

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A RESCUE MISSION IS PREPARED

They sipped their tea and looked at each other.

“How on earth did the Shaman get hold of the instruction book for your ship?” Leaping Elk asked the scientist. “Come to that, why on earth did you need to write one? After all, you made the thing! Surely you know how it works!”

Mr. Jordan looked rather embarrassed. “Well,” he said, “I needed reminding. I forget things. So much to think of - breakfast, where I put my glasses, why I climbed a tree But I never realised that every time I turned the thing on I was upsetting things so badly! I just thought it was me I was trying to blow up!”

Leaping Elk looked at Joe, raised her eyes in exasperation and sighed. “I also don’t understand how he suddenly gets so lucky,” she went on. “Our Shaman, I mean. It just happens that the ship falls down on the bit of the Other Side where he happens to have escaped at the last minute.”

“Um, er, well,” began the scientists hesitantly. “I can perhaps explain that too. You see, the drive creates a sort of path first, all through the dimensions of the Other Side, and then it launches itself down the path. I had been experimenting with it to create the paths and then when I turned it on full to go, it blew up. But if I had created the path and the Shaman suddenly went through into the Other Side with no very clear idea of where he was going, then he probably landed up on the same path to the same destination. So I’m sort of responsible for a lot of the things that have happened. Funny how these things work out isn’t it! Ha ha ha, . . . oh.” He laughed nervously; the others were looking at him stony faced. He shut his mouth with a snap.

“Hilarious!” replied Leaping Elk dryly.

“But what about the robots?” asked Joe. “How come he finds them, too? Is it all, oh, what’s the word? Co-something or other.”

“Coincidence,” said the scientist and he blinked thoughtfully behind his spectacles. “Those robots . . . yes, I wonder I’m sorry, I’m afraid a lot of this seems to be my fault.”

“Never mind that,” said the Chief. “Question is, what we do now? No longer possible to travel on Other Side to rescue Madame Fifi. Shaman too strong.” He looked very morose. “Him say me too stupid to follow and him right.”

Leaping Elk took his hand. “It’s not your fault,” she said gently. “You weren’t to know. And you’re not stupid.”

“He also said I was too much of an idiot to make another drive for months and without blowing myself up,” put in Mr. Jordan. “Well, sucks to him! I’ve made another one, and I didn’t even singe myself - much.”

“What!” shouted the Chief, banging his hand on the table. “You got another Taddlepoddle Drive? Then we can get after him!”

“Tidpiddle!” corrected the scientist. “Yes, I have - but only the drive. It’s a spare, in case . . . well, in case the other one blew up - again. We haven’t got a ship to put it in, though. At least I haven’t. Have you?”

“Only ship I know of is Nemesis,” replied the Chief.

“The Nemesis!” said Joe. “That’s no good! It’s a sailing ship. Not built for space - it floats all right but in space you need a pressurised hull and air and things.”

“Oh it doesn’t need to be air-tight and all that,” said Mr. Jordan airily. “It doesn’t even need to be water-tight. The drive does all that. That’s the Dual Purpose Duplicate Living Environment bit of its name - it creates its own little bubble of constantly refreshed air around it, all fully pressurised and even with its own gravity. You could put it on any sort of ship, really.”

“You could!” shouted Joe. “Then what are we waiting for! Let’s go and find the Nemesis!”

“Need to persuade crew first,” pointed out the Chief, excitedly. “But all wanted to fall off world anyway. Shouldn’t be too hard.”

“Hold on, hold on!” said Leaping Elk, hand raised to try and restrain the enthusiasm a bit. “Before we all get carried away, have you stopped to think what happens if and when we get there? For a start there’s an army of metal men at the Shaman’s beck and call!” She hitched the blanket up around her ample figure a bit more. “We don’t want to go charging into that lot and get ourselves captured or worse.”

They all subsided a bit. “Good thinking,” said the Chief. “We need some help. Need some more metal men to clobber these metal men. Where we get some from? You got any?” he asked Mr. Jordan.

The scientist shook his head. “I made a robot once,” he said, “but I used my own brain waves to programme it and it and it threw itself off a cliff trying to fly.”

They all sat in thought for a moment.

“Metal men?” began Joe and then he jumped up in excitement. “Metal men! Armour! Of course - the Khan’s guards! Do you think they could take on those robots?”

