

Z

by Jose Beltran

"I bet you're hungry asshole. Too bad the Señora just ran out of tamales. Isn't that right Señora?" said the heavily tattooed man.

On the man's arm, between the tattoos of a big breasted demon and the Virgin de Guadalupe, Enrique could see the Z engraved on an ink bullet. The tattoo marked membership in the Zetas. The violent organization feared by police and cartel members alike, for its members had no allegiances and no limits. The tattooed man was an enforcer. And even though the man was in the lowest level of the Zeta's organizational structure he still had the power to end Enrique's life if he so wished, and they both knew it. The basket in front of him was half full of tamales but Enrique knew there was no point arguing. He wouldn't be eating this evening.

They were standing in one of the small open courtyards of the Reynosa Penal Institution. The one where a handful of Señoras were unofficially permitted to sell food and drinks. Those prisoners fortunate enough to have a little money could exchange a few dollars for a home cooked tamale and a strong cup of coffee and thus avoid the usually foul fare served at the prison's mess hall.

Enrique was wondering how the hell he'd been able to survive in prison. He had been an inmate at RPI for 26 month and so far he had successfully avoided the two main reasons inmates in any Mexican jail usually didn't finish their sentences alive: Siding with the wrong Cartel and getting involved in drugs. He had even been able to create an interesting little side business doing odd favors for the warden. But lately, the feeling of immunity he had enjoyed up to now as a result of being one of the warden's favorites was starting to be disregarded by the Zetas. That scared him.

Enrique had always been a petty criminal but he had never had any idea how much power and money was really up for grabs out there. Knowing what he knew now, sometimes he ironically felt safer being in prison than out on the streets. The real criminals, the drug capos and crooked politicians that protected them; the military

and ex-military that served both government and cartels; the Americans who turned a blind eye to it all as long as the blood didn't spill on their side of the border, they were still out on the streets, and it was out on the streets where they would fight their turf wars and make a show of their muscles. The number of deaths claimed by the drug wars in Mexico was in the thousands, many of them innocent civilians. But that number didn't surprise Enrique. Knowing what he now knew about what these men wanted and what they were capable of doing to get it, Enrique was surprised the number of deaths wasn't in the tens or hundreds of thousands and that even more blood wasn't spilling over the border. He was not even in the same category as these men. He was a schemer, but he wasn't a criminal. Not like them. He had had a nice operation going for a little while. Usually nobody got hurt. He had seen an opportunity and seized it. What those people really wanted was hope, and he gave it to them. It wasn't his fault that the container door got jammed that night. Enrique didn't like being called a Coyote, a human trafficker. He actually never really dealt in the trafficking. He saw himself more as an entrepreneur. Hundreds of people from towns all over central and southern Mexico and Central and South America would reach the Border cities every day. They all had the same goal: To cross over to the Other side. The actually believed everything would be alright if they just made it to the Other side, Enrique thought that was pathetic . The nearly 2,000 mile long border between the United States and Mexico has the Rio Grande as a natural boundary for most of its length. It is sometimes nothing more than a slow moving river not more than 100 feet wide. But for some people, being on that side of the river or this one meant the difference between endless possibilities and utter hopelessness, and they were willing to do anything to cross it. All Enrique was doing was helping them out. He knew the truth, he knew the Other side wasn't any better. He knew that for the few that actually made it over, there was nothing but years of back breaking work waiting. So he decided to open their eyes a little quicker. Big deal. It wasn't his fault that most of them were so ignorant they couldn't read the

billboards. It wasn't his fault that the water canal that ran thru the city looked like the Rio Grande. Real coyotes would charge people thousands of dollars, and they wouldn't even guarantee they would actually get them into the United States. Or that they would make it alive for that matter. Enrique just charged them \$500 a head. \$800 if they wanted to cross as a couple. He was an entrepreneur after all and he was proud of his pricing initiatives. He would gather twenty desperate men and women. Never more than twenty, he didn't want them to suffocate like hogs being taken to slaughter. He was an entrepreneur, not a criminal. He would then load them into an old freight container he had mounted on an old truck that barely ran and drive them around for a few hours before taking them to the fields along the water canal west of the city. A new Wal-Mart had just opened up besides the housing developments that were being built on the other side of the canal. The place where the city looked more Americanized. Shit, If he didn't know any better he would believe that was actually Texas over there too. Enrique would usually have two other men with him when he opened the door. They would both have high powered searchlights with them to disorient the emigrants even more. Enrique would open the container doors and point them to the canal. "There it is. Hurry before the Migra comes. It's not deep" he would yell. By the time they crossed the canal and their fear subsided enough for them to realize they had never actually crossed the border and that they were still in Mexico penniless, Enrique would be at a bar having a cold beer. It was a simple plan, and things usually came out right. The night of his last operation was no different. He collected his fees from the 19 people that were "crossing": 10 men, 7 women and 2 children. He drove to the fields and him and his two partners got ready to open the doors and herd the people towards the canal. But the door wouldn't open. It had gotten stuck somehow. Then they heard it: It sounded like a big pickup truck. The dirt cloud preceded the big black Hummer with dark tinted windows. It stopped right in front of them. Six men got out of the Hummer, all of them wearing jeans and thick cowboy belts. Five of them wearing hats and carrying automatic weapons.

