

Author of *Shadow of the Thunderbird* and *Track of the Bigfoot*

DALLAS TANNER



**WAKE OF THE
LAKE MONSTER**

BOOK 3 OF THE CRYPTIDS TRILOGY

PRIMAL DEEP

The ten-foot boat was thrown nearly two feet out of the water, the bow raised thirty degrees, and the stern submerged almost to the waterline. It splashed down again, sucking a layer of pond scum into the bottom. Ian was summarily thrown backwards, out into the fetid stench of the brackish swamp. He cut his shoulder, as his nor'easter snagged on a cypress stump, and hung him there. Dazed at first, he flailed and screamed for Alma to come for him.

The cartographer nearly spilled over the side herself, in a frantic effort to come about and row towards him. She was clumsy in the water, unsure of maneuvering the oars. She yelled for him to hold on, as he struggled to extricate himself. He was pinned against the dead trunk, lifted out of the murky bayou high enough to prevent him from slipping out of the oversized raincoat.

The enraged creature bellowed, as much in pain, as territorial defiance now. It bolted passed Alma, with a churning brown wake that expanded across the algae covered surface of the marsh. The greenish brown of its heavily mottled skin, almost warty in appearance, with looser folds near the pale oyster yellow of its underbelly, moved inexorably toward its helpless prey.

Alma clumsily drew close and reached out her hand to Ian, as the Alty surged between them. The lake monster butted Ian with its lowered head, ripping him from the ensnaring folds of his borrowed slicker. It hung like the tattered remains of a macabre scarecrow, the hood empty and the sleeves floundering. McQuade was once again thrown headlong into the water, amid rushes and lily pads closer to shore.

"Alma," he gasped, sputtering water as he tried to catch his breath from the force of the blow to his ribs. "Help me! Don't let it get me, again!" Del Nephites yelled for him to hold on, as she managed to turn the boat towards him a second time. He pulled himself along with a one-armed, flailing dogpaddle. His side ached, and he was sure the monster had bruised, if not cracked one or more of his healing ribs. It submerged and was now nowhere in sight. It gave Ian hope that if Alma hurried, they just might make it out of that fetid swamp. She rowed alongside, or as close as she dared, dropped the oars and clinging to the side of the boat. She held out her hand to him, as he grasped thin air to reach her in time.

If they could have but seen themselves from above or below, where angels and demons stood by and did nothing, they would have still watched helplessly, as the Altamaha-ha rose up from the depths. Without slowing, it corkscrewed in its path, and gaped the maw of its fearsome mouth towards the nearest of Ian's kicking legs. His outstretched fingertips just brushed Alma's, when the creature struck, lifted him up, and bore him under. The last he saw or heard, was Alma's muffled screams, and the quickly fading light of the steel-gray morning that silhouetted her lithe form.

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)

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Wake of the Lake Monster
Book 3 of The Cryptids Trilogy

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DEDICATIONS

To Dan Taylor (1940-2005)
Loch Ness Submariner
For Chasing a Dream

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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

Cartographer Alma Del Nephites bumped her head against the coach passenger window. Sleep eluded her in a window seat over the wing of an overcrowded Boeing 737. She tossed and turned, as it fought the Gulf Stream en route from Lima, Peru to Mexico City. The Foundation agent was just dreaming of an elusive city in a forgotten civilization. It meant she was no longer obsessed with returning home to her family and village. She was finally free of any obligation to those she left behind at the foot of Machu Picchu, in the Peruvian Andes.

It was over these same mountains, that the outdated jetliner encountered turbulence. Ten years earlier, she left the altar of an arranged marriage to the son of a greedy and powerful landowner. She could still see herself in her mind's eye; the tatters of her long-dead mother's wedding dress drenched in mud, as it caught on the jungle rushes. The eldest daughter of Miguel and Rosalita Del Nephites fled the small church, their ancestral home and life, forever.

Vowing never to return.

It was the last promise that she could no longer keep. Her father did not openly pressure her to marry, but the village of Cahzca Yunqa was dying. Only by instilling her love of the millennial town into her betrothed, could she hope to save it from oblivion and the slow decay of time. Alma pictured the old rustic shops and dilapidated buildings joining the Incan ruins of the mighty and fallen. Machu Picchu barely stood stone upon stone. To the tourists who flocked to the Andean ruins, it was just another victim of desolation, and the conquest of the Spanish. In truth, the conquistadors never discovered it, or mentioned it in their chronicles. Its exact purpose was unknown, which coincided with the knowledge and understanding of most visitors to Machu Picchu. To capitalize on the ignorance, villages like hers became trading posts for trinkets and souvenirs made elsewhere.

She found her childhood home virtually unchanged upon her return. Once she left, Ramone de Montoya wasted no time in chasing after the recently widowed young wife of the village's only mercantile, solidifying the union without her. The once svelte and handsome heir to the lands surrounding the tiny village was eventually disowned by his cruel father. He married a woman who could only give birth to bright, beautiful, headstrong girls. He lost his birthright to his younger brother, who seemed incapable of siring anything but strapping young boys.

With nowhere else to go, her former fiancé now ran the shop with his shrewish wife. For not providing her with all the status and comforts of his family's wealth, she would punish him the rest of his life. He swept the storefront porch, gaping when he saw the matured beauty of the prodigal daughter who rejected him. As Alma glanced up, he looked away, pretending not to notice her arrival. She bore him no ill will. In fact, she never would have become educated and seen the world, had it not been for him. Ramone barely met her gaze as he stepped inside and closed the door.

Del Nephites exited the bus and completed the last seven miles of the arduous, uncomfortable journey on foot. She told no one of her plans to return home, let alone

her arrival. Several of the adults and older children came out to greet her with hugs and kisses, proud of her defiance. Others tacitly avoided or ignored her, for limiting the fortunes of their isolated village. For better or worse, her escape ultimately turned the attentions of the landowner from their town. It was the last stop at the foot of the Andes, along the trail that wound up into the mountains, and Machu Picchu. The senior Montoya would have turned it into a way station, to be trodden underfoot by visitors to their land.

Her father was ailing when Alma entered the house of her birth. He was gray with age, lined and withered from years of worry and care. She looked after him the last eleven weeks of his life. He was stricken with an inoperable tumor that led to dementia. He saw her only as the young woman she once was, the last time he laid his fading eyes upon her. He pleaded with her now, not to marry Ramone. He finally admitted it was wrong to insist that it would be her only chance for happiness, or to escape the poverty of their life.

She promised, and entering the fourth month of her return home, he died.

Alma remained only a month longer to see that his affairs were in order, and the rest of her family would be cared for by relatives, and friends of the family. She had three elder brothers, one younger brother, and two sisters, of whom she was the oldest. In the remote village of Cahzca Yunta, everyone depended on everyone else for life and survival.

Death was a harsh reality in the remote mountainside community. Proper medical attention for long-term illness was not only unaffordable, but also often refused, even by those few who had the means. To be given up to die did not deprive the dignity of the sick and afflicted. Instead, it was observed as a time of celebration, the passage of the spirit from mortality to eternity. It was the tradition of her people to show reverence for the sanctity of death, throughout. A wake was held to ensure the demise. A festival was held thereafter, to honor their patron saint and remember all the dead of the village.

The most recently departed attended, as the guest of honor. Afterwards, her father's body was taken down from a pyre that would never succumb to flames, and placed in a roughhewn sepulcher. There, he would lie in everlasting peace beside her mother. Rosalita was stricken in childbirth, when the last of the twins was breeched. Though they were identical, and their mother would have died for either of them, their father always loved one and despised the other.

She was only thirty-one when she died, the same age as her grown daughter. With no widow left behind to mourn his passing, it was customary that the eldest daughter show grief for her father by cutting her hair. Alma did this herself, as she sat before the oaken mirror in her parent's bedroom. Their wedding picture was edged into one corner of the oval frame. A picture of herself and her siblings adorned the other. Strands of dark sable began to fall with each snip of the scissors. The origin and true meaning of the tradition was lost, but not the observance of the ritual. When she finished, she sat amid the raven curls of her shorn tresses. It was difficult for her to express sorrow, but not to honor his memory. She did what any child, any good daughter would do.

For the first time since her mother died, she wept out of sorrow.

Alma suffered another loss in that homecoming. She left a second loved one behind, buried as to her joy of this passing world. Del Nephites shifted miserably in

her seat, casting her crystal blue eyes about to see if any perceived her thoughts. Only a young boy eyed her curiously, smiling without front teeth at her sudden attention. For nearly three years, she avoided flying commercial airliners because of the effect on her giant crimson spider, Titian.

Eighteen inches in diameter, the unclassified breed of arachnid took up residence in the wooded grove behind the cartographer's childhood home. There, she passed the winter. In the early days of spring, she grew large and built a nest sack. Watching over her brood, Titian grew thin, and frail besides. A week later, Alma found her pet lying overturned on the ground, her long legs splayed outward at the foot of a calabash gourd tree.

In the boughs and branches, the last of Titian's hatchlings, each the normal size of a full-grown spider, gazed warily at her. A few held close to the trunk, as if to approach the dead matriarch and feed upon her. They scattered before Alma, not suffering that one of them should become her pet, in the stead of their mother.

Soon, they were all gone, and Del Nephites was left alone with the body.

Where no one could see, she gathered the lifeless remains, placing them in a box she once kept as her dowry. Her mother gave it to her on her fifth birthday, telling her that she should gather into it all the promises and precious things that would bring her happiness. Since there was now no one to share it with, she emptied the few ragged contents, and gently laid the stricken arachnid inside. Delicately, she tucked and folded the spindly legs over the corpse, and resealed the lid.

She bound the cover to the sides of the box with a length of twine scarcely thicker than the strands of Titian's web. Alma slept that night with the makeshift coffin beside her bed. Del Nephites decided to return the next morning to the place where they first met, there to inter the remains.

