

PAST IMPERFECT

CHAPTER TWENTY

RAGNAROK!

Mr. Jordan was right; they certainly travelled faster with the ships coupled together. It was not long before they arrived, dropping out of inter-dimensional space with its “fireworks” and finding themselves on the sea in a thick fog. Mr. Jordan’s spaceship bobbed about, luckily watertight, until the crew of the Nemesis got a rope around it and hauled it in close to the sailing ship. A hatch opened on top and the scientist put his head out.

“We should be there!” he said.

“We probably are,” Lief called back. “It’s so foggy we can’t see a thing.”

It was an odd fog, too; faintly red, it was shot with lightning bolts high above them, but there was no thunder - just an ominous heavy silence. The Nemesis drifted on, the crew trying to keep a lookout and hanging lanterns around the hull, until it bumped gently into a strange structure that loomed out of the gloom.

“It’s the pier!” said Aunt Fifi. “It must be! There don’t appear to be many people about, though. I thought it was summer - there should be loads around.”

“Good job they not!” pointed out the Chief. “Not everyday a galleon and a space ship dock at pier with a crew like this lot! Saves explanation!”

He was right there, of course. They climbed onto the pier - there was a set of steps that lead up to the wooden deck. They left the Nemesis and the spaceship moored safely to the iron pillars that held the pier up, both in the charge of Deaf Charlie.

The rest of them made their way along the pier, seeing very few people about. The fog was thick, redder in colour as they walked onto the promenade and the lightning raged above them in dead silence - it was eerie and worrying - and of course, they needed to find the Tower.

“I think I know the way,” said Aunt Fifi. “I came here a few years ago. Follow me!”

They blundered along the road - a group of teenagers saw the strange cavalcade, headed by Aunt Fifi, in her dressing gown, followed by an Indian Chief in full war paint, Leaping Elk, the scientist with his hair still frizzed by the shock he had in the pyramid, a gaggle of Khan’s Guards, all ferocious looking men in armour, Lord Asahi, even more ferocious in his Samurai costume with its demon-mask, and the rag-tag crew of the Nemesis. The teenagers ran for their lives!

The Chief stopped and held up his hand.

“Wait!” he said. “Me feeling something in head! Big disturbance!”

“That’s not unusual,” giggled Leaping Elk and the Chief gave her an exasperated look.

“Me mean that me know something going on - this way!” he continued and pointed; he led them down a street - and they came to a very impressive entrance with lots of steps leading upwards, with pillars and carved bits of stone everywhere. Joe and Sarah looked up. Through the gloom of the red fog they could make out over the grand entrance the illuminated letters “Tower Ballroom” and in smaller letters “Special Performance - Lancashire Symphony Orchestra and Choir in Concert”. They climbed the steps, to be met by a uniformed commissionaire with a worried look on his face.

“You can’t come in - especially not dressed like that!” he said. “We’re full - and in any case there’s some sort of emergency going on. We can’t get into the auditorium.”

They went back down the steps and Aunt Fifi took charge.

“Can’t get into the front of the house?” she said. “There’s always a way into a theatre! Follow me!”

She lead them back and down a little alley at the side of the theatre; she was looking for something and she soon found it. It was a little, shabby-looking door which had a notice on it, faded and peeling. “Stage Door; Artistes Only” it said.

“Only the best for the poor entertainers!” muttered Aunt Fifi and opened the door. She led them all inside - while it wasn’t the first time Joe or Sarah had been backstage in a theatre, the little theatre on the end of the pier they had been in before was only tiny compared to the Tower Ballroom and they found it fascinating - if dingy. The Chief and Leaping Elk had been backstage in many theatres, of course, and they knew their way around like Aunt Fifi. Together they worked out the way to the stage and the little band of the Defenders of the Earth walked through the deserted theatre, lit only by a few dim bulbs, until they saw a blaze of light up ahead.

“We’re in the wings,” hissed Aunt Fifi. “Listen! What’s going on?”

