

Skin in the Game

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Contents

Title Page
Copyright Notice

Begin Reading

Copyright

Geocache

I am at B Street and Somerset, headed for Zombie City. Or La Boca del Diablo—the Devil’s Mouth—as the Latinos in the surrounding barrio call it.

Neither name shows up on GPS, of course, because maps are pure fantasy. What is real doesn’t fit on a grid. And Zombie City/La Boca del Diablo is real.

The zombies, los vivos, the ghosts who live there—all real. Their hunger—real.

It’s the city’s double-named portal to the underworld, and I’m headed there because I have some sympathy for its inhabitants. Because I know hunger. And because it’s my beat.

* * *

Not the Expected Fictions

The zombies are all white.

They take the subway to Somerset, cross the streets of the barrio, then climb through a hole in the railroad fence and scramble down under the Conrail tracks to get their ten dollar fixes of heroin.

After shooting up, while their minds are swaddled in the wooliest moment of their drug, they pace the rails—wordless, aimless, brains on mute—until need turns them back around to do it again.

Los vivos are Latino.

Vivo means alive—as in the mothers, grandmothers, kids, comais, and compais who live on the streets above la Boca del Diablo. But it also means cunning, as in the drug dealers they are always assumed to be, and sometimes are.

The zombies and los vivos coexist for minutes, hours, and sometimes days together: the dead white ones who pay not to see, and the living brown ones who can’t look away.

And around them, flitting in and out of notice, the ghosts. They are black and white and brown, because homelessness may be the only thing in this city that doesn’t heed our segregated neighborhood lines.

The ghosts pitch their tents at the edge of Zombie City and string wards and prayers from tarp to tarp. Better than any other resident or visitor, the ghosts know the truth. No moment of peace is guaranteed.

* * *

Stay In or Take Out

Yolanda looks up at me, hands spread protectively over the bags of food in the trunk of her car. She always parks it at the same spot on the Richmond bridge above Zombie City.

“Ah, Blanca,” she says. It’s not my name, but what she calls me because I take after my father and pass for white. She’s Afrolatina, so the Boricuas and Dominicans call her morena. Or, when they want to slur, prieta.

Spanish is so damned regional, even in the city. As a Mexican from South Philly, morena doesn’t mean black to me, and prieta is an insult more commonly levied at those of us with indigenous heritage. But I learned as soon as I got to the 24th precinct that I’d better adapt to the older barrio’s way.

“Somebody been hassling you, Yoli?” I ask. The ghosts love her because she brings cooked meals for them every other day, but the zombies and dealers can get rough sometimes.

“No, of course not,” she answers, but I see her shoulders relax.

I’m shorter than Yoli—shorter than most women in the United States because my mother is from Chiapas and my tatarabuela was Mam—but I’m big otherwise and all of it is muscle. Plus, I’m quick with my taser and the 9 mm. People know not to mess with Yoli when I’m around.

“La Isleta gave me some pork and yuca for today’s meals,” she says. “And McDonald’s pitched in some fries.” Yoli doesn’t have much to call her own, but she gets every merchant in the barrio to contribute food for the ghosts.

“It’s all still warm. Want some?” she asks. She knows I don’t eat while I’m on duty, but she asks the same thing every time we meet, because she’s got that gene that equates food with caring.

“Nah,” I say, even though my stomach is swimming with Dunkin’ Donuts black and nothing else to soak up its acid. “We got a missing person’s report, I’m just here to look for the kid among the zombies.”

Her nose twitches. If it’s possible for Yoli to feel disdain for another human being—and I’m not sure it is—it’d be for the zombies. It’s not the drug use (she herself carries old scars from addiction), but the fact that most of them have an open future and decent schooling and still choose to live lit.

Despair Yoli understands, boredom not so much. Those are her words. I know it’s not just boredom that drives the zombies, but why argue with her? Yoli is one of the few truly decent people I know, and when I argue I tend to alienate.

