

# **A Dark Guardian**

**By**

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You awaken to a cacophony of dull thuds, the echoes of trampling feet above you. With a lethargic moan, you sweep a skittering roach from your bare calf. Disoriented, you open your eyes to find yourself in the petite body of a teenage Hispanic girl. Your previous life seems to have been only a dream. That existence fades away as the memories and emotions of your adolescent host inundates you.

Your heart is a hollow ache more severe than the burning craving of your desolate stomach. You never knew your father, nor any rumor of his life. Over a year ago, your mother failed to return one morning from escorting a client. A week later you were evicted from the capsule hotel that had been your home, leaving you no choice but to join a street gang of thieving urchins. Even they shun you now, forcing you to slumber under the abandoned maglev train car that is their adopted residence.

Sitting up on your bed of thin cardboard, you rub the sleep from your eyes and take stock of yourself in the faint light seeping into your secret sepulchral den.

Your filthy pair of boy's sneakers, too large for your little feet, have lost their soles. Your tattered socks are mismatched, one black, the other blue, one long, the other short. The purple spandex shorts hugging your slim thighs reach just above your scrapped, knobby knees. The bottom hem of your oversized pink hoodie with padded mouse ears is frayed, and the worn fabric is marred with a myriad of stains. You aren't wearing any underwear, or a shirt for that matter. You have never worn a bra, your budding bosoms in no need of support. Your unkempt brunette hair, jutting from your drawn hood like oily straw, hasn't felt the stroke of a brush in months. It's been even longer since your last shower. Vending machine bathing towelettes is the only reason your olive skin isn't black with grime.

Your hunger is so consuming, you don't realize how thirsty you are until you notice the crinkled plastic bottle holding an inch of water. It's all that's left of the stolen handfuls of ice. You unscrew the cap and pour the meager gulp down your parched throat. Holding the bottle upside down, you tap the bottom to coax the last dribbles onto your jutting, curved tongue. It's not nearly enough to satisfy your acute thirst. You mentally kick yourself for the hundredth time for letting your urine recycler get stolen, then cap the empty bottle and slip it into the front pocket of your pullover.

Retrieving a keychain die from the same pocket, you give it a slight squeeze. A holographic digital clock projection flickers and shudders for a moment before you stash it away.

The sun should presently be sinking behind the towering skyscrapers of the supercity above. Since your banishment, you have formed an aversion to the harsh light of day. The artificial neon illumination of the night is more hospitable. It is much easier to slink through the droves in the evening.

You crawl over the cold polycrystalline floor to the opposite corner of your hideaway to check on your furry roommates. Momma cat is sprawled on her side, nursing three mewling kittens. A sharp pang strikes your hollow heart. A fourth kitten lies still and stiff. You buried one a few days ago. At this rate, none of them will survive.

Hot tears trickle down your cheeks as you begin to softly weep. You think to yourself solemnly, I should give up and die. I have no one and nothing. I scavenge and scrounge to endure a bleak existence without meaning.

That's not true and you know it, rebukes a more optimistic voice within your mind. You still have one friend that cares for you. That's more than some. And you have the hope of a better future to drive you. A lot more than some.

"Pssst," comes a hiss behind you, interrupting your internal debate.

Ashamed for reason unknown, you move the tiny corpse behind momma cat to conceal it. “Hey, Ratón,” whispers the only gang member that still acknowledges your presence.

You wipe your tears with your sleeves before turning around to face your one and only remaining friend.

On his elbows and knees, cheek to the ground to peek under the train car, Luciano grins at you with a hint of fear in his expression. He’s only two years older than you, yet he’s too big to fit through the gap that you can slip through so effortlessly due to your small stature.

You inch three-quarters of the way towards him and halt so as not to spook him. He usually has gifts.

Luciano reaches under and sets down a handful of individual coffee creamers. “For your cat.”

You sniffle and smile. “Thanks.”

He digs into a side pocket of his camo vest and pulls out half of a muffin. He places it next to the creamers. “It’s not much, I know. But some of the others are getting suspicious. If they find out, we’ll both be banished.”

You stifle a sudden sob that seems to well up from nowhere. Luciano risks so much for you. You wish you could prove your gratitude somehow. You wish you could repay him. But you have nothing to give. “Thank you.”

He offers you another tense grin. “Bye, Ratón.” And hurries off to rejoin the others.

