

THE LONG COUNT #1

The Silence Inside Her Heart Part One

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PAGE ONE

ROW ONE: ONE PANEL 2/3 Page

Panel One: Establishing shot of Nueva Cempoala, a Kowloon-like city: claustrophobic, dirty, poor, vertical. The people live and work inside box-like units, one stacked atop another. The exterior walls of which are covered by iron grids. From the grates, the denizens dry their laundry, hang flags of Nueva Cempoala, and fasten posters of sports teams.

Through the grates we can even see caged animals: small rodents, birds, even puppies and cats...which are used as much as for food as companionship inside the city.

The street-level is mud-brick and concrete, reinforced with steel. The bottom level is solid aside from a few stained glass windows depicting saints and religious symbols. The stained glass is protected by vertical wrought-iron rods. It is sacrilege to deface the images but still some are covered by graffiti and concert posters.

A young woman in futuristic sports padding is running down the street, past the gang tags and colored glass. Her beaded hair is dyed with clay-colored streaks, and pulled back from her face in a loose ponytail. Her eyes are circled by dark bags; she hasn't slept for days. A tribal-geometric tattoo faintly glows around her left eye.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Two boxes:

As a kid, growing up on the streets of Nueva Cempoala, I learned how to run.

Head down, eyes up, always moving.

ENVIRONMENT (POSTERS)

Espadas: ¡A la Victoria!

(sports poster)

(Espadas: To Victory!)

Chicle-Titlan: La Solución Herbaria

(herbal chewing gum advertisement)

ENVIRONMENT (STOREFRONT)

Iglesia de Jesús Cristo – Manera de Zapatista

(accompanied by a stylized Catholic cross)

(Church of Jesus Christ – The Zapatista Way)

ROW TWO: ONE PANEL

Panel One: CU of the face of CARMEN SANDOVAL, the young woman. Behind her is the mud-brick wall of the alley. It is covered in graffiti stencils and ad posters. Carmen is on the far left of the panel.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Two boxes:

It's not just putting one foot in front of the other, because whatever it is you're running away from?

It's doing that too.

Evasion, survival, is in the maneuvers, the duck and weave.

ENVIRONMENT (GRAFFITI):

¡VIVA ZAPATA!

ENVIRONMENT (POSTER):

CURFEW: 8p Weekdays/9p Weekends
(A spraypainted "X" over it.)

PAGE TWO

Panel One: CU on Carmen's upper body. Behind her is the mud-brick wall of the alley, covered in graffiti, stencils, and ad posters. Carmen is on the far left of the panel.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

Cities are just like people. Both have arteries, brains, spirits, guts, and skin.

To learn a city, you must learn its heart.

Panel Two: CU on her legs, battered and bloody from the scratches that criss-cross them. She is passing by a poster of a combat sports team, decked in their gear. There are five women in the poster. In the middle is Carmen, striking a pose, the captain of the New Cempoala Swords, the Nueva Cempoala Espadas.

Carmen is toward the center of the panel.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued over multiple boxes:

For those of us who grew up here, far below the silver towers, knee deep in the human sewage, we knew Nueva Cempoala like a brother, like an old lover...

...but then the city changed.

Panel Three: Carmen runs past a gang tag: NCV – NO JODAS in a freestyle font.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued over multiple boxes:

Las pandillas took over the streets in a shower of blood, absorbing those they could manipulate, destroying those they could not.

For those of us on the street, the gangs became the most powerful force in the universe.

Pandilleros are always looking to make their names, prove their manliness. *Exercises in power*, they call it.

Rape, murder, extortion. The gangs are always looking for marks.

Victims give the gangs reputation. Famous victims give the gangs control.

PAGE THREE

ROW ONE: THREE PANELS

Panel One: CU of a hand. The hand has a dragon tat running around its fingers.

Panel Two: CU of Carmen's face.

Panel Three: The hand again; this time, a knife has fallen into its palm from the sleeve.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued over multiple boxes:
And when you become famous, there's always some *guanajo* looking to take you
down...

...trying to make a name for himself.

ROW TWO: ONE PANEL

The man with the dragon tattoo, PS SANCHEZ, steps from the alleyway in front of Carmen. She's just a few steps from the light, from leaving the alley, and this jackass has to stop her. He's brandishing the knife toward her; Carmen is still bolting toward him full steam.

SANCHEZ (SPOKEN):

Hola, Señorita Sandoval. A little far from the dome, aintcha?

