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The Girl of Spices

Musripah Medkom

*Translated from Indonesian to English
by Pujia Pernami*



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The Girl of Spices

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Author	: Musrifah Medkom
Supervisor	: Supriyatno Helga Kurnia, Lenny Puspita Ekawaty, Arman, Ivan Riadinata
Illustrator	: Ahmad Saba Dunya
Copy Editor	: Niknik M. Kuntarto Wuri Prihantini
Art Director	: Siti Wardyah Sabri
Book Designer	: Ines Mentari, Dono Merdiko
English version	
Translator	: Pujia Pernami
Editor	: Indah Nurchaidah

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Message from the Head of the Center for Book Affairs

Hello, children of Indonesia who love reading and being creative!

This time we will bring you cool and exciting books. Not only they are fun and interesting to read, but they will also broaden your horizons, inspire you, and help develop good character. In addition, you will be introduced to Indonesia's diverse cultures. These books are also accompanied by unique and attractive illustrations that are a pleasure to look at.

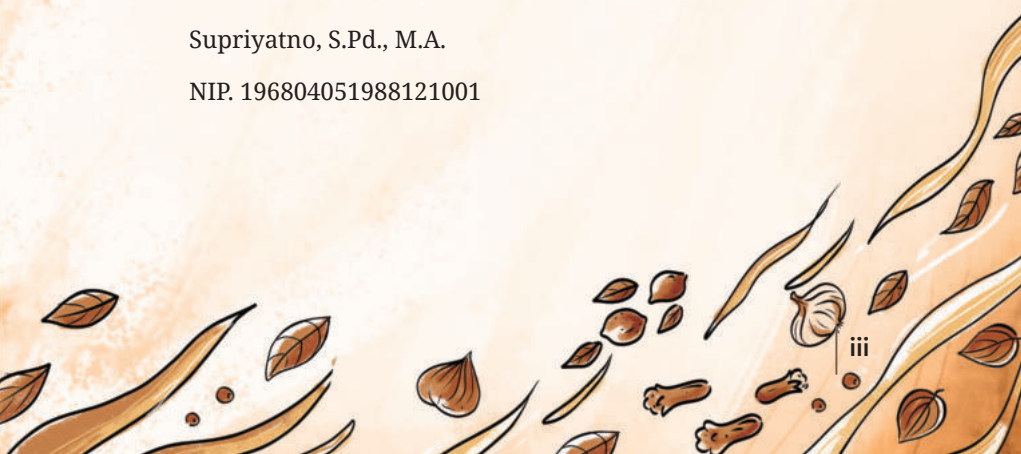
My dear children, a good book is one that moves and inspires us, like the one you are holding now.

Happy reading!

Head of the Center for Book Affairs

Supriyatno, S.Pd., M.A.

NIP. 196804051988121001





Foreword

With deep gratitude, the author has finally completed this novel. All praise be to Allah for the health, learning opportunities, and the support from many individuals that made this work possible.

Special thanks go to Dr. Niknik M. Kuntarto, M.Hum., whose attention to detail greatly enhanced the enjoyment of reading this novel. The author also extends sincere appreciation to Wuri Prihantini, M.Hum., for her steadfast guidance and thoughtful input, and of course, to the team at the National Book Center, who selected the author and provided the opportunity to learn and grow through this project.

Writing a novel for students under the guidelines set by the government's educational publishing standards was a new experience for me. The regular reporting process and relatively tight timeline became a motivating challenge to deliver a manuscript that is not only morally and educationally meaningful but also engaging and submitted on time.

Naturally, it was not easy, especially as I'm a working mother managing household responsibilities while also completing other writing commitments. But alhamdulillah, with perseverance and family support, all the challenges could be overcome.

May this humble novel brings positive energy and inspiration. Happy reading.

Musrifah, M. Med.Kom

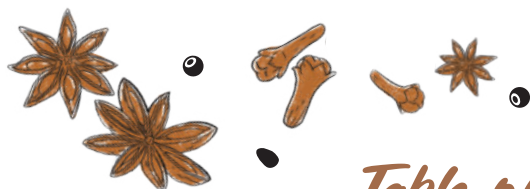


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Be like spices, they don't drown, even as the tide rises. They drift with grace through the currents of time, quietly cherished by those who love them from afar.



Prologue

I was never good at working with spices, but I once made a promise: that someday, I would write a story about spices, a story we could read together.

The little girl never missed a chance to accompany her mother shopping at the market. She is always looking forward to seeing the spice merchant. To her, the spice merchant was one of the magical people in the market. The moment her mother mentioned the name of a dish, the seller would pick out just the right spices, quickly, precisely, and without hesitation, then gather them onto a torn piece of paper, wrap them up, and hand them to her mother.





The little girl's sense of wonder hadn't ended. She saw another magic every time her mother touched the spices in her kitchen. Just like the spice merchant, her mother would pick up the spices, swiftly and carefully, then grind them by hand in a stone mortar.

She struggled to follow the story of the spices. Everything happened so fast. Before she could catch up, a fragrant smell filled the tiny kitchen, and the spices had already become a delicious dish that made her stomach growl with hunger.

Spices kept casting their charm, as if they didn't want her to ever stop admiring them. Almost every time she got sick, her mother turned to spices as her remedy. The little girl began to believe that spices were one of the magical gifts God had given to humans.

Years later, on her first day of marriage, her husband asked, "Do you know what kinds of spices there are?" She paused for a moment. What kind of question is that? She thought. "Of course I do," she answered lightly.

Her husband smiled and asked again, "What can you cook with them?"

This time, the girl fell silent. It was not an easy question. She had known spices and their wonders since childhood. But still ... she didn't understand why she had no interest in turning them into an authentic dish.

"I may not be good at cooking spices, but I promised, one day I will write a story about spices that we can read together," she said.

Happy reading!

Chapter 1

A Cup of Ginger Wedang That's No Longer Warm

*The absence of proper wedang to warm
her body was reason enough for her
heart to boil over.*



Clink ... clink

The long chime of Wak Parjan's pedicab bell broke the silence of Surabaya's night. A new day has just begun. The sky was still dark. It seemed the heavy rain from the night before had left the residents of the city wrapped in mist and dreams.

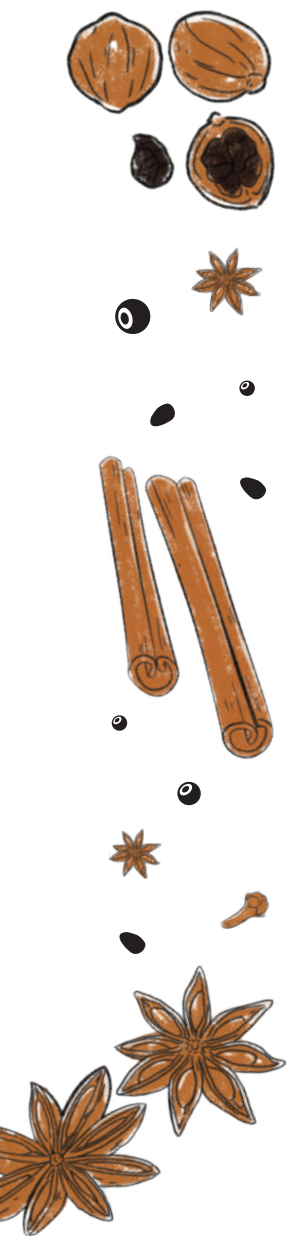
Wak Parjan pedaled his pedicab quickly. Surabaya was still very quiet and empty. He could ride through any street he wanted. There were no traffic officers on duty yet.

The old man knew that neither he nor his pedicab was welcome anymore in this big, polished-up city. Pedicabs were seen as outdated, no longer fit for the streets. Each year, there were fewer roads left where pedicabs were allowed. The road from the Red Bridge to Pabean Market was one of the few.

Wak Parjan had also long wanted to quit working as a pedicab driver. He wasn't terribly poor. Even though he had no children of his own, there was someone he had raised as his own, and that child now supported him.

But Wak Parjan was too attached to his pedicab. He just wanted to have an income of his own, even if it was small. In fact, he had only one regular customer left: Naning, a wealthy, middle-aged spice seller who had been widowed for ten years. In the past, Naning's husband often helped Wak Parjan, and now she relied on him as her trusted means of transportation to and from Pabean Market.





Wak Parjan took a deep breath. He removed the hood of his raincoat. He had arrived at Naning's house—a large Roman-style home with a tall black iron gate. Two cajuput trees stood in front of the house, as if guarding the entrance.

It was an unusual sight, a pedicab driver like Wak Parjan picking up the lady of such a grand home every day. But Naning preferred riding in a pedicab to asking Mr. Wisnu, the family chauffeur, to drive her.

“Marlan! Marlan!” Wak Parjan shouted as he peeked through the gaps in Naning's front gate. Now and then, he swallowed raindrops that slid down his face.

A tall, broad-shouldered man named Marlan woke up with a jolt when he heard somebody called him. He rushed out of his guard post and quickly opened the gate for Wak Parjan.

“Stayed up watching football again, didn't you?” asked Wak Parjan to the man in a full security guard uniform. Marlan just gave a sheepish grin and rubbed his red, sleepy eyes.

The gate was already half open. Without saying anything much, Wak Parjan climbed back onto his pedicab and pedaled forward.

He still had another meter to go before reaching Naning's front door.

He finally stopped right in front of the terrace. A sweet scent of ylang-ylang filled the air as he arrived. Dozens of ylang-ylang trees were planted in front of the house, their yellow petals swaying gently, such a contrast against the still-dark Surabaya sky.

Naning was lucky to have Sabir, the gardener who patiently cared for dozens of ylang-ylang trees and kept her garden shady and lush. Not to mention the various kinds of spice plants in the side yard. All of them thrived and stayed well-tended because of Sabir's dedication and care.

Clink!

Wak Parjan rang the bell on his pedicab once more, the one made from an old bolt. This time, he meant to wake the house's owner. Still, there was no sign of the door opening. Eventually, Wak Parjan got off his pedicab and pressed the doorbell near the front entrance.



The sound of the bell stirred Naning from her deep sleep. She dozed off on the couch in the living room. The middle-aged woman rubbed





her eyes. A cup of ginger *wedang*¹¹ sat on the table, seemed blurry in her vision.

Slowly, Naning's wrinkled hand reached for the cup's handle. *Cold. Arumi must've made this in the middle of the night while I was asleep*, she thought, just before placing the cup back down without taking a single sip.

Naning loved *wedang*, a warm drink infused with the flavor and aroma of spices. Her parents had been a spice merchant for generations. Naning grew up in a true spice-trading family. They didn't just live off spices, but they treated spices as part of their family, even part of their life. They loved spices deeply.

As a spice lover and merchant, Naning's kitchen was full of hundreds of kinds of spices. Naning still remembered when Arumi was little, she would take her along to choose spices and put them into clear jars with wooden screw-top lids. Naning would let her daughter smell each spice from the mouth of the jar before sealing it and putting it away.

"Do you know what it is?" asked Naning to her little daughter.

"I know! I know! It must be ginger," she guessed as she jumped in excitement.

"No, this is white turmeric," Naning replied with a smile.

Sadly, the long rows of jars now only decorated the kitchen walls. Naning hardly even had time to prepare a cup

11 *Wedang* is a traditional Javanese term for a warm or hot beverage, typically made by infusing water with spices, herbs, or local ingredients like ginger, lemongrass, pandan leaves, cinnamon, or cloves.

of her own favorite *wedang pokak*¹². All cooking matters had long been handed over entirely to Siti, Sabir's wife.

And how about Arumi? The high school girl spent most of her time drawing in her room. Occasionally, she would go to the kitchen to grab food or make herself a cup of instant tea, which she had bought from the supermarket.

Naning always hoped that at least once a day, Arumi would take the time to prepare a cup of *wedang* for her mother with her own hands, especially in the early morning before she left to Pabean Spice Market. Naning conveyed the hope gently to her only daughter two years ago.

"Is that such a difficult request, *Nduk*¹³? I just need a warm drink before the market. Haven't I even prepared the recipe for you?"

"Okay, Mom," Arumi answered flatly, with a blank face and short tone.

As always, Arumi's curt response made Naning stop in mid-sentence. The girl was always composed, with a blank expression on her face. Even when Naning spoke in a raised voice, Arumi always replied evenly. She never said "no" to her mother. And yet, Naning was never satisfied with her only daughter's attitude and answer.

From that moment on, Arumi always prepared a cup of *wedang* in the living room for her mother. By around three in the morning, *wedang* would already be there, just in time for Naning to drink it before heading to Pabean Spice Market.

12 A traditional Javanese herbal drink brewed from crushed ginger, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, lemongrass, pandan leaves, and sweetened with palm sugar.

13 *Nduk* is a Javanese term of endearment, used by parents when addressing their daughter.



But after just a few months, Naning began to feel that something wasn't quite right with her *wedang*. It tasted thin and bland. She couldn't find crushed ginger in the ginger *wedang*. Nor could she find pounded rice or mashed *kencur*¹⁴ in the *beras kencur*¹⁵ blend. And in the other cups Arumi served on different days, Naning no longer found the familiar spices she had known and loved all her life.



"I bought instant *wedang* powder, Bu. I just didn't have time to blend your spices anymore."



Her honest confession hit Naning hard. She felt deeply disappointed.



"How could you buy all those instant powders, when your mother is a spice seller? Do you really think I wouldn't be able to tell the difference between a handmade *wedang* and a factory-made one? What was the point of me teaching you spices since you're a little girl? What for all those spices in the kitchen?" Naning kept scolding her daughter. The absence of proper *wedang* to warm her body was reason enough for her heart to boil over.



Once again, Arumi can only lower her head in silence.

Naning took a deep breath. She looked at her daughter's face, still gentle and innocent,



14 Aromatic ginger (also known as sand ginger)

15 A drink made from pounded rice, mixed with aromatic ginger juice

though no longer a child. Truly, it was a face untouched by guilt. This was the girl who had never once complained, always obeying her mother. *Why is it that now, Arumi treats spices so carelessly? Something I've loved with all my heart!* Naning cried out silently.

But when her gaze returned to Arumi's face, her anger melted away. Especially when, for a moment, she saw a flicker of Handoko, her late husband, in the clear reflection of Arumi's eyes. And Naning chose to walk away, leaving her daughter standing motionless behind her.



Clink!

The long chime of Wak Parjan's pedicab bell was in the air. Naning glanced at the clock on the wall. The long needle goes to number eleven, while the short needle goes to number four.

"Subhanallah!"

Naning hurriedly grabbed her long veil lying on the table and then opened the door. It looks like Wak Parjan is already standing in front of the terrace.

"Daydreaming again?" asked the old man who had loyally taken Naning to Pabean Market ever since her husband passed away.

"Don't you dare. Wait a minute, I need to say goodbye to Arumi," Naning said hastily, then went back into the living room. Half running, she crossed the room and climbed

the spiral staircase leading to Arumi's room. She nearly collided with a Chinese-patterned ceramic jar, which almost as tall as her.

Arriving in front of her daughter's room, Naning took a moment to catch her breath before knocking on the door.

"Arumi ...? Arumi...?"

There's no answer. Naning gathered her courage and opened the door. As usual, Arumi had fallen asleep in her chair, her head resting beside the laptop.

Naning gently stroked Arumi's long black hair.

"It feels like in the blink of an eye, you've grown up and now you're eighteen years old. However you are, I love you, *Nduk*. You're getting more beautiful."

Naning's eyes drifted to a few sheets of paper scattered across Arumi's desk, filled with sketchy drawings. She was accustomed to finding Arumi in this state.

She never really knew what her daughter was so absorbed in. Like her late father, the girl was quiet and spent most of her time drawing.

"This is my world, Mom!" That was always Arumi's reply whenever her mother asked what she was working on. Is it really that hard to explain to me what those scribbles mean? Naning sighed inwardly. But the same answer, repeated over and over, had left her too weary to keep asking.





Carefully, Naning closed her daughter's door and hurried outside to meet Wak Parjan, who was standing beside his pedicab.

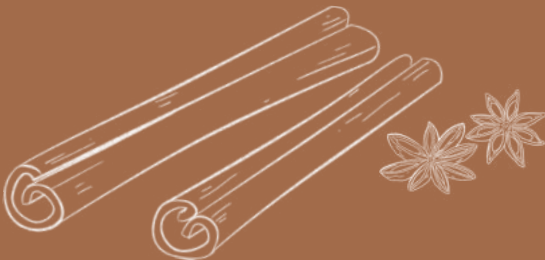
"Let's go. Sorry to keep you waiting."



Chapter 2

Mom, I Need to Talk to You

*Perhaps, a cup of wedang you prepare
with sincerity from your heart will truly
flow warm into theirs.*



“A_{rumi} ...!”

Arumi scanned the schoolyard, hoping to find the girl who had just called her name. *It must be Dinda*, Arumi thought. Only Dinda called her Arumi. The others usually call her Arum, or just Rum.

“Is our plan to go to ITS¹¹ today still on?” Dinda asked eagerly as she reached her. The girl with shoulder-length straight hair and bangs neatly trimmed above her eyebrows spoke with enthusiasm.

Arumi didn’t answer. She simply looked at Dinda with weariness in her eyes, while Dinda stood there still catching her breath.

“I-oh, I don’t know, Dinda,” Arumi replied weakly.

“Come on, Arumi. This time I’m ready to go with you, really! My nephew isn’t home today ...” said Dinda, trying to cheer her up as she swung Arumi’s arm lightly.

Arumi gazed in awe at Dinda’s bespectacled eyes. There was so much hope behind her clear gaze. The girl was also kind and helpful. Every morning before going to school, Dinda would first drop her nephew off at kindergarten.

Dinda had been Arumi’s best friend since junior high. Their families were close, too. Dinda’s father had long been friends with Arumi’s father. Both men shared a deep love for visual art. They had even once worked together on a middle school *Seni Budaya* (Cultural Arts) textbook team.

11 Sepuluh Nopember Institute of Technology





Arumi slowly let go of Dinda's hand, then tried to sit calmly on the concrete bench beside her. "I'd better ask my mom for permission first, Dinda," Arumi said, her voice growing weaker.

"What? I thought you already did?" Dinda asked, half surprised, quickly sitting down beside her.

Arumi shook her head. "Not yet. I haven't had the chance."

"Oh, I see. Alright then," Dinda replied lightly.

"Pray that she'll say yes, okay, Dinda?" This time, Arumi looked deeply into her friend's eyes.

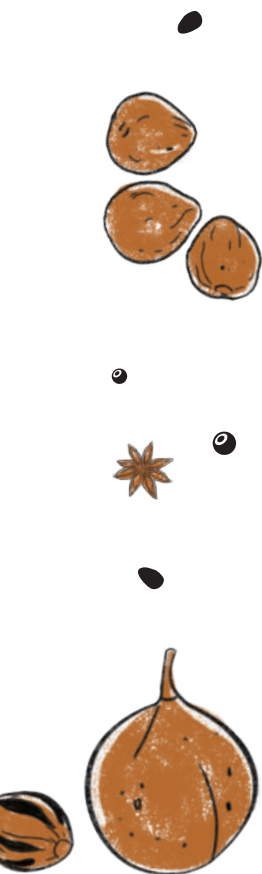
As always, Dinda smiled, the dimples on her cheeks appeared.

"Ameen. I always wish you the best, Arumi. Even though we've been best friends since junior high, I'd never ask you to go to the same university just for my sake," Dinda said as she gently patted Arumi's shoulder.

"Thank you so much, Dinda. You're really kind," Arumi said, eyes welling with tears.

"You're welcome, Arumi," Dinda replied, as she gave her shoulder another pat.

The two of them exchanged smiles before parting ways.



Arumi had only taken a few steps when Dinda called out to her again.

“Hey, wait a second, Arumi!”

“Yes?” Arumi turned around, trying to put on a sweet smile even though her heart still felt heavy. Dinda quickly walked up to her.

“Uhm... why don’t you try making your mom’s favorite *wedang*—the one you mix yourself? Then sit down with her and talk things through gently. Maybe that way she’ll agree to let you study in the design program,” Dinda suggested, her eyes sparkling.

Arumi stared deeply into Dinda’s bright eyes, filled with excitement. Cheerfulness was like an ornament that never left her face. Arumi couldn’t bring herself to say no to her friend’s suggestion. She nodded and smiled, pretending to agree, then waved and turned to walk a

On her ride home on a motorcycle, Arumi couldn’t stop thinking about Dinda’s last words that afternoon. It wasn’t that she’d never made *wedang* for her mother, but there was always something wrong with her *wedang* in her mother’s taste buds. The ginger *wedang* had ginger that was too finely crushed, the *beras kencur* lacked the proper thickness, the *wedang pokak*¹² had too much palm sugar, or the *sinom*¹³ turned out too sour.

Arumi often felt frustrated. None of the *wedang* she made seemed perfect for her mother. One day, she decided

12 Pokak is a traditional Javanese herbal drink brewed from crushed ginger, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, lemongrass, pandan leaves, and sweetened with palm sugar.

13 *Sinom* is a traditional herbal drink from Java, brewed from young tamarind leaves (*sinom*), palm sugar, and turmeric. It has a sweet-sour taste and is often consumed for its refreshing and digestive properties.

to buy several small bottles of instant *wedang* powder at the supermarket. She thought the factory-made formula must have been precisely crafted by experts and would surely suit her mother's taste.

But instead of praise or sympathy, Arumi was met with scolding and a flood of lectures. As a descendant of a long line of spice merchants and a passionate lover of traditional herbs, her mother refused to drink factory-made instant herbal drinks.

Even so, Arumi had no other choice. Schoolwork was becoming more demanding by the day, especially with final exams just around the corner. She knew she needed to study hard to prepare. More than anything, she hoped to achieve excellent final grades so she could apply to university through a scholarship program.

Her mind drifted back to a conversation with Dinda two days ago at a café on Dharmawangsa Street, Surabaya.

"Arumi, you're the only daughter of a wealthy spice merchant in Surabaya. Why bother chasing scholarships? Your mom can afford to send you to any university you want, right?" Dinda said while picking up the menu from the table.

"What does be rich have to do with applying for a scholarship? Anyone can get one if they have achievements. Besides, I want to earn that scholarship as a surprise and also to prove to her that I'm capable of going to college, in the major and on campus I choose myself, Dinda. You know how hard my mom has worked on her own to pay for my study all this time. She wants me to study in the major she chose—economics and business. This scholarship is



my only chance to show her that I can do this,” Arumi said, fiddling with a pen on the table. She had flipped through the menu countless times, yet the order sheet in front of her remained blank.

A waiter came over. Dinda quickly scribbled down their order: chocolate ice cream, iced lemon tea, and two milk pies.

“Let me confirm your order: two milk pies, one iced lemon tea, and one chocolate ice cream,” the waiter repeated to make sure.

“Please make the lemon tea not too sour,” Arumi said with a smile, glancing at the waiter in front of her.

“Anything else you’d like to add?” the waiter asked.

But almost at the same time, they both replied, “No, thank you.”

The waiter walked away to prepare their order.

“I’m sure your mom would be proud if you got into any public university, especially if it’s the best tech campus in Surabaya. She’d have no problem paying for your tuition. So, why are you still chasing scholarships?” Dinda continued talking once the waiter left.

Resting her chin on both hands, Arumi resumed the conversation. “Hmm ... It’s not like you think. My mom doesn’t like my interest in art. She doesn’t like seeing me draw. She thinks being a product designer doesn’t promise anything. My mom wants me to major in economics so I can take over my great-grandfather’s spice business. She believes business is the only path to a prosperous life. How am I supposed to change that belief?” Arumi asked, her face clouded with worry.

A moment later, a smiling waiter returned, carefully placing a bowl of ice cream, a glass of lemon tea, and two plates of milk pie on the table.

“Thank you,” Arumi and Dinda said almost in unison.

“You’re welcome. Enjoy,” the waiter replied with a warm smile.

Dinda furrowed her brow while playing with the topping on her ice cream. “Hmm ... your life is more complicated than I thought, Arumi. Uhm ... what should we do?”

“Ugh ... I asked you, and now you’re asking me back. What’s with you, Dinda?” Arumi pinched her friend’s cheek playfully.

“Hey ... I’m still thinking, okay?” Dinda replied with a laugh.

“Hmm ... you’re lucky, Dinda. Your parents have an open mind. They let you choose the college major you really wanted.” Arumi stirred her glass of iced lemon tea half-heartedly.

