

SOME SWIFTLY FADING SKY

LAKAN UMALI

I

A day before the world was meant to end, I threatened to kill myself if the guard didn't let me out.

After the morning-tranquilizers were slipped into everyone's fruit-juice, I took my cup, and went to the bathroom. I smashed a mirror, and picked up the largest shard.

The guard rushed to the bathroom. When he saw me, I put the piece of glass against my throat. I couldn't hold it properly, because I was shaking so much, and the edge nipped my skin. I saw the guard's eyes grow wide. I told him to let me out, and that if he forced me to stay, I would slash my throat. Some drops of blood dripped on the tiled floor.

I was lucky it was the long-haired one on duty. The muscular one would have said that the world was ending anyway, and that dying the day before wouldn't make a difference. The bald one would have manhandled me and stuffed the Xanax down my throat.

But the long-haired one ran his hand up and down his military-gun nervously. I noticed his foot tapping against the floor, and he sputtered gibberish before saying something coherent.

"Please go back to your family, sir," he said, his voice breaking at every other word. "I will prepare you another dose to help you sleep."

Fruit-juice and tranquilizers. Pandesal and tranquilizers. Rice and tranquilizers. That was our menu in the bunker. They sedated us so much that a few overdosed in the first days. But they got the hang of it, of keeping everyone dazed all day long. Sometimes I wondered who sedated the ones who sedated. I would see everyone, even the doctors in their white coats, sleeping, or tripping on their beds if they tried to get up. I'd only see the one guard on duty still cogent, making sure everyone was fed.

Poor guy, I sometimes thought. Poor guy, having to stay aware, even for a day.

Yesterday, I remembered something about a reunion. A restaurant somewhere, and I knew I had to leave.

“Just let me out,” I told him. “Landfall is tomorrow anyway. One more day wouldn't make a difference.”

“Why do you want to go out?” he asked. “There's nothing to see.”

I wanted to tell him the truth, but I couldn't risk it.

“I need to meet someone,” I said. “Before I went inside the bunker, I promised her I'd meet her today, and if I leave now, I'd probably still be able to make it.”

The guard eyed me, head-to-toe. He seemed to be either considering my request, or debating on whether to shoot me in the knee. The glass shard was growing more and more uncomfortable pressed against my throat, and I thought of giving up my bluff.

“Your parents...” he said.

“They’ll be high until the end,” I said. “They won’t even notice I’m gone. But she doesn’t have any tranquilizers with her, and she’ll know.”

He led me outside, and opened the giant metal door.

“No living thing would or should be out there right now,” he said.

I nodded at him, and crossed the doorway.

I walked along a dimly-lit hallway, and climbed a few flights of stairs, until I reached the hatch to lead me out of the bunker. I opened it, and wondered what I would see.

II

Long ago, in a forest dark and deep, there lived a youth. He lived a simple life. The forest was usually filled with animals for hunting, and the trees gave him protection from the sun and rain. There was a lake nearby, sparkling blue like a clear sky, where he would bathe and catch fish. He would wander around the forest, exploring every tree trunk and bush and gathering interesting-looking herbs and plants. And he would sleep, shaded by the moonlight.

One day, near sundown, as he was resting beside the lake, he saw a shooting star. He was astounded, because he had never seen such a thing. He was even more astounded when he saw the star fall into the lake. The youth took off his clothes and started swimming.

He swam until he noticed a figure bobbing in and out of the water. When he neared it, he saw that it was a young man, struggling for air. He grabbed him, and swam until they reached the shoreline.

On land, the young man coughed and coughed the water he swallowed. The youth looked at him. He had a comely face: kind eyes, an aquiline nose, and a small, sensual mouth. He had clear brown skin, and a lean, muscular body. There was a small piece of cloth covering his manhood, but otherwise, he was naked. His skin gave off a faint glow.

The youth remembered the stories his grandmother told him. Stories of lonely men who would watch stars descend to earth, and discover that they were beautiful women. The men would keep them on earth, and force them to be their wives.

He never imagined that stars could be young men. He was about to leave the star, fearing that he would end up trapping him on earth, when he noticed the star staring at him.

The star moved closer. He clung to the youth's hand.

They stood up, hands still intertwined, and ventured into the forest.

III

The city seemed to be covered in snow.

