

Night Flight

By B.R. Flynn

1

April, 1933
Panay Island,
The Philippines

Jalena awoke to the sound of struggle in the next room. She sat up in bed, moonlight pouring in through the window. It must have been close to three in the morning, the worst time of night.

She stayed where she was for a moment, listening, before sliding out of bed and rushing to the next bedroom. The door was standing open, as it always was: Kaajal, her sister, and she kept no secrets. They both figured that since Kaajal's husband had died in a freak accident, that she should move in with Jalena, who could take care of both her sister and her unborn child; Kaajal was eight months pregnant.

Now, Jalena could hear the sounds of her sister struggling in bed. Her voice was muffled, as if someone was covering her mouth.

Jalena pushed the door open and peeked inside. What she saw made her cover her own mouth with a hand in shock.

The moonlight was stronger in here; Kaajal's window was standing open, the blind pushed aside. Jalena could see two shapes in Kaajal's bed. She could tell that one of them was Kaajal. The other wasn't human at all.

Something crouched over Kaajal. Something that had large wings folded behind its back. Something that was holding Kaajal's mouth closed with one hand, the other wrapped around the young woman's neck. Something that was female but hideous. Something that had its mouth open and a long, barbed tongue slithering out of it. That tongue was probing Kaajal's large, exposed belly, searching for weak

spots.

Jalena knew what the creature was right away, though she couldn't believe what she was seeing. These things only existed in children's stories, surely! Still, she knew what she had to do and she crept silently into the kitchen and grabbed the tin of salt, opening it as quietly as she could.

When she returned to her sister's room, the beast was just about to strike, its head raised up, sharp tongue lashing about.

“No!” Jalena screamed.

The creature looked up at Jalena, its long probing tongue receding into its mouth. It grinned at her before letting go of Kaajal and unfolding its wings. It was about to attack Jalena but the woman tossed the tin of salt at the creature.

The beast screamed in pain and anger. It launched itself into the air and Jalena saw that there was nothing below the creature's waist. It was a pair of arms, a head and a set of wings attached to a torso. No hips or legs were in evidence.

With a horrible cry, it flew out of the window and into the night sky. Jalena ran to the window and slammed it closed before comforting her terrified sister.

2

Rico drove the open-topped jeep along a bumpy road through a dense swath of rain forest. It was a hazy, humid morning. The rain had stopped less than twenty minutes ago. As the vehicle bounced about, Rico shot a glance at his passenger. He smiled at her.

Maggie Engel smiled back and it just about made Rico's day.

“Not too bumpy for you?” he asked.

“Not at all!” she answered. “Nothing like a bumpy ride to get the blood flowing, start the day right!”

He chuckled and shook his head. He hadn't known Maggie long – just a few hours, in fact – but she had made quite an impression on him. In fact, she made an impression on just about everyone she met. She was thirty-four years old and scrappy, with red hair, freckles and big blue eyes. A bit of a tomboy. Her leather flight jacket was well-worn and obviously well-used. And with good reason. She was world-renowned for what she did.

Soon the rain forest cleared and he could see the airfield ahead. It wasn't much to look at, only a couple of hangars and two criss-crossing runways but he smiled nonetheless. One of the hangars stood open and he could see Vin working on one of his planes.

Rico pulled into the airfield and parked the jeep near the hangar. He got out of the car and watched

as Maggie jumped out of it, bounding with confidence into the hangar beside him.

Vin was deep in the engine of the plane he was working on and he didn't look at either of them as they approached. When he spoke, his voice echoed off the engine and bounced towards them.

"I told you that I was working, Rico," he said. "I don't like to be bothered while I'm working. You know that."

"There's someone I wanted you to meet," Rico said.

"Great, my brother has brought someone else to bother me. Wonderful."

"I really think you'll want to talk to her, Vin."

Vin stopped working and turned to look at his brother, shaking his head. "A girl, Rico?"

"Not just any girl. This is Maggie Engel."

Vin stared at his brother for a moment. He chuckled. "The Aviatrix. Right, next thing you'll tell me that --"

He broke off. As he was speaking, he finally glanced at his brother's companion. Rico smiled as he watched his brother's shocked expression. Vin climbed down from the ladder he was working on and grabbed a rag from his belt, wiped his hands.

Maggie Engel, The Aviatrix, offered him her own hand. Vin looked at it for a moment, as if he couldn't believe it was real, before taking it. They shook.

"Nice to meet you, Vin," she said. "Maggie Engel."

"I know who you are," Vin said in a daze.

"Course you do!"

Vin took her hand and kissed it. Maggie chuckled. "You're a real Killer-Diller, aren't you?" She patted him on the shoulder. "Now where's this plane your brother's been telling me about?"

Vin looked at Rico, grinned, then looked back at Maggie. "How did you even hear about it in the first place?"

"Remember that article in the newspaper?" Rico said.

Vin looked once again at his brother, nodded, and turned his attention back to Maggie.

"Friend of mine told me about the article," she said. "Translated it for me. Is it really the hawk you claim it is?"

Vin nodded vigorously. "That was months ago. It's faster, now."

"May I take a gander?"

"Sure! Follow me."

The three of them left the open hangar and headed to the next one over, which was closed. Vin unlocked and opened it, revealing a small, sleek, red plane.

Maggie laughed with delight and approached the plane with reverence. She was about to reach out and touch it when she stopped and looked back at Vin. “May I?”

“Of course,” Vin said with a nod.

Maggie ran her hands along it and closed her eyes, her smile growing. After a moment, she opened her eyes once again, took a step back, taking in the plane before looking at Vin. “Bernard SIMB V.2, isn't it?”

Vin nodded.

“One of these honeys broke the airspeed record in '25!” Maggie said. “But you've made some modifications, I see.”