“Hey, how about we trade places? You be my mom’s daughter, and I’ll be your parents’ kid?” Dinda joked, trying to cheer her up.

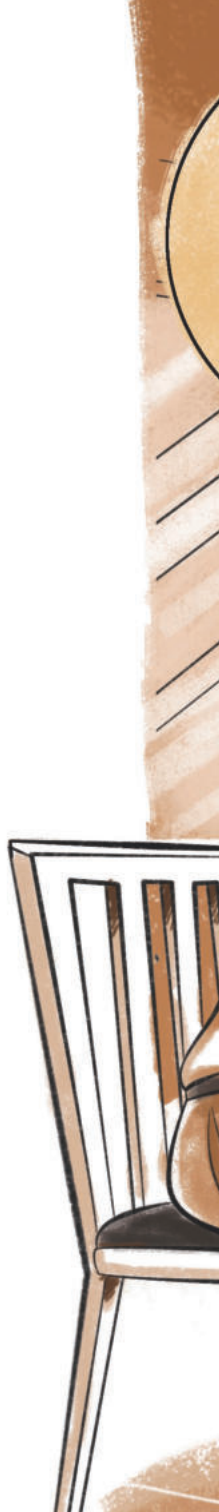
It worked. The girl in the light grey headscarf across from her laughed—just a little, but still.

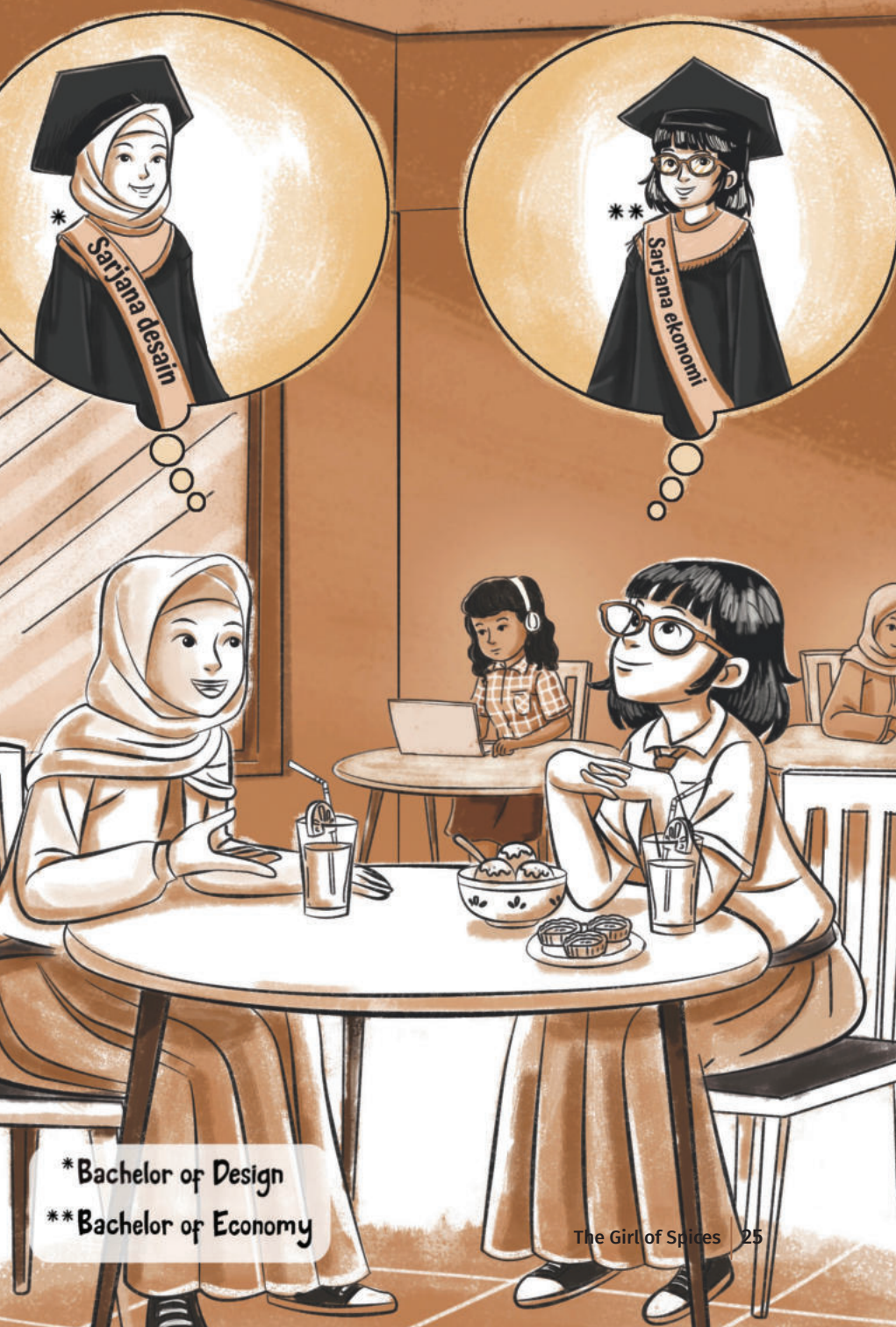
“Ah, you’re ridiculous, Dinda. As if that’s possible. Besides, even though my mom acts the way she does, she never actually interferes when I’m drawing. She’s never tidied up the messy sketch pages in my room either, because she understands that I don’t like my drawings being tidied up. And she always makes me *kunyit asam*¹⁴ when I’m in my period. The cramps in my stomach really ease up after drinking it,” Arumi said as she sipped her tea.

“There you go! Every mother has their own special way of showing love, Arumi. Try to win her heart. Try to love spices the way she does. Try to prepare a cup of spice *wedang* following her recipe. Do it with real intention to make her happy. Who knows? A cup of *wedang* that made sincerely may warm your mom’s heart. What do you think?” Dinda asked encouragingly.

She looked warmly into Arumi’s eyes, which were starting to well up again. So much quiet hope shimmered there.

14 *Kunyit asam* is a traditional Indonesian herbal drink made from turmeric and tamarind, known for its refreshing taste and believed health benefits, especially for digestion and women’s health.





* Bachelor of Design

** Bachelor of Economy

“Dinda ... since when you got this wise?” Arumi said, shaking Dinda’s left hand.

Dinda laughed after taking another spoonful of ice cream. “Well, it’s worth trying. Trying to make my best friend happy. Right, Arumi?”

“You always manage to make me laugh. Okay, I’ll give it a try,” Arumi said firmly. Her eyes were slowly beginning to brighten.

“Great. My prayers are always with you, Arumi,” said Dinda, clasping both of Arumi’s hands tightly.

“Thank you so much, Dinda,” Arumi whispered.



Arumi cast a glance at the old clock hanging on the wall—a black, long-pendulum heirloom from her late grandfather. The hands showed it was nearly nine at night.

She turned to her mother, who was fast asleep on the living room sofa. Her mother looked utterly exhausted. Every day, she spent all day selling spices. She left before dawn and returned home around sunset.

Arumi had really hoped that tonight she could finally talk to her mother about her dream of studying product design, a major she deeply desired. But all the words she had carefully arranged in her head remained stuck at the tip of her tongue. She barely had the chance to talk at length with her mother, even though it was just the two of them living under the same roof. Despite sharing the same

home, they hardly had a normal conversation like mother and daughter did.

Once, Arumi had asked her mother why she didn't just let her employees run the shop, so her mother could spend more time with her. And why didn't she ask Mr. Wisnu, their family driver, to take her to the market every day? Her mother usually only asked Mr. Wisnu to drive them to Uncle Yanuar's house. For the daily trips to the market, she preferred to take Wak Parjan's pedicab.

"Only those who genuinely love spices can treat them with the respect. All my employees just work, they don't truly love them yet. And cars? No, thank you. I feel much more at ease riding a pedicab along the Kalimas River, enjoying the open air and the Surabaya sky. There are so many spice stories to be found there," her mother recalled.

Arumi could do nothing but swallow those words in silence. She couldn't respond. All she understood was that those words were the reason her mother had to leave before dawn and return late in the evening. She understood that those words were the reason her mother came home with nothing but exhaustion, with barely any time to help her study, let alone draw, the one thing she loved most.

And in moments like that, it was impossible for Arumi not to miss her father, Handoko. He was the one who gladly helped her with her studies. He was the one who patiently taught her how to draw. He was also the one who loved taking her out to Book Village on Semarang Street, or Heroes Monument. At the Book Village, her father bought her books and design magazines several times. At Heroes Monument,

little Arumi had once posed for a photo with her father beneath the statue of Soekarno and Hatta, before they went to buy a green sweater for her mother.

“Arumi, look at this. I want to buy this sweater for your mother. She’ll like it, won’t she?” said Handoko with his familiar smile.

Arumi touched the knitted sweater in her father’s hands. The green fabric felt soft and warm.

“She has been telling me for a while she wanted something warm to wear to the market. I only got the chance to buy her one. Now let’s buy it, ask the shop assistant to fold it nicely, and we’ll put it in a gift box,” instructed Handoko. And Arumi nodded in agreement.

“Can I add some rose perfume at home, Dad?” Arumi suggested.

“No—don’t!” Handoko quickly replied. “Your mother doesn’t like perfume. Just put in three mothballs in a color you like. She once said mothballs are the best spice to keep clothes smelling fresh,” he explained.

“Okay, Dad,” Arumi replied quickly, eager to follow her father’s instructions.



Memories of her father never failed to bring tears to Arumi’s eyes, and she didn’t realize she had been crying

until the chime of the old clock startled her. The clock's hands kept moving. It was nearly ten o'clock at night. Arumi glanced over and saw her mother still fast asleep on the sofa.

"Mom, I want to talk ..." she whispered, sitting beside her mother. Her cheeks suddenly felt warm. She hadn't even noticed the tears streaming down.

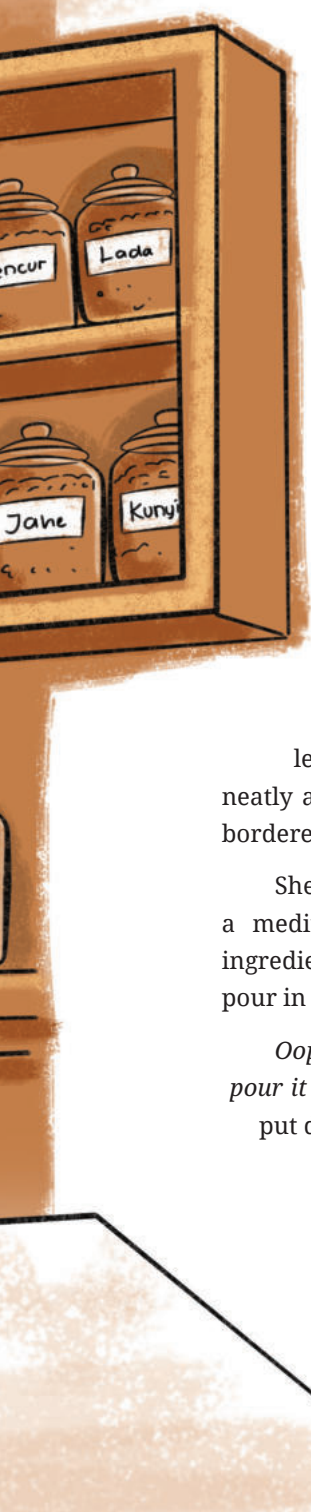
In that moment, she became fully aware of how tired her mother was. And she didn't have the heart to wake her. Another moment to speak was slipping away, even though her chest was tight with unspoken words. She held them back once more. Now, there was still something she needed to do before sleep took her. She had to prepare a cup of *wedang* for her mother to drink when she woke up.

Arumi hurried to the kitchen. She felt there was still hope. There would still be a quiet moment before dawn when they could talk before her mother left to Pabean Market. *Surely, over a cup of warm wedang, her mother's heart would soften*, she thought, remembering Dinda's advice.

Standing in front of the kitchen cupboard, Arumi opened a drawer and pulled out a handwritten recipe book—her mother's. She carefully flipped through the pages until she found the one for *wedang pokak*. "This one's mom's favorite," she said with a smile. She read the recipe slowly and attentively.

Then, with care, Arumi picked several spice jars from the long wooden shelf attached to the kitchen wall. Palm





sugar, cloves, cinnamon, and kaffir lime leaves were now lined up neatly on the kitchen counter.

“Oh, right, something seems to be missing” The sweet girl suddenly stopped her hands from mixing the *wedang*.

Arumi suddenly remembered there was something she needed to get from the side of the house. Through the door beside the kitchen, Arumi walked to the spice garden next to the house. There, her mother had asked Mr. Sabir to plant many kinds of spices. Arumi gently cut a few stalks of fragrant lemongrass and some pandan leaves, which grew neatly along the edge of the garden, near the wall that bordered their house.

She returned to the kitchen quickly, preparing a medium-sized glass and carefully placing all the ingredients for *wedang pokak* inside. Arumi was about to pour in the hot water when a thought stopped her.

Oops ... better wait until just before Mom leaves. If I pour it now, the wedang pokak will be cold by then. She put down the kettle she had just lifted off the stove.

Before going to her room, Arumi grabbed her father’s favorite pale blue cup. She added two teaspoons of instant ginger powder and poured hot water into it. The ginger

wedang was for herself—something to help her stay awake while she drew, the one thing she had loved doing since she was a child.

She didn't go straight to her room. Instead, she sat again in the living room, quietly watching the cup of ginger *wedang* she had placed on the table near the sofa, where her mother still slept soundly.

Still too hot, she thought, touching the cup with her right hand. Arumi decided to draw in her room and left the freshly brewed ginger *wedang* behind.



Chapter 3

A Scholarship or a Competition?

Arumi had often experienced for herself how spice wedang drinks were not only comforting to drink but also frequently helped ease her ailments.



The school canteen had started to empty out.

Rows of long tables and benches were gradually being left behind. A few students in white and grey uniforms waved to one another as they passed. Others lingered. Two of them always chose the northern corner near the prayer room. Next to it was a small pond with an artificial waterfall.

Though the sound of the water wasn't always clear, the trickle of ablution water could always be heard during break time. That was where the two friends, Arumi and Dinda, often spent time chit-chatting after school.

"Where are we going for New Year's, Arumi?" asked Dinda. "Let's go to Bromo. Didn't you say the other day you really wanted to go?"

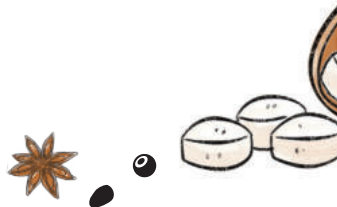
"Oh yes, absolutely!" Arumi said. "I still daydream about riding a horse across the mystical Whispering Sands and watching the sunrise while sitting on Love Hill, lost in thought." She closed her eyes, picturing it.

"And we'll bring your instant *wedang* mixes so we can drink something warm up there. That'd be perfect, right, Arumi?" Dinda added, full of excitement.

"Totally. But ..." Arumi's voice trailed off, as if something had just occurred to her.

Dinda frowned, noticing her friend in the white headscarf suddenly change her mind.

"But what?" Dinda probed.





“Isn’t the exam coming up soon?”

Arumi replied.

Dinda slumped in mock defeat. “Aw, Arumi, I know that already. That’s exactly why we need to treat ourselves a little first. Besides, a smart girl like you don’t even need an extra effort. Your grades will be great anyway, right?” she teased, laughing as she pushed the spoon aside in her glass.

“Ugh. Still, I need to study for exams!” Arumi shot her a look, lips in a playful pout. Dinda burst out laughing at her friend’s expression.

The two of them laughed together.

“So... you’ve really settled on product design?” Dinda asked once the laughter died down.

Arumi nodded firmly.

“You’re applying through the merit scholarship route?” Dinda asked again.

Another nod from Arumi. She took the last sip of her lemon tea.

“That’s why, Dinda, I not only have to work hard to be selected as a top student, but I also have to start building up a portfolio, because every major in the design faculty requires one,” said Arumi.



“Wow, you must already have a lot of work to expand your portfolio by now, Arumi. You’ve won so many design competitions, right? I’m sure the school will pick you, and you’ll get the scholarship for your dream program,” Dinda said confidently, trying to reassure her friend.

“Amen to that. But I still have to be prepared, Dinda, because the quota from this portfolio track is limited. If I don’t get accepted, I’ll make it through the independent merit-based route. But that one requires a registration fee. I need to start saving up bit by bit, so I won’t have to ask for money from my mom. I want to surprise her,” Arumi explained.

“You mean, so your mom will only find out once you’ve already been accepted as a student?” Dinda guessed.

“Yup, exactly,” Arumi confirmed.

“Wow, my best friend’s really something. My dad was right, you didn’t just inherit your artistic talent from your dad, but your persistence and determination come from your mom, Arumi.”

“Really? It’s just that my mom” Arumi let out a long sigh.

Dinda smiled. “Arumi ... Arumi ... I get it, I really do. But don’t always expect your mom to understand you. You also must try understanding her. Of course she wants you to continue the family business, since you’re her only hope to carry on your family business that’s been passed down for generations.” Dinda advised Arumi as a mom talking to her daughter.

Arumi fell silent. She admitted Dinda was right. But Arumi had never felt the slightest interest or talent in business. She had been learning about spices since she was little. She didn't only know their benefits from her mother, but she had often experienced how spice *wedang* also helped cure her when she was sick. Even so, turning spices into a profession and a future? Arumi still couldn't picture it. All she knew was that she had talent and a deep passion for design and drawing. That was the world Arumi believed would become her future.

"Come on, let's go home. The security guard's been pacing and eyeing us for a while now," said Dinda as she stood from her bench, followed by Arumi.

"Hehe... you're right. I didn't even realize we'd been talking way past our time here," said Arumi, quickly putting on her jacket and bag.

The two walked briskly out of the school canteen. As they passed the front corridor on their way to the parking area, Arumi caught sight of a poster on the announcement board. It grabbed her attention immediately, stopping her in an instant.

"Dinda, come here, look at this!" Arumi called out.

She was just about to enter the parking area, turned back right away. "What is it?" Dinda asked curiously.

"Take a look at this," said Arumi excitedly, pointing at the poster she had only skimmed.



- ① BULLETIN BOARD
- ② Trendy Product Design Competition
- ③ category



**Trendy Creative Product Design
Competition**
**Presented by the Ministry of Creative
Economy/Creative Economy Agency
For High School and University
Students**
Winning tens of millions in cash prizes!

“Wow, this is interesting. Totally perfect for you, Arumi!” Dinda exclaimed.

Arumi nodded enthusiastically. “Right? I’m totally signing up,” she said as her eyes scanning the words on the poster.

“How strange it is, we didn’t see it yesterday? Or were we just not paying attention? Do you think it was posted recently?” Dinda asked.

“Exactly! Hopefully it can be my chance, Dinda,” said Arumi, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Yup, don’t miss out, Arumi. Look! There’s still about two weeks left until the submission deadline,” Dinda pointed to the timeline printed at the bottom of the poster.

Meanwhile, Arumi was still absorbed, reading the poster line by line.



“Phew ... I’ll have to rush this!” Arumi responded. She quickly dug her phone out of her bag and snapped a picture of the poster.

“Well ... guess our horseback riding trip to Bromo is off again,” Dinda said with a smile, glancing at Arumi, who was still focused on capturing the shot.

“Hahaha, yeah. Let’s save that for another time,” Arumi laughed while checking the photo on her phone.

“Got it, Arumi!” said Dinda, raising her hand in a mock salute like during a flag ceremony. Arumi burst into laughter. Soon after, the two parted ways with a wave.



Once she got home, Arumi went straight to her bedroom. She threw herself onto the bed and reached into her bag for her phone. She read over and over every line on the competition announcement. *Two weeks to design for a national-level competition was clearly not a lot of time*, she thought.

She still stared for quite a while at the photo of the poster, looking for something.

“Here it is!” she exclaimed cheerfully when she found the social media link for the competition. Her fingers danced swiftly across the phone screen. In seconds, the screen had switched to the Ministry of Creative Economy’s social media account. Arumi read through it again carefully.



"I'd better print this out," she muttered.

Arumi opened her laptop and turned on the printer. Just seconds later, two sheets of paper came out. She pinned both pages of the competition's technical guidelines right above her desk.

Arumi read through the guidelines slowly and carefully. This was the biggest prize she had ever seen for a competition. A contest perfectly aligned with her interests and talents. There was no way she was going to let it pass.

Pictures of winning played out in Arumi's head. She imagined what it would be like if she won the competition. The announcement clearly stated that the first prize was fifteen million rupiah. That would be enough to cover the tuition fees for the program she's dreamt for at the university for three or even four semesters.

Bismillah, I must win this. If so, I couldn't only surprise Mom by getting into college through a scholarship, but I could also fund several semesters of my studies on my own, she thought. A smile spread across her face at the thought.



Arumi reread the competition guidelines carefully. What kind of creative economy product should she design? She began to think hard.

“Fashion product? Food product? Something for children? Or what? Creative economy ... what could it be?” Arumi kept guessing, scrolling through social media and hoping to stumble upon an idea.

The subject of this competition wasn’t easy for Arumi. Usually, the competitions she entered clearly stated what kind of product the organizers were looking for. But this time, creative economy products



were still unfamiliar territory for her. Besides, Arumi was a homebody. Unlike most kids her age, she wasn't into shopping or hanging out at cafés. Lately, she'd spent most of her time studying at home to chase her scholarship dream.

Should I pick one? The scholarship or this competition?
The thought flickered through Arumi's mind again.



Chapter 4

At A Restaurant

Her mother usually sliced shallots thinly and mixed them with a few drops of cajuput oil. The mixture felt warm and fragrant



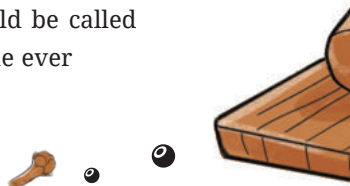
Time cannot be slowed down or sped up. It flows according to nature's unchanging rhythm, orderly and precisely. Time is not a commodity to be bargained over. It's not necessary to ask whether someone is ready, not even Arumi, who lately felt that time was slipping by so quickly. Suddenly, she was already in twelfth grade. Suddenly, graduation was around the corner. Suddenly, it's time to apply the state university admission tests. Suddenly, the submission deadline for the competition was so close. *Deadline.*

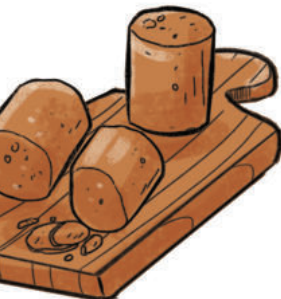
DEADLINE. Arumi stared wearily at that word on the wall. It was printed in large, bold letters, placed right in front of her desk. Every time she sat down, she couldn't avoid seeing it.

Usually, beneath that word, the wall would be filled with colorful sticky notes listing Arumi's assignments and various design competition deadlines. But this time, only two pieces of paper remained. A light green one labeled "Announcement of Outstanding Students", and a pale blue one that read "Ministry of Creative Economy Competition Deadline."

"Ugh ... I still have no idea?!" Arumi groaned. "Only five days left. Oh my God!" She paced back and forth repeatedly, occasionally massaging her head, though she wasn't even having a headache.

Finally, Arumi sat down at her desk in front of her laptop. Her mother once said the desk should be called a work desk, not a study desk, because no one ever sat at it longer than Arumi did.





“Teenagers usually study for two or three hours. But you’re in there almost all day, Arumi. Don’t your back or your eyes get tired?” Naning once asked, genuinely puzzled by the study habits of her only daughter. As usual, Arumi only responded with shaking her head.

Still in her room, Arumi’s train of thought was suddenly broken by her phone ringing. She turned and glanced toward the top of her drawer, where she usually placed her phone.

“Arumi! What are you up to, our future designer?” Dinda teased from the phone.

“Busy daydreaming!” Arumi replied bluntly.

Dinda burst into laughter.

“Designers are really like that, huh. If they’re not designing, they’re daydreaming. And in the end, those daydreams turn into a design too, right? Hahaha” Her laughter grew louder.

“Ugh, keep teasing me, Dinda!” Arumi retorted, pretending to be annoyed.

“Whoa, someone’s feisty today. Are you on your period? Come on, instead of just daydreaming, let’s go out. It’s Sunday, after all” Dinda coaxed.

