

# PULSE OF THE EARTH

A TALE FROM THE TRIUMVIRATE UNIVERSE

## Other Works by Christopher Andrews

### TRIUMVIRATE SERIES

*Pandora's Game*  
*The Darkness Within*  
(collection)  
*Of Wolf and Man*  
(Bronze IPPY winner for Horror)  
*Araknid*

### PARANORMALS SERIES

*Paranormals*  
*Paranormals: We Are Not Alone*  
*Paranormals: Darkness Reigns*

### NOVELIZATIONS

*Dream Parlor*  
*Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*  
*Night of the Living Dead*  
*Macbeth*  
*Julius Caesar*

### SCREENPLAYS

*Thirst*  
*Dream Parlor*  
(written with Jonathan Lawrence)  
*Mistake*  
*Vale Todo / Anything Goes*  
(written with Roberto Estrella)  
*Adrift in the Darkness*

### WEB SERIES

*Duet*

### VIDEO GAMES

*Bankjob*

# PULSE OF THE EARTH

A TALE FROM THE TRIUMVIRATE UNIVERSE

---

A Novel by  
CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS

Copyright © 2025 by Christopher Andrews

Pulse of the Earth: A Tale from the Triumvirate Universe

ISBN: Hardcover #978-1-7361983-4-6

Cover art copyright © 2025 by Daniele Serra

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the creator's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

This book was printed in the United States of America.

Rising Star Visionary Press hardcover edition: November, 2025

**A Rising Star Visionary Press book  
for extra copies please contact by e-mail at  
[risingstarvisionarypress@earthlink.net](mailto:risingstarvisionarypress@earthlink.net)  
or send by regular mail to  
Rising Star Visionary Press  
Copies Department  
P O Box 9226  
Fountain Valley, CA 92728-9226**

Thank you to my wife, editor, and Imzadi,  
*Yvonne Isaak-Andrews*,  
for all the ways you make life better.

Thank you to my friend and colleague,  
*Daniele Serra*,  
for producing another marvelous Triumvirate cover.

And thank you to my daughter,  
*Arianna Kristina Andrews*,  
for making fatherhood such a dream come true.

The following story takes place approximately  
six months after the events depicted in the  
Triumvirate novel, *Araknid*.

Consciousness trickled into her, like some perverse water-torture device, bringing the pain searing through her back, scorching its way through her nerve endings. She was somewhere dark and cold, lying on her side on a hard floor and breathing in a rancid stench. Her head throbbed with each heartbeat, and she could feel the stickiness of drying blood matted in her hair.

Pain? Oh, yes. But clarity? No, clarity shunned her.

Time ticked by; it might have been minutes, or even hours, as far as she knew. The agony in her back seared hot and deep — burning lines of it, like ... like ...

*Like I was cut*, she thought. *No, like I was clawed.*

Some lucidity returned then, and with it, fear. Enough to know she was still in danger, and that she needed to remain absolutely silent.

She attempted to open her eyes, but the drying blood in her hair had oozed onto her eyelids, gumming her lashes together. And even after forcing them apart, she saw little more than darkness — the main lights were out, replaced by insufficient red-tinted emergency backups. It didn't help matters that her ears felt clogged as well.

She swallowed, prompting a *click* within her eardrums. A droning hum all around her continued, but one sound cleaved through it, a grotesque noise that churned her stomach with revulsion and dread: *Chewing*. And beneath that, a brief, weak, horrible moaning.

She turned her head and, squinting through the murky half-light, swallowed a gasp when she saw the first dead body, a man sprawled on his side, whose face looked the way her back felt. Past him, a lifeless woman, her throat ripped to shreds.

The awful chewing noises arose from the shadows beyond them.

A new thought flittered across her mind: *But when did it—?*

That was as far as she got. As soon as the word “it” formed, more of that elusive clarity returned.

She regretted longing for it. It was all she could do not to whimper, to sob aloud. She trembled, and that intensified the pain in her back.

But she bit her lip and forced herself to concentrate.

The chewing emanated from somewhere past the dead man and woman. So, if she stayed low, if she kept absolutely quiet, she might be able to ...

To what? To fight or escape it? Probably not.

To thwart it, somehow? Maybe.

Turning her head the other direction — and God, how even that slight movement prompted yet another spike from her ragged back! — she blinked her eyes several times and scanned her surroundings until she spotted it: Her solid steel steamer trunk. Expensive as hell, so heavy it was a pain in her ass, and, right now, worth every penny.

*If she could pull this off before she died, before it killed her.*

It had come for her trunk, for the contents therein. Why else would it be here, now?

She drew a preparatory breath, yet still aborted her first attempt to move when the anguish threatened to force a scream past her clenched lips. She knew she could make *no* noise at all, but given the wretched state of her back, that was easier said than done.

*Come on ... this might be the last thing you ever do, so make it count!*

Steeling herself, her second effort succeeded insofar as she managed to roll from her side onto her stomach. The pain was exquisite, every movement torture, but it also helped her stay focused. So long as those abhorrent chewing sounds continued unabated, she had a chance.

In short, careful, precise movements, she crept onto all fours and inched her way forward, away from the dead people and the chewing, toward her trunk. For an intense heartbeat, she questioned whether or not she had her keys with her, but then she felt them digging into her hip.

*Thank God I actually wore slacks with pockets today; otherwise, they might’ve been back in my handbag.*

This notion was mildly amusing, at best, but in her current state, she almost let slip a giggle. She froze, holding her breath — *had* she let it out?

The chewing carried on, and so did she.

She was almost there, so near she could almost touch the trunk's cold metal front, when her palm slipped on a puddle of blood — her own or someone else's, she had no idea. Her hand skidded forward out from under her, and her upper body cracked down onto her elbow with a painful *thunk*.

A small sound, little more than what she had already been making.

Yet the chewing halted, replaced a second later by a low, heavy growl that sent an icy chill down her agonized spine.

*This is it. This is how I die.*

*But not yet!*

Embracing the jolt of adrenaline that shot through her system and dulled the pain, she lunged, collapsing against her trunk even as she shoved her hand into her pocket.

A dark shape beyond the two bodies rose into view, the red emergency lights throwing it into silhouette. Its growl crescendoed, its shoulders hunching as it prepared to launch itself at her.

She jerked the keys free, and God smiled upon her as she gripped the correct one on the first try.

Death descended upon her with a thunderous bark, but not before she stabbed the key into the lock and jerked her hand sideways, snapping it off inside.

With her dying breath, she gasped aloud, "Take that."

They weren't the best final words, but as the claws and teeth tore through her flesh, they offered her some, minuscule satisfaction.