The cracked roads and empty buildings were all covered in white. It was still falling gently from the sky, like snowflakes on a winter's day somewhere cold and foreign. It blanketed abandoned cars, covered tangled piles of debris, collected in potholes that dotted the ground. It covered the body of a dead cat on the road, the white mixing with the red that spilled from its belly and the yellow of the maggots that feasted on the corpse. It looked like someone sprinkled sugar on the entire city. It looked like someone attempting to make a badly-burned cake a little sweeter, to mask its failure.

It fell on my face and skin, and I felt that I could not escape.

With the white came the smell of burning. I realized that the snow was ash. Or something close to ash, which meant Landfall was closer now. Which meant it was nearing our atmosphere, burning itself, shedding its old skin to make itself presentable, for when it came to earth.

The ashfall stopped. I jumped when I saw a rat skittering past me, to a former grocery. I heard the faint sounds of nipping and chittering within. I looked through the dirtied front window, and inside I glimpsed a hundred rats, their claws clinging and crawling on the plaster walls, their needle-teeth chewing open packets of candy and pastries. I cautiously moved away from the grocery, fearing that the rats would hear me, and charge towards me for one last meal.

I walked for a few meters when I spotted something fiery in the sky, heading towards me. I panicked. This is a Low-Level Impact Zone, I thought. Nothing should be falling. Nothing should hit me. I could hear it, sizzling the air, as it built up speed the closer it fell. I ran as fast as I could. I reached a corner, with the street-name faded out, when I heard a loud boom behind me.

When the flames died down, I moved closer, and saw that it was a satellite. It must have been hit by one of the meteorites. Its circular antenna was charred-brown. Its body was crushed-in and speckled with dirt and dust, while its solar panels were spread impotently beside its body, like wings that failed to take flight.

I walked away from the satellite. When I passed the other abandoned buildings and houses, they did not seem real. They all seemed to have died shortly after their inhabitants left them, when news of Landfall spread. The ash leached them of all color, left them pale and washed-out, while all the waste that accumulated inside seemed to bloat their corpses, seemed to make their doorways and windows sag under the weight of everything that was left behind.

IV

While they were walking to his hut, the youth could not bear to look at the star. Though the star only let off a faint glowing, he seemed to shine as brightly as the sun, and seemed just as hot. He let go of the star's hands after a few moments, because he could not endure the heat.

When they arrived at his hut, the star asked him a question, in a voice that seemed to still the entire forest.

“Why will you not look at me?”

“The lake,” the youth said, though he could see the drops of water falling from the star's body. “It seemed to have cooled you, for a moment. But now that you are almost dried up, you are too hot and bright for me to bear.”

The star seemed to dim, dimmed until the faint glowing was dulled completely. The only heat that filled the hut came from the flesh. The only thing that illuminated the small interior of the hut was a moonbeam passing through a window.

The star seemed one with the light.

“What is your name?” the star asked. The frogs stopped croaking

“Bighani,” the youth said. “And yours?”

“Balátik,” the star replied. “I am the Trapper of the night sky.”

“What happened to you? Why did you fall to earth?”

“I cannot remember,” he said. “I was the one who would help catch my falling brothers and sisters. When they would tumble from their perch, I would dive and catch them. But then

something struck me down. Something beastly, and I was not able to catch myself.”

That night, the star slept on the cot, while the youth slept on the floor, even when the star told him there was still space for two.

V

After a little while, I found myself tired from the walking. Nearby, I saw a huge mall. It was covered with the coal-dark ashfall of earlier days, and its tail-section was a scorched skeleton of steel and concrete, lying near a small crater. It smelled rancid, like a pool of burnt plastic and oil grease, but the rest of the mall was still standing, so I decided to go inside.

Some of the stores had their windows broken or their doors jimmied open, but most of them remained untouched, except for the occasional group of pests making a meal out of what was left behind. A nearby candy-stall was heavy with ants and flies, the rainbow gumdrops and sour-tape dotted by the black swarms of insects. I went to a stall that used to sell buko-juice, and found a few dead mice drowned within the vats that contained the juice.

When I found a bookstore, I forgot about the outside. I got a book from the shelf, unwrapped it, and sniffed it. I did it to another. And another. The smell made me forget even more. I read snatches of novels and short stories, and some flash fiction about sleepy little towns and resurrections. I sat there, in a growing circle of books, just sniffing and reading.

I thought about staying there. I thought of just barricading myself inside the bookstore, to spend my last day on earth just reading, forgetting about everything else, in the coolness and quiet of the mall.

I remembered you, though. I remembered I was the one who set the meeting. I was the one who told you I wanted to see you before the ash had nothing to fall on anymore. I checked my watch. I had wasted two hours. But if I hurried, I would still be able to make it in time.

