Chapter 4

Alto woke in the tiny cell-like room. It was pitch black except for a sliver of light peaking in from the crack at the bottom of the door. It was impossible to tell the time in these caves. Standing and pulling the dangling chain for the light, he looked at his watch. It was six am. He was glad he hadn't overslept. Today was the day they would take the trip with the shipment back to the states. He had to be on his game today. Everything needed to go as planned, Yassin still hadn't told him how the drugs got from here to the states, but he assured him it was no problem. Everything about the operation from the growing to production was very efficient. There was nothing Alto saw that gave him pause except for a group of men who seemed to be a third party in this endeavor. Yassin assured him they were nothing to worry about, saying they were crucial in the drugs' transportation. Alto, of course, wanted to speak with them and was told that he would be able to before they left. It troubled him. These men who were not Taliban and not simple villagers were a liability. They knew how the drugs got to America and were instrumental in the process, but where did their loyalties lie? If they were not Taliban, then they had no reason to follow Yassin's orders. If they were not part of the village, they had no reason to follow the Taliban's demands. It was going to be a problem. Once they shut down the supply chain stateside, there was no telling what kind of blowback would come from these men. He needed to find out more about them, but there was no time. In a few short hours, they would be leaving. Cutting it close was an understatement.

Alto emerged from his room to find Adrian sitting at the square wooden table in the center of the room. He looked like he hadn't slept, dark circles under his eyes and a pale, sickly look to his skin. "You look like shit."

"I need to talk to you," his eyes darted around the room, "Let's go outside."

They followed the orange cable to the cave entrance and walked out into the cool morning air. The sun was coming up behind them, leaving the sky a light purple hue. The daytime heat had not yet taken hold and the night chill still hung in the air. Adrian moved off to the right, making his way to an area where the vehicles were parked. He moved in behind a few of the larger trucks and turned to Alto. "We've got a problem."

"We've got a few, I would say."

"There's a group of men here, a cult of some sort, I guess. They call themselves the Conscripts of Leng."

"You mean those culeros in the red robes?"

"Yeah, the villagers and the Taliban soldiers all but shit their pants when they come by."

"Yassin said they have something to do with how the drugs are transported," Alto said as he glanced around the truck to see if anyone had noticed them.

"The priest at the Mosque in town gave me something. A man had taken it from those men. He was tortured and probably killed because of it. The priest gave it to me so that they wouldn't find it in the Mosque. He was scared shit-less."

"What the fuck, man. Did you take it? What was it?"

"It's a book."

"Shit, if they find it on you, all hells gonna break lose."

"I know, Alto. I didn't want to take it, but the look in his eyes. They would kill him if they found it."

"Now they're gonna kill you."

"There's more."

Alto ran his hand over his bald head, letting out an exasperated sigh.

"I read some of the book last night. It's some real end times shit. These fuckers worship some ancient god from before any recorded history. It's supposed to have a thousand names and faces. I found it mostly referenced as The Messenger. It has some connection to a place it calls the Plateau of Leng..."

"This is bullshit man, are you really worried about some fairytale."

"I didn't say I believed it. My concern is that we have some fanatical cultists here who have some plan that hinges on getting these drugs to the states. We need to know what the hell they are planning."

"I'm with you on that. We can try to find out whatever we can, but the clock is ticking. Once we are en route, there isn't much we are going to be able to do."

"Also, I have something. A beacon. Once I activate it, we have thirty minutes before the drones lock onto the coordinates and light this place up. This whole valley is gonna be a memory after that. As long as we take care of what's happening stateside, we won't have to worry about this end."

Alto smiled, "I knew there had to be a good reason to have you along. As long as these Leng fools don't pooch it, we should only worry about the far end. Once we get there, I'll call in the cavalry. We can sit tight and wait for it to go down."

Adrian nodded. They both left in different directions so they would not be noticed together. Alto walked out past the motor pool taking in the cool breeze. He wasn't so eager to head back into those stifling caves. Moving as quickly as he could back inside, he hurried to his room. He needed to get everything packed up and adequately hidden.

Once in his room, Adrian wrapped the deteriorating old book in a bundle of his clothes and put it into his backpack. He then pulled down his pants so that his right thigh was exposed. Pulling his belt from the loops in his pants, he put it in his mouth and bit down. Reaching to the small table beside his cot, he grabbed his utility knife and opened the blade. He felt around a discolored portion of his thigh until he seemed satisfied with the location. The blade was sharp and cut in cleanly. He only needed to make a small incision and not too deep. Pushing towards the bottom of the discolored area and wincing in pain, a small object began to become visible in the blood. Adrian grabbed the end of the thing with his thumb and finger and pulled out what appeared to be a small metal star. Wiping the object and his wound with a handkerchief, he placed it on the table and went about stitching the tiny cut. He dressed it and pulled his pants up, returning his belt. Wiping up any signs of blood with the handkerchief, he stuffed it in his pocket. For a moment, he stared at the small metal star on the table, a shining moment in his career. He only needed to survive long enough to make it happen.

When Adrian stepped from his room, fully packed up and ready for the journey, Nina greeted him. She sat at the table, drinking what appeared to be coffee from a tin cup. "You look like shit," she said plainly.

"So they tell me."

"Where is Alto? Himee is looking for him."

"I think he took a walk outside. You ready to go?" Adrian gave her a once over. She seemed to always be ready to go. Did the woman ever sleep?

"Whatever you have planned, leave Golshiri out of it. He is mine."

"You get breakfast already?" Adrian's eyes went wide at Nina's blatant disclosure. He gave her a look as if to say. We don't know who is listening.

She waved her hand, dismissively. "No, you?"

"Let's go see what we can find in the mess hall," he said, putting his upturned palm ahead of him towards the tunnel entrance. "Lady's first."

She glared at him as she walked past. He had no idea what her agenda was, and he didn't want to know. If Golshiri was part of it, that was fine with him. The man wasn't part of Adrian's mission, and the less he knew, the better.

