

# PAST IMPERFECT

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### FIREWORKS IN THE STARS

Meanwhile, as the Khan arranged for Pearl of Heaven to have a companion, the Chief was trying to control a cloud containing twenty guards, plus the Captain, Joe and a pile of equipment. He concentrated hard and muttered to himself. The Captain sidled up to Joe, a bit nervous anyway about travelling in the cloud.

“Does he know what he is doing?” he whispered to Joe.

“Shush!” commanded the Chief. “It hard. All travel on Other Side becoming harder because of Shaman. Also, transporting you lot take much effort. Ah, we nearly there!” He opened his eyes and the cloud began to clear.

They were on the grassy knoll outside Mr. Jordan’s house and the Guards looked around them with interest. Facing them was Leaping Elk, now fully dressed and the Scientist, also properly dressed but looking decidedly dusty. They were standing by a heap of old bits and pieces that looked as if they had come out of a rubbish dump.

“That’s a good way to travel,” observed the Captain after Thunder Head introduced everyone to everybody else. “Although we prefer horses. Nice place you have here,” he went on, to the scientist. “What’s all that old junk for?”

“Junk!” replied the scientist, offended. “That junk - er - that equipment, I should say, is the Tidpiddle Drive! That is what will take us through time, space and a thousand dimensions to the Shaman!”

“I wish I’d never asked,” murmured the Captain.

“You found it then,” said the Chief, eyeing the pile of bits and pieces with some doubt. It looked like any other old pile of odds and ends that littered Mr. Jordan's house.

“Oh yes!” replied the scientist. “It took a bit of time. I couldn’t find it all no matter how hard I searched at first.”

“Then he fell over it,” put in Leaping Elk. “We were worried about you because you took so long. Are there any problems? You look tired.”

The Chief nodded. “Travel difficult,” he said. “Too many in cloud and Shaman now seem to be trying to stop all travel. Him now powerful man! Getting to Nemesis will be hard. Me need help.”

“Well, both Mr. Jordan and I are psychic,” said Leaping Elk. “Neither of us has your abilities but we might be able to help - and then there’s Joe. You heard what the Shaman said. Either Joe or Sarah or both of them seem to be able to boost our ability in some way.”

“Good idea,” agreed Thunder Head. He arranged them so that the Guards and the Captain were at the back with himself, Leaping Elk, Mr. Jordan and Joe in front, all linking hands. The pile of equipment and the Tidpiddle Drive were laid on the ground between them.

“Er, I think it may be worth pointing out that the only time I have ever travelled anywhere on the Other Side was when I blew my laboratory up,” said Mr. Jordan, doubtfully. Still, he linked hands and closed his eyes - and then yelling, “Hang on! Back in a minute!” he dashed off into the house again.

“What wrong? He left gas on?” muttered the Chief.

The scientist soon returned, waving a couple of candles and a box of matches.

“Essential bits of the Drive!” he puffed as he rejoined them and linked hands. The Captain looked even more puzzled.

“Now, we think cloud!” said the Chief. They stood and emptied their minds, while the Guards and Captain remained absolutely silent, hardly daring to breath. Joe half-opened an eye and saw the cloud beginning to rise up again from the ground. Soon it enveloped them.

“So far, so good,” said the Chief. “Now, you all think lift and me steer. Hope me move it all in right direction. Off we go!”

The cloud lurched about a bit but soon settled down and the journey was quite short. Joe found his feet were cold as the cloud landed and began to clear - he looked down. His feet were covered by water - they had landed in the sea. Fortunately they were only a short way from the beach.

“Clot! You missed!” scolded Leaping Elk as she picked up some bits of the Tidpiddle Drive and poured the water out of them.

“Hey, it not bad,” protested the Chief. “You know how far we come?”

“No, do you?” his wife answered.

“Not a clue,” responded the Chief cheerfully, “But it long way and me have big load to steer.”

“Are you looking at me,” said Leaping Elk, smoothing her dress.

“No - at all these guards,” answered the Chief with a grin. “You not big load, just comfortably built!”

