

# PAST IMPERFECT

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### BREAKFAST AND ANCIENT SECRETS INSIDE THE PYRAMID

So, what had been happening in the Pyramid on the Moon since they had seen the Shaman arrive with his prisoners? For Aunt Fifi and Sarah it was the beginning of a fairly tiring time, although it did at least start with some breakfast - very welcome indeed after their journey through the dimensions. It was Aunt Fifi who suggested that food might be a good idea as they walked between the lines of headless robots into the heart of the pyramid. The Shaman was intent on a grand entrance, but a sudden loud rumble from Aunt Fifi's stomach rather lowered the tone of the occasion.

"Sorry," she said. "I'm starving. All that travelling has made me hungry. Any chance of some breakfast?"

The Shaman looked askance at her.

"Really Madame! You have no sense of occasion," he exclaimed; however, he went on, "Still, I must admit that I am rather peckish. But aren't you awed by this place? Don't you want to know why it is here?"

"Oh, quite," replied Aunt Fifi. "But I'd be more receptive if I had a good meal inside me, wouldn't you, Sarah?"

Sarah agreed. However, she was also most certainly awed by the place as well as being ravenous. They stood in the centre of the vast structure, with what seemed like thousands of headless robots all around them, and looked up. It was a stupendous sight.

Looking into the picture displayed in the globe around the drive on the Nemesis, Joe realised that the entire pyramid was hollow and as all the lights came on, he realised just how big it was as it rose on a series of balconies or galleries, one above the other, right up the pointed top. Along each gallery was a line of lights and Joe thought that there must be dozens of galleries, perhaps over a hundred; they were linked by flights of metal stairs but up through the centre of the building rose a transparent tube which appeared to contain a lift. From the central shaft more tubes radiated out to link up with the galleries, all with lights along them, so that the lift shaft and the radiating spokes seemed like some huge Christmas tree.

Surrounding the Shaman and Aunt Fifi and Sarah were robots - masses of them. They returned their heads to their bodies and stood looking at the newcomers, their eyes glowing with an unearthly pinkish-purple glow.

"Very impressive," observed Aunt Fifi as they stood by the lift and looked up. "Make a good shopping centre"

Sarah shivered as she looked at all the robots standing impassively around them, their eyes pulsing with light.

“I don’t like these things,” she said. “I think they look creepy.”

“They are perfectly all right as long as you do what I tell you,” responded the Shaman. “They will all do my bidding. Through them I am learning now about the rest of the history of them and this building - and of the beings who made it all. And I will soon learn the secrets of the Beast I seek to awaken!”

“Well, meanwhile, what about breakfast?” said Aunt Fifi.

“Where is your sense of wonder and desire for knowledge?” scolded the Shaman. “However, I agree - some sustenance would be acceptable while I learn more. Already this band I wear tells me that we will find somewhere to eat on the third floor. Please, enter the lift.”

He touched the tube with his staff and the entire shaft glowed. A panel open to one side in front of them and they saw that inside was a circular platform. The Shaman ushered Aunt Fifi and Sarah inside, followed by four robots. Then he entered last, the door slid shut and the Shaman touched a panel inside with his staff; the panel displayed a very long row of tiny lights and Sarah guessed that there was one light for every floor. The Shaman had touched the third light from the bottom. The lift stopped - it certainly moved very quickly; the door slid open again and revealed a long transparent tube leading from the shaft to the balcony opposite. Along the base of the tube was a narrow walkway with rows of lights each side - there was no handrail and the tube was very transparent. It was unnerving to walk along it although they were only on the third floor; Sarah wondered what it would be like stepping out onto a walkway near the top of the pyramid. She put out her hand - she could feel the solid wall of the tube and it was comforting to know that there was no way she could fall; she stepped out with more confidence. Then she looked down and drew her breath in sharply. Aunt Fifi wondered why and saw that Sarah was looking at something below them - her eyes followed Sarah’s and she realised what she was looking at. The massed ranks of robots below were all looking upwards at them, hundreds - perhaps thousands - of pairs of glowing eyes were following them impassively as they walked along the tube. It was eerie.

