

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE RETURN OF AN OLD FIEND

They stood aghast, looking at each other. They had lost Aunt Fifi and Sarah along with the spaceship. What on earth were they to do now?

“Isn’t there any way that you can find out where they have gone?” asked Joe, desperately.

“Um, may be one way!” announced the Chief. “Mystic Lake of Spotted Creek may give us answer!”

“That thing,” scoffed Leaping Elk. “A muddy puddle where you can’t even see the bottom - and anyway, it’s miles from here!”

“Not so!” admonished the Chief. “Mystic Lake has great powers - and me always carry a bottle of it in case of emergencies!” He returned to the pile of blankets that formed the bed for himself and Leaping Elk and emerged with the deerskin pouch he always carried at his waist, hung from his belt. He opened it and took out a small, corked, bottle.

“Me pour this into bowl and then we see if Mystic Lake gives answer,” he said.

Leaping Elk continued to look extremely doubtful but went along with the idea - after all, what alternatives were there? Still draped in her blanket she followed the Chief and the others into the house and they sat round the table. Mr Jordan produced a shallow glass bowl, poured the nuts and bolts that were inside it out onto the floor and carefully wiped it out with his handkerchief; he passed it to Thunder Head who poured the contents of the bottle into it. Joe watched as a lot of muddy water came out - looking, it must be said, less than impressive. The Chief now breathed in deeply, passed his hands over the bowl and stared at the surface, then he gently blew over it, making little ripples on the surface. Leaping Elk pursed her lips and Mr. Jordan blinked behind his glasses. Then, as Joe stared at the rippling, brown surface, he saw it begin to swirl, as if some current was moving it around. It swirled faster and faster and from the middle, and gradually filling the surface, a picture grew. It showed the ship that Mr. Jordan had built, flying through space - but it was not the star-studded blackness that Joe expected to see, but a vast vacuum shot through with great shafts of coloured light, through which planets and suns spun crazily, hurtling past the ship as they whirled around each other in a mad dance.

“There’s my ship!” exclaimed Mr. Jordan, excitedly, “and it’s crossing between dimensions - you can tell by the colours. It’s working beautifully - it hasn’t blown up yet, like the last one!”

“Can we see inside it?” asked Leaping Elk.

“Me try,” responded the Chief and he passed his hands again over the bowl. The picture dissolved and was replaced by another, showing the interior of the ship, and everyone around the bowl drew in their breath at what they saw. There was the Shaman, minus his mask, but wearing a strange glowing band around his head, like a silver ring set with coloured stones that glowed and twinkled in different colours.

“Hmm. Why he look like Christmas tree?” muttered the Chief.

Then the picture grew and gave them a fuller view of the ship - and they saw Aunt Fifi and Sarah! They were sat in two of the chairs with one of the odd looking robots on either side of them. Other robots were standing about, immobile, eyes blank, as if temporarily switched off - but the ones stationed each side of the chairs had glowing eyes that throbbed with light, indicating that they were most certainly switched on! Joe could see that the Shaman was talking and that Aunt Fifi was frowning as she listened to him. Sarah looked frightened.

“I wish we could hear what he was saying,” said Leaping Elk.

“Me and Madame Fifi able to communicate very well,” mused the Chief thoughtfully. “Perhaps me able to make contact.”

He closed his eyes and then opened his mouth. To Joe’s huge surprise, Aunt Fifi’s voice came out of it!

“You’re potty!” she was saying. “Kidnapping us and stealing this junk-heap! It’ll probably blow up any minute! Do you have any idea how to control it? If it can be controlled, that is.”

“Humph!” snorted Frank Jordan. “Of course it can be controlled. And it won’t blow up any minute. It shouldn’t blow up for a good couple of hours!”

Leaping Elk hushed him and they heard the voice of the Shaman come out of the Chief’s mouth.

“On the contrary,” he said, in his thin, reedy tones, “I am very sane, my dear lady. I have been working on this plan for some time. The ship is safe enough for now. That idiot scientist has corrected most of its faults. And yes, I can control it - because I have an instruction book! Look!”

He held aloft a rather tatty, singed leaflet.

“That’s the Mark Two instruction book!” gasped Mr. Jordan. “How did he get hold of it?”

“How did I get hold of it?” said the Shaman as if he had heard the question. “It fell out of the sky! Along with the wreckage of a strange ship - very like this one. You know those strange events in the sky that we have all been seeing? Great rents on the fabric of space where all creation seems to be in chaos?” Aunt Fifi and Sarah nodded. “Well, I had been wondering what was causing them.”

