

LOLOTABANG AND BIUQBIUQ
Lolotabang dan Biuqbiuq

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LOLOTABANG AND BIUQBIUQ

Lolotabang shivered. It was not due to the cold air pressing against her skin, but because of the piercing gaze of that robust man. His eyes sent chills down her spine. Her pretty face turned pale with fear. She tidied up her weaving kits in a hurry and went inside her house, slamming its door shut.

Then she peeked from the corner of a window. The big tall figure on the horse's back was still looking at her house. However, soon after that, he turned and rode away. The beautiful girl sighed with relief. Her face was still pale when her sister suddenly appeared from the kitchen. “What’s wrong, Sister?” asked Biuqbiuq in wonder. She looked at her sister with a worried expression.

Lolotabang looked back at her younger sister. Her lips trembled slightly.

“Just now... The Nobleman...,” Lolotabang stuttered. “The Nobleman? Really, Sister?” “Yes, Little Sister. The Nobleman passed by our house while I was weaving. Then...” Biuqbiuq was waiting. Her face was filled with deep anxiety.

“Then... he was just staring at me for a long time. I am scared, Little Sister,” said Lolotabang with a trembling voice.

They embraced each other tightly, trying to get rid of the heavy burden in their chest. "Oh well, Sister. Don't think about it too much," Biuqbiuq tried to calm down her sister's heart. "Hopefully he harbors no ill intentions towards us."

The two sisters then grew silent, carried away by their own thoughts.

Biuqbiuq was really worried that something bad would happen to her sister later on. The Nobleman was the richest man in their area, the owner of all rice fields and every inch of the village ground. His power could influence and determine the fate of every farmer in the village. If the Nobleman wanted something, it would surely be his in no time. The Nobleman had seen Lolotabang and stared at her for a long time. Of course, he did so not without a certain purpose.

Biuqbiuq couldn't help but shudder. She was horrified to imagine what would happen if the Nobleman really wanted her sister, whose beauty was known throughout the village.

Her skin was smooth and fair, her neck graceful, and her raven black eyes were framed with curly eyelashes, beaming a melancholic expression which always made people want to

protect her. Her face was oval and sweet, as if God were feeling happy when carving her face in heaven. Her lips were red like a timidly budding rose. Her body was slender with perfect curves. Biuqbiuq would not be surprised if the Nobleman had been instantly smitten by her sister at his first sight.

Suddenly she gripped her sister's arm so strong that her nail scratched her sister's skin. "Ouch!" Lolotabang yelled. "We must get out of here, Sister!" said Biuqbiuq.

Lolotabang's fair forehead wrinkled. "What do you mean, Sister? Why should we go and ... where should we go?"

The younger girl, lesser to her sister in beauty as she was in age, remained silent. Yes, where would they go? They were two sisters who had been orphaned since childhood, without any relative to protect them nor any friend to console them.

"Are you worried about the Nobleman?" asked Lolotabang, breaking the eerie silence between them.

Biuqbiuq stared at her beloved sister intently. Lolotabang was her only sister, her source of love and hope since her childhood. The two of them had each other, had been taking care and loving each other in their own way. They had grown up together, savoring sweet things this life offered to them in joy and enduring the sorrows in tears. They were no longer children but they had

grown into two teenagers, each equipped with their own uniqueness. Lolotabang was a stunning and smart teenager, as well as a skillful breadwinner, while Biuqbiuq was a rather weak and plain little girl, but with a brave heart and courage sturdy as stone. Lolotabang earned their living by selling her beautiful woven fabrics, while Biuqbiuq cooked and took care of the house.

Biuqbiuq nodded.

Lolotabang smiled, trying to appear tough, before saying, “No need to worry, My Little Sister. The Nobleman just looked at me for a moment without saying anything and quickly went away.”

That pretty girl swallowed hard. Her throat was choked on a lie she had just said to her younger sister.

The Nobleman was not just looking at her. She understood perfectly that such gaze was an unspoken order, more of a command for her to appease her master’s wish.

Both Biuqbiuq and Lolotabang tried to believe that there was no need to worry. They continued their activities distractedly, with troublesome thoughts still looming in their heads.

Two days had passed. Nothing strange happened to either of them. There was no rumor about the Nobleman. For two nights in a row they hadn’t been able to sleep well thinking of the

Nobleman's plan for Lolotabang, but now at least they could breathe in relief. Perhaps, the Nobleman was fascinated by Lolotabang's skill in weaving the fabrics that he stared at her for a long time. Perhaps, their unreasonable fear arose from an exaggerating sense of honor and respect to the Nobleman himself.

Today Biuqbiuq was very happy. She had cleaned the house and the yard, drawn water from the well, and cooked delicious foods while singing merrily. Lolotabang was happy as well, carried in the contagious joy spread by her sister. She weaved the cloth on the veranda of the house while humming a piece of a folk song.

Suddenly, the joyful situation in that small house was disturbed by the arrival of a carriage with some guards were trotting along behind it. Lolotabang's beautiful eyes rounded, her singing stopped abruptly. Biuqbiung immediately froze as she gripped the edges of the winnowing tray on her hands.

“The Nobleman!”

The two sisters were terrified when the carriage stopped in front of their yard. They watched as a pair of legs in gold silk shoes and matching fabrics stepped out of it, followed by the figure of the Nobleman with his broad shoulders and a big head on his sturdy neck. His steps were firm and steady, showing a strong sense of confidence and power. His entourage was standing behind him,

bowing their heads in reverence, ready to receive all of their master's commands and orders.