They walked along the tube and reached the gallery and the Shaman indicated that they go to the left. They walked along the gallery, the metal feet of the robots echoing on the metal floor; to one side was a railing made of black and silver metal in writhing, twisted, intricate shapes set here and there with what seemed giant pearls, the size of tennis balls. On the other side of that was the huge, empty space of the interior of the Pyramid; on the opposite side was the wall of the gallery which made them gasp at the sight of the decoration that covered its surface. Even the Shaman seemed struck by the way the walls were decorated and they stopped and examined the surface. Sarah looked along the wall of the gallery they were standing on and then at the walls on the opposite side of the pyramid, and then at the surface of the walls in the gallery above them, and then at the gallery above that . . . and above that . . . and above that . . . and realised that every wall in the entire building seemed to be decorated in the same way.

Etched into the dull green metallic surface of the wall was an amazing brightly-coloured picture of a great long writhing snake-like creature, body covered with millions of iridescent scales, and with hundreds and hundreds of heads on scaly necks and limbs terminating in wicked claws branching off all over every surface wherever she looked. The eyes of the heads burnt with red fire, every mouth

breathed a sulphurous yellow flame and blue smoke, every claw was alive with glittering bolts of energy. The great body and the scaly necks and heads writhed in and around planets, suns, comets and clouds of stars, each depicted with such precision and care that they might almost be real bodies in space - and here and there amongst all the objects round which the snake writhed was a closer view of a planet, very detailed indeed. Forests, seas, mountains, were all indicated in minute detail, all connected by that great body with its thousands of heads and claws. Its heads reared above suns, cities, forests, whole solar systems. A much closer look at how the pictures were constructed made Aunt Fifi's eyes widen in amazement - the whole surface that covered the entire inside of the pyramid was coloured as if with an enamel that had fused with the wall, but the highlights and detail were made using precious stones - rubies, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires and other stones of colours and intensity unknown on her Earth. Some were tiny, others large, cut, polished and positioned with precision and care. It was also obvious that gold and silver - and other metals too, untarnished and of wonderful colours - had been used in the pictures.

"This place is a vast jewel box!" gasped Aunt Fifi. "There's an absolute fortune in here. Are you sure it's not just wealth you want?" she continued, addressing the Shaman. "Take only a couple of panels off this wall and you could live like a king for the rest of your days!"

The Shaman smiled his thin-lipped, mirthless smile; "Wealth? What is that? It is power I want, Madame! Wealth is of no use to me except in so far as it buys me more power over others. But greater than wealth is fear! I seek power over others by fear! So much more satisfying! Come, the robots tell me that we shall find food and drink in this room - and not before time. Your stomach is becoming most insistent!"

"Sorry!" said Aunt Fifi.

"Actually, I think it's my tummy that's making all the noise at the moment," apologised Sarah. "It was all the talk about food earlier."

The Shaman had indicated that they enter a small room off the gallery. The picture of the snake creature writhed around the doorway and the door itself was of bronze. Inside, they found themselves in a plain room, walls and ceiling of a dull, yellow colour, the floor covered in some grey material. Functional chairs of a rather odd shape - as if built for a slightly different body to the human form - were arranged around a table. Occupying almost all one wall was a machine - a bit like a cross between a drinks dispenser and an automated filing cabinet, with the addition of flashing lights and lots of buttons.

"Tea?" the Shaman asked and the others nodded. "Something to eat as well, I presume - now what would you like? Sandwiches? Biscuits? Cakes? Well, let's see what the machine can give us. It hasn't worked for millennia. I don't even know for what creatures it was made."

The robots marched over to the machine at the Shaman's direction and pressed buttons. Lights flashed, gurgling and whirring noises could be heard in the depths of the machine.

"Not worked for millennia!" repeated Aunt Fifi. "We'll probably end up with a cup of oil and a plate of rust!"

"I'm so hungry, Auntie," sighed Sarah. "I hope it works!"

"Arr!" exclaimed Short John as he watched the events unfolding in the display on the Nemesis. "Young Sarah could do with a piece of my cake!"

The machine seemed to cough, a drawer opened in one part and three steaming cups appeared in another. The robots brought the drinks and the contents of the drawer over to the table where the Shaman and his guests sat. Aunt Fifi and Sarah looked closely at what arrived - the cups held a very pleasant-smelling tea while the drawer held metallic plates bearing an assortment of sandwiches and cakes - of the sort served in posh cafes where sandwiches are always decorated with sprigs of parsley and carefully sculpted tomatoes and cucumber, and cakes are called 'gateaux' and come served with a small fruit salad and lashings of cream. Everything looked fresh, smelled delicious and didn't have the slightest hint of rust.

