

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER NINETEEN

COMES THE CAVALRY!

On board the *Nemesis*, Leaping Elk had just said “I wish I knew what was going on there,” when the Chief, standing in the bow trying to look impressive as usual, stiffened and closed his eyes.

“Hum!” he said as to some invisible caller on a phantom telephone. “Wait one moment, please. Putting you through.” He swiftly climbed down the steps to the main deck, stood by the Tidpiddle Drive and held out his hands towards it. The others watched to see what was going on.

“Madame Fifi trying to get through!” announced Thunder Head. “Watch!”

Everyone gathered round the Drive as the Chief held out his hands and the glowing ball of light formed around the pile of scrap and odds and ends that made up the motor driving them through the dimensions.

“Can you hear me,” came Aunt Fifi’s desperate voice through a cloud of pink gas that seemed to fill the ball.

“We hear loud and clear!” said the Chief. “What going on?”

“We’ve locked ourselves in a room at the top of this pyramid,” said Madame Fifi. “Those robot things are trying to break the door down. He’s found the answer - the Shaman, I mean. It’s Blackpool Tower in our world! Get there and stop him!”

“We rescuing you first!” said the Chief. “We nearly there. Hold on!” He turned to Mr. Jordan and barked, “Scientist! How long before we arrive!”

“Oh, er, well; actually I think we’re there,” replied the Scientist looking around.

“Hey, the fireworks have stopped,” shouted Deaf Charlie.

“Moon dead ahead!” came Ben Bun’s voice from the masthead. “We’re going to crash straight into it any minute! Whoopee!”

They looked - the ship had emerged from the strange space it had been flying through and was now in what was supposed to be real space, blackness shot by stars and with the vast disc of the moon in front of them; they were certainly hurtling straight for the surface at a very high speed.

“What direction?” shouted Sakowa. “Where do you want me to steer?”

“I know this sounds daft, but don’t!” replied the scientist. “Just let it find it’s own way!”

He was right; at the speed they were going and the direction they were taking, straight into the moon at hundreds of miles an hour, it did sound daft. However, Sakawa let go of the wheel and they all held their breath. Joe noticed that Mr. Jordan had his fingers crossed - and was looking rather nervous. They hurtled closer and closer and Ben Bun shouted “Everybody down! Watch out for the bits!” and Joe closed his eyes as the vast silver disc now filled the whole horizon and the craters and

mountains loomed up very fast indeed. Then he opened them again - they hadn't crashed and everyone seemed to be breathing out again.

The ship had pulled up at the last minute out of its dive and was now skimming over the grey surface, which was lit brightly by the sun, with strong shadows silhouetting every rock and crater-wall of the inhospitable surface. The ship was still belting along - the glowing ball around the drive was still there and Aunt Fifi's voice came through again.

"What's going on?" she said. "Get away from here! It's crawling with robots. Get to Earth and stop that idiot releasing whatever he's going to release!"

"We nearly there," replied the Chief. "Hang on! We on our way!"

"Dirty great big pointed metal box dead ahead!" yelled Ben from the crow's nest. "There's some funny looking ship moored there already! We're coming alongside!"

The pyramid was indeed dead ahead; at great speed the ship had covered the distance to the platform and under the roof that covered it they could see Mr. Jordan's other ship. There were no robots about and the Nemesis slowed right down and drifted in, setting itself down beside the other ship, as light as a feather.

"Do we drop anchor?" asked a worried Leif.

"Not necessary," replied Mr. Jordan. "The ship will stay here, protected by the drive, as long as that candle stays alight. If it looks like going out, then light another, quick!"

"Right!" said the Chief in a decisive voice, "Crew stay here and keep ship clear of robots. Man cannon and things. Rest of us go and get Sarah and Madame Fifi! All ready?"

"I'm going too," said Sakowa. "You might need a hand throwing robots about."

Bomkoff had found a sizeable club somewhere and was ready to go too.

"How are you going to tell him to stay here?" asked Leaping Elk.

"Me not bother," said the Chief. "Him heap big man. Could be good idea. But you stay here with Joe."

"Well, you can forget that idea too," replied Leaping Elk decidedly. "I'm not letting you have all the fun!"

"Me, too," said Joe. "I want to go. I want to help."

"Notti sokblat etty jam!" said Bomkoff, nodding vigorously and winking at Joe. The Chief shrugged his shoulders.

"Me not put it better myself. Come on then, charge!"