The Nobleman smiled rigidly at Lolotabang. The girl bowed her head immediately while squeezing her woven fabric anxiously with slender fingers.

"I am here to give you good news," said the Nobleman with a deep and heavy voice.

Biuqbiuq was silent, waiting. The good news for the Nobleman was surely bad news for both of them. For some reasons, Biuqbiuq could smell an evil plan behind the tycoon's sweet words.

"I will turn this dilapidated house into the most beautiful palace in this village."

Hearing the Nobleman mocked the inheritance from their parents, Biuqbiuq felt a sudden rush of blood to her head. She was furious at those insolent words.

"Then I will buy you, Biuqbiuq, beautiful clothes to replace your ugly ones," continued the Nobleman.

Biuqbiuq gripped her winnowing tray tighter. The bamboo splinter sticking out of the winnowing tray injured her palm, and

yet the blister in her hand was nothing compared to the heartache triggered by the Nobleman's insult.

“Lolotabang, you will stay in the palace with dozens of maids and servants who will serve you. You don't have to ruin your smooth skin with that loom. You will just eat, drink, party, and maintain your incomparable beauty.”

Lolotabang's stomach felt sick when she heard all of those praises the Nobleman showered her. The flattery sounded like the lethal seduction of a sharp-fanged wolf to a sheep. Her heart sunk as she began to guess the meaning of his winged words.

“You will be my most beautiful wife, Lolotabang!”

“Daaarr!” A loud explosion erupted in Lolotabang and Biuqbiuq's mind. Both of them were shaken to the bone. Lolotabang felt her joints paralyzed, while Biuqbiuq, the brave one, could no longer stand it. She immediately rose and stood up straight in front of the Nobleman. The guards quickly moved to grab the girl but the Nobleman kept them from doing so.

Biuqbiuq stared at the Nobleman's eyes directly hatefully.

“Sir, you ought to ask my sister Lolotabang first, whether she approves your plan or not!” she said angrily.

Then she turned around, staring directly at her sister's eyes.

“Sister, would you like to be his wife?”

Lolotabang stared back at her sister. Tears started to flood her beautiful face.

“Would you like to be his wife, Sister?” pressed Biuqbiuq.

Lolotabang glanced at the Nobleman and caught a flash of threat in the man’s eyes. She looked down and then raised her head slowly.

“I ... I ... don’t want to”

“Well, you have heard it yourself, right!" said Biuqbiuq sharply. "My sister will not marry you, so please look for another woman!"

Hearing Biuqbiuq's brusque sentence, the Nobleman lost his face in front of his guards. He became angry at the courage of that poor little girl in opposing his will. His face turned scarlet behind his thick sideburns. His guards were getting more restless.

“Hey, don’t be so insolent to the Nobleman!” scolded one of the guards to Biuqbiuq, furious with the little girl.

Some neighbors who heard the commotion came out of their house one by one. They whispered to each other but did not dare to come any closer.

The Nobleman gazed around. He saw the villagers swarming not far from that place so he could not act harshly to this girl in front of them, afraid that it would only ruin his reputation as a gentleman.

Then, the Nobleman feigned a soft tone. “No problem. She is still a child, she doesn’t know yet the manners to talk to the elders.”

That man gave a sign to one of the guards to come closer and whispered something to his ear. The guard nodded understandingly and left immediately. Biuqbiuq wanted to know what kind of trick the Nobleman was planning against them. She followed the guard’s movement with the corner of her eye, convinced that the man had been instructed to do something evil. She did not know what, though. She wanted to follow the guard but she did not dare to leave her sister alone with the Nobleman and his guards.

“Well, Sir, I hope you will not force my sister anymore, then.”

The Nobleman snorted indignantly. His hand could not wait to slap that sassy little mouth. However, in front of dozens of the villagers’ eyes, he refrained himself.

“Ha ha ha! You’re such a stupid little girl!” he mocked. “You should be happy because I will lift you out of poverty! I can give your sister a dignity by making her my wife!”

“Forgive me, Sir, but we are content with our life and we do not need any wealth nor higher position from you,” replied Biuqbiuq firmly. “Besides, we have been together since childhood. You cannot separate us because we love each other.”

Lolotabang sobbed upon hearing her younger sister’s words. She immediately hugged her sister affectionately, with a love of a mother, sister, and friend at once. The Nobleman felt disgusted at seeing the tearful scene in front of him but he tried to keep his cool.

“I do not wish to waste more of my precious time here,” he said. “I want you to prove your love to your sister through a challenge.”

“A challenge?” asked Biuqbiuq in wonder.

“Yes, I promise to never disturb your life again if you can make it through.”

Biuqbiuq’s brows furrowed. The Nobleman clapped his hands loudly three times and the guard who had disappeared before returned at once. He brought a large cauldron and gave it to his master.

“If you fail, I have the right to take your sister away. How is it?” continued the Nobleman.

Biuqbiuq and Lolotabang looked at each other. Deep worries were clearly reflected in their confused faces.

“What if I refuse to accept your challenge, Sir?” asked Biuqbiuq.

The Nobleman laughed, “He he he, you’re a stubborn little one, aren’t you!”

“I don’t want to commit any violence against you. You should be grateful, Kid, because I am now giving you an opportunity to choose. Anyway, the requirement that I ask is very easy. I’m sure, a smart and stubborn kid like you will be able to do it,” said the Nobleman.

