

THE LAST MOON



BOOK I

The Golden Rooster

QOHELETH III

FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTERS 1 AND 2

A free sample of *The Golden Rooster*, Book I of *The Last Moon*.

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This is a work of fiction drawn from the epics of the Philippines. The gods, heroes and peoples of those epics belong to living cultures; this story is one retelling among many.

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CHAPTER 1

The Last Song

That night, the moon was red like a wound that had not yet closed.

Hiraya sat on the bamboo floor of her grandmother's house, knees drawn to her chest, while the sea wind slipped through the gaps in the nipa walls. Outside, she could hear the neighbors readying their gongs and pots. That was what Nalbuan did whenever the moon turned red: it brought out everything that could make noise, because the only thing the Bakunawa feared was the voice of the people.

"Again," said Apo Sinang. "From the shore."

The old woman's eyes were closed. She had not needed to open them to see for a long time. Her face was like a net dried in the sun, all lines and knots, and her hair was as white as sea foam. She was the last babaylan of Nalbuan. Hiraya was her last student.

Hiraya breathed in and began to sing.

*On the sands of Nalbuan, where the water returns,
they laid the bones of the hero the sea had swallowed.
Covered with a tapis, watched over by the night,
and the rooster crowed, and the dog barked,
and the bones remembered the flesh.*

As she sang, she felt it: the heat rising from her belly to her throat, the weight of words older than this house, this village, the coconut

palms that ringed it. This was *gunita*. The living memory of a people, flowing through a body strong enough to carry it.

And she felt the price, too.

A small thing. An afternoon when she was a child, when her father taught her to swim beneath the waves. The taste of salt in her mouth. Her father's laugh. Her father's color. As she sang the last line, she felt that memory blur, like a footprint in the sand after a wave has passed, until all that remained was the knowledge that such an afternoon had once happened, but no longer what it had looked like.

She stopped. Her cheeks were wet.

"Good," Apo Sinang whispered. "What did it take?"

"My father. An afternoon with him."

The old woman nodded slowly, as if counting. "That can be paid. Afternoons are many."

"I can't remember his face anymore, Apo."

"Then you remember him another way." Apo Sinang opened her eyes, and in the light of the oil lamp, Hiraya saw that they were full of tears too. "That's what they don't teach you about being a babaylan, child. It isn't about how much you remember. It's about what you're willing to forget for others."



Outside, the first gong began to sound. Softly, only a test, but another answered from the far end of the village, and another, until all of Nalbuan was humming like one great heart.

"There is one more verse," said Apo Sinang.

Hiraya stared. "We finished the epic. Lam-ang rose. He married Ines Kannoyan. That's the end."

"That's the ending we sing." The old woman took Hiraya's hand. It was cold, though the night was warm. "Not every part of an epic

is sung aloud. Some verses pass only from one babaylan to the next, when she is ready. Or when there is no other choice."

"Which of those is this?"

Apo Sinang did not answer. Instead, she brought her lips to Hiraya's ear and began to sing, so softly it could barely be heard beneath the gongs.

*And when the seventh night of hunger came,
the hero returned to the mouth of the sea.
Not because he was defeated,
but because the sea owed him a debt.
Find the rooster that does not age.
Find the stone the waves do not reach.*

Hiraya felt the words enter her, heavier than anything she had ever sung. They were not only verses. There were pictures inside them: a beach of black sand, a rooster gleaming like gold in the moonlight, and something beneath the water, enormous, ancient, opening one eye.

"Apo," she said, "what is this?"

But the question died in her mouth, because the dogs had suddenly gone silent.



In Nalbuan, a dog was always barking. They barked at the crabs on the sand, at the fishermen coming home at midnight, at the wind itself. Their silence was more frightening than any noise.

Then the gongs went silent too.

Not all at once. One by one, from the farthest end of the village, like candles blown out by the wind. The last gong sounded once more, very loud, and then there was nothing.

Apo Sinang stood. For the first time in many years, Hiraya saw her move quickly.

"The Pipi," the old woman said.

