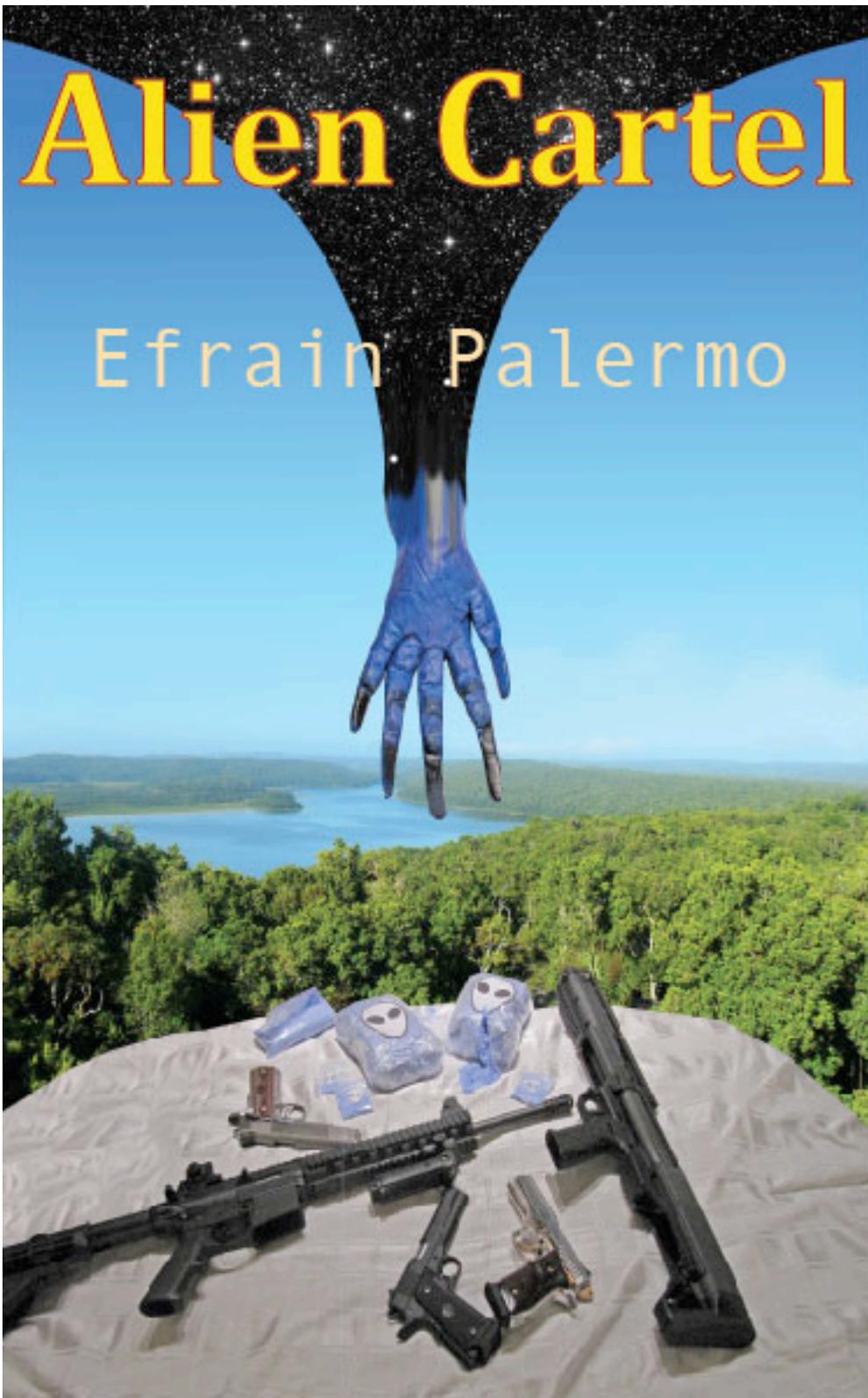


Alien Cartel

Efrain Palermo



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by Efrain Palermo

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“Nothing is so firmly believed as that which is least known.”
- Michel de Montaigne 1580 A.D.

Dedicated to Mac Tonnies
a fellow traveler who left too soon

Prologue

The old man lay helpless, unable to move. Cold sweat matted his sparse, gray hair. Fear oozed from his sleeping body and condensed on the floor of his small hut. The shaman was knee deep in a nightmare. His dream paralysis nailed him to his bed as he was attacked and overwhelmed by large, blue insects. Their gaping mouths spewed forth a toxic dark blue smoke. His skinny, veined arms thrashed wildly in his sleep and his eyelids fluttered.

