

Author of Track of the Bigfoot and Wake of the Lake Monster

DALLAS TANNER



**SHADOW OF THE
THUNDERBIRD**

BOOK I OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

OUT OF THE BLACK FOREST

Sam clasped Edger's shoulder, pulling a fist full of material. "It's just a lousy bird, Paulie. Get a grip." Paulie wasn't listening. Instead, he spun on his grounded foot and stepped out from under the eave of the cabin. He walked stiffly out toward the center of the clearing, pointing and muttering incoherently. Carter put his hands on his hips and looked at the darkened doorway, before turning away in disgust. "Of all the thickheaded, cowardly..."

He followed Paulie's stricken gaze and shaking finger. In the gloom, it was difficult to make out. A darker shade separated itself from the low-flung clouds. It turned toward them in a wheeling movement, before disappearing below the level of the trees. The cry came again, much closer this time.

The clouds shredded beneath the growing sound of a gathering wind. The rising moon stood in full relief against a smattering of stars, accentuated by the flicker of lightning and the roll of distant thunder. The mist at their feet was disturbed at the far edge of the clearing. Something was approaching, something huge, and it had them cut off from their truck.

Rain was coming, but whatever preceded it was far worse.

It was then that they saw the outspread wings, wide and fixed as a small airplane, black and unmoving as it glided toward them. Beneath, massive talons as large as bicycle wheels flexed and readied. A large, ugly beak nearly a yard long opened and gave forth a primeval cry that echoed loud and piercing. It was crossing the open field, and lowering directly toward them.

"Shoot it, Paulie. Now!"

Edger couldn't move. The .38 caliber Webley hung limp in his other hand, its owner paralyzed with fear. Sam looked from the monster, to his terrified partner, and back again. He could now see the fathomless depths of its eyes, reflecting the ghost of an unforgiving moon.

Written by
DALLAS TANNER

NOVELS

THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY
Shadow of the Thunderbird
Track of the Bigfoot
Wake of the Lake Monster

NOVELLAS

The Chupacabra
(Published in Elementum Bestia)

SHADOW OF THE THUNDERBIRD

BOOK 1 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

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Shadow of the Thunderbird:
Book 1 of The Cryptids Trilogy

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DEDICATION

To Billye McCarty
Editor Extraordinaire
For The Cryptids Trilogy

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Every novel begins its life as a diamond in the rough. Someone has to spot its potential amid so many unfinished others, then see that it is cut and polished until its facets are revealed. If you find any imperfection, or remnant of its former state in the novel you hold in your hands, the fault remains with the author. I'd like to express my thanks and appreciation to those who chipped away at anything that didn't shine. First and foremost, my tireless editor Billye McCarty, whose guiding hand told my story better than I ever could. Ideal reader Fred Scheeren, who has waited longest for the trilogy to be completed. David Caldwell, best friend, proofreader and resource on all things military, from minie balls to atom bombs. Rick Spears, museum exhibit designer and artist of all creatures real and imagined. Bob Finley, who slogged through a week in the Altamaha River with me, and saved a pair of subs in the process. Cryptozoologist Loren Coleman, for his books, his early morning advice, and infinite patience. Leslie Williams and her son Connor, who reminded me why I got into cryptozoology, in the first place. James Rollins, who continued to give me encouragement and advice, long after his own literary success. The faculty and students of Greenville Technical College, who adopted my first novel and invited me time and again to talk about it. Kristi and Larry Draper, scuba diving enthusiasts who just might make a fossil diver out of me yet. My cat Samwise, who sleeps atop my monitor until *he* decides I've written enough for one night. Last and certainly not least, fellow author and brother-in-ink Lee Murphy, for teaching me how to catch as much light with this little gem as I possibly can. I am indebted to you all, and proud to call you my friends.

CHAPTER 1

It should have been a short trek, into the Brazilian rainforest of the western Amazon Basin. Trudging single file, aching backs bent beneath a dwindling load of supplies and provisions. Three native porters and their youthful guide grumbled to themselves, cutting glances in furtive disdain of the American in the lead.

He was not a tall man, standing just under five foot, ten inches in height. His light brown hair lay soaked with sweat and early morning dew, plastered against his forehead. He wore a beaten up, autographed Boston Red Sox baseball cap signed by the Yaz himself, Carl Yastrzemski. It was a gift from his father, one of few. He was dressed all in khaki, shorts with thick woolen socks and crepe-soled hiking boots. He shoved his wire-rimmed spectacles back up the bridge of his nose. If nothing else, it gave him time to figure out where he was.

A swipe of his fingers failed to clear the heat of the jungle and his own perspiration from the glasses. He muttered to himself, removing them to wipe the lenses on the front of his shirt. The path before them split for the third time that morning. To make matters worse, it rained half the night, obliterating any tracks and obscuring the steaming trail. For all he knew, they could have been going in circles the entire march.

The locals should have known where they were going, but remained strangely silent. Translating parts of their broken English was as difficult as interpreting the dialect of Portuguese they spoke. He knew some conversational Spanish, and assumed that it would be sufficient. There was almost no similarity, whatsoever. Languages were never his forte, or interest.

Ian McQuade, the assistant curator of a lesser-known New England museum of natural history, exhausted his vacation time, and nearly all his savings to fund this expedition. The board of trustees was not at all enthusiastic about his interest in undiscovered animals, and considered his hobby an embarrassment to their reputation. He was forbidden to pursue the study of hidden animals on their premises, which was just as well. Cryptozoology cost him the approval of his doctoral dissertation.

As a child, while accompanying his parents on a camping trip to the Pacific Northwest, young Ian saw...something. Late in the evening, when the campfire was burning into embers, a large creature stepped between the last of the fire's glow and the flap of his tent. It was heavy, breathing hard and smelled like a wet goat. As the shadow passed, the young boy could see that it was manlike, hairy and walked upright. It swung its arms and swayed, turning its torso as if looking for food.

Ian gasped and pulled his sleeping bag up to his neck. The sudden motion caused the creature to stop, the shaggy head looking directly at his tent. His parents were asleep in theirs on the other side of the campsite. He didn't dare call out, frightened as he was. The shadow grew until it filled the flap from side to side.

The firelight was almost completely blocked out.

Nothing happened for several tense moments. The young McQuade relaxed slightly, remembering he all but forgot to breathe. He let out his captive breath raggedly, groping in the dark for his asthma inhaler. All at once, a large, leathery hand, lined with matted fur and jagged nails, pulled at the top of the partially untied flap. A single yellow eye moved in a circular motion as it tried to fix its gaze on him. It was surrounded by red to black matted fur, in a face elongated and apelike. The face was hideous, with ripples of muscle pulled away from a mouth full of large, grass-stained teeth.

At only nine years of age, Ian McQuade screamed to the top of his lungs. He drowned out the sudden burst of rolling, guttural bark from deep in the monster's chest. Surprised, it lunged up, just as Ian dove into the insulated folds of his Batman sleeping bag. He heard steps and shouting, then hands pulling at him. He continued to cry out, as if he were in the clutches of the devil himself.

Finally, in a moment of terror, a large hand grasped him by the collar of his pajamas. His tousled head was drawn back out of the top of the bag. Two heads, now the monster had two heads! The beast threw its arms around him, consoling him in his mother's voice. Helen McQuade took her son in her arms, bedroll and all. She rocked him back and forth, as his father rubbed the top of his head.

"Must've been another nightmare," Charles McQuade said, speaking as soothingly as he could so as not to startle his only child. His mother continued to hold him, comforting him in a low, singsong voice.

"It wasn't a nightmare, dad. Not this time, I promise!" Ian sputtered, the tears flowing freely. "I saw something. The Boogeyman, I think. I swear, it was outside, and it was coming to get me!"

His mother and father looked at him compassionately, but without belief. They thought he imagined the whole thing. Eventually, he got back to sleep, snuggled between his parents in their tent. They dismissed the notion of a Sasquatch coming into their camp. Afterwards, they did their best to try and never mention the incident again. The nightmares continued for Ian.

A year or two later, a well-meaning child psychiatrist suggested clipping newspaper and magazine articles about monster sightings. It would be a healthy outlet for his fears, so long as his parents emphasized that such creatures don't really exist. He collected stories about aliens, ghosts and unknown animals, especially Bigfoot. Ian became obsessive about his growing collection of scrapbooks. He quickly learned to discount grocery store tabloids as a dubious source of information on the paranormal. The young McQuade considered the credibility of the stories and airbrushed photos automatically suspect.

Fifteen years later, he received his master's degree in anthropology, from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Helen and Charles McQuade felt they could finally breathe a sigh of relief. That is, until their son submitted the dissertation proposal for his Ph.D. He sought to assert that human encroachment would reveal the reality and nature of undiscovered species. Cryptozoology is the study of hidden animals, also known as cryptids. These included animals considered out of place or time. Primarily, extinct prehistoric creatures not believed to have survived into present-day, or modern beasts found outside of their normal habitation. Their existence was the stuff of native legends, historical records and eyewitness accounts.

Ian contended that humanity lives on only ten percent of the landmass, on a planet roughly three quarters water. Only an estimated one million species were discovered and classified thus far, with ten times that many believed to exist.

McQuade always loved to debate the merits of cryptozoology, beyond its relegation as a pseudo or fringe science. The term was attributed to French zoologist Bernard Heuvelmans, and Scottish naturalist Ivan T. Sanderson. The etymology included the Greek prefix *kryptós*, meaning hidden, and the suffix of *zoology*, the study of animals. John E. Wall of Manitoba, Canada, later coined the term cryptids. The word commonly described animals rumored to exist, those sought by cryptozoologists. McQuade aspired to become the first and only cryptozoologist ever granted credentials by virtue of his education.

Ian concentrated on the traditional aspects of mythical animals in folklore and legend, as representations of superstition and pagan belief. As long as he continued to do so, Anthropology Department Chair John Dreyson admitted that the subject matter would be acceptable. It was not a concession, or a compromise. It was a direct condition for allowing McQuade to go forward with his postgraduate studies.

It took Ian months to persuade Professor Dreyson to accept the topic. Cryptozoology was not a degreed curriculum, in any college or university, anywhere in the world. A good friend and mentor since Ian's undergraduate days, the eminent anthropologist was very fond of McQuade, and his star pupil. It did not keep him from considering his apt student assistant an oddity, in and of himself. McQuade relied too much on books, to avoid life and its challenges.

Ian always got along well enough with his peers on campus, but seemed to get along better without them. His studies were as varied as anthropology, paleontology, and zoology. McQuade grinned at the memory. No one ever mistook him for the outdoor type. Only the coaxing of an ex-girlfriend persuaded him to go camping again. He was a professional student, but not an athlete. His parents were worried that he would turn thirty, and never hold anything more than a summer teaching job. At twenty-seven, he finally completed the carefully altered final draft of his dissertation, turning it in late for consideration of submission. Dreyson, for the first time in all their years together, was furious with him.

"This is not what we discussed at all, Ian!"

"Did you even bother to read it?" Ian countered.