Hiraya had heard that name before, in the stories whispered by traders who passed through Nalbuan. Soldiers who served someone they called the Forgetter. Men and women who had given up their own names in exchange for power, and having no names, had no voices either. They did not shout in battle. They did not beg for mercy. And according to the stories, they were hunting the babaylan.

"I thought they were only stories," Hiraya whispered.

"Everything is a story, until it knocks on your door." Apo Sinang knelt in the corner of the house and pried up a floorboard. Beneath it lay a small bayong woven from pandan. She handed it to Hiraya. "Take this. Don't open it until you reach the stone."

"What stone? Apo, I'm not leaving you..."

"Listen to me." The old woman held Hiraya's face between her two hands. "They aren't hunting you because you're a babaylan. They've already killed so many babaylan. They're hunting you because you're the only one left who knows that verse. Me, and now you. If we both die tonight, Lam-ang dies too. Not the way people die. The way stories die. No one will remember that he ever lived."

Something sounded outside: not footsteps, but the absence of footsteps. The silence of people who knew how to walk without being heard.

"Go to the mangroves," said Apo Sinang. "Follow the water north to the end of the sand, where the earth is black and the waves don't reach. Find the rooster."

"And you?"

The old woman smiled. It was the saddest smile Hiraya had ever seen.

"Me," said Apo Sinang, "I will sing."



Hiraya slipped out the back of the house, through the gap in the wall she had used as a child to escape to the sea. She dropped onto the cold sand, the bayong clutched tight to her chest, and ran toward the dark line of the mangroves.

She did not look back. That was what she had been taught. But she heard.

She heard the door of the house open, without a kick or a shout. She heard the silence of the Pipi coming in. And then she heard her grandmother's voice, old and cracked, begin to sing.

It was not the song of resurrection. It was the song of war. The part of the epic where Lam-ang, a boy only months old, took up a spear and walked into the mountains to avenge his father. The part sung only when the strength of an army was needed.

Hiraya saw the light behind her before she felt it. A golden flash burst from every gap in her grandmother's house, so bright it cast a shadow from every mangrove in front of her. She heard things shattering, bodies falling, and, for the first time, the voice of one of the Pipi: a wordless scream, like the voice of someone who had forgotten how to speak but not yet how to hurt.

And beneath it all, the song. Rising. Rising.

Then it faltered.

Hiraya heard her grandmother's voice hesitate in the middle of a line, like someone climbing stairs in the dark who suddenly cannot find the next step. She knew what that meant. Gunita asks a price, and the song of war is the most expensive of all. It takes memories faster than anyone can give them.

Hiraya stopped at the edge of the mangroves, the water already at her knees. She could not help it. She looked back.

Apo Sinang stood in the doorway of her burning house, facing three more Pipi standing on the sand. Her hair hung loose, and the golden light still flickered on her skin, but it was fading, like an ember running out of air. She had stopped singing. She looked

around her, at the burning village, at the silent soldiers, at the sea and the red moon above it, as if she were seeing all of it for the first time.

Then she looked toward the mangroves. Toward Hiraya.

Hiraya did not know whether her grandmother could see her in the dark. But she heard the last thing she said, carried clearly on the sea wind:

"Who are you, child? Why are you crying?"

Then the Pipi moved.



Hiraya ran through the water until she could no longer feel her feet. She ran until the light of burning Nalbuan was a small spark behind her, and then nothing. She ran until the only sounds left were her breathing, the waves, and her own voice whispering the secret verse over and over, so she would not forget it.

Find the rooster that does not age.

Find the stone the waves do not reach.

No gong sounded in Nalbuan for the rest of that night.

Above, the moon grew redder.

And far out at sea, in a place no fisherman dared to go, something enormous stirred slowly beneath the water, and the wave it made reached the shore an hour later, gentle, almost like a sigh.

CHAPTER 2

The Rooster on the Stone

The sun rose as if nothing had happened.

