

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE MAN OF SCIENCE

“When was the Chief first contacted by Chang?” asked Aunt Fifi as she rode by the side of Leaping Elk. The children rode behind her, while the Chief was well out in front, lost in his thoughts.

“We were in the Wild West show,” replied Leaping Elk. “He was one of the star performers and I was just in the chorus, singing and dancing. I always thought he was so handsome! He kept going off into trances, though; I think he had been regarded as a medicine man by the tribe he came from. I used to do the same, and had done since I was a girl, but my trances were not so deep as the Chief’s. I would see visions of people and events in the future. One day I went off just before a performance and when I came to again - because I would go off and be oblivious to everything around me - I found the Chief beside me, making sure I was all right. He told me about his trances too. That was how we first got together. He had always had really powerful images in his trances, and after we got together the images became even stronger and he began to be able to talk to people on the Other Side, one of them being Chang, who spoke to me as well, through the Chief, and told me to look after him because things were going to get really difficult. He was right, too. When the show folded, we wound up back on a reservation, with things very bad indeed for the people of the tribes. There were no buffalo left, no land to roam over, not enough food, diseases killed the children and the schools forbade the survivors to even speak our language.”

“You couldn’t even speak your own language?” said an astonished Sarah.

“That’s right,” nodded Leaping Elk. “Then the traders sold us cheap firewater which killed many of us. I never touched it but the Chief did and it nearly killed him. He became very ill and I thought he was going to die, so I called on Master Chang one day as the Chief lay on his bed. I was convinced he was dying and I was at the end of my tether. Master Chang spoke through the Chief, even though he was unconscious, and told me to concentrate on his voice, hold the Chief’s hand and think of the great prairie and of the herds of buffalo that once roamed over it. I did and when I opened my eyes, we were here. The Chief was nursed back to health by Master Chang and me - he still went on binges occasionally, as you know.”

“I certainly do. Where did he get the stuff from?” asked Aunt Fifi.

“We can bring things through from your world - horses, coffee, a few bits and pieces,” answered Leaping Elk. “Nobody misses it - a lot gets lost or destroyed in accidents. If we are ever short of food we can always get hold of something - although it’s very rare that we run short of anything.”

The Chief had dropped back a bit now and indicated the trees that now lay ahead of them, extending from the slopes at the foot of the mountains right up the sides.

“Scientist live here!” he said. “We very close now. We leave horses here and walk. It not far in the trees.”

They dismounted and left the horse contentedly grazing on the prairie grass, near a stream which ran from the trees onto the plain for them to drink from. The Chief led them into the trees.

“Scientist live here in clearing,” he said. “Perhaps him able to help. Me not know where else to turn - no-one else here any good!”

“That’s true!” agreed Aunt Fifi. “I can’t see Napoleon’s second cousin, Henry VIII’s hatter or Attila the Hun’s younger brother being much use. I’ve met all of them.”

“I don’t think Alphonse Hadrian would be much use either,” put in Joe.

“Which leaves us with Mr. Jordan,” sighed Leaping Elk. “I hope he can remember who he is, where he lives and hasn’t blown himself up again!”

“Doesn’t inspire a lot of confidence, all this!” said Aunt Fifi.

“Like me say before, him all we got!” said the Chief.

They walked into the trees, tall redwoods that rose to a huge height, and Joe and Sarah found it cooler, shady and peaceful under the trees - they could hear birds and the faint rustle here and there of small animals running about. Then they came to a grassy knoll in the midst of the trees on which was a strange building. It was a long, white single-storied construction, with a flat roof, big windows, some of them curved, and it bulged outward here and there, or as if there were bits built on as an afterthought. A big pair of steel doors were set into one of the extensions, and another, smaller, wooden door was in the side of another bit nearby. It was up to this smaller door that the Chief lead them. He banged on it with his fist.

“Ow!” he said. “That hurt!”

They waited. There seemed to be no response from inside - and then, just as the Chief was about to bang on the door again, there was an explosion from inside and a window shattered as a piece of metal flew through it inches away from them and embedded itself in the grass.

