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Opening extract from

# The Remarkable Adventures of Tom Scatterhorn: The Museum's Secret

Written by

**Henry Chancellor**

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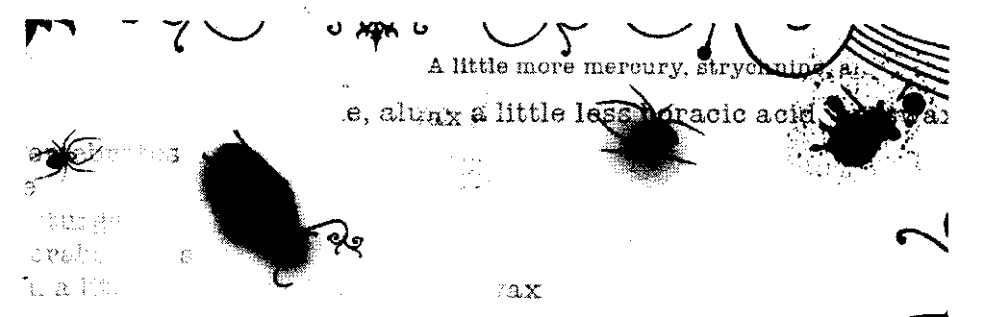
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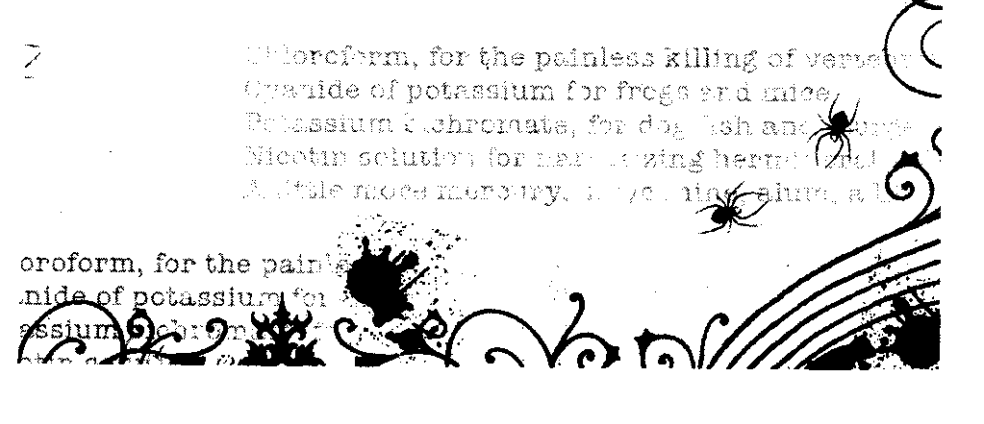

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# PROLOGUE

## RIGHT NOW, ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Night came up suddenly in the Tosontsengel Valley. All day the jeep had bounced across an endless series of hills, straining to the top of one only to find yet another beyond it. And another beyond that. By late afternoon the road had dropped down into a wide valley floor heading due west and as the sun began to drop, the smooth sides of the mountains glowed orange and the dark pine forests below them turned to purple.

'There, over there. That looks good.'

The jeep jerked to a halt. The tall blond man with a scruffy beard shaded his eyes and pointed up to a crest of flame-coloured trees on the edge of the forest, picked out by the last rays of the sun.

'You see something?' came a voice from the back seat.

The gaunt man did not reply, but raising his binoculars he picked out row upon row of collapsed pines above the bright crest, toppling over to form a long grey gash in the forest. It was a perfect spot.

'That's it.'

He pointed, and the driver, a thick-set Mongol in a tatty grey fleece, grunted an acknowledgement. The jeep swung off the dusty road and bounced up towards the ridge.

By the time they reached the edge of the trees the sun had gone. The westerner got out painfully and stretched, and moments later the back door slammed and he was joined by a small, shifty-looking Chinese man in dark glasses. The Chinese man looked up at the forest behind them and smiled approvingly.

'A landslide. Well spotted, Mr Scatterhorn.'

'Thank you.'

'Tonight I think we will be lucky.'

'You said that last night.'

The Chinese man smiled again, but this time Sam Scatterhorn did not acknowledge it. He had spent all day being thrown about inside that infernal jeep, breathing in the stale sweat of the driver, his head banging against the cushions nailed to the roof. He was exhausted, stiff, and the unfailing politeness of Mr Wong was starting to grate. There was something unpleasant behind that smile . . .

'To work then,' he muttered wearily, and reached into the jeep for a small bag and a thin metal stick. 'I may be some time.'

'Don't worry, Mr Scatterhorn,' smiled Wong, 'we won't be leaving without you.'

Sam Scatterhorn grunted. 'I thought as much.' Ignoring Wong's smile he stomped up over the rocks and into the forest.

'Idiot foreigner,' hissed Wong to himself as he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. This guy should count himself lucky. There were plenty who would give anything to be out in this remote stretch of Mongolia right now. Sam Scatterhorn was a nobody.

Wong had found him in a cheap hotel, living like a beggar. He had only just come out of jail, and he had no money, no clothes, just a microscope. Probably an illegal, thought Wong, running away, looking to make a quick buck and then disappear—Wong had met these types before. Many times before. But this 'Mr Scatterhorn'—whoever he was—just happened to be the best there was. Clearing his throat, Wong spat harshly into the dirt and smiled to himself. Wong had the patience of an elephant: Wong could wait as long as it takes. Scatterhorn would find what they were looking for, eventually. He *had* to. And if he decided to make trouble, well, it was very easy to disappear out here in the wilderness. Accidents happened frequently. No one would miss *him*, would they?