“Help me distribute food first,” she says. Her eyes are wide, full of entreaty and the type of pain that makes me want to reconfigure the world.

I raise my eyebrows to let her know I’m on to her. She’s got magic—all of us do—

and she's apt to use it when she's asking for the ghosts.

She gives a little laugh and lets her eyes slide away from mine. "It is such a pain in the ass that you're resistant to el embrujo," she says.

"You know I wouldn't be here otherwise," I say.

Long ago I learned that if you reveal one ugly story people will leave off asking for more. They'll think they've gotten to the core of what makes you who you are. Yoli knows that my resistance to magic was born from an act of violence, but she doesn't know any of the rest. And just as well.

"I'm hearing things from the tents," Yoli says by way of explanation for her attempted manipulation. "There are new folks in la Boca del Diablo. Almost every ghost I speak to is haunted and in fear and it's not the usual. I could use your help figuring out what's going on."

"Later," I say. "I have only a short window of opportunity before the missing kid gets caught up and can no longer leave. But if you need help carrying those bags down..."

She shakes her head. I've put some ten feet of busted-up asphalt between us before she says anything.

"Jimena."

Her use of my proper name stops me, spins me around to face her again.

There's a beat, or two, before she says anything. "Are we caught up? Can either of us really leave?"

"We're not in thrall to anything," I say.

She gives me a smile weighted by doubt.

* * *

To Spell It in Spanish, End at I

I think about Yoli's smile as I climb down the Devil's Mouth, to the heart of Zombie City. A scan of the tracks is all I need: the zombies cluster under the overpass, busy at their table of floored girder, heating powder on aluminum bowls made from can bottoms before shooting the stuff into their necks, because their arms are already shot to shit.

One look isn't enough to tell me whether the teen I'm searching for is in any of the tents that wing out from that central hub under the bridge, but it isn't likely. The ghosts and zombies may share this eight-block stretch of rail bed, but the ghosts are families with children, and they don't let anyone else near their tarps. Only Yoli.

Still, I do a quick check down the alleys between tents, and plod through a carpet of used syringes as I walk the tracks. Nothing catches my attention. Except a needle almost makes it through the thick sole of my shoe, and I'm thankful—as I am at least

once a day—that the department requires the clunkiest, heaviest mother of a shoe. I would already have the Hep alphabet flowing through my veins if not.

I meet up with Yoli again as she’s hauling her garbage bags full of food down into la Boca and I’m climbing out. “I heard one of the Biblicals mention a new house,” she says when she stops to catch her breath.

The Biblicals are two Boricuas and a Cuban—Ismael, Ezequiel, and Zacarías—who started as lowly bagmen in the eighties and are now kings of whatever makes it onto the barrio streets and down to Zombie City/La Boca del Diablo. Even with their tripled magic, the Biblicals aren’t top echelon in the Philly drug trade. But they’re as close as any Latino has gotten. The fraudulent drug rehabilitation houses they’ve set up to import the already addicted from the island to the mainland has earned them a steady supply of clients and money.

What can I say? We prey best on our own.

* * *

Johnny the Fox

Back up on the streets, there are dozens of people out and about in the commercial hub under the El: Puertorriqueñas and Dominicanas in quilted jackets even though the weather hasn’t turned yet; white girls just off the subway and already crossing onto the lying-est place in the barrio—Hope Street—for party favors to take back to school with them. And, on one of my favorite corners, old men shuffling dominoes on rickety tables in front of the busiest of the old-time bodegas. Their guayaberas are so white they dazzle the eye.

“Eh, Mena,” one of the guayabera clad says to me, overfamiliar as always.

I’ve got more nicknames than I can keep track of, but Officer Villagrán is what I’ve told this guy he should call me. You’ve got to demand your respect when most people are twice your size. But Johnny Zafón is hopeless, and not to be trusted even with a name.

