

Spider Wars

by Brent Reilly, ...

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This story is fiction. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is coincidental.

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I dedicate this fun historical thriller to my wonderful wife and sons.

Gonzalo Gonzales cloned prehistoric mega-spiders in the Colombian Amazon to turn their dangerous venom into medicinal serum to save thousands of lives a year. 100 million years old and a meter wide, they are the largest spiders in history. For years he fights off drug cartels and corrupt generals who attack his high-tech ranch with helicopters, hovercraft, and howitzers until a bitter betrayal costs him his family. To rescue them from thousands of drug soldiers, he'll need an army, but the only killers he has are a million giant venomous spiders. With a spider army at his back, Gonzalo goes to save his wife and daughter from drug traffickers, if it's the last thing he does.

Chapter 1

Bogota, Colombia

The teenage thieves jimmed the window loose and crawl inside the office. They didn't dare turn on the lights, and so relied on their smartphones to see, not realizing the danger they were in.

"*Guevon!* Here's the expensive equipment we helped that old man bring in. Let's see what he was hiding in the back room."

It had a hatch, like on a submarine, instead of a door, and had been sealed tight. As they opened the hatch, a wave of pressurized oxygen-rich air washed over them like a cool breeze on a hot day. They shined their lights around the room, never thinking to look up at what was hanging upside down.

"Tomas was right! That dude sealed every crack. What do you think he's pumping in here? I can breathe easier. Think this will cure my asthma?"

"*Callate, baboso bulloso!* I don't see shit worth stealing. Hey, what's that in the corner?" The fools walked in to their deaths. "I stepped in something white."

"Bird poo? Cuz that old man acted bat-shit crazy. Anyone that paranoid must be hiding something rich."

"Weird. I can't pull my shoe loose." The *idiota* got down on all fours to see. "It looks like glue. It's sticky as hell."

The other *imbecil* got down to check it out. "Is cum sticky? My brother tells me a lot of bullshit."

"Quiet, *estupido*. Something moved!"

They scanned the room, never looking up because humans live in a two-dimensional world while their hunters lived in three. Spiders spent as much time upside down or clinging to a wall as right-side up. One crawled to the hatch to block their escape.

“*Que chingados es eso?*” (The fuck is that?) They backed up and one walked into a spider web. “I’m stuck in giant cum! Get me out.”

“I’m not touching cum. Not after what my brother did to me.”

One *tonto* tried pulling the other free until a second spider landed on his head. Screaming, he twirled like a dancer, arms over his head like in a rave. He finally ducked and swept it off, but lost his phone. The spider ran into the shadows. The robber in the web tried calling for help, only for an arachnid to climb over him. The terrified punk dropped his phone and, with it, any chance of survival.

“It’s tickling me!” He tried to slide out of his shirt, which was stuck to the web, but that just entangled him more. The creature shot him in the face with something white and sticky. “That better not be what I think it is! *Ayudame, menso!* It’s eating me!”

His friend had more urgent worries. He sprinted for the hatch, hoping to dive through to freedom, only for the spider to eject someone sharp from its body. It pierced the boy’s calf. Stunned, his momentum crashed him into the wall.

“It shot me!” The fear in his voice was contagious.

“With cum? Join the club. I saw you try to abandon me, buay.”

“It’s tying me up with some kind of rope. I can’t move my arms! Ah! It’s climbing on me. I think it’s that face-hugger from *Aliens*, but three times bigger.”

It finally occurred to these geniuses that they may not survive the night. The spider’s weight tipped the kid off balance. They landed with a thud and the startled spider bit the boy. The monster spun a cocoon and rolled him up to enjoy later. The kid went into shock, the venom paralyzing him.

The next afternoon, when the professor unlocked the door to his industrial space, he sensed the extra oxygen right away.

“They learned to open doors?” was the first thought to cross his mind. Then he saw the open window. “I am so screwed if they escaped!”

He grabbed a metal rod by the door, wrapped a thick cloak around his body, and pressed a button as he ran to the window to close it. The office looked clear, so he walked carefully to the 30’ tall warehouse space and peeked in. There, hanging upside down from the ceiling, were the two kids who helped him move in.

“Fuck! Again?”

The professor couldn’t believe his lousy luck. He had moved because other jerks ruined his last lab. However, his cloned spiders, were also there. One begged him for help. A boy, not a spider.

“Sorry. If you live, you’ll tell people about the giant spiders and I’ll spend the rest of my short life in jail. You thieves are getting what you deserve. For what it’s worth, you’re dying for a great meal.”

He closed the hatch and barricaded the window so other robbers could not get in. With a sigh of relief, he checked his gene sequencer to see the latest results.

Chapter 2

Bogota, Colombia

Gonzalo Gonzalez got out of the taxi, feeling weird returning to his old university. He only finished his Master's in Business Administration a year ago, but his world had changed since then. Married with two kids, making more money than he ever dreamed of, he couldn't imagine his life getting better.

He found his mentor's office just where he left it. "Professor! It's good to see you."

"My star pupil returns! Gonzalo, you look good. Life is finally treating you well."

"I'm happy, so someone fucked up."

"Come. I need to show you something." They walked to his lab, crammed with young students and ancient equipment. "An alumni donor gave this to me. Fool had no idea what it was."

It felt like a rock, but looked like wood.

"What is it?" Gonzalo asked. "Other than an insect caught in amber?"

"It's a proto-spider, an arachnid ancestor, or part of one. Chimerarachne yingi. That's a tongue twister, so I call them Mega Spiders. Like modern spiders, it has eight legs, forward fangs, silk-producing spinnerets punctuated by a long, thin tail. It's history's biggest and most venomous arachnid. I was able to extract pure DNA, the only sample in existence. Insects grew several times larger in dinosaur times because the atmosphere had 30% more oxygen, insects breathe through their skin, and because there were no birds. It was several times larger than modern tarantulas and fed on animals several times its size. I remember you had a pet tarantula as a kid."

"I also had a pet snake, in case you have a titanoboa."

History's largest snake stretched 42' and was three times thicker than today's largest anacondas.

The professor studied Gonzalo. "Your American pharmaceutical company makes snake venom for expensive medicine. I want to sell them spider venom."

"Venom?"

"Thousands of animals are venomous. Venom from scorpions, snakes, spiders, bees, fish, lizards, octopus, and even snails are used against cancer via immunotherapy, tumors, strokes, blood disorders, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, heart attacks, and autoimmune diseases like arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and lupus. The same active properties --peptides and proteins working as toxins and enzymes-- that make it deadly are exactly what saves lives by targeting molecules that control disease. Venom works fast and is highly specific. Spider venom treats muscular dystrophy and chronic pain, for example. The deadlier the venom, the better it works medicinally."

Gonzalo tried not to laugh because he knew the university paid its professors poorly. "I'll pitch it to them, but I doubt they'd be interested. We'd have to clone the damn thing just to test its venom. That'd take years."

"It took me 12 because my gene sequencers are ancient." The professor showed him a video on his smartphone. "I call them Adam and Eve. The first of their kind

in 100 million years. My tests show incredible potential. Your company can verify it. The donor gave the amber to me, not the university. He's passed on and left no record of the gift. The university knows nothing about it and I'll be retiring soon."

"This could be a gold mine," Gonzalo said, stunned with the discovery.

"If you can produce enough of it, yes. I had no luck synthesizing it. You may have to breed thousands to meet demand."

"How big are they?" he asked.

The professor laughed. "Eve's body is a foot long and her legs stretch almost a meter wide. I imagine we could genetically engineer them far bigger, to produce more venom, grow faster, and live longer. Careful, though; they're jumpers." He paused suspiciously. "How's your father?"

Gonzalo beamed like a headlight. "Good. Worries too much, but the ranch is not losing too much money."

"The *guerrilla* don't fuck with him too much?"

Colombia had a de facto civil war since the 1950s because just a few Colombians owned most of the country. Rebels got into drug production, trafficking, and distribution in the 1980s. Pablo Escobar nearly brought down the government, blowing up malls, airplanes, and police stations. He assassinated anyone who opposed him. Conditions improved, though, giving the government more popular support than the rebels, who no longer pretended to fight for the common people. All but the most profitable drug operations laid down their arms. Those who didn't expanded production and armed up. For decades they controlled an area larger than Switzerland. Gonzalo's family owned a lot of land that they did not control. His father reached an agreement with the local drug lord, just as his father had done before him.

"The leaders don't waste time on him, but bored drug soldiers are a constant nuisance. They shake down everyone and everything. Peasant women often pay a rape tax just to leave. Dad has slept better since sending me and my sisters to university in Bogota. When he dies, we'll lose our ancestral land because we will no longer live on it. My sisters would be raped and I'm too smart to waste my life in the jungle ten-hours from Cali."

"Gonzalo, that'd be the perfect place to ranch prehistoric mega-spiders."

"But it'd suck to get killed by extinct pets."

Chapter 3

Blindfolded, Gonzalo ducked his head into the taxi, the professor gently guiding him.

"First date?" the *taxista* quipped.

"Shut up and go right at the light," the professor ordered.

He didn't shut up, but he didn't talk anymore, either. All taxi drivers in Colombia seem to know every word to every song and can sing them surprisingly well. None use air conditioning because that cuts fuel efficiency, and all taxis in Colombia were manual to save a thousand bucks on the transmission. It was not usual to see three cars driving parallel in two lanes, yet the collision rate was

lower than America because drivers paid more attention. He almost ran down a dozen foreigners and treated red lights as suggestions. In America, cars avoid pedestrians; in Colombia, pedestrians avoid cars. Though a beautiful city, high in the mountains, smog in Bogota was so bad that the government imposed “car holidays”—rotating what cars could drive based on their license plates.

“You can have your smartphone back when we’re done,” the professor promised.

“Ah,” the *taxista* said after belting out a Vicente Fernandez *ranchero* song. “Second date, then.”

Gringos assume the deadliest people in Colombia are the heavily armed drug-trafficking narcos, the heavily armed city gangs, the heavily armed soldiers on street corners, the heavily armed corrupt police, the heavily armed *guerrilleros* trying to topple the government, or the heavily armed *paramilitares* fighting the *guerrilleros*. They assume wrong. The most dangerous people in Colombia are the taxi drivers. They are terrorists without ideology, scaring customers by ignoring stop signs, speeding through red lights, and seeing how close they can drive next to freight trucks. Every Colombian taxi driver behind the wheel is a metaphorical gun to the head. Colombian taxi drivers are not trying to kill you, but they’re not trying hard to keep you alive, either.

After an hour of unimaginably bad traffic, they arrived. The old man led his protégé through a dozen buildings and up several flights of stairs to his secret lab in a gritty industrial section. Gonzalo could feel the grim. Once in, he removed the blindfold.

“Those are big-ass spiders!”

They stood by a window into a warehouse that stretched 30’ to the ceiling. Crossbeams let them spin webs. Both had drained a rat for breakfast.

“History’s biggest. Like some smaller spiders, they can eject their spindly hairs with shocking force. They can’t see well, but their eyes are tuned for movement. Spiders can’t hear like we do. Instead, they listen for vibrations and use touch to communicate. Smell is their best developed sense. I’ve learned to extract their scent and spray myself with it so they treat me like just another giant spider. They are used to three-dimensional space, whereas we like to stay on our feet, so you can pick them up and turn them upside-down and they won’t do a thing -- as long as you smell like a friend instead of food. Most mammals are potential food. I pay homeless kids to collect live rats for me. The spiders will feed on dead rats, but prefer live ones. Big mammals would go crazy being confined to a small space, but spiders spend most of their time being still.”

Gonzalo walked up to them. The webbing was huge, beautiful, and artistic.

“How do you get them to come out?”

The professor chuckled. He picked up a metal stick and showed his student the buttons. “I use behavioral conditioning to train them to respond to simple cues. It takes a while for babies to put their fangs in the things and you have to reward them right away so they learn, like rats getting cheese for ringing a bell. Different vibrations tell them specific things. The green button asked them to drain their venom, yellow is food, and red tells them to fucking chill. I put on smooth jazz when I go to work. The pincers on this pole can grab them without triggering a threat response.”

“How illegal is growing deadly spiders without government approval?”

“If someone dies, I could be charged with second-degree murder, just like attack dogs. That’s why I need you. Your family owns land in Narcolandia, which the government has not controlled for decades. Federal law leaves this up to local governments, but you have literally no local government to ask permission from. Lawyers says it is therefore not illegal. I tried setting up in Bogota, but the regulations were killer. They treated my proposal as if I was messing with deadly infectious diseases. It’d cost a fortune to meet their safety standards.”

His family cleared a jungle valley generations ago in the Colombian Amazon. Colombians called Disneyland, *Disnilandia*, so narco land was *Narcolandia*. Most of it was dense jungle or inaccessible mountains. Very inhospitable. The military only entered in force, for a specific purpose, and for a limited time—such as rescuing kidnapped hostages.

Gonzalo saw the possibilities. “I was wondering how I won the lottery. Dad is cash poor while narcos are cash rich, so he pays them in food. Security will be the biggest challenge, and it will not be cheap. My biggest concern will be liability. A spider killing someone would result in a killer lawsuit.”

That kept the professor up at night. “Yes. That’s why you’ll hike in the jungle near your home and come back with a giant spider. My name must never be associated with spiders. You’ll get most of the risk and most of the compensation. You need a local newspaper to report it and locals to put pictures of you with it on social media. Convincing your friends and family is key, when prosecutors make them testify.”

“You expect me to be charged with murder?” That shocked Gonzalo. “Professor, I thought you liked me.”

“I’m a geneticist with expertise and equipment in cloning. If I have an extinct prehistoric spider, I get blamed for any deaths. You’re just a kid out of college who caught one running loose in the Amazon. How can you be blamed for wild spiders killing people?”

Gonzalo tried de-blowing his mind. “What do you get out of it?”

“I have cancer. I won’t die soon, but I won’t get better, either. I have a grandson with special needs. He’s small now, but he can never support himself. I want you to get him whatever he needs when you’re making millions—dollars, not fucking pesos. Start a charity to earn goodwill. I’m retiring this year and plan to disappear.”

“You’re asking for an open-ended commitment. You may die before I have to pay a *centavo*. How will you enforce our agreement?”

The professor aged before his eyes. “I’ll count on your decency. I remember when you first came to live in our dorms. Your dad impressed the hell out of me. I wish my son was half the man your father is. If the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree, then you’ll honor our agreement if you can. The first spider you’ll sell on Ebay to the highest bidder, but only to respectable institutions like zoos, and only on the condition that they never sell, trade, or give away its venom for commercial purposes. You’ll ask for a million bucks to get news attention. Once that’s sold, you’ll sell more for less and we’ll split the profits evenly. I’ll make as many as you need, until you’re ready to start your own spider ranch in the Amazon. Deal?”

That floored Gonzalo. They shook hands like the world had just changed.

“I could really make millions of dollars?”

“Annually. Plus save thousands of lives. You’ll have a monopoly on the world’s most powerful venom. Would your company be interested?” the old man asked. “Otherwise I’ve worked years for nothing.”

“If the venom has profitable applications, hell yeah they’d be interested.”

Chapter 4

The chairman of the global pharmaceutical was so intrigued by the proposal that he insisted on meeting Gonzalo himself. A few dozen executives, specialists, and scientists grilled him like a barbeque. The Legal and Engineering departments spent considerable time investigating the project.

“We could save money by not pressurizing the shipping containers,” the tight-ass CFO argued.

Gonzalo found shipping containers the cheapest spider dens; not the 20’ long, but the 40-footers, stood on its end because spiders like to climb. They could get a thousand used containers for \$5000 each, seal them to not leak air, and stack them in long rows, with sensors and transparent plastic windows to see inside. Sealing and keeping oxygen levels at 30% above normal was not cheap. His canyon had room for a million spider dens, if he could extract enough oxygen locally.

Gonzalo sighed again impatiently “The spiders will grow bigger and faster with more oxygen. We need to find their ideal level. With perfect conditions, strawberries can produce fifty harvests a year.”

“That’s a lot of money to spend on someone else’s land.”

“You’d still own the containers,” Gonzalo pointed out. “Millions of standard containers are bought and sold a year. Pressurized gas canisters are common, too. If things go belly-up, then take them back and sell them off. Heavy equipment to landscape the site wouldn’t cost much or take long. Marketing says we could dominate a multi-billion-dollar market, so your investment would pay for itself in just a few years.”

“Why wouldn’t the drug cartel simply take over?”

“Because few have deep technical skills and our contract stipulates you can only deal with us—even if we die. Buy us the Auto-Snipers and the rest of security will be on us.”

“Why not milk spiders somewhere safe?” asked their chief of global security, who flew the red eye to see the prehistoric monsters for himself. “The Caribbean has plenty of uninhabited islands.”

Gonzalo had researched that. “And plenty of gunmen with boats who’d try to take what is ours. Every drug runner with a corvette would hassle us. Because of that first sale, people assume each spider is still worth a million bucks. Nowhere is safe because thieves are everywhere. My canyon, at least, is inaccessible. Few foreigners could get past the cartel and even Colombians are scrutinized, harassed, and shaken down by drug soldiers. The government cannot protect me, but neither will they get in the way of me protecting myself.”

“You’re asking for too much.”

Gonzalo slowed his breathing and tried to relax his face. “We’re risking our lives working with the most dangerous creatures alive—and prehistoric spiders. As an employee, I’m offering you first dibs before I auction off my serum to the highest bidder. I’m offering you a ten-year exclusive to compensate for out-of-pocket costs. This deal will not work unless all parties benefit.”

The CEO coughed to get everyone’s attention. A Mexican-American, he grew up speaking Spanish. “It’s a big business for a 24 year old.”

“I’m not doing this alone. My dad has managed a hundred workers since he was my age. My family and friends will live and work there with me. You can implant a GPS tracker in me if you’re worried I’ll get lost or skip the country with venomous spiders. In return I ask your Security Department to monitor us. I need to know when armed men approach. If attacked, I need to know you’ll have my back—or, at least, that you’ll safeguard your investment.”

The CEO liked him, but not the deal. “Ten years is too short. You’d auction the venom off to the highest bidder—I know I would.”

“Then raise my percentage 3% a year after ten years.”

“Your lawyer doesn’t speak much,” their lawyer said.

Gonzalo chuckled. “You haven’t asked him any legal questions today. What we’re doing is not illegal, as there is no local government to issue or deny a permit. There are no police and the nearest soldier is stationed 300 kilometers away. As long as Senior Morales protects us for your monthly payment, then we’re golden.”

“And if the drug cartel replaces him with someone greedier?”

That was their joint fear, not spiders. “Then we invest more in defense. By paying me a percentage of gross revenue, I’m sharing your risk. You’re risking shareholder money to monopolize a multi-billion dollar product, yet I’m risking the lives of my loved ones. I’m confident we can pull this off. Getting off the ground will cost you \$25 million—you spend several times as much annually on advertising. If you don’t sign with me, then I’ll find someone else. The first spider sold for \$1.25 million and I’ve sold a dozen more since then. I could retire off sales.”

The CEO really wanted this. “We’ll pay you \$100 per 100 cc vial for twenty years. Take it or leave it.”

Gonzalo smiled. “I think the serum is more profitable than you project; that’s why I want a percentage of gross sales instead of a fixed price per volume. Getting a percentage negates the need for me to find other distributors. A monopoly would be more profitable for us both. Once I sell more spiders, I could fund this myself, then sell to the highest bidder. If you don’t sign today, then I’ll shop around. I’m famous now, since my video went viral, and getting more calls from boutique biotech firms, venture capitalists, and angel investors.”

The professor demonstrated the safety of the spider “perfume” by letting Adam and Eve literally walk all over him. He picked them up, always signaling with the vibrating rod. After watching the old man walk among monsters for an hour, Gonzalo tried it himself, while the professor recorded him. Picking up Eve, the bigger one, was the thrill of a lifetime.

“Your compensation is too generous,” the CFO said. “We could make twice as much if we milked our own spiders.”

“And if you had a gold mine, you could mine your own gold. Since the videos of the spider crawling over me went viral, a million adventurers have swept the jungle, looking to capture their own—without luck. Sign today or I’ll sell to everyone but you—your institutional investors will be furious. Every day you delay is money lost. You could make billions a year just from my product, yet here you try squeezing a guy who squeezes deadly spiders for a living.”

“We haven’t even seen the damn spider!” the chairman finally yelled, breaking his long silence.

“Sign the contract and I’ll show her to you.”

“Show us the spider and we’ll sign your fucking purchase agreement!” he roared back.

Gonzalo got up, walked around the table, and held out his hand while his lawyer zoomed in. Recording the negotiation was vital for upholding their deal in court. The financial penalties were severe if the company tried shorting him. Gonzalo was afraid the company would simply steal the spider. He needed to leave the city before someone kidnapped him.

“I’ll show you the spider if you’ll sign the deal, as is,” Gonzalo promised.

The chairman stood to shake hands. “Show me.”

Gonzalo sent a text and led the group to the service entrance. A beat up freight truck backed up and two guys with sub-automatics and full body armor got out. One handed Gonzalo a gun before opening the back. Inside, ten huge spiders turned to stare at the blurry shadows. The chairman peered close and knocked on the big water tank to make the spiders move. They moved, all right, and one shot a “hair” at him that stuck to the inside like a dart. It would have pierced the chairmen between the eyes. Gonzalo feared he’d crap himself, so he pressed his vibrating rod against the water tank and pushed the green button. The hungriest spider inserted her fangs into the receptacles and filled two vials with valuable venom. Gonzalo held up two transparent, hard-to-break plastic containers to show them fluid that looked like red wine and smelled like red urine.

That sold the chairman, who turned on his team.

“Sign the contract,” he ordered them. To Gonzalo, he said, “send us as much serum as you can, as fast as you can.”

Chapter 5

His father was shocked at the size of the project. The fortress they’d soon call home could house a thousand people if built out completely, but the first of a million used 40’ standard containers dwarfed everything else. Thick concrete towers—to shoot from—rose around the canyon rim. It’d take more than RPGs to break them. A few guys could hold off an army at the only entrance into the canyon. The fortress home itself was designed to be hard to break into—half was buried within solid rock.

"You'll take up the entire canyon!"

Gonzalo laughed. "The heavy construction crews are just paving it all now so we can add on later. I want physical barriers to make defending it easy. The trees I

transplanted within the canyon will obscure satellite imagery and shooters on the canyon rim. The well gives us pure drinking water and pumping it to the rooftop water tanks gives us indoor plumbing. Solar panels, micro-windmills, and hydrogen fuel cells will give us more power than we need. No government official will come here without a battalion for escort, so we can work without interference. Drug soldiers never walk down here and must get past the Auto-Snipers. The company is even paying the local druggies to protect us. Every time a bully with a gun hassles us, Morales get fined."

"You've thought of everything."

Gonzalo was not sure. "I want you and mom to move here to help me. We'll have dozens of workers soon."

"And abandon the farm and ranch?" He had worked all his life preserving them.

"You're working them for free since guys with guns take what they want without paying for it. Drones will fly in supplies, materials, and experts to avoid roadblocks. Doing without the farm, ranch, and house will make you safer, richer, and relaxed. Gunmen steal a quarter of your shipments and Morales does nothing about it. Are all drug lords that lazy? You cannot even have nice stuff for fear they will take it. You and mom will be more comfortable here, I'll worry about you less, and I'll even learn to fly a helicopter."

