

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

# Detective In Time

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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.'

'If the machine is so erratic you and Anthea could have lost each other when you came across. You might have landed in different parts of this world.'

'I tied us together at the wrist, and we hugged each other when it was happening, so that was alright. What was your experience?'

'I landed flat on my back next to a battle.'

'Sounds interesting, you can tell us about it over dinner.' She slapped the bandage holding the dressing that had been applied to my chest, and I barely flinched. 'Don't worry, you're going to live for a while yet, and may you father many young Amazons.'

## Chapter four

### Mysterious disappearances

The Amazon village was nearby and the girls had gone home after Cheryl assured them that I was alright and the bandages could come off after a day or two. I was even allowed to go outside with Anthea to wander round the clearing, as long as I didn't go too far or get too tired. Apart from anything else I had had a busy day.

Anthea brought her spear. 'We sent over a shipment of guns and ammo,' she said, 'But haven't found them yet. We'll feel a lot safer when we have weapons that can keep the Gorbies away.'

'Spears aren't much use against those flying lizards' I said. 'The Gorbies have their own airforce.'

Well, we're branching out into bows and arrows. The Amazons are pretty good at those and we've been taking lessons. The lizards can't come too low now, and they're surprisingly fragile. Sometimes you can get them with a single shot. Their wings break easily if they hit a tree or something hard and once they're broken the lizard is finished. That's why we put the tents up among the trees. It makes us harder to get at.'

I saw a pile of nylon ropes lying at the foot of a tree. It was a knotted and tangled pile, surely they hadn't brought a collection of old rope with them.

'They're cargo nets,' said Anthea

'You seem to have dozens of them; Why so many?'

'Well Mum suspected that the stuff we were sending loose would be scattered all over the place at this end, so she ordered a lot of them, and she was right again.'

'I don't get it, why would you need nets?'

'They held everything together. The carriers that were bringing the stuff into the house thought we were mad. Everything had to be stacked carefully inside a circle on the floor between the projectors, but you saw those yourself. They would come back later and it would be all gone, nothing there except for a few more bricks knocked out of the house, or something had collapsed. But for the later shipments we used cargo nets.'

'Yes, I understand that, but how did they work?'

'The delivery guys thought we were totally round the bend. They couldn't believe what we were doing. Mum made them spread a cargo net on the floor, where the circle was and then stack the goods on it. Then they had to put a tarpaulin over the stack, in case it was caught in the rain, then another cargo net, to tie everything together, and top it all with a radio beacon equipped with a long life battery.'

'Another of Cheryl's big ideas?'

'Yes, she's brilliant! We sent over some motorized trail bikes too. We soon found them, and after that it was easy. All we had to do was follow the beacons, and we located everything except some of the earlier shipments and some where the beacon wasn't working.'

'So now you've got plenty of cargo nets?'

'Yes, oodles of them, portable beacons too. And look, there's Claire waving to us, we have to come in for dinner.'

I was led to a large tent where dinner was to be served. There were dining chairs in the tent but the dining table could have been better. It consisted of four folding picnic tables pushed together.

'We sent over a nice table,' said Anthea 'but it's still out there. I hope it doesn't rain too much before we find it. A week of rain could ruin it.'

All this gear you've got here must have cost millions. How could you afford it?'

'Simple! Uncle Seth went overseas on business so we picked the lock of his office, Mum's good at that sort of thing,' she said. 'She got into his safe as well. His bank card was there, and it was one with unlimited credit, so we racked up about two million dollars in shopping'.

'What! Two million dollars worth of clothes?'

'No, no! Only about five thousand on clothes. The rest went for equipment, tools, generators, furniture, food, fuel, and stuff for the control panel she's building right now. His house was a wreck after we finished. We always waited outside while the Array was at work, and were almost afraid to go inside afterwards in case the house collapsed on us.'

'He could have you arrested.'

'Let him try! We searched his safe and found enough documents and note-books to have him put away for ten years, or more. We took the originals and left photo-copies in the safe, and there's nothing he can do about it.'

'So those are the papers he wants back?'

'Exactly,' said Anthea.

Another guest came to dinner. Someone I knew well. It was Lance Chillingford, a mate of Dad's. They cooperated in business because Dad liked sitting in front of the computer searching files and building up profiles of missing persons. Lance preferred to be out on the road meeting people and investigating whatever case he was on.

In answer to my first question he said, 'Sorry, Andy, I haven't seen your old man, but I'm sure he's out there somewhere. Cheryl reckons all the gear she's lost would be within a hundred kilometers of here, so we've got a circle of land two hundred k's wide to search. don't worry, we'll find him or he'll find us.'

'Most of our clothes are missing,' said Anthea. We sent off ten big wheely suit cases before Mum got her brainwave about the nets and beacons. They were full of the loveliest clothes you've ever seen in your life, and we're still looking for them. All my outdoor gear was there too. That's why I have to wear these clothes, even in the forest.' She still had on the polo-necked jumper and jeans. 'I hope it doesn't rain too much before we find the suit-cases, and the dining table.'

'I think the Amazons have got them,' said Lance. He winked at me. 'While I was out I met some of them strutting around in the most gorgeous clothes you could imagine. I wondered where they got all these Paris model type dresses. But if you negotiate, Anthea, they might give you some nice furs in exchange.'

Anthea, horrified at this news gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

Cheryl had noticed the wink. She said, 'Lance, don't tease the girl. If you're going to tell fibs like that you won't get any dinner.'

Anthea slapped him hard on the arm and he hung his head pretending to be sorry. 'Well, I thought you'd treat me better than that, after all I found your stove and panels for the switchboard.'

He and his escort had just returned from a trek and had arrived with a gas stove, still in its crate, and the panels he had spoken about.

Cheryl was delighted with both finds. She had collected nearly fifty bottles of gas but no stove. She could now teach Anthea to cook, and any Amazons who might be interested could join in.

After dinner I was asked about my experiences and how I had appeared in their midst. I didn't have to explain about going through the Matter Transfer Array, it had happened to all of us, but told of being picked up next to a battle, being put in charge of a battalion of Scottish soldiers, reading the burial service for two of them, being presented with pistols and a bag of ammunition then flying off clutching the leg of a winged lizard, which I shot.

Lance was interested when I told about the battalion, together with Witherspoon and his cavalry, and how they were lost in a country they didn't understand.

'I've been a private detective and investigated disappearances all my working life,' he said. 'Thousands of people around the world vanish every year. Most come back eventually, or they're found, but hundreds are never seen again. A lot of them would have planned their disappearance very carefully, but I am convinced that many have walked by mistake into another time and place.'

Cheryl said thoughtfully, 'There's been a lot of talk between scientists about the possibility of parallel universes and worlds, and I think my machine has landed us in one of those.'

'A lot of disappearances happened before the Matter Transfer Array was invented, you may have just speeded up the process.'

'What are these other disappearances you were talking about? Tell us, Lance!'

'You heard Andy talk about his experience today. He was lost and then he met a small army that had no idea where it was. It had lost its base and wandered into another dimension. There's the Bermuda Triangle, ships and planes disappear mysteriously. - On Gallipoli in 1915 two hundred and sixty six officers and men of the Royal Norfolk Regiment advanced up a hill, none came back and no trace of them was ever discovered. The War Graves Commission wanted to bury them after the war, but couldn't find their bodies, and the Turks hadn't taken them prisoner. It happens all the time.'

'They may be here. If we come across them we'll let you know.'

Cheryl had another story to tell. She said, 'I read a history once about the earliest British colonists in America Sir Walter Raleigh left one group on Roanoke Island, Virginia, while he went back to England for supplies and more settlers. When he returned there was no one there, the settlement was deserted, and to this day no one can explain what happened to them!'

All this talk was most interesting and gave me another slant on my experiences, so far, but I had had a rough day and was falling asleep in my chair. They took pity on me and I was led to a tent with some beds in it. I stripped down to my underwear, got in, and that's all I remember.

## **Chapter five**

### **Into the unknown**

It was morning and Lance shook me awake from a dazed slumber. I turned over and tried to burrow down again into the warm caverns of sleep.

He wouldn't let me. 'You won't want to miss this, Andy,' he shouted. 'Breakfast's ready, and afterwards we're going off on the motor-bikes.'

'Where to?' I muttered, feeling just a tad of interest in the project.

'Cheryl said one of the missing beacons came good during the night. She judged from the strength of the signal that it can't be more than about twenty k's from here, and they sent me to get you. Breakfast's on the table right now.'

Sleep was good but I wasn't going to give over a chance to ride a motor bike in open, unexplored country in another world. No roads, nothing, just a distant radio beacon to aim at.

Bacon and eggs for breakfast, all cooked over an open fire. The stove had not yet been unpacked from its crate, but Cheryl would organize its installation after we came back.

I asked her about navigating by GPS, but she shook her head. 'No Global Positioning here,' she said. 'I really don't know what world we are on, but there are definitely no satellites overhead. We'll have to follow the beacon while it operates, and we don't know how long that will be.'

'How will we find our way back?'

'Shouldn't be a problem. I've got two beacons mounted in the trees, that's in case one packs it in. So we we'll find our way home again, no worries Even if we're separated it should be alright, the four bikes are fitted with direction finders. After we've gone a few kilometers and they've had a good shaking I'll check them again, just to be on the safe side.'

Outside there were four bikes waiting for us, complete with trailers to tow behind. I had never seen all terrain bikes with trailers attached, but there they were. Cheryl said she would have sent a four wheel drive ute over but it was too big to get into the house. The trailers would have to do. They were light steel mesh boxes fitted with motor bike wheels.

All they carried when we set out was lunch, a bow in each trailer, a bag of arrows, and a spear.

'Not to worry' said Lance. 'Just a precaution.'

'Some precaution,' I thought. 'Looks as though we're ready for a tribal war.' But he was very good in showing us the right and wrong ways of handling the weapons and he made sure we had absorbed his lessons before leaving.

Cheryl checked the direction finders. They all indicated the same line, so it seemed safe enough for us to set off to find the missing consignment of goods.

That was a good ride, over sweeping grasslands with mountains in the distance, and on the higher peaks snow glittered in the sunshine. At every rise there was a halt and binoculars were brought out to survey the land, but no sign of a hostile presence. Starting again the grass seemed to flow away under our wheels, the ride was so easy and pleasant.

Shallow streams crossed our path from time to time, but they were no obstacle. We drove across, only wetting our feet, but that was part of the enjoyment, and I was riding alongside Anthea.

About half way along Cheryl's estimate of distance to be travelled Anthea startled everyone with a piercing scream. Her steering wobbled a bit and she turned off to the left.

The scream alerted us all. Lance reached behind and grabbed his bow and arrow bag from the trailer while steering the bike one handed. We all raced after the girl. I was not good enough to steer and reach for a weapon at the same time, but it was in my mind.

She stopped her bike and jumped off. 'Look!' she pointed at something in the grass.

A row of suitcases were standing neatly upright, side by side, all locked and undamaged as though they had been set there by some careful hand.

She fell on them joyfully, kneeled on the grass to fumble something out of her pocket and came up with the keys to her luggage. She had been carrying them all this time.

'Not now, sweetheart,' said Cheryl. 'Open them at home otherwise you'll have clothes everywhere. They're too nice to be spread out on the grass.'

Anthea was disappointed by this good advice but wanted to take her find straight back to the house. It hadn't rained lately in this world though the cases had been out in open for weeks and she wanted to check the contents of every one of them.

They were loaded into two of the trailers, five in each and that was all we could fit in.

Anthea pleaded with her mother to turn back with her treasures. Cheryl didn't want to separate the company in unknown country, but at last she yielded. She said, 'You boys go on. It seems safe enough and it would be a pity to waste fuel coming this far and then turning back. Besides, the beacon may cut out any time. You take the picnic lunch and we'll see you sometime this afternoon. Don't be late because at dinner we girls will be dressed in our gorgeous new clothes.'

Anthea, ecstatic at her find, kissed Lance and me goodbye, which was the best part of the trip so far. How could she have such a fragrant scent even in this wilderness? But all the same I was disappointed. I'd been looking forward to sharing a picnic lunch with her. Still, I would see her that evening in one of the outfits she had been talking about.

Lance and I watched them until they disappeared. Then we checked our direction finders. They still agreed, so we pressed on.

After a long drive there was no trouble in finding what we were looking for, beside a dense growth of trees and bushes, but it was disappointing. Someone had discovered the consignment before us. The nets and ropes had been slashed, and the goods scattered. Boxes were lying smashed open with heavy stones and abandoned when the looters found in them nothing they wanted, or could understand. The beacon, whose signal we had followed had been kicked over but, lying on its side, was still transmitting.

Unopened cans of food, which had been thrown around the area were gathered and stacked in our trailers. Gauges, switches and panels needed for Cheryl's work were picked up. Other electrical gear that I did not understand was also carefully loaded until our two trailers were full

Even then there was enough left to fill more. They had sides about forty centimeters high which made them larger than two shopping trolleys, but not by much. We would have to come back to collect what was left.

Before starting to gather up the scattered goods we laid our weapons on the ground where they were close at hand. Some arrows were stuck points down into the ground so they could be plucked out and fired quickly, if necessary.

They would have been useful if one of us had stayed on guard while the other loaded , but we were not alive to our danger.

I was stacking some cartons on board when I heard a strange noise behind me. It was a thud followed by a hoarse, breathy sound like a cough. I turned and there was Lance looking at me, eyes wide open. An arrow stuck out of his back.

While I stared, not believing, not understanding what had happened, his knees gave way and he fell forward on the ground . At that moment a warrior in my place would have dived on the bow, grabbed the arrows with the other hand, and sprinted to the trees to get some cover.

I was no warrior, but stood shocked and motionless.

A real warrior, but ridden by a Gorbie, now burst from cover carrying a bow .The Gorbie was leading two other warriors by a rope tied round their necks. It screamed at them and I was caught as I tried to get away. I stumbled and fell almost on top of the leather bag that held powder and shot, ammunition for my pistol. I snatched at it with the idea of defence and flight, if there was a chance. The pistol was still in my pocket. One of the two warriors got there first and wrestled the bag out of my clutches. He took it and hung it over his shoulder. Perhaps he thought there was food in it, or something worth having.

More Gorbie ridden warriors appeared and I stopped struggling. It was hopeless.

The first Gorbie was screaming at me. I shook my head, with no idea of what he was telling me. Others gathered round, showed their teeth and made chattering noises. I think they were laughing at me.

It didn't matter. My hands were tied behind me and a noose passed over my head. I and the two spare warriors were tied one behind the other at the neck, and were led like dogs on a leash. There was enough rope to leave a space of more than a meter between us, they didn't want our legs to tangle as we ran and I was last in a line of three.

The Gorbies had no interest in the bikes, or the stores we had been gathering and they ignored Lance's body. A jerk of the rope reminded me that I was a captive and I had to stumble after my new masters as they moved away leaving Lance where he had fallen.



## Chapter six

### More Amazons

The Gorbies. were, I think, patrolling the area, looking for trouble, or sussing out the neighbours. There were six of them, plus the warriors they rode. They whipped their steeds into action and we had to follow or fall down. Anyone who fell was whipped until he got up and started running once more.

Now I was plodding along miserably hoping the trek would soon come to an end. But fearing what might happen to me when we arrived, wherever that should be. I kept my eye on the bag as it swung in front of me during our march. If only I could get it back, escape might be possible.

The pistol in my pocket was bumping my thigh to remind me of its presence. It was charged with powder and shot. Lance, who was expert in most things, had shown me how to load it, how to ram the charge into place, and how to make the gun safe by gently lowering the hammer on to the flint. Still, a single pistol shot between six Gorbies did not seem like great odds. I decided to wait for a chance to escape, and stumbled after them for what seemed hours.

The mountains were closer now. Sharp, jagged peaks with snow lying in the upper crevasses. I hoped the Gorbies didn't have a lair in this forbidding neighbourhood. It was cold and bleak. No place for an urban dweller like me.

The Gorbies definitely didn't like me. I had to stay back at the full length of my rope or else those nearer would lash out with their whips. Not that that was anything special; they would lash out at the spares too, if they got out of line, and there seemed little hope of rescue.

I was trudging along in this miserable procession when, after some hours, I was aroused to our surroundings by the Gorbies calling to one another.

We were passing close to a hill, an outlier of the mountain range, and were turning left to go round it when I was stirred from my misery long enough to look up to see the top of the hill. It was dotted with huge upright stones arranged in a circle. Interesting perhaps, but not to me. My friend was dead and I was on my way to captivity or death, scenery meant nothing.

I thought of Anthea. She and Cheryl. would be off at first light tomorrow morning to look for us. They would follow the beacon, if it was still working, to the place of tragedy, and find Lance's body. After that I don't know what they could do, except setting their neighbour Amazons on the job of finding me.

A noise broke these thoughts and I looked up again. Everything had changed. The slope was now alive with fighters pouring out from behind the rocks where they had lain in wait. They sprinted down hill towards us, screaming, waving their weapons.

It was an ambush, and about to be a massacre. We had to run to keep up as the Gorbies whipped their steeds. The first of the attackers were reaching out with spears and shields, lusting to kill when, for once, I acted quickly. I propped and yanked hard on the rope that tied me to the rest of the party. The two warriors fell over, gagging and struggling for breath. The Gorbie who was leading us had tied the end of the rope around his waist. He was plucked off his saddle by the weight of three falling bodies and fell also.

There were four of us on the ground while the remaining Gorbies fled in a vain attempt to escape the oncoming wave of attackers.

What followed was a welter of shrieking, and stabbing, struggling and falling. The Gorbies were dragged down and killed, the warriors were speared through and through. When they were all dead the attackers turned their attention to the four, still living, bodies lying on the road.

My Gorbie had untied the rope around his waist and tried to run away. He was caught and killed. The two warriors attached to me were soon dealt with, they died. One of the attackers approached holding a bloodied spear and wearing a snarling wolf's head as a helmet. He looked down from bloodshot eyes and raised his spear to deliver the death blow.

Someone shouted, 'Marilyn, no!! It's a man.'

The spear quivered and was reluctantly drawn back. I rolled over, got up on trembling legs, and mutely showed the ropes around my wrists. The spear came down again, but this time to cut my bonds with the edge of the blade. I loosened the noose from around my neck and threw it to the ground.

The fighters, a tough looking lot, gathered round to examine the only survivor of the massacre

And a colourful sight it was. My saviours were decked out in feathers, animal skins, kilts, woven into patterns which reminded me of the Scots, and wore beaded moccasins. One thing was certain there wasn't a man in sight. Even Marilyn, in spite of her size and ferocious appearance, was a woman. I was still a captive, and this time a different and more warlike tribe, than the Amazons I had already met, was in charge.

The bodies lying on the ground showed that Lance's death had been avenged. Though I got little satisfaction from it. He was still dead and I was still a captive but I was pretty sure this new lot of Amazons wouldn't kill me. I preferred the change of management, but I wasn't looking forward to spending time at their village.

The ammunition bag was lying on the ground and I disentangled it from the warrior corpse to sling it over my own shoulder. No one tried to stop me, or take the bag.

The tribe didn't linger to enjoy their small victory. Five Gorbies were down but there were plenty more and they could appear at any time to take us on. The Amazons got into marching order, with me in the middle, and set off. This lot had no steeds like the Gorbies, no horses either, perhaps there were none in this country. It was a tribe that walked or ran everywhere.

Marilyn started running, we followed and jogged along a mile or so with Marilyn in the lead until she held up her spear slowing the column to a walk.

Another half mile or kilometer passed then she raised her spear and the running started again.

This was their way of travelling when they were in a hurry, and we had reason to hurry. When the Gorbies found out what had happened they would be after us, seeking vengeance.

This went on for hours and Marilyn set a fairly fierce pace.

I'd done a lot of jogging, and been in a few marathons, swum the pier to pub race, not winning of course, so I was reasonably fit and able to keep up once I got into the rhythm of what they were doing. There was no point in trying to escape. Nowhere to go and they would probably enjoy the exercise of running me down. The race might end with a spear in the back, like Lance.

I seemed to be the only one running under a handicap. It was the bag, with its load of gunpowder and lead bullets that kept bumping me as we ran and making me stagger unless I held it down firmly with my elbow. One or two of the Amazons seemed to notice that I was running well and keeping up with the tribe. They caught my eye and nodded to show approval.

It was dark when we came to their village. It had a high wooden fence all round, about five meters high, and a heavy gate had to be unbarred to let us in. Cooking fires illuminated the scene. They had been lit some time before and we were given food almost as soon as we arrived. I sat on the ground with my group to eat it while everyone in the village came to have a look at me. I may be vain, but they seemed to like what they saw.

Public opinion did not seem to count with Marilyn. As soon as we had eaten and my group dispersed she ordered that I be taken to a small grassy square in the centre and chained by the leg to a post.

The village must have been built round its water supply for in the middle of the square was a well with a low, stone wall. A thin, depressed looking man in a smock that came down to just above his knees was pulling up a bucket of water as they chained me to make sure I wouldn't be taking any midnight strolls. The water carrier looked on curiously while untying the rope from the handle of the bucket but said nothing and hurried away with his load.

I was wondering if I was expected to sleep in the open when a dome shaped hut about one and a half meters high was carried in by two women and dropped alongside me. It had wooden ribs inside that were curved and met at the top. A frame was attached to the ribs and on that a thick thatch of straw which was held in position by long, bendy branches of willow, stripped of leaves and tied with cord. It had the shape and appearance of a huge mushroom.

They had laid the hut close to the post and my chain was long enough for me to crawl inside. Marilyn supervised while two women supplied me with straw for my bed, and a candle. I was allowed a fire outside my hut .

'You be careful with that candle,' said Marilyn. 'Keep it away from the walls, and don't drop it on the straw. If you set fire to the hut you won't get another, so watch it.' After delivering this kindly warning she departed and left me with my candle.

The advice was good because they hadn't taken my bag and the first thing I did was to put it inside so the gunpowder would not be affected by the damp evening air. If the hut caught fire we could have a spectacular explosion and lots of shrapnel as the bullets flew everywhere. The worst thing was that if the straw caught fire I would still be chained at the centre of the fire and explosion to follow.

The huts around me were bigger, but built on the same plan, and had rounded tops, like the Zulu huts I saw once on the History Channel.

After their meal was eaten everyone went to bed. They couldn't read or write, no TV or radio. My arrival caused a stir, and some people got out of bed to see me, but not for long and the village soon settled down leaving me to sit by this small fire at the end of my chain and brood over the events of the day.

I was about to crawl into the hut and sleep when the man I had seen earlier drawing water from the well appeared out of the gloom. He looked round cautiously, then came to sit at my fire. He rubbed his hands together and held them out to the warmth. 'The nights here are cold,' he said.

He was right, it was cold. I had buttoned up my coat, and was still wearing the cap which had survived so much.

He noted the number on the cap, and also the red coat. 'He said. I see by the stripes that you are a lieutenant and the number on your shako indicates you served with the 32nd Regiment of Foot.'

I didn't know how I got the uniform, but the Colour Sergeant had said much the same thing.

'Your regiment fought with great distinction at the battles of the peninsula campaign in Spain, also at Waterloo. Did you ever meet Lord Wellington?'

I was astonished. 'Are you a teacher, or something?'

'No, I'm a slave, though I was a teacher once, a Professor of Chemistry. Military history was a hobby of mine. I could tell you all about Wellington's victories. We British never lost a battle either in India or Spain while he was in command.'

'You're a slave of the Amazons! How did that come about?'

'I went for a walk one day. Just a quiet walk. I left the school grounds for a ramble in the woods and got lost. Suddenly everything changed and I was walking in this country, there were no familiar woods and I couldn't find my way back.'

'Just like that! You walked into another world.'

'It appears so. I wandered around for days until the Amazons found me. They gave me food and shelter, and here I am, a slave. What happened to you?'

'Same thing, only I met some friends here, and now I've lost them again.'

'I will get into trouble if I'm found out of the slave quarters at night. But I must tell you something. In 1990 I was Professor of Chemistry in an English School that was founded about six hundred and fifty years ago by a man called Josiah Conybere. He paid a hundred pounds to establish the school and that was an awful lot of money in those days.'

'It must have been a tremendous amount if it was enough to establish a school that lasted for six hundred and fifty years and was still going strong in 1990.'

'But there is something that worries me. Conybere left money to maintain poor scholars on the condition they prayed daily for his soul.'

'Oh yes, and did you?'

'Well, not lately. Henry VIII put a stop to that sort of thing, and since then we have prayed for Conybere only once a year. Do you think that because I didn't pray for the man daily this is my punishment?'

'Could be! I haven't prayed for your mate either, and here we are. They've chained me by the leg and you're their slave.'

'Yes, but things can change. We are planning to revolt. The slaves knew about your arrival and they sent me to see what sort of man you are. Now that we have an experienced soldier in the village we can put our plans into action and you will be our leader.'

I was willing to try anything to escape. Anything except a slave revolt with me in charge. There would be no Sergeant telling me what orders to give. I was about to explain the drawback in his plan when we were interrupted.

Someone loomed out of the darkness, it was Marilyn. She was still wearing her wolf helmet, carrying a spear, in the light of the fire she appeared terrifying.

My revolutionary friend squeaked with alarm.

'Meadowes, what are you doing out at this time of night?' She gestured with her spear. 'Get back to the slave quarters, now! I'll deal with you tomorrow.' She turned on me. 'You, new man, get inside that hut and don't come out until morning.'

I wasn't going to argue with a bad tempered Amazon carrying a spear, so I did as I was told.

Meadowes disappeared into the darkness. The last thing I saw through the entrance hole of my hut were Marilyn's sandalled feet stamping on the fire to put it out. Along with her other talents she may have been a fire walker.

## Chapter seven

### The Amazon village burns

It was early when I woke the following morning. Colours of dawn had not yet faded from the sky when I was aroused by the distant sound of angry argument, and the barking of dogs. Everyone else was up and hurrying in the direction from which the racket was proceeding.

But for the chain and post I would have gone too.

After they had all passed Meadows himself appeared, carrying his wooden bucket. He looked round carefully, making sure there was no one present but me.

He was about thirty, I guessed, not an obvious revolutionary. His hair was long and unkempt, his smock dirty and he hadn't shaved for a while. A scruffy length of rope round his waist acted as a belt. He looked weedy, as though a strong wind would blow him away.

He looked back over his shoulder and scuttled closer. I would have thought him much happier setting up a chemistry experiment, than organizing a slave revolt.

'What's going on back there?' I asked. The shouting and barking had increased as if the whole tribe was joining in.

He grinned a little and put down his bucket. 'It's Marilyn and Catherine. They're fighting over me.'

'They're what??' I was astounded, why would two Amazons battle over a scrawny specimen like Professor Meadows?

'Marilyn was hitting me with the butt of her spear. It was punishment for being out of the slave quarters without permission, and when she wouldn't stop Catherine started punching her'

'Why would she do that?'

She loves me, she adores me.'

At last the secret of attracting women was out. Be a skinny, six hundred years out of date chemistry teacher and you've got it made.