Johnny, el del barrio. Johnny, el Zorro. A charmer, a con man and ex-con. He didn’t serve much time, but enough to bear its marks.

“Know anything about a missing kid?” I ask him. “Five-nine or so, just eighteen, buying for his frat?”

“¿Zombi?”

I nod.

“What will you give me for the information, Jimena, Mena, Menita?” he croons.

Of course. Johnny’s magic is in his voice. Back in Mayagüez, his father used to sing the sailboats safely into port. Even I feel the tug of the rich baritone and his repeating words.

“Nada,” I say. “I don’t buy or sell.”

For an instant his eyes go sad. “You know you’re going to pay sometime.”

“Not today,” I say.

He cocks his head like the fox of his nickname, studies me, then gives me an address. I nod my thanks before turning to go.

“You’re going to need backup,” Johnny says.

* * *

Partners and Other Troubles

Everyone in the barrio hates my partner, Nasey. I don’t blame them. Nasey’s the first to tell you he’s got a thing for spics, likes to fuck them over in every possible sense of the word.

He tried with me when I started, but after that hellish first day I’ve added a pinch of one of my mother’s mixes into every pot of station-house coffee. Nasey always accepts a cup—he says after the childhood he had, he doesn’t ever turn down a gift or free food—and as soon as he has a sip, he becomes nauseated in my presence. Gag reflex on overdrive, acid rushing up his throat, stomach cramps. If he steps away from me, it’s better.

The nausea makes him amenable to breaking protocols, and he drives the cruiser down the streets of our beat in the 24th while I cross the 26th precinct line to work Zombie City/La Boca. Nasey’s got the friendships to make sure the cops at both the 24th and the 26th turn a blind eye to the arrangement. They don’t call it blue solidarity for nothing.

Johnny watches me as all this runs through my head (and across my face), then gives me a glum “are you done with me?” look before ducking into the bodega. No doubt to warn wizened little Tatán Ortiz that the cops will be all over the neighborhood soon, so he should hide any evidence that he trades food and WIC vouchers for cash payouts (minus his cut). They don’t call it barrio solidarity for nothing.

I play with the walkie before I press any buttons. Long enough for the word to spread among los vivos. Long enough for the zombies to hide inside the hollowed-out, trashed couches along the rail bed. Long enough, even, for the ghosts to gather their lives into grocery bags and vacate.

I dally long enough to cost me my badge if someone important were watching.

But that’s the thing: what survives here, good and bad, does so because nobody is watching. Not the council people nor state legislators whose districts overlap in Zombie City; not church do-gooders; not police nor social workers nor public health officials.

Just me.

* * *

Fronts

El Centro de Rehabilitación Corazón Fuerte has a nice façade, but get past the door and its heart is rotten.

The first room we go into has so much trash strewn about it's impossible to tell whether there's hardwood or carpet beneath our feet. It was once grand, that I can see from the crumbling plaster detail on the ceiling and the decaying moldings.

There's no one in the room. Nor in any of the rooms we check on the bottom floor. Nasey says he searched the database as soon as I called, and this rehab is officially listed as serving some twenty-five residents. Whatever money they make from drug sales is frosting on the rip-off-human-services cake.

I find the body on the third floor. Sprawled out, face down, hair dark and wet from some cold sweat she went into before keeling over. It's not the boy from the missing persons report, but a viva. As we move closer, I see tiny bits of foil kick up and dance in the light streaming through the busted-out window. Addiction's telltales.

"Another OD," Nasey says.

I squat down, push the girl's shoulder to turn her over. Not an OD—her chest is cracked open. It is a disturbingly tidy cavity, without a single organ or even much blood left to pool under it.

"Jesus," Nasey says. "You ever seen this kind of thing before?"

I shake my head.

Nasey takes a step back, burps, reholsters his gun. "Special Units is going to want a piece of this. Better for us. Except for the part where we have to wait for them to show up."