"You could buy one if this works out. You sure the pharmaceutical will pay?"

"They're not investing \$25 million for nothing, yet they can't tell investors they own the most venous creatures ever to go extinct. Wall Street bankers won't understand—or they'll demand to see them. The liability alone prevents any company from owning potential man-killers.

"But no one will bother us here. We produce the venom safely, far from cities, and convert it to medicine before flying it out. The company gets to say they're buying it from a private third party. Corporate lawyers say it's all legal, too. That's what makes us different from *narco traficantes*."

Constant stress aged Senior Gonzalez beyond his years. "The farm and ranch are a lot of work and I'm not as spry as I used to be. It'd be nice to work indoors, with air conditioning. Mother deserves nice things. She can't even go shopping without fear of rape. But what I want most is to keep our land in the family. *Narcos*, *guerrilla*, and *paramilitaries* killed my brothers, uncles, and nephews. You, me and your little boy are all that's left of the male line."

"We can move the chickens, goats, hogs, milk cows, and horses into the canyon, where no one can steal them. A hydroponic garden can grow more in less space. Underground freezers will hold literally tons of meat. I'll even transplant fruit trees to make us self-sufficient."

"What aren't you telling me?" dad wanted to know.

"We must demolish the house so gunmen don't move in, trade in your farm trucks for electric-fuel cell hybrids, and cement steel gates that big trucks cannot crash through."

That was a kick in the nuts. "My grandfather built that house."

"And we're building another, but modern and safer. My bigger worry is Morales took payment via food. If we stop farming, he'll want cash, and it'll never be enough. He agreed to what the company offered, but only to hold us hostage to demand more later."

“How can we counter that?” dad asked.

“Most of your workers have been with you for years. I want to bump their salaries, include free housing, utilities, and food, and give them weapons training—those that want to milk spiders or work the new garden. It’s their lives at stake if narcos overrun us.”

“Druggies are lazy. They’ll try taking whatever we build.”

Gonzalo smiled. “That’s why I’ve been buying better weapons. All who stay must train on them.”

Chapter 6

“Looking good,” Gonzalo told Emilio, his brother-in-law. He just had his first kid with Gonzalo’s sister, who was getting a degree in accounting. They had been video-chatting while Emilio remote-piloted the modified drone from Neiva, the closest major city. Gonzalo now co-owned a private airstrip for drones with a dozen other farmers. They paid more for better security because drones are expensive, in demand, and extremely portable. Gonzalo even got his own warehouse. Most big farmers used drones to dust crops with insecticide, pesticide, fungicide, or fertilizer. The military used them to kill coca. “You’re lined up good.”

Emilio dropped the payload—rice and beans—onto used mattresses within the canyon, a few hundred miles away as the drone flies, or several hundred by road. Everything fragile Gonzalo had freighted in before destroying the roads.

“I gave my favorite nephew his favorite video games,” Emilio said as he dropped his load within a red bull’s eye. Most, but not all games, could be simply downloaded. A few hundred mattresses from a big hotel made it hard to miss. “Flying around to pick up the package.”

Hanging from a tall, curved pole was their first venom for shipping. The drone opened custom-made arms that funneled the serum into a cushioned cargo space.

“Pickup confirmed!” Dad said from outside, though the night was very dark. Inside, they tracked the venom via a GPS tracker.

“You did it, bro! And I thought you stupid for joining the Air Force. Now get it into a refrigerator before it spoils.”

They flew at night to attract less attention and to give the serum more time. The other airstrip owners gave Gonzalo a discount for only flying at night. The pharmaceutical used special refrigerated drones to transport serum to their lab in Bogota. The container itself was meant to keep beer cold. Emilio’s former boss waited impatiently at the private airstrip. Military police surrounded the unmanned plane as soon as it taxied over to them. One jogged over to show the general. Being liquid, it certainly didn’t look like a drug.

“What is this, Emilio?”

“Serum from venomous spiders. You can have it tested. It’s not dangerous in its current form, though I wouldn’t drink it. We anticipate deliveries every Sunday night.”

“I’ll need to send someone I can trust to verify you’re not bringing anything else from drug country.”

“We’d be happy to cover your expenses.”

The general smiled. “I hear your brother-in-law bought entire trucks worth of ammo, including .50 caliber shells bigger than my dick. Is he planning a war?”

“Nope. He’s trying to prevent one. Those *narcos* are greedy fuckers. They don’t know when to stop. If we ever need military assistance, we’d compensate the Army for their expenses.”

“Do you have any sniper drones?” the general asked, studying his reaction. “Those are very illegal.”

The military rightly wanted a monopoly on those and couldn’t get their hands on enough. Instead of adding a sniper rifle on a drone, various high-tech companies designed purpose-built drones around the world’s best rifles. The barrel rotated underneath, but blended in so the plane looked like an agricultural drone. Imaging sensors tracked targets, adjusting aim as their relative positions changed, until a remote-pilot pulled the trigger by clicking a button. While they looked like ordinary drones, they used electric-fuel cells to fly quiet and were painted to blend in the sky.

Emilio was rightly shocked. “We can’t afford those! But, if we ever needed such services, I’d ask your advice.”

That relaxed the general. “You’ll keep me informed, then? I don’t like surprises.”

Emilio met his hard eyes. “Sir, I’ll text you if anything comes up that you need to know about. We’re making medicine from spiders. That’s all.”

“That better be all.”

Chapter 7

A proximity alert woke them in the canyon. Heavy construction equipment dug a deep ditch and piled a tall berm to surround the canyon so gunmen could not simply shoot down at them. Miles of barbed wire covered both because Gonzalo didn’t want druggies shooting down his drones. He had to control access to a square mile shaped like a banana. Luckily, he held the highest terrain within several miles.

“We got company,” dad warned, looking at the wall screen. “Looks like fifty armed riders coming up that old game trail. They must have local guides to know about that. Don’t know where they could have come from unless they rode for a week. They’re not legit if they’re riding up on us at night. Release the safety on the Auto-Sniper?”

“Hell, yes. Let’s see if it’s worth the fortune we paid for them.”

They had three, but their expert said they needed seven. They popped up out of concrete silos on hilltops to dominate the local landscape. Radar towers tracked targets for the autonomous units. Networked sensors let them work as a team. Humidity degraded electronics and rusted steel, so they kept them covered until needed.

“Should we fire a warning shot or let them get close enough to hose them all?” dad wanted to know. It felt good, being able to shoot back. Fuckers surprised him

all his life, kicking in his doors or shooting up his windows. Hell of a way to raise a family.

Gonzalo didn't like them coming at night, but didn't want to kill a bunch of strangers. "Shoot the first rider when you get a clear shot."

A canon boomed and they saw something throw that poor bastard off his horse, which ran away, seriously freaked out. Even in their living quarters within the canyon, they heard the echo.

"I hope I recognize that fucker," dad said savagely. The first rider was always a local who knew the terrain—that's why he went first. They knew by face most of their tormentors.

"We'll know in the morning. Looks like they're leaving. Or getting out of range."

At dawn their cameras saw the intruders camped up the nearest road. They must have rode all night to circle around. Thick concrete posts, imbedded in the bedrock, reinforced their gate. Controlling vehicle access to this area was a huge advantage. Big signs said, "private property" and "do not enter." Recent rains turned the craters and ditches into mosquito-filled puddles. Bastards ate a cold breakfast because nearby wood was too wet.

"That's my son," the former foreman said.

"Fuck," Gonzalo said with an angry sigh. "Wilmar's back."

"I thought you liked him, Gonzalo."

"I liked him gone. He works for Morales, living large and banging bitches. He's gonna try squeezing us out of business. Well, let's go talk to him. In full armor."

Gonzalo had bolted a chain gun to the back of a 4x4 pickup that could shoot a zillion rounds a minute. Dad manned it, grinning like a fool. Gonzalo drove up to within shouting distance and kept the engine running. Angel, a sniper and Gonzalo's best friend, had climbed up the radar tower that oversaw this area.

"Wilmar! *Que pasa, calabasa?*"

The narco was furious. He thought he controlled this region. "*Mal parido!* You killed Eduardo."

"Not me. I set up autonomous weapons to protect private property. That game trail has three bright signs that warn intruders not to enter."

"Intruders? I've ridden that trail all my life. You saying you own the box canyon, too? We can't see shit at night, *guevon*. Oh, hey, dad. Still working your ass off for these losers?"

The foreman knew his only son broke bad, but his only daughter married well and was churning out adorable babies in Medellin. "I got a promotion, a raise, and air conditioning. Milking spiders is easier than ranching, and pays better."

"Spiders? The fuck you talking about?"

"*Mijo*, the family replaced farming and ranching with milking venom from big-ass spiders for the pharmaceutical company that built all this. We formed a private company to service them. I'm part owner, so I hope you don't fuck things up for us."

"Papa, they only keep you so I mess with them less."

"Your mother and I have never had it easier or better. She now has things that I was never able to get her. The TV is huge and the satellite internet is fast. She streams *telenovela* soap operas made from other countries. They're remaking Rubi,

Beti La Fea, and Rosario Tijeras, for some reason. She misses you. If your boys move away, she'd like to give you a hug."

"Why must my men move away?" Wilmar asked.

Gonzalo answered: "Because you might kidnap your own mother to use her against us. You can only step beyond the barrier unarmed. Your mom made kickass *bunuelos*, fresh from the fryer." Gonzalo remembered how much that violent bully loved *bunuelos*. "But you don't get to see her until we reach an agreement. I know you want to bleed us dry, but we borrowed heavily to finance all this. The buildings and expensive equipment belong to the pharmaceutical, but we have to pay them back for the cost of construction. We have no cash to give you. However, if you protect us from low-lives, then we'll give you her satellite phone number so you two can video-chat between your robbing and raping. If we make money, in a year, we'll pay you a cut based on how well you protect us. No gifts, though. If gunmen hassle us, you get nothing. As we pay off our debt to make real money, then your payments increase. If you can control the idiots in this area, then you could retire in a decade or two if demand for this venom stays profitable."

"I don't believe you're milking spiders."

"You think I'd make that up? My videos are famous; do you live in a cave? You should not have dropped out of elementary school. Your view of the world is narrow, like a horse with blinders. Ask your mother."

"I want to see the spiders."

Gonzalo laughed. "So you can better plan a break in? Not gonna happen. Ever."

Wilmar was unhappy. "Gonzalo, you didn't used to be such a colossal prick."

"I know you only respect strength. Being two years older, you used to pick on me, growing up. In Bogota I took years of martial arts and weapons training. One day, when you turn on me, I'll kick your ass."

Wilmar laughed, but not because he thought the threat funny. His guys heard it, so he had to laugh it off. "Does your wife still dream of me?"

"She never thinks of you. You stalked her as soon as she got boobies. You forced yourself onto a twelve year old, groping her while she begged you to stop. You've always been the best looking kid our age; you could have courted her like a normal boy. Instead you created a need in her for a safe, square guy like me. She never looked at me twice until I beat you up."

"That was a draw," Wilmar said with a growl. "You tackled me from behind and hit me over the head with a rock."

"Which worked. You stopped calling me a pussy, after that. How's your little girl, Juli? You still seeing her mom in Cali?"

The obsessive mom became violent if Wilmar saw anyone else. Wilmar called her Crazy Pussy. Gonzalo thought she was The One for Wilmar; the cheap bastard even bought her a boob job. Then she got pregnant and became super insecure as her belly bulged. He would never have been faithful, but she drove him away long before he felt like straying.

"Juli is six now and the most beautiful girl in the world. Her mom's still hot. She's got her sugar daddies, but fucks me whenever I visit. I send a few million pesos a month, but it all goes to the kid."

“Good for you. You may be a shitty boyfriend, but I always thought you’d be a great daddy. You got photos?” Wilmar took out his smartphone, showing Gonzalo a thousand pictures and videos. The kid was super cute. “*Compa*, I’m happy for you.”

“You have pictures of your wife and kids? I hear you got Sofia big boobies.”

Gonzalo, still in the truck, gears in reverse, shook his head hard. “I’m not even gonna show you my kids because you’re a dangerous man. I hope you can keep these goons in line so I don’t have to kill them.”

A lady came out with a bowl of *bunuelos*. English doesn’t have a good word for them. “Mama!” Wilmar gave her a big hug and extracted information from her like the CIA, drinking down the *bunuelos* with “guaro” (Colombian whisky under the name *Aguardiente*). He kept saying, “spiders?” When his mother returned to the shelter, Wilmar got back to business. Four of his companions had been talking shit and Wilmar needed to give them something.

“You shot a soldier, Gonzalo. That’s gonna cost you ten million pesos (\$5000 US dollars).”

Gonzalo got out his walkie-talkie and spoke loudly. “Kill the one in the yellow shirt.” That druggie looked like a total asshole and gave the sniper the easiest shot. A moment later a hole exploded his chest, center of mass, and bounced off a rock behind him. He died before he knew he had been shot. “What’s that, Wilmar? I couldn’t hear you.”

“You’ll pay for that!” Wilmar swore.

“You think I’m the only one playing with my life? My drone could drop incendiaries on every coca field in the province until Morales has you killed. If anything happens to me or mine, that’s exactly what will happen. I told Morales that, myself, because I was just a boy that last time he saw me.”

“Gonzo, you are so fucking dead.”

“Angel, kill the guy in the blue shirt.” A moment later the powerful sniper rifle boomed and the world lost another dickhead. The impact turned the druggie around like a tornado and removed his right upper body. “Wilmar, if you fuck with me, there will be consequences. If you encourage others to fuck with me, you will personally suffer. If Morales lets something happen to us, he’ll lose a billion dollars’ worth of coca, the twelve coca processing plants I know of, and as many drug soldiers that my drones can snipe. All that is guaranteed if I die. I am not the little boy you used to pick on. I’m just as ruthless as you, but more rational. If I can’t do business with you, then I’m sure another thug can take your place.”

He said it loud enough for the remaining leaders to hear. Gonzalo studied them and asked their names. The fools answered them.

“Leave me in peace,” Gonzalo told them, “and I’ll pay you well.”

Forty gunmen started to flank the property, not yet realizing that challenging a sniper rifle (with a range of a mile) with full automatics (with a quarter-mile range) was suicide. His shooting towers dominated the terrain.

Wilmar kept his hand off his hidden pistol. “You ruined the road. Three coca fields needed that road and the river is too far away.”

“You’ll have to use horses until you hack out a path from the river. The nearest coca field is too close to us. Find somewhere else.”

“Morales will have your head.”

Gonzalo didn't think so. "He has my number. If he plays nice, my drone will drop him emergency food and supplies. If he wants war, I'll defend my canyon. I'm more worried about you. I married the hottie who rejected you. I now have a unique way to make a living on my family's ancestral property that I know you want for yourself. And I just stood you up in front of your *ladrones*. If you're smart, you'll do profitable business by keeping your gunmen off my back. Everyone profits and no one suffers. If you're dumb, you'll die horribly. Which will it be?"

Good question. "Mama makes good fucking *bunuelos*. I spend most of my time near Venezuela. Since their government collapsed, Venezuelans have become far more desperate and violent than Colombians. Fuckers are trying to take our shit. But I'll pass through here a few times a year. I want to see my mother. I have no control over the guys who come here, so I can't promise to control them. But I can promise I'll kill you and take all you have, one day. I bet your little girl will be hotter than her mom in several years."

Gonzalo should have killed him then. If Wilmar didn't move behind a tree to obscure a sniper shot, he would have.

"The game trail comes too close to the canyon, so it's off limits to anyone armed. You'll have to ride the long way around. I was hoping you'd be smart, but I was always an optimist. Wilmar, we used to be friends. I played in your home and you played in mine. When did our friendship die?"

Gonzalo thought the fight or the girl, but Wilmar surprised him. "When you won the university scholarship. My own mother wished you were her son instead of me."

"Now we're both armed businessmen who will kill to get ahead. Funny how we're so similar now. If you didn't hate me, we could be brothers. I always wanted a big brother."

"Enjoy my ex-girlfriend, Gonzo, knowing one day I'll enjoy her again. Maybe I'll have a threesome with your wife and daughter."

"Over my dead body."

"That's the plan, *hermano*."

Chapter 8

Morales retaliated by sicking the military on him, which must have cost the drug lord a billion pesos. A battalion of poorly armed conscripts surrounded the canyon, then an army helicopter tried landing within the property. A .50 caliber projectile put a hole through its engine as it hovered 50' above ground. The chopper fell like a rock. Gonzalo's men quickly took the pilots hostage. The general did not die, so Gonzalo broke his neck when no one was looking. The general's aide fractured his arm and was in a lot of pain. If the infantry had prepared for an assault, as opposed to just intimate civilians, then they would have charged.

"You fired on the Colombian Army!" the pilot yelled as if that didn't happen all the time in *Narcolandia*.

“Not us,” Gonzalo insisted. “Drug soldiers in the brush take pot shots at us all the time. It must have been them. You tried landing on private property without permission, however, and that is illegal. My legislator will be complaining to your superiors to make sure that never happens again.”

“You killed the general?” The pilot thought this was a routine extortion mission. How were they going to justify the loss of an attack helicopter?

“He died in the crash. He should have hired better pilots. What’s the name of the guy in charge?”

“Colonel Lopez.”

“I need to talk to him.” In case Gonzalo was not clear, he pressed his pistol against the pilot’s head. The colonel was demanding to know what the fuck happened. “Colonel, my name is Gonzalo Gonzales. You are trespassing on private property that has been in my family for 300 years. If you attack, you will lose most of your troops and probably be court marshaled for shooting civilians. The general died in the helicopter crash. Would you like to see him?”

Gonzalo soon guided the colonel to the crash site. Rows of shipping containers lined the canyon like dominos. They reminded the colonel of orange trees, with just enough room between them for a pickup truck. Inner rows stood back to back. The spiders liked meringue music, but not too loud. Each adult had its own oxygen-rich habitat, where it could spin whatever it wanted. Most stood or hung still, like statues. They looked fake until they moved and were surprisingly hairy.

“I was told this was a coca processing plant. Why do you have so many spiders?”

“We turn their venom into medicinal serum. It’s legal, but safer to do here, in the isolated jungle. We drain the adults daily. I’m pretty famous. You should have Googled me before launching an assault.”

“But why are they so big?”

“Born that way. If you attack, some may escape into the jungle and then the Amazon would become inhospitable. Imagine how pissed the government would be, much less voters. Please inform your superiors the next time the drug cartel bribes them.”

“I know nothing of that!”

“Your battalion passed eight coca processing plants. My men will guide you to them so you do not get reprimanded for wasting resources attacking legitimate businesses.”

Gonzalo’s helicopter landing site, where the canyon opened up, was still smoking. The chopper sat on its side, fucked up beyond repair. The Colombian Army would need to rent a Russian Mi-26, the world’s heaviest lift helicopter, to get their aircraft back. It had titanium rotors for a better weight-to-lift ratio.

Gonzalo had recently built his own airfield topside to land and launch heavier drones. Emilio still air-dropped perishable food, but needed bigger planes to feed a few dozen people. Gonzalo used small refrigerated drones to send the serum directly to the lab in Bogota because the military inspectors got too greedy. This expanded, yet simplified, operations. Emilio would land a plane, Gonzalo would refuel and return it the next night. Auto-pilot did most of the work.

The colonel ran to the general to check his vitals. Furious, he turned on Gonzalo. “You think you can get away with this?”

“The *pobrecito* died in the crash. He should not have tried invading personal property. If he genuinely thought this was a drug operation, why didn’t he just demand a tour, like I just gave you?” An angry voice on his smartphone barked something. “Ah! The governor would like to speak with you.”

This attack meant the governor just lost his annual bonus. He was paid to protect the operation. Gonzalo paid provincial and federal income taxes because he knew he’d someday be standing in court, justifying his company. He needed the ability to legally justify everything. The governor himself gave him special permission to install the Auto-Snipers, which was understandable, given the narco threat. The colonel got off the phone, fuming.

“You just turned the Colombian Army into an enemy.”

“You can hit all eight processing plants today if you hurry. If you don’t burn them, then social media will know you’re as corrupt as your dead general.”

“You’re as bad as Morales.”

“Nope. I only fuck with those who fuck with me. I’ll reward anyone who gives me useful information.”

“Now you’re trying to bribe an army officer.”

“Not at all,” Gonzalo said, still gripping his gun. “As a military man, you appreciate the value of actionable intel. I’m willing to cross Morales to guide you to his factories. If you ever learn something I need to know, I’d hope you’d tell me. Here’s my business card. Please stay in touch.”

He scoffed when he read it. “You call your venom business, Medicinal Hope? How pretentious.”

“It’s a better business name than Spider Venom Inc. I knew a lady called Barbara Lies (pronounced Lease) who started a company with a guy named Lester Moore. They were tempted to call the start-up Moore Lies.”

“Good luck with staying in business, Senior Gonzales.”

“Good luck staying in the army, colonel.”

Chapter 9

Gonzalo spoke softly to his son. “Compensate for the wind, angle, and difference in height. Keep your breathing calm. When it feels right, gently squeeze the trigger. Do not pull or you’ll jerk the weapon.”

Junior hit the target, half-a-mile away. Dad hugged him tight. Then his wife stepped up.

“Gonzo, why are you teaching our eight-year-old how to shoot?”

“We need more shooters, but I hate adding guys who do nothing until battle. It feels like everyone is working but them.”

“You expect another attack?” she asked.

“Morales lost eight coca plants, plus whatever he bribed the army. Cocaine is a seasonal business. Soldiers need to guard production and processing until it’s shipped. So, every winter, they have free time. They didn’t attack us the last two winters because Morales wanted us to plant roots. He thinks he can take our shit, hold us hostage, and ransom the equipment to the pharmaceutical. The company

agrees and will loan us a special ops squad for two months—gringos who speak Spanish. They're also loaning us funds for the other four Auto-Snipers, the related computer upgrade, hundreds of sensors networked together, and a thousand Claymore land mines. The funny thing is that I can put everything on our own land. Dad found old maps of the original sale. I didn't even know we owned all land to the river. Morales is growing and processing coca on our land. I can't wait to tell him."

Now she understood. "So that's why you bought the bulldozer."

"I only rented it for a month. I got three teams using it around the clock to get my money's worth. We need wood, too many trees block our view, and clearing fields of fire makes it harder for narcos to sneak up. Dad has his own lumber yard now, with a man-cave the size of a canyon.

"Colored flags mark 100, 200, 300, and 500 meters and over one hundred of us will man defensive positions. We dig pits with sharpened stakes, deep ditches that men cannot climb out of, and build towers to shoot from. I can't wait to get the billion metal spikes I ordered. No matter how they fall, they always point up. A man running will get a hole in his foot. Potentially fatal once the metal rusts."

"You're expecting a war."

"Just a battle. Morales must punish us or his commanders will replace him. Our women and children will take a vacation this winter so I have bunks for more soldiers. The serum works better than expected, so both demand and profit margins have improved. If we can hold our own, then the company will buy us more containers to milk more spiders."

"When will this end?"

"When we fill the canyon. I want to expand production as fast as possible because we can't home school our kids forever. We need to make our money while we can. I've always wanted financial security. All we have to do is teach the nearest drug cartel to leave us alone. And maybe the military."

