



1. THE GREEN MAN

Alex's bike was upside down, balancing on its seat and handlebars, and stabilised by Alex's grip on the rear wheel. It needed the firm grip because Dev was vigorously forcing air into the repaired inner tube with his pump.

'Any good?' Dev asked.

'Yeah, think so,' Alex replied. 'Seriously though, mate, thanks for helping. If I'd had to do this tomorrow it wouldn't have been the end of the world, but I'm glad I don't have to.'

Dev stopped pumping, wiped his damp brow with the back of his bare arm and then squeezed the rubber tyre between his thumb and forefinger. 'Oh, yes, nice one. We. Are. Done,' he declared, and began to unscrew the adaptor from the valve. 'So, what would be the end of the world?'

'What do y' mean?'

'You said it wouldn't have been the end of the world. So what would be?' Dev repeated as he screwed on the dust cap.

'Ah, got you. How about something from space? Whacking great big asteroid like the one that did in the dinos.'

'Yep, that could do it. Or how about an invasion?'

‘Nice one,’ nodded Alex as he flipped his bike over and propped it against the fence. ‘Full-on alien invasion. But, is it a military-style attack or hungry superior lifeforms that snack on humans?’

Dev stopped to consider this as he gathered up the puncture repair kit. ‘Why not both?’ he suggested matter-of-factly. ‘Grisly xenomorphs with superior laser power, a-slicing and a-dicing all life into handy bite-sized chunks.’

‘Gruesome,’ acknowledged Alex as he took the offered kit and stowed it in a pouch beneath his saddle. Dev clicked the pump into place on the frame. ‘But efficient.’

Just then the back door opened and Alex’s mum stuck her head out, popping the two boys out of their sci-fi armageddon thought experiment. ‘Your phone’s charged, Dev,’ she said passing it to him. ‘Have you boys seen Nan?’

‘No, Mum,’ answered Alex. ‘Is her scooter in the porch?’

‘Just looked. Empty. You two couldn’t race up the lane and see if she’s up there again, could you? Dinner will be ready in twenty minutes.’

‘Yep, leave it to us,’ said Alex, reaching for his bike. Dev retrieved his from where it was leaning against the battered shed.

‘Thanks, boys,’ smiled Alex’s mum, already turning to go back inside, but then something occurred to her. ‘Oo, have you got time, Dev? Shouldn’t you be heading home?’

‘Nah, I’m good, Mrs H. I’ve got time to help.’

‘Do you want me to give your mum a ring?’

‘S’okay, I’m just sending her a text.’

‘Alright. See you in a bit.’

“Up the lane” referred to the footpath that ran past the side of their terraced cottage up to the wooded copse at the top of

the hill. The path was reasonably wide, banked by tall hedges of hawthorn and holly, and partially enclosed by hanging boughs of beech, yew and silver birch. You could take a car up it, should you have access to the gate at the bottom, so it was easily wide enough for the boys to cycle side by side, standing on their pedals as they fought the steady slope. It was early evening and the sun was low in the sky to the west, casting a warm orange light that threw a golden dappling into the leafy tunnel. As the path rose, it curled around a small hollow to their left, a field used as grazing for a bad-tempered pony that belonged to Alex's neighbour.

'Now, if you ask me, the end of the world will come in the form of the zombie apocalypse,' offered Dev as he swung his front wheel round a nasty looking pothole.

Alex nodded. 'Fast zombies or slow zombies?'

'Oh, I can't be doing with those fast zombies. Give me your classic shambling undead, shuffling after you in a never-ending hunger for brains.'

'I thought you didn't like zombies?' grinned Alex.

Dev ducked a low branch, then rose into a blast of warm orange light as they rounded the top of the field and the path straightened out to the copse. 'Can't bloody stand 'em. Literally the stuff of my nightmares. But if we're debating the end of the world then that would pretty much do it for me. Which would naturally mean your worst apocalyptic scenario would be...'

'Vampires,' said Alex, almost at a whisper, as if to mutter their name was to summon them, even on this most striking of summer evenings.

'Ha-ha! You really don't like 'em, do ya!' laughed Dev, pulling ahead for a moment in his glee.