## AIRPORT EXCLUSIVE

*Damn, I'm out of shape*, Jason Bakari Samir grumbled, his chest heaving way too much as he huffed through the parking garage toward the terminal. *Guy my age shouldn't get winded from a short little run.*

Internal carping aside, Jason considered himself lucky to be navigating one of the smaller airports in Southern California. He preferred to avoid the headache of LAX, or even John Wayne Airport, whenever possible.

One upside to his brief hustle was that it warmed him a bit. "Sunny California" was known for its mild climate, but this year's winter weather was lingering longer than he had come to expect. Chilly drizzle dampened his hair, and cold evening air nipped at his long-ago thinned skin through his too-light jacket; Jason had been born in New Jersey, but his family moved to California before he was in Kindergarten, and thirty-ish years later, he barely remembered the snow. Now it just seemed wrong to have these kinds of temperatures loitering into springtime.

Scooting into the welcoming warmth of the dry terminal at last, and displacing a small flock of white-crowned sparrows picking over some discarded food as he rushed by, Jason shook the rainwater from his lanky hair like a dog just as his phone announced a telltale *ping!* His damp sneakers squeaking and slipping on the tile floor, he shuffled to one side to let an older, weary couple pass by as he tugged it from the back pocket of his jeans, then pulled a face as he read the text from his nominal boss, known online only as "Trey Romero":

FLIGHTAWARE SHOWS CHARTERED PLANE ARRIVING LATER THAN EXPECTED. GET COMFORTABLE FOR NOW.

*Great*, he grouched some more. *I rush in here, thinking I'm gonna be late ...*

But Jason wasn't going to complain to Trey about getting this assignment, or any assignment, so he headed for an available concourse chair to settle in. At least until the good doctor's plane arrived, he would be out of the crappy night.

He collapsed into his chosen seat and released a resigned sigh. All he could do now was wait.

What he really wanted was to have a beer and maybe watch some basketball or whatever, but he knew from past experience that airport bars were a little too pricy for his wallet; given the growing size of his gut of late, that was probably for the best. He thumbed through his phone for a minute, then got bored with that and put it back in his pocket. Instead, he indulged in a little people-watching — which, for him, was somewhat more than the idle pastime it might be for others.

What was he watching for? Anything weird. What else would a distinguished reporter for *Watchdogs of the Weird & Unusual* seek?

But tonight, he couldn't fight disappointment at the lack of any strange or extraordinary airport clientele; the individuals on display were too mundane for his professional needs:

Over by the restrooms, a short Latina wearing a gaudy purple shawl appeared to be talking to herself, but these days he had to assume she was wearing a Bluetooth earpiece he couldn't see ...

Seated not too far away, a lanky, older white guy with bright blue eyes and reddened, wind-chapped cheeks — he looked like he could be a fishing buddy of Robert Shaw from *Jaws* — was tapping out an odd, intricate rhythm with his right foot and left hand; Jason imagined he could be a retired drummer ...

Not far past the hypothetical-drummer, a skinny white girl, no older than twelve and sitting apart from her presumed parents, was holding up a *Ranger Rick* magazine — Jason noted the black-legged white-tailed mongoose locked in combat with a black mamba snake on the cover — and peering at it with a literal glow in her eyes, a glow which Jason suspected came from a phone hidden from her parents' view ...

Leaning against an open stretch of wall, an androgynous individual with dark hair, pockmarked skin, and ambiguous features gazed up at the ceiling, without blinking or otherwise moving, but that could be heavy daydreaming, the product of simple, sheer boredom —

most people could sympathize with that, as Jason could this very moment ...

He hoped that tonight's assignment proved worth his time, but even Trey could never guarantee that. This scientist he was meeting, Doctor Aimée Hellqvist, was an anthropologist so obscure that even Google had trouble finding anything on her. She got her Ph.D. from Cambridge, but since then she had published no major papers and only held a few positions before dropping off the map years ago; she just sort of wandered off on her own, with her wealthy-ish family footing the bill. Now, according to Trey, she claimed to have made some sort of earth-shattering discovery and wanted to share it with the media. But flash forward a couple of months, and she had gone from trying to get interviews with *National Geographic* and other, more reputable channels, to pandering to organizations like the Watchdogs.

Far be it from Jason to shit on his own affiliated publication — if “publication” applied to their niche website — but he never deluded himself that the Watchdogs were anything more than an esoteric curiosity to most of the general public; a ragtag collection of paranormal-obsessed weirdos. If it hadn't been for their coverage of and exclusive interviews pertaining to the “Arach-mageddon” last year, *Watchdogs of the Weird & Unusual* would still be a tiny blip on the greater digital landscape of the World Wide Web.

And if Doctor Hellqvist were suffering such a giant step down the media ladder to reach out to the Watchdogs, he had to question the veracity of her vague claims: Just how “earth-shattering” could her alleged discovery be?

*I guess I'll find out*, he thought as he pulled his phone out again to check the time. *Eventually.*

So Jason waited. And waited. And he started to have second thoughts about maybe treating himself to one of those overpriced beers—

“Excuse me ...?”

It took a second for Jason to absorb that the female voice was addressing him. Then he looked up, and up.

A breath-taking white woman awaited his response. Even from his seated viewpoint, he could tell that she stood well over his own five-foot-nine — she towered over the other women, and a few of the men,

who passed by — and her long red hair flowed like a river of fire. She sported a tight, emerald dress that peeked from beneath her black leather coat; the color complimented her beguiling green eyes. And she had those extraordinary eyes focused on *him*.

The first thing Jason did was suck in his gut. Then he responded with a suave and delightfully Freudian, "... tall?"

The instant the word passed his lips, his dark cheeks burned in mortification.

Luckily, her sympathetic smile suggested she found this endearing. "Yes, I know," she returned with a slight trace of an accent he didn't recognize. She gestured to the chair opposite him. "May I join you?"

*No way*, he thought. *No way I'm this lucky.*

But his eyes darted around the concourse, confirming that there were an abundance of open seats. Yet, this super tall, super attractive woman was asking to "join him."

And she still awaited his answer.

"Yeah," he finally spat out. "Yes. Please. Do."

The Junoesque woman nodded — a regal gesture, which matched her majestic, Eastern European features that seemed carved from perfect marble, except for a light powdering of freckles across her nose — and lowered herself into the chair. She crossed her long legs — her heels were tastefully short, which made sense given her Amazonian stature — and rested her small purse upon her lap, folding her graceful hands atop it.

And then she looked at him with an expectant gleam in her eyes and an enigmatic smile on her lips.

