

THE EGG MAN

by Mary Rosenblum

Mary Rosenblum's first professional publication, "For a Price" (*Asimov's*, June 1990), was a story she'd written for the 1988 Clarion West Writers' Workshop. Mary will complete a professional circle when she takes on the role of instructor at this year's workshop. Since her first publication, she has written eight novels and sold more than sixty short stories to SF, mystery, and mainstream markets. The paperback edition of her newest novel, *Horizons*, was released by Tor Books in November 2007. *Water Rites*, a compendium of the novel *Drylands* and three prequel novelettes that first appeared in *Asimov's*, came out from Fairwood Press in January 2007. Although the action in her latest story takes place hundreds of miles south of her earlier works, the people are equally brave, and the land as hard and unforgiving in...

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Zipakna halted at midday to let the Dragon power up the batteries. He checked on the chickens clucking contentedly in their travel crates, then went outside to squat in the shade of one fully deployed solar wing in the 43 centigrade heat. Ilena, his sometimes-lover and poker partner, accused him of reverse snobbery, priding himself on being able to survive in the Sonoran heat without air conditioning. Zipakna smiled and tilted his water bottle, savoring the cool, sweet trickle of water across his tongue.

Not true, of course. He held still as the first wild bees found him, buzzed past his face to settle and sip from the sweat-drops beading on his skin. Killers. He held very still, but the caution wasn't really necessary. Thirst was the great gentler here. Every other drive was laid aside in the pursuit of water.

Even love?

He laughed a short note as the killers buzzed and sipped. So Ilena claimed, but she just missed him when she played the tourists without him. It had been mostly tourists from China lately, filling the underwater resorts in the Sea of Cortez. Chinese were rich and tough players and Ilena had been angry at him for leaving. But he always left in spring. She knew that. In front of him, the scarp he had been traversing ended in a bluff, eroded by water that had fallen here eons ago. The plain below spread out in tones of ochre and russet, dotted with dusty clumps of sage and the stark upward thrust of saguaro, lonely sentinels contemplating the desiccated plain of the

Sonoran and in the distance, the ruins of a town. Paloma? Zipakna tilted his wrist, called up his position on his link. Yes, that was it. He had wandered a bit farther eastward than he'd thought and had cut through the edge of the Pima preserve. Sure enough, a fine had been levied against his account. He sighed. He serviced the Pima settlement out here and they didn't mind if he trespassed. It merely became a bargaining chip when it came time to talk price. The Pima loved to bargain.

He really should let the nav-link plot his course, but Ilena was right about that, at least. He prided himself on finding his way through the Sonora without it. Zipakna squinted as a flicker of movement caught his eye. A lizard? Maybe. Or one of the tough desert rodents. They didn't need to drink, got their water from seeds and cactus fruit. More adaptable than *Homosapiens*, he thought, and smiled grimly.

He pulled his binocs from his belt pouch and focused on the movement. The digital lenses seemed to suck him through the air like a thrown spear, gray-ochre blur resolving into stone, mica flash, and yes, the brown and gray shape of a lizard. The creature's head swiveled, throat pulsing, so that it seemed to stare straight into his eyes. Then, in an eyeblink, it vanished. The Dragon chimed its full battery load. Time to go. He stood carefully, a cloud of thirsty killer bees and native wasps buzzing about him, shook free of them and slipped into the coolness of the Dragon's interior. The hens clucked in the rear and the Dragon furled its solar wings and lurched forward, crawling down over the edge of the scarp, down to the plain below and its saguaro sentinels.

His sat-link chimed and his console screen brightened to life. *You are entering unserviced United States territory. The voice was female and severe. No support services will be provided from this point on. Your entry visa does not assure assistance in unserviced regions. Please file all complaints with the US Bureau of Land Management. Please consult with your insurance provider before continuing.* Did he detect a note of disapproval in the sat-link voice? Zipakna grinned without humor and guided the Dragon down the steep slope, its belted treads barely marring the dry surface as he navigated around rock and thorny clumps of mesquite. He was a citizen of the Republic of Mexico and the US's sat eyes would certainly track his chip. They just wouldn't send a rescue if he got into trouble.

Such is life, he thought, and swatted an annoyed killer as it struggled against the windshield.

He passed the first of Paloma's plantings an hour later. The glassy black disks of the solar collectors glinted in the sun, powering the drip system that fed the scattered clumps of greenery. Short, thick-stalked sunflowers turned their dark faces to the sun, fringed with orange and scarlet petals. Zipakna frowned thoughtfully and videoed one of the wide blooms as the Dragon crawled past. Sure enough, his screen lit up with a similar blossom crossed with a circle-slash of warning.

An illegal pharm crop. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. This was new. He almost turned around, but he liked the folk in Paloma. Good people; misfits, not sociopaths. It was an old settlement and one of his favorites. He sighed, because three diabetics lived here and a new bird flu had come over from Asia. It would find its way here eventually, riding the migration routes. He said a prayer to the old gods and his mother's *SantaMaria* for good measure and crawled on into town.

Nobody was out this time of day. Heat waves shimmered above the black solar panels and a lizard whip-flicked beneath the sagging Country Market's porch. He parked the Dragon in the dusty lot at the end of Main Street where a couple of buildings had burned long ago and unfurled the solar wings again. It took a lot of power to keep them from baking here. In the back Ezzie was clucking imperatively. The oldest of the chickens, she always seemed to know when they were stopping at a settlement. That meant fresh greens. "You're a pig," he said, but he chuckled as he made his way to the back to check on his flock.

The twenty hens clucked and scratched in their individual cubicles, excited at the halt. "I'll let you out soon," he promised and measured laying ration into their feeders. Bella had already laid an egg. He reached into her cubicle and cupped it in his hand, pale pink and smooth, still warm and faintly moist from its passage out of her body. Insulin nano-bodies, designed to block the auto-immune response that destroyed the insulin producing Beta cells in diabetics. He labeled Bella's egg and put it into the egg fridge. She was his highest producer. He scooped extra ration into her feeder.

Intruder, his alarm system announced. The heads-up display above the front console lit up. Zipakna glanced at it, brows furrowed, then smiled. He slipped to the door, touched it open. "You could just knock," he said.

