



MUTATION

THE THRILLING CONCLUSION TO CRYPTID HUNTERS BY
ROLAND SMITH

MUTATION

ROLAND SMITH



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FOR ALL MY CRYPTOZOOLOGY FRIENDS WHO HAVE STUCK WITH ME THROUGH THESE
LONG YEARS, WAITING FOR MARTY AND GRACE TO COMPLETE THEIR ADVENTURE

cryp·to·zo·ol·o·gy (krip-ta-zō-ä-la-jē) *noun* The study of animals, such as the Sasquatch, the Yeti, the Loch Ness Monster, the Chupacabra, kraken, and others, whose existence has not yet been proven scientifically. There are thought to be more than two hundred **cryptids** in existence today.

— **cryp·to·zo·o·log·i·cal** (-zō-a-lä-ji-kal) *adj.*

— **cryp·to·zo·ol·o·gist** (-ä-la-jist) *noun*

THE CRYPTID HUNTERS

Marty O'Hara: Wolfe's nephew. Grace's cousin (formerly thought to be her twin). Thirteen years old. Brown hair, gray eyes, a foot taller than Grace. Talented artist. Master chef. Scuba diver. Mountain climber. Skydiver. Has an eidetic memory. He has spent most of his life at the Omega Opportunity Preparatory School (OOPS) in Switzerland. His parents, Timothy and Sylvia (the most famous photographer/journalist team in the world), are missing after a terrible helicopter crash in the Amazon rain forest.

Grace Wolfe: Wolfe's only daughter (although for most of her life she thought she was Timothy and Sylvia O'Hara's daughter and Marty's twin sister). Black hair, blue eyes the color of robin's eggs like her mother Rose's. Born at Lake Télé in the Congo. Thirteen years old. Small for her age, but a foot *smarter* than Marty. The best student to ever "grace" the halls of OOPS. Fluent in several languages. Habitual journal-writer (uses a Montblanc fountain pen and Moleskine notebooks). Lock-picker. Genius.

Luther Percival Smyth IV: Marty's best friend and former roommate at OOPS in Switzerland, where they managed to get into a tremendous amount of trouble. Coauthor/illustrator of Marty's graphic novels. Sleeps like a vampire. Eats like a wolf. Gangly, with wild orange hair. His father (Luther Percival Smyth III) and mother are billionaires and often forget they even have a son. Expert computer hacker and video gamer.

Dr. Travis Wolfe: Cryptozoologist. Veterinarian. Oceanographer. Cofounder and owner of eWolfe with Ted Bronson. Called Wolfe by his friends — and foes. Grace's father. Marty's uncle. Sylvia O'Hara's older brother. Widower. Former son-in-law of Noah Blackwood. A giant of a man — just under seven feet tall. Unruly black hair, bushy black beard, brown eyes. Wears size-fifteen shoes. His right leg was bitten off by a Mokélé-mbembé as he tried to save his wife, Rose Blackwood, in the Congo. He now wears a high-tech prosthesis invented by Ted Bronson.

Dr. Ted Bronson (a.k.a. Theo Sonborn): Wolfe's closest friend and partner at eWolfe. Eccentric genius. Inventor. Recluse. Rumored to have not left the Quonset hut on Cryptos Island (where he develops his marvelous gadgets) in more than three years.

Theo Sonborn (a.k.a. Dr. Ted Bronson): Has been with Wolfe since the beginning. Surly. Pugnacious. Obnoxious. Jack-of-all-trades, master of none.

Dr. Noah Blackwood: Wealthy. Powerful. Owner of several animal theme parks around the world, all called Noah's Ark. Environmental television superstar — but he is not what he appears to be. He hunts and breeds endangered animals and cryptids, and displays them at his parks. In their prime he kills the animals, has them stuffed, and displays them in his private diorama. Father of Wolfe's deceased wife Rose. Grace's grandfather.

Butch McCall: Noah Blackwood's chief henchman. Dangerous. Tattooed. Tough. Expert field biologist. More comfortable in the woods than he is under a roof. Sworn enemy of Travis Wolfe, whom he despises for "stealing" Rose Blackwood away from him.

Yvonne Zloblinavech: Freelance marine mammal trainer. Spy for Noah Blackwood aboard the *Coelacanth*, and now his operative. Ambitious, desperate to work her way to the top in Blackwood's organization.

Dr. Laurel Lee: Wolfe's cultural anthropologist. Birdlike. Athletic. Former circus aerialist. Taught Grace to walk on a high wire to help her focus and overcome her many fears. Laurel and Wolfe are sweet on each other.

Ana Mika: Investigative journalist, world traveler, and Ted Bronson's longtime girlfriend.

Mr. and Mrs. Hickock: Caretakers on Cryptos. Wild "Bill" Hickock remains on the island; Melanie Hickock (Ph.D. in Egyptology) is currently curating an Egyptian exhibit at the University of Washington.

Dylan Hickock: Sixteen years old. Caretakers' son. Just got his driver's license. He's new to the Cryptos Island crew, but not new to cryptids.

Dr. Robert "Doc" Lansa: World-renowned biologist. Hot-tempered and tireless. Runs a jaguar preserve in Brazil.

Jacob "Jake" Lansa: Doc's son, and a rain forest enthusiast in his own right.

