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-Balod-

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ngi-ngi!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Darkness swallowed the moon and the stars.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ngi-ngi!

Notes:

Ina - means 'mother'

Sing-sing - means 'ring', in this case the island is an atoll, which is a ring-shaped island formed by coral growth around a volcano that had sunk.

Kudyapi - a type of two stringed, fretted, boat-lute.

For a youtube demo: [\(531\) Kudyapi Master Samaon Sulaiman - YouTube](#)

Gambang - a type of wooden, xylophone like instrument.