The crew pushed the gangplank over the side so it sloped down onto the platform and down it dashed the Chief at the head of the Guards, Sakowa, Lord Asahi, Bomkoff, Frank Jordan, Leaping Elk and Joe. They ran straight into the cavernous interior, not knowing what was in front of them, but hoping to take whatever it was by surprise. As it was, it was they who were taken by surprise - they ran in at full pelt, weapons at the ready - and met no resistance at all. The robots were there all right, thousands of them, it seemed. Rank upon rank, they stood like metal statues on either side of the attackers, but their eyes were all dark.

"They must be in some sort of power-save mode," guessed Mr. Jordan.

"Long as they stay off! Quick - everyone in lift!" commanded Thunder Head.

He pointed to the lift shaft. The door opened as they reached it and the all piled inside - there was just enough room.

“How do we make this thing work?” asked Leaping Elk.

“I think we just touch the floor we want,” said Mr. Jordan, pointing to the panel with all its lights. That was a problem - they didn’t know which floor. Then Joe jumped.

“What’s wrong?” asked Leaping Elk. Joe didn’t reply but touched one of the buttons towards the top of the column. The lift shot up.

“I don’t know,” said Joe. “It was as if someone shouted in my ear and told me the one to press. But I didn’t actually hear it - it was as if someone was shouting inside my head.”

“Somebody help us!” nodded the Chief. “Well done!”

The lift arrived very quickly; the doors opened - but before they all dashed out Joe had a thought.

“Hang on!” he said. “If this goes down and those robots wake up it will bring them up here. Can we stop the lift?”

“Good thinking,” said Mr. Jordan. “I think I’ve got the very tool!” He pulled out a small hammer from his pocket and smashed the control panel to fragments.

“Very scientific!” muttered Leaping Elk.

“Oh, I always carry a hammer,” said the scientist airily. “It’s the most useful tool I’ve got! Oo-look! I think this is the power cable - arrgh!”

It was; he had pulled out a striped wire from the smashed panel and had touched the end. There was a blue flash and the scientist slumped to the floor. He was still breathing but was out for the count, with a surprised look on his face and his hair all frizzed out like a halo around his head.

“Bring idiot along!” said the Chief. “Quick, at double!”

A guard slung the scientist over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes and they all dashed down the long transparent tube - Joe hoped that whoever had told him the floor number had got it right! As soon as they emerged from the tube, Joe realised that they had. They heard the Shaman shouting and screaming and on their left they saw him, surrounded by a group of robots and Joe was pleased to see a look of shocked surprise on the face of the Shaman as he saw the Guards and the rest of them hurtle out of the tube. On their right, along the balcony, was another crowd of robots bashing at a door which was buckling and swaying.

“Madame Fifi in there!” shouted the Chief. “Rescue them first and then we deal with weasel-face!”

“I don’t look like a weasel!” screamed the Shaman. “After them, you fools!” He urged on his robots - but kept well out of the way himself. He looked down and screamed to the robots below to help. A thousand eyes suddenly came on and they trooped towards the lift, which was stuck, smoking, on the Shaman’s floor. He shouted at them to take the stairs; some turned to go to the stairs, others carried on the lift and there was a right mess as robots fell over each other and collapsed, bashed into each other and generally milled about. It was a while before they trooped to the first flight of steps and began to climb up, clanking like steam engines.

Meanwhile, the robots battering the door stopped, turned round and headed for the attacking guards and assorted others. Sakowa and Lord Asahi were in front and as the robots reached out to grab them they did their Judo trick, each holding on to a robot and falling backwards near the railings of the balcony - and two robots sailed gracefully over it and dropped down to the floor far below. There were two very satisfying metallic crashes like dustbins falling from the top of a

skyscraper on to concrete. Bomkoff didn't mess about; he grabbed the nearest robot and swung him around his head like a club. More robots went flying, heads adrift, and were tossed one by one over the side - there were another series of satisfying metallic smashes far, far below.

"We here! The cavalry has arrived!" shouted the Chief as he banged on what was left of the door.

"Not exactly well put," murmured Leaping Elk.

There was the sound of a load of metal bits being dragged away from the door and it opened to reveal the rather frightened faces of Sarah and Aunt Fifi.

"Is it really you," said Sarah, "Oh you're wonderful!" She threw herself at Leaping Elk and gave her a hug, and then hugged the chief. Aunt Fifi curtsied to Lord Asahi who bowed.

They had been trying desperately to block the door and had thrown all the things they could find in front of it that would move - there was quite a pile of assorted metallic furniture now to one side of the door. The guard carrying Mr. Jordan carefully put the unconscious scientist down on the floor inside the room.

