

CREATURES OF NIGHT AND FLIGHT

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The first time I saw a Manananggal was on the front cover of a tabloid.

It was Sunday, right after morning mass. We had been sitting in the large, nearly-empty church for the previous hour, the priest's soft, flat voice lulling me to sleep, the heat cooking me in my seat, so I had been more than itching to go home by the time it was over. But Ma had insisted on buying a fresh garland of sampaguitas afterward, and her *suki*, a thin, lazy-eyed man who usually wore a violet basketball jersey, was nowhere to be seen, leading her to haggle with all the other sellers for what she deemed to be a fair price. As she was bargaining, I wandered off to the newsstand nearby, and looked at all the headlines on display. There were car crashes and bomb threats and students calling for the fall of the "dictator". There was the President promising to crush the rebels in the South, and the First Lady talking to the president of the United States. She was almost as tall as him. Her hair was perfectly coifed, and she wore this mango-colored *baro't saya*, studded with white gems in the front, with butterfly-sleeves poofed around her arms.

On the tabloid next to the First Lady was the Manananggal. Where the First Lady and the President were in full-color, she was in black-and-white. The cover showed a woman with long, messy hair, her face wrinkled in anger. Her mouth was open, a dark, gaping hole that revealed a few, razor-sharp fangs. Blood was dripping from her lips down to her neck, black against her paper-white skin. The picture was taken up close, so it looked like she was about to attack the photographer. Beside her was

the headline, done in big, bold, red letters. “MANANANGGAL SA SQUATTERS' VILLAGE”. I was about to read the rest of it, when I felt someone pull me back.

“Elsa, don't wander off like that ever again. What if someone had tried to take you?” my mother scolded. “And I saw you reading that tabloid. Didn't you learn about them in school? They're nothing but trash. You won't learn anything good from them.”

“Ma, what's a Manananggal?” I pronounced the word slowly, stumbling over its many letters. It was the first time I'd ever encountered it. I thought it might have been some supernatural creature, from the way the tabloid showed her. Something like Dracula, from the fangs and the blood and pale skin.

“She's an imaginary monster, Elsa, like a vampire or a werewolf,” my mother told me. She grabbed my wrist, and pulled me behind her as she rushed to the car. I had to walk more quickly, almost run, to keep up with her fast pace. Perhaps she was worried I would see something else that was troubling, or trashy.

“Why do they call her a Manananggal?” I asked her, the word like sticky bubblegum in my mouth.

“She... separates herself, her upper-half from her lower half,” my mother replied. “She leaves her lower-torso and legs on the ground. After that, she flies in the night to look for her victims.”

I was about to ask her more about the Manananggal, but she had already started the car, the engine cutting off my voice. She had her driving-face on, the one that said, “Don't bother me, Elsa, I need to focus on the road.” We exited the church parking lot, and merged with the traffic outside. The car's aircon was broken again, so we had to drive with the windows down. The streets were wide and near-empty, with a few people bustling

around here-and-there. I looked up at the sky, and felt some relief that we were travelling in the safety of the day.

The next time I saw a Manananggal was when I was watching a movie with Ate Chin, who lived right next-door.

It had been her turn to pick the movie, much to my disappointment, because I had just gotten a videocassette of *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and thought Ate Chin would enjoy watching the sea-creature terrorizing all those helpless scientists. But the film she chose was something called *Pagsapit ng Dilim*. It was a film reel, and I had to help her set up her bulky projector just for us to be able to watch it.

“This better be worth it,” I told her, jokingly, after we had finished setting up the thing in the living room of her apartment.

“Oh, it's worth it,” she replied, as she took down a few pictures from the wall, to create a make-shift screen.

It was a Filipino horror movie. I had not watched many local horror movies, partly because Ma wouldn't let me go out to the theaters which screened them—she said that they were in a bad part of town—and partly because I had never gotten the urge to watch them, because of how campy they seemed. Some of them I really liked. *Patayin sa Sindak si Barbara* and *Maligno* were both really creepy, and *Beast of the Yellow Night* had really good effects. But I'd seen a few others, and they had just seemed bad. In *Dugo ng Vampira*, the vampire-woman looked more like a clown than a blood-thirsty monster. The devil in *Langit, Lupa, Impiyerno*, looked like he was wearing some cheap, goofy Halloween costume with an even goofier beard.