Vin joined her and they began to talk shop. Rico tuned it out. He didn't understand any of the technical stuff. He just liked being around the planes and liked that his brother was so passionate about them. Maggie, it seemed, shared his enthusiasm.

A while later, Rico got some sodas for them out of the icebox and they sat at a little picnic table between the hangars.

“The real question, Vin,” Maggie said as she finished her drink, “is will you let me take it for a spin?”

Vin smiled and nodded. “It would be an honor.”

Maggie slammed the table with the flat of her hand. “Aces! Let's see if we can break some records.”

They were preparing for flight less than five minutes later.

Jalena hung the strips of garlic she had bought at the market that morning outside of every window and door on the house. When she was finished, she stood back and evaluated her work. Sighed.

Kaajal joined her and Jalena wrapped an arm around her sister's shoulders to comfort her.

“Will it work?” Kaajal asked.

Jalena didn't answer for a moment. Finally, she met her sister's gaze. “I don't know. I hope so.”

“Is it really what I think it is?”

Jalena nodded. “It must be.”

“But how?” Kaajal said. “They aren't real. Are they?”

“Like I said, they must be.”

“A manananggal.” She shook head in disbelief. “Where did it come from?”

Jalena let go of her sister and turned towards the tree line, which was just past their house. She

folded her arms across her chest.

“The jungle,” she said.

Kaajal joined her and looked towards the dense thicket of trees. “How do you know?”

Jalena shook her head. “Have there been any widowers who have married strangers lately?”

“No.”

“Then it must have taken a home in the jungle somewhere. Probably not far.”

Kaajal sighed and shook her head. “It will take you days to find it. People could be hurt – killed – by then!”

“I know.”

“Then what are you going to do?”

Jalena turned away from her sister. “I’m going to go to work, like I do everyday. What else can I do? I’m already late as it is.”

“Be wary of strangers.”

Jalena scoffed. “You do know where I work, don’t you?”

“I know, but still...”

Jalena headed into the house to collect her work things. Kaajal followed her.

“I’ll try my best,” Jalena said.

“I’ll do what I can today,” Kaajal said. “Chichay next door may have something that can help us, if her old stories are true. I’ll talk to her.”

“Alright.”

Jalena gathered up what she needed for work and smiled at her sister. They hugged. After that, she left for work.

In the air, high up, Maggie Engel became The Aviatrix. It was what she was always meant to be. She had been fascinated by flight from a young age and there were exhibitions in Kansas, where she grew up, all throughout her youth.

Now, high above Panay, she giggled with delight. The souped-up Bernard was fast. She wasn’t breaking any records – it was all seaplanes that broke records nowadays – but the plane was fast nonetheless. One of the fastest that Maggie had ever piloted. It was exhilarating, as it always was.

And the land below was beautiful. She could see the large village in the distance but directly below her was all dense rain forest. She had never seen anything so gorgeous and wondered why she had

never made it to this part of the world before now.

She circled the rain forest a few times before heading back to the airfield. Her landing was smooth as butter, the wheels of the plane becoming one with the ground like they had never left at all. She was all smiles when Vin and Rico came to meet her as she taxied the plane into the hangar.

“Well,” Vin said as Maggie climbed down from the plane, snapping off her flight hood, “what did you think?”

“She's a beauty, Vin!” Maggie said. “One of the best I've ever flown. You should be proud of yourself.”

Vin turned to his brother and clapped him on the shoulder. “World-class, what did I tell you?!”

Rico nodded and smiled broadly. The three of them retreated to the picnic area once again. Maggie and Vin discussed the finer points of the flight while Rico listened politely, nodding whenever it seemed appropriate.

“I have got to get my hotel,” Maggie said some time later, “but I wanted to ask you something before we go, Vin.”

“Anything,” Vin said. “Name it.”

Maggie leaned towards him on the opposite side of the table. “You know what really gets me excited?”

“What?”

“Flying at night.”

Vin nodded. “I know what you mean.”

“In America, it's still illegal in most states to fly at night, did you know that?”

“No!” Vin said.

“It is!”

Vin gestured dismissively. “Even if it is here, no one will give you any trouble.”

“So you think we can make it happen?”

“Absolutely!”

“Tonight, perhaps? It was a long journey getting here. Stepped off the boat and right into Rico's jeep. I need to get a few hours sleep and maybe clean up a little, but after that...”

“I'll be here.”

“Well, that's swell!”

After that, Rico and Maggie left for the village, leaving Vin smiling from ear to ear.

Jalena worked at the only hotel in town. She was ideal for front desk work: not only was she personable and attractive, but she spoke Hiligaynon, Tagalog and English.

She found it hard getting through the day. Her thoughts kept returning to the creature in the night and what it might do to her sister, or anyone else in town.

In the late afternoon, when she was alone in the lobby, she let the full weight of the night's events fall on her shoulders. She cradled her head in her hands and wept silently, her elbows resting on the counter in front of her.

She was in this position for a full minute before she was startled by a concerned, questioning voice.

"What's with the waterworks, kitten?" it asked.

Jalena looked up. A beautiful tomboy of a woman wearing a leather flight jacket was on the other side of the counter. She had curly red hair that was not quite chin length. One battered, worn piece of luggage sat on the floor next to her.

"It's nothing, ma'am," Jalena said, wiping away a tear. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Poppycock, it's nothing!" the woman said.

She undid the first few buttons of her jacket and produced a handkerchief from it. Jalena took it after a moment's deliberation. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it. You're in awful distress."

Jalena dabbed her eyes and nose. "You must think I look so silly. I apologize."

"No need to apologize," the woman said. "And you don't look silly."

"You have a reservation, I assume?"

"As a matter of fact, I do! But that's not important right now. What's important is what's got you so distressed."

The woman came around the counter and wrapped an arm around Jalena's shoulders. "Tell me about it."

"It wouldn't be appropriate," Jalena said.