“He’s on form today!” observed Leaping Elk.

The door opened and a smoke-blackened figure emerged, clutching a smoking plate. His singed hair was frizzed out as if he had had a fright and he wore a rather ragged white coat. He also had round glasses that were now covered with a thin film of black smoke so that they looked like sunglasses. He removed them to see who his visitors were. He had blue rather vacant eyes, with a look about them of perpetual amazement.

“Oh hello!” he said, recognising the Chief. He spoke in a high pitched Scottish accent. “Please come in, you’re just in time for dinner!” he continued, indicating the plate.

“We thought it experiment gone wrong!” exclaimed the Chief, inspecting the charred remains dubiously.

“No, it’s my dinner, or it was,” said the man. “I turned the gas on but forgot to light it, then I remembered and lit it and blew up the oven. I think I’ll have to find something else. And something else to cook it on.”

Leaping Elk looked up at the sky in exasperation. “We’ve got some dinner left,” she said. “I’ll go and get it.”

“Oh thank you,” replied the man with a smile. “Please come in, all of you!”

While Leaping Elk went back to the horses to unload some food, the rest of them went inside the house, which turned out to be as strange on the inside as on the outside. The walls were white on the inside as well, except for the odd patch where it looked as though something had blown up or been on fire. The rooms they walked through as they followed the scientist were full of the strangest machinery. The innards of computers were mixed with bicycles, sewing machines and ancient valve radio sets. In one room a huge bank of washing machines took up one entire wall, all with TV screens instead of glass doors.

“It was an idea I had to make washing more interesting,” said the man, noticing the children staring at the odd sight. All the TV screens were showing a film of washing going round and round. Aunt Fifi looked amazed.

Finally they emerged into a very large room where there was a round dining table and chairs, lit by great glass doors that opened onto an expanse of grass now bright with sunshine. However it was the object that took up fully half the room that took Joe’s breath away and made both Aunt Fifi and Sarah gasp in surprise. It was a spaceship! At least, that’s what Joe assumed it to be.

It was white, about thirty feet long, with a pointed nose, most of the front end of transparent material, with big fins both amidships and at the back; it had a streamlined look that made it appear as if it was straight out of some very old fashioned science fiction comic that Joe had seen once. It certainly looked nothing like the sort of spaceships Joe had seen on the TV and in films, all angular, with bits pointing out here and there, huge atomic engines and lots of hi-tech gadgets. It actually looked like a spaceship ride Joe had once seen in a funfair.

“It finished then?” said the Chief, indicating the ship.

“The Mark Three? Oh yes!” came the reply. “And it hasn’t exploded this time. Not yet, anyway. I’m looking forward to trying it out. Perhaps you’d all like to come along for a ride?” the scientist continued, beaming at them.

“Er, I’m not sure,” replied Aunt Fifi. “What is it exactly?”

“It’s my spaceship!” the singed man said. “I built it from some bits I found in a fun fair. I’ve just installed the engine. It’s my latest invention - the Tidpiddle Drive.”

They looked nonplussed and uncertain quite how to take this.

“The what drive?” asked Joe.

“The Tidpiddle Drive,” repeated the scientist proudly. “The Trans Interstellar Dual Purpose Inter-Dimensional Duplicate Living Environment Drive.”

“Two of words you use ring bells,” said the Chief. “Old Chang mention ‘trans’ and ‘dimensional’. He once say we able to move between dimensions, whatever they are.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying for years!” said the scientist excitedly. “That was my field of study. They said I was mad! Me! Just because I kept going off into trances and blowing up laboratories. Always trying to perfect my Tidpiddle Drive. And they called me mad!”

“Just fancy!” murmured Aunt Fifi. “How silly of them.”

Sarah looked at her Aunt and so did Joe. Aunt Fifi looked back at them and raised her eyebrows.

They spotted Leaping Elk crossing the grass outside, with a pack on her back. The scientist opened one of the sliding glass doors and let her in. She arranged some food on a table while the scientist went to get washed and changed.