Barking out an order to the sullen driver who was already rolling out an old military mess tent, Wong returned to the jeep and pulled out his satellite phone. Setting up the aerial on the bonnet, he stubbed out his cigarette and waited for a connection.

By now the sun had disappeared, and the valley floor was an expanse of purple shadow. Up in the cool, dark forest, Sam Scatterhorn reached a clearing and paused, catching his breath, against a tree. Closing his eyes he breathed deeply, drinking in the heavy, pine-scented air. At last he was starting to feel like himself again. The crickets zinged all around him, and far off he heard the distant tocking of a woodpecker. Between the wolf and the moon, he smiled to himself; the magic hour. This was his favourite time of day.

Then he remembered why he had come here. Casting an expert eye into the fallen trees around him, he began prodding about in the rotting wood with his stick, scraping back the leaves and turning them over. It was not long before he spotted what he was looking for. Kneeling down before a fallen trunk, he found a small hole in the soft white wood. Taking out his penknife he gouged out the hole, and then carefully withdrew his blade. There, balanced on the tip of his knife was a plump white grub, about four centimetres long.

'*Lamprima adolphinae*,' he whispered to himself. This was a good sign. The creature did not appreciate being removed from its cosy hole and began to wriggle blindly.

'OK, OK,' whispered Sam Scatterhorn softly, and returned it to its soft pulpy home.

Dropping to his knees, he carefully turned over the red earth around his feet and a moment later he saw a glint of gold and black. There he was. Gingerly lifting back a leaf he found the adult male. It was a Papua golden stag beetle, standing braced and motionless on its six black legs. Its body was a polished golden plate reflecting the inky blue sky above the forest canopy, and on either side of its head two pink barbed mandibles curved up towards the treetops, poised to snap. He was magnificent, like a creature from another world. For a moment Sam Scatterhorn felt the same sense of wonder as he had many years ago, as a boy, finding his first beetle in the woods above his house.

'You're a big fella, aren't you?' he said quietly, stroking the hard golden shell of the beetle's back, and he slowly took another box from his bag. With a practiced hand he coaxed the

creature on to the end of his metal stick, and in one movement slipped his box over the top of it and folded back the lid.

'You're coming with me.' He smiled, tapping the box with his finger, before placing it carefully in his bag. 'Now, do you have any friends for Mr Wong?'

By the time Sam Scatterhorn returned to the camp it was dark. Mr Wong was sitting beside the fire and as soon as he saw the tall westerner emerging from the trees he jumped up, eager for good news. But Sam Scatterhorn's sullen expression suggested otherwise, and, checking himself, Wong sat down again, watching as Sam gently set down his bag and took a long, long swig from his water bottle. Finally Wong could not contain himself any longer.

'How many?' he asked. Sam Scatterhorn ignored him. 'One? Two? Four? How many, Mr Scatterhorn?'

Sam Scatterhorn splashed some water into his palm and slowly rubbed his tired eyes.

The driver, who was squatting over a pot of steaming rice, watched Wong out of the corner of his eye. The foreigner had found something, and Wong was attempting to control his temper. This was good.

'None then?' spat Wong.

'Twelve,' replied Sam Scatterhorn casually.

'Twelve!'

Wong scurried over to the bag to look for himself. There inside were twelve long paper boxes, all stacked and neatly labelled. He opened one up and carefully shook out the golden stag

beetle into the palm of his hand. Wong gasped. It was larger than any stag beetle he had ever seen. With a book-keeper's eye he measured up the width of its mandibles, barbed and glinting in the firelight.

'This could be a champion fighter,' he said softly. 'Are they all this size?'

'Some are even bigger. The conditions up there are perfect.'

Wong made some rapid mental calculations. In Tokyo, beetle wrestling was big business and champion beetles from around the world commanded huge pri-ces. Every millimetre of their length added hundreds of dollars to their value. And here were twelve fighting beetles! This bag could be worth fifty, even a hundred thousand dollars. He stifled a laugh: this was the jackpot, but he mustn't show too much emotion in front of the foreigner, just in case he realized what a bad deal he was getting.

'I think a small celebration is in order,' said Wong carefully, putting the beetle back in its box. 'How about the last bottle of sake?'

It was all Sam Scatterhorn could do to force a smile.

'That's better,' grinned Wong. 'You know, you should smile more often. It's good for you.'

Later, after the inevitable mutton and rice washed down with Wong's cheap sake, Sam Scatterhorn lay beside the fire in his sleeping bag and stewed. Wong needn't have worried, he already knew what a bad deal he was on. But he had no choice but to accompany these pirates out into the wastes of Mongolia in search of rare stag beetles. Even if he saw only a tenth of what

Wong must be getting, it was still worth it. The money from tonight's find would last him a few more months, and he was getting closer to what he was looking for, he could feel it. Every day he was getting closer . . . Sam Scatterhorn lay back and stared up into the Milky Way, which was blazing brightly in the vast dome above the pine trees. Mr Wong could have his beetle fights in the backstreet bars of Tokyo for all he cared, he was out here in the wilderness for a higher purpose. But that was his secret . . .

The wind, which had died at sunset, was now picking up again and racing across the valley. It was cold. Though he was facing the fire, Sam Scatterhorn could feel the icy air creeping through his sleeping bag and over his back. Wong was in the tent, snoring, and the driver was there too, sprawled on the floor, dead drunk. As long as he got his fare and his daily bottle of vodka he didn't care whether they found any beetles or not. Sam Scatterhorn was in no mood to join them, so he pulled his hat right down over his head and burrowed deeper into his sleeping bag. Like a grub.