"That's all?" She scoffed. "You're playing with our lives."

"No, *mi amor*. I am not playing. This is no game."

"You won't win with just defense. Where's your offense?" Gonzalo's smile made her freeze. "Gonzo, what crazy shit are you planning?"

She could tell that Junior knew.

"Morales needs a thousand guys to overwhelm our defenses, but can't hide that many. Once I know he's coming, I plan to release spiders in their path. They won't kill many drug soldiers, but will freak them all out."

"What if they reproduce?" she asked.

"Everyone will leave us alone once word spreads that giant spiders roam this jungle."

Her husband thrilled and terrified her. Trillified? "You're a badass, Gonzo Gonzales."

"That's why you married me."

Chapter 10

“Alo?”

“My name is Gonzalo Gonzales. Google my name once we finish speaking. I wish to pass a message to your client, Jorge Torres.”

That was the biggest Venezuelan drug lord who threatened Morales.

“I am not his secretary.”

“Tell him Alonso Morales will soon take several thousand gunmen from the Venezuelan border to attack me in Caqueta Province.”

“Is this a joke?”

Gonzo laughed. “No. I’ll text you a link to a GPS tracker I hid in one of his men so Torres can verify it himself, if he has real-time satellite imaging.”

“Why are you telling me this?” the lawyer asked.

“Because Morales and his cartel are a threat to my family. The enemy of my enemy is an ally.”

“What’s your name again?”

“Gonzalo Gonzales. The internet calls me El Hombre Arana (Spiderman). Google me, then add me to your contact list. Maybe we can help each other again.”

“Morales really left his border defenseless?”

“He expects to return them quickly because he does not know I plan to crater the roads he needs. His men will have to walk home.”

The lawyer considered the possibilities. “I’ll pass along your message.”

“Gracias.”

Chapter 11

Late at night, masked gunmen surprised the town that Morales depended on. Outside of government control, it had no police, so Gonzalo hit their cocaine warehouse, where most drug soldiers slept. He didn’t need to take the building, only burn it down with everyone inside. Next he stormed the nearby brothel, because most clients worked for Morales. The attackers targeted everyone armed, then broke into homes and hotels to shoot other drug soldiers. A firefight broke out, but the gringos quickly extinguished it.

Morales owned the supermarket and kept it well stocked to feed his employees. After packing perishables into his trucks, Gonzalo burned it down. Then the rest of the tiny town, leaving everyone literally homeless.

Gonzalo climbed a pickup and shouted: “Morales started a war. Flee to the cities. Viva Jorge Torres!”

Instead of stopping the cartel army, it strengthen their resolve, as Gonzalo hoped. On the long drive home, he dropped off dozens of pregnant spiders. They only lived two years, on average, which is more than most modern spiders in hot climates. Other spiders live longer in cold climates, though adults have to molt, and up to 20 years in captivity. Gonzalo could produce as many as he had room for, so he distributed the pregnant ones early to give the babies time to grow up. The longer this dragged on, the bigger they’d get.

As they drove, Gonzalo ruined the road with ditches, landslides, grenades, toppled trees, and spikes because he wanted that army to walk. Morales could

take other roads, but only through government controlled areas, which often set up road blocks to catch drug fuckers like him. If he shot his way through, they'd air-drop elite troops.

The government did not maintain roads it did not control, so they were full of potholes already. Gonzalo wanted to make them impassible. Luckily, they found crates of grenades to supplement the sticks of dynamite they brought. The gringo demolition expert taught Gonzalo how to rig them so they blew a deep, wide trench across a narrow bottleneck. Best of all, they didn't have to worry about the military because the drug war along the border monopolized their attention. He'd need the ten gringos a month longer, but they'd be worth the enormous expense. Gonzalo hired sabotage experts and paid extra for them to bring him goodies.

Once home, Gonzalo put the gringos to work: "You have a month to booby-trap the area. The better you work, the fewer drug soldiers that will plague the world."

Gonzalo found it hard to get professionals to commit to two months (now three) in narco-controlled jungle, so he offered ten professional hookers who tested clean as soon as his wife left. Junior stayed because his father needed him to see what it takes to keep what was theirs. Three generations of Gonzales worked together like brothers. His sisters had given him four nephews, but they were too young for battle.

Gonzalo had his sisters, wife, and daughter vacation in America. Emilio "rented" a sniper drone from the Colombian military while it "underwent repairs." He vowed to buy his own.

The equator doesn't have much of a winter or summer, and the Amazon doesn't get cold, but there are definite wet and dry seasons. Farmers harvest at predictable times. Morales needed to move his army as soon as the cocaine was sold, but during the dry season. His attack window was rather narrow.

Gonzalo impatiently waited for him. All his life, narcos had fucked with him and his family. His sisters had to attend high school in the city to avoid multiple gang rapes. More than anything, Gonzalo wanted to control his family's land and live in peace. To do that, he needed the cartel to leave him alone. He looked at the spiders in his million pressurized shipping containers and smiled.

Chapter 12

Morales didn't believe the first reports, even when his vanguard reached the smoldering town. His driver drove him all night so he could see for himself. He had other logistical centers, but each was vital. He couldn't sustain his business operations without them. It was like America losing all its Walmarts overnight; sure, life would go on, but it became much harder. Knowing he'd be pissed, the people left. Even the whores, to avoid fucking on grass. All Morales saw were a few hundred stinking corpses.

"They even blew the town generator, transformers, and electrical box," his advanced man told him grimly. "Torres wouldn't blow roads and it looks like they had technical expertise. These were not ordinary thugs."

“It’s the spider guy,” Morales said angrily. “He knows we’re coming. That punk, Wilmar, warned me not to underestimate him. Clean up this mess. We’ll sell his spiders for compensation.”

His satellite phone rang because the jungle has few cell towers. It was the commander he left by Venezuela. Morales only took encrypted calls from phone numbers his phone recognized.

“What’s up, Santiago? What do you mean, Torres launched a full attack? He doesn’t have helicopters!” He listened impatiently, getting angrier by the minute. “Chavez, you’re in charge of the spider guy. I need to take half our troops to beat back Torres.”

“He attacked as soon as we left?” Chavez said suspiciously. “That means he knew we would be leaving before we left. Torres must have a mole.”

Morales shook his head. “I didn’t even tell you I planned to punish the Spiderman, who correctly guessed I’d retaliate for costing me eight processing facilities. He has a master’s degree in business administration and apparently can think ahead.”

While the northern half returned, the southern half of the convey raced ahead, only to find the road fucked to hell. Those rapists were so screwed. Chavez had to buy, borrow, and steal a thousand horses and mules to carry weapons, ammo, and supplies. Leaders and scouts rode while most walked. Then a sniper drone shot Chavez in the back and went after others on horseback. Then everyone walked. While they try to look like ag-drones, sniper planes need greater flight time, and thus have smaller fuselages and bigger wings. Nano-solar covered the latest electric-fuel cell hybrids to keep up aloft longer.

The Great Spider War, as historians would call it, entered a new phase.

Chapter 13

Wilmar let Morales disconnect first, then yelled, “Sniper drone shot Chavez and Morales returned to fight Torres, so I’m in charge.” The other sub-commanders groaned because Wilmar was a big prick. “Relax, guevones! This op just got fun. Morales knows no one wants Spiderman dead more than me. After we take his spiders and rape his bitches, we’ll have nothing but hookers and blow!”

Working for drug traffickers has its perks, like raping and robbing, and nothing beats the power of taking another man’s life, but the salary didn’t go far and the conditions usually sucked. Most big Colombian cities had thousands working in gangs, but you had to grow up there because they didn’t trust outsiders. The competition was fierce, but the opportunities to score were vast. Boys growing up in rural areas had to take what they could get.

Wilmar didn’t assign sentries because he held just a temporary command, no one would attack a thousand gunmen, and because the military didn’t mess with the cartel unless the cartel messed with them. Battles in civilian areas or blowing up malls guaranteed a vigorous response. Drug lords knew what military drones or elite forces could do. They prospered by avoiding government attention.

The army marched until nightfall, then settled in for the night.

Something heavy landing on his back woke Javier. He assumed his brother Alejandro was just fucking with him again—until something sharp sank into his shoulders. While most spiders cannot even break skin, this monster pierced his shirt to squirt venom into his blood stream. Of 40,000 species, just a dozen can seriously harm humans.

She jumped off while the venom took effect. Her victim thrashed about, waking other sleeping soldiers in the brush. Several got up angrily, which threatened her. She bit a leg that looked like it was about to kick her, wrapping her legs around it until another kicked her off. She sensed a dozen more get to their feet. Now fearing for her life, she ejected hard spiny hair in all directions as they closed in. A few fell and even more cursed in pain as she fled up a tree. She scurried across a branch when explosions started taking the treetop off. She leapt to another tree just in time. Sadly, she didn't know she ventured farther into the camp. She crossed this tree, desperate to escape, flying to another. Disappearing into a fourth tree, she felt vibrations that told her many trees were being slaughtered. Something shook the tree she was on and she fell on a human. She enclosed his head and dug her sharp feet into him before leaping into bushes. Running between legs and sometimes over those too drunk to get up, she fled.

A man holding a gun blocked her escape. She jumped just in time to avoid his first shots. Her momentum knocked him onto his back and she bit his face to escape. Something kicked her hard. Scared, she fled up another tree, only for it to burst into bits. She lost a leg and her balance. She fell on another human. He clawed at her as she clawed at him before escaping beneath plants. She ran at full speed, this experience bewildering her. The ground and bushes exploded around her. Everything seemed to vibrate, overwhelming her.

She climbed up a young tree and jumped over a group of men, landing on the last. He grabbed her leg and wouldn't let go. She didn't hear the screaming, per se, but felt the air shake. Ejecting more hair spindles, she escaped once more, only for a bullet to puncture her gut sack. She rolled in a ball until someone kicked her into another man. She opened her legs and vented her venom into his neck while he screamed for his life. More bullets tore her apart and she died, not knowing why she was attacked.

The drug soldiers shined flashlights at the monster that killed several men and wounded a dozen others. Javier was still convulsing, his mouth drooling something unnatural, his eyes wide open and not seeing a thing. The venom stretched his face and emptied his bladder.

"It's bigger than my dog," Alejandro complained. "And Gonzo has a million of these beasts?"

Wilmar stared at the thing, still twitching as if it knew a hundred weapons pointed at it. "Mom said it was big, but I never imagined... I thought he enhanced the video. I swear I didn't know."

"I'd rather face Torres than giant spiders."

A dozen guys grunted their agreement.

"Morales gave us a job to do and we're gonna do it." Wilmar needed to focus them or he'd lose half. Mercenaries are notorious for collecting a salary, then bailing before they have to put their lives at risk. "We'd be a million bucks richer if

we had captured it. In the morning, let's build cages. We'll stick to the road from now on. It'll take longer than cutting cross country, but safer."

He lost fifty guys that night and twenty more to the drone the next day. After breakfast, they returned to the cratered road and cleared a hilltop. They burned the trees to keep the creepy crawlies away. They moved at dawn, but stopped after hiking half-a-day to cut another camp, this time on a mound. They saw how fucking far those spiders could jump, and so wanted high ground. They lit several fires around them so they could sleep at night, and this time Wilmar posted sentries. No one bitched at that duty anymore. Each held a machete, rather than a rifle, to avoid friendly fire. Standing guard, Alejandro grieved for his little brother. What a fucked-up way to go! He thought he heard a buzzing noise, as he added wood to his fire, but assumed it was the echo of a distant passenger plane.

Then it got louder.

"Drone!" he screamed, diving out of camp into the trees he feared all night. One heartbeat later a one-ton homemade bomb, in the form of a steel tank filled with sharp metal and combustible fluid, hit the center of the camp and exploded outward. Intense heat and flying shrapnel washed over the sleeping bullies as the plane returned to base in Neiva. The borrowed sniper drone would hunt them again at dawn.

Wilmar lost another hundred gunmen, but only half to wounds. Others fled because they were not getting paid enough to justify the risks.

"What now, genius?" Alejandro asked Wilmar in front of everyone. "We must stick to the road, which means Spiderman can track us; yet we must clear trees to avoid spiders in our sleep, which means he can bomb us."

Wilmar kept swearing vengeance. "We'll break up into four groups, listen for electric drones, and sleep without fires. Even on foot, it shouldn't take long to get there. A million spiders times a million dollars each is a billion American dollars. We'll all retire rich! Dwell on that instead of your cowardly fears."

$\$1 \text{ million} \times 1 \text{ million} = \1 trillion , not $\$1 \text{ billion}$, but no one bothered to correct their obsessed commander.

Chapter 14

Two gringos rode one electric dirt bike while Angel and his spotter rode the other. Gonzalo had thousands of solar panels which stored electricity in ultracapacitors, which don't deteriorate with usage like batteries. After recouping his capital investment, his electricity was basically free. All excess electricity went to scrubbing oxygen from the atmosphere. A hundred residential windmills around the canyon made their supply more reliable and Emilio air-dropped pressurized hydrogen gas for their fuel cells.

They reached their hill and planted a metal pole into the ground. That afternoon they spotted the enemy, cutting their way through dense foliage. The two gringos were actually Latinos born in America. They didn't seem like foreigners. They attached three pieces of metal and waved the two Colombians over.

“Mortars are simple, light, man portable, muzzle-loading artillery with a smooth-bore metal tube fixed to a base plate to absorb recoil. Our L16 fires a 120 mm XM395 Precision Guided Munition fitted with contact fuse and propellant rings. It combines GPS with directional control surfaces to guide it to its target within an eight kilometer range. It works great on heavy vehicles, buildings, and infantry. As Diego locks the laser range finder on their camps, the computer gives us a GPS coordinate, that we program into our very expensive mortar rounds. Those narco fucks will get very little sleep tonight.”

Diego, the Puerto Rican from New York, happily pointed to the tablet screen. American soldiers hate criminals in general, but despise drug thugs more than most. They looked forward to fucking these a-holes up.

Diego scrutinized Angel. “You look like a veteran who has seen some serious shit. Why are you risking your life for a jungle spider milker?”

Angel wasn't a talker, especially to strangers, but these loud gringos opened his world. “My father and grandfather worked for the Gonzales family, plus my uncles and great-uncles. Gonzo's grandfather funded my parent's honeymoon at a luxury resort on a Colombian island in the Caribbean called San Andres. They didn't have to, and were falling in debt, but his grandpa liked my dad that much. Narcos later killed them both. Gonzo gave up a sweet life in the big city to keep his family's land. I respect that. Every year he gives all of us who stayed a bonus -- profit sharing, he calls it. Every year it's bigger. My last one was several times my old annual salary. He pays me more because of my skill as a sniper, but I've already made more than my father did his entire life. Growing up, he treated me like a little brother instead of an annoying peasant and his father is a man among men. I'd kill or die for them. Diego, you know I respect you, but you are a mercenary selling his services to the highest bidder. Do you know how I feel?”

Taking no offense, Diego threw an arm around his shoulder. Though they were the same age, Diego felt older. “I'd kill to feel what you feel. Friendship requires reciprocity. As long as Gonzo is loyal to you, you should be loyal to him. I didn't have to come here, but my mother overdosed on drugs, so killing narcos makes me feel better. My dad raised me straight and cried when I told him about this gig. I get to fuck hookers, fuck over bad guys, and make bank? I'm living the dream, Angel.”

“You don't seem worried you'll die.”

“There's always a chance. I fear snakes and spiders more than drug runners, though. Spraining an ankle, out here, is almost a death sentence. Gonzo told us the threat and what he intended to do about it. Angel, I've learned to trust those who inspire confidence. Few have their shit together. Not every doctor is smart, for example. Some get old, buggy, or druggy. Gonzo has his shit together, just like his father. When it's time to settle down, I may ask him if he needs a good gun.”

“Colombianas are the best looking women in the world,” Angel boasted. “Go to any indoor shopping mall and see for yourself. In Cali, try Unicentro or Chipichape. In Medellin, try El Tesoro. My dad says women can be *buena, bonita, o barata* (good, beautiful, or affordable), but that the guy must choose two out of the three. The right Colombiana can be all three for the right guy.”

“Sounds like you're in love.”

Angel flushed. “Just giving sound advice to a brother-in-arms.”

They napped until nightfall, then woke to wake up the neighbors. Diego used thermographic scans to “see” the enemy.

“We have a bad angle for one camp, so I’ll hit it twice. It’ll get the first and last round. Here we go!”

He dropped one, which flew like a football on a Hail Mary pass. As soon as it left, Diego dropped another. Five rounds flew in under a minute.

They turned on their long-range cameras to later post this shit online, like other battles. Gonzalo needed people to know a drug cartel was attacking him to pressure the government to help. Emilio’s friends in the military told him they were still pissed that Gonzalo killed one of their own. They took that personally, though they didn’t deny he was corrupt. Generals more than frown when citizens kill a general.

The anti-personnel rounds exploded ten meters above their targets, shredding shrapnel at the speed of sound. The night came alive with the cries of screaming.

“I love self-guiding smart munitions!” Diego shouted. “Love’em and leave’em. Shoot and scoot. Fire and forget. Let’s get some sleep. We have a busy day tomorrow.”

Chapter 15

Sensitized to nighttime attacks, Wilmar woke before he realized what woke him. He threw off his blanket and was sprinting for the trees, outside of camp, before he was half-awake. He had already plotted an escape and was running for his life. Darting behind trees, he heard the shrieking whistle from the sky, descending ominously. The troops woke in confusion, the smarter ones leaving the dumber ones behind. Wilmar dove instinctively when the munition exploded, scrambling frantically behind the thickest trees. The pressure blast swept over him like a heat wave, followed by a dozen angry thuds in the tree trunks he passed a moment before. Yells in camp devolved into screams as men in pain begged for help. They traveled half as fast, and so used up their supplies twice as quick, so food, ammo, and medicine already ran low. Smarter soldiers hid painkillers and antiseptic wipes. Most of the group were strangers, so individuals saved shit for themselves and their friends.

Chest heaving, Wilmar looked around for spiders. He was one of the few who brought a machete and guarded it with his life. He held it now, backing up towards camp. The bomb only hit one corner of camp, which was a relief. Guys treated the wounded while others started fires to give them light. Their flashlights ran out of batteries long ago.

Wilmar stepped in shit, and not metaphorically. He squatted to check it out. That’s when the second bomb blew, higher than the first to spread its shrapnel farther. Wilmar fell over, into the shit, to put tree trunks between him. Something small punctured his back, but his buddies would soon dig it out. It hurt like a bitch, though, which made him think of Gonzo. Fucker’s gonna pay, he swore for the millionth time.

Soldiers pulled the wounded to the side of the camp better protected by a hill. Others huddled in the trees, exasperated by an enemy they couldn't even see. Drug thugs are always the aggressor, except for rare military attacks; defense does not suit them. They're used to imposing their will on unarmed civilians and getting whatever they want, once they hurt enough victims. Wilmar lost half his force, mostly to desertion, but plenty to sniper drones and spiders. He had not even reached the booby traps and hidden Claymore mines.

A hundred guys did nothing productive but bitch and complain. Wilmar's reputation as a leader was at stake.

"If you're not helping the wounded, then kill the fuckers firing on us. You'll find them on the tallest hill, within line of sight on us. Tell the other three camps to flank the enemy so they don't get away. It's safer to move now, when they can't see you, and it's not like you're gonna get a good night's sleep anyways. Move it, fuckers. Kill them by morning or they'll shell us again.

They grabbed their backpacks and stumbled in the dark trees. Probably a quarter would simply desert. How did Gonzo get artillery? Man, Wilmar couldn't wait to torture him to death. A group of thirty stepped in swamp water, which was not unusual in the Amazon. Their waterproof boots could take a licking. But it got deeper quickly, even in the dry season, and crocodiles like to wander from one pool of water to another. During the day, crocs are just good target practice, but at night in waist-deep water, they were killer.

"Spread out and find the shallowest way across," ordered Alejandro, though no one put him in charge.

A long ten minutes later, one group called out and the rest hurried over, careful to not sprain an ankle.

"Can't see shit," one complained.

"They can't be far. I'm gonna steal a spider and sell it on Ebay like Gonzo."

"Good luck with that."

"He auctions off a female every month. The last one went for \$450,000 American! Just imagine what he makes off the venom and antidote."

"He only sells females so they can't reproduce. It takes two to tango."

"The tango is hard. My girl prefers salsa."

"You should concentrate," shouted Alejandro from the back. "Anyone see webs?"

That woke them up. They looked up, pointing rifles at leaves.

"It's hard to see webs in the dark. Anyone got a light?"

Someone burned the end of a newspaper and someone else started screaming: "Web!" The first burst of gunfire made the leaves all around them move. "There's a million of them! Light'em up, boys!"

Thirty guys shot the foliage above them. The baby spiders would have preferred to let them pass, as the size and number of the humans made them anxious. Some fell with the leaves and others jumped to fight back.

"It's on my face! Someone please help me."

"Something bit me."

"I got some on my back."

"Retreat," Alejandro yelled over the shooting and screaming.

The firing became indiscriminate as each fought their own battle.

"Santos, you fucking shot me!"

“Sorry, bro. Got a spider on my barrel.”

“Dude shot Santos! He’s gone loco. Kill him!”

Alejandro waddled for his life, huddled over as bullets killed branches above him. Once out of the water, he kept going, as mad monsters followed him out. And maybe spiders. He felt something move on his back, so he backed into a tree, squishing it. He turned to see a spider, the size of his hand, fall to the ground. He stomped it again and again until his leg hurt, pulverizing it while his comrades desperately needed help. Later he’d realize his second shirt saved his life.

“It’s okay,” he shouted. “They’re normal size.”

“I ran into web! Ah, I can’t get it off!”

“Someone please shoot me.”

“Who just shot me? I’ll kill the fucker.”

Of thirty who entered, only a handful got out, and they were not loving it.

“I quit this shit!”

“Morales should hire exterminators.”

“Let’s capture the baby spiders!”

“Baby spiders just kicked our asses!”

At dawn, they heard powerful rifles snap off shots like pros. Drug soldiers prefer “pray and spray” because they don’t pay for their ammo. Wilmar climbed a hill and hid under plants to not skyline himself. His binoculars saw a small group of guys on a taller hill sniping his best troops. Few got within a mile of the enemy, and now they were getting shot from beyond their range. He returned and called a meeting.

“Gonzo sent snipers and a mortar team against us. They’ll leave an hour before nightfall to prevent us from encircling them, but just head to the next tall hill and do it again. I bet they have spy drones tracking us. They’re watching screens while we battle spiders. Let’s return our wounded before we run out of food.”

No one cheered, but no one argued. Wilmar lost most of his men without putting a single kill up on the board. He may lose his command to anyone who thought they could do a better job. He marched straight to Morales to “control the narrative.”

“*Jefe*, we need a supply run to get bite-resistant clothing, medicine, machetes, gloves, masks, scarves, backpacks, and all the spider poison we can find. We thought we’d drive there. A change of plan requires a change of tactics. If you want our *campesinos* to cut their way through a jungle filled with giant spiders, then you need to give them hope. We also need a lot more soldiers.”

Morales was pissed. “I expected you to follow orders.”

