

Manola's Lemon Tree

Manola, *the youngest kinnari princess*

Kalea, *eldest kinnari princess*

Lani, *second kinnari princess*

Dara, *third kinnari princess*

Thep, *a Buddhist hermit*

Bun, *a hunter*

King of Pengchan, *Sithon's father*

Queen of Pengchan, *Sithon's mother*

Phra Sithon, *Prince of Pengchan*

Prime Minister

Priest

King Sucandrima, *king of neighboring kingdom*

Feuchy, *Lao Soung farmer*

Houa, *Lao Soung woman farmer*

Xieng Mieng, *Headman (trickster)*

Scene One

Spot light on a kinnari dancer stands still as a statue, then slowly begins to dance.

MANOLA Like all good stories, mine begins long ago and far away—in a place that was once real and belongs only to the imagination now, when all mountain forests threaten to become a distant dream. (*the kinnari come out dancing, and flying*).

We were daughters of the Kinnari King, our home was the Himabanta forest, a green palace between the river and the clouds. Our parents let us fly freely everywhere in the world, except to Lake Bokkharani. But one moonlit night, we flew above its silvery waters and felt the powerful tug of the forbidden.

KALEA I can't resist any longer. Let's go down.

LANI Just to bathe for a little while.

KALEA Remember, not a word to father.

DARA So beautiful. So inviting. (*they take off wings and swim*)

MANOLA Why should such lovely water be forbidden?

LANI It's like liquid silk.

MANOLA Race you over to the other side.

(Monk and Hunter secretly watch the Kinnari)

THEP See, there they are! Just as beautiful as I told you.

BUN More than I imagined. But...perhaps you've just conjured a vision to deceive me.

THEP My powers aren't so great.

BUN I'm going to catch one.

THEP I promised you only a look. The Kinnari are too delicate for you. They'd melt in your hands.

BUN *(puts his hands around the hermit's throat)* But you won't! Quickly, tell me how.

THEP Didn't you tell me you once saved the Naga King's life and he gave you his magic noose?

BUN Ah, yes.

THEP Hide the wings of the one you want and when she can't fly, bind her with it.

BUN Now don't you go scaring them. *(he laughs, and hides Manola's wings)*

KALEA *(getting out)* Hurry, Manola. We have to go.

MANOLA Coming. I was diving to see how deep the moon's reflection was. *(gets out)*
Alright! Very funny! Who hid my wings?

DARA What?

MANOLA I hung them here on this branch. *(the sisters stare at the empty branch)*

LANI They must have blown away.

DARA Everyone, quickly look around.

KALEA It's almost daylight. We have go.

MANOLA But I can't! *(Bun steps forward and swings noose. The birds scream and take off. Manola runs after them. The noose catches her.)* Stop! Come back! Save me!

DARA We can't leave her.

LANI What can we do?

KALEA We'll attack together. Lani, you go for one eye, I'll go for the other. Dara, peck his hand holding the noose. Dive! *(Bun shoots and misses. Only Kalea dives and strikes his eye. He writhes on the ground.)*

KALEA *(unable to free Manola.)* The noose is magic, Manola. I can't untie it. We have to go. *(they fly off)*

BUN *(he clutches his eye)* You'll pay for this.

THEP *(he rushes in)* You caught one!

BUN Use your herbs. Save my eye.

THEP *(he makes a patch for Bun's eye)* I don't know if this will save your sight, but it'll take away the pain.

BUN It doesn't matter. I'm a rich man now.

THEP Indeed! Few men are lucky to have a Kinnari wife!

BUN Wife! King Sucandrima is preparing a grand sacrifice of all living things. He's offered a large reward to the hunter that brings a Kinnari. Goodbye, old fool.
(He puts Manola's wings in a bag, and throws her over his shoulder.)

Scene Two *(priests prepare the sacrifice)*

SUCANDRIMA Welcome all, esteemed princes, to the greatest sacrifice in the world—one of every kind of animal. Look at them, lined up as far as the eye can see! They docilely wait to be sacrificed to god and eaten by men—such is their fate. *(gazes out at audience)* Ah, Prince Sithon, friend and neighbor. We're especially honored by your presence. Is it not a magnificent sight?

