

# PAST IMPERFECT

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE GREAT FENCE OF CHINA

A group of the warriors rode closer to the clump of bamboo where Joe, Sarah and Alphonse Hadrian were taking refuge. Although he was keeping his head down as close to the ground as possible and trying to hide himself in the bushy leaves of the undergrowth, Joe was able to notice that the warriors were wearing armour made up of lots of small plates of metal held together by brightly coloured threads and the plates were not black but a bright shiny blue or green. The helmets the men wore had broad pieces that protected the backs of the men's necks and also their shoulders and the shaggy little ponies that they rode were hung round with lots of braided cords and tassels in all sorts of colours. If they hadn't been trying to fill him full of arrows, Joe would have liked to have had a closer look at the warriors. One of them rode right up to the clump of bamboo and swung at the children and Alphonse with a long spear which seemed to have a sort of three-foot long sword blade on the end. It whistled into the bamboo and chopped a few of the stalks down. A few more blows like that and Joe reckoned that their cover would be gone - but then a flight of arrows whistled through the air, and Joe saw that for a change these did not come *from* the warriors but were aimed *at* them. Several arrows rattled off their armour plates, others stuck into them and with yells and shouts the warriors made off quickly, back the way had come. Alphonse, Joe and Sarah crawled out from the bamboo to see a troop of men mounted on small horses and dressed in thickly-padded red and green coats covered with embroidery, galloping after the armour-clad warriors, firing arrows as they went.

Alphonse spat out bits of earth.

"I see the Caledonians are still giving us trouble," he said. "Our brave boys have driven them off though."

"Since when were the Caledonians or whatever you call them dressed in armour and riding horses?" Sarah said, exasperated. "You said they had long hair and were painted bright blue - we're nowhere near Scotland! Look at the locals. Do they look like Scots?"

"I never took a lot of notice of the locals when I was around," said Hadrian. "I spent most of my time trying to avoid them. But I must say, they do look a little different - and our Roman troops weren't dressed like that when I was around. But then, there may have been one or two changes - we may have arrived a year or two after I left for the Other Side."

"Changes! A little different!" said Sarah in disbelief. "Look at them! They're Chinese!"

"She's right," nodded Joe. "This is China, not Scotland."

"Oh, surely you're imagining things," said Hadrian with a nervous laugh. "We've just arrived at a different part of the wall, before it's been properly finished. The people here are a different tribe

with different local customs. And the soldiers must be Dacians that my brother-in-law has brought over to protect the Wall. He said he was going to bring in some cavalry. Odd people, the Dacians.”

Sarah looked at Joe, who shrugged. If Hadrian couldn't admit that they were miles off course there wasn't a lot they could do about it. Both the children were rather alarmed however when Hadrian stopped one of the green and red clad soldiers on horseback, one with more than the usual amount of embroidery all over his coat, held up his hand in a Roman salute and said, “Ave, soldier! All Hail to the Emperor Hadrian. How goes the day against the enemies of Rome!”

The man looked down at Hadrian wordlessly and called over a troop of his men. He removed his helmet to reveal a yellow-brown complexion, high cheekbones and narrow eyes. He didn't look friendly.

“Er, ave,” said Hadrian again, nervously. “Long way from Dacia. How do like the climate here?”

“Where is Dacia?” hissed Joe to Sarah.

“I'm not sure,” whispered Sarah, “but somehow I don't think he's a Dacian.”

“Barbarians!” grunted the warrior to his men. “They didn't ride off like the others - must have lost their horses. Take them to the Mandarin. If they resist, cut off their heads and just take the heads to him - either way he'll be pleased and we will be well rewarded.”

Hadrian looked flabbergasted and tried to protest that he was the Emperor's brother-in-law but it didn't make any difference. The troop of warriors surrounded them and lowered their wicked looking spears. They urged their prisoners to step out smartly along a path and there wasn't a lot their prisoners were going to do to protest. Off they set and as they went, Sarah looked around them. In the fields the locals had come out of the bamboo and were back at work as if nothing had happened. She thought that this sort of thing must happen a lot and that they must be used to it. Some soldiers were trying to prop up the fence and others were collecting arrows and spears but otherwise the scene was peaceful again. She looked at Hadrian, who seemed totally bemused.

“Do you really think we are in China?” he asked.

“Well, it's more likely than Scotland,” replied Joe. “Wherever we are, I think we're a long way from your wall.”

“I agree,” said Sarah. “Something has gone wrong somewhere.”

“It's that addle-brained Red Indian!” muttered Hadrian. “I should never have let him talk me into this. He set the Cloud on its way - he must have been at the fire water again. I thought he had given it up.”