“Where do we go?” Arumi asked.

“Let’s find some VG snacks for my dad,” Dinda suggested.

“VG? What’s that?” Arumi asked, confused.

“I’ll explain it later. If you want to come, I’ll pick you up after noon, okay?”

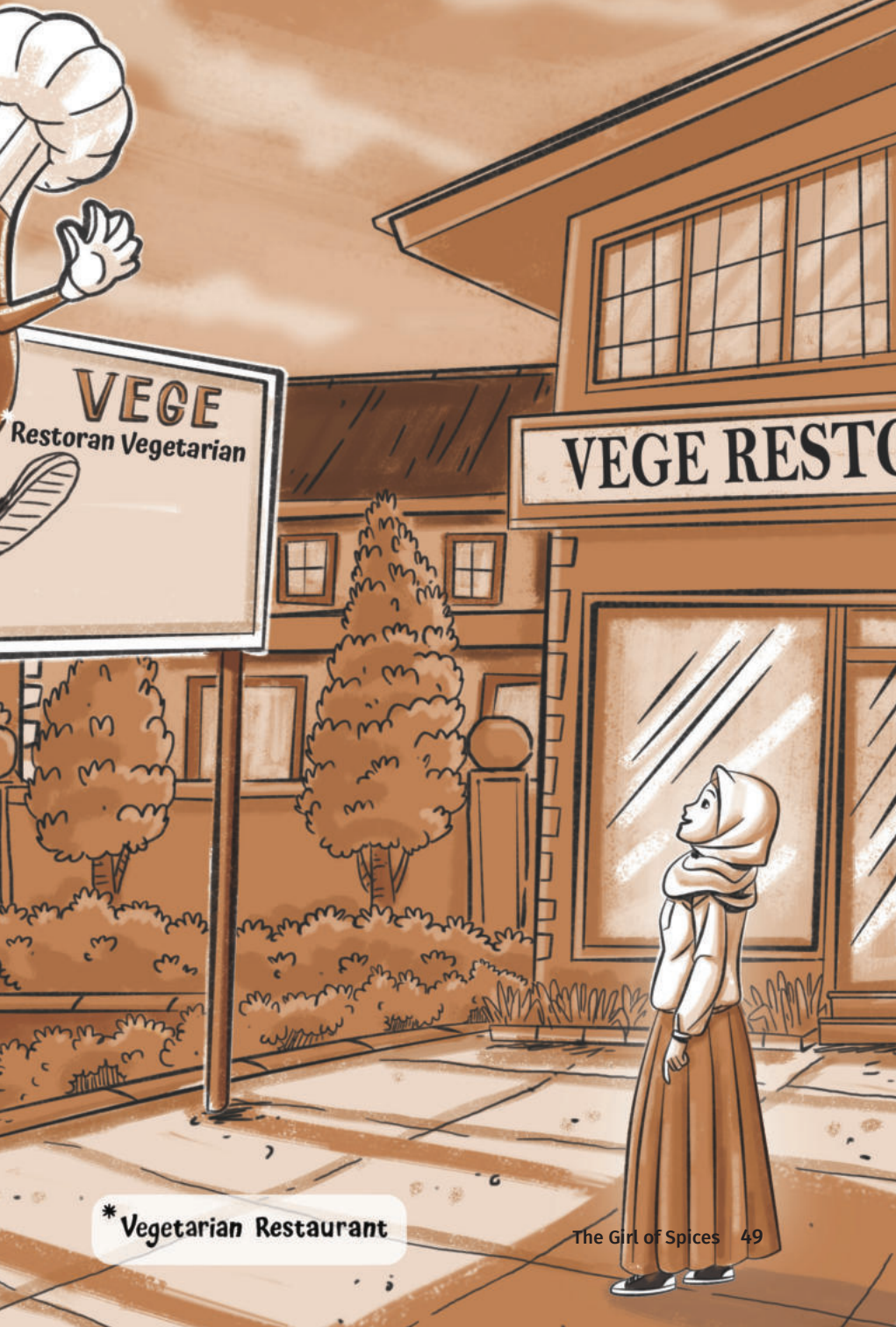
“Okay then,” Arumi said.



Arumi preferred riding together with Dinda than riding alone. It was as if Dinda had left footprints on every street in this City of Heroes. With skill and confidence, she rode through wide and narrow roads. Every corner of the city, even the hidden alleyways, seemed to be memorized by this ice cream enthusiast girl.

“We’re here!” Dinda said as the sound of her motorbike stopped. After taking off her helmet, she stayed still for a moment, letting the wind blow through her hair. Arumi just smiled, watching her friend flushed from the heat. Since deciding to wear a headscarf in middle school, Arumi had gotten used to the heat in her hometown.





* Vegetarian Restaurant

Arumi glanced at the classic-style restaurant building in front of them. The name was Kedai Vege.

“What a unique restaurant,” Arumi said. “How come I’ve never heard of a place like this in Surabaya? I mean, the vegetable icons are everywhere, even before we go inside,” she added, surprised.

Dinda laughed. “Of course you’re surprised. You’re the beauty princess who never leaves the house. A total homebody,” she teased.

“Uh-huh, throwing a shade, are we?” Arumi grumbled, followed by a playful pinch to her friend’s cheek.

“Haha ... well, this restaurant is new, Arumi. But there are already quite a few vegetarian places in Surabaya. I just wanted to check this one out because it’s still considered new.”

“Vegetarian? Your dad’s a vegetarian?”

Dinda nodded.

“Ever since he was diagnosed as being at risk for heart disease, my dad’s been really disciplined about his diet and eventually decided to become a vegetarian. Now, for the past two days, my mom’s been away on a business trip. That’s why I’ve been buying food here for him. They even have VG snacks. You know I can’t cook as deliciously as my mom, especially VG dishes!” Dinda covered her face with both hands.

“That’s fine. We’re not food-making specialist, we’re specialists at eating food,” Arumi laughed.

“Haha ... wow, you can be funny too, huh? Come on, let’s go inside!” Dinda said.

Arumi slowed down a bit. Many things caught her attention as they stepped into the restaurant’s parking area. The name and the look of the place already made it clear—it was a vegetarian restaurant through and through. A row of vegetable icons was neatly lined up, designed in an eye-catching way, and displayed in large sizes. The name *Kedai Vege* was simple, unique, and already quite informative. The restaurant also had a fun and fitting mascot, a cartoon of a Bok choy with a chef’s hat on top of its roots.

“Adorable!” Arumi said with delight.

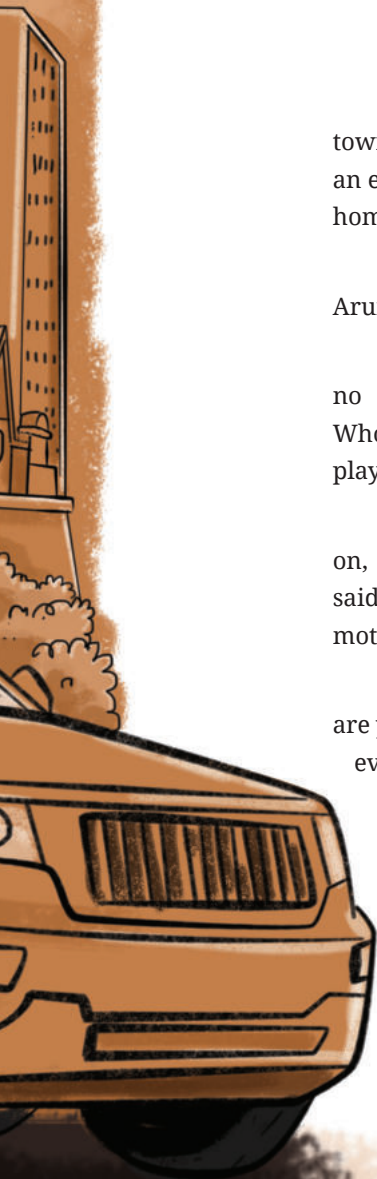
The two of them stepped into the main dining area. Once again, Arumi slowed her pace, amazed by what she saw. The vegetarian theme felt so alive in the spacious room. Arumi clearly remembered the times when her father was still around. Her parents often took her to restaurants. But from what she could recall, none of those places had such a strong identity. This vegetarian restaurant was definitely different.

Arumi continued observing everything closely. Since the restaurant wasn’t very crowded, she could easily take in all the details. The props, the interior design, the color scheme, the menu layout, the staff uniforms, even the product packaging. Nothing escaped her attention.

“Hey! Done analyzing everything yet? What grade does this restaurant get?” Dinda teased, startling Arumi, who looked absorbed entirely in the restaurant’s vibe.

Arumi laughed.





"You're too much, Dinda!"

"After this, let's go for a little ride around town. My dad's not home yet anyway. He's got an event at his school. And your mom's coming home in two hours, right?" Dinda coaxed.

"Umm ... no. I want to go home right away," Arumi replied, picking up her pace.

"Hmm, that's unusual. You never say no to hanging out with me on Sunday. Who are you meeting, huh?" Dinda asked, playfully suspicious.

"Meeting who? Don't be silly ... come on, I really need to get home," Arumi said, tugging Dinda's hand toward the motorbike parking area.

"Hey, hey, what's going on, Arumi? Why are you pulling me like this?" Dinda asked, now even more confused by her friend's behavior.

"I just got an idea, Dinda. An idea! A really good one!" Arumi exclaimed excitedly.

"Wow, sounds like a big one!" Dinda commented as she started up her motorbike.

"Come on, hurry!" Arumi urged.

“Hold on, Arumi!”

“Hehe ... sorry, Dinda. I’m afraid the idea will disappear!”

“Okay, okay!”

Dinda’s motorbike sped down the streets of Surabaya, heading to Arumi’s house.

“Alhamdulillah, we’re here!” Dinda said with relief, catching her breath. Then the phone in her pocket rang loudly.

“Oh no, *Mbak* Widya called four times, and I didn’t even hear it!” Dinda looked sadly at her phone screen.

“I’m so sorry,” Arumi said. Here, try calling her back with my phone,” Arumi quickly pulled out her phone and handed it to Dinda. From the sadness in Dinda’s eyes, Arumi could tell her friend was really worried about her older sister and probably couldn’t call her back because she was out of credit, Arumi guessed.

Dinda nodded slowly and took Arumi’s phone. The usually cheerful girl suddenly looked gloomy as she called her sister.

“Dinda, come home now.” Arumi could hear *Mbak* Widya’s voice clearly on the phone.

“Okay, Kak. I’ll come home right away,” Dinda replied a few seconds after talking with her sister.

“What’s wrong, Dinda? Is *Mbak* Widya okay?” Arumi asked, concerned.



“My nephew Haikal is sick.. He’s coughing and throwing up. I’m sure she’s panicking, Arumi.. I’m the one she can count



on. I have to go, Arumi,” Dinda said quickly, turning her motorbike around in a rush.



“Yeah, Dinda. I’m really sorry ...” Arumi said quietly. She truly felt bad.

Dinda just nodded, then rode off on her motorbike.



“Be careful, Dinda!” Arumi shouted as Dinda’s backpack grew smaller in the distance.



Just after opening the tall gate to her house, Arumi suddenly remembered a herbal mix her mother used to make when she was little. Her mom would usually slice red onions thinly and mix them with a few drops of cajuput oil. The mixture felt warm and smelled soothing when it’s rubbed on little Arumi’s back, chest, and stomach. That simple remedy had always worked to ease her stomachache and soothe her throat.



Her mother would also always prepare a mixture of pure black soy sauce and fresh lemon juice to help soothe little Arumi's cough.

In a hurry, Arumi sat down on the carved iron garden chair in front of her house. Her fingers quickly danced across her phone screen. She typed out her mother's old recipe and sent it to Dinda via WhatsApp.

I hope Dinda sees it soon, Arumi thought anxiously.



Chapter 5

The Kalimas River and a Boy Named Pras

*Little Naning often lay on piles of spice sacks
while listening to her mother's stories tales of
European traders exchanging spices with the
indigenous people of Indonesia, along with the
origins and benefits of each spice.*



The wheels of Wak Parjan's old pedicab turned slowly as it rolled along Kasuari Street, its surface glistening wet after the heavy rain the night before. On the side of the road ran the Kalimas River, the oldest and largest river, cutting through the old part of Surabaya.

As usual, Naning sat in silence on the pedicab, her eyes gazing out at the flowing river. Droplets of drizzle left from last night's rain still danced and bounced on the water's surface.

The drizzle that never entirely left, even after the rain, always brought back memories that Naning cherished throughout the rainy season. It reminded her of the last time she walked along the banks of Kalimas River with Handoko. Twenty years ago.

"My late father used to say that Kalimas used to be a public harbor, where spice merchants from both local and foreign lands came and went. My great-grandfather was one of them," Naning recalled.

Handoko nodded, listening intently.

"Han ..." Naning called out sweetly to the man sitting beside her.

"Hmm?" Handoko replied.

"Would you let me continue my family's spice business after we get married someday?"

The man nodded.





“Go ahead if it’s good for you. But I’d be happier if you could live well with what I provide, even though my income isn’t as much as your family’s spice business,” he said.

Naning looked deeply into the sparkle of the man’s eyes. He was a modest man, merely a contract teacher. His earnings were far below Naning’s parents, who were seasoned spice merchants. But it was precisely Handoko’s simplicity and determination that had won her heart.

Eventually, Naning and Handoko got married. Just as he had promised, Handoko allowed Naning to continue her late parents’ spice business. Naning felt it was her duty to carry it on, especially since, before her parents passed away, they had asked her to be the one to continue it. Meanwhile, Yanuar, her only brother, had chosen to go into the property business.



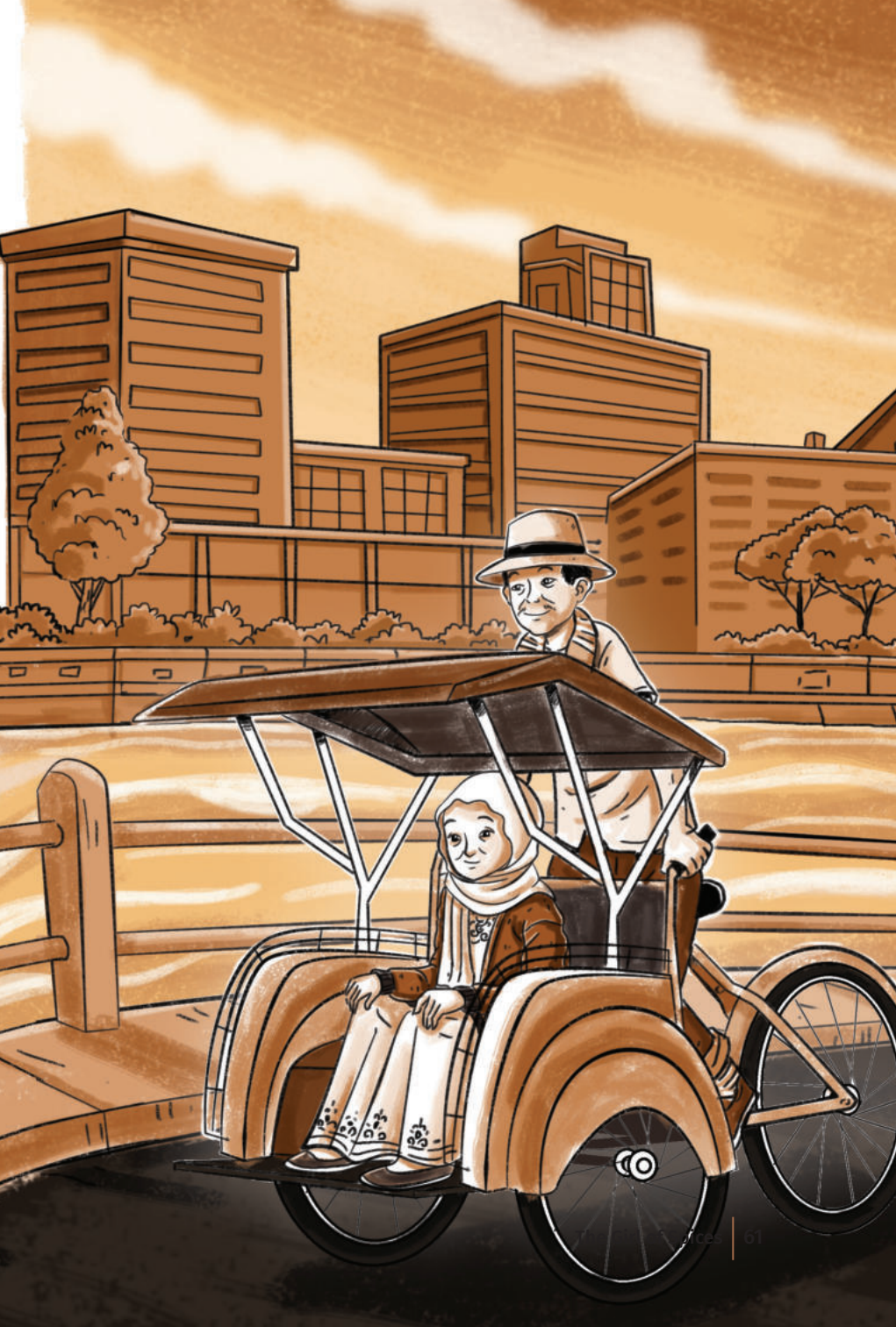
From a distance, the noise and movement of Pabean Market were already evident. The light drizzle faded away, drop by drop.

“Is Arumi still at school, Ning?” Wak Parjan ventured to start a conversation, shattering Naning’s daydreams.

“Yes,” Naning said, tightening the green knit sweater around her. It was her late husband’s last gift. Even in a city as hot as Surabaya, the early morning air could still make her shiver.

“Pras has been looking lost in thought, Ning. Seems like the boy already wants to get married. He’s even asked about Arumi. Looks like he’s got an interest in your daughter, Ning,” said Wak Parjan cautiously, like raindrops that slowly but surely dampen the car windows of passing vehicles.

Naning didn’t reply. Her thoughts drifted back to about half a year earlier, when Pras first met Arumi. At that time, Arumi had accompanied Naning to the market because



Wak Parjan was unwell. On that day, a market operation was underway, led by several staff members from the Ministry of Trade, with Pras participating as part of it.

“So, you’re Mrs. Naning, the one my uncle, Wak Parjan, often drives to the market?” Pras had asked.

Naning nodded. “Yes. And you are ...?” She studied the young man’s warm brown skin and friendly face. He spoke like they were already old friends.

“I’m Pras, Ma’am. Wak Parjan’s foster son,” the young man introduced himself to Naning.

“Oh ... so you’re Pras. Wak Parjan always talks about you,” Naning said warmly.

“Hehe ... yes, Ma’am. And ... that young lady?” He pointed toward Arumi, who was heading toward the market’s exit.

“That’s my daughter,” Naning replied.

Pras nodded, then glanced around the shop, taking it all in. “Your store is huge! I feel like I’m standing on a football field that has been transformed into a spice shop. You don’t seem to have many employees. Wouldn’t it be better if you hired more staff?” asked the man in a neat brown uniform.

He looked at each of Naning’s employees, who were busy serving the customers. There weren’t many of them. Even so, they appeared very friendly and efficient. Once they finished serving one customer, they quickly moved on to the next, going from one sack of spices to another. The porters were just as quick. With every complete transaction, they would swiftly and skillfully hoist a sack onto their shoulders and stride briskly out of the shop.

"I'm not alone, you know. As you can see, there are plenty of workers here. They've been helping me for years. Some of them even worked for my parents back when I was still a teenager," said Naning, glancing at an employee who looked a little older than her.

"Yes ... However, all those workers appear to be primarily involved in physical labor. I think you also need a personal assistant who can help you think about the shop's future, don't you?" Pras asked, his tone probing, making Naning's expression start to turn slightly sour.

"These days, it's not easy to find young people who know spices well. But at least they've stayed here for many years. What ... are you applying for a job in my shop, young man?" Naning asked half-jokingly.

Pras grinned widely.

"No, Ma'am, now you're making fun of me. I mean, look at all these spices. There's no way I could name them all. I can't always tell the difference between galangal and ginger. Once I ate galangal, thinking it was beef. Another time, I bit into ginger thinking it was chicken. Hahaha ..."

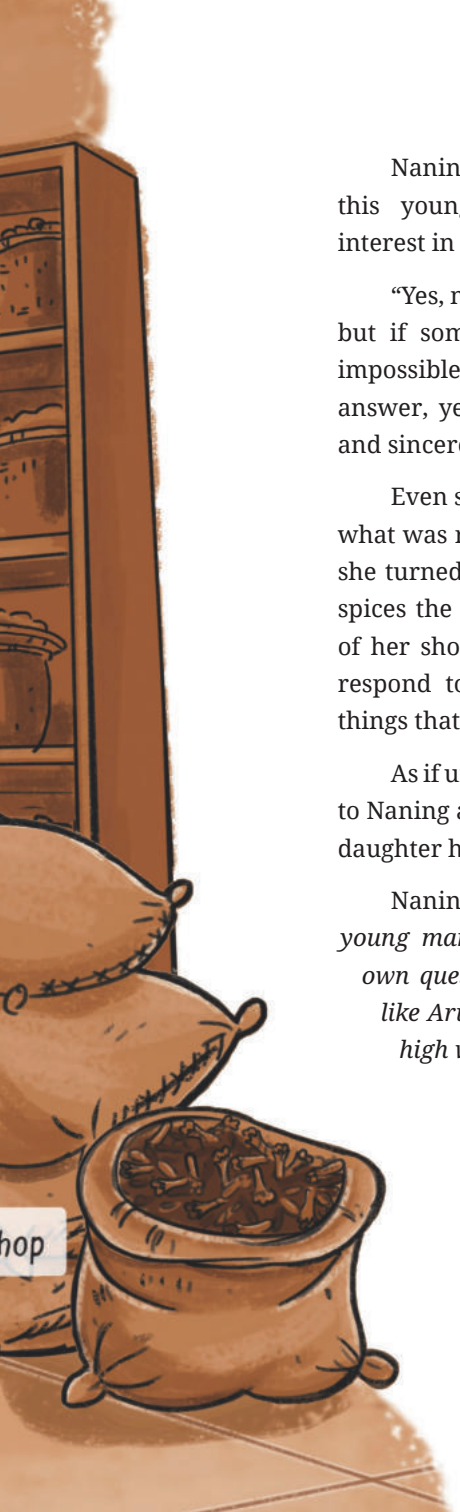
Pras's joke made Naning burst out laughing. His lighthearted humor somehow managed to cheer her up, even in her frequent spells of gloom.

"But ... I once tried a spiced coffee recipe I found online. Besides coffee, I added star anise, crushed ginger, cloves, and cinnamon. Too bad I didn't have rock sugar at the time, so I just used regular sugar instead. The taste was ... unique and bold. Perfect for boosting energy," Pras explained proudly, giving a thumb-up.

*Toko Rempah Oetami



*Oetami's Spice S

An illustration of a spice shop. On the left, there are tall wooden shelves filled with various spices and jars. In the foreground, there are several large, brown, burlap sacks. One sack is open, revealing a pile of dark, chunky spices. The floor is made of light-colored tiles. The overall style is a simple, hand-drawn illustration with a warm, brown color palette.

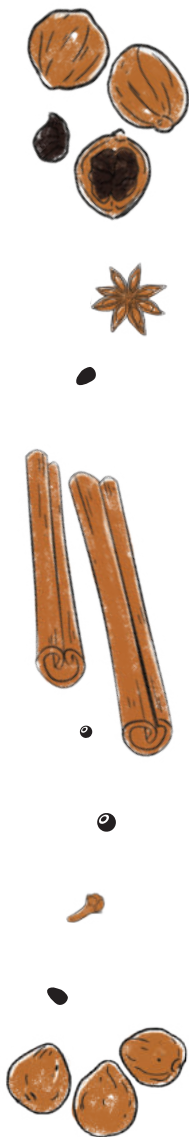
Naning smiled. She hadn't expected this young man to have such a strong interest in spices.

"Yes, memorizing so many spices is tough, but if someone's willing to learn, nothing's impossible, right?" Pras's question needed no answer, yes it convinced Naning of his good and sincere intentions.

Even so, Naning didn't want Pras to know what was running through her mind. Quickly, she turned her attention to the large sacks of spices the porters had just unloaded in front of her shop. She didn't have enough time to respond to Pras. There were far too many things that needed her attention.