At dawn, she slid a folding shovel into a sheath running down the side of her backpack. She donned her glacier glasses, and put on a faded vest. Most of the insulation was flattened, nearly useless against the early morning chill. Then, she woke a loudly snoring third cousin on her father's side, who lived next door. She paid him for a ride back down the mountain trail. It was nearly a hundred kilometers to Cusco City. The transition, from rusted out pickup to a train filled with tourists, did little to lessen the discomfort she felt. A rude little German boy kept asking her, in broken Spanish, what she had in the box she held tightly on her lap. He would not go away, or leave her alone, so she showed him.

It was the last time he approached her for the duration of the trip.

Most of the towns and villages, nestled along the winding mountain course, remained nearly unaltered through the centuries, despite the advent of the railroad. Several built open-air markets beside the tracks, in the hopes that gawking turistas would stop and buy their wares. They did, too often for Alma's taste. The shop owners sold few handmade items, most of which were imported from China. The rest were consumer goods as diverse as washing machines, computers, and motorbikes. Many carried an overwhelming array of spare parts for unidentifiable machinery, such as cogs, gears, and circuit boards. The latter were most likely scavenged from failed NAFTA ventures. Alma fingered an invisible rosary, thanking the patron saint of her village for sparing it either the ravages, or decadence of progress.

Still, she succumbed to a young girl selling only a single item, which she kept hidden in the folds of her poncho. She was native Incan, probably a direct

descendant of the former inhabitants and rulers of this mountainous country, and those adjoining it.

"Senhõrita," she said in a fluent Portuguese dialect, so that many of those immediately around her would not understand her words. Whatever she offered was for the older woman alone. The child played to Alma's vanity, calling her by the greeting of a young woman. "I have something unlike any of the others, something rare and old. I see by your pack that you carry a shovel, and dig at the earth. You are no farmer, but a scientist. Would you like to see what I have for you?"

"Very much," Del Nephites replied honestly, her curiosity piqued. The young girl gazed about her, and then drew the cartographer aside with a gesture of her tousled head. They were soon alone in a quiet place, further away from the bustle of the makeshift bazaar. The child turned, so that her back was against the crowd, shielding their view. There was a strange wisdom about her, a timeless understanding stretching back to the ancient Incas. She seemed undiminished by her age, or the generations separating them.

Satisfied they were alone, the youth withdrew the object she guarded so closely. It was a figurine, hand molded of sun baked, reddish terra cotta clay. It was scarcely six inches in height, nearly nine in length. It was a dinosaur, but not depicted as scientists described them even half a century before. It had large eyes on either side of a reptilian head. Its lower jaw was thick and heavy, lined above and below with sharp teeth. The snakelike head rode on a long, serpentine neck to broad shoulders. Wide, claw-tipped flippers supported its powerful chest. Its torso narrowed at the hips to a tapering lower half. It used its hind flippers for balance, folding together to form a curling spade around the vestigial remains of a tail. It appeared anatomically correct in every respect, right down to the logical way it carried itself. Only one thing set it apart from the small plastic dinosaurs for sale in blister packs, and larger vinyl ones standing in rows at several of the stalls.

There was a perfectly scaled human in ceremonial dress, astride its bent shoulders. Before she could refuse, the little girl placed the ancient looking statuary in Alma's hands. The older woman was so surprised, that she nearly fumbled it. Now, it was the cartographer's turn to become adamant. Reverting to English, Del Nephites turned the relic over, finding no mark, or date of its creation. She knew the age generally by the method of its baking. It was a tradition of long standing among her people, as well.

It was not ceramic, fired at high temperature in a kiln. There was not even the baked in residue of having been placed in the ashes of an open hearth, to harden after molding. No, her first assessment was correct. This artifact predated any authentic sculpture or pottery to be found here, by thousands of years. She commented that perhaps her boss would enjoy another oddity for his office display case. "How much do you want for it?" she ventured, to begin the obligatory haggling. The girl shook her head, stepped back, and waved her hands in refusal before her.

"For you, young lady. Nothing."

The bargaining was going opposite to all she encountered in her journeys. The more she bid for the item, the less the child would accept. Alma rested the model in the crook of her arm, reached into her backpack and withdrew a small pouch containing her traveling money. She pulled off two American ten-dollar bills, worth

ten times their value in South America. The girl ran off a short distance, back towards the open central bazaar, and turned. She ignored the men, women and children making their way along the narrow aisles of tables and booths.

"Is there nothing you want in exchange for this?" Del Nephites called after her, gingerly proffering the figurine.

"Yes, there is," the child replied. There was hurt in her voice; for a gift freely given, but not openly received. "Tell him we are watching."

"Who?" Alma was confused.

"Your friend. He will come for you, and set you both free!"

The young girl then stepped back into the crowd, and vanished without a trace. Alma tried to follow, but there was no sign of her passing, among the throng of buyers and sellers. It almost seemed to her as if the strange child had never been there, at all. Except for the artifact, and the money she would have gladly exchanged as payment for it. Feeling foolish, Del Nephites returned the cash to her pouch. She gently wrapped the statuary in her discarded vest, laying them both inside her pack. The cartographer only had time to scan the bargain hunters once more, in vain. The engineer sounded the whistle, as the conductor checked his pocket watch and called for everyone to board the train. Soon, the locomotive steamed from the stoking furnace, gathering speed as it left the open-air market and the strange little girl behind.

Both appeared anxious to be on their way.

Between four and five that afternoon, they finally arrived at the cultivated Urubamba, or Sacred Valley of the Incas. The capital city of Cusco lay beside a swiftly flowing tributary of the Amazon River. It was one of two, forming a delta to the northwest. Machu Picchu stood barely visible on the heights, in the gathering mist of early evening.

The heart of the brisk Peruvian tourist trade, Alma wandered the streets of the ancient city, quickly finding a hotel with vacancies. Only after she checked in did the street urchins and beggars stop trying to separate her from what little money she carried. Not wishing to run the doling gauntlet a second time, she ordered room service and stayed in for the night. That evening, she stepped onto the veranda and gazed out over the city. The skyline was dominated by a pair of huge cathedrals, fronting one another at the famed Plaza de Armas. As a brisk, but gentle breeze lifted the curtains of the balcony behind her and stirred her hair, she thought for the first time in weeks of Ian McQuade.

Laying Titian to rest would be her last responsibility to home and Peru. Aside from her surviving relatives, there would be no reason to return to the village. There was so much that she wanted to tell the anthropologist, if she ever got the chance. They grew close in pursuit of thunderbirds from the Black Forest region of northern Pennsylvania, to Chaco Canyon in New Mexico.

She fought back the slightest telltale pangs of regret, any feelings she might harbor for him. It was too late now, she supposed. No one had heard from her former partner, since his abrupt departure from the Chimera Foundation. He left under mysterious circumstances, following his first assignment without her as senior agent. Amelia Pritchard, their operations specialist and niece of CEO Cyril Pritchard, told her that Albert Myers was his partner on a Phase One fact-finding mission. It was

never divulged what transpired between them at that time, or whether a Phase Two expedition was mounted. The petite blonde wanted to say more, but all communication to the surface was not only monitored, but censored as well. Ever the conspiracy theorist, Myers was once again contained in the subterranean facility, beneath the Manhattan office building that bore its name.

Officially, the Foundation claimed to have no idea of Dr. McQuade's present whereabouts. Off the record, of course, they had all but guided his steps until he met her by the shores of the Rio Negro, near her home outside of Manaus, Brazil. He was lost, searching for the legendary Diablo Rojo in the company of thieves. She rescued him there in the rainforest, and brought him to Pritchard and the others in New York. She had no idea of the less than coincidental arrangement, but doubted she ever convinced Ian of that. He did not trust her, and she made it clear that the feeling was mutual. Still, one unimpeachable source would not be silenced, either by its daunting security chief, Edwin Burroughs, or the imperious Loretta Michaelson, Amelia's adoptive aunt and supervisor of the Operations Center.

When she got back to the states, she would call his mother...

After a breakfast of eggs, black beans and mixed poached fish washed down with a cup of green tea, Alma gathered her belongings and checked out of the hotel. Skirting solicitors by clinging to side streets and walking alleyways, she came to a shop that rented motor scooters to tourists. Alma paid the proprietor for a full day, in deference to, or perhaps in anticipation of, the winding medieval cobbled streets.

According to oral tradition, legendary ruler Manco Cápac founded the city in the eleventh century AD, as the sacred capitol of the four administrative regions of the Incan Empire. He was believed to emerge from nearby Lake Titicaca, where he planted a golden staff at the site of the Temple of the Sun. Titicaca remains the highest navigable inland body of water in the Americas, and the second largest in South America, after Maracaibo.

Beyond that, not much is known or accepted as fact, before the coming of the Spanish conquistadors. Only that the Incan Empire reigned over a great part of what is today Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina and Chile. When Francisco Pizarro supplanted the Spanish flag, and founded his own city there on March 23rd, 1534, a cultural blending took place. He preserved much of the previous architecture, hydraulic engineering, medicine and agriculture. The Incan capital for over 200 years, much of the city, as it now stood, was built atop the ruined foundations of the trampled empire. She secured the wooden box, carved by her father as a gift from her mother, to the back of the two-seater Honda Elite 80. She revved the 80cc, four-stroke fully automatic transmission, and eased the pearl blue scooter into traffic.

Within minutes, Del Nephites reached the outskirts of the city. She began the eight-kilometer journey to Tambo Machay. At 12,267 feet, the highest elevation of the primary ruins north of modern Cusco, Tambo Machay lay 300 meters off the main road. This thoroughfare joined these "Baths of the Inca" with the massive fortress of Sacsayhuaman, sacrificial amphitheater Quenco, and Puca Pucara. The latter was a trading post in its day, for goods and travelers. More apparent by the stretch of highway when seen from above, the archaeological sites of old Cusco were formed in the shape of a puma.

Twenty minutes later, she arrived and gazed about in fond memory.

