, Jarot? Tell us the truth!" Pak Kadus demanded.

Jarot lowered his head, nodding reluctantly after the

villagers' shouts rang out in the hall. "*Inggih*, Sir. That's right. It was mine."

Pak Kadus interrogated Jarot loudly, "Stop giving us half-answers. The fire that burned down the warungs and the boats in our village started from the fish grill, and got out of control because you swapped the water inside the jerrycan with kerosene. Am I right? Are you the one who did that?"

Jarot glanced at Broto beside him. "I didn't do it, Pak. He's thde one who did it."

Broto, in turn, protested fiercely. "*Ngapusi*. He's lying, Pak."

The two village thugs shouted and screamed at each other.

Pak Kadus ran out of patience. “Quiet! Speak one at a time. Now I see what’s going on. You’re both in on it, colluding and scheming together, aren’t you? You carefully planned this chaos, didn’t you?”

Jarot cut in once more. “It was Broto who bought the carbide, Pak Kadus. He discreetly put it on the fish grill to spark a fire. And I was ordered to put the kerosene-filled jerrycan near the grill, so that the fire would spread.”

Bapak, Pak Kadus, and all the villagers of Dusun Prau gasped at Jarot’s confession. Pak Kadus planted his hands on his hips. Despite his slender build, he stood bolder, realizing that most of the villagers in the hall were backing him.

“Hold on. You said you were *ordered* to prepare the kerosene-filled jerrycan. If so, who gave you that order? Who’s the mastermind behind this chaos?” Pak Kadus gripped on Jarot’s collar as he glared at Broto. He was furious.

Suddenly, a commotion was heard outside the community hall. A group of villagers forcibly dragged in Kasno, none other than the boat owner himself. The rich man was furious, hurling insults at the villagers for humiliating him.

“You’ll regret this! You have no idea who you’re dealing with!” Boss Kasno shouted.

Bapak, who had been sitting with Jarot and Broto like a trio on trial, was asked to rise and join the other villagers. Meanwhile, Boss Kasno took his place on the bench in the middle of the hall, joining the two other men who would have to answer for their deeds.

"We caught him trying to flee to the town at the edge of the village!" Natsir, a young leader from Dusun Prau, shouted. "Luckily, our youth group stopped him just in time."

Boss Kasno glared at Natsir, raising his clenched fist toward the young man. "You're Natsir, Kromomantoro's son, right? Your father owes me a favor! Watch yourself."

Bapak watched from the outer edge of the community hall, taking shelter under a tree to stay cool. Some villagers came over to shake his hand, as if congratulating him on being cleared of the accusations. A woman stole a glance at Bapak, and then shyly shifted until she was standing next to his right side.

"Kang...," the woman whispered, tugging at Bapak's sweat-drenched shirt sleeve. He was used to wearing only a singlet, so the long-sleeved batik felt suffocating, especially without the option to roll up the sleeves, like he was standing on hot coals.

Bapak was startled. He turned and immediately recognized the woman. "Yu Semi...? Are you not mad at me anymore?"

Yu Semi flustered. She clasped both of her hands together to hide her nervousness. "*Nyuwun pangapunten*, Kang. I'm sorry. I mistakenly accused you of deliberately burning my warung. I didn't realize there was a mastermind behind it all."

"Shh... we'll discuss it later, Yu," Bapak replied, "let's listen to Pak Kadus who is still raging."

Indeed, Pak Kadus spoke loudly, demanding honesty from Boss Kasno, who kept dodging the accusation. He washed his hands of the matter and repeatedly denied any involvement.

"Broto and Jarot have confessed. They also said there was a mastermind who ordered them

to cause trouble. And who would that be if not you, Pak Kasno? These two are your loyal followers, your subordinates. Don't try to deny it," Pak Kadus pressed on.

Boss Kasno wouldn't have that. His finger pointed accusingly at Pak Kadus. "How dare you! You think you can boss me around just because you're the village head? I had nothing to do with those two troublemakers. I was just telling Nasrun...," he froze, only to realize too late that he'd slipped up.

The community hall erupted into uproar, with everyone talking at once and berating Boss Kasno.

Pak Kadus stamped his foot in anger. "Just what I thought! A wicked person

will eventually reveal their true face. Nasrun already confessed this morning, even before Jarot and Broto came clean. He admitted to spreading centipedes in the tourists' lodgings!"

Boss Kasno grew increasingly frantic. He began ranting like a madman. "Nasrun's an idiot. Why couldn't he keep his mouth shut? But he didn't admit that I told him to slash those tires in the cave, did he?" There was a sudden silence. He realized he'd just put his foot in his mouth.

The hall erupted again, but this time Boss Kasno was subjected to the villagers' anger. Pak Kadus was left overwhelmed, trying to calm the storm.

"Never mind, Yu. It's alright. Now we know who the culprit is. But I'll still help you rebuild your *warung*," Bapak said sincerely. The two adults avoided the commotion at the hall, preferring to take shelter under a banyan tree instead.

"*Matur nuwun*. Thank you so much. You are too kind. I shouldn't have let my emotions get the better of me," Yu Semi replied.

"But on one condition, Yu Semi. You have to help me in return."

Yu Semi looked puzzled. "Help with what?"

Bapak whispered, worried that he might be overheard by the other villagers.

"Please keep Layur company. Talk to her and cheer her up. She's still shaken, and at her age, she's not ready to handle something like this, don't you think? You'll help, won't you?

"*Inggih*, of course. Insyaallah," Yu Semi replied quickly. "Hey, is that her on that speeding bike?"

From a distance, two teenagers were seen on one bike. The girl sat on the backseat, holding crutches, and repeatedly hit her friend's back with her left hand as he sped on.

"Is it over already, Yu?" Layur asked Yu Semi with a pout.

Yu Semi wrapped her arms around Layur. "Your father's problem has already been settled. There is still a matter at hand with those three sitting in the center of the hall!"

Layur craned her neck to see. Then she turned and glared at Alun. "You and your flat-tired bike. Now we're late, thanks to you!"

Chapter 15
Entertaining

Three days after the rampaging fire incident.

Yu Semi peered into Layur's house, which, of course, had no lock. With a single push, the front door swung open. It was quiet.

"Layur ... I bring you breakfast, Nduk. Your dad mentioned that you want to eat gudangan and tempe bacem."

A couple of seconds passed before a response came.

"I'm at the back, Yu! Over here, by the well. Just come on in."

Yu Semi walked across two rooms, placed a three-tiered green container filled with food on the dining table, and headed toward the well.

"What did you say you brought me, Yu?" Layur greeted her neighbor, who is an excellent cook, and burst into a laugh. She had

vaguely seen her guest carrying something just a moment before.

"A complete set of gudangan, spicy, just the way you like it. What are you washing?" Yu Semi crouched down beside Layur.

"These are from Mas Naryo, he sent some cassava. Bapak said he wanted to eat boiled cassava, so I'm preparing it while waiting for him to get back from fishing."

Layur wiped her hand with the edge of her shirt and shuffled closer to Yu Semi.

"I am so sorry about your warung, Yu. I am really sorry. It's just that ...."

"Hush! Don't say that, Nduk," Yu Semi interrupted. "Actually I'm the one who needs to apologize for getting carried away and throwing tantrums like that. None of this is your fault. And it's also not your father's fault."

Yu Semi helped lift the batch of cassava that Layur had peeled clean. She transferred it to a steamer, added water, and placed it on the stove by the well. With a click, the fire flickered to life. Soon, the boiled cassava would be ready to eat.

Layur gently refused when Yu Semi tried to help her stand up. Quickly, she reached for a pair of crutches that she had leaned against the nearby water bucket.

Yu Semi smiled meaningfully. The teenage girl opposite her was devouring the food with gusto, using her fingers instead of a spoon. Her hands moved with practiced ease, picking up flavorful *gudangan*—a Yogyakarta specialty dish consisting of shredded coconut with a spicy, sweet, savory flavor, served with boiled vegetables.

"Besides boiled spinach and cabbage, I also added some kembang turi. There are many *kembang turi* blooming along the road to Bukit Menara," Yu Semi explained.

"Excellent, Yu. Your gudangan is always super delicious, especially with kembang turi. Bapak and I love it so much!" Layur raised both thumbs toward Yu Semi, her fingers still sticky with grated coconut.

Layur was stuffed. She leaned forward slightly without getting up from her chair and grabbed two glasses, filling them with cool water from the pitcher. She handed one of the glasses to her guest.

"I want to join in and help rebuild your warung. That way, you can get back to selling just like before."

"Tomorrow's Sunday, Nduk. Pak Kadus has already made an announcement for the villagers to gather and clean up the remains of the fire and rebuild the warungs," said Yu Semi. "You can help out in the kitchen. We'll prepare lunch and drinks for the men who are working."

"Wow, who's helping with the funds to rebuild the warung, Yu?"

Yu Semi and Layur left the kitchen, which also served as the dining area, and moved to sit on the *lincak*.

"Boss Kasno has admitted his actions and is also willing to cover all the costs of the fire damage a couple of days ago, Alhamdulillah, thank God. I can get back to selling soon," said the middle-aged woman without any bitterness in her tone.

"Bapak told me a bit about it too, Yu," Layur added. "It's a relief that the cause was found quickly. I was terrified back then, and I felt so guilty."

"Your dad mentioned it. He said you were devastated and that you felt it was all your fault. That's why he asked me to come and talk some sense into you, *Nduk*," Yu Semi said honestly.

Layur felt embarrassed.

Yu Semi gave Layur a meaningful smile. "I've already told your father that you don't need any advice. You're already grown and more mature than most kids your age. If you can lead the people of an entire village, you can certainly lead yourself."

Layur's embarrassment deepened, her cheeks blushed.

"I feel like I should confess my mistake to Bapak, Yu. My motives for involving the villagers weren't entirely altruistic. I craved recognition and applause."

"Have you told that to your father?"

Layur shook her head.

Yu Semi gently pinched Layur's cheek. "Hey, *Cah Ayu*... you truly deserve applause and praise from everyone in the world. You're amazing, and if you follow your dream, you'll do even greater good."

Layur nodded.

"Eh, who's that?" Yu Semi asked as she heard footsteps entering the house.

"Excuse me... is anyone interested in looking at photos of three buses full of tourists?" Alun joked, suddenly appearing in front of them. He was like family to Layur, so he often dropped by unannounced.