Flanna Brenna: A botanist at the jaguar preserve, and likely Jake's future stepmother. The mastermind behind the web of zip lines they use to navigate the rain forest canopy.

Special Agent Steven Crow: An FBI agent close to retirement. He's been on the trail of hijacker D. B. Cooper (a.k.a. Buck Johnson) for years, and he thinks he's coming to the end of the road.

Buckley "Buck" Johnson: Hijacked a jet under the alias D. B. Cooper, hoping to use the ransom money to save the life of his son, but ultimately failing. After he returned the money, he disappeared.

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Fraternal twins Marty and Grace O'Hara are attending the Omega Opportunity Preparatory School (OOPS) in Switzerland when they receive shocking and tragic news: Their parents, Sylvia and Timothy, have disappeared after a helicopter crash in the Brazilian rain forest. The twins have to leave OOPS to stay with Travis Wolfe, their mother's mysterious older brother.

Travis Wolfe lives off the coast of Washington State on a volcanic island called Cryptos. Together with his genius business partner, Ted Bronson, Wolfe runs a very profitable tech company, but his real interest is cryptozoology. He spends almost every dime he makes searching the world for mythical animals called cryptids. Now, though, his mission is finding Sylvia and Timothy.

A few days into Marty and Grace's stay on Cryptos, a cultural anthropologist named Laurel Lee shows up unannounced. While living in the Congo, Laurel came into possession of a large egg supposedly belonging to a dinosaur called Mokélé-mbembé. Back in the U.S., Laurel took the egg to be tested at the labs of Dr. Noah Blackwood, the famous wildlife conservationist and TV personality, and his people stole it from her.

Travis Wolfe and Noah Blackwood have been archenemies for years. Noah is rich, famous, and respected, but Wolfe knows that Noah's wildlife parks around the world — his Arks — are fronts for his real purpose, which is to collect rare species and “harvest” them for his endangered taxidermy collection.

Wolfe springs into action. He and Laurel plan to travel to Lake Télé in the Congo to save the last dinosaur on earth before Noah Blackwood and his chief henchman, Butch McCall, get their hands on it. Wolfe decides to send Marty and Grace back to OOPS, but they have to ride along on a supply drop over Lake Télé before returning to Switzerland. Things don't go according to plan, and the twins land in the Congo clinging to a parachute, days before Wolfe and Laurel can get there.

Alone in the treacherous jungle, with Butch McCall stalking them, Marty and Grace take up residence in a gigantic tree house built by Wolfe years earlier. While there, Marty and Grace discover that they are not twins after all, but cousins. They learn that Travis Wolfe, their guardian, was married to the late Rose Blackwood — Noah's daughter. To escape her controlling father, Rose eloped with Wolfe and they hid out in the Congo. Grace, their daughter, was born there. Noah Blackwood is Grace's grandfather.

Marty and Grace find the Mokélé-mbembé nest. The last living dinosaur has died, leaving behind two eggs. The cousins take the eggs and escape by hijacking Noah Blackwood's helicopter, leaving Butch and Noah to make their way out of the jungle on foot.

Back on Cryptos Island, Wolfe decides it's best to leave the country for a while. He knows that Noah is going to come after both the eggs and Grace. Marty's best friend from OOPS, Luther Percival Smyth IV, joins them aboard Wolfe's research ship, the *Coelacanth*, and they all head to New Zealand to catch a giant squid for Northwest Zoo and Aquarium, the rival to Noah's Seattle Ark. Butch McCall manages to get aboard the *Coelacanth* disguised as a researcher, with two co-conspirators to help him

Yvonne Zloblinavech and Mitch Merton.

The Mokélé-mbembé eggs hatch, producing two baby dinosaurs. Meanwhile, Noah Blackwood pursues the *Coelacanth* aboard his own research ship, manned with mercenaries. As Marty and Ted maneuver the *Coelacanth's* submersible to catch a giant squid, Noah and his hired hands attack the ship. The crew fends off the assault, but not before Blackwood's scuba divers secretly place explosive charges on board. Below, Marty and Ted discover the explosives and frantically try to disarm them. On deck, Butch, Yvonne, and Noah's mercenaries have bagged the Mokélé-mbembé hatchlings and are holding Laurel at gunpoint.

Noah lands his chopper on the *Coelacanth's* helipad. Butch threatens to shoot Laurel if Wolfe and his men don't lay down their arms. To protect her father and friends, Grace agrees to go willingly with her grandfather. Marty and Ted disarm all the bombs, and the Cryptos crew heads back to Seattle with the first giant squid ever to be captured alive. But they've lost Grace and the dinosaur hatchlings.

Wolfe heads to Washington, DC, leaving Marty and Luther with the new Cryptos caretakers, the Hickocks, and their son, Dylan. Together with Dylan, Marty and Luther set off for Noah's Seattle Ark to find Grace themselves.

Grace convinces Noah Blackwood that she is happy living in Seattle with him. But she's truly after information about her late mother, Rose, and she's curious about the contents of the sealed-off third level of Blackwood's mansion.

