

## LA BRUJA ROJA

Marc sat in a window seat of La Bruja Roja across from Brenwyn and wondered when she would crack. She had been completely silent on the ride in to town. She had exchanged only a few words of Spanish with a matronly Latina as they sat and then fell to studying the menu. Since she ordered what sounded like a five-course meal from memory, Marc assumed Brenwyn didn't feel like talking yet.

The place looked like the standard mom-and-pop Mexican restaurant with stucco walls, exposed wood beams, and potted succulents scattered throughout. But the meso-American fertility figures and blow-ups of Castaneda covers led Marc to believe there was just as much hidden here as any other business in Arcanum, but in Spanish.

The woman who seated them, Marc guessed she was the owner, showed up quickly enough with a huge circular tray of dishes. Four of them wound up in front of Brenwyn, a selection of tortillas, chili peppers slathered in cheese, eggs and chorizo sausage scrambled together, and fried tortilla sections smothered in salsa.

It was only when the owner had placed his western omelet and hash browns in front of him that Marc realized he had seen this woman naked. This was Xiomara, a member of Brenwyn's coven and a particularly curvy attendee at the clothing optional bonfire.

As his inner eye began to plot, of its own accord, those curves underneath the peasant blouse and ribbon skirt she wore, Marc looked away.

Outside there was a very interesting glamor-bombed telephone pole wrapped in what looked to be an argyle sweater. He focused on that for a moment, that and the old Catholic priest standing too casually across the way.

When he looked back, she was smiling. Her expression told him that she knew that he knew what she looked like nude. It also said that Brenwyn knew too, and would be teasing him about it if she hadn't had the crappiest morning of the year.

At least, that's what he thought it said.

“Cortesía de la casa, amiga,” she said with the slightest toss of her head.

“Gracias, Xiomara.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Marc said, as conflicted as always.

Xiomara smiled, nodded, and sashayed away to the kitchen. Marc didn’t look. Not at all.

He instead he ran through his “For Want of a Nail” mantra, a crappy little poem that helped him to stay on track with his deadlines and the myriad distractions offered by Arcanum.

*Plot the land; pull the permits.*

*Fill the tool barn; build the camp.*

*Don’t look at the nekkid women...*

Sometimes, he would add in the last line when appropriate.

Brenwyn picked up a tortilla in her left hand and laid into her breakfast with her right. She opened a jar marked with a biohazard sign, applied a healthy portion of the contents to the chilis, and nodded appreciatively.

Marc watched, bemused.

“I never figured you for a huevos-and-chorizo kind of girl.”

“Comfort food,” she replied between bites. “My grandmother used to make these.” She paused to chew and swallow. “All the time.”

“Like Thai vegan food for me, I guess.”

“I know.”

Marc just rolled his eyes rather than start that old mind-reading discussion. Brenwyn moved on to the green salsa and fried tortillas. She gasped, took three large bites of tortilla and chewed vigorously.

“These are great!” she exclaimed around a half a mouthful of food. “But they still lack a little something.”

Brenwyn shook on prodigious amounts of extra-hot sauce and tasted her eggs and chorizo. She made a sound of almost obscene pleasure and wolfed down half a tortilla. Beads of sweat appeared on her forehead.

Marc dabbed her forehead with a napkin.

“You’re glistening.”

“You are supposed to sweat while eating real Mexican,” she mumbled. “Hot climate food. Helps to cool you down.”

Marc just watched, impressed at her ability to pound down the food, and glad to not be discussing other women.

“This isn’t like you, Bren.”

“Yes, it is.” She took a long sip of her tea. “Whenever an old lover commits suicide and calls from beyond the grave *and then* has his body stolen by undead animals, this is exactly how I behave. Every. Single. Time.”

She continued eating, looking only at her plate. Marc picked at his omelet.

“Do you need someone to stay with you for a while?”

“I can blot my own forehead.”

Marc sighed.

“I just thought, considering the situation...”

“I will be fine. You are the one he wanted to kill.”

“I remember.”

“He just wants me to be his sex slave for all eternity.”

Brenwyn scraped up the last of her chilis with a spoon and swabbed her plate clean with a tortilla. Only then did she look up.

“I wonder if they have any chocolate cake?” she said to herself.

Marc leaned closer, propping his chin on one hand.

“So, what do you think is going on—with Jeremiah, that is, not dessert?”

“My first guess would be that he made some deal with the Qliphotic Elements to return from the dead. I am sure that is what he wants us to believe.”

