**\*\*\* Combat Con La Muchahuahua \*\*\***

The morning sun touched lightly on the blood-spattered dandelion flowers. Dew mingled with the blood, pooled orange between the golden petals, and dripped off the ends of the emerald dagger leaves. Carla stretched out her hand to catch a droplet in her palm, then lifted her hand and watched it bleed down her arm.

La Muchahuahua, sighed and shifted, digging its claw deeper into Carla’s calf, all while still asleep. She sucked air through her teeth and grabbed handfuls of grass beneath her. She’d been belly-down since dusk, riveted in place by the dog, and had drifted in and out of consciousness most of the night.

Now, at dawn, she turned her head toward the warm sun, completely awake, fully aware and awaiting certain death.

She looked over her shoulder at her leg. The point of the monster’s claw embedded into the muscle; dark blood congealed around it in a halo. The pain grew worse by the moment.

*As bad as the pain is, it’s good,* she thought. La Muchahuahua may have tried to claim the leg as its own, but the pain proved it was still hers.

The dog turned on its side with a grunt, extended its legs, and stretched convulsively. Its claws unsheathed from the fur on its paws. The one in Carla’s leg burrowed deeper. She stifled a cry, careful not to wake the beast, and grasped wildly at the ground as the animal’s movement lifted her lower body into the air. For a moment, she hung, half-suspended, half-grounded.

At the end of its stretch, the monster relaxed. Its claws retracted and released its hold of Carla’s calf. Her body fell with a *thud*.

Carla quickly turned on her side, drew the injured leg up to her chest, wrapped both arms around it, and bit her knee in pain.

*I’m free.*

The thought stabbed her. She whipped her head around to look at La Muchahuahua. Its chest rose and fell rhythmically.

*Go. Go now.*

Carla reached out and took hold of a tree root that surfaced above the grass with a high fin. She curled her fingers around it, planted her elbow on the dewy ground and pulled her chest up.

Instinctively, the toe of her injured leg pushed against the ground, and another slash of pain tore through her calf. Carla grabbed an errant stick, put it in her mouth, and bit down on it to assuage her need to scream.

Jaws clenched and nostrils flaring, Carla got to her knees. If she could get to the tree line, she had a chance. The forest was too thick for the monster’s elephantine body to maneuver with any speed.

Keeping La Muchahuahua in her peripheral, Carla crawled to the tree under which she’d been pinned. Digging her fingernails into its bark, she pulled her body up against the trunk and clawed her way to standing.

*One, two*… she counted the other trees in the copse then paused to mentally measure the distance to the forest. *Three. Three steps. That’s all. Tree, tree, forest, free.*

Carla reached out for the second tree and hopped. The toe of her shoe caught between two roots. She hit the ground with a hollow thud and let out a surprisingly loud grunt.

The monster snorted and stirred.

*Go, go, go!*

Carla pulled the toe of her shoe from between the roots, bit down harder on the stick, and made for the forest in a crippled crawl.

Snorts. A throaty, low-pitch growl.

*Go, go, go—don’t look back, just go!*

Barking.

*Don’t look back!*

Thudding. The hiss of grass underfoot—under *heavy* foot.

*Get on your feet, get on your feet. You’re almost there!*

Carla pushed her body up into a tripod then stood upright to hop, but her shoe slipped on the wet grass, and she fell again on her belly. She pushed up on her forearms and crawled, dragging her injured leg, panting through clenched teeth, pleading with her body to move faster, faster, faster.

A stone’s throw from the refuge of the forest, the enormous dog darted in front of her and stopped, haunches high, chest low, teeth bared.

Carla skittered backward. She turned and tried to push up to standing. Her feet squelched out from beneath, and she fell on her side. The stick in her mouth struck the ground and pulled from Carla’s teeth, jerking out a canine tooth with it. She grabbed her temples, pulled her knees to her chest, closed her eyes and prayed that whatever happened next would happen quickly.

*“¿Adónde vas, juguete?”*

Carla looked at the beast, brows furrowed in question. *No*, she thought with a shake of her head. *No. This isn’t happening.* *It didn’t speak.*

La Muchahuahua narrowed its eyes and dipped its nose with a nod.

“You… talk?” Blood dribbled from the edge of Carla’s mouth as she spoke. Tinny warmth filled her mouth. She wiped her chin and looked at the blood on her hand in confusion. She ran her tongue over her teeth then reached for the fleshy, toothless gap between them.

*“Te falta un diente, juguete.”* The monster pointed with its eyes at the ground beside Carla.