Jason floundered for something, anything to say. He couldn't remember the last time he had made small talk with a woman, and he was pretty sure that he had never been in conversation with *any* woman so alluring. Californians didn't normally chit-chat much about the weather — traffic was the typical substitute — but ...

"Cold outside," he commented, offering what he hoped was at least a passably charming grin.

She shrugged, the shoulders of her supple leather coat shifting alongside her lithe neck. "I don't mind," she returned, with a sly grin of her own. "I find the bite quite invigorating." God, her voice was smooth as silk.

*No way, he thought. No way this is really happening, a woman this exotic and attractive, talking to me. I'm being punked, that's the only explanation. This is probably being streamed to YouTube or TikTok or something.*

He looked around again, figuring he would catch some young assholes giggling while pointing their phones at him. But he spotted nothing out of the ordinary.

The woman raised an eyebrow. "I apologize. Were you expecting someone?"

Jason shook his head, trying to maintain his composure. "No, no," he assured her, "not at all. I, uh ... I just ..."

She waited for him to finish the thought, her grin spreading another few degrees.

Feeling foolish and clumsy, he tried again. "I was—I ..."

She cocked her head a little, still waiting.

*Well, buddy, you wanted weird, you got weird. Except it's you who's making a buffoon of himself.*

Jason released a resigned sigh. He wasn't suave or sophisticated; never had been, never would be. So rather than play this woman's game — or attempt to, anyway, with his own embarrassing brand of "debonair" — he might as well cut to the chase. If he was right, if this was some kind of prank, some fucked up "social experiment" or whatever, at least he could go home tonight knowing he had not fallen for it.

"Look," he said, spreading his hands wide in a show of affable surrender. "I promise, I'm not trying to be rude here. And I don't mean this to be the weirdest pickup line in history, either. But you're so ... " He gestured at her, up and down. "... and I know I'm not. Maybe five, ten years ago, but probably not then, either. Let's be real here: You're outta my league. Anybody in this airport would know that in a heartbeat."

As it happened, he glanced around again and spotted another guy, a white dude about his age, making this exact assessment: Gaping back and forth between Jason and this amazing "hottie," all while giving a little disbelieving, disapproving shake of his head. Then he noticed Jason looking at him and zeroed in on his phone screen with extreme focus.

Rather than embarrassing him further, this confirmation of his position actually amused Jason, and made this whole awkward exchange that much easier.

“Yeah,” he continued. “So, again, I’m not trying to be crude or disrespectful or whatever, but, with this whole concourse available, why would *you* choose to sit down and chat with *me*?”

There. He’d said it. Now she could laugh, or slap him, or just get up and walk away, and he could relax. Hell, he would have a funny story to share with the other Watchdogs tonight.

But she didn’t laugh. Or slap him. And she made no move to stand and walk away. During his little monologue, her expression had not changed, but the gleam in her eyes, if anything, had grown warmer.

“I appreciate your honesty ...” she began. Then she paused and raised one inquisitive eyebrow.

When he finally realized she was waiting for his name, he provided, “Uh, Jason.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Jason,” she repeated. “I truly do. I think you are being a little downtrodden on yourself, but I’m also worldly enough to know how I am viewed.” She flexed those amazing, long legs for just a second—

*God, those calves!*

—then smiled and shook her head. “So I apologize if I gave you the wrong impression. I didn’t sit here, across from you, to imply anything other than this: I’m in the mood for conversation, and you’re one of the few persons sitting here who isn’t glued to their phone.” She cocked her head again. “But, if you’d prefer solitude, would you rather I go sit next to that gentleman?” She pointed toward the guy whom Jason had designated a retired drummer, still beating that rhythm with foot and hand.

Jason found himself much more at ease as he told her, “No. I would not rather you sit anywhere else.”

She nodded. “Good. I’m glad that’s settled.” Then she leaned forward and extended her hand across the aisle to him; a simple effort, given her height. “My name’s Regina, by the way.”

Jason leaned forward to accept her hand. “Nice to meet you, Regina.”

She held on to Jason’s hand a moment, then sat back and settled

into her chair as though it were the finest, softest, luxury leather. “So, Jason, what brings you here tonight? Picking up a friend? Family?”

Jason held on to a sliver of skepticism a touch longer, then decided, to hell with it, he would take her at her word. And if he were wrong, who knows — maybe going viral as the butt of a joke could help the Watchdogs’ readership.

“No, I’m not picking anyone up,” he told her, “but I am here to meet someone. I’m a journalist, and I’m supposed to interview her.”

He had expected Regina to just nod, or say something simple like “I see” or “Interesting.” He was therefore surprised when her beautiful green eyes widened, and she flashed the biggest smile yet.

“Really? Well, now I’m beside myself! This is an extraordinary coincidence.”

Jason refrained from his knee-jerk response of, *I’m always suspicious of “coincidences”* — he avoided offending her before, and he didn’t want to push his luck. Instead, he asked, “How so?”

“I don’t suppose by any chance this interviewee of yours would be the Swedish anthropologist, Doctor Hellqvist?”

Jason’s jaw dropped.

This prompted a delighted laugh — almost a girlish titter — from Regina. “I’ll take that as a ‘Yes.’ I’m *also* here to interview Doctor Hellqvist.”

He shook his head in disbelief. “No fu— ... no way.”

She nodded. “I’m also a journalist, though I’ve only been working for a short time. In fact, this’ll be my first ‘solo’ interview.”

“What publication?”

“I’m with the *Register*.”

Jason’s jaw almost dropped again. So much for the larger publications showing no interest in Hellqvist’s announcement. “That’s ... wow. That’s awesome.”

“What publication are you representing?”

“I, uh ... I’m with *Watchdogs of the Weird & Unusual*.”

Regina cocked her head, something he was starting to find familiar. “I’m sorry, I don’t know that one.”

He resisted the urge to clear his throat in chagrin. “I’m not surprised, honestly. We’re not exactly on par with the *Register*.”

She picked up on his self-depreciation. “Don’t feel bad, Jason.

This'll be my first interview because the *Register* wasn't interested enough to send a more experienced reporter. I'm really only one step up from an intern. Believe me, my position — my assignment here tonight — is no cause for professional intimidation." She smirked and offered a conspiratorial wink. "Not yet, anyway."

Mollified, Jason matched her smirk and nodded his appreciation.