The skinny boy hanging from the front of the Dragon by his fingers as he tried to peer through the windscreen let go, missed his footing and landed on his butt in the dust.

"It's too hot out here," Zipakna said. "Come inside. You can see better."

The boy looked up, his face tawny with Sonoran dust, hazel eyes wide with fear.

Zipakna's heart froze and time seemed to stand still. *She* must have looked like this as a kid, he thought. Probably just like this, considering how skinny and androgynous she had been in her twenties. He shook himself. "It's all right," he said and his voice only quivered a little. "You can come in."

"Ella said you have chickens. She said they lay magic eggs. I've never seen a chicken. But Pierre says there's no magic." The fear had vanished from his eyes, replaced now by bright curiosity.

That, too, was like her. Fear had never had a real hold on her.

How many times had he wished it had?

"I do have chickens. You can see them now." He held the door open. "What's your name?"

"Daren." The boy darted past him, quick as one of the desert's lizards, scrambled into the Dragon.

Her father's name.

Zipakna climbed in after him, feeling old suddenly, dry as this ancient desert. *I can't have kids*, she had said, so earnest. *How could I take a child into the uncontrolled areas? How could I leave one behind? Maybe later. After I'm done out there.*

"It's freezing in here." Daren stared around at the control bank under the wide windscreen, his bare arms and legs, skin clay-brown from the sun, ridged with goosebumps.

So much bare skin scared Zipakna. Average age for onset of melanoma without regular boosters was twenty-five. "Want something to drink? You can go look at the chickens. They're in the back."

"Water?" The boy gave him a bright, hopeful look. "Ella has a chicken. She lets me take care of it." He disappeared into the chicken space.

Zipakna opened the egg fridge. Bianca laid steadily even though she didn't have the peak capacity that some of the others did. So he had a good stock of her eggs. The boy was murmuring to the hens who were clucking greetings at him. "You can take one out," Zipakna called back to him. "They like to be held." He opened a packet of freeze-dried chocolate soy milk, reconstituted it, and whipped one of Bianca's eggs into it, so that it frothed tawny and rich. The gods knew if the boy had ever received any immunizations at all. Bianca provided the basic panel of nanobodies against most of the common pathogens and cancers. Including melanoma.

In the chicken room, Daren had taken Bella out of her cage, held her cradled in his arms. The speckled black and white hen clucked contentedly, occasionally pecking Daren's chin lightly. "She likes to be petted," Zipakna said. "If you rub her comb she'll sing to you. I made you a milkshake."

The boy's smile blossomed as Bella gave out with the almost-melodic squawks and creaks that signified her pleasure. "What's a milkshake?" Still smiling, he returned the hen to her cage and eyed the glass.

"Soymilk and chocolate and sugar." He handed it to Daren, found himself holding his breath as the boy tasted it and considered.

"Pretty sweet." He drank some. "I like it anyway."

To Zipakna's relief he drank it all and licked foam from his lip.

"So when did you move here?" Zipakna took the empty glass, rinsed it at the sink.

"Wow, you use water to clean dishes?" The boy's eyes had widened. "We came here last planting time. Pierre brought those seeds." He pointed in the general direction of the sunflower fields.

Zipakna's heart sank. "You and your parents?" He made his voice light.

Daren didn't answer for a moment. "Pierre. My father." He looked back to the chicken room. "If they're not magic, why do you give them water? Ella's chicken warns her about snakes, but you don't have to worry about snakes in here. What good are they?"

The cold logic of the Dry, out here beyond the security net of civilized space. "Their eggs keep you healthy." He watched the boy consider that.

“You know Ella, right?” He waited for the boy’s nod. “She has a disease that would kill her if she didn’t eat an egg from that chicken you were holding every year.”

Daren frowned, clearly doubting that. “You mean like a snake egg? They’re good, but Ella’s chicken doesn’t lay eggs. And snake eggs don’t make you get better when you’re sick.”

“They don’t. And Ella’s chicken is a banty rooster. He doesn’t lay eggs.” Zipakna looked up as a figure moved on the heads-up. “Bella is special and so are her eggs.” He opened the door. “Hello, Ella, what are you doing out here in the heat?”

“I figured he’d be out here bothering you.” Ella hoisted herself up the Dragon’s steps, her weathered, sun-dried face the color of real leather, her loose sun-shirt falling back from the stringy muscles of her arms as she reached up to kiss Zipakna on the cheek. “You behavin’ yourself, boy? I’ll switch you if you aren’t.”

“I’m being good.” Daren grinned. “Ask him.”

“He is.” Zipakna eyed her face and briefly exposed arms, looking for any sign of melanoma. Even with the eggs, you could still get it out here with no UV protection. “So, Ella, you got some new additions to town, eh? New crops, too, I see.” He watched her look away, saw her face tighten.

“Now don’t you start.” She stared at the south viewscreen filled with the bright heads of sunflowers. “Prices on everything we have to buy keep going up. And the Pima are tight, you know that. Plain sunflower oil don’t bring much.”

“So now you got something that can get you raided. By the government or someone worse.”

“You’re the one comes out here from the city where you got water and power, go hiking around in the dust with enough stuff to keep raiders fat and happy for a year.” Ella’s leathery face creased into a smile. “You preachin’ risk at me, Zip?”

“Ah, but we know I’m crazy, eh?” He returned her smile, but shook his head. “I hope you’re still here, next trip. How’re your sugar levels? You been checking?”

“If we ain’t we ain’t.” She lifted one bony shoulder in a shrug. “They’re

holding. They always do.”

“The eggs do make you well?” Daren looked at Ella.

“Yeah, they do.” Ella cocked her head at him. “There’s magic, even if Pierre don’t believe it.”

“Do you really come from a city?” Daren was looking up at Zipakna now. “With a dome and water in the taps and everything?”

“Well, I come from Oaxaca, which doesn’t have a dome. I spend most of my time in La Paz. It’s on the Baja peninsula, if you know where that is.”

“I do.” He grinned. “Ella’s been schooling me. I know where Oaxaca is, too. You’re Mexican, right?” He tilted his head. “How come you come up here with your eggs?”