“I thought it was you,” put in Aunt Fifi.

“I take it as a compliment that you think I am powerful enough to tear open space and time,” replied the Shaman. “But no, I can claim no credit for that.” (“He sounds disappointed,” muttered Leaping Elk). “However, I do hope to have that power soon. But that is another story. First I will tell you how I learned of this ship. I managed to get away when you set that sea-serpent on fire and it dived with me beneath the waves. I was able to escape into another part of the Other Side, but only just. I found myself half-dead in a place I had never seen before, desolate and cold, on a ravaged world where life clung on to the rocky surface, but only just. There were a few scraggy trees and some scrubby grass, and in the distance I saw an ice-covered ocean. Not a hospitable place at all, and I was too weak to leave it, and nearly dying of cold and exhaustion as it was. I sought shelter and dragged

myself to a cave and made a fire at its entrance. I sat back to recover and looked out over that blighted world, when suddenly the sky opened up and the planets and suns of far distant regions whirled closer and closer - never had I seen them so near and I confess I was terrified. Never had the yawning pit of eternity come so close to me. Then out of the spinning void came a heap of junk, a pile of fragmented wreckage that landed in a heap near the front of the cave and nearly brained me. And fluttering down after it came this little book. In the next few hours as I stayed by my fire and rested, regaining my strength, I read this book. I found out about that idiot scientist and his dream of making a machine that would do what we can do but do it better and cross from one world to another, not in the little steps that we can manage, Madame, but in great leaps to untold numbers of parallel worlds! And then I realised what had been causing these rents in space and time - that clot of a scientist had opened them up every time he had tried to turn his machine on!"

"Oh dear!" muttered Frank Jordan. "I didn't realise that! I thought I was just blowing myself up."

"So you decided to steal it," said Aunt Fifi. "But why? What's the point? I thought you were trying to get into our world although I can't see why. And then you were trying to get Sarah and Joe to help you. Just what are you up to?"

"All in good time," purred the Shaman. He was enjoying himself and wanted to make the best of his story of his own cleverness and diabolical cunning. "Oh yes, I wanted to get into your world. It was one of those that I could not manage to enter on my own. There was information there that I wanted but most of all I wanted you. Or these children, or even all of you! It's a good job that I failed to capture you, for all our sakes, as it turns out. I wanted you to assist me in getting to a certain place that I knew existed but which I could not manage to get to on my own. It exists in one of the most distant places on the Other Side, an Earth, true, but a very different one to the usual type. I knew I needed to get there, and I thought I knew what I was looking for, but I didn't know what it was like."

"I don't see how on earth we could have helped you," said a thoroughly confused Aunt Fifi. "I didn't even know I was contacting some alternative worlds! And I've only recently been able to travel on the Other Side and then only to a very limited number of places and only with the Chief's help."

"The Chief!" spat the Shaman. "That feather-headed savage! He doesn't have a clue what powers he has! If I only had his psychic power, what wonders could I perform! I could have woken the Great Beast long before this - but you! Oh, my dear lady, you underestimate yourself! And these children too," he hissed, turning to Sarah, who shrank away, "they also do not realise what they are capable of!"

"What are we capable of?" asked Sarah in a timid voice. Frightened as she was, she was still anxious to know if it was she or Joe who had these strange powers.

"You are unusual," the Shaman continued, "When you are apart from each other, you have very little psychic power, but together, and certainly when you are with your Aunt here, you have the most unusual and indeed amazing abilities. That is one reason why I kidnapped you - only I missed the boy. On his own he is almost useless, though, and that great clump of an Indian is too stupid to be able to follow me alone. Anyway he will be drunk for weeks on all that whisky I sent him. But with you two here I know that no-one can follow me where I am going. I wanted you to open doors for me before but now I don't need you at all because I have the ship. It is perfect! That idiot scientist could

perhaps build another ship but it would take him months and several explosions. My plan is irresistible! There is nothing to stop me now!”

He was preening himself unbearably.

“Possibly,” sighed Aunt Fifi, “But at the risk of confusing myself to death, would you please explain just what it is you are trying to do?”

“And why it is a good job that you didn’t get us to open the door to where you want to go,” put in Sarah, inquisitive despite her fear. “You said that it was a good job for all our sakes that you weren’t able to get hold of us to do that for you.”

“That’s right, my dear. But to explain that, I must also explain how I found these little friends of mine,” the Shaman replied, indicating the robots. “Don’t you want know where they come from and why it is that they obey my commands?”

“I can’t wait,” murmured Aunt Fifi, without any conviction.