“More to the point,” said Sarah, “how do we get back? I mean it's not as if we are particularly welcome here,” she added, nodding towards the soldiers who rode beside them, impassive on their horses, eyes glittering under the broad brim of their helmets, ever watchful to see if any of the captives tried to escape. Joe noticed that one of them in particular kept fingering the long and wickedly curved sword at his side, smiling down at the prisoners. Somehow Joe didn't think he was being friendly.

“I'm not sure,” said Hadrian in a worried tone, “I need to be in a trance to get the cloud back. I've got to be somewhere quiet. I'm not sure we are going to get the chance to sit quiet for a bit while I summon up the cloud.”

Joe had a sudden thought. “As you're on the Other Side already, can they hurt you?” he asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that,” responded Hadrian, thoughtfully, “I’m not sure and I don’t think I want to find out. Then there’s you two. What your status is here I really don’t know. As visitors to the Other Side, can you be hurt?”

“I’m not sure I want find out either,” muttered Sarah and Joe could only agree.

Their journey on that hot day actually seemed to pass very quickly for some reason. Although the soldiers looked dusty and tired by the time they reached a big white fortified building with high walls, tall square towers and broad red-tiled roofs, the children and Hadrian felt quite fresh still, although thirsty. It was odd, thought Joe. The soldiers looked as if they had been on a long trek while Sarah, Hadrian and he only seemed to have been walking for about half an hour. The sun was going down too - and yet only a while before it had been high overhead. He pointed this out to Sarah.

“You’re right,” said a surprised Sarah. “It’s as if time has passed differently for us. I could do with a drink though.”

“I’m with you there,” agreed Joe. “As for the time difference, I really don’t understand it. Our escort look as if they are fit to drop.”

“There is a time difference between here and your world,” said Hadrian. “You can be here for quite a long time and yet back home hardly any time has passed.”

The great gates of the fortress opened and the little group entered. The soldiers dismounted and led their tired horses to a stable while some other soldiers with spears and swords lead the three prisoners to a small wooden cage in the courtyard and locked them in.

“Not like a Roman fort,” said Hadrian, looking round. “It’s quite a place, though.”

It was; the courtyard was enormous, lined all round with stables, barracks and storehouses. One building in the middle of the courtyard stuck out by its magnificence - it was raised above the courtyard on a stone platform and was approached by a set of steps, had red-painted columns all round its lowest story and lots of gilded carvings of dragons and lions. Above that towered another three stories, each separated by an expanse of broad red-tiled roof, the eaves at the corners decorated with carved flying golden dragons, wings outstretched. A large number of soldiers guarded the doors, tall men magnificent in green, red and gold. Joe took the opportunity to look at the soldiers guarding the cage - they wore the thick padded coats that all the men seemed to have as protection and he now saw that they were studded all over with little brass rivets. One soldier began to repair a tear in his coat and Joe realised that inside, between the layers of padding, were small metal plates secured with the brass rivets. The soldiers were well protected.

“No wonder they felt hot and tired,” he thought - and realised that the horses were carrying quite a weight too.

Night was falling fast now. Joe saw that the soldiers were looking nervously up at the night sky and he followed their gaze - and gasped. He drew Sarah’s attention to the sight in the sky. They looked open mouthed as great rips seemed to appear across the heavens, revealing gaps through which could be seen other stars and suns and swirling colours, with comets whizzing soundlessly across the stars. Vast bolts of multicoloured lightning arced soundlessly between the spinning suns and planets, more holes appeared within the rips, revealing spinning galaxies in a distant, velvet blackness. Then as suddenly the tear would close, and the sky would be quiet again, only to open up with another display of bizarre lights and whirling planets as another rip opened up. It was an alarming sight.

"I've never seen anything like this before!" whispered Sarah. "It's scary!"

"I have," said Hadrian in a shaky voice. "It's been happening a lot on the Other Side recently. I've no idea what causes it. The Chief has been trying to find out."

"My dad said he had seen lights in the sky when he lived in Scotland for while," said Joe. "He said that they were called the Aurora Borealis," he continued, stumbling over the words, "but he never said that they looked like this."

"I know what you mean," said Sarah, "but I've never seen them. I suppose that's what they could be."

Hadrian shook his head. "I've seen those lights in the sky too in Caledonia," he said. "They were nothing like this, though."

Then the sky cleared and all was serene, with the stars and the moon and wisps of cloud. The soldiers returned to their repairs, shaking their heads and muttering.