"So, what exactly is *Watchdogs of ...?*"

"... *of the Weird & Unusual*," he finished for her. "We're a website that shines a spotlight on the stories the mainstream media outlets skip or treat with skepticism. We're apolitical; we don't do conspiracy theories or anything like that. And we're not interested in clichéd tabloid bullsh— tabloid nonsense, either; no 'the government captured aliens' or 'Bill Gates is really Elvis' or whatnot. But when something truly bizarre happens and no one at ABC or FOX or whatever wants to give it air time, and the *Times* might stick it on the very last page ... well, we give it its fair due — if our leader, Trey, deems it worthy. And we try not to commentate; we stick to the facts as we uncover them, no matter how outlandish they may seem to most people." He shrugged. "Almost no one had heard of us until we broke the story on 'Arach-mageddon.' That finally put us on the map, earned us a little more recognition, and landed a few more bucks in all of our pockets."

"Forgive me, but what is 'Arach-mageddon'?"

"You know, that 'cute' nickname the media eventually gave to the spider freak-out in Los Angeles last year."

Regina communicated her ignorance with a little shake of her head and parting of her hands.

This reaction surprised Jason. The incident had garnered a lot of attention — the Watchdogs had only "broken" the story ahead of the mainstream by a matter of hours, and only because it took time for all the horrifying individual accounts to come into focus as one big related event. Trey demonstrated some real foresight on that call.

Jason's consternation must have shown on his face, because Regina explained, "I traveled quite a lot last year, mainly in Europe. I must've missed this spider news from California."

But that excuse didn't quite sit right for Jason — this had been *big*, coast-to-coast news, and he knew for a fact they heard about it up in Canada, and even over in England. But under the circumstances, he

stowed his dubious attitude for the time being and described it to her.

“About six months ago, something — everybody has their own pet theories about it, but no one really knows for sure — caused spiders in the Los Angeles area to start breeding like crazy and become unusually aggressive. In retrospect, a bunch of exterminators claim there had been warning signs in the weeks and days leading up to it, but *one* night in particular, the critters swarmed like angry killer bees. They invaded homes, they bit people left and right, and there were a number of deaths. Black widows and brown recluses can always be dangerous to kids and the elderly, but the sheer number of bites had a few people dying from common household spiders. Dozens of tarantulas marching across your kitchen floor were the scariest to look at, but the smaller ones could crawl through vents, gaps, under doors — it was a whole thing. And scary as hell, I’ll bet.”

Aghast, one hand raised near her mouth, Regina asked, “And this happened all in one single night?”

Jason nodded. “The worst of it, yeah. Like I said, exterminators saw some buildup, but no one could’ve predicted what those warning signs meant. So that night the spiders went nuts, but by morning—” He snapped his fingers. “—it was all over. Their unexplained aggression vanished. In fact, most of the spiders themselves disappeared, back to wherever spiders usually hang out, I guess.”

Regina returned to clasping her hands atop her purse. “Did you experience this yourself?”

Jason shook his head. “No, thank God. Whatever caused it, the epicenter was somewhere up in Los Angeles. It didn’t reach this far south. But everybody knows somebody who was affected by it.”

She drew a deep breath, held it a second, then released it with a shudder. “Terrifying.”

“Yeah. Anyway, Trey got the Watchdogs working on it before the crack of dawn. The *Times* and the *Register* and all the morning news shows jumped on it, of course, but this was the first time we got a few of them quoting *us*. I don’t know exactly where Trey lives, but I’m guessing he was in the middle of it.”

Regina shook her head in disbelief. “I’m surprised I hadn’t already heard about this ...”

Jason held back a *No shit* remark.

“... but I imagine you’re grateful that your website earned professional respect over it.”

He shrugged. “One of those ‘silver lining’ things. But I wouldn’t have wished it on anyone.”

“Of course.” She shuddered again, but this time it was a little more theatrical. “May we please change the subject?”

“Sure.”

“I’m sort of new to journalism,” she began, “but what about you? Have you been doing this long? Have you always wanted to be a reporter?”

He smirked. “No, not at all. When I was younger, I wanted to be a wildlife photographer.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yeah. Big time. Not long after my family moved to California, I saw a red-tailed hawk in our backyard — they’re pretty common around here, but I didn’t know that, then. Seeing that gorgeous bird swooping out of the sky with an effortless grace left my young mind spellbound. When it snagged its prey in its talons, I was transfixed, unable to take my eyes off it. I guess a lot of little kids might’ve been freaked by the sight of a mouse dying like that, but for me, it was ...” A look of wonder lit his eyes. “... it was like a switch had been thrown inside my head, something waking up for the first time. I mean, I’d seen plenty of dogs and cats and stuff before, of course, but the beautiful grace of that wild, free red-tailed hawk ... all of a sudden, I couldn’t get enough of wildlife — not just birds, *all* of ‘em. I saw all animals differently from that day forward. I begged my parents to take me hiking in the Santa Ana Mountain Range, and when I saw my first mountain lion, it was *magical*.”

When Jason realized that he had gotten a little carried away, he blushed. But thankfully, Regina did not seem bored or put off by his unexpected gushing; instead, she appeared genuinely charmed by his effusion.

“After that,” he continued with a shrug and a grin, “I was hooked. I read books, watched documentaries, and eventually joined a local wildlife photography club for kids. I wanted everyone to see wildlife like I did, from a family of deer wandering through the forest to a bald eagle soaring above. I felt like I was a part of something greater, a

small piece of this intricate puzzle of nature, and I wanted to capture that splendor with my camera and share it with the whole world. I used to daydream about shooting pics for, you know, *National Geographic*.” His grin grew more whimsical. “I imagined getting my own coffee table books, featuring all my pics of wildlife — or maybe, at least, a series of calendars ...”

But he held up his hands in defeat, then dropped them onto his lap.

“When reality finally set in, I had to accept that the paying jobs were too few and far between. I no longer lived with my parents, and I needed to make rent, you know?”

She nodded in sympathy. But between how she was dressed, how she carried herself, and that remark about traveling “a lot, mainly in Europe,” he wondered if she had any idea what he was talking about.

“Anyway,” he continued, “setting aside wildlife photography, I’ve also always been fascinated by bizarre, unexplained phenomena — like Arach-mageddon. I had my own blog, which was really just a hobby for me, and I wrote a few entries that somehow caught Trey’s attention. He reached out, asked if I’d be interested in joining the Watchdogs, which was a pretty new group at the time. The website wasn’t getting much traffic yet, but Trey still made it worth my while. You know, we’ve never even met in person — almost none of us have, really — but after my first few articles, Trey upped my base pay, threw me a couple of bonuses, and here I am now. Waiting at the airport for an unknown anthropologist. And chatting with you.” He smiled.

Regina made a show of checking the seats on either side of him and the surrounding floor. “No camera tonight?” she asked with a playful smile.

He chuckled. “No, for something like this, my phone’s good enough. I’m not expecting any wild animals to make a cameo.”

She smiled. “True.”