"Nuts to that! My name's Maggie. What's yours?"

"Jalena."

"A beautiful name for a beautiful muffin. Tell me what ails ya."

"You wouldn't understand."

"I'll try to."

"It's my sister. I'm worried about her."

"She's in danger?"

“I think so.”

“From whom? Or what?”

Jalena looked at the woman, eyes narrowed. How much could she trust this stranger? She seemed like a good person but you never really knew.

“I can handle it,” she finally said.

Maggie watched her for a moment, then nodded. “All right, Jalena. You don't have to tell me anything. But I'm willing to listen and help if I can. I'll be in room... What room am I in?”

“Oh!” Jalena said. She checked Maggie's reservation and gave her a room key. “Room 304.”

“Room 304!” Maggie said. “I'll be in room 304. Come and get me if you need any help. And wake me up if I'm asleep! Just come into my room and shake me awake!”

Maggie left for her room, saying she didn't need any help with her single bag and there was no need to call the valet. Jalena watched her go, smiling at the strange encounter. It didn't make any sense but she felt like this odd woman would be able to help in some way. But in what way, she didn't know.

6

When Jalena got home after work, it was dusk. She found her sister sitting at the kitchen table, arms wrapped around her fat belly, feet up on another chair near her. Jalena hugged her and kissed the top of her head.

“It will be okay,” Jalena said.

“I know,” Kaajal said, although she didn't sound so sure of herself. “You will do what you can.”

Jalena was about to sit down in another chair near her sister when Kaajal put out a hand to stop her. “Oh, I almost forgot. I brought something home for you today.”

She got up with some effort and crossed the room to the icebox. Jalena followed her sister.

“Your talk with Chichay was fruitful?” she asked.

Kaajal nodded. She reached into the shadows beside the ice box and picked up an object that was leaning against it. She raised it into the light so that her sister could see it.

Jalena gaped at the object. It was a whip fashioned out of the tail of a stingray; short, just over two feet long. Jalena reached out cautiously to take it.

“A buntot pagi,” she said with wonder. “Where did she get it?”

“Her husband made it years ago,” Kaajal said. “She claims that he did battle with a manananggal. He warded it off with that.”

Jalena shook her head, amazed. “Too bad he isn't around to help us now.”

Kaajal hugged her sister. “You are strong enough to defeat it.”

“I don't know if I am.”

“Then get help from wherever you can.”

Jalena nodded silently, thinking of the odd woman she had met at the hotel earlier in the day, the one who acted like an enthusiastic boy or young man.

7

The moon was high in the sky when Maggie was in the air once again, far above the trees. She loved the feel of the wind on her face, loved the way the moon looked from this high up. It was magical.

Below her, from a dense thicket of trees, a large colony of bats suddenly bounded into the air. Maggie was just able to catch a good look at them as they ascended, compensating the aircraft so as not to run into them, disable the plane and send her crashing to the ground.

“Out of the way, winged friends!” she yelled, peeking out of the cockpit. She laughed, shaking her head.

As she adjusted her flight goggles, she idly wondered what had spooked the animals so. There came a strange sound that seemed to be animal in nature. It sounded like a bird of some kind. It made a “tik tik” sound and seemed to be coming from below, not far from where the colony of bats soared into the air. She could hear the sound over the roar of the aircraft engines, so it must have been loud indeed in the jungle.

She frowned – a rare thing, indeed – as something else moved out of the trees below. Something that didn't look like any animal Maggie had ever seen before.

It was winged but Maggie thought she saw arms on the creature as well. Whatever it was, it was flying up towards her and the aircraft. She turned her gaze towards the space ahead of her, just making sure that she wasn't going to hit any stray bats, before taking another good look at the approaching creature.

What she was seeing couldn't be right. It looked like the torso of a woman, separated from her bottom half flying on wings that sprouted from her back. It was hard to tell by the soft glow of the moonlight, but the woman's skin appeared to be a sickly grey.

For a moment, Maggie wondered whether she was going crazy. When she ruled that out, she was left with the only obvious solution: what she was seeing was real.

“Well roll me in manure!” she said.

Curiously, as the creature climbed higher, getting closer, the strange “tik tik” sound it made grew

quieter, until it disappeared entirely as the beast leveled with the aircraft. Maggie looked at the monstrous, almost human face of the beast and tried to give it a smile. It wasn't working.

The creature looked agitated, annoyed. It didn't take Maggie long to realize that it was bothered by the aircraft. Either the sound of it or the mere presence of it in the air. Whatever the reason, it hated the plane and, as Maggie watched, it got closer, reached out and grabbed hold of her left wing.

Its grip was powerful and Maggie had to compensate with the stick, fighting it to keep the aircraft from flying out of control. Maggie shook her head, annoyed herself now. "Alright, you wanna dance, you ugly mug?!"

She pulled the aircraft to the right, yanking it out of the beast's grasp. The creature quickly caught back up with the plane. This time, it didn't grab hold of the wing, but simply sat on it, taunting Maggie. It tapped its long, sharp claws on the wing, swept its head back, opened its horrible mouth and laughed. Its long, hideous tongue danced in the air.

Maggie grit her teeth and tipped the plane to the left. The beast slid right off the wing and began to fall. Maggie uttered a single, taunting laugh but the creature was by her side once more, flapping its wings. It bared its sharp teeth; no longer playing. It meant to bring the aircraft down.

Maggie used evasive maneuvers but the creature kept pace, zig-zagging about with the aircraft. The beast receded back a few feet and grasped hold of the aircraft's tail fin. Maggie glanced back just in time to see the creature tear off a great chunk of the fin and she suddenly had more to worry about than the sudden appearance of a supernatural creature in the sky.

The aircraft tried to wrestle away control from her and Maggie had to fight just to keep up. The plane began to descend rapidly. Maggie caught a final glimpse of the creature as she fell. It was staying at the same altitude as it had been when it disabled the aircraft. It waved goodbye to Maggie as she plummeted.