“Oh, but Madame Fifi, they are so much more reliable and useful than the brutish and ignorant tribesmen I relied on before. I wish I could say it was my cleverness and my exhaustive studies of ancient wisdom that lead me to them but it would not be true. It was luck pure and simple.” He sounded disappointed again but then smiled and preened himself again like some big, ragged bird. “But it was my cleverness and exhaustive studies that told me of the place where I would learn one of the great secrets of creation! A secret whose echoes exist on every earth that has ever been or will be - and gave rise to legends and stories amongst peoples across all the Earths. It is a legend of a creature beyond time and space, a creature born in the fires of the first creation that can destroy whole worlds. That is what I seek - and where we are going will give me the last bit of knowledge that I need to awake that mighty force!”

“Sounds nasty; suppose you wake it and can’t get it back to sleep!” observed Aunt Fifi. “I assume you are intending to use it to get you something - but what if you can’t control it?”

The Shaman smiled his thin-lipped mirthless smile again. “Oh, I want it to get me something, all right” he said. “When I threaten destruction to a thousand worlds and show what this great beast can do then I will be given power and wealth beyond imagination! I will truly be master of life and death!”

“Nice to have ambition,” said Aunt Fifi. “But at the risk of becoming boring, I repeat, it could all go very wrong if you can’t control it.”

“Oh, don’t fret about that, dear lady! I doubt that you will be around to see it,” hissed the Shaman, menacingly, “After all, I must have some examples to show people what happens to those I dislike. And to answer the young lady, well, if I had been able to force you to open the door for me to the world we are going to, then we would have arrived in a place even more desolate and blasted than the one I was stranded on when the wreckage of that ship crashed. So damaged in fact that even its air has been burnt off in a titanic struggle millions of years ago. It was, as I say, pure chance that lead me to discover that.”

“What’s that peculiar thing around your head?” asked Aunt Fifi. “Has that got something to do with these metallic freaks?”

“How very astute of you,” purred the Shaman. “Yes, it does indeed allow me to control my little friends here. It was the glint of silver and the dim pulse of a tiny red light in the cave that lead me to discover it. I sat by my fire in that cave and read the instructions for the ship and realised that I had a

way to reach the world I wanted to go to - if only the idiot scientist could perfect the engine. I sat back and looked into the interior of the cave for a flat place to sleep before I attempted to return - and then I saw a little glint of silver as my fire reflected off something in the floor. I might have just assumed it was some quartz in a rock but then I saw a faint pulsing light and I investigated further. The thing I found was almost completely buried, but when I pulled it out, and cleaned it a little, and saw the lights come on more strongly as I touched the inside, I wondered what would happen if I put it on - and when I did, my mind was filled with images. I couldn't make sense of them at first, and as I tried I looked up - and saw these figures in front of me, covered in grime. They too had been buried in the floor of the cave for thousands of years, perhaps much longer; my putting the band on had woken them from their age-long slumber. I found I could control them, and gradually I began to make sense of the images in my mind."

He turned to look out from the windows of the ship at the whirling anarchy that filled space. Joe noticed that the mad dance was slowing, the colours fading, and gradually the images outside began to resolve themselves into the jet black of space shot with the hard diamond points of stars.

"We are arriving," said the Shaman, in a businesslike voice. "Now you will see what no living being has set eyes on for millennia, where once all creation itself almost met destruction and where the key to the agent of that destruction still lies! See! There!" he pointed a bony finger at some dark mass that began to fill the windows. "All that remains of a once mighty world!"

Aunt Fifi and Sarah turned in their chairs and the image in the centre of the bowl that Joe and the others were watching shifted to show them the view outside the ship, and what they saw made them gasp in disbelief. A bare gutted cinder of a world spun slowly in the black sky, sunlight glinting off the shattered remains, showing where great chunks had been torn from the surface. No oceans existed, mountains had been levelled and there were vast plains where rocks had melted and run like wax. To Joe it looked like some representation of an alien planet he had seen in films or in books, some far-distant world ruined in a vast stellar catastrophe. Then as the ship passed over the surface on its orbit and night fell, the moon rose above the wrecked surface and they drew their breath in again; it was the spitting image of the old, friendly, moon that rose above the Earth that they had come from! The silvery, mottled surface so familiar to anyone who has looked up on the night of a full moon in late summer filled the heavens. But here it was rising over a grim, blackened husk of a world, with no oceans left to reflect its gleaming rays, no snows to flood with its white light and no life left anywhere to look up to it.

