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The Remarkable Adventures of Tom Scatterhorn

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CHAPTER 1

Listening for Fun

At six o' clock the last yellow flash of sunlight dipped behind the mountain and night came up fast. The banks of cloud, which had been building slowly along the horizon all afternoon, now advanced in from the ocean, turning from white and orange to purple and black. And the wind was rising, too. It was not going to be a pleasant night. 'Too damn hot,' muttered the heavy, grizzled man as he stood in the doorway of the shack and squinted up at the black tentacles of cloud, silhouetted against the purple sky. Arlo Smoot could almost smell the storm coming. Reluctantly he made his way up the steep jungle path to the base of a tree where a set of steps was lashed. Shoving the torch he was carrying into his back pocket, he laboriously climbed up to a long narrow hut perched precariously in the crook of a giant tree. This was his office. From here he could see out over the jungle to the dark sea and the islands in the distance, now bathed in the strange purple light. Lightning flashed in the distance. Yes, there would be a storm tonight all right: a big one. Leaning out of the open window, Arlo Smoot shook the long aerial attached to the hut—it was secure—then he glanced back to the top of

the hill to where his weather balloons were tethered in a cage. He could just see one large orange helium balloon dancing on the end of its rope. Still there. Good. He had lost all of them in the last storm.

Flopping down into an old swivel chair, Arlo Smoot rubbed his unshaven face violently, trying to wake himself up. It was too hot to work, and he had no enthusiasm for the night's task. Listening to hours and hours of radio reports, decoding the movement of aeroplanes, the patterns of ships out in the ocean, submarine communications . . . sometimes this job was very boring indeed. Idly he flipped on the banks of switches in front of him, and listened to the crackle of static as the radios warmed up. Maybe he could permit himself an hour or two of fun first. Yes, why not. After all, it beat working for a living. Wheeling himself across to the other side of the room, Smoot lifted aside some files on a shelf and, stretching his hand inside, pulled out a thick old textbook. He opened it precisely in the middle, to reveal a dog-eared red notebook hidden inside. 'For Smoot's Eyes Only' was scrawled on the cover.

'Yes sir-ree,' Smoot murmured, brushing the dust away. 'Known only to the Smootster.'

This little notebook contained all the strangest secrets Arlo Smoot had ever heard over the airwaves. They were shocking, bizarre, and downright unbelievable, and if Smoot ever found himself in serious trouble, he reckoned these little facts might just be worth a whole lot of money. His fingers brushed through the pages passing chapters headed *American Presidents*, *Chinese experiments*, *alien landings*, *UFOs*, *parallel universes*, *time holes*, until he reached the very end, and the page he was looking for.

'Mr Zumsteen, my main man,' murmured Smoot, staring at the mass of figures and dates. Why not go after the big cheese? After all this Zumsteen guy was turning out to be the missing piece in this whole jigsaw, and by now Smoot had become quite intrigued.

'Let's do it,' he said, and paddled himself back to the radio. Checking the date in the notebook, he punched some numbers into the computer, and listened as waves of white noise hissed across the room. It was all working, good. Standing up, Smoot turned and stretched, and noticed the figures of two children in the window of the shack down below. They looked up at him and he waved, and the tall girl and the young boy waved back. Knowing they couldn't hear him, he mimed putting on his headphones and pretending to be very bored, scribbling in the air. The girl shrugged her shoulders. Then he made a sign that the girl should put the boy to bed, and the small boy made a thumbs up in return. Then the girl blew him a kiss. Smoot blew one back.

Smoot smiled, then walked over to the door and closed it. They knew he was working now: there would be no disturbances. Perfect, as what he was about to do required intense concentration. Smoot sat down in the swivel chair and, putting on his headphones, began to work the machines with a practised hand. Arlo Smoot was a radio spy, and eavesdropping on other people's secrets was his profession. Through a web of satellite connections he could access the most advanced listening stations in the world, and then direct the microphones to pick up any sound, made anywhere on earth. Though many universities had begged for his skills, the armies of some very large countries

paid him better . . . so this is what he did: he found out military secrets—for a price, of course—and he undertook some private work too, if he felt like it. But this was not all: for Arlo Smoot had a secret, a very big secret indeed, that in his humble estimation, made him probably the best radio spy in the business . . .