Marc tried to recall his brother Allen’s rantings about the Qliphotics.

“Is that even possible?”

“Normally, I would say ‘no,’ but a wide array of impossible things have come to pass since you arrived in Arcanum. I mean, I am good, but I have never been as good as when I am within your sphere of influence.”

“Funny, I was going to say something like that myself.” He thought about the many things he’d done in the last few months he might have previously thought impossible, including getting in and out of the ICU in only a few days after getting spiked like a football by an invisible demon. The joys of having a noumena, natural knack or whatever to amplify magick, and a family history of schizophrenia. “Lucky us.”

Brenwyn smiled and it really was like a sunrise over a field of gold, as Eleazar often said.

“In some ways.”

She slid her hand across the table towards Marc. He covered it with his own.

“So, what is the plan now?” Marc asked.

“As for me, I will continue to stuff myself with comfort food until I am past my urge to scream and cower beneath my bed.” Brenwyn huffed, probably at frustration at being merely human. “After that: some serious research as to how to handle Jeremiah and the undead skinless horde.”

“And me?”

“Try your best not to die,” she said with a smile.

“That is usually my plan A.”

Brenwyn cast a sideways look at him.

“Even that night when you attacked the invisible monster with a shovel?”

“I was still fine-tuning the plan when you arrived,” Marc replied in a somewhat-false offended tone.

“With you dangling upside down, thirty feet in the air?” Brenwyn grinned. “I would have loved to see you work out that one.”

Brenwyn waved to catch Xiomara’s attention. She came over, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Xiomara, una porción de pastel de chocolate, por favor?”

Xiomara nodded and headed for the kitchen. Marc thought she might have winked at him as she went.

Trusting that the love of his life hadn't just ordered his execution, Marc went back to the English portion of the conversation.

"Well, I'll keep my shovel close at hand."

He undid his amulet and offered it to her. "Maybe you'd like me to leave this off?"

"No, keep wearing it," she said. "Perhaps, if he cannot find you, he cannot harm you."

"Whatever you say." He shrugged and secured his magickal mind shield back around his neck. "I have to go. One of the neighbor's cows found a way onto the faire grounds. We need to replace the fencing before his cattle or my people get hurt."

"You will be careful, yes?" Her eyes were steel-grey, her color for fear and anxiety. Far better than the bright chrome color they turned when she worked magick.

"Aren't I always?"

Brenwyn gave him a dubious look.

"Okay, I'll be *more* careful."

Marc stood, then leaned over to kiss her.

"I love you, Brenwyn."

"You are not sorry that you met me?" she asked. "You usually only say 'I love you' when you fear for your life."

"Nawww!" He forced a chuckle. "This is fun."

"I love you, too. I would never forgive you if you were to get yourself killed."

"Yes, dear."

He dropped a few bills on the table to cover breakfast, a tip, and however many desserts Brenwyn might be having. He kissed her again.

"Say goodbye to Xiomara for me."

"I shall."

Marc headed for the door before he could embarrass himself again.

“By the way...”

Marc stopped and turned.

Brenwyn grinned evilly.

“I knew.”

#

Marc was lucky to get Albert on such short notice. Though his mass and mental sharpness usually put him the realm of livestock, he was a good kid, and a farm kid. Marc didn't need to teach him how to string barbed wire. As Marc reinforced a rotting wooden post with a new steel one and wire, Albert was clearing the next post over.

With a dramatic amount of groaning and grunting, Albert pulled out the last staple with a pair of fencing pliers. It popped free and the pliers flew with it out of Albert's hands. They landed several feet away in the snow near a bush.

“Damn!”

A good kid, but not the best at eye-hand coordination.

“Losing your grip, Albert?” Marc quipped.

“Don't start with me,” Albert shot back.

“If you could hang onto a fifty-dollar pair of pliers, I wouldn't have to,” Marc snapped. “Go get 'em.”

“I will, I will.”

Albert tramped into the underbrush after the missing tool.

“With my luck,” he muttered to himself, “it probably fell in the middle of a big patch of poison ivy.”

“Just wear your gloves, you'll be okay.”

Albert waded into the brush and hip-deep snow in the general direction of the pliers' flight. Dropping to his knees, he reached into a tool-shaped hole in a drift and retrieved the pliers.

Something must have startled him, because Albert shrieked and fell backwards on his ass.

“Boss!”

“What?!” Marc wasn’t sure yet if he should be concerned or just pissed off.

