

Detective In Time

By Uncle Jasper

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A letter from Dr. Thomas Bowdler MD.

To Uncle Jasper

Honoured Sir, this letter is written in a spirit of friendship to point out that there are some unseemly passages in your otherwise excellent book "The World Beyond." You depict young people in physical congress and cohabiting when not joined in matrimony. I offer to edit out these offending scenes from your book so no innocent maiden would be shocked to read it and discover that such behaviour is possible.

Sincerely Dr Thomas Bowdler MD

Uncle Jasper's reply.

Dear Doctor Bowdler, Back off. 'The World Beyond' is my book and you're not going to bowdlerise it. I thought you were dead years ago, it seems I was wrong. You were famous for going through Shakespeare's plays, taking out all the naughty bits, and publishing your own version of his works. That was so an innocent maiden could read all his plays without a blush. Is it the same maiden you're protecting now? I hope she reads my book as it is and learns what happens when young people meet..

By the way, all the naughty bits you edited out of Shakespeare have been put back in. Your labour was in vain. Don't tell your resident virgin, she might say, 'Love's Labour's Lost'

Thankyou, but no thankyou

Uncle Jasper

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Chapter one

A house of ruin

I didn't know that a hole had been punched in the fabric of space and time, at least not until I met Uncle Seth.

That was the day two heavy looking characters walked into the office and asked if I was the proprietor. I said no, I was his son and looking after the business while he was away.

They said they had a job for me and could I come and talk to their boss about it. I didn't like the look of either of them, but business is business, so I said, 'yes, certainly. I can spend an hour with your boss, but no more, I have other appointments.' They drove me to the classiest and most expensive suburb in town.

I was shocked when we stopped outside one of the mansions which lined the street, it looked as if it was in recovery mode after an earthquake. But there had been no stories on TV about an earthquake in our city, and the grand, expensive houses on either side and over the road seemed untouched.

The house we had come to was surrounded by scaffolding. Teams of workers were repairing cracks in walls, restoring fallen chimneys, replacing glass in broken windows, fitting new roof tiles.

The men with me ignored my questions except to say that the boss would explain everything, and we entered.

The interior of the house, like the outside, was a mess. A marble staircase leading to the next floor was cracked and propped up by heavy timber poles. We went up. It was safe enough, but you had to watch where you stepped.

We walked along a passage. Huge cracks ran across the walls in jagged patterns. Plaster had fallen off in chunks and the ceilings were starting to sag. I noticed frames holding broken pieces of mirror which had not yet fallen out. Pictures hanging on the wall had lost glass the same way. Planks had been laid where the floor was in a dangerous state.

There were more workers inside. Painters, plasterers, electricians, and carpenters all busy cleaning up and repairing. Their work-lights and tools were drawing power from cables that

snaked through the broken windows down to an electrical generator in the garden. It was a big one. Even through noise they were making inside the house I could hear the engine running. We walked the plank over holes in the floor and went further into the house, then into a room which had seen better times. It too was decorated with, a spider web of cracks and some holes where lumps of plaster had fallen out.

I met the boss in that room. He was a big man in a wheel-chair, seated at a desk that seemed to have suffered disasters along with the rest of the house. He was black bearded, but bald on top. It looked as though hair fallen from his head had got stuck on the way down and joined his eyebrows and beard. The beard was so thick and his face so covered by hair that he seemed to be glaring at me through heavy shrubbery. Neither of us was impressed with what we saw. 'They're getting younger,' he said.

“Yair, we're running out of the older blokes.”

At that moment it became clear. This was the man responsible for all the disappearances. I turned to run, but too late. His goons caught me by both arms and held on. I wasn't running anywhere.

'It's alright, lad,' said the bearded one. 'I'm just offering you a job. It's worth two hundred and fifty a day, plus expenses.'

At least a dozen enquiry agents had disappeared in the past few months along with my Dad. 'What have you done with my father?'

Your father? What's his name?'

William Mason -- Bill.Mason'

He looked at me and muttered. 'Mason? Mason?' Enlightenment came. 'Oh yeah, I remember, quiet sort of guy. I employed him too. He's out there somewhere trying to find my niece and her daughter.'

My Dad, off somewhere looking for missing people?? That wasn't his style. He preferred to be known as an 'Enquiry Agent' rather than detective, and specialized in finding people who had run away, been kidnapped, or were lost. But the man's story was the most unlikely I had heard for a while. To find anyone who disappeared Dad would have demanded their computer, their files, memory sticks and the like. That was where he always started, and he wouldn't have gone off without telling us.