“Gonzo isn’t going anywhere.”

Back in the canyon, Gonzalo couldn’t believe his eyes. “They’re retreating? But they didn’t get within a hundred clicks of us. Hit them with the Metal Storm.”

That drone would hit most of Wilmar’s remaining men and keep him hiding for days, until it went away.

In Neiva, Emilio felt both jubilant and fearful. “Word is Torres is doing better than expected. Seems Morales needs every gun to go against him.”

“Looks like we bought ourselves another year,” Gonzalo said what his ears could not believe. “I’ll have the gringos sabotage more jungle, have them teach my guys,

and order more special supplies. Bro, order a billion more spikes from that metal-works factory. I think we're gonna need them."

Chapter 16

A year later, Emilio's wife called her brother in the middle of the night. He answered half asleep.

"They shot Emilio!" She was crying, hysterically. "Guys on motorcycles when he tried picking up the kids. His body armor protected him better than his bodyguards."

"Will he live?"

"The doctors are optimistic. I have to pull the kids out of school and lock myself in our fortress."

"Wilmar will be attacking soon, then. I'll call you after the battle."

Gonzalo knew how dependent he was on Emilio, but hoped no one else did. Fucking Wilmar found him. A few pilots worked for Emilio, but had limited access to credit cards to buy supplies. Gonzalo could survive many months with what he stockpiled, but had too many mouths to feed. His need for computer, communications, and weapon specialists also increased with his defenses.

Gonzalo sent his drones farther out until he found seven enemy staging areas (all rural ranches), each with a thousand gunmen wearing leather and motorcycle helmets. Each would attack along a different road, trail, or river. Each group had several thousand horses to carry shit. It looked like they wouldn't bring anything they couldn't transport via horse. He called a war council.

"We need to evacuate non-combatants," he told men he trusted with his life. "I bought a *finca* (rural estate) off a *famoso* (famous person) by Cali. They can stay there until it's safe to return. We only seeded the northeast with spiders; we have just a week to spread them along six other routes here. Megas surrounding us was always our best defense, though it also pens us in. Few trees grow within a few miles of us, so hopefully the spiders will not return to the canyon. That would be horrible and ironic. The more we throw into the jungle, the more we lose in profit, so let's start with our oldest. We've had a year to set traps for intruders; soon we'll find out how well they work.

"Angel, divide your men into seven teams and thin out the enemy," Gonzalo said, rubbing his finger along the wall screen, which showed an aerial map. He laughed because Wilmar had no idea the shit storm he was about to ride into. "I'll use supply drones to drop spikes to slow them down as you retreat. We've previously identified dozens of potential bottlenecks. They won't work as well on horsemen, but I'll blow a bunker buster in front of each group to crater their morale. That new squadron of sniper drones will keep our remote-pilots busy. Bummer the government will finally find out. If I survive, I'm gonna catch some serious shit from that federal prosecutor who interviewed us last year."

It seemed mega spiders were killing people along a hundred miles of road in the jungle near Venezuela and the attorney general thought Gonzalo might have something to do with it. He kept a straight face while denying everything.

“No sir. As you can see for yourself, we’re not missing any spiders. We keep them locked up as if our lives depend on it. Each is worth \$350,000, so we try hard not to lose them. Wild spiders must be attacking those poor people. We’re a hundred kilometers away. I don’t see what any of that has to do with any of us.”

The prosecutor didn’t believe a word, but didn’t have enough evidence to arrest Gonzalo. Putting a deadly animal in someone’s bedroom while they sleep can be manslaughter, but losing a wild animal that later kills someone is not murder. Dogs attack people all the time, but their owners get sued, not jailed. As long as Gonzalo denied ownership of those spiders, and denies putting them there, then all the attorney general could do was instill fear in Spiderman: we are watching you! Now spiders would soon occupy several times more jungle, all suspiciously around his home. He couldn’t even argue self-defense without admitting he let them loose.

“You gonna get gringos?” his dad asked.

Gonzalo kept a private security firm on retainer for just these emergencies. They were expensive, but had special expertise and equipment.

“Against Wilmar?” Gonzalo thought about it, then laughed. “That fool is about to lose his men. Again.”

Morales had been hiring like crazy to fend off Torres. With a lull in that turf war, he could finally tackle Spiderman.

Chapter 17

Seven sniper and mortar teams left in the morning. Angel remember Diego as they drove all day, switching drivers every four hours. Six guys on three electric dirt motorcycles, each pulling a narrow trailer, formed a team, but each had a world-class sniper rifle, a thousand hours of practice, and plenty of mortar rounds. Each team had driven here before to find out how far and fast they could go. They napped in a hidden hut, off the road, which conveniently had three double bunk beds, cases of bottled water, and solar panels on the roof to charge an ultracapacitor, which recharged their bikes as they slept. By the next night, most had reached the enemy vanguard, otherwise known as cannon fodder.

Angel was looking forward to this. A sniper drone alerted them when the enemy force stopped for the night. From the highest nearby hill, Angel’s team entered GPS coordinates for twenty smart rounds, spacing them 100 meters apart to blanket the camp. A thousand guys and several thousand horses take up a lot of room. It took just a few minutes to send them on their way. Even from five miles away, they heard the explosions, like Godzilla taking on Tokyo. Chuckling at having a smarter boss, Angel inserted a metal rod into the earth, pushed a button so it’d vibrate—telling spiders to stay away—then got into his “armored” sleeping bag. He zipped his entire body in and slept soundly, under bushes.

The sniper drone shot at suspicious heat sources with killer efficiency all night and all day. A drone designed around the Metal Storm weapon system could fire literally a million rounds a minute. 36 barrels and a computer control system

could blanket a targeted area. Gonzalo only had one, given how expensive they were, but got his money worth. This spread the enemy out and slowed them down.

At dawn, Angel dropped “bunker busters” onto bottlenecks in the road, forcing the narcos to take dangerous detours through dense jungle. A dedicated infrared drone helped Angel spot enemies. He spent the day happily taking potshots or shelling those who bunched up. Three groups of thirty split off in the morning to get behind Angel’s team, guided by locals. It took them all day, but forced Angel to retreat. But, first, he drove a mile ahead to drop off a spider, then another when they abandoned their hill, and every few miles from there. They had not fed the megas, so they were hungry.

Angel pulled out his smartphone to track the progress of the three horsemen teams fighting their way through jungle as drones sniped them. When the first stopped for lunch, he exploded an anti-personnel round over their heads. The teams stayed in contact because the other two groups spread out. He couldn’t stop them from reaching the road, so Angel set his team on a nearby mound and sniped them. The ability to track the enemy made all the difference.

The main group then tripped the first claymores, where Angel dropped the first spider. Hidden under brush, a horse kicked a cable and several trip-mines hurled a few kilos of metal balls at them. Area-denial weapons were awesome! Angel’s team recognized the explosion, which told them where most horsemen were. They dropped several mortar rounds, then called it a day.

Back in the hut, they enjoyed a hot meal on their electric stove and napped. At midnight, they drove to deny the enemy a good night’s sleep. The bad guys spread out, but that left them more vulnerable to things that flew, slithered, or crawled. Angel dropped a dozen rounds while a drone recorded the results.

The team slept in because they slowed the enemy down. The next day, Angel found a good spot to hit them again and repeated his attacks. As he retreated, he let loose more monsters and cratered more bottlenecks. Every day, more horsemen tripped booby traps, Claymores, or stepped on metal spikes. Every night, spiders killed more gunmen and horses. Each of the groups fell back, after losing most of their force. None got closer than several miles of the canyon.

Chapter 18

Fishing boats dropped off Wilmar’s real assault team. He hoped the idiots riding horses monopolized Gonzo’s attention. His river men all wore wetsuits and motorcycle helmets to reduce their heat signature and to protect them against spiders. Each got a machete to hack off leaves and swat spiders. The first arrived in small groups from local fishermen and each cut a path forward. Gonzalo didn’t know they were there until the first claymore blew.

The soldiers under Wilmar were as professional as gunmen in the drug trade get. Wilmar divided them into 10-man squads. Each squad leader got a headset to coordinate and maneuver. Wilmar’s voice now warned them:

“Gonzo’s gonna hit us with everything he has, so we must get to the canyon. Spread out and hurry up. His sniper drones will become more effective at daylight.”

“I already lost half my men,” the vanguard commander said. “Someone else must take the lead.”

“How’d you lose so many?” Wilmar demanded because a different squad tripped the claymore.

“A spider got one, a pit with sharp sticks got another, a third stepped on sharp metal, a booby-trap fatally wounded the fourth, and an anaconda squeezed the life out of the fifth.”

“That’s fucked up.” Wilmar didn’t mean to broadcast that. “Squad 2, take the lead.”

Wilmar commanded the reserve squad, which barely left the river.

“This is Squad 2. You said we’d get several miles closer before we’d be detected. Recommend abort.”

“Negative, 2. Proceed fast and furious. The other teams are counting on our RPGs.”

With a tripod and fire control unit, the RPG-29 has a maximum effective range of half a mile. The Auto-Sniper-7 can shoot two miles. Math was never Wilmar’s strongest subject when he dropped out of fifth grade.

Sniper drones tried finding them through the canopy, but scared them more than wounded them. It didn’t occur to Wilmar that Gonzo wanted his team far from the river until the Metal Storm drone fired. It sounded like several thunderclaps, spaced one heartbeat apart.

“The hell was that?” a leader demanded. “I’m wounded. All my guys are down. A million bullets eviscerated the jungle around us. The entire canopy is down and we’re exposed. We require immediate extraction.”

Wilmar almost laughed at that. “Hide as best as you can. We’re coming for you.”

He had never heard of the Metal Storm, though it had been around a few decades. The drone was new, though. While promising rescue, Wilmar executed retreat: he ordered the reserve squad ahead while he ran for his life to the fishing boat. A moment later several thunderclaps took out another squad and he ran faster. A mortar team shelled a third and he knew he had to escape before dawn or he was dead meat.

The week later, after spiders ate their fill, Gonzalo led a team to sweep the area to the river. “It’s 30 miles to the canyon. Did they really think they’d get so far undetected?”

“You need more motion detectors,” Angel said, “and physical barriers. We need specialists with ground-penetrating radar to build a topographical map to determine the best ways to deny access along a hundred miles of river. Proper amphibious watercraft could drop a division of marines on us during a storm.”

“The military is more likely to just bomb us to death,” Gonzalo had already concluded. “But smarter enemies will come when word leaks of how much money that venom is making us. Oh, this is gonna get expensive.”

Chapter 19

Torres kept Morales busy for three more years, but plenty of adventurers tried stealing spiders from Gonzalo. Individuals to large groups of gunmen to foreigners with special gear—everyone wanted a piece of his monopoly. He still sold just one a month, but sometimes skipped months to keep the price high. Every zoo worldwide needed one because they were so popular with customers, but Gonzalo only sold older ones, with only a year of life left. Repeat buyers got a discount.

Gonzalo did not need a river port to receive heavy equipment, materials, and supplies because he used a hovercraft to deliver them over rocks, swamp, spikes, ditches, logs, and barbed wire. The hovercraft was a huge truck that flew two feet over any relatively flat surface, like swamp, waves, snow, mud, ice, or spiders. Three different concrete-and-steel gates controlled the route, which was ironic because what he most imported was sand, gravel, wire mesh, rebar, and cement. It flew down the river to the coast and returned with ten tons of something. Drones followed overhead, for security. It got attacked several times a year, but had a well-armed crew. A construction crew worked year-round to strengthen the canyon and block satellite imaging.

Without serious threats, Gonzalo maximized production of serum, adding workers he hoped he could trust since he had to arm them. His private army of venom-milkers tripled to 300, but serum production multiplied as his operation grew more efficient. The serum not only saved thousands of lives a year, but its success rate forced insurance to cover it, despite its ungodly expense.

With money flooding his bank accounts, he hired experts to criticize his defenses. He built a runway with a catapult, like on aircraft carriers, to keep spy drones up longer. Instead of one circling above, he kept three aloft at all times, except during bad storms. They flew circle-8s in a triangle pattern to keep an eye on more of his surroundings. Gonzalo bought lighter drones with better sensors when sales reps blew his mind with the range of options now available. They juggled through a dozen infrared filters. Special “learning” software got better at filtering out noise and flagging potential threats.

Physical defenses got better, cutting off roads and game trails so people on foot, horse, or cars could not get through. Automated anti-air sites went up, along with an anti-air radar blimp, secured to the ground with a tether. A Toshiba nuclear battery powered his small town.

Opportunists started shooting down his serum drones before they reached Bogota. His new runway and catapult enabled him to buy smaller, faster “smart” drones that rivaled anything the CIA had and surpassed the defense of Air Force One. Best yet, they flew high, from the Amazon, above passenger jets, until they spiraled down above Bogota to the pharmaceutical’s new landing strip. Weekly trips now became daily to meet demand.

The corporation did not know this, but Gonzalo invested all cash that he didn’t need into their stock. He allied with major institutional investors to lobby the executive committee to spin off the serum as a publicly traded subdivision. Consumers buy \$2 billion worth of Viagra a year, much less the larger erection medicine market. The top 25 pharmaceutical companies alone have a \$1 trillion

market capitalization. Gonzalo foresaw a billion dollar product in the making, if fuckers would just leave him alone.

Chapter 20

The cameraman focused on the Australian's smiling face. A hand counted down and the Crocodile Hunter started the final episode of his long-running TV show.

"We're back, mates, after a six week hiatus. Last time, we followed a giant female spider we named Sheila in the Colombian Amazon as it spun a protective cocoon to molt. When a spider molts, she sheds her old hard outer shell—which is probably as painful as it sounds—because she has outgrown it. Most big spiders need four weeks to molt, but this devil unexpectedly needed six, which really put us behind schedule. I'm a busy guy—and my producer is not happy, either. We flew back right away, however, when our team reported it moving again.

He gestured and the camera panned to the canopy around them.

"As you can see, large webs cover both sides of the river, as far as the eye can see, which has really pissed off the locals. I'll be showing you videos of the giant creatures catching large birds in their webs and draining them dry like vampires. Very scary stuff, so you may wish to put the kids elsewhere when that bit goes on. We don't have film, but we've found the corpses of—ironically—spider monkeys, deflated like busted bouncy castles. The locals say spiders kill thousands of monkeys a year, and we no longer think that's complete bullshit. Excuse my French. Birds, mammals, snakes, insects, and lizards are their favorite prey, and we'll show you examples of each. The Colombian government blames giant spiders for the deaths of 122 people, mostly children, but the total is surely many times that. Many more have been bitten and half-a-million in the jungle have fled the prehistoric menace. Folks, it's a jungle out here.

"As you'll remember from last time, we stay in a houseboat in the middle of the river because this place is crawling with crawlers. We thought that'd be enough to stay safe, but the spiderlings—baby spiders—spin parachute webs and drift with the wind. Every morning my crew has to sweep them off the boat. All three got bit by babies and they are not happy, despite the bonuses the show must now pay them. The outrageously expensive antidote, however, works as advertised. Gonzo's Big Pharma distributor must be making a killing on the profits. One adult male somehow got on board—we still haven't figured out how—and we are so screwed if these monsters have learned sailing. We know they can jump a few dozen feet, but we purposely positioned our boat equidistant from the nearest branches. How did an adult male get in the middle of a wide river? I'm blaming Uber. Sadly, the crew had to spray the bastard with poison."

They inserted video of the thing, curled on its back, still twitching.

"They've been wearing full spider armor ever since. Even sleeping in it. We spider-proofed the cabin, sealing it off, and good thing we did because it really heats up without air conditioning. I don't blame them at all for using up so much expensive fuel, but our producer is not happy."

The camera zoomed on the cocoon, then on several smaller males around it.

“A week ago there were a few dozen males because that female will emerge from its cocoon horny. All spiders live lonely lives, and the main purpose of males is to mate before they go to spider heaven—or Hell, as the heat here would suggest. So when they come across a mature female, they wait, even starving themselves to not miss out on the fun.”

The Crocodile Hunter nervously laughed at that.

“Forgive me, mates, but female spiders have a habit of killing and eating their lovers—and you thought your ex was a bitch... Not all do it, but the males seem aware of the possibility, as you’ll see in a moment. Now, I like fooling around as much as the next bloc, but I wouldn’t risk dying over it—and I mess with dangerous beasts for a living! A croc bit off part of mi thigh, an anaconda tried hugging me, and a stingray actually stung me. I even fed the ungrateful bastard! But, ever since I hit my 40s, I’ve preferred living to sex. My brave crew could see the female from the boat, but my cameraman was smart enough to bring remote-operated equipment to lock onto the cocoon 24/7. Sorry for the boat rising and falling gently. As one camera focused on the female, the remote-operated one tracked the males, while the cameraman stayed safely inside the air conditioned cabin. The results are fascinating, so stayed tuned after the commercial break.”

The showman was clearly excited.

“And we’re back! Over the last few weeks, we obtained exclusive footage—the first in history—of giant male spiders fighting over a mate. Three lost their lives, so they’re literally dying for sex—and I thought I was desperate. For most, this will be the only time in their lives that they get some. Imagine dying a virgin; I know I did. This is the first fight over this female that we recorded, but it won’t be the last.”

The camera showed two dark males making threatening gestures on opposite fronds. One was closer to the cocoon and the other wasn’t having it. The farther one finally leaped on the other and they tumbled together, locking legs and breaking hearts. Each tried fanging the other, but they were equally matched. They rolled around, wrestling, and were about to pull apart when a third spider landed on the edge of the giant green frond, lowering it just in time. The Aussie couldn’t help laughing over the video as the ball of spiders simply rolled off the leaf, down thirty feet, into the river. The camera lowered to show them scrambling and sinking in the cold current.

“You see, kids,” the showman said smiling, “it pays to learn swimming.” The next clip show a bigger male intimidating a normal size male on a solid branch, when another crawled up behind him. “Mates, that’s the same spider that dunked the last two into the Caqueta River. Coqueta means flirt in Spanish, but he sure screwed those rivals. We’re calling him Einstein, as you’ll understand in a minute. Folks, if you’re squeamish, you may wish to close your eyes.”

The male closest to the cocoon wasn’t giving up an inch, so the bigger one walked over and gave it a proper beat down. The smaller one fought furiously, but the bigger spider had the upper hands. Then Einstein landed on the big boy’s back and bit deep between his armor plates. The big guy rolled to throw him off, but both rivals clung to him, attacking with savage fury.

“I had to do something like that in my college dorm,” the Aussie quipped. “Still didn’t get laid. Watch as we put this next part in slow motion.”

As they rolled, Einstein moved from the bigger spidey to the smaller one, surprising him to death.

“You can see how Einstein gets a fang into the abdomen, ripping it open like a gut wound. Intestinal fluid sprays him, but he continues tearing the poor bastard up. The big dude is still moving as the venom kicks in, paralyzing him. Einstein must have made him feel pretty stupid. He reminds me of a roommate who liked beating me at cards. Ah! Having defeated four males, Einstein is feeling pretty boss. Look at how he looks at his remaining rivals. One took just a step closer and Einstein turned to shoot him with laser eyes—or something. The coward gave ground, that’s for sure. You can’t see it, but Einstein is vibrating his feet to tell the others to back off. They may not listen, but they hear the message. Our victor will feast on two carcasses as he waits for his prize. Other spiders will move in, but Einstein is five meters closer when Sheila breaks out of her cocoon. The best is yet to come, so keep watching!”

The screen showed the female punching through hardened silk like she was pissed someone put it there.

“That reminds me of the time I got locked in the bathroom,” the narrator jested.

She’s almost twice as large as the males and it took an hour to tear down her fortress. She’s not just awake, she’s “woke.” Viewers can tell, as she scans her surroundings, as if for the first time.

“Six weeks is a long time to nap, folks. My record is only three. This job is demanding! I wake every day at the crack of dawn and—sometimes—I’m out of bed by noon!” He chuckled to let his fans know he’s joking. “Sheila is more awake than me. Watch her spin a web like she owns the place. Despite my reputation, I’ve never been that fearless. We should change Sheila’s name to Bad Ass cuz that’s how she crawls. Look at those males back up as she rears on her long legs. That threat posture reminds me of my ex. That, and all the hair. I swear that girl needed to shampoo her shoulders. Oh, wait, that was me. Sorry, mates. No worries.”

Time lapse film sped up the process. Now that she had a home, she was willing to listen to reason. And possibly to males. The web was larger than their boat.

“She sure is showing us the ropes! I love watching an artist at work. Or at home. Just ask my neighbors. Einstein must wait until the rain stops because spiders communicate through vibrating string. He wisely kept his distance, giving Sheila time and space to get her shit together. Or whatever you call that web. Now the courtship begins. He’s dancing now, and I’m pretty sure he’s stolen my best moves. Notice how he doesn’t move closer. She’s scrutinizing him, sizing him up, and possibly wondering how he’ll taste.

“Look how carefully he crawls to the end of her web, knowing she’s watching. He knows Sheila can kill him if he displeases her. Hmmm, reminds me of my mum. Her name was Sheila, too. Now he’s gently plucking the string. Too much and she’ll assume he’s food trapped in her web. He is signaling his presence, as if she did not know, and asking her if it’s cool. If she raises herself to her full height, he’ll back up if he wants to keep his head. Which reminds me; my neck still hurts.

“It looks like he just dropped a load, so she must like him. He was tensed up, as if his life was at stake. Unlike most virgins, his life really was at stake. She must have plucked something nice because now he’s dragging the big dude he poisoned

to her web. That's smart because he's feeding her when she's starving, but also showing he can take care of business. That's what I do on all my first dates! Women generally like to know the guy isn't a total loser before having his kids, which is why men invented alcohol. My wife dived in without looking, but I can't get into that.

"And she's hooked! Or hungry. She moved surprisingly fast. You'd think she has eight legs. She's dragging her meal to the middle of her web to feed in her comfort zone. All she lacks is a beer, TV, and recliner. But enough of my bachelor days! Man, she's hungry. Watch her suck that dead corpse like it had flavor. Reminds me of... Well, the divorce agreement prevents me from talking about that. The male is jumping like he's about to get laid. Einstein sure has a stupid look on his face, so he's expecting something world-shattering. Next, he'll be doing flips like my crew when we arrived after six weeks. Those lonely boys hit Medellin like Pablo Escobar."

The video sped up as dawn was breaking.

"Sheila has fed and wants to fool around, or so my spidey sense says. Einstein, that genius, after waiting weeks, agrees. Watch him put one foot on her web and ask her permission to come aboard. She turned to take another, longer look at him. Personally, I think he needs glasses, but I'm into nerds. Preferably female. Through vibrations in the web she told him to approach, but she didn't throw open the door because he's moving cautiously, like a virgin holding up money to a prostitute with a knife.

"Well, well. Looks like he may get some after all. The other males are pissed! Watch them storm off, stuck being virgins into their old age. I hate it when that happens. If I didn't get this show... Now they're mingling, so my producer owes me a hundred pesos. Now I must find out how much a hundred pesos is worth. Five cents? We made a bet for a nickel? Folks, my producer is laughing at me. He's calling me Not Einstein. I should call him Sheila, the way he screws me over. Sorry, mum.