Parking the rented moped, Alma untied and lifted the box carefully from the metal tray behind her seat. There were only a few tourists milling about, and an old woman spinning yarn in front of the Temple of the Sacred Waters. Its construction consisted of three terraces of fine stonework. Mortarless, yet they were so closely fitted that a knife blade could not be passed between them. The channeled springs had an underground rivulet as their source. It was the site of water purification and worship.

Perhaps the Incan priests sensed its relative unimportance to the conquering Spanish. The abutting rock face behind the tiered levels was used to conceal an invaluable cache of their knowledge. Discovered three years earlier when its natural roof caved in, the repository was full of clay tablets, scrolls, and plates of beaten brass. Many were written with a form of Egyptian hieroglyphics, among other ancient languages. The irony was that not only could they not read the gathered texts; the Incans had no written language of their own. Among them was also found cryptic knotted strings, called khipus. At first, they were believed to be a form of accounting, used to record numerical data.

The Sumerians and Babylonians wrote on clay, the Egyptians on stone and papyrus. Cloth may have been the medium of the Incas, a rare commodity for its day, a sign of wealth and authority. Serious scientific and philological studies ensued, which sought to prove the knotted strands were more than ledgers. No Incan equivalent of the trilingual "Rosetta Stone" inscription used to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs was ever excavated, there or elsewhere. It was an archive, a library of sorts. It contained the combined records of the Incas, and the peoples the empire dominated at its peak.

She was called in to catalog the finds, and decipher as many of the charts and maps as she was able. It was here, in a tree whose branches and roots grew down through the opening, that Alma Del Nephites first encountered Titian. The poor thing squealed in fright and derision. It snipped its thread-thick web strands, and scuttled up the bole in flight from the pursuing cartographer. Reaching out to lay hold of the spider, it lunged out and sank its fangs deep into her forearm, just above the wrist.

Ignoring the wound after a single outcry, Alma slipped off her down-filled vest and wrapped the creature up in it. It writhed and struggled to break free, but Del Nephites climbed up and out of the backside of the chamber. She spread her booted heels and straddled the low cliff framing Tambo Machay, refusing to set it free. They would remain together, from that day to this. For nearly three years, the two were inseparable, much to the chagrin of Ian McQuade and others like him. Alma could not be held responsible for the arachnophobia of others. Like any neuroses, the event predisposing individuals to fear spiders usually stemmed from an aggrandized childhood memory.

Author and philologist J.R.R. Tolkien was bitten by a spider, as a young boy in his native South Africa. The literal representation of that encounter figured prominently in not only *The Lord of the Rings*, but *The Hobbit* and *The Silmarillion*, as well.

Skirting the edge of the surrounding hillside from which the "Baths of the Inca" were hewn, Alma once again found her way into the chamber. Shrubbery and wild brush overgrew the base of the tree, at once hiding and blocking the entrance. It was

larger now than she remembered, with longer branches and thicker roots. It was difficult, slow going on the way down. She balanced between the obstacles and the burden she carried so gingerly. Sunlight filtered through the exposed aperture in dusty pillars slanting against the bare walls. Not only was the stone cut room empty, even the tiled mosaics were carefully removed from the floors and adjoining walls. Nothing remained but her memories, and the reliquary of a dead culture. Its only purpose was to serve as a time capsule, so that its people and culture should not be forgotten with the passage of time.

For a moment, she recalled the lost city of the Anasazi. She almost killed Ian, by failing to warn him of the hazards of another underground river. She forced her wandering thoughts back to the present, and her grisly task. She set down the tiny casket, sliding out of her backpack. Alma unfolded her shovel, beginning to dig at the base of the tree. Its deepest roots cracked the floor, exposing what little remained of the precision masonry.

She labored more than a half hour, raising chunks of unadorned tile and the soft earth beneath it. When she dug a hole wide and deep enough, Alma slowly got to her feet, wiped her hands and removed the threadbare vest. Wrapping it tenderly around the box containing Titian's remains, she placed both in the makeshift grave. She struggled for words against her strained emotions, offering the eulogy and a prayer in the same ragged breath.

For the second time since her mother died, she wept in sadness.

Alma Del Nephites wiped a single tear away from the bitterness of that recent memory. In English, German, Spanish and Portuguese, the flight attendant announced their arrival from the coastal city of Lima, Peru to Mexico City Airport. Their landing was uneventful, and Alma was soon at the luggage carousel, awaiting her only suitcase. She checked her bag, but kept her backpack as carry-on luggage with her, during the flight. Other than the unusual statue she received from the strange little girl during the train ride to Cusco, she had nothing to declare. She proffered her dog-eared, stamp-filled passport to the customs agent.

It was her intention to stay in Mexico only a few days. She wished to visit old friends and forget her grief, before returning to New York and the Foundation. There was one person she wished to see, in particular. He was the entomologist she avoided to protect Titian. They broke up amicably, before she ever found her pet. She refused to reconcile or ever see him again. She even returned his mail, unopened. Alma was certain he would seek to classify Titian, dissect her and keep her remains in a jar of formaldehyde. Now, there was nothing to keep them apart. Perhaps she could begin her life again here, possibly even with him. She understood and felt her loneliness more keenly than in years past. For the first time in more than a decade, she felt...

Vulnerable.

As it turned out, the clay model was enough to get her detained, even without Titian. She was shaken out of her reverie, and escorted roughly to a room adjoining the customs area. There, she was interrogated for an hour about the terra cotta figurine of the strange animal, and its human passenger.

"For the last time, *senõra*. How did you come by this artifact?" Alma was angry at the balding officer, with his potbelly and droopy mustache. His name was Claudio,

and the customs agents regarded him uncertainly. He looked weak; spineless in fact, but he wielded great influence over them. Odd, that a regular *federale* with more knowledge than she had about the statuary should be on hand to arrest her, literally upon her arrival.

"I told you over and over again," Alma repeated in Andalusian Spanish, the ceceo dialect erroneously attributed to a lisping Castilian ruler. "I bought it at an open air market, in Peru. I thought it primitive, yet curious, so I purchased it for a friend in America. That's all there is to it. Now, may I please have my belongings and leave?" Alma lied about how she acquired the relic. She understood the penalty for trafficking in stolen antiquities. If she said it was simply given to her, she would appear more of a courier than a duped sightseer. As much trouble as she had brought upon herself already, the appearance of guilt would mean an automatic prison sentence. The Mexican judicial system was based on Roman and Napoleonic law, much like that of France and Italy.

"You are presumed guilty, until proven innocent. Your civil rights are subsequently denied, in lieu of your crime." Claudio raised himself up, and hitched his gun belt back under his ponderous middle. It all but disappeared from view, beneath the great swell of his distended belly. He seldom took his hand from the butt of his service revolver, which shone and smelled of cleaning oil. "I'm afraid not, Señora Del Nephites. I am most disappointed to say that you will be remanded into our custody, at this time."

The sheriff opened the door to the interrogation room, motioning for two plainclothes men in dark suits to enter. They approached as if already instructed, and lifted her up from her chair to either side. Claudio pulled her hands together, cuffing her wrists. "You see, you are in possession of one of the fabled clay models of Acambaro. There are still many of these figurines unaccounted for, and feared lost. For all I know, you may be entering Mexico to steal another of our archaeological treasures, to sell on the black market!"

Alma protested that she knew nothing of Acambaro, as she was led away.

CHAPTER 2

Near Glen Rose, Texas, seventy-five miles southwest of Dallas, a storm was brewing. Not from the slate gray skies of early spring that permeated the landscape with a tinge of silver, but from the ramifications of an event a century old. Strongly held beliefs were about to collide over the providence of a discovery no one in a hundred years could fully explain.

It was either 65 million or seven thousand years in the making, depending on the balance of truth versus fact. It was not an enviable position for a seasoned professor of paleontology, let alone an inexperienced substitute.

The man restlessly pacing before the group of undergraduates struggled for a reply. He could no longer hide from them, any more than he could avoid himself. He squelched a nervous stutter, in spite of sandy blonde hair worn longer to hide his face, beneath a beard grown out of apathy and rebellion. Somehow, neither made him feel any more menacing, than distant. He adjusted his wire-framed glasses, as he thought of something to say to his expectant audience.

For the past four months, anthropologist Dr. Ian McQuade lived a life of isolation and self-imposed exile. Only the unexpected phone call and opportunity to lead this field study group saved him from lapsing into despair, altogether. For the first time in his life, he truly hated academia, and all it represented. A professional student well into his late twenties, he entered his thirties no longer idealistic about the delusions of education. Like Einstein, he truly began to appreciate the value of imagination over knowledge.

As the anticipation of his gathered students lapsed into awkward silence, their collective stares reflected his own lost confidence. He was just like them, once. He sought knowledge with reckless abandon, trading intellect for worldly experience, as long as possible. Now, they wanted him to be their voice in the wilderness. The dried riverbeds of the Paluxy were no place for a baptism; not even one by fire. Religion and science always made for strange bedfellows. Philosophically, they both sought to explain the natural order of the universe. There was always a price to be paid for disturbing the status quo, wherein the twain should never meet. When the tipping point of dogma collided with discovery, there was simply no middle ground.

You were a heretic in either camp; fit only to be burned at the stake.

In his mind's eye, he relived the loss of his Ph.D. candidacy at the University of Virginia. He was cast out because he believed in the fabled beasts of Native American legend. He sought to gain credibility by theoretically proving their existence. His masters' theses in anthropology, paleontology and zoology were rife with allusions to thunderbirds, lake monsters and Bigfoot.

Why should his doctoral dissertation be any different?

John Dreyson, his faculty advisor and professorial chair of the anthropology department, caught the lack of metaphorical reference and called him on it. Ian could still hear the echo of the old man's office door, as it closed behind him. For a time, he found work as the erstwhile assistant curator of the beleaguered Clayton Echols Museum of Natural History, in Boston, Massachusetts.

