

Steve Noir's

FEAR GIRL



BRUJO

By Nathan Neil

S t e v e N o i r ' s
F e a r G i r l

B R U J O

B y N a t h a n N e i l

Thrown over his shoulder like a Grecian robe, she hangs in total paralysis. Each step he takes is balanced, integral, at ease, like a predator at home in its natural habitat. Her hair and fingertips reach toward the ground, swaying to the rhythm of his body like a pendulum.

Immune to influence or exertion, his body is awe inducing, terrifying, like an ancient tree that died long ago but never toppled, his arms and legs not resembling limbs so much as trunks and his muscles, practically fused into the skin, showing no signs of having ever come into contact with fat or atrophy.

He looks like what men looked like before they knew weariness, before they knew shame. As though every waking moment were spent stalking, crafting, fucking, and every ounce of sustenance put to work.

His face, a death's head, is covered in a mask bearing the visage of a skull decorated with thorned stems and buds of roses, his hair pouring passed his cheeks in beaded dreadlocks. His

eyes, shrouded in the skeletal shade of the mask's sockets, glowing silver.

This is his realm, or so it has become. Through the unfolding corridors of this panopticon, corners appear ahead that would seem to vanish when you look back, as though in dreams, and yet, familiar, he walks without doubt. His path through this changing architecture as clear to him as an old prayer. He learned its patterns long ago and now he never takes a wrong step.

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He carries her into his chamber, flops her onto a mat spread out on the floor. She hits it like a cadaver, eyes dead open, hair splayed out on the mat in a ragged tuft.

He looks her over; her physique is as efficient as his own, though, perhaps hers is a better multi-purpose tool. The bluntness of his own body is suited to a particular kind of brutal work and exercise. Hers however is flexible, cat-like. He sees how capable she would be of laying traps with a smile, the bat of an eye. In the right situation attraction can be deadlier than fear. Yet, looking at the muscles in her hands and fingers, he is certain that she could kill a man, even such as himself, readily and ably.

On the floor across the chamber from her sits a battery powered stove. On top a small ceramic pot sits on the burner putting off a smell like a crypt. He hardly notices the odor; to

him it is routine, ordinary. To her it is repulsive and torturing. She is forced to endure it, incapable of doing anything to protect herself from the stench.

Strewn about the stove are various tools and ingredients for his concocting: mortars, pestles, dried plants laid out on rags, various extracts and oils, jarred specimens and assorted vials containing their venom; these his only possessions. The strict parameters of his lifestyle lay completely bare in the focused contents of his chamber. Besides the mat, there are no artifacts of leisure.

He wafts the steam rising up from the pot up into his nostrils, sucking hard at the stench. The odor splashes onto his olfactory glands.

Good, he says. This batch is ready.

He picks up a wadded rag from off the floor and uses it to lift the pot from off the burner, pouring the thick and dirty contents out into a mortar. Steam rises in a sickening plume; she hates that she is looking at the stench. The smell alone is unbearable.

He grabs some dried plants off one of the rags and throws them into the mixture. With great care he works in the plants with a pestle.

Your lips don't move, he says. But still I can hear you screaming.

His voice is baritone, resonant, like the inside of an underwater cave.

Honestly, he continued. What other possibility is there? I know what it is like to wake up in this place, to find yourself surrounded by these changing walls.

He throws his eyes at her intensely, considers something grave.

I imagine, though, that it must be worse for you, he says. Your head is empty. Whatever they tried to use on me, it didn't work. I still *remember*. You and the others they bring here, your heads are all empty.

Others? What others? She thinks. Inside she is a howl, but outside she is locked in. She doesn't want to be hearing his words, his dark insinuations, his subtle grazing of the truth, but she is paralyzed awake. What choice has she?

He's right about her memory. Somehow they erased it, whoever *they* are. Now her past and future are eclipsed, along with all sense of hope, which is why his way of talking without revealing anything is such torture, like he's dangling rotten meat just beyond the jaws of a starving child.

Does he do it because he is cruel or because he is alone, she asks herself? A part of her doesn't want to know. This place seems infinite, indecipherable, inescapable, and she is helpless. She feels like a mouse caught in the cat's fangs, yet this man

doesn't seem to be toying with her. He seems to be *preparing* her, as though she were a patient about to undergo surgery.