"Folks, it's not usual for spiders of the same specie to look vastly different. Our relatively small tarantula-looking male is dark and hairy like my ex, but the female is almost twice as big, shaped like an hourglass, with a bright red streak like a Corvette I once owned, without the mud flaps. Yep, she's a beauty. He climbed on top, but not for the reason you suspect.

"I don't know if you know anything about spider sex, but spiders don't have sex. I don't want to get too technical with sexual terminology with you lay people, but there's no penetration. He's dangling his sperm sack—at least, that's what I call mine—near her Opening, if I can use that word on basic cable. He's waiting for her to receive it and man, he looks nervous. I'd be too. She just spent six weeks in solitary and may have poor impulse control. I know I do, after six weeks in confinement.

"And she took it! Apparently. Even zooming in, we can't see shit—I assume those splotches are *caca*. But he sure looks relieved. He's gonna be a daddy! Oh, Einstein, congratulations, dude. I'll hand out cigars; I hope Cubans are okay. Not for him, but because I promised my network to capture a pregnant female to get them to fund this little expedition. We blew past our budget and they're insistent I deliver as promised.

“But how do you know if a female is pregnant? I’ve lifted a few skirts before, but all I got were restraining orders. As all guys know, every girl with a few extra pounds does not have buns in the oven. That’s when we searched for a molter. Not even I can mistake a giant spider cocoon for anything else. And to find one by the river was ideal; I really should pay my field people more and my producer less. See, folks, if a female mega is worth a quarter-million dollars, then how much are a thousand spiderlings worth? Enough to fund my show for life, is what I’m guessing. Man, this is the happiest day of this season.

“Wait! What? Did you see that? Folks, we’ll replay that in slow motion for you while I sit down and sip a Foster’s. Yes, Sheila just expertly took off Einstein’s head like a ninja. We should call her Samurai Sheila. She’s holding up the head and looking at it like a work of art. Yeah, I’ve been there. I guess the non-sex was not worth repeating. Oh, no, she’s sipping him like a fine wine. Well, I don’t drink fine wine—I chug cheap crap at wrap-up parties—but I assume that’s what sipping fine wine looks like. I’ll have to ask my ex. Einstein lost his head—I hate it when that happens. The irony is killer. I guess the spider he gave her wasn’t enough. She’s hungry enough to eat her lover. Reminds me of my glory days. And they were such a happy couple during their relationship. Stay with me, folks, because next I’m gonna snatch that spider. Or die trying.”

The video showed the Aussie host with the female in the canopy behind him. He looked more nervous and poorly dressed than usual, under all that leather. A plastic “Paul Hogan” mask made him look like a hockey player.

“I’m not a medieval knight,” he boasted. “I just play one on TV. These beasts are dangerous, but I’ve handled all sorts of dangerous monsters—have you met my family? I’m an expert, so you kids don’t try this yourselves. Leave it to the professionals.”

The boat was much closer and the spider eyed them suspiciously.

“Sheila just finished drinking Einstein, after liquefying the poor brave bastard. Now that she’s full, pregnant, and laid, she should be easier to handle.” He held up an odd-looking weapon. “I was a pretty decent shot, though I’m not an expert at taser rifles. We laid a wide raft under her, but I must wait for her to turn so I can electrocute her side. Hey, Sheila, bet’cha wish you had friends to protect you! Spiders, sadly, can’t hear words, though they detect air vibrations. Let’s move the boat a bit so I don’t have to shoot her between the eyes.” The video fast-forwarded. He talked grimly into the camera. “Third time’s the charm.”

This time the taser ends reached skin, instead of armor, and she shook like an epileptic, fell on her back, feet dancing, and finally slid off the frond, into the floater. The crew reeled her in like a whale.

“Yes! She fell for me, just like in my dreams. I totally told my wife I don’t suck, but she didn’t believe me, for some reason. Wow, Sheila is twitching like a coke addict. Hope I didn’t just electrocute her babies cuz getting them was the whole damn point. I do not want to repeat this miserable experience. Lester, if she loses her babies, you mind impregnating her?” The crew laughed. “So much for your mad sex skills.”

They threw a net over her, once the raft got close.

“I wanted her stunned, not dead. This was a long six weeks if she was alive. Dead... Get the pool net and scoop her up. She’s heavy? Lester, help pick up that

dead spider. You guys act like we should have brought a crane. Is the containment cube ready? I can't wait to sneak a deadly creature past customs. Let's dump Sheila in it as we shake her out of the net. Carefully! We don't want her to lose any limbs. Damn, she got tangled. What the? Bitch didn't insert the sperm sack. She's not yet pregnant. I know sometimes they just carry the sacks around, webbed to their body, but we can't afford to hang around a spider infestation. Maybe we can insert them if she doesn't? She may not want to become pregnant in captivity. That's right, Sheila, you're now my bitch. I own you. Well, the network will."

"Is she grabbing the net?" Lester asked, afraid.

"She isn't dead? That's great news! Just a little more, guys."

That's when she ejected her "hairs" at shocking speed. The Australians sure looked shocked. Most dug into their armor, but Lester found an arrow in his leather glove. His screaming woke the jungle. Another pinned his foot to the wooden deck. But the famous Crocodile Hunter, after eight glorious seasons, took one in the eye, quivering like a bull's eye. It hit hard enough to penetrate his brain. His face glitched and the momentum threw him over the rail, into the river, where he quickly sank into obscurity, except on the internet, social media, and urban legends. There he'd live forever. Sheila wrapped herself around Lester's leg and sank her fangs between his leather cowboy chaps. He howled like a wolf under a full moon. He pulled his Browning out of his hip holster and emptied it into the spider and the engine, below her, cutting off power. The air conditioner coughed and peed a clear liquid. Knowing his life was ending, he dove overboard to drown the bitch that took all he had, and all he'd ever have. This ended the life of Lester Moore.

No Les, no Moore.

Chapter 21

Sofia looked up as Gonzalo entered the room. She taught the dozen kids living in Canyon Town and enjoyed it more than she expected.

"*Mi amor*, I want to evacuate non-essential personnel until the storm passes."

"You're afraid of storms now, too?"

Her husband's paranoia amused and annoyed her.

"It's a big storm, coming in predictably, and will cover us for a few days. Perfect time for someone to hit us hard, while our sensor defenses are degraded."

"Morales has more important things to do."

"It's not Morales who worries me. Other drug lords have taken over his fields near us. They haven't attacked, but only because they were not ready. This storm will be a rare opportunity to breach our defenses."

"It's suicide to attack this place," she thought. "You killed several thousand, last time, then used heavy equipment to block every path here, except for gates you control."

He tried not to talk down to her. "A business is valued according to the profits it generates. That makes our serum factory worth \$1 billion, with very low operating costs. This area has been lawless since the 1950s. Every neighbor is drug-related

or lives off those who make a living off drugs. There are no consequences if someone destroys us and takes over. The Colombian government won't do shit. While our defenses are thorough, we are not invulnerable. Sufficient resources could beat us. One cruise missile could shut us down. We can't stop tanks, bombers, or fighter jets."

"What aren't you telling me" she demanded.

"Emilio's been getting warnings. Rogue generals may team up with other cartel members for a joint attack. They'll blame me for attacking them, then hit me hard, in ways I don't expect."

"Ah. That's why you've been smuggling in all that illegal tech. I assume it's as expensive as it looks. Your dad says you spent a fortune on import bribes."

Gonzalo didn't know how much to tell her. "I've sent for specialized help for the week. Just in case."

That stunned her. "If you're scared enough to get gringos, then we'll leave today."

Chapter 22

Gonzalo rushed the gringos into the room. Bad weather delayed their arrival. He led them down several flights of stairs, within the canyon wall, to his command center. Huge screens covered every corner. Gonzalo pointed to one, his tone of voice exasperated:

"The only way here is by air or hovercraft. 100 hovercraft, with auto-cannon, heavy machine guns, and anti-tank weapons bolted on the bows, are making their way up the river. Because winds are so severe, I installed camera crews at ports and slung chains across bottlenecks to buy us time. They think they'll arrive tonight, but blasting chains may delay them several hours. Trees funnel intruders from the river into a narrow corridor, where your anti-tank teams can surprise them."

The newcomers exchanged knowing looks. "We're gonna have to work, this mission. I wish you ordered more teams."

"I wish I knew 100 hovercraft would attack," Gonzalo said bitterly. "Hovercraft can't breach the canyon, though, or even get over the ditches and berms, so I assume gunships will transport infantry to the canyon walls."

"They must be desperate to fly in this weather."

"The general getting paid will not be flying in this weather. I've upgraded my anti-air defenses, so helicopters don't worry me as much as these." He pointed to photos taken the day before. "What are these trucks?"

Their leader dropped his jaw. "Your own military is participating? If you mentioned that, we would not have come."

"That's why I didn't mention it," Gonzalo retorted. "You won't be involved with them. Tell me what they are."

"Those trucks are towing howitzers firing NATO 155mm ammunition at six GPS rounds a minute with a range of 42 kilometer. Wind will reduce that."

Gonzalo barked a question to his staff. "How far away are the trucks?"

“35 kilometers.”

“Fuck! Now I need to kill more generals.” Gonzalo was lost in thought for a moment. “Well, I’ll need to get my ten oldest drones out of storage and load them with explosives. *Caballeros*, please follow me to the cafeteria for a hot meal. Someone will show you to your rooms. An hour before dawn, small hovercraft will drop you off along the corridor I cut in the trees.”

“Five teams cannot kill 100 hovercraft,” their leader said defensively.

“The enemy assumes they can blast their way through because satellite imagery doesn’t show my portable blast walls. My guys are installing them tonight since the storm will block aerial views. Those enemy hovercraft will be boxed in. I need you to disable them by shooting through the trees at maximum effective distance. They’re full of gunmen, working for the drug cartel, not real soldiers. Thugs for drugs! My drivers will stay with your hovercraft for extraction when they send infantry after you.”

“What about the giant spiders?” another gringo yelled in bad Spanish.”

“Don’t piss them off. We’ll spray you so spiders ignore you. Let the druggies threaten them instead.”

Chapter 23

“Angel, what do you think?” Gonzalo asked as the Metal Storm drone reached its target at midnight. Through the rain, they could barely discern the soldiers manning the artillery behind the trucks. “Should I risk drawing first blood?”

“Hit them now and hit them hard.” He was proud of his military service, but appalled they’d fire on civilians for drug bribes. “They should be asleep. Instead they look ready to shoot before wind strength increases.”

“My thoughts exactly. I think they’re waiting until the last possible moment because my chains blocking the river delayed the hovercraft crews. That means the local commander is in communication with the drug teams. Pilot, please circle to get an optimum shot. The more we kill, the fewer shells we’ll receive. Strike at your discretion, but keep firing until you run out of bullets.” He turned to the other dozen pilots, manning his most disposable drones, now full of fuel and explosives. “Kamikaze the howitzers, not the trucks. You two in reserve, wait until we get clear video, then hit any artillery not smoking. Do not bother bringing your planes back.” Gonzalo turned to the guy driving the Metal Storm drone. “Except you. Get that baby back before winds get worse.”

Emilio called, so Gonzalo stepped outside to get better reception. “Twelve Apache attack helicopters are scheduled for live-action training this week by Mitu.” Near Brazil. Locals were famous for their Mitu tourism movement. That meant the air attack would come directly from the east. “They supposed to return tomorrow. I promised \$10 million pesos (\$5000 dollars) for the information.”

Gonzalo waved his teenage son over. “Junior, prepare six anti-air drones for takeoff. Let me know when the first one is ready.” He un-muted Emilio. “Triple it and offer \$100 million for the bio of whatever general sent a platoon of 155mm howitzers in Caqueta, twenty miles from the nearest paved road. Then crash a

drone into that man's home, after verifying his family is there." Gonzalo, amped up for the battle, paused to clarify something. "Crash someone else's drone."

Emilio didn't like that. "I don't want to kill a wife and kids."

"But that's exactly what the general is doing to us. How long will you and yours survive after we've perished? You know too much. If you want your wife and kids to survive, then you have to kill the family of the corrupt bastard willing to kill mine. Deterrence is lethal. Generals will think twice when they know what happened to the loved ones of the last guy who took drug money to kill women and children. It won't stop this attack, but it may prevent the next."

"Gonzo, you're as bad as the narcos."

"No. What I do is legal and benefits society. I save millions a year making unique medicine, while narcos kill millions a year via overdoses, violence, and crime. I make an honest living, while they try taking what is mine. If you let them kill me, then the blood of millions a year is on your hands."

"*Que pereza!* I'll see what I can do."

Gonzalo stepped back into the command room in time to see the Metal Storm gun spray literally several million bullets into ten sets of artillery as it slowly spiraled down.

"One launched!" a technician yelled. "I'm counting 6—no, 12—rounds. They must have had their finger on the trigger."

Gonzalo opened the case for his alarm. He pulled the lever for a horn to repeat on loudspeakers across the canyon to tell his people to get underground. He had turned off all lights as soon as the gringos landed, closed all blast doors, and shuttered all windows. Years of preparation were about to pay off -- or not.

"Slam those fuckers!"

He missed the first few that crashed into the artillery, but saw the last several with grim satisfaction. The fiery explosions comforted him. The link to the planes was delayed like a bad internet connection, so he was glad he didn't wait for the storm to get worse. The last two pilots asked for instructions since all ten howitzers were totaled.

"One of you dive to maximize speed from the east, come in low, and hit the closest truck in the center. The other do the same from the west."

The ten were parked parallel. The two drones hit at almost the same time, from opposite directions. The outer trucks flipped into their neighbors before detonating others. The hard rain seemed to have little effect on the fire as gasoline burned oil and men. The Metal Storm drone flew slowly over, recording the devastation. It looked like Godzilla stomped them.

"Scratch a hundred *paisanos*," a technician muttered.

Killing Colombian soldiers felt as bad as killing Colombian drug *soldados* felt good.

Then the 155mm shells landed. The earth shook. Wind blew most off course, but a few landed within or around the canyon. Damage reports came in.

"Juanito and his boy got blown apart!"

"We just lost three spider dens!"

"Fuckers bombed a bunch of solar panels."

None hit the landing strip. That would have been fatal.

Junior called. "Papa, one is ready for takeoff."

Gonzalo patted his best pilot on the shoulder. “Pedro, you used to drive Apaches, so you get this job. Go east, get behind them, then shoot down one so the others leave us alone.”

It took an hour to find the gunships flying into strengthening winds. Planes are more stable platforms and thus handle cross-winds better. Heading into a monster storm must have felt worse by the minute. Then a drone with Sidewinder missiles rose above them, circled behind them, and set target designation lock. Their threat receivers blared and they jinked left and right, skimming trees and hugging terrain. One helicopter fell in an air pocket and crashed in the forest. The drone crept up to optimum distance and waited.

Back in the canyon, Gonzalo complained. “How hard a decision is this? Go home, fly boys!” he yelled as if they could hear him from a hundred miles away.

Then the second drone swept past and turned around. That’s when they bailed. They flew straight north and the drones let them go.

“Return the drones, then take a siesta!” Gonzalo ordered his pilots. “Dad, swap out their Sidewinders for air-to-ground. We have a hundred giant hovercraft to kill. Get that Metal Storm armed!”

Russians had military hovercraft as big as a football field. Some civilian ferries were even bigger. These were not quite as huge, but looked new. Hovercraft would come in handy in terrain with lots of rivers, but few paved roads, but probably cost a million dollars each.

“The entire cartel is after me,” Gonzalo told the mirror as he peed in the toilet. He was always scared, but never like this. Morales got the east, so these fucks controlled the south and western jungles of Colombia. “I’m gonna have to fuck drug lords,” he said, as if he wouldn’t soon be the biggest drug lord himself.

That was the irony: serum is a drug, making him a drug producer. He had the equivalent of an army and sovereign territory, making Gonzalo Gonzalez a drug lord. But his drug saved people.

He ate leftover *empanadas de pollo* and napped until dawn. He ate *calentado* with the gringos and personally sprayed them with spider “perfume.” His drivers looked nervous, except Junior, who seemed excited. They all wore thick Kevlar *panchos*. Gonzalo held out ten for the gringos.

“These are bullet-resistant Kevlar blankets with a hole for your head. They’ll add another layer of kinetic protection against ricochets or anti-personnel rounds. They even have sleeves to protect your arms and are doused with spider perfume so they ignore or avoid you.

“The first wall in the corridor is up—20 inches of hardened steel, wrapped in amorphous metal, hidden in brush. We slid it into its resting place, deep in bedrock. It’ll be a bitch to return up the slope. The road curves five miles around what we call Tarantula Hill. From the summit, my mortar teams can hit ten miles of corridor. Once you start shooting, they’ll pile on. Our vehicle munitions will self-guide to the center of the thin-skinned hovercraft. They were designed to hit charging armored vehicles, so stationary targets several times as large should be no-brainers for their smart chips. Enemy infantry will have to walk ten miles through spider-infested, booby-trapped jungle before crossing two miles of land cleared for our Auto-Snipers.

“Junior, drop off the gringos where they can hit the enemy as they blast the wall. Provide security and keep an eye out for *aranas* (spiders). Gael’s guys will roll the other walls to trap the convoy. Keep your distance because their heavy weapons can pack a mean punch from far away. Our hovercraft will attack the enemy’s rear, so please don’t shoot it. Its real job is to prevent bad guys from escaping. Since we planted pregnant megas there, two years ago, there must be a million spiders in that jungle. Let’s feed them druggies.”

Chapter 24

At twelve, Junior felt older than his years. He trained for this moment all his life and felt ready. They spent many a night throwing out scenarios, some more ridiculous than others. They imagined hovercraft, but never so many. Only tanks could break through their barriers and withstand their assaults, but tanks would sink in the soggy soil. Other than that, ballistic missiles could do them in.

Junior got the gringo commander. The teen tried out his English, which the gringo seemed to understand. Each personal hovercraft was longer than a pickup, but narrower. The two passengers barely had enough room for all their ammo. Junior ended up surrounded by 50-pound shells as he drove 100 knots in the rain. The corridor they cut in the forest was in the shape of an “S” to slow down intruders. The trees were not thick, but numerous. Last year, dad tried knocking trees over with his hovercraft and got nowhere. The trees trapped them.

They had hacked a narrow path for the personal hovercraft, a thousand paces from the corridor. Reflectors told Junior where to go. He parked at the bottom of a ridge and walked them up. The other four parked a hundred meters farther so they could shoot up several hundred meters worth of enemies. Junior stabbed the earth with a metal rod and pressed a button. They heard it vibrate. The teen adjusted the volume.

“Megas don’t like certain frequencies. Imagine nails scratching blackboards. They simply head in the opposite direction.”

That surprised the lead gringo. “You got rid of them that easily? How old are you, kid?”

“12. My sister is 11 and is already a sharpshooter. Papa bought her an expensive sniper rifle with exploding rounds. Practice costs a lot of money, but apparently she has the gift.”

The guy grunted. “They grow up tough in Colombia. You’re not scared?”

“Tomorrow we will be robbing the dead as compensation for this attack.” The boy paused to point. The size of the three spiders startled the gringos. “Avoid webs. Spiders interpret things caught in their webs as food. Back away softly if confronted, as they mostly bite out of self-defense. Most should be near the corridor because papa let a thousand rats loose there yesterday. We also slaughtered a hundred cattle on the road to attract spiders. We barely had time to cut out the best steaks. Those drug fuckers are so screwed.”

“Seems like your dad thought of everything.”

“He doesn’t think so. He expects the cartel to surprise us, somehow.”

The gringo laughed nervously for a pricey mercenary. “Well, we’ll surprise them first.” His assistant put down binoculars and marked an X in chalk on the rock. Then he scooted sideways, while staring through the trees to the corridor. “Alex is marking spots where we can hit them. We shoot, duck behind cover to reload, come up several meters away and shoot again. Apache Indians would never fire from the same place twice, if they could help it. Kid, do not expose yourself. If you can see them, then they can see you.”

Junior laid down between two boulders like he had done this a thousand times before. “I’m a pretty good shot. Not as good as my sister, from this distance, but good enough. I had to chip away at one rock for my barrel, but then inserted a thick piece of metal to minimize my exposure.”

The veteran didn’t like it. “You think you can snipe someone from this distance, with this much wind?”

Junior smiled. “The inflatable that surrounds the craft is taller than you. It’s bullet-resistant, but not against my hallow points.”

The gringo loved this kid. “How long have you been training for this?”

“I got my first battle when I was 8. I didn’t see any action and didn’t get to shoot anyone, but it was still pretty intense.”

“Is your dad really a billionaire?”

Junior scoffed. “Not yet. He spent millions against this day while this attack will cost him millions more. It’s a fucked up way to run a business.”

The gringos wore headsets. Each checked in after marking the ten best shooting spots along their hundred meters.

“Pee now,” their leader suggested as they installed the anti-tank rocket pedestals. “This may be a long day.”

Explosions echoed from the river.

Junior explained. “Drones are launching Hellfire missiles at the hovercraft once all hundred enter the corridor. That makes them a dozen miles away. They bolted gun racks, pedestals, and missile mounts on the bow, so the planes are shooting them from behind.”

The leader repeated the good news over their comms. Thirty minutes later, the team closest to the hovercraft fired at the lead vehicle. It looked like a two-story oval building covered in men. The missile missed, but only because the hovercraft swerved into the trees, bounced and spun in the wrong direction, blocking traffic. A second missile hit the second hovercraft, which crashed into the first. A moment later, either a mortar or a Hellfire fucked up the lead craft. It burst into tears of flame. These were bigger than Gonzalo’s 10-meter-wide hovercraft and so barely squeezed through the path he cut in the trees. Thousands of stumps blocked wheeled and track vehicles, which is why enemies needed hovercraft.

Several drones and several mortars pounded those farther back, who pushed the damaged and destroyed craft into weaker trees. The Metal Storm drone slaughtered the hundred or so guys on each hovercraft. After losing a few more expensive hovercraft, they were free to race along a curving road, bouncing off trees and stumbling over stumps. Strong winds and heavy rain punished the poor fucks on deck, gripping the rails like throbbing cocks. Even the guys harnessed to the heavy weapons couldn’t shoot back. Those massed on the stern sent waves of bullets at the drones, who wisely fired from a few miles away before returning to

base to re-arm. Each had only four Hellfire missiles, so all seven ran out quickly, leaving twenty hovercraft smoldering in the rain. The mortar team had thousands of rounds and looked forward to using them all.

Gunmen bailed out, but had few options. Walk miles to the target or miles to the river, where a Gonzalez hovercraft blocked an easy escape? Most hid in the trees to avoid unnecessary exposure. That's when they saw their first spiders. They exhausted their ammo, then their grenades. The blood, noise, and vibrations only attracted more megas, who found unarmed meals fleeing them.

The lead hovercraft maxed speed to crush the barrier. Instead, spikes on the wall ruptured their inflatable and sent dozens of gunmen flying. Gonzalo had several camouflaged heavy machine gun nests that hosed those losers. The next hovercraft returned fire, but were very exposed, compared to the locals ambushing them. As more vehicles flew in, the corridor became a parking garage. The gringos grinned at the fat targets.

"Our guys just rolled out the middle wall!" the kid told him happily while still firing methodically. He deflated an expensive hovercraft every minute. "Those vehicles are not leaving!"