He crouched down beside me. 'I can't stay long I have to get a bucket of water. The fight may end at any moment, and I could be missed.' He winced, I'm sore after that beating, but no matter, Madam Marilyn will be the first to go when the revolt starts.'

He held up his hand to stop me saying anything. 'Did you know that by the time of Elizabeth I the English were making the best gunpowder in Europe?'

I was becoming impatient. As far as I was concerned life was too short, when one is captive and chained to a post, to sit through a lecture on English gunpowder. Besides, it was

hard to concentrate. There was a huge row going on down the other end of the village. It wasn't dying away. I could hear screaming, and barking dogs. No one was worrying about Meadows' whereabouts.

He ignored the racket and held up his hand again. 'No, this is important. I have a degree in chemistry and I am making gunpowder in the slave quarters. It is of a better quality than the best gunpowder ever produced in England.

I could see the germ of a plan here. "What are you going to do, blow up the village?"

'Precisely!', he cried. 'A friend of mine from Scotland is a cooper. That is he makes wooden barrels. He used to work for a whisky distillery.'

Until he got lost,' I said.

Exactly so, and now he's turning out small barrels in the slave quarters and we're cramming them full of gunpowder. Others, under my direction, are making hundreds of feet of quickmatch.'

What's quickmatch?'

It's like string, or light cord, it burns quickly and we intend to use it as a fuse. If you set fire to one end the fire races along the cord until it reaches the other end.'

'And if the other end is stuck into a barrel of gunpowder there's a hell of an explosion.'

'I see you have the quickness of the military mind to understand these matters.'

Well, what's your plan?'

'We have been working on it for some time. Whenever the village is empty, People are tending their crops, or out on a raid, perhaps. We sneak in and bury a barrel of gunpowder under a hut. Madam Marilyn is a special case, so she has two, right under her bed.'

Well, what do you do with the quickmatch?'

'It's easy. No problem at all. We are always being called on to repair huts. We hide the quickmatch in the new straw and from there down to the barrels of gunpowder. No one has noticed yet. Any of the Amazons who have been cruel to us are sitting on a barrel of gunpowder, those that are kind we leave them alone. The slaves decide which people they want blown up.'

How are going to set all this off?'

'As you may have noticed the Amazons go to bed at sundown. At night there's no one about except the sentries on the wall, but they look outwards and not in.'

'Alright, everyone's in bed, the sentries are watching out, not thinking the enemy might be already inside the gates. That's when the slaves go into action, right?'

'Just so. We slaves know every inch of the village. We know who sleeps in which hut and we know where the end of the quickmatch can be found sticking out of the straw on each hut. We will set fire to the long fuses first and work our way to the shorter ones so the explosions will go off pretty well together. We don't want the bad people to have time to get out of bed when they hear the other huts blowing up, especially Madam Marilyn.'

This is all good stuff. But where's the key to my padlock. I don't want to be chained to the post while the village is being blown apart. Do you know where it is?

I think Madam Marilyn may have it.

'Oh, that's lovely. Marilyn's got two barrels of gunpowder under her bed. When they go off they'll blow my key into orbit. We'll never find it.'

'Never fear. After the village blows up we will release you. Another slave, Mr Arkwright, is a skilled metal worker. He can cut the chain for you.'

'What about when the explosions are happening? I'll be in the middle of it.'

He paused. 'Well, yes.' Then he had an inspiration. 'I know what we will do, a slave will bring you some extra blankets. You can hide under those until it is safe to come out. We are going to need your military skills during the next phase of the revolt.'

My career in the army lasted about two hours at the most, and all I had learned was to relay the orders of the Sergeant. I had just opened my mouth to say this when we realized that the fighting had died away and the voices of the Amazons could be heard as they returned.

Professor Meadows picked up his bucket and hurried away, the model of a hard working servant. If only Cheryl could get her hands on him to help with her work. I was sure she could make use of someone with a degree in chemistry.

Nothing much happened after the excitement of the morning. I was given breakfast, and ate it, and later, lunch. The slaves were very cheerful, winking and nodding at me whenever they passed through the square, or gave me a meal. Some made the two finger victory sign which caused me some uneasiness. If the Amazons picked up on this unusual cheerfulness they might become suspicious. There would be hell to pay if they caught on and squeezed the truth out of our little Guy Fawkes and his plan to blow them all up.

A slave arrived and handed me two blankets. He said nothing because an Amazon always came with a slave to make sure there was no talking. All he could do was grin, nod, and raise his eyebrows while the Amazon was not looking..

So it was really on, the big bang was scheduled for tonight. If all the gunpowder barrels were in place there was no point waiting any longer, especially now they had an experienced, battle tested officer to lead them. God help us!

Lying outside the hut, drowsy and half asleep, a sudden thought jolted me awake. What would be the reaction of the remaining Amazons if half the tribe was destroyed in one night



by a series of hammer blows? If they worked out that the slaves were responsible they might massacre the lot, even me as well, just to make sure.

I was desperate to see Meadows to point out the probable reaction of a bunch of armed and enraged Amazons when they figured out who was responsible for blowing up half the tribe.

However he was not to know what followed. No one could know that fate was about to shuffle the pack again and deal us a different hand of cards.

An army of Gorbies' appeared in the afternoon, and seemed ready for battle. There were hundreds of them ranged outside, mounted on their warriors, armed, ready to fight.

The sentries over the gate called out an alarm which was repeated on other walls. The gates were opened so the slaves outside tending their crops, and their supervisors, as well as Amazons practising their battle drill in the open, could get inside before trouble caught up with them.

The Gorbies made no attack on those caught in the open. They waited until everyone was inside and the gates were closed. Judging from the chattering noise that ran through the ranks they seemed to find it all very funny.

Inside the stockade armour and helmets were put on and adjusted. Knives, shields and spears were brought out of the huts. Bows, and crossbows were strung, bags of arrows were carried up to the firing step from where they could be shot at the enemy. Marilyn and Catherine climbed ladders either side to look out over the tops of the upright logs that made a palisade around the village.

There was a platform inside, over a meter below the tops of the logs which were sharpened to a point so as to discourage anyone from the outside trying to climb over them. This was a fighting platform for archers, rock-throwers, or spear women, whoever was defending the village at the time.

I heard scraps of conversation from hurrying Amazons as they passed to take their places in the ranks.

--- 'There are hundreds of the little bastards, it looks like we might be in for a siege'---

--'If they try to burn the crops or cut down the fruit trees we'll just have to take them on.'---

-'Amelia's right. If they start destroying the crops we'll have to go after them, otherwise we'll be in for a hungry winter.'—

--'Whatever happens there'll have to be a stand up battle. We can't last long in here, there's plenty of water but not enough food'.---

I heard little more for they had passed without looking at me and gone to their stations.

The archers, with bows and arrows and shields at the ready, as well as four or five with cross-bows, took their places on the platform from which they could see over the walls.

Another large party, armed with spears and swords, waited inside the gates, now shut, ready to race out and take on the Gorbies as soon as they heard that the food supply was under threat.

A strong group of warriors made ready to shepherd and guard the girls small, and big, who were too young to take their places in the fighting line. Though many of the littlies carried small spears, or bows and arrows. Their protectors appeared to be tough, experienced fighters. I guessed they would give their lives to protect the young ones.

Nothing happened for a while. The Gorbies' forces halted beyond bow shot and waited. This gave the cross-bow women an opportunity to shine. Their weapons had a slower rate of fire than the bow and arrow. They had to be wound up each time, but had a much longer range. Every time they managed to skewer an enemy there was a burst of cheering.

The pause did not last long before more shouting was heard. The flying lizards were coming. The appearance of those sinister black shapes circling overhead marked the beginning of disaster and defeat

Missiles started to rain down and burst into flames as they crashed to the ground. Fires erupted everywhere through the village. Huts started to burn, and I knew what would happen next.

The bag of pistol ammunition was still stashed in my hut, which would likely catch fire. The gunpowder in the pouch may not have been as good as that buried all over the village but it was enough to blow me away. I dragged it out, made sure the flap over the opening was firmly strapped down and threw it as far as I could to the other side of the square.

The warriors standing on the firing platform looked down, and I saw flames reflecting on their faces, shields and armour.

Two huge explosions burst together and a mass of debris was thrown into the air.

'There goes Madam Marilyn,' I thought. But I knew it wasn't so, only her hut. She was standing by the gates, ready to lead the Amazons into battle.

More thunderous explosions burst out of the ground as the huts caught fire. Huge pulses of light and energy that illuminated disaster and shook the village so the palisade walls swayed and those on the firing step had to hang on or fall off.

Everyone was awestruck by the violence of what was happening. 'Great Mother of All protect us,' I heard someone cry. Then a murmur of "Amen."

An Amazon was struck down by a whirling length of timber. Others cowered away from chunks of flaming straw that danced around in the rising heat from the flames. My hut soon ignited and I crawled under the blankets as far away as the chain would allow.

The wooden walls of the village began to burn and the archers had to come down, or be roasted.

Marilyn was in command. 'We can't stay here! she roared. 'We'll go, out and meet them. Archers to the front. Our bows are better than theirs so loose your arrows at them outside their longest range. Go for the warriors, they're bigger targets, and once they're down the Gorbies are helpless. And you cross-bowers concentrate on those bloody lizards, make them keep well up out of the fight. We're ready now, open the gates!'

The gates, starting to burn, were wrenched back. The archers went first, arrows nocked on to bow strings, ready. to shoot as they picked their marks. Then the cross-bow women, their weapons pointing up at the sinister shapes overhead.

Marilyn gave them a few seconds start, then signaled everyone to follow. They raced out through the opening screaming war cries.

## Chapter eight

### The Breakout

After a wait to see if the Amazons would return Professor Meadows appeared with a blackened face, to inspect the results of his cunning plan. He peered at me through the haze of writhing smoke that hung everywhere.

'Well, it worked,' he said. 'You will have to agree the gunpowder was of excellent quality, with only one defect in the plan, nobody was home when their huts blew up'. He was carrying what appeared to be a large brown egg. about the size of an emu egg, and heavy, he had to carry it with both hands.

'It's from a lizard,' he said. 'The Gorbies are cleverer than I thought. This is what they were raining down on us. The eggs smashed when they hit the ground and burst into flames. This one must have a very strong shell. It didn't break.'

'Eggs don't explode when you drop them.'

These do! The Gorbies have been quite clever. They have taken a lizard egg, made a small hole in the end, just big enough to extract the contents, and replaced whatever was in it with a flammable, explosive liquid. They dropped dozens of the things and all the others smashed and burned, except this one.'

'Well, don't drop it near me. I'm chained up like a dog, so I can't run away.'

'Never fear, it will be handled carefully until I have the time and facilities to investigate this burning liquid.'

He seemed pleased with himself. The great slave revolt had had an entirely unexpected outcome, but he had gained an explosive egg on which to experiment.'

'Can you get your friend to cut this chain?'

'Yes, yes,' he said absently. 'Everything is in hand and we will have it off you quite soon. I wish I had the school laboratory here. I could analyze the liquid inside the egg, and find out how they made it.'

Another thought came to me. 'There'll be a lot of questions to answer when the Amazon's get back. They'll want to know what caused the explosions'.

'That is, if they get back. They're greatly outnumbered, you know. They may be all killed. Have you noticed? The noise of battle has died away.'

He was right. The screaming and clash of arms was much fainter than before, as though the battle was being fought at a distance.

He said 'The Amazons have the same battle tactics as the Zulus, a race of warriors from South Africa, These Zulus had short stabbing spears and animal hide shields. They were efficient warriors and one occasion they wiped out an army of British soldiers.'

'They'll wipe us out too if they come back and work out what caused the explosions.'

Professor Meadows went to the gate and looked out; after a while he returned.

'I think it is going exactly as the Gorbies planned. First they flushed the Amazons from the village with their fire eggs. Though I suppose they were surprised their raid had such astonishing results. Now the Amazons are surrounded and trying to fight their way out of a trap, and the battle seems to be moving away from us and towards the forest.'

A sooty man appeared in the square. He carried a hammer and tools and was clutching under one arm a heavy block of wood. This gear was dropped on the ground close to my chained leg.

'This is Mr Jesse Arkwright from Yorkford, England. He has offered to cut you loose from your chains. Mr Arkwright, this is Mr Andrew Mason.'

'Ah, jer do', said Mr Arkwright. He fingered the chain that fastened me to the pole.

'Can you cut it, Mr Arkwright?'

'If this wor good Yorkford steel I'd 'ave me doubts, but it's roobbish nae better'n tin. I could chew it through wi' me teeth. Aye, we'll have it off 'im in no time. If ye'll joost get up Mr Mason and stand hard alongside the the edge of yon block yer leg shackle can rest on it, and I'll be able to get at the bolt that's holding it closed.'

He turned the shackle so the bolt was in position, and was about to attack it with his hammer and chisel when someone appeared from outside the gateway.

The newcomers were a party of Gorbies, six of them, mounted, as usual, on the shoulders of their warriors.

Jess Arkwright fled, heading for the slave quarters. Professor Meadows disappeared and I was left alone, still anchored, to face the newcomers.

The Gorbies looked round cautiously, then urged their steeds into the village. The fires were dying down, most of the fuel had been consumed quickly, but the remains were still smoking and a plume of dirty smoke marked the site of our ruined village.

They laughed at the spectacle of a lonely survivor crouching alongside a pole, and fastened to it. I think they were laughing, they made a sort of high pitched chittering that sounded like laughter. They made their steeds kneel and dismounted to wander around the ruins and poke at the ashes. Probably looking for items of value worth taking away. The warriors stayed where they were left and gazed at me blankly.

The battle outside the walls was still on. It could be heard faintly but the noise was dying down as they moved further away. The Gorbies present were probably stragglers, not interested in fighting anyone, but eager for loot. They were not having much success. Most of the good stuff in the village had been burned or blown away.

Professor Meadows appeared unexpectedly. He had left his egg somewhere but this time he was carrying a small wooden barrel. It was sealed tightly with some cord coiled on top, and he staggered under the weight. The Gorbies stared at him, but he smiled back and carried the barrel over to the far side of the village where there was a level patch of ground free of debris. He put the barrel down gently and stood back to smile again at the Gorbies. He rubbed his hands together shivering to remind them that the weather was turning cold, and indicated by gestures that he would build a fire to keep them warm.

The Gorbies seemed pleased. They chattered a lot. I had the impression that we could slave for them, building fires and the like, perhaps finding some food, but after that we would be expendable. Probably they would order their warriors to kill us.

Meadowes pointed at me and my chain and mimed me picking up unburned pieces of wreckage and piling it round the barrel to make a nice big fire.

The Gorbies seemed to like the idea of us working for them, but had no way of setting me free.

The Professor took care of that, he went off stage for a minute and returned dragging Jess Arkwright with him.

'Come along, Mr Arkwright,' he was saying. 'Just a few quick blows with the hammer and Mr Mason will be freed from the chain. Now we can't run or hide there's nowhere to go. Play the man Mr Arkwright and we may yet live to tell the tale.'

Arkwright picked up his hammer and chisel from where he had dropped them while the Gorbies looked on curiously, wondering what was to happen next.

'Stand up Mr Mason, next to the block. Don't look at them, Mr Arkwright. Ignore them. Keep the hammer with you when you finish. If the worst comes to the worst it will be an excellent weapon.'

The professor steadied the chisel on the bolt holding my leg irons while Jess Arkwright pounded away with his hammer. As he said it was poor quality metal and chisel cut though

the bolt after just a few strokes. There was a satisfactory clinking sound as my chain fell away.

'Put the chisel in your pocket. It could be a handy club. Not yet, Mr Arkwright.' He caught hold of Jess' arm as the man tried to sneak away. 'There is work to be done. You have to help gather fuel for the fire. At this point we must be bold, we have no other choice. If we try to run away they will hunt us down and kill us.'

This little guy was quite a leader. He was taking charge better than I could. We spread out searching for unburned fragments of the huts that had been blown away before they caught fire.

There was a lot still to be found, and we piled it around the barrel. The professor warned us not to put anything still smouldering on top, of the barrel or near the quickmatch. He wanted save his surprise for later.

After the fuel was gathered and stacked round the barrel Professor Meadows produced a tinder box made by Jess Arkwright. There were some iron rich pebbles inside which, when struck together, produced a spark, also finely ground dry bark. After a number of sparks had fallen on the bark he gently blew on it until it began to burn and, from that he lit the fire.

It was cold by now and the Gorbies gathered round to enjoy the warmth, chattering some commands to the Prof.

He backed away. 'I think they were ordering me to find food. Instead we had better take cover,' he muttered. 'I planted that barrel directly over the top of another that didn't explode. This should be quite a bang.'

The Gorbies didn't notice, but Jess and I crouched in a hole well back from the fire. The professor walked over and joined us. We peeped over the edge to see that my leather bag had been found and was being examined while they sat round the fire.

They were not impressed by the contents of the bag, the stuff must have tasted awful. One of them stood up and poured the gunpowder on the fire.

He was instantly engulfed by an eruption of scarlet flame and staggered back, his pelt on fire. The other Gorbies sprang up horrified, but we saw no more. We crouched down in the hole. Lying face down in the dirt with our hands over the backs of our heads

Far down as we were, the blackness before my closed eyes, turned red as a flash of light suffused the blood in my eyelids. A double blast followed, shaking the ground and causing soil to slide down the sides of the hole. Rubbish rained down. Something heavy fell on the top of my head, but I was protected by the shako which had survived so much.

Dazed, and with ringing ears, we crawled out of the hole.

The professor turned to me. 'That was an interesting example of physics at work. I wish my class could have seen it.'

He wanted to discuss physics at this critical moment in our careers.

'When the Gorbie threw loose gunpowder on the fire it caused a dangerous flare, not an explosion, whereas the gunpowder packed into the barrels exploded. So the lesson is when you want an explosion, rather than a flare, your explosive must be tightly packed in a strong container. Pity about the smoke, but I don't have the materials here to make smokeless powder.'

I suppose he was right, but a lesson on how to blow up people was not needed at that time because we were face to face with another peril.

The six warriors who brought the Gorbies had been ordered to stand well back from the fire and to go to another part of the ruined village. Even at that distance they had been knocked over by the blast, and suffered having wreckage showered on them, but they were unhurt and gathered their weapons as they stood up.

Lying almost at their feet was a badly injured Gorbie which had been blown clear across the village. They laughed as they stabbed the body of the creature with their spears and would have gone looking for more but, through the smoky gloom, they saw us, and came running.

Jess Arkwright tried to flee again. but Professor Meadowes, caught him by the arm. 'The hammer!' he said, 'It's still in your hand. Stay here and be ready to fight!' I hurriedly scrambled the pistol out of my pocket and pulled the hammer back.

The Prof. had no weapon, but he stood with us.

When close enough the warriors fell to their knees and then forward on their faces and rubbed their foreheads in the ashy soil.

'Get up,' said the professor. 'This soil is filthy, you must not rub your faces in it, that is not good personal hygiene'

'They want to surrender,' I said.

'So I believe.' He gestured for the warriors to stand up. They got to their knees, but remained kneeling, with bowed heads.

'Why are they doing that?'

'I think they expect us to get on their shoulders, which is clearly foolish. Our weight would be far too much for them. But they could carry food and equipment.'

'You have food and stuff?'

'My dear boy, we have been planning our revolt for months, everything has been thought of, including food. Weapons, footwear, warm clothing, seeds for new crops, even candles, everything. If the remaining Amazons were not prepared to treat us as equals we would go our own way and start afresh. The question now is, where are we to go?'

'I think I can help you there. If we find the place where I was captured I believe I could lead us all back to the camp I started from.'

'Is someone camping in this wilderness?'

'Yes, with beds, sleeping tents a mess tent, and properly cooked meals. Two women live there, mother and daughter, and the mother, Cheryl, is a scientist. She's busy right now building a laboratory, and I think she could use a researcher with your skills.'

'My dear Andrew, say no more. Let us get ready at once. Unfortunately my friend, the cooper, was killed in the raid. But I am sure Mr Arkwright will be more than welcome with his ability to make and repair.'

Aye, I'm a workman,' he said. 'Even if I do say so mesel. I can turn me hand to anything in the building and metalworking line, and make a reight good job of it.'

'Excellent! We will be welcome when we arrive and while we're on the march, you can tell us more about this mother and daughter.'

The professor was right about the stores that had been gathered together ready for the big breakout. There were sacks of food, and some goatskin waterbags which we filled from the well. Some muskets made by Mr Arkwright. Rifles would have been better, but he did not have the skill or machinery to make them.

All this was loaded on to the warriors so we could get away before anyone came to stop us.'

Jess Arkwright was particularly useful in tying knots and distributing the load so our bearers could carry it more easily. 'I shall name them,' said the Prof. It's not right that they should join our escape and have no names. We can't ask them who they are so I shall give them names.'

'Alright, as long as we don't hang around more than we have to. What are they.

He tapped each warrior on the chest as he named them. 'Sleepy - Sneezy - Grumpy - Happy - Sunny - and Doc.'

I had heard those names before from somewhere, but there was no time to discuss them.

My burned and scarred bag was located. It had been blown some distance by the flare, but apart from that it was still useable.

'An excellent find' said the professor. 'I made up a number of packets of gunpowder. They are quite waterproof, and would be a handy reserve if we have to fire the guns.'

The man must have loved making gunpowder, and I would be a walking bomb if I carried the bag. Besides it was heavy, he dropped a lot of lead musket balls in as well. Luckily they could be rammed without too much trouble into the barrel of my pistol. We draped the bag over Doc's shoulders, he was the biggest.

The other slaves had disappeared. Either run away or been killed. We couldn't find any but the professor thought we might pick up some of them on the way.

The plan was to leave at once. There was nothing to stay for and the Amazons and Gorbies were too busy fighting one another to notice that we were no longer about

Still, nothing ever goes to plan. We were just about to march out through the gateway when more visitors appeared. Two Amazons armed with spear and shield had come back



from the battle. I did not know either, but remembered them from the group who had slaughtered the Gorbies and captured me at the same time.

They saw the warriors and lowered their spears. 'Stand back,' cried one of them. 'We'll deal with them!'

They were about stick their spears through the cowering figures but we were just in time. The professor got between one of them and her prey, while I caught the other's arm so that her thrust missed.

She raged at me for upsetting her stroke and there was a lot of shouting until we convinced them that the cowering, frightened warriors were, prisoners of war, and now on our side.

When she calmed down, the Amazons, whose name was Hilda, stared at me and asked, 'What's happening today? When we were walking here there was a big flash of lightning over the village and a little later the noise of the thunder god. It was like being in the village when the Gorbies were dropping all those fire things on us.'

The other Amazon, whom I guessed was Catherine, had a black eye and was hugging the professor and crooning over him but he went straight into, lecture mode. He spoke to Hilda over Catherine's shoulder, even though he was a little breathless from being hugged so tightly. 'What a pity you didn't have a stop-watch,' he said. 'For all practical purposes you see a distant light, like an explosion the instant it is generated, but sound travels only about six hundred feet a second. If you had a stop watch you could have started it when you saw the flash and stopped it when you heard the explosion. A simple calculation would have worked out how far you were from the village'.

The two Amazons looked at each other. 'Cath., I told you he was mad,' said Hilda. She turned on the professor. 'We knew how far we were from the village. We live here and didn't need calculations, or whatever you call them, to tell us that. But what we want to know is what caused the lightning and the big bang.'

'Ah,' said the professor. 'It was the Gorbies that did it. The bombs that rained down on us, and caused all those terrible fires and explosions. They were really dragon eggs that the Gorbies had filled with flammable liquid that exploded and caught fire as they hit the ground'.

'Alright, but that was before, what caused the thunder and lightning we heard a while ago?'

'Well some Gorbies came, and they were very stupid they had some fire eggs and wanted to see if they still worked, so they threw them on to the fire.'

I could have thought up a better story than that.

'Well, you saw for yourself, the bombs exploded and killed the Gorbies sitting round the fire.'

How come you weren't killed too?'

'We had more sense than the Gorbies. We knew that the last thing you do is throw bombs on a fire. In fact it was the last thing they ever did. But we jumped into a hole when it happened.'

Catherine was so glad to see Professor Meadows alive and well that she accepted this unlikely story and hugged him some more. He almost disappeared into her embrace. Hilda frowned but asked no more questions.

She looked at her friend and shook her head. 'I don't know what she sees in the scrawny little runt. Anyway she's got him now, but we have to clear out of here, there's no time to waste'.

Catherine was saying, 'Oh, Teddy, you're safe! you're safe!'

Hilda pulled a face and turned away from this strange sight. She said 'I think the Gorbies were sorry they stirred us up. We carved our way through them until we got to the trees, and that gave us cover, and they can't really get at us. They tried to bomb us out but that was a waste of time, we just moved to one side, and the forest's too green to burn, anyway'.

Catherine said nothing, she was cuddling Professor Meadows, who struggled to get free.

'This is quite a problem,' said Hilda. 'The tribe's OK at the moment, but it's going to be a long slog to get you back to them. The direct way's lousy with Gorbies on the ground and overhead, we'd be cut down before we got across to the forest.'

'We are not coming with you,' retorted the professor, who had freed himself from Catherine. 'We renounce the name of slave. You Amazons can choose your own path, but leave us to go another way.'

Jess Arkwright and I nodded on hearing this declaration of independence. Hilda was outraged. Catherine burst into tears.

'You'll do what your bloody told! Cath. and me didn't walk miles out of our way just to hear rubbish like this. The tribe has to have slaves. We do the fighting and you lot do servant's work. That's the way it's always been, and that's the way it's going to stay. Now just shut up and we'll work out how, to get you back to the tribe. That's why they sent us.'

She turned on Catherine. 'Now Cath., stop that bloody snivelling, it's getting on me nerves. It's coming on dark now. If we walk all night and take a wide sweep round the fighting we might back with the others about mid-morning.'

'We are not coming,' repeated the professor, 'But if you intend to force us I will make a nice fire to warm you before we start.'

'There's no time for fires. If we're going to walk all night we'll have to start now.'

I pulled the pistol out of my pocket again. It was still loaded. I pulled the hammer back until it clicked into place.

Hilda glanced down at the weapon but did not recognise it as a threat. She knew nothing of guns.

I often thought of the camp where the two women lived. I was there for only one night but now it seemed like home, and I was desperate to go home. If the Amazon tried to force us to rejoin the tribe I would kill her.

'I want to be with Teddy,' said Catherine. 'If he leaves the tribe I'll go too and protect him.'

I told you you were mad Cath., and this proves it. If you walk away from the tribe when they're in trouble they'll kill you. You could never come back!'

I could see by the Professor's face that he had hoped to escape Catherine's attentions, but she and Hilda had returned too soon.

You can go back, Hilda, I want to be with the man I love.' The professor's shoulders sagged.

There's another Amazon tribe out there, Teddy and I could join it, and they'd probably be glad to have us.'

I wondered if she knew how to find this tribe. There could only be one other, and that was near home.