But what for? What for? What are his intentions? What is he doing? Has he done this before? The questions are too many to process. Her mind thrashes. Where am I? Who brought me? What is this place? The questions pulse through her bloodstream, so pervasive, so encompassing, that they cease to be mere questions and become a state of delirium.

Dropping his pestle into the mortar, he puts a finger to his own head.

It takes a lot more than chemicals and narcotics to make a brujo forget, he says making two clicks with his tongue.

Brujo. That she won't forget. An answer to one of her questions and the only possible relief she can imagine coming her way any time soon.

I'm surprised they even had an opportunity to abduct me, he continues. To this day I still don't know how they did it. But I gave up trying to figure that out long ago.

He places emphasis on the word long, stretching it out one or two seconds. He kneels down next to her and resumes grinding his mixture.

I'm not sure how long ago, he says. The sun doesn't rise here, but, on the *bright* side, it doesn't set either.

He laughs. The comfort in his laugh, the casual acceptance of it, actually disgusts her.

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Done cooling now, the brujo says.

He dips his finger into the mortar, letting it soak. The liquid condenses heavily around his skin. Carefully, he places his hand over her face and points his soaking finger down into her open eye.

There is nothing she can do. She can't blink. She is paralyzed, suspended, eyes open, forced to watch as the horror of this hideous liquid begins to hang heavily from the tip of the brujo's finger, getting heavier and heavier directly over her pupil, an exposed nerve, until, at last, the forces of gravity rupture the surface tension and a large dollop of the stinking juice splatters into her eye.

Her vision goes blurry and for a second she is grateful to be numb. But soon she realizes that she can't tell if it is hurting. What if it burns her? Could it be acid? Is she going blind?

The brujo dips his finger again, dangles it over her other eye. Splash! The world is a blur. The brujo pulls his hand away, then speaks.

I give you new eyes for new seeing. I bind you to me, so that you always know when I am near. Though it won't be your eyes that tell you, they will be too busy dreaming. It will be your body. It will be feeling. It will be *fear*.

He sets the mortar down on the floor.

The beat of your heart will tell you, he says. The sweat on your skin, it will know. Your eyes... your eyes will see something different, but what.

He makes the clicking sound again.

Who knows? I cannot tell you. I do not know your mind and, perhaps, you will learn that you know little of it also.

Brujo smiles, a deep sickening smile.

Sleep now. Let the *hu'asca* carry you into the dream. The time has come for our trial.

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His voice is tiny now, echoing through the deepening wells of her eye sockets. He is miles away, both of him, looking down into the shape of her skull expanding, growing deeper and deeper, as though she were sinking in. Her eyes sinking into her eyes. Something impossible, yet, still happening. She sees it or thinks she sees it. Her eyes inside of her eyes falling down a well, the well of her skull, and this *brujo*, both of him, laughing and smiling, miles away, near microscopic, two tiny flecks of light fading and fading still.

All sounds as if she has descended in a submarine. Her senses recede into herself as though a fly she swallowed accidentally, a lump in her throat. Gulp and her senses plummet. Splash! Into the sloppy sound of her insides, down in the pit of her stomach, dark and red, a gurgling boil. How did she get here? Is she her senses or is she herself?

Herself *is* her senses.

Why has she never noticed this before? Things felt so real. Everything felt so real. She thought... she thought she was something solid, something of substance, something of matter, but now she is here, alone and only her senses, disembodied, collapsing inward, floating in the acid of her stomach and dissolving away.

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Dark.

Endless living dark, now peeling away. Darkness peeling away and becoming light. Light peeling away and becoming matter.

The unfurling of time. The unfolding of space.

All questions eradicated, all living consciousness, all consequence, all of existence reduced to its lowest common denominator; a single instant suspended in time like melted sand cooling into glass.

An instant of eternity: an aeon, a century, a second. There is no distinction.

All is the same.

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Running now and it seems she has been running a long time.

The feeling only now returns to her body. She's in full force, the gravity of sensation bearing down on her, muscle and nerve enlivening, everything tingling, chest and abdomen, calves and thighs, igniting in fire.

Her left leg spasms in deep shredding agony. She loses control. Tumbles head first hitting her shoulders on the thicket in front of her.

What thicket?

She bounces. The forest spinning all around her.

What forest? Are these leaves?

They're not leaves. It is the chamber somehow changing to fit her thoughts, her inner desires, her impulses, her dreams.