As if unwilling to give up, Pras came closer to Naning again and asked, "Why doesn't your daughter help out here, Ma'am?"

Naning took a deep breath. *Didn't this young man already know the answer to his own question? What could a young woman like Arumi possibly do in a huge shop piled high with sacks of spices like this?*



“Your spice shop is the oldest and largest in this market, biggest spice distributor in East Java. It’s amazing how you manage such a big business with only ten employees,” Pras said, his eyes lingering on the rusty steel sign that read *TOKO REMPAH OETAMI*¹¹. “You’ve got the same spirit as my uncle, Wak Parjan. Even though I’ve promised to take care of him, he still insists on pedaling his old pedicab, which is almost extinct in Surabaya,” he added with a note of pride.

Naning felt her patience fray. She could no longer keep up polite small talk, especially as more customers began crowding into her shop.

“I’m sorry, Young Man. The shop’s getting busy, I need to get back to work,” she said at last.

“Oh ... alright, alright. Sorry for taking up your time. I’ll be going now. If you ever need help, please feel free to contact me,” Pras said, placing a business card on top of the large digital scale standing next to Naning.

11 Oetami Spice Shop

And that was the end of Naning's brief encounter with Pras. She couldn't understand why Wak Parjan had felt the need to tell his foster son so much about her and Arumi. She also couldn't understand why Pras had spent so many of his work hours simply questioning her.

Naning had never imagined Pras would bring up Arumi again in the future. Of course, she had no thoughts or suspected anything about him, much less the idea of Arumi marrying at a young age. Naning knew very well that her daughter was far from thinking about marriage.

"Ning?" Wak Parjan's voice cut through her reverie again. The old man sounded as though he were desperate for an answer.

"Tell Pras there's no point in waiting for a schoolgirl, especially since Arumi will be starting university soon. It will be a long wait ..." Naning quickly cut off Wak Parjan's wandering thoughts.

"What's the point of college, Ning? In the end, a girl just ends up cooking in the kitchen, doesn't she?" Wak Parjan shot back, just as bluntly.

Thud. Naning felt as if Wak Parjan's last words had slapped her in the face. Hadn't she been just a step away from graduating college before deciding to accept Handoko's proposal, dropping out and getting married right away? Hadn't she, in the end, shared the same fate as most women? Tied to the kitchen, the well, and the bedroom. Only after Handoko passed away did Naning hand over all

the household chores to Siti, while she spent most of her time running her spice business at the market.

Aarrgh

Naning let out a long sigh. Maybe Wak Parjan was right. For years, she had been the one paying for Arumi's schooling alone. Day by day, Arumi grew up, but she seemed to care less and less about her mother.

For days on end, Arumi had been busy in her room with her tablet and laptop. The girl had no interest in spices at all and preferred drawing instead.

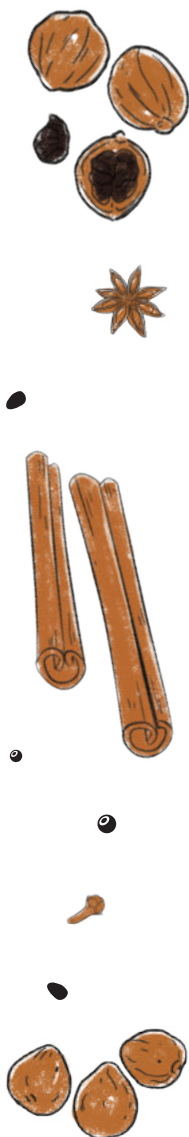
There may be nothing wrong with Arumi marrying young. Who knows, maybe then she would understand how heavy a mother's responsibilities could be. Naning's thoughts began to wander into dangerous territory.

But what would Yanuar, her one and only older brother, react to if he heard about a plan for Arumi's marriage? He had been married for over fifteen years and still had no children. As an uncle, Yanuar loved Arumi like his own daughter. Naning's mind kept churning.

Naning also felt indebted to Yanuar, because it was her brother's persistence that eventually persuaded the whole family, who had at first opposed Handoko, to give their blessing to Naning and Handoko's marriage.

Without realizing it, Naning spoke in an almost whisper, "But I'm tired ... exhausted"

A chill wind swept across Naning's face, brushing against features already showing the signs of aging. She had not yet reached half a century in age, but the life she



had led since her husband's death had made her look older than her years. Naning had struggled alone as a single parent, and she had fought single-handedly to keep her family's spice business alive, an effort that had left her body frail and weary.

She hugged herself tightly, wrapped in the knitted sweater Handoko had once given her. Her mind wandered back to that moment.

"Put it on. It's warm."

Handoko had simply walked away after placing the gift box containing the sweater into her hands. A strong scent of camphor filled the air as Naning opened it.

"It's not an expensive sweater, but Arumi and I agreed on this one. I thought you'd really need it for those early-morning trips to the market. Arumi also loves the calming shade of green." Handoko explained.

"Masha Allah," Naning murmured repeatedly as she kissed the smooth fabric. Her eyes glistened with tears. Handoko must have known, quietly, how badly she needed it. She lifted

the sweater to her nose. The scent of camphor. She preferred the fresh scent of camphor over the floral fragrances sold in perfume shops, and she had often told Arumi so.

“Camphor is a spice from Sumatra, *Nduk*. I love its freshness,” she had once said to her daughter. Like her father, the little girl would only nod whenever her mother talked about spices—not just every day, but all the time.

There wasn’t a single spice Naning didn’t know—its name, shape, aroma, history, origin, properties, and uses.

Naning’s great-grandfather and parents had been trading spice for generations. As a child, Naning would always accompany her mother, walking through the Chinatown district on Jalan Songoyu until they reached their shop in Pabean Market.

Even now, despite the rise of modern shopping centers, Pabean Market remains the largest and most complete spice market in East Java. It’s a place that never seems to sleep. Morning, afternoon, evening, and even late at night, the spice traders, buyers, and laborers hauling sacks of spices are still coming and going.



“Ning, please don’t take Arumi to Pabean Market every day,” Handoko said one night.

“What’s wrong with that?” Naning replied, annoyed at her husband’s request.

“I see Arumi’s talent is in drawing, not trading spices. I’m allowing you to continue your family’s spice business, but not for Arumi!” Handoko spoke softly but firmly.

Naning fell silent. His words felt like they cut straight into her heart, sharp and painful. It was as if her husband was belittling what she did with spices. To Naning, anyone who belittled spices was also belittling her.

Seeing the disappointment in Naning’s eyes, Handoko came closer and stood behind her. “I don’t mean to insult you or your spices, Ning. I can sense and see Arumi’s talent in art because I spend more time with her, while you’re more often at the market.”

Naning said nothing. She knew in her heart that what Handoko said was true. From before dawn until almost sunset, she spent most of her time at Pabean Market.

“I want Arumi to go to college someday so she can excel in something she loves—in art or design,” Handoko explained, wrapping his arms around Naning’s waist.

Handoko’s embrace left Naning motionless. Her heart was already wounded by his words. Even when Handoko released her and went to bed, Naning remained standing by their bedroom window.

She never imagined that would be their last embrace and their last night together. Handoko fell asleep and never woke up again. So peaceful, yet so sudden.

From that moment on, Naning stopped taking Arumi to Pabean Market. She no longer allowed herself to hope that her daughter might come to love, or even one day inherit

the family's spice business. Instead, she steeled herself to shoulder everything alone, determined to see Arumi through school until she earned a degree in design, just as her late father had wished.

But as time passed, it carried not only memories but also new hopes. Now, nearly fifty years old, Naning felt utterly exhausted. She found herself thinking differently now, with a new hope that Arumi would step into her place and carry on the family spice business.



Wak Parjan stopped pedaling his pedicab. Realizing it was no longer moving, Naning gently set her feet on the ground and stood at the market gate. She lifted her gaze to Surabaya's sky, still glowing orange. She handed three purple banknotes to Wak Parjan. The old man accepted them, his eyes lighting up.

In her heart, Naning still felt indebted to Wak Parjan. He had been a help to her for years since Handoko's passing. Suddenly, she felt it would be wrong to refuse the old man's good intentions.

"Jan?"

Wak Parjan turned his head.

"Maybe you're right about Arumi. I need someone from the family to help at my shop. If Arumi doesn't want to, maybe her husband will. So, there's no harm in Arumi getting married. Who knows, maybe her husband will be willing to help me run the spice business."

“Yes, Ning?” Wak Parjan asked, his face was now serious and eager.

“About Pras, I’ll try talking to Arumi. As far as I know, she doesn’t have a boyfriend yet,” Naning said .

“Ning, Arumi wont regret marrying Pras. He’s generous and hardworking, just like you.”

Naning nodded slowly. Wak Parjan turned his pedicab around, his face glowing with joy.



Naning stepped through the main gate of Pabean market. Her eyes swept over the market, already crowded with people going back and forth. Most of them had been there since late at night.

She let out a long sigh. Perhaps soon she would no longer need to come this early. Perhaps she could sleep a little longer at night. If Arumi were married, she could slow down, just work at her own pace. The thought lingered as she walked on.

She kept walking, breathed in the warm, sharp smell of spices filling the market. This was the place where her parents had raised her while running their stall. As a child, she would lie on piles of spice sacks, listening to her mother’s stories about European traders bartering with the locals, about the origins and powers of each spice.

The call to the dawn prayer drifted faintly through the air. Naning quickened her steps toward her spice shop, then spread out her prayer mat. As Arumi had reminded her, she wouldn't start trading before performing the dawn prayer.



Chapter 6

Star Anise

“... I want their hearts to feel warm, their bodies stronger, and their minds refreshed and energized after enjoying wedang and spiced snacks in this café.”



Night had just draped its long gown over the city of Surabaya. Colorful lights quickly spread across tall buildings, city parks, and the streets of the city of heroes.

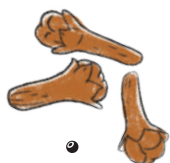
But for a metropolitan city like Surabaya, night wasn't a time to rest. For many of its residents, night is when work begins, or when they find the best chance to unwind after the long hours of the day. They flock to late-night food stalls or stroll with loved ones, especially on a Saturday night like this.

Arumi was different. This Saturday night, she preferred to stay in her room. The past two nights felt endless for her because she needed to finish a design competition entry. From the double casement window on the second floor of the old Roman-style house, her bedroom light stayed on until morning. She bent over her desk. Every so often, she got up, studied for a long moment a sheet that had just slid out of the printer, then tossed it aside.

She sat back down, fingers dancing on her tablet's stylus pen. She had already sketched, printed, and tossed aside dozens of designs—too many to count.

Four days. That was all the time Arumi had left to finish her designs for the Creative Economy Competition. She often joined design contests, but this one drained her thoughts and energy more than usual, although the prize was substantial enough to make it worthwhile.





Ever since she got the idea at a vegetarian restaurant a few days ago, Arumi had barely stepped out of her room. She refused to let even a spare minute pass without sketching on her tablet.

In that time, her room had changed too. Once as neat and gleaming as a four-star hotel lobby, the almost basketball-court-sized space had turned into a chaotic studio. Sketch-covered papers littered the marble floor.

But she couldn't admire them for long. For the past week, she had gone to bed past midnight almost every night. Tonight, it was only nine o'clock, yet she could no longer keep her eyes open.

With heavy steps, Arumi walked to her bed and let her tired body fall onto it. Her eyes caught a glimpse of light glinting from the crystal lamps hanging on the ceiling, then she drifted off to sleep.



Arumi's phone kept blaring relentlessly. She slowly opened her eyes, catching a sliver of light slipping through the sheer curtains that fluttered in the breeze. Warm air brushed across her forehead.

She shifted toward the edge of her wide bed and, with a lazy reach, grabbed the phone that had been buzzing on the little table beside her.

“Hello ...” she mumbled.

“Arumi!” Dinda’s voice exploded through the speaker. “Where are you?”

“In my room,” Arumi replied innocently.

“Ugh, seriously!” Dinda huffed. “I’m in front of your house!”

“Just come in, Dinda. Head up to my room!”

“This girl, I swear!” Dinda grumbled. “How am I supposed to get inside, Your Highness? Your gate’s locked, duh!” Her voice got so loud that Arumi had to hold the phone away from her ear.

“Is Mr. Marlan there?” Arumi asked.

There was a brief silence on the line. It seemed that Dinda was peeking through the gate to see if the security guard was in his post. “He’s here. Completely passed out!” Dinda said, irritated.

“Alright, give me a second. I’ll wake him up” Arumi slid over and sat near the intercom by her bed. After the buzzer rang several times, a nervous male voice finally answered from the guard post.

“Hello, hello, Miss Arumi,” Marlan said, his voice wavering with unease.

“Mr. Marlan, can you open the gate? My friend’s here,” Arumi said.

“Yes, Miss. Sorry, I dozed off—I stayed up watching soccer,” Marlan muttered, embarrassed.

“It’s fine,” Arumi replied kindly.



The sound of Marlan’s footsteps hurried closer. *Creak.* The tall, heavy gate slowly opened. Dinda’s expression softened the moment she saw his face appear from behind the gate.

“Sorry, Miss Dinda,” Marlan said politely.

“It’s fine,” Dinda replied as she started up her motorbike again and rode slowly until she reached Arumi’s front porch.

As usual, whenever she came to Arumi’s house, Dinda didn’t go straight inside even though the host had already invited her. She preferred to sit first on the garden chair, enjoying the water flowing from the artificial waterfall and the chirping of little birds that often perched on the branches of the ylang-ylang tree.

After she’d had her fill of the view and the warmth of the morning in Arumi’s yard, Dinda finally went inside. In truth, she preferred meeting Arumi in the living room. Going up to Arumi’s bedroom was something Dinda always tried to avoid. Not only because she felt uneasy wandering alone through such a large, luxurious house, but also because the wide rooms and the many winding stairs often left her tired before she even got there.

“Oh my gosh! What happened here, Arumi!” Dinda froze the moment she opened Arumi’s bedroom door.

Sketches of various spice designs lay scattered everywhere, covering almost the entire floor.

Arumi, looking worn out, tried to stand and then sank into her chair. “Just leave it. I’m exhausted!” she said. “Oh, Arumi ... you’ve done all this just for that competition? I can’t believe it! I thought you’d given up since the deadline’s so close. But it turns out” Dinda’s voice rose in shock as she took in the state of the room, which looked like it had been hit by a nuclear bomb.

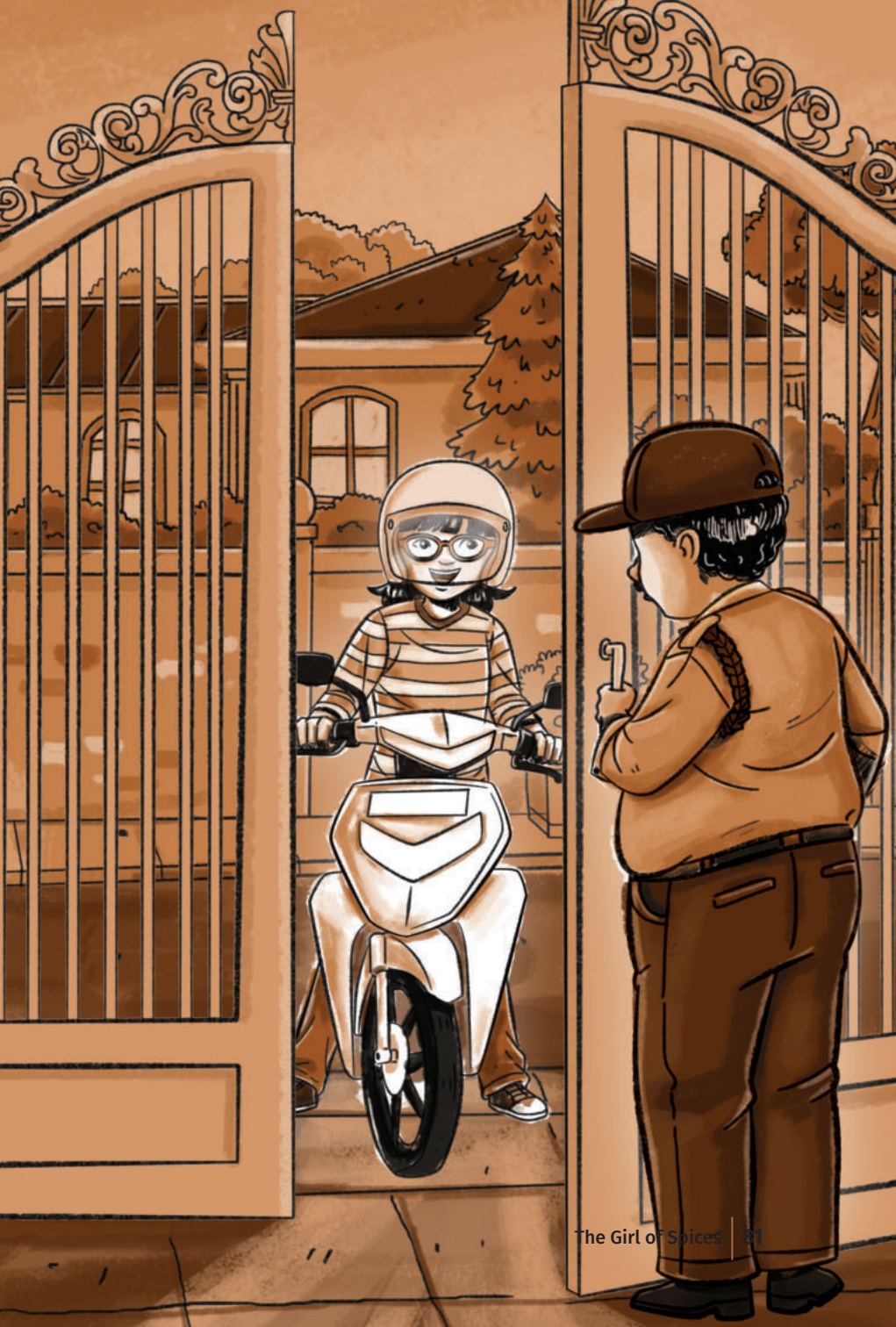
Arumi only grinned at Dinda’s outburst. “Of course, not. I’m not giving up. I went quiet back then because I couldn’t find the right idea, but ... after our visit to that vegetarian restaurant”

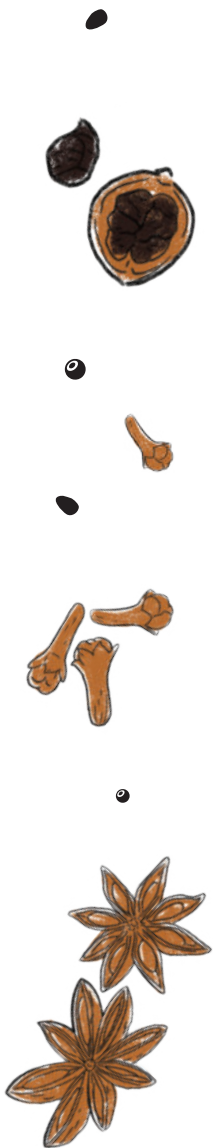
“You got your idea there, didn’t you?” Dinda cut in.

Arumi nodded.

Dinda watched as Arumi poured herself a glass of water from the dispenser and drank. “So what’s your idea, Arumi? What theme are you entering for the Creative Economy competition?” Dinda pressed.







“Spice Café,” Arumi replied curtly.

“Arumi! That’s awesome!” Dinda grabbed her shoulders and shook her.

“Yeah, yeah, I know ...” Arumi grinned. “Please stop!” she shouted.

“Okay, okay.” Dinda finally stopped shaking her. “No wonder, I saw all these spice sketches scattered around your room, but I had no clue what you were trying to do. Arumi, your idea is amazing. Super unique and original!” Dinda exclaimed with excitement.

Arumi smiled.

“Come on, show me! I’m dying to see it!” Dinda urged.

Arumi pulled open her desk drawer and took out a stack of design papers clipped together.

“I haven’t had time to bind them neatly yet,” she said. The two girls sat facing each other.

Arumi opened the first page of her design portfolio and began explaining. “My spice café is designed as a cozy place where anyone can enjoy modern spice-

based food and drinks. There'll be plenty of spice drinks and light snacks made with high-quality flavors. Everything I create can be enjoyed here or taken to go."

"Wow ..." Dinda's eyes widened as she stared at the first page—an exterior sketch of Arumi's café design. Even though it was only a drawing, the café looked warm and calm at first glance.

"This café isn't just a place to sit and chat. I designed it so visitors can also experience the spice trade routes that once stretched across the Nusantara archipelago. That way, they'll know every flavor they taste has traveled through long stories, from farmers, traders, even freedom fighters of the past," Arumi said passionately.

Dinda flipped to the next page—a sketch of the café's interior. The design carried a strong historical vibe. On one wall, Arumi had drawn a spice route map, while the open space was decorated with warm shades of maroon.

"I don't just want visitors to enjoy spice-based food or relax at my Spice Café but also feel inspired by the goodness of spices flowing through their bodies," Arumi explained softly, almost like a poet.

Dinda nodded eagerly, flipping through page after page of the portfolio. She couldn't wait to hear the rest of Arumi's ideas. Arumi just smiled at her friend's excitement.

"I want every visitor to feel the benefit of spices, for both their body and soul. I want their hearts to feel warm, their bodies to become healthier, and their minds to become fresher and more energized after enjoying our *wedang* and

spice snacks here. That way, they'll feel better and long to come back to the café again," Arumi said.

"How many spice menus do you even have, Arumi?" Dinda asked, more curious than ever.

"A lot, of course. I went through all of my grandfather's old spice recipes. There's *wedang pokok*, *wedang jaselang*¹¹, *wedang ronde*, *beras kencur*, *sinom*, *angslé*¹², and so many more spice drinks. Most of them are good for restoring stamina and boosting the immune system. There are also plenty of spice-flavored snacks, such as spice cookies, spice pies, spice cakes, and even spice ice cream. They're not like regular snacks. You don't just taste the flavor, but it keeps you healthy too. I guarantee you won't gain weight even if you snack a lot. Oh, I can't wait to make all of this real, Dinda!" Arumi said as she slowly walked toward the window and pulled the curtains all the way open, letting the soft, warm morning breeze sweep across her face.

"But, sorry to say this, Arumi. Some people still think of spices as nothing more than *jamu*¹³. You know, *jamu* is usually associated with old folks. What if they" Dinda's once-bright enthusiasm slipped into a slower, more hesitant tone.

Arumi quickly stepped back toward her.

"No ... no ..." She waved her right index finger in front of her friend's face. "Go ahead, open the next section, Din. You haven't gone through the whole portfolio yet, have

11 *Jaselang* is an acronym of *jahe*, *secang*, and *alang-alang*. It is a traditional hot drink made from ginger, sappanwood (*kayu secang*), and cogon grass (*alang-alang*), originally from Malang, East Java

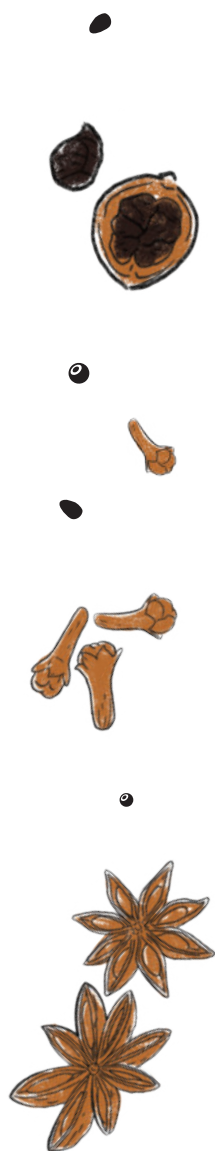
12 *Angslé* is a traditional Javanese warm sweet soup made from coconut milk with glutinous rice, bread, peanuts, and small mochi-like balls

13 *Jamu* is a traditional Indonesian herbal drink or tonic, usually made from spices, roots, and natural ingredients, believed to have various health benefits.

you? In the last pages, you'll find the product-packaging designs I made. I gave them a totally modern look. Visitors can choose to enjoy the spice *wedang* hot or cold. They can drink it right here in the café or take it home. I created different packaging options. No one's going to think of it as *jamu*, the look is too unique and contemporary. Even if they drink it here, they'll experience a café atmosphere that feels grand yet calming. They can sit back in open spaces on coconut-wood chairs while admiring spice route paintings across the walls. Families can gather, or colleagues can even hold meetings in semi-outdoor rooms decorated with spice accents everywhere," Arumi explained, her voice steady and convincing.