Slowly Smoot began to scan the airwaves, both his hands on the dials, adjusting his frequencies, setting and resetting the coordinates of his microphones. The constant, hissing roar of white noise filled his headphones. Smoot knew that sometimes it could be like this for hours, days even; he must be patient. And Arlo Smoot could be very, very patient. What was he searching for? Not the bleeps and tweets of battleships and submarines talking to each other: it was something much more interesting than that. For Arlo Smoot was directing his microphones to find forgotten sounds, obscure sounds, conversations from the past, still resonating through the upper atmosphere, and the sounds of the future, too . . .

Tonight, for some reason, Smoot felt lucky. He did not know why: perhaps it was the approaching storm; sometimes adverse weather conditions actually helped him find things. Slowly his fingers moved the dials, back and forward, his ears attuned to the smallest fluctuations in the hiss. To anyone else, Arlo Smoot was listening to nothing, just a badly tuned radio, crackling and fizzing. But Smoot was concentrating intensely, and already he was somewhere else, flying through the black ocean of noise, shining his torch into the darkness, hunting for something

very specific . . . again he changed frequency, and again. The numbers spun. And then he heard them: distant at first in his headphones, barely distinguishable from the hiss and static, but to his well-trained ear they were there, buried beneath. Voices . . . human voices. Smoot's heart quickened a little, and he licked his lips. Even though he had done this thousands of times before, this moment was always like the first time. Voices coming in across the airwaves, ghosts from the past, the future, he couldn't tell yet, but people, emerging out of the fizzing fog towards him, strangers about to tell him their secrets . . . Smoot worked quickly now, focusing his microphones, making a series of minute adjustments to sharpen the sound. The machine blinked and flickered before him, trying to keep up.

'Smoot, you beaut,' he muttered to himself, smiling as he carefully peeled away the layers and layers of hum and static, filtering and refiltering the sound. Could this be him?

A minute later Arlo Smoot had got a clear signal. Instantly he knew he was in a jungle somewhere, as the noise of the insects was deafening. There was a jabber of voices—in a language he did not understand—a huddle of men, squatting in the dust. A village on the edge of the jungle maybe, a few piglets running around, the splashing of puddles . . . the vivid sound picture appeared before his eyes. Then a nervous English voice. It was him! He knew that man. He knew that voice.

'Smootie toot-toot,' he purred, turning up the volume. 'Did anyone tell you you're a genius?' This was exactly what he wanted.

'Where did you say he found it?'

'In a cave. Way, way down, masta. Very dark. He saw the belly shining.'

'When was this?'

'Oh—long time back. My grandfatha is old man now. He was just a boy then, like me.'

'And it was definitely a beetle, you say?'

'Oh yes, masta. Head, legs, big jaws like this. They all gone. Dust now. Just belly left, masta.'

'The belly?' said another voice. 'Well, well. Curiouser and curiouser.'

'And you painted it—I mean decorated it. These patterns . . . '

'Spirit patterns masta, yes. It's an ancestor. You understand?'

'I do. It's very beautiful. How much do you want for it?'

'You wan' buy?'

'Yes. I like it very much.'

'Oh.' The boy muttered something in another language. 'Is rare. I never seen before, ever.'

'Neither have I,' said another, commanding voice. 'Extraordinary, it feels rather like rubber, but it isn't. Makes you want to squeeze it, somehow. What on earth is it made of, August?'

'No idea. Some kind of fungus, perhaps. Definitely not man made. Not out here, at any rate. You buy it, Nicholas old bean. It's not a forgery.'

'Forgery? No forgery, masta. No no no. Is real ting. Beetle ancestor, masta.'

'I'd believe him if I were you, old chap. Give the lad what he wants.'

The negotiations continued, Smoot noting them down word for word. For him the excitement was always in the chase,

hunting down the voices, what they said was not always that interesting. But this object, whatever it was, sounded intriguing; and Smoot found himself doodling what it might look like in his notebook. Egg-shaped, covered in dark patterns, made of a kind of clear plastic material, which the boy claimed was actually a beetle's abdomen. Could this be true? Smoot knew nothing about beetles but he thought it sounded pretty far-fetched. Eventually he stopped listening and made a note of the frequencies, then slid his chair across to a map, flicked open a page and made a calculation. Satisfied that he was correct, he drew three lines on the map in pencil with a ruler.