'Are you running the business for him?'

'Yes, it's the Uni, vacation. I'm keeping the agency open so he'll still have a business to come home to. Anyway, what have you done with him, and all those other private detectives that disappeared? I don't want your job, just bring them all back, specially my dad.'

'They're busy, and they'll be paid their money when they get back with Cheryl and Anthea.

Get back from where?'

'Wherever it happens to be! If I knew where they were I'd have them back by now. Enough with the questions! Let's get down to business.' He didn't listen any more.

A large padded envelope lay in front of him. He tipped its contents out on to the desk. Australian, American, European and even Chinese money slid out, all wrapped in fat plastic bundles, straight from the mint. He pushed the bundles to one side with the back of his hand.

'Look at these.' Some enlarged photos had fallen from the envelope and he spread them on the desk. I couldn't touch them, I was still held fast by the men on either side.

This one,' he said, pointing, 'Is my niece, Cheryl.'

Cheryl was a woman in her forties, wearing a white lab coat and standing in front of a control panel. The panel was big and loaded with gauges and controls. I guessed it was much bigger than what I could see of it in the photograph.

'She's got bagsful of degrees. Nuclear Science, Engineering, Biology, Languages, Medicine, and God knows what else, but she's an idiot.'

'The other one I want found is her daughter, Anthea. She's a featherhead.' He put out three more photos for my inspection.

'Now, Anthea was worth studying in all three of the photos. She was about, twenty, I thought. No lab coat, but a bikini, a tennis outfit, complete with racquet, a long sleek dress, for a formal, I suppose. Wow! what a looker. She was one girl I would love to find.

He slid everything back into the envelope. 'There are more photos in there and papers giving full details about them. The money might be handy, when you get to where you're going.'

'Where am I going?'

'I tell you I don't know, but you'll be there soon. We're giving you a back pack too. It's full of food, blankets, and stuff like that. You might need it. Take him to the lab!'

The two gorillas hauled me out of the room and along the passage. A siren was wailing somewhere overhead and I could hear the thunder of feet. I guessed it was the workers leaving the house in a hurry. Wherever I was being taken I didn't want to go there.

They dragged me into the room they called the lab and there was the very same control panel I had seen in Cheryl's photograph. It took up the end of the room and would not have looked out of place in a nuclear power station, or controlling the electric grid for an entire country.

I was dumped into an office chair with arms. One of the guys held me down while the other strapped me into position. The siren was still wailing and I was sitting, fastened to the chair the focus of three machines spaced equally round in a circle. Somehow they reminded me of an old fashioned cinema projector I had seen once in a science museum.

My patron appeared in his wheelchair, pushed by a third man. 'What the hell are you doing?' I screamed. 'Let me go!'

'You're off on a journey,' he said. 'And I've come to wish you bon-voyage. Hang on to the envelope. You'll need it. Oh, by the way they've got some papers of mine they shouldn't have. They have to come back too. Make sure of it! You'll find the details about them in the envelope.'

He was holding a wand which he pointed at the control panel and clicked. The panel came to life. Lights flickered and settled. The needles in the gauges quivered to attention. Mathematical equations and graphs appeared on some screens, diagrams that came and went appeared on others.

'Cheryl built that,' he said. 'For a while I thought she'd inherited the family brains, and she was sending loads of stuff through, making it disappear into somewhere or other, testing the machine, I suppose, until I told her to stop. It was shaking the house down. Then, when I came back from overseas, she did something incredibly stupid.'

I didn't care about Cheryl, or her experiments. I just wanted to escape this collapsing mad-house. I struggled to break the straps holding me down.

'She took Anthea with her. They disappeared from that very spot where you're sitting now, and you're going after them. Bring them back lad, with my documents, all the others have failed. Do it and you're on to a really fat bonus.'

He spoke over his shoulder to his chair pusher. 'Call Lou and tell him to ramp the generator up to full power.'

The man took a phone out of his pocket and rang someone, and when the other party answered he said, 'Full power Lou, everything she's got.' He paused and listened. 'He doesn't care if it does burn out, he wants full revs and full power. If it's clapped out afterwards order another one'.

Lou must have obeyed his instructions. The screens and lights on the control panel brightened as more power poured in. A low humming noise, not noticeable before grew more intense. I began to feel it in my chest. Then the house started to shake.