But it was a good movie. Perla Bautista played the Manananggal, who hunted the poor barrio villagers. There was a scene where she attacked someone in the hospital, her shadow stalking the hospital patient, and I was actually closing my eyes. During the

movie, Ate Chin explained to me things about the Manananggal that I wasn't able to learn from Ma.

“She flies around at night, looking for her victims,” she told me. “During the day, she looks like any other woman. But at night, she becomes an animal. If she likes the look of you, she'll fly into your house, and carry you away to be eaten. But usually, she goes after pregnant women. She uses her long, hollow tongue to suck out the fetus from a pregnant woman's belly while she's sleeping.”

“She sounds a lot like a vampire,” I told her.

“She's not really like a vampire,” Ate Chin replied, and I felt kind of embarrassed at her correcting me. “Vampires can be men and women, while Manananggals are usually just women. And vampires can't stand the sun. Manananggals look perfectly normal in the day, like you and me. It's only at night when they go around terrorizing people.”

“Why are they all women?” I asked her.

“I don't know, actually,” she replied, and then smirked. “Maybe it's because we're actually scarier than a lot of men.”

When the movie was finished, I didn't want to leave yet, so Ate Chin and I exchanged a few ghost stories. She told me about the headless nun who stalked students at the local girls' school, and appeared in bathroom cubicles while you were doing your business. I told her about the secret *duwende* market in Quiapo, that happens right before midnight, and the poor souls who are trapped there forever when they fail to leave before the sunrise. When I was done, I noticed something on the floor in front of her couch. It was a tabloid. The headline was in big, bold, red letters, and showed a black-and-white picture of a woman with her mouth wide-open.

“Ate Chin, what’s that?” I asked, pointing to the tabloid.

“Oh God, so that’s where I put it. I’m a very messy person, Elsa. Don’t follow my example,” she told me, picking up the tabloid and showing me the cover. “It’s something I picked up on my way back home. I thought, hey, I’m coming home at 10 in the evening. Might as well pick up something to make me even more scared. Sometimes I like getting scared a little too much.”

She said that as if she were making a joke about herself, but it made me realize how haggard she looked. Her hair looked dry and uncombed, and her face was shiny with oil. There were deep bags under her eyes. Her eyes had a far-away look to them, as if she couldn’t concentrate on staying awake. I felt a pang of guilt well-up in me, because I was worried that I was intruding on her time to rest, and that she was too polite to tell me to go away and leave her in peace. I looked at the clock. It was only 6:23pm. But she appeared as if she were coming from one, long, terrible night.

“It’s getting late,” I told her. “I’ll be going now.”

“What?” she exclaimed. “Your mom says you don’t have to be home until 7. Come on, I still have a nice haunted hotel room story I want to tell you.”

“Nah, it’s alright,” I told her, though I really did want to hear about the haunted hotel. “I still have some homework I need to finish.”

“Well, let me walk you back to your apartment,” she told me.

She gave me the tabloid, and told me I could keep it since she was done reading. I thanked her, folded the tabloid until it was big enough to fit in my pocket. I walked, trying to keep my hands over my pockets to cover the noticeable bulge.

When I got back home, I saw that Ma was reading a newspaper. Her mouth was curled into a deep frown, and her eyes were fixed on the page she was reading. She looked like she was in great pain, and I wondered what article could possibly cause her so much dismay. When she noticed us, she put the paper on the floor, out of sight.

“Hey sweetie,” she told me. I was about to sit down to eat dinner when she told me, “Elsa, can I have a word alone with your Ate Chin? You can go to your room and do some of your homework. I’ll just call you when dinner’s ready.”

I went to my room, and started reading the article. It was in Filipino, so I had to read it twice to understand all of it, but I think I got the general idea. It was about a few families living in this garbage dump, who reported seeing a Manananggal flying at night, her wings covering the moon. One family said that they had found their dog dead, with its belly ripped open, while another said that their entire home was destroyed, when the Manananggal swooped in to kidnap their newborn baby. The families said that they tried reporting it to the police, who just laughed, and threatened to evict them.

