

PAST IMPERFECT**CHAPTER SEVEN****SPACE IN THE PARK AND TEA ON THE PATIO**

A rather thoughtful Joe walked home and told his mother (some) of the things that had happened to him that morning. Actually he left most of it out - all the bits about Hadrian, the Mandarin, the Khan, tea and yoghurt for instance, but he did tell her about meeting Sarah and her aunt, and being treated to a drink and biscuits.

“He’s got a girlfriend, he’s got a girlfriend,” taunted his older brother. Joe turned red as his brother went on, “I bet she’s fat, spotty and cross eyed! Must be, to like him!”

Joe said something rude and just in time Joe’s mum stepped in to stop a row by sending Joe’s brother up to his room to tidy it and giving Joe his sandwiches and crisps. Joe realised over his lunch that his afternoon had been already planned out for him by his mother - he was on room tidying duties too. Reluctantly going upstairs and into his room, and taking a look around, Joe realised with a bit of a shock that it was going to take all afternoon and nothing he was going to be able to say or do was going to stop his having to knuckle down and get tidying.

Actually he didn’t argue too much (which was a surprise to his mother); his head was too full of all the things that had happened to him in the morning and perhaps time moved differently in Joe’s room that afternoon, or perhaps he was too absorbed in his thoughts as he tidied that he just didn’t notice how the time was going. Whatever it was, his mum put her head around the door later and announced that it was dinner time - and in a voice that sounded surprised and pleased at the same time she congratulated Joe on how good a job he had done. Joe seemed to wake up and had a look about him - and was quite surprised himself at how tidy the room looked and how quickly the time had gone.

“Always does when you concentrate on something,” said his mum.

“Or when you end up being transported by a daft Roman to ancient China in an uncontrollable white cloud,” thought Joe. But he didn’t say anything - although he did have a quick look round his room to see if there was a trace of any white cloud, but there wasn’t even a wisp, though.

Over dinner Joe told his dad about his new friend and that they were supposed to be meeting in the park tomorrow. His dad was pleased - he had been worried that Joe wouldn’t have many friends to play with in the holidays. One of his best friends had gone on a long holiday with his family and another had moved away altogether. Dad gave Joe some money to buy ice creams for himself, Sarah and her little brother and Joe’s older brother grumbled that he wasn’t getting any money and had another go at Joe over his new “girlfriend” - but dad told Joe to take no notice and said that Andy, his brother, was just jealous. Dad also offered Andy some ice cream money but he just went off in a huff.

The next day was as bright as it had been the previous day and Joe was up bright and early too. He had slept like a log, although he had some strange dreams. He couldn’t remember any of them the next day - just a strange jumbled blur of colours and faces. Joe ate a good breakfast, washed and dressed and when he went downstairs again he found Andy had got up - unusually early for him - and was hunched over some toast. Andy noticed that Joe had put on a clean tee-shirt and muttered that his new girlfriend was having an

effect already and would his eating habits get better now too? Mum winked at Joe and said that she wished someone would have the same effect on Andy and for once Joe didn't bother to argue with his brother, but went out and headed for the park.

Sarah was already there, sat on a bench with a small red-headed boy beside her who was holding a space-ship toy and making ray-gun type noises. Sarah waved to Joe as soon as she saw him; Joe waved back, and ran over to the bench.

"Been here long?" asked Joe.

"Only a few minutes," replied Sarah. "This is Tom," she continued, nodding towards the small boy.

"Hi, Tom," said Joe, "I like your space-ship."

Tom proudly showed Joe the toy and told him what it could do. Joe had had something similar when he had been a bit younger and so he played at saving the galaxy with Tom for a while in the sand pit. Sarah looked on, glad that she didn't have to join in and get sand everywhere. Soon Tom found a couple of friends of his own age and ran off to play on the slide with them and Joe brushed the sand off his hands and trousers and sat down beside Sarah again.

"He likes you," she said. "Thankyou for playing with him. I never know what to do."

"He's all right," said Joe. "I'll swap my older brother for him!"

