

# Daniela Reyes

*The Mechanic*

DANIELA REYES SAT IN THE WAITING room and tried not to fidget. She hated dresses and itchy nylons. But the new meatpacking plant was searching for a mechanic, and they were offering some cracking benefits. With a salary like that, she could afford to finish her bike with Raleigh parts as opposed to scrounging up whatever she could find at the junkyards. The opportunity was worth enduring the scratchy nylons, if only to prove to her prospective bosses that she meant business.

Last week's interview couldn't have gone better. On the way out, she'd found the interviewer, Mr Filch, hovering over his open car hood with the frozen air of someone faced with a riddle in a language they don't speak. It was just a bum battery, but she made the most of the opportunity, pointing out some potential maintenance tasks to head off future car problems at the pass. The little man had seemed impressed. That had to be a good sign, but she sure hated waiting.

Finally, the secretary ushered her into Mr Filch's office. Still on her best behavior, Daniela shook his hand. Not that she was inclined to judge, but the fellow was a bit of an odd duck. He was bald as an egg – he didn't even have eyebrows – and his skin had the smooth, unblemished softness of a newborn baby. Altogether, he reminded her of a recently hatched chick too much for comfort. But she didn't have to admire him to get him to hire her.

"How is your car running?" she asked as she sat down.

"Purring like a kitten," he said. "I am in your debt, Miss Reyes."

"Not at all. It's what I do. And I'd be very happy to put those skills to work at New Horizons, Mr Filch," she declared.

"We'd be happy to have you," he said, baring his teeth. "Let's discuss your compensation."

She suppressed the urge to pump her fist and shout aloud. Finally, things were looking up.



TO CELEBRATE THE GOOD NEWS, DANIELA offered to take her friends out for a seafood dinner at her

favorite roadside stand up the coast. It was a pretty day for a drive, although Imogen's bike was out of commission while she awaited the delivery of new valve spring covers, and Daniela's truck had been unsalvageable after the flood. So they all piled into Pawel's truck for the trip. The fried shrimp were piping hot and the corn on the cob dripping with butter, leaving pools on the paper-lined baskets. After they'd filled their bellies, they lounged at the picnic table, enjoying the combination of bright sun and cool breeze.

"This is the life," said Imogen, rubbing her belly. "If this is what happens when you get promoted, I hope you're running that place within the year. I'm so full I might burst."

"I didn't even tell you the best part," replied Daniela. "They're giving me a work truck to replace the one that got washed away. I'll be able to put all my hard-earned cash into my bike, so we'll be able to take some trips together next summer."

"Wahoo!" exclaimed Imogen, holding up her soda bottle. "I'll drink to that!"

They clinked glasses. Then Daniela frowned.

"I hope you two don't feel abandoned," she said. "Honestly, the only thing negative about this new gig is that you won't be there."

"Bzdura," said Pawel, waving a hand dismissively. "Is good that you grow."

"Besides," added Imogen with an impish grin. "We fully expect you to recommend us when more slots open up. We're happy for you, but it's a self-serving sort of happiness."

"I admit nothing," said Pawel, holding his hands up in prayer like an innocent schoolboy, and they all laughed.



AFTER THE MEAL, THEY TOOK A DRIVE further up the coast but ended up turning back earlier than planned. Sullen clouds scudded across the previously clear skies with alarming rapidity, threatening rain. The wind kicked up, gusting off the water with a strength that rocked the truck. Pawel was steady behind the wheel,



ALTH OF NEW  
BS ARRIVES!

## New Horizons ustries to Plant Flag on Arkham

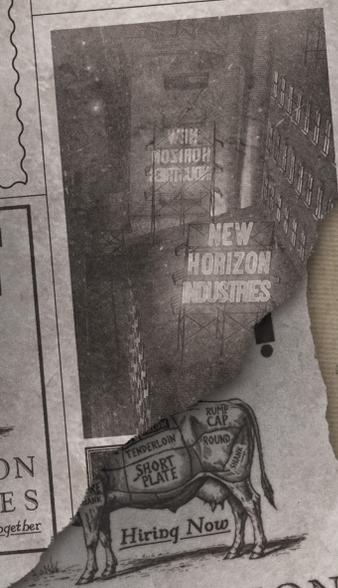
the road to reconstruct-  
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Industries. Soon, the com-  
y will open a meat pack-  
plant in the Waterfront  
trict.

he *Advertiser* had the op-  
rtunity to speak with Mr  
oward Wiles, president of  
ew Horizon, about his plans  
d how it fits with Arkham's  
ature.