She was already headed in the direction of the airfield. If she was able to maintain control of the aircraft long enough, she might be able to land with minimal damage. "Might" being the operative word here.

The aircraft was dangerously close to the ground when Maggie saw the airfield and runway ahead. Vin and Rico had lined it with flaming bottles of soda to light her path. The plane careened into the airfield and Maggie jolted as the front wheels connected with the ground. The aircraft bounced and tried to become a thing of the air again before coming back down to earth. It was a bumpy landing but it was a landing, nonetheless.

As the aircraft slowed, Rico and Vin came running towards it. Vin ran to the back to examine the damage while Rico was more concerned with the pilot. He wanted to know if Maggie was alright. She

assured him that she was and took a moment to cool down before exiting the plane.

8

The manananggal flapped quietly into the village. It approached the home it had zeroed in on the previous night. The full belly of the woman it had prodded last night spurred its hunger and imagination.

Seeing the strands of garlic hanging from every door and window, it retreated into the shadows of the homes opposite and waited, folding its wings behind its back. As late as it was, it didn't take long for a villager to walk by, coming home late and a little drunk by the looks of him.

The man staggered down the road. When he was close enough, the creature stepped out of the shadows, tip-toeing on the edges of its wings behind the man. Grabbing hold of him firmly, it leaned in before he could scream and started whispering into his right ear. The man froze, eyes going blank as the manananggal's auditory hypnotism took effect.

After a moment, the monster let him go, receding into the shadows once again. It waited as the drunken, hypnotized man walked over to Jalena and Kaajal's house and removed strands of garlic from one of the windows. When he was finished, he dropped the garlic onto the ground, retreated to the middle of the road and simply looked up at the moon.

The creature flew across the road and into the shadows of the house. It looked at the drunken man and considered devouring him. It was only for a moment, however. He didn't look appetizing. It snapped its clawed fingers and the man went about his business, resuming his drunken walk down the road like nothing had happened.

The monster smiled wide and horribly and looked up at the sky. It snarled at the memory of the flying machine that had disturbed it. Those monstrosities weren't supposed to be out at night. She ruled the sky during moonlight!

But no matter. She had brought it down. And now she had the rest of the night in which to feed.

She slowly, quietly, opened the window and crept into the house.

9

Jalena wasn't entirely asleep. She was aware of her surroundings, only half dozing. She was too on-edge to fall into a healthy sleep.

Her paranoia paid off and her eyes snapped open as she heard the creaking of a window being

opened. It was accompanied a split second later by a strange noise that could have been a bird call: “tik tik.” She rolled out of her bed and grabbed hold of the stingray tail whip and ran towards her sister's room. As she approached, the strange bird noise faded until it was gone entirely as she entered Kaajal's room.

She found her sister sitting up in bed, eyes wide with fear. Jalena didn't see the manananggal anywhere. Her sister's gaze met her own and Kaajal indicated a spot above Jalena.

The hair standing up on her neck, Jalena slowly looked up. The manananggal was clutching onto the ceiling, claws dug into the wood, its mouth open wide, hideous probing tongue sticking out and hanging down towards her.

Jalena didn't think, she just acted. She struck out with the whip before her brain even registered what was happening. She swatted the creature's tongue before it could reach her.

The beast reacted at once, snapping its tongue back into its mouth in pain. It roared with anger, baring its sharp teeth. Jalena was terrified but she had to protect herself, had to protect her sister. She struck with the whip again, this time across the creature's face.

It let go of the ceiling and dropped to the floor, its wings thrashing about. A lamp was knocked over on a nearby table, its bulb popping as it hit the ground.

Jalena didn't let up. She approached the beast, holding the whip out in front of her. She struck again and the creature was forced back towards the window. A few more strikes and the beast flew out through the window once again.

Jalena slammed the window shut and collapsed to the floor. She couldn't do this much longer. If she never got any sleep, she would be no good to her sister. She wouldn't be able to stop the creature every time it came, which looked to be every night.

What was she going to do?

“A manananggal?” Rico said. “You expect me to believe that?!”

“What did you call it?” Maggie said.

The three of them were once again sitting around the picnic table between the two hangars, under the moonlight this time.

“Manananggal,” Vin explained. “It's an old legend. A little bit like a vampire. From your description, that seems to be what you saw.”

“But it can't be!” Rico said. “They're not real. They're just stories.”

Vin shrugged. "I'm not so sure."

"You can't be serious, brother."

"Serious or not," Maggie said, "legend or not, I saw what I saw. What do you think did that to the aircraft, a gazelle?"

Vin nodded while Rico shook his head. Maggie sighed, seeing that they weren't going to get anywhere with this topic, so she changed it. "Think you'll be able to fix it?"

"Of course," Vin said.

"Need any help?"

He shook his head. "Not necessary. Could use some improvements anyway."

"That's the spirit, ace! Always turn a problem into an opportunity, that's what I always say. Now, come on, let me help."

"If you insist."

"I do! And while we work, you can tell about this legend."

As the two of them got up, Rico shook his head and stayed where he was.

11

It was early morning when Maggie awoke suddenly. Instinctively, she rolled on the bed, grabbed the pistol she kept on the nightstand and took quick aim at the door to her hotel room.

Looking straight into the wide, alarmed eyes of Jalena.

She immediately lowered the pistol and sighed, a smile forming on her lips. "Jalena. You startled me. I do apologize."

She set the pistol aside, yawned and stretched. When she stepped out of bed, she saw that Jalena wouldn't make eye contact with her. She cocked her head to one side. "I really don't mind that you woke me. Should get an early start on the day, anyway."

"Sorry," Jalena said. "I let myself in. You did tell me to wake you if I needed help." She was still looking politely away.