It must have been around midnight when he woke up. The wind was blisteringly cold now, far too cold to sleep outside. He had no option but to join Wong in the tent. Cursing softly, Sam Scatterhorn struggled out of his sleeping bag and slid on his boots without bothering to do up the laces. Stumbling out into the darkness, he had only gone a short distance when he realized that he was not walking on scrub any more. The ground snapped and crunched beneath his boots, like ice. How strange. Switching

on his headtorch he bent down to see that he was standing in the middle of a long column of beetles that stretched right down into the valley. There must have been tens of thousands of them.

'Ha,' exclaimed sam scatterhorn, scratching his head. This was extra ordinary. Excited now, he tiptoed across the column to the far side where he knelt down and carefully picked one beetle out of the mass. Holding the wriggling creature up to the light he couldn't contain his surprise—it was quite unlike anything he had seen bef-ore. The beetle was very large, about twenty centimetres long, and its body was the shape of a pebble encased in a dark bluish armour. Instead of mandibles it had sharp little pincers like a scorpion, a large black scorpion: *Pandinus imperator*, the imperial scorpion . . . Sam Scatterhorn's mind began to whirr . . . that lived in Africa, and anyway, scorpions are members of the arachnid family—they have eight legs like spiders, unlike insects with only six. Carefully he watched the struggling creature, snapping hungrily in the moonlight. This was definitely some kind of hybrid: *a new species*—perhaps . . . was this, could it be—Sam Scatterhorn's heart began to beat faster . . . wait, no, he must wait. Take it back to his hotel first, study it, test it, maybe he could even name it.

'*Lamprima Scatterhornus*,' he chuckled. Yes, that had a certain ring to it. And those pincers looked vicious, good for killing. He must show it to Wong. Wong would love this.

Shining his torch around him Sam Scatterhorn could see that the column he was standing in had now swollen into a river, and all the beetles were marching towards the forest. It was almost as if they were migrating—but why? What was up there in the forest? Just then Sam Scatterhorn felt the first nip. It was inside

his boot. And then another, on his leg. Pointing the torch at his trousers, he discovered that the beetles were crawling all over him. At first he smiled: here he was, the beetle guy covered in beetles; Wong should take a photograph. But then he realized that this was serious. These little beasts were vicious, and they were biting him everywhere. Their sharp little legs crawling over his collar and falling down his back, and those pincers were as sharp as tiny shards of glass. He tried pulling one off his shoulder, but its black barbed feet clung on so hard he almost had to rip its legs off to get free. Whatever they were, these beetles possessed extraordinary strength. And there were millions of them. Now, for the first time in his life, Sam Scatterhorn realized that being here, right now, was asking for trouble. In fact they were all in big trouble already.

Stamping a path back to the camp Sam Scatterhorn found small black bodies swarming over everything. The water, the food, even the tent was covered in them. He was about to shout for Wong, but then he was distracted by a sight so extraordinary that it made him forget everything else. Columns of beetles were marching around the fire, whose embers were still white hot and flaming. Then one beetle, forced either by the sheer volume of insects behind him or being of a more intrepid character than the rest, suddenly struck out across the white hot ashes. Sam Scatterhorn fully expected the creature to shrivel and die immediately.

But the beetle didn't.

*It just kept going.*

Slowly, its six spiky legs turned from black to pink in the heat, and as it scrambled through the flames its body began to glow

like molten steel. And still it carried on marching, as if performing some crazy circus trick. Once it had reached the other side of the fire the beetle merged back into the stream, its body rapidly cooling from pink, to amber, to brown and finally black once more, and soon it was lost in the crowd. Sam Scatterhorn swallowed hard and tried to think clearly. This was *impossible*; no insect on earth behaved like this.

He glanced back to the fire to find others now setting off across the white hot embers, clambering and struggling, until the fire was a living carpet of pink and gold. Each beetle glowed like a jewel in a furnace, entirely oblivious to the heat. Sam Scatterhorn was dumbstruck. These creatures, whatever they were, were the strangest he had ever encountered in his life. How could they possibly *do* that? Suddenly the pain of a thousand nagging bites all over his body blazed across his train of thought. These migrating beetles were crawling all over him too. He must get out of their way, right now. But what about Wong, and the driver?

Sam Scatterhorn stamped his way through the black tide to the tent and flashed his torch inside to find two shapes lying motionless on the ground.

'Wong? Wong, wake up!'

There was no answer. The sleeping men had become hidden beneath a living, moving swarm that covered every scrap of their bodies.

'Wong?'

Sam Scatterhorn shone his torch into Wong's face, and gasped as one large beetle crawled up his neck and forced Wong's lips open with its pincers.

'Oh my God,' he whispered, and the next moment the beetle had disappeared inside. It appeared to be *eating* him.

Suddenly Sam Scatterhorn felt his head begin to spin. Grabbing at the tentpole, he closed his eyes and tried to hold back a violent urge to be sick.

*Breathe deeply*, he told himself, *keep calm.*

But his heart was drumming a wild rhythm in his ears and he couldn't think. Are these beetles carnivorous? This can't be happening . . . it's a bad dream . . . and then he felt a pair of sharp pincers close on his own forehead.

'No!' he shouted; ripping the beetle out of his hair he stumbled across to the jeep, pulling frantically at the door. It was locked. Of course it was, the driver had the keys! They were in his pocket, but Sam Scatterhorn was not going back to that tent, not now. No way. Staring at the dark stain all around him he realized it would not be long before he too was overpowered. There were just too many of them. The sound of millions of scraping legs drummed in his ears. Pincers cut through his trousers and clamped themselves onto his flesh. It couldn't end like this.

