

THE ALIENS' MIDWIFE

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Ben would walk for miles and not remember a thing. The sky would darken, lightning pierce the veil, and he'd trudge on, oblivious. A man was stabbed once right there as he passed under a bridge, and he'd missed it.

Then on other days, his senses would focus, and people's faces and lives jumped out at him with an almost intolerable clarity. He'd be reinstilled with the grim sense of purpose. Adzemas. It would recede so far, the name go foreign, only to return without warning, along with the messages.

When the Adzem first came to him, he thought he was losing his mind. Because he lived alone, and had few friends, his instinct was to hide his condition, rather than run for help. He managed to call in sick that day, and lay in bed for a week - he must have eaten at some point, but he didn't remember it - watching pictures projected by them into his brain, learning the contours of another green world, with a sulfurous yellow sky. And then, at the end of the week they left him. Something seemed to crawl out of his head.

When he regained his sense of place and time, the digital counter on his telephone still glowed a red zero. No one had called. As far the people at work knew, Ben was sick, he'd called in for the week, and they'd made do. They had learned to leave him alone on the rare occasions when he was unable or unwilling to work because for the better part of ten years he had reported faith-fully and uncomplainingly to his dull desk job.

The only thing different about his apart-ment from the week before had been a little anole reptile, rare this far north, that he found shaded by the chunk of rose quartz in his windowsill cactus garden. He under-stood, as the Adzem had instructed him during that week, that he would need to safeguard this animal until they were ready.

“You puttin’ on some weight there, Ben,” said Lucky, the easy going, Jamaican cashier at Steinman’s. Ben dug through his pocket for exact change.

Gloria, the serious-minded, midwestern cashier, snapped at her across the magazine rack “Lucky! Don’t say that! You want Ben to go and shop at the Safeway?”

Lucky slid a loaf of bread carelessly across the scanner, and though it failed to register the UPC label, she let it pass into the bagging area. She made that mistake about once every other order, and Ben could never tell if it was intentional, just another aspect of her laid-back personality, or both. He knew she hated the automated cash register system, but he also knew she was loyal to the old Jewish butcher and his manager brother that had employed her for nearly twenty years. It was just the way things were done around here. Lucky let loaves of bread slide by, and maybe Joe Steinman made up for it once in a while with a big thumb on that old spring-weighted meat scale. The books balanced each month, the Steinmans did well enough to send their kids to out of town colleges, and Gloria and Lucky scraped by. It made Ben feel human. If he could feel human all the time, he might forget the Adzem.

Ben gathered in his change from Lucky and pocketed it without counting it. He figured the change all evened out in the long run too.

“Paper or plastic?” Lucky asked. Ben began to answer automatically, “P-” then stopped short and reflected Lucky’s ‘Gottcha!’ grin back at her. No such choice at Steinman’s. As Lucky slowly bagged his groceries in the same two-ply brown paper bags Steinman’s had been using for the last forty years, Ben flipped through the morning paper. As he scanned an article about recombinant DNA, sirens whined softly in the distance.

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Jane told people she’d gone to the University of Michigan, but she hadn’t. On job applications where a college education was not necessary, she omitted that lie, and listed her schooling as Central Valley High School in Yuma, Colorado. Had the potential employers checked - which none of them ever did - they would have discovered not only no high school by that name, but no valley. Jane was no criminal, but she was on the lam from her past, an abused and colorless childhood that had greyed her hair and etched her face well past its twenty-four years.

Jane mistakenly considered Ben her one and only friend. Because she lived in Ben's building, the Adzem found her a convenient place to work from and wait in. Ben had introduced the Adzem to Jane after they had been in Morgan, a former coworker of Ben, now institutionalized, and Betsy, a street person, now deceased. Ben didn't much like Jane, so when the transfer of Adzem consciousness from the lizard to Jane was over, his regret was minimal.

Jane, like the others, now had trouble coping with the rare moments when the Adzem relaxed their grip on her mind and the sensual immersion in an un-peopled, alien landscape blanked out. She'd pace around her tiny two room apartment, chain smoking, afraid to tell anyone about the visions except some-times Ben. The old world grew increasingly false and frightening with each return. Fortunately, the maddening wait would end after a few hours and she could go back to the good place.