"I did!" Maggie said and took a few steps towards the young woman. "I'm sorry if I scared you. If it helps, I probably would have missed you had I fired. I'm not the best shot in the world. On the ground, anyway. Put me in the air with a fighter plane and I'll hit a dime set on a sundial straight on! Oh, but I am babbling, aren't I? You said you were worried for your sister. Tell me all about it."

Jalena glanced at Maggie, looked her up and down, then looked away again. "Can you take care of this, first?" She indicated Maggie's body.

Maggie was confused for a moment then her eyes widened in surprise and realization. “Oh my, did I sleep in the nude again?! That's it, isn't it?”

Jalena nodded, still not looking at Maggie.

“I'll put some clothes on,” Maggie said, heading for the closet. “But it's not like I've got anything you haven't seen before.”

Once she was dressed in her jodhpurs, boots, shirt and flight jacket – herself once again – the two women headed downstairs. Maggie put an arm around the other woman. “Now, tell me all about what's going on.”

Jalena shook her head. “Alright. But you won't believe it.”

Maggie cocked her head to one side. “You'd be surprised what I'll believe, especially after last night.”

Jalena looked at her confused. Maggie smiled knowingly.

“First your story,” she said, “then mine.”

12

They ate breakfast at a nice little cafe near the hotel. When it was finished, and both of their stories told, Maggie was quiet for a moment before speaking.

“It's obvious what we have to do,” she said.

“Not to me it isn't,” Jalena said.

Maggie leaned across the table they shared. “But isn't it?! I'm in the air, you're on the ground. This creature doesn't like the sound of the plane. I'm the distraction; the bait! I go up when it gets dark, it chases me. I lead it all over creation while you destroy the lower half of its body. You said it can be done, right? With salt?”

Jalena nodded and then shook her head. “It can but the creature always hides its lower half when it goes out hunting. I will have to find it in the jungle and that's impossible. It could be anywhere.”

Maggie leaned back in her chair, thought about it for a moment. She shrugged. “Then we find it during the day.”

“Find it?”

“Yes, today. I'll call Vin. He'll want to take his plane up in the air today anyway, to make sure it's in good working order after our repairs. You said that during the day, this creature looks like a normal woman.”

“Yes.”

“And that there haven't been any mysterious women marrying any widowers in town, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Then she must have a place to live not that far from town. A shack or house hidden in the jungle.”

“Yes, but where?”

“I'd wager half my fortune that it can be seen from the air. Vin goes up today, tells us what he sees and gets back to us and we check it out. Vin's got good eyes. He's knows what he's doing up there.”

Jalena shook her head but she was smiling, too. “Why are you helping me? You don't even know me.”

Maggie reached across the table and took hold of Jalena's hand. “I like damsels in distress.” She chuckled. “Joking aside, I sense a kindred soul. You...” She trailed off, looked down, embarrassed, then back up again, smiling. “You're not alone, no matter how much you feel like you are. I think we're a lot alike.”

Jalena blushed and looked down, as well. She was still looking down when she spoke. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” Maggie said. “How many women of your age in this town aren't married? Or a widow?”

“Not many.”

Maggie nodded knowingly. “We're a lot alike,” she repeated, softly.

Jalena still couldn't meet her gaze. She left her hand in place, though, liking the warmth of Maggie's grip. The moment passed and they parted. Maggie stood up. “I'll telephone Vin.”

Jalena nodded. When Maggie left to use the telephone in the hotel lobby, Jalena sighed. It was a longing sound.

A few hours later, the two women were trekking through the jungle silently. They had taken the jeep they had borrowed from Rico as far as they felt safe, then left it behind as they approached their destination.

Maggie consulted her compass, nodded and slightly adjusted her heading. Jalena was close by and they slowed down the further they went, damping down the sound they made.

When they reached the edge of a small clearing, both of them dropped low to the ground. In the clearing was an old house, small but sturdy. They could see movement; the house wasn't empty. Vin had seen it from the air and marked it as a good candidate.

As they waited, Maggie glanced at Jalena, smiled. Jalena looked back, smiling as well. Despite the situation, they were both enjoying each other's company. If things had been different, this could have just been a pleasant walk through the jungle.

A woman stepped out of the old house onto the front porch and scanned the jungle. Had she heard them? They stayed completely still. Maggie hoped they were hidden well enough to remain undetected.

The woman was attractive with long black hair tied back and a simple but flattering dress. She looked about for another moment before stepping back into the house, apparently satisfied that she was alone.

Maggie sighed with relief. The two women retreated into the jungle. When they felt that they were safe once again, Maggie shot Jalena a questioning glance. She didn't have to articulate the question. It seemed Jalena could read her mind.

The young woman nodded. "It was her. She's ugly and horrible in her true form but even in this disguise, I recognize the features."

Maggie clapped her hands together. "We've got her. If only we could chain her up right now, be done with it."

Jalena shook her head. "It wouldn't work."

"I know," Maggie said with disappointment. "Her lower half has to be destroyed. And when that's done, she'll be turned to dust. Damn legends. Always so many rules."

As they headed back to the jeep, they went over the plan.

"So I go up in the plane," Maggie said, "while Vin is on lookout at the airfield. You and Rico come out here and find the monster's lower half while she's distracted."

Jalena shook her head. "She will still have hidden it, even if it is close to her home."

Maggie shrugged. "True but now you have a much smaller area to cover." She put an arm around Jalena's shoulders. "You can do it. I believe in you."

"I don't know if I believe in me."

As the day turned towards dusk, they made preparations. Jalena was home, Rico waiting outside in his jeep. Kaajal had a record on the turntable, an imported jazz tune. Jalena gathered what she needed, grabbing the whip last. She was about to leave when her sister stopped her.

Kaajal took Jalena's hand and held her close for a moment before speaking. "Come back."

"That's all?" Jalena said.