'No wonder no one knows where you are . . . ' he muttered to himself, as the intersection of lines crossed on a small cluster of islands out in the middle of the Pacific. They were so small he could barely see them. Smoot squinted hard at the map, then returned to his little red notebook, and recorded the following entry: 'Nicholas Zumsteen, August Catcher, Sir Henry Scatterhorn, purchasing strange "beetle" object on the Tithona Archipelago, November 28th 1961.'

Smoot leant back and rubbed his eyes, feeling very pleased with himself. This was something indeed. The strange story that he had been piecing together over the last year had taken a new and important twist. It was like a movie without pictures that was happening out there over the airwaves. First there was some kind of an elixir of life, which a guy named August Catcher had invented and some kid named Tom Scatterhorn had stolen. Then this strange, crazy guy named Don Gervase Askary had gotten hold of it. Now Askary wanted to find this Nick Zumsteen guy,

lord knows why, and he was searching heaven and earth to find him.

'Betcha don't know what I know, Askary,' he smiled, absently flicking to another frequency and watching as the numbers settled onto a familiar wavelength that he happened to know came from the future. Through the static he heard familiar voices. Flicking several switches he brought the sounds nearer.

'The elixir is, I believe, performing very well, your grace,' announced a high nasal whine.

'Good. Excellent. Now, what about Nicholas Zumsteen?'

The deep voice boomed around a large space that Smoot always imagined to be some kind of cathedral. There was an awkward silence.

'Erm . . . he is . . . yet to be found, Don Gervase—I mean, your grace, but I guarantee we *will* find him. We just need more time . . . '

'More time,' replied Don Gervase, with a trace of anger. 'Does anyone even have the faintest clue where he is?'

There was no reply. Smoot imagined rows and rows of elderly men staring blankly at their master. He put up his hand.

'Please sir, I do. But I'm not going to tell you . . . ' he giggled.

'Hmm. What about his friend, August Catcher?'

The silence deepened. A chair creaked.

'Sir Henry Scatterhorn?'

'Nada,' Smoot cut in, out loud.

'How very tedious you all are.'

'There is . . . there is *Tom* Scatterhorn,' suggested a thinner, weasely voice from somewhere near the back. 'If your grace so desired, we could . . . err . . . quite easily—'

'Please, spare me. Do you really think I need your advice regarding a twelve-year-old boy?'

The silence was deafening now. Arlo Smoot could almost feel the fear seeping through his headphones.

'Does it not strike you as odd, that after many months, and much effort, none of you have discovered *anything* at all?

There was a pause, and a couple of nervous coughs.

'Or perhaps you are not telling me the truth. Perhaps you *do* know where Zumsteen is. And you have chosen to help him.'

'Your grace, we . . . we are doing our best. It just so happens that—'

'Your best is not good enough? Are you aware of the gravity of the situation?'

'Indeed,' added Smoot, in mock seriousness. 'How useless *are* you people?'

'We really are trying—'

'Are you? Really, are you? Lotus, would you mind?'

There was a sound of soft footsteps echoing on stone, and then the creak of a mighty door opening. Suddenly a ripple of anxious murmuring filled the hall. Smoot bent his head and listened closer. What was that which had just been brought in?

'I don't believe you have met one of these before?'

'My lord,' continued the pinched voice, clearly terrified now, 'this is the Council Chamber, I really must insist—'

'Lotus,' barked Don Gervase, 'unleash it.' There was a click of fingers that echoed loudly. 'You will be pleased to know, gentlemen, that they show no mercy and are always hungry. Goodbye; and good luck.'

There was a strange clattering, rushing sound, followed by a scream and a burst of static as the frequency was momentarily lost.

'Whoops-a-daisy,' murmured Smoot, impatiently scanning the airwaves for that booming voice once more. He had heard these scenes before, many times in fact, and he found them strangely compelling. Who were all these old guys that kept meeting their grisly ends, and what was that scratching thing that killed them? Arlo Smoot was so busy chasing the frequencies that he did not hear the dull thud of a car engine in the jungle far below. Then suddenly Don Gervase Askary was back on a quite different wavelength.

'Is it this way?'

'Indeed, my lord.'

'What is his name?'

'Arlo Smoot, my lord.'

'What?' said Smoot out loud. The voices seemed to be getting louder in his headphones. His fingers flew across the dials . . .