Ella was watching him, her dark eyes sharp with surmise. Nobody had ever asked him that question openly before. It wasn’t the kind of question you asked, out here. Not out loud. He looked down into Daren’s hazel eyes, into *her* eyes. “Because nobody else does.”

Daren’s eyes darkened and he looked down at the floor, frowning slightly.

“Sit down, Ella, let me get you your egg. Long as you’re here.” Zipakna turned quickly to the kitchen wall and filled glasses with water. While they drank, he got Bella’s fresh egg from the egg fridge and cracked it into a glass, blending it with the raspberry concentrate that Ella favored and a bit of soy milk.

“That’s a milkshake,” Daren announced as Zipakna handed Ella the glass. “He made me one, too.” He looked up at Zipakna. “I’m not sick.”

“He didn’t think you were.” Ella lifted her glass in a salute. “Because nobody else does.” Drank it down. “You gonna come eat with us tonight?” Usually the invitation came with a grin that revealed the gap in her upper front teeth, and a threat about her latest pequin salsa. Today her smile was cautious. Wary. “Daren?” She nodded at the boy. “You go help Maria with the food. You know it’s your turn today.”

“Aw.” He scuffed his bare feet, but headed for the door. “Can I come pet the chickens again?” He looked back hopefully from the door, grinned

at Zipakna's nod, and slipped out, letting in a breath of oven-air.

"Ah, Ella." Zipakna sighed and reached into the upper cupboard. "Why did you plant those damn sunflowers?" He pulled out the bottle of aged mescal tucked away behind the freeze-dried staples. He filled a small, thick glass and set it down on the table in front of Ella beside her refilled water glass. "This can be the end of the settlement. You know that."

"The end can come in many ways." She picked up the glass, held it up to the light. "Perhaps fast is better than slow, eh?" She sipped the liquor, closed her eyes and sighed. "Luna and her husband tried for amnesty, applied to get a citizen-visa at the border. They've canceled the amnesty. You live outside the serviced areas, I guess you get to stay out here. I guess the US economy faltered again. No more new citizens from Outside. And you know Mexico's policy about US immigration." She shrugged. "I'm surprised they even let you come up here."

"Oh, my government doesn't mind traffic in this direction. It likes to rub the US's nose in the fact that we send aid to its own citizens," he said lightly. Yeah, the border was closed tight to immigration from the north right now, because the US was being sticky about tariffs. "I can't believe they've made the Interior Boundaries airtight." That was what *she* had been afraid of, all those years ago.

"I guess they have to keep cutting and cutting." Ella drained the glass, probing for the last drops of amber liquor with her tongue. "No, one is enough." She shook her head as he turned to the cupboard. "The folks that live nice want to keep it that way, so you got to cut somewhere. We all know the US is slowly eroding away. It's not a superpower anymore. They just pretend." She looked up at Zipakna, her eyes like flakes of obsidian set into the nested wrinkles of her sun-dried face. "What is your interest in the boy, Zip? He's too young."

He turned away from those obsidian-flake eyes. "You misunderstand."

She waited, didn't say anything.

"Once upon a time there was a woman." He stared at the sun-baked emptiness of the main street on the vid screen. A tumbleweed skeleton turned slowly, fitfully across dust and cracked asphalt. "She had a promising career in academics, but she preferred field work."

"Field work?"

“She was a botanist. She created some drought-tolerant GMOs and started field testing them. They were designed for the drip irrigation ag areas, but she decided to test them ... out here. She ... got caught up in it ... establishing adaptive GMOs out here to create sustainable harvests. She ... gave up an academic career. Put everything into this project. Got some funding for it.”

Ella sat without speaking as the silence stretched between them. “What happened to her?” She asked it, finally.

“I don’t know.” The tumbleweed had run up against the pole of a rusted and dented *No Parking* sign and quivered in the hot wind. “I ... lost contact with her.”

Ella nodded, her face creased into thoughtful folds. “I see.”

No, you don’t, he thought.

“How long ago?”

“Fifteen years.”

“So he’s not your son.”

He flinched even though he’d known the question was coming. “No.” He was surprised at how hard it was to speak that word.

Ella levered herself to her feet, leaning hard on the table. Pain in her hip. The osteo-sarcoma antibodies his chickens produced weren’t specific to her problem. A personally tailored anti-cancer panel might cure her, but that cost money. A lot of money. He wasn’t a doctor, but he’d seen enough osteo out here to measure her progress. It was the water, he guessed. “I brought you a present.” He reached up into the cupboard again, brought out a flat plastic bottle of mescal with the Mexico state seal on the cap. Old stuff. Very old.

She took it, her expression enigmatic, tilted it, her eyes on the slosh of pale golden liquor. The she let her breath out in a slow sigh and tucked the bottle carefully beneath her loose shirt. “Thank you.” Her obsidian eyes gave nothing away.

He caught a glimpse of rib bones, faint bruising, and dried, shrunken flesh, revised his estimate. “You’re welcome.”

“I think you need to leave here.” She looked past him. “We maybe need to live without your eggs. I’d just go right now.”

He didn’t answer for a moment. Listened to the chuckle of the hens. “Can I come to dinner tonight?”

“That’s right. You’re crazy. We both know that.” She sighed.

He held the door for her as she lowered herself stiffly and cautiously into the oven heat of the fading day.

She was right, he thought as he watched her limp through the heat shimmer, back to the main building. She was definitely right.

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He took his time with the chickens, letting them out of their cages to scratch on the grass carpet and peck at the vitamin crumbles he scattered for them. While he was parked here, they could roam loose in the back of the Dragon. He kept the door leading back to their section locked and all his hens were good about laying in their own cages, although at this point, he could tell who had laid which egg by sight. By the time he left the Dragon, the sun was completely down and the first pale stars winked in the royal blue of the darkening sky. No moon tonight. The wind had died and he smelled dust and a whiff of roasting meat as his boots grated on the dusty asphalt of the old main street. He touched the small hardness of the stunner in his pocket and climbed the sagging porch of what had once been a store, back when the town had still lived.

They had built a patio of sorts out behind the building, had roofed it from the sun with metal sheeting stripped from other derelict buildings. Long tables and old sofas clustered inside the building, shelter from the sun on the long hot days where residents shelled sunflower seed after harvest or worked on repair jobs or just visited, waiting for the cool of evening. He could see the yellow flicker of flame out back through the old plate-glass windows with their taped cracks.