He handed the cauldron to Biuqbiuq. “You have to fill this with the water from the well behind the house and bring it back here.”

Biuqbiuq received it with a confused mind. “How come his requirement is so easy? Where is the trick?” thought Biuqbiuq.

Biuqbiuq looked at the cauldron where she saw, at its bottom, two small holes. “That cauldron is leaking, or ... has it been deliberately perforated?”

“But, this cauldron is leaking!” protested Biuqbiuq.

“Well, that’s exactly where the challenge is!” said the Nobleman. “You must have a clever brain behind that stubborn skull!”

That little girl was silent. The Nobleman was very clever and wielded his power with great cunning. “Not smart but sly!” moaned Biuqbiuq’s heart.

“I give you three chances to fill this cauldron and bring it to me. If your time is up, I will bring your sister to my palace!” threatened the Nobleman.

Hearing the threat, Lolotabang shuddered. Shivers were creeping to her neck when she imagined herself as a wife of the Nobleman. The man had previously had four wives who were eventually dumped after he was bored with them. "God, I hope Biuqbiuq will get through this challenge," prayed Lolotabang earnestly.

“Hurry up!” scolded the Nobleman.

The Nobleman’s harsh tone made Biuqbiuq nervous because she did not have time to think further. She realized that she would not be able to resist the Nobleman’s power. She felt as if her sister’s destiny were on her hands, just like the cauldron. If she failed, her sister would be taken away. If she succeeded, they would be able to live in peace again. Flashes of such thoughts instantly spurred her spirit. She immediately darted to the well behind the house with the cauldron in her hands.

So she began to draw water from the well, filling the cauldron to the brim and immediately took it back to the yard.

“You call this full? It’s only half of it!” the Nobleman mocked her.

Sure enough, the two small holes at the bottom of the cauldron made the water splatter all the way from the well behind the house to the front yard. Biuqbiuq immediately ran back to the well to add water to the cauldron again. After she thought that it was full, she brought it again to the Nobleman.

However, the water in the cauldron had greatly been reduced again before she reached the yard. She turned back to the well. It was her last chance. This time she tried to fill the pot slowly while tapping the holes at the bottom of the cauldron with her fingers. Then, she brought the full cauldron carefully to the yard.

But alas, the Nobleman was no longer seen anywhere, neither all of guards, his carriage and ... Lolotabang!

Biuqbiuq’s heart seemed to leap out of her chest.

“Sister!!! My Dear Lolotabang!” screamed Biuqbiuq in panic while running around like a possessed person. Some neighbors who had been watching from a distance now were rushing to her.

“Your sister was taken away by the Nobleman!” said one of them.

“What? Taken away?” screamed Biuqbiuq.

“Yes, you heard it well. You’re considered to have failed in the challenge to set your sister free so the Nobleman took her away!” said the other.

Biuqbiuq sat down lifelessly on the ground, almost losing her consciousness. The neighbors immediately helped her walk to her house where they could take care of her. They laid her on her cot, and an elderly woman rubbed her body and nose with eucalyptus oil to make her feel comfortable. Then, another woman boiled the water to make her a warm drink.

Biuqbiuq buried her face in her hands. She was at her wits end. Anger, fear, and sadness mingled into one inside her. The Nobleman had cheated. She still had one chance but that man had taken her sister away. Perhaps, he was afraid that Biuqbiuq would succeed in overcoming his challenge.

That teenage girl was furious. Unconsciously, she clenched her fist and hit it against the wall of the house. The elderly woman who accompanied her was startled.

“My Granddaughter, what’s wrong?” she asked.

Biuqbiuq stared at her. The elderly woman shuddered upon seeing so much hatred in the young girl’s eyes. She could understand Biuqbiuq’s anger that was triggered by the Nobleman’s dishonest behavior towards her.

“I will follow my sister Lolotabang to the Nobleman’s palace!” said Biuqbiuq with trembling lips.

The women in the room were stunned upon hearing her statement.

“Oh my God, are you serious?” asked one of the women.

“I’m serious, Aunty. I will follow my sister and set her free from the grip of that wicked man!”

The firmness of every word which came out of her mouth amazed everyone who heard it. They whispered to each other, expressing their own thoughts and feelings. Biuqbiuq’s decision to follow Lolotabang and opposed the Nobleman’s order was a very dangerous thing as meddling with the Nobleman was a serious matter. He was like a god that gripped the soul of every villager in that area. His wealth was without limits and reached everywhere, making the villagers afraid of him.

The men who were waiting outside Biuqbiuq’s room were shocked when they heard the rumor about her determination to go to the Nobleman’s house. An old man that the community had considered to be one of the elders in the area immediately entered the room to see Biuqbiuq and stood beside the girl’s bed.

“My Granddaughter, Biuqbiuq, are you sure with your decision in following your sister?” “Yes,” answered the girl firmly.

“Do you know where the Nobleman brings your sister?”

“To his palace, of course. Where else do you think?”

The elderly man smiled.

“The Nobleman is not bringing her to his palace.”

Biuqbiuq stared at him with question in her eyes.

“The Nobleman’s palace is in the south, while your sister is being brought to the north,” the elder man explained.

“So, the Nobleman has another palace, then? Where is it, Grandfather?”

The elderly man shook his head. “I don’t know. That palace is the Nobleman’s secret place of retreat. No one knows where it is except his personal guards.”

