

# PAST IMPERFECT

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### NEMESIS

Joe looked around the Nemesis at all the preparations. He saw Mr. Jordan, the scientist, happily checking over the controls of the ramshackle heap of bits that made up the Tidpiddle Drive, scribbling things down on a piece of paper, frowning and then a look of panic crossing his face as he examined one dial - then he tapped it and when that failed, hit it. The dial fell off, and he quickly picked it up and stuck it back in place. The reading changed and the scientist's face resumed its happy, rather dazed and satisfied expression. Joe had often dreamed of heading a starship on some great mission, blasting through space in a technological marvel of a ship, bristling with advanced space weapons, sleek, yet functional, with a crew of dedicated, highly trained space warriors in immaculate spacefleet uniforms. Now he was indeed blasting through some sort of space, but on a wind-powered wooden galleon, crewed by as strange a set of sailors as ever put out of a port on a doomed voyage, made up of the lost, the lonely and the looney. The space expeditions in the stories he had read were usually off to stop some demented scientist from destroying the world but here they had a mad scientist actually controlling the engine - an engine which wasn't some miracle of super-space science but an assemblage of scrap which ran on cheap whisky and was powered by a candle. The fighting men were straight out of the middle ages, clad in armour and with weapons of no greater technological height than the bow and arrow. The leader of the expedition was not some keen-eyed, square-jawed hero in a well-cut space uniform, blaster pistol in a holster, but Chief Thunder Head, once a star of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, now wearing full war paint and feathered war bonnet, and with his trusty tomahawk stuck in his belt. It was not an image to inspire confidence and he shook his head.

Leaping Elk came up to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Worried?" she asked. Joe nodded. "You look like you're thinking that it's pretty hopeless taking on that lot with our ship and this crew," she continued.

"Well, there are an awful lot of robots in that building," said Joe. "I hate to think of Aunt Fifi and Sarah being held captive by the Shaman in there, but us charging in may not be a very good idea."

"We've got surprise on our side," said Leaping Elk, trying to sound more reassuring than she actually felt. "And we've got the Chief leading us. Oh, dear, perhaps that isn't such a good thing to say!" she sighed. "But he really is very brave and he knows a thing or two about taking on larger numbers of well-equipped enemies with a small mobile force of braves. After all, that's what we had

to do when we were trying to keep our lands. I know it didn't work in the long run, but it was that or giving up."

"I don't want to give up," said Joe firmly. "We've got to try, haven't we?"

"Of course we have!" replied Leaping Elk. "That's the spirit. Still, I wish I knew what was going on there. I think the Chief is going to have another go at contacting Madam Fifi and Sarah just before we arrive to see what's been happening."

What had been happening in the Pyramid? Sarah had begun to stir before Aunt Fifi could tell the chief about the rest of their day looking for the secret the Shaman was on about. Actually, there wasn't a lot to tell. They had walked around the vast interior for hours and hours, or so it seemed, exploring floor after floor and they had found nothing. The pictures just went on and on - planets, suns, stars and comets, solar systems, galaxies and occasionally close-ups of planets, and all with that huge, jewelled serpent entwining through everything. The most important bit of news that they could have given the Chief - and Aunt Fifi was kicking herself for not telling him this - was that they had found nothing.

"My feet ache," sighed Aunt Fifi for the hundredth time as she walked around yet another floor. Sarah was exhausted and near to tears and she sat down and said she couldn't go another step. The Shaman was frustrated, angry and extremely tired himself - he had the additional problem that he was getting lots of images from the robots and that made him even more tired, trying to sort them all out. Sarah sat by the balcony and looked down - they were a long way up now, still only halfway up the monstrous structure, but it was a very long way indeed down to the ground. She had almost lost her fear of heights now - they had been walking along these galleries so long that she didn't seem to notice the long drop quite so much. She looked down - not something she would like to have done earlier in the day - and noticed something: all the eyes of the robots were off. They all still stood there, the lights of the galleries glinting dully off their domed heads, but all signs of life had gone. For some time their glowing eyes had followed the progress of the little group around the Shaman, as they had wondered from gallery to gallery, but now they stood, rank upon rank, still as statues.

Aunt Fifi sat down beside Sarah. It seemed ages since they had eaten.

"I'm not going another step either," she said firmly. "Sarah's had it and we both need food and drink. You can do what you like about it, but we're staying here unless you find somewhere for us to rest and eat!"

The Shaman seemed to be about to burst into a rage - Sarah wondered if he would order the robots to throw them over the balcony - but he stopped and calmed down.

"Very well!" he said. "I need to sit down and try and think this out. We will find somewhere to eat and drink again - the robots tell me that there is another room along here where we can find one of those machines that give out food."