“If this is our best hope of finding out what is going on, then I’m dead worried!” admitted Aunt Fifi. “And I’m not going for a ride in that thing either!” she continued, pointing to the space-ship. “It’ll probably go off bang!”

“It do that often!” nodded the Chief. “But him perhaps got answer; we must try.”

The scientist came back, with another white coat, clean but as Joe noticed, carefully patched from previous accidents.

“I better introduce myself,” he said. “I’m Frank Jordan, former researcher on the Whittington project.”

“I remember that,” said Joe. “Wasn’t there a terrible accident? Something about a laboratory being completely destroyed - just wiped off the face of the earth? Only one man was reported missing though - I think my dad said no sign of him was found.”

“That’s me,” nodded Frank Jordan. “I pressed the wrong button. I meant to turn the coffee machine on.”

The others looked even more dubious now. The Chief introduced them all to Mr. Jordan and they sat down to eat.

“It’s only leftovers, I’m afraid,” said Leaping Elk. “We’ve eaten once. I always bring a bit more than is needed.”

She certainly had - there was enough for a good dinner for all of them, rounded off with more of her excellent biscuits.

Over dinner, the Chief explained why they were there.

“So,” said Mr. Jordan after they had told him everything. “No America, the great fence of China seems a bit unlikely and either Shakespeare or Columbus are present at the wrong time. And then here are the strange things in the sky. Well, I can account for some of them. I’ve been working on a theory for years - that there are hundreds - possibly thousands - of parallel worlds, all earths, all in a slightly different dimension to our own. They are all very similar but there are slight differences on most of them - on some of them perhaps much greater differences. I think that people like me, the Chief here, Leaping Elk, you, Madam, and possibly the children here, can see into those other dimensions, sometimes talk to people in them who have the same ability, and can even sometimes travel between them - it all depends on how much psychic power we have.”

“That makes some sense,” nodded Aunt Fifi.

“It does?” thought Joe - but he didn’t like to say anything. He looked at Sarah and she looked back at him and shrugged her shoulders. She looked as nonplussed as he felt.

“So, me seeing into other dimen-things!” mused the Chief. “Me always able to see things from when me young. Also, often seem that things me see are bit crooked.”

“That’s the fire water,” said Leaping Elk.

“No! When me not drink firewater me see strange things,” insisted the Chief. “It as if several pictures there all at once, but some a bit different to others. Send eyes funny.”

“Perhaps that’s because you’re seeing into several dimensions at the same time,” suggested Sarah, and Joe was very impressed.

“That’s a very good point,” agreed Aunt Fifi.

“It is?” said Sarah, surprised. “I don’t know what it means.”

“It perhaps explain daft Roman’s buildings,” said the Chief. “They always crooked - now he have excuse!”

The scientist continued, “I think that some people can also open a way into another dimension for others - rather like opening a door to let someone through. I don’t know how this energy they have works,” he admitted. “I’ve been trying to make a machine that can tap into it. One thing I have found is that even if there are hundreds of other worlds like our own in other dimensions, and even if we have a lot of psychic ability, we can still only look into a small number of them, or travel between a few.”

“So, I’ve been talking to people in this world,” said Aunt Fifi. “What a world to pick!”

“That’s right,” nodded the scientist, missing the point that Aunt Fifi was making. “And now you’ve been able to develop your skill so you can come through into this one. You may well be able to go through into others as well. Some of us have that ability to open the door into other worlds for other people to pass through - so the Chief can get Joe and Sarah through to another world - by mistake, by the looks of things, which is how they wound up with Leif and the Nemesis in a world where there is no America. Your Shaman probably wants you to open up a door so he can get into your world for some reason. He can’t get through himself. I can’t get into any of the others and that’s why I’ve built my spaceship and given it the Tidpiddle Drive - then I can go through to other dimensions and explore new worlds. I’d show you how it works but I haven’t got any fuel left. It runs on alcohol.”