“I will look for my sister Lolotabang even though I have to go to the ends of the earth!” Biuqbiuq persisted. Even though everybody knew her as a persistent and strong-willed girl, her determination made shake their heads in disbelief. The elderly man’s face darkened with shadows of anxiety and fear for Biuqbiuq’s safety.

“I promise to bring back my sister to this house even though I have to pay the price with my own life!” added Biuqbiuq.

All the people were speechless.

"Well, if your determination is unwavering, we will not resist your plan," finally the village elders spoke up.

Then, after Biuqbiuq felt she had enough rest, she prepared for her journey to find Lolotabang. Her neighbors also helped her make some meal to bring with her during the journey. The elders gave her a banana blossom wrapped in a white cloth.

"This is a magical banana blossom," said the elders. "Plant it on the ground when you think all of your efforts bring no result. Hopefully God will help you, My Granddaughter," he added.

They let her go with a lot of prayers and good wishes that the Almighty God would protect and bless her efforts.

Having bidden her farewell to the neighbors and the village elders, Biuqbiuq left her house, heading to the north as the elderly man had suggested. She observed the ground to follow the traces of the Nobleman's carriage. Suddenly, something odd drew her attention. Several hens and birds were pecking at the grains of rice scattered along the way where the carriage traces were seen. The more Biuqbiuq observed them, the more she became convinced that those grains of rice were a clue to go the Nobleman's palace.

Her lips formed a broad smile filled with happiness.

“Sister, thank you for helping me find you!” she said to herself.

Biuqbiuq then followed the clue, which she believed her sister had left for her. The Nobleman’s hiding palace was indeed very far from her village. After a day of walking, she finally arrived at a palace protected by a tight row of big trees. The palace was not as big as the Nobleman’s other palace which Biuqbiuq had seen before, but it still had the charms of a grand and elegant building. Several guards were staying on the alert around its fence.

Silence seemed to wrap around the palace, which was interrupted only by the sound of rustling leaves rubbing against each other as well as the chirping birds jumping from one twig to another. The relaxing breeze blew, making it such a comfortable resting place. However, Biuqbiuq had not forgotten the purpose of her arrival there, which was to bring her sister home.

She observed her surroundings from behind a tree. She had not been able to decide what to do to free her sister from the Nobleman’s hands. Lolotabang must have been hidden in a room inside the palace. She was not even aware of the tears running down her cheeks, when she recalled her sister’s fate.

“My God, please protect my sister from all dangers, amen!” prayed Biuqbiuq silently.

She sat on the ground with outstretched legs and then opened the food provision she had carried while her mind went back to her sister. When she was resting, she heard indistinct sobs from the palace. She immediately tried to listen to it better and could recognize the voice of Lolotabang. She stood up at once and shot a sharp glance towards the palace.

“Sister!” Biuqbiuq squealed anxiously. Why was her sister crying? Was the Nobleman torturing her?

Hundreds of bad thoughts rushed to her tortured mind, making her come out of her hideout to immediately run towards the palace’s gate. The guards, upon seeing someone’s sudden arrival, immediately prepared to arrest her. Biuqbiuq did not flinch at all. She deliberately shouted for Lolotabang's name to attract the attention of the palace owner.

“My sister Lolotabaaang! I’m Biuqbiuq, Sister!!!”

Two guards snatched her hands violently. “Stop it! How dare you make a noise here!” said one of them. He twisted Biuqbiuq’s hands easily, but the little girl wriggled out as she kept shouting.

“Sister!!! Sister!!!”

The other guard got annoyed and tried to gag Biuqbiuq's mouth with his big palm. Suddenly, the Nobleman appeared in front of the palace gate with both hands on his hips.

"What on earth is going on here?" he growled.

One of the guards bowed down with reverence to his master, while his friend was still locking Biuqbiuq's arms.

"I'm sorry that your peaceful rest is disturbed, Master," said the guard. "It looks like this crazy girl is passing by and making a mess here."

The Nobleman scrutinized Biuqbiuq from head to toe with furrowed eyebrows and eventually could recognize the girl.

"Why are you here?" he asked angrily.

"I want to see my sister!" replied Biuqbiuq brusquely.

Nobleman emitted a mocking laughter.

"You can't! You have lost so you will never see your sister again. Forever!" said the Nobleman.

"What is that supposed to mean, Sir?" asked Biuqbiuq, unable to stifle a shudder.

“Calm down. The fact is, I am truly in love with your sister. I will not hurt her at all. She is safe in my palace and is served very well.”

It seemed that the Nobleman could read the worries in the girl's eyes. Quietly, Biuqbiuq heaved a sigh of relief.

“But, I heard her cry...”

Before Biuqbiuq finished her words, Lolotabang had rushed from inside the palace, having heard of her sister's arrival.

"My sister!" shrieked Lolotabang as she ran towards Biuqbiuq. However, the Nobleman snatched her body quickly. Lolotabang wailed behind his robust stature.

Biuqbiuq's body grew limp. Her heart was broken when she saw the sufferings of her sister who continued to cry hysterically. Lolotabang cried because she felt helpless against the Nobleman's desire to marry her. She also lamented her separation with her only beloved younger sister. They had been destined together, like a tree with its root. If the root were cut from the trunk, it would surely die. She felt her soul was dead already when she was separated from her sister by force.

“Sir, please let me see my younger sister!” stuttered Lolotabang in tears.