"Wow, that's amazing. How did you even come up with such a brilliant idea, Arumi?" Dinda asked in awe.

"Spices are the breath of my family," Arumi said. "I didn't realize how much they meant, especially to my mother. I'm the descendant of a respected spice merchant here, but I often took it for granted. I couldn't



follow my mother in running the spice market business. But designing this spice café lets me carry the goodness of spices forward, making them a source of pride for young people, not just the older generation.” Arumi let out a deep breath. Dinda saw the spark burning in Arumi’s eyes.

“Arumi, I don’t know what to say. Your idea is amazing. If your father were here, he’d be proud. You’re still your mother’s girl of spice, and with this café design, you’re showing your father’s artistic talent. Both your parents would be proud of you,” Dinda said, gazing at her friend.

“And you know what? On the last page of my portfolio, I saved my best design as a tribute to my parents. I wanted my spice café to be more than just a café, but also a family learning spot. Beside the café is a mini spice garden, where parents and kids can pick fresh spices. Then, they can step into a special kitchen I’ve prepared for visitors and try making *wedang* or simple spice dishes together. I’ve set up both traditional and modern tools—mortar and pestle, stone grinder, blender, and grinder machine. Families can enjoy the dishes they make,” Arumi explained, pointing to the page. The kitchen adjoins the spice garden, decorated with spice accents. “You could even bring Haikal, your adorable nephew. He and his mom would love cooking with spices here,” Arumi added.

“Wow, that would be so much fun! I really hope your design wins and becomes a reality soon, Arumi. I can’t wait to take pictures with Haikal in your spice garden and cool kitchen!”





“Hmmm ... all you think about is taking pictures!” Arumi gently pulled her portfolio sketch back from her friend’s hands and slipped it into the drawer of her desk.

Dinda burst out laughing. “Of course, you’ll need a model to be your ambassador when your café launches, right? I’m totally ready for that! Sounds like the perfect fit, right? For you, I’ll do it for free!” she joked, getting more and more carried away.

“You’re ridiculous!” Arumi finally couldn’t help laughing, too.

“Oh, right, what are you going to name your café?” Dinda asked once she finally managed to stop laughing.

“*Kembang Lawang*,” Arumi replied, taking a small dark-brown jewelry box out of the drawer of her desk.

“*Kembang Lawang*? What’s that?” Dinda asked curiously. What is the connection between *Kembang Lawang* and the small object in the jewelry box?



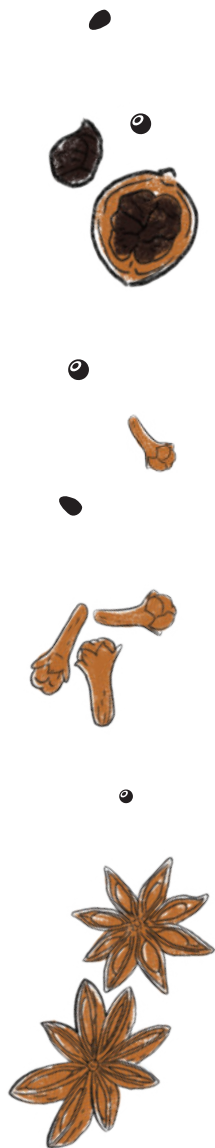
“Star anise. It’s the spice I find most beautiful. But I like calling it *kembang lawang*. Even my father, who’s never had the slightest interest in spices, was stunned and fascinated when he happened to see the star anise my mother brought home from the market,” Arumi recalled, her eyes resting on a jewel-studded brooch shaped like a star anise blossom lying inside the box.

“He was inspired by star anise and crafted this brooch for me,” Arumi said, showing the star-like brooch with seven carpels and oval dark-brown gemstones resembling the seeds nestled in each carpel.

“This brooch is so beautiful,” Dinda said in awe.

“Star anise is not just beautiful, as a spice, it’s also unique. It can be used not only in cooking, but also





in cosmetics and medicine. As a spice plant, it is adaptable to various habitats. Beautiful, special, yet simple ... that's the impression I get from this spice. That's why I felt drawn to make it the name of my dream café. What do you think?"

Dinda raised both thumbs. "It's just perfect, the name and the café."

Arumi smiled. "Besides that, *kembang lawang* also holds a philosophical meaning for me. *Kembang* or flowers are often associated with beauty, as they soothe the eyes of whoever sees them. I don't think there's anyone, man or woman, who doesn't admire flowers. Meanwhile, *lawang* or door is something everyone knows as an essential feature of a home. Only by opening and passing through it can we explore the rest of the house. A door is also a symbol of privacy and family safety. Placing the word *kembang* together with *lawang* feels as though the host is ready to welcome guests with honor and warmth, inviting them to find goodness inside the home." Arumi spoke wistfully.

“Wow, I didn’t realize it could carry such depth. It’s perfect, Arumi.”

“Alhamdulillah.”

They both let out a soft sigh, the room quiet for a moment, until Dinda broke the silence.

“Actually, the real reason I came was because I was worried about you. It’s not like you to ignore my messages or miss my calls,” Dinda said, her concern plain.

“The past two days I deliberately turned off my phone. I wanted to focus on designing and push myself to finish by today. Earlier, after dawn prayer, I dozed off again and ended up oversleeping. I didn’t even have time to make *wedang* for my mother. I don’t even know when she left. She must be so disappointed in me.” Arumi said, her face folding into guilt.

“Relax, Arumi. Your mom won’t be upset. At the very least, I’ve brought happy news today,” Dinda comforted her. Her eyes twinkled playfully. “Guess what it is ...,” she teased.

“Ah, I give up. My head’s still a bit dizzy. I’m not in the mood for guessing games!” Arumi said, turning away and lying back down on the bed.

“Alright then. The good news is ... you’ve been chosen as an eligible student. I just checked our school’s social media account this morning. Just one more step to the achievement scholarship, right?” Dinda explained excitedly.

“What? Seriously? Are you for real, Dinda?” Arumi instantly sat up from the bed.

Dinda only nodded firmly, smiling, her eyes shining with joy for Arumi.

“Alhamdulillah!” Arumi cheered. Like a little child receiving free candy, she jumped up and down.

“Now, come on, let’s tell your mom. She’ll definitely be so happy too!” Dinda urged, glancing at Arumi’s phone on the table.

“Not now!” Arumi stopped her. “It’s not the right time yet,” she said briefly.



Chapter 7

A Surprise

*“... just keep trying and don’t give up, let
God prepare the most beautiful surprise.”*



No one ever knew what tomorrow would bring. No one could tell what God had set aside from morning to night. Each day arrived as a certainty wrapped in a surprise. Nothing could be denied, nothing could be escaped. This truth lingered quietly in Naning's mind as she began her day.

Morning at the Pabean Spice Market felt long for Naning. As she moved through the early hours before dawn until midday—the busiest time at the market—major middlemen from various regions of East Java to Central Java often came to her shop.

Naning's shop stood as the oldest and most prominent in the legendary Pabean Market. Her family had kept it alive for nearly a century, passing it down through three generations. The shelves overflowed with the widest assortment of spices one could find—dozens of varieties, fresh and dried, stacked high in abundant supply.

Each morning, Naning busied herself with customers—mostly traders who bought in bulk to resell elsewhere. Some came from modern herbal medicine companies, collecting spices as the backbone of their products.

Approaching noon didn't mean break time for Naning at her shop. In fact, midday was usually when shipments of spices from all over the country poured in. Most of these spices came from Maluku and West Sumatra.

Although she had only ten permanent employees to serve customers, there were always plenty of porters offering their help to Naning every day.





“Ning, I need a word,” a gruff, gravelly voice startled Naning. Wak Parjan, owner of that rough voice, rushed to the entrance of her shop.

What on earth does Wak Parjan want at such a busy hour? Naning thought, slightly annoyed. The market was at its peak bustle. Spice middlemen poured in. Dozens of sacks from the trucks awaited her inspection.

“Ning” Wak Parjan called again.

The middle-aged woman only shot him a brief glance before resuming her work. This was simply not the time for conversation. Surely Wak Parjan knew this was her rush hour and that she would never receive visitors unless their business was connected to spices. *He ought to know that; after all, the pedicab driver had been taking her places for the past ten years,* Naning thought, a little disappointed at his insistence.

“Cinnamon, one quintal. Nutmeg, one quintal. Black pepper, two quintals. White pepper, three quintals” Naning checked each sack of spices the porters had just unloaded and brought into her shop.

After waiting in silence and being ignored, Wak Parjan finally dared to step closer to Naning. “Pras wants to come

to your house, Ning. The sooner, the better, he said.”

Naning paused, her hands still. She fixed a sharp gaze on the old man, startled by his news. *Why so soon?* she wondered. She still needed to learn more about Pras. What Wak Parjan had told her wasn't enough.

She hadn't discussed this matter with her extended family, especially Yanuar, her brother, who adored Arumi and always wanted to hear news about her. Naning hadn't even told Arumi about her plan yet. She was still searching for the right words—or the courage—to speak to her daughter.

She stood frozen, staring at Wak Parjan. She said nothing. Wak Parjan shifted, then hurried off, leaving Naning to her work.



Later that night, Naning meant to talk to her daughter, but Arumi wasn't home. She remembered the call that afternoon. Arumi had said she'd be stepping out with Dinda, whom Naning knows well. Of course, she allowed her to. Arumi is a





Toko Rempah
Oetami

homebody. She almost never goes out when her mother is at home. *Maybe this time she just wanted to take in the Surabaya night with her closest friend*, Naning thought.



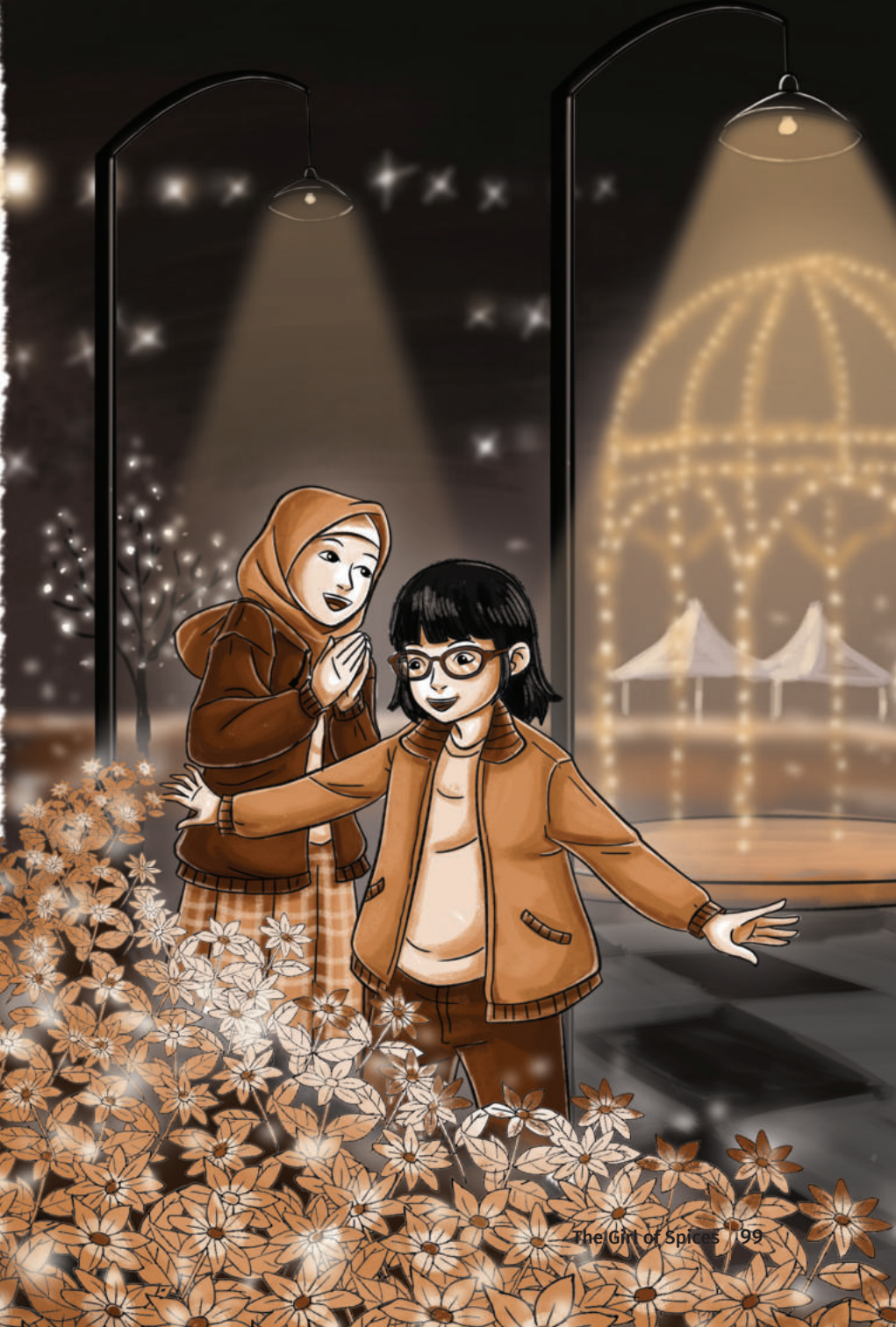
Meanwhile, that night, Dinda and Arumi strolled leisurely in Lightning Garden, a newly established city park in Surabaya. True to its name, the park was designed to be visited after dark. Thousands of lights of every shape and size glowed, illuminating each ornament on every side of the park.

“Have you checked the contest organizer’s social media yet? The participants’ work is amazing.” Arumi broke the silence. For the first few minutes, the two of them had simply walked in silence, taking in the park they were visiting for the first time.

“I did, but only a quick glance. I was in a rush,” Dinda said, reaching up to play with the strings of tiny lights dangling above her head.

Arumi exhaled, shoulders slumping. “At least I tried. I already feel satisfied and like a winner just for giving it a shot.





Of course, I hope to win, but I'm ready if all my work ends up as nothing more than a portfolio." She switched off her phone, then reached out and gently brushed her fingers across the wings of an artificial butterfly, feeling its glitter catch on her fingertips as the wings rose and fell.

A few minutes earlier, Arumi had opened the Creative Economy contest's social-media account while sitting with Dinda. Dinda noticed her friend's frown appear and saw her eyes dim as Arumi scrolled through the lineup of participant portfolios on the screen.

"Don't be so pessimistic, Arumi. Everyone's entries are great, and so are yours. We don't know what the judges are looking for, do we?" Dinda tried to encourage Arumi, trailing her hand through artificial fireflies over the flowers.

Deep down inside, Dinda was impressed by the other contestants. Their ideas were striking and the designs stunning. Yet one thing had caught her eye, something Arumi seemed to have missed. Most of the entrants were university students; only a handful of high schoolers had dared to enter such a prestigious competition. Arumi was one of the few.





"No wonder their designs are amazing, Arumi. They're already design majors at college. They've got all that training from campus, while you're still in high school and everything you know about design comes from self-study and the talent you inherited from your dad," Dinda said, resting her hand gently on Arumi's arm to reassure her.

She saw a slow smile begin to form on Arumi's thin lips as the words settled in.

"The announcement isn't even out yet, and you're already losing hope. Didn't you always say: Keep trying, never give up, and trust God to prepare an amazing surprise?"

"Thanks ... you really are my best friend!" Arumi hugged Dinda. They walked to a domed tower glittering with golden lights. They continued walking until they reached a domed tower whose pillars and roof were illuminated with golden lights. For a moment, the two girls seemed to forget they'd be graduating from high school in just a few days. Laughing, they twirled around each pillar of the tower.

“Don’t stop dreaming, Arumi!” Dinda shouted.

“And wait for the best surprise from God!” Arumi replied loudly.



Chapter 8

Gifts Pour In

Isn't that how it is when God gives surprises? They're nowhere in sight one moment, absent even from dreams, and then all at once they're there.



That morning was unlike any other. Students streamed out of their classrooms, heading toward one corner of the basketball court. In front of a large bulletin board, a crowd had already started to gather.

“I give up! Give up ...!”

“Who got selected? Who?”

“Hey, move aside a little!”

“I’m just going to chill, I’m sure I won’t get picked anyway ...”

“Then step aside already!”

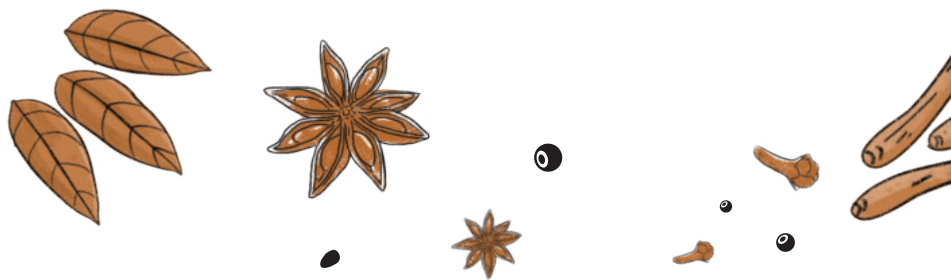
“Wait, isn’t that Arumi’s name at the very top of the list?”

“Yah, that’s Arumi!”

“Hmm, I’m not surprised!”

While walking past, Dinda initially didn’t feel like joining the crowd. But the moment she heard her best friend’s name, she stepped closer.

“What are they even looking at?” she muttered, pushing her way in. Carefully, she began to read the noticeboard.





ANNOUNCEMENT

The following students have been selected to participate in the national university admission selection based on academic achievement.

Dinda's eyes widened at the notice board in front of her. In a flash, she spotted the very first name on the school's list of high-achieving students entitled to register for state universities through the merit-scholarship track:

1. Arumi Madasari — Product Design Program

Quickly, Dinda dug her phone out of her bag to snap a photo of the announcement. After taking the picture, she edged herself sideways from the crowd.

"Arumi!" she called as soon as she was clear of the people. She hurried toward the school gate, where she saw Arumi stepping out of a gleaming black sedan.

"Wow, it's unusual to see you dropped off by Mr. Wisnu," Dinda said, poking her friend on the shoulder.

"Yeah. I'm not feeling well. I suddenly started shivering and have had a sore throat since last night. Mom told me to just skip school,

but I insisted on coming, so she asked Mr. Wisnu to drive me,” Arumi replied.

“Your mother was right. Besides, what’s the car for if it’s just leaving there unused? Such a waste ...!” said Dinda. She glanced at Arumi’s car as it gracefully drove away from the school gate.

“True. If it hadn’t been for Uncle Yanuar pushing her, my mom would never have bought a car. She’s always relied on her favorite pedicab,” Arumi grumbled.

“Your uncle’s right, Arumi. If something like this happens, say you or your mom suddenly gets sick, it’s much better to go by car than by motorcycle or pedicab. At least occasionally, you can look like you’re actually rich. Don’t stay low-profile all the time,” Dinda teased.

“Ugh, there you go again” Arumi shot Dinda a look while her friend chuckled beside her.

“But wouldn’t it be better if you just rested at home? You still look a bit weak,” Dinda said, studying Arumi’s slightly pale face.

“No way. Being alone at home all the time is boring. Besides, school’s almost over, right? We’re graduating soon anyway,” Arumi replied.

“Yeah, that’s true. You’re feeling better now, aren’t you?” Dinda asked to be sure.







Arumi nodded. “Yeah, thank God. Yesterday, I’ve been mixing and drinking a blend of turmeric extract, egg yolk, and honey. My sore throat and discomfort have eased up a lot after drinking it.”

“Wow, since when do you bother making your own herbal concoction?” Dinda laughed.

“Well, something like that can’t possibly come in instant form, you know! Not like the instant ginger drink I usually have!” Arumi retorted. Both of them burst out laughing.

“Hey, have you checked the Ministry of Creative Economy’s social media yet? Has the announcement been posted?” Dinda asked as they passed the school basketball court.

“Uhm ... not yet, but it’s been almost a month, hasn’t it? I’ll check later, but honestly, I’m still kind of pessimistic. The other contestants’ designs are good. I’ve resigned myself to whatever happens,” Arumi replied lightly.

“Come on, didn’t you say that once you’ve tried your best, all that’s left is to wait for God’s sweetest surprise? And speaking of surprises, I have something special for you,” said Dinda.

“A surprise? What is it?” Arumi asked, curious.

As always, Dinda loved watching Arumi try to guess. “Go on, guess!”

“Hmm, your motorcycle license has finally out, hasn’t it? Yay, now you can give me rides anywhere,” Arumi teased.

“Ha! Spoiled girl. That came out months ago already, Missy!”

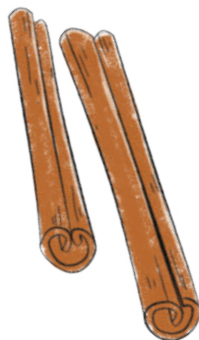
“Hmm, what else?” Arumi seemed to think. “Oh, your birthday’s soon. Are you treating me?” Arumi laughed, pointing at Dinda’s nose.

Dinda laughed. “Hey, that’s not a surprise, but an extortion!”

Arumi burst out laughing. “Or your brother-in-law came home and took your sister and nephew on a vacation and you’re tagging along? Fine then, I’ll just be here alone without my best friend.” She grinned at Dinda, feigning sadness with an exaggerated pout.

Dinda shook her head, smiling as she reached out to pinch Arumi’s waist. “You’re ridiculous, Arumi. I’m too old to be tagging along with them,” she teased.

Arumi yelped in surprise and stepped back. “Ow! That hurts!” she exclaimed, rubbing her side.



Dinda grabbed Arumi's arm and gently tugged her toward the bulletin board near the basketball court. "Come here ... come on." She pointed to a sheet of paper with the school logo pinned to the board. "Read that."

One second, two seconds, three seconds. Arumi read it.

"Dinda ...!" Arumi shouted. Several students passing by turned to look at them.

Overcome with excitement, Arumi grabbed Dinda by both shoulders and shook her. The petite, bespectacled girl swayed like a boat rocked by waves, her shoulder-length straight hair flinging back and forth.

"Stop, Arumi! Enough!" Dinda yelled.

Arumi let go of her, while Dinda straightened the glasses that had slipped out of place.

"I'm sorry. I'm overjoyed!" Arumi covered her mouth, trying to stifle a laugh as she watched Dinda fix her now-messy hair.

At that moment, Arumi's phone vibrated in her pocket. Casually, she reached for it. A new message from an unknown number had appeared.

Congratulations!

You've been selected as one of the winners of the 2023 Creative Economy Competition by the Ministry of Creative Economy. Please check the official announcement on our social media account and complete your registration through the provided link.

Thank you.

"Dinda, I'm not dreaming, am I?" Arumi whispered.

"What is it?" Dinda stopped walking to catch up with her.

Arumi held out her phone, signaling for Dinda to read the message she'd just received.

"Wow ... another surprise. Congratulations, Arumi. This is not a dream!" Dinda jumped. Arumi jumped too.

"God's gifts are pouring in. Oh God ... I still can't believe it!"

"This is exactly what you always say, Arumi. Keep trying. Let God send the unexpected surprise. So why, when it all arrives, do you feel strange?" Dinda's words made Arumi's eyes brim even more with happy tears. She had never imagined God's gifts arriving one after another like this. She had never expected the gifts from God she'd been waiting for to start pouring in. Isn't that how it is when God gives surprises? They're nowhere in sight one moment, absent even from dreams, and then all at once they're there.



The two girls held hands, jumping up and down as they chanted like cheerleaders. Students and teachers passing by stared and smiled, surprised by the display. Their antics continued until the long bell signaled the start of class. Both girls clapped their hands over their mouths, struggling to stifle laughter.



Dinda honked her motorbike horn right in front of Arumi, who was standing beside the security post.

“Didn’t Mr. Wisnu pick you up?” Dinda asked as she lifted her helmet visor.

Arumi shook her head. “Nope. I want you to take me instead, Din!” Arumi whined playfully, as always.

“We’re going home, right?” Dinda asked to be sure.

“No. Take me to my mother. I want to surprise her.” Arumi pressed her hands to her cheeks and smiled sweetly.

Dinda nodded, glancing at Arumi and noticing the bright sparkle in her friend’s eyes. Dinda realized she had never seen Arumi look so happy at midday before.