The voice of the Shaman broke in on their thoughts - his voice only a whisper, as if even he was awed by the terrible sight. "There is nothing there now. Everything is dead. It is to the moon we go - the key lies there." He touched a lever on the makeshift control console and moved another to one side and the ship headed for the moon, which grew in size rapidly as they swept towards it at incredible speed.

"He'll crash into it!" gasped Joe.

But the Shaman didn't crash into it. He operated the controls expertly and brought the ship to a stop above the surface; now they could see the ancient, cratered surface clearly and the Shaman eagerly looked out the windows, intently searching for something. He moved the controls and the ship slowly flew over the inside of a huge crater and then rose over the tall, jagged rim - and on the other side appeared a sight that made the Shaman shout in triumph and which amazed all those who

were watching, both on the Shaman's ship and on the Nemesis. It was a huge pyramid of dull grey metal that reared up out of another crater, the sides sheer and seemingly without a join. The ship circled the pyramid and at its base, on one side, they noticed a flat black platform. Gently the Shaman set the ship down on it. Only now did they see just how huge the pyramid was, dwarfing the ship with its looming bulk. As they sat on the black surface a great section of the pyramid in front of them seemed to swing upwards and extended, forming a roof over the whole platform, along which lights flickered on. More lights came on within the roof and up the sides of the structure. A great black cave was revealed by the section that had swung up and over them, and now more lights began to appear within it and in the gloom they saw the dim shapes of figures moving about. Sarah and Aunt Fifi were rather apprehensive, wondering just what was about to come out of the huge, dim space. Walking towards them, in their peculiar way, came hundreds of robots, just like the ones on the ship. They formed two long lines that ran from the ship to the distant inside of the pyramid which now began to blaze with light, and gave them some idea of the enormous size of the interior. It was as if the robots were forming a guard of honour.

"Time for us to go!" said the Shaman. "Come, you will have the honour of accompanying me in taking possession of my new kingdom, a place where no living being has trodden since the dinosaurs roamed upon your earth!"

He imperiously raised his hand and the robots on each side of Aunt Fifi and Sarah lifted them gently out of their chairs. The eyes of the other robots began to glow and they moved, to gather round the Shaman as he pressed a button. The hatch of the ship swung down and the Shaman swept out, head erect, walking slowly down the long double line of robots. As he passed, each one in turn removed its head in salute and held it under its arm.

"Taking politeness a bit far if you ask me," murmured Aunt Fifi as she and Sarah, surrounded by robots, followed the Shaman down the ramp and between the lines of headless figures.

"I had a nasty feeling that they might expect us to do the same thing," said Sarah. "Auntie, how are we going to get out of this?"

Her Aunt sighed and replied, "Darling, I'm thinking as hard as I can but I've drawn a complete blank. If you've got any suggestions, I'll listen."

"I wish Joe was here, and the Chief too - and Leaping Elk. I'm sure they would think of something," replied Sarah in a small voice. Her Aunt put an arm round her.

"Don't worry," she whispered, trying to sound as reassuring as she could. "I'm sure they are doing their best." Deep down she was thinking that relying on the Chief to get them out of this was just being a tad optimistic at the very best. But then, who else could help them?

Joe looked away from the bowl and at the Chief and his eyes widened. He pulled at Leaping Elk's arm and she looked first at Joe and then at the Chief and was as alarmed as he was. The Chief had gone deathly pale. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow and he seemed to have difficulty breathing. Suddenly he toppled sideways and Leaping Elk only just caught him before he fell off his chair.

"What's wrong," she cried, anxiously. "Thunder Head? Are you all right?"

"I'll go and get some water or something," said Mr. Jordan and he went off. With Joe one side and Leaping Elk the other they held the Chief on to his chair and he leant back. His breathing seemed to become more regular and he opened his eyes, to see two very anxious faces looking at him.

“Me sorry,” he whispered. “It getting very hard to keep contact. Shaman now very powerful - that band seem to increase his psychic power. Me no longer able to contact Madame Fifi.” The mystic lake was now dark, too. Mr. Jordan brought the Chief some water in a jam jar (“It’s all I can find. I think I used the glasses in an experiment,” he explained.) and went off again to make some tea. The Chief had a big drink from the jar and put his head back, breathing deeply.

“Me better now,” he said to Leaping Elk and patted her hand. “But what are going to do now? Things very bad.”

They say in silence for a minute until Mr. Jordan brought them some tea. The cups and mugs were of all colours, shapes and sizes but everything at least looked clean and the tea smelled good. They sat round the table, with their steaming mugs, cups and assorted containers of tea and looked at each other. There were a lot of questions that needed some answering.