'Mate, I hate them. Just imagine it, fingers scratching at

your bedroom window, hungry to get in and either suck your body dry of blood or convert you to their fang-toothed club. Makes me shiver just thinking about it.'

'Best hope the world keeps on turning as it is, then.'

They'd arrived at a broad five-bar gate across the path. The gate, like its twin at the foot of the lane, was chained and padlocked. Alex's dad was a Keeper who worked for the Forestry Commission, so he had a key and could bring his van up, but just about everyone else had to do so on foot, or bike, and use the small angled gap in the fence just wide enough for a person to negotiate their way through to the wood on the other side.

Neatly parked next to this pedestrian access was a metallic red mobility scooter, sporting rather too many stickers of cats to the point that it wasn't entirely obvious from some angles if the scooter was indeed a red one at all. This profusion of sticky pictures was Nan's way of dealing with not being able to have a cat, a favoured and regular companion throughout her life, now denied her due to Alex's mum's allergic reaction to the furry felines.

'Well, at least we know she came this way,' said Alex as he hopped off of his bike and stepped up to the gate to look into the woods beyond. They were at the north-eastern corner of the hill's treeline, with the hill rising slightly further to the left, high enough with its cover of beech and oak to put this side of the hill into shadow, hidden from the evening sun. There wasn't much growing beneath the broad arms of the beech trees, and the leafy canopy was relatively high, but the low light was a problem.

'How far can she get without it?' asked Dev. He thought to look along the path's sides beside him in case there was some place else she could have gone, but it was clear from

the knee-high bank of earth and the thickness of the bushes that an elderly woman, unsteady on her feet, wasn't tackling those obstacles.

'Depends what sort of day she's having,' replied Alex before climbing back down. 'Can't see her. And in the copse it's all quite open under the trees. She could be anywhere.'

'Then we'd best get these bikes lifted over and get a wriggle on.'

The ground was littered with curled brown beech leaves and the remains of last year's nut casings, but there was an obvious track through it all of dusty brown earth, cleared and compacted by the many feet of dog walkers and ramblers that commonly came this way. Alex decided it was unlikely his grandmother had struck off down the slope to their right, which ended in boggy ground, nor was it likely that she'd attempted the steep slope to the summit on the left. She must, therefore, be before them. Somewhere.

They'd remounted their bikes and now threaded their way along the track, bumping over exposed tree roots laid bare by the passage of thousands of booted feet across the years. A squirrel darted across the leaf litter in looping bounds, betrayed by the noise it made as it disturbed the floor's dry coating, before making the body of an impressive beech and screening itself from view by keeping the trunk between itself and the bike riders as they passed.

Dev, aware he was broaching a touchy subject, gathered the courage to ask Alex a question: 'Your nan. Is she alright?'

Alex, however, seemed happy to talk. 'No, not really. I don't think she's been right for a while. Mum reckons it's dementia. She keeps getting so confused about numbers, and she never seems to know what day it is.'

‘Oh. Sorry, mate.’

‘S’alright. Nothing to be sorry about. That’s just nature. Everyone grows old.’ And, after a pause, ‘Nan is old, I suppose.’

They were moving in single file now, so Dev could only see his friend’s back. He sucked in his lips and decided to ask what had really been on his mind. ‘So, what does she come up here for? I mean, when we were younger she was always up here. Is it the exercise? There’s hardly a view with all these trees. What’s so interesting about a copse?’

‘Dunno. I always thought she just needed the space and fresh air. She had her whole house before, and now she’s just got a tiny room that’s space to call her own at our place.’

‘She’s not, like, unhappy, though, is she?’

‘No. Well, I don’t think so. She’s always seemed, you know, content.’

‘Well, you know her best, mate, but I’ve always thought she was happy, too. And she’s always been lovely to me.’

They arrived at a split in the path. They had come round to the northern side of the hill now, where the right fork would take them down a steep and zig-zagging path cut through with twisted roots that ended at a boardwalk across the bog. The left path continued around the circumference of the hill. This was the most likely way, but Alex couldn’t contain his worry that they’d still not caught up with her. Although the sun wasn’t setting quite yet, it was getting closer and closer to the horizon with each passing moment. Before he could dwell much longer on it, though, he was startled by the low flying arc of a jay, its colourful feathers still apparent even in the poor light. It disappeared into the trees bordering the slope to their left where a stray beam of sunlight managed to break through.

