

CHAPTER SIX

Together, they floated inside the cloud until they arrived at a small Island with trees, low hills, and cultivation. There were houses scattered around the shore line and into the hills. The cloud wished them well and told Atrollis that it would be ready to take them back when called upon. It hovered while the old man and the Captain took their leave and landed at a point not far from the shore, where they sat on a golden bench under a most beautiful shade tree, the like of which the Captain had never seen.

Food was brought to them, and Atrollis started his story.

‘Captain, as I told you when we left port, I was going home to be with my people to end my days. What I didn’t mention was, that this wouldn’t happen until I defeated my enemy. To do this I had to bring sufficient power with me. You and the cargo are that power. We were defeated by the enemy many, many years ago and my life’s work in exile has been to develop the strength and strategy to return victorious.

‘I chose you for your sailing skills, your strong mind, and your well-developed sense of right and wrong. Unknown to you until now, you have been groomed from childhood to fight my evil enemy, Shardforth, and the Supreme Being. For indeed, Captain, this is a struggle of right and wrong.

‘The powers bestowed on me are being transferred to you. Over time, as we fight my enemies who are now also your enemies, we’ll each have equal power, but as they are crushed, I will lose my powers and you’ll be the leader of my people and become the caretaker of our lands. My staff will be planted on the main Island and grow into a tree the same as this one we sit under. This tree was also born from a staff by one of my ancestors whose family came from this Island. My staff will join a forest of staffs, now all beautiful trees. The occupying enemy know we receive our powers from this forest, and have long tried chopping them down, just to see them grow again overnight. However, these trees are slowly losing the power to regenerate and gradually the forest is thinning. We must defeat the enemy before all the trees die, or we will have lost the battle and my race will die with them.’

They ate, and the old man didn’t speak again until they had finished their meal, which gave the Captain time to absorb this extraordinary story as his list of questions for Atrollis grew.

‘Old man, we speak only through our minds. Have I lost the art of speech?’

‘You’ll use your normal powers of speech when there is a need to talk to others who do not possess telepathic powers. When you’re in my people’s company and their supporters such as the cloud that brought us here, you’ll only use telepathy.’

‘When we fought the ice, my mind was receiving messages from different sources; you, the magpie and, as you warned me, the enemy. How can I block out those that I don’t want to talk to, and keep my thoughts, either to myself, or communicate only with whom I wish to?’

‘In time, you’ll develop this ability. We’ll practice together until you have mastered what we call the skill of exclusion. It will also enable you to recognize when others don’t want to talk with you. It is the power of thought that drives this skill. You need to concentrate solely on the people or person you want to talk to. They’ll receive your request and either open their mind to you or not. Should it be a legitimate direction concerning the safety of our people they’ll be forced to listen and obey.’

‘How was the enemy able to penetrate my mind?’

‘Two things. One, you hadn’t developed the skills to exclude people. I had only just started giving you powers. Secondly, they had to combine several of their strongest minds to enter and control you. This effort has exhausted them, and it is one of the advantages we’ll have when we enter the black cloud. They are just learning about telepathy and are not very good at it, nor have many got this ability. All our people have it and have had it for many generations.’

‘They seem to control much of nature. We were nearly defeated a couple of times.’

‘True, there is the Supreme Being that rules over all that is evil. The elements, when controlled by us do as we request, but when the evil is strong it commands great power over the creatures of the sea and the elements of nature. Shardforth is his emissary. He cannot do this for long periods, as this control is resented, and nature fights back.

The greatest strength, we, now you, will always have is your crew, your little army. If they operate as one they’ll always defeat the enemy and, providing you have time between attacks, you’ll repair them as I did. The cargo is a weapon of enormous power. There are two groups, each with separate armaments that we will need as we fight for my lands. They must be secure and hidden from Shardforth and the Supreme Being who know much of my

abilities, but not of the cargo. This cargo has been secretly developed over many generations and is now at its peak to fight for us.'

'Ah, Atrollis. How did I select my crew if they were to play the key roles you talk of? I selected them on seamanship and traits of loyalty.'

'You didn't, Captain. As you have rightly guessed. I searched all the lands and have chosen them. They were all guided by me to be available for hire by you. At the time you wouldn't have been aware that I was controlling your mind.'

'And the dog that guided me to the tavern? Was he on board? I didn't see him.'