This time, though, it had been nearly four days. And this time, she became convinced that Adzemas was her real home, that she was a bodiless spirit who would float there in eternal peace, except that she was periodically punished for some sin by being forced to inhabit a primitive flesh creature in some kind of prison hell. She hadn't eaten for the entire four days, though one thing she normally did when back here was eat. She had not slept. She'd smoked two cartons of ciga-rettes. And she was now convinced that she would never be allowed to return so long as the body into which she'd been projected lived.

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"I ain't seen you with that girl lately," Lucky said, setting a bottle of grapefruit juice on top of the bread. Gloria glared at her.

"I know," said Ben. He set the newspaper back on the rack "She's not around much anymore."

"What's her name again?" Lucky per-sisted.

"Jane."

"Oh yeah, Jane. That's right."

Ben hoisted one paper sack into his left arm and Lucky helped him lift the other to his right. The sirens from the street grew louder, a mixture of fire, police, and ambulance. They seemed to be coming from several directions.

Ben, opened to a sudden telepathic message from the Adzem, saw the past five minutes inside his building replay in compressed time: Jane in the basement, pouring gasoline on a pile of firewood stacked high in a corner and lighting it. Jane lying on the floor in her apartment, as smoke leaks in through the floor-boards and up along the radiator pipes. The brown anole crawling out of hiding, then scurrying up onto her face and latching onto her forehead, where it begins to redden, breathing and throbbing a blood red, its toes kneading her skin as it takes back the impulses of Adzem consciousnesses. The anole then scurrying off into a crack in the floorboard. The room oxygen flashing over and the Jane body, motionless, consumed in fire.

As Ben reached the exit he saw through the glass that firetrucks were stopping at the end of the block He could see flames shooting out the lower windows of his apartment building. A voice spoke in his head: *Save it.* The bags slipped out of his arms and groceries burst out onto the floor. Lucky gasped at the sound of shattering glass. Ben rushed through the door. Gloria ran out to watch. Lucky started methodically pick-ing out the undamaged groceries from the ruined ones, and set them on the third, rarely used checkout counter, so Ben could retrieve them later. She called for a stock worker to mop up.

A police car blocked the intersection in front of Steinman's corner store. At the other end of the street, a firetruck was pulling around the corner to a hydrant, while firefighters from the first truck on the scene pumped water in a huge arc into Jane's kitchen window. Flames shot through the roof of the almost totally engulfed building.

The emergency workers were too startled to stop Ben as he ran by them and bounded up the stairs into the hot smoke. He passed his own second story apartment, fumbling for the covertly duplicated key to Jane's place on the floor above. He scrambled up the last flight of stairs into thicker smoke. He unlocked her door, shakily, and began crawling along the floor, down which ran little rivulets of firehose water as it emptied from the street-facing room. He choked on a caustic mixture of smoke and steam.

The door to her bedroom was closed. He touched it with the back of his hand and it was scalding. Leaning back on his hands he braced himself against an opposing doorjamb and kicked the door open. Flames shot out and singed his hair and eyebrows off. Through the wall of heat he could see a charred corpse, and paralysis seized him. His body wisely refused to move into the deadly room, until he was again shown a mental picture of the anole crawling under the floor board. Half the floor was already burned

through, but he started crawling into the room anyway.

Two firemen came crawling after him into the apartment. Ben felt his knees and palms burning on the bedroom floor and fell reflexively back into the hallway. It was suddenly impossible to see anything - the smoke and steam were too heavy. He gasped a huge gulp of air, like a man about to plunge into water. Then the lead fireman reached out and dragged him from the apartment.

He remembered strangely masked faces and oxygen-tanked backs and a feeling of bouncing like they were run-ning him down the stairs. Then he was dreaming, a horrible scenario of disaster and pain, mixed in with the cool, desert night of Adzemas in an impossible, con-tradictory reality. He knew it was a dream, and he knew that he'd awoken in one of the worlds. And then he did wake, bitterly disappointed and in pain, in a hospital bed.

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Ben checked out of the hospital two days later. No one had visited him. The only place he could stay now was Richard's loft. Richard did not live in a way to which Ben was accustomed. A nightclub owner, Richard had dozens of friends, acquaintances, mystery business partners, understudies, and all of the above prefaced by "former", yet who still seemed to come around, or to call. Mostly call, apparently, as almost anytime you knocked on Richard's (open) door (and then let yourself in), you'd find him pac-ing the barely furnished, wall-to-wall carpeted living room talking into his cordless phone. Ben had seen him do this, call after call, for hours at a time. Ben read most of several books watching Richard pace, tuning him out for the most part, but occasionally picking up on some fantastic new plans being laid - a docu-mentary film on the mothers of serial killers, a lunch with the punked-out daughter of the president of Japan's big-gest steel company, a woman (or poss-ibly a transvestite - Ben hadn't absorbed all of this conversation) threatening him with legal action over something having to do with Richard's disruption of her "performance art". By the end of that conversation, she had settled for an apo-logy and a fifth of Polish vodka.

