

1 Reina

Food for Tinieblas

There were many warnings about the Páramo Mountains, tales of ghosts and shadows now bound to the land after their tragic demise. Yet no one had warned Reina about the cold. How the air filtered through the inadequate layers of her vest and jacket. How every breath she took was a sliver of sustenance, so thin that each gulp left her starving. They'd never told her crossing the Páramo would feel like a journey without end.

The mountains rose ahead of her with their sugar-powdered peaks showered in the violet hues of the arriving dusk. And they opened up behind her like boundless rolling hills blanketed by cold-burned shrubberies and the jutting frailejón trees, which stood alone on a territory perhaps too cold or elevated to be hospitable to anything else.

An icy wind buffeted her forward. Reina fell to her knees like a scared child, her scabs splitting and streaking red on the jagged rock beneath her, but her prehensile tail looped around the rock, reassuring her with balance. When she gathered the courage to continue her climb, she glimpsed the gray fogginess of smoke far ahead, and it filled her with hope. A fire meant a hearth, which meant civilization wasn't too far off.

The way forward was treacherous, but so was the way back. One more day on foot, and Reina was sure she would reach the lower valleys. Images of an inn's warm bed kept her company. She entertained herself with dreams of reaching the farmsteads bordering Sadul Fuerte, when she finally arrived in the city and could share the reason for her journey with the first stranger who asked. She imagined pulling out the invitation marked by the mauve wax seal of the Duvianos family, the elegant loops of Doña Ursulina Duvianos's cursive beckoning Reina to come meet a grandmother estranged

by Reina's father's broken heart. From her breast pocket she would produce a golden badge proving the missive's legitimacy, which had been delivered along with the letter.

The engraved medallion was a metal translation of the Duvianos banner: an orange flower crowned by a red sun rising over a mauve sky. Reina recognized the crest, for she had seen it on jackets and correspondence her father owned from his time as a revolutionary, before he had renounced his old life. Juan Vicente Duvianos had never spoken much of his mother, and when he had, it had been with the rancor and disappointment of a schism. Even after he'd died, Reina had discarded the possibility of a family with her grandmother. But after reading the words inviting her to the faraway Águila Manor, where Doña Ursulina was employed, Reina couldn't be sure who had disowned whom.

When the cold ached her bones and the mountain rebelled against her, Reina clutched her objective and reminded herself why she was fleeing to Sadul Fuerte to begin with. Behind her, in Segolita, she was nothing more than a jobless nozariel living on the charity of humans. The laws enslaving nozariels to humans had changed, but not the attitudes. The streets of Segolita had been her home—all crooked townhomes of peeling baroque façades and roads muddied from shit and the latest rainfall—and her hell. Reina was of age, too old for the family for whom she had worked as a scullery maid and accidentally caught the eye of the oldest son, and too undesirable to be welcomed by any other human family or employer. The invitation gave her an opportunity, and hope.

Her path opened up to a crossroads, where a naked, knobby tree sustained two planks with carved directions: Apartaderos, where she had come from, to the north, and Sadul Fuerte to the west. A chill ran through Reina as the air grew cooler and the shadows elongated. No longer was the sky streaked in the stark mauve she imagined had been the inspiration for the Duvianos banner. Dusk spread through the mountains, and with it came a howling wind and faraway yaps that turned her jumpy. "There's nothing but frailejones and demons in the Páramo," the inn owner at the foot of the

mountain had warned her, shaking his head in disapproval. She would gladly trade the devils of Segolita for the ghosts of the Páramo.

Camping for the night was the last thing she wanted to do, but the path ahead was long and even more treacherous in the dark. Reina broke off course from the well-trodden road and followed a small creek downstream, looking for a burrow or shelter. The creek entered a patch of frailejones, each tree reaching for the sky with its cluster of hairy succulent leaves. Reina followed the stream, plucking the marcescent leaves hanging from the frailejón trunks to build a fire. The night was still. Her huffs of condensing breaths and footsteps crackling the underbrush were all that disturbed an otherwise deathly quiet, which was odd. Just moments ago she had noted the rising cacophony of night: crickets and the croak of amphibians and the occasional hooting bird. The moon was rising, its light creating odd bipedal shapes in the shadows of the trees she passed.