SITHON Yes, the gathering is...impressive. Many strange creatures I've never seen before, *(surprised)* but there's a woman among them!

SUCANDRIMA It's a Kinnari. She'll be killed last.

SITHON But where are her wings?

SUCANDRIMA You're right. Her glory is only in her wings. I'll display them.

(The wings are brought out, a rat runs by Manola. She screams. Sithon puts his finger to his lips)

SUCANDRIMA Now let the ceremony begin.

PRIEST Let the King of the Mountains, Queen of the Waters,
Dewi Seri goddess of rice,
be moved by our prayers
and accept our great sacrifice
of the millions that die
all for the good of mankind.

We submit the willing flesh and feeble minds,
of the diverse kingdom over which we reign,
with this magnificent rite
offered with humility
all for the good of mankind.

(Sithon sets off fire cracker. A sudden uproar as the animals howl and shriek; a black cloud of crows rises from the trees and rats scurry through the crowd, scattering people and creatures in all directions. Amid the turmoil, Sithon grabs Manola in one hand and her wings in the other.)

BUN *(he staggers in drunk)* King Sucandrima is furious. His grand sacrifice was a failure and he was shamed in front of all the princes. He even sent some thugs to rough me up and take back the money for the Kinnari. Now he's threatening war if she isn't brought back.

Black out

Scene Three *(in Sithon's private rooms)*

SITHON *(seated with Manola)* You still want to fly away?

MANOLA Not just this minute.

SITHON *(teases)* Tomorrow?

MANOLA Perhaps tomorrow's...tomorrow.

SITHON Are you glad it was me who rescued you?

MANOLA You? I thought the rats nibbled the ropes binding my hands.

SITHON I had them secretly released to create panic.

MANOLA Smart little creatures. *(teasing)* I'm as grateful to them as to you.

SITHON Perhaps you'd rather marry a rat?

MANOLA Marry? Who said anything about marrying?

SITHON I am...now.

MANOLA I'm not really a woman. I'm a bird, a spirit of the forest.

SITHON You're enough of a woman to satisfy me. Will you fly away when I leave the room to ask my father to approve the marriage?

MANOLA You know I can't. You've hidden my wings.

SITHON Marry me, or if not, I'll give you your wings and never see you again. Tomorrow I have to face Sucandrima's army. He's demanded you back.

MANOLA I'm only an excuse. He wants your timber.

SITHON I know. He's helped us in the past, but now he wants too much.

MANOLA Take me with you. I can fly high and report on his army's movements.

SITHON No, you'll be safer with my family. So, when I return, will you be here?

MANOLA I'll wait.... for my husband. *(she gives him a ring)*

Scene Four (*in Penchang's court*)

P MINISTER The King promised Sithon to my sister, but when the prince went and married that Kinnari witch, I had to do something.

Priest Yes, he really spoiled your plans.

P MINISTER He's endangering the whole country.

PRIEST What have you heard from the front?

P MINISTER Sithon is winning.

PRIEST But you've intercepted all messages?

P MINISTER Yes, it's been two weeks since the King has had any word of his son.

PRIEST Then we must act before Sithon returns.

An anguished cry from the king.

KING P (*he enters*) My counselors, I've had a most horrible dream. I was captured by Sucandrima. He plunged his sword into my belly and pulled out my intestines, and then wound them around the city three times.

PRIEST A portentous vision!

P MINISTER Sire, we have just had word that Prince Sithon has been captured. Sucandrima is marching on the capital.

KING P Is Sithon is alive?

P MINISTER We don't know.

KING P We must prepare the city. Barricade all gates.

P MINISTER Sire, such measures have already been taken, but they will be for nothing if we continue to harbor a witch.

KING P What witch? The Kinnari?

PRIEST The cause of all our trouble. If she is sacrificed, the city stands a chance. If not, Sucandrima will tear down every brick to get her.

KING P If I hurt her, Sithon will kill me.