Marty, Luther, and Dylan manage to enter the Ark undetected, but their plans are thwarted by Blackwood's facial recognition technology. Luther is drugged and kidnapped by Butch McCall, and locked away in a lower-level room below the Ark. Noah fears that Wolfe is planning to take back Grace and the dinosaur hatchlings and shuts down the Ark, trapping Marty and Dylan inside the grounds. He plans for the intruders to be killed by his genetically engineered and vicious chupacabra, controlled remotely by his henchwoman, Yvonne.

Grace manages to enter the secret third floor of Blackwood's mansion, where she discovers a horrifying diorama of stuffed endangered and extinct animals, as well as the green screen set where he fakes episodes of his nature TV show. Grace leaves the third floor via a laundry chute that reunites her with Marty and Dylan. Luther makes his own escape by crawling through the duct system of the Ark, disconnecting all of Blackwood's surveillance cameras along the way. Then they capture Yvonne, take the remote that controls the chupacabra, and trick her into thinking she's locked in a dark room with the vicious creature. They also rescue both hatchlings and three baby pandas from the Ark before being picked up by Ted Bronson in a helicopter he's stolen from Blackwood.

Noah is furious and wants Grace, the hatchlings, and his pandas back.

DAY ONE

Marty O' Hara watched the three panda cubs wrestling in the aisle at thirty-five thousand feet. He was aboard his uncle Travis Wolfe's converted bomber jet, winging his way south to the Amazon basin in Brazil with several other members of Wolfe's Cryptos Island crew. Marty was exhausted and wanted to take a nap, but he couldn't because he was holding Wolfe's growling three-pound teacup poodle on his lap. It was all he could do to keep PD, as the tiny dog was known, from leaping into the fray and getting mauled by the adorable black-and-white bear cubs.

"Panda-monium," Marty quipped.

His cousin, Grace, looked up at him from the aisle where she was supervising the wrestling match. "Punny," she said. "I'm sure going to miss these cubs."

Marty had to admit that the cubs were cute, but he hadn't been around them enough to know if he was going to miss them or not.

Marty's best friend, Luther Percival Smyth IV, and their new friend, Dylan Hickock, were in the back of the jet behind a hermetically sealed bulkhead, to everyone's olfactory relief, feeding the Mokélé-mbembé hatchlings. The two not-so-little dinosaurs were voracious eaters, and they always smelled worse — if that was even possible — after a meal. Travis Wolfe and Ted Bronson were three rows in front of Marty, staring at their laptops and crunching the treasure trove of data that Grace had stolen from Noah Blackwood's computer. It had only been a day since Ted, Marty, Luther, and Dylan had rescued Grace from Blackwood's mansion, where the renowned naturalist had held Grace, his own granddaughter, since kidnapping her several weeks earlier.

"Blackwood," Ted said, pointing to the television screen above his head.

Marty was out of his seat like a shot, clutching PD.

"A rerun from last night," Wolfe said.

A smiling Dr. Noah Blackwood was being interviewed inside the Squidarium at Northwest Zoo and Aquarium. A giant squid was swimming in the background. Standing next to Blackwood was Dr. Michael Loch, the zoo's director. He looked as if he would rather be in the clutches of the giant squid with its beak piercing his skull, than standing next to Noah Blackwood.

"So, what do you think, Dr. Blackwood?" the eager reporter asked.

Noah amped up his smile to 250 watts. "It's magnificent!" he said, putting a congratulatory hand on Loch's shoulder.

Loch looked like he was going to be sick.

"We will learn a great deal about these mysterious denizens of the deep by having this specimen in captivity," Noah continued. "I couldn't be prouder of Dr. Loch and the NZA staff."

Marty rolled his eyes. Noah was making it sound like Loch and the NZA staff worked for him.

"Doesn't having the giant squid here at NZA affect the bottom line at your wildlife park, the

Seattle Ark?” the reporter asked.

Noah’s smile dimmed, but only slightly. “A rather crude way to put it,” he said. “And the answer is no. I am not interested in the bottom line. My sole purpose in life is the conservation of wildlife. I am not concerned with how many people come through the gates of the Seattle Ark versus Northwest Zoo and Aquarium. My mission can be summed up in two words, ‘Wildlife first.’ ”

My sole purpose, Marty thought. My mission. My, my, my ... Lie, lie, lie ... Liar, liar, pants on fire.

“I didn’t mean any offense,” the reporter said, then continued undeterred. “I was interviewing some zoo visitors here at NZA, and they said they’d been planning to visit the Ark today but changed their minds when they found out the panda cubs wouldn’t be on display. I was just thinking that the —”

Noah cut him off. “I’m glad you brought up the panda cubs,” he said. “They are a perfect example of what I was just saying. We determined that they were becoming slightly stressed by all of the attention they were receiving. We decided to take the cubs off display for their own well-being, knowing full well that it might affect our so-called bottom line, as you put it.”

Marty glanced behind him. Grace had stepped forward in order to better see the interview. The cubs were pulling on her shoelaces. If anyone was stressed, it was Grace. She was hanging on to the seats on either side of the aisle, trying not to topple over.

“How long do you think the cubs will remain off display?” the reporter persisted.

“Until we deem it appropriate to put them back on display,” Noah said.

Or until Butch has a chance to pop over to China and poach three more cubs for Blackwood to showcase, Marty thought.

Among the files that Grace had “liberated” from Blackwood’s computer was a report about how his henchman Butch McCall had “harvested” the cubs from their mothers in the Gansu province of China.