“What about you? Have you always—?” But he was cut off when his phone *pinged!* an incoming text from Trey. “Excuse me, please, that’ll be my boss.”

She nodded her understanding. “Of course.”

The new text read: PLANE LANDING SOONER THAN LAST EXPECTED. BUT KEEP YOUR EYES & EARS OPEN. OTHER SIGNS THAT SOMETHING UNUSUAL IS GOING ON WITH THE AIRCRAFT.

*“Something unusual”*? Jason thought.

He started to type out a reply, asking for more details, when he noticed several airport officials, two of them from Security, hustling toward the runways. Their expressions were neutral, but their body language denoted concern.

Jason supposed that if he were in a movie or TV show, or even if he were a traditional reporter, he would attempt to sneak away from Regina to search for a possible “scoop” ahead of her. But his easy-going personality, not to mention his hormones, decided otherwise.

Leaning forward, he lowered his voice a bit to say, “Looks like something’s up with Hellqvist’s plane. Wanna go check it out?”

She looked as though she wanted to ask followup questions, but instead smiled and said, “That’s an interesting proposal. I accept.”

They stood together, and he was reminded just how damn tall she was. Then she slipped her free hand under his arm, linking them.

Looking down to meet his eyes, she prompted, “Shall we?”

Once upon a time, it would have been no big deal for them to step outside and onto the airport’s apron to await an incoming plane. That was before 9/11 and the TSA, but with an airport this small, Jason had a few options. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he gripped his rudimentary PRESS pass, but as he saw more of the airport staff getting distracted by whatever was going on, he wondered if he might not need it.

Of course, it was difficult not to draw attention with someone like Regina on his arm — given their height difference in her favor, they were kind of the opposite of “inconspicuous” — but he wasn’t going to ditch her now.

Then the PA system kicked in. The low rumble of conversations and clattering luggage faded to a hushed murmur as the words echoed throughout the airport. *“Ladies and gentleman, may we have your attention, please ...”*

This had an almost comical effect on the people milling around, as everyone shifted into a kind of slow-motion as they paid attention to the announcement without actually halting their activities.

The PA continued, *“We must ask everyone in the terminal to please relocate to the parking garage ...”*

This time the scattered crowd reacted with less curiosity and more

belligerence. Lamentations of “But it’s raining outside!” and “I’ve already been waiting here for—!” and “I paid good money for—!” rose all around them, drowning out the details that followed through the PA and kicking all employees into crisis mode. Whatever might be going on with Hellqvist’s plane, from a Public Relations standpoint, the airport staff were in for a big headache.

Most of the people were, more or less, shuffling toward the exit and the parking garage, but a fair number of determined individuals marched the opposite direction toward the security gates. Jason heard raised voices, angry and demanding to know what was going on, when would their flights depart, when would their loved ones’ planes arrive, and the word “lawsuit” got thrown around a few times.

Jason whispered to Regina, “Follow my lead.”

Swinging around to the outer edge of the security gates, Jason watched for the most harried TSA agent, and he found her, hair already slipping free from her tight bun and veins popping in her forehead. Her eyes darted around for backup, but that wasn’t coming anytime soon, as all agents were inundated with pissed-off members of the public.

“I paid for this flight months ago!” an angular, frumpy man was shouting in a reedy voice, right into the poor TSA agent’s face.

“I understand that, sir,” the TSA agent returned, struggling to maintain her composure; to her credit, her voice held firm even as her eyes darted toward her fellow agents.

“No, I don’t think you do!” bellowed Mister Frumpy. “I came out here in this shitty weather, and I do *not* expect to—!”

Regina in tow, Jason moved forward so that he was alongside Mister Frumpy. “Sir, you need to back the fuck up, *now*.”

Frumpy regarded the brown man suddenly standing next to him in something close to shock. “Wh-what? *What*?! Just who the—?!?”

“This young woman,” Jason overrode him, nodding toward the TSA agent (who was anything but “young”), “is just doing *her job*. And if you don’t take a step back *right now*, I’ll see to it that you’re not only arrested, but that you’ll be able to read an exposé about yourself in the morning edition.”

Frumpy blinked at that several times, his slack cheeks quivering in equal parts rage and confusion as he attempted to process this turn of events. But he did take a step back.

Jason turned to the TSA agent. "Anderson cleared me," he told her as he whipped out his PRESS pass and flashed it, a little too quickly for her to get a good look at it.

The woman, while wearing an appreciative smile, looked almost as confused as Frumpy. "I'm sorry, who cleared you?"

"Sanderson," Jason blurted, giving Frumpy a dirty look. "He cleared me through, but I couldn't just walk by and let this asshole abuse you like that."

The TSA agent's smile, while still thankful, wavered as she shook her head in bafflement. "I ... *who*?"

"Alderson cleared me, damn it," he slurred, behaving as though he, too, were starting to get frustrated with her. "He cleared me. Us. He cleared us through."

The TSA agent looked up at Regina, taking her in for the first time and gawking at her height.

Regina smiled at her. "He's telling the truth. I heard it for myself." Releasing Jason's arm, she produced her own, more impressive PRESS pass and waved it around, not only to the agent, but also to Frumpy just as he was taking a breath to start blustering again.

The agent shook her head. "I'll need to, um ... just let me ..."

Jason huffed in forced patience. "Listen ..." He read her name badge. "... 'Glenda,' I promise I'll put in a good word for you. But I gotta get through here before Sanders hands me my ass. And if certain *assholes* don't behave themselves," he directed this last bit back at Frumpy, "you just let me know, and we'll give this idiot a public thrashing like he's never seen."

Frumpy had finally had enough. His reddened face twisting up like he was sucking on a lemon, he unleashed an exasperated sigh, spun on his heel, and stomped away. But when another upset guest took his place, Glenda was ready to throw in the towel, too.

"Okay, go, go," she waved Jason and Regina through. "Just tell, um ..."

"Anderson."

"... right, tell him I was helpful, okay?"

"I promise," Jason assured her as he and Regina moved past her and away from the milling crowd.

"Well done," Regina praised as they left security behind.

Jason smiled. "Thanks. I hate doing that to people like her, but I love doing it to dickheads like him." He realized that the PA system was still going, but couldn't make out if it was sharing anything new. "We'll only be able to get away with that once or twice, though. We need to get outside onto the apron and find out what's going on." He clipped the PRESS pass to his jacket; Regina did the same. "I hope you meant it when you said you find the cold 'invigorating.'"

"Oh, I do."

Her expression was inscrutable, but he didn't have time to analyze it. In his peripheral vision, he spotted someone approaching them from the left.

"Sir?" a male voice said; Jason made a point of not turning to get a better look. "Ma'am? Sir?"