He was forbidden there to pursue the obsession that drove him to the brink of social acceptance and professional respectability. Cryptozoology was the study of hidden animals, those out of place and time. Ian argued that it was a legitimate science, an extension to mainstream curriculum. His old friend and mentor reminded him that it was not a degreed field of study, in any college or university, anywhere in the world. It lurked at the fringes of several acceptable fields of study. By rejecting his dissertation, Dreyson made damn sure that UVA was not going to be the first to grant legitimacy to a pseudo-science and career killer. What he did, he believed to be in the best interest of his most accomplished pupil.

Following a thinly veiled lead to South America in search of a legendary giant spider, McQuade was lost along the Rio Negro, the largest tributary of the Amazon River. His thieving guide and porters nearly starved him to death, as they circled the resort city of Manaus. Only the spider's owner, a fair, blue-eyed Peruvian named Alma Del Nephites, saved his self-funded expedition from disaster. She defended him, exposing the petty criminals for what they were. They took his money to buy fast food in town, while he ate tubers and drank questionable water. He finally found Diablo Rojo, the arachnid Red Devil. She called the 18-inch horror Titian, and treated it more like a child than a pet. The odd thing was that she came in search of him, there in the canopied rainforests of western Brazil.

Conveniently, coincidentally, or by design, she lived nearby. Alma delivered the fateful message of a phone call waiting for him, along with a jet to New York. An offer to search for monsters of myth and legend was too compelling to pass up, considering his other prospects at the time. Word got back to Frank Gustman, curator of the museum, of Ian's exploits in the jungle. McQuade was promptly fired as a potential embarrassment to the hallowed halls of the nearly bankrupt museum.

With nowhere else to go, Ian accepted a position with the Chimaera Foundation. Too many things fell into place, leading up to that moment. Unable to refuse a steady paycheck, he felt like a lab rat running the maze of their labyrinthine, underground corridors. It gave him the chance to prove the existence of thunderbirds. In the end, he was vindicated and received his Ph.D. from Dreyson himself, but couldn't tell anyone outside of the organization about it. With Alma no longer at his side, he was then asked to find the very creature that started him on this path. He saw a Bigfoot as a child, but no one believed him.

He was again redeemed, but lost his heart and soul for the work.

His obsession led to rash decisions and the death of a member of his team. This was no benevolent lost city, but a seismic monitoring station on the desolated rim of Mt. St. Helens. For their part in the tragedy, Dr. Ian McQuade could not forgive himself, any more than he would the Foundation.

If only Alma had been there. She might have known what to do...

"Professor McQuade? Ian..." It was Sybil Lance, a black graduate student, sent by Upstate Carolina Technical College to look after him. One of the forty-thousand who took courses remotely under the auspices of Clemson, Furman, and the University of South Carolina in Columbia, she was more like a chaperone than a pupil.

She was nearly his height at five-foot, nine inches. Her dark irises searched the unfocused glaze in his unblinking, hazel eyes. He looked away, but her gentle touch

became a firm grip on his upper arm. She was concerned he was not up to the challenge confronting him. In spite of the trauma that seemed to be fighting its way to the surface, he shrugged out of her hold. The anthropologist turned to face the class of seventeen boys, eleven girls.

This was a rare field research trip for them, and only his presence convinced the school to permit him access to their additional financial resources. It did not require a college degree to teach at the community college level, and most Ph.D. recipients sought administrative positions. Ian was an exception. He would not be there long, but they took full advantage of his scholastic credentials. The position didn't pay well, and was only temporary.

Dr. McQuade carried a full range of courses, in conjunction with his background. He interspersed stories of undiscovered or relict creatures, thought dead long ago, with their textbook studies. When they asked the inevitable question whether man walked side by side with dinosaurs, he was strangely non-committal.

"Why don't we go and find out?" he suggested. In the final weeks of Winter Quarter, he found himself staring back at their inquisitive faces, along the banks of the Paluxy. He first shared with them the more recent history of the area. How, in 1908, a violent flood careened through the river valley. The following summer, a teenager by the name of Ernest "Bull" Adams was wading through the limestone creek bottom of the Wheeler Branch.

The boy stumbled across a series of large, three-toed tracks, arguably revealed by the removal of sediment the year before, in the torrential rainfall. Two years later, in 1910, a local youth named Charlie Moss, and his brother Grady were fishing along a limestone shelf of the Paluxy. Together, they found more of the unusual tracks. Even more curiously, these alternated with manlike footprints, 15 to 18 inches in length. The implication and furor they caused, over the course of the past three decades, were only a source of mild acceptance and casual discussion, at the time. After all, a gap of over 60 million years separated the last of the dinosaurs from the first ancestors of modern man.

By the 1930's, some enterprising Glen Rose residents began to chisel out the dinosaur tracks, selling them to tourists and residents alike. It was also rumored that some of the 'human' tracks were carved out and sold, but their current whereabouts are unknown. Apparently, no photographs were ever taken.

Around this same time, George Adams, the brother of the boy who originally discovered the first set of tracks in 1908, was said to have fabricated human tracks. His nephew Wayland, Ernest's son, later explained the technique. It involved finding a suitably oblong depression, then hollowing out the facsimile of toes and heel, at his uncle's leisure.

The first scientist to take an interest, a paleontologist by the name of Roland T. Bird, located a number of three-toed tracks with the help of locals. A fellow by the name of Ryals, who was the first to cut and sell the tracks, showed him the only 'human' track Bird ever found. The results were inconclusive, at best. Combined with the limited carving skills of Adams, the anatomical attributes were too grossly misshapen to be organic.

Let alone human.

By the 1960's and 1970's, until as late as 1999, other tributaries yielded up more of these incredible finds. "We are standing at the Upper Taylor Platform of the

McFall Trail," Ian explained. "It was here that the latest of these intermingled tracks were discovered. Over the same period of time, there has arisen much confusion as to the authenticity and origin of these tracks."

"Some want to believe that it is proof man co-existed with the dinosaur, only seven millennia ago. Others want to disprove that anything remotely human dwelled on this planet, 65 million years ago. The former are called creationists, the latter evolutionists. They have polarized into the irreconcilably different camps of science and religion."

They gathered around the vestige of a previously undiscovered track, which allowed a community college like Upstate Tech to fund a short research junket. Some of the students even tried what so many before them attempted. Like some prehistoric Hollywood Walk of Fame, they placed their bared feet into the track. It was large, nearly seventeen inches, but the shape was only marginally human. It sat within the recessed track of a saurian impression, slightly askew.

One of the students sought to interrupt the last of his professor's monologue on the area and its gift to humanity, buried so long beneath two feet of solid rock. With his present frame of mind, McQuade ignored the heavysset older man, and continued unabated.

"Many have come to study the tracks, some to remove them for profit. Others sought to destroy them to keep the world status quo, whatever their perception. As for me, I could really care less, one way or the other." An audible gasp escaped the assembled crowd. Almost in unison, they turned their gazes downward at the overlaid tracks supposedly linking man with dinosaur.

"What we do know for sure, is that mainstream geologists assign the Paluxy river bed and its tributaries around Glen Rose to the lower Cretaceous period. This would make the formations into which the tracks were laid about 113 million years old."

Abner Garrett, a gray-haired man with a handlebar mustache who often quoted scripture, or wandered off for personal prayer, finally reached the point of exasperation. He stabbed a finger full of self-righteous indignation downward onto the cover of his King James Bible. "I trust the Good Book, son. No one can tell me that we're not looking at a human footprint. The dinosaur tracks are faked, I tell you. There's no way you're going to prove it, otherwise!"

With a cavalier attitude far beyond and removed from his former self, Ian pulled a multifunction knife from its sheath. It was the only souvenir of his time with the Foundation. Turning the blade on its curved edge, he reached down and dug into the base of the heel. He looked up into their expectant faces, especially that of his eldest pupil.

With a flick of his wrist, he dislodged a chunk of sediment to expose a triangular, dewclaw impression. "I can, and I just did," Ian stated. There was a challenging chorus among several of the other students, but his hard look shamed them into receding behind their classmates. "My advice, to all of you, is that you study and discover for yourself, empirically. Use your mind and your senses to seek out what is true about this world. If you rely on others or trust only your heart, you may very well blind yourself to the obvious."

He asked to borrow Garrett's bible, which was heavily marked with red colored pencil over significant verses. He blushed with embarrassment, as Ian thumbed

through the tabs to find that Job 40:15-24 had already been highlighted. "In The Book of Job, Chapter 40, verses fifteen through twenty-four, it reads:"

Look at the behemoth, which I made along with you and which feeds on grass like an ox. What strength he has in his loins, what power in the muscles of his belly! His tail sways like a cedar; the sinews of his thighs are close-knit. His bones are tubes of bronze, his limbs like rods of iron. He ranks first among the works of God, yet his Maker can approach him with his sword. The hills bring him their produce, and all the wild animals play nearby. Under the lotus plants he lies, hidden among the reeds in the marsh. The lotuses conceal him in their shadow; the poplars by the stream surround him. When the river rages, he is not alarmed; he is secure, though the Jordan should surge against his mouth. Can anyone capture him by the eyes, or trap him and pierce his nose?

"That's not necessarily proof of any dinosaur in the bible," Abner countered. "Verse Fifteen could be referring to a crocodile, hippopotamus, or even an elephant. Seventeen might just as easily describe a trunk. The original Hebrew translation of Verse Twenty-Four suggests that 'eyes' might actually mean 'by a water hole'."

"My point, exactly," Ian commented, handing the open scriptures back to their fastidious owner. "But, since you brought it up, what about Verse Seventeen? Such animals were common in those days, and none had a tail like a cedar. Psalms 92:12; Isaiah 2:13 and 37:24; Ezekiel 17:22 and 31:3. Along with Amos 2:9, they all describe the cedar tree as high and tall. I had to study this out for myself, and I believe you have, too. Unfortunately, the term dinosaur wasn't coined until the 19th century, to describe the first fossils discovered in the modern world. In the dark ages, they might have believed them to be the remains of dragons. The bones and tracks are real enough; the only question is how and when they got here, and whether our prehistoric ancestors ever lived beside them."