Sarah laughed. They sat for a minute watching Tom playing in the sunshine with his friends - it was all very summery, the park full of the green of trees and grass, the sky a pure light blue and the air full of the shouts and screams as children played. Then suddenly everything around them seemed to move very slowly like a slow motion replay on television, all the sounds stopped and a great rip opened up in the china blue sky right above them, and they looked again into a huge hole in space, feeling dizzy as the vast emptiness of blackness, shot with stars, appeared above them. A planet spun crazily across the tear in the sky and vivid colours danced in monstrous dust clouds that swirled in the void. Joe and Sarah looked up, mouths open, fearing that they would be sucked up into the vacuum of space and then as suddenly as it had appeared, the rent closed. Everything moved at normal speed again, the birds sang and the children chattered and no one else seemed to have noticed that anything had happened at all.

Sarah and Joe looked at each other.

"Did you see it?" asked Joe.

Sarah nodded. "No-one else seems to have noticed at all. What on earth was it?" she said.

"It was like that sky we saw in China," said Joe. "Only it seemed much closer this time."

"It wasn't a dream, then?" asked Sarah. "We really did have that adventure, didn't we?"

Joe nodded. "It looks as if it's still going on, too," he said.

"And Aunt Fifi's invited you to tea on Sunday," said Sarah. "Do you want to go?"

Joe thought. "Do you?" he asked.

"I'm not sure," replied Sarah. "I like Aunt Fifi, but after what happened still, she's baking some special cakes for us."

"What sort?" enquired Joe, who liked cakes.

"Well, she said she got the recipe off Marie Antoinette's cook - she calls them real queen cakes."

"Is that the Marie Antoinette that lost her head in the French revolution?" asked Joe; Sarah nodded. "She knows some odd people, your aunt," he went on, "She's nice, but a bit strange"

"Strange is the word!" said Sarah. "But I like her a lot. Suppose we go off again, though - you know, to the Other Side, wherever that is."

Joe and Sarah sat lost in thought for a bit. Then Joe remembered the money his dad had given him and suggested that they had an ice cream and a drink. Tom came back at that point and agreed that an ice cream sounded just right. They went to the little cafe in the park and bought their ices, and sat in the shade of a big oak tree to eat them. Sarah tried to stop Tom getting in too much of a mess, which wasn't easy. Joe

was also a messy eater with ice creams but made a special effort as Sarah was there and succeeded in not getting any down his tee-shirt for a change. Joe played with Tom again for a while and then Tom left his precious space-ship in Joe's care while he went off with his friends again.

"You're honoured!" said Sarah, eyeing the space-ship in Joe's hand.

"Tom's all right," said Joe. Then he looked serious. "That funny thing that happened just now, you know where nobody else noticed?" Sarah nodded and Joe went on, "Well, it made me think - you remember the cloud that appeared when we were in the cage?"

"The small one that could only take one of us," nodded Sarah.

"Yes, that's it," said Joe. "Well, old Thunder Head said that Hadrian was too nervous to summon a cloud up."

"I know what you're going to say," said Sarah, "and I've been thinking about it too. Was it one of us?"

"Yes," nodded Joe, "and that thing just now, was that also part of it all and is it one of us that made it happen? You, probably."

"Why me?" cried Sarah indignantly, a bit annoyed that she should be blamed. It was like being blamed when Tom knocked something over.

"Well," said Joe, "after all, your aunt's got the gift, as she calls it, and you are related. Have you ever had anything like that happen before?"

"No," replied Sarah, shivering, "and I don't like the thought if it. I think it's all a bit creepy having anything like that happen, contacting the Other Side or wherever it is. I don't see why it should run in families. It could be you, you know - it's never happened before when I've visited my aunt. Have you ever had anything like that happen?"

Joe thought. "The time went quickly when I was tidying my room yesterday," he said, "but I don't really think that's got anything to do with it."

"Doesn't sound likely," agreed Sarah. "Anyway, there were some really odd things about yesterday morning."

"You mean even odder than winding up in a white cloud going to ancient China with a mad Roman?" said Joe.

"Put it like that and perhaps not," replied Sarah, "but did you notice that everyone spoke English?"