Then he burps again. Grimaces. The color climbs up those pale cheeks and I swear it even tints his hair as he fumbles with the radio. "Too much coffee," he says. His eyes stay on mine longer than they should. Maybe he knows.

Non-Latino folk have magic too. I sense it when I go to the Ukrainian neighborhood to buy pierogies, or when I pick up an order in Chinatown. Sometimes I even feel it reaching out to me from my father's people if I get roped into working the St. Patrick's Day parade which, thankfully, isn't often.

People who talk about code switching don't know the half of it.

"They're on their way," Nasey says. I hear his footsteps as he leaves the room, but my gaze lingers on the dead girl. Her skin is still good, which means she was new to this. I use my thumbs to drag the lids down over her eyes, then shove both thumbs in my mouth.

The taste of her fear-driven flop sweat, her death, washes over my tongue, takes the edge off the hunger that's always nested inside me. Taste prompts image. I see the

girl, face upturned as she waits for her fix, then something striking fast at her chest. Not a knife, but a mouth with scimitar teeth that pop out like double switchblades. I'd like to say I focus on the face of the assailant in the vision, like a good cop would, but I don't. Just the blood. So much blood. My gut clenches with a sympathetic convulsion.

I take my thumbs out of my mouth and scramble to my feet to find Nasey. He's leaning against a rickety-looking banister, shooting the shit with two other dudes from the precinct. As soon as he sees me come through the doorway, he steps up to meet me.

"I've got to go," I say. "You'll have to deal with the paperwork."

His eyes narrow. "Whadya have?"

"Nothing. A rumor to check out."

As I start to brush by him, he gags, then swallows hard several times and grabs my arm. "If the rumor looks good, you'll call me in, right?"

"Sure."

"I mean it, Villagrán."

He pronounces my surname perfectly. Nasey may play the part, but he's not truly a redneck. He's something else I haven't been able to decipher yet, hurt and bitter and confident all rolled together.

Because there are so many cops on the fake rehab center call, the streets of el barrio are nearly deserted as I make my way back to the entrance of Zombie City/La Boca. Once more through the packed mud lip, the stone teeth, and down its gullet to the tripas, the innards, of forgotten Philly.

"Tell me about the new ghosts haunting this place," I say when I find Yoli.

She hands out the ten or so meal boxes in her final garbage bag before she turns to me.

"Not ghosts," she says. "Monsters."

* * *

Me, Myself, and Mine

So the thing about monsters is that it is easy to confuse us for human. If we want to we can look the same, smell the same, behave the same.

Some purport we can be identified by our teeth, but they are unreliable indicators at best. A number of us have fangs that fold back and are completely hidden, hinging out only when we get within striking distance of our prey. Others have hollow, venom-stemmed teeth that pivot sideways in their socket joints. These last don't even have to open their mouths to strike, they wear their concealing smiles the whole time.

But even monsters with fixed rows of fully visible needle teeth don't need to worry

these days. Human kids have started to file their teeth sharp in a bid to be considered edgy and fashionable, and the visual confusion works to the monsters' advantage.

In any case, nobody has ever been able to see me for what I really am. Not even my mother, who must have started looking for the monstrous telltales the minute I slipped out of her on a slick of vernix and blood. She knew as well—no, better—than any of her foremothers which herbs to use to rid herself of the product of rape, but she didn't.

So I try to do justice to her faith in me.

I hunt my own. My monstrous kin. And when I take them down, the last thing I see in their eyes is the sting of my treachery.

But I ask, what deserves my loyalty?

Not the hunger. Never the hunger.

* * *

Another Kind of Ghost

I don't know what Yoli reads on my face—self-loathing, stubbornness, what—but her jaw sets. "Tell me whatever it is you're not saying," she demands.

She's not using magic, but for the first time since we've known each other, the need to let her under the surface of my story hits as hard and fulminating as any other desire I've ever experienced. Even the one called up by blood and soft organ meats.