And yet Richard was Ben's only true friend. Though he was intensely social, he communicated very personally. And Ben could be almost anonymous around Richard, at his club especially, but even in his home, through which numerous persons paraded every day. At either place you could be politely ignored, sit in a corner, have beer and food, and wait.

Before he went to Richard's, he walked back to the burned-out apartment building. He moved slowly, wearing protective hospital scrubs under his pants and coat, and keeping his gauze-wrapped arms close by his body. The outer walls of the building were still standing. As Ben arrived, an empty dumptruck, towing a rusty yellow bull-dozer, pulled up and parked in front. Ben watched cautiously from across the street, but the workmen stepped off the truck and immediately crossed over to his side and went into the bar and grill for lunch. Ben crossed the street the other way. The big dumptruck obstructed the view between the bar and the front door of the building. Ben darted up the stairs he'd last seen from semi-consciousness, upside down, draped over a fireman's shoulder. The stairway and parts of rooms on the second and third floors still clung to unsound beams and brick.

It was Jane's third story flat he was going to, and in her bedroom, under the floorboard, he found it, still there. He picked up the anole and stroked it. Brown now, like the dusty wood, it seemed not to be breathing, and nothing moved save its big eyelids blinking down over green orbs. It seemed okay. He held it up in his palm and tried looking right into its eyes. It just sat there. Externally at least, it was a dumb lizard - what did he expect? He dropped it into his shirt pocket, buttoned it closed, and descended the stairs carefully.

By the time he reached the charred ground, the workmen, having only bought soft drinks, were stepping back onto the property. "Hey!" one of them yelled, but Ben turned the corner.

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He took the little lizard back to Richard's. Richard was there, on the phone as usual. He spoke in his customary hushed tones, mystifying the conversation for his newest dressed-in-black girlfriend, who pretended not to listen, leafing through the pages of a music fanzine.

"I need a quarter. You got any?" Richard was saying as Ben walked by.

Drugs, as usual, Ben thought.

Ben sat down in an easy chair across from the girlfriend. She seemed not to notice him, keeping her eyes fixed on the magazine. Ben closed his eyes. The only sounds were the occasional swishing by of a car on the rainy street, and the soft mumblings of Richard, now on a new call. After a long while, Ben opened his eyes. The girlfriend was staring at the lizard,

which had crawled out of Ben's pocket and was resting on his chest, pale green against the pale green of the hospital scrubs.

"What's its name?" she asked.

"I dunno," said Ben.

"It has to have a name."

"Okay, how about Adam?"

The girlfriend snorted. "That's a pretty dumb name for a lizard."

"Oh, well," answered Ben. "It just popped into my head." He smiled to himself. The girlfriend, unamused, went back to her magazine.

"Ben, what's shakin' dude?" Richard chuckled, rubbing him on the head and messing his hair.

"Not much, Sean Penn." Ben covered the lizard with his hand.

Richard rubbed his left ear, which was red from the telephone. "I hear you had a close call. I woulda come to see you in the hospital, only -"

The phone rang again, and without excusing himself Richard punched the button and launched into a new conversation.

Ben palmed the anole and went into a guest bedroom, where he carefully placed the animal in the back of the closet. "Find someone quick," Ben said to it. "You're liable to get squashed around here." He had no idea on what level it comprehended him, and in any case felt certain he didn't need to assist it in its operations. Communication with the Adzem had always been one way, even when they were inside him.

As he left the apartment, he walked past Richard, who had actually gotten off the phone and was putting some music on. "I'm going for a walk. Gotta get some clothes. It all burned up."

Ben walked around the neighborhood for an hour. There was a dark corner grocery, with crowded shelves. Three blocks away was a Salvation Army store, where he stocked up. There was a laundromat directly across the street from Richard's building. It was going to be easy to live here. Lots of empty and demolished lots, too - places he could think in.

When Ben returned to Richard's apartment, the phone was ringing, but no one was coming for it. Either Richard had gone to buy smokes, or what Ben suspected might happen had happened. He sighted a black-shoed foot pointing at the ceiling, just inside the guest room.