Joe hadn't thought about it before. "You're right," he said in surprise. "We had a Roman, a Red Indian, a Chinese Mandarin and the Khan - and I haven't a clue what language he was supposed to speak. How on earth did we understand them all?"

"How did they understand each other," said Sarah, pointedly.

"We understood them all," said Joe. "The only one who actually spoke a bit oddly was Thunder Head."

"It's all a bit strange - and I've never heard of the Great Fence of China before. Come to that, Alphonse Hadrian wasn't in our history books at school either," said Sarah.

"Yes, it all sounds very unlikely," agreed Joe.

"And we've got an invitation to tea," pointed out Sarah. "It could all happen again."

"Hmm," mused Joe, "I like the idea of the cakes and none of my aunts is anything like your Aunt Fifi. I wish they were. I like her."

"So do I" agreed Sarah. "Dad says she's weird but I love to visit her. She talks to you properly not like . . . , well, you know."

"Like you're a child of about three," said Joe. Sarah nodded. "It might not happen again," continued Joe. "You said it never has before. We could just have a nice tea."

"You want to go, don't you," giggled Sarah. "Do you want to see her photographs again?"

Joe went red. “No, I don’t” he said, crossly. “If you think that’s why I want to go, I won’t go, then.”

“I’m only teasing,” soothed Sarah. “Honest. I’ll tell her we’ll see her Sunday, about three, she said. All right?”

Joe nodded. There was a splash some distance away and a yell from Tom. He had fallen into the pond and when they pulled him out he was covered in green pond weed. He thought it was a great joke but Sarah was nearly in tears as she scolded him.

“I’ll really get into trouble now,” she sniffed. “I should have been looking after him.”

“We’ll dry him out,” said Joe reassuringly. “Tell you what, I only live just round the corner. We’ll take him home and wring out his clothes and dry them. Your mum will never know.”

Looking at the state of Tom, Sarah wasn’t convinced but she went along with the idea and they took the wet and soggy Tom round to meet Joe’s mum who was a bit surprised to say the least when shown the state of Sarah’s younger brother. She laughed a lot when they told her what had happened but when she saw how upset Sarah was she soon calmed her down and gave Sarah and Joe a biscuit and a drink while she rinsed Tom’s clothes and spun them dry in the washing machine. She hung them on the line in the sun to finish drying while she gave Tom a quick shower. He was perfectly happy to be showered and wrapped in a towel and then to sit quietly playing with some of Joe’s toys. Sarah calmed down and they looked through some of Joe’s books together and Joe told his mum about the invitation to Aunt Fifi’s on Sunday. His mum agreed that Joe could go - she liked both Tom and Sarah and told them they could come back any time. Andy put in an appearance at one point and looked at Sarah with surprise. He seemed to be amazed someone who looked normal could associate with Joe.

Joe went home with Sarah - and Tom held his hand all the way much to Sarah’s disgust - her little brother was behaving like an angel, very unlike his usual self. But then, Joe had lent Tom one of his old space-ship toys.

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With some trepidation Joe prepared to go to Aunt Fifi’s for tea on Sunday. He was half looking forward to it and half a bit worried about it. It wasn’t as if he was afraid, exactly; it was more that although he liked Aunt Fifi - none of his relations were anything like as interesting - there was the possibility of something really strange happening. But then again, to be honest, Joe didn’t want to miss out on it if it happened. As he washed his hands and face and put on the clean tee-shirt and jeans his mum had laid out for him he remembered that a week ago he had been thinking to himself that the summer holidays looked like being fairly boring. Already he had enjoyed a few weeks in China, had learned to ride a pony and had met some interesting people, one or two of whom had tried to fill him full of arrows, and who knew what would happen next? Did he want another adventure? He wasn’t really sure. Still, at least with invitations to Aunt Fifi’s, the holidays weren’t going to be boring.

He set off; Sarah and he had exchanged phone numbers and she had rung earlier to say that she would meet Joe on the corner of Portal Place at 3 p.m. Joe was a bit early and sat on a wall. Sarah soon appeared and sat down beside him.

“Looking forward to tea?” she asked.