“Guards! Lock the girl in the palace underground prison!” ordered the Nobleman without heeding Lolotabang’s plea. He then dragged her back into the palace. The poor woman was screaming but was too weak to fight against the powerful old man. Both of them disappeared quickly behind the palace door which was soon slammed shut. Lolotabang’s loud voice calling out her sister's name was clearly heard outside of it.

The guards immediately followed their master’s order. They tied Biuqbiuq’s hands and pushed her inside a dark underground room below the palace. Biuqbiuq fell on the cold ground and could only cry until she grew tired and fell asleep.

Dusk started to crawl. It was getting dark and the beautiful palace was quiet. No more screaming or crying sound as had been heard before. Biuqbiuq and Lolotabang had fallen asleep, with exhausted body and soul.

“Tic tic tic!”

Biuqbiuq was awakened when drops of water fell on her head. She looked up to find where it came from. In the dim night, her eyes caught a light penetrating from the fissure in the palace pavement. She saw that the water was dripping from there. Apparently, inside the room above her head, someone was dropping the water little by little through the crack of the loosened wooden floor.

“Biuqbiuq! Biuqbiuq!” whispered a voice behind the floor.

“My sister Lolotabang!” Biuqbiuq jolted with happiness.

“Big Sister!” she whispered back. The floor above her was trembling a little. Apparently, Lolotabang was trying to find out where her sister was. With both of her hands tied, Biuqbiuq could not knock on the floor so she just banged her head against the wooden floor to help Lolotabang find her location.

The two sisters cried, overwhelmed with bitter-sweet emotions.

“My Little Sister, you must be thirsty and hungry. I will drop you some food from here. Open your mouth, Sister,” said Lolotabang. Then, she dropped some steamed rice through the floor cracks. Biuqbiuq opened her mouth to eat it.

“Thank you, Sister. How could you manage to find me?”

Lolotabang dropped some drinking water and Biuqbiuq opened her mouth again to drink it.

“I know you're locked up under the palace, so I traced each floor quietly. I heard you calling my name over and over again,” explained Lolotabang.

“I must have been calling you in my sleep, Sister.”

Both were silent, carried away by their own thoughts. Suddenly, Biuqbiuq asked, "Sister, did you drop the grains of rice all the way to the palace?"

"Yes. I know that you will look for me so I dropped the grains of rice I had found inside the carriage to leave you a clue to find me easier."

Biuqbiuq smiled at her sister's ingenuity. They continued to chat affectionately, with the palace floor between them. Morning arrived without them knowing. Both were sound asleep in their own place; Biuqbiuq under the palace and Lolotabang on the floor of her room above. The guard peeked to the underground room and saw his prisoner was still there, sleeping like a baby. When he returned at night, his prisoner was still asleep. He wondered how come the girl did not wake up from hunger or thirst. The Nobleman had ordered anyone not to feed her at all. Nevertheless, the girl looked fit. The guard had no idea that Biuqbiuq had been fed and given water by her sister through the crack in her bedroom floor.

When the night fell, the two sisters talked as much as possible by whispering at each other. Lolotabang felt so sad that she was not allowed to see her younger sister. Nevertheless, she never stopped begging to his future husband to let her see Biuqbiuq.

“Sir, why do you dislike Biuqbiuq so much? If you love me, you should also love my sister. She is my only family. I ...”

“Enough! I want to be the only one you love!” snorted the Nobleman angrily. It seemed that he was very jealous to see how deep Lolotabang's affection was for her younger sister.

"Let Biuqbiuq go then. She is innocent," implored Lolotabang.

“All right, I’ll let her go.”

Then, the Nobleman instructed the guard to set Biuqbiuq free and to expel her from his palace. However, Biuqbiuq begged to see the Nobleman and so she was taken to the Nobleman’s presence. Biuqbiuq kneeled in front of him, lowering herself and swallowing all of her pride for the sake of her sister.

“Sir, I want to see my sister face to face. I just want to say goodbye for the last time, Sir!” “No!” the Noblemen’s voice thundered, shaking the furniture in the room. Everyone in the room lost their courage, including Biuqbiuq.

“Guards! Drag this girl out!” roared the Nobleman. Two guards immediately rushed towards Biuqbiuq but the girl did not give up.

"Sir, let me ask you for one thing before I leave!" she shouted.

The Nobleman was very angry but he finally gave a sign to the guard to stop. Biuqbiuq did not waste her last chance.

"Allow me to plant a banana blossom beside his palace. This is a memento of my farewell with my sister."

The Nobleman seemed to think for a moment.

"Alright, I grant your wish. But, after you plant it, you have to leave this palace right away!" he said.

"I will, Sir. Thank you very much for your kindness."

Without wasting any second, before the Nobleman could change his mind, Biuqbiuq immediately took out the banana blossom from the pouch around her waist. The blossom was planted right next to her sister's room.

Lolotabang observed what her sister was doing behind the curtain of her room's window, with the Nobleman at her side. She was not allowed to speak directly to her sister.

After the banana blossom had been planted, Biuqbiuq stood up and looked at the window of Lolotabang's room. She was sure that her sister was behind the curtain. With a loud voice she said, "If the banana tree withers, it means I'm seriously ill. If it dies, it means that I also have died."

Those words were addressed to Lolotabang. Her sister gasped when she heard Biuqbiuq's words but could not say anything. The Nobleman's sharp eyes made her tongue froze. A drop of tear rolled down her smooth cheek.

Biuqbiuq left the magnificent palace with a broken heart. She returned home, hoping that God would help them through the banana tree she had planted. She remembered again her dream the previous night, where the elder man of the village handed her the banana blossom.