Himee stood at the edge of the village, watching as the truckload of heroin was loaded up and prepared for the trip. There was no effort to conceal the drugs in any way. The brown bricks were stacked in the truck as if they were a shipment of grain going to market. The street value of this truck was simply insane, and these poor villagers who toiled under the Taliban to create it had next to no idea of the wealth of their labor, nor the destruction. The truck was almost loaded. They would soon be making their way to what Himee believed to be a tunnel system under the ruins that let out at a secret location near the ocean. He assumed they would then load the drugs onto a ship and travel to the US from there. He couldn't figure out how they would get the drugs from the ship to the endpoint of this supply route in San Antonio. It made no sense. Especially considering that after almost a year of investigation, the DEA still had no clue how it got there. He watched Alto as he surveyed the loading of the truck. Alto was a hard ass and always had a watchful eye. Nina was standing next to the Iranian man who had convinced Yassin and Alto that he should come along as well. Adrian was keeping his distance from the group and seemed to be preoccupied with something. He looked like shit, and he wasn't acting like himself, frigidity and suspicious-looking. Himee was worried that he would fuck things up after they had made it so far. No one seemed to be concerned with him. They were all focused on getting the truck loaded and ready for the trip. He could almost taste it now. When this mission was over, he was out. He just needed to make sure everything went smooth.

Once the truck was loaded, they moved up the road from the village to the ruins. The noonday sun beat down like a river of hot lava. Sweat beaded on Himee's forehead. Wiping it with his bandanna, he watched the guards at the entrance of the ruin complex get closer. Several men in red robes could be seen beyond the entrance moving into a crumbling structure at the center of the complex. The truck drove through the two weathered ancient columns which marked the entrance. As they moved closer to the center structure, it was clear that this complex was quite large. What looked like bare desert sands from a distance were identified as ancient structures whose only remaining footprints were the crumbling brick outlines that marked their foundation. Sand had covered most of the low walls, and marked pathways and desert foliage were prevalent throughout. Only a single structure at the center of the complex was more than an outline in the sand. It was clear that this structure was much larger in the past. Red jagged rock and crumbling brick lay all around, remnants of the outer structure that was all but laid to waste by the desert's hot, dry heat and winds. An opening in the center of the mound of broken stone was all that was left.

The opening was large enough to pass the truck easily through. It was odd that it would be so large but clear that this must have been a place of worship for this ancient city. A large entryway to accommodate throngs of worshipers would not be out of the question. The truck continued through the opening down what at one time was a broad set of stairs and was now nothing more than a dirt slope to a chamber below. The air inside was cold and held a stagnate odor, like something old and forgotten left to rot for eons in this ancient tomb. There were many of the red-robed men milling about in the chamber below the sands. Himee figured they must have gone down at least twenty or thirty feet after entering the structure. A large stone doorway was in front of them. Again, wide enough to pass the truck through and at least fifteen feet tall. The colossal stone doors were decorated with symbols and pictographs. Bas relief sculptures depicted strange beings with wings and no facial features, large spider-like creatures with almost human faces, and great winged lions. The site of these carvings made Himee's skin crawl. He made the sign of the cross instinctively.

The truck stopped in front of the doorway, and several red-robed men pushed the massive stone doors open. The sound of stone sliding on stone echoed through the room as the heavy doors gave way to another large chamber beyond. The truck moved forward into the room, and Himee was able to get a look at the entirety of it. The room was vast. He estimated it was a good fifty feet deep and twenty to thirty feet wide. The floor was polished black marble. Unlike the other areas they had been, it was immaculate, free of dust and degeneration. Columns rose on either side, reaching into the darkness overhead. He was unable to determine the height of the room. It had to be over thirty feet tall. Bas reliefs decorated the columns, and frescoes adorned the walls on all sides.

The imagery was startling and grotesque. More of the beings he had seen on the large stone doors but in a more narrative organization. The frescoes on the walls depicted almost human creatures with goat legs and horns protruding from their foreheads. These creatures were directing enormous faceless frog-like monstrosities with gelatinous bulging bodies and tentacle-like appendages. It seemed these were some subservient beings who later rose to defy their masters. There were depictions of large spider-like creatures with horrid human faces dominated by large gaping maws full of needle teeth. Worst of all was a depiction of gargantuan blasphemy with three legs ending in horrible clawed four-pronged feet supporting an almost human torso with two arms and clawed hands whose head was a single blood-red tentacle writhing wildly into the air. At the sight of this, Himee almost lost the contents of his stomach, "el dioblo," he murmured to himself.

The others, including the detail of Taliban soldiers that Yassin had insisted come along for the trip, were visibly shaken. The truck moved further into the room, coming to a stop before a single black stone wall positioned in the center of the room. The wall was somewhere near fifteen feet wide and rose about twenty feet into the air. It dominated the center of the large chamber. The wall was adorned with arcane looking symbols and patterns that Himee could not guess the origins. There were braziers on either side of the wall lit and burning brightly. A red-robed man knelt by each one chanting in some language that was not Farsi.

"What the fuck is this?" Alto exclaimed to Yassin, who had accompanied them this far.

"This is the way we get your drugs to you." Yassin gave a broad smile, delighted by the shock and fear he could see in Alto's eyes. It was the only moment thus far that Yassin seemed to have the upper hand on Alto, and he was enjoying it to the fullest.

"What is it?" The moment was fleeting as Alto regained his composure.

"They," Yassin motioned to the red-robed men, "call it a gate."

"You're fucking kidding me. Like a magic gate or something?"

The smile still hung on Yassin's face. "These men have cared for this site for ages. We always thought it was just a myth, but we knew we had to ally ourselves with them when we found them. Once they showed us this," he waved his hand toward the wall, "we knew we had to control this area. Smuggling drugs for money is a small-minded endeavor, but it is not our only plan."

"This is bullshit Harry Potter. You expect me to believe we are delivering this shipment through some magic gate?"

"I only expect you to make the journey and decide for yourself. I have never been through the gate, but I have sent my men. The drugs make it to the destination, so I must assume that it is legitimate, whatever this is. Inside, they say, is another world or dimension. There are other gates like this one that leads to other places in our dimension. We found one that led to America, so we marked the path from this gate to the American gate. We send groups in to find other gates," He turned to Adrian and Nina, "We found one that leads to Russia, near Kazan."

Adrian chimed in, "Once you are inside, it is a different place?"

"Yes, very different."

"Can you see back through to this side or call for help?"

"No. I am told that the wall looks the same on the other side. I have a group of men that stay on that side and guard the gate against intruders."

"What do you mean, intruders?" Gloshiri spoke up.

"There are beings on the other side," he pointed to the images on the walls. "You do not want to encounter them. Stay on the path and get the truck to the other gate as fast as possible. It is relatively safe."

"Relatively?" Alto said he had regained his composure and was now asserting his dominance once more.

"There are risks in trafficking drugs, even with conventional means, are there not?"

"This is crazy. Let's just get this done. If I make it back safely with the cargo, I'll deliver it to my boys on the other side. I'll be back in Kandahar with your money and the advance we agreed on. If I decide this is too risky, you'll get your money for this shipment, and we'll decide on any further business."