PRIEST Sithon's life is already forfeit.

P MINISTER You must think of the safety of your people and your person.

PRIEST Shall I prepare the sacrifice? (*King nods and exits*)
black out

Scene Five

- P MINISTER *(Manora is brought in bound)* You're responsible for the war and the gods will only be appeased by your death.
- MANOLA The birds tell me Sithon has won and is already returning.
- P MINISTER The king is in despair and the people hate you. Prepare the fire. *(exit)*
- KING P *(King and Queen enter)* Manola, you've thrown our world into chaos.
- MANOLA I'm weak and completely in your power, but if you kill a spirit of the forest, you doom yourself.
- KING P Enough!
- MANOLA Oh queen, let me perform my sacred dance. It has saved cities from the plague, and may save you.
- QUEEN Surely we may let her dance one last time. Fetch her wings.
- KING P Then dance, Manola, your last dance. *Sound of drums, Manola dances and then flies away)*
- P MINISTER *(running in with priest)* What have you done? Seize her!
- MANOLA *(from above)* Oh king, beware. I disappear but your son approaches. *(The sound of different drumming as Sithon arrives with army. Prime Minister and Priest exit.)*
- SITHON *(he rushes in)* Father, where's the welcome for the victorious army? Why didn't you greet us at the gate?
- QUEEN My son!
- KING P How did you escape?
- SITHON Escape? I was never caught. Ours was a steady route from the beginning.
- KING P We heard only of your defeat.
- SITHON Then someone was hoping to benefit by such reports. Where's Manola?
- KING P Gone.
- SITHON Did you kill her?
- QUEEN Sithon, truly she's flown away on her own wings. But we're not guiltless...we thought you were dead, and Sucandrima was going to attack the city, and the Kinnari, was the cause.
- KING P I ordered her sacrifice, but your mother was wiser and allowed her to escape.

SITHON I don't blame you. You were deceived. But I'm going to search for her. Since all I know is that her kingdom is far away and difficult to reach, you may truly have lost a son this day. *(he exits a different direction as they exit) Black out*

MANOLA *(spot light)* But the king is right. We can't mix, human and Kinnari. We're too different. Love blinded us, but eventually we'd realize it wasn't possible. I'm glad to go back to my Kinnari kingdom. *(knocks on a gate)* Gatekeeper, let me in.

GATEKEEPER Turn back! No one can enter.

MANOLA I'm Manola, the King's daughter.

GATEKEEPER I know who you are and you, especially, are not allowed in. The whole kingdom is suffering Bird Flu. Everyone here is quarantined, and no one allowed in, especially those who've been in contact with humans.

MANOLA Bird flu? What's that? I'll take any test to prove I don't have it.

GATEKEEPER No, the law stands. You will not be allowed in till 7 years, 7 months, 7 days have passed. Then you must undertake the rites to wash away the taint of humanity.

MANOLA Taint of humanity?

GATEKEEPER A very bad stink. I can smell it from here.

MANOLA What absurdity. But tell me, how are my parents? My sisters?

GATEKEEPER Alive.

MANOLA Tell them I'm alive too. I'll return when the period of penance is over. *(exit)*

(Kinnari stand above and look down)

Scene Six

DARA So what does Manola do now? She can't go home for seven years and it will take Sithon at least seven years to find her. He is having adventures with a magic lemon a hermit gave to him.

KALEA A lemon?

DARA In those days, lemons could be magic.

LANI But even a magic lemon couldn't help him when he got to the sea of corrosive waters that dissolved anything that fell into them.

DARA I'm sure the lemon helped when he crossed the river with giant catfish whose whiskers can cut a person....

LANI Then he didn't need it; almost no more giant catfish left.

KALEA Hey, we're telling her story, not his. Manola is wandering around in the forest not knowing what to do.

DARA When suddenly the forest starts to blaze.

LANI She runs, her eyes water, her throat stings, even her wings are too weak to fly.

KALEA The farmers are burning the forest to clear land and grow rice. But we Kinnari, are creatures of the forest not the rice field. What can she do?