Before Leaping Elk could stop him, the Chief said, “That no problem, we got plenty barrels of firewater. Ow!” and he jumped as Leaping Elk kicked him under the table.

“Excellent!” smiled Mr. Jordan. “Then we can fuel up the drive and go exploring. Can you get the barrels here?”

Again, before he could be stopped the Chief nodded and moved out of range of Leaping Elk. He stood silent with his eyes closed and a huge heap of barrels materialised on the lawn outside. Frank Jordan beamed, Leaping Elk looked daggers at the Chief, who shrugged, and Aunt Fifi and the children watched as the scientist opened a sliding door and went out with the Chief to get one of the heavy barrels.

“Clot!” hissed Leaping Elk. “What did he want to do that for? The idiot scientist there has already blown himself up twice before to my knowledge. The last time was when he built another ship like this in a tin hut outside. I don’t know what he did, but the bang was huge and he put the tin hut into orbit - as for the ship, we never found a trace of it - it must have been scattered over fifty square miles in fragments so tiny no one could find them! We found him in a tree, all his hair burnt off, clothes in rags, wondering how he got there! I really don’t want to be in range if he does it again!”

“Supposing it works?” asked Joe. “It might be quite exciting to go exploring new worlds.”

“And supposing it doesn’t!” put in Sarah. “Would you really trust yourself in space with that thing? It’s out of a fairground!”

“I’m with Sarah,” nodded Aunt Fifi. “I think the whole thing is potty. Mind you, his idea about the other dimensions and lots of worlds makes some sense - it might explain a few things.”

Grunting, Frank Jordan and Thunder Head manhandled a barrel through the doors and made for the ship. Joe followed - interested to see what the inside looked like. Sarah and Aunt Fifi sighed and followed him and Leaping Elk brought up the rear, shaking her head.

A hatch opened as Frank Jordan hit a button with his elbow, swinging down and acting as a flight of steps up into the strange craft. Inside was a cabin lit by the transparent walls of the nose of the ship. Several seats were bolted to the floor, and on a control panel there were switches and levers that looked as if they had come of various washing machines, old cars and radios. Wires ran from them to a compartment at the back of the ship. Frank Jordan opened a door into this compartment and revealed his pride and joy - the engine of the ship. This consisted of a contraption made of Meccano, bicycle bits, old radio valves, a string of Christmas lights and a big steel ball with a candle under it and copper tubes leading from it to the back of the ship. Wires snaked away from the machine to the controls in the front of the ship. The gleaming steel ball seemed to be the heart of the drive and from it a rubber tube lead to a copper tank at one side of the drive. This tank was now filled from the barrel of whisky, the Chief assisting the Scientist but looking at the liquid as it disappeared into the tank with a rather mournful expression. The scientist then placed a lid on the tank and stood back with a satisfied smile on his face.

"That's it!" he said. "All we do now is light the wick and wait for the reaction to start! Soon the drive will be ready to work!"

"Light the wick!" said Joe in disbelief.

"Oh yes, it's very simple really," nodded Mr. Jordan. "Just light the wick, sit back and off it goes!"

Joe looked at Sarah who had the same stunned expression that he thought his face had. They both looked at Aunt Fifi and Leaping Elk who shook their heads.

"Don't look at me," said Aunt Fifi. "Science was never my strong point."

"Nor mine," agreed Leaping Elk. "Problem is, I don't think it was our friend's strong point either!"

"Hope this firewater not wasted!" said the Chief.

Frank Jordan looked rather pained. "I assure you it works," he said plaintively. "You all sound just like the people I showed the idea to at the laboratory. Just before it was destroyed. I told them not to use too big a candle. But you're not convinced are you? Look, just leave it warming up overnight and it will be ready to use tomorrow, then you'll see!"

They trooped out of the ship and sat round the table again.

"What about shapes in sky?" asked the Chief. "Any wise ideas?"

Leaping Elk snorted under her breath.

"Well," mused Mr. Jordan, "Perhaps if you try and draw them. Here, I've got some paper and pencils. It's only tracing paper, I'm afraid. The other paper all went up in smoke with yesterday's dinner."