'No doubt he is listening to all this anyway. He calls himself the ears of the universe, does he not?'

'That is correct,' replied the thin, nasal voice. 'Umbrella, sir?'

'No. This won't take long. Up here?'

'Yes sir.'

'Ah! Good evening, Dr Smoot.'

The voice boomed so loudly that Smoot ripped off his headphones and stared at his machines in bewilderment. How did the voice become so loud? It wasn't as if he—

'I said, good evening, Dr Smoot.'

Smoot spun round to see a tall, narrow man in a black linen

safari suit sitting in a chair behind him. He had a large domed head, oiled hair streaked with silver, and peculiarly small feet. His skin was pale yellow and his eyes were a strange, milky green. He looked both elegant and hideous at the same time. The man smiled, dangerously.

'I confess I am somewhat perplexed to find you still here.'

Smoot shifted uncomfortably in his chair, his mind still spinning. How had *that* just happened?

'You know who I am, of course, so I shan't introduce myself. And you must have known I would be coming,' continued the tall man, evenly. 'After all, a radio spy of your calibre can hear anything and everything. The past, present, even the future. Am I right?'

Smoot smiled weakly.

'Any sound that has ever been made, you alone can hear. Sound travels for ever, I believe; it never stops. There are no secrets.'

'You have to know where to listen.'

'Indeed you do, Dr Smoot. And you do. Which is why I am confused.'

'Confused?'

'Very. You see, we have something in common.'

'Oh?' Smoot tried to look as innocent as possible.

'Yes. Odd, isn't it? You see, I am looking for someone. A man named Nicholas Zumsteen. He took part in an air race across the Pacific Ocean and it is rumoured that he crash-landed somewhere in Micronesia. Apparently he found a remote volcanic archipelago and made some remarkable discoveries there. Need I say more?'

Smoot considered his position. Of course he knew all this and much, much more besides . . . but should he let the cat out of the bag? Not for nothing, definitely not. Hey, beggars can't be choosers, and Smootie-toots got to live, hasn't he? He knew this Askary guy was nuts, but he clearly had a large organization and almost certainly played for big bucks . . . string him along a bit.

'I'm not sure what you're talking about,' said Smoot, clearing his throat.

Don Gervase regarded at him quizzically.

'No? That is a shame. How disappointing. And then we have Mr Zumsteen's friends, August Catcher and Sir Henry Scatterhorn. They too have mysteriously vanished. Have you heard of them, perhaps?'

'Never. Sorry.'

Don Gervase took a deep breath and frowned at the floor.

'But I could try to find them, if you like,' suggested Smoot helpfully. 'It may take time, of course. Six months, maybe more. And the costs, well, you know,' Smoot exhaled loudly. 'Getting a fix on individuals is never easy. No sir. Could be past, present, future, even. We're talking serious spondoolicks, señor. Muchas wongas.' Don Gervase fixed him with his large green eyes. He was marvelling at the gall of the man. Arlo Smoot shifted in his seat uncomfortably.

'You seriously want me to find these guys for you? Because you know if you do—'

'Don't make a fool out of me, Dr Smoot.'

Don Gervase twirled his long fingers into a knot. Where to begin . . .

'What if I were to tell you, Arlo Smoot, that you are lying through your teeth. You know all about Nicholas Zumsteen.'

Smoot did his best to look surprised.

'And August Catcher,' Don Gervase continued, 'and Sir Henry Scatterhorn too. And what if I were to tell you that you have been spying on me for months. You have listened in to my organization. You have heard of my little triumphs and my . . . setbacks.' Don Gervase eyed his prey carefully. 'You have been deliberately building up a picture of everything about me. What do you say to that?'

Smoot shrugged his shoulders.

'Very well then. I'll get to the point. Who are you working for, Smoot?'

'What do you mean?'

'You cannot be alone. Who are they?'

'Who are who?'

'Are they paying you to find it before I do?'

'No one is paying me anything,' said Smoot, and cursed himself that they weren't.

'Then why do you seek what I seek?'

'I don't "seek what you seek", man. Hey look, it's . . . OK!' Smoot threw up his hands. 'You're right—it's me, whatever. Sure, I'm listening in. For fun, right? Just goofing around. It's cool. "Let's go get the Zumsteen guy!" So what? It doesn't mean anything . . . does it?'