“Oh, just imagine how happy my mom will be. Her only daughter, the one she calls spoiled, quiet, and cold, and claims doesn’t love her spices, will show up and surprise her,” Arumi said as she and Dinda sped along on the motorbike.

“Hold on, let me imagine that first... Ehm... but I’m afraid we’ll crash if I picture it on the road like this!” Dinda joked, earning a pinch on the waist from Arumi. Both of them burst out laughing.

“Just picture it. How my mom will react when she finds out I got into a state university on the merit pathway? And when she learns my spice café design won the prestigious Ministry of Creative Economy competition? What do you think she’ll do?” Arumi kept on chatting excitedly, ignoring the scorching midday sun and the hot Surabaya wind tugging at her neatly arranged white scarf.

“Hmmm, if I were your mom, I’d probably be shocked, cry with joy, hug you, or even pick you up in my arms.”

“Not that far, Dinda!” Arumi laughed. “Pick me up? What am I, a toddler?”

Their laughter rang out again.



Chapter 9

Chased by Shadows

Naning truly didn't care. She brushed aside everything blocking her way. The faster she walked, the more Handoko's shadow chased after her, closing in.



Midday at Pabean Market is the time when people, who are worn out from their struggles, try to find ways to entertain themselves. It's certainly not easy to make hard workers laugh under the piercing heat beating down on their heads.

Porters go back and forth hauling sacks of spices, large trucks load and unload those sacks, pedicabs carry buyers and retailers, and street vendors with their small goods crowd the road along Pabean Market. Traffic jams from morning until late afternoon are a constant sight on this northern corner of the City of Heroes.

Amid that congestion, the phone in Dinda's pocket rang, loud and long. Half-heartedly, Dinda reached for it, but her reluctance vanished the moment she saw the name on the screen. Widya, her only sister, had already called her six times in less than thirty minutes.

"Sorry, Arumi. I'll drop you off here, okay? Looks like my sister really needs me," Dinda said just before suddenly pulling over and stopping her motorcycle in front of a convenience store some distance from the market.

Arumi nodded, her face clouded with guilt. She was beginning to realize how often she had been taking up Dinda's time. Meanwhile, Widya who had been in a long-distance relationship with her husband for a long time, might really need to spend time with her only sibling.

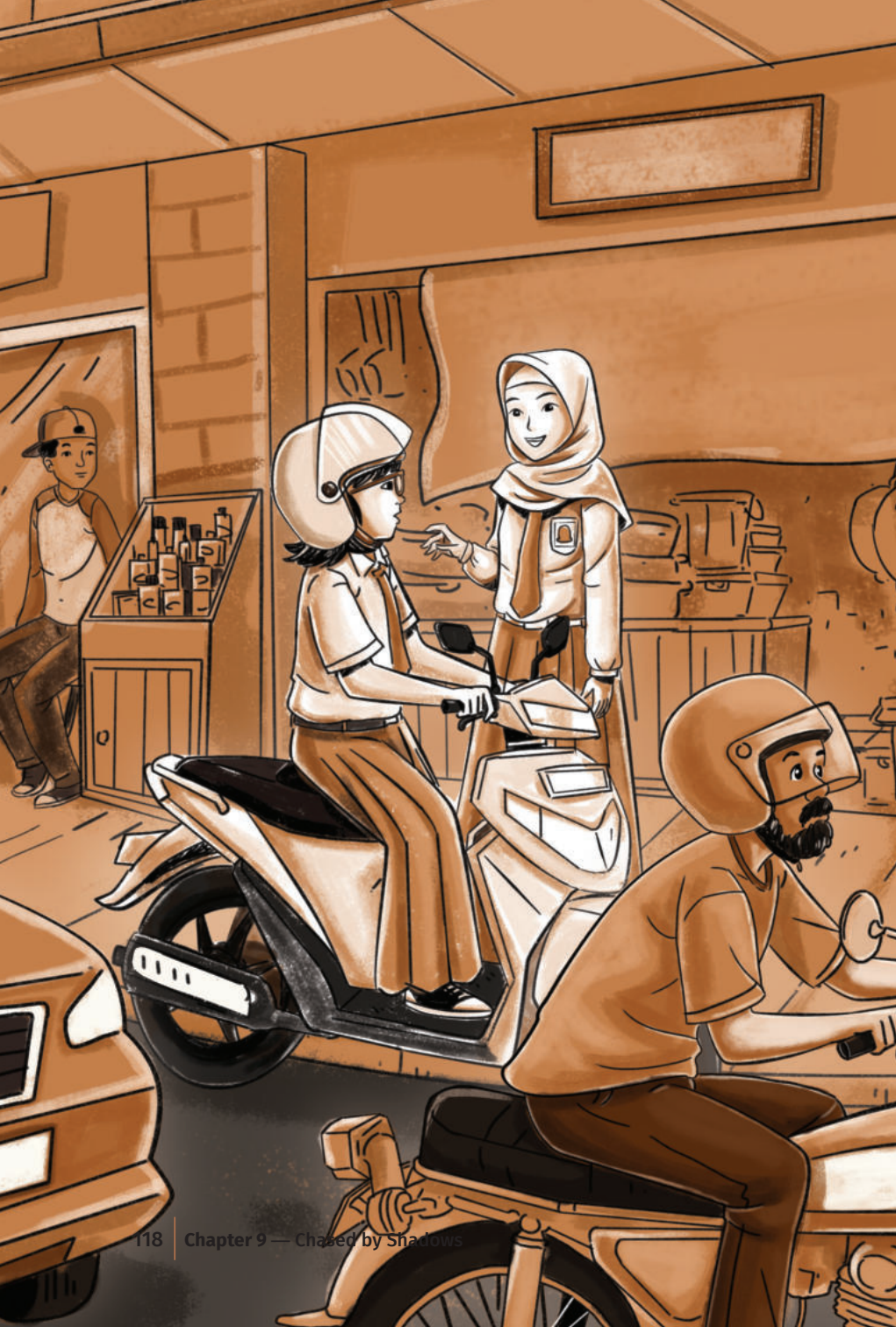


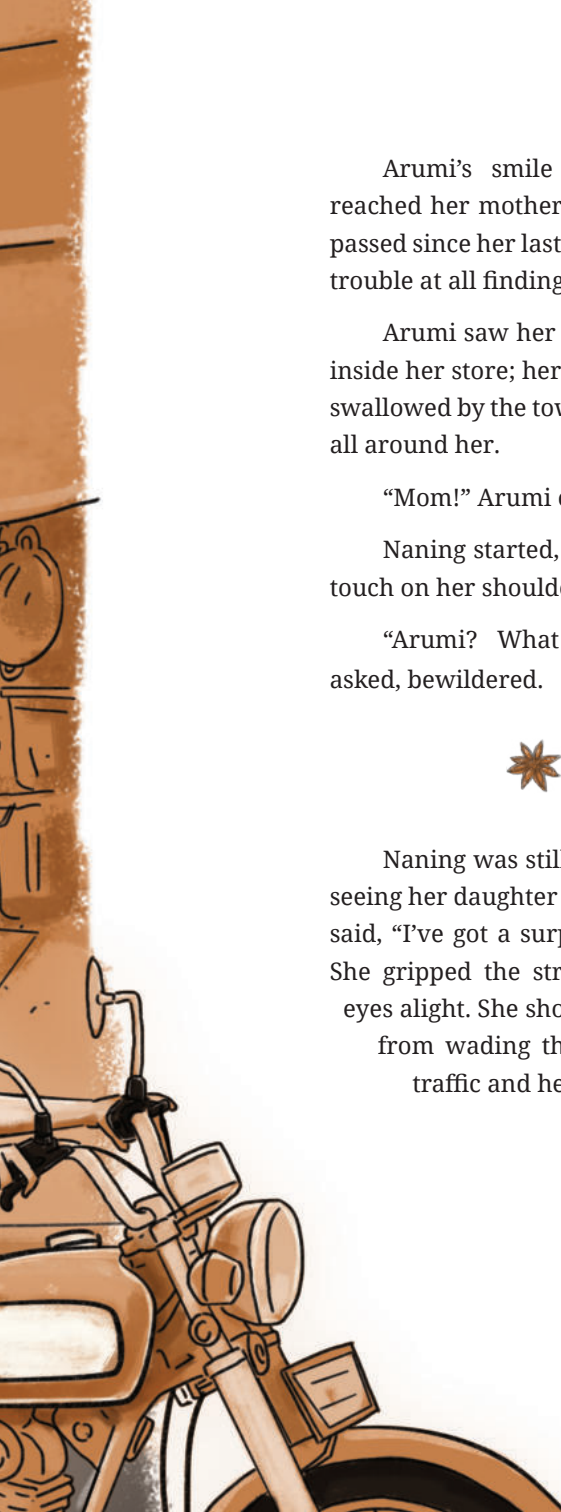


After watching Dinda and her motorcycle disappear, Arumi continued her journey alone. She walked slowly through the narrow gaps between the crawling vehicles, until she reached the main entrance of Pabean, the legendary market that had established since 1849.

The strong pungent aroma of spices, mixed with human sweat and motor fumes, greeted her. Arumi kept walking past stalls of spice vendors. Many women vendors, around her mother's age, smiled at her. Their eyes followed Arumi from her black shoes and grey skirt to her white headscarf. Arumi smiled at herself, imagining what the vendors must be thinking. *What is a high school girl doing here?*

Seeing the piles of spices stacked high at every stall reminded Arumi of her childhood, when her mother often bought her to Pabean. Her mother held her left hand while her right hand played atop the peaks of the spice piles as they passed. Her fingertips danced from one mound of spices to another.





Arumi's smile bloomed as she finally reached her mother's shop. Though years had passed since her last visit to Pabean, she had no trouble at all finding the market's largest store.

Arumi saw her mother scribbling intently inside her store; her thin frame seemed almost swallowed by the towering sacks of spices piled all around her.

"Mom!" Arumi called out from behind.

Naning started, turning at the unexpected touch on her shoulder.

"Arumi? What brings you here?" she asked, bewildered.



Naning was still reeling from the shock of seeing her daughter at the market when Arumi said, "I've got a surprise for you. A real one!" She gripped the straps of her backpack, her eyes alight. She showed no sign of exhaustion from wading through Surabaya's midday traffic and heat.

Naning fell silent, trying to guess what surprise her daughter brought. It had to be something big, something special, to bring the girl all the way here. *Could it be? Had this girl truly fallen in love and found herself a boyfriend?* Naning had never once seen Arumi close to any of the boys at her school.

“I’m so happy you’re here. I can’t remember how many years it’s been since you last came, Arumi. So, what’s the surprise, *Nduk?*” Naning asked softly, setting down her pen and the pages of her notes for a moment.

“This is the most amazing surprise, Mom. I’ve been preparing it for a long time just to give it to you. I’ve been accepted into the Product Design program at a state university on a merit scholarship. It’s my dream school. It was also Dad’s dream. Dad and Uncle Yanuar must be proud of me, right? You are too, aren’t you?”

Naning was captivated by her daughter’s sparkling eyes. She longed to hug the girl in the high school uniform before her. She couldn’t even remember the last time she had held Arumi; it must have been more than five years ago, back when she was still in junior high.





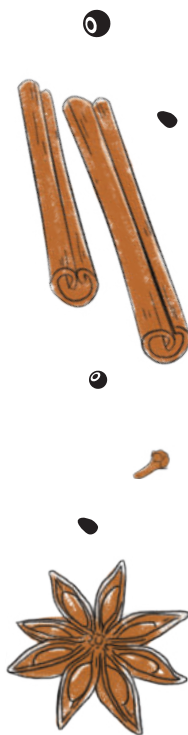
“That’s not all, Mom,” Arumi continued, stopping Naning from hugging her. “I also won a competition. First place, Mom. First place!” This time, Arumi was genuinely overjoyed. She grabbed both of her mother’s hands and squeezed them tightly, her eyes shining brightly as she looked at her still-surprised mother.

“What competition, *Nduk*?” Naning asked innocently.

Arumi smiled. “A creative economy design competition, Mom. It’s ... kind of a contest where you draw ideas for entrepreneurial ventures. The Ministry of Creative Economy organized it. Isn’t it cool, Mom?” Arumi said clearly, in words she felt her mother could understand.

Slowly, Naning’s smile began to bloom. Yet the middle-aged woman still seemed unsure how to respond to her daughter. She wanted to hug Arumi so badly. She wanted to say congratulations, but suddenly her heart was filled with anxiety. *Oh God, what have I done? I’ve made a huge mistake to my only daughter! What kind of mother am I?* Naning scolded herself silently.

“Mom? Why are you just sitting there? Aren’t you happy? This is such an amazing competition, Mom! Only me as a high school student who won. Other participants were



already in university!” Arumi squeezed her mother’s hands even tighter and shook them. Meanwhile, Naning’s eyes began to fill with tears.

Arumi pressed herself against her mother and hugged her. Naning seemed powerless, following her daughter’s lead.

“Do you know what design I made to win? I designed a spice café, Mom. All of your spices, and everything you taught me about spices when I was little, I poured into that design,” Arumi whispered into her mother’s back.

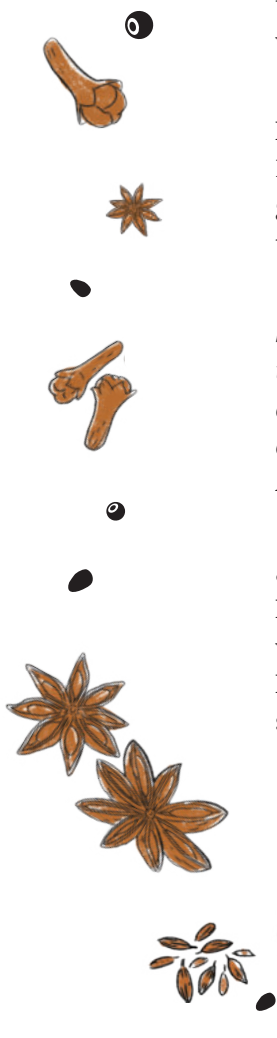
Naning could no longer hold back her tears. Her defenses broke at the sound of the word “spice” from her daughter. Her tears soaked Arumi’s white high school uniform headscarf.

“If only you could see the spice café I designed, Mom, you’d be happy and proud. The aroma of spices is so strong, even though it’s just a drawing. Spices are everywhere, in the interior, on the menu, in everything. I tried to create a spice café for young people, so they could love spices and feel their benefits in life,” Arumi explained, slowly releasing her hug to see the joy and pride on her mother’s face, but only sadness and anxiety were visible on her mother’s face.

“Are you moved? Why are you just standing there? Aren’t you happy?” Arumi asked, looking at her mother in puzzlement, who still stood frozen with her face downcast.

Arumi pressed her palms against her mother’s wet cheeks.

“Mom ... look at me, your daughter, who could only make instant spice drinks all this time. But I also truly love



the spices you love. I just have a different way of showing that love.”

Naning could no longer speak. Her lips seemed frozen, along with her body. Even the warmth she had just felt now gave way to shivers. Guilt gripped her tightly. Her body trembled.

Oh God, forgive me. How foolish I've been all this time. I must find Wak Parjan immediately. I have to talk to him right away. No! Not Arumi. Pras must find another girl. Suddenly, Naning let go of Arumi's hand and hurried out of the shop.

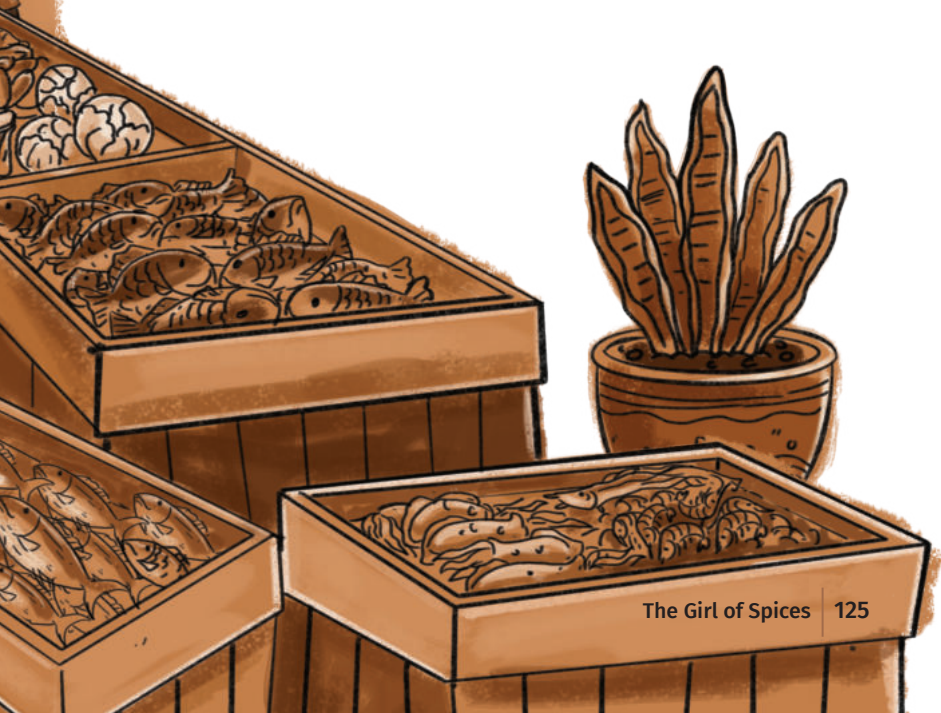
“Mom! Mom, what's wrong? Where are you going?!” Arumi shouted after her mother. She truly didn't understand why mother, who should have been happy with her achievements, was suddenly leaving her.





Naning paid no attention to Arumi's shouting. She ignored the onlookers as well. She kept moving hurriedly, her thin body seeming to hold immense strength. Swiftly, Naning pushed through the market crowd, unconcerned with the curses of the people she bumped into. They were shocked.

What had made Naning, known for her gentleness and generosity, suddenly become rough and indifferent like this? Indeed, Naning didn't care at all, clearing everything that blocked her path. The faster she moved, the more Handoko's shadow seemed to chase and draw closer.



Forgive me, my husband. Truly, forgive me. I am not a good mother. I have failed to honor your wishes. I will make things right. I will undo everything. I will find Wak Parjan until I do.



Chapter 10

When A Man Meets a Young Man

Resolve the issues within yourself.

Solve the problems within yourself.

Deal with your past.

*Resolve everything before you start a
relationship with anyone.*



Naning decided not to go to Pabean Market today. Her mind churned. Her body ached with exhaustion, especially after failing to find Wak Parjan the previous day.

Naning had already searched every corner of Pabean Market. She had asked every pedicab driver, the friends of Wak Parjan, the food stall owners who might once have been his hangouts, and so on. She didn't care about the market folk who found it odd that she was suddenly looking for Wak Parjan everywhere. All the while, Arumi was left alone in the shop.

After a long time of searching, she decided to go home.

Naning kept pacing back and forth inside her house. The scent of the roselle tea she had just brewed still hung in the air; she hadn't even touched it yet. The hope that its warmth and fragrance would calm her had already slipped away. Guilt and anxiety about Pras's impending visit still gnawed at her.

Time and again, she lifted her gaze toward Arumi's room upstairs. She kept wanting to call the girl down and start a conversation. But her lips felt frozen. She knew Arumi must be furious with her for leaving her behind at the market. She also must be deeply disappointed that Naning hadn't seemed happy about her double achievements. Still, Naning wasn't certain how Arumi really felt; all she could do was guess from the heavy silence above.





Upstairs, Arumi sat alone, sad and disappointed. That afternoon, she had decided to go home after waiting long enough at the shop for her.

Arumi chose to remain in her room until today. Her achievements felt meaningless without a mother who appreciated them. She still didn't understand why her mother had suddenly frozen and let her speak alone in the shop back then.

Arumi grabbed her phone, trying to call Dinda to ease her loneliness. Going out with Dinda on Sunday morning would surely be more enjoyable than staying in her room all day. But unfortunately, Dinda's number couldn't be reached. This was unusual for her, Arumi thought to herself, and in the end, she decided to lie down again.



The sound of the house gate opening reached her ears. A car slowly entered Naning's yard. Her anxiety grew. Her face began to pale, and her hands trembled, becoming damp with sweat.

“Wait. I think I recognize the owner of that car. There’s no way that luxury car belongs to Pras. It’s impossible a new employee at the state-owned company suddenly owns a luxurious one,” Naning whispered as she peeked from behind the living room curtain.

The car’s owner got out, and Naning could clearly see his face.

“Mas Yanuar? Oh my! What brings him here?”

Before Naning’s curiosity and anxiety could be answered, her doorbell rang loudly, startling her.

“Ning, why did it take you so long to open the door?” Yanuar immediately scolded as Naning opened the door and invited him in.

“Ah, yes ... um, I ... sorry, *Mas*,” Naning replied awkwardly.

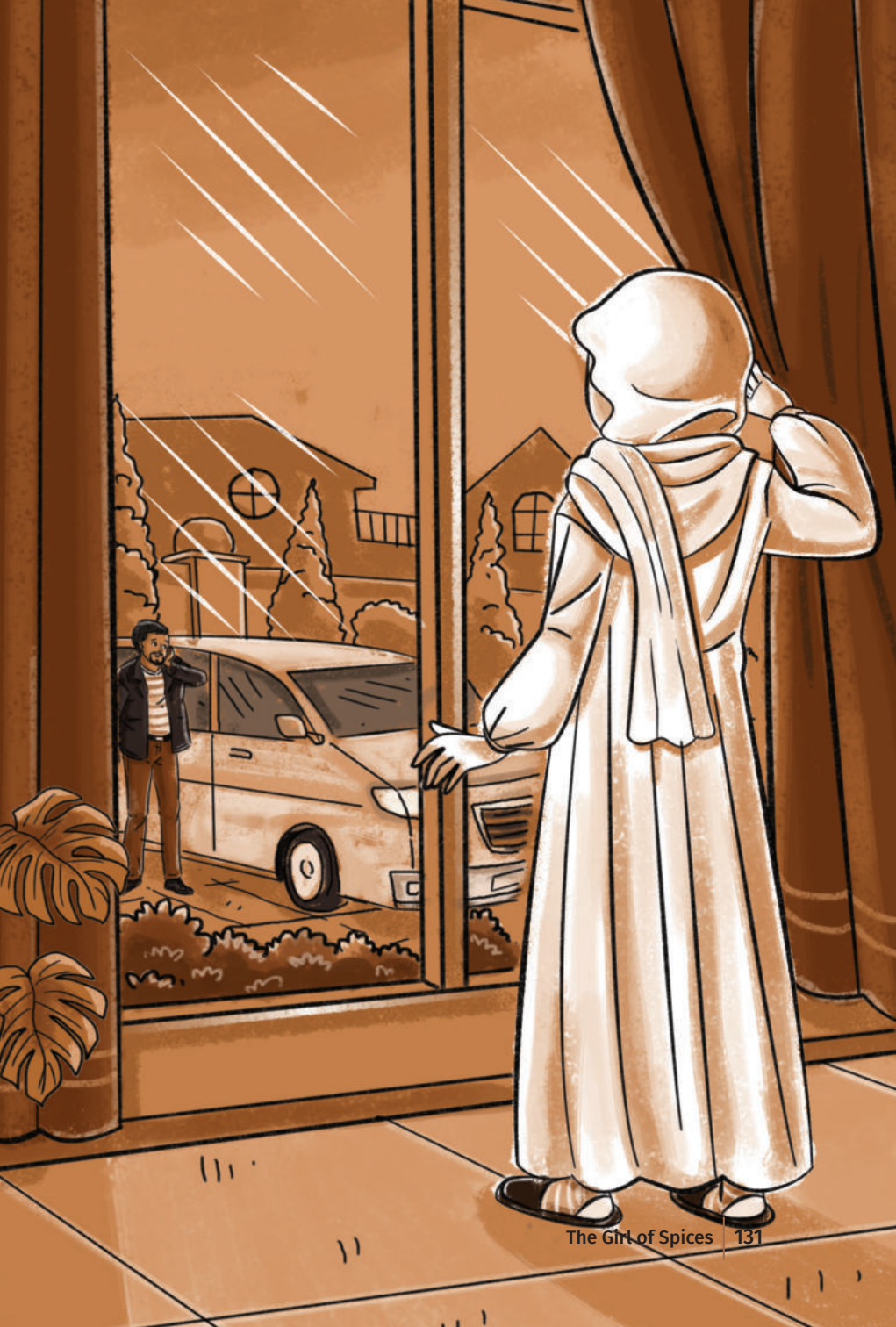
“Never mind,” Yanuar flopped onto the sofa, still holding his cheek. “Ouch ... it hurts so much,” he groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Naning asked anxiously, quickly sitting beside her brother.