"Plant it next to Lolotabang's room. You'd better give in, My Granddaughter. Your efforts have failed. Leave your destiny to the Almighty God," advised the elderly man gently.

She took the banana blossom with mixed feelings. The village elderly man had advised her to give in. It meant that she was encouraged to stop fighting for her sister and had to go home.

"This banana tree will show your condition when you are away from your sister. If this banana tree dries up, it's a sign that you are suffering from a serious illness, and if this banana tree dies, it symbolizes your death as well. Thus, your sister will know your fate even though she cannot see you," explained the village elderly man.

Biuqbiuq finally arrived home. She visited the elderly man and told him all of her experiences and also about the banana blossom that had been planted as the elderly man had instructed her to.

The man, who was nearly a century old, just nodded his head understandingly.

"Somehow, my heart shuddered and felt that you were experiencing great suffering and trouble. Finally, I prayed day and night, asking God to help me deliver my message to you through a dream," said the village elderly man.

"Thank you for all of your guidance, Grandfather," said Biuqbiuq sincerely. "I surrender everything to the Almighty God now."

Meanwhile, in the Nobleman's palace, Lolotabang was overwhelmed with deep longing for her sister every day. Every time she opened the window, her gaze directly went to the banana tree that her sister had planted. The banana tree grew bigger every day. Lolotabang never forgot to water and give it some fertilizer to thrive since the tree was very meaningful to her because it was a substitute figure of her younger sister. Moreover, Biuqbiuq's message before leaving the palace continued to ring in her ears very clearly.

If the tree withered, it meant that her sister was seriously ill, and if the tree died, it meant that her sister had died too. She did not

want bad things to happen to her sister so she believed that if she took care of the tree well, she also took care of her sister's health.

Her marriage to the Nobleman was postponed a few weeks because the Nobleman had to travel to a faraway land to monitor his gardens and rice fields there. Nevertheless, the Nobleman kept guarding his beloved future wife strictly. He did not allow Lolotabang to go outside the palace fence. The front palace had been specially designed for Lolotabang and the Nobleman, while the back of the palace was occupied by the Nobleman's previous wives, mistresses, maids, guards, and children. Of course, it aroused envy in the hearts of the previous wives and mistresses of the Nobleman. However, the fear of their husband kept them from harassing Lolotabang. They just concealed their jealousy in a forced smile when they their paths crossed with that beautiful woman.

One morning, when Lolotabang opened the window of her room, she was shocked. The banana beside her room had withered.

“Oh My Dear Sister, what happened to you?” she thought sadly.

She imagined her sister lying helplessly alone at home. No one took care of her illness, no one accompanied her. Lolotabang's tears welled up right away. She immediately knelt down near the banana tree and prayed, "My Dear God, please heal my sister!"

After a few days, the condition of Biuqbiuq's banana tree grew worse. The leaves were now brown and dried, the stem dropped as if it were going to collapse. Lolotabang observed the banana tree anxiously. The illness of Biuqbiuq must have been getting worse. Without further thought she went to the Nobleman who had just returned from his journey.

"Sir, I miss my hometown," said Lolotabang fearfully.

The Nobleman turned to stare at Lolotabang and felt a sudden rush of blood to the head. He hated it when Lolotabang brought up her hometown, because it reminded him of Biuqbiuq whom he had removed with difficulty from his future wife's life.

"We will get married soon, so don't ask for anything!" scolded the Nobleman.

Lolotabang's heart sunk when she heard it. She then left the Nobleman and rushed to the banana tree next to her room while holding back her tears. In her mind, the tree turned into Biuqbiuq's frail body.

Her poor younger sister was suffering from a disease she did not know about. She imagined her whispering weakly, "Sister, help me! Come here!"

Lolotabang hugged the banana tree and sobbed, as if she was hugging her dying sister. The elder wives of the Nobleman looked at her miserably from a distance. They were not allowed to approach their husband's future wife.

The next day, she saw that the banana tree had died, with its stem already fallen to the ground. Lolotabang screamed hysterically that all the servants and guards ran toward her. She passed out and was immediately carried into her bed. Soon after that, Lolotabang came around and started to call out her sister's name.

“Biuqbiuq!” she shouted in tears.

When she remembered the fallen banana tree, she lost her consciousness again. She fainted several times so that the Nobleman became very anxious and immediately called a shaman. The shaman cast a spell at Lolotabang and spurted her with his special potion. Lolotabang kept shouting as if she had been possessed.

"It looks like the princess is possessed by the evil jinn that passed by," the shaman explained to the Nobleman. The Nobleman believed in the shaman's explanation and let him attend to his future wife.

After the shaman had danced around while chanting and spurting his potion at Lolotabang's face in a kind of medication ritual for two days and two nights, the woman seemed to calm down.

Proudly, the shaman went home carrying a bag of money given to him as the Nobleman's token of gratitude. The shaman was very sure that his supernatural power had healed the Nobleman's future wife.

Now Lolotabang became gloomy and very quiet. Every day she mused alone, sobbing near the windowsill of her room. She kept crying until her beautiful eyes became swollen. She refused to eat and drink her face then became thin and pale.

Lolotabang looked at the soil of the former banana tree planted by Biuqbiuq. She had ordered to have its stem buried there. She felt that her soul also had been buried with the banana tree. All that remained now was only her visible body, which was getting weaker and thinner now.