*It must not.*

There was only one thing he could do. Frantically Sam Scatterhorn brushed thousands of beetles off the bonnet, and kicked his way up onto the roof of the jeep. The tide of beetles scrabbled up the windscreen after him, skidding back down the glass until the sheer volume of one on top of another reached the level of the roof. The creatures began to swarm up his boots and onto his trousers.

'Help!' he screamed. 'Please! Help! Someone! Please!'

Sam Scatterhorn's cries echoed down the empty valley, into the wind, up to the stars, to anyone out there in the wilderness.

And as it happened Sam Scatterhorn was heard. Just below the tree line on the other side of the valley, a man emerged from behind a sturdy wall of rock and stone into the moonlight. He wore traditional Mongolian dress with a cap raked at an angle, and even in the moonlight his proud, eagle-like features were unmistakably European. He raised a pair of night-vision goggles to his eyes, and peered across at the tiny figure standing on the roof of the jeep, frantically beating back the dark river of beetles that flowed all around him.

'Not another of those damn fool collectors?' came a voice from inside the cave behind him.

'Good Lord,' muttered the tall man, squinting into the lense. Sam Scatterhorn was on his knees now, and he was almost done. There were beetles crawling all over his face. The tall man cast away a thin cigar, and reached for an ancient rifle leaning against the wall, slinging its tasselled strap over his shoulder.

'In a bit of a pickle, by the look of it. Better go and give him a hand.'

Grabbing a cartridge belt and a small jerrycan he vaulted out into the darkness. Moments later his long, loping shape had disappeared . . .



# CHAPTER 1

## A Strange Reception

'What do you have in here; rocks, I suppose?'

It was three o'clock on a cold winter's afternoon, and a small round man struggled around the back of a taxi with a battered blue duffel bag and heaved it onto the pavement.

'Not exactly,' replied the skinny blond boy, standing shivering in the wind in a thin coat.

'Don't tell me, there's a few bricks in there too?' wheezed the man, raising his eyebrows as he reached into his pocket for some notes. The boy smiled politely and braced himself against the buffeting wind. Even though it was only mid afternoon, the streetlights had already come on up and down the grey street, and the minicab driver unrolled the top of his steamed-up window just wide enough to slip out his hand for the money. He wasn't going out in that; that was far too cold. That wind came straight from Siberia.

'Cheers, mate,' he said, taking the wad of notes and blowing noisily on his fingers, 'have a good Christmas yourself.' And away he sped through the puddles.

'Right, Tom, let's get inside before we both freeze to death,'

wheezed the round man, and grabbing the duffel bag in both arms he tottered up the wide steps of the large, crumbling brick building behind him and disappeared through a small side door. Huge hailstones had started to fall, cracking hard against the stone steps, and Tom was just about to follow him inside when he caught the eye of two angry-looking stone dragons above the entrance. Between them they were holding a crumbling stone plaque that read:

THE SCATTERHORN MUSEUM
FOUNDED 1906 BY SIR HENRY SCATTERHORN
BEQUEATHED TO THE PEOPLE OF DRAGONPORT
GOD SAVE THE KING

Despite the hailstones and the icy wind whipping his face, Tom found himself smiling. Maybe it wasn't going to be that bad after all. There couldn't be many children who were about to spend their Christmas holidays in a museum that was named . . .

'Tom Scatterhorn, get yourself in here right now before you turn to ice, boy!'

The voice boomed above the cracking hailstones and Tom suddenly remembered that his teeth were chattering. He scampered up the steps two at a time and ran inside.

'So Mum's taken off to Mongolia or some such place, has she?'

Tom nodded. He was now sitting in a small yellow kitchen at the back of the museum, with his fingers pressed onto the

radiator. Slowly he could feel himself thawing out.

'Good old Sam. Full of surprises.'

'Well, let's hope to goodness she finds him; it's an awfully big place.'

'She will find him,' said Tom politely but firmly, 'I know she will.'

Ever since his father had disappeared six months ago, and his mother had gone to look for him; this is what Tom had wanted more than anything else in the world.

'Hmm.' Aunt Melba poured the tea thoughtfully. 'Well, let's stay optimistic, shall we?'

Tom nodded, though his teeth were still chattering. He *had* to stay optimistic—he had no choice. Just as he had had no choice but to spend Christmas with his only other living relatives, Uncle Jos and Aunt Melba, on the other side of the country. They were the proud owners of the Scatterhorn Museum, and he had never met them before in his life.

'Biscuit, Tom?'

'Oh yes, please,' interrupted Uncle Jos, taking two.

'Now just you wait, you great heffalump,' snapped Melba, snatching one back and passing it to Tom.

'This boy's bound to be hungry; just look at the state of him.'

Jos crunched the biscuit noisily and peered over his spectacles at the skinny boy shivering on the other side of the table. Tom was eleven years old, tall for his age, but thin, with strikingly dark, piercing eyes. His hair was a wiry blond tangle that tumbled down over his forehead. He looked both young and strangely grown-up at the same time.

'Just like his old dad,' said Jos with a shrug. 'He's the spitting image of Sam.'

'But thin as a whippet,' added Melba with some concern. 'Don't your parents ever feed you, Tom?'

Tom looked across the table at the two strange looking people and all he could think about were his mother's words as she had kissed him goodbye at the station that morning.

'Just remember that Uncle Jos and Aunt Melba are a little bit different.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, they are older, and they've not had children of their own. They're just a bit . . . different.'

'Like . . . eccentric?'

'No, not exactly,' replied his mother, weighing her words carefully so as not to put Tom off, 'just *unusual*, that's all. They've spent a long time in that funny old place.'

Tom had wondered what 'unusual' meant as he watched the raindrops racing down the train windows. It could be unusual like his own parents—they scarcely counted as normal. But now that he had arrived he was beginning to see what his mother had meant.