ROW THREE: TWO PANELS

Panel One: PS Sanchez makes a lunge toward Carmen but she grabs his wrist, the one holding onto the knife.

Panel Two: Carmen bends the wrist back, snapping the arm in two. The thug is screaming out in pain.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Two boxes
I have twenty minutes to meet the Dragon or it's all over. As much as I love wasting time
with *torpes* like this—

I'm just too short on time, and right now...

PAGE FOUR

ROW ONE: One Panel, 3/4 Page

Panel One: Carmen steps out of the alleyway and finds the streets empty save a pedicab (essentially, a bicycle but with a second seat for paying customers) idling down the street, no passenger on its back seat.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:

...I don't want to draw any attention.

ROW TWO: One Panel, 1/4 Page

Panel One: PS Sanchez is getting up from the alleyway. He's brandishing a gun in his good hand—the one not dangling from a broken arm. Blood is streaming down the sleeve of his cracked limb.

SANCHEZ (SPOKEN):

Fuckin' *puta*. Gonna pay for that shit.

PAGE FIVE

ROW ONE: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen’s POV: The emptiness of the street.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued across multiple boxes:
It’s silent.

Growing up on the street, you learn to fear silence.

Silence hides your enemies.

Panel Two: Sanchez lifts up his gun. The eyeline is even with the gun’s barrel; we see Carmen’s head lined up with the path of the bullet.

SANCHEZ (SPOKEN, YELLED)
Die, perra!

ROW TWO: One Panel ,1/2 Page

Panel One: Worm’s Eye: Carmen rolls out of the way of the bullet, on the far left of the screen. Her movement is perfect, trained. Sanchez’s mouth is open in a scream, unholy fire bursts from his gun—something dark and unnatural is alive in that thing. The bullet whizzes though where Carmen was before the bullet finds purchase in the faux-adobe wall of a local shop.

ROW THREE: Two Panels

Panel One: Sanchez is aiming his shot as a cloud of black fire manifests behind him.

SANCHEZ (SPOKEN)
You think you got it, *puta*? I don’t think so.

Panel Two: CU of Carmen; the tattoo around her left eye is glowing blacker, brighter like her body was just hit with a power surge. Her eyes are wide, scared. The black fire is reaching out towards her, having consumed Sanchez whose body is a charred skeleton covered with bits of burning meat.

CARMEN (SPOKEN, WHISPERED)
Madre de Dios.

PAGE SIX

ROW ONE: One Panel, 1/4 page

Panel One: The black fire reaches out toward Carmen like a ghastly claw but she sidesteps it.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued over multiple boxes:
After the gangs took over, the streets changed.

I was lucky. I was drafted into the *Ligo Deportiva Nacional*.

My friends were not. Some died, others went military...
but those that stayed behind did whatever they could to survive:

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen turns to run toward a side alley...

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:
Prostitution, organ-legging, human trafficking,
gunrunning, street chemistry...

Panel Two: ...but she stops suddenly, her eyes aghast. A large shadow is cast over her.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:
...even acting as vessels for the *diablos*.

ROW THREE: One Panel (cut into three)

Panel One: The left side of the scene shows the black smoke swirling into the twisted, slender shape of a man; it is the demon Paqok.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:
The street demons.

PAQOK (SPOKEN, SINISTER)

Welcome home, Miss Sandoval.

Panel Two: The middle panel shows Carmen turning her head to face the forming apparition, still aware of what is on the other side.

Panel Three: There is two statue-like demons forming from the ground. They're two heads larger than a man, and appear as living totems, animate idols from the land's past.

PAQOK (SPOKEN, SINISTER)

I see you haven't forgotten your *promesas*.

PAGE SEVEN

ROW ONE: One Panel, 1/4 page

Panel One: Carmen stands completely still, focusing the energy around her. The moment is surreal, time has stopped. She is staring intently at the viewer.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued over multiple boxes:

The night I got away, a *marimbero* named Paqok *juró por su madre* that he would kill me.

My death, he said, would fulfill my obligation to him.

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: Paqok makes a sinister gesture with his hand.

Panel Two: The eyes of the statues come alive, bluish-black energy courses through their cracks and indentations.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Continued over multiple boxes (across both panels):

Ever since that night, the eve of my eighteenth birthday, I've been running.

Running from the demons, from the *barrio*, running toward fame and safety...