Garrett remained adamant, growing red-faced as his mustache drooped.

"Well, according to Verse Sixteen, sounds to me like your dinosaur might have had a belly button! Quite a trick for a reptile, large or small, don't you think?" With that, Abner Garrett snapped his Old Testament shut, and stepped smugly back into the crowd.

Sybil regarded the astonished group, voicing their collective question for the anthropologist. "Professor, what about all those other footprints? Some of them are clearly five-toed. Some are huge. You believe that no ancestor of modern man could have possibly made them? What about all your stories of relict, prototypical humans surviving the last ice age, when it killed off the other megafauna? Could it be that something not quite human passed through here, at some point?"

Ian chuckled mirthlessly, as he cleaned his knife. He returned it to the sheath looped at his belt, snapping the cover. "Are you asking me if Bigfoot hunted dinosaur? I proved for myself whether any species of large, hairy, manlike bipeds exist. I suggest you do the same, but keep in mind; if you have any aspirations of a scientific career, or value your academic credentials, don't waste your time."

Ian hoped that his audience would be so quelled by his dismissive tone, that they would overlook his Freudian slip into present tense. The last thing he needed was for his misguided recommendation to get back to the department heads at South

Carolina's largest technical school system. Now that he was no longer part of the Foundation, he needed the work.

Two year associate degree program, or not; multiple degrees, or not; they would have been within their rights to kick him out. He simply stood, turned, and walked away. His mind raced after a fragmentary thought, a tenuous ideal to bridge the gap he inadvertently created.

This was not about science, or religion; it was about him and his beliefs.

More than that, his money from the first Foundation mission was running out, and he needed the little this job paid. He refused any compensation for the second mission, referring to it as blood money. All the same, it was brought down to the same hard ground. Was he willing to throw away another opportunity, for the sake of his foolish pride?

He had little time to sift an objective reply through his fragile ego, when Lance once again stole up behind him. She called his name several times in a low, persistent tone. When he balked at her interruption of his reverie, she took his arm again, literally spinning him around. He was about to scold her for the rebuke, but could only stare down at the flip cell phone she proffered him.

"Professor, there's a woman on the line for you. I told her you were busy, and tried to take a message. She insisted on talking with you, said it was an emergency. You have to take this call!" Ian stared dumbly at its black and chrome surface, backlit buttons, and screen of cobalt blue. He was unwilling, or unable to fathom who would want to track him down, and with such poor timing. His mother?

Alma...

Tentatively, he took the mobile phone from the young woman, stepping even further away from her. The students still followed, gathering behind her. They were all looking for answers, but he had none to give them.

Yet.

"Hello?" Ian waited expectantly as a voice, faint through the white noise at the edge of the roaming service perimeter, called his name. He blocked his other ear and shushed the murmuring crowd, but still couldn't make out the identity of the caller. It was indeed a woman's voice, but tremulous. Neither his mother, nor Del Nephites would ever use such a hesitant tone with him.

She, whoever she was, feared his response.

"...Ian, Dr. McQuade? It's Pritchard; Amelia Pritchard..." After a moment's awkward silence, an empty space filled with trepidation and doubt, she blurted out the rest of her message. For the next thirty seconds, Ian could only barely contain his anger. Not so much at the niece of the Chimaera Foundation's CEO, but the clandestine subterranean facility and what it represented.

Either way, he was not the least bit surprised, let alone happy to hear from her. Her uncle manipulated and lied to get him into the Foundation. Cyril sent him on missions to Chaco Canyon and Mt. St. Helens, in search of thunderbirds and Bigfoot. What now, Ian wondered? After the fiasco of their last mission, with the frantic young girl on the phone as remote ops specialist, he made a fateful decision that cost one of his team members their life.

What more could they ask of him? McQuade's thoughts were roiling, a seething fury he gritted his teeth against unleashing. He scarcely understood a word she said. "Amelia, look. I want nothing to do with you, your uncle, Michaelson, Burroughs or

Meyers. In fact, the whole lot of you can sink to the ninth level of hell, for all I care. Especially that damned AI computer running the place. All of you give me the creeps. I'm trying to make a new life for myself here, so goodbye!"

He was about to hang up when her faintest, final whisper gripped his whole consciousness. "You didn't mention Alma, Ian. Do you at least still care about her?" Recalling the petty triangle that formed with his former partner's rejection of his feeble advances, and the flirtatious blonde at the other end of the conversation, he balked.

"Look, Amelia, that's low. You know I haven't seen her in months. For all I know, your agents are still tailing her, as well as me. Why don't you go and ask her yourself, and leave me alone?"

"I," her voice trailed off. "We can't, Ian. She's missing. Alma was on her way back to New York, but disappeared on a layover in Mexico City. Nobody will tell me anything."

For the first time, Amelia had his undivided attention. McQuade spent months trying not to think about the beautiful Peruvian. He did his best to harden his heart towards any feeling he had left for her. Try as he might, McQuade no longer thought about anything, but his isolation and loneliness without her.

He remained silent as Amelia haltingly, between stifled sobs, made an end of the plea. "I know you want nothing to do with me, Ian. You don't have to blame yourself for what happened in Washington State. It wasn't your fault. You had no more choice than I do about being here, now. They have a way of getting what they want; but they can't hurt you, not anymore. I can't explain now, but there is somebody here you can trust. Listen to him, Ian; before it's too late!"

At that moment, a high-pitched frequency jammed the signal, leaving a ringing in McQuade's ear. He suddenly pulled the phone away, and flipped the earpiece cover down. He nodded noncommittally, as Sybil accepted her Nokia back.

"Is everything all right?" she asked, full of growing alarm and suspicion.

"We'll see," he said. A nauseating sense of the inevitable told him he was about to be dragged back into the fray with the Foundation. Ian's doubts and fears coalesced, seared away in a crucible of guilt and recriminations. Whether she abandoned him or not, Alma never truly betrayed him. He owed her that much. If the past were any indication, let alone tracking him down to another person's cell phone, he would be given little time to consider any other alternative.

The Foundation was coming to get him.

Casting his gaze about for any possible object lesson to appease his divided audience, Ian's resolve solidified into one irrefutable notion. They could take away what they wanted from it, both sides satisfied that the debate would continue. He strode to the bank of a gullied rivulet of the Paluxy riverbed, at the Upper Taylor Platform, along the McFall Trail. He rolled up his sleeve, cupped his hand and reached down into the silty water. He scooped up sediment and debris collected over time, from the muddy bottom of the shallow flow.

"Unformed matter," he began, holding it palm up above his head, for the others to see. The dirty water trickled down, veining his exposed wrist and forearm. He lowered his hand and left the stream, kneading the clay as he did. "Yet, when I shape it into a ball and set it here on the bank, it becomes a solid mass unto itself." The

students grew silent. Even the elderly Garrett pushed to the front of the group, anxious to see what was happening.

"Now, if we were to leave this globe here and walk away, so that others might one day find it, how would they determine how long it has been sitting here?"

For long moments, no one answered. They simply screwed their faces inwardly, trying to work it out for themselves. Hardly anyone looked at him with any comprehension of the question, let alone understanding of the answer. Most simply shook their heads, or shrugged their shoulders. The rest looked for any semblance of realization of either in their classmates.

Abner, for the first time since they set out together on the charter bus towards central Texas from South Carolina, actually smiled. It was not the grin of a pious bible-thumper, but rather the sardonic expression of a devil's advocate.

"Why, they'd test the ball of clay to see when it was made, of course."

Ian nearly lost his train of thought, at gaining such an ally. The older gentleman, originally from Tennessee's mountain country outside Knoxville, knew what the associate professor was proposing. More than that, he was even in agreement with him!

"Carbon dating, right?" He searched their bland expressions; only a few mingled in the crowd were even mildly suspicious of his intentions. "Whether you accept the accuracy of testing the rate of Carbon-14 depletion in dead organisms or not, is irrelevant. All that matters is that this mud ball has not been sitting here, as long as the materials of which it is comprised. The biological traces I just molded today existed elsewhere, long before now. Anyone can draw his or her own conclusions, from the evidence. The important thing is for you to search it out, for yourself. Never let others tell you what you believe..."

There was no more dissension. The creationists acknowledged the hand of God in forming the earth; evolutionists, the random acts of time, space and the chaotic nature of life itself. Both were placated, and Ian was satisfied he had finally reached them all.

"...Not even me," he added, quietly.

CHAPTER 3

Instinctively, Ian walked away from the group, back down the trail to their campsite. Sybil followed him, simultaneously congratulating him on the analogy, and wondering what he was doing. She stopped at the flap of his tent, as he lowered himself and began to pack his few meager belongings.

"What are you doing, professor?" Ian reminded her that he was an associate professor in name only, and that his temporary assignment was at an end. "What do you mean? We have three days left before we're expected back. You can't just leave us here. Who do you suppose is going to fill in for you, me?" There was an unmistakable hopefulness in the woman's voice. Ian was tempted to vent in response to Sybil's persistent assault on his authority, but there wasn't time. Besides, he knew the Foundation would make the necessary arrangements to facilitate their plans.

They would have to provide a substitute.

Before he finished rolling his sleeping bag, stuffing his toiletries and cooking gear into his backpack, the sides of his tent shook with a sudden wind. "Right on time," he thought, pensively. Whatever they had in store for him, he was not looking forward to it. If anything, Alma was probably hiding from Chimaera. Obviously, with more success than he had. Their inability to track her every movement was no justification to hunt her down. If she was anything like him, Del Nephites probably just wanted to be left alone.