It takes me a while. I don't want to lose her friendship, and even her understanding that we don't pick our magic—or our parents—won't be enough to prepare her.

"The victim," I say. "The thing that took her out ... I know it. I know its taste. It tastes like me."

"You?"

"It has my same DNA."

I climb into the passenger side of her car without her asking me to get in, and when she slides in the driver's side she focuses on fitting the key into the ignition. Her hand shakes a little.

"I guess it's time we talk to your mother," she says.

* * *

Las Girlfriends

My mother lives on a block of South Philly I've come to call Witch Central, because the neighbors whose houses flank hers have her same proclivities. They're all old; single or singled; women who keep too many animals for their small living spaces: Sonia keeps birds, Nilda turtles, and my mother cats. They dress alike—as if big flower prints had never gone out of style—and talk alike, with accents that have

slipped from Chiapas, Tabasco, and Guatemala to generic Spanish. They've even started a business together, though they can't decide how serious they are about the actual selling side, so it's more sideline than subsistence.

When Yoli and I pull up, my mother's place is dark but light dances out of Sonia's windows. She opens almost immediately after we knock. A wave of warmth pulses through the door because she, like my mother, keeps her thermostat at a near-tropical setting.

"Eh, Mena, entra," Sonia says, stepping aside to let me in. Then she bellows, "Oye, Rosa Marta, llegó tu hija."

Not only my mother, but Nilda and about a dozen little finches perching free of their cages, look over at the summons.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your party," I say, "I just need to talk to my mother."

"Ay, chula, it's no party and no interruption," Sonia answers as she moves away and lets my mother take her place.

"So, he's found you," my mother says as soon as she takes a look at my face.

"How? And why?" I ask, following her from the entryway to the big room that is Sonia's living room, dining room, and kitchen all rolled into one. I hear Yoli close the front door and come up behind me.

"He's your father, mija," Nilda says. "That says it all, no?" She's the oldest and largest of las girlfriends, and at the moment she has her massive arms sunk elbow-deep in the bowl of masa she's mixing on Sonia's kitchen table.

"You think monsters don't pay attention to rumor?" my mother says to me. "Or that they don't know you're protecting humans at their expense? The surprise is they've taken this long to try to rid themselves of a turncoat."

"You knew." My words come hard, pushing against the years of disguise and subterfuge.

"I'm your mother. Of course I knew." She wipes her hands on the apron that half covers her wide skirt and comes behind me to guide me into one of the kitchen chairs. "Sit," she says, pushing on my shoulders. She nods to Yoli to grab the remaining seat.

Yoli clears her throat. "Are you saying the body Blanca found was left there as a message for her?"

My mother scrunches her face at the unfamiliar nickname. She rummages through the jars of ground herbs gathered on the table and hands one to Sonia before she nods.

"There are probably other kills like it that haven't been found yet," my mother says to Yoli. "Vivos, zombies, ghosts—anyone under Mena's protection."

"In order to force a confrontation with her?" Yoli's voice turns skeptical. "Doesn't that—"

“No, *mija*,” Nilda interrupts, “not confrontation. Mena’s father wants to reclaim her. ¿Entiendes?” She spreads the masa on a banana leaf she hands to Sonia, who sprinkles the ground herbs onto it, folds the leaf, and gives it to my mother to tie and place in the tamalera. Their hands work independent of their minds, because they’re all watching Yoli and me with their too bright, too dark eyes.

“The hunger is always inside me,” I say, but tentatively, because it’s the first time I’ve lent breath to these thoughts. “Like a huge hole that wants to be filled with blood. Blood, or the taste of human fear.

“I hold it back with tricks of restraint. With hope of redemption. But just barely,” I say. “My father must know that. He knows who I really am, because he made me.”

Yoli stays quiet for a long time, then gives me one of her looks—the one with which she compels good—even though she knows it won’t work on me. Even now that she knows why.