"Yes," John Dreyson softened. "It's very good. Your ideas are plausible, but completely unsubstantiated. You and I both know that it isn't enough to be logical. Your evidence must also be factual in your supporting argument." The anthropology department chair sighed. "The doctoral board of review will never accept the case for hidden animals, out of place or time. 'Cryptids', as I believe you called them." The older man picked up the thick document. He thumbed through the opening, until he found the thesis statement. "These are your words; '...coming into conflict with civilization, due to climatic changes and progressive human encroachment, in time the reality of any or all such creatures will be revealed'."

He put the dissertation down, in tired resignation.

"I can ill afford, at this stage in my life, to risk my career and reputation on such frivolous nonsense. I cannot accept or submit what you have written. I'm very sorry, Ian. I truly am, and disappointed as well. By seeking to dupe me and embarrass this university, you have squandered a promising career." The tall,

distinguished professor looked withered and shaken. He rounded his large oaken desk, and escorted the failed doctoral candidate from his office. Not another word passed between them. Dreyson ushered Ian out into the hall, and slowly closed the door on their friendship of eight years.

For the first time in his life, Ian felt utterly alone, without a purpose.

Worse than that, he would have to get a full-time job.

It was Ian's last conversation with his old mentor. Ian tried for several months to get and keep a job, both in his fields and out. He had almost no practical work experience for professional positions, and was overqualified by virtue of his education for manual labor. In four months, he was fired or quit from seven jobs. Penniless, he left the dorms near faculty row, and moved back into his parent's home in Charlottesville. A friend of the family, Dreyson kept tabs on the struggling McQuade, although they did not speak directly.

The professor passed along a recommendation for Ian to become the assistant curator at the Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History, in Boston. The offer of employment came across his desk, anonymously. Curiously, it mentioned Ian by name as the only applicant. His former campus address was listed below the letterhead, which explained why it came to his professor, instead. There would be no interview process. The job was simply his, if he wanted it. Relieved, Dreyson gave the letter to Ian's father, who handed it over dinner to his son.

He and the curator hated one another on sight, but neither had much choice about the arrangement. McQuade moved to New England, got an apartment, and tried to patch things up with the only two people he knew in the whole city.

The only girlfriend he ever had, and the best friend that stole her from him.

Ian toiled in obscurity, as a glorified janitor. It wasn't hard work, and gave him many opportunities to continue his studies. He kept his opinions to himself about Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster. There was so much more to the field of cryptozoology than that. Only an important discovery would convince anyone of the validity of his theories. He was there to await the chance to prove himself. After two years of toiling in anonymity at the museum, Ian was ushering a busload of third graders into the marsupial wing. He overheard a resonating voice talking with museum curator, Frank Gustman. Ian edged over, flattening himself against the corner, just out of sight.

"Don't underestimate the grain of truth beneath superstition, Mr. Gustman. I may be a simple trustee of this museum, and a friend of your late uncle, but I have done my share of exploration in my younger days. I tell you, there is an unclassified species of giant arachnid at the western edge of the Amazon Basin. By the local natives, it is called 'The Red Devil', and at a safe estimate is twice the width of a man's outstretched fingers. Unfortunately, at the current rate of deforestation, it will be gone within the year. Can't you spare anyone to go and see if it exists before it's too late?"

Gustman, in a rare moment of forced silence, remained in place. A single set of footsteps slowly made their way in Ian's direction. He looked about quickly for a place to hide. Ian ducked into the alcove for a drink of water between the doors to the men's and women's restrooms.

As he bent and took sip after sip of water, he could make out the ambling figure of an elderly man. He tapped and pulled himself unsteadily behind a cane. At the

edge of his peripheral vision, he watched the old man crumple and toss a piece of paper into the wastebasket, not ten feet away.

Ian never saw his face, concentrating on what he threw away. As soon as the board trustee hobbled out of sight, Ian rushed to the trashcan, picked it up and sifted through the refuse.

"Finally getting around to emptying the garbage, McQuade?"

Ian jerked his head around to find Frank staring at him, rocking on his heels with the pinched expression of a spoiled brat on his pale face. He obviously trailed after the other man as far as he dared, not wishing to invoke another browbeating. Gustman was both a coward and a bully, with none of the potential redeeming qualities of either.

"What's that you have in your hand?"

Unknown to him, Ian recovered the discarded paper thrown in by the trustee on his way out. He handed it reluctantly to him. He unfolded it snippily, recognized it for what it was, and with agonizing slowness tore it into tiny pieces. To add insult to injury, he let them drop and flutter to the freshly mopped floor, the marble-tiled main gallery that Ian shined to a polish only that morning.

"Pick that up, will you? We have a reputation to uphold."

With that, the weasel that was Frank Gustman slithered away. Ian fumed as he gazed after him, his fists balling as his nails cut into his palms. "Someday," he said between clenched teeth. He bent down and hastily retrieved the fallen bits of paper. A few drifted back into the wastebasket. Not daring to be caught sifting through the garbage can in the middle of the museum foyer a second time, he wrapped the container in his arms and backed into the men's bathroom.

Frantically, he dug to find the missing pieces. The only way to know if he gathered them all was to reconstruct them. In his excitement, Ian suddenly had to use the facilities, as he hurriedly reassembled the image by the shape of the tears.

It was a map, hastily drawn, but exact to scale of the Amazon Basin near the Rio Negro, both clearly marked. There were two pieces left to go, probably still lying somewhere near the top of the rest of the garbage. In his excitement, Ian couldn't hold out any longer. He leapt into a stall, locking the door behind him. A weak bladder was one of his milder dysfunctions.

Moments later, he heard the outer door open, followed by footsteps and a discreet cough, as someone entered the bathroom. He walked up to the sink, and washed his hands. Losing patience with the air dryer, he tore off a paper towel and dried his hands. Afterwards, he spent a few moments grooming himself in front of the mirror. As McQuade listened quietly, the man turned to leave, but came back, as if he forgot something. The next set of footsteps did not return but retreated until muffled by the closing door. Alone again, Ian hummed to himself, pleased at the acoustics of the room and his incredible luck.

Afterwards, he opened the door to a horrible surprise.

Although the tiny pieces of paper were still lying to the side, near the paper towel dispenser, the trashcan was gone. Frantically, he crumpled the ragged slips into his pocket and ran out to look for the thief. After pushing through the double doors at the rear of the African exhibit, he spied not one, but several cans, exactly like the one he lost. He cried out pitifully as he fell to his knees before the compactor, and began to rummage through the wastebaskets, upending them on the floor as he waded

through with his arms.

“You that bad off, boy? I know I don’t make as much as you, but I’d be happy to loan you some money for food, or whatever. You know, just until you get back on your feet.”

Ian instantly recognized the voice of the head security guard, a former NFL great from the old days of the Baltimore Colts and original Cleveland Browns by the name of Lamar ‘Choo-Choo’ Smith. Pensions for old school pro football players weren’t as they are for today’s multi-millionaire celebrity/athletes. His knees ached much of the time from arthritis. This was due to the constant abuse they suffered during his career, and reconstructive surgery after retiring. Arthroscopy was unknown in those days, and unaffordable in these, at his part-time salary.

“Sorry, Choo, can’t stop to talk. Somebody stole my garbage can. I was in the bathroom when somebody just walked in and took it!” After a confused moment’s hesitation, the middle-aged black man lifted the much smaller McQuade to his feet. Taking Ian by the shoulders, Lamar confessed that he found the can sitting on the edge of the sink, and took it back to the maintenance area to be emptied. Together, they made their way to the stockroom situated between the loading dock and the janitorial closet that doubled as Ian’s office. The pair could only move as fast as Lamar’s arthritic knees would allow.

“How was I supposed to know you were savin’ the junk in it?”

Ian apologized for the accusation, asking for Lamar’s help in locating the trash can. To save his knees, Ian brought the wastebaskets over to a workbench, dumping their contents one at a time. As they sifted through the discarded wrappers and soft drink containers, Ian gradually reorganized the slips of marked paper, from his pocket onto the laminated counter top.

After twenty minutes, he failed to find either of the two missing pieces. He looked over, hopelessly, at the trash compactor, with empty cans stacked inside of one another in front of it.

Before anything else could happen to the surviving bits of paper, he gathered them up like so many moths, rushing them over to the supply closet that doubled as his office. Taking down a sheet of 8 ½ x 11-inch contact paper, he pulled off the backing. He gingerly placed the adjacent pieces together, like a jigsaw puzzle. He was finished when he was satisfied that he replaced them all correctly. Ian realized at the same time that he had no choice now, if he hadn’t. He covered them with a second sheet of the sticky, opaque covering.

Then, he went over to the copier, laid the composite gently face down, and punched the Start button. The luminescent green band passed beneath the glass plate, and moments later, a perfect reproduction came out. It was copying a second and a third, as punched in by the previous user. Ian ran over to a worn-out Atlas sitting on a metal shelf between *On the Track of Unknown Animals*, by Bernard Heuvelmans, and *Mysterious America: The Revised Edition*, by personal favorite, Loren Coleman. These men went out and did what he intended to do: leave the confines of a tiny office and chase after cryptids.

All he lacked was the last known location of the spider and any discernible landmark that would take him to it. It had to be diagonally positioned, between the two missing adjacent pieces. In what order, he had no clue.

Ian raced back out of his office to begin researching the area, and its celebrated

cryptid. Just moments before the miffed curator came in search of him. Instead of his erstwhile assistant, Gustman found a pair of fragmented copies of the map he thought he destroyed. Instead of reprimanding McQuade yet again, he simply smiled without lips. Folding the sheets, he tucked them into the breast pocket of his expensive suit.

A month later, Ian took a leave of absence. He boarded a jet at Boston's Logan Airport, flew coach to his connection in Miami, then on to South America. Now, well into the third week of his two-week vacation, here he was. Lost in the rainforest, out of money, out of time, and lacking any sense of direction. His team shifted uneasily behind him, knowing he had no idea where they were. Let alone which way to go.

Cervares, a dark-haired boy in his late teens who never wore a shirt or shoes, came forward to stand beside Ian. "Perhaps, señor," he said in as near a faltering Spanish dialect as he could muster, "if you were to tell us again about what it is you seek? Maybe then we may know where it can be found."

Ian McQuade was secretive about where he was going, vague about what he was going to do once he got there. Here, it made little sense, but the language was a barrier. At that moment, a large, brown spider, half the size of a man's outstretched hand, topped a decaying log. It shifted left and right, turning toward them, as if fixing them in its multiple, jet black eyes. Ian shivered. He had to be crazy, but it was a start.

He pointed at the spider, and then uttered "Allí." There. "Es rojo, pero más grande." It is a spider like that one, but red and much bigger. Ian held both hands together, the fingertips fanning outward. The rest of the locals muttered among themselves, trying to understand, when Cervares suddenly threw up his hands, his eyes going wide with realization.

"You seek *El Diablo Rojo*, the Red Devil himself?" Ian grabbed the boy by slim, bare shoulders and turned an anxious glance to the others, now gathered expectantly behind Cervares.

"Yes! Have any of you seen it?" Ian held out his hands, pleading with them to understand. In an uncomprehending mix of nods and smiles, shakes of their heads and frowns, the rest of his entourage finally drew silent in an uncertain display of shrugged shoulders and sidewise glances. McQuade read their expressions, and knew they all heard of the legendary giant spider rumored to live in the area. He knew as well that none of them ever actually encountered it. Ian took a quick inventory of their dwindling supplies and diminishing prospects. They were reduced to eating roots and bark to conserve what little food they had left. They drank water from questionable streams, and whatever they collected that fell from the high rainforest canopy. It was not always clean and very seldom clear. He would be lucky to get out of the jungle without something his shots didn't cover.