Pain was building up inside me, a throbbing pain. The three projectors, or whatever they were showed signs of life. A green light on each turned to orange, then red. The machines were ready to be activated.

The air crackled with energy, and our faces screwed up in pain. I heard the boss shouting, 'Karl you've forgotten his back-pack. Take it to him.'

Karl, if that's who it was, staggered across the heaving floor and dropped a heavy pack on my lap, on top of the envelope. He muttered, 'Sorry, pal, I'm glad it's you and not me.'

He moved away, - quickly.

'Everyone out!' was the next order. 'Out! Out!' They left in a hurry. The door scraped on the floor as it shut behind them.

The next instant the projectors burst into life. Each directed a searing ray of red light on to my body through a mist of glowing red particles. I couldn't stand any more. It felt as though my heaving body would break the straps. It was too late. I toppled out of the chair and fell some distance landing with a crash on a hard, flat surface.

Chapter two

Commanding a Battalion

There was a fire close by. Smoke everywhere, dirty grey smoke, and every now and then a crashing noise which brought on more smoke. Something was wailing horribly.

I was lying on grass, dazed. Flat on my back with no plans but to lie there and wait for the madness to stop.

The shouting and crashing noise continued, wreathing smoke, grey and smelly, poured over and round me.

Some red-coated men ran by carrying guns. They stopped and looked at me. 'It's an officer,' said one. 'A bleedin' officer. Can't see no wounds, but we can't leave 'im 'ere. Charlie, pick 'im up!'

They hoisted me on to the shoulder of one of their number, he clutched me so I wouldn't fall and they ran on. My legs hung down one side and my head jolted on the other. The man carrying me had a rifle hung over his other shoulder on a strap.

I could see the boots I was wearing. They weren't mine. The heavy black trousers weren't mine either, and I was wearing a red coat I had never seen before. The men burst in among a crowd of women wearing tartan skirts and laid me down. One of them shoved a tall red cap on to my head. I didn't own a cap, of any kind and hadn't seen it before.

They left me and started reloading their guns. A huge bearded woman, also wearing a skirt, ran and picked me up. 'Are ye hurt, sir,' she bawled at me. 'Have ye taken a hit?' She patted my body looking for damage. 'Ah, you'll do fine sir there's nothing broke. Yer dancing days ain't over yet.' 'But ye'll have to take command, sir, seeing as you're an officer. The colonel and the officers are dead, killed by them flying bogles. Have you seen them yerself?'

I looked round. There were more of these women, more than I could count. All were dressed in red coats and tartan skirts. Some were pointing guns at a howling, approaching mass of warriors. A hoarse voice roared 'fire! There was an instant crash and smoke jetted from their guns adding to the fog of war. Memory clicked into place. I had landed in the

middle of a nineteenth century colonial battle and these were kilted Scottish soldiers fending off charging warriors.

The bearded woman who had picked me up was actually a man and had stripes sewn on the sleeves of his red coat. He was bawling at me. 'Orders, Sir, we need orders!' What are your orders?'

What?'

We need orders sir, otherwise we're done for.'

'Well, you give the orders.'

'I can't sir, I'm a non-commissioned officer, only a Sergeant. I can't take charge while there's a real officer present. That's you sir I know you're new to us, but you must take command. What are your orders, sir?'

I looked helplessly at the advancing warriors. Some had been shot and fallen but there were hundreds still running. They were strangely shaped and appeared to be about eight feet tall.

As they ran they screamed and clattered their spears against their shields, There were only minutes left and I had to give some sort of magic order that would get us out of this mess. I had a lucky idea and asked, 'What would the Colonel have done?'

'He would have ordered us to form a square, sir.'

'OK, form a square!'

Bawling at the men to get it all straight and well formed. The four sergeants ignored the enemy but the Sergeant was bellowing at his men. They seemed to understand what he was saying and formed lines while moving into position. In seconds the Sergeant, and I and a piper who had produced the wailing noise from his bagpipes, some horses and carts were inside a square of Scotties who all faced outwards, with double lines all round and guns at the ready. There was a sergeant outside the face of each square who stepped inside at the last moment.

The guns of the men who brought me in were being reloaded. The men were ramming powder and shot down the barrels of their weapons.

The terrible wailing noise broke out again, this time behind me. At this critical moment the bagpiper had decided to entertain us. Strangely no one complained. His job was to stir up our spirits during the battle. I found it depressing.