Quickly, the three gathered around Alun's phone, scrolling through hundreds of photos from the Jakarta tourists' recent visit to Tambaksegaran Beach. Layur felt even more certain that her tourism village concept was worth pursuing again.

Layur asked Yu Semi and Alun for many suggestions on rebuilding Dusun Prau. She felt that it would be impossible for her to do it alone with just Alun, her best friend, by her side.

Alun said, "I once suggested getting all the friends who received government laptops involved, but you ...."

"Yes..." Layur interrupted. "I thought I'd lose credit if I brought them in. Now I see that was a mistake." Layur sighed with regret. "Now I realized that they should have been involved all along."

"Get other youth involved as well, Nduk. Pak Kadus still thinks the riots weren't solely Boss Kasno's doing. Maybe there are many young folks who need to be included so they don't feel jealous and left out," Yu Semi suggested carefully.

"That's exactly what I wanted to tell you, Layur. That's why I came here on purpose," Alun replied.

Layur furrowed her brow. "You're keeping secrets from me, huh?" she said, her voice rising, clearly annoyed.

"That wasn't my intention, Layur. It was Mas Naryo who warned me not to tell you. He feared you might lose motivation ... or even become scared." Alun clarified.

Layur became upset. "Oh, so that's how it is, Alun? You're colluding with Mas Naryo now. Just spill it. Tell me everything."

Alun went on to explain in detail about a group of young men from a neighboring village who'd been hostile toward Mas Naryo. They felt that they weren't getting any benefits from the bustling activity in Dusun Prau.

"They complained that their village road has deteriorated since a lot of cars started passing through their village to get to our area. There were also many speeding motorbikes, and there was even a hit-and-run accident caused by tourists," Alun explained.

Layur and Yu Semi listened attentively to Alun's explanation. It turned out that good intentions didn't always receive a positive response. Whether the youths' reasons were valid or not, the point was that everyone wanted a share in the development of the tourism village that Layur had envisioned.

"Thank you, Alun. And thank you, too, Yu Semi. I'm starting to realize that I was arrogant to think I could do this alone. Will you help me fix this and make this dream reality again?"

Alun and Yu Semi nodded, raising both thumbs.

"Geez!" Alun shouted, startling Yu Semi and Layur. "What's that burnt smell?"

"The boiled cassava! It's burnt! We forgot ... the water must have run out!" Yu Semi shouted in panic.

Chapter 16

Keep the Sails Full of Wind

Layur sat on the steps of the pendopo, her face occasionally lighting up with smiles and laughter.

She enjoyed watching a group of children playing in her yard, boys and girls, with one child dancing in the middle and the others forming a circle, holding hands and singing together as they played a traditional game called *jamuran*.

Jamur-an ya ge-ge thok Ja-mur a-apa-ya gege thok

Jamur gajih mberjijih sak ara-a-ra Sira bage jamur apa?

Jamur gagak! Gaok gaok gaok

The kids started mimicking crows flying. Layur chimed in, shouting out crow calls. The bright full moon illuminated their playtime.

"Here's a warm ginger beverage with palm sugar for you, Layur...." Bapak set down two cups of *wedang jahe* and a plate of fried

cassava beside her daughter before sitting down with her.

"Shouldn't it be the other way around, Pak? I'm the one who's supposed to be serving you this ginger tea. But I'm afraid it'll spill like last time."

"Don't overthink it. Don't put too much pressure on yourself. When the time comes and you have the means to get a prosthetic leg, you'll be able to do anything, even playing jamuran like them," Bapak consoled her.

Layur playfully patted her father's arm. "What year will it be, Pak? Will I be too old to play *jamuran* in ten years? Hahaha ...."

The soothing warmth of ginger spread through Layur's body, and she felt an even deeper sense of connection with her father as they found themselves opening up to each other more often.

"So Boss Kasno was finally taken to the police station, huh, Pak?" Layur said, taking another sip of her *wedang jahe*.

"That's what people say. Life would be more peaceful for me if he got the punishment that he deserved. You know how the villagers of Dusun Prau have been struggling to catch fish since the coral reefs were damaged? One by one, they've had to sell their boats just to make ends meet. And they're left with no choice but to rent boats from Pak Kasno just to make a living."

Layur chimed in. “At least you didn’t sell your boat.”

Bapak fell silent. Layur waited for his response. Then she realized there was something her father was hiding.

“Pak...?”

Bapak nodded weakly. “I sold our boat two years ago, Nduk,” he said, finally admitting the truth. “I needed the money to support our family. So, even though I’m still using the same boat, it’s actually no longer ours.”

Layur looked down, overcome with guilt once more. “You sold our boat two years ago. That was when you were paying for my high school tuition, wasn’t it, Pak?”

“Oh, no, no, Nduk. Don’t blame yourself.” Bapak quickly changed the topic. “Boss Kasno was getting more furious because people were reluctant to go to sea. The villagers were enjoying working on land, where they could earn money without risking their lives. They’re renting out *andong*, guesthouses, working as parking attendants, or opening *warungs*.”

Layur started to get the picture. Her father had mentioned that person several times before. Now she knew who was behind all the bad things that had happened in Dusun Prau.

“I heard from Mas Naryo that Boss Kasno’s men threatened you. They wanted you to stop me from

building the tourist village, right? You lied to me. You weren't honest with me, Pak."

"Actually, it's the opposite, Layur. I didn't tell you about their threats because I support your good intentions. I didn't want you to get discouraged."

"But, Pak, why were they so relentless and coordinated in their harassment?"

Bapak shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure, Nduk. But I'm certain there are many people involved—not just Boss Kasno and his men. There must be people who feel they've been wronged because they didn't benefit from the river tubing, young men who weren't recruited by Naryo to work there. And the landowners who weren't fairly compensated."

Bapak passed her a plate of fried cassava, and Layur snatched the biggest chunk. It's so good! It's still warm and fluffy. It must've been dug up fresh from the garden today.

"So, they're also the ones behind all the chaos and disruption to disturb the tourists? Placing centipedes in the accommodations, slashing tubes at the cave, and even planning a fire during the bonfire?" Layur fumed.

"Nduk, Pak Kadus and the police are on it. Now our names are cleared and Pak Kadus has assured the villagers that you and I are not behind all this."

Layur affectionately hugged her father's arm. Her tears, still plentiful, welled up again.

"*Alhamdulillah*, Pak," she said.

The kids who were playing in the yard were now sitting on a mat, exhausted from singing. Their voices had died down as they were busy making shadow puppets from cassava leaves.

"Nduk, Yu Semi said you wanted to discuss something with me. What is it?" Bapak asked carefuly.

"Pak ... I'm done," Layur said softly, throwing pebbles without enthusiasm, looking uninterested in doing anything.

"Done with what?"

"With everything. I just realized that I'm nobody."

Bapak stroked her hair.

"One day, I'll take you sailing." Layur turned. That's an odd intention.

Take me sailing with my condition?

"I want to show you, Nduk. How the waves fought as if to keep my boat from heading out to open sea. The waves crashed against the boat, tossing us around as high as it could, rocking us violently from side to side. But... see what happened?

Layur nodded. "Yes. You keep going out to sea, catching fish, and returning to the same spot."

Bapak fixed his gaze on her. "If you let your sails stay down too long, you'll never catch the wind," he said softly.

Layur squeezed her father's arm tightly. "This experience has taught me a lot, Pak. I've been selfish and craving validation, seeking praise. I've come to realize

I've been doing things just to gain recognition. I just don't want to be looked down on because of my disability."

Bapak turned around, facing his daughter.

"It doesn't mean you have to give up, Nduk. You just need to clear up your intentions. Just as I regularly clean my nets, removing debris and mending the broken threads, so we can catch plenty of fishes and achieve our dreams."

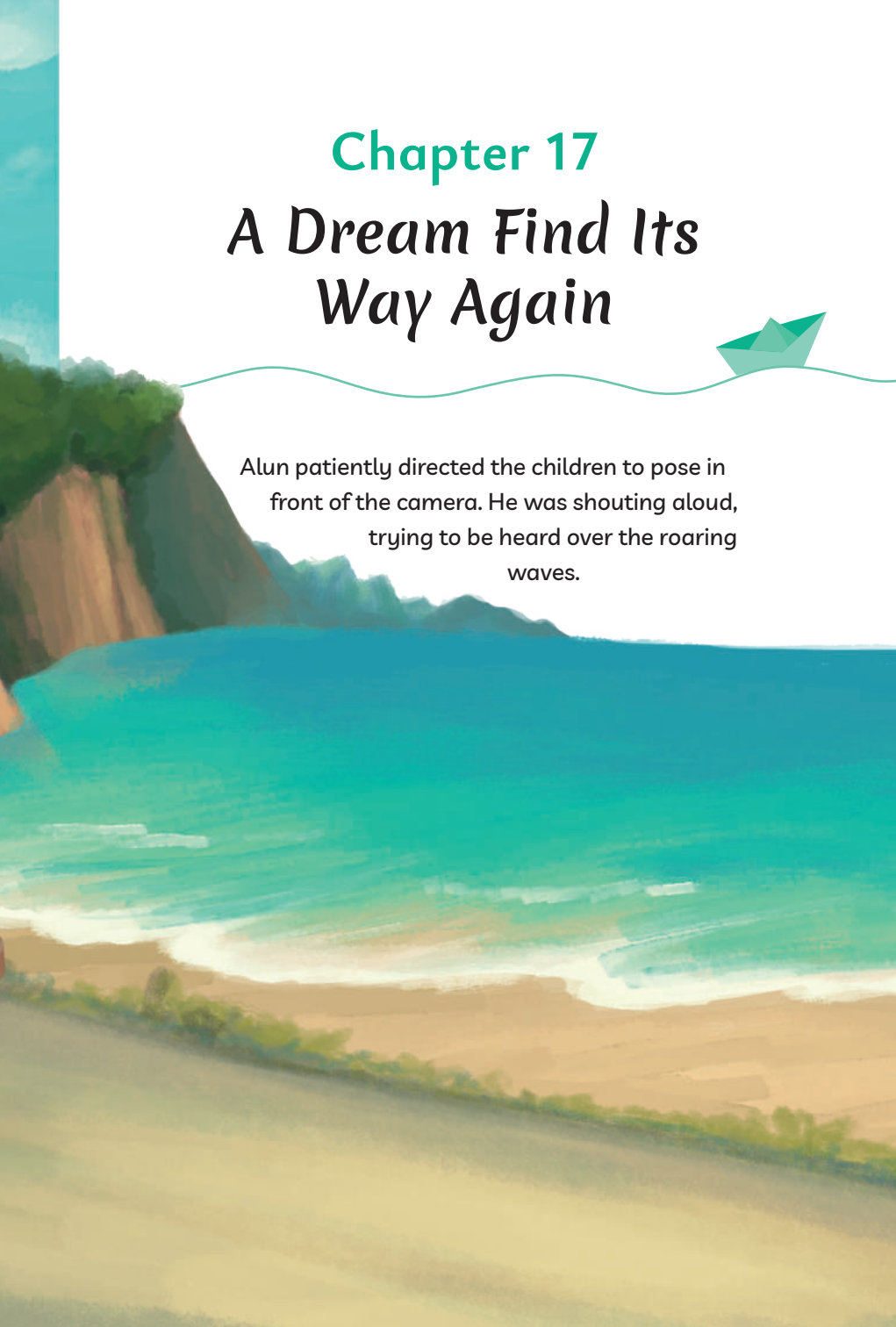
Layur chuckled. "You're quite the poet, Pak. No wonder Ibu fell for you."