He led the way and Aunt Fifi and Sarah wearily stood up and dragged after him. They saw the robots open a door in the wall of the gallery and they went in. The room was almost identical to the one they had eaten in before, and they sat down at a very similar table with more of those odd-shaped chairs around it, but this time Aunt Fifi decided that she and Sarah needed something more substantial than sandwiches. Thinking hard, she ordered up a steak and kidney pie with roast potatoes and carrots with a big, steamed treacle pudding with custard for afters; the robots

understood and must have pressed all the right buttons, for, after a short while of gurgling, sputtering and clicking from the machine, a beautiful big dinner arrived.

“Wow, Auntie,” breathed Sarah. “That’s just what I wanted. How did you know?”

“It’s the gift I’ve got - anyway I wanted it too!” replied her Aunt. There was a big pot of refreshing tea, as well. The Shaman had hesitated to order but saw the piled plates of Aunt Fifi and Sarah and decided he would have the same. For quite some time, there was silence broken only by the sound of clinking knives, forks and spoons and the pouring of cups of tea. At the end they all sat back and sighed rather more happily.

“A good choice, Madame,” said the Shaman. “It has restored me - although I do not exactly feel like doing a great deal after all that. We all need rest before we carry on. I need to commune with the robots a little more and you may stay here and relax - for now. I shall be back later.”

He left the room, the robots following. The door shut and Aunt Fifi tried it to see if it would open - it didn’t.

“Although what we would do and where we would go if we did get out of here, I really don’t know” she said.

“I wonder how far we walked today,” said Sarah. “My feet ache!”

“And mine - I think we’ve walked twenty miles or more at least,” replied her Aunt. “I didn’t see anything that might have been what he was looking for - what was it? Some sort of cage imprisoning the creature’s head?”

“Something like that,” agreed Sarah.

“In fact after a while every wall looks exactly the same,” remarked her Aunt. “I didn’t really notice anything different about any of them and neither, I think, did he.”

Sarah sat in thought for a few moments. “Actually, Auntie,” she said thoughtfully, “it all began to look a bit different as we walked along the last couple of galleries. I was thinking that the whole thing was rather like a big map - a sort of path through it marked by that giant snake - and then I began to think it was a giant game of snakes and ladders at one point, without the ladders, though, except for the ones we climbed up. Then I saw that in the last couple of galleries, those robots appeared in the pictures along with some creatures that looked a bit like velociraptors - you know, those dinosaurs I was on about earlier.”

“I remember,” nodded her Aunt. “I didn’t notice, I’m afraid. All the pictures had become a blur by then. What were the veloci-things and the robots doing?”

“Mostly being eaten or running away,” said Sarah “Although here and there they seemed to be trying to fight the snake with funny weapons or trying to catch it in a big net. There weren’t many velociraptors in the last pictures and the ones that there were had bands on their heads like the Shaman’s.”

“Well, don’t tell old weasel-face,” said Aunt Fifi. “I don’t want him to know anything that might help him.”

“Old weasel-face already knows,” came the familiar reedy voice from behind them. “And it does help a bit. Tomorrow we need to go higher up and look at the pictures towards the top of the pyramid.”

“Must you creep up on people like that,” snapped Aunt Fifi, nearly jumping out of her skin. “It’s most disconcerting!”

“Of course it is! That’s why I practice it so much,” replied the Shaman. “Your niece is very observant. The pictures actually tell a story and the bit we have reached is when the creators of our robot friends began to attempt to stop the creature and imprison it. We may be nearer the answer now - I suggest tomorrow we start at the very top of the pyramid - perhaps that is where the story stops, although I doubt that the answer is quite so simple.”

“What do we do until then?” asked Aunt Fifi, noticing that the Shaman was looking very hollow eyed and was leaning heavily on his staff. She realised that the strain of communicating with the robots and the long walk they had undertaken had affected him badly. He was exhausted and near collapse.

“You will stay here,” said the Shaman and gestured to a robot. It went to one of the walls and must have pressed a hidden switch. A panel of the wall opened to reveal another room, and the Shaman indicated that Aunt Fifi and Sarah should enter it. They did so, accompanied by two robots. The room had two beds in it, with gentle, low lighting and there was a shower and a loo in a cubicle in one corner. Everything was made for someone of a slightly different shape to either Aunt Fifi or Sarah, but they were all still useable. In another corner was an odd machine, that looked a bit like a large waste paper bin.

“That is a laundry,” indicated the Shaman. “The robots tell me that you can put your clothes in there and they will come out clean in the morning. Good night. I will leave three of my robots with you - just in case”

“Oh good,” remarked Aunt Fifi. “Just what I want, three animated hat stands to keep me company while I sleep!”