Noah made a big deal out of looking at his watch. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to cut this short,” he said. “I have animals to tend to back at the Ark.”

“Five less than you did two days ago,” Marty said.

Grace laughed. They watched Noah walk out of camera view. A look of relief passed across Dr. Loch’s face. The camera panned back to get a view of the crowd watching the giant squid.

“Is that Al Ikes?” Grace asked.

Marty stepped closer to the screen. Grace was right: It was Al Ikes, but he wasn’t dressed like the Al Ikes they knew. His typical three-piece suit had been replaced by a black hoodie, jeans, and high-top sneakers.

“That’s Al,” Wolfe confirmed. “He and his crew are keeping an eye on Blackwood while we’re away.”

Al must have realized he was being filmed because he quickly stepped out of the camera shot. He was ex-CIA, and he didn’t like to be photographed. He and his “crew” were in charge of security on Cryptos Island, Wolfe’s headquarters.

Didn’t do us any good two nights ago when Blackwood tried to have his chupacabra murder us,

Marty thought. *Not that I'm complaining. If Al had known about our plan, he would have stopped us from going to the Ark, and we wouldn't have gotten the hatchlings — or the panda cubs.*

“What about Butch and Yvonne?” Marty asked.

“Al hasn't caught sight of them yet,” Wolfe answered. “Which is a little worrisome. But he reported that Blackwood went back to the Ark after the interview and was very visible throughout the day.”

“Butch is probably still licking his wounds,” Ted said. “I did a number on him the other night. I doubt he'll be moving around much today.”

Marty hadn't seen the “number” Ted was talking about, but Grace had told him that Ted was some kind of fiftieth-degree black-belt ninja, as well as a super genius and a hijacker. Ted had managed to rescue them with Blackwood's own helicopter, which was now stowed away in the back of Wolfe's converted bomber.

Wolfe looked at Marty. “I suspect Yvonne isn't moving around too well today, either, after what you did to her with that pig.”

Marty grinned. He hadn't hurt Blackwood's other trusted employee, Yvonne Zloblinevich, but she was probably still shaken up. He and Luther and Dylan had locked Yvonne in a dark room with a potbellied pig after convincing her it was the chupacabra she had sent out to kill them.

“I wish I could have seen her face,” Wolfe said, returning his grin.

“You wouldn't have recognized her,” Marty said. “She looks a lot different without her fake smile. Kind of scary, actually.”

One of the pandas wrapped its front paws around Wolfe's right leg and tried to take a playful bite out of it. He laughed and picked it up. “You'll get a mouthful of metal, little guy.”

Years earlier, Wolfe's right leg had been bitten off by Mokélé-mbembé, the mother of the dinosaur hatchlings, but his injury wasn't apparent when he walked or ran. Ted had invented a prosthetic leg out of a special metal alloy that Wolfe claimed was better than flesh and blood, but Marty knew his uncle would rather have his real leg back.

“Do they have a good enclosure for the pandas at the jaguar preserve?” Grace asked.

Wolfe looked a little confused by the question, which wasn't unusual. He always looked a little confused when Grace or Marty asked him a question. “I'm not sure,” he finally said. “I haven't been there before, but it doesn't matter. The cubs aren't going to the preserve.”

“What are you talking about?” Grace cried.

“The pandas don't belong to us,” Wolfe said.

“They don't belong to Noah Blackwood, either,” Grace said.

“Exactly. Which is why I asked Phil and Phyllis if they would make a side trip to China after they drop us off in Brazil.”

Phil and Phyllis Bishop were Cryptos Island's pilots. The father-daughter team were in the cockpit flying them south.

“Kind of a big side trip,” Marty said.

“But necessary,” Wolfe insisted. “We can't possibly take care of these little guys where we're going. We'll have our hands full with the hatchlings. I've been in touch with the Chengdu panda

research center. They've agreed to take the cubs off our hands with no questions asked."

"Is it a good place?" Grace asked.

"The best," Wolfe assured her. "I've been there several times. It's where the cubs belong, and it's the best place to keep them out of the clutches of Noah Blackwood."

"They belong back with their mothers," Marty said.

Wolfe frowned. "I agree, but that's no longer possible."

"Thanks to Butch McCall," Grace said bitterly.

They all knew that Butch had shot the mothers to get the cubs.

"Can't we have him arrested or something?" Marty asked. "Animal poaching. International wildlife smuggling. Violation of the Endangered Species Act. I bet he's broken a dozen laws."

"He and Noah Blackwood have probably broken thousands of laws," Ted said. "But we don't have any solid proof."

"What about the files I stole?" Grace asked.

"It's fabulous information, but it's vague," Ted explained. "We understand what they're talking about because we know what they're capable of, but nothing we have here would stand up in court. For one thing, the information's stolen. For another, Blackwood and Butch have been doing this stuff for decades. They're very careful with the language they use. These records could be interpreted in several different ways."

"And Blackwood's a very powerful man," Wolfe added. "He has a lot of money and a lot of influence. Nobody's going to be eager to prosecute him even if we find something that's actionable." He fixed his dark, intense eyes on Grace's robin's-egg-blue ones. "And then there is you," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Grace asked.

"Noah Blackwood is going to come after you."