Her father laughed heartily. "So, when are you going to fire up your laptop and promote our tourist village again?"

Layur didn't respond, her gaze fixed on the full moon. *Can my dreams still shine under its light? Or ... should I just let them go?*

Chapter 17

A Dream Find Its Way Again



Alun patiently directed the children to pose in front of the camera. He was shouting aloud, trying to be heard over the roaring waves.

"Okay, good ... run while holding the kite string. Now, stand there and lift the kite high. Oh, don't be stiff—relax on the horse. Smile naturally!" Alun directed.

Alun's camera had snapped countless photos. That morning, he needed a lot of shots to fill his social media account and showcase the tourist village, especially since a national kite festival was going to be held at Tambaksegaran Beach at the beginning of next year. That's why Alun was so enthusiastic about capturing images of children playing with kites against the backdrop of rolling waves.

Meanwhile, Layur and Naryo were heading into Dusun Prau in a pickup truck, grinning from ear to ear after meeting Ibu Wakil Bupati, the vice regent of the area. They couldn't wait to see their friends, who were already waiting for them at the community hall.

"I didn't expect that, Mas Naryo. My stammering presentation actually worked on Ibu Wakil Bupati," said Layur lightheartedly.

"That was your fake tears that got her. She didn't have the heart to say no and now she's on board with our cause," Naryo shot back.

"I wasn't acting. I was actually moved. How could I not tear up when talking about the destruction of our tourist village?"

Naryo steered the car toward the community hall. “We’ve just gotten started, Layur. Bu Wakil Bupati has said yes, but we still need official approval on our proposal.”

“You’re right, Mas. Let’s gather our friends to back our plan. I’m done going solo. I thought I knew it all,” Layur said, playfully tapping her own head twice. Naryo couldn’t help but laugh at her silly gesture.

“Hey, that’s Alun!” Naryo exclaimed. “Should we go over?”

“No need,” replied Layur, casually. “He’s busy filming. Just let him walk to the community hall. It’s only a few hundred meters anyway.”

Naryo shook his head, chuckling softly. The two teenagers’ friendship was indeed unique. They were a perfect match in many ways, yet they seemed to guard themselves from showing affection. *What’s going on with them? Oh, well.*

“Hey, looks like everyone’s here!” Layur said, greeting her friends as the car pulled up to the community hall. She took a quick count: Five girls and three boys about her age. They were sitting cross-legged on the mat in the hall.

Layur shook their hands warmly. She knew most of them since they were from the same village, and some had been classmates. The group included Dini, Ratna, Wawan, Basri, Petrus, Vani, Sisil, and Yuli.

"Your laptop's covered in stickers, Wan! Are you selling them?" Layur teased Wawan, who was busy browsing.

Vani piped up. "Those are stickers of Wawan's girlfriends' school emblem. Look, that's the sticker from his first girlfriend, and next to it is the sticker from his second!"

Wawan quickly clutched his laptop to hide the evidence. "Stop meddling, you girls. You're all just a bunch of singles!" Wawan retorted, grinning widely.

Naryo joined in the conversation. "It's fine if you've got stickers on your laptop. Just make sure to take care of it. It's a laptop from the government's grant, right?"

Out of nowhere, Alun appeared among them. "I thought the meeting had started. Pass the drinks, I'm parched!" Without asking permission, he grabbed a maroon tumbler and started gulping it down. *Gulp, gulp, gulp!*

"Hey! That's mine!" Sisil complained. Alun just ignored her.

"Shall we start the meeting now?" Ratna suggested. She had arrived early and was already seated next to Dini and Basri.

Alun stood with his hands on his hips, and had a sudden idea. "Why are we stuck in this community hall

like old folks? Let's hit the road and head up! We've got a car, after all."

"Head up? What do you mean?" Petrus asked.

"Yeah. Bukit Menara would be a great spot for our meeting. It'll feel like a mini outing. It will be more fun!" Alun suggested.

Aha! The others nodded in agreement. Wawan quickly packed up his laptop and stuffed it into his backpack. Meanwhile, Dini, Ratna, and Sisil rolled up the mats and loaded them into the pickup.

"Layur, get in the car. Sit in the front," Alun ordered. Layur bristled, she hated being bossed around.

She whacked Alun's leg with her crutch. "Who do you think you are? My grandpa? No way! I'm sitting at the back," she said.

The others were taken aback.

"Why are you all just standing there?" Layur quickly turned around, facing away from the open pickup bed, and sat down, swinging her legs into the vehicle. "You think I couldn't get in by myself? Think again!" Layur stuck out her tongue. It was adorable — and everyone burst out laughing.

"Okay. I'll sit in the front with Mas Naryo, then," Basri said.

While Basri and Mas Naryo got into the front seat, the other nine squeezed into the pickup bed at the back. The old truck rattled and bounced along the Tambaksegaran Beach side road toward Bukit Menara.

Bapak and Pak Kadus sat far off, cross-legged on a pandan mat atop a sand hill. The rough seas had kept the fishermen of Dusun Prau from setting sail. This downtime allowed them to repair their nets and maintain their boats, awaiting calmer waters.

They both watched as the group of teenagers drove off together in a noisy, crowded pickup truck, heading up the hill.

"Genduk Layur seems to be her lively self again, doesn't she?" Pak Kadus observed. The strong, black coffee and the sweet *ampyang* made a perfect pair to start the day. Despite its firm texture, Pak Kadus could still chew the traditional Javanese snack made from peanuts and palm sugar.

"That child of mine has energy like a diesel truck. Once she's fired up, she'll speed to the top of Bukit Menara in a minute, no sweat, haha..." Bapak said, unable to hide his pride.

"She's got spirit and courage, that's for sure. She deserves a thumbs-up!" Pak Kadus replied. "I was

surprised to hear from other neighboring village heads that she's been visiting theirs, encouraging the youth to work together on the tourist village project."

Pak Kadus couldn't hide his admiration.

"Back in our day, at Layur's age, we only aspired to be fish porters!" Pak Kadus commented with a chuckle.

Bapak agreed, laughing along with Pak Kadus. Soon after, Pak Kadus excused himself to return home and resume processing salted fish.

"*Monggo* ... go ahead, Pak Kadus. I'll just relax here for a bit. Oh, and please don't mention what other village heads said about Layur earlier. I don't want her to get too full of herself," Bapak requested. He didn't want his daughter to get caught up in praise like before.

Bapak remained sitting crossed-legs, holding a nearly empty coffee cup. On that morning, he wanted to savor the scene of sea foam washing over the shore, something he'd seen for decades with every breath, yet never truly appreciated and enjoyed until now.

Who would have thought that the landscape of Tambaksegaran Beach was a hidden gem? It continued to thrive and shine, captivating tourists. Sadly, the villagers, particularly Bapak, had been oblivious. Poverty had obscured their vision, preventing them from seeing the beauty that surrounded them.

And my daughter has discovered the hidden gem and turned it into a new source of income for the villagers, Bapak thought. *He also felt grateful that Layur had met Alun, a smart and down-to-earth boy.*

Bapak's lips curled into a gentle smile as he pictured Alun, who had become a close companion to his daughter. Initially, Alun lived with his parents in Jakarta. However, four years ago, Alun's father was transferred to the interior of Kalimantan to manage a mine there. At the same time, Alun's mother had to go abroad to pursue her doctoral degree.

"Mas, I'm entrusting my son to you. I let him stay with his aunt, but he needs a male figure to teach him courage and the struggle of life," Alun's father wrote in a letter long ago. "You're the only one I can rely on..."

The two men had been close friends since way back, before life took them into different directions.

From then on, Alun lived with his aunt in Dusun Prau. Unbeknownst to him, Bapak had been discreetly keeping an eye on him all the time.

Bapak would often sneak in advice and set a good example whenever he met that city boy. He treated Alun and Layur with the same love and care.

Bapak was once worried when the two teenagers began their journey to transform the village into a tourist destination. He feared their high hopes might end in disappointment. How could their remote village

possibly gain recognition—through the internet and Alun's phone alone? Layur was still getting the hang of government-aided laptop, after all.

Without anyone knowing, Bapak sent a letter to Alun's father in Kalimantan.

> *Mas, I'm sorry to bother you. Our children are working hard to turn Dusun Prau into a tourist destination. I fear they may be disappointed, their dreams are too big. I can't stop them, I'm just an uneducated person. But I wonder... would it be possible for you to help bring tourists to Dusun Prau?*

Alun's father readily agreed to Bapak's request. Surprisingly, he organized a trip for his colleagues and staff from Jakarta to visit Dusun Prau, arriving in a convoy of three large buses. It was this group that later suffered the unfortunate incident a while back.

Bapak felt a sense of guilt, knowing he had played a role in secretly bringing in such a large number of tourists. Layur and Alun were still too inexperienced to handle the crowds and responsibilities that came with it. The villagers of Dusun Prau, too, were not fully equipped to manage the tourism industry, given their generations-long background in fishing on boats.