How long had she been running in her paralysis as though possessed? The chamber had sensed her fear, her frantic state, and created a perfect tunnel, a reflection of her subconscious. A path to sustain her animalistic flight and fear. Walls as green as a jungle, patterns jagged, a reflection of the forest of her most primal drives. But why was she running? Why was she afraid?

Then she remembers: *brujo*. In her mind she still hears his voice.

I give you new eyes for new seeing. I bind you to me...

Thud. She crashes into a bank in the changing architecture, breaking her fall.

The brujo is near. She senses him even now, like a storm rising over the trees. The dread in her stomach rising. He is approaching.

She must make herself a labyrinth. Confusion is her only chance at survival. To continue in a straight path would be folly, possibly death.

Rising to her feet, she concentrates, attempting to forge some abstract possibility in the space around her. Seeking to fracture the reality of herself and this panopticon, this metamorphosis chamber. It doesn't seem to work; she can still feel him drawing nearer. Then something occurs to her, a sudden instinct. She imagines herself as a phantom, something both dead and alive, and the path ahead of her splits.

She chooses the right, jetting forward, her spasmed leg calling out to her in protest. She ignores it. With every step she recites these words in her mind: I am like death, I am undeath, I am the living.

The path carves itself out before her in fractal designs, a geometry of terror, a webwork of fundamental human contradiction and insecurity, but she can't sustain it. The thought is too big. Her concentration slips. The blooming labyrinth begins to simplify and she finds herself back in the tunneled forest of her own fear. Her stomach turns not out of sickness but out of anxiety. Her heart races. The sweat builds.

The brujo is coming. She hears him call out.

Clever. Clever thinking. The fastest anyone has learned. You, like I, are one of the wide awake ones. I am convinced now that we have something in common and much to learn from one another.

His talking distracts her. The jagged avenues forming ahead of her start to grow smaller. She becomes entangled, forced into a stop.

Around her the chamber keeps shifting. It is as though the walls were covered in a kind of moving plague, the surface boiling, as though something were infecting the chamber around her.

It is him, she thinks. His will affecting the chamber as mine did before.

A feeling of panic raises within her. She forces it back down with every ounce of emotional restraint she has. She has to be stronger; she has to outmatch his will if she is going to survive.

She closes her eyes. The brujo calls out.

I can feel you, you know, tickling my designs. Somewhere out around the edges. Your will in mine.

She shuts out the words, tunes into her breathing. I am like death. I am undead. I am the living.

There is quiet, then the brujo calls out once more.

Maybe you are closer than I thought. Perhaps if I just reach out...

His hand breaks through the jagged patterning of the chamber passing next to her face. She jumps turning to grab his thumb and ring finger in each of her hands. With all of her weight she drops to one knee, twisting his hand and arm until she feels the

bones crack. When her knee touches the ground, she forces his arm back in a twist shattering his elbow.

The brujo screams. The metamorphosis chamber bursts open into a dome, his concentration broken. The opportunity hers, she dives back into the forest of her own fear, where, before long, she resumes her chant of death, undeath, and living so as to leave a trail of confusion laying behind her. The brujo's howling becomes all the more distant with every step.

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I am a lover, I am killer, I am lover.

She repeats these words to herself in an endless cycle. A mantra of contradiction, simpler than the last and easier to sustain.

As she was running, the spasmodic pain in her leg had started to worsen. Her thigh began throbbing. She was forced to stop. Now she sits still under a canopy, waiting for her body to recover.

The mantra helps to maintain the confusion surrounding her. She focuses her breath, slow and steady, repeating the words. I am a killer. I am a lover. She bats away the distractions.

You broke his arm. You really broke his arm.

Don't gloat about it. Concentrate. You are a lover. You are a killer. You are a...

Yes, but you broke his arm. It will be useless now for a few days.

That's not an advantage. Not with a man like that.

It is something.

Okay, it's something. I'll give you that. Now come on, concentrate.

I am a lover. I am a killer. I am a...

She detects a subtle change, the minuscule hairs on the back of her neck stand on end. A feeling moves through her like a cold front, changing the weather, her thoughts and feelings, disrupting her chant.

He is near.

Don't think about him, she tells herself. You are a killer. You are a lover. You are a...

New patterns infect the ceiling above her head, like the delicate calligraphy on ancient Persian architecture but in motion. Yet somehow it seems to be emanating from a distant point.

Then it hits her. He isn't moving. He's *reaching out*. Scanning the chamber by extending his will outward.

Of course, she thought. It took him time to set his arm and hand. He's starting from zero now, reading the path for signs of his prey.