“Will the drive be all right?” asked Joe anxiously as they dragged bits of it and the Guards’ equipment onto the beach.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” answered Mr. Jordan. “It should soon dry out. It’s the matches to light the candle that we must keep dry!”

“What about all your equipment?” Joe asked the Captain.

“It should be all right,” came the answer. “We’ll spread it all out and dry it on the ship - we’ll polish and sharpen our swords and rub our armour to keep it bright. It’s the bowstrings that we must keep dry - every man has a couple of them and keeps them in a little pouch next to his body.”

Joe was thinking that taking on a bunch of high-tech robots relying on a candle-powered drive, swords and armour and a lot of bows and arrows was not perhaps ideal. Still, there was no other way.

“Ogrot! Noglick lodbotty!” came a familiar voice. They turned to see where it was coming from and there was the big figure of Bomkoff, sat fishing on a wooden jetty a short distance away and waving to them.

“Hi!” shouted Joe, and waved back. They saw that the Nemesis was tied up alongside the jetty. They decided to leave the guards and the Captain on the beach for a while, out of sight of the village in case the locals became alarmed at the sight of a lot of armed men in their midst and thought that they were under attack again. The spare Tidpiddle Drive was left with them. Joe, Mr. Jordan, the Chief and Leaping Elk walked along the beach and onto the jetty.

“Do you know where Captain Leif is, please?” Joe asked Bomkof.

“Nikski ragbut solpoddle,” replied Bomkoff and pointed to the ship.

“Thank you!” said Joe and led the others up the gangplank of the Nemesis.

“What did he say?” asked Leaping Elk.

“No idea,” answered Joe, “but I think the captain is on board somewhere.”

They looked around the ship. It was looking very spick and span, freshly painted, decks scrubbed and everything tidy.

“The Nemesis is certainly looking very smart,” observed Joe as they stood by the main mast.

“Thank you,” came a mild voice from behind them and they turned to see Captain Leif walking out the galley at the bow.

“I’ve been spending some time tidying her up, although I don’t know why,” said the Captain, smiling his usual vacant smile. “No-one seems to want to sail her anywhere, very far, at any rate.”

“Arr, that’s because all they wants to do is sail off into oblivion!” said Short John as he also emerged from the galley and grinned at them.

“Hello, sailor!” squawked Cap’n Mint. “Man the pumps! All hands on deck!”

“Hello, Short John,” said Joe. “Hello, Cap’n Mint. Is anyone else on board?”

There was a wild yell from above them and they all looked up in alarm. They saw Old Ben hurtling down from the crow’s nest towards the deck. As usual he had tied a length of rope from his ankle to the top of the mast - but this time there was a difference. As he drew level with them the rope tautened and then Ben bounded back up again! The rope was elastic! He bounded up and down like a yo-yo, cackling hysterically as he did so. He eventually came to a halt, upside down, and swung to and fro, grinning like a demented pendulum.

“How be?” he said. “Good to see you all again. But you be upside down! Hey - it’s old Chicken Head! How’s your feathers?” he said to the Chief.

“Him still potty!” muttered the Chief; he eyed the rope. “But that look fun. Like to try that.”

“You’re as barmy as he is!” scolded Leaping Elk.

“The rest of the crew are around,” said Captain Leif. “They’ve been making themselves useful in the village. We use the Nemesis for deep sea fishing - we can go further than the villager’s boats - but this is our day off. Short John runs a very popular cafe in the village and several of them help with making and repairing boats. Didier and Franz have planted some vines and are pretty useful gardeners. We’re quite at home now, I suppose.” He sounded regretful. “I’d still like to try and sail a bit further and see if we fall off and end up in the stars.”

“Funny you should say that,” said the scientist.

“Yes, me got proposition for you all,” said the Chief.