"Now we deal with weasel-head!" said the Chief and a bolt of pink light smacked into the door frame by his head and left a nasty jagged, sizzling hole!

"Look out!" warned Leaping Elk. The robots around the Shaman had decided against trying to tackle the invaders man to man - or rather, tin thing to man - and had decided on a different tactic. They used their hands as if they were guns and began blasting bolts of fire at the attackers, who rapidly took cover. Bomkoff still had a robot - or rather most of one - that he was using as a shield and trying to reflect the blasts back. The guards were armoured, as was Lord Asahi, but two of them were hit, and it was obvious that the armour was not going to protect them properly. They groaned and fell. The furniture used to jam the door was rapidly piled up to make a barricade across the balcony from behind which the guards took cover, wondering what to do next. Then Sarah stubbed her toe against the head of the robot Aunt Fifi had kicked off. She remembered something.

"Their ears!" she shouted. "Shoot at their ears! It's an off switch!"

At first the guards thought Sarah had caught something off old Ben Bun but they strung their bows and took aim. They were good shots. Arrows hit ears and robots began to drop - but more had appeared from other floors as the Shaman had called up for help - and far down below thousands of robots were piling up the stairs. Arrows flew and robots dropped - but the arrows were in short supply and several of the guards had been hit.

Leaping Elk had run out the room to grab a fallen guard and pull him back in to the room to attend to him when a bolt of pink light bounced off a railing of the balcony only an inch or two above her head. The injured guard was alive but stunned and was slowly recovering; he still had his bow with him and Leaping Elk let loose an ear splitting war-whoop, grabbed the bow and fired. She was an excellent shot! A robot dropped and the guards shouted and cheered with encouragement. Another bolt of energy smashed into a rail beside her from a robot on a gallery opposite - this time the Chief was annoyed - he grabbed the bow and arrows of another wounded guard and fired, also whooping and hollering war cries. It was a long shot but he hit the robot right in the ear and it stopped. The guards shouted and cheered again - but the bolts of energy were coming thick and fast and their arrows were running out. Things were looking desperate.

Meanwhile, Joe was in the room with Aunt Fifi and Sarah, having been shoved into it by Leaping Elk and told to stay out the way. With them was the prone body of the scientist on the floor - he was all right but still out for the count. Staying out the way sounded like good advice but Joe had a good look around while the fight outside was going on. He realised that the room they were in was something like a control centre; there were several screens, like odd-shaped computers and some of them were switched on.

"I've been looking at these," said Sarah. "Look at all the little lights on this screen."

Joe did - there were thousands of them, it seemed - but they noticed one or two winking off every now and then.

"It's the robots," suggested Joe. "Each light must be a robot. As the arrows turn them off, so they go out."

"That's what I thought," agreed Sarah. "I wish we could turn them all off from here but I don't know how to use the controls!"

Joe examined them; there was what looked like a computer mouse on the floor - there were no wires attached to it and it had been knocked off the desk when Aunt Fifi and Sarah had been throwing furniture about. He picked it up and ran it along the surface of the desk top in front of the screen. A green trail appeared on the screen and he held down a button on top of the mouse; the green trail drew a little box around a group of robots. Then he looked around for something else that might look like a switch - and saw something like a harness with gloves hanging on a hook on the wall, its wires plugged into the computer. Thoughts raced through his mind; he quickly put it on with Sarah's help, slipping his hands into the metal gloves - they were built for a bigger and odd-shaped hand with only two fingers and a thumb, but he could fiddle his hands and fingers into the thing easily enough. Then on Sarah's suggestion he lifted his left hand and scratched his ear - and all the lights in the green box he had drawn went off!

"Do it again!" shouted Sarah. "I'll go and see what happens!"

Sarah ran outside, Aunt Fifi rushing after her shouting, "Come back! What do I tell your parents if you get holes in you?"

Outside on the balcony things were looking grim; bolts of light were flying all over the place and the defenders were rapidly running out of arrows and trying to make every one tell - but Sarah threw herself down flat on the floor of the gallery and peered over the edge; Aunt Fifi threw herself down beside her.

"What on earth are you doing!" she gasped. A bolt of pink energy zipped through her hair and there was smell of singeing.

"Hey - I don't like my hair parted!" she shouted.

"You get used to it Auntie," replied Sarah. "Look - are they going off?"