"McQuade? Ian McQuade?" A decidedly feminine voice called out to him from the edge of the clearing at which they halted. Ian spun around, shocked that anyone else should be out there, let alone knows his name. It was a beautiful woman, nearly his height. She had the dark hair of the Indians, but naturally curled to her shoulders where theirs was straight. Her skin was fair and her eyes a sudden, vivid blue. Her high cheekbones and full lips made for an incredible appearance. Yet, dressed

properly for the area in a blouse of hand-woven linen, hiking shorts and heavy boots, she cut a most impressive figure. It was a fact not lost on Ian or any of the other men with him. She cut McQuade's men a look that diverted their ogling gazes, and left her alone to speak with their boss.

"Y-yes," he stammered. "Who are you?"

She smiled for the first time, a broad grin revealing two rows of pearly white, even teeth. "My name is Alma Del Nephites," she said, nodding slightly. She never fully gave in to the amusement stirring at the corners of her vibrant smile, as if she knew his desperate situation and struggled not to show it. Ian looked around the clearing, trying to pierce the veil of the surrounding rainforest. Perhaps, he reasoned desperately, she arrived by some hidden or overgrown jungle trail they might take out of their predicament.

"How do you know my name, and how did you get here?" McQuade asked hopefully. "Did the museum send you to find me?" He suddenly realized the implication and admission that he was, in fact, *lost*.

Alma laughed in response, shaking the thick, dark locks. "Museum? No."

Ian let out a sigh. He was already a week overdue back at his job keeping kids on the visitor side of the display ropes and scraping gum from the poles.

"I have been watching you for the past two days," she said, almost apologetically. Ian was indignant.

"You've been spying on me, then?" Grabbing the brim, he yanked the ball cap from his head, angrily shoving fingers through his sweaty hair to push it out of his face. He practically slammed it back on his head. The brown spider keeping vigil on the log leaped down, and scurried into the undergrowth.

"No, please forgive me," the young woman said. She was close to his age, but there was a confidence, almost a swagger to her movements and mannerisms. She could handle herself out here in the jungle. "I have a house, just over that rise." Alma Del Nephites jerked her thumb back over her shoulder. He gazed up and leaned to his right. Ian could see the baked red terra cotta tile of a hacienda-style roof.

"Two days?" Ian asked pitifully, holding up as many fingers as if he barely had the strength.

"Yes," she replied again. "You've been going in circles for at least that long; maybe even three." Alma winced, unafraid of his reaction but trying to soften the impact of her words. The women in his life, from his mother to the girl he almost married, always took that tone with him.

Why was that?

McQuade turned back and looked balefully at his supposedly experienced guide and porters. True, there was only the four of them. From the beginning, they seemed to have no knowledge of where they were. Now, he understood why. They were paid well to take a stroll. They could care less if he got anything out of the deal.

Suddenly, one porter, an unusually fat Indian named Tomas belched loudly. In the hand he used to wipe his mouth, he held a vaguely familiar fast food wrapper. Another porter noisily sucked the last out of a wax-coated soft drink container through a striped blue and white straw. Ian walked over and grabbed both items roughly out of their hands. The two protested and stepped toward him. Alma came up beside him, crossing her arms over her chest. She raised an eyebrow, as if daring them to move a muscle. She meant it, and they stepped back behind the others and

hung their heads.

Ian opened the paper. His Spanish may not have been conversational, but the logo on the containers was undeniable.

The Golden Arches.

They all came from a McDonald's restaurant. He was nearly famished, relying on berries and tubers to keep his stomach from growling, and they were eating out. "Where did you get this?" he demanded in English. If nothing else, they knew by his tone what he meant. They better give him something more than blank looks for an answer. In unison, they pointed toward Alma's home.

So, they understood him, after all.

Ian swung around to catch the young woman in a wild, accusing glare. Alma met his stare calmly. "Not me," she said. Gesturing to herself, she shook her head and held her hands out toward McQuade. Uncertain, he stepped away from the ring forming around him. "It's from Manaus." She could tell he still had no idea where he was. "It's the most westernized resort city in this corner of Brazil." Walking toward him, she took the cup from his hand. Supporting her elbow on the forearm draped across her stomach, she turned the cup from side to side, as if modeling it for him.

McQuade snatched it from her hand and stomped it into the ground. The resounding pop sent multicolored birds flying from the surrounding canopy of trees. Monkeys, hidden in the boughs, called noisily down to them. Other animals, much larger, growled and roared from deeper in the rainforest.

"Perhaps we should go," one porter said to the other in perfect English.

The others attempted to beat a hasty exit during the argument and aftermath, but Alma grabbed Cervares by the shoulder and spun him around. "I have seen you hustle tourists in the city, taking their money in a dozen different ways." She looked accusingly down at the boy, who adopted a rebellious grin. Alma tightened her hold on the tops of his shoulders.

"Give the nice man back as much of his money as you still have." He started to protest, but she locked her fingers in an excruciating vise grip.

"Ow! Okay, just let go, will ya?" He almost sounded like a kid from New York, which as it turned out, he was. He took a knot of money out of his pocket, pulled off a couple of twenty-dollar bills, proffering it to the American. Ian, standing behind her, was about to reach for the proffered cash when Alma snatched the bigger wad out of the other hand. She held the money up over her shoulder for Ian, who took it without counting, and stuffed it in his shirt pocket.

"Now, get out of here before I have you all arrested!" They knew the woman meant every word. Needing nothing more than a head start, they disappeared along the only trail toward the city. The four, led by Cervares, knew where they were, all along. Ian sat down on the log vacated by the spider, his head in his hands. He rubbed his tired eyes beneath his glasses, sighing heavily. Alma walked over and sat down beside him. She put her hand at the back of his neck, squeezing gently.

"Cheer up, it's not really so bad now, is it?"

He looked over at her, smiling as best he could through the hunger and the shame. "No, I guess not," he said, feigning a conviction he lacked.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, until Ian reached down and stirred up the powdery dirt between his boots. "Here I thought I was about to make a great

discovery, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but my wits and my native Indian companions.” He shifted miserably, picking up a stick and drawing a circle in the sand as the brown spider positioned itself to watch from beneath the safety of the log. “I blew my whole vacation and squandered my life savings, to get taken by a bunch of kids on a hellish death march, while they sneaked out for junk food. I could have starved to death out here, or died of thirst.”

Trying to lift his spirits, or at least change the subject, Alma winced again as she dared to ask the obvious question. “What are you doing out here, anyway?” Ian thought it over for himself a long quiet moment before answering. Brazil was only slightly smaller than the United States, with a history bringing together a melting pot of cultures almost as varied. One hundred, seventy-two million people of Portuguese, German, Polish, Italian and Spanish ancestry accounted for about fifty-five percent of the population. The rest was primarily of mixed descent.

McQuade’s reasons for coming to South America were his own, but centered on the Amazon River Basin deforestation. Lumbering in the area, for any reason, was made illegal two years earlier by an environmental crime bill signed into law. The act was punishable by stiff fines and jail terms. He was looking for a specimen to prove his theories on the effect of human encroachment on isolated, unclassified species.

One breed of spider, in particular.

“Just taking a look around,” he replied at length.

His motivations were his own. Despite the help of the beautiful woman who rescued him in his ignorance, they had to remain so, at least for the time being. He had no reason to trust her. For all he knew, she could be a part of the ruse and still in league with his former team. Why did they leave so quickly, when the two of them were so badly outnumbered? He hadn’t been in a fight, himself, since the eighth grade, and was in no shape to help much in the event Cervares and the others called her bluff. By this time, he was starting to smile despite himself and his hopeless situation. Alma laughed, but not at him. She patted his knee and stood, starting in the general direction of her house. “Come on. I’ll fix you something to eat.”

He watched her walk away, and then stood up to follow. “By the way,” he asked, catching up to her at the edge of the clearing, “why were you looking for me?”

Alma nearly forgot. “Oh, that,” she said, throwing back her head and shaking the thick curls. “I have a phone call for you.”

They walked together up a meandering path, reinforced on either side with stone gathered from the area, taking hold of a handrail shaped and polished from a single piece of wood. The steps wound up and around a stream appearing at the crest of the hill, below the yard. It tumbled over cascading rock formations, into a shallow pool at the bottom. Alma set in there a variety of brightly colored tropical fish. “Mollies,” she explained. “I netted them myself, straight out of the Amazon at Rio Negro.” Ian was impressed. He could only guess how much work would have been needed to build up the pond and surrounding area, without detracting from the natural beauty of its surroundings.

At the top of the hill, they crossed a neatly kept yard, ducking under a netted awning and over the adobe brick patio beneath. “Here we are,” Alma announced,

obviously proud of the home she made at the edge of the rainforest. She pulled back a glass-paned door, which ran half the length of the patio, and stepped inside.

Inside, there was another jungle. A variety of brightly colored flowers in planters hung from the ceiling, or wall brackets, at nearly every corner of the room. Vines grew across bookshelves, dangling down from thresholds and eaves. Everywhere he looked was more baked clay tiles, paneling of polished wood, and stucco walls.

"You did all this yourself?" Ian asked.

"Over time," Alma replied, taking obvious pride at her handiwork. They stood together, the peaceful serenity of the room calming them both. At length, she returned her attentions to her guest. "You must be famished," she said, excusing herself as she went to the kitchen. "Make yourself at home," she called back to him, over her shoulder. "I won't be but a minute."

Ian walked over to an antique book cabinet, repainted to match the décor and filled to nearly sagging beneath the weight of dozens of books. He ran his finger up and down along the faded letters adorning the canvas, papyrus, and leather bindings. He found nearly all of them to be centuries old. Maps, charts, and records were filled with the supposed location of lost cities, and the histories of ancient civilizations. There were even scrolls rolled up and cached in tubes of various materials and finishes. "All I have is herbal tea to drink while we wait. Would you like ice with it?"

Ice. Ian pulled down his lip in astonishment. "Sure, ice is fine." He reached up and pulled down a gold embossed cylinder. It was labeled with the unusual title of *Antarctica - the Land Beneath the Ice: AD 958*. From his studies, Ian knew Antarctica was a true continental landmass. The Arctic was but a frozen sea, with edges bordering other countries and varied wildly in size, throughout the year. He was intrigued what any early explorer could know what modern man had yet to discover. Removing the tarred cork from the end of the tube, he reached in to slide out a stained brittle parchment. Tucking the container under his arm, he began to unroll noisily the ancient document.

"Be careful with that!" Alma cried from behind him, causing him to drop the map, cylinder and all. She set down the teakwood tray she carried, and rushed over beside him to pick it up.

"I-I'm sorry. I was, was just curious," Ian stammered, something he often did as a child whenever he was caught in a blunder, social or otherwise.

