

CHAPTER I: PATIENT ZERO

Isidro Sanchez was a small corn farmer in Chiapas, and as he prepared his fields for planting, he cursed the Americans to the north.

Corn farming went back in Isidro's family for literally thousands of years. European colonization in Mexico had not gone the way it had in America. The Indians in America were mostly driven west or murdered as Europeans came and took over the land. In Mexico, of course, there was some of that; but more often, the Spanish intermarried with the Indians, in a process known to Mexican historians—certainly not to a farmer like Isidro, who was dimly aware of the concept but gave it very little thought—*mestizaje*, roughly “Mexification.” The Spanish and the Indians intermarried so thoroughly that a new race, the *mestizo*, was born. In Chiapas, deep in the south of Mexico, this process was not as complete as in most of the country; Chiapans had higher proportions of Indian blood than most other Mexicans. Therefore, though Isidro spoke Spanish, knew nothing of indigenous languages, and was Catholic in religion, corn farming was in his blood just as much as his father's genes were. His ancestors had been the ones to domesticate corn, to first harness the power of the grain which now so thoroughly fed the world. He was a man of the corn, of life-giving corn. As many of the workers' groups in this part of Mexico said, “*Sin maíz, no hay país*”; without corn, there is no country.

And yet here he was, struggling year after year and barely keeping his land and his crops, thanks to competition from heavily subsidized American corn farmers, already hundreds of times richer than he was, getting enormous subsidies from their government and selling their corn well below cost in Mexico. The Mexican government could do nothing about this; thanks to NAFTA, it could put up no tariffs to protect native-grown crops against subsidized foreign imports. Many small farmers had already given up; they had gone to Guadalajara, or Mexico City, or north of the border into America to work for the same subsidized, industrial farmers who had put them out of business in the first place. But Isidro Sanchez, he told himself, will not give up. He will work the soil, and the soil will yield him corn. American subsidies would not put *him* out of work.

Like many small farmers of the Mexican hinterland, Isidro still worked his fields with draught animals. Pushing on his loyal if recalcitrant *burro*, Isidro again cursed NAFTA under

his breath and then jerked forward when the *burro* stopped unexpectedly. The plow had hit something. Stepping forward and leaning down to inspect, Isidro found a rather largish rock blocking the path. “Ah,” he said to himself, “*¿eres la problema, verdad?*” You're the problem, aren't you? He dug his hand into the soil that he'd dug into a million times, the soil that his people had been digging for millenia. But this time, Isidro dug out something that none of them had ever dug out, something that none of them ever knew.

As Isidro put his weathered, calloused hand into that rich, long-sown soil, curving his fingers under the troublesome rock in order to pull it up and continue on his way, his hand brushed up against the recently deposited feces of a small rodent. This was totally unremarkable; it was soil, after all, and in large part it consisted in former feces and other organic matter. However, within this particular bit of feces was a very active virus, which made the leap from the feces to Isidro's finger with little difficulty and immediately got to work. It passed through the membrane of Isidro's skin cell and, being (in medical jargon) a single-stranded positive-sense ribonucleic acid virus, immediately began being copied by Isidro's own cellular chemicals. In less than thirty minutes, the virus had completely co-opted Isidro's skin cell, and copied itself so thoroughly that it burst the cell's membrane, sending hundreds of copies of itself through Isidro's body. Several of these found their way to one of Isidro's capillaries, floating on to some very important portions of Isidro's internal systems.

In another two hours, Isidro decided to go in from the fields for the day; he was suffering from a headache that was getting considerably worse. He asked his wife to get him some aspirin; they were out, so she wrapped her shawl around herself and went into town to get some. By the time Isidro asked her this, however, the virus had already gotten into his lungs, went out of his lungs with the air he used for speaking, and was dutifully inhaled by his wife, who now had the virus in her lungs, where it again busily went to work. By the time she returned with the aspirin, she took two herself, because she was also coming down with a headache. Isidro was even worse off; he had a fever of one hundred and three degrees and rising, his stomach was hurting so badly he was doubled over even when laying down, he had begun having a low-grade nosebleed, and his tongue was beginning to take on a dark,

almost black color. What's more, he was beginning to appear significantly jaundiced. Isidro's wife was worried, and called for the doctor to help; the doctor arrived the next morning, about twenty-four hours after the virus had made the leap to Isidro's skin, and poor Isidro was in a bad place.