'Oh Cath., I wish you'd never seen the little bugger, but I can't go back without you and the slaves, they'd never understand. I'd kill him now if I thought it would help, but it would probably make you worse. I tell you what, I'll come too until you get over this strange love thing, then maybe I can kill him.

We couldn't stay where we were, and this was the best offer we could get, so Hilda agreed to us moving off straight away. Catherine admitted she had no idea where the other Amazon tribe might be so we had to go with my original plan, to find our way to the place where I was captured by the Gorbies and then follow luck and memory, or find motor bike tracks, if any, and get home that way

I made the pistol safe by lowering the hammer slowly, but if Hilda tried to injure the professor I would shoot her.

The wooden walls of the village, having smouldered for a while flared up again and the final ruin of the Amazon's settlement was marked by a series of groaning noises as the logs came under pressure followed by crashes as the walls collapsed. Each upright log was fastened to its neighbor and as each burned section fell it dragged down another until nothing was left standing. Cath. shed a tear or two, Hilda shook her head, but the rest of us were happy to walk away

Hilda knew the place well where the ambush had taken place and could lead us to it, even during the darkness of night.

We walked all the way. This time, there was no running because of the condition of the warriors. Our party arrived at the hill before dawn and sheltered behind the same standing stone where Hilda and some others had concealed themselves before attacking the Gorbies.

This time it was to shield ourselves from a bitter cold wind that had blown up during the night.

The big rock gave us little shelter and we all shivered uncontrollably as we squatted under the distant light of blazing stars and a moon not yet full that rose while we were still on the march. Dark shadows swept across the ground as they raced after scurrying clouds. We ate an early breakfast of bread and dried meat.

Our prisoners of war seemed to feel the cold more than anyone. They shivered and huddled together for warmth, but refused all offers of food. The professor went through his store of provisions but nothing appealed to them and they shook their heads listlessly each time he offered them something to eat.

'Don't give the idle buggers anything,' said Hilda. 'Our people are back in the forest with no food except what the hunters can bring in. If Cath. could give up this crazy idea about love, whatever that is, we could take it all back with us.'

When the night started to turn and streaks of light appeared in the eastern sky we got the carriers to their feet and loaded them up again. They were not well boys, still shivering, and seemed weaker than yesterday.

Hilda inspected them, their eyes were still vacant and staring. 'They're going to hold us back,' she said. 'I don't know how long they'll last, but I can put them down for you right now. They'll be out of their misery, and it would save us a lot of trouble.'

'No, you will not!' I was really angry. 'We're tired of murders and battles, and meaningless deaths. If they can't keep up we'll wait for them. But there'll be no massacres, do you hear me?'

Hilda glared at me but the Prof. patted me on the back. 'Well said, Andrew. We are in a barbaric land but we are not barbarians. What do you say Mr Arkwright?'

'Ahm with yer,' said Jess. 'We wouldn't put up wi' that sort o' thing in Yorkford, and we won't here.'

Hilda shrugged. 'Well, if we get into trouble because of this bloody stupidity don't expect Cath. and me to hang around and get you out of it.'

She caught hold of my arm as we were about to move off. 'You've been this way before and must remember something about it, walk with me. Everyone else fall in behind. I'm the tracker and I don't want people trampling over any traces that may still be here.' She turned to me again. 'Watch out for landmarks, or anything that might remind you which way you came.'

It was now light enough for her to see any tracks and in spite of fatigue we did not want to stay in this miserable, cold place, especially if there were Gorbies around. She led us down hill and motioned for everyone to stay back while she examined the ground.

'Look, this is where the ambush happened. The Gorbies came later, took away their own dead and then they let the lizards eat the bodies, of the warriors we killed.' She pointed to crunched and broken bones that lay on the ground. 'The signs are clear, and the lizards'll have us to eat too, if we're not careful. Another thing, if they're flying around and we're hiding don't look up at them. They'll see your faces.'

The professor, Jess and I were carrying Jess's home-made muskets and were glad to have them after seeing the evidence lying around in this grisly place.

Hilda and Catherine didn't understand when told they were dangerous weapons, but there was no demonstration of how they worked. Powder and shot had to be conserved.

Hilda called me to her side. She pointed to the hill where we had spent part of the night. 'We attacked you on your left just as you were turning left to go round it into the valley, because that's where the Gorbies hang out. Did you cross any hills during the march?'

'No, we were walking on flat ground all the way. It was open grassland, though we passed plenty of trees.'

'Did you take any notice of the mountain?'

'Yes, that was on our left, too. I think the hills got bigger the closer they were to the mountain. But we didn't climb any.'

'Yeah, that'd be right. It gives us a good line to follow. We'll keep the hills and the mountain on our right for a while and see what happens. Watch out as we go and try to remember any landmarks. Come on,' she cried. 'Andrew and me in front, you follow, don't try to pass us.'

We set off. Hilda with eyes to the ground. I couldn't see any trace of my passage from the other day, but Hilda announced that we were going well. She said, 'I see your footprints sometimes. You were walking at the back tied by that rope you were telling me about, and you wear those funny things you call boots, no one else had them on, so I know it was you. You stumbled a few times.'

I had to take her word for it, I couldn't see any of the things she pointed out.

We walked steadily for about an hour, then she held up her hand to stop the party.

'Come and look at this, Cath..' They examined the ground together. 'You can see he was plodding along not watching where he was going and got out of line. One of the Gorbies turned his mount round and forced him back into his place at the end of the file.'

Catherine studied the ground for a minute. 'I think you're right, Hilda. I don't see it as clearly as you, but those are his bootmarks, and he did stagger a bit. Did the Gorbie hit you with a whip, Andrew?'

The others gathered round trying to read the signs on the ground. Except our bearers who stood to one side shaking and swaying. They were in a bad way and seemed ready to drop.

'Yes, I remember that. He lashed out at me. It stung, but it didn't really hurt that much.' It would take more than a whipping to stop the gladness that welled up in me at this time. Hilda was an expert tracker and with her help we would find the place where I was captured, and after that she could lead us along the motor- bike tracks to home.

## **Chapter nine**

### **Hunted by Gorbies**

After another hour we were walking through country with trees growing alone or in sparse clumps, and on our right a stony slope covered in boulders. It stretched away towards the mountain, rising during the whole distance. I didn't remember all this. I had been too miserable and shocked by Lance's death to pay attention when I was stumbling along behind the Gorbies.

Hilda told me it was alright and we were still on track to find the place where they caught me. She pointed out my footprints, where I had been walking the other day. But there was no way I could see them.

She raised her hand, and we all stopped.

'It's those bloody lizards again', she said. They're up wind of us and I can smell them. Run for that tree over there.' She pointed to a tree with wide spreading branches, close to the rocks. We hurried towards it and got under shelter.

The tree's leaves were turning brown almost ready to drop, Autumn was on us though the day had warmed, just a little.

'Squat down!' ordered Hilda. 'Heads down, don't look up. I'll stand behind the tree and keep a lookout. Stay still, don't move! They might not see us.'

We squatted as told and lowered our heads until she suddenly screamed again. 'Get those bloody idiots back under cover.'

She ran towards the bearers who had not sought shelter with us but had clustered around a flowered bush and were busy pulling off leaves and cramming them into their mouths.

Everyone ran to bustle the bearers back under shelter. They had to be dragged away because they pulled off leaves and forced them into their mouths until they could no longer reach out to clutch at the bush.

'It's rather a pretty bush,' said Professor Meadowes who was holding a small purple flower and a spray of leaves still attached to a twig. 'I wish we had a botanist here, but I shall keep these specimens until they can be examined by an expert.'

'Get down', screamed Hilda.

We pulled the bearers to the ground under the cover of the branches. They were chewing busily with cheeks distended by all the leaves stuffed inside, but they didn't resist.

'It's the *Eatme Eatme* bush,' whispered Catherine. 'That's how the Gorbies control them. It's a sort of drug. Once you've eaten the leaves you don't want anything else. They have to be forced to eat proper food.'

'Like the Lotos Eaters, in the poem by Tennyson?'

Silence followed these words, no one knew what the professor was talking about.

Surely you must have learned it at school.'

It seemed not. The Amazons were too busy hunting and fighting to bother about schools, or poetry lessons.

Watch out,' cried Hilda. They've spotted us.

Two lizards were now circling the tree and we could see their riders peering down.

Our Amazons had bows and arrows. They stepped out from under the cover of the tree and loosed off an arrow each. One lodged in the membrane of a wing. The creature cried out and turned away, followed by two more arrows, which missed.

It was time for me to have a go. I raised my musket, took aim and pulled the trigger. The hammer fell and almost half a heart beat later there was a terrible blast and I was knocked over. We heard a chittering sound from above as the remaining dragon rider turned away, unharmed.

'Ah,' said Jess Arkwright, waving away with his hands a dense, smelly cloud of smoke. 'Them muskets 'ave a terrible kick; Like a mule, I'm told. Are you alright, lad?'

Another example of the Newtonian principles governing the world', remarked the Professor. 'You were knocked over by the reaction of the gun against your shoulder, exactly the same force that pushes space ships into orbit'.

'Ah best reload the gun,' said Jess, and this time a pinch less powder. Now, Mr Mason, if ye'll juist take notice I'll show 'ee how it's done.'

I climbed to my feet and stood slightly hunched while rubbing my shoulder, trying to ease the pain.

He stood the gun on its butt end and poured some powder down the barrel. 'Now the ball.' He held up a small lead ball between finger and thumb and rested it on the muzzle. A little smaller and it would have slipped easily down the barrel. 'Muzzle loading guns were

used as late as the American Civil War in the 1860s'Professor Meadowes informed me, 'But not later, I think. They were superseded during the war by much better weapons.'

Jess Arkwright continued his demonstration. He took the ramrod, which was clipped to the bottom of the gun barrel and used it to ram the bullet down until it was hard against the gunpowder. 'That's a good tight fit', he said. 'But don't try any fancy shooting like ye did just then; ye'll miss every time. Muskets are deadly but only when you get real close.'

The bearers were glassy eyed as ever but seemed stronger and ready to go on. They would have gathered round the *Eat me Eat me* bush again but the Amazons forced them back while the professor picked leaves and stuffed them into a small sack.

'What are you saving those for

'You can't feed them that stuff, they're drugged already'

'Yes, but we can wean them off it gradually. I can give them a leaf or two after they have had some food. That will be their reward for eating properly. The poor creatures were suffering from Cold Turkey.'

'Never heard of it. What's Cold Turkey?'

'Well, you see I rounded off my education by talking to the boys in class. They told me that Cold Turkey was the name for the pangs suffered by drug addicts hen their supply of drugs was cut off.'

We were interrupted. by Hilda calling out, 'They're bringing up reinforcements.'

About twenty Gorbies appeared, mounted as usual. They whipped up their steeds and raced towards us.

'The rocks!' shouted Hilda. She pointed with her spear. 'Go for the rocks, run!'

We sprinted to a jumble of great boulders that were nearby. Once in there we would be hard to get at.

When we reached the shelter Hilda was still not satisfied. 'This is no good, they'll circle round and get at us from behind. Keep moving until we find some place we can defend. Some narrow place with no back entrance. Only two of us are armed, and that makes it hard.'

'We've got muskets, and the bearers have their spears and bows.'

Bloody muskets! Bang, smoke, and you're flat on your back.'

'Well, you and Cath. let off four arrows and only one hit anything.'

'Shut up and keep running!'

We ran on for about twenty minutes, but I could see the professor was beginning to fail.



I put my arm round his waist as we stumbled on, trying to give some support. Jess Arkwright came to his other side and helped us. 'A reight good friend,' he said. 'Them Gorbies won't get him if I can help it'

Our Lotos Eaters were running strongly though they were spitting out bits of leaves all the time. The encounter with the *Eat me Eat me* bush had given them new life.

Cath. was loping along behind us. She could have run faster but Hilda had assigned her the job of rear guard. At the moment no enemy was in sight. She noticed the trouble we were having to help the professor, and handed me her spear. She picked him up, threw him over her shoulder, took back the spear and ran on. Then we came to a strongly flowing stream which meandered out of sight among the rocks behind us. The water was frigid.

'Keep going!!' Shouted Hilda. 'Run for the opening!'

We couldn't turn back because of the enemies who followed, but waded knee deep towards an opening between two solid rock faces. That was where the water was coming from.

We went between them to find a grassy patch of land like a small lawn. It was above water level. 'We can't go back,' said Hilda.as we paused for a moment. 'Even if they don't follow they'll be waiting for us to come out.'

I don't think they'll come after us,' I said, as we hurried on. 'This place is becoming narrower and easier to defend all the time.'

'Not if they've got some of those fire eggs on hand,' retorted Hilda. 'We're here and the walls are coming together. If they dropped a few of those things on us we'd fry. That is if the explosion didn't kill us first. Keep climbing, we might come to an open space where we can dodge'

Hilda was right, our party was in a cleft leading us upwards towards the mountain. It had been carved through rock by the water. and the way became ever steeper and narrower, and the walls higher, as we struggled on towards the source. The stream ran faster as the climbing became steeper. It crashed into rocks on its way down to throw up a misty spray, but we still had a path to follow,

Through this ordeal Cath carried her love. He struggled to get down and walk, but Cath was too strong for him.

Our passage between rock walls which were becoming higher It was not straight but turned in places and water foamed against rocks as it changed direction. Stony ridges showing above the water were slippery wet with mist and spray, but we had to struggle over them, helping one another. As we climbed onwards the walls on either side closed in and grew even higher.

The late afternoon sunshine was cut off by the cleft we were in, and the water was nearly freezing. By this time we were all puffing with the exertion and breath steamed from our mouths as we toiled higher and higher.

The stream, now a racing torrent, did not flood the gorge wall to wall and we walked through grass and low bushes. If we had lost the path and been forced into the stream the current would have swept us away. But the path did run out as we came to a dangerous impassable spot far higher than where we started.

At the next turning the gorge beyond was even steeper. Water from above poured down as through a sluice and crashed against the wall on our side and we were walking in a cold mist of spray, wondering what to do next.. The rocks were, drowned in foam and rushing water, and there was no way to get past. The party stopped to study this obstruction.

'We might have to go back and cross lower down', I said

Hilda ignored me. She stepped into the stream, not far below where it made its noisy change of course. She was testing the depth of the water with the butt of her spear and struggling to keep her footing.

She looked up. 'Cath,' she screamed. 'Come and help. Put him down!'

Catherine lifted the professor from her shoulder and stood him on his feet. She was so strong I think she had forgotten he was there. She gave him a brief kiss and stepped into the rushing water.

'Wait, wait! cried The Prof., we could barely hear him above the noise of the torrent. 'We have rope! There's plenty here.'

He turned to our bearers 'It's carried by either Sneezzy or Grumpy, I forget which'. He pointed them out and it was Grumpy who was carrying the rope.

Catherine came back out of the water and two ropes were tied round her waist. One was for her and one for Hilda, while the rest of the party divided into two halves to hold on to our end of the ropes in case the girls should be swept away.

Catherine went back in towards Hilda who was still fighting the current to stay in one place. The water was icy and I could see how her hands were shaking as she tied herself to the rope.

She tried again to reach the far bank but must have stepped into a hole in spite of her probing with the spear, and then she was being swept downstream.

Not far, though. The watchers on the bank were holding firm, and she travelled only a little distance before the rope went taut and she ended up on rocks on our side of the stream. She struggled to her feet.

She had lost her spear which floated in the current. I ran down to pick it out of the water just as it was about to float away downstream and presented it to her.

Up to her waist in icy water like a river nymph, though shivering with cold, she glared at me. 'Don't you do that again!', she said, clenching her teeth to stop them from chattering. 'It's my spear and if lose it I'll find it myself.'

It seemed that Miss Hilda, no matter what her qualities as a warrior or guide, was sensitive in some matters. I was not a spear bearer so I walked away, my boots full of freezing water.

She called to Catherine. 'Cath. We'll try here, move down.' Why she chose that spot I don't know, instinct perhaps. We all moved down to be opposite her and Catherine, and let the rope slide through our hands as one or another of the girls worked painfully to the other side of the stream. We would clamp it tight instantly if one was to slip and fall.

With the aid of her spear Catherine finally got to the far side and propped there to anchor the others as they crossed. We sent the bearers next, one at a time and after they had all crossed safely we had a number of ropes strung from one bank to the other.

With crossing ropes in place Hilda decided she was no longer needed as an anchor in the middle, she struggled out shivering from head to foot.

After that we all crossed, thankful for the ropes which saved us from a quick trip downstream. On the far side the whole party huddled together in a shivering, saturated group. 'Come on,' said Hilda. 'We can't stand around like this. Gather up all those ropes and put them back in the bag,

'No,' said the professor. 'Coil them and carry them, one each. Instinct tells me we will need them when we get round the corner.'

He was right again. The next slope was impossible. The gorge was narrower than ever, and steeper. The water ran so fast that all soil had been scoured away, leaving no path either side only an impassable torrent pouring down a steep slope.

I examined the cliff which towered above us. 'We're not beaten yet. There are plenty of hand and foot-holes on the rock-face. We can get to the top and then work out our route from there.'

'I'll go first', said Hilda. She was quaking with cold and could barely speak her teeth chattered so much.. 'No you won't!' I retorted. 'I'll go first. I've done a lot of rock climbing back home. You're shaking so much you'll shake yourself right off the cliff-face. Wait until I get a safety rope attached to something solid up there, then you can climb.'

Professor Meadowes, ever eager for knowledge asked, 'Did you learn the art in Switzerland?'

'No, on The Arapiles, in Western Victoria. The rock climbing there is as good as anywhere in Australia. If you want to try it go by way of Natimuk.

I turned to Jess Arkwright. 'Tie the longest rope we have to my waist, Jess, and the other end to the next person to go up, and I'll take a coil over my shoulder. If there's a tree, or something solid I can anchor to it'll be handy. When I'm settled I'll tug the rope that's the sign for the next one to come up. If anyone's too frightened to climb tell them they can't fall because I'll hold them with the rope. If that doesn't work say the Gorbies are coming that should smarten them up a bit.'

There was nothing to wait for. We all needed warmth and rest so I started the climb straight away. Back home the climb would have got just an ordinary rating. No shortage of hand and foot-holes. There was a bit of an overhang at the very last but nothing to worry about. At the top I found a grassy meadow and nearby, the mouth of a cave. The stream poured out of the entrance and then into the gorge.

Catherine came next. She untied herself, gathered up my rope and threw the end down for the next person.

I found a small tree close by and anchored myself to it, then sat close to the edge, Catherine did the same with a rope she had brought up, settled beside me, and together we fished for people. One or two slipped and would have fallen but for us being anchored to them. No problems, we hauled them in anyway.

## Chapter ten

### The Cave

Our collection of spears and shields bows and arrows were second last to come up, and Hilda last of all. In spite of her half frozen fingers she managed to tie them securely. As she couldn't be first she decided to be last. She had appointed herself rearguard in case the Gorbies came after us. Personally I thought they had given up the chase some time back. It was too dangerous for them. If they had fallen into the stream they would have been swept away, nor had we seen a glimpse of the lizards since we left them behind.

When Hilda arrived, still shaking with cold, she did the same as everyone else. She looked around and then made for the cave to get out of the biting wind blowing over the plateau. Catherine and I coiled our ropes and followed.

The cave was big, with a floor of thick sand. The stream, which flowed out of inky blackness into the light, occupied less than half the space, leaving us room to spread out and already there was a fire lightening the gloom.

The professor and Jess stripped our bearers of their loads but would not let them rest, no one could.. Fuel was needed to keep the fire going all night, and there was room in the cave for two fires

Everyone had to join in gathering fallen branches, twigs, moss. anything that would burn until we had enough fuel to keep one fire going during the night, perhaps even the second fire.

Soon two fires were blazing and there was room for us all to hold up our wet clothes to dry. The smoke was not too bad, a steady flow of cold air from deep in the cave drove most of it outside. It drove away the warm air too, but that could not be helped

It was getting dark outside as we finally unpacked the food and were given a blanket each to keep our backs warm as we sat round facing the fire. The prof. handed out a strip of dried, smoked meat to each of us, and some bread. The meat was a dark reddish colour, and quite hard. Not too bad after it was chewed for a while, in fact quite tasty.

The bearers didn't want their dried meat. Instead they were eager to get the bag of leaves. The professor was firm with them. Eat their meat first, a leaf each of the *Eatme-Eatme* bush later. They didn't understand our language, nor we theirs, but they got the picture, gave in, ate their food, and got their reward. After this little play was worked out we were presented half an apple each, which seemed to be the last course

'We must ration food,' said the professor. 'We don't know when or where we can get more.'

Hilda glared suspiciously at her half apple. 'This food was stolen from the tribe.'

'Quite so,' retorted the professor. 'We took it in place of wages. You never paid us for our work. But you can leave us in the morning if you don't like eating stolen property. Regardless of that there are gifts for everyone here. Mr Arkwright, would you please explain.'

'Ah can't make speeches,' said Jess. 'Ah can do owt, make owt, but I'm no talker. You tell 'em, professor.'

Professor Meadows rose. 'My friend, Mr Arkwright, can, as he told you, do or make anything, and amongst his skills is that of knitting. He can knit any garment from jumpers to socks. To enable him to follow his hobby he made a spinning wheel to convert wool taken from the sheep

"Stolen from the sheep,' said Hilda.'

'Exactly so. As you say we stole fleece from sheep belonging to the tribe. You never paid us for our work, so we couldn't buy it. Anyway, we gave Mr Arkwright the stolen fleece and he converted it on his spinning wheel from fleece to woollen thread. After that triumph he turned to knitting. He particularly enjoys knitting bed socks, and now he can present to everyone here a pair of the finest woollen bed socks you will ever receive.

This sounded good to me. I had never thought about bed socks in my entire life, but now, to get them in this cold, draughty cave sounded like a gift from heaven.

There was a burst of applause and thanks for Jess as he handed out his socks. Once we had them there was a general urge to go to bed and try them out.

Everyone was drooping from tiredness because of our efforts to get here, and we hadn't slept at all the night before.

I chose a spot to sleep a little removed from the others. I could see the fires though they did not warm our refuge. I dug a hip-hole in the sand, placed the blanket over it and sat down to take off my boots and socks to put on Jess' gift. The socks taken off were still damp, but at least clean after my adventures in the river. They were laid as extra padding on the boots which were to be my pillow, and over that was laid the red tunic. I wrapped up in the

blanket and laid my head on the tunic. It couldn't have been better, the bed socks were terrific, and the hip-hole was in the right position I had slept in much worse places than this.

I lay there before sleep, hearing the stream burbling past and thinking about all that had happened while getting here and wondering what would happen tomorrow. I was enjoying the first real warmth I had felt for hours when someone flicked the blanket off and exposed me to the frigid air of the cave. It was Hilda.

She lay down on my blanket, sharing it with me. She had two others, big and comfortable, which she threw over us, one each. She said, 'Meadowes told me I was a special case so I could have two blankets. I've changed my mind about killing him. And you're to warm me up.'

Was that his idea?'

'No, mine. And take your trousers off. I don't go to bed with a man who's still wearing his trousers. Take 'em off !

It seemed to be an important rule in her life so I removed them under the blanket, being careful not to lose the bed socks. She put on her bed socks as well, even though they were stolen property

She moved closer, shivering. 'By the Great Mother, I'm still cold. Put your arms round me.'

Anything to oblige, I did as I was told. She was right, it was like embracing a block of ice. It was a time for quick thinking. I said, 'Turn over and I'll rub your back, that should warm you in no time. 'For once she did as she was told and lay there, still trembling with cold.

She had a very good back. Any woman would be pleased to have a back like that. Muscular, strong, slim, very pleasing! I rubbed it briskly, firmly, from her shoulders to her buttocks, while she breathed in short, hard gasps. I was rubbing so vigorously I had to move her hair out of the way with my spare hand and then catch hold of her shoulder so she wouldn't be pushed off the blanket.

After a while spent on this treatment I slapped her on the bottom and asked if that was enough.

She rolled round to face me and nodded. 'Yes, that was good'. She pulled us closer, and we drew the blankets up to our chins. 'You can do it again tomorrow night'. She moved my arm and rested her head on it, though her moccasins were close by, and I had opened the tunic to cover them as well as my boots. Her hair cascaded over my arm and shoulder and I had to blow it away from my mouth. She was almost warm now. Looking into her face I saw that in spite of her sternness and bloodthirsty impulses she was no older than me. Amazons have hard, difficult lives, much harder than ours. She had probably been warring with other tribes and hunting for her food since she was quite small.

She was feeling better, and actually smiled while looking at me. 'Wait a minute.' she said. 'There's something I want to see.' 'Lie on your back for a moment.'

Someone had thrown fuel on the fire and it was burning brightly. I did as I was told, wondering what was to happen next.

I had not noticed her hair before the back rub. Usually it was in a sort of top-knot held together by a bone needle, or some such. Now I saw it was beautiful, glossy and black.

She leaned on her elbow, took a handful of her black, damp hair and held it across my face, just under my nose. She looked at me, grinning, 'Yes I thought so. You should grow a moustache. It would look good, you have dark hair like me, and a beard would look good too.'

'Give me that.' I took the hair and tried it under her nose, then shook my head.

'Don't you grow a moustache. It wouldn't suit you at all.' We both laughed, and she snuggled closer. 'I'm sorry for the way I spoke to you today,' she said. 'But really, I was angry with myself. You know, we Amazons have a saying - "If you lose your spear you lose your honour." I should never have dropped my spear no matter what happened. And if you hadn't brought it back it could have been lost forever. I would have had to go through all sorts of tests before they would have let me fight again in the front rank during a battle. I felt bad about that.'

I thought it was a risky sort of honour to win, but said nothing. Instead I kissed her and felt her breasts pressing against my chest, a pleasant sensation.

'Apology accepted. I won't tell anyone you dropped your spear if you tell all the girls we meet that I'm very good at female back rubs'.

Her eyes narrowed. 'Just you watch it, or you'll be in a lot of trouble.' We laughed again. 'Well, before the trouble starts, I want to remind you I've finished the back, do you want me to start on the front?'

She drew in a short breath. 'No, not if it's going to be as hard as the back rub. But if you're gentle this time, yes! Kiss me again, first.' I liked that.

I kissed her as asked, and we both liked it.

I felt her breasts, they were perfect. Pleasing for a woman to have, and superb for a man to touch.

I kissed and stroked them. She stiffened. Her hands also were wandering and we were both having trouble breathing. We listened to each other's hearts as they drove blood through veins, and arteries suffusing every part of our bodies, and warming us. We couldn't wait any longer. The rest was so easy, so heart-stopping. She moaned as we melded into each other and clung together in a world of our own, no cave, no one else, just us.

Then we lay side by side, wrung out, exhausted. She put her head close and whispered, 'Tomorrow?'

I nodded, and a little later, as we kissed goodnight, she was still smiling.

After what seemed only minutes she was prodding and shaking me. Fiercely whispering for me to wake up.