A branch snapped. Reina paused, thinking it must have been the wind. Then a second rustle set the hairs of her back on end. She whirled around. There was nothing but the moonlight and the shadows it created. Fear fell over her. The shadows breathed. Like they were hunting her.

When the silence was shattered by a second snapping twig, she ran.

Guttural snarls erupted behind her, and stomps. With her blood pumping hot in her ears and her heart panicked, Reina breathlessly pelted through the underbrush. Could there be bears in the Páramo, or lions? The sounds were wet, and the hunting creature sounded heavy. She glanced behind her, cursing when it slowed her down, and saw a shadow crowned with horns. She cried and tripped on a protruding root.

Pain lanced through her ankle, but she had no time to nurse it. She pushed herself back to her feet as several pairs of stomps joined the pursuit. The bared trees closed in around her, their marcescent leaves stretching like claws to pull at her clothes. Thorny bushes sliced her calves and ankles. Fog blanketed the mountain. Unable able to see, she stumbled into a gully. She shot another glance at her pursuers as she scrambled up. They carried the shape of people, bipedal, with long,

naked limbs coated in the grime of the wild. They had the ears of a bovine and the curved horns of a goat. Moonlight gleamed off small eyes reflecting a single line of intention: the desire to devour. But the worst part of it all—what made Reina realize this would be the brutal, bloody end of her journey—were the grinning teeth. They were blunt, like a human's, but with twice too many shoved into the hanging mandible of a monster.

The first one yanked her by the tail. Its clammy touch leeches all the heat from her. The thing tossed her against a bush, thorns impaling her side and scratching her cheeks open.

Reina brandished her knife, which was a rusty, untrustworthy thing she'd brought for skinning game—not for fighting. She screamed as she slashed at her attackers' limbs to no effect. They regarded her with snarling laughter, the sounds warped as if they originated from her own imagination. As if they had one foot in this world and another in the Void. Tears flooded her eyes and blurred an already black night. They slapped the knife away, their claws ripping her clothes and skin.

Desperate, Reina kicked at one with all her strength, sending it toppling back. She scrambled to all fours and sprang up for another getaway. One jerked her braid, then clutched her tail; another grabbed her by the wrist; and the third reached for her collar and ripped her jacket open.

“Stop!” she cried uselessly, for deep down she knew there would be no stopping them until they had all of her.

She shrieked as one of the creatures dug its teeth into her flesh. One moment its face was close, blank eyes reflecting nothing but instinct, and the next it was pulling out her skin and muscle and sinew as it ripped her forearm open.

White-hot pain surged through her. Reina's screams reverberated across the mountain. The other monster tore her cotton shirt open. Her grandmother's badge flew out, and she caught it, by instinct or by a miracle. The thing was heavy in her hand. She smacked the creature gnawing on her forearm with all her strength, imprinting her family's sigil on its sickly forehead.

A glow spread from the badge upon impact. A bubble of yellow light swallowed Reina and the creatures devouring her, revealing their hairless bodies covered in black welts and boils. The light burst out of the badge like a spring of water. Anywhere it touched, their hideous skin sizzled and smoked, earning their wet, agonized hisses.

The creatures were relentless. Their claws went for her chest as if digging for a treasure within, scraping her ribs, her final barrier. Reina swung their mucous arms away with the lighted badge. She swiped left, then right, forcing the light to repel them. Bloodied and battered, she twisted around to her feet and scrambled away. The monsters remained at the perimeter of the badge's light, their growls following her. They wanted her flesh, but something about the light deterred them.