'She's got to be up there,' decided Alex.

'You reckon?'

'Got to be. I can't see her wanting to wander around in the gloom when the hilltop will still be in some sunshine.'

'As good an idea as any,' agreed Dev. 'Let's go.'

They were closer to the steep upwards slope here, but didn't have to go far before they came to a small side path, crowded by brambles. 'Better push the bikes,' Alex said.

It was narrow, but seldom used. Most people took the path down to the boardwalk, across the bog and out on to the heath, so far fewer feet stepped past this slight, overgrown rut through the undergrowth. Nan, Alex thought, came up here so often that she'd know about it. After all, she hadn't always been so dodgy on her feet.

Up ahead the path was obscured by low branches of silver birch and tall green and brown ferns, one or two of which were trodden down. Taking care, they guided their bikes through to a thickly-grown gap in the earthen banks of the slope. Alex's dad reckoned it had been some sort of hill fort dating back to before the Romans, and as they appeared into the golden sunshine he could almost believe they'd stepped back into another time.

Before them was a clearing in the copse's trees. Mostly grass, with a handful of bramble mounds, the clearing sloped downwards slightly to the southwest. The clearing was kept this way, so Alex's dad said, by deer, stopping any new tree growth before it had a chance to flourish.

With a final push they had their bikes up and on to the clearing itself. To their left someone had pushed some logs together to make three sides of a square, at the centre of which was the black scar of a long forgotten fire, all burnt stumps and powdery ash with a charred bottle at its centre.

They rounded a heaped tangle of brambles and walked into the warm evening sunlight, with the orange sun partly visible above the treetops.

Alex was just drawing in breath to call his nan's name when the words died on his lips.

Before them, beneath a curving, twisted bough of an oak that sat on the treeline, was a curious sight. There was his nan, reclining in the branches of a small tree, which in turn was framed by an upright ring of foliage. So odd was the setting that it looked like some theatrical device used upon a stage. With the sun almost above this curious diorama, the two boys found themselves squinting, moving closer for a better look. Their progress forward took them lower on the gentle slope, pushing the sun from view and allowing their eyes to adjust.

With some surprise Alex realised two things in quick succession.

Firstly, his nan was smiling, and one hand was lifted to the leafy branch before her face. Then, quickly, like an optical illusion suddenly revealing itself, he realised she wasn't sat in a small tree, but in the bark-covered arms of a large green man, her hand laying a gentle caress upon his emerald leafy cheek.

'Nan?' said Alex, almost too quietly to hear.

The green man visibly flinched, although his hold on Alex's nan remained secure. As if in acknowledgement of the wrinkled hand upon its cheek, it hadn't snapped its head round either, although Alex could see what passed for its eyes were firmly on him. His nan didn't look in any distress, in fact she smiled at him as he narrowed the gap, closing on the strange ring of plants beneath the oak's bough and to this strange embrace taking place beyond it. As Alex pushed his

bike through the centre of the ring she turned her attention back to the green man and gently patted her fingertips upon his cheek, saying, 'It's alright. That's my Alex.'

The last thirty paces had carried them down the slope and now Alex found himself having to look upwards. Whatever this green man was, it, or he, was tall, with no visible legs but a thick curling trunk of a body adorned with moss, small ferns and lichen over a rough bark. Where his chest began, somewhere above Alex's head, small, delicate leaves overlapped like birds' feathers, covering everything but the arms, although the forearms were heavy with moss. His face had the most elaborate pattern of leaves of them all, spiralling and flowing around the contours that mimicked a human's. He could have been an elaborately decorated natural sculpture if not for the fact that there was a changing expression on that face, betrayed by the rippling and fluctuating leaves.

'Nan? What... what's going on?'

But, before she could answer, the sound of wood splitting with a tremendous crack reverberated from amongst the dense trees further down the slope. The green man's entire body twisted round to face the sound and, as it did, huge, thick leaves sprouted from his arms and began to wrap themselves around Nan, hardening into a solid brown shell as they overlapped.