I climbed out of the depths of sleep and looked with half opened eyes towards the entrance of the cave, and saw something marvellous. A moon was out there escorting a convoy of brilliant stars that were too bright to be dazzled, by moonlight. They were dropping towards the west and would soon set. We had been asleep the whole night, and within the hour the sun would be rising over the other side of the mountain we were in. I knew it wasn't our familiar old moon, the markings on the face were different, and I didn't recognise any star clusters either. Probably the same stars but seen from a different angle.

Hilda hadn't woken me in the early morning, after a long dreamless sleep, to see the wonders of the universe. She was lying on top with her chin over my shoulder muttering urgently. 'Let's do it again.' She blew into my ear.

I nodded This time more slowly. You know, take it easy. We can make it last longer.'

I was not sleepy, any more and we made love tenderly, calmly with the blessing of moon and starlight.

Even in our exalted state, we could not defy nature. We must have fallen asleep again after it was over because we were still lying close together under our blankets when the others in the cave were stirring, feeding the fires, gathering more fuel, and waiting for breakfast.

We woke together and Hilda looked at the sand. 'They've been stepping over us, and walking round us,' she said. We'd better get up.'

## Chapter eleven

### The Rocky Passage

The mountain range behind us cast a shadow over the difficult country we had passed through, its peaks were outlined by the light of the rising sun. Catherine had risen before dawn and roused the bearers who were made to take off their bed socks and fold their blankets. Then she led them out of the cave into the cold half light.

No one had taken away their bows and arrows because they seemed tame enough, and Catherine thought they might be good shots. Well, they were, and the party came back with a collection of snow rabbits, and some large, plump birds I had not seen before. They brought in enough food to keep us going for several days.

The prof. wanted to keep one of the birds and stuff it until it could be identified. He was overruled. Catherine said there were plenty more out there and she was hungry. If he wanted a specimen he was invited to go and get his own.



The girls had a lifetime of experience in skinning animals as well as plucking birds and cooking over an open fire. The heavenly odour of our breakfast was soon being driven outwards by the unceasing wind from somewhere inside the cave.

You should have called me,' said Hilda. 'I would have come too.'

Catherine smiled. 'I didn't like to. After what we were hearing last night we thought you would be exhausted, so we let you sleep in.'

Nothing more was said. We concentrated on tearing our food apart and eating it with the aid of fingers. The prof's. escape plans had included knives, but plates and forks were not to found in an Amazon village, so we came away without them.

No matter, we had all the water we could drink and it was also good for a wash.

The prof. again took a firm line with the bearers. They had to eat breakfast before he would give them one each of his supply of narcotic leaves. They were very obedient and seemed to revere him. I think they knew it was his explosion that had freed them from the Gorbies. And the incident when we stopped Hilda from slaughtering them would not be forgotten.

After breakfast the question before us was what to do next.

'I don't want to go back the way we came,' said Hilda. 'The Gorbies are probably watching out for us, and then we'd have to have the fight we backed away from yesterday, but if we go in the direction Andy wants to follow we'll be climbing over rocks all day, probably longer. The grassland we were walking on yesterday is a long way away if we take that route.'

The prof. had another suggestion. 'This wind that constantly blows out of the cave tells me that it has another entrance higher up in the mountain. My suggestion is that we follow the stream to its source, and we can find an exit that is not watched by the enemy.'

'How far away do you think it is?'

'I have no idea. We won't know until we get there.'

'Well, we'll be walking in pitch darkness because if we carry candles they'll blow out.'

The professor smiled. 'You have forgotten the ingenuity of my very good friend Mr Arkwright. He found some suitable sand and, after experimenting, made glass, and then lanterns so our candles will remain alight in the midst of a gale.'

The professor's idea didn't appeal much. None of us wanted to tramp through a cave of unknown size and length to find an opening that may or may not be better than where we were. There was the stream too. The rising sun heralded a perfect autumn day and melting snow. It was likely that in places we would have to force our way against a rushing, frigid torrent of melt water

Not that our present location gave us much satisfaction. We were on what one might call a grassy platform with sheer cliffs on either side. The drop was no problem, if we climbed up one side we could go down the other. It was the bottom that looked uninviting. We would

descend into an area of shattered rock and giant boulders, and beyond that there were more cliffs that had to be scaled or walked round.

We decided unwillingly to try the cave.

'Muskets!' said Jess. 'We mun charge the muskets before we set foot in the cave. Now Mr.Mason you have seen how it's done. Let's see thee do it thysen.'

'It's already loaded.' I said. 'How do I get the old charge out?'

'You mun shoot it out. Hold up yer musket.'

I held it up for his inspection.

He poured a little black powder into a small pan built on the top of the gun. There was a tiny hole in the middle of the pan and some grains of powder trickled into it.

'Check yer flint to make sure it's alright. Thumb the hammer back and point yer gun outwards, not at any of us.'

He urged the professor to do the same. We both cocked the hammers on our guns and and held the butt of the gun hard against our shoulders so the recoil would hurt less. We both fired at the same time.

After yesterday it was disappointing. The guns didn't bang, they coughed, there was no recoil to speak of.'

'I wor reight,' said Jess, Powder wor damp. Come on lads, reload.'

When we were almost ready to go I said, 'If we're going to explore a cave with a river running through it we should be roped together. If anyone falls in we all drop down and grab a rock or something to stop us from being dragged in too.'

I joined some lengths of rope and tied them around everyone's waist, so we could go in single file, about two and a half meters apart. We walked reluctantly into the darkness of the cave, and soon we were treading on rock, hearing the stream rush past us, as it hurried down to the plains.

Jess' lanterns didn't give much light, because the glass was thick and pebbly. Given time to practise his glass making skills our resident genius would have done better, but we were glad of them to dispel the total darkness, through which we struggled for hours..

I had a lantern because I was in front. Hilda followed me in case any fighting should be necessary. She and Catherine probed the path with spears as they went, checking for pot holes. Behind Hilda and me was Jess, who also carried one of his lights, then followed the bearers,. The professor had the third light. The bearers had never been underground before and were terrified of the cave and the blackness in which we were stumbling. They seemed to take some comfort from having Jess in front of them and the professor behind. they knew as well as anyone that stumbling in a pot hole could bring them down to end up in the stream

Catherine was last of all. She was the rearguard, ready to fight in the unlikely event that we were followed.

It was hard going. The tunnel we were in sloped upwards, the rocks underfoot were slimy and damp. We slipped many a time but no one fell in. Just as well; if one had fallen we might have been all dragged in. The stream was running fast and high.

The roof was low overhead, sometimes it came lower so we had to hunch down. I bumped my head once or twice. It hurt but no real damage done. The battered shako was still in place and took most of the blow.

Hilda was not sympathetic, she told me to stoop a bit lower, watch what I was doing, and not to complain because it was my own fault. Then she hit her own head on the roof. I told her she should hunch down a bit, and not complain though she was rubbing the sore spot for a while. I got a punch on the back over that little episode, but not too hard.

After slogging along for what seemed hours we came to a waterfall. We had been hearing it for some time and were worried that it might be too high to pass.

It was not that big, four and a half meters, perhaps, It was hard to see the top in the poor light of the lantern. Even when everyone caught up to crowd behind me, and three lights were shining on the curtain of water, it was hard to tell because of the spray and mist in that narrow space.

'We have to climb it or go back,' I shouted over the noise of falling water. My voice added to the din, echoing and re-echoing down the passage. 'First thing, everybody pick up the rope joining you to the person front. It's all lying on the floor now we're crowded together, and if someone trips over it we could all fall in.'

The rope was hastily gathered up and I could hear Jess and the professor getting the bearers to do the same.

The water was not tumbling down on our half of the wall, but was trickling instead, wetting the barrier that had to be climbed. I passed my lantern to Hilda and she shone it over my shoulder while I felt for hand and foot-holds. 'Be careful, Andy!' she whispered, and kissed me on the back of the neck. 'Please don't fall.' I reached round behind me and she squeezed my hand.

I was afraid, but would not show fear in front of Hilda. She let go of my hand and I reached as high as possible to catch hold of a wet, slippery outcrop of rock.

'We have lift off,' I thought, and scraped my left foot across the rock face looking for the toe-hold I had noted earlier. Hilda saw what I was doing and guided my boot to a perilously small and greasy projection. I was stuck; there was nowhere I could put my other foot until I heard something click against the rock-face.

It was a musket. Professor Meadows had brought the bearers forward and three were holding the gun upside down so I could put my other foot on the butt and push upwards

against their united strength. He marshalled the other three and they put a second musket against the rock-face. It was higher than the first.

Hilda and Catherine joined in, and the two parties managed to push me, with cracking muscles, just a little higher. I reached upwards trying to find the top of the wall and was rewarded by grasping another knob of rock which was the most secure I had found yet. Rivulets of freezing water had been flowing over my hands, down my outstretched arms, inside my shirt and tunic, down my legs, and then it dripped out the bottom of my trouser legs on to my helpers.

I had to ignore all that as I climbed up beyond the reach of any aid from below, the rest was up to me. My boots found two precarious places to rest and though I felt that I might slip and fall at any moment I reached up yet again, looking for another vital groove or projection on the greasy rock to which I could cling.

I had got up beyond the reach of the light below and I was groping around in almost total darkness until I realized by touch alone that top of my head was just below a platform or ledge, It was the top of the rock wall. If I could climb on to it I would be safe for a while.

The waterfall was just an arm's length away on my right. With a struggle I could get up there, but it required a lot of strength and the old mantelpiece routine. After straining upwards and teetering a lot I managed to raise my arms above my head and lay my hands flat on the ledge itself. The rest was plain, brute strength, and there wasn't much of it left by this time.

I had to use my arms and elbows to lift myself even higher, scraping my chest on the rock until my belly button was about level with the ledge. Then I could lean forward and rest for a moment. My torso and head were flat on the rock, and by turning my face to the right my nose and mouth were out of water. My legs still dangled over the edge, a dead weight. The slightest wrong move and I could slither backwards to a bone-smashing fall.

There was no time to rest. I had to get fully on the ledge in utter darkness, and then sit down in the flowing water brace myself to start bringing up the others. My chest burned like fire where I had scraped it when I fell into that tree. After another struggle on my elbows I crawled forward a bit and then managed to get one leg up on to the ledge. After a terrific struggle the other followed and I was safe for a while. Then I sat in trickling water with my feet braced against a rock, and a spare rope round my waist for the next one up.

I shouted, but it made no sense because of the echoes and the noise of the stream falling, so I threw the rope down. It was Hilda's turn to make the ascent.

Rock climbing practice is for the leader to go up first, and make himself secure. It is not the leader's job to haul up whoever comes next, but to be an anchor in case his number two should fall. The leader absorbs the shock and hangs on until the follower works out what to do before climbing again.'

I broke the rules, keeping the rope taut all the way up as Hilda climbed. I knew how difficult and dangerous it was. She appeared after a struggle, and sat in the water alongside me. She had brought up my lantern and used it to look around curiously.

'It's so cold,' she said, referring to the water, and the wind which was still pouring down the tunnel.

'Yeah, though we'd be a lot colder if it wasn't for all the exercise we've been getting. Anyway, I bags the first back rub tonight.'

She was about to argue, but decided not to. 'Alright, you've earned it. You were marvellous climbing without a rope to hang on to. I couldn't have done it.'

I knew that. She had slipped twice on the way up, it was only the rope that saved her.

'Thanks, Now, untie the climbing rope and throw the end down so the next one can come up'.

She sat with me in the water and eased my aching muscles by helping to haul up the next candidate. It was Jess Arkwright, and he brought up another lantern, which was a great help.

The next to tackle the climb were the professor's boys, as he called them, Sneezy, Grumpy, Happy, and so on. I think he had grown fond of them in the short time we had been together.

Doc was to be next. Hilda wanted to anchor this ascent so our end of the rope was passed round her waist and she braced her feet against a rock.. We were still sitting side by side and as a precaution I asked Jess to sit behind her and hang on to the rope that joined them together, he was to be an extra anchor.

Doc climbed well. He needed only an occasional tug to help him on the way up that slippery wall. We actually saw his face grinning at us as it appeared in sight

Then he fell. Hilda screamed as she was dragged over the edge and I grabbed Jess as he was about to go too.

'By gow, that hurt!' he gasped. The rope around his waist which tied him to Hilda had tightened painfully as she fell.

There were cries of horror from below.

Poor old Doc had smashed into the rock floor but Hilda was dangling on the rope, swinging in and out of the fall of water. I started hauling her up. She was in so much pain that at first she couldn't help. Jess and I found it almost beyond our strength to raise her as a dead weight. We got her up and she lay on the ledge for a while panting and trembling with shock.

The parties were shouting to one another above the noise of the waterfall, and the rolling echoes. I heard that Doc. was badly hurt. and had broken a leg in several places. There was no way he could go any further.

'We can't get him up here,' I said. 'We'll just have to turn back.'

'No!' said Hilda, still gasping with pain. 'We've gone too far, we can't turn back. If we give up now you'll be the last one down, and you'll have to do it without a safety rope. You'll fall for sure.'

'But we have to go down. We can't leave him here. I can tie the rope to one of the big stones up here. That should hold me.'

She and Jess raised their lanterns to search the dimness.

'No!' said Jess. 'There's nobbut small rocks here. None big enough. If yer tied yer safety rope to one of them and slipped you'd drag the rock with yer. The bluidy thing'd fall on yer nut.'

'How can we get him down to the cave with a broken leg?' demanded Hilda.

'We can't make splints, we can't make a stretcher. The pain would kill him on the way.'

'Professor Meadowes can give him those leaves to chew. That would ease the pain.'

Hilda clicked her tongue disgustedly when I said that. She shouted down to Catherine. 'Cath., is he as bad as they say?'

In spite of clamouring echoes we heard the professor's reply, 'It's very bad, a compound fracture. There's bone sticking out through the flesh.'

'Alright,' responded Hilda. 'Cath, you know what to do.'

There was a pause, then outburst of shouting and screaming from below.

'She's killed him,' cried the professor.

'It was the kindest thing to do,' said Hilda. 'He was going to die anyway. One clean spear thrust through the heart solves a lot of problems.'

'Is that the Amazon way, to kill the wounded?'

'No, only the ones who are beyond help. If an Amazon is mortally wounded she knows she is about to greet the sky mother and asks for a quick death. I will expect the same kindness when my time comes.'

There was no time to argue this out. The rest of the party had to be brought up. They were busy untying Doc's rope and fastening it on to the next in line, Sleepy. The bearers were terrified of climbing the wall after what had happened, but they were deadly afraid of Catherine. Even more so when she turned Doc's body over and shoved it into the stream. It floated away. and would probably reach the cave where we started, after that, who knows.

The boys had no desire to climb after Doc fell, but Catherine snarled at them and threatened them with her spear while pointing at the wall. After that they would have climbed Mount Everest.

They all came up at last, safe but shocked. Third last we hauled up, everyone's weapons, then the professor. Cath was last of all.

## Chapter twelve

### The Flooded Cave

After leaving the falls behind we were no longer climbing. Except for scattered rocks, the way was fairly even, and we soon entered a flooded cave. It was big. We knew that by the way our voices echoed and re-echoed

As far as we could see, with the aid of our dim lights, the lake spread from wall to wall as the water waited its turn to go over the fall., and we were wading round its edge, still roped together.

'This cave is widening out,' said the professor, 'And there seems to be a rock platform standing clear of the water on our left. We can stop on that while we decide what to do next.'

He may have said more but I didn't hear him. The surface on which I was wading came to an end. I fell over the edge and plunged into deep water. I could hear yelling going on, then my rope tightened and I was hauled out on to the rock platform the professor had noticed and lay there gasping like a stranded fish.

Hilda knelt beside me on the rock. 'Andy, are you alright?' Even by the dim light of the lanterns I could see the concern on her face. I spat out some water and handed her my lantern which had to be relit. 'I'm okay, just thought I'd take little bath before bed time.'

'Idiot!' she snapped. 'You nearly dragged me in too. You can't be trusted to get it right. In future just watch where you're going.'

'Give us a kiss,' I said.

'No! and don't make fun of me, you could have drowned.'

I was about to answer back when the professor shushed us all to silence.

'I can see a light,' he said, pointing.

We looked, and sure enough a light could be seen descending towards the surface of the water. 'Shout!' cried the professor, 'Let whoever it is know that we are here, and in need of help'.

We shouted as loud as we could while echoes rolled around filling the air. A cacophony of echo and re-echo told us we were in the biggest cave yet.

Whoever was carrying the light screeched and dropped it with a smash reviving the echoes which had been dying away. It must have been an oil lantern because a fire started on the spot where the light fell.

'We heard a patter of feet and what sounded like a heavy door crashing shut, and then another sound as though a bar was being dropped into place. These noises rolled round the cavern and then died.'

'We have to mark the spot before the fire goes out,' cried the professor. He dragged Sneezy over to the edge of the rock platform. 'Stay!' he said. 'stay!' and shook his finger at the man. Then he turned to Jess. 'Mr Arkwright, get out some candles.'

He caught Happy by the hand and led him to a spot about two meters behind Sneezy and made him stand there.

'I'm using them as markers,' he said. 'When the fire over there burns out we will still know where it was, in spite of the darkness. Mr Arkwright, give them a lighted candle each. They are to hold them at shoulder height in their right hands.'

'The wind's going to blow them out.'

'Not so, Andrew. Haven't you noticed? The breeze has almost died away. There is such a big mass of air in the cave that it can expand and slow down. It is only when it enters a narrow tunnel, such as we came through that it picks up speed. It is known as the venturi effect.

Alright,' said Hilda. That fire's dying down, what happens next?'

'Another lit candle please, Mr Arkwright. Andrew is our athlete. He told me he took part in a swimming race called, *From Pier to Pub*. A strange name, but he should be able to swim that short distance. If there is a door he may be able to open it, or plead with the people inside.'

'Cath. and I are coming too,' said Hilda. 'If there are rocks there we'll bash the door down.' The Amazons always did believe in direct methods.

Your shako, please Andrew. You are to be our beacon.'

I handed him my hat and he held the candle over it. The flame melted some wax which dropped on its flat top. He stood the candle upright on the gob of hot wax where it stayed,

He handed the shako back to me. 'Put it on carefully,' he said 'The candle could be dislodged very easily. You are to swim across shining like good deed in a naughty world, and you will need the light when you get there. Ladies,' he said, while speaking to the Amazons, 'If you insist on swimming across I think you had better go first so there is no danger of you splashing and putting out his light. As long as you are in line with the candles held by the boys then you are on track to reach the door even if the fire has gone out.

'Give us a candle each,' said Hilda. We can swim one handed and hold the candle up with the other.'

They took their candles and lowered themselves into the water. I followed and three little lights moved slowly across unknown waters to an unknown destination.

We came to a short flight of steps carved out of rock, with a metal handrail. At the top of the steps was a heavy wooden door, so tightly closed we couldn't even rattle it.

The Amazons looked round for a small boulder they could use to smash the door down.



'We should try knocking first,' I said. 'Perhaps someone will come and speak to us if we just knock on the door.'

The Amazons did not understand polite knocking but hammered on the door with large stones, and screamed for attention.

No one came so they looked round in the darkness for a large stone that they could manage between them to break the door. While they were searching, and I was knocking politely, Catherine noticed something floating nearby. A rope was attached to the railing, and the other end disappeared into the gloom.

Catherine tugged at the cord and a small, circular boat drifted towards us. It had no bow or stern, was as round as a saucer, but the sides were much higher.

It's a coracle,' said Hilda. 'We use them back home for fishing. They're a bugger to steer until you get used to them. Cath. was our champion coracle steerer. Some of us could never work it out, but she could go anywhere with them. Anyway, whoever owns it left the paddles, so she'll be right.'

This is a terrific find,' I said. 'Cath., can you go back to the others and tell them we found steps and a door, but we can't open it. If we can't get in this way we can at least use the coracle to explore the cave, there may be other ways out.'

Catherine departed in the coracle while Hilda and I once again turned our attention to the door. I restrained her and knocked politely yet again. I even used a stone to tap out an s.o.s. message, but no one came.

Presently the coracle returned with two passengers and some bundles. 'Well,' said Professor Meadows as he climbed out, 'How the world turns. These little craft were used by primitive fisher folk thousands of years ago. I suppose its owner fishes on the lake. Hand up the parcels Mr Arkwright, and you young people are wet, don't go near them or touch them.' He was delighted with the stone steps and the door. 'These things were crafted with metal tools. What a pity we have to destroy them. Never mind, if Mr Arkwright is invited to he can restore them later.'

Aye,' said Jess I know what's what, and I can blow in a door if I try, and put it back together again like new, if I want to.'

'Mr Arkwright was a sapper and miner in the First World War', said the professor. He spent three years on the Western Front digging tunnels under the German trenches, and blowing them up, so he knows all about explosives.'

Aye,' said Jess, 'And a reight awful job it were too. Those of us that weren't kilt went mad. I'm still a bit that way mesel, after all these years.'

They had brought packets of gunpowder and Jess was stacking them at the foot of the door while he talked. 'We mun have rocks to contain the explosion.'

'The stuff might be damp'. I said. 'Water could have got into the packages after all we've been through.'

'Yes, that's a possibility,' said the professor, 'But we were not going to inspect gunpowder by candlelight so we brought most of what we had. If this works it will be a spectacular explosion. There are four packets of powder and Mr Arkwright will run a fuse to each in case any of them don't go off. We'll take the others back with us in case we have to try again.'

'If they all go off,' said Jess, 'It'll be like the time the Australians blew up Hill 60. Dry rocks first, I don't want wet rocks anywhere near the charge.'

A flat space in front of the door had been cleared of stones, but many lay nearby. We gathered them to be put where indicated by Jess. Catherine boated off to collect more. The prof's boys helped to gather dry stones to add to Jess' collection .

Catherine made three trips across and brought stones back each time. On the first trip she took Hilda, who had been strangely quiet for a while. On the second trip she took two of us, the professor and me. We led everyone back into the tunnel so we could no longer see the light where Jess was still working.

The professor gave Sneezy, Grumpy, and Happy a lit candle each and stood them in a straight line, one behind the other in the tunnel. They stood in flowing water up to their waists. Catherine had been told about this and when the candles were in line with the coracle she was to turn and drive it straight towards them.

A distant shout was heard followed by bouquet of echoes. They had scarcely died away before the coracle was dimly seen and a flutter of shining drops as Catherine wielded the paddle for her life.

She remembered her instructions and didn't make for the tunnel directly until she saw the three candle in a row. Once in the tunnel I thought her craft was travelling too fast and would be caught in the current to be swept away. It would have been a bumpy ride back to where we started.

No worries, Grumpy and Co, in spite of their fears remembered their orders. They caught hold and pushed the coracle over to where we were pressed against the wall. Catherine and Jess climbed out to join us.

We waited, flat against the cavern wall, sheltered from any blast.

It was just as well. Seconds later there was noise of thunder, a flash of light that illuminated the cavern from end to end and we could see and hear rocks hitting the far wall and bouncing off. I had a sudden, painful ear-ache.

The whole party put their hands to their ears. The professor reassured us. 'It's alright, the air in here was compressed by the shock wave, but the pain will pass.'

He was right a gust of air blustered past as the last of the flying stones bounced off the wall into the stream.

'Yon was what I call an explosion,' said Jess, 'A reight big'un.'

Hilda stood up. 'Cath and me, we'll go and see what's happened,' she said. In spite of a tan from years in the open her face was white.

'I'll come too!'

'She looked at me with a strange expression. 'No! You stay here with the others.' There was no mistaking her determination not to have us with her.

'Cath, come and help me with the coracle.' She was pushing it against the stream to where the tunnel widened out to become a cavern.

Catherine. was puzzled. 'Can't we take Andrew? We don't know what we'll find there.

'No, he's not needed, just you and me, Cath.!'

She was so set on the idea of taking only Catherine that we didn't argue as they got into the coracle and disappeared round the corner.

We sat shivering in our damp clothes waiting for the coracle to come back. The prof. blew out the candle in his lantern because we had used up half our supply already, and did not know what lay ahead.

As we sat in total blackness time seemed to stretch on and on. We talked to pass the time. The explosion was rated a great success, Jess said the powder must have been dry and he was sorry to have used so much, a little explosion would have done the job, instead he had set off a monster.

There was plenty to talk about, we had come through dangers and set-backs enough to fuel a lifetime of reminiscent talk. But talk ran out in the end as we watched and waited for the tiniest speck of light or rescue.

We heard a lot of noise rolling round the roof of the cavern. It sounded like women screaming. Could it be that our Amazons were fighting for their lives while we cowered in the tunnel.

At last I said, 'I'm going to swim over and see what's happening.' I would grope my way to the place where I fell in when we first arrived and then use memory to guide me to the steps.

This proposal worried the professor. 'Andrew, you could drown out there. There is simply nothing to guide you. You could veer off course without knowing it and swim along the cave instead of across.' How about lighting the candle?

If all else fails I could get back that way.' 'Good idea. We'll use it to find our way to the rock platform. We may be able to see something from there.'

Our discussion was interrupted by shouting. It was Catherine, she was paddling the coracle and trying to find us.

We shouted back, but that was useless, there were so many echoes that it was impossible to tell where the noise came from.

Jess had his tinder box ready. He lit the lantern and waded into the stream to give her some guidance.

She made it past the rocks and we all ran to catch her precious little life-boat before it was swept away.

Catherine was crying. She clutched the prof. 'I've had the most dreadful fight with Hilda,' she said, between sobs. 'She wants to kill you all.'

## Chapter thirteen

### Merlin's Castle

We all stared at her, even the bearers knew that Catherine had arrived with some shocking message. Why does she want to kill us?'

'She says you're murderers. You tried to kill us all by blowing up our village. The noise of bombs going off in the village was the same as what we heard a while ago, and there were other explosions besides. She wanted my help in slaying you all, then we would go home.'

'My best friend and me, we were screaming at one another. I'm surprised you didn't hear us. I told her my Teddy wouldn't do any such thing, he's too gentle. She specially wants to gut Teddy and Mr Arkwright I wouldn't let her on to the coracle so she could come back and do it.'

'We'll go and talk to her,' I said 'Hilda and I slept together last night, so she may not kill me, but if she does, don't let her get at either Jess or the professor.'

'Take tha musket, lad,' said Jess. 'If she cooms at thee yer can protect thysen!'

I shook my head. 'No! No weapons. If she sees me with a gun or knife it might make her worse. I'll take my chances. Come on, Cath, let's go.'

We climbed together into the coracle and everyone helped to push it out of the tunnel into the deeper water of the cave.

A dim light burning to guide us to the steps where Hilda stood on guard, behind her was a jagged opening where the door used to be. Rubbish floated on the water but most of it had been driven inwards by the blast. The stone steps were covered in rubble but not much damaged.

A candle had been fixed to the railing and as soon as I came within its feeble light Hilda glared down. 'What do you want?'

'I want to come up and talk to you.'

'You're a murderer, same as the others. You were in the plot and if you set foot on these steps I'll kill you.'

'No you won't. I'm coming up. We talk first, then you can kill me afterwards, if you still want to.'

I climbed out of the coracle and walked up the steps, looking steadily into her eyes.' She clutched her spear and waited.