"After this trip, it will only be my men going through. No risk to you. Let me take risks."

"We also have to consider the fact that the last Mara's to oversee this operation were blown to shit. That was because of your shit, not ours. That's something to consider."

"The money we are making on this partnership is something to consider as well. Look at what you have gained so far and weigh that against the loss of two men."

Alto nodded.

"Yassin." Adrian spoke, "We have seen your operation, and we have spoken with Alto about the operation you have been running with them. It seems like a good partnership. Kazan is close enough to Moscow to safely get the shipments there and far enough not to cause suspicion." He reached into his pocket and squeezed the metal star in the precise spot to activate the beacon. "I offer you this. It was my grandfather's. It is a red star. High honors in the Red Army for his service at Stalingrad. It is very important to me. I leave it as a promise that I will be back after consulting with my superiors. I think we will have a deal. We will bring good faith money when we return." He handed Yassin the metal star. Yassin looked at the trinket and smiled.

"I look forward to doing business with you."

Adrian glanced at Alto. "Let's get this moving," Alto shouted for all to hear, again taking control of the room.

"You need only to pass through the wall," Yassin said as he backed away from the truck. "Safe journey, my friends, may Allah watch over you."

The truck lurched forward. Alto, Nina, and Golshiri sat in front with the driver, Himee, Adrian, and the four other Taliban soldiers sat in the back with the cargo. One of the soldiers was Amed, who Adrian and Himee had met playing cards. Now that the method of getting the drugs to the states was revealed, Adrian felt more nervous than he had before. It only proved to legitimize the things he had read in that horrible book. Could this be real? It was evident that everyone was concealing their fears, posturing not to be seen as weak. However, it was clear that not one person in the truck (Taliban soldiers included) was not terrified at the prospect of what was on the other side of that wall.

Alto kept his composure as he watched the truck's front make contact with the wall and pass through as if moving through a waterfall. Tension built in him as the wall moved closer and closer to the cab. He wondered what it would feel like to pass through. Only a slight dull popping sound in his ears and an instant of bright white light before cold air and purple-hued darkness surrounded him. He was still in the truck. The others were there too. Quickly turning behind him, he saw the wall from the other side. It looked the same, and he could see the rest of the truck materializing out of the wall as it pulled forward. His senses reeled as he turned to look in front of them. Before him was a vast plain that looked like desert sands but was in various hues of purple. The horizon could be seen in the distance extending into a nighttime sky dotted with stars that didn't seem quite right. Stretching in front of the truck was what looked to be a marked road trailing off into the distance. The truck stopped, and for the first time, he realized that just outside of the wall were some small structures and men who looked to be Taliban soldiers moving toward them. They spoke for a moment with the driver and motioned for him to continue. The truck lurched forward again and began its slow journey down the crudely marked road toward what seemed to be a speck of light in the distance.

Yassin stood in the chamber, watching the truck disappear into the black wall before him. He would never get used to that. He could feel the presence of Ayan beside him. He turned to greet the leader of the Conscripts of Leng. "You grace us with your presence Ayan."

"I was hoping to reach you before the truck passed through. I have had an item of extreme importance stolen from me. The timing of your visitors and the theft give me pause. I have questioned the man who stole the book. He died before revealing who he gave it to."

"You believe they had something to do with it?" Yassin said, motioning to the wall.

"I only said that the timing is suspect. I would not expect them to know anything about our arrangement."

"Certainly not. They are only a means to an end. Once we have the weapons and soldiers, we can execute the final stage. These," again he motioned to the wall, "are only needed to provide money. We are close. A few more shipments, and it will be time."

"You know I don't care about your war. I am ready with my side of the deal. We have been ready for years. The time is right."

They walked out of the chamber and began the climb up the ruined stairs to the structure entrance. "What was stolen?" Yassin continued.

"It was a book, significant to our sect."

"I will turn the village upside down. We will find it."

They reached the top of the stairs and moved to the opening. The sun shown in at an angle through the large entryway. Dust swirled in the air. The heat of the day could be felt in the breeze as it swept into the temple. When they reached the Opening and looked out onto the valley, Yassin stopped. He could see the dust from a large group of vehicles moving beyond the ruins and out of the valley. There were no scheduled moments today. Then he heard the sound which he had grown accustomed to during this war with the infidels. The distinct sound of death from above, only a trained ear could detect the drones' sound. He pulled the metal star Adrian had given him out of his pocket and threw it on the ground. "Run!" he shouted to Ayan, and he hurried back into the ruined temple. As fast as they could, they rushed down the slope and managed to enter the gate room just as the Conscripts were closing the colossal stone doors. Yassin ran as fast as he could. Ayan was faster still. He watched Ayan disappear into the wall as he heard the first dull thud, which shook the entire room, raining debris down on those still in the chamber.

An older man sat in the front seat of the stolen Taliban truck. He had managed to gather all those that were not loyal to the Taliban and convince them to attempt an escape. He had seen the truck enter the ruins and put his faith in Allah that the man he had encountered was telling him the truth. He staged an escape stealing several of the Taliban's trucks and driving off with reckless abandon to exit the valley. They had taken no casualties from the gunfire directed at them as they raced off up the road toward the ruins. They managed to get past the ruins and into the mountains' rocky peaks when the first missiles landed in the valley. Tears welled up in his eyes for the souls left behind, those who were misguided in their loyalties. There was no saving them now. The entire valley was engulfed in a conflagration that reminded him of fire and brimstone from the Christian holy book. The valley, the Taliban, and the detestable Conscripts of Leng were now rubble and ash. He must lead these people out, somewhere safe, somewhere they could live free from the tyranny of the world.

The truck moved slowly down the marked path in the oddly colored sand of this strange alien landscape. Mountains could be seen in the distance to the left and right of the truck. It was impossible to tell which cardinal direction these were as all of their instruments were malfunctioning in this reality. The truck plodded along toward the speck of light in the distance. The driver indicated (through a series of hand gestures and broken single words of English) that the other gate would exit somewhere near San Antonio. They had been moving only a short time and could still see the first gate behind them. Going was slow due to deep sand and strange craters in the road, which they would have to navigate around, or large stones that the soldiers would work together to move out of the path. The place was cold and barren. Everything was cast in an eerie purple light emanating from two adjacent moons in the sky, which marked this land as distinctly alien and frighteningly surreal.