"Not very likely after I hacked his computer, kidnapped his panda cubs, and stole back the hatchlings," Grace said.

"Actually, it's even more likely now," Wolfe said. "Noah doesn't like to be crossed. He doesn't like to lose. He wants you back."

"And he wants the hatchlings back," Ted added. "And the pandas, although he'll have a hard time getting them once Phil and Phyllis return them to China. He will be coming after all of us."

"What do we do?" Grace asked.

"We have a good head start," Wolfe said. "We have eyes on Noah Blackwood. What we do now is take advantage of the time by trying to find Marty's parents."

Wolfe handed Grace the panda cub. PD growled, but Marty held him tight.

"I'll put the cubs back in their enclosure," Grace said.

"I'll give you a hand," Marty said.

He dropped the tiny poodle in Wolfe's lap. PD continued to growl.

ONE WAY OR THE OTHER

Luther and Dylan were covered in blood.

“Nice timing,” Luther said. “Why do you two always show up when we’re finished?”

The two Mokélé-mbembé hatchlings were wrapped around each other on a bed of straw, snoring and farting, sleeping off their bloody gluttony.

“Whew!” Marty said, waving his free hand in front of his nose. “I think Wolfe has a shower in back. It’ll get the blood off, but not the stink.”

“What stink?” Luther asked.

“Let’s get this mess cleaned up before we shower,” Dylan suggested. There were bits of meat, guts, and bloody knives strewn all over the food prep table.

“Don’t worry about it,” Luther said. “Marty and Grace will clean up.”

“In your dreams,” Marty said. “We have our hands full.” He was carrying one of the pandas. Grace had the other two.

“We’ll take them,” Luther said.

“Forget it,” Grace said. “You’ll get them all bloody.”

She headed through a second bulkhead hatch. Marty followed, but not before giving Luther a victorious grin.

“When you’re done back there, we need to get moving on our next graphic novel,” Luther called after him. “I have some good ideas, and Dylan does, too.”

Marty hadn’t even thought about writing and illustrating the next installment of their adventures. Right now, he was focused on getting to Brazil and finding his parents.

But we do have a long flight ahead of us, he thought. Working on a few pages might get my mind off things.

“We are staying in Brazil for the duration,” Wolfe had announced before they took off from Cryptos, adding ominously, “one way or the other.” This meant they weren’t leaving until they found out what happened to Marty’s mom and dad — Sylvia and Timothy O’Hara. Sylvia was Wolfe’s younger sister. There was only *one way* Marty wanted to find his parents, and that was alive and well. But he knew he might not get his wish. His parents had been missing for a long time, in one of the harshest environments on the planet.

Worrying about them isn’t going to help me find them, Marty told himself.

He took in his surroundings. Wolfe’s converted bomber was divided into several sections separated by bulkheads. Up front was the cockpit, or flight deck, where the Bishops were handling the controls of the plane. Behind the cockpit was the seating section, where Wolfe and Ted were huddled over their laptops. Behind that was the galley, which had been converted into the hatchling nursery. Behind the galley, where he now stood, was animal holding.

He put his panda into the cage with the other two cubs and watched as they started to do somersaults in the straw.

“I’m going to miss them,” Grace said.

“I’ll bet,” Marty said distractedly. He hadn’t been in this part of the plane since he and Grace had been in the Congo, or more accurately, *over* the Congo.

He pointed to a familiar hatch in the floor. The hatch covered the bomb bay that Wolfe used to airdrop supplies for his expeditions. There were two containers in the bay waiting to be dropped before they landed in Manaus, Brazil.

“Remember that?” Marty asked.

Grace turned around, looked, and gave a visible shudder. “How could I forget?”

Marty laughed. Bo, Wolfe’s bonobo chimpanzee, had gotten out of her cage as they’d been flying over the Congo. He and Grace had climbed into the bomb bay to get Bo back at the exact moment Ph Bishop had released the load. At the time, the fall had been the number one most terrifying thing that had ever happened to him. So many other terrifying things had happened to him since that the fall was now down to number six.

Or maybe number seven, he thought.

He walked over to another bulkhead.

“Where are you going?” Grace asked.

“I want to check out what Wolfe brought along for the trip.”

Marty had spent their last day on Cryptos Island inside Wolfe’s stone fortress, sleeping, cooking, and eating, and he had missed the loading. He opened the bulkhead hatch and switched on the light. Grace followed him in.

“Whoa!”

Marty had expected Wolfe to bring supplies and equipment, but nothing like this. The large section was stacked from floor to ceiling with plastic and wooden crates. They were barely able to squeeze past them to get in.

“What is all this stuff?” Grace asked.

Marty didn’t know, but he was certainly going to poke around and find out. The containers were carefully marked. He pointed at a stack marked *Freeze-Dried Food*.

“Wolfe has enough grub to feed an army for a year!”

He continued his poking, discovering medical supplies, four-wheelers, motorcycles, tents, hammocks, two-way radios, rain ponchos, flashlights, batteries, remote-operated cameras, hats, ropes, tools, and spare parts for everything.

“Look at this!” He pointed at two large containers marked *Ultralight*.

“What’s an ultralight?” Grace asked.