Alma gingerly pushed the map back into the dark tube, replacing the pitch-covered cork. She shook her head apologetically. "It's all right. You didn't know what you were doing." They stood together. "I've spent my life recovering and restoring old records and documents. Many are priceless, and all are irreplaceable." She slipped the gold embossed cylinder back in its place on the bookshelf. "Please don't touch."

Ian followed her back around an oversize sofa, the back of which was draped with an afghan, hand-woven of alpaca wool, and tied back with lapis lazuli beads at the edges. It was rough, and scratched the soft underside of his forearm as Ian leaned up to accept the cool drink from Alma. He remained there, perched on the edge of the couch. Alma chose to sit in a wicker chair off to his left, pulling up her legs with her muscular calves tucked to her side. Unconsciously, he found himself gazing at their tanned length, until she cleared her throat and sat her tea on a coaster on the

short-legged table before her.

"So," she began, straightening her legs and pulling her shorts back to mid-thigh. It occurred to Ian he was staring, and both of them turned a deeper shade of red. She clasped her hands together, leaning her elbows outward from her knees, drawing closer to him. "What's a nice boy like you really doing way out here in the jungle, anyway?" Alma smiled again, a disarmingly bright, open grin.

McQuade paused a moment, considering what part of all that went wrong during his time in the jungle to reveal. Mercifully, he'd barely gotten out a syllable when a strange, trilling ring came from a rectangular box beside an old, roll top desk. "Excuse me, but I'd better get that," Alma pointed and hurried over to the satellite phone. It gave three quick rings by the time she reached it, and picked up a remote headset. She positioned the earpiece and microphone to her left cheek.

"Yes, this is Alma. He's right here. Go ahead and put him on." Ian looked at the LEDs as they blinked in progressions of green, yellow and flickering blue. He looked under the desk, following with his gaze the coaxial cable snaking across the floor. It ran to a small, hastily spackled hole leading into the stucco wall. He hadn't noticed a satellite relay dish on his way in, but this was obviously the connection to a satellite-based communications device.

"It's for you," Alma said a second time.

Ian snapped out of his muse, stretching himself up from the seat with a slight groan, his sore, tired muscles having already adjusted to the relative comfort of the cushions. He walked over, took off the ball cap and handed it to Alma. He put on the headset, and brought the boom mike close to his lips. "This is Ian McQuade," he said, almost as a question.

"Mr. McQuade," a rich baritone voice said on the other end, "may I call you Ian?"

McQuade nodded, "Ian would be fine."

The voice on the other end did not wait for any further pleasantries or questions. "Ian it is, then." A slight pause, almost as if the stranger was writing something down. "My name is Cyril Pritchard. I am President and CEO of the Chimaera Foundation, LLC. Perhaps you've heard of us?"

Ian searched his memory. "No. Sorry, I can't say I've had the pleasure." He was confused, but something about the name instantly touched his imagination. Although equated with the mythological creature with the head of a ram, the body of a lion and the tail of a writhing serpent, it represented any unknown entity, even a cryptid. Ian smiled to himself.

"Well then, permit me to explain who we are and what we do by way of an introduction." Mr. Pritchard was insistent. "We are a philanthropic organization seeking out such individuals as yourself. We provide them with the means to pursue, shall we say, *unique* areas of field research. In exchange for your time and considerable talents, we contribute generously to your academic institution, or corporate employer. If they agree to allow you to go on sabbatical to represent our interests, they are compensated quite handsomely, as are you. In the meantime, you need give no thought to equipment, provisions, or expenses. We will provide everything you need."

Ian was only listening distractedly, waiting for the opportunity to ask his own questions. How did they know where to find him; let alone who he was, or why he

was there? The voice on the other end left little room for discussion, and none to respond. Although Ian tried his best, he was silenced again and forced by years of courtesy and proper phone etiquette to listen. "Have you ever considered working in the corporate sector, Mr. McQuade?" The question was simply worded. For better or worse, it spoke volumes to the budding cryptozoologist.

"There is more I would like to discuss with you, but I would prefer to meet in person. Would you by any chance be interested in coming to New York for a visit, possibly take a tour of our facilities?" It was more of a rhetorical question than a request. Through it all, Cyril's voice lost none of its pleasantness. He was not a man to be refused, or denied what he wanted.

"Well," Ian said under his breath, "there's always a first time for everything." He raised his voice in reply. "I'd love to, Mr. Pritchard," Ian said, looking at Alma, who allowed a small smile to curl at the corner of her lips. "But, I'm afraid I have to be getting back to the museum. You see, I'm an assistant curator at the Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History in Boston. I'm overdue back there, already." Apologizing yet again would have lessened his resolve.

"Not anymore," Mr. Pritchard replied evenly.

"Not anymore?" Ian looked again at Alma Del Nephites, who shrugged her shoulders slightly. She genuinely did not seem to know to what Cyril was referring. "Well, when you didn't show up for work this past Monday, you were summarily sacked."

Sacked? Ian's mind raced to recall the continental equivalent. "Sacked." He repeated the word aloud to himself. Suddenly, realization knotted his stomach. "You mean they fired me, just like that?"

Ian could hear the sympathetic tone on the other end of the line. "I'm afraid so, Ian. Apparently, they got wind of what you were doing in South America. The story was somehow leaked to the local papers. The museum's chairperson, Clayton's ex-wife and widow, Marjorie Echols, prevented it from hitting the wire services. She called in an old favor from the publisher of the *Globe*. The curator was livid, and had no choice but to report the matter to the museum board of directors."

Ian slumped and his knees nearly buckled. "I'll just bet he fought it."

He never got along with Frank Gustman. Both were friends with Professor Dreyson, but the congeniality ended there. Mr. Gustman never let the chance go by to let either of them know it was not only a favor, but also an imposition. How did the story get to the paper in the first place? Would Frank have spilled the beans? No. That was impossible. As much as the curator disliked him, the museum gained nothing by leaking such an article.

Who, then?

"Ian, I'm sorry." It was Alma. She laid a gentle hand on his shoulder. He wanted to end the conversation. Nothing good came of it, and he was worse off than before. There was nothing keeping him there, and nothing for him back in the states. Cyril's measured words broke through to his scattered thoughts, doubts and fears never fully resolved. "Mr. McQuade, I am truly sorry. Still, their loss can be your gain." It was hard enough to get bad news from a stranger, without having him pass yet another dubious prospect under his nose.

"Come to New York, today. I have a private jet waiting for you and Ms. Del Nephites at the airport in Manaus."

Ian could scarcely contain the doubt and disappointment any longer. “Look, Mr. Pritchard, I’ve had a very long, very bad day. I managed to lose my way, my money, and now my *job* over a giant, non-existent red spider.” Ian was nearly shouting now, a frustrated choke at the back of his throat. “Give me one good reason why I should?” He was fairly shaking with outrage now. Neither Ian, nor the corporate CEO, gave in to the tense silence filling the space between them. Alma stepped away, leaving the room for a moment. Ian could hardly blame her.

As much as he detested the treatment he received at the museum, the assistant curator’s position and its meager paycheck were all he had.

What was he going to do now?

“Mr. McQuade?” Alma said softly. “Ian?” Ian sighed and shook his head, turning to face her. His eyes and mouth flew open. His face lost its color, in shock and surprise, at what he saw. Cuddled against the crook of her neck and shoulder lay a spider. Crimson as blood, it was roughly the size and apparent weight of a small dog. It was the arachnid of local folklore and superstition, the object of his search and the reason he came to Brazil, *El Diablo Rojo*.

The Red Devil itself, they called it.

In a trance, unable to take his eyes from the fantastic sight, he pulled the boom mike closer to his lips. “We’ll leave immediately,” he croaked, handing the headset back to Alma. She stepped toward him and took it, allowing him to see the magnificent creature up close. It raised a bristled foreleg as he reached out to touch it. Ian reconsidered when he saw the inch and a half long fangs poised just beneath the slowly working mandibles.

Alma responded to Cyril Pritchard’s final instructions, absently stroking the fiendish looking creature. Ian wasn’t particularly fond of snakes, but he was terrified of spiders. Whatever possessed him, to turn his life upside down for a glimpse of this hideous beast, had better be worth it. Del Nephites ended her conversation, gathered a few belongings in a worn out backpack, and caged the giant spider. “It’s coming with us?” Ian asked skeptically.

“Always,” Alma responded. She led him outside to an old jeep awaiting them in the muddy driveway. Ian got in on the passenger side as Alma placed the arachnid in a mounted travel cage, securing the straps as the spider turned to grip the wire of the front grill. With a scrabbling of useless legs on the plastic base of the interior, Ian felt an involuntary shiver as the reason he came to Brazil stared back at him out of the darkness of its cell and fell sullenly quiet.

Jumping over the seat to take her place behind the wheel,

Alma drove home the key in the ignition, bringing the Jeep to sputtering life. She slid an Aerosmith cassette into the tape player, and cranked the knob to full volume. Del Nephites wasted no time. She tore through muddied trails winding through the verdant rainforest, to the city below. On the way down, they overtook the con artists who led Ian on such a costly wild goose chase. Alma intentionally hit a puddle, dousing them. Hoping to hitch a ride back to Manaus, they were now nothing more than a quartet of indignant wet clay statues. Cervares pulled in his thumb and gave a decidedly New York City gesture to the fading vehicle, and its troublesome passengers.

They stopped off at the drive through of the local McDonalds, once they reached the resort end of town. Alma ordered a couple of combo meals at the

window, both for Ian. Fifteen minutes later, they were seated aboard the private black and blue Lear jet bearing the winged Chimaera logo. It taxied for takeoff, bound for New York and Ian's first meeting with the enigmatic Foundation CEO, Cyril Pritchard. Within moments of confirmation from the makeshift tower, the twin GE turbines roared fully to life, bearing Ian and his newfound companion out of the deceptive jungles of Brazil.

CHAPTER 2

Ian reclined in the high-backed seat, glad for traveling in comfort for a change. Besides Alma and himself, there was only one other passenger. She was a quiet, older woman with nothing to say to either of her traveling companions. Content in observing him, when she acknowledged them at all, she would occasionally glance up over a pair of outdated reading glasses at Ian. It gave him the uneasy feeling the papers she was shuffling through had something to do with him. It was almost as if he in were in some kind of preliminary job interview. The whole effect was unnerving, but nothing he could put his finger on or identify. He knew instinctively, interrupting or inquiring about the imperious woman, would be a very bad idea.

McQuade shifted in his seat uneasily. Alma leaned hers back, extending the chaise lounge, eyes closed and hands locked over her stomach. Hers was a natural beauty, an effect achieved with little or no make-up. Unaware or convinced of her appearance and its affect on him, Ian couldn't be certain. Either way, she slept now as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Near the window sat a small plastic cage, with interlocking top and bottom. It contained the giant red spider he came to South America to find, in the first place. Occasionally, he could just make out the slanting light through the wire bars, highlighting the prickly crimson fur. Even more unnerving to him were the fathomless black eyes, sitting in double rows on the tapering head. They now stared back at him from behind the wire grill.

"You're wondering how I got her, aren't you?" Alma leaned forward in her seat, suddenly awake. She gazed over his shoulder at her pride and joy.