I said, 'You and Cath were part of the patrol that ambushed the Gorbies and captured me. Then I was brought to the village and chained to a post. I spent the night there, still chained. None of the slaves were allowed to speak to me. How could I know anything of this plot you were talking about. What plot?'

'I saw you talking to Meadowes in the morning.'

'You did! I think he was about to tell me something but all the people passing by frightened him, and he went away.' Some of the tension left her body and she supported herself with her spear. 'You knew nothing about it?' she asked

.'Whatever it is you're talking about, I knew nothing!' I lied.

'I'm glad I don't have to kill you, but I'm going to kill Meadowes and Arkwright.'

'No you're not. You Amazons brought plots and trouble on yourselves by keeping slaves and ill-treating them.'

'Amazons!' said a voice behind her. 'Amazons! I should have known. You females are always causing trouble and now you have totally destroyed my back door, go away, at once!'

The speaker was a man in a black gown with a hood. His garment was covered in white dust and he carried a lantern which threw some light on the scene. He was wearing carpet slippers.

The three of us stared at him, astonished.

'There is no excuse for trespass and wilful destruction of property. I would have the law on you if there was any law in this wretched country. Kindly vacate my premises immediately so I can get back to my studies.'

Hilda was about to reply but I stopped her. Negotiating is not a strong point with the Amazons, they tend to strike first and ask questions later.

'We're sorry about your door but we were desperate. We have just climbed a tunnel from a lower cave in the hope of finding a way out into the open. Then we saw your light and shouted, hoping you could help us.'

He snorted at us. 'A ridiculous story, you could have got out further along. Any person of ordinary commonsense would have done so.'

'Yes, but the cave is flooded and we don't have a boat. I'm sorry but we had to borrow yours. Look, I apologise, but we were desperate, if we had known of another way out we would have taken it and left you alone. All we want right now is to get out of this cave.'

I put my hand on Hilda's shoulder. Sir, my name is Andrew, these are Hilda and Catherine, may I ask your name?'

'The man drew himself up, he was still shorter than me, and said, 'I am Merlin, a magician descended from the great Merlin friend, advisor, and magician to King Arthur. I have inherited such powers that were I not a merciful man I should blast you from these steps in a second, and it would be a particular pleasure to do so if you were all Amazons.'

While Hilda was looking at him, wondering what he was talking about I whispered urgently to Catherine. 'Cath., go and fetch the professor and, if you can fit them in, at least two of his boys, bring more of them if you can. They're to be his bodyguards in case Hilda goes mad when she sees him. Go back after that and ferry the rest of them here.'

Catherine paddled away, pleased to rescue her beloved.

I concentrated again on the two people with me. Hilda was still to respond to Merlin's remarks about Amazons, and I didn't want him to hear what she said in case it made matters worse. 'The only time filler I could think of was to ask if he had lived here for long.'

'My family first settled in this valley in the year five hundred and fifty,' he announced. 'After the death of King Arthur we were forced to leave because of the spread of Christianity in Britain. Of course we were believers in the old faith, as was Arthur.'

'It would be safe to go back,' I said. 'After fifteen hundred years people are more tolerant. Nowadays you can do or say what you like, no one cares anymore.'

'I know that,' he said. 'We have not buried ourselves here. My ancestors studied at Oxford, as I have. But there little left now in Britain to remind us of Arthur.' He looked past me and frowned, then turned his lantern to shine on the water. It lit up the approaching coracle.

'Are there more of you?' he asked.

'Yes, just a few, and one of them will replace your door, if you wish.'

First out were two of the professor's boys. They came up the steps with spears and looked at Hilda. She ignored them but her face hardened as the professor followed.

I made a nervous introduction while keeping an eye on Hilda, who stood by glowering. I said, 'Professor, this is Merlin the Magician, he is the owner of the door, and I believe this is the back entrance to his dwelling. Mr Merlin this is Professor Edward Meadowes.'

'Might I enquire, Sir,' asked the professor, 'If you are a descendant of the Merlin who was the friend and magician of King Arthur?'

'Yes,' answered Merlin, 'I am a direct descendant of the Great Merlin, and may I ask as to your lineage?'

Professor Meadows looked at him steadily and said 'I am the Pendragon!'

Merlin's eyes widened, and he drew in a sharp breath. 'The Pendragon,' he whispered. 'After all these years, his line still exists. Master!' He stopped to pull himself together. 'Master, let me hear the words of power, then I will know you are truly him.'

The professor waited as more people arrived on the steps, and when the whole company was together and quiet. I was facing Hilda, holding her gaze with Meadows and Arkwright behind me. The professor did not notice this and spoke to Merlin in language that I had not heard before.

Merlin had a rapt expression as the words flowed over him. They were grave and beautiful. He sank to one knee and asked, 'Lord, are you directly descended from Arthur.'

'Yes, but in the Early Middle Ages we adopted the name of Meadows. It was to remind us of the lost fields of Avalon.'

'Pendragon,' cried Merlin, there were tears in his eyes, 'My humble dwelling is open to you and your company. Enter!'

'That were Welsh, that were,' Jess informed us as the tension lessened. 'I worked with Welsh miners during the war and when they talked together, it sounded just like that.'

We all filed inside, through the ruined doorway.

To the left was a passage that disappeared into more darkness, to the right were steps hacked out of the stone, but directly opposite was a wall and by the light of Merlin's lantern we saw something crumpled against it.

'What's that? Shine the light on it,' I said.

He did and we saw it was the body of a girl who had been caught in the blast. A wooden bucket, smashed, lay alongside her.

'One of the kitchen assistants no doubt,' said Merlin. 'She would have been down here to get water. They will just have to send someone else. Now follow me upstairs and we will see about rooms for you.'

'But the girl, what are going to do about her?'

'No problem, I will mention the matter to the butler, he and his assistants will take care of things. They are very efficient. Now, follow me.'

At the top was another passage, along which we saw the glory of daylight, and were drawn towards it after our long, painful trek in the dark. The passage ended in a balcony overlooking a valley, but the light hurt our eyes and we had to turn away for a few moments. Then talking broke out as we moved around to take in the view. Air, light, space; It was overwhelming after all our fear and anxiety. We had come out on the east side of the mountain range. The

sun was setting behind the mountains and casting long shadows over a beautiful valley spread out under the sky.

Hilda was not interested in scenery. She muttered, 'I'm still going to kill them.'

'No you're not!' We spoke quietly so the others couldn't hear us. 'I forbid you to do it. Besides, we are all guests under the shelter of Merlin's roof. If you were to murder a fellow guest you would be breaking the oldest law of hospitality and would deserve death yourself.'

This is the Vale of Avalon,' said Merlin, holding his arms wide as though to embrace the whole valley. 'It was so named by my family, when we moved here. They did so in memory of Arthur. Like your family, Pendragon, we have not forgotten the old days.'

'Is there anything to eat?' asked Hilda. She seemed frustrated by my attitude, and didn't understand what the professor and Merlin were talking about, anyway.

This time she spoke for all of us. We were tired, hungry, our clothes were damp and cold.

Of course,' said Merlin, 'Apart from blowing my door away you have had a very busy time. He walked the corridor in front of us opening doors as he passed. 'A fire is being lit in every room, choose which you want, I have ordered dinner for you, and it should be ready in about half an hour.'

Catherine and Hilda selected a room, disappeared into it and the door was closed firmly. The prof, now the Pendragon, and Jess, put their boys into another room and told them by signs and whatever scraps of their language they had picked up, to dry their animal pelts, and the homespun cloth they had for body covering.

They could not understand how anyone could sleep in a bed so they were allowed to strip the blankets off to lie in comfort on the floor mats. They were told to dry their bed socks by the fire, but not to burn them, and food would be brought when it was ready.

Between us we had picked up a few words of each other's language, and were practising sign language.

The professor and I shared a room, basking in the warmth of the fire and seeing our clothes steam as they dried. A servant knocked on the door and came in bringing a blue robe.

From my master,' he said, 'For the Pendragon' He held it up and it was decorated with a dazzling pattern of moon and stars.

He helped the prof. put it on but seemed nervous and fumbled while tying the waist cord. The Prof. took over and tied it neatly so the gold tassels on the ends of the cord hung about halfway to the floor. The servant bowed and went away 'Very chic,' I said. 'You'll be a sensation with the ladies. Perhaps not Hilda, but Catherine will like it. It must be the uniform of the Pendragon. But what is the Pendragon, What does it mean?'

'It means I claim to be a descendant of King Arthur, whose family name was Pendragon. He lived in Britain after the end of the Roman occupation, and was supposed to be lord of South West Britain, Devon, Cornwall, Somerset, that area, before they were given their



modern names. And, I think, at least part of Wales. Actually, no one knows where his boundaries were, or if there was any such person. During his lifetime he was supposed to have driven off invading tribes and kept his people safe.'

'And are you a descendant of this King Arthur, who may or may not have existed?'

'I don't know, but it seemed a good story at the time, and it pleased our host. I really believe he has delusions. But don't say so.'

I looked round. 'I haven't seen Jess since we left the balcony. where did he get to?'

He had an attack of conscience for his part in destroying the back door. He wants to start tomorrow to fix it all up, so he and Merlin went together to see what material was available. Merlin said there was plenty of timber and, certainly enough to make a door, and as well as that he had the tools that would be needed.'

He paused. 'There is one thing I can tell you about our host he certainly doesn't speak or understand the Welsh language. Though Welsh was supposed to be Merlin's native tongue.'

But you spoke to him in Welsh, the words of power. I heard you!'

'Yes, but I was being cautious and trying him out, words are too important to be wasted on people who don't understand them. I recited what I could remember, in Welsh of course, of parts of Dylan Thomas' poem, *Under Milk Wood*. If Merlin knew Welsh he would have asked me why I was quoting poetry, instead of the words of power, whatever they are.

So you think he's either a sandwich short of a picnic or he's a liar?'

'I don't know. In fifteen hundred years, if what he is saying is true, anything could have happened, but we must be very wary.'

Merlin knocked and entered at that moment. 'You have your robe,' he cried. 'Well done, we have kept it many years for this moment, wrapped in tissues and protected from the light.'

'It's a very fine robe, thank-you.'

'That reminds me,' I said. 'There is something that puzzles me about the Amazons, how is it they all speak English?'

'It's an accident of time, Mr. Mason, another mystery in this strange land. It seems that many years ago in England a group from a girls school went for a walk. They never came back, but it's possible they ended up here. Who knows?'

'The same thing happened in Victoria, where I come from. A party of school girls went for a picnic at a place called Hanging Rock. Some of them wandered off among the rocks and were never seen again. Perhaps their great-great granddaughters are living here now as Amazons.'

'It is possible,' said the professor, 'But Merlin, what intrigues me is how do you know what happens in England?'

'Simple, my dear Pendragon. The men of my line, including myself, have been studying at Oxford for hundreds of years. It was our great grandfather who told us about the missing girls.'

'Well then, how do you get to England and back?'

'It's a family secret,' said Merlin, smiling.

While we were considering this mysterious statement Jess arrived full of enthusiasm. 'This is a right marvelous place,' he said. 'There's an old oak table down below, biggest I've ever seen and Mr. Merlin told me I could take it apart to make the door, and there are bells too. I'll hang one inside, so if anyone wants to get in the new door they can pull on the rope. I'll put a sliding panel on the door so you can look out to see who's ringing the bell.'

'He's an eager workman, your Mr Arkwright', said Merlin. 'He intends to spend the night down there so can get an early start in the morning.'

'We may have to drag him upstairs for breakfast,' said the prof.. 'I will go down myself in the morning to make sure he comes.'

The group broke up soon afterwards, we were all tired.

Our food had been brought to us earlier and there were two trays on the passage floor, outside the door of the Amazons' room, they too had eaten.

I said, 'Pendragon, you're going to sleep with Cath. tonight.'

'Do I have to? That young woman is insatiable.'

You have to make sacrifices for the cause. Hilda is very angry with you and Jess, and she's even angrier because I'm still talking to you. I'm afraid she might do something really bad unless I persuade her into a better mood.'

'I would rather not.'

'Sorry Prof. But what must be, must be, Cath. will be over shortly.'

## **Chapter fourteen**

### **Hilda and the Lizards**

I left him and crossed the corridor to where the two Amazons were sleeping. The door was not locked or barred, so I went in, to find them in a double bed.

'Go away,' said Hilda. 'You're not wanted here, shut the door after you.'

I said 'Cath, go and sleep with the professor.'

'I don't think he wants me to'.

'No, he'll be right, he's expecting you.'

'Cath., stay where you are!'

'I'm not staying here with you, Hilda. I've never seen you in such a bad temper. Andy, see if you can calm her down.' She climbed out of bed and I heard her go into the prof.'s room.

The bed was a four poster, and the mattress was stuffed with feathers, One sank into it.

I undressed, got in and lay beside Hilda. She turned her back. Even in the dim light from a window I could see her black hair fanned across the pillow.

'I've never slept in a bed like this before,' I said. 'Such luxury! We could get used to this.'

'Just shut up and leave me alone. I'm tired and I want to go to sleep without you around.'

'Do you remember when you were second up the waterfall after me and we were sitting side by side in freezing water, and that cold wind blowing over us as we were bringing up the others, I said I bagged first back rub when we went to bed. Do you remember that?'

'No!'

'Well, I do, and I'm giving up that privilege and you can go first. You're tense and angry and I've never seen a woman more in need of a back massage than you.'

'Don't touch me! Don't you dare touch me!'

She tried to shrug me away as I caught her shoulders and squeezed.

'I can feel the tension in your shoulders and back, they're harder than they were last night.' The above wasn't strictly true, I couldn't feel any difference, but then I was playing for effect.

'So they should be. You were talking and eating with those men who were going to murder me and my tribe.'

'Not you, you weren't on the list'. I was massaging her shoulder muscles with my thumbs.

'What do you mean? What's a list.'

'They meant to blow up the people who ill-treated them' and you weren't included, neither was Cath.'

'Ow! That hurt,' she said, wriggling. 'If you have to do it be a bit more gentle.'

My thumbs had pressed too hard into her shoulders as I emphasised the point I was making.

'As far as I can make out they were going to kill only about a quarter of the tribe, but they didn't think it through because the other three quarters would be very annoyed and would

probably massacre them as well as the rest of the slaves. Just as you would have done if you'd caught them at it.'

'Lower down,' she said. 'Leave the shoulders for a while, and go a bit easier, not so heavy with the thumbs.'

'You're in the expert hands of Doctor Mason, fear nothing.'

'And I hurt really bad round the waist. It's where the rope caught me when I fell.'

'Right, your waist shall have special attention, both front and back.' I resumed my ministrations.'

'Like I told you before', I said, 'You brought it on yourselves. You can't capture clever men like Professor Meadows and Jess Arkwright and make them slaves, ill treat them, beat them. Something bad was going to happen.'

'Not so much with the thumbs and more rub. My spine as well. I hurt that too, when I fell.'

'Very good ma'am. Do you know, those two men, in their own ways, are cleverer than a whole tribe of Amazons'.

'Rubbish!' she said, 'You don't know what you're talking about. Don't stop.' She meant the massage.

'I'll tell you something else while we're in bed together. There's a battalion of Scottish soldiers in this country and when they meet the Amazons there'll be a hell of a fight and afterwards you'll all settle down together and the Amazons and Scots will be one big tribe, and boy babies will be as welcome as girls.'

'No we won't. We'll kill some of these Scots you're talking about and make slaves of the rest.'

'They're hard men to kill and you'll have your work cut out to make slaves of them, they don't like that either. You'll just be storing up trouble for yourselves. Besides, they have better weapons than you.'

'Such as?'

'Muskets.'

'Muskets!! I saw you firing a musket and it knocked you over. We'll have these Scots for breakfast. Ow!' she cried. 'I didn't say my spine was broken, I just said it hurt a bit. You don't have to push it back into place with your thumbs, just take it easy.'

'Do you know,' I said, still rubbing 'Apart from all your other attractions, such as good temper and a forgiving nature, you have a very nice bum.'

"Do you really think so?"

“Well, I'm not an expert, but to me it looks and feels as though it's in excellent shape, and your figure looks terrific, both from the front and back. I noticed it in the river when you were soaked through.”

She rolled over to face me. “Andy, do you know what hurt most when I worked out that Meadows and Arkwright had planted all that gunpowder stuff in the village?”

“No, what was it?”

“I thought you'd been in on the scheme, and you made love to me last night, even though you knew about it.”

“No, not me, not until it was too late and the place was being blown apart. The Prof told me just before you and Cath arrived to take us back to the tribe. I didn't mention it because I thought you might have lost your temper and killed them on the spot.”

Another lie, but that was better than the truth, I was within easy stabbing distance and her spear was handy.

She moved my arm and rested it on the pillow, then she laid her head on it as she had done the night before.

'I'm so glad you weren't mixed up in the plot, but you shouldn't talk to those two as if nothing happened. That's what made me so mad, you talking to them, knowing what they tried to do.'

'But their plot didn't work. Everyone was up and about when the Gorbies started dropping their eggs.'

'That's not the point.' Your friends planned to kill a lot of my tribe.'

'Shush, we've had a heavy day and we can talk about all this in the morning.'

'Alright, but since I met you I can understand Cath. better, and her talk about love. I thought men were weak and they were only good for making babies. But then you wouldn't let me climb that cliff because I wasn't fit to, and you did it yourself. You climbed that wet slimy wall in the tunnel none of us could have done it without the rope to hang on to. And you stopped Arkwright from following me over the edge when I fell, and the only reason I didn't kill Meadows and Arkwright was that you wouldn't let me. Just hold me for a while.'

We lay contentedly in each other's arms until she said, 'kiss', and raised her face to mine.

We kissed and moved quietly as we made love. What we had that night was as good as anyone could get, even better than last time.

We woke the following morning when someone tapped on the door to call out, 'Breakfast! fifteen minutes to breakfast.'

Hilda clutched me to stop any thought of getting out of bed. 'Don't go, stay here. I know you, you'll be talking to those men. Stay here with me. We'll make love again.'

'Don't be greedy. Turn over.'

'What for?'

“‘I'm going to smack you on the bum.'

Why?'

One, because I would enjoy slapping such a nice bottom, and two, to remind you it's time to get up for breakfast.'

I was right about men the first time. You're mean and nasty and I should never have let you into my bed. Tomorrow Cath. comes back.

'That should be interesting, three of us in bed together, though it's big enough. I bags sleeping in the middle?'

She was laughing and kissing me. With an effort of will I struggled free and got out of bed.

Breakfast was not hard to find. The rattling of dishes, clattering of cutlery, and noise of conversation led us to the spot.

It seemed quite civilized. Chairs were set out round the table, and a serving girl stood behind each one, except Merlin. Behind him was a tall man clad in a white caftan with a blue skull cap on his head. 'This is Perceval,' he said. 'My butler, manager, head of household, superintendent, fixit man, etc. Without him I am helpless, the household would fall apart.'

Hilda heard none of this. She was looking at one of the girls who had a bruised eye, was unsteady on her feet, and had to clutch the back of a chair in front of her to save herself from falling. Someone had punched her brutally.

Hilda marched over to the girl. 'What happened? Who hit you?'

The girl looked at her and shook her head. She seemed unable to look at anyone else.

'I say you've been hit. Who did it?'

'I - I fell over,' she stammered.

'You tell me who did it and I'll deal with him.'

"The girls do hurt themselves from time to time,' said Merlin They fall over, or fall downstairs. It's very common, the other servants look after them. Now you mention it she does look unwell, and I didn't notice the mark on her face. I think, my dear, you can go and lie down for a while.'

'Alright,' Hilda conceded, Go along and lie down. I'll come and see you later and find out who did this to you.'

Merlin was becoming agitated. 'Really, Miss Hilda, I think you are taking too much on yourself. This is a staff matter and if, as you say, she has been struck I will look into the

matter and take the appropriate action.' He turned to the girl. 'You may go, my dear, and have a nice lie down. The staff will look after you.'

He stopped, unable to go on, suddenly terrified of Hilda's blazing glance. The girl hurried out with a hand over her black eye.

'I'll find who did it,' ground out Hilda, 'Then God help him.'

Perceval was still standing behind the master's chair. He said nothing during the encounter but nodded agreement when the girl was told to go and lie down.

Merlin covered his sudden fear and embarrassment by trying to resume conversation over the breakfast table, but was interrupted again.

Hilda's face hardened once more when she saw Catherine, Jess and the professor sitting with Merlin.

'Come on, Cath,' she said. 'We'll eat on the balcony,'

'No problem at all, dear lady,' responded Merlin. He ignored her glowering face in an effort to restore calm. It's a beautiful day and I will tell the servants where you are'. His opinion of Amazons was not going to spoil his duties as host.

'The Pendragon's servants are out there already. They can't make out what chairs are for and prefer to sit on the floor, in the open.'

"Coming?" asked Hilda. She looked at me.

I wanted to talk with Merlin, find out about their family history. The whole thing was puzzling. He claimed they had settled in this place fifteen hundred years ago, give or take few decades. How had they lasted so long? And this story about studying at Oxford seemed extraordinary. The prof would have to worm the secret from him.

Hilda raised her eyebrows.

I said 'OK, coming.' I didn't want her getting the sulks again and working herself into a rage. But I could see it was not going to be easy keeping her, spear in hand, away from Jess and the professor

We went to the balcony to wait for breakfast. The professor's boys were there, sitting on mats and enjoying the morning sunshine, much more alert than when we first met. They had eaten their breakfast and were now waiting for the professor to bring them a leaf each.

Catherine didn't like being made to eat out on the balcony with us. She had discovered enjoyment in the company of men and it was widening her knowledge of the worlds outside her tribe. She had joined in and told Merlin about our struggle up the tunnel and her decision to kill poor old Doc when there was no other solution to our problem. Apart from that a lot of their conversation was of things she did not understand, but she was learning fast.

The servants brought us a small table and three chairs. They seemed nervous and we had not heard them speak a word yet. No doubt the story of Hilda's reaction to ill treatment of the servant girl was already known to everyone.

That day Hilda had her first lesson of sitting on a chair and eating with a knife and fork. It was not easy, but she managed. She would have rather sat on the floor and eaten the way they did in the world of the Amazons.

It was pleasant having a meal in the sunshine until we were interrupted by the professor's boys leaping to their feet, shouting and pointing.

Rising from the valley and flocking around the balcony were a number of noisy flying lizards. They zoomed around eyeing us closely and shrieking as though, at any moment, we could change from being breakfasters to breakfast.

The Amazons always had their spears with them and were ready in an instant to take on any lizard who tried to snatch us from the balcony. The boys ran and got theirs too, and soon there was a formidable hedge of weapons waiting to fend off any hungry dragons.

The noise ended breakfast inside and the men came out to see what was going on.

Merlin laughed when he saw the lizards circling around expectantly. 'My little chicks,' he cried. 'They're looking for their morning treat.'

'Well, they're not getting us,' Hilda retorted.

'No, no, Dear Lady, quite harmless. They know better than to attack anyone on the balcony. We have taught them many sharp lessons when they got too close. Perceval, instruct the servants to bring out the chicken carcasses. And have the cross-bow men ready if the lizards should forget their manners.'

Perceval reappeared after a short time, leading out the girls who had served us at breakfast, each carried a tray with the body of a chicken on it.

Two men armed with crossbows were stationed either end of the balcony..

'This is our little morning exercise,' said Merlin, still playing the role of a jovial host. 'We throw them chickens and then enjoy the fights. Mr Mason, would you go first?'

Ignoring Hilda's disapproving looks I took a chicken and threw it as high and as hard as I could.

Shrieking broke out and the group climbed up on flapping wings. One creature, smarter than the others, did not follow, but flew straight across to snatch the chicken carcass on its way to earth. The rest of the flock hurtled down after him, but it was too late, his prize had been crunched and eaten within seconds.

'That was Lancelot,' said Merlin, 'My favorite sky dragon. I have known him since he first picked his way out of the egg.'



'Do you breed them here?' asked the prof. He took a chicken carcass and dropped it over the balcony rail, watching as the squabbling creatures followed it down.

'Why, yes. While you are my guests you must come down to see the hatcheries. We leave one egg for the mother and hatch the others in our heated shed.'

'What do you do if you have too many eggs?'

No problem, old boy. We extract the contents to feed the peasants.' I noted a shudder of disgust that shook the servants.

And the empty shells, do you have any use for those?'

'Yes, certainly. Have you ever heard of Greek Fire?'

'I have, it is an oily substance that will cling to any surface, including human flesh, and burns fiercely.'

'Exactly so! I rediscovered it during my laboratory work and we seal it in the empty eggs, and these eggs are used in air raids on any troublesome tribes, or those who refuse to deliver tributes of food and goods. It's very effective.'

I grabbed Hilda's spear arm so she couldn't raise it. No one noticed, and Merlin didn't know how close he was to death at that moment.

He indicated to the girls that they should throw the rest of the food over the edge, which they did, and caused a shrieking commotion all the way to the ground.

'Tha doesn't see many flying dragons in Yorkford,' said Jess. 'If ivver I come home I'll have a lot to tell. But I must get back t' me work first. A job never started is a job never finished, as me old Dad used t' say.'

'I will come with you, if I may,' said the Prof.

'So shall I,' cried Merlin. 'I will give you both a guided tour of the workshop and my laboratory. You will find it most interesting.'

They went away leaving me with the Amazons, and the Prof's boys.

'You should have let me take him down', said Hilda, 'That's someone else you've stopped me from killing.'

'All in good time,' I said. 'I don't want to leave behind a trail of bodies to mark our visit to this world'.

'I'll get that Perceval too. I'm sure he's the one that's been knocking the girls around, and using them for his own amusement. When we go I'll kill them both and we'll take the girls with us.'

I sighed inwardly, life was becoming more difficult all the time. I said 'You know best, but they don't look to me like future Amazon warriors. Now, what shall we do with the rest of the

day? We can't go the workshop or laboratory because there are three people down there you'll kill if you get the chance.'

'Four!' she said. 'You've forgotten Perceval.'

'Did Merlin make that fire stuff they dropped on us,' asked Catherine. At least she had understood that part of the conversation.

'Yeah, he's the one.'

'I'll help you kill him', said Catherine.

'Perceval's the one that hurts the girls.'

'We'll kill him too.'

As an assassin Catherine would be in the same class as Hilda. It looked as though our visit to Merlin would be memorable one, and I would be busy trying to keep down the body count.

## **Chapter fifteen**

### **Escaping the Valley**

We went for a walk in the valley. The Amazons did not understand the concept of walking for pleasure. In their world walking was to hunt game for the pot, or to get from one place to another, or to find out the dispositions of an enemy. Scenery was not there to be looked at, but assessed as to how it would benefit the tribe.

I sold them on the idea of walking round the valley to study its features and to work out how to escape if we had to fight our way through any enemies.

They liked that thought and we all went. The Prof's boys weren't sure what I had in mind but came when I beckoned them to follow. They were still armed, no one had taken their weapons. So were the Amazons. If anyone had tried to take their spears, bows and knives, that person would be severely punctured.