You immediately scurry forward with haste, scared someone or something will steal your breakfast. Scooping up the muffin half, you shove all of it passed your chapped, plump lips at once. It’s stale and yet soggy, but you don’t care. You mush it up in your moaning mouth and swallow it down in an instant. You lick a few moist crumbs from your palm, then pick a few more from the dirty polycrete as your stomach rumbles and groans for additional sustenance. For a moment, you consider drinking the creamers but the subsequent guilt would be too much to bear.

So instead, you carry the creamers back to momma cat. You peel one open and pour it onto a plastic saucer. Before you can open a second, momma cat has already lapped up the first and is meowing for more. When all of them are empty, you jab your tongue into each to reach the last drops of tepid cream. You’re so hungry it’s overwhelming.

Usually, you wait until it’s completely dark to sneak out, but the muffin and cream have exacerbated your hunger pains. After settling the lifeless kitten into your front pocket, you slide out from under the train car and scamper through the partially collapsed metro station.

Rather than climb up the crumbling stairs of the subway entrance to the streets and take the chance of being spotted by one of the gang members, hunched over, you scuttle down a drainage pipe into the storm sewer labyrinth.

The dry brick walls rise into a curved ceiling where industrial cage lights are widely spaced, casting pale illumination upon the decaying trash impregnating the center channel and the squeaking rats crowding the elevated walkway.

Shuffling your feet, you make your way through the mangy rodents with caution. You don’t want to step on a long tail or a little foot and get bitten. Your ankles are already riddled with scars from their sharp teeth.

Each overhead light you approach flickers until you pass beyond it, reminding you of the heavy shadow that lurks behind you like a hovering cloak. Since no one else notices, you disregard it as a figment of your demented imagination, even though it’s always visible in your peripheral vision as wispy tendrils whorling and furling.

You reach the first junction of tunnels. The quickest route to an open manhole is via the left passage, but the next light in the right passage begins to pulse. Your shadowy follower is attempting to lead you somewhere again.

Dismissing it, you round the corner to the left and continue your slow shuffle through the crawling carpet of rats.

A few minutes later, up a set of rusted steps you go to emerge from a manhole into a dingy alleyway. A rerun junkie is lying in a heap of rubbish, twitching as his eyelids flutter, oblivious to your presence. Stooping beside him, you check his pockets in search of anything of value besides the illegally augmented X-Pod feeding his addiction. Unfortunately, you discover nothing other than he's pissed himself.

With a disappointed sigh, you leave the alley behind to rove the sprawling ghetto of claustrophobic multilevel slums.

It consists primarily of ramshackle apartments over bustling marketplaces, bursting at the seams with the downtrodden and depraved. Everything from rodent curry and roasted cockroaches, to sensory enhancement bionics and weaponized prosthetic limbs, to replay experiences and refurbished sex-bots are up for sale. Oppressive superstructures of biosteel and nano-glass loom over the seething supercity like tyrannical titans. Auto-taxis and hover-buses streak through the sky above. The holographic hypnotic subliminals of sigil advertising blank out the stars beyond the environmental enclosure dome. It's a manic orgy of chaos gasping with lust.

A perfect domain for a pickpocket as nimble and clever as yourself.

But first, you must lay the deceased kitten to rest. You choose a square patch of dirt mostly covered in garbage beside the road so passers-by will think you're simply rummaging. You don't want anyone to steal the corpse for food. With a rusted can, you dig a tiny grave. After placing the kitten in the shallow hole, you quickly cover it with the loose soil, pat it down, then conceal the spot with refuse. You close your eyes and whisper a prayer, hoping he finds his way to heaven. Imagining all the warm cream and fresh fish waiting for him surges you with envy, sparking you to get moving.

Head down, your eyes scanning back and forth under the edge of your hood, you hunt for an adequate mark. Your stomach roils as you stroll passed steam clouds of food scents and your head wobbles as you drift through exhaled hazes of Euphoria vapor.

Before your exile, Luciano and yourself had become comfortable working as a pair. Luciano would usually act as a diversion while you did the sneak and snatch. You were a great team. Going it alone is more difficult and dangerous.

Something snags your ankle and you tumble forward and roll onto your back in the middle of the congested street, splashing into a greasy puddle of a foul smelling liquid.