'Paste sandwich, Tom?' wheezed Uncle Jos, holding a tiny plate of bread triangles out to him. 'Go on, they're the best: sardine.'

Uncle Jos was a round ball of a man, with red cheeks and a bald head that sprouted small clumps of hair in all directions. His most prominent feature were his eyebrows, which were as thick as hedges and met in the middle, hiding a pair of dark beady eyes that were constantly on the move. At the moment

he was wearing two cardigans, one on top of the other, and his head was cocked slightly to one side like a dog listening to a public announcement.

'Err . . . no thanks.'

'No idea what you are missing, lad,' said Uncle Jos, cramming another sandwich into his own mouth.

'I think he might, Jos,' clucked Melba disapprovingly, 'Tom dear, do have some more tea. One can never have enough tea.'

If Uncle Jos was one extreme, Aunt Melba was quite the other. Instead of being short and round and rather jolly she was pale and slim and, with her hair cut in a pudding bowl like a medieval king, she looked rather severe. At this moment she was picking the crumbs off her plate with quick birdlike movements and placing them on the tip of her knee, where a long white rat with red eyes sat nibbling. This was Plankton, and he was having his tea too.

'Plankton is the best mouser in town,' cooed Melba, gently stroking his back.

'Mouser?' repeated Tom, who was sure that mousers were cats and definitely not rats.

'Ah yes,' winked Uncle Jos. 'Didn't you know mice are terrified of rats? Particularly white ones with red eyes. They meet Plankton in the dark holes in the skirting board and they think they've died and gone to hell.'

Jos picked up two jam tarts and wedged them beneath his huge black eyebrows. 'He is the devil, you see, with big, red, eyes! And he has come to punish them for all those naughty things they have done in their lives! Roah! Roah!'

Jos waved his stocky arms madly in the air like a weird little

monster, and Tom stifled a laugh. The next moment Jos popped the jam tarts out of his eye sockets and winked.

'So them naughty little critters turn tail and skedaddle. They never come back!'

'Don't you listen to it, Tom,' said Melba with a smile. 'But devil or no devil he's a very fine rat, wouldn't you like to hold him?'

And before Tom knew it Plankton was scrabbling about on his lap.

'Er . . . thanks. I . . . er . . . ' Tom had never been sure about rats, and Plankton, who smelled slightly of straw, did not change his mind.

'I think he likes you,' cooed Melba.

'So . . . er . . . is this a . . . er . . . busy time of year for the museum?' said Tom, trying hard to ignore Plankton's scabby white claws investigating the pocket that happened to contain his last sherbet lemon.

'Oh yes, lad, it's all go all the time,' Jos replied breezily, 'it never stops here, ever. Melba and I run this ship entirely on our own. Why, only last week we had . . . erm . . . who *did* we have, Melba?'

'The school party from St Denis's canceled on Monday,' she said, feeding Plankton a crumb.

'Yes, ah, it's a wee bit cold for the little ones this time of year,' explained Jos. 'But those old folks from the Dragonport Historical Society came on Tuesday and they *definitely* enjoyed it—'

'Except for the two who swore blind they would never come again.'

'Why was that?' asked Tom.

'Scared,' replied Uncle Jos quickly. 'We have to keep it very dark in there, you see. Some of the old dears' hearts aren't up to it.'

'Three people on Wednesday.'

Jos harrumphed loudly.

'You see, my dear, I just don't think you're counting properly. It was definitely more than that—'

'Well, there was one old fellow who slipped in and out without paying at all.'

'Leaky Logan?' exclaimed Jos. 'Not him again!'

'He refused to pay because he says you owe him so much money for fixing the boiler that he deserves a free ticket in here for the rest of his life,' said Melba pointedly.

'Hagfish!' muttered Uncle Jos.

'Thursday, Friday, no one at all,' Melba went on, and with a smile she relieved Tom of the troublesome rat.

'Maybe so, Melba, maybe so, but Saturday is always the biggest day of the week for the Scatterhorn Museum,' Jos replied, refusing to be put down. 'Why, in our heyday we've had thousands through here on a Saturday, crowds stretching right down the street. Like a cup final.'

'But last Saturday it was just two. And both were from the Council, with more demands for money.'

'All right,' said Jos holding up his hands, 'I know, it's not exactly profitable. But, Tom, the point is,' Jos cleared his throat, 'the point is—'

'What was it your father used to say?' prompted Melba quietly.

'As long as we're here,' boomed Jos, and standing up he suddenly

grabbed Tom by the shirt, 'then, boy, we're *here*.'

'As long as we're here, we're here, we're here, as long as we're here, we're here, we're here,' sang Melba in a thin reedy voice, and Jos's shoulders began to shake violently.

'As long as—'

'Stop it!' wheezed Jos, his eyes screwed up like tiny dots and his face turning such a deep shade of purple that Tom thought he might explode. Melba tittered. Tom looked from one to the other and smiled helplessly. He was beginning to wonder if Jos and Melba were completely mad.

'Dear, oh dear, never could work that one out,' said Jos finally, wiping his eye. 'But I took it to mean keep the place open, come hell or high water.'

And being an ex-navy man, this was a phrase that Jos could understand.

After tea Uncle Jos led Tom up the rickety back stairs to a small attic room at the top of the narrow slice of building at the back of the museum that was Jos and Melba's home. The roof was so low and the door so thin that Jos struggled to get through it.

'Sorry about the mess,' he said, kicking some very old-looking packing cases out of the way and hefting Tom's bag onto the bed. 'Lord, that's heavy.'

Jos sank down beside it, puffing so hard that his breath turned to steam like a kettle.