“But your father isn’t the only one who made you,” she says finally.

“¡Eso!” I hear the old women say. *That!*

And with it, they acknowledge Yoli worthy to add something to the collective magic they’re cooking up: they hand her an apron. For a few minutes—finches flying free in circles around us and the women I love making their tamales—I let myself believe that nurture can win over nature.

Either way, I’ve got skin in the game.

* * *

Hunger

Las girlfriends make hundreds of tamales with special protections steamed into them. Tamágicos is what they’ve called them since they first started making them a few years ago. The little steamed packets—wrapped variously in plantain leaf or corn husk—bring love and luck and winning judgments after just a few bites. They’d be a hit even without the magic—Sonia, Nilda, and my mother have never once in their lives made a bad, or even mediocre, tamal.

They drive their battered vehicle around the older barrio streets not so very different from their own South Philly ones, handing out free samples as they ask people to nominate them for Best Food Truck on *Philly Magazine*’s annual list. Sonia’s daughter Pat comes up with the ruse.

Unfortunately, not only does it point out the city’s cultural gulf (no barrio store carries the Anglo magazine, so las girlfriends have to write out the internet address on scraps of paper) but also, it doesn’t have enough reach. Even with Yoli handing out more tamágicos to the ghosts, and me sharing them with the domino players and bodegueros, too many are left unfed.

The next week, Nasey and I crash three more fraudulent drug rehabs and stumble onto four more bodies. Johnny the Fox brings me word that the Biblicals are down to two—Ezequiel has met an end that left him looking like a lobster after its innards have been scooped out by a famished diner.

And at the tents, two of the ghost children have gone missing. Yoli and I find one shell of a body spraddled across a ditch at the far end of the rail bed, and another small one folded into a box that once held a microwave.

With every body found, the spasms twist my gut, urgent and increasingly undeniable. I'm running out of time.

* * *

On the Rails

I'm crunching across the familiar landscape of needles. A hundred feet behind me, the zombies' girder table is empty.

In just seventy-two hours everything has changed.

The tents are gone and so are most of the ghosts. After the gruesome deaths of the two homeless children leaked to the public, the District Attorney swept in with most of the 26th precinct at his back and social services covering his flanks, to tear down the makeshift homes, haul the adults in for criminal checks, and portion out the children to the city's youth shelters.

And to arrest the zombies, from whose ranks the child killer is assumed to have come.

It is an election year, and after the well-coifed and well-heeled TV reporters slip and slide down the steep incline of Zombie City/La Boca del Diablo, the cameras capture the DA's heroic stance and tough words as slow-moving zombies are put in restraints behind him, and ghosts are roused from their homes.

By the time it is done, one of the news people has been taken away in an ambulance with a spent needle caught through the thin red sole of her stylish shoe. The DA and cops, who've never experienced Zombie City, leave ... counting the minutes until they can bleach the traces of it from their hands and minds.

Nasey stays longer than anyone else.

He pokes at a stained mattress pushed up against a hollowed-out sofa and mound of other rubble the city sanitation guys are supposed to clean out in the next couple of days. It'll never be cleaned, I'm sure of this, as I'm sure that the fast-scattering zombies will be back, and new ghosts will find their way here. Zombie City is self-renewing, and probably eternal.

"You can't do this anymore, Villagrán," Nasey says when he finally looks up at me.

“What?”

He motions around him. “Protecting the zombies and ghosts. It’s not meant to be like this. You, alone.” His voice is uncharacteristically kind, and I feel hope surge up in me, fierce and unexpected.

“Are you saying you’ll join me?”

He gives me a tight-lipped smile as he shakes his head.

Hope, such a human attribute. When Nasey’s teeth rotate on their sockets and project from between his closed lips to punch through my skin and pump their venom, I should curse my mother for the weakness I inherited from her.