Jason shifted his jacket around toward the speaker, tapping his PRESS pass with his fingertip. "We got cleared by Sanderson," he stated with confidence as he led Regina straight for the apron's sliding doors.

"Sir!" the voice demanded.

Regina, too, angled her own pass around as Jason had. "Anderson cleared us, damn it! Now back off unless you want your name on record!"

The doors opened, Jason and Regina hurried out into the rain and chilly night air, and whoever had been calling after them did not follow.

"Nice," Jason grinned at her.

She returned his smile. "Thanks, I got it from the best. Any more professional tips for me?"

He laughed. "Watch and learn!"

But the question taunted him: What the hell comes next? The rain had escalated to more than just a drizzle (he wished he had thought to bring his umbrella), the night was colder, and while this airport was small, it still had three different runways, their lights a glowing haze in the dreary night. If a real story were brewing here, he needed to know which way to go.

Pulling out his phone, he texted Trey: ?4U, KNOW WHICH RUNWAY HELLQVIST WILL BE USING?

"Texting your boss? Trey?" Regina asked.

“Yeah. He used to be the slowest typist in the world, but thank God, he’s gotten a lot better over the past few months. I’m hoping he can point us in the right direction, and quickly.”

Regina nodded, easing her hands into her jacket pockets as a wistful smile graced her lips. “I wish my editor offered that kind of hands-on support.”

“Trey’s pretty great, most of the time. Every once in a while he disappears for a stretch, but the rest of us can’t really ...”

Jason’s voice trailed off as he saw that a text from Trey was incoming.

ON IT. HANG ON.

He hung on, gritting his teeth as he tried not to shiver from the cold — especially since, true to her word, the frigid air did not seem to bother Regina.

Then, *ping!* GOT IT. HELLQVIST’S PLANE SET TO LAND ON THEIR LONGEST RUNWAY. DYK WHAT’S GOING ON?

NOT YET. WILL UPDATE. THX

Grateful that he had been to this airport before, he gestured and led Regina forward. “This way.”

Outside the terminal, Jason would never have known that any sort of emergency was underway; for the most part, aside from the rain, everything seemed like business as usual. Two baggage handlers looked their way, one of whom ogled Regina for a crude stretch of time, but they were never approached — their PRESS passes may or may not have had anything to do with it.

Jason’s phone *pinged!*, from Trey: FYI, SHOULD LAND ANY MOMENT.

Jason replied, THX

Sure enough, as they slogged toward the near end of the runway, they could hear the incoming plane and make out its navigation lights through the rain. No baggage handlers here; instead, several emergency vehicles were lined up with engines running — though the accompanying staff looked more focused than worried. One of them, a woman with short hair, glanced over at Jason, then up at Regina, then down to each of their PRESS passes before dismissing them altogether.

“Now,” Jason whispered as they came to a halt, “we watch and listen, for anything out of the ordinary.”

“Anything ‘weird’?”

Jason smiled. “That’s our mission statement.”

When the plane itself appeared through the precipitation shortly thereafter, Jason was a little surprised — it was bigger than he had expected; since it was a chartered flight, he had pictured a private jet, but this was more like a cargo plane. He wondered which was more expensive to charter, and just how much money Doctor Hellqvist’s family had at their disposal.

The next thing he noticed was that the plane was coming in a little faster than seemed prudent to him. But what did he know?

The plane descended and touched down in one harsh plunge, then braked hard. Whoever was flying sure wasn’t putting a lot of consideration into their passengers’ comfort — or, if they were actually hauling cargo, the contents on their manifest. That landing was so rough, Jason would not have been shocked if sparks had showered the runway.

The emergency vehicles surged forward to meet the aircraft as it skidded to a stop, and airport security and local police units joined them; fortunately, the latter group did not take notice of Jason and Regina’s uninvited presence.

“Here we go,” Jason said, and each of them took out their phones.

“Bet you wish you’d brought your camera tonight after all,” she commented.

He acknowledged her words with a distracted, “Mm-hm,” but his attention was locked onto Hellqvist’s plane.

But after an initial burst of action, the event’s momentum ground to a snail’s pace. The emergency vehicles, lights flashing, reached the aircraft and bustled about its engines ... and then all of them appeared to stand down from Red Alert, their urgency replaced by evident confusion and uncertainty; a series of radio and phone calls followed, though Jason and Regina were too far away to hear anything specific. Several attempts were made to communicate with the pilot via exaggerated hand signals, but based on their behavior, they received no responses. A stair vehicle joined the scene, and attempts were made to open the aircraft’s side door, to no avail. The collective activity drifted toward the back of the plane, where the larger cargo door was located.

“Let’s see if we can get any closer,” Jason suggested. “Just be

slow and casual.”

Regina slipped her arm around his again, and they inched their way forward.

As with the side entry, the cargo door put up a stubborn fight against their efforts, but this time the emergency crew did not give up. Tools were applied to the inside of an access panel, accompanied by a liberal amount of cursing.

*Fuck*, Jason grouched to himself. *How much longer do we stand around out here, watching them try to open the goddamn thing?* He was losing his battle against shivering as the rainfall grew heavier, and with their linked arms, Regina couldn’t help but notice. *If this is all nothing more than a complicated maintenance issue, we could’ve just waited back at the damn terminal. Well, okay, sure, the PA asked everyone to relocate to the garage, but since we used our passes to bluff our way out here, maybe we could’ve—*

A deep grinding noise distracted him from his woes; looked like they were finally getting the cargo door open. Once the passengers disembarked, Jason and Regina could identify Doctor Hellqvist, get her somewhere dry and warm, and at last get down to actually—

One of the emergency staff hollered, “*Shit!*”

That was their only warning.

A dark form exploded from the belly of the plane, bursting out with ferocious speed that caught everyone off guard; some kind of animal, but enormous, and moving fast for something its size, *too* fast in Jason’s experience. It barreled through the emergency crew, knocking three of them from their feet, and took off down the runway. Between its shocking speed and the rain, Jason couldn’t identify it — a massive dog, maybe? Like a Newfoundland, or a rare Saint Bernard with black fur? Or a large wolf? Except, how in the world would a *wolf* end up on the plane—?

But he had no opportunity to ponder further. The animal, whatever the hell it was, disappeared into the night. It was just ... gone.

All of that happened in a flash, and the beast never made a sound.

For several long seconds, every soul on the tarmac of the runway stood in motionless silence; even the people knocked to the ground remained where they sat.

Then someone declared in a raised voice, “Well, boys and girls,

*that'll wake you up in the morning."*

Only one person laughed at the joke, but everyone got moving again. The three were helped up, their coworkers making sure they were uninjured, which they were for the most part. One of them rubbed his ass, forcing a chuckle and asking no one in particular, "Was that a fucking *bear*?"