Despite his old and frail body, his was a warrior spirit. He fought valiantly but he was losing this dream-battle. A cockroach the size of a chair gnawed on his arm. His other hand was crushed in the mouth of a man-sized praying mantis. Its large, angled eyes looked at him with an otherworldly intelligence. The shaman struggled to get away. His body thrashed about in his sleep and his struggles finally woke him up. He opened his eyes, relieved that he was awake, but he was not in his room.

Instead of the simple furnishings of his hut, he was in a dark cave with a floor of molten lead. The stench of sulfur singed his nostrils and burned his eyes. Hot bubbles of lead burped an eerie, dark blue powder that settled on his skin. The particles morphed into microscopic insects, which then burrowed into his body. Horrified, he frantically looked around for a way out, but there were no exits on the cave walls. With a superhuman effort of will, he awoke from the second nightmare and opened his eyes again. This time, the bare walls of his hut greeted his half opened eyes. The late-morning sun was burning a hole through his small, dirty window. He was usually an early riser, but this morning his dream had kept him under longer than usual. The shaman was not a stranger to unusual dreams, but this one had shaken him. Unconsciously, he rubbed his arm, half expecting to find it chewed off and his blood crawling with insects. The shaman reached for a drink from the bowl he kept by his bed, but it was not there. It was on the other side of the room, upside down in a pool of water. He had knocked it over there in his sleep.

Whenever he took his Ayahuasca brew, his soul was transported into realms beyond his wildest imagination. In his trances, there were always symbols to interpret or future events to unravel. His dreams, good or bad, were prophetic. This time, the shaman was at a loss on how to interpret his grotesque dream.

He stood up from his straw bed, staggered and almost fell. He started to go outside but changed his mind and sat down in his chair instead. His body trembled and his breathing was fast and shallow. He took a deep breath and held it for a minute before he exhaled. A prayer escaped his lips to ward off evil spirits. The ancient invocation, which predated the Incas, was very powerful and he rarely used it. The shaman repeated it ten more times until he felt safe enough to relax. When he regained his composure he rewound the dream and looked at it again. This time he was able to read the portents in the nightmare. What he saw unnerved him.

A dog barked in the distance followed by the laughter of village children. Life was going on outside of the walls of his hut, uninfluenced by his horrific dream. People were going through their morning routines. They were oblivious to the future he had foreseen. As a prophet, he was always faced with the responsibility of telling the truth about the

future. *'Should he tell someone that they were going to die a gruesome death in six months, or let them go on living ignorant and content until that time came?'* Outside of his window he saw children happily chasing a dog. He smiled and decided to let people enjoy what little time they had left. The shaman closed his eyes and settled into his chair. *It may not be too late to change the future if I can understand the past.* He left his body and traveled the rivers of time to uncover the beginning of the end of human civilization.

Chapter One

Deep in a Colombian jungle, a group of peasants worked silently as they processed tons of coca leaves into cocaine. The workers included men, women, and young kids. A pregnant mother was working alongside her children. They needed to feed their families and it made no difference whether they picked coffee berries or stuffed gasoline filled drums with coca leaves. In the dark hours after midnight, the warm rain made the plastic wrapped cocaine bricks as slick as giant jungle slugs.

Ten cartel guards surrounded the workers and supervised the operation. The men on watch had AK-47s, Israeli IMI Galil assault rifles and sawed-off shotguns. On the perimeter of the clearing were two men with rocket-propelled grenade launchers perched on their shoulders. On a small hill, a bunker was manned with two .50 caliber machine guns. The excessive armament was not for the workers, who could easily be cowed with a harsh look or a swift kick. The heavy security was for the rival gangs and the Colombian police, who wanted large busts to give them the illusion that they were winning the war on drugs.

Under a mildewed tarp, a long table was being used to make bricks of cocaine. A carefully measured amount was packaged in layers of plastic wrap. A drawing of the cartel's logo, a golden poison dart frog, was inserted before it was tightly wound with clear packing tape. The completed products were then hauled over to a Russian built submarine moored in the river fifty yards away. The loaders had to wade through thick, sticky mud to get to it. The cartel men were in a rush, twenty tons of cocaine had to be loaded before the high tide. The submarine cost five million dollars and the cartel already made over one hundred million dollars using it. For them, it was an investment worth the small army that protected it.