Ben looked quickly over at the couch to see if the girlfriend was still there. She wasn't, so he called out, "Anybody home? Hello?" When no one answered, he locked the door. The Adzem always knew not to make their move when other people were around.

He went to Richard's prone form and kneeled beside it. Richard was on his back, arms folded across his chest like a man in a coffin, but with eyes calmly open, blinking regularly. Instead of pressing itself to his forehead like it had done with the others, this time the reptile had crawled half its body into Richard's mouth. Its long brown tail swished across his chin once, and it slipped in all the way. Richard swallowed.

Ben shuddered. He was sorry it had chosen Richard, rather than one of the people that hung out here, for now he had no one left on earth he could talk with or trust. But the sense of mission instilled in him by the Adzem made such personal concerns seem trivial. Richard's body was synonymous with that mission now. And Ben sensed that Richard might be the last carrier he'd have to watch over. The direct *entry* of the lizard into Richard's body signalled a major change in the way the Adzem would now operate. Maybe Richard would take over for him as their caretaker. He wondered if Richard would tell him about his visions, as Jane had.

Richard looked up at Ben. He was taking it well. Except for showing a faint question across his brow, Richard looked almost pleased. This cheered Ben, who always felt mixed emotions about the transformation. Soon, millions of Adzem minds would move around on the atomic circuitry of Richard's nerves. And as they did so, the essence of Richard would expire in equal measure.

Ben helped Richard to a sitting position against his bedframe. He had already forgotten the lizard, Ben knew, and though Richard would not remember, Ben told him, "I'll take care of you. I'll always be here taking care of you." Richard smiled, the question on his face disappeared, and he slipped into a light coma. "Only I'm lying, Richard," Ben said to the oblivious body. "I can't protect you."

Ben heard voices. His eyes glazed over, his mouth hung open, and he concentrated on the communication. *This human body will be different from the others*, it was telling him. *This human body is not a resting place*,

or a place of study. This human body will take us to the desert. You will take this body to the desert.

The next day Ben drove to the airport and, using two hundred dollars from Richard's wallet and the rest of his own checking account, purchased two one-way plane tickets to Mexico, and exchanged the rest of their cash for pesos. He led Richard gingerly along the folding hallway into the plane. Richard needed to be regularly reminded how to walk. And though he was generally comprehensible in his speech, he frequently spoke in non-sequiturs now. He greeted the flight attendant in front of the cockpit with a bubbly, "Hello, Mother!" The Adzem process of reading and building onto his cerebral processes was not perfectly localized, and stray firings were spilling into all sorts of other areas, distorting everything from socialization to locomotion. His personal identity was also thoroughly disturbed - he only occasionally recognized himself as 'Richard' now. Ben had taken to calling him Romero, as a joke, and because he thought it would be a good name for him in Mexico.

Mexico City was just a blur of colonial architecture and soot to Ben, and on the bus ride out, mile upon mile of almost shantytown living rolled past, backgrounded by industry that seemed particularly alien here, pounded into this highland plain under blue. Only when they'd left behind them the city, the destitute suburbs, and a hundred miles or so of road, did Ben relax into the rhythm and space of the Mexican landscape.

Suddenly Richard began to seize violently in his seat. Passengers on the bus turned around when they heard his moaning and thrashing. Ben did his best to restrain him, but Richard slammed his head into the metal seat frame in front of them and started bleeding. The man in the seat across the aisle said something in Spanish that Ben didn't understand. Ben glanced at him dumbly and then looked back to Richard. Blood was all over his white shirtfront. Ben ripped off his shirt-tail and pressed it firmly against the gash in Richard's head while Richard continued to buck in his seat.

The man across the aisle poked Ben's shoulder, and gestured to Ben to push something into Richard's mouth. He pulled on his tongue and mimicked biting it, shook his head no, then placed his own wallet into his mouth and bit down on it. Ben waved him off, but tightened his grip on Richard to hold him still. Richard was arching his back, as though trying to lift himself to a standing position.

By now the bus had stopped. Before the driver and others could

come to help them, Richard's body lurched forward into the aisle, and it was all Ben could do to hold on to Richard's body as it stumbled involuntarily toward the door. The driver opened it and they made it down the stairs somehow.

The driver turned to the alarmed passengers and announced something in Spanish. Ben caught "pueblo... delante... ayuda..." and then the driver called after him, "In town doctor. We get."