The gringo didn't know Gonzalo had a third barrier. Neither did the enemy. Cleverly hidden at a turn, it cut off the river, trapping the invaders within range of the mortars. The anti-tank missiles left visible white plumes of smoke, but a few miles of rain obscured and dispersed them, so it took an eternity before the enemy fired upon the ridge. The mortars were murdering them. Once the last survivors crashed into their comrades, the enemy commander made the obvious choice and abandoned ships.

"*Hijo de puta!*" the kid growled angrily, fumbling with his phone. "Dad, the big hovercraft are ejecting personal hovercraft, similar to ours, to get through the trees." He grunted agreement a few times, then yelled at the gringo leader: "Focus on the small hovercraft!"

The battle just got less one-sided. Each mama hovercraft held thirty smaller ones, which searched for ways through the trees. Many got stuck, but the guys just got out, tilted it, and then pulled it through the bottleneck. They must not know their gunships and howitzers failed because they raced towards the canyon. The mortar men switched to anti-personnel airbursts and the gringos blew a few small hovercraft, but most entered the tree line away from them.

"Fuck! We must get back now," Junior demanded.

Chapter 25

The kid led them behind giant berms of piled earth, but at least the leader got the best firing spot. They scrambled on all fours up the artificial hill to lay upon the top. Junior explained.

"Iraqi vets said concrete was their best weapon, so dad wanted physical barriers to limit access. From the river, they cannot reach the mesa around the canyon rim. They must storm the only entrance, which we now overlook."

A 50' ditch rose to a 50' berm that stretched for miles. Caesar's men dug a 19 mile ditch and berm to deter Germans from crossing the Rhine when he started his conquest of Gaul. Defenders poured down from the mesa to perch alongside them, spaced several meters apart. Just over two miles away, the enemy hovercraft waited for the rest to catch up, until mortars started blowing holes in their ranks. Trees crowded them in, so they charged. Several Auto-Snipers scored the first kills, as hovercraft flipped or lost air. They carried gunmen, but were not armed or armored, and didn't stand a chance without backup from hundreds of heavy weapons. They could not even breach the barriers that protected the entrance. The gringos caught a couple before the half that survived turned and fled. The rest were screwed. A hundred intruders either died shooting or threw down their weapons.

"I got one!" Junior boasted proudly. "A hovercraft, not a man. I got plenty of those. I thought battle would be scary, but they haven't shot anywhere near me."

Gonzalo won the Battle of the Canyon that day, but it'd take a week for sniper drones to pick off those who fled. He inherited a few dozen large hovercraft in new condition and was able to repair a few dozen more. Hundreds of smaller ones he'd soon sell on Ebay. The larger ones he used to minimize drug trafficking on the Caqueta River, a major commercial artery. He bombed and burned every coca field and drug asset he knew of, and tortured his prisoners to reveal more. They told him all they knew, only for Gonzalo to feed them to his spiders.

The Pit was fifty feet deep and a hundred wide, but with very steep walls that defied purchase. Not one prisoner was able to climb out of it because Gonzalo landscaped it that way. Mature trees grew on the bottom because spiders liked climbing. Gonzalo dumped a few hundred near-naked prisoners into the Pit at dawn, after setting up recording equipment, then watched from his room as a thousand mega-spiders feasted on them. This video would consume the internet. The drug soldiers fought back, but were outnumbered and outmatched. Spiders dissolved their insides, then sucked their interiors to deflate them like defective mannequins. Cameramen remotely turned and zoomed as one man after another got suckered.

"Gonzo's Revenge" social media soon called it. Anyone who attacked the canyon now knew how they'd die if caught. He had the video uploaded from Peru, so he could deny accusations, when everyone knew these drug soldiers attacked his home. The men even cursed him with their dying breath and his legend grew.

Chapter 26

Salvador Blanco liked that his name meant "white savior" though he was rather dark and no one's idea of salvation. Bullying came easy to him, especially to his little sisters. As he grew, he worked out to challenge others his age. He killed to steal his first gun, an old fashioned Colt 45 beauty that he could have sold for a fortune. Stabbing that guy in the back to take his revolver was the highlight of his childhood. High school was too much work, so he hit the streets, making a killing when he wasn't murdering. He entered his first gang at 16 and never looked back.

Smarter than the average fool, he watched his superiors and learned what he needed to know. Handling difficult men became his specialty, and a talent that stayed in demand.

So he wondered why he was soaked to the skin on a boat that flew, entering the jungle on a risky adventure that seemed more suicidal as the hours bled into days. He grew up in Cartagena, making him a *costeno* or coastal guy. Shit, that area was mostly desert. He understood desert. A place full of trees so bunched up together that a guy couldn't walk between them was foreign. Alien. Uncomfortable.

The river ride at night was cool, especially doing 100 knots, but then they flew onto land, into a corridor cut among a forest of trees. He was not claustrophobic, but did not like feeling caged. Still, a hundred other hovercraft were with him, most ahead, with 10,000 gunmen wielding a thousand pieces of heavy equipment. How could they lose? The cartel shot their wad with this invasion. They planned to take that spider hole and keep it, against all rivals, including the Colombian military. That was bold, and he liked bold. "Life is too short for pussies," he liked to tell his victims as they bled out.

His helmet didn't fit right, and leather felt absurd in this heat. He would have been sweating rivers if the storm didn't bathe him in rain. He wondered if he'd see a spider. He wanted to stomp one; maybe several. They were big, but he was bigger. But it didn't look likely. Gunships and artillery would surprise Gonzo in his sleep, then this hover-convoy would deploy on his front door, kick it in, and take everything they didn't kill. He heard this dude's wife was hot and wanted to taste her personally. As a mid-level commander, he might get the chance.

The explosion took him and everyone around him by surprise. The enemy was not supposed to know they were coming. How could they, in a storm? No one puts up drones in hurricane winds. The thunder grew louder and droned on like the beat of drums. That's when he first got scared.

His hovercraft rounded a bend and crashed into the one in front, like two giant bumper cars. Up ahead he saw horror: dozens of hovercraft cracked up and belching flame. The fires laughed at the rain. He heard mortars coming, then saw a rocket or missile fly straight into the poor fool in front of them. He yelled at his idiot driver, who just crashed into them from behind.

"Turn around! It's an ambush!"

He felt his own hovercraft turn in place. The ones in front and behind tried doing the same. The heavy machine guns on the bow lost line-of-sight with the enemy, which they couldn't see anyways. The detonations intensified. Entire hovercraft flipped over like a giant threw them. Then the bombs blew closer.

That's when he first peed himself. He was used to shooting, not getting shot at.

The last several hovercraft retreated at high speed, bumping off the trees that penned them in. Sal used his binoculars to see tiny fucks pushing a wall of steel in their way, while they were several miles from the river! The closest craft drove them off with heavy fire, but the wall remained. They punched dents in it, and chipped away at the edges, but Gonzo built it solid. Sal watched guys from a hovercraft simply leap over the two-meter-tall wall. That looked good. A long walk, but he was young and strong. A few dozen jumped over, though a few got squished as the hovercraft bounced back and forth between wall, trees, and other hovercraft. Those who escaped exchanged rifle fire with enemies in the trees, who

enjoyed heavy machine guns. Then a big beast shot from the dark. It was a hovercraft! Sal thought they were saved until it murdered the guys against the wall. Then it fired upon cartel hovercraft and that's when Sal shat himself.

There was no escape.

Drones fired into the hovercraft nearest the wall and it became a huge cooking fire, roasting men who'd never rape again.

"I need to get out of here," that genius yelled to no one in particular. His craft had not even taken direct fire yet. The big bonus he already spent in his fantasies burned up with his eyesight. The blast caught him by surprise and, for a moment, he feared he was blind. Nope, but they now had one fewer hovercraft. "*Todo eso vale verga!*"

Then the surviving hovercraft opened their ramps and the small passenger ones flew out. Screaming for their lives, guys climbed off the big one to get a ride. Sal pushed a *paisa* from Medellin out of the way to catch the last spot on the last ride out. He laughed at his good fortune, only to ask why the fuck they were heading in the wrong direction.

"The river is the other way!"

The drug lords picked drivers for their loyalty, those sneaky fucks. Salvador broke a leg against a tree and pulled in his other limbs while crying like a little bitch. He was useless after that, so his companions tried pushing him off. Sal shot one with a pistol so they'd stop.

It seemed to take forever to get through the trees. He saw a hundred other hovercraft and heard their boss order the attack. He sat up to see what they were attacking and thought, fuck that! It looked like the gate that natives used to keep out King Kong. They weren't getting through that. Then something punctured their inflatable, the front dipped into a tree stump and the hovercraft turtled.

Salvador Blanco now had a broken arm and leg. He surrendered, watching incredulously as his companions tried out-shooting snipers and heavy machine guns. The enemy yelled at survivors to drop all weapons and approach. A little kid with a big rifle walked up to him and kicked him in the nuts.

"I shot your boat!"

The torture began that night and lasted all the next day. He was a city boy who didn't know shit about coca production. After failing even simple questions about the coca trade, they left him alone while he begged for food.

At dawn they marched him and a few hundred others into a big hole, crawling with spiders, and pushed them in. Sal broke his good leg and his good arm in the fall. His back didn't feel well, either. Looking around him, he tried imagining how their well-funded armada ended up like this. He saw his boss' boss and screamed questions like it mattered.

"Hey, *culero!* How come we lost? Are you as stupid as I feel? We didn't even get to see into the canyon. I wanted to see a million spiders and Gonzo's hot wife. You owe me! This must be a septic because I feel like shit."

Then the first spider landed on him. It hopped from a tree. Sal didn't see it until it popped on his shoulder, peering at his face like it wanted to answer his questions. Spiders don't talk, but they stare well. Two big eyes up front, and three on either side to scout for predators. It was bigger, heavier, and hairier than he had imagined.

“Vete al diablo!”

The spider either didn't understand Spanish or didn't think it merited a reply, as obviously they were already in Hell, given the heat. Other men began screaming until it reached a horrible crescendo.

A feast 100 million years in the making happened on video as the mega sank her fangs into Salvador Blanco. He screamed like a girl and wet himself like a baby. Some kind of acid burned and dissolved his organs, turning them into a liquidy mush. A spider spun web around his head to get more comfortable and the last thing he experienced was a giant prehistoric spider drinking him from the inside out.

Chapter 27

Gonzalo spent the next few years using drones to drop off pregnant spiders in loose bags wherever he found narcos in the jungle. Every night he flew at least one trip, slowing until the drone almost stalled, then release them on a hilltop or thick canopy. Each bred several hundred more, who had to spread out to find food enough for them all, especially as they grew so fast. Soon drug-infested areas of Colombia were spider-infested and drug lords in Colombia were a shadow of their former selves. No longer could they afford to buy cops, generals, and politicians. The military took the rest of Colombia, though few lived in the jungle anymore.

Gonzalo maximized venom production, filling the canyon, as competitors popped up. They had trouble producing in quantity as they didn't own big tracks of land rent-free and had trouble getting city permits for deadly venom factories. The gravy train wouldn't last forever, so Gonzalo tried riding it for all he was worth. Which, according to Fortune magazine, was a cool \$1 billion.

All he had to do was sit back and enjoy it all.

Chapter 28

Gonzalo answered the phone because he didn't get to talk to Junior much since he started university in Bogota.

“Que pasa, calabasa?”

“Dad, I met someone.”

“Female, I hope.”

“I think I'm in love.”

Gonzalo ran to find his wife. “I've heard sex can cure that. What's the lucky girl's name?”

“Juliana Maria Obredo Obredo, but I just call her awesome.”

Latinos have two last names. The first is their father's and the second the mother's. If the father does not give his last name, then the child is stuck with the same name twice.

“We’d love to meet her.”

“Can I bring her over Christmas break?”

Sofia now had her ear to the phone. She nodded, eyes shut in concentration.

“Christmas is good. I’ll send a chopper for you two.”

“Thanks, dad. You’re the best.”

Christmas came all too soon. The parents greeted their boy and his hot *novia* as they stepped down from the helicopter. She chose an outfit that showed much and promised more.

“Nice to meet you, Juliana. This is my wife, Sofia.”

They shook hands and the girl could not contain her excitement. “I’ve wanted to meet you two for so long!”

“Junior, give her the grand tour. Dinner will be ready around 6.”

No sooner did the lovebirds get out of hearing when his wife pulled Gonzalo close: “Who got her the boob job? I went up two sizes, but I bet she went up four. She looks like she works in porn.”

“Let’s not prejudge her,” Gonzalo warned. “Junior is smitten.”

“Everyone thinks his father is a billionaire. I sense something false about her. She should prove her love.”

“I’d prefer they take it slow,” Gonzalo carefully admitted, knowing young love will do what it wants.

They had just finished dinner when Junior dropped the good news: “We’re pregnant!”

Sofia froze, her stomach churning.

Gonzalo tried to cover their shock. “Both of you? I’ll expect twins, then.”

“Mom, dad, I’ve asked Juliana to marry me.”

“You just turned 17. Shouldn’t you spend more time getting to know each other?”

“You married at 16 and Emilia is getting married at 16.”

Emilio’s daughter fell for a wealthy, politically-connected landowner. The fiancée was several years older, a fighter pilot, and an overall great guy. Sofia planned to ask Emilia to investigate Juliana.

“We also grew up together,” Dad countered. “I knew her family and her family knew me. Our engagement surprised no one.”

“I want to marry on my 18th birthday.” Junior seemed unusually insistent. “A month after the baby is born. I’d prefer to wed here, but her family can host it in Bogota.”

Gonzalo didn’t feel safe elsewhere in Colombia. Too many *ricos* (rich people) got kidnapped. Gonzalo suffered from *cara de rico* (rich man’s face). It was a play on *cara de mico* (monkey face), a common insult. He took Sofia on vacations in America and Europe because paranoia can ruin a good time. Dad tried to be politic.

“Continue dating and, if you’re both still in love, then you can wed when you’re 18.”

Because he could not stop them. The young lovers enjoyed a wonderful weekend while the parents freaked out. Gonzalo had a pool with inflatable slides and the fake blonde looked designed for micro-bikinis.

“Pregnant, my ass,” his wife complained.

“They won’t last long if she isn’t pregnant. She sunk her fangs into a virgin and is sucking him dry.”

Gonzalo didn’t mean for that to sound sexual.

The happy couple returned to school that Sunday and Gonzalo thought that’d be the last of it. But, no, they flew back every long weekend and Juliana, indeed, was very pregnant. If anything, they looked even deeper in love, annoyingly so.

“Did we flaunt sex like them?” Gonzalo asked his wife, who looked at him blankly.

“We had sex after Junior’s birth? You worked full time while studying full time and I had my hands full with a baby.”

Junior Skyped the birth of little Gonzo from the best hospital in Bogota. Her parents and Emilio’s family waited in the next room. They did a C-section to schedule the birth and to not cut open her belly—she planned on getting her flat belly back. The newborn was even cuter than they hoped for.

“Dad, do you want the wedding in the canyon or in Bogota?”

Gonzalo lost his first battle. “*Mijo*, wherever you want.”

Chapter 29

Security called Gonzalo to the command room. “Ten soldiers on horseback approaching. Never seen them this close before. Think they want wedding cake?”

“Keep an eye on them, without killing them.”

Because he destroyed roads in his area, troops had to get around on horse. Gonzalo gave several hovercraft to an elite military anti-drug team to score positive press. The president himself thanked him. The government did not control all territory within its borders, but the cartels lost most of what they dominated. Over 100,000 Colombians worked directly under cartels, growing coca or processing it into cocaine. Spiders moved most, but not all because Gonzalo didn’t drop spiders too close to cities. Megas moved over a million people from coca-producing areas. They hated Gonzalo while the rest of Colombia thanked him for getting their country back. Many pundits saw The End Of War. Bogota’s El Tiempo newspaper did a long interview with Gonzalo that set the tone.

Sofia intercepted him. She thought every husband should come with a GPS tracker.

“Her parents are late, but told her to start the wedding without them. They should be here tonight.”

Gonzalo didn’t feel comfortable letting his son marry without meeting the girl’s parents. Junior said her mother was great, but the father abandoned her before her birth. Bastard wouldn’t even give her his last name. Both Junior and Emilia met and liked the father, the one time he visited Bogota, but learned very little of him. The maternal grandma took care of the one-month old in Bogota.

Juliana brought a film crew and several friends. Gonzalo had never had so many strangers in his canyon home. It made him very uncomfortable. He hated having to give spider tours on his only son’s wedding because he needed to spray himself each time. It didn’t smell horrible, but it was far from perfume. Junior had

never looked happier, though, so he bit his tongue and wished his wife did the same. Sofia liked Juliana less, with every visit.

The wedding was gorgeous and they streamed it live for millions of spider fans. The bride looked stunning and Junior was never more handsome. He thought he won the lottery and said as much. Emilia just got her own boob job, which sent her fiancée in the clouds. Gonzalo toasted the happy couple. As soon as he finished his prepared speech, the helicopter carrying her parents flew in. It was bigger than he expected, so maybe they brought a ton of luggage. He jogged topside to greet them. On the way, he bumped into Angel, chilling with Isabella.

“Check the horsemen. They were getting too close without an invitation. The Auto-Snipers may kill them by accident.”

The twelve guests got out while the rotors still turned, but on the far side, pulling out suitcases. Juliana’s parents walked to Gonzalo, dressed to perfection. She looked familiar and was almost as beautiful as Juliana, while he wore a beard, shades, and a Mexican sombrero. At the last moment Gonzalo saw him pull out a taser and shoot him in the chest.

Gonzalo was not a crier, but he cried now because his blurry eyesight confirmed his worst nightmare.

“*Que pasa, calabasa?*” Wilmar asked him, smiling hilariously as he zip-tied Gonzalo’s wrists once he stopped vibrating. “Get up. I want to see my son-in-law.”

“Why?” Gonzalo mumbled, the electricity still shocking his system.

“Our grandson, Gonzalo Gonzales, will inherit your family’s vast estate, once you and yours die. My daughter gets to kill your annoyingly perfect son, but I get to kill your daughter, nieces, and nephews. I’ve waited for this moment for so long. I told you I would be back.”

The vindictive couple grabbed him by the arms and dragged him to the canyon edge, where they looked for a way down. Gonzalo saw the professor’s autistic grandson, tending the garden, which he enjoyed. He had always wanted to free the spiders because he, himself, hated being caged up.

“*Dejalos!*” Gonzalo ordered. That means “let them go,” but Wilmar thought he referred to the stupid plants.

“Is that the retard Juli told me about?” Wilmar asked. “I should put him out of his misery.”

“*En serio?*” the young man yelled up, because he had asked to free the spiders ever since he got there, years ago.

“*Si. Dejalos ya!*”

Delirious, he ran between two lines of shipping containers, pulling levers to open them while the intruders slid down a PVC tube that spiraled down. The ten gunmen soon tossed down the bags of guns and ammo to seize control of the canyon. Now within the canyon, Wilmar pulled Gonzalo to the mansion.

“What is that retard doing?”

“Just playing with the spiders.”

That lie didn’t last long. “That idiot is opening the containers! *Perra*, hold Gonzo so I can shoot him.”

Juli’s mom grabbed him, so Gonzalo jackknifed his body. His forehead broke the bitch’s nose and showered her in blood. Gonzalo stumbled back into Wilmar, who shot a container instead of the kid. Everyone heard it and its echo. Furious,

Wilmar bashed Gonzalo's head with the handle of his gun, knocking him out. Or so it looked. In fact, his fingers were clawing his pants pocket for his phone to warn his wife, who was first on his speed dial. He closed his eyes to concentrate, imagining what his phone was asking as he pressed buttons. It sure looked like he was knocked out, however.

Wilmar missed his first five shots, but hit the kid on the sixth, right in the back. He face-planted the grass and didn't get up. He must have opened a hundred containers. Wilmar needed to close them fast, but something big jumped on Juli's mom. The *bandido* had never seen a mega up close before. It was fanging her bloody face while she screamed bloody murder. While a gun battle started by the mansion, Wilmar tried kicking the spider off his obsessive ex. The mega turned and leaped. Wilmar had been in plenty of fights, so he ducked to one side while using the barrel of his gun to knock it away. Then he ran to the wedding reception, looking back to see Gonzo covered in spiders. Then, to his horror, he watched his ten best gunmen slide down the tube into a few dozen spiders, who attacked. His guys shot some, but didn't last long as the megas jumped them from all sides.

He just lost his most loyal people. Gonzo didn't get up and two spiders were sucking his ex. He heard the retard groaning so Wilmar shot him again. As he jogged, he heard the Auto-Snipers, which were supposed to be on "safe," blow away his horsemen dressed in army uniforms. He called the squad leader, who didn't answer.

At the mansion, his goons pointed their guns at a few dozen guards who had them trapped. He heard running, which meant more gunmen would soon arrive. Several guests and three of his soldiers bled out from gunshot wounds, which meant he did not have the men to keep the canyon. Alejandro used Isabella as a human shield, another Gonzo's hot wife, and Juli held a knife to Junior's throat. Wilmar smiled at Sofia, pushed his gunmen away, and wrapped an arm around her. He backed up against a concrete wall, next to Alejandro. Mother and daughter exchanged grim looks.

"Mija, spiders got the pilot, so we must ride out of here."

"Where's mama?" Juli asked, her joy turning to terror.

"Spiders got her and, if we don't leave now, they'll get us all. That retard let a hundred loose."

"We can't just leave!" the crazy bitch screamed at her father. "You promised me a billion dollar business. Just get more men."

"I don't have more pilots or helicopters, and the ten riding here, posing as soldiers, just died."

A hundred armed residents now encircled Wilmar.

"Did you kill my dad?" Junior asked, finally appreciating how bad things were.

"Spiders got to him before I could kill him." Wilmar sounded apologetic. "I needed him as a hostage to turn over control to me. For years I dreamed of torturing him to death. A mega death was too painless. He deserved to die hard."

Junior knew his wife was gonna kill him. He felt like such a tool. Their whole relationship was a lie, a con, *un engano*. "With my father dead, I am now in charge. Grandpa, do not let them leave to rape mama and Isabella."

Grandpa pointed his automatic at Wilmar. “I remember you. You shot up my windows and laughed like a clown. I fucking hate clowns. My wife had nightmares for years, because of you.”

Junior used the distraction to turn in place, felt the cake knife pierce his neck, instead of his throat, and bit Juli’s nose while his hands tried choking the bitch out of her. Wilmar stepped forward to get a better angle and shot Junior in the head. Blood splashed Juli’s face like cheap makeup. Then someone shot his dick off. Wilmar fired back reflexively.

“Dad?” The bullet entered his father’s stomach. Wilmar knew how long and painful gut wounds were. “How could you shoot your own son?”

His father had many regrets, but shooting off his son’s dick was not one of them. He laid on the ground like he was about to turn on TV.

“You’re not my son. You’re an expensive mistake, a bitter regret, and an enormous disappointment. Your mama prays for you, but I know prayer doesn’t work because God does not intervene. Mijo, you’re a blind slave to your stupid cock. Junior was right—you’d rape Sofia and Isabella to death if you could. I just couldn’t live with that. I wanted to retire to San Andres Island, but thought our presence held you back. Never dreamed my own son would kill me.”