But I doubt I’ll long have the heart to curse.

* * *

Fraternal Order

I’m not bound, but the paralyzing venom wears off slowly. Some monsters like to play with their food, I guess.

Nasey has taken me to a private club on the corner of Front and Lehigh that never gets busted because it’s at the juncture of three precincts and everyone knows it caters to cops. It is a plain space, enlivened only by bar mirrors and the colors that flash from the screens of illegal poker machines.

It’s not only Nasey in the room. Three of my colleagues from the 24th, and eight cops from the 25th and 26th lounge at tables and stools, all watching me. When I can speak again I ask them what they’re waiting for.

“Not what, who,” says an officer from the 25th. She looks familiar, but not enough to call up a name. “The head of our little fraternity. Should be here shortly.”

“We’re giving you the benefit of a doubt, being that you’re one of us,” Nasey adds, in a tone I assume is meant to reassure me, but infuriates me instead.

“I’ve never been one of you,” I say. “Not as a cop, not as a monster.”

“That’s my fault,” says a new voice. A tall, sandy-haired figure moves from the shadowed door behind the bar to stand in front of me. The eagle insignia identifies him as an inspector, his features identify him as my father.

“If I had realized your mother had some cunning craft, I never would have gotten you on her,” he says, after he’s studied me.

“Your bad,” I say. My hand strays to where my taser usually hangs but, of course, Nasey has taken that from me. “Speaking of my mother ... she’ll figure this out and come looking.”

He waves the comment away. “Nedders are resistant to puny human magicks, as you well know.”

“St. Patrick managed to drive you out of Ireland while he was still human.”

He doesn't laugh, but his smile stretches so wide he no longer passes for human.

"And turned us from isolated, solitary predators to a fraternity in exile," my father says. "So here we are now—a fraternity within a fraternity within yet another fraternity—the threefold blessing.

"Nedders keep tabs on every class graduating out of the police academy," he continues. "But it wasn't until you slipped that herbal mickey into the coffee at the 24th that anyone started paying attention to you."

He sighs. "How many monsters have you killed? Seven? Ten? If they were humans instead, you'd be on par with our most promising rookies. You've got good aim, kid, you just picked the wrong targets."

"She hasn't killed one of us, just solitary monsters of lesser type," Nasey pipes up. "And we aren't sworn to loyalty to them. I say we give her a chance. She's got the instincts and the hunger, and if we teach her proper Nedder protocols—"

"You can't teach loyalty," one of the cops from the 26th interjects.

"She's my partner, I'll vouch for her."

I'm stunned by this, and so are the others. There is a rustling from among their ranks, and one voice rings clear, "Crack her, drain her, share her tender bits." And then, a sound of metal pinging on metal.

I think some of the cops are tapping their badges on their holstered pistols and I don't know what it means. I don't even know if it's a cop thing, or a monster thing, or something specifically Nedder. I don't know, because I've always been on the loneliest of trajectories.

And it's this thought, more than anything that has preceded it, that lands a punch. What might it be like to be surrounded by those who share my desire? Who understand the how and why of who I am? Who swear to have my back no matter what I've done?

I want to belong somewhere. I crave community even more than I crave blood.

The metallic sound gets louder, relentlessly rhythmic and hypnotic. I feel myself vibrating to it as it fills the room. It takes all my will to force my words out into that ringing space.

"I'm sorry, Nasey, but no," I say.

Nasey's teeth rotate and poke out from his closed lips, as do those of some of the other Nedders; those with fangs, like my father and me, let them slide out from their maxillae and snap into place. All of us are showing and ready to strike, but we don't move.

Melody serpentine across the percussive backbone, then sidwinds to full-on music.

I don't know who cuts through the metal doors of the private club—there are a

number of folks in the barrio who know how to work an acetylene torch—but the first person I see come through is Johnny the Fox, shimmying in time to his own singing. Behind him are his domino-playing companions—hitting cowbells with clappers, running steel brushes up and down güiras—and old Tatán Ortíz, thumbing the metal tabs of a marimbol almost bigger than he is.