The Sergeant also stood behind me. Over the noise of the pipes I heard him say 'Sergeant Cox, front rank, fix bayonets. Second rank, level and fire.

I took the hint and cried, 'Sergeant Cox, front rank fix bayonets! Second rank, level and fire.'

Sergeant Cox repeated the order and the result was astonishing. Every gun in the second rank facing the enemy was raised and bellowed in another huge explosion. Dirty, stinking

grey smoke from the muskets cut down visibility even more. A dozen or more of the warriors were smashed backwards.

'Rear rank reload,' I cried, prompted yet again from behind.' Front rank, fire on command.

The same result, but something extraordinary was happening.

'They're little manikins sir,' roared the Sergeant.

It was true. Every time a warrior went down a figure the size of a small child riding on his shoulders would fall or scramble off and run away. the warriors they rode on were no taller than us.

Someone in the ranks had fired high and killed a manikin. It tumbled to the ground and the warrior who had been carrying it stopped and stared at us. He held shield and spear loosely, to take no further part in the battle.

The fight swirled round to the other three sides of the square and I was busy passing on the orders of the. Sergeant. 'Front ranks fix bayonets,' I ordered. 'Rear ranks, fire! Rear rank, reload' It was a desperate business fending off the spears and warriors directed by the manikins. They guided their mounts by pointing, or drumming on their chests with one heel or the other. They screamed orders at them too and each had a whip to urge his steed into action.

If a warrior was shot and fell his rider would take a nasty fall, but would get up, snarl at us and run away, being careful to avoid trampling feet. It was simple to knock them off their steeds, or shoot them, it also put the warriors out of action. Once a warrior lost his rider he would also lose direction. and stand around waiting for orders.

The men who had picked me up were equipped with muzzle loading rifles instead of muskets, and were much more accurate. They noticed the fall of the manikins too, and concentrated on shooting the creatures. This soon put a stop to the fighting. The riders were vicious but knew better than to stay and be targets. They turned away from our square and whipped their steeds into a sprint. The Scotties cheered them on as well as inviting them to come back and fight. The bagpiping died away though I had not noticed it for a while. We heard a horn blast from the trees and the remaining warriors trotted off towards the sound.

The soldiers stayed in their ranks, talking and laughing after the strain of battle. There was a long pause with no sign of the enemy returning I heard my mentor say, 'Stand down.'

'Stand down!' I roared. Everyone relaxed and groups of soldiers gathered round the fallen warriors and manikins to see what damage had been done. One of the manikins was brought for my inspection. It looked like a monkey. It was covered in grey, brownish hair, had pointed ears, brown eyes, no hair on the palms of its hands or the soles of its feet, and was about the size of a small child. Its face was almost human-like, except for the pointed teeth.

'You've done well, sir,' said the Sergeant. You must be lost the same as us. And it's hard taking over a strange battalion with no other officers in the middle of a battle. With luck we'll catch up with the army today.'

I couldn't understand why the man was so respectful. He was old enough to be my father, yet he was treating me as a superior being.

'You were the real commander,' I said. You gave the orders and I just passed them on.'

At that moment I remembered I was wearing a uniform I had never seen before, and a red coat with shiny brass buttons.

I was so taken aback that I put my hand to my forehead and discovered I was still wearing the tall red hat that had been shoved there. Not only had Cheryl's machine dropped me next to a battle it had, dressed me in an officer's uniform, which gave me the respect of the sergeant.

Cheryl's machine, with an amazing sense of humour, it had put me in the way of taking charge of an antique battalion. Those muzzle loading weapons should have been sent off to a museum centuries ago.

I snatched off the cap to examine it. It was tall and red with a black brim to shade the eyes. The letters, "thirty two" had been made in brass and attached to the front of my headgear.

'Aye Sir,' said the Colour Sergeant. 'Ye do well to be proud of the old 32nd. The enemy has never seen their backs yet. We Scots are proud to fight alongside you. And I see you have no side-arms. Sir, we can fix that.' He went to the cart and came back with two antique pistols. Though they may have been modern for the time we were in.

He handed them to me, and a leather bag with a strap. 'Belonged to the Colonel, sir. I'm sure he wouldn't mind. Both loaded and ready for action, you may need them anytime.'

'How do they work?'

'He seemed surprised that an officer should ask such a question, but answered, 'Pull the hammer back, sir, until it clicks, then it's ready to fire. There's a ramrod under the barrel, and the bag holds enough powder and ball for about sixty shots all told. They're yours now, sir, and may they serve you well.'