One of them wearing a yellow hood over his head. Drug lords. This was an execution. Enrique knew it, although he had never seen one in person before. It would be nothing to these men to shoot three more people.

The man that had been in the driver's seat approached. "What the fuck are you doing here?" he said.

Enrique looked at his two partners. The both looked down. "We're truck drivers. We stopped here because we wanted to skim some of the cargo from that one. But we looked, there's nothing valuable" said Enrique as he pointed to the old truck

"Just a fucking little thief, eh? What's your name pendejo?"

"Enrique, Señor. Enrique de la Peña"

"Look here pendejo. I don't like thieves. I think your kind is lower than addicts. Scum. You get the fuck out of my sight right now. Run! before I change my mind" said the man as he pointed his rifle at Enrique's head.

The man with the rifle knew these idiots wouldn't say anything. they wouldn't want to implicate themselves with whatever they were doing with that truck.

Enrique and the other two coyotes ran. They didn't look back. They would come back for the truck later. Then they heard it. A single shot. They knew the man with the yellow hood had just been executed. They kept running.

It wasn't until the next morning that they felt it would be safe to go back to the field and get the truck. They got a ride to the Wal-Mart and went to the edge of the parking lot to take a look onto the field on the other side. The truck was there. So were a dozen agents from the Agencia Federal de Investigacion, Mexico's answer to the American FBI.

Juan Fernandez, the head AFI agent in Reynosa knelt over the body with the yellow hood. Another drug execution. Number 85 this year alone. What was different with this one was the truck. Nineteen people had been trapped inside. A small girl was dead. The heat and the lack of water had been too much for her little body to take. Apparently they had been dumped there some time the night before.

Agent Fernandez had a feeling the two incidents were unrelated. Some idiot had just been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He had a pretty good description of the Coyote. Fernandez and his team would find him quickly. He was responsible for the death of a little girl and more importantly to Fernandez, was probably a witness to the execution.

Agent Fernandez had done his job. Within 48 hours he had found Enrique and his accomplices and only after being satisfied that they had told him everything they saw that night did he turn them over to the prosecutor's office for the death of the little girl. This had been 26 months ago.

Enrique left the courtyard and entered the main cell block at RPI. His cell was on the third tier. Past the first tier cells. Prime prison real estate: the domain of cartel members or Narcos. Most of the cells on the first tier were equipped with televisions and mini refrigerators. Cartel members had these cells for themselves, sometimes living in them with a woman. The bosses had cell phones and pretty much anything they could want from the outside: food, girls and booze were common on the first tier. Past the second tier cells. The second tier was known as the Mercado: Inmates who had been at RPI long enough to get some concessions but were not as powerful as the Narcos. Most of the inmates on the second tier ran small operations out of their cells. Cigarettes, drugs and sexual favors were bought and sold on the second tier. Enrique considered himself lucky: He shared his cell now only with two relatively harmless inmates. Most third tier cells held four or up to five prisoners. His ex fourth cellmate had died from a shot of dirty heroine a few weeks before. Dirty heroine was one of the ways the cartels and the Zetas dealt with problems. A little car battery acid mixed with the drug was enough to provoke an instant overdose. No questions asked, just another junkie overdosing. His cell was in the middle of the third tier. He was ready to sleep and get done with another day at RPI. He found it strange that his cellmates weren't there but he didn't care. He wanted sleep to come easy tonight.

The following morning, the warden walked to the cell in middle of tier 3. Enrique was hanging from a wire tied to metal grate that covered the fluorescent light in the middle of the ceiling.

"Cut him down, it's obviously a suicide." said the warden as he walked past the third tier cells "And call whoever is on his file as next of kin. Have them pick him up quickly. I don't want this body to rot in my prison."