The moment he entered he felt it—tension like the prickle of static electricity on a dry, windy day. Paloma was easy, friendly. He let his guard down sometimes when he was here, sat around the fire pit out back and shared the mescal he brought, trading swallows with the local stuff, flavored with cactus fruit, that wasn’t all that bad, considering.

Tonight, eyes slid his way, slid aside. The hair prickled on the back of his neck, but he made his smile easy. "Hola," he said, and gave them the usual grin and wave. "How you all makin' out?"

"Zip." Ella heaved herself up from one of the sofas, crossed the floor with firm strides, hands out, face turning up to kiss his cheeks. Grim determination folded the skin at the corners of her eyes tight. "Glad you could eat with us. Thanks for that egg today, I feel better already."

Ah, that was the issue? "Got to keep that blood sugar low." He gave her a real hug, because she was so *solid*, was the core of this settlement, whether the others realized it or not.

"Come on." Ella grabbed his arm. "Let's go out back. Rodriguez got an antelope, can you believe it? A young buck, no harm done."

"Meat?" He laughed, made it relaxed and easy, from the belly. "You eat better than I do. It's all vat stuff or too pricey to afford, down south. Good thing maize and beans are in my blood."

"Hey." Daren popped in from the firelit back, his eyes bright in the dim light. "Can my friends come see the chickens?"

My friends. The shy, hopeful pride in those words was so naked that Zipakna almost winced. He could see two or three faces behind Daren. That same tone had tainted his own voice, back when he had been a government scholarship kid from the wilds beyond San Cristobal, one of those who spoke Spanish as a second language. *My friends*, such a precious thing when you did not belong.

"Sure." He gave Daren a "we're buddies" grin and shrug. "Any time. You can show 'em around." Daren's eyes betrayed his struggle to look nonchalant.

A low chuckle circulated through the room, almost too soft to be heard, and Ella touched his arm lightly. Approvingly. Zipakna felt the tension relax a bit as he and Ella made their way through the dusk of the building to the firelit dark out back. One by one the shadowy figures who had stood back, not greeted him, thawed and followed. He answered greetings, pretending he hadn't noticed anything, exchanged the usual pleasantries that concerned weather and world politics, avoided the real issues of life. Like illegal crops. One by one, he identified the faces as the warm red glow of the coals in the firepit lit them. She needed the MS egg from Negro, he needed the anti-malaria from Seca and so did she. Daren had appeared at

his side, his posture taut, a mix of proprietary and anxious.

“Meat, what a treat, eh?” Zipakna grinned down at Daren as one of the women laid a charred strip of roasted meat on a plate, dumped a scoop of beans beside it and added a flat disk of tortilla, thick and chewy and gritty from the bicycle-powered stone mill that the community used to grind maize into masa.

“Hey, you be careful tomorrow.” She nodded toward a plastic bucket filled with water, a dipper and cups beside it. “Don’t you let my Jonathan hurt any of those chickens. He’s so clumsy.”

“I’ll show ‘em how to be careful.” Daren took the piled plate she handed him, practically glowing with pride.

Zipakna smiled at the server. She was another diabetic, like Ella. Sanja. He remembered her name.

“Watch out for the chutney.” Sanja grinned and pointed at a table full of condiment dishes. “The sticky red stuff. I told Ella how to make it and she made us all sweat this year with her pequins.”

“I like it hot.” He smiled for her. “I want to see if it’ll make me sweat.”

“It will.” Daren giggled. “I thought I’d swallowed coals, man.” He carried his plate to one of the wooden tables, set it down with a possessive confidence beside Zipakna’s.

Usually he sat at a crowded table answering questions, sharing news that hadn’t yet filtered out here with the few traders, truckers, or wanderers who risked the unserved Dry. Not this time. He chewed the charred, overdone meat slowly, aware of the way Daren wolfed his food, how most of the people here ate the same way, always prodded by hunger. That was how they drank, too, urgently, always thirsty.

Not many of them meant to end up out there. He remembered her words, the small twin lines that he called her “thinking dimples” creasing her forehead as she stared into her wine glass. *They had plans, they had a future in mind. It wasn’t this one.*

“That isn’t really why you come out here, is it? What you said before—in your big truck?”

Zipakna started, realized he was staring into space, a forkful of beans

poised in the air. He looked down at Daren, into those clear hazel eyes that squeezed his heart. She had always known when he wasn't telling the truth. "No. It isn't." He set the fork down on his plate. "A friend of mine ... a long time ago ... went missing out here. I've ... sort of hoped to run into her." At least that was how it had started. Now he looked for her ghost. Daren was staring at his neck.

"Where did you get that necklace?"

Zipakna touched the carved jade cylinder on its linen cord. "I found it diving in an old cenote—that's a kind of well where people threw offerings to the gods centuries ago. You're not supposed to dive there, but I was a kid—sneaking in."

"Are the cenotes around here?" Daren looked doubtful. "I never heard of any wells."

"No, they're way down south. Where I come from."

Daren scraped up the last beans from his plate, wiped it carefully with his tortilla. "Why did your friend come out here?"

"To bring people plants that didn't need much water." Zipakna sighed and eyed the remnants of his dinner. "You want this? I'm not real hungry tonight."

Daren gave him another doubting look, then shrugged and dug into the last of the meat and beans. "She was like Pierre?"

"No!"

The boy flinched and Zipakna softened his tone. "She created food plants so that you didn't need to grow as much to eat well." And then ... she had simply gotten too involved. He closed his eyes, remembering that bitter bitter fight. "Is your mother here?" He already knew the answer but Daren's head shake still pierced him. The boy focused on wiping up the last molecule of the searing sauce with a scrap of tortilla, shoulders hunched.

"What are you doing?"

At the angry words, Daren's head shot up and he jerked his hands away from the plate as if it had burned him.

"I was just talking with him, Pierre." He looked up, sandy hair falling

back from his face. “He doesn’t mind.”

“I mind.” The tall, skinny man with the dark braid and pale skin frowned down at Daren. “What have I told you about city folk?”