"Are what going off? Oh, look at that!" said Aunt Fifi and pointed. A whole swathe of robots, only a few floors down now and heading upwards fast, suddenly put their metal hands to their ears and fell over. Then another lot did the same. More robots fell over them - the stairs were jammed and it was chaos. But the robots firing at them were still very much alive and the arrows had nearly run out. Sarah picked herself up and ran back into the room, closely followed by Aunt Fifi.

"It's working!" shouted Sarah, "But move faster! It hasn't affected the ones outside!"

Joe was moving as fast as he could. He drew box after box and scratched his ear again and again - there seemed to be thousands of the red lights, though. The Guards and the rest abandoned the barricade, and carrying their wounded, withdrew into the room and tried to block the wrecked door. The Shaman could be heard shouting in triumph and the bolts of energy were fizzing into the room itself. Then the fire slackened, the Shaman could be heard shouting in rage and Joe's hands were going over the mouse and his ears like lightning. There were only a few red lights left on now and he rapidly closed them all down and with his ear aching from all the scratching and his hand numb, he sat back. The pyramid was quiet now - all except for the sound of the Shaman cursing and jumping up and down in between kicking robots to make them move. He was jumping up and down because he kept hurting his foot.

"We won!" said the Chief in surprise. "Well done everybody - especially Joe and Sarah!"

"Tobglot gosbasket!" nodded Bomkoff, nursing a burnt arm.

"Now let's get that Shaman," said the Captain of the Guards. "I want to wring his scrawny neck!"

They left the wounded to the care of Leaping Elk and Aunt Fifi and charged out the room. Joe and Sarah went with them - if the Shaman was going to get his neck wrung they rather wanted to see it. What they saw was the Shaman at bay - backing along the gallery with the remaining Guards and Lord Asahi, swords drawn, in pursuit.

Then the Shaman threw up his hands.

"You think you have won!" he said. "But I have knowledge now that will take me where I want to go. Fools, you are all doomed!" A thick red cloud formed around him and although the Guards dashed into the smoke waving their swords, they were too late. The smoke cleared and the Shaman had gone.

"Well," said Aunt Fifi, as she emerged from the room to see the last wisps of red disperse, "at least we know where he's gone. We better get after him. Can we use the cloud?"

The Chief shook his head. "He still very powerful - have much knowledge now, like him say. We must use ships - slower but they get us there."

"And at least we know where we are going," said Aunt Fifi. "Blackpool Tower. Although what they will say in Blackpool when we all arrive, I really don't know!"

But there was the small matter of getting back down to the ships and also of helping their wounded to think about.

First they went back to attend to the wounded and also to see if they could be moved - and it was now that Joe and Sarah saw that Leaping Elk had some more remarkable powers that they hadn't realised before. There were seven wounded guards. Their armour had saved them from being badly injured or killed but they had suffered some bad burns and broken limbs. Bomkoff, too, had been hit. Leaping Elk put her hands over the burns and concentrated - and the guards breathed more easily as if the pain had gone. Bomkoff was amazed.

"Lasto kobble slobotty!" he said.

"You have the gift of healing," said a Guard, "I think that's what he means, and he's right."

"Yes - she got great gifts," nodded the Chief. "Can help both men and animals."

“I need to get them back to the prairies so I can use some herbal medicine I’ve got which will do a proper job,” said Leaping Elk. “I can help a bit now, but they will need some attention later, and the broken arms will need splints.”

The guards were able to get up and the scientist also began to recover.

“Oh dear!” he said groggily. “What was I doing? Blowing myself up again?”

“No, you got big shock from little wire,” said the Chief.

“Which makes me think,” said Joe. “How are we going to get down again? It’s a long walk if that lift is out of action.”

“First you want me to knock it out and now you want it to work again,” smiled the scientist. “Let’s have a look, shall we?”

“There’s another thing,” said Aunt Fifi. “What if those tin things have smashed the ships? How do we go anywhere?”

“First we get down,” said the Chief. “Meet that problem when we come to it.”

Frank Jordan got to his feet and made his way to the lift shaft, followed by the rest of them. The scientist was surprised at all the broken robots lying about. “I seem to have missed all the fun!” he said. Joe watched as the scientist prodded the remains of the panel.

“What colour was the power wire?” he asked.

“It’s that striped one,” replied Joe.

Gingerly Mr. Jordan held it and told everyone to get in to the lift.

“I hope this works,” he said.

A nasty thought went through Joe’s head - if it didn’t, would the lift just drop like a stone? It was a long way down. The scientist prodded the wire at some bits of shattered metal in the panel’s remains and the door slid shut. The lift began to fall - not like a stone but still pretty fast. They braced themselves but the lift arrived safely on the ground floor and the door opened.