There were the oddest sounds coming from the auditorium and the stage - like stifled screams, shuffling, gasping and then the dim, distant sound as of roaring volcanoes and colliding comets, but far, far away. A wild-haired figure wearing dinner jacket and black trousers, his bow tie askew, stood in the wings and turned to look at the odd group around Aunt Fifi as they made their way into the wings of the brightly-lit stage.

“Who are you,” he said, panic in his eyes, “Oh, what does it matter. It’s all gone wrong! It’s awful - the whole place has gone mad!”

“What’s going on out there,” said Aunt Fifi. “Pull yourself together and tell us!”

“It’s the concert!” gabbled the man “There we were, all ready to play the best classical choral bits, full house, Mayor and Lady Mayoress out front - and then, disaster! Some strange projection’s appeared from nowhere, red gas everywhere, hypnosis - hallucinations - I don’t know! No-one can move! That great thing is terrifying everyone and no-one can move! And the players can’t make a sound! The phones have gone dead, half my staff can’t get through the fog, the local press haven’t turned up - thank heavens - but it’s a mess! If we survive I’ll have to give everyone their money back! I’m ruined!”

They left him in the wings, wondering about and muttering, looking for stagehands to lower the curtain. The Chief put his head round the side of the curtain and peeped out into the auditorium - his eyes widened and then he boldly stepped out onto the stage and beckoned the others to follow.

Joe and Sarah stepped out behind Leaping Elk and Aunt Fifi, the others following on behind. What they saw was a mixture of the terrifying and magnificent. The stage was massive and was

occupied by a full orchestra in evening dress, all sat still, clutching instruments and staring open-mouthed into the auditorium. To one side of the orchestra was a great choir made up mostly of large ladies in pink all holding songbooks but all looking out into the auditorium with mouths as open as those of the orchestra. Out in the auditorium the lights were still on - and Joe and Sarah saw that the theatre was huge and wonderfully decorated, with a riot of gold and red everywhere, gilded pillars and heads of gods, goddesses and cherubs, swags of flowers, statues, heavy draped velvet curtains, and a full house of ladies and gentlemen in their best clothes - all looking white faced and open mouthed at the vision that seemed to engulf the whole theatre, auditorium and stage alike.

Wisps of red smoke drifted around the theatre, along with thicker clouds of blue smoke. There was a strong smell of sulphur - and weaving around the whole of the inside and even the stage was a vision out of the depths of terror! A vast head, covered in metallic scales, mouth yawning like a chasm, exposing long rows of jagged teeth, seemed to fill half the theatre; it breathed smoke and yellow flame, but it was as if it was only half there - it faded and then became more solid, only to fade again. They could see part of the body, too, but it seemed to shrink and become smaller - and then suddenly to grow as huge as the sky - and in the space of the theatre it was as if they had a vision of the vastness of the space between the stars and the great yawning gulf that was enclosed by all the dimensions themselves. The suns and comets that had whirled around the Nemesis on its voyage now seemed to play amongst the drapes and pillars - sometimes fading and then becoming more terrifyingly solid and the whole thing was accompanied by a distant roaring and crashing, that seemed to fill the heads of everyone there - it was almost hypnotic, as the manager had said. The audience and orchestra appeared mesmerised by the sight. They looked into the terrible vision and saw the creature's awful red eyes boring into them - and then Joe noticed something else and cried out. He pointed and the Chief followed his pointing finger and cried out himself - there on the very top of the creature's head was the tiny figure of the Shaman! Again he was riding a serpent - but not the sea-serpent he had raised from the ocean depths before, but this time the mightiest monster ever known to creation! Typhon the Terrible, the Midgard Serpent and every awful legend of destruction ever spoken of by trembling storytellers for thousands of years, all wrapped up in this great vision! Then the whole theatre appeared to fill with the Shaman himself, his eyes wild, his hair streaming in some unearthly wind, arms outstretched and staff waving aloft. They heard him crying, as if from a great distance, "Ragnarok! The Doom of the Gods! I bring destruction to every world in all creation! Obey me or I destroy you! Ha ha ha ha!" He laughed in a manic, high-pitched cackle.

"Him over doing it. It rotten act!" said the Chief.