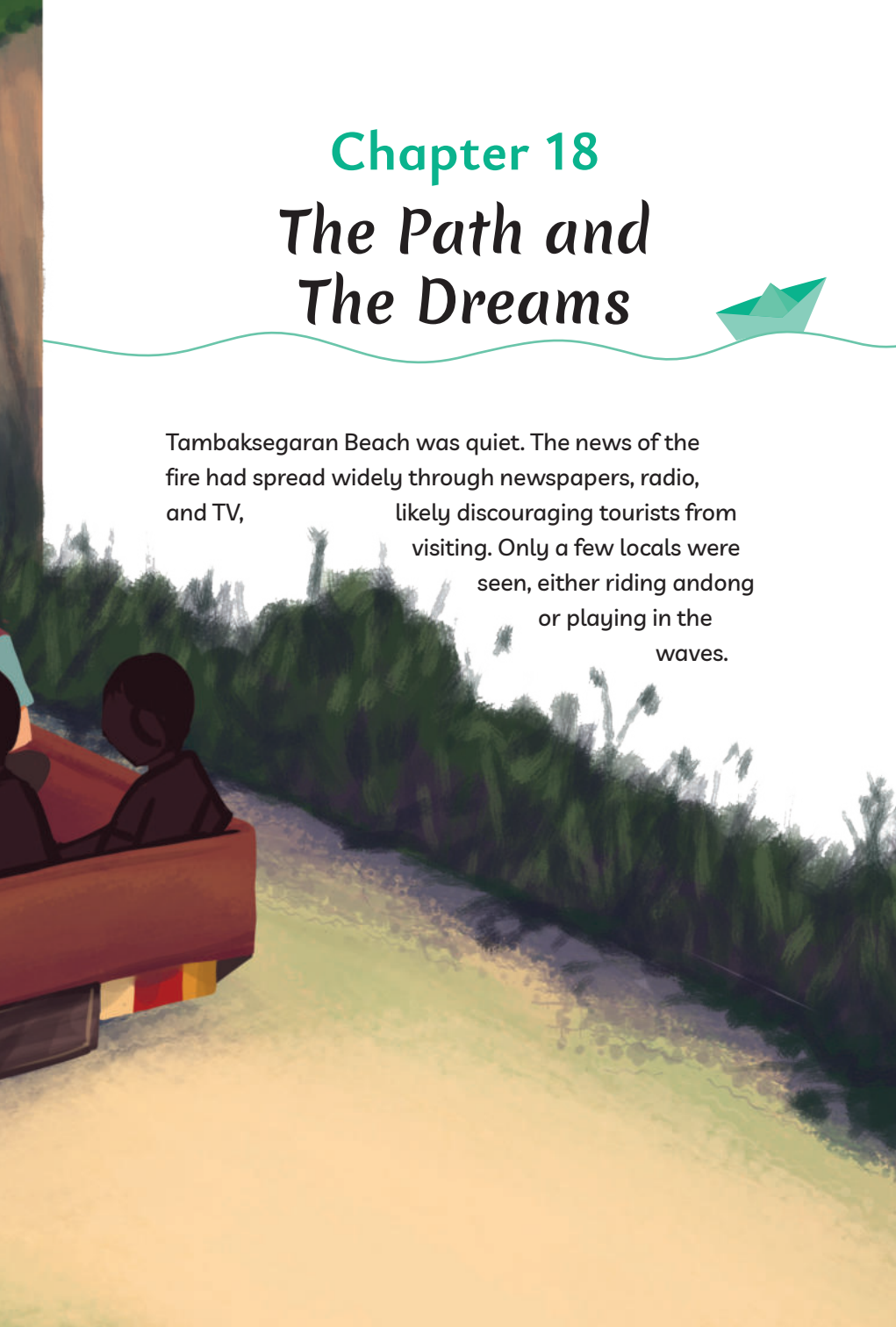
Bapak realized that anything forced to grow too quickly will eventually fade away just as fast. He should have been more patient and allowed Layur and Alun to progress one step at a time until they were fully ready.

Indeed, when his daughter organized her plans more effectively and involved many parties, their tourist village regained media attention. Various stakeholders showed interest, including universities, paragliding investors from Menado, and even the Ministry of Tourism itself, which expressed interest in organizing a kite festival early next year.

Bapak couldn't even believe it, wondering whether his Genduk Layur's hard work was truly the driving force behind it all.?

Chapter 18

The Path and The Dreams



Tambaksegaran Beach was quiet. The news of the fire had spread widely through newspapers, radio, and TV, likely discouraging tourists from visiting. Only a few locals were seen, either riding andong or playing in the waves.

"Aluuuun, you're the coordinator for the kite festival, right?" Petrus shouted over the sound of the waves, wind, and the old pickup's rumbling engine.

"Yeees... what about it?"

"My *pakde* owns a convection and printing shop. How about we put up flags and banners along the beach?" Petrus suggested.

"That's a great idea! I totally agree!" Dini replied. "As for the bamboo needed for the banners, let the siblings Vani and Sisil handle it. Their father is a bamboo supplier."

"I'll try to ask our dad, but I can't promise," Vani replied.

"Why?" Layur chimed in.

"Our dad is stingy, *mbedidil*, haha!" Sisil said innocently.

The teenagers erupted into laughter. The car turned onto a rugged, hardened dirt road and slowly wound its way up Menara Hill.

Ratna gasped in wonder. This was the first time she had seen her village from the top of Menara Hill. Down below, houses were lined up, interspersed with *para-para*, where fishermen dried their nets and preserved salted fish. On the other side, the colorful boats looked like a masterpiece painted by a world-renowned maestro.

"Wow, what a beautiful view. Hey, look at the one with those bird cage poles. Isn't that your house, Yul?" Ratna commented while nudging Yuli.

"Yeah. One, two, three, four, five. Yep, if it's five poles, that's my house. I'm the one who hoists the flag, no wait, the bird cages every morning, haha," Yuli joked.

Dini just had to tease. "Next year, you'll be invited by Pak Bupati to be part of the flag-bearing squad at the regency square!"

Everyone burst out laughing, except Basri and Naryo, who were sitting up front. They were deep in conversation, occasionally munching on *manggleng*—a cassava snack the size of potato fries. It was rock-hard.

"What's wrong, Layur? You seem lost in thought," Dini said, making her other friends notice that Layur was being unusually quiet.

Layur was snapped back and chuckled softly. "Think about it. What can be enjoyed from here, without paying a lot of money, and easily promoted online?"

The nine people in the back of the truck were deep in thought, including Layur. What could it be? A cheap tourist spot that attracts more people and is easily promoted on the Internet? The car wound its way

up Menara Hill, climbing higher and higher. The view grew more breathtaking.

"I have a suggestion," Vani said, raising her hand. "What about cycling! The route goes uphill from the beach, all the way up ... up ... to the cave..."

Sisil jumped in. "There's an attraction that's even cheaper and draws more people. Let's invite the school scouts to trek from the beach to the hilltop. With 200 students, it'll be a big event. I can sell scout sticks made from my dad's bamboo."

"Nice one! You're a business genius," Petrus commented, thumbs up.

Vani suggested having a scenic viewpoint along the road, but Yuli wanted more shade trees.

"Why build a viewpoint that might spoil the view? Let's plant more trees instead. People would rather sit under the trees. Especially if they're with someone special, hehe," Yuli said.

Vani got defensive at Yuli's remark. "Hey, *cah ayu*, my scenic viewpoint wouldn't be made from concrete. It would be made of bamboo to give it an exotic feel. And my dad could supply the bamboo."

Hahaha! The laughter filled the air as the group of friends arrived at their destination.

"We're here!" Basri exclaimed from the front. "Everyone out!"

"Wawan, you've been pretty quiet," Alun said, tapping his friend back. "Why don't you spread out the mat? I'll bring out the snacks and drinks."

"On it, Mas." Wawan quickly unrolled the mat and took it to a row of teak trees in front of the cave. With Petrus's help, they set up a cozy spot in no time.

Suddenly, Alun remembered the time. "It's already 12 o'clock, aren't you guys going to pray?"

"You're right, thanks for reminding us," Basri replied.

After taking turns performing *wudhu*, they prayed together in the *musalla* provided in the tourist area. Luckily, there were sufficient prayer mats and *mukena* available. Basri, the youth leader of the Dusun Prau mosque, led the congregation as the *imam*.

"Aren't you praying, Layur?" Petrus asked. The three of them—Alun, Layur, and Petrus—sat on a bench on the left side of the cave.

Layur glanced at him sideways. "You really want to know? I'm on my period. Hey, we've brought some food, right?"

"Relax. Pak Kadus gave us 15 packed meals. We were planning to have a meeting at the community hall until this evening. There's also a box of donuts from Yu Semi and some biscuits and tea from Pakde

Bambang. It's all in the car. Let's hope Mas Naryo and Basri haven't devoured it all," Petrus said.

Alun was quiet for a moment, deep in thought. "This place should've been crowded, especially since tomorrow is a holiday."

"Don't be sad. Everything will work out in time. Past incident has made some tourists cancel their river tubing plans. Mas Naryo says five groups have already asked to reschedule. Hopefully, there won't be any more trouble and this place will be crowded with tourists again," Petrus said wisely.

"Easy for you to say 'don't be sad'," Layur muttered. "I'm still traumatized by what happened. I don't want to get my dreams up too high again."

Alun moved to sit on Layur's left side. Now, the girl was sandwiched between her two male friends.

"Layur, didn't you remember when we sat up in a row like this?" Alun said.

Layur's brow furrowed. Petrus bit his lower lip, a sign that he was deep in thought.

"I remember!" Petrus almost shouted. "Two years ago, during National Education Day, we sat in the same formation as now. We were part of the *cerdas cermat* quiz team representing our school, and we worked so well together. You were our spokesperson,

Layur, and your voice was so strong that it intimidated the other teams."

Layur›s eyes widened. "Oh yeah, you remember."

Alun's expression turned serious. "At that time, the Layur we knew was an optimist. Fearless against opponents, confident of winning. She dared to dream big, representing our district at the provincial level."

Petrus added. "Yeah, the Layur I used to know would never give up. But now, you're just a shadow of your former self. You lose your fire, get emotional easily, and don›t dare to aim high."

Layur let out a loud laugh. The sound reverberated off the walls of Bukit Menara. Luckily, all of her other friends had finished praying. "You guys. You really know how to lift my spirits. Thanks, bros!"

"I'm starving. Let's eat," Wawan said, approaching them. "Let's get our food out and eat together."

Eleven people gobbled down fifteen portions of rice. It goes without saying who had seconds. Alun beckoned to his friends to take a look at the photos on his phone.

"Want to know how our tourism village idea was sparked? It›s all because of these photos!"

Vani, Sisil, Petrus, Ratna, and Dini crowded around to get a closer look. The phone circulated among them, and they all *oohed* and *aahed*.