Kaajal nodded. "That's all."

They hugged. Outside, Rico honked the horn of the jeep. Jalena looked past her sister, still holding onto her, towards the open front door. Rico raised his hands in an impatient gesture. He indicated the setting sun behind him. Jalena nodded her understanding to him. They had to get moving.

She held her sister at arm's length, smiled. She nodded. "I will come back."

Kaajal wiped away her tears and let her sister go. Jalena lingered for a moment by the front door, then departed with Rico.

They got in the jeep, Rico shaking his head. "Can't believe you and that mad pilot talked me into this crazy business."

Jalena smiled at him. "I'm glad you're with us."

Rico shook his head again but couldn't help but smile back.

15

Dusk had passed. The moon began to rise above the treeline, casting shadows across the island.

Maggie fitted her flight cap, snapped it in place, goggles still set above her eyes on her forehead as she walked onto the runway. Flaming bottles already lined the strip for light. Vin followed Maggie out onto the runway, fiddling with something in his hands.

As Maggie reached the plane, she turned to him and smiled. "Get ready to send up smoke if something goes wrong."

Vin nodded, still fiddling with the object in his hands. Maggie frowned at it with bemused eyes.

"Gonna tell me why you're messing with that doodad?" she asked.

Vin looked up at her, smiled. Handed over the object. "I think you may need this."

Maggie took it. It was a dagger with a strange hilt, pocketed away in a sheath. Maggie tried it out by grasping the finger-fitting grip and pulling it out. The blade was shaped roughly like a leaf. She smiled down at it before nodding to Vin.

"It's a balarao," he said. "The winged dagger. Supposed to be effective against manananggal." He shrugged. "Don't know if it works, of course, but it was my father's and he wasn't the kind of man to buy anything frivolous, let alone keep it and hand it down to his oldest son."

"Thank you," Maggie said. "Might come in handy."

She wrapped its leather strap around her belt, made sure it was tight and secure. Vin saluted her and Maggie returned the salute and climbed into the plane. Before starting the engine, she shot a glance at him, cocked her head to one side. "You're sure you don't want to make this run yourself?"

Vin shook his head. “And be bait for that thing?” He chuckled. “Count me out. You can take the risk, thank you very much. Try to keep the aircraft intact, if you can.”

She chuckled, as well, and started up the engine as Vin got the propeller going. He backed away from the path of the aircraft as it taxied forward. A moment later, Maggie was in the air.

She crisscrossed the jungle over the spot where she and Jalena had found the little house. Just when she thought it wasn't going to work – that the aircraft wasn't enough of a distraction for the beast – a colony of bats exploded into the sky from below. The monster was coming.

That horrible “tik tik” sound filled the air once again, even blotting out the roar of the engines. Maggie winced at the intense noise but it faded fast as the creature approached. Its mouth was open impossibly wide, tongue lapping the air, leading with its claws.

Maggie, The Aviatrice, smiled. Despite everything, she was having the time of her life. When the beast was perhaps thirty yards away, Maggie banked the aircraft and headed away from the village, away from the house in the jungle. Her hope was to give Jalena and Rico enough time to find the beast's lower half and destroy it.

“Alright, kitten,” Maggie spoke to the aircraft, “let's see what you can really do!”

She pushed the plane for all it was worth, banking, spinning, tumbling. Whenever there was a sufficient clearing, she would fly as low as she could, hoping to drive the creature into the ground, sending it to oblivion. It was no good. The beast was an incredible flier, as deft and maneuverable as any winged creature. Still, she could delay it as long as she was able.

Soon, the beast was gaining on her. It tried to grasp hold of the repaired fin but Maggie dove out of its way, the creature close behind. With a growl, the manananggal came for Maggie herself, ignoring the aircraft.

It grasped onto Maggie's seat back, opened its mouth wide, drew its head up for a strike, its long sharp teeth glistening in the moonlight. Maggie, keeping her eyes on the path ahead, drew the dagger Vin had given her and, with one swift motion, brought it up and embedded it in the creature's right arm, just below the wrist, pinning it to the aircraft.

The beast howled with pain and anger. Slowly, it tried to extricate itself from the blade and Maggie seized the moment, banking hard to the right and sending the creature flying off the aircraft. The knife stayed where it was, tearing out of the beast's arm and sending a spray of horrid black blood into the air.

Maggie laughed as the creature fell, tumbling end over end, wings trying to find purchase against the air once again. The Aviatrice retrieved the knife and sheathed it away safely at her side. A moment later, the creature righted itself and raced towards her, faster now, filled with rage.

When it returned, it latched onto the aircraft's left wing. Maggie tried to shake it off but its grip was true. She could already see that the creature's wound was healing. She shook her head in disbelief. It was remarkable.

The creature caught her look and smiled hideously back at her. Their gazes were locked for a whole second before, with a mighty heave, the beast tore a massive chunk of the wing off. This dislodged the creature from the plane and it flapped in the air, watching the aircraft begin to immediately fall.

Maggie tried to control the plane as best she could at the same time looking for the creature. She caught a brief glimpse of it in the sky before it swept low, heading back towards its home. In that moment, Maggie knew that the creature sensed danger to its hidden lower half. It was heading for Rico.

And Jalena.

Maggie had to help if she could. Desperately, she forced the falling plane around, pushing it as far towards the hidden house as she was able. As the aircraft headed for the approaching ground, Maggie spotted a narrow strip of cleared land in the jungle. She didn't know if it was even possible to land the plane there – leaving out the possibility of safely – but it was worth a try.

The aircraft was leaning dangerously in one direction – a result of the damage – and Maggie tried to compensate, gripping the stick with all her might and pulling it in the other direction. The ground was fast approaching and she was still going too fast, the aircraft shaking and bucketing from side to side.