Adrian was counting in his head since his watch was utterly useless once they entered the gate. He was near to thirty minutes, give or take when a ball of fire ripped through the gate behind them, and a soft pop could be heard. Judging from the fireball size and the silence that followed, it was clear that the explosion had taken out the guards that were placed on this side of the gate. That was an unexpected complication thankfully solved by the ordinance laid down by the drones. The soldiers began shouting and pointing back to the entrance behind them, all of them except Amed, who kept quiet and drew his weapon. Adrian noticed this and pulled his pistol but eased it back down once he saw Amed had positioned his weapon to face the soldiers and not Himee or himself. The truck came to a stop a moment later. The soldiers all jumped from the back of the truck with weapons drawn.

Amed turned to Adrian and Himee. "Let me handle this. I know why you're here. Well, not exactly, but I am a friend. They don't speak English. I don't know what the hell that was, but I assume it was you." He smiled. "Looks like we are not going back that way."

Amed jumped out of the truck and began speaking to the other men in Farsi, motioning them to get back in the vehicle. The driver also exited and moved to get a better look at what had gone on behind them. He pulled a pair of binoculars from his belt pouch and stared for a few moments at the flames in the gate's direction. Lowering the binoculars, he shook his head. The other soldiers all looked around as if they had come to some terrible realization. Some spoke a few words, Amed translated. "The gate is gone, the guards are gone, there is no way back."

Alto heard this as he rounded the truck to where the others stood. "Fuck!" he exclaimed, giving his best show of disappointment. He was keeping up appearances. They were still technically outnumbered and outgunned. Himee moved closer and said something quietly to him. "Get back in the truck. We have to make it to the next gate. We will figure things out once we are out of this fucking nightmare," Alto said with a commanding voice. Amed translated for the soldiers. They seemed to agree and relax once they realized Alto was taking control of the situation.

Once everyone was back in the truck, they began moving forward again. Judging from the distance they had traveled, and how far they seemed to be from the lights, it would be at least another few hours before they reached the other gate. No one, it seemed, wanted to be here any longer than was necessary, judging from the speed at which obstacles were removed from the path when needed. The progress was slow but steady. No one said a word. They all stared out onto the alien desert, waiting for some horrible abomination to reveal itself. Everyone had seen the images on the temple walls, and this barren landscape was all too familiar in that regard. An hour had gone by when a shriek rang out, coming from somewhere behind them.

It sounded like a man screaming and was cut off almost as quickly as it began. They all exchanged frightened glances and brought their weapons up. The truck didn't stop moving. It was clear that those in the cab had not heard the sound. As the men in the back stared into the dark landscape behind them, looking for a sign of what had made the sound, they could hear the unmistakable whooshing of wings flapping in the night sky. The sound grew closer and louder. It was not the sound of a bird taking flight. It was the sound of something much larger and sinister. The slow whooshing of wings beating a steady staccato as the men stared up in fear. Himee caught a quick glimpse of something large and dark in the nightmare sky as it passed through the light of one of the gibbous moons. Before he could speak, an object the size of a bowling ball landed in the bed of the truck between the panic-stricken men. They all instinctively followed the object to its final resting place and gazed in terror as they realized what this object was. It was a freshly severed human head.

One of the soldiers screamed and crumpled to the wooden bed of the truck. Another fired wildly in the air several bursts before the other men could subdue him. The truck stopped, and everyone got out.

"What the hell was that?" Alto looked furious.

The soldiers pointed into the sky, and Himee responded, "Something was in the air. It dropped a fucking head in our laps. I think it was from one of the guards at the gate. We have to get the fuck out of here, man. This is no joke."

As he said the last, a large figure ascended from the sky, landing no more than fifteen feet from the back of the truck. It was all black and stood over nine feet with great black membranous wings stretched out behind it. The face was solid black with no features or definition. The darkness of its skin seemed to suck the light out of its surroundings. Without hesitation, they all began to fire on the thing. The demon beast lunged forward as if unaffected by the pelting of bullets it was receiving. With a quick motion, it snatched the whimpering soldier from the bed of the truck, launching itself back into the air.

"Get in the truck!" Alto screamed, and everyone followed his order. The driver threw the truck into gear and pulled away. He was driving faster than before, everyone urging him on. The truck bounded quickly down the barely visible path to its destination, the single speck of light twinkling in the distance. They barrelled across large craters in the road. Instead of carefully navigating them, the driver wildly swerved around them, several times almost tipping the truck or sliding into the unexplained holes. They were able to cover a considerable distance before an obstruction in the road ahead stopped them. Several yards ahead of them was a huge spherical object. Upon closer scrutiny, they could see that some sort of tube-like objects protruded from it, and some of them were moving.

Nina quietly said. "What the hell is that?"

Golshiri shook his head.

The driver muttered something in Farsi. He then slowly pulled the truck closer to the object in the road. There was no way they could move something this large out of the way. They would have to go around it. The men in the back were now muttering inquiries as to why they had stopped. Once they were only a few yards from the object, the lights of the truck revealed a horror beyond comprehension. What lay in the road ahead of them was what appeared to be a giant spider upturned on its back. Wickedly sharp legs were writhing in the air. Above its abdomen, a grotesque nightmarish facsimile of a human head with long stringy hair, horrifyingly cognizant eyes, and a gapping round maw filled with needle-like teeth looked around wildly. The face turned to them as they approached and regarded them with a sickly stare that betrayed its understanding of their trespass into its alien world.

"What the fuck is that thing?" Alto said, voice wavering.

Nina screamed in rage and pushed Golshiri as she scrambled for the door. He complied, and she exited the vehicle to the protests of Alto. "Nina, stay back. You don't know what that thing can do." Golshiri screamed as she moved closer to the injured monstrosity. Even in the fear and confusion, Alto recognized that Golshiri had used Nina's real name. Something was up between them but now was not the time for that. She stood less than ten feet from the thing and brought her pistol up. The eyes regarded her. It began to vocalize in a low guttural voice, words that were utterly foreign and made Alto nauseous just to hear. The thing only got out a few syllables before Nina unloaded a full clip directly into its forehead. After the last shot Alto could still hear her pulling the trigger as she began to weep uncontrollably. Golshiri went to her and caught her as she collapsed to the ground. He pulled her back as the thing's limbs ceased to move. Its head looked like a smashed tomato with the top taken entirely off. It was dead. Golshiri pulled Nina to the truck and got her inside as screams rose from the men in the back. "Go Go Go!" Adrian screamed.