'So, Tom,' he said, glancing up with his head cocked to one side, 'what do you think of your quarters?'

Tom looked around at the tiny room. It was dark and damp

and cold, and every wall sloped inwards under the eaves. At the far end was a small desk before a window with a view out over the wet rooftops of the town and the wide grey river beyond. On the far side, Tom could just make out the yellow lights from the docks and the shadows of huge cranes, looming up out of the gloom like dinosaurs.

'It's great,' he said, shivering slightly. 'Maybe a bit cold but I—'

'That can be sorted, lad,' interrupted Jos. 'Don't you worry. It may be cold in here but you can bet your life it's warmer than Mongolia!'

With a chuckle he heaved himself off the bed and navigated back through the boxes to the door.

'I'm sure you want to get your stuff shipshape now, so I'll leave you to get on. Tomorrow we'll have a good look around the old place and you can tell me what you think of her. And I'll want to know,' he winked, 'after all, you're a Scatterhorn. One day you may end up taking the helm yourself.' And with a wave he was gone.

Tom looked around the cold dark room once more, with its piles of musty books and old newspapers that smelt slightly sweet. Suddenly he felt very alone. Walking through the boxes to the window, Tom watched the moon racing through the silver clouds and listened to the howling wind. In his mind he imagined that same moon shining down on the other side of the world. There, on the edge of a vast forest, was a little tent with a fire crackling beside it. And there were two shadows beside the tent, always two shadows—

Tom turned away from the window, biting his lip. Right now he missed his parents more than he could possibly say.

'Be brave, my darling,' Tom's mother had said as the train pulled out of the station. 'I'll find him. I promise.'

Tom flopped down on the low creaking bed and stared up at the peeling wallpaper above his head. Angrily, he wiped away the tears with his sleeve. This was not how it was supposed to be.

*Where had his father gone?*

Some strange, empty country, full of forests and rivers. Tom rolled over and tried to ignore the truth that haunted him. After all, it might have been so very different . . .



# CHAPTER 2

## THE DIVINE SPARK

That night Tom had a dream. It was the first of July, his birthday. It was a warm, sunny morning and as he was too excited to sleep he crept downstairs before his parents got up to look at the presents waiting for him on the kitchen table. There was a large pile at one end—his—and at the other end a much smaller pile for his father. Coincidentally, Tom and his father shared the same birthday, and even though he was dreaming Tom knew this to be true. Carefully, Tom picked up each present in turn, squeezing it gently and trying to imagine what was inside. Just then Tom heard the letterbox click shut and running out into the hall he found a small pile of letters scattered across the floor. 'Tom Scatterhorn, Tom Scatterhorn, Tom Scatterhorn.' . . . That last one felt promisingly heavy; money, hoped Tom as he carried the letters into the kitchen and spread them triumphantly on the table. It was only then that he saw, half-hidden behind all the other letters, a small, dirty envelope marked 'airmail'.

Tom picked up the letter and stared at it. The paper was yellowing and smudged, and it looked as if it had survived shipwreck, fire, and possibly an earthquake as well. It was

addressed to *'Sam Scatterhorn Esq.'*, and despite its battered appearance there was something vaguely official about it. Tom was puzzled: his father never received letters on his birthday. One of the stamps was long and thin and had a colourful picture of a horseman with an eagle on it, surrounded by words in a language he had never seen before. Without knowing quite why, Tom carried the letter into the kitchen, lit the gas stove and held the yellowing smudged envelope over the blue flame. He watched as the paper slowly turned from yellow to brown and the orange flame licked down towards his fingers, closer, closer, closer—

Ah!!

Suddenly Tom sat bolt upright in bed, clutching his fingers. Glancing down he was relieved to find there were no burns, no marks, nothing. It was just a dream, nothing more.

*A dream.*

Wasn't it?

With a heavy sigh, Tom flopped back down on the bed, knowing that this wasn't a dream. It was a memory of his seventh birthday, and it was all true except for one thing. He never burned that letter, and he should have done. And he clearly remembered what happened next.

At breakfast Tom's father opened the letter and scratched his head. It was certainly very odd. Then he read it again.

'Who's it from, love?' asked Tom's mother.

'The International Movement for the Protection and Advancement of Insects,' he said slowly, turning it over. Tom

could see the words 'Private and Confidential' written in heavy black type across the top.

'What do they want, Dad?'

'It seems they want to make me a member. Apparently it's very prestigious.'

'You?' said Tom's mother smiling, 'Why have they asked you?'

'Do you remember I used to collect beetles as a kid?'

'No.'

'Well I did. I used to be rather good at it, in fact. Got a prize once.'

'And that's why they've written to you?' said Tom's mother, not quite sure that this wasn't a joke. 'Because you used to collect beetles?'

'So it seems,' replied Tom's father, utterly mystified. 'Well, there's a turn up for the books.'

Sam Scatterhorn was a tall man who worked for the local council as an accountant. He did not smile much, but his eyes were laughing all the time, and this was one of those phrases that he always used. If an elephant had sat on his car, or a dog had scored the winning goal in the Cup Final, or an alien spaceship had landed in the next-door garden, they would have all been greeted with, 'Well, there's a turn up for the books.'

So Sam Scatterhorn put on his jacket as he always did, failed to notice he was wearing odd socks, as he always did, and went out of the door of 27 Middlesuch Close. Tooting the horn of his car, he reversed out of the drive and drove to work. As he always did.

* * *

That evening Tom caught his father reading the letter again, and again the day after that. Then a week later, another letter from the mysterious International Movement came. It also had 'Private and Confidential' written on it. Sam Scatterhorn studied its contents, and that evening he came home with a large book on insects that he had borrowed from the library.