"Her? You mean to say it's a *she*?" Ian shifted his position, suddenly remembering his entomology regarding the relative size of female to male arachnids. In this case, he was grateful there was no smaller male. He thought about the puny, fist-sized spider he'd seen in the clearing that morning. He could hardly blame the little fellow for remaining a bachelor. Especially if a date with a female, clearly so far out of his league, meant ending up as dinner. Ian knew exactly how it felt.

"I named her Titian, after the shade of crimson created by the Renaissance painter," Alma stated, matter-of-factly. Ian could not get over the sheer bulk of the creature. She was easily twice the size of his outstretched hand. "What does she eat?" Ian asked, determined to keep his fingers clear of the front grate.

"Oh," Alma replied, "the usual. I'd say mostly fruit, small birds and lizards. Insects are generally too small, and not worth the bother. Omnivorous, I'd say." With that, Alma cut off a small slice of apple she took out of her backpack, where it leaned against the far side of her seat. "She loves apples," Alma explained. Then, addressing Titian in a baby voice, she cooed, "don't you, girl?"

Ian watched as the spider flattened herself against the front of her enclosure, hooking its mandibles on the wire framework to maintain her position. Nimble, it reached up with a red bristled foreleg and took the sliver of apple through the bars in

the cage. The slice disappeared as the spider withdrew to the back of its cage. Ian could swear he heard it chewing.

"I was on an archaeological dig at Tambo Machay, near the foot of the Peruvian Andes, for the Universidad de Colombia. They called me in to catalog a cache of papyrus scrolls, clay tablets, and brass plates unearthed in an ancient library." Alma shifted toward him in her seat, her enthusiasm mounting. "I was helping to clear a patch of jungle overgrowing the rear entrance to the archives, just below ground level. Before I knew it, I ran into her web. The strands were as thick as twine." To emphasize, she held her fingers nearly a sixteenth of an inch apart.

"She immediately started to descend toward me, thinking she was going to eat like a queen. That's when I screamed. She screamed, too, and scurried up to the edge of her web, snipping them with her pincers and running up along the lower branches of a tree." With that, Alma looked back into the recesses of the cage, as if sharing the common memory with the creature.

"She wouldn't come down, but I knew she was as frightened of me as I was of her." Alma set her jaw before continuing, upset at what she was about to say. "We were there to salvage what we could before loggers and land developers turned the whole area into condos, or worse."

Alma relaxed as Titian reappeared. "I couldn't just leave her there to be crushed, along with the only home she'd ever known. I slid my machete into my belt and climbed up after her. She struggled at first, when I took hold of her. She even bit me." Alma showed Ian two faint scars just above the wrist, on the underside of her forearm. "She's a spinner, not a jumper, so her poison is meant to immobilize long enough to subdue and cocoon her prey. A ground spider would have been looking to kill its prey immediately."

"Has it..." Ian corrected himself, "...has *she* ever been formally identified, or classified?"

Alma shook her head in response. "Not formally, no." As Ian regarded her quizzically, Alma hurried on with her story. "I once dated an entomologist who specialized in arachnids, spiders and scorpions mostly, months before I found Titian." Alma let out her breath wistfully. "I thought about calling him when I couldn't categorize her, but I figured he'd think it was just a ploy to get him back into my life."

Then, she set her jaw tight and narrowed her eyes. "Either that, or he'd try to steal her away from me, as some new species." Alma leaned forward, pushed on her knees, rising gracefully to her feet. "I'd pity anyone who ever tried to come between me and Titian." Alma looked down at McQuade, who suddenly felt like a deer caught in headlights. He gulped involuntarily, hoping she hadn't noticed. As little as he knew about her, he got the distinct impression she was perfectly capable of backing up the threat, whether or not it was intended for him.

Alma returned after a few moments. They were notified by cockpit recording the aircraft was experiencing slight turbulence. The Lear was now over the northernmost tip of the Andes, in Venezuela. The mountain chain ran like a spine along the western coast of South America, down to Argentina. McQuade was just glad he chose not to attempt an expedition anywhere along its winding length. He would have probably never been found.

The pair buckled into their seats as the jet compensated by climbing northeast, above and away from the last of the rugged peaks. They sat together without speaking, awkward in the silence growing like a wall between them. Ian had so many questions for the young South American, but felt compelled to sit down and keep quiet under the continued scrutiny of the matronly woman with the high, severe hairstyle.

She continued to thumb through the loose pages of a single document, regarding him, from time to time, with a studied condescension. He didn't appreciate the unwarranted attention in the least. He struggled through his childhood as an undersized, overweight kid with glasses. His teenage years certainly hadn't been much kinder, gracing him with braces and bad skin.

Now he was an adult, grown to five foot nine with straight teeth, and skin cleared with the passing of adolescence. The memory still left him somewhat defensive about his looks. Especially when someone stared at him, as she was doing now. He didn't want to appear to be completely ignorant, but under the circumstances, they had him at a distinct disadvantage.

Ian had no idea who the woman was, or what to expect on their arrival back in the states. For that matter, he was having difficulty with Alma traveling with a spider big enough to eat a Chihuahua. Resigned to getting no straight answers to his many questions before they reached New York, he settled back in his seat for a short nap.

Titian, as it so happened, possessed a cleverness and agility equally uncommon in others of her species. Ian could find no other explanation for what happened next. He soon fell asleep and dreamed about his luckless trek through the rainforest, when the hopelessness of his situation caught up with him. Finding himself alone, he began to panic. His breath came in short gasps, and he felt a pressing weight settle onto his chest, as if clutching his heart. Rousing himself out of the nightmare, he awoke.

Ian was plunged immediately into another.

Alma must have covered him with a blanket as he slept. She and the older woman were nowhere in sight. He looked over the side of his seat, toward the bulkhead. Ian noticed, to his growing horror, the front grill of the spider's cage was open. He leaned up abruptly, the weight of Titian pulling the upper fold of the red flight blanket down into his lap. It struggled against being covered, taken from its comfortable place on Ian's warm chest. McQuade screamed in a volume and register he hadn't hit since his voice changed.

Alma, who presumably conversing with the older woman in the conference room at the rear of the plane, came running. She collected her pet from Ian's convulsing lap, disentangling Titian from the blanket as she consoled and comforted it. "Are you all right?" she asked, her voice full of care and concern.

"I'm fine, thanks," Ian replied, wiping the imagined impressions from the place where the spider positioned itself on him.

"I was not asking you," Alma replied evenly. "Look, you frightened her!" She hugged the eight-legged horror close to her face as she continued to speak to it. The tittering and squeaking it made in response sounded like a young child past tears, hoping for more attention. Ian glared at them both. The frowning, matronly woman came forward and took her seat, buckling in as she sat. Alma returned the spider to her cage, double-checking the latch.

Several hours later, the sun had already crossed over the jet and made its way toward the western horizon. They heard the same metallic pilot's voice come over the PA system, informing them of their initial descent into New York's La Guardia airport. They were advised to check their seat belts. Despite an overwhelming fear of heights, Ian never had much trouble flying. The only exception came when he flew in high-winged turboprops, where he felt as if he was swinging beneath a gondola. This jet was much smaller than the MD-88 he took south, out of Miami. Even that aircraft was much smaller than the Boeing 737 he'd flown out of Boston's Logan Airport.

Without warning, an unexpected pocket of air suddenly took hold of the private jet, shaking it several times. They were in the trailing wake of a much larger commercial airliner. Presumably, it passed through the same airspace minutes earlier. The impact and effect were much the same as crossing the waves of a larger vessel on water. Ian reached down and pulled at his seat belt, drawing it tighter across his lower abdomen.

Alma looked over and stifled a laugh in a mock sneeze. She wiped at the corner of her eyes and smiled at him. "I have less than ten thousand frequent flyer miles, lifetime." Ian did his best to explain away his inexperience with air travel, but quickly realized the excuse was lost on her. He crossed his arms like a sulking child, looking out the window until they landed.

They touched down in La Guardia after coming across the harbor, passing directly over the Statue of Liberty. Ian went to New York as a child with his mother, to visit her ailing great-aunt. At the time, they were able to go up into the crown of the massive Lady Liberty. He looked out, grew suddenly dizzy with vertigo and promptly acquired acrophobia. He still shivered at the memory, over twenty years later.

They received landing instructions, and touched down after circling the greater metropolitan New York area for nearly thirty minutes. It gave Ian the opportunity to view the New York landscape. He recognized Madison Square Garden, Central Park, and the Empire State Building. Alma tried to direct his attention to a gigantic tinted black monolith off Park Avenue, in lower midtown Manhattan, but he couldn't make it out as a landmark against any other surrounding it.

"The Chimaera Building," she said, seemingly content he was given all the information he needed. Frustrated, Ian pretended he saw what she pointed out and kept his mouth shut. He ignored her attempts at explanation, interested only in a heartfelt apology. Besides, he still wasn't speaking to her. They pulled up to the gate after a landing in which the flight crew couldn't seem to decide what wheel to land with first, or even if they should use all three once they touched down. That was enough. Alma watched him cover his mouth, as his cheeks took on a sickly greenish hue. "Are you feeling all right?" she asked, touching his arm. Ian shook his head, excused himself, and went back to the restroom to hide his airsickness. He ran towards it, nearly colliding with the sliding door in his haste. Del Nephites shook her head, looking over at the elderly woman. The severe lady shared their long flight, without ever speaking directly to him. The older woman returned her gaze, sharing the South American's concern with an air of skepticism.

"Poor Ian," Alma said under her breath. She shrugged her shoulders at the other woman, who merely stood and gathered the papers she studied. She placed them in a

solid black leather valise and locked the tab. By the time Ian got out of the restroom, somewhat sheepishly, the older woman already deplaned. Alma waited by the door with her backpack slung over one shoulder. Settled in her cage, Titian dangled loosely from her hand. Ian noted the door to the cockpit, with its blue handled lock still latched on the passenger side, was never opened. "Are they coming?" Ian asked, referring with a nod to the pilot and copilot in the forward compartment.

"Already gone," she replied. *Never there* would have been a more appropriate response, but it was too soon for such a revelation. Alma still had no idea whether he would accept the Foundation's proposal. She figured there was no sense in alarming the poor fellow unnecessarily, if not prematurely. Technological advancements not yet available, even to the military, were hardly an inducement. Especially, to someone who ventured as far as South America, without so much as a compass.

Ian ran his fingers through his hair, pushed his glasses back up on his nose and walked over to join her in getting off the plane. "Are you *sure* you're all right?" She asked again with more sincerity, real concern registering this time in the rose tinged ivory features of her face and blue eyes.

Why does she keep asking me that? Ian thought to himself. He realized he'd never given her an answer before, let alone an adequate explanation for his fear of heights. It would have been more of an embarrassment than he was trying to live down. "Yes. I'll be fine. It's nothing I haven't experienced before." He flinched, kicking himself at the involuntary admission.

They walked down the jet's extended ladder to the tarmac as gusts, propelled by the dying engines, pulled against the prevailing winds perpetually buffeting one of the world's busiest airports. The middle-aged woman was far ahead of them by this time, talking with a man who stepped out from the gate area to greet her. He was bald and round, somewhere in his mid to late fifties. They spoke animatedly, hands to ears, and gesturing as they tried to understand each other over the din of airport traffic.