"Never mind being a critic!" snapped Leaping Elk. "Do something! It's getting more solid by the minute - he's already singeing the drapes! Next thing it'll be lurching on the audience!"

The Chief frowned and shook his head. "Me not know what to do!" he said.

Then Joe noticed something; he and Sarah were standing by the side of the stage, close to one of the boxes that framed either side of the stage, covered in gilded plaster decorations. One of the gilded plaster heads on the box was blurring, as if going out of focus and then it resolved itself - to reveal the head of Chang, the old sage who had once guided the Chief! Joe pulled at Thunder Head's arm and pointed.

"Master Chang!" breathed Thunder Head reverently. "What am I to do, oh Master?"

The calm, serene face of the old man smiled and spoke, and through the sound of suns collapsing and comets colliding in the distant reaches of space, a gentle voice echoed through their minds. "Music hath charms to soothe the savage breast, to soften rocks or bend a knotted oak," it said and then faded, the head of the old man replaced by the gilded face of some plaster god.

"Music!" muttered the Chief. "Well, it worth a try! Hey Maestro!" he called to the conductor who turned to him with difficulty, wrenching his eyes away from the vision filling the theatre.

"Er, yes?" replied the conductor, not appearing to bat an eyelid at the appearance of a Red Indian Chief in full war paint on the stage. With everything else going on, it didn't seem so unusual, really.

"You know Song of Hiawatha?" asked the Chief.

"Well some of us played it not long ago," said the conductor. "I think we've still got the music with us."

"What about pink singers?" asked the Chief.

"We know it well enough and we've still got the words with us," replied a large lady wearing enough pink chiffon to make a good-sized hot air balloon, "but there's no one to take the solo parts."

"Right, find music and words quick and take it from top!" ordered the Chief. "We take solo spots. If any of players not know tune, busk!"

"We are professional musicians! We do not busk!" said a rather grand lady cellist in the orchestra.

"Listen lady," said the Chief, pointing to the monster, now growing ever more solid, his sulphurous breath now heating the place to tropical temperatures, "You not busk, you end up as dinner for dog-breath dragon there!"

The lady cellist gulped and nodded. The Chief's words seemed to rouse the orchestra and the choir out of their state of trance and sheets of music were swiftly distributed, Leaping Elk and the Chief stationed themselves to one side of the stage, with the choir on the other and the orchestra in the middle. Thunder Head sent Joe and Sarah in to the wings to collar the manager and get him to turn down the lights in the auditorium. They found him and made him understand what was wanted and he went off to the lighting control board. The crew of the Nemesis and the Guards joined the ladies in pink, sharing song sheets, and if they couldn't read the music or the words, they hummed in harmony. Bomkoff was particularly good at this, his deep bass voice underpinning everything. The ladies seemed worried at first by these fierce warriors and the oddly-clad crew, especially old Ben and Lord Asahi in his Samurai costume, let alone the frizzy haired scientist, but they soon made them welcome. The orchestra struck up, the choir began to sing the choruses and the Chief and Leaping Elk sang the lead parts of a long and very beautiful piece of music that neither Joe nor Sarah had ever heard before - the story of the great Indian Chief, Hiawatha. Thunder Head's fine baritone and Leaping Elk's soprano were beautifully matched and in the choruses Bomkoff's deep base and the Guards fine voices could be heard too. Short John and the rest of the crew of the Nemesis all had good voices and sang along with the rest. Joe looked around for Aunt Fifi and whispered to Sarah to ask where she was.

"I don't know," replied Sarah. "She was here a minute ago."

Aunt Fifi had nipped backstage once the music started, with an idea of her own. She had looked through the costumes in a store room and had changed rapidly. Now she emerged, just as the

lights in the auditorium dimmed and the stage lights came up; Short John beamed while Joe and Sarah gasped and the Chief smiled broadly. Aunt Fifi emerged onto the stage clad in a brief very glittery costume and holding two enormous fans of ostrich feathers. She began to dance in time with the music, a gentle, sinuous dance, twirling, sweeping the fans across the stage, pirouetting gracefully, dancing as she had never danced before. Joe and Sarah were mesmerised by her as her costume caught the lights and twinkled. The music filled their ears and they almost forgot about the monster and the Shaman - it seemed to be a magical place, that theatre and then they turned to look out into the auditorium, remembering the terrible vision that filled the place and wondering what effect the music was having on the monster. The audience, already thoroughly confused, were now entranced, not by the frightful vision of the Shaman and the monster he had conjured up, but by Aunt Fifi and the wonderful music. But it was not just the audience that were entranced.