“But...” Daren bit off the word, ducked his head. “I’ll go clean my plate.” He snatched his plate and cup from the table, headed for the deeper shadows along the building.

“You leave him alone.” The man stared down at him, his gray eyes flat and cold. “We all know about city folk and their appetites.”

Suddenly the congenial chatter that had started up during the meal ended. Silence hung thick as smoke in the air. “You satisfied my appetite quite well tonight.” Zipakna smiled gently. “I haven’t had barbecued antelope in a long time.”

“You got to wonder.” Pierre leaned one hip against the table, crossed his arms. “Why someone gives up the nice air conditioning and swimming pools of the city to come trekking around out here handing out free stuff. Especially when your rig costs a couple of fortunes.”

Zipakna sighed, made it audible. From the corner of his eye he noticed Ella, watching him intently, was aware of the hard lump of the stunner in his pocket. “I get this every time I meet folk. We already went through it here, didn’t anyone tell you?”

“Yeah, they did.” Pierre gave him a mirthless smile. “And you want me to believe that some non-profit in Mexico—Mexico!—cares about us? Not even our own government does that.”

“It’s all politics.” Zipakna shrugged. “Mexico takes quite a bit of civic pleasure in the fact that Mexico has to extend aid to US citizens. If the political situation changes, yeah, the money might dry up. But for now, people contribute and I come out here. So do a few others like me.” He looked up, met the man’s cold, gray eyes. “Haven’t you met an altruist at least once in your life?” he asked softly.

Pierre looked away and his face tightened briefly. “I sure don’t believe you’re one. You leave my son alone.” He turned on his heel and disappeared in the direction Daren had taken.

Zipakna drank his water, skin prickling with the feel of the room. He looked up as Ella marched over, sat down beside him. “We know you’re

what you say you are.” She pitched her voice to reach everyone. “Me, I’m looking forward to my egg in the morning, and I sure thank you for keeping an old woman like me alive. Not many care. He’s right about that much.” She gave Zipakna a small private wink as she squeezed his shoulder and stood up. “Sanja and I’ll be there first thing in the morning, right, Sanja?”

“Yeah.” Sanja’s voice emerged from shadow, a little too bright. “We sure will.”

Zipakna got to his feet and Ella rose with him. “You should all come by in the morning. Got a new virus northwest of here. It’s high mortality and it’s moving this way. Spread by birds, so it’ll get here. I have eggs that will give you immunity.” He turned and headed around the side of the building.

A thin scatter of replies drifted after him and he found Ella walking beside him, her hand on his arm. “They change everything,” she said softly. “The flowers.”

“You know, the sat cams can see them.” He kept his voice low as they crunched around the side of the building, heading toward the Dragon. “They measure the light refraction from the leaves and they can tell if they’re legit or one of the outlaw strains. That’s no accident, Ella. You don’t realize how much the government and the drug gangs use the same tools. One or the other will get you.” He shook his head. “You better hope it’s the government.”

“They haven’t found us yet.”

“The seeds aren’t ready to harvest, are they?”

“Pierre says we’re too isolated.”

Zipakna turned on her. “Nowhere is isolated any more. Not on this entire dirt ball. You ever ask Pierre why he showed up here? Why didn’t he stay where he was before if he was doing such a good job growing illegal seeds?”

Ella didn’t answer and he walked on.

“It’s a mistake to let a ghost run your life.” Ella’s voice came low from the darkness behind him, tinged with sadness.

Zipakna hesitated as the door slid open for him. “Good night, Ella.” He climbed into its cool interior, listening to the hens’ soft chortle of

greeting.

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They showed up in the cool of dawn, trickling up to the Dragon in ones and twos to drink the frothy blend of fruit and soymilk he offered and to ask shyly about the news they hadn't asked about last night. A few apologized. Not many.

Neither Daren nor Pierre showed up. Zipakna fed the hens, collected the day's eggs, and was glad he'd given Daren his immunization egg the day before. By noon he had run out of things to keep him here. He hiked over to the community building in the searing heat of noon, found Ella sewing a shirt in the still heat of the interior, told her goodbye.

"Go with God," she told him and her face was as seamed and dry as the land outside.

This settlement would not be here when he next came this way. The old gods wrote that truth in the dust devils dancing at the edge of the field. He wondered what stolen genes those seeds carried. He looked for Daren and Pierre but didn't see either of them. Tired to the bone, he trudged back to the Dragon in the searing heat. Time to move on. Put kilometers between the Dragon and the dangerous magnet of those ripening seeds.

You have a visitor, the Dragon announced as he approached.

He hadn't locked the door? Zipakna frowned, because he didn't make that kind of mistake. Glad that he was still carrying the stunner, he slipped to the side and opened the door, fingers curled around the smooth shape of the weapon.

"Ella said you were leaving." Daren stood inside, Bella in his arms.

"Yeah, I need to move on." He climbed up, the wash of adrenalin through his bloodstream telling him just how tense he had been here. "I have other settlements to visit."

Daren looked up at him, frowning a little. Then he turned and went back into the chicken room to put Bella back in her traveling coop. He scratched her comb, smiled a little as she chuckled at him, and closed the door. "I think maybe ... this is yours." He turned and held out a hand.

Zipakna stared down at the carved jade cylinder on his palm. It had

been strung on a fine steel chain. She had worn it on a linen cord with coral beads knotted on either side of it. He swallowed. Shook his head. "It's yours." The words came out husky and rough. "She meant you to have it."

"I thought maybe she was the friend you talked about." Daren closed his fist around the bead. "She said the same thing you did, I remember. She said she came out here because no one else would. Did you give it to her?"

He nodded, squeezing his eyes closed, struggling to swallow the pain that welled up into his throat. "You can come with me," he whispered. "You're her son. Did she tell you she had dual citizenship—for both the US and Mexico? You can get citizenship in Mexico. Your DNA will prove that you're her son."

"I'd have to ask Pierre." Daren looked up at him, his eyes clear, filled with a maturity far greater than his years. "He won't say yes. He doesn't like the cities and he doesn't like Mexico even more."