The guards were uneasy and were on high alert for the *policia*. The dense canopy of the jungle choked out any ambient light. Dark clouds and a misty rain gave the operation added cover. A helicopter could hover right above them and would not be able to see what was going on. However, it only took one informant with a GPS unit tracked by the Drug Enforcement Administration, to make the jungle cover meaningless.

The sound of a military helicopter filtered faintly through the verdant forest. The guards froze and signaled the workers to stand still and be quiet. The echoes of spinning blades came closer and then slowly faded as it moved away from their location. The guard's fingers relaxed on well-worn triggers and the workers nervously continued to load the submarine.

Slowly the tide came in and lifted the heavily laden sub off the muck of the riverbank. Hurriedly, the last of the bricks were loaded and the workers were sent away with the few pesos they had made for their night's work. A sealed envelope was given to the submarine captain. He keyed the secret coordinates into his iPad marine navigation app for a rendezvous with a container ship off the coast of Puerto Rico. The guards were breaking camp when a distant light glimmered through the canopy. It was below the tree line and moved silently. Instantly the leader gave hand signals to set up defensive positions. In the war against drugs, any form of surveillance could be used against them, including muffled drones.

The illumination in the distance moved slowly and erratically, as if searching for something. The light blinked on and off from yellow-white to a dark blue. The guards were not tech savvy, but they knew the *federales* used advanced, U.S. supplied electronics to find them in the thick jungle.

The light faded as the aircraft lost its scent and started to move away from them. It dimmed and then suddenly disappeared. The men's pupils had adjusted to the luminous source and its sudden departure made the darkness thicker. The singsong *coqui* of mating frogs started up again. The guards were on high alert. Their breathing was quick and shallow, the thump-thump of their heartbeats drowned out the ambient jungle sounds. Just as they began to relax, a bright light flooded them from above the river. Blinded by the sudden illumination, they fired in its general direction. Assault rifles went on full automatic and sent a cloud of bullets at the craft. The .50 caliber machine guns spat out forty rounds a minute. Bullets ricocheted off the hull of the unknown craft with high-pitched pings. Rocket propelled grenades hit the ship and lit up the jungle like an illegal fireworks display.

There was a loud boom from the unidentified flying object that eclipsed the small arms fire. An intense purple flash and black smoke filled the air. Something in the craft had exploded. The sound of tortured metal cut the air as the craft flew by overhead. It was low and snapped the topmost tree branches. A gust of wind sent shredded leaves and twigs to the men below. The craft angled downward into the jungle and disappeared. A tremor shook the ground beneath the men's feet followed by a concussive blast of air.

The raucous firefight had deafened the men and left their ears ringing. In the abrupt silence, the men's heavy breathing filled the air as they tried to regain their composure. No one moved. The guards were tense and looked for another target. Surveillance aircraft never flew alone and the men were ready to attack or flee. The click-click sound of replaced magazines filled the air for a few seconds and then it was quiet again.

After five minutes of holding still, the men's nerves settled down. The urgency of getting the sub launched took over. The tide was fully in and the sub was afloat. The captain had hidden behind some trees with his crew when the fighting started. As one, they ran into the sub and started up the diesel engines. With a puff of black smoke, the mini-sub slowly churned its way down river. The guards stood watch until it turned a bend of the river and disappeared from view.

Their job done, they turned to investigate what they had shot down. A downed U.S. military drone was worth a lot of money to the Russian mafia. The prospect of making a few extra pesos on the side spurred the guards to make their way to the wreckage hidden somewhere ahead in the jungle. The coming dawn exposed the debris trail and damaged trees, which led directly to the crash site. The men followed the trail in single file cautiously, with the safeties off their weapons.

An opening of broken trees revealed the ship straight ahead. Dull gray metal contrasted coldly against the dark green foliage. Surprisingly, there were no wings or propellers on the craft. It was unlike any drone they had ever seen. The guard leader, Alejandro 'Chimbo' Muñoz, radioed the base dispatcher. To his surprise, the head of the cartel, Raul 'Cojones' Melendez, was on the other end of the line.

"*Jefe*, a drone came up on us just as we finished loading the sub." Alejandro explained breathlessly.

"What the fuck! How did you let that happen?" The anger in Raul's voice sent cold shivers down Alejandro's neck.

"I don't know *jefe*. It snuck up on us, but we shot the shit out of it and it crashed. We are coming up on it now" Alejandro tried to sound calm, but it was not working.