MANOLA *(comes in coughing)* This smoke! I can't breathe! The crackle of burning trees hurts my ears; the panic of birds pains my heart. I can do nothing to save them.

FEUCHY Come away from there.

HOUA Help her. She'll get burnt. *(Man grabs Manola)* Come with me. I'll give you water.

FEUCHY *(the fires dies out)* Well, that should be enough for this year. But the soil is not good. We'll have to move again next year.

MANOLA Oh, but you can't keep burning the forest.

HOUA We have to. There isn't enough land to grow rice.

MANOLA No, it's too terrible. You get valuable things like bamboo shoots, mushrooms, chestnuts, and medicinal herbs from the woods too. You could plant other things.

FEUCHY Don't listen to her. We've heard all this before.

HOUA We need to grow rice to feed our family. The officials come and tell us to grow fruit. We grow peaches, but they're seasonal. Banana and papaya grow up here and their roots help to hold the soil, but we're too far away from the market to sell it.

MANOLA You could build a road.

FEUCHY We don't have the time or the money. Besides, our people are spread all over the mountain; we'd need several roads.

HOUA We're told not to burn the forest, but we can't leave the land fallow as long as before. We have to move more often now.

MANOLA You could plant other things....

FEUCHY Yes, like the lucky devils in the lowland who grow teak to build their houses. But teak doesn't grow here in the uplands. And then there's rubber. They want us to work on rubber farms, but they belong to foreigners. We would have nothing. At least now we have rice to eat.

HOUA The rubber company says it will give us rice for 7 years while the trees grow, but then we have to pay for the rice in rubber sap we collect.

FEUCHY That would make us dependent on them forever. The rubber plantations are taking up more land, forcing us to move on.

MANOLA But whose land is it?

FEUCHY That's the big question.

HOUA The land isn't ours; only what we plant on it is. We used to plant pigeonpea and maize in between the rice rows, and chromolaena odorata (Siam weed) in the fallow fields. They helped fertilize the soil and keep away the nematodes. But now we can't leave the land fallow long enough. It means we have to spend more time weeding. And moving more often.

FEUCHY Our animals helped fertilize the land, but the rubber owners don't like them and people have had to sell their cows, pigs and goats. What can we do?

MANOLA Well, you can't keep burning the forest.

HOUA No, we know that, but it's not fair. We burn, but they cut. Look over there...see the whole side of the mountain has been cut bare, but not by us.

MANOLA My forest is being attacked by everybody. Where will the Kinnari live when all the trees are gone?

HOUA You can stay with us.

MANOLA I'm not a rice farmer.

HOUA Can you weave?

MANOLA No. I know what I'll do. I'll plant tall trees, like Pine (*Pinus kesiya*) and Hing (*Keteleeria evelyniana*) Mi (*Schima wallichii*), Sakai (*Betula alnoides*) for the Kinnari and other birds. Help me collect seeds and then I'll plant the seedlings in the fallow ground.

FEUCHY They'll take too long to grow.

MANOLA But we must replant the burned trees. All the soil will wash away. There'll be mudslides.

FEUCHY You're just like all the other NGOs, you come and you go.

MANOLA I've been in the forest for thousands of years, far longer than you.

FEUCHY Listen to her, now she's claiming the land is hers.

HOUA I think her plan is not bad. Let's go ask the village headman.

FEUCHY He'll never let you. He'll say they want it for rubber even though the market is so bad that the foreign rubber farmers are cutting down their own trees. They just want the timber.

HOUA Oh headman. We have a proposal.

XIENG MIENG (*he is missing a leg, holds out his hand*) What's the budget?

HOUA No budget.

XIENG Then don't bother me.

MANOLA Oh, I have a huge budget.

XIENG (*sees Manola*) Oh, who is this pretty creature?

HOUA Can't you see she's a Kinnari?

XIENG (*rubs his eyes*) That's what I thought. Well? Dollars? Euro?

MANOLA Even better. (*she makes gestures of counting money*) Have you ever seen so much money in your life?

XIENG Huh?

MANOLA One thousand, one hundred thousand, one million.

XIENG Huh?