“Um, I think so,” replied Joe. “I’m looking forward to seeing your aunt again anyway. Seen anything else in the sky recently?”

Sarah shook her head. “No,” she said. “Have you?”

It was Joe’s turn to shake his head. They looked up. The sky was a fabulous deep blue, with not a trace of rogue planets and far distant galaxies; the blue was flecked with white clouds that looked perfectly harmless, free of Romans and Indian Chiefs, and unlikely to travel anywhere except across the deep blue

sky. It was a fine, sunny afternoon. Sarah and Joe jumped off the wall and walked down Portal Place towards number 7, where the purple paint glistened in the sun.

Aunt Fifi welcomed them at the door, cheerful as ever, wearing another purple dress, with a different golden pattern this time, and still hung with lots of baubles, bangles and beads. Tinkling and chiming, she ushered them into the sitting room at the back of the house where the patio doors were open. On the stone slabs of the patio was a wooden table with chairs around it made comfortable with cushions. The table and chairs were shaded by a sort of big striped tent with open sides. Aunt Fifi sat them down in the chairs and bought them drinks and said that she would serve the sandwiches and cakes in a while after they had a chat.

“Have you had any more visits from the Chief, Auntie?” asked Sarah.

“Well, I did see him yesterday, dear,” replied her aunt. “He popped in while I was in the bath - no sense of time or place, that man. There I was soaking in a nice hot bath with some scented bath cubes and lots of bubbles, nicely relaxed, when without even an excuse me he walked straight in through the wall, fell over the sink and dropped his feather head-dress in the bath. I ask you! I scooped it out quick but the feathers had gone all droopy and when he put it back on it dripped all over the floor. I made him put it in the sink and sent him out the bathroom while I draped myself in towels and then shouted to him to come back in. Silly man! You know what he had come to tell me? That Alphonse Hadrian had returned. As if I wanted to know!”

“Had he finished the wall?” asked Joe.

“No, but he was sacked when both sides realised what a mess he had made,” continued Aunt Fifi. “They said they would finish it without him. The chief also said that some of the problems on the Other Side with the cloud and the odd things in the sky seemed to have stopped.”

“That reminds me, Auntie,” said Sarah. “Last week Joe and I were in the park together and we saw something strange in the sky. It seemed to open up and show lots of strange planets and clouds and things somewhere out in space.”

“It kept happening when we were in China, too,” put in Joe.

“What day? Wednesday? Oh yes - about what time?” Sarah and Joe thought it had been about ten o’clock. “What was I doing then?” said Aunt Fifi. “Oh, I remember! I had a client round - Mrs. Smyth-Brown. She was trying to get some news about her Pekinese dog. Daft little thing had run off and she thought I could help. I’ve no idea how. Well, I tried to go into a trance and think dog - it must have been about the same time. I tried to call on the Chief but couldn’t get him. Then a big red cloud filled the room . . .”

“A red cloud?” interrupted Joe.

“Yes, red. I thought it was odd,” said Aunt Fifi.

“The Shaman’s cloud was red!” gasped Sarah.

“Was it? Oh well, that might explain what happened,” went on Aunt Fifi. “Someone came through but I couldn’t see who it was. Had a big head, whoever it was. Mrs. Smyth-Brown saw him clearly enough and screamed and then ran out the house like a tornado. I suddenly snapped out of the trance - something to do with the scream, perhaps. It was like a steam whistle. The cloud vanished and so did Big Head.”

“Wow. Mrs Thingy-whatsit must have seen the Shaman,” said Sarah.

“With all his stuff on, including the head,” added Joe. “No wonder she screamed!”

“Yes, and the best of it is that she came back later and paid me!” said Aunt Fifi. “I only charge for successful consultations you see. I was rather surprised. I don’t have many successes, between you and me. She came back, as I said, and had this big bruise on her forehead. It turned out that she had run screaming from the house, had hared off down the road and tripped headlong over her daft dog as she went. She thought I had something to do with it all - if I did, I don’t know how! But all that happened about the same

time you saw something in the park. Odd, that. Perhaps one of you is psychic, too. Now, sandwiches and cakes, I think.”