A craggy-faced elderly man, not much taller than you, hunches over you, leaning heavily on his aluminum cane. He stretches his leathery palm toward you. "Let me help you, sweetie."

Afraid you'll pull the feeble man down atop you, you climb to your feet without his aid. "Thanks, I'm fine."

His bushy eyebrows rise in surprise as he surveys you and he cackles a wide-mouthed chuckle, revealing his two front teeth are missing. "Clearly we have different opinions on the definition of fine. You're soaked to the bone with filth. And you look half-past starved."

"Well," you blink at him timidly from under your dripping hood, "I'd be grateful for a bite to eat if you have anything to spare."

He grins at you with compassion, taken by your puppy-dog act. “I don’t have a bite on me, but if you accompany me to my home I’ll heat you up a bowl of rat stew while you use my bathtub. I’ll take care of those filthy clothes for you too.”

The promise of hot food and a bath brings tears to your eyes. You blink them away and nod with vigor. “Yes, please, thank you.”

He gestures with a tilt of his bald head. “Well then, follow me this way.”

You stride by his side as he hobbles through the hectic mob in a hurry. He is undoubtedly overjoyed to have some company. “You can call me Ratón. Everyone does.”

He glances at the mouse ears atop your hood with a preoccupied smile. “Quite befitting. You can call me Abuelo.”

Not another word is exchanged as he guides you on a zig-zagging path through side streets and back alleyways where pushers and prostitutes are loitering, prepared for the evening’s debauchery.

He pauses for a brief moment beside a rowdy group of drunken men gambling with dice on the street. The dealer gives him a slight nod before you continue on.

A few blocks later, he leads you through a rear entrance of a dilapidated building that originally must have been a factory or warehouse before it was converted into housing. You climb three flights of stairs littered with trash and squatters and infested with roaches. The luminous strip running up the wall parallel to the handrail dulls as you pass. Abuelo doesn’t seem to notice.

A palm scan unlocks the metal door to the elderly man’s studio apartment. It’s cramped and dimly lit but surprisingly clean and uncluttered. The kitchenette has a table for two across from an open bathroom. A twin-size bed is set opposite an antique white crib with baby-pink bedding, accommodating a sleeping teddy bear. The door clanks locked behind you automatically. With a spike of anxiety, you realize there are no windows in this polycrystalline cell and no manual door lock.

Abuelo slips off his worn beige loafers. “Leave your shoes and clothes by the door.” He limps over to the freestanding bathtub. It’s large enough to stretch out in, unlike the smaller round ones available for rental. Forged from nano-glass, it’s transparent and there’s no privacy curtain either. He twists the squeaking handle to start the water running and steam wafts over the edge of the tub. He squeezes a drop of exfoliating microbes soap into the rising water. Then moves to the stainless steel toilet-sink combo and pours a dose of Listerine Tooth and Gum cleanse into a small cup and places it on the fringe of the sink.

When he turns around, he cocks his bald head at you with a furrowed brow. “Ratón, don’t be shy, sweetie. I can’t put your clothes through the wash and dry with you still wearing them.”

Holding one arm, you chew your bottom lip with nervous tension. “Could I, um, have a drink of water first?”

“Oh, of course. Excuse my forgotten manners.” He shambles over to the kitchenette sink and fills a plastic cup. He delivers it carefully, his hand shaking with his unsteady gait.

“Thank you.” You accept the plastic cup with two hands and drink it slowly, delaying the embarrassment of stripping nude.

Abuelo moves to the table and fiddles with an X-Pod until the sensual mid-tempo tunes of bachata music begin to flow at a low volume from speakers set in the ceiling corners of the apartment. The speaker above you crackles. Abuelo eyes it with curiosity.

By the time he moseys over to the bathtub and turns off the water, your cup is empty. Your thirst got the better of you and caused you to drink too swiftly. You still haven't gathered enough courage to take off your clothes. "Um, Abuelo, can I have some more?"

He returns and takes the cup. "Sure thing, sweetie, but not until you're squeaky clean and sitting at my table."

Your mind scrambles for a reasonable justification to reject the offered bath and finds nothing. You could compose a story to explain why you must suddenly leave without the bath and meal, but your sharpening stomach pains trounce your turmoil about getting naked in front of this genial old man.