“Are you kidding? An ultralight is an airplane ... well, more like a go-cart with wings really. I’ve always wanted to fly one. You can bet if Ted’s designed it, it will do things normal ultralights never dreamed of doing.”

“I doubt Wolfe is going to let you fly it.”

“He let me fly the dragonspy.”

“There’s a big difference between flying a bot using a remote control and piloting an airplane from inside the cockpit.”

“Don’t forget that I was inside the Orb about a million miles beneath the ocean when we captured the giant squid.”

“Hardly a million miles,” Grace said. “And you forgot to mention you were with Ted, who was the one piloting the Orb when you captured the giant squid.”

“Minor technicality,” Marty said, but she had a good point. If he wanted a shot at flying the ultralight, he would have to get Ted Bronson on his side. He was going to start working on this as soon as he got back up front. Ted was a lot more reasonable about letting him do stupidly dangerous things than Wolfe was.

They wove their way deeper into the stacks of stuff.

“How’s he going to get all of this to the jaguar preserve?” Grace asked.

“Blackwood’s helicopter, I guess,” Marty said, although they hadn’t seen the helicopter yet.

“My grand —” Grace turned red. “Noah Blackwood’s helicopter is not that big.”

“It’s not your fault he’s your grandfather,” Marty said.

“I know that,” Grace said. “It’s just so ... Oh, never mind. It would take a hundred trips on Noah’s helicopter to get this stuff to the jaguar preserve, and some of these containers won’t fit through the door.”

Marty let the whole Noah-Blackwood-is-Grace’s-grandfather thing go. He’d be sensitive about it too, if his grandfather was a narcissistic psychopath.

“Well,” he said. “They have to get all this stuff there somehow.” He opened the final bulkhead door. Blackwood’s helicopter was lashed down to the steel floor on the far side of the cargo hold. The rotors had been removed so it would fit into the hold. He walked over to it for a closer look.

“I guess that explains it,” Grace said from behind him.

“Explains what?” Marty asked. He was staring at the helicopter, thinking how weird it looked without rotors, and visualizing it with the rotors back on so he could draw their escape from the Ark with the hatchlings and panda cubs.

“This thing,” Grace answered.

“What thing?” Marty turned around.

Grace was standing next to what looked like a huge boat. Or maybe a gigantic army tank. It was hard to tell in the dim light. Whatever the massive object was, it took up three-quarters of the cargo hold.

“I guess we know how they’re going to move all the stuff now,” Grace said.

“The Thing,” Marty said, touching the camouflage-painted hull.

“Love the name,” Ted Bronson said, stepping through the bulkhead door. “I’m calling it the *Rivlan*, but I like The Thing.” He walked over to them. “Volkswagen produced a car in the seventies called The Thing. I wanted one, but of course I was too young to drive back then. *This* thing looks a little like The Thing.”

“There’s also a horror movie called *The Thing*,” Marty said. He and Luther had watched it several times.

“Which was a remake of another movie from the fifties called *The Thing from Another World*,” Ted said.

Marty didn't know Ted was a movie buff, but then again, there was a lot he didn't know about Ted Bronson.

“So it's a boat,” Marty said.

“Essentially. But it does a couple of things traditional boats can't do.”

Marty wasn't surprised. Ted squatted down beneath the hull. Marty and Grace joined him.

“It's made out of the same material as the Orb, although reconfigured a bit for terra firma.”

The Orb, formally the Oceanic Reconnaissance Bot, was a deep-water submarine, and a fraction of the size of Ted's boat.

Ted pointed to the large tires protruding from the hull. “I have it in tire mode at the moment, but there's also an all-terrain track mode that turns the boat into a bulldozer that will pretty much knock down anything in its path, though I doubt we'll be using that in the rain forest. That mode is not exactly environmentally friendly. There is also a hover mode. Brings the boat about twenty feet off the surface. It won't do us much good in the rain forest, but it'll work well for avoiding flotsam and jetsam on the river.”

“What're *flotsam* and *jetsam*?” Marty asked.

“The Amazon River is the second-longest river in the world,” Grace said.

“What's the longest?” Marty asked.

“The Nile,” Grace answered immediately. “But the Amazon is the largest river by water flow. The average discharge is greater than the next seven largest rivers combined. It has the largest drainage basin in the world, almost three million square miles, and accounts for approximately one-fifth of the world's total river flow. The width of the Amazon varies between one and six miles at the low stage, but expands during the wet season to thirty miles or more. The river flows into the Atlantic Ocean in a broad estuary about a hundred and fifty miles wide. The mouth of the main stem is fifty miles across. The river is sometimes called the River Sea.”

Marty stared at his cousin in wonder. Grace had changed a lot in the past few weeks, but in other ways she hadn't changed at all.

“Thanks for that, Ms. Wikipedia,” he said. “But what I asked originally was, what are *flotsam* and *jetsam*?”

“Sorry,” Grace said. “*Flotsam* and *jetsam* refer to debris like logs and garbage. With that much water flowing, the Amazonian version of flotsam and jetsam could be hundred-foot trees. You hit one of those and you're sunk.”

“Not with this boat,” Ted said, giving the hull a slap. “It's impervious to almost everything. Unfortunately, passengers aren't. If we slam into a hundred-foot hardwood tree at a hundred and twenty-five knots, someone is going to get hurt.”