...running like the streets taught me to run.

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen brings up her left hand in a defensive edge.

Panel Two: She counters just as a statue ambulates towards her, swinging its stone-like fist..

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

But now the time for running is over.

PAGE EIGHT

ROW ONE: One Panel, 1/2 page with inset second panel

Panel One: Carmen is ducking another swing from the statue.

Panel Two (inset): Paqok is whispering a dark and arcane prayer.

ROW TWO: COMBAT PANELS

Carmen steps her way behind the statue and cracks the large disk atop its spine. The page ends with the statue letting out a primal scream as Carmen leaps off its head toward the ground. Blackness spews from the crack like the pained exodus of ancient souls.

PAGE NINE

COMBAT PANELS

Carmen lands on the ground with a roll. The other statue has closed in and now Carmen is facing them on two sides. She leaps for the first, smacking the disc on its breast plate. As with the first, a black spray shoots forth and collects on Carmen's armor. Copper smoke lirts from where the blackness is starting to eat away the armor.

PAGE TEN

COMBAT PANELS

The first statue stumbles back, almost falling but it regains its balance. Carmen turns her eye toward the second statue. The statue lumbers forth and begins to bend down. Seeing an opportunity, Carmen goes for the discs in its eyes. With each hit, she is sprayed with ichor. More copper smoke gushes from her armor. The statue topples forth, collapsing in a heap. Carmen rolls out of the way of its falling mass.

PAGE ELEVEN

COMBAT PANELS

Carmen climbs on the back of the fallen statue and leaps toward the first. Its final disc is on its head. Carmen catches its arms as it swings towards her. She scrambles up to the top of its head and barely manages to duck a swing from the beast. She steadies herself on the top of its head and glares at Paqok, lifting her foot up high. The last panel is Carmen's upper torso, a moment before she delivers the killing blow.

CARMEN (SPOKEN, ANGRY)

How cowardly are you, Paqok, that you cannot face me yourself?

PAGE TWELVE

COMBAT PANELS

Carmen brings her foot down into the beast's head, shattering the disc and covering her leg in the black ichor. The colossus falls and Carmen leaps onto the other statue which is just starting to get up. Carmen breaks off a piece of the statue's decoration, a long, cylindrical wedge, and brings it down upon the back of the statue's head, killing it, and splattering herself with even more of the blackness. The last panel shows Carmen falling to her knees, exhausted.

PAGE THIRTEEN

ROW ONE: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen is holding herself up with one arm. The blackness is growing, covering her, her body is outlined with a plume of copper smoke that is so dense it looks almost like blood.

Panel Two: Suddenly, her arm gives and she collapses atop the statue.

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: Paqok walks calmly towards Carmen's body. He flashes a wry grin.

Panel Two: Paqok gently kneels down beside her.

PAQOK (WHISPERED)
Sweet, sweet Miss Sandoval.

ROW THREE: Three Panels

Panel One: MCU of Carmen's face, locked in paralysis. Paqok has a finger against her cheek, gingerly wiping a thin line of the blackness from her face.

PAQOK (WHISPERED)
You put up a good fight, my sweet.

Panel Two: Same shot, a little tighter, but Paqok's finger is gone and the blackness is almost entirely obscuring her face. The light from her tattoo is fading.

PAQOK (WHISPERED)
What you feel encasing your flesh, my dear, is me.

Panel Two: Tighter shot on Carmen's face now almost completely covered in the blackness. Her eyes are still open wide...but the light from her tattoo is gone.

PAQOK (WHISPERED)
I was without you...but now I am within you.

PAGE FOURTEEN

ROW ONE: Two Panels

Panel One: Paqok reaches down and lifts up Carmen's limp, blackened body. The copper smoke encases them both.

Panel Two: He turns, displaying her lifeless form. He is flashing a wide, self-satisfied grin.

PAQOK (Spoken)

Come, *mi hijos!*

ROW TWO: Three Panels

Panel One (1/4 row): A clawed paw bursts from the rubble of the first statue.

Panel Two (1/4 row): It is followed by a gnarled, flat mongrel face.

Panel Three (1/2 row): The show widens and we see another dog-like creature is rising from the ruins of the second statue as well.

ROW THREE: One Panel

Panel One: A medium shot of Paqok's torso, his serpentine appendages holding Carmen's limp form. On either side, the mongrels trail behind them. You cannot see Paqok's face but Carmen's is visible. From deep within the black, the light of her tattoo flashes to life.