That was the first thing that made Hiraya angry: the indifference of the morning. The sky turned pink, then gold, then the ordinary blue of summer. The birds in the mangroves began their chatter. The crabs came out of their holes and scuttled sideways across the wet mud. As if a whole village had not burned last night. As if an old woman had not forgotten her own granddaughter's face before she died.

Hiraya walked through the water until she could not walk anymore, and then she walked on anyway. Her feet were cut by mangrove roots and sharp shells. Her skirt was torn to the knee. The bayong Apo Sinang had given her hung from her shoulder, heavy in a way she could not explain. It was not heavy in weight. It was heavy like a promise.

She did not open it. *Don't open it until you reach the stone.*

At noon, the mangroves ended.



The shore north of Nalbuan was unlike any shore Hiraya had ever seen. The sand here was black, fine as ash, and it glittered in the sun as if there were splinters of glass inside it. There were no coconut palms. No houses. No trace of people. Only the black sand, the blue

sea, and, at the end of the shore, a tall hill of rock that reached far into the water like the finger of a giant pointing at the horizon.

Hiraya noticed something strange as she walked toward it. The wind was strong, and the waves were high. They pounded the sand and reached all the way to the foot of the hills behind. But around the hill of rock, in a great circle, the sand was dry. The waves came, reached the edge of that circle, and drew back, as if there were an invisible wall.

The stone the waves do not reach.

Hiraya began to run, though her feet screamed.



The first thing she saw was the dog.

It lay at the foot of the hill, in the shade of a great rock. It was very old. Its fur was grey as the ash of a fire long dead, and its eyes were clouded and white. But when Hiraya came close, it lifted its head and looked straight at her, and in that moment she had the strange feeling that it had been waiting for her for a long time.

It did not bark. It only stood, slowly, as if every joint hurt, and walked up the hill. It looked back once, as if asking whether she would follow.

She followed.

At the top of the hill was a cairn of carefully stacked stones, about chest-high. The stones were black too, smooth as if honed by water for hundreds of years, and each bore a carved mark. Hiraya came close and touched one. Baybayin. The old script of her ancestors, which almost no one could read anymore.

She read it slowly, because Apo Sinang had taught her as a child, on nights when there was nothing else to do.

Lam-ang.

And at the top of the cairn, standing like a king on his throne, was the rooster.



Hiraya had never seen a rooster like this. It was not simply yellow or red. Every feather was gold, true gold, gleaming in the sunlight like coins. Its comb was red as blood, and its tail was long and flashed green and blue whenever it moved in the wind. Its eyes were black and sharp, and they watched Hiraya with an intelligence no bird should have.

"You," Hiraya whispered. "You're the rooster that does not age."

The rooster tilted its head, as if thinking.

Hiraya remembered the epic. The part about Lam-ang courting Ines Kannoyan, when he brought his rooster and his dog to her house. The rooster crowed, and a house nearby collapsed. The dog barked, and it stood up again. The children of Nalbuan always laughed at that part. A rooster that knocks down houses. A dog that stands them up again. Toys of a boastful hero.

Hiraya was not laughing now.

Slowly, she lowered the bayong from her shoulder and opened it.



Inside were three things.

The first was a tapis, a woven cloth, neatly folded. When Hiraya unfolded it, she gasped. The cloth was cream-colored, faded with age, but the pattern was still clear: waves, fish, and, in the center, a great silver circle. A moon. Along its edge, in tiny stitches of black thread, was more baybayin. A name.

Ines.

The second was a small brass gong, the size of her palm, with a hole at its edge for a cord. She could not remember Apo Sinang ever using it. But when she held it, she felt the same warmth she felt whenever she sang. There was gunita inside this gong, locked away, waiting.

The third was a piece of bamboo split down the middle, and inside it, finely carved, were a few lines of baybayin. The hand was shaky, and Hiraya knew Apo Sinang had written it when she was already old.

She read it aloud, because that was the only way she knew not to forget it.

The sea owes a debt. Collect it.

The cloth will cover. The rooster will wake. The dog will keep watch.

The gong is for the night when there is no other voice.