I scoured through every restaurant and grocery for whatever food was left. Nearly everything was either frozen or spoiled. But I did find a few carts of bread that had been preserved and kept fresh, and ate as much as I could. I put canned food and bottled water into a large luggage bag that I had taken from a nearby shop.

Before I left, I decided to go to the department store for a change of clothes, because I smelled of sweat and dust.

When I arrived, above the Men's Shoe Section, I found a row of hanging bodies.

VI

The next day, the youth went to the town market.

It was usually a quiet place, filled with a few people happily exchanging their wares. But today the market was filled with the voices of hundreds and hundreds of people, and seemed to hum with life. The youth could put a finger to the air, and feel it vibrate with sound. So congested it was that he had to push and prod his way through, past a sea of colors and voices and scents, some of which he had never seen nor heard nor smelled.

He went to Huli, the kind old woman who would frequently buy his goods and give him a fair price for hers. She was chattering away with another young man, when she saw him, and embraced him as if he were her long-lost son.

“Oh Bighani,” she said. “The most frightening thing has happened!”

“What has happened?” he asked, half-knowingly.

“A star has fallen!” she said. “But not just any star! The Trapper has fallen! The Trapper that catches the Bakunawa, and keeps him from devouring the moon and the world.”

“The Bakunawa?” The name was unfamiliar to him. His parents never told him of its stories.

“The Bakunawa, my dear boy!” she said. “The monstrous dragon that desires to consume the moon and earth to fill its terrible appetite! Its mouth is as big as a town, its body is as big as a country, and its wings are as wide as a world! It breathes a flame far hotter than the sun. Its tail is studded with the swords of all those that have tried to defeat it. Thousands and thousands of them, gleaming in the starry cage where the Tatlong Maria have caged him.”

“But now he has escaped!” Huli continued. “The first sign of his freedom is the vanishing of the Trapper, which tells that the Bakunawa has broken free of its cage!”

When he returned to his hut, he found the star waiting for him. He told the star what Huli told him, while the star remained silent.

When he finished, the star spoke.

“I have failed,” he said, so brokenly that the birds seemed to weep.

The youth could do nothing but embrace the star, and let himself be warmed by his light, wondering how so strong a light did not burn him.

VII

The bodies seemed overdue. I had long expected to find some, somewhere on the streets or lying in the bedroom section of the furniture store. I would have liked to say that the hanged looked peaceful, that their eyes were closed and that they merely seemed asleep. They weren't.

Their eyes bulged out of their sockets, the white streaked with bloodied veins. They were swollen and washed-out, like the houses. Their stomachs were large and distended, like balloons that had been filled with too much water. A sickly-sweet smell escaped from them, and a viscous, blurry liquid dripped from their orifices, down to the shoe rack below. They couldn't have been more than a few days old. The maggots and other carrion had not feasted on their bodies yet, though there was a halo of flies buzzing around their heads.

A trail of ants and roaches led to a closed door in the back.

I didn't open it, of course. I didn't want to linger there any longer than I had to. I went to the Men's Clothing Section, and found a light-blue polo that seemed to suit me, as well as black slacks and some leather shoes.

I smelled the clothes I put on, to make sure that they did not absorb the stench of the corpses. They smelled fine.

VIII

"Is there anything we can do?" the youth asked. "Is there not a word, or an amulet, or a magic spell, to destroy the Bakunawa and save us all?"

"Not that I know of," the star said, his back turned away from the youth, as they laid on his cot.

“Is there not a way to bring you back to your perch?” he said. “Is there no way to bring you back to the skies, to stop the evil dragon?”

“I have fallen to earth,” he said. “I have failed to stop the Bakunawa, and I cannot go back.”

“We will not all perish,” the star continued. “Haliya will defend the southern islands. The Bakunawa will tremble when faced by her mask, and she will impale its body on her sword. But the dragon will consume the moon and many lands before she defeats it.”

“Do we reside in the lands that will be consumed?”

The star did not reply. Instead, he faced the youth, and lifted the hair from his eyes.

“Let us go to her, Balátik,” the youth said. “Let us go to her, and let her save us, and we will live out the rest of our days in the bountiful fields of the south.”

“The ports are full of people with the same ideas, Bighani,” the star replied. “I visited them when you were at the market. There is no ship that will deliver us across the islands that separate us from Haliya. It is a long journey, and we will be adrift at sea when the Bakunawa devours us.”