Golshiri barely had a chance to shut the door when the driver kicked the truck into action. He pulled a wide semi-circle around the heinous giant spider creature and pulled the truck back onto the path. They were now moving even faster than they had been previously. The men in the back of the truck watched as large spherical shapes moved toward them, sickly sharp and awkwardly jointed limbs pulling them along at incredible speeds. The men in the back had not seen the creature Nina had slain and were not prepared for its brethren as they closed in on the speeding truck. One of the soldiers fainted straight away and fell from the back of the truck. They all watch in horror as one of the things set upon the fallen man, tearing him into small pieces and devouring them. The other things, three now, continued to close in on the truck. "Shoot for the head!" Amed yelled as he raised his modified AK-47 and began to spray the creatures. Himee and Adrian broke from their terrified catatonia. They moved to the back of the truck, aiming at the heads and firing.

Himee was the first to connect after he had fired his fourth shot effectively. The thing went face down then flipped end over end until it came to rest in the disturbingly purple sand. Amed's barrage of bullets eventually proved too much for another creature as one of its limbs was cut in half. The thing tumbled to a stop, writhing and finally, letting out an ear-piercing scream that made them all want to heave over the back of the truck. They focused on the last, but Adrian took it between the eyes with one well-aimed shot. The thing fell face down in the sand and slid to a stop. The truck sped on, leaving the frightening silhouettes of these creatures out of a child's nightmare to slowly shrink into the darkness of the hellish desert landscape.

"How did you know to shoot for the head?" Adrian asked of Amed.

"Shoot anything in the head, and you kill it."

Adrian looked at Amed. There was something about him. "What's your story?"

"It's not the time. Let's get out of this fucking place, and I will explain. For now, let's just make sure we survive."

"You got any other helpful fucking tips you wanna share?" Himee said.

"You can't kill those flying things, or at least I don't think you can, not with these at least." he shook his weapon in his hands.

"Well, it was at least a few miles back that we saw that thing," Adrian said with a determined look.

"It will follow us, hunt us. I think the explosion alerted these things to us, or maybe it was the smell of blood I can't be sure."

"Comforting. Thanks." Himee added.

"We just need to get to the other gate and get out. Once on the other side, we need to destroy it. They will come through if we don't. It is what those guys in the red robes were planning. The Taliban want to use this passage to attack American soil, but those men the Conscripts of Leng, they want to bring about the end of days."

As Amed finished, the truck came to another stop. The men all looked at each other with nervous expressions. Moving around the cargo to the truck's cab, Adrian pounded the metal divider with his fist. "What's going on? Why are we stopping?"

The doors to the cab opened, and all but Nina exited the cab. "Rocks in the path," Alto shouted. There were two large boulders in the road that needed to be moved. Alto motioned for the driver to return to the cab and moved toward one of the rocks. Golshiri followed him; the others came soon after rounding the truck, heads darting quickly in all directions.

"Can't we go around them?" Himee said with a nervous tremble in his voice.

"If we move off the path, we may drive into a sinkhole in the sand. They can swallow a truck whole. I have heard many terrible things from the men about the making of this path." Amed offered.

"Did you see those things, Alto?" Adrian asked as he crouched down. He put his shoulder against the thigh-high boulder of some sharp porous rock that was a purple-green color and glittered slightly in the double moonlight.

"Yeah, we saw them in the rearview. We lost another man?"

"Yeah."

They all helped roll the boulder out of the path, each feeling the urgency of the situation. Sweat rolled down Alto's face; despite the cold, he was sweating profusely, his nerves were damn near shot. He didn't know how long he could keep up a calm exterior. When the last bolder was rolled off the path into the shifting windblown sand, he turned to look in the direction of the beacon they had been heading towards for the last two hours. The light was much larger; they were getting close but still had at least another hour or more. "Count your ammo, everyone."

"Two clips," Himee muttered, looking into the sky.

"Three," Adrian said, inspecting his weapon.

"One clip for the rifle and four for my handgun. He has one clip for his rifle, no handgun." Amed looked in the direction of the gate. "The driver has a pistol. He hasn't used it yet, so he has four."

"I have four clips. I will check Ni…" Golshiri caught himself before he repeated Nina's name.

"Who are you, and how do you know her? You think I didn't notice you said her name back there?" Alto's tattooed face looked terrifying in the dim purple light.

"I would ask you the same, I know you're not drug dealers, and since I know Nina, this one isn't Russian mafia." He looked at Adrian.

"You're not CIA. There is no way they would let you in with those tattoos." He nodded his head affirmatively. "DEA, why else would you be dealing with these drugs?"

Alto stared silently at Golshiri.

"But you," he moved toward Adrian, "you are a bit of a mystery. I thought you were CIA, but you barely talked to Nina, and you have a white knight quality to you that… FBI." He emphasized each letter. "You are here for the same reason I am, the rumor of an attack on American soil."

Adrian stared at him calmly but didn't speak.

"It's OK. You don't have to tell me. Once I saw Nina, I knew you all had to be part of some undercover op. It's OK. It's OK. I am a CIA asset. I have been for years. We are on the same side."

All eyes turned to Amed.

"I am a friend. I can tell you no more."

"None of this is gonna matter if we get eaten by fuckin' monsters. Keep your trigger fingers steady. We have to conserve ammo. Pick your shots and make them count. Let's go." Alto began to walk back to the truck as the sound of wings above caused everyone to look up to the sky.

"Run!" Alto screamed.

They all broke into a run heading back to the truck. The driver fired it up before everyone was in and began to drive. Alto caught the open passenger-side door as it passed him and pulled himself into the cab. The men headed to the back of the truck all pulled themselves in as it picked up speed. Himee could hear the sound of large wings behind them and closing fast. Once he pulled himself into the bed, he turned and scanned the sky, looking for the telltale black shape. Amed was saying something to the other soldier, pointing to his gun. Even with the extra speed, the sound of the approaching beast grew louder.

Alto was urging the driver to pick up speed as Nina regained her composure. "What is going on?" she asked.

"We are heading to the gate. There is something… out there. Are you OK?" Golshiri sounded genuinely concerned. Alto began to realize that these two had a past. The driver looked panicked but was composed enough to keep the truck on the marked path.

"Those spider things?" Nina looked terrified.

"Something else." Golshiri was trying to keep her calm.

The sound of something large landing in the bed of the truck startled them. They could hear the sounds of the men yelling just before the sound of gunfire erupted.