I thanked him for this unexpected gift, and was glad to have them, because of my present situation. There were deep pockets in my coat and the two pistols went in, snug on either side. Both hammers were down and harmless. The strap of the ammunition bag went over my shoulder and I half staggered. It was lot heavier than I thought it would be. I was armed and deadly, and hoping there would never be a use for these strange weapons

The Sergeant looked round, 'The lads are a bit uneasy, Sir. We're not sure where we are. This place doesn't look like Spain, not at all.'

I had to agree. It didn't look like Spain to me either, but then I had never been there. It seemed the battalion had stopped on the edge of a forest from which it had been attacked. A dirt road ran past, and beyond that, open grass-land. A nice place to have a picnic, but for all the bodies lying around.

Two of our boys had been killed and their grave was soon dug. The Sergeant handed me a book. 'Tis the Book of Common Prayer, Sir. I've marked the funeral service with a slip of paper, and it's got the names of those two poor lads on it, so you can mention them at the right time. If ye'll just read it to us as we lay them to rest it'll see them on their way.' As a reluctant commanding officer it was my duty to preside over the burial, and I did so as they were laid side by side in their grave.

'Caps off, lads,' ordered the Sergeant. I took mine off too.

"Man that is born of woman has but a short time to live, and is full of misery." That's what I read from the prayer book. It seemed a fair summing up of our situation at the time. "In the midst of life there is death." I read the funeral service through to the end, a sad experience for all of us. After that they shovelled dirt over the young bodies and left them.

Afterwards the Sergeant was in a thoughtful mood. 'Things haven't looked right since them flying bogles killed the Colonel and the Major', he said. 'And, there were manikins riding on the backs of the bogles ,just like they rode them warriors.'

I didn't know what a bogle was and could scarcely concentrate on anything because of the extraordinary events of the day. Somehow Cheryl's machine had made me, I think, a captain in the British Army, and I had taken part in my first battle and read my first funeral service. I kept feeling my uniform and wondering if it would disappear as quickly as it had arrived.

'Sir, the lads are getting a bit uneasy', said the Colour Sergeant. 'We don't know where we are and perhaps a few words from you, an explanation of what's happened, will set their minds at rest.'

I had to think about this. I didn't know where we were either, and if I told him how I got there he wouldn't believe me. I guessed that Cheryl's machine had tipped me out somewhere in the nineteenth century, and there seemed to be a war going on. Beyond that I wasn't too clear about anything. My envelope and back-pack had disappeared.

'Where did you last see the army?'

'Well, the colonel told me our orders were to report to General Hill's division. It was up ahead, so he said, and we was slogging through rain and mud when suddenly everything changed.'

'How do you mean, changed?'

'You must have seen it, Sir. The rain stopped. The clouds disappeared in a flash, the sun came out and we was walking through grass. You remember that don't you? I never seen anything like it.'

We both stopped at that moment and listened. Some horses were approaching. We could hear their hoof-beats on the unmade track, the unmistakable clatter of wheels and jingling of harness.

'Stand to!' I shouted. Men sitting or lying down jumped up, gathered their weapons and formed into ranks while being roared at by discontented sergeants.

'Load!'

There was an instant response, powder was poured down the muzzles of their guns, followed by shot and wadding, the lot being tamped down by ramrods which rattled inside the barrels.

We waited. The thumping of hoof beats grew louder, though riders and horses were hidden by the edge of the forest.

Chapter three

Lizards and Amazons

A rider appeared from round the corner. He wore a red coat, and I heard the Colour Sergeant let out a great breath. More horses swept into sight, riding two by two along the narrow track; about twenty in all.

The leading rider halted his followers, trotted up to us and dismounted. He saluted. The Colour Sergeant sprang to attention, and saluted also. I, being an officer in his majesty's army, should salute too, which I did.

'Witherspoon.' said the newcomer, addressing me 'Cornet of Cavalry,' He looked at my hat. 'The old thirty second, eh? Thank God you're here. I was getting quite worried, we're lost, you know.'

'It's a day for getting lost.' I said, 'So am I, we all are. They were marching through mud and rain then suddenly everything changed. The sun came out and they were walking on grass. As for me, I'm just lost.'

'Same thing here', he said. 'There will be hell to pay when we get back to our unit. They don't like losing bits of their army' He noticed the remnants of our battle, the fallen warriors and was astonished at the sight of their monkey riders, or whatever they were. 'I wish we had been here, my lads would have enjoyed this, and we would have had something to report at headquarters.'