PAGE FIFTEEN

ROW ONE: Two Panels

Panel One: CU of Carmen's face. The light from her tattoo is pushing away the black, which reacts as if it's alive. Her skin is rough, reddened.

Panel Two: CU of Carmen's hand as it slowly balls into a fist.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

I knew the danger my return would draw.

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: CU of Carmen's legs; the black ichor is starting to drip. The armor that shows beneath it is half-eaten by the blackness.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:

I never should have come back here...

Panel Two: CU of Carmen's face again. Her area around her eyes and nose is almost completely clean. Her face looks sunburned where the black once was.

ROW THREE: One Panel

Panel One: Her hand reaches up and clutches Paqok's throat. He reacts in terror.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:

...but I made a promise to a friend.

PAGE SIXTEEN

ROW ONE: One Panel

Panel One: Paqok drops Carmen suddenly.

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen lands on a knee, staring at Paqok. She still almost completely covered in the ichor: Most of her face is exposed as is part of her leg and arm. The ichor is pooling beneath her.

Panel Two: Paqok is clutching his throat as he glares down at her.

PAQOK (Spoken):

You're stronger than I remember.

ROW THREE: Three Panels

Panel One: CU of Carmen's face, distressed, angered.

CARMEN (Spoken):

I'm not the scared little girl I was then, Paqok.

Panel Two: Paqok's smirking face.

PAQOK (Spoken):

Oh, Miss Sandoval...

Panel Three: Same shot but there's a sinister flame in Paqok's eyes, an unholy fire that shoots forth from their sockets like torchlight.

PAQOK (Spoken):

...sure you are.

PAGE SEVENTEEN

ROW ONE: Two Panels

Panel One: Paqok's already long fingers extend even further. The symbols and sigils on his clothes take on a menacing, blue hue. Behind him, the earth is rumbling, something is jutting from the ground: a gigantic pillar.

PAQOK (Spoken):

How I wish you wouldn't make this so hard.

Panel Two: Carmen slowly stands, steadying herself. She undoes the straps of her still-smoking chest plate. The pillar is taking the form much like the previous statues, but it's taller, wider, and coursing with even more of the black ichor that almost took her life.

PAQOK (Spoken):

I only want what I am owed.

ROW TWO: One Panel

Panel One: Carmen takes one step back to steady herself. She throws the chest plate to the ground. The padded sports shirt she is wearing is pocked with burnholes.

CARMEN (Spoken):

I have paid my debt to you, *pendejo*. I owe you nothing.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

The streets taught me how to run.

ROW THREE: Three Panels

Panel One: Paqok brandishes his cane.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

Necessity taught me how to fight.

Panel Two: Carmen starts to glow throughout her entire body.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

But it was Quetzalcoatl, my mentor, and my friend...

Panel Three: CU on Carmen's face, her deadly serious countenance.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

...who taught me how to fight...

PAGE EIGHTEEN

ROW ONE: ONE PANEL (FULL PAGE)

Panel One: Carmen's skin is unraveling from her body, exposing a being made of serpentine light. She is lifting off the ground, hovering a foot above the stone.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:

..like a dragon.

PAGE NINETEEN

COMBAT PANELS

Carmen literally runs through Paqok, who dissipates into his original black cloud form. She grabs one of his dogs in her hand. She throws it at the Guerreros Idol's main disc, shattering the dog but not the Idol. She grabs the other dog and swings at where Paqok was. Not seeing him, she smashes the dog against the ground, cracking it in half.

Before the Idol can move, she clutches onto it and begins her ascent.

PAGE TWENTY

COMBAT PANELS

The Idol begins to glow as well and the light is burning and blinding Carmen. The light is like a jolt of electricity through her body. She almost lets go but maintains her grasp. She manages to get to the top of the Idol and she starts elbowing the disc on top of its head. It won't give. As a last resort, she drives her right arm deep into to the disc. It shatters, her arm disappears into the Idol, and a jolt of electricity wracks her body; the energy causes her eye to explode in light, shooting a stream of blood up towards the sky.

Carmen collapses on the crumbled Guerreros Idol whose head sits atop a pile of smoldering ash and stone. Carmen is draped over the Idol's head, exhausted, her right arm is at an unnatural angle deep inside the beast. The light that surrounded her is gone.