None of these thoughts slowed him in his preparations to leave, or giving Sybil last minute instructions. She would get in touch with the school to advise them of the change in instructors. She would then act as interim guardian of the students, as legal representative for the duration of the field study.

If they didn't hear from him in a week, they could assume he quit or fire him, whichever they preferred. Stepping out from under the tent awning with Lance in tow, he spotted the commercial grade Gryphon VTOL. It was idling one hundred yards away, in a clearing behind the campsite. The hybrid jet helicopter with canister turbines was capable of taking off like a chopper.

It could then fly like a conventional aircraft, with a turn of its gyroscopic twin engines. In spite of the dust and dirt kicked up, as the surrounding trees swayed before its approach, it made no sound. It was all part of an enhanced Foundation stealth technology, designed for use by the military, and a successor to the original prototype.

As McQuade turned and walked toward it, he recalled that the Foundation funded much of its research through the retrieval and reverse engineering of crashed alien technology. Through sales to the military black budget, the Chimaera Foundation was able to indulge expeditions into the unknown.

In the midst of the swirling dustbowl spinning about the futuristic aircraft, which bore the familiar royal blue and gold emblem of its mythical namesake, Ian spotted a familiar figure. Tanned, dressed in a tropical print shirt and khaki Bermuda shorts, a smiling Albert Meyers stood waving to him. A geologist by profession, he

was a conspiracy theorist with delusions of grandeur regarding his alleged Cold War affiliations. Meyers was the first agent to retire from the Foundation. Others were older, as exemplified by its doddering three principals, yet there he was. Here was the man who supposedly broke through the security and secret at the heart of the underground complex, beneath lower midtown Manhattan.

Ian often wondered why the aging relic was allowed to wander unchecked throughout the facility. His continued presence there infuriated its security chief, Edwin Burroughs. Operations supervisor Loretta Michaelson, as well as Pritchard himself, insisted on allowing Meyers to accompany Ian to the Ohio River Valley. Originally, they went to verify reports of a giant albino bipedal primate caught on video tape. Instead, they found an artifact thought to be lost nearly forty years.

Convenient, as Meyers was partly responsible for losing it in the first place. The last mission the geologist was permitted to lead was the unfortunate incident preceding Ian's assignment to Mt. St. Helens, in Washington State. Shortly after the May, 1980 eruption of the suddenly active volcano, at the foot of the Cascade Mountains, which devastated much of the surrounding Guilford Pinchot Forest, Albert Meyers was sent by the Foundation to survey the damage.

He led a group of fellow geologists and spelunkers in exploration of the delicate cave systems adjacent to the smoldering, sunken cone on the north face of the mountain. In Ape Cave, Albert's company was assaulted by an unseen entity that decimated his mission team. There was documentation attesting to this fact. It was inexplicably not from the Foundation, but the U.S. Geological Survey. It placed him at the scene, and confirmed his order that the tunnel be sealed.

Nothing could get out. Trapping those he lost in an unmarked tomb, he was unwilling to risk losing anyone else in a search of the cave system. Ian read the order with his own eyes. The Foundation did not advise McQuade, during the mission briefing, by divulging the fact. Let alone, the circumstances surrounding it. Pritchard, in particular, would not allow Meyers to accompany them. Had he been forbidden to speak of it, in spite of the fact that he often disregarded warnings and outright threats not to interfere? Ian's partner on the Phase Two mission was the feisty primatologist Billye Carleton, who chose to remain with the Foundation after his departure. McQuade knew it was strictly for the money needed to keep open her family's meatpacking business, and did not fault her for it. The only thing that mattered was that a valuable member of Ian's team died because of his uninformed decision. Nick Bogard's body was never found, and they could only assume the worst.

So much tragedy could have been avoided, if only the broken seal to the ice chamber had been explained. Somebody paid the widows and surviving team members for their silence. Ian McQuade endured enough of the Foundation, with its self-serving sacrifice of both agents and operatives.

By now, Ian was only ten paces from the whirling canister props of the VTOL. Meyers stopped smiling when he saw the expression on his former partner's face, and stepped back in uncertainty. McQuade, his genteel nature forgotten, scowled, dropped his pack and rushed the older man. Blinded by unchecked rage, Ian gripped Myers by the collar of his Hawaiian shirt, spun him about slamming him up against the fuselage of the aircraft.

The pilot saw the exchange through the bubble of the cockpit canopy, and hurried back into the hold. Ian struck at Albert, and threw him to the ground. Myers

covered his face on the ground, against the onslaught of the anthropologist's fists about his head and shoulders. As he raised his fist again, strong arms gripped Ian from either side, pulling him off the quailing geologist. He was summarily twisted about and slung to the ground, with the combined weight of two men leaping down and pinning his chest to the sparse undergrowth.

Ian glared up over his shoulder at the pilot. His uniform and helmet were standard issue for those flying the Chimaera air fleet, from the two-seater Harpy to the gigantic six-engine Thunderbird. In the reflective chrome of the polarized flight visor, he could see the contorted anger in his own face, and allowed his frothing indignation to subside.

Ian nodded that he would be okay, and assured the pilot his outburst was at an end. He was allowed to roll over onto his back, as Albert remained where he was pushed, rubbing his jaw. Looking to the other man who still pinned him to the ground, McQuade recognized the face at once. A sympathetic smile revealed the man who shared the dangers of Ian's last mission with the Foundation. Fortean researcher, author, and lecturer Loren Coleman turned his restraining grip into a handshake, and helped McQuade to his feet.

"Loren! Loren, what are you doing here?" Ian was astounded to see his mentor in cryptozoology standing before him. He was as glad to see his old friend, as he was unhappy that Albert Meyers now lay behind him. Coleman did well to maintain his composure, under the circumstances. Still, he searched Ian's shifting expression, for any sign the apt novice would resume his attack on the older Meyers. Satisfied, he looked every bit the professorial outdoorsman in his white hair, peppered beard, and blue eyes.

Like McQuade, he was dressed for an extended stay in the wild, and had his own pack to prove it. "Ian, you know how these people operate. I turned down their offer to be on staff, before. I never questioned their motives, but their methods always made me uneasy. Now, we both know why. I wish there was more I could have done to help with that business at Mt. St. Helens. I arrived much too late. That's partly why I'm here, now. A friend of yours is in trouble. I've come to fill in for you with the field study, so that you can go and find her."

Ian listened intently, but looked past Coleman. The conspiracy theorist rose shakily, with the help of the pilot. Meyers gestured that he was all right, and waved off the pilot, altogether. He wiped at his bloodied lip, with the back of his hand. For whatever reason, Albert favored his right side, scarcely moving his left arm. In his tirade, Ian didn't realize the geologist was unable to defend himself. In spite of his justifiable anger, he felt ashamed for his actions.

Lured by the sight and nearly soundless landing of the VTOL, the curious students formed a half circle between the hybrid aircraft, and the camp behind them. Loren took up his pack, turning to Ian as he slung a strap over one shoulder.

"Look, Ian. I was in the area, anyway. I was filming an episode of Mysterious America with my sons in coastal Georgia, when the Foundation contacted me. I was as angry and reluctant to help Chimaera as you are, for all the same reasons. I read all about your mission debriefing, before I signed my affidavit and release. I am never to reveal what went on with the Bigfoot in the Cascades. I know, as well as anyone, what they put you through. I can only guess what part this geologist played

in all of it. Still, he's the only one who seems to know where to find your friend, let alone how to get her back. Listen to him, Dr. McQuade."

Loren Coleman started past him, stopped, and spoke out of earshot of anyone else a final, prophetic observation. "They probably wouldn't even go through the trouble of finding her, if they didn't need you both for something happening with them. Be careful, Ian, and keep yourselves safe."

"I will," Ian muttered. He watched his longtime idol and guiding force in cryptozoology withdraw to join the milling throng. Sybil nodded instinctively and approached her new professor, seeking to establish her dominance over the others. In spite of his celebrity, as with the remaining Bogard twin at the seismic monitoring station on the slopes of the American volcano, no one seemed to know who he was. That would soon change, and McQuade knew he was leaving the class in good hands.

The anthropologist turned to discover that Albert and the pilot had already boarded the Gryphon. The latter made his way back into the cockpit, and throttled up the engines for a quick dust off. Meyers slumped back against the far side of the insulated cargo bay fuselage. He sat away from the door, which Loren slid closed as Ian reluctantly climbed in and took a seat. The VTOL rose from the sun-baked clearing, swathed in pockets of serrated tussock grass and scrub oak. Both leaned away from the sudden blast of intake exhaust as far as their roots, leaves, and branches would allow. The commercial grade, hybrid jet helicopter hung in the air at thirty feet, cleared the trees and sped noiselessly off to the North.

The low thrumming of twin-turbine, canister engines was the only sound breaking the silence between the two passengers in the hold. Meyers regarded Ian uncertainly, but McQuade stared forward with no attempt at making eye contact. The last time he saw him, Albert thought they broke through to a new level in their relationship. They worked well together in locating the Minnesota Ice Man. Whether it was the Foundation's primary reason for allowing him to accompany Ian or not, was of secondary importance.

Wasn't it?

The elderly geologist dabbed at his swelling lip with a monogrammed handkerchief. He ran his tongue along the crease of the split, and spat out the blood. This was not McQuade, as he knew or remembered him. If Myers had any inkling of the reception awaiting him, he never would have agreed to come out of retirement long enough to intervene, one last time, in Chimaera's behalf.

The anthropologist was too angry and confused to apologize. He had no idea whom to blame, other than himself. After all, it was his decision to lose control and react the way he did to seeing Myers again. He could have turned them all down, refused to get involved with the Foundation again. Even if it was to find out what happened to Alma, and be sure she was all right. They betrayed him, all of them; Meyers, Pritchard, Michaelson and Burroughs. Even Alma, in her own way, left him behind to suffer the repercussions of his uninformed decisions.