'I'd forgotten that one in four animals on this planet is a beetle,' he said, squinting at the pages over his cornflakes. 'Did you know that some of them have been here for two hundred million years—they're almost living fossils.'

'Is that so,' said Tom's mother as she hurried through the kitchen on her way to work, 'how totally fascinating. Let us know if anything changes by this afternoon, won't you?'

'I might if you're lucky,' replied Sam Scatterhorn, his eyes smiling as they always did. But Tom noticed that behind his smile his father was becoming more serious now, as if he was always thinking about something else. Every week more and more correspondence from the Movement dropped through the letterbox, all marked with the distinctive IMPAI symbol and covered with interesting foreign stamps which Tom wouldn't have minded collecting had his father not gathered them all up and squirrelled them away in his study. Then one night Tom woke up to hear his parents having an argument downstairs.

'But tell me how we are going to live!' shouted his mother. Tom could tell she had been crying.

'Well, you're a teacher, you have a job. Dearest, I have just *got* to do this. Please let me do it.'

Then his mother burst into tears.

This was the start of it, because the very next day Sam

Scatterhorn gave up his job with the council and bought a microscope. At first he began collecting insects in the garden, killing them, dissecting them, and then examining them for hours under his microscope. But after a few months of this work Sam Scatterhorn became restless, and he began to look further afield.

'Now *there's* a turn up for the books,' said Donald Duke who lived next door. He was staring dubiously at the old and rusty camper van now parked in the Scatterhorn's drive.

'Is that thing going to stay there?' chirped a bird-like voice from behind the hedge. That was Dina, his wife.

'Unfortunately it is, dear,' replied Donald.

'Well, you'll have to do something about it,' she whispered loudly, and jabbed him in the ribs with her trowel. 'What do they think this is, a scrapyard?'

But Dina Duke needn't have worried; the rusty old camper van didn't stay there—in fact it was hardly there at all. The moment every school holiday began, Sam Scatterhorn loaded up supplies and blankets into the van and they were off, heading for some distant river or mountain in pursuit of the only thing that interested him now. In France they collected weevil larvae. In Germany it was click beetles. In Hungary it was mayflies. In Italy it was small black scorpions. At first Tom discovered he was quite good at finding them; he would set off at dawn with a stick and a specimen box, and by lunchtime he had collected all sorts of creatures for his father to look at under the microscope. It was exciting for a while, and Tom was always thrilled when he managed to prise a particularly vicious little scorpion from under its rock, but as he grew older he realized that he didn't want to spend all day

searching under stones and chasing through the woods with a net. And he also began to realize that his fathers' obsession was no longer about collecting. Sam Scatterhorn was chasing something elusive, a secret truth that he might never find.

'So,' asked Tom impatiently, 'what is it?'

They were sitting in a moonlit pine forest in Spain, watching fireflies dancing through the trees. For a long time his father stared at the campfire, watching the embers glow.

'In the old days it used to be called the divine spark,' he said slowly. 'It's the lightning bolt that kick-starts the motor. Makes everything breathe, move, be. The spirit of life, I suppose. Scientists can make things grow in their laboratories, copy animals and even graft one living thing onto another, but they all have to be *alive* in the first place, don't they? So what *makes* them alive in the first place?'

Tom thought he understood what his father was saying, but still it did not quite make sense.

'But . . . why insects, Dad? Surely everything that is alive has a divine spark?'

'Hmm.'

Tom's father stared at him intently across the fire. He seemed more serious than Tom had ever seen him in his life.

'I wish,' he began, 'I wish I could tell you. And Mum too. But we're not really allowed to say anything. It's like a big secret and once you knew . . . you'd never—'

But he never finished his sentence. Tom waited, burning with curiosity. The hiss of the crickets was deafening.

'Dad?'

'Hmm?'

What exactly *is* the International Movement for the . . . the . . . you know?'

'Protection and Advancement of Insects?'

Tom nodded. It was a question he had wanted to ask for a very long time, but still his father did not reply.

'It's just that, well, I can't see why they asked *you* to look for it,' Tom continued, feeling the frustration beginning to well up inside him. 'I mean, you're not a scientist. Why don't they get someone else, like a professor or something, to go and find it?'

Tom's father smiled and shook his head.

'Because, Tom . . . they'd never understand. This is not science, it's more like . . . a quest, I suppose,' he said at last. 'Once you take up the challenge you can't stop. And what's more, they haven't really given me much choice.'

Tom poked the fire roughly, sending sparks floating up into the night.

'But what happens if you never find the divine spark? I mean, that's possible, isn't it?'

Sam Scatterhorn stared silently into the flickering embers. There was a deeply troubled expression on his face.

After that trip matters really did take a turn for the worse. Sam Scatterhorn rarely left the house now, and Tom could barely get up the stairs to his bedroom as boxes of insects and beetles crowded every step. Then Sam Scatterhorn noticed a car that was often parked at the corner of Middlesuch Close at odd hours of the day and night with two men inside it.

'There's double-o-seven and double-o-eight outside,' called

Tom as he came back home from school. 'They're watching you, Dad.'

But Sam Scatterhorn's eyes were not laughing any more. He peered nervously through the curtains at the car at the end of the road, and a week later he screwed the front door shut, forcing Tom and his mother to enter the house only through the back garden. He was convinced the men were about to break into the house and steal his specimens. Something was going very, very wrong, and both Tom and his mother knew it: Sam Scatterhorn was fast descending into a paranoid, crazy world of insects and scientific formulas where no one could reach him. At mealtimes nobody spoke and Tom dared not catch his father's eye for fear of starting an argument. He just could not find what he was looking for, and he was becoming desperate. Then one morning in June, the worst thing that could have happened did happen. Sam Scatterhorn went outside for the first time in months to find the camper van had been ransacked.