The four men backed toward the cab of the truck, firing on the demon thing that had landed before them. The creature's jet-black body was over nine feet tall, similar to a human with sharp protrusions at its elbows and knees' joints. Its clawed feet tore into the wooden bed of the truck as it moved purposefully toward them. Great bat-like wings extended behind it, folding up onto its back as it came. The face was goat-like in shape but bore no features, only smooth black leathery skin topped by two protruding horns that spiraled up like those of a gazelle. The demon was unaffected by the hail of bullets they fired into it. It swung a clawed hand at Amed but missed, piercing a reserve can of gasoline that splashed out over the thing's body. Amed fell to his back on the bed of the truck with the unspeakable horror above him, closing in for the kill. Just then, the other soldier leaped toward it using his assault rifle as an improvised club, bashing it into the thing's chest. The nightmare stumbled back at the onslaught leaving the soldier between it and Amed. It righted itself in one fluid motion and swung its arm, taking the man in the chest and exiting his back with a spray of blood. It lifted the screaming Taliban soldier off the ground and regarded the man now impaled on its arm. The others raised their weapons but realized in that instant what the man had done. In an act of final defiance and sacrifice, the dying man pulled from his pocket a small silver item and, with a quick motion of his hand, lit the lighter and pressed it to the gas soaked skin of the beast.

The thing burst into flames with an audible whoosh and immediately let out a high-pitched screaming sound that pierced the ears of the onlooking men. The man impaled on its arm also caught fire, his human screams mixing with the unearthly sound of the devilish thing as they both fell backward out of the moving truck. They hit the sand and rolled, extinguishing some of the flames that engulfed them. As the truck sped off, the forms could still be seen, their silhouettes growing smaller and eventually fading into the unnatural purple darkness. The thing lingered on the dead man for a moment, then launched itself into the sky, leaving a trail of oily black smoke as it went. The smell of burnt skin and hair hung in the air as the last three men in the back of the truck collapsed to the bed, shaking.

"How can we kill that thing? It's just gonna come back." Himee was breathing heavily.

"We do not have the means to kill it, I think. It does not follow the same laws of physics that we are accustomed to." Amed offered, staring at the line of smoke in the sky.

"How the fuck do you know this, Amed? You need to start talking. We are in this together now whether we like it or not." Adrian looked angry but not at Amed.

Amed slumped down with his back against the cab of the truck. They were moving at a steady pace and hadn't slowed since they left the last set of boulders in the road. If they did not have to stop, they should reach the gate within the next half hour. "I suppose it matters little now. You have all seen this." He motioned with his hand in the air. "I am part of a secret organization. We deal with," he motioned again in the air, "now that you have seen these things, you must keep it a secret. If we do survive, you must not tell anyone what you have seen here. Our job is to protect citizens from these threats, and not only to protect them but also to protect them from ever knowing these threats exist. Do you realize what kind of shit storm would be created if people knew this place existed? Religion, our place in the universe, not to mention the panic and fear, would cause chaos in our society. My organization is in place to guard against that. Those within our group are the only people who know we exist, and we operate off-book. Now that you know, you are in a unique position. You could be recruited. Either way, you will keep silent if you don't…" Amed trailed off and let the thought lie there. The other men were pretty certain what he was getting at. "I infiltrated the Taliban almost two years ago," he continued, "Yassin had made contact with the Conscripts of Leng, and that put him on our radar. I am Afghani, but I was born in the US. I got into Afghanistan with fake papers and joined up. It took me a while, but I got to the valley and waited. I am pretty sure it was my group that orchestrated this whole thing, from the drone strike that killed Alto's men to the intel about Yassin," he looked at Adrian, "and bringing in Golshiri. You wouldn't believe how crafty they can be, you have all been tapped, and if you weren't, well, you are now."

"How do you know about these things, these fucking monsters." Adrian's world seemed to be crumbling around him.

"We have scholars, people who study books like the one your group stole from the Conscripts." He let the words linger in the air for a moment. "I don't know which one of you has it, but I know you do. That book and others like it tell of all sorts of horrible shit that should never be. My group usually studies them. I would recommend that you destroy the one you have, or give it to me. Anyhow, I was debriefed on what we might encounter inside here. We haven't seen the worst of it."

"You're fucking kidding me." Himee blew out a breath of air. "Well, we are almost there. If we can make it to the gate without that thing coming back, we can get the hell out of here. Then what?"

Amed looked at each of them in turn. "Then we make sure nothing comes out with us."

Alto could see the fire at the gate ahead of them. They were moving at a reasonable speed now and hadn't experienced any obstacles in a short while. He glanced at Nina and Golshiri. They were engaged in a quiet conversation that he wanted no part of. The important thing was to get to the gate and get the hell out of this place. He could almost make out the large, black stone wall that made up the gate from this distance. It would be only fifteen to twenty minutes before they would arrive at their destination. He could feel the end in sight; they were only a short distance from the exit of this nightmare world. He let himself relax for a moment, but the moment faded as the truck was struck by something large from the passenger side. The entire vehicle tilted up onto its driver side wheels. The men in the back were yelling curses, trying to hold on while the driver attempted to right the truck without rolling over. Counter steering, the driver managed to slam the truck's lifted side back to the ground but, in doing so, left the marked path in the sand. Alto could see something large and black clinging to the passenger door with Golshiri screaming and trying to hold the door closed.

He watched as a leathery black arm shattered the closed passenger side window, spraying glass shards across the cab of the truck. The large human-like clawed hand engulfed Golshiri, and in an instant, the man and the door he feverishly clung to were pulled free. Nina tried to grab hold of him but was no match for the thing, which then launched into the air. Smoke from the smoldering beast hung in the cab as the remaining occupants were left staring at the missing door and the open-air beyond. The truck swerved in the deep sand, the driver trying his best to keep the truck moving and get it back onto the marked path. Nina was screaming to stop the truck, watching helplessly as the thing went higher into the air. Suddenly a muffled pop could be heard in the air. She let out a terrified protest as a smaller object began to fall from the thing, Golshiri. The truck lurched back onto the stable path. Still, its momentum carried it back into the uncharted sands on the opposite side. Nina watched as what could only be the body of Golshiri fell from the sky. It landing a hundred or so yards to the right of the road they were careening off of. Again, the driver attempted to counter-steer in the deep sand to get the unruly truck back onto the marked path. This time the sand proved to be too deep, and the truck tilted into what could only be described as a sinkhole. Sand began to funnel toward a center point pulling the large cargo truck down the front end first into an impossibly large sinking section of the desert.