“Then we will ride there. We will ride the fastest horses we can find.”

“Even the swiftest horse cannot bring us to Haliya in time.”

“We will find an enchanted amulet, and fly to Haliya.”

“No magic can bring us to that great a distance.”

The youth began crying. Because he had never been so happy, and knew that he would lose it all in a cupful of time.

The star took his head and put it on his chest.

That night, the youth heard a rustling in the forest and a murmur near the lake. But he did not mind. Instead, he and the star wished upon each other, over and over again.

IX

I didn't realize our meeting place was so close to a High-Level Impact Zone.

I had never seen one up close before. I had only seen them on news programs or videos, which gave a bird's-eye view of the stricken areas. The meteorite showers didn't just hit them; they erased them. After the first areas were hit, there was nothing left but blackened craters, like pockmarks on the earth's face that it never managed to wipe off. They ushered us into the bunkers, and we all worried that there would not be enough space for everyone.

Then the second wave of showers came, and we were left with so much room.

The smell hit me first. Like sulfur and car fumes and moldy cheese. Like industrial waste and blitzed earth. Like every possible rotten and spoiled thing in the world was gathered up into one, big pile, and set afire. It smelled like a poisoned hearth. Like a toxic funeral pyre. I was near one of the worst-hit regions, where everything was erased. I stood at the edge of the crater, and looked upon it, and felt the bits of dead soil crumble and tumble underneath my feet, into the sloping pit below.

Nearby was our meeting-place. From afar, one could mistake the restaurant as something alive, with its bright-striped signboard and vibrant, red-brick walls. But nearing it, I saw a rat chewing on some leftover bread-sticks left on one of the tables, and I managed to shoo it away. The food that was displayed behind the counter had already spoiled, which made the inside smell almost as bad as the crater nearby. I sat on a chair near the sidewalk, under a white umbrella printed with the name of the restaurant.

I think I fell asleep, my head on the table, as I waited for you to show up. I woke up to a cockroach resting on my arm. It tried to scramble away, but I crushed it with my hand. Its wings flickered a few times, before it became motionless, and I wiped its lumpy innards on a chair-leg.

I waited. I laid the glass shard on the table, in case a rabid dog or a giant rat or, god forbid, another person, showed up and tried to attack me.

X

The youth woke to Huli and a mob of villagers outside his house.

“Why are you all here?” he asked, as if he did not know the answer.

“We know it is inside, Bighani,” Huli spoke first. “We have searched the forest and the lake, and found nothing.”

“Surrender the star, Bighani!” he heard a man call out. “If it is a gem, there will be no use for such a bauble when the Bakunawa rises.”

“If it is a woman,” another called out. “Her warmth will be of no comfort in the fire of the Bakunawa.”

A group of men were trying to push themselves to the front of the mob, when the star emerged from the hut, naked save for some cloth draped around the lower part of his body. The people whispered amongst themselves, words that the youth did not want to hear.

The star spoke, and everybody was silenced.

“What is happening?” he asked.

“We have found a way to return you to the skies,” Huli spoke, after a short while.

“That is impossible,” the star said. “I did not descend. I fell. There are no means to return after a fall.”

“There is,” Huli continued, her voice trembling. “I have found an old book, that talked of a star like yourself, who fell to earth after being overthrown, many ages ago. But she found a way to return.”

“What is it?” the star asked.

“We have to burn you,” she said. “The star burned herself, and the wind spread her ashes back to the heavens.”

The star kneeled before them, and lifted his hands to the skies. He spoke the names of his mother and father, and all his brothers and sisters, while the mob dispersed, because they did not feel worthy of hearing such sacred titles.

When they were gone, the star took the youth inside the hut, and cradled his crying head.

“It won’t be the end of the world anymore,” the star said.

“But it will be the end of our world,” the youth replied.

The youth looked at the star. His eyes held whorls of color and light, as if the constellations themselves were tucked within them. They gave the youth no comfort.

“I cannot keep you here,” the youth said. “I will not let the Bakunawa prevail, and eat up the whole world.”

“The Tatlong Maria will vanquish the Bakunawa one day,” the star said. “Then, maybe I will be able to come back.”

“One day,” the youth said, tasting the words on his lips, salted by his tears.

“One day,” the star repeated.

And when the youth kissed the words out of his mouth, they tasted much sweeter.

XI

I recognized you from a distance. You were wearing the orange jacket you always wore, the one that should have been laundered a long time ago.

