

AFTER THE GREAT FIRE

(from Bolivia)

A long time ago in the Land of the Yuracaré, there raged a terrible war between two groups. As soon as one group began to yearn for peace, an evil wizard named Sararuma would whisper something terrible to them about what the other side was planning to do. "They plan to attack you," Sararuma would snarl. "You must act now, while the land is still dry from the drought. Set fire to the enemy's lands. They'll never bother you again!" Then he ran to the other side. "I know your enemy plans to set fire to your land. Quickly, you must set fire to their land before they do the same to you!"

Before long all the grasslands of the countryside were ablaze and both sides had completely destroyed the other.

Only one man and woman survived. They had seen the war getting worse and worse. They had tried to urge their leaders to talk to the other side, but none would listen. At last, the couple hid themselves deep in the earth with provisions to last many days, and so they were spared. After the great fire, they were the only human beings left alive on earth.

From the safety of their hole in the ground they could see the flames and could smell the smoke still raging outside. After several days, when the worst of the destruction had subsided, the man crawled to the surface and stretched out a twig. Instantly, it caught afire. "It is too soon," he said, and quickly returned to the safety of their den. The next day his wife tried, and again the twig smoldered. For eight more days they tried and on the tenth day the twig neither burned nor smoldered. Carefully, they emerged from their hiding place to the surface.

And looked around.

"Ashes - everywhere," said the man. His wife murmured, "There is nothing I recognize." No grasses, no trees were left standing. There were no people and no animals. Only an expanse of flat land, ankle-deep in places with ash and swept over by great clouds of swirling dust.

Suddenly, in front of them loomed the evil wizard Sararuma himself. His cloak, red as flame, billowed around him.

"How do you like it?" he said, snarling. "Of course you, too, will soon die."

"We do not have to die," said the man.

"We will live," said his wife.

"Worse for you if you do!" he howled. "A pathetic existence, dying of hunger in this deathbed of dust and ashes."

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"The land is dry for now, true," said the wife, fingering seeds in her pocket. "But we can plant."

All of a sudden, Sararuma started to shrink. And as he dwindled in size, the tips of new grass sprouted through the ashes.

"What makes you think you're any different from the others?" he shouted, flailing his arms. "You'll end up in wars and destruction, like the rest of the filthy, despicable humans!"

"We can't know what will happen," said the man, "but we'll go on."

The charred trees began to turn green. Sararuma was barely the size of a child.

"You're the only ones left!" he squeaked in a rage. "You'll have no one to talk to."

"Things will change," said the man. His wife added, "We shall have children."

Then animals rose from the ashes and started to peek their noses about. Sararuma's cloak wound around him one last time as he was turned into a gust of wind that was blown away, howling.