I had my pistol and gunpowder that had come through the cave in my shoulder bag. The gunpowder had been packed in supposedly waterproof packets, and some had been used to blow the door away. what was left had been drying out again in the room that the professor and I were meant to share.

'That's a cowards' weapons,' said Hilda. 'When you fight you should be able to look your foe in the eye'.

'I am a coward,' I said. 'I hope no one's been telling you I wasn't. Anyway, you've got a bow and arrows. How often do you invite an enemy to come really close and gaze into your eyes before you plug him with an arrow.'

'Bows and arrows are different.'

'How are they different?'

'Oh, shut up, you talk too much!'

I grinned at her, but she wouldn't respond. Instead she said, 'Come on, if we're going. let's go. We haven't got all day.'

After some searching we found a door that opened to the outside world. Beyond it was a landing and some stairs which descended to the valley. Like the one we had already seen, it had been cut from the rock face, and was exceedingly dangerous. There was no outside railing to hang on to, and no landings except far down where the stairs changed direction to zig zag down the cliff face. It was cold outside with a biting wind blowing, but not enough to blow us off, unless we were careless.

The steps seemed the only way to the valley floor so, in spite of my concerns, we were going that way.

I took a step down, leading, with Hilda following. As I did so she put a hand on my shoulder and leaned forward to kiss my ear. I turned and we smiled at one another.

'Cut it out, you two,' I heard Catherine cry. 'Just watch where you're going.' I smiled again as I looked down the long flight of uneven steps before us. I think Hilda did the same.

We walked in single file. Everyone wanted to be as close to the wall as possible, especially with a strong wind blowing. One stumble and it could pick you off for a long fall to valley floor. It was a slow trek down, and my legs were beginning to ache before we reached the bottom. I was not looking forward to the climb back.

When we stepped off the stairs we looked up and saw the balcony high above us, where windows had been pierced in the rock. There were no other balconies or windows anywhere that we could see, Merlin alone dominated the whole valley.

A clay path followed the base of the wall, about two or three meters from it, and disappeared one way around a swell in the rock face. Carefully tended crops, bending in the strong wind were growing on the far side of the path and seemed to extend to the other side of the valley. There were a few sheds and huts in the distance. Perhaps these were where the dragons were hatched.

'Let's go that way,' said Hilda, pointing with her spear along the disappearing path.

It was as good a way as any, so we turned left and followed it.

'They have a big team looking after the crops', said Hilda, after a while.

'How do you know?'

'Look down; it must have rained a couple of days ago.'

'I could see what she meant. Recent rain had softened the clay and there were hundreds of footprints to be seen.

'How many do you think, Cath?', she called.

'Oh, about twenty or thirty on this path, and an overseer.'

'How does she know that?'

'Because the overseer wore boots, like yours, and the workers didn't, most of them were wearing moccasins. The overseer walked behind them coming and going, and probably touched them up with a whip, now and then. This is just one path, and there must be dozens of paths through the crops. We have them like that at home.'

What she was saying made sense. I hadn't seen machinery anywhere, and if they were planting and reaping by hand they needed paths.

We walked on, and round the corner the path started to rise. Other paths branched off to the right, but we ignored, them they, could be explored later.

Our path continued with views now and then of hills and mountains in front of us. We had left the cultivated areas and trees were closing in. It was more like bush walking back home. The track went up and sometimes down into deep gullies, but always tending upwards. We were walking almost on the lower slopes of the mountains.

'This track gets a lot of use,' said Hilda. 'People have been coming and going since the last time it rained, and at least one horse has been ridden up and down since.'

About half an hour later Hilda said, 'I can hear a waterfall.'

'So can I. It's around the next bend.' I was wrong, it was not around the next bend, nor the next, but the walking was easy, the path was no longer rising but the ground on our right was falling away to form a shallow valley.

Passing another corner we came to a rushing torrent fed by snowfields further up. It didn't continue down into the valley but crossed underneath a bridge where we stood, cascaded over some boulders and disappeared into a cave.

'That's our stream,' I said. 'It's feeding into Merlin's cave and then down to the other side of the mountains. I'd take bets on it. Let's go in and see what we can find.'

'Why?' asked Catherine. 'It's just an old cave.'

'I've seen enough caves to last me for a lifetime', added Hilda. 'This path just seems to go up into the mountains, and it's going to get steeper as we get closer. I think we should go back and try somewhere else'

'I'm no tracker, Hilda, as you know, but it seems to me that a lot of people go in and out of that opening, there has to be a reason, have a look.'

'Hilda and Catherine inspected the rocks, and a rocky platform in front of the cave opening. 'Yes, it's used a fair bit, quite a lot I'd say, but what of it?'

'I'm going to have a look. I won't go in far, and I'll stop when the light cuts out'

'Don't be stupid, you'll fall in and be swept away. And don't blame us if you drown; you'll deserve it!'

'Well, if I do fall in I'll keep to the left hand side of the cave and watch out for the steps at Merlin's back door. Jess should be working there with a light. If I can't make it to the steps I'll shout out my last message to you and he can pass it on.'

'Stop being stupid, this is serious. You are not to go into that cave! You don't know what's in there.'

'Well, we won't know until I go in and have look. Sorry to upset you Hilda, but I've always wanted to go caving, but I haven't got lights or the equipment and I'll only go as far as I can see. When the daylight cuts out I'll be back.'

'No one but a fool would want to go into that place after what we've been through.'

'Don't forget, this is an exploring trip, we're finding out everything we can about the valley, When I come out we'll walk a few kilometers more on the path and get an idea where it goes.'

'You're a stubborn idiot. But I'm coming too. You need a sensible person with you.'

I put an arm round her shoulder and kissed her on the cheek. 'I know how much you hated climbing through that tunnel yesterday in the cold and dark, but you were very brave. You don't have to come I'll be careful, and I promise not to fall in.'

She shrugged my hand off her shoulder. 'I'm coming!'

With my reluctant companion behind me I walked down some handy rocks to the entrance. I was sure it was used often and for some purpose we did not yet understand. She was muttering something uncomplimentary about me, but I paid no attention.

Outside the mouth of the cave we stepped on to a natural stone platform. It was damp with spray but seemed safe to walk on. The platform we stood on was well above the stream and continued into the cave itself. We walked a little way along it, then further again, away from the sound of falling water. The light from outside was fading and, as we went on, Hilda prodded in front of us with the butt of her spear.

After a while the light was completely gone. 'It's as black as midnight now,' said Hilda. 'Satisfied?' Her voice echoed around the cave.

'No, listen to that!'

Harsh echoes were rolling to and fro on the hidden walls around us. Something was making a noise in the distance, staccato and hard. A noise repeated over and over until it diminished and died away, to be replaced by another burst of echoes.

'That's Jess,' I said. 'He's working away at the door, hammering something. Keep probing with your spear, but I'm sure this path is used regularly. and that it leads to Merlin's back door, so can we go a bit further?'

'No we can't. I'm afraid. It's all so totally black. I can't see my hands, I can't see anything. I know my hands are there because I can feel them, we're going back.'

'Well you go, but lend me your spear so I can feel my way forward. I think we're on a path that's been cut out of the cave wall, and it will lead us to where Jess is working'.

'No one takes my spear. When we're old enough the tribe gives us our spears and we're bonded until they break, or we die. Sorry, I just can't do it. Now turn around and march out of here.'

'Alright, back to the entrance! I have another idea.'

Catherine was relieved when we came out. 'By the Great Mother,' she said. 'I'm glad to see you two, what have you been doing down there, snogging again?'

'He's mad. He loves going into dark dangerous places.'

I ignored this and said to Catherine, 'Have you seen any candles, or lanterns, or even a tinder box near the cave?'

They stared at me. 'Why would we find them here?'

'I'm convinced we can walk through the cave to Merlin's back door. And a lot of people go that way. If I'm right and people use it they would need lights, but not once they were out in daylight. The, lamps, or whatever they are, would have to be stashed somewhere dry and safe nearby. Have a look and. see what you can find.'

The professor's boys knew we were seeking something so they joined in. We examined the stony slope leading to the entrance of the cave without success, then up on the path.

One of the boys, Sneazy, I think, looked into a hollow tree and shouted at us.

Bingo! There were candles and lanterns safely protected from the weather, and packed in dry moss. There was even a tinder box. I was right; the path was still in use. We took this find down to the hollow where we were out of the wind, and I was able to light some candles and lanterns with the aid of the tinder box.

'Hilda was curious to see how the tinder box worked. She said, 'Do you think Arkwright could make two more of these tinder boxes for Cath. and me?'

'Not if you kill him first. But if you ask him nicely I think he would do it.'

'I'm not going to ask him anything. You do it.'

'If he makes you and Cath. a tinder box each, would you promise not to kill him? And that goes for both of you'.

'We'll think about it.'

'Alright, let me know, and if he's to get off free I'll ask him. I'm sure he'll do it for you. Come on, let's go.'

'Our feeble little lights made all the difference. We fell into a single file again because everyone wanted to touch the wall on our left and keep as far from the edge as possible. All the way along we could hear the echoes of Jess' work. It was almost thunderous as we got closer

About three or four hundred meters into the cavern we saw light dancing on the surface of the water. I was right again, it was reflection of Jess' lights and he was busy fixing the door.

He was startled when we shouted at him and waved our lights in the gloom. But was even more surprised and pleased when our party filed out of the darkness on to his small working space.

'Jess, we've just come from the outside', I said. 'If we had had more light when we first arrived we could have seen this path and walked right past the door.'

'By gow yer reight', he replied. But I must tell ye I ducked down and nearly cried when the door blew. For a moment I thought I was back in the war and it was Hill Sixty being blown up all over again, and I feel guilty about the poor lass who was caught in the blast'.

Jess looked at our tail of warriors. 'Ye've come at the reight time', he said. I been wondering how to lift the frame and set it in position, can yon lads help?'

'Of course they can, me too. Just show us what you want.'

He got us to lift an end of the frame and push it upwards until it was standing upright, and in place. Then we supported it while he got a ladder and hammered in pegs to secure his work.

'They're reight good lads,' he said. And this is good carpentry. D'yer know there's not a nail nor screw in a thousand mile from here. I've had t'make plugs instead. Tha's reight, wooden plugs and dove-tailing. It's all held together like that, and it'll be standing here long after I'm gone.'

I congratulated him on his workmanship, then had a moment of inspiration, I said, 'Oh, by the way, Jess. The girls are tired of rubbing sticks together to start a fire, and it's hopeless in the rain. Could you make them a tinder box each? Nice ones suitable for a lady, perhaps with a little decoration on each.'

'Glad to,' he said. 'I'll get reight on to it as soon as I finish the door. I'll see what's in the workshop that I can use.'

I turned to the girls. 'That's very kind of Jess, say Thank you Mr. Arkwright.'

'Just call me Jess.'

'Very well, say Thank you Jess.'

'Catherine said, 'Thank you Jess.' Hilda glared at me.

I held up my finger. 'Manners, Hilda, manners!' Jess is going to make tinder boxes for you both, and all your tribe will envy you. Now be a good girl and say Thank you Jess.' After a small pause she mumbled 'Thank you Jess.' She looked more angry than thankful.

We all walked away along the tunnel to return the lights to where we found them.

After a while she said, 'You bastard, I'll kill you for that.'

Everyone had to stop as I turned and held the light up to her face. 'So I'm on your private death list now, and Jess is off. Is that right?'

'Stop turning my words around. You're talking, talking all the time. Just shut up!'

We returned the lights to the hollow tree, and packed them round with dry moss

'It's not late,' I said. 'Let's follow the track for a while.'

'We didn't bring anything to eat,' announced Catherine.

'That's alright, I'm surrounded by great hunters, and there should be plenty of lunch running around in the bush at this very moment. See what, you can do. I'll keep on walking, and I have a tinder box; we can cook anything you bring in.'

On our left was the bare mountainside, on our right a wooded valley which was becoming deeper as we went on. There was no argument. They chose the valley and descended until I could no longer see them. I pressed on, knowing they would find me when the hunt was over.

## Chapter sixteen

### The Black Knight

I walked on, it must have been for about half an hour when I turned a corner and came on an unexpected sight. A figure clad from head to foot in black armor, and astride a black horse, had placed himself in the middle of the track. At foot were two snarling dogs that seemed to wait only for his word to savage me.

I stopped and gaped at this extraordinary sight.

'Who are you to intrude upon my land?' he said. 'By what right do you invade this realm?'

Politeness was called for here. This strange figure, complete with hunting dogs, was armed with a lance, sword, and mace. The latter was a heavy club used for bashing people over the head.

'I'm sorry, I didn't know it was anyone's land, but I won't go any further if you don't want me to.'



'How came you into my land?' he asked.

'I am a guest of Lord Merlin. I thought I would take a walk. This is a very beautiful country that you own.'

'I don't care whose guest you are. I know you are an intruder and a spy for Merlin. In my realm spies have their heads cut off. Kneel now so I can carry out the sentence.' He dismounted and drew a long two edged sword from its scabbard. He kissed the blade. 'Ah, my darling,' he said. 'I know how you thirst for blood. Today I can only give you poor stuff from some miserable spy who will not be missed, but one day you will drink the blood of Merlin himself.'

The dogs were shivering with excitement, but still snarling. He had a whip and lashed both until they fell back, whimpering, but still with their bloodshot eyes fixed on me.

I turned to run, but the man bellowed 'Boniface!'

The bushes at the side of the track shook. A horse and rider burst out in front of me. His horse rose on its hind legs, front hoofs flailing the air, I staggered back.

The rider whirled a rope and threw, it had two weighted ends. The rope hit me just above the knees and I went down as the ends whirled around my legs, binding me tight.

The knight rode over and sneered down at me. 'As well as being useless as a spy you lack manners. You should not have run away while I was speaking to you.' His restless horse was dancing about in its eagerness for action and I thought it was going to squash me like a beetle.

'I have had second thoughts about you,' he said. 'You appear to be young, and in good health. It would be wasteful to kill you when we are in need of slaves. When you are old and no longer fit to work, we can kill you then.'

'Master,' said the servant. 'There are hunters down in the valley, look.' He pointed.

'Hunters in my valley! By God I'll skin them. I'll nail their hides to trees. 'Merlin's sending his people here to provoke me, is he? He's succeeding, but he can send as many trespassers as he likes. I can deal with them all'.

'Boniface, tie the spies' hands together, and he can run behind your horse. We'll take him to the cabin and leave him there, then we'll deal with these others that are intruding on to my land.'

'Boniface tied my wrists tightly together. It was painful and cut off the circulation. The other end he tied to his saddle. Then he leapt on to his horse with the weighted length of rope he had untangled from my legs. As he did so the master leant down and whipped his horse hard on the rump.

Under the sting of the lash the horse took off instantly, dragging me behind it. I nearly fell over, and heard the big man laughing.

'Keep running, spy!' he roared. 'If you fall over we won't stop. You'll be dragged the rest of the way, and you'll be torn to ribbons, not worth saving.'

'They kept going, making no concessions and I had to sprint a mile, or more, with the hounds bounding alongside until we turned off into a clearing where there was a miserable little hut.

Boniface took me in and tripped me over. I fell and he lashed my feet together and bound me round the chest so my arms were pinioned to my side. He finished with me still lying on my back and my feet tied to a pole that supported the roof.

He left, and I heard the two of them galloping away.

I lay there for a long time listening and hoping that the others were okay.

I must have fallen asleep.

Someone shook me by the shoulder. It was Hilda, She was kneeling down, her face pale and concerned.

'Are you alright?'

'I think so. The big guy was going to make me a slave, has there been a change of plans?'  
Cut me loose, will you. These ropes hurt.'

'You idiot!' she said, as she cut my bonds. I can't turn my back without you getting into trouble. We went off for a short hunt, and when we came back you were gone.'

'The two that caught me were going down into the valley to kill you. Did you see them?'

'Saw them, heard them. The big one in the tin suit was making so much noise saying what he'd do when he caught us we just, sort of, melted away. As far as I know they're still down there. We left our catch and came to see what had happened to you.'

'You followed our tracks, didn't you?'

'Of course we followed the tracks. Your hands were tied and you were running behind one of the horses. We could see that clear enough. How stupid can you be? You fell for that old ambush trick. I just cannot let you out of my sight.'

'You've forgotten my hands. Cut them free, please. The ropes hurt.'

'Why should I? If your hands are tied you can't get into more trouble.'

'I can't give you a friendly slap on the bottom either. You'll be sorry.'

She sighed loudly, took out her knife and sliced the rope in seconds, then put her arms round my neck and kissed me. 'Oh, Andy, I've been so worried about you. Then I came in and saw you lying there. I thought you were dead.'

'No, I'm alright, I was just having a bit of a kip.'

'What! We were running our guts out trying to catch up and you were having a nice snooze. 'You deserve to be punished for that.' She started to punch and I flinched away.

'You are a coward! A real man would fight back.'

'Not me, I'm only a naughty boy, and I'm enjoying it. You haven't got a whip handy, have you? You could use that, it's more fun.'

'She threw herself on me and started laughing. 'I don't know what to do with you. You shouldn't make me laugh when I'm angry, it's not fair.'

'We could kiss and make up.'

'Don't try that stuff on me. You don't deserve any consideration.'

'I know, but I need tender loving care as much as any other man.' I pulled her head down and we lay side by side for a moment until Catherine shouted from outside. 'He's coming back!'

We rolled apart. Hilda grabbed her spear and shield and ran outside. I followed, pulling back the hammer of my pistol.

The knight had arrived at the end of the clearing. He was still accompanied by his sidekick and the two savage dogs that hung around and growled deep in their throats, waiting for an order to attack.

He laughed at us, a great booming laugh, sarcastic. His lance was upright, the butt resting on his boot. The servant halted half a horse length behind his master.

'So, you've escaped your bonds,' he roared. And your army consists of two Amazons, and five black warriors. I take it these were the hunters we saw. Splendid! This should add interest to my day.' He turned to his servant. 'Boniface, I can see poor sport here, but they are better than nothing, you will call out the score as I and the dogs kill them'

Boniface ducked his head and grinned.

The knight paused. 'Chivalry is all', he announced, 'It is only polite that you should know who is killing you. I am the Black Knight, Lord of these domains and I kill and spare at my pleasure. You are trespassers on my land, but I am merciful. Those who wish to live will kneel, and become my slaves. Those who choose to die will stand and fight.'

'Stop rabbiting on, you old goat,' cried Hilda, ever the diplomat. 'If you're going to kill us come and do it, we haven't got all day.'

She and Catherine stood almost shoulder to shoulder, crouching behind their shields, spears at the ready.

The Black Knight roared with laughter and spurred his horse into a canter, accompanied by his dogs. The horse scarcely broke into a gallop in the short distance it had to cover. His lance came down and pointed at one of the women; I could not see which, while I ran in from the

side, my pistol aimed at the horse. Not a good move, I was running right into the path of one of his dogs, we saw one another at the same moment.

It leapt at me showing its bayonet like teeth. I forgot the horse and killed the dog. It was a lucky shot, for me! Right through the mouth, and it went down on its side to twitch and scrabble at the ground with its paws.

Our warriors threw their spears as one man. Most rattled harmlessly off the knight's armor, but a lucky throw hit the horse's rump and it squealed with pain and anger.

The horse had to be brought down. Once on the ground the knight's two main weapons, his lance, and long, heavy sword would be useless against opponents who refused to stand still to be chopped to pieces.

The warriors darted forward to pick up their spears and chased him, but only for a few seconds. The other dog got one of them down and had to be dealt with first.

As the horse passed me the spear fell out of its rump. I picked it up and went after the enemy. At this moment I bumped into Catherine who had stumbled while turning aside, and we both went down. But only for a moment, then we were on our feet again

The Black Knight was struggling to turn his injured steed around because the two Amazons had jumped aside at the very last moment and were going after him while his back was turned. He stood up on the stirrups, looked round and saw Catherine and me getting to our feet. He threw the lance like a spear. I ducked in time and ran forward to help Hilda who vaulted up on to the back of the horse, reaching round to stab him in the face. The fool was so arrogant he had not lowered his visor.

She got the blade deep into his mouth and I could see her hand working as she gouged the knife into tongue and tissue. Then she fell off, as he struggled, arched his back in agony. She still had the bloodied dagger in her hand.

The horse did not move but stood trembling, its head hanging down. They were both defeated. The knight sagged forward, blood, pouring from his mouth. The saddle creaked as he started moving sideways, then he slid off and fell to the ground with a clash of armor.

Hilda dragged his head back, found a chink in the armor and plunged her knife into his throat.

'Better safe than sorry', she muttered. Then she looked upwards at the sky and screamed in exultation. It was the warrior's cry of victory over a slaughtered foe. At that moment I realised the depths of savagery in her soul.

Then we saw her friend. Catherine was lying on her side, taking shallow breaths, and moaning quietly now and then. The spear thrown by the Black Knight had pierced her just below the rib cage on the right side. Hilda ran and knelt beside her. I think she did not hear the final shot in the battle.

Boniface, appalled at this defeat and death of his master, had roared, dragged out his own knife, and held it high as he urged his horse towards the kneeling Hilda. She seemed not to see or hear him.

I dived to get the spear before it was too late, but no need, Jess shot him in the back as he rode to kill Hilda. Then he too fell off and lay dying, while his horse wandered away and started to eat grass at the edge of the clearing.

Jess and the professor had arrived panting, and almost exhausted, just as the Black Knight fell to the ground. They had hurried to follow us carrying a loaded musket apiece, and a spare for me.

Hilda may have heard nothing of this. She could look only into her friend's eyes and hear her rattling breath and gasps of pain.

A short distance away another little party was grieving. It was the professor's boys. Sneezy had been dragged down by the Knight's other dog, which had gone for his throat. The dog had been killed by dozens of spear thrusts, but it was too late for Sneezy.

The professor and Hilda were kneeling either side of Catherine so Jess and I went first to the boys, and joined their little group. I felt Sneezy's chest. No heartbeat, he was dead, and the boys looked at me as though I could say something that would ease their pain.

'He was a good man,' I said. Jess pulled off his cap and stood bare-headed. 'A friend to us all. I have known him only a few days after we freed you from the Gorbies but he truly stood by us, as you have done, and we can only hope he has gone to a better place.'

The boys did not understand what I was saying but nodded gravely. I added some remembered bits of the twenty third psalm. -"The Lord is my shepherd"-, and so on. They were pleased to hear me saying some words over their friend, but I felt guilty, I wanted to get away and be with the others at Catherine's side.

They squatted on the ground around the body awaiting further orders. Jess and I went to join the tiny group with Catherine.

Jess looked at her and muttered, so no one else could hear. 'I seen hundreds of wounds during the war, mebbe thousands and she won't live with this one. If we had an ambulance handy, and mebbe a field hospital they might save her, but no, she'll go soon.' He took off his cap again and knelt beside me.

Blood was welling out around the shaft of the lance which was embedded in her body. No one wanted to pull it out. Blood would gush from the wound and we had no means to stop it.

She had been talking to the others between spasms of pain and looked at us as we knelt beside her.

'Hello Jess' she murmured. 'Thank you for saving Hilda's life'.

'Ah, lass, it were nowt. I wish I could have done more.'

'Don't forget my tinder box, as well as hers. Someone in the tribe will be glad of it.'

She looked at me. 'Andy, you go home. Hilda wants you to join the tribe, but that's wrong, go back to your own people.'

She said nothing more but shortly afterwards the shadow of death moved across her face, and she was gone.

Hilda threw her head back and howled at the sky. She got out her knife to cut herself but Jess and I caught her in time and the prof. wrestled the knife out of her hands. Then she fell to the ground where she writhed, throwing dirt and twigs over herself, and crying. She tore at her hair until we stopped her. I held her wrists as she screamed.

The prof. said, 'We have to give them a decent burial.'

I looked at him. He said, 'No, not the oppressors, just Catherine and Sneezzy. We'll take them away from this terrible place. The others can stay here until they are found. Mr Arkwright, can you make two litters for our friends?'

## **Chapter seventeen**

### **The Clan Attacks**

We carried the two bodies down to the valley floor and found a pleasant spot where they would lie near one another. Jess and the professor went back to the workshop for tools to dig their graves while I waited with Hilda to make sure she didn't harm herself.

We sat on a bank nearby, she was much calmer. I put an arm round her and she laid her head on my shoulder 'Cath was my best friend,' she said. 'We grew up together and were given our spears and shields on the same day. She asked me not to harm Meadowes or Arkwright, so I won't.'

I told her how Jess had saved her, and she thanked him when they returned with shovels and picks. That left only Merlin and Perceval on the highly endangered list. It seemed good progress.

While we were digging I asked the Prof. how he knew we were in trouble.

'That was our friend Merlin,' he said. 'He told me of a powerful clan living in the area which was led by a maniac who enjoyed killing people. He had a suit of armor and waylaid people to kill them, or make them slaves, or hold them for ransom. I mentioned this to Mr Arkwright and he remembered that you were taking that very path. So we armed ourselves and followed as fast as we could.'

When the two graves were ready we put Catherine's shield at the bottom of hers and laid her on it with the spear in her hand. Hilda said her friend had promised to wait for her at the Bridge of Spears and together they would fight their way across to greet the Supreme Mother.

The professor had brought two blankets' which we laid over them and then shovelled dirt in on top.

I recited again what I remembered of the funeral service, and the professor spoke a short eulogy for both. Then we left them.

We climbed the long stairs because we wanted to keep off the path, and also not to alert Merlin to our knowledge of the back entrance. We would wait until he told us. At the foot of the stairs I stopped our party and asked if the muskets were loaded. Mine was but Jess had not reloaded his since shooting Boniface.

'We've really stirred up something bad by killing that guy,' I said. 'I think he was head of a clan, and they won't be happy about us killing the boss, so we have to be super careful from now on.'

I was right, the boys went to their room when we arrived, breathless, at the head of the stairs. Merlin was in an agitated state, and cried out when we arrived. 'What have you done, The Black Knight and his servant have been murdered. His people want revenge! They say the persons responsible should be handed over to them for punishment.'

The professor responded. 'They are certainly dead, his dogs also, I saw it happen. He started the whole miserable business by trying to kill us all, and paid the price.'

'The clan members said you trespassed on their land and killed the Black Knight and his servant. You started the trouble and you must face their justice. 'You are to be handed over to them immediately' He pointed at Hilda. 'Perhaps if we were to give her, and the other Amazon, to them that might be enough.'

'No way,' I said, 'We're not giving up anyone. 'If they want us they'll have to come for us!'

'But they are here already.'

We had been talking to him in the passage and in a moment it was full of armed men who poured out of his room where they had been hidden, and also from the balcony. They closed in on us front and back. Merlin disappeared into the crowd.

Hilda and I faced one way, Jess and the professor, the other. Our muskets were ready and Hilda had her spear.

'We no kill you here,' cried a man facing me, and I could smell his foul breath. 'We kill you where everyone can see.' He grinned at my musket. His few remaining teeth were dirty. 'Sticks no stop us, you put them down!'