Bending down, you wiggle off each of your oversized sneakers and place them beside Abuelo's loafers as he carries the emptied cup to the kitchenette. As you peel off your crusty mismatched socks, he retrieves a garbage bag from under the sink and whips it open. You empty your front pocket, placing your keychain die and crinkled bottle in your sneakers. You gulp down the anxious lump swelling in your throat as Abuelo limps toward you, then pull your hoodie up and over your head.

Abuelo stands before you, uncomfortably close, holding up the bag with one hand. "You're as skinny as you are petite. I may have to feed you *two* bowls of stew before I set you free."

You stuff your soiled pullover into the bag without comment and then toss in your tattered socks. You resist the compulsion to cover your tiny tits as you stand there topless, your cheeks burning, your eyes welling with tears, your heart drumming in your ears. You feel so exposed and vulnerable. You want to crawl under the bed and weep.

"Come on, sweetie." Abuelo shakes the bag. "The bottoms too."

You don't want to remove your spandex shorts, but your elfin mound and slit are visible through the thin purple fabric anyway, and Abuelo is waiting. Slipping your thumbs under the waistband and arching over, you push your shorts down and step out of them.

"No panties," Abuelo snorts in surprise. "Have I unknowingly welcomed a savage into my home?"

Your only response is dropping your shorts into the bag and clenching your hands together over your smooth, virgin girlhood.

"Don't slouch," Abuelo grunts. "Stand straight and roll your shoulders back so I can get a good look at you."

Your tears break and drip to the bare floor as you stare at your crossed feet and quiver with shame as Abuelo's eyes scour every contour of your naked body. You have never felt so small, so weak, so dirty. The seconds drag on and on and on as he scrutinizes every curve and valley of your nude form, shuffling to the left and right to inspect your rounded backside.

Finally, he consoles, "Dry those gorgeous opalescent eyes. I just had to check you over for bugs. Now you go hop in the bath while I take these filthy rags to the laundry room. I'll be back in a few."

He palms the security scanner, unbolting the sturdy door, and hobbles out, carrying away every article of clothing that you possess. The thought of losing them makes you feel queasy.

The instant the door relocks, you rush into the bathroom, the overhead lighting flickering as you pass, and you sit on the cold steel toilet. Yellow urine streams into the narrow bowl as you release your bladder with a sigh. That cup of water zipped right through you. It's the most you've had to drink at once in several weeks.

As a force of habit, you shake dry, wiggling your bottom, rather than wipe. Then hurry to climb into the tub. You wince as you first step into the sweltering water, but you quickly acclimate to the high temperature and sink below the surface to allow the microbes to clean your face, scalp, and hair.

Eyes closed, you hold your breath as you attempt to relish the first bath you've had in years. Even before your mother disappeared, you rarely enjoyed a bath. A flash-spray shower is ten times cheaper, and even those you shared.

A snippet of a forgotten memory flashes from the depths of your psyche. A brief recollection of Abuelo watching you through a crowd from a distance. The image of a butterfly caught in a spider's web projects onto your inner eye, triggering a frigid shiver to ripple up your spine, exaggerated by the hot water.

Lungs beginning to burn, you break the surface with a gasping inhale. Your stomach roars at the scent of food and you nearly leap out of the tub to hunt it down and devour it.

Abuelo is stirring a small pot on a single electric burner. The laundry room must be very close for him to have returned so fast. Setting down the spoon, he turns toward you. "Ratón, your meal will be ready in a moment. Are you done?"

You bob your head. "Uh-hu."

He points. "There's a towel on the shelf above you."

To reach it you'll have to stand up, exposing yourself again. He's already surveyed every inch of your flesh, but at least before you were shrouded by several layers of filth. You wait a moment, hoping he'll return his attention back to the stew but he continues to watch you with patience. Reluctantly, you twist around and rise onto your feet to reach the towel, baring your bottom to him. You wrap it around yourself before turning and stepping out, dripping onto the bath rug.

Snatching a paper tote bag off the floor that you hadn't noticed before, Abuelo limps toward you with a smile. "I have some elegant clothing that should fit you nicely."

Worried that you've lost the only gift that still remains from your vanished mother, you ask, "What about my hoodie?"

Abuelo plops the bag down at your wet feet. "Your rags aren't finished yet. The machine is an older model."

You suggest, "I could wear the towel until they're ready."