'He is, but mainly stays in the cargo bays. Unless needed elsewhere, he guards the cargo from attack. He is extraordinarily powerful.'

'You should rest now as I need to be with my people. I'll wake you when I'm back. You'll have dreams which will educate you. It will shorten our stay here. The cloud will return tomorrow and stay until we need it.'

Atrollis floated away and the Captain immediately fell asleep as if he had been hypnotized.

He was in a classroom. It was empty except for himself and Atrollis teaching him about his powers, and who to recognize as friend or foe.

He explained the staff and how to use it. Firstly, no matter what happened, such as if the Captain was whisked away against his will, it would always find him. Sometimes it would be disguised to protect itself from the enemy but normally it would look like any bone handled tall walking staff. It will always give power for good, will heal and bring back life, change shapes of all upon the earth, and develop weapons of defense. It cannot kill and will only allow death to occur against magical creatures with evil intent, and only as a last resort. It will always provide the necessities of life such as food, shelter and clothes. It will be a companion in times of loneliness and distress. Should it be working somewhere else, it can always be reached telepathically.

The Captain woke, to find the old man leaning over him.

'In your dreams you have learnt much of the powers of your staff and other things. Because of my age, it suits me to carry it as a staff, but it may suit you to wear it as a pendant. One of my predecessors wore it as an armlet. You may choose its shape, but when an owner passes over to the other world, it will be planted as a staff to grow into its final form, a large everlasting tree.'

‘There are only two staffs that exist at any one time, one for the person about to go over, me, and one for my replacement, you. As needed, it can pass powers onto others, such as giving the rat’s tail strength and heat to clear a passage through the ice and the powers of your crew. You’ll have observed that it gives powers, and very rarely does it get involved directly. It is important that our people earn their rite of passage from birth to death.

‘We must now go under the Island. I have been warned of a swarm of deadly wasps coming from the black cloud. They seek us out and will be hard to defeat without my rat and magpie. Come, we’ll enter the sea and stay until the danger has passed.’

Suddenly the Captain and Atrollis were each in the middle of a green bubble.

‘Follow me.’

They dived into the sea. In the distance, exiting the black cloud, was a bright blue light, containing a dark mass – the wasps. As the old man and the Captain plummeted down, deeper and deeper in their green bubbles, one after the other, they passed through many types of sea creatures, unknown to the Captain. There were also large schools of the type of fish he had eaten.

The Island floated above a flat plain but was fixed by its own power in one spot against the movement of the ocean. The Island moved around the ocean when it had cause to do so.

Their bubbles were attacked time and again by the same snake creatures that attacked the ship. The old man appeared inside the Captains bubble and explained the shape of the enemy and pointed to the dormant fish lying on the bottom of the ocean.

‘Soon the snake creatures will call on help to defeat us and we’ll need support.’

True to his predictions, there appeared numerous snakes, too many to count, swimming rapidly toward them. At the same time the old man pointed his staff to the ocean floor. It lifted and formed a solid barrier blocking out the snakes. But it wasn’t the floor of the ocean. It was a school of fish with small arms that linked them together, their hooks forming a mesh curtain, their mouths positioned, ready to eat the snakes when they tried to break the mesh. Soon the water was boiling with blood and bits of snake and fish floating by the green bubbles. Suddenly the mesh of fish yielded, and the snakes,

surrounded by the evil blue light burst through. Atrollis, now back in his own bubble, called the Captain.

‘Concentrate, Captain, point your staff with mine, we must strengthen our capsules. It will give the fish time to counter attack. The captain pointed his staff as the old man did. The green capsules throbbed, as the mesh fish, now as individuals, and many times their original size, turned and attacked the snakes. There was more blood, and snake and fish bits torn from both, flashing the colours of good and evil. The many dead, and those in their death throes, drifted past their bubbles. Finally, the blue light faded, the snakes, now a much smaller number, withdrew.

Atrollis left his bubble and floated through the debris of snake and fish parts. The Captain, still in his bubble, was wide eyed as the old man turned the pieces of snake into reeds when they then joined the reed beds where he saw the ordinary fish of the ocean feeding on the creatures hiding there. Atrollis continued to wave his staff around bringing the body parts of the attack fish together. Some he noticed were too damaged to make whole again. Those that were complete swam back to the ocean floor. In time, the water was clear of any fighting fish or snake parts. His last act was to replace the dead fish from the floor, the newborn swimming down to fill the gaps left by their dead ancestors. The old man, now back inside his bubble, sat on a bench, his head bowed.