She looked down and retrieved her tooth. She whispered, “What’s happening?”

*“Es sólo un sueño, juguete.”* The beast took a step closer. *“Vuelve a dormir, mi juguete, vuelva a dormir.”*

“Go back to sleep?” Carla shook her head. She wasn’t sleeping. “This… it’s… not a dream…” Carla looked around herself, wondering. “No.” She looked over her shoulder, back to the shade tree where she’d endured the night. “It’s real, I know—”

The dog bounded at her, catching her between its forepaws. Carla screamed and squirmed, pushing against the paws to free her hips.

The animal brought its muzzle down and sniffed repeatedly in quick succession. Its breath hung hot and putrid over Carla’s face. The stench seeped into her mouth, mingling with the pooled blood from the empty tooth socket and creating clots of rot around her tongue. She heaved, and the swill poured from the edges of her mouth.

 La Muchahuahua tilted its head side to side and released its hold on her, just enough to let her push away and vomit in the grass. Then the dog snatched her back. Again and again, it did this, letting her move away just a bit, then capturing her again between its paws. It slid forward on its belly, back legs outstretched, tail wagging.

*It’s playing with me.*

The realization made Carla stop struggling for just a moment. She looked up into the animal’s eyes: one black, lined with dirt, clay-red crust on the inner corner. The other eye bulged milky and heavy from the socket. In its center, over the shadow of a pupil that floated under the vitreous surface, Carla saw her reflection.

The hold on her hips lessened, and Carla again pushed, wriggled, and slithered back to free herself. She grabbed grass and ground, ripping and tearing at it, hoping it would help. Just as La Muchahuahua trapped her again, her fingers found the stick that had been in her mouth.

*“Juguete mío,”* it whispered, sliding her toward its muzzle.

“I am *not* your toy,” Carla screamed, stabbing into the dark and dank cavity of the beast’s nostril.

The animal shrieked, reared up on its back legs, and, with a violent shake of its head, hurled the stick into the distance toward the trees. Carla watched the stick sail through the air, tumbling end over end against the sky, until it disappeared into the forest.

“Go, go, go,” she said, willing herself out of the freeze of shock. She rolled over then clambered away on both hands and a foot as quickly as she could.

But La Muchahuahua clamped down on her torso, and like her stick, it hurled her into the distance. As she sailed through the air, tumbling end over end, she caught a glimpse of the blue sky, then the green and black forest.

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**Off With Its Ear**

Rain drummed an unsteady rhythm against Carla’s body. It pelted hard, like handfuls of rock, against her shoulder and back, then her legs, then the length of her. She moaned and wiped her face, smearing cold grit over her cheek.

“What?” She opened her eyes and looked at the dirt on her hand. Another black shower hit her mouth. She rolled her lips in, then pushed up on her elbow to spit grit from her teeth. Pain shot through her sides like tiny knives between her ribs.

Carla grimaced and hugged herself hard, trying to take a deep breathe but not expand her chest. She looked around then down over her body.

New meadow. Same sky. New injuries.

Same monster.

Beside her, a short distance away, La Muchahuahua dug, throwing dirt that rained down with *thap*, *thap*, *thaps*.

A cough caught Carla. She hacked, pulled her ribs together to control the pain, and without thinking, moaned loudly. Too loudly. She clapped her hand over mouth and looked at the animal.

The beast kept digging. It angled its hips this way then that, focusing completely on the hole.

Carla looked at the forest. She could do it. She *had* to do it.

After a cursory glance back at the monster, she gritted her teeth and, for the second time that day, crawled for her life toward the tree line.

A metal clatter startled her. Carla looked over her shoulder, then recoiled when something hit the ground beside her. Was it a metal glove?

She reached out to touch the gauntlet. Another bit of metal landed near her. Another clatter, another and another. In addition to clumps of dirt, the sky now rained steel.

Carla looked back at the pit the moment a large shield pitched up. She pulled into a tight ball just in time to miss the thing relieving her of her legs.

The shield stood on its end for a moment, stuck shallow into the ground, then fell.

Carla grabbed it, then slid her body under it, keeping the edge lifted just enough to watch the monster. This could be her cover. She would edge closer and closer to the trees like a snail.

Metal and dirt rang on the shield and around her on the ground. Then a hand. Then a foot. Pale body parts clanked down upon and around the shield.

Then a body.

It landed like a ragdoll in front of Carla. The armor on it rattled with the impact.

Carla covered her mouth, stifling a scream. He’d been a knight. And on his hip hung a sword, still in its sheath.