Once inside the terminal, Ian and Alma made their way to customs, a mandatory checkpoint through which international travelers passed to gain entry into the United States. It occurred to Ian it might not be so simple a task to pass a giant specimen of venomous, eight-legged arachnid into the U.S., when even a basket of fruit would be confiscated. He braced himself for the worst. Before they reached the security station with the uniformed agents, Alma handed the cage to McQuade. She reached inside her backpack, producing her passport.

The agent eyed her carefully, a little too carefully for Ian's liking. His cheeks burned with something like jealousy, but he said nothing. McQuade looked down at all the stamps in her passport. At least thirteen countries previously admitted her into their borders, from the look of them. He recognized Germany, Scotland, Great Britain, two or three African republics, Egypt, and China. There were others, but they were not issued in dialects he could as easily identify.

The other agent, a retired gentleman with a world-weary look about him, held out his hand for Ian's passport. Opening it to the first page, the agent looked up at Ian and grinned. There was only one entry, McQuade's costly, ill-fated excursion into Brazil. Ian rolled his eyes. The older man stamped his passport and handed it back.

The other agent, the one who tapped Alma's weather-beaten passport against his open palm, now pointed to the cage Ian held out to his side. "Anything you'd like to declare?" he asked, taking in Del Nephites' deeply tanned legs.

"Yes," Alma said. "I'm up here." The customs agent, who looked like he was former career military, lost his smirk, replacing it with something far less sociable.

Great, Ian thought, now we're going to be here a while.

Instead, Alma pulled out a dog-eared phalanx of yellow, pink and white carbon copies, all stapled together. "I have the proper papers to bring my pet in and out of this country, signed and authenticated."

The customs officer snatched the papers from her hand. He pulled them open, looking for the proper designations and signatures. As he looked, his gaze shifted back to her, and occasionally over to Ian. *What's he looking at me for, anyway?* McQuade thought to himself. "I-it's not mine," he replied at length, stuttering as if guilty of a crime, and caught in the act.

The agents eyed him suspiciously, as Alma rolled her eyes. What's in there, anyway?" the man in the crew cut asked, "Some kind of bird, or snake?" He bent down to look into the cage.

"I wouldn't do that, if I were you," Alma warned. He ignored her, with a glance that told her that he had every right and intention of inspecting the contents of the enclosure. He peered into the dark recesses, his fingers drumming restlessly against the rectangular openings in the wire grill. After searching within for a few moments, the younger agent could see an evenly arranged quartet of reflected lights shining back at him from the darkened recesses at the rear of the cage.

"What on earth?" he asked no one, in particular. He poked and prodded through the bars, with a probing finger. Titian responded immediately to the intrusion by pitching herself forward noisily against the restraining wire. The customs official barely had time to pull his fingers back and count them, as he landed on his backside in abject terror. Forelegs and mandibles were extended in poised defiance, through the openings.

Alma nodded toward the cage, proudly regarding the huge spider, as if it was a child. "She's with me." The older agent gave Alma a bemused look. The younger man gathered himself, what was left of his dignity, and the identification papers off the floor of the customs area.

"Well," the elder customs official said, as he took the papers from the dumbfounded agent. He reviewed them without any further interruption. "Everything seems to be in order, here." He stamped the passport, folded the papers, placed them inside the small blue visa, and proffered them back to Alma. The younger man said nothing as he kept a safe distance from the cage. "Welcome to the United States, Miss." Addressing Ian as well, he added, "Both of you."

The agents walked through the remaining gates, baggage, and ticketing areas to the terminal. Outside the entrance, Ian paused. A big organization such as the Chimaera Foundation, and no formally attired chauffeur waited for them in the terminal, holding up a placard with their names. What kind of outfit was this?

Alma sensed Ian's unease, shaking her head. Ian seemed to have a neurotic fear, bordering on panic, of being lost or abandoned. She tried to broach the subject as lightly as possible. "Ian," she said softly, "is something the matter?"

Ian shook his head, even as he looked from one end of the pick-up and drop-off area fronting the airport, to the other. "No, nothing's wrong, really. It's just that I expected, well, thought we would be met by someone from the company."

Alma nodded, understanding his consternation. "There are plenty of stretch limousines coming and going between La Guardia and Manhattan." Alma set her backpack beside the cage Ian then lowered to the ground. "I simply prefer to drive my own car when I'm in town." With that, the bald man who met the elderly woman at the plane rounded a late model Lincoln Town Car and stepped up onto the curb, handing Alma a set of keys. "Thank you, Burroughs," she said, the man making a very slight continental bow and addressing Ian.

"Where are my manners?" he said, smiling broadly. "My name is Edwin Burroughs. I'm what you might call a 'Rent-a-Cop', head of security at the Foundation. So good to finally meet you, Mr. McQuade." He reached out, took Ian's hand in his own and shook it vigorously. It was all Ian could do not to collapse to his knees, under the crushing grip.

It was all in fun, as far as the older man was concerned. Alma sensed again Ian's discomfort, putting her hand on top of Edwin's wrist to restrain him. "That's enough," Alma requested politely. "Let him go, *now*." Burroughs all but ignored her. This test of manhood caused Ian's fingertips to turn visibly blue beneath the nails from the lost circulation.

Alma saw enough of this display of male ego. She reached out and gripped the top of the bigger man's wrist, pinching down with the flat of her thumb and index finger until his grip wavered and broke. He grabbed his wrist in obvious pain, but made no comment about it. "I just wanted to see what the boy was made of, that's all," he complained. "After all, that is why the handshake was created." He turned his gaze to the smaller McQuade, mockingly adding, "For men to discern one another's strength and character."

Ian rubbed the life and circulation back into his bruised digits. "Glad to meet you, too, Mr. Burroughs."

Edwin broke into a hearty, robust laugh, clamping his broad hands onto Ian's shoulders, and nearly lifted him off the ground. "You'd be amazed how many bookworms and scientists come to tears over a simple little handshake. Well done, m'boy. You didn't even whimper!" With that, he crushed Ian to him in a bone-jarring hug, planting a kiss on each of his cheeks." Then, he grabbed Ian by the lower jaw, forcing his lips into a pucker, like his mother used to do when he was a little boy because it made him, in her words, 'look so cute'.

Looking over again at Alma, Edwin Burroughs realized her patience was wearing thin with his antics. Tall and lithe as she was, he knew she could hurt him if she wanted to badly enough. He let go of the younger man and dropped his hands. "No harm done, then," Burroughs observed dryly, appraising Ian one last time before returning to his car.

Loretta Michaelson was nowhere to be found.

Ian watched the burly man with the shaved head start up the late model automobile and slip smoothly into airport traffic. "He's not by any chance..." Ian began, unsure how to ask the question. He wiped his cheeks of spittle where the overbearing man kissed him.

"No. French descent, I think. Possibly even Cajun, somewhere along the line," Del Nephites chuckled as she only half-heartedly attempted to dispel his fear. She was clearly enjoying his discomfort. "I'm certain he wouldn't be amused to hear you thought otherwise." Ian looked suddenly stricken. "Don't worry," she laughed, "he won't ever hear it from me."

Ian felt she liked him from the moment they met in the Amazon Basin, but in a strangely protective, maternal way. He sighed heavily as he imperceptibly shook his head. He'd have to do better than this if he wanted to convince anybody he was anything other than a fearful, lost little boy. It was already too late to present himself as the strong, silent type.

Alma took up her pack and motioned for McQuade to follow with the cage containing Titian. She crossed the street to the back of a lipstick red Ferrari, parked conspicuously in one of the ten minutes or less curbside spaces. Del Nephites inserted her key into the trunk. She stepped back, as the lid slowly rose on its hydraulics. Reaching out towards the front of the car, she pressed a button on the key ring bob Burroughs gave her. The lights on the sports car flashed twice, turning off the alarms. The driver and passenger doors rose upward and outward.

"Now, this is more like it," Ian said to himself with an approving nod of his head. Tossing in his duffel bag beside her worn backpack, he then turned to help Alma snap Titian's cage down into a fitted harness. It pushed through a folded down, middle armrest into the back seat. After checking to see it was secure, Alma patted the cage and closed the trunk. Ian was not thrilled to learn there was an access panel fitted to the interior of the car, at the rear of the enclosure. The modification allowed Titian to breathe, and Alma to keep a watchful eye on her while driving. Neither option was high on McQuade's list.

"Ready?" Alma asked. Ian nodded, and they circled to either door of the expensive automobile.

Tentatively, Ian ducked down as he got into the car on the passenger side. The dashboard lit up like a jetliner, as the doors folded down around them. There was much more to this vehicle than speedometer, tachometer and fuel gauges.

He was no communications expert, but there appeared to be various locations and meteorological displays, including a GPS system with overlaying map grids put On Star to shame. This was the real thing. *But why?* He reached out as Alma pulled into traffic. It glided with the sound of an unknown engine type, running on an alternative power source. Whatever was under the hood, this luxury sports car didn't rely on fossil fuel.

She slapped his hand away from the series of LED buttons beneath the primary directional display. "Sorry," she said. "This is all very delicate equipment." Alma realized she'd been harsh with him. By way of an apology, she tried to make him understand as much as she was free to explain. "This model's been specially modified for more than New York City traffic."

It was then he noticed sets of buttons grouped below the dash. These were backlit with icons, or labeled with even more ominous warnings. Others looked like weapons systems readouts and tactical displays. He pulled in his hands, touching nothing for the rest of the ride into the city.

Alma wove in and out of traffic, driving with all the confidence and skill of a Formula One racer. Ian never got motion sick as long as he was sitting in the front

seat of an automobile, but if there was ever a time, it was now. He didn't envy Titian at all. He could hear her trying to get a grip on the bottom of the plastic cage as she slid around corners. Alma looked back in the rear view mirror to check on her. "Hang on, baby. Almost there."

Suddenly, somewhere downtown along the northern end of the Avenue of the Americas approaching Central Park South, the powerful sports car swerved out of traffic. It sped down the ramp of a private parking garage. She came to a quick, smooth stop at a checkpoint.

A security guard came out of his station, as a small device moved across the yellow and black yield bar lowered in front of her car. It turned perpendicular to the pole on which it rode and scanned the whole of the automobile, including its passengers. Midway across, it dropped beneath the level of the front fender to take in the bar-coded characters on the license plate holder.

Ian looked in through the heavily paned guard station. Another security officer reviewed information displayed over their images, as they sat in the car. Finally, the laser ended its run up and down the pole. Like a dog track rabbit, it returned to a cubbyhole on the station side of the bar.

The guard bent down to the window, his hand on the holster of his gun belt. He held the ID given to him by Alma. He shifted nervously, as the last of the scan was processed and her identity was confirmed. All at once, the lights imbedded along the pole turned green, accompanied by the sound of a digital horn. It signaled the pair was approved to enter the parking area.

The guard relaxed and smiled. "Good to see you again, Ms. Del Nephties." Then, with a touch to the brim of his hat, he added, "Mr. McQuade." With that, he stood away from the car and waved them on.

Ian was dumbfounded. Everything about this whole escapade was getting over his head. "Parking has to be at a premium to get that kind of once over," Ian said, jerking his thumb back in the direction from which they came. Alma laughed. It was a melodious sound. Ian looked at her and grinned. He was not certain whether the joke was at his expense, but he was glad for it, nonetheless.