“Then I’ll call everyone together,” said Captain Leif and he helped Ben down. The pair of them took a couple of huge conch shells, stood in the stern of the boat and blew massive blasts on them that echoed around the village. The rest of the strange crew of the Nemesis appeared, from

various parts of the village. Deaf Charlie, of course, hadn't heard the call of the shells. However, once he saw the others ambling towards the boat, he tagged along; he had been mending fishing nets. Sakowa appeared from the other end of the village street, along with Lord Asahi, who had been told by the villagers of the arrival of some strange men - they had already caught sight of the Khan's Guards. As it was, the Guards were also attracted by the sound of the shells and made their way to the boat while the villagers decided that it was more prudent to stay indoors and see what happened. Once everything was explained to Lord Asahi however, he sent a messenger to tell everyone that it was all right. The villagers came and watched as the crew of the *Nemesis* and the Khan's Guards gathered to listen to Thunder Head. He explained what was going on and concluded by saying. "So we need help. Madame Fifi and Sarah in great danger - and Shaman may be planning heap big trouble for everyone!"

"Madame Fifi and little Sarah in danger!" said Short John. "Then count us in!" he said, on behalf of himself and Cap'n Mint.

"Get me out of here!" squawked Cap'n Mint.

"Pogbottle sotblod kneeskuttle!" announced Bomkoff emphatically.

"That goes for me too," nodded old Ben. "It's the barmiest thing I've ever heard and I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

Carlos, Didier, Franz, Riccardo and Stefan all seemed to cheer up no-end once the prospect of setting off into the stars on a hopeless quest was put to them. Leif's reaction was "Oblivion here we come!" and a happy grin. Leaping Elk was amazed at all of them. Sakowa said he was in for the expedition too.

"But you not need to come along," said Thunder Head. "You now home."

"Oh, I would love to come along - I could do with a bit of excitement," said Sakowa. "Anyway, you might need someone who can throw people over the side of the ship, eh, Joe?" and he winked. Joe smiled - he was pleased Sakowa was coming along. The biggest surprise was that Lord Asahi wanted to go too. The Chief pointed out that if the expedition failed the Shaman was likely to come back and take his revenge on the village but Asahi insisted - if they failed, he wasn't likely to be able to defend the place on his own and he had other reasons too. Sakowa explained them.

"First, he really liked Sarah and wants to help rescue her. Then, you see, he's got a bone to pick with that Shaman after what happened last time," said Sakowa. "He's a pretty handy man to have around in a battle - he's a Samurai warrior and they're fierce!"

"We could do with all the help we can get, if you ask me," said the Captain of the Guards, eyeing up the crew. They didn't fill him with a lot of confidence. So Lord Asahi hurried back for his armour, while Frank Jordan set up the Tidpiddle Drive on the deck - much to the amusement of Ben Bun. When he lit the candle, old Ben collapsed on the deck in hysterics.

"He's twice as barmy as I am!" he wheezed. "I've never seen anything so funny in years!"

Meanwhile, once Lord Asahi was back with his armour, the crew cast off and set the sails and the ship began to move through the calm sea. The Scientist ran lengths of wire from the Tidpiddle Drive to the sails and also to the ship's wheel. They were now cruising through the waves when he turned to the rest of them and said, "Right, everything is ready. I remember now what it is that's been bothering me since we set out. What course am I to set? I need to know where we are going."

Everybody fell silent and looked at the Chief.

“You don’t now, do you?” said Leaping Elk sadly.

“Now you mention it, no,” admitted the Chief. Everyone went very gloomy.

“But you must know!” exclaimed a desperate Joe. “After all we’ve done, got the ship, the crew and the Guards, we can’t just stop now!”

Thunder Head looked down at the boy, who seemed almost in tears. He straightened up and thought deeply, eyes closed. As Joe looked at him he seemed to shudder as if some great power was coursing through his body. He went pale and nearly fell, but Leaping Elk quickly supported him. She struggled to keep him from falling and Bomkoff leapt forward and picked the Chief up in his arms as if he was as light as a feather. As Leaping Elk arranged some blankets, Bomkoff gently set the Chief down on them.

“Creska bar sisk flot,” he rumbled.

“Ah, that he is!” agreed Ben, quietly.

The Chief began to breath more easily. Then he whispered something that Joe couldn’t hear and opened his eyes to see Joe and Leaping Elk sat either side of him, looking anxious. “Him think me idiot, that Shaman,” he said, weakly. “But perhaps me not quite so daft. Scientist! Why your Taddlepaddle drive head for world with robots in cave in first place?” he asked.

