

Chapter 1: Pink Dolphins and Alpaca Spit

My name is Michael Vey, and I'm back in Peru.

I hate Peru. I've got good reasons to hate the place. The first time I was here, my mother was being held captive in an electrified cage, the Elgen tried to feed me to rats, and one of my friends was killed. And, as thanks for saving their country from Elgen tyranny, the Peruvian government put us on their Most Wanted terrorist list. So, yeah, not my favorite place. I'm sure there are a lot of great things about Peru. Especially when they think you're a tourist instead of a terrorist. I know because Ostin once went off on one of his diatribes and told me more about the country than I ever wanted to know.

For instance, Peru is home to most of the world's alpacas. If you don't know what an alpaca is, it's basically a miniature llama that isn't secretly plotting to kill you. Alpacas couldn't kill you if they wanted to. They're smaller, softer, and gentler than llamas, and their primary defense is spitting. Sure, it's green and smells, but if that was my only defense, I'd avoid street fights.

There are interesting things in Peru besides alpacas. A lot of big things start or started here, like the world's largest river, the Amazon. Potatoes come from Peru, ergo your french fries and potato chips. So did the Incan civilization.

The country boasts other curiosities. The tallest sand dunes in the world are in Peru. There's a mountain that's colored like a rainbow. One of the deepest canyons in the world is here—it's twice as deep as the Grand Canyon. And Ostin's personal favorite, the Nazca Lines, giant geoglyph drawings of animals that can only be seen from the air—which begs the question (cue the eerie UFO music), who were they drawn for?

Peru also has the world's most expensive coffee. It's called Coati Dung Coffee. It's exactly what its name says it is—coffee made from beans that have been eaten by a jungle beast called the coati (basically a raccoon with a bigger nose), then pooped out. The local Peruvians collect the beans, wash the poop off them, dry them in the sun, and then sell the coffee for around sixty-five dollars a cup. That's almost a thousand dollars a pound. I swear I'm not making this up.

In addition to the coffee-eating coati, Peru's got a whole slate of weird animals the rest of the world doesn't have, like pink dolphins, glass frogs, wood-eating catfish, hairless dogs, and penguins, which probably got stuck on an iceberg a thousand years ago, floated to Peru from Antarctica, and liked the neighborhood, so took up residence. I'm probably not making that up either.

But, like I said, I'm not here as a tourist, and I didn't come for the dung coffee. I came to rescue Tara and Jack from the Chasqui, a break-off band from the Elgen with another megalomaniacal leader. At least that was our intention. Now Jack claims he's one of them. What am I supposed to do with that? Could he have been brainwashed like in *The Manchurian Candidate*? I don't know, but Jack's the most loyal person I know. I'd trust him with my life. At least I would have. Now I don't know. He's just not one I would ever think could be a traitor. So, here's the dilemma we're wrestling with: Is it worth risking all our lives to save Jack from himself? And is that even possible?

I know that the last time I wrote, I said that I was bored and wished something exciting would happen, but boring suddenly doesn't seem so bad. Now I just wish people would stop trying to kill us. If I'm going to die, I'd rather do it in the comfort of my own home, not travel all the way to some piranha- and bug-infested jungle to be un-alived.

Like I said, I hate Peru.