Joe and Sarah looked at each other as Aunt Fifi went off to get the eatables.

“I bet it’s you,” said Joe. “I said so at the time.”

“It’s never happened before,” said Sarah a bit annoyed still to be thought liable to odd events like that. “It could just as easily be you.”

Before they could argue any more Aunt Fifi returned with a big plate piled high with sandwiches.

“I don’t know what you like,” she said. “I can usually make a pretty good guess with my psychic powers, but I thought I would make a good assortment, just in case. Hope there’s something for you both.”

There certainly was. Sarah liked cheese and tomato and egg and cress, while Joe liked cheese and pickle and peanut butter - and there were lots of each. Aunt Fifi smiled.

“I’ve still got the power, then” she said, happily. She tucked into her own favourite, beef with very hot horseradish which required rather a lot of tea as an accompaniment.

“I gather you had some nice tea on your last adventure,” she said to Joe.

Joe nodded, his mouth full of cheese and pickle. Sarah did the same - only she was munching cheese and tomato. Both of them were remembering what their mothers had said - not to talk with their mouths full and to be polite. For once, both of them were on their best behaviour.

“Well, real China tea is very nice,” went on Aunt Fifi. “I brought some last week. If you like, I’ll make a pot. I don’t think it will be as good as the Mandarin’s but you’re welcome to try it.”

Sarah and Joe agreed. Aunt Fifi went off to the kitchen and Sarah and Joe had some more sandwiches.

“This is a great tea!” said Joe enthusiastically. “None of my aunts gives me anything like this!”

“Nor do mine - only Aunt Fifi,” said Sarah. “Mind you, none of the others send me off to China on an adventure!”

A whiff of white cloud drifted over the table. They looked up in surprise and alarm - and saw Chief Thunder Head walk in with a tray full of tea things. It isn’t every day you see a six-and-a-half foot tall Red Indian wearing a huge feather head-dress, as well as lots of beads over a bare chest, carry a tea tray into a garden and Joe wondered if any of the neighbours were watching. The chief put the tray down on the table and Aunt Fifi followed with a milk jug in her hand, shaking her head.

“He’s invited himself,” she said. “Never asks of course. Just turns up.” She looked severely at the chief.

“Me hear you have tea party so me get some good tea,” said the Chief, unabashed. “Mandarin’s special. He send it just for you!” he said to the children.

“Er, thank you,” said Joe. “When did you see him?”

“Last Wednesday,” said the Chief, sitting down and ignoring Aunt Fifi’s frown. “Went to see how idiot architect getting on. Found him in gaol. He had messed it all up again. Made bargain - I would take him away and Mandarin would give me some good tea. Wife threaten to batter me with buffalo if I drink firewater again so I thought tea might be good idea. He also give me some for you and send his best wishes. Say he hope to see you again one day.”

“Wednesday?” said Aunt Fifi. “That’s when I tried to get in touch with you to find Mrs. Smyth-Brown’s Pekinese. I got some idiot with a big head. The children tell me it was the Shaman.”

“And we saw something very strange in the sky when we were in the park, all about the same time,” added Sarah.

“A sky full of odd planets and strange clouds, like we saw in China,” put in Joe.

The chief looked puzzled and thoughtful and Aunt Fifi poured the tea.

“Odd,” he said, “Everything been quiet on Other Side for last week. Me wonder what happen.”

He sipped his tea. Joe blew on his to cool it and looked out over the sunny garden. It was a beautiful afternoon, he was eating a gorgeous tea and having a really good time, but there was no doubt about it - it was certainly an out-of-the ordinary tea party. After all, it's not every day you have tea with a Red Indian chief and discuss your last trip to China, and talk about Shamen with big heads arriving in clouds when people with odd names have been asking for help to find dogs . . . Joe wondered if he had woken up this morning or if he was still dreaming. He looked at Sarah. She smiled at him and he sighed and helped himself to another sandwich. After all, he thought to himself, he could be having tea with his Auntie Jane instead - dry corn beef sandwiches and indigestible rock cakes and listening to Uncle Eric's interminable stories about the excitement of working in drainage. He decided he liked it better here.