Joe and Sarah saw the head of the terrible monster swaying, the great eyes heavy, transfixed by Aunt Fifi, his head moving in time to the music. The vision had faded slightly now, not as solid as it was before, and Sarah nudged Joe and pointed to the top of the creature's head - there was the tiny figure of the Shaman, hopping mad, belabouring the monster with staff to wake him up - he might just as well have tapped him with a toothpick for all the effect his staff was having on the metal scales that covered that enormous head. Even the manager had calmed down and was standing in the wings, smiling now at the wonderful performance, having forgotten about the horrors that had filled his theatre earlier, entirely taken with the gentle music and the dance.

The beast seemed to become smaller now, too, the suns and planets that had swung crazily around the theatre had become fainter and fainter and the monster threw back its head and yawned a cavernous yawn, and Joe and Sarah saw that the tiny figure of the Shaman had been dislodged from its head and was falling, falling . . . Then as the monster breathed out a vast jet of blue smoke from its mouth at the end of the huge yawn, the Shaman seemed to disappear from view. Joe wasn't sure but it looked as though the Shaman had fallen right inside the monster's huge mouth, as it shut its great jaws and shook its head again, eyes now closing. The strains of the music were gradually lulling it to sleep and at last it closed its great eyes completely and the vast head sank through the floor of the theatre, melting away like morning mist. Aunt Fifi covered by her fans, sank down to the stage gracefully, like a sleeping swan.

The last bars of the music died away the house lights came up, and the audience seemed to collectively shake itself and wake up, wondering what had been going on. They seemed to be vaguely aware of some great event, some wonderful performance, and saw in front of them the exhausted choir and orchestra, now silent, and the graceful figure of Aunt Fifi covered by her fans. The audience applauded wildly, somehow knowing that whatever had taken place had been marvellous, but not too clear what it had all been about. The conductor bowed and the choir and orchestra took a bow too, all congratulating each other on the performance of a lifetime. A specially big hand was given to Aunt Fifi, who gracefully curtsied, tired out but happy to be back on the stage. The curtain came down although there were another three curtain calls before the orchestra and choir could leave the stage.

"You did it!" cried Leaping Elk, hugging the Chief tight.

"Could not have done it without you!" answered the Chief, beaming all over his face. "Madame Fifi wonderful, too!"

“She certainly was,” came the voice of Short John, and he bowed as low to her as he could. “Madame, you are the most beautiful vision a man could wish for!” he said to her. “It was beauty overcame the beast!”

Aunt Fifi didn't know what to say and blushed, but she was very pleased and flattered.

“Him quite right,” agreed Thunder Head. “Dance mesmerised beast and music lulled it to sleep. Good combination.”

The manager hurried up to them.

“That was marvellous!” he said. “I'll offer you anything you want to repeat that performance! You can have a contract for the whole season!”

“Sorry, dear,” said Aunt Fifi. “I've retired from the stage. That was my farewell performance.”

“We not available either,” said the Chief. “Have engagement in Japan - must fly!”

He rounded up the crew and the guards, who were making friends with the pink ladies; Ben Bun was missing - he suddenly appeared, fired from below the stage through a trapdoor, making an entrance like that of the Demon King in a pantomime, but upside down.

“Whoopee! I'm going to build one of them on the ship!” he cackled.

Thunder Head marshalled them all together and ushered them all back to the ships quickly before the thick fog cleared completely. It was already thinning and there were more people about as they walked through the streets back to the pier; they got some funny looks.

“Must be a concert party,” muttered one man to his wife when they saw them.