The frailejones opened to a clearing showered in moonlight. Reina limped to it, her wounded arm gripping the remains of her ripped shirt and jacket over the bloody opening on her chest. Her other arm waved the badge like a beacon. She wasn't sure if the monsters still followed.

Swaying deliriously, she stepped on loose mountain terrain, and the stones beneath her gave. She slipped. Her limbs and head crashed against stone and bramble as she rolled down a scree. When the fall finally ended, Reina took a desperate gasp of air, then curled into a ball. Her spine and skull were miraculously unbroken. Somehow, she was alive. But every inch of her ached and burned, and maybe, just maybe, she would have been better off dead.

“Is that another one?”

“No—that's a person.”

Voices echoed in the vast void of Reina's darkness, stirring her. Grime coated the inside of her throat when she took in a big gulp of crisp Páramo air. The brightness of a cloudy sky blinded her as she turned her head. She was rewarded with a headache. Reina found herself cushioned by a mossy

blanket. A beetle scuttled dangerously close to her eyelashes. She sat up, and a sharp pain lanced her arm. There was a bloody, gaping bite on her forearm.

She had nearly been eaten.

Tears flooded the edges of her vision. Reina felt a renewed vigor to live. She moaned a reply to the voices, which approached with several pairs of squelching footsteps. With the effort came a thunderous ache in her chest, which was crusted with blood, her skin reduced to flaps barely hanging on.. Trembling, her hand hovered over the injury. Her broken skin burned, but the ache came from within. A blazing pain. Even the simple act of curling into a ball, to shield her soul from squeezing out of her wound, was torturous. She cried again. She would never make it to Sadul Fuerte.

The footsteps reached her. Someone grabbed her by the shoulder and twisted her around for a better look.

A “No!” blurted out of her from the pain, but she hadn’t the strength to fight them off.

“This one’s basically dead,” a man said.

“But she lives,” the second voice said. This one belonged to a woman who crouched close. Her leather gloves gently wiped the grime from Reina’s cheeks, and she shushed Reina’s sobs.

A pair of blue eyes peered down at her, brilliant, like the sunny skies in Segolita when not a single cloud marred the sky. The woman had clear pale skin and a sharp nose. Blunt black bangs covered her forehead, and the rest of her silky hair was pulled up into a high ponytail. From the crown of her head curled a short pair of antlers, smooth, the color of alabaster.

The young woman was valco.

Reina couldn’t believe it...to be able to see one in the flesh, even if right before her death.

The woman’s hand hovered over Reina’s torn chest without touching the wound. “You were attacked by tinieblas. But you lived—how?”

“I would hardly call that *living*,” the man behind her said, covering his nose with his jacketed forearm. He was crowned with a pair of antlers, too, but his were taller and better developed, with

sharp edges surely capable of being made a weapon to impale. His hair was as silvery as the clouded sky. Boiled leather armor peeked out from underneath his ruana—a black shawl-like covering, triangular in shape, which covered him from neck to waist.

“The wretch is nozariel,” he added, noting her tail with a grimace. A typical reaction from humans when they realized her parents hadn’t cut it off after birth to conform. Perhaps valcos were also in agreement.

The pair had other companions lingering behind, awaiting orders or standing as sentinels.

“The rot is going to get to her one way or another. Leave the creature be,” he said.

Reina reached for the woman’s hand. She gripped it without permission and begged, “Help, please.”

“Unhand her!”

“Oh, hush, Javier,” the young woman said. She couldn’t be older than Reina, but she was beautiful, in the regal sort of way Reina imagined the princesses of the Segolean Empire were raised to be. She was wearing a woolen ruana like Javier, woven in blue and white with fringes decorating the bottom. She took it off and draped Reina in her warmth, and her scent. “Don’t you care to know how she survived the tinieblas? They went for her heart.”

“Not particularly. We banished them. Our work here is done.”