All the same, Sarah carefully examined her tea before drinking it - it was excellent and she realised how thirsty she was. Aunt Fifi tried a sandwich and declared herself very impressed. The Shaman tucked in too - although Sarah did notice that he only started after he saw that she and Aunt Fifi seemed undamaged by their helpings of sandwiches and tea. The Shaman ate ravenously - all the strain of communicating with the robots and making sense of all the information they had fed him had made him hungry. They all had seconds and several cups of tea.

"I hope there are plenty of loos on these balconies," observed Aunt Fifi. "I shall need them after all this tea. If these chairs are anything to go by, the toilet seats might be a bit strange too!"

When they had finished the Shaman sat back, brushed the crumbs off himself and put his hand up to the band around his head.

"We have a busy day ahead of us," he said. "My mind has been filled with images since I first put this thing on. Only now do I begin to make sense of them. But one bit of the jigsaw has still not been made clear. All I know is that the secret of where the Great Beast is imprisoned lies somewhere in this building - and the information seems to be locked within the pictures that line the walls of this building. We are going to have to examine them."

"All of them! Do you realise just how tall this building is and how much wall there is?" gasped Aunt Fifi.

"I do indeed," came the reply, "but I have little choice. Although we may be able to narrow the search down a little."

"We?" put in Sarah.

"You will of course accompany me." said the Shaman, as if he was offering them a pleasant country walk. "Your observations will be invaluable."

"If you think we are going to help you find whatever it is that you are looking for, you're loopier than that scientist and his fiddle-faddle drive!" exclaimed Aunt Fifi.

"Tidpiddle! Tidpiddle!" insisted Mr. Jordan on the Nemesis. Everyone shushed him.

"Anyway, we haven't a clue what it is you are supposed to be looking for," pointed out Sarah.

"Do I detect a hint of inquisitiveness on your part?" enquired the Shaman. "What am I looking for? A key, or rather, a lock. Let me tell you the story of this creature."

"If you must," murmured Aunt Fifi in a resigned tone. "But you'll have to excuse me if I drop off after that meal!"

The Shaman ignored her and continued, "I learned about it long ago. I have been piecing together the full history of it for many years. Now, almost all the story is complete. Look at our little friends," he went on, indicating the robots. "Tell me, what do they remind you of?"

"Rats," replied Aunt Fifi. "It's those long snouts."

"I'm not sure," said Sarah, looking carefully at the robots. "Ever since I first saw them, they've reminded me of something - on T.V. or a film, or was it the Natural History Museum? That's it!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Dinosaurs! Velociraptors!"

"Veloci-whats?" her Aunt responded, bewildered.

"Velociraptors. They were a kind of dinosaur that walked upright on two legs," explained Sarah. "They had two front legs with nasty claws on them, long faces with big mouths full of teeth, and tails. Those robots look very like them - they even look like they've got stunted tails. They walk in a funny way too - just like in a film I saw of velociraptors walking."

"Very good!" said the Shaman. "Excellent in fact! You are most observant - yes, they look just like dinosaurs - big lizards that once walked the earth, some of them upright on two legs."

"Why ever make robots that look like lizards?" asked a mystified Aunt Fifi.

"What shape would you make them, if you could?" replied the Shaman. "Like you, surely, if it was possible. The makers of these robots made them in their own image."

"You mean that they were dinosaurs!" Sarah said, incredulously. "But I thought you said that these are all parallel worlds, exactly like ours. The dinosaurs died out millions of years ago - they never made machines and things!"

"Not in your world, no," agreed the Shaman. "But when I said that the worlds are parallel, I said that there were some slight differences. On this version of Earth, the dinosaurs evolved faster than in your world. They became vastly more intelligent, with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, and the ability to make the most intricate and complicated machines - rather like humans. They were like humans in other ways too - but even more so. They were intensely destructive, competitive, and warlike. They fought each other with weapons as yet undreamed of even in your world, and they searched for ways to travel into other places and times and there they carried on their terrible struggles."

The Shaman stopped and looked at the robots, standing immobile, eyes glowing. He thought for a few moments before going on, in a quieter voice. "Finally, there were only two factions left, two sides vying for control of all space and time - they were lords by then of all the dimensions and all times, or so they thought. What power they had! One faction seemed to be the victor, to have triumphed and destroyed the other - but the few remnants of the other side had secrets of their own and they turned to the very heart of creation itself to have their revenge. In their conquest of all the different dimensions of time and space they had discovered something - how can I describe it?"