His mother rushed over, wailing, and hugged her husband. Shedding tears, she turned on her only son. “I disown you! You are the opposite of all I wished for in a son. I hope they kill you and your *puta disgraciada* (disgraceful whore) of a daughter.”

Juli grabbed a gun from Alejandro’s belt and shot her grandmother in the chest. “Fuck you, *mamita!* I’ve only been with Junior because dad couldn’t risk me getting knocked up by anyone else.” Then she put her gun to Alejandro’s head and pulled the trigger. Juli grabbed Isabella by the hair to get her own human shield as Alejandro collapsed at her feet. “Dad, Junior showed me stacks of cash in a vault. Let’s stuff some bags before we leave.”

The original Gonzo laughed bitterly. “Only my son and grandson knew the combinations and you killed them both. I never need money, so I never needed to know.”

Wilmar couldn’t believe every man he brought had already died. His luck sucked ass and the pain from his blown crotch was getting worse. “*Vamos, mija.* We’ll ransom these bitches later. Hey, *viejo,*” he said to Gonzo’s dad. “Get me a medical kit with heavy pain pills or I’ll kill these bitches.”

As night fell, the residents of the canyon watched them ride off into the sunset, two to a horse to not get sniped. Wilmar rode sidesaddle because his phantom dick had an erection.

Chapter 30

Gonzalo found Angel on a berm with his sniper rifle. “If you get a good shot at Wilmar, take it.”

Angel freaked out like a spider jumped on him. “I heard you were dead.”

“Just played dead until the spiders got off me. They ignored me, just as the professor promised. He’s still crying over his grandson. Never expected to out-live the boy. His doctors expected the professor to die years ago, but the serum beat back his cancer. I doubt he’ll last much longer, though. His daughter is an even better geneticist. I hope she continues working here to genetically improve each generation.”

Angel put an eye to his scope. “The horse moves up and down too much to get a clean shot from this distance. It might go through him to hit Sofia. That bitch Juli has a pistol pointed at Isabella’s head. If Isabella was here, with a sniper rifle, I’d chance two shots, but no one else is a good enough shooter.”

“Sofia says you proposed when you got my daughter pregnant. You’re my best friend. How come you never brought it up?”

“I wanted to marry Isa, but didn’t want to be associated with Juli. Isa wanted a duel wedding, but I went with my instincts. I thought the marriage would be bad, not the wedding. Junior didn’t even get a honeymoon.”

Fury consumed Gonzalo. “Bastard killed my boy and took my women. We must get them back tonight or we may not get them back at all.”

Gonzalo did not sound hopeful. He lead several of his best men, riding hard to catch up. About midnight, they saw a light descend from the sky. A few minutes later it rose, Gonzalo howling at it like a moon. They found the horses. The one covered in blood already attracted spiders.

“A helicopter picked them up,” Gonzalo said, unable to believe his ears. His phone tracked their GPS positions as they flew away. “We should have put up anti-air drones. I just lost my wife and daughter.”

“We can still find them before it’s too late,” Angel argued.

“A fortress and several thousand gunmen will protect them. I need an army to get my girls back.” A spider jumped on Wilmar’s horse, driving its fangs into the throat. Others joined the feast. “Angel, I have an idea.”

Chapter 31

As soon as they landed, the ladies turned their watches on to emit a sound that humans could not hear. Rough hands tore off their jewelry and searched them for phones before they were thrown behind bars. Blood on the concrete floor warned them that other prisoners had been tortured to death here. Some cells had wide beds with straps secured to four posts—rape beds. The holding cells for men had simple cots.

Morales visited his new prisoners while they ate breakfast. “Senora Gonzalez, I am sorry to hear about the loss of your son. I only expected your husband to die. Wilmar sold me on a hostile takeover of a billion-dollar business. Instead, I’ve lost men, a chopper, and a lot of patience. How much will your father-in-law pay for you and your daughter?”

“In good condition? Whatever he has in cash, if he could trust you. He’s never wired money in his life. Unless you let me Skype him, he will assume we are being

raped and think death preferable to that. Right now he probably plans on attacking you with drones.”

“Give me his phone number.” Morales wrote it down as she slowly recited it. “I have anti-air defenses, but I’ll text him that I’ll cut you up if he attacks.”

“He’ll attack anyways because he assumes we’re lost. I can stop him if you let him see me.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I need to speak with Wilmar when he wakes up from surgery. He has cost me more than he is worth.”

Sofia laughed bitterly. “He’ll cost your everything. Imagine several times as many megas around your coca fields. Return us before Wilmar wakes up and I promise you all the cash in the canyon.”

“It’s nice to deal with a businesswoman. I may not rape you, after all.” He gazed at Isabella, who tried to look less hot. “I must be compensated for my losses. If you cannot convince your father-in-law to air-drop all his cash, then I’ll be pounding your beautiful daughter three times a day.”

“We knew we’d be raped to death since last night. Mr. Gonzales won’t give you anything until he knows for sure we will be released unharmed. Touch us and you’ll get nothing but pain and misery.”

“I’ve been threatened all my life, yet I’m still here.”

She stood up to stare him down. “By anyone who has their own air force?”

“I’ll give you one free day. After that, if I’m not given compensation, then I’ll take it instead.”

Chapter 32

On his smartphone, Gonzalo watched a video of Emilia, in Bogota, knock on a door. Two young thugs answered suspiciously. She wore short shorts and a tight half-top that exposed her flat belly (*una hombligera*). Looking like a hot teenager needing quick cash, she explained herself.

“Wilmar sent me to keep you guys company. That is, if you’re in the mood to party.”

They were. One ran to the store to buy a case of *guaro* while the other asked her in. She found the old lady watching a baby in a crib and clicked twice on her phone. She took off her top and asked the bad boy why he was wearing so many clothes. Then she shot him while he had his pants around his knees. Thinking of her cousin Isabella, Emilia shot Juli’s maternal grandmother and left with baby Gonzalo, the fourth of his name. When the other thug returned, gunmen were waiting and ready.

“Putting a GPS tracker in the baby’s favorite toy just saved his life,” Emilio told his brother-in-law, proud of his little girl. “Now it’s my turn.”

The Metal Storm drone shot several million bullets as the druggies listened outside to Morales give a speech. Hundreds of drug thugs fell like flies. A few dozen pilots sat at workstations, concentrating. On his tiny screen, Gonzalo watched a drone shoot a hellfire into the chopper that rescued Wilmar. Other drones blew the shit out of armed vehicles, then started on buildings and outer

walls. The fools wasted their shoulder-mounted anti-air, heat-seeking missiles on electric fuel-cell drones which did not radiate heat.

They had better luck with their heavy weapons; most pickup trucks had one bolted on the back. The sheer number succeeded in down several drones, but Gonzalo had plenty. Sniper drones picked off enemies, the Metal Storm would return several times a day, and air-to-ground rockets constantly harassed them. Gonzalo wanted a continuous attack, 24/7, to give no rest to the wicked.

While Gonzalo walked on a road through jungle, a dozen technicians in the canyon spliced and diced “best of” videos from the drone cameras. The YouTube channel called The Great Spider War just got hours of content for news organizations to use for free. It turned out that drug traffickers getting their asses kicked was very popular worldwide. The Colombian president ordered the military to take back the interior jungle along their border with Venezuela—once Gonzo cleared it for them.

The world’s most unusual war just entered a new phase and a billion people couldn’t get enough.

Chapter 33

At the cartel headquarters, before dawn, they lifted Wilmar to the “hospital” and the doctor worked on him right away.”

“Will it still work?” the bully begged.

“Your penis can probably still pee, but you’ll miss less if you do it sitting down.”

Wilmar didn’t give a shit about that. “Can I still get an erection?”

The doctor paused to stare at him. “With what?” he showed the thug what remained and the little bitch cried.

“But they can fix that, right?” Wilmar asked. “Somewhere, there’s a clinic that can give me a working cock?”

He had read how some crazy gringa cut off her husband’s penis and threw it out the window. Doctors not only sowed it back on, but the dude stared in porn movies and remarried. Surely there was hope.

The doctor lost his license for becoming addicted to prescription drugs. Working for a drug lord kept him supplied. Rather than tell the truth, he said whatever would keep this dickless asshole off his back.

“Sure. You can probably just Google that shit. Now lay still while I sow you up.”

After Morales jailed Gonzo’s wife and daughter in his basement bunker, he asked the doctor his opinion.

“Fucker has a one-inch penis that will probably spray urine on his hands. Other than that, and never fucking bitches again, Wilmar will be fine.”

Juli had never been here before and couldn’t wait to leave. The druggies saw her oversized boobs, unnaturally flat tummy, bloody wedding dress, and assumed she was here to party. She didn’t even have other clothes to change into.

“Back off, fuckers,” she warned, waving a pistol around. “I’m Wilmar’s daughter.”

One explained reality to her. “Leaders become leaders by getting followers. Wilmar got all his men killed. We don’t work for him. If he fucks with us, then he has to answer to our friends or leader. Besides, word is he just lost his dick. No one will follow a dickless leader. Ironic how that dickhead lost his dick head.”

“I call first dibs,” a commander said with authority upon seeing what fell in their lap.

“Wilmar will kill you!”

“Not if I kill him first. Mateo, explain to the doctor that Wilmar may wake up homicidal—that wouldn’t be unusual—and offer to strap him down and keep him sedated.”

Smiling, Mateo took off for the hospital. Juli raised her gun, clearly intending on using it, when someone struck her arm with a stick. The gun went off, and maybe killed a bug in the dirt, before a dozen hands ripped her bloody clothes off.

“Take her to my place,” the commander ordered. “I have room for us all.”

Chapter 34

Military gunships and news helicopters over-flew the migration. Avila Alvarez, a hot fake-blond reporter, looked and sounded horny at the sight of a million giant spiders crawling towards Venezuela. The jungle itself seemed to move as they marched.

“Folks, this is the first time in history that a massive collection of spiders has acted in concert. It looks like an ant colony, a mile wide and several miles deep. Every day more join. How many megas will Spiderman command when he reaches *Narcolandia*? They’re eating everything in their way, except their fearless leader, walking among several spiders twice as big as the others. Where did he get such huge creatures? They’re unnatural. The largest is the size of a car. Social media has named her the Queen. I should ask him. Pilot, set us down in the road.”

Someone off camera could not contain their disbelief. “*Estas loca?*” The chopper landed and spiders soon crawled over it. The pilot looked at a monster on his windshield, looking down at him like lunch. “I think they’re hungry.”

Not getting out, the reporter waved at Gonzalo. He had a metal walking stick and carried a big backpack. He had not shaved, lost ten pounds, and was looking fierce.

“Mr. Gonzales? Please give me a minute. Viewers want to know your intentions.”

He walked up to the transparent door and studied them calmly. “Narcos took my wife and daughter,” he said as if the internet did not talk of anything else. “I’m gonna get them back, dead or alive.”

He, however, was just a distraction. It’d take him too long to walk to Morales’s base. Instead, it was up to Angel’s crew to rescue the women.

“You’re a billionaire. Why didn’t you just pay a ransom?”

“He killed my only son. Some debts can only be paid with blood. If Wilmar flies or drives from his fortress, my drones will blow him to bits. Even if he carries my girls.”

“How do you command spiders?” she asked as if just looking at him was making her wet. Indeed, HotGonzo would soon become a meme. A billionaire giving up his life to rescue his women? That shit scored views. Men loved the spider army while women loved his heroism. Gonzo became the king of clickbait. “And why are some so much bigger?”

“We made them bigger every generation. We’ve been replacing smaller ones with bigger ones to get more venom for the same work. We also optimized them for our needs, which meant making them easier to condition. Smarter does not capture what we did. They only live a few years, so the Super-Megas are several generations into the modification program. That means several generations of their ancestors have been genetically engineered to meet a unique set of needs. The big ones have my DNA, for example, so I smell like family instead of food. They will follow me into hell, as you’ll soon see.”

“But can they beat several thousand drug soldiers?”

“That’s what I’m about to find out. I’m gonna kill them all.” He paused to look at the chopper. “And everyone in my way.”

“We were just leaving. Thank you for speaking with me.” She turned to the camera, feeling as soaking hot as she looked. “This exclusive interview with Spiderman, Gonzalo Gonzales, comes from Avila Alvarez of Hot Chile News.”

The helicopter rose, a few spiders sliding off. She looked at one man among a million arachnids, not realizing he drove his metal walking stick into the ground. Humans were not sensitive enough to its vibrations, but megas heard from miles away and came crawling.

While the professor and his daughter did make them bigger, the learning that they passed down to the next generation had nothing to do with genetic engineering. All animals pass down lessons learned. Gonzalo found out early that the offspring of spiders trained to respond to vibration cues caused the fewest problems. Spiderlings of parents who ejected venom into receptacles when asked grew up knowing to do the same to get fed. They barely had to teach the second generation. Several generations later, their response was instinctive. The vibration sticks made them come, go, attack, feed, or eject venom on command. The spiders did not think; they simply obeyed, like mice pushing a lever to get cheese. The bigger ones were safest because several generations of ancestors imbedded these cues into their DNA. Conditioning had also taught them to consider those with specific smells as food producers rather than food.

Though Gonzalo could not be sure, he doubted spiders would kill his wife and daughter when they over-ran the enemy camp. Rather than take that chance, Angel and a dozen gunmen planned to infiltrate the camp and implant rods to attract spiders. Gonzalo had distributed megas across that area to deny it to Morales. Those vibrations told them to come and feed.

Gonzalo paused to rest every few hours because spiders are not used to walking that far, that fast. He checked his phone for the latest updates. Every day thousands of mega joined him, lured into his path by the vibrating rods that scouts had inserted along his path. His interview already went viral and someone turned one quote into a pop song. Gonzalo listened, astonished how fast the world moved.

“I’m gonna kill them all,” he heard himself say over the dance beat. “I’m gonna kill them all.”

Chapter 35

Morales was telling everyone in the courtyard what the fuck was up because too many rumors infiltrated his fortress.

“*Hombres*, I’ve ordered more food, ammo, and heavy weapons. We just got another hundred recruits from Santa Marta. Please teach them, this time, instead of challenging them to duels. The spiders suck, but at least they keep Torres on his side of the border. Our truce is still holding and the government is leaving us alone. Coca production is down, but we’re lining fields with spider poison -- that’s the only thing that keeps them out of here.

“As many of you have heard, Wilmar’s mission to take the canyon failed again. I’m as shocked as you that Wilmar fucked up. Again. But there is justice in the world because his own father shot his dick off. I mean literally, not metaphorically. And let me tell you, Wilmar is pissed! He’s both pissed off and pissed on. If you want to mess with Wilmar, he’s strapped to a bed so he doesn’t start shooting people at random. I gave him condoms just to fuck with him.

“He brought a couple of hostages. I am negotiating their ransoms. Please be patient. You remember how it works: first we get all their cash, then we fuck their bitches. They both look tasty, too, and the older one is a grandma. I can’t remember the last time I raped a grandma. Months, certainly.

“Wilmar not only didn’t get the canyon with the million spiders, but led the enemy to us. And this enemy has armed drones, so keep our anti-air guns manned at all times. Our primitive radar is better at spotting big planes than small drones, so expect the unexpected.”

The alarm blared and lights flashed red. The guys laughed.

“Very funny, Franco. I’m trying to be serious for once, and you’re fucking around.”

Franco yelled from the back. “With my diarrhea, I can’t do shit.”

The Metal Storm drone had been diving from high altitude to get past the usual programmed threat detectors. Gunships come in low, so Emilio dropped from up high. He lined up the courtyard and 36 barrels started emptying their magazines. He swept the open spaces by gently banking his bird. It only took a few minutes to exhaust several million bullets. He clicked the Return To Base button and then Auto-Pilot to grab the controls of a missile drone.

The first wave already dropped their air-to-ground missiles. Pickup trucks with .50 caliber machine guns, auto-cannon, and chain guns blew up in spectacular fashion, shredding shrapnel into enemy soldiers. Morales had several armored vehicles—mostly personnel carriers—Emilio assigned two drones to each. Sniper drones concentrated on easy targets or those yelling orders.

Morales dived off stage into the dirt, but a bullet pierced his thigh anyways. It hurt like hell, but wouldn’t be fatal unless it got infected. He got under cover and yelled at them to use the anti-air guns. Thirty drones shot their loads, then

returned to base for more ammo, except three that his boys shot down. Auto-cannon burst the first drone diving at them into a million pieces; it took out the gun that killed it. A Ma Deuce heavy machine gun got another, that lost control and wandered over the horizon. A chain gun clipped a third, but the remote-pilot flew it, trailing smoke, into a corner wall. The bastard even lined up the run so momentum would take out a few hundred feet of tall stone wall. Emilio watched the camera on his drone until it 9/11'ed. The solution was so obvious it pissed him off he didn't think of it earlier. He called over his father-in-law.

"Please fuel every old drone we have and stuff them with explosives. We're gonna knock down walls so Angel can get in and the girls can get out!"

They had a dozen old unarmed weather or spy drones. This was the perfect way to get rid of them.

It wasn't until the drone fleet left to re-arm that Morales heard the mortars. There was only one hill within range and the enemy must be on it. A chopper must have dropped them off last night, as he controlled all roads here. He ordered a battalion to take it and limped to the hospital. Their only doctor was working on someone else, but Morales needed pain drugs now.

"I don't have room for all the wounded," the doctor said nervously because he was often punished for things outside of his control. "And two of the three nurses are too high to be trusted."

"Just get the bullet out of my leg," Morales ordered. Wilmar snored from across the room. "That *pendejo* may cost me everything."

Chapter 36

Max Maximo loved his fucking name, and loved his parents for giving it to him. It helped him get noticed. With more self-confidence than he deserved, he wore bright colors, carried big guns, and bragged more than most. He looked at the thousand guys, including a hundred new recruits, and laid it on thick.

"Some assholes with a mortar are firing rounds into our home, so we gotta kill them. Jesus, take a company and flank them from the east. Felipe, flank those fuckers with your company from the west. Rodrigo, your runners will take the paved road to get behind them. Be ready to ambush those pussies when they run. The rest of us will attack from here. The hill is four miles away, so don't exhaust yourself before you get to it. These guys have big balls to hit us in our own backyard. I say we make them pay with their lives. They're still dropping several rounds a minute, so they stocked up. At 50 pounds a shell, whatever they brought should be running out soon. Does anyone have any stupid fucking questions? New guys, you get to show us how brave you are. Get those fuckers!"

The thousand men dispersed. 600 watched the newbies sprint into the jungle, waiting for surprises. When nothing happened, they followed. Thick canopy held off the sun, but the humidity still made them sweat, despite the shade.

"Max, the new guys are running into spiders."

"Then shoot them!" He paused. "The spiders, not the recruits."

They didn't know that several vibrating rods had been attracting megas since last night. This jungle was literally crawling with them. No one ventured into it anymore, but how many spiders could one jungle support? Max knew something was wrong. Three miles from the hill, there should not be this much screaming. The mortars should have had ignored them, but his guys were going through ammo like there was no tomorrow. It sounded like a battle, but one side did all the screaming. Max rushed forward to take control.

He saw his veterans triggering careful 3-round bursts into spiders above them, but his freshmen were just shooting at the canopy. They killed more time than megas. Spiders who did not fall, jumped instead, landing on rookies who begged their neighbors for help. Men were trying to pry fangs out of their buddies, only for spiders to shoot tiny arrows in all directions. What a mess!

He waived his battalion forward, himself shooting as little as possible. By the time they broke through the tree line, Max had lost most of his troops. He heard two heavy machine guns on the hilltop engage the companies he sent to flank the enemy, then the whistle of a mortar round. He was about to tell everyone to take cover when a sniper round punched him in the belly. Anti-personnel rounds burst in the air above them, killing few, but injuring most.

The blood attracted the real enemy -- spiders. They crawled from the brush to snack on his men, just as it started raining. Max laid still and put pressure on his gut wound. Time crawled as slow as the megas. The sun started to fall when several guys walked through the battlefield. Max begged them for help, assuming they were friendlies. Angel knelt next to him since he was the one who shot him. His other guys took shirts from the dead and dying to blend in.

"Hey, soldier. What's your name?"

"Max Maximo. I don't recognize you."

"*Que nombre vacano!*" What a cool name. "I'm one of the new guys. What's the password to get in? In all the excitement, I forgot."

"*Al maximo!*" To the max! "Who are you?"

"I'm the sniper who shot you. You're dying because Wilmar fucked with Spiderman. In case you wanted to know."

They walked through the trees to the target until nightfall, waving their rods to clear a path. Then the last anti-air guns opened fire. Smart missiles, fired from several miles up, exploded the last anti-air sites. Other planes flew closer. Angel looked through his sniper scope.

"Sensor drones," he told his team. "Emilio's gonna take down the outer walls. Spiders can climb walls, but defenders will no longer feel safe."

Decades before, Morales took over an abandoned military base on a hilltop near a town. Spiders forced residents to flee years ago and drone rockets blew power generators, cell towers, and communication cables. Incendiaries later burned the town to the ground and bunker busters cratered all roads in, but the fortress held a commanding height that made it easy to defend. From men. Torres didn't even bother attacking it because defenders had too many walls to hide behind. That didn't stop spiders, however, forcing Morales to freight in spider poison by the ton. Rain and time, however, reduced its effectiveness, so he had to keep pouring more around his base. Though the camp was generally rectangle-shaped, walls poked out at odd angles to deny intruders favorable terrain.

Electric drones are hard to hear over heavy rain and hard to see at night. They all crashed into walls within a minute of each other, so Emilio had coordinated them. Instead of crashing into the side, each plane hit a corner to take out a line of wall. A dozen explosions rocked the camp and killed hundreds of defenders. Fire made the rain sizzle like a steak and the howls from dozens of screaming men pierced the dark.

At a fortress entrance, Angel yelled the password, “al maximo.”

Fools opened the gate. “Where’s everyone else?” a guard demanded. They had heard the terrifying battle.

“Watching Max torture the bad guys. He sent us rookies to bring him grenades for the spiders, but didn’t say where they are stored.” The guard saw all the blood on their clothing and stared at them like heroes. He pointed to an underground depot. “How many did the drones get?”

The guards were dumbfounded by the casualties. “A few thousand. What are the metal poles for?”

“To hit spiders. Millions surround us.”

They didn’t take that well. “You smell like shit.”

It was the spider perfume. “We’re not used to the jungle. Hey, I got wounded. Where’s the medical center?”

The hospital had more wounded than room. A few drugged out nurses milled about, scared and overwhelmed. Half the patients screamed for pain killers. The cries would drive anyone crazy. Angel found Wilmar, laying in a cheap cot in the corner, unconscious. Angel wanted him to die hard, so he drew the curtains and broke the bastard’s arms, legs, and fingers. That drained the rage a bit.

The doctor was doing surgery. Angel cut his throat from behind, emptied a gasoline can in the medicine room, and burned all those pills. On the way out he shot the nurses. He met his team by the ammo dump. They had planted a dozen rods where wall became rubble. That’d call spiders for miles. Fires still illuminated the base, but would die out soon. Each man carried a crate.

“Grenades,” one told Angel with a sly smile.

“We still need to find the women.”