She listens to her leg, still throbbing, and considers dashing away before he can detect her. But, as she observes the changes in the walls of the chamber around her, she notices that his senses, his will, seem to be strained as though approaching

their limit. The shifting patterns no longer seem to be expanding, only to be feeling around blindly near the edge of their extremity. He is over exerting himself.

Balking, she returns to her mantra.

I am a lover, I am a killer, *he* is a...

She gasps sensing deep within the fatality of this mental slip.

The texture of the floor changes beneath her. She feels molested. Then the shifting stops just long enough for her to know that he has pinpointed her.

There are no other options left, she jumps to her feet attempting to run, but a dozen jagged bars jut out of the floor blocking her path. She screams.

A harrowing dread swarms within her like a plague of insects. She looks back startled to find there is nothing left behind her but a long dark tunnel. That is where he is, the brujo. She is certain of it.

She tries squeezing herself between the bars to make an escape, but once she pushes her arm and shoulder through, the bars pinch down on her. Her reflexes spare her arm from being severed, but now there is no way out.

She trembles. Tears flow from her eyes as her terror becomes palpable. She is surrounded, unable to focus and totally helpless.

She turns and looks back down the tunnel. There the brujo stands no more than a few dozen yards away. He appears enshrouded in pale light like that which comes from the moon. She sees him attempt to walk toward her. His legs push forward but he does not seem to advance. He remains in place.

Then she feels it. The ground beneath her, the walls around her, the bars behind her all jerk forward. With each step the brujo pulls her side of the chamber toward himself with the will of a god.

She feels herself sliding toward him, her desperation and fear exerting no influence on the chamber around her. She underestimated his will before when she thought she noticed him straining. That had been an error in judgement. It wasn't strain, it was restraint. Now she is being drawn in by his power, his utter magnetism, with no chance of escape. His is the will of the warrior, balanced and absolute, not prone to burn wildly, only to raze what it must.

She backs herself into the bars behind her. The floor, the walls, the bars around her still sliding toward him and taking her along with them. Half the distance closes between them when, without explanation, the brujo suddenly pauses. He looks at her coldly. The room stands still. His dark features glow as though the pale light were a mystical bioluminescence.

He takes a step forward.

She trembles though this time the floor doesn't move. He takes another steps and she leans back into the jagged bars behind her. They cut into her skin. He takes another step and the entire chamber seems to rattle under the weight of his foot.

The brujo squats, leans forward, preparing to run. She imagines him rushing into her, pushing her through the bars cutting into her back, slicing her apart. She is shocked at the relief this thought brings her. She wants this to be over. She can bear no more fear. She howls.

The brujo laughs. The sound seems to come at her from all directions. Then, he lunges forward.

His silver eyes upon her, he closes the distance in a few easy strides. Yards become feet, feet become inches, and just as she makes herself ready to feel him smashing into her, to feel her skin tearing and bones breaking as razor-like bars rip her apart, he vanishes suddenly, falling away into the floor like an illusion, a part of the chamber. The brujo had used his will to conjure his own image out of the material of the panopticon.

The bars fall away behind her. She stumbles backward, slipping on a puddle of blood she had leaked onto the floor. She loses her balance, tipping backward. She hits something behind her with a dull fleshy thud and then dread, pure dread, overtakes her as she realizes what it is.

A man; a man built like tree trunks and able to summon out of his own will. A man who hunts without killing, tracks without

moving, who travels safely through the corridors of his own subconscious world. A *brujo*. He had been behind her all this time, behind the bars, making her suffer this enigmatic mirage.

She feels his large splinted arm enclose about her waste as his other hand wraps around the side of her face. Two blunt fingers, thick as bottles, slide into the wet and open orifice of her mouth pushing two handmade capsules down into her throat. She feels herself slip away.

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Again, thrown over his shoulder like a robe in total paralysis, she sways to the movements of his body like a pendulum. How many times has she hung over him like this? There is no absolute way of telling. Even now she feels her memory slipping away, something in the capsules.

He makes his way back toward his chamber, or it makes its way to him, where she is certain he will prepare her for their next trial. To this cycle, she can see neither beginning or end. Nothing is certain.

You broke his arm, she thinks to herself. You broke his fucking arm. He wasn't expecting that. However long this has gone on, you're getting better. Learning somehow.

She drinks all the satisfaction she can from this line of thinking, completely uncertain as to how long it will last.