He seemed very animated now, excited by the images he had seen in his mind and struggled for the words to describe the visions to his "guests". He got up and walked about, his hands grasping the air.

"How can I tell you?" he said. "Ah! I have it!" he straightened up and beckoned to the robots. Obediently they came over to the table, and stood, one on each side. Sarah shrank away as a robot stood by her. The Shaman raised his hand and the robots did likewise. From each metal hand there came a beam of pink light. The beams met in the middle of the table and a globe of light formed, very like that which had appeared around the Tidpiddle Drive and which was conveying the pictures to those on board the Nemesis. The globe first pulsed with pink light and then cleared - to become absolutely black.

“Behold all space before creation began!” whispered the Shaman. “There is nothing - only void. But watch now!”

A tiny pinprick of light appeared in the heart of the blackness. It grew rapidly to become a great fireball of glowing, swirling energy.

“That is how creation began,” said the Shaman, quietly. “But there was not just one great burst of energy - there were hundreds, thousands, all at the same time, in all the different dimensions. You see here only one - in the dimension that you live in. But here and in all the others, time was born with this great cataclysm. For eons, the ball of energy you see here expanded at a fantastic rate. In all that mass there is every planet, every sun, every cloud of stars, that form the pinpoints of light in the night sky. But there is something else - look deep into the heart of the furnaces of the first creation!”

The view changed, taking them deep into the swirling maelstrom of energy and they saw, tiny and insignificant, a small, wriggling creature, like the mythical salamander in the fire, swimming in the energy, basking in the fires, eating the incandescent energy all around it. As the fireball expanded, so did the creature, and they saw it become larger now, more closely resembling the pictures on the walls outside the room; the eyes glowed red, its breath was a yellow flame, and it had four limbs, terminating in claws. Yet, as they looked into the furnaces where matter was being born, the images seemed to multiply, - not exactly out of focus but as if there were hundreds of images, as if the creature in the centre of the picture was multiplied a thousand times and each one was in a very slightly different place to the other. The rapid expansion of the ball of energy meant that already bits of it were coalescing into embryonic objects, flung out far from the centre, the prototype galaxies full of stars and planets. The creature expanded with them, but as it did so it seemed to fragment, pieces of it whirling off into the flying parcels of energy - but still remaining a complete whole, somehow, and still appearing as if it were thousands of superimposed images.

“Sends your eyes funny, looking at all this” remarked Aunt Fifi.

“As the energy that is all our universe expands, so does the creature,” said the Shaman. “It exists in all space, in all time and in all the dimensions - that is what you see and it is as if it has thousands of heads, thousands of limbs, and claws.”

“Just like the creature on the walls,” said Sarah excitedly. “That’s what the pictures are trying to show - not that it’s really got thousands of heads, but that it’s everywhere!”

“Very good! That’s exactly right!” the Shaman congratulated Sarah. “In the vast amount of time that passed between the birth of the creature in the first furnaces of all creation and the time when the stars and planets formed, it slept, exhausted perhaps by the creation itself and the fact that it was extended over such a vast space and over so many dimensions and worlds, but it was still there, quiet, dormant, until our friends who made these robots awoke it as part of their titanic struggles with each other. It was woken to take revenge on one faction for its success and it took a truly terrible revenge. It became uncontrollable, raging over every world that the creatures had discovered, all Earths like yours, but in different dimensions. They had called it into existence from its long sleep and now it was awake, hungry and angry. It destroyed worlds across space and time - what was millions of years on some worlds was only thousands on others. Time moves differently on the Other Side, as you may know. It broke through at different times too. Almost all the peoples on all the earths that survived have stories of the time when this creature raged across their worlds. It goes by many names and many legends were told of the time it would come again and what it would then do! To the men

of the Northern lands it was Ragnarok, the Doom of the Gods, when Jormungand the Midgard Serpent that encloses all the world would rise and destroy the gods themselves. For the Greeks it was Typhon the Terrible, the many-headed monster that breathed fire and warred with the gods of Olympus. To the Egyptians it was Apopis, Lord of Destruction, to the Hindus it was Ravana, the ancient Chaldeans called it Tiamat the Bringer of Chaos - it has innumerable names but always it means fire, doom and destruction. Its appearance was certainly memorable - in almost all the stories it appears as a many-headed monster, each head with a hundred tongues of fire, claws of adamant and scales of steel!"

"Memorable, all right," said Aunt Fifi. "I can see how it survived in legends but what happened in the end - it didn't destroy our world, obviously."