“Lolotabang,” called the Nobleman.

Lolotabang turned to him. Her future husband approached her with a clearly forced smile as his heart was broken to see the conditions of his future wife. Lolotabang's beautiful body became thin, her skin was dry because it had never been treated again, her face was no longer beaming and her eyes were hollow, without

any ray of life. The Nobleman held both of Lolobatang's palms that flopped down over his lap weakly.

Those palms were cold and thin. The man blinked several times, holding the warm tingling sensation that began to sting his eyes.

"Have you ever heard about the magical lake?" he asked.

Lolobatang shook her head then diverted her gaze elsewhere.

"The lake is not too far from here. My personal servant said that after taking a bath there, any sick person will be healed, any person with a troubled mind will gain peace." The woman he talked to just stood there, frozen. Her mind was flying somewhere in the sky.

"What if you go to the lake? Perhaps, after taking a bath there you will be as healthy and beautiful as you were before, so that we can get married soon," persuaded the Nobleman.

Lolotabang showed no reaction. The Nobleman held his breath, worried.

Out of the blue, suddenly Lolotabang's eyes were sparkling. She instantly looked at him as her lips formed a timid smile.

The Nobleman was confused by the abrupt change in the attitude of his future wife. “Of course I’m willing to go there,” replied Lolotabang tenderly. The Nobleman breathed in relief.

He left the room happily. He was about to prepare for Lolotabang's trip to the magical lake he had just told her. Indistinctly, she could hear the cheerful voice of the Nobleman giving order to the maids and the guards to get ready.

Lolotabang flashed a mysterious smile.

The journey to the magical lake was not too long. The lake was located in a small forest near the Nobleman’s palace. Lolotabang’s entourage arrived at the lake and looked for a place to rest. The horses were left to graze, the baskets of foods were opened up, and the woven mats were rolled out. The Nobleman preferred to sit and enjoy the provided foods while Lolotabang looked for a hidden part of the lake. Some maids accompanied Lolotabang to swim in its clear water. Lolotabang's face, which had been grim for several days, now looked radiant. The maids were happy to see the cheerful face of their mistress.

Lolotabang was very good at swimming, showing off her graceful and swift motions underwater.

“I will dive there,” she said to one of the maids, pointing at the surface of water covered by the leaves of the lush plants on the edge of the lake.

"No, Princess, it seems a bit scary there!" the maid warned her.

Lolotabang laughed softly. “What do you mean scary?”

"There may be a snake or any dangerous water animal hiding down there," said the maid. She shuddered with fear.

"Don't exaggerate," Lolotabang said. "It's just in your head."

Then, without waiting any longer she took a deep breath and immediately dived into the lake. The maids did not dare to prevent her from doing so. They waited at the brink of the lake nervously.

Lolotabang deliberately dived into the bottom of the lake because she planned to escape from the supervision of the maids and guards. The lake was very deep and got darker inside. She was in difficulties to see her surroundings.

Suddenly her legs twisted. At first she thought they were trapped among the roots of the plants growing in the bottom of the lake. However, something twisted around her legs were like pulling her body. She struggled to escape from it, which now was gripping her legs harder and she was hopeless against its mighty force.

Before long, Lolotabang was gasping for breath as she felt a tremendous dizziness when the lake water entered her nose and mouth. At the end she grew unconscious as her body was swung around at the bottom of the lake.

Lolotabang opened her eyes. Her sight was blurry but she still could see a figure standing next to her. Lolotabang blinked her eyes, trying to observe it better. It was a man-headed horse!

“Thank God you’re awake,” the centaur said.

Lolotabang tried to get up but a tremendous headache banged her head all of a sudden.

“I am the King of the River who controls the lake and the river here. I intentionally pulled you to keep you from swimming further. This lake basin has many steep and dangerous niches,” added the centaur.

“Thank you for saving my life,” said Lolotabang.

The King of the River nodded amicably.

“Tell me how you got into my kingdom,” he asked.

Lolotabang told him the whole story of her life while the King listened to her attentively.

"That's my story," Lolotabang said. "I want to go to my home village. Maybe my sister has died, because the banana tree she had planted died a few weeks ago. I want to visit my sister's grave."

"I will help you as long as you agree to fulfill my wish," said the King of the River. "You have to marry me after I take you back to your village."

Lolotabang was taken aback. Her lips quivered as if she wanted to say something but nothing came out. The woman wondered how the King of River could fall in love and propose to her so quickly. After all, they had just met.

"I know, my request sounds strange and shocks you," said the King of the River, breaking the silence between them. "However, I cannot contain the feelings of love that possessed me when I saw you swimming in my lake. You are a beautiful woman who I have been dreaming of all these years," stuttered the King of the River with a choked voice, out of his deep love for Lolotabang.

Lolotabang was touched by the King of the River's love declaration. She had no choice. The centaur had saved her life so it was becoming for her to pay him back for his kindness. After all, the King of the River seemed to be a good man. He also had a handsome face despite his horse-like body. Finally, Lolotabang agreed to fulfill the King of the River's wish to marry her.

“Alright, I promise to become your wife after I get back from my village,” she said.

The King of River’s eyes were teary because he was very happy. Finally, his long waiting was over, the soul mate he had been dreaming of finally came and accepted his love.

“Now hop onto my back, we will go to your house,” said the King of the River. He was so excited and could not wait to accomplish his task.