"We at New Horizon are de-  
ghted to be able to be part  
f Arkham's renewal," Mr  
Wilkes said. "This gives us a  
chance to showcase our core  
philosophy: that an industry  
such as ours is not only a place  
of employment. It is a commu-  
nity within a community. The  
jobs we provide do not simply  
change the lives of those peo-  
ple who work them. They also  
change the lives of everyone  
connected to our employees.  
We live by the idea that what  
we do at the plant can touch  
the whole city."

Asked to elaborate, Mr Wil-  
kes continued, "Remember  
what our product is. We hire  
people to pack the meat. That  
meat then feeds the people of  
Arkham. The wages we give  
our employees helps them pay  
for homes and enjoyment of  
this life. That's the kind of vir-  
tuous circle our world needs  
more of. Companies helping  
those they serve."

To which this paper can only  
add a hearty "Hear! Hear!"



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guiding the vehicle with sure hands, but they all agreed that it was probably better to cut the trip short.

Pawel took a different route back, circling inland to avoid the worst of the wind. After a few twists and turns, they emerged onto Route 18, a two-lane backcountry road. The wind was better here, but a cold rain pattered against the windshield and the clouds had grown so dark that Pawel switched on the headlights despite the early hour. It wasn't a white-knuckle trip – Daniela had driven in much worse conditions – but it certainly wasn't a day for a pleasure ride.

"Well, isn't this just a walk in the park," murmured Daniela. "Got to love Massachusetts weather."

"I don't have to love anything," declared Imogen. "It's ruining the party."

Suddenly, the truck died. The lights went dark, the engine cutting off. The windshield wiper stalled halfway through its arc across the glass. Pawel blurted out another word in Polish which probably wasn't a curse but definitely smacked of frustration. Daniela patted his arm as he veered onto the berm.

"If you're going to break down in the middle of nowhere, at least you have the good sense to do so with two master mechanics," she observed, trying to lighten the mood.

This comment earned a brief smile, and they all piled out to take a look under the hood. The freezing rain stung Daniela's cheeks, and she hunched her shoulders as she

circled around to the back of the truck to fetch the toolbox.

"Grab a light, would you?" called Imogen.

"On it!"

Daniela pulled the heavy flashlight from the box before lugging the whole kit and caboodle up to the front of the truck. But when she flicked the light switch, nothing happened.

"Dang it!" she exclaimed.

Pawel studied it, eyebrows knitted.

"Is new," he said, obviously puzzled. "It should work."

"It's still bright enough to see by if we shake a tail feather," suggested Daniela. "And it's awful cold out here. I say we get this show on the road and deal with the flashlight later."

"Seconded," said Imogen.

But try as they might, they couldn't find a single problem with the truck. The fuel pump looked fine, the filters clear. The battery was in tip-top shape. With every struck theory, Daniela grew more confused. There was no reason this truck shouldn't run, and with every passing minute, the sky grew dimmer and dimmer. It seemed much later than... what time was it anyway?

Her watch had stopped, which was icing on an already frustrating cake.

"Anybody got the time?" she asked. "Forgot to wind my watch."

Pawel grunted, looking down at his wrist.

"Strange," he said. "Is stopped."

Imogen let out a strangled yelp.

"Mine too!" she exclaimed.

A chill ran down Daniela's spine. There was probably some rational explanation for this, some sort of mineral deposit that emitted electrical frequencies and fried circuits or... something. Dead zones didn't just happen; they were caused. But she didn't have to like it. She'd better get her friends to safety before things got worse like they tended to do around these parts.

"I think we should scam," she said, keeping her voice steady with effort. "We're not getting anywhere, and who knows how far we'll have to walk before we hit a farmhouse. It's cold and dark, and honestly this place gives me the heebie-jeebies. I'm not afraid to admit it."

"I'm not looking forward to that walk, but I'm sure as heck not staying here all night. Who knows when someone will come by to give us a hand? I can't remember the last time we passed another car," declared Imogen.

Pawel hesitated.

"I'll ride shotgun with you tomorrow to pick up the truck," offered Daniela. "We can tow it back to the garage if necessary."

His expression firmed.

"Right," he said. "Is important to keep you girls safe. My matka would come back from dead just to yell at me if I did not."

"I would have liked her," said Daniela, picking up the toolbox and sliding it into the cab to lock it safely away.