Dev hadn't been paying much attention as they'd rounded the brambles and was only aware that Alex had seen something amiss when he almost ploughed into the back of him. Not that Alex had paused for long, and was soon striding forwards, hands whitening on the grips of his handlebars as he tried to understand just what he was looking at. By now Dev

was captivated, too, but his focus wasn't so much on where Alex's nan was sitting, but on the upright ring of plants set into the ground between them. It certainly did look circular, so Dev doubted it could have grown that way naturally, although why on earth someone would go to the trouble to grow something over an arch up here on the hill was beyond him. It seemed to comprise several plants, and there were at least two types of flower blossoming throughout its tangled length. It was perhaps five metres wide, and three from its top to the ground, suggesting that if it was a perfect circle there would be a further two metres beneath the soil. All this Dev took in quickly, but what really caught his eye was the bizarre disconnect between what he was seeing around the arch and what he was seeing through it. Although every step he took towards it filled more of his vision, what he could still see around and past it simply did not marry up. The position of the sun casting its distinctive evening sunshine was correct, but the trees through the leafy circular frame just weren't in the right place. He craned his neck upwards, following the mighty oak's heavy twisted bough where it curved over the arch. As they stepped up to it, and through, the thick branch simply disappeared, revealing instead a much higher canopy of leaves. The oak tree didn't exist on this side of the archway. Dev took another few steps, twisting the handlebars of his bike to turn it and himself so he could look back to where he had come from. Back through the arch he could just about see part of the gnarled trunk of the oak, but it just wasn't there on this side. There were plenty of trees, but they weren't oak, and they stood much further away.

'What the...' he muttered, but before he could consider it any more there was the sound of splintering wood and Alex

began to scream for his nan.

‘Hey! Wait! That’s my nan! That’s my nan!’ shrieked Alex, increasingly desperate as the shell-like cocoon hardened and darkened. Alex had let go of his bike, carelessly letting it drop to the ground as he stepped forward, arms waving in the futile hope of being listened to. The tiny leaves on the green man’s face were rapidly turning yellow and orange and brown, drying and crisping, and falling away to reveal an empty void within. The enormous shell was dropping, too, but in a controlled manner as vines and creepers held it while a multitude of tiny branches erupted to support its descent. In a few short seconds the shell was on the woodland floor, then being pulled beneath it as the ground burst apart with writhing, grasping roots. ‘What are you doing? What are you doing to her,’ Alex bellowed, reaching out to pull at a branch but finding it dry and crumbling in his hands just as a python-like root gently encircled his waist and prevented him from getting any closer.

Meanwhile, Dev’s attention was back on the arch as it, too, darkened, dried and split. One second he was looking back towards the clearing, the next it blinked out of existence to be replaced by a continuous view of more large trees as the desiccated remains of the arch crumbled and tumbled to join the leaf litter upon the floor. His head spun back around to see the churning earth settle as the last of the roots either slid back into the darkness or flaked to splinters. Alex’s restraining root was the last to break down like this, dropping him forward to his knees where he immediately began to tear at clods of earth, shouting the name of his grandparent into the broken soil. But he knew it was hopeless. He’d felt the movement deep into the ground and there was no way

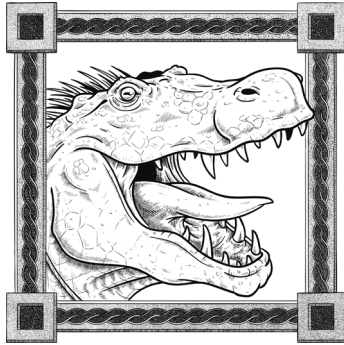
he was getting her out with his bare hands alone.

He desperately tried to rationalise what he'd just seen, fighting a sense of panic as he realised he'd have to explain all this to his mum and dad. Nauseous, he pushed himself to his feet and lurched for his fallen bike, babbling, 'Dev, we gotta go, we better go, get my dad, get him up here, bring a spade and, and, stuff from the shed.' He went to move past Dev back to the clearing but realised he was facing the wrong way, so wrenching the handlebars up and pivoting on the back wheel, he spun round. Still no clearing.

He now knew something was very wrong indeed.

'Dev, where the hell are we?' he said, straining to keep the rising panic from his voice, but when his eyes settled on his friend he found no comfort from the look of shock he found there. 'What is it?' Alex whispered as he turned in the direction of Dev's gaze.

'We're being watched.'