Marty did a quick calculation in his head. “That's almost a hundred and fifty miles an hour!”

“The upper end is closer to two hundred miles an hour.”

“That's faster than a helicopter!” Marty said.

Ted nodded. “Which is why we're going to have to do our fast runs at night. We don't want to

attract too much attention, or scare people to death. But chugging along during the day like a regular boat is going to slow us down. The chopper is going to get to the jaguar preserve before the *Rivlan* does.”

“I assume you’re driving, or piloting, the boat,” Marty said. “Who’s flying the helicopter?”

“Wolfe,” Ted said.

“How long will it take him to get to the preserve?” Marty asked.

Ted shrugged. “Hard to say. He’ll have to stop and refuel at least once, maybe twice if there’s a strong headwind.”

“Who’s flying to the preserve with the hatchlings?” Grace asked.

“That’s what I came back here to talk to you about. The chopper’s going to be kind of crowded. For obvious reasons, Wolfe doesn’t want anyone getting a look at the hatchlings, so he’s flying them to the preserve. That means that Luther will be on the chopper because they seem to have taken to him.”

That’s going to be one stinky trip, Marty thought. “Did you tell Luther?” he asked.

“I just talked to him. He said he’d be happy to stick with the hatchlings.” Ted looked at Grace.

“You’re on the chopper, too. Luther will need help.”

“Why me?”

“Because Wolfe doesn’t want you out of his sight,” Ted answered. “And I agree with him. After the hatchlings, you’re Blackwood’s primary target.”

“He’s not down here yet,” Grace said. “There’s a chance he won’t figure out —”

Ted interrupted her. “He’s going to figure it out, Grace.”

“He didn’t find Wolfe or my mom in the Congo.”

“True, but they weren’t in possession of the last two living dinosaurs on earth. And technology has changed everything. It’s a lot easier to find people now than it was fifteen years ago. You’re going with him. Wolfe’s not budging on that. You might as well go along with it.”

Marty looked at Grace. Her blue eyes were completely neutral, which was usually a bad sign. He quickly looked back at Ted. “What about me and Dylan?”

“I know you want to get to the jaguar preserve, and we could probably squeeze you into the chopper, but I was hoping that you and Dylan would give me a hand on the *Rivlan*.”

Marty was eager to get to the preserve to find his parents. When someone, or something, wasn’t trying to kill him, he had thought of little else. He ran his hand along the *Rivlan*’s hull. He knew from experience that flying over a river in a chopper and riding on a river were two entirely different things. Riding aboard the *Rivlan* might be his only chance to see the real Amazon. And then there were the ultralights. He glanced into the other cargo hold where the crates were. He didn’t want to get too far from those.

With Wolfe upriver, I just might be able to talk Ted into letting me take one out for a spin.

“What would I be doing aboard?” Marty asked.

“Like I said, I’ll be running fast during the night. Eight hours of that is going to wipe me out. If I don’t have someone to pilot the *Rivlan* during the day at regular speed, I’ll have to tie up so I can sleep. That’s going to slow my arrival at the preserve by days. You and Dylan would be the day

pilots.”

“But at the speeds you’re talking about, the *Rivlan* shouldn’t be that far behind the chopper.”

“That would be true if we were talking about traveling in a straight line, but the Amazon is anything but straight. It meanders back and forth like a giant anaconda. And I’m anticipating mechanical failures. The *Rivlan* has never been in the water.”

“What?” Marty wasn’t sure he had heard him correctly.

“You and Dylan would be on the *Rivlan*’s maiden voyage.”

“How do you know it will even work?” Grace asked, taking the words out of Marty’s mouth.

“It’ll work,” Ted answered. “But there will be glitches. There always are. I think I’ve brought enough spare parts to take care of any eventuality, but I’ll be honest, if we have a breakdown, it could take me a while to fix it.”

“Maybe I should ride on the *Rivlan* to the jaguar preserve instead of Marty,” Grace said.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” Marty said. “You heard what Ted said. Wolfe has a lot on his mind. He doesn’t need to be worrying about you along with everything else.”

“Are you sure?” Grace asked.

“Positive,” Marty answered, but he wasn’t positive. He wanted to get to the preserve and start looking for his parents, but with Blackwood on the prowl, Grace would be safer with Wolfe. He changed the subject. “So what’s the latest from the preserve?”

“You remember Jake Lansa?”

“Sure,” Marty answered. “Dr. Robert Lansa’s son.”

“Doc” Lansa was in charge of the jaguar preserve. His son, Jake, had been sailing to Australia when Marty and Grace had met him. Jake had taken Ted’s girlfriend, Ana Mika, and Laurel Lee out to the *Coelacanth* off the coast of New Zealand, where they’d caught the giant squid.

“Jake’s back in Brazil now,” Ted explained. “He got to Manaus about the same time as Laurel and Ana. The three of them headed upriver with one of Doc’s biologists. They got to the preserve last night. Laurel and Doc are heading out into the forest as soon as they can get their gear together, to find that uncontacted tribe that might know about your folks.”

“What do you mean by *uncontacted*?” Grace asked.

“A group that has never had contact with the outside world. And finding them is not going to be easy. Uncontacted tribes are usually uncontacted because they don’t want to be contacted. When Wolfe gets there, he’ll head out with a guide who works for Doc. Everyone else will be sticking around camp, including me, as support for the expedition. If they get into trouble, we’re the cavalry.”