“I don’t know, this toothache has lasted three days,” Yanuar groaned, trying to endure the pain.

“Have you been to the dentist?” Naning asked.





"I did go to a dentist earlier, but then I realized it's Sunday. I had hoped to come home cured. Ouch, this is what a toothache feels like"

Naning fell silent, feeling anxious herself. If only there was something she could do to help.

"I purposely stopped by here. You must know which spices help with toothaches, right?" Yanuar asked.

"Have you tried rinsing with salt water?" Naning asked.

Yanuar nodded. "Yes, it eases the pain for a while, but then it hurts again," he complained.

"Have you tried lemon juice?" Naning inquired further.

Yanuar furrowed his brow at the word "lemon," pressing his right hand harder against his cheek.

"Ah! No lemon. I can't handle anything that sour!" he shouted in pain.

Naning grew more anxious seeing Yanuar continue to groan before her. She tried to dig into her memory, searching for which spices could help relieve a toothache. Thinking felt difficult, because she kept worrying that Pras might arrive unexpectedly and complicate everything.

"Ah! I remember!" Naning suddenly sprang from her chair and hurried to the kitchen. "Clove oil can also relieve toothache. I'll get it for you," she said, stepping quickly toward the kitchen.

The kitchen was Naning's favorite place in the house. Though she no longer had the time to cook for years and had left all the kitchen work to Siti, simply sitting and drifting

into thought in her spacious, spice-scented kitchen already calmed her. Just looking at the bottles of spices was enough to make her happy.

More than a hundred clear glass jars with wooden screw-top lids lined the spice rack that covered almost the entire kitchen wall. They were the main reason Naning loved lingering there. All the more so when she threw open every window, letting the soft breeze and sunlight from her spice garden warm the entire room.

But this time, none of that brought Naning calm or happiness. Her heart remained uneasy, worried that Pras might come all sudden. She hoped the young man would delay his visit, just as he had failed to come yesterday. Moreover, Yanuar was at her house today. Naning truly didn't know how to act if the two men were to meet.

"Naning, why are you taking so long?" Yanuar's voice startled her. She almost dropped the clove oil bottle from her hands. If that happened, she would feel even more guilty for her carelessness. All her life, she had handled her spices carefully and had never once broken a cherished spice bottle.

"Sorry. I ...". Naning said, flustered.

At the same moment, the living room intercom blared loudly.

"What now, Marlan?" Yanuar grabbed the clove oil bottle from Naning and turned toward the living room.

Oh God, is that Pras? Oh no! What do I do? Naning stood frozen in the kitchen, her heart pounding with anxiety. She felt her chest thrum as Yanuar lifted the intercom receiver.

“Hello ...” Yanuar’s voice sounded strong despite the pain in his teeth.

“There’s a young man here looking for Mrs. Naning, Sir,” said Marlan through the intercom.

“A young man? Alright, let him in.” Yanuar said with furrowed brow.



Curiosity managed to push away Yanuar’s toothache for a moment. Naning rarely had guests, let alone a young man. The tall, broad-shouldered man moved toward the living room door, his strides unconsciously lengthening, quiet but eager, driven by curiosity.

The roar of a heavyweight motorcycle engine ceased just as Yanuar opened the front door. From the moment the rider removed his helmet and jacket, Yanuar scrutinized him carefully. The stranger looked up, flashed a smile, and stepped forward with confident air.

“Assalamualaikum,” the young man greeted, extending his hand.

“Waalaikumsalam,” Yanuar replied flatly, his eyes still studying him.

The man then removed his sunglasses and smiled proudly.

“I’m Pras.”

"I'm Yanuar. Who are you looking for?" Yanuar asked, keeping his hand pressed to his cheek.

The young man hesitated under Yanuar's sharp gaze. He looked as though he might be at the wrong address. "Is Mrs. Naning home?" he asked at last.

"Naning? What do you want with her?" Yanuar shot back, refusing to answer the question. He lingered in the doorway, his expression tight, making no move to let the visitor inside. Under that steady stare the young man began to shift, clearly uneasy.

Seeing the youth in front of him grow awkward and slow to respond, Yanuar gradually lowered his hand from his cheek and forced a smile. He could easily have sent the young man away right then. Having a male guest in his younger sister's house unsettled him. Yet the youth's politeness made him doubt any ill intent. He motioned toward a garden chair on the terrace.

"Please, have a seat," Yanuar said.

The young man drew a deep breath and visibly relaxed as he sat. Meanwhile, Yanuar tried to suppress the pain in his tooth, still genuinely curious about why this stranger was looking for his only younger sister.

"What's your name again, young man?" Yanuar asked once more.

"Pras," he answered politely.

"And why are you looking for my sister?" Yanuar asked again, this time raising his voice slightly.





"To propose to Arumi, her daughter," Pras replied curtly, enough to leave Yanuar stunned.

"What?!" Yanuar was shocked, forgetting about the toothache.

Of course, Yanuar was instantly surprised to hear Pras's claim that he intended to propose to Arumi, his beloved niece, who was only eighteen. Yet, he wanted to hear first what made the young man dare to say such a thing.



The porch of Naning's house was better described as a garden, located in one corner of her spacious and lush yard. There, the two men sat facing each other, accompanied by small birds playing among the ylang-ylang flowers.

Siti arrived carrying a tray with two cups of spiced tea and two small plates of pumpkin pie. Thin steam curled up from the cups and plates, filling the air with a fragrant warmth. Yanuar could see the aroma catching the young man's attention.

"Have you had breakfast, young man?" Yanuar asked as soon as the woman finished serving the tea and pie in front of them.

"Uhm, yes. A cup of coffee and a slice of bread was enough for this morning," Pras said politely.



"In that case, there's no harm in tasting this tea and pie first." Yanuar lifted his cup and took a careful sip. The warmth of the spiced tea eased his toothache a little.

"It doesn't seem like ordinary tea. I can taste the aroma of cloves and star anise in it," Pras remarked after taking a sip.

"Wow, what a keen palate you have. You really know your spices. Naning has inherited many spiced tea recipes from our parents," Yanuar said, taking another sip. He gestured to the plate in front of his guest. "Try the pie too."

Pras took up his spoon and cut it into the pie. Yanuar watched him enjoy it, the cinnamon-scented pumpkin clearly making an impression.

"Hmm, this is the most delicious pumpkin pie I've ever eaten," Pras said, greeted by Yanuar's friendly smile. Pras cut another piece, this time including a slice with Indonesian *kenari* nut. The combination of sweet and savory seemed to delight him immensely.

"Now, please, introduce yourself and your family, young man. Also ... how you came to know Naning and Arumi," Yanuar requested. Hearing this, Pras hurried to finish his last bite, though half of the pie still sat temptingly before him.

"I don't know exactly my family lineage. What I do know is that I've been an orphan since childhood. Wak Parjan and his wife raised me. They once told me my parents were their employers in the village. Wak Parjan managed my father's rice fields. One day, my parents went to the city to buy farming tools, and a tragic accident took their lives. Wak Parjan and his wife, who had no children of their own, then raised me as their own.

As a farm laborer, Wak Parjan may not have been as skilled as my parents in managing agriculture. Income from the farm kept declining. Many villagers chose to leave their fields and move to the city. Wak Parjan and his wife opened a small stall near Pabean Market. When I was a teenager, Wak Parjan's wife fell ill and passed away. Wak Parjan began struggling to run the stall alone. By the time I reached high school, I had already left home, studying while working as a menial worker. Eventually, I earned a scholarship to continue my studies in Malang. After graduation, I passed the civil service exam and was accepted. My prayer then was to be assigned in Surabaya so I could return to Wak Parjan and repay his kindness in raising me. My prayer was answered; I was assigned to Surabaya, only to find Wak Parjan now working as a pedicab driver. He chose to live alone and didn't want to stay with me. But I have always tried to ensure that his life lacks nothing."

Yanuar nodded as he listened to Pras's long story, spoken in a low voice. There was a deep sadness there, strenuously hidden. Yanuar caught a glimpse of a single tear glinting at the corner of Pras's eye, but the young man quickly wiped it away roughly with the sleeve of his shirt.

"You're a good young man, but ... I think Arumi is still too young. She's just graduated from high school. She's not ready to be a wife, let alone a mother. She still needs to learn many things in life by living it for herself, to decide her own future," Yanuar explained wisely.

He had tried to choose his words so they wouldn't wound Pras. Yet to his surprise, the young man didn't look

disappointed at all. He kept looking at Yanuar politely, as if ready to listen to more of his advice.

“Actually ... I’m not even sure if I’m truly ready to marry. I’ve mostly just heard stories about Mrs. Naning and Arumi from Wak Parjan. I think Mrs. Naning’s efforts in raising Arumi and running the spice business are incredible, but ...” Pras took a deep breath and lifted his face. “But it’s not just that. I intend to get to know Arumi and make her my future wife” Pras said without hesitation.

Yanuar immediately interrupted, “Son, excuse me. What was your name again?” he asked the young man before him.

“Pras ... Sir,” Pras replied briefly.

“Alright, Pras. First, I want to thank you, and honestly, I’m a bit surprised by the purpose of your visit here, but I do commend your good intentions and courage in proposing to my niece, Arumi. However, if Arumi were to marry now, I’m not sure she would agree. Also, do you really think that once Arumi marries, her mother’s work will become easier? Do you think Naning needs your help, young man?” Yanuar pressed Pras with pointed questions. “How long have you known Naning and Arumi? How much have you heard about them from your uncle?” Yanuar asked questions that were hard for Pras to answer.

Pras could only remain silent.

Yanuar sighed, pressing his cheek to ease the pain in his tooth. As tempting as the pie before him was, the pain restrained him. Then he began to speak.





“Naning is my only sister. As a woman, she is gentle, meticulous, and careful. No wonder our parents chose her over me to continue the family spice business. Naning was raised to love spices from childhood. Unlike me, wandering from place to place and appearing tough, I cannot handle spices with such precision and care. I am not as patient as Naning,” Yanuar began his story, while Pras listened intently.

“Naning is gentle with spices, but ... she is hard on herself. She’s always had difficulty finding employees because her criteria are too strict. Isn’t it hard these days to find young people who truly understand spices?” Yanuar took a deep breath and continued, “Naning has high hopes for Arumi. Her daughter is indeed her only hope. But Arumi is different. I know that girl, she’s like my own child. She has inherited more of her father’s talents. Naning and Arumi may clash in many things, but they are not women who appear to need help the way you think,” Yanuar said, his eyes following the small birds hopping among the slender branches of the pine trees lining the right and left sides of Naning’s yard.

o



Yanuar looked at Pras again, who seemed to be listening to his story intently. Pras gathered courage and spoke up once more.

“That’s not all. I also feel bad seeing Mrs. Naning work alone. I thought”

“Never marry out of pity! Marry because you can give your future family a better life!” Yanuar raised his voice, and Pras lowered his head.

“I still see a lot of doubt in you, young man. I’m not sure you’re truly ready to marry. Have you ever been rejected in love before?” Yanuar asked sharply. His piercing gaze made Pras uneasy. Pras turned his gaze to the artificial waterfall in one corner of the garden. The steady and gentle trickle of water filled the brief silence between them.

“You’re right, Sir. I had a first love. She’s a junior at university. She loved me too, but while I was still studying, I heard that she got married. I still can’t forget her,” Pras said quietly.

“So maybe Wak Parjan often saw you sitting there staring off blankly like this and told you about Arumi. You seemed interested, so he thought you were ready to marry her. Right?” Yanuar guessed with a smile, then winced and pressed his cheek.

Pras nodded. “Uh ... maybe that’s it.”

Yanuar laughed loudly, startling Pras. Pras quickly calmed himself by eating the last piece of pumpkin pie.

“Hahaha ... young man, I am no longer as young as you. My heart isn’t as soft as yours, but we’re both men, right?” Yanuar asked, his gaze sharp as a knife. Pras could only nod in response.

“First, solve the problems within yourself. Deal with your past. Resolve everything before you start a relationship with anyone. Never expect to lead others, let alone a family, if you yourself are still full of problems.”

The young man’s posture tensed under his words. Yanuar leaned closer, his broad shoulders casting a shadow across the table. When he saw the youth’s color drain and a sheen of sweat appear on his forehead, he drew back and settled against his own chair. The pain in his tooth began to pulse again, and he pressed a hand to his cheek.

“I’m glad to meet and get to know you, young man. I hope you can soon let go of your classmate who is already married, or if she is truly your destined one, may God find a way to reunite to you. For now, go home. First, resolve the issues within yourself.” Pras nodded. For the first time, he

felt that Yanuar wasn't someone to be feared at all. Before leaving Naning's house, Pras actually felt a sense of calm he had never experienced before meeting Yanuar.

Before saying goodbye, Yanuar invited Pras to finish his tea. Still holding his cheek, Yanuar saw him off as a father would send his son off to work or travel.

"Even though we sat together only briefly, this short meeting means a lot to me. Thank you very much, Sir," Pras said, standing up from his chair and extending his hand.

Yanuar shook his hand and nodded.

"I hope we can meet again someday, young man."

"Yes, I hope so too."



Yanuar kept walking, ignoring Naning who followed behind him, pleading, "Mas Yan! Stop and listen to me!"

When he stopped and turned around, he saw Naning's eyes brimming with tears.

"I know I was wrong. I wasn't serious about matching Arumi back then. I just ... I was so tired. And I saw that, day by day ... Arumi cared less about me" Naning sobbed.

"You were tired? Why are you only saying this now? Why have you always refused any helps before?"

Naning could no longer hold back her tears. Her defenses crumbled, and the tears spilled freely.

Unable to bear seeing his sister kneel like that, Yanuar extended his hand and guided Naning to sit on the sofa.

“Give yourself some time, Ning. Give Arumi time too. When was the last time you spoke alone with her? I’ve always been sure that it’s not that Arumi doesn’t care for you; she just has her own way of showing love. Don’t you also have your own way of showing love for her? That’s why the two of you have never truly connected, even when alone at home,” Yanuar lowered his voice, noticing that Naning could no longer contain her sobs.

“Do you think you’re the most tired and suffering mother? Have you forgotten about your sister, Ranti? She has always felt guilty for not being able to give me a child until now. Look at how we’ve managed to nurture this love, so everything seems alright. If you want to call it sadness, yes, we are sad too.”

Yanuar let out a long sigh, refusing to let his heart sink into sorrow.

“Look at Arumi. Even though you hardly have time for her, she continues to give you kindness. She has so many achievements. Have you ever thought about what would happen if she no longer felt at home, stopped going to school, and chose to hang out freely on the streets?” Yanuar said softly, gently patting his sister’s shoulder.

Naning covered her face with both hands, horrified at the thought of Yanuar’s words coming true for Arumi.

“Ning, don’t love spices blindly. Don’t love anything blindly. This is not what our parents wanted. I will find a

few employees for you right away. I'll take care of Arumi's schooling myself."

Yanuar paused, feeling he had made his sister sufficiently aware and remorseful.

Unnoticed by both, Arumi was already standing across from them. Her eyes lingered on her mother, a mix of sadness, confusion, and disappointment all merging in her face.

"Arumi?" Naning's voice was barely a whisper. She wasn't sure if her daughter had overheard her entire conversation with Yanuar. *Or perhaps Arumi already knew about Pras's visit earlier*, she wondered.

Just as Naning tried to stand and approach her daughter, Arumi chose to run to her room.



Chapter 11

Dinda, Where Are You?

*God's intention is so that we don't become
overly happy and forget to be grateful.*



Arumi's school graduation ceremony was both grand and touching. The school hall was filled with students, all of whom had bright, eager faces. As the most favorite public school in Surabaya, Arumi's school was indeed full of high-achieving students. Arumi and her classmates had already been accepted into state universities through various routes, including scholarships, exams, and independent admission.

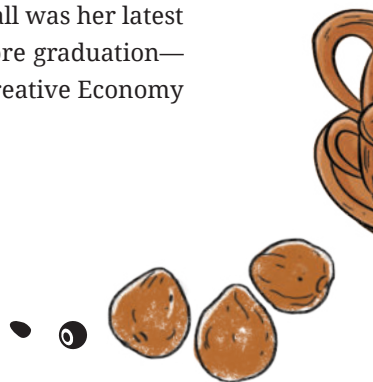
All twelfth-grade students attended, accompanied by their parents. Arumi was no exception; she came with her uncle and her mother.

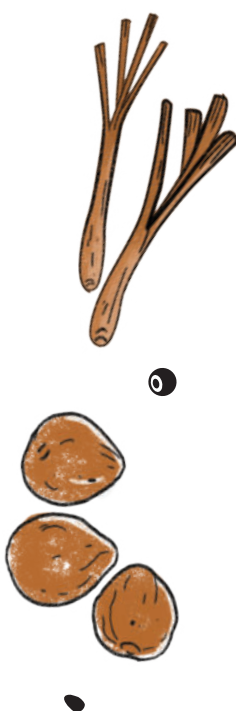
Arumi had every reason to be happy. Not only because Yanuar gladly accompanied her like a father, but also because at that moment she received countless congratulations from her friends.

Arumi shone like a star at her graduation ceremony. Every student had achievements, but none matched the breadth of Arumi's accomplishments. She had won nearly every trophy and medal available. A wealth of achievements she had earned since her first year of high school had made her the pride of the school. Most special of all was her latest achievement, earned just a few weeks before graduation—none other than the prestigious National Creative Economy Design Competition.

"Congratulations, Arumi!"

"Arumi! You're amazing. Congrats"



An illustration of two cinnamon sticks and three cardamom pods. The cinnamon sticks are long and thin, with a rough, textured bark. The cardamom pods are small, round, and have a bumpy, textured surface. They are arranged in a vertical line, with the cinnamon sticks at the top and the cardamom pods below them.

“Wow, you’re simply the best, Arumi. Congrats!”

Arumi’s friends took turns offering their congratulations.

The stream of well-wishes kept coming, overwhelming her. Several times, she readjusted the gold graduation sash draped over her shoulders. Her hands could no longer hold the colorful bouquets from friends, juniors, teachers, and many school guests.

Yet, Arumi felt something was missing. All this while, her eyes scanned every corner of the hall, hoping to find her best friend. For Arumi, this special day felt incomplete without Dinda by her side.

“Dinda, where are you?” Arumi whispered to herself.

Arumi didn’t understand why Dinda had been so hard to reach lately. Every time she tried to call, she failed. Her chats hadn’t even been read. It seemed Dinda’s phone had been off for the past few days. Arumi felt the absence of her friend deeply.





Dinda was not a high-achieving student at this school. Back then her name appeared at the very bottom of the waiting list for tenth graders. Arumi was the only student who truly hoped Dinda would be accepted. Her wish came true. Her friend since junior high was admitted. Even though they weren't in the same class, the two of them spent almost all their time together outside class.

Dinda, petite and cheerful, made anyone happy to befriend her. Even though her academic scores were average, she always seemed friendly and happy.

But why didn't Dinda come that day? Even during the recent award ceremony organized by the Ministry of Creative Economy, Dinda was absent. The night before, Arumi had kept calling, hoping Dinda could accompany her for that special moment. But her efforts were in vain, and Arumi had to accept the award with only her mother by her side.

Yet Arumi had hoped Dinda would come along. She was sure Dinda would have been happy to accompany her. After all, Dinda had always been eager to encourage her not to give up and to keep applying for the competition. Wasn't

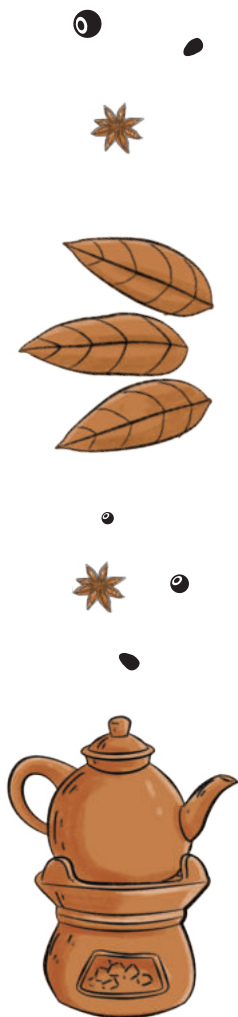
Dinda also the one who convinced her to stay optimistic after seeing the impressive works of the other contestants? But now, why did it feel as if Dinda had vanished off the face of the earth? Arumi promised herself that once she got home, she would go to Dinda's house right away.



Arumi arrived in front of Dinda's house. She hadn't set foot here for years. Back in junior high school, she would often visit Dinda's house. Arumi remembered that the last time she came must have been for Haikal's second birthday. Now the boy is already five years old.

The gate was left half-open. Arumi tapped on it several times with her motorcycle key. No one came. Summoning her courage, she stepped inside and knocked on the front door. Still no response. It seemed the house was empty, Arumi thought. Could Dinda's family be out of town? Anxiety crept in. It didn't make sense that Dinda and her parents would miss the graduation unless something serious had prevented them. Even though she wasn't a top student, Dinda had been accepted into a prominent public university in Surabaya to study Accounting, just as she had hoped. Certainly, she and her parents had reason to be proud of that achievement.

After knocking several times with no answer, Arumi turned around, feeling a pang of guilt. She often involved Dinda in her own complaints and problem-solving. Now, however, it seemed that Dinda herself was facing some problem, and as her friend, Arumi had no idea what it was.



As she walked slowly toward her motorcycle, Arumi began to speculate that Dinda's troubles might have started when she had to leave early several times after her sister called repeatedly. Was Haikal sick?

"Arumi?"

Just as Arumi was putting on her helmet, she heard Dinda calling her. The girl looked up from the window of the car that had just arrived in front of her house.

Immediately, Arumi felt relieved and smiled upon seeing Dinda and her family inside the car.



On Widya's terrace, Arumi and Dinda sat side by side on rattan chairs. Arumi held back from starting a conversation. Widya and her whole family looked sad when they got out of the car. Arumi didn't dare say anything. She was happy enough when Widya invited her to sit on the terrace.

“Haikal just got out of the hospital, Arumi,” Dinda said, her eyes swollen. It seemed her tears had long since dried on her cheeks.

“We just got back from the hospital,” she added.

“Oh God ... I’m sorry, I didn’t know. Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” Arumi asked, full of guilt.

“You’re happy and I didn’t want to show my sadness. That’s why lately my sister has been calling me often to take Haikal to the hospital. Until finally, the doctor ordered him to be hospitalized. Haikal was in the hospital for five days until this morning. The doctors allowed him to go home,” Dinda explained, taking a deep breath.

“How’s Haikal now? Is he better?” Arumi finally asked.

Dinda nodded slowly. “Yes. Much better. He still often refuses to eat.”

“Try giving him *temulawak*¹⁴, turmeric, and honey. That can help increase his appetite, Din.”

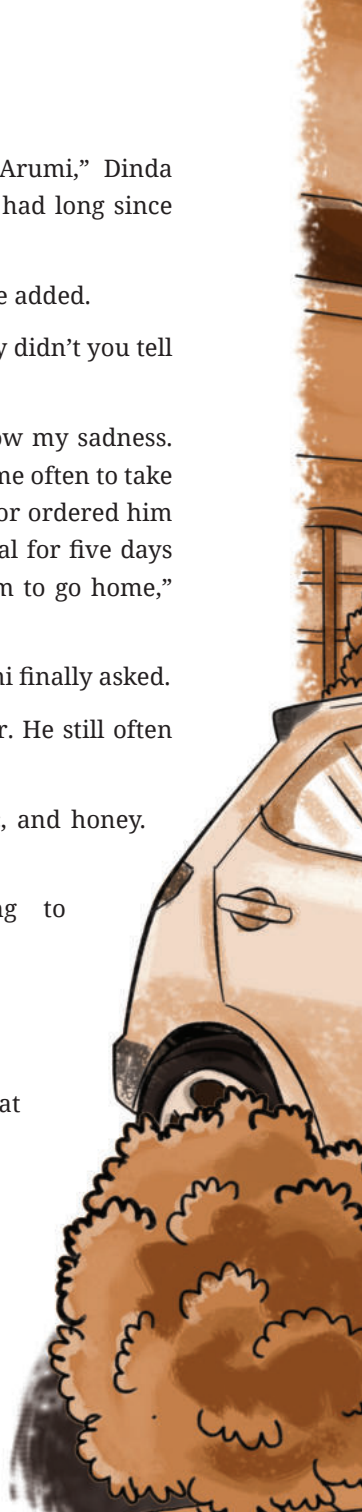
Dinda just nodded again, listening to Arumi’s advice.