2. THE GHARVEESH

The hill appeared to continue its gradual slope downwards, at least until the undergrowth became thick enough to disguise the view. Roughly halfway to that point there looked to be a rough, rutted track running from left to right and disappearing behind the largest tree trunk either of the boys had ever seen, made even bigger by huge sprawling roots. Stood on top of one of these was a figure clutching a long pole and wearing something that gleamed in a sharply angled beam of evening light. The figure was looking their way.

‘Is... is that a spear?’ wondered Alex out loud.

‘Got a shiny tip,’ Dev replied, unable to tear his eyes away.

A second loud splintering sound echoed across the woodland, but the figure didn’t react, even when other sounds became apparent: the rattle of a harness, the trudge of feet dampened by the earth floor, kicked-up dried leaves and stepped-on brittle twigs, and the protesting sound of wood rubbing against wood.

‘You hear that?’ asked Dev.

‘Yeah, I hear it.’

‘Do you think matey-boy up there is with whoever’s

coming?’

‘I reckon, yeah.’

‘Do you think we should, like, scarper?’

Alex agreed. ‘Yeah. Good idea.’

But they’d barely moved a step when a second figure appeared beside the first, freezing the two boys in their tracks. The figures appeared to be discussing them as the first dipped his spear and pointed it in their direction.

‘Aw, mate, I don’t like the look of this,’ hissed Dev through gritted teeth. ‘We should go.’

‘Too late. They’re coming.’

One after the other, the figures jumped down into the shadows amongst the roots of the trees, emerging instantly in a slightly stooped walk. At first Alex thought they’d been wearing clothing that draped down their back behind their legs, like a scarf, but now he could see that, whatever it was, it projected out behind them, held low but off the ground, and the gleaming clothing was clearly some sort of metal, held in place with leather straps so the pieces overlapped. Now almost upon them, Alex could see, they weren’t moving like any person he’d ever met before. They walked on three broad toes, and what he’d just thought of as a scarf was clearly a stiffly held tail. But the biggest surprise was their faces - not even remotely human, but instead like a blunt crocodile snout with long thin spines sprouting at the back of a milky white head and neck. Unlike a crocodile, though, these creatures had lips, which twitched and curled to reveal sharp yellow teeth. Oddly, Alex felt less afraid the closer they got as it quickly became obvious they weren’t paying any attention to himself and Dev, but to the churned up dirt where his nan had disappeared.

The one with the spear thrust the point into the broken

ground and jabbed about, while the second began uttering a string of strange throaty sounds.

Alex chanced a look at Dev and saw his friend returning the glance, eyebrows raised and his face a mixture of fear and puzzlement.

Now the one with the spear stood straighter and grunted something in reply to its companion before dropping its upper body forward as its tail rose, and stepping over to the dusty, broken remains of the arch. Here it again jabbed its spear into what was left of the dead plant material.

‘Maybe they can’t see us,’ whispered Dev hopefully.

‘Really?’ Alex murmured in reply.

‘Well, they don’t seem that bothered,’ reasoned Dev, a little louder this time. ‘Maybe they can’t hear us either.’ At which point the lizardmen, now both in the upright posture, stared right at them.

‘Nice one,’ hissed Alex.

The one with the spear angled its body forward and moved over to the boys. It paid them so little attention that it can’t have felt threatened by them, almost turning its back on Dev as it poked the spear carelessly towards Alex. Alex very nearly protested. Between himself and the creature he still held on to his bike and it was this that seemed to hold the lizardman’s interest, its spear clanging against the frame. Both lizardmen immediately focused on the noise, with the second swiftly circling the churned earth to get a closer look. They both prodded and rubbed various parts of the bike, totally ignoring Alex who still held the grips of the handlebars. He felt as if he should be afraid but instead he was assailed by a heavy meaty smell overlaid with something that had long ago gone bad. This rotting stench, and the fact they were choosing to ignore him, was instead making him

feel quite angry, and when one of the pair went to push a blackened claw into his front tyre enough was enough.

‘Get off,’ he snapped, snatching at the handlebars and swinging the bike up and around, so he was between them and it. They reacted instantly, one raising itself up tall, and the other dropping low as it swung the shaft of the spear round and knocked Alex from his feet.