“They will switch off while you sleep,” said the Shaman, ignoring Aunt Fifi’s sarcasm. “If you attempt to escape or do anything out the ordinary they will turn themselves back on and will warn me.” He turned and left and the panel closed behind him with a hissing sound.

“Well, it’s a bit like a bed-and-breakfast place, but it’s clean and comfortable,” said Aunt Fifi looking round. “No dust, which is pretty good after a few thousand years. I wonder if this has been created especially for us or if it’s been here all along?”

Sarah sat on one of the beds. “They’re quite comfy, Auntie,” she said, and laid down. She yawned. “Actually, they’re really comfy . . . “

“Well,” began her Aunt, “I think we better have a shower although I don’t like the idea of having one under the eyes of these tin things. You never know who’s watching - suppose those are cameras in their eyes and . . oh!” She stopped. Sarah was fast asleep, fully dressed, on the bed. Aunt Fifi gently took off Sarah’s shoes, put her further into the centre of the bed and covered her up.

Yawning herself now, she sat on the other bed, thinking she would get up in a minute, have a shower and put her clothes in the laundry - and then she lay down and the next thing she was asleep too. Some hours later, with the lights dim and everything very quiet, the Chief contacted her and that was when she gave them all the information about the pyramid. When Sarah began to stir, Aunt Fifi cut off contact with the Chief and opened her eyes to make sure Sarah wouldn’t be upset when she awoke and found that she wasn’t in her own bed but was in very distant place, miles from the comforts of home. As she woke, so Aunt Fifi was there, sat on the bed beside her; Sarah smiled when she saw her, and then the smile left her face when she saw the robots standing guard and remembered where they were. The robot’s eyes flickered on when Aunt Fifi and Sarah got up and

went into the shower cubicle and closed the door. While they showered away from the prying pink eyes, Aunt Fifi told Sarah about her contact with the Chief.

“I think they’re on their way,” she whispered. “It won’t be long now. I wonder if we can find some way to help them take old weasel-face by surprise?”

Sarah nodded, feeling happier now. They showered, dressed and entered the bedroom again. The panel opened and a robot gestured to them to go into the other room. Aunt Fifi shrugged her shoulders. “Must be our breakfast call,” she said.

The Shaman was waiting for them, looking a little fresher than he had the previous night.

“Good morning,” he said. “We have a busy day ahead of us. I want to get a move on, so if you would please order your breakfasts, we can renew our search.”

They ordered a breakfast - Aunt Fifi reckoned that if the previous day was anything to go by, a large traditional breakfast of eggs, bacon, sausages and lots of tea was in order and Sarah didn’t disagree.

“We start at the top of the pyramid today,” remarked the Shaman.

“Using the lift, I hope,” said Aunt Fifi.

The Shaman nodded. “We can then walk downwards, which might be less tiring. I feel it will not be long before we find our goal.”

“Do you actually know what it is that you are looking for?” asked Aunt Fifi.

“I am getting a better idea, but still do not know exactly what the picture will be like,” admitted the Shaman. “Please, finish your tea and we can go.”

He was fidgeting now but Aunt Fifi was firm.

“If we are going to be trailing about along these galleries like we did yesterday,” she insisted, “I need some food inside me to keep me going - and so does Sarah. I am going to have some toast and marmalade and another cup of tea!”

Sarah realised that Aunt Fifi was spinning out the time as much as possible - so she went along with the idea although she was pretty well full. Still, she also had some toast and another cup of tea. Aunt Fifi then insisted on cleaning her teeth before they set off and it was a very frustrated and fidgety Shaman who eventually shepherded them out the room and back to the search.

Despite all Aunt Fifi’s attempts to slow everything up, it didn’t actually take too long to find what the Shaman was looking for. For a start, as they were near the top of the structure, the galleries were a lot shorter to walk along and it was clear that in these pictures there had been a considerable change. The robots and a few velociraptors were more in evidence, pinioning bits of the huge body of the creature on various worlds.

“We’re too close to the answer,” muttered Aunt Fifi. “I was hoping it would take longer.”

Sarah found she had become interested in the pictures - it was like a story and she wanted to know how it had happened. She recognised odd things in the pictures - in the various Earths that were displayed in close-up there were features she had seen in books or even in places where she had been. She wondered if some of these places were on her world or on one of the alternatives - she recognised the Great Sphinx of Egypt being used to keep a bit of the monster tied down and she was sure that at one point there was a picture of Skegness Clock Tower holding down a claw - if any work was ever done on it, she thought, the workmen were going to have a real shock.

The Shaman was hurrying, looking from one picture to another, impatient to find the answer, knowing that he was very close and was paying no attention to Aunt Fifi and her attempts to slow him down. He had more robots with him now - there were ten of them with them and below on a lower gallery were another twenty. He was taking no chances with an escape and hurried them on.