The children each tried to draw the shapes they had seen from memory, looking over at each other's work.

"No," said Sarah, shaking her head as she looked at Joe's effort. "It wasn't like that. It had a bit here."

"No, it didn't!" insisted Joe. "It went like this. I know it did!"

"I tell you it had a bit here!" Sarah snapped.

They were getting tetchy; Leaping Elk held up her hand.

"Children, children!" she said. "Just draw it as you remember it."

“Well, I know it didn’t go like that!” said Joe emphatically as he looked at Sarah’s and he threw his piece of paper down. Sarah tossed hers on the table as well so it fell on top of Joe's drawing.

“It’s better than yours,” she said, and they sat there fuming.

The scientist looked down at the pieces of paper which had fallen on top of each other - and as they were drawn on tracing paper, both images could be seen at once. His eyebrows rose.

“You know, when you put them on top of each other like that, it looks like a three dimensional representation of a multi-dimensional map or perhaps a transdimensional object inhabiting multiple space and time locations at a singular stationary vector point.” said the scientist, and sounded as if he understood what he had said.

“Him talking hobble gobble!” said the Chief.

“Possibly,” agreed Leaping Elk, “but it doesn’t look like anything else.”

“Unless it’s a piece of knotted knitting,” added Aunt Fifi. “Is it something the Shaman’s done? If so, why?”

“Ah, now there you’ve got me,” said the scientist, and he went off to make a cup of tea.

“Is he safe doing that on his own or will he blow himself up again?” asked Aunt Fifi.

“Just duck under table if you hear hissing!” said the Chief.

“Look, is this idea of his about the other worlds really right?” asked Leaping Elk. “Does it begin to explain anything?”

“It sound much like Master Chang say,” answered the Chief. “Me not understand fully but it explain quite a lot.”

“That’s right,” agreed Aunt Fifi. “It’s not a bad theory really.”

“And I suppose it explains why the Shaman tried to get to you once, when you were trying to help Mrs. Whatsit-thingummy when she wanted her Pekinese back.” said Sarah.

“And why he wants us to help him,” added Joe. “He wants us to open a way for him to get to our world for some reason. He thinks we can do that for him. He could have asked Alphonse Hadrian, though.”

“Would you?” asked Leaping Elk. Joe agreed that she had a point - the hopeless Hadrian probably wasn’t going to be of much use to the Shaman.

“I wonder what he wants to do?” mused Aunt Fifi.

It was getting dark now and the Chief said he wanted to go out and check on the horses.

“It time to sleep,” he said. “Perhaps it all make sense in morning. We stay night here.”

Frank Jordan returned at that moment with tea things on a tray. He hadn’t blown himself up. “That’s a good idea,” he said. “Although I haven’t any spare beds, I’m afraid. In fact I can’t remember where the one I use is, at the moment.”

“We’ll sleep under the stars,” said Leaping Elk. “It’s a fine night and quite warm.”

“Er, I don’t think I’m designed for sleeping outside!” said Aunt Fifi. “Not on the ground, anyway. I need a nice soft bed!”

“You could use a hammock, Auntie,” suggested Sarah. “If we can find one, you could sling it between two trees. They’re very comfortable, really.”

“I also need little amenities - like a loo and a shower!” said a rather desperate Aunt Fifi, not very taken with the prospect of camping.

“Me arrange!” announced the Chief and he closed his eyes. On the lawn, at the edge of the trees, appeared a portaloo and a shower cubicle, like the ones you sometimes find at camp sites or outdoor events.

“Where did you get that from?” asked Sarah in astonishment.

“By side of main road in your world. Some big event taking place tomorrow. They not miss one for short time. Me hope nobody in it at time. They still there - without loo or shower round them!” said the Chief.

“By a main road? That could stop the traffic,” giggled Aunt Fifi. “Someone taking a shower and suddenly out in the open! Come on, let’s check and see!”