“But instead of horses, we’ll have an ultralight,” Marty said.

Grace gave him an eyeball roll, which he completely ignored.

Ted smiled. “So you saw the crate.”

“I sure did,” Marty said. “And I wouldn’t mind taking it out for a spin.”

“You know how to fly?”

Marty nodded. “I’ve had lessons.”

“When?” Grace asked.

“Skydiving camp.”

“That hardly counts,” Grace said.

Ted laughed. “It actually *does* count. The most important skill for an ultralight pilot is to know how to use a parachute.”

“Until you hit the top of the canopy,” Grace pointed out.

“That’s a problem,” Ted admitted. “And it can hurt.”

“Speaking of parachutes,” Marty said. “When do we make the supply drop?”

Ted looked at his watch. “Several hours. Early evening in Brazil. We’ll try to drop the supply canisters as close to camp as we can, then head into Manaus to unload. You two might want to get some rest. Once we get there, we won’t have much time for that.”

Jake Lansa was amazed at all the additional lines Flanna Brenna had strung through the canopy during his time away from the jaguar preserve.

“You could go at least five miles in any direction from camp without touching the ground once,” Jake said.

“Seven point five miles,” the redheaded woman replied, jumping off the platform and disappearing into the thick green tangle.

Jake had been following his father’s botanist girlfriend along her web for the past several hours, trying to get his “canopy legs” back by taking short runs on the zip lines. He was now standing on a platform readying himself for a two-hundred-yard run, trying to remember everything he knew about long zips.

“It’s just like riding a bike,” he whispered as he waited for Flanna to let him know that she was offline.

“All clear!”

A flock of blue-and-gold macaws exploded from the tree to his right, screeching off into the canopy. He snapped his harness on to the line and looked down. He could barely see the ground through the broad leaves and thick vines.

“Just like riding a bike,” he repeated, and stepped off the platform into a void.

He knew immediately that it was nothing like riding a bike.

Too fast!

He was completely out of control. Flanna had a bungee block breaking system at the end of each long run. He hoped it would slow him down. It didn’t. He hit the block. The bungee snapped like a piece of twine. He slammed headfirst into a branch as big around as he was. He heard his helmet crack. He dropped like a rock. Everything went black.

Stars, he thought. How odd. You don’t see stars in the rain forest. The canopy blocks the sky. Am I why am I hanging here? Where am I? What happened?

He shook his head trying to clear the fog. He regretted the move immediately. It felt like someone had inserted a hot poker into the center of his brain. He threw up, which was a little awkward, and messy, upside down. At least he thought he was upside down. He couldn’t see. There was something in his eyes, which he hoped was not vomit.

“Oh my God! Jake! Are you okay?”

He could hear Flanna shouting somewhere above him, but he couldn’t see her. He reached a gloved hand up to his face to wipe away whatever was blinding him. He looked at his glove. It wasn’t vomit; it was blood. A blurry-looking Flanna was working her way down to where he was dangling like a spider monkey.

“You’re tangled,” Flanna said.

What was that phrase Marty O’Hara and his friend Luther had used?

“Duh *du jour*,” he said.

“At least your sense of humor works.” Flanna was now perched ten feet above him on a landing platform. “I’m going to throw you a line. Can you manage to tie it to your harness?”

“I think so.”

She dropped the line. After a couple of awkward attempts he managed to snag it, but it seemed to take him forever to attach it to the harness, as if he’d somehow forgotten how to tie a knot.

“Secured,” he was finally able to say.

“Are you sure?”

He stared at the knot for several seconds before he was able to confirm that the knot was indeed secured.

What’s the matter with me?

“I’m going to right you so you can grab the zip line.” Flanna sounded like she was speaking to him from the bottom of a steel barrel. “Once you have the line, you’ll have to untwist yourself to free up the pulley. I can’t tell if it will be clockwise or counterclockwise.”

Jake wasn’t quite clear on the clockwise/counterclockwise thing, but he did understand that in order for her to reel him in he had to free the pulley. He began twisting himself around.

“That’s the right direction,” Flanna said. “Keep going.”

Every couple of rotations, he had to stop and wipe the blood out of his eyes.

“I guess the helmet didn’t do me much good,” he said.

“The helmet saved your life,” Flanna said. “A couple more twists.”

Finally, the pulley popped free. Flanna reeled him in like a fish and helped him onto the platform.

He sat down with his feet dangling over the edge. “Feels good to have something solid under me.”

“I bet. Do you know what happened?”

Jake shook his head. “Ouch!”

Flanna smiled. “Better use your words.”

“I’m not sure what happened,” Jake answered, keeping his head very still. “I guess I started out too fast and snapped the bungee brake.”

“Too much time on the ocean and not enough time in the trees?”

“I guess. How bad is it?”

“I need to take off what’s left of your helmet. Hold your head steady.”

He did, but it still hurt as Flanna popped the helmet off. She took out a package of antiseptic wipes from her backpack. “Head wounds always look worse than they are.”

“That’s comforting.”

“This is going to sting.”

She was right. The gentle dabbing felt like a blowtorch on his forehead. When she finished, she leaned back and squinted at the wound.

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