"Get out!" Alto called, urging the driver to escape from his side. The driver opened the door as the truck began to tilt in an even steeper angle, moving slowly down into the pit. Nina was exiting through the now open passenger side and climbing up the cab into the back of the truck. The driver leaped from the cab onto the edge of the sand that was funneling into the sinkhole. Alto watched as the man scrambled quickly away from the edge as the sand under him began to move down into the hole. Alto was out next, following Nina's lead and climbing the cab into the back of the truck. The other men were already at the tailgate as Nina and Alto made it to the bed. They jumped out just before the truck lurched down in an even steeper angle, throwing Nina and Alto hard against the cab. Nina was up in an instant, scrambling up the tarp-covered cargo toward the back of the bed. Alto watched as she leaped out and disappeared below the line of the tailgate. An instant more, and he would not be able to pull himself up the steepening angle to the back of the truck. Taking two strides, using the cargo as footholds, he leaped, arms outstretched towards the tailgate. His fingers caught the edge of the tailgate just as the truck began an even steeper and faster descent into the sandy grave. Pulling himself up to the edge, he was able to jump free of the truck moments before it was too late.

They all watched in abject horror as the truck slid more quickly toward the center funnel and was eventually swallowed by the oddly purple sands of the nightmare desert. Alto wasted no time moving to the marked path and getting his bearings. The fire from the gate could be seen a little more than a hundred yards from them. Relief at being so close was instantly cut short as the sound of wings could be heard in the sky above. Nina began to move in the direction they saw Golshiri fall, but Alto grabbed her. "It's no use. He wouldn't survive that fall. We have to go." Nina looked at him for a moment. Alto could feel the tension in her body release as she conceded to the fact that there was no going back for him. They would die if they tried. Without a word, she began to move toward the gate in the distance. They started after her when a violent shaking began under their feet.

Amed turned back to see what he knew had caused this tremor. Rising from the desert floor, a great distance away from them, he could see a column moving upward from the sand. It looked like a giant tube and was taller than a skyscraper and still rising. "Run!"

They all broke into a run towards the fires at the gate. They could see movement from the men set to guard this end of the horrible road less traveled. Behind them was something immense, something beyond comprehension. It rose into the sky so far that it was lost in the strangely lit clouds. Then, it plunged down, diving into the sands of the desert, burrowing-in as if breaching, and then diving into water. As it slammed into the desert floor, the shock wave could be felt for miles. Blind fear gripped them as they stumbled towards the gate, trying not to let the shaking of this nightmare-induced earthquake slow them down. Moving out to them, as they got closer, voices from the guards could be heard now encouraging them forward. The smooth black stone of the gate could be seen carved into the side of a cliff that rested at the base of a range of small mountains extending out to either side. They could hear the hideous roar from behind them of the gigantic horror moving through the sands, like a whale in the sea. Alto could see the horrified look on the four guards' faces as they saw what was moving across the barren desert behind them. With less than twenty feet between them and the gate, they were stopped dead in their tracks as the black-winged beast, which had hunted them since entering this foul place, landed between them and the gate.

A scream rose from one of the Taliban guards that were closest to the thing when it landed. The other men began firing as it quickly spun towards the screaming man, taking his head from his shoulders in one arc of its clawed hand. Moving with preternatural speed, the nightmare creature slashed across the neck of a second guardsman, pitching a spray of blood and mangled skin onto the other two. One of the remaining men crumpled to the ground clutching at the sides of his head and screaming uncontrollably. The final man emptied his rifle into the thing as it approached him. A full clip from the AK-47 seemed to have little or no effect on the beast as it stopped in front of him and paused, seemingly regarding him with interest. It waited long enough for the man to utter a prayer to Allah and then plunged its open clawed hand into the man's chest and through the back of him.

Alto's group approached as the creature moved toward the final man, screaming on his knees, forehead to the ground clutching his head in his hands. Suddenly Nina broke into a run towards the thing. Alto reached out to stop her, but she was too fast. She took several measured strides and then, in a single fluid motion, launched into the air. Pulling a boot knife as she did and using the thing's own body as footholds, she climbed the thing hooking her legs around each wing as if she intended to ride the foul monster. Once firmly positioned on its back, she lifted her large knife into the air and came down with it directly on the top of the creature's head. There was a cracking sound as the knife penetrated the skull and its body lurched. Nina then twisted the knife. A high pitched and sickening scream emitted from the horrid demon then it fell silent. It took one step, then fell forward onto the sand, Nina pulling her knife free then tucking into a roll as she dislodged herself from the monster when it landed. The Taliban guard was still screaming on his knees as Nina rose from a crouched position beside him. The others were running toward her and the gate behind her. Alto saw the look on her face as she stared past the dead thing on the ground, passed her running companions, and off into the desert where the giant unimaginable worm thing was closing in. Her eyes widened, and her face went slack. She made no sound only fell to her knees, dropping her knife in the sand.

Alto pulled her from the ground when he reached her; he hoisted her up and put her over his shoulder, then ran with everything he had to the gate's smooth black wall. It was like running in quicksand. The others were there running as well, but he could barely perceive their presents. He was focused on one spot of the wall. He would get there before the death that moved toward them from behind engulfed him. The sound of the screaming soldier was muffled but constant. Keep moving; keep running, stay standing. Then a sound, like the snapping of fingers and a quick white flash, and he was running into a large room with concrete floors and brick walls. Five men stood from the table they were sitting at, all of them with shocked expressions and raised weapons. Alto took a few final running strides and fell on the ground, Nina rolling on the hard concrete and coming to a sliding halt. The others blinked into existence behind him, first Adrian and Amed, then the driver, and finally Himee.

Alto rolled over and slowly got to his feet. Himee opened his mouth to say something when suddenly a large black-clawed hand exploded from his chest. Alto could see the arm protruding from the gate. The arm of the foul black demon from unfathomable hells that was still coming for them. Amed was fumbling for something in his pack, Adrian was staring at Himee in shock, Nina was on the ground next to Alto. Himee looked into Alto's eyes, so close, the defeat on his face was crushing. Then he watched as the life drained from Himee's eyes, and the rest of the beast began to move through the gate.

"Go!" Amed screamed, and Alto could see that he had placed a rather large brick of C4 with a timer at the base of the gate. Alto screamed for the men to help Himee as he ran for the stairs that led up. The room they were in was some sort of loading area large enough for the truck but surrounded on three sides by brick walls. The final wall was the gate itself. Directly opposite the gate was an open door, which led to a set of stairs leading up. They all ran for the stairs. Once Amed reached them, he pulled the door closed behind him and continued moving up. The startled men in the room, all MS13 judging from their tattoos, scrambled to help Himee. None of them realizing the others had escaped and locked them in the room with a demon straight from hell and a bomb with forty seconds on the timer.