‘No!’ shouted Dev, his bike hitting the ground a split second after his friend’s as he stepped forward to intervene, his hands held up. The unarmed lizardman dropped forward, arms reaching, claws outstretched on long scaly fingers, mouth agape and growling a warning. Dev didn’t dare move a muscle.

The stand-off was broken by the arrival of more lizard people, all wearing the same assorted plates of metal and carrying weapons of a distinctive material. Looking up from his reclining posture on the floor, Alex thought it looked like bronze. He twisted his head slightly in the direction of the tree and could see more and more of these lizard people appearing upon the track from somewhere behind the tree. The noise of a harness and what was presumably a cart or vehicle sounded very close indeed.

There were now five new arrivals interested in the disturbed ground. One was more elaborately decorated in shredded scraps of material and animal hide, carrying a long wooden pole with a crosspiece from which dangled several long clanking bones. All the others appeared to defer to this one. It listened to the first two, presumably explaining the situation, while the original spear-carrier repeated the process of poking the turned-over ground, the arch, and then tapping Alex’s bike. Again the two boys were ignored as if of no importance. The one in charge looked back and forth

between the three places of interest, then lifted its staff high and drove it forcefully into the spot where Alex's nan had disappeared. The long bones clattered and rattled as they swung beneath the crosspiece while the leader circled the disturbed earth to investigate the fallen bikes, putting itself between Alex and Dev. The stink off of this one was just as ripe as the others.

It lowered itself, counterbalancing with its tail, and stroked a finger down Alex's bike's crossbar. The paint was a bright metallic green, which seemed to fascinate it. Alex didn't dare speak as it began to inspect the tyres, cocking its head and making gurgling sounds in its throat.

'It's a bike,' said Dev, speaking slowly and softly. The leader straightened slightly and looked at Dev properly for the first time. Dev, in turn, could make out rectangular pupils in its pale blue eyes. Its throat bulged and lips flexed, then a strange set of guttural sounds spilled forth. Dev could do no more than stare.

Sensing the failure of communication, the leader barked a command at one of the newcomers, sending it scurrying off back to the main group, so Alex rolled slowly on to one side to get a better view. There were dozens and dozens of bronze-clad warriors now, all halted on the track. Something or someone had stopped them, presumably while this distraction was taken care of, but none seemed interested enough in the little drama to be watching. Most of their attention was on whatever was making the creaking, squalling noise and, judging from the sound of it and the fact that many of the lizard soldiers were stepping off the track, it was very close. From amongst the shifting crowd the lizardman returned with another, taller and more slender than the others, and instead of bronze plates it wore metallic

oddments on a bronze chain, most of which were scraps of no clear purpose but Alex was surprised to see a teaspoon amongst them. Again the pantomime of prodding was repeated but this time the final grunts were accompanied by spear-pointing at Alex and Dev.

The more gracile lizard took the time to look at them properly, then stood fully upright, before saying something that, to the boy's ears, sounded decidedly Chinese. The boys exchanged a look.

It tried again, but this time the noise was different and the word was understood straight away: 'Metal?'

Its eyes were looking down to Alex at this point, and he felt himself compelled to reply.

'The bikes? Yes, they're metal,' he replied softly. Slowly he made to stand which went unchallenged. 'Er, would you like a go?'

'Seriously, mate, they're not pedalling anything with those feet,' mumbled Dev.

Alex carefully picked up his bike and gestured Dev to do the same, leaving them both stood with bikes between them and the small interested party.

'I feel like we're trying to get 'em to buy our wares,' murmured Dev, attempting to look harmless with a lop-sided smile.

The gracile lizard came closer, twisting its head this way and that as it tried to understand what it was beholding, although it made no attempt to touch the bikes. Instead it began to loop its finger in the air, drawing a circle with its curved claw. It gestured like this to each of the four wheels, then turned back towards the tree and repeated the movement in the direction of the noise. 'Wa-gon,' it said.

