

Cryptids

Robert Herrick

No Drawing Required

As always for Elizabeth

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Contents

1. The Loch	1
2. Debrief	7
3. Jahan	11
4. Welcome Home	17
5. Protecting the Cryptids	21
6. The Current Crisis	25
7. In the Swamp	30
8. Chasing CARL	37
9. Inside the Cave	41
10. Captured	48
11. Imprisoned	56
12. The Archon	63
13. Escape	70
14. Finding CARL	74
15. The Engineer	82
16. Enforcers	89
17. The Starlight Drive	94
18. The Bridge	98
19. The Elevator	106
20. The Hanger Bay	111

21. Explanations	116
22. Conclusions	121

Chapter One

The Loch

Alex dove to the deck of the small dock just as the giant, reptilian head shot past him. The monster slammed into a dock piling, taking a sizeable chunk out of the wood where CARL had been sitting moments before.

Not again, Alex thought. The monster had eaten CARL. If only CARL had shut off its attractor when I told it to.

The head pulled back from the piling and focused on him. It weaved back and forth, supported by a fifteen-foot-long neck that disappeared into the cold water of the loch. Slowly, the creature opened its mouth, exposing two six-inch fangs in front of two rows of three-inch-long teeth. It lunged at Alex, and he rolled to one side. As the head shot past, Alex reached out and slapped a stunner on the creature's neck. Its eyes glazed over as the device took effect. There was a loud pop, and the crisp smell of ozone filled the air.

The creature's head and neck dropped onto the dock with a satisfying thump. The old wooden planks creaked and shuddered as the creature slid backward until its body settled onto the rocky bottom in the shallow waters near the dock.

Alex wanted to shout out in triumph but suppressed the urge. It was ok to be excited, just not loud. He looked around for any signs that someone might be approaching. He didn't think anyone would be nearby, but he had to check. The old dock was one of the most isolated places on Loch Ness. It hadn't been used in years and was just rotting wooden planks. Still, he couldn't be too careful.

Humans are dangerous, he thought.

A cold Scottish wind brushed at his face. Alex pulled his jacket around him. Satisfied that he was alone, he pressed a button on his watch. Now, all he had to do was wait for the UFO to show up. He hadn't expected to spend his twelfth birthday recovering the Loch Ness Monster.

Once the UFO arrived, there would be no more Loch Ness Monster, one less mystery for the citizens of Earth to discover.

Alex attached a neural blocker to the Loch Ness Monster's neck. He patted it softly. Its silver skin quivered at his touch. "You are a long way from home, aren't you girl."

The creature was an Almachian bentong. Born on a watery world, three hundred and fifty light-years away, and was one of twenty-two alien creatures placed on Earth by a group of extraterrestrials after their spacecraft had malfunctioned. Some of these creatures had been spotted over the years, but none had ever been captured. Humans had dubbed them "Cryptids" from the Greek word for hidden, and an entire pseudoscience called "Cryptozoology" had sprung up to prove their existence.

Alex's gaze followed the neck until it vanished into the dark water of the loch. He wanted to look at the bentong's body, but that would have to wait until later. Moving to the head, he continued his examination.

The head resembled an alligator's, except for the eyes. They were much larger than an alligator's, faced forward, and sat under two bony ridges atop the head. He raised one of its eyelids and shined a small light on the golden eyeball, noting how rapidly the star-shaped pupil contracted.

"Don't worry, you're going to be all right," he said. "This is better than being captured by humans. I wasn't even supposed to come and get you for another two weeks."

The recovery of the bentong had been moved up when a high-tech billionaire announced that he would bring an international team to conduct a complete underwater survey of Loch Ness. The survey team was bringing equipment that could prove the existence of the Loch Ness Monster.

The team members were scheduled to arrive in two days.

Alex had arrived three nights ago.

He hadn't been able to get the cryptid's attention the first two nights. The bentong had been feeding in the middle of the loch. But tonight, it had sensed the attractor, a device attuned to its predatory instincts. When activated, the attractor caused the bentong to become extremely violent, making whoever held the attractor its primary prey. If the bentong hadn't been captured tonight, Alex would have gone out in a boat after it. Fighting with an enraged sea monster on a small boat at night was a bad idea, no matter how much he'd trained for it.

Convinced the bentong wouldn't wake up soon, he sat on the edge of the dock and wrapped his coat tightly around him. All he had to do now was watch over it for another twenty minutes until the transport arrived.

He smiled proudly, still excited about how well the capture had gone. The bentong hadn't put up as much of a fight as he expected. Still, something about the bentong was bothering him. He knew something was wrong but couldn't place it. His smile slowly faded into a concerned frown.