"Coming from Boston, I really didn't think the ride here would make you uncomfortable," she added.

Something about the innocuous comment grated on Ian, until realization struck him like a thunderbolt. "I never told you I lived in Boston," he said. He eyed her suspiciously. "Come to think of it, why should I already be in your systems?" Alma didn't respond, instead taking a corner ramp sharply up to the next level of the garage.

Finally, Ian felt like he had a tenuous grasp on at least one question plaguing him about her, about the whole situation.

"Your hat," Alma said, pointing with a finger still on the wheel to Ian's Boston Red Sox ball cap. "I assumed you lived there, at one time or another. As for your name, the brim reads," and with this she pulled the hat down over Ian's eyes, shoving his glasses to the very end of his nose. "To Ian McQuade, best wishes from C. Yaz."

Ian flushed and pulled his head, hat and glasses back into position with one frustrated motion. "It's Yastrzemski, Carl Yastrzemski. You know, the baseball Hall of Famer." Alma shrugged her shoulders. So much for trying to figure out anything

before they told him why he was there. Ian crossed his arms, and looked out the other window. He felt shamed again, and withdrawn into silence. He'd never given his last name to the guard, but he decided to quit while he was behind. She knew it. She had to. *Who are these people?* He let the thought trail out beneath his breath, but said nothing.

Alma threw back her hair and stole a glance at him, while looking at herself in the mirror. She cast a sidewise glance only once, as he ignored her. His face was flushed with anger. She chuckled softly to herself as she looked at the bright red tinge of his ears. "So cute," she murmured.

Finding a space reserved for Chimaera Foundation employees, Alma parked the car and retrieved Titian. Refusing to allow Ian to carry her backpack, she slid a strap to counter the weight to one shoulder. He was left to retrieve his own luggage.

Making their way up to street level, they crossed a wide plaza filled with professional types leaving work in the late afternoon. In the very center, a fountain collecting jets of water illuminated from within by fiber optic strands immediately caught Ian's attention. The spray landed on stone and trickled down the base of a large, bronze representation of a mythological creature.

A realist at heart, Ian could still make out the facets of the beast in its abstract form. There was no detail to the statue, which stood nearly seven feet high. Rather than attempting to show it anatomically, the commissioned artist took bands of metal and looped them to shape the monster. Still, there was no mistake about what it was intended to depict.

Its bearded face was only marginally human, with huge tusks that protruding from its lower jaw. On its head were horns like those of a pronged deer. A short, thick neck connected it to a leonine body covered with scales trailing down muscular legs to three-toed claws, like an eagle. Its wings were as large as the rest of its form. Its tail wound back and forth over the full length of the beast, until it passed over the head of the creature and back again. It ended between its legs, in the splayed tail of a fish.

It was a chimaera. There was no doubt about it. Still, something about the form of banded metal tugged at the back of Ian's mind, something personal eluding him. Not only the creature depicted in classical mythology and this abstract statue, the word also represented any unnamed thing only recognizable by its individual components. This could only be the corporate headquarters of the Chimaera Foundation LLC.

They had arrived.

CHAPTER 3

Entering after Alma, into the main lobby of the post-modern office building, McQuade immediately noticed a pair of tinted cylinders set against the far walls of the interior. They seemed to be constructed in one continuous piece of glass and black metal. The atrium of the building ran all the way to the top without obstruction. As he watched them in their elegant rise and fall, the elevators stopped at floors marked by corridors lining the inner walls.

There was great attention to detail. The open space flowed freely between art and technology. It never offended the preferences of either architectural type. Pictures, a full story high, played on active matrix screens. The towering images changed the aesthetics of the edifice, as well as the ambience.

Ian was impressed. The only murals he was familiar with were glued like wallpaper to the examining rooms of medical offices. Jogging his memory, Ian reached into his pocket, and took out a pencil. He scribbled a note in a tiny day timer that he kept with him, at all times. He had yet to take the leap into PDAs. Handheld organizers only confirmed to McQuade that the human race was far too wired. It was the same reason that he refused a pager, and vowed never to own a cellular telephone. It was time for his semi-annual dental check up, he noted in the calendar.

Better safe than sorry.

Alma took him by the arm, guiding him to yet another security desk. She presented her ID card to a small man with bifocals, and a dour expression. He spoke as if his nostrils were pinched together, an unpleasant voice which was nonetheless cordial. He looked it over, then at Alma, whom he regarded briefly before turning his attentions to Ian.

His gaze dwelled longer on the former assistant curator, making Ian feel just a little self-conscious. Satisfied they were cleared for access, he gave Ian a temporary pass. There was no picture, only a number magnetized with a code for limited access. It was valid for that day only. If notified he would be staying longer, security would extend the access. Otherwise, he would be declared an intruder and hunted down. It wouldn't be much of a chase. A chip was implanted into every ID. As long as he kept it, they would know his whereabouts. Then, the guard slid Alma's green photo ID badge into a reader at his station. A light appeared above the entrance of a private elevator directly behind him. The guard handed the card back to Alma. She thanked him, and called for Ian to follow.

McQuade was used to elevators in office buildings that went to alternate floors only, having exited the wrong ones often enough, only to jump back on with mumbled apologies to the other riders before he could be stranded. *At least,* he thought to himself, *I know where this one is going.* He looked up, one last time, at the lofty interior of the spacious office building. The lights of the glass cylinders ran along their polished metal shafts. The elevators moved constantly between the main lobby and the suite of offices, high above.

He stepped in beside Alma, who put her arm through his. Ian kept his hands in his pockets, a habit from childhood. He always thought his gait was too contrived,

his walk betraying a lack of confidence. His father was tough on him about it, among other things. "I wonder," he muttered under his breath, "what my old man would think if he saw me now?" He looked over at Alma, who flashed a dazzling smile and squeezed his arm.

The rounded doors to the elevator shut, but the two remained at the ground floor level. A scanning device, exactly like the one in the parking garage, appeared and circled them on a track. It ran the edge of the domed top, where it met the elevator wall. Again, they were checked. Alma, who insisted on carrying Titian in her cage, patted the top and spoke comfort to the giant crimson arachnid. The weight shifted from one side of the cage to another, dipping in Alma's hand. She brought the cage up to her hip to balance it. Ian thought to offer to hold it for her, but knew better than to ask.

Instead, he drew close to her, noticing that a camera swung to keep him in its gaze. "Is all this scanning and security really necessary? I mean, short of a full body cavity search, I'd hate to think that all these lasers are making us sterile." Alma smiled, in spite of herself, laughing as the camera next shifted to her.

Finally, the elevator began to move. Down. They were not going up. It moved quietly but rapidly, as if it had a great distance to cover in a few seconds. This was not the lazy, almost graceful way of those headed to the rented spaces above, filled with normal business types. Where was he going? Where was this beautiful woman taking him? Who are these people?

Ian had little time to figure out or even retrace his steps. The elevator came slowly to a stop, without so much as a bump. The doors slid back on themselves into their curved recesses, revealing yet another station. This one, however, was manned by a young woman, with flaxen blonde hair, wide green eyes and a quick, albeit professional smile. It ended at her eyes, which were much too busy to obligate her whole face to welcoming guests. She finally turned her face toward them several seconds before lifting her gaze from the screens mounted on her desk in the reception area. Recognizing Alma, she stood.

"Ms. Del Nephites," she acknowledged, "Mr. Pritchard has been expecting you. Please, follow me." Ian, despite the arm encircling his, watched as the small woman in the tall heels and business casual designer suit led them along the marbled corridor. She didn't bother to check if they followed, but that was all right with Ian.

He felt a glancing slap on his arm. Alma eyed him playfully, trying to be stern. "Before you get any ideas," she warned, "her name is Amelia, and she is Mr. Pritchard's niece."

Ian gulped. He was feeling now a little like the Cowardly Lion, Tin Woodman, and Scarecrow, all rolled into one. "Well," he told himself sarcastically as he placed a reassuring hand over Alma's arm, "at least Dorothy's here." He looked down as a long, bristled red foreleg tentatively extended through the front grate. It felt the lock at the top of the cage. *And Toto, too*, Ian thought with a shiver. Whoever the Wizard of this Oz was, his niece made one fine-looking Glenda, the Good Witch. He kept his eyes looking to the walls, floor and ceiling.

At the end of the hall, a pair of large doors stood open, Amelia leaning back against the rightmost. "Uncle Cyril will be with you in a moment." Amelia appeared to have a habit of tilting her head when she spoke. She very seldom made direct eye contact. "Is there anything I can get for you, while you wait?"

"A mineral water would be fine," Alma said.

"I'd really like a Cherry Coke, if you don't mind?" Ian asked. Alma sighed. Ian really needed to work on his assertiveness. He probably never dated enough to be comfortable around women. They entered the conference room. Alma sat Titian down on the edge of the table, travel cage and all, taking a seat as Ian pulled out the chair for her. She gripped the arms of the high-backed seat, not sure of what happened. "Sorry," Ian said. "Old habits die hard, I guess. My father raised me to be polite; never presume, or take anyone or anything, for granted."

Alma looked up at him as he took the open chair beside him. "Do you always do what your father says?" she asked, innocently. The look on her face was at once precocious, slightly mocking. She was playing with him.

"Not anymore," he admitted. Alma studied the look that suddenly swept over his expression, drawing his face into a determined, yet saddened set of features. There was a history there, she was certain of it, but not here and not now. *Soon enough*, she thought and made a mental note before letting the subject drop.

A door across the room opened that connected with an office at the far end of the hall. It was the very one Ian hoped they would not have to enter. Now that they arrived, he was apprehensive of the man behind all this secrecy. A man in his early sixties entered, bearded, tall and distinguished. He wore no glasses, and his green eyes were as deep and penetrating as those of his niece. Unlike Amelia, he met their gaze without faltering, as he rounded the table to greet them.

The tall man reached Ian first. The older gentleman towered a good six inches above him, and was half again as wide. Ian only half-heartedly extended his sore hand to meet the enormous handshake. "Mr. McQuade? Ian, I am Cyril Pritchard. It is so good to meet you, at last." His grip was warm and yielding. He placed his other hand part way up Ian's wrist, a good sign. Alma was relieved. These two are going to get along well.

Ian jerked just a little, the pain of his earlier encounter still in his mind, if not his hand. Pritchard noticed immediately and softened his hold. "Met Mr. Burroughs, did we?" He smiled, shaking the proffered hand gently. On the ring finger of his right hand, he wore a massive ruby, set in a gold and sterling crest of runes. The band was a size twelve, at least. Ian's were the hands of an artist, according to his mother. His father wasn't so easily impressed. Ian was never able to palm a basketball, or grip a football like a pro. In Little League, he was able to develop a mean knuckle ball, much to the surprise of his coach.

Mr. Pritchard stepped around Ian and shook hands with Alma. It was then that Ian noticed that there was no ring finger on the older man's left hand. It was missing from the middle of the digit closest to the knuckle. Other than that, his only distinguishing mark was a scar that ran up from just above his right eye. It cleanly separated the gray brow neatly in two, toward the temple.