He would have said more, but was interrupted by sudden shouting and soldiers pointing at the sky. ..Huge winged shapes had appeared flying from the direction of the forest, just skimming the tree tops. Skin membranes instead of feathers. Black wings outstretched about twelve meters tip to tip. They were like bats, but a thousand times bigger, and were gliding down on us, wings outspread, in a death dive.

The Sergeant was so agitated he forgot to relay his orders through me and shouted, 'B. Company, skirmishers, Aim!'

The guns went up as one.

'Fire!'

The bogles had flown into a hail of lead. It brought some down to crash around us. Little figures fell off and spun to earth where they lay, stunned or dead.

Most of these huge flying lizards got through and were striking at us with their claws, throwing men to the ground bloodily wounded. The cavalry horses panicked, they had not been trained in this kind of battle, and bolted, taking their riders with them, those that didn't fall off.

One of the creatures snapped at me in passing. Its breath stank as it tried to crunch me. I stumbled back and caught hold of a scaly leg as it flew on and soared upwards.

It was unbalanced by the extra weight, and was not flying as easily as the others who banked around for a second attack, and I heard another volley of musket and rifle fire.

The lizard shook its leg violently but I clung on while it screamed. The manikin riding just in front of the wings leaned down to strike with a whip, but the lash was too short. We turned back over the forest and flew away. Perhaps to get help so I could be detached from the leg and killed.

The giant lizard was skimming over the forest canopy, having to go round some trees which had grown higher than the others. The rise and fall of the creature as it flapped its wings, struggling to gain height caused the guns in my coat pocket to thud gently against my thighs as if suggesting it was time for action.

The man said they were loaded and now I was to find out, if he knew what he was talking about. If it didn't fire it could be used as a club when we arrived at wherever I was being taken.

It was hard work pulling the hammer back one-handed while bouncing up and down and hanging on the leg of a flying dragon, but persistence paid off, and finally the hammer clicked to a stop.

I did not want to kill the animal because we would fall together, perhaps to our deaths, so it was better to try something less drastic. If one of the wings were disabled we might float to earth, so a shot where the wing joined the body on my side would be best. It seemed a good idea at the time.

I pointed the pistol upwards towards a hollow, like an armpit, that appeared by the body of the animal every time the wings were extended high, ready for the downward beat. My finger curled round the trigger.

The blast of the pistol was loud but the screaming of the lizard was deafening as blood poured from its wound. It seemed to stagger in the air and half rolled on to its side. A wing became caught in a tree top, the creature cartwheeled over and disappeared head first into the forest canopy. Its manikin tumbled off and fell out of sight.

I fell too and would have followed them down but my chest painfully struck a branch and, by dropping the pistol, I was just able to hold on. The lizard was crashing through branches on its way to the forest floor

My branch swayed up and down while a noisy, startled flock of birds circled overhead. But they could be ignored, the problem now was to get down without disaster. In spite of cut hands, a bruised chest and various scrapes, it had to be done. After some flailing around a lower branch gave my feet some support and I was able to work my way sideways towards the trunk of the tree where the boughs were thicker. Getting down was tricky. The boughs, where they joined the trunk, were smooth and slippery. A lot of thought was needed before letting go of one grip to slide to another. It took a long while because of stabs of pain, and worrying that the next move might bring me crashing to earth. The lizard was lying at the foot of the tree amidst a mass of branches and leaves it had brought with it, and appeared to be dead. Which was alright because it would have been dark on me after I shot it and brought it down.

The great lizard carcass lay directly under a low branch to which I was clinging. That was handy because there was nothing lower to hang on to and the tree trunk was smooth. No climbing down that way.

It was some meters to the ground, enough to make an uncomfortable fall, so I decided to drop on the body of the beast, it might possibly be softer than the ground. I lowered myself off the branch, holding on by two hands, in spite of the burning pain in my chest, then let go.

Spot on! I landed directly on the creature's rib cage, which was harder than I thought, and slipped off on to the grass, but the results were unexpected.

The creature shrieked. The head, on its long flexible neck whipped up and looked around until it saw me, and reached out with snapping jaws.

I fell over backwards. The head was above me, and once again I could smell its foul breath as its jaws came down to bite me in half.

A spear with a long and glittering tip appeared just in time, it was jabbed forward at the descending head and penetrated deep into an eye. The head pulled back screaming leaving gobbets of blood and eye matter spattered on the grass. Then someone caught the back of my collar and dragged me away from the thrashing, dying beast.