Panic bubbled in Reina’s belly. She knew what the man’s look meant. She’d been a recipient of it time and time again in Segolita—had seen it directed at the starved and wounded nozariels on the streets. They were going to leave her to die because of the part of her that wasn’t human.

Her heart palpitated uselessly. The spasms shot up her chest again, leaving her without the words to beg for mercy. Tears streaked her cheeks as she lifted the engraved badge with her bitten hand. The trinket was half coated in the red crust of her blood, but the faint light emitting from it was unmissable. Warm magic pulsed from within the metal.

The woman was even more beautiful when her eyes and mouth rounded inquisitively. She took the badge from Reina, despite the dried blood. “It’s the crest of Duvianos,” she said, rising to her feet and taking the badge with her to show it to her companions.

“No—please,” Reina begged, desperate not to be abandoned. Her chest flared again, punishing her. She moaned and twisted in agony like an earthworm under the sun.

“Javier, you must heal her!” The woman’s words were faint and far away. “Use healing galio.”

Reina couldn’t keep her eyes open any longer. She knew she was slipping away.

“Do I look like a nurse to you?”

In some ways, Reina was grateful for it.

“Please, act like you have a droplet of human blood in you for once in your life. I command it.”

She had failed in her journey, right as she was reaching Sadul Fuerte. If anything, she was a fool for thinking she could escape her fate at all.

“Please, Celeste, pay no heed to her baubles. The wretch is a thieving nozariel. How else would she get her hands on something like this?”

Reina’s trembling fingers reached into the torn jacket and produced the letter. She had the strength for a few last words. And if this was going to be the end, then she might as well say them. “I am no thief. I’m here to meet my grandmother, Ursulina Duvianos.”

The impact of her head against a hard surface yanked Reina back to reality. It flared every nerve of pain like jabbing knives. She had been thrown into a shadowed room, where the scent of dust and

manure pervaded the stagnant air. At least it was warmer than it had been, and the bedding was softer than the mountain ground. Voices approached and someone entered.

Reina bit down the ache to sit up and take stock of her surroundings. The dormitory was small, with plain walls and a wooden rosary nailed to the wall opposite her. The young valco woman named Celeste stood by the doorway. She fidgeted with Reina's badge, which was the only source of light as dusk settled over the world outside.

As if she'd been waiting for Reina to wake, Celeste said, "Stay here, and don't go anywhere else."

"I couldn't move even if I wanted to." Her heart pounded in a mad race to outrun the pain. A contest it couldn't win. "Please return my badge."

"If you are who you say you are, then I must take it with me." Celeste didn't give Reina a chance for rebuttal, and Reina would have howled at her for leaving the room with her badge were she not so weak.

She wished sleep would claim her a second time. Was she going to die? The memory of the shadowed devils with the grinning, blunt teeth returned the moment her eyes closed. So she forced herself to stare at the ceiling instead.

Soon, the hum of a hushed argument filled the hall outside the room. The argument ended the moment the newcomers reached the doorway. Celeste brought reinforcements: a middle-aged woman who commanded Reina's complete attention as she entered the room. The woman wore a billowing long-sleeved blue dress with fine golden embroidery. She had bobbed black hair, fair skin, and a strong resemblance to Celeste.. Her mother, a human lacking the valco antlers.

She approached Reina's bedside, cautiously, and sat on the stool positioned next to it. Another woman also entered, heralded by the clicking footsteps of heeled black boots on the stone floor. "Doña Laurel?" she said. "What is the meaning of this?"

The second woman was the tallest in the room. Her umber skin was lustrous and free of marks, and her black hair was braided in a circle behind her head. She wore black pants, and her high-necked jacket was partitioned into red silk sleeves and a black silk bodice embroidered with golden laurels down the middle.

“Doña Ursulina,” Doña Laurel said by way of welcoming her to the room. “That is precisely what I’m trying to figure out.”

Stunned, Reina looked to the taller woman, her heart racing again. Suddenly everything about her features became familiar. The high cheekbones; the fullness of her lips. Yet there were other things Reina never saw in herself: The confidence and commanding presence. The opulence of her clothes.