"Please, shall we sit down?" Cyril motioned to their seats, rounding the table to sit on the highest backed chair of them all, at the end of the table. Alma leafed through a folder. Ian looked over her shoulder, then down at the table before him, wondering where his folder could be. He sat down with a crunch of paper. The CEO pretended not to take notice, a courtesy for which Ian was grateful. McQuade raised himself off his seat, and took the folder laid neatly there for his arrival. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Damn.

Cyril Pritchard coughed, and cleared his throat. It was habitual in a manner designed to give him a moment to prepare himself. He was definitely comfortable with his place at the end of the table, Ian thought. “Now then, Ian,” Pritchard emphasized his name, as if convincing himself that it was still acceptable to call McQuade by his first name.

“How do you like our facilities so far?” he asked, taking unabashed delight in what the company put together in the heart of New York.

“Incredible,” Ian admitted, “although I’m not quite sure what I’m doing here.”

Right to the point. Cyril liked that about the young man. Direct. “As I told you on the SATCOM phone, you are in the offices of the Chimaera Foundation, LLC. I founded this organization seventeen years ago to fulfill some philanthropic, humanitarian desires I have harbored since my days as a computer systems designer.” He paused at that point, fully expecting that Ian would recognize him by name, if not reputation. Apparently not. Ian was hooked on computer games as a teenager, but was never even very good at them.

At that moment, Amelia returned. She carried a glass of ice, a bottle of Cherry Coke, and an unopened mineral water on a small, round tray. She sat it down, and poured the cola. Pritchard’s niece proffered both the glass and the bottle to Ian. Rising, she stared openly at him, smiling with her hands tucked behind her back. Alma sighed, and reached to get her own bottled water. Cyril laid his large hands on the tabletop, fingertips splayed.

Ian noticed that there was some strange scarring around the remaining half of Pritchard’s ring finger. “That will be all, Amelia,” Cyril said, almost smiling. Ian watched her leave, until he could feel the eyes of both Alma and Mr. Pritchard upon him. He was afraid to return their gaze. “You’ll have to excuse my niece,” the older man apologized, with more than a hint of the protective uncle. “She is very, *very* young.” Ian could feel his cheeks burn. It was the CEO’s subtle way of telling him that she was strictly off-limits.

If Cyril was crestfallen that his name and reputation did not precede him, he did not let it show. Instead, he folded his hands, elbows on the long, smoothly polished table. “Now then,” he addressed Ian, who squinted slightly askew at his host. He knew he should know him, but he wasn’t sure from where. He decided to sit back, let the situation resolve itself. Unravel the mystery surrounding it. That was the only reason he agreed to come to New York, in the first place. “I’m sure you have many questions already, about why you’re here and who we are. So, let’s begin, shall we?” Then, to no one in particular, he said, “A/V and lights at 60%, please.”

Immediately, the lights in the room dimmed, panels mounted on the far wall pulling back to reveal a four-by-six-foot screen at the far end of the conference room. On either side were still more strange looking monitoring devices, gauges and meters. As to what their exact function was, Ian had no clue. The style and placement almost identically matched the nonstandard hardware in Alma’s expensive automobile. McQuade looked over at her in the near gloom. She smiled back at him, nodding toward the screen and shifting to get more comfortable. She mouthed the words, “you’ll see. Be *patient*.”

Ian watched the logo of the Chimaera Foundation, LLC logo that appeared on the video display. It resembled the statue he saw atop the building’s cascading

fountain, not ten minutes earlier. A four-bar orchestral flourish built to a resounding, final symphonic sting. The name of the company appeared in three-dimensional polished brass letters, barred top and bottom beneath the now still creature.

For the next twelve and a half minutes, Ian watched an orientation film on the founding and phenomenal growth of Chimaera Foundation. It was the brainchild of Cyril Pritchard, while still a managing executive with Synapse AI. The latter was an artificial intelligence company, which folded within eighteen months of his departure. Suddenly, Ian recalled an article in *People* magazine about Pritchard. It appeared several years before, while McQuade was an underclassman at college.

Most published accounts claimed that Synapse collapsed under its own weight, because of losing his leadership. Cyril himself stated publicly that he only influenced others to take an active, financial part in his efforts there. When the company went IPO, Pritchard traded a meager salary, during the start-up phase for, stock options. Gaining controlling interest in the company, he made billions. The CEO made certain that his latest venture, The Chimaera Foundation, remained privately funded, and required no outside investments.

Beyond that, there was precious little in the way of where Chimaera was located. Let alone, regarding what non-profit business they conducted. There was a great deal about the anonymous underwriting of fellowships, grants and scholarships. These were ‘awarded’ to individuals, students and professionals. These worked for the company around the globe, on a contract basis. Mostly, in pursuit of various avenues of what could only be described as discreet field research. According to the video, the purpose was to catalog the superstitions and belief systems of man through the ages, from the pagan to the alien.

Ian once read about a folklorist who equated the little green men of the latter part of the twentieth century to the leprechauns of medieval times. It was the contention of this author, in all respects acknowledged as being at the forefront in his field, that it was all part of a collective consciousness shared by Mankind, down through the ages. Again, Ian opened his mouth and got into trouble with conventional thinking, not to mention the university he attended for expressing and ardently defending a radical view. It could not all be a retained figment of social imagination. Something had to remind humanity through the ages of these cultural icons. From enchantment to lost time, changelings to hybrids, mushrooms to flying saucers.

They were all Little Green Men, whether as the leprechauns of medieval Western Europe, or the aliens that always seem to turn up in lower Alabama. What if people in the Middle Ages described the same phenomena as reported in modern day sightings, in the only terms they could understand?

Ian caught himself as the video ended and the room lapsed into silence. “Lights, please. 85%.” Ian screwed up his face and looked about the room. He could picture someone hidden close by, adjusting a rheostat dimmer switch. If he learned anything about this unusual man, it was that the technology involved was well beyond parlor tricks for his benefit. The building, or basement, whichever it was, more than proved that to Ian.

Cyril spoke again to the open air. “Ms. Michaelson, would you join us for a moment, please?” Immediately, the far door leading to Cyril’s office opened. In walked the elderly woman, who rifled through papers while unnerving him over the

top of her glasses, during the flight from Brazil. Approaching the table, she crossed the room in a dignified manner and took an empty seat directly across from McQuade, her hands folded neatly on the polished mahogany surface. As before, she did not acknowledge him. This woman, in her general disposition and lack of personality, reminded Ian of his third grade teacher. While he later tested ‘normal but academically unchallenged’, it was her initial estimation that the young student lacked maturity, and rebelled against authority.

It was only his father’s intervention, and the accompanying stigma of repeating a grade for either of those reasons, that allowed McQuade to graduate with the rest of his class. His mother, on the other hand, felt that her son could have used the extra year to catch up socially and emotionally. He was glad that his father won that discussion, if few others. It was the year of his family’s camping trip to the Pacific Northwest. In her size, yellow teeth and demeanor, she reminded Ian of the Bigfoot he saw. His teacher’s name was Miss Suskind, but he called her ‘Sasquatch’. Ian shivered involuntarily at the childhood memory.

Mrs. Michaelson sat quietly staring at him for the space of two minutes. The matronly woman folded her hands on propped elbows and rested her chin upon them, as if in prayer. She allowed an imperceptible smile to grow slowly behind them, as her gaze softened. Ian smiled nervously back, but only in self-defense. He wasn’t sure what there was to be relieved about with this stern-looking woman. “Loretta has been with me nearly thirty years, and I trust her judgment implicitly,” Pritchard stated rhetorically, removing any doubt about her reasons for being there, as well as defending her odd behavior on the plane.

McQuade suddenly felt miserable all over again and wanted to leave, to run from the room before anyone could stop him. Alma leaned over from her chair and bumped gently against him. He tried to put some sincerity into the fixated smile, but his shifting eyes continued to betray his discomfort and growing distrust.

Loretta took a manila folder out of the same leather brief case she hid worked behind on the Lear jet. She handed the folio to Cyril, who took it gently. He removed a ream of nearly two hundred sheets of heavy stock paper. The CEO nodded as he flipped through the pages. “You must have put a lot of work into this, Mr. McQuade,” he commented with a slight nod of approval.

Ian stared disbelieving from Pritchard to Alma, then Michaelson, and back to Cyril. “What is that?” he asked, defensively. The growing knot in his stomach told him his worst fears were already realized. The president of the Chimaera Foundation, LLC looked at him in mild surprise. The young man should have already guessed, by now. “Why, it’s your doctoral dissertation, of course!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dallas Tanner was born in 1956, at the stroke of midnight during the worst storm of the century to that date, in the seacoast township of North Kingston, Rhode Island. The eldest child of a career naval officer, he attended 9 schools in 12 years, as they moved about the country. His interest in local myths, legends and all things paranormal grew out of the ever-changing diversity of his upbringing.

His first novel, “Shadow of the Thunderbird”, was required reading at a large technical college in South Carolina. He has frequently lectured, appeared on or hosted radio shows, and presented at conferences on his books and interest in cryptozoology. He is often cited in the media as an expert on unknown or unexpected animals.

He was instrumental in salvaging Dan Taylor’s Nessie chaser mini subs, the Viperfish and the Nessa II, and is currently pursuing an interest in fossil diving. When he isn’t exploring remote locations such as the Altamaha River, Mt. St. Helens or Loch Ness, Tanner is content to write novels in his home study under the watchful eye of his longhair Tabby, Samwise. He now lives in Greenville, SC with his wife Carla and their five children, where he is at work on his latest project.

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Dallas Tanner is available to speak locally with your group, or remotely via phone or web. Visit his web site for more details and scheduling information.

THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

We live on just 10% of the Earth's surface. Only an estimated 10% of all the known species of animals on this planet have been encountered and classified. Cryptozoology is the study of unknown or undiscovered cryptids, animals out of place or time. There are no degrees or curriculum in any college or university to become a cryptozoologist. Ian McQuade tries and fails to become the first, and embarks on the adventure of a lifetime!

ENTER THE WORLD OF CRYPTOFICTION IN THIS GROUNDBREAKING EPIC

THE JOURNEY BEGINS...

SHADOW OF THE THUNDERBIRD

BOOK 1 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES...

TRACK OF THE BIGFOOT

BOOK 2 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

THE JOURNEY ENDS...

WAKE OF THE LAKE MONSTER

BOOK 3 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

THE JOURNEY BEGINS...

For the past 160 years, giant birds have been reported in the skies above the Black Forest region of northern Pennsylvania. Now, it's up to one man and one woman, to find out where they came from, and where they've gone...

Failed Ph.D. candidate and erstwhile assistant museum curator Ian McQuade is rescued by Peruvian cartographer Alma Del Nephites, after an ill-fated expedition into the Amazon Basin.

Together, they travel to meet with her employer, the enigmatic CEO of a secretive organization that investigates and profits from the paranormal. The two are given the opportunity to seek out proof of the existence of thunderbirds.

A madman's journal will lead them into the heart of a 700 year-old mystery, where cutting edge technology designed to locate and identify such creatures will collide with an ancient power that has hidden and protected them for centuries.

Ian must face his past, in order to believe in a future that couldn't possibly exist. With lightning in their eyes and thunder in their wings, who will control the fate and destiny of the thunderbirds?

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