It was going to be a crash, for sure, but Maggie was aiming for a controlled crash. She grit her teeth and slid onto the earth. Dirt kicked up around her. The ground wasn't even, wasn't meant to be a landing strip, and it was doing quite a number on the aircraft.

“Come on, kitten, hold together,” Maggie coaxed it on.

A second later, one of the wheels snapped off and the aircraft abruptly halted. Maggie slammed her head into the windshield in front of her with a crack.

For a few seconds, she was out like a light. When she awoke, she lolled her head from side to side, trying to clear it. Her sight was all blurry. When it cleared, the world looked cracked. She frowned before realizing that it was just the windshield, cracked when her head ran into it.

She struggled out of the harness and began to climb out of the aircraft. Everything hurt but she was alive, which was something, at least. When her feet hit the ground, she crumbled and fell over, ass landing in the wet dirt.

She pushed herself off the ground and shook it off. She snapped off her flight cap and goggles and tossed them away, slapped herself in the face in an effort to wake up and think properly, sitting against the aircraft. The plane was damaged but not a complete loss; it could be repaired.

After a moment, she got on her feet, looked at the jungle ahead. She was pretty certain that she knew

where the cabin was or, at least, the general direction that it was in. With a half-grin, she started running towards Jalena.

Rico and Jalena came to the hidden house in the jungle armed, though some of those arms were of the unconventional variety. Rico carried a rifle slung over his shoulder but his hands were busy carting around a large bag of salt. Jalena carried a flashlight and her buntot pagi whip. Both of them had knives sheathed on their belts.

Night in the jungle was heavy, unseasonably humid. Jalena wiped her brow and looked about. The house was draped in thick, twisting vines that emerged from the ground and clung to the building, becoming a part of the jungle.

Jalena felt a chill run down her spine and forced herself to move towards the house. The two of them stepped onto the porch. Jalena tried the door but it was locked, which wasn't a surprise, but the house was old and busting the door frame didn't take much effort on Rico's part.

Jalena's mouth dropped open when she saw the interior of the house. Everything was lit with an eerie red light – a dim bulb with colored gel hung from the ceiling and swung lightly at the sudden hot breeze from outside. There were hanging jars filled with liquid and less pleasant, solid masses. The smell was overpowering. The place stunk of mold and disease. Bugs scattered across the floor at their presence.

The house was nothing more than a large open space – a window on each wall – with no dividers to create multiple rooms. In the center of the space, a large gnarled root dominated. It seemed to have ripped through the wood flooring of the building. It wasn't a tree, not quite – more a nightmare version of a tree, a thing only madmen dreamt about.

Jalena looked about at what little there was to look at. She found no bottom half of a human body.

Rico shook his head. “This is madness. We're not going to find anything here.”

Jalena nodded but kept looking. Sensing movement in the far corner of the room, she raised her whip and aimed her flashlight in that direction. For a moment, she saw nothing, only a twisted vine. When the vine moved, she realized that she had been mistaken. It wasn't a vine at all. It was a centipede. An unnaturally large centipede – perhaps three feet long – lying in wait. Readying itself for attack.

Jalena started and nudged Rico. He sighed and reluctantly looked where she was aiming her flashlight beam. His reaction was worse than hers. He nearly dropped the large bag of salt and took two

steps back.

Steeling her courage, Jalena strode towards the large insect, leading with the whip. She snapped at it once, twice. It reared up, threatening her with its pincers but she swatted it a third time and it finally departed, scampering away between the floorboards.

Jalena frowned. It must have been going somewhere, she reasoned.

She continued looking around and discovered a trap door. She looked up at her companion. "Take a look at this."

Rico joined her, crouching down alongside her. He inspected the door and nodded. "Could be a cellar."

Jalena smiled. "Could be a good place to hide something."

"Could be."

They opened the door together. Rico put the bag of salt aside to help. The hole that the door led to was earthen, a ladder installed on one side. It was dark. Jalena shined her flashlight down into the pit. The beam seemed to disappear only a few feet down, swallowed up by the darkness.

She looked up at Rico and shrugged. "Guess we better go down."

"Guess so," Rico sighed.

Jalena started down first while Rico grabbed the bag of salt. A distant, bird-like call was audible. It sounded to Jalena like, "tik tik." She frowned but the sound faded shortly.

It came as a shock, then, when the manananggal came flying into the house through the open door, silent and terrifying, wings spread wide, mouth gaping open. It barreled into Rico. He dropped the bag of salt near the trap door and was sent hurtling through the nearest window. It shattered and he was cast out into the jungle, knocked out cold.

Jalena screamed, lost her footing on the ladder and fell into darkness. She landed on her back, the wind knocked out of her. Struggling on the earthen floor for a moment, she whirled about, shining her flashlight around.

The roots of the not-tree above created a cave-like interior here below the house. It was twenty yards across and Jalena was elated to see that the creature's separate lower half was, indeed, here. It leaned against a large root, partially entangled in it.

But the salt was upstairs!

As she thought this, the manananggal came down the hole, a tangle of wings and slashing arms. It was still eerily silent and Jalena suppressed a scream. She was terrified but she had to act, had to save her sister if she could.

She dropped the flashlight to the ground and struck out at the approaching creature with her whip.

The beast dodged the attack and came at her from the side. Jalena rolled out of the way and came up swinging, striking the monster across the face.

The creature howled and backed away, giving Jalena enough time to run and jump at the ladder, clinging on with one hand, battering with her whip behind her. It was no good. She simply couldn't fight off the monster and retrieve the bag of salt at the same time. She needed help.

It was at that moment that a voice rang out from above. "Hey, ugly! You forgot to finish me off!"

The monster grit its teeth and looked up the hole. Jalena smiled. The voice belonged to Maggie Engel, The Aviatrix.

Things happened very fast after that. Jalena dropped from the ladder at the same moment that Maggie kicked the bag of salt down to her. Jalena caught it and rolled out of the way at the same time that the manananggal went flying back up into the house.