"Is this really Tambaksegaran Beach?" Ratna asked, curious.

Alun shook his head. "Actually, it's Parangtritis Beach. I took the photo from the top of that hill." He pointed to the telecommunication tower.

"This beach in our neighboring district is really packed, isn't it? Many buses and vehicles parked around the beach. Layur was so sure that Dusun Prau and Tambaksegaran Beach could be transformed into a tourist destination just as good," Alun explained.

Dini glanced at Ratna meaningfully. "How about you take us all the way up there, to the spot where the photo was taken, Alun?"

Ratna quickly chimed in. "Yeah, who knows, maybe standing up there will give us lots of ideas for developing our tourism village. Right?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" Dini, Vani, Sisil, and Petrus agreed.

"Let's go, then!" Alun exclaimed. "Petrus, go tell Mas Naryo we're leaving."

Meanwhile, Layur was having a heated discussion with Naryo in front of the cave.

"That's not right, Mas Naryo. You can't

discriminate like that. Our tourist spots need to be accessible for people with disabilities." Layur's voice rose in protest.

Mas Naryo scratched his head. "We're working on it, Layur. We've made the stairs here more accessible, and there are even special paths for people with disabilities. But not all are suitable for people with disabilities, especially attractions like this river tubing. The cave floor is slippery, Layur."

"Excuse me, Mas Naryo, Layur. All of us are going to the top of the hill, okay? Alun will accompany us," Petrus interjected.

Naryo gave them permission to explore Bukit Menara. "But don't stay too long, okay? It's getting late, and we don›t have electricity here."

Layur didn't like being interrupted. She poked Naryo. "Mas, I want to try something."

Naryo's gut told him he wouldn't like this. "What do you mean, Layur?"

"I want to go into the cave and try floating down the river on a tube like the other tourists!"

Naryo's face went white. Wawan, Basri, and Yuli, who were standing there, looked just as horrified.

Naryo begged. "Don't be reckless, Layur. It's dangerous. I'll get in trouble with your dad if anything happens to you."

Layur ignored him. She swiftly moved her crutches towards the cave entrance.

"If you're not coming with me, that's fine. I can do it myself. I discovered this cave, and I've been in worse situations before."

Yuli exclaimed.

"Layur, stop! Please!"

Chapter 19

Toppled Over

Basri knew Layur's character well. They had known each other since before they started school.

"The more you argue with her, the more stubborn she'll be, Mas," Basri whispered to Naryo. "Let her try until she reaches her limit, Mas Naryo. Just prepare three tubes. We'll all jump into the river."

Naryo was still uncertain, but Basri's look made him change his mind. "Alright. Wawan and I will get the tubes. You and Yuli try to calm Layur down. Tell her to wait for me."

Yuli was having a hard time holding Layur back. The more Yuli blocked her way, the more determined Layur became.

"The Layur I know is indeed brave," Basri said in a loud voice, trying to get Layur›'s attention. It worked, she fell silent, although her face still looked sulky.

"But the brave Layur I know isn't the reckless type," Basri added.

Layur spun around. "Don't act like you know me, Basri. I'm annoyed." Despite her words, her anger seemed to ease slightly. Basri was indeed skilled at choosing his words.

"We'll all go into the river together, but let's do it properly. Wait for Mas Naryo and Wawan to bring the tubes. If you're going to be reckless, then go ahead and jump in alone."

Layur didn't say a word. She gave in and sat down on a bench, waiting for the tubes. Her lips remained sealed. Yuli was greatly relieved.

Wawan and Naryo arrived, each carrying a fully inflated tube. Naryo had double-checked at the cave site—no flat tubes this time. He wasn't going to relive the trauma of the previous week›s tragedy.

The five of them headed to the river's edge within the cave. They had to be extremely careful not to slip on the slick floor. The karst cave was filled with dripping water, forming beautiful stalactites and stalagmites, but also treacherous underfoot.

Yuli and Naryo helped Layur settle into the tube, positioning her hips to the center and her head to one side, her thighs draped over the edge.

«Yuli, Wawan... you two get on the tubes. I'll swim and steer them. Basri, you follow along the bank and keep an eye on us, okay?" Naryo instructed.

"Got it, Mas," Basri replied.

Yuli and Wawan had already positioned themselves on the tubes, lying on their backs like Layur. Naryo efficiently linked the three tubes in a line, with Wawan at the front, Layur in the middle, and Yuli at the back.

The river's depth was between Naryo's knees and chest. Carefully, he began pushing the front inner

tube towards the middle of the river. The row of tubes glided along smoothly.

"Wan, steer the tube if you need to. Use your feet to deflect any rocks," Naryo instructed.

It turned out that floating down the river on a tube was actually quite fun, Layur thought. She hadn't expected Naryo to let her try this river tubing adventure. Inwardly, she regretted how harshly she'd spoken to him, especially because he's older than her.

Splash! Splash! Naryo splashed water from the side of the tube at Wawan, Layur, and Yuli. The three of them were startled, but they quickly retaliated. A full-blown water splashing battle ensued. Yuli, at the back, easily splashed Layur and Wawan in front of her. Soaked! The sound of joyful squeals filled the underground river.

"Wawan! I'll wait here, okay? You're approaching the deep part of the river, and I won't be able to swim there. Just stay still and enjoy the current..." Naryo shouted.

His shout was drowned out by the joyful screams of the three on the tube. They were having a blast, splashing each other with river water. The tube bounced as it navigated through the rapids, caught in the uneven current. Yuli squealed with delight, feeling like she was on a swing. She bounced up and down, laughing. Wawan grew more and more excited,

splashing water in every direction, unaware that Layur was struggling.

The tube was becoming increasingly slippery. Layur was panicking, but too embarrassed to ask for help. *After all, I've put myself in this situation, she thought. I need to pull myself together and stay calm.*

Layur's amputated left leg was struggling to find purchase on the slippery tube. With all her might, she used her left hand to lift her body, which was sliding further into the water. *This was tough!* And then, suddenly, the tube hit another current, lifting and bouncing over the waves.

Splash! Blurp ... blurp! In an instant, Layur's body tumbled and slipped, sliding down into the water from the center of the tube. She tried to stand, her right hand clinging desperately to the slick tube. In no time, her entire head was submerged beneath the surface.

"Layur!"
"Layur...!"
"Layur...!"

Yuli, Naryo, and Basri, who were watching the tube's movement, cried out in unison. Wawan turned around and was shocked to see that his friend, who had been on the second tube, was gone. Layur's right hand had lost its grip on the tube.

Blurp!
Blurp!

Layur gasped for air; everything happened in an instant. Water flooded her mouth as she kicked frantically, trying to reach the river bottom. But the water was too deep and her leg was too short. Meanwhile, the undercurrent was stronger than the surface current, pulling her down. Layur struggled to stay afloat.

Splash! Suddenly, two people grabbed her hands. They wrapped Layurs arms around their shoulders and pulled in perfect unison, lifting her out of the water.

Whoa! Layur took a deep breath, coughing and spitting out water. She was still bobbing in the water, supported by Naryo and Basri. The three tubes floated about ten meters away. *Had I been carried that far downstream?*

"Layur!"

"Layur ...!"

"Layur ...!"

Ahh, refreshing!

Vani drained the water from her bottle in one gulp. She was satisfied, enjoying the breathtaking view from the top of Bukit Menara. The hike had been tough, though, with the hot sun beating down on them and the lack of shade on the hill making it even more sweltering for the teens from Dusun Prau.

"Shall we head down?" Vani suggested.

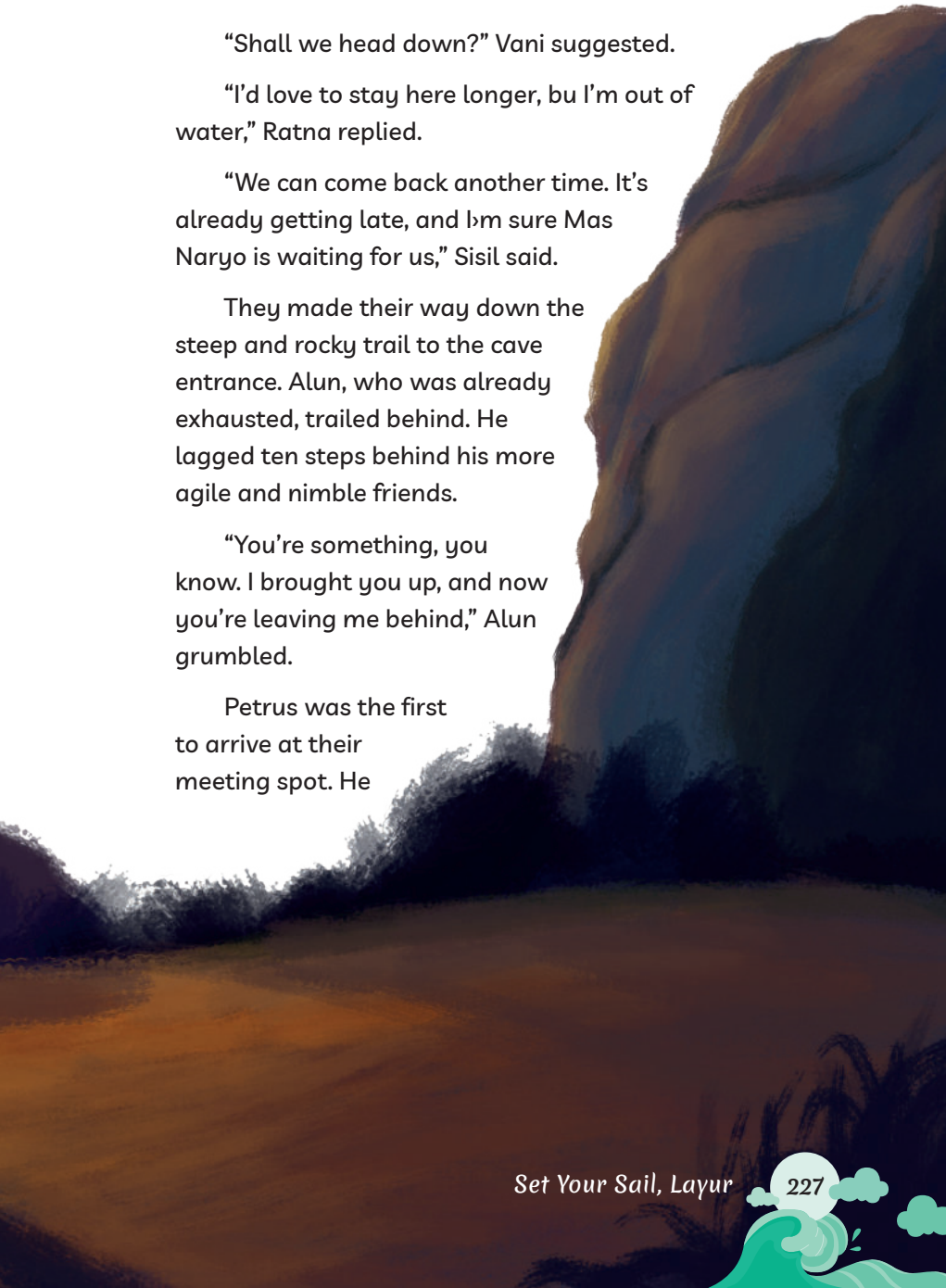
"I'd love to stay here longer, bu I'm out of water," Ratna replied.