Jason snorted at that. The animal had been damned big, no question, but no bear could run that fast. *No* animal that large should have been able to, to his knowledge. That thing had been, like, cheetah-fast, but cheetahs were lanky and this thing had some serious bulk.

Jason realized that he had not taken stock of Regina's reaction to all this. Looking up, he found her staring with somewhat widened eyes at all the commotion, but otherwise, her expression was neutral.

When she realized he was looking at her, she asked, "What do you think that was?"

He shrugged, his mind still processing what they had seen. "Honestly, I have no idea. I wish we'd gotten a better—"

But his thoughts were again interrupted. Not by a curse this time, but by a scream.

At some point, two members of the emergency crew had gotten around to actually entering the aircraft; now both of them fled down the ramp, shouting incoherent blather and pointing back inside. Then one of them bent at the waist and vomited.

More crew entered, only to retreat as well. They were all babbling, their voices intermingling in an unintelligible mess; Jason wished he could make out what they were saying, but as the situation evolved into something ever more complicated, getting any closer seemed unwise — at the very least, they might finally get noticed for real and escorted away.

Security took their turn entering the cargo plane, and while they lingered inside longer and exited in a less panicked state, they were all on their radios and, when one of them barked orders into hers, Jason caught the phrase: "Get the Feds out here!"

Regina leaned over to comment, "Our little 'interview' has developed into something a lot more interesting."

Jason nodded. Cold and rain be damned, he wasn't budging.

\* \* \*

He was soaked to the bone, but Jason's determination held true. He could be stubborn that way.

A myriad of authorities had swarmed the aircraft. Local police and county sheriffs milled about, and even a few FBI agents showed up. Jason had expected the FAA and/or the National Transportation Safety Board to put in appearances, but then, the plane had not actually crashed.

Another conspicuous element: Not only did Doctor Hellqvist never appear, *no one* emerged from the plane — no passengers, no flight crew; every person who exited, Jason had seen enter from this end of things.

Also, some coroner vans materialized, but no ambulances. This, too, spoke volumes. But there were no body bags. Not yet.

Jason attempted using his credentials to get closer, to get a quote, to get information, to get a photo, *something*. It was maddening. But they all shut him down, hard and repeatedly; in fact, he would have already been removed from the scene if he hadn't done a little voice-raising of his own ("Are you blocking out *the press*?!" and so on). In that regard, Regina was a blessing — if they looked like they were going to start manhandling him, she aimed her phone at them and offered a polite warning of, "Uh-uh-uh, boys!" and would wave her own PRESS pass in their faces.

No one attempted manhandling Regina. In fact, one of the city cops tried hitting on her. But, to Jason's amusement, she just stared at him with a flat, somewhat disgusted look in her eyes that was colder than the rain. Jason stifled a chuckle when the jackass slunk away, his tail between his legs.

Jason had texted Trey a few times, updating him on the lack of progress. Trey was stoked that he was one of only two journalists on the scene and wanted him to find out everything he could about the plane and the fate of Hellqvist, but he had been especially, almost specifically, curious about the large animal. Sure, Jason wanted to know about that, too, but Trey was asking about its size, its speed, its strength, what noises had it made, which direction had it gone ... it almost made Jason long for the days when Trey was a slow typist.

Finally, just when Jason's perseverance was faltering, he spotted the proverbial ray of light. "Thank God," he mumbled.

Regina perked up. "What? What is it?"

Jason nodded toward a specific police officer, a county sheriff's deputy who had stepped away from the thick of things to take a phone call. "The Black deputy over by himself — name's Derek. He's a friend and one of my sources, sometimes. Cross your fingers and toes."

The deputy ended his call as Jason and Regina approached him. His eyes widened in mild surprise, and Jason's wasn't sure if it was in a good or bad way.

"Deputy," Jason greeted with a deferential nod.

Derek shook his head. "Jesus, Jason ..." He glanced at Regina, and even though he stood roughly eye-to-eye with Jason, he seemed less impressed with her height and more interested in her PRESS pass. "Together, huh?"

"Yeah," Jason smiled, "we've kinda 'joined forces' for the evening."

"Delightful. You know there's nothin' I can tell you, right? You gotta wait for the official statement like everyone else."

Jason looked around. "Come on, man, it's not like you're swamped with the paparazzi."

"Not yet," Derek grumbled.

"Deeereeeek ..."

Derek scratched the back of his neck under his uniform hat as he considered. He then made a big show of shaking his head. "Okay, so far as anyone's concerned, I'm just givin' you a bunch of 'No comments,' okay?"

Jason offered a few desperate gestures of his own. "Understood. No direct quotes."

Derek looked to Regina, who nodded her agreement. "No direct quotes."

Peering back at Jason, Derek added, sotto voce, "You gonna make it worth my while later?"

"Of course."

Derek snorted at that. "Don't give me 'of course.' You already owe me a couple, remember?"

"I know, but I promise: Top-shelf all the way, on me."

“Don’t promise anything too quickly, man. It’s not much to go on so far. And you probably won’t believe this weird shit, anyway.”

“Dude, everything I cover is ‘weird,’ remember?”

Derek’s eyes flicked over to Regina again.

She smiled. “I’ll keep an open mind.”

Derek held back one more second. Then, shaking his head more and pointing back at the terminal as though he were telling them they should clear the area, he informed them, “Looks like everyone on board, every single person — the entire flight crew and a small number of passengers — were all slaughtered by some kind of animal. They’re all dead. All of ‘em.”

Jason whispered, “God.”

Regina did not quite gasp, but her intake of breath was still audible over the rain.

Derek nodded. “Yeah. I’m glad I didn’t get too good a look. Don’t need that shit in my head.”

“But ... how the hell did the plane *land*, then? Was the flight crew—?”

“Auto-pilot did an emergency landing, apparently. I didn’t know they could do that on their own. Guess they can.”

“Yeah, but it was a rough landing,” Jason told him. “And we saw the animal, when they first got the back of the plane open.”

“Really?” Derek asked, his own curiosity slipping through. “Was it as big as they say?”

“Damn big. And fast. If it killed everyone on the plane, we’re all lucky it didn’t bother to kill anyone else on the ground, too.”

“Fuck,” Derek muttered. “And then it just took off? Just like that?”

“Yeah.”

Derek shook his head. “Wild animal like that, fuckin’ loose around here? Jesus.”

Jason had so many questions, he didn’t know where to start. “What was an animal doing loose on the plane in the first place?”

“We have no idea.”