"No, although it did frightful damage." agreed the Shaman. "Many of your great ancient civilisations were either badly damaged by the floods, volcanoes or earthquakes it produced as it rampaged around and within your world or were destroyed. After all, its breath is the fire that was born in the first suns, its body is impervious to the blasts of the creation furnace and its claws were used to rip the first worlds apart for breakfast."

"I presume that that explains the appearance of the world that we flew over earlier," said a pensive Aunt Fifi, with a nasty idea of what the Shaman was intending to do.

"Exactly. Hard to believe that the blasted cinder around which this moon orbits was once a world very like yours - almost exactly the same in fact. And that is what I shall threaten to do to world after world unless they do as I say!" he finished, triumphantly.

"How did the dinosaurs who woke it up deal with it?" asked Sarah.

"A very good question, my dear," smiled the Shaman, evilly. "But I am not giving away all the secrets I learned. Suffice to say that they very nearly didn't. They fought it across many a thousand world, for thousands of years, and saw it tear suns apart, and play ping-pong with planets. Almost all of them were destroyed but in the end they were able to imprison it again, pinioning it in some mysterious way across all the worlds the creature had appeared on. Parts of the beast were imprisoned on each because it had appeared in so many different dimensions, on so many different worlds and at so many different times - but there is one earth where its head lies, pinioned by some strange inter-dimensional cage. I have found many parts of this creature on many earths but that last one eludes me. When I find it, I know how to undo it and that will awaken the creature."

"I hate to say this, because I don't suppose it will make the slightest difference," said Aunt Fifi, "but is it worth saying that these veloci-things weren't able to control it once they had woken it up, and there must have been a whole lot of them . You are on your own. What makes you think you can control it?"

"Because I know how it was subdued and controlled at the end," replied the Shaman. "I know how it is imprisoned - if necessary I can imprison it again."

"What happened to the dinosaur people who woke it in the first place?" asked Sarah. "After they were able to imprison it, that is."

The Shaman shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know for certain," he replied. "I know that there were so few of them that they had to use these robots to help find and deal with the monster. There were very few left by the time they had finished. Their own world was destroyed, as you have seen. By then, they knew all the secrets of travelling in time, space and every dimension that exists. The cost of

finding that knowledge had been terrible - they seem to have gone, but the robots do not know where. Now, however, I know their secrets, and I will become Lord of all space and time!"

His voice had risen, his face was flushed; he stood in triumph, arms raised, eyes glinting. With his weasely face and wispy hair he was far from impressive, but still Aunt Fifi shuddered. It wasn't what he looked like - it was what he knew that frightened her.

The Shaman pulled himself together and his voice took on a more businesslike tone. "Now, we must go and look for that last clue," he said. "In these pictures lies the answer. One of them will show us where the head of the beast lies imprisoned, in time and space. Come, it will take us a good long time to search. I need you with me - you may not want to help, but I am not leaving you alone. I don't trust either of you!"

"Not a lot we can do with thousands of those tin things about down there," observed Aunt Fifi regretfully.

"True," replied the Shaman, "but when I am so close to my goal I intend to take no chances! Come!"

A robot stood each side of Sarah and her Aunt. With a sigh, Aunt Fifi got up and so did her niece. "I hope we find another place to eat later up on one of those galleries," said her Aunt.

The glowing globe around the Tidpiddle Drive went dark and the voice of Aunt Fifi came through to them, quiet and urgent.

"I think Sarah is stirring," she said. "I better be awake so I can comfort her if she's upset when she wakes up."

"Good thinking," said Thunder Head. "Give her our love, if you can do so without making the Shaman suspicious. We will try and contact you later."

The globe shrank in on itself and disappeared. The crew of the Nemesis looked at each other.

"I wonder if they've found the answer yet?" muttered Leaping Elk. "But it doesn't appear as though they have. How long before we arrive?" she asked the scientist.

"Oh, about half-an-hour," came the reply.

"We try again to contact Madame Fifi before we arrive," said Thunder Head. "Meanwhile, we know what we up against. All get ready!"

With a new urgency, the Khan's Guards and Lord Asahi attended to their armour and weapons. The crew of the Nemesis trimmed the ship's sails and loaded the cannons and Short John baked another cake. They were all quiet and determined, all well aware that they were heading straight into what looked very like a fortress stuffed with metal defenders, but none of them even thinking of turning back.