They went out into the now darkening evening. There was no indication that anyone had been using either the shower or the loo, both of which were spotless and obviously ready for use the next day. Aunt Fifi was still not entirely happy about sleeping under the stars and was worried about insects, but the Chief not only whistled up three hammocks for them, but also some mosquito nets and he and the children arranged the hammocks and nets in the trees. Joe and Sarah were quite looking forward to the adventure of sleeping under the stars and Aunt Fifi decided she might as well give it a whirl for the sake of the children.

“Still, I’d prefer a night-dress,” she said and blinked - a rather splendid purple silk night-dress suddenly appeared hanging on a bough of a tree nearby, along with a matching dressing gown.

“My compliments!” said the Chief. “You like one?” he asked Leaping Elk, who grinned. “I’ll make do with a blanket,” she said.

Aunt Fifi changed in the shower cubicle and the children helped her into a hammock. She was pleasantly surprised how comfortable it was. Joe and Sarah climbed expertly into theirs and the Chief and Leaping Elk bedded down in a pile of blankets and rugs provided by the Chief. Before settling down, the Chief and his wife began a song, Thunder Head’s fine baritone voice harmonising with Leaping Elk’s clear, high soprano as they sang a gentle lullaby in their language. Soon Aunt Fifi and the children were fast asleep and shortly after that, so were the Chief and Leaping Elk. Quiet settled over the scene and the moon rose.

Everyone slept very well - too well in fact. No-one heard the figures moving quietly through the trees in the early morning light, or noticed the wisps of red smoke that drifted through the branches. A breaking twig alerted Joe and he opened an eye sleepily - and then both eyes wide as he yelled as loud as he could! He saw strange metallic figures advancing on Aunt Fifi and Sarah, about six feet tall, gleaming in the dawn light, walking in a very odd way on two silvery spindly legs that supported bronze bodies with stubby articulated tails, deep chests and thin waists and with two arms dangling from the top of the torso, as spindly as the legs. The heads of the figures were an odd shape - like a metal caricature of a lizard’s head, complete with long nose, bulbous eyes each side and domed heads. Joe’s yell woke everyone up - but too late to stop the figures grabbing Aunt Fifi and Sarah before they could escape. They were bundled up in their hammocks and carted off like rolled-up carpets, each carried by two of the metal intruders. Two of them headed for Joe, but he leapt out of his hammock just in time and hared off through the trees, the two metal figures trudging in pursuit. Thunder Head emerged from the blankets on the ground and saw what was happening. He slung his tomahawk at one of the figures; it clanged off the creature’s head and it paid not the slightest attention. Then the Chief grabbed a branch and swung at the two figures. The branch shattered over one of them and

then it turned and began to advance on the Chief. Leaping Elk, who had wrapped herself in a blanket, threw herself under the feet of the figure, which fell over and lay there, immobile. A whistle sounded from somewhere towards the house and the second figure stopped, turned, grabbed its fallen companion and picking it up, walked back to the house, where a mass of red smoke was forming. Joe emerged from some bushes to join the Chief and Leaping Elk, who were scrambling after the retreating figures.

“It’s the Shaman!” gasped Joe. “It must be!”

“But what are metal men! Where are they from!” said the Chief.

“Never mind that, we must rescue Sarah and Madame Fifi,” shouted Leaping Elk as she ran, wrapped in her blanket, after the figures who were now lost in smoke. But the cloud cleared, and there was no sign of anyone. Frank Jordan emerged from the house, wearing some startling pyjamas of bright red with huge yellow sunflowers on them. He didn’t have his glasses on and stared round short-sightedly.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “Have you got my spaceship?”

“Spaceship!” shouted Joe. “They’ve got that as well?”

“As well as what?” asked Mr. Jordan.

“Madame Fifi and Sarah gone! Kidnapped by some metal men who attack us!” said the Chief.

“Metal men! Do you mean robots?” exclaimed the scientist. “Where did they come from?”

“Good question!” replied Leaping Elk. “And I have another one. Where have they gone!”
Where indeed?