"We can come back another time. It's already getting late, and I›m sure Mas Naryo is waiting for us," Sisil said.

They made their way down the steep and rocky trail to the cave entrance. Alun, who was already exhausted, trailed behind. He lagged ten steps behind his more agile and nimble friends.

"You're something, you know. I brought you up, and now you're leaving me behind," Alun grumbled.

Petrus was the first to arrive at their meeting spot. He



was shocked to see Layur and some others who had stayed behind drenched from head to toe.

"We left for a while, and you're having a swimming party?" Petrus asked, eyeing Naryo and the others, who were still dripping wet and shivering.

Yuli nudged Wawan. "You tell them."

Wawan was hesitant to explain, but Layur interrupted. "Yeah, we went splashing around in the river. It's so refreshing, and the water's safe to drink, too. Happy now?"

Petrus was left speechless. He was only asking a question, and Layur snapped at him.

One by one, Layur's friends arrived and sat down on the mat. The team was finally complete. They finished off the remaining food. Dini, noticing a guava tree not far from where they sat, immediately pulled Wawan's arm. The two of them quickly climbed the tree and picked the ripe fruits. Sisil and Yuli followed closely behind. They waited beneath the tree, hoping their friends would toss down some guavas.

"At first, we'd planned to start with a meeting. But we ended up discovering so much just by exploring, no need to sit in a circle at all," Alun said, chewing on a biscuit.

Ratna nodded. "It's great that we came here. Now we know exactly what we need to improve along the

route from Tambaksegaran Beach to this spot. I've already made a few sketches."

Layur and some others sitting on the mat scooted closer to Ratna. The girl who loved drawing had created a detailed map of the area, covering Dusun Prau, Tambaksegaran Beach, and the surrounding hills. It highlighted locations for lodgings, campsites, orchards, cultural centers, and several trekking routes.

Layur was impressed. "Wow, this is amazing. Your ideas are brilliant."

Ratna chuckled and clarified. "Actually, this isn›t my idea. I was inspired by those who went up the hill with me. From there, we could see the vast horizon, which made sketching easy."

"By the way, what did you find while we were up on the hill?" Petrus asked Layur.

Layur glanced at Mas Naryo and motioned for him to speak. But he raised his hands, palms outward, indicating that Layur should continue.

Layur paused for a moment. Then she said, "My finding is simple but very important. Everything we plan must be accessible to people with disabilities. And most importantly, safety must be our top priority."

Layur's friends spontaneously applauded. They realized that being creative and innovative was essential for teenagers like them, but so was being

responsible and careful. That way, their plans would bring benefits, not disasters.

Alun spoke up. "I think we can't handle everything together. It's better if we split the tasks based on our interests. I'm not good at climbing and stuff. I'd rather focus on promotion and research using the Internet. Wawan would be a great partner for me."

"Yeah, leave the climbing, facility setup, and sign installation to me and the tomboy, Dini, here," Petrus chimed in, waving at Dini, who was sitting comfortably on the tree, enjoying guavas.

"I'm actually more into the arts. Would it be okay if I taught the kids dance and gamelan at Layur's pendopo? Anyone else want to join?" Vani asked, and Ratna immediately responded, "I›d love to!" Basri, Yuli, and Sisil followed suit.

Layur was touched. *If only I had involved them from the start... Ah, never mind. But I guess everything happens unexpectedly for a reason.*

"Definitely. You can ask my dad to help with the gamelan. My *pendopo* and yard are spacious, so you can dance or do whatever you like," Layur said. "I'll focus on spreading the word among the youth groups in the nearby village with Mas Naryo. That way, our plans can gain broader support."

Naryo interrupted. “It’s already time for Asr prayer. Let’s pray and then head back down. I need to return Pakde Bambang’s pickup before Maghrib. He’s going to the city tonight.”

Layur protested, “I don’t want to go home. I want to stay here and sleep over.”

Everyone was shocked. Naryo looked exasperated.

“Layur, don’t be ridiculous. Haven’t you had enough of almost drowning in the river?” Naryo complained.

“No, I haven’t,” Layur said, crossing her arms. “Guys, why don›t we all camp here for the night?””

Chapter 20
Reaching for the Stars

Naryo shut the car door with a bang.

"Are you mad at me, Mas Naryo?" Layur asked.

Naryo hesitated. "Not at all, Layur. This pickup has always had a loose door. You have to slam it shut firmly—like that."

"Oh, I see. Have you written down everyone's requests?"

Naryo nodded. "Yeah, everyone asked me to bring them clothes, towels, soaps, and toothbrushes. Oh, and Wawan asked me to bring his laptop charger too."

Layur frowned. "Where's he going to charge it? There's no electricity here."

Naryo face-palmed. "Wawan's just messing with me. Let me bring his laptop home instead."

"Make sure to bring lots of food, snacks, and drinks, Mas. We're starving," Layur said.

"Got it!"

Layur moved closer to Naryo.

"Besides clothes and toiletries, tell my dad to also bring some *kempitan*."

"Kempitan? What is it?"

"*Ra sah takon.* Don't bother asking. My dad knows."

Naryo turned the car around and drove down Bukit Menara, planning to come back up on his motorcycle.

Sisil, who had been listening to Layur and Naryo's conversation, whispered to her sibling, feeling curious.

"So, what is *kempitan*?"

Vani whispered, “Sanitary pads.”

Finally, the teenagers agreed to camp for one night at Bukit Menara. Thrilled by Layur’s brilliant idea, they couldn’t wait to see how breathtakingly beautiful Tambaksegaran Beach looked from above, lit up by the moonlight.

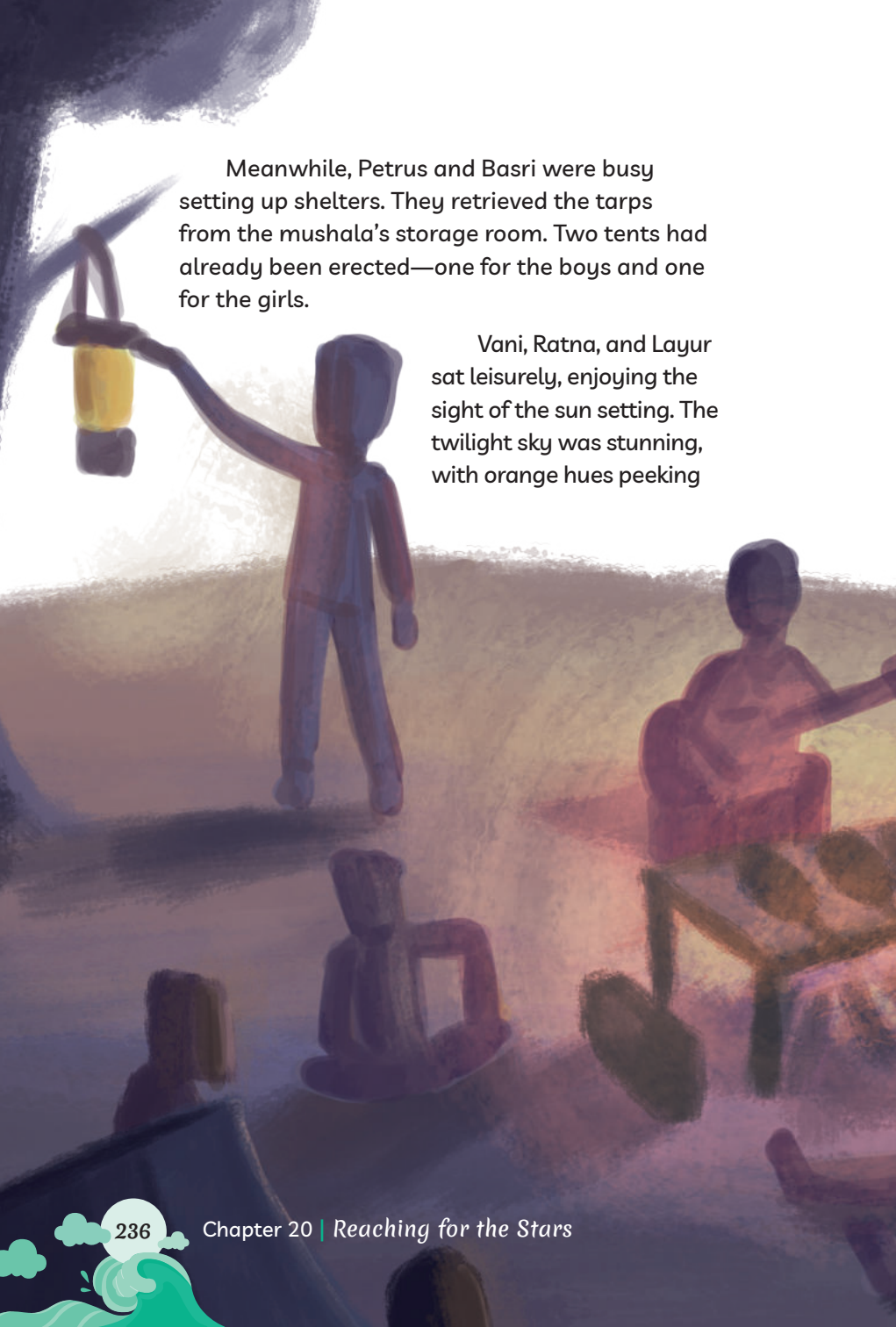
Wawan and Alun were already busy making videos and taking photos of the sunset on the hill. Their intention was to create as much social media exposure as possible to attract visitors to the village’s tourism account. Luckily, their friends were more than happy to help—posing and even acting in front of the camera.