Albert scooted backwards, not quite on his feet yet.

“There’s another one of those mutant Chihuahuas over here!”

“What? Rat’s ass!” Undead bunnies usually were nearby any time Jeremiah was causing trouble.

“Get the Hell out of there!”

“Yeah. Right.”

Albert finally got his feet underneath him and galumphed like a snow-bound moose to Marc’s side.

He held up his prize as he panted to catch his breath.

“I got the pliers.”

“That’s great,” Marc said absently. “How many of those little monsters are there?”

“Just one that I saw.”

The bush rustled directly ahead of them, indicating there were two or more reanimated vermin tussling underneath.

The brush also rustled to their left and their right and directly behind them.

“Of course, there could be more,” Albert said.

“Get to the Bobcat,” Marc ordered. He always picked his battles, and with Albert to protect, too, this wasn’t a fight he wanted to start. Just in case, there was a shovel a few paces to his left.

Albert bent down to collect the tools.

“Get to the Bobcat, NOW!”

Albert dropped everything but the hard-won set of pliers and headed for Theodora, parked a few yards away.

Undead skinless rabbits and squirrels appeared at the edges of the brush, numbering no more than a dozen altogether.

Then, the reanimated roadkill appeared behind them. Raccoons, woodchucks, pancake cats, and

even a few dead deer joined the decomposing throng. Within a minute, Albert and Marc were surrounded by over a hundred zombie animals.

Albert froze several feet away from Theodora.

“Keep going, Albert,” Marc shouted, “I’ve got your back. Just hop behind the wheel and fire her up.”

“O-kaay.” The big kid stumbled his way to the cab of the Bobcat.

Marc picked up a shovel and moved in a martial arts crouch towards Theodora while trying to look in all directions at once.

Albert cautiously slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine.

The zombie animals just watched: not moving, not even breathing.

Marc climbed into the bed, holding onto the crash cage with one hand and his shovel with the other.

Albert flailed his hands over the various controls on the dashboard.

“What do I do with the bucket?” Panic was clear in Albert’s voice.

“Bring it up about a foot. Angle it down—forward. Use it like a cow-catcher.”

“There’s cows, too?” Albert squeaked.

“That’s just a figure of speech.” Marc pointed through the crash cage. “Pull that lever there!”

Albert fumbled his way through until Theodora’s bucket jerkily raised off the ground.

Marc watched in all directions as the undead animals continued to fill the clearing. He guessed at a count of two or three hundred, now.

Albert guided the Bobcat toward the path, nearly jolting Marc off his feet. The way out was four or five deep in undead, furry things.

“What do we do, now?” Albert whined.

“Gun it. We’re punching through.”

Albert locked his elbows and stepped on the gas. Theodora veered towards escape under minimal control, fishtailing in the mud, slush, and gravel.

The undead animals blocking the way held their positions in the middle of the gravel path. The



others behind and to either side of Theodora fell to pursuit. They hissed and screeched as they crashed through the dry bush.

The Bobcat hit the wall of undead flesh and punched through. Reanimated roadkill, whole and in pieces, was thrown every direction. Those on either side of Theodora jumped up to attack.

Marc struck back with various hand-to-hand and boot-to-head techniques while hanging onto the roll cage. Albert swatted at the creatures with his free hand and squealed like a piglet, but he kept driving.

Eventually, Theodora pulled away and the last of the animals were pushed overboard. A thin layer of green-grey hair and decomposed flesh covered everything.

Marc took a deep breath as they careened down the path.

“I think we’re clear now!” he shouted over the sound of the engine.

Albert glanced up at Marc, just daring a bit of a relieved smile. He looked back down in time to see a small herd of undead cows that were blocking the path ahead. They were black and brown and mossy green in several places.

“Jesus Christ! There ARE cows!”

Albert stomped on the brakes, but Theodora still plowed into the lead zombie cow at high speed. Bones, hair, and decaying leather flew up like confetti.

Marc got thrown over the top of the roll cage to bounce off the back of another undead bovine. He hit the ground, bounced again and landed in the grass on the far side of the herd.

He saw Theodora veer off the path, roll down an incline and run blade first into a tree. The metal of the bucket’s edge cut several inches into wood. She wasn’t going anywhere until a tractor dragged her back up the hill.

Albert pulled himself out of the Bobcat and limped up to stand over Marc.

“God, I thought it was bad hitting them when they were alive.” He spit out something fibrous and brownish-green.