A dog walked beside you. I could see its ribs sticking out of its body, barely covered by scraggly dirt-gray fur, and a wound festering on its long, thick tail. But it was smiling, and its eyes looked happy. You took a piece of food out of your pocket, and fed it. It wagged its dying tail in appreciation.

“Holy shit,” you said, upon seeing me. “You actually came.”

You told me that you picked up the dog while you were traveling to the restaurant. You said that you tried to get rid of it, but that it had fought off a pack of feral cats along the way, and you felt sworn to care for it in return.

We sat on the table, facing each other. I got out a can of spam from my bag, opened it, and gave it to the dog. It gobbled it up greedily, its tongue lapping the meat off the ground. Afterward, it licked my hand as if it were its second meal of the day.

“Does it have rabies?” I asked, after it was done licking and left my hand covered in slobber.

“Well we wouldn’t know, would we?” you said. “It takes at least ten days for the first signs to appear.”

I laughed, and you laughed as well. There was a loud explosion in the distance, and we glimpsed a scattering of dust and debris spurt upward from the crater. The explosion scared off the dog, who ran away before we could call it back.

“Of all the places you could have picked,” you told me, jokingly. “It had to be the one bombarded by meteorites.”

“Hey, how was I supposed to know?” I said. “I’m just glad you came.”

“You are terrible at coming,” you said. “To appointments, I mean. Remember dinner with my friends?”

“There was a family emergency.”

“Our visit to Quiapo Church?”

“I had a paper due the next day.”

“Our trip to Baguio?”

“My cousin needed someone to watch over her kids.”

You took my hands. We both looked up at the sky, peppered with objects that shouldn’t be there.

“Well, you have to admit,” you said. “They are beautiful.”

I took out more of the canned goods, and you went inside the restaurant. When you came back, you had two clean plates and some utensils.

“Lucky us,” you said, holding up the plates. “Last ones left.”

We ate spam and some canned peaches and pineapples, and swatted away the flies and ants that tried to go near us. We didn’t talk, because it seemed both of us were too tired for conversation, but, under the table, I felt you press your leg against mine, and I didn’t try to shoo it away.

When we finished, we walked a bit, until we reached one of the nearby apartments. I hovered near the entrance, while you went inside.

“Seems clean,” you said. “No rats or pests anywhere. No people either. This was one of the more sosyal places in the city, so it’s probably sprayed top-to-bottom with Lysol.”

We climbed up, all the way to the rooftop, and sat on a cold, metal box that was probably the ventilation. The sun was setting, and because there were no lights or smog in the city, it was the first time I saw the night sky filled with stars and other objects.

It would soon be dark. We couldn’t see the streets below us, and I pretended that everything was okay.

XII

That night, in the field between the forest and the town, the youth took the star to the crowd of townspeople. There was a stake, driven through a cleared patch of land, as well as a mound of dried grass and kindle-wood surrounding it. The townspeople formed a circle around the stake. When they saw

the youth and the star, they parted to allow them both entrance. The star followed Huli to the center of the pyre, while the youth stayed at the back of the mob.

The star wore a long, white robe, to quicken the catching of the fire. Two men tied his hands behind the post, with a piece of twine.

Many of the townspeople were on their knees, praying, for they felt as if they were burning a saint, or even a god, and needed to ask the skies for repentance. Some of the townspeople glowered at the youth, their eyes cold and unflinching, as if he were the reason they were doing this terrible act.

The youth did not pay them mind. He only looked at the star, as Huli was chanting a prayer, to implore the Tatlong Maria to vanquish the Bakunawa, and to accept their holy deed.

Before the match was struck, the star broke his gaze upon the youth. Instead, he looked up at the sky. The youth did likewise.

The youth saw the shadow of something beastly. He saw the outline of fangs that were bigger than mountains and sharper than death, and a mouth that could swallow worlds. He saw wings that seemed to dim the light of the moon. He saw a spiked tail that seemed to whip the stars from their roosts.

Huli lit the match. The dried grass caught fire first, and let out a faint crackling. Soon, the flames were racing up the pyre, lapping at the star's white robe, before engulfing him completely.

He did not hear the star scream. He did not see the star bathed in fire, and turned to ash. Instead, the youth ran away, ran as fast as his legs could take him, not looking back to the townspeople or the kindled pyre.

When he arrived at his hut, sweat mixing with tears streaking his face, he found a flicker of ash clinging to his hair. He placed the flicker on the flesh of his palm, and blew it, blew it until the night-wind caught it, and took it up, to places above the roof of the forest.