'Oh dear me,' smirked Donald Duke from the other side of the hedge, eyeing the smashed windows and ripped seats scattered across the oil-spattered drive. 'Now why would anyone want to do a thing like that?'

Sam Scatterhorn did not reply, he just stood blinking in the sunlight, staring at the chaos. Turning round, he squinted down the road to where the car was parked on the corner. The two men were still there. Somehow the destruction of his precious van seemed to have finally stunned him to his senses. He seemed almost pleased.

* * *

Later that night, a soft 'clink' interrupted Tom's troubled dreams. Tom rolled over to see that it was five past two in the morning, and pulling back the curtain a fraction he could just make out his father quietly closing the garden gate. On his back was a large rucksack, and in one hand he held his long butterfly net. Tom watched as his father peered cautiously around the hedge into the road. Apart from a tabby cat making its rounds beneath the streetlights, everything was quiet. The inhabitants of Middlesuch Close were all asleep. Sam Scatterhorn glanced up at the window and Tom saw that he was smiling, really smiling, for the first time in a long, long time. Tom wanted to shout out, say something, but already his father was striding purposefully out into the centre of the road. A minute later he turned the corner and disappeared.

For a few weeks Tom's mother pretended she knew where her husband had gone.

'Switzerland, Tom. We'll get a postcard soon, I expect,' she would say as she busied about getting ready for school, and Tom half believed her. They started using the front door again, and Tom noticed that the car with the two men was no longer parked at the end of the road. But the weeks turned to months and there was still no word. Every morning Tom's mother would run downstairs to pick up the post and walk back into the kitchen trying to hide her disappointment, and every night she would quietly open the door of Sam Scatterhorn's study and start looking for clues. But it was all a sea of chaos, and Tom would often wake up to hear his mother crying softly. How Tom

wanted to help his mother in those moments, but what could he say?

He knew that if his father had gone off to find the 'divine spark', whatever that was, then he might be anywhere on the planet. And somehow Tom didn't want to think of his father as a tall rangy man driven half-crazy by his obsession with insects any more. In his daydreams Sam Scatterhorn became the granite-jawed explorer of a comic book, one moment wading heroically through a mangrove swamp, ripping the leeches off his chest, the next battling up an ice face in a blizzard, ice axe in hand. His father was a man on a quest that was so secret he couldn't tell anyone about it, not even his own son. But one day he would come back a hero, having found the divine spark. And in Tom's dreams he would follow in his footsteps.

Then one morning a postcard did drop through the letter-box, but it was not from Sam Scatterhorn. The black and white photograph on the front was very curious: it showed an elegantly dressed man with white hair and a moustache lounging on a sofa. Sitting next to him was a large cheetah, and both the man and the cheetah looked rather bored. '*Sir Henry Scatterhorn and Friend: 1935*,' it read at the bottom. The card was from Uncle Jos, hoping that all was well 'at your end', and 'wondering if we could have a wee chat about funds for HMS Scatterhorn, the family flagship, in the not *too* distant future.'

'As if we could give him anything,' snorted Tom's mother. 'He's as mean as mustard himself.'

The card was stuck on the fridge door, and Tom thought nothing more about it until some weeks later, when he came home

from school to find his mother standing in the hall with tears streaming down her face.

'Mum? . . . Mum, what's happened?'

A knot of fear tightened in Tom's stomach: they'd found his father, hanging frozen to death on some glacier, or burnt to a crisp in the desert . . .

'He's OK.'

She held up a letter and waved it like a flag.

'He's in Mongolia.'

Tom felt his heart was ready to burst and he ran to her, hugging her as tightly as he could. There would be no pretending any more. He was OK, everything was OK. Mum smiled as she choked back the tears.

'He couldn't say where exactly, but he needs my help,' she whispered as she held him close. 'I must go and find him.'

Tom did not understand.

'But why—'

'I know. But I'll be back, Tom, I promise. I'll bring him back home.'

Tom felt as if the walls of his world were starting to cave in. He had lost his father, and now his mother was about to leave him as well. He felt a lump begin to rise in his throat.

'Can't I come with you?' he pleaded.

Tom's mother knelt down before him, and he could see her eyes were bright with tears. It seemed to Tom she so wanted to say yes.

'Please, my darling,' she murmured, 'don't make it more difficult than it already is. I just—'

'What?'

Tom's dark, questioning eyes searched her face. At last she looked at him, and for a moment they sat together in silence.

'You're a very brave boy, Tom,' she said, brushing a lock of thick blond hair away from his eyes, 'but I just can't afford to lose you both,' and leaning forward she hugged him tighter than ever. 'You will be safe with Uncle Jos.'

'Uncle Jos?'

'Yes,' said his mother drying her eyes, 'I've just spoken to him. He'll happily look after you for Christmas.'

'Uncle Jos . . . this Christmas?'

'That's right, my darling.'

Tom looked blankly at his mother, trying to take it all in. Suddenly everything seemed to have been worked out. One minute his father had gone, and they were just carrying on, pretending that everything was fine and he was just on holiday somewhere. Now that he had made contact, it was OK to admit that they had both been so worried about him they thought he might even be dead. And now his mother was going to rescue him. And that was that.

'So . . . so you really are going?'

'I'm afraid so, darling. I have to. You remember the state he was in.'

Tom stared at the floor angrily; he knew that there would be no changing her mind.

'When?'

'On Monday. After school.'

Tom stared up at the low attic ceiling and shivered. Monday was this morning.