“Oh good!” said Mr. Jordan with a smile on his face. “It was the right one after all - there were quite a lot of bits in there. I was guessing, really.”

“Me glad you didn’t say that before we get in!” muttered the Chief.

They made their way, assisting their wounded, to the platform where the ships had been left, wondering what they would find - and what they did find was rather surprising. For a start there were lots of bits of robots scattered about all over the place, heads, limbs, bodies and here and there, iron cannon balls. The ships were undamaged except for three holes through the sails of the Nemesis, slightly singed around the edges, and a couple of ropes had been severed, which Franz and Didier were now engaged in splicing. The crew cheered as they saw the Chief and his party return. Short John beamed as he saw Aunt Fifi and he waved. Then he disappeared into the galley to rustle up something to eat. What had been happening on the ship?

It was Captain Leif who explained as soon as everyone came on board.

“We’ve been attacked,” he said. “You had gone inside and everything went quiet. Old Ben was keeping lookout and he suddenly shouted “Dustbins on legs ahead!” Well, we all looked out and saw lots of those metal things marching towards us in long lines. They fired pink lightning from their hands but it bounced off because of that diddle-doddle drive thing.”

“Tidpiddle!” corrected Mr. Jordan. Everyone shushed him.

“We had loaded the cannons,” continued Lief, “but to be honest, none of us had much idea about firing them. Then Short John took charge. He said . . . oh, what was it now?”

Short John emerged from the galley carrying a huge cake with Ben Bun behind him with a tray of plates, cups and a big steaming teapot. Cap’n Mint was on Short John’s shoulder.

“Aim low and skittle ‘em like ninepins!” squawked Cap’n Mint.

“Yes, that’s right!” said a beaming Captain Leif. “He took charge, as I said, and called for a light. That was when we got the holes in the sails because Old Ben brought John the candle from under that drive thing and the protection it gave us stopped! John made him take it back and light a slow match. Then he fired the guns and directed us to load; he aimed the guns and he really knew what he was doing. He knocked them for six all over the place!”

“That’s the way to do it!” squawked Cap’n Mint in agreement.

“Arr! That’s right! Well, you see, before I was promoted captain, I was master gunner on the Mersey Ferry,” explained Short John. “It’s good to see you again, young lady!” he said to Sarah. “You need a big piece of my cake. And a welcome to you too ma’am!” he said shyly to Aunt Fifi. “And if I may say so, you are a sight indeed for sore old eyes like mine. Please have a slice of cake!”

“Oh, thank you,” said Aunt Fifi, fluttering her eyelashes. “It’s lovely to see you again too.”

While they enjoyed tea and cake, the Chief discussed what they should do with Frank Jordan.

“We take both ships or just this one?” he asked. “We got to get there quick.”

“I’ll hook the two up together,” answered the scientist. “Two drives will go exactly twice as fast. That’s the law of inter-dimensional physics.”

He trailed a wire between the Nemesis and his spaceship and asked the Chief to keep an eye on the Nemesis’ drive while he manned the spaceship.

“Him ask me to look after this thing?” wondered the Chief, looking at the pile of bits that made up the motor. “Me have no idea if it go wrong or work all right!”

“Just keep the candle lit and duck if something starts fizzing - that’s my advice,” said Leaping Elk.

Over on the other ship Mr. Jordan closed the hatch, waved through the window and then he must have pressed something because both ships lifted off and set off in a direction away from the Moon. Then they suddenly accelerated very fast and they were off in the “fireworks” with Deaf Charlie enthralled at the sight all over again. Sakowa steered, Leaping Elk bound the Guards’ wounds, made splints for broken arms and helped them over their pain, while Joe and Sarah sat down with Aunt Fifi in the galley and had lots of cake and tea - they felt they needed it. Short John sat with them and smiled as they enjoyed his cooking so much.

The Chief came in to join them and had a large helping of cake.

“We arrive soon, I think,” he said. “Although really me have no idea what we do when we get there. Where is it? Blackpool? Me been there once, long ago - with show.”

“Frankly, what Blackpool is going to make of us arriving in a sailing ship and with that odd thing the Scientist is driving, I really don’t know!” said Aunt Fifi. “If we’re stopped we’ll have to tell them we’re appearing in a show at the Tower!”

“If it still there!” pointed out the Chief. That was a thought; the Shaman had a head start. What would they find?