“*Ghaes*, if you think this awesome sunset view behind me is in Bali or the Maldives, you’re wrong, *ghaes*. I’m currently in one of the hidden paradises in Gunungkidul, Yogyakarta....” said Dini with a thick Javanese accent. With her tomboyish charm, Dini repeatedly struck poses, mimicking a TV travel host’s style.

“You’re from village, *wong deso*. It’s weird to hear you say ‘guys’ with such a thick accent,” Alun said playfully, and the others burst into laughter. Dini paid no heed. She just requested to move to a new location for another take.

Meanwhile, Petrus and Basri were busy setting up shelters. They retrieved the tarps from the mushala's storage room. Two tents had already been erected—one for the boys and one for the girls.

Vani, Ratna, and Layur sat leisurely, enjoying the sight of the sun setting. The twilight sky was stunning, with orange hues peeking



through the wispy clouds that resembled ocean waves.

"Should girls like us go to college?" Layur asked without turning around.

"I'd like to. All my siblings have graduated from college," Ratna said.

Vani chimed in. "I don't want to rush into college. After graduating from high school, I want to perform. Dancing from one studio to another, from

stage to stage. From town to town, and hopefully, across countries."

Vani, sitting between her two best friends, was enveloped in a strengthening hug.

"I can relate to you, Vani. I haven't thought about college yet,"Layur responded. "My dad hasn't mentioned it. Maybe it's because money is a problem. He sold his only boat to pay for my high school tuition."

Vani squeezed her best friend's hand tightly. "That doesn't mean you can't have dreams, Layur."

Layur smiled, and then said, "I want this village to be bustling with tourists again—buses lined up at the end of the road, families arriving on motorcycles and cars. After sunset, tourists still linger, relaxed and smiling, enjoying grilled fish and wedang jahe at Yu Semi's warung. Little children dance in front of my house, watched by visitors snapping photos and recording videos, capturing memories. That's my simple dream."

Ratna chimed in, offering words of wisdom. "The moment we think our dream is simple, the strength of our conviction to achieve it shines through."

"Where did you get that profound quote from?" Vani teased.

"It just popped out of my brilliant mind, haha!" Ratna responded.

"Yeah, I'm confident we can make it happen. Dusun Prau will be world-famous—guesthouses fully booked, Yu Semi's and other warungs packed with customers until late at night, grilling fish nonstop. And me, this simple Layur, who might not even have a college degree, will be supported by Doctor Ratna and Vani, the art maestro, to turn our dreams into reality."

The twilight scenery was enhanced by the silhouettes of the three friends, wrapped in a tight embrace.

Petrus spotted the headlights of the approaching vehicle and jumped up, racing toward the path. Sisil and Wawan trailed behind him.

"Huray, Mas Naryo's here! I've been starving," Wawan shouted.

"But why's he taking the car? Didn't he say he'd ride his motorcycle?" Sisil asked.

Petrus wasn't sure. But Sisil was right ... those two headlights meant it was supposed to be a car.

"No way!" Wawan exclaimed.

The bright headlights drew closer, revealing two motorcycles. Pak Kadus rode one, while Mas Naryo rode the other, with Yu Semi seated behind him. Both bikes were loaded with supplies.

Wawan called out to his friends to help unload the stuff. It wasn't just clothes, but also kerosene lantern, extra tarps, and...

"Fish! This is my treat for you runaways, haha!" Yu Semi joked. «Go get the fire ready. I've already cleaned and seasoned them."

Basri quickly lit the lantern. Bukit Menara, originally dimly lit by the moon, was now bathed in bright light, almost like daytime. At the far corner, Wawan, Ratna, Petrus, and Yuli were grilling fish. The other kids were busy arranging the dinner spread. Whoops, no ...

Instead of joining the others, Layur and Alun sat with Naryo on the bench in front of the cave.

"I didn't invite Pak Kadus and Yu Semi. They wanted to come here after I told them about what happened this afternoon," Naryo explained. He was worried that the teenagers might feel uncomfortable with adults around.

"What did you tell them, Mas? Did you mention the river incident?" Layur asked with concerns.

Alun was taken aback. "Incident? What incident?"

Layur and Mas Naryo exchanged a quick glance. "Uh, you see... um... my sandal. Yeah, it fell into the water and Mas Naryo and Basri went after it," Layur stammered, trying to deflect.

Mas Naryo cleared his throat. "I had to share your ideas to Pak Kadus. Your collaboration and the sketch,

whoever made it, really caught his attention. And he couldn't wait to meet you all."

"All we talked about was just a wishful thought, Mas Naryo," Alun said with humility. "We have no idea what to do with it."

"You shouldn't think that way, Alun. The elders in Dusun Prau never even imagined coming up with plans like yours. Our lives have always been about sailing, rowing, throwing nets, and preserving fish. It's a tradition passed down through generations."

Alun nodded in agreement. "We never thought we'd get this far either. Since the Internet came to our village, my friends have become eager to learn anything—technology, social media, arts. That's why our minds have grown so much."

"That's the thing, Alun. The older generation is clueless about the Internet, laptops, or computers. They don't know how to use them, and they might even blow them up! *Boom*, like that... haha!" Naryo joked.

Layur suddenly realized something. "Wait ...what about Yu Semi? Why did she come along too?"

"Well, I've got a lot of stuff to bring up here, and Yu Semi said she could lend a hand. Plus, she wants to teach Vani how to dance," Naryo explained.

The teenagers joyfully savored their dinner. Their laughter and chatter echoed off the walls of Bukit Menara. Layur and Alun led their friends to the edge of the path leading to the sea. The air filled with continuous *oohs* and *aahs*.

The night view from the hilltop was like a black canvas to an artist's eye. The dark sea and dim sky merged together. The stars twinkled like celestial ornaments scattered across the arched sky, where it met the sea at the horizon. On the vast, endless waters, the flickering lights of boats bobbed gently with the waves.

"How many nights, do you think, campers would want to stay here, with this incredible view?" Layur asked her friends.

"They might even ask us to build a villa here, so they can relax and enjoy the starry nights for weeks on end," Pak Kadus said.

They all laughed. They hadn't expected Pak Kadus to be so poetic.

Suddenly, Alun appeared between them.

"Are you ready, Pak Kadus? Have you memorized it?" Alun asked out of the blue.

The rest of them looked confused. Pak Kadus flustered.

"Pak Kadus is going to shoot a promotional video of our tourist village," Alun explained. "Who knows,

after it goes viral online, he might get promoted to be a *camat*, sub-district head."

"Hush, don't be ridiculous...," Pak Kadus responded.

Pak Kadus and Alun quickly moved to the cliff's edge, seeking a perfect angle. With the star-studded sky and obscure sea behind them, Alun was ready to capture the shot. Layur put her finger to her lips, asking her friends to keep quiet.

"*Action*!" Alun exclaimed.

"I'm standing on Bukit Menara, *ghaes*..."

"Cut! Cut! Pak Kadus, please don't use 'ghaes' like that," Alun said with a mix of frustration and amusement.

"So awkward!" the teenagers chorused in perfect unison..

Chapter 21
A Simple Dream

One by one, the teenagers stepped down from Pakde Bambang's pickup truck. They looked sleepy and exhausted, but their faces couldn›t conceal their excitement.

"Pakde, thank you for picking us up," Layur exclaimed, waving her hand.

"*Podho-podho* ... you're welcome, Layur. Anytime you need a ride, just let me know. *Wis*, off you go home," Pakde Bambang responded.

This time, Layur asked Pakde Bambang to drop them off at her house—no detour to the community hall where they'd first gathered. She remembered she had some syrup stored away, perfect for quenching her friends' thirst before they headed off to their own homes.

Before dawn, Yu Semi had gone home with Pak Kadus on his motorcycle because she had to buy ingredients for her warung. Vani and Layur, already awake since dawn, saw Yu Semi off and expressed their gratitude.

"Thank you, Yu, for teaching me dance and playing *cublak-cublak suweng* with us all night. It was so much fun," Vani said.

"Oh, don't mention it ... I just did my part, contributed a little. I'm not capable of thinking deeply like you kids," Yu Semi said.

Layur added. "But, your performance during the *cublak-cublak suweng* recording was fantastic. It looked so natural."

"Oh please, natural? I'm just goofing around like a village woman. Hahaha... Tell Alun that if the video isn't good enough, we need to retake it. And I'll make it even more over-the-top!"

Layur and Vani waved goodbye as Yu Semi and Pak Kadus left their camping site. Their morning's agenda was to shoot a sunrise video at Bukit Menara. It was sure to be fun. At least they had something to do while waiting for Pakde Bambang to pick them up..

"Bapak ... I'm home .... Pak!"

Layur opened the gate, followed by Alun and the others. Vani and Sisil went straight home since their houses were right across the road. Layur quickly headed to the kitchen, grabbed some glasses, and prepared a batch of iced syrup drinks. *All set!* Everyone was in for a cool treat.

"Ratna, Dini... can you help me take these drinks?" Layur called out. The two girls, who were lounging in the *pendopo*, quickly got up and headed to the kitchen to help.

Layur continued calling out for her father, but there was still no response.

"Do you guys want to eat? If so, go make some noodles—fried or boiled, your choice; eggs, too. Just check the cabinet above the kitchen sink," Layur said, and her male friends responded with enthusiasm.

Layur hung out with her friends, relaxing. Before long, Vani and Sisil arrived, carrying a basket of rambutans they had picked from the garden.

"Hey, Layur, come here," Vani whispered. "I heard you calling out for your dad."

Layur nodded. Vani seemed to have some information.

"My mom said your father stopped by yesterday and asked my dad to keep an eye on the house. He left because he got a call," Vani explained.

"What call? From who?"

Vani hesitated, unsure of how to break the news, but Layur pressed her for more information.

"I don›t know how to say this... But my mom said the police called your dad in yesterday."

Layur was utterly shocked. The others who heard Vani›s explanation were just as stunned, and they all began chattering and asking questions at the same time.

"I don›t know either, Alun," Layur snapped, panicking. "What has Bapak done now? I heard the troublemakers have been caught."

Layur still couldn't shake the worry about her father's fate. She grabbed her crutches and began searching the house, room by room, hoping to find him. But still, no sign of Bapak.

"Alun, help me think this through, okay? Don't just zone out," Layur snapped. Alun, who had always been Layur's emotional anchor, knew exactly what to do: stay silent.

Vani tried to soothe Layur, while Yuli and Ratna urged her to sit and calm down.