“What about where this plane might’ve had any stopovers? I’m guessing a plane that size didn’t fly all the way here from Europe, right?”

“Can’t help you there, either.”

Jason glanced at Regina to see if she might have any speculation; she shook her head. He’d have to ask Trey about it later.

Then Derek muttered, “Shit. Gotta go. Now.” He gave one final, forceful point away from the plane. “Talk later.” He turned his back to them and strode away. Jason held his hands up in mock frustration before turning back to Regina.

She offered him an uncertain smile. “When I commented that our interview had gotten more interesting, I had no idea.”

“Yeah. This has turned into one fu— one messed up night.”

Regina laughed, though it sounded forced. “It’s all right, Jason. You don’t have to keep editing yourself. You can swear in front of me. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m a big girl.”

He smiled at that, but it felt no more natural than her laugh; the information from Derek weighed on them both. In retrospect, having seen the huge animal with their own eyes, they shouldn’t have been so surprised. But for Jason, he had pictured the flight crew, at least, having barricaded themselves inside the cockpit, away from the beast. Or maybe the plane had been partitioned in some way, separating passengers from cargo bay? But to hear that *everyone* on board was dead — *slaughtered* — including Hellqvist...

They stood in silence for several long minutes, facing toward one another, but each pair of eyes gazing at the plane. Gurneys were eventually wheeled out of it, each with its own sealed body bag, one of which had lumps that did not appear to form an actual, complete human body.

“All right, that’s enough, I don’t need to see any more,” Regina announced. “I have enough to start a story, even if it’s not the story we expected. I can write about the deceased passengers and crew and the ‘alleged’ animal attack for now. If my editor wants a followup, that’s on her.”

Jason said, “Oh.” He could understand wanting to turn away from this ghastly scene, but he couldn’t help feeling disappointed that she was leaving.

“Don’t worry,” she added, perhaps misinterpreting his expression, “I promise not to quote your deputy friend.”

“Oh, sure, yeah, no, no worries, I trust you, otherwise ... um,

yeah.” He was rambling, so he closed his mouth.

She offered him her hand. “It was very nice meeting you, Jason. Even if the ending is darker than hoped, I enjoyed our time together.”

Jason shook her hand and, before he could lose his nerve, asked, “Would it be all right if I call you sometime?”

She replied with a question of her own. “To compare notes?” Jason noted the twinkle in her eyes.

“That, too, sure, but I was hoping for a little ... more.”

Her eyebrows shot up, and he half-expected her to retort with something to make him squirm in embarrassment. Instead, she let him off the hook and pulled out her phone. “What’s your number?”

He told her, her thumbs flew over her screen, and his phone gave another *ping*!

“And now you have mine,” she told him. “I look forward to hearing from you.”

With that, she turned and followed the runway back toward the airport terminal. Even though she was every bit as drenched as he was, she still managed to look as though she were walking the red carpet at some movie premiere. He hoped he would get a chance to see that walk a lot more.

*Don’t get ahead of yourself, man.*

Jason wasn’t sure how much longer he wanted to stick around, either. Between the sickening sight of the bodies – covered or not — being unloaded from the plane, the miserable weather, and Regina’s departure, he had also taken in about as much misery as he could stomach.

Then he saw one last thing that made him stick around a few more minutes.

On the heels of the final gurney, a large crate was taken from the plane. No, not a crate, more like a big metal box, maybe a steamer trunk — and heavy, by the looks of it. Then the authorities stood around it and got into some sort of debate.

Jason crept forward, keeping his advance slow and discrete. The rainfall had finally eased back to a drizzle, but he still could not hear anything the group was saying. Were they discussing jurisdiction? Why was this item of specific interest? In fact, why bother with this big trunk at all at a time like this? Surely the victims were a much higher priority

— not to mention chasing down the animal that caused all of this.

Then one of the figures, another one of the sheriff deputies, saw him and scowled. He pointed a finger at Jason and raised his voice. “Hey! Get your ass back—!”

“Don’t worry, sir,” assured a familiar voice. “I got him.” Derek advanced upon him. “You,” he ordered, “come with me, right now.”

Jason raised his hands in surrender and allowed Derek to escort him back toward the terminal.

Once they were a safe distance away, Jason asked in a low voice, “Dude, what’s with the metal box?”

Derek scoffed. “Jesus, Jason ...”

“Dude, come on.”

Derek shook his head, and used the motion to glance back over his shoulder. Jason looked as well, seeing that the group surrounding the trunk were no longer watching his escorted departure.

“Christ,” Derek muttered, “I can’t imagine what you’d be like if you worked for a real news site.”

“Ouch.”

“Whatever.” But he sighed and continued, “I’ll make this quick. But don’t forget that you *already* owe me.”

“I know, I know.”

“And if you fuckin’ quote me—”

“No quotes. Now give.”

“All I can tell you is, except for the victims, there’s no real sign of the animal having been on board. No piss on the walls, no shit on the floor, nothing ... except for that steamer trunk. God only knows why, but it looks like the damned thing tried to claw it open. Tried, but failed.”

“Why the hell would it do that?”

“Can’t help you there.”

“Well, what the hell’s *in* the trunk? Raw sides of beef?”

“Don’t know. The animal didn’t get into it, but now the lock is so mangled, we’ll have to break into it ourselves just to find out if there’s anything significant inside.”

They were close enough to the terminal that Derek halted but pointed for Jason to keep going.

“That’s all I got for now. We’re not sure which organization is taking the trunk, and half of ‘em think we shouldn’t bother with it until

we hunt down the thing that caused all this mess.”

“Can’t disagree there. I had the same thought myself.”

“Yeah, me, too. Now do us both a favor, please, and keep back. Better yet, go home. I’ll make sure you Watchdogs know about any official statements, but don’t hold your breath waiting. This whole thing is FUBAR.”

“Thanks, man.”

Derek grunted and hurried off to rejoin the circle, leaving Jason to ponder alone.

*This is gonna be a hell of a write-up: Anthropologist with “big news” chooses wrong plane. Big animal sneaks aboard, kills everyone, tries to open a steamer trunk, then runs off into the cold, rainy night.*

*What the hell is this all about?*

# PULSE OF THE EARTH

A TALE FROM THE TRIUMVIRATE UNIVERSE

Available Now!

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

CHRISTOPHER ANDREWS lives in California with his wife, Yvonne Isaak-Andrews, and their wonderful daughter, Arianna. In addition to his duties as stay-at-home Dad, he is always working on his next novels, and continues to work as an actor and screenwriter.

Excerpts from all of Christopher's novels can be found at [www.ChristopherAndrews.com](http://www.ChristopherAndrews.com).