“We can ask them to try,” replied Leaping Elk. “Look, I’m going to get dressed, then we can set off and rescue our friends - that is, if we can sort out the drive, the ship and some metal men of our own. And the first thing we will need is the spare drive.” she added - and looked pointedly at the Scientist, who blinked in a rather dazed fashion behind his glasses.

“Ah! The Drive! I’ll have to have a look around,” he said. “I’m not too sure where it is, really. It’s got to be in here somewhere. It shouldn’t take too long - I hope. I’ve forgotten where I left it.” He laughed nervously.

“That’s hardly a surprise,” said Leaping Elk. “I suggest you have a good rake around.” She stood up. “I shan’t be long getting washed and dressed,” she continued. “I shall want a bit of breakfast before trusting myself to a wooden sailing ship powered by your drive cruising in the stars. Meanwhile, we shall need to contact the Khan.”

“That our job,” said the Chief. “Joe and I go off to see about some metal men. Me not got much to put on to dress. Joe, you need wash?”

Joe nodded and he and the Chief went back to the blankets where the Chief had his few remaining bits of clothing, while Joe threw some water on his face in the shower cubicle. When he had done, he joined the Chief on the grass outside Mr. Jordan’s house.

“Are you sure you can still travel on the Other Side?” he asked. “I thought you said the Shaman was blocking everything.”

“Only in place around him at moment,” said the Chief. “Me think it OK to go to other places for now. We see, anyway. Wife making self presentable and scientist go to sort through junk in his house to find drive - so we got plenty time to try. Ready?”

Joe nodded. He stood by the Chief, who closed his eyes and took in a deep breath. The white cloud rose from the grass around their feet and enveloped them.

“Me make bog-up of getting there last time,” said the Chief. “Me need to concentrate! Aimed cloud at Wall of idiot Roman Alphonse Hadrian and missed - ended up in China at time of Great Fence. Now got to make sure we not wind up at Roman Wall!”

The Chief got it right though. It was only a short journey and as the cloud cleared, Joe found that they had wound up just outside the Khan’s tent, with a couple of bemused guards staring at them.

“How!” said the Chief, holding up his hand in greeting. “We need to talk to Big Chief in tent!”

“Er, he means can we please see the Khan?” explained Joe.

“I remember you,” said one of the guards to Joe, his face brightening, “You got rid of the Shaman! I was in the band that rode to his camp with you. Is the man with the feathers a friend of yours?”

“Yes,” nodded Joe. “This is Chief Thunder Head. We would like to see the Khan to ask a big favour - it’s to do with the Shaman, actually.”

“Oh, then I’ll get the Captain,” said the Guard. “He’ll probably take you straight in. Hang on there a minute.”

The Guard went inside the tent and returned quickly with the Captain of the Guards who was very pleased to see Joe again and made him very welcome. He was introduced to the Chief and they shook hands.

“Any friend of Joe’s is a friend of mine,” said the Captain. “You want to see the Khan, do you? Well, come on in, and I’ll see if he’s free.”

They entered the tent and went down the long silk-lined passage towards the central chamber. An attendant stood at the entrance to this chamber; he recognised Joe and smiled. The Captain whispered to him and the attendant nodded and entered the chamber. He reappeared a moment later.

“The Khan is just about to have his afternoon tea,” the attendant said. “He’s invited you all to join him. Do go in!”

He ushered them through and into the great central chamber. There on a huge pile of richly embroidered silk cushions sat the Great Khan himself, with a small table in front of him containing a teapot, some cups and a plate of cakes. The Khan’s eyes lit up when he saw them.

“Do come in,” he said to Joe. “It’s so good to see you again. And you’ve brought a friend, too. Very pleased to meet you, sir. Do sit down. Tea everybody? Captain, please sit and join us.”

They all sat down and over a cup of tea, Joe introduced the Chief to the Khan and explained why they were there.

“Oh, well, I see,” said the Khan. “If that Shaman is back in business and has the sort of help that you say he has, then he needs dealing with. If he isn’t stopped, then I’m sure he will come back here and seek his revenge on all of us. And of course, you must rescue poor Sarah and her Aunt. Now, Captain, I shall need some of your men here in case of trouble, but I am sure we could spare some. How many would you like?”

“Ship not very big,” said the Chief. “Could carry perhaps twenty, if you can spare them. But only right to say that it quite possible they might never come back!”

“Point taken,” said the Khan. “We must tell the men that and ask for volunteers.”