The door slammed and the first class cruiser bus accelerated off. Ben sat on the dusty ground, holding Richard. The spasms were coming at regular intervals now, but less intensely. Ben watched the white bus go until it disappeared about six miles off on the long, straight road, blending with the white splotched mountain range ahead. Ben had hoped they'd end up in those cool mountains.

As for here - Ben scoped the landscape. Across the road was just dirt, with a few stray cactus and spindly weeds growing out of it. To the left was the road back to Mexico City, to the right, the road to the mountains, with a lot of green growing alongside it - some kind of crop. He swiveled himself and Richard around in the dry dirt to see how far toward them the crop ran. Right behind them was a field of cactus, which started about a mile back down the road from Mexico City. In the bus, he'd been too preoccupied with Richard to notice the appearance on the scene of this unusual crop - huge prickly pear cactus, planted in neat rows like corn, for almost as far as he could see to the south and east. Thousands of acres, miles of it.

Richard's body lurched forward again and he fell headlong between two rows. His face hit the sand hard. Ben thought about rolling him over, but before he could move he got the vision he'd been waiting for - the first one since Richard's apartment.

He saw the million cactus all suddenly change form. Still green, but now needles on top turning to two eyes, and the bottoms narrowing to thin bodies with long tails. A field of lizards to the horizon, millions of them.

"Here?" Richard asked out loud, surprised. "Now?"

Yes, came the reply, so emphatically and clearly that it seemed to be spoken aloud, right next to him, or from the sky, rather than from inside his head, which is where he knew it really was.

From inside Richard, he reminded himself, and transmitted to my

head.

Watch, the voice added - with relish, it seemed to Ben.

The soil began to darken in a growing circle around Richard's head. A liquid was pouring from him into the earth. Ben watched as the wetness raced along the contours of Richard's body, then spread rectangularly out from his legs and torso like ink bleeding into a blotter. Then the body itself began to dissolve. Ben could only watch, amazed at the process, understanding what was to come, but not exactly why. I guess they just want it, he figured.

A sea of maggot-like wriggling began in the wetness. Quickly the larvae creatures sprouted tails and became more articulated, taking on the clear shape of four-legged lizards. In a matter of minutes they were the size of small iguanas, and a liquid began to arc out of their mouths, which they opened to the sky. Their bodies did not dissolve as Richard's had - they simply spewed out the liquid onto the ground for a moment, then ran off in all directions, radiating out into the cactus field, along the road, and across the road into the unplanted desert field there. They kept growing as they ran. More larvae began to wiggle in the patches of liquid that the lizards vomited. A car rushed past, crushing a hundred lizards in a twenty meter stretch of road, and instantly the white wriggling began in the road kills. In a matter of seconds, thousands more tiny lizards scattered from that spot on the road.

Ben sat in the dirt, as hundreds of tiny new creatures ran close past him and over him. The firstborn, which Ben could see lumbering away in the distance, were now the size of alligators, but with flipper-like buds growing alongside their forelegs. Now Ben saw dragons rise up off the desert floor. First just a few, then in flocks, like ducks flushed from a swamp, they became so numerous that they dimmed the sun, and their beating wings became a roar.

A car crept by, the driver afraid to move too fast on a road filled with eight foot Komodo Monitors. Ben ran up to it and pulled the driver's door open. The little boy and girl in the back seat were hysterical, and their mother, herself on the verge of screaming, reached back to try and calm them.

"Los comprendo! Es importante!" shouted Ben over the din of scrambling and flying animals. The flight of nearby dragons was also causing a tremendous wind and dust storm. "Yo los comprendo, estes animales!" he yelled.

Perhaps out of desperation, the father slid over and let Ben climb in. Ben hit the accelerator hard, also perhaps out of des-peration. He struck a few lizards, and the old Plymouth almost skidded off the road - the children shrieking - as they deflected off a Komodo with nearly full, flapping wings. But the creatures down the road began to scatter and lift off, and soon Ben was speeding along. They approached a small cluster of buildings at the intersection of another rural route.

The father pointed “ Acá.” Ben pulled the car off the road into the gravel lot in front of a small café and fruitstand. The family ran inside.

They were out of range of the ground lizards, but dragons continued to fly over by the hundreds. Looking back toward the cactus fields, they could see a huge black swarming, a living cloud, from which thousands and thousands of mon-sters diffused out across the sky.