‘That was close, Captain. I didn’t expect so many snakes in these parts. Never mind, they have increased the size of our reed beds, shelter for the smaller fish and food aplenty. A good outcome. The wasps are overhead. Their protective blue light is weak, the cloud having spent much energy supporting the snakes. We’ll float to the surface and tempt them to attack us.’

They arrived at the surface, the Captain concerned for their safety. His staff had formed an eye at the top of the curved handle and assured him they were all safe and to look down. He was amazed to see waves of flying fish rise and break the surface, catching the wasps who were trapped against the surface of the water by a layer of green cloud. In time, they were all eaten, the flying fish now flopping about, their bellies full.

‘Come, Captain, we’ll return to the Island. Our enemy will not bother us again tonight. We’ll eat and rest. I too, need to strengthen my powers.’

The Captain, his knuckles white, held tight to his staff. He learnt more of its powers, as he floated above the waves without his bubble, to reach land where he bedded down in one of the houses along the shore.

The Captain heard people arriving and leaving, having spoken with Atrollis in the adjacent room. At a late hour, Atrollis introduced the Captain to the head of the Council that administered the Island's affairs and slipped away.

'My name is Recorder, Captain. Atrollis is busy. We can continue the discussion as this gold ring I give you is a gift only from the people of the Island.'

'If you concentrate on the ring in time of need, a dog will appear at your feet, and protect you when the staff has entered your head.'

The Captain slipped the ring onto the ring finger of his left hand, marveling at the perfect fit, as he watched it glow and bond with his wedding ring. He'd seen a similar ring on the old man's finger. Recorder told the Captain that the ring could never be removed, even if his finger was cut off. The ring and finger would disappear and when safe to do so, would re-attach itself.

'Recorder. There is a sensation, something I can't describe coming from my wedding ring.'

'That is very good, Captain. Your wife is receiving this information in a dream. The dog ring is starting to prepare your family for yours and their transition. I've not seen this happen before. It means your family will be safe under the powers of the dog. You are truly blessed. I sense a great future for you and therefore our lands. But there is much work to do before this golden age can commence.'

'Thank you, Recorder. I'm comforted by your words. As you say, the two rings have fused. You mention the staff living in my head.'

'That rarely happens, but it means your mind has been taken over by the enemy, or it has given it a disease. The staff will be in liquid form and replace your mind until there is an opportunity to repair it.'

'What if I were to die before selecting a successor as the old man is doing?'

'Throughout our history, this has only happened once and the staff of our leader at the time created an image of itself and the two joined together to anoint the baby as it emerged from the dead leader. The child was absorbed into the new staff and taken to a safe place where it grew rapidly into a young adult. The old staff was taken to the forest by the new leader and planted alongside the other trees.'

‘Why doesn’t this happen to the old man?’

‘Reincarnation can only be done in emergencies. Our people prefer to bring in new people selected by the leader of the time. We find this keeps our society better energized, better balanced.’

‘And my wife and children? Do I want this role which I have so far not had a chance to refuse?’

‘Captain. Should you and the old man be successful in defeating this enemy of ours which has controlled our lands for many centuries, then you’ll be reunited with your family in our lands. As I have said, your family is already being assimilated.’

The Captain held back tears as he listened to Recorder, the head of the Island people, describe his future.

‘Captain, While Atrollis is resting, let me take this opportunity to tell you about your history. Sit, drink a cup of our special nectar and you will learn how you were chosen. In some countries, you would be considered royalty though our system doesn’t allow for layers of elitism.

‘My role has been to develop an underground movement and help prepare the conditions needed to support the old man in his quest to defeat Shardforth and the Supreme Being. I have more freedom than others to do this as my Island is not considered worthy of close attention by Shardforth. His arrogance will be his undoing.

‘It is now time to travel to your homeland. Your father, Ramaedie, is waiting to tell you his story which will prepare you for your role in rescuing Dottlefink from the evil that has controlled us for so many years. Take your staff, hold my hand.’

With locked hands, they floated out of the house and entered a small white cloud. He wasn’t sure if he slept but what seemed an instant in time they landed in his home village.