PAGE TWENTY-ONE

ROW ONE: Three Panels

Panel One: Carmen slowly lifts her head up, her bottom lip busted. Her eyes are pitch black, ink-colored blood is spilling from her eye tattoo. Her gaze is hollow and cold but her face shows anger, deep and righteous.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:
I never should have come back here...

Panel Two: She braces herself with her left arm and tugs at her right, trying to free it. No go.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) One box:
...but I made a promise to a friend.

Panel Three: With another tug, her right arm is freed. It's broken, dangling from her elbow at a right angle.

ROW TWO: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen stumbles off the Idol, almost falling when she hits the ground.

Panel Two: She looks around for Paqok but he's gone.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:
I met the Dragon on the eve of my eighteenth birthday.

ROW THREE: Two Panels

Panel One: Carmen looks down an alley way at a wall of screens.

Panel Two: Cradling her arm, she starts walking toward the alley.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE) Single box:
Folks say he's just a myth, a fairy tale, but I know he's real.

PAGE TWENTY-TWO

ROW ONE: Three Panels

Panel One: Carmen is struggling to remain upright, using the steel and brick wall for support. The wound is worse, her eye is still glowing.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

He saved my life. I owe him everything I have and everything I am.

Panel Two: Carmen stumbles to her knees. Her left hand is still up on the wall; her right hand is shaking. A long stream of blood dangles from her lip.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

He's the only reason I'd come back to the *barrio*.

Panel Three: Carmen stands, starts walking down the alley. The wall of screens is much closer now.

TEXT BOX (NARRATIVE)

He called to me, and I have answered.

ROW TWO: One Panel, 2/3 Page

Panel One: Wide shot of Carmen, collapsing on the ground, on her side just a few feet from the screen. She can't get up. Behind her is a large teletronic multi-screen wall: some screens are advertising some herbal chewing gum with chibi-chan characters wearing sombreros and shaking maracas; others are running warnings about the revised curfew; one is running a recruitment ad for the NC border security; a few are showing exterior shots of the Gloria Dome, the safe haven of the upper class that sits beyond the destitution of el Barrio. She is facing the screens, half-conscious but barely. Her half-lidded eyes stare blankly.

ENVIRONMENT (TELEVISION SCREENS)

Ahora Reclutando: NC Seguridad de la Frontera
(Now Recruiting: NC Border Security)

Senor Tasty's Tapas del Amor
(Senor Tasty's Tapas of Love)

The Gloria Dome: Vida segura y hermosa para todos
(The Gloria Dome: Safe and Beautiful Living for Everyone)

Advertencia: Toque de Queda En Efecto/Curfew In Effect

Ninguna Señal
(No Signal)

Various screens simply show standard television programming.
No news channels or weather stations, though.

PAGE TWENTY-THREE

ROW ONE: Four Panels

Panel One: CU of a single screen from the wall; the commercial is now obscured by lines of static

Panel Two: The screen goes black

Panel Three: ECU of a reptilian eye, scarred and bleeding.

Panel Four: The single screen is now nothing but static.

ROW TWO: Three Panels

Panel One: Carmen is limp on the ground, eyes closed. Blood is seeping from her lips, the tattoo; it's pooling on the ground around her. A trail of her blood is rolling toward the wall of screens.

Panel Two: CU on the blood trail, millimeters from the screen, slowly making its way to the wall.

Panel Three: The blood has touched the wall of screens and electricity is arcing from a jackport on the wall to her blood.

ROW THREE: Two Panels

Panel One: The electricity is traveling along the blood trail, arcing to her body. Carmen's eyes snap open, wide as suns.

Panel Two: With a shock, Carmen's body bolts upright. Her mouth is agape, her body arched in the extreme pain of rebirth. The tattoo around her left eye is shooting forth electrical light.

PAGE TWENTY-FOUR

ROW ONE: One Panel, Full-Page

Panel One: Carmen is sitting, leaning heavily on her left hand. She is seated in a pool of blood. Her head is up, looking at the wall of static-laden screens before her. Smoke is wafting from her body.

The entire screen, almost the entire page, is the body of her guide, her mentor, the Dragon of the Clouds. His body is segmented among the myriad screens, forming him as a mosaic among the white noise. He is beautiful, majestic. He is a god.

Carmen's mouth is barely parted, her body is still wracked with pain. Her left eye is a darkened, empty socket. Through the haze and smoke, she can only see her savior; she can only say his name.

CARMEN (SPOKEN, PAINED)
Quetzal--?