I looked up to see my rescuer but was unable to speak. Standing over me was a blonde girl about my age holding a spear with blood dripping from its tip. She had on tailored jeans and a cream polo jumper, earrings, and a gold chain around her neck. She was gorgeous. I kept on looking, at her, it was worth it, and the face was familiar. Was she an actress or fashion model and had I seen her picture in a magazine, or perhaps on the telly?

She glanced down at her jeans. 'That's alright,' she said, 'No blood splashes. You have to be careful. Are you okay? It took you a long while to get down the tree, you seemed to be in pain.'

'Yes, my chest hurts.' It was burning like fire, and I tried to rub some of the pain away.

'It was pretty silly to drop on to the lizard like that, they take a long while to die, and even then you don't want to get too close'.

'You've been watching me?'

'We were listening to the gunfire and saw the lizards fly across in that direction, then we heard a bang and the noise of you and the lizard falling through the branches so we came across to see what was happening. But we really should get out of here. If the Gorbies come looking for you we could be in trouble.'

'Gorbies, what are they?'

They're those nasty, monkey looking creatures that cause a lot of trouble.'

' Well, I was hanging on to the leg of the lizard. I shot it and that brought it down. And its Gorbie, if that's what you call it, fell off, did you see it?'

'No, but the girls did.'

'Is it alive?'

'Not any more. The girls don't like Gorbies, they prefer them to be dead.'

'What girls?'

'Those girls.'

'As she spoke a group of about a dozen young women armed with spears , bows, arrows and other deadly equipment appeared from the trees. In spite of the pain I struggled to my feet, we looked at each other and they started giggling.

They wore a mixture of animal skins and furs as well as rough cloth. I couldn't help thinking of cave-women.

They kept on giggling and glancing at each other. 'He's nice,' said one of them.

'Yes, he'll do for a while,' said another.

'He's younger and better looking than the others, that's good,' added a third.

Then someone found my red cap, which was lying at the foot of the tree. They were delighted and everyone tried it on with much laughter until, it was handed back.

'You can't have him yet,' said my new friend. 'He's been hurt. He fell off the dragon and banged his chest on a tree branch. Make a stretcher and you can carry him to Big Mumma. She'll fix him up.'

The girls were good at that sort of thing. They soon cut down some small trees, lashed cross pieces on with tough creepers like ivy. and borrowed my coat to put the side poles through its arms.

They took off the coat, with more giggling. I wasn't laughing, it hurt.

Everyone seemed excited at what was underneath. I was pinched painfully several times amidst much laughter until my rescuer told them to concentrate on making the stretcher and leave me alone.

They settled down and cheerfully contributed some animal skins which were tied to the stretcher and I was then placed on it clutching the remaining pistol. Someone had found my shoulder bag, which had landed nearby and was carrying it for me, which was a relief, the lead shot in it was heavy.

It was rough ride at the beginning. They all wanted to have the honour of carrying me to the mysterious Big Mumma and a bit of a struggle took place until they worked out how each would take a turn.

'Cannibals!!' The thought came to me suddenly. 'Why were they so pleased to meet me? Why were they so eager to strip off my coat and look at what was under it? Why the pinching except to see how much meat was on my bones?'

I was tied to the stretcher. I thought at first that was to stop me falling off, especially when they were struggling for possession. But was it to keep me from escaping? And who, or what, was Big Mumma? My rescuer said Big Mumma would fix me up. What was the exact meaning of those words? It could contain terrible possibilities.

When all was ready my friend with the silver tipped spear nodded and led us on to a track that wound through the forest. We followed her for several kilometers until we came to a clearing in the forest. It seemed a natural clearing and it was surrounded by tents that had been put up among the trees.

We marched to one of the tents and the girls called for someone named Claire.

A young woman, wearing an apron, too big for her, came out. She stood tip-toe to get a good view of me on the stretcher bearer's shoulders and appeared to be delighted. She ran inside. We could hear her shouting. She was saying, 'Big Mumma, come and have a look! See what the girls have found.'

A few seconds later a woman wearing a white lab coat came out and looked at me. I knew her straight away. Her photograph had been shown to me that very morning. 'You're Cheryl,' I cried.' Then another idea hit me. I turned my head towards the girl with the spear. 'And you're Anthea!' No wonder her face had seemed familiar.