He stared at the moon's reflection as it shimmered on the waters of the loch. Then it dawned on him—the eyes. *Gold eyes. Its eyes should be green. Only bentong males have gold eyes, and the bentong I'm after is a female.*

Quickly, he set his watch to tracker mode. A tiny flashing blip indicated the location of the cryptid, and the readout showed it was at the dock. Alex looked from the flashing blip

to the bentong. He tapped the side of the watch, but the blip stayed steady. *See, nothing to worry about*, he thought. *Perhaps the aliens were mistaken about the eye color. But, they had never been wrong before about a cryptid's physiology.*

Suddenly, the calm water of the loch exploded with a roar as another reptilian head broke the surface. Its jaws snapped shut, exactly where Alex had been a moment before. He would have been impaled on the bentong's fangs if not for his alien-enhanced reflexes. A massive head and neck, almost twice the size of the first bentong, wavered above the waters of the loch.

"Where'd you come from?" he said in disbelief. Realization dawned on him. "Unless you're the bentong's mother?" It was the only thing that made sense; somehow, this one must have given birth. But, whatever the reason, he now had to capture the second one.

After giving him a quick glance, the female bentong moved toward the unconscious baby. She seemed to be trying to figure out what was wrong with it. Alex usually had a good sense of animal behavior, especially of those from another planet, but he couldn't have been more wrong. As soon as the female got within striking distance, she attacked, burying her teeth deep into the baby's neck. Despite the vicious assault, the baby Bentong remained unconscious.

Frantically waving his arms, Alex yelled, "No! Stop it. You're hurting him." He picked up a rotting plank from the dock and threw it at the mother bentong. It bounced off her tough hide. The bentong ignored his attempts to distract her. Alex could only think of one reason the female was attacking the baby - CARL's attractor was still activated.

If he didn't stop her, she would tear the baby apart until she destroyed CARL's attractor. Alex reached down and turned his own attractor to the maximum.

Immediately, the female bentong released the baby. Her head spun towards him.

"That got your attention." Alex moved further away from the baby.

The bentong's head followed his movements, zeroing in on his attractor's stronger signal.

I might as well have a bull's eye painted on my chest, he thought. He ran for the other side of the dock. He had an idea. First, he would have to get to his boat.

Halfway there, his foot jabbed through the dock as a section of rotting boards gave way with a crack! In a few moments, he would be an easy morsel for the bentong. He struggled to get his foot free. He thought about turning off his attractor but couldn't take the chance that the bentong would attack her baby again.

The adult bentong smashed into the side of the dock and then raised her head again to strike. Alex rolled forward as his foot came free, and once again, the bentong's jaws closed on empty air.

Dashing towards the end of the dock, he leaped over the unconscious bentong and landed in the boat. Quickly, he cut the mooring rope, started the engine, dropped the attractor underneath the seat, and dove overboard.

The boat shot out into the loch. The bentong raced after it. Even at full speed, it was no match for the cryptid, which quickly overtook the small craft. The bentong rammed into the center of the boat, splitting it in half. Then she dove under the water, following the signal of the attractor as it began to sink. With one bite of her powerful jaws, she silenced the device. With his attractor gone, she detected the signal coming from inside the baby. She turned back to the dock to destroy it.

Reaching the dock, the female bentong drew back its serpentine neck to strike the wounded baby. As she lunged forward, Alex rose from behind the baby's neck, where he had been hiding. The bentong changed her aim in mid-strike. He pulled to one side and slapped a stunner on the cryptid's neck. The bentong's eyes rolled up as the stunner discharged, and her head fell onto the dock next to her baby.

Alex dropped to his knees beside the bentongs. He looked out at the dark loch. “I hope that there’s no father bentong out there. I’ve caught enough sea monsters for one evening,” he said tiredly.

Alex retrieved a neural blocker from his coat. He placed it on the mother and applied a pressure bandage to the baby’s wound. Alex was still tending the baby’s wound when he felt the pulsing of the transport’s engines overhead. He spotted the dark outline of the ship against the night sky. Small black spheres were detaching themselves from the sides of the spacecraft. The spheres sprouted long metallic tentacles as they descended towards the dock. Like the CARL units, these black spheres were biobots, sophisticated robots with photonic processors replicating biological systems. Alex stepped aside as one of the biobots took over the wound treatment.

The other biobots slid underneath the bentongs and wrapped metallic tentacles around their bodies. Thirty seconds later, they activated their repulsors, and the Loch Ness Monsters rose into the belly of the spacecraft.

Alex followed on a skimmer disc the aliens had sent down for him. As soon as the disc came to rest in the cargo bay, the ship rose rapidly into the ionosphere and headed south. From start to finish, the UFO’s visit to Loch Ness lasted only three minutes.