Amed was the last to reach the top of the stairs. A door on the right led out into what looked to be an abandoned barn. Slamming the door shut, he moved as far from the door as he could before the bomb went off. A muffled pop could be heard, followed by a fireball bursting the door off of its hinges and sending them all sprawling on the dirt-covered cement floor. The barn section, which served as the roof of the room below, collapsed a second later, pulling half of the barn down with it. Luckily the portion of the barn they had all retreated to remained standing. However, the wood creaked and protested under the newly distributed weight. They had only an instant to stand before four men rushed in from outside, all holding AR-15 assault rifles. Their tattooed faces and arms marked them as Maras. Recognition registered on their faces as they caught sight of Alto, pulling himself up off the ground.

"What the fuck was that?" they all looked confused, and none of them had lowered their weapons.

Alto moved to the front of the group. "We had trouble coming in."

"The truck? What happened to the truck?" the forward man said as he looked at the caved-in section of the barn.

Alto glanced at Adrian, raised his gun, and fired a shot into the man's forehead. A second shot rang out as Adrian took another in the head with a well-placed shot. Amed followed suit, putting two rounds into a third, one in the heart the other between the eyes. The final man dropped his weapon on the ground and raised his hands. "Don't kill me homey, what the fuck?"

"Who else is here?" Alto said in a flat voice.

"No one esse, the guys in the basement and the rest of us were on guard outside. We came in when we heard that blast. That's it."

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yeah, boss, your Alto Silva, your one of the Council of Nine." The fear in the man's eyes was plain.

"Wrong answer." Alto fired again. The man fell to the ground. He stared at the dead man for a moment. He was visibly pained by what he had done. Another gunshot rang out behind him. He spun to see the truck driver fall to the floor with a bullet hole in the side of his head. Amed lowered his weapon. The look in his eyes matched Alto's.

"Loose ends." was all he said as he turned and began to walk to the door the others had entered.

Adrian gave Alto a look then moved to pull Nina off the floor. He put her arm around him and his around her waist and began to walk to the door. Nina was murmuring a seemingly random string of numbers over and over. "26, 24, 34, 19". Alto searched the man in front of him and found his phone, he checked for service, the signal was weak, but it was there.

They walked outside and were greeted with a hot, dry, barren landscape for miles in each direction. The sun above them beating down, hot and bright. The heat was a welcome change from the cold purple nightmare landscape they had just left. They were home. Alto took a few steps then sat down in the dirt, staring out across the desert. They were on a rise at the foot of a range of mountains that ran on forever east and west. Down the slope ahead of them miles in the distance, he could see a dark line cutting across the desert floor. A road, a way home. Adrian lowered Nina to the ground beside Alto. She curled up into a fetal position repeating those numbers quietly over and over. Adrian sat down, then leaned back, lying flat on the dirt staring into the beautiful blue cloudless sky.

"You remember what I told you, not a word." Amed stood in front of the others. He reached out and handed Alto his gun holding the barrel. "If anyone catches me with that, they'll throw me in Gitmo faster than you can say Jihad." He smiled, "You tell Alto what I said." He looked at Adrian. "When you know, you can either snap," he nodded toward Nina, "or you can fight. We'll be in touch." he ran his hand through his beard. "I need a fucking shave." With that, he turned and began walking into the desert. The others said nothing, only watched him get smaller and smaller in the distance.

Golshiri lay on the purple desert sand. His leg was broken, he had other injuries, but the leg was the most serious. He pulled himself to a large stone and tried to conceal himself the best he could. He could hear the truck moving again. They thought he was dead. They left him. What did he expect? If he could set the leg, he could make his way to the gate. He only needed something to use as a splint. The thing that had tried to fly off with him could no longer be heard in the air. It had gone after the truck. He was surprised he managed to hang onto his sidearm as he fell to the ground. The shot hadn't hurt the beast. It only served to loosen the grip of the thing on him, allowing him to struggle free and fall to the desert sand. Time seemed to linger forever as he searched for something to splint his leg. Then he felt it, the tremors that shook the entire desert. He saw the thing, a great worm rising and falling, moving through the sands like it was water. But the final terror would come not from one of the nightmare denizens of this unholy place but from a single sound. The sound that took the wind from his lungs, that took the hope from his mind. The sound of an explosion in the direction of the gate. He knew before he positioned himself to see it. They had blown the gate. His only means of escape was gone.

A man stared out across the vast barren landscape of oddly purple sand and strange alien vegetation. He smiled as he took in the beauty before him. His red robes fluttered in the breeze. He had waited so long to behold the majesty of Leng, and now it lay before him in all of its magnificence. He watched as the dust rose behind a speck out on the desert floor. It was the truck that was heading for the gate to America. Again he smiled as he thought of just how unaware they all were. He began to chant, the words rising on the wind, louder and louder until, at last, he felt it. A tremor beneath his feet, it came, he called, and it came. The world of man would tremble at his feet. The world would be reclaimed. It's old masters come home.

Alto Silva sat in his den, the single reading lamp by his chair cast a sickly orange glow across him as he stared at his phone. The link he was sent was from Adrian, that son of a bitch wouldn't let it go. He watched the video. It was some sketchy footage that claimed to be from somewhere in Russia, in a rural area not too far from Moscow. It was taken from a helicopter flying over a thickly forested area. There was nothing for a few minutes, just men speaking in Russian, he didn't understand. The voices seemed panicked. It was hard to tell. Occasionally someone's arm came into the frame pointing at something in the forest below. Then the chopper hovered over a small snow-covered clearing in the trees. The men's voices became even more excited, and again the arm pointed to the clearing below. Suddenly something moved out from beneath the tree cover and into the clearing. Alto's stomach sank as a spike of fear gripped him. A giant spider-like creature moved into the clearing and quickly across, back into the cover of trees. From the helicopter's distance and gaging the size of the trees, he could tell that the thing was huge. Probably ten or more feet around, and with the markings and the familiar almost human head. It was one of those things they had seen two years ago, in that fucking place, that place he never wanted to remember, that place that haunted his dreams every night.

He reached for a snub-nosed revolver he had on the table next to his chair. Closing his eyes, he pointed the barrel under his chin and pulled back the hammer. A knock on the door stopped him. He opened his eyes and breathed out. "Papa, can you color with me?"

With tears in his eyes, he replied, "Uno momento nena." He put the gun back on the small table beside his chair, turned out the lamp, and moved to the locked door. He opened the door, making sure to lock it behind him, and walked out into the well-lit house beyond closing the door behind him. The room was dark except for the pale blue-white light of the cell phone on the table beside the chair. The light of the phone stayed on for an instant before going dark. There beside the gun on the table, the reply to Adrian's message was still up on the screen, and it read. "I'm in."