Nearly all the lizard warriors had moved a few steps

down the slope by now, allowing a large and powerfully muscled beast to pass on the track. It looked a little like an over-sized sandy-coloured rhino except it had two curling protrusions shaped like a Y on the end of its snout, with pairs of bulbous nodules running along its head, over its broad, high shoulders, and down its back. The jangling harness they'd heard was affixed to these lumps, bumps and horns so it could pull what now rolled into view - a massive, crude, wooden wagon. It didn't have any sides to speak of, but upon it sat an equally massive mound of orange hair. Quite what it was, and whether it was alive or dead, wasn't clear. The beast pulling this mighty weight bellowed as its handlers brought it to a halt.

'Wa-gon,' repeated the gracile lizard as it turned its attention back to the bikes.

'Well, not really,' said Dev. 'Not a wagon. It's a bike.' But the lizards all just looked on blankly. 'Here, let us show you.' Slowly the boys swung their right legs over the back wheels and planted their behinds upon the seats. 'See?'

'They're not getting it, Alex.'

'I don't think they understand what makes it go. We've got nothing *pulling* our wagon.'

The gracile lizard repeated the circular motion; 'Wa-gon.' Meanwhile the other lizards were becoming restless. The original lizardman began to clench and unclench the shaft of its spear.

'Look,' said Alex. 'Like this,' and he put his right foot on the pedal and gently pushed off with his left, swiftly followed by Dev. The small party of lizard people all took a step back in surprise, but the boys were already several metres away, allowing gravity to pull them down the incline. Some of the larger group of lizards, whose view wasn't blocked by the

wagon, began to take notice, too. Just as they reached the track an immense roar issued from their former inquisitors.

Dev didn't even trouble with a look over his shoulder. 'Leg it!'

'Bloody hellfire! What was that all about,' yelled Dev. They were barrelling down the dry dusty track amongst the huge, widely-spaced trees, dodging fallen branches and ancient ruts.

'I dunno, I dunno. What about my nan? What do we do about my nan?'

'Well, we can't go back there, not yet anyway.'

'This is all so mixed up. I don't even understand where we are,' whined Alex, letting go with one hand to wipe at his eyes. They were still travelling downhill at quite a pace, rapidly closing on a lethal-looking hole. The boys instinctively swung either side of it just as a long bronze spear embedded itself in the hole's far side.

'Saala kutta!' screeched Dev. 'They're right behind us.'

Both boys snatched glances back up the track to see three of the lizardmen bearing down on them. Apart from their slender muscled legs they were completely horizontal, finely adjusting their pursuit with their counterbalanced tails.

Alex chanced another glance in time to see one stop to retrieve his spear. 'Damn, they're fast.'

They swept around the fat roots of another tree only to reveal a large herd of what looked like deer. 'Ah, man! Get out of the way!' Dev shouted.

The deer, almost as one, turned to look at them, standing high on fabulously elongated legs. Their flanks sported golden brown spots on an otherwise creamy hide.

'We can't stop,' cried Alex as another spear came

dangerously close to striking them.

‘Then we’d better make some noise,’ yelled Dev and they both began to holler and scream. The leggy deer, understandably startled, scattered left and right, creating a path through their numbers. ‘It’s working. And I think it’s thinning out ahead.’

And in a sense it was, apart from an angry looking, thick-necked buck with spectacularly broad antlers looking to protect its females from these wailing interlopers. It stepped forward purposefully, dropping its head and flicking its antlers, but Alex and Dev were already peeling off, shooting off the right-hand side of the track and into a narrow gully. Two of the lizard warriors followed, the third failing to avoid a savage flick of antler.

Fat broad-leafed plants stretched over them like a marquee canopy making it difficult to see where they were going but they could hear the vocalising of the lizards now. As they bounced along Alex was sure that if the lizards didn’t get them then the obstacles on the forest floor would.

They broke out into the evening light again on to a rocky fern-covered ledge some twenty metres wide. It was obvious by the top of the tree beyond the ledge’s lip that it was either going to be exceptionally steep or a sheer drop, so instinct made the boys squeeze their brakes and slam their heels into the ground, skidding sideways and bumping to a halt as they panted hard. Horrified, they saw the lizards weren’t slowing, bronze spears pointing straight at them, held firm and low. Alex sucked in air to scream just as something broad and hairy crashed into the side of the warriors with a sickening crunch, cartwheeling the lizards over the edge.

For a moment all was still, just birdsong and the gruff

snorting of the beast before them. On its back sat a teenaged girl. 'There'll be more coming. You'd best come with me.'