Zipakna clenched his teeth, holding back the words that he wanted to use to describe Pierre. Lock the door, he thought. Just leave. Make Daren understand as they rolled on to the next settlement. "What happened to her?" he said softly, so softly.

"A border patrol shot her." Daren fixed his eyes on Bella, who was fussing and clucking in her cage. "A chopper. They were just flying over, shooting coyotes. They shot her and me."

She had a citizen chip. If they'd had their scanner on, they would have picked up the signal. He closed his eyes, his head filled with roaring. Yahoos out messing around, who was ever gonna check up? Who cared? When he opened his eyes, Daren was gone, the door whispering closed behind him.

What did any of it matter? He blinked dry eyes and went forward to make sure the thermosolar plant was powered up. It was. He released the brakes and pulled into a tight turn, heading southward out of town on the old, cracked asphalt of the dead road.

* * * *

He picked up the radio chatter in the afternoon as he fed the hens and let the unfurled panels recharge the storage batteries. He always listened, had paid a lot of personal money for the top decryption chip every trek. He

wanted to know who was talking out here and about what.

US border patrol. He listened with half an ear as he scraped droppings from the crate pans and dumped them into the recycler. He knew the acronyms, you mostly got US patrols out here. *Flower-town*. It came over in a sharp, tenor voice. He straightened, chicken shit spilling from the dustpan in his hand as he listened. Hard.

Paloma. What else could “Flower-town” be out here? They were going to hit it. Zipakna stared down at the scattered gray and white turds on the floor. Stiffly, slowly, he knelt and brushed them into the dust pan. This was the only outcome. He knew it. Ella knew it. They’d made the choice. *Not many of them meant to end up out there*. Her voice murmured in his ear, so damn earnest. *They had plans, they had a future in mind. It wasn’t this one*.

“Shut up!” He bolted to his feet, flung the pan at the wall. “Why did you have his kid?” The pan hit the wall and shit scattered everywhere. The hens panicked, squawking and beating at the mesh of their crates. Zipakna dropped to his knees, heels of his hands digging into his eyes until red light webbed his vision.

Flower-town. It came in over the radio, thin and wispy now, like a ghost voice.

Zipakna stumbled to his feet, went forward and furlled the solar panels. Powered up and did a tight one-eighty that made the hens squawk all over again.

* * * *

The sun sank over the rim of the world, streaking the ochre ground with long, dark shadows that pointed like accusing fingers. He saw the smoke in the last glow of the day, mushrooming up in a black flag of doom. He switched the Dragon to infrared navigation, and the black and gray images popped up on the heads-up above the console. He was close. He slowed his speed, wiped sweating palms on his shirt. They’d have a perimeter alarm set and they’d pick him up any minute now. If they could claim he was attacking them, they’d blow him into dust in a heartbeat. He’d run into US government patrols out here before and they didn’t like the Mexican presence one bit. But his movements were sat-recorded and recoverable and Mexico would love to accuse the US of firing on one of its charity missions in the world media. So he was safe. If he was careful. He

slowed the Dragon even more although he wanted to race. Not that there would be much he could do.

He saw the flames first and the screen darkened as the nightvision program filtered the glare. The community building? More flames sprang to life in the sunflower fields.

Attention Mexican registry vehicle N45YG90. The crudely accented Spanish filled the Dragon. You are entering an interdicted area. Police action is in progress and no entry is permitted.

Zipakna activated his automatic reply. "I'm sorry. I will stop here. I have a faulty storage bank and I'm almost out of power. I won't be able to go any farther until I can use my panels in the morning." He sweated in the silence, the hens clucking softly in the rear.

Stay in your vehicle. The voice betrayed no emotion. Any activity will be viewed as a hostile act. Understand?

"Of course." Zipakna broke the connection. The air in the Dragon seemed syrupy thick, pressing against his ear drums. They could be scanning him, watching to make sure that he didn't leave the Dragon. All they needed was an excuse. He heard a flurry of sharp reports. Gunshots. He looked up at the screen, saw three quick flashes of light erupt from the building beyond the burning community center. No, they'd be looking there. Not here.

Numbly he stood and pulled his protective vest from its storage cubicle along with a pair of night goggles. He put the Dragon on standby. Just in case. If he didn't reactivate it in forty-eight hours, it would send a mayday back to headquarters. They'd come and collect the hens and the Dragon. He looked once around the small, dimly lit space of the Dragon, said a prayer to the old gods and touched the jade at his throat. Then he touched the door open, letting in a dry breath of desert that smelled of bitter smoke, and slipped out into the darkness.

He crouched, moving with the fits and starts of the desert coyotes, praying again to the old gods that the patrol wasn't really worrying about him. Enough clumps of mesquite survived here in this long ago wash to give him some visual cover from anyone looking in his direction and as he remembered, the wash curved north and east around the far end of the old town. It would take him close to the outermost buildings.

It seemed to take a hundred years to reach the tumbledown shack that marked the edge of the town. He slipped into its deeper shadow. A half moon had risen and his goggles made the landscape stand out in bright black and gray and white. The gunfire had stopped. He slipped from the shed to the fallen ruins of an old house, to the back of an empty storefront across from the community building. It was fully in flames now and his goggles damped the light as he peered cautiously from the glassless front window. Figures moved in the street, dressed in military coveralls. They had herded a dozen people together at the end of the street and Zipakna saw the squat, boxy shapes of two big military choppers beyond them.

They would not have a good future, would become permanent residents of a secure resettlement camp somewhere. He touched his goggles, his stomach lurching as he zoomed in on the bedraggled settlers. He recognized Sanja, didn't see either Ella or Daren, but he couldn't make out too many faces in the huddle. If the patrol had them, there was nothing he could do. They were searching the buildings on this side of the street. He saw helmeted figures cross the street, heading for the building next to his vantage point.

Zipakna slipped out the back door, made his way to the next building, leaned through the sagging window opening. "Daren? Ella? It's Zip," he said softly. "Anyone there?" Silence. He didn't dare raise his voice, moved on to the next building, his skin tight, expecting a shouted command. If they caught him interfering they'd arrest him. It might be a long time before Mexico got him freed. His bosses would be very unhappy with him.