Lolotabang climbed onto the back of the King of the River who instantly darted out of the lake as fast as a lightning. The Nobleman’s entourage only saw a glimpse of white light flying from the lake to the sky in awe.

“What happened?” asked the Nobleman, wondering why his servants were staring at the sky in amazement.

“Master, there was a flash of white light coming out of the lake all of a sudden and then it disappeared into thin air!” one of the guards reported.

The Nobleman gasped.

“Where is Lolotabang?” he immediately shouted out.

At the same time, Lolotabang’s maids arrived in panic.

“Master! Master! The Princess drowned!” “What?”

Everyone rushed to the place where Lolotabang had dived. Some guards dived into the lake to look for Lolotabang. In the meantime, the Nobleman was walking to and fro with hands on his hips. His eyes glared with anger over the neglect of the maids at guarding his future wife.

The quest to find Lolotabang continued until it was getting dark, to no avail. All of Lolotabang's personal maids trembled in terror thinking of the severe punishment that the Nobleman would bring upon them.

In his confusion, the Nobleman called for the shaman who had healed Lolotabang. He asked the shaman to look for his future wife through the unseen world.

A worship ritual was then commenced.

In another location, which was the house of Lolotabang and Biuqbiuq, a stiff body of a girl lied on her cot. It was Biuqbiuq who was not dead yet but had been in a comma since weeks ago. No one had watched or looked after her since she got sick.

Lolotabang and the King of the River arrived in front of the house and looked for Biuqbiuq immediately. When she saw her sister's body lied there lifelessly, Lolotabang started to scream.

“Sister!!! Sister!!!”

She hugged and shook her sister’s body several times, which remained stiff. Biuqbiuq’s face was pale like a corpse, her eyes closed but Lolotabang could feel her sister’s heartbeat even though it was very weak.

“She’s still alive!” she shrieked.

The King of the River came closer immediately to check Biuqbiuq’s pulse rate.

"Hurry and make porridge for your sister!" he ordered.

Lolotabang was confused and upset at the same time. How could the centaur ask her to cook porridge for her dying sister?

“What do you mean?” asked Lolotabang, annoyed.

"Don't ask too much, make a bowl of porridge right away!"

Despite being upset at the order of the King of the River, Lolotabang obeyed him. She rushed to the kitchen to make a bowl of rice porridge. Soon, the porridge was ready and she brought it to the King of the River.

The King of the River opened up Biuqbiuq’s tightly clasped mouth and fed her a spoonful of warm porridge. Gradually, the

girl's face began to blush. Her blood started to flow again. The King of the River fed her until there was no more porridge left.

Shortly after, Biuqbiuq's lips quivered and her eyes fluttered a bit.

Lolotabang was amazed to see what was happening. She hugged her sister while crying happily.

“Biuqbiuq, get up, My Little Sister!” she whispered to Biuqbiuq's ear.

Her younger sister's eyes fluttered open. As their eyes met, they hugged each other affectionately. “Sister, you finally came home!” “Yes, My Little Sister!”

“Promise me, Sister, you will never leave me alone again!”

Lolotabang froze. She remembered her promise to become the King of the River's wife. If she married to the ruler of the river, she would have to live in the kingdom of the King forever. Lolotabang did not dare to look at her sister's eyes.

Before Biuqbiuq had a chance to raise a question, they heard a commotion outside. The three of them immediately went outside to find out what had caused it.

Both Lolotabang and Biuqbiuq were very shocked to see the Nobleman and dozens of his well-armed guards in front of their house!

“Lolotabang! How dare you to escape from me!” shouted the Nobleman.

Lolotabang's body shrunk behind the King of the River. Biuqbiuq, who was still weak, leaned on the threshold.

The King of the River jumped up to face the Nobleman.

“Who are you?” growled the Nobleman.

“I am the King of the River, Lolotabang’s future husband!”

“What? How dare you to seize my future wife!”

Lolotabang came forward quickly with eyes burning with anger and revenge. The Nobleman had never thought that his future wife, who had been sweet, weak, and obedient, could find such courage to oppose him.

“I do not want to be your wife! You’re such an old man with no dignity! You have made many women suffer and you have tortured the villagers with high taxes. In fact, my parents also died from exhaustion of working day and night to pay their debts to you. You have tricked them!” The words slid violently from

Lolotabang's lips like the flood hitting against the river embankment.

The Nobleman was furious. Without thinking twice, the Nobleman jumped off from his horse to hit Lolotabang, but the King of the River managed to prevent him from doing so. He immediately attacked the Nobleman and a fierce battle between the two of them could not be avoided.

The King of the River could beat the Nobleman with his supernatural powers. He easily wiped out the Nobleman and many of his guards. The rest of the survivors escaped. The centaur reminded Lolotabang of her promise to marry him.

"But, can we stay onshore after the marriage?" pleaded Lolotabang. "I do not want to be separated from my sister anymore."

The King of the River just smiled. Lolotabang and Biuqbiuq looked at each other, waiting for the King's answer anxiously. The dusk was coming. At the brink of a shady lake covered by leafy old trees, a beautiful woman was weaving intently. Beside her, a younger woman sang a lullaby to a baby in her arms.

"My Niece, you are so sweet, just like your mother. But you also have to grow up and become a brave woman, like your aunty!"

she said softly to the baby. The two women smiled at each other affectionately.

A figure of a handsome man with a horse-like body appeared on the threshold of the cottage. He smiled at them as he came closer to land a sweet kiss on his little baby's forehead. Then the mist began to descend and spread all over the lake.