'Fire!' I cried, and pulled the trigger. The man who had spoken was thrown backwards with a bullet in his chest. Hilda speared her opponent through the belly. Others were knocked over by falling bodies. The same shock happened behind us.

The passage was full of smoke, the floor and walls were bloodied, our ears rang from the noise. Then the boys burst out of their room to spear the clan members still standing. Those nearest to the stairs bolted, leaving their dead behind while we stood back to let through the others who had hidden on the balcony. We stood amidst the ruin, half dazed by these events.

Merlin reappeared, this time with Perceval.

He stared, horrified at seeing the bloodied bodies lying on the floor, and made mewing sounds.

Perceval was less affected, he said to a white faced servant, who had followed them, 'Throw the bodies over the balcony and get this place cleaned. Call the other servants, it's to be done now!'

'Sir', asked the servant, 'Shouldn't they be buried proper?'

'No, they should not. The lizards need feeding.'

'But some are only wounded!'

'Treat 'em the same, they weren't invited. Now, get on with it or I'll have you thrown over too.'

The man scurried away.

Merlin was distraught. 'This means war. When they come they will kill us all.'

'Rubbish!' cried Hilda. 'They can only climb those stairs two abreast at the most. Your crossbow men can shoot them down before they even get close.' Her grief seemed forgotten for the moment while she was confronted by a military problem. 'If we had enough supplies we could die of old age up here before they could get anywhere near us.'

Merlin was not convinced. 'You stupid woman! You caused all this trouble, and you have forgotten the back door; they can smash their way through that, or they can heap fuel against the door and set fire to it. The Black Knight's clan will stop at nothing to get revenge.'

Jess was startled to hear this. 'Tha's my door yer talkin' about!!' he cried, 'No one's goin' to smash my door, or burn it. It'll be there hundreds o' years after Ah'm forgotten.' He stumped down stairs, taking the boys with him.

'We will have plenty of rocks to drop on them,' said the prof. 'This whole place is carved out of shale or heavy sandstone. It would be easy to go into one of the spare rooms and hack heavy blocks out of the wall.'

'Are you people mad?' asked Merlin. 'Your stupidity and blood thirstiness has raised a whole clan against us, and now you're talking about making things worse. I still say we should give them the Amazons and hope for the best. What else can we do?'

'We can fight!' roared Perceval.

The servants stared at him. They stopped their cleaning and body disposal duties.



'Get on with it!' he ordered the astonished group and turned again to Merlin.

'You blithering old ninny. Ever since the Black knight was head of the clan they've been needling us, pushing us, looking for a fight. Well, the Black Knight's gone now, and so has that bloody mad servant of his, and his dogs! They won't find another two leaders like that in a hurry. We couldn't take them on at a better time.'

Merlin decided to assert himself. 'You shouldn't speak to me like this Perceval, particularly in front of the servants and my guests. I am your social superior, and my family has watched over the Vale of Avalon for fifteen hundred years. You will apologise!'

'Bullshit!' said Perceval. 'Your lot has been here eighty years, tops. My family has been around longer than yours. Whether or not you're a descendant of Merlin I wouldn't know, but it doesn't seem likely.'

Merlin stared at him and stammered. 'How dare you speak to me like that in the presence of the Pendragon. You are dismissed. Take your belongings and leave.'

'I'm not going anywhere.' He turned to me. 'The Amazon woman's right, we can defend this place, will you lot be staying round to help?'

'I don't know,' I said, 'We'll have to talk it over!'

Merlin re-entered the discussion. 'Perceval, I believe I told you to leave. Kindly do so at once, or apologise for those slanderous and untrue statements about me and my family.'

Perceval ignored him. 'What we should do now is force them to attack us before they're ready. I'll send a message to the Gorbies to make a fire raid on the clan's village; that should stir them up.'

I looked at Hilda's face. This was not her way of making war, and she remembered the fire eggs dropped on her own village.

'That's the coward's way,' she said. 'Go there and fight them. If the Black Knight was their best man it won't be hard, a single horseman like that is easy meat for trained warriors. He should have known better.'

The lizards had been swirling outside the balcony, shrieking at one another and fighting as the servants threw corpses and wounded, screaming men over the railing. Now they were crawling over their feast still shrieking and fighting to see who got the most. The members of the Black Knight's clan had reached the foot of the stairs by this time. They tried to drive the lizards away, but fell back defeated and trudged off to relay the news of their latest disaster.

'We're going down to talk to Jess and the boys,' I said to Perceval. 'We will let you know in the morning.'

Perceval nodded. Merlin had gone to his room and shut the door.

As we were going downstairs I asked the Prof. about the huge time differences between the two men. 'One said fifteen hundred years, the other, eighty.'

'I am inclined to favor Perceval's estimate', he said. This whole dwelling has been carved out of fairly soft rock, including the stairs we are walking down now, but they don't show fifteen hundred years of wear. In my opinion Merlin is living in a fantasy world.'

Downstairs we found Jess and his assistants. They had gone down after the battle with our neighbours to see what he was doing. They were much more alert and healthier than when we first met, and no longer craved narcotic leaves every day.

These are reight good lads', he said, as we arrived. 'If I had them a while I could make gurt tradesmen of them.' He led us to look at some rusty old tanks I had not seen before. 'They were in the store-room and we're to be cut up and flattened and then to fixed on the outside of the door to make it fire-proof. 'And I'll have a trough full of water over the door, that can be tipped upside down from in here to put out any fire.'

' This is excellent, Mr Arkwright,' said the Prof. you are very inventive. But before you do anything else we must consider our own position. We are caught between two forces and we don't want to join either, they are equally bad. The Greek Fire that fell on Hilda's village was made here in the laboratory. It's only a recent discovery and Merlin is in alliance with the Gorbies to supply them with flying dragons and fire eggs. They're starting to use the bombs on neighbouring villages to force them to give up food and treasure. Merlin gets a share of the loot.'

'I say go, and leave them to it, interposed Hilda. 'But before we walk away we kill Merlin and Perceval. After that, we go north. We can fight our way past that mob of crazies. I killed the Black Knight, and Jess here killed Boniface. Between us, upstairs, we took care of about eight more. So they're about ten fighters down and haven't got a leader. If we walk that path again they may not even want to fight us'.

'We don't know where the northern path leads to,' said the Prof. 'But if we go the other way, south, I am sure we would come to the place where you ambushed the Gorbies and captured Andrew.'

'That's not a bad idea. I could go home that way, back to my tribe.'

'Yes, but I believe we would first have to walk through a pass in the mountains, with lots of Gorbies and lizards to fight. That is where their lair might be. But then the northern path might bring us to yet unknown dangers.

' Aye, but if we go north we'll be further from Mr Mason's fowk. That lass and her mother need our help, and we need theirs. Mebbe the mother can send us home. But we'll not find her on the north side o' the mountains.'

'We ran from the Gorbies last time', I said, 'and ended up here. If they start attacking us in the pass, if there is a pass, there will be nowhere to run.'

'It's quite a dilemma,' said the prof. 'We will make our decision in the morning. We go or we stay, and if we go, which way?'

Merlin and Perceval did not appear at dinner, which was a relief. We did not want to talk to either. Everyone was tired, and we wanted to finish with this sad day.

Before we parted Professor Meadowes took Hilda by the hand. 'Catherine was a good hearted girl,' he said, 'A fine young woman, she deserved better than to die like that; and I shall always remember her with fond affection.' Tears started from Hilda's eyes as he kissed her hand, but she nodded, unable to speak.

'She were a reight good lass! said Jess. 'I'm sorry she's gone.'

Later, in bed, Hilda clung to me and cried. 'I'm glad I didn't kill Meadowes,' she said between sobs. 'He's a kind man. Cath saw what he was really like and loved him. I suppose you're right, and we shouldn't have clever slaves.'

I held my tongue and didn't say they shouldn't have slaves at all. Instead I petted her, glad that the extravagant grief at the death of her friend had changed to quiet sorrow.

She thought about Jess too. 'If I'd stabbed him there would have been no one to shoot that madman who was coming to kill me, I would have been buried with Cath.'

'I want to go home,' she said. 'Come with me, Andy. I want to be with the tribe again, and I want to see my daughter.'

'Daughter! You have a daughter.'

'Yes, she's three years old now, a pretty little thing, and she has hair just like mine.'

'Who was the father?'

'Oh, just a man. I don't remember his name. He got four of us pregnant, and then left. We haven't seen him since.'

'Were the other three children all girls?'

'No, but it didn't matter. We swapped with a mixed tribe that was short of boys, but had too many females. There's a lot of hard bargaining goes on at times like that. They want to give us girls that are weak, or undersized.'

'Your little one will be missing her mother, don't you worry about her?'

'No, not really, she has a hundred mothers. The tribe will look after her, whatever happens.'

'I see, in three years time you will have forgotten my name too.'

'No, never! I'll always remember you. And I've got a good feeling that I'm going to have a baby girl. Come with me please, Andy. They'll welcome you.'

'Yes, as breeding stock, but when I'm clapped out they'll tell me to go. But Hilda, I'll always remember you'.

We both knew that our time together was coming to an end. The decision to be made in the morning might mean death for both of us. Even if we survived we would have to return to our own worlds. I watched her until she fell asleep.

## **Chapter eighteen**

### **A battle underground**

In the morning I was awakened by a cry and rolled over sleepily to ask Hilda if she had heard it too. She was not there. Her side of the bed was still warm so she had got up only a short time before. Her clothes had disappeared as well as her spear and shield. Her bow and arrows were still in the room. I was not concerned, she carried her spear every everywhere, even to breakfast.

I lay for a while thinking about our decision for the day, then thought I should get up and dress, because if we were to move on we should make an early start.

While dressing a strange shuffling noise was heard coming from the other side of the door. I looked out and saw some white-faced servants who carrying a bloodied body between them in the direction of the balcony. The dead man was Perceval, there was a wound over his heart.

Hilda followed them. Blood ran down the shaft of the spear on to her hand then dripped to the floor as she walked. Other servants watched, cowering at the end of the corridor.

The Prof's door opened as the body was carried past.

Hilda looked at me. 'I got up early this morning,' she said. There was something that had to be done. I didn't mean to kill him so soon, but things happen.'

'Why didn't you talk to me first?'

'You're too soft-hearted. You would have stopped me.'

The body glared up at us with dead eyes and open mouth. Perceval had been killed with one spear thrust.

Hilda said, 'He won't be ill-treating those girls again.'

We followed them out to the balcony.

'You're not going to throw him to the lizards, are you?'

'Why not? It was his way of getting rid of dead bodies, live ones too.'

She gestured for the servants to tip the body over the edge. They did so, and it fell out of sight. They scurried away before she could give them any more tasks to perform.

As we came off the balcony Merlin appeared, white-faced . He still had on his night cap and a gown reaching nearly to his ankles. He stammered, and at last said 'The servants tell me that the Amazon has murdered Perceval. She must be handed over for punishment. I never thought the advent of the Pendragon would bring so much trouble on my house --'. He screamed and ran away. His bedroom door was slammed and bolted from the inside.

It was Hilda who caused his retreat. She had joined us and he had seen her spear with Perceval's blood drying on its blade.

'Call the servants to get our breakfast', she said, ignoring Merlin's sudden departure. 'I'll wash my hands first.' She went into our room where there was a water jug and basin.

'That young woman never ceases to surprise me,' said the professor. 'I note that you have some influence over her. Could you persuade her not to murder Merlin also?'

'I'll mention it to her, but she does these things without telling me.'

Jess and his helpers were called up from below to eat with us. He had risen early and taken his followers with him to finish the job of fire-proofing the door, they knew nothing of what had happened.

'She's a reight caution, that one,' he said. 'She'd no fit into Yorkford. We be quiet fowk that don't hold wi' people stabbin' one another, though I'm glad we saved her yesterday'. He shook his head several times afterwards but was not greatly troubled by news of Perceval's death. Jess was accustomed to death and wounds, he had seen so many tragedies during the First World War. that he was hardened to pain and bloodshed.

Why did you do it I asked Hilda.

'Well, I got up early and went to that place you call a laborotory, or something like that. You know, it's where he makes the fire eggs. I took some of the eggs and fire-bombed the place. It was starting to burn nicely when Perceval came in and screamed at me to stop. I was a bit carried away, and I don't take orders from anyone who beats women, so I put him down.

We finished breakfast it was time to decide.

Hilda got up and left the table.

'I trust you did tell her not to kill Merlin, ?'

'Yes, she promised not to do it until I gave her the word.'

The professor need not have worried. Hilda returned a few minutes later with four serving girls who seemed wary of us, but terrified of Hilda. One had a black eye.

'They're coming with us,' she said. 'They'll never be fighters but they'll be welcome in the tribe, and they won't get the rough treatment they've had here'.

'You'll need warm clothes and lots of food', she told them. Go raid the kitchen and food stores for supplies. Bring what you can because we'll all have to carry something. If the men

give any trouble send for me, I'll sort them out.' The girls left, glad to get away, even if only for a short time.

'I don't like this place,' she said 'And I hate living indoors all the time. I'll feel better when we're out in the open.'

'Which way do you want to go?'

'South, I want to go home. I want my family around me.'

I asked the Prof. 'What do you think, south, north, or stay here?'

He was just about to reply when Jess burst in. 'There's fowk at the back door,' he cried, 'tryin' to smash their way in! We got it closed just in time, and me boys are down there waiting with their spears in case they do break through.'

'How long will it hold?'

'It's a good door, even if I say so mysen. It'll hold unless they build a fire against it, we haven't had time to finish the fireproofing.'

'Crossbows!' cried Hilda to some scared servants who had appeared after hearing the banging from below. Tell the cross-bow men to take some lights with them and they're to stand on the steps and shoot anyone who gets through. 'Do it now!' she screamed as they stood and looked at her. They scattered.

She turned to us. 'Guns! Get your guns. Andrew, bring your bag of ammo.'

The guns were already loaded and we were back within seconds, ready to go down and help.

'Forget that,' she said. 'They'll have to hold on as best they can. Down the outside stairs, now! We'll take them in the rear.'

It was a good idea, but only if we were in time. We pelted down the stairs. It was dangerous, but no one thought of that. Hilda and I were down first but didn't wait and ran straight along the path to reach the entrance to the cave.

When we arrived even Hilda was puffing. A man was gathering firewood. He turned to run but Hilda speared him from behind and he fell, scattering wood which she kicked aside. We ignored her victim and went down to the mouth of the cave. She turned panting. 'See if they've left any lanterns or candles in that tree.'

There was one candle that had been overlooked so I crouched beside her, out of the wind, and lit it with my tinderbox while she waited to see if anyone else came out of the cave.

Just as I got the candle burning Jess and the professor, badly winded, staggered into view.

'Stay here for a while until you feel better', said Hilda. 'Keep under cover and shoot anyone you don't know who tries to go into the cave. But don't shoot us when we come out.'

Entering the cave with our candle we heard hideous echoes of screaming and yelling as a battle raged ahead. The reflection of yellow flames glittered and danced on the water, so I blew out the candle and put it in my pocket.

Someone loomed out of the darkness, perhaps going to get more firewood. He saw the light glinting on the tip of Hilda's spear. 'What --?' That was the last word he ever spoke. The spear tip went through his belly and he fell off the path into the lake, disturbing the lights bouncing around on the surface.

By the time we caught up part of the door had been forced and we saw cross-bow bolts flashing into the light as they were fired off from the stairs.

A queue of fighters on the path were waiting to take part in the battle as we hurried up behind.

We stopped just behind the last man, but no one turned round to look. I levelled the musket and said to Hilda. 'Put your hands over your ears!'

She leaned her spear against the cave wall on our left and clamped her hands over her ears.

I fired and took out two of the men at the end of the queue. They fell forward and knocked some others off the path, into the water. The noise deafened me, I could scarcely hear the huge echoes that bounced round the cave.

Hilda grabbed her spear and ran screaming and stabbing at those still standing. Some fell, others jumped into the water to escape the fury that had descended on them from the rear, some turned to defend themselves, but it was too late.

I reloaded my musket, hearing muffled sounds, hoping my hearing would come good.

The attackers panicked, a battling harpy drove men at the back of the queue to try to escape by pushing those in front. Some fell off the path into the stream, some at the head of the queue were exposed to the cross-bowers, and they started to fall, pierced by darts. The survivors tried to escape and jumped into the water to escape Hilda's deadly spear. The surface of the lake was churning with struggling bodies. The non-swimmers clung to others who tried to fight them off and both disappeared under the water.

Our gallant boys, ignoring the burning heat, appeared with more stabbing spears forcing the attackers off the path and the surface of the underground river was churned up even more. The cross-bow men came down to stand on the path to shoot at helpless bodies floundering to death.

I caught hold of Hilda, who struggled with me, and dragged her back. 'It's all over.' I said. 'We've won, but the boys can't see properly in the darkness. They might kill us by mistake.'

She still had the battle frenzy on her but I dragged her away swearing, though her voice was faint in my ears. I didn't want either of us to be killed by a dart fired at random, or by an over enthusiastic spearman.'

As I pulled her back to the entrance of the cave we met two other figures groping their way inwards. I got in front of Hilda to stop her from gutting them. Luckily so, it was Jess and the professor.

'We heard the gunshot and hurried in to see if we could be of assistance.'

I was almost deaf, but understood what they said. 'No, not now. If it was the clan that attacked us it has been totally defeated, though I'm sorry to say part of Jess' door has been damaged.'

'This is reight bad news,' said Jess. 'Ah mun go and see for meself.'

I caught hold of him too. 'No you don't Jess. There are a lot of excited people down there all armed, and if you appear suddenly from the darkness you might be sorry. I suggest you give them at least half an hour to settle down, and keep whistling as you get close.'

'There'll be stragglers too,' said Hilda. 'Some will get back on the path away from the fighting. Some will swim the length of the cave and climb up the rocks. I'll kill them as they come out.'

There was no doubt about that girl, she enjoyed her work.

'A few might find that rock platform we were on the other night,' suggested the prof. They could hide out of sight where we were.'

This remark seemed to fire up Hilda's imagination. 'I'll borrow the coracle later,' she said, 'And go over and deal with them.'

While we were talking just outside the cave some survivors tried to sneak out. Hilda was going to skewer them all but we held her back. We thought she had killed enough people for one day, especially if you added Perceval to that number.

She raged at us. 'Cowards! Weak kneed jelly guts! I won that fight. If Cath. had been here we could have bored right in and killed the lot of them.'

Some stragglers who heard this ran past us up to the path and fled

After a while it seemed that no one else was coming and she angrily shook us off and marched, shield and spear at the ready, into the cave.

We followed, hoping there would be no more deadly encounters on the way.

No one challenged us. The boys were delighted when we arrived and we praised them for standing up against the intruders. They did not know what we were saying but knew it was praise and were delighted. The cross-bow men were arguing cheerfully as to who had the most hits and were pleased when we congratulated them too. After a chat about their triumph they saluted us and left. It seemed that no one was mourning the passing of Perceval.

Hilda did not say anything but went upstairs with a face like a thundercloud. Luckily she did not meet Merlin on the stairs because he came down a few minutes later.



He looked round cautiously at the mess and the sagging door which Jess and his helpers were already taking down for repair.

I heard him say, 'Is the Amazon here?'

My head was still ringing but at least I could hear.

'No, you missed her', I said. 'She went upstairs just before you came. You could have congratulated her for winning the battle. She attacked them in the cave and they had the choice of being slaughtered or jumping into the water.'

Merlin threw up his hands in despair. 'All this fighting and provocation of my neighbors is most distressing. Since you arrived you have destroyed the good relations I built up with the clan. They never would have attacked me if you had not interfered.'

'Those good relations you speak of were a lie', the professor told him. 'When the Black Knight captured Mr Mason he told him that you were to be murdered.'

'No, all would have been well if Mr Mason had not provoked him in the first place.'

All I had done to provoke the man was to walk along a path which he claimed to be his. It was no use pointing this out to Merlin so we took the coracle to look for survivors.

The coracle was the unhandiest craft I have ever been in. It was as round as a saucer with high sides and no matter how hard we paddled it wouldn't go where we wanted it to go, it just rotated

It was dangerous too. We were near where the current started to increase its speed towards the tunnel. At last we got the hang of it to paddle together on opposite sides and finally reached the rock platform to pull the coracle well out of water. We left it there and with the aid of lanterns borrowed from Jess went looking for stragglers.

'While crossing the stream to get to where we had hidden from the force of the explosion I felt something nudge my leg. I glanced down and my lantern illuminated someone floating there. He was underwater and gazing sadly up at me. Tendrils of long hair floated about his face. I reached down without thought and grabbed him by the front of his tunic to drag him up to get some air before it was too late.

The man's head lolled back and I turned it so water would pour out of his open mouth before resuscitation could begin.

The prof. caught my arm and held his lantern up to the swollen face. 'Let him go!' he said. 'He's dead.'

'How do you know?'

'Have you heard anyone fall in since we left the landing? Have you heard anyone struggling in the water? We would have heard; at least I would have, you know how the walls magnify every noise in here. In a day or two the dead bodies will start to rise to the surface.'

They will drift in this direction until they are caught in the current, then they will be swept away and end up God knows where, probably in some river downstream.'

He was right, so we let the dead man go and went to look for the living.

With the aid of our lanterns we found two refugees, but it was difficult to persuade them, they were not to be killed. After pacifying the pair we got them, with the aid of the coracle back to the steps where Jess and his assistants were busy fixing flattened metal sheets on the outside of the door and its frame.

The two we had rescued grunted something and headed off towards the mouth of the cave.

We did not leave that day because Jess was anxious to fix the door, a task which occupied him and his assistants for hours. At dinner that night Hilda did not appear, nor did Merlin. Jess came to eat hurriedly and we had a good report of the work he and his helpers had done. The door would not burn again. He made sure his team was fed, had something for himself, and went down again to finish the job, his loyal band followed him.

Upstairs the girl servants were still frightened. They came to us and one said, 'The Amazon told us we had to be ready in the morning because we will be going on a long, long walk to join her tribe. Will it be dangerous?'

'We don't know,' answered the prof. 'It may be just as dangerous to stay. We have been attacked three times since we arrived. What if there is a fourth attack and we are not here to defend you? But I will say this, if you really don't want to go we won't let her force you. Tell us in the morning what you want to do.'

I went to bed soon after. There was a tray outside our door, which I nearly trod on because the only light was a candle I was carrying. At least Hilda had eaten.

I undressed and got into bed. Hilda's back was turned and neither said anything as I blew out the candle and nestled into the mattress. The moon, now past full, shone some light into the room

The quiet continued for some seconds until she suddenly spun around and said, 'Well?'

'Well, what?'

'Talk to me! Aren't you going to talk me round like you always do?'

'Do you want me to?'

'No!' She flounced back again to where she was before. I reached out, caught her by the shoulders pushed some hair aside and kissed her on the side of the neck.

'You think I'm just a stupid, bloodthirsty, Amazon, don't you.'

'Amazon, yes - bloodthirsty, sometimes, - stupid, no. As for -bloodthirsty- that was part of your training. Like you said, you were taught to kill the enemy today so he, or she, couldn't come back and kill you tomorrow.'

She nodded. 'You people are too soft hearted. If Merlin doesn't keep the clan in check they'll kill him one day.'

'I know he's a soft hearted cowardly jelly guts like me, but he has the added disadvantage of being soft in the head.'

'She spun round once more. 'Don't say that! Don't you ever say that again! 'You're not a coward, none of you are. Not you, not the professor, not Jess, but I'm all churned up. I've lost my dearest friend, and even if we're alive tomorrow and the day after we'll have to go different ways. I'll lose you too.'

'It's going to be hard for me as well.'

She began to cry I lifted her head and guided it on my outstretched arm; she liked that.

'Cath told me about love, and I didn't believe her. Now I understand what she meant, but I didn't know it could hurt so much.'

I kissed her forehead and thought of something to make her feel better.

'You'll be seeing your daughter soon, what's her name?'

'Crystal.'

'That's nice, I like that. And it'll be good for you both to get together again.'

'If you've given me another daughter, and we live. I'll call her Andrea, after you.'

'Thank you Hilda, I hope to meet her some day.'

After that she was quiet and, I watched her by moonlight, as she fell asleep.

## Chapter nineteen

### The Long Walk

At breakfast time four of the girls told us they would come, but a fifth was in love with a kitchen hand. Hilda had not invited any males to join us on the trek, so the girl had made her choice.

Before we left some gifts were handed out. After fire proofing the door Jess had turned his skills to other jobs. He had made two tinder boxes with hinged lids, a product of excellent workmanship. On the lid of one was a raised capital "C", on the other an "H".

Hilda could not read but we explained which was hers, and which she could give away in Cath.'s name. It was touching to see her pleasure in these things. She even went to the extent of kissing Jess, a welcome change from their earlier encounters.

That was not the end of gift giving. Jess had persuaded his helpers to do women's work. They had made string bags and must have labored for hours because there were bags enough for everyone. They showed how two bags joined by a cord could be slung over one's shoulder, before and behind to carry the water skins and food we would need.'

We admired their work, praised them for making these valuable articles, and they were totally delighted with the way we received the gifts. They did not know that we intended to leave Merlin's rock hewn dwelling, which could be defended, and lead them through unknown territory into unknown dangers. They would have come anyway.

Apart from all this I was happy because my hearing was back to normal. The lesson I had learned was not to fire muskets in a cave.

We ate our breakfast but Merlin did not appear.

Professor Meadowes went to his door and knocked.

He heard a muffled response from within the room. 'Is the Amazon there?'

'Yes, she's here, but I am the Pendragon, and I personally guarantee your safety.'

We heard the door being unbarred and Merlin peered out. His face was grey and lined I suspected he had spent long hours lying awake and worrying about his future. 'Order her to put down her spear,' he said.

I'm sorry Merlin, she ignores orders, but I can ask her.'

He turned to Hilda. 'My dear, you can see Mr Merlin is in an extremely nervous state. Would you be good enough to go out on the balcony for a while, where he can't see you. Take the boys with you.

'Well, you tell Merlin. I killed Perceval because of the way he was treating the maids, and if I hear any more of it I'll come back and kill him too'. After this reassuring message she gestured to the boys with her spear and led them out on to the balcony to be greeted by shrieking, squabbling lizards who thought they were to be served breakfast.

Merlin reluctantly came out of his room. He said, 'Mr Mason, would you stand by the door and let me know if she is returning.' I shrugged my shoulders and stood guard as he requested.

He continued, 'Mr Mason, you told the Pendragon that the Black Knight intended to kill me, is that correct?'

'It certainly is. He was about to cut off my head when he started talking to his sword. He told it the blood of a spy and trespasser wouldn't be good to drink but yours would taste much better, when he got round to murdering you.'

Merlin was even more grey faced when he heard this. 'I find it hard to believe that he was plotting my death. And there's that Amazon, she killed Perceval and I have no doubt she would kill me, as she said.'

'Well, you need not concern yourself there,' said the prof. 'We're leaving, and Hilda is coming with us. The clan should be quiet for a while. They have suffered terrible losses in their attacks on us, and it will take months, perhaps years for them to regroup, unless they smell weakness on your part.'