“She was a victim of tinieblas. We found her on our way down from the Páramo,” Celeste said.

“There are tinieblas on my lands?” Doña Laurel raised her voice, accusation dripping off her words. “*You* found her?”

“Yes, mami.”

“I’ve told you time and time again that I do not want to see you hunting tinieblas,” Doña Laurel said, disappointment and concern simmering beneath the surface. The words took Reina back to that moment with those creatures, reminding her of the determined hunger in their eyes, how their blunt teeth tore chunks off her skin. Every mother *should* be concerned.

“It was Javier’s idea,” Celeste added, quick like a white lie.

Doña Laurel pursed her lips, her attention drawn to Reina, who was finding it hard to restrain herself from squirming in pain in front of these women. Cautiously, the woman lifted the covers shielding Reina’s chest for a peek at the wound. A metallic stink filled the room.

“The tinieblas’ rot,” Doña Ursulina said.

Doña Laurel clicked her tongue, but her façade was unbothered. She reached out and wiped the sticky bangs away from Reina's temple, her pity clear in her eyes. "You survived the tinieblas? With your heart intact?" Then she turned to Doña Ursulina and asked, "How is that possible?"

"My badge," Reina croaked.

Celeste presented Doña Ursulina with the trinket, then the letter. The taller woman's eyes doubled in size, then her face contorted into a scowl as she recognized the medallion. She hesitated before accepting the letter with fingers bedazzled in fat gem-encrusted rings.

"What is your name?" she asked without lifting her gaze.

Reina choked on her own spit but answered.

Doña Ursulina unfolded the stained letter, her jaw rippling as she read her own words inviting Reina to these cold lands across the mountains.

Reina met her black gaze as a chill shook her from neck to toes. This was the moment she had dreamed of during those lonely days as she crossed the Llanos and the Páramo. This reunion with her grandmother. How flat and painfully disappointing it had turned out to be.

Doña Laurel watched them. "Do you know this woman?"

"This badge belongs to me, just like it used to belong to my father, and his father before him," Doña Ursulina said, slowly turning it over in her hands. "I enchanted it with a powerful ward of litio protection and bismuto—enough to allow you to see the tinieblas and ward them away. I knew the journey here would have its dangers—I just didn't expect to be...so right." She crossed the distance to Reina and lifted her chin for a better look. "A nozariel like your mother, aren't you?" she said, eyeing the black spots of pigmentation on the iris that made it look like Reina's pupils were oblong, almost like a cat's; the caiman-like scutes over the bridge of her nose; the long, pointed tips of her ears. The marks of her nozariel breed, undiscernible from far away but never failing to earn her a scowl or a grimace from most humans. "You actually came."

"Explain yourself, Doña Ursulina," Doña Laurel commanded.

“I sent the badge to Segolita along with this letter, to my granddaughter.”

Doña Laurel’s mouth hung open. “As in, Juan Vicente’s daughter? He has a daughter?”

The way they said his name, with the familiarity hinting of a past Reina wasn’t privy to, reignited the agony in her chest. She chewed the insides of her cheeks, tasting her own blood, and forced the words out despite the pain. “I came to meet you.” She tried sitting up again, only to collapse with a moan. A violent spasm shook her, made her want to scream.

“She needs a doctor,” Celeste blurted out from her spot by the doorway.

“The tinieblas hungered for her heart, and they have tainted it. This is dark magic, and it will not be cured by a mere doctor, if at all,” Doña Ursulina said.

It was a blow, renewing Reina’s fears. She let out a shuddery breath. With an angry hiss and the last of her strength, she said, “I came from Segolita—I traveled this far—to be your family. Not to die!”

And the witch who shared her blood smiled.

“Then it must be fated that you live, child, for if there is one person capable of salving a tiniebla’s rot, it will be me.”