"Ella?" He hurried, scrabbling low through fallen siding, tangles of old junk. They weren't here. The patrol must have made a clean sweep. He felt a brief, bitter stab of satisfaction that they had at least caught Pierre. One would deserve his fate, anyway.

Time to get back to the Dragon. As he turned, he saw two shadows slip into the building he had just checked—one tall, one child short. Hope leaped in his chest, nearly choking him. He bent low and sprinted, trying to gauge the time ... how long before the patrol soldiers got to this building? He reached a side window, its frame buckled. As he did, a slight figure scrambled over the broken sill and even in the black and white of nightvision, Zipakna recognized Daren's fair hair.

The old gods had heard him. He grabbed the boy, hand going over his mouth in time to stifle his cry. "It's me. Zip. Be silent," he hissed.

Light flared in the building Daren had just left. Zipakna's goggles

filtered it and crouching in the dark, clutching Daren, he saw Pierre stand up straight, hands going into the air. "All right, I give up. You got me." Two uniformed patrol pointed stunners at Pierre.

Daren's whimper was almost but not quite soundless. "Don't move," Zipakna breathed. If they hadn't seen Daren...

"You're the one who brought the seeds." The taller of the two lowered his stunner and pulled an automatic from a black holster on his hip. "We got an ID on you."

A gun? Zipakna stared at it as it rose in seeming slow motion, the muzzle tracking upward to Pierre's stunned face. Daren lunged in his grip and he yanked the boy down and back, hurling him to the ground. The stunner seemed to have leaped from his pocket to his hand and the tiny dart hit the man with the gun smack in the center of his chest. A projectile vest didn't stop a stunner charge. The man's arms spasmed outward and the ugly automatic went sailing, clattering to the floor. Pierre dived for the window as the other patrol yanked out his own weapon and pointed it at Zipakna. He fired a second stun charge but as he did, something slammed into his shoulder and threw him backward. Distantly he heard a loud noise, then Daren was trying to drag him to his feet.

"Let's go." Pierre yanked him upright.

"This way." Zipakna pointed to the distant bulk of the Dragon.

They ran. His left side was numb but there was no time to think about that. Daren and Pierre didn't have goggles so they ran behind him. He took them through the mesquite, ignoring the thorn slash, praying that the patrol focused on the building first before they started scanning the desert. His back twitched with the expectation of a bullet.

The Dragon opened to him and he herded them in, gasping for breath now, the numbness draining away, leaving slow, spreading pain in its wake. "In here." He touched the hidden panel and it opened, revealing the coffin-shaped space beneath the floor. The Dragon was defended, but this was always the backup. Not even a scan could pick up someone hidden here. "You'll have to both fit. There's air." They managed it, Pierre clasping Daren close, the boy's face buried against his shoulder. Pierre looked up as the panel slid closed. "Thanks." The panel clicked into place.

Zipakna stripped off his protective vest. Blood soaked his shirt. They were using piercers. That really bothered him, but fortunately the vest had

slowed the bullet enough. He slapped a blood-stop patch onto the injury, waves of pain washing through his head, making him dizzy. Did a stim-tab from the med closet and instantly straightened, pain and dizziness blasted away by the drug. Didn't dare hide the bloody shirt, so he pulled a loose woven shirt over his head. *Visitor*, the Dragon announced. *US Security ID verified.*

"Open." Zipakna leaned a hip against the console, aware of the heads-up that still showed the town. The building had collapsed into a pile of glowing embers and dark figures darted through the shadows. "Come in." He said it in English with a careful US accent. "You're really having quite a night over there." He stood back as two uniformed patrol burst into the Dragon while a third watched warily from the doorway. All carrying stunners.

Not guns, so maybe, just maybe, they hadn't been spotted.

"What are you up to?" The patrol in charge, a woman, stared at him coldly through the helmet shield. "Did you leave this vehicle or let anyone in?"

The gods had come through. Maybe. "Goodness, no." He arched his eyebrows. "I'm not that crazy. I'm still stunned that Paloma went to raising pharm." He didn't have to fake the bitterness. "That's why you're burning the fields, right? They're a good bunch of people. I didn't think they'd ever give in to that."

Maybe she heard the truth in his words, but for whatever reason, the leader relaxed a hair. "Mind if we look around?" It wasn't a question and he shrugged, stifling a wince at the pain that made it through the stimulant buzz.

"Sure. Don't scare the hens, okay?"

The two inside the Dragon searched, quickly and thoroughly. They checked to see if he had been recording video and Zipakna said thanks to the old gods that he hadn't activated it. That would have changed things, he was willing to bet.

"You need help with your battery problem?" The cold faced woman—a lieutenant, he noticed her insignia—asked him.

He shook his head. "I'm getting by fine as long as I don't travel at night. They store enough for life support."

"I'd get out of here as soon as the sun is up." She jerked her head at the other two. "Any time you got illegal flowers you get raiders. You don't want to mess with them."

"Yes, ma'am." He ducked his head. "I sure will do that." He didn't move as they left, waited a half hour longer just to be sure that they didn't pop back in. But they did not. Apparently they believed his story, hadn't seen their wild dash through the mesquite. He set the perimeter alert to maximum and opened the secret panel. Daren scrambled out first, his face pale enough that his freckles stood out like bits of copper on his skin.

Her freckles.

Zipakna sat down fast. When the stim ran out, you crashed hard. The room tilted, steadied.

"That guy shot you." Daren's eyes seemed to be all pupil. "Are you going to die?"

"You got medical stuff?" Pierre's face swam into view. "Tell me quick, okay?"

"The cupboard to the left of the console." The words came out thick. Daren was staring at his chest. Zipakna looked down. Red was soaking into the ivory weave of the shirt he'd put on. So much for the blood-stop. The bullet must have gone deeper than he thought, or had hit a small artery. Good thing his boarders hadn't stuck around longer.

Pierre had the med kit. Zipakna started to pull the shirt off over his head and the pain hit him like a lightning strike, sheeting his vision with white. He saw the pale green arch of the ceiling, thought *I'm falling...*

* * * *

He woke in his bed, groping drowsily for where he was headed and what he had drunk that made his head hurt this bad. Blinked as a face swam into view. Daren. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, his head splitting.