He scoffs, "Certainly not."

You press, "I don't mind."

"You'll dress in proper attire if you wish to eat at my table!" He stomps a demanding foot with more strength than you thought him capable of. "Am I understood?!"

Intimidated, you whimper, "Yeyeyes, sir."

"Good girl." Abuelo turns and heads back to the kitchenette. You wonder if he truly needs the cane.

You unwrap the towel to dry yourself thoroughly, forgetting all modesty at this point. You don't want to postpone your meal or prolong your visit any more than necessary. After rubbing down your legs and getting between your toes and cheeks, you wrap up your messy hair with the towel.

Within the tote bag, you find a white floral lace thong, fuchsia fishnet thigh-high stockings and a short sundress of sheer pink silk. You slip on the risqué panties, the thong sinking deep between your cheeks, then each lascivious stocking and pull the diaphanous dress over your head. Somehow all of it fits you perfectly. The butterfly in the spider's web flares in your mind.

You swish with the Listerine for thirty seconds, your mouth tingling, and spit in the sink. Then scamper to the table as Abuelo is setting a steaming bowl next to your refilled cup of water.

As you sit on an old wooden chair, he whispers into your ear from behind you. "You look absolutely delightful. But I have a finishing touch." He dangles a pink dog collar over your shoulder to let you see, before fastening it around your throat. It's tight but not strangling. You don't understand why you should have to wear a dog collar to eat rat stew, but you're not going to dispute his weird desire and incur another violent outburst.

Abuelo hands you a metal spoon, then slumps into the chair opposite you, presumably to watch you eat.

You're too famished to be concerned about the scandalous clothing, the dog collar, or Abuelo's bizarre behavior. You can worry about all that after your barren belly has been sated.

Leaning over close to your bowl, you scoop spoonful after spoonful of mushy cubes of potato, soft bulbs of garlic, and chewy chunks of rat meat in a creamy brown gravy into your gobbling mouth. Too ravenous to chew properly, you wash down each mouthful with a gulp of water, nearly choking with each swallow. Your spoon is scraping the bottom of the bowl in no time at all. You suck the spoon clean and then lick the edges of the bowl, reaching your tongue in as far as possible.

You're startled by a pounding on the door and drop the bowl onto the table. It impacts with a clatter.

Abuelo slams a fist down in aggravation, rattling the bowl and vibrating the spoon off the table to clink against the polycrystalline floor. You're not sure if he's perturbed at you or the new visitor. He shuffles angrily over to the door and palms the scanner, barking, "You're early," before the newcomer is even revealed.

A middle-aged man, bulky with muscle, dominates the doorway, utterly dwarfing Abuelo. The barrel-chested brute lumbers inside, shouldering Abuelo out of his way while ogling you with a greedy smirk. His cold eyes are the reflective onyx orbs of ocular implants. His bulging arms are alive with dynamic tattoos of nuclear-green maggots squirming through heaping piles of human skulls. His gel-armor sleeveless shirt, Kevlar jeans, and grav-biker boots are crimson with black accents. You've never seen a man more daunting.

He stares at you while speaking to Abuelo. "I keep telling ya, you collect 'em, you don't play with 'em."

"I want double for this one," Abuelo protests, stepping in front of him again. "It took more time than usual. And look at her, she's clearly worth at *least* double."

With a firm hand, the muscle-bound hulk pushes Abuelo aside. "*Fine*. But stay out of my sightline. I'm starting the recording now. I wanna capture the entire experience and have it on sale by morning."

Your heart rate speeds as you process what they're saying. You don't have a neural interface, required for replay, so you're unsure of what the typical experience consists of, but you're certain what these men have in mind isn't good.

The tattooed giant approaches with the slow caution of a predator stalking skittish prey, like a grizzly cornering a bunny. He sits, the wooden chair creaking in objection, then reaches across the small table with his brawny arm and places a scarlet cardboard box, the size of his hefty fist, before you. "Go ahead, Princesa, open it. It's a special gift for a special girl."

An abrupt bout of indigestion sears your throat. You consider throwing the bowl at his head and making a run for it, but there's nowhere to flee. Only Abuelo can unbolt the door. So

with a trembling hand, you open the box, expecting something to spring out and chomp off the tip of your nose.

This is the end of the free preview.

The full story is available for purchase at most major eBook retailers.

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