"Feathers now dry," the Chief said to Aunt Fifi. "Your soap bubbles bring them up well!"

"I'm so glad," said Aunt Fifi. "But next time, please knock!"

The Chief smiled and turned to Joe and Sarah. "Would you like to visit past again and see another famous man" he said.

"Famous!" put in Aunt Fifi. "Since when have you known anyone famous!"

"Well, all right, nearly famous," said the Chief a bit shamefacedly.

"I'm not sure," admitted Joe. "We were away for quite a time on the last adventure and it seemed to be a bit difficult to get back."

"And then it nearly became rather nasty," added Sarah, remembering the arrows and the Shaman.

"Me do better this time," promised the chief, confidently. "What bit of history you study at school next term?"

"I think we're doing the great explorers," replied Sarah.

Joe nodded, "That's right," he said, "All about the New World, whatever that is. Our teacher told us at the end of term."

"That my home!" said the Chief, and then he looked sad. "Before the coming of the White Man, it was good home, too. Then it all go moose-shaped." He cheered up and looked at them, "If you want, I take you to see some exploring!"

From above the table came a clear, loud, female voice.

"You be careful!" it said. "They're only children. I still don't think it's safe."

The chief looked annoyed. "That my squaw - Leaping Elk," he sighed. "She never trust me. Think me a clot." He looked up and addressed thin air, "Me look after them," he said. "Everything all right now. Me great hunter, noble warrior, master of the plain, cunning as fox and smart as wolf. Me take care of them!"

There was a snort from above. "More like thick as a plank and daft as a brush!" the voice said. "You know there's something wrong somewhere."

"But everything all quiet now," protested the Chief. "Anyway not go for long. Just find someone who can tell them about exploring."

"Who?" said the voice irritably. "Just who are you going to get to talk to them? Which one of the misfits and oddballs that you know are you going to get to explain about the great voyages of discovery? Most of them can't find their way down a garden path!"

The chief frowned. "Not true," he muttered. "Some of people I know can find way down garden path, if it straight and they have map. There must be someone me could ask."

"How about Columbus?" said Aunt Fifi. "He discovered America after all. Can't you get to talk to him?"

The Chief snorted. "Him!" he said. "Books say he discovered New World. Me know better. My several times great-grand-dad say he see first white men in our lands years before. Say that they were wearing horns on metal hats and had long beards - he call them two-legged bison."

“Sounds like the Vikings!” gasped Joe.

“The Vikings!” said Aunt Fifi. “I remember reading that there were stories that they had discovered America a long time before Columbus. Looks like it’s true.”

“Me try to take you to find great explorer,” announced the Chief. “I will be guide, and protector!”

There was another snort from above and Aunt Fifi pointed out that the Chief might stick out a bit in his feather head-dress and beads.

“Good point,” agreed the chief, ignoring the snort. “Me find better clothes once we arrive.”

“Are you sure about this?” Aunt Fifi said in a low voice to Joe and Sarah. They looked at each other.

“And I thought the holidays would be boring!” said Joe.

“Me too,” agreed Sarah. “Should we go and see what the Chief can find? I’ll go if you go.”

Well, that was that. Joe could hardly say no and look like a weed in front of Sarah. He nodded and the Chief smiled in triumph, frowned at a spot above the table and nodded in defiance. Aunt Fifi wished them good luck and promised cakes when they got back. The Chief folded his arms and closed his eyes. White wisps wafted across the table and from out of the shrubbery a dense white mist rose and engulfed them - Joe and Sarah were pleased to see that it was indeed white and not red. It was a very short journey this time and the next thing they saw as the cloud cleared was that they were still sitting on their garden chairs but were rather un-nervingly suspended in mid-air over a great heaving grey-green sea! Joe and Sarah gripped the arms of their chairs in some alarm. The Chief was with them, also in his chair and he opened his eyes and looked around, seemingly quite satisfied.

“Well, so far, so good,” he said. “We here over sea. All we need now is ship! Wonder where it is!”

Both Joe and Sarah had the same thought - that arranging a ship might have been a good idea before actually setting off on the journey