"Yes, I think so," agreed Pawel.



THE WALK WAS COLD, MONOTONOUS, AND outright miserable. The road stretched on for what felt like miles, cutting a swathe through thick stands of trees and long stretches of unbroken fields. No matter how hard Daniela squinted, she couldn't make out a single building. Didn't anyone live out here? Someone had to tend these fields.

Pawel and Imogen shared her misery. The teasing banter had long since trickled away, leaving no sound save the crunch of their footsteps in the gravel and the hiss of the rain. Well, that and the howls.

Daniela thought she'd imagined the first distant, mournful call. No one else reacted to it, so she wrote it off as a flight of fancy. But then there was another, off in the trees to the left. Imogen let out a little yelp, and Pawel stiffened, lifting his hand. In it, he held the heavy flashlight, and at first Daniela wondered why he'd bothered to bring it. Then she realized he intended to use it as a cudgel. Good thing, too, if there were wolves on the hunt.

She could only hope it was actually wolves and not something worse. Something... inexplicable.

"We were having wolves in our village growing up," said Pawel, his voice low and

calm. "They will come around you in circle, try to break up group. Carry off weakest. If I give order, you listen. No arguments. No running. Never running."

"Got it," replied Daniela, snatching a heavy branch from the side of the road.

"Oh my gosh, are we really doing this?" exclaimed Imogen, shaky and breathless. "What an adventure!"

The situation sure didn't feel fun, but Daniela appreciated the attempt to lighten the mood. Yet the howls drew closer, and her makeshift club felt entirely insufficient. She would have given anything to be at home in her warm bed.

Then the creature hopped out from the edge of the woods, and her heart nearly stopped.

It had a wolf-like snout which it raised to the sky, releasing another of those hungry howls. But instead of fur, the head – and in fact the entire body – was covered in moist, sickly green skin. The body was oddly hunched, the back legs overdeveloped. As Daniela gaped at the misshapen thing, a smaller one hopped up to join it.



It too let out a call, the fading light glinting off of more teeth than should have fit into that narrow jaw.

"I think I just wet myself," said Imogen, her voice tiny.

"Keep walking," ordered Pawel, resolutely looking away.

As they marched on, Daniela's eyes darted through the trees, catching flashes of movement she couldn't track. How many of them were there? Her heart beat in her throat; she couldn't catch her breath. It was only a matter of time before the things attacked.

Although she knew much more about machinery than she did wildlife, she was right about that. The attack came, swift and silent. Pawel let out a yell, swinging his flashlight. Imogen cried as she lashed out with her heavy boot. Daniela took her branch in a two-handed grip and swung it with all her might as one of the frog-wolves loped toward her, mouth open in an eager leer. The years of lugging heavy machinery lent weight to her strike; she hit the thing so hard that the branch shattered. The beast went flying with a cry of pain immediately cut short as it slammed into the trunk of a heavy tree. She let out a fierce yell, snatching up another stick.

Before their attackers could regroup, a pair of headlights broke the growing dark, and the growl of an engine cut off the angry roars. The car was somehow right on top of them, but Daniela wasn't about to question the arrival of the cavalry. The creatures fled into the wilderness as the vehicle drew closer, tootling out a warning on the horn.

"Not a word," Daniela cautioned her friends. "They'll toss us in a sanitarium and throw away the key."

Pawel nodded, drawing an X over his chest in a silent promise. Imogen let out a bark of semi-hysterical laughter. But they all pasted on smiles as the roadster slid to a stop next to them.

"You folks need a lift?" asked the old man behind the wheel. "You look like you've been through the wringer."

"Boy have we ever," replied Daniela, surreptitiously dropping her branch to the ground at her feet.

ON THE WAY BACK TO COLLECT HIS truck the next day, neither Daniela nor Pawel made reference to their frightening ordeal, but she knew it was on both their minds. The ride was tense; Pawel had a heavy hammer tucked next to his seat. When he thought she wasn't looking, he rested his hand on it like it gave him comfort.

The abandoned truck started right up. The two of them exchanged thin-lipped glances, waiting for the sound of howls that never came.

"Is done then," said Pawel, frowning.

"For now," she agreed.

"Do you think...?" He shook his head. "Never mind. Is Arkham. Cannot explain."

She snorted in amusement, but she couldn't stop thinking about that as she followed his truck back into town. There was no explaining Arkham indeed, but it was home.



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