Most of all, he was roused to action by the pitiful urgency in Amelia's voice. There was nothing more to be gained in feeling sorry for himself. They needed him, after all. As much as he detested it, he might even require the services of Albert

Meyers, before the end. There might be little hope of finding Del Nephites, if she were in any real trouble.

"So, where is she?" Ian ventured, without looking at his traveling companion. The words turned his youthful countenance into an unbreakable scowl. Meyers saw the subtle change in expression. He chose to ignore it, with the same detente as the communists during the Cold War. In his younger days, McQuade would have paid dearly for his insolence. There were no more enemies among civilized nations, no more talk about super powers. Whether one country could destroy the world five times over, and its greatest enemy and threat only three, the outcome was the same.

"I thought you'd never ask," Meyers grouched. He wanted to ask Ian why he was greeted with such brutality. By another scientist, no less; a Ph.D. like himself. The Foundation principals cautioned him after his retirement not to expect a warm reception, should the two ever meet again. They told him why, and that softened the blows. Under the circumstances, he probably deserved every one of them. For that matter, it sure beat the hell out of getting shot again.

He elected not to dwell on it any further.

Instead, Albert shifted his weight, taking up a remote control with a built in laser pointer. He flipped down an armature in the panel behind him that revealed and positioned a tactile keyboard. Albert punched up a recessed display that lined the wall, framed with digital sensors and LED readouts.

"I really rather thought your first question to me would be, 'where are we going?'" Meyers suggested. Ian's glare softened, as he mentally kicked himself for not bothering to ask their destination, instead. He actually struck another human being, for the first time since grade school. Not even while defending himself against the intruders overrunning the nameless lost city of the Anasazi did he so much as raise a finger. He didn't have to; Alma, the relict Pueblos, and the giant thunderbirds took care of them.

"I'm listening," the younger man hissed, his own seething anger boiling just beneath the surface of his flushed veneer. He had no idea why he agreed to come on this rescue mission, let alone what was expected of him. He was entirely too introspective, a regular Hamlet. By not taking any action, like that tragic Shakespearean character, he brought about the death of someone unintended.

Regardless of the consequence, he couldn't let that happen again.

Meyers coughed to clear his throat, fingering the barrel of his pointer to reveal a digital image of a series of clay effigies, most resembling crude dinosaurs. Some were shaped with humans disproportionately smaller, either to their side, holding their necks, or astride them. Ian might have dismissed them out of hand, had it not been for one curious aspect.

Most of them held their tails aloft at varying degrees, for balance. Such a trait was not universally represented in dinosaurs before the late 1970's. These figurines, if not the black and white photos themselves, clearly predated that period. He recognized them for what they were, but struggled to show no surprise.

"How much do you know about these artifacts, Dr. McQuade?" Albert asked with a professorial intonation to his voice. He realized quickly that Ian had a great deal of knowledge about the subject. With only a moment's hesitation to gather his thoughts, the young anthropologist paraphrased the early history of the famous relics.

"In 1945, an archaeologist named Waldemar Julsrud excavated over 33,000 terra cotta figurines at the foot of El Toro and Chivo Mountains, on the outskirts of Acambaro, Mexico. Similar pieces found in the area were linked with the Chupicuaro culture, which flourished from 800 BC to 200 AD. In spite of the huge numbers, the authenticity of the find was challenged; mostly because of the inclusion of many identifiable dinosaurs."

Ian delayed a moment, reflecting on the matter. He rubbed his bearded chin to search his memory, then continued. "They died out over 65 million years ago, and any reliable knowledge of them is generally accepted at less than two centuries old. Albert, what has any of this got to do with Alma?" Meyers only diverted his gaze from the screen for an instant, urging his apt pupil to find out for himself. The moment stretched into a strained pause, struggling for a reason to pursue the inevitable. At last, Ian relented and continued his observations.

"Over the following year, Carlos Perez of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City declared the Julsrud dig unauthorized, but his findings authentic. Other officially sanctioned archaeological sites were opened, in which many more ceramic models were found, including dinosaurs."

"A decade later, in 1954, a strictly controlled excavation was conducted by four well-known archaeologists of the day. They found even further evidence of these incredible figurines at a depth of six feet, which should have vindicated any doubt regarding Julsrud. Their initial enthusiastic support was withdrawn when humans were found depicted with adjoining dinosaurs. Waldemar was discredited as a fraud."

"The statues were subjected in 1955 to extensive radiocarbon dating, which proved at least their materials to be an average of 2500 years old. These results were withdrawn, as well. It was learned that some of the samples were from figurines depicted with both humans and dinosaurs." McQuade pondered the relevance, and then pressed on without a single reply, question, or comment from the conspiracy theorist.

"As late as 1990, results in extensive radiometric carbon-14 tests of a range from 4000 to 1500 years in age were refuted, to adhere to evolutionary dogma. Never mind the implication of the apparent co-existence of man and dinosaur. If the age is right, then these people knew, at least secondhand three thousand years ago, what we have only discovered in the past twenty to thirty years."

"Dinosaurs used their tails for balance, not to drag behind them as a useless appendage. Regardless, the evolutionists and creationists have argued the veracity and significance of the relics, ever since." McQuade shook his head almost violently, still looking for the connection between this sideshow anomaly and his former partner's disappearance. "How could a hoaxer in the 1940's fake what was not discovered until the late 1970's?" Ian directed the question to Meyers, who gave no response, other than to purse his swollen lip and uncomfortably shrug his left shoulder.

Albert clicked quickly past a map of central Mexico, showing Acambaro in the Guanajuato state, due east of Guadalajara. The anthropologist suddenly looked out the port window, facing the mid-morning glare of the rising sun.

They were headed north. Ian was incensed, and grew agitated all over again. "Why are we going this way? We should be going south, if Alma's in Mexico. If you

intend to take me to New York and dump me at the doorstep of the damned Chimaera Foundation, you might as well turn this bucket of bolts around, right now. I'm not going anywhere with you, until you tell me what's going on. Right now, Meyers!"

Albert instinctively withdrew, but kept a death grip on the laser pointer.

"If you'll allow me, I'm getting to that very point," the geologist countered. He was tiring of the infantile outbursts. His actions were so uncharacteristic of the Ian he'd come to know. He had changed since their time together in the subterranean complex, thirty stories beneath the building that bore its name. "To silence the critics, five to six thousand pieces from Julsrud's 33,000-plus mansion collection were locked up in storage, where they were forgotten for over forty years."

He displayed a picture of two men standing before a modest building of stucco with green awnings, whom he introduced simply as doctors Patton and Swift. "Through their efforts, they gradually gained access to all sixty-four of the crates locking away the warehoused Julsrud archive. In 1999, they succeeded in convincing the Mexican government to open a museum in Acambaro. The purpose was to exhibit the incredible figurines, regardless of their arguable age or anthropological implications."

Ian fidgeted like a schoolboy, unable to contain his anxiety over how all of this information tied back to his reason for boarding the aircraft, destination unknown. "Relax, McQuade, we're not going to New York. You know better than I do what this collection represents. Dinosaurs from around the world, anatomically correct. They are surrounded by other terra cotta figurines depicting various races none of these people could ever have met. Africans, Eskimos, Mongols, Polynesians, even bearded Caucasians. No one really knows what happened to the rest. There is a persistent rumor that a foreman at several of his digs, a wealthy Nazi sympathizer by the name of Heinz Gerstadt, gradually came into illegitimate ownership of much of the missing relics."

McQuade was next shown the fully restored Julsrud mansion, taken through zoom lens to avoid the guards posted in dark suits along the estate's perimeter. "The site of this house is the rich Guanajuatan valley surrounding Acambaro, 180 miles north of Mexico City. Even so, the surviving daughter of this man exerts a great deal of influence in local and federal government. She requires the arrest of anyone suspected in trafficking stolen Acambaro pieces on the black market."

"Alma?" Ian suggested weakly. "Alma," Albert replied, with a stiff nod. "She was apparently detained by customs, because she denied any knowledge of the nature of an object in her possession. To make matters worse, she was evasive when pressed how she came by it. Somehow, she must have gotten hold of one of the missing artifacts, as near as we can surmise. Don't fault Amelia, McQuade. She told you all she knew. I relied on my own contacts in the political and diplomatic fringe for the rest."

Ian's eyes cut to Myers, a feigned look of disinterest veiling his expression.

"And, for God's sake, don't look so surprised either, Doc. I negotiated a trade for her release, with the help of the Foundation." Ian shook a finger at the aging geologist, whom he couldn't help but regard in a new light. At least some of the posturing about his exploits as a spy with counter-intelligence was true, after all.

"They got back their figurine," McQuade argued. "Are they holding her in a Mexican jail because they think she knows where any more of these pieces can be found?"

Albert laughed, mirthlessly. "No, they're keeping her as a guest in the old Julsrud mansion. Because, in spite of the unduplicated vastness of the collection kept by Baroness Eva Von Gerstadt, Alma Del Nephites unwittingly had one in her possession that was never a part of it!"

Ian flushed inwardly. "They want to know where she got it. Is that it?"

"Actually, they could care less about its origin. It's not the girl they're after, and the statuary seems inconsequential to them. Oddly enough, they seemed to already know about her association with the Chimaera Foundation, and even more about her connection with you."

McQuade looked anxiously out the porthole at the swiftly retreating sun. "Me? What would they want with me? What have I got to do with any of this?"

"I thought you'd never ask", Meyers replied, with a sardonic grin. He excused himself and went back to the cargo area of the spartan Gryphon, which made up in speed for what it lacked in amenities. He approached a stack of stenciled wooden crates, covered in a bound tarp strapped four to a pair on adjacent pallets. He gingerly lifted and carried back a small box already opened, but stuffed to the brim with packing material.

He slowly and painfully sat down across from Ian. The anthropologist winced at the discomfort of the aches he caused the older man. Albert looked into the box, then at his former friend and partner. Proffering the container gently, McQuade received it with the same ginger care. Not knowing what to expect, he peered over the lip, then quizzically at the conspiracy theorist.