I remembered that, sometimes when Ma and I went to the mall, we’d pass by this bridge overlooking a river. On both sides of the river were these make-shift houses, made of hollow-blocks and covered with corrugated metal. They occupied only a small part of the riverbanks, but there were so many of them. They all looked squished together. When the car’s windows were open, I’d be able to smell the stench coming from it. Then one day, a few weeks ago, all the shanties were gone, though the river was no less clean. I asked Ma what had happened, and Ma told me that the president had all the houses demolished, because people like that had “no place sa Bagong Lipunan.” I remembered the shanties by the river as I was reading the article, and felt very sad for some reason. I imagined what it was like, running

away from demolition and then from the Manananggal, always watching over you. I tried to forget it by reading this Sirena in Ilog Pasig story on Page 8.

Before I could start, I heard the front door slam shut. I tiptoed outside. I saw Ma, sitting in front of the dining room table, her eyes shut, her nostrils flaring. I could hear her heavy breathing. When she opened her eyes and saw me, she stood up to get some rice and beef kaldereta. The night seemed hotter than it was before, even though the food had grown cold while I was in my room.

“Eat up, sweetie,” she said, absentmindedly scooping rice on her plate. “There's plenty of food.”

“What did you talk about with Ate Chin?” I asked her. She stopped mid-scoop, and let the rice fall back into the bowl. She glared at me, her mouth pinched in fury.

“I was talking to the guard the other day,” she said. “And he told me that for the past few days, Chin had been coming home just before midnight. And he told me that she looked... unwell. He said that she looked very tired, as if she had been out all night doing God-knows-what. And this morning I received a call from her parents. When Chin first moved in last year, her parents had asked me to watch over her because they had to stay in their province to watch over their family business. They seemed like good people, so I tried to take care of her as best as I could. Well this morning, I received a call from them. They were almost crying. They said that they received a letter from Chin's university, saying that she was on probation for not attending any of her classes. That's why I had to talk to her.”

I was very shocked when I heard this. Whenever I visited Ate Chin, she always had her nose in a book, or typing away on her typewriter. I saw all her medals and certificates framed on her apartment wall, and all the books she had. The only time I ever

saw her do anything fun was when she was watching movies with me, or when we were telling each other ghost stories.

“What did she say?” I asked Ma.

“Oh she wouldn't tell me,” Ma replied. “She said that what she was doing was her business and that I had no right to interfere. I told her that her parents were worried sick about her and, walang-hiya, she told me that I wouldn't understand. The nerve of that girl! I tried to be considerate and she walks out on me!”

My mother grew as red as the kaldereta when she told me this. I resolved to not talk about Ate Chin for the rest of the night.

“I don't want you seeing any more of Ate Chin,” Ma said, as we were putting away the dishes. “Not until we've fixed this entire matter.”

A FEW DAYS later, I came home to find a strange woman coming out of my bedroom. She didn't even look at me. She entered my parents' bedroom, and I was about to call out to her, but I was surprised to find that I had lost my voice. I saw Ma on the couch, and asked her what was going on.

“Watch your mouth, Elsa,” Ma said. “Just behave. Remember how you should talk in front of strangers.”

The woman emerged from my parents' bedroom. She wore bougainvillea lipstick, bright-pink against her fair skin, and had long, silky black hair. She might have been around my mother's age, but she didn't look like it. She wore a blouse the color of the sky, and a skirt that fell just below the knees, enough to show off her perfect-smooth legs. Her face reminded me of Virgin Mary statues.

“Mrs. Handumon, you never told me you had a daughter,” she said. “Just like you never told me your husband was out of the country. I wonder what else you're keeping from me.” She laughed, after she said this, as if she wanted to lighten the situation.

“Elsa, this is Ms. Vasquez,” Ma said. “She's from the mayor's office. She's here to talk to you about Chin.”

“Why, did anything happen to Ate Chin?” I asked, trying to control myself. I imagined Ate Chin in a hospital somewhere, after some horrible accident.

“No, no,” Ms Vasquez said, soothingly. “Your Ate Chin is fine. She's in class right now. Or at least, she's supposed to be. You see, the Mayor is friends with Chin's family. And he has heard of her alarming behavior lately. Cutting classes. The late nights. The guard and other neighbors tell me that Chin sometimes comes home right before midnight, before the curfew, or that she doesn't even come home at all. And the Mayor's taken a special interest in the case, because Chin comes from a very respectable family. And to have a girl from a respectable family behaving like that, well, it causes a lot of problems for everyone.”