The store owners stood in front of their building, watching the spectacle. They seemed more amazed than afraid. The sky behind the mountains began to glow red, as the village on the other side burned where the first of the dragons had learned fire. With this last physical hurdle passed, and cognition and mem-ory triggered, the dragons remembered who they were and why they’d come. As they flew, they spewed their white, wrig-gling spawn onto the earth, and fire onto the man-made structures.

To the woman shopkeeper, who had darker skin than her husband, Ben said, “I’m sorry about the groceries, Lucky. I hope it wasn’t too much of a mess.” Their invasion launched, the Adzem had no more need for Ben and had released his mind - released it not only from them, but from its own conscious control.

To the shopkeeper, Ben said, “Es el fin del mundo, señor, si. Pero un día nuevo para el planeta.” The shopkeeper nodded, neither no nor yes, thinking, Loco.

“There’s one vision I had all by my-self,” Ben shouted to no one. “They showed me the end, how they take it over. That was them. But this place, this valley, that was me. I chose this place, not them. It’s mine. They can have the rest, but this is mine.” He spoke again to the woman. “Tell them this. Tell them that the lizards will take over everything, burn it all down, but they forgot about right here, the source, where they’re too little to breathe fire. This little valley will be where the resistance starts. This is where people will survive. Tell them.” She looked to her husband nervously.

Ben jumped in front of her suddenly. "Stand behind me," he said to her. "We've got to clear the slate. Me and you, we'll start it over. We don't need them." He pointed hostilely at the husband, and at the family huddling for shelter under the eaves of the fruit stand.

The woman tried to run to her husband, but Ben held her back. The shop-keeper rushed at Ben, who kicked him and pushed him down. Ben grabbed a shovel that was leaning against a beam and began swinging it wildly. The shop-keeper got up and ran into the café.

"Coward, ha!" Ben shrieked, his eyes bulging. "Too weak Only I -" His voice choked out. The storekeeper now stood in front of him with a shotgun.

"Esta loco," he shouted to his wife over the din of the low flying airforce of dragon invaders, and cocked the rifle. With Ben momentarily distracted, the woman ran behind her husband, whose eyes, and the gun, remained fixed on Ben. He stood squarely and motionlessly, his face hard. Ben roared out and raised the shovel over his head, charging. The man fired. Both barrels blasted Ben into a heap of death.

The shopkeeper went inside the café. With the help of the family, he began to gather together provisions. Outside, the dust continued to whirl in the roar of the dragons' wings, but the dragons flew by, many of them at great altitudes, as if setting off on long flights. They seemed uninterested in the valley. Still, if they had to, the shopkeeper and his wife, and the family, could live in the caves in the mountains. There'd be water there, and they had plenty of food. For now, they'd just stay here and hope everything would be alright.

The shopkeeper's wife went into the fruitstand attached to the café. She too gathered food, putting apples and potatoes into a large sack. She walked to the back, to a big steel sink where they washed some of their produce shipments. Lying in a shallow puddle of water at the bottom was a small green snake. It was curled in a circle, head to tail, ringing the drain. The woman reached in and placed her fingertips lightly on the serpent's head. She closed her eyes.

She saw a hundred million snakes rise like stalks out of the ground, flop to earth, and begin slithering toward water. She saw them plunging into the ocean, into lakes, ponds, and mud holes in the desert floor. Then she saw huge sea serpents shoot out of the water into the sky, unfolding wet new wings and catching the winds. She saw them begin to do battle with the dragons - or were they joining with the dragons to do battle against the

armies of men? It was not clear. She wasn't sure there were people there at all. The planet in this vision barely resembled earth, with smokey yellow skies and burned out forests and cities smothered in furious tropical growth.

Soon, it would all happen. It was as inevitable as the sunrise. She felt freed of a huge burden. The earth had never belonged to human beings - they came from it and returned to it, but it was never theirs. *Es nuestra, la tierra - it's ours* - the alien mind told her.

She felt suddenly overwhelmed by tiredness and stumbled into the small room behind the shop. She unfolded one of the cots they kept there, lay down, and immediately fell into a deep sleep. The serpent crawled up a leg of the cot, across her face, and into her mouth. Acting much more quickly than the lizard had, it began to dissolve inside her. It would use her DNA to meet its accelerated physical demands, and to build mind centers. The woman's body rolled off the cot. In a matter of seconds, it liquified and soaked into the dirt floor. The earth beneath the two tiny shops began to rumble.