"Go on," the older man whispered, with a flourishing gesture toward the cardboard box. It was almost as if he was expecting the reaction to a gift, rather than a bauble with which to buy Alma's freedom.

A fin jutted out, cracked and jagged, but unmistakable. Peeling away the layers of insulation and padding, Ian caught his breath, first with anticipation, then incredulity. His final response, much to Albert's chagrin, was utter disbelief and deflated disappointment. It was the dorsal stabilizer to an otherworldly craft of unknown origin and design, molded in unfired clay.

For lack of a better term, a UFO.

"Don't you know what this is, Ian? Do you have any idea how valuable such a collectible would be to the likes of Baroness Gerstadt?" Meyers was not sure whether the significance of the ransom was lost on his young protégé, who showed little surprise. Ian wedged the box between his knees, reached in over Albert's protestations and lifted its contents free of the bubble paper and Styrofoam peanuts.

"Yes," Ian replied. "I recognize it, but I can't honestly say that I know what it is." He began to turn the ancient figurine over in his hands, looking for some identifying mark, or imperfection that would betray it as modern. As he fully expected, there was nothing. No mold seams, brand seals, or even a potter's stamp.

"I saw this in Pritchard's office, the first time I went to speak with him at the Foundation. Yes, of course I know what it is." For all intents and purposes, it was a spaceship, delta-winged with a fuselage tapering backwards from the cockpit. It was operated by a pair of helmeted, bug-eyed aliens. One held what appeared to be a

joystick, while the other peered into a series of squared plates on a console wrapped about them.

"I forgot there were many different objects depicted among the artifacts, including extraterrestrial. I never placed this as one of the lost treasures of Acambaro." Ian was intrigued, but crestfallen at the same time, and his anger returned. He realized the futility, even danger of making such a gesture to those for whom the models were a deadly obsession. The baroness kept armed guards and hostages to protect her assets.

He thought to ask Meyers how Cyril came by it, but quickly discovered that he didn't care. Not one damn little bit. He needed answers, or at least assurances. There was more at stake here than Alma's freedom. If he went into that palatial mansion holding this model, there was no guarantee he was getting out again.

With, or without Alma.

"Meyers, what makes you think that by doing exactly what landed Del Nephites into trouble in the first place, that we're going to get her out of it? They don't sound like they're so easily bought. This is a nice piece, but it's just one more bit of evidence that the Foundation is trafficking contraband relics."

"Precisely!" Meyers exclaimed, forgetting his injuries as he rose unsteadily to stand before Ian. "That's just what we want them to think. These people are blinded by avarice, to recover the missing artifacts of Acambaro. They had a final count of over 65,000 terra cotta models, by the early 1950's. That is, before they catalogued and warehoused them in a Mexican Well of Souls. Through the years, they've lost track of nearly half of the collection. They'll do anything to recover it!"

Even set Alma free...

Ian's resolve over the matter was wavering. Perhaps, he would spring the same trap that caught her. He didn't care. Not anymore. Not for her, and certainly not for himself. As for Meyers, well, there was certainly no love lost there. Still, he had his doubts that it would work.

"What if this baroness doesn't go for it, and decides to hold us both indefinitely for ransom? Who's going to believe anyone has what they're looking for, anyway? It's been fifty years, Albert! We could all end up in a Mexican jail..."

His voice trailed off, feebly, as he looked for solace and resolution at the unhurried movement of passing clouds. He regretted now that he didn't call on his parents to look after his old Bassett hound, Bernard. Let alone, say goodbye.

"What if this just isn't enough?" Ian asked. He placed the crude spaceship effigy back in the padded carton. He wedged it gently under the packing materials, and closed the box cover. It really didn't matter whether he ever gave it to them or not. He would be considered an accessory to whatever smuggling operation they believed Alma was conducting.

He sat the resealed carton down into a plastic corrugated shipping container Meyers brought over to receive it. Regardless of its value as a bargaining chip, it still belonged to Pritchard and the Foundation.

At least, for the time being.

"If all else fails, I am to give them this," the elderly geologist explained. He dug into the pocket of his Hawaiian print shirt, and withdrew a parchment envelope.

"What is it?" Ian asked, reaching out to take it from the older man's slightly trembling hands. He held it by its corners. There was nothing remarkable about it,

aside from the calligraphic block lettering. That script alone was immediately familiar to Ian, even upside down.

It read, simply:

*To Eva,
With Love and a Promise Kept.
~ C.P.*

Before he was assailed by another round of twenty questions, the conspiracy theorist gestured for McQuade to turn the card over. Swapping the position of his hands without releasing the edges, Ian looked at the old-fashioned wax seal that bound the envelope. Where the two sides came together, red paraffin was impressed with a signet crest that could have come from only one source. Its purpose was not to seal the inner paper within the outer, but to authorize the bearer to stand in the sender's stead. In this case, the erstwhile anthropologist and would-be cryptozoologist, Ian McQuade. C.P. had to be none other than the enigmatic billionaire and CEO of the Chimaera Foundation LLC, and the source of Ian's most recent rise and fall.

Cyril Pritchard...

McQuade bristled, as a cold sweat began at the nape of the neck. A relentless pounding grew at his temples. "So? This still doesn't explain why we're headed north, if we're not going back to the Foundation for the rest of the missing collection. There's no way those eight crates back there are more than a sample. If we go down with less than all of it, I'll be arrested, too. Sounds like the Foundation's using you to manipulate me again, Myers."

The geologist slumped back to his seat, his resolve and patience spent.

Ian continued to regard him warily, in spite of Albert's weakened state. "No, there's something else they want. If you don't tell me what it is, you can turn this gyrocopter around and take me back to Texas. I've had enough lies and withheld information from Chimaera to last me a lifetime. Alma or no Alma, you can tell me exactly what's going on right now, or I'm out of here for good!"

In response, Meyers flipped through several detailed slides of other colored figurines from the various dig sites. He hit on a photograph that was, on the surface at least, unrelated to the rest. "I hope you'll forgive me, Ian, if only for this. We'll get to your other issues later. I'm no cryptozoologist, so maybe you can tell me about this photograph. I'll give you a hint. It was taken in October, 1937, at a whaling station in Vancouver, British Columbia, at a place called Naden Harbor..."

Ian approached the screen and studied the picture up close. It was unremarkable, except for the inset image of a horse-like head resting atop a finned, fluke-tailed, twenty-four foot long, serpentine body. "Naden Harbor? Sure, I know it. Then again, who in this field doesn't? Anyone who studies sea serpents could tell you that this is supposedly a *Cadborosaurus* juvenile, cut from the body of a sperm whale. The photo survived, but no one really knows what happened to its remains."

"That's too bad," Meyers countered. "Because I told them you could find it for them, in exchange for Alma's freedom. It was all they wanted, besides their property back, and it didn't seem like too much to ask. I told them you were up to the

challenge, and they've agreed to give us a week to bring it back to them. Regardless of the condition, after all these years."

"And if I fail?"

Albert gulped and slid back, as Ian rose resolutely to his feet. There was no sign of the unconfident, insecure agent he appeared, just four months earlier. He was now focused, determined, and very, very angry. It seemed he carried a grudge against Chimaera and its principals, but especially Meyers. Damn the Foundation. Why did he trust Burroughs' assurance that it would be all right for him to travel alone and unguarded with Dr. Ian McQuade? As usual, at least one of them was given less than the information they needed to stay out of trouble, let alone harm's way.

"Don't worry, Ian. I know where the body of this creature can be found. Pritchard and Michaelson hired a local tracker who can take you to it. That's where we're going now. Not to New York, not the Foundation. We don't have time for all their mission preparation and protocol. You won't have any high tech gadgetry or satellite telemetry, to guide and protect you. Where you're going, you'd be out of range and probably won't need it, anyway."

"What," Ian huffed. "You talk as if you're not coming with me?"

"Not on your life," Meyers replied, taking a moment to breathe a sigh of relief. Ian reluctantly took his seat again, suddenly feeling weak in the knees and sick to his queasy stomach. "You're to meet a guide, an old contact of the Foundation's, who will lead you into the 'Headless Valley' of the South Nahanni River."

"Canada?" McQuade ventured.

"Don't worry; you'll get any gear and extra clothes you need, once we arrive." Ian was not reassured, taking little comfort in knowing the destination, with its promise of rations and hiking gear.

"Northwest Territories? How did the valley get its nickname, anyway?" Ian shifted nervously, his false bravado dropping even as the temperature fell.

"From what I understand," Meyers explained, "The Nahanni Valley got its well-deserved reputation from the mysterious way several people died there." He slowly drew his finger across his neck. He stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth and crossed his eyes, for effect.

Ian suddenly wondered why there never seemed to be parachutes on a helicopter.

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 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 chat. 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 ENDS...

Along the coastal waterways of Georgia's tidal marshes, there lives a monster that makes the Altamaha River its home. Over 20 feet in length, with a snakelike head atop its long neck, the Altamaha-ha has been sighted dozens of times by those who live along its namesake.

A pregnant female struggles to return upriver and give birth. She is bound by those who captured her before, and pursued by others who already killed her mate for where she can lead them. A place marked as the abode of dragons by the Tama Indians, it is also the location of a treasure buried in the final days of the Confederacy.

A thousand miles away, Ian McQuade is rebuilding his life outside of the Chimaera Foundation. When they contact him to say that former partner Alma Del Nephites is missing, he boards a VTOL Gryphon to the mysterious Nahanni Valley. There, he seeks to win a prize that will free her, if he survives a deadly race.

Drawn to the river and caught up in events centuries in the making, Ian becomes the unwitting pawn in a quest for world domination. He soon learns of his link to the Altamaha-ha, and that he must save it, if he is to save himself. Aided only by a few colorful locals, McQuade must defeat the enemies of the Foundation, before its technology is turned into a doomsday device.

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