Layur was on the verge of tears. She thought for a moment, and then pointed at Alun. “Get your bike, go! Give me a ride. We’re going to the police station. Let’s find Bapak.”

Alun started to panic too. “Which police station? There are many, Layur. You›re always impulsive.”

“Fine, I’ll go myself. Don’t follow me!” Layur snapped. She yanked her crutches roughly, determined to go.

Yuli tried to calm Layur down again. “I’ll come with you, okay? Just sit down, let me get my bike.”

Basri, Wawan, Sisil, and Vani piped up, saying they were ready to grab their bikes. Alun felt embarrassed, so he decided to get his bike too.

“None of us here have a motorbike?” Ratna asked in surprise.

“Well, we’re all the same age, and none of us are allowed to have a driver›s license yet. Dini’s the oldest, but she can’t even ride a bike,” Petrus teased.

“Hurry up and get your bikes. I›ll wait here for five minutes,” Layur interrupted.

Layur paced back and forth in the pendopo, waiting for her five friends to return with their bikes. She felt anxious. If her dad had been called by the police yesterday, why hadn›t he come home yet? What if he was being held in a cell? Layur felt like crying. She pictured her dad sleeping on a cold floor without a mat, like she had seen in a movie. Her dad

would definitely cough all night, and Layur knew he hated sleeping on the floor.

"Layuur! The bikes are ready...." Alun called out loudly. Indeed, Layur saw her five friends were already waiting with their bikes, and she quickly joined them at the yard. She picked Basri to ride tandem, because he was the biggest and presumably the strongest and fastest rider. The other friends quickly paired up to head to the police station together.

"Can we just go? Let's find him at the nearest police station," Layur urged.

Suddenly...

"Where are you guys going?" *Whoa, what?* Whose voice was that?

"Bapak!" Layur exclaimed joyfully. The person walking behind the bike was the one Layur had been anxious about. Her friends looked relieved.

"They said you were called by the police? Did they put you in jail, Bapak Layur?" Dini asked innocently.

Layur glared at her.

Bapak couldn't help but laugh. "Yeah, the police called me yesterday afternoon. Not to lock me up, but they needed me as a witness. They grilled me with questions, trying to piece together the file for Boss Kasno."

Petrus was curious. ""So ... why did you just get back from the police station today?"

"Who said that?" Bapak asked. "I was at home last night. I left early this morning to find diesel for the boat."

"Oh ... so that's what actually happened. Still freaking out, Layur?" Alun teased, earning a playful pout from Layur.

And then, all of Layur's friends said their goodbyes, promising to meet up soon and work on their plan to turn their village into a tourist destination.

"Hopefully, the proposal will get approved, Layur...," Ratna whispered, with Vani's genuine smile beside her.

"Can I hug you girls again like last night?" Layur asked affectionately.

Vani and Ratna hugged Layur.

"Your dream of building Dusun Prau will definitely become reality, Layur," Vani whispered.

"Yeah," Layur said, still wrapped in the embrace. "Don't forget your promise to help the kids here practice dancing and playing *gamelan*."

With that, the three of them let go.

"And you, Ratna. Wherever you go to study, don't forget to come home. At least, in Dusun Prau's history, there will be a beautiful doctor who was born here," Layur said, voice firm.

Layur waved goodbye to her two friends. The house felt empty again. But she knew her father would start asking about her whereabouts, and wouldn't stop until the night had fully settled.

"Are you happy having so many friends?" Bapak asked.

Layur nodded. She looped her arms around Bapak's, hugging it tightly.

"I'm bored being friends with just you, Pak!" Layur teased.

Bapak ruffled her daughter's hair, playfully indulging her need for attention. Layur wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him closer.

"Pak, in two months, I'll turn seventeen. Do you have enough savings to buy me a phone? You promised, didn›t you? A used one is fine," Layur pleaded.

"I'll see what I can do," Bapak said briefly.

"It would be great if I have a phone. I could call my friends, and take photos of our village and share it on social media. So that more people would come here," Layur said excitedly.

Bapak just nodded, lamenting over his empty wallet.

"Oh, by the way, there›s mail for you while you were out. I'm not sure what it›s about, but it has the UGM logo on it," Bapak said a while later. UGM, or Gadjah Mada University, is one of the prestigious universities in Indonesia.

Layur nodded. "Maybe it's a response to the letter I sent a while ago. They're slow to reply, huh?"

"What did you ask UGM about?"

Layur shrugged. "I was curious about scholarships for people with disabilities like me."

"Go ahead and open the letter."

Layur let go of her father's embrace.

"I'll take a bath and wash my hair first, Pak. I've been feeling sticky since I didn't get a proper wash yesterday afternoon."

"Aren't you curious about what's inside the letter?"

Layur just waved her hand; unclear whether she was signaling that she was going to the bathroom, or showing she wasn't curious about it at all.

Layur stepped into her room, grabbed a change of clothes, and then took the towel hanging in front of the bathroom door.

Should she go to college? Or focus on making the village tourism program a reality first? Layur looked at herself in the bathroom mirror with a wide smile, seeing her own reflection.

The moment we think our dream is simple, the strength of our conviction to achieve it shines through. Layur was very confident about her dream, just as Ratna wisely whispered last night!

A few moments later, Layur opened the letter bearing the emblem of her dream university. She read it on the porch as the dusk bled across the sky. Her eyebrows rose high as each word sank in, one by one. Far above the quiet hills of Dusun Prau, a shooting star streaked across the sky..

Epilogue

Who claims a legless soul can't move freely?

Just watch me! I ride dreams as I dance,
nothing can stop me.

It's not as easy as snapping fingers,
not by far.

But here I am, soaring beyond the hills,
reaching for the sky strewn with stars.

Glossary

Ampyang	A traditional Javanese snack made from peanuts coated in melted brown sugar.
Bapak or Pak (lit. Mister, Sir, or Father, Dad)	An Indonesian term used to address a male parent or an older man, as a sign of respect.
Bondet	A local term for blast or bomb fishing; practice that uses homemade explosives to stun or kill fish, often risking premature detonation.
Bukit	A hill.
Cadik	Bamboo or light wood attached on both sides of a traditional outrigger boat, shaped like wings, used as a balancing aid to prevent the boat from capsizing. Another term for this is *katir*.
Cah Ayu (lit. Pretty girl)	An affectionate term used to describe a beloved or cherished person—especially a woman or girl.
Caping (pronounced CHA-ping)	An Asian conical bamboo hat to protect from the sun.
Dusun	A small village; hamlet.
Gamelan	A set of Javanese musical instruments (also found in Sundanese, Balinese, and other regional cultures of Indonesia), consisting of *saron*, *bonang*, *rebab*, *gendang*, *gong*, etc.
Gatot	A traditional snack made from dried cassava that's sliced into thin strips, boiled, and mixed with sugar, typically served with grated coconut.
Ibu or Bu (lit. Ma'am/Mrs, or Mother/Mom)	An Indonesian term used to address a female parent or an older woman, as a sign of respect.

Jingking	A type of small crab, usually used as topping for *rempeyek*.
Kang or Kangmas (or Mas)	A respectful and affectionate term used to address men, typically older brothers, young men, or male peers. It conveys a sense of politeness and familiarity.
Layur	A marine fish species with a long, slender body. Its body length can reach up to 2 meters, with a recorded maximum weight of 5 kilograms, and it can live up to 15 years. It is particularly active during the day, roaming in shallow coastal waters rich in crustacean plankton.
Ledek/ledhek	Traditional performers—dancers and singers—who typically travel together with a gamelan ensemble.
Mas	*see* Kang or Kangmas.
Nduk or Genduk (lit. Girl or Young Girl)	A Javanese term of endearment used to address girl or young woman, similar to "dear" or "sweetheart".
Niyaga	Player of *gamelan* (musician).
Pak/Bu Bupati	A term used to address the head of the regency.
Pak/Bu Camat	A term used to address the head of the district.
Pak/Bu Kadus (short of Pak Kepala Dusun)	A term used to address the head of the village/hamlet, or Village Chief.
Pandan	A tropical plant commonly found in Southeast Asia, known for its long, green, fragrant leaves. Pandan leaves are widely used in cooking as flavoring or wrappers, especially for cakes and rice dishes. Besides culinary use, the leaves are also traditionally woven into mats, baskets, and other crafts.
Pendopo	A large, open structure that forms part of a traditional Javanese house, located at the front of the house, used for community gatherings and other social activities.

Rempeyek (also called peyek)	An Indonesian savory cracker made from a rice flour batter mixed with spices, herbs, and various toppings such as peanuts, dried shrimp, small fish, or, at some place, jingking, giving each bite a briny flavor and a crunchy texture.
River/Cave Tubing	Adventure activity involving floating along river currents using tubes (tire inner tubes), while enjoying the beauty of underground river caves.
Sarong	A traditional or cultural large piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and worn like a skirt or dress, often seen in rural or religious settings.
Sayur gori	A traditional Javanese dish made from young jackfruit (*gori*) and coconut milk.
Tayub	A social dance whose performers are called "ledek". The Tayub Yogyakarta art form has a cultural identity that reflects human life and its relationship with the surrounding nature. This dance is also found in other parts of Indonesia.
Tiwul	A traditional Javanese staple food, serving as a rice substitute, made from cassava (singkong) or sweet potato and known as *gaplek.*
Urap	Shredded coconut seasoned with spices, used as a mixture for boiled vegetables. Typically eaten with rice and fried tofu or tempeh.
Walang	An Indonesian and Javanese word for cricket. In many parts of Indonesia, including Central Java, these crickets are harvested and fried as a local snack.
Wayang	A traditional Indonesian performance art originating and rapidly developing on the islands of Java and Bali. Children can create *wayang* (shadow puppet) figures from cassava leaves or sweet potato materials.
Yu or Mbak Yu	A Javanese term used to address older woman.

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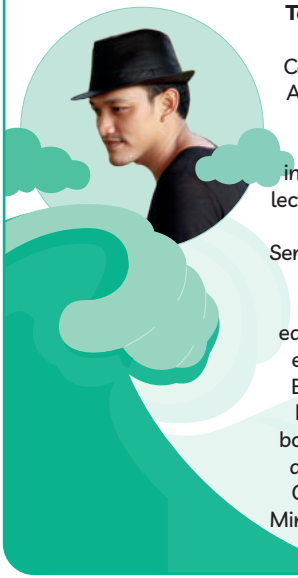

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