Sarah nudged Joe again and Joe turned to see what she was giggling at. Franz, Didier and the other ex-fiancés of Dockland Doris had made friends with five of the ladies from the choir, and they had tagged along with them, thinking that they didn't have a lot to go back to and fancied a bit of a change and some romance in a Japanese village.

So that was that. They all got back to the ships.

“Pity we got to go,” observed the Chief. “Should get good notices after performance like that!”

“Yes, I'm looking forward to reading what the papers say about it!” agreed Aunt Fifi.

“Anyone see what happen to Shaman?” asked Thunder Head. “We come all this way to deal with monster - but need to deal with him too.”

“I think he fell into the monster's mouth,” replied Joe. “But it was difficult to see through all the smoke when he yawned.”

“Yes, I think he was swallowed,” agreed Sarah. “But I agree with Joe - I couldn't see very well through the smoke.”

“Me not feel that him still able to stop travel on Other Side,” mused the Chief. “Everything now quiet. Hope him now gone for good!”

Everyone agreed.

“You know, we could go back home by the train!” said Aunt Fifi to Sarah and Joe. “But this Dudpuddle Drive thing is faster - although it might blow up of course.”

“Fidduddle! I mean Tidpiddle!” insisted Mr. Jordan, who had overheard her. Everyone shushed him.

“Mind you,” she continued, eyeing a beaming Short John who had stayed close to her all the way back, “I might have a bit of a holiday myself for while - I think I need a break.”

“You couldn’t do better than a nice seaside village in Japan,” said Short John. “And I know a very good restaurant there!”

“Here we go again!” squawked Cap’n Mint. “Batten down the hatches! Stand by for boarders!”

“I’ll get Joe and Sarah back first,” said Aunt Fifi. “And I better change too. Is this thing safe?” she asked Mr Jordan. “We need to get back home in one piece.”

“Use cloud,” suggested the Chief. “It possible now and much safer!”

“Well, really!” huffed the scientist. “My Drive hasn’t blown up yet. It might not go up for hours!”

The Chief ignored him and went on, “Shaman gone so cloud available now. You like some help to steer it?”

“No thank you, dear,” replied Aunt Fifi hastily. “No offence, but I’d rather steer it myself. Otherwise you never know where we might end up!”

“Quite right!” said Leaping Elk although the Chief harrumphed. “Come on,” she continued to Thunder Head. “You can help that mad scientist get this lot home.”

“All right!” said the Chief, resignedly. “Hey, Joe, Sarah! You had good holiday?”

“Its been different,” nodded Joe and Sarah agreed.

“And there’s still a whole week to go!” she said. “It seems like it’s gone on for months!”

“You like to come and see us on Other Side again next week?” asked the Chief, a twinkle in his eye. “After all, it sound like Aunt taking holiday in Japan and spending all time in restaurant!”

“Er, if it’s all the same to you, I rather fancy a quiet week at home.” replied Joe. “Even with decorating, it might be a bit more restful.”

“Decorating nearly over and weather getting better,” said the Chief. “Lots of sun - you be able to go on park again. Me know these things. Tell you what, look out for me on park! I might pay visit.”

“Let’s face it, you won’t be able to miss him!” laughed Leaping Elk. “We’ll see you again, one day. I know these things too.”

They said goodbye to everyone, promising to see them all again soon, Aunt Fifi wished up the cloud and they set off back home, while Mr Jordan lit the candle to take the Nemesis and the space-ship back to their own dimensions.

They sat quietly in the cloud, tired out after all their experiences.

“You know when we get back to school, the teachers sometimes get lost for anything to do and set us to write about what we did on our holidays?” said Joe. “Well, at least we’ve got something to write about now!”

“It’s going to be quite a story!” nodded Sarah. “They’ll never believe a word of it!”

“No, but you’ll get points for imagination!” laughed Aunt Fifi. “I’ll be back home in a couple of weeks or so. Tell you what, if you get bored, say in next half term, get in touch and see if you want to come round for tea.”

Sarah and Joe thought that they just might do that. But there was a whole week of the holidays still to look forward to with sunshine and the park . . . and the memory of an incredible adventure to think over.