'That's us,' said Cheryl. She nodded at the stretcher bearers and held back the tent flap.

'Bring him inside.' They brought me in and laid me on a table with a padded leather top. It could have been from a doctor's surgery.

The girls wanted to crowd in and watch but Cheryl shooed them all out and said they could wait outside and she would give a report when she was ready.

When they were gone Cheryl said, 'You're young to be a detective.'

'Well, I am, sort of, my Dad is, and I've been looking after the office since he disappeared. If he doesn't come back soon I may have to give up my uni course.'

'Yeah, that figures. Uncle Seth has been shoving enquiry agents through the machine wholesale, and spraying them everywhere. He must have run out and started on the next generation. Where's your envelope, and the money?'

had to confess they were lost in transit, though I still had the shoulder bag. She carefully laid both pistol and bag on the ground

'Don't worry about the money it's no good around here. We exchange instead. One chicken equals five bunches of fruit, and so on.'

My Dad's name is William Mason. Everyone calls him Bill. Have you seen him?'

She shook her head. 'Sorry, no. Though some of his mates have turned up and were asking about him. That's enough information for the moment. I want to see why they brought you here.'

The girl wearing the apron stayed with us and stood by a table covered in bottles and bandages, she had a pair of scissors.

'This is Claire', said Cheryl. 'She's an Amazon, a member of an all woman tribe. I'm training Claire as a medical aide because I really need one, I'm always patching up the girls after they hurt themselves.'

Claire seemed delighted to help take off my shirt in spite of my shudders and suppressed cries of pain. I wouldn't let them cut it off. It was the only one I had.

There was a question I couldn't hold any longer. 'Are those women cannibals?' I asked fearfully.

Cheryl seemed astonished. 'Good Lord, no! What put that idea into your head?'

'Well they were pinching me, and fighting to see who would have the honour of carrying the litter.'

'Oh, forget that! They're not going to eat you, they have other plans for your future.'

... 'Such as?'

'They're Amazons, you see. A tribe of women - no men! That's why Anthea and I get on so well with them, we're women. They call me Big Mumma and Anthea is Big Sista; not that we are members of the tribe. But you can join them in an honorary capacity as Big Daddy.'

'Big Daddy! Why would they want a man in a tribe of Amazons, they're all women?'

Well, it's obvious isn't it? They need men to father the next generation.'

Claire grinned at me, her eyebrows flickered up and down and she pointed at herself.

I looked away, it was too much. and lay back stunned to let them attend to my cuts and bruises What was suggested was a career I had not considered before.

While they were attending to me with antiseptic and bandages Cheryl changed the subject by enquiring about her Uncle Seth

. 'How is he?' she asked.

I think she wanted to take my mind off my injuries and the next possible stage in my life. I had to concentrate on what she was saying.

'He seemed alright this morning, and he's very anxious about you and Anthea.'

“ Of course he is, greedy old sod. He wants us back to sign some papers. He didn't know until too late that I had patented The Matter Transfer Array, which brought you here. It's in my name and I hold the Certificate of Patent. He wants it assigned to him. He's as rich as Croesus, but he wants more. If Anthea, as my heir, and I, sign those papers he'll have everything. He'll be the richest man in Australia, possibly the world, which is not a bad deal, for him, anyway. It's scary to think that I might be that rich one day. I think I should stay here where money doesn't matter'.

'So he doesn't care about you and Anthea, he just wants power and wealth.'

'Absolutely! That's exactly right.'

'And what about the machine? It's ruining his house.'

'It does, and I knew it would. My Matter Transfer Array packs a terrific punch, as you've noticed. I told him it would make him billions transferring passengers and freight all round the world in an instant. I got it working perfectly but he was overseas when I was sending equipment, furniture, clothing, food, and so on ahead, and I was quite happy to wreck his house while I was doing it.'

'What was the equipment for?'

That was so I could build a second Matter Transfer Array here. We appear to be in another world, another universe, and its first job will be to send you all back home and you can mount a class action against Uncle Seth and take him for everything he's got. Anthea and I will come back to be your witnesses.'

'When?'

'I can't tell you. The one back in Seth's house has no station here to lock on to, so it sprays stuff everywhere. So far we've found only half of what was sent over. When the detectives started turning up I sent them off to look for the missing bits.'

'That's dangerous isn't it?'

'Well, they know they can't go home until I put everything together and I give them each an escort of Amazons who know the country. The girls will hunt and cook for them and your friends will have all the comforts they need.'

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