“Then we grenade every building that doesn’t have them. Carlos is booty-trapping the ammo depot. God I love demolition experts!”

They started with bunkers, noting those with locked doors. Angel would hit those last, before dawn.

Chapter 37

Pain pills knocked out Morales, who slept through the worst of the explosions in his basement bunker. He stayed alive with the help of a network of informants. An army captain called him on his satellite phone.

“How much would you pay for me to get a sniper drone to take out Gonzo?”

They never addressed each other by name.

“Spiders killed Gonzo in the canyon.”

“Then why is he leading an army of spiders to you?”

“*Mentiroso!*” (Liar!)

“The interview he did is all over TV and social media. You should get better internet. Let me know if you want a sniper drone to kill him. It will not be cheap and you will have to pay up front because you may die soon.”

Bullets from the Metal Storm weapon messed up his satellite receiver, so Morales had to watch the video on his phone, cursing the lag time. He’d get a few seconds, have to wait a minute while it buffered, then get another few seconds. It was hard to tell if it was the real Gonzo. The internet, though, seemed convinced. This made things better and made them worse. Despite the late hour, he limped to the basement jail.

“Senora, it appears your husband is alive.”

“I know. He texted me before Wilmar threw away my phone.”

He wanted to punch her so bad. “If he wires me a million dollars, I’ll set you free.”

“He can’t do that from his phone. I need my phone, but Wilmar threw it out of the helicopter. Gonzalo won’t send you a peso until he knows we were safe and un-violated.”

She gave him the number, Morales dialed, and Gonzalo picked up on the first ring.

“Alo?” He sounded like he was still walking.

“Mr. Gonzales! I have your wife and daughter with me.”

“Mr. Morales, if you let them go now, I will not take all you have left. If you don’t let them go, then I will kill everyone you love, starting with your grandkids. Three of them attend the same university as my son did, until he was murdered on his wedding by your employee.”

“Since I have your women, I get to threaten you, you don’t get to threaten me.”

“I had you researched years ago. I know of five of the mothers of your children. Six of your kids have married. I know of twelve grandkids. And that’s before I put a price on their heads. I have millions of friends and followers online now, while half-a-billion people signed up for Gonzo Google Alerts. I’ve typed the full names, bios, and addresses of every family member that I know of. Uploading the list will take just a moment.”

Morales pulled out a gun and killed the wall. “I just shot your wife. Do as I say or I’ll kill your daughter.”

“Give me a moment to send a text.” Gonzalo came back on. “I just told my teams to take their first targets. If you harm my daughter, your entire family will die.”

“I have your girls, so I have control.”

“Most of your men will be dead soon. Your only hope is to turn over my family and leave Colombia forever.”

Morales laughed. “You remind me of your old man. I liked him, despite his mouth. Did you know you had an older brother? I killed the toddler in your dad’s arms, the last time he talked back to me. Must I do the same to your daughter?”

“A million dollars? I can do that. But first I must talk to them.”

Morales gestured for them to yell. “*Mi amor*, he didn’t shoot me.”

“*Hola, papa*. They haven’t raped me yet.”

“An angel is watching over you, then. Morales, my phone needs charging. I have solar panel shoulder pads, but they don’t work at night. Let’s talk tomorrow to

arrange the details before my phone dies. I'll also pay you \$100 million U.S. if you torture Wilmar to death. Upload that video and text me the link."

"Done!"

They disconnected and Morales studied Sofia.

"Does he have that much liquid cash?"

"He'll have to sell stock, but that was probably the first thing he did after our kidnapping. I need to see the man who shot my son die. Horribly."

"Pain killers knocked him out, but in the morning I'll tell the doctor to stop giving him medication. He barely has any penis left and the pain seems excruciating. I don't know if I can make him feel worse than he already feels, but I'd be happy to try. You can hurt him as much as you want for just another \$1 million."

"Sold! If you release us clean, then you could retire a rich man."

"He said he has teams surveilling my family."

Sofia nodded. "We started that a decade ago. He told you to leave us alone. It was very stupid to tell him you killed his wife. I wonder how many loved ones that mistake cost you."

"I thought he was bluffing."

"My husband didn't become a billionaire from weakness and stupidity. He can see around corners. If you don't release us now, he'll take all you have. If you die tonight, he'll still kill all your family. Even that doofus your daughter Valentina married."

Morales was used to ruling the world through fear. "If I've lost a single child or grandchild, you will never leave this place alive."

"And you won't see a fucking dollar. You'll die poor, just like your father and uncles."

A series of explosions shook the hilltop. Morales got up. "We'll talk tomorrow. If my family is well, then we can do business."

Once he left, Isabella looked jubilant. "Angel came for me."

"You told me he would. I told your father I thought Angel would make an ideal husband for you."

Chapter 38

Few Colombians have air conditioning in their homes, so they put bars in the windows to prevent intruders. All night they proved ineffective against spiders. Desertions soared and someone left a gate open. Suicidal drones knocked down their outer walls and going outside was murder. Thousands of spiders crawled to the vibrating rods, looking for the promised food.

Marcos Martinez had been with Morales since a teenager. Exhausted by a day of battle, he didn't notice a shadow push his window open and crawl in. It smelled food as it crossed the concrete floor to the simple bed. Something rocked back and forth in it and the mega was hungry. It climbed up and stood on the man's chest, deciding where best to sink its fangs.

Marcos woke from a bad dream to face his worst nightmare. A giant hairy spider on his chest stared at him hungrily. He turned in bed, throwing off his blanket, and ran. It was as big as a dog, but made no noise. His screaming woke the barracks. As a sub-commander, he got his own room, but most soldiers slept together.

“Spiders!” he yelled, grabbing the first pistol he saw. He poked his head through the door and saw a spider in the window. He assumed it was trying to escape, so he shot it in triumph. But that was not the mega that sat on his chest. That hungry bastard jumped onto his leg and sank its fangs deep. He emptied the chamber, killing it, but already he felt the venom take effect.

His platoon barricaded themselves inside their barracks, but could not close the windows. Every time a shadow, real or imagined, passed by, they fired, keeping the rest of the camp awake. A commander came over to find out what the fuck was happening, but got jumped instead. They recognized his voice as he screamed. The squad leader opened the door and ran out, only to envelop himself in a spider web in the doorway. A mega rolled him up until his men started shooting. The platoon rushed out, armed to the teeth, only for monsters to chew them up. Spiders like high ground, and many stood on the roof, waiting for something to eat. Others spun webs that caught drug soldiers. They sensed movement and attacked. The screams of so many men brought out many others. Thousands of spiders fought hundreds of men in the dark. The nightmare continued in the morning, though no one got any sleep.

Chapter 39

“On three,” Angel told them, each gripping a grenade. He counted, they threw them through windows, and ran. Detonations imploded the bunker. In the last few hours, they blew six buildings and shot up several more. They got into a firefight with another group, which they won with grenades. Every vehicle, heavy weapon, and ammo dump got blown if no one was looking. They were almost the only guys outside and those inside rarely peeked out because spiders might get them. Sniper drones took out guards, but everyone on Angel’s team wore a GPS identifier.

Angel stared at spiders staring at them. He stabbed the last rod into the dirt and waited. The megas didn’t move closer or farther away. Shooting and screaming started on the other side of the building, which finally lured the megas. A dozen battles raged across the base, intensifying as the night wore on. A commander saw Angel’s team and yelled:

“Get your asses over here!” They ran around a corner into a bigger group. A hundred spiders blocked the main street. The dude yelled louder. “Form a skirmish line and blast the fuckers.”

Angel’s team mingled with the enemy, but didn’t fire when the others did. Instead they walked backwards while the enemy reloaded and unloaded on those fools. Angel shot the commander between the eyes with his Glock 17. The hollow point took off half his head.

“Grab their ammo,” Angel ordered as he scanned around them for threats. “Hey, let’s bomb those buildings!”

Two structures stood near each other, spiders covering the roofs and clinging to walls. Angel saw mostly equipment and scared soldiers in both, so his team threw grenades into one, then the other. Later they ran into a well. Pipes pumped potable water into the water system from an aquifer, so they removed the cover and dumped bodies in it. Spiders heard the splashing and crawled inside.

“Angel, there’s too many spiders.”

He noticed that himself. “Let’s find the girls and get the fuck out of here.”

They moved from shadow to shadow, shooting anyone outside and tossing grenades at targets, until they found the gang bang. Fearing it was Isabella, Angel burst in, startling the naked soldiers. His team followed, pointing weapons. They got the drop on the rapists.

“Who’s that?” Angel asked, almost politely, aiming his full automatic at their leader. Her fake-blond hair was definitely not Isabella’s. They had her arms and legs strapped to four posts and had been taking turns.

“Wilmar’s daughter. Who the fuck are you?”

“The new guys. We got our asses kicked, silencing that mortar. No one told us of this party.”

The commander noticed the rookies kept aiming their weapons. “You want to cut in line?”

Angel shook his head. “I don’t like sloppy seconds.” Half a hundred guys filled the chamber. “I heard Wilmar brought two other bitches. I’d rather party with them.”

“Morales locked them up. He gets first dibs, then me and Max.”

“Mad Max is trying to clear the base of spiders. Shouldn’t Morales be doing that?” Angel asked. “Where is our fearless leader?”

“Not endangering himself, that’s for sure. That’s how he has lived for so long.”

“Where are the two women?”

“I’ve never seen you before,” the commander said suspiciously, his cock softening. He even took a hand off Juli’s fantastic tit to bring it closer to his Sig Sauer.

Angel shot him with a three-round burst in center of mass. He turned on the nearest drug dude. “Where did Morales lock up the hostages?” That guy didn’t answer fast enough, so Angel blew off his head and aimed his rifle at a farmer-turned-soldier who just soiled himself. “Tell me and I won’t kill you.”

“In a fort within the fort, in the basement of a luxury home that’s mostly buried underground.”

“What was the name of the commander I just shot?”

“Howling Hugo.”

Angel didn’t want a firefight here. “We’ll find our own party.”

They backed out and barricaded the door. With bars on the windows, the bad guys couldn’t get out, though spiders could get in.

“Shoot the glass windows,” Angel said, “then toss in grenades, but don’t kill Juli.”

It took an hour to find tall walls that enclosed a mansion, but they couldn’t get in, so Angel called for help.

“Emilio, you got missile drones overhead? I need you to kill the guards by the gate and maybe blow a path so we can escape.”

More spiders came in, making it hard for them to find a safe place. They heard shooting and screaming all over the place as soldiers fought for their lives. The ammo depot blew like a nuke, shaking the earth and scaring the spiders.

Angel climbed a roof, sharing it with twenty spiders, and sniped several sentries within the compound. The megas knew he was there, but ignored him, so the perfume still worked, despite the rain. Rockets blew open a gate, then the drone did a kamikaze into the wall behind the mansion. Angel’s team ran in while he sniped movement within the home. He jumped down when he ran out of targets and sprinted over.

His guys were shooting it out with guards, throwing grenades like they stole too many. Sections of the structure collapsed and fires broke out. Angel found stairs leading down. With a Glock in one hand and a Beretta in the other, he kicked in the basement door and shot an old lady who kept an eye on the hostages.

“Angel!” Both ladies broke into tears. “Only Morales has the key.”

He didn’t have time to strip search the bodies above. “Use the bed as a shield.” He shot the lock until it opened and Isabella rewarded him with a wet hug.

“You are so getting laid!”

“Sofia, you okay?”

“I’ll be okay once we get out of here.”

His team exchanged fire with drug soldiers who came over to see if Morales was still alive. Angel found a back door to where the plane knocked over the wall. The outer wall, a hundred paces away, was already rubble.

“*Vamonos, muchachos!*”

The guy with the rod walked point as Angel feared spiders more than the enemy. They sprayed themselves once more, as the rain washed some off. Sniper drones helped clear their escape. They disappeared into a jungle full of prehistoric monsters. Sofia used Angel’s phone to call her husband.

“You get them out?” he asked, his voice tense.

“*Mi amor*, Angel got us out!”

Badass billionaire, Gonzalo the Gonzo Gonzales, burst into tears. He sat down and sobbed beside the Queen, who looked at him like he was crazy. His voice cracked every time he tried forming words.

Everyone on Angel’s team wore cameras. Their videos would soon dominate the internet. Her husband couldn’t talk, but Sofia could.

“Just so you know, you are all millionaires as soon as I get to my computer.”

The squad cheered their good fortune as they hacked their way through dense foliage in the dark. All had worked for the family for years and most had kids living in the canyon. A chopper dropped off another squad on the hilltop with the mortar, with literally a ton of mortar rounds, and picked up the heroes. While the new team blew buildings with the mortar, the hostages flew home to spend the morning getting hugs in the canyon.

Chapter 40

Everyone gathered around the Gonzales family graveyard to mourn their dead. The professor, Wilmar's mom, and Sofia cried the most, but not the loudest. Several spoke to the group, told funny stories, and fondly reminisced. Angel tried cheering them up.

"Isabella and I will marry this Christmas in the canyon. You're all invited." That got him some kind chuckles. "She's pregnant, so we want to tie the knot before his birth, unlike the last bastard."

Emilia, also pregnant, held baby Gonzo in her arms like a giant papaya.

"On the business side, we'll concentrate on smaller areas that drug cartels still control, then follow those that opened shop in Brazil, Peru, and Ecuador. Torres and other Venezuelans are taking advantage of their government's virtual collapse to hire the coca farmers and processors who we forced to flee. He even put the ad on Craigslist. We may need to seed those areas with pregnant megas. Deaths from spiders is up, but still a fraction compared to drug violence. Overall preventable deaths is the lowest since they started keeping records, so pat yourself on the back. Colombia has nearly doubled its urbanization, as our megas don't like cities. People in neighboring countries are already moving to avoid the rush.

"Experts say spiders will keep most people out of the 7.5 million square mile Amazon Basin. Slash-and-burn farmers in Brazil have already stopped their senseless deforestation since we dropped the first megas in their way. If the Amazon got back all its lost jungle, then global warming would slow to a crawl.

"With my million-dollar bonus, I had a company install a virtual reality center so I can shoot virtual people from now on. It's free and you are all welcome to play. I bought thousands of holographic games so future adventures will be safer.

"The president of Colombia has thanked us for ridding the country of the drug scourge. After several decades, Colombia finally won its long civil war. Stability, less income equality, and business certainty should help the country grow faster than ever. The stock price of the pharmaceutical company that distributes the serum lost half its value, after the kidnapping. Ironically, we found over a billion dollars in cash when we took the drug fortress and Sofia recovered several billion more from Morales' computers. Since we strung him up, he was quick to give us his passwords. His phone helped us find the rest of his family, who should all die soon.

"Sofia had shorted the pharmaceutical stock when Gonzalo texted her a warning of Wilmar, then sold her stake in the company, further depressing the price. Today she used that profit to buy the stock cheap and now owns a majority. She'll take the pharmaceutical private, if she can get loans to buy out other investors."

"How's Gonzalo?" the professor asked, looking good for a guy who expected to die a dozen years ago.

Angel smiled. "It was a long walk, but he should reach the Morales compound in the morning. Yesterday we installed video cameras to record it for posterity to supplement drone footage. He should be back here for dinner tomorrow. I'm flying to meet him there at dawn."

"And the bitch who killed Junior?"

Angel sighed. "Junior's wife was still alive, though torn up inside. She lost her front teeth and the anal rape tore her a new asshole—I'm paraphrasing our doctor.

We moved her to the hospital, with Wilmar and Morales, so they can all die together. We fed everyone else to the megas.”

“So it’s all over?”

“Well, Gonzalo wants a last word with them.”

Chapter 41

Gonzalo drove a scooter pulling a trailer all night, reaching the enemy base at dawn. He called ahead so his guards didn’t shoot him by mistake. Drones and spiders kept the government and military away; Gonzalo promised them they could have the place tomorrow.

Spiders crowded the road—the buffet was the equivalent of hookers and blow to the megas. Gonzalo stopped so Queen could get down from the trailer and take control. She had protected him because no other spider wanted to fuck with her. She stepped forward like she owned the place and the megas backed up so fast they ran into each other. She went wherever he pointed the vibrating stick. Angel met him at the main gate, covered in spider protection and clutching his rod like a throbbing cock.

“We took everything of obvious value. You may wish to tour the place after your interview. Your expensive drones knocked down a lot of walls.”

“Thank you, again, Angel, for rescuing my girls.”

“Calling you dad would feel weird. Can I call you, bro, instead?”

Gonzalo hugged his best friend, exhausted by the longest week of his life. “Want to watch me introduce Queen to Wilmar? Maybe that little bitch will pee himself.”

His doctor kept his three prisoners alive, but nothing more. No food, no pain killers, no sympathy. Cameras surrounded them to record their last day alive. For a few days after Angel’s rescue, a thousand gunmen fought a million spiders to the death. None escaped because there was nowhere to escape to, not without a working car. Drones blew up any vehicle that drove to the place.

Gonzalo entered the mighty fortress like a king. Queen looked like a Volkswagen Beetle, painted to look like a spider. She cleared the path better than a hundred rods. He drove the last few days just to see their faces. Social media loved Queen, who missed breathing twice Earth’s normal oxygen. She suffered the equivalent of shortness of breath, as spiders breathe through their skin. More oxygen meant bigger spiders. She looked relieved when the chopper dropped off the scooter and trailer. She rode in the back like Gonzalo was just her chauffeur.

Spiders and webs covered most of the base.

“We waited for you before burning the barn,” Angel said, pointing to a warehouse full of drugs. “We poured all their remaining fuel over it. It has over a billion bucks worth of cocaine. You still want to burn it?”

Gonzalo walked over. “I want to throw the first match.” He actually used a lighter, and watched literally tons of cocaine turn into dense smoke. A soldier worked a camera to zoom in. “The spiders downwind will have a fun day.”

Angel led him to the hospital, where all three moaned and groaned pathetically.

“When we found Morales in the collapsed mansion,” Angel explained, “we didn’t see anything wrong with him, other than the leg wound. It just knocked him out and buried him. We had to dig him out of his own home. Then I broke his fingers, toes, arms, and legs.”

“You needed the therapy,” Gonzalo agreed, “after what you went through.”

They entered one of the few rooms with windows. Angel closed the door so spiders didn’t sneak in. Wilmar aged a decade since last week.

“*Que pasa, calabasa?*” Gonzalo said after slapping that bitch awake. “You remember me, old friend?”

“They broke my limbs while I was drugged out,” Wilmar complained.

“That was Angel. Do you remember Isabella’s fiancée? The sniper? Isabella is pregnant with his child. He rescued my wife and daughter the night after you took them. Pretty badass break in. A Hollywood agent wants to buy the rights to the movie.”

“What happened to Juli? I can’t understand anything she tries to say.”

“Your buddies raped her for several days. They’re into anal because you’re such an asshole. Angel trapped them in their barracks. They used up all their ammo, shooting spiders trying to get in, and were starving when Angel had them killed. My doctor has revived her because I want her to know what’s going to suck her from the inside out. Wilmar, have you met Queen?”

Gonzalo tapped the floor and the spider walked over like an obedient puppy. Juli and Morales woke up to also start screaming.

“The fuck is that?”

“I call her a Super-Mega Spider. Every generation they get bigger because we give them more oxygen and design them better. I’ve been seeding the Amazon with rejects. The biggest ones fill my million containers. They produce twice as much venom as my first million, so I’ve doubled production for the same labor. It’s so much easier than adding another million shipping containers. I just don’t have the room! Each generation is better conditioned to follow the vibration cues. Watch this.”

Gonzalo tapped Wilmar with his rod while pushing a green button. Queen got excited, scrambling up and studying her meal. Instead of fanging, she started wrapping Wilmar in web.

“She just ate, sucking a soldier dry, but she’s a big girl. She’ll be hungry soon.”

“Gonzo, please bro. Don’t do this. I’m sorry. Spare me, *compadre*.”

Gonzalo put his face in Wilmar’s face, with webbing between them. “I told you to leave me alone. I offered to reward you for getting others to leave me alone. Instead you spent years preparing the opposite. You used your daughter to hook my innocent son, get her pregnant to steal my family’s estate, all while planning his death at the wedding. That’s fucked up. Even for you. But, then, you never cared about the misery you caused others. Their suffering amused you. My dad looks forward to watching you die. He’s eating expensive gourmet popcorn right now. Wave to him.”

“Noooooo!” Terrified, he begged for his life.

Gonzalo moved on to Juli, who was still nude. Bruises covered her body and someone pulled one of her fake tits off. It hung loose like it was mostly decapitated. Porno tits, his wife called them.

“Are you still my daughter-in-law? You tried killing my son within an hour of marrying him, so I don’t know how it works. Emilia killed your grandmother; said she seemed nice. I have your baby boy. He doesn’t seem psycho yet, but I’ll keep an eye on him. If he takes after me more than his other grandpa, I’ll let him live. If he starts torturing pets like Wilmar did, then, well, I’ll have a tough decision to make.”

She muttered something, but her tongue and lips were swollen and her throat dry. “I love the fear in your eyes. You didn’t see this coming, did you? You forgot your father is an idiot. He talks a better game than he plays. What’s that? Angel broke your limbs? Think of it as therapy. You should cover yourself, *puta barata*. And clean up the cum flowing out of your pussy. Is it true you fucked fifty guys? Looks like you will die an expensive whore, like your mother. When you marry for money, you must earn every peso. Are you trying to spit on me?” Gonzalo laughed. “Let me introduce you to my little friend.” Queen crawled over and spun her a cocoon. “Adios, you murderous bitch.”

The drug lord watched all this in silence. Like the others, he was strapped to a bed.

“Mr. Morales! Such a pleasure to see you again. First time I saw you, my daddy made me promise to be on my best behavior. That motherfucker never told me you killed an older brother. Said that grave was for an uncle. We got all your grandkids but Luciano and his clever mother. I may have to pay a gang in Barranquilla to kill her for me. If you know where they are, I’ll make your death quick and mostly painless. Thanks, by the way, for all the cash in your vault. It only took me a few days to wipe out your army of several thousand gunmen.”

The old man mumbled. “My grandfather worked on your farm, a century ago. His daughter is Wilmar’s mother. I never told him we’re related because he’d become an even bigger pain in the ass. I enjoyed humiliating your father and grandfather, plus all the other aristocratic landowners who oppressed the peasants. I exploited them too, but provided even more with steady employment. A million Colombians worked for me, at my peak. Then you got spiders, and it’s been all downhill from there.”

“Your workers feared you like they never did my grandpa. He paid fair wages or else they’d find better work elsewhere. You committed them to a line of work and didn’t let them leave. Illegal drugs will finally stop influencing Colombia’s government, police, and military.”

“I should have raped your wife when I had the chance. The gunshot, pain killers, and the pain made it hard to get an erection. Then all the bombing, screaming, and fucking spiders. Still, I fucked up.”

“Morales, I want you to know that I will hunt down the rest of your family until I exterminate your bloodline.”

Morales gave him a sad smile. “When Gauls sacked Rome in 390 BC, their king told the Romans, woe to the vanquished.”

“Defeat sucks,” Gonzalo paraphrased. “Adios, Senior Morales.”

After Queen sucked all three, Gonzalo returned her to her four-container home in the canyon, where she bred an even bigger generation of prehistoric monsters that’d save the lives of millions.