“Tidpiddle,” insisted Mr. Jordan. “I don’t know!” he went on, “What’s that got to do with anything . . . . Oh! I see what you mean!” he continued, thoughtfully. “Yes - perhaps you’re right. That band he wears . . . . perhaps generating an interdimensional control field . . . and that Pyramid is active now. Perhaps it’s like a beacon. Well, let’s see!”

He pushed a lever, flicked two switches, one of which fell off, turned a dial, frowned as a needle in an instrument failed to move, kicked the machine, smiled as the dial registered, and turned to the others.

“Working well,” he said. “It seems to have latched on to a target all right. Now, I suggest you all put your fingers in your ears.”

“Why?” asked Joe. “Will the change in pressure make our ears pop like on an aircraft?”

“No, the machine might blow up,” replied the Scientist. Everybody not only put their fingers in their ears, but also ducked as the scientist took a deep breath, and flicked a big red switch. The ship seemed to jump in the air, accelerate at a huge speed and then all around them the heavens tore apart in a blaze of whirling suns and spinning planets, comets hurtling in mad patterns across the demented void, galaxies swirled and great fountains of colour filled the vastness of the space between the galaxies. Deaf Charlie thought it was marvellous and called everyone to see the fireworks. Ben Bun danced about the deck and cackled wildly and everybody else looked at the sight open mouthed. Dockland Doris’s former fiancés had happy smiles on their faces as they faced oblivion and Lief was looking round for the pigeon to send back to Spain.

“Cor! Strike a light!” squawked Cap’n Mint. “Full speed ahead and watch out for the bits!”

“That’s right,” nodded Short John. “Just like when we went smack into that Chinese junk full of skyrockets and it all blew up.”

“When was that?” asked Joe.

“When I was captain of the Mersey Ferry,” answered Short John. “We were a bit off course. It was foggy, like. Made a lovely mess!”

“It work, then!” said the Chief, sitting up.

“So far,” agreed Leaping Elk. “I hope you’re right and we *are* going to get to where the Shaman is.”

“Well, wherever we are heading, the signal is extremely strong,” said the scientist. “We need to have someone steering, though,” he continued in some alarm, as they headed straight for a very large planet surrounded by coloured rings.

“Someone is!” said Joe. It was Ben; cackling mightily, he was heading the ship straight for the huge giant and then, at the last minute, he spun the wheel and the ship veered off. Sakowa took over!

“Spoil sport,” said Ben, “I was having fun there!”

He went back up to the crows nest to keep look out - although once there he just kept pointing at things and whooping, laughing and clapping, so he was no use.

“What happened?” asked Leaping Elk quietly. “How did you get the idea to let the Drive find it’s own course?”

“Master Chang come and say one word to me,” replied the Chief. “He just say ‘Robots!’ and me understand! Me not quite so stupid as Shaman think.”

Leaping Elk hugged him. “You’re not stupid at all!” she said. “We’re on our way, by the looks of things. I wish we could find out what’s been going on since they arrived, though.”

“Me been thinking of that,” said the Chief. “Mystic Lake no good now. But Drive may be able to help - open up way to Pyramid. Also, we got many here who can contact other side - you, Joe, Captain, Scientist and me. Me need a bit of rest and something to build strength up before we have go. Pity we not have any biscuits.”

“Who needs biscuits?” came the voice of Short John. “If we’re going to rescue Madame Fifi and Sarah we all need strength. Try some of this!”

They turned to see Short John carrying a huge cake on a plate. Behind him were two Guards with plates and knives. Another two carried trays with cups, saucers and pots of tea. Short John had roped them all in to help with refreshments - not that they seemed unwilling.

The Chief’s eyes lit up. “Hey, him psychic too!” he boomed. “That just what doctor ordered!”

Leaping Elk sighed - but Joe noticed that she had quite a large slice of the cake herself (“I need to keep my strength up, too!” she said to Joe), although the Chief was given an extra large slice by Short John.

“This is my way of helping Madame Fifi and Sarah,” said Short John. “If I feed everyone up, they’ll be stronger and able to tackle that Shaman fellow!”