"Any chance of you getting that cloud back?" whispered Sarah to Hadrian.

"I'll try," Hadrian replied, "but trances were always difficult if I was at all nervous - and looking at these men with their spears and swords makes me nervous. I'm out of practice. I wish Thunder Head was here."

He closed his eyes but wasn't able to concentrate for long because a squad of soldiers tramped up to the cage and ordered it opened. The prisoners were told to get up and march towards the palace in the middle of the courtyard; Hadrian stood up and shook his head. "I'll try again later," he said. "It's not working at present."

They were marched over to the palace and were taken through a great entrance hall lit with torches that threw flickering light onto strange pictures painted on the walls, of forests full of strange plants and birds, where dragons writhed and buildings seemed to float on milky pools of water. Impassive soldiers guarded every door, opening them as the prisoners and their escort passed through. Finally they entered a smaller room, all hung with blue silk curtains on which embroidered butterflies flew amongst brightly coloured flowers. Lamplight flickered and made the pictures seem to come alive. At any other time Sarah would have been enchanted - but as it was she was rather nervous. In the middle of the room, sat on a heavily carved chair, was a man in richly embroidered robes. He wore a round blue cap on his head from which escaped wisps of grey hair. He had long thin moustaches, also grey, hanging down from the sides of his mouth; on each side of him stood a man in a colourful robe, arms crossed, hands hidden in the wide sleeves of the robes that they wore.

"I am the Mandarin of this province," said the old man in the chair, his voice high-pitched but gentle. "You do not look like the barbarians who have been attacking us for so long. Who are you?"

"Travellers!" said Hadrian. "My name is Hadrian and I am an architect and we came here to, er, to offer our services to you."

"I'm not sure we need more architects," said the Mandarin. "I have several. Who are these children? It is a dangerous place for children to be." He smiled at Joe and Sarah.

For the first time since they had arrived in this strange place, Sarah felt reassured. She smiled back. "I'm Sarah, and this is John," she said. "We are travelling with Hadrian."

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" asked the Mandarin.

The children realised just how hungry and thirsty they were.

"Yes, please," said Joe.

The Mandarin rose from his chair and beckoned to the three to follow him. With an attendant bringing up the rear he led them into a smaller chamber, lit by little green jade oil lamps that stood on a brass stand in the shape of a dragon. On the floor, which was covered with carpets that had strange and wonderful patterns on them, were three long, low couches covered with silk cushions and in the middle of the carpets was a low table, heavily carved. The Mandarin seated himself on one of the couches and motioned to the others to do the same. They sat in comfort and two attendants brought in cups, pots and plates of the most beautiful china and set them on the table. There were all sorts of things to eat - Joe had eaten Chinese food before and so had Sarah but neither of them had ever seen anything like this. The Mandarin poured some light coloured liquid from a teapot into delicate bowls on which painted flowers seemed to float. The liquid steamed and there was a smell of blossom and delicate perfumes in the steam. The attendant put various bits and pieces on a plate and handed it to Sarah, and then did the same for John and Hadrian. A bit uncertain of what they might find they tried the food. It was really very good and they helped themselves to more. Joe was thirsty and picked up the bowl carefully, afraid he might drop and shatter the delicate china. He sipped the liquid; it tasted strange, but very refreshing and he drank some more. The Mandarin smiled as he saw Joe enjoyed it so much and when Joe put his empty bowl down the Mandarin filled it up for him.

“Is it good?” he asked with a smile.

“Very!” said Joe. “What is it, please?”

“Tea,” said the mandarin. “It is a local speciality.”

“This is tea?” said Joe in surprise. “Well, it’s nothing like the tea we have at home,”

He had never liked tea at home at all. It didn’t smell as nice as this nor did it taste anything like so good - it was far too strong a taste at home, even with lots of milk and sugar.

“Where is home?” asked the Mandarin.

“It’s a long story,” said Hadrian, sipping his tea. “We are from a great distance away.”

Joe had a sudden thought - just how long had they been away from home? Surely his parents would be worried by now - and how were they going to get back, and when? He remembered that Hadrian had said time went at a different rate on the Other Side, but how differently? He wondered if Sarah had the same thoughts and looked across at her but she seemed happy to be eating the strange food and drinking the fragrant tea.

“Who are the people who are attacking you?” asked Hadrian. “What do they want?”

The Mandarin sighed. “They are the subjects of the Northern Khan, a powerful ruler. They have been raiding across the Fence for so many years that I really don’t know why they started or what they want. We have soldiers stationed in the local villages and whenever they cross we soon have a party out to stop them and then we launch a raid in return. It’s been going on for years. Crops do not get properly attended to, villagers have to protect themselves with walls and no one can travel the roads in safety.”