Then he stopped at a picture and studied it closely. Sarah was right behind and she was struck by a rather smaller picture, one that seemed almost an afterthought by the artist, a little picture-postcard of a view - and Sarah gasped although she tried to hide it. It was no use - the Shaman turned, saw what she had been looking at and despite her efforts at putting him off by standing in the way of the picture and claiming she had something in her shoe, he pushed her to one side, despite Aunt Fifi's protestations, and sucked in his breath.

Aunt Fifi hadn't seen the picture and was indignant at the way Sarah had been elbowed aside.

"How dare you!" she said. "All to look at a picture of Blackpool Tower! You should be ashamed off yourself." Sarah was trying to shush her but it was too late.

"Blackpool Tower!" said the Shaman in triumph. "Well, I never! I would never have known what it was! I thank you, Madam! You have told me what I needed to know! Look, there is the cage that pinions the monster's head! A strange inter-dimensional lattice made of forces that bind the very universe together! And you call it Blackpool Tower!"

"Yes, but it could be anywhere," said Aunt Fifi desperately. "There might be hundreds of Blackpool towers on all your alternative Earths!"

"Now who would be daft enough to build lots of those things!" said the Shaman contemptuously. "Only on your witless world do they do things like that!"

"Oh, do they," said a deflated Aunt Fifi, casting desperately around for some other way of putting the Shaman off. She couldn't think of anything.

"Absolutely!" crowed the Shaman. "Now I have the last piece of the jigsaw! Now is the time for me to travel to your world and release the creature; you will come with me to share my triumph and witness the beginning of an age of terror!"

He gestured to the robots behind him, and they stepped forward, heading for Aunt Fifi and Sarah who backed away, Aunt Fifi indicating that Sarah should stay behind her.

"It is pointless to resist, Madam!" hissed the Shaman. "You will only get hurt. For the sake of the girl, come quietly!"

The lead robot, arms outstretched, was almost ready to grab Aunt Fifi when she gathered her strength and in the best tradition of a former dancer at the Follies Bergère, delivered the hardest, highest high kick she had ever managed. Her foot connected with the robot's head and it went flying high in the air. "RUN!" she shouted to Sarah and they turned - and the robot's head which had flown up in the air came down right in front of Sarah - she put out her arms and caught it and hared off down the gallery carrying it as if it was a rugby ball. Aunt Fifi ran too - they didn't know where they were going but they ran. There was one of the transparent tube arms of the lift to one side but Aunt Fifi didn't know how to work the lift and reasoned that the only way was down - into a horde of more robots. So she carried on along the gallery - and came to a dead end. The gallery ran out - there was a door ahead, one of the usual sliding ones, with a glowing panel to one side that looked as if it should open it somehow. Aunt Fifi tried to open it by banging on the panel with her fist. Sarah turned to look back; she could hear the Shaman shouting and screaming at the robots to go faster and could

hear a commotion - but when she looked, she saw that the robots were in trouble. The one Aunt Fifi had kicked was still moving, but without a head it had no sense of direction and was wondering about from side to side and even backwards. The other robots couldn't get round it, two had fallen over and were trying to pick themselves up and then Sarah, in her anxiety, twisted a bit of the robot's head with her fingers - and the headless robot promptly fell over.

Sarah glanced down; the eyes of the head in her hands had gone out and she looked at what she had twisted - it was the things ear! At least, it was in the position that an ear would have been if the robots had had ears. As it was, they only had one of these odd things, on the left side. She looked back at the pursuing robots and saw them fall over the headless body. The door suddenly opened - whatever the mechanism was, Aunt Fifi's pounding had made it work. They tumbled inside and then Aunt Fifi began pounding on a panel inside to make the door close again, while the robots picked themselves up and lumbered in pursuit. The door slid shut and they desperately looked round for something to jam it shut with. The door ran on rails and Sarah jammed her shoe in between the bottom rail and the door to stop it - it would hold for now, she thought. The robots reached the door and began banging on it while Aunt Fifi and Sarah cast around for something more substantial to act as a barrier. They found a tall standard-lamp type thing, with a metal bar for a body, and jammed that between the end of the door and the wall - it was the right length and as the robots found the panel that opened the door and tried to make it work, the motor that operated the door made a straining noise and stopped. The robots began to pound on it again. For the moment they were safe.

"Right," gasped Aunt Fifi, "Hold hands! We're going to contact the Chief!"

They held hands, concentrated as never before and tried to blank out from their minds the sound of robots banging and pounding on the door, the Shaman screaming somewhere in the background and the intermittent whine of the motor trying to open the door and making straining noises as it hit the metal lamp. It wasn't the ideal atmosphere to hold a seance in, but they had to try. Would it work?