"Take care of it!" Maggie yelled. "I'll hold her off!"

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The manananggal came shooting out of the hole and into the air, bathed in the red light of the house. Maggie was ready for it and rolled underneath it as it swooped towards her. She came up with a smile, eyes wide with excitement.

The flying creature banked and came around for another attack. Its claws reached out for Maggie. The Aviatrix grabbed her own weapon, the knife that Vin had given her.

When the attack came, Maggie dodged again, swiping out with the blade and cutting a groove into the thick flesh of the beast's right wing. The creature howled with pain and whirled around, swiping out with its arm.

The blow connected with Maggie's face and she went tumbling to the hard floor. The beast was about to go in for a killing blow, arms spread wide, when a gunshot rang out. A rifle bullet came flying through the broken window and struck the monster in the side.

It wasn't a fatal wound – not in the slightest – but it distracted the monster and it looked out to see Rico on the other side of the window, standing in the jungle, rifle aimed. He grinned at the beast as he loaded another round into the chamber. "Didn't like that, did you?!"

Maggie – seizing the moment and still smiling – came up with her knife and drove it into the monster's belly. The creature was too wounded to scream or cry out. It flapped backwards, away from Maggie.

Rico fired again, this time hitting the monster in the upper chest on the right side. Still not a fatal

wound – not for a supernatural being – but enough to push it back even further. The manananggal clutched at its stomach, trying to extract the blade but every time its fingers came in contact with it, there was a hissing sound as its flesh was burned.

The same thing was happening to its belly. Maggie could see the flesh burning away there. At the same time, Jalena's voice came ringing up from the pit below them. "It's done! The bottom half is burning away! It's like magic!"

The manananggal struggled in the air a moment longer before collapsing to the floor in a heap. It writhed and managed to cry out, one clawed hand reaching out for the open trap door, its fingernails clattering against the wood paneling.

Rico was framed in the broken window now, watching as the monster began to crumble like burning logs in a campfire. Its stretched-out arm broke off like ash from a cigarette. The detached limb bounced and rolled into the open trap door, falling into darkness.

It looked up at Maggie and opened its mouth wide, tongue writhing about. First the tongue melted and slithered out of the gaping hole, then the monster's jaw broke off and burst when it hit the floor.

Its head soon followed. After a moment, nothing was left but ash, the balarao knife resting in its center.

18

At the cafe near the hotel the next morning, Maggie turned the knife over and over in her hands. She had tried to return it to Vin but he had insisted that she keep it. That she had earned it. She had given him money – quite a lot of money – to repair the aircraft and to compensate for his time and help. *That* he had accepted.

Rico had been quiet. Maggie figured that his whole worldview had changed because of this encounter. She could sympathize. She had seen some strange things in her life over the years but remembered what it felt like that first time when her old view of the world was challenged. It was sobering but you had to see the joy in things. That was what kept you living.

Maggie saw Jalean approaching her table. *Case in point*, she thought.

Jalena sat opposite her. They didn't say anything to each other. Not while they ate breakfast. Not while they shared a morning drink. Not for some time. In fact, the only thing that was spoken between them there at the table in the little cafe was at the end. Maggie said it.

"Want to join me in my hotel room?" she asked.

Jalena only nodded.

A few hours later, they enjoyed a cigarette together, naked, lying in bed. Once again they were silent. Both of them wore big smiles, their hands entwined.

When the cigarette was finished, Maggie stubbed it out in the ashtray on the nightstand. She brought up Jalena's hand and kissed it.

“You could come with me, you know,” she said.

“Come with you where?” Jalena asked.

Maggie shrugged. “Home.”

“And where is that?”

“Just outside Newark, New Jersey. It's nice.”

Jalena chuckled, shook her head. “No.”

Maggie screwed up her face, although she knew this would be Jalena's answer. “Your sister. I know.”

Jalena nodded. “Yes. I have to take care of her. Help her raise her daughter.”

“You're sure it will be a girl.”

“I'm sure.”

“You're confident.”

“I am.”

Maggie sighed and the two of them lay next to each other, looking up at the hotel room ceiling. The sun was shining outside the open window and a light breeze wandered into the room. It was glorious.

“Let's just stay here and enjoy this a little while,” Maggie said. “No matter what happens in the future.”

“I'd like that,” Jalena said.

The following day, Jalena and Kaajal came to see Maggie off. Vin and Rico had met her in town with the jeep. All four of them converged in front of the hotel. Jalena told Kaajal what had happened – well, most of it, anyway – and Kaajal was grateful for Maggie's help.

Maggie packed light – only a single suitcase – and wore her knife proudly on her belt. She thanked them all for the wonderful time she had while visiting the island. She came to Jalena last and they

hugged. They didn't kiss – Jalena wasn't ready to tell her sister yet – but it was a good hug, long and heartfelt.

When it was finished, Maggie held the young woman at arm's length. “You're the bravest person I know, Jalena.”

Jalena, embarrassed, looked down. Maggie used the tip of her pointer finger to lift the young woman's face back up by the chin. “And I mean that.”

Jalena smiled. Nodded.

“This isn't goodbye,” Maggie said as she got in the jeep with Rico. “I'll see you all again.”

“When?” Jalena asked.

Maggie shrugged. “I don't know.” She laughed.

As the jeep started to drive away, Jalena left her sister's side and ran alongside the vehicle for a moment. “How will I find you?”

Maggie had to shout to be heard as the jeep roared away, hands cupped over her mouth with a wink. “Always look up!”

Jalena let the jeep outpace her. Kaajal joined her and Jalena put an arm around her sister. They watched the jeep go, heading towards the coast where Maggie would pick up a boat for her departure.

Jalena was just able to see Maggie wave to her as the jeep disappeared over a distant hill. She didn't have time to wave back.

end

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