She could *use* that sword.

Under her steel shell, Carla crawled toward the corpse. She grabbed the sword’s worn grip and pulled. Blood and mud had sealed the blade into its leather sheath. It wouldn’t budge. She continued pulling then looked at the man’s face in frustration, as if he could draw the sword for her.

She froze.

The man looked down at her, brown eyes blinking slowly. The horseshoe of teeth at the top of his mouth protruded above where a chin and jaw had once been. In its place, a grievous wound marked their absence, giving his face a gawking expression as if he were laughing at her.

And then he did. He laughed. His whole body shook with the cackling from his maw.

Carla gave up on the sword and pulled at the dagger tied to the man’s leg.

He laughed louder. She pulled harder. His body rocked with a howling chortle.

Carla tugged at the dagger, fighting to free it.

The man shrieked, and with a final guttural howl, he stilled.

Silence.

The man lay wide-eyed at the moment of death.

Silence.

In the distance, birds chirped and warbled.

Silence.

Wind shushed through the leaves of the surrounding trees and stirred the smell of freshly turned ground and wet earth.

Wet earth not falling. No *thap*, *thap*, *thap*.

Carla looked up. La Muchahuahua looked back, shoulder deep into the hole, a human leg hanging from its mouth. The two stared at each other, seemingly waiting for the other to move.

La Muchahuahua went first, backing out of the hole, dropping the leg as it went.

No sooner had Carla pulled the shield back over her, it was pulled away. Daylight hit her face, and before she could scream, Carla was between the monster’s teeth.

La Muchahuahua returned to its hole. It pawed further into the dirt as Carla half held on and half hung from its mouth: her legs and a shoulder dangling. Down in the pit, dead hands reached up, and feet kicked out from the dirt. Fetid corpses in various stages of decay lay twisted, tattered, and torn.

The monster leaned forward and dropped Carla into the pit. It then stepped over her and dug at the dirt, unearthing another knight from amidst the bits and pieces of other victims. The animal chuffed and pawed excitedly at the corpse, tearing away the armor. Metal pieces skipped and clanged across the dirt, including a small piece that glinted in the light as it kicked up. It came to rest right in front of Carla. Her heart sank.

A dagger.

*“Juguete,”* the monster said with a happy, ascending pitch. It then then folded its paws beneath itself, rested on its upper chest and nudged, nibbled and nosed its *juguete*—its toy.

La Muchahuahua’s body stretched across and partially out of the hole, its hips and legs on the grass above. Its torso hung above Carla’s head. Its belly swelled and ebbed with long breaths. Its chest *thump*, *thumped*.

Inhale, *thump*, *thump*, exhale, *thump*, *thump*. Breath, blood, blood, breath, blood, blood.

Carla grabbed the dagger and held it close to her chest for a moment. Then, gritting her teeth, she drove the blade upward below the parting of the beast’s ribs.

It howled and bounded up from the hole, pulling the dagger, and Carla still holding its handle, up with it. The dagger slid free just as Carla’s body crested the edge of the pit. The undammed wound sprayed red.

La Muchahuahua shrieked and howled, slinging its head. Blood pumped from the gash, painting the insides of the animal’s legs as it staggered, holding onto life.

It stumbled toward Carla. She threw herself back, narrowly missing the last snap of the monster’s teeth before it fell into its own pit.

Carla sat frozen, afraid to venture into the pit after it.

When the sun sank from the top of the blue sky into a purple skyline, Carla inched to the edge of the pit and looked down. She collapsed onto her forearms and cried. It was done.

When the nightingales began their evening songs, Carla wiped her face and looked over at the horizon. She had to get going. She turned away from the pit to crawl, but she stopped and looked back.

No, it wasn’t over yet. She had one more thing to do.

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The grass hissed as Carla’s wounded leg slid over it. The pain in her ribs hadn’t eased up, but her hope propelled her forward. She would keep crawling no matter what.

A hunting horn sounded in the distance. Carla pushed up and lifted her chest.

“Here,” she screamed, waving an arm. “Here!”

A figure in the distance waved back.

Carla collapsed to the ground in relief, then she righted herself to sitting. She grabbed the piece of the dog’s massive ear that she had cut away and held it up. The severed portion fell down to her lap; the top point reached her chin.

She rubbed her fingers over her teeth marks in it. That had been her only way to carry it: to bite down on it and drag it along. She fit her teeth back into the indentions and sat there, ear hanging from her mouth, waiting and smiling.

The End