The next day, at the market, the people let him pass unencumbered, and Huli gave him a discount on the day's goods.

XIII

“What happened with your parents?” you asked, as we sat on the edge of the rooftop.

“They didn't really take it well,” I replied. “I confessed, right after they took us into the bunkers. But they were kind of... dismissive? Of the entire thing, I mean. They tried to get me to hook-up with the cute daughter of a neighbor, who also happened to be in the same bunker.”

“Oh god,” you replied. “That is awful. I remembered the time a friend of mine slept over.”

“What happened?”

“Well, we woke up at the same time since we both had class. But my parents insisted that we have breakfast with them. And while we were eating, do you know what my father told me?”

“What?”

“Your mother and I also met in college,” you continued. “And they were holding hands, and my friend kept on nudging me under the table, as I tried not to laugh.”

“That is fucking awful,” I said. “I would’ve probably just went with it. Gotten myself a fake girlfriend for four or five years.”

“You can’t pull that off,” you said. “You’re too awful at lying.”

“I lied my way to get here,” I said. “I told the guard at my bunker that I’d kill myself if he didn’t let me out. Held a glass shard to my throat for added effect.”

You looked startled, and angry. You held up my chin, and examined my neck. When you saw a thin red line near my throat, from where the glass nipped the skin, you frowned.

“That was really, really stupid,” you told me, gravely. “You could have actually gotten hurt. Or worse.”

“I didn’t have any time left,” I said, not looking at you. “I had to do something to get out, and I couldn’t have missed another meeting.”

“Well, you did make it,” you said. “Though we really didn’t do anything.”

“We ate some canned spam and fruit,” I said. “It was a lot better than some of the dinners I’ve been to.”

“The company was shit, though,” you said. I punched you on the arm, and you faked being hurt.

“Where were you, all this time?” I asked.

“I didn’t have a chance to make it to a bunker,” you said. “I lived in a high-rise, alone, ever since the first showers hit. I barricaded myself, and prayed that the Low-Level Impact Zone stayed a Low-Level Impact Zone.”

“Why did you come?” I asked.

“Well, unlike you, I actually keep most of my appointments,” you said. “Though it seems you might have changed for the better.”

“I mean, it was an okay first date, right?” I asked you. “We ate some dinner, and wandered around the city a bit, and managed to catch the sunset.”

“That isn't the sunset,” you said, tilting my head the other direction. “That's the sunset.”

“Then what was that?”

“That means Landfall is near.”

“How much longer do we have?”

“Around an hour. Maybe less.”

The not-sun fell closer and closer to the horizon. It was followed by the shadow of something monstrous.

“You wanna do this again some time?” you asked. “Tomorrow, 4 p.m., same place?”

“Same place.”

“It's a date then.”

I leaned my head against the shoulder, as night finally fell.

“See, look up there.”

You pointed to the sky. The shadow grew larger and larger, until it seemed to almost envelope the moon.

“I’ll wait for you,” you told me. “And if you can’t make it, there’s always another day.”

I closed my eyes, and clung to your hands, as if they could stop whatever was coming. I closed my eyes, and pretended that the sky above us was still blue and spotless, and that we still had some more time left.

XIV

Bighani saw a glowing thing fall into the water, but he was too weak to fish it out.

He sat on dry land, his legs tired from the walk from the hut to the lake. He watched the figure splash around before it found its bearings, and made its way to land.

It was the star. He had a lean, muscular body, with a piece of cloth covering his manhood. His comely face had not aged a day.

“Hello Bighani,” the star greeted.

“Hello Balátik,” Bighani replied.

He remembered a story, a long time ago, of a youth who fell in love with a star, but was forced to give him back to the sky.

“Has the Bakunawa escaped yet again?” he asked. He felt his own face, wrinkled like bitter melon. He touched the crown of his head, and felt a few strands of dry hair.

“No, thankfully,” the star replied. “I caught him just in time, all those years ago, before he could consume the moon. It took many years for the Tatlong Maria to defeat him. But now his ashes are spread across the universe, to float away and never meet again.”

“I see that you are unchanged,” Bighani said. “From the fire.”

“Yes,” the star replied. “Stars cannot die. They just form.”

“So since you cannot die, and the Bakunawa is dead,” Bighani said. “You have all the time in the world.”

“Yes, I do,” the star replied. “All the time in the world.”

The star moved closer. He clung to Bighani's hand.

They stood up, hands still intertwined, and ventured into the forest.