Behind them, dozens of others: las girlfriends with Yoli, too many vivos to count, and a few zombies and ghosts who were missed in the raid. Almost everyone is carrying metal: bars, jagged lengths of window grille, even a few cortacañas and machetes, which they ring, metal on metal, blade on blade, keeping to the rhythm Johnny and his band set.

They dance around us, a swarm of warm human bodies surrounding the cold-blooded ones vibrating open-mouthed and torpid from the music.

Las girlfriends and Yoli encircle me in arms. It's not a hug, and not an attempt to further immobilize me. They shield me from what's coming. Anyone who's lived in the tropics can tell you: you've got to cut off the head of a snake to kill it.

When the screaming starts, they block my sight with their bodies. So many trusting arms around me. So much tender human flesh.

My nostrils flare wide to the aroma of blood and iron that atomizes in the air. Las girlfriends, Yoli, they've got quick reflexes but I'm quicker. I strike without intending to. It's glancing, a mere nick, but enough to draw blood and when the dribble trickles down my throat, the need inside me rises so huge it threatens to swallow me whole.

Magic, love, my own will—who knows which keeps me from striking again. All I know is that as one part of me strains to sink my fangs into the flesh of what remains, stubbornly, within my reach, the other parts band together to hold me back.

When the music stops, las girlfriends and Yoli step away from me and I stumble first to Nasey's body and severed head, then to my father's. I close their eyes, as I've always done with the dead on my beat, but I don't stick my thumbs in my mouth. I fear the familiarity of this death like I've feared no other, and I don't want its taste in my mouth.

After a long time, I walk back to where las girlfriends and Yoli wait. I see my mother's left hand curled protectively around her injured right hand. She's pressing on it hard, so no more blood will well up from the abrasion, or perhaps to stop any poison from working its way up her arm.

"I'm not like them," I say. I mean, I have no venom in my bite, but my mother understands it differently.

"I know," she says. Her uninjured hand goes to my hair, smoothing it back as if she were shooing away thoughts. "You take after me."

* * *

Minor Chord

“I have you to thank, don’t I?” I say to Yoli as we walk away from the carnage, and through the crew of vivos under orders to clean up and repair the joint.

Behind us, I can hear las girlfriends bantering as they follow. Johnny the Fox, too, and damned if I don’t think they’re all taking turns flirting with him: making him laugh, exacting promises that he’ll come to South Philly to get a good taste of their tamales. I really hope that’s not a euphemism.

When I return my attention to Yoli, I continue. “You used your magic to compel nearly everyone in the barrio to join in this.”

“Johnny, las girlfriends, me—we all used magic, but the community came forth on its own,” she says. “You may not be *from* the barrio, but you are *of* the barrio.”

“Just wait. When the communal adrenaline of this wears off, they won’t be able to see past the fact I’m Nedder. They’ll never again think of me as being like them. I might as well be covered in snakeskin.”

She laughs, but there is a sharp undertone to it. “And you think it would be the first time they act that way toward one of their own?”

Snakes have notoriously bad eyesight, so it would be a comfort to think it is inheritance that has made me blind to this aspect of my friend’s life. But comfort isn’t truth. I’ve protected Yoli on these streets, yes, but only from the most obvious aggressions.

“I’m sorry,” I say to her. “I’m so stupidly blanca.”

Yoli’s mouth twitches into a real smile. “I didn’t give you that nickname as reproach, you know. It’s affection.”

I nod, but I’m still miserable with the knowledge that she—whose heart is big enough to fit ghosts, vivos, old tricksters, and witches, and at least one monster—is the one I’ve failed.

She nudges me, then fits her hand to mine. I know she’s not trying to convince me of anything when our eyes meet, but I seem to be in thrall anyway.



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