Hilda must have been listening to all this while waiting on the balcony. She came and looked over my shoulder. Merlin shuddered and prepared to run.

'Those crossbows are too slow,' she said. 'The range is good, and they're accurate but they have to be wound up each time. If there had been bowmen on the steps yesterday they could have massacred the enemy without us. Train some of your people to use bows and arrows, they're faster and just as deadly.'

'And yer no t'mind the back door,' said Jess. It's been strengthened and fireproofed. I found an old pump that must have broken down years ago. It's fixed now and yer can get water without going outside. Yer can also pump water up over the door into a pipe and that will pour the water on to the fire.'

'Oh, Jess,lad', I said.'Yer a reight champion.'

He grinned at me. 'Yer no too bad thysen, but ye'll nivver be a Yorkshire man until you learn the language.'

'It's very dangerous whichever way you go,' said Merlin. 'Perhaps you, Mr Arkwright, would care to stay. You would be very welcome. In fact the whole party, except the Amazon, of course, may remain here, if they wish. I apologise for my remarks of yesterday.'

'I wouldn't stay if you got on your knees and begged,' snorted Hilda. 'I'm going now. If any of you lot want to come, stop yakking and let's get on with it. She went down the passage and returned shortly escorting the four girls, each carried loaded string bags. This little group included the girl with the black eye.

'These are members of the staff,' cried Merlin. 'I have not given them permission to leave.'

'The've my got my permission', retorted Hilda. Do you want to make anything of it?'

Merlin shuddered and drew back. He turned to the Prof. 'Pendragon! I would like to have your company longer and, for that matter, Mr Mason's also.'

'The Prof. smiled at Merlin's invitation, which could have been made to have us there in case of another clan attack. We shook his hand and wished him well. Hilda was already leading her girls to the door that opened on to the long stairs while we hurriedly swung our loaded string bags on to our shoulders.

At the foot of the stairs we looked up for the last time and saw Merlin gazing down on us from the balcony. We waved, he waved back. I guess no one yet had told him about the damage to his laboratory. Then we turned and started following the path, this time southward.

'That should be the end of the fire egg business,' I said. He'll have to go into some other line of work.

The professor considered this. 'Not really,' he replied. 'He can soon start up again. The dragons are producing plenty of eggs and the oil, which is a basic ingredient of Greek Fire comes from a natural well somewhere. It is a sacred place because a fire has been burning there for hundreds of years. The priests can sell him all the oil he needs.'

This was bad news and I thought about it as we trudged on. After a twenty minute walk we came to a large shed with a wooden shingled roof

'This may be where they hatch those damned lizards,' said the professor.

Inside it was uncomfortably warm. Lanterns were arranged round the walls and wood fired ovens under low tables with slatted tops were pouring heat into the shed. On every table there were shallow wooden trays, and every tray was laden with drab coloured eggs.

A man wearing a long apron from neck to ankles had been turning some eggs as we entered. He rose, bobbing his head as a sign of respect, and then alarm, when he saw our muskets and the spears.

'I take it that this is where you hatch the lizard eggs?' said the professor.

'Yes, Lord,' replied the man. 'I am the Keeper of the Eggs. I have to maintain them at an even temperature, and turn them regularly, as you saw me doing just now.'

'What happens after they hatch?'

'They're taken to the hatchling shed next door until they're ready to fly then they are passed on to their trainers.'

'And after they have been trained, what then?'

'Then they are ready for sale.'

'For sale! To whom?'

'Well, the Gorbies are our best customers. They pay us in goods and food.'

'Where do they get the goods and food,' enquired Hilda. 'Do they steal it? Do they threaten other tribes with a rain of eggs full of Greek fire unless they're given food and goods?'

'I don't know, girlie. That's not my concern.'

A loud thwack resounded through the shed and the man was lying on the floor, holding his ear and moaning. Hilda had belted it with the shaft of her spear. He looked at her fearfully.

'I am not a girlie, I am a warrior and you will address me properly. Now, get up and answer my questions.'

The man staggered to his feet by hanging on to a table. He was nearly crying with pain.

He said 'I'm sorry Madam, what was the question?'

'Do you expect a good crop of these things?'

'Yes, Madam. They are almost ready and we are going to have an excellent hatching.'

'Oh, I don't think so. In fact it might be quite a poor result.'

'No, no. Everything is going well so far.'

'You won't have a good hatching if people come into your shed and do this sort of the thing, will you?' Hilda picked up a tray of eggs and tipped it out on the ground. The eggs all broke, giving off a pungent odor. The girls we had brought with us clung together and screamed.

The man stared, dazed, unable to speak.

"And what if people tip over the tables and smash all the eggs?" she said, while doing just that. The smell was almost overpowering, and the floor was fouled by the embryos of dying lizards.

'She went round the shed upsetting everything, including the stoves and lanterns. After this she surveyed the place. Oh, look,' she said, 'There's one that hasn't broken. It would be a shame to leave the job half done.' She reversed her spear and smashed the egg with its butt. 'There! I was right after all. I knew it was going to be a poor crop this year.'

She turned on the attendant who stood open mouthed, terrified.'

'My advice to you,' she said, 'Is to ask Merlin to transfer you to another job. 'If we're attacked again by these flying dragons I'll be back with a tribe of mad Amazons and next time we'll do the job properly. Now, there are hatchlings next door, baby dragons - right?'

The man shook his head. It must have hurt because he cried out, and then stammered, 'No, no, they w-were big enough to take away for training. The shed's empty, waiting for this lot.'

'You had better be telling the truth. We're going to have a look, and if there any there, you'll be sorry. I'll be back to fix up your other ear.'

The shed began to burn. The embers tipped out of the warming stoves, and candles from smashed lanterns, had fallen on the straw and dry timber which littered the place, and the mess was starting to flare up.

'She's a fair cough drop, that one,' said Jess, as we filed out away from the flames. 'I wouldn't like to take her to Yorkford. She'd bring on a lot of trouble at t'mill.'

'Well,' said the professor, 'As a rule I support private enterprise, but this time I am inclined to approve of her actions. It's good you are with us Mr Mason, apart from your other excellent qualities you also have some influence over the young lady. It may be needed before the end.'

Hilda did not go into the other shed because it too was on fire. The Keeper of the Eggs was half running half staggering back along the path, the way we had come, still clutching his ear. Soon Merlin would have another reason to hate Amazons.

We continued our trek. We were in the mother of all black holes as far as my telephone was concerned, no messages, no time signal, and the prof. carried the only watch in the party.

It had to be wound every morning. A long time later he told us it was three hours since we left the stairs and the girls, who had probably not walked that distance in their lives before, were badly fatigued.

The cultivated area had been left behind and the path had become a track. We were travelling through a pleasant valley with mountains on either side. To give the girls a rest we stopped under a tree with wide spreading boughs. The girls sat together, glad of the shade. They were wary of us and frightened of Hilda. They may not have volunteered if they had seen her in action before we left. To witness a woman bully and hit a man, an authority figure, was frightening.

'Lizard coming!' cried Hilda. 'Face down everyone. Don't look up, it's heading this way'.

We all went to ground as ordered. The creature was coming up from behind, travelling the same direction as us. Hilda lay down too, on her back. She had a twig with some leaves on it, and looked through these. She told us later the leaves were to break up the outline of her face. A Gorbie was riding on the lizard but gave no indication of having seen us, even though he flew close to, our tree.

'Probably a message from Merlin to the Gorbies to say there would be a shortage of lizards this year, and to kill those responsible,' said the professor. 'He knows which way we went and he will be mad with rage. I think Hilda will be a special target from now on.'

'I guess you're right prof. She ruined a nice little earner there. The Gorbies should be out in force soon, looking for us.'

The professor glanced at his watch. 'I fear that they will be,' he said. 'We can give the young ladies ten minutes more rest, then we must be on our way.'

Another three kilometers and there was a lot of activity overhead. This was a heavily wooded part of the valley, narrower, and the mountains were rising on either side. We hurried from tree to tree, seeking shelter wherever we could

'You should have let me kill Merlin while we had the chance,' said Hilda, 'Then this wouldn't have happened.' She was stringing her bow ready to shoot.

'We don't need the bow yet!' I said, they haven't seen us so far. When they do they'll cluster round overhead. You'll get plenty of good shots then.'

'Huh! Reckon you're the warrior, do you? I'm a trained fighter, you're not.'

'Yeah, that's the problem. You're trained to fight first and think afterwards. No, we'll go on as before, running when they're not around and hiding when they are.'

'He's right, you know,' said the professor. 'The further on we are before they find us the better our chances of getting through.'

Hilda was sulky but put the arrow back in its bag.



It was after this that our luck began to run out. The valley was becoming a steep pass between encroaching mountains. The track before us was rising, becoming stony, and the trees were fewer and smaller.

The Gorbies knew this of course, it was their territory, and they had planned to meet us there.

We marched on, no longer able to hide but still determined to continue, whatever the odds. The girls were exhausted, never in a life of domestic service had they faced an ordeal like this. They begged us to return, or at least leave them behind so they could go back to the world they had known all their lives.

Hilda was remorseless. She would not let them lag behind or return to the semi slavery they had lived in. She became angry when we insisted, for their sake, on another rest before tackling the next stage of our trek.

'You're a bunch of weaklings,' she said. The longer we hang around here the harder it will be to get through. They'll be calling in reinforcements right now.'

'Well, it was your idea to bring the girls with us,' I said. 'You knew they would be unfit for this sort of walking, so don't abuse us now if we're giving them a better chance to get over the top.'

'Just pipe down!' said Hilda. 'You can't keep your trap shut, can you!'

'A lizard coming!' cried the professor.

A big animal with outstretched wings was gliding towards us. gaining speed as it descended. One of the girls screamed and ran down the path, the way we had come, though we grabbed the others in time. I heard the rider make a chittering noise as it swept over us towards the running girl. A fire-egg landed alongside her as Hilda loosed an arrow.

As the egg broke the girl was caught in a burst of oily flames that engulfed her whole body, she staggered away. We saw her hair and clothes burning as she ran frantically. Hilda sprinted after the victim and stabbed her twice before she fell to ground, dead, but still burning.

Hilda's arrow had brought the lizard down and it was struggling on the ground unable to take off. Its rider had fallen hard and was injured. It tried to limp away. The boys ran across and dispatched him, spearing repeatedly. Hilda ignored the lizard, .and came back. The boys were spearing it too.

We looked at Hilda, horror struck. The girls left were screaming hysterically.

'Did you think I wanted to do that that?' she asked harshly. 'It was an act of mercy. She couldn't live after being burned all over her body, she would only have lasted for a while and in agony. Do it for me if I'm sprayed with that burning stuff.'

She turned to the crying girls. 'Stop that howling, it's getting on me nerves! On your feet, now! We have no choice, we have to go on, otherwise they would hound us all the way back along the valley.'

We trudged up the stony slope which was now a narrow defile, with high cliffs on either side. Hilda handed her shield to one girl, her spear to another. They were more frightened of her than of anything that might lie before us.

'Stay close,' she said. I might want them in a hurry.' She walked with an arrow nocked to the string of her bow, ready to pull and loose the arrow in an instant.

Up ahead lizards were circling and waiting, but only about five of them, I would have expected more, but they were waiting to destroy us with a rain of fire-eggs.

As we walked upwards and were getting very close two of them peeled away, heading towards something we could not see.

'There are only three left,' I said.

'Two!' responded Hilda. She drew back the bowstring and released it. The arrow flashed upwards into sunlight, then buried itself in the breast of a lizard. It screamed, its wings stiffened and it began a long, slow noisy descent to earth that ended as it crashed into some rocks.

I raised my pistol and pulled the trigger, estimating where the second creature would be in about one and a half seconds. Bingo! It half turned over, the Gorbie fell off, with his fire eggs and got immediate cremation. I think the boys were a little disappointed that there was no point in spearing him, he was already dead.

Something else was happening that we couldn't see. The stone walls on either side were echoing to a repeated crashing noise. The echoes were not as loud as in the cavern, but here we were in the open.

The Gorbie riding the remaining lizard must have realised they were within range of Hilda's arrows so they turned away to gain height on the rising thermals.

'We're playing hell with the lizard population today,' I said

Run! cried Hilda as she nocked another arrow on to the string.

I could hear her remaining arrows rattling as she ran past me, going a short distance and then pausing. We lumbered upwards after her and stopped also. This was the summit of the pass and were looking down to where the walls became lower and further apart. To where the track meandered down through crops to a long vista of grasslands stretching to the horizon.

## Chapter twenty

### The Final Battle

A cloud of grey smoke hung over the area at the entrance to the pass, and the noise we had heard echoing in the mountains continued, it was coming from within the smoke. The fog was lit for a moment by flames from within, followed seconds later by the crashing sound of muskets being fired.

'You see!' said the professor, turning to Hilda. 'This is another example of light travelling faster than sound. If we were closer we would see the flames and hear the report instantly.'

Hilda ignored him.

Lizards were circling and bombarding those below. Every now and then dimly seen flares of bursting fire-eggs shot up through the canopy of smoke.

One of them was shot down as we watched. A bullet must have hit the string bag in which the Gorbies carried their supply of eggs. The dragon was suddenly swallowed in a welling out of fire from the centre. It tumbled down, not far from us leaving a trail of filthy smoke in the air. The surviving Gorbies turned their lizards away.

'What the hell's happening?' asked Hilda. 'What's going on down there?'

There were red coated horsemen too, seemingly tiny at that distance, but they were very active, they had swords and turned repeatedly into the smoke, ignoring the dangers from above. The notes of a bugle sounded sweet through the fouled air as they charged..

'It's a battle!' I cried. 'I betcha my Scotties are in the middle of all that, they're taking the Gorbies on again. Those lights you can see are muzzle flashes when they fire their muskets. And the riders are cavalry. Come on, let's go down and join in.'

Another fire-egg bursting among the rocks reminded us that the enemy still lurked above. The girls shrieked and ran towards a cave opening we had noticed. They took shelter just inside the entrance. We followed.

'You can't stay there!' shouted Hilda. 'You don't know what's inside.'

'We just want to go home!' said one of the crying girls. 'We shouldn't have come. You didn't tell us how bad it was going to be.'

'It's almost over. Get out, or I'll beat you out with my spear.'

Their terror of Hilda was even greater than their fear of being burned and they were reluctantly stirring to come out when Jess put his arms round their shoulders.

'Eh! Ye poor lassies,' he murmured, as they huddled close to him. 'The worst day of yer life. Ye've walked mile after mile, until yer feet are near droppin' off, ye've seen your friend die in

agony, and this harpie wi' a spear drivin' you on all the time. But she's right, we can't stay here, and from now on it'll be easy going until we get you away to somewhere safe'.

Another fire-egg fell down the face of the cliff. It was well aimed but hit an outward jutting rock and exploded. We all had to cram into the cave, as far from the entrance as we could to avoid the flames and burning liquid dripping from the rock that had spoiled the Gorbies aim.

The cave stank of Gorbies and we bumped into someone in the dark. Hilda frantically groped for the girl who was carrying her spear.

A voice cried, 'Don't kill me, I'm only a slave.'

Hilda forgot about her spear and left us to deal with the stranger. There was still a pool of burning liquid outside the cave entrance, but the flames had died down. She ran outside leaping over the dangerous spot and raised her bow, aiming upwards. We heard her bowstring twang followed by a cry from above. Then something fell and landed in the burning pool. Hilda had actually shot a Gorbie out of its saddle.

'He was coming down to see what had happened to us,' she said. I thought he would. You can all come out now.'

'We had crowded deep into cave when the Gorbie's body fell into the burning pool, and had escaped being splashed by the vile liquid.

'Next time I meet Merlin I'll kill him for making this Greek fire stuff,' she said. 'Don't try and stop me.'

We brought the slave to the light so we could see one another. His beard and hair were white, an emaciated skeleton of a man clothed in rags, moccasins tied to his feet with cord. He blinked in the daylight, and shivered as we edged past the dying pool of fire where the burned Gorbie now lay, pierced by an arrow. He spat on the body.

I knew him. 'Dad!' I cried. 'I've been looking for you.'

He stared at me. 'Andy, it is you!' We embraced, arms around each other. He stank of the cave and of captivity. He cried on my shoulder. 'I didn't think I'd see you or the family ever again. How's your Mum?'

'She's okay Dad. But we have to get you out of here before the Gorbies come back.' Jess and the prof. gathered around to shake his hand. The boys grinned at him and raised their spears in salute. They knew some kind of family reunion was taking place. The girls didn't care, they just wanted to arrive at somewhere not so terrifying.

Hilda said, 'It's great to see you getting your dad back, Andy, but we have to keep going. If you have friends down in that army they'll be very useful if we can catch up with them.'

'Alright,' I agreed. 'Come on Dad, let's go, the sooner we walk down this hill, the sooner we'll get you home.' He was shivering so I put my tunic over his shoulders. The old red hat, the shako, was lost, probably an unwanted relic of our visit lying in Merlin's apartments

The battle was still going briskly at the foot of slope but it was difficult to see what was happening because of the smoke.

'If the Gorbies break and run they'll come galloping up here mounted on their warriors,' said Hilda. 'I've noticed a few caves and a lot of huts where they can shelter. Check your muskets, and Andy, is your pistol reloaded?'

I didn't retort because we were all on edge. I was an old campaigner by this time and had reloaded it immediately after my last lucky shot.

There were a few caves and lots of well made huts. We shouted into each one as we passed. Called to see if any slaves were inside, and offering to escort them to safety. One half starved captive responded, and we had to go inside to cut her loose.

She was a woman, an Amazon, whom Hilda recognised. She came out dragging a startled Gorbie, by the arm. from where he had hidden. It was his death. warrant.

The Amazon whose name was Doreen saw the shield and spear the girls were carrying. 'That's your shield Hilda,' she gasped, 'and your spear. Take 'em back, and give me the bow and arrows. I used to be the best shot in the tribe, and I feel like skewering some of the little buggers.

'Are you strong enough?'

'Don't you worry about me Hilda. They've held me for a year I've been starved and beaten. But I never gave in. That's why I was tied up. Now it's payback time.'

We were about to go on when we noticed some *Eat-Me-Eat- Me* bushes beside the track. Our lads saw them too and glanced guiltily at the Professor. He shook his finger at them and plucked one leaf for each and handed them over.

They respected the man too much to disobey and said 'Thank you Professor Meadowes,' as they got their leaves. He had been teaching them manners, and also a little English.

The Gorbies had lost the battle and were routed. They came pelting up the hill as Hilda said they would, whipping their steeds unmercifully.

They swerved when we appeared, their enemies were close behind and they didn't want to take on any more.

Doreen was, as she said, a crack shot with the bow and loosed arrows repeatedly at the unfortunate Gorbies who fell off leaving their steeds standing, dazed and disoriented. She shot away all the arrows and called for more, which we didn't have. We left her behind wrenching arrows out of dead bodies and throwing aside ones that could not be reused.

The Gorbie army was now no more than a mob, seeking to run away and find shelter, any shelter. Hilda added to the panic. She held her shield to cover her body and stabbed over-arm with her spear, Jess and I guarded her with muskets at the ready. We didn't fire, the clumsy weapons took too long to reload. We would use them only if someone came at her from the side.

Then it was all over, the last of them were running past us. Red coated horsemen had come up the hill led by Cornet Witherspoon, whom I had met on the first day of our both being lost in this strange land.

'Witherspoon,' I cried. 'It's me, Mason. We met a few days ago when we were fighting those lizards.'

He stared at me, astonished. Another rider who was not a redcoat slipped from her horse, ran over, threw her arms round my neck and kissed me. 'Andy,' she cried, 'We thought you were dead!'

It was Anthea. I hugged and kissed her in return and found I was clutching an assault rifle which was slung across her back. Its barrel was still hot. She also carried a pistol at her waist.

'You found your guns and ammo!' I said. And you're safe.'

She nodded, there were tears in her eyes, 'Yes, we were searching for you and found the weapons instead.'

During my time in this strange land I had fallen into the company of some dangerous women, Anthea was now in that category.

'Mum will be up in a minute,' she said. She doesn't like horses so she rides a trail bike.'

Witherspoon saluted with his sword, shouted a greeting, he seemed startled at the sight of Hilda, but had other business on hand and drove his men forward to hunt the enemy and cut them down with their cavalry swords..

I introduced Anthea to Hilda. The two women seemed to dislike one another at sight. Cheryl broke the tension by riding up on her trail bike. The trailer was still attached carrying spare fuel and supplies.

Anthea screamed at her, 'Mum, look who I've found!'

Cheryl braked, got off her bike and came over smiling, she kissed me. 'Andy, this is so good, we thought we'd never see you again. We buried poor old Lance, and drove for miles searching for you. but couldn't find you anywhere.' She looked at my face. 'You need a shave, young man, and I think you've grown up a lot since we saw you last.'

'He looks good as he is,' was Anthea's opinion,

'Hilda tightened her grip on the spear as though she was about to stab someone, perhaps me.

I said, 'I've a lot to tell and we can talk about my appearance later, but first let me introduce the people I've met since we last saw one another.'

A terrible wailing noise interrupted this little ceremony, and the sound of tramping feet. The music of the bagpipe and the sight of the approaching battalion was good to hear and see after all the terrors we had endured over the past few days.

The Sergeant recognised me and brought the troops to a halt. He saluted.

'Good to see you Sir,' he said. 'We thought you were done for when you flew off hanging on to the leg of that bogle. Nae doot ye'll wish to take command.'

'Thank you Sergeant, but no. I authorise you to remain leader of the battalion. I have retired from the army.'

'I wish you wouldn't, Sir. I'm having a hard time holding them. We can't find the army and we don't know where we are. And, on top of everything else, we're running out of powder and shot, and things haven't been the same since we met the Amazons.'

'It's not surprising,' said Cheryl, 'I think half the girls may be pregnant already, they no longer need your services, Andrew.'

'Well, that's something else to be thankful for.'

'We'd best be getting on,' said the Sergeant. 'We'll just follow the horse boys up the hill and help them finish the job. It won't do to let them monkey things off too easily.'

'Don't touch the warriors,' said the professor. 'They're drugged and not responsible for what the Gorbies make them do.'

'Aye,' chimed in Jess. 'Give them to us and we'll teach them trades. Mebbe farming, or whatever trade is useful round here. The ones I have already are reight good lads. Come on Professor Meadows, we'll take them with us to tell the warriors we won't harm them.'

I could see we were going to have more apprentices than we would know what to do with, but then if the Gorbies didn't have warriors or flying lizards in their service they could not do much damage.

The battalion marched on accompanied by Jess and the professor. Following behind were a number of Amazons, some of whom I remembered from my first day in this new land.

They recognised me, some smiled and giggled.

'Their world has changed,' said Cheryl. 'Now they go into battle with their men, though the our Sergeant doesn't approve of women warriors..'

We were left near the site of the battlefield, which was ghastly to look at. There were charred corpses lying around, mostly from the Gorbie's side. It looked as though they had been killed by "Friendly Fire."

'It was the Gorbies that kept the regiment together,' said Cheryl. 'They fire-bombed our camp as well as the Amazon's village. We lost half our tents, so, we all set off to teach them not to do that anymore.'

I was concerned at this news, 'Are you alright?'

'Yes, some of our tents were gutted, and I lost equipment. But we're still upright. The thing is we don't know what to do next. We need different skills and especially a builder.'

'Well, say no more. You have just met two men who will answer your prayers. The gent with the plummy accent is Professor Edward Meadowes. He was a teacher with a degree in chemistry. He also, so he tells me, makes the best gunpowder since they closed the English powder mills, and if there is anything you want to know, anything at all, just ask him.'

Cheryl and Anthea seemed delighted to hear this.

'But wait, there's more. The other answer to your prayer was right here. When they come back you will also meet Jess Arkwright, metal-worker handyman, builder. You tell him what you want and he'll make it for you.'

'Is he good?'

'Aye,' I said., 'He be a tradesman from Yorkford, and yer can't get better ner that.'

Witherspoon and his troop of cavalry came trotting down towards us. They had suffered some casualties for there were riderless horses with them. The Cornet saluted, he noticed Hilda and dismounted. We shook hands. 'Well,' he said 'we have finished our work for the day.' Behind him the Gorbie huts were burning.

He looked at Hilda. 'I say, Mason! What a peach of a girl, introduce me, will you.'

'What's your first name?'

'James, James Montague.'

I said, 'Hilda, may I present James Montague Witherspoon, Cornet of Cavalry. Witherspoon, this is Hilda, as far as I know she has no other name. When she last saw her tribe it was under attack by Gorbies and she's anxious to get back.'

'She shall ride with my troop,' answered Witherspoon grandly. 'My fellows will soon deal with the enemy.'

'You want to get rid of me, don't you,' said Hilda. 'You've got friends around you now, you've found your father, and I saw that girl kiss you, and I saw the way you looked at each other.'

'No', I shook my head.

'I'm told we have to transport the lady who appears not to have eaten much lately, and the young girls,' said Witherspoon. 'No problem. We'll take blankets from the horses without riders. Miss Hilda can ride behind me, the best and cleanest blanket for her. The others can ride with anyone who wants a passenger. See to it, you men!'

There was an instant uproar. Everyone wanted to have one of the young girls, riding behind no one volunteered to take Doreen.

'Wait!' cried Cheryl. 'Doreen and Mr Mason are starving. They need food straight away. Just enough to keep them going until they can eat normally again. I have some in the trailer.'

She gave them a sandwich each which they wolfed down and looked for more.



She handed some packets to Hilda. 'In an hour,' she said, 'Give her another one. Keep that up for a day or two until she's eating normal meals.'

'Thank you,' said Hilda. 'You are very kind.' She was becoming civilized too.

Blankets were being folded and laid on the horses rumps to make soft seating, and Witherspoon was settling quarrels about who was to ride with a girl behind. He assigned Doreen to the oldest man in the troop.

'Don't you worry about me', the trooper said, when the others jeered at him. 'When she gets some good food in her belly, and some meat on her bones she'll be the best looking one of them all.'

Witherspoon had already mounted, He said to the soldier who was holding his horse's rein, 'Trooper Proctor, assist Miss Hilda on to my horse.'

Trooper Proctor put his hands together, fingers laced, so Hilda could put her foot in it and get up behind Witherspoon.

She ran over and caught me round the neck, she was crying. I know it has to be this way,' she said. 'The tribe needs me. But it hurts.' We kissed tenderly, and she turned away. Trooper Proctor helped her to mount, then handed up her bow and spear, but there were no arrows left.

We watched as Witherspoon saluted and the cavalry troop wheeled, then galloped away.

Watched until they were out of sight. I had a guilty feeling of relief, mixed with regret, but couldn't help wondering what would happen to Hilda's tribe when she arrived back with an escort of young horsemen.

Anthea was looking at me coolly. 'You haven't been wasting your time, have you,' she said.

'Oh, forget it.' I replied. 'Come on, let's go home.' Though I knew I wouldn't get off that easily.