MANOLA Invisible money. So convenient. You can carry as much of it as you like and no one will ever try to rob you.

XIENG That's for sure.

HOUA Hah, tricked by you're own trick!

XIENG What good is invisible money?

MANOLA It's an investment. You might not see it today, but it becomes visible in the future. My proposal is to plant tree seeds.

XIENG Well, that should keep you busy...for a century. No one here can help you. We're too busy planting rice. Besides, the forest replants itself as secondary forest "Bpa lau".

MANOLA I'll make a program with a representative in town to attract tourists. They can adopt seedlings or come plant them. Let tourists feel useful in a place that they've visited. We just have to get organized. (*they mime work*)

DARA So Manola begins her project. She collects seeds before the farmers burn, and then when they move, she returns to plant them in the depleted soil. She works long and hard but gradually more and more people help.

LANI The seven years pass and she returns to us. Each day we fly out to collect seeds with her and the planting goes much faster.

KALEA Seven years pass, the seedlings grow into small trees, and Sithon draws near the lake. He hears us laughing as we bathe. He does not recognize Manola. She is browned by the sun. Her delicate features are coarser from her work, but then he hears her voice, knows that it is her. He leaves his ring beside her wings.

LANI Later he finds her in the field.

MANOLA *(rests on her shovel)* Well Sithon, you finally made it.

SITHON I've risked my life many times to get here.

MANOLA Have you had your fill of adventures and ready to settle down?

SITHON Living with you will be the biggest adventure of all.

MANOLA A good answer. But do you still want me? I'm not as beautiful as before.

SITHON I am older too, and wiser.

MANOLA Another good answer, but first I must ask the headman.

SITHON Not your father?

MANOLA My father passed away—Bird flu. Xieng Mieng is in charge.

SITHON Oh dear! Our lives are to be decided by a trickster?

XIENG *(enters and overhears)* So this is the famous Pra Sithon? He doesn't look so impressive. I'd better test him to make sure he really loves you, Manola.

SITHON I'm prepared to be tested, but not tricked.

XIENG Yes, well, don't expect any golden fly to help you. Such magic creatures went extinct long ago. You're supposed to be a smart educated fellow. We want you to build a road. One that won't wash out in the next big rain.

SITHON What? A road by myself?

XIENG Your love not strong enough? Don't worry, we'll help but you must plan it.

SITHON All right. I'll begin...

XIENG And that's not all. After the road is built, I am sending you on a journey.

MANOLA That's not fair. He's already been traveling for so long.

XIENG So he has experience. He can ride his vulture if he wants to. He's going to Washington.

SITHON Ah so far! I'll need many vultures.

XIENG There you make a proposal that America come get the gifts it left.

SITHON What gifts?

XIENG The bombies must have been gifts, since we never asked for them. Once they're cleared off, we'll have much more land to cultivate and won't have to burn the forest. Too much land, too many legs have been sacrificed to the bombies.

SITHON I thought America recently gave more money for the cleanup.

XIENG It's not enough. We need expertise. Sniffer dogs, equipment. It's their responsibility. You go see my friend Rep. Michael Honda. Tell him to persuade Congress to clear away the remnants of war.

SITHON You're much cleverer than me. Besides....(*points to Xieng's leg*). You should go.

XIENG But you're a handsome hero and will make a better impression.

MANOLA You can't disagree. Sorry, my love, you've been tricked.

XIENG Yes, you'll have to do better when you get to Washington. We can never truly occupy our homeland until all the UXO are all gone.

SITHON Manola, are you willing to wait so long.

MANOLA It's not forever. It's a finite job. The UXO can be cleared.

SITHON It might take another seven years.

MANOLA By then, my forest will have grown. For you, I'll plant a lemon tree.

XIENG Removing the bombies won't just help us rice farmers, it'll help heal other war wounds too, the distrust between Lao Soung, Lao Theung and Lao Loum. Once the bombies are gone, we can begin to think about working together for the future.

SITHON Manola, I've never seen you dance. Put on your wings and dance for us.
(*the Kinnari come down and dance together*)