"*Pendejo*, secure any of its electronics and equipment. I'm sending a helicopter over to bring the craft to the compound. Hurry up before it gets too light!" Alejandro acknowledged his boss with a heavy sigh and clipped the phone back on his belt.

The guards approached the craft and surrounded it. Close up it was larger than expected and too big to be a drone. The craft did not have any visible means of propulsion. There were no propeller blades, jet engines or wings. The men figured the trees must have ripped off the wings. The nose of the ship was stuck in the jungle floor but it still looked imposing. It was twenty feet wide and thirty-five feet long. The craft was shaped like an oval plantain. It was thicker around the middle and all of its edges were smooth curves. Alejandro walked up to the ship and his nose twitched at the scent of ozone. He tentatively touched the skin of the craft. The metal looked cold but it was warm to his touch. A tingling sensation traveled through his fingers and made the hairs on his arm stand up. When he pulled his hand away from the hull, a static electric spark snapped back with an audible crack.

"The gringos must be desperate to build something like this just to track us," snickered one of the guards. The other men laughed nervously.

The craft was upside down. Alejandro ordered the guards to help him turn it over. Part of the ship lay across a broken tree stump and they used that as a fulcrum to flip it over. As it upended, a mangled hatch swung open and out fell a pilot, face down and unconscious. He was wearing a gray metallic suit with red stripes down the sides that gleamed in the early dawn light.

The man closest to the hatch pulled out his gun and climbed down. He turned the pilot over and screamed. He dropped his gun and ran headlong into the woods, tripping on tree roots and looking back over his shoulder. The guards who were on the other side of the ship came over to investigate.

"¿!Carlito, *que paso!*?" One of them yelled after the man who had taken flight. But Carlito was already out of earshot. The guards reached the side where the pilot lay and froze with shock.

"Ay Madre!" Someone gasped out loud. Alejandro came up and pushed the men aside to see what was going on.

"¡Hijueputa!" Alejandro exclaimed.

The face was not human. The head was unnaturally bulged at the top and tapered down to a narrow chin. Its eyes were closed but it was evident that they were larger than normal. The strange pilot did not have a nose and had a small, lipless hole where the mouth should have been. Those initial impressions were bad enough but what was worse and set some of the men to mumbling prayers under their breath was its skin color. The skin was blue, but not the blue of the sky or a flower. It was the color of someone who had died from asphyxiation. It was a splotchy, organic blue that signaled death. Its chest moved rhythmically, it was breathing. The pilot was still alive.

One of the men who felt brave walked up to it and went down on one knee. He leaned in closer to get a better look. Above its closed eyes, the strange pilot had bulging, dark blue veins that reminded the guard of his grandmother's varicose legs. He sniffed and grimaced at the fetid mixture of methane and sulfur rising from the pilot's body. He hurriedly turned away and vomited.

"¡Ay Dios mio!" Alejandro said aloud, his voice was tremulous. He fumbled for the phone on his belt and it fell to the ground from his shaking hand. He picked it up and called his boss.

"Jefe, there's a pilot and he's alive, I think. But..." He hesitated to say what he saw.

"¿Que? Keep him alive until the helicopter gets there!" The cartel boss was already counting the U.S. dollars he could get as ransom. Americans paid dearly for its downed pilots.

"But...but..." Alejandro's tone was subdued, "He's not a gringo, or a *federales*. I don't know what the fuck it is, but it is not human."

Raul "Cojones" Melendez did not get to the top of a vicious drug cartel by being afraid or stupid. The fear he heard in his hardened underling's voice made him think twice before yelling a string of curses at the man.

"Ok, listen carefully. Tie him up. Remove anything from his pockets that can send a rescue signal. Do not kill him. If he needs killing, I want to be the one to do it." Raul tried to contain his temper but it was difficult.

"The helicopter will be there in three minutes. Tie the aircraft to the helicopter straps. Then I want you and your men to come down here and report directly to me. Tell *no one* what happened or what you saw. Your men did well this morning. I received a text from the sub. It's safe and in open waters with no sign of pursuit. Make sure you get everything from the crash site. Before you leave cover your tracks and hurry the fuck up!"

"Si, Jefe." Alejandro ended the call and gave his instructions to his men. In the distance, the *whoosh-whoosh* of the approaching helicopter was a welcome sound.

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Thank you for reading the first two chapters of Alien Cartel. The novel will be available as an e-book soon! For any questions or correspondence you can email me at efrain@palermoproject.com.