As they all munched their cake, Joe had a look at the bits of wire that Mr. Jordan had arranged between the machine and the sails. Joe was intrigued and as soon as he had finished his cake and brushed the crumbs off himself he went to ask Mr Jordan about them. The scientist had eaten his cake and was studying the instruments on the machine and making notes in a little book.

“Mr. Jordan, why are there wires running from your drive to bits of the ship?” asked Joe. “It seems odd that the sails still look like they are filled with wind. After all, there’s no wind here, is there?”

“Well, there’s the solar wind,” replied the scientist, “but that’s not what’s doing it. The sails are acting like a motor. Instead of filling with wind because there’s a wind behind them which is driving us forwards, which is what usually happens on a sailing ship, they are filling with charged

inter-dimensional quark particles from my Tidpiddle Drive which are then blasted backwards. That's what is pushing us along - actually it's much faster with these sails than using a conventional space ship - which is probably why we haven't blown up yet."

It was the "yet" which Joe found just a little unsettling.

"Also, the Drive is connected to the wheel for local steering," went on Mr. Jordan. "It's really making very good progress. We will be arriving in about half an hour, I think."

"Unless we blow up first," thought Joe, but he didn't say it out loud.

The Chief had recovered by now and arranged Captain Leif, Leaping Elk, Joe and Mr. Jordan around the drive, with instructions to sit down and link hands.

"Oi, this is no time to be playing Ring around the Roses!" came the voice of Ben from the crow's nest.

"Ignore him," muttered the Chief. "Now, we all psychic in some way. Drive is clearing path to Pyramid. Me going to try and contact Madame Fifi and see what has been happening."

"Give her my best wishes," put in Short John.

"Me do my best," continued the Chief. "Don't know how we going to see results, though. May be all of us, may be only me. We try, anyway."

"I hope we find out what's been going on," said Leaping Elk. "I'm quite worried about them."

They sat down, linked hands, closed their eyes and emptied their minds. All round them, the crew went about their work quietly, while the Guards polished armour, sharpened swords and looked on, also keeping quiet. Sakowa helped Lord Asahi put his armour on in the cabin at the stern so as not to make a noise, but they kept the door open so they could see what was going on. Bomkof eyed the little group round the drive, all with earnest, anxious looks on their faces, and began to sing quietly, in his deep bass voice, some gentle, chanting sort of song that entered their heads and helped to clear them of all other thoughts - just the gentle, drifting strains of the music filled their minds. It helped; the Chief smiled - he had established contact. Then to everyone's surprise, around the Tidpiddle Drive there appeared a strange, luminous cloud. The Drive whirred and clicked and the cloud cleared to show a dark room, lit only by the glowing eyes of three robots. There were two beds in the room each occupied by a sleeping figure - on one was Aunt Fifi, and on the other Sarah. Then they heard Aunt Fifi's voice, although she still appeared to be fast asleep.

"Hello," she said, "am I dreaming this? Can you hear me?"

"Yes," came the deep voice of the Chief. "Me hear you well. No, you not dream. We on our way to rescue you but would like to know what has been happening. Best keep quiet so those tin pots do not hear."

"They'll alert the Shaman if we speak," said Aunt Fifi. "You're going to have to be careful, you know. This place is crawling with them. What do you want to know?"

"What's been happening since you arrived?" asked Leaping Elk. "Are you both all right? How's Sarah?"

"Frightened but safe," came the response. "Tell you what, I'll try sending you pictures and sounds of all the things since we got here. It'll give you a better idea of the layout of the place. I'm sure I can do it."

"Good idea," said the Chief. "We got big screen here to see it on."

"Sounds like wide-screen telly," responded Aunt Fifi. "Here goes."

Everyone on board the Nemesis who could do so gathered round in wonder to see the images that now began to fill the strange, glowing bubble that surrounded the Tidpiddle Drive, like a big goldfish bowl in which three-dimensional images of all the strange events that had occurred since Aunt Fifi and Sarah had arrived on the Moon now appeared. Old Ben hung upside down from the crow's nest to get a better view and only Deaf Charlie didn't get the chance to see the show. He was now steering, still entranced by the wonder of the display taking place all round him as the Nemesis cruised in the wonderful wild anarchy of inter-dimensional space.