Forgive me, grandchild. I can no longer remember your name as I write this. But I know that I love you.

Hiraya dropped the bamboo.

She sat on the black sand, at the foot of the grave of a hero who had died before her great-grandmother was born, and she wept until there were no tears left. The dog came and lay beside her, pressing its warm old body against her thigh. The rooster stayed on top of the cairn, silent, watching.

Hiraya did not know how long she sat there. When she looked up again, the sun was in the west.

And someone was standing at the edge of the circle of dry sand.

*
**

They wore white. That was the first thing Hiraya noticed: the whiteness of their clothes, spotless even in this wilderness, as if dust and sweat could not touch them. Their face was painted white too, thick as a mask, and across the mouth ran a black line, straight from one cheek to the other.

One of the Pipi.

She was young. That was the second thing Hiraya noticed. Beneath the paint, her face was the face of a girl no more than seventeen. But her eyes were empty, like the windows of a house long abandoned.

She held a kampilan.

Hiraya stood. She had no weapon. All she had was a small gong, an old cloth, and an epic she did not know how to use to kill.

The Pipi stepped into the circle of dry sand. The waves behind her drew back, as if afraid.

The dog stood in front of Hiraya. Its old legs trembled, but it stood. It let out a low growl from deep in its chest, a sound older than any dog should live to make.

The Pipi did not stop. She raised the kampilan.

And the rooster crowed.



Hiraya had heard thousands of roosters in her life. She had woken to their crowing every morning. But she had never heard anything like this.

It was not a sound. It was a wave. A wave of golden light that burst from the rooster's throat and struck the Pipi like the blow of a giant hand. The kampilan flew from her hands. She fell to the sand, her white clothes suddenly filthy, and the white paint on her face cracked like dried mud.

And beneath the cracked paint, Hiraya saw that she was crying.

The Pipi's mouth opened. The black line across it broke. And in a hoarse voice, like the voice of someone who had not spoken in a very long time, she said:

"Lawi. My name is Lawi."

Then she seemed to remember where she was. Her eyes widened in fear. She stood, left the kampilan behind, and ran out of the circle toward the hills, until she was only a white speck in the fading light.

Hiraya stood for a long time, staring after her.

They remember, she thought. The Pipi. When they hear the right voice, they remember their names.

They gave up their names. But the names were not lost. Only hidden.



When dark fell, Hiraya sat at the top of the hill beside the cairn, the dog in her lap and the rooster on her shoulder. She did not know when it had flown there. It was warm, and light, and smelled of sea and sun.

"I need to name you both," she told them. "I don't know your names from the epic. It never said."

The dog looked at her.

"Ayong," she said. It was what her father had called her as a little girl, one of the few things about him she still remembered. The dog's tail wagged, once, weakly.

She looked at the rooster. "Balitok," she said. Gold.

The rooster did not move. But Hiraya felt that it accepted the name, the way a king accepts a gift he does not need.

Above, the moon rose. It was no longer red. But it was paler than before, and at its edge, if you stared long enough, there was a thin shadow, like the mark of a tooth.

And out at sea, far from the shore, Hiraya saw the water boil. A great bubble rose to the surface, then another, and another, as if something beneath was breathing, something very large and very old.

Balitok stood up on her shoulder. He spread his wings. And facing the sea, toward the place where the water boiled, he crowed once, loud and clear, like a challenge.

Hiraya realized it was not a challenge to the Bakunawa.

It was for the *berkakan*. The giant fish that had swallowed Lamang three hundred years ago.

The sea owed a debt.

And it was time to collect.

THE STORY CONTINUES

Hiraya has found the rooster. Now the sea must give back what it took.

Twenty-two more chapters follow in *The Golden Rooster*: the bones in the sand, Maria Makiling's mountain, the giant's chain, the land of the Ibalon, and the night the Bakunawa rises.

BOOK I · LUZON

The Golden Rooster

BOOK II · THE VISAYAS

The Sea of Seven Siblings

BOOK III · MINDANAO

The Darangen of the Last Moon

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