“Arumi”

“Hmm ...”

“Why is it that sad news often comes at times when we should be happy?”

¹⁴ *Temulawak* is a Javanese ginger plant (*Curcuma xanthorrhiza*), traditionally used in Indonesian herbal drinks and remedies.





“Hmm, maybe it’s God’s way of making sure we don’t get carried away and forget to be grateful.”

“That’s true,” Dinda said.

Arumi smiled as she saw the cloud over Dinda’s face gradually fade away.

“Oh, how’s the gift from the Ministry of Creative Economy? Still safe, right?”

Arumi smiled, “Still safe. I wouldn’t use it for snacks, would I?”

Arumi and Dinda laughed together.

“Your mother must be very happy, Arumi.”

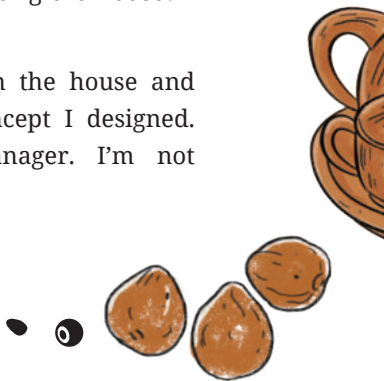
Arumi nodded. “Not only that. Mom also supports Uncle Yanuar’s plan to open my dream spice café.”

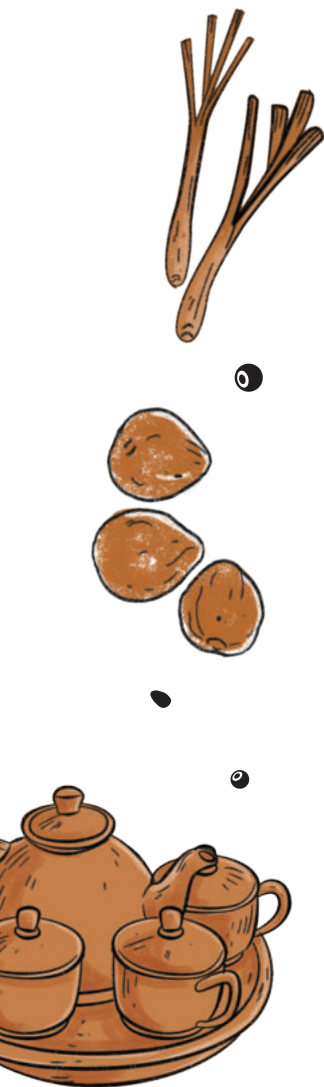
“Oh really?” Dinda was surprised, her eyes widening instantly.

“Uncle Yanuar gave me his rental house to turn into my café. Dinda, you must help me, okay?”

“Wait, wait, help with what? Renovating the house? I can’t do that.”

“No, no. Uncle’s team will demolish the house and decorate it based on the spice café concept I designed. You helped me as the financial manager. I’m not good with numbers.”





"Oh, don't worry then. It's my thing. And then?"

"Uncle Yan's plan is like this: I'll be the manager of the café. I'll handle all aspects of interior design, product design, employee uniforms, and merchandise. I'll also manage the café's daily operations. As for the menu, we'll follow my mother's legendary recipes. But my mother can't be there daily. Aunt Ranti will oversee the kitchen. For marketing and finances, I'm leaving that to you, my friend. What do you think?"

"Wow ... that's awesome! You know I need a job, Arumi. But I can still do it alongside college, right?"

"Of course. I'm in college too. Uncle Yanuar has already started posting ads for the staffs to help us out when we must leave the café for classes."

"Oh, my God ... this is amazing, Arumi. You're so lucky!"

"This is also thanks to you always motivating me. Without you, I might have been too pessimistic to join that competition. Maybe I wouldn't have won, gotten the prize, and now have my uncle's full support."

“Come on, I can’t wait. Let’s go to our new café!”

“Hey, slow down ... it’s still a rented house right now. I told you, the lease won’t be up for another six months. And then , we’ll start preparing the place to turn it into a café.”

“Oh, I thought it was now.” Dinda laughed.



Chapter 12

From Spices to the Heart

*Nduk, there is no spice I love more
than you, my only daughter.*



Opening the first page of a warm February, Naning sat on the third-floor balcony of her house, inhaling the gentle steam rising from a cup of *wedang pokok* she had made. Slowly, she savored her drink. The sweetness was barely noticeable. Naning had deliberately added only a small piece of rock sugar and a hint of cinnamon.

She intentionally avoided sugar. Approaching half a century in age, sugar was one of the things she needed to limit. Naning had promised herself to be more careful and mindful of her body. She wanted to stay healthy until the end of her life, so she could continue accompanying her daughter as she achieved her successes, pursued her career, and eventually built her own family.

It was the first morning Naning had truly allowed herself to take things slowly. The whole day already felt strange. Out of habit, she had still stirred before dawn, half-thinking she needed to get up for the market as usual, before remembering this morning was different.

Humans are strange. When tired, they immediately let go of all work and routine. Yet, when sitting relaxed, they start longing for the rush of daily life. Naning smiled, quietly teasing herself.

She reached for a spiced biscuit from the jar. The first bite was thoroughly enjoyable. Naning hadn't realized she still remembered the recipe by heart from making the biscuits yesterday afternoon. The combination of ginger, nutmeg, cloves, and cinnamon was perfectly balanced. It turned out that Arumi also loved her mother's biscuits. In fact, the girl immediately decided that these biscuits had to be a staple on every table at her café.





"Mom ... here you are. I've been looking all over for you."

Naning smiled at the sight of Arumi catching her breath. The third floor wasn't large, but the winding dozen-plus steps were tiring for someone unaccustomed to going up and down.

Up here, there was only a single open space with a small pantry and a toilet tucked to one side. The most inviting spot was a broad balcony that took up almost half the floor, the place where Naning loved to sit, lost in thought.

"Come on, Mom, let's go down! Uncle Yanuar and Aunt Ranti were at the café for half an hour. We need to get there before the staff and guests," urged Arumi, neatly dressed in a light brown skirt and tunic. *My daughter is truly beautiful*, Naning thought.

"All right, all right. I'm coming down now," Naning replied, her face bright with happiness.

"What's this?!" Naning exclaimed as her foot accidentally stepped on something.

"Oh, that's my brooch! It must have fallen because I pinned it in such a hurry, I didn't even notice when it fell," Arumi said as she picked up her brooch.

“This brooch is beautiful, *Nduk*. Can I help you pin it?” Naning asked.

“Of course, Mom. Dad made this. You didn’t know, did you?”

Naning paused for a moment. She looked at the brooch, shaped just like a star anise, with admiration. Then she carefully pinned the star anise brooch onto her daughter’s hijab.

“Now you look even more beautiful,” Naning said, admiring her daughter.

Arumi blushed slightly. “Alright, Mom. Let’s go!” she said again, tugging hurriedly at her mother’s arm.

In a rush, Naning followed her daughter down the stairs. Just a few minutes later, a shiny black sedan slowly drove them toward the Kembang Lawang spice café.





“Mom, I hope we’re not late,” Arumi said anxiously. She had lost count of how many times she had checked the hands of her watch.

“Be patient, Arumi. Your uncle and aunt will surely wait for you. After all, you’re the owner of the café,” Naning said, trying to calm her only daughter.

“Yes, Mom, but this is the café’s launch. It would be really inappropriate if I were late,” Arumi replied, her gaze constantly shifting between her watch and the window. Her worry was clearly visible on her face.

“Yes, let’s just pray we’re not late, *Nduk*”

Naning’s gentle touch on Arumi’s shoulder gradually soothed her. Arumi looked at her mother’s serene face. The simple smile, the cheeks and forehead starting to show lines, and the eyes gazing at her with affection, Arumi felt it was the face she had longed for most. The most beautiful face her mother had ever had.



Today wasn’t only a happy day for Arumi, but also for Naning. Not because she could take a short break from her work surrounded by piles of spices at Pabean Market, but because today her daughter had turned her love for spices into a café of her own initiative. It’s truly an achievement Naning had never imagined. A surprise she had never expected. A perfect happiness for Naning’s extended family.

One kilometer from Pabean Market, Wisnu suggested an alternate route to avoid traffic.



"No, it's fine. Let's go this way," Naning advised the driver.

"No, Mom! It might take us longer to get there," Arumi interrupted.

Naning smiled again at her daughter's impatience.

"All right. Let's take another route," Naning requested, and Wisnu nodded in agreement.

Not long after, a red light at an intersection brought the car to a stop again. Through the window, Naning saw several pedicab drivers relaxing in front of an old shop-house. She looked carefully to make sure. Wak Parjan wasn't there.

Naning let out a long sigh. Her mind suddenly drifted back to a few days ago, the last time Wak Parjan had escorted her home from Pabean Market.

"Come on the first day Arumi opens her café, Jan. Just like my late husband used to say, you're already like family to us," Naning started the conversation. She noticed that Wak Parjan had been unusually quiet along the way. Naning thought that by mentioning her husband, Wak Parjan would surely come, as the old man had great admiration and respect for him.

“No, thank you. I’ve already bought a train ticket to go back home tomorrow,” Wak Parjan replied calmly while continuing to pedal his pedicab.

Naning was startled and turned around. “Wait, you’re going back to your village and not coming back to Surabaya?” she asked, curiosity lacing her voice. Wak Parjan’s answer was completely unexpected.

“That’s right. I’m going back to my village. I’ve been away too long. It’s time to return to the fields and plant again.”

Naning fell silent. This was the first time she had heard Wak Parjan speak with such seriousness and wisdom.

“And what about your pedicab?” Naning asked again.

Wak Parjan smiled. “I’m giving this pedicab to Yanuar. He’s happy. He said it fits perfectly outside Arumi’s *Kembang Lawang* café. Perfect for the spice theme, he said. Visitors can even take photos with it. I’m glad it’ll be useful.”

Wak Parjan’s calm words seemed to seal Naning’s lips. She knew how much he cared for that pedicab. Yet this time, he was truly letting it go. Naning felt a sense of relief afterwards. Her brother would surely provide a replacement of equal value.

“Ehm, and ... what about Pras? Does he know about your decision?” Naning asked cautiously this time. To Wak Parjan, Pras was like a son, as he often reminded Naning.

“Yes, I’ve told Pras. I told him, ‘That’s enough, Son. You’ve repaid your debt. More than enough, even. Now, I’m returning to my village. When you get married, let me know.’”

Naning fell silent, with no more questions. That was the last day she would enjoy the heat and dust of Surabaya while riding in the pedicab. That was the last time she would ride a pedicab along the spice routes of the Kalimas River, the Red Bridge, and other old streets of Surabaya.

“Mom! You’re spaced out again. Come on, get down! We’ve arrived!” Arumi poked her mother’s shoulder repeatedly. Naning’s reverie was completely broken.



As soon as she got out of the car, Naning was awestruck by what she saw. The simple house left by her father, which Yanuar had been renting out all this time, had now been transformed into a beautiful spice café.

A row of lemongrass plants formed a living fence, separating the café from the main road. The fragrant aroma of spices wafted from a partitioned area that Naning recognized as the kitchen. Every spice-themed ornament decorating the walls seemed to greet Naning warmly.

“This café is wonderful, *Nduk*,” Naning said, still in disbelief at everything before her eyes. Seeing her mother frozen in amazement, Arumi smiled and took her hand. Slowly, the two of them entered the *Kembang Lawang* spice café.

“Come on, Mom. Uncle Yanuar and Aunt Ranti are already waiting for us inside,” Arumi urged.

It was already busy inside the café. Yanuar looked serious as he spoke with the staff, while Dinda chatted casually with a few members of the media crew covering the launch event.

Seeing her sister-in-law Ranti busy in the kitchen, Naning quickly made her way toward her.



“Arumi! Why did you get here so late?” Dinda exclaimed as soon as she saw Arumi approaching her.

“Hehe ... yeah, sorry,” Arumi said shyly.

“Okay then. We’ll start the launch in ten minutes,” Dinda said hurriedly.

The launch of the spice café was both simple and festive. Arumi cut the symbolic red ribbon, accompanied by her mother and her uncle. At the same time, fragrant spices were scattered from the second floor—tiny pieces of pandan leaves, jasmine, and ylang-ylang flowers. The aroma filled the air.

Dozens of visitors applauded. Without being told, they immediately began tasting the various spice snacks arranged on each table. Some guests opted to mix their own spices to make a cup of *wedang*. Others





strolled around, enjoying the spice route map displayed on one wall and reading the spice-related books available there. Before leaving, visitors were invited to queue for a glass of their chosen spiced drink and a bag of spice biscuits.

Naning and Ranti were busy preparing the menu in the kitchen.

“I’ve never been this happy, Ning,” Ranti said as she packed the biscuits into many paper bags.

“Forgive my daughter for the trouble she’s caused,” Naning said, doing the same.

“Not at all. I’m glad. This keeps me busy instead of just sitting idle at home. Especially seeing how close Arumi and Dinda are and how pampered they were with me earlier. It felt like I finally had children of my own that I’ve longed for.”

While packing the biscuit bags, Naning saw her sister-in-law’s happy face. She felt even more aware of how much she had forgotten to be grateful for.

Meanwhile, Arumi and Dinda were still busy mingling with the visitors, most of whom were students.

“Dinda, look who’s here,” Arumi said, approaching Dinda and pointing at a couple and a child who had just stepped out of a car.

“*Mbak* Widya, Haikal, and his father. I’ve been waiting for them all this time,” Dinda said excitedly. “*Mbak* Widya’s husband returned just the day before yesterday, Arumi. I just invited the three of them to your café launch. Sorry,

I didn't ask for your permission first," Dinda said, feeling a little guilty.

Arumi smiled, gently patting her friend's shoulder. "I'm actually glad. I've always hoped my café would be the best place to create memories and share kindness with families and couples," Arumi said, closing her eyes and pressing her hands together over her chest.

Dinda just smiled, watching her friend lost in that dreamlike moment.

"Oh, and you should take them to the spice garden. They can relax there and enjoy the menu. It's too crowded in here," Arumi said as she opened her eyes.

"Sure. That's what I planned," Dinda replied and went to meet the couple and their son. Haikal immediately jumped into Dinda's arms. The four of them headed straight to the spice garden beside the café, which was set up for guests who preferred to dine outdoors. They were even allowed to pick some spices there. Naning arranged for a guide from one of her shop's employees to educate visitors who wanted to learn more about spices.

"Good morning, *Mbak* Widya," Arumi greeted, extending her hand.

"Good morning, Arumi. Oh, I'm late," Widya said with a smile as she shook her hand.

"That's okay. Please enjoy it. Make yourself at home."

"Thanks, Arumi. Wishing *Kembang Lawang* Café much success!"

“Thank you.”

“Arumi and I will go there first. It looks like more visitors are still coming,” Dinda said to her sister, excusing herself after placing the menu list on Widya’s table.

“If you need anything, just call a server. Or if you want to mix your own spiced drink, you can do it over there,” Arumi said, pointing to a corner of the café where visitors were still patiently lining up to prepare their own drinks.

Widya nodded with a smile. Meanwhile, Haikal immediately started running around the spice garden, accompanied by his father.



That day, the clock seemed to move too fast for Dinda and Arumi. By late morning, guests were still arriving. Dinda and Arumi remained busy greeting and serving them warmly. On that day, visitors were allowed to eat and drink as much as they wanted. Yet, the steady flow of guests made Arumi almost disbelieve how many people enjoyed the spice-based menu. Many guests seemed reluctant to leave their seats, even after sitting for a long time, savoring their meals. Some of the new arrivals had no choice but to sit in the garden, where a few seats were still available.

Yanuar greeted one of the new guests. They were clearly already acquainted. Courteously, Yanuar led him toward the garden.



"Finally, you've come, young man. Thank you, thank you," Yanuar said, putting an arm around Pras, the young man who had just arrived.

"There's no way I'd miss your invitation," Pras replied.

They walked together comfortably, like a father and son who hadn't seen each other in a long time.

"We didn't expect so many guests to keep coming. It's already very crowded inside. I hope you don't mind staying out here, young man," Yanuar said, pointing to an empty chair and inviting Pras to sit.

"Please, help yourself to whatever's available. I'll call a server for you," Yanuar added before stepping away. Pras responded with a smile and a nod.



In another corner of the garden, a woman walked alone, observing her surroundings. From the way she moved, it was clear she was trying to avoid the passing guests. Whenever she passed by someone, they would offer



her one of the empty chairs on the left side of the garden, but she always declined. She seemed to prefer strolling and admiring the neatly lined spice plants on her right.

Occasionally, she would stop, gently touching each spice plant she encountered. Carefully, she bent down and kissed the newly bloomed star anise flowers. The garden was indeed filled with star anise plants, which had also inspired the cafe's name. Other spices planted abundantly in the garden included cloves and roselle.

The woman was slightly startled when someone suddenly approached and hugged her from behind. "So you're here, Mom. I've been looking for you."

"I thought you were still busy with your guests, *Nduk*. I didn't want to disturb you," Naning said after turning around, looking deeply into her daughter's clear eyes.

"They've been well taken care of. I just want to spend more time with you right now," Arumi said, taking her mother's hand and leading her to the far end of the garden. "Look, Mom. This is my favorite spot."

Naning widened her eyes in disbelief and stared at a patch of land covered with saffron flowers. The soft purple petals swayed gently, teasing the red saffron stigmas inside, as if daring Naning not to stop admiring them.

"The world's most expensive spice is now here at your simple cafe, Mom. There's no reason for you to be gloomy or sad anymore. All the spices you love are here," Arumi said.

Naning immediately placed her index finger in front of her daughter's lips. "*Nduk*, there is no spice I love more than you, my only daughter."

“Even more than saffron, Mom?” Arumi asked softly.

“Even more than thousands of saffron flowers,” Naning replied, wrapping her daughter in a warm embrace. For a few moments, mother and daughter held each other, holding back tears.

“Oh, and I have another surprise for you, Mom.”

Quickly, Arumi wiped the tears from her cheeks and led her mother to a wooden bench near the saffron patch. In front of the bench was a small round table with four stemmed glasses of tea, each a different color.

“These are the signature spice teas of Kembang Lawang Cafe, Mom. This one is a blend of star anise, cinnamon, and cloves. This one is saffron tea, and this one is roselle tea. The beautiful blue one is butterfly pea flower tea. I made all of this myself. So, Mom, which one do you want?”

Naning smiled at Arumi, who had quickly brightened her expression while pointing to each glass. Everything looked tempting and refreshing. Naning picked up a glass of roselle tea and sipped it slowly. Arumi watched her mother with sparkling eyes.

“So, Mom, how is it? You like the tea I made, right?”

Naning nodded, then took another sip of her tea.

“Yeaay!” Arumi jumped to her feet, leaping and shouting loudly.

Naning smiled as she watched her daughter’s playful behavior.

“Arumi ... Arumi ... sometimes you seem so mature, and other times so childish,” Naning said softly.

“Don’t we all have both sides? Sometimes we sulk, act selfishly, or get cranky like children. Other times, we choose to yield, be patient, and act wisely like adults. Hmm, that’s just how it is. Oh, and thank you for being such a good mother to my daughter.”

“You’re welcome, Honey”

Naning flinched, realizing what she had just said, as if her beloved husband were there beside her, witnessing her happiness with her cherished daughter. Her body suddenly trembled when she saw no one sitting next to her. Only the saffron, star anise, and other spice plants remained faithfully by her side.



Epilogue



The season wasn't going well when I wrote this novel. A warm cup of ginger often kept me company while writing. Even during a review in Jakarta, I deliberately brought along a few shallots and cajuput oil to keep myself warm. I believe none of these circumstances came by chance. The girl of spices must have been trying to appear in my life, just as I tried to bring her to life while writing her story.

Who is the girl of spices, really? I think she isn't always Arumi. She could be Dinda, or Naning, me, or even you—the ones reading this novel. Haven't we all, at some point, encounter spices and experienced their goodness?

Ultimately, I aim to invite readers to form a genuine connection with all the characters. In this novel, the characters are not just ornamental. They have roles, meanings, and leave positive marks in their own stories.

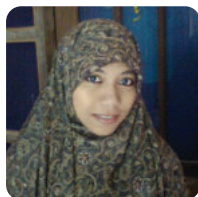
I don't expect readers to idolize anyone. But if that happens, I believe it is no coincidence. I made each character imperfect, and so am I. Yet, spices brought them together beautifully. Spices also brought me together with my characters.

My friends, thank you for reading this story to the very end. I hope there will still be plenty of time for us to enjoy the goodness of spices, even after this novel is finished.

Musrifah, M.Med.Kom.



Author



Musrifah, was born and raised in Surabaya. She has loved writing since childhood, even before she could read, by scribbling letters randomly and sending them as notes to her little friends. Currently, alongside her work as a lecturer in communication studies, she makes time to write and sometimes to take photographs.

Musrifah has written books for both children and adults. Her latest works include the bilingual children's book *Ayo Petik Daunnya (Let's Pick the Leaves)* published by Balai Bahasa JATIM, 2023 and *Di Mana Riri Bersembunyi (Where is Riri Hiding?)* published by Balai Bahasa Gorontalo, 2023. She lives in a home that also serves as a children's reading space, located on a hill near the northern coast of East Java. Correspondence can be sent via e-mail to musrifahmedkom99@gmail.com.

Illustrator



Ahmad Saba Dunya, commonly called Kang Ahmad, has loved drawing since childhood, learning it entirely on his own. His experience as an illustrator and animator is well recognized both domestically and internationally. This is reflected in the various achievements he has earned, including winning the Indonesian Animation Festival in 2009 with his team and receiving an award from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) in 2016 as the best illustrator for the *Indonesia Membumi* program.

Manuscript Editor



Niknik M. Kuntarto, is a skilled writer and editor. She has produced numerous works to keep herself productive, including the biography Chairul Tanjung (2022) and Tetirah Sang Pencerah. In addition to her written works, Niknik has received various awards and was also listed among the 40 Top Indonesian Women.

Manuscript Editor



Wuri Prihantini (Wuri/Uwi), has been a book editor since 2013. She recently completed her master's degree at the Faculty of Cultural and Language Studies (FIB UI), majoring in Linguistics. Her love for books, especially children's books, led her to specialize in and pursue psycholinguistics in children. For her, children's language is unique and fascinating. She is currently active at the Book Center, Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, working as part of the technical team.

Art Director



Siti Wardiyah Sabri, better known as Dunki Sabri, has been involved in children's book illustration since 2005. Her works in art, illustration, and graphic design can be enjoyed on her social media platforms.

Designer



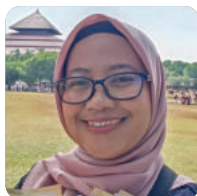
Ines Mentari, successfully completed her studies in Visual Communication Design in 2015. Since then, Ines has decided to pursue graphic design as her profession. She has also gained extensive experience across various graphic design industries. Anyone interested in viewing her works can contact her via email: inesmentari1@gmail.com

Translator



Pujia Pernami, known by the pen name Jia Effendie, has been active in the literary and publishing world for over 20 years. She published her debut book in 2008 and has since written multiple titles, including *Editing 101*. Alongside her writing, she has developed a career in translation and editing, translating over 20 books from English into Indonesian and subtitling various TV shows from Indonesian into English. Furthermore, she has edited hundreds of fiction and non-fiction books, collaborating with authors such as Dee Lestari (*Rapijali Trilogy*), Raditya Dika, and others. In addition to these roles, she also teaches writing online, mentoring authors for writing manuscript, and currently curates and edits for SIBI Batch 2.

English Edition Editor



Indah Nurcaidah, also known as Ida Wajdi, is a passionate book lover who has translated several titles and edited hundreds of works across both fiction and nonfiction genres, including numerous children's books. She currently works as a freelance editor for several publishing houses. One of her lifelong dreams is to write and publish her own stories for children. She can be reached at idawajdi@gmail.com.