“What you need is a wall,” said Hadrian, “a good strong one with lots of towers.”

“I agree,” said the Mandarin with a smile, “and you, I suppose, are the man to build it?”

“I do have some small expertise in the building of great walls,” said Hadrian modestly. “I have built one nearly a hundred miles long in the country of Joe and Sarah here. It is a great success.”

He looked at Joe and Sarah and winked.

“Well, your wall would have to be fifty times longer for a start and if you can build it we will pay you handsomely,” replied the Mandarin. Hadrian smiled and his chest swelled visibly as he thought of the years of work it would take and how well he would be paid. He could build another even more splendid villa with lots of underfloor heating and have dozens of servants to make all these fine dishes for him. His dream shattered when the Mandarin continued, “Of course, as soon as you start any work the Khan will send men to cut you and your workmen into tiny, tiny pieces.”

“Can’t you protect the workmen?” asked Hadrian. “On the last wall we had lots of barbarians painted bright blue who tried to stop us but we had plenty of soldiers to protect the builders.”

“My men are at full stretch as it is,” said the Mandarin. “I’ve got five thousand miles of fence to guard.”

“Have you ever asked the Khan why he’s attacking you?” asked Sarah, suddenly.

The Mandarin looked surprised and sat back and thought for a minute.

“No,” he said at last, “I don’t believe we have, not for many years at any rate. It’s difficult to talk to people who are always trying to fill you full of arrows.”

“But if you could talk to them and perhaps offer them something in return, then they wouldn’t stop your builders,” suggested Sarah.

“You are a sensible girl, said the Mandarin, “and your idea is perfectly logical - but the problem remains that we find it very difficult to get near them and have any sort of conversation. If you can find a way of building a wall we will reward you very handsomely. If you can’t, well there may be problems for you.”

“Why?” asked Hadrian.

The Mandarin looked very sad and sighed before he went on, “Because our emperor has decreed that any strangers found on this side of the fence must be executed. It’s an immutable law - that means I can’t change it. I’m very sorry. It has to be done within seven days and while I am perfectly willing to write a letter to the emperor begging him to spare you, the post takes a week to get to the capital and a week to get back - and that’s on good days. If it rains it will take longer. I’m really very sorry.”

Joe felt cold all over and Sarah had stopped with a cup half way to her lips and sat in shock. Hadrian choked on a Chinese delicacy.

“So the best thing for you to do is try to talk to the other side - and I wish you luck. We must execute you if you are still here after a week and they will almost certainly fill you full of arrows as soon as you set foot over the fence,” said the Mandarin sadly. “I’m stretching things letting you even try but I trust you and I’m sure you are not spies for the Khan. Meanwhile, you may have the best rooms in the palace and I wish you a very good night.”

With that the supper was over and the attendants conducted the shocked and numb children and Hadrian to some bedrooms on the next floor. At any other time they have been very pleased to have been given beds covered in fine embroidered silk, with the wall of their rooms painted with mountains, streams and waterfalls. As it was they barely noticed. They held a council in Hadrian’s room by the light of a flickering jade oil lamp before they retired for the night to sleep - if they were able.

Joe said how worried he was about his parents and that they must be wondering where he had gone. Sarah nodded miserably and sniffed in agreement.

“Oh that’s no problem,” said Hadrian. “Remember what I told you, time on the Other Side works differently. I doubt anyone has noticed yet.”

“Really?” said a puzzled Sarah. “Perhaps that explains our walk yesterday. We seemed to have come a long way but it didn’t take long for us.”

“And those soldiers seemed absolutely exhausted, as if they had been travelling all day,” said Joe.

“That’s right,” said Hadrian, “but on the other hand an execution is different. How that affects us, I’m not sure.”

“What about getting the cloud back so we can travel home?” asked Joe.

“I’m too nervous and worried - I need a good night’s sleep,” wailed Hadrian. “Even then I’m not sure what I can do. I’m no expert on that cloud - I’ve only ever taken it short distances and never travelled in time. We need Thunder Head and he’s nowhere to be found. He was supposed to come with us - he’s our guide.”

“We’ll have to try talking to the other lot,” said Sarah firmly.

“And be filled full of arrows?” objected Hadrian.

“Sarah’s right,” said Joe. “Anyway we get filled full of arrows whatever happens. In any case, I’ve got an idea,” and he explained his idea to the other two. Together they hatched out a plan and when they went to bed they slept rather better than they might have done - there was now a ray of hope.