'That is for me to know, and you to decide, Dr Smoot.'

'Excuse me?'

'Enough,' growled Don Gervase, silencing him with a sweep of his hand. Arlo Smoot could see that the strange looking man was

boiling with rage now; his head seemed to be visibly pulsing. There was an awkward silence, and in it Smoot spotted his small red notebook lying open on the desk . . . holy schmoley, he hadn't hidden it away! How could he be so darned careless?

'What to do, what to do . . . ' murmured Don Gervase, staring out of the window at the oncoming storm. 'I suppose you wouldn't have been so foolish as to keep any evidence of your treachery?'

'Treachery?' snorted Smoot, casually resting his fingers over the small red notebook. 'What is this, the Spanish Inquisition?'

'What is in that notebook?'

'Notebook? What notebook?'

'The one you have just put in your pocket, Dr Smoot.'

Don Gervase turned to look at him. Arlo Smoot smiled nervously.

'I . . . it's . . . just a diary, that's all. My diary.'

'May I?'

Don Gervase held out his hand. His large green eyes held Smoot's like a magnet, and Smoot felt his courage start to waver. There was no way this guy was getting his notebook. No smokin' way.

'Look, Mr Askary, I'm sorry for listening. I didn't know it was such a big deal, for Chrissakes.'

'Invoking the Almighty cuts no mustard with me, Smoot.'

Don Gervase stared at him hard, his brow furrowing. Then he smiled.

'Give it.'

Smoot shook his head.

'No can do, amigo. All kinds of stuff in there. Classified and all that.'

Don Gervase sighed and listened to the wind whipping through the trees outside. The sound concealed the soft footsteps of Smoot's daughter climbing up to the tree house with a phone in her hand.

'OK,' she said quietly, 'that's great . . . would you like to speak to him? Hold on I'll get him . . . hold on.'

The girl climbed up the steps and heard the strange low tones of a voice she did not recognize. A visitor? Reaching the top step, she peered in through the door to see the outline of a tall, narrow man sitting with his back to the door. Her father sat facing him, with a fixed, awkward expression on his face. She was about to walk in but something about the visitor's demeanour made her hesitate: something serious was happening here. She checked herself on the dark threshold and listened.

'So it seems we are at an impasse,' said the man in the dark safari suit. 'Which I predicted, of course. You see, Dr Smoot, I really *do* need to know where Nicholas Zumsteen is, and one way or another, I shall find out. I'm not sure you appreciate that.'

There was a heavy scratching sound on the roof—a branch perhaps. Don Gervase smiled hideously, revealing a set of blackened teeth.

'Oh, the suspense. It is killing.'

Smoot smiled nervously and wiped the sweat off his brow. This guy was seriously weird. Maybe they could strike a deal, to hell with the money . . .

'Listen,' he began, 'the problem is my notebook has—'

'Did you know that three hundred million years ago, the largest insect on the planet was a centipede?' droned Don Gervase, ignoring him.

'Is that so?'

'*Estraordinario*—no? An unruly beast, about four metres long, with no teeth. No teeth! Like a little old lady!'

'Really?' replied Smoot, trying to humour the tall man who was now chuckling to himself. 'Incredible.'

'Really incredible, Dr Smoot. It strikes its victims with its poisonous fangs, swallows them whole then dissolves them into a soup in its mouth. Bones and all. Ingenious, no? I like soup. Gazpacho. Do you like gazpacho, Dr Smoot?'

Smoot shrugged in confusion. Centipedes? Soup? This guy was even more insane than he looked . . . and creepy too, alien, somehow . . .

'Give me that book, Smoot, or I shan't spare you, or your children.' Don Gervase's large green eyes narrowed to slits and his voice dropped to a whisper, barely audible above the wind. 'My men have your daughter down below, right now. One shout from me, and she is dead.' Don Gervase uncurled his long, powerful fingers and waited.

'Give.'

Smoot glanced towards the dark doorway, and saw Pearl, his twelve-year-old daughter, standing there. Well, *that* was a lie. But Pearl looked terrified. Again there was a loud scuffling on the roof: what *was* that? Smoot was sweating freely now, desperately trying to think . . . something told him this guy was not going to pay for anything . . . there must be some way out of this . . .

'Well, Dr Smoot?'