"You passed out." Daren's eyes were opaque. "Pierre took the bullet out of your shoulder while you were out. You bled a lot but he said you won't die."

"Where's Pierre?" He swung his legs over the side of the narrow bed,

fighting dizziness. “How long have I been out?”

“Not very long.” Daren backed away. “The chickens are okay. I looked.”

“Thanks.” Zipakna made it to his feet, steadied himself with a hand on the wall. A quick check of the console said that Pierre hadn’t messed with anything. It was light out. Early morning. He set the video to sweep, scanned the landscape. No choppers, no trace of last night’s raiders. He watched the images pan across the heads-up; blackened fields, the smoldering pile of embers and twisted plumbing that had been the community center, still wisping smoke. The fire had spread to a couple of derelict buildings to the windward of the old store. Movement snagged his eye. Pierre. Digging. He slapped the control, shut off the vid. Daren was back with the chickens. “Stay here, okay? I’m afraid to leave them alone.”

“Okay.” Daren’s voice came to him, hollow as an empty eggshell.

He stepped out into the oven heat, his head throbbing in time to his footsteps as he crossed the sunbaked ground to the empty bones of Paloma. A red bandanna had snagged on a mesquite branch, flapping in the morning’s hot wind. He saw a woman’s sandal lying on the dusty asphalt of the main street, a faded red backpack. He picked it up, looked inside. Empty. He dropped it, crossed the street, angling northward to where he had seen Pierre digging.

He had just about finished two graves. A man lay beside one. The blood that soaked his chest had turned dark in the morning heat. Zipakna recognized his grizzled red beard and thinning hair, couldn’t remember his name. He didn’t eat any of the special eggs, just the ones against whatever new bug was out there. Pierre climbed out of the shallow grave.

“You shouldn’t be walking around.” He pushed dirty hair out of his eyes.

Without a word, Zipakna moved to the man’s ankles. Pierre shrugged, took the man’s shoulders. He was stiff, his flesh plastic and too cold, never mind the morning heat. Without a word they lifted and swung together, lowered him into the fresh grave. It probably wouldn’t keep the coyotes out, Zipakna thought. But it would slow them down. He straightened, stepped over to the other grave.

Ella. Her face looked sad, eyes closed. He didn’t see any blood, wondered if she had simply suffered a heart attack, if she had had enough

as everything she had worked to keep intact burned around her. “Did Daren see her die?” He said it softly. Felt rather than saw Pierre’s flinch.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” He stuck the shovel into the piled rocks and dirt, tossed the first shovelful into the hole.

Zipakna said the right words in rhythm to the grating thrust of the shovel. First the Catholic prayer his mother would have wanted him to say, then the words for the old gods. Then a small, hard prayer for the new gods who had no language except dust and thirst and the ebb and flow of world politics that swept human beings from the chess board of the earth like pawns.

“You could have let them shoot me.” Pierre tossed a last shovelful of dirt onto Ella’s grave. “Why didn’t you?”

Zipakna tilted his gaze to the hard blue sky. “Daren.” Three tiny black specks hung overhead. Vultures. Death called them. “I’ll make you a trade. I’ll capitalize you to set up as a trader out here. You leave the pharm crops alone. I take Daren with me and get him Mexican citizenship. Give him a future better than yours.”

“You can’t.” Pierre’s voice was low and bitter. “I tried. Even though his mother was a US citizen, they’re not taking in offspring born out here. Mexico has a fifteen year waiting list for new immigrants.” He was staring down at the mounded rock and dust of Ella’s grave. “She was so angry when she got pregnant. The implant was faulty, I guess. She meant to go back to the city before he was born but ... I got hurt. And she stuck around.” He was silent for awhile. “Then it was too late, Daren was born and the US had closed the border. We’re officially out here because we want to be.” His lips twisted.

“Why did you come out here?”

He looked up. Blinked. “My parents lived out here. They were the rugged individual types, I guess.” He shrugged. “I went into the city, got a job, and they were still letting people come and go then. I didn’t like it, all the people, all the restrictions. So I came back out here.” He gave a thin laugh. “I was a trader to start with. I got hit by a bunch of raiders. That’s when ... I got hurt. Badly. I’m sorry.” He turned away. “I wish you could get him citizenship. He didn’t choose this.”

“I can.” Zipakna watched Pierre halt without turning. “She ... was my wife. We married in Oaxaca.” The words were so damn hard to say. “That

gave her automatic dual citizenship. In Mexico, only the mother's DNA is required as proof of citizenship. We're pragmatists," he said bitterly.

For a time, Pierre said nothing. Finally he turned, his face as empty as the landscape. "You're the one." He looked past Zipakna, toward the Dragon. "I don't like you, you know. But I think ... you'll be a good father for Daren. Better than I've been." He looked down at the dirty steel of the shovel blade. "It's a deal. A trade. I'll sell you my kid. Because it's a good deal for him." He walked past Zipakna toward the Dragon, tossed the shovel into the narrow strip of shade along one of the remaining buildings. The clang and rattle as it hit sounded loud as mountain thunder in the quiet of the windless heat.

Zipakna followed slowly, his shoulder hurting. Ilena would be pissed, would never believe that Daren wasn't his. His mouth crooked with the irony of that. The old gods twisted time and lives into the intricate knots of the universe and you could meet yourself coming around any corner. As the Dragon's doorway opened with a breath of cool air, he heard Pierre's voice from the chicken room, low and intense against the cluck and chortle of the hens, heard Daren's answer, heard the brightness in it.

Zipakna went forward to the console to ready the Dragon for travel. As soon as they reached the serviced lands again he'd transfer his savings to a cash card for Pierre. Pierre could buy what he needed on the Pima's land. They didn't care if you were a Drylander or not.

Ilena would be doubly pissed. But he was a good poker partner and she wouldn't dump him. And she'd like Daren. Once she got past her jealousy. Ilena had always wanted a kid, just never wanted to take the time to *have* one.

He wondered if she had meant to contact him, tell him about Daren, bring the boy back to Mexico. She would have known, surely, that it would have been all right.

Surely. He sighed and furred the solar wings.

Maybe he would keep coming out here. If Daren wanted to. Maybe her ghost would find them as they traveled through this place she had loved. And then he could ask her.