I looked at her. She bent down, to look at me in the eye, and smiled. She was close enough for me to smell her toothpaste breath. I felt my mother grasp my shoulders. They say that if a person is an Aswang, your reflection in their eyes is upside-down. I was too scared to look at her eyes.

“Have you ever talked to Chin?” she asked me. “You called her 'Ate', so that means you two must be close.”

“No, we don't talk much. We just say 'hello' when we see each other,” I told her. I was surprised at how casually I said it, because Ma used to tell me how bad a liar I was. “I call her 'Ate'”

because my parents and teachers taught me to be respectful and call older people 'Ate' and 'Kuya'.

Ms Vasquez looked at my mother. "My, what a respectful child you have here," she said. When she said it, my mother tightened her grip on my shoulders. "Call me, if you ever notice anything strange with your next-door neighbor." She placed a card on the dining-room table.

When she was gone, the room seemed lighter. My mother went to the bookshelf, got a book, and took out a piece of paper from it.

"A letter to your father. I told him about how bad things are getting. About the riots and the rallies and the arrests. And about the people in Malacanang," she said. "God help me if she had seen them. Thank god I managed to hide them while she was in your bedroom. I'm sorry Elsa, I had to let her in."

It was the first time I'd ever heard Ma talk about the government. I didn't learn much about them at school, only the basic facts, like who was president, and for how long he was president, and what the Bagong Lipunan meant for us. Me and Ma lived a nice life, so he couldn't be so bad. But Ma sometimes said that we had a good life because Pa was abroad, earning dollars, not pesos. And then I remembered the shanties along the river that weren't there anymore. The world was too confusing.

Ma and I had dinner in silence. I went to sleep early, because it seemed like the best thing to do.

The next morning was a Saturday, and after Ma left for the market, I snuck over to Ate Chin's. I found the front door wide open and, cautiously, I stepped inside.

It was a mess. There were chairs and books and papers scattered on the floor, and a flower vase that had been smashed to bits.

The TV was still standing, but a few of the framed certificates had fallen. There was debris all over the ground, and I felt a crunch with every other step. On a white wall was a dark-red stain, and I did not want to think about it.

I moved to her bedroom, hoping to find her sleeping in her bed. I hoped that it was just one, huge fight with a friend, and that she was still okay.

The bedroom was also a bit of a mess. The sheets on her bed were unclean, and had a sweaty-smell to them. There were signs all over her bedroom floor. “Ibagsak and Diktador!” said one, while another said “Stop Political Killings!”. On the floor, beside her bed were books whose titles I didn't recognize. *The State and Revolution* by Vladimir Lenin. *Das Kapital* by Karl Marx. *Philippine Society and Revolution* by Amado Guerrero.

I gathered all the signs into one corner, so they looked tidier. I went back to our apartment, and came back with a broom and a dustpan. I swept up all the broken glass and splinters of wood. I put all the books back on their shelves, and hung all the frames back on their hooks, and went back to our apartment. There was a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach, that clouded my mind, and made me feel like throwing up. I went downstairs, to talk to the guard about what I saw in Chin's apartment. When I told him, he just smiled at me, and told me that Chin had moved away, back to her family in the province. I asked him why there was a huge mess in it, and in a low, growling voice, he told me not to put my nose in other people's business.

I sat on the couch, trying not to think anything, until Ma came home and I told her everything that had happened. She didn't interrupt me the entire time, and when I was finished, she cradled my head on her chest, and I was surprised to find myself crying.

“She’ll be back, won’t she?” I said, even though I knew the answer.

“She’s a brave girl, your Ate Chin,” my mother said. “I wish I were as brave as her.”

I cried until it was night-time, and Ma let go of me, saying that she had to prepare dinner. While she was cooking, I went to our living-room window, and stared into the night. There was a policeman patrolling the streets, and a guard at the entrance of the apartment, but I didn’t feel safe, not with that creature roaming the city, ready to strike once you’ve been spotted.

I said a prayer, for Ate Chin, and the people from the demolished shanties, and all those who were taken away by a pair of wings and claws in the dead of night.