“I will call the guards together, with your permission,” said the Captain, “and I would like to go myself, please. I owe it to Sarah. And I should not like to ask my men to volunteer for a dangerous expedition that I myself did not take part in.”

The Khan nodded. “Certainly,” he said, “I quite understand, although I must say that if things go wrong, you will be sorely missed, Captain. Please, go ahead and muster your men.”

So it was that the Khan’s Guards were all gathered together on parade and were addressed by the Captain. The Khan, Joe and the Chief looked on as the Captain explained why he had called them together. “And so,” he concluded, “I am calling for volunteers! This is a dangerous expedition into the unknown to rescue Sarah and her Aunt and stop the Shaman, and no-one will hold it against you if you do not wish to go. Both his Highness the Khan and I know that you all brave men, and it is quite possible that no-one will return from this campaign! Now, please step forward all who wish to be considered for the expedition!”

As one, the entire corps of the Khan’s Guard stepped forward. The Captain swelled with pride as he faced his men and the Khan wiped a tear from his eye.

“I am very proud of you all,” the Khan said. “I will ask the Captain to select twenty of you. If this expedition fails, I do not doubt that we will face the full wrath of the Shaman and I will have absolute confidence in all of you that you will do your very best to defeat him.”

The Captain walked along the ranks selecting men. Those selected stood to one side ready for orders as the rest were dismissed back to their duties. One of the men selected was Joe’s friend who had taught him to ride, and another was the Guard who had taught Sarah. Both had asked especially to go. While the Captain went off to organise supplies and weapons, Joe introduced the Chief to his friend, Jagtai.

“It is good to see you again,” said Jagtai. “Once again we go on an expedition together! Pity we are not riding into action - I always feel more at home on a horse. Have you been able to ride since you were here?”

“Oh yes,” replied Joe. “The Chief here found us some horses and we rode quite a long way in his land to find the scientist who made the engine that will take us to the Shaman. It was nice to be on a horse again - although it took me a while to get used to it. But I hadn’t forgotten how to ride!”

“Good,” said Jagtai. “You were a good pupil - and so was Sarah. So, the Chief found you horses. Were they good?” he continued, eyeing the Chief.

“Oh yes!” said Joe. “The Chief has some beautiful horses. He’s very good with them.”

“Oh, so you are good with horses?” said Jagtai, and the Chief nodded. Jagtai winked at his friend - Joe saw them but the Chief didn’t. “Well, would you like to show us your skills? We’ve got a little horse you can try them out on.”

Jagtai’s friend winked back and Joe felt rather uneasy as they smiled at each other. The Khan’s guards were always up for mischief, as Joe knew very well, and they liked to play jokes on newcomers - as Alphonse Hadrian had found out. Joe was worried but the Chief nodded solemnly.

“Me agree,” he said. “Joe tell me much about your horses and your riding. Me like to see both.”

The Guards were always willing to show off their skills - and reckoned they could have a bit of fun with the Chief too. So they took Joe and Thunder Head off to a long paddock or exercise yard, enclosed by fencing, where they practised. At one end was a sort of corral in which there were several horse. One horse in particular stood out; it was white, quite tall and very handsome - but it had a wild glint in its eye and it seemed nervous and twitchy as it pawed the ground or shook its head, trotting here and there - never still, always restive. It was all alone in a special bit of fenced-off coral. Several of the guards had joined them and they saddled up some mounts and showed off their skills to the Chief. They rode at speed, crouched low and to one side, so they could hardly be seen, speared tent pegs from the ground or shot arrows into a target as they rode full pelt down the paddock. One turned right round in the saddle twice as he hurtled down the course.

“Hum!” said the Chief, nodding. “They excellent horsemen!. And treat horses well too. Would do well in Wild West Show!”

“Right,” said Jagtai, grinning. “Now would you like to show us your skill on a horse, oh Chief? Perhaps you’d like to ride Pearl of Heaven there.” he continued, pointing to the white horse, still all alone in his pen. No-one had been near him when they had selected their mounts. “There’s a saddle there,” continued Jagtai, pointing to a saddle on a fence. The rest of the guards stood round, all grinning. The Chief knew very well that something was up. He looked from the guards to the horse and back again, eyes narrowed.

“That horse looks dangerous,” whispered Joe. “I wouldn’t go near him! They’re up to something!”

“Me know,” said the Chief in a low voice. “But me try anyway. Don’t worry!”