He was bleeding now not only from his nose, but also from his ears and even his eyes. His temperature was one hundred and six degrees, and he was plainly delirious; the doctor wasn't sure if the delirium was a symptom of the disease or of the incredibly high fever literally frying his brain. Isidro was thrashing about in his bed due to severe abdominal pain and headache; his tongue was now fully black and swollen to twice its normal size. The doctor recognized this as a hemorrhagic fever, of a type he'd never seen, and recommended immediate transportation to a hospital for antivirals. Isidro never made it; he was dead within the hour, screaming in agony for a mother who had died four years earlier, like a child after a bad dream.

By then, Isidro's poor wife and children were thoroughly ill, and the doctor insisted that they all go to the hospital to have antivirals administered and their fevers treated. The nearest hospital was in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, about two hours by ambulance; Isidro's wife died on the way, along with one of the children. The other two survived at the hospital for nearly a full day; the antivirals had no visible effect, and while treating the fever appeared to extend their lives somewhat, it proved futile in an amazingly short time. By then, the doctor was dead, along with most of the people in Isidro's little village, who had either caught it from his wife when she bought his aspirin or had caught it from someone who had. By this time, however, Mexico City had become aware of the problem, and had sent down some of the best doctors in the country to analyze the disease.

One of the men in Isidro's village, though, appeared to be a bit resistant. Juan Alvarez had run into Isidro's wife on his way out of town in a rusty old 1982 F-150; he had lost his farm the previous fall, undersold by the industrial American farmers that Isidro had been cursing when he caught his death in the ancient soil of his people, and unable to find work had decided to go north to meet with some relatives of his in a place he'd never been, Virginia, in the United States, who said they could find him a job. He had the disease, but it spread comparatively slowly in him, as if his body were giving it a better contest than it expected, and it needed a few minutes to get up off the mat and really get the fight going. He crossed the border at Brownsville without incident on 1 May 2023, and proceeded north and east in the old pickup, finally arriving in Josephsville, Virginia, on 4 May 2023. Of course, as he drove the disease progressed; by the time he crossed the border he had a pretty bad headache and stomach ache, and when he got to

Josephsville he was feeling downright wiped, and spoke to very few people before crashing on the floor in his cousin's share of a small duplex, a spot from which he never again would rise. At least, not alive; his cousin, Ricardo Sanchez, found him there around ten in the morning and called 911; but poor Juan Alvarez was already dead.

Of course, the more people who were infected, the more vectors the disease had for spreading, and consequently the more quickly it spread. By the time Alvarez reached Virginia, most of Chiapas had succumbed to the disease; the new "Mexican plague" was all over the news channels, and shocked by the incredibly fast spread and high fatality rate of the disease, the Mexican government had requested assistance from the international community. Its neighbor to the north, the source of so much trouble to those who had first contracted the disease, was among the first to volunteer. Indeed, the president of that great country personally appointed his most trusted and experienced biological warfare general to handle the case, who immediately assembled the greatest minds in the English-speaking world on the subject. And as Providence would have it, one of the few men that Alvarez would speak to upon his arrival in Virginia turned out to be a man of great interest to those volunteers; they all got to know him quite well before all was said and done.

It can't be said that Juan Alvarez was responsible for spreading the plague to America; it most certainly would have spread there anyway. And Alvarez was not the only one who took an unusually long time to die; had anyone been left to take statistics after the plague had run its course, they would have found that nearly five percent of victims had a significantly longer course of sickness than the rest. Typically they survived infection by about a week; some lasted as long as two. This is no mean feat; for the most part, twenty-four to thirty-six hours was more than enough time for the virus to knock its victims thoroughly flat. But as the first example of such comparative longevity, coinciding with the far-from-first example of illegal immigration due to economic hardship, Juan Alvarez gave researchers their first and, ultimately, their only shot at saving the vast bulk of humanity from this disease. That shot came from John Knighton, who prior to the fourth of May never would have believed that he could have mattered that much to anyone, much less to the whole world.

But for poor Isidro Sanchez, the fight was over. He laid in the farmhouse his family had occupied for centuries, on the land they had farmed for millenia, killed by a disease whose near relations had struck his people repeatedly over the eons of time. His body lay there, peacefully, alone; it remained there undisturbed for a very, very long time.

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