He walked on over to the horse as the guards nudged each other and giggled. The horse really had a very wild look in its eye and Joe felt very nervous for the Chief. Thunder Head lifted the saddle, felt its weight, and then put it down again. Instead, he picked up a blanket and a length of rope and walked over to the corral containing Pearl of Heaven. The guards were now silent, expectant, waiting to see what would happen.

Pearl of Heaven stood in his pen, pawing the ground and eyeing the Chief as he walked up to the fence. He snorted and shook his head.

“I think our friend has thought better of having a ride,” said a guard, looking at the discarded saddle.

Joe watched anxiously as the Chief stood by the side of the pen, folded his arms, and spoke in a low voice to the white horse. Joe couldn’t make out what he was saying - he realised that the Chief must be talking in his own language, but whatever he was saying, it calmed the horse, who stopped snorting and pawing the ground, and stood still, lowering its head. The Chief carried on talking, in

very low, almost musical, tones. He held out his hand and to the surprise of the Guards the horse trotted up and nuzzled his hand, then put its head next to that of the Chief, cheek to cheek, and Thunder Head patted him and continued to talk. Then the Chief climbed the fence and stood by the side of Pearl of Heaven, fussing him, stroking him and talking to him all the while. The Guards were now amazed.

"I've seen that horse try to bite a man's hand off!" said one.

Now the Chief put the blanket on the back of the horse and showed the rope to Pearl of Heaven, who sniffed at it. Then the Chief tied it around the head of the horse like a bridle, and still talking gently, he climbed on the back of the horse and motioned Joe to open the gate of the pen. Joe did so and the Chief rode the beautiful Pearl of Heaven, snow white mane flying, out through the gate and into the paddock. All the Guards were absolutely silent now, watching thunderstruck as the Chief trotted the horse along and up to the end of the paddock.

"That horse broke the arm of the last man to try and put saddle and bridle on him," gasped a Guard.

Then the Chief bent down, patted the horse's cheek and whispered something in its ear. With a wild whinny it dashed forward and the Chief, whooping loudly, rode the horse in a mad gallop the length of the paddock, turned in a tight circle at the end and dashed back up. The Chief now showed his own brand of trick riding - he leapt off and on the horse's back, first on one side and then on the other, spun round like lightning on the back of the horse, and as the Pearl of Heaven turned and galloped again up the length of the paddock, he stood up on its back with the rope bridle in his teeth. The Guards shouted, whooped and clapped.

As he reached the end of the course, the Chief dropped down onto the back of the horse again and it trotted, as good as gold, into its pen. The guards continued to applaud like mad.

"He good horse," announced the Chief as he dismounted and patted Pearl of Heaven.

The Captain hurried up, very angry, having seen what was going on from a distance. The Khan was a short way behind him, having come to see them all off.

"Who suggested the Chief ride the Pearl?" he shouted, and his men looked ashamed. "That animal is dangerous! He's bitten, kicked or trampled six men! I'm very sorry," he said to the Chief as Thunder Head left the corral. "They could have got you killed or badly injured."

"No problem," boomed the Chief. "Him good horse. Nervous, excitable, but good and fast. Need friend. Suggest you find nice old donkey or perhaps cat to keep him company!"

"That's a good idea," piped up a Guard. "When we got him, he was in a field with an old donkey. Perhaps he misses him."

"Hmm, good thinking," agreed the Captain. "I'll arrange to have the donkey brought here. Thank you!" he said to the Chief. "Now, all the supplies and weapons are ready, so can we set off? I assume you will be arranging transport."

Thunder Head nodded. "That right!" he said. "We go straight away. All stand by supplies!"

They all stood by the pile of bags and weapons arranged by the Captain; the Khan and his attendants, with some of the other Guards, stood a little way off and waved to Joe and the Guards that were going on the expedition. "Good luck!" shouted the Khan.

The Chief stood, arms folded, eyes closed, looking as impressive as always, with the Guards and the Captain at attention behind him and Joe by his side. A white cloud arose from the ground and

enveloped them, and when it cleared, they were all gone. Pearl of Heaven snorted and whinnied in his corral and the Khan looked up at the sky.

“Good luck,” he said again, quietly. “I hope we see you all again. I believe the Captain wanted to bring a friendly old donkey to keep that beautiful